

# My Little Ventrue

by Novus Animus

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**A story in the Dolareido Universe**

**Description:** (Knowledge of the setting not required!) Set in the world of Vampire: The Requiem. Dolareido. A city of dark alleys, dirty contracts, and deadly predators. Predators in business suits and stiletto heels. Jack, just a young man and barely an adult, finds himself on death's door. Before he knows what's happening, he's pulled into the world of vampires, the Danse Macabre, and the Masquerade.

**Tags:** Some Sex, Ma/Fa, Mult, Consensual, Romantic, BiSexual, Heterosexual, Fiction, Fan Fiction, Mystery, Paranormal, Vampires, Were animal, Group Sex, Orgy, Anal Sex, Double Penetration, Exhibitionism, Oral Sex, Petting, Squirting, Tit-Fucking, Big Breasts, Slow, Violent

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# Part 1

# Chapter 1

~~Author's Note~~

My Little Ventrue is a paranormal romance thriller, centered around the machinations of vampires. Drama, seduction, love, and every sin found in the dark corners of a major city. It's a brutal world, filled with deadly politics, deadlier creatures, ancient conspiracies, and Gothic obsessions.

It's a long story, and will be growing for a long, long time. If you're interested, please read the first 4 chapters. If you're not intrigued by then, you can safely move on knowing this story is not for you.

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~~Welcome to the world of Vampire: The Requiem~~

~~Jack~~

“And then ... and then she fell into the water!” Jack tried to keep from getting a stomach stitch, but laughter was hitting him hard. “By the time we fished her out, it was too late. The dress, the hair, the make-up, it was all ruined.”

Jack, the smaller of the two, was sitting on his friend's couch. A leather couch, Jack was sure, or some expensive derivative. The walls were a solid white but for the paintings framed in elegantly simple, smooth framework. The paintings themselves were of dark things, both in color and what they showed. Jack was sure many of them were of harsh moments from the bible, but he could never be sure.

Who was he to judge though? He preferred white walls without a thing on them.



“Oh wow. And this was her high school prom?” Julias was also sitting on couch across from Jack, a grin on his lips and a glass of red in his hand.

Julias was bad ass. There was no denying it. Jack was a little guy, he knew it, and while he certainly took care of his body and had become quite lean and strong, Julias was a big, built man. He was tall, with broad shoulders and pale complexion. His hair was blond and slicked back flat to his head. It was almost movie surreal. No one did that with their hair. No one could pull off that hair.

Julias could. Even here in his home, on the couch with a glass of red wine in his hand, the man was wearing a really, really ... really nice suit. Far nicer than Jack’s own, that was for sure. He had at least undone the jacket and loosened his black tie, but with the black shoes, black socks, and the cuffs, Jack guessed the cost of his getup at two months his own salary, at least.

“Yeah. She was so upset, I took her home and she missed the whole thing,” Jack said.

“Oh my, took her home?”

“Ha! Man I wish. No, within five minutes of getting her home, she dumped me in a fit of blind rage.”

“Ouch. You have my sympathies.” Julias was trying to not laugh, if only to not spill his drink as he sipped it. Jack doubted it would have really put much of a dent into his friend’s money even if he did though.

Jack had to stand up. Seeing Julias’s place was always a blast, complete with a massive TV on the wall and wall-window view overlooking the city. He paced a little as he looked over the buildings below him. Marble floors in an apartment. The floors alone made his shitty shoes seem inadequate.

“Ever date anyone after?”

Jack almost gasped at Julias’s sudden appearance next to him. He hadn’t made a sound. Those shoes and marble floors and not a sound. Damn smooth.

“No. Ashley was the first and last girl I ever dated. Dumped me before I ever got past second base either.” A moment’s embarrassment past, Jack looked back out the window with his hands in his pockets. His own suit was a pale, dyed comparison of Julias’s, and the two of them standing next to each other made the sad idealism apparent.

“Oooh I see. So that’s what this was all about. You wanted me to find you a girl.”

“No ... well, maybe.”

“Jack, I drag your ass to the gym so many evenings. You even talk to people there. You’re not the weak little piss ant you were five years ago. Thought you’d have some confidence.” Julias swished his red wine around in his glass. It always looked so thick.

“I have confidence.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“A hatred for the human race and the stupidity of its populace?” Jack said.

“Or perhaps too much time on the internet developing ridiculous standards.”

“Yeah, that too.”

They both laughed. It was a weird friendship, to be sure, like fire and water. Julias was cool, suave, smooth and built. Jack was a lean

little guy with a bitter tongue and too much time on his hands. They always had something to talk about.

“So you got that promotion at Barksen’s?” Julias took another sip of his drink before looking to Jack. He put his back to the window and leaned against it with his free arm folded against his chest, hand hooked underneath the other arm.

“You know I had plans to get into law school,” Jack said with a shrug. “Apparently, I’m good at making people do what I want. Barksen wanted me under his thumb early.”

“I can’t blame him. You’re a master at breaking people to your will.” Julias’s sarcasm was almost dripping from his lips, but Jack countered it with a classic wink.

“Barksen thinks I am! He hired me didn’t he, straight out of high school.”

“Yeah but you’ve been stuck at that job for almost three years, Jack. Barksen got you under his thumb because he knew you’d be cheap. He’d have to pay thrice what he pays you to get that job filled by someone with a license.” Julias looked down to his drink and gently swished it around with tilts of his hand.

Jack looked up to older man with a slow squint, before he gave his own grin.

“You’re right, you’re right. I have money aside and I have the connections now. Barksen doesn’t realize one of his partners is looking to branch, and neither of them realize Mr. Turner is looking to expand into this district either. I got a foot in with him too.”

Jack must have looked absolutely pleased with himself. Why wouldn’t he? With this plan he’d have a secure and stable future. He’d get his jobs, his promotions, and retire at a comfortably early age all the while having a comfortable life.

That was good, right?

“You got your ducks in a row then.”

“I like to think so.”

“No risks?” Julias said.

“I ... I don't know. I mean, why would I take risks?”

“When you want something, and really, truly want it, it likely means something or someone's stopping you from getting it so easily. Thus, risks.”

“True. I guess I just haven't found anything worth taking risks for.”

Julias took a long, hard look at Jack after those words. He even took a lick of his teeth. With a sigh, the older man stepped away from the glass and walked toward his kitchen. The apartment was a seamless connection of entryway to living room to kitchen to stairway to bedroom. Surprisingly large and spacious, and it let Julias walk to his counter to grab his wine bottle and refill his drink without breaking conversation.

“And if you had one?”

“If I had ... something worth taking a risk for?”

“Yes. Let's say you were ... fighting for power. Politics. What would you stoop to do to win a campaign?” Julias leveled his gaze on his small friend, and waited. His eyes were steel, cold, and Jack found himself squirming a little at the sudden stare. Why the abrupt change of mood?

“I suppose it would depend on how I felt about my rivals.”

“Oh, predators. Predators the lot of them. Given the opportunity they’d kill you, let alone your campaign.” Julias licked his teeth again and offered another grin before sipping his red. “Some of them you’ll hate, some you won’t, but all would be willing to kill you in your sleep for their own goals.”

“Whoa, that’s ... that’s a lot of risk for political power.”

“But the rewards, Jack. The rewards are ... real power. You have your domain, you have peace, you have your way with whatever you wanted. With whoever you wanted.” He beckoned for the small man, and Jack came. He didn’t plan to, didn’t even want to, but Julias’s eyes were open and unblinking. They looked upon him, gazed upon him with a strange resonance.

“ ... what’s this about, Julias?”

“Answer the question.”

“No, seriously, you’re asking some we-”

“Answer the question.” Julias’s eyes flared wide, and Jack took a step back. The air around Julias seemed almost darker, as if the lighting had dimmed in some ridiculously cheesy horror film. Not so cheesy when you’re in it.

“I...” Jack’s mouth moved on its own. Why was he talking? He didn’t mean to answer that question, but he couldn’t stop. “I ... for my own goals? I’d ruin them. For my own life? ... I’d kill them.”

“Kill them? Harsh words.” The older man motioned for Jack to sit across from him at the counter, and the younger one sat obediently. He felt small, very small. All of a sudden the dark apartment felt less a cool hangout, and more a spider’s web.

“Well fuck, man, I’ve never been in that situation. We’re talking about some fantasy world where I’m a god damn mobster. I’m just

going off my gut here. What's ... what's going on, Julias?"

With a long and weary sigh, Julias put down his glass and sat down as well. He leaned forward, and with netted fingers, put his chin top his knuckles. He wasn't playing, or kidding or joking, he was just staring Jack straight in the eye until the young man was almost sweating.

This wasn't the Julias he knew. This was frightening.

"I need help. I need someone I can trust. I need someone who will have my back when shit hits the fan."

"When shit hits the fan like back at Omack's? Right?" Jack said with a grin, but found his grin fading when Julias did not smile back. The man across the counter from him was almost glaring, but his gaze was more cold, more hard and dead than angry.

"What if, Jack ... what if you could ... leave it all behind." He stopped. He didn't explain himself. He just left the statement on the air, and Jack tilted his head to the side in confusion.

"I uh ... what?"

"I need someone to help me, and I think that person is you." Despite the compliment, Jack found himself squirming. Julias was not complimenting him aimlessly. He wanted something; all the signs of a business proposition were apparent. Jack saw them, and Julias knew he saw them. The problem was that despite this, Julias was still effortlessly in control of the conversation, and Jack felt smaller by the minute.

"My help? Julias you ... you make enough money to buy ten of me. What could I possibly—"

"Trust. You are my friend. And you are far better at the dance than you think."

“Dance?”

“Politics ... of a sort.” Julias gave his small friend a playful grin, like a fucking tiger might before the kill. “But to my point, I need a friend, and I have a proposition for you. The dilemma is you have to leave it all behind.”

“What is all?”

“All.”

“You can’t ... I don’t ... Julias you got to help me out here.” Jack knew his words would frustrate Julias, but the sheer vagueness of it all was driving him insane.

“All.” Neither frustrated or impatient, Julias kept his voice smooth but stern. “You will move on from your current friends and family. They’ll think you’re dead. You’ll be working with me, here in South Side. You will have a new place to stay, and you will be powerful ... very powerful.” The fact Jack’s mouth had dropped open did not stop Julias. “The money is great, the power greater, but it’s not about that. Well, not just about that. It’s about ... a whole different world, Jack. A world with risks, and rewards.” If his friend was trying to make it sound romantic, he was failing hard. So far, Julias’s speech was only making Jack shake in his shoes.

Julias had gotten up at this point, and was walking around with his glass in his hand. He gestured with his words, but his cold gaze never left Jack. The smaller man couldn’t help but take quick glances to his friend’s drink, if only to avoid Julias’s gaze. Had his red wine always been so thick?

“You’ll be joining me in a long career, my good friend. You will have everything you’ve ever wanted, and more.”

“I, I just, I ... I don’t know! I mean, just ... abandon everything?”

“Everything. The only thing you’ll keep from your old life is my friendship.”

“But my fucking family, Julias! My mother, my sister, my fucking dog. My friends...”

“You don’t have any close friends besides me, and you know you’re not close with your family.” Julias took another sip.

“Hey, I got ... yeah I got nothing.” Jack slumped into a stool at the counter. “Holy fuck Julias. This is a pretty big god damn thing you just dumped on me.”

“A secret thing, by the way.”

“Well yeah, considering the lead-up to your question, I get the impression I tell anyone about this and I’ll have snipers at my back.” Jack let his buzzed head fall to the counter, and lightly rolled it side to side.

“That is ... possible.”

“Oh fuck. Oh god fuck fuck, I didn’t believe it until you just said it.”

“Jack. Take a breath. I’m not forcing you into anything. This is not an offer you can’t refuse.” Jack stirred lightly when he felt a hand on his shoulder, but otherwise kept his forehead on the counter “Think on it. Take a few days.”

“A few days? Yeah ... yeah I think I’ll do that.” He pushed himself from the counter and stood there for a moment. Julias was standing across from him, the counter between them, and was kinda smiling, and kinda frowning. His expression alien and unreadable, Jack only grew more nervous, and eventually turned around.



“And here I thought we were going to talk about random shit.” Jack walked to the door, put his hand on the handle, and took a glance back.

“Sorry,” Julias said, and the man gave an apologetic shrug.

“So, this change, this job ... anything illegal?”

“Illegal? Not ... really. Different world, my friend. Different rules.”

“ ... mafia. This sounds sounds like mafia stuff. That’s why you have all these suits.” Jack’s words apparently caught the big guy off guard, cause Julias laughed and set his drink down.

“Cherry on top. Agree to join me, and I’ll hook you up with a bunch of suits.”

“Damn man. That...” Jack almost removed his hand from the door handle. “I’ll definitely have to think about that. Cya.”

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It was a cold night. Jack couldn’t help but shiver a little when his feet hit the sidewalk. The sun had set hours ago, and the moon was clear in the sky. At least as can be clear in a dense city. Even at this hour, people were walking the streets. Business suits and classy dresses were common. Sharks and call girls no doubt, but at least it wasn’t as obvious or dirty as his neighborhood in the Alley.

“Even the prostitutes make me look like a low-class pleb,” he said. He couldn’t help but laugh at himself and adjust his tie. Presentation, presentation.

The bus station was a good twenty-minute walk, but the streets were crowded and the police didn’t exactly sleep. Jack didn’t worry, at least not about the people. The cold was starting to set in, and he could feel his toes starting to go numb. Business shoes were not good with cold.

“Excuse me.”

Jack almost jumped. The voice beside him was smooth, alluring, feminine and inviting, but extremely unanticipated.

“Shit! Sorry, uh ... yes?” He turned to face the mysterious woman, and struggled to keep his jaw from dropping. She was gorgeous. Long red hair, pale skin, sharp blue eyes, and dark lips. It was unfair how gorgeous she was. The coat she wore, black and long, hugged her figure nicely and highlighted her thin physique. She was standing in an alley between two of the buildings, and her eyes almost glowed in the darkness.

“Do you know Julias?” She spoke so smoothly, so softly, that Jack found himself taking a step toward her. What was so inviting about that voice? At eye level with him, her gaze was unrelenting, but intoxicating. It pulled him, and almost as if a hand was tugging at his neck, she took another step forward.

Her eyes were just like Julias’s.

“Uh ... yes...”

She grinned at him and licked at her lips in a not-so-subtle way, just like Julias would when flirting with a girl. With a raised hand, she beckoned the boy into the darkness. The cold was suddenly not a problem, and Jack stepped toward her yet again. The background shuffling of others grew quiet as he went deeper into the darkness toward the woman, and quieter yet again when his mind grew hazy.

“Did he ask for your help?” One of her fingers pressed to his chest, but it only magnetized him. Attached to her finger, Jack was deep into the darkness now. Any light that would normally line the walls in the alley were blown, yet the stranger’s eyes were still clear in the black, like how a cat’s eyes caught light.

“He ... did...” The words just came out. No resisting, nothing.

“Then you’re the one I’ve been looking for.”

He didn’t even see the knife.

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~~Julias~~

“I wonder if he took me seriously.” Julias paced back and forth from his window, and only occasionally glanced out to look at the city lights. His eyes were fixed on his drink of red. His last attempt at maintaining at least somewhat normal eating habits.

He leaned forward and put his free hand against the window, but still his eyes stayed on his drink. The swirling pool of red was not transparent, and his gaze drowned in it.

“How am I going to do it? How could I explain ... I mean ... with Viktor it was ... Yeah, I don’t want that.” With a weary sigh, Julias walked back into his kitchen and put the glass on his counter. “I don’t want to hurt him, and now I just left this bombshell on his ... he doesn’t deserve that. I can’t give him half-truths. Fuck Viktor. None of that manipulative shit.” The whole conversation had been a horrible attempt to recreate Viktor’s proposal, and just like then, the proposal had been terrifying. Smart. Way to ruin everything, Julias.

He snatched the glass up and raised it with his sights set on the sink. With a strained hand and tight grip, he slowly, very slowly lowered the glass back down.

“Don’t smash the glass, control yourself,” he said between clenched teeth. After putting the glass down, he walked toward the door, all the while looking at his shaking hand. He flexed and released it while his skin grew more and more pale. “Blood stains are a bitch.”

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“Where’s that kid gone?” Julias strolled down the street as fast as he could without drawing attention. It was a cold night, but he didn’t mind. While most everyone was in trench coats of some shape or another, Julias stuck with the suit. It was a nice suit; he felt good wearing it. He felt tall around these people. They were just sheep, after all.

“Yeah, I wonder ... how he’ll feel walking down this street after it’s done.” A woman walked by and took a moment to glance Julias up and down. She was attractive, with her blond hair tied into some fashionable shape against her skull’s crown. Julias managed a small nod and kept walking. “Never the same. He could shut himself up even more, or ... become cold and dead. I don’t want another Viktor. If this is going to work, he needs to want it. I can’t trick him into this.”

He kept walking. That was it then. He’d have to explain to Jack tonight what this was really about, instead of letting the man stew for days with all his half-truths.

“I wonder if he’ll hate me. I wonder if he’ll tell anyone. If he told anyone, and I had to clean up that mess, and kill him...” No, don’t think about it. Jack was a smart man, and a disturbingly tenacious little man at that. He could trust him. But shit happens, and if Jack did indeed try to spread the truth once the secrets were out, it would be on Julias’s head.

“Fuck, not just my head. This isn’t just a business deal. He’s your friend. He’s your—” His voice stopped, and he came to a dead halt in the street and looked around. Something wasn’t right. His insides clawed at his ribs and demanded aggression. Someone was inside the domain. Someone was on the hunt inside his domain.

He broke into a run. People in his way were quick to move, and those that didn’t were tossed aside. A few unlucky people found themselves more than knocked aside, and more than one crashed

into nearby members of the street crowd with loud hollers of pain. He got faster, and bulldozed through a couple holding hands, each getting pushed to either side and landing against the sidewalk with bone crunching noises.

There was no way someone would have picked this night of all nights. Someone must have known, someone was watching him. Fuck, where's a Mekhet when you need one. Jack couldn't have gone far, he had only one possible route to walk, and he could glance down the alley of each as he ran by, but it was a long shot. Whoever was in his domain could have just taken Jack and run, or pulled him into the sewers, or worse.

Rage built inside him. Whoever it was, he was going to tear them apart. He was going to sink his fingers into their limbs and rip them out of their sockets. You do not just walk into someone's domain without permission, and there was no way this was done by accident, especially not on this night.

Finally, he could smell his friend. Jackpot. He had only to glance down an alley to see the coat of a woman, and the falling body of a boy. Oh god, if he was too late.

“Get away from him!”

The woman pulled away with a jolt. She gave him a glance, only one, before she turned and ran. She was like liquid. Her motions were beyond fluid and her speed was beyond his grasp. Daeva bitch. It had to be. She must have drawn Jack in and ... and...

“Jack! Shit, Jack!” Julias got to his knees and looked down over his little friend. “Fucking hell Jack, can you hear me?”

The small man coughed up blood, curled up on his side, and splattered some of it onto the street. He was always tiny, but now he looked like a spec against the dirty asphalt. Just a kid with a buzzed head in a bad suit, bleeding everywhere.

“I ... I just got stabbed, didn't I?” Blood was seeping out of where Jack kept his hands to his stomach. Julias fought to keep his eyes from staring at the growing pool. He would kill that Daeva with his bare fucking hands, with his teeth! No, not now, he had to focus.

“Move your hands, I have to see.” Julias wrapped his grip around his friend's hands and pulled them away. Jack fought against him, groaned and moaned in pain, but Julias's strength easily overpowered him. “Hold still! I have to see how bad it is.”

His hands gripped into Jack's suit and shirt and lifted it. His desperation even ripped it, but then, it was a cheap suit. He'd really have to buy Jack a nice suit after this.

“Ok, I'm seeing ... ten holes. Fuck that Daeva bitch! Shit shit shit.” He let Jack curl back up into a ball as he stood up. Panic-filled eyes looked around from deep within the alley. It would take only a second to get Jack out into the street, and maybe ten minutes to get him into a hospital. What good would that do? He'd been stabbed ten times.

“I ... I'm not a doctor, but I think...” The little guy coughed up some blood between words. “I think ... I'm dead.”

“What the fuck Jack, how can you ... you're dying!” Julias pulled Jack up to sit against the alley wall.

“I guess I'm just ... intellectualizing? I'm sure ... it'll hit me ... later ... when I'm dead.” Being sat up brought a new fit of coughs, and Jack clutched at his stomach hard. Julias could see it wasn't only from pain, the kid was actually just trying to keep his guts from spilling.

“Well stop intellectualizing! God damn it Jack, I ... shit this is my fault.”

“ ... wha—”

“That Deava cunt! She did this to you to get at me, to stop me. To ... hurt me.”

“Daeva, I don’t un—” Another coughing fit cut Jack off, and he stopped trying to talk. Instead, his draining eyes looked up to Julias. The little guy’s face was getting very white.

“Jack, I ... fuck it. Jack, I’m going to help you.”

“You ... look at me.” Jack pulled his hands away from his stomach, which let loose another pool of blood to spill over his fingers. “I’m dead Julias, just ... take me to the hospital, so ... mom can get me after.”

What the fuck was wrong with this kid? He was dying, he would be dead in minutes, the amount of blood pouring out of him was insane. And yet he was just accepting it. His last moments would be spent just happily giving in? No.

“No, fuck that, fuck that ‘quietly into the good night’ shit you stupid bastard.”

“But ... you can’t—”

Blood stains really are a bitch.

“Yes I can ... yes I fucking can.” Julias reached down and pulled Jack up into his arms. The tiny guy was weightless. He took him deeper into the alleyway, and then, jumped.

“Holy...” Little Jack tried to yell, even flail a little, but the small man was exhausted and shivering. Good. It made carrying him up the side of the building easier. Julias jumped the fire escape railing, and then onto the railing of another, and another still, until ten floors were scaled in a matter of seconds. He landed on the rooftop, where only darkness and moonlight waited.

“How did—”

“Do you trust me?”

“Julias, I—”

“Do you trust me?” Julias yelled this time as he sat down. He put Jack down between his legs with his back to his own stomach. He cradled the small guy in a hug, and rocked him back and forth. He was getting cold.

“ ... yes.”

“Then just relax. Just relax and take a breath.”

“I don’t...” His words trailed off when Julias sank his teeth into Jack’s neck.

Julias knew the reaction. He knew it well. It was always the same. First, his prey would twitch for just a second while his bite first punctured and then numbed the area. And then, they would simply relax into the Kiss. Jack relaxed far too quickly, far too easily, and the blood that flowed into Julias’s mouth was slow and lacked volume.

“What ... are you...” Jack shivered a couple times, trembled, went limp against Julias’s chest. His heartbeat grew slower, and slower, but Julias kept drinking.

How long had it been since he’d drunk someone dry? Years. But his friend? How long had it been since he’d done this? A lifetime.

“I’m ... getting ... tired.” The poor little guy couldn’t even lift his arms anymore. He could barely talk. At least Julias was making the loss of blood feel good, right? He could feel it in Jack’s body. He wasn’t struggling, and he was probably high on the pleasure of it. But then, he probably thought he was dying and that his pleasurable



feelings were his body's chemical responses to death. Well, he was half right.

Jack trembled, and then as his trembles faded, he shivered, and then not even that. Now was the time, right? It had to be. The tiny man's breath was almost gone. Julias could feel his anxiety growing. What if this didn't work? Think, what had Viktor done? Viktor had drained him ... completely.

“I can't ... feel ... Please, Julias ... I'm ... scared...”

Jack started to shake. The blood wasn't flowing anymore. He sucked forcefully now, actively, trying to pull the blood out of Jack's body. No more came. Jack's breath turn into nothing but a cold haze.

“ ... a dream. That's all it is. A dream, Jack. Just a dream. Now I have to wake you up.”

All it took was a slice of his fingertip to cut into Julias's own wrist. The blood didn't come; it fought to stay inside him. He could see it in the cut, refusing to fall free of his skin. He glared at the blood, at the Vitae that kept it within. All or nothing, Julias. Just another step toward damnation.

He placed his wrist against Jack's mouth.

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~~Jack~~

Jack woke up screaming.

“God! Oh god!” He looked around in a panic. Couch. There was a couch. Paintings on the wall. Even a giant window. Julias's place. He looked around some more. There was Julias, standing behind the counter of his kitchen. His face was a weird mixture of relief and pain, Jack had to guess.

The throbs hit him hard, and Jack fell off the couch to his knees.

“Oh god, Julias! What the fuck ... what the hell is going on.” He looked to Julias in panic, but the tall man was just standing there, watching and waiting. “Julias! Come on, what ... oh fuck. Oh fuck was it all a dream? Did...” With trembling hands, Jack sat back and looked down at his clothes. They were still soaked in blood.

“It wasn’t a dream,” his friend said.

“What the fuck Julias!?” Jack raised his shirt to look at his stomach. His abdomen was covered in his blood, but the wounds were closed. Not healed over. Just closed. They should still be bleeding, but as far as he could tell, they’d stopped. “What’s going on? I can’t ... what the fuck is going on!?” Jack crawled forward until he was on his knees, and forced himself to standing.

It didn’t last long. He reached out to grab one of Julias’s stools, but fell with a hard thud to the floor. He clutched at his stomach again. There was a weird mixture of pain, but also a hunger pang. A deep hunger pang that was well into the pain realm too.

“Here. Drink this.” Julias came over to him and knelt beside him with his glass of red in hand.

“... you’ve ... never offered me a drink before.” Jack looked between his friend and the drink. The deep red was oddly alluring. Normally it never seemed appetizing, but with it right there in front of him, he had to admit, he wanted a sip.

“I’ll explain everything, don’t worry. Come on, drink.”

With a sigh of relief, Jack reached out. His hands were still bloody, and now that Julias was so close, he couldn’t help but notice the huge stains of blood in his suit as well. Drink though. Julias said drink, so he’d drink.

The first sip was strange, to say the least. Was that metal? The thickness poured over his tongue, and he just had to take a second to let it coat his taste buds. Damn what a taste. Sips soon turned into gulps, and he drank down the glass entirely. It was euphoric. He could feel it in his belly and spreading out, making him feel warm.

“Wow ... this is ... really good.” Jack had to laugh at how the drink managed to make him forget about his current predicament. “I don’t normally drink wine. What’s it called?” The hunger pangs subsided, at least a little.

“Later,” Julias said. Jack squinted at Julias before his smile faded. Julias was frowning.

“Ok, ok ... so, what’s going on? I remember ... some woman, and then ... a knife.” After handing back the empty glass to Julias, Jack reached down and pulled up his shirt again. He felt his muscles, his abdominal muscles, where the knife had punctured him. He could feel the holes, tiny little vertical slits just enough for his fingers to catch against subtle indents, but the wounds were closed for the most part.

If there was one way he was going to die, it’d be getting stabbed by some beauty in a dark alley.

“This can’t be real, Julias. What the fuck is...” Julias had stood up and offered Jack his hand. Jack took it, and slid onto the stool. As if psychic, Julias was already pouring him another glass of red.

“It’s very real. Here,” Julias said, and put the glass straight into Jack’s hand. Jack drank the newly found, delicious sin with fervor. He almost growled into it when the thick liquid started to coat his throat.

“So, what? What happened? I got stabbed, Julias! I got stabbed a fuck load of times. I’ve read enough to know what extreme blood

loss is like.”

“Yes. You were bleeding to death. You had minutes to live.”

“Well then what the fuck!”

Jack was stuck somewhere between panic and joy. He should be dead, but he wasn't. He could see the blood all over him, all over his best friend, but he was still alive. It was obviously the same night; the blood on him wasn't completely dry yet.

Julias sighed and sat down on a stool across the counter. Since when did Julias look so pale? Jack had to give him a few double takes to see it, but there it was. His skin was white, and thin.

“Check your pulse.”

“What?”

“Check your pulse, Jack.”

“I can't take a shower first? I mean my god look at us, we're—”

“Check. Your. Pulse.”

Jack grew quiet. Julias was staring at him, with steel eyes and dead calm look. Dead was an understatement. He'd never seen Julias look so ill.

With an annoyed sigh, Jack put his index and middle finger to his wrist.

“... um ... hold on, hold on.” He put the same fingers against his upper neck, near the jaw. “... hold on, hold on.” He put his hand over his heart. “Julias ... where's my pulse?” Jack cracked a worried, fake smile at his friend, but Julias just shook his head.

“I didn’t think you’d remember. You were low on blood, and ... most Kindred never remember being embraced. Not with any clarity.”

“Kindred? Embraced? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“What do you feel, Jack? Inside, right now, what do you feel?” Julias’s stare was stone and more than a bit unsettling. Jack couldn’t help but lower his gaze at the intensity of it.

“I feel ... I don’t know. Just ... I feel ... hunger.”

“Anything else?”

“I don’t know what you mean, dude. I just ... I feel...” He had to take the time to think about it. That throbbing ache in his stomach, in his whole body was subdued but there. There was a strange anxiety mixed with fear and rage, but that had always been there, right?

Jack took a step back. No, it hadn’t always been there. He had trouble looking Julias in the eyes now; he never had that before, not like this. A part of him tingled with the fear of it, the fear of ... Julias? A part of him was itching to run too. A part of him really, really really ... really wanted to tear into something and eat.

A towel hit him in the face.

“Go wash up, get the blood off of you, and take a long look in the mirror.”

---

Since when had he been this skinny? Jack couldn’t help but stare down at his body while the water of the shower washed the blood from his skin. He could see the stab wounds, closed, and he managed a small smile at the sight of his abs. Julias had been forcing him to eat right and exercise for five years now, and it

certainly paid off. Despite his small size, he was a lean and tough little thing, and he ran his fingers up his abs to feel them, and the multitude of stab wounds that still marked them.

But he wasn't just lean anymore. He was thinner. His stomach was pulled in just slightly. His skin was thinner, and paler too. Well that made sense, he had just lost an insane amount of blood. But then, how the hell was he still standing, and moving around as if perfectly fine? He could see the stab wounds like he was some recently stabbed, embalmed corpse.

And that hunger, that hunger wasn't going away. It ached inside him, and not just in his gut. He could feel it coursing through his limbs. He could feel ... something inside him, clawing at him. Something inside was fighting him.

Eventually he got out of the shower, and stood in front of the mirror. He wiped away the moisture with a nearby towel, and let the vapors fade away with the turning ventilation. Slowly, his face came into view.

“Oh my god...” He put a hand against the wall and leaned in close. What the hell happened to his face? His face was pale like the rest of him. His eyes had no sparkle. Everything seemed so ... still. So dead.

“ ... dead. Oh my god. Oh my god oh my god oh my god.” Jack spun around and scampered to gather the clothing Julias laid out for him. He struggled to get on his boxers, and his pants came on one leg at a time while he tried to get the bathroom door open. His efforts earned him a hard land on his side and arm in the hallway, and Julias leaned around the hallway from his stool in the kitchen to peak at him.

“Dead! I'm dead, Julias! What the fuck! I'm a zombie. I'm a god damn zombie! Oh my god oh my god oh my god.” Jack didn't even

try to get up. He just lay there, half naked with his pants only on one leg and his hands on his face.

“Figured it out did you?”

“How can I be a zombie? What the flying shit god damn fuck, Julias! Zombies aren’t real.”

“You’re not a zombie.”

“What?”

Julias gave a sigh and walked over to Jack with a reached-out hand. The big guy pulled him up and, with a half-smile, helped Jack sit down so he could put on his pants.

“You’re not a zombie. You are dead though.”

“I, I... “ Jack had to take a moment to breathe. Breathing didn’t seem to do much though. The little man let his head fall and his chin land in his palms with his elbows on the counter, before his head slid further and his eyes planted in his palms instead. Breathing wasn’t doing anything.

“I wasn’t supposed to do this to you so suddenly, Jack. I was going to ease you into it, and you were supposed to have the option to say no. I ... you got pulled into this though, and it was either let you die, or turn you.”

“Turn me ... oh god, you...” Jack almost choked on his tongue. He forced himself to raise his head and make eye contact with Julias. The steely gaze, the pale skin. Julias didn’t look like this before, but now he had that same dead look Jack did.

“We’re vampires, Jack.” Julias gave Jack a tiny little smile and exposed a long fang. It wasn’t normally there, but there it was clear

as day on his lip before he hid it in his mouth again. He slid another glass of red toward Jack.

“Vampires. Vampires ... fucking ... vampires.” Jack’s eyes lowered down to the glass. They sank into the pool of it, the swirling mass of its intoxicating appearance. He never cared about the stuff before, and now he couldn’t stop looking at it. “ ... that’s blood isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You gave me blood.”

“Yes.”

“I ... how could ... Julias, I...” Jack pulled his eyes away from the drink with great effort. It looked so fucking delicious. “Julias you fucking turned me into a vampire! And you’re a vampire, apparently. I’m freaking out, ok. I am freaking the fuck out.” Even as he complained and ranted, Jack had to stop to drink that delicious, sweet, fulfilling glass of red. That throb in his stomach wasn’t going away, not completely, but the blood drink was at least suppressing it.

“I know, I know, and I’m sorry. This is never easy for anyone. I ... I couldn’t just let you die, friend.”

“But I am dead!”

“Well yes.” Julias scratched at his suit collar. He was still covered in blood, and Jack had to cringe at the sight of it. All of his blood. “We’re vampires. Kindred.”

“How come I’ve never seen it on you before? You don’t normally look so ... dead.”

“Kindred can perform the blush of life. It makes us look human and function like a human for a little while.”



“So you’ve been a vampire, a Kindred, this whole time? How long? ... how old are you?”

His words hit something sensitive. Julias turned around and reached into his fridge to get another bottle, and poured the two of them another glass. Now Julias was the one who was avoiding Jack’s gaze.

“I was turned during the first world war.”

“The first ... world war ... World War One. Wow.” Jack ran his fingers through the buzz of his hair. “Wow, you’re ... wow that’s old.”

“Joys of being Kindred. You don’t age.”

“Wait, is that why you got me exercising and eating well? You were going to turn me?”

“I was preparing you, yes, but I was never going to force you. I was going to explain everything, and that’s what that business proposition was about earlier. Then I was going to explain what being a Kindred meant. Immortality, but a blood lust, the beast inside, the Danse Macabre, the politics and the other Kindred and the—”

“Dude, dude! I ... ok I am barely keeping it together. I am...” He put his head in his palms again, and let the weight of the insanity pull it down to his elbows. “I just ... I need to think. I need to think. I need to contextualize. I ... you said, earlier today, that my family and friends would think I was dead? That I’d ... be staying here in South Side?”

“Yeah.”

“ ... so my life ... it’s all gone?”

“Yeah...”

Jack had to get up. He left his glass behind and started to pace around with his fingers on his buzzed hair. They both went silent. Jack wanted to pant, but breathing didn't come naturally anymore. All the little fidgets of his body were gone, or at least lessened. He had to make the pacing more frantic, just to make it seem justified.

“So I'm ... immortal now?”

“You won't age, but fire will burn you like dry paper. And ... sunlight will do the same.”

“No sunlight?”

“No.” Julias grimaced with the word.

“Oh god ... so that's ... that's why I can't ever see my family again? My friends?” Jack fell to the couch with his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. He kept looking around, desperate for something to focus his mind on.

“Partially, but also ... that pain in your gut. That's the blood lust, Jack.”

“Blood. I have to drink blood. Fucking god I'm Dracula.”

“Don't say that around the Prince if you want to keep your head ... which losing will also kill you, by the way. But beyond that, you're not going to die. Bullet to the head won't even do it.”

“Oh, that's actually pretty—wait, Prince?”

“Yes, Prince, a ... you'll see. I wanted to turn you because you're my friend ... but also because I need an ally, Jack.” Julias came over to sit down next to Jack, bloody suit and all. The couch was likely

ruined, but Jack figured Julias had enough money to ignore it. Or that the situation made it not worthy of note.

“So we’re not just two blood suckers enjoying eternity, are we?” Jack said.

“No. There are others. I figure there’s over three hundred Kindred here in Dolareido. And there’s a structure to it.”

Holy shit. Three hundred other vampires in the city, with their own structure? Were they all like Julias, with mobster painted on their forehead?

“How come I’ve never heard of this ... any of this.”

“Rule number one, is to preserve the Masquerade. If you tell people about vampires, the sheriff will leave you out for sunrise. You have to do everything you can to make sure people don’t realize what you are. As my new childe, you’re my responsibility, and I will help you as much as you need.”

“Masquerade. Masquerade, got it. I ... think I got it. Rules ... so there’s more than one rule.” Jack turned his head from within his palms to catch Julias in the corner of his eye.

“I know that this all got dumped on you without warning, but it’s not all bad.” Julias got up and started to take off his jacket. “You’re immortal.”

“I ... I guess.”

“I have to shower, then I’ll show you the clothes I’ve prepared for you.” He winced. “Then we’re going to meet Viktor.”

“Viktor?”

“My sire.”

## Chapter 2

~~Julias~~

Julias looked over at his little protege. While Julias had picked his usual favorite clothing, a navy lounge suit, two button, single-breasted with no tie, he felt the little Ventrue would be better off with something a tad bit more professional. First impressions were important. He hooked Jack up with a gray business suit, double-breasted, complete with a white dress shirt and a nice tie.

He had a lot of suits already lined up for Jack. Only the best for his new childe.

The streets were cold. People were walking by in trench coats and furs, but his eyes glossed over them even as their eyes drew to him. Besides being in a suit despite the cold, he was tall, broad-shouldered, and looked almost like a hit man. He knew it too. The kine walking by sometimes stared for a little too long, and he met their gaze with a small, intimidating smile. They looked away.

“Viktor is one of the three elders who lead the Invictus. He is one of the founding members of Dolareido, and has been here for a long, long time. Maria and Michael not as long,” Julias said.

“Maria?”

“Yes, a Nosferatu. That brings up a good point.” He glanced around as they rounded a corner. The streets weren’t entirely empty, but good enough to talk about things quietly. “The clans. I should warn you about them. Differences run in the blood and some of them can be a little ... unsettling.”

“Oh?” Jack’s interest was piqued. The little guy always did have an interest in things most people avoided. It’s how they met, after

all.

“Daeva are fast and strong, and can seduce you with a glance. They are obsessive, materialistic, and concerned only with gratification. They’re almost always beautiful, and they know it.”

“So, like a succubus?”

“Yes, actually. Very accurate parallel. Be especially careful with them, as our Prince is a Daeva.”

“You mentioned Prince earlier. What’s that?”

“Nutshell? She owns the city’s night. She says what we can and can’t do.”

“Scary. She?”

“Prince is a gender neutral title for the Kindred.”

“Oh.”

“Indeed.” Julias gave Jack a quick punch in the arm, and Jack bounced back like always with feigned shocked. “I know you, Jack. Don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong. You have to learn that quick, because Kindred are paranoid predators and they’ll tear you apart and leave you for the sun if they think you’re up to something.”

“ ... very scary.”

“Next. The Mekhet. They are shadows. They see everything and can hide anywhere. Fast too. Good at collecting information.”

“Assassins? They sound like ninjas.”

“Next. The Gangrel. Barbarians in jeans. They are very strong, and very tough. They can be very ... beast-like.” Julias sighed with his

word; he couldn't keep the harsh tone out of them. His distaste for the Gangrel must have seemed obvious. "And then the Nosferatu. They are ... monsters."

Jack turned to give Julias a confused look. Always with the interest in the dangerous things, this kid had. He'd have to work hard to keep his childe from getting himself killed.

"They look like monsters, and they can use that fear against you." Julias pointed to his temple. "They'll fuck your head from the shadows, and are strong as well. You've seen The Phantom of the Opera? Think of Erik."

"Oh, that's ... that's classic tragic. I have to avoid them?"

"Honestly? They're probably the ones you should worry about the least. They're wolves. The others are wolves in sheep's clothing." Julias brought a hand up to his chin and scratched at the gruff. "But they look different, so I felt I should warn you."

"So Gangrel, Nosferatu, Daeva, and Mekhet. And..."

"And us, the Ventrue. We are leaders, rulers, kings and queens. We control, and we cannot be stopped. It's in the blood." He threw Jack a smile, and caught a glimpse of surprise in his childe. Jack had never thought of himself as a leader, Julias knew, but there was a potential in his friend. He could see it, even if Jack and no one else could, and that made him a powerful ally indeed.

"You'll find all five in the Invictus. We are the largest of the covenants here."

"Covenants?"

"Political parties, I guess. We have goals and an organization. It would take a long time to fully explain, but just know the names for now. We are going to see Viktor, Maria and Michael, who are the

heads of the Invictus. There are also the Carthians, the Circle of the Crone, the Ordo Dracul, and the Lancea et Sanctum. The Prince has outlawed the Second Estate, the Lancea et Sanctum though, or at least any overt practicing of their ways.”

“She ... outlawed an entire political party? Dolareido is a dictatorship?”

“A monarchy is the closer example. She has advisers from all practicing groups, but ultimately her word is law.” He took a glance down his shoulder at his tiny friend. This was a huge information dump, but better than letting Jack brood. He’d seen too many freshly embraced brood themselves into suicide. No, this was better. Don’t let him think about how he’d just lost his entire life and now he was going to have to spend immortality never feeling the sun anymore, and always craving blood. He was going to spend every moment of his existence fearing some elder Kindred was going to rip him apart. No reason to ruin what was proving to be a surprisingly smooth embrace, near-death experience aside.

“So ... why? Why all the politics?”

“How else could you keep a bunch of solitary, territorial predators forced to share the same food source from killing each other?”

“I guess, yeah.”

“Good. You got the basics.”

“Basics? How much more complicated does it get?”

Julias just had to laugh. He raised a hand to his face and put his fingers over his smile. He knew Jack would be frowning at him, but that only made him laugh harder. Eventually, Julias put a hand on his friend’s shoulder to steady himself.

“Alright jackass, I get it,” Jack said between clenched teeth.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. While many of the Kindred are new to this, not much older than you even, many are also as old as I. Some far more so. They dig their fingers into people and spin webs of deceit so large, no one can track it anymore. Complicated does not begin to describe it, so make sure you don’t fall into any spider webs. Ah, we’re here.”

The two of them stood before a massive office building. It was monolithic, with indented black valleys up and down its length, while gentle white lights bathed it just enough to be visible in the night. The entrance was multiple massive doorways of reinforced glass, each clean to perfection so Julias could see into the lobby.

“Come. Stay beside me. Speak when spoken to, and address members of the circle only as Your Excellency.”

“Holy shit. This is Xnomina. They’re a massive corporation, Julias! From software to foodstuffs. You fucking tell me...”

“Yes, the Invictus run the company. Macro-level stuff. Come on.” Julias stepped up to the front of the building and opened the door. He’d normally open the door for his friend first, but this place was different. He went in first.

“Mister Mire. The circle is already assembled in the conference room. Please hurry,” the woman behind the counter said to Julias. A Mekhet, the quiet librarian type too, complete with glasses, short black hair, and eyes hard-locked on her laptop. Attractive, but timid. The beast inside him grumbled silently at the sight of her, knowing full well it could destroy her if it wanted to. Julias just smiled at her.

“Thank you Madam Jennings. Oh, and please put Master Jack Terry, my childe, in the system.” Julias motioned to the little Ventrue behind him.

“Master Jack? Oh. Oh! Well, isn’t he ... he’s a tiny thing isn’t he?” Gloria Jennings gave Jack a devious grin as she typed his name.



Predictable. Julias was a tall and built man, and his friend was ... not. Still, he gave Gloria a quiet growl, and she sat upright in her seat and doubled her typing speed.

Julias kept walking. It'd be disrespectful to look back and check on Jack, but he knew Jack would be frowning and glaring daggers into Gloria. He could only hope he didn't try that with Viktor.

The building was empty. Such a massive lobby, but the building was closed during the night, at least to its kine employees. Come nightfall, the building was empty save for the Invictus that had business here. The walls were high and black marble, and elevators lined the sides of the room.

"This way." Julias continued on. Toward the back, there were a single elevator marked with Xnomina X. Julias pressed the open button, and waited.

"So ... we're going up?"

"Yes."

"To the top floor of Xnomina HQ."

"Yes."

"... fucking shit."

Julias took a quick glance at his childe. The poor boy was shaking; his inner-beast was well aware of the danger, even if Jack thought he was just nervous. He'd have to explain the beast to him later when there was time, but he could not keep Viktor waiting.

"Just stay quiet, and only speak if they ask for you to. Be pithy, and respectful. To everyone."

His childe nodded in sync with the ding of the elevator. The two stepped in, and a button press and quiet elevator ride later, stepped into a hallway, and then the conference room.

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~~Jack~~

Jack didn't know fear until then.

It was a large room, modern, with a huge wooden table in the center, and massive windows that overlooked the city night. The ceiling was raised high with an array of LEDs in ornamental patterns, and the floor was the same black marble as everything. It could not have looked anymore like a conference room designed for typical high-level business discussions.

Along the table, a quick glance revealed several objects that looked religious in origin, though he could not guess it. There were also folders, mountains of paper, and pictures of people and things. On the walls, TVs fed streams of data, statistics and telemetry. Some he recognized as stocks and other economy angles, some as crime reports, some as usage statistics on products. It was the head of the Xnomina corporation, and all the power it held. It made it difficult to tear his eyes away.

But what scared him were the people inside it.

There were only three people in the room. The first was a tall man with wide shoulders, and a black suit that might as well have said 'kneel before me' on its breast. Viktor, Jack guessed. His black hair was tied into a ponytail behind his head, and his face was clearly from an older age, despite his youthful appearance. He looked like he could have worn a cape and brandished a rapier, and have pulled it off easily.

Beside him was another man, but this one was dressed to kill. Jack guessed his motifs rather mafia-esque, with blazer suit, open

neck, and a piercing that connected nose to ear by a chain, all under a shaved-head. He was huge. That must have been Michael, the Gangrel.

Then there was Maria. She stood a little short, with a slim and tiny figure. Her hair was long and black over her pale skin, and much of her face was hidden behind it. With her white dress that seemed almost dead to the eye, she looked like a ghost. When she turned to face Jack, he found himself quaking. She didn't just look it, she felt like a ghost too. The air around her was cold — he could feel it from well over by the door — and bits of moisture in the air turned to mist around her.

She was Nosferatu.

“Ah, Mister Julias. Come in and introduce your friend.” That was Viktor. His voice was smooth and had some weird mingle of foreign accents, but every syllable was pronounced cleanly. An expert in communications and, by proxy, manipulations, Jack figured. The other two stood there and leveled their eyes on Jack, and he felt even more small than usual.

That new sensation inside him was howling to get away.

“Alder Viktor, may I present Master Terry, my childe.”

“I did not realize that it would be happening so soon,” Viktor said, and started to walk toward the small Ventrue. Jack did not look him in the eye, and decided it'd be best to keep his head down entirely. He gave a small bow.

“There were unexpected developments, and I was forced to embrace him early. He'd been stabbed.”

“Was he now?” This time it was the Nosferatu Maria who spoke up. Jack could feel the chill in his spine when her hoarse, raspy voice hit him. If someone had been thrown into a basement and left

to die without water, he figured there final words would have sounded kinda like that.

“Yes. I believe it was Rebecca,” Julias said. Funny, Jack thought he could hear a moment’s hesitation in his friend’s response.

Alder Viktor, whatever Alder meant, walked up to Jack and looked down at him. Down didn’t do it justice. It was a king looking down at his servant’s servant. A god looking down at a pleb. He smiled, but Jack dared not look any higher than to see his lips and fangs.

The amount of body language reading was overwhelming. It was business, and he knew business, but these gods were all looking at him, and even a child would have noticed how they were thinking thirty steps ahead, purely on how he moved or didn’t move.

“I am sorry, Master Terry, that your embrace had to be handled so callously. I am sure Mister Mire did what had to be done to save your life. Tell me, what do you remember of who attacked you?”

The gods wanted him to speak. Fuck.

“... your Excellency, I remember ... a woman of similar height to myself, with red hair,” he said with lowered head. His voice wavered, and he could barely hear himself. He was sure he could hear Michael suppress a chuckle.

“That does indeed sound like Rebecca.” Viktor turned and paced before Jack and Julias. His hands had slipped behind his back, fingers netted, and his face was hardened into a small grimace. “A dangerous accusation. We’ll take it into consideration. In fact, it may have had something to do with your mission, Mister Mire.”

“Mission, Alder Viktor?”

“Yes, it ... perhaps you should send your childe home. We have business.” Viktor slowly lowered his gaze down to Jack, and the

little boy averted his eyes with a snap. If he could avoid eye contact for the night, maybe he'd come out in once piece. He could still feel that thing inside him, something new and unbridled, demanding he escape these titans.

With a nod, Julias put his hand on Jack's shoulder and escorted him out of the room, before closing the doors behind them. They stopped in front of the elevator, and Julias turned Jack to face him.

"That went well," Julias said.

"It did? I got kicked out. That lasted a whole two minutes." Jack squirmed as they waited for the elevator. Some idiot must have called it back down, and now they had to wait, with those terrors behind him.

"Trust me Jack, that was a good first impression. Now, take the elevator back to the lobby and just head back to my place. Drink more of the blood I have in the fridge, and wait for me."

"How long you going to be?" Jack said.

"Don't know, but—" The ding of the elevator interrupted him. "Just get home quickly, and drink as much blood as you want. I really shouldn't just be abandoning you on your first night like this, and Viktor knows it. If he's got something I need to do now, it's important."

"Are there things I should be worried about on my first night?"

"Not if you just get back to my place quick and stay inside my apartment. I'll catch up with you later."

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~~Julias~~

The building was already on fire.

“Oh shit. God ... fuck.” Julias stood at the edge of the building, just some run down old apartment building in the old district, but the flames it gave off were starting to rise. He couldn't go rooting through the building's rooms, he'd be ash in seconds, but Viktor wanted that data and supposedly it was in there.

He paced from side to side and looked through the windows. No fire alarms were going off; the building must have been abandoned. Probably condemned. The neighborhood was in the factory district, old and filled with typical lowlife. He wouldn't feed off these streets. And it meant it'd be a while before the police department showed up.

Which meant he had time. The fire was filling the front windows, but around back and behind maybe there was still time. Behind it, the parking lot was empty save for some broken cars and shopping carts, and the backs of other buildings that surrounded the block in the typical dead-city fashion. It was the sort of place he expected a Nosferatu would hang out to feed.

Third floor, apartment 35. Viktor had said a Mekhet would be there, some no-name with sensitive data. Data his master wanted. But now the building was on fire, and the whole thing stank of ash, chemicals, and unlikely coincidence.

The back door to the old building was broken off its hinges, and the fire hadn't done it. In fact, the back of the building was still mostly intact. He stepped up to the door and took a long sniff of the air, but only managed to get smoke. There was movement ahead though, someone else, some short person in a trench coat. They were trying to get up the stairs, but flames blocked their way.

“Rebecca.”

The Daeva turned around. Her speed was a blur, like it was just innate to the she-demon to move with such swiftness. She dug the balls of her feet into the flooring, and growled back at him.

He hated that she was so damn gorgeous. A somewhat petite woman with long red hair and blue eyes, she had the look of a lounge singer, and even her trench coat had that Daeva fashion sense. Classy, sophisticated, but luxurious.

“Julias. Setting fire to the building? I must admit, that’s pretty smart.”

She was accusing him of setting the fire. That meant she hadn’t done it, or was just trying to trick him.

“You stabbed my friend.”

“Ah yea, the boy ... stabbed, but not dead then? So you had time to turn him? Ah well.” The bitch gave a shrug, followed with a devil smile. Flames burned behind her, easing up and devouring the wallpaper, but she didn’t seem phased. “I should have just stabbed him in the face.”

He growled right back at her as the beast within his ribs clawed at his insides for blood. He was going to enjoy ripping her into a fleshy mess and leaving her for the flames. There was no escape, as his body was broad enough to cover the small doorway, and Rebecca knew it. Try as she might to be confident, he could see her eyes glancing around and looking for an exit. It was only getting hotter.

“Here for the data too then?” she said.

“Of course.”

“You even know what’s on it?”

“Do you?”

“Of course,” she said, and gave him a wicked grin. “Tony isn’t Viktor.”

“Then by all means, share with the class.”

“No.”

He thought he'd have learned by now, but no matter how many times it happened, he always underestimated Rebecca. Her fist smashed into his chest, hard, hard enough to break bones and send him stumbling back. She was such a tiny thing, but she was a Daeva, and that meant she was fast and damn strong. He'd managed to get one of his hands onto the door frame though, just in time to block the doorway when she tried to get past him.

It felt really good to crack her in the face with his knuckles. She rolled back onto her ass, but was on her feet in just a second. To his satisfaction, he could see how his punch had dented in her cheek; the bone underneath was damaged, and the fire was growing behind her.

“Get out of my way, Invictus.”

He grinned and stared down at her. “No.”

“Move! The sun is coming up soon. We'll both die here.”

“Maybe. I'd really love to make sure you burn first though.”

Her Daeva beauty faltered for a moment when she screamed death upon him. She lunged at him, but this time she brought out her knife mid-flight. He'd forgotten about the knife.

Even as a Kindred, a knife was not something to ignore. The feeling of it cutting open his stomach was painful, but his vampire body would not let his blood escape through the wound. He took the opportunity to reach out and take her neck with both hands, and squeeze.



Crack. Crunch. Her neck began to collapse inward under his large grip. It wouldn't kill her, but she wouldn't be able to do much if her neck and spine were a crushed mess. Her eyes bulged in panic, and she sliced at him several more times, but only cutting skin deep. She bared her teeth at him, and raised her hand into the air.

The knife went cleanly into his face. She'd stabbed him under the cheek, likely aiming for his temple and missing, and the metal pushed through the upper half of his jaw to come out the other side of his face. He was no Daeva wimp, he was a Ventrue, and no Ventrue would stop simply from a knife through the face. He continued crushing her neck, and jerked his head about to dislodge her grip until her hands grabbed his wrists. She wasn't strong enough to escape this. He knew it. She knew it.

"You tried to kill my friend. You failed." He threw her weight against a nearby wall, but held onto her neck hard enough that he heard bone snap. The heat was rising, fire danced up the old furniture and dirtied carpet, and smoke clouded the air. "I'm going to break you until you can't move, and then I'm going to toss you into the fire."

This time he smashed her down against a nearby table. Everything in the building was so old and worn, it gave way without resistance, so the girl crashed into the floor with wide eyes. Her hands reached out in obvious panic, and Julias glared down at her with enough rage that he could feel it coursing through his fingers. More things went pop in her neck. Her fingers found something on the floor, but he didn't care. She was dead.

By the time he'd realized what Rebecca had grabbed onto, it was too late. The crashing force of a hammer to his skull knocked him to the side, his grip lost and his balance gone.

"Fucking hell—"

She hit him again. And again. He could feel his skull cave inward under a flurry of blows from the hammer — a mallet, it looked like — before the heating floor rose up to meet him. Then, blackness.

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~~Jack~~

Jack had no idea blood could be so warm.

What happened? He was on a rooftop, that much was clear, and from what he could see, he was at least ten stories up. A quick glance over the edge, complete with some vertigo and mild dizziness, confirmed his suspicion. Julias's place was only a few blocks down the street; he recognized some of the buildings even from the weird angle.

There was blood on his lips, his chin, even his neck. It'd been warm only seconds before, so warm, but now in the cold night and on his cold body, it was just as cold. The sweet, sweet taste of it was on his tongue, and the tingling bliss it filled him with rippled out into his limbs from his core. It was just like Julias's drink, but a thousand times more powerful. The hunger was gone, and he felt like he could take on the world.

The corpse behind him made him want to puke.

There was no ladder to get up this high. He must have climbed it. He didn't remember climbing the building, or who this person was. They were dead though, and their eyes weren't closed. They were just staring up at nothing, with the person's face frozen in a terrified expression.

He walked over to the body. A woman. She was in a coat, a few of the buttons torn off, and a business suit underneath. She looked maybe forty, but he couldn't tell. Nothing looked right. There was no subtle movement to her lips or eyes. No blinking. It was like some uncanny valley. With a shaking hand, he reached out to touch

her face. Cold. A mess of red was around her neck, staining her blond hair, and the puncture wounds were obvious and messy. The flesh wasn't just punctured, but ripped and torn, like some animal had bitten her neck and thrashed.

She had a wedding ring.

"I ... I don't..." He fell back onto his butt, and sat there. There was a corpse in front of him. Her blood was on his lips. When he buried his face in his hands, fuzzy images of screams, walls, and darkness crept up on him.

The shaking started. He dragged his fingers down his face and stared at the woman, even as every second made him want to wrench his guts out. His body fought against the urge; it demanded blood. The thing inside him, that hidden thing clawing at his ribs was satisfied and would not let it go, no matter how much he wanted to puke it out. Jack could only hug himself tighter.

"She's dead. She's dead. She's dead." More memories sneaked their way into his consciousness. He'd been on the street, and he'd been hungry. Overwhelmingly hungry. He was supposed to get back to Julius's and have some of his blood drink, but he couldn't wait anymore. That thing inside him, it ... it demanded blood. It just demanded it.

"I did this. Fuck ... fuck..." That barrier between reality and acceptance came crumbling down, bit by bit. Not just a corpse, not just a blood bag. This woman was married. She had a family. She had a life. Her blood had been so warm. "God ... fucking ... damn it."

He sat there and cried for a while in the dark, until the woman was paler than even him. How long until sunrise? A part of him thought about just waiting it out and letting the sun take him, but the thought quickly passed. Suicide was a coward's way out. He killed someone. He had to accept that. He had to ... deal with that.

“Shit. The Masquerade.” The puncture wounds on her neck were obvious. No one would have mistaken this for anything but what it was: a vampire attack. “I ... fuck. Run. Run I could run. I could leave! Viktor couldn’t find me. I could hide and...” Only the dead quiet of the corpse in front of him answered. He couldn’t hide, not from Viktor, not from Xnomina. Where the fuck could he run? Sunlight would kill him!

And even if he did run, this corpse would end up on the news, and the puncture wounds in her neck would lead to all sorts of media sensationalism about vampires, warranted or not. Then Julias would have to pay for his mistake. He couldn’t do that to Julias.

“I ... have to ... deal with this.”

Easier said than done. He leaned over the woman — the body — and put a hand over her face. Closing her eyes did not feel natural. How many movies had he seen where they closed the person’s eyes? But he couldn’t let her ... let it see him do what he needed to do. Couldn’t let it watch.

He pulled out a knife.



~~Julias~~

Blood. There was blood being forced into his mouth. Julias didn’t think twice about it and opened his mouth wider to let the sweet nectar flow down his throat.

The revitalizing power of fresh human blood always astonished Julias. He could feel his stomach reseal, his gashes close, and his skull begin to reform. His left eye returned, and with it did his eyesight, though he could still only see darkness. He must have been underground. Was someone feeding him?

His neck eventually closed and allowed his shriveled lungs to pass air. His voice returned, and he took a few moments to make a grunt or two to test it.

“Where ... where am I?” He tried to move to at least determine his orientation. Snapping to consciousness in the dark gives horrible vertigo. His arms refused to move, but he could feel they were functioning. His legs too did not move either.

“Deep in the South Hill Cemetery. The old catacombs.”

He knew that voice. A woman’s voice. He tried to turn his head to see as his Kindred eyes adjusted, but even they had trouble deep in the dark.

“Catacombs? What ... did you... ?” He tried to move his arms and legs again, and this time the binding chains were apparent. They rattled lightly against the hard floor from his attempts to dislodge them, and even his healed body could not free them. They weren’t there for kine, they were for Kindred.

“Julias Julias Julias. You don’t recognize my voice? I’m hurt.”

His head raised at the sound of a thud and clattering of what he had to guess was bone. A stairway showed just the hint of candlelight from a room above, and a stairway connecting them. A corpse was strewn across its steps now.

He sighed. The blood had to come from somewhere.

“You’re ... Beatrice.”

“Ah, I am so glad you remembered.”

He almost gasped when the Kindred crawled onto his body, silent as a snake. She straddled him and smiled in the dark, even as her hands dragged up and down his bare chest. Bare?

This close, he could see more of her features in the dark, and combined with memories, managed to piece together what she looked like. He remembered her claws, long and unnatural. He could see her raven hair that reached her shoulders and framed her face. He could even see the odd green of her eyes and the black slits within them, like a reptile's.

With a chuckle, the Nosferatu brought a candle out and lit it with a strike of a match, and immediately the image was completed for him. She was tanned, for a vampire, and her features were almost predatory in how they highlighted the sharp, piercing gaze of her serpent eyes. She had an average height, but with a body built for flexibility and strength both. She was wearing jeans with a white tank top, and her midriff was completely exposed to show her rather impressive low bodyfat. She wore no bra, and the tight top highlighted her defined torso and pert breasts.

If he didn't know better, he'd think she was showing off. He remembered her though, at the last meeting they saw each other years ago. Nosferatu. She wasn't showing off, she just didn't care.

"I remembered you of course, Mister Julias Mire. Always in such a nice suit like a typical Ventrue. I think that Daeva ruined this one though." She let out a playful laugh and brushed aside remnants of his shirt to expose his chest.

Her laugh was what brought a quick shock back to his system. While her mouth seemed perfectly normal at a glance, past either side of her lips she carried an array of massive crocodile teeth that hooked outside of the jaw and cheek, instead of being hidden within human cheeks. When she opened her mouth, she opened it like a crocodile did, and exposed the myriad of teeth she carried. Perhaps that's why she kept her hair framed around her face, to hide her teeth, if only a little?

"I, what ... you ... you saved me?"

“Yes, I did. Brought you here last night, before the sunrise. You should thank Mr. Dunferl over there for his blood,” she said with a gesture to the corpse on the stairs behind them. “He wasn’t very willing at first, but then I made him relive his worst nightmare. Dark, dirty man.” She put a claw to his lips. “I remembered you didn’t like killing innocent kine, so I made sure to find one you wouldn’t mind disappearing.”

Last night. Shit. Jack would be wondering where he’d gone, or worse, something could have happened to him too.

“ ... thank you.”

“Don’t mention it Superman. Now you owe me one.”

“I see. I do indeed ... is that why I am tied up?” He looked to the binding metal on his left and right wrists.

“No. That’s so you can’t get away while I torture you. The Carthians caught wind Tony was checking something out, something important enough to send Rebecca. Then, funny enough, I found you.” She traced her claws up and down his chest again, and let them dance along the indentations of his broad muscles. Having just drank blood, his body was fueled and feeling the blush of life, and her claws on his skin proved strangely stimulating. “I saw an opportunity. Rebecca bashed your head in good and left you for the sun, or fire.” She snickered. “No one else knows what’s happened to you. I can just leave you strapped here until you tell me what I want to know.”

“I’ll tell you.”

“I’ll start with—wait what?” She sat upright and glared daggers down at him. She even put her hands on her hips, and Julius had to force his lips to not smile at her childish expression.

“I’ll tell you.”

“I heard you! You ... you’re not supposed to just tell me, what the fuck Superman. Resist!”

“I’m sorry? You did save me after all, and there’s little I can do to get out of this situation. Besides, there’s not much to tell. The Invictus wanted me to check out the location for a Mekhet named Vance’s belongings. Apparently he has or knows something we want.” Julias gave a small shrug. “But I imagine you knew all that, otherwise you wouldn’t have shown up at the location as well.”

“Yes. Arg, fuck you you ... fucking Ventrue. You’re not in control here!” She planted both her hands against the stone floor around his head and leaned forward. Her serpent eyes practically glowed, and her mouth opened at the cheeks to expose her assortment of teeth before she closed it. When her mouth was closed, her lips looked perfectly human, until the corners of her lips met with the array of massive crocodile teeth.

“Sorry.”

“And stop apologizing! Fucking Superman.”

The two held eye contact for a moment, and Julias wondered about the Nosferatu before him. Her green, serpent eyes were gazing down at him with enough predatory fervor that the beast in him was trapped in a strange mix of fright and intrigue. She really was beautiful, but her crocodile mouth couldn’t be hidden even with her black hair trapped over the sides of her face. The center part of her mouth though, the human lips, were dark and ... inviting?

It was Jack’s fault. It had to be. Before the kid even knew about Kindred, he was sharing tales with Julias about being attracted to scary women, women in horror stories, women with teeth.

He blamed video games and the internet.



“The fuck are you looking at.” She lowered her gaze further, until their noses were almost touching. “Ladies’ man not used to looking at a chick with teeth? Thought you’d be used to Nosferatu with one of your bosses being one.”

“I am, and she ... looks nothing like you.”

“Sorry not all Nosferatu got the same little quirks.” She opened her mouth wide this time, far wider than a human could, and showed both her array of massive teeth, and a long dark tongue before she closed up. “We can’t all be delicate little flowers for your fucked up Superman save me routine. Don’t think I haven’t seen you in the clubs and bars, seducing soft, gentle girls and giving them a night of passion and romance and a good bye Kiss.”

“I didn’t—”

“Shut the fuck up.” She drove her hand into the stone next to him, literally into the stone, so that her claws sank an inch through the floor. Nosferatu were strong. “Now I’m pissed. Staring at my face like that. I should just rip you to bits right here.” She sat upright onto his pelvis, and Julias bent a little at the hip when her butt landed against his crotch.

Definitely Jack’s fault. It was true about his love for more tender and romantic relations with the kine, but now this Nosferatu was sitting on his crotch and she had the control. She had the body of a warrior gymnast and her jeans and tank top hugged so tight it left nothing to the imagination. Her crocodile smile only drew in his interest, his intrigue, and her serpent eyes ... Try as he might, he couldn’t look away from her face. She really did have nice lips, supple and soft looking, even with her crocodile teeth on either side. She was powerful, scary, monstrous looking, but ... sexy.

Always thinking with your dick, Julias. You’re a Kindred, act like one.

“There you go, staring again. Maybe you won’t stare so much if I— what the fuck.” Beatrice looked behind her, and Julias could only shift in embarrassment at what she found. He’d grown an erection, and it was pressing through his suit’s pants and nudging against her ass.

“Ah, sorry. I just ... the blood you fed me, it’s ... yeah, you know, and—”

She put a hand over his mouth and used her other to gesture around them. “Let me get this straight, Superman. I got you tied up in a fucking catacomb. The shelves here are full of bones. The floor is covered in dust and ash. There is a corpse of a rapist behind us, the one I fed to you. You have a fucking Nosferatu sitting on you ready to rip you apart ... and you get a stiffy.”

“Mmfhmff.”

“Oh I know. You just drank. You get that rush inside you, makes the body quiver and the skin tingle. Makes you feel alive again. It doesn’t give you a fucking boner though, unless...” She removed her hand and leaned toward him again with both her sets of claws against his bare chest. “Does Superman have a dark side?”

“I ... uh...” He didn’t know what to say. This wasn’t exactly a normal situation. He looked around at the room she described, but couldn’t find any explanation beyond the obvious. He had remembered Beatrice from when they met, and hadn’t thought much of it, but now that she was on him and they had a chance to exchange words, there was something about her Carthian punk attitude that was appealing to him. That and her child-of-the-damned aura she was pulling off extremely well. Nosferatu were always good at that.

“Let’s find out.” She gazed down at him and brought up some claws to stroke her neck. The monster was thinking, pondering, but for the life of him he couldn’t guess what. Those snake eyes of her

were looking into him though, and for a moment, he thought she might rip out his insides to see what they looked like. She was getting angrier.

“What ... I mean, what do you want to do, or wish to know?”

“You sleep with women almost every day. You make kine drop their panties at just the sound of your voice, and all without using your abilities. Like a Daeva, they flock to you and gladly sit on your cock and let you drink their blood. I see you do it all the time. You know what I do?” She took her claws and grabbed the collar of his open shirt. “I hide. I blend to the crowd or shadows, and I grab someone unsuspecting and drink them. If I’m feeling angry, I’ll make them relive their worst nightmare, or maybe one of my own. I’ll get into their mind, and from the dark I’ll ruin their lives. Sometimes I kill them, sometimes I don’t.” She shook him hard enough to make his eyes bounce around in their sockets. “And you! You just fucking walk into any public place and let the girls get in line.”

“I’m sorry Beatrice, but ... I know you’ve been around for a while. I thought you’d...” She was really dropping the hammer on him, complete with rage in her voice. The shock was apparent on his face, it must have been.

“Fuck you, Superman. Really, just ... what the fuck. Will you sleep with anything on two legs?”

He frowned up at her. That was too far.

“I haven’t had relations with another vampire in over fifty years, Beatrice.” Other Kindred had no spark, no life, no passions or desires. Just hunger. Beatrice was proving him wrong though, and quickly at that.

“I’d ... I’d thought you...” She leaned down again until her nose was almost touching his. Those teeth were huge. “Then what the

fuck?”

“I can’t be attracted to you?”

“You can say I’d be surprised, yes. Lots of Kindred out there without a shark smile.”

“ ... I like the smile.”

Her mouth opened in a classic jaw drop. He was almost proud of himself for finding the right words to get the power back into his hands. Ventrue habit. It was the truth though, and he did find his eyes drifting between her green serpent eyes and the extra teeth between her cheek and jaw bone. His erection wasn’t going away.

“I’m afraid I have to insist on my freedom. I sired a friend just tonight ... last night, actually. I’m afraid if I don’t get back to him soon, he’ll—”

She put her hand over his lips again.

“You owe me a favor. Right?” she said.

“Mffmf.”

She laughed. Not some sadistic, cruel laugh, or manipulative typical Kindred laugh. The woman laughed. If he didn’t know any better, he thought he might have seen a genuine smile on that crocodile mouth.

“I’m going to let you go, and because you’re such a nice guy, you’re going to come back here next week, and you’re going to do what I ask. Got it?”

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~~Jack~~

Jack woke up in a bed. It was a nice change from the last time he woke up. Comfy sheets, quiet, no pain in his belly or blood soaking his clothes.

With the slow dawn of realization, he sat up. It was Julias's spare bedroom, the one on the same floor as the kitchen and living room. The blinds — apparently on a timer — started to open on their own, and pulled aside to expose the night sky of the city.

When the sun had started to come up the night before, the change was immediate. The exhaustion overwhelmed him, and within moments, he'd collapsed onto the bed with no say in the matter. Thank god Julias's place had timed curtains, or he'd have probably cooked.

So it was the next night. The next night of being a vampire. He looked down at his stomach; those stabs wounds were still there, closed and healed but never fully sealing.

“Still no Julias. I wonder ... if his mission got him...” He shook his head, slapped his own face a few times, and got up. He'd never been in Julias's place without him. Without thinking about it, he walked into the kitchen, poured himself a glass of blood, and sat down on the couch. He'd seen Julias do it a hundred times, and now, it seemed so natural.

He turned on the TV.

“—orpse was found in the South Side docks. Mrs. Pavala's head had been cut from the body, and was found some ways down the docks.”

Next channel.

“Mrs. Pavala's widow is left with two sons and a daughter to care f  
—”

“—r hopes and condolences go out to the Pavala family and their —”

“—horrible, bloodthirsty monster could do such a th-” He shut the TV off, and let his head hang.

There wasn't anything he could do, other than wait for Julias to get back. So he sat there and stared at the glass of red in his hands between his knees. Images of Mrs. Pavala's face — fuck he never counted on learning her name — forced their way into his mind. Cold dead eyes. Warm, tasty, delicious blood.

Nothing to be done but brood, so he just listened to the silent clocks. It wasn't until an hour later that the door opened. Julias walked in, far worse for wear than Jack was. His sire's clothes were ruined, and his face was covered in dirt, ash, and blood.

“What happened to you?” Jack said.

“Rebecca! That she-witch nearly killed me. Left me for the sun.”

“Shit. So she's nearly killed both of us in one night.”

“Yeah. Yeah she did. I'm going to catch that Daeva bitch and crucify her and let the sun eat her. And I'll watch.”

Jack blinked. His sire was pacing around, fists clenched, livid and dripping with fury. His teeth were grinding, fangs bared, and something else. Something inhuman and unseen was coming off of him in waves, like rippling waves of ... of something. Something that shook him to his core.

“I'm sorry,” he said, and after taking a moment to compose himself, he sat down next to Jack. “And you? I just sent you back to my place on the night of your embrace. That is not good form on my part.”

Jack took a moment to look at his friend. Part of him wanted to scream at him, to yell and cry and tear into him and blame him. How dare he leave him alone? He didn't know that the sun would make him pass out, he didn't know about feeding on living humans, and ... he didn't know about whatever it was that took control the night before.

So he just turned on the TV.

“—hunt for Mrs. Pavala's killer continues. Coroners say it has been one day since her body was dumped into the water, and that she died of bloodless before her mutilation. Please be warned, the following scenes are quite graphic.”

Julias turned it off, and stared at him. Jack could only maintain eye contact for a couple seconds before he had to look away. He could feel himself trying to cry, but the tears didn't come; corpses don't cry.

“I ... I am so sorry Jack. I ... Viktor ... I...” He stopped. He probably figured words wouldn't mean anything. He figured right. “Did you ... lose control?”

“Yeah. Seems that way.” He forced his voice to not break. He was already sobbing, a voice crack was not what he needed right now, so he just sipped his blood.

“The beast. That thing you feel inside you. If you don't feed for a long time, it ... it takes control. It shouldn't have happened so soon, but ... maybe because you'd been stabbed so much, and had to heal, it...”

“There's a beast inside me?”

“All of us.”

“Wonderful.” He took another sip of his drink, and wiped away at his eyes. No tears, but it felt like there should be. “I had ... had to get rid of the body.” The body. Say it. The body. “Had to get rid of it, and hide that she’d been ... bitten.”

“I can’t even ... you did the right thing, Jack. Always preserve the Masquerade. But it should never have gone down like this. This is all my fault.”

“Just tell me one thing. Does drinking someone always kill them?” Am I going to be killing people on a regular basis?

“No, not at all.” The pain on Julias’s face was so blatant, Jack could feel it on his shoulders. “I’ll teach you how to drink someone, the Kiss, and you’ll see it’s not so bad a thing. It can be a great thing even.”

Jack choked on a laugh. “Great thing ... hard to see that side right now.”

“You’ll see. Really.” His sire stood up, took his drink away, and gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Much as this sucks, this is why I sired you, Jack. You did something god awful, and you took care of it when any other freshly embraced would have just disappeared, or waited for sunrise.”

“ ... yay me.”

“I’m serious Jack. You did good.”

“I killed someone!” He stood up and stared straight up at his sire. The difference in their sizes didn’t matter, the difference in their ages didn’t matter, and all the favors in the world Jack owed Julias didn’t matter. He shoved his friend back and shoved him hard, hard enough that he fell back against the counter harder than he’d ever have been able to shove him were he alive. “I killed someone! They’re...”



Julias didn't even fight him back. The big guy just sat down at the counter he'd been pushed against, and listened.

"She's dead."

"I know, Jack, I know."

"I ... I don't..."

"You feel bad you killed someone, even though it wasn't really your fault. Remember that feeling, but don't let it bury you." Julias smiled, walked over to him, and put a hand on his shoulder again, even as Jack sobbed a few more times. "It will keep you human."

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~~Julias~~

There she was, bitch supreme.

Julias stood way up high, a good twenty feet above the unsuspecting kindred. The remains of the fire were barely enough to call a building, but then the abandoned apartment had been rundown and rotting for sometime. At least before it was burned to a crisp. Not many homes remained this close to the factory district, but warehouses remained at large, and Julias kept low upon one's roof. He hated to leave Jack again, but his childe was home, fed, safe, and this had to be dealt with and dealt with now.

Rebecca was dressed in jeans and a hoodie, which were hilariously out of place with her usual attire, the Daeva vixen, but it made it far easier to move about at night, ignored in the bowels of a city like the warehouse district. She was rummaging through the burned wood and blackened furniture for something, but what? The shattered array of ruined beams and barely standing walls were enough to block Julias's view; he'd have to sneak in closer.

It's hard to sneak in a suit, and shoes, and especially when you generally suck at sneaking. The beast in him was not interested in sneaking. It wanted to walk in through the front door and bend his prey's mind to his will like some idiot puppet, but that wasn't going to work. If he wanted what Rebecca had, he'd have to catch her by surprise. Daeva are fast.

He climbed down the side of the warehouse, taking care that each step onto the siding was quiet. He'd have jumped down but shoes landing on asphalt weren't quiet enough, so he climbed. He must have looked hilarious, he imagined, still in his suit but scaling down the side of a building. Once he was low enough, he gripped the side of a window and let himself slide down with gravity, just slow enough to land with only the gentle tap of a shoe.

She was still there, rummaging and digging, but still too far to see with any detail. He knew he wouldn't be able to get closer, but there had to be something. This was the factory district, and there had to be rats.

He took a moment to look around while keeping himself to the dark. Indeed, a rat passed by, no doubt on a journey from one abandoned house to one of the warehouses to scavenge. Pressed to the wall of the warehouse, it stopped to look at Julias, its beady little eyes wide in the dark. Julias looked straight back at it. He could feel the tiny creature's presence, its quick little mind, its silent feet, and its odd intelligence. He could feel every bit of its self-awareness even as the creature lost control of itself.

Then, he could feel it hand itself over to him, and become him.

Now Julias was the one scurrying in the dark. He turned to look at the body of the man slumped against a wall in the dark of the night. His eyes weren't wide or beady, and his suit was indeed hilariously out of place. Now, with a form slick and quiet and

unnoticeable, Julias crawled over the leg of his old comatose body, and scampered toward Rebecca.

“There has to be something,” she said. The red-haired vixen was opening drawers and opening folders, all too preoccupied to notice the little rat. His fur blended nicely into the ash of the burned home, so much that he might as well not have existed as he got closer still. His feet didn’t even rustle the soot beneath him.

She eventually found a box buried underneath more folders.

“Please don’t be locked, please ... shit.”

Shit. She found something. His claws dug effortlessly into the dirt and burnt wood, and he worked his way up a beam to a higher position. Little whiskers tickled the air as he pressed to the wall, but he had to get closer and see what she was talking about. To be silent was effortless, but now that he was above her, he cursed within his little rat mind. He couldn’t see shit; damn a rat’s blurry vision. He could hear just fine though, every little detail.

Minutes went by, then an hour. Tony’s childe continued to dig through the wreckage, and as time went by she only got more and more anxious. Soon she was actually pushing pillars over, lifting objects no young woman should be able to lift, and getting dirtier than any Daeva he’d ever seen bother to get. She could have just ripped the box open, but then, Mekhet were smart. A damaged box could mean ruined contents.

“Come on, he has to ... fuck yes. Finally.”

Rebecca wasn’t stupid though. Or at least, not so stupid as to go shouting to the rooftops what she was doing. She kept quiet and murmured to herself as she worked. And he could hear every word of it. He could even hear the tick of metal opening; she’d found a key.

“Drop location ... North Side ... a month.”

He laughed. Well, a rat didn't laugh, so he let out a tiny squeak of joy. Her quiet muttering was his for the listening.

“Blah blah ... Antoinette's downfall?” Rebecca stood up straight, tensed, and slipped something into her pocket. Then she was gone. Her insane speed combined with his blurry rat vision made following her with eyes impossible.

He didn't need to though. Now he knew what he had to do, and he had one month to do it.

He broke the connection, and the snap back into his own body left a dizzying wave to crash into him. With a groan, he forced himself back to his feet, dusted himself off, and started to walk back home. A whistle had joined his gait, and with his hands in his pockets, he even found a skip in his step. He couldn't stop smiling.

Rebecca would find out he was still alive soon, and it would eat at her how that happened. He definitely needed to thank Beatrice for that. He now knew what Tony and Rebecca were up to, so a failed mission was partially recovered. On top of it all, his friend had nearly died, then killed someone, and yet his friend was now his child, and of his own willpower managed to preserve the Masquerade in the most horrible of situations. Things were bouncing back.

His mind wandered back to Beatrice. The sexy Nosferatu — a paradox he still blamed Jack for — had saved his life and then let him go. He'd misjudged the crocodile-mouth in the past, back when they met at a cross-covenant meeting in the Elysium. That must have been ten years ago.

“Saved my life, let me go ... if Garry knew. Heh.” He laughed. Could he have found a potential ally in her? She was a loose cannon if there ever was one, strong, wild, and brazen. If he gave her the

explosives, she'd probably have blown up the Prince's tower just to watch the fallout.

Whatever her plan was for him, he did owe her. And for the first time in decades, he had no idea what sort of favor this Kindred he owed would ask for.

He found himself looking forward to it.

## Chapter 3

The next week went by in a blur. Jack couldn't have imagined the amount of details he'd have to learn just to get a grasp for his new world, or the amount of work he'd have to do to be able to make his old life gone.

The first night was spent organizing enough hints to suggest to his family that he'd been killed, and that there was no body to find. Vague bits of evidence left that lead to reports of kidnapping and murders. He'd watched his family during the night then, through windows and from trees. He watched them monitor the news with crying eyes, and watched them hug each other until they crumbled.

He never thought of himself as a family man, but seeing his mom die a little inside nearly broke his resolve. Thrice, his sire had to stop him from walking in on his family and proclaiming he was still alive. He was allowed only one trip to his tombstone, lest he risk someone recognizing him.

During all this, he was haunted by the face of Mrs. Pavala. Julius told him to accept it and move on, that he had to work past it. Don't look up any pictures of her family. Don't look into how her husband's doing. Don't stare at that one picture of her the news had of when she was smiling. Of course he did all these things, and slowly dug himself a hole that took every bit of energy he had to dig himself out of.

It was a painful couple weeks of misery and self loathing. Every brooding cliché he could think of, he experienced. Staring in the mirror, breaking dishes, crying over photos of his family, and everything in between. But, with a little time, the pain faded.

Next, he had to learn about being a Kindred.

“Normally,” Julias said, “when you want to drink someone, or Kiss them as we call it, you can either subdue them physically or use your disciplines.”

“Disciplines?”

“Abilities of the blood. You’ll learn about those later.”

The two of them were walking around outside, middle of the night, in a graveyard nearest Julias’s place. It was a rich person’s graveyard, with everything in a neat row and all the mausoleums in prime condition. Even the fence that surrounded the place was massive, Gothic, and well maintained.

“So I can just ... pin someone down?”

“Indeed.” Julias made a grabbing motion with his arms. “You can hold someone easily, and then bite into them. Control yourself, control them, and they will succumb to the Kiss. It will immediately sap their energy.”

“Like ... a snake bite.”

“No. The Kiss will not only be the best feeling you’ve ever had, but if you do it gently, it can be amazing for the person you bite too.”

“ ... come again?”

Julias came over to him, hands in pockets, and walked side-by-side with him between the tombstones. “Romantic vampire trash novels? Not entirely unfounded. A kine — human — being Kissed is more or less trapped in a state of orgasmic bliss, if you do it subtly. Gently.”

“Oh. That...” As much as his last feeding experience still left haunting pain in his gut, he had to admit the idea of a pleasurable vampire bite was rather enticing.

“Make no mistake, a Kindred lives for the Kiss. A hundred years from now, it will be the thing that makes you wake up for night, spawn an empire, have a harem of ghouls, and much more.”

“Are you serious? I’m dealing with people like Viktor, gods basically, who are motivated only by their hunger?”

Julias chuckled and patted him on the shoulder. It got under Jack’s skin, and Julias knew it. He’d make sure to find a way to get Julias back later.

“When you’ve got a proper taste for the Kiss, you’ll understand. The Prince rules Dolareido, hundreds of Kindred, with an iron fist and an unbreakable will, because it means she gets to live a long life filled with the Kiss.” Julias leaned back onto a tombstone and put his hands against it to balance himself. “I know your first time was horrible, and a blur, but when it’s done right, it ... makes this unlife worth it, Jack. It really does.

“Someday even, you may have your own ghoul. A person you can feed on whenever you want.” He grinned a knowing grin at Jack, and the small Ventrue quirked a brow at him.

“Ghoul?”

“When you have the strength to hold one, you can feed your blood to a human, one who is healthy and alive. They will, as long as you continue to feed them regularly, no longer age. They’ll be stronger, faster for it, and they’ll be your loyal servant. A Kindred-blood-addicted servant.”

“I’m ... not sure I’d want a blood-addicted servant.”

Julias nodded back at him and stroked at his chin. “Me neither. I’ve never created a ghoul. When you’re strong enough to take care of yourself, don’t think you can’t have one just because I don’t. Just



make sure to talk to me first. They're not only very valuable tools, but they can be good friends too."

"You sound like you know some ghouls."

"I do. So do you."

"I do?"

"Indeed. You may even see some you recognize at the ball tomorrow."

"Ball? Ball what ball? You never said anything about a ball."

"The ball I'm taking you to tomorrow." Julias chuckled and winked at him. His sire was a nice guy, but manipulation and deceit came to him as second nature.

"I'm going to a ball?"

"Yeap."

"... to a ball."

"Yeap."

"You mean a suit, dresses, appetizers—"

"Hors d'oeuvres."

"Whatever! With ... with all the politics and nuance I don't get?"

"Yeap."

Jack ran his fingers over his buzzed head with a sigh. If there was one way he was going to get himself killed, it was saying something he shouldn't at a ball.

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“I look ridiculous,” Jack said.

“You look like a Ventrue, my good man. A small one, but a Ventrue nonetheless.”

Jack frowned at his sire. They were walking down that same old street, the one that connected to his friend’s apartment complex. The city was way too crowded, even at this time of night, for his sire to bother with a car. A cab was the only viable means of travel.

That or jumping along rooftops, which was perfectly doable to two vampires. Just not good for the rather fancy suits they were wearing. Suits made for a ball, not for business.

“Should I be wearing a mask or something?”

“It’s a ball for ... it’s a cocktail party,” Julias said.

“You most definitely do not wear suits like this to a cocktail party. It’s practically a wedding tuxedo. I think I can feel the souls of the hundred slaves who sacrificed their lives to sew this thing with their blood.”

“That’s how you know it’s quality. Come on.” His sire only smiled at him as he waved down a taxi. “So do you know how to speak at the party?”

“You mean ... don’t?”

“Haha, well ... yeah, I guess. It’s probably a good idea for you to simply not, unless someone talks to you. Viktor, you may greet as Your Excellency, like in the meeting. Maria and Michael, greet as My Lady Turio and My Lord McDonald. Pay attention to how other Invictus talk with each other, and you’ll start picking up on the titles. It’s a game, with rules and implications that you’re good at figuring out.”

“But ... there are so many other Kindred. I didn’t even meet the rest of the circle, and—”

“Viktor, Maria and Michael are a triumvirate. They each have their right and left hands if you will, and many of them have freshly embraced to care for, such as yourself to me. Just stick by me, and you will be introduced to others. To others of similar rank as myself, address as Most Admirable Mister or Madam surname. To others who are young like yourself, you may address as Master or Miss surname. If referring to them but not speaking directly at them, add The at the start of their title.”

“Mister or Madam for people like you, Master or Miss for people like me. Ok, ok.”

“As for people outside the Invictus who are visiting, well...” Julias shrugged and, once a cab had pulled up, he opened the door and stepped in, with Jack to follow. “To the Fall Palace my good man.” The cab driver nodded and started driving without a sound. Apparently this was normal for him. Jack took a moment to look at him with scrutiny.

“Wait, others? Other co—, er, groups will be visiting?”

“You may speak freely. George works for Maria. He knew when to pick us up.”

The human gave a small salute, but otherwise kept driving.

“Oh. Ok, well, um ... others? Like, Carthians or Cronos?”

“The Circle of the Crone has very few members, and never meddle in our affairs. Invictus run this city, with only the Carthians as a thorn in our side, so we invite Garry to our balls to encourage him to join us, or at least mend bridges. Other cities often have a much more violent relationship between the Invictus and Carthians. We do not want that.

“The Prince and her sheriff are of course, also invited,” he added.

“Oh shit. Antoinette and ... Daniel.” Jack shivered in his seat. His sire’s sire’s boss, and her hitman. Julias had sewed a few stories of the nasty hits Daniel had done on unruly Kindred.

“We pay her every courtesy. She lets us run the city, even as she stands as Prince. We dare not risk offending her as she does very little to impede us, and only controls the Kindred in the city to preserve the Masquerade. When she gave Viktor permission for the Invictus to sire someone, he gave that right to me, and I then had to ask her for it personally.”

“Hoops! So many hoops, Julias! Oh fuck, fucking ... ugh.” The small boy leaned his head down and put his elbows to his knees. How was he going to manage all this? One wrong word and he’d be exiled or executed or worse. He couldn’t imagine worse, but he was sure there was worse.

“Refer to her as Your Excellency as well, and you’ll be fine. Come on, you got this.”

The explanations continued. Minor details that he would never remember, but he knew that just hearing them beforehand meant catching onto it faster once he was in the wolf’s den. Jack prayed he’d find another Kindred his own age, someone he could confide in, someone he could open his mouth to and not risk immediate death. Fat chance.

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Very fat chance. The building was something out of the Victorian age. It was a ballroom. A genuine ballroom, complete with a ludicrously massive chandelier, classic paintings of godly figures on the walls, and red-lined chairs on the sides of the immensely tall walls. To its end, two staircases curved upward and joined into a balcony.

Even more intimidating were the people. They were all dressed in clothes that looked like a strange combination of the past and the future. Suits were both fashionable but honorable. Dresses were both frilly and long, but also revealing and sexy. He figured at least a hundred people were standing around, talking with each other over the quiet music of some classical composer he did not know.

Nearly every one of them was a vampire, and the beast in his chest cowered at the sight of it all.

How could there have been so many vampires in Dolareido? And all of them were Invictus. He recognized members of each blood clan, and as he gazed over them, they looked back at him with inspecting eyes. Too many eyes. He found himself paralyzed in the opening archway of the ballroom, suddenly with no idea where to put his hands. A hundred hungry, deadly predators were looking right at him, and more than one of them had that same downcast in their eyes that Viktor and his partners had.

He was just a little minnow in a tank full of piranha.

“Presenting Mister Julias Mire, and childe Master Jack Terry.” A man to the side called out his title to the crowd, complete with a smart phone in his hand. Jack wouldn’t have been surprised if the man had been carrying a parchment of guest names instead.

“Mister Mire! How good of you to join us.” A man, all too similar in Julias in build except for his long, black hair. Another man straight out of a mafia film.

“Mister Vanna. I am glad to see your business venture has gone well. Might I introduce Master Terry, my childe.”

Jack gulped, but managed to make a small bow.

“Master Terry. Fresh to the fold I see? I am delighted to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine, Most Admirable Mister Vanna.” He stood straight again, and raised his head only long enough to glance to Vanna’s eyes. The other Invictus was smiling, and even gave him a wink. He could breathe, or at least would if a vampire needed to. Habits die hard.

“Has the Prince arrived?” Julias asked.

“Fret not, you are safe, the guest of honor should be arriving momentarily though. Come, I bore of this dillydallying. Let us talk business.”

And they were off. Jack did his best to stay behind his sire, but the dancing bodies and the swaying dresses and the lovely music were all such a strange contrast to the reality of it all that he found himself distracted. Maria, he saw in the distance, was not some frightful ghost haunting and killing, but instead wore a white dress that was both long and elegant, and even weirder, the scary Nosferatu was talking with other Kindred. He could tell some of them found the ghost woman unsettling, but they talked to her nonetheless. It was a den of monsters.

He half expected to find a dining table with a naked woman’s body on it, and drink taps plugged into her wrists.

A group of men and women were circled in the center of the floor, and of them Jack recognized the other of the inner circle, Michael. He too was wearing a beautiful suit that was odd to see on so beastly a man. They were chatting, using words in contexts he did not understand. Angel? Red book? Monomacy? Valea? He dared not ask anyone, but if he could remember to ask Julias later, maybe he could get somewhere.

There were other freshly embraced as well. Paiges of their Invictus sires like him, so he was told. They were nervous too, but many of them stood side by side with their sires, instead of behind. Most were tall, proud looking, with great bodies and intelligent eyes.

They were doing as he was, absorbing information, saying less than they knew so as to never leave an opening, and to always find a step up without exposing their flank.

Even the kids were learning to dance the Danse.

“Mister Mire. Welcome.”

Jack froze, but forced himself to look in the direction of the voice. Viktor came walking down from the balcony, and many of the party stopped talking to look to him.

He was a king and a tyrant in a suit. The black ensemble looked like something one would wear to an opera, but with the streamlined adaptations of the future. He knew Viktor to be a powerful, old beast, and guessed someone else had picked his wardrobe. They'd done their job well, as what might as well have been an emperor stepped down to join them. Viktor, like many of the Ventrue, was tall and well built, and his long black hair was tied into a ponytail. Jack could not have felt more out of place with his buzzed head.

“Alder Viktor, I am glad to have made it. I see Mister Tones of the Carthians has joined us,” Julius said, and made motion to the one Viktor had been talking to on the balcony. It was for Jack's sake more than anyone else's, and Jack thanked his sire with a small nod before looking up to see the man. Garry Tones did not look good in a suit, and was clearly uncomfortable, but just a glance at him made Jack nervous. He was normal height, shaved head, with a hard jaw and a fighter's body. The Gangrel leader of the Carthians looked like he was raised fighting on the streets.

Jack expected dynamite to have longer patience than Garry, by the looks of him.

“Mister Tones and I were discussing the growing incidence of our neonates becoming violent with each other. Conflicts are to be

expected. Violence that is a blatant threat to the Masquerade is to be punished.”

“Of course, Alder Viktor, I—”

“I know you to be of sound mind, Mister Mire, as well as Mister Vanna. You, my Master Terry, are you of sound mind? Would you thoughtlessly pick fights with a random Carthian, in hopes of boast?”

Viktor, Julias, and Vanna all looked at him expectantly. It wasn't just the four of them that were silent, nearby Invictus were listening and watching now too, and Jack found himself the center of attention of at least thirty members, even paiges who glanced between each other in shock. Apparently, his predicament was unique.

“ ... Your Excellency, I would not stir trouble that was not worth its price, and nothing is worth risking the Masquerade,” Jack said, and dared not raise his eyes above Viktor's shoes.

The other Invictus smiled and nodded to each other, and Viktor, if the movement of his shoes was any indication, seemed pleased by Jack's response. He used the correct address to his superior, he upheld the value of the Masquerade, and he made it in the context of business. Point for you, Jack.

“Well spoken Master Terry. The Invictus do not waste resources on pointless acts of pride. The First Estate was not built on juvenile jousts.” He gave a nod, and went on his way. The crowd returned to its chitchat, and Jack more than once heard his name. Not exactly the way he wanted others in the Invictus to learn about him, but not bad at all.

“Well spoken indeed, Master Terry.” Vanna gave him a small nod and walked after Viktor to join in whatever conversation they had planned.



Once Jack glanced back to his sire, Julias gave him a grin. Jack couldn't help but grin back. This wasn't so bad.

“May I present Alder Antoinette, Prince.”

Jack turned at the sound of the announcer. Alder Antoinette? The Prince wasn't Invictus. But then, Julius said she was regularly invited, so perhaps she liked to play to their etiquette?

When the crowd shifted to look, Jack found himself staring at the backs of many other Invictus, and no way to see the Prince. He stepped to the side a little further, and a little further still, until he was leaning over one of the seats on the side of the great hall to see. No one was looking at him or his goofy pose, and damn it he really wanted to see the Prince.

He almost fell into the chair once he did.

If he didn't know better, he'd think it were some kind of story or fairy tale character he was looking at. The Prince was very, very tall. She had a foot of height on him, so that she was even taller than Julias or Viktor. Her dress was very long, smooth, elegant, tasteful but gloriously sexy in its black curves and subtle sparkle. This Daeva did not care for the frilly dresses the Invictus wore. It seemed she preferred more formfitting dresses.

That form was fitting to be sure. She wasn't just tall, she was a deadly creature of lean physique but also glorious curves. The hips, the waist, the absolutely massive breasts. Jack's jaw was hanging open, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from her. Her hair was wavy, long, like some sort of princess, but it was white. Pure white. And unless he was seeing things, the iris of her eyes were red. White hair, but she didn't look old at all.

A quick glance to Julias, and his sire gave him a nod of knowing. She was both unusual looking, and absolutely beautiful.

She was making her way through the crowd. She was shaking hands, nodding, exchanging momentary courtesies with the triumvirate before moving onto the ancillae. She ... she was greeting the neonates. She was greeting the paiges! Every Kindred she passed, it seemed she greeted, and she was getting further through the crowd.

“Mister Mire. It has been weeks since your request. Has it gone well?”

Her voice carried just a hint of French, and was smooth like her dress. Her lips were red against her milky white skin, and her eyes were indeed red too.

“I have, your Excellency. May I present Master Terry, my childe.”

Jack slowly, so very slowly, raised his head to look up at the Prince. She was looking right at him, right into him, with her red eyes and her red smile. God she was beautiful. The beast in him was both stricken with fear from the power that dripped from the Prince, but also awe-struck with her. As a Daeva, it was only expected she'd have spent a long time making herself look beautiful, but the sheer confidence she displayed was overwhelming. Even those around who must have been intimidated by her massive height were watching her with hungry eyes.

“Master Terry. Tell me child, what is your first name?”

“ ... J-Jack, your Excellency.”

“Master Jack Terry. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.” She gave him a small nod, and continued on her way.

When she moved, everyone stepped aside for her with lowered heads and roaming eyes. She was Jessica Rabbit with white hair and a black dress. Even just how she walked in those heels was mesmerizing, complete with a hip sway that demanded everyone's

gaze. The dress left her back wholly exposed, and her height only served to emphasize the long, enticing curve of her spine down to the small of her back. Her lengthy attire, sliding along the clean floor behind her, was split at the hip and left one of her legs exposed, and Jack's eyes opened a little wider each time she took a step with her right leg to bare the long, milky, toned limb.

He would have been drooling if he could salivate. He didn't even look around, just at her. The rest of the ball had gone on about its business, and Antoinette was talking with Garry and Viktor up on the balcony. When feeling returned to his limbs, Jack turned to look to Julias, and his sire gave him a small shrug.

"She likes to know everyone's name."

"Everyone's? I ... that ... what." He took a moment to look around at the other paiges, and they too were watching after the Prince, as confused as he. "Why?"

"Because she's good at what she does." Julias walked up to Jack, and motioned for him to follow. "She and her Sheriff are the only Ordo Dracul we know of in the city, and yet she is Prince. Never underestimate her, Jack. She is cunning, intelligent, and dangerous." Soon, the two of them found a caterer, and like a couple of snobs, were drinking blood from expensive wine glasses.

"Indeed. The Prince is both a beautiful and deadly ally."

Jack and Julias turned at the sound of another. A woman, dressed in a conservative white dress of minimal frills. She was only as tall as Jack, and even thinner than he. Her features were soft, skin almost obsidian, and her long black hair was kept smooth to her back.

"Ah, Miss Pol. May I introduce Master Terry, my childe."

“Charmed.” She gave a small curtsy, and Jack replied with a small bow. His insides weren’t freaking out with fear, but were instead comparing itself against this new creature. She couldn’t have been very old.

“Miss Pol is Mekhet, and recently ended her paige-hood and became a neonate with the Invictus. You met her sire at the reception of Xnomina. The Madam Jennings.”

Gloria Jennings. She’d called him small, but maybe it was a flirtation? Miss Pol was certainly small.

“That is correct, Most Admirable Mister Mire. I am pleased to know my name is not forgotten. The Invictus grow large.”

“You are most welcome. Master Terry and I were discussing the faces of those he does not yet know. It is his first time at the ball,” Julias said.

“Then I am sure his mind must be reeling with the names and faces and customs.” She stepped toward Jack, and he stood his ground. There was a glint of something in her eyes, awareness perhaps, or intrigue. “I bid you farewell, Master Terry.”

And like that she was gone. Jack scratched at his buzzed hair, and looked back to Julias with confusion on his face.

“Um ... what was that?”

“She was introducing herself. Now you know who she is, she knows who you are, she knows you know who she is, and who her sire is, and her current progression in the ranks, and she knows I remember her.” Julias made some puppeteer motions with his hands. “All from thirty seconds of her time.”

“ ... damn. This will take some getting used to.”

“You have all the time in the world now.” Julias gave him a pat on the back. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to some more, less threatening people. Then we’re out of here. I got a date.”

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~~Beatrice~~

Was she nervous? When was the last time that happened?

Beatrice stood in front of her mirror in her home, far from her feeding den at the cemetery. It was an abandoned old apartment building, and other Carthians went there to sleep, deep in the Prince-sanctioned district of the Carthians, where they were safe. Likely safe, anyway. It was old, dusty, falling apart, and rats outnumbered them a thousand to one. The only thing they were safe from was Invictus invasion, not from the building falling on their heads.

But it was quiet. And some nice Mekhet had even stolen them power and, fucking hilariously, internet. There was a laptop next to her, complete with running music. She was a metal fan, naturally.

Nude in front of her mirror, and adjusting her hair in preparation for her date. Could she even call it a date? She’d saved the fucking Invictus’s life, he owed her one, and this was what she was wasting that favor on. Well, fuck Garry, he’d said the Carthians needed to bide their time and wait, and she was going stir crazy. Julias would prove an interesting distraction.

Her crocodile smile emerged. Julias was interesting. Dude had full-on popped a boner underneath her. Now that had been unexpected. The great and mighty Julias, right hand of Viktor Honors, ladies man and walking sex in a suit, was turned on by her, monster chick in the cemetery. He’d said he hadn’t been with a vampire in decades, so maybe he was sick of ... well, vampires. Scheming, manipulating, selfish, conniving leeches, completely

predictable and yet you could never tell what they were thinking or planning. She fucking hated that shit.

She adjusted the piercings in her nipples. Her breasts weren't large, but they certainly weren't small. They were tight against her muscular form though. She had the body of a fighter, complete with ripped six-pack of abs, defined serratus muscles, wicked V-cut hips, and some thickness to her arms. She'd been a fitness instructor when she was alive, beautiful and a master gymnast, flexible, lean, strong. Gorgeous.

“... and then some fucking bastard Nosferatu with a sick fetish for me turned me against my will, then gets executed by the Prince for siring without permission. So poor ole Beatrice gets left without a sire to fend for herself in a broken system overflowing with predators. Sob sob, weep weep.” She eased her claws down her mirror, and her long tongue sneaked out to lick at her huge extra teeth. It really was a sad story, but that was twenty years ago. She'd moved on. She was a monster and human interaction was not going to happen; even the vampires avoided Nosferatu as monstrous as she.

“So, then there's Julias.” She flicked at the dangling bit of metal chain from her navel piercing and rubbed at the tattoo of the skull where her pubic hair should have been. She always did prefer the shaved look when alive — the tattoos and piercings came after. “What the fuck is up with him?” Her claws clicked at the assortment of piercings dangling from her ears, then the one hooked into her right nostril, before tracing the tattoo of a snake that danced along her abs until it bit into her right nipple. Her first few years into the world of darkness had been quite the roller coaster.

“This another trick? More Kindred shit? This all some ploy to get information about the Carthians from me?” She threw on a white tank top, black jeans, and army boots. “We'll fucking see.”

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Julias was waiting for her at the cemetery. Fuckler was dressed in a casual suit, no tie but with a nice jacket and some loose cuffs. Her teeth clicked side to side. Ventrue really knew how to wear a suit.

“Beatrice,” Julias said. He gave her a small wave.

“ ... did you just wave at me?”

“Yes. Was ... I not supposed to?”

“Arg.” Ten seconds into this exchange and she was already thrown off her game. Julias was smarter than her, older, and if she wasn’t careful he’d get into her head and who fucking knows what with his Ventrue fucking Jedi powers. “Look. We’re doing this because I want to. No manipulative shit, no schemes, no bids for power.” She walked up to him and put her claws against his chest. “If I figure out you’re trying anything, now or later, I’ll rip out your entrails and leave you for the sun.”

“Of course.” Julias didn’t back down, he didn’t even flinch, he just smiled at her. What the fuck was his problem?

“Think I’m joking?”

“No! No, I don’t, I—”

“Good. So, you owe me one, and this has nothing to do with Garry or Viktor or whatever fucking games our bosses are playing. I need some R&R and you’re going to provide. Take me to dinner.”

“Dinner? I’m not sure what—”

“Take me someplace nice ... ish, someplace you frequent. Someplace where we can sit down and enjoy a nice meal between us with no violence or screaming.”

“Oh. Yes, I can do that. Where would you like to go? And ... will you be wearing that?” His question made him grimace, as if it would bring down her hellfire.

He was partly correct, and she wrapped her claws around his throat and pulled him down to meet her at eye level. He squirmed but otherwise did nothing but smile awkwardly. She could swear he was enjoying this.

“You think what I wear matters? I’ll be next to you, but hiding with a discipline, dumbass. No one will notice me. You’ll get us a nice meal with that devil charm of yours, and then we’ll eat.”

“I see ... I think Bloodlust will work well. Once seated, no one will notice your differences in the dark. Just, please don’t kill anyone there.”

“Bloodlust is in Invictus territory.”

“You’ll be hidden, right? And with me anyway. No one will question.”

She let go of him, and clicked her teeth side to side. She’d seen the outside of Bloodlust many times, but she’d never dared go in, not even while hidden. A place swarming with that much life and that many bodies so close to each other, it would have struck too close to painful memories.

But this time she’d have her man here to take her. Different circumstance, right?

“Alright, let’s go,” she said, and slipped her claws into her jeans pockets. It took only moments to step out of the catacombs, and the empty cemetery provided no distractions from stepping onto the road.



Julias followed up behind her in a short jog until they stood side-by-side.

“You look lovely tonight.”

Oh no he fucking didn't.

“Spare your bullshit.”

“What? It's not bullshit.”

“Really?” She turned to him, and opened her mouth to its fullest. When she wanted to, she could open that crocodile smile until it was ninety degrees apart, and he'd be able see down her throat and how long her tongue was.

He didn't even blink.

“You know Maria, Viktor's partner, is a Nosferatu right? Are you trying to scare me?”

“Maria doesn't have an extra fifty teeth.”

The man shrugged.

“Come on. I thought you wanted to go out and enjoy yourself? Is it so hard to believe I don't find you hideous? Here I thought that's how we got into this situation.”

“... fine.” He had her there. She'd asked him to do this because it seemed like he'd been sexually attracted to her. Fucked up reason to ask for such a stupid favor, but fuck reason.

The walk was otherwise uneventful. Julias tried to make small talk, but she ignored it. She wasn't interested in his ridiculous attempts at normalizing this absurd affair, but he did not relent. She had to threaten him before he shut up.

The Invictus half of South Side district was always alive, lights everywhere, and people wearing nice clothes walked down the nice sidewalks and into nice buildings. She avoided this place. Not only was it Invictus territory, but she used to live here and in this life. Twenty years was not long enough to forget.

“Ah, we’re here.” He motioned to the Bloodlust, and stepped up to the bouncer at the door. A nod and handshake and they were in. Invictus, and Ventrue in particular, were connections incarnate. Julias could probably shake a hand, call in a favor, and walk them into any club or business in the city. How fucking nice for him.

The inside almost blinded her senses. She had to put up a hand and partly cover her eyes at the weird array of smells and sights. There was a white light that pulsed with the beat-heavy music, but between it was the constant dull red lighting that must have been just enough for humans to see. People danced with each other in a dancing center, and booth seats lined the walls.

“So this is how the rich nightlife plays out,” she said with her shoulders almost touching Julias’s arm. “Fancy clothes, fancy personalities, but when it gets dark they grind like bunnies.” She motioned to the dance floor where they were, indeed, grinding like bunnies.

“Yes. People come here to relax, get laid, or just meet. Admittedly, people here are a little more open-minded than other places. That’s why I come here.” He pointed to one of the two staircases that lined the walls, leading to a second balcony floor. “Come. It’s quieter up there, darker.”

“Lovely.” With a groan, she followed her knight up the staircases. The balcony floor was indeed less populated, and the white pulse light didn’t shine very much up there. There were booths with people in them, and as much as they were hidden in the dark from

each other, she could see them just fine with Kindred eyes. A lot of them were kissing, some were chatting, some were fucking.

“Just lovely.”

“I could have taken you to an opera, but I believe you said you wanted to eat?” He turned and grinned at her.

“Yeah. Yeah fine.” She did like metal operas, maybe she’d try a normal opera. Later.

“Here’s an empty spot.” He grabbed a booth near the back, and stood by it with a palm open toward the seat. The Ventrue was waiting for her to sit first.

She rolled her eyes and sat down. Even if she wasn’t using her Nosferatu abilities to hide, she doubted anyone would notice her back here. Part of her felt offended, but another felt relieved. She could stop taxing her vitae so much to hide.

Julias sat down next to her, and shifted on his hip to look at her with a smile.

“... what?”

“What what?” he said.

“Why are you smiling at me?”

“Oh, was I smiling?”

“Yes you were fucking smiling you bastard.” She sneaked a hand underneath the table and grabbed at his leg hard enough to pierce his skin with her claws. He winced and shifted around, but otherwise stayed quiet. “Stop making fun of me.” She dug in a little deeper. Were he still alive, his blood would have been dripping down his leg.

“I ... I’m not. Really, I’m not.” He cracked another smile, though she could see it mixed with pain. Good.

“You’re making me angry. Just get us something to eat, Superman.”

“ ... ok.”

She hurt him. Physically, of course, but she saw that look of sadness on his face. Now she felt guilty. Guilty and angry. Was it so weird that he was trying to be nice to her? She did save his life after all. That was Kindred business though, or so she thought, but then...

“Fine! Fine, talk,” she said, and his smile returned immediately. He was like a weird hybrid between a valiant knight and a manipulative trickster. She couldn’t quite place him or his motives, and it was driving her insane. “Talk about ... you said you hadn’t been with a vampire in fifty years. I see you hook up with kine all the time, why not Kindred?”

“I don’t ‘hook up’ with kine.”

“Ha! Yes you do, you slut. I may never have sneaked in here but I’ve sneaked into other clubs. I’ve seen at least two dozen different women either go home with you, or straight up fuck you in the club while you drink them.”

Ho ho. The mighty Ventrue was squirming with embarrassment. Point for her.

“That’s ... I like to see them happy.”

“You fucking what?”

“I like to see them happy. I make sure they all know it’s not a relationship, but to see a human simply ... give in to pleasure and relax and enjoy themselves. To be happy for just a few minutes. I

like that.” He shrugged at her. “You ever seen a vampire be happy like that? Ever see a Kindred stop manipulating, scheming, planning, for just five minutes to enjoy a Kiss, or just a regular kiss?”

She stopped, and stared at him. That sounded familiar.

“Kine don’t think outside of a week, maybe a couple years at most. I can’t have a conversation with a Kindred without them planning out fifty years in advance. Viktor, easily a hundred.”

“ ... yeah, that really does fucking suck.” She flicked at her earring chain and scratched at the table. The Carthians were not nearly so long-sighted and boring as the Invinctus, and she found even them trying to talk with.

“Julias!” A squeal of a voice came from the stairs, and a woman skipped over in her ridiculous heels. She was barely five feet tall and was wearing an open-back dress with a short skirt, dark red. Fake tits too. Typical bimbo blond. Julias was smiling right back at her though.

“Hey Kristen. Get the job?”

“No!” She humphed like a child and hooked her arms under her bosom. “They gave it to some dumbass. Glass ceiling, am I right?”

“Completely right,” Julias said. Did he really know about this random woman’s life? Did he actually fucking care?

Beatrice’s eyes opened wide when he gestured to her.

“This is my date, Scarlet.”

“ ... h-hi.” Beatrice sank into her booth, and made sure her hair framed over her cheeks, where her extra teeth were. Talking with a kine like they were friends was not what she had planned.

“A date? Julias you make me sad. I thought you said you weren’t interested in dating.”

“Well, Scarlet is a special case.” Julias winked at her. She was going to kill him later. “We met a couple weeks ago, and she roped me in.”

“Lucky girl.” The bimbo stared right at Beatrice, and gave her a big smile of absolute obliviousness. “And here I was hoping for another one of those special kisses.”

Beatrice twitched. Julias was Kissing the same people multiple times? He was letting them run around knowing that?

“Well, actually, Scarlet here is really shy, but she gives the same kiss.”

“Really now,” the bimbo said. She walked around the table, and slid into the booth to cozy up next to Beatrice. “The same? How? Julias won’t tell me, and ... it’s really amazing. Like, totally. So you’re shy? Hi my name is Kristen, and I’m just a young girl in the city working for a micromanagement division, and—” She went on, but Beatrice had to tune her out and give Julias a long, hateful stare. She really, really was going to kill him.

“So ... you can kiss?” She slid closer, and Beatrice found herself sliding away until her hips were against Julias’s. Naturally, the bastard didn’t move, and the bimbo only slid closer until she was sandwiched between the two of them. “Can you ... you know, kiss me, like Julias does? I’ve never had a woman do it, only Julias, and ... you seem really sexy.”

Because you can barely see my face in this darkness you dumbass bitch.

“Kristen Fitzern, how dare you come onto my date.”

“Oh come on! It’s just a little fun. Please?”

Beatrice was trapped. Not really trapped, she could have easily slipped out of there, made the bitch suffer some kind of nightmare hallucination, something. But she was hungry. Really hungry. She looked over her shoulder to Julias again, but the fucker was just smiling and motioning to the bimbo.

“ ... ok. But ... turn around.”

“Yay! Turn around? Hehe, exciting.” Kristen did as requested and turned herself around so her back was facing Beatrice, and then she backed up even more until she was resting her back against Beatrice’s shoulder. Beatrice had to turn to face her a bit, and let the bimbo rest her back into her torso.

Kristen relaxed. Beatrice did not. The Nosferatu sat there, and stared down at the sight before her. This stupid, idiotic bloodbag without a clue in the world ... was just resting against her, and waiting for it. There were no mind tricks here, no struggles, no use of her hiding or nightmares, just a kine who wanted to get drunk from the Kiss, ignorant of what it was.

Her dress meant Kristen’s naked back was pressed to Beatrice’s body, and she could feel her heart. This close to her neck, she could practically hear it through the bass-heavy music. Her heartbeat was slow, or at least, slow compared to who she usually fed from. Hell, the bimbo was almost grinding against her.

“I’m sorry, is the dress in the way?” Without hesitation, the blond reached up, undid the neck of the dress, and let it fall to her lap. Now Beatrice had a topless bimbo almost in her lap, begging to be sucked on. She got what she wanted, but didn’t know if she wanted what she got.

“ ... ok.”

She could tell Julias was watching intently from his spot, but otherwise did not move to intervene. He'd said to not kill people, but that was proving to be a tough thing to do. She really, really wanted to kill this one. Hell, even when she was alive she'd have wanted to kill this one. But, she couldn't deny the simple efficiency of having your meal walk up to you, let its dress down, and beg to be Kissed.

She leaned in, and put her lips to the girl's neck. She had to fight her own reflex to pin down and bite into her prey hard, like she usually had to do. This one was willing, and damn it all, she was going to try one of these consensual feedings. It's why she was here. She'd never done it in her entire unlife; how could she?

Opening her mouth only just as wide as a normal Kindred would, she eased her fangs — only her normal fangs — onto the bimbo, and let her teeth sink into her neck.

“Oh! Mm ... you're ... right ... Julias. It's...” Kristen trailed off as the euphoria of the Kiss washed over her. Beatrice, on the other hand, was focused so intently on her new experience, her eyes open wide enough to hurt. The blood wasn't a squirting mess, and it wasn't thinned with adrenaline. This blood was thick, it was warm, it pooled into her mouth in slow, powerful waves. And it was sweet. So very, very god damn sweet.

She hooked her lips onto the prey's neck to prevent a single drop of the blood from escaping, and only had to suckle to ensure the delicious red filled her. Her mouth wasn't open very much, so even crocodile teeth instead of cheeks, the blood simply pooled along the bottom of her mouth before she swallowed it down. No mess, nothing.

Even more surprising was when Kristen took Beatrice's hands, and hooked them around her breasts. The kine encouraged her and pressed her fingers into her. The bimbo's nipples were damn hard,



and Beatrice had to admit, fake or not, those large tits felt nice filling her palms.

“You have ... long nails. You have to tell me ... where you bought them ... later.”

What the fuck was going on? Beatrice was supposed to be getting a free meal, but even she let out a tiny moan, like the bimbo's. Hell, she was starting to squeeze and massage Kristen's breasts just to encourage the bimbo to relax into her even more. She was sure the blond would have been masturbating if she had any energy, but the Kiss had sapped all her strength within seconds and left her a lethargic slug. Kristen was used to this, very used to this, and was leaning up and into Beatrice's own neck to rest her head. If she had opened her eyes, she may have been able to see the Nosferatu's extra teeth, but the kine was completely absorbed in the orgasmic bliss of a Kiss done the gentle way. The sexual way.

A tap on Beatrice's shoulder snapped her out of her own bliss. Slowly, with delicate care, Beatrice removed her fangs from Kristen's neck. The kine didn't say anything, even when Beatrice licked the wound to seal it. Her eyes were closed and she was practically comatose, so Beatrice had to right her up herself and put her back to the booth seat. She put a claw to her own lips; the human's breasts were still on display, and rising and falling with the labored breaths of a satisfied woman.

It was really, really hot.

She reached out and cupped one of those tits in her palms, just to feel its weight. Julias was still behind her, but she didn't care. Fresh blood was coursing through her insides, filling her, spreading through her, making her feel warm and alive again, and with no violence or death in the mix, instead she found all the energy going toward ... arousal.

“She’s really just ... sitting here ... and ... we could ... could anything. We could fuck her all night long.” She raised the tit and let it drop, jiggle, and bounce. Fake, but she cupped it again anyway. Still hot.

“We could. She wouldn’t even mind. As long as you didn’t take too much from her, she’d let you do anything to her, and she’d thank you after.”

Beatrice let go of the woman’s breast, and turned to face Julias. He was looking at Kristen, and smiling a half smile. Something was on his mind, something that was making the situation bittersweet for him. There wasn’t anything like this to find in the Kindred world. This dumbass bimbo wasn’t thinking outside this night alone for her plans, and that simple honesty, coming from even such a stupid bloodbag, was intoxicating.

The Nosferatu reached with both hands and raised Kristen’s dress to tie it back behind her neck.

“Let’s get out of here,” Beatrice said.

“Oh? Sure. Where to?”

“Your place.”

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Julias’s place might as well have had Invictus Ventrue written on the fucking walls. White walls with Gothic paintings, expensive looking leather couches and chairs and streamlined ... streamlined everything. She rolled her eyes.

“Jack, you here?” Julias said.

“Your new childe?”

“Yes. He often shows up. He’s pretty new to the whole thing.”

“Yeah...” Her mind fell back to memories of her own sire. That relationship had lasted just a few days before he’d been executed, and it was not a relationship she’d enjoyed. He was stalker and fucked up creature, looking to pass on that fucked up clan of his.

“So, may I interest you in a drink? I do keep several blood types for drinking.” He shrugged with a silly grin. “It helps me feel human, you know? Sit down, sip from a wine glass, chat with Jack about good times.”

“You ... were friends with Jack?” She walked around and let her claws drag along various surfaces. It was so clean.

“Yes. For five years. I groomed him, helped nurture his intelligence and trained his physical body.” Julias wandered over to the fridge and pulled out a wine bottle. She knew fuck all about wine, but it was blood anyway so what did it matter? The Ventrue really did enjoy the image of it all, and he sipped from a glass. She’d fed, but he hadn’t.

“Does he know you’re such a tragedy freak?”

“ ... I’m sorry, what?”

“Tragedy freak. Weep and cry at the cruel night at all? Hang with the humans because you miss it so much, and never truly accept that you’re a dead thing now?” The signs were all there, after all. As much as his Kindred side showed through every so often, he played at the white knight and tried to balance the two. “You practically drip of the brooding, tragic hero stereotype, Julias. Like, no matter how nice you are, you just can’t rejoin the humans in life. You’re a Ventrue, so why are you acting like an emo Daeva bitch?”

He looked at her for a long while before setting his glass down on the counter. “ ... you don’t miss it?”

Boom.

She'd thought she'd had him. She'd figured it out. Pieced together the puzzle of the great Julias and his weird habits, and even his attraction to her. Tragedy freak. But then he asked a stupid fucking question and suddenly she felt his genuine eyes poking a hole through her bad girl attitude.

“Of course I fucking miss it! I ... that was the first time I've ever really talked to a human in twenty fucking years. That idiot blond! And...” Her hands gently grasped at the air in front of her in a subtle motion. “And ... yeah. Yes, I get it. I fucking get it, I miss it. But you! You don't get to miss it! You don't get to fucking miss it!” Fuck him. Fuck him and his bullshit. She was Nosferatu. He was Ventrue. He looked dead sexy and could wear a suit and get a job. He had no right to complain.

“Sorry,” he said, and took another sip of his blood, “I can't help it. I'm neck deep in all these political games playing out for decades to come. I don't know how Viktor does it, or Maria or Michael, but ... I just get sick of it all. The Danse is fucking horrible.”

“... you're fucking right it is.” Her anger fell away, and she laughed. She had to. Ventrue live and breathe for the Danse Macabre. They came to it naturally. But this one was sick of it? She had to laugh.

She walked over to him, and wrapped her claws around his wrist. When he blinked at her, she lowered his wrist until he put the glass down on the counter, and she tugged at him.

“What are—”

“Shut the fuck up.” She pulled him toward the stairway. Yes, the fucker's apartment had a second floor, and she was sure his master bedroom would be up there. What kind of bed she wondered? She licked at her crocodile teeth as she envisioned it, no doubt some fancy memory foam mattress with silk sheets if Julias's stereotypical tastes were predictable enough.

Bingo. His king-sized bed was layered in black silk. The walls were still white, and this time there was a single painting of a beautiful, pale woman with long black hair and a see-through white dress, wet with rain and laying across a seat of Victorian style.

“You sleep with this thing on the wall, looking at you?”

“I find the image soothing. She seems like a quiet soul.”

“You mean a miserable soul. Look you fucked-in-the-head dumbass, if your unlife sucks so much, then you make a god damn change to make it suck a little less. You think I really wanted to go out tonight? I’d rather sit in my apartment in the god damn dirt and dust and watch TV, or eat some some worthless fuck off the streets, then risk someone freaking out over how I looked at the Bloodlust. I came out cause I saw an opportunity for a god damn change.”

Her grip tightened and she threw him onto the bed. Literally. None of that whimpy shit. She was Nosferatu, and she was a hell of a lot stronger than him. The bed thankfully did not break. Julias on the other hand looked shocked as all hell, and she chuckled at him again as she approached.

“And you know what? That was the first time I’d fed on someone who wasn’t resisting me or unconscious. Ever. And as much as I hated that bimbo bitch ... thank you for that.” She climbed onto the bed, and straddled the poor, idiot Ventrue the same way she had when she’d fed him in her catacombs.”Now we’re going to do thing number two I haven’t done since being embraced.”

She really had no clue how they’d gotten to this point. She never had any intention of sleeping with Julias, but now she was straddling the man on his bed. His attraction to her had been a window of opportunity, but now it was going straight up to fucking.

She could use a good fuck. Twenty years celibate was not fun, even as an undead.

She blushed for him. The blush of life brought color to her skin again, got her old dead heart beating again, and even got her to salivate again. She licked at the little bit of wetness that formed on one of her massive teeth along her cheek.

“Now you, my tragic knight, are going to do exactly as I say for the night. Got it?”

“I, uh ... yes ma’am.”

Heh, ma’am. She chuckled, reached down, and slid off her tank top without hesitation. The Ventrue’s eyes opened wide at her body, but she saw the spark of intrigue and arousal in his gaze. Her mouth may have looked like it belonged on some monster in a horror movie, but she had the body of a fucking amazon warrior. She reached down with both hands and cupped her perky breasts, and even plucked on her pierced nipples for him.

“Blush,” she said.

Julias did as ordered. Ordering a Ventrue around was a first, and she grew giddy with the power of it. She knew the bastard, much older than she, had the powers to turn her into a mindless puppet, but she was confident she had the position to rip him in half if he tried anything. And honestly, she didn’t expect him to try anything.

His blush of life brought a nice tone to him, a little darker than she expected. He had blonde hair combed back over his head, like some mobster from the 40’s, but she had to admit it worked on him. That was it! He looked like some kind of young king of the mobsters from the 40’s. That was driving her nuts.

She already felt his erection poking against her ass, and immediately her body responded. It’d been so damn fucking long, her nipples were already growing to points.

“You, sir knight, are a god damn bastard. How much did this suit cost?” The look of shock on his face was priceless when she motioned to slice it up, but she didn’t. Instead, she put her hands against his chest, and started to slide off his jacket. He helped — it’s hard to get a jacket off when lying down — and she tossed it aside. Her claws found the buttons of his shirt, and with great dexterity, she undid them one at a time.

“Thank you. It cost ... a lot.”

“Of course it did. Got to look good in the mobster world.” She spread open his shirt, and let out a quiet moan of satisfaction. He was a man after all, not some whiny little girl like he sounded. His chest was chiseled and wide, muscles defined, shoulders broad, and a bit-but-not-too-much chest hair. Perfect. Her claws roamed over his hard muscles, but she did not remove the unbuttoned shirt from his shoulders. More interesting to leave it on, as it framed his abs. He wasn’t super ripped like her, but his stomach was flat and hard, and she put her hands against it. Mmm, firm.

“What would you have me do?”

“Shhh. No talking,” she said, and Julias smiled and closed his mouth. Good, he was getting the game.

She shifted back and put her hands to his belt. When was the last time she’d done this? Undressing a man, the pop of the belt buckle, sliding it off and out and tossing it to the floor? She’d been a sexual animal when she was alive, and she could feel the old hunger coming back to her. Her claws tugged at his pants and underwear, and she slid them both down to his knees in a single motion. She had to reach behind her to continue, and get them over his boots. Fuck, the boots. She undid those too, and pulled it all off, even his fucking socks. Nosferatu didn’t get laid often, and she wasn’t going to spoil this by rushing it.

Once she turned around again, she sat straddling his knees, and Julias smiled to her from across the bed with his hands hooked behind his head. He had a nice, big back with wide lats, but her eyes lasted only a second before drawing to his member.

“Is this why you’re such a slut?” She hovered over his member, and took a second to examine it. He was circumcised, and his girth was surprisingly thick. And long. There were veins running around it in interesting patterns, and she ran the smooth side of one of her claws up and down them. “I admit, you got a huge dick.”

He looked about to say something, but he remembered his orders, and closed his mouth again. He just smiled, and she rolled her eyes.

“Shame to lose it.” She took her right hand to its base, and wrapped around its warm, hard girth. Damn that feeling of a cock in her hand. With a wicked grin, she aimed it straight up, opened her mouth wide so all her teeth were on full display, and moved to bite down on his dick. Julias sat up with a startle, but relaxed when she didn’t bite down.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m going to do. I find the first guy who don’t mind a crocodile mouth and I’m going to bite his dick off.” She rolled her eyes again, and lay across his leg. She was still wearing her jeans, but being topless was fun. Her hand remained around his cock, and she squeezed it gently with experimentation. The shark smile was only inches away from his cock as her head was by his hips, and yet his erection remained. He really did like her smile.

She stopped to take a moment to enjoy the situation. The man really was a hunk, a bastard Invictus and a Ventrue at that, but that didn’t change he was a hunk. Her claws were wrapped around his cock — fuck he was big — and it only grew harder at her touch. She gave it a slow stroke with a tender squeeze, just enough to feel its texture comply to her hands, and pushed it forward so it lay across



his abs, before she brought it back to stand. His pubic hair was short and trimmed, proper and neat, just like a typical Invictus.

She liked it.

The Nosferatu picked herself up and stood over the Ventrue. She grinned down at him, knowing full well grinning made her look like a demon from hell, and started to undo her jeans. They came off easily, and panties too, so she was standing stark naked over the man. Her claws reached down and found another piercing, a little ring that pierced the hood of her clitoris, and she plucked at it softly. It bounced against her clit and sent tingling sparks up through her pelvis and down her thighs. Fuck she was horny.

“I expect the mighty slut knight to know how to use his tongue. He better. I’ve got a lot of years to make up for.” She didn’t really wait to see his response, but already started to get down onto her knees and spread herself over his head. One of her hands had to press to the wall for balance, but her other found his head, and her long claws wrapped around his skull while her knees worked further and further out.

Finally, she eased her pussy onto his lips. The shivering started immediately, and she let out a sultry moan that surprised her when she felt her juices spread over his face. Christ it had been forever. She looked down to him, but his eyes were closed. Good, she didn’t want him to see how deliriously aroused she already was. It was all over her face, she could tell, as all it took was a single lick from the large man to make her eyes roll upward.

“Fu ... uuuuck.” Soon both of her sets of claws were on the wall, and Julias wrapped both his hands around the front of her thighs to help her balance. He wasn’t just licking, he was suckling. The man had wrapped his lips around the upper half of her cunt and was pulling her clit into his mouth. Just a little suction was going a long way, and he licked and nuzzled his tongue against the piercing too.

She thought she'd grind her cunt against him, but this was proving far better. The Ventrue bastard was skilled, she had no reason to move, so she simply sat there, shaking, while he kissed her cunt.

“You ... fucking ... slut.” She'd been horny ever since she Kissed the bimbo at the club, but she was racing now. Her mouth was hanging open, her voice was coming out in moans, even girly mewls, and her juices were spreading. She could feel them on her thighs, making a mess on the knight's bed, but she didn't care. It was the first time anyone had touched her in two fucking decades, and holy fuck, undead or not, she missed this.

The orgasm did not take long to arrive. Her claws sank into the wall, but better than the man's head. Both her hands used the wall for grip as her body started to shake and the pleasure tremors shot up through her. Sparks of bliss made her powerful thighs quiver, and the clench of her cunt caused more of her juices to leak from her and onto Julius's face. His tongue grew far softer, but he gave her a few long, gentle licks to keep her orgasm going until she was trembling.

“Ok! Ok stop ... Jesus.” She backed away and eased herself onto his stomach, leaning forward with her hands on his chest. Not even five minutes and she'd cum already. “Fuck I needed that. God damn. Ok, round two.” Still shaking a bit with orgasm aftershocks, she smirked up at the Ventrue. He still wasn't talking, as ordered. It made her grin.

She rolled off of him, lay down on her back, and spread her legs. She had great legs. Just the act of putting herself on display like this put that spark into Superman's eyes that she longed for. He was hungry for her. Christ, just the sight of a hunky man like him hungry for her had more of her juices flowing. She ran her claws up and down her powerful thighs, and shivered at the tingling it sent up her still quivering body.

With great delicacy, she slid those claws down her shaved pussy before spreading open her dripping folds. “Fingers. Now.”

Julias gave a grin and a nod. Part of her still worried he was manipulating her, Invictus and all that, but the cock between his legs wasn't lying. She really ... really wanted to do things to that cock, but that would come later. For now, she was going to just lay back and enjoy herself with her hands hooked around the inside of her thighs and spreading them open.

The big loaf knelt next to her and, with a stupid smile on his face, leaned down to kiss one of her knees, while one of his hands started to caress her leg. She rolled her eyes, and did her best to suppress the smile she felt tugging at her cheeks.

Then, Julias put his other hand against her pussy. He didn't penetrate her, he just rested his hand against her soaked, bare folds, and caressed her labia. Up and down they went, kneading and massaging the outside of her cunt, squeezing her lips together until she felt her juices leak, before his fingers spread out to work where her thigh connected to her pelvis. She wanted to yell at him to get to it, but, the feel of those large hands loosening her up and spreading her cum around was making her start to tremble.

At last, she let out a low, primal groan when two of his big fingers eased her open. Her muscles gripped down, hard, and she had to force herself to relax while he worked his digits further into her insides.

She stopped holding her thighs apart, and put her hands to the blankets to sit up a bit. There was no way she'd miss seeing this. She kept her legs spread nice and far for him, but her eyes were glued to his fingers. They were just barely visible as she leaned forward a bit to see over her bare mons, and she clicked her crocodile teeth together at the sight of them when he pulled them from her squeezing muscles. Her juices were dripping from his knuckles.

“Yeah, yeah ... like ... that.” Her arm closer to him reached for him and took his shoulder, but she kept her eyes on his fingers. It was mesmerizing. He sank his middle and ring finger into her, palm up and to the knuckle, and wriggled them around until she felt her toes curl. Then he pulled them out of her in a slow, massaging motion with his fingers curling upward against her g-spot. Then he did it again.

He reached into her as deep as his fingers could go, and pressed up toward her belly. She gasped in a sharp hiss, and leaned forward a little closer to hook the arm on his shoulder around the back of his neck instead. His digits pressed a little harder into her, toward her belly with his fingers buried in her cunt to the knuckle. There, he massaged above her deepest spot, and smiled at her while doing it.

“Stop ... smiling ... you ... jackass.” Try as she might to stay quiet, her other hand was soon clutching the blanket until her claws sliced into the fabric, and more of her juices joined the mess. His big digits pressed so deep into her, deep and up against that spot way in the back that was making her body sing and her mind go blank. Her mouth opened wide, crocodile teeth on full display, but she didn’t care. The bastard was making her cum, and she even let out a few quiet moans as her muscles clenched down like a vice and forced more of herself to leak onto his palm.

She collapsed. Julias finally stopped massaging the depths of her cunt, so she was free to just lay back and ride out her orgasm. The aftershocks worked up and down her legs like fireworks, and every so often her body would just convulse for a second and clench down on his fingers. She had no control, she could only lay there and let the pleasure earn the occasional small moan from her.

Then Julias started to pump her insides up and down like a piston.

“Ah shi-i-i-i-t!” Both her hands were on the blankets again, but she managed to force herself to sit up to see. Julias’s hand was no longer gently stroking her insides, but instead he was slapping his two fingers up against her g-spot hard enough to make her ass lift off the blanket, before pushing back down only to do it again.

His free hand slid down from her leg to her pelvis, and he pushed down against the muscle below her navel. Her poor g-spot was trapped between both his hands, and when she tried to say something to ask him to ease up, he only pumped her faster, and harder. The noises were lecherous, and even her pert breasts were jiggling against her with the force of his fingering. Her juices were soaking his palm, and they splashed around her thighs and down her shaking ass. Every muscle down the valley of her abs was in constant flex, and try as she might to squeeze Julias’s fingers, he only worked harder to finger her. The piercings in her ears and nose clinked together with the vibration, and even the piercing in her clit hood bounced against the swollen flesh.

After almost a minute of near-painful cumming, Julias stopped pumping her insides. A random spasm of her muscles caused a little gush of her juices, and she tried fruitlessly to suppress her mewls. She collapsed again, and this time didn’t try suppress the little mewls that the orgasm aftershocks pulled from her. The wet spot on the bed had grown substantially, but she didn’t care, the rich fucker could probably buy a million beds. Right now, all she cared about was how fucking amazing it felt to have a pair of fingers inside her again. Even now, the bastard was gently stroking her depths, just enough to make her body still quiver and her toes curl.

“Ok ... you ... can speak.” Were she still alive, she’d have given up on going to work the next day. Hell, just the sensation of him removing his fingers was enough to make her tremble.

“Enjoying yourself?”

“ ... yes.” She forced herself to sit up. There was no point in modesty here, so she didn’t cover up or anything. She just spread her legs and looked down at the mess she’d made all over the Ventrue’s sheets. He was sitting on his knees and smiling at her, but something had changed. His smile was different.

He actually seemed happy. Strange.

“I’m glad,” he said.

“Well you had an advantage. I’ve just fed and spent twenty years in a shadow. You know how hard up a vampire can get?” She tried to pull herself up onto her knees to sit like him, but more rippling shakes worked through her core and put her flat on her ass again. Julias chuckled with a warmth she hadn’t expected, and she smiled right back at him, crocodile teeth and all.

“You deserve ... a reward,” she said. “I hereby give you the right ... to fuck me in whichever way is most popular ... among your lady friends.” Little mewls were sneaking into her speech, try as she might to suppress them. “Come on, gimme the top rated position.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeap.”

“ ... alright.” Julias lay down, and motioned for her to come to him. “Lay down on your side next to me.”

“ ... you have got to be shitting me.” She pulled herself forward into a crawl, complete with a raised ass and arched back to emphasize her wicked form, and did as he asked. Soon she was facing away from him with his pillow under her head, and her arms in front of her with her claws playing with his blankets. “You legit going to spoon me?”

“I am.”

“Aha. Alright.” She didn’t look, but she could feel him nuzzle up against her back. He was a big, muscular guy, and he not only sank the bed in, but she fit into the crevice of his pelvis nicely. His hand found her hip, and she gave a tiny shiver. The position made her feel so ... vulnerable. She wasn’t going to look back and make it obvious, but she could feel a little anxiety creep up on her.

His cock pressed against her ass cheeks, and her whole body went rigid as it sneaked its way down her buttocks before sliding between her thighs. She looked down, and his glans peeked its way through underneath her cunt as the large Ventrue snuggled, fucking snuggled up against her back. With his cock between her thighs and rubbing against her soaked pussy, she became acutely aware of suddenly how nervous she felt. Her skin was turning red, fucking blush of life, and her nipples were so hard, her piercings were starting to hurt.

“Would you ... guide me in?” Julias had his head over hers with his weight propped up on an elbow, so she had only to turn a bit to see him smiling down at her. Why the fuck was this making her so tense? With an unsteady hand, she reached down to her thighs, and slipped her claws around the underside of his member. She had to be careful to not hurt him with her claws, but she found it hard to not tremble, just a bit, as she slid her hips forward, and pushed up on his cock.

When she eased her hips back down, she let out the softest little moan as his cock’s head spread her tight cunt open. Everything was so damn soaked in her juices, that even his big dick had little trouble spreading her muscles apart, and his member slipped into her with a quiet plop.

“God ... fuck ... mother fucking...” She’d expected him to pick a position better for a good cunt ramming, but now she could guess why he picked a softer arrangement. The fucker was likely to hurt a woman if he went with a more aggressive position.

She blinked down at her breasts. Julias had sneaked one of his hands onto her tit, and was giving it a squeeze not unlike what she did to his cock. Gentle and massaging. His finger found the little bolt piercing through her nipple, and he plucked at it lightly, which only sparked more mewls from her. Along with his gentle touch, the bastard was sliding more of himself into her, and her eyes again rolled upward. The angle let his glans press straight into her g-spot on the way in, and her head collapsed onto the pillow as the sensation of its texture on her swollen insides made her quiver all over again.

“I like your piercings,” he said, and his hand sneaked down to her abs to find the one on her navel. “Did you get them before or after your embrace?”

“A ... after.” Fuck, she was moaning again. Julias was fucking her now, but the bastard was so slow about it. He never shoved, never pushed, he only eased his cock into her as deep as the position would let, which was plenty with his size, and then eased himself back out of her.

“And the tattoos?” The fingertips of his free hand found the tail of her snake, and traced it along her flat stomach until it came back to her breast where the snake had an open mouth around her nipple.

“ ... a ... fter.”

“What happened to being so talkative?”

“Fuck ... you...” She didn’t look his way this time for fear of how bright red her face must have been. Getting him to lick and finger her to a mess of orgasms had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now the big bad Ventrue was spooning her and she was doing her best to not gush all over him. He’d probably planned this! Fucking bastard would pay for it ... later. Now, she brought one of her hands to her other breast, and the other hand sneaked back down to her cunt to find his cock. She didn’t stop him, didn’t even



touch herself, she just wanted to feel that member of his slide into her. Her juices were literally dripping down her leg. She'd always been a wet one during sex, but this was embarrassing.

As if in tune with her, Julias lowered his hand down her stomach and her pelvis, and stopped short of her thighs. His fingers found the piercing of her clit hood again — god damn her clit was so sensitive — and he began to rub it up and down against her body in that same damn gentle motion his fucking was doing. Too slow to make her cum, but just hard enough to send tiny sparks of pleasure down her legs.

“Come on, just ... please just fuck me hard. This is...”

“You said fuck you like I do the kine I feed from. This is how.” He lowered his head to her ear, and her body went rigid when his lips found it. His lips plucked at some of the many piercings her ears contained before lowering and settling on her lobe. There were piercings there too, but he seemed content to suckle lightly on the flesh.

“Christ. How ... long does it take to cum ... like this?”

“Could take a while.” He sighed into her body and held her close to him. His nibbling on her ear would stop, only to start again in a different spot on her ear, and his finger on her clit never grew rough or hard or any of the things she silently begged it would. His rhythm with his hips was barely ever enough to even make the bed creak, but was just enough to make his cock's head kiss her g-spot lightly with each motion until her toned ass was molded to his pelvis.

He definitely planned this.

“So ... you — nnnm — uh ... you ... don't do this with other Kindred?” she said. She couldn't admit to losing control of the battle.

“Nope. You’re the first Kindred I’ve shared my bed with in a very long while.”

“ ... heh ... yay ... me.” Both her hands were free, and she found herself playing with her own breasts with one, while the other rested on the wrist of the bastard’s hand currently make her clit sing. “The other Carthians ... oh ... they’re boring. No — fuuck — no ... spunk.”

“You have spunk,” he said. Damn right she did. “I like that.” He gave her clit a little pinch, just enough to shock her system, but not enough to get her over the edge, before he settled back into his practically loving rhythm.

“Tragic knight ... such a romantic? I’m ... surprised a Daeva didn’t ... scoop you up.”

“I’m a hopeless romantic ... and a slut. I guess I should have been Daeva.” He gave a harder thrust into her, just a single one, just enough to earn a mewl from her before he eased back into the gentle sex.

“Ha, yeah. I ... can see it now. Ditch the suit, start writing ... poetry.” She’d given up on trying to talk smoothly. He was riding her constantly at the edge of orgasm and it was fucking with her speech. She sounded like a little girl with her tiny mewls.

“I hate poetry.” His rhythm got a little faster, and the fingers on her clit got a little rougher. “And as much as I’m a romantic, I do love to control things.” His rhythm got a bit faster again, and his back pushed a little harder into her so she was turned slightly toward the blankets. She’d lost control, without contest.

“Fuck ... ing ... Ventrue.”

His new rhythm was just fast enough, just hard enough, that should could feel her orgasm building. Her face turned into the

pillow, and she clutched at the blankets as his thrusts got just a bit deeper and harder. It was such a slow transition into a proper fucking speed that her mind was left in a haze as the orgasm she longed for was always just slightly out of reach.

A single strong thrust did it. She tightened like a vice and squeezed his member hard enough she'd thought she'd wring it off, but her juices came trickling out of her boiling cunt and kept everything flowing nicely as her orgasm started working through her legs. Her toes curled and her knees bent against herself into a fetal position as she shook. That warm, rippling bliss of the climax went up and down her spine and through her core, and another squeeze of her cunt forced the wet spot of her cum on the sheets to grow.

The tragic knight had only just started to cum when she was finished though. When the tremors were at last starting to pass, he pushed into her again with enough force to make her squeak. Then, warmth. Another push of his hips, and that warm started ooze out from their messy connection. He was cumming, and filling her cunt in the process. Not like a Kindred could get pregnant from just having the blush of life going, but god damn she'd long forgotten what this felt like.

Another push. One of her hands reached behind her and rested on his hip, but she dared not move. The fucker had spent so long working her to orgasm, she was still struggling to get some control of her muscles, and in the mean time he was squirting his cum into her and making her mewl with each thrust. Another shove of his hips, harder than the last, earned a small spurt of her own cum to join his trickling down her thigh.

She looked over her shoulder to the big guy, and a smile graced her lips. The man really was a hopeless romantic. He was holding her, nuzzling into her, and his eyes were closed like he was in love. His big arm pulled her close, and she had to admit it certainly would

have swept her off her feet, how he held her into the nook of his broad body and slowed his thrusts as his orgasm came and went. He eased into a slow rhythm again, and hell, she had to squeeze down on his cock to help milk him dry. He'd earned it after all, and she grinned with a playful snicker as she pushed her ass against him, squeezed hard enough to hurt, and drew her hips forward to pull out what little cum he had left.

"That is ... very tight," he said with a whisper. His face leaned into her neck, and she shivered at the feel of his lips on her skin.

"You are way too good at this. I'm rusty." She pushed her ass back into him. Her ass was great, there was no denying it, big and firm and toned and hard, and she pressed it to his pelvis and squeezed down on his cock yet again. Her antics forced him free of her, and she looked down with a sigh. His cum was leaking out of her and dripping down either side of her thigh. Fuck, she'd missed this.

"Thank you." The big mobster man was hugging her still, and even cuddling into her. She rolled her eyes, but didn't move. That was his quirk after all, he was the tragedy freak who missed life and all its simple pleasures. Didn't mean she couldn't join in for a little while.

"Don't get the wrong idea. This is not some Beauty and the Beast relationship. You are my window to good food and a good fuck. Got it?"

"Got it, Belle."

"Excuse me?" She tried to turn around and give him a good smacking, but the big Ventrue pulled her tight into the spooning hug, and she relented. What was a girl to do? It was comfortable in the nook of his body.

"Sorry. You can play badass Nosferatu all you like, but I like it." His free hand slid down one of her arms until his fingers were

dancing on one of her palms, and her huge claws nudged against them.

“Cause you got some screws loose and you’re a tragedy freak.”

“Maybe. I think it’s because I like a woman with some life to her,” he said. She had to chuckle at that. “And I think reptiles are beautiful.”

“Calling me a reptile?”

“A little bit.”

## Chapter 4

~~Jack~~

It only took a small nod to the bouncer for Jack to get in. Just a week ago, he wouldn't have dared dream of it, but Invictus connections were endless – larger than just Xnomina - so now here he was, stepping into throbbing music and pulsing lights. The air smelled of sweat, body's grinding against each other with the beat, and enough skin was exposed to make his heart race. Or at least, it would have if it still beat; the fact it didn't never stopped unsettling him.

Everything was an elegant mixture of sex and presentation. There were no tube tops or cut-short jean shorts, but instead open-back tops, fashionable blazers, silk shirts open at the neck, and stilettos. The rich and comfortable enjoying the night life, fancy cars and white lines included.

How many people were in here? The smell was on his nose, not offensive but defined. He could feel the animal inside him struggle against the inside of his ribs. He could hear more than just the music, or even the tap of feet against the floor and chatting of people in dark corners. He could hear flesh and blood.

“Julias does this all the time, Jack. The people here want to socialize, they want to get drunk and fuck and get high.” He straightened the open collar of his white shirt. “You can do this.”

Ahead of him was the bar, parallel to the run of the hall that lead into the more open area. Beyond the hall opened a large room, easily capable of fitting a hundred people. At least fifty were out on the floor, and streaks of white light exposed them in the otherwise drowning red dark. Each time a streak crossed a dancer's path, it

was a quick flash that showed the person dancing for a single moment. The dance floor seemed like it was a TV show running too slow, a stark contrast to the ear-numbing repetitive bass-heavy so-called music.

Jack looked to his left and right. Stairways on the side, beneath the red lights, lead up to a second floor where a balcony went over the bar. All along the walls, both above and below him, white tables with black booths had people. Some were alone, some were with others, some were almost dry humping as if the dark red of the Bloodlust's lighting would hide them.

“Yeah ... maybe I should ask a Mehket where they feed. This place is going to make me vomit.” With a cringe, Jack moved past the bar and kept to the sidewall to find one of the staircases. He walked up the stairs while keeping his eyes off to the side and looking down at the people below. Some of them weren't just rubbing pants in the seats. Some were actually having sex.

At least they kept their clothes on.

It was when Jack reached the top that he looked out over the second floor. It was more of the same, except darker. There were fewer tables, fewer people, and the music wasn't as loud, but the people up here were mostly unchanged. In fact, he seemed to have come across the make-out spot of the club, as almost every booth had a couple in it. Some were drinking, most were kissing.

One booth though, at the far back and on a slightly raised platform, had a different arrangement. One woman, tall and with long hair was sitting alone, yet behind her stood two other women. They did not sit, but waited next to her, outside the booth, with their hands hooked behind their back and their eyes on Jack. He gulped.

Antoinette.

Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck. The animal inside him almost screeched. Run. Get the fuck out. You can't be here!

The Daeva raised one of her hands and pointed her finger at him before curling it toward herself.

Jack made a quiet groan. His hands were clenched hard enough to the railing to damage it, and he was almost shaking in his new shoes. Why hadn't he worn his new suit though? Casual black pants and white shirt weren't exactly meet-the-Prince material. Why was she here anyway? Bloodlust was in the Invictus domain, Viktor's domain. Then again, a Prince could go wherever she wanted probably. It was her city. And there were no other vamps here besides the two of them, so maybe other kindred avoided Bloodlust because of Antoinette?

She frowned.

He was stalling, and now she was angry. With a reluctant sigh, the tiny Ventrue walked over to her with his hands at his side, doing his best to not let her see they were shivering. At least the music wasn't as loud up here.

Daeva were always beautiful, but Antoinette was different. Her long, wavy white hair was clearly unnatural, as her sharp face looked no more than 30-years-old, and her red eyes were just as unusual and alluring. Her lips were dark, and the red lighting of the club hid whatever color lipstick she was wearing, but she had indeed taken the time to dress for her outing. Hopefully she was just out for a social visit to her club.

She was tall, as well. Well over six feet, and now that only a few feet separated them, he couldn't help but notice her glorious curves. Whoever had sired her in some ancient past had clearly picked his timing with purpose, as the woman was both lean with a fit physique, and yet endowed with exceptionally large breasts and



wide hips. Julias had said who the Daeva sired was largely influenced by their appearance; Antoinette was a defining example.

Her dress was jaw-dropping, and it barely covered her body. An open-back black dress that tied around the neck and went down across the chest before wrapping the legs in a long, side-split skirt. The chest of it hugged Antoinette's breasts tightly, barely able to contain them as it exposed the sides of her large bosom. No bra in sight. She was leaning back in her booth with her arms up on the backs of the seat, legs crossed, and clearly enjoying how the sight of her was making Jack squirm with fear and dead man's arousal.

With a devious grin, the Prince pointed to the open space beside her in the booth.

Jack gulped almost audibly and sat down. His fingers ran over his buzzed hair with nervous habituation, and he tried to not look at the Daeva next to him. Where the hell to look though? The two women standing behind them were quite attractive as well, both of small height, one a blonde and the other a brunette. They had soft features and ballerina figures, and were dressed in uniform black jeans and black shirts that left the midriff exposed.

Ghouls? Must be. They weren't dead at least.

"I, uh ... I didn't know ... I-" Jack came to a stop when the Prince brought one of her fingers up to her own lips with a quiet shh. The small Ventrue's eyes followed the finger, now helpless to look away.

"You are Julias's new childe, yes? Jack ... Terry." The French in her accent was subtle, but still there.

"Yes ... your Excellency," Jack said. Oh god she remembers your name.

"My Prince, please." The goddess tapped her finger on the table to emphasize the title; it was important to her. "Julias is a good man. I

see that he has chosen an ... interesting childe.” She liked to draw out her words, her sentences, and make every syllable dance on her lips with a playful articulation. “Most Ventrue prefer to sire those of ... greater presence, with greater power or at least the ability to pretend such power. You though, you have none of this.”

Words hurt.

“Yes, Prince.”

“My Prince,” she said.

He tensed; he’d made a mistake. But her tone was soft, and her gaze was teasing. She was the cat playing with the mouse. He knew very well she could have him killed, right here, if he said even the smallest offense. No one would risk her wrath over the death of a freshly embraced.

“Yes ... my Prince. Julias sired me for other reasons.” Keep it short. Answer her questions directly. Do not lie to her. His hands felt like they were trying to sweat.

“Oh? And what are those?”

“He ... chose me because I am...” He turned the words over in his head. Get to the point. “Because of my tenacity, so he claims.”

“Ah. That is indeed a powerful trait in an ally.” She leaned forward and hooked her fingers together with elbows on the table. Her chin rested against her knuckles, and she licked her lips. “A dangerous one in an enemy.”

His eyes went wide. She was going to kill him. Was she? She was just staring at him, this succubus of death and curves, and the little boy could only sit there and wait for her whim. The beast inside him huddled to the base of his gut and whimpered.

“Haha, do not worry little Ventrue. You are safe, for tonight at least. You amuse me. Most newly embraced would simply run, or have frozen, but here you sit. Tenacity indeed.” She winked at him in a motion so subtle he barely noticed. “It has been a long time since I’ve been able to talk with someone so new to the dark.”

He sighed in relief.

“You want to talk to a fledgling like me?”

“Yes.”

“But-”

“You offer a view of the world that is uncolored with decades, or centuries of bias. A freshly embraced like you is a welcome change of pace.” She let out a soft, masterful giggle. “You have met Viktor, I am sure. Imagine talking with none but his sort for years on end.”

Jack laughed, and quickly brought a hand to his mouth. Not only did he just laugh in front of the Prince, but he laughed at his sire’s sire.

“I ... understand, my Prince.”

“So, you have come to the Bloodlust to feed, little Ventrue?”

“I, uh ... yes.”

“How many times have you fed on the kine?” she said.

Kine? Oh right, humans.

“Just once. It was a ... violent experience.”

“You must be hungry then. And nervous.” A new smile graced her sharp lips.

“Yes ... my Prince.” Embarrassing did not even begin to describe his predicament. He tried to keep his hands on the table in front of him, but he couldn’t help but run his fingertips along his buzzed hair again. He really was hungry.

“Julias comes here. Women grow wet at the sound of his voice. He should have been Daeva.” She chuckled again and let her hands fall to the table. “You do not have such a commanding presence. His advice to feed here is probably misplaced.”

Jack sighed, and nodded. It was a terribly depressing truth, but the small Ventrue didn’t exactly bleed the confidence common to his clan. And without the Daeva’s natural talents for seduction, wooing women into his arms on a nightly basis wouldn’t be easy.

“Ashley. Come sit next to Jack, and let him feed.”

“Oooh, yes mistress.”

Jack sat upright with a jolt. He looked wide-eyed between the tall Prince beside him, and then to the ghoul who came to sit on his other side. The blonde, with her gentle features and soft smile, did not hesitate to obey her master’s orders. Up so close, he could see the subtle lines of her abdominal muscles from her toned, lean stomach. Her top was tight to her body, and while her breasts were tiny, her lithe figure was very appealing. She was small, like Jack.

“Uh ... my Prince, I...”

When he looked to Antoinette, he went rigid at the sight of her sliding closer. She inched her body across the booth until she was touching leg-to-leg with Jack, with her closest arm upon the booth behind him. Her breasts, massive and hugged tight by her dress, were inches from his chest. She was leaning into him.

“Go on. Slowly. Enjoy it. Let her enjoy it.”

Jack gulped and looked to the ghoul, Ashley. This one was apparently quite happy to indulge the Prince's commands. He'd imagined Viktor's ghouls as beaten, broken slaves; the blonde kine was nothing like that. Ashley was smiling playfully at Jack even as her breath quickened. She wanted it.

"Julee, I think Jack is unfamiliar with women, as much as feeding."

"I believe you are right mistress," said the other ghoul. She had wandered over at this point, and was leaning over the booth from the other side. Jack was completely surrounded. A deer in headlights.

"Have some fun with him Ashley. He will hold still, won't you Jack?" There was a quiet hint of absolution to her voice, as if the very idea someone like him would disobey her was unfathomable. Frozen, the best he could manage was a small nod.

"Yes mistress." Ashley was almost giddy with excitement. "I never get to get to be ... the one leading." She ran a finger up and down Jack's shirt, across his stomach. "He is a cute little boy isn't he?"

"Yes, very," the Prince added. When Jack turned to look at her in surprise, she gave another wink and put a finger to his lips. Julias had warned him about Daeva, but only now did he recognize how deadly they were. Without threat of violence or risk of danger, he was a puppet to Antoinette's games.

Things could have been worse. A lot worse, he realized, as Ashley nudged her head toward him and put her lips against his neck.

The ghoul's neck was completely exposed. The black shirt she wore was barely more than a tank top, and now that she was snuggling into him, he could see that it was open-back like much of the clothing in the Bloodlust. A single string tied it to her neck, where it then hooked under her arms and tied around her lower

back. A fact she was aware of, apparently, as she guided Jack's nearest arm around her and placed his fingers to her naked spine.

The Prince had told him to not move, and he was not going to move. Well, maybe squirm a little.

"The Daeva enjoy a much more ... delightful approach to feeding, when we can." Her finger on his lips moved down, and Antoinette's hand soon found itself on the boy's shaking leg. She pressed it down with a sudden power, and his shaking stopped from the sheer strength of her grip. She was smiling though; there was no anger in her eyes. She was merely enjoying herself.

"You can bite me," Ashley said, her voice barely audible underneath the music, "whenever you want. Please be gentle." She leaned up to his ear and gave it a little nibble. So close, he could smell her, almost hear her heart pumping that warm, thick, delicious blood.

His hands started to move on their own to take her, if only slowly and gently, and hug her to him as his cravings started to rise. She started to shake in his grip, but with excitement instead of fear. Her nipples had grown hard until they were pressing into his chest. One arm was tickling along his back underneath his shirt, and the other was joining Antoinette between his legs. The ghoul's hands were warm, unlike his or Antoinette's, and the heat of them was making his fangs grow.

The dark, red light of the Bloodlust was becoming far too strong a metaphor for his own bloodlust. Unable to ignore his desires anymore, he closed his eyes, and leaned into Ashley's nibbling. His lips found her neck, and she shuddered with anticipation. His fangs were at their full length now, and all it took was just the slightest, tiniest bit of pressure, to gently sink through her skin and into her muscle.

“ ... oooh.” Ashley moaned into him once the first signs of pain faded.

Holy hell.

Jack could not believe the sensation of it, the power of it. He could literally feel her heartbeat pumping tiny flows of that hot, heavy liquid up from her neck and into his mouth. He didn't have to pierce deep, it didn't take much force at all to gently coax the blood from her lean flesh.

His legs shook for a few seconds, but the elation settled him. He didn't have to pin this person down, or fight them. The beast within was left to sleep while he got to enjoy the pleasure of it. It was inhuman. The thirst, the cravings quenched felt so amazing that it left him relaxing into Ashley's neck. Once the initial cravings were subdued, all that was left was basking in the bliss of that sweet, sweet liquid trickling down into his cold body.

“He's ... gentle,” Ashley said. She was mewling quietly into his ear, and her body was relaxing into his as much as he into her. Her muscles shuddered every so often, a little jerk that surprised him. She was enjoying herself far more than he'd anticipated.

Without breaking the kiss, he looked up and over to Antoinette, who was now leaning in so close as to nearly be touching noses with him. Her red eyes were gorgeous.

Even with the Prince so close, Jack couldn't help but get pulled back into his Kiss with the ghoul. The ballerina was pressing harder against him, and her moans had grown only more erotic. He could feel the buzz of her vocal cords within her neck as he drank more, and more of her blood into his corpse. That warm liquid coating his insides was making him tingle, like a slow, easing orgasm.

No wonder Kindred enjoyed this so much. Jack couldn't help but give a small smile into Ashley's neck as he looked back up to

Antoinette. That's what she was doing. She wanted to see him enjoy himself. Was it because she was so ancient? Had such things become boring to her? He couldn't see how. This lithe, sexy little creature was grinding against him, mewling into him, begging for him to continue, and the way each squirt of blood felt splashing against his tongue and going down his throat? He had no idea, just no idea how good this could feel.

"You may want to stop," Antoinette said. "If you keep drinking, she'll pass out. Anymore, she'll die."

With reluctance, Jack slowly lifted his head and turned his sights to Ashley. Her eyes were closed and weight rested to his shoulder. Her breathing was shallow, more like panting little moans, and her hand drifted up and down his stomach underneath his shirt with teasing fingertips. She had clearly enjoyed herself, even as drops of blood rose to the puncture marks still on her neck.

"Lick the bite to heal the wound." Antoinette gave his leg a reassuring nudge.

Right, Julias had mentioned that. Not that he'd need encouraging, with more blood leaking from the ballerina's neck. He put his lips to her delicate skin, and with an almost loving touch, licked the blood off of her and let his tongue press to the holes. He could feel her wounds closing underneath his touch, as inhuman as his own blood lust.

"I ... like this one," Ashley said. She was almost asleep, and had a big smile on her face. She rolled off of him and went lax beside him in the booth, apparently too weak to stand up.

"I do too." The Prince brought her hand from Jack's leg to his neck and ran one of her long claws up and down his cheek playfully. He was still shaking a little from the strange, overwhelming joy of the feeding, so new to him. The toying touch of an ancient, deadly



queen on his face was the strangest spice to what might as well had been the best orgasm of his life.

“I, um ... uh ... thank you, my Prince.” What else could he say? His thirst was quenched, his beast sated, his anxiety about the whole process greatly reduced, and it was all because Antoinette felt like being generous.

“You must think I am doing this to manipulate you, hmmm? A pawn in the Danse Macabre?” Antoinette did not slide back to her original spot. Apparently, she was quite happy to stay snug against the small Ventrue. Jack did everything he could to avoid staring at her breasts, and hide the erection this whole ordeal had given him. The flood of fresh blood into his corpse had awoken his body’s nerves, and that included sexual response.

“ ... may I speak freely?”

The Prince tapped her chin thoughtfully for a second, before she gave Jack a knowing grin.

“You may.”

“Julias explained the Danse to me, the power games, and told me of the clans and covenants. This ... certainly seems like a maneuver in the Danse, but you know that I know absolutely nothing, will never learn anything of value, and have no influence.” He managed to swallow his fear and smile at the tall, gorgeous Daeva. “I can only assume you were telling the truth, and that ... you really do just want to talk to a fledgling like me.”

She took a while to look at him, those red predatory eyes looking straight into his green eyes. She was thinking? He’d said something to make the Prince deliberate? He held perfectly still, dared not even blink when she lowered her hand from his cheek to his lips, and wiped across their surface. The gorgeous creature brought her

fingertip to her own lips, and with an elegant kiss cleaned the ghoul's blood from her digit. God damn.

“You are a smart little Ventrue,” she said, “but you may be underestimating the value of your own worth. We were all newly embraced, once.”

She was talking to him so normally, like he was an equal – well, almost. He started to relax a little, partly from being sated and partly from her words. She was Daeva, he had to be careful, but so far she hadn't said or done anything other than be friendly. Very friendly, what with Ashley snuggled against his arm, half asleep.

“And you ... my Prince, are ... I just ... wow. I...” He tried to find the words, but how the hell was he supposed to describe her? She was beautiful, but she undoubtedly knew that. She was beyond scary and intimidating, but she knew that too. She was drop dead sexy, but that'd be like telling a bird they have wings. What could he say? “You are ... wow.”

Antoinette outright laughed, and Jack couldn't help but smile at the sound of her voice.

“Thank you, Jack. It has been some time since someone has complimented me so truthfully.”

“Really?”

“Truly.”

“But you're so ... beautiful, and intelligent, and...” His words trailed off. She was smiling at him, but it had changed. This wasn't the cool, manipulative, powerful Prince smiling at him. It was a woman smiling at him, but there was a weight to it. Something pulled at her eyebrows and made her look somber.

His mother had smiled at him the same way, after their father had died.

“ ... are you lonely?” he said.

The brunette ghoul behind the booth frowned, but didn't say anything. Antoinette gave Jack a hard look, and he almost shook in his seat. He may have just crossed a line.

“Yes. I am.” She finally looked away and back to the table in front of them. “It is the way of things. The Danse Macabre exists for a reason; Kindred are paranoid, avaricious creatures.”

He looked away as well. Things just got serious. His words had apparently struck a nerve with her, and her playful Daeva side vanished. Well, what a great way to repay her enormous kindness. Make her sad. Brilliant.

“I ... could ... I mean I don't know what I could possibly do. I can't even begin to wrap my mind around the sort of world you live in, but ... I could visit? Talk, maybe?” He ran his fingers across his buzzed hair again, and tried his best to look her in the eyes. His gaze kept drifting though, afraid her eyes would burn him if his proposal backfired. Who was he, to make such an offer to the Prince?

She looked to him again, slowly though, and as she turned to face him, a small frown was on her lips. He froze. He might as well have told Kali he'd be happy to visit for tea.

“I would like that,” she said, and her warm smile returned. When his jaw dropped, relief washing over him, she reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. “You are a brave little Ventrue. Innocent, and terribly honest.” She plucked at his ear a little. “I like that.”

The fresh blood in his stomach, and the touch of her fingers was making him blush. He was still trying to not shake; the sudden shift in their relationship hadn't changed that she was a spider and he

was a fly. But now, with her fingers on his earlobe, even brushing his buzzed hair lightly, he couldn't help but sigh a little into her touch.

Her fingers felt nice.

“Come back soon, if you wish. I can help you with learning to feed.” She leaned in close, close enough that her lips just lightly grazed his earlobe. “And other things.”

“Other ... things?” He gulped. The Prince's lips actually touched his ear.

“Indeed.” She pulled away, but her voice – so husky and sultry – let out a quiet sigh of satisfaction. “You'll have to come back to find out.”

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~~Beatrice~~

There's nothing quite like a great singer who can belt a note with perfect glottal compression and cord closure.

Beatrice had her headphones on, and she had the metal cranked. Normally she'd sit still when listening, maybe air guitar or mouth the lyrics, but this time she was jumping up and down. She couldn't stop smiling.

When the singer hit a really high note, loud and hard, she kicked her bed hard enough to send it flying into the wall, and she slid onto her knees, all the while holding a non-existent mic to her non-existent singing.

Her door swung open loud enough that the crack of it against her wall managed to penetrate her headphones.

“For fuck's sake! Beatrice, the fuck is wrong with you?”

Beatrice came to a stop, looked at Joe, and held up a finger. Just ... one ... last ... minute.

“Song had to finish,” she said, and removed the headphones while she stepped over to her laptop to pause the music. Metal/rock operas always had the best singers.

“Yeah, sure.” Joe gave a low snort, not unlike an annoyed dog. She was tempted to throw the Gangrel a ball, just to see how pissed he’d get. He was a big guy though, a little older than her, a bit taller, and much thicker. Bald too. Looked kinda like a wrestler, now that she considered it.

“What do you want then?”

“Garry’s back. Says he wants to talk to you?” Joe gave a shrug and disappeared down the hallway. He had a room down the hallway a bit. All of Garry’s closest friends had rooms up here on the top floors of the building.

She hoped she hadn’t ruined that ‘closest friend’ title already with the whole Julias thing, hopefully still a secret. Even as she left her room and headed for the roof, she couldn’t help but smile to herself at the thought of Julias. She knew she shouldn’t of course; she’d made it clear to him what that night meant, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t enjoyed it. Or that it’d be the only night like it.

“Hey Beatrice.”

A small guy stepped in beside her. Scrawny, short brown hair, dazed eyes. Mike, a Mekhet who spent his days on the computer. He hadn’t been in the game for more than a few years, and he averted his eyes from her mouth when talking to her.

He annoyed the fuck out of her, but he got her mountains of free software so, he’d earned a pass.

“Yo Mike. Garry want to talk to you too?”

The kid nodded back. “And he’s got someone waiting for us?”

“Know who?”

“Nope.”

She shrugged, clicked her crocodile teeth from side to side, and stepped up onto the roof.

Garry was standing there in the center, and from the way he had his arms across his chest, she guessed he was in a defensive mood. He was a tough guy too – you had to be to run the Carthians – and the Gangrel looked more like he belonged in illegal street fighting rings than running any covenant. His hair was buzzed to basically nothing, his scruffy-short beard was barely kept in any state of neatness, and his hard jaw kind of made him look Russian from a distance. Julias may have had a suave, kingly look to him, but Garry looked like he could rip anyone apart with his bare hands.

The two vampires he was talking to, on the other hand, looked like a couple of wimpy bitches.

“Garry ... Tony, Rebecca,” she said.

Her inner-beast stood up straight and tried to seem bigger than it was, but Rebecca was strong enough to beat her in a fight. The Daeva had a lot of years on her. Worse though, was her sire Tony.

Tony looked like he came out of a fucking vampire chick flick. She practically expected him to sparkle. He was a bit tall, with a lean and almost girlish figure. His hair was a short black trim, his face was soft with just a touch of scruff, and his blue eyes always carried a hint of gentleness to them. All he had to do was give her a small glance with those blue eyes though, and she found herself paralyzed.

He was ancient. Far older than Rebecca, or Garry for that matter. Every motion he made, she could see how measured it was, how precise. Worse still was how his blue eyes carried just a hint of the insanity you saw in serial killer sociopaths. The Prince's ex-lover was terrifying.

The two of them may have looked like wimpy bitches, but her inner-beast knew better. They'd rip her to shreds.

"Mike, see if you can crack this. Tony thinks it may have some coordinate data encrypted in some messages." Garry tossed a phone Mike's way, and the Mehket reached out to grab it. Of course, the idiot nearly dropped it, and everyone sucked in their breath for a second before Beatrice snatched it out of the air.

"Ah ... sorry ... boss," he said. Beatrice just had to wince; that cost him some respect points. She gave him the phone, and pushed him toward the door. He needed little convincing, and vanished back into the building.

"That kid, I swear." Garry groaned and looked back to the two Daeva on his roof. "Any other favors you want? Should I fucking dance?"

Rebecca looked angry, but Tony just laughed. "You don't want me to succeed?"

"You could say you're not my first choice for the next Prince."

"I'm hurt, Mister Tones." Tony shook his head, and his condescending-but-playful smile never waned. "But I could use a pair of eyes on the Invictus. You knew I'd ask though. That's why you sent for her, is it not?" He pointed straight at Beatrice.

"Tch." Garry gave a small snort in Gangrel fashion. "If the Prince catches on to what you're doing Tony, the Sheriff will be the least of your worries."

“I won’t tell if you won’t.”

The sheer amount of implied terrors was beyond her imagining. Julias was right, Kindred were fucking tiresome. Beatrice forced herself to stay silent, and instead resigned to watching Garry and Tony make thinly veiled threats at each other.

She ignored the slight trembling in her boots.

“I’ll let you know if Beatrice comes up with anything. No promises,” Garry said.

“Of course. No promises. Are there ever?” Tony gave a bow. Hell, even his whore childe Rebecca gave a bow, and then the both of them walked off. A small jump and they were down the building side, and down into the streets to be on their merry way.

“... we really working with those ... no-covenant fucks?” Beatrice said, and stepped up to her boss.

“Tch. We work the hand we’re dealt. The idiot wants to be a thorn in Antoinette’s side, I say let him.” He leaned over the side of the rooftop and gazed out into the street below. “You think I went to a fucking Invictus party for the chicks?”

“Hell no, sir.”

“Fucking right, no. Invictus are up to something. Viktor was pushing for a little ceasefire between us, for now. And you’re going to deliver.”

“What?”

“Ease off the aggression. Don’t go making any new enemies until I say we’re in the clear. Understood?” He leveled his gaze at her. Something was going on, and if she fucked with shit, she might ruin it.



And she wouldn't do that. She owed him, and they both knew it.

“ ... understood sir.”

“Viktor and Tony are going to get in each other's way sooner or later. When shit hits the fan ... well, we'll see. Tony wants us to give him a heads up if the Invictus head his way, so just keep an eye on the triumvirate's right hands, Julias and Natasha and them. If they're on his tail, tell me.”

Julias. She tried hard to not smile.

“Oh, and if you see an opportunity to kill that bitch Rebecca and pin the blame on the Invictus, take it.”

She couldn't hold back the smile anymore.

“Hell yes, sir.” She gave a small nod, and headed back inside.

On the way down, she heard more voices. There hadn't been anyone else up there, and no one had come up the stairs since Mike had gone down. But when she stuck her head back out through the door to see, her boss was just standing there and looking out at the street.

Weird. She never pegged her boss for the talks-to-himself type.

# Chapter 5

~~Julias~~

“The Carthians are rebels without a cause. They don’t do well taking orders from the older covenants, and work to try and establish more modern forms of government.”

Julias paced back and forth in his kitchen, glass of red in his hand and his childe at the counter.

“They don’t sound bad,” the boy said.

“They’re not ‘bad,’ but they’d tear down generations of structure, of heritage, of rules and dynasties just because it doesn’t have the flash of a modern government.” He gave a shrug and sipped his drink. “Props to them for wanting a more fair and just system, but they’re naive. Kindred are not just, fair creatures, Jack. They’re greedy, paranoid predators.”

“Then how do the Invictus do it?”

“Rules. We’re the foundation that a society of vampires can last with, harsh and strict and formal. The Carthians would collapse within a year of being in charge.”

“But ... I thought Antoinette was in charge?”

Julias quirked a brow. The boy said her name with an odd touch of softness. “She is. We ask her permission for anything she’d care about, and she almost always lets us do as we will.” He chuckled. “It drives the triumvirate mad though. What’s that dragon up to, they argue constantly.”

“How many Carthians are there?”

“As many as Invictus; the two covenants make up the bulk of Dolareido’s Kindred. Viktor, Maria, and Michael are older than Garry though, so the Prince lets the Invictus rule ... usually.”

“Right right. And Antoinette is a ... dragon?”

“The Ordo Dracul. A small covenant, concerned only with weird, pseudo-scientific pursuits of self growth. They guard their secrets well. Only Antoinette and Daniel are members of that covenant, here in this city, as far as we’re aware.”

“Ok...” Jack ran both of his hands back and forth over his buzzed head, and his eyes were darting back and forth at nothing. Processing.

Julias managed another chuckle and took another drink. The amount of information was massive, and there was still more to come. The covenants would be enough for today though.

“Antoinette banned the Lancea et Sanctum, so you don’t need to worry about them. Normally they’d be our partners; Invictus control while the Lancea et Sanctum record. They’re a very religious group.”

“Can’t believe she has the power to ... no, wait, yeah I can believe it.” The small Ventrue gave a shiver. Apparently his meeting with the Prince had left an impression on him.

“And then ... there’s the Circle of the Crone.” It was Julias’s turn to give a shiver. “Jacob is their leader. A Nosferatu. He ... well...” He scratched at the back of his neck, even as Jack raised his head to look at him with wide eyes. “Jacob is primal.”

“Primal?”

“Yes. Primal. Jacob would be deep underground with his nest, and I would not be surprised to see him chanting around a bowl of

Kindred blood, mixed with the bones of animals and kine, and casting ... dark things.”

They stared at each other for a moment. So far, all talk of Kindred had been modern, of business men and slum lords and politics and money. The thought of the Circle and their ancient, primordial ways got under Julias’s skin, and under the skin of his childe too from the way Jack was looking at him.

“No one’s mentioned him ... I’m surprised Antoinette allows that, and not the Lancea et Sanctum.” Again, Jack’s voice said the Prince’s name with an odd inflection, and for a moment, Julias could swear the boy smiled.

“You have the Prince on your mind, Jack? What’s up?”

“I ... er, yeah.” The little man huddled in on himself until he practically reeked of shame. “I ... hung out with Antoinette last night.”

“ ... I’m sorry. What?”

“I uh ... had a lovely night with Antoinette.” Jack was scratching his head in that way he always did when he was nervous. Well, at least his childe was predicable. Or so he thought.

“The Prince.”

“The Prince.”

“You had a lovely night with ... the Prince ... of our city.”

“ ... yeah.”

Julias’s face was stuck in a permanent frown, but his childe apparently couldn’t contain his grin anymore. He refused to look

Julias in the eye, and his were looking to the counter. Hell, even one of his fingers was tracing nothing into its surface.

“Ok, ok, you’re going to have to walk me through it.” With a groan of frustration, Julias took up his usual glass of blood and started to walk around. Soon he was in front of his window and looking out over the city. His childe had been talking to Antoinette?

“Well, I dropped by Bloodlust like you suggested. Which was a horrible idea, by the way. The music alone, my god. I mean-”

“The story, Jack.”

“Right, right. Well, I went up onto the second floor, thought maybe it would be nicer up there. And .. well Antoinette was there in the back.”

“The hell was the Prince doing at Bloodlust? She’s never been there before...” Julias scratched at his chin before taking another sip of his blood. A Prince wouldn’t just go walking around visiting new places. They are machines of decision and efficiency. Everything is done with a purpose.

“I have no idea, but when she saw me, she made me sit with her.”

Julias had to turn to look at Jack just to make sure the boy wasn’t joking. Nope, the small Ventrue was scratching his head in his usual way.

“You sat down at her booth.”

“Yeap.”

“And Daniel didn’t cut you into bits?” Julias made a sweeping gesture with his hand. Literal bits.

“Who?”

“Her sheriff.”

“Oh. I uh, didn’t see him. Only two of her ghouls.”

“You wouldn’t see him, he’s a Mekhet. He was there though, he’d have to be. Antoinette wouldn’t just go out alone.” The large Ventrue paced back and forth in front of the window. Viktor was not going to like this. Anything out of the ordinary was enough to make his master nervous, and that it had been this brand new childe who discovered it? Suspicious wouldn’t even describe his reaction.

“Well, I’m still in one piece, so I guess he didn’t. I sat down and Antoinette saw I was hungry.”

“You hadn’t fed?” This time he purposefully sounded judging.

“That’s why I went there! You know I’m no good at this sort of thing. Antoinette noticed right off the bat, so she...”

“She what?” Julias stopped pacing and stared at Jack. She couldn’t have.

“She um ... let me feed off of one of her ghouls.”

“Oh ... oh. Well.” His grip loosened on his drink, and he came back to the counter to sit across from his childe. “She didn’t give you any of her blood to drink, did she?”

“What? No, no ... vampires can drink other vampire blood?”

Julias ran his fingers through his hair in a way not too dissimilar to Jack.

“It’s ... just, don’t do it. Never do it. Ever. I can explain it in detail later, just know that it will ruin you. Ruin. You.” He could tell his words struck home, as Jack’s eyes opened wide. If he had to scare

his childe to the extreme to get across his point, he'd do it. Jack was far too trusting and innocent to be making that risk.

“Ok ok, never drink another vamp's blood. Got it. So I drank from her ghoul, which was amazing and insanely hot, by the way.”

“Which one?”

“The blonde, Ashley. Ballerina's body you know? She got all snug with me and rubbed against me and stuff.”

“... damn that is pretty hot, so lean and bendy and – wait wait wait. She let you feed on one of her ghouls? Why?” Focus, Julias. Women later, the problem now.

“I guess ... to be nice?”

“She's the Prince, Jack. She's not going to do anything without a real motive.”

“I know, I know. But what exactly is she going to get out of controlling me, Julias? I'm not in a position of power, or influence, or even knowledge. And hey, I get that, I understand. So what's the harm?”

“I ... don't know. Vampires are patient, her more than most. She may be sewing a seed that will help her in decades to come.”

“Maybe, maybe, but ... I don't know. She didn't know I'd be coming - hell I didn't know. She was ... she seemed like she ... wanted to experience the things I was only just experiencing.” The small Ventrue scratched at the back of his neck, and Julias could only ponder.

“She is ancient, and a Daeva. She'll chase after things like that, I guess. This is unheard of though, for Antoinette. If Tony knew...”

“The Daeva Primogen?”

“Yeah. If he knew, he’d rip you to bits, and I don’t think he’d worry about doing it secretly,” Julias said.

“Fuck ... fuck fuck fuck.”

Julias groaned and moved over to his couch. If Antoinette’s unknown games weren’t going to get Jack killed, then Tony’s jealousy would.

“Don’t ... just be careful. It’s not like you can just tell her no, if she asks you to do something innocent, even if it does piss Tony off. Maybe she’ll protect you if he finds out ... maybe?” The taller man swished his drink around in its glass. His eyes stared into it and his mind wandered. His new childe was already at the whim of the Prince herself, and her games were putting his new life at risk.

Jack came over to join him. Even with scared written on his face, Julias could see the small Ventrue was also smiling.

“ ... you like her!”

“What!? No I don’t.”

“Oh yes you do Jack. She has you wrapped around her finger and she’s making you dance.”

“I can’t dance.”

“You know what I mean Jack. She’s got you swooning over her like a typical man and a succubus.”

“She didn’t use her ... abilities, as far as I can tell. I mean I remember what it felt like when Rebecca had me, and Antoinette didn’t do anything like that. Or she’s really good at hiding it.”



“Well that’s good ... ish.” Julias couldn’t help but smirk at Jack. The little Ventrue was certainly biting off big fish, whether he had meant to or not. “So, what was she like?”

“What do you mean?”

“Her personality.”

“You don’t know?”

“No one talks to the Prince outside of meetings, Jack.” Julias took another sip of his drink and smirked at his childe. “You’re in the Danse Macabre now, if only by the strangest means possible.”

“Oh, wow. Well she was ... well, she was nice. Oddly insistent I call her ‘my Prince,’ but still really nice to me.”

“Nice?”

“Yeah, nice, like she legitimately wanted to have a nice night and talk to me, help me even.”

“You do know she’s ancient, right? She’s the oldest vampire in the city. Older than Viktor. Maybe even older than Jacob. She’s been around since the Italian War 1542. She has seen more death than any of us. She’s seen nations rise and fall. She’s one of the oldest members of the Ordo Dracul!”

“ ... I don’t know what to tell you dude. She seemed nice.” The childe squirmed a little. Some memory put a smile on his face. “And sexual.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she ... she got really close, especially when I got to feed on Ashley. Got right up next to me, leaned into me, played with my ear a little.”

Even Julias found his interest peaked. This was the Prince? He knew she was Daeva, but damn.

“She was wearing this little black dress that left very, very little to hide. Just ... wow. And she was so close while I was feeding, it was ... and I mean...” Jack gestured to his chest with open palms. “They were huge.”

“I admit, Antoinette is gorgeous. Tall though. She’s got a foot on you.”

“And I am perfectly fine with that.” Jack grinned like a jackass, and Julias could only hope the man’s innocence wasn’t going to get him turned into ash.

“Please please please don’t try and hook up with Antoinette.”

“I would never!”

His feigned shock managed to make Julias laugh.

“Jack.” Julias forced himself to frown, reached over, and gave him a good slug in the arm. “I’m not ... I’m just ... you’re new to this. You’re picking it up very quickly but you’re still very new to this. You have to tread carefully. Not all Kindred are reasonable.”

“I’m picking this up quickly?”

“Yes.” Julias gave his friend a slow sigh before sipping his drink. “But if you draw too much attention before you’re able to protect yourself, depending on who you piss off, I won’t be able to protect you.” It was a bitter pill to swallow.

Jack was still smiling though.

Just when Julias was about to give him a tongue lashing for not taking things seriously, a call came in on his phone.

~Yo let me in.~

“Ah, Beatrice is here,” Julias said.

“Who?”

“A new acquaintance. I’m sure you’ll like her.” The older Ventrue hit OK on the apartment smartphone app, and a chime let him know the lobby door had been opened. The wonders of technology. It startled him sometimes, having been embraced early in the 20th century. Technology grew so fast as to make his head spin, and sometimes he could only imagine what it did to the elder Kindred.

“A girl? I should go then. This—hey, how often do you drink the women you bring here?”

“I don’t bring women here that often.”

“Oh hell yes you do man.” Jack just laughed, and Julias found himself frowning at the drink in his hand. Did he really? Beatrice was right then.

“ ... yes, I drink them. I don’t kill them.”

“Didn’t think you would man. You may be a playboy but you certainly don’t seem a—”

The door flew open with a crack, and both men almost jumped at the sudden sound. Beatrice walked in in her typical jeans, black army boots and a tank top, but she also had a box in her hands.

“Ok White Knight, pants off. I got a box of goodies and we are going to try some shit out!” Beatrice said, and she grinned maniacally with all her teeth on display. She must not have seen Jack yet. Julias raised a hand, but the Nosferatu threw the box to the floor where it landed with a loud thud. “And check these out!” With a shameless motion, Beatrice lifted her tanktop up to her neck

and hooked it against her chest above her breasts. Her claws found her nipples, and they plucked at some rings that pierced them, rather than the bolts she had last time. “I brought lots of piercings and chains and shit we can try and see what looks hot.”

“Beatrice, um...” Julias said, and motioned to his childe on the couch. “Have you met Jack?”

Jack was a deer in headlights. Beatrice just humphed though, and lowered her shirt before turning to look at Julias’s friend.

“This is Jack? Dude is like, fucking ant sized.” She walked over to him and poked him in the forehead with a claw. “Hello little Ventrue. RAAR!” Her mouth opened wide, completely wide with her huge array of teeth on display, and Jack stumbled back on the couch at the shock of it. Julias grumbled, put his forehead in his palms, and put his elbows to the counter.

His childe was a child, and his lover was a punk.

“Um, I ... I should go,” Jack said.

“Yeah, buh-bye kid.”

Once Jack was off the couch, Beatrice hopped into it his spot and crossed her legs. Jack glanced to her, but she just smiled and waved her claws. Ok, so maybe Jack wouldn’t like her, but Julias was sure he’d figure out how to make them get along. Maybe.

Jack managed a slow, hesitant return wave, and mouthed ‘what the fuck’ before leaving.

“Aha, that is fucking adorable. You sired him? Fuck man. I’m surprised Viktor hasn’t eaten him. Literally. I don’t mean diablerie, I mean just eaten him whole like a fucking pickle.”

“Jack is actually over twenty years old, he just looks kinda young ... and acts it. He’s a friend though, and I sired him for good reasons.” Julias took another sip. He had to admit, seeing Beatrice walk through his door and with such a brazen attitude was such a change from the Invictus approach. Her crass behavior wasn’t irritating, despite how much he felt it should be, but was instead very refreshing. Usually.

“Hey, I ain’t judging his character, just his size.” She reached out and over to her dropped box, and slid it back to the foot of the couch where she sat. “So, seriously, check this out. I got some vibrators, some beads, some lube – of fucking course – and some rope. Oh, and a bunch of different piercings to try, and nipple chains. Fucking eh, nipple chains, right? Never tried em.”

“You think it’s that easy? You just show up and we fuck?”

Beatrice slowly raised her eyes from the box to him, utterly perplexed, before she burst into fits of laughter. “Yes. I do. Think I didn’t see how much you liked this piece of ass last time I was here?”

“ ... well, still, a little dialogue might be nice. What have you been up to?”

“Me? I have been up to absolutely fuck-all besides stealing sex toys and having a nice good feed before coming here.” Suddenly, she was topless, and her tank top was on the floor. She’d taken it off in such a carefree motion, Julias wasn’t sure he’d seen it. “How about you? I’m sure you must have a ghoul or two around to drink.”

“No ghoul.”

“No ghoul?”

“Nope.” He shook his head and took a sip of his drink. “Never felt comfortable with the idea.”

Try as he might to maintain normal conversation, he was in fact staring at the topless woman. She had the thick, toned legs of a fighter, but the leanness of a gymnast. He was almost jealous of her muscle definition along her flat stomach, but jealously quickly turned to arousal as he drank the sight of her handful breasts sitting on her strong torso. The tattoos and piercings and her casual sitting stance, as if everything was normal despite having taken her shirt off, painted the perfect picture of a badass woman.

He really liked it. When her dark hair covered her cheeks and left only her normal lips exposed, she seemed like a perfectly normal, albeit spunky woman. With snake eyes. And claws.

“I suppose you wouldn’t really need one, with girls lining up at your door. Ah man, you should invite me to one of your feedings sometime. We could turn the lights off so she can’t see my face, and do all sorts of dirty things to her in the dark.” The Nosferatu was grinning with her scary array of massive crocodile teeth, and started to dig into the box of goodies she’d brought.

“If it was a ghoul, I could leave the lights on,” he said, and walked over to join her on the couch after setting his drink down on the counter.

“Thinking about getting one then?”

“I’m not sure. Why not you?”

“Me? Shit Julias, I’ve only been a Kindred for 20 years. Turning some kine into my slave is heavy shit, not to mention a Nosferatu’s slave. Plus Garry says it can be a drain on you ... aha!” As if she’d found treasure, she pulled out of the box a small, black bag, the sort you’d keep jewelry in. She dumped the contents onto the nightstand and exposed an assortment of chains.

“See?” she said, grabbed one of the thin silver ones, and right in front of him as if trying on hats, hooked each end to her nipple

rings. She was turned on the couch to face him now, with her knee pulled up onto the cushion, and one of her arms hooked along the back of the couch, so her other hand was free to pluck at the length of the chain.

Then she blushed. The blush of life brought color to her skin right in front of him, and to his delight, made her nipples swell slightly. She must have caught the lust in his eyes, cause she got up off the couch, and posed for him.

“You like?”

“What happened to the nasty, horrible monster who lived in the dark and hated everyone?”

“Hey! I never hated everyone, just ... the monster is on vacation. This is her vacation, unless you want me to—”

“No no, please continue.” He leaned back in his couch and put both his arms along its back. The blush of life went through him as well, and within moments colors had come back to his skin, saliva had joined his tongue, and arousal started to pump blood into his member.

“Ah, see, now I feel like a schoolgirl trying to make it in the movie business, so I agree to do an audition that gets dirty.” She just laughed. “How about this one?” She changed chains for a longer, thicker one that nearly reached her navel.

“Oh, I do like that one.”

“I know, right? It’s got heft. I can feel it pulling down on my tits.” The warrior walked up to him, put her hands down onto his knees, and leaned forward so the chain nestled against the bottom of his shirt.

“I can ... feel that.”

“That all you feel?” With a bit of roughness to her, she put her clawed hands against his crotch. “Come on, I don’t have all night here.”

“You don’t?”

“Well ... ok yeah, I do.” She started to rub against the growing erection in his pants. Just the fact she was so brazen about it was enough to bring him to full arousal within seconds. “That’s why I brought the box.” The Nosferatu pulled herself onto the couch and straddled him, then slid forward enough so her own crotch rested against his. One of her arms hooked around behind him, and the other rested its elbow on his shoulder so her claws could run through his hair.

He had to admit, she was acting very differently than last time. All the subtle ways she tried to hide her crocodile smile were gone, and instead she was looking him straight in the eye with the huge array of teeth on full display. Her lips in the center looked perfectly normal, but both cheeks were replaced with monstrous teeth that could easily rip him in half. Despite himself, having such a monster grinding on him was only making him harder.

“Christ you are one weird man, Julias. Inches away from snapping distance, and you get horny.” She leaned in closer, and closer, until their noses were touching. “That really turns me on.”

He leaned in toward her in return, and put his lips to hers. She blinked at him, and for just a moment he thought she was going to bite him, but once his hands reached behind her and started to caress her naked back, she relented. She let her body relax against him, closed her eyes, and kissed him back with a sigh.

That sigh of acceptance on her voice was what he wanted. It was beautiful, how such a dark creature could be so sexual, and even tender and romantic. He dared not say it, lest she rip him to bits, but he could think it.



“Ok Romeo ... don’t make me smack you.” She loved to threaten him, but he saw the grin on her lips. She liked it.

Her hands reached down and took his, and as she got comfy on his lap, her claws guided his fingers to her body. She really did have the physique of a gymnast and fighter combined. Her legs were thick and powerful – damn hot in those tight jeans she liked – and her stomach was an impressive array of defined abs. He was a big, tall, and muscular guy, but her chiseled stomach was iron.

A snake tattoo danced along her stomach, curling around over the muscles of her pelvis, abs, and then up the center of her sternum to turn and bite into one of her nipples. She even guided one of his hands to follow the snake’s trail, until she planted his hand against her breast. Even with her lean, muscular physique, her breast was just large enough to fill his large palm, and a gentle squeeze was enough to mold its softness to his fingers while the chain dangled over his thumb.

Her hands found his tie. To his surprise, she was looking at it with a rather lustful gaze. Her claws drifted up and down its length, and she plucked at his tie bar with a playful grin.

“So ... we’re going to have a no-work-talk clause, right?” she said, and hooked one hand around his neck, while the other continued to tug and pull at his tie.

“A clause?”

“Just trying to talk like an Invictus would understand.” She shifted her jaw to the side a bit, which caused a few of the front crocodile teeth to click together as they slid over each other. “You know shit will happen between the Carthians and Invictus. And I don’t want any of that fuckery coming in here and ruining a good thing.”

“ ... are you planning on coming over often?” He tilted his head to the side and nudged his cheek into her wrist.

The Nosferatu looked at him for only a moment before her eyes wandered away, and the telltale hints of shyness sneaked their way into her mannerisms. She started to fidget a little, confidence wavering, and her body tensed. She was thinking.

“You don’t want me to?”

“I definitely do want you to.” He gave her wrist a kiss, and her smile returned. “But you’ve entered relationship territory now. If you start coming over regularly, I’m afraid I’ll have to officially declare that we’re dating.”

“ ... fuck. Seriously?” The Kindred frowned down at him. “You can’t do that. Our bosses would kill us.”

“They won’t. They may want to, but they won’t.” Both his hands slid down to her waist, and he let his fingers run back over the muscles of her pelvis, before reaching behind her to feel the shape of her ass through her jeans. She leaned into his grip a little too. “Besides, I won’t tell anyone if don’t want me to. It’d just be for us.”

“But ... I don’t want to be in a committed relationship.” She sat back on his lap, and he could swear she was trying to pout. She couldn’t really do it right though, with her extra teeth along her cheeks.

“Too bad. Call me old fashioned.” He gave a shrug, but smiled his jackass smile. “You’ll get to come over whenever you want, share in my things, share in my meals too. We’ll talk, laugh, comfort each other, and kiss and other things.” He sat up and spread his legs, and Beatrice’s eyes opened a little wide as her ass fell between his legs and onto the couch. “Won’t that just be horrible?”

The poor girl. She was dealing with a Ventrue. He never went into a conversation without having planned it out ahead of time, for a million different possibilities. He could read her expressions – even with her extra teeth – like a poker player too, to every last tell she had. He crafted the words, the inflections, the propositions to go with them, all to manipulate and control the dialogue to go the way he wanted it to go, and make the other person realize what he wanted them to realize.

He wanted her to realize he liked her.

“Come on. Do ... I have to decide now?”

“No. Take your time.” Now that her ass was on the couch between his legs, his height came into play and he was looking down at her. His hands sneaked up her back, and his fingers danced along her naked shoulder blades. He even leaned forward, and put his forehead to hers. She tried to pull away, but with his hands on her back, she was trapped and helpless to escape. All she could do was lower her gaze and avoid eye contact.

After a minute of stubborn quietness, the Nosferatu creature let out a quiet grumble and put her hands on his chest. “I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you.”

“Fucking ... Ventrue.” She reached up and undid his tie. How she managed to undo clothing without her claws cutting it, he couldn’t fathom. “I just wanted to come over and have a good fuck, maybe chill out a bit. Didn’t want any of this emotional crap.” Little by little, she started to undo his suit. He watched her work with a tilted head and a smile; much as she may hate the Invictus, or Ventrue Kindred, she seemed to really like his suit, and she was delicate as she undid the jacket, and then the waistcoat.

“Sorry,” he said, knowing she’d frown at him for using the S word. “You’re the one that asked me out first. You have only yourself to blame.”

She laughed, and he gave her another kiss. This time, she kissed him back immediately, and even smiled a little before pushing him harder so he was leaning into the couch. Her claws were quick, and an eagerness started to join her movements until she was almost pulling his clothes off of him. When she finally had him down to his boxers, she slid off of him and laid down on the couch, and with her legs in the air, she undid her boots, then pulled off her pants and underwear.

The Nosferatu, naked and smirking, let one of her legs dangle off the side of the couch, and pulled up her other leg to bend at the knee and press into the back of the furniture so her legs were spread open. Her claws drifted up and down her hard stomach, and one pair found the chain still attached to her nipples, then idly tugged on it.

“If it’s my fault, at least I can get something out of it.” She reached down with her other hand, and her sharp claws found the pierced hood of her clit. The little nub of flesh was already swollen, and Beatrice didn’t hesitate to start stroking it.

For a moment, a part of him worried about his couch, and then he grinned at the image of what would happen if he told Beatrice to stop for fear of his furniture. She’d probably stab the couch, then him.

The couch didn’t matter anyway. The deadly creature in front of him was naked, masturbating, and watching him with hungry eyes. Just seeing those snake eyes of hers, green with black slits down their centers, was enough to make him shiver. She really was a dangerous animal, wild and almost chaotic with her impulses. He wanted more of that.

“You just going to watch?” she said. Her fingers had gotten faster, and he could see the shine of moisture already starting to build on her tight snatch’s lips.

“You seem to like it.” He reached out, took her leg still on the couch, pulled it onto his lap, and ran his hands up down her calf and thigh. She really had the legs of a warrior.

“... I do. No one’s looked at me in a long time.” She clicked her teeth together, and even let out her tongue – damn that was a long tongue – to lick at her chops. “And ... I really got off on being watched, when I was alive.”

She spread herself a little more, and started to masturbate a little faster. Every bit of him wanted to take her there, but there was something to this. The sight of her, monster and all, spreading herself and playing with herself, knowing he could see every detail and had his hands on her leg, was intoxicating. Her abs flexed whenever she got a little rougher, and the leg in his hands pressed against his bare chest a little harder too.

He slid off his boxers. His member was already hard and upright, and he kept his eyes on Beatrice as he wrapped a hand around it. The Nosferatu responded immediately, her voice growing to a full moan, and her hand on her clit getting faster and faster. When he started to slowly stroke himself, all while keeping his eyes focused on her, she erupted.

She almost pushed herself off the couch, but managed to balance herself before her spreading legs nudged her anymore. Her back arched, one hand grabbed onto her breast, and the other covered her pussy while the juices started to trickle. In only minutes, she’d gone from the teasing creature on his lap, to cumming and groaning at her own fingers.

“That was fast,” he said. The Nosferatu didn’t seem to mind. She milked her orgasm with her hand gently cupping her cunt, holding

herself, while the spasms of her body worked through the couch so he could just barely feel them. She was looking at him while she came too, and her snake eyes drifted down to where his hand was stroking himself.

“H ... hold on,” she managed to say, and forced herself to sit up. He stopped massaging his cock, and laid back as Beatrice grabbed his shoulders, and straddled his lap again; he could feel her trembling thighs against his. This time, she had her knees planted on the couch on either side of him, and the hand that was holding his shoulder moved to wrap its claws around his throat.

He dared not move. For a moment he wondered if she'd cut off his head, but the fear passed quickly as her other hand reached down and grabbed his shaft. She gave it a few, tender strokes, enough to rekindle it to full arousal. With her lean, ripped body squirming around in front of him, and the chain dangling from her nipples – not to mention her other assortment of piercings – Julias could only drink in the sight of the wild animal guiding his cock upward.

With a quiet whimper, she lowered herself onto him.

“Fucking ... shit ... god damn it, Julias.” She kept her grip clinched around his throat - for balance he hoped - and wriggled her hips left and right a little as she sank down onto his lap.

She was so unbelievably tight. Julias settled his hands on her hips, and simply watched with hungry eyes while she continued to work her way down. He was a big guy, he knew that, and Beatrice was tight enough and strong enough she could probably squeeze him until she tore his dick right off. She was so wet though, that even her clenching muscles let him penetrate her, inch by slow inch. The blush of life had her small labia dripping juices down his length, and before long, he could feel her warm cum on his testicles.

“Ever ... thought of ... getting into porn?” she said. She’d managed half of him at that point, and even Julias was struggling to hold still. Her soaked insides were squeezing his glans, massaging with each inch of him she took in. The hot wet of her cunt was sending little jolts of pleasure down his cock; it took every part of his willpower to not push down on her hips.

She liked to be watched, and he wanted to watch.

“Porn?” he said. He surprised himself with the small groan and struggle in his voice.

“Yeah, dumbass. You got the dick for it. You ... need a girl ... with a looser pussy. This is ... painful.”

Despite her complaint, Beatrice let out another moan, her jaw opening and her long tongue hanging from between her teeth. A low growl escaped her. She’d finally taken him to the base, and slid her hands back to his shoulders to hold on while she sat there and got comfortable with a little wriggle of her hips.

“I don’t think I’d look very good on camera.” He smiled at her, and she even grinned back at him. He was better at controlling his voice than her, but truth was he found no room left for his cock inside her. Every last inch of him was being squeezed by her snatch, almost hard enough to be painful, but she was soaking wet and only dripping more of her juices down onto him. Apparently, Beatrice was a sex addict in life, and it carried over to her undeath. Even as a vampire, the blush of life had turned her body into a fountain of hot, flowing juices that sent waves of warm pleasure down his cock.

She started to move. She didn’t bounce up and down, instead the monster was more content to push against him, and make sure his back was against the couch, so she could lean back and gently grind herself back and forth. It was heaven on his cock; he could feel his glans gently rubbing against her deepest walls, massaging him in her almost circular lap dance.

“Fucking hitting ... that deep spot. Hurts...”

“Are you alright?”

Beatrice just laughed, and let her weight sink her balls deep onto him. More of her juices trickled down his testicles, she was so wet.

“Only hurts a little. But ... so ... fucking ... deep, nng. Just don’t ... move...”

The Nosferatu was in control. It left him with nothing to do but watch, and touch. His hands started to drift up and down her body, to the skull tattoo where her missing pubic hair would be, the snake that coiled around her abs and bit into her right nipple, and to the various other tattoos that decorated her muscular form. One of her ears had a large assortment of earrings, and a small chain that connected a nose-piercing to it; he reached up to touch those as well. An eyebrow held a small stud. Her shoulder-length dark hair framed her face and hid it, but with his hands roaming her body, he found the tattoo of chain link circling her neck. He touched it all.

Any one of these would have made her uncouth, even vulgar to an Invictus, but Julias could only stare, mesmerized. The chain connecting her nipples started to jingle lightly against her abs, and one of his hands took it and softly pulled on it, just hard enough to feel her breasts resist.

“You ... keep staring...” She took his hand from the chain, and guided it down her stomach to the piercing of her clit hood. “Play with me too.”

He looked down at where they were connected. With one hand over her mons, he could see the skull tattoo between his fingers. When he touched her, the sensation was immediate. All he had to do was gently rub his thumb down along her swollen clitoris, and then nudge it upward just as gently. Every time he did, he tensed a little from the powerful squeeze her muscles did around his cock, all



while she lightly rocked herself back and forth. He worked her clit in a subtle rhythm, half to pleasure her, half because each time he massaged it with a little force, she gave a quiet whimper and squeezed his cock so tight, he thought he'd cum right there. The sensation of her pussy gripping his whole length was intense.

“You are so ... beautiful ... and tight.”

“Ha! Julias you fucking ... dumbass. You can't talk classy and dirty at the same time. Bad form.”

He laughed. The Nosferatu was good at banter. He couldn't help but smile all the more, and even as they struggled to talk while little moans and groans slipped into their dialogue, he continued to play with her clit. Soon he was toying more with its piercing, and he pushed up on it with his thumb just to let it fall against her sensitive flesh. Each time, she almost winced, tightened her grip on his shoulders, and really really tightened her grip on his shaft. The monster creature let out a rather deep, almost sultry moan, and sank down onto him until she'd swallowed him to the base again, and Julias found himself struggling to keep his eyes from closing with how strong a sensation it was. His glans was so swollen, and she was squeezing it so hard, he was sure it'd hurt if her flesh wasn't absolutely dripping.

Soon, he could feel the juices start to build. Beatrice was keeping her pace slow, and each time she worked her hips back and forth, the head of his cock sent powerful jolts of stimulation down his length. Her movement only let her shift maybe an inch of his length, but it was more than enough with how tight she was.

Before he could say anything about how close he was, Beatrice reached down and stopped his hand from playing with her clit anymore. Her other hand squeezed into his shoulder, hard, her body went still for a moment, and then started to tremble. Her thighs squeezed in around him, and the creature herself was looking down

at where she was spread open over him. More juices joined the already messy connection, and the vice-like grip of her insides clamped down on him with spasms.

She was cumming, and with him already on the edge, it was more than enough to bring him over it. The quivering of her insides made his own legs shake slightly, and he had to hold her hips when the liquid started to pour from him.

“W ... wait...” she said, but Julias could barely hear it. For just a few seconds, he lost control, and with his hands on her hips, he forced her balls deep and pushed up with his own hips. Just a few times, just enough so those first few squirts of his cum sent powerful, almost painful jolts of pleasure down his cock and between his legs. Each thrust earned a small, pained squeak from the Nosferatu, made her nipple chain bounce against her, and caused a drenching splash of her juices to coat his pelvis. He was already stretching her to her limits, and now he was hitting the back of her pussy with an almost desperate need; he couldn't stop. When the urge overwhelmed him, he gave her a final hard thrust upward while pressing down on her hips. Her muscles responded in kind, and squeezed him hard enough to make him wince as more of his thick cum gushed into her.

After the first few seconds of his orgasm, he relaxed and leaned back, and looked to the woman on his lap while they came together. She was still cumming, and her mouth of crocodile teeth was hanging open with her tongue dangling out. His forceful climax had apparently done a number on the powerful creature in his arms, as she sat there in his lap and let out quiet mewls while her body continued to lightly spasm. Her insides clenched and squeezed in random spurts, and forcibly milked several more waves of his cum from him, along with trickles of her own juices.

A couple moments later, she collapsed forward and put her head against his shoulder. She was a fair bit smaller than him, and fit

against his chest and body without issue.

“You ... hurt me...” she said. She was still trembling, unable to hold still, and Julias put his hands to her back to hug her while she came.

“I’m sorry. I, I...”

“You dumbass.” Still shivering, she wriggled her hips about so she could wrap her legs around and behind him. She hugged him too, and kept her face hidden from him in the nook of his neck. “It’s ok. Just ... was a little surprised. Didn’t know Superman could be so rough.”

He breathed a sigh of relief, and let himself relax back against the couch while he held the woman to his chest. He hadn’t meant to hurt her, but sometimes the need to be rough was irresistible. Beatrice was only hugging him tighter though, and her trembling pussy still gave a small spasm every few moments. She’d absolutely soaked him. Poor couch.

“If I was human, I’d be walking bow-legged for a week ... fucking bruised my insides.”

“I thought you said it was ok?”

“Well that’s one perk about being a vampire. I will be by tomorrow night.” She nudged her nose up into his neck. “But maybe tomorrow night ... we’ll try spooning again.”

“Tomorrow night?”

“Fucking right.” She sat up again and put her claw against his nose, a glint of playfulness in her eyes and a grin on her lips. “Cause now, I’ve got my eye on you.”

# Chapter 6

~~Julias~~

It didn't matter how many times Julias stood before the triumvirate, he never felt safe.

Viktor was old. Michael and Maria were there as well, and while they were older and stronger than Julias, it was Viktor that made his inner-beast recoil. Sometimes Julias wondered if his sire would try another torpor, before his strength grew to the point that he'd need Kindred blood to survive, and not kine blood. Every time he stood before him, he started to worry more and more about that possibility.

Natasha and Jessy were there too. Jessy was Michael's childe, a Gangrel, and his right hand for the Invictus; she was just a bloodthirsty animal. Natasha on the other hand was a Mehket, and served as Maria's right hand. Only Maria knew who Natasha's sire was.

The three right hands and their three masters. They stood in the top floor of Xnomina, with a gigantic touch-screen on the wall. The masters were not good with keyboards, or texting, but they were quite comfortable managing complicated webs of notes, photos, hints and evidence. The huge touch-screen let them slide the nodes in the web quickly.

“Rebecca was seen at Julias's, and attacked his childe before he was turned. Then was later seen at the building Julias was sent to to capture Vance or his data.” No titles, all business. Viktor was pacing in front of the screen, and his right hand would occasionally reach out to drag one of the digital images to the center of it, so it would grow in size for them to read or analyze. “She defeated Julias, who

only managed to survive because the fire or sunrise risked Rebecca's life."

Natasha frowned, Jessy snickered, and Julias grit his teeth. Well, at least they didn't know Beatrice had saved him.

"Julias managed to recover the situation. The next night, he observed that Rebecca had recovered the data, and overheard – with brilliant use of possession on a rodent, I might add – that in a months' time from that night, in North Side, there would be a drop. Typical lingo of gutter trash." Viktor gave a shrug. "Now, we have another piece of the puzzle to add to that."

"Sir?" Julias said. He tried to hide the small smile he had over the earlier compliment. Jessy hated him.

"Natasha has come across some valuable information. Her childe has discovered that, not long after Rebecca recovered Vance's data, her and, who we believe to be Tony, visited the Carthians."

"S-sir," Natasha said, barely above a whisper. She was a petite thing, long black hair, with a young but hard face. "W-we know the Carthians have a Mike Unknown working for them. He ... he is only five years embraced." As the ridiculously shy Mehket spoke, Viktor turned around and pulled up Mike Unknown's picture on the touch-screen. "He is a hacker."

"A hacker? This-" Jessy tried to cut in, but Michael snapped her a look Julias only manage to catch a second of. Jessy's sire certainly wasn't happy. He was probably upset over Jessy's lack of anything to contribute. Julias had to try hard to suppress his grin.

"A hacker," Natasha continued, "who we believe has been responsible for several data leaks of Invictus trades."

Jessy whistled. Even Julias was impressed. The little punk on the screen had balls.

“His antics have been nothing but meaningless jabs at Xnomina, with no major consequence,” Maria said, “and we have ignored them until now.”

The ghost lady walked around the conference room table and stood in front of the three right hands. They all stood up straight at her approach. Sometimes, Julias thought Maria looked like a freshly dragged corpse from the river. When she stepped up to him and looked at him, only a foot away, he could swear he could see bits of water drip from her skin before turning into mist.

“And you three, are going to find out what he knows.”

Shit.

Michael stepped up beside Maria. “We know this could spark problems with the Carthians if anyone finds out. The Prince has made it absolutely clear that we are not to disturb the peace, so...”

“So that means no one finds out.” Jessy punched a hand to her palm. She had really, really short blonde hair, was almost as tall as Julias or Michael, and looked more like a boxer than anything.

“Get the information by whatever means necessary,” Viktor said, “but if this gets back to the Carthians, someone will have to pay.” With that, the eldest of them all stood there, hooked his hands behind his back, and stared at the three of them. His gaze was cold, stern, and despite his young form, the furrow of his brow was heavy enough to carry centuries.

They were pawns, and pawns were expendable.

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“I don’t understand why we don’t just beat him until he tells us what we need to know, and then dust him.”

Jessy was dressed in a leather jacket and pants, and looked somewhere between a Carthian's love for street-wear, and an Invictus's love for class. She was even wearing some slim sunglasses. At night. She'd seen The Matrix too many times. It fit the scene though, with the three of them kneeling on a rooftop and looking down at the streets leading into the Carthian half of South Side.

Julias rolled his eyes. "If Mike disappears, they'll know he's dead. Dead Mike means Garry gets suspicious. You think Garry won't find out? Think he'll take that shit lying down?"

"N-no ... he wouldn't." Natasha was beside him, dressed in a simple business suit with a knee-length skirt, blue color.

"Then what do we do?"

"Natasha?" Julias looked to her.

"We ... we could observe him. But he wouldn't j-just make a stupid mistake. He's smart. He'll have l-locked everything, encrypted, and wouldn't accident-tally say something out loud. He's lived the digital world his whole life."

"Fucking new Kindred," Jessy said, and she clenched the rooftop's edge hard enough to sink her fingers into the structure.

Much as Julias hated to admit it, the new Kindred had a huge advantage. They adapted to how insanely small the world had gotten, how connected and immediate it was. He grew up when the radio had just become a household item. Natasha and Jessy, barely half his age, grew up when TV was still young. The internet was absolutely nauseating to try and understand in scope.

He could only pity Viktor, on that front.

“ ... then I guess I’ll have to make him tell me, then make him forget.”

“What?” Jessy stood up and looked down at Julias. “I’m sorry, since when were you an Elder Kindred?”

“She’s r-r-right.” Even Natasha stood up and looked down at him. “We’re all Ancillae. You’re ... not that powerful. Maybe against a kine, but against a Kindred?”

Sometimes, when presented with the opportunity to be a jackass and a show off, you just can’t help but give in. “Watch me.”

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Finding Mike wouldn’t be too hard. Natasha was a Mehket, and her clan held the power of Auspex. Nothing could be hidden from them for forever. The problem would be what to do once they had their hands on him.

Jessy and Julias followed Natasha around, out in the open streets of the night. Trespassing was allowed, but feeding in another covenant’s territory was not. And there were plenty of people around. The kine were everywhere; the smell of blood and the sound of heartbeats filled his nose and ears. These were the things he was about to risk his unlife for: food. Blood bags. A couple he recognized from Xnomina, and they nodded to him, cheerful and pleasant.

He really did envy them. All of them.

When they walked by, his eyes drifted down over their faces, down their jawline and to their necks. Even on a full stomach, he could feel the cravings force his attention to blood. Always back to the blood. Idly, he wondered how long it would be until he’d have to enter his first torpor, when his cravings would become too strong and he’d be forced to survive on the blood of other vampires. How long until he’d be in Viktor’s shoes?



Another woman he knew walked by; Juliette, he believed her name was, and an employee of Xnomina's daytime activities. They'd slept together a few times, he drank her each time, and just walking by her was enough to make his insides tingle with desire for the warm, rich drink. She offered more than just a smile, and even reached out to let her hand graze along the sleeve of his suit as she walked by, complete with a glance over her shoulder.

"Food later," Jessy said.

"Coming from you, that's a laugh." Julias gave a small snort.

"I'll have you know I drank from both my ghouls before coming on this trip." The Gangrel stepped up beside him, and even gave him a punch in the arm. Gangrel hit hard, and he couldn't tell from the smirk on her face if she was angry or just being aggressive and playful. Animals were never easy to read.

"And again tonight, I imagine. Think they'll survive?"

"Fuck you, I don't kill my ghouls."

He grit his teeth hard enough that his fangs were just visible.  
"You ne-"

"Quiet!" Natasha said. To hear the quiet girl snap at them with hushed but harsh voice was enough to make the two of them shut up. "He's ... here. Alone."

The three of them stepped into an alleyway, complete with hazy neon lights on brick walls advertising convenience stores and movie rentals. No one would ever rent a movie these days.

Natasha took them to a worn, dark green door. It was one of those metal doors they had on the back of small stores, complete with a numpad for inputting a door code. Jessy just gave a small chuckle, and pushed in on the door with a hand on the doorknob. The metal

bent and cracked in effortlessly. The damn animal had the grace of an ox. Julias and Natasha both grimaced in unison, but when no alarm went off they followed Jessy in.

“What the fuck!”

A scrawny little Mehket with messy hair over his eyes jumped up in a panic. He was in the dark, with several computer monitors laid around the desk shining dull blue light over a keyboard, mouse, and a desk covered in dozens of ... things. Catalogs, little books, pamphlets, devices, smartphones, pens, and wallets. A classic example of a fresh Mehket in the new world; he lived in computers and, while a juggernaut in the digital realm, was a sad waste of skin in the real one.

“Oh shit ... shit shit shit. I’m sorry, I’m sorry I stole those blueprints. I’ll delete them right now! Just give me twenty seconds and you’ll have-”

“Shut up.” Jessy was on him in a second, with her fingers around his throat and slamming him back into a wall.

Julias grunted. Jessy’s antics were likely to get them all killed, but she didn’t hesitate, and that was useful. “Natasha, keep an eye open.”

“Of c-course.” The little woman stood by the door, and waited. Mehket were always valuable on missions as well; they could keep themselves hidden like nothing more than mist in the corner of the eye. One as powerful as Natasha could keep them all hidden.

Julias looked to Jessy, and she threw a glance back at him. There was a need in her eyes, like a cat who wanted to play with a mouse. She liked making the poor fool in her hands squirm and wriggle in fear.

“Mike. What did you learn from the phone?” Julias said.

“Phone? Phone what phone? I don’t have any phone, man. Come on, seriously, I’ll do anything you want! I’m sorry, Invictus won’t get anymore trouble from me.”

Jessy growled, and Julias stood over the messy desk. He idly flipped through the array of random things. The kid even had spare hard-drives lined up, plugged into what he guessed were servers running only God knows what.

“The smartphone. Rebecca or Tony gave it to you. You’re a hacker.” Julias rolled his eyes and walked up to the kid pinned against the wall. “How stupid do you think we are?”

Mike’s jaw dropped. “You ... you can’t ... we have a truce! The Prince won’t allow this.”

Jessy grit her teeth so hard, Julias could hear them grind. The kid was right, and this was all resting on the hope that they could convince the kid to keep this quiet, which would be impossible. Normally.

“Mike,” Julias said, and stepped even closer so he was standing over him.

“You’re all Invictus! You can’t do this, you’re ... you’re...”

“Look into my eyes, Mike.” He leaned in closer until only a foot separated their faces.

“I don’t ... know...”

The Gangrel would never know this feeling, neither would the Mehket. The Daeva could only make people adore them, and the Nosferatu could only make people fear them. The Ventrue though, they could make people obey.

From deep within, down in his core, into the blood that circled his corpse, he pulled forth his vitae. The energy rose like forgotten adrenaline. Unseen and overwhelming, his mind reached out and found Mike's. The eye contact was the key. He could see straight into the weak Kindred's eyes, and he could feel the twerp's inner-beast fall to its knees. Mike's eyes had gone wide, but they were now unblinking.

"Mike. Is there any surveillance in here monitoring us?" A test.

"... no..."

Good. His voice was dead and monotone. The fool was broken.

"What did you learn from the device Rebecca gave you?"

"There's ... a drop..." Mike's eyes stayed wide. All the subtleties of his movements were gone. Robots had more life to them.

Jessy gasped. Her grip loosened on the kid until he was standing on his own, while she stood there casting surprised glances between Julias and Mike.

"Where."

"The abandoned ... textile mill ... North Side."

"When."

"... eight days."

"What's the drop?"

"... information."

Julias narrowed his eyes. "What kind of information?"

"Didn't say ... important to ... the covenants."

God damn it. Julias couldn't extract information that didn't exist. He groaned and looked to Jessy, who was smirking at him.

"Impressive," she said, "but I could have just beat that out of him. We're no better off now either way. He's going to tell Garry, or we kill him and Garry figures it out."

Julias leaned in closer until only six inches were between his eyes and the tiny Kindred's. Mike didn't squirm anymore, and his eyes didn't break contact. For a moment, Julias was sure he could see through the kid's pupils and into his insides. Into blood and ash.

"Mike." His voice practically echoed in the quiet. "We were never here. This conversation did not happen." The vitae in his dried and withered insides rose higher. It filled him. He could feel the inhuman plague flow into his brain, into his eyes, and through the contact with his victim.

Mike never stood a chance. Like the rat, the child Kindred's mind surrendered and collapsed.

Julias put a hand on the wall to steady himself. He wanted to fall over. Exhaustion washed over him, and so too the hunger. He'd gone from a full belly to the beast within knocking at the door, demanding he feed or it'd feed for him. He forced down a growl and brushed his hair back with his fingers.

"Let's go." Julias gave Jessy a nod and headed to join Natasha at the door. When he glanced over his shoulder, he could see Jessy blink at Mike before she turned to join him. Mike collapsed to the floor, but did not move; he wouldn't move for a while.

Within five minutes, they'd broken down a door, interrogated a kid, and rewrote his memories. Julias smiled to himself as they walked out of the building, back into the street, and with the practice of decades, nonchalantly rejoined the flow of bodies walking the large sidewalks.

“Julias, you just re-wrote that kid’s memories.” Jessy grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop.

“Y-yes. That is ... how did you do that?” Natasha stepped in beside Jessy and looked up at him. She looked meek, but her eyes always had a layer to them. Whenever Julias met them, she looked away, but for just that glimpse he could see she was thinking fast.

“How do you think?” He met Jessy’s glare, but the Gangrel stared right back at him. Julias wrenched his arm free and started walking again. Damn idiots. You don’t stop to talk in the middle of moving crowds unless you actually want to look suspicious.

“I’m sorry, did you suddenly go Elder on us when we weren’t looking? Victor is the only Ventrue in the whole damn city who can rewrite someone’s memories.”

“Not the only one.” Julias gave Jessy a playful smirk, and to his satisfaction, she immediately growled and furrowed her brow in frustration.

“I’m not fucking kidding here!” The Gangrel reached out with a snap and yanked him into an alley. Before he could even say anything, she’d moved them well into the black of the alley and away from the crowd again. She’d pushed him against a wall, but he pried her hands away from his shirt.

So much for getting out of there quickly.

“Back off, Jessy,” he said.

To his dismay, Natasha stood beside Jessy, and she peaked up at him. “Julias ... we’re afraid of Victor.”

“You’d be a fool to not be.” Julias frowned down at the little Mehket. “Michael and Maria are scared of him too.”

Jessy finally let go of him. “We’re all afraid.”

“V-Victor ... he’ll need torpor again soon. If he comes back ... even worse than last t-t-time.” Natasha shuddered. “And if he doesn’t torpor, he’ll need to drink ... Kindred to survive.”

“ ... you want me to do something about it?”

“Yes,” they both said in unison.

“Pray tell, what am I supposed to do about my own sire?”

Both the scary Gangrel and the shy Mehket looked down, then at each other, and then down again. It was obvious they’d been talking to each other before this. They even shuffled their feet from side to side.

Then Natasha looked up at him, and her eyes hardened. “Kill him.”

---

~~Jack~~

It was the same damn music. Mindlessly repetitive and deep enough to give a headache purely by making his skull vibrate. How did people listen to this stuff? But then, that was probably part of the problem. The first thing he noticed was the music while everyone else here was noticing each other instead.

It had been a week since he was last here. He figured a week would be the likely schedule a figure like the Prince would follow. Businesses breathe in weeks. He could have come some other day, and avoided Antoinette, but here he was actually going out of his way to see her.

He had a death wish, he must have. Little fledgling that was he going to have a sit down with a vampire so powerful and ancient she might as well have been fictional. So why was he walking next to the

walls of this place again, bathed in red light with his fingers on the railings? Why was he walking up that staircase again and up onto that second floor? Why was he scanning the room for the very tall woman with the white hair?

Why did he get excited when he saw that she was there?

She looked at him, and again he almost quaked in his shoes. It was a harsh reminder that he was no longer human, when the beast inside him reeled back with hair on end and tried to run away. Two predators that saw each other at a distance, except one was a god and the other was a house cat. But when the look on her face – he could swear it was almost sad – turned into a smile, he couldn't help but smile back.

She pointed at hand to him and curled her finger in the same way as before, and this time Jack walked over without hesitation. He still walked slowly – he wasn't that stupid – and took a moment to look around for Daniel. To know that Mekhet sheriff was around, hidden and spying and able to effortlessly cut him to bits, was not exactly a comforting thought. To see the Prince smile at him though, and motion for him to join her in the booth, quickly buried that fear.

Now all that was left was the strange mix of exhilaration of talking with the Prince of Dolareido, and the ever-present worry that if he said or did anything to offend her, absolutely nothing stood between her and his final death.

“You came back.” She smiled again, and Jack found his toes tapping on the floor. The dress she wore was just as enticing and beautiful as the last time. Open back, it was again black and wrapped tightly to her figure, but this time the chest opened to reveal the large cleavage she carried before connecting together again just below the navel. The skirt it connected with split at the left hip and, while the skirt went down to the ankle, it only had



enough fabric to cover her right leg. Her left leg was fully exposed, and Jack couldn't help but take a quick glance at the long, white limb, and the dangerously sharp six-inch heels she was wearing.

“Yes, my Prince.” Every time he said that, he felt so submissive. He didn't mind, but it felt weird. What reason could she have for forcing people to personalize the title?

“I was sure Julias would convince you to avoid me.” She pointed at the space next to her, and Jack slid over closer to her with a shy glance.

“Really?”

“Yes.” Now that he was almost touching her, Antoinette slid just a few inches until they actually were. Her bare leg was pressed to his pants; god how he wished he wasn't wearing pants. “I assume he had warnings that I would manipulate you for my own plans, and that I was dangerous. Not only I, but others in the Danse Macabre would be a danger to you as well.”

She slid closer still, but already pressed against him, her motion brought her torso a little closer to him as she put her arm behind him across the back of the booth. He tried his best to not stare, but he hadn't expected her to start snuggling up to him like this. It was so blatant, so sexual, inviting and imposing at the same time.

“Uh, yeah, he did. But I assured him my utter uselessness to anyone would protect me.” He managed to crack a goofy smile, and the Prince giggled.

“You have such a low opinion of yourself for a Ventrue!”

“I prefer the predictability of realistic expectations, versus the gambling of delusions of grandeur.” The straightforwardness of his words shocked him. Be careful Jack, before your social bluntness gets you killed.

“Oh, I see. But then, you are here, with me, the Prince. That seems a paradox.” She tilted her head pensively.

“I ... thought the gamble was worth the risk, my Prince. You’ve treated me with a lot more respect than other Kindred. I thought that ... well ... I’d hate to throw away a friendship like this one.” He had to look away, and his eyes drifted down to the table in front of them. He waited with netted fingers, and his thumbs rubbed into his knuckles with worry.

“ ... is my friendship valuable to you? A powerful ally?”

“Yes ... no! No I don’t mean, I didn’t mean that ... I’m not here for an ally. I’m here because ... other than Julias, you’re the first Kindred I’ve talked to who’s talked to me, not at me.”

“I see.” She gave him one of her smiles, less seductive, more genuine, and he relaxed. “I suppose you must be wondering why.”

“Yes, very. I can’t imagine what I could...”

“ ... how much do you know of the history of our kind, little Ventrue?”

“Almost nothing. Julias hasn’t told me much.”

“He tells you little because he knows little, because we know little.”

“Know little? I ... I don’t understand. Aren’t you 500 years old?” he said. She gave him a frown, and he immediately put both his hands up apologetically. “I’m sorry! But-”

“It is true, I am very old, as are Daniel, and Viktor, Tony, Jacob, and the other Primogen. But age does ... take its toll on the mind.” While one arm stayed behind Jack, her other came up to her face and palmed her cheek with thought. “Centuries cause memories to

fade, to blend. They mix with fiction, with fantasy, and then torpor...”

“Torpor?”

“I suppose Julias would not have told you, as he has not done it himself, at least not for a real length of time. It is a sleep, a deep sleep full of dreams. When an elder such as I becomes ravenous, we must sleep before our hunger consumes us.” She looked away. Was she ashamed? “Decades of dreams. They bend and twist the mind. For some, the effects are ... wicked.”

Viktor. She was talking about Viktor. She had to be.

“A coma?”

“Yes, in a fashion. It does fade the memory, and now ... I cannot even remember my sire.” She took a fingertip and ran it around the edges of a glass in front of her. Jack guessed the contents as blood; he recognized its consistency from Julias’s.

“I am s ... sorry.” He dared the word, but he recoiled a little just in case she decided shred him for the offense. She did not.

“I am as well. Things are lost, including our history. I would trust only the Lancea et Sanctum to have any literature worthy of a historian’s eye.” Her eyes narrowed and she glared daggers into her glass. “And I do not allow those zealots to practice in my city.”

That was not a playful glare or a toying glare or a teasing glare. She was legitimately angry. The beast in him cowered in such close proximity, and an almost overpowering desire to flee rippled through his limbs. Even his eyes went wide, just glancing at her red eyes glaring at the table.

When she turned to look at him though, her eyes softened. Apparently she saw that she scared him, and she made herself calm

for him. At least, that's what it looked like, and that she made the effort made him smile.

"I remember almost nothing of my time as a youngling, little Ventrue. Who could I talk to about it? What fresh neonate would share their life story with me? As you said, I am lonely."

Jack had to stop for a moment and just look at her. She was so upfront. This ancient, almost mythical entity was asking him to share his life story? All because he didn't know when to keep his mouth shut?

"Have I said too much?" she said.

"No! No I ... well yes." She blinked at him, but he gave a shy grin at her. "But I like that."

She laughed, outright laughed with a wholesome volume that he could feel through her leg.

"And I you, little Ventrue. Perhaps we can play a game?" Her arm behind him drifted down a little, just enough for her claws to find his ear on the far side. He shivered with her touch.

"A game?"

"Trading questions. I am sure you have many."

"I do, but ... you'd really answer my questions?"

"Indeed."

"Even personal ones?"

"If you ask me, but be prepared to answer one just as personal." She gave him a wicked grin and licked her dark lips. This was a dangerous game.

“ ... I’ll play.”

“Wonderful.” She leaned in nuzzled against his little body, just a tad, to the point her breasts were almost pressed to his suit jacket. “You go first.”

“Oh, wow um ... uh...” He was so very thankful his body wouldn’t sprout random erections anymore. “Why ... is your hair white, and your eyes red? I haven’t seen another Kindred with such unique features.”

The hand on the table rose and ran through her hair, and she pulled a large portion of it onto her chest to rest between her breasts while she combed it.

“I honestly do not remember. Daniel believes it may be because I was one of the first members of the Ordo Dracul, and am perhaps linked to Dracula. The coils back then were new and untested.”

“Dracula.”

“Yes.”

“The Dracula?”

“Yes, butchered by fiction, but yes. I would ... prefer to avoid the details, what little I remember.”

Jack had to nod. That was fair. He had no idea what coils were, but that was probably stepping into the details realm.

“My turn.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “What was the first thing you thought, when you finally, truly realized you were now a vampire? That you were now a dead thing?”

“Oh...” He ran his fingers over his buzzed head. “I, er ... haven’t even told Julias this. But I honestly thought ... how the hell am I

going to lose my virginity now.”

Antoinette stopped, completely stopped. She stared at him with bewilderment for almost ten full seconds before she cracked a smile, and then erupted into laughter.

“That is ... that is so delightedly honest. You have no idea.” She even gave him a hug. An actual hug, with her right arm hooked around his neck and pulling him to her side. “Many Kindred lose their taste or interest in sex. The act of feeding replaces it. Daeva, such as myself though, are not so quick to forget the simple pleasures of the body.”

Dangerous game indeed. He gulped from pure habitual reflex.

“Your turn.”

“Oh! Right, um ... wow this is hard. Uh ... why did you ban the Lancea et Sanctum? I understand they’re holders of a lot of our history?”

“I have banned the practice because it is idiocy. They are self-deluding fools who convince themselves of all manner of lies and deceit to condone their actions and their hypocrisy. The Judges are disgusting, illogical, worthless tyrants. In God’s name, they say. In God’s name, over and over, to convince themselves of anything that fits their fancy, if they can bend the words enough to serve their bible. Longinus indeed!”

He knew it’d be a hot button. Why’d he have to ask? He was sure he’d wet himself if his bladder still functioned, but all he could do was sit there and not move an inch. Jack was still in her half-embrace, and he was sure if he tried to move enough to at least break their touching legs, she’d shred him like an tiger.

The Daeva eventually calmed down, and Jack made mental note to be careful with the topic in the future. He’d thought it perhaps a

political reason, but apparently it was not. She had removed them from the city for more personal reasons.

“We are better without them. Instead of looking to the past in some pointless attempt to embody dead ideals, we can look forward and embrace truth, logic, and intelligence.” She gave Jack a long, quizzical look, and he turned away with her scrutiny. “That was a dangerous question, little Ventrue. I am impressed.”

“Th-thanks.”

“Oh, did I frighten you?”

He dared a glance, he had to. Like a moth to the flame, he raised his head to meet her eyes, and quickly lost himself in her red gaze. She was looking directly at him, into him even, and he could feel the beast in him grow silent with awe.

“Yes.”

“Good. I would hate to see you grow dumb with your courage. Now, my turn.” The Daeva tapped her chin a fingernail. “Do you miss the things you’ve lost, since being embraced?”

Jack sighed. He knew he didn’t need the air, but the question was so powerful and something that had been on his mind all the time. How could it not?

“... My family thinks I’m dead. I was never that close with them, but now ... now I miss them.” He lowered his eyes but did not turn away. Julias’s words came back to him with a sting. “My friends think I’m dead. I miss them. I even miss that stupid job.” He chuckled a bit, but it caught in his throat. “I don’t really miss the sun, or food, but ... but sometimes I get hit with it, you know? I’ll sit down and just ... miss things. Random, stupid little things.”

“Such as?”

“The small things you never even think about. Shaving. Trying to beat the rush hour. Trying to pick which spice for your chicken. Worrying about vitamins. Exercising. Trying to find motivation to exercise. The security of a boring, predictable job.” His voice grew soft. It never seemed like much, just thinking the things, but saying them out loud was different. He had to cough to stop the urge for a quiet whimper.

“The nuances of life.” Antoinette’s fingers found his buzzed head and traced along his crown.

“I guess, yeah.” He went silent. His question had angered Antoinette, while hers had sent him into a spiral of depression. This was not the same night as last week.

“I am sorry, little Ventrue. I understand Julias embraced you to save your life.”

“Yeah. I had been stabbed after leaving his place. I ... it was a shock.”

“You have handled the change well. Many soak in misery for months, even years.”

“Julias has helped me a lot ... so have you.” He scratched at his buzzed hair, but tried to keep eye contact. He was rewarded when the Prince smiled at him. Such a lovely smile, when she wasn’t playing a manipulative Daeva. He couldn’t deny it was definitely in her nature, but if he said just the right thing, she rewarded him with something genuine.

“You are most welcome. Also, your turn.”

“Oh, right. Hmm.” The conversation had grown very serious, but empowering. They had asked each other meaningful questions and gotten meaningful answers. What else could he ask? “Do Kindred ever have relationships?”



Yeap. If he was going to get himself killed, it'd be in a bad attempt at flirting with the Prince of Dolareido, and an insanely powerful Kindred to boot.

“Oh! Are you not full of big surprises, little Ventrue.” She ran her fingers upside the temple of his head opposite to her. “I suppose you mean a romantic relationship with another Kindred?” He managed a small nod. “Yes, we do. The last I had was with Tony, my childe. A sad story that ended when he ceased being my pupil decades ago, and left the Ordo Dracul.”

He remembered Tony. He'd seen him at a distance once, at the Elysium. He shivered. The man was terrifying. If Viktor was the bull he had to avoid, Tony was the serpent.

“He is not the man he once was. He despises me now, but I suppose that is true of many scorned lovers. I leave him as a Primogen though, so I may hear the voices of his worthless, directionless lot.”

“You let him have such power?” She had banned the Lancea et Sanctum after all, why not this thug?

“Yes. I disagree with him, his methods, but he is not a mindless fool incapable of adaptation or logic. His council is valuable.”

The Danse Macabre. She would keep this man she once laid with, this man she no longer loved, and who despised her in return, as council purely for the information it gave her. Jack had to wonder how many ancient Kindred had weaved such interesting webs between them.

“If questions are going to get this personal, well then.” She leaned in again, and with her hand on the other side of his head, hooked some of her fingers around his jaw to guide his face to look up to her. His heart would have stopped were it beating as she put her nose to his “Would you like to kiss me?”

Oh sweet mother of god.

“I ... er – uh, um ... uh...”

“I assume that is why you asked, no?” She leaned in closer, but you can’t get much closer than touching noses. Her lips were literally only an inch from his, and if he moved there was a good chance he’d accidentally kiss her.

“Well ... I mean...” He tried to move away, but her grip was immovable; he couldn’t even turn his head. She put her other hand on his leg, and simply stared into his eyes like a hungry snake. The Daeva side of her was coming out to play.

“There is no one here but us, little Ventrue.” She raised her head just a touch, then lowered it, so her nose nudged playfully against his.

Too fast. It was all happening too fast. The gorgeous woman nudged her nose against his so lightly, again and again, just so the tip grazed his. It was so close. Her red eyes were so fucking beautiful. It was all so fucking beautiful. Her long white hair pulled over her shoulder and down in front of her, and she raised her hand from his leg to comb it with her fingers in a blatantly seductive way.

He really wanted to kiss her, but she was a god. She was just toying with him, she had to be.

“Please, I ... it’s...”

“You can say no, if you want. I will not hurt you. But I am no fool. I can see where your eyes slide.” The hand holding his head toward her tickled his jawline. “If I wanted to, I could break your will with a discipline, Jack. I could twist and corrupt your mind so that you would care for me and only me.” She leaned in just a little closer, so her forehead grazed his, and her red eyes were practically glowing.

“But I have not and will not. You came here tonight of your own desire, and ... I appreciate that. More than you know.”

Everything froze.

Antoinette had stopped moving. She was just looking at him, smiling at him, waiting and watching. Those sultry eyes of hers looked into him until he could feel the ancient, colossal power of the vixen. She wasn't using her power on him; the doubt in his mind about the insanity of it all proved it. But that didn't mean she wasn't a woman. A deadly, scary, godly powerful, seductive, ancient undead woman.

“I ... I don't want to ... ruin...”

“If you spend your whole unlife waiting for good things to happen, little Ventrue, you are in for a long wait.” With a playful smile, she turned her head left and right so their noses lightly rubbed together. Eskimo kisses. “You need to make them happen.”

Fuck, Julias had said the same thing to him, the same damn thing. Jack was always waiting, always playing it safe, always aiming for the easy goals with no risk. Methodical, and boring. That was then though, and that old life was gone. Gone! He was a different person now, a different creature in a different world. If there was any time to change...

He half-closed his eyes, and leaned in just a single inch, but it was enough. His lips found the Prince's, and she gave the smallest smile into his own before she too leaned in. She only half-closed her eyes as well, and they looked at each other while their lips met.

God her lips were so soft.

“Thank you, Jack,” she said, barely breaking the kiss but able to speak with perfect enunciation. “It has been ... so very long since a

Kindred has kissed me.” Before he could respond, she’d already leaned back into the kiss and took control.

He held still, and let the crazy situation take him. The most powerful being in his wildest dreams was kissing him, her dark lips nudging into his, her tongue sneaking out just long enough to give a little lick. For a second, he pictured a snake tasting the air of him, but then she lowered her lips, and lightly plucked at his lower lip before pulling away.

She laughed then, pulled away, and combed her long hair over her shoulder with one hand while the other tickled along his jaw. The jaw had dropped by that point, and he found himself unable to lift it until she did it for him. He couldn’t stop staring at her.

“Mister Terry,” she said, and put a finger to his lips, “I do hope to see you again. Would you like that?”

# Chapter 7

~~Beatrice~~

Following the Invictus right hands was hard enough, but now she had to follow three.

Shadowing Julias was easy. Like a typical Ventrue, he was useless on his own. His power was in creating and controlling armies. But damn he looked good in a suit. Those broad shoulders, the combed back mafia hair, even the damn tie. It was a good thing she wasn't using the blush of life, or she'd be rubbing her thighs together already.

Fuck, the stupid knight made her feel like a cat in heat.

The other two were the problem. Younger than Julias, sure, but Jessy was a Gangrel and that meant someone she couldn't easily predict in a fight. She was an animal, like Garry, and she knew well enough from Garry about dangerous animals. Natasha, on the other hand, Beatrice was sure she could crush into ash in seconds, if she could get her hands on her. And she wouldn't be able to get her hands on a Mehket. Worse still, the damn Mehket could hide in the shadow like Beatrice, but also see ... anything. Anything and everything.

It meant Beatrice had to drain every last bit of vitae she had within to fuel her cloak of night, but she had no choice. The fuck were the three hands doing in Carthian territory? And that fucking Natasha, the little shadow bitch, was making it so damn hard to even see them with her use of cloak of night. Her eyes would glide off of them and onto the random kine walking the streets, and she'd have to focus herself – with a good face slap – to get her eyes back on track. She couldn't lose them.

And then she lost them.

Fuuuuuuuck. She dared not even curse out loud, the damn shadow could probably hear it. Beatrice did her best to stay pressed down to the rooftops, and her cloak of night would keep all eyes off her completely. But then Natasha did the same damn mother fucking thing!

Where was this? The convenience store, complete with ancient movie rentals. This was Mike's hangout! Mike, the stupid punk kid Garry had given Tony's stuff to. She dug her claws straight into the building rooftop. Shit shit shit shit.

She couldn't go in there; she was no use to Mike dead. But then if she didn't, Mike could end up dead. They wouldn't kill him, or at least Julias wouldn't. The other two, she couldn't guess. God damn it, they were Invictus. If they killed Mike, it could spell war. If they killed Mike...

There! The three were suddenly on the street again, heading back the way they came. They were bickering among themselves, but it was too quiet to hear in the bustling streets. She looked between the convenience store and the three Invictus. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Fuck it. Once they had some distance, she hopped down from the rooftop and into an alley. She eased off her shadow hiding, but kept enough of it going to let her glide through the kine without attracting their attention. Just a face in the crowd. Within moments, she'd crossed the street and stopped at Mike's door. It'd been broken in.

Mike was on the floor with his back against a wall. The kid's place was a huge mess of the typical nerd shit, but the kid himself looked fine.

"Mike! Mike you stupid fuck." She almost pounced at him before she reached down and picked him up. "Mike. Mike!" And a slap to

the face for good measure.

“... Beatrice?” The kid’s eyes opened wide. She was point blank with him, and her teeth were on full display. He was startled.

“Mike you fucking stupid piece of shit. What happened?” She shook him hard enough to crack his head against the wall a few times.

“Ow! Hey hey hey! I, I ... what? What do you mean what happened?”

“What do I mean? The fucking Invictus man! What did they want?”

“Invictus? What?” The kid looked around, absolutely perplexed. “No one’s been here.”

“I ... you ... what? What do you mean no one’s been here.” She dragged him out to the door and pointed at the broken lock. “The Invictus broke in here just five minutes ago!”

“Whoa.” He inspected the lock, obviously surprised. “I don’t know. You ... you don’t think...” He put a hand to his lips and stared back at Beatrice.

“No. It wasn’t Viktor, it was Julias. He isn’t ... strong...”

They both just stared at each other. Julias had rewritten the kid’s memories. Her secret boyfriend had rewritten Mike’s god damn fucking memories.

“Come on, we’re heading back home. I gotta talk to Garry.”

---

She kept a close eye on Mike. Julias had been in his head, and who fucking knew what sorta shit a Ventrue could leave in there. She’d heard stories from Garry, about all the nasty tricks a Ventrue

could do to someone's mind. They could brainwash you, turn you into a sleeper agent, and attach triggers to you. It was some seriously scary shit. She was shaking just thinking about it; what if Julias done something to her?

"You ... you just ... stay here." She ushered the kid back to his room, back at the abandoned apartment building, and sat him down on his bed.

"The hell Beatrice, why are you dotting on me?"

"Just don't touch anything! I need to talk with Garry. You had a fucking Invictus Ventrue inside your head man." She reached up and pointed at her temple. "So do me a favor and stay put."

Finally, realization hit the stupid punk. His head lowered, his jaw dropped, and his hands grabbed at the knees of his jeans.

"I ... I get it. I'll just ... yeah."

"Yeah," she said, and despite herself, reached out to give him a gentle pat on his slumped shoulder, claws and all. "Don't worry about it though, Garry's dealt with this kinda shit before."

He nodded. Good, he wasn't freaking out, cause fucking hell she was. What if Julias had done something to her? What if it had all been a god damn Ventrue ploy? A trick? Fucking smooth talking bastard could have done anything to her.

She forced herself to walk. No use in getting everyone's attention. Garry would know what to do; he always knew. Dude was fucking ancient and a beast, and he'd saved her from stupid shit multiple times.

She opened the door to his room without so much as a knock. The Gangrel was standing and looking out a window into the night sky. He practically dripped of introspection and reflection.



Which was weird as hell. Garry didn't do shit like that.

“Garry! Sir! You told me to keep an eye on the right hands, so I tracked them and they fucking found Mike, and they fucking did ... did something to his mind! He seems fine, but he can't remember anything. Not a damn thing!”

The ancient Gangrel gave a quiet sigh, and turned over his shoulder to look at her. “Is he alright?”

“What? Yeah, yeah he's alright. He's fine I think, but who the fuck knows what Julias did to his brain! I didn't know he'd gotten that strong. He's ... that's dangerous. That's so fucking dangerous, Garry! The fuck am I supposed to do if he can just-”

“Julias isn't Viktor. He's not strong enough to do much more than make someone forget.” Garry raised a hand dismissively, folded his arms across his chest again, and resumed looking out the window. “I'm glad Mike is safe.”

“Yeah, Mike is ... is...”

She stood there and stared at him. The Gangrel lowered his head and turned it just enough to keep her in the corner of his eye. He was ... relieved.

“You knew!”

He turned back to the window, like as if his silence would have been enough to end the conversation.

Well fuck that.

“Garry, what the fuck?” She stomped right over to him and stood in front of him. He avoided her glare. “What the fuck is going on?”

More silence.

Fuck him! She reached out and shoved him hard enough to drive his back into the wall. The bastard didn't even look shocked. "Tell me!"

"... just let it go, Triss." He stood up straight then, put a hand against the wall, and stepped back to where he was. He looked down at her, and the weight of his eyes crushed her. For just a second, Garry looked old, so old.

"Come on, you can't just—"

"I can't tell you, Triss. Let it go."

They stood there, the two of them, and stared at each other. She wanted to stay angry at him, maybe even push him around some more, but the Elder Kindred and her most trusted friend in the damn world was looking at her with enough burden in his eyes to make her sick. What webs was he weaving? What stupid Kindred bullshit of manipulation was he playing at? What the fuck was he doing that risked Mike's life?

"Enjoy your Primogen meeting, jackass." She kicked over his desk – who the fuck cared how juvenile it was – and stormed out.

Within a few minutes, she was back in Mike's room.

"Beatrice, I heard a slam, what—"

"You're fine, Mike. Julias didn't do anything to you, except make you forget whatever information he got."

"Oh ... ok ... that's good, right?" He blinked at her. She must have looked furious.

"Yeah. Get a snack and move your computer shit to a new haunt before something happens."

“R-right ... yeah.”

He looked sad. Stupid kid had spent a lot of time building that nest probably, but it was compromised now. Tough lesson and a tough way to learn it.

She turned around and left.

“Triss, where ya going?”

She dismissed him with a small wave, barely more than a shake of her claws, before she marched down the stairs and back out into the streets.

Someone was going to get an earful. If Julias had been playing her with his ‘Kindred are so tiresome’ talk, she was going to cut his balls off with her claws and feed him the ashes.

---

~~Antoinette~~

How dull it was, in the demon’s mouth.

The Prince of Dolareido sat upon her throne, a luxurious leather office chair, and leaned forward with her elbows on her desk. Behind her, a glass wall was the only thing that separated the room from the hundreds of feet to the street beneath them. Every so often, she turned her chair halfway toward the glass and gazed out over the city. In the center of the Elysium, the South Side district was full of lights from the nightlife, and she let her eyes wander over the beautiful dance of it all.

The room itself was devoid of anything that would cause distraction beyond the window. The walls were white. The floor was black. The ceiling was white with hidden LEDs to light the room. All was designed to maximize the efficiency of its purpose.

To house the squabbles of demons. Within the center of the room, a massive table of clear glass connected to her desk, and surrounding it were chairs fit for kings. Her Primogen.

“Rebecca and Julias are going to kill each other eventually.” Viktor Honors, eldest of the Invictus triumvirate. He did look good in a suit, but his Ventrue habit of talking like he owned everything was irritating. Maria and Michael were sitting on either side of him, the ghost woman and the animal.

“You have no proof of that.” Tony. Her ex-lover and childe. The Daeva sat across from Viktor, and he held his chin in his palm with a stupid smile of feigned innocence on his face. Sometimes she wondered why she let him remain Primogen, with no covenant of his own. Better the devil you know, she supposed.

“She was seen in Invictus territory, near Julias’s home.”

“The Prince hasn’t given a no-trespassing law. Only that we can’t feed in each other’s districts,” Tony said.

Viktor grumbled, and Tony smiled. Antoinette did her best to not groan.

“Don’t fuck with us, Tony. We know Rebecca was snooping around the Invictus chunk half of South Side.” Garry. The Gangrel didn’t bother to dress up for her meetings, but she really wished he would. While Michael looked like he was trafficking drugs across borders, she imagined Garry could pull off a casual blazer with the sexual flare of the bad boy.

“So what if she was? Sorry if I like to keep a feeler out. Like you guys don’t do the same.” Her childe knew just how to talk to sound like a juvenile, but he gave each of them a tiny glance – just for a second – that made them hesitate to challenge him.

“Is this why we’ve gathered this month? To bicker over Rebecca?”

Then there was Jacob.

The Nosferatu took a long look at each Primogen, and then looked at her. The others would never hold her gaze for long, but Jacob would look into her eyes, as he did now, and smile. While Maria's physical deformity of her Nosferatu clan was her ghostly appearance, Jacob was another beast entirely.

At first glance, he looked normal enough, with short, wavy salt'n'pepper hair and the subtle wrinkles of an older man, but it only took a second glance to realize there was much more. He had no eyes, as if someone had scooped them out – his eyelids too – with a smoldering, serrated spoon.

Looking into the eyeless Circle of the Crone was like looking into the inner-beast of them all.

“Gentlemen, please.” Antoinette straightened her chair to point back at her group of cutthroats. “Viktor, Tony is correct, you have nothing but suspicions. Bring me proof that Rebecca was breaking the no-violence or no-feed treaty, and I will punish her. She is not forbidden from entering the Invictus state in South Side though.

“And Jacob,” she continued, just a touch of venom on her voice, “we meet to discuss what matters. You may think it immaterial, but wars have been fought over smaller incidents.”

Daniel gave a small nod and hmph to mark her words. Her fellow dragon was an innocent-looking fellow, average height, fairly thin, with somewhat short brown hair. He wore a pair of reading glasses, and with him in his trench coat, she would not put it past him to be a school teacher. His expression was – as always – blank and emotionless.

“Of course, Prince.” The Circle of the Crone witch put both his hands on the table. “Is there anything else to discuss? Rebecca causing a stir is nothing new.”

Antoinette looked to each of the Primogen in turn. No one said anything. “This meeting is adjourned then.”

That was it. The Invictus trio bowed, Garry and Tony managed small nods, and Jacob put a hand to his chest. She bowed in return. Without another sound, they walked out through the door, and would disappear from her tower in whichever way they deemed fit. Sometimes she wondered if they’d start trying to kill each other right there outside her door.

Once the doors closed, Antoinette let out a weary sigh, got up from her chair, and walked over to the window. She dared not touch the glass for fear of dirtying it, so she netted her fingers together behind her elegant business dress.

Daniel stepped in beside her, a little shorter than her despite his tall figure, and he too gazed out the window.

“How many Kindred are there in my city now, Daniel?”

“Over three-hundred, Annie.” His voice was so deadpan, so straightforward that she almost found it cold. It wasn’t though. That was just Daniel. He raised a gloved hand to adjust his glasses.

“Most of them Invictus and Carthian. Do I let them grow too large?”

“I do not think so,” he said.

She frowned, but after a few moments, it turned into a smile, and she chuckled at her sheriff. She would have a better luck getting blood from a stone.

So the two of them stood in silence, and watched over the city.

It was a good twenty minutes of admiring the sparkling lights of the night skyline of Dolareido, before her memories eventually

drifted to the little boy she'd met thrice now. She had been there to witness his first controlled feeding. She got to see the pure bliss of it overwhelm his almost comically honest face. And to her delight, the young man had pushed through his fear to see her a second time, not to ask for more free blood, but instead just to talk with her.

She licked her fangs at the thought of him.

“ ... what do you think of Jack?”

“I'm not sure what you mean, Annie.”

She reached out for Daniel and put a hand on his shoulder. The man did not even flinch or turn to face her.

“You know what.”

“ ... he certainly isn't Tony.” For just a brief second, the Mehket managed a small smile, and Antoinette's own smile grew in response. Daniel's smile vanished quickly, as if he'd been caught in a shameful act, and he adjusted his glasses again.

“I think I would like to see him, then. Send for him, and bring him to Elysium garden.”

“Yes, Voivode.”

---

Her tower, at the center of the Elysium ground, was a gigantic thing of glass, curved and nothing but windows. In the day, it would have spelled death for any vampire within with no where to hide from the sunlight, but at night it was the center of Elysium, her official no-violence zone. In all directions from the skyscraper was garden and artistic pathways of road and sidewalk within curving walls of stone.

Kindred fledglings hung around in Elysium, safe from the hungry teeth or games of their betters, but as she walked down the stairway

of her tower to the street, all fled at the sight of her as politely they could. She could force them to her, naturally. Her control of the Daeva disciplines was enough to have every young Kindred and every kine in all of Elysium begging at her feet. But there was no soul in that, no truth or intimacy or friendship.

It was an old, cruel story. She was not so delusional as the mighty Viktor or the consumed Tony to think herself immune to such solitude, but with age came barriers and shackles.

The taxi pulled up to the front of her tower. Jack stepped out, wearing what was obviously his best suit – Julias had dressed him well – but perhaps a little out of place for what she had in mind. He looked ready for a company merge negotiation.

She smiled at him from across the entry lane. It was further past the bushes and trees, near the entrance of her garden, but she was confident the fellow Kindred would see her in the dark. She'd sat upon a bench, an artful piece of stone vines, and she waited for him with a small smile.

“My Prince.” He walked to her, caught somewhere between a hurried step and his best businessman's walk. He looked so happy, excited, but his innocent face could not hide his fear either. Silently, their two inner-beasts looked at each other, smelled each other, and without hesitation the boy's knelt in submission.

Hers crooned with interest.

“Mister Terry.” She motioned for him to join her, and he sat beside her with a small bounce. To him, it must have seemed such a natural thing, to be so expressive.

“My Prince ... are you alright?” He blinked up at her, then quickly looked away and scratched his buzzed head. “You seem sad.”



“Do I? Then that must be the reason I summoned you, to raise my spirits.” She grinned at him with just enough smirk to expose a fang, and pulled her hair out in front of her to comb it with her fingers. As she did, she took her time to fold one leg over the other. The motion was purposeful, drawn out, and it was more than enough to draw the poor boy’s eyes like moths to flame.

While young Kindred would flee from her, those old enough to stand against her did not care for the physical. Yet Jack was devouring her with his eyes before he managed to snap to awareness and avert his gaze. She almost cooed, and did not hesitate to slide across the bench a little until they were closer. He was like a nervous, excited puppy.

“I-is something wrong?” he said.

“Ah, the bore of running a kingdom.” She gestured to her monolith of glass windows. “The Primogen are not easy to corral and coerce. Like mating birds, they posture and shout.”

Jack just stared at her, with a dropped jaw and his delightedly innocent, amazed expression.

“Have I said something offensive, little Terry?”

“No! No, but ... are you sure you should be talking about ... you know ... such important things in front of me.” The boy looked left and right like they were being stalked.

She gave a warm chuckle. “Jack, you do know who I am, yes?” She slid closer again, and this time wrapped an arm about his shoulders. Whenever their legs touched, back in the Bloodlust club, it was enough to make the poor boy tremble. She cultivated the reaction, and gave a mischievous grin to Jack when her touch yet again earned his quaking.

“This is my city,” she said, “and mine alone. The Invictus have Xnomina because I let them. The Carthians rebel against their meaningless barriers because I let them. The Circle of the Crone hide in the dark and pursue their primal magics because I let them.”

“B-but-”

“I will talk with who I please, about whatever I please, in front of whoever I please.” She leaned in close. Her business dress hugged her form nicely, but her breasts were large and pressed to the boy whenever she leaned in so. His squirming always increased whenever her breasts touched him, despite the layers of fabric between them.

All the classic tricks of seduction, all the blatant flirtations, all the tosses of her hair, folding of her legs, and teasing with her fingers, it worked all too well on the poor boy. His eyes would widen, and then he'd catch himself looking at a part of her for too long, and then he'd force himself to look away. And each and every time, it made her cold, withered insides warm.

It had been ages since she'd had the opportunity to flirt, and ages more that it hadn't simply squashed her target with fear. This boy was precious.

“Yes, my Prince. I ... wow, I just have trouble grasping it.” He smiled up at her, scratched his head, and tried to shrug off his anxiety.

“I am sure you will grow more comfortable, the more time we spend together.” She drew out the final word. Implications abound. It was enough to make the boy smile nervously and awkwardly. Honesty dripped from his every action like honey.

Her fingers grazed his skull, just soft enough that it'd shock him. And it did, but after a moment he managed to relax into her touch, and even gave a soft murr as her fingertips touched the odd texture

of buzzed hair. His sudden ease and noises surprised her; she'd found a spot he enjoyed being touched, evidently.

"I enjoy trimmed hair," she said.

"T-thanks. I uh ... time together?"

"Why yes. I was quite pleased that you decided to kiss me." She leaned in even closer, until her head was just over his, her nose just over his. "Or have you forgotten?" With others, toying and taunting and teasing them would soon have them thinking they were being drawn into a trap. But Jack Terry, little Ventrue, was both fearful of and entranced by it.

How she missed this game of cat and mouse, and Jack was such a cute little mouse.

"I ... I..."

Ah, she'd stunned him. She would have to lead the poor boy, it seemed. That was ok, she enjoyed it.

"What were your plans for the night, little Ventrue?"

He snapped back to awareness. Her talk of time together had put a fantasy in his head apparently.

"Um ... Julias was teaching me the Ventrue disciplines."

"Powerful knowledge and skills to learn. Ventrue can become nigh invincible, can control animals, and even others."

"Julias said the same thing. I like the idea of becoming invincible..."

Ah little Ventrue Who wouldn't? "But?"

“But ... controlling others? I can’t even ... I can’t wrap my head around that either.” Jack squirmed, as if the sheer thought of controlling others was unfathomable to him. He’d learn.

“As your power grows, little Ventrue, so too will your ability to control the kine, and even other Kindred.” She gave his buzzed hair a light stroke of her fingers; it truly was an interesting sensation on the skin. “Kindred have my permission to with the kine as they see fit. As long as you do not risk the Masquerade, you may do whatever you wish. You may kill, you may feed, you may bend, manipulate, control, build and nest.”

“Whatever I want?”

“Indeed. Carnal delights, I admit, are what most freshly embraced drift to, and I cannot blame them.” She spun her words carefully, with just the right inflections to emphasize the sexual nature of it all. “You could command a kine to make love to you while you drink them. With a little practice, you could have walked into Bloodlust, and simply asked any woman there to join you in a booth. At your command, they would have let you devour them while granting your every sexual desire.” She gave him the look. The look. Sexual intent poured from her gaze like water.

She could play a brilliant devil when she wanted.

“Command someone, er, command a kine for sex? For blood? That...” The boy scratched at his buzzed head. “I mean yeah, that sounds great ... for a little while. I dunno, that ... that seems like it’d get pretty...”

He turned the words on his tongue. He was afraid he’d offend her. Just what was on the young Kindred’s mind?

“It sounds hollow.”

The erotic gaze she carried faded. The boy, the poor silly boy struck something within her so hard, she could feel the pain resonate through her core. She'd have gasped, if the reflex had still existed.

“ ... that it does, little Terry, that it does.” She pulled him closer to her. The boy had a confused look on his face, but he usually did. She hugged him, pulled his head to her shoulder, and stroked at his crown idly. He wouldn't know why she was holding him so, and that was fine, because she knew he'd just accept her touch. And he did.

He most definitely was not Tony.

“But,” she said, and turned them both slightly to again look at the humans that walked down the pathway past them, “you must still learn the disciplines, for protection or when you must feed and have no choice. I suggest...” She grinned down at the boy, and slid away on the bench so they could face each other. Whenever she held her words, Jack always squirmed a little with anticipation; it was delectable. “I suggest you practice on me.”

“ ... my Prince?”

“You will not be able to dominate me.” Oho, the word choice alone was making the game such a pleasure. “You may try though.” With a foot between them, both of them sitting on the bench, she held his hands in her lap, and lightly stroked his knuckles.

“But, I ... I...”

He squirmed and wriggled all the more at the proposal. The little Ventrue was almost turning on himself with conflicts and struggles. She gave him a moment to think, and soon Jack turned to face her, and gave a small nod.

“I must meet your gaze,” she said, and looked the little boy straight in the eyes. “Now, you must learn to exercise your power

over your Vitae. The blood in your body, you control it. Like an extra muscle, you can wield it.”

Jack gave another small nod. It had been so long since she was embraced. Centuries. For her, to control the energy within her blood was just second nature. She’d long forgotten what it was like to breathe, but she imagined it was similar. For Jack though, it would be new, and she did her best to convey how ingrained it was into a Kindred’s body.

“Yes my Prince. I think ... yes. Alright, uh ... what ... what should I try to do.”

“Mesmerize me of course.” She gave his hand another gentle stroke of her nails. “I will be a slave to your whim. Anything you desire.” And of course, a cherry on top to reward his efforts.

His eyes were so wide, she could see the whole of white around his irises. Then determination set in, he furrowed his brow, and gazed right back into her own eyes. The concentration in them was so endearing, she had to do her best to not smile at him. It was a serious matter, to learn to control Vitae, but the little man was truly adorable.

She could feel it though. His mind was reaching out and trying to control hers, mesmerize hers. It was surprising. Astonishing even. It was not like some fledgling only several weeks to the game, as Jack was. Rather, it felt like a Kindred of some years was trying to tear down her walls and dominate her.

He never could of course, but she had to admit, there was a reservoir there in the little man. Julias had chosen well.

“These ... are not the droids you’re looking for.”

She bopped him on the head. He’d grown bold, the little imp, but she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sorry! Sorry, I ... I couldn’t stop myself,” he said.

“Well, your silly sense of humor aside, you succeeded in performing the attempt.”

“I ... yeah, I felt something. Like I could feel you through my eyes ... thank you, my Prince.” He grinned up at her sheepishly, and stroked at where she thwaped him.

“Little Ventrue, you wasted a perfect opportunity at romance.” She leaned in close, close, and closer still, and kept her eyes unusually wide. The boy was helpless to look away, despite how she did not use a single discipline upon him. She didn’t need a Ventrue discipline to mesmerize with her gaze.

“But ... I didn’t want to ... impose...”

“I invited you to my estate.” She ran one of her fingers down his neck, and then down the center of his suit’s chest. “I shared one of my ghouls with you.” Her other hand behind his head lightly grazed his ear. “We kissed.” Her nose nudged against his. “And I would like to again.”

Jack had the look of a boy confronted with a dream memory come to life. Had her kiss all been a dream, she imagined were his current thoughts.

With a warm smile, she brought her lips down to meet his with half-closed eyes. He’d have pulled back in surprise, but she had her arm behind him; he was trapped, and there was no way she was going to miss the look in his eyes.

It was always his eyes. They were wide with shock, despite the road he’d taken to get here. Beautiful, green, innocent eyes. His gaze blinked a few times when she plucked at his bottom lip, and she couldn’t help but chuckle.

“You may kiss me in return, Jack. I will not bite.” She nudged her nose into his lightly, and put a light kiss on his upper lip. “Yet.”

Her silly threats sounded so juvenile and cliché to her, but Jack reacted just as she’d hoped, nervous and afraid but hopeless to escape her charms. He kissed her back, clumsy and timid, but that was what made it so enjoyable, so — dare she think it — fun. Her hand upon his head lowered to his shoulder, and with soft fingers, she tickled along his jawline while she played her lips across his. The boy’s eyes eventually closed, but she did not close hers; she dared not miss a single moment of his expression. Even with his closed eyes, he looked so enraptured with her. And to her utmost delight, he made a tiny moan when she pushed a little harder into him.

Then her beast within stood upright and roared. The silent noise was enough that she almost slammed Terry back into the bench. She put a hand to his chest to hold him in place while she scanned around with angry eyes.

“My Prince, I-”

She silenced him with a finger over his lips. There, by the entrance to the parking lot, a man stepped around the stone wall and into her Elysium.

It was Tony.

“... you should run along now, Jack.” Her voice had gone cold, and her grip around the tiny Ventrue had become protective.

“Is that Tony?”

“Indeed. Go home. He will not harm you, but it seems he would have words with me.”



The young man looked between her and the Daeva in the distance. For a second, there was a strange look of determination in his eyes, but before she could say a word, it had faded and young Master Terry slipped off the bench.

“Goodbye, my Prince.” And then he left.

He didn't sneak off through the maze though. To her utter amazement, the young man walked with slow determination up to Tony. She got ready to intervene, but Tony only gave him a quick glance, and Jack did not even raise his head to meet it; he just marched on past Tony and out into the streets.

She had not expected that. The little Ventrue did not seem so little anymore.

Tony walked toward her, hands in pockets and a small smirk on his face. He truly was a beautiful man with his tall, lean figure, his short black hair, and those blue eyes. Such a stylish dresser too, with his business coat and shoes. All he had to do was give her that half smile and memories crept up her spine and refused to die.

Their inner-beasts growled at each other in silence. Her childe had grown to the point she was no longer his obvious superior. He was a dangerous creature.

“New boy toy?” he said. “I'm a little surprised. Bit young, don't you think?”

“He is an adult.”

“Barely. You always did like them young.” He kept walking toward her, and soon he came to a stop just a few feet in front of her. He was almost as tall as her.

“Did you come here to taunt me, Tony?” She leaned her weight into one of her hips, and folded her arms together underneath her

bosom. “A little juvenile.”

“You’d know juvenile, wouldn’t you?”

She grit her teeth until she felt her fangs poked against the inside of her lips. “What do you want, Tony?”

“Just came to check up on my old sire. I see your pedophile tendencies have only gotten worse.”

Do not play into his game, Annie. Do not debase yourself.

“You stepped into my Elysium, Tony. When was the last time you came here outside of the meeting of the Primogen?” She took a step toward him, and looked down at him. “If you wish to duel, I will gather them, and we can settle your frustrations in combat.” Her hand reached up and pushed her hair back over her shoulder behind her.

“Sorry Sire.” He didn’t look away or back down. He met her gaze with his usual arrogance and nauseating smirk. “Don’t mix business with pleasure. You-,” he reached out and poked her sternum hard enough to make her take a step back, “taught me that. Must have been a couple hundred years ago before this city even fucking existed.”

She did not unfold her arms. “Do not test me.”

“Sorry again.” He gave a shrug. “But it’s my right as the ex in our relationship.”

The Prince took a moment to watch her childe. He was so smooth, suave, with just that edge of badboy and the cleanliness of a man who took care of himself. He dripped confidence, intelligence, and sexual allure.

She’d taught him well. Too well.

“Begone, Tony.”

“It’s the Elysium, right? I can take a stroll here if I want, by your own rules.” He gave her another push against her sternum, and she was forced to take another step to stay standing. “That Jack kid looks cute as a button. Maybe I’ll have Rebecca pay your new boy toy a second visit.”

For just a moment, a split moment, she heard a growl. She didn’t know where the sound came from, maybe it was from her, but a sound came that no human mouth could make. The next moment, she was standing with a foot forward and a fist already out in front of her. The skin of her knuckles had split open to reveal the dark, thick blood of Kindred that would not drip.

Tony was across the way with well over a hundred feet between them. One of the stone walls of her maze garden was cracked, and he was slumped against it with a hand against his jaw. The bone and skin of it was shattered, torn open, broken to pieces and splattered over his clothes. Kindred blood did not drip or flow, but her sudden assault had been enough to splash the viscous liquid against his neck and collar.

A crowd of Kindred crept up in the shadows. The garden maze covered a huge expanse of Elysium, and at least twenty freshly embraced fledglings who craved its no-violence law stood at the edge of the maze’s walls. Their eyes were hidden, and they whispered to each other while Tony crawled around on the ground with strands of his jaw hanging from his skull.

With a groan, the Daeva forced his body to recover. Flesh molded over the shattered bone and torn muscle; it was all dead flesh after all, and a Kindred as strong as her arrogant childe could regenerate from the wound. The young Kindred watching even let out gasps at the sight of Tony’s jaw reforming itself.

She should have punched him harder.

“You’re going to regret that,” he said, once his jaw and tongue were back together. Much of his bone was still exposed, but pale skin was growing over it quickly. “You’re going to regret everything.”

Damn it, the bastard had baited her. Now there she stood with bits of Kindred – now turning to ash – on her fingers, with a host of fledglings watching. She’d struck first, and inside her Elysium where violence was forbidden. On top of that, his threat against Jack had been ambiguous; she had no proof. With just a few words, he’d damaged her position.

Conniving, manipulative, cruel and vicious. Part of her was proud, while another part of her wanted nothing more than to rip him apart, piece by literal piece.

Tony laughed to himself as he struggled to get back up. For a moment, she thought he’d fight back. Daeva fighting was a dangerous game indeed, for as fast and strong as they were, they did not have the resilience of a Gangrel or Ventrue. The fight would have been over in seconds.

He didn’t though. With a snarky laugh, he turned around and walked away. He even gave a small wave as he moved on, without bothering to look back, and left her in the wake of her mistake.

## Chapter 8

~~Beatrice~~

She had to get something to eat first, then she'd show Julias. She'd show up and beat the undead shit out of that piece of shit, stupid shit fuck. Eat first though, definitely. She was drained and tired from shadowing the trio, and there was no way she was going to confront big bad ancillae Julias without a stomach full of blood.

She'd tried feeding on some people gently lately, using the darkness and her strength to her advantage. It had worked well enough, and she'd had more than one kine succumb to her grip and enjoy the Kiss from the unknown creature in the shadows. But tonight, she stalked the streets for a bit, found some asshole who was about to rape someone, and then she drank him to death after making him relive his most horrible nightmare.

That made her feel a bit better. She could get into people's heads too; perks of being a Nosferatu. Not like a Ventrue could, but damn there was something very satisfying about making a fuckwad of a kine piss themselves in fear with hallucinations.

And then it was the next night. She was fully rested, strong, ready to kick some Invictus ass. She dialed his number.

“Yo let me up.”

Bzzt. The door to the apartment complex opened. She could be walking into a trap for all she knew, but fuck it, she wouldn't go down easy.

She was dressed in her combat boots and jeans, with a black t-shirt to go with. The boots were steel-toe, but not obviously. If things went sour, she was going to crack some nuts.

On the elevator, she folded her arms across her chest and waited while it went up. Her mind drifted around to all the things she might do to Julias if it turned out he'd been messing with her head. She already owed him for Mike. Poor kid was always a bit nervous and shaky, and now she could only imagine the sort of paranoia he'd have. Just thinking about it was making her nervous too.

She walked in with the same confidence she had last time she was there, when she'd shown up with a box of sex toys and night of fun in mind. Julias gave her that warm smile of his though from behind his counter, and already put a dent in her armor. For just a split moment, she thought about forgetting the whole vendetta thing and just having a good romp with Superman again.

Jack was there too. The two of them were sitting at the counter in his luxurious apartment, and they were ... looking at a candle.

“Hey Beatrice. I was showing Jack here the difference fire has on the skin now that he's Kindred.” With that, Julias ran a fingertip through the candle flame quickly. It only took a moment, but just that was enough for the flame to cut a deep gash of ash into his finger, almost deep enough to burn straight through it. If he'd been an elder Kindred, he'd have lost his entire hand.

When Jack repeated the motion, with a groan and grimace to join it, the damage to his skin was far less. Just a few specs of ash and burned skin.

“And now ... focus on that blood inside you. Pool it into your finger. Tell it to rebuild you.” Julias put his hand palm up on the counter. Beatrice stood beside the counter, and watched the Ventrue rebuild his own flesh. Kindred blood was nothing like kine blood; it was thick and viscous and moved like another limb. True to Julias's words, the strange, dark red covered the deep hole burned into his finger, and rebuilt pale flesh onto his dead bones.

“This is ... fucking ... hard.” The poor kid groaned all the more, and Beatrice openly chuckled. He glared at her, and she straight up laughed. His expression was so hilariously honest and juvenile in its frustration, she had to sit down on the couch before laughter knocked her over.

Julias looked over at her with a frown, but she just grinned back him, crocodile smile and all.

“ ... why don't you go home and work on this, Jack?”

“Yeah, good plan.” Jack, still holding his hand in the other and looking at it like it were his enemy, got up and headed over to the door. He managed to throw Beatrice an angry glare, which she returned with a smirk to go with. A moment later he was gone, and she was alone with her supposed boyfriend.

She got up and stood there, hip out to the side and arms folded on her chest. Julias looked back at her, and tilted his head to the side.

“How's it going Beatrice?”

Damn him. That smile, that confident but benevolent, powerful but gentle smile, was so inviting. He didn't just sit there either; he got up and walked over to her, and even put his hands on her hips.

She clicked her crocodile teeth together. “ ... this isn't a social visit.” She couldn't wane. He was a Ventrue; just repeat that line. An Invictus Ventrue.

“Oh? What is it?”

“I want to talk about what happened last night.”

He didn't even flinch. “What happened last night?”

In that moment of him acting like nothing happened, so smooth and perfect, she felt her insides burn. Her inner-beast almost sent her into a fury right there, with how rage exploded and filled her limbs.

She shoved him hard enough to send him back five feet and onto his ass. “You know what fucking happened!” There, that earned a flinch from him.

“... what happened to the no-work-talk rule?” Julias reached up to a nearby stool to stand up, but he didn’t fix the mess she’d made of his suit. His shirt had loosened at the waist and his shoulders weren’t on straight anymore, but all he did was stand there once he was up again. His expression was ... hurt? Serious? Angry? She couldn’t tell.

“You and your right hand bitch friends broke into Mike’s place and you ... you ... you fucking screwed with his head!” Her voice was getting louder, and that made it easier. With the rage building again, she pulled back a fist and drove it into the bastard’s chest. He fell to the floor with a very audible thud.

“... what do you want me to say?” This time, he didn’t even bother to get up.

Well then she’d make him. She stomped over to him, reached down, and picked him up by his shirt like he weighed nothing.

“I want you to fucking explain yourself!”

“You know I can’t.”

“Bullshit!” She threw him into the fridge. The heavy appliance cracked against the wall behind it, and Julias fell to the floor again with his back to it. His suit was a mess now, but all he did was sit there and look down at the floor.



“ ... I can't. You know it's Invictus business.”

“Fuck that and fuck you. You rewrote my friend's memories! I bet you made him tell you something! So-”

“So I can't ... tell you.” He didn't look up, he just looked to the side.

“What about me then, hmm? The fuck did you do to me?” There wasn't much thought left going on in her head anymore, just enough to know she wasn't thinking. She reached down, picked up the damn Invictus bastard, and shoved him back against the fridge again.

“You? I've never done anything to you Beatrice.”

“Liar! That's why you agreed to go out on a date with me, isn't it?” She punched him hard enough to hear something crack. “Like a classy, sophisticated, self-righteous Ventrue would ever date a shark-mouth! You saw an opportunity! What Carthian secrets did you take from my mind then, hmm?” The second punch made a dent into his old, undead bones. “What the fuck have you made me forget!?”

This time, she used her claws. Cutting into a Kindred was different than cutting into a living human. His suit was like paper, but the flesh underneath was hard. It was a Kindred reflex, after all, to expend vitae to protect the insides, but it wasn't enough to stop her claws from forcing their way through a couple inches of his pale skin and into the hidden, withered insides of a vampire.

It had only taken a couple minutes, but she went from his hands on her hips, to her cutting open his chest. What surprised her even more was her sudden outburst about being a shark mouth. Her anger only increased; she was supposed to be passed that Nosferatu self-lamenting bull shit. She was done with it! Done!

He fell back down again, and did not react. He just slumped, and slowly raised his eyes to look up at her. Fuck, those god damn eyes really were hurt.

“ ... I’m not lying.” He looked down at his chest, and put a hand over the open gashes. The Kindred blood stayed inside his wounds, like a liquid with its own mind determined to stay hidden. With a groan of pain, he looked back up to her. “About either part.”

“Either? What fucking either?”

“What you’re thinking.” He finally started to pull himself up under his own power.

Watching the beaten and sliced open Ventrue get up struck her with a sudden fear. What she was thinking? He didn’t know what she was thinking!

“Actually, I do know what you’re thinking,” he said. She practically gasped. “You’re angry. You’re angry I hurt your friend...” He stepped toward her. “And now you’re using that as a cover.”

“ ... cover? What fucking cover?”

“That you hate being a Nosferatu. You hate being a shark-mouth, and now ... you’re taking out that hate on me.” He came a little closer.

She punched him in the face hard enough to crunch nose. “Fuck you! Tragedy freak! This isn’t a fucking therapy session you stupid-”

“I’m sorry I hurt your friend, but I had to to save his life. He had info we needed, and if I didn’t take it from him that way, he would have ended up ash.” He hadn’t fallen over this time; he didn’t even break his gaze with her when he raised his hands to realign his nose with a crack. “And ... I have no way to prove to you that I’ve never wiped your memories, other than that I simply can’t. You’re too

strong.” He started walking toward her again, with a sad and tired smile. “And I have no way to prove to you that I really do like you. You know me though, I’m a tragedy freak.”

“You fucking calling me a tragedy you fucking-”

“I am.” His smile returned, even as he used the counter for support while his wounds closed. “And now you know what I’m thinking.”

“ ... you think ... that I haven’t gotten over this Nosferatu curse.”

He gave a nod, and stepped closer to her again. “And maybe I’m a freak because I like that about you. Maybe I like that you’re not dead inside ... like Jacob. Or Maria.” His weight fell onto his hand on the counter, and he held himself up that way with his other hand on his chest. He didn’t try and fix himself up, fix his suit or heal his wound. He just stood there, a half-smile on his face, confident as always, but ... something else. “I like you, Nosferatu tragedy included. This,” he gestured to the wounds she’d inflicted, “included.”

Too much. It was way too much. How dare he? How dare he just stomp on twenty-years of her bullshit. Fuck him and his ... his ... bullshit!

She punched him again, but her rage had faded. It wasn’t even hard enough to make him stumble back. He stepped toward her again, and she could see where his hands were going. He wanted to put them on her hips again. She couldn’t let him.

She shoved him, and ran away.

“Beatrice! Wa-”

Slam. Fuck listening to that psychology shit. He couldn’t read her mind! He ... could practically read her mind, without any powers.

How was he so good at reading her? Screw all that ... fucking ... stupid...

Ten minutes later, she was back in the catacombs where she first talked with Julias. Dark, filled with bones, deep underground with nothing but stone and earth and death around her. No one would hear her here.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaarr!”

Her claws came out in full force. The shelves held hundreds of skulls on layers of stone and dust, and it all came crashing down when her claws ripped through them. Her inner-beast took over, and she scratched and clawed against the walls with rabid abandon. More screams came out, inhuman and wall-shaking, until she could almost feel her jaw crack with how wide her mouth was. Before she knew it, she had grabbed a coffin and bit through it. The bones and clothes within exploded outward from the force of her shark teeth snapping through it all.

“It does not bother me anymore! It shouldn’t bother me anymore! How ... how can this ... still...”

She collapsed in a corner, covered in dust and bone, and cried.

---

~~Julias~~

It’d been a week since he last saw Beatrice. He may have just fucked up the first real relationship he’d had in decades.

He’d known Beatrice would be volatile, it was part of what attracted him to her, but not only had she picked a fight with him, she had literally cut him open. She’d followed him as per Carthian orders he figured, and that didn’t bother him. It was scary the young Kindred was able to hide from Natasha and stalk all three Invictus

right hands, but again, that didn't bother him. If anything, that just made her more interesting. She was powerful.

Julias paced in front of his massive window, a hand on his chin with a glass of blood in the other. It'd been a week since Beatrice had thrashed him, and he hadn't seen her. He'd considered walking into Carthian territory, knocking on the door of their pathetic apartment building, and just asking for her. He couldn't risk inciting an incident though, after Rebecca had put everyone on edge.

"... I really do like her though." He took a sip of his blood. What could he say to her? He'd said all he could say. "Yeah but I talked to her like a fucking therapist. I'm surprised she didn't rip off my arm." He chuckled. "You really fucked this up Julias. Tragedy freak.

"Alright, alright, how to fix this ... fuck I don't know how to fix this. She hates being Nosferatu, but I can't fix that. She still doesn't accept that I like the way she looks, not really. I have to convince her that I do. The thing with Mike though ... she was really upset I hurt her friend. Or was it about ... that I could have..."

He smacked himself in the forehead. "Fuck. She can't trust me anymore. She thinks I can do to her what I did to Mike, that I may have rewritten her memories. How the fuck am I supposed to prove I—"

His smartphone rang. It was Viktor.

"... shit." He answered. "Alder Viktor."

"Mister Mire. I require your presence."

---

There was no triumvirate this time. In the meeting room of Xnomina, Viktor was standing by the digital board, with his back to Julias and his hands netted together on the small of his back. Julias

stood where he did last time, but without Jessy or Natasha at his side.

Just him and his sire, one of the most powerful Kindred in Dolareido. Each and every time, his one-on-one's with his sire made him more nervous.

“Mister Mire, you know that tomorrow is when you must retrieve that sensitive information from the North Side drop location.”

“Yes Alder Viktor.”

“Are you also aware that Antoinette has started visiting Bloodlust every week, starting about the same time I sent you to retrieve the information from Vance? The night of the fire?”

“I ... was not.” Julias folded his arms across his chest and stepped up to be next to Viktor. On the screen, pictures of Antoinette were shown, entering and exiting Bloodlust. They were date stamped. “I knew she had been visiting Bloodlust, but I did not make that connection.”

“Indeed.” Viktor gave him a short glance, cold and demanding. “And did you know she has been seducing your childe?”

He did not like where this conversation was going.

“Yes, Alder Viktor.”

“Strange that you have not brought this to my attention.” Viktor looked back to the screen, and gently eased several more digital photographs onto it. There was Antoinette, tall and gorgeous, with Julias's little childe in her arms.

The kid was right, Antoinette was really sexual with him. Really sexual. The picture was of them in Elysium, sitting on a bench outside her tower, and she was holding his childe to her and

snuggling and ... kissing. His childe was kissing the Prince of Dolareido.

Viktor looked back to him, and his eyes were even more cold.

“I hadn’t realized it had progressed this far,” he said. God damn it Jack.

“Is he aware of any sensitive information?”

“No, sire.”

Viktor idly wiped some non-existent dust from the shoulder of his suit. “But that does not mean he will not become aware of any. She...” His voice trailed, and he reached for another digital image to drag into the center of the screen. He dragged at its corners to expand it, and zoomed in on Antoinette’s face. “Interesting.”

“Sire?”

“I’ve known the Prince for a long time. We met before she was Prince, and... ,” he pointed to her eyes, “she rarely shows those eyes anymore.”

Julias took a long hard look at the picture. Antoinette was stroking Jack’s chin with her arm hooked around his shoulders. She was holding him close, and she’d leaned in close enough to touch her nose to his. He almost felt jealous, that Antoinette was getting so much of his childe’s attention. It was in the Prince’s eyes though, and now that Viktor pointed it out, it was clear as day.

She liked Jack.

“Bring him on the mission.”

Say what? “I ... am not sure that is a good idea, Sire.”

“He is young, barely a fledgling, and your childe; it is natural for you to think so. He has value though. If the information we aim to retrieve from this ‘drop’ is indeed related to the Prince, as Rebecca and Tony believe, his intimate experience with her may be of use.”

You mean he’d be a valuable pawn in your game. Cold, cruel, calculating, and efficient. Would his sire really use his own grandchilde, just a babe, in his game? Most definitely.

Viktor Honors reached out for another folder on the screen, opened it and spilled out another list of images. They were of Tony and Rebecca, and based on the background, it was pictures of them scouting North Side. “Now that we know where to look — thanks to you — we caught these two sneaking in the area.” Even his compliments sounded cold and calculating. “Tony is no fool. He will expect others to show up for this drop, even if he does not suspect us specifically.”

“There may be a fight then. How many others are we bringing with us?”

“No one. I would bring Mister McDonald and Madame Turio, and perhaps their proteges, but the rest of the Triumvirate and their right hands are otherwise engaged. Someone has been performing night raids on several of Xnomina’s factories, damaging the company’s export profits.” He gave a subtle frown. “They have eluded capture. It is likely one or more Kindred, perhaps an ancillae and several fledglings, but I trust my partners to handle it.”

“Perhaps to be a distraction during this drop?” Julius said.

“Perhaps. And that is why I am going for the drop, as are you.” For just a second, Viktor had a smile. “Tony and Rebecca may be powerful Daeva, but they are also degenerates. Whores. And we will crush them. I trust you want revenge against Rebecca.”



He had to hand it to Viktor, his sire could be a persuasive, charismatic man when he wanted to be. He'd even raised a hand in front of him, and squeezed into a fist.

“ ... I would indeed, sire.”

---

~~Jack~~

“Mrs. Pavala’s murder is still under investigation, but with no leads, it would appear that the case has gone cold.”

Jack dared peak at the TV on display, but immediately regretted it. There were pictures of Mrs. Pavala when she was alive, and interviews with her family. It was enough to make his dead, withered insides turn upside down.

“Can I help you sir?” the cashier said. Some young guy, pimples, skinny, messy hair.

“Ah? No, I’m just getting a lighter.” He forced his eyes away from the TV hanging from the ceiling, and reached for a lighter. Nothing special or fancy, just your typical cigarette lighter from your typical convenience store.

It had hurt so much more than he thought possible, when he just ran his finger through the flame for a moment with Julias. His sire had done the same and almost lost his hand.

He held it in his grip. It was a lighter, he’d seen hundreds of them, but now it was something different. Just holding it in his hand was enough to make the strange Kindred energy in his blood, vitae, rise and prepare to defend itself. Like a human afraid of heights looking over the edge of a cliff fall, he could feel the fear in his bones.

He slipped the cashier the money, and left with his eyes still on the lighter in his hand. It was only when a hand grabbed his

shoulder from behind that he looked up.

“Jack!”

“ ... Mary?”

It was his sister. Oh shit.

“Jack! Jack what the fuck? You’re alive? How ... I ... what? What’s going on?”

His sister was taller than him, a brunette with a soft face and lean figure. Her eyes were soft, and right then, wide enough he could see the veins.

“Mary, I ... I...” Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit.

“You’re alive! What are you doing? Did you run away, is that what happened?” She had tears in her eyes, and her voice was getting higher in pitch. People in the streets were stopping to stare. Even the nightlight pedestrians were startled by random squeals of shock.

“Mary, let-”

“I got to call Mom! She’s going to be so happy you’re alive!”

Jack gripped the lighter in his hand tighter.

“Mary.” He grabbed Mary’s hand and pulled her to the side of the street, and then out of the way a little, between some of the convenience stores. Dark alleys. Dolareido was full of them.

“Jack, what are you do-”

“Look into my eyes, Mary.” He forced down the imaginary bile he felt building up. There was no bile, because he wasn’t a human anymore. He was a god damn mother fucking vampire, a Kindred, and he had to accept that, both the good and the bad.

“The fuck are you on about? I have to call-”

“Look ... into ... my eyes.” He reached out with his mind, with his eyes, with the vitae inside him. Like reaching out with a hand, except it was his gaze, his own vision bestowed the power to grasp, touch ... control.

Mary went quiet. Her squeaks stopped, her hyperventilating stopped, her expression went deadpan, and her arms fell to her sides limp.

It wasn't just eye contact. Eye contact was how you got your foot in the door. He couldn't do it against Julias, and definitely not Antoinette, but against this weak kine ... his sister ... he could feel it. Her will was broken; it didn't even try to fight. Unaware and ignorant, with no inner-beast to fight him, she just gave in without a fuss. He could almost feel her mind his palm, soft, malleable, ready to be shaped into whatever he wished.

“Mary ... forget ... you ever saw me. As far as you know, I'm dead.”

“ ... I will forget.” If a corpse would talk, it would sound like that.

“Now go home.”

“ ... I will go home.” No more emotion. No more sparkle of excitement and shock and surprise in her eyes. Mary just turned around without hesitation and walked down the street.

Jack crept back further into the alley until there was only shadow, and the sounds of the streetlife had completely faded. He found a dumpster, filth-ridden, but he didn't care. Something, anything to hide while he collapsed. With his ass on the dirty pavement and his back against the dumpster, he ignored the horrible smell and cold liquid soaking into his clothes.

He punched the wall. Ventrue reflex turned his skin and bone harder, so he punched it again. And again. The wall began to dent and crumble into powder and dust, and he kept punching it until the hole punctured the building. He was so close, so closing to moving on, but one stupid mistake and every horrible memory sprang back up and crushed him.

He had to stare deep into the eyes of his sister, and make her forget. The last memory he'd ever have of her would be her dead expression while he wiped the encounter from her mind. That hopeful, sudden burst of shock and joy and confusion and excitement in her eyes, and then nothing.

He got up and kicked the dumpster hard enough to send it spiraling down the alley before it slammed into a corner. He didn't care. He screamed into night air while he collapsed again, and put his hands against the wall he'd punctured.

For now, all he could do was cry, with no tears to show for it.

---

Xnomina was paying for his own current apartment, and it certainly was a sweet apartment. It was expected that eventually, once trained under Julias, he would serve his sire as partner in expanding Xnonmina's branches. For now though, he had the time to become accustomed to being Kindred, and he needed it.

He went to Julias's apartment the next day. Normally he would have preferred to deal with his sadness alone, but things had changed. He had a sire, and the new shit that was tearing him apart wasn't exactly typical grief.

"Hey Julias," he said with a small nod.

"Jack. I was going to call you." Julias was in the living room, getting dressed into a casual suit, and slipping a large knife into a large sheath along his ribs.

“ ... um, what’s with the knife?”

Julias gave him a long, hard look, but slowly his expression softened. “A mission.”

“Never thought I’d see you carrying a weapon. I thought we were Kindred?”

“Unfortunately, the other clans are a bit more apt at straight-on confrontation than a Ventrue.” He gave him a smirk. “So we adapt.” Then he pulled out a pistol, and slipped the disturbingly large firearm against the other side of his chest.

“Shit ... what’s going down? Wait wait, do I want to know?”

“No, you don’t. But you’re going to, because you’re coming.”

“ ... on a mission.”

“Yes.”

“Where you’re taking a knife, and a gun I’m sure could put a hole through an elephant.”

“Yes.”

They sort of just looked at each other for a while. He couldn’t figure out his sire’s face; what the hell was going on inside his head? Julias always looked like he belonged in the mafia in the 40’s, but the knife and gun completed the imagery.

“We’re going to North Side,” he said, “to pick up a package meant for someone else, and wanted by Tony and Rebecca.”

“I’m sorry, I think I misheard you. Did you just say Tony and Rebecca are going to be there? That someone unidentified might also be there? That we’re going on a mission I’ve had no prior

warning about, into a potentially life threatening situation, to steal some unknown person's important package?"

"Yes."

Jack couldn't hide his frown. It was just one real moment after another. Every time he thought he had a second to get his bearings, to get adjusted to being a Kindred, something new came up. "A possible fight ... as much as I'd love to see Rebecca dead, I'm only going to be a liability."

"Viktor wants you there."

"Viktor is a sociopath!"

It was Julias's turn to frown. "Viktor is my sire, Jack, as I am yours. He can be cold and brutal, but he is smart. Very smart. I trust his judgment."

There was a moment of hesitation in Julias's voice though. It was just a moment, and Julias tried to cover it, but Jack heard it. And Julias knew it.

"There's more to this, isn't there?" Jack said.

"... yes." Julias adjusted his jacket and stepped over to the giant window to look out into the city; the whole conversation now reeked of a movie scene. "I don't want to put you between Viktor and Antoinette." He looked over his shoulder at him. The look said it all; Julias knew he'd been seeing Antoinette more. "But the information we aim to retrieve is sensitive to the covenants. That means it could have to do with the Invictus, or the Carthians or ... the Ordo Dracul and Antoinette."

Crap. Jack sat down onto the couch and ran his fingers over his buzzed head. "I probably should have listened to you and avoided Antoinette, right?"

Julias walked over to him, and to Jack's surprise, there was a strange smile on his face.

"I can't deny you and the Prince could have perhaps done a better job hiding your little game." He reached down and pulled Jack back to standing, firm but slowly, before patting him on the shoulders. "And now, like I said, you've got yourself in the middle of the Danse Macabre. You're important. You know things, whether you realize you do or not, and Viktor and Tony, probably even Garry and Jacob all know your face now."

"... ah shit. So I'm going because ... because I should?"

"Viktor thinks so. You're in the Danse now. You have connections with Antoinette; your input may prove quite valuable," his sire said, and at the same time handed him a sheathed knife similar to his own. "I won't let anything happen to you."

He wanted to talk about Mrs. Pavala. He wanted to talk about him and Antoinette. He wanted to talk about Mary. But now, he had a knife in his hand, and his sire was hooking a carrying belt around his hips.

"You must trust Viktor a lot, to bring me on this mission just cause he thinks you should." Jack raised his arms so Julias would have an easier time hooking the belt on him.

"You know Viktor is a dangerous man." Julias finished and stood up. "But I've been working with him since he sired me seventy-years ago, since even before then. He truly believes in the Invictus, and you're Invictus now."

"I'm Invictus ... but I haven't done anything for the Invictus yet."

"Yet."

---

~~Julias~~

He really hoped he was right.

The two of them, Julias and Jack, were in a taxi and riding to North Side. It was an Invictus taxi, the driver was one of Michael's ghouls, but the two Ventrue had gone quiet. Julias occasionally threw his childe a small glance, but the young man was looking out the window and rubbing his buzzed head nervously.

He could tell Jack was a mess of nerves, since he always went quiet like that when he was nervous. Not only that, but Julias had seen the pictures; Jack liked Antoinette, and now the kid was getting put into a situation purely because he knew the Prince. Who knew how that was going to go?

Julias was no better off. Natasha and Jessy wanted him to kill Viktor. Kill his sire. It was a classic story of course, of an elder vampire grown old, powerful, and dangerous. Viktor's last torpor had lasted decades, and when he'd awoken from his long sleep, he wasn't the same. And now Julias had his own childe to think about.

Nothing was the same.

He almost laughed. God, did he really just think that? If Beatrice was there, he'd have said it just to irritate her with the cliché.

"Do I get a gun?" Jack said.

"... what?"

"A gun. You gave me a knife, but not a gun."

"Do you know how to fire a gun?"

"I'm sure I could figure it out." Jack finally turned from the window, and gave Julias a little grin.



Julias did laugh this time. “Tomorrow night. I’ll take you to a range and make sure, so you don’t accidentally shoot a pedestrian.” He gave his childe a grin back. Jack’s confidence was starting to show through, and he probably didn’t even realize it.

The taxi stopped at a dead-end road that came to an abrupt stop before North Side. The factory district was blocked off by various walls of old brick and dying wire fences, and this particular road stopped in the most dense section. Every hundred feet was a warehouse of some kind, broken up by wood pallets and empty metal cargo units. The only lighting was the occasional flickering light hanging by wire, strung between warehouses.

Viktor Honors was standing by one of the buildings, with his arms folded across his chest. Dressed in a gray suit Julias was sure was made by the devil himself, his sire also sported a black long coat, a duster at that. It was open at the chest, revealing Viktor’s own chest strap that carried a pistol, and ... his sword. With his black hair in a ponytail, his young face and his ancient gaze, his sire looked somewhere between comic book cheesy, and awe inspiring.

Jack’s jaw had dropped. Viktor gave his grandchilde a smile.

“Master Terry. I am glad to see you came.” His voice was so smooth but monotone, soft yet antediluvian.

“Your Excellency.” Jack gave a small bow.

“Please. We are all Invictus, and that includes you, Master Terry. Refer to me by my title.”

“Yes Alder Viktor.”

The kid tried to hide his smile, but failed. Viktor returned it though. Even Julias found himself smiling. Things were going well. It was true that Viktor was terrifying, but he hadn’t fed on another

vampire yet. Maybe Julias wouldn't need to kill him, if he even could.

“Do you understand why you are here, Master Terry?”

“Yes Alder Viktor. I am to provide possibly valuable insight into the situation if the opportunities arises. I understand we're here to retrieve an information drop that may be pertinent to the covenants.”

“Indeed. Your relationship with the Prince is unheard of, since Tony. And I believe your insight regarding that serpent may be even more valuable.” The elder Kindred then looked to Julias. “I have only been here twenty minutes, and I have heard nothing. Still, let us assume the worst and approach this cautiously.”

All three Ventrue nodded. Jack got behind Julias while the two of them eased against a wall of a warehouse, and Viktor the other. Between the two buildings, it was a long, exposed walk toward their destination. Even Viktor, who dripped professional efficiency, carefully stuck his head out.

Then half of the elder's head exploded.

## Chapter 9

~~Jack~~

Jack's eyes went wide. Half of Viktor's head was gone, just gone. The bloody gibs of brain matter and bone turned into tiny fires that faded into ash and embers before they even hit the ground.

"Shit! Shit shit, what-"

Julias put a hand against Jack's mouth, and pushed him back against the wall. "Sniper, down the path."

Jack reached up and pulled his sire's hand down. "What about Viktor!? The fuck are we supposed to do now?"

Just as he was about to start ranting, his jaw dropped yet again when Viktor sat back up, safe out of the line of sight of the alley. Half his head was still missing, but it was rebuilding itself. That dark and thick Kindred blood was seeping into the gory mess and quite literally rebuilding bone, muscle, tendon, teeth, and even his hair. It wasn't like when Julias healed from his burn; this was some freaky mutant insane healing powers shit.

A minute later, Viktor was standing and dusting his shoulders off. His hair was now undone, and the black length reached the middle of his back. "Vermin. Cowards. If they want to play as rats, then rats they shall have." He looked to his childe, grandchile, and gave a small grin. The smirk was gone so fast, Jack wasn't sure he'd seen it.

And then, as if thrown into the ocean during a hurricane, Jack had to press a hand to the wall to brace himself against the invisible. Viktor's voice was quiet, but he could feel it resonate through him. There was power there, so much power that it shook the blood in his withered insides. It only got worse when Viktor used a fingernail

to slice open his wrist, and forced a large splattering of his blood to land on the pavement.

Squeaks. At first it was a barely audible buzzing sound, like a fly near the ear, but soon the rising tide of squeaks flooded toward them. When Jack looked toward the source, he could not find it. It came from everywhere. In the dark of night, it looked like the pavement had come to life.

Hundreds of rats poured over everything. They ran the corners of building and street, flowed up from sewer drains, and down the walls of warehouses, all to sip at Viktor's blood.

“Go. Swarm and devour my enemies.”

King of the rats. The flood of moving fur poured past them all and down the alley. The moving carpet of teeth was met with gunfire, squeaks of death and exploding, furry little bodies, but whoever was shooting did not have nearly enough bullets to stop a torrent of claws. Within a minute, the sounds of gunfire had fallen back.

Julias went in first, his pistol held in both hands. Viktor had also drawn his pistol, a machine pistol at that, but he held it in one hand. With an almost flamboyant flare, he drew his sword and held it in his right hand at the ready. It was not some antique, but rather something clearly modern, almost more like a very long dagger.

Jack found himself suppressing a grin. He was afraid, there was gunfire, and Viktor had lost half his head, but damn if his grandsire wasn't an irrefutable badass. Viktor went in after Julias, and the two went at a full run. Jack came up behind them, and found himself drifting to hide behind Viktor more than Julias. No offense to his sire, but his grandsire was scarier.

Instead of stopping to regroup once a new set of warehouses were reached, they kept running. Fearless. It was strangely exhilarating. At first, he was terrified, and he still was, but there was something

to this, hunting things in the dark. Something primal and ancient tugged at Jack's insides, that inner-beast that now lived inside him, and pulled him along like a cat chasing prey. He forgot about Mrs. Pavala, about Mary, about all the stupid shit that didn't matter then. For the moment, he was a predator.

They soon found themselves in a cross section of road, warehouses, factories, dipping ramps of asphalt that lead into garage doors. The rats were pouring down one of the ramps and under a barely-opened garage door. Then the air was filled with squeaks, hundreds, even thousands of squeaks. Dying squeaks.

Viktor held up a hand, and Julias came to a stop with his back against the wall of the opened door. Jack's sire clearly had training; he moved with efficiency and speed with his pistol in both hands. His grandsire on the other hand, walked forward as if immortal. For all Jack knew, he might as well have been. The elder Kindred stepped underneath the garage door, following the rats into the darkness.

Jack followed him in, only to have the garage door slam behind him.

---

~Julias~

Shit.

Julias only had time to take two steps toward the garage door before a pair of hands crashed into him. Everything turned upside down, everything hurt, and suddenly the pavement was zipping by underneath him. He was sent fifty feet before he skidded to a stop, suit torn to bits and his pale skin ripped open all over.

His skin closed and healed itself within seconds, and he was up on a knee in the same amount of time with his gun drawn. A quick

look around showed he was in clearing of street, likely where transport trucks rerouted.

“God damn Ventrue. Too damn hard to kill with bullets.”

Rebecca. The redheaded bitch was wearing a wearing a black trench coat, and ... a nice scarf. Damn Daeva always concerned with looking sexy. The woman had a large rifle with a long barrel in her hands, but she threw it to the ground with a frustrated groan.

“Good thing Daeva aren’t so hard to kill.” He’d shot thousands of bullets from dozens of different guns. His current pistol had kick, but it was nothing a Kindred couldn’t suppress easily, so firing several bullets in rapid succession from the oversized weapon was easy.

Hitting the Daeva, on the other hand, would not be so easy. Rebecca moved as a blur, fast enough that before he knew it she had put a warehouse corner between them. He’d clipped her; the splattering bits of dark blood and withering ash proved it. He’d have to hit her in the chest several times just to slow her down long enough to take off her head, though.

Well, at least the place was deserted for a wide radius. No cops.

“Come out come out wherever you are.” Julias stood up and started to walk toward where she’d disappeared, pistol at the ready.

“Are we going to play hide’n’sseek?” the darkness asked.

“Well, you can hide, but eventually I’ll give up and get back to Viktor.” He poked his head around the corner, just long enough to see what waited for him. Nothing.

“Well I can’t have that.”

“No I don’t suppose you can. You really think Tony can kill Viktor?” He really only had one direction to move in: toward the voice. Rebecca was staying ahead of him, ducking around warehouse corners and likely hiding on rooftops to throw her voice.

“What’s a Ventrue without his subjects to fight for him?”

“Ah, so that’s why you separated me.” He kept his pistol in both hands, and tracked his gaze with practiced speed.

“Indeed!” Always with a flare for the dramatic, the serpent jumped from a rooftop. Jumped was incorrect, she’d actually propelled herself down toward him, and she crashed into him with enough force to dent the wall behind him with his head.

He was prepared this time, and Ventrue reflexes had his vitae pumping defense through his body upon impact. Physics were physics though, and he slammed into the wall hard enough to almost bounce. He pulled the trigger, several times, but all the bullets went wide. It only got worse when a punch hit his hands hard enough to knock the weapon away.

“I’m going to – ah!” Rebecca jumped back with her hands to her chest.

Julias got back up, knife in hand and Rebecca’s blood on its blade for only a moment before the red became ash. He didn’t need a gun.

“You nearly killed by childe. You nearly killed me.” He gripped the blade tight in his right hand with his left hand open and pointed toward the Daeva. “You really suck at finishing jobs. You wouldn’t last two days in the Invictus.”

“Old hags and dusty dicks who couldn’t move on from dead dynasties.” She paced left and right in front of him, a growl on her beautiful lips. Her hands were empty; she’d left the sniper rifle behind.

Or at least, they were empty. It was too damn hard to follow her movements, but she managed to reach into her jacket and pull out a weapon before he could move. He wasn't worried about a pistol, but she wasn't pulling out a pistol. She was pulling out a short-barreled shotgun, perfect for splattering a Kindred into bits.

He ducked in and tackled her. She was faster and stronger, but he was tougher. Her shot clipped over his shoulder and tore a chunk of his flesh free, enough to disable the arm. For the moment.

“Get off of me!”

She bashed him in the face with the weapon, but he was inside now. His right hand still worked, so he swung the knife for her guts. She raised the gun in a harsh uppercut though, straight up against the hand, blocked his swipe, and drove the butt of the gun into his face. The damn Daeva hit so hard, his knife was knocked up from his hand and away, and his head snapped back almost hard enough to break his bones.

She pointed the gun at him again, but he reached for it with his good arm while falling back. His torn up arm was taking just seconds to heal, but seconds was a long time when a Daeva was struggling to get a shotgun in your mouth, so he only had the one hand to hold onto the gun while she had a free hand. She used it to punch his chest again, and again, and again, until bone broke inward.

He didn't let go of the gun. She beat him, tore into him, ripped open his chest, but still he didn't let go. Over the seconds, his arm put itself back together with the crack of undead bone and shifting cartilage. When the arm finally started working again, he ignored the blinding pain – his inner-beast demanded it – and raised his free hand to grab her face. He was bigger than her, much bigger, and he put his size to use with his larger grip over her eyes, and his grip squeezing hard enough to crush bone.



He may not have had the strength of a Daeva, but she didn't have the resilience of a Ventrue. Within seconds, he felt her pale skin start to give way to his fingers, and soon the bone underneath it around her temples and eye sockets began to crack.

She screamed. Kindred were not immune to pain, and her noises made Julias grimace. Her high-pitched wail turned into a furious banshee cry as she let go of the gun, but put both hands against his assaulting hand, and ripped it off.

It was his turn to cry out. Her nails dug into his flesh, into the undead insides, and tore it apart at the wrist. Bits of bone flew out, along with a small splatter of his blood before the viscous liquid contained itself to his open wound. His hand was gone though, and the severed limb crumbled into old dust and bone on the pavement. He wasn't Viktor, it would take a lot longer than few seconds to grow an entire hand.

Rebecca threw her fist into his face, and this time he flew back only to crash into a nearby warehouse wall. With only five feet between them still, the Daeva pounced at him.

But he hadn't let go of her shotgun.

With barely enough sense of mind to pay attention, searing pain tearing through his wrist and through his body, he raised his remaining hand up to the serpent's face. She was mid-air, she couldn't change direction, and the speed of it all meant she crashed into the gun the moment he pulled the trigger.

Rebecca still crashed into him, but now it was a mess of limbs, blood and ash. She wasn't trying to grab him, not yet. Maybe he'd killed her? He got his bearings – she was on top of him – and he swung the gun into the side of her head. She rolled off of him, onto her knees, and started moving, struggling, groaning.

He forced himself up and onto his feet, gun still in hand. He tried to not look, but eventually he had to take a glance at the damage Rebecca had done to his other hand. There was no hand, just a stump of wrist where it had been. Pain re-surfed anew, and he forced down the need to scream and yell. He had a job to do.

The Ventrue looked down at Rebecca, who was whimpering with obvious pain and favoring one arm. When she realized he was up, she turned around on her knees to face him, but immediately fell over onto her side. There was a mess of blood, torn clothes, and a blatantly open cavity in her right chest that exposed dark flesh and shrunk organs. Were the shotgun any stronger, it would have put a hole clear through her torso.

He pointed the shotgun at her head.

“ ... m-mercy,” she said.

He froze.

She attacked.

He only had time to blink before the Daeva forced herself into a tackle against him. She was practically snarling, and despite a giant chunk of her chest missing, she was still using both arms and managed to punch him in the jaw hard enough crack bone again. When his back smashed into the pavement, he let go of the shotgun, and immediately found his only hand pinned underneath one of hers.

“God damn Julias Mire. Still a sucker for a girl in distress. You know what? Fuck you. I’m not going to kill you because it’s my job. Instead, I’m going to kill you just because you’re an archaic, sexist dick.” She put the shotgun against his head.

And then she had no arm.

Julias's jaw dropped open as Rebecca's arm dropped to the floor. By the time it reached the ground, the limb fell apart into bone, ember, fading ash, and the shotgun bounced harmlessly across the pavement.

Rebecca's eyes opened wide. She tried to get up and turn around, but only two seconds after her arm had simply fallen off, a massive set of claws were sticking out of her chest. Some claws poked through the wound the shotgun had made, while most just bore straight through her back and out through her ribs.

"I ... I ... can-"

Another set of claws punctured her, next to the others. Rebecca was skewered ten times through, and shaking with disbelief, and pain.

With taunting slowness, Beatrice exposed her face from behind and over Rebecca's shoulder. Like a dark ghost, the Nosferatu formed into view from the shadow, with obsidian melting off of her to expose her teeth, claws, and snake eyes.

"Beatrice? Wai-wait, I-"

Julias's hand was suddenly free, and he had to raise it to his eyes to cover himself from the sudden explosion of Kindred flesh. Beatrice's arms swung to both sides, and the Daeva split apart at the center, down the middle and in both directions. For just a split second, he saw a surprised look on Rebecca's face, before his hand was covering his eyes, and the Daeva's blood and body went everywhere. Within seconds, her flesh withered and decomposed, until moments later it was nothing but bones and dust.

When Julias lowered his gaze, it was just soon enough to see Beatrice showered in red, her arms out to either side of her, and large chunks of Rebecca still within her claws. With a slow, almost dramatic flare, the Nosferatu stepped up from her knee, and stood

over Julias. He was still just laying there, jaw dropped, and blinking up at the woman.

Holy shit.

“Fuck that felt good. I really hated that bitch.” She chuckled, stepped forward, and reached for his hand. “Need a haaaand ... oh god, I didn’t even realize.” She managed a glance at his missing hand, then back to him, before she burst into laughter.

“ ... thanks.” He took her hand, and pulled on it hard in a weak attempt to pull her down to him. But she was Nosferatu, and instead pulled him up to his feet like he weighed nothing.

“Damn you really owe me one for this.” She was smiling, big crocodile teeth on either side of her mouth, with her sweet, perfect lips between them. He really wanted to kiss right then. Not now, Julias!

“I do. Definitely. But I need to get in that building. Jack, Viktor and Tony are in there.”

---

~~Jack~~

If there was one way Jack was going to get himself killed, it’d be making a stupid decision.

There were dead rats absolutely everywhere. Someone had ripped them up like a tornado of meat and bits of blood, stomped into mulch underneath boots. It was a carpet of whiskers and rat tails midst tiny guts and tufts of fur.

“My oh my. The great and proud Viktor Honors himself. I’d have thought you would have sent your right hands,” the black said.

He froze; he knew that voice. That was Tony.

Rows and rows of machines lined the floor of the large warehouse, abandoned and forgotten. Spools of different fabrics were being rolled into machines of turning wheels that were then threading the threads into other machines. All were silent, except for the hidden man's voice bouncing along the walls for a dull echo.

It was the textile mill.

Viktor sneered. "It wasn't you, serpent, raiding on Xnomina property then?" The elder Kindred walked forward into the black, unhindered with any sort of hesitation or fear.

Why weren't they leaving? Tony was a Daeva, and that meant fast, and strong. If Jack turned around to open the door, it meant being exposed. Still, there were two of them, he could open the door while Viktor covered him. Instead, the ancient Ventrue walked between the old machines, sword and gun in each hand, black hair pouring down his back.

It probably never even dawned on his grandsire to retreat, or that retreat was even an option.

"I have to admit, I didn't expect one of the triumvirate, especially the Ventrue himself. What good are you without an army to bark orders to?"

Jack tried to follow the voice, but Tony's sly tone was a soft echo and nothing more.

"You try my patience, Tony. Begone."

"Guess I'll just take the pack-"

"You don't have the information drop, plague-ridden vermin. Otherwise you would have left already." Viktor took a swipe at the air with his sword.

Jack smiled. Damn his grandsire was such a badass.

“Tch.” From down the pathway of cold floor and dusty machines, Tony stepped out into the open. He was wearing black jeans and a jacket, so casual Jack almost found it insulting.

But the grin on his face was enough to make the tiny Ventrue’s withered stomach turn on itself, and his inner-beast recoil in fear.

“Begone.”

“Nah,” the Daeva said with a shrug. “The fuck do I have to fear from a god damn Ventrue?”

The two elder Kindred stood there, looking at each other, neither moving, neither making the first move. At first, Jack noticed the hilarious similarity of it and shogun samurai duels; two people staring at each other, as if their facial expressions alone were a battle. But as time went on, his body slowly froze under the power of it. These were not juveniles throwing around testosterone, but gods, staring down hundreds of years of wisdom and murder.

Jack stepped back an inch.

“Ah, hey, it’s they kid. Hey twerp.” Tony stepped forward toward them.

It was enough to make Jack step back again, even with a hundred feet between them. Viktor didn’t move though, and with a leisurely gesture, angled his sword down between Jack and Tony.

“You’ve met my grandchilde then? As I understand it, he’s accomplished something you could do not.”

Jack went completely still. What? What had he accomplished? The only link between him and Tony was ... Antoinette.

“... be careful Viktor.” Tony tightened his hands into fists. On the surface, it was nothing but posturing, but Jack could feel the anger and power flowing out of the Daeva like lava.

Viktor glanced over his shoulder at Jack, gave him a knowing smirk, and looked back to Tony. “He managed to woo the Prince, but a month old and barely a fledgling.” He took a step toward the Daeva. “Does it sting, vermin? The great and mighty Tony, forgotten by his sire, only to be replaced by a freshly embraced?”

Oh. He was bait. That’s why Viktor wanted him, not for his ‘insight,’ but for bait. Well, he had to admit, it was a smart move. A dangerous move, for him. His unlife was on the line now and Viktor was specifically goading the monstrous Daeva into attacking. If he did, Jack would be the first he’d try and kill.

But Viktor was keeping between the two of them, and the Ventrue seemed more than ready to fight if the situation called for it.

“You don’t know what happened between us, Viktor. You know nothing.” Tony stepped forward again, but then raised a hand. “You know, we’re both here for information. Think I’ll find any nasty Invictus secrets?”

It was Viktor’s turn to grimace, but he said nothing.

“I don’t give a shit about you, Invictus,” Tony said. “I want Antoinette crushed and ruined. So, how about we put this little dilemma on hold?”

“So you can get your hands on that information? I have no intention of letting vermin learn of our secrets.”

“And if I promise to share?” Tony said, but he laughed when he said it. “We could ignore each other, for the time being, and use the information together.”

“You do not even know what the information is.” Viktor dismissed Tony with a wave of his hand. “Or if it’s here already, or coming.”

“Mehket can be sneaky, but I saw a car drive away when I got here.” Tony snickered. “So it’s probably here, somewhere ... come on Viktor. You’re not being very reasonable. Think I don’t know you want to be Prince?”

“When I become Prince and destroy Antoinette,” Viktor said, with sword now raised and pointed at Tony, “it will be on my own terms, and not with the aid of some vermin ser-”

“What? You can’t hurt Antoinette.” Before he could stop himself, the words were out of his mouth. Jack put a hand to his lips, as if he could cover up the mistake. If there was one way he was going to get himself killed, it’d be making a really, really stupid decision.

Tony stopped and looked at him, eyebrow raised and hands slipping into his pockets. Viktor, on the other hand, slowly turned to face his grandchilde, and his expression was shocked. More than shocked. His eyes were wide, confused, and his mouth looked like it was ready to drop.

“ ... I beg your pardon?”

“Um ... I...”

Viktor started to walk toward him, one slow step at a time. His eyes were still wide, and ... afraid? It didn’t make sense. The ancient Kindred just walked toward him until Jack’s back was against the garage door.

“You ... you would dare insult me?” Viktor swung the sword in the air several times, as if to display his disbelief. He wasn’t afraid. He was furious.



Like Tony moments before, Jack could feel the anger actually flow out of his grandsire as crushing waves. His own inner-beast was screaming in terror, but he couldn't move back any further. His mind was in a panic, he couldn't turn to lift the door, he couldn't get out. Trapped. Trapped!

“Al-Alder Viktor, please, I ... Antoinette is-”

“You would betray me for her?” Intent was dripping from Viktor's gaze like blood. Maybe there was fear in his eyes. Fury, but also paranoia. Julias had said elders were paranoid, but he had no idea.

Jack was shaking.

“I-”

The blade came down fast. Too fast. Almost as fast as a Daeva. And in the next moment, the blade had swiped through and was now pointed down at Viktor's feet.

The moment after that, Jack fell to his knees, and then onto his side. Things stopped working. He clutched his hands at the floor and tried to pick himself up, but it just wasn't happening. He looked down at himself, but found only a mess of his suit cut down the center, and the thick, viscous blood of a Kindred dripping down onto the floor; Kindred blood wasn't supposed to do that.

Then the pain started. It exploded outward from his face first, and when he reached up to clutch it, he found a massive gash down through it, through his forehead, nose, mouth, jaw, and into his skull. It wasn't just a small cut, but a deep cut that had sliced deep through his bone. The pain moved downward, and with a trembling hand, he managed to bring a hand to feel his chest. There too, a massive gash had cut into chest.

Things were falling out of him.

When he managed to force his attention through nausea and blistering pain, he could just barely make out withered things, dark and atrophied and dead things slipping from his pale skin, and soaked in dark red. Kindred insides.

“Learn your place.” Then Viktor kicked him. “And die.”

Bone cracked inward and more of his precious vitae splattered over the floor. Hard as the viscous liquid fought to stay inside him, he was cut open like a gutted fish, and the blood was helpless but to pool around him. He tried to talk, to beg, to plead, but all that came out was Kindred blood.

He could hear laughter, and voices. Viktor was talking, but not at him. Tony. The two were walking toward each other, faster, and then ... running at each other.

Gunfire. Metal smashed against the machines. Everything became a blur. Tony was moving, jumping, insanely fast but everything was spinning now. Even Viktor looked like a blur, with his machine pistol drawn and unleashing a sliding light of muzzle flash in the darkness.

Their fighting was his death song. Sword against the floor and bullets against the spooling machines. Whoever won was going to kill him. Either Tony would for his relationship with Antoinette, or Viktor for Jack’s audacity.

He was going to die. He was going to die because he didn’t know how to keep his mouth shut, because Viktor was a paranoid bastard, and because Tony was a deluded asshole.

... no. Fuck that. Fuck it. Fuck Tony. Fuck Viktor. Fuck them all.

He reached out across the floor with one hand, dug his fingers into the floor as best he could, and started to drag himself. He’d

broken his leg once as a kid. He'd been kicked in the balls by a bully once in high school. One time, he lost a tooth to an infection.

None of it even compared. If he'd still be human, kine, he'd have passed out from the pain. So much of his body had been split open, he could feel bone grinding against bone where it was supposed to be connected. Each inch crossed sent migraines of pain that overwhelmed him until he couldn't think. No! He was Kindred now. He was a fucking Ventrue, and he wasn't going to fucking pass out and die to a fucking flesh wound in the middle of a fucking textile mill!

Textile mill! Thread. Fabric. Spools of it. Let it be let it be ... yes! The lighter was still in his pocket.

The two elder Kindred were still fighting. He could barely follow that they were moving, and the gunfire was growing quiet. Gunfire wasn't supposed to be quiet. He had to go faster. Find some thread, some fabric, something that was hanging far enough down he could light it.

He wouldn't let these fucking animals hurt Antoinette.

The building was in disarray. It'd obviously not been properly emptied when abandoned. And after dragging himself twenty feet, he found one of the spool machines. It was such an old machine, no wonder the mill had been abandoned. It wouldn't have passed safety inspection, and it would have cost a fortune to replace all the machines. But it'd only recently been abandoned, and now that he was up against the machines, he could see through cloudy eyes that bits of fabric were everywhere.

He held the lighter in front of him. It was drenched in blood, and he had to struggle to hold it. He was shaking, either from how close to his second death he was, or because he was holding Kindred bane in his hand. Every flick of the thumb against the flint wheel was fruitless. He kept trying, even as he fell over onto his shoulder, and

could barely see the lighter in front of him or the threads of fabric, he kept at it.

Finally, a spark.

And then, fire.

---

~Beatrice~

Fire. Fire! Fire poured out of the old warehouse like death given its own life, its own desires, its own hands to reach out and grab and take whatever it wanted. And it wanted everything.

“No! Jack!” Julias tried to rush past her, but it only took a quick hand to his chest to knock the big man down onto his ass.

“Stay back, fucking idiot! Look at that!”

Fire didn't just rise from the old building. It exploded outward. Fire and smoke and chemicals; it was a giant cluster fuck of insane proportions.

And then it was the next building. They didn't go up in flame with the same eagerness as the first building, but the fire was spreading nonetheless. Just looking at the flame was making the Nosferatu tremble.

“Jack was in there, with Viktor!” Julias motioned to the first building that went up in flame. “I have to get him!”

Superman got up again, and she put him down just as easily. Hell, he was missing a hand and beat to shit, he couldn't even land without stumbling over. “You'll fucking die! We'll both fucking die. The fire is spreading.” She reached down, picked him up by his collar, and shook him. “Use your god damn brain, Invictus!”

He struggled. “No. No I have to go get him, I-”

Nope. Fuck that. She punched him in the face, and when he spit curses of pain, she punched him again until she heard something crack. She couldn't knock him out without nearly kill him, but it was enough to break his face if that was the only way to get him to not commit suicide.

She dragged him off. He was holding his face now, yelling and struggling, but at least his hands – er, hand – was off of her so she could drag him without issue.

“I didn't save your god damn life so you could throw it away. Now shut up. The kine will be here soon. This whole district will be in flames soon!”

Wow, he did not stop struggling. Whatever, she overpowered him easily, and the big man was helpless to escape her grip as she bounded up onto rooftops.

She took him back to his place.

---

Finally, they were back at his apartment. She had to use her cloak of night to get past all the pedestrians, and with the one-handed Ventrue hanging off of her shoulder, that was no easy task. At least the big lug had finally given up struggling.

“Sit down and so help me god if you try and leave I will rip off one of your legs. See how far you can get with half your limbs gone!” She threw him onto the couch, hard enough to make her point.

“ ... alright.”

Superman slumped against the couch and cradled his missing hand. He'd be able to regrow it during the day when he slept, and the host of other wounds he'd taken. He'd be hungry as well when he woke up, for the sheer amount of vitae it'd require to regenerate.

“Sunrise is in an hour. So don’t ... just don’t.” She stood there, arms folded across her chest, before she finally took a look down at herself. God she was a filthy mess. She had Rebecca all over her.

Ok, the situation sucked, but that thought made her laugh. Julias quirked a brow at her, and she raised her hands up in surrender. “Just a funny thought.”

“Jack could be dead.”

“Yep.”

“ ... fuck you,” Julias said.

She did a double take. He had said it, right?

“Hey, he could be alive too.” Pretty damn unlikely though. The fire had eaten a dozen warehouses by the time it was beyond them and out of sight. And even to a Kindred as young as Jack, fire was still extremely deadly.

Julias didn’t say anything. Just looking at him was enough to make her feel weighed down though. For just a moment, she thought of the old stories she’d heard, of what a parent went through when they lost a child. The Ventrue was beaten, missing a hand, suit in shambles, but it was his down-pointed eyes that had her feeling ... feelings.

She came over and sat down next to him.

“ ... what are you going to do?” she said.

“Don’t know. I don’t even know if Viktor is alive; he hasn’t called to arrange another meeting.”

“God. What the fuck went down tonight, Julias?”

“It was just supposed to be a smash’n’grab! Get the package, get out, push Tony and Rebecca around if we had to.” He reached up with his only hand and covered his face. “Important information, just didn’t know what it fucking was. There were too many signs to ignore though, so we risked it. Fucking ... Viktor. I trusted him to keep Jack safe.”

“It ... uh ... doesn’t sound like a very well thought-out mission. Not very Invictus-like. No offense.”

“It wasn’t. But the information was supposed to be sensitive to the covenants, so Viktor ... thought it was so important, he’d go himself.”

“Wow, the big man himself thought it was that important?”

Julias gave a slow nod, but she’d set the wheels turning in his head. His eyes drifted forward, but he just gazed into nothingness while his hand gripped at his other wrist. She had no hope of following all the webs he was untangling in his mind.

“ ... thanks ... for telling me all this,” she said.

Julias blinked; she’d startled him.

“I ... I really shouldn’t have.” He managed a small smile at her, and scratched at the back of his neck with his only hand. She could see he was in a lot of pain, but he bore it like a true Ventrue. The stupid bastard.

“Well, thanks anyway.” She got up again, headed for the door, and gave the poor guy a pat on his shoulder. “And ... he ... well...” Arg, why was this so hard? She clicked her teeth together from side to side. “I ... I’ll go.”

When she lifted her hand and stepped to the door, a tug on her arm stopped her. She turned around, and found Julias’s one good

hand holding onto hers. His hand, covered in the now-turned-to-ash blood of Rebecca, sneaked its fingers between her long claws. She gave a small tug again, but he didn't let go.

He didn't raise his head, didn't smile anymore, didn't move, just looked down at the floor in front of him, and held onto her hand.

“Sunrise is in an hour, I have to-”

“Stay.” Finally, he raised his eyes to look at her. “Please.”

Man, even a begging Ventrue still looked noble. Part of him looked like a poor boy asking for more food, and another like a defeated king bravely requesting of his conquerer for his people to be spared. Those eyes of his lowered a bit, to where their hands were netted together, and then he looked up to her again. He tugged on her this time, only tightened his hold of her hand, and lead her to sit back down beside him.

“It takes thirty minutes to get back home though. I-”

“Just ... stay.”

Her turn to blink. She wanted him to stay? “As in ... stay the day? Like, sleep here? Like, super defenseless deep Kindred sleep, with no one around to protect me?”

He managed a small chuckle, weak, but real. “The place seals off from sunrise to sunset, and the curtains automatically close. And I ... I could...” His eyes lowered again, where his hand held hers over his knee.

She'd never thought she'd ever see a Ventrue look so defenseless, open ... vulnerable. Broken.

“ ... alright.”

---



~~Jack~~

Fire was always a frightening beast. It seemed alive and bloodthirsty, even when it was just a candle's flame. But dry fabric like cotton was not the same. Not the same. He could not have known how bad it would have been.

It was like an explosion. The fire filled the air far faster than he could have imagined. The flash of it burned his skin until he could feel it against bone, and he backed away from it like a panicked animal. Fear, so much fear filled him, that for that brief instant the red flame lit up the mill, he could not feel that he'd been cut open from head to gut.

“W-wait!” Tony screamed.

“No. No!”

Jack looked across the way, but all he could see was flame billowing out. Something was in the air, something that caught the flame and whipped it into a maelstrom. He'd heard stories, horrible stories about cotton mill fires, but he had no clue. It slammed him into the garage door hard enough that he was sure something else broke. To the two elder Kindred though, the effect was entirely different. The explosion of incinerating air crashed into them, and through the fury of its swirling red, Jack forced himself to watch.

The two of them only had time to raise their hands in panic, and then they were gone. Their voices echoed with billowing force over the explosion, like dying gods, and then they were gone. They burst into flames, bright and unnatural against the fire, before falling apart to ash, and then they were gone.

It was almost disgustingly quick. Beings hundreds of years old, ancient, powerful, deadly and intelligent, were gone in a flash. A literal flash. The air was on fire and it didn't care about how

powerful and ancient they were, it just made them gone. And it was coming for him next.

The walls, the machines, so much of it was old and dry. It was going up in flames after the flash fire, and he had no time. No time to think about it, no time to worry about it, he could only do one thing.

He turned around with one hand holding his guts in, got to a knee, and used his free hand to grab the garage door's base. He lifted.

Agony coursed through him. He could feel his undead insides fight against the weight. It wouldn't have been too hard for a kine, but even as a Kindred, split almost in-half and with one hand, nothing was working right. He started to tumble over, blink in confusion, lose his sense of awareness, before he snapped back to his senses. He pulled harder, and harder, until he heard the creak of moving metal against the roar of fire. More of his blood was pooling out of him. Kindred blood wasn't supposed to do that, but it didn't matter. Ignore it, just move!

At last the door lifted. For a moment, he forgot about his singed skin turned to ash over half his face. The next moment, it was almost enough to blind his thoughts. He stumbled forward as the door rolled up, and fell out onto the pavement. He managed a glance around, silently begging for Julias, but his sire was no where to be seen.

He looked behind him, and found only more of the growing red engulfing everything in its wake, like a demon on his heels.

He grit his teeth. He wasn't going to die to this bullshit. He'd killed Tony. He'd killed Viktor. He was not going to die to some fire that he himself created. Fuck that and fuck them. He was a Ventrue.

Ventrue do not fail.

He started to crawl. Attempts to stand quickly proved impossible, for pain and lack of strength, but that was fine. He didn't need to stand, he just needed to move. More of his dark blood dripped out of him in unnaturally thick globs, but he ignored it. Just move. Just move.

A small chuckle escaped him, quickly regretted for the pain. He was absolutely and completely alone, in what was proving to be a raging fire that was doing more than just burning the building behind him; it was burning the buildings everywhere around him. Still, somewhere in his mind, he refused to accept it. He was a Ventrue. He would not die here to a stupid fire.

So he kept crawling, even as the fire spread out to the buildings in front of him, even as the palettes of wood around him burned, and the trucks and what-the-fuck-ever started to catch fire, he kept crawling. His bloodline would not let him give up.

Boots. There were boots in front of him. He looked up and tried to focus his eyes. A person, someone tall, in a trench-coat. And glasses?

Whoever it was leaned down with a hand outstretched. Part of him wanted to panic and fight, but the hand was empty. He was too tired to fight anyway. Instead, the stranger put his hand on Jack's shoulder.

“Mister Terry? I got you.”

Heh, Mister? His title was Master Terry, just a kid. Julius was a Mister. Whoever this guy was, he was no Invictus. Darkness pulled him under, and all he could think was, what a dumb last thought to have before you die.

# Chapter 10

~~Antoinette~~

From the meeting room of her great glass tower in Elysium, Antoinette stood in front of the window-wall, and watched the city burn. Far off in the distance, the night sky had turned slightly orange with the light of flame, as the large fire of the North Side's warehouse district spread. Sirens filled the air, and flashing lights of firetrucks and other emergency vehicles zipped by.

"It burns," she said.

"Quite the sight."

Jacob stood beside her. The old Nosferatu was dressed in some ridiculous garb, old and worn fabric that draped over him, thick and heavy like some sort of animal skin. It smelled like it too.

She managed a small chuckle at his words, and even the eyeless Nosferatu cracked a grin at her in return. He could see without eyes, she knew it, but how he did or what it was like were mysteries she would never know. Mysteries were infuriating and intoxicating to a Dragon.

"Did your raid against Xnomina go well?" she asked.

"Michael and Maria both showed up. I made enough chaos that they stuck around, so whatever is happening out there," he said, and pointed at the giant fire miles off in the distance, "is probably just between Viktor and Tony." He lowered his hand, and she grimaced. He'd left a smudge on her window.

"I cannot see how either of them would cause such insanity. They are not children, Jacob."

“You’re right, but men can get pretty stupid in a pissing contest.” The old Nosferatu gave a shrug, slipped his hands together inside his robes, and moved over to lean back against the window. Ugh, her poor window, so many smudges. “And hey, maybe you got what you wanted. One of them could have killed the other.”

“I can only hope.”

The door opened. She turned, and smiled when Daniel stuck his head in through the door.

The smile quickly faded when he walked in with Jack in his arms. The boy had been split open from face to gut, and half of him was badly burned. Kindred blood soaked him, and bits of it turned to ash on his skin and ruined suit.

“Jack!” She almost jumped to Daniel to scoop the boy out of his arms. Composure went out the window. It was only Daniel and Jacob, one her faithful servant and the other ... well, composure mattered little to the ancient Circle of the Crone member. “What happened?”

“I found only Mister Terry at the site. Mister Mire and ... Beatrice, I believe was her name, were both there, but were leaving to escape the fire.” Daniel stepped forward and adjusted his glasses with a single finger, his voice monotone as always. “If Viktor or Tony had been there, I found no sign of them.”

No Tony or Viktor. Could the fire have eaten them? She could only hope.

Now was no time to bask in triumph though, she had to deal with the boy. He was in torpor, the Kindred coma forced on him by his wounds, but he would not survive with more of his blood escaping by the minute. He was too young to regenerate what would wound even her.

“Daniel. Bring me three from the reserve.”

“Three, Prince? Per-”

“Now.”

“ ... as you wish.” The quiet man gave a small bow, and was gone.

“Perhaps the boy can tell us what we wish to know.” Jacob was beside her, and she found herself naturally stepping between him and the boy.

“Perhaps. For now, I am only concerned with saving his life.” She held the small man to her business suit. It did not matter that his dark blood soaked through it, she did not care. All the webs she’d spun, all the deceit and manipulations and carefully laid plans, it all just stopped existing. For just the moment, for just right now, there was only the young vampire in her arms.

“Yeah? What does a Voivode of the Ordo Dracul care with a fledgling?”

She glared daggers into him. “You are not a Dragon, do not call me by that title. And,” she looked down and stroked the boy’s hair, “when was the last time someone cared for you, witch?”

He stopped. She had chosen her words carefully. The old monster, long a witch of the Circle, likely cared for many things, but for someone to care for him was a different matter entirely. So for the moment, she did nothing but stroke the unconscious Ventrue’s hair, while the Nosferatu lowered his eyeless gaze to look at nothing. They were just two old monsters, prime examples of each of their covenants’ most powerful members, and in the end, it meant nothing.

Tony would not understand it, and neither would Viktor, but Jacob knew. He knew all too well.

Daniel returned, and by his hands he pulled three people along with wrists cuffed behind their backs.

“Daniel, would you ... no, it is too late to risk it, even for you. Tomorrow night, please find Julias Mire and explain to him that his childe is still alive. I will return him soon.”

He nodded, and left. Not even the situation before them could spark conversation from her stone sheriff. He'd left the three kine in her care.

“Jacob, you may go. You may stop your raids against the Invictus for now. I will contact you again if your help is required. And ... I—”

He raised a hand to cut off her apology, and moved it to the side with a dismissal as his smile returned. “Don't worry about it,” he said, “happy to help anytime.” Then he vanished. Literally. Even she could not follow his mastery of the hiding disciplines. Such a powerful ally. Such a dangerous enemy.

Antoinette turned to her sacrifices, gave each of them a stern look, and they whimpered in their gags. She was not a cruel soul; she avoided sacrificing kine that deserved life, when the situation allowed. But an elder learned to not be wasteful with their enemies, even human enemies.

She could spare a few souls from her dungeon.

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It took only twenty minutes. In twenty minutes, she had bled the three kine dry. It was so simple and easy for her to cut their throats, pin them to the boy's propped-open mouth, and force the fresh blood to pour into his destroyed jaw. Kindred reflex was enough to make even one in torpor drink blood, so when the warm, red fluid gushed into Jack's mouth, he drank it down. Had he been awake, she imagined the young vampire would have found such casual murder revolting. She was glad he was not.

His head had been almost split open to the center, but one kine's blood was enough to close it. The second's blood was enough to restore the giant gash through his chest and stomach; his insides would regenerate throughout the day when he slept. And the third kine was enough to regenerate the massive amount of burned flesh. Much of it had peeled away and fallen to rotting skin before eventually turning to ash, but gallons of fresh blood now pumped through the young Kindred's body and restored his skin quickly.

And then he woke up. There were only thirty minutes before sunrise, but that would be more than enough for a quick conversation.

"Uh ... Antoinette? Er, I mean, my Prince? What's ... going on?" He looked around, clearly confused.

"You survived the fire." She gestured to the window. The small boy hopped off the table and fell to floor. He let out a loud groan of pain, but when she stood up to help him, he'd already forced himself to stand and look out the glass wall.

"Oh ... god ... oh fuck I'm sorry. I had no idea it'd get this crazy."

"You did this?"

"I ... yes, my Prince. I had to. Viktor and Tony, they were going to kill each other, but..." He lowered his gaze, even as he turned around to face her. "Viktor let slip he wanted to be Prince, and that he'd kill you to do it. I said no, and ... he was going to kill me. He ... cut me..." Jack took a sniff at the air, and then glanced over by the door, where Antoinette had laid out the bodies. He was still cradling his stomach where much of him had been ruined. "... were they for me?"

"Do not worry about them," she said, and dismissed the three dead humans with a wave of her hand, "continue the story. Please."



“Right ... Viktor cut me, and he'd ... his eyes ... it was like he'd gone insane. Just because I said he shouldn't kill you. Tony and Viktor were bickering, fighting, and I was dying, and we were in a textile mill, and I had to think of something, because Viktor wanted me dead now and Tony wanted me dead because of you and Viktor taunting him by using me so I set fire to the mill and both of them died in the fire like incinerated dead and—”

“Alright. Alright.” She stepped over to him by the window, and reached down to raise his gaze. “You set fire to the mill.”

“ ... yes.” He looked down at his bloodied body. There were still massive gashes down his flesh, but those would heal while he slept come sunrise.

“To save yourself?”

The boy turned his gaze to the side for a moment. “I ... yes, but...” And then, he looked up to her, and a smile graced his lips. “Not just for me. Um ... he wanted to hurt you, you know? Both of them did.” He touched the huge cut along his chest that had split open his suit. “ ... I didn't want you hurt.”

Oh damn you Jack.

She reached out for her nice leather chair, without a care for the mess of blood on her, and sat down with Jack's hands in hers. “Jack ... Jack I am so sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry for what?”

“There was no information, Jack.”

He just blinked at her, but that was alright. He was but a fly caught in her web, to her dismay. He did not deserve what her net had wrought.

“That mission that Julias was sent on last month, to acquire information, was planted at my whim. The fire, the fake Vance, everything.”

He blinked a few times more, but she could see his mind start to come to the realization.

“So the information drop ... was all just ... a goose-chase?”

“I needed to create a situation where Tony and Viktor could be dealt with, and where I could blame their deaths on each other.” She looked down just to avoid the pained look on his face, so she stroked his knuckles with her fingernails instead. “My first appearance at Bloodlust was to spark their paranoia. I pulled many puppet strings to lead them both to that location and confrontation. If they killed each other, wonderful, but if not, it was for my sheriff to kill them, and plant evidence they had had killed each other. The plan was not perfect. There were many risks, and gambles, that could have turned the result of this against me instead. But the risk was worth it.”

She would not mention Jacob’s name. The twisted Crone had been the one to plant evidence of Vance, the mysterious information, and the trail that lead to the Carthian hacker Mike. He had even worked with Garry to ensure the trail of evidence would lead to North Side.

She would not betray that trust, but Jack deserved to know the rest.

“And you,” she continued, “killed Viktor, and Tony ... on your own,” a sad chuckle forced its way through, “by burning half of North Side.”

The small Ventrue just stood there, digesting the information. The poor boy. So young, and already she had corrupted him with the Danse Macabre.

“What about ... us?”

When she raised her gaze at his question, she was taken aback. He looked worried. Almost petrified with worry.

“Oh no, little Ventrue.” She pulled him in a little closer. No no, she would not lose this. “Our first meeting was coincidence. I ... please do not think...” She raised his hands to her chest and held them to there. Begging. The Prince was begging, and she did not care.

“So ... you crafted a ridiculously complicated plan just for a slight chance of creating a situation where you could kill Tony and Viktor while avoiding political fallout. Me nearly dying in the process was an unhappy consequence, but us ... together ... is a good thing?”

“Yes. I did not lie to you.”

This time, it was the boy who stepped closer to her. “Then what’s the problem?”

“You almost died, Jack! You were split open and burned. You had to kill your own grandsire, and Tony. Two elders!” What had happened? The young boy was still the same, but changed. Just a little changed, just enough that a warm, confident smile was on his lips, instead of a nervous one. Well, maybe still a little nervous.

He looked down at himself; he was truly an absolutely a mess. The gash, closed but not yet completely healed, ran down his face to his chest and down his stomach to his pelvis. Much of his pale skin was still growing and replacing withered skin and rotting ash. Most of his clothes were ruined, bloodied and burned and split open from neck to hip, and even as he still clutched his stomach in pain, she knew his insides were not whole.

“But ... none of that matters,” he said. Again he stepped closer, until they were almost touching noses, but this time he was the one

looking down at her, as she was sitting. “I ... um.” He squirmed, and worry rejoined his expression. “I don’t want to lose this either.”

The boy looked so afraid, sad, uneasy. Did he not realize he was the one who’d been injured, not her? Did he not see that she was the one afraid of losing him?

She let go of his hands, reached out for his sides, and pulled him into her. She even closed her eyes; there was no playful flirtation here, she just wanted to kiss him. Kiss the young man, make all his problems go away, take him, protect him, hold him, and just hug him. He sank into her kiss, so she wrapped her arms around him entirely, and cradled his smaller form against her.

He was hers. Her little Ventrue.

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~~Jack~~

He awoke in her office. Thankfully, like Julias’s place, it automatically sealed itself come sunrise. She’d let him sleep there, since it was so late there was no chance he’d get home before the sun came up. They’d only had time to kiss for five minutes before she left for her den, and invited him to sleep in the office.

And he slept like a corpse. Upon awakening, he felt reborn, with his pain gone and insides healed. For once, it was good to be dead.

Alone in the dark of her office. No bodies – mental note, ask about those bodies later – were found, and no Kindred waited him. Instead, he found a suit prepared for him, a note on the table, and a keycard.

“Prepare yourself, and come join me in the ... sub-basement? What?” The note was hand-written, and some of the most god damn beautiful calligraphy he’d ever seen. So, with a shrug, he took the keycard, and looked around. The office had a bathroom, and upon

entering, he found it actually had a shower. A shower in an office. Pays to be rich.

Once he was no longer a bloody mess, and wearing the prepared suit, he started his way down the glass tower of Elysium. There were several Kindred and kine working in the tower; which, upon exploring, was actually an office building. Probably for some dummy corporation Antoinette owned, he imagined. The kine, he did not know if they were ghouls or not, so he said nothing to them, but the Kindred he walked by gave him curious glances. Kindred working for Antoinette not even of her own covenant. Scary. One even stopped him, but he held up the keycard and was immediately given passage to continue.

Then there was the guy with the boots, the last thing he'd seen before passing out. With no more fire and insane pain screwing up his vision, he could see the man clearly. Trench coat, glasses, gloves, and a thin, tall, unassuming form. His own inner-beast shriveled at the sight of him though, and that was enough to know who it was. It was the sheriff.

And Jack walked right up to him.

“Sheriff.”

“Mister Terry.”

“I ... owe you. Antoinette told me about what happened, and then you must have—”

The sheriff held a finger up to his own mouth, and glanced around at nearby patrons of the hallway. When he lowered it, Jack found himself a little uncomfortable with the man's gaze. It was so ... deadpan, emotionless, and almost creepy. But then the Kindred adjusted his glasses, and gave a tiny smile.

“Be kind to her, young Kindred. She is more fragile than you know.”

And then he was gone. With nothing more than a nod, the ancient Mehket just walked past him and continued on his way. For a moment, Jack thought he looked like an English professor, or something.

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Dozens of floors and a few oddly vault-like doors later, he opened a door that would have blocked a nuclear explosion, and stepped into the Prince’s den.

The room was massive. Absolutely massive. Huge black drapes hung from the walls, all the walls, bathing the room in darkness except for several standing lamps that gave off just enough white light to keep the room lit. In the center of the room was the bed, the Prince’s bed. It was huge, easily ten feet both across and long, covered in silk black sheets and similarly silk black-covered pillows, a dozen of them. The sheer size of the room combined with the black motif and white light made for an imposing presence.

The floor beneath him was marble, with dancing dragons and coiling around each other. Where black dragons coiled into white dragons, the marble around them changed color as well. Within the coiling dragons, various symbols were highlighted, symbols beyond his knowledge.

“The Coils of the Dragon, of the Ordo Dracul. There are many.”

Jack froze. Ahead of him, Antoinette was sitting on the edge of the bed and facing him. She was dressed in what was probably a silk nightgown, white, and painfully see-through. It did little to hide that underneath it, the Prince was completely naked. Completely. Naked. He tried to avert his eyes, desperate to look at anything to keep his lust down. Oh look, the lamps had dragons coiling around them too, how interesting.

“Come here, my little Ventrue.” That stern voice had come through again, but she was smiling at him. He recognized that smile, from the first day they talked at Bloodlust. She wanted something.

He dragged himself toward her, but damned if he was going to stare. The Prince was beautiful, beyond beautiful, so naturally he had to do everything his power to not look at her right? He kept his eyes on the floor as he eventually closed the distance between them.

“Am I going to have to guide you through every step of this journey?” she said. She was teasing him, he knew it. Her French accent was subtle and playful, and he knew that she knew that he knew that she was playing with him.

He nodded, and she laughed.

“That is fine with me. Come, sit.” She motioned to the space next to her on the bed. There was a lot of it.

With a nervous sigh, Jack took those two final steps toward the woman, and sat next to her. So close, he couldn't help but see her in the corner of his eye. He was wearing the simple suit someone had left for him in her office, but the woman next to him was wearing what might as well have been nothing.

The Prince turned to face him with one knee pulled up onto the bed. She placed one hand to the bed to lean her weight onto it, and the other drifted up and down her own leg.

“Take off your clothes. Every. Last. Piece.”

Both his hands were on his head, rubbing and scratching at the buzz cut. Wow, just ... what could he do? Say no? But then, why would he say no? He'd killed Viktor and Tony, largely because he knew if he didn't they'd have killed him, but wasn't the only reason.

Glancing at Antoinette with nervous green eyes, he knew. He killed them because he didn't want her hurt.

He reached up and undid the buttons of his jacket, and slid it from his shoulders. The Prince helped him, her delicate grip taking the jacket from him and tossing it to the floor.

With a nervous smile, he took a quick glance at her as he undid his tie and did the same. Once he started unbuttoning his shirt though, he got far more nervous. It was his first time getting naked in front of a woman, but the Prince's word was absolute. Not only absolute, but her smile was so terribly inviting. With shaking fingers, he started to work on his buttons. Each proved problematic, but it wasn't until he undid the last that Antoinette helped him slide the shirt from his arms.

"You are a lean little thing, aren't you?" She ran one of her hands up and down his thin body. He had the body of a gymnast, which Antoinette apparently liked. A lot. Her claws found his abs and ran down the cracks of his muscles with hunger. Her red eyes drank in the sight of his small, tight form.

"Do you ... like bigger guys?"

"A faint memory suggests I did, when I was but a freshly embraced. Tall women were not common, and all the men wanted a little dainty thing under their arm." She leaned in close and put her dark lips to his ear. "That was a long time ago." She gave his earlobe a gentle nibble as her hand slid further down his stomach to tickle around his navel.

"I, uh ... mm." Her hands were on him, touching him, playing with him. Her lips were on his ear, tugging and nibbling. Nervousness and anxiety mixed with anticipation and arousal. She wanted him. The Prince of all Dolareido was chewing on his ear.

"I did not say stop," she said. Commanded.



Jack let out a tiny, nervous chuckle. It was a weird position, but he made it work and undid his pants. Her grip on him was unmovable, her strength unimaginable, and she made no effort to stop teasing his stomach as he slid his pants off. Now, the only thing between him and the sheets was his boxers.

“Uh ... do y-”

“Now.”

He trembled. That voice almost resonated with power, terrifying, like a hungry tiger looming over a mouse.

A strange mix of exhilaration and fear was coursing through his dead bones. He was scared, but definitely aroused, and the combination made him shiver with excitement when he slid off his boxers.

“Oh, you trimmed it.” She let out a teasing giggle before she lowered her hand to the man’s pelvis. Jack dared not move, but he couldn’t help but turn his head to watch her. She was grinning at him. With a wink, her fingers started to stroke where his pubic hair would have been, but found only soft fuzz where he had trimmed it all off. “You remembered when I said I do not like hair, hmm? Did you expect this to happen?”

“No! No, I ... well ... I hoped.”

“Good. Blush for me, my little Ventrue.”

He gulped. On nothing. Kindred don’t salivate unless they had the blush of life going. He took a moment to visualize, and reached into his blood; it was becoming much easier now. Instead of grasping blindly and hoping it worked, he could find his blood and move it like a limb, and with a little concentration, he could tell it to course through him like real human blood.

Tingling warmth came back to his skin. Saliva came back to his mouth. The forgotten, subtle nuances of a heartbeat filled him. He was even blinking his eyes again to moisten them.

His member had also risen with an erection.

He chuckled nervously, horribly nervously, and managed to look up to her eyes. She was licking her lips with her gaze on his member though, and he almost quaked at the hunger in her stare. Quaking turned to a quiet groan when her grip, tender and gentle, wrapped around the base of his shaft. What little growing it had left to do finished an instant, now as hard as possible in her hand.

He had to take a second to examine the situation, so he looked around with a shy shift of his eyes. He was in the Prince's haven, her lair. The huge room was extremely intimidating; he half expected a metal coffin in its center. The most beautiful creature, and most powerful he'd ever seen, was sitting next to him in a see-through gown, and he next to her wearing absolutely nothing, on a bed. Her hand was around his cock, and she was slowly, so very slowly, starting to squeeze and stroke it.

"I ... I don't know how ... how did this all hap-"

She put her free hand to his lips with a chuckle, kissed his forehead, and then stood before him. Both her hands reached up to her shoulders, and took grip of the collar of her gown. She arched her back subtly as she pulled on the silk to let it fall down her body, and soon she was standing in front of Jack, completely naked.

Jack's mouth fell open. Just ... wow. Her body was unbelievable. Her legs were toned and curvy, her stomach flat, her waist thin and her hips wide. Her ass was plentiful, and her breasts were absolutely enormous, with large, dark nipples of the same tint as her dark lips. Her skin was pale, more than other vampires', and her long, white hair reached down to her hip.

The fact she was a foot taller than him only made it all the more intoxicating a sight.

Then she too blushed, and his mouth fell open further. Her dark nipples and lips turned red like her eyes, and her pale skin turned into beautiful white alabaster. It was like looking at painting.

When she saw that her nudity had struck him dumb, Antoinette giggled — an actual giggle — and crawled back onto the bed beside him. She laid down on her side, propped her head up on one arm, and slowly rubbed her legs together as she waited for Jack's eyes to eventually reach her.

Jack's eyes had a long journey to make though. They started at her feet, which had nails painted black, before sliding up the length of her long, very very long legs. They looked so smooth. His eyes soon reached her hips and between her legs, where the smoothness of her body was uncontested. Not a hair to be found. She wasn't lying about disliking body hair.

His eyes continued moving up her body, but came to a standstill at the sight of her breasts. With her on her side like that, one breast was squishing the other into the silk sheets. They were heavy, natural, and sagged slightly with their volume and mass, like teardrops. The sight of them collapsing to gravity only made him groan in arousal.

“Lay beside me.” She motioned to the space in front of her.

Jack melted back onto the bed. It was truly soft, obviously covered in the finest of silks and a mattress definitely made of the latest in memory foam. He could even see the mattress contour just slightly to the shape of her hips, her torso, and the weight of her breasts. He had tried to land on the bed so they'd be face to face, but her greater height had offset him and now he found his eyes just above her nipples. Her areola, puffy and swollen, were only inches from his chin.

“Tell me, little Ventrue. What do you think of my breasts?” On her side and propping her head up with her elbow, her free arm reached out and took Jack’s hand. Her sharp fingernails drifted down his forearm to find his fingers, and there she guided them up to her body and placed his open palm to the underside of her breasts.

Jack froze. He was doing it. He was really touching her. God her breast was soft.

“I ... my Prince ... I...” No words to be found. He still didn’t move, but with the huge mound of her breast filling the cup of his palm, he couldn’t help but caress her skin with his fingertips. The feel of her breast molding to fit the shape of his hand with its heavy softness made him groan.

“Ah, my little Ventrue, always so honest.” She licked her lips and slid his hand higher until his palm was pressed against her engorged nipple. It was hard against his palm, and Jack’s eyes went a little wide at the sensation of it pressing into his skin.

“I want you,” she continued, pushing his palm toward her until her breast’s ample size overflowed his hand, “to play with my breasts as you desire. Do as you will.” With that, she let go of his hand, and placed her claws upon the back of his neck to rest there. She waited.

Jack was sure he’d died and gone to heaven. Died again, maybe? With her gentle grip on his neck, he drifted across the blankets toward her longer body, and finally brought his face to her breasts.

What’s a man to do when an amazing, huge pair of breasts, so soft and heavy, are just inches from his face? Jack found himself moving without telling himself to, and his lips touched the topside of her bosom. His kisses pressed into her skin, and he let his chin sink into her a bit as he found the sheer size of her breast enough to let his face rest against.

Unable to contain himself any longer, his lips moved further down, and he wrapped his mouth around the large, swollen nipple and areola. A gentle mewl escaped Antoinette. God, how could such an unobtainable goddess be letting him do this? Not just letting him, encouraging him. She pulled his head closer to her breast, enough that much of it overwhelmed his lips, chin and nose with its softness. If he had to breathe, he'd be worried.

He brought both palms to her breasts, but with his head unsupported it had to fall to the blankets. That was alright though. Her other breast, squished under its sister, was just as inviting and soft, and he delightedly wrapped his lips around its nipple instead. Even on his side, he managed to wrap her breast with both palms, and gently squeezed and kneaded its size. With his palm trapped underneath it, its size completely hid his hand and buried his fingers.

A touch of lips on his buzzed hair shocked him from his breasts obsession, and he looked up to see the source. Antoinette was smiling down at him with that softer, more elegant, more natural and honest smile he was growing fond of.

She closed her eyes and rolled onto her back with her hips still turned to face him. Her hands raised and ran through her white hair, now splayed out across the black sheets, like a painting of white radiance against night's black. With her body mostly flat against the bed, her breasts slipped free of Jack's hands and lips, only to flatten against her body with their natural weight. The volume of them dipped to the sides of her torso, mostly toward Jack, and the sheer size of them combined with the angle made them seem like the most comfy pillows imaginable.

She pointed a finger at him, and curled it toward her breasts.

Jack groaned, almost growled even, and pulled himself over her. Sitting down beside her, he leaned over and put one hand next her

so the other could cup the side of one of her breasts. He pushed its weight back up onto her torso, where it slid lightly toward her neck from how she was laying down. God, the size of them. He leaned back in to devour it with a little more aggression this time. The way her breast moved and rolled with its size over her smooth, perfect body was too much for the little Ventrue. He just had to have her, and with tight lips around her nipple, he started to suckle.

Antoinette outright moaned with this, and brought both her hands out to hold his head from behind.

“Never have I seen a man so engrossed with a woman’s bosom. Like a child,” she said, but her voice was anything but insulting. No, she was encouraging him, even pressing him harder to her breast. Her leg nearest his slid over to nudge against him; she was beyond smooth, like the silk they were laying upon.

“You have warmed me, little Ventrue.” With a grin, she put both her hands on Jack’s temples and raised his head. He was almost drooling. “I trust one such as you is well educated in the anatomy of a woman?”

Jack blushed bright red, but nodded. He knew she knew everything about him, including his lack of experience with such things. His only experiences worth mentioning had been with her after all. But a man could learn a thing or two from diligent internet research.

“Good. Make me cum.” She giggled when his eyes went wide. “And you may only use your mouth for now. Come, slowly now.” With that, she leaned back even as she pushed his head down toward her belly. Once she had pushed him far enough that his eyes were over her pelvis, she slowly, teasingly spread her milky white, toned legs apart, and laid herself bare.

Jack, with a gulp and groan, slid over one of her legs to get between them. He got down onto his stomach and leaned in close,

but nothing could prepare him for the unusual beauty of the scene. Antoinette's vulva were smooth, just like the rest of her, and the lips of her pussy were of the same dark tint red as her lips and nipples. It was exceedingly erotic against her alabaster skin. More so was how little beads of her juices coated her pussy's lips, and she periodically gave her muscles a slow but hard squeeze that forced out a couple more drops of her juices.

Antoinette just reveled in waiting.

He was terrified. He was excited. He was shaking with fear. Or was it arousal? He couldn't tell anymore. A mighty goddess had her legs spread and was asking for him to pleasure her, and one wrong move could upset her. But ... he really, really wanted to touch her.

He leaned down to her center, and with a very large degree of nervousness, placed a couple kisses around her inner thighs. Satisfied, quiet mewls from the Prince eased his anxiety though, and he pushed into his kisses more. Her skin was so smooth, always so smooth, but her thick legs were toned and strong. It was a lovely feeling, that soft skin against hard muscle beneath his lips.

His kisses drifted closer to her pussy, but he took his time. Antoinette was not some schoolgirl. She was ancient. She wanted him to go slow, and so did he.

Finally, his kiss found her labia. They were wet. Very wet. He blinked in surprise at the reaction her body had given to his touch. While the blush of life had brought her body's living functions back to the surface, he hadn't expected her body's response to be so strong. Her juices moistened his lips, and he sighed into her body. When his kisses eventually found her clitoris, erect and swollen, Antoinette outright moaned.

"Careful Jack. Gently ... slowly... , " she said. Her claws drifted down to her stomach and down her thighs.

Jack tried to contain his excitement. She was enjoying it. The ancient succubus was enjoying his touch. He beamed with pride and grinned into his kiss upon her clit. She'd said use only his mouth, so he hooked his arms under her legs and put his hands onto her stomach while he eased his tongue against her moist cunt.

Her hands found his and netted their fingers together. She tickled his palms with her fingernails and let out more, quiet moans. When he let his tongue slip under her clit and pressed it to her body, her grip on his hands tightened. He could feel her muscles clench, and more juices leaked from her onto his lips, even onto his chin with her arousal.

When he gave her clit a gentle little suckle, her grip on his fingers tightened sharply. Apparently, he'd found something she liked. He smiled into his kiss before sucking her swollen button back between his lips again, this time where he kept it with a constant but ever-so-gentle suckling.

He stopped for a moment, and the Prince gave a tiny whimper. Oh god the sound of her voice, making tiny whimpers because of him? He really wanted to devour her harder, but she said slow, she liked slow. Slow was making her mewl. So slowly, he explored the whole of her labia. He probed at her pussy's clenching muscles with curious licks, and sucked her lips between his own, just to hear the quiet purrs of pleasure she made. It was when his lips trapped the entirety of her clit though, that her sounds grew so erotic it was making his cock hurt between him and the bed.

He sucked a little harder this time, and pushed with his tongue against the budding, swollen flesh in his mouth. The pressure was apparently too much for Antoinette, her hands grabbed his head and pinned him to her. He looked up from between her legs, down the valley of her body to her face, but could not see anything but her chin. Her head was reeled back, and her grip was firmly on the back of his skull, preventing him from retreating.



She had grown quiet, but more juices had joined the mess between her legs. It dripped from the little Ventrue's mouth and wet the sheets. Her legs spread further, and her hips pushed her slit up against his mouth in rhythm with her clenching muscles, until more of her fluids dripped down her skin. Her orgasm was silent, not a squeak or moan to be heard, but her body spoke volumes as her legs started to shake and her hands did not let go. Jack knew better than to grow too zealous with his licks during her climax, but he could not resist another long stroke of his tongue along the folds she was pinning his head to. That managed to pull a gasp from her, and another drop of her cum hit his tongue before trickling down his chin.

“Ah ... that was delightful.” At last the mighty Prince released him, and Jack put his palms to the sheets to sit up before wiping his lips dry.

“... wow.” He sat there and watched her, and she watched him in return. She kept her legs spread, and her hands returned to her breasts to softly knead the mounds. She was massaging her breasts in front of him. His member felt like it was going to explode.

“Now, little Ventrue, I want you to use only your hands.”

Fuck yes. He was free to touch her, to open her, to feel her. Anxiety was replaced with genuine excitement by this point.

His left hand reached out and rested against her leg for balance, and his right ran its fingertips up and down the Prince's soaked folds. She chuckled at him, but soon her juices had coated his fingers, warming them and moistening them. With curious experimentation, he caressed her labia from side to side, and traced the lines of them up to the hood of her swollen clit. It only took a touch of the underside of the little nub to make Antoinette let out a quiet mewl.

“Am I some new land for you to explore?”

“Sorry! I just ... never done this, and ... you’re so beautiful. I want to...”

She reached down between her legs with both her hands, and with a slow, teasing motion, she spread her lips for him. “Explore.”

Jack gulped. Her juices were leaking out of her, and he could see the opening of her pussy clench down in anticipation. It was all so wet and inviting. His index finger grew bold and pressed along her folds before sliding toward the opening, and with an almost fearful slowness, he slid his digit into her squeezing body.

God her insides felt amazing.

Antoinette chuckled and squeezed down on him in response, and Jack found himself groaning again. Her insides were so warm, rippled with bumps and grooves, and each clench she made only highlighted the curvature. When he turned his hand over so his palm faced upward, he curled his finger and found a swollen bump, slightly rougher than the rest of her flesh.

Her sigh of content was his signal. He’d found her g-spot, and he smiled to himself. He sneaked in his middle finger to join his index, and the tightness of her walls increased, as did his pressure on the bump of her flesh. His other hand went flat over her pelvis, just above her pubic bone, and when he pushed down on it, he could feel his fingers pressing up from within her.

“Nn ... Jack, sly little creature.” She slid her hands back up to her body, and pushed her hips forward to meet his fingers. “Harder.”

The little man did as commanded. He pushed his fingers up against her g-spot, and with his other hand, pushed down against her pelvis, trapping her between his hands and massaging the sensitive flesh between. Her pussy dripped her juices down his knuckles, and her ass raised when he pushed harder up against her.

He stopped. She gave him a small pout, but he had to feel more. He sank his fingers into her as deep as they could until her folds swallowed his last knuckles, and he rubbed his fingers up against the soft flesh of her cunt from beginning to end. With his other hand pushing down, he could feel every groove of the softness of her squeezing, tight muscles, milking at his fingers. Antoinette wiggled her hips to meet his exploring fingers, and she mewled in rhythm with them.

He started to finger her in earnest. Instead of just curling his fingers, he started to push his whole hand upward, and the motion gave his two fingers inside her enough force to almost slap against her g-spot. It was enough force to make a sloshing sound of her growing juices, and pull even more moans from the mighty Prince. He got faster, and faster as his actions only made the Prince grow louder and louder. Just to hear her voice make such sounds was intoxicating, and watching her heavy breasts tremble along her body even more so.

Eventually his hand was forced to stop when her muscles squeezed down on him like a vice. He let her relax, and only with gently curving fingers did he continue to massage her insides. Her orgasm had her quaking, and her hips rocked up and down while more of her juices leaked over his palm and down his wrist. She went silent once again — it seemed to be what she liked to do when she came — but the pleasure on her face was obvious.

He had no idea this ancient creature was capable of such sexuality, but her body responded without hesitation or embarrassment to his touch.

Eventually, her legs slowly closed around Jack to embrace him between her quivering thighs as her body calmed with orgasm aftershocks. He could still feel the shaking of her large thighs against his sides, and when he slipped his fingers from her, she gave another husky mewl.

“Delicious,” she said, and licked her lips as she sat up, weight on her elbows.

For a moment, he froze. Her red eyes were staring at him, more wide than usual, and lips were curled into a predator’s grin. Then she reached out, took his shoulders, and eased him over onto his back beside her. He was just a feather to her, and even though she was gentle with him, he couldn’t move an inch.

With a slow motion, she got up onto him, and straddled him. She was so tall he almost disappeared between her legs, with her weight now on her knees around him, and her pelvis hovering just over his.

“I ... don’t know if I’ll-”

Her finger found his lips, silencing him. “Do not speak.”

He gulped. The tall, gorgeous goddess reached down, and wrapped her other hand around his cock. It had several drops of precum on it already, and she chuckled as she gently eased the skin down to expose his glans. So swollen it was almost painful.

It only got worse when she aimed the member up toward herself, and began to lower her weight onto him. The hot, soaked folds of her cunt found his cock’s head, and he groaned with the powerful sparks of pleasure her squeezing muscles coaxed out of him.

“Watch,” she said. He forced his eyes to open, and just drank in the sight of her. She lowered herself slowly, with a light rocking of her hips from side to side, complete with a hard squeeze of her muscles around him whenever she dipped from left to right. It was a dance. The Prince was dancing for him. She put her hands on his shoulders, pinning him down and so he was helpless to escape her as she worked her body to devour him to the hilt.

When her folds found the base of him, she squeezed him again, so hard and tight it made his jaw drop and a low moan escape him.

“Do not think our difference in size a problem, little Ventrue.” She leaned forward so her elbows were against his chest, her breasts against his neck, and her lips over his eyes. “You feel delightful inside me. And I trust I am a comfortable sheathe for you?” While still leaned forward, she raised her ass higher, squeezed tight the whole way up, before lowering herself back down with a slowness that had him almost whimpering.

“I-”

She cut him off with a finger yet again, and gave him an almost angry look. Dangerous. He wasn’t supposed to speak.

She sat up, and let the weight of her body bury him inside her. Then, as if performing art, she reached up to comb her fingers back through her hair, arched her back to jut out her breasts, all the while easing her hips back and forth against him. Her juices were soaking him, coating him, as if rewarding him for her earlier orgasms.

Then she leaned forward again, took his shoulders, pinned him down, and started to work her hips in a figure eight. An actual figure eight, so that each curve outward of her hips was met with a light forward thrust. He was mesmerized. Her heavy, beautiful breasts hung over him, swaying back and forth with their weight, but it was the glorious movement of her wide hips he couldn’t look away from. She was just so god damn perfect, and skilled; each forward shift of her body was met with a squeeze of her cunt in just the right way to make the tingling bliss start to build between his legs.

The Prince took the boy’s hands into her own, and pinned them against the blankets over his head. “It has been many, many years since I have delighted in this dance.” Her breasts were swaying directly over his head now, as she was leaning far more forward to hold his hands down over his head. He just stared with jaw open. “How would you like to cum, hmm? I could take it from you

roughly.” She raised her ass, dragged her soaked lips along his length, and slammed her hips back down. The bed creaked, and he struggled to not push his hips up to meet her.

It took everything he had to not cum right there.

“No, I do not think so. You, my little Ventrue, are not that sort.” She grinned again, a devil’s grin, and leaned down even closer. His hands were still pinned, so he couldn’t even lift them to touch her, but she pressed her body down into him so her breasts overwhelmed his collar and neck, and he had to look up to see her with her head past his. “You are a methodical creature. Deliberate. Paced. You would prefer slow.” Her voice got deeper, husky, and she arched her back to push her breasts into him. “Very slow.”

Oh god. She was squeezing him so tight, and now she was easing herself back and forth along his body, with the whole of her pressed into him. Her hips were pushing into him at just the right angle to massage the length of him while milking the swollen head of his member. She was edging him closer and closer, and each time he made a little groan or whimper, she let out a satisfied sigh.

Over the course of painfully long minutes, the rising pleasure was too much. Warm cum poured into him, and after a powerful wave of bliss forced his muscles to clench, it poured into her.

“Oh,” the Prince said. She sat up so she could look him in the eyes, but still leaned forward enough to keep his hands pinned down above his head against the bed. “Cumming inside, are we?”

He managed a small nod, even as he struggled to keep his eyes open while his muscles tingled with each squirt of cum that escaped him. She chuckled down at him, but did not stop easing herself back and forth in her slow dance, and tight grip of her insides. The eye contact was overwhelming; something on his face, in his expression maybe, was making the red-eyed goddess gaze at him with almost animal hunger. It made each clench of his muscles, each spark of

bliss between his thighs and along his length feel almost unimaginably surreal. How could this be happening?

But then, she squeezed him yet again, and his own fluid started to trickle out of her and onto his body. It was most definitely happening, and the mighty goddess continued milking him until his eyes rolled upward. She kept a perfect pace of tight, massaging, hot muscles along his cock, that each squirt of his cum was almost painful, and the pleasure made his breath come out in pathetic pants.

When his orgasm finally started to pass, she pressed her chest to him again, and kissed his head, even as she continued to gently rock her hips. “You are so adorable, little Jack.” At last, she let go of his hands, and put her weight into her elbows against the blankets so she could hug him, and to his delight, continue to rock her hips forward. Those few final drops of his cum were squeezed out of him in the rocking motion, and he trembled underneath her with each one. She was milking him, squeezing him in a rhythm to stir those last few sparks of orgasm aftershocks down his cock’s length and into his thighs.

She finally sat upright completely, and lifted her hips from his body. His member slid free, and more drops of their mess dripped down onto it. It only made her smile.

God damn that dark red, ludicrously seductive smile.

“You may speak now,” she said. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

He looked up to her with wide eyes, totally perplexed.

“I ... well, virgin. No frame of reference. But that ... just ... wow,” he said.

“You are too cute, Mister Jack Terry.” She rolled over, and Jack gave a small gasp of shock when she turned him around to face

away from her as if he weighed nothing. Suddenly they were spooning, but she was the large spoon, and he was tucked snug against her pelvis. She propped herself up on an elbow, and leaned forward to rest one of her breasts along his shoulder.

He was the small spoon, and she was using his body as a breast rest. She even sighed warm noises into his ear, and hugged him closer to her to her stomach. All he could do was snuggle back into the crevice of her body, let her take control, and just melt into her.

“So, how do you feel Julias will respond to all of this? You killed his sire, and now you are my lover. We may have put him in an unusual situation. He is likely to replace Viktor on the Invictus council, so he will be forced to make difficult decisions.” Her hand drifted up and down his side, his legs, his abs, and circled the lines of his chest. She really liked to touch his muscles, he guessed. He’d have to thank Julias later for all those grueling nights being forced to exercise and eat well when he was still alive.

“He doesn’t know that we’re ... lovers.” He hesitated on the word, but it only made Antoinette laugh softly. He’d never imagined using the word before. “Should I tell him?”

“Yes. He is your sire. Do not betray his trust.”

“He doesn’t know I killed Viktor either...”

“That is perhaps more difficult, but I know the other Invictus right hands wanted Viktor killed.”

“They did?” Jack said, and turned to blink up at the Daeva leaning over him.

“Viktor did not return from his latest Torpor the same man. He was not always so cold or destructive.” She let out a weary sigh and continued to stroke Jack’s chest. “I once considered him an ally, but both his childe and I saw who he was becoming. Julias and his



companions will be thankful ... though do not expose my plot to him, if you please.”

“So ... what do I tell him?”

“You killed Viktor because he threatened your life, and my own. It is true, is it not?” She leaned down and gave him another kiss, this time on his earlobe. “At the time, that is all you knew.”

“That is true ... sneaky.” He grinned to himself. He did not like half-truths, but this one was harmless. The Prince merely gave Viktor and Tony the rope to hang themselves with. Look at you Jack, already dancing the Danse Macabre.

“Do not think that is the only reason you are here in my bed, little Ventrue.” She gave him a hard pinch on his nipple, and he let out a yelp. “I found you intriguing even when we first met. How could Julias have picked such a small, feeble creature for his childe, I thought to myself.”

“Thanks,” he said with a grumble.

“And then, when we met at the Bloodlust, I knew why. You, my little Ventrue,” she leaned down again and grazed his ear with her lips, “have quite the spark in you. And that spark is mine now.” Her lips encased his lobe again, and he shivered against her with delight.

“I was so terrified of you ... I still am.”

“And yet, that only seems to spur you on.” She hugged him closer to her with her hand on his chest. Her grip was strong, damn strong, immovable even, but Jack didn’t struggle. He shivered a little at the feel of her naked skin against his back, and the thought of how she was literally the most powerful, deadly thing in the entire city and then some, pushing her naked body into his.

“Tell me,” she said, “is there a gift you would like, for your actions against Viktor and Tony?”

A gift? He hadn't really thought about it. He'd assumed his current position, literal and figurative, was reward enough.

“I uh ... don't know. I never really did want for big things. Julias chastised me for lack of ambition.”

“Well, you are Ventrue now. Ambition is in your blood. Come, whatever sneaks its way into your mind,” she said. Her fingers kept tracing the indentations of his abs and chest, like he was a canvas for her to paint.

“Can ... can I sleep here today?” he said. His hand rested against his stomach where Viktor had sliced him open. The wound was gone, not even a scar, but the scars of Rebecca's stabbing stayed. Had he really been through so much? He could still remember the feel of his insides spilling, bone breaking, skin burning. Next to Antoinette though, the images faded.

“To sleep next to me?”

“I'm sorry, I just ... little scared lately. Rebecca got me, and then Viktor ... but ... I really like it here, with you. I know it's ... I know Kindred don't normally ... yeah it's too much to ask. I- “ Her finger found his lips and silenced him.

“You have earned my trust, little Ventrue, and I understand.” She guided his head to turn and look at her, and he found himself shocked. For a moment she looked sad, but her eyes drifted down and her smile opened. “You may sleep next to me today. And future days.” She hugged him close again, and this time she kissed his crown and nestled her head atop his.

“It has been a long time,” she said, “since I have trusted anyone but Daniel, and he is only a friend. That you would waste a gift on

something so little, just to be closer to me?” For a moment, he thought her voice was caught in her throat, as if ready to cry. She didn’t though. He knew she wouldn’t, perhaps she even couldn’t, ancient as she was. She hugged him closer still though, and sighed with relaxed joy into his ear. “Are you trying to woo me?”

“ ... yes.” He smiled. The Prince was moved by his request. To him it seemed such an obvious thing. He’d killed for her, fought for her, like a fool in love; was it so strange that he’d want to spend time just sleeping next to her?

“Be careful, little Ventrue. If anyone found out you were by side during the day, it would create opportunities for enemies. Kindred are powerful things, and some can control your thoughts, your body, even your memories.”

“Shit, then ... I shouldn’t risk your-” Her fingers found his lips again.

“And I have been Prince of this city for decades. It is not my safety that worries me, it is yours.”

“ ... then I’ll risk it.” Fool in love. Yep. If there was one way he was going to die, it’d be head over heels in love.

Antoinette let out another sigh of contentment, and rolled Jack toward her, onto his back. Before he knew what was going on, she had locked her lips against his, and half of his body was covered in her white hair as she leaned over him. Her eyes were closed this time, and her hands were bracing her weight against the sheets with her breasts pressing to his chest. His own hands drifted up her arms and then along her back, and his eyes eventually drifted close in the kiss as he succumbed to her touch.

“You are under my protection now, Jack,” she said between kisses, “and I will kill anyone that threatens you.”

His eyes opened again in surprise, but hers were still closed, absorbed in the sudden intimacy. Her words scared him to all hell.

... he kinda liked it.

# Chapter 11

~~Julias~~

A sleeping Kindred is not really sleeping. Instead, they are nearly in torpor, an undead coma. When the sun disappears, they wake in an almost jarring pulse of energy from their dead body jamming vitae through their limbs. Older Kindred, like Julias, had long learned to rise with awareness and efficiency.

Younger Kindred like Beatrice rose with a startle, as if someone had injected adrenaline straight into their heart. They had fallen asleep together on his couch when dawn demanded they slumber, and when she awoke, she punched him with the sudden snap of a frightened animal.

“Ah! Triss!” He got up from the couch and rubbed at his jaw. Good, his new hand was there to rub the chin; it’d regrown over the night without issue. He was definitely hungry now though; regrowing a limb was no small thing.

“Shit! Julias, fuck...” The Nosferatu got up from the couch and walked toward him. “Hey, got your hand back.”

“Yes.” He took a moment to look himself up and down. Christ he was a mess, torn up suit and covered in Rebecca’s ashes.

Memories flooded him like acid. The fire. Rebecca. Viktor and Tony. Jack.

He stumbled back until he was forced to catch his weight against the counter behind him. “Fuck. Jack. I have to go look for him.”

“Right. Right.” Beatrice lowered her head and scratched at the back of her neck.

“Come on, I want you to come too.”

“What? Why?”

“Why not?” He had to find Jack. Kid was probably dead, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to try his hardest to find him.

“Speaking of whys. Why did you save me? Why did you follow me?” He threw questions at her, riding the anxiety of his situation.

“I ... because I was following the right hands cause Garry told me to.” She didn’t look up, but instead hooked her fingers together and shuffled her feet.

“And saving me?”

“Because!” She looked up at him this time, and her eyes were angry, frustrated, and a little sad too.

He looked at her, opened his mouth to say something, and stopped. Not the time, definitely not the time. “Just ... I could use your help. Please?”

“Alright. Yeah, let’s go. Got any Mehket friends to help with this?”

“There are plenty in the Invictus, but this is heavy shit. We need to be discrete, and I’d only trust Natasha with that. We don’t have time to get her though, we need to get going.” He moved and talked, threw off his suit jacket and threw on a coat to cover the mess of his clothes.

“Julias, I know you have to find your childe, but slow down and think this through. There was a massive fire there less than twenty-four-hours ago. It’ll be crawling with kine and you know the Carthians and Invictus will already have ghouls investigating. Someone will f-”

“It doesn’t matter! I have to look, I have to look!” He yelled the words. He didn’t mean to, but his voice just came out with enough volume that the Nosferatu almost jumped back. A touch of guilt quickly passed; the only thought in his mind was Jack. It was pulling at him. Blood inside was pulling at him, making him move, forcing him to go faster. He’d heard of the bond between childe and sire, but he had no idea, no idea at all.

He swung his door open, and stopped dead.

A tall, thin man was standing in the hallway, with an unassuming, passive face, complete with glasses befitting a Languages professor. He had one hand in his trench coat, and the other was reaching out to knock on his door; Julias had opened the door just before he had managed to. Whoever he was, the man had gotten in without being buzzed in.

When realization kicked in, Julias’s inner-beast almost screamed in shock before it started to whimper silently, terrified. It took all Julias’s will to not jump back in fright. The sheriff was at his door.

“Julias? What’re you – oh shit!” Beatrice held no such reservations, and jumped back hard enough to knock over his living room table. The sheriff managed a small glance at her, but Julias dared not look back to see what else she’d broken.

“... Mister Mire.” The sheriff, Daniel, pulled back his hand to adjust his glasses before slipping it into his coat. “And Beatrice.” He gave them both a small nod.

The sheriff of Dolareido was giving them nods, like this were regular happenstance. It was most definitely not regular happenstance.

“... Sheriff,” Julias said.

“Mister Terry is safe. He and the Prince are enjoying the evening together. He will be returned to you soon. Before dawn, maybe.” With that, the sheriff gave another nod, and turned around.

And then Julias’s hand was on his shoulder and turning him back to face him. He heard a gasp come from behind him, Beatrice, and even he realized what he just did was insanely stupid. But whatever the fuck was pulling at him did not care.

“He’s ... alive? And with the Prince? Why the Prince and not with his sire!”

Daniel barely reacted. He didn’t smile, didn’t frown, didn’t even brush Julias’s hand away. The sheriff, most powerful Mehket in the whole damn city and one of the only two Ordo Dracul in it, just looked back at him through his glasses.

“I suggest asking Mister Terry when you see him next. May I go?”

Julias’s hand twitched. Part of him wanted to throw the sheriff around, but he forced himself to let go. The fuck could he do to the sheriff anyway? “ ... thank you.”

“Good day, Mister Mire.” The sheriff gave him a small nod, and left with his hands in his pockets and movements so casual it seemed unreal. He pressed the button for the elevator and waited for it, didn’t even glance Julias’s way, until the door parted and he disappeared inside.

Julias slowly closed the apartment door, and turned around. Beatrice was standing by the counter, one of his stools knocked over by her feet, and her crocodile-teeth mouth was hanging open. Even the Ventrue’s mouth was parted in shock.

“Jack and the Prince? Jack, little itty bitty Jack, and tall, deadly Antoinette ... enjoying the evening?” Beatrice said.



“ ... yeah.” What the fuck have you gotten yourself into now, kid? “Um, yeah.” Julias reached up, ran his fingers through his hair, and eased himself down onto the arm of his couch. When he looked out the huge window of his living room, he could just barely see the Prince’s grand tower, in the center of her Elysium in the distance, with the lights of a building that never slept.

“Yeah? That’s it, yeah? Details man, details!” The Nosferatu had her claws against her lips like they were sharing juicy gossip.

“ ... The Prince and Jack are apparently ... dating.”

Beatrice collapsed. For a split moment, he thought she’d gone into shock, but the feisty woman was rolling on the floor, laughing like a hyena, claws reaching out to hold onto something while her body shook.

“Hey, come on. This isn’t funny.”

“Fuck yes it is!” She would have started to struggle breathing, if she were kine, but a Kindred could laugh ad nauseam.

“Well, at least the kid is alright, and far as I know from what he’s told me, Jack and the Prince are pretty close.”

“Friends in high places, man! Ah this is great. I’ll have to ask him for details myself.” The Nosferatu got up with a bounce, and sat down on the couch. To his surprise, she reached out, and pulled him off the couch arm to sit down next to her. “The fuck you still look so sad for?”

“Do I?” He reached up and touched the corner of his lip. “Just Jack, I guess, getting into such dangerous things so quickly. I may have really screwed up that kid’s life.”

“Come on!” She punched him in the arm. Always with the hitting. “Jack’s alive, good thing. Rebecca’s dead, fucking good thing.”

“ ... and there’s this thing with my girlfriend. I didn’t realize how much I scared her when I used my abilities on her friend, and I couldn’t figure out how to apologize because of how complicated the situation is. And all I really want to do is let her know I’d never betray her trust, but I have no way to prove it.”

The words sort of just fell out, some shitty, poetic confession, like a juvenile Daeva. He hadn’t really meant to say them, but now that he had, he raised his eyes and watched Beatrice’s.

It was her turn to look sad.

“Fucking hell Julias. I tore you up, and you’re the one apologizing.” Still looking away, she slid across the couch, and put her head against his shoulder. “Just ... you were right, ok? I was using that excuse to cover up typical drama bullshit. Can we just ... forget it? I trust you, alright? I mean, you were actually going to let Rebecca go cause she played the damsel in distress for just a second.”

He frowned. “Is that why you saved me?”

“I was on the fence about it, when watching you two fight.” She lightly dragged her claws up and down his arm. “But, seeing you stop fighting just cause ... yeah. You’re too damn soft, Julias.” To his surprise, she buried her face in his shoulder, and hugged his arm against her.

He could hardly believe what he was seeing, when looking down at the warrior woman holding him. She looked so gentle, caring even, and she continued to hold and pull and nudge into him with her forehead.

“ ... thank you,” he said.

“ ... you’re welcome.”

Awkward silence.

“I, um...” He blinked a few times and tripped over the words on his tongue. “I know I said som-”

“I said forget it. I don’t want to dig up buried shit just so we can let out our feelings.” She raised her head again, and he found himself shocked yet again. The Nosferatu was grinning at him. “I like you a lot, and you’re my boyfriend. That’s that.”

What happened to Beatrice? Did seeing him get his ass kicked in by Rebecca affect her that much? There was that moment, that one stupid moment, where the Daeva had asked for mercy; he froze then. Triss seeing that he really was such a stupid, stupid man was apparently a great thing.

He chuckled. “Oh so you’re agreeing with my terms then?”

“Yes.”

She gave him another punch in the arm, and just when he was going to let out a yelp, she grabbed his face and kissed him. Before he knew what she was up to, she’d already slipped onto his lap, straddling him, and was holding him by the back of his neck and head with her claws.

“Are you su-”

“Fucking course I’m sure.” Her lips found his again, and with a sinister chuckle of her own, she rubbed some of her giant crocodile fangs within her cheek against his cheek. “We got a good thing going, and I was stupid to think a big softy like you would do anything to screw me over.” She sneaked in another quick kiss. “And thanks for not letting your friends fuck up Mike. Stupid nerd is smart, but just a dumb kid.”

Before he could say anything else, she already had her lips on his neck, and her lap was grinding into his. She'd blushed, heat was starting to seep from her skin, and he could feel the warmth of her saliva on his collar.

He was no fool. When a beautiful – if perhaps also monstrous and scary – woman is on your lap and demanding sex, you give her sex. He put his hands on her back, let his fingers drift down her spine, and also blushed. The Nosferatu wasted no time once he did, and within moments she had her claws slipped under his coat by his shoulders and was sliding it off.

“Christ we're both a mess, we should-”

Then his phone rang.

“You better ignore that.”

“I ... it's the triumvirate.” He reached down into his coat pocket and pulled out the smart phone; the custom ring was the most horrible sound he could possibly imagine right then.

“Fine. Fine!” With a grumble, Beatrice got up, and stomped around. She was pouting.

He tried to not smile at her. Her pouting was as effective as a sad crocodile.

“Mire here.”

~Mister Mire, it is good to hear your voice.~ It was Michael McDonald.

“Sir?”

~We've heard no word from Alder Honors, or you and your childe.~

“I’m sorry sir.” He got up and started to pace around, but his eyes just glazed over everything. Shit, no Viktor? No Viktor ... no Viktor. “There was a huge fire, Mister McDonald. I was separated from my sire. Alder Viktor Honors is ... the Alder could be dead, sir.”

The line went quiet. Julius raised his eyes to Beatrice to find the Nosferatu had pulled herself up to sit on his counter, with her legs dangling off the side. He knew she wouldn’t make a sound; if Michael or Maria found out she was listening, they’d make his life hell, and hers too.

~Mister Mire, please come meet us at the Xnomina HQ in one hour.~

“I’ll be there, Mister McDonald. One hour.” He tapped his thumb against the end button, and walked up to the counter next to Beatrice. Once he put the phone down, he put his elbows against the counter and looked over at the woman.

“Think your sire is really dead?” she said.

“ ... maybe.” He managed a slow nod, and shifted out of his coat before hanging it up. Did he feel sad? Was he relieved? Was he happy? He couldn’t tell. Viktor was a scary man, but he’d always been a reliable man. Decades of knowing his sire was there, an anchor for the Invictus and a terrifying, powerful elder Kindred, just gone in a single night.

Not just that. Viktor was his sire. His sire. Trying to process the conflicting feelings was just too damn hard to do right then.

He started to make his way down the hall to the bathroom. “I have to meet Maria and Michael at Xnomina in an hour. I guess I’ll see you later?”

“An hour? Fuck that man. That’s more than enough time.” She hopped down from the counter and walked after him. Within

moments, she'd already taken off her top and was kicking off her pants, even as she grabbed his hand and pulled him into the bathroom. "Shower-sex quickie. Let's go."

Despite himself, his old smile came back. The damn Carthian wouldn't understand what it meant to lose a sire, not a real sire, and he was kind of thankful for that. He couldn't pull the sorrow card, and at the moment, he didn't want to.

If there was anyone who'd keep him from being a sad, stupid man, it was the Nosferatu in his shower.

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"Mister Mire." Michael was leaning back against the conference table, and Maria was looking out the window with her hands hooked behind her back. The ghost woman managed a small peak over her shoulder at Julias, but her expression was bewildering.

She looked happy. Or at least as happy as a recently killed girl dragged from the riverbed could manage.

"Mister McDonald ... Madame Turio."

"We've scoured the site of the fire, Mister Mire." The Gangrel folded his arms across his chest. "With what little was left of it after the kine had their way during the day, we managed to piece together at least one thing. From the ashes, we know at least one Kindred died. We haven't heard from Alder Honors."

"And," Maria said, voice raspy as per usual, "Madame Vola has reported that both Tony and Rebecca are missing."

Julias gave a small nod. If Natasha said Tony was missing, he believed it.

"My childe and I both escaped, and with how fast the fire spread, it was a very close call." A small smile managed to sneak onto his

lips. "I did kill Rebecca though. That I can confirm." No need to bring Beatrice into this.

McDonald gave a hearty chuckle, reached out, and patted him on the shoulder. "Good form, Mister Mire. That bitch was a constant thorn in my side. But I am sorry about your sire."

"... are you, sir?" Julias said.

Maria turned around then, and slowly made her way toward him. With her wet, black hair covering her face and clinging against her white dress, her approach gave him the distinct impression she was going to reach out and pull him down into the abyss.

"What do you mean?" the Nosferatu said.

Sometimes he forgot how scary Maria and Michael could be. Viktor Honors dominated any room he was in, but Michael and Maria were elders too, hundreds of years old and both with a long history of murder and Invictus servitude to their names. Now that the small ghost woman was only a foot in front of him, staring at him with an almost sinister gaze, his inner-beast started to shrivel.

But it was too late now.

"Madame, I ... there's been more than a little talk about Alder Viktor."

Michael gave a small snort, not too dissimilar from a wild hog's. It fit the large man.

"My sire was one of the oldest Kindred known. He..." Julias forced himself to make eye contact with Maria. "And he was not the man he was when he sired me. After his long torpor, I ... he was-"

"Instead of another torpor to calm his bloodlust, he was going to start drinking Kindred blood to sate it," Maria said. When Julias's

jaw dropped, the Nosferatu gave a shrug. “It is the way of things, Mister Mire. We grow old, and we eventually succumb to the curse. Alder Honors was not the first partner we’ve lost to time.”

Michael eased himself down into a chair at the table. “Something had to be done, but you know as well as I that the Alder was no push over. He was...” The big guy struggled with the words, chewed them up in his mouth, and eventually settled with a sigh as he put his hands on the table.

“He was going mad, but his unlife was wholly dedicated to the Invictus; we were unsure of what to do.” Maria took a seat opposite of Michael, and netted her fingers together before resting her elbows upon the table with her chin on her knuckles. “A brilliant actor, Alder Honors kept his fits of paranoia and delusions well hidden. Those delusions may have very well proved his undoing in this meeting with Tony.”

After all that, the small ghost woman could only give a small shrug, and settled her eyes on Michael. “It all burned. We will never know the details.”

Jack. He would know the details. He might be able to fill in some of the blanks.

“The Invictus in Dolareido have survived decades because of the power of a triumvirate, Mister Mire.” The Gangrel tapped his fingers against the wood, but his animal eyes were staring long and hard at Julias. “Not only are you one of the oldest ancillae within the Invictus, but you are the most powerful and intelligent of them. It would be both practical and fitting if you would replace your sire on the council.”

Holy shit. They wanted him on the triumvirate. He was still just an ancillae, with at least another fifty years to go before the power of elder was in his grasp, but the highest seat of power of the Invictus in Dolareido was being offered to him.



He looked down at his regrown hand. He knew he was powerful, Jessy and Natasha confirmed it, and he knew he was smart. Part of him had just assumed it was Ventrue pride, but the animal and the ghost of the Invictus council apparently disagreed.

“This is not the formal invitation, as we will have a banquet for such matters of presentation. But this is the moment of truth, mighty Ventrue.” Maria reached out to the chair next to her and pulled it out for him, complete with a beckoning motion. “We have need of younger blood on the council, and we both agree that you are the best candidate. Do you accept?”

He looked between the two of them. Julias was a great actor and poker player. He’d learned from the best, and could read anyone, but these were Invictus council; their gaze was cold and pure. It was like reading steel.

“ ... I do.”

---

~~Antoinette~~

It was just the two of them in her bed, quiet, deep in her tower, and holding each other.

Truly, it was her holding him, but the boy did not seem to mind. He was nervous at first, the poor thing, like a mouse before the tiger. All Kindred contained within them an animal, a beast that spoke in the unseen and the unheard, and the boy’s was terrified of hers, while hers was basking in the glory of superiority.

But there was more. That demon inside, disgustingly poetic as it was, was accepting the young man as more than just someone to force into submission. She found herself pulled to him, hugging him tighter just because she had to. What the boy felt inside, she could not know, but he sank into her and returned her embrace with the most precious sighs of contentment when she held him.

Sometimes she worried if her tall stature, greater age, or superior might would suddenly crush the boy's intrigue, as it had done to others before, but he returned her kisses with the same nervous joy as that first night in Bloodlust. Only Jacob could fully understand how lucky she genuinely was, and she did not envy the Witch his solitude.

With a warm chuckle, she sat up and started to comb her hair over her shoulder. When she saw Jack sit up and found his face frozen in a shocked, amazed expression, she blinked. She followed his gaze, and realized he was looking at her breasts. The silk had fallen from both their torsos, leaving their bare skin exposed. His eyes only made her smile.

“Already you lust for me? Were I not informed, I would assume you still kine.”

“I ... just I ... um.”

Neither of them had performed the blush of life again since their last bout, so their skin was pale, lifeless, and their frames slightly thinner. It was not enough to dissuade the boy's eyes though, and that made the Prince smile all the more.

How would she treat this? Hundreds of years ago, she could faintly remember such a time with Tony, when her sexual wiles had controlled him, when her teasing and use of sex as manipulation had been a source of amusement and confidence. She did not want that. She would not create another Tony.

All the mistakes she'd made with her childe crept into her mind. What could she do differently this time?

“... Jack.” She put a hand to his chest, and his eyes raised to hers. Lovely, green eyes that bared the boy's honest soul so completely, it was sometimes painful for her to see. Now, she craved it. “I want you,” she said, and gently pushed on his chest until he was laying

down once more, “to come to me when you wish for my touch.” She leaned over him, still sitting up and with a hand on his flat stomach, her heavy breasts hanging over him. “Do not be shy with me. Whenever you wish of it,” she said, and traced her fingers along his abs, “and if I am available, I will gladly share it.”

The boy Ventrue quirked a brow, more confused than ever. He did not know why she said such things, and that was fine. Her history with Tony was painful, and unneeded. She would do things better this time.

“Of course, my Prince.”

Like a resonating note, the words rung clear and unmistakable. It was so obvious a barrier, and one she would have to throw away.

“ ... call me Antoinette.”

The boy’s eyes widened all the more.

“And I do not lie, little Ventrue, when I say I will gladly share my touch, my bed, even Ashley and Julee.” While still leaning over him, sitting, and the boy on his back, she had one hand free to roam his body. She took his wrist, and placed his hand upon her other arm. “Whether you wish to be in my embrace, and rest against my bosom,” her hand reached for his other wrist, and this time raised it to place his palm underneath the weight of her nearest breast, “or share in any carnal delight you can imagine.”

The boy froze, eyes wide, jaw dropped. Apparently, her honesty had robbed him of speech. She could no longer hold back her laughter, and she let herself fall against him so her torso pressed to his. She put her cheek to his and snuggled against him, whispered sweet nothings to him, and held him under her with gentle hands. A few moments later, the boy finally responded, and raised his hands to hug her.

“Damn, um. Yes, my ... Antoinette,” he said. “Yes, gladly. And, uh, you can ... well ... yeah, you can do anything with me, any time. Not just physical too, you know?” He gave a tiny shrug and dopey smile, like joyful surrender.

Surrender. It was such a horrible word, one that a Kindred would never use as anything but insult or tragedy. Kindred were lone predators; their societies and covenants were created to force cooperation, not because of it. But to see the boy just give into her so completely, honest green eyes smiling up at her, his hands on her back and almost afraid to touch her, was overwhelming.

Part of her knew her Daeva blood was twisting this into obsession, but another part of her knew there was more. So much more. Dusty old words, long buried and forgotten, would have to be unearthed to make sense of it.

“I have only fifteen minutes time before I must prepare for my first meeting,” she said, “but I am sure I can satisfy you in less, if you wish.” She sat upright again with her weight on her hip, leaning over the boy, palm pressed to the blankets, free hand caressing his chest.

“I ... really? Like ... just like that?”

“Of course.” She gave another warm chuckle, and this time, leaned further in until her breasts were hanging over his face. The boy, to her delight, had proved to be quite enamored with them. They were heavy, very large teardrops, and if not for her Kindred body, would have been a source of pain and frustration. She had long since learned to enjoy her great height and curvaceous figure though, even if some others found it intimidating instead of arousing. The fact that Jack found it to be both was delightful.

And when she blushed for him, the sight of his beautiful eyes opening even more wide was intoxicating.

She mouthed 'blush' silently, and the boy was quick to also perform the blush of life. Such a young man, that once his body took on the color and signs of a living human, his erection returned in seconds. With a chuckle, she watched his fake heartbeat cause his member to rise against the blankets, higher and higher, until she peeled the sheet away to reveal the naked boy. The way he squirmed, the way he struggled against his shyness, the way he avoided eye contact but kept sneaking glances at her naked body, it was all deliriously arousing.

She slid down the blankets a little further from him, got onto her hands and knees, and with an arched back to prowl and emphasize the curves of her form, she slipped between the boy's legs. He watched her like she were some fairy tail creature, those wide eyes of his struggling to grasp the reality of what she was about to do.

She got down onto her elbows, laid herself on her stomach between his legs, and took his member with one hand to point it up to her face. The boy sat up enough to put his weight on his own elbows, but otherwise did not move, paralyzed by her. Good.

Her lips found his shaft, and with ginger kisses, she brought her lips from the base of him up to the tip, while her hand eased the skin down to expose its head. The pink flesh of his glans was so swollen, she gave it a kiss as well, and Jack trembled under her touch. Another kiss, and again he shivered, with eyes drawn and mouth parted to moan quietly.

Jack was no supreme lover, or ladies' man. He had no large history with women, no well of experience to draw on. He was just a boy, barely a man, and that meant everything she did and everything she would do to him was a new moment of pleasure he had never experienced before. When she finally wrapped her lips around the whole of the head of his cock, that alone was enough to make him shudder, and when she suckled on it while drawing her lips back

across its skin, he let out a blatant moan. Hers were the first lips he had ever felt on his body.

His inexperience was addicting.

She wanted to edge him toward orgasm. The sight of his eyes, eyebrows raised in pleasure, was making her mad with need, and she wanted more of that. She wanted to hold him down and slowly, over agonizing minutes, milk pleasure from him while gazing into his eyes.

And she would, for the moment. There was not enough time to really indulge, but there was enough to have a little fun. So she watched the poor boy squirm while she eased her lips back down along his ripe and swollen length, and yet again gave it gentle suckles while sliding her lips back and forth around the tip's base edge. While she did so, her hand around his member lightly stroked up and down, and her other sneaked down to find his testicles to softly tease and caress the skin with her fingertips.

The poor boy. He was already twitching with rising pleasure. His muscles were flexing, and his shaft was pulling against her lips with its gentle spasms, announcing his orgasm.

So she stopped.

He let out a relieved sigh, but his eyes spoke volumes. Begging. He was silently begging her to continue.

She kissed his cock in small, teasing pecks that raised from the base of him up to his glans once again, where his twitches brought out a couple drops of his precum. With a playful grin, she gently licked it off. Jack's eyes closed and his head rolled back in obvious bliss, but she gave the base of his shaft a hard squeeze, just hard enough to hurt a touch.

"Watch," she said, her voice soft but firm.

He raised his head, forced his eyes open, and watched her with those begging, green eyes. In turn, she watched him, gazed at him, grinned at him while she tilted his shaft to point toward her chin, and then eased her mouth down upon it. Her tongue danced along its underside while she slipped inch after inch into her mouth, before finally bringing her lips to the base of him.

“Oh ... god...” He squirmed all the more, and she could feel him twitch inside her throat. To her delight, he did not break eye contact, despite how much his eyes tried to roll upward when she tightened her lips around the hilt of his length.

She stayed there for the moment. Air was no concern, and the boy's struggles were too scrumptious to resist tempting. Her tongue slipped out from between his flesh and her lip, and with a devious smile, slowly licked the underside of his cock where it joined his body. He started to pant, even moan quietly, but just as his member began to twitch once more, she stopped, and withdrew her attentions.

When she raised her head, another drop of precum had risen to the tip of his member; she kissed that one away as well.

“I'm ... so close...”

“Tell me then, little Ventrue. Where would you like to cum?”

“I ... what?”

She laughed. Oh Jack Jack. The boy could not see further than five seconds into his future, so she wrapped her hand around the base of him again, and gave more teasing kisses to his swollen glans. He was just on the edge of orgasm, and she could keep him there until it hurt if she wished it.

“Would you like to cum on my face, like this were some horrible pornographic video? No, that does not seem like you.” She leaned

forward, wrapped the whole of his cock's head in her lips again, and pulled them away in a suckling motion. His tortured, quiet groans were making her wet. "Perhaps on my breasts? Perhaps inside my mouth?"

His eyes were looking at her, over her, around her, and they were almost panicked with the question she'd posed. She drew his attention back to her eyes with yet another warm kiss to the underside of his length, and then the same along the swollen tip.

"... lips," he said. The Ventrue brushed so brightly she felt he might burst.

Of course, she thought. She'd spent the past ten minutes showing off how she could milk pleasure from him with her lips. Her lips were quite luscious and red when she blushed, and warm.

So she gave him that wicked devil smile she had long mastered, and put her lips over his glans again, but this time just enough to wrap half of it within her massaging embrace. The blush of life kept her lips warm for him, wet, inviting, and she gazed up at the boy with bedroom eyes while she kissed and suckled. All the while, one set of fingers caressed his testicles, and the other gripped the base of his cock with relaxed strength. Slowly, gently, she squeezed a little harder, worked her hand up a single inch, before sliding her grip back down.

He came in seconds.

The boy didn't look away. Such an obedient young man, even when the pleasure was so obvious on his face that it was practically pouring off of him. His panting was laced with moans, quiet ones that were close to whimpers, and when she gave his glans a slow suckle, she could feel she was walking the line of pleasure and painful stimulation.



But when his warm cum started to trickle out of him, she couldn't stop herself. All it took was a gentle kiss, just the smallest one, and the boy trembled in her grip. The first gush of his cum was a sharp spurt, and it splashed over his stomach. With a chuckle, she put her lips over the head of his cock, and this time made sure to catch the new waves of cum that flowed out of boy. The new trickles of his cum were slow, thick, and she kissed them to let them coat her lips in white. Warm wetness dripped down and onto her hands, pooling between her fingers working his length, and when she wrapped the whole of her mouth over his glans again, she let more of his cum slip free of her lips.

She held him on the edge of that pleasure pain threshold, lightly moaned onto his cock while she suckled the final bits of his cum from him, and let it fall down his length. For several minutes she coaxed those final bits of pleasure from Jack, milked it from him with centuries of practice, until the boy had practically melted into her bed.

“Sorry I ... such a mess,” he said. One of his hands reached out for his stomach, and he ran a finger through a small pool of his cum.

“One of the joys of being Kindred. When using the blush, your fluids like saliva, and cum,” she emphasized the last word with a smack of her soaked lips as she sat up, “will fade to nothing but the faintest trace of dust in a few minutes.” It was already starting to disperse. Delightfully convenient, it also meant the mess of his fluids over her hands and lips was fading.

“Oh. Then ... thank you.”

Thank you? Ah Jack, silly boy. His awkwardness was enough to nearly have her in fits of laughter. “You are quite welcome. You do owe me though, and I expect you to repay me tonight, when you return.”

“Return? Am I going somewhere?”

“Indeed. I have meetings for the next five hours. You should visit your sire during that time.” She stood up and combed her hair over her shoulder, between her breasts. Her blush was still pumping fake life through her, and it kept her aroused. Very aroused. She wanted to pin the small man down, kiss him, hold him and slide his cock into her and squeeze him until her own juices were dripping down her thighs. How long had it been since she had felt such ravenous desire?

Later, later. For now, she relaxed her vitae and the blush ceased. Her skin thinned, paled, and her nipples no longer swelled with need. Fake hormones stopped pumping, saliva faded, and sexual desire along with it. Patience. She could indulge as much as she wanted later.

“I’m not looking forward to that conversation,” he said.

She walked around the bed and stood over it beside him. He was such a young creature, and even now when he looked up to her, he couldn’t hold eye contact for long before he looked away, a little shy, a little scared. So she leaned over him, ran a finger down his lips, and let her breasts sway directly over his head. His eyes opened so wide.

“Julias is a good man, and he deserves to know. Take care of your sire, and he will take care of you. And, if you do this,” she said, and leaned down further to let her one of her heavy breasts nudge into his cheek and nose, “I will make sure you are rewarded.”

She couldn’t help but enjoy some teasing, just a little.

---

She waited.

Her legs were folded, her hands on her lap with fingers netted, and her gaze on the door of her meeting room. The same meeting room where she had killed and fed three of her kine prisoners to her

new lover. A small smile managed to sneak its way onto the corner of her mouth before she suppressed it.

Now was not the time for smiles. Now was the time for dominance.

Jacob entered the room first. With only the two of them, there was just a small enough window to share a knowing glance, and even a nod. Behind him though, Garry stepped into the room. She truly wished the man would put on a nice suit instead of his jeans and other lowly clothing; if only he knew how easily he could pass for a dark James Bond. Such a waste.

Then there was Michael, a Gangrel like Garry but no where near as delightful; he was just a brute, a smart and dangerous brute. Behind him was Maria, ghost woman, and the sight of her always made Antoinette's withered heart ache. The few Nosferatu in her city often had trouble finding comfort in others, due to their disfigurements, and Maria's was one of the worst she had seen.

For a moment, she expected Viktor to follow in behind her, but her tensed blood settled when, instead of her most dangerous enemy back from the ashes, Julias walked through the door. Implications abound. Julias must have been summoned to replace Viktor, and if they thought him worthy of joining the meeting of primogen, it meant he was already promoted to a member of their council. It had only been twenty hours since the fire, which meant both Invictus had been hopeful of such an event. Good. That meant that Michael and Maria, whether they wanted to be or not, were her allies.

All her puppets danced beautifully under her strings.

When Tony did not follow, she was forced to look down. In a single second, memories of their time together, faded and worn in the centuries, were strong enough to flash before her. She could

remember the smart and suave man at the dawn of the Romantic era; he was a painter.

Part of her even wanted to cry, but she pushed it aside. Tony was ash, and not only were they all better off, her new lover was his killer. She could wrestle with her conflicted emotions later.

If Daniel noticed her distress, he made no show of it. As per usual, he stood there quietly by her side, bless his damned soul.

“My primogen,” she said, and motioned for them to sit at the glass table, “I have heard that Tony and Viktor were at the source of the fire last night. And they are not here. I can only assume the worst.” She said it slightly too fast, slightly too obviously, with just a touch too much enthusiasm. Of course, she did it on purpose, and they knew it. It was enough to let them know she had a hand in their deaths, and that was plenty.

“... Indeed.” Maria with her raspy voice was the one to talk first. How often it had been Viktor and Tony to talk first, to bitch and whine in their own, elderly ways. It was nice to hear the tiny woman speak, raspy voice included.

“You can guess why we have brought Mister Mire then,” Michael said, and he gestured to Julias while he sat down.

Garry chuckled. “Not exactly a long time to mourn your twice dead. And this kid is who you brought to replace him?”

Julias gave Garry a tiny smirk. Jack’s sire was barely a century old, a wolf in a den of tigers. But the man was intelligent, and more importantly, wise.

“If Viktor is truly dead, then ... it is a shame. We saw what was happening to him. To take such a long torpor is a gamble,” Jacob said.

Julias said nothing, but leaned back in his chair and shifted his gaze from elder to elder. What must be running through your mind now, Ventrue? To hear the most powerful Kindred of all Dolareido lament the trials of their age?

“We believe both Viktor and Tony were caught in the fire.” Michael leaned in and put his elbows on the table. “But enough of this bullshit. We all know those two were going to going to keep getting in each other’s way, and do more damage to the peace we’ve managed to secure here.” Then, to the Prince’s silent delight, the Gangrel gave her a thankful glance. “Dolareido is one of the few cities without active conflicts between the covenants. Viktor ... Alder Honors and Tony would have ruined that.”

“ ... perhaps they would have, Mister McDonald. If I had known Tony would become an anarchist, I would have...” She bit her tongue hard enough to spark some pain, enough to snap her out of sad memories. For all her control, a small crack had managed to slip into her voice. “We’re quite the sad sight for our new primogen. I am sorry, Mister Mire, for this sorry state of affairs.”

The tall Ventrue glanced between the group of them before offering a nod. “Alder Viktor Honors was my sire ... and despite that, I agree, we are all better for his passing. I understand your feelings, Prince.”

Garry gave another chuckle, and Jacob right along with him. Antoinette could tell those two had more in common than they realized. But then, the two exchanged a quick glance. A tiny thing, just as subtle as any of them. What sort of dealings had those two shared beyond the ones she knew? Her sheriff could find out later.

Julias’s glance though, was on her, and it was not a quick one. His gaze lingered on her, met her eyes, and when she looked back at him, the young Kindred did not break. The other four had started talking about the pressing matters at hand, such as the fallout of

Tony being dead and his followers now leaderless, but Julias did not join them. He continued to look at her, and as the seconds grew, his eyes were unwavering.

Evidently, Daniel had delivered her message about Jack.

She gave him a nod of her own. Jack was not a topic for the primogen, and the less they knew about her relationship with the boy, the better. But Julias was the boy's sire, and he deserved to know she recognized that.

The two of them, she and the Ventrue, were most definitely going to have to talk.

---

~~Jack~~

There was some time before he had to get back to Elysium, so he could spend the day sleeping with Antoinette.

He couldn't stop grinning. Sleeping with Antoinette. Sleeping. Antoinette. God damn he was sleeping with Antoinette. Not just the Prince, but Antoinette. Curvy, tall, busty, smooth and classy and sexy and gorgeous and beautiful Antoinette. Scary, dangerous, smart, witty, terrifyingly powerful and even manipulative Antoinette. It was all so mesmerizing.

He almost twirled while waiting for the elevator. The ding of its arrival was enough to shock him out of his high though. He was here to see Julias, and as much as he was high on bliss, he did not look forward to explaining to his sire what had happened. It'd taken him some time to work up the nerve to come here, hours even. Antoinette had meetings for much of the night, and instead of just waiting for her in her bed, he got up and started wandering around the city dreading this conversation with his sire.

When he stepped onto the elevator and watched the doors close, the weight of realizations crashed into him. The last time he was on this elevator, it was to talk to Julias about his sister, but that conversation never happened. He wanted to talk about how horrible that fucking felt, and how that and Mrs. Pavala and everything about his actions were crushing him. Then there was Viktor, who he'd killed. His grandsire. And then there was Antoinette, who he was spending more and more time with, while spending less and less with the man who he owed everything to.

When the doors opened up again, he froze. What was he supposed to say? How was he going to say it? Oh, sorry Julias, I killed your sire, and shit has been kind of rough for me, but I'm sleeping with the Prince now so everything is good?

Fuck it. He knocked. Since being embraced, he'd taken to just walking into Julias's, but now he had to knock; the door was a literal and figurative barrier. What would Antoinette say? How droll.

When it opened, he suddenly found himself looking at the floor. He could see Julias's shoes. Such nice shoes.

"Jack! Kid, I am damn glad to see you ... why the knock?"

"Julias, I ... man, I..."

"Jack? What's the problem?" His sire put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him into the room.

Jack managed a glance around. Same place but it felt so damn different. Julias apparently caught onto his unease, and ushered him over to the couch to sit down.

"You ok Jack? When we got separated, everything went downhill and I had to take care of Rebecca."

Rebecca. The memory of that bitch stabbing him was like scar tissue on his brain. “Did you get her?”

“Indeed I did.” Julias gave him a light punch in the arm. Where’d he pick up that quirk? “She’s dead. Soon as she was ash, everything suddenly caught fire though. I tried to get to you, but Beatrice—”

“The Nosferatu was there?”

“Yeah. She was the one who actually killed Rebecca. But don’t tell anyone, no need to get her involved.”

Jack gave a small nod. He’d definitely have to thank shark-mouth.

“You were in that warehouse with Viktor, and Tony I assume. What happened? That fire just exploded and took out half the district.”

Antoinette said Julias would not be angry that he’d killed Viktor, but it wasn’t the same as being in front of the man and actually having to say it.

“I ... set the fire.”

“You did what? Fucking Christ Jack, a day after I showed you what fire does! Someone like Viktor might—”

“That was why.”

“That was why? You...”

Jack looked up from the floor just long enough to see the realization dawn on Julias’s face.

“I said the wrong thing. When the two of them were arguing, Viktor said something about becoming Prince, and I said I didn’t want him to hurt Antoinette. And Viktor just ... he just lost it. He cut



me nearly in half, and ... then and Tony and him started fighting, and ... and I had to do something, and...”

Silence. When Jack managed another peak, Julias was sitting in the exact same position as him, elbows on his knees and head hanging on slouched shoulders.

“You killed Viktor then.”

“ ... yeah.”

“Tony too?”

“Pretty sure, yeah...”

More silence. His sire must have been thinking. He’d raised a hand to hold his chin, but his face was pained.

“Then ... I am sorry Jack.”

“You? Sorry? I killed your sire Julias.”

“Only because I was putting it off.”

Jack raised his head. “Really?”

Julias copied the motion. “Viktor was ... he needed to die. He was...” His voice caught in his throat, and he coughed it out as he leaned back. “Shit, everyone was looking for Viktor to die. More than one Invictus wanted him dead, and they were looking to me to do it. He was old, his last torpor had twisted him, and his bloodlust was growing beyond what human blood would satisfy.”

“Antoinette said that too. Kindred can drink other Kindred blood?”

Julias grabbed him on the shoulder, and both squeezed and twisted him hard enough to hurt and face him. “Never do it. Ever.

That's why I was so worried about Antoinette and you, cause she had so many opportunities to slip you her blood, and then you'd..." The pain on his face was enough that Jack felt it on him. "You become addicted to Kindred blood, and at the same time, you become enamored with whose blood you drank. Drink it a few times, and you become so unbelievably infatuated, you'd put Romeo and Juliet to shame."

"But ... but Viktor-"

"That changes when you're so old, so powerful, that kine blood just isn't enough anymore. Then Kindred just become your new food source, and Viktor was fast approaching that day."

Jack ran his fingers over his buzzed head. "Fuck. So someone could just slip me their blood and ... fuck, Antoinette could have done that easily. Shit, Antoinette is older than Viktor! She could already be past that day."

Julias's grip relaxed. "Dolareido is lucky to have Antoinette as its Prince. Dragons are fucking mysterious, and one mystery they have is they manage torpor very well; her last torpor quelled her blood lust very well. And much as I hate having a Dragon as Prince, and a Daeva at that, the Prince is damn smart, and ... stable." He managed a sad chuckle, and braced his face with his hand. "If Viktor was Prince, he'd have turned it into a dictatorship. And they never last."

"Fuck, he sounds like a monster."

"... Give it a couple hundred years, Jack." His sire got up then, went around the counter, and started to pour them both some glasses of blood. "Put yourself in my position, and me in Viktor's. Could you do it?"

"No ... no I couldn't. God damn it Julias, I'm sorry I-"

“It’s all for the best, Jack. I’m just ... I couldn’t bring myself to think my old sire had fallen so far, and I left you in his protection. You came out on top though, and that’s why I sired you. Tenacious kid.” He took a sip, and the sorrow mostly faded from his old gaze. “I’m damn proud you’ve come so far in such a small amount of time, even if it paints a bullseye on your back. But you got friends in high places now, and not just the Prince.”

“Not just the prince?”

“The council has asked me to replace Viktor on the triumvirate.”

“Damn dude! Wow, holy shit what a promotion. Fucking ... like ... I don’t even know. What’s that change for us?” He hopped up off the couch and jumped onto a stool by the counter. The conversation had quickly turned from sobering to joyful, and that was a fucking awesome change.

“Now,” the tall Ventrue said as he slid Jack a drink, “we make the changes.”

---

~~Beatrice~~

The catacombs seemed more empty than usual.

Of course, the catacombs of the old cemetery were always empty. Not even the stupid punk kids showed up to vandalize it anymore with graffiti, not after she was through with them. Still, it really did seem more empty than usual. The other Kindred didn’t hang out there, they knew it was her hangout, and the only Kindred old enough to give her trouble didn’t give a shit about some nasty old catacombs.

The only reason it felt empty was because she wasn’t used to it anymore. She stood there, leaning against a shelf of rock, covered in skulls, and she marveled at them. Dolareido practically belonged in

France; the joys of having an ancient French Daeva as the city's Prince. Normally she enjoyed the hilariously edgy, brooding nature of a catacomb deep in the dark, spooky cemetery of the city, but it was just so damn empty. She'd gotten used to hanging out with Julias. That was the problem.

Problem? She grinned to no one. It wasn't a problem. Sure, she was a Nosferatu and that meant she'd never be able to hang with the kine, not openly, but if hanging out with Julias taught her at least one thing, it was to not judge a Kindred too quickly. Maybe she should start hanging with the other Carthians more? Hell, maybe she should hang at the Elysium more? All the neonates like her hung out there regularly. No ancillae or elders to scare them; they all had more important business.

She clicked her teeth together, and dragged her claws carelessly along the stone walls in the dark. "Would it be so bad to make some friends?"

"A friend you can trust is worth any hell."

She spun around with such panic, her claws cut through the stone and sent bones flying. Someone was in the tomb with her. Some dude she couldn't smell or see.

"The fuck! Who the fuck is there?" The darkness held no secrets from a Kindred. She crouched down, claws drawn, and crept forward through the black. No one waited for her, no presence, no smell, but then she could hear a chuckle. Whoever this fucker was was laughing at her.

"The fuck do you think you're doing? Nosferatu, Mehket? Hiding in the shadow? Come on out so I can rip your fucking face off." Big words, Triss. If she couldn't find them, then they weren't a pushover. Whoever was in her lair was a master of the shadow disciplines; she couldn't even smell him.

“I understand you tore Rebecca apart. I find that impressive.”

She spun around again. The bastard had gotten around behind her, but still she couldn't see anyone. “Fuck you! No one else was there, so how would you know?”

“Garry told me.”

“Garry ... how the fuck do you know Garry?” Last time she'd tell her boss a damn thing.

“You heard us talking.”

Talking. She'd heard them talking? “ ... on the roof, after Tony gave Mike the shit to crack.”

“Well aren't you smart.” Another chuckle.

“So Garry wasn't just talking to himself.” Secrets on top of secrets. Fucking Kindred. Even Garry was playing that stupid game. “So who the fuck are you then?”

And yet another chuckle. “Guess?”

Guess, right. Fuck him. Still, some knowledge was better than none. It was a man's voice, and the only dude Mehket she knew powerful enough pull this in-your-face shadow shit was Daniel. And the sheriff didn't strike her as the playful type, unlike this fucker who was taunting her.

That meant a Nosferatu, a powerful one, and if it wasn't Maria then it was...

“ ... Jacob.”

“Bingo.”

Shit shit shit shit shit shit. She started to back up away from the voice, but then his Joker laugh started up behind her. This time, there was something there, someone wrapped in a dirty old cloak. Someone with a bandage wrapped around his eyes. The old Witch was eyeless, one of the more fucked up Nosferatu deformities, and how he managed to get around she had no idea.

But he was there, arms and legs hidden inside his cloak, eyes covered, and walking toward her with a smirk. His hood was pulled back, and his grey and black hair looked so very odd on a Kindred. Vampires rarely sired someone older than in the prime of their youth. He even had a couple wrinkles.

“Get the fuck out of my hideout.” Hollow words, her inner-beast was practically frozen in fear. Hell, she’d be pissing herself if she was kine. Jacob was as old as the fucking Prince. Older.

“Make me.” He took a step forward toward her.

So she took a swing at him. No thought to it, no considering the ramifications, no worries or that too-many-mind bullshit. No one got to just fuck with her, elder or not.

Jacob fell apart like black mist. Even her Kindred eyes could not follow it in the black, and it wormed around in the dust and bones of the abandoned catacombs like something out of a god damn Dracula movie. That was not a trick innate to Nosferatu blood.

“Oh ho ho ho, Garry was right about you.”

“Did you just fucking laugh at me like some comic book villain? Hold still so I can—”

And then Jacob had his hands around her wrists. He was behind her, his grip was insane, and it felt like her arms were going to get ripped out of her shoulders. It didn’t get any better when a foot was planted between her shoulder blades, and her body was driven into

the stone earth. The crunch of a ruined nose was a warning sign before the pain hit her too.

“You are a fierce creature. I like that.” He pulled on her arms more, more things went pop, and she screamed.

“Fuck you! Fuck you and let go so I can kill you you fucking god damn fucking stupid—”

“I came here to test your spirit, Beatrice. You may have noticed that Dolareido is a nice place, with little Kindred conflict, especially now. And you know? I’m starting to get bored.”

Oh my god the fucker was going to talk her death. She’d rather he just rip her arms off.

“So, I came here to make an offer.”

“Offer ... and if I say no?”

“You won’t say no. Why? Because I can tell just by looking at you neonate, that you’re sick of the mind games of these elder Kindred and their bullshit. You’re sick of the century-old games, and how these old tigers are playing you all like puppets for their own benefit. Even Garry, barely an elder, is already playing those games, and you fucking know it. He risked Mike’s life for it. And you? You are sick of being on the sidelines. So excuse my ranting,” he pulled harder on her arms again and coaxed more screams from her, “but I know an opportunity when I see one.”

He let go, thank fucking god. She rolled over, and forced her hands up to grab her shoulders. Kindred blood quickly got to work, forcing undead tissue tight and making sure her joints were aligned. But she wouldn’t let herself stay exposed, undefended, not with this nutjob standing over her. She started to get up, expecting to get pinned again, but Jacob just watched her with that stupid, weird, goofy smile.

“Opportunity?”

“To put a little chaos into their plans, Beatrice. To put the tigers back on the front lines, so they’re the ones that take the heat for their stupid, god damn plans, like I did with Viktor and Tony.”

Oh fucking shit.

“Garry, Michael, Maria, Antoinette,” he said, “and the others. Instead of just letting these fuckers play puppeteer, how about we sew a little chaos in their bullshit?” The fucking ancient Nosferatu witch was disturbingly persuasive.

“Wait. Others?”

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~~Damien~~

All the kine were walking around with their handhelds and their smartphones and their bluetooth devices. Not only that, most of them were wearing revealing clothing designed to function in the cool air. Winter was approaching, and Dolareido wasn’t very far North, but it wasn’t exactly warm either. Despite that, the kine were whoring themselves out on the streets. High-class hookers and dealers in ties. A den of sin and decay.

“Look at this, Damien. Look at these kine. Have I been gone so long? Fifty years of sleep and the world changed above me.” Damien’s sire, a quiet man with brown skin and short, curly black hair sat on a bus bench. “It is good you awoke me when you did. The technology alone is ... I cannot understand it.”

Damien was sitting next to him, with a half-shaved head, and waves of black hair combed over that reached down to his shoulder. His sire was dressed in some simple black robe, while Damien was in jeans and a snazzy jacket. What an odd couple, but that was the



times. Damien had the luxury to acclimate and adjust over the years. His sire did not.

“Times have changed,” Damien said. “They still change. Even those born in this twilight of science and blasphemy can’t keep up. And after what the Prince did, the churches here have become passive, empty.”

Lucas reached out and gave him a strong pat on the shoulder. “Antoinette did what she thought was best for the city. Painful as it is to say, there is peace here.”

“The peace of gluttony, and sloth.”

“Ha! Well said.” Again his sire gave him a pat on the back. “It is true. These kine need the fear of God in them. But first, we must put the fear of the Lancea et Sanctum into the Kindred.”

“With Viktor Honors dead, the Invictus may not be our ally this time, Archbishop.”

“But if Tony is dead, as you say he is, then there is a flock out there, Damien. They need a shepherd. Do you know where that devil slept?”

“I do.”

Lucas gave a curt nod, stood up, and closed his bible with a loud, resounding thud, as if the walls of the church surrounded them once more. “Then come, and let us be the harbingers of a grand reckoning.”

# Part 2

## Chapter 12

~~One week later.~~

~~Jack~~

“Twenty million.”

“Fifty million.”

“Twenty million.”

“I’m sorry. Is there an echo in here?” The sly brute adjusted his gloves, even as he put his feet up on the table. A pistol rested in his chest strap, mirrored by the four thugs who stood behind him. Thugs in suits.

“I know what the merchandise is worth, and it’s not worth fifty,” Jack said. He was standing, with his arms folded across his chest and a surly look on his face. It was all part of the game, of course. Bargaining was just as much a game of knowledge as it was poker, reading and outplaying the opponent.

“Seller’s market kid. You want it, you pay fifty, and I know you want it.”

Jack could feel his frown growing. “You think I won’t buy it elsewhere?”

“Who else would deal with Xnomina? Your head man has gone missing, and all they have is his lackeys to follow up for him. So how about we cut the bullshit, and you give me fifty or get the fuck out.” The weasel kine gave a hearty chuckle; he’d thought he won.

Jack glanced over his shoulder. Julias was leaning against the wall, his arms across his chest in a similar manner to Jack. Or maybe it was Jack mimicking him?

Julias just gave him a shrug and a tiny smile. Time to man up.

Jack feigned a weary sigh, and began to pace left to right in front of the kine. He could smell the blood in their bodies, he could just faintly make out other smells too. Things normally lost to the air, he could make notice of; too much cologne was easy, but one of the men had a hint of perfume on him, and another smelled of gunpowder. All of them had the subtle mix of salt and musk that came with sweat.

When he glanced between them, they held his gaze, but there was a flicker of concern there. They didn't know him, and they didn't understand why he was so confident. He was just a young man, a tiny young man, with only one man for back-up, in a room full of sharks. What could he possibly do? When he returned their gazes, he gave them a smile, a grand smile, the smile of a man who made men like them dance on strings.

Being a Ventrue was not just his title, but his blood. Julias's lineage had started to take hold, and now, when he looked over the five humans trying to negotiate with him, he delighted in bravado of it all.

"Mr. Woolang ... look into my eyes." Jack took a step toward the table, put his hands down against it, and leaned forward to look straight at the businessman.

"Kid, I am looking right the fuck at you. What kind of ... of..."

Mr. Woolang's voice died down. His expression deadened, became deadpan. His body relaxed. With just a moment, he even lowered his feet, and sat still and limp with his head loose on his shoulders.

He looked right back at Jack, and Jack in turn gazed straight into the conniver's soul.

And he crushed it. The human's will was just an ant before him, and through his eyes he was able to find that will and grind it into dust. His sister Mary's will had been much stronger than this oaf, this worthless gutter trash, this inferior, juvenile thug. And despite himself, he enjoyed squashing it.

"You will accept twenty million, Mr. Woolang."

"I will ... accept ... twenty million." Like a drone.

"Mr. Woolong?" His guards walked up to reach out and shake him, and when they looked to Jack, they met his gaze too. And they too crumbled.

"You four will accept this as a good deal."

"We ... will accept..." A chorus of drones.

"Good. Call my assistant to arrange the exchange. Good night." He gave a short nod, didn't even try to hide the obvious pleasure in his eyes, and walked out of the room.

Julias chuckled behind him, but didn't say a word. He just followed his childe out, playing the role of bodyguard in their little charade. When Jack gave a glance over his shoulder, Julias was grinning at him, and gave him a pat on the shoulder as he closed the door behind him.

A few minutes later, they were out of the dark alley and back onto the busy streets of Dolareido. Hookers in fancy, expensive dresses, cocaine addicts in expensive suits, and expensive cars with nowhere to go. Such was Dolareido night life.

The sidewalks were large, but Dolareido was a city that reached the sky with apartments stacked on apartments, particularly in South Side. The hotels were luxurious and the casinos were noisy. It was a city that never slept, and that meant people, lots of them. Julias and Jack were soon buried in the crowd, but they walked through them with an ease Jack had never known when he was alive. Dodging shoulders and hips was easy, but keeping his eyes off their exposed necks was not.

Damn he was hungry. Mesmerizing five kine was not what he'd planned, and now he had an empty stomach to show for it.

“Five at once, Jack. Color me impressed.”

“Thanks. They were just ... it was just so damn easy. I mean I really wanted to do more, like tell them to beat each other senseless for that bull shit. Fifty million for just a year's worth-”

Julias gave him a quick jab in the side. Right, right, you don't mention any details where people can hear. Xnomina didn't need a federal investigation into its less-than-legal dealings. Kindred talk was easier to get away with in the open; vampires didn't exist after all.

“If you could have done more, then that is even more impressive. It may be a talent of a Ventrue to dominate another's mind, but it's coming to you really quick.”

“I got a good teacher.”

Julias stepped in beside him and hooked an arm about Jack's shoulder, complete with a hug. “I am pretty amazing.”

Jack laughed. Julias laughed. It was that same stupid laugh they shared back before Jack had ever known about vampires. God damn the nostalgia felt nice.

“Got another date with the Prince?” Julias said. His sire let go of him then, but not before giving him a hard punch in the arm. Julias didn’t used to be the guy with the buddy punches; Beatrice probably taught him that one.

“Yeah. With Xnomina’s schedule and her schedule, we don’t see each other as much as we’d like.”

“Look at you, trying to balance your work and social life like an adult.”

His sire was goading him. Good-natured ribbing had become the norm between them again, since Julias’s rise to power. The two of them had become the duo Viktor and Julias had once been, securing deals for Xnomina and expanding the power sphere of the Invictus. For now, it was just dealing with kine, and that was getting easier and easier every day.

But there was something else too. Julias was smiling more. He’d always been a more morose fellow, and in hindsight, Jack realized his sire fit the bill of eternally-tormented undead creature of the night quite well. That was then though. In less than ten days, the century-old Ventrue had gained a bounce in his step.

Could it have been because Viktor was dead? Or was it shark-mouth’s fault? Mental note: ask Beatrice, and thank her for whatever kinky shit she was doing to him to make him smile.

“Things going well with you and the Nosferatu?”

“I haven’t shown her the new place yet.” Julias waved down a taxi. “At first I figured she’d hate a mansion, but then ... well, she’s really got a thing for suits.” His sire grinned with that one.

“Ugh, I don’t want to visualize that.”

“Hey, you’re the one whose relationship is the hot topic. You don’t think everyone’s visualizing what Antoinette’s doing to you?”

He hadn’t thought of it, at least not in such explicit terms. Their relationship wasn’t secret, there was no way it could have been, but knowing other people were talking about him, picturing him with her? For a moment he frowned, but then the reaction passed, and a Ventrue smile replaced it.

“Let them.”

Once the taxi came to a stop, Jack jumped in, but Julias remained on the street and leaned forward to put his hands on the door and roof.

“Just be careful kid.”

“You know Antoinette won’t-”

“I don’t know her, and that’s the problem.” Julias gave a shrug. “I got everyone in this city figured out, Jack. I know what they want and I know why, even that witch Jacob. But her? Who knows what’s going on in any Dragon’s mind?”

Jack laughed then, and gave Julias a small, dismissing salute. “Blood and secrets, like everyone else.”

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The Elysium tower – the humans called it Central Tower – was where the Prince both held her meetings, and where she slept deep down in its depths. There were no other towers near it for several blocks, so once he found the garden maze that spread out before it, all he had to do was walk toward the giant glass monolith.

He stuck to the sidewalks for a little while, just to hear the heartbeat of the city more clearly. Taxis and high heels instead of crickets and rustling leaves. Over the past few months, they’d



become his chorus of life; it's not like he had his own to provide it. No heartbeat, no breath, even swallowing saliva or the need to blink were gone. He kind of missed it, but only a little.

Some larger kine walked by him, obvious that they expected him to be the one to move, but when he gave them a hard glare they were the ones to step aside. Julias had warned him Ventrue had a desire to dominate, to control, to own and rule, that it was in his blood and it would be both an asset and a curse. But for the moment, he enjoyed having the street crowd of kine be the ones to step around him, instead of him being the one to move.

He stepped into the garden maze. Antoinette really did have amazing taste, if old, but it really lent to the odd mash-up of modern metal railings and walls that served as platforms for the garden walls, the benches with carvings of stone vines, and actual vines that joined them. It was like someone had combined smooth, minimalist metal architecture with old, rustic stone carvings. The walls were short, three or four feet, so it wasn't much of a maze, and it let him see the various people coming and going from the streets and paths that connected with it.

Elysium was a no-violence zone for Kindred, and its garden maze was a great place for Kindred to hang out. He could see them, hiding in the shadows with only the occasional lamppost to expose them, and they gave him a quick glance before going about their business. Some of them stopped though, stared at him in shock, and then turned to a fellow Kindred to whisper.

He was the survivor of the incident that had killed Tony and Viktor; so many talked about that. Then there was the fact his relationship with Antoinette had become public knowledge. It's not like he could have hidden it, he was no Mehket, and Antoinette's movements were monitored by everyone.

And that was fine. He gave the other young Kindred a small smile, even a small wave, which was very decidedly not Kindred-like of him. They faded into the shadows. He couldn't blame them; that's what he did for a while when he first became Kindred.

According to Julias, he got over bullshit fast, and was picking up being a Kindred fast too. That didn't mean he didn't think about Mrs. Pavala or Mary or his mom, but he knew if he did too much, he'd be just like those other Kindred hiding in the shadows of Elysium. Weak, depressed, and struggling with their new life as undead predators. A different sire, different circumstances, and he could have spent a decade wallowing in misery.

He stopped in front of the giant, glass tower, and glanced back over his shoulder toward the garden maze. Damn it. He shook his head, like he was trying to shake out the infectious thoughts. Why the fuck was he thinking about all this? Get out of your head for once, Jack. Shit was going well. Shit was going very well. Just enjoy it.

So he pushed open the doors of the Elysium Tower, gave a nod to the front desk, and headed towards the elevator.

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The elevator didn't go all the way to the bottom floor, but stopped before an array of stairways in a giant lobby of the black marble the Prince seemed to like so much. From there, the stairways reached down to varying levels, each opening to a hallway marked by dragon statues at their entrances. Antoinette's vault was only the final part of the inner depths of the Elysium tower, and he wasn't there quite just yet.

It was an underground, ridiculously expensive paradise. The cost to fill each floor with its luxuries would have easily been in the tens of millions, like the huge pool, the electronic entertainment, the bar where only the best blood was served, the stage for musicians, and its locked labs where Antoinette pursued her secret Dracul ways.

The joys of power, money, and the centuries to use it.

Then there was a giant vault door. Getting through that would have taken a nuke, and it was only there the Prince felt comfortable sleeping the day. He walked down the stairs, fully intent on knocking, when the sound of splashing water drew his eyes to the side.

He walked between two dragon statues, curling marvels of blue, before stepping into the pool room. Like much of the underground levels, the walls, the floor, everything was black marble with cracks of white throughout. Antoinette really had a thing for marble. But, to her credit, it both looked awesome, and was updated with smart LED bulbs in carved holes. They were emitting slow waves of blue and white light over the huge room. The only sounds were the quiet hum of air cycling, and more splashing.

Antoinette was there. For a moment, he was excited at the prospect of seeing her in a swimsuit, but the tall creature was in a white bath robe, sitting on her side on a lounge chair by the poolside, her elbow propped up on its arm and a book in her hand. She was so tall, curvy, long white hair, just ... so fucking beautiful.

The water looked surreal with the white and blue light gently alternating over it against the black marble. Around the pool were a dozen huge lounge chairs of white, with glass tables for sitting and chatting. He'd never seen anyone use them though, until now.

The splashing was coming from two girls in the pool.

“Ashley, come on, I beat your time so bad.”

“Lies! Madness! You did no such thing. I am still the champ – Oh! Jack!”

Jack found himself standing at the edge of the pool. He felt so out of place, still in his shoes and wearing his suit, while the two ghouls

were wearing open-back one-piece swimsuits. But hot damn, the two blonde and brunette ballerinas looked great in the water. He did always have a thing for wet hair.

“Ah, Mister Terry. You arrived early,” the Prince said, and she lowered her book down before giving a small smile. “Good.”

“Ah, hey ... girls.” Nervous cough. The Prince’s two ghouls swam up to him, came to a stop only a couple feet away from him, and glanced at each other with delighted giggles.

“You’ve been stealing all the Mistress’s time! We haven’t seen her in over a week!” Ashley said.

Julee nodded in agreement.

“Sorry! But we’re ... you know...” Christ, he could stand toe-to-toe with any cold, ruthless thug, but talking to a couple of pretty girls was more than enough to put his tongue in a knot.

“Forgive the girls, little Ventrue. It is true that I have neglected them for you lately.” She motioned for Jack to come to her. “I hope you do not mind sharing my time with them for a little while?”

“No, of course not.” He walked around the pool, almost skipped, and came to a stand by the Prince. She had her white hair combed over her shoulder to drape down her chest and white robe, and she combed it with her fingers when she looked at him. So pretty.

“Come now Jack, please undress. There is no need for suits here.”

“Hehe, ya!” Ashley had followed him without leaving the pool, and now the blonde had her elbows up on the pool edge to hold herself while she watched. Julee followed in behind her, the quieter of the two girls, but she hooked her elbows over the pool edge just the same, and gave Jack a rather intrigued look.

He looked to the two ghouls, then back to Antoinette. She was giving him that look with her red eyes, the one where she expected him to obey. It was never a harsh or cruel look, but a dominating one nonetheless, and it was more than enough to make him oblige. He wanted to oblige.

He started to undress.

“Julee, Ashley, come here. You may have your drink while Jack gets comfortable,” the Prince said.

The girls pulled themselves out of the pool, and Jack couldn't help but sneak glances at their bodies while he undid the buttons of his jacket. Their swimsuits may have been one-piece, but their open-back designs left little to the imagination. Tight little ballerina bodies Jack very, very, very much wanted to sink his teeth into. Why didn't he eat before coming?

It only got worse when the two girls sat down on the floor, and with great smiles, waited impatiently while the Prince cut open her own wrist. Jack had never seen what it looked like, for someone to drink Kindred blood, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from Antoinette cutting open her skin with a fingernail. The pale skin of a vampire did not let blood just flow out freely, so Jack's eyes were glued to the sight of it when a large, thick, dark droplet of it formed over the wound. The Prince was forcing the blood out, much the same way a Kindred controlled their blood to do many things.

In this case, it was to feed her ghouls. First a single drop for Ashley, and then Julee, which had them both sighing with the bliss of satisfied addiction. Julias had explained the addictive properties of Kindred blood, but also how it turned humans into immortal, strong creatures for weeks before more blood was required. It had all been explained, but seeing it was so different, so real, how the two ghouls sat at Antoinette's side like pets. Happy, purring pets.

Soon, his jacket, tie, and shirt were on another lounge chair, with his shoes and socks underneath. “Um, should I—”

“All of it,” the Prince said.

He was just going to ask about the pants, but she wanted him naked. Naked in front of her two ghouls. The two pets even turned to look at him then, and they got comfortable on the marble floor to watch him like giddy school girls.

With an awkward cough, he slid off his pants and boxers. Like the Prince, he hadn’t blushed yet, so his skin was pale, thinned, and no physical symptoms of arousal were to be had. Despite that, Ashley and Julee giggled yet again, and watched him with hungry eyes.

“Oh. He’s a strong, lean little man, isn’t he Mistress?” Ashley said.

Antoinette nodded. “Indeed he is. Julias groomed him well.”

All three women were gazing at him, looking him up and down, smiling their devilish little smiles and sharing hushed chuckles. He was a piece of meat on display, and yet, he couldn’t even begin to be offended. Nervous and uncomfortable, sure, but after having seen Antoinette devour him with her eyes many times, it was exciting instead.

“Blush for us, Jack,” the Prince said.

He knew what would happen the moment he did, so he looked away, and kept his hands at his sides as he began the blush of life. Immediately, his skin warmed with the pulse of a fake heartbeat, and his member rose to a full erection; he suppressed his reflex to cover himself. Antoinette would not want him to cover anything.

The ghouls burst into fits of giggles, cheeks red with their own blushing, but the Prince gave each of them a thump on the head.

“Treat Jack with respect. He is my lover, and you will be seeing much of him.” The Prince motioned for Jack to sit on the chair his clothes were laying on. “Jack, you would not mind letting my pets grow more comfortable with you, yes? They have never been with a man.”

Jack took a seat, gripped the edge of the chair, and did his best to not squirm. Never been with a man? Was Antoinette implying what he thought she was implying?

“S-sure.”

More giggles, but when he looked at the ghouls, he could see they were just as nervous as him. Nervous, and aroused. The nipples of their small, pert breasts were standing hard against their swimsuits, and they just lightly rubbed their thighs together while they too squirmed a little. And, at the height of his new senses, he could smell their blood course with need.

Ashley was the first to get up. They’d shared a Kiss before, and the sight of her lithe body coming to sit next to him brought back all the tingly memories of it. When Julee came over and sat down on the other side of him, he actually started to get light-headed. So aroused, but so hungry too, a concoction of varying lusts fighting for his attention.

“We can ... touch him, Mistress?” Ashley asked.

Jack looked between the two blushing ghouls, then back to Antoinette. She met his gaze, nodded to him, and gave her lips a slow lick.

“Lean back, little Ventrue. Put your hands behind you on the chair, and do not move them.” Her words were hushed, teasing, but again they carried that controlling tone.

He obeyed, leaned back, and put his palms to the chair surface behind him. His body was on full display for the two girls at his sides, and he glanced between them with a nervous shiver.

“You may do whatever you wish with him, my pets,” Antoinette said, “but be mindful. He is Kindred, and mine.”

Welp, he was all their plaything now. But just looking at the Prince was more than enough to sway him; he really was hers, and he loved it.

Ashley was the first to touch him. With a warm sigh, the tiny woman put her hand on his chest, and her fingers roamed the indentations of his lean frame; she must have picked up the habit from the Prince. How long had the three of them been sleeping together? His mind drifted off to thoughts of the two girls, and Antoinette, naked, a mess of legs and breasts, fingers entering each other and lips on each others’—

A hand around his member snapped him to awareness.

“Oh, it’s ... hard, but kind of soft too.” While Ashley was busy exploring his chest, Julee had reached down to wrap her fingers around the hilt of his cock. “None of our toys ... get this ... texture.” Her mouth was lightly parted, and her eyes were fixed on his shaft. She looked like she was in a trance, as if her hand had developed a mind of its own. It started to squeeze him, just softly, and lightly stroke the base of him.

Ashley joined her, and put her hand over the remaining half of his length. “It’s kind of spongy.”

“Spongy?” He managed a sad, embarrassed frown at the blonde.

Both of them erupted into laughter, but they only scooted in closer, pressed their legs against his, and leaned in to push their



breasts against his arms. They put their cheeks to his chest, and looked at each other while glancing down at the cock in their hands.

“Are you gonna do it?”

“I dunno. Are you?”

“Maybe. Mistress said we could do whatever we wanted.”

“So we can ... you know.”

“Yeah. So this ... inside...” Ashley squeezed his cock a little harder.

“Then you should do it.”

“Why not you?”

“I dunno! It’s...”

“I’ll do it, then you do it, k?” Ashley said, and got up to stand in front of Jack.

“Ok.” Julee smiled at Ashley, then back to Jack. They had curious grins, like plotting thieves.

And then the two of them peeled their swimsuits off. Jack’s jaw dropped while they slipped the straps from their shoulders, and pulled the tight fabric away and from their skin. Like Jack, the two girls were lean creatures, small but well built, a bit skinny but nothing unhealthy; Antoinette would never let her ghouls be unhealthy. The two girls were, instead, athletic ballerinas, and their small, pert breasts stood at attention when finally exposed.

The two of them were blushing, but what embarrassment they may have felt was clearly overwhelmed by arousal; he could smell it on them. Their small nipples were hard against their skin, and when they finally pushed their swimsuits down past their hips to fall off, he could see their the arousal on their smooth pussies.

Then they attacked.

“Ah!” Like cats, they pounced him. Ashley got up onto his lap straddled him, and put her hands against his shoulders. He’d have handled her weight fine, but Julee sat beside him, grabbed his arm and pulled it from under him so he fell back onto the chair. Laying on his back with his legs off its side, he could only look between the two girls as they shifted him around until Ashley was comfortable in the nook of his pelvis, with Julee sitting next to them.

Antoinette let out a hearty chuckle. Jack looked to her in panic, but she just grinned at him, smiled that devil smile, and slid her robe apart at the thigh. The Daeva began the blush of life, raised one leg slightly, and with her eyes on Jack, started to lightly stroke her clitoris. Seeing him helpless against the whims of her ghouls was apparently extremely arousing for Prince.

God he loved that.

“So ... are you and the Mistress ... going to be together a lot?” Ashley slid forward a little, careful of her knees so she didn’t fall off the lounge chair, and gently placed her warm cunt against the underside of Jack’s cock. “We’ve never had a man before, and ... you’re nice. And cute.” She put her hands on his chest, and started to slide her body back and forth so her cunt’s lips coated his shaft. Antoinette said they’d never been with a man, but if that was true, Ashley had a major porn habit, cause she was quite comfortable with the position.

“ ... th-thanks.”

So warm, wet, inviting. Don’t move your hands, Jack. Every fiber in his undead body wanted to take the girl, slam her down on his cock, and bite into her. Drink her, feel her writhe in the Kiss while penetrating her. But Antoinette said don’t move, and when he looked to her again, he could see her lips were lightly parted, her

eyes just slightly glazed, and her fingers had disappeared between her legs.

Ashley giggled down at him, oblivious to his blood hunger. She shook her hips around a little, let out quiet mewls of bliss as she dragged her clit along his length, and reached out to take Julee's hand. Her fellow ghoul was awestruck by it all, Jack noticed, with her eyes locked to where Ashley was soaking him. And her mouth simply dropped when Ashley sat up, reached down, and guided Jack into her drenched insides.

The little vixen was so tight, it was almost painful. She slid into the groove of his pelvis, and with a playful squeal, wriggled her hips around some more.

"Nn ... oh ... oh! I like this." Ashley wasted no time. Jack could hardly believe the sheer sexual drive of the ballerina sitting on him. "We need to do this more." She started to slide back and forth with speed, complete with tiny mewls of bliss, and her insides only grew more tight as more of her juices coated him.

Antoinette had clearly nourished the girl's sexual drive, but Jack found himself looking away from the ghoul to the Prince instead. Ashley was certainly beautiful, and definitely lively, but she had none of the control or subtlety of Antoinette.

The Prince caught his eye, spread her robe for him so he could see her hand, and continued to finger her insides in slow, insidious motions. The woman was a sexual marvel of drawn-out, deliberate movements; everything she did was calculated to make him boil with need. As if on queue, with a grin, she used her other hand to point at Ashley, and silently mouthed some words.

Drink her.

Jack sat up, wrapped Ashley's naked back in his hands, and pulled her into him.

“What? Hey, wai-” Her words came to a stop when he sank his fangs into her neck.

Oh. My. God. The blood. Oh god it was so warm, and it tasted different. Something was different in the blood, an odd taste on his tongue like a sweet spice that made the blood a dessert. Ashley’s wriggling, writhing, squirming, it all mixed and made her blood practically squirt into his mouth; he had to bite her hard and keep his lips tight just to make sure none spilled.

“But ... we just ... started...” Ashley’s voice turned into quiet pants. Her hands reached out to hold onto Jack’s sides, but her grip was weak and trembling. Despite her growing still until she was reduced to a quivering, faint thing in his arms, she started to cum, hard. Her insides squeezed in random spasms, and a copious amount of juices leaked from her until she was dripping from his body.

Her orgasm intensified everything. The blood became a sweet, flowing river that washed over his tongue and throat, warmed his insides, and made him hold her tighter. The small creature in his grip was helpless, barely conscious anymore, but when he secured his grip and pulled her hips to him to sink her slit to the hilt of his cock, she came all the more. Being trapped in his Kiss while skewered on him turned the ghoul into a mess of trembling bliss and fluids, and with each shudder of her body, more of her blood naturally gushed over his teeth. No wonder Kindred often fucked their victims; it turned them into geysers of blood and delight.

Julee put her hand on his shoulder. It was enough to snap him back to awareness, and he finally let the blonde ballerina go. She collapsed against his chest though, and judging from the sounds she was making, she’d either passed out or was so exhausted she might as well have been. Jack gave her neck wound several licks, both to heal the fang marks, but also because god damn that blood was sweet.

“Wow. She...”

“Ashley grew a little too bold for my taste, and I could see Jack was hungry.” The Prince got up, stepped over to their chair, and reached out to pick up the petite thing. Jack let out a tiny groan as Ashley’s warm, drenched insides were pulled off of his cock, and the ballerina was set down onto another chair nearby.

“Can ... can I ... you know...” Julee slid a little closer to Jack, still on the same chair as him, and pressed her body into his arm. Her head was upturned to look at the Prince though; she was asking Antoinette, not him. He couldn’t blame her.

The Prince curled her fingers toward her as invite, and Julee got up to stand in front of her, between her and Jack. Julee didn’t have anywhere near the same bounce or enthusiasm as Ashley, but Jack could smell the arousal on her all the same. The brunette ballerina was definitely more shy than her friend.

“Please forgive me, my little Ventrue,” the Prince said. Still in her robe, the Prince was behind Julee – fuck she was tall – and put her hands on the small girl’s shoulders. “Ever since our first night together, I have shared stories with my pets of us. You know how much women enjoy talking with each other.” She let her hands drift over Julee’s shoulders, and even down her body to find her tiny breasts, where she cupped them and traced circles around her hard nipples. “And my poor pets have both been neglected, and dying to taste you.”

“Oh ... really? I mean, it’s just me.” He reached up to scratch at his head. Why would they want him so bad?

“Mister Terry, for all the confidence of a Ventrue, you underestimate yourself when it comes to women.” Antoinette reached down, wrapped one of her hands around Julee’s throat, and her other sneaked its way down the lean girl’s stomach to find her smooth, drenched pussy. To prove her point, the Prince

purposefully spread the ghoul's lips wide to expose the dripping folds.

Julee could only mewl with helplessness. She didn't struggle, didn't even turn her head, she just looked at Jack, the Prince's hand still around her throat, and blushed so bright her face went completely red. The ghoul really, really wanted him.

"So I promised my ghouls that they would have their first time with you." Antoinette nudged Julee forward, and the ghoul let out an excited squeak. She climbed onto the chair again, straddled Jack over his stomach, and put her hands on his chest. Unlike Ashley, the brunette had trouble making eye contact, and even raised one of her arms to hide her breasts after she noticed Jack staring at them. Her nipples looked so hard against her pert breasts and thin body.

"Shit, and I'm just laying here and-"

"Just as we wanted, little Ventrue. Please lay back, and relax." He couldn't see the Prince very well, with Julee nearly sitting on his chest, but he didn't have to to feel her grip around his cock.

"Ah ... hey..." Her grip was so ... perfect. Firm, solid, just shy of painful, just enough to keep him on the edge. And she kept that grip on him even as her other hand took Julee's hip, and slid her back like she was weightless until her warm lips found his glans. The Prince rubbed his cock up and down against Julee's entrance, but Jack couldn't see any of it, he could only wriggle and squirm while Antoinette teased Julee with him.

"Mistress ... please ... it's too embarrassing." Julee's whole body was turning red. She hugged herself, but one of her hands had drifted up to her parted lips where quiet pants and mewls escaped. The girl radiated young sexuality, the same as Ashley, even if it was behind some shyness. Jack understood her all too well.

But thank god, while Julee may have been too shy to initiate, Antoinette was not. She finally pushed Jack's swollen cock in toward the young girl's cunt, and pulled Julee back until she fell into the crevice of Jack's pelvis.

"Nn! Oh ... oh..." Julee put her hands down against her own legs and looked down at where she was spread over Jack's cock. Everything was soaked, and not just in her own juices but her fellow ghoul's as well. So warm, so very warm. "This ... feels nice. It feels different than toys. It..." Julee shifted her weight forward a little, partly at the Prince's behest as Antoinette put both her hands on the girl's hips. "It's got ... it's different, and..."

The Prince laughed, a full laugh that made Jack smile despite himself. "Sex between a man and woman is a delicious thing. You can feel him filling you up, spreading you open, warm, hard." Antoinette said, and after sitting down behind Julee on the large lounge chair, she reached one hand up under Julee's arms until she found the girl's throat again. Just a small grip of the petite thing's neck was enough to make Julee squeeze on Jack's cock like a vice.

And when the Prince used her other hand to play with Julee's swollen clit, Jack had to do everything in his power to not cum right there.

Julee on the other hand held no such reservations. Jack could see it in the tiny thing's barely open eyes; the Prince's grip around her neck was a trigger. With Antoinette holding the girl's neck in one hand, and her clit in the other, her ghoul turned into a squirming mess of mewls, and Jack could only do his best to hold still. Those tight, squeezing muscles were working back and forth on his length, though from the look on Julee's face he could see she wasn't meaning to. She was too preoccupied with trying to hold still, but the Prince knew just how to touch, just where to squeeze, to milk pleasure from someone. She'd done it to him dozens of times, and now she was doing it to the girl sitting on his cock.

Then Antoinette sank her teeth into Julee.

“Mistress! Not now, I ... he’s ... watching...”

Julee started to cum immediately, and Jack joined her a moment later. There was simply no way he could hold on any longer, with how the ballerina was moaning, mewling, and trembling on him. When Antoinette bit into her, Julee just erupted in the same way Ashley had, and came so hard Jack could feel every muscle inside her spasm in random spurts. Her juices practically gushed over his cock, down his pelvis, and his own juices soon joined her in the mess, white trickling out of her. She was milking him of his cum, wringing it out of him, when all she was trying to do was survive the combination of orgasm and Kiss.

But for Jack, it was about seeing the act. He’d never actually gotten to see a vampire feed, not like this, not so close. He got to watch Julee’s eyes roll upward in the unnatural bliss, see her whole body tremble in the weird mixture of pleasures, see her hands fumble about blindly for something to hold onto while her body shook. Her skin grew a little more faint with the moments, but that didn’t stop her body from convulsing in pleasure. The blood was flowing through her like a wave with each mewl she made; he could actually see Antoinette’s mouth suckle each time the girl’s hips subconsciously pushed forward to grind her cunt against him, milking him of his cum until that too was dripping off of his testicles. Her trembling, quivering insides massaged his swollen cock and ripe glans until the waves of pleasure had his own legs shivering underneath her.

And then there was Antoinette. The Prince was still in her robe, cozy up behind Julee between Jack’s legs. The tall woman was sustaining Julee’s orgasm to what must have been painful degrees; he knew the feeling. Her eyes though, they were looking at Jack. Red, seductive, intelligent eyes that were gazing into him with blatant desire. He managed to hold eye contact with her, even as



Julee continued to writhe on his cock; she wanted to see his eyes, and he wanted to see hers. The Prince loved to stare into his eyes, and with time, he learned to meet hers, to look into her ruby gaze and drink it in.

It was like looking into the eyes of a goddess. Ancient, wise, all-around unfathomable, and so damn fucking beautiful. And she was smiling at him with those eyes even as she drank her ghoul, like it was something easily done. He could barely keep his eyes open when in the Kiss, let alone flirt during it.

At last, she was done drinking. He'd never seen Antoinette so soon after she fed, but he imagined a recently fed tiger looked similar. Julee, on the other hand, was a twitching mess of exhaustion, and she'd long ago collapsed backward against the Prince's bosom.

Antoinette pulled her fangs from the girl's neck, and gave her skin light kisses. "Julee is a little different than Ashley, no?" Again the Prince wrapped her hand around the girl's throat, and squeezed, this time tight enough that Jack could see the girl having trouble breathing. She was choking the exhausted ghoul, and even more so, she started stroking and massaging the girl's clit once more.

And that was more than enough to make Julee, barely conscious after the Kiss, start to tremble on his cock again. Her young muscles squeezed him hard enough to make him wince, milk the final sparks of pleasure from his orgasm, and draw out a few more drops of his cum. Even more of Julee's juices trickled down over him as Antoinette brought the brunette a second orgasm. The ghoul was completely exhausted by the Kiss, and simply sat there with her arms dangling at her sides while her whole body quivered.

Finally, the Prince let Julee breathe, and even gave her a kiss on the cheek, before lifting her from Jack's body, and setting her down

next to Ashley. “She enjoys a little breath play, some light domination. Did she feel pleasant upon you, during my Kiss?”

“Oh god yes.”

“Wonderful.” Antoinette let out a long, satisfied sigh, and undid the belt of her robe. That body was beyond amazing, and such a contrast to the two ghouls she kept. A flat stomach and fit physique, true, but she was a curvy woman, with wide hips, thick legs, and glorious, massive, heavy teardrop breasts.

He really had a thing for breasts.

She kept the robe on, but open, and slipped herself over him so smoothly he almost didn't even realize she was moving. The goddess reached down, took his drenched member in her hand, slid it into her awaiting insides, and then she too got comfortable in the nook of his pelvis. In just a split moment, she'd gone from standing before him, to fucking him, as if she were just slipping on shoes. The expression on her face was anything but bored though; she looked delighted.

“Oh my. Everything is so wet. My pets do not normally make such a mess; they must like you more than I thought.” The Prince moaned softly, shifted her weight about to get more comfortable on him, and put her hands on his chest. “I hope I did not betray your trust when I promised them they would taste you.”

She talked so casually, comfortably, despite that she was sitting on his cock and already rocking herself back and forth in a gentle-but-perfect pace. Ashley's blood was fresh in his belly, thank god, so he was still good for a round two.

“I'm just surprised they wanted to so badly.”

Antoinette let out a sultry chuckle. “Well, I did regale them with tales of your touch, little Ventrue. Stories involving your lips on my

breasts, in particular, were of great interests to them.”

“I ... can’t blame them.” He reached out for her. They’d had sex a few times now, and when she was on top, they got into a nice rhythm. She would lean forward, put her hands on his chest, slowly work herself toward orgasm, and he got to play with her breasts. Soft, heavy, they filled his palms to overflowing, and a gentle squeeze made the Prince smile down at him. He brought his thumbs to her nipples, and lightly teased her swollen, large areola.

“Next time, I am sure they will ask for similar breast play from you.” She closed her eyes and pushed her hips forward a little harder. She’d been masturbating before, and it showed in her movements; she was already close to climax.

“Next time? Sure! Sure, I just...”

“Hmm?”

“I ... I don’t want you to think that ... I’m here just for sex, you know?”

“Jack.” She gave him a thunk on his forehead with her right hand’s knuckles. “You are not kine anymore. You are Kindred. Let go of your inhibitions, and embrace the few joys of unlife.” Now she sounded like an Ordo Dracul.

“But I—”

“I know, and I understand. You need not worry. You are mine, and I am yours. No one else spends the day in my bed while I sleep, not even my ghouls.” The Prince sat up straight, raised her arms, stuck out her chest, and combed her fingers through her hair like a glamour model. She was just showing off for him now, as any Daeva loved to. Her long, beautiful white hair matched her robe nicely.

And god he loved to watch her show off for him. He lowered his hands down to her hips, and just gently held on while she danced on his cock for him. She was squeezing him harder, and pushing herself forward into him a little faster. Some small sounds were even coming out of her, with a much deeper, huskier voice than the ghouls could manage.

“And I hope you forgive me, little Ventrue, if you think I only desire you here for sex.” She leaned forward again, put her hands on his shoulders and elbows down to the blankets, so her chest was pressed to his. So much taller than him, it caused her huge breasts to overwhelm him chest and shoulders. “But ... I look at you, and until I am satisfied, all I can think of is this.”

She pushed her hips forward harder this time, and then stopped. Her voice went silent, replaced with a single, quiet pant, before she started to very lightly shiver on him. While her whole body was mostly still, her cunt squeezed down on him so very, very hard, and her warm juices joined the pool of wetness already soaking his cock.

It amazed him how the woman was in so much control of her body that her orgasm was something she'd mastered. She wanted to cum, so she came, and her warm, tight muscles did not hesitate to milk him in thankful bliss for it. Even while the orgasm trembles worked through her pussy, squeezing and massaging him, her eyes never closed, and instead gazed into his while their noses touched. And when the trembles began to settle, she started to fuck him harder, and soon earned herself another orgasm.

The longer he held out, the longer he got to watch her gorgeous eyes in orgasm, and feel her powerful, constricting, massaging flesh on his length. She even dipped her hips around in a dancing motion, like a belly dancer, just to make him mewl he bet. It worked every time.

“Three women have cum on you tonight, little Ventrue.” She nudged her nose into his cheek, and then his own nose, before smiling into tiny kisses on his lips. “Where would you like to cum?”

Oh god. She always knew when he was close, every time. She’d work him to the edge, and with a succubus smile, ask him.

“In ... inside.” Much as he loved her outside, her insides were so warm, wet, and binding tight. And the lounge chair didn’t leave much room for different positions.

Antoinette chuckled over him and got to work, sinking herself to the hilt before slowly raising her ass, all the while making sure to squeeze her muscles so tight she almost hurt him. Almost. She knew just how hard to squeeze to milk the rising waves of pleasure, and she knew just how to arch her back, twist her hips, and ease herself back down to make sure she edged him toward orgasm in slow, blissful strokes of his glans and length.

He was a little more bold these days, a little more confident. The Prince was more than happy to receive his touch, and god damn he wanted to hold her. So he did. He wrapped his arms around her, hugged her taller body, and let his hands roam up and down her back underneath the robe. When he started to cum, he had to settle his hands on her shoulder blades and just hold on while she worked her magic.

They never broke eye contact. It was her thing; she liked to watch his eyes when he came, and he was quickly picking up the fetish for hers too. She sank her hips down, and with her body devouring every single inch of him, she shifted her hips left to right in a slow, deliberate movement. Just at the right pace, and squeezing so hard in rhythm with him spurts of cum, that she milked each gush of him until more of his fluid was leaking out of her.

Holding eye contact while she masterfully wrung every drop of cum out of him while riding him at the edge of pain and pleasure

was not an easy task, but it was worth it to see her quenched smile.

“I look forward to other choices, little Ventrue.” Her voice was warm, and he could feel her delighted chuckle through her chest into his while she nudged their noses. “Not that I mind this, indeed I love to feel your cum inside me, but the ghouls would delight getting to play with you. Perhaps I could seduce you with an image?” She sat up, brought her hands up to her breasts, and she cupped their weight with her palms. “You, sitting on my stomach, and both Ashley and Julee,” she motioned to the two sleeping girls, “kissing and suckling on your length until your cum coats my breasts.” Her smile turned devilish. “Just a thought.”

Oh god he was dating an ancient, all-powerful succubus.

She stood up then, and let out another satisfied sigh, before walking over to grab some towels. He immediately grabbed the opportunity to watch her ass sway with her steps, and couldn't stop himself from groaning at the sight of the copious amount of juices the four of them had made dripping down her thighs. While the Kindred's fluids were already fading, the ghouls' would not.

So the Prince took a moment to wipe some of the mess away, and tossed Jack a clean towel to do the same. “Come, to my changing room.”

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“While it pleases me that Ashley and Julee can orgasm with such intensity, I do hate having to clean such messes. Their cum is everywhere.”

The shower in her changing room was, predictably, luxurious, huge, and a marvel of black marble, metal fixings, and LED lights from carved holes in the ceiling. There was no curtain or glass barrier, as the shower itself was its own room within the changing room. But his eyes weren't looking at the shower walls, they were looking at Antoinette.

The blush of life had ended, but that didn't change how beautiful she was. Her nipples and lips were dark instead of red, her skin a paler version of alabaster, and the lack of blood flow caused the skin to thin lightly. But with her long white hair, now wet underneath the shower flow, cascading down her back and sticking to her from the water, his eyes had become transfixed. She was so tall, curvy, that just watching the water pour down the S shape of her body was mesmerizing.

Suddenly, all those stupid old paintings of naked women in water all made sense.

“Will you not join me?”

“Oh! Yeah, definitely.” He hopped in with her, and forced himself to lift his gaze from her body. It was the first time he'd ever seen her changing room, or the shower room half of it, and he grinned up at the hot water when it found him. Antoinette didn't use a shower head like a normal person, no. Instead, she'd set up a sort of fake waterfall that poured from slanted marble in the ceiling, and it fell down on them like heavy rain.

“How long did it take to build this place? And keep it so modern, with all these cool ... things.” He pointed at the waterfall structure when he looked up to her. It was seriously awesome.

“Decades, little Ventrue. It was long before I...” The moment she met his gaze, her voice stopped, and trailed off like someone had stolen it.

Antoinette was staring at him. He blinked at her, a little confused, and tilted his head to the side. Her arms reached out for him, and with a tender touch, she turned him around so his back was to her. She pulled him against her, leaned forward to hug her arms around him, and rested her chin on his shoulder.

“Did ... did I say something wrong?”

“You do not even notice when you do it, do you?”

“Do what?”

“When you smile so. Your eyes widen, your mouth parts slightly, your cheeks raise.” Her voice turned to a whisper, and her hug grew a little tighter around him.

Damn. She was talking about his facial expressions. “Julias is teaching me to get better at, you know, not wearing my emotions on my face. Hard to work for the Invictus if I can’t lie with a straight face.”

“A useful skill.” She reached out for something, and when he looked down he found she’d filled a hand with soap, and was rubbing it down along his abdomen. “But when I see you smile, in such a way that even your feet gain a small bounce, I ... please do not lose that.”

Fuck, his feet gain a small bounce? He frowned a little at that; he’d never make a good negotiator if he couldn’t learn to lie. He did alright with the thugs from earlier, but they were just stupid, arrogant kine. He needed to be able to fool a Kindred.

The Prince didn’t care about that though. When he turned his head to take a peak at her with her chin on his shoulder, she nudged her nose into his, and took a long taste of his lips. “Please.”

“I ... I won’t,” he said. The way she looked at him, like her heart would break, was enough to shake him to the core. He never wanted to lie to her.

“Good.” She rested her forehead against his temple, while her hands started to roam over his lower body to clean him. If he turned on the blush, the situation would have instantly turned erotic, but he didn’t want to. It was just really nice to lean back into her body, and let her hold him, hug him, and wash him.



“I am hosting a ball in several weeks, my little Ventrue. It will be a time for the covenants, all of them, to socialize without the weight or worry of Viktor and Tony’s anger. And I do hope that you,” she poked him in the chest while her other hand continued to lather him, “will accompany me as my companion. My date.”

Uh oh.

“Really? Um ... I mean, I’d love to but...”

“I know you worry for my station, but there is no need. Everyone already knows of us, even the other fledglings.” She turned him to face her, and took his hand into hers. “And this is my city. I can protect myself, and all know that any who harm you will see a swift sunrise.”

“It’s not that. It’s...” Ah shit, his expressions must have been so damn obvious then.

“What is it then?”

“ ... I can’t dance.”

# Chapter 13

~~Beatrice~~

Beatrice had no idea Dolareido had so many dark, hidden corners.

“You Carthians. It will never cease to amaze me how much you want to adapt the modern,” Jacob said.

“Modern?” The two of them were deep into North Side, and probably near the edge of the city. It was a big city; she’d never been out this far.

“That you would take a car, instead of this!” The crazy Nosferatu gave that weird chuckle of his, and jumped. With the old, dark robes he was wearing, he looked like a shadow.

They were on rooftops in the old business district, old old, back from way before Beatrice was alive. North Side had long ago turned into more a factory district, full of heavy labor workers during the day, and dead silent at night. And it meant that the two monsters could jump from rooftop to rooftop of factories, warehouses, parking garages, foundries and power plants. They had the freedom to let loose, jump from building to building like the predators they were, and even look up at the sky.

Every so often, that’s exactly what they did. Jacob would hold up a hand, look up at the sky — what the fuck dude your eyes are covered with bandages how the fuck can you see — and sigh with some weird bliss. But hey, when he did, she did, and she had to admit, damn that was a nice sky. You couldn’t see it in South Side, not with all the massive buildings and the constant sources of light.

“It’s hard to go roof jumping when there’s a hundred thousand cameras and a couple million eyes looking around,” she said.

“Hard for us?”

“ ... no, I suppose not.” It was true, of course. Any Nosferatu or Mehket could hide in shadows, and the best of them could hide in plain sight. Jacob could. She could.

She followed after him, jumping from rooftop to rooftop, like cats jumping from tree to tree. “You put your den way the fuck out here?”

“Dolareido started over a couple hundred years ago. Back then, it was just Antoinette, her lover Tony, Viktor, and me.” He grinned over his shoulder at her. “Three groups. We all took a corner, and I have since made sure that my corner is ... not a focus point of attention.” He stopped then, and this time gave her a Joker smile. “Kind of like your Catacomb Fortress of Solitude.”

She grumbled and looked away. The fucker was disturbingly pop-culture savvy, considering he was the oldest Kindred in the whole fucking city.

“Fine. Fuck you, but fine. So I’ve earned your trust, is that it?”

He walked toward her then, and she stood her ground. The elder Nosferatu had had multiple opportunities to kill her; that wasn’t his game. So she wasn’t afraid of him killing her, or at least that’s what she told herself. He was a psycho, and the closer he got, the more her inner-beast told her to shut up the fuck up and run.

“Of course not.” He poked her in the shoulder, and she stood there and took it. The fuck was she going to do to him? “The primogen know of the den. You can do no real harm knowing its location. And besides, I think you’ll like it.”

More grumbles, but she eventually gave a nod, and clicked her monstrous crocodile teeth side to side. “Fine, let’s go.”

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All the way outside the city and further up North Side, they came to the mix of hard, dry forest and rock. Lots of lifeless rock. But Jacob gave her a wink, and jumped down one of the larger drops.

Holy mother fucking shit. There was a cave. An actual real cave buried in a dense bit of wood and bush, at the base of the canyon. The fall would have killed any kine, as it was pretty steep, and the landing was almost nothing but jagged rocks, but the two Kindred were able to jump down without issue. Jacob squeezed through all the twigs and sharp stone like a snake, slick and smooth; she got a thousand cuts trying to follow him. But it was worth it.

The cave was, for a good long while, just a tunnel, but after a couple minutes of pressing forward through solid black, her Kindred eyes were suddenly forced to adjust to flickering brightness.

She thought her catacomb was metal, but whatever fucking insanity Jacob had set up in the cave was beyond humbling. The tiny tunnel expanded into a massive, absolutely colossal cavern. A thousand people could have fit in it, and when she glanced around, she could see there were tunnels that lead elsewhere. The floor of the cave had been smoothed out, like a beach stone, and the walls were not only smoothed out as well, they had holes carved into them. They held skulls, and the skulls served as the base for lit candles.

All along the walls of the rounded cave, there were bones hung in symmetrical arrangements. Where someone else may have hung paintings, or splurged on fancy sidings and curtains, the cave used bones. They weren't just put at random, but arranged as artwork themselves that drew her eye to the center of the room. Skulls were the theme, naturally, and some sort of fountain altar, lined with skulls up and down its rim and sides, stood in that center.

A couple of ghouls were walking around, nothing special about them, except they had brooms and clothes and were casually

cleaning.

“ ... did you find this?”

“No. Decades of effort were required to carve this hole.” Jacob jumped across the whole of the massive room, and landed by the center altar, just opposite of her. She walked, walking was fine, but her eyes were drawn to that altar; as she approached, she could see it was filled with red liquid, thick and viscous.

On the way toward the altar, she glanced around. Many of the tunnel holes dug into the walls were actually just small rooms, some ground level and some higher, all rounded and filled with furs. And one of them had noises coming from them.

She took a peak at Jacob, but he just shrugged at her with a smirk, and looked into his bowl of blood. So she had the freedom to explore, did she? They probably figured she'd be too timid in the new surroundings, well fuck them. She walked toward the noise, got comfy in the doorway with her shoulder against the wall of stone, and folded her arms against her stomach.

“Beatrice.”

“ ... Othello. Haven't seen you in a while.” She tried to hide the shock in her voice, but it was true she hadn't seen the man in some time.

Othello was a dark-skinned fellow with delicate brown eyes, long black hair, and whoever had groomed him before embracing him had put him through a grueling training regimen. He was of average height, sure, but he was built like a tank. Steroid abuse had probably been in his history, when he was kine. He was a Daeva too, and as far as Beatrice knew, he was almost a century old, almost as old as Julias. He was one of their strongest Ancillae Kindred; he'd been a Carthian before he kinda just upped and left.

Apparently, he'd joined the Circle of the Crone. And apparently he was enjoying himself, as was the woman sitting on his lap. A curvy, short creature with clipped red hair was facing Beatrice, her back to Othello, with her legs spread and her ass grinding into his naked body. The Kindred was just sitting there, letting the girl do all the work, but judging from the noises she was making she was perfectly happy with that. The quiet Daeva's cock had spread her ass open, so the woman's cunt was on full display, and it was a mess of juices. The room smelled thick of her sex.

"Enjoying the view?" The big guy's hands reached out for the curvy little fox on his cock, and they started to drift and roam up and down her body. He made a showing of pinching her nipples, lifting her breasts by them to let them drop, jiggle a little too, before sliding down to her pussy. His fingers slipped into her cunt, and from how the girl started moaning, he was probably stroking her insides with his shaft deep in her ass.

Beatrice shook her head for a second to snap her eyes back up to Othello's; now was not the time to think about sex. But there wasn't any harm in looking, right?

"You could say I'm a little surprised. You witches just fuck like animals, all the time, no privacy?"

"We could have privacy, if we wanted," he said, "but we don't. No desire to. It's not really in the spirit of the Circle, is it?" Suddenly, the ghoul started squirming and mewling; Othello's fingers had started doing a number on her insides.

"... I suppose not." She took a peak around his room. Nothing in there except a mountain of furs to rest on, and fuck on.

More noises, but not from those two. She gave Othello a small nod, he returned it, and she moved on. She really, very much tried to not think of the girl having the anal sex with the fingering and

the wriggling and the squirming and the cumming. Arg, she could smell sex, and it was making her hungry.

The next room with noises required a good thirty-foot jump to reach, but was otherwise the same, just a really large, carved-out nook in the wall of stone and bones. It was all smooth stone with a couple of skull candles in its walls, and a mountain of furs.

This time she found Jennifer. The Ventrue was only a decade embraced, a neonate, and they actually looked kind of similar with their ear-length raven hair that framed their face, average height, slightly dark skin, and slim, fighter physiques. Every time Beatrice saw her, it was a painful mirror of what she'd look like if she wasn't Nosferatu.

Jennifer's side was to the doorway, and she was laying down on her back on top of a man. And on top of her, was another man, and she had her legs spread around his hips.

“ ... you have got to me shitting me.”

“Oh, Beatrice. Jacob said he'd be bringing you here today.” Jennifer let out a quiet sigh of pleasure, and turned her head to look to the Nosferatu.

She didn't stop fucking though. In fact, the two men – ghouls, Beatrice assumed – just continued to fuck her and ignored Beatrice completely. Even knowing she was coming, Jennifer hadn't bothered to hold off her sexual desires until later. Everyone just went with their desires in the Circle, evidently.

“So you all really do just fuck like animals.” This time she did look away, but the image was already burned into her skull. One girl, two guys, six legs, the rhythmic back and forth of three sets of hips, and Jennifer's quiet, controlled sighs.

The Ventrue just laughed, and wrapped her hands to pull the man between her legs closer. “We are animals, just at the top of the food chain. I think we’re entitled to a few perks.” Spoken like a true Ventrue. “Come join me. My ghouls won’t mind a Nosferatu, what with Jacob terrorizing them regularly.”

The two men chuckled at that, but still didn’t stop. They’d buried their faces in the girl’s neck at that point, and just kept gently fucking the Kindred between them. It was all so surreal, the way their limbs all just entwined on each other, their bodies on the furs. Jennifer was apparently quite comfortable with the position, and she relaxed into their bodies while her hands roamed over one of the men’s back. The Ventrue angled her hips in just the right way, and raised her legs in just the right way, to keep everything moving in just a perfect pace of sexual god damn fucking beauty.

Well, Beatrice was definitely down with the Circle’s approach to sex. It took everything she had to look away, but she had a boyfriend now though. Shit, now she had thoughts of Julias, naked, doing things to her.

“Um, can’t, but ... I’ll ... uh ... talk to you later.”

She didn’t wait to hear whatever Jennifer had to say, or moan. She’d seen more naked bodies fucking in five minutes than she usually did in weeks of hunting, so that was enough sex thoughts for now. A second later she was down by Jacob.

“Enjoy the sights?” he said.

“This is like, some Phantom of the Opera shit dude.” She gestured to the array of candles that lined the back wall. Unlike the other candles, the ones along the back were all sitting on hands of bone that jutted out from the wall, instead of sitting in a carved indent. “... if Erik had been even more horny. You all just fuck all the time?” Then she gestured to the holes-in-walls with the two Kindred and the sex noises.



Jacob just shrugged, like it were the most casual question. “My acolytes? Jennifer, Othello and Aaron do. The Circle encourages us to embrace our primal desires. You want to fuck? Fuck. You want to kill? Kill.”

She winced at that last part. “That where you got all these bones?”

“Indeed, from decades ago. I thought you would be comfortable with killing kine though. I know you have, many times.”

“Yeah but ... I did try to always make sure anyone I killed deserved it.”

That was enough to get Jacob laughing. He put a hand up to his salt and pepper hair, and raised it on the bandage that covered his eyeless eyes. “Don’t we all?”

“No, we don’t all, you jackass. I know some Kindred who are sickening.” She put her claws on the edge of his big blood altar, but her eyes were on him. “You think Tony or Viktor didn’t occasionally kill a kine, or maybe someone’s new childe, just because they could?”

“And now they’re both dead.” That grin of his was massive and disturbing.

“... ok, ok, but you said you wanted to sew some chaos. The fuck are you aiming for?”

“What do you know of the Circle of the Crone, Beatrice?” Jacob began to circle the altar then, and dragged his finger along the bowl’s edge where the skulls surrounded it.

“Fuck all, cause you’ve told me fuck all. All I know is that you’re all a bunch of primal fucks and ... that’s it. Carthians are trying to secure modern government for Kindred, with groups and votes and shit, while you disturbing weirdos would prefer anarchy.”

“Not anarchy.” He shook his head, dipped his hands into the bowl of blood, and then ran his fingers along the skulls of the altar. “Anarchy is bullshit. Freedom for everyone? Everyone gets to just do their own thing? Don’t make me laugh.” He laughed, and raised the finger to lick some of the blood off.

It was old blood, and most definitely not appetizing. Fucking gross.

“The Circle,” he continued, “wants us to accept what we are. And that’s it.”

“That some philosophical bullshit?”

“Not at all.” He stepped between her and the altar, and slipped his hands into his robes while he got comfortable leaning back against it. “Tell me, when you tore Rebecca apart with your claws, how did you feel?”

Shit, Rebecca. She’d sunk her Nosferatu claws right into that bitch’s back, when she was about to kill her man, and she’d torn her apart. “ ... fucking awesome.”

“Right? To get your nails right into someone and just destroy them in such a savage way. I’m sure you felt something deep down inside. I only wish my Nosferatu curse had given me such delightful claws.” Jacob ran his bloody fingers along his face then. His fingers looked normal, but he was forced to wear bandages over his eyes lest a kine see them, or lack there of.

She frowned. Her inner-beast had reveled in the bath of Kindred blood and ash, but it made no sense for Kindred to just give in to their beasts. Inner-beasts were mindless, incapable of keeping the Masquerade, and if the Masquerade fell, all Kindred everywhere would get wiped out; humans had this nasty perk of outnumbering Kindred ten million to one.

“Yeah, I get you. Fucking felt satisfying, but-”

“Not just satisfying. Don’t fucking lie to me, Beatrice.” He reached out and grabbed her hands. Now she had old, disgusting blood on her huge claws, but she didn’t try to remove her hands from his grip. She probably couldn’t if she tried. “It felt natural. Like instinct.”

“Instinct.” She raised an eyebrow, but Jacob gave her a long, waiting gaze. He wanted to know what she thought, no lies, and she had never really thought about it. When Rebecca was about to kill Julias, she’d just acted, no thought to it. Well fuck. “Then ... yeah, I guess. I mean I just ... just went with it.”

“Exactly! By the grace of God, she’s seen the light” He let go of her hands and raised his own, like a preacher giving praise to the lord, but the dopey and psychotic smile on his face betrayed him. “Someone wanted what was yours, so you tore them apart when you saw the opportunity.”

“Yeah ... so?”

“So? You ever seen an elder get their hands dirty like that?” He walked around the altar again until it was between them, and this time he kept his face pointed down at it. “You think a human, blood-cattle kine, would have the instinct to rip into someone like that, with their bare hands, or their teeth?”

She folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot, but shook her head. “So elders are bitches, and we’re not like kine, is what you’re saying?”

“That is part of it. The Circle of the Crone is such a simple thing, such a straight forward thing, and there is only one binding view. Just one mother fucking thing you need to believe to be a member.” With that, he made a large sweeping gesture to the cavern around

them. The furs of dead animals, the skulls and bones of dead kine, and the altar of blood before them. “That we’re natural.”

“Natural.”

“Natural.”

“Natural?”

“Natural.”

“Natural! I get you said natural, ok? Fucking explain it.”

Her frustration just made the bastard laugh. “What else is there to explain? Do you think God reached down from the sky and cursed Vlad the Impaler, or Longinus and his spear, with undeath?”

“ ... no.”

“Do you think answers to our plight can be solved with governments, monarchies or democracies, totalitarians or councils or politics? You really think the Invictus or the Carthians will be able to carve out something worthwhile out of the clusterfuck of insanity that is a bunch of lone predators trying to live together and share food?”

“ ... no.”

“Do you think there is some hidden meaning to being a Kindred? Some explanation to our existence that will raise us to a new level of understanding?”

“ ... no.”

“Then you are no Ordo Dracul, Invictus, or Carthian. And thankfully, no Lancea et Sanctum either. Now perhaps, do you think that Kindred simply ... are? That we have been around for as long as kine, and we exist just as they do? Do you stare up at the night sky

and think of God casting his judgments, or do you think the universe is just really fucking big, and you are one tiny fucking spec inside that infinite cosmos?”

Well, she didn't look up at the stars much, but yeah, that was exactly what she thought. She clicked her teeth to the side and blinked her snake eyes at him. “Sure.”

“And that is what we believe. We simply are what we are. Lone predators who have been hunting the kine since there were kine to hunt.”

She tapped her foot on the ground some more. “That's a lot of preaching and not much to do with it.”

“Too true, too true. The truth is, I have need of a right hand, such as the Invictus have.”

“Pretty sure Othello is a lot older than I am, Jacob.”

“Perhaps. He has value, but he does not have the same hunter's instinct as you, not the same...” he tapped his bloody finger on his lip, “affinity for brutality that you do. Like I do.”

She winced again, but found herself taking a small step back. The old Nosferatu loved to leave little implications like that laying around, like candy eggs or land mines.

“You realize you're asking me to leave the Carthians, right?”

“Garry is a friend ... of a sort. He will understand, and I do believe you'd prefer some of the tasks I have planned for you, over Garry's meaningless tests of territory with the Invictus.”

She did hate the stupid bickering the Carthians and Invictus had all the time. Kindred got hurt, sometimes killed, because someone didn't respect feeding grounds, and it was just a bunch of stupid

political bullshit, red tape, and lies to get justice. Jacob had her pegged.

“Ok, alright, I admit you guys really got a thing going for you that I like. Maybe a little heavy on the Gothic shit,” she said with a motion to the walls decorated in bones, “and maybe a little heavy on the porn show,” and another motion to the rooms where Jennifer and Othello were getting off, “but yeah, you’re talking my language. I’ll give it a shot. What’s your test?”

Jacob gave a slow nod. His face turned serious, very serious, which was so very odd on his almost constant Joker expression.

“Lucas has risen from torpor, and that means there will be conflict soon.”

“Lucas?”

“An old friend from long ago. When the Prince was finally at the end of her patience, she expelled the Lancea et Sanctum, and killed the Bishops and Priests. Lucas, the Archbishop, disappeared, and no one was able to find him. We had simply assumed he left Dolareido, even me, but I was wrong.”

She just listened, and as he talked, her mouth dropped more, and more. He talked about it like it were the most casual thing, but he was talking about the purge of the Second Estate. It was well before Beatrice’s time, but she’d heard the stories. She knew about the Prince and the Sheriff, and the killings and the blood hunts. It was the the story Garry told them, when they questioned if they really needed to bother with any of the covenant bullshit.

“So he was in torpor?”

“Yes, deep in the bowels of the city. Only his childe Damien knew where.”

“How the fuck do you know all this?”

Again with the Joker smile. “This is not just the Prince’s city, as many would believe. It is also mine.” He shook his head then, and gave a long, slow, psychotic chuckle. “I like you. You’re fun.”

Every conversation with this insane Nosferatu elder was like some twisted vision of her future. If she lived another four hundred-years, would she be this ridiculous? She’d be strong enough to do whatever she wanted, but Jacob was so hard to follow.

“So your test is to confirm something for me. I want you to sneak into Tony’s underground network. I am sure that is where Lucas has set up his new nest. Then I want you to determine what you can about this childe of his.”

“You don’t know him?”

Jacob frowned, turned, and started to pace his altar of blood. “I don’t. This Damien, probably his new Bishop, is a sneaky creature. A sneaky Mehket is something to worry about.”

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~~Julias~~

Sometimes, it disturbed Julias, how quickly he adapted to his new role.

Maria Turio and Michael McDonald seemed happy with him, at least. The Nosferatu ghost woman, and the big brute of a Gangrel slid into a rhythm with him that felt quite natural. They talked as a council, shared views, debated with intelligence, and even wisdom. His two fellow council members did not preach of meaningless values or views like a zealot would, like Viktor sometimes did with his mindless devotion to the Invictus.

It was pleasant. They could argue sometimes, but he was arguing with equals, and that was satisfying.

“Miss Amanda Pol and Master Jordan Leval have both disappeared.” Michael made a grand, sweep gesture to the giant touch screen that covered the wall. They were in their primary meeting room, at the top of the Xnomina HQ, and the three of them were standing and looking at the screen’s display of a map of Dolareido.

“They were only a few years embraced, still young neonates,” Maria said. “Perhaps they were caught unawares by sunrise?”

Julias shook his head. “I’d thought as much, but I’ve already asked their sires. They’d looked into it and both agreed it was highly unlikely. The two are simply gone.”

Michael grumbled, adjusted his tie, and leaned forward until he’d placed a hand against the wall, beside the wall display. “Last seen here.” He reached out with his other hand, and drew a circle on the display around a chunk of South Side. The display app circled it in red for him.

“Near Tony’s district.” Julias got up and stood next to Michael. They were both tall, broad guys in suits, but Julias standing next to Michael felt like standing next to a barely-contained wild animal. He was a Gangrel though, so Julias was just going to have to get used to standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

“Tony’s gone, and Rebecca’s gone. We know of no one else in his flock of covenant-less fools who would be both strong enough, and stupid enough to kidnap or kill our Kindred.”

“Then perhaps something else is going on?” Maria walked around the table to join them. Now the ghost woman was on his other side, looking like a freshly dragged river corpse as usual. Just being near her was enough for Julias to feel the unnatural cold pour off her.



“We’ve seen unusual activity from the anarchists. Even without their leader, they are doing something. They scout their area like it were still their territory.”

Michael grunted. “Without Tony or Rebecca to stop us, why don’t we just march in there and stake them? Put them out for sunrise one at a time, one kill a day, until one of them tells us what we want to know. They have no covenant to claim them, so the Prince will not mind.”

Julias shook his head. Staking a vampire in the heart paralyzed them, forced them into torpor until the stake was removed, so Michael’s plan would certainly work. But hell no. “They’re all neonates, Mister McDonald. Tony was the only elder, and Rebecca their only ancillae. They are just children.”

“No, they are not.” Maria was the one to frown this time, and the tiny corpse looked up him from behind her flat, black hair. “Do not let your new role as sire cloud your judgment, Mister Mire. Unless I am correct, your childe was quite thorough in undoing the damage of an error on their first night. Beheading the kine corpse, I believe, of someone he’d killed in frenzy. Not childish behavior.”

Invictus had good memories. “... he did, yes. Master Terry is not as easily broken as most fledglings though.”

“Perhaps, Mister Mire. Perhaps. But the fact remains, we should not underestimate them, or be lenient simply because they are young. They had every opportunity to join the Invictus, even the Carthians.” Then she gave a small smile, which was all sorts of disturbing on her quiet face. “Even if they’d joined the Circle of the Crone, at least they would have been a known factor.”

“Then I suggest we investigate first,” he said. He stepped closer to the screen, and drew several lines along rooftops and subways. “We send two or three Kindred we can trust to handle themselves. They can report back, and we can make an informed decision then.”

“It’s a smart choice,” Michael said, “but it delays action by a night. Maybe two.”

Julias gave a small nod, and looked to the animal on his right. “We do not survive centuries by jumping to conclusions.”

That earned a small smile from Michael too. Julias always knew what to say to make them happy, and get his way. He really did have a knack for this; Viktor would have been proud.

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Natasha and Jessy walked in, and Julias gave them both a small nod. He was leaning back against the table of the meeting room, while Michael and Maria sat further back at the table. They were there to listen, nothing more, he hoped.

Little Natasha, the Mehket, and Maria’s right hand. A bit short, with long black hair and dainty features, he worried she’d one day wake up and find her skeleton had cracked in half. She really was too thin, but she was fifty-years embraced; it was far too late to tell her to eat a sandwich. She was in a casual gray business suit, pants and single-button jacket over a white shirt. It was so plain, so Mehket. She reminded him of the sheriff.

Then of course there was Jessy. Short blonde hair that, he had to admit, looked pretty sexy on her boxer figure. She was almost as tall as him, and had no trouble meeting his eyes and trying to stare him down; she reminded him of a panther. She too was in a suit, black, but her jacket was open, her shirt unbuttoned enough to show some of the black bra underneath, and a pair of sunglasses hung in the pocket. She even had a gold necklace that trickled down between her breasts, and long gold earring chains.

Thirty-years out-of-date fashion sense, but that was alright. He knew what that was like.

“Madame Vola,” he nodded to Natasha. “Madame Herrington.” Another nod for Jessy. Using titles of address was proper for Kindred in the Invictus, whenever discussing things in an official capacity, but for the moment, he just wanted to rub their noses in his success. What good was there in being on the triumvirate if you couldn’t tease your old comrades.

They both give him back their own, weird, slightly embarrassed nods.

“M-mister Mire. You summoned us?” Natasha said.

“Indeed. I have a mission for you two.” He walked over to the digital map on the wall; for a second, he reminded himself of Viktor, strategizing and giving orders. “Miss Pol and Master Leval have gone missing. Last we heard, they were hunting near Tony’s old grounds.” He circled the large chunk of South Side where Tony used to nest. It was prime black market territory, with a lot of bars and a lot of dark alleys that made the alleys of the business district seem tame.

Natasha took a tiny step forward. “T-that...”

“Madame Vola?”

“Yesterday, my childe Vivienne ... Miss Maiorie ... she did not report in. I had assumed she had simply forgotten, lost in her w-w-work.” Natasha looked down, then to the side when worry painted itself on her face. “Her apartment is near there.”

Julias looked back at Michael and Maria. Now things were personal for one of his chosen, but the two of them dismissed it with a slight wave of their hands.

“Keep an eye open for Miss Maiorie then, but understand your primary objective is to determine what happened to Miss Pol and Master Leval. We know Tony and Rebecca are dead, but he had a lot

of underground networks built over the centuries. There are entire labyrinths we should get mapped, later. For now, we just need to know what's going on that's caused our young neonates – three now – to go missing. The moment you can answer that question, return here.”

“And if we find out they were killed?” Jessy said. Growled, practically.

“Return here.”

“Come on Julias, you can't expect us to—”

“Did I stutter, Madame Herrington?”

Cold did not do justice the tone of his voice. Jessy was a powerful, willful Gangrel, but her impulsive bullshit was a liability. He could nearly feel Michael smiling behind him; Jessy's sire was more than happy with his approach to crushing Jessy's juvenile stupidity.

“ ... no, Mister Mire.”

“The operation is to begin tomorrow night, two hours after sunset. You have the rest of the night to prepare.”

“Are we expect-ting a fight?” Natasha said.

“Something happened. I trust our Invictus neonates to be more than punctual with their check-ins. So if they're not checking in, then...” He shrugged, and gestured to the map on the wall again. “Just be prepared.”

“Yes, Mister Mire,” the two right hands said in unison. After a small nod, they both turned and were gone.

Julias sat back against the table, and kept his eyes on the map. What was going on? There were no attacks against Xnomina lately,

no trouble with the Carthians on Invictus borders. Everything was quiet. Even Jacob, or his Circle of the Crone group, hadn't caused any trouble lately.

“What do you think you'll find?” Maria said, her elbows on the table, fingers netted and chin on her knuckles.

“Honestly? I've no fucking idea.” Julias ran his fingers through his blonde hair, slick backed against his head. “If it were werewolves, there would be a lot more damage than a few missing neonates.”

“The Seven? Perhaps the Strix are connected?” Michael said.

But Julias and Maria both shook their head.

“I can't see a pattern. Until we have one, we can't push forward on this,” he said.

“Indeed,” Maria said. “In the meantime, I would like to discuss the ball the Prince has planned. The Carthians will be there, Garry will be there...”

Julias tried to listen, but his mind wandered to thoughts of Natasha and Jessy. Normally he'd be going with them, and he kind of missed the thrill of going on a mission. He'd been in dozens of fights with Tony's anarchists, and sometimes the Carthians when they got rough. Deaths were rare, but they happened, and the last thing he wanted was his old partners coming back in urns.

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Part of his promotion was getting Viktor's old mansion, and now that he had it, he had no idea what to do with it.

It was a classic thing, something built a ways out along the edge of South Side where only the most filthy rich lived, where there was actual space for roads, small hills, and grandiose buildings. There

was no official name for the district, but most simply called it Rich Side, and the multitude of hills it was built on were enough to raise the heights of his mansion so his window view saw over much of the city. And he did find himself staring out that window on a regular basis, with both hands netted behind his back.

He'd seen Viktor stand like this a million times, but he never imagined himself doing it.

When he looked down behind him, he got flashes of the Victorian era. Massive, curling stairways lead down into spacious rooms with classic furnishings. There were no TVs here, all electronics were hidden and subtle, and his front door was a giant pair of wooden doors. There were pillars of white, carpets with ornate patterns of red and gold, and all sorts of extra rooms that were useless. He did not need six bathrooms. He barely needed the one.

And when someone knocked, they used a door knocker that sounded like a club against a church bell. With a groan, he stepped away from the window, walked down the stairs, and headed for the door. He'd seen the car pull up, but his mind was wandering, and his body just went on auto-pilot mode to open the door.

It snapped back to awareness with jarring effect when he found the Prince at his door. The tall, gorgeous woman was dressed in something white and furry, and it matched her white hair and red lips well. Her red eyes made her look like she'd stepped out of a movie.

“Prince! I, uh ... how can I help you?”

“I was hoping we could talk, Mister Mire. May I come in?”

“Yes ma'am.” He stepped back and held the door for her. She returned his words with a nod, a smile, and walked into his abode. She paused for a moment to give her driver a small wave, and when

Julias peaked his head out to see, he bit his cheek at the sight of the sheriff.

He could count on one hand the amount of times he'd had a direct conversation with the Prince, and now she was at his place. At his actual place, and her sheriff was waiting for her when she was done. He tried to suppress the aching fear his beast was emitting.

“Would you enjoy a drink, Prince?” Be kind, be courteous. He had the leeway to be an aggressive negotiator in a primogen meeting, but he had no such room to maneuver when it was just the two of them.

“Thank you, but I am fine.” She gave a small dismissal with one of her hands; she was wearing white, elbow-length gloves. “How is your new home, Julias? Viktor’s old-fashioned taste must be quite boring for you.” She gave him a devilish grin before she walked over to one of the couches – some sort of massive, Victorian lounge chair, he believed – and sat down. “It does remind me of my previous home, oh so long ago. Such faded memories.”

The lounge chair had plenty of room, so at least it didn't feel awkward when he sat down on its other end and angled himself to face her. “I forget sometimes that you are from Europe, from a different time. Your Elysium tower, and most of the architecture in Elysium seems much more modern.”

“Ah, Mister Mire, I do strive to ride the waves of fashion as best I can. It can be hard, when you are as old as I.”

She was a master at manipulation. She'd adjusted the conversation so he knew how old she was, ancient even, while making it seem like it was a weakness, instead of something that gave her massive power. He wasn't about to simply ask her what she wanted though. It'd borderline on rude, even though it was all he could think about.

“Viktor made no effort to change with the times. I had no idea he was so obsessed with the past until I’d inherited this home. This entrance lobby is just the tip of the iceberg. He has rooms dedicated to reliving ages past,” he said.

“Has he now?”

Julias nodded. “I’m sure there is clothing and jewelry here worth more than this house, and he has them on display in glass casings.”

“Oh Viktor, you always had your eyes to the ground.” The Daeva gave Julias a knowing glance, and even a soft smile, like she were apologetic about something. “I am sorry for this talk of Viktor. I did not come to discuss your sire past. I came to discuss your childe.”

You mean that you’re dating my childe and basically have me by the balls because of it? He almost said it, too. “I ... am not sure that is my business, Prince.”

“Of course it is your business. He is your childe. You wish to protect him. He is also a member of the Invictus, while am I Ordo Dracul; our relationship is highly peculiar and you deserve to have any concerns voiced, or questions answered.”

Well, this was going to be a weird, painful conversation. He’d planned on approaching her about this, not the other way around.

“ ... this is all true, Prince, but I can only be so frank.”

“Say whatever you wish, however you wish. I grant you complete freedom of speech, Mister Mire.” She raised a gloved hand to her red lips, and touched one of her fangs while she looked at him with an analyzing eye. “For now.”

Was she trying to get him to talk himself into a corner? Those red eyes of hers were so damn hard to read. She just held his gaze, and each time her gaze shifted from one of his own eyes to the other, he



could practically see the thousand possibilities she was calculating. If he said the wrong thing, he could make a powerful enemy. But on the other hand, her proposal seemed genuine enough, logical, and he had no reason to distrust her motives other than her impenetrable veil of secrecy.

Damn Dragons.

“Alright, if that is true. Then ... may I ask ... why?”

“Why what?”

“Why Jack?”

She raised a brow. “ ... why Beatrice?”

God mother fucking damn her. Did she know everything? He hadn't brought the relationship up to anyone, and the Nosferatu was good at the shadow arts.

“Beatrice ... why Beatrice.” He raised a hand to his hair, and let his eyes drift to the carpet. He'd never really thought about why. Can you put into words what draws a kine to gaze into fire? “She's captivating. She ... she's so different than me. She cares nothing for politics, or Kindred webs. Brutal, genuine, direct, all those things I've forgotten how to be, if I ever was...” A smile forced its way onto his lips. He tried to hide it, but he couldn't. Just the thought of that damn shark-mouth and her brazen attitude, calling him out on his bullshit and forcing him to ... to be alive, it was something he wanted more of.

“There is a secret, Julias dear, that I have told no one.” She leaned forward then, and folded one leg over the other. He hadn't noticed her white high heels; she really did have great fashion sense. “You and I are much alike.”

“ ... I'm sorry?”

“I first met Jack when he failing at something that came naturally to you, or me. Failing to manipulate kine for an easy meal. And when he saw me, he froze in fear as many do.” She gave him a grinning wink then. He was one of those people who froze at the sight of her too. “How many fledglings do you imagine could suffer the fear of meeting someone nearly five centuries their elder?”

“ ... none. You are a scary creature, Prince.” Careful Julias.

But his words just made Antoinette chuckle, and she looked to the floor while she traced a finger along her knee. “Jack did. He sat next to me in that booth, and it was then I noticed a strange thing. Something I’d never seen in another Kindred.”

Julias blinked, and tilted his head to the side.

“Jack was afraid of me,” she said, “but he was also intrigued. It was all over him, every gesture, every glance, every noise. His eyes spoke volumes, honest and open, and it was indeed captivating. He has a spark in him, Julias, that you found when he was still alive. The boy has an honest soul, and a determined one.” She chuckled again, but followed it with a longing sigh that had Julias shocked. “And I know you see similar in Beatrice. The reason she despises our webs of deceit and control is because she too is an honest, determined soul.”

“Honest. Determined ... you summarize people very well in few words,” he said.

“Only because I have been doing it for much, much longer than you.” She righted her gaze at him then, and a harsh edge joined it. “You would do well to hold onto Beatrice. She has that inner fire that will warm your cold insides. As Jack will mine.”

He did not like that predator look in her eyes. “Are you saying I’m using Beatrice, and you’re using Jack?”

“We all use each other, Julias, but that does not mean I don’t hold Jack in my arms, and wish happiness upon him. I want nothing more than what is best for Master Terry,” she said, Invictus title and all, “and I will fight for that.” She stood then, and looked down at him. He couldn’t bring himself to meet her gaze just then, like she were some goddess casting her gaze down at him from on high.

She was grabbing what she wanted, she wasn’t going to let go, and if he stood in the way, she’d destroy him.

But, after a while, she let out a slow sigh. “I am sorry. I made that sound a threat, and I did not mean that. I only wished to say...”

He raised his eyes to blink at her, surprised. The Prince was embarrassed about something. She was even squirming a little.

“To say that Jack is precious to me, Julias, and that is a feeling I have not felt since before your existence. Do you understand what that means to me?”

“I ... I don’t think I can.”

“I believe you do, Julias. It is why you sired Jack in the first place, no? You sensed in him that fire that warmed your cold, dying soul.” She reached out, and poked him in the forehead. It was the first time she’d ever touched him.

She sure was Daeva. Disgustingly, unabashedly poetic, but painfully truthful.

“If you do not wish to become Viktor, a broken and paranoid man with no humanity in his withered, dead insides, you will fight for Beatrice, as I will fight for Jack. And I do not wish Viktor’s fate upon you, Julias. You are a kind man, and one I would like to keep in my city.” Again she sighed, and reached up to pull her main of hair over her fur scarf and down her chest so she could comb it with her fingers. “Forgive my ranting. Do you have anymore questions?”

The fuck could he ask after that? A single conversation and she'd made him feel like he was a teenager barely passed puberty, getting a lecture from his mom about love.

"I'm not sure. I ... I'm glad, that you think so highly of Jack. I really do love that kid," he said.

She smiled, was about to say something, but stopped herself. "... I owe you, Julius. I cannot grant you a boon that would affect the covenants, but whatever personal favor you can think of, please, ask of it."

He just blinked at her. He was doing a lot of that, but Antoinette was not someone he could control in conversation. "If I think of something I will. Thank you."

"You are most welcome, Mister Mire." She gave a small bow, turned, and headed toward the door.

Before he knew what he was doing, he was up and opening the door for her. For a moment, he thought maybe she'd bewitched him into opening the door, but when she gave him a smile, another nod, and walked on, he knew she hadn't. She just had that affect on people.

"Ah, Prince?"

She stopped, ten feet from the doorway, and looked up the stone pathway up to him. "Yes, Mister Mire?"

"The Ordo Dracul, do you-"

"Don't worry, Mister Mire." She tapped her lips in a mocking shh. "Master Terry is Invictus, and it would be decades before I could even open those doors to him. You have nothing to worry about on that front."

He sighed with relief, and gave a nod of his own before watching her go. Well, at least that one was thing he didn't have to worry about; she wouldn't steal Jack that way, and she wasn't stealing the other neonates either.

Then where the hell were they?

---

~~Natasha~~

“Man that Julias has a big pair of balls on him.” Jessy said. She was smart enough to keep her voice down, but the Gangrel kept getting louder and louder until Natasha had to poke her in the ribs. She'd had to a few times now.

“He is Viktor's childe, after all.” It was so much easier to not stutter when it was just the two of them. “And he was right. It was the right plan.”

“Fuck, doesn't mean he should talk down to us like that.”

Natasha smiled up at the Gangrel next to her. It was just the two of them, and they'd worked their way down the subway tunnels. Natasha was happy to wear one of her typical suits, but Jessy was much happier going all out. She'd put on leather, and all sorts of weird layers of straps, belts, and vests over top of it. It was some sort of modern, secret military espionage armor, probably, maybe. It looked cool, but kind of silly too.

But then, Natasha was the one with a silenced pistol in her hand, and a short sword on her side. To each their own.

She'd kept the two of them hidden from eyes with her cloak of night. If there was at least one thing she could do right, it was hide them from prying eyes, even with Jessy's loud voice. Julias trusted her with stealth, even for infiltration, and that made her smile.

“I still c-can’t believe Viktor is dead, and Tony. You think Julias did it?”

“Maybe.” Jessy shrugged. “Or his little kid Jack. See that kid? Christ he’s tiny.”

“Hey.” Natasha frowned up at her partner.

The Gangrel laughed down at her, and even put a gloved hand on her head to toy with her hair. “Tiny little thing like you? Bit different than with a guy. A small guy like that, all I can think is, his dick must be the size of a used-up pencil. You though? Guys are thinking ‘hot damn, she’d be so fucking tight.’”

Her friend knew no shame, and Natasha could swear she was blushing, even without the blush of life going. “He’s dating the Prince.”

“I know!” she yelled, and Natasha was quick to give her another jab in the side. “Sorry, sorry. But yeah, she’s so damn tall, and she’s a pretty curvy thing you know? The hell she doing with that pipsqueak?”

“Size isn’t everything.” She shook her head. Why was she having this conversation? It was such boy talk, talking about penis sizes and breast sizes and vagina sizes. “And besides, biological differences in size of genitalia are not correlated with frame height at a one-to-one ratio in an adult. His penis size is probably of adequ – are you making fun of me?”

Jessy had started using her hand as a fake mouth, and was flapping it in the air in front of her. “Nerd.”

“Barbarian.”

“Geek.”

“Philistine.”

“Hermit.

“Butch.”

“Hey hey, now that’s below the belt.” Jessy gave her a frown, and used both her hands to adjust her hair a bit. “Shit, you got me all self conscious now.”

They had to slip through some very old tunnels, older holes, into ancient tunnels that weren’t even used anymore. Tony’s underground network was very, very old. But at least it was sturdy. Without a fear of a rock falling on their head, they were free to stick to the shadows of the pillars that held the tunnel up, and once they were beyond any lights, there was only darkness. Eventually it got so dark that even Kindred eyes could barely see. But that’s where Natasha was her most comfortable.

She could see where others could not; an unnatural talent for the auspex, her sire had said. Jessy called it Sith sight.

Natasha smiled at the thought, but a noise down the way had her reaching up to grab Jessy, and she pulled her down into a crouch along the railway. Voices rolled off the walls up ahead from far ahead. Natasha crept closer.

Light was starting to bounce off the rocks of the large tunnel, but thankfully its curving nature and metal pillars gave them something to hide behind. Not that they needed it, as Natasha kept the cloak of night upon them both, but better safe than sorry. She crept from corner to corner of the curling tunnel, to pillar to pillar, until the tunnel straightened out and finally, they both could see a gateway.

It was odd. Deep down, under the earth, in old abandoned tunnels, they’d found what looked quite majestic. The tunnel ceiling rose so the gate had room to stand tall, a pair of pillars of dark metal

with a beam that connected them above. But the metal had been shaped into ornate curves that looked like something that would belong in the Prince's Elysium. It was definitely Tony's nest, complete with electric lanterns that dangled from hooks and gave off gentle white light.

And they could hear people talking. Not just talking, Natasha noticed, but talking casually. They were ... happy? She pressed forward, but stepping out into the light and through a gate was not so easy. Her cloak of night drained her, and doing it so openly was exhausting, but if Vivienne was in there, or Amanda or Jordan, she had to find out.

So they walked through the gate. Jessy kept low, stuck to her side, and behind a little. They'd worked together for over a decade, had developed great synergy, so all they had to do was make small gestures at each other or tap each other on the shoulder to communicate. They stuck to the walls of what had become a hallway, plain and metal like everything so deep underground, but the further they got into the lit tunnel, the more it became not-so plain. More of the electronic lanterns hung from the walls. Carvings and engravings of ornate, meaningless patterns decorated the floor and ceiling.

And then the hallway opened up into a giant room. All it took was a glance left or right to see it was a series of several massive lobbies connected by doorways similar to the one they'd found to enter the complex. There were chairs, there were tables, there were lights and doors with names on them, some open and some closed. And there were ghouls and Kindred walking around, young neonates all of them, minding their own business and chatting with each other. They had smiles on their faces, and many had a large book in their hand.

Vivienne. Her childe was sitting at one of the tables, chatting with Jordan, and Amanda too. Others were at the table, Kindred she did



not recognize, but none of them were a threat. Now that she looked around at the strange group of Kindred, perhaps nearly fifty, with another fifty ghouls, she sort of recognized them, if only in passing. Tony's brood. The anarchist had a thing for collecting souls for his personal use, she knew, but his brood never looked happy whenever she saw them.

They looked happy now. So too did the three missing Invictus neonates. Vivienne, a small and quiet little thing like her, was laughing openly, loudly even, with her fellow missing Invictus, and the others.

What was going on? She almost said it, but they were too close to make a sound; even her cloak of night wouldn't be able to hide everything from so close. Jessy and her kept to the hallway, with its metal pillars serving as something to hide behind, but they couldn't do this for long. Natasha looked at Jessy, but the Gangrel just shrugged at her and mouthed 'your call.'

The Mehket bit her lip, and poked her head out to look further down the way. One direction lead through another large lobby, with its own doors along its side – bedrooms, she guessed – and the other direction opened to a lobby filled with pews. Pews?

And then two men walked out. One of them was of average height, average build, and all around forgettable if not for his hair; she kind of liked the look of it, one side shaved clean, the other half with long black hair. A Mehket, and judging from what her inner-beast felt at the sight of him, one of similar age to her.

She contemplated talking to him. He did seem like a guy she'd want to talk to. He had a nice, gentle face, and plain clothes; just jeans and a blue shirt.

The man he was talking to was a fledgling, a Daeva not even a week old. A freshly embraced Kindred. A smiling, freshly embraced Kindred. It was unsettling to see so many content faces.

“Bishop, I worry about my role in all this. You—”

“Jonathan, you spend far too much time worrying about things beyond your control.” This Bishop fellow put his arm around the fledgling’s shoulder. “Your purpose is clear, and the Archbishop and I will help you with any problems you may have serving in that purpose.”

“So, I mean ... I just...”

“Serve your sire. She will teach you how to seduce kine with but a glance, and you can feed upon them as God demands we should. You are the wolf, and they are God’s sheep.”

“God’s sheep. But then, I don’t understand why we’re supposed to feed on them, and even kill them sometimes...”

“Read the Testament of Longinus. And then, once it has confused you, read it again. And then once you are confused even more, come talk to me,” the man said with a chuckle, and gave the fledgling a pat on the back. “But for now, simply know that human kind has sinned, corrupted to the core by Adam and Eve. Earth is their prison, and we their tormentors. Only through total devotion to God will the sheep find salvation, and by preying upon them as the wolf, we will force them to put their faith in the shepherd.”

Natasha managed a half-smile half-frown. He had a lovely voice, but his words were a loud warning. *Lancea et Sanctum*. She’d never met one, how could she since the Prince had banished their covenant from the city. It was when she was first embraced, half a century ago, and she could only barely remember the conflict. But there had been violence, and a lot of it.

And then the Bishop looked straight at her.

She jumped. Jessy jumped too, hand on Natasha’s shoulder. But it was enough signal for the two of them to immediately turn around,

and run. Natasha dropped her cloak of night, ready to put all her speed to use, but she froze.

The Bishop was already behind them, with his head tilted to the side so his half-head of hair hung over the shaved side. He was fast! Faster than most Mehket. Faster than her. “I am surprised. It has been not even two weeks since Tony’s death, and already scouts have come for his place?”

“Well you fuckers stole three of our-”

Natasha elbowed Jessy in the side. Her friend talked way too much.

“Oh? Three? Then you are Invictus. You speak of Amanda, Jordan, and Vivienne,” the bishop said, and gestured behind them.

“... Sire?” Vivienne said. The three Invictus members, and a couple dozen Kindred and ghouls stepped up to circle them, but only through sheer intrigue.

“... Vivienne. I’m g-g-glad ... you’re well.” Neither she nor her childe could look each other in the eye. Guilt dripped from Vivienne’s face like tears, and Natasha was forced to look away to avoid it. She’d been betrayed, but it need not be said.

Jessy, of course, was more than willing to say it. “So what’s up you fucks? The fuck is going on here? Lancea et Sanctum shit? The Second Estate was banned from Dolareido.”

“We ... we...” Vivienne tried to talk, but Amanda stepped up.

Amanda Pol, Gloria Jennings’ childe, another Mehket of the Invictus, stood her ground. “They’ve started again, and we’ve joined. We’re a family here, we belong, and—”

“And nothing you stupid little shit. You don’t just vanish without a word. Now I don’t give a fuck about what church boy here,” Jessy gestured to the bishop behind her, “or his ‘family’ want to do, or whether they exist, but you owe the Invictus. You’re coming with us, and you’re going to explain everything.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that.” Damien reached behind him, and slowly withdrew a sword. It was an elegant piece, sleek, modern, and he held it with a confidence that had Natasha almost trembling. “Please, do not force me to kill you. Surrender, and no one will be harmed. Once my sire is back, he can decide how to deal with this situation. We want only peace.”

Sire? She’d figured this Mehket had avoided notice due to his young age, but if he had a sire, she was thoroughly confused. She knew of no one old enough to be this boy’s sire except for the sheriff. And he most definitely was not the sheriff’s.

“Two against one, fucking priest.” Jessy took a step forward, hunched over slightly, and pointed her hands down. With an almost sickening tear of leather, large claws erupted from her fingers and through her gloves.

“... Invictus Gangrel, I pity your sire. Your counting ability leaves much to be desired.”

Jessy and Natasha looked back to the crowd that surrounded them. The two of them were at the entrance to the hallway that lead out of the weird underground complex, but the Bishop was in the hallway blocking them, and behind them was a growing half-ring of Kindred. The former Invictus neonates did not join in, but that didn’t stop Tony’s old brood from stepping up.

And Tony’s old brood didn’t seem too upset by the prospect of beating up some Invictus.

Natasha put on her biggest frown, pathetic as it was, and walked up to the bishop. She motioned for Jessy to cover their six, and the Gangrel gave an annoyed grunt before turning to face the oncoming neonates.

“ ... w-what’s your name?” Natasha asked the bishop.

“Bishop Damien.” He said it with a small bow.

“Alright, so no violence? And we c-can’t leave?”

“Correct. Please submit. You will only be detained until my sire returns, and then he can determine what to do. He wants only peace for the Lancea et Sanctum.”

She gave a small smile. He really did have a nice voice.

He didn’t make a sound when she shot him between the eyes, and collapsed with a large hole in his forehead.

A silencer did not reduce a gunshot to quiet levels, not even close. Instead, it was just not ear-splitting loud, so the score of Kindred behind her did not hesitate to jump forward and tackle them when she fired. To their surprise though, Jessy also did not hesitate to throw herself against the tide.

“You stupid fucks!” She grabbed one of them by the throat – she did not spare her claws – and smashed their skull into the floor and walls. Natasha turned to face Jessy, only to look away at the sight of a Kindred’s skull splitting open.

It wouldn’t kill a Kindred, but it’d be a close call with second death for any fledgling. But, to Natasha’s surprise, it didn’t deter them. In fact, a few of them threw themselves at Jessy, and Natasha was forced to step back and away from the cluster of limbs fighting and scraping.

“Get off of me! Fucking vermin!”

Those poor Kindred, they didn't know. They may have known who Jessy was, but none of them had seen her fight, not really. Natasha stepped back a little further, and made room.

One of the Kindred flew straight up and into the ceiling, and her arm was missing. Another was thrown back and into the lobby, through several chairs and tables and ghouls. The ghouls were not so sturdy as to not break limbs on contact with the flying body. Another Kindred lost a leg, and Jessy screamed murder at those on top of her and drove the limb into one of them like a baseball bat.

There were too many though. Too many. Get out get out, they had to get out. Don't panic, Natasha. Look at Vivienne, what's she doing? She's just watching, scared. This doesn't need to get worse, just get out.

Then Damien got back up.

“That ... hurt...”

She squealed with a jump, but Damien's hand was around her throat and pinning her to the wall before she got two inches into the air. From so close, she got to see the hole in his forehead close itself. The Bishop, this fellow Mehket, was strong. Too strong. His grip was tight enough around her throat to break skin, and his other hand was on his sword and raising it to her eye.

But she still had her gun in her hand, and she raised it to try and shoot him again. All she got for her efforts was a sword through the palm that stuck her hand to the wall. She screamed.

“Natasha! Shit, get the fuck off of me,” Jessy said. Natasha couldn't see the her, not with Damien pinning her by the throat against the wall. But she could hear the crunch of bone, tearing

clothes, and ripped skin coming from her friend's direction. Jessy was not happy.

“I said no harm would come to you if you surrendered, and I was not lying. But I cannot fault you for your caution. The flock will detain your friend, and you will come with me. Understand?”

“You ... you can't expect me to-”

“Tell your friend to stand down.”

“No. We – aaar!” This time, Damien removed the sword and stabbed her clean through the stomach and into the wall. All thoughts of reaching for her sword to counter attack were washed away by the splitting pain of a blade skewering her insides.

“One more time. Please, ask your friend to stand down.”

“ ... Jessy ... can—”

A blur cut straight down from Damien's side. A massive blur that moved the air as it past, before slamming into the ground hard enough to make the walls ring.

“Aaaaaarg!”

The noise didn't come from Damien. Damien was gone. Natasha had to close her eyes from the spray of blood, and it wasn't warm kine blood either. There was Kindred blood in the air, and it splattered over her face before soon fading to ash. Whatever that blur was, it had forced Damien away with all the subtlety of a truck.

The sword had been pulled from her gut, but to the side and harsh enough to cut her guts open, forcing her to hold onto her belly while she collapsed. Damien had held onto the sword, when Jessy had pounced him.

Jessy. Damien. She looked to the group of Kindred, but they were a pile of bodies and groans struggling to get their senses back. When she looked to the other side, it was a frenzy of movement and madness. All she could do was drag herself along the floor away from them, with a trail of Kindred blood and ash behind her.

Damien had his sword, and he was blocking and slashing with the speed of a Mehket, but Jessy continued to push forward toward him with wild insanity. She'd let her Gangrel side out, and it was enough to have Natasha back away from them both. Jessy's claws had grown to immense lengths, and had become serrated like something from a horror movie. Her skin had darkened, and her posture was hunched to the point she was leaping and pouncing around like some sort of beast. When Damien managed to land his sword upon her, it did wound the Gangrel, but didn't slow her down. It was like poking a crazed, bloodthirsty animal with a stick, and all it did was make Jessy scream with rage.

Jessy's massive claws had already cut Damien's chest open — it must have been the attack that had dislodged Damien from Natasha — and it was not a clean wound. Those claws ripped and tore and shredded.

“Jessy, be careful!”

But Jessy was barely there. “I'll kill you! You don't touch her, ever!” Jessy roared, screamed, gave voice to that inner-beast they all kept hidden, and let out her Gangrel side. “Never touch her!” When those massive claws on Jessy's hands found metal, they sliced through it with heavy, monstrous swings. Each time, Damien had to dodge, and if it weren't for his Mehket speed, the crazed woman would have rendered him a splattered mess in a single hit.

For a moment, she thought of the Nosferatu Beatrice, and her claws. These were ten fold that size.



“Ah!” Natasha fell down, and turned over to find a couple of the Kindred had jumped her. One of them was missing an eye now, a fresh wound, but the neonates were determined. Like brave soldiers, or crazed zealots.

“Pin her down! We have to get her back and into one of the cells. Lucas will be happy,” the neonate said.

Lucas? She didn’t know the name. Damn it, they were too heavy for her, and she’d dropped her gun. Her sword was still on her, but she couldn’t get it, they were grabbing her hands and pinning her down, punching and kicking all the while.

“Jessy! Help!”

“Quickly children, get her to the cells!” Damien lunged forward, and sank his sword into Jessy’s neck.

Jessy screamed rage, fury, loud enough that it shook the walls.

“Jessy!”

Damien pushed the sword forward. “Don’t make me kill you, Invictus. I—”

Natasha twisted her head to see as best she could; Jessy had turned her neck into the blade so badly that Kindred blood was actually dripping down her body, but she’d bit down onto the Bishop’s sword, hard. It was enough to get the shocked Damien to hold still for that split moment, and that was all Jessy needed take one large swing with her hands and land those monstrous claws on him.

He let go. He jumped back with that same, insane speed he’d used to get behind them, but it wasn’t enough, not completely. Jessy’s claws managed to sink their way into his chest, and he spun

backward into a heap on the floor with four new, massive gashes along his skin.

“Lucas is here! Hold them!” Another Kindred said as he rounded the corner. He had no idea. No idea at all.

The random Kindred probably didn't even register it when Jessy leaped at him. Her claws crashed down onto the unsuspecting man, and in that single slash, she cut him from head to his waist so he fell apart into three chunks of shredded meat. He was too young to turn to ash upon second death, and instead rotted away to decayed flesh before their very eyes until he was bone.

“What? What's going—”

Jessy wasted no time. Her boxer reflexes knew what to do, Natasha was sure; you followed up a hit with another, and Jessy's other hand swiped out horizontally against the two Kindred holding Natasha down. It was a blood bath. Natasha closed her eyes as fast as she could, just so she wouldn't see the two young Kindred nearly explode from the impact of the serrated claws.

For just a split moment, Natasha thought Jessy might attack her next. Those eyes were crazed, frenzied, as if she had given into her inner-beast completely and just let the madness consume her. But she scooped Natasha up, held her to her friend's bigger body, and hooked her arms around her neck and shoulders before tossing her onto her back.

Before she knew it, Jessy was running on all fours, back out the way they came. The light faded quickly, but Natasha could only wish Jessy ran faster. Once blackness covered them, Natasha did her best to guide her partner, but it was like trying to guide a rampaging bull. Jessy even crashed against the tunnel walls with enough force to crack stone, but her body was heavier now, her skin thicker, her bones harder, and she just kept running.

“You killed some of them.” Natasha said. She coughed with the pain of her damaged throat.

“What the fuck was I supposed to do? We don’t know who the fuck this Damien is, or Lucas, or Archbishop or Bishop and fucking shit. They wouldn’t let us go.”

“I know, I know. You made the right call, but...” She looked behind her at the disappearing light. If this Lucas person came running after them, they were thoroughly fucked. But with time, no one came, and Natasha finally took a minute to start healing her stomach wound.

She had no idea what to tell Julias, or Maria or Michael. What about Vivienne? She’d betrayed Natasha, and now the Invictus had killed a few of their new group.

Shit could not have gone worse.

## Chapter 14

~~Beatrice~~

“So you’ll do it?” Jacob said.

“Yeah I’ll fucking do it. But if this Damien is as sneaky as you think he is, you think I can really just creep into his place and follow him around?” She clicked her teeth together.

“I know you can.” Psycho-man circled around the skull alter so it was between them, and began to move his hands over the bowl of rotting old blood. “That’s part of the reason I brought you, after all. You have a lot of power, strength, and that animal instinct, unlike those worthless fucking leeches.” He laughed then, and started to wave his hands over the blood. “And you’ll have help.”

“Help?”

He nodded then, and with a motion so casual, sliced open his wrist. She winced, he cut deep, but it wasn’t enough to make Jacob even blink. The dark, thick blood of a Kindred started to drip from the unnatural wound in a slow, mesmerizing flow. When it fell into the pool of old blood, it pushed away the gross mess, and overtook the bowl of blood. Eventually, the blood was renewed.

And then Jacob started to hum.

“... what the fuck are you doing?”

He held up a finger then, and gave her a quick glare that shut her right up. He was serious. Scary serious. When he looked down at the blood, the look was so solemn it made her insides clench, and it only got worse when he put his hand into the blood. He kept

humming, louder, and louder, until he found the frequency to make the very cave resonate.

She took a step back, but Jacob's other hand rose, and gestured her to step closer. His joking smile was gone, and now she was standing in front of an altar. And he was bleeding his blood, his vitae right into an altar bowl of skulls in front of her. Suddenly, the bones on the cave walls didn't seem so ridiculous.

As the weight of his hums made the cave almost vibrate, she couldn't help but get drawn into the awesome but overwhelming, sinister, and horrific nature of it all. Bones, blood, bleeding, dark words that had no meaning, it all combined into a surreal array of theatrical notes. She could almost hear the chanting of naked, ancient Kindred dancing around the corpses of their kills.

Scary stories spread by fellow Carthians about Jacob and his dark arts were the things young neonates talked about. What else were freshly embraced going to do? They sat around in the dark, afraid of the elders, and talked about the unusual, disturbing things they'd heard those elders could do. There'd been talk about the Lancea et Sanctum, long gone, and their strange works of God. But the stories about Jacob were so much more visceral, because Jacob was real, and none of them knew anything about the Circle of the Crone. Stories about something they could do with blood, and magic. Something called Crúac.

And now she was here, in his dark ritual. It was Crúac. The whole cave was made as Jacob's shrine, and the altar in the center that had seemed moderately innocent at first now loomed before her like an evil god. It was a sacrifice altar, and the weight of that only now dawned on her.

What sort of fucked up shit had she gotten herself into? Her insides were howling, like wolves howling at the moon. She stepped closer to Jacob then, because her inner-beast demanded it, and she

watched with wide eyes. Something called to her, something wild and animal, hungry and territorial, savage and pure. The sounds of those hums danced up and down her spine and made her whole body tingle.

When Jacob reached out to place a bloody hand against her face, she didn't even flinch, she only closed her eyes and let the elder put a hand print of his own blood on her face. And just like that, it was as if someone had injected the blood of a god straight into her withered, undead veins. She stumbled for a moment while the power worked its way up and down her legs and into her claws; it even made her teeth vibrate.

“What ... wh—”

“You'll have my mastery of the cloak of night, for tonight. Use it well. I want to know everything about this Damien, and now that Lucas is back, I am sure he'll let something show.”

“Your ... right, right, ok. Why not do it yourself though?”

Jacob shook his head and idly scratched at the gash made in his own flesh. “I will be distracting Lucas.”

She gulped. Jacob was putting a whole lot of faith in her. Why? Why not the others? The psycho bastard was going to ‘distract’ some other elder, while she fucking followed his childe?

It was some serious next level shit.

“I'll try.”

“Ha. Might want to do better than try. You fuck up, and Lucas may just rip you to shreds.” Jacob shrugged, gave a large psycho smile, and dismissed her with a wave. “I knew him, and that was fifty years before his torpor. Who knows what kind of man he is now.”

---

How long had it been since she'd felt so nervous? Must have been since she was turned. Back then she was just a mess of self-loathing, thrust into a fucked up world, and only Garry showed her an ounce of compassion. And Garry was a scary guy. But now? Now she was dragging her ass through the vents of Tony's old underground lair, with a Crúac bloodmagic symbol on her face giving her elder levels of badassness, so she could spy on a super dangerous elder's childe.

Nervous did not begin to describe how she felt.

Fighting on the streets, pushing around Invictus assholes treading on Carthian territory, and worrying about how she'd get her next meal were the things she was used to. Now she was neck deep in the shit. Jacob had said he knew her, that she was sick of being on the sidelines, and back then this was exactly the sort of shit she would have wanted. She had stakes in the game now and some power to go with it. She got what she wanted, but not so sure she wanted what she got.

The vents were built into the structure of the ceiling of the tunnels. How Tony had managed to get all this shit built she could not guess, but then he had centuries to work with. And Jacob knew it all. Jacob had probably arranged the entrance into the vents being built somehow too. Her life was in his palm, and she could only hope the crazy fuck knew what he was doing.

Beneath her, there were ghouls wandering around, all very new to the whole thing. They sat in the tunnels of metal walls and discussed with each other their new masters. She peaked down through grates to watch, and spotted several Kindred who walked with them. From how the conversation was going, the ghouls seemed to be the servants of the Kindred, which was typical.

What wasn't so typical was how they talked about God. Not a god, but God. Kindred serving God? The fuck kind of shit was that?

Jacob had said Lucas was an Archbishop for the Lancea et Sanctum, so maybe this shit was the norm back before her time, but now it sounded like cult talk.

“Sam said that the Archbishop said that Vince is doing well! He was sent out to scare some kine into thinking the devil was haunting them, and...”

Beatrice rolled her eyes, and moved on. What a sick, twisted joke. Kindred scaring kine into being obedient little religious folk? Ugh.

Vents were not easy to move through. The movies made it seem easy, but when you don't have the proper traction of feet, and you have to be quiet, squirming and wriggling through vents is a bitch. Whatever weird blood spell Jacob had cast had definitely affected her, made her cloak of night stronger, but that didn't mean she could make a bunch of noise. Not when there were other Kindred walking around beneath her. Not when this mysterious Damien character was such a question mark.

It really was a weird thing, now that she thought about it. Jacob had only just learned about this Damien apparently, and she'd never heard about him from any other Kindred. Who the fuck was he? If he was Lucas's childe and Lucas had been in torpor for half a century, then Damien was at least fifty years old. It's not like a Kindred just hopped city to city, so Damien must have been hiding out in Dolareido for fifty years.

Jacob had said sneaky Mehket. No joke.

She continued on.

“Jonathan, you spend far too much time worrying about things beyond your control. Your purpose is clear, and the Archbishop and I will help you with any problems you may have serving in that purpose.”



Archbishop and I? Jackpot. Beatrice came to a stop over one vent and peered down into the room beneath her, and found more than one Kindred gathering there. She could put her face onto the grate, nose against the metal, and as long as she trusted Jacob's blood magic, she would be able to remain hidden. Hopefully.

“Serve your sire. She will teach you how to seduce kine with but a glance, and you can feed upon them as God demands we should. You are the wolf, and they are God's sheep.”

She blinked down at the one talking. So that was Damien? He seemed normal enough, with a cool haircut and half-shaved head. His voice was soft, but confident. He seemed ... unremarkable. Even her inner-beast barely noticed him. He was just another Kindred.

And then he was gone. She was staring right at him, analyzing him, and then he was gone. Poof. She almost made a noise, bit her tongue, and pushed her face closer to the grate.

“I am surprised. It has been not even two weeks since Tony's death, and already scouts have come for his nesting grounds?”

He'd moved. What the fuck, the fucker had moved, and she could only barely see him in the large room, at the doorway of what looked like a tunnel.

Two other Kindred were there, and she knew these two: the bitch Jessy, and the pussy Natasha. What were the Invictus doing here? Natasha started talking then, and Beatrice could just see her and her partner's back, facing Damien. The speedy fucker must have moved to block the doorway.

Natasha said a few quiet words, and Beatrice strained to hear her. That Invictus was always quiet, and she stuttered like a scared mouse probably would have. Fuck she was infuriating.

But then Natasha shot the guy. Beatrice barely even noticed the movement, but like a sly snake, the tiny Mehket girl drew her pistol and put a hole straight into Damiens' forehead. He crumbled like a sack of potatoes. The brains and dark, Kindred blood that splattered out behind his skull turned into bits of hot ash in the air.

And then all hell broke loose.

Beatrice was so focused on the two Invictus and their unexpected appearance, she hadn't even noticed the growing crowd. They threw themselves at the Invictus, but Jessy wasted no time throwing herself at them. Fuck Jessy was such a mindless animal, and that Gangrel side of her came out with no hesitation, claw mutation and all.

Beatrice took a moment to look at her claws, and then the claws of the wild woman in the orgy of punches and kicks. Jessy spared no effort, and tore into the young Kindred and ghouls alike as if they were fresh meat. They kind of were, even the Kindred with a few years on them, and Beatrice winced each time one of them was bent in half by the barbarian.

Damien got back up though. He healed fast. Very fast. Before Beatrice could figure out what was going on, Jessy just went psycho and grew claws straight out of a monster horror flick. She jumped at Damien, and he started fighting her off with a sword, and then it was Natasha against the mob. They tried to pin her down, but just like the insane, reckless fuck she was, Jessy jumped in and killed them. It was fucking chaos contained to a few seconds.

Holy mother fucking of shit. Day one of her new sneaky sneak Circle of the Crone ways and she was already watching two covenants shit down each other's throat.

“Stop them! Stop them! Lucas is here. He'll want them!”

Beatrice looked back down, and her whole body went stiff. Lucas wasn't supposed to be coming. Jacob was supposed to keep him distracted! Fuck fuck fuck. She started to creep backward, but her eyes fell back down through the grate to Damien. The two Invictus were running, but Damien wasn't pursuing. He'd collapsed and sat down on a chair with his hands to his chest. The barbarian bitch must have landed a hit on him with her claws. It was a wonder he hadn't been split into separate pieces.

Leave, Beatrice. Lucas is coming, and you have no fucking clue if you can stay hidden from an elder. But of course she couldn't leave, not when all the tasty, succulent information she wanted was right there in front of her. Heh, wow, first day on the job and she was already addicted to the rush of the Danse Macabre.

So she kept quiet, and did her best to stay hidden with the cloak of night. Jacob said Lucas and him were friends, so maybe she'd be able to talk her way out of a second death?

---

~~Julias~~

The three of them sat in silence.

Not true silence, of course. His fellow members of the triumvirate were busy with their smart phones and tablets. He had to give them credit, the two elders had managed to adopt modern technology to a degree Viktor never could. They weren't exactly capable of multi-tasking like younger Kindred, but with their devices they could handle large, complicated webs of data. Both of them used their smart phones for only that, and talking.

The thought of the Nosferatu ghost woman playing a match-3 game made him smirk.

“The ball the Prince is hosting seems like it is in good faith. Master Terry says as much, though he is definitely biased,” Julias

said.

“I’m sure he is.” Michael gave a hearty chuckle, but his eyes never raised from his tablet. From what Julias could see, the large Gangrel was reading reports on the affairs of Xnomina. “Your childe has proved efficient in both Xnomina’s dealings, and at making friends in high places.”

“He has. The former I predicted, the latter not so much.”

“We all change when embraced,” Maria Turio said, and she reached up with one hand to idly stroke her flat, black hair. She could never truly hide her corpse-from-the-water look, it was her curse after all, but she dressed for her role and was all the more intimidating for it. “As for the ball, you know the Prince is simply looking to gauge the feelings of the Kindred population here. The death of two elders would make any city’s Prince worry for political change.”

Julias gave a small nod and leaned back in his chair with a hand on his chin. “Agreed. I plan to go too, if only to do the same. Will you two?”

They both considered, but eventually gave Julias a nod and returned to their devices. For a moment, Julias thought of them as children addicted to their smart phones, as many kine were these days, but the two elders were anything but addicted to mindless distraction. Their finger strokes were determining the outcomes of many merges of companies, acquisitions of product and resources, and other elements of Xnomina Julias wasn’t even familiar with.

He thought of the ball. He’d go to test the political climate, and to keep an eye on Jack as well. Beatrice though ... he wanted to go with Beatrice. The damn pain-in-his-ass Carthian was really stirring up all sorts of strange feelings in him. Joy and recklessness combined. He thought of her in an evening gown that highlighted her ridiculously amazing legs and ass, and that too put a smile on his

face. Elysium was open to kine, so she'd have to hide her face to stop one from seeing her Nosferatu elements, but a silky face veil would look foreign, exotic, and very sexy.

Then the door opened.

“Madame Vola, Madame Herrington ... what the hell happened?” Julias got up and just stared at them. This was not good.

They were all back at the Xnomina HQ, in the same scenario as when Julias gave the two women their order. Maria and Michael were sitting at the center table of the office, and Julias was standing while leaning back against the table.

The exact same, except that Natasha and Jessy had limped in. Kindred didn't carry wounds like a kine, being a walking corpse and all, but he could see it in their uneven steps and their worn faces. They were more pale than usual, they winced as they moved, and even Jessy held a hand up to her neck every so often to hide the obvious gash.

“Mister Mire,” they said together. They could barely even muster the energy to sound professional.

“What. Happened?”

They looked to each other, and the shared glance of guilt was obvious.

“Sir,” Natasha said, “we ... there was...”

“It was the Lancea et Sanctum, Mire.” Jessy took a step forward, and met his upset gaze. “Tony's old brood are now a bunch of religious nuts.”

“Truly?” This time it was Maria to speak up, and everyone in the room looked to her. The ghost woman sounded genuinely surprised.

Excited, maybe?

Natasha managed a tiny nod. “Yes, Madame Turio.”

Michael tapped his fingers on the table loud enough to grab their attention. “Hold on. The Lancea et Sanctum is back? What about our missing neonates?”

“They’ve ... they’ve joined,” Natasha said, and looked down at her hands. Even Jessy went quiet, and looked down.

Julias too looked down, and grit his teeth. For fledglings to change covenants was not unheard of, and the state of peace in Dolareido allowed it, but it was always painful for a sire to see their childe leave their ways. But who could just randomly sway dozens of young Kindred, three of which were Invictus, to join the Second Estate?

“ ... it was Lucas, wasn’t it?” Julias said. He reached up and tapped his chin, but his eyes looked back over his shoulder to Maria. She looked away, and for just a second, he saw a small twitch of delight on her ghostly lips.

Viktor had confided in Julias more information than his council realized.

Natasha tilted her head a little. “Lucas, sir? We heard that name when we were down there.”

“Lucas is alive then?” Michael got up and started to pace around, but his slightly hunched, animal posture made it look more so like a stalking wolf. “The Archbishop survived the Prince’s purge.”

Jessy and both Natasha raised their head, blinked at each other, and looked at Michael together. “Archbishop, sire?”

“You were both embraced mere months after the purge, and we were not to discuss the Archbishop or his Bishops and priests.” Julias gave a small dismissing wave of his hand, but the memories of the purge were still there. Memories of the sheriff, his sword, and the ashes of dead priests. Memories of Lucas, a Mehket so persuasive and compelling, he should have been Ventrue.

“Archbishop Lucas of the Lancea et Sanctum. He ran the Second Estate here, and was a frequent thorn in the Prince’s side.” Michael chuckled and folded his arms across his chest. “We thought he may have escaped the purge, but we had no proof.”

“Is ... is he an ally then?” Jessy said. She had a guilty look on her face, and Julias squinted at her. She avoided his gaze, shuffled her feet, dripping guilt all over the floor.

“The Invictus and the Lancea et Sanctum are almost always allies. We are the First Estate, and they are the Second Estate for a reason.” Maria got up, moved to the display wall and brought up the digital overhead display of the city. “The Archbishop had twelve churches, here and here, and here.” Elysium and the Prince’s lair lied in the center of the city, more or less, with the Xnomina HQ – where they stood – not too far off. The churches circled it nicely. “If things had continued as they were half a century ago, the current Prince would probably not be Antoinette.”

Julias gave a small sigh. There had been a purge for more than one reason, but he did not disagree with the Prince’s more known explanation: the religious pursuits of Lucas bordered on mindless zealotry. Julias had been quite happy with their removal, while his sire had most definitely been not.

“Did you speak with Lucas then?” Maria said, and approached the two right hands. Both Jessy and Natasha avoided eye contact with her most of all.

“Um, Madame T-T-Turio, we ... um...”

“There was a fight,” Jessy said, and she forced her eyes to Maria’s.

Julias winced. He knew what was coming. Right on queue the ghost woman reached up to the taller Gangrel, grabbed her by the neck, and brought her down to her knees like she was a toddler. Jessy could only comply, and Julias could see the mix of shock and fear in her eyes.

“Did you kill anyone?” Maria’s voice had turned gravely, and Julias could hear dirt and grit coming out of her mouth. If graveyards could talk, they’d sound like that.

“N-n-n-n—”

“Shut up Natasha.” Maria squeezed harder, and Jessy brought up her hands out of reflex to grab the elder’s wrist. She even struggled a little, but Maria’s grip was absolute. The itty bitty ghost woman had more than enough strength to crush Jessy into dust right in front of them, and they all knew it. “Did you kill any of them?”

Julias considered stepping in to help the Gangrel, but the way anger was just pouring off the ghost woman told him he better not.

“Yes but ... no one ... important,” Jessy managed to stay through a crushed windpipe.

With a loud scoff, Maria threw Jessy back and onto the floor. She stepped toward Natasha then, and the tiny Mehket did her best to stand her ground. Julias hid a small smirk, as Natasha managed to even make some eye contact with Maria despite the proximity.

“So you both just strolled in?” the Nosferatu said.

“Y-yes ma’am.”

“And you found Lucas?”



“No m-m-ma’am. We found a ... a congregation, ma’am, and someone called Bishop Damien.” Natasha looked away when Maria leaned in closer. “We ... got into a fight, and ... B-B-B-Bishop Damien tried to detain us. We ... resisted. And we were forced to d-defend ourselves. Some of Tony’s old brood died.”

Julias blinked, raised a hand to his hair to brush it back, and stepped up to put a hand on Maria’s shoulder. A little touch to stop her from getting too angry and damaging their already-damaged Invictus. Hopefully she wouldn’t tear it off. “Tony’s old brood? So Lucas is back, he’s moved into Tony’s nest, and he’s converted them?”

Jessy got up in as submissive a way as possible, and held her throat in one hand. “Yes sir.”

“And the doors to Tony’s nest were just ... open?”

“Yes sir.”

Julias quirked a brow and looked at Maria. The Nosferatu returned his confusion with a frown, and sat back at the table without even a glance at poor Jessy.

“So you killed some of their members. Did you kill our neonates?”

“No sir!” Natasha’s eyes went so wide, as if Julias had struck her insides with a hot poker. She was loyal to the Invictus, through-and-through, Julias admitted.

“And this Bishop Damien?”

“No sir. He was who we fought, when he tried to stop us from leaving, but he lives.”

Julias groaned and paced back and forth in front of the two right hands. “Bishop Damien ... I do not remember a Bishop named

Damien before the purge. How long embraced do you think?”

“Maybe fifty years, sir.”

Fifty years ... Fifty years? Was he new? It wasn't common for Kindred to hop cities; a single mistake meant sunlight and a very painful death. Had he been hiding in Dolareido this long? Was Jacob hiding him? Antoinette?

“We have all we need for now. You two may go. Submit your detailed reports tomorrow.” McDonald stood in front of the wall display of the city, and gave a small wave of his hand to dismiss the two right hands.

Julias leaned back against the center table and watched the two girls leave. They left limping. Maria hurt their pride, sure, but they were physically injured too, and if it wasn't from Lucas, it certainly wasn't from some neonates. They were trained, old enough to be ancillae, and hand picked to be the Invictus right hands. Natasha may not have been the best in a fist fight, but she was capable, and her mastery of the Mehket disciplines was astounding. On top of that, Jessy was a terror in combat, and if given room to let loose she could annihilate groups of Kindred.

So ... what? They were beaten by this Damien? Someone no older than them?

Once Natasha and Jessy were gone, all three of the triumvirate stood in front of the wall display, and scanned the digital map. They stood in silence for a moment, until Julias turned to look at them. They met his gaze, and a weird, awkward silence fell on them.

“ ... what do we do?” he said after a while.

“There has been fifty years of peace, and that is largely because of the Prince's choice.” McDonald reached out to the digital display and drew an X through each church Lucas used to control. Some of

them were actual churches the kind used that were re-purposed by Kindred during the night, while others were strictly Kindred-only buildings. “How many had there been under Lucas’s hand? Three hundred? What were left after the purge...” McDonald shrugged. “All Lucas could possibly muster now for his followers are Tony’s brood, and our own neonates evidently. He could not reach the numbers he used to control without decades to grow.”

“And Antoinette will not allow that.” Maria stepped between the two large men, reached up, and drew a circle around Tony’s nest. “When she learns of Lucas, if she doesn’t already know, she will give him the same ultimatum as before. If he doesn’t leave the city, she’ll slaughter him and every follower he has.”

The two men nodded. It was a tricky situation. Lucas was a valuable ally, even for all his insane ways, but the Prince had not only been clear about her law, she and her sheriff were strong enough to enforce it. If they sided with the Lancea et Sanctum, it would mean war, and last time the odds were in the Second Estate’s favor yet they still lost.

But the Invictus had only watched the carnage last time. They’d made no efforts to stop it, and that meant they had the same choice again this time.

For a good long while, they all stood there, thinking the same thoughts, until McDonald spoke up. “Who the fuck is Bishop Damien?”

Maria and Julias shrugged.

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~~Damien~~

He had not expected that.

He'd expected someone to show up eventually, true. The Invictus were as likely a candidate as any, especially considering three of their group had converted. And he'd expected anger, and perhaps even a thrown fist from whoever did discover their congregation.

He hadn't expected to be standing over the corpses of several Kindred. They were young enough, only a few years old, that they didn't even fall to ash like a true Kindred. Instead their withered corpses were left. Other Kindred had wandered up to gather them, and picked up their mangled, dry husks. They stood in front of Damien with the bodies in their arms, and they had sad, expectant faces.

Damien just sat down in a chair, held his sliced-open chest with one hand, and his face with the other. "Take ... take them to the second library. I will burn them later."

They nodded and obeyed without question. A part of him wished they'd argue with him, just so he had a reason to let out some anger.

"I see our quiet home has finally been assaulted."

Lucas stepped into the room of metal walls and tunnels and approached him. The good Archbishop, with his soothing voice and soft smile, was dressed in his black robes. He had short, curly black hair and beard, dark skin, and a blend of many accents Damien could not quite place. The Archbishop was from Africa, from a time well before Damien could even imagine.

But just his presence was enough to have every Kindred in the room fall hushed with awe and silence. Damien was not surprised, as their contact with their elders would have been few and far between. They must have felt like simple dogs before the mighty Cerberus, a glorious example of the most powerful of their kind and an icon of faith. Of course they worshiped Lucas, and he could not blame them.

“Archbishop, we beg your forgiveness!” The crowd of Kindred, all fledglings and neonates, bowed and pleaded. “Everything went-”

“Please, children, let the Bishop speak,” Lucas said, and approached Damien. He reached out with both hands, and put a hand on his childe’s torn open chest and shoulder before touching where the bullet had entered his skull. “But I can guess what happened.”

“... the Invictus Right Hands. I thought to detain them, and ... that...” The words were bitter.

“I can imagine how the Gangrel would have responded to that. Like a caged animal?”

“Yes.” Damien managed a quick glance down at the mess of the fight, where bits of ash coated the floor. “I thought perhaps an Invictus would ... would not be so...” He clutched at his wound and squeezed his eyes shut. The healing was slow, painful, as the fight left him drained and unable to regenerate quickly. That Jessy feral animal had hit him hard. And the fellow Mehket Natasha, her quick actions had put a bullet in his head.

Perhaps that was what frustrated him most? That he’d fallen for her innocent exterior? Or that he wasn’t fast enough. He needed to be faster. Everything would fail if he wasn’t faster.

Lucas gave his cheek a light tap. “I will see to the dead, my childe. You should go, feast, and rest.”

“But more may come.”

“Unless they can summon an army within the hour, I am sure I will be fine.” Lucas shook his head and motioned to the crowd behind him. More and more Kindred had gathered, even the ghouls, and they waited with hopeful faces. All they wanted was a word from his sire, a message or sermon, anything to soothe their fears

and worries. Damien could admit he too wanted to be soothed; now that the Invictus could confirm their existence, everything was moving forward.

All according to his sire's plan, but that did not change how dangerous it was. How unnerving.

Lucas gave Damien that same, fatherly smile, but his eyes drifted.

“Sire?”

“Hmm? Oh, I am sorry my boy. My thoughts are elsewhere. An old friend and I shared words.” He gave Damien another pat on the shoulder and a nod. “And he will not trouble us. So at least that is one worry dealt with. Now go, but be careful. The Invictus will be slow to react to this, as they are to everything, but you never know.”

“I always am, sire.” He managed a smile, and with the Archbishop's help, stood up. The wounds were healing, at least enough that he could go hunt.

He decided to take a side exit, one not used by either the congregation or the intruders. Once he was out of sight, he clenched his fists and let the rage work its way up his limbs. He didn't head out into the night until his arms stopped shaking.

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The streets of Dolareido were loud with the hustle and bustle of movement, whores, drugs, alcohol, self-deceit, dirty money, and suits. Maybe it was the pain of his wounds underneath his coat, but being so near the sheep of God and their sin was more annoying than usual. How many years had he lived in this, and only now it ate at him? How many years he stayed hidden in the most rotten core of the city?

Only now did he have his sire back, but only now did he know the pain of another Kindred cutting him open and blowing his brains

out. The highs and lows of the massive changes were a harsh contrast.

“Fifty years ... it took fifty years, but I have him back,” he said with a hushed voice. He was only talking to himself while he walked deep into the loudest and most compressed sections of the city, where bars and gambling and prostitution were on every corner. Talking to himself while surrounded by people who ignored him.

It almost felt like a film noir scene.

Deeper and deeper he went into the city’s underbelly. Soon the bright lights of the casinos and the hum of endless vehicle horns were faded background, and instead he found the hiss of its recesses. It was a quiet hiss broken by random gunfire, sirens, and cat calls. The hookers wore fake fur instead of fine dresses, and the men wore tattoos of hookers in fake fur, instead of ties.

The upper class were a lost cause, but these lower class still had an ounce of soul left in them, and that meant they were worth saving. So as the crowds on the streets grew less and less, until he was surrounded by only dark and windows-with-bars, he kept walking. It wasn’t until he heard the familiar cry of crime that he turned a corner.

Down an alley – Dolareido and its alleys were common to the point of cliché – he found the source. A woman was trapped between several alleyways, with each containing a thug of some sort or another to block her way. Each offender had lust in their eyes. One of the thugs, Damien noticed, was a woman. At least Dolareido was progressive with its gender roles.

“No! Stop!”

“Shut the fuck up before I break your jaw.” A taller guy with broad shoulders stood between the woman and the street Damien walked in from. Apparently, the brute and his group were more than happy

to rape in the middle of an alley. They knew the alleys in this part of town had no cameras. Damien knew it too.

“Please ... don’t...”

Damien crept in closer. Hunger was on his tongue. His body demanded blood. The beast in his chest could smell it, see it, hell he could hear their hearts pumping. The greater the hunger, the closer that beast came to the surface and the more he wanted to rip the blood bags open with savage need, and drink from a fountain of red.

But right now, he really wanted to let out some anger first. Damien was no Gangrel, or Nosferatu or Daeva, or even Ventrue. It was a Mehket’s way to use shadows, secrecy, and speed. But for the moment, he didn’t feel like doing any of that. For the moment, he wanted to feel a vermin’s blood on his hands.

And the satisfaction of driving his sword through the rapist’s back and then up and through his sternum was euphoric.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” from the three remaining that lived. They stood there, eyes wide and jaws dropped, staring at him, but he didn’t care. He just let the skewered man gargle on blood even as the delicious, warm liquid gushed over his hand.

He removed the sword with a sideways swipe, and it forced the man’s body to twist and fold on itself from being nearly split in half. The blood was everywhere, and each splatter it cast drew more screams from the viewers. Their voices were just tiny echoes against the ugly hiss of the city’s dark side.

Deep down in Dolareido’s underbelly, it was free feeding for any Kindred. They could feed, kill, whatever they wanted to the kine within. As long as the Masquerade was not risked, it was up to the Kindred to do as they wished within its borders. And right now, that meant a killing spree.



“What the fuck is—” The female thug was next. No archaic notions of gender inequality here; the woman died in the same way as her friend, but with the sword stabbing down through her sternum and out her back instead.

“No! No!” The remaining rapist managed to come to his senses just long enough to turn around. He managed a single step, then Damien was behind him, and he sank his sword through the man’s back and out through his stomach. Before the prey could start screaming, Damien let go of his weapon and reached out to pull the taller man down to him with a hand around his mouth. His other hand grabbed the man’s shoulder, and with enough force to break bone, he bent the man down in an unnatural position so he could sink his teeth into his neck.

Everything went quiet. The dying man could only grumble with Damien’s hand over his mouth and nose, and the vampire wasted no time draining the stupid sheep of blood so quickly, so aggressively, that it was only moments before his victim was unconscious. Damien could only just barely hear behind him the weeping, petrified woman he’d saved. Just barely over the pumping blood in his mouth and the roaring beast in his gut, he could hear her whimpers.

She’d have no idea what he was doing, in the dark and with his back to her. It was her only saving grace.

When the last of the warm, delicious red liquid coated his tongue, he reached down and pulled the sword clean from the body. He let the corpse fall, and before it managed to fully crumble he lopped off its head with his sword. Even in the dark, he squarely destroyed the fang marks with his blade and the cold efficiency of hundreds of murders.

And now everything was covered in blood. It was all over his hands, cooling in the night, and it soaked into his clothes. The

painful wounds on his chest were already sealed with the rush of fresh Vitae, and hunger was at last settling, but now he was surrounded and coated in so much red that the beast within was rumbling with the glee of slaughter.

He raised a hand to his face without a care for its stained skin, and put it to his forehead. Why was he so angry? Shouldn't he be happy his sire was back?

“I ... I... —”

“You!” He slammed the sword into the wall next to her head. Brick exploded into powder next to her skull, and the volume was like a gunshot. The poor, helpless sheep just collapsed and stared at him, shaking, pale, and wide eyed.

“You ... The devil is coming for you, stupid girl.”

“What? What, I-”

“Swimming in sin. Stupid girl has forgotten all about the Lord her shepherd.” He grabbed her throat, lifted her like she was nothing but a feather, and tossed her forward. He was careful the dumb harlot wouldn't break any bones, but some skinned knees and a piss-soaked skirt would do her good.

“B-b-b-but-”

“I can smell filth and disease on you from here.” It was true of course. To the stupid sheep, he was just a blur of movement in the dark alley, but he could see every detail on her painted face and smell the disease coming from between her legs, along with perfumes to hide it. “Now swear to me, you worthless harlot, that you will fear God.”

“Fear God? I ... my mom, and...”

His patience was gone. Normally he would do all this manipulation, all this coaxing and terrorizing through subtle actions his target wouldn't be able to pinpoint. But now he was just burying himself in the anger that was bubbling up and taking him over. Now he felt like a Nosferatu relishing in the mix of a torturer's power and animal's rage. He reached down, grabbed the girl, picked her up, and slammed her against the wall with his fingers around her neck.

“Go beg the nearest priest for forgiveness then. If I see you out on these streets, I will cut you open from cunt to mouth.” His sword, now ruined with scratches from the brick, found its way up to her eyes, and he used his free hand to bring it within an inch of her iris. “Have I made myself clear?”

She fainted.

He rolled his eyes and set the girl back down. There was no way anyone would harm her while she recovered, with all the bodies scaring away anyone who may accidentally stumble down the alley. When she awoke, he was sure she'd do just as he demanded. He knew that look in her eye, terrified and destroyed, and it'd scar her for life. It'd also put her back into God's embrace.

He took a moment to check for evidence. He'd only bit one kine, and destroyed his fang marks after. All DNA that may have been left behind would fade to ash and dust within mere minutes, and even fingerprints were nothing but hazy blurs from a Kindred. The crime, the slaughter, it was all a mess of chaos and random brutality, but it could not be traced. Damien knew which alleys had cameras, so the whore would have nothing but her own word.

Fed, but not satisfied, Damien jumped up onto the rooftops. His wounds were healed, his energy returned, and his inner-beast was no longer ravenous and on the edge of taking over to frenzy. But still, he was not satisfied. So he jumped to another building, and another, with just enough cloak of night to hide himself from

accidental glances from kine. After several buildings, he sat down and let his legs dangle over the side of one ledge, seeped in enough dark to hide anything.

“I’m not angry with the Invictus right hands.” He brought his bloodied hands up to his temples and rubbed them in circles. Talk through it. Verbalize. Intellectualize. Understand. “Sire said to let them come. Kindred died because of that. Am I angry he made a stupid decision, or am I angry I think it’s stupid? Am I angry with myself that I can’t see the wisdom in his decision?” He bit down on his teeth hard enough to hurt the fangs hidden behind his lips. “He hasn’t told me everything though. How can he not trust me?”

“... or I’m just angry that he’s demanded patience.” He chewed his teeth until it hurt, and squeezed his eyes shut. Memories of the Bishops and priests turning to ash in a slaughter were always there, even fifty years later. It ate at him, and it demanded justice. Maybe that was why? No patience for revenge? “Why didn’t Lucas take advantage of the secrecy? I woke him at the perfect time, fifty years of patience, and he didn’t use it to take revenge. Why?” Why did Lucas waste half a century of his childe’s misery?

He mulled over it, chewed on it, until he forgot he was covered in blood. His sword needed to be replaced and his clothes too, but he knew himself enough to know he was stuck in his mind. He couldn’t move until he’d made sense of his own feelings.

At least normally that was true, but he jumped up and turned around with sword in hand like someone had jammed a tazer into his ass.

Someone was there.

“Who the—” He cut himself off. Talk less. Control the situation. Someone was up on the old tavern’s roof and he couldn’t see them.

And that meant it was someone strong. No one could hide from his sight. No one.

He stepped forward, sword drawn, and started to scope out the rooftop. Deep in the underbelly of the city, the sky wasn't as washed out by the lighting, which was great for vampires stalking prey. And for many, they thought it meant they could hide from the prying eyes of their betters.

“But not from me,” Damien said, voice so quiet he could barely hear himself. He kept his short sword at the ready at his side; he'd already accidentally let them know that he knew someone was there. So he crept around, eyes peeled, and with a belly full of sheep's blood he had more than enough power in him to rip apart whoever was spying on him to silence them.

It wouldn't be the first time.

Only silence greeted him though. He'd felt eyes on him, he knew it, but now there was nothing there except the silence of the night. He grit his teeth, hid himself to the shadows, and faded away into the black. There was no use pursuing the issue soaked in blood, even with the inner-beast's ability to hide a Kindred's face from cameras. It was too dangerous, so he retreated, and sped back to the underground nest of the new Lancea et Sanctum.

He couldn't remember exactly what he'd said when talking to himself. Nothing incriminating, nothing important. Maybe?

Everything had been going according to plan. He prayed he didn't just screw it up.

# Chapter 15

~~Jack~~

Every time he woke up, it was a shock.

Julias had said a Kindred doesn't really sleep, cause how could a corpse sleep? They just become a corpse, and when the sun sets, they un-corpsify. Each and every time, it was like someone jammed adrenaline straight into his heart. He sat up in his bed with a jolt, and could feel the Vitae spike through his system to wake him with its unnatural power.

But then it settled. He'd grown more comfortable with his new body, its strange, thinned and pale skin, its strength and durability, and even the beast that now lived in his chest. He looked around, and smiled at the world around him. It was his apartment, and it was a really, really, really nice apartment, like the one Julias had before he'd been promoted. The place locked down automatically during the day, so he didn't even need to worry about accidentally getting himself killed in the sun.

He took some time to look at himself in the mirror. The scars were still there on his stomach, a painful reminder of the circumstances of his embrace, but other than that he really liked what he saw. Sure, a Kindred was pasty white and unusually thin unless they blushed life, but everything else looked great. And it always would. He no longer aged, and every day he'd revert to the condition he was in upon embrace while he slept. He was god damn immortal.

As long as he kept drinking blood, that is. He pat his belly, half expecting it to growl either from gurgling stomach acids that no

longer existed, or from the famished beast that lived next to his withered heart.

“Wow, poetry?” he said to the mirror. “Antoinette’s rubbing off on me.”

The apartment didn’t have two floors like Julias’s, but it had three bedrooms – two completely unused cause what the fuck did he need three bedrooms for – and a connected living room and kitchen. All sleek, stylish and cool-colored cupboards and walls, with a window to overlook the city from high high high up in his apartment. Hell, Julias’s old apartment was right across the street.

He walked around his apartment, naked of course. It was weird how there was absolutely no sensation of cold from the air on bare skin, not even a little, even when he opened his fridge. There was blood there, in the same sort of wine bottle Julias used. He reached in and got ready to down it straight, but rolled his eyes and put the thing back.

“Get a glass or get it fresh.” He wanted fresh, of course. There was nothing quite like a cool drink when he was alive, but now he was dead and his dry insides demanded warm, thick blood to satisfy.

His mind drifted to Antoinette and her ghouls. Much as he loved the Prince, it was her ghouls that came to his mind when he was actually hungry. The feel of their young, healthy blood gushing over his tongue with the mix of hormones from arousal, and orgasm, it was all a glorious cocktail of taste and exhilaration. And then, there was the feel of their tight, wet flesh wrapped around him during the Kiss, and all the hot juices that came with climax.

“No! Fucking hell you stupid ass. Antoinette is busy today, Julias is busy today, so you have to take care of yourself. You’re not some weak leech. You’re a fucking vampire.” He stabbed himself in the temples with his index fingers a few times, before rubbing his fingers along his buzzed head. “Go hunt. Hunt. Hunt.”

Hunt. Hunt. It sounded so easy. It's what Kindred did after all, and he'd more than proved himself to the Invictus and to Antoinette that he was capable. But the actual act of a solo hunt was just something he'd yet to do. Something always happened that allowed him to bypass it. Fuck that though, he was going to do it.

He got dressed in the typical suit of casual Invictus business, and tried to keep the memories of Mrs. Pavala from his mind. It wasn't his fault, he knew that, and the beast in his gut who'd killed her didn't care about her death or her family's misery at all. And then that made him think of his own family. Kindred had a dozen ways to fall into a spiral of depression.

"Maybe that's why I'm being such a pussy about this. Alone with my thoughts ... ugh. Julias warned me, he did." He stood in front of his apartment's door, still closed, and bounced his head against it. Then banged. He'd been spending all his time with Antoinette, and his sire Julias, cause it meant he didn't have to think about this shit.

Well, fuck that. He wasn't a pussy!

---

Ok, he was a bit of a pussy.

Just a couple week ago, he was riding high on his ego after a successful mission for Xnomina, and even higher after having slept with three women in a single night. But now he was standing on the sidewalk outside his apartment building, watching the nightlife walk by, taxis drive by, and he had no fucking idea what he was doing.

Suddenly, the kine he was supposed to feed on weren't kine. They were humans. They had thoughts and feelings and voices.

"Social anxiety? ... really?" He jabbed himself in the forehead with a finger. He was a Kindred. He was a fucking vampire.



But he just stood there, shuffling his feet, watching people go by. Paralyzed.

“Hey.”

“Holy shit!” He jumped, spun around, and actually landed on his ass.

It was Shark-mouth. She was leaning back against the door to the apartment building — she’d gotten behind him so easily — with arms folded against her stomach and one boot against the door. She really carried that badass chick thing well, complete with the tank top, leather jacket, ripped jeans, the works. She was using that nifty cloak of night thing Nosferatu and Mehket could do, but so close like this they could still talk.

To the kine, he probably looked like he was talking to his imaginary friend. Wonderful.

“Julias here? He wasn’t at his place.” She pointed across the street.

“His place? Oh, right, he said he hadn’t shown you his new place.”

“He moved? ... he didn’t tell me.”

Wow. If he didn’t know any better, he’d think she was pouting. It was hard to tell with how her raven hair hid the sides of her mouth, but he doubted it’d be any better if he could see her massive array of huge teeth. “He took Alder Honors’s mansion for his own.” He tried to sound adult, proper, royal, but it just didn’t sound very good on him.

With a small wince, he got back up and dusted himself off. Presentation was important, even to a Nosferatu, or a rebellious Carthian. But adjusting his suit and tie only made the damn monster girl chuckle. She was infuriating, and scary.

“Wait wait, he’s got Viktor’s old place? Shit man, in Rich Side?” She pushed away from the door, and a mad grin crossed her lips, big enough he could see the shark teeth peak through.

“Right, Rich Side. Ok? I’ll be seeing you.” He gave up on the fake royal demeanor waved her off before he started walking down the street.

A moment later, she was walking next to him. She definitely had guts for a Nosferatu, not for walking with him since he was just a pipsqueak, but for walking along in the crowd of kine. She tilted her head, avoided eye contact with kine who stepped too close, and otherwise kept her discipline going just enough so kine’s eyes just glided off of her. It was impressive.

And he’d much prefer to make his mistakes learning to hunt in private.

“What do you want?”

“You’re hungry aren’t you? Please sir, I want some more?”

“Oh fuck you.”

“Ha!” She reached out and gave him a pat on the shoulder, just hard enough he felt the claws on her fingers. “Kid you are fucking hilarious.”

“Seriously could you fuck off so I can—”

“You have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”

He looked up at her and gave her the meanest glare he could muster. It only made her laugh.

“Kid you got a Ventrue with a heart of gold for a sire and a Prince with blood bags by the dozens lined up for you. Not either of them

has probably had to go on a proper hunt in decades. Antoinette, centuries.” She chuckled more, wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and pulled him in close while they walked. “Ain’t neither of them who could teach you to hunt. Manipulate people and control them, sure, but hunt?”

He grit his teeth. Julias was a tough fucker, and Antoinette even tougher, but Beatrice had a point. Neither of them were hunters.

“What’s your point?”

“I,” she said, and poked his temple with a claw, “am going to teach you.”

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There was no way out. Between the dark and the street, there were only walls. As if he was herding sheep, the kine in the back alley stepped away from him with a hurried, uneven step.

“Who are you? Hey, don’t try anything!”

It was a woman, someone in her forties, in good health and well dressed in a nice, sexy nightlife dress made for clubbing. The dress was particular for its open neck line, and his eyes transfixed themselves to it. She couldn’t see his face, not with the distant back light of the street behind him, and only blackness around them, but he could see every detail on her. With hunger bubbling up in his chest, the subtle touches of veins on her neck stuck out like a sore thumb.

“I said stay back!” She started rooting through her purse, and before long she had out her pepper spray, but he kept coming closer.

There was no one around, this deep into the city’s underbelly. No one who cared about a woman in an alley, anyhow. He had no idea how unsafe it was down here, this deep in South Side, but now that danger was his ally. So many dark alleys, barely any cops, and

enough dirty money being thrown that nearly every street had some sort of unruly establishment. It made for easy pickings.

She reached into her purse, hands fumbling and zippers rattling. “I’m warning y—”

“Look into my eyes, woman.” He put on his best Julius voice. He was short, with no width to his shoulders or weight to his stance, but none of that mattered to a panicking woman all alone in a dark alley. And when he stepped closer so she could see his eyes in the shadow, he could hear her heart beating fast enough to hurt.

“I ... said...”

Quieter, and quieter. Her voice faded until it was just a whisper. Her eyes locked to his, drifted half-closed, and when he moved his head to the side, hers moved with it. Even her heartbeat slowed rapidly.

“Look into my eyes.” He came closer again, until he reached out. Would she break from his hold? Would she scream bloody murder? So close, he could smell her body, the natural scents of skin, the unnatural scents of perfume, and the hidden tide of blood within.

“I...” Barely audible. When he finally took her wrist into his hand, she didn’t pull back or flinch or even breath faster. She just held his gaze, and he held hers. Her consciousness had faded, and her eyes became a window to her subconscious. He had control.

Don’t think about your sister. Think about those thugs you controlled for that Xnomina deal instead. He didn’t know this woman, and that anonymity was powerful. It took only a small bit of effort, the smallest push, and her weak and terrified consciousness knelt like a slave. He never considered himself to be the dominant sort, but to have a human just give into your will was ... intoxicating.

“Expose your neck.”

She tilted her head to the side, reached up, and brushed her hair out of the way. Her eyes had grown dull, subservient, and her breathing was smooth and calm.

“Turn around.”

She did as told. So easy, so effortless. Intoxicating wasn't a strong enough word for the rush of power he felt controlling her. He took a step nearer to close the distance, put his hands on her stomach and hip, and took a deep breath of her neck. The smell of life, blood, even the musk and perfume, it spoke to that beast in his gut and mixed into his senses like thick incense.

And when he bit into her, it all came together in that orgasmic mixture of sweet, warm, flowing blood gushing up into his mouth. Tight lips, don't spill a drop, drink it all down until the flow slowed. He remembered, from Antoinette and Julias, remembered how to keep the victim alive. For the moment though, he let his beast rule, and drank with wild abandon. She didn't mind, and even let out moans of bliss from the power the Kiss had. Just like with Antoinette's ghouls, just like with the kine he'd fed on when with Julias, the woman melted and gave in.

A minute later, he opened his eyes, and lowered the now unconscious woman to the ground. He spent a moment to make sure she was leaning against the building wall, and despite himself, even checked to make sure he could still see signs of life. It was important she was still alive.

Beatrice landed beside him with a loud thud. She'd been watching from above, and it was her guidance that had lead him here. She showed him how to pick a target, follow them, guide them with bits of scary noises, moving shadows, and knowledge of the city's layout.

“You let her live.”

“What? Well ... yeah, course I did.” He tilted his head to the side and scratched his buzzed hair. “Is that ... do you not?”

She shrugged. “I usually let them live. Sometimes though, you find a kine that really just deserves to die.” With a quiet chuckle, she brought her claws up to her hair, and moved it aside to expose her shark teeth so she could pick at them. “But some Kindred kill at their whim. They’re just kine, blood bags, sheep, and you’re the wolf. You can too.” She reached out with that claw then, and poked him in the forehead hard enough she actually pierced skin; and it did nothing, no blood or anything, because he was a Kindred.

He was a Kindred. Not a human, not really. He was a walking corpse.

“ ... just because I can doesn’t mean I would.” He frowned then and pushed her claw aside, complete with a painful wince. “What sick fuck would just murder living, thinking, self-aware humans just because they can?”

“Your grandsire for one.”

“Then I’m glad I fucking killed him!”

She blinked. He blinked. Oh shit. Oh fuck he may have just royally boned himself.

“Fucking hell. You set the fire that took him out!” She grinned a smile that had him taking a step back. Those teeth were horrifying whenever she let them show.

“I ... um...” Shit shit shit. He looked around in a panic, but there was nothing and no one around. It was just a dark alley, an unconscious woman, and a Nosferatu Carthian who should very much not know what he just said.

“Don’t worry kid, your secret is safe with me. You think I’d be fucking your sire if I just wanted to screw you guys over?” She winked at him, but there was an obvious glee in her eyes. No poker skills at all, like him.

She was trustworthy ... ish. Julias had taught him well enough to see that.

“Ugh, don’t remind me.”

“Ah god damn kid, you’ve seen me topless. Just think of all the things your sire does to me in the dark.”

Ew. Ugh. Erk. Beatrice was attractive, sure, in a monster chick kind of way, and her shark-teeth-for-cheeks made her definitely interesting, and scary, but the thought of his sire fucking her was disturbing. Kind of like picturing your dad fucking someone.

“Speaking of sex!” Beatrice peaked down the alley to make sure no one was coming into the dark, then sat down on the unconscious woman’s lap. “Gimme the scoop!”

“Uh, she isn’t going to wake up?”

“Fuck no. You drained her good. In a few hours she’ll wake up and this’ll all be a hazy memory.”

“Um ... alright. Scoop?”

“You and the Prince! My god man, you’re banging the most powerful Kindred in all of Dolareido! Hundreds of Kindred in this city and your first hook-up is the mother fucking Prince. Gimme something!”

He did not expect that, not at all. Most of the Nosferatu he’d dealt with were quite closed off and aggressive. Beatrice was certainly

aggressive, but she was smiling and grinning in a genuine way he couldn't quite understand. A happy Nosferatu was paradoxical.

He wasn't exactly keen on talking about Antoinette with her, but he did owe her. And she had him by the balls with his slip-up.

“Are you going to the ball with her?” she said.

Arg, the ball. All the Kindred would be there. At least, the Carthians and Invictus would, and Antoinette. The Circle of the Crone never came to those gatherings, thank god. Jacob was a scary fucker.

“Yes, yes of course but...” He looked around, as if someone else may be listening. Just him, the monster, the unconscious woman, and the dark. “Fucking terrified of dancing in front of hundreds of Kindred.”

The laughter that erupted out of Beatrice was almost deafening. “Fucking surrounded by vampires, all of them older than you and looking for any edge they can find, and you're worried about your dancing skills?”

He shrugged. “Wouldn't you be?”

She tapped her chin a few times with a claw. “You know what? I probably would be too.”

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~~Beatrice~~

She could never whistle, not since she got her shark teeth, but she tried anyway. It was a huge mansion. Huge! Dare she say, it was the biggest place in Rich Side. And her boyfriend owned it. She tried to hide the grin on her face, even wipe it away, but it remained. There really was something hot about Julias and his rise to power,



complete with the suits to go with. Her old Carthian friends would laugh, hell she'd laugh if she'd known she had such a kink.

But she wasn't about to just walk up to his front door. He had a big, fancy place, and she was sure in typical Julias fashion that he'd let his guard down with his naivete. So she crept through the shadows and worked her up toward the huge building, which was not easy with its large array of windows on its antique, Victorian design. Whatever, that was Viktor's shit, but it did mean she had a lot of windows to keep track of as she approached, even with her cloak of her night hiding her.

It'd been a few days since Jacob had marked her with his Crúac. That insane rush and elder mastery of the discipline was gone, but she was still a damn pro. Pro enough to sneak up on her white knight, at least. There were small hills, trees, and holy fuck there were statues holding pitchers of water and everything. It was so disgusting. She loved it.

She went around back. Christ there was a fountain, huge and pouring water over an array of some kneeling statues before a tall ... Viktor. The fucker had a statue of himself. The hair was different, but she recognized the cheek bones of the twice dead bastard. Around the base of the statues were yet more statues of various predators and scavenger animals. Typical Ventrue, thinking he lorded over the animals and the kine.

One of the small animals waved. A rat, a real one. She looked at it, it looked at her, and it waved again. Why the mother fucking shit was a rat waving at her?

How had she not smelled it? Shit, she was downwind, so the fucker must have sneaked up on her. And to top it all off, the rat was pointing at the back door of the mansion. Rats didn't just randomly stand up and point at things, but this one was.

For fuck's sake. With a loud grump, she got up, let her cloak of night fade, and opened the large door. It was one of those heavy doors of colored wood with ornate carvings of historical figures she'd only seen on book covers.

She was not prepared for what was inside. Massive, spiral stairways, pillars, couches with elaborate patterns and what must have been the softest fabrics from a billion years ago. On one of the couches that pointed toward the entrance she'd come in through was Julias, one leg folded over the other and a smirk on his face.

“Alright, alright, you caught me.” She put up her hands. It was his rat, the dirty rat. Damn Ventrue and their rats.

“Think the Invictus would have given me this place if I wasn't strong enough to protect it?” He got up, gave her that cocky smirk, and walked to her.

All she had to do was smirk though, and that cocky smirk of his was gone and replaced with his old white knight self. The dumb bastard, smart as he was, didn't have a cruel bone in his body, and she took full advantage. She stepped up to him, and gave him a quick kiss. It was more than enough to make him surprise blink.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” he said, head tilted and eyebrow raised. “You seem in a good mood.”

“I am.” Extremely happy!

She'd told Jacob about Damien, and what she'd seen him do once he'd left the underground compound. And Jacob had nodded, greeted her into the circle, and said she was free to do with the information as she wished. Right now, she had no idea what to do with it, but the power and choice was making her high. She'd warn

Julias about the Lancea et Sanctum, but his goonies would have already told him. They didn't know that she knew, though.

“My god this mansion is huge. So many rooms!” She looked down the hallway where wooden chairs with cushions and end tables waited. The other way, a spiral staircase. The other way, the main entrance room where two staircases ended in a glorious display of wasted space.

It was such a turn on.

She took Julias's hand then, and started walking. He complied without a sound, but very confused. “So, which bedroom did you have my box of goodies in?”

“Oh,” he said, and the light clicked on over his head. “Sure, this way.”

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“Oh my fucking god ... Ok, I admit it, this is so fucking awesome.”

The bedroom was gigantic. Big big big big bed, four posts, fluffy blankets of royal purple — fucking purple! — and massive pillows. The walls were drapes and curtains between fitting mannequins, and each mannequin was wearing some elaborate dress suit from probably hundreds of years ago.

And she was going to fuck on that bed. A lot. Nearly every day if she had any say in the matter.

“Viktor wasted much for extravagance,” Julias said, and he stepped around her to show a small frown. “I'd meant to bring you, but—”

“Whee!” She jumped up, spread out in the air, and belly flopped onto the bed. With expected delight, it bounced her back up a foot before she got to settle in. She looked over her shoulder at Julias,

who was beyond bewildered, and she turned on the blush of life with a wink. Tone returned to her skin, her heart started pumping again, and the feel of blankets on skin became even more euphoric.

He chuckled, outright laughed even, and also began the blush of life as he approached her. “I had no idea you’d enjoy this sort of thing so much.”

“Decades spent living in rundown and abandoned buildings, Julias. Decades. Even when I was alive, nothing like this!” She kicked off her jeans with a laugh, and threw them at Julias at just the right angle they fell on his face and shoulders. He didn’t seem to mind, and smiled at her from between their legs.

“So, look at this.” She got onto her hands and knees, and arched her back like a stretching cat. The effect was her ass in the air, and to make things even better, she’d worn a thong. A tight, black thing that was a little lacy, but mostly just a thin strip that covered what might as well have been nothing. Micro thongs were the hottest. “You have any idea how uncomfortable ass floss is?” Uncomfortable, sure, but she had a large, toned ass, and the thong really brought out those curves perfectly.

Poor Julias’s jaw had dropped. “Damn.” He walked toward the bed with that same confident swagger he always had, but it was in stark contrast to his face. He was mesmerized. Had she found his weakness? His eyes were glued to her exposed ass cheeks, and even as he reached under the bed to pull out her box of goodies, he didn’t break his gaze. Yeap, he was an ass man, and she had the legs and ass of a yoga god.

Memories of Othello, the woman in his lap, and her ass spread open on his cock, jumped into her mind.

“Hey.” She grinned a big, delightful grin. “You know I never really thought about it, and I only just realized it. We’re vampires, and

that means,” she said, and reached behind her to give her ass a slap, “no prep work needed for some fun. One-hundred percent clean.”

The look of genuine surprise on his face yet again made it all worth it. She was the one throwing the curve-balls tonight.

“You sure? I mean—”

“Hell yes I’m sure.” She looked around, grabbed one of those ridiculously expensive-looking pillows, and put it under her hips so she could lay down on her stomach. This way she got to relax, and keep her ass in the air.

The old tingles of excitement started to spark on her toes and up her legs. She loved anal sex when she was alive, if she could find a man who actually knew what he was doing. Julias had a hundred years under his belt; he most definitely knew what he was doing.

He started to undress. She found another pillow to put her head on, and turned her gaze to watch her man get out of his suit. Something about the way he undid the tie, slipped off the jacket, undid the buttons, it all reeked of confidence. And strength. The damn Ventrue had a lot of years on her, but it was more than that. It was in the size of his shoulders, the thickness of his arms, his height, the hard jaw despite his soft smile, and how he wore that ridiculous haircut of slicked-back blonde hair so well.

When he was finally naked, she took a good long look at his cock. Excitement turned to just a touch of panic. Julias was a very well-endowed man, and sure that was awesome for a rough-loving girl like her, but it was a little more complicated for anal sex.

But the big guy sat down beside her, and all it took was a gentle finger running along her thigh to break her. She let out a quiet murr before burying her face in the big pillow. With her hips raised on the other pillow, she wriggled around, got comfy, and took peaks over her shoulder to spy on Julias and whatever he was going to do.

He spent a couple minutes just massaging her ass with deep, drawn-out motions. She rolled her eyes and kept quiet, since there was no use in trying to coax the big bastard to do anything fast. He liked slow. Those tingles between her thighs were getting stronger though, and that fake warmth from the blush of life wasted no time.

He finally slid off her thong, and she let out a pleasant sigh. “Come on,” she said, “some of us have places to be.” She dipped her hips around left and right, squeezed her thighs, grinded them down against the pillow, and spread her legs nice and wide to expose everything for him.

He just chuckled.

She was about to protest, but instead let her head sink into the pillow, even chew on it a bit with her huge shark teeth, as Julias started to massage the lips of her cunt. He knew just how to tease her folds, just where to press and rub near her insides to make her muscles clench. When his fingers found her clit, it all just came together in a perfect array of pampering. She’d pay him back later with a good strip dance and lap fuck or something, but for now she just let him spoil her.

She let out a high-pitched meep when something cold landed on her ass. “Hey! Oh ...ahaha.” Over her shoulder, she watched Julias drip copious amounts of the lubricant from her box down the crack of her ass. Like, a lot. He just let it pour, until even she found herself a little worried for the pillow. “Yo, the bed is soaked now.”

He shrugged with a knowing smile. Once he’d thoroughly soaked her, he put the bottle away and resumed gently massaging her clit with his thumb. She thought it was his thumb anyway, not being able to see between her legs from the angle. But that circular, loving motion of it along the swollen nub, and how it teased her clit-hood piercing just right definitely meant thumb. She’d grown quite fond of that thumb.

His other hand though sneaked its way along her back and tickled her spine. If she were still kine, she'd have started breathing faster in anticipation. Those fingers roamed up and down the small of her back, nudged her shirt up to tease more of her back, before inching their way down to her ass. Just when she was about to say something, that thumb making love to her clit slipped into her cunt between muscle clenches, and she let out a surprised squeal.

“Hey! Cheater.” She leaned up on her hands and arched her back to look behind her, but she only managed a quick glance at the bastard's sly grin before she collapsed. His thumb reached into her pussy deep and pressed down toward her belly, hard. Like fucking lightning, powerful shocks worked up and down her legs and into her insides until she was shaking. Her huge claws pierced the ridiculously expensive bed, and her huge teeth took a chunk out of the pillow, but she couldn't possibly bring herself to give a fuck while an orgasm was working through her. She squeezed, clenched, wriggled and squirmed, and otherwise just laid there while Julias rubbed her g-spot down toward the pillow she was resting her hips on. Her juices gushed out with each hard clench of her muscles. Girl cum soaked her, splashed against his thumb, and trickled down her thighs.

“I think,” Julias said once she'd stopped mewling into the pillow, “you should come to the Prince's ball with me.”

“Wh ... what?”

“You should come to the ball with me.”

“I thoooooought...” She looked behind her again. Julias had started to caress and massage the rose of her sphincter. His other hand still had its thumb deep inside her slit, but now he was slowly working a finger into her ass. And she loved it. Something about the pressure, the spreading open of the muscle, the sinking sensation of his finger working her open and entering her.

The mountains of lube he'd used also made it easy. The big guy had big hands, big fingers, but he was slow and knew just how to lightly press in, give her time to adjust, let her relax, and then push a finger deeper.

"I thought we talked ... about this." Quiet moans were mixed with her words, and her eyes were fixed on how his hand was moving between her butt cheeks; watching him slide his finger into her tight ass was half the fun. When his finger started to work on the second ring of muscle inside her, she lied back down and sighed with glee. So deep. After a few more delightful minutes, he'd managed to get a finger in down to the base knuckle, and he was pushing it down toward her belly and womb. Pressure, deep inside her in her belly, pushing down and into her abs from inside her ass.

He pushed into her further, sinking more than just the finger, but some of his hand as well. With time, he pressed down harder, until he was squashing her womb and deepspot through the wall of her insides and pushing them into the blankets. He pressed in a slow rhythm, but each time he pressed down until she felt like she was pinned, ass spread open and insides singing in bliss.

Christ she was mewling like a cat in heat again.

"We did, but you're much easier to convince in this scenario," he said, and started to ease his finger out. She managed a small whimper, which sounded disgustingly girly, but god damn it'd been so long. Just when she was going to say something, he started to work two fingers into her, massaging the lubricant around and opening her up.

"I told ... don't want to go ... fucking ball." She could feel her juices soaking the pillow, coating her thighs, and joining the mess of lube everywhere. Two fingers were wriggling around inside her ass, pushing down toward her cunt, and putting pressure on that deep spot inside. Deep deep inside. When he got the two fingers into her



ass past the knuckles, space inside her suddenly ran out, and her eyes were rolling up with the sensation of being so full.

“You sure?” He started to press down toward her belly again, and this time he massaged her clit with his other hand until the juices were just pouring.

She tried to look behind her to watch, but the telltale signs of an orgasm put her head back down onto the pillow. It was different when it was so deep. A clit orgasm was like a sharp shock of pleasure, but the way he got to press down into her deepest parts got one of those powerful, full-body waves of pleasure orgasms going that she could feel from her core to her toes. Her muscles gripped down on his fingers between spasms, and more of her juices leaked from her cunt until the pillow was a lost cause. And he milked it from her, pushing those two fingers harder down against her until she could feel it pushing against her cunt and womb through her ass. The effect left her a wriggling, writhing mess of moans, and leaking cum.

He pushed harder, enough to sink her down into the bed. She came again, groaned into the pillows, and squirted against his hands so hard she felt the splash. He eased his play on her clit — thank god, the swollen nub had become so sensitive, any touch felt like fire — but the fingers in her ass were not so forgiving, and they started to work up and down hard enough to make her ass bounce. Her whole body convulsed, pleasure spasms tearing through her, making her toes curl and her feet kick at the blankets. She squirted again, and whimpered like a little virgin girl as a few more sharp spurts of her cum splashed against the pillow and her thighs. But at last, just seconds before she was going to start begging for a break, Julias eased up his finger fucking, and massaged her quivering walls with his fingers while her orgasms settled into blissful aftershocks.

“See, I think it’d be pretty amazing for a Carthian to be seen with an Invictus.” He removed his fingers, and she found herself

clenching her muscles in spurts at the empty feeling. “A member of the Invictus council, nonetheless.”

He thought she was still a Carthian. Hell she thought she was still a Carthian half the time. Better everyone thought that, for now.

“Is that why? Politics?” She managed to put her weight on her elbows, shivering included, and gave Julias the biggest evil glare she could muster.

It all melted away when he knelt down between her legs, and laid his cock between her butt cheeks. She tried to look back up at him, glare at him or something, but her eyes were stuck on how its length rested in the crevice of her muscles, and its head, swollen and demanding attention, nudged into the small of her back.

And it only got better when he started to drip more lube onto it. He didn't give a damn about the bed either.

“I'd be lying if I said no. There's peace, and I'd like to keep it that way.” He brought his cock back a ways, and with one hand guided the glans down between her toned ass cheeks to find her sphincter. The way he'd thoroughly worked her open earlier left her muscles still partly spread for him, and he used it to start easing his fat cock into her ass.

He'd only just started and it was already thicker than two fingers, but the man knew what he was doing, and went slowly. Very slowly.

“... and?” she managed to say, before he sank a couple inches of his girth into her. Her rings of muscle squeezed on it and made her wince for a moment, but its flesh texture spread her open and continued to push into her, until her eyes were rolling up in her skull.

“And I think it'd be a great time. You, me, slow dancing.” His voice got deep in that manipulative way he was so good at, until she could

feel it against her. Then he leaned over her, put his hands down against hers so they were pinned down to the bed, and he started to lower himself on top of her.

“I hate ... slow dancing...”

Sometimes she'd forget how physically imposing Julias could be. He was a smooth talker and all-around nice guy. He had no business being so tall, with such broad shoulders and thick arms, but when he got on top, she became the tiny girl hidden in his shadow. His big hands entwined with her claws, and his chest grew closer and closer to her spine as he sank further down.

And the further he sank down, the deeper he went. Deeper, until he was deeper than his fingers went. With him right over her, she put her cheek to the pillow and looked up at him sideways, and did her best to not mewl, or panic. It was really deep.

She almost stopped him. It felt like there was no end to him, and when it felt like he was going to push up into her stomach, she opened her mouth to say something. But her ass and his hips aligned, nice and snug, and Julias let out his own quiet groan as he pushed his weight into her. She, on the other hand, started to tremble. She was trapped underneath him, his abdomen against her ass and pushing her into the bed, and it was so damn fucking hot she could already feel her toes curling. His balls resting against her soaked pussy lips only made everything better.

“I think you like slow dancing.” His weight nudged forward, just enough to make her ass shift with him and the girth of his cock press down at a different angle. Then he eased back, still buried balls-deep in her ass, in the softest rocking motion he'd ever used on her.

And it worked. That deep penetration sensation was scary, it was all such soft flesh inside there, but the way he put his weight down in that constant pressure pushing down against her womb was

fucking wonderful. She squeezed her claws around his fingers between them, and let her mewls get louder as another one of those overwhelming climaxes worked through her like a machine.

“This is different ... slow dancing.” She managed a little energy, and pushed her ass up to meet him, but she barely had enough room to even wriggle. She could still squeeze though, and when the orgasm aftershocks weren’t making her muscles spasm too uncontrollably, she did her best to milk the man’s cock for him.

The groans he gave, quiet and just barely audible grunts over her head, would have sounded so corny in a porno. But they were real groans, and she was the one milking them out of the big guy, and that made it all so much hotter.

He kept that super slow pace of his for a good ten minutes. The bastard had so much patience, and no matter how much she squirmed and wriggled to entice him, he never started to fuck her hard. This time she was thankful for it. She laid there, and simply writhed in pleasure as he pushed his cock down against her deepspot until she came a couple more times. With her legs spread and with how he was burying himself to the hilt inside her, she could feel his testicles resting against her pussy lips; they were absolutely drenched in her cum.

And when he started to cum inside her, he put his head down next to hers on the pillow, continued to fuck her in that slow, gentle, barely-moving pace. His body gave tiny muscle twitches, and his weight rested on her back as he came. She let out soft whimpers, partially just cause it seemed like the thing to do, but the sensation of his body burying hers into the bed was oddly comforting. He was squirting cum into her guts, with how deep he was. Fucking god the thought alone made her moan for him, squeeze her ass, and grind it against his body to milk more hot cum from him.

“You don’t think ... everyone at that ball would be staring at you like I do?” he said, and leaning down so far he managed to put his lips to her ear. “At that ass like I do?”

Fuck, the ear. So cliché, but she was still shaking like a leaf and all it took was a little kiss or breath on her ear to make her shiver a little.

“That is ... you think so?” Of course he was just smooth talking. She had claws for fingers and a shark mouth; she just had to look at younger Kindred to make them look the other way, or run.

But then, she’d never hung out with older Kindred before Julias. Maybe there was something there? Even the Invictus Maria had to get laid, right? Well, maybe not. Elder sex drives were unpredictable.

They laid together for a few more minutes, just letting the last remnants of their fake life leak out of them as sexual juices. She turned her head enough to look at Julias, and he looked at her, and they sorta just looked at each other for a while. Comfortable.

Comfortable was weird, new ground, but fuck it, she liked it.

Should she tell him about Damien? That Mehket was fucking dangerous. No doubt Julias had learned about him from Natasha and Jessy but the things that happened after were surprising. The things Damien had said when she followed him after his murdering spree, hints about some plan...

She’d told Jacob, and only him. Was Jack in danger? Damien clearly had something against the Prince, and that meant Jack. And after earlier tonight, she had to admit she liked the kid.

Ok, maybe just a little info, to keep Jack out of shit. “So ... I did a little scouting a few nights ago, right? Ran into this guy named Damien.”

# Chapter 16

~~Damien~~

There is much you can see from above.

Damien sat there, sullen, in the dark, until the image of it made him shake his head. If anyone had the right to be emo, angst, edgy, dark and brooding, it was him, but things were different now and every action had purpose and goals. He sat atop one of the tallest towers of South Side, and he peered through his telescope. Not some child's toy either, but a genuine, expensive, heavy machine he'd carried with him up the tower.

There were several such towers, and he knew which ones were safe to perch from and observe the city in peace. The Carthians, the Invictus, even the occasional witch from the Crone, he knew their faces and he knew their patterns. For fifty long years he watched, waited, analyzed, stalked, and it was all starting to come together, now that Lucas was awake once more.

He hoped.

This tower he chose because it allowed him to see into Jack Terry's room. The boy was standing by his large window, and he was ... practicing poses of intimidation. He had a glass of blood in one hand, his other hand in the small of his back behind him, and he was trying to stand up straight with good posture. It did not suit the small vampire.

He could kill Jack, of that there was no question. He could have killed Natasha and Jessy too, if he hadn't let his guard down and suffered a bullet to the face to start their fight, and hadn't been trying to subdue them instead of kill them. That defeat still ate at

him. Jack, he could kill in his sleep, but the boy deserved no such fate.

His lover did, and that was why he watched him. Information was deadly, and any he could glean from Jack about Antoinette would be worth it. If the worse came to pass, he could kill Jack to make sure she suffered, but it would be a hollow victory. And it would doom him. The Prince would burn the city to the ground looking for him, and even he could not avoid that.

He could kidnap Jack, hold him hostage, but then the Invictus and the two Dragons would rain death upon him and the Lancea et Sanctum. The Carthians would probably join in just to watch the fire.

Every fiber of his being, every shred of dust and ash in his withered insides wanted that Prince dead. He wanted to see her crucified and left for the sun. He wanted to collect her ashes and throw them into the the sewers.

But he couldn't do it. Not for any ethical, moral, or even political reason. He simply did not have the strength. Lucas was only just awoken from fifty years torpor; it would take him months, even years to fully recover the strength he once had in his prime. All Damien could do was believe in his sire. He had a plan.

Movement. Jack was turning from the window to answer the door.

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~~Antoinette~~

How long had it been, since she had walked the streets of her city so openly?

She had to be careful, for more reasons than most. As Prince she was a target, her second death would cause a power vacuum many

hoped for. But there were other, more subtle reasons, such as her distinguished features. It meant that older humans could recognize her quite easily, even if they hadn't seen her in half a century. Kindred faces did not appear on camera or film easily, the beast was a sly creature capable of avoiding such things, but a human's eyes had no such issue.

Still, it had been a long time since she'd let her face be openly known to the public, and that meant she could walk the streets if she wished. And now in the modern times, her white hair, her red eyes, they were just expressions of the latest fashion with hair dye and contact lenses. Naturally.

“What do you want to do about Lucas?” her sheriff said.

Daniel was next to her. The tall, quiet man with his monotone voice kept pace with her as if he was inanimate, like some sword in its sheathe. Something about the way he moved, trench coat and unassuming face behind those boring glasses, was enough to make any approaching kine step aside and give them both a wide berth.

“I am not sure. No doubt it was Tony's death that sparked his return, but Viktor's death would only harm his inevitable attempts to reestablish the Sanctified.” She gave a small shrug and kept walking. Even for a midnight stroll through her city, she would not be caught wearing something as drab as a trench coat. Instead she wore a black night coat with fur for cuffs and neck lining, with the straps of a corset along the coat's back.

Daniel adjusted his glasses. “He hides in Tony's complex, but has managed to convert many. His approach is the opposite of what I expected.”

“What he did last time is why we killed them, Daniel.” Antoinette gave him a quick glance, but kept walking. The topic of conversation was very sensitive, but meaningless to any kine who overheard. “Now he attempts passivity, as if he were Ghandi. I suspect I will



have to deal with him and that childe of his before their veil of deceit succeeds over their new congregation.”

Daniel made the tiniest flinch. “Of course Voivode.”

“Daniel, I know you spared the boy for a reason, but if he wastes your generosity, I expect you to have the will to deal with him.” Her voice grew cold, ice, and she reached out to take her sheriff by the arm. She squeezed the wrist just hard enough to force him to look at her.

His eyes, as monotone as his voice, managed to hold her gaze until he adjusted his glasses again. “Yes Voivode.” The slight twitch in his lip was enough to let her know he was listening.

“Good.” She let go, and they resumed their stroll. She did not enjoy being harsh on her sheriff, but circumstances had changed. Things were simpler when it was simply the two of them holding the city through sheer force, and keeping the other covenants under her control. Now she maintained an unsteady peace with two covenants, while one hid in the dark and the other seemed content to rise as Jesus.

She let out a quiet groan and brought a hand to her face. “Once that fool Lucas is dealt with, as well as that sneaky childe of his, I will have to deal with Jacob.”

“You don’t trust him?”

“Of course not. He plays his games for chaos and carnage. If I let him, he would have the entire city sectioned off, and he would let survival of the fittest rein within.” Her voice turned to bile. “No respect for the Masquerade, for the Danse Macabre, or anything that would last the tide of a revolution by the kine.” She gritted her teeth and shook her head. How could the fools not understand? Lucas and his idiot religion would not survive technological growth,

and neither would Jacob's Circle of the Crone. At least the Invictus understood that, and the Carthians.

In a hundred years, space travel could very well be commercial, and each decade brought with it new ways to expose Kindred everywhere. Could they not see the future? Were they so blind as to the dangers? Idiot children. Worse yet, idiot old men incapable of adapting.

She bit down on her fangs. Now she was angry. Things had been going so well, but Lucas's return and Jacob's games had ruined her delightful mood. "Daniel, return to the tower and have my assistant cancel my three o'clock. I will be spending the remainder of my time with Mister Terry."

With only the smallest nod, he turned and started to walk, but he only managed a foot before she took his arm again.

"Daniel, your childe is already involved in this. You should warn them."

"... yes, Voivode."

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She knocked.

Oh, how long had it been since she knocked on someone's door? It seemed like such a simple thing, but now she realized it was a rarity in her life. It made her chuckle. She made sure to step aside so Jack would not be able to see her clearly through the peephole.

He opened the door with barely a check. "Hello?"

She reached out, grabbed him, and pinned him against the wall of the hallway. It was one of the more modern apartment buildings, where each floor contained only one apartment, all connected by a single elevator, each with a single small entrance lobby. It also

meant no one could knock unless Jack had buzzed them in. She had her ways, of course, and had bypassed it. And still Jack had opened the door as if nothing was unusual.

“My dear boy, you are much too trusting.” She leaned down to put her forehead against his, and met his gaze with a wicked grin.

“My Prince! I ... um...” Aha, she had caught him with his guard down. He even looked ashamed. “You’re right, sorry. Just habit.”

“I am glad you are home though. Please forgive my unannounced visit, but I could do with a distraction.” Too forward? Nonsense. She didn’t let go of his wrists though, and kept them pinned to the wall.

He looked so confused, like a deer in headlights. “Um, I ... you’re ... alone.”

“I am alone. Is that surprising?”

“You’re the Prince! I expected bodyguards, the sheriff, sniper sights tracing me right now!”

She laughed. “Were it but fifty years ago. The elders would hide in their homes and let their ancillae wolves handle the fighting between covenants. There is peace now, and I can once again walk my streets without fear of such mindlessness.” She lowered her face further, until her lips were grazing the boy’s and her nose was nudging against his. “But even in such times, I took care of myself, little Ventrue.”

“Wow. Just ... it’s like, royalty knocking on my door, ya know?”

“Like? Prince is a Kindred title of politics.” She pressed her lips against his, and drank in his green, wide eyes as she did so. “You, my dear lover, have been fucking the Queen.”

Oh the look in his eyes lifted her spirits immediately. He was so delightful, the way they opened wide with her words, realization and exhilaration and shock and fear mixing in only a split moment of awareness. She let go of him then, and took a step back to give him way. Once he realized why, he gave a small ‘ooh’ and stepped inside to hold the door open for her.

She recognized the apartment’s style. “You truly are Julias’s childe. But I admit there is a certain elegance to the simplicity.” The apartment took up the whole floor of the building, and every room with interconnected with few walls. Minimalist, with cool colors. Of course, there was the huge window that overlooked a huge chunk of South Side. Its sister building across the way had the same. People often stood in the windows and looked at each other. No one waved, but some managed smiles. Some did a little more than smile.

“Sorry, sorry! And, uh, I didn’t know you were coming. So I...” Jack looked around, scratched at his buzzed hair, and gave her a quirky smile. There was no mess, but there wasn’t much of anything.

“Most Kindred your age would be hanging any memento they could of the time of their death. Something that would mark the time period they passed. Do you not have any idols?”

“It’s never been my thing, I guess.” He put his hands out for her coat, and she obliged. Underneath she wore her business suit, though it was closer to a dress than a suit, and its ample cleavage and exposed knee was more than enough to pull the boy’s gaze. “I can sit, and listen to a virtuoso for hours, and focus on the depth and technique and complexity of the composition, but it just never occurred to me to put their picture up on my wall.”

The boy was skilled in active music listening then. A rare talent. “It sounds to me that you prefer to focus on the art, and not the artist, yes?” She sat down on his couch, a lovely thing of black

softness, and folded a leg over the other. “To truly let yourself be captured in the moment of art is a skill rarely found in kine, Jack. It is something many Daeva look for in a potential childe.”

“Really?” He plopped down next to her on the couch. He too was in a suit, something far more casual, and she could smell the after-scents of kine on him. From the smile and the smell, he must have returned from a successful hunt.

“Indeed. That level of focus, and awareness? It is impressive, and it brings me joy to know that you have it.” She curled a finger at him, and he slid closer along the couch. “It is why you have an innate talent for the Ventrue discipline dominate. To focus so purely and completely?” She pointed at her eyes, and then his own. “It is the same focus a conductor uses to weave together a massive tapestry of dozens of instruments across movements.”

And he went deer in headlights again. She rolled her eyes, and laughed. Such talk could be saved for between Julias and his childe, but it was nice to know there was more depth to Jack than what was obvious. Even as he stirred uncomfortably while she watched him, the hints of self-awareness dripped from his movements. The way his eyes flickered for a second when he looked between her and an object, the way his fingers tapped subtle rhythms, it all left small droplets of thinking, processing, and being trapped in his thoughts.

She would pull him out of those thoughts into the moment, and enjoy doing so.

She blushed life. It was enough to bring the boys eyes up, and a smile. That expectant, nervous, excited smile. “Blush for me,” she said, in a way she’d grown accustomed to. And like a well-trained husband, he broke into a big smile and did as told. Warmth returned to their skin, as did color, and the heat of fake life.

“I still feel horribly unprepared, this place is just an apartment. You’re royalty!”

“And that is why I walk the streets alone instead of with an army of ghouls and ancillae, like Viktor would.” She chuckled all the more. “Ruling, for Kindred, is in the action, not the presentation. But,” she waggled a finger, “a little presentation never hurt. Have you decided on what to wear to the ball?”

“The ball ... er...” He shuffled, squirmed, refused to look at her, and even dragged his feet along the hardwood floor. “I haven’t. Julias purchased me some things, cause ... you know, never going to change size-wise.”

“Mon cheri, you must fetch them! The ball is in only a few days, and while Julias has a good eye, he does not have mine.” Her French accent erupted into full bloom. Hazy, distant memories of trying on dresses back in Europe crept into her mind, and faded away just as quickly, like dreams. But the emotion was there, and it touched on her and made her giggle.

Jack blinked a few times at her, then was up with a bounce and running down the hall. Nervous, as always, but excited too. In a few minutes, he had several garment bags thrown onto the counter of his kitchen.

“Heh, this could be fun. I never thought about doing this with you. Always seemed like the kind of thing to do before you meet the girl.” He moved to the window and reached for the curtains. They were only open a couple feet, and now that he was aiming to close them, a thought dawned on her.

“Leave them open.”

“Antoinette?”

“The curtains, leave them.” She brought her fingers to her chin and rested her index upon her lip, complete with a wicked smile. “And try on some clothes for me, s’il vous plaît.”

Conflicted. What would he do? He would obey, of course, after debating it in his mind as he always did. He would consider his options and realize she was presenting him the opportunity for both growth, and exhilaration. And after a moment he did as requested, with the occasional glance toward the window as he started to undress.

“A few windows across the street can see into here.”

“Let them see, then. They are just kine, and no Kindred of age would care.” She took her own glance at the window, and then back to the young man stripping in front of her. “And any who see you would only grow hungry for you, as I do.” She pulled her skirt up a few inches on one leg, and let the fingers of her other hand drift up her thigh.

“I ... uh ... should I—”

“Do not stop, little Ventrue. I would like to see the clothes.”

The way he squirmed and struggled with the mixture of so many avenues of stimulation was like a tasty dessert. He'd glance out the window as he stripped off a piece of clothes, then back to her, and she'd entice him with her wandering fingers while she sat on the couch. Before long, he was down to simple undergarments, and trying on a suit.

“Hmm. It is lovely, but too business imposing. The ball will be formal, but not business related. It is a black tie event.”

Jack scratched his head and looked down at his suit. “The tie is black.”

Laughter just poured out of her. “Oh Jack. Silly boy, I mean a tuxedo.”

“Oh!” He started to undress again, and once down to his boxers, he unzipped the bag containing the tuxedo. “But ... it doesn’t have a tie. It has a bow tie, but — why are you laughing?”

It was too much. The utterly perplexed expression on his face had her in fits of laughter. Her voice grew to a volume she’d not used in ages, and it was all joy. When she managed to recompose herself long enough to look at Jack, he was torn between smiling and looking offended, and it only made her laugh harder.

She got up, and with a swiftness that took her lover by surprise, she scooped him up into her arms and hugged him. “Never you mind the insanity of it all. Just show me your choice of tuxedos ... later.” She set him down on the couch, and replaced him as the one on display.

“Later? I ... oh.”

With slow teasing, she started to undo the buttons of her suit jacket. “I love to indulge in great displays of wealth, power, presence, such as a tuxedo or dress, when it is not a question of politics. I can faintly remember, when I was but a young ancilla hundreds of years ago, walking down grand stairways with silk dress twenty-feet long following behind me, tied to my naked body at the wrists. Musicians would be there, playing gentle music on strings, and before me a host of kine, men and woman alike, waited and bathed in a pool of warm waters. I would drink of them all, and the moans of sex would fill the corridors.”

Jack’s eyes were wide and glued to her fingers.

“But,” she said, and slid out of her suit jacket to begin undoing the buttons of her shirt, “it was all, as you once said, hollow. Right now, to simply enter my lover’s abode, not to feed on kine, but to talk and touch? You may think this simple, or obvious, but to an elder such as I, this is ... unique. Precious.” She slid out of the white shirt and tossed it aside. As expected, the boy’s eyes immediately fell to her



bra, and how it fit snug against her large bosom. A delicate, white thing made more for looks than function.

“I ... well ... I mean ... heh.” He managed to break eye contact with her breasts and lift his gaze to her before scratching his buzzed hair. “That does sound pretty amazing though.”

“Oh? Then perhaps some day, I will gather a dozen girls for you? A slave to a Daeva discipline for the night, they would gladly do anything you wanted.” She reached behind her, and undid the clasp of her bra with just the right amount of angle and twist that it came off with almost elastic force. And when it fell, Jack’s eyes were again fixed to her breasts, helpless to them. “But I think you will find I can satisfy any desire you have personally.”

He gulped, something Kindred did not do, but her topless body was enough to regress him so. She chuckled, stepped forward, and put her hands on his shoulders. Her long white mane was behind her, spread over her back, and her breasts dangled with their size and weight in front of the boy’s face.

“Undress me.”

“... ok.” His hands found her hips, and fumbled behind her to look for the zipper of her skirt. His face was almost touching her breasts, but he knew better than to disobey. It took some time for him to find the zipper and undo it, but time only made everything sweeter for her. She shifted her hips as he pulled down, and with tiny chuckles, worked her way out of the skirt. A kine or two were probably watching the two of them through the apartment window. Good.

“Continue.”

He was practically melting, and arousal was pouring out of him. Her panties were, of course, of something both elegant and soft on the skin. Even a vampire disliked coarse fabrics.

He slipped his fingers into them, and let out a groan. “God ... so ... beautiful...” His tongue got twisted in his mouth, but his green eyes were locked to her hips, and lower. When he finally exposed her smooth privates, he groaned even louder. Then he glanced to the window. “Um, some people might be able to see you.”

“Then let them watch.” She kicked off her heels, and raised a leg to place the foot upon the couch, next to the young man. She was completely naked, and her great height put her sex at the perfect height to Jack’s face, as he was still sitting on the couch. With a quiet sigh, she stood up straight, and leaned her crotch in towards his lips, with one hand on her hip and the other on his fuzzy head.

With a little guidance, she brought the boy’s head to her pussy’s lips. He responded with another moan and wrapped her lips around most of her, devouring her, burying her slit in the warmth of his lips. He started softly though, like she taught him, and gave her clitoris slow, loving licks. More quiet mewls escaped her. She put her other hand on his head to balance herself, and pin him there.

“Slowly at first, like that. You can ... taste me ... growing more wet.” She slid a hand off his head, found his arm, and guided his hand up between her legs. “And when you can taste me, then you can enter me.”

Jack looked up at her, though she had to lean forward to see past her breasts, and the look of intoxication in his green eyes had her growing more wet just for it. He was so enraptured, so compelled, she sometimes wondered if she had accidentally fed him some of her blood to bind him, or perhaps used a Daeva discipline on him to seduce him. But she had done neither, and it made it all the more sweet when he finally did slip a finger into her wet, dripping insides.

“Yes. There, a little deeper ... there. Curl your finger toward yourself, like ... that.” It wasn’t that Jack was a poor lover; indeed, he was a quick learner, but she knew what she liked, and every man

could use a little guidance now and then. Jack didn't mind, and even thrived on the advice. He curled his finger toward her g-spot, and continued to lick her clit until her juices were almost dripping. When he started to suckle on her clit, pulling it between his lips and burying with his tongue, she did start to drip. Her juices trickled down her thighs, and it only spurred Jack to finger her faster. Sparks of pleasure filled her center, and rose into her into and down into her thighs.

Her muscles clenched down. The orgasm was building, but it wasn't there yet. She would milk it though, suppress it and rebuild it until she was ready. "Two fingers ... harder." He withdrew his finger, and then spread her open with two, before resuming with curling pressure toward her g-spot that only grew harder, and harder. She started to move her hips with him, and put both her hands on his head again to steady herself as at last the waves of pleasure started to creep up and down her legs.

Her toes curled, her voice grew quiet, and her eyes rolled upward. Her nipples swelled, and juices leaked out of her onto the boy's palm.

"Slower ... gently..." she said, a difficult thing to do in the middle of orgasm. But it was worth it. It would have been painful for him to keep going during orgasm, but to be gentle and milk her pleasure during climax was wonderful. Her pussy started to spasm on its own, and those blissful waves worked their way up into her chest and down to her toes. The gentle, continued touch of her lover kept those waves going, until her eyes closed and she basked in the long-coming afterglow.

At last, she stepped away. Her legs were quivering with orgasm aftershocks, and she let out a long sigh with contentment at how the sparks worked up her thighs. She sat down next to Jack, and leaned her head down to rest it atop his while she focused on those final pleasure tremors.

The young man was smiling giddy.

“Proud of yourself?”

“No! Well ... yes, but it’s you, you know? The look on your face, and the way you move and ... arg, it’s all so damn amazing, and hot.”

“Thank you.” She took a moment to look around. His couch was quite large, with flat cushions. Horrendously dull, but efficient, and it also worked as a small bed. So with a chuckle, she leaned to the side and rolled onto her back, and laid down upon the couch. With a little adjusting of her long hair, and wriggling of her hips, she successfully got comfortable with her head up on the arm of the couch, and one leg behind Jack while the other rested on his lap.

“Umm...”

“Come here, little Ventrue.” She opened her arms for him, palms up, and motioned for him to come to her. She had vague images of a siren or mermaid, seducing a naive sailor from the safety of his vessel.

But only softness awaited her Jack. He smiled, green eyes wide at the valley of flesh she had laid before him, and he wriggled around to face her between her legs. She let one of her legs dangle off to the side of the couch to give him room, and he crawled up and over her with patience despite the ravenous look in his eyes.

He nearly fell off the couch getting out of his boxers, complete with looks of shame, but it only made her laugh. She reached out and slipped her hands down his back, felt the lean muscles of his smaller body, how his hard muscles lined his shoulder blades and down his spine, and how his abs rested against her stomach as he laid down on her.

Her hands drifted back up to his neck, and without even thinking about it, she guided his lips to her breasts. Their large size and

heavy weight made them fall to the sides of her ribs, but that did not stop Jack from closing his eyes as if in glorious rapture when he wrapped his lips around one of her nipples. He was laying on top of her, his weight but a feather, and the feel of his body and cock along her pelvis and stomach was warm, comforting, erotic. But it was the feel of his tongue, saliva, and lips enveloping her engorged areola and hard, swollen nipple that had her cooing.

The earlier orgasm had readied her body, and now everything the boy did, every lick of his tongue along her breasts, the way he shifted slightly with his cock resting on her lower stomach, the way his gentle groans vibrated on her skin, it all made her tingle with pleasure. Pleasure sparks worked through her, from her breasts into her core and down between her legs, and all she had to do was lay there and let Jack do what came naturally to him.

Then he raised his head, tilted it to the side and looked at her, puzzled. “You ever think ... I dunno, just sometimes I think this is a little childish of me.”

“Oh?”

“Your breasts! They’re ... huge, and soft and so heavy, and ... your nipples get all swollen and big...” As if addicted, he cupped the weight of her other breast to push it up onto the center of her chest so he could nudge his nose into its soft underside. “And I have to suck on them. Not exactly manly.”

“We can do something manly later, my little lover. Perhaps a blowjob? And then you can take me hard from behind?” He blinked with raised eyebrows, and she laughed. She would do it, of course, and enjoy every moment if only because of how fun it would be to take Jack through such exhilaration. But... “But for now, I would like to lay down on my lover’s couch, and feel his kisses on my breasts. Many women would love for nothing more than this.

“If only one change...” She reached down underneath him, between where their stomachs grazed each other, and took his cock into her hand. He backed up a little, looked down at how she held him, and melted into her grip like butter as she guided him in. The feel of his member opening her soaked flesh was always the most euphoric moment. Each separate inch of his cock spreading her and making her cunt spasm in random spurts of delight. And when she squeezed, Jack had to work to push himself in further, which made her weak in the knees and had him almost whimpering as her soaked, hot flesh gripped him.

But eventually he was in, and she put her hand back on his head while the other rested on his lower back. She helped him of course, raised her hips into him and guided his motion with her hand, but it was not a new position for them – except for the couch part. He leaned down into her, balls deep inside her, and rocked back and forth in a slow, subtle motion while he used his hands to keep himself over her. No matter the position, the boy really loved to gorge on her breasts with his lips, and continued to do so. The warmth of her earlier orgasm made her breasts sensitive, her nipples hard and loving the attention, so each of his kisses sent more slow tingles down her core until it reached her thighs and toes.

His kisses drifted up higher, and she even found herself a little stunned when his lips found her neck. He pressed his chest down against her, just a little, and nudged his nose up underneath her jaw before taking a few more kisses along her naked collar. Despite being surprised, she leaned into it, and stroked his head’s crown with encouragement. It was a little thing, but something Jack would not have done without her forcing it in the past.

“You know, every time we have sex ... I really do feel like I’m in the arms of a goddess.” His kisses drifted further down, and before long he started to do the same to one of her breasts again. “A scary, deadly, beautiful undead goddess.” He used his hand this time, and

squeezed the soft mound so that it overwhelmed his hand and fingers. Without a care for time or need to cum anytime soon, he massaged her breast, ran his thumb over and around her swollen nipple, and again wrapped it within his mouth to suckle on it.

All she had to do was lay there and enjoy every moment of his touch and his words.

It was a slow, gentle bout of sex. She would entice more of his hidden, aggressive nature eventually, but there was no harm in reveling in the soft and loving pace of their style right now. It made sex last. For twenty minutes she laid there, caressed the man's back with her fingers, letting out quiet encouraging mewls whenever he suckled on her breasts, and squeezed his cock in a milking rhythm. So slow, the build up to an orgasm was like a relaxing massage, and eventually she succumbed to it.

She hugged the boy and went quiet when she came, as was her way. She focused on the pleasure, on the bliss of how tingling muscle spasms fired outward from between her legs and squeezed on that warm cock inside her. And he knew to ease his breast play, but he still sneaked in gentle suckles while she came on him, and more of her juices leaked from her.

And then she squeezed, hard. Jack pushed himself up straighter, but he was trapped between her legs and unable to pull away. She saw that look on his face, the mix of pleasure and over-stimulation as she gripped his cock hard enough to hurt and force her juices to drip out of her. She dipped her hips left and right, squeezed in rhythm with the dance, and gave a joyous sigh at the look on Jack's face when the first gush of his cum flowed into her. He'd spent so long building up his own orgasm, every gush of cum was met with a shack of his body and a thrust of his hips despite his almost painful expression.

“God ... damn...” He collapsed onto her. If he were still alive, he would have been panting. His cum started to leak out of her, warm and wet, and eventually his cock softened and fell out of her as well.

“From royal orgies with a dozen slaves, to a simple fuck on a couch. How unbecoming a Prince,” she said. Jack lifted his head and pouted, but she put her hand back his head and pushed it back down to her chest. “Fret not. I am much happier here.” She stroked his buzzed head, grinned at the fuzzy texture, and massaged his back with her other hand.

“Yeah?”

“Truly. It has been centuries since I have been able to enjoy something so delightfully simple and intimate. In the past, the Lancea et Sanctum would have publicly insulted me for such behavior. The Invictus too, but Viktor is gone, thanks to you,” she said, and touched his nose with a finger. “I owe you much.”

“You owe me...” He sat up then, and got up from the couch to walk around. That stern jaw made her think of Julias, complete with pacing back and forth. The boy completely forgot the window curtain was open. “Then, I ... don’t suppose I—”

“You are going to the ball, Mister Jack Terry.” She got up and followed after him. He backed up against the counter and looked down, broken; the guilt was obvious. “Why would you not want to go?”

“Besides not being able to dance? I ... don’t do well with crowds.”

“I seem to remember the first time we met was at a similar event held by the Invictus.” The fool boy, still prey to social anxieties. So she put her hands on his shoulders, and when he looked up at her, she leaned down to put her forehead to his as before. “And you may not have heard during that ball, but I heard the whispers of many speaking your name. Apparently, you had quite the way with words



with Viktor, yes? And others wondered what sort of creature Julias had sired. Who was this boy who stood among vipers, they whispered.”

“ ... really?”

“Indeed. And now your sire is a part of the Invictus Triumvirate, and you are publicly known to be the lover of the Prince.” Men. All it took was a little stroking of the ego, and men were as malleable as clay. But it did not change that it was all true. “You have the social skill, and you have the status to empower it. Do not be afraid of the other Kindred. Most will be more afraid of you.”

“ ... me?”

Aha, the boy smiled with that subtle glee of a Ventrue validated. Good. He would have to leave his human habits to die, just as his human life did.

“Oui.” She gave him a kiss, and reached for the tuxedo still within its garment bag. “And just as Julias has tried to teach you, I am sure, you can say much with how you dress.”

---

~~Damien~~

He had not expected that.

Sure, he'd expected Antoinette and her little bitch boy to fuck, but that wasn't fucking. That was making love. He frowned until his cheek dug into the telescope. It hurt to watch.

He was envious.

“I'm a monster of God. A damned creature. Know peace in that.” Still, Kindred could fuck Kindred. God didn't care whether two of his damned fucked, only that they did not lay with the kine. And it would be nice to have someone to hold.

Maybe ... Natasha? He reached up and touched where she'd shot him. Why was he thinking about her? Same age embraced, same bloodline. Maybe that was why, but something else nagged at him. Something about her seemed so familiar.

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Tower #8, used for monitoring Natasha and Jessy. They had apartments near each other in South Side, and often looked out their windows. It was a Kindred quirk, to gaze out at the city from the window, like wolves gazing over a herd of sheep. Their curtains were closed this time, but Damien had quality sight. Mehket sight. He knew where to look, and he let the telescope roam over the street near the apartment building until he found the tiny girl.

She was standing still in the middle of the large sidewalks, surrounded by moving kine walking past her. In front of her, standing like a rock against water, was the sheriff.

## Chapter 17

~~Natasha~~

Nothing was as satisfying as the sensation of keyboard keys giving way to just the right movement of the fingers for flawless typing.

Did that make her a geek? She was too old to be a geek. Fifty-years embraced, and another twenty-five kine years on that meant she was older than commercial computers. By a lot. But she picked them up quick. Perhaps it was her lifetime of piano play that drew her to typing. Even as a kine, she found typewriters fascinating.

“Yo, Natasha.” Snap snap. The Gangrel was snapping her fingers in front of Natasha’s face, and she hadn’t even realized. “The info?”

“Right, right.” The two were in Natasha’s apartment, in her living room, and she had her laptop on the kitchen counter. Jessy must have got up from the couch to pester her.

“It says here,” she said, and raised a finger to point at the screen, “that Lucas came to Dolareido after the Prince, Viktor, and Jacob did. Hmm, about one-hundred and fifty years ago. Only Jacob knew him, but he quickly became friends with Viktor and Maria.” Natasha gritted her teeth. No wonder her master was so intrigued by the news.

“No connection with my sire then?” Jessy said.

“No. Mister McD-D-Donald’s relationship with Lucas was distant at best.” Natasha’s eyes scanned through the records. Thank god someone in the Invictus was smart enough to digitize their old journals. Nothing was written that was incriminating or destructive, but enough that she could read between the lines. A company

merged here or acquired there, a piece of real estate changing hands, funds and donations, etc.

Natasha pointed at the screen again. This time there was a picture of Lucas, as much as anyone could take a picture of a Kindred. It was, at best, a hazy glimpse of his side in a blurry picture from a time when commercial cameras were only just becoming popular. “It-t says here ... Lucas was embraced sometime in the sixteenth century.” They both whistled. He was very old. “And ... he’s from Africa.”

Jessy looked down at her, but Natasha was dumbstruck until her friend poked her a few times in the head. “So?”

“Here.” She pointed at the hazy picture again, and a quick summary someone wrote of Lucas. “Lucas is the name he chose after he escaped Africa. He was ... a slave, and was about to be transported when someone turned him.”

“Fuck. So he’s ... that is some old school dark ages shit.”

“And he escaped a continent after being embraced, not before.” She turned on her stool and looked up at Jessy. “Whoever Lucas was, or is, he has been through some ancient hell. How c-could a Kindred survive a boat trip across the ocean hundreds of years ago? How could you...”

“I guess that’s why he’s a member of the Sanctified then.” Jessy gave a shrug, hopped back onto Natasha’s couch, and turned the TV back on. “Worst possible life you can imagine, then someone turns him into a vampire. Can’t blame him for looking for something to believe in.”

“Maybe, except the Lancea et Sanctum don’t believe they are God’s children. They believe they are God’s monsters.” She reached across the counter and lifted the Testament of Longinus. The full version, not the abridged the typical neonates read. It was a beast of

a bible. “Longinus was the Roman soldier who stabbed the crucified Christ with a spear. A moment of compassion, or fear, if you read the book, from the overwhelming gaze of Jesus. The wound splashed blood, and some of it went into Longinus’s mouth, or eyes, or something.” Natasha grumbled with the infuriatingly vague and confusing text. “But thus was born Longinus, ancient Kindred. Potentially the first.”

“So ... what, Kindred are just damned things?”

Natasha shrugged and rubbed her arms. “They think so. They have to serve as God’s monsters, terrorizing and torturing the kine, like wolves to sheep, to scare the herd back into the Shepard’s warm embrace.” She found the imagery disturbing, but powerful. It was no wonder such a message affected her childe. “If they serve, then maybe, some day, they will no longer be damned. Very maybe. The text isn’t specific about redemption at all.”

“Brainwashing.” Jessy scoffed, dismissed it all with a wave of her hand, and turned on a streaming service on the TV. “Let’s watch a movie. I’m thinking—”

It all faded to background noise, for Natasha. She had a hand on the Testament of Longinus, and her eyes kept switching between it and the picture of Lucas on her laptop. This man, and his Bishop Damien, had converted several Invictus, including her childe Vivienne. It couldn’t be just mindless brainwashing idiocy, if Vivienne could be turned.

She hated herself. She should have seen this coming. Information about the Lancea et Sanctum was not hidden, and even information about Lucas was not hidden. But by the time she’d risen up the ranks and had access to such information, it had ceased to be an issue. The Sanctified were long gone.

She turned off her laptop, made some quiet grumbling sounds, and reached for her coat.

“Hey where you going?”

“Just ... out.”

“Fuck that. You’re going out to look for Vivienne.” Jessy was up in a flash and getting in Natasha’s way, herself between Natasha and the door. “And you know that’s a bad idea. We’re already on bad ground after having killed some of them.”

“You killed—”

“You shot the Bishop in the face!” Jessy reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. She knew she didn’t like to be touched, but again Jessy insisted on touching her arm. Stop touching. “I had your back when shit hit the fan, right?”

“Yeah b-b-but—”

“But nothing. You owe me, so promise me you won’t go looking for Vivienne, ok?”

“I still—”

“Ok!?” And then Jessy shook her like a child.

Natasha lowered her head and did her best to hide her destroyed feelings. If she were alive, she’d have tears in her eyes. “You d-d-don’t know! You don’t have a childe. It ... it gnaws at you. She’s mine. Mine and ... I lost her.”

“You didn’t lose shit you dumbass. Either things will calm down and you can hang with your childe again, just on different sides of a business fence, or someone will put the Sanctified back into the ground and we’ll make sure Vivi isn’t involved in that. Ok?”

Natasha did her best to get a stiff upper lip, or some such. It was hollow. But she tried anyway, and managed to put on a stern face

and a nod for Jessy. “Ok. I ... I just want to go hunt.”

“Hungry? I could get the boys over.” Jessy let go of her and hoped back up onto the counter. Her super short blonde hair and her tall, boxer build really made every motion she made seem so ... ferocious, like everything she did was in preparation for a fight. Maybe she was.

Sometimes Natasha wondered why they were friends. She wanted quiet, peace, and all those other things that made her and her Gangrel friend fire and water. The classic introvert and extrovert pairing.

“You know you ... k-k-killed some of those K-kindred. Are you ... okay with that?”

Jessy just shrugged. “It was a fight. We could have died too, we had no way of knowing. I ain’t gonna bust myself up about shit hitting the fan. But seriously though, can I invite the boys over? Come on, I know you want em.” The Gangrel reached out, grabbed a glass, and tossed it from one hand to the other. “How many years now since you had some fun with your meal? You gotta open up a bit, have some fun.” She put her hands up then, and gave a big, playful grin. “Hey, I’ll be there! No funny business, and hot damn it’ll be a glorious mess of legs.”

Natasha shuddered. Touching. Contact. So much ... close quarters proximity with others, kine at that. They were warm, they breathed and bled, they salivated, they ejaculated. Part of her was so very repulsed by the idea of others being in her personal space like that.

But she wasn’t oblivious to her own desires. She spent plenty of time online, like any introverted Mehket did. An idle mind lead to a vary diverse browser history of pornography. She took care of her sexual needs in peace, alone, with a belly full of blood and some toys in hand. She didn’t need others to take care of that need.

But it could be pleasant. Jessy would be there after all, for better or worse, and it'd be nice to have a quartet of men lined up to drink.

“Maybe ... later.”

“Bah, you always say later. Been saying that for years.”

“And I mean it! Ok! Just ... g-g-gotta ... I'll be back later.” She didn't wait for Jessy to interrupt her again this time.

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Out the door and down into the lobby, she took a deep breath to relax herself. Of course it did nothing. She hadn't needed to breathe in decades.

She fidgeted with her long coat around her, avoided eye contact with the humans on the way through the lobby, and got out onto the street. There. In the crowd of kine just moving past and around each other like chaotic water, it was so much easier to blend in. She could forget all the bullshit, and just let her hunter instincts guide her.

A wolf among sheep. Just like the Testament of Longinus said. Surrounded by anonymity and blood, she had the freedom to just let her beast lead her. Someone would eventually take a break in an alley, or expose their back in a secluded convenience store, or drift further down into the city underbelly where it was a free-for-all.

But she didn't get very far. Without even looking up she could feel a wall, a barrier of power that spread kine apart around it without anyone even realizing. It stopped her in her tracks, and shook her to the core until the beast inside her was kneeling and whimpering in fear.

After a few hard seconds, she looked up, and five feet in front of her was the sheriff, Daniel.



The sheriff was an average looking man, just a little tall with a lanky figure, and a boring, dull trench coat hanging off of him. Short brown hair, some simple glasses, and brown leather gloves. He was the epitome of simple. There was a sword hidden underneath the coat along his back, but it was not visible. She knew it was there, though.

She took a look around, and used her Mehket sight to scan for nearby threats. But there was no Kindred within earshot of the two of them. “ ... sire.”

Daniel reached up, pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose, and stepped in closer to her. He stopped once he was a couple feet away, looked down at her, and gave a small nod. “Madame Vola.”

“You know you can c-call me Natasha.”

“You never call me Daniel.”

“ ... never feels right. N-not since then.” She shook her head and tightened her coat around her. She wasn’t cold, she couldn’t get cold, but that barrier between her and her sire was like ice.

“ ... I know you infiltrated the Lancea et Sanctum.”

A small nod. He always knew. “ ... yeah.”

“You attacked Damien.”

“How ... how d-d-did...” She was looking down. She didn’t know when she started to look down, but before she knew it she was hugging herself protectively and keeping her gaze on her sire’s shoes. He really did always know everything.

“I am the sheriff. It’s my job to know things.”

“I ... had to act fast. I d-d-didn't know who he was, or what he'd d-do.”

“He spotted you through your discipline.”

Oh no. “He ... yes.” She could feel her insides trying to make her whimper, but without the blush of life going, she had no tears or the muscle contractions. Just a still, pale woman who couldn't look the man in the eye.

“He's a dangerous man.”

“He didn't look dangerous.”

The lanky man adjusted his glasses again. “Exactly.”

She forced a frown. “I did land the shot. Right here. Forehead.”

“Impressive.” Daniel gave her a small smile. It was such a small thing, innocent and barely noticeable, but it made her dead heart flutter for the praise. “How is Maria treating you?”

Natasha shuddered a little. How many decades now, had she served under Madame Turio? The ghost woman was scary. Very scary. Her orders were usually of the information-gathering nature, and Natasha was very good at that, but every failure and every mistake felt like it could be her last. “... c-could be worse. Viktor was ... worse.”

That earned the tiniest smirk from the sheriff, so fast he probably thought she didn't notice. She very much noticed.

“Was I worse?” he said.

“What? No! No just ... the Ordo Dracul, and ... the things you and the Prince researched. You know I found it t-t-t-too...” Both she and Daniel and had drifted to the side of the street, closer to the building

by this point, out of the way of the flow of kine. Even with the anonymity of the crowd, talk of the Dragons was too sensitive to speak of as anything more than hushed whisper.

“Too frightening. And Maria is not more frightening?”

“She works with money, and real estate, and politics and and and ... d-d-deals and contracts.” She reached out with her hands and grabbed at the air subtly with each example. “Real things.”

“The order does deal with real things.”

“Those weren’t ... just...” Ugh, talking with her sire was like talking to a stone. But then, she imagined she wasn’t very easy to talk to either. Couldn’t they have had this conversation with e-mails, or texting? Did Daniel even know what those were? Time for a topic change. “So...” Her feet drifted around a little. Nervous shuffling. “Why ... um ... why did you come?”

“I came to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“About that man, Damien.”

“The Bishop? He wasn’t that t-t-tough.”

“He is ... a true believer, Natasha. You got very lucky. In any other circumstance, he would have killed you to protect the Sanctified.” The sheriff looked away, and even down, as if the words had weight. Why would Damien mean anything to Daniel?

“ ... you know him.”

“I do.” He raised his eyes again, and even reached out with a gloved hand for her. She flinched, he paused, and after a few

moments of awkward silence, Daniel put his hand away. “Just ... avoid him, please.”

Please ... please? Had he ever said those words to her before?

“Things will get worse,” he said, and adjusted his glasses again, “and more Kindred will die before this is done.” He turned, and started to walk away.

Her hand was out and tugging back on his elbow. She didn’t remember putting it there, and once she realized what she’d done, she pulled it back with a little squeak.

“How?” she said. “You can’t just...”

“It was a ... moment of compassion. Of weakness.” He looked over his shoulder at her before turning halfway to offer a small frown. “I spared him during the purge. He was ... just like you.”

Just like her? He was fifty-years embraced like her, and a Mehket like her, and ... something else? What else? She looked up at her sire, but Daniel had already turned around again, and was making his way through the crowd.

And as always, it was the kine who stepped aside for him, like water parting.

She sighed, leaned back against the apartment building wall and watched the kine go by. Talking with her sire was a rare thing, and it was like two stones trying to have a conversation. As far as the rest of Dolareido knew, she had no sire, and as far as their conversations went, it felt kinda like that too. Or at least it normally did, but the way he looked at her, it was almost like ... someone caring for her? So many questions.

The beast in her gut grumbled. Right, food. She could analyze the conversation later.

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~~Julias~~

“So the Lancea et Sanctum – god what an annoying name – are back?” Jack said.

“After a fashion. Lucas is back, and he was the leader of their movement here in Dolareido. How convenient he came back right when Tony left a whole herd of young, easily controlled Kindred without a leader.” Julias ran a finger down his jaw as they walked. There were pieces, a puzzle, and not much time to put them together before shit hit the fan.

“So he was in torpor?”

“Most likely.”

“Just ... what, hidden in a coffin underneath the city where the Prince and the sheriff couldn’t find him?”

“Most likely.”

“Fuck, that’s a long time to be in weird dream coma land.”

Julias and Jack were in a taxi and being driven through South Side. A ghoul of the Invictus was driving them, otherwise the conversation would have been a little more subtle. They were also dressed for business, real business, a combination of business savvy fashion, and freedom of movement. It was their ‘shady deals could mean a fight’ suits.

Of course his childe was practically oblivious to all the undertones and hidden messages of the various elements of the suits, but that was fine.

“It is. Lucas was a very old Kindred, so old I knew that he’d begun feeding on other Kindred in order to satiate his hunger. A long torpor will suppress such insane hunger for many decades, and it let

him vanish from existence for half a century. He will be weak, but his strength will return.”

Jack tapped his chin with a finger, in a manner not too dissimilar to Julias, which made the older Kindred smirk.

“And you think Damien raised him?”

“Yes. He sensed the opportunity with Tony’s death. But ... ugh, something doesn’t make sense. Even if he raised Lucas, Lucas wouldn’t just expose himself like this by living in Tony’s old nest. I remember the purge, Jack, and it was not like Antoinette walked up to a pacifist and stabbed him. Lucas was a raging zealot who was hellbent on controlling all the Kindred and forcing everyone to follow the Lancea et Sanctum. Now he’s playing passive, and that just isn’t Lucas.”

“Maybe his torpor changed him? Maybe he’s a more passive person now?”

Julias gave Jack a long, dead stare, and Jack rolled his eyes and nodded.

“Yeah yeah, not likely, I get you. I’m still not sure what to gain from visiting the Carthians though.”

“Well,” Julias said, but stopped talking as the taxi pulled up to the sidewalk. A moment later both him and his childe were on the street, and making their way down through the Carthian side of South Side. Down here, the people weren’t in business suits or power dresses, but jeans and shirts instead. The two of them stuck out like a sore thumb. “It was fifty years ago, and the Carthians were still young and growing at the time. Garry though, Garry was the tough new guy, only a hundred years old but standing up to the Prince and Jacob and the Invictus on his own.”

“I remember seeing him at the Invictus ball, all those months ago.”

“Indeed. He’s smart and tough. And when the Prince began the purge, it was more than just those two against the Lancea et Sanctum army. Garry and his small group of Carthians were, at the time, at war with the Sanctified.”

“Shit...”

Yeah, Julias could see it on Jack’s face now as they walked. The boy was only barely paying attention to the kine on the sidewalk, but was instead intently focused on his sire’s words. Fingers on his chin, eyes flickering back and forth, Jack was thinking about all the connections and possibilities. The Danse Macabre was a complicated web of madness.

“And Jacob?” Jack said.

“The witch? As usual, he watched from afar, and knowing that man he probably instigated a lot of the conflicts between the covenants.” The damn witch was chaos incarnate. If he could find a way to deal with Jacob, he would, but the Sanctified was the bigger question mark at the moment.

“The Invictus didn’t do anything either, from what Natasha tells me.”

“Viktor called it a crisis of politics. The Invictus don’t mindlessly follow ideologies, you know that. We pursue power, growth, money. Neither side was a safe bet, and Maria and Michael were divided on it anyway.”

Jack nodded. He got it, Julias could see that. In fact, Jack embraced the power growth money motto quite well. Kid had that ruthlessness buried in there, hidden under goofiness, but then, that’s why Julias was bringing him. If, and when things went

sideways, the kid would pull through, and the only two people who knew that were Julias and the Prince. His ace in the hole.

He was damn proud of his childe, but he wasn't about to shower him in praise. Not yet.

“So, we need to talk to Garry, and get some more information,” he said.

“You think I'm ready for this?”

“You think every sire takes their childe to multi-million dollar business deals? You think every neonate can dominate half a dozen kine?” Julias reached out and gave his childe a hard punch in the shoulder. Maybe a little praise.

Jack almost fell over, but kept walking and rubbed where he punched him. “Antoinette said I had a talent for it.”

“I sired you for a reason Jack. I said I needed you to watch my back, remember? So hey, I'll let you in on a secret.” He leaned down then, but kept walking. No need to draw attention. “I'm young. A hundred years for my position? Very young. And you are in the same boat. We're young, and when things go bad, people will underestimate us.” He chuckled and ran his fingers through his blonde hair. “Never underestimate a Ventrue.”

That got the kid walking with a little confidence in his step. Good, Jack deserved it. He had the drive, the obsessive drive to master and overcome obstacles of a Ventrue, now all he needed was the confidence it deserved. As long as it didn't inflate his ego to disastrous proportions, as had a tendency to happen with Ventrue. Like Viktor Honors.

The neighborhood only grew more urban and downtrodden. It wasn't like the city underbelly, filled with vice and disease. Instead it was just hard working folk with no time or money to waste on



frills. There were far less people on the sidewalks, and the buildings were often brick and stone, painted horrible ugly colors. The streets were cracked, patched, and all the road surface markings were faded. Taxis and buses and old cars that sounded like they ran on coal.

The kine here were hardened, tough, loyal. The Carthians probably thought of themselves the same way. Maybe Garry was, and Beatrice too, but Julias had been in enough tussles with the rebels long enough to know better. Like all the other covenants, the Carthians had their own agenda, and weren't above underhanded bullshit to get it. The Invictus had clashed with them for centuries in more places than Dolareido. Grudges die hard.

So two Invictus walking through their half of South Side, even with the peace, was not exactly welcome company. Eventually they got to a part of South Side that was pretty empty, even quiet, and that's when the Carthians started to come out like locusts. The damn rebels were always looking for a fight, to the point it was printed on their faces. They stood leaning against street lights with arms folded across their chests, t-shirts with skulls, tattoos of chains, and baseball bats or tire irons in hand.

And then there were even more them. Some in front, some behind. One of them sat on a car's trunk, a pistol in hand and a big smirk on his face. He was a big guy, thick, bald, built like a bear.

"The fuck is Julias Mire doing this deep in Carthian territory?" He dinged the trunk a couple times with the handle of the gun.

"I need to talk to Garry." He kept his hands in his jacket pockets, but didn't back down. It was all just posturing, and this Carthian Gangrel postured like an animal, like some bird puffing up.

Julias postured like a king, with a straight back and a knowing smile.

“Then fucking call him. You don’t just show up unannounced, Mister Triumvirate.”

More Carthians started to gather. Steel-toe boots, jeans, and miscellaneous weaponry abound. They had formed a loose circle around Julias and his childe, but they kept their distance. Jack looked around, over his shoulder, and back at the growing crowd, but Julias managed to catch a glimpse of the kid’s eyes.

Jack had a small grin too, and was standing the same way Julias was. The message was clear: the two of them were businessmen, not thugs.

“It’s pretty important, and I’d rather not do it over the phone.”

“... uh huh.” The big guy hopped off the car and started to walk toward him. “And you couldn’t call to make an appointment?” He said appointment with enough emphasis that it was practically spat at Julias.

“Who says he didn’t?”

Like a choreographed dance, everyone turned and looked to the apartment building across the street. An old, abandoned thing, with paint peeling off the walls and cracked windows. In the open doorway stood Garry, with a buzzed head and a short scruffy beard. He wasn’t tall, and he wasn’t huge, but he had all the markings of a man who grew up splitting his knuckles fighting bare-fisted. His hard face had a lot of scars on it too, and considering Kindred healed wounds when they slept, it meant they were from before his embrace.

“Boss, you knew these guys were coming?”

“Yeah Joe. Rest of you, fuck off. Joe, get in here.”

With some obvious groans of disapproval, everyone dispersed. Joe walked into the building after Garry, and Julias gave Jack a wink before following him.

Once everyone was inside the lobby of the apartment building, and Julias had closed the door behind him, Garry snapped his hand out, caught Joe by the mouth, and forced the much bigger man down to his knees. Jack was dumbstruck, but Julias had to keep from smirking. Maria had done the same thing to Jessy not long ago. Except Garry had actually put three of his fingers into Joe's mouth, and was squeezing the man's jaw hard enough to split skin.

“A member of the fucking Invictus triumvirate shows up and you have the god damn nerve to get lippy with him? Joe, give me one reason I shouldn't rip out your tongue. That'll take a few days to regrow.”

Julias did his best to not laugh. He was pretty sure Garry wasn't Joe's sire, even though they were both Gangrels, but Garry was just that sort of hands-on kind of guy.

Joe made some muffled noises.

“Fuck it.” Garry let go of him with a backward push, and Joe was forced to get to a knee before standing up. “Start trouble with the Invictus just one more fucking time and I'll stake you and let Mire here decide what to do with you.”

“... sir.” Joe lowered his head and walked out, but not before both Julias and Jack gave him the most subtle smirks.

“Mire, this better be fucking good. The fuck do you want to talk about that you couldn't talk about on the phone?”

“Lucas.”

“The fuck do you want to talk about Lucas for? Dude showed up and basically painted a bulls-eye on his forehead. The Prince or the sheriff will have his second death, sooner or later.” The Gangrel just shrugged.

“Can we ... talk somewhere a little more private?”

“And the kid?” He pointed at Julias’s child.

“Master Terry is my partner in this,” Julias said, and gave a head nod in the boy’s direction. Jack affirmed with a nod of his own. “Besides, it’s not secret information, just sensitive.”

“ ... fine.” Garry went for the stairs, and the two Ventrue followed.

Only after ten flights of stairs did Julias notice how long it had been since he’d last taken the stairs in a building. It was no trouble for a Kindred, but the direct comparison of an Invictus in a suit riding the elevator, versus a Carthian in jeans walking the stairs, was poetically accurate.

A minute later, they were in one of the rooms. It was just a regular apartment room of a low-rent building, except the furniture had been removed and replaced with a desk and chair for Garry to sit at. He motioned for Julias and Jack to sit, and Julias reached for one of the equally unimpressive chairs. Jack looked around, devouring the information with his eyes, before also sitting.

“K Mire, you got your fifteen. The fuck do you want to know?” Garry leaned back in his chair and put his boots up on the table, all the while picking at his fingernails with a knife.

“Lucas. You and him were at each other’s throats for a long time.”

“You make it sound like a juvenile spat, Mire. Kindred died.”

The dark look Garry gave him put a dent in his composure, until Julias was forced to lower his head in apology.

“I understand. My question is about his new behavior. No one knows what sort of tactics he used better than you.”

“Be specific.”

“The Lucas I remember was meticulous and careful. He had a dozen Bishops and churches he used as bases and he slowly expanded. But now he just ... he just showed up, and is squatting in Tony’s old nest with his ass exposed.”

“Yeap. And I agree, that is very weird.” Garry brought the knife up to his teeth and picked at them idly. A pointless habit for a vampire, but more than enough to catch Jack’s eye at least. “Kind of pulling a Jesus, isn’t he? Rises from the grave and just plays nice. Far as I’ve heard, he’s just sitting in Tony’s underground network and preaching the good message.” The Gangrel choked on the words with a harsh chuckle.

“Can you give me any insight into why?”

Garry stabbed the knife into the desk hard enough that it made Jack jump in his seat, but the elder didn’t even look the boy’s way. He kept his eyes on Julias, and Julias did not break his gaze.

“Invictus sat on their asses and watched me fight that fucker for years. Why the fuck do you care what he’s doing now?”

“I wasn’t on the council then, Mister Tones. My sire may have had no issue with the Lancea et Sanctum, but I do. I am not about to let Lucas ruin the peace, and I am trying to make up for Viktor’s mistakes.” It was like staring down a raging bull; he had to be careful. Garry wasn’t just a Gangrel, but a Carthian, and that was a frustrating cocktail of unpredictability and violent tendencies.

“Heh, you got balls. Not even an elder yet and trying to play with the big boys.”

“You did the same back then, and held your own against Lucas and his army of zealots.”

“Touché,” Garry said. “So, Lucas ... never seen a Mehket so comfortable talking to crowds. Your typical Mehket is meticulous and careful, like you said, but Lucas was more than that. He had the patience and intelligence, but also the belief.”

“Belief?” Jack said.

“Yeah kid, belief. We’re talking about a covenant of religious types, right? Well, unlike your typical religious fuckwad, Lucas really fucking believed in that Testament of Longinus shit. A lot of elder Sanctified just use the covenant to pursue power – which is typical and expected – but Lucas was not that sort. He really bought into his own sermons.”

Julias leaned back in his chair and put a couple fingers to his chin. “Do you think fifty years of torpor could change that?”

“Not a chance. I’ve seen long torpors do fucked up shit to an elder, like Viktor.” Garry threw Julias a harsh glance, but continued on. “But Lucas would die for his beliefs, and bring everyone else down to hell with him for them.”

That made Julias sit up straighter. Kindred were selfish creatures, normally. They cared about blood and the safety to see another night, and that was it. It was a rare thing to deal with a Kindred who fought for other reasons.

“You think he’d sacrifice his flock if it meant achieving a goal.”

Garry chuckled, gravelly voice and all, and started rolling the knife along his knuckles. “I know he would, Mire. And if history is

any indication, a long torpor would only drive a crazy man crazier.”

Each time they mentioned torpor, and the effects it had on sanity, Julias noticed Jack wince. By now, Jack’s eyes had wandered off, and he was rubbing his buzzed head with his usual nervous ticks. He must have been thinking about Antoinette.

“Indeed.” Sorry Jack. Antoinette would have to go through such a torpor in the future. Julias just hoped, for Jack’s sake, the Dragons and their hidden talent for suffering torpor well would save her from such a fate. “So if there is one thing we know, it’s that Lucas’s goal is to further the Testament of Longinus above all else, and now with such a long torpor just past him, he may very well take that to the next extreme.”

“Yeap. So, what are you going to do about Maria?”

“You know about Lucas and Maria?” Shit, the conversation was going in a direction he didn’t want Jack to know about. The less he knew about such behind-closed-doors behavior, the better.

“Better than anyone, Mire. More than once I had that ghost bitch on my ass. She tried to kill me a few times, and did every dirty, underhanded trick she could to kill me so save her precious Lucas.”

Shit shit shit. Julias looked to Jack, but the boy was listening intently with fingers netted in front of his mouth and nose. He was devouring information again, and when he looked back at Julias, he could see the awareness on the boy’s face. He knew what he was hearing was deadly.

“But hey,” Garry said, “she failed, and then the Prince lost her patience and ended things herself. Bygones, right?” He rolled his eyes and started flipping the knife in his palm. “I fucking wish. Keep an eye on her, Julias. You may have a good head on your shoulders, but that bitch is fucking vicious. If Jacob and her were trapped together in a room and had to fight it out, I’d put my money on her.”

Julias groaned audibly. He dealt with Maria all the time. She was intelligent, self-aware, capable of making reasonable decisions, and extremely talented in the Nosferatu disciplines. Normally she'd be the one he'd rely on over Michael, but now that Lucas was in the picture, that would have to change.

And Garry's faith in her was not expected. Fear her over Jacob? The witch had almost two-hundred years on Maria. Sure, Maria Turio was terrifying like most Nosferatu; she was basically the ghost girl in the well. But against Jacob?

"Alright, thanks for the info, Mister Tones. I hadn't realized Lucas was a little ... different, than most elders. I'll see what I can do to stop this fire before it burns down the city." He got up, gave Jack a nod, and turned to leave.

"Mire, about Beatrice."

Julias looked over his shoulder. Jack was in the middle of getting out of his chair, but stopped halfway. Garry was sneering at the kid, and his eyes drifted between the two of them.

"Yes?"

"She's neck deep in some serious shit I doubt she's told you about. She likes you though, and I expect you like her." He leaned back in his chair again, and idly rotated the knife along his knuckles. "Keep her out of trouble, would you?"

He half expected a Dad speech about Garry hurting him if he broke her heart.

"... I will."

He gave a small whistle, and Jack resumed from his freeze position to stand and walk after him. Garry said nothing else, not



even a dismissing hand gesture. He just looked at the knife in his hands, and went silent with thought.

Fifteen minutes later, they were back in the taxi. Jack and Julias gave each other occasional glances, but were silent. He'd just dumped a lot of dangerous info in the kid's lap, and Jack knew it. He was processing it, breaking it down and analyzing it, just like Julias was.

But unlike Jack, Julias's mind kept wandering back to Beatrice. What sort of shit was Garry talking about?

---

~~Damien~~

Natasha was the sheriff's childe.

That was where he recognized her personality, her character, her movements. It all held just a hint of the monster's taint. The quiet and stillness of cold, and then the sudden action of brutality.

He put a finger up to his forehead where she had shot him. It was a hazy memory, and a weird one, the feeling of a hole in the skull, and then darkness. She'd been so ... timid seeming, and then before he even realized what was happening, she'd put a hole through his face.

As if a cold stone could strike out with lightning. Just like the sheriff all those years ago.

He moved fast. He took the telescope with him, scooped up the components into his bag, and took off with as much speed as he could muster. All the Mehket speed in the world, all the shadow tactics and cloak of night he could muster, every bit of silence he could get from each step, he poured his vitae into it and vanished from the tower. He couldn't leave a trail, and he couldn't take his time.

He covered miles in minutes. No one spotted him, no one stopped him, and before long he was deep underground and tearing through the sewers. A hidden doorway there. A hidden hatch here. A winding tunnel. The Prince may have owned the city's surface, but its underground was his home, and no one knew it like he did, not even that witch Jacob. Navigating the underground tunnels was as natural to him as playing an instrument.

And before long, he was back in Tony's abandoned tunnel network. As he approached, he could hear Lucas, and the chorus of a hundred voices agreeing between bits of sermon.

He walked in, and everyone turned to look at him. It was the largest room of the complex, with massive walls that echoed every noise. Huge metal walls created interesting acoustics, and the sudden silence made every motion ring loud. He set the pack down, careful of the sensitive bits of a telescope, and headed up to the podium. Everyone watched him.

"Sire, we must speak."

Lucas tilted his head to the side. "Is it urgent?"

"Yes."

"Then, I am sorry children. Bishop Damien and I have business together. Take the message and keep it inside, and use it to control that beast in your chest. We are damned, and only by serving God's plan is there a place for us."

"As Longinus," they said, together, as an army.

Damien smiled and nodded to each Kindred that made eye contact with him. He saw that look in their eyes, that look of fulfillment, and satisfaction. They had a place to call home, a belief to drive them, and a man to look up to. They looked up to Damien,

true, and he preached the word to them with patience and knowledge, but Lucas was different.

Lucas was like Jesus Christ to them. As the congregation filtered out of the hall, Lucas walked among them, patted them on the shoulder, knew their names, and gave each of them specific advice. Knowledge was a Mehket currency, and Lucas wielded it well. Combined with his quiet, wise demeanor, they flowed around him like a school of fish.

“Bishop Damien, I...” A fellow Mehket walked up to him. Vivienne, Natasha’s childe. A tiny, frail thing just like her sire.

For a moment, he considered taking her hostage, and using her to control Natasha, and in turn perhaps control the sheriff? No, too distant a connection, too risky. It’d give him no control over Invictus repercussions.

He shrugged off the exhaustion that made his bones tremble, and forced a smile. “Vivienne?” He was Bishop Damien now, in these tunnels and halls. The children did not know of his nightly exploits, and it was best to keep it as such.

“I wanted ... to apologize for my sire. She was only—”

Damien held up a hand. “Don’t worry, Vivienne. She was only trying to protect herself, and you. I was in error to try and detain them.”

“Jessy was in error!” The tiny thing had some bark to her. “She killed ... and it didn’t need to escalate like that. Natasha was just trying to ... and then Jessy...”

A pat on the shoulder. It was all it took, just a simple pat on the shoulder, a small, gentle smile, and Vivienne’s downtrodden expression managed to rise to something of relief. He walked her

down the isle and out of the room, and gave her a small shove to send her on her way.

“There is a plan for us all, Vivienne Maiorie. There will be justice, don’t worry. Now go.” He waved her away, a fish cast back into the ocean. She looked like she was about to say something, but a confirming nod from him was returned by one from her, and she left with the abridged Testament held close to her bosom.

Then he turned and met with Lucas. His sire waited for him in the isle, dressed in a black robe and wearing a necklace with a tiny spear dangling from it. They both nodded to each other, quiet, hushed, as Mehket always were, and they waited for the congregation to fade away.

Then, they moved to the next room. The door, seemingly innocent enough, was sealed, soundproof, and the walls it met with were as well. The room inside was not large, but once they’d closed the door behind them, it was the safest place to converse.

“Sire.”

“Damien. You seem anxious.” Lucas cast a warm glance his way, and moved toward the altar the room held. A large table covered in expensive fabrics, ornaments, sacraments, and symbols rested against the back wall, and what little light the room held was pointed to it. Lucas stood by the altar, and with patience removed the necklace he wore and placed it within a chalice to join the other symbols.

“Sire, I have news! It is about the sheriff.”

“Oh?” That got his attention.

“I knew I recognized Natasha from somewhere. The way she moved, acted, it all itched at the back of my mind. But today I observed a conversation between her, and the sheriff.”

Lucas put his fingers to his chin, but nodded and waited.

“And the way they moved, the way they looked at each other, it was clear, sire. Sheriff Daniel is the girl’s sire.”

Lucas’s eyes went wide, his small grin grew large, and before long a boisterous laugh escaped him. “Truly? Bishop Damien, I could not have picked a better childe before my torpor.” He walked forward, wrapped his robbed arms around Damien, and gave him a hug.

Damien froze. A hug? He’d never felt such a thing from his sire, not since being embraced. It felt ... strange. When Lucas pulled away and chuckled all the more, Damien tilted his head to the side and watched his sire. Something was strange. His sire didn’t laugh like that normally.

“I will visit Maria then, and she will deliver the girl to us,” Lucas said, and he turned with a sweeping gesture around the room. The walls were covered in hanging drapes, each with a woven image of scenes from the bible. Jesus on the cross. Job and the tortures he suffered. The ninth circle of hell, with Satan frozen and trapped within. In Satan’s hands he held Brutus and Cassius, and in his mouth he chewed and tore into Judas Iscariot.

Traitors.

“You believe ... Maria will betray Natasha to us?”

“We have no intention of ending the girl’s second life, and Maria Turio’s faith will steel her resolve.”

“What will we do once Natasha is ours, without fear of Invictus anger?”

“But one piece of the puzzle, Bishop. She will be how we disarm the Prince’s guard. Two remain: to arm ourselves with a shield, and a weapon.”

“Shield and weapon, sire?”

“The weapon, I have.” He motioned to one of the ornaments by the altar. A sword. A ridiculous antique of a weapon that must have been well over a thousand years old. Maybe two-thousand. Rust, dust, dents, scrapes, it certainly looked like no weapon with its ornamental design.

And then Lucas turned around, and walked up to Damien with enough necessity and power in his eyes that the Bishop found himself taking a step back. Lucas put both his hands on his shoulders though, and squeezed tight, hard enough to hurt.

“The shield though, Damien, the shield will be flesh, and ash!”

# Chapter 18

~~Julias~~

A taxi would not do, not for this.

Perhaps it was too ridiculous, too absurd, or just too over-the-top, but Julias took great delight in the magnificent limousine they were in. Other Kindred would arrive in their usual ways, but the Prince expected a certain level of presentation for her ball, and Julias got that. There was something beautifully innocent in the mindless indulgence of expensive vice, jewelry, and wearing someone on your arm.

Jack was in the limousine with him, and both of them were in tuxedos. His childe looked so cute in his suit. Like all young neonates, they wore more modern clothes, but the older Kindred such as himself were more partial to clothes that managed to capture the majesty and allure of the older age. Himself, his tuxedo carried hints of the early 1900's with its open jacket, inner vest with a chain in the pocket, and tie. He was sure there would be even older, but even more compelling clothes combinations at the ball.

And to make the trip even more luxurious, the two of them were sipping blood.

“How does it feel to be visiting the Black Hall?” he said.

“Dude, Julias, I ... crap man, I had no idea the Prince owned the Black Hall.”

“I imagine she doesn't talk about it much? The Prince has vast corporations under her thumb. Which ones, we're not entirely sure. We know she owns some of the major old money corporations,

which is natural, and her influence spreads as wide as Xnomina's, just quietly and secretly.”

Jack frowned. “Secretly. She never told me about any of this.”

“Hey, don't blame her. Centuries of habits die hard. Someone like Antoinette has built a base of money and power over many webs over many decades of careful manipulation. And she's a Dragon. The Ordo Dracul are made of secrets.”

If only Jack knew. Julias chuckled, sipped more of their blood, and watched the city go by in the window. Xnomina was built on such secrets and manipulations, and that rabbit hole went deep, but neither he nor his peers knew what sort of secrets Antoinette built her empire on. It was one of the reasons she ruled the city; she was the better businessman.

He looked over at Jack. The kid was also looking out the window and drinking in the sights of the city. Black Hall was on the outside edge of the Elysium district, and while it only rose a few stories high, the building was massive. The building the Invictus held their balls and ceremonies within paled in comparison to it. Black Hall could hold thousands.

And when the limousine pulled up to the red carpet – an actual red carpet – there were guards in suits and unknown pedestrians who'd gathered to watch. They didn't know what was going on, as Black Hall events were never announced to the public, but still they gathered. The guards weren't Kindred, but Julias didn't think they were ghouls either. Antoinette had her fingers in everything.

Once they were out on the carpet, he stopped to admire the sight. The carpet didn't have any stanchions; the guards standing around it were enough to keep the random pedestrians from storming the carpet. And even without the guards, the look on the kine's faces was clear: intrigued but intimidated.



They took pictures, and recorded with their smart phones, but the pictures would always come out just a little too blurry or at the wrong angle. Such was the way of the Kindred beast.

The building itself was made of massive columns of that black marble the Prince seemed to love so much. Subtle curving dragons of long body were carved into the pillars, and the pillars themselves were part of a overhang half-circle that the carpet was underneath. The walls of the building were a similar, weird mixture of ancient and modern architecture, with more of that black marble color and cracks of white throughout its surface, like lightning. The windows were as tall as the walls, which was at least thirty feet, but they only showed the dark curtains on the other side.

To a kine, the building must have seemed like some sort of dark, mysterious, but grand and majestic Taj Mahal. To the neonates showing up, it must have seemed like the Queen's palace. They stood in awe, with their mouths hanging open and staring up at the grand entrance. It was the first ball the Prince had held openly for all covenants in years, and it was for all members and all ages; that meant a lot of neonates who'd never seen those massive doors, with black gates before them coiled with white dragons.

Jack too stood in awe, but maybe not as long as the other neonates. The kid regularly went deep into the Prince's tower after all, and Julias assumed such architecture was common within its depths.

A ball, a big fancy party, for Kindred was always an interesting affair of sizing each other up and trying to predict each others motives, strengths, weaknesses, and vices. They didn't mix or mingle like kine, but circled each other and faked social niceties. It was the Danse Macabre after all, and while he tired of the webs of deceit elders weaved, he had to admit he enjoyed the more innocent play of a gathering. He was good at it. Poker on a larger scale.

When the guards opened the massive gate, all eyes were on him and the small vampire at his side. He gave his childe a wink and just smiled at the crowd of Kindred before him. He was Julias Mire, youngest vampire of the Invictus council of Dolareido. They knew who he was, every last one of them, and that really stroked a Ventrue's ego.

The crowd was already well over a hundred. He recognized many; Maria and Michael were already there; so were Natasha and Jessy, and even some high ranking Carthians were already there. The dress code was hard to pin down, as it was both a black tie event, but everyone brought their own mixture of their era. Maria and Michael were dressed in proud and obvious throwbacks to their time, which from the eighteenth century meant corsets, jackets, frills on dresses and jackets alike. The other Kindred, not so old, wore clothes more suited to the nineteenth century, such as vests and fancy dresses with exposed shoulders. The difference compared to the younger Kindred, such as Jessy, was that of modern tuxedos and sleek white dresses.

And then the fresh neonates dressed for sex, with the new, suit-like tuxedo, and the modern dress's exposed thighs. He couldn't blame them; they were young, and young Kindred usually found solace in their new ability to fuck with impunity.

The Prince wouldn't be there yet; it would be a social faux pas for the host to arrive on time. But he was curious to see how the ancient Kindred would dress.

It had been years since he last stepped into the Black Hall. He'd forgotten how massive it was inside, as the gate opened into a large stairway that spread outward and down into a colossal room. There were no windows; instead, there were giant walls of white marble cracked with black lines, and the walls had ornamental arches carved into them. Always dragons. From the ceiling hung massive cages of black with the same dragon decoration as the front gate,

but within the cages was white fire. Columns were spread throughout the ballroom every twenty feet, like a forest of kingly marble. At the other end of the room, a split stairway rose to reach a balcony that lined the upper wall of the massive room in a complete circle. The walls curved in to join the ceiling where, in the white and obsidian marble colors the Prince held so dear, there were two dragons painted coiling in each other.

It truly put the Invictus ballroom to shame.

He recognized another Carthian: Mike, the young neonate he'd bent to his will only months ago. He offered the young man, so clearly out of his element at the ball, a small nod of acknowledgment. Not an apology, but an offering of respect. It was better.

“Presenting Mister Julias Mire of the Invictus Triumvirate, and his childe Master Jack Terry of the Invictus, companion of the Prince.”

Julias looked over his shoulder at the marshal of the court, and raised a brow. A ghoul, the sheriff's he believed, was standing beside the gate entrance from within. And someone had given him special instructions for Jack's introduction. The Prince, evidently, was content to throw Jack into the deep end of the Danse Macabre.

And the kid froze. For just a moment, there was fear in his eyes, that petrified fear from a quiet, shy person suddenly asked to speak to a crowd of their peers. Everyone was looking at him. He looked at Julias, and Julias just looked back at him like nothing was wrong. Because nothing was wrong. Come on kid, you've got this.

Jack gave Julias a subtle nod, loosened his shoulders a little, and started walking again. Like nothing was wrong. Like he was the center of attention because he deserved it. Like he was a mother fucking Ventrue.

And then everyone went back to their work under the guise of social mingling.

“I’m going to talk with my peers. Try and enjoy yourself kid. The other neonates could learn a thing or two, and though I’m sure you’re loathe to admit it, vice versa.” He gave Jack a small salute, and turned to walk toward the stairway where Michael and Maria were gathered. Natasha and Jessy were nearby, sampling the different blood being catered by more of the Prince’s servants.

Julias had no idea who these servants were. They weren’t Kindred, but they didn’t seem like ghouls either. Were they all under her spell? Elder Daeva were terrifying, powerful creatures, when they wanted to be.

Maria was dressed up nicely, in something that looked more like a wedding dress that belonged on an English queen from over three-hundred years ago. It also included a veil – again something that belonged on a wedding dress – that she wore over her face to hide her Nosferatu features. “Mister Mire.”

“Madame Turio, I see you and Mister McDonald decided to show up after all.”

The ghost woman shrugged. “Madame Vola insisted it would be valuable. Apparently, Tony’s death has caused more of a power vacuum among the young than we had anticipated. And since the young are invited,” she motioned to the ballroom full of anxious, excited neonates, “I thought it best to observe.”

“I see Master Terry is taking a more hands-on approach.” McDonald nodded his head in the direction of Jack. The kid was talking with the other Invictus neonates. “Are you afraid he’ll mimic the few other Invictus neonates, and join the Lancea et Sanctum?”

Julias shook his head. “No. It would never happen.” If anything, one conversation with the religious covenant would drive Jack to

murder. Logic and science were his world.

The conversation died there. Michael nodded and turned back to resume talking with Maria, and Julias headed over to his old comrades. “Madame Vola. Madame Herrington.”

“Mister Mire,” they said in unison. Natasha was dressed in a quiet dress, black and slim but with no features or exposed skin. Jessy, on the other hand, had taken to some nice, blue evening gown with an open back, and must have cut the thigh open to expose as much leg as possible. She was an attractive woman, sure, and her rather warrior-ish build reminded him of Beatrice, but she was taller, broader at the shoulders, and wore her blonde hair very short.

They were talking with a few younger Invictus, a pair of neonates only embraced within the decade. They bowed to him, but refused to make eye contact with anymore than his boots. For a moment, he considered trying to alleviate their concerns, but as always with the Ventrue, the sight of others averting their gaze from respect, or fear, was intoxicating.

He would never take advantage of it, like Viktor would, but it was harmless to indulge in the presentation of the position, wasn't it? Careful Julias, power corrupts and that goes double for a Ventrue.

“How goes? Are you—”

“Now presenting Mister Garry Tones, leader of the Carthians, and companion Beatrice of the Carthians,” the court marshal said.

Say what?

---

~~Beatrice~~

She thought she looked ridiculous, but her new witch mates had assured her she looked gorgeous. Jennifer, in particular, made a

couple of efforts to get her naked only moments after helping her put on the dress. She had no idea that monster chicks like her had become a sexual fad in the new world, but apparently it was a thing.

And it really was a nice dress. Hanging out with Julias was rubbing off on her, and awakening some weird, fucked up desire to wear super luxurious and classy stuff. The dress Jennifer and Othello helped her pick out was a long, slim black thing with a skirt that went down to her toes. She refused to wear high heels though! But the dress did a nice job of hiding that she was wearing black, open-toe shoes instead. It exposed the claws of her toes, but it was subtle.

The dress also only covered half her torso. It was one of those weird, asymmetrical ones that was long sleeve on one half of her, and covered her shoulder as it cut down across her chest on an angle to leave the other side of her bare. And Jennifer had picked the most skin-revealing version, so the half of her torso exposed was exposed all the way down to the hip. The chest of the dress was so tight and formfitting, she could actually see her nipples poking against the fabric, and she thanked the devil she'd remembered to remove her many piercings.

And of course there was her face. The party was not so secret that kine couldn't see Kindred, so it was better for Nosferatu to hide their disfigurements. Her claws and green snake eyes were not a problem, but the huge array of crocodile teeth along her cheeks required some intuition. Jennifer had proposed something pretty simple: an Arabian black face veil. It tied together behind her head, over her ear, and covered her nose, all the way down to her neck.

Jennifer said it really highlighted her eyes. Green snake eyes that, according to her witch mate, were extremely fuckable. And then the Ventrue had taken out her make-up kit and painted up Beatrice's face with eyelash curlers and enough mascara and eyeliner that she

looked like she'd walked off of an assembly line ready to give blowjobs.

And Julias was already there. Good. She looked over at Garry, and gave him a nod. He returned it, but with a weird look in his eyes. Sadness, maybe? Things were never the same between them, since she left the Carthians – still a secret – and she doubted she'd ever be able to mend that bridge. But the Circle of the Crone were her new home, for better or worse.

Focus on the party Beatrice, or 'ball' as the elders liked to call it. Bunch of peacocks showing off their feathers.

Well, she had some nice feathers too.

She walked down the stairs and looked around. Nothing but Carthians and Invictus, but that meant over a hundred faces. There were a dozen Nosferatu, and she did not envy any of them their disfigurements, but they all managed to hide it in some way. A lot wore gloves, many had their faces covered, or wore cocktail masks, and others just wore more layers.

Had it always been like this? Were Nosferatu accepted so easily among other Kindred? She really, really, really hoped she didn't spend a couple decades hanging out in a catacomb just because she was too stupid to see it. Hanging out with kine was out of the question, sure, but that didn't mean she had to isolate herself from Kindred too.

"Surprised you showed up." Joe, an old Carthian fellow, walked up to join her as she stepped off the stairs. "I haven't seen you around much."

She smirked under her veil. There was a look in his eye she hadn't seen on him before, not pointed at her anyway. That mix of intrigue and arousal that suddenly had her wanting to flirt and jerk him around.

But she wasn't that bitch. "Hey Joe. Cya Joe." A small nod, and she was off. Sorry Joe, but she was on a mission.

Alright, first encounter was a success. Blowjob mascara and sexy-but-classy dress were working. Some of the tattoos she had were exposed, but the coiling snake tattoo and the chainlink tattoo and the skull tattoo, none of them caught any eyes. In fact, when she looked around, many of the Carthians had various tattoos exposed by their dresses. The men and their tuxedos hid them better, but some still had art on their faces.

It really was a weird ball. Everyone was invited, and the only dress code was a vague somewhere-between black tie and formal. That meant interesting dresses, interesting tuxedos, and everyone bringing their own flavor. And the Black Hall! Fucking building was huge, and she felt like she'd walked into some colossal, ancient, mysterious ... Taj Mahal or something.

She looked back to Julias. Natasha and Jessy were standing next to him, and they were in some conversation with other neonates nearby. Whatever Julias had been doing with them though was paused, and he was looking at her she was someone else. As if someone new had taken her over. His mouth was hanging open.

She smirked, licked her massive teeth, and walked up right to the group of them. "Mister Mire," she said, and did her damndest to keep the chuckle out of her voice. She even gave him a small bow. "Madame Vola, Madame Herrington."

"... Miss ... Beatrice," they both said in Unison.

She did chuckle a little there. Her last name was Damor, and it wasn't even a secret, but no one bothered to know it. That would change.

Julias looked mesmerized. "Beatrice. You came."



Natasha, Jessy, the neonates, everyone's jaws dropped when Julias stepped up to her, and reached out for her hand. They dropped even more when she took it.

"As you requested."

"Ladies, paiges, if you'll excuse me. My date has arrived." He turned to the others, gave them a small nod, and walked off with her. The way he moved, held his shoulders, stood up straight, proud and dripping with confidence, it had everyone staring at both of them in surprise.

She hooked her arm with Julias, looked back at the onlookers, and winked. That's right bitches. He was hers, all hers.

Julias took her up the stairway and up onto the balcony. There were few other Kindred up there yet, and it meant they could talk a little more privately she assumed, while still being on full display for everyone to stare at them with confused expressions. Glorious.

"Quite the entrance," he said.

"Ch'yeah. Fully admit, that was fun. The look on everyone's faces? Worth."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Politics right? Good for covenant relations to see an Invictus hanging with a Carthian."

"Fuck the politics." Julias stepped in closer, reached out, and eased his fingers up and down her arms. His gaze was glued on her eyes though. "I didn't know you even owned make up."

She fluttered her eyelashes at him in the most exaggerated, ridiculous way possible. "A friend helped me out."

“Your friend really knows their stuff.” His hand on her sleeved arm reached up, and ran along her veiled cheek before nudging her dark hair aside so his fingers drifted along her ear. She shivered a little at the touch. “They really emphasized your amazing eyes.”

“Snake eyes.”

“Yeah. And you know I love those snake eyes.” He leaned down, and with his raised hand reached down just enough to get a finger under her veil and lift it. And then, with a grin in his eyes, he kissed her.

And when she thought it was just a sweet, innocent kiss, his other hand drifted down to the small of her back, and pulled her in. It was one of those long kisses. A kiss more than long enough for everyone to see, and for her to really get into it. With her veil up, people could see her shark teeth, but fuck them, Julias was a great kisser.

“You know ... you’re not an elder, you’re an ancilla.” Quick kiss. “First on the Invictus council of Dolareido ever.” Another quick kiss. “And now you’re kissing a Carthian, a young neonate, and a Nosferatu monster.” She counted off the weirdness on her claws in front of his eyes, but then gave him another kiss. “You’re really risking your position.”

“It’s a good thing I’m really, really good at what I do then.” He lowered her veil then, took a small step back, and just looked at her, up and down.

“... Mister Mire, your gaze is most unbecoming your station!” She tried to keep a straight face while faking her more uptight accent, but failed miserably. The veil hopefully hid it well enough.

“Sorry.” He leaned over the railing of the balcony, but kept his gaze on her. It was obvious he was drinking her with his gaze, and he didn’t hide how much he was looking at how the dress hugged tight to her hips and ass.

“You really want a piece of this already? I just got here.” She leaned out over the railing too, but made sure to stick her ass out a bit toward the wall behind them. “You’d think you just ate and had a full belly getting you riled up.”

He laughed. “Sorry, but the way you strutted in here? If I didn’t know better I’d think you were a Ventrue.”

“It’s the dress. It was sewn with the souls of a thousand dead children, I’m sure.” She looked down at the way the dress crossed her torso at an angle, shoulder to hip. “Is this why Ventrue always wear suits and gowns and shit? Cause just wearing it is really making me want to boss people around, like I’m some kind of queen.”

“Indeed.” He kept his elbows on the railing, but slid closer to her until they were touching hands. He hooked his pinky finger around hers, and she was glad the veil hid most of her face, cause holy shit everything he did was so hopelessly romantic and it always worked so damn well on her.

“You came with Garry.” Julias gestured out to the group of Kindred below them on the floor. “He hates these parties more than anyone.”

“Heh, he does kind of look like a bulldog someone’s forced to wear a tux.” The visual had her grinning madly behind her veil. “He needs a bone.”

“What’s the metaphor?”

“A bone! A lay. He’s so busy all the time trying to run the Carthians. Typical edgelord with no social life. No ghoul to keep him company even.” She shrugged and turned around, put her shoulders back on the railing again, and re-hooked pinky fingers too. Fuck it, full romance mode.

“He seems like he’s lived a hard life.”

“Hey, what kind of life did you have? You know, when you were alive.” She motioned toward the crowd beneath them with her head. “Something like that?”

“No. Well, maybe a little. Just a young banker who managed to work his way out of poor family. Long story short, I had a rise to power, Viktor noticed, became my friend, groomed me for the embrace, and turned me without even asking.” He shrugged. “The US was about to conscript for World War I, and he didn’t want me in that.”

“Silver lining?”

He nodded.

World War I. Fuck Julias was old. “Wife and kids?”

“Wife.”

“Oh ... well damn, man. What happened to her?”

“You really want to know?” he said. “It was a long time ago.”

“Yeah, I think I do. We’ve never really talked about your past. You know mine, just a single girl with a vampire stalker.”

“My wife, she...” He reached up and scratched his neck. Nervous was he? “I vanished from her life, but kept an eye on her. She moved on, found a new husband, had children. Lived happily ever after. Without me.”

Shit, maybe not so good a question. That somber, brooding look he sometimes wore was back on his face, and she had to reach out with her free hand and touch his chest to break it. “Hey, sorry. So uh ... when’s dancing?”

That put some spark into his eyes.

“Dancing?”

“Mhmm. Nothing fancy! But I can at least slow dance in this dress.” Of course she wouldn’t tell him she had to relearn how to slow dance cause the last time she did it was prom back in 1980.

“No dancing until there’s music ... You seem to be warming up to this life pretty quick, Beatrice.”

She shrugged and fluttered her dark eyelashes at him some more. “Every badass woman has a princess inside her just waiting to be pampered.”

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~~Natasha~~

What the ever living fuck.

Julias and Beatrice? What? Since when? Why? Fucking ... how? She watched them walk past her and up the stairway, up onto the balcony, and then proceed to kiss, touch, talk, all like it was second nature to them. So they must have been together for months by now. Think. Analyze!

She had no idea. She never kept any feelers out on Beatrice, because there was never a reason to. She was just a punk Carthian, and with her shark mouth, it wasn’t like she could just walk into a building and not be noticed by someone. Anyone. Was she that skilled at the cloak of night? And why was Julias so interested in her?

Arg, so many questions. She looked over at the others, and they were just as confused as her. At least the young paiges had the sense to not stare.

Worst of all, the two of them looked really, really, really good together. Julias was a smart, wise, confident man who always had a certain aura of sadness. Beatrice was fairly young, volatile, full of attitude, and angry. Just watching them was making her envious. They laughed together, flirted, held hands, touched, kissed, like watching yin and yang swirl.

“I don’t fucking believe it,” Jessy said.

Natasha could only shrug. “I had no idea. Wh ... wh ... what could Julias be thinking?”

“Thinking with his dick.”

“No. He’s t-t-too smart for that. He’ll ... just look. They like each other.”

Jessy looked up at the two of them, stared for twenty seconds, and then looked at Natasha before mock gagging. “I bet they fuck all nice and gently too.”

Natasha rolled her eyes, and made sure Jessy saw it.

What did Garry think of the couple? She looked out to the center of the room where Garry was still walking. The scary brute was just as scary in a tuxedo, largely cause of how off it looked on him. The young Invictus avoided him, not because he was particularly grotesque – hell Garry was a sexy man – but he was a loose cannon. Other Carthians came up to him, talked to him, but even then Garry seemed out of place.

And he was keeping an eye on Beatrice, Natasha could see. Constant glances. He was worried about her.

“Julias never ceases to amaze.”

Natasha and Jessy jumped. Maria had drifted up to them, quiet as always.

“Madame Turio, he ... I had no idea,” Natasha said, and looked down to avoid eye contact with her master.

“Nosferatu need companionship as much as the next Kindred, Madame Vola.”

What? That was weird. Maria never talked like that. Natasha forced herself to take a peak at her master. The ghost woman was looking up at Julias and Beatrice, and she had the smallest of smiles on her lips.

“Does the sight of it disgust you?” Maria said.

Natasha put up her hands in defense, complete with wide eyes. “No! No Madame, just ... surprised us.”

“No offense about the Nosferatu thing, ma’am. Just surprising to see a Mister Mire with such a no name.” Jessy gave a small jerk of her thumb toward the two on the balcony. “Beatrice is just some punk Carthian who gets in our way sometimes. And honestly, I never pictured Julias with any Carthian, let alone shark-mouth.”

Natasha clenched her teeth and stepped on Jessy’s foot. Damn it Jessy, you’re already on Maria’s bad side.

“It’s true. Mister Mire,” Maria said, with extra emphasis on the proper Invictus address, “does seem like he would prefer a proper individual. But then, you seem like you would prefer the company of dogs.” And, of course, the ghost woman said ‘company of dogs’ with just the right inflection to make the sexual connotation obvious. “We are all capable of surprise.”

Jessy lowered her head. Just let it pass Jessy, before the Nosferatu woman rips off your head.

“ ... if ... you’ll excuse us ... Madame Turio.” Natasha reached out for Jessy’s hand, gave Maria a small bow, and walked off to join a different crowd of Invictus.

“God I hate her,” Jessy said once a decent amount of distance and noise was behind them.

“D-don’t ... poke the bear.”

“I wasn’t po—”

“Shark-mouth?”

“That wasn’t—”

“You two talking about Beatrice?” Jack had walked up to them. That young neonate had grown quite bold, but it wasn’t unwarranted. He was quickly gaining responsibilities meant for older vampires, and according to his sire, it was entirely on his own merit. “Sorry. Madame Vola, Madame Herrington.” And a bow to follow.

Natasha smiled and nodded in return, but Jessy laughed.

“Kid I ain’t your boss,” her Gangrel friend said.

The boy smirked at Jessy. Natasha had assumed the boy would be quite anti-social and have difficulty talking, based on what she knew of him, but Jack talked with a confidence befitting a Ventrue. Was it Julias, or the Prince rubbing off on him? Or that Ventrue bloodline?

She envied him and his sire both.

“Yes, Master Terry,” Natasha said. “We were a little surprised to see Mister Mire and Beatrice were involved.”

“I ... suppose you don’t know Julias like I do.” Jack looked up at the two love birds on the balcony, rolled his eyes, and looked back to



Natasha. “Mister Mire was just going through the motions of this second life, like he was on auto-pilot. Lacked a spark of his own. She’s that spark.”

Natasha tilted her head to the side, and looked Jack up and down again. He gave her a quick glance and when he noticed she was looking at him, he had his own shy reflex and avoided the eye contact, like she did. He was just a kid after all, not even a year embraced, but ... he saw things with self-awareness. He was smart. Julias’s childe, he was.

“I ... think you both look quite beautiful tonight.”

Natasha blinked. Jack dripped awkwardness, uncomfortable giving the compliment, and was struggling to keep eye contact, but he was standing his ground like he was fighting a battle.

Jessy erupted into laughter, and wrapped an arm around the boy’s shoulders. “Kid, I like you. Flirting like your sire? Nice. You got a thing for older women?”

If Kindred could blush, she was sure Jack would be bright red. Just the topic was making Natasha uncomfortable.

“He is the Prince’s companion, Jessy. You’ll get your head torn off before the night is over.”

Jessy immediately let him go, but frowned hard enough it probably hurt her face. She was really on a roll.

“Sorry, about the horribly delivered compliment. Just ... trying out this socialize for fun thing. Not really my thing.” He looked back up at Julias for a quick moment before back to Natasha. “I’m not sure how he does it.”

“Socialize?” Natasha almost giggled. Jack had all the makings of a Mehket. Why did Julias pick him?

“Well, socialize, dance the Danse Macabre, and not become exhausted.”

“He’s a natural,” Jessy said. “Which is why we were all kind of surprised when he sired you.”

“Hey...” Natasha leaned over to give Jessy a sharp elbow in the side. “Be nice.”

“No, it’s alright.” Jack help up his hands. “I don’t exactly bleed confidence and royal demeanor, it’s true.” Despite his words, he gave them both the most subtle, sly grin. “And it’s ok if that’s all people see. Julias sees different. So does the Prince.”

“Very true kid. You got me stumped. Hey! Waiter!” Jessy flitted off – with no limit to her unending rudeness – and stopped one of the waiters to grab her and Natasha a glass of blood each.

Her friend was rude, an idiot, and obnoxious, but when Natasha looked down at the glass Jessy put in her hand, none of those things really mattered. She really did miss having Julias in the Invictus right hands though, to offset Jessy’s bluntness.

“Shit. You want one kid?”

“I’m good, th—”

“Now presenting ... Alder Jacob, leader of the Circle of the Crone ... and companions Othello and Jennifer,” the court marshal said.

Say what?

---

~~Jack~~

Jack looked to the door like someone had slammed it shut. Jacob? Circle of the Crone? They never came to the parties,

gatherings, ball, none of it. They hid in the dark and stayed there, like the boogiemer. What the hell were they doing here?

Jacob was obvious. The man had salt and pepper hair to ear length – grey hair on a vampire was practically unheard of – and he wore dark robes made of leather, fur, and ornate in complexity of straps and weaves. It was kingly, and scary, as if Attila the Hun had dressed for a ball. And the black bandage wrapped around Jacob's eyes completed the ensemble. The oldest Kindred in the city looked the part.

Othello, a huge man with dark skin and long black hair, was dressed quite extravagantly and beautifully, as Daeva did. Jennifer was a young Ventrue, not as young as him but young still, and dressed in something he'd expect to fall off of her and leave her naked at the slightest breeze.

He didn't notice at first, but everyone had stopped talking. Everyone was staring at the trio, or Jacob at least.

"Friends!" The Nosferatu made a sweeping gesture. "Please, continue with your evening. I am here only to visit, as you are." And just like that, the ancient Kindred stepped down the stairs and joined a crowd of Carthians.

They were all frozen stiff with surprise, or fear. Both, definitely both. Garry moved to Jacob though, and the two struck up a conversation, as if they'd done it a million times. Had they done it a million times? There was a strange ease between them, something that had Garry relaxed and comfortable.

Julias's lessons about reading body language were paying off.

"What's he doing here?" Natasha said.

Jessy stepped up beside her friend, and her brow was furrowed. For a second, she reminded Jack of an angry lion. "Yeah. What's a

witch doing at a ball?”

“The invitation was for everyone,” Jack said.

Natasha shook her head. “There’s a ... an unwritten rule ... the P-Prince doesn’t like witches ... at her ... events.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Jessy said, “they make other Kindred nervous. At least you can trust a dragon to be smart and logical. A witch? ... ever seen Battle Royale?”

Jack lowered his head. Yeah, he’d seen it.

“Jessy exaggerates ... a little. Alder is an Invictus title, and Jacob brandishes it like a joke.” Natasha took a moment to smooth out her dress before looking at Jack. “Be careful with them. They would let the city rule under survival of the fittest, if they had the option.”

“They don’t have the option.” A surprise grin hit Jack. “My girlfriend would crush them.”

The words had come out of him before he even knew he’d say them. Both Jessy and Natasha looked at each other, then at him like as if he’d turned into a different person.

And it was sort of true. Something about everything Julias and Antoinette had been telling him was starting to ring true in his skull. The other Kindred were looking at him with interest, intrigue, even a little fear or awe. It was not even one hundredth the shock and awe that Jacob or the Prince inspired, but it was enough to stroke his ego and set that Ventrue blood in him aflame. He wasn’t so stupid as to let hubris destroy him, but the Danse Macabre was not a passive game. He had to get in there if he wanted to stay on top of the invisible war before him.

So he gave Jessy and Natasha small nods of departure, and walked off to find Jennifer. Start at the bottom, and work your way up.

He knew nothing about her. The beast in his gut told him he didn't need to be afraid, and that she wasn't much older than him. And, upon closer approach, the way she stood up straight and met his gaze was a clear signal; she was Ventrue.

The first one he could talk to since Viktor and Julias, and the only one near his age. There was value in that. Her dress made things difficult, as it was barely more than a few pieces of silk strung over her shoulders and dangling from her hips. The strips were just barely see-through, so he could see the slight change in color of her nipples. Normal height, with a lean and firm build with raven hair at her shoulder. For a second, Jack thought he was looking into a mirror of what Beatrice looked like before her Nosferatu disfigurements.

“Good evening,” he said. “I am Master Jack Terry, young neonate of the Invictus.”

Jennifer blinked at him, took another sip of her glass of blood, and lowered it to her exposed stomach where her other hand ran a finger along its edge in circles. “Jennifer, Circle of the Crone. You'll have to forgive me Invictus, us witches have little use for last names.”

She was looking him up and down with a single brow slightly raised, and a tiny smile. If Julias was correct, that meant she liked what she saw.

For a moment, he wondered if he spent his entire first life missing what were now fairly obvious signals of interest.

He liked what he saw too, of course, and no amount of Ventrue stature could hide his aroused gaze in front of the nearly naked,

beautiful woman. But fear of Antoinette ripping him in half set him straight. “Jennifer. Are you enjoying the ball? As I understand it, Circle of the Crone rarely join these affairs.”

“Yeah.” She shrugged, like it were the most innocent of things. “The Prince doesn’t want us here, and we don’t really want to be here. But tonight’s special, right? First time a ball’s been held here in a long time. Hell, first time I’ve ever been in this palace.”

“Special?”

“Yeah special. To celebrate peace.” She rolled her eyes and waved off the word like it was meaningless. “Or whatever.”

“Not a fan of peace?”

“Not a question of my taste, young Ventrue.” One of the servers walked by, and she scooped a glass of blood from their tray like she’d been living the served life her whole life. She passed it to Jack as if the thought of him not taking it were impossible. “Just an illusion. Struggle is the nature of existence, after all. If peace were truly a thing, it would be something to avoid, because without struggle we’d all atrophy, devolve, and fade away.” Another sip. “And even the dragons can agree with us on that.”

Definitely a Darwinian view, but logical. It made him smile. “I can agree with that, if we accept the premise we are creatures bound by natural selection.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“Self-awareness comes with perks. A wild animal with no understanding of self is molded completely by its environment and genetics. But with sentience, we can step outside that paradigm. A conscious, aware choice can be the basis of guided evolution, rather than natural evolution.” He mirrored her sip. “We can choose

different goals to be what we sharpen our claws on, instead of sharpening them on each other's bones."

She tilted her head to the side a little, smiled wide, and chuckled. "A good counterpoint. I'm impressed. I disagree that that choice can be made, but hey, what's a second life without disagreements?" She stepped a little closer then, and looked him up and down again. Her grin remained. "You're Julias's childe, right?"

"I am." He stood up a little taller.

"Lucky man." The fellow Ventrue nodded up with her head toward the two on the balcony, Julias and Beatrice. "She's a beautiful monster, that Beatrice. Bet she fucks like a wild cat."

He managed his own grin, but she'd surprised him. He'd assumed a Ventrue would talk proper, but this one had no issue getting her words dirty.

The way she was looking at Beatrice though, there was a little more to it than casual lust. Did she know Beatrice? Why would a witch know a Carthian? But then, why did Julias? He was probably reading too much into it, but Jennifer's gaze lingered on Beatrice for quite a while.

"So tell me, why are you asking?"

"Huh?"

"About the Circle. Why are you asking?" She'd started talking before she lowered her gaze back to him. Crafty.

"Well ... there aren't many of you. It's rare to get to talk to one of you."

"Talk to Carthians often?"

“Touché, but their goals are obvious, understandable, and I know plenty about the Carthians from talking to other Invictus. You though, the Circle are a mystery and an intriguing one.”

“Everyone so damn interested in us lately,” she said. “There’s nothing complicated.” She stepped closer again, and leaned down to blow a little bit of air at his face. How rude. “We’re the monster in the woods. We hunt, we kill, we eat, we survive. Where you worship money and real estate, we worship ancient gods and the elements of nature they represented. You guys spend your time looking for a good contract, we spend our time looking for a good mark, to kill or to fuck.”

Wow, ruthless with the description. “Um, thank you.” Everyone was interested? What did that mean? It was like she was purposefully dropping hints to tease him about what he didn’t know, complete with sly grins.

“Getting to know the young prodigy, Jennifer?”

He froze. Jacob was approaching, with a sly grin that echoed Jennifer’s, except times a thousand. He was a walking, talking comic book character who put his ridiculous and exaggerated expressions and emotions on display like life were a play. But then, to an elder as old as Jacob, second life was probably a grand stage.

He tried to ignore the beast in his gut. It could handle Maria and Michael and Garry, and even Antoinette, without cowering to its knees, but there were two Kindred in the city that just being near was enough to make every fiber of his being want to run. The sheriff, and this psycho fucker. The Joker comparisons were not unwarranted.

“Prodigy?” she said.

“Yes, the young Master Terry here is carving himself quite the career path. Bloodline of Viktor Honors, childe of the Julias the



youngest Invictus Council member I've ever known, and himself a proficient Invictus businessman with his own connections. Not many share the arm of the Prince." He said it all so perfectly, fluidly, without stutter or wavering of his huge smile, that it made Jack's feet tremble.

But fuck that. Enough of these fucking elders and their fucking games.

He raised his eyes and forced them to look at the wrap where Jacob's eyes should have been. "You know a lot about me."

The Nosferatu chuckled. "I know a lot about many, but you little Ventrue are a curiosity." He circled Jack then, like a wolf eye preying.

Jack managed a quick peak over his shoulder up at Julias. His sire was watching Jacob with enough intensity that he was surprised the elder didn't burst into flames. Another peak showed that more than Julias were watching, Natasha, Jessy, and Maria were as well. So he was the center of attention. Again.

"What makes you say that, elder Jacob?" Fuck any 'your excellency' bullshit, and fuck calling him Alder. He wasn't Invictus.

"I'm not exactly sure." He stopped around in front of Jack again, and leaned down a little to bring his face in close. Having no eyes to make eye contact with was making the conversation very unusual. "I only know one other Kindred who has that weird, unknown quantity. Unpredictable. Hard to guess. I like it!" He leaned in even closer until their noses were almost touching.

Jack gritted his teeth and stood his ground. "You believe so?" He didn't ask about the other Kindred who interested him. That would tip him off that he didn't know. The Danse Macabre was a disgusting game.

“I know so,” he said. Jennifer watched, entranced by the exchange between them. “Why else would the Prince be interested in you, hmm?”

“People can like each other for simpler reasons than that.”

“Kindred aren’t people, Jack.” The monster’s grin disappeared. “Never forget that.”

“Now presenting, the Prince of Dolareido, Voivode Antoinette, and her sheriff Daniel,” the marshal of the court said.

Oh thank god.

# Chapter 19

~~Antoinette~~

Her Black Hall had more faces than she'd expected. Wonderful, that meant tensions had lessened between covenants and individuals alike. There would be lasting peace in her city, even if it meant she had to drag the idiots into the peace like kicking, screaming children.

She took a moment to look around. Garry, Jacob, Maria, Michael, and Julias up on the balcony. Delightful, all the primogen were there. It was the first time in a long time the primogen had come to a ball of their own accord, all at the same time. She had to extend her invitation twice to Jacob, to insure him he was truly welcome, but she did not expect the witch to attend. Yet there he was, standing with Jennifer and Jack.

What was he doing with Jack?

She began her slow descent down the stairs, with the sheriff at her side. While Daniel wore the most boring tuxedo ever devised by Kindred or kine, she would never wear something so dull. This was her ball, her building, and her city. She would dress the part.

Her dress was blue, in stark contrast to her red lips and eyes. It wasn't as slim or revealing as she normally wore; the evening was not about blatant seduction. Instead, it was an off-shoulder mermaid gown with a skirt that tightened at the knees before spreading into a beautiful array of heavy curves where it barely touched the floor. The fabric had the most subtle sheen, and its smoothness was perfect. Along the collar and along its base, the most tiny threads of dancing silver framed the color perfectly.

It was most definitely not a dress from her time. Instead, it was a modern thing, and a beautiful example of the elegance of simplicity. The only jewelry she wore to compliment it were tiny drops of black from her ears, and a single necklace of chained silver and obsidian.

She gave a small nod to Daniel, and reached out to touch his arm. “Try and enjoy yourself old friend.”

“Yes Annie,” he said, but all he did was adjust his glasses and then find a corner to stand in, alone.

Ugh. She would break him. It may take a couple hundred more years, but she would break him, and find something that would make him happy.

She took a moment to run her fingers through her long, lush white hair, and gave the watching Kindred a knowing but gentle smile. “Guests, please continue. There are no announcements to be made, or agendas to be had. Peace is a rare thing, so let us celebrate it while we can.” She dismissed her own words with a small flick of her wrist, and continued to step down the stairway. Each step only momentarily exposed the tip of her black shoes; a short heel, as there was no need to stand taller than everyone even more than she already did.

They kept watching her, and they would for the rest of the evening, but at least everyone went back to their conversations. That was good. It was such a rare thing for Kindred to let their guard down, even a little, and if she could foster that trust just a touch, then efforts she made were worth it. If everyone had that same honesty as Jack did, her job would be easy.

Jack. The boy looked absolutely adorable in his fancy little tuxedo. Julias knew his childe well, and when she met Mire’s gaze with a look upward, he gave a knowing nod of his own. Thank you, Mister Mire.

Then she looked to Jack. He was staring at her with wide eyes, and looking her up and down. The dress did not reveal much skin, and it hugged her breasts tightly enough to contain her bust. What drew his eyes so?

“ ... my Prince,” he said once she was near, and bowed.

“Silly boy.” She reached out and flicked him in the head. Nearby Kindred gasped, and some chuckled. That was fine, a little humor was exactly what she was looking for. “You are my lover, not my servant.”

“Heh, sorry Prince Antoinette.”

“Have you been talking with Jacob?” She moved in closer to Jack, stood beside him, and faced the two witches he was talking with. Her nod for Jennifer was genuine – quite the sexy creature that Jennifer – but her gaze was barely better than a glare for Jacob. Careful what you say here, witch, or your antics will get you more trouble than you can handle.

“Jacob expressed some interest in me.”

“Did he?”

The ancient Nosferatu made a dismissing wave of a hand. “An innocent curiosity, I assure you. Master Terry has been making a name for himself, and for one so young, I just had to see what all the fuss was about.” Jacob gave her a nod, but as always his idiot grin and weird movements buried his words in sarcasm.

“Terry surprised many. I am glad Julias made the choice he did.” She furrowed her brow, and glared daggers into his eyeless face. If you touch the boy, you worthless fool, I will rend you limb from limb.

Jennifer was silent, and standing beside Jacob much in mirror of Antoinette and Jack. Two elders and their two young companions. It made for a strange parallel.

“I am glad the Circle of the Crone decided to attend,” she said, and she combed her fingers through her hair until the long mane was hooked over her shoulder and in front of her.

“Are you?” Jacob said. It could have been more sinister or angry, but he said it with that touch of quiriness to offset the potential insult. Because that’s what he did, never direct, always dancing around his own words.

“I am. You’ll have to forgive me if I do not always accept the Circle into my gatherings, but you have a history of stirring up trouble, Jacob.”

“Oh?”

She stepped toward the ancient Nosferatu. “Do you not remember the chaos you caused twenty years ago, with Viktor and Tony?”

“Oh yeah! Aha, that was grand.” Jacob roared a laugh, enough to have the rest of the Kindred looking their way again. “Fuck they really wanted to kill me for that.”

“You also have no subtly.” She nodded her head toward the onlookers.

Jennifer was looking at her like she was insane. Jacob had surely scared the young Ventrue with his dark arts, and she probably thought Jacob was the strongest Kindred in the city. Antoinette suppressed one of many smirks the night would surely summon. Someday she would have to put Jacob back in his place.

Jacob did not bother to suppress his smirk. How fitting. “I can be subtle.”

“Dressed as a royal Hun?”

Jack burst into laughter next to her, but was quick to cover his mouth. She did not realize what she said was so humorous; the boy was the only one laughing.

Jacob gave Jack a harsh glare, as much as a one could give with a bandage wrapped over his eyes, but his anger passed quickly. “With all due respect Prince ... can you imagine me in a tuxedo?”

It was her turn to chuckle. “Touché.” The image of the older, crazy Nosferatu in a proper tuxedo did indeed not sit at all. “If you’ll excuse me Jacob, I would like to walk with my lover.”

Such a wonderful word, lover. It held just the right note of attraction and appreciation, of sexual imagery and emotional attachment. And to a heartless creature like Jacob, it must have sounded disgusting. It made the old man cringe and scrunch up his nose, but Antoinette smiled at him, put a hand on Jack’s shoulder, and started walking. No need to look back, let them think what they will.

Jack fell in beside her, and walked like her companion, not her servant. Good. She smiled down at him, and he returned it with beaming eyes.

“Thanks,” he said.

“However did you get pulled into a conversation with that beast?”

“I was talking to one of his fellow witches, Jennifer. She seemed ... intelligent.”

“And rather forward and feisty, I imagine?”

“Yes! I had no idea witches were so direct with their belief. Carthians wax poetic about modern government, but the Circle

surprised me with their conviction.”

“Indeed.” She put her hands on the boy’s shoulder again, and pulled him a little closer, so they nearly touched bodies as they walked. “Intelligent and dangerous. Jacob is both a valued member of my primogen council, and a thorn in my side.”

“Like Tony?”

Bile was upon her lips in seconds. “That fool was most certainly a thorn, and valuable as a primogen, just not for intelligence. But,” she took a deep breathe for effect, “let us not dwell on thorns. Are you enjoying the ball?”

“I kind of am.” The young thing shifted his feet from side to side for a moment, looking down, until he raised his gaze back to the witch Jennifer. “I’ve learned a lot.”

“That is good then.”

“And ... you look absolutely beautiful.”

She raised a hand to her lips and chuckled. It was a delight that the boy tried to compliment her, but such a bold and direct compliment just did not come naturally from him. Julias could, but poor Jack could not. Still, the effort warmed her.

“Thank you.” She put both her hands on the boy’s shoulder then, leaned down, and kissed him. His eyes went wide of course. How could she risk such behavior in front of everyone, he probably thought. But then she drew the kiss out, tugged on his bottom lip with hers, and nudged her nose into him.

It took a little while, but eventually his own eyes closed, and he kissed her back. Satisfied, she pulled away and grinned at him. Others were staring, but many were smiling. Perhaps they thought it sweet?



She did not care. He was hers, the Black Hall was hers, and the city was hers. Let them think what they would.

“Come.” She started walking again, but took a quick peek behind her to see if the boy was was going to join her. Apparently she had shocked him, but after a moment to get his bearings the boy skipped after her to join her side again.

Everyone kept glancing at her, especially the young neonates. She could hear them whisper, some in fear, some in wonder, many simply wondering about her hair and its white color, and others intimidated by her height. The usual. But the whispers were also different, as many giggled or chuckled between themselves at the sight of Jack next to her. He intrigued them. The neonates, she noticed, looked at Jack with a curiosity and wonder not to dissimilar to how they looked at her.

Good. Good. Everything was going smoothly. If she could make everyone comfortable with each other, and not spend every waking moment conspiring to kill each other, there was hope for their damned race.

“A drink, my Prince?” One of the servants held a single glass upon a tray out to her.

“No thank you my dear. Jack?”

“Uh, no. I’m good.”

She waved off the servant, and the man nodded before returning to the one of the side doors of the Black Hall.

Jack nudged her side and motioned his head toward the server. “He didn’t seem like a ghoul.”

“He was not.”

“Then just a regular kine? You trust him?”

“Mon chéri, all the kine here are slaves to my will.”

“Oh, wow. Like what a Ventrue does?”

“No. They are still of their own mind, but I have cast my spell upon them. They wholly desire to serve me.” The Daeva discipline of majesty. She knew it was how Rebecca has enraptured the poor boy when she had stabbed him, and nearly taken away this precious creature she now coveted.

“Oh wow ... how long does that last?”

“For a young Daeva, she or he may enthrall a kine for the night. The servants here at the Black Hall are mine for weeks, and I will enchant them again before it fades.”

“Jesus, and I thought Viktor’s dominate was impressive.”

She grinned. Now that was a compliment Jack delivered well.

Their stroll came upon Maria Turio and Michael McDonald, the two Invictus primogen. Predictable and dull those two were, but at least still of a sane mind compared to Viktor. “Madame Turio, Mister McDonald.”

“Prince. Enjoying the evening with Master Terry?” the tall Gangrel said.

“I am. Your young master is a joy to my second life.” She liked Jack, a lot. Is that so hard to comprehend, you soulless husks? At least the boy stood proud next to her, despite the unbelieving eyes of his superiors.

“It seems there is much intermingling between the covenants.” Maria stepped forward, and the ghost woman lightly motioned

toward the two on the balcony.

“Mister Mire and Miss Damor,” Antoinette said.

Both Invictus looked at each other with momentary confusion. They did not know Beatrice’s last name of course, and why would they. But they would now, if only because now they knew she was with Julias. Jack said nothing, but she saw a smirk on his lips.

“I do hope Mister Mire remembers his position.” Maria shook her head a little, and it made the white veil that covered it sway. “She is just a rankless neonate.”

Antoinette shrugged lightly. “Carthians do not care much for rank.” And the fact she was no longer Carthian. She wondered if Beatrice had told Julias yet of her change in covenants. So far, she had done an excellent job of hiding the information, and Antoinette doubted anyone knew except the Circle themselves, and Garry. It would be an interesting conversation, she imagined.

She knew though, of course. She was very good at her job, as was Daniel.

The Prince looked back at Maria. “I do not believe Mister Mire would ever betray his position or his allegiance, Madame Turio.”

Maria squinted her eyes through her white veil, but Antoinette just smiled. She remembered the Nosferatu’s relationship with Lucas. A gentle reminder, a little deterrence, to keep her in her place.

“Of course.” Maria bowed her head somewhat, but there was a scowl there hidden under the veil. Maria did not like her, but that was fine. She did not like Maria.

“I think I will say hello to the good gentleman and his companion.” Antoinette gave Maria and McDonald a dismissing

nod, and began to walk up the splitting stairs the two Invictus leaders were near.

Jack was beside her a moment later. “You two don’t seem to get along.”

“You and I are the only Invictus who do.”

“Oh ... is that normal, between covenants?”

“It is. Fundamental views shape and mold who we are, do they not?”

“I guess.” Jack reached up and ran his fingers along his buzzed head. “But I don’t really think of disagreements as not getting along. I enjoy a debate as much as a friendly conversation.”

She smiled down at the boy beside her. Oh Jack, oh sweet Jack. Were the rest of vampires as genuine as you.

Soon, the two of them were upon the balcony. She took a moment to look upon the crowd of Kindred that drifted around the floor of her Black Hall. The hall could house a thousand, but Kindred would not mingle so closely as kine, so it was better for them to have their space. They drifted around in small cliques, sticking to their own covenants and even their own age groups. But, she noticed, diversity was spreading. Some Invictus were talking with Carthians, and Jack’s example had more Kindred even talking with the witches. Julias and his now blatant relationship with Beatrice was also sparking a lot of intermingling between groups. Good, good.

“Mister Mire,” she said. Julias had already turned to face her, and he bowed with her greeting. Beatrice did too, though the poor woman was obviously uncomfortable with the movement, or with her.

She had never talked with Miss Damor one-on-one. That should change.

“Prince,” he said.

Then Antoinette smiled at Beatrice. “Miss Damor.”

That made the Nosferatu blink. “ ... Prince,” she said.

That’s right little Nosferatu, I know you, and your secrets.

“It is quite the gathering,” Julias said, and he looked back over the railing. “I never thought to see so many getting along.”

Jack took a step forward to his sire. “Was it always so bad?”

The Prince also took a step forward, and leaned over the railing the same as them. “Once, this city was as violent as most cities still are between Kindred. War in the shadows. Pointless death.”

Beatrice looked her way. “Sometimes a cause is worth killing for.”

Everyone turned to look at her. It was like she had taken a knife and cut through the air until it bled.

“ ... I would speak to you privately for a moment, Miss Damor.” It wasn’t a question.

She stood back up, walked past them, and ignored their confused gazes. Beatrice was staring at her like she was the devil come to take her soul, but the young Kindred started to walk after her. Antoinette’s beast delighted in its blatant domination of Beatrice’s.

“Are you enjoying your time with Julias?” Antoinette said, once they were a ways further down the balcony. She kept her voice hushed.

“Um, yeah ... uh ... Prince.” Beatrice was trying to keep eye contact, but the fear was obvious. Antoinette had spent so much time cultivating a little fearlessness from Jack, she had almost forgotten how most young Kindred responded to her.

“Do give my compliments to Jennifer. You look lovely tonight. And from the way Julias is looking at you, tonight I am sure he will be after you like a young boy and his fist girlfriend.”

Now the Nosferatu was looking at her like with wide eyes, so wide Antoinette could see the startling detail of their snake features.

“ ... how much do you know?”

“It is my city, little Nosferatu. Daniel and I hold this with our own hands. Do you think I miss such things?”

“Fuck, uh ... have you told anyone?”

Bold of the young woman to ask questions of her so directly. She liked that. “No. It is of no harm to my kingdom. Yet. But that is not why we are speaking.”

“Then—”

“I wish to speak of Julias.” This time she turned to look out over the crowd of Kindred below them. She knew at just what volume to speak for only Beatrice to hear, and if any Mehket had bright ideas to spy on her, she would notice.

“What about him?”

“He is key in my plans for this city, little witch. You see the peace below us? Nearly two hundred Kindred, and none of them are plotting to kill each other, at least in the immediate. I have worked hard to arrive at this point. And Julias is the fruit of my labor.”

“I’m not following.”

Antoinette took a moment to think her words over carefully. Could a young Kindred such as Beatrice even understand the utopia she was trying to craft?

“Julias accepts without issue that Kindred of different covenants can befriend each other, even love each other.”

“Whoa whoa no one’s said the L word.” Beatrice put up her hands and waved them around as if to stop some great wind.

Antoinette chuckled. It had been centuries since she had said the word with any intent to another. Old, forgotten, covered in rot and decay. But the language between Julias and Beatrice was clear and obvious. Julias probably knew it too, but he was wise enough to not scare off Beatrice with it. How would that conversation go, Antoinette wondered.

“My relationship with his childe is also a delightful, if unexpected fruit of those labors. Julias is the first of many minds I hope to mold into something both wise, intelligent, and with an inkling of awareness. He knows what future awaits Kindred, and that only with a little cooperation are we to weather that storm.”

Beatrice, the poor thing, was shivering next to her like a scared animal. Antoinette had unknowingly risen to a full stand and was speaking down at the woman with her public speaking tone. She sighed, and let herself relax.

“I mean no ill will toward you, Miss Damor, only to warn you. Jacob and his brutal views may not mold so well to my ideals. Were Julias not interested in you, I would say nothing and let you suffer the consequences of your choice, come what may. But Julias appears to value you, and so will I.” That made Beatrice blink in twenty sorts of confusion. “So I warn you now. Please listen to Julias when he brings wisdom. He may be a sad creature, but he has

found a spark in you, and I would hate to see your choices destroy you, when the man you love could prevent it.”

She placed the love word again like an immovable flower, wrapped in context and weight so the Nosferatu had no choice but to accept it.

“Alright alright. I’ll ... yeah, I’ll do that.”

“Good.” She leaned on her elbow and faced the woman before her again. “You have had a much harsher life than most, Beatrice, considering the circumstances of your embrace. I appreciate that it has not warped you into a monster.”

So many words. It was a bit of a gamble, dumping so much information on the new witch. It was nothing Antoinette could not spare to say, but that did not mean she was doing herself any favors handing so much information to Jacob’s newfound pet.

“What do you know about my embrace?”

“Nosferatu can be such tragic figures. And one such tragedy, Jerem Montallia, obsessed over a woman who embodied everything he wanted, both before and after his embrace. But he did not have my permission to sire – I do not let my city grow uncontrolled – so he acted on his own. I was the one that decreed he would die his second death for his unsanctioned action, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. So you think you know me now, hmm?” This time Beatrice stepped closer. Antoinette could see the young thing was terrified, and the beast in her gut was shaking with fear, but rage pushed her through it. “I had nothing and no one and your utopia was hell on Earth for me.”

“Then imagine how much worse it would have been, if someone such as Lucas had taken advantage of your misery, brainwashed you with fool notions of purpose in a God’s divine plan, and then used



you as cannon fodder in a true war between covenants?” Antoinette kept the words soft. She did not want to defeat Beatrice in this conversation, merely enlighten her. If Julias enjoyed Beatrice so, it must have meant the woman had depth to her, a depth Antoinette could encourage.

“I imagine I’d be dead.”

“Indeed. So think carefully when Jacob preaches of his ideals, of a world where the strong rule the weak with tooth and claw. Do you think such a society could last?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a lot of value, and wisdom in old views. We’d be fucking idiots to just dismiss what we are ... Prince.” Beatrice was standing only a couple feet from her, and was looking up at her and meeting her gaze. The Nosferatu had courage indeed.

Antoinette nodded and looked back toward the crowd beneath them. “True. I battle against our own nature. And it is a long fight, but I think I will win.” She gave a dismissing wave, and turned to start walking back toward the boys. But first, a quick glance over her shoulder back at Beatrice. “I always win.”

Beatrice frowned like a chipmunk, with a scrunched up nose that almost had Antoinette break into another chuckle. But she did not want to offend the woman. The young Nosferatu had power to her; it was why Jacob had scooped her up. A seed of thought planted in her mind would, Antoinette hoped, yield fruit.

“You two ok?” Jack said once she was near.

“Merely womanly talk,” Antoinette said.

Julias gave her a quiet look with a raised brow, but said nothing.

“Yeah.” Beatrice shrugged and stood next to Julias again, a little closer than necessary. Fear, perhaps? Or had Antoinette’s words of love broken into the stubborn child’s skull?

“I bid you both a good evening then. Come Jack, I would speak with Mister Tones.” A nod for the couple, a nod returned, and she walked back down the stairs.

Jack joined her. He too said nothing, but glanced back over his shoulder at Beatrice, and then to Antoinette. When she looked at him, he did not break her gaze, but met it with a couple of telling blinks and a nod in the Nosferatu’s direction. Antoinette smiled down at the young man, and shook her head. Women keep their secrets, dear boy.

“Mister Tones,” she said once near the Gangrel. “You look ... please, if you would give me but a day, I could have crafted for you the most luxurious tuxedos and suits. Something more to your size and facial shape.” The man was a dark, brooding, sexually alluring beast, but he did not know how to dress for it.

Garry frowned at her. Her teasing, it appeared, would not ease his fury. Lucas and his return were on the man’s mind, no doubt.

“Prince.” Despite his anger, the man gave her a small bow. “Enjoying the evening?”

“I am. Have you ever witnessed so many Kindred under one roof? Delightful.”

“Yeah, I—”

But then the doors opened. The marshal of the court said some words of defiance, but the growing group of figures overwhelmed him with their numbers. Soon the marshal was forced to step off the stairs to make room for the large group of black-robed vampires.

“Good evening,” the man in the front said.

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~~Damien~~

“Lucas!” Her voice was so loud, Damien checked the walls for speakers.

But there were none, there was only the pure white fury of the Prince. The rest of the Kindred in the Black Hall parted like the Red Sea, and they even bowed their heads like beasts cowering before their pack leader.

Damien kept to Lucas’s side, but he would not cower. While he was dressed in black robes of a modern make, Lucas had worn his old robes from when he was a true Archbishop. The hood was raised, the whole of it was worn with dirt, and it was colored dust and brown on its edge. It was stitched together with dirty, thick thread, and a rope of twined human thread circled his waist. Not everyone knew, but Damien could see it so close; the robe was patched together layers of human skin.

“Prince Antoinette.” Lucas gave a small bow. “I have come as invited.”

“The invitation was not for you!”

“I had heard all Kindred were invited.” His sire tilted his head to the side. “We are Kindred.”

“Do not play coy with me, vermin. I have postponed dealing with you, and you spit on the last shred of kindness I offer you.”

“Kindness? The Lancea et Sanctum has a right to practice in this city, Prince, despite your views as to otherwise.” Lucas began to pass side to side, with a lowered head and fingers netted behind his back.

“And despite losing several Kindred mere weeks ago, we have not retaliated. We wish only for peace.”

“Lies.” Antoinette kept marching up toward Lucas, alone. The sheriff was nowhere to be seen, and everyone else in the room had backed off. The Kindred that Lucas brought also backed away, and it took everything Damien had to stand his ground beside his sire. It was her, the woman who’d butchered so many Bishops and priests. The beautiful dress did not detract from the fury that poured out of her, washing over everyone in close proximity and crushing them.

“Lies? I have sat quiet for fifty years to let anger fade and wounds heal. We can start fresh, and coexist. That is what you want, is it not?”

That stopped her a good ten feet before she reached him. Her hands were so tight by her side, Damien was sure they’d snap at the fingers.

“Everything I have done was for peace,” she said.

“Then why can I not attend this ball meant for all Kindred?”

“Because you are not capable of peace, monster.”

Lucas lowered his head, and with a slow, heavy motion, he lowered his hood and exposed his dark skin, short curly hair, and his tired eyes. “Fifty years of torpor can change one’s perspective. We clashed in the past, and I do not wish to repeat history.”

Garry stomped forward from the side with enough weight in his step to draw everyone’s eyes. “Fuck you. Repeat history? Mother fucker I’ll rip you to bits you fuck—”

Antoinette put an arm in front of him to stop him from passing her. Damien relaxed, slowly, and let go of the sword in his robes.

Garry was a different problem; one wrong word and that psycho mutt would be a much harder fight than Jessy ever was.

When Damien looked past them though, and saw the two Invictus by the stairs, he focused his gaze on them. Mehket eyes could see how McDonald was watching intently, but a white veil was over Maria's face. The way she moved though, the body language, subtle shifts and a sway of her hips, he could tell there was anxiety there. Lucas and Maria had something between them, but he had no idea how far that went.

“Garry Tones, there was a lot of anger between us.”

“Is that some sort of bad joke?”

“Not at all.” Lucas shook his head. “I am here in hopes we can move past that. It was fifty years ago, and I have done nothing to seek vengeance for the deaths of my flock at your hands.”

Garry was shaking, grinding his teeth, and staring daggers into Lucas. “I lost as many to yours.”

“And ... for that, I can only apologize. It is a different time now, and I realize the iron fist of the Lancea et Sanctum will no longer create peace. We must adapt, and we will maintain the peace for as long as you will.”

Damien quirked a brow. They would? As far as he knew, Lucas had every intent of taking over the entire city in a slow crawl, like a mighty plague of Egypt. At least, that's what his sire had told him. In all his sermons, Damien realized, he never heard Lucas speak of their plans for domination to the congregation, like it were some sort of vague secret of an idea.

The congregation nodded at each other, and quiet murmurs of agreement spread throughout them. They liked they idea of peace. What was Lucas doing?

The Prince did not seem too accepting of the idea. “Peace? You?” She walked closer. Lucas did not move, but every Kindred stepped back as she approached. Even Damien took a step back, as if a tidal wave of aggression was pushing against him. The beast in his gut struggled against the dominant force of hers, but it was just a puppy standing its ground against an alpha wolf.

“Please, Prince Antoinette, I—”

“You do not want peace! You want submission, and blind faith.”

How Lucas could stand against this woman’s fury was beyond Damien. In a distant memory, Damien could recall when Lucas commanded a dozen Bishops and many priests, and had many Kindred bow to him, but never did the man raise his voice or use rage and fury. Always Lucas was gentle, and intelligent, and talkative about the ways of Longinus. There was no blind faith here.

“The ... the Archbishop doesn’t want blind faith! He teaches us, we learn!” one of the Kindred with them said.

The look the Prince gave the innocent vampire shut her up, hard stop. Those red eyes of the dragon’s were like fire.

“ ... will you not let us stay?” Lucas asked. Begged. The tone was almost enough to break Damien’s withered heart. Half for the sadness of it, and half for lie of it.

“You will leave my hall at once!” The Prince’s voice boomed.

Damien peaked around the deadly creature and to Jacob. The oldest Kindred in the city, Jacob and Lucas. There was a friendship there, a weird one, one that Damien knew nothing about, but Lucas had said they were friends.

But Jacob was just grinning. The Nosferatu met Damien’s gaze, as much as he could with no eyes of his own, and his grin only grew.

The only friend they could have possibly found in this den of sinners was Maria, and she remained silent.

Lucas let out a sad sigh. “I—”

“Enough! You will leave the hall immediately, and you have three days to leave my city. Three days, you stupid, tired old fool, or I will wipe clean the sewers you hide in of you, your ashes, your ghouls, and every single Kindred who dares call you Archbishop.”

The entire Hall, already silent, somehow grew even more quiet. A pin drop would have shattered the walls.

She was talking about war, another war. Damien gritted his teeth, and did everything he could to keep his voice from escaping. Lucas had to know this conversation would have gone this way. The other Kindred were younger, and ignorant of the massacre fifty years ago; they didn't know what the Prince was like when confronted by the Lancea et Sanctum.

What was Lucas doing goading her? What would this madness possibly accomplish?

The Archbishop lowered his head. “... as you wish, Prince.” Then he turned, gave a tiny dismissing wave to his congregation, and walked through them to leave the Black Hall.

Whispers erupted. Everyone started talking at once, the congregation and the rest of the hall alike.

“What's going to happen to us now?” Damien's flock asked. “Are we leaving? But how ... where?” With heavy heads, they all left.

Damien was the last to leave, and he stood his ground before the Prince with a harsh eye. She returned it, but with no where near the rage of before. In fact, she looked sad. Morose.

It infuriated him. How dare she, how fucking dare she look sad. This was all her doing! She was ruining their lives. She was ruining his life and Lucas's life a second time.

He was fast, and she was unarmed. He could try and kill her there. Maybe, just maybe. She was so close too, only ten feet away; might as well have been nose-to-nose close, and the sword in his robes could cut her head off the same as any head. She would fall apart in ashes, and right there in a single strike, he could stop this madness and Lucas could resume his role of a true Archbishop, and even Prince himself.

But that look in her eyes stopped him. Sad, but confident. She knew what she said, and it had hurt her? She stood her ground at looked at Damien with enough weight in her own eyes to press him into the earth. He couldn't meet those eyes of hers anymore. Red, ancient, knowing ... mournful.

He turned and left.

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The walk back to their underground network was depressing. Lucas kept the congregation under the veil of his cloak of night, so they could walk among the kine uninterrupted, but despite their privacy none talked.

Once back into their deep metal hole under the city, they entered the room they treated as their church, and sat in their pews without so much as a word from anyone. Lucas, with fingers netted together behind him and head lowered, hood raised, walked with heavy feet toward the podium, and did not stand behind it with any enthusiasm. And when he raised his head to expose his grimace, Damien's heart sank even more.

“Three days, until we must leave,” Lucas said.



“We can’t leave! This is our home! Some of us have had lives here for decades,” someone in the crowd said.

“This is crazy. We can’t just leave.”

“Yeah, we have to do something! She threatened us and we haven’t done anything!”

“Even when the Invictus attacked us, we didn’t retaliate! We just want peace.”

Damien watched his flock grow louder and louder. There were no ghouls there, it was only Kindred, and the Kindred were rising from their quiet composure and growing into a mob.

“Please my children, the only way we could stop the Prince is if we struck first. We do not have the numbers or territory for war.” Lucas shook his head and ran his fingers down the edges of his Testament of Longinus. The book overwhelmed the podium with its size, and Damien was sure it was bound in human skin, like the Archbishop’s robes.

Someone in the crowd stood up. “Then ... then we strike first!”

Lucas shook his head, stepped around the podium, and reached up to lower his hood. “You know not what you ask, my flock. War is why I spent fifty years waiting. The Prince’s hate and insanity was to be avoided.”

“But we can’t avoid it.” Yet another voice.

“And if we leave, we could die on the journey, or find ourselves oppressed again! Tony left us all behind, and now we have to defend ourselves from her!”

The congregation were all getting up, looking at each other, exchanging words of violence and intent, and looking to Lucas with

expectant eyes. Damien just watched the madness and fury unfold around him, and he nearly let his jaw drop. Was this really happening?

Lucas put up his hands and lowered them. "Please! Children! Calm yourselves."

It took a minute, but quiet eventually fell upon the flock.

Lucas let out a long sigh, and then sat upon the stage of the podium. "Gather close then children."

A little confused, the Kindred rose from their pews and stepped in closer, and as they gathered, they got to their knees so everyone could be near Lucas. He was sitting, and his face carried the most gentle look Damien had ever seen, like Jesus Christ himself talking with his disciples.

"Do you truly wish to risk our lives, to save our home and our faith?"

Some of the congregation went quiet and looked between each other with hesitation. The three Invictus they had recruited stepped back with bowed heads. But many, even most, were all too eager to nod and vow to their cause.

Damien just watched.

Lucas smiled at those that stepped back. "If you do not wish to come, we understand. Do we not, my children?"

The rest of the flock hummed their confirmation.

"Then ... we are in agreement."

More hums and grunts of agreement.

Damien said nothing.

“Then we must strike fast, and hard. We must make preparations now, and tomorrow night, we will unleash the vengeance of Longinus upon this unbeliever.”

The crowd cheered. Damien blinked in disbelief.

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They were alone again, in their sealed alter room. Lucas was leaning over the alter of artifacts, and the grin was on his face lit by candlelight. Damien was next to him, but he dared not touch anything. His hands were not worthy.

“The shield of ash and flesh is ready. They will gather arms, and tomorrow night we will do the unthinkable, my Bishop.”

Damien grimaced. Their congregation were going to be that shield, and that meant they were going to get slaughtered. “You plan to attack the Prince head on.”

“I do indeed. You, and I, and our flock, against the Prince. We will flood her home and crush her there, where she least expects it.”

Damien avoided the now almost psychotic gaze of his sire. “What of the sheriff?”

“Thanks to you, we know his weakness. I have many times battled minds with that dragon, and I know he has a weakness for someone. His childe, it is. Now, I must go talk with Maria, and the arrangements will be made.”

“But...” How could he say this without insulting his sire? “You ... are still weak, from torpor. And the Prince has shown to be truly brutal.”

“Faith, my good Bishop.” Lucas reached out, put both hands on Damien’s shoulders, squeezed, and shook him. “Faith! Come,

practice your eyes and set your touch upon this.” His sire grabbed the antique sword from the alter, and placed it in Damien’s hands.

The younger Mehket quirked a brow at his sire, but did as commanded. A Mehket was a creature of secrets, of shadows and speed. But they were also the only Kindred who could see with more than eyes.

When the sword entered his hands, it took little effort to cast otherworldly eyes upon it. The vision attacked him with viciousness. Like lightning, it cracked against his closed eyes and tore into his mind. There were men. Soldiers. Guards? There was a garden. There was a man standing between the guards and another man, and he’d drawn this sword. For a moment, Damien was that man, and in a flash, he cut off someone’s ear.

Damien dropped sword, took a step back, and fell back with hand grasping at his chest. Lucas was quick to catch the sword, and the Archbishop gave him one of now many odd grins.

“I may not be able to fight with the same strength as before, not for months, even years. But I still have my faith. I will call upon God’s help, and he will smite the dragon for us. The sheriff will not move against us while I hold his childe captive, and you will have many Kindred at your side.”

His side? He would be fighting the Prince? Damien forced himself up. Analyze. Think. “God will smite her for us?”

“There is power in faith, good Bishop, and I will show it to you. The Prince will still be a threat though, but with God on our side and our congregation throwing themselves at her, you will have the opportunity to end her. I trust in your skills, Damien.” Lucas put his free hand on his shoulder, and kept the sword in the other. “And we will triumph.”

Damien nodded, but his mind was going a mile a minute. It was all planned. Lucas was looking for an opportunity to strike with a zealot's madness. A suicide mission. A kamikaze mission. This was not the Lucas he remembered. Where was the gentle man and his soft voice who taught them to respect God and guide kine into his embrace? This new Lucas, his eyes were wide, his gaze was frightening, and any softness was an act.

He was going to sacrifice his flock to kill the Prince. And Damien was getting pulled into the insanity right along with it.

## Chapter 20

~~Beatrice~~

The ball didn't last long after that. Antoinette left, and she took Jack with her. The poor kid looked pretty scared as the most powerful Kindred in the city dragged him off with a firm grip hand-in-hand. He'd looked Julias's way, with 'she's angry' printed on his face. Julias gave a small wave, and Beatrice did too, but hers was far more teasing. She had no idea what Antoinette did when she was upset, and Jack probably didn't either, but he was going to find out.

"Fuck man. Just ... fuck." Beatrice was leaning over the railing next to white knight. "So much for peace."

Julias nodded. "Quite the gamble of Lucas."

"Yeah. I wonder what the fuck he thought was going to happen?"

"Maybe catch Antoinette on a good day?"

They both managed a nervous chuckle, but Beatrice knew there was more to it than what they had observed. Lucas was up to something, her nightly exploits had discovered that. Hell, this whole visit by Lucas and his 'flock' seemed really out of place too.

But it wasn't her problem. Lucas probably had his eyes on the Prince, not her. And the Prince could take care of herself. More importantly, Julias kept giving glances, complete with juvenile smirks while those eyes of his kept falling to her ass.

"Hey. So, should we go?" Beatrice said. The word love was ringing in her head, another secret in her pocket.

"Mm? Yeah sure, let's."

He took her arm, she took his, and they walked down the stairs into the atmosphere of unknown. People didn't care about either of them anymore, they cared about what hell Lucas had just unleashed on himself. And she kind of liked that. She could just hold arms with her man and no one gave a shit anymore.

Julias gave a shit, apparently. He walked a little faster, and a little faster, and she had to almost jog to keep up once they were outside.

“We in a rush?” she said.

He looked over his shoulder at her. Those eyes of his were hungry, starving even. He took them around a corner, away from the crowd of leaving Kindred and wandering kine. The living who were watching the coming-and-going crowd talked with wild confusion. Who were all these people and why would they attend such a short party?

But with the way Julias was pulling on her, she was pretty fucking happy the party ended short. When was the last time she'd run off with a guy after a party – not a ball of course, but a real party with booze and open-minded people – to go home for a good fuck? It made her smile.

But they didn't get home. Julias took her down one of the alleys, pristine and clean because everything was in this neighborhood, pinned her against the wall, and pressed his body against her.

“Blush for me,” he said.

Oh wow. He'd literally pinned her against the wall, hands about her wrists, body against hers, and his voice had grown dark. He was so much taller than her, wide shoulders burying her, and his hands were huge against hers. Tall, dark, handsome. Since when did her Superman have a dark side?

She blushed. One moment, she was a lifeless husk of pale skin and cold bones, the next her skin was warm, her lungs breathed air, and her color returned. And her body was on fire.

He blushed too, and she found herself pushing her body against him a little.

“Hey,” she said, and smiled up at him from behind her veil. “You uh ... you’re being awfully aggressive.” She was stronger than him, at least in a pure physical strength sense. It wasn’t like she couldn’t push him off, but look in his eyes was animal. No way she was going to douse that fire.

“Seeing you stand up to everyone like that? Show off to everyone like that?” He pushed his body closer to hers until she had practically vanished from sight underneath him. “A lot of eyes were on you. A lot of eyes wanted to fuck you.”

Had they? She knew Joe was startled by her makeup and stuff, and definitely had a look of lust on him. But a lot of eyes? “I didn’t ... I know I saw you staring at me, but you’re a freak.”

“A lot of eyes,” he said again, and he let go of her wrists. His hands moved lower, and she put her claws on his forearms while those hands reached behind her to cup her ass with tight, squeezing fingers. He was kneading the meat of her ass, digging the fingers into her, prying apart and pushing cheeks together like a young school boy who didn’t know what he was doing, just driven by sheer arousal.

And she really liked how Mr. Perfect’s composure was thrown to the wind by her. Antoinette had guessed it perfectly; that bitch was too damn smart.

His hands went further down, and then Julius was lowering himself down her. A moment later he was on his knees. Superman



on his knees, in a dark alley, with his hands sneaking under her long skirt and lifting it higher, and higher. Holy fuck.

“Hey what’re you doing? Someone will see.”

“Let them see.”

It was dark, and she was still wearing her face veil. No kine would be able to see her extra teeth in the black. Julias knew it, and the man had every intention of taking advantage of it apparently. Her skirt was up to her hips in no time, her back against the wall.

“Where’d you get these?” he said, and he hooked his fingers around her panties. Before she could say anything, he’d slipped them off. She was forced to step out of them as he brought them to her feet.

“I ... um...”

They were black lace panties, bikini style with the extra straps that went over the hips. Completely unpractical, and definitely what your typical rich slut wore when she wanted to seduce businessmen. And she really liked them.

Julias pocketed them, but he kept her skirt up. “You kept this on.” He leaned in then, and gave the piercing in her clit hood a light kiss.

Fuck fuck fuck. Just the sensation of his breath on her clit was enough to send sparks up her spine, and he didn’t stop there. His lips were on her and he wasn’t wasting time. Normally he would go excruciatingly slow, warm her up, work her and build her up before he even touched the good stuff. But right now she was already worked up and more than willing to have a quickie in the alley. She was just so damn surprised it was her man doing the pushing.

A second later, tongue. His tongue found her folds and spread her open before running up to stroke her clit. He didn’t take long with

that either. She had her hands in his blonde hair, her claws circling his head, and just held on while the man buried her pussy in kisses. His one hand kept her skirt up to her hip, and the other stroked up and down her thigh.

And those fingers of his were already getting wet. Her juices were starting to drip down the inside of her legs, to the point she was embarrassed. All he had to do was touch her these days and she'd get wet if she was blushing life, but tonight she was a soaking wet mess.

Those fingers of his found her cunt, and he sank them up into her while he lifted his lips up further to suckle on her clit. That's when she started mewling.

“Hey what's ... oh my.”

A couple. She'd heard them coming, but it took everything she had to even glance their way instead of staring down at the man between her legs.

“Julias ... some ... kine are...”

“Honey? What's ... um...” The husband. Beatrice could see the subtle twinkle of a ring on his finger, and the woman's.

A couple in their early thirties, wearing nice clothes and nice perfume and nice cologne. Beatrice could smell just the touch of it mixed with alcohol.

“Julias, come on, they're – nng!” Her man didn't stop. He only started to finger her harder, until the noise of sloshing flesh was audible. They could probably hear every splash of her juices on Julias's palm.

She looked at them. They looked at her. They couldn't see much, in all the dark, but they could certainly see her silhouette, and the

man eating her out.

And they just kept looking at each other. The two kine were tipsy, and from the way they touched hips, held hands, and looked between each other, were quite aroused themselves. Perhaps they too had come to the alley for a quicky, or were just on their way home for a good fuck. But she could smell the arousal on them, growing. The woman's nipples were hard against her dress, and the man's dick was hard against his pants.

As much as she wanted to look down at the big guy opening her up and making her squeak, she couldn't look away from the two kine staring at her. They weren't going away. Maybe they were waiting for her to say something? Maybe they were just shocked. But the two of them just stood there with quickening heartbeats.

She motioned for them to come closer.

They were hesitant, but they did come closer. The woman was a curvy blonde creature, short with large breasts, wearing a black dress with a plunging neck. Her husband was a black man with very short hair, stubble, and the sort of glasses a powerful lawyer might wear. He didn't have the shoulder span or height of Julias, but he looked fucking delicious.

And both of them were licking their lips watching her.

Julias managed a quick peak at the onlookers, but she put both her hands on his head again and turned him to face her. Don't stop. He grinned up at her, and fingered her faster, harder, hard enough to hurt. His tongue pressed harder and harder, until that was painful too, but the man knew what she liked. Sometimes she liked it soft, and slow, and lovey dovey and all that crap. And other times, like right the fuck now, she wanted those fingers slapping against her g-spot hard enough to make her body shake against the wall.

"She's wearing a veil. That's so exotic," the wife said.

For a split moment, Beatrice almost panicked that they could see her. But the veil hid her teeth and the darkness did too. She was free to just indulge in a set of eyes watching her.

“Yeah, I ... damn.” The man was staring right at her. Like, right at her. The woman was looking a lot at everything, at Julias between her spread legs and at the dress Beatrice was wearing and at the way Julias was making her move and mewl, but the man was just staring at her eyes.

She looked right back at him with her snake eyes, and came.

Julias had to grip her ass and thigh hard with his other hand just to keep her from falling. His lips finally let go of her clit but he only fingered her harder, hard enough that her clit hood piercing bounced against her swollen flesh while more of her juices leaked out of her. More moans forced their way out of her, and she had to brace her claws to the wall behind her to keep from falling.

“Julias, wait ... wait ... please.”

Finally, the man stopped, and he looked up to her with a tilted head. He managed a small smirk at the two humans watching, but his eyes were drawn back to her.

“Hey,” he said, “you want to try something?”

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~~Julias~~

It was the most luxurious bathroom in his mansion. A moderately large room, with candles on the walls – all lit now – in bronze candle holders. The floor was hardwood, cabinets and dressers rested against the wall in many numbers, covered in even more towels, oils, and all sorts of things a Kindred would not need. A kine on the other hand would consider it a paradise of pampering.

The tub in the center of the room was equally impressive. Large, long, with an old style faucet on the side out of the way. And now that he thought about it, Viktor probably had this exact circumstance many times. A couple of kine, naked, under the spell of his dominate discipline and ready to give their blood the moment he asked for it. But he didn't ask for it yet, and instead just laid there in the tub with his arms hooked over edge.

“Valerie. Jonathan.”

“Yes master?” they said in unison.

They looked happy, excited even. Whenever he looked in a different direction, he could tell they were sneaking touches on each others bodies, and he could not blame them. Valerie was a short, curvy blonde creature with teardrop, heavy breasts and swollen, large nipples. She would frequently have her hand around Jonathan's member, and her husband would sneak kisses onto the tiny woman's neck. He was a bit skinny, but certainly nothing unhealthy. A lean man with a bit of muscle to make it look sexy.

He met their eyes. They met his. They were under his control, but unlike his sire Viktor, his control would be gentle; he had no desire to crush them and reduce them to mindless pawns. Instead he would bend their minds and memories only enough that they would enjoy the night with gusto, and then forget all about it tomorrow.

“Please,” he said, and motioned for them to step closer to the side of the huge tub, “wait to start touching each other. It would be rude to Miss Damor.”

“Fucking eh!”

Beatrice stepped into the room, completely naked. In the light of the room, and with her standing around naked, Julias got to take a long look at her tattoos. He did absolutely love how fit and lean her body was, with muscle and thick legs. Better yet, he loved how that

large snake tattoo coiled around her stomach, her abs, and up her body before it coiled one of her breasts and bit into her nipple. He had traced that snake many times.

Both the kine whistled, Beatrice practically glowed with pride; it must have been the first time a kine had ever admired her with her face exposed. It was part of the reason Julias had made her this offer.

“Like what you see?” she said, and she plucked at her pert breasts with her claws. She’d put on some of her piercings again, not all of them, but a lot of them. In particular, she’d put on a nipple chain, which she seemed rather fond of, and she plucked at the heavy thing so it made her breasts bounce for a moment with its shaking weight.

Valerie took a step around the tub toward her. “Wow ... you’re so fit!”

“Anything to say about my teeth?” Beatrice reached up and plucked at her huge crocodile teeth that she had where a normal person’s cheeks would be.

The husband stepped up behind his wife. “Terrifying ... but strangely hot.”

Julias couldn’t help but laugh; the man had guts. He’d nailed Beatrice perfectly, but his tongue might land him in hot water with his vicious girlfriend. She laughed though, and walked to the nude couple.

Then she put one of her clawed hands on Valerie’s breast, gave it a gentle squeeze, and did the same thing with her other hand around Jon’s cock. The two of them went rigid for a moment, maybe a little scared of the deadly creature, but Julias’s mind control made sure they were both acclimated to the scary claws and teeth of a Nosferatu. Instead of panicking or running, the two of them

squirmed a little, obviously aroused, and did nothing to remove her hands.

Beatrice looked at Julias, and smiled the most playful smile, like a kid with a new toy. Like a kid with a new Christmas toy, on the magic of Christmas morning, was probably the better comparison. It occurred to Julias that not only was this the first time she'd ever shown her teeth to a human, but also the first time she'd ever engaged in sexual fun like this with a human. It was something Julias had taken for granted so long ago, but Beatrice had lost the option when she was embraced.

She really was a kid on Christmas morning with her new toys. It made him a little sad that the Nosferatu had been denied one of the very few pleasures Kindred normally had: to do with kine whatever sexual whim came to them. But it also made him happy he could give it to her.

Beatrice walked over to the tub, leaned over it, and dangled her nipple chain in front of Julias so it touched his chest hair. "Thanks."

He winked at her. She rolled her eyes.

"Hey," she said, and motioned for the two kine to come near. "Come here, get down on your knees, and eat me out."

The married couple were more than happy to oblige. They got behind her, Beatrice spread her legs while still leaning over the tub, and a moment later two humans were on their knees between her thighs. Julias took a glance over her arm to see that delicious toned ass of hers, and from the angle, he could tell Valerie was licking her ass and Jon was licking her pussy. So blatantly erotic, but Beatrice just kept leaning over the tub and smiling at him, even as the telltale signs of arousal crept onto her face again.

"Enjoying yourself?" Julias said.

“Fucking ... yes I am.” She leaned in closer, and touched her lips to his. “They’re ... so warm. I can smell their blood, and ... feel their warmth. Christ.” She lowered her head then, set it to rest on his shoulder, and the further arm reached down to grab his cock through the water. Her claws, large and sharp, wrapped his girth and guided it into her softer palm and fingers, before she started to stroke it in slow, deep movements.

Her grip was a little shaky, what with two people devouring everything between her legs, but she made it work. He had both hands free though, and he raised one to cup her nearest breast. He was already getting hard, and the feeling of her pert breast filling his palm, along with the heavy chain dangling over the palm’s side, was speeding the process even more.

And there was the look in her snake eyes, that look of sexual bliss. God he loved to watch her when those green snake eyes with their vertical black slits raised in pleasure. She squeezed him harder, and for a moment he was worried she’d slip and cut him open, but the Nosferatu was an expert with those claws. No harm, no foul, she kept stroking him and squeezing him and letting out quiet moans in front of him until he was so hard he’d thought he’d burst.

“Valerie ... that lube over there ... prepare my man. Jon, prepare me.”

“Yes mistress,” they both said.

The look of glee on Beatrice’s face was so precious, Julias almost laughed. But, better to just smile at her, and savor the expression.

Both kine came back with bottles of lube. It was rather expensive stuff, silicone based and made for working under water. Val stood next to him, and waited with a huge blush on her cheeks. She was staring down through the water at his naked form, and how Beatrice was still stroking him.



Julias stood up, and Val groaned. She filled her palms with the thick liquid, reached out, and grabbed his girth with both hands when Beatrice let go. The Ventrue grinned down at his victim, and reached out to put an arm around her. The short woman shivered, and smiled up at him with that delirious look of overwhelming arousal. She exchanged a quick grin with her husband before she started to spread the lube onto his cock. And when she was done, she didn't stop.

“Hey you, you better not ... fucking ... nng.” Beatrice gripped the tub with both hands and let her head sink. Her ass was in the air, legs spread, and Jon was scooping his fingers into her. She must have guided him a moment before, because from what Julias could see, Jon was working the lubricant into her ass.

Valerie pouted but let go. “Sorry Mistress, he's just so ... big. I want to squeeze him.”

“Heh, I know right? But hands off.” She brought the backside of a claw down on Val's hands like a gentle punishment.

Beatrice was warming up to having her own servants like it was second nature. All the things that Julias did but had lost a taste for, Beatrice was doing for him. When he had finally moved on from having to leave his wife behind a century ago, it had been a slow, tortured walk back into a sex life. And he never really embraced using his powers to indulge in it. Beatrice, on the other hand, was eating it up.

She really had that spark.

“You, back in the tub,” she said, and pointed down.

Julias grinned at her, but did as she said. The lubricant held against water well. And the tub was deep, very deep, so deep it went up to his chest with him leaning back against its curved edge. It was

a tub designed to sit in while someone else washed you. But Beatrice had other things in mind.

“Ok, that’s enough,” she said to Jon. Her face had that rush of arousal on it again, and grinned it at Julias as she stepped around the tub. “Gonna be a tight fit.”

“I’ll slide back and—”

“Not the tub.” She chuckled. Such a bad joke, but it made him laugh too.

She stepped into the tub. It really wasn’t made for two people, but she put her feet down by his waist, straddling, and lowered herself facing him. Her claws found his cock, guided it upward, and she squatted down onto him through the water.

The imagery was amazing. He reached out, set his hands on her waist, and watched the lean warrior ease herself down onto him with one set of his claws around his cock and the other gripping his shoulder. With her leaning forward over him, her nipple chain slid down his chest the lower she got, and with her flexibility, she wasn’t going to stop. The head of his member rested against the rose of her ass, loose from Jonathan’s fingers, and with the ludicrous amount of lube used on both of them, it wasn’t long before the glans of his cock started to spread her open.

He could still see the sparkle of her clit piercing through the water.

“Is ... that going to fit?” Val asked. Jon had stepped behind her again, and his hands were holding her stomach.

Beatrice only managed a quick glance at Val before her eyes rolled upward. “Fucking tight. Fucking ... so tight.”

It was. Julias was a well endowed man, and that usually meant anal sex was too difficult to make worth it. But the monster straddling him felt differently. She squeezed the rings of her ass in spurts around him, and sank him in just a little more between each squeeze. Her fake breath came out in pants the deeper he went, and her grip on his shoulder tightened.

“Julias ... knows better ... than to ... just pound a girl. Right Superman?” She fell forward then, put her face against his chest turned to the side, and held onto his arms with both of hers as she kept getting deeper. “Anal sex like this? Slow ... deep ... with a big cock? Just ... so fucking deep until ... you can feel it ... pushing against your belly.”

At last, the firmness of her toned ass found the groove of his hips. She sank into him, shook on him a little, and then leaned back to hook her arms around the back of the tub. He did the same.

Just two vampires, leaning back in the tub, facing each other, with their two kine bloodbags ready to do their bidding while the two vampires made love.

Careful Julias. Love was a dangerous word, especially to a Kindred. He would hold onto it for now, and with time and a gentle touch, lay bits of it before Beatrice like a trail of candy. He did not want to scare the beautiful creature with any sudden, poetic, and likely sappy declarations of amour.

Beatrice let out a low groan, and wiggled her ass up and down a little against him. Just the sight of her bare, exposed pussy shifting around above where his cock spread open her ass was enough to get his juices rising. With how her muscles squeezed around the base of him, and with how the woman clearly knew just how to bend her body, it was going to be a short-lived bout.

But then she stopped moving, just leaned back, and relaxed against the tub.

“Hey,” Julias said, and put his hands down on her hips. He started to move her, but she reached into the water and poked at his hands with her claws.

“Nope nope. You’re going to just sit there, balls-deep in my ass, and watch.”

That watching fetish of hers. No doubt, if he had controlled a dozen kine and had them stand around to watch, it would have driven the Nosferatu creature into a sex frenzy.

But he liked to watch her, and it was delightful.

She gave him a little mercy, moved around danced on his cock for him in gentle motions. Then she tapped a claw twice on the tub to get the kine’s attention, and motioned for them to come near.

“You, massage,” she said, and pointed at Jon and then to her shoulders. “You, massage.” This time she pointed at Val, and then down through the water to her cunt. “You.” She pointed at him this time. “Hold still and enjoy it.”

And then the display began. It took all his willpower to let go of her hips and instead put his hands on the tub side, but the payoff was amazing. When Jon started to dig his fingers into Beatrice’s shoulders and upper back, the woman melted down onto Julias so her ass sank onto him as far as it could possibly go. It was when Val reached down, and started massaging the lips of Beatrice’s slit though, that Julias started gripping the tub just so he didn’t let go.

He could feel her muscles squeezing in spurts. She started to shift her hips back and forth in timing with the set of fingers working the outside of her pussy, and Julias was forced to watch and feel it but not allowed to participate. He really, really wanted to take her hips and start fucking her, but Beatrice wanted to lay back and let their servants take care of them. It was really cute.

Val was almost drooling while staring down at Beatrice's body. "You're so lean! You have abs..."

"And amazing breasts." Jon lowered his hands down Beatrice's body, slipped his fingers underneath the Nosferatu's breasts, and cupped them in his palms. His index fingers and thumbs massaged and tickled along her areola, and every so often plucked at the piercing to draw the nipple outward slightly.

Beatrice just basked in the attention. Julias could see that pampered princess look on her face, and it was a little weird with how her crocodile mouth was drifting open and exposing her extra long tongue. She was a monster getting treated like royalty and she was already loving it. Her head drifted back and came to rest against Jon's chest while the man continued to massage her breasts.

For a moment, Julias felt jealous. It was never really his thing to dominate kine like this and have them pamper him, but seeing how Beatrice was enjoying it was making him wonder. She was being treated like a queen. Maybe she was the more Ventrue of the two of them. The thought made him smile.

Jealousy faded when Val started to massage Beatrice's clitoris, and the Nosferatu started to squeeze and squirm and mewl. The double rings of muscle around the base of his cock milked at him, like a vice, but it was how Beatrice arched her back and pushed her body down against him that was stroking his swollen glans inside her. Each motion she made made her insides rub the head of his cock and send little pleasure waves down his length in rhythm with her movements.

Val reached down through the water with her other hand, and pushed down on Beatrice's flat stomach right below the navel, feeling for Julias's cock through the vampire's abs. "... that's so deep."

Julias groaned. He could feel Val's hand pushing down.

“Very. Feels like he’s in my stomach. I just ... gotta ... move ... slowly.” Beatrice gripped the tub edges for support, and danced her pelvis back and forth on Julias, all while the two kine massaged every sensitive bit she had. “Thankfully, Julias has one of those big dicks that doesn’t get super hard.”

Julias frowned. “Hey!”

“Hush you.” Beatrice raised her feet this time, and put them on his chest. The claws of her toes, almost big enough to be talons, grazed against his skin.

Then she squeezed him some more, outright moaned, and Julias winced. He could feel her tremble around him in orgasm, even as her head rolled back into Jon’s chest again and her feet rubbed against Julias’s chest. It hurt a little, how tight she was squeezing him, but seeing her cumming and squirming while having her pussy massaged and his cock in her ass made it more than worth it.

Val slipped her fingers inside Beatrice, and giggled with exhilaration. “Master, I can ... feel you inside her.”

The cliché dialogue alone was making Julias smirk, but Beatrice was loving it. The Nosferatu raised her feet off of his chest, hooked her ankles on the sides of the tub, and started shifting herself back and forth an inch against him. And that felt good, really good. He so very much wanted to touch, but no touch. No, he was going to just watch, and let his princess cum her brains out on him.

He could feel his own cum started to build underneath his cock. The warm, almost subtle sparks of pleasure that told him his fluids were rising. Watching Beatrice getting fingered and massaged by strangers was a little odd at first, but seeing her cum yet again with him inside her firm ass was more than enough to get over that hurdle.

“I really like your tattoos,” Val said.

“And your piercings.” Jon’s hands hadn’t stopped massaging her breasts, and every so often he stopped just for a second, to give her nipple chain a few playful tugs.

Julias smiled. His instructions to his two slaves of the night were simple: enjoy the sex, do whatever Beatrice asked, and pamper her. It was written into their minds now, like a hypnotic suggestion; they couldn’t do otherwise. He was just a bit surprised at how much Beatrice was enjoying it. Like Egyptian royalty, just laying back and letting her slaves feed her, stroke her, fuck her, make her cum. Her life as a human must have been one of attention and rich vice. People must have fawned over her.

Well, he was happy to do just that for her.

His cock was getting harder. The rising pleasure of impending orgasm was starting to send that warm, thick liquid up between his legs, ready to escape. Every instinct told him to start pushing up into her, but she wanted to edge him toward orgasm, and the slow pace of it was dragging out each wave of pleasure. The way her ass grinded against him, the way her hips shifted around like a belly dancer, was driving him closer. The way she started to bounce when Val stopped being gentle and started to finger fuck her hard was euphoric.

He came. He couldn’t keep his fingers away anymore, and they slipped into the water to hold onto her hard thighs while he came. His groans were quiet, and his movements were subtle, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t help but push up into her, just a little, with each squirt of his thick cum.

“Hey you,” Beatrice said, voice barely more than a moan. “Cumming? Fuck man that is ... so...” She stretched out her arms and legs over the tub edge in a big, whole body stretch, and then let herself sink against him again while Val fingered her cunt yet again.

It wasn't long before he could feel her clench around him and start trembling with orgasm again. The stimulation was painful. His cock was swollen, and had just finished gushing cum into her when she started to grind her body into him again. The head of his member was ripe, hard, and her shifting and squeezing and squirming was milking every last drop from it.

But at last, she collapsed back, and reached down to remove Val's hand. "... fucking ... love ... to cum like that."

"Was it good, mistress?" Jon asked.

The Nosferatu reached up with her other hand and stroked the man's face, then took his hands off her breasts with gentle claws. "Yeah, you got nice hands. Must play with your wife's breasts every day."

Val giggled. Julias watched. The difference between the harsh, aggressive woman he met in the catacombs versus the woman before him now, kind and relaxing in post orgasm with kine pampering her, was huge. Hell, she was full-on smiling.

Beatrice took the edge of the tub in hand, and wiggled herself off of Julias. He moaned with how the rings of her sphincter muscles squeezed along the length of him. She did it on purpose he realized, when she gave him a grin. Her legs were a bit shaky though, and she had to hold onto the tub for a few moments before she could step out.

"If I didn't know any better, Miss Damor, I'd think you were Daeva, with your thralls tending to your every sexual whim." He stood up as well, and stepped out of the tub after her.

"Heh, guilty." The monster stepped around Jon, and standing behind him, she peaked her eyes up over his shoulder at Julias. "It's so much fun though. I had no idea. Enjoying yourself Jon?" She



wrapped her claws around the kine's member, and right in front of Julias, started to stroke the meal's cock.

"Y-yes," he said. A little afraid, sure, but it certainly wasn't affecting his erection.

Was she trying to make him jealous? Well, two can play at that game. He stepped around the tub to Val, and got behind the short, busty woman. She looked up at him with big doe eyes, and he grinned a dark, vampire grin down at her. That alone was enough to get her trembling.

One hand reached down for neck, and his fingers enclosed it in a gentle grip; her blood was pumping hard, fast. His other hand reached down in front of her, and plucked at a swollen nipple. Val mewled. His hand went lower, creeping down her stomach before finding her pelvis, and eventually down between her legs. Her thighs were soaked.

She had all the signs of a woman who liked to be dominated and controlled. Julias preferred a woman who liked to take charge, like Beatrice, but there was still something appealing in taking charge himself. Something primal, and satisfying, in making someone cum on your hands, whether they wanted to or not. Val was melting in his grip, her dainty grip on his wrists, and her cunt boiling against his fingers.

He tightened his grip around her neck, just hard enough to make breathing a little difficult, just hard enough to slow the blood reaching her head. Her breaths turned into tiny pants, and they grew even shallower when he slipped two fingers into her dripping insides.

Beatrice and Jon were both watching him. Her hand around his cock was working faster, and the look on Jon's face was obvious: he was going to cum soon. Jon's eyes lowered to Val's, but Beatrice kept looking at Julias. Jon was taller than her, so it was just her

eyes peaking over his shoulder at him, but that didn't stop her from grinning at him with those snake eyes, and stroking faster.

Val tightened her grip on Julias's wrist, but only because the poor creature had already started to cum. "J-Jon," she said, but her hips were pushing into Julias's hand, and her juices were dripping from his knuckles.

Then Julias leaned down, and bit into the woman.

"No ... nooo..."

The result was explosive, as it always was. He'd made so many women go through this, fingers on their insides and teeth in their neck. The combination of orgasm and the Kiss, for the kine, always had the most powerful result, to the point the kine would shake in spasm, no longer able to stand, and their noises would completely stop from lack of breath. Val was no different, and he had to hold onto her tighter just to keep her from falling as the orgasm worked through her. The mix of orgasm and Kiss even changed the taste of blood with the wash of hormones.

Beatrice did the same. It was her first time treating a kine such a way, Julias was sure, and he didn't want to miss it. He watched her stroke the kine faster, and watched how she had to wrap her arm around the man's chest to keep him from also collapsing when she sank her fangs into him. Cum came out of the man in thick bursts, and splattered over the floor of the grand bathroom.

Jon started to lean forward with exhaustion, but Beatrice pulled him back, and she milked his cock with a grip Julias knew all too well. Soon the kine's cum was dripping off her knuckles, and she slowed her strokes, but she was determined to milk the man, even as she milked more blood from him. He could see it in her eyes; it was the first time she'd ever drunk blood from a kine in orgasm.

Eventually, both kine were spent. Julias removed his fangs from Val, loosened his grip, and set the woman to lay down on the floor. She'd passed out, as many kine did after a full Kiss. Beatrice mimicked him, and set the husband down like a feather.

“Holy ... shit ... it tasted different.” Standing there, naked, body flush with the bliss of the Kiss, it was as if all sexual arousal had been rekindled. If she wanted, and if Julias had wanted, they could have gotten back in the tub and had sex a couple more times then.

But, he was content to step up behind her, place his hands on her stomach, and put his chin on her head.

She leaned back into him, even as she took a towel from a hook off the faucet and started wiping the kine's cum from her fingers. “No wonder all you fuckers create harems and just fuck and drink all the time. That was great.”

“Daeva in particular grow quite addicted to it.”

“Think ... think next time we could get like ... more?” She looked up at him over her shoulder, and gave what he was sure was her best attempt at little girl begging eyes.

It just made him laugh. “How many do you want?” Maybe he'd regret opening this avenue of vice to her.

“Fucking ... like, get a fucking dozen. All guys. I want to try a full on orgy, you know? Something I never did when I was alive. A bunch of dicks all just lined up and ready to cum in me and on me.”

She grinned. Fuck, she was playing with him. Or was she serious? Probably both.

He knocked her skull a bit with his chin. “How about we start small? Maybe ... three guys?”

Her eyes went wide. “You’re going to spoil the shit out of me.”

---

~~Natasha~~

Natasha sat alone, in her apartment, in front of her laptop.

She took a moment to consider that. Alone, surrounded by quiet darkness, her face lit up by the light of a computer screen. Perfectly at home.

On her laptop were pictures of Vivienne — blurry of course. Her childe had been rarely seen since joining the Lancea et Sanctum, with only the occasional sighting. That’s how it had been for many of their group, once proud members of Tony’s anti-covenant ways and now hiding in the city holes of the dead elder’s memories.

Vivienne. They had been good friends, when the girl had been hired to work the books at Xnomina. She was just a human, shy, small, a mirror to Natasha. When Natasha revealed the truth, about vampires, Vivienne had digested the information with cold practicality. It was a trait Natasha could understand. It was not long before she had sired the girl.

Vivi was the closest thing she had to a friend. No, that wasn’t true. Jessy was her best friend, and Vivi was her childe. There was always that to connect them, and separate them. Something like a mother and child, but not quite. Never quite explainable, except as sire and childe.

Her mind drifted back to the ball. It had ended abruptly, once Lucas had left.

She shivered. Lucas. She had never seen a Mehket who could stand up for himself with words, to a crowd, to enemies. The way he had confronted the Prince with calm, controlled points was beyond admirable. No wonder so many were flocking to him.

She thought of Julius and Beatrice. Miss Damor. Yet another detail she had missed. Madame Turio couldn't be thinking of her in very high regard, at the moment, with the information her right hand kept missing. How had that Nosferatu shark-mouth seduced a man like Julius? Jack had said she was his spark, and she could understand that to a point. Julius carried a weight of sadness with him, he always had since she'd known him, and Beatrice was the first Kindred she had ever seen put a real smile on the man's face.

She bet they were fucking, right now. Julius had probably dominated a few kine, and they were having an orgy, plugging all of Beatrice's holes and making a mess of cum everywhere before the two vampires drank themselves full. Yeah, she was jealous.

It made Natasha's withered insides ache. Kindred were such stupid creatures, lone predators who craved companionship like any kine did. A cosmic joke. She wanted someone to hold in her little arms. Someone to make her smile. Someone she could have genuine, deep one-on-one conversations with. Someone she could enjoy exploring all sorts of sexual kinks with, if at least quietly. The ball had introduced no one. Maybe she would have to find a ghoul, and indulge her need for a little contact that way? Maybe a few ghouls, so she could indulge her more ridiculous kinks?

The door knocked.

"Jessy?" No response. Natasha mumbled, got up, and headed for the door. She talked as she opened it. "Jessy, you—"

"Hello my dear." It was Lucas, and Damien. The two were just standing there, arms folded together under their robes on their chests.

"Uh ... um..." She started to back away. She was in shorts and a t-shirt, her sword was in another room, as was her pistol. No way to defend herself.

Panic flooded her, but she forced it down. She wasn't a fledgling, she was a right hand of the Invictus. Don't panic. Don't let the the ancient elder at your door make you panic.

She inched her way toward her bedroom. "You can't ... touch me. The Invictus won't allow it."

They both stepped in. Damien looked sad, but Lucas smiled. "Madame Turio knows how to play the game well, Miss Vola. Come with us. Your life will be spared."

"Maria ... she..." Betrayed? What? He said her life would be spared, but then why did they break into her apartment building to come for her? Did they even have to break in? Did Maria let them in?

Too many questions! Too much risk. She had to get away, had to get out.

"... um, wait, hold on..."

"Please, Miss Vola, if you do not come with us then I am afraid we will have to make you," Lucas said. He walked after her, a gentle smile on his face. From so close, she could see the final details of his oddly colored robes, and she could smell just a touch of the weird fabric's ancient origin. Skin?

"You c-can't expect me t-t-t-t-t ... to just ... come."

Then Lucas's smile faded. "Very well." From beneath his gentle gaze rose stern eyes, a harsh glare, and a deep anger that had her trembling. "Damien, take her."

Damien was next to her, between her and the door. She hadn't seen him move! Fast. So fast. Faster than her. He wasn't this fast when she had shot him.

“How did you—”

The stake hit her heart fast enough that, when she looked down, she couldn't really understand that there was a piece of wood sticking out of her chest. It took a moment for the paralysis to kick in, just long enough that she could look back up and at Damien.

He looked so sad.

# Chapter 21

~~Jack~~

The drive back to the Prince's tower in Elysium was terrifying.

He didn't say a word. She didn't say a word. They both sat in silence in her limousine while one of her bewitched kine drove them. The woman behind the wheel, Jack noticed, was visibly nervous and made sure to keep her words short, concise, and polite. Perhaps she had never seen Antoinette angry? Her hands were shaking and stuck at the two and ten.

Jack had never seen the Prince angry, not really, and being in the limousine with her felt like being trapped in a shark cage with the shark. She looked out the window, but the beast aura she radiated crushed down against Jack with enough weight he felt his own beast being forced down into his bowels. Is this how ancient civilizations felt, when a great storm was upon them, and they all assumed they were suffering the wrath of their mighty and fickle gods?

When he dared to look at her red eyes, he had to look away quickly. She never broke her gaze from the window, but just seeing the fury in her face was enough to strike him still. Like a stake through the heart, paralyzed.

It didn't get much better once they arrived at her glass tower. The lone receptionist gave them a nod, but the man was quick to also notice the anger pouring out of every motion of the Prince. He looked away, and resumed typing with the softest but fastest typing Jack imagined possible.

And with how Antoinette was stomping forward, she didn't even check behind her to see if Jack was following. But, she'd taken him from the ball, so, into the lion's den.



They went down, and down, down the black marble of the basement levels of her great tower, past the multiple levels of complex, interwoven layers of her underground facilities, and down toward the giant vault door.

She opened it with enough snap to her movements, Jack was sure she would rip the huge thing from the wall before it slid open, and she stepped inside.

“In.” Her words left no room for debate, or even a word of his own. Absolute obedience was his only option. He looked down, afraid, almost trembling, and stepped past her into the room.

He had never heard someone slam a giant vault door before, and the way it rung metal in the room created a weird roar of vibration.

“I will kill him! Kill him! I will rip out his throat, remove his limbs, and let the sun take him! I will roast his screeching body over fire! I will grind his bones into powder and – you, sit!”

He squeaked, and sat down on the edge of her giant bed. Antoinette paced back and forth in front of him, fists clenched, and when her shoes failed to handle her stomping well, she took them into her hands and threw them at the wall so hard they flattened.

“I will open his gut and pull out each foot of his insides and feed them to him while I burn his testicles with a blow torch!” She turned then, and punched the wall. A wall of solid marble, but she punched it, and the wall cracked open for several feet in several directions. The impact forced her back several feet across the floor, but her stance did not waver, she just slid. Bruce Lee would have been jealous.

“ ... Antoi—”

“What!?” She threw her gaze at him then, and he had to dig into every fiber of his being to not crumble like her shoes.

“A-Antoinette, I ... do you ... want to be alone?”

“Yes! But I will not let you leave the tower. That monster, that delusional sadist will do whatever it takes to ruin me, to destroy me, to tear away at everything I care for and he will start with those I care for.” She walked over to him, and he pulled away onto the bed a few feet to give her room while she started to stomp back and forth in front of him. “Not this time. I will not let him this time. Ashley and Julee rest within their private quarters, and there they shall stay as well until this madness is over.”

Not this time?

He opened his mouth, stopped himself, and considered. She said she wanted to be alone, she didn't want him here, but wanted to keep him safe. And from the way she was moving, his question would be poking the bear with a hot iron.

“ ... what did Lucas do to you?”

He never was good with people.

She came to a stop, and turned to face him with heavy, slow steps. Her fists did not relent, and her eyes were wide with frenzy. She came closer, until her knees were touching the edge of the bed, and her great height cast a shadow over him.

And then he forced himself to look her in the eye. Terrified, trembling, probably would have pissed himself if he could, fucking scared to a second death, but he looked her in the eyes and kept it. He actually started to shake like a petrified, injured animal, with how intense her gaze was. Was that all he was to her right now? Just a scared mouse?

Well, fuck that, he wasn't going to just leave her to her misery, not after everything that had happened. “I can't ... even begin to

understand what you're going through and angry about. It's beyond me. But I can listen."

"Understand? Listen? You are not even a year embraced!" She put both hands onto the bed and leaned toward him. Her fangs were bared, like some sort of cat ready to tear him open. "Decades, decades I worked to remove that filth! People were killed! My ... my..."

With agonizing minutes, Antoinette calmed down. He was sure they were staring at each other for years, and all he could do was try his best to not panic or crumble as he tried to smile. A sad, pathetic smile of a scared young man, but he gave it to her nonetheless. He expected a punch, maybe a harsh verbal beating, but she kept his own gaze and slowly released her fists. Her steel gaze softened, her shoulders slumped, and her mouth parted.

"You would ... you would tempt fate so?" she said.

Now she was the one who look shattered.

He gulped on nothing, inched across the bed toward her, reached out, and took her hand. She let out a small cough, as if she was holding back a sob, and gripped his fingers with her own once they were intertwined. She even tried to pull away with a weak, half-hearted effort, but he kept her hand in his, and tugged on it. Her attitude had changed as quickly as wind.

"I am sorry, my little Ventrue. What have I done, I ... must seem so horrible."

"Not horrible! Just angry. Come on, you're beautiful. Scary, terrifying even, but beautiful."

His dumb words managed to pull a chuckle from her. They held hands, like a lovey-dovey couple, and she even rubbed her thumb against his. After a while, she sat down beside him, and leaned over

to rest her tilted head atop his. He could still feel rage pouring out of her, but undertones of mourning and sadness joined it.

“Ashley and Julee are precious to me. They are close friends who I share my feelings with, gossip with, and blood with.” She talked, kept her head on his, and continued to stroke his thumb with hers. “Do you understand?”

“Y-yeah, I think so.”

“Lucas is one of many branches of the Lancea et Sanctum beliefs and doctrines. His particular views are very ... anti-relationships with kine. His belief is that kine and Kindred are to be kept separate, and that you must not lay with them. He made an example ... of ... the ghouls I...”

He squeezed her hand. He didn't need to hear anymore, he got it. Lucas killed her ghouls.

The thought sounded so plain in his head, but when he pictured Ashley or Julee being killed – in very likely a horrific manner – just to hurt Antoinette? That gave the image weight, context, and it made his insides burn.

“There were others, Kindred too. Lucas sacrificed and tortured and ... it was not just a war for him. It was a holy crusade.”

Pictures started to form. Torture on Kindred? The sort of things you could do to a vampire before they died were limitless.

“I'm sorry that ... yeah. I didn't know. Julias never really went into the details and ... yeah.”

“It is fine, little Ventrue.” She lifted her head, and looked around with a weird expression, like she were checking to see if they were safe, before she pulled herself up further onto the bed. In the center

of it, she reached out, plucked Jack up like he weighed nothing, and set him down laying beside her, away from her.

She'd grown quite fond of the large spoon position, apparently. Her arms wrapped around him, her fingers squeezed his, and she just held him to her.

“The sun will be up soon,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Um, should we—”

“Just ... do not leave the tower, Jack. Until Lucas is dealt with, please, stay here.” Her grip tightened until he was squished against her breasts. They were still both dressed in their ball clothes, but the Prince didn't seem to mind. She even slipped a leg over his, and held him down.

She was terrified.

It hurt to see her so afraid. To see her afraid at all was barely something he could wrap his mind around, but she was clutching him like a girl and her teddy bear.

“I'll stay ... as long as you want.”

---

He awoke in her arms.

The jolt of Kindred vitae pumping through his corpse woke him with a startle, like it always did, but Antoinette's grip was still on him, and she woke with grace.

“Good evening,” she said, and she kissed his head. Still the big spoon.

“Good evening.” He gave her hand a squeeze, and looked over his shoulder to smile at her.

“It will be a sad night. Knowing my little Ventrue is here waiting for me will make me eager to end my affairs, but my affairs are many, and important.”

“Very understandable. With Lucas and Dolareido and ... yeah, I can’t even imagine.”

“It is not all horrible, Jack. Before the morning, I will be back, and I will make sure this cage I have forced upon you is a gilded one.” She squeezed him harder, hard enough that he felt her breasts through her dress and his jacket. “When my affairs of tonight are dealt with, you will have me. I do look forward to the warmth of your body upon my breasts.”

Oh god. “Sounds ... wow.” What did he ever do to deserve a woman who enjoyed breast play so much?

“Good.” She gave a chuckle, got up, and headed to the wall on the side of the room. It held a door with a very subtle indent handle, and she slid it open to reveal her changing room. Built so deep into the earth, metal, and marble, it was the most secure changing room on the whole planet probably.

She stripped, sat in front of her mirror, and took the time to apply her make-up, comb her hair, and peruse her selection of dresses. Jack watched, mouth open with how gorgeous the nude creature was when just going through her morning routine.

“Jack, forgive my teasing, but your gaze softens me. I must steel myself for the night’s horrid mess of decisions to come.” She grinned at him, but it didn’t last. The ancient Daeva resumed her dressing, and with no ceremony or dance, put on a power suit for the day.

The whole business of getting ready for her day took her only a few minutes. She put on her mask and her clothes with such efficient speed, she must have been doing it for centuries. The dumb thought made him chuckle; of course she'd been doing it for centuries.

“Hey, Antoinette ... why don't you ever talk about yourself? You know everything about me.”

“I...” She was on the way toward the vault door, but his words stopped her. In fact, they stopped her cold. When she finally did turn around and looked at him, her eyes were torn somewhere between a frown and sadness. “They are painful memories, little Ventrue, as you heard with Lucas.”

“They can't be all bad! Come on, I—”

“Another time, Jack. Please.”

He was pushing his luck, but something about last night's conversation had made him realize something. He knew absolutely nothing about Antoinette except for what Julias had told him, which wasn't much. No knowledge about her tastes, her past – what she remembered of her ancient history anyway – or her hobbies. Did she have hobbies?

“ ... ok.” He forced away his frown. Now was not the time.

Antoinette gave him a small nod, opened the vault door, and left.

Jack watched after her, but did not follow. She probably had business upstairs, in her grand tower of mystery business, and he couldn't exactly walk into that and absorb the secrets.

His mind drifted back to that angry, terrified look she had last night when she locked them both in her room. “Christ those eyes. She looked terrified for me ... for me. Fucking scary, but...” But it

had been so powerful, even moving, how she protected him with so much emotion behind it. Like love.

He thumped himself in the temples with both hands before he started to caress his buzzed head. Do I love her? Damn it, now is not the time to get romantic, Jack. Shit was on Antoinette's doorstep and there was a good chance it was going to get on his shoes too.

Too late. The thought was already there. She was holding onto him so tight yesterday, and that look in her eye, like as if the thought of him dead petrified her. Love, or Daeva obsession?

“Does she know how to love?” He paced around in her empty room. “Julias warned me it may be beyond her, with how old she is. But ... those eyes certainly spoke otherwise. I have to dig just to get any information about her though; she won't open up to me. And if I dig too hard I could really piss her off.” Fuck, he wished he'd had some real relationships in his first life, just for a little practice. Antoinette being the first love of his life was like learning how to swim in the deep end of the ocean in a storm.

On the way up and out of the deep vault levels of the tower, he checked his phone for a signal. Finally, after a few floors up and out of the deep bowels of the dragon tower, he dialed his sire. “Julias?”

“Yeah Jack?”

“Yeah!” a loud voice called through the phone.

Jack moved the phone away from his face and grimaced down at the device. Beatrice was there, with Julias. He could only wonder what sort of kinks shark-mouth had.

“What's up Jack?” Beatrice again. She must have taken the phone.

“ ... right, wanna tell Julias that I'm going to be staying with the Prince until Lucas is dealt with?” He'd already spilled his guts to her



earlier, about Viktor and Tony, no point in worrying about minor shit now.

“Smart. Good move. I’ll let him know.” She hung up.

And then she sent a picture of herself, topless. She was wearing a nipple chain, and grinning the biggest grin, with all her crazy extra teeth on full display. Julias was in the background, face in palm, embarrassed.

Jack took maybe a couple seconds too long looking at the picture. Beatrice was really ripped, and he had to admit, he liked the nipple chain. He put the phone away, rolled his eyes, and walked out in the main lobby of the tower.

All the glass walls scared him. If the sun came out, it would be death no matter where he moved, but Antoinette assured him many of the floors were capable of blocking out sunlight in an emergency. Still, it chilled him right to the bone.

He wandered around. Normally he’d hang out downstairs with the Prince and her ghouls, swim in the pool, browse the internet on a computer between conversations, but none of that really interested him then. It was such a weird situation to be in, just wandering the Prince’s tower while he waited for her to deal with what could become a war.

War. How did vampires fight a war? The act of killing a Kindred was not easy. You either had to burn them in fire or sunlight, cut off the head, or do so much damage that all that was left is pulp. He tried to imagine how you could do that; a fully automatic assault rifle and several clips? A dozen shotgun shells? Or a sword?

He shuddered. The front lines of battle were not for Ventrue. Julias and Viktor were, according to others, unusual for how comfortable they were with combat. Ventrue usually controlled,

manipulated, and dominated servants into fighting for them. And he could see the appeal of that, instead of risking your neck.

He wandered toward the front doors of the glass tower. The receptionist – just a kine – gave him a nod, and resumed his work.

“ ... whatcha doing?” Jack said.

The man was a portly fellow, balding, but he had one of those nice faces, and Jack found himself wanting to talk to him.

“Good evening Mister Terry. Organizing the Mistress’s assets; she has a mountain of them.”

Mister Terry. Not his Invictus title, but it was nice to be called Mister anyway, better even.

Assets? So not a receptionist then. Weird, considering he had a circular counter desk in the front of the otherwise empty lobby. “How did you come into the Prince’s employ?”

“Ah! It was thirty years ago. Prince Antoinette was using one of her old disguises, and playing the cello at a concert. I had to meet her, so I got a backstage pass and—”

His voice faded to white noise. Antoinette played the cello? How had he not known? So much, so damn much the ancient vampire never told him. Why so little about herself? He bit down on his teeth just to keep himself from saying something in anger before he focused on the not-receptionist again. Mr. Chunk according to the nameplate on the desk. Really?

“—the few of us got invited back to the glass tower here in Elysium. There’s no way we could say no to a lifetime of servitude. Right? Right?”

Jack thought he was joking for a moment, but Chunk looked at him with awaiting eyes.

“Uh, yeah...” Chunk was another kine under his Antoinette’s spell then. “Cya then Chunk.”

“A fine good evening to you too, Mister Terry.” The big guy started typing again. And eating a donut.

Terry drifted to the back of the tower where the elevators were, and leaned against the marble wall between them. He didn’t know what to do. Cello? She played the cello?

Maybe ... maybe ask her to play for him? He smiled. He would love to hear it. He should ask Ashley and Julee if they knew anything else too.

---

~~Damien~~

The next night, it was just him and Natasha. He looked down at the woman who had put a bullet through his skull.

It was only the two of them, within the sealed and room of sacred objects. No air or sound could escape. With the door sealed, no one but an elder would be able to escape it. It was a tomb, now that he thought about it, of metal walls and godly artifacts.

He made a small sneer at the girl. At her apartment, she’d been quite surprised at how fast he was; he remembered the look in her eyes when he staked her in the heart. “Because this time I did not underestimate you. I thought you were just a stupid, weak little girl. I should have known better. Stupid stupid stupid.” He turned, and smashed his head into the wall. Pain. Pain was recompense. He couldn’t make mistakes, not before God, not for the Sanctified.

But this whole night was turning into a mistake.

He reached down and removed the stake from her heart. The wound closed quickly, but the stake had left a hole in her shirt. It was the least of her worries. She sat up a moment later in that sudden-but-controlled way Kindred do.

“... you.” She put both hands to the floor and started to push herself away from him. No panic though, he noticed. She was thinking, analyzing the room she was in, just as he would if in the same situation.

“Hello,” he said, and he squatted down in front of her with the sheathe of his sword in hand, tip on the floor, its grip resting against his shoulder. His fingers rotated the sword against his palms.

“What ... what do you want? Why am I here? Where’s here?”

“Deep within the underground network Tony left behind. This is the Archbishop’s alter room.” He made a sweeping gesture to the alter with its artifacts, the couple of lit candles, and the various paintings. “God’s dark little corner of this hellhole.”

The tiny Mehket looked down, then around at the array of Godliness around her. Damien managed a small smirk. She wasn’t panicking, but he could see she wanted to.

“What and why,” he continued, “is because we need to disarm the sheriff. He won’t stop us while we have you.”

Her eyes went wide, and they flickered around in the same way his did when thinking at extreme speeds. Yes, little girl, that’s right, we know.

“... and ... Lucas said ... Maria is letting you d-do this?”

“Indeed. We promised her you would not be harmed.”

“Harmed? What are you ... you’re...”

He nodded, but his smirk vanished. “You will be going with us when we assault the Prince.”

Her eyes opened so wide, he could see far more than he wanted. It hurt. He hated that it hurt.

“B-b-b-but the Prince ... she’ll...”

“We will see, we will see.”

With that, they both went silent. He watched her, she watched him, and like edges of sand in the wind, the tension faded. Just two Mehkets sitting in the dark, thinking, analyzing, just like home. After a while, he got up and began to look around the small room, at the paintings and the artifacts, and the sword on the alter he had touched earlier, Saint Peter’s sword. He dared not touch it again; the images and emotions the ancient relic had scarred him with were terrifying and powerful.

“Damien,” she said. He looked at her, and motioned for her to continue. “D-did Maria, did she ... really just ... betray me?”

He sighed and shrugged. “Lucas talked with her, not I. It is the two of them who care for each other.”

“She betrayed me...” The little girl pulled her legs up to her chest and lowered her face to her knees.

“Your safety was promised.”

“You can’t promise that! If you’re going t-to use me and force Daniel to stand d-d-down, you’ll have to take me there and ... show it.”

“Yes.”

“And ... you’re all just going to ... attack the tower?”

“Yes.”

“That’s insane. Crazy. Lucas is crazy! I read a lot about Lucas, and ... he was always ... brutal. He—”

“Archbishop Lucas was a beacon of purity of God’s purpose, Invictus.”

Natasha blinked at him, like he was speaking insanity. “You ... you’re only as old as me.”

“And?”

“And ... you don’t know. You don’t have access to the records.”

“I know enough!” He stomped toward her, and she cowered backward into the corner. “We serve the church, we serve God. The Prince and Garry and the sheriff, they marched in here and slaughtered the priests, the Bishops, even the faithful who dared stand against them!”

“They d-did that b-b-b-because ... Lucas was taking over, and killing ... everyone.”

He froze. What?

“It’s true,” she continued. “He ... and the Bishops, they ... killed ... a lot of people. They were t-taking over, and ... a lot of Kindred died.”

“Then they must have deserved it.”

“They did not! This was ... it wasn’t what you think, Damien. Your sire was ... slaughtering p-people b-b-b-b- ... before the war began.”

Anger rose up through his body. He slammed the sword down between her legs; he didn’t even remember when he’d drawn it from its sheathe. They locked eyes. She was ready to cry, but like a chipmunk, she scrunched up her face and glared at him.

The tiny girl shook her head. “And ... and now you’re going to ... attack the Prince directly. K-kindred will die. Do you ... do you think Lucas is ... innocent in this?”

He gripped the handle of his sword hard enough to hurt. He wanted to cut her head off right there, but he would not. He needed her, not a pile of ash.

But it wasn’t just that. Truth ate at him, terrible in his gut, cockroaches on his skin, burning behind his eyes. The way her pathetic eyes glared at him with defiance ringed so loud it threatened his mind. He was just a child back then, not yet embraced, and he had looked up to the vampires and even ghouls around him with nothing but envy. Every word Lucas had said, that his Bishops and priests had said, he had absorbed with need.

And it was all falling apart. Was it all an act? Like with how Lucas had spoken with the Prince at the ball, calm and wise. All an act? Fifty years, did he spend fifty years serving a sleeping master only to have such madness greet him? Like a twisted black play, and he was the tragic figure to be undone by his mistake.

He really wished he could stop thinking. Stop analyzing. Stop questioning everything and just accept faith. But dark, disgusting thoughts were laying bits of trail before him and he could not look away. Mehket were creatures of secrets; he gobbled them up and put them together whether he wanted to or not.

“He is—”

The door opened.

“Bishop Damien, how is our prisoner?”

It was Lucas. He had a warm smile on his face, one that reminded Damien of the old days when he had first met the man. Natasha frowned though, and Damien found he had to look away from

Lucas's face now. The subtle smirk on his sire's face and twitch of the eye, they were like cracks in a porcelain mask.

"She is ... fine."

"Is she then?" The ancient Mehket got down onto a knee before the tiny woman, and pulled back the hood of his robe. "If you would turn around please? So that we may detain you. The effect of this presentation will be stronger if you are awake, but I will stake you again if I must." The Archbishop produced some black rope, and gave it to Damien.

"How ... d-d-d-d-..."

Her stuttering made Damien grit his teeth. He wanted to slap her hard enough to drive her timid nature out of her skull.

"Speak, child," Lucas said. His warm smile never wavered.

"... How did ... you find out about me."

"Divine intervention!" Lucas got up and raised his hands in a praying manner. "Damien has been my scout for my entire slumber, Miss Vola. He has devoured information about all the covenants, and he has kept an eye on all of you in that time."

"... when ... Daniel visited me."

"Indeed." The Archbishop stepped over to Damien and patted him on the shoulder. "He observed it all. My Bishop has served God well."

Damien smiled, but it was hollow. Natasha looked at him, with a quiet begging in her eyes, but also a glint of awareness. She saw the doubt. She saw the cursed thoughts he could not shake.



He got down next to her, she turned around, and he tied her hands behind her back. The rope was strong, strong enough for Natasha, or any Mehket for that matter. He made sure to use a knot a crafty creature like her could not slip either, something that would have ruined her hands for lack of blood if she were alive.

She said nothing, but looked over her shoulder at him, and stared into his eyes with little bits of fury in her gaze.

He looked away.

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~~Julias~~

“Did you just send a topless selfie to my childe?”

“Bah, he’s seen my tits before. Besides, kid probably has his dick between those giant tits the Prince is sporting every night.”

Well, he was certainly happy his childe was enjoying himself, but the image was unneeded.

He reached out for the woman and hugged her closer to him. They were both in the master bedroom, cozy under the ridiculously luxurious blankets, and naked. Beatrice wasn’t even trying to act disgruntled or anything; instead she was snuggled against him with a cat’s grin, rubbing her breasts and nipple chain up and down the side of his torso in teasing circles.

“So,” he said, “I know you’ve been up to something.”

“Oh?”

“Garry tipped me off. Said you were in some shit? And I can see you’ve been rather ... sneaky lately.”

She sat up, smiled a wicked smile, and dragged one of her monster claws up and down his chest. “I have been. It doesn’t have

anything to do with you though.”

“Keeping secrets from me?”

“Oh, mountains. I’ve been making friends, moving up in the Danse, but it’s nothing to worry about.”

The wording was weird. Nothing for him to worry about? “Can’t tell me?”

“I could ... I just ... I don’t want to ruin anything. I’m pretty happy and call me paranoid but I’ve had a pretty shitty life up until now. I’d like to stay happy.”

“Same boat.”

“Ha! You’ve been fucking bitches and living in luxury your whole second life.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never been happy with it.” He took her claws in his hand, and his other reached out to caress her cheek. She hated his romantic gestures, but he didn’t care. Right then, just holding her hand and touching her face, brushing her hair aside, even running his finger down her giant extra teeth, it made him happy. “You think I’d give you up?”

“Well ... no.” She tried to ignore his touch, but he was no child. He knew just how to touch her, how to read her expressions to see what she liked, even if she hated that she liked it. “Just, I don’t know, it’s pretty big.”

“Something you can’t tell me because of the Carthians?”

“Ah, uh...”

He stroked her thumb with his. The huge claw that excited where a thumbnail normally would was terrifying in its own right, but he

was used to it. Thrilled by it even, with how its sharp tip ran along his chest on its smooth side. Like coaxing a scared animal to him, he just went slow, and continued to slide his fingers along her jawline. “Yeah?”

“Um ... I’m not a Carthian anymore.”

He didn’t see that coming. “ ... really?”

She nodded, and looked away. The expression was hard to read. Embarrassed maybe, but happy? Proud? Like a little girl with a secret, but one she was dying to share.

“I joined the Circle of the Crone.”

Jaw drop. “ ... you’re a witch?”

“I don’t think they like being called that. I’m an Acolyte,” she said. His hand had dropped from her mouth from sheer surprise, and it earned a frown from her. “What do you think?”

“I think ... I think ... I don’t know, honestly. Really, not sure what to think. You work for Jacob?”

“Work for isn’t really what the Circle does, you know? Jacob is the alpha, I guess, but we all sort of ... follow his lead.” Her eyes fell, and she sat up a little straighter, away from him. “Don’t approve?”

“I have no love of Jacob. I can’t deny that.” He sat up with her, but when she tried to pull her hand in his grip away, he did not let go. “But ... tell me about it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. All I know are the hard details, not the experience. And ... you do seem happier, as of late.”

She grinned a huge grin and slid back in closer to him again. “Part of that is because of you, and your stupid white knight bullshit that I can’t seem to shake. And part is because ... life in the Circle just makes so much more sense to me.”

He quirked a brow down at the creature as she pushed her shoulder against him. The Carthians were dangerous, but predictable. Jacob though, he thrived on stirring chaos, just because it served as a culling. The ancient Nosferatu liked to keep the Kindred numbers from growing too large; he wanted them to be few, and strong. If Beatrice was a witch – Acolyte – now, then she was among those Jacob prized.

He thought back to when Beatrice had saved him, and had torn Rebecca apart with her claws, a vampire much older than her. Yeah, his girlfriend was very dangerous.

He liked that.

“I had no idea. Does anyone know?”

“Just Garry, the Circle, and ... the Prince. Cause she’s too fucking smart.”

“Agreed. So you’re an Acolyte then? How does that work? What secrets am I privy to, dark creature of the night?”

That made her chuckle. “I can tell you whatever I want, hell I can do whatever the fuck I want. There aren’t any stupid rules. I’m given freedom to be my own animal.” She crawled onto him then, complete with a cat crawl arch in her back, and she slipped onto his stomach to straddle him. “No stupid ideologies, no stupid power structures of complicated red tape. We worship ancient gods that have been around for thousands and thousands of years!”

Holy shit. He had no idea Beatrice had such a primal side to her. “You worship gods?”

“Not really, but Jacob points to all the creation myths, the vampire parallels of many entities in these myths, and the myriad of gods that have existed since well before written history.” She shrugged, and slid her claws up and down his chest. “I’m not going to say I believe it, but I’d be stupid to ignore the possibility. Have you seen what blood magic can do? Cruac? Fuck, Julias, the things ... like, ancient things. Things so old it defies explanation. Things that lived in the Earth for ages. Things old, dark, things done with blood, death, and sex.” Her hips were moving back and forth, and she blushed for him. In seconds, he could already feel her wetness on his stomach.

Her new covenant life agreed with her. It really scared him, the lack of rules, the religious views of ancient gods and old ideas like blood sacrifices, but ... it reminded him of the first time he’d really talked with Beatrice. Back in the catacombs, when she had both saved and captured him. Something about that dark, scary, beautiful monster straddling him was just so damn arousing.

“I uh ... have to admit ... that is a whole new level of scary stuff from you.” He blushed too, and he was right behind her in arousal. His erection raised, and she slid herself back so it rested between her ass cheeks.

“Good.” She leaned in closer, and placed her fangs against his neck, just hard enough so he could feel it before she started kissing his jugular.

“I—” The phone rang. It was Jack’s ringtone.

“Fucking hell. Should I send more pics?”

“No, no I think if you did, and the Prince saw, she’d deal with him.” He sat up and reached for the phone. “And then she’d deal with you.”

“Ha yeah, good point.”

He hit the button on the phone, but had to pull it away from his ear when the loud cracks and explosions of noise assaulted his ear. “Jack?”

“Julias! Get help, get fucking help! Here! Now!”

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~~Antoinette~~

It was just her and the sheriff.

All alone in her office, she had her wall converted to a digital touch display. The idea had been planted by her Invictus primogen, and she had to admit that she enjoyed both the compromise of digital and tactile, and the ease of its use. Before her, she had her city map displayed, but also the mappings of its sewers, the underground network Tony had built, the Circle of the Crone pit in the rock canyon, the districts of feeding zones she had given to each covenant, and the Elysium zone where she deemed violence was not allowed.

But there was more than that, things only she and Daniel knew. There were the various colored circles around various places, places where the Carthians, Invictus, and the expunged Lancea et Sanctum housed influence. Also were every Wurm’s Nest in her city circled, places of mystical power that only she could appreciate. She, her sheriff, and that infernal witch Jacob.

She reached out and touched one such circle of power. A ghost had haunted a mansion there. She touched another; catacombs where, deep in underground layers far below what Beatrice had explored, undead and mindless corpses roamed. Another Wurm’s Nest was a spring beneath forest and rock, and the strange energies there attracted things that she did not understand. Ghosts, but not ghosts. Spirits, entities, things that did not speak but existed. It was where she spent much of her secret life learning her Coils of the Dragon.

But her eyes were on Tony's underground network. Tony knew it was also a place of power, a gentle one, but one that created a point of influence. It gave power to voice, and neither she nor Tony could figure out why. But Tony did not need to know why, he was content to abuse it. And now, she imagined, Lucas too was abusing it.

That idiot fool would not understand why his words would resonate with such power in Tony's old nest, and he probably did not even realize it was unnatural. The nest did not brainwash, but it just a touch more influence to any preached message. "That fool will have every wayward soul serving his delusions by the end of the year, Daniel. I should have sealed that nest shut when Tony was killed."

"We didn't know. Lucas's childe raised him only days after Tony's death," Daniel said. Voice quiet, monotone, dressed in his long coat and wearing his boring glasses. But at the moment, she could use his predictability. He was the rock she could rely on in their conquest.

"Do you think Lucas will leave, as I demanded?"

"Perhaps. Even if every covenant-less childe and more than that joined him, he would not have the power to stand against both us and the Carthians."

"I do not want the Carthians involved. Garry will bring fire, explosives, bullets upon bullets, and destruction. I do not want that again. We need to be surgical."

Daniel stepped up to the map, reached out with a gloved hand, and pointed at the entrance to Tony's underground nest. "Perhaps we should not wait? If we move now, we—"

Red lights started to flash on the screen. Not just the main screen though. She moved around to her desk and down at her laptop, where the screen displayed more flashing red. Daniel blinked at her,

and she clicked a few prompts on her software. Multiple camera feeds appeared on the wall display, and they all showed the same thing.

Lucas, surrounded by at least fifty robes, walking up to her doorstep.

“He ... he cannot be serious,” she said.

Daniel stepped closer to the wall display, adjusted his glasses, and then reached into his robes. The sword he carried was long, something that belonged in ancient warfare, unlike the shorter and more intimate swords used by Kindred in the modern age. The blade was thin, it had a subtle curve, and Daniel had to reach behind his neck to draw it upward and out to the side. She would have said it was something from Japan, but the blade had no ornamentation or even layers to its grip. The blade was as lifeless as the man himself.

Panic hit her. Jack. For a split moment, she had forgotten her lover was downstairs. She could only hope he had stayed within the the basement of her tower.

She stomped after Daniel, and moments later they were both in the elevator. “He is insane.”

“Probably.”

“This carnage could summon the police!”

“Perhaps.”

“He is only recently revived from half a century of torpor! He cannot hope to face us in combat.”

“He’ll have a trick up his sleeve.”



She nodded while she flexed her hands in front of her. Here and now then. Here and now, on her own doorstep, the madman was going to bring his fate. She did not fear for herself or Daniel, but her ghouls were downstairs, and so was Jack. Losing her ghouls a second time would be a horrible tragedy, one she was not sure she could withstand without leaving many, many Kindred tied to her rooftop for sunrise. But losing Jack was not acceptable. She would not have it, could it not have it, she would burn her whole city to the ground to kill Lucas if it came to that.

The elevator was not a slow elevator, but every second was a wasted one, and by the time it finally dinged open, she was ready to tear through the door. But just as it opened, Lucas stepped in through the front doors of her glass tower, at the opposite end of the Lobby.

“Prince?” Jack said. He was leaning against the wall by the elevator and playing with his phone.

“Jack, my Jack, please get downstairs, you must—”

“Antoinette! Daniel! How lovely to see you both here.” Lucas made a grand sweeping gesture with his arms. He was wearing the same sick, disgusting robe from last night, and just like last night his crowd of robed followers fell in beside him.

Her assistant Chunk backed up and away like someone had laid Ebola at his feet. Jack inched to the side, back to the wall, but he too was just as shocked as her assistant.

“Lucas. How dare you. How ... dare ... you ... Do you think I will let you leave after this?” She stepped forward, and with the grace of a feline, stepped out of her shoes. Shoes were a mistake for any creature that planned to move quickly, with force. With intent to kill, you needed to feel your ground beneath you, so you could tell how fast you were moving before you crushed someone’s face in with your fist.

Daniel followed beside her. He said nothing, but his sword was still drawn and at his side. He kept his shoes on, but when the violence began, he would not even touch the floor.

“No, I did not think that you would. But then, I will not be leaving as you instructed either. My flock and I have, with heavy hearts, agreed that the only course of action is to remove you from your position.” He stepped forward a little closer. She noticed he was carrying a very old looking sword; how quaint. “Will you step down as Prince?”

She laughed. “You are pathetic, Lucas. You have only recently awoken from half a century’s sleep, do you honestly expect me to fear you? Daniel, would you please disp—”

Lucas held up a hand. “Damien, if you would?”

The crowd of robed Kindred stepped aside like water, and the young protégé who had stalked her streets for fifty years stepped forward. He seemed like such nice a young man, with an average if athletic build, and a half-shaved head that combed long black hair to one side. He was the one Daniel had spared in their purge.

And he was the one who held Natasha in front of him, with his sword against her throat.

Oh no.

She stopped walking forward. Daniel stopped walking forward. They both just stopped, and stared at Damien and Natasha each. The girl was awake, bound, and glancing around with panicked eyes. She knew what was coming.

“Daniel,” Lucas said, and he moved over to stand beside Damien, “I don’t suppose you could save us all the trouble, and execute the Prince for us?”

Fear. For just a second, just a passing moment, fear hit her. Fight Daniel? Could she fight Daniel? She could not win against her sheriff, not in a straight fight.

They looked at each other. Daniel's eyes downcast once they met hers, and flickered up to meet them again several times. He was ... sad. A lifetime of conversations, of actions, of events, of decisions and anarchy and vengeance and justice and conquest and secrets and learning flashed before her eyes, of her and her friend Daniel. Her quiet, monotone friend, supporter of all her endeavors, was torn. More emotion than she had ever seen on his face in the centuries that she had known him.

His eyes flickered to her, then back to Natasha.

"Sire, you..." Natasha twisted to get free, but Damien held her strong. "Sire, you c-c-can't-t-t-t ... give int-t-to these ... monsters."

If only it was that simple, girl. Daniel had only ever sired two, one long long ago, and that was tragedy for him. Antoinette could not imagine what sort of emotional wreckage her friend had to dig through to build up to siring Natasha. It was not a choice she envied.

Daniel, with sadness etched into his face with pain, fell to his knees. Jack gave a tiny gasp, echoed by the host of terrorist in her home.

"Ah, it is the way of things is it not?" Lucas stepped around in front of the crowd of cultists, and made another sweep of his arm with the old sword. "Our childer, our future. And for some, our weakness."

Damien winced. Antoinette noticed it, just that quick snap of the lip edge, but she noticed.

Lucas smiled. "I knew it would be too much to ask you to kill the Prince for us, but understand that if you intervene, sheriff, your childe's ashes will scatter the floor."

"You ... you will all die if you touch her." Daniel's voice was a broken thing, wavering and cracked.

"We have faith, sheriff. You should try it sometime. And you," the Archbishop said, and he pointed that silly sword at her once again, "you, I suppose, will not step down just because I hold your friend's childe hostage?"

"I think not. She is not my childe, and this is my city." She took another step forward, and unfurled her fingers like claws at her side. "I am going to kill every last one of you."

Jack was still around. The fool boy had at least moved aside and out of the way of the inevitable carnage, but he was poking his head out from behind one of the pillars near the stairway to the depths of her castle. The boy was still wearing the tuxedo he wore last night, and a Ventrue was nothing without weapons or servants.

She, on the other hand, found herself looking forward to finishing this with her bare hands. As long as she kept herself between the zealots and Jack, this would be easy.

"It is ok Daniel." She set her hand on her friend's shoulder; he did not move. "He will not touch her if you do not intervene."

Daniel did not even move, he simply knelt there, head lowered, eyes flickering between the floor and the feet of the mob before them. To see her friend so ruined was enough reason for her to tear Lucas's teeth out, force them through his eyes and into his withered, worthless insides.

Better yet, she was going to make Lucas's flock do it for her.

She stepped forward a few more times, reached out her hand, and pointed it at the crowd of Kindred. “Kneel.”

She dug deep into herself, far into the endless reservoirs of vitae she had to muster. Elder Kindred harvested blood, coveted it, held it dear inside them and pooled it into oceans within. And when they wanted to, they could draw on that ocean to unleash the absurd.

Forgive me Jack.

The aura was invisible, but not subtle. Like a goddess, like a succubus, her presence filled the room, overflowed and overwhelmed everyone within. As if a divine spotlight was on her, and only her, every mind would bend, break, and succumb to her allure. The beast in their guts would bow, beg, and their every desire would be replaced with a need to serve her.

And it was working. She grinned at Lucas when, like a choir preaching to their new god, his flock began to fall to their knees. One by one, they went wide-eyed at the sight of her as she broke them with something they could not see, but only feel. Lucas was out of her reach, as was Daniel, but everyone else was enthralled, enslaved, and defeated. She was their goddess. If a choir of angels had joined the sudden silence to announce her presence, it would have been only too perfect.

Damien and Natasha were beginning to fall, and Jack beside her was already on his knees with gaping jaw. It broke her insides to see him enslaved, to see his honest face ruined by such fake admiration. Those beautiful eyes of his were empty of anything but total love for her, but like a perfect doll, devoid of anything real. She would make it up to him later, if the poor boy could look her in the eyes again. It would kill her, if she damaged the normal look in his eyes she cherished so much.

Lucas noticed, and reached down to pluck Natasha from Damian before Daniel had the opportunity to act. The elder’s grip was more

than enough to pluck Natasha's head from her body in an instant, if it was needed.

"This serpent is strong. Step aside children," Lucas said. "And behold the glory of God." Then the damn idiot zealot held the sword high, and started to hum a hymn.

Antoinette rolled her eyes and stepped closer. "You cannot be serious." He was just a Mehket. His were the powers of speed, secrets, and shadows. He had no way to stop her majesty.

But then the sword started to glow.

Everyone stopped moving. The Lancea et Sanctum backed away, gasped, and froze. Jack's jaw dropped even more. Daniel raised his head, and even his mouth parted. Natasha and Damien gazed up at the glowing sword with stunned faces. Even Antoinette, despite herself, raised her gaze in surprise and watched, shocked.

Only Lucas was smiling. "I pray unto thee, O Lord, to smite the wicked. Your will be done."

She would have gagged, if not for the increasing glow of the sword. Soon, the lobby itself was bathed in so much light, she worried that the sun had risen and she did not notice. Many vampires raised their arms and covered their eyes, but not Lucas, and not her. They both gazed at the searing light, blinded but unable to look away.

For a brief moment, she thought she was looking at the sun again. Old, dead memories of ten lifetimes ago flooded her. She remembered standing on a street, horses with carriages were trotting by, and a man was holding her hand. The air was filled with the sound of hooves on cobblestone, calls of the crowd chatting about their day, wearing frilly dresses and fancy vest tuxedos. She could smell the sea.

And like lightning, the light cracked white and streaked outward into the air. Then thunder that vibrated the glass tower and the earth it rested on, until it nearly cracked. A wave of invisible weight pushed against them all, as if the air was water, and it threatened to crush her. All she could do was stand there, confused, dazed, eyes wide, and let the madness consume them.

A second crack of lightning, but this time the sword Lucas held incinerated from the explosive crash of white energy. The lightning smashed into her chest, and she fell to her knees as the weight increased a hundred fold for a single moment. Everything went black before coming back as blurry shapes, so the crowd of robes before her were blended together like mist.

They were getting up, her majesty discipline broken. She reached out with a hand and dug deep into her insides, but the vitae would not rise. She could still feel the vitae coursing through her fingers, toes, through her chest and her eyes, but when she tried to use it to engulf the lobby in her majesty, it was blocked.

With time, her vision started to return, but nausea and pain coursed through her. She reached out and steadied herself against a pillar, and her other hand rested on Jack's shoulder.

“ ... Jack? Jack please, you must ... get ... downstairs.”

“He just hit you with lightning!”

“A miracle, boy!” the Archbishop said. All that remained of Lucas's sword was dust at the zealot's feet.

Antoinette scoffed, and dug her nails into the rivets of the pillar to try and stand straighter, but for all her proud posturing, it was taking effort to not lean on Jack. “Sorcery. Theban sorcery.”

“Strong are the miracles of God, Dragon. Now my children, bring her down. She cannot enchant us with her serpent gaze any longer.”

Lucas chuckled, a dark chuckle, something a cartoon villain would do. Did his flock not hear it? Could they not see how deranged and psychotic their leader was?

The crowd of Kindred started to stalk forward toward her, like hungry but desperate animals. They had crazed looks in their eyes, and they lowered their hoods when they got closer to her.

She pushed out against Jack, hard, and sent him flying back against the wall toward the stairwell and down. There was no way to escape her tower's deeper levels, as such escape routes often backfired an elder. Now, all she wished was that she had such a route for that damn fool boy who should have been running.

And poor Daniel was forced to watch it all from only ten feet away.

“Wow, she looks wrecked!”

“Yeah, this’ll be easy.”

“Faith. Reward for our faith.”

“The Archbishop will be Prince before the night is done!”

They had knives, large ones, they had pistols, they even had shotguns. Nothing military, nothing extreme. If they had taken more time they could have perhaps armed themselves appropriately, but in their hubris they came unprepared. Their mistake. She had no sheriff, she could not use her majesty discipline, she was outnumbered, but she was going to kill every last one of them herself.

At first she feigned weakness, trembling, her body against the pillar like it was the only thing keeping her up. For a moment it was true, but she found the strength in her bones. Once they encircled her, that confidence in their eyes like poison, that was when she



struck out. She did not need to enthrall these fools to destroy them, no, she had all the strength and speed of any Daeva, and that speed was a blinding blur of motion and force. The first one, she grabbed by the throat and slammed it back into the pillar she was leaning against. If the Kindred had any intentions of protest, they were rendered meaningless by a destroyed larynx.

But she did not stop with merely crushing the enemy's throat. With no time to play with her prey, she struck hard. The vampire's throat crushed inward, then into the spine, and then apart as Antoinette's hand cut through withered vampire flesh and bone until her grip found the marble of her tower's pillar. The body fell away, and the girl's head sat on her hand for a moment before it rolled off to the side. She glared anger into the young Kindred's face even as the woman she just killed blinked at her. Then the dead vampire fell apart to ash.

She turned to the three Kindred who surrounded her; they jumped away, but not before she managed to grab the one with the shotgun, the dangerous one. Her first kill had forced her right hand against the pillar, but she spun with the motion so her left hand could grab the other in a reverse spin. Her hand was open palm so her fingers sunk into the Kindred's skull, through bone, into teeth and ashy flesh from the strength of the impact. The grip was more than enough for her to pull the arm in as fast as she could, and smash the Kindred's face into the same pillar.

There was a split moment where the Kindred she had caught could not understand that Antoinette had driven her fingers into their skull, eyes wide with shock, but it all went away when their face crumbled against the pillar.

The result was explosive. For a single second, she could feel bone resist, but then it collapsed and exploded in a mess of dark, Kindred blood, hair, bone and eyes. She didn't bother to keep her gaze locked with his as he dispersed into the tiny flames of death before ash was

all that was left. There would be more than enough death eyes tonight.

She slowly turned to face the stunned crowd of onlookers, curled and uncurled her fingers, and growled. Thick clumps of warm ash fell from her palms like death's tears. The Kindred closest to her were terrified. Good.

“Come then.”

She could faintly hear Jack calling out for help into his phone as the hail of gunfire began.

## Chapter 22

~~Julias~~

“Natasha is here! Lucas has her held hostage! Everything is—”

More gunfire, and the line went dead after a single, static snap.

“Shit shit shit shit shit.”

He wasted no time. He jumped out of bed and got dressed while he walked toward his office. Office was a strong word, it was just a room with a computer, and all the weapons he preferred up on the walls. A pistol, a small shotgun, another pistol, a large knife, a small sword, all slipped into various places on his body once he started putting on his belt, vest holster, and suit jacket over top the small armory.

Hold on Jack, I’m coming.

He started dialing his phone when Beatrice grabbed it from him.

“The fuck are you doing?” she said.

He almost echoed the words. “Summoning the Invictus! I’m going to save my childe.”

Beatrice kept the phone at bay when he reached for it. “Fuck man, you’re a fucking Invictus triumvirate! If you get between the Ordo Dracul and the Lancea et Sanctum, shit is going to get ugly.”

“Ugly? You have got t—”

“Lucas is there for the Prince, and no one’s going to agree to fight a war because of the death of one young neonate.”

The urge to smash her face into the wall hit him with enough force to surprise him. He had to blink a few times and shake his head to dislodge the compulsion.

“Natasha is there too! She might die as well. And since when did you care about any of this?”

Her eyes dropped, and she handed him back the phone. “I don’t want a war. I wasn’t here for the last one but I bet a lot of Kindred will die if there’s another. Just let those two fight each other and the strongest one will come out on top.”

Was she serious? He glared hard enough to crucify her, and she looked away like a guilty child. He didn’t buy it. Beatrice enjoyed violence; maybe not to the level of a war, but she was always one of the first ready to throw a fist.

“And if Jack gets killed in the process?”

She winced. “Hey I don’t want the kid to die either.”

His grinded his teeth down inside his mouth until he could practically feel them falling apart. “I have to do something. How the fuck are they even managing an attack? The sheriff is there.”

Beatrice tilted her head to the side and started to pick her teeth with her claws. She leaned against the wall, wearing absolutely nothing, and let her eyes roll upward in thought.

“I...”

“I what?” he said. Bitterness was in his voice, and he didn’t care. She was the one stopping him from interfering, and that meant his childe could die. Worse, she was right. If Jack did die, it was doubtful the Invictus would go to war with the judges over it, even if he was a childe of one of the triumvirate.

“I ... guess it might be because of Natasha.”

“What, Natasha? Why? Why is she even at the tower?”

She was hesitating, he could see it all over her. Why didn't she want to tell him. Even with him staring at her, she started to walk back into the master bedroom. He followed after her, and glared at her while she got dressed. She was stalling.

“Look, this is exactly what I was worried about. Shit is—”

“The fuck. About. Natasha?”

Enough games. He tried to keep calm, to be polite, kind, to try and understand it from her perspective, but his patience was tightened to nothing but a wire strand. Jack was in danger. Right the fuck now, Jack was in danger and everything was between him and doing something about it.

“Maria and Lucas are old flames, yeah? And Natasha works for Maria.”

“Mhmm.” He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the door frame. There was that little kernel of Ventrue inside him that wanted to reach out and force her to tell him everything, force her to obey. He wouldn't do that, he wasn't Viktor, and he loved her. But holy fuck every bit of him was being torn in half.

“Natasha is the sheriff's childe.”

Glass shattered in his mind. “Natasha...”

Tiny, skinny, little Natasha. She was fast, and she had great Mehket eyes. Secrets and shadows were her world, and Julias knew she was always a step above the typical Mehket her age in that regard. But in a fight, she was only as useful as the gun she was

carrying. Her stuttering, her shy demeanor, her inability to even look someone in the eye, it always threw him.

But then, there was the sheriff, the most quiet man Julias had ever known. It fit so well, it made him nauseous that he never pieced it together. It hurt that she never told him; they'd worked together for decades. Questions and questions and more damn questions ate at him.

And then, how did Beatrice know? He'd have to ask her, later, when everything stopped burning to cinders around him.

"You ... you think..."

"Yeah, I do," Beatrice said. "I haven't seen Daniel much, but he ... he had that somber look in his eyes, you know? Like you used to all the time." She walked up to him, wearing the dress she was last night, and poked him in the forehead with a claw. "In that sad way that just begs for someone to come along and fill it. Someone who could have their heart strings tugged at easily, if you knew where to tug."

That stung, but she was right, and he knew it. Just like that, he was the one getting a lecture.

Then she put her hand on his. "So I'm thinking Lucas is holding her hostage and forcing the sheriff to stand down while he deals with the Prince."

"I can't believe he has her! He can't just take an Invictus hostage, not unless he wanted to risk war with the Invict—"

Maria. That bitch. The fucking stupid, vain, twisted bitch. She gave Lucas permission to use Natasha, she must have!

He turned around and headed down the main stairs.

“Julias? Hey! Where you going?”

“I am going to the Elysium tower. Alone.”

“Without the Invictus? Are you fucking insane?” The Nosferatu jumped straight over him and landed between him and the door of his mansion. “You could get killed!”

He tried to push past her, but the damn Nosferatu put her claws against his chest and pushed him back. He was bigger than her, tougher, but she was much stronger, and pushing him back was easy for the little monster.

“Get out of my way Beatrice.”

“No.” She backed herself against the huge door, and put herself dead center between its two sides. “Lucas is there to kill the Prince. You heard the gunfire! Jack could already be dead!”

“Get out of my way.” He approached her and tried to push her aside, with strength this time, but the Nosferatu twisted his grip away and pushed him back like he weighed nothing.

“Come on Julias! You’re going to get killed, and I don’t want that!”

He tried again, grabbed her wrist, put one hand against her shoulder, and put his weight into a throw. She struggled against him, lighter than him, but she got a foot behind his and pushed him backward hard enough that he flew backward ten feet. The monster wasn’t going anywhere.

“Damn it Beatrice, I have to help him!” He yelled at her from the floor, but didn’t bother to get up. She’d just knock him down again.

“What about me? Huh? What the fuck about me? You’re going to get killed and I’ll be alone...”

“I—”

She stomped forward and slammed a clawed foot into the floor in front of him. “No! No you don’t just throw yourself into the middle of shit like you have a death wish.” Then she kicked him in the boot, hard, hard enough to send him back a bit and send a spike of pain up his limb. “I thought ... you wouldn’t ... cause I’m...”

He was down on his ass, glaring up at the Nosferatu trying to stop him from dying. If a Ventrue’s weakness was hubris, a Nosferatu’s was loneliness. The look in her eyes was heartbreaking, gut wrenching, and every part of him wanted to get up and hold her. God he wanted to hold her, stroke her hair and promise her he wouldn’t leave her like it was some sixties movie.

But he had to save Jack.

“ ... Ok.”

“Ok?”

“Yes, ok. I won’t Rambo in there.” He held out a hand to her.

“Fucking good.” She reached down and plucked him up with enough force to almost yank the shoulder from his socket.

He looked at her, looked down, looked at her some more, and he could feel his face range from sorrow to fury, back and forth as he struggled with it. He could feel Jack pulling at him, like some invisible thread that caught his throat and was pulling him toward his childe. It was as mindless and powerful as a mother’s idiot urge to sacrifice herself to save her child even when it was hopeless.

But Beatrice was glaring up at him, and when she put her claws on his shoulders, her snake eyes penetrated him like knives. Her expressions mirrored his own, half angry and half terrified.



“I have to do something though, anything,” he said.

“Then just ask.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Just. Ask.” She stepped in closer, lowered her hands to his sides, and hugged him. Actually hugged him, complete with her face pressed against his chest and her body close to his. “I can help, you stupid fucking cunt fuckhead.”

“I di—”

“Yeah I know what you didn’t want to do, fuckwad. But fuck you and your white knight bullshit.” Even as she tore into him, she kept her face buried into the jacket of his suit, like a little girl holding her teddy.

He really was fucking stupid. It was only a year ago when he was alone, with no child and no love, and that’s how it had been for decades. Now this woman was hugging him, holding him, squeezing him like he’d vanish in a puff of smoke if she loosened her grip. He didn’t know what to do, all he could think to do was protect the new things he’d been given.

“Hey,” he said, and he raised his arms to hug the creature buried against his chest. “You’re right.”

“Yeah.”

He laughed. “Yeah. It’s just been me for a while since I’ve had anyone. And now...”

She pulled her head away, looked up at him, and clicked her teeth side to side. “And now you’ve got a girl and a kid. Yeah, I get it. But do I look like a fucking trophy wife?”

“No, no you most definitely do not.”

“Hey! Calling me ugly?” He should have seen that coming. One moment she was frowning at him, the next she was punching him, but then she smiled. “So, you going to ask?”

“ ... will you help me save Jack?”

“Of course I’ll help you save your childe you stupid god damn fuckhead.”

---

~~Jack~~

“Julias! Get help, get fucking help! Here! Now!”

“What’s going on?”

“Natasha is here! Lucas has her held hostage! Everything is-”

The phone exploded in his hand.

He didn’t see who shot the smartphone, but whoever they were they were was one fucking crack shot. And worse still, the other Kindred started unloading bullets upon bullets upon bullets toward Antoinette at the same time. He wanted to jump in there and do something, but dozens of robed Kindred swarmed across the lobby toward them both.

The mob started to march forward, and with them came more and more bullets. The marble pillars of the lobby chipped and tore apart, and the walls around Jack showered him in chipped rock and metal. The gunfire was no longer just pointed at Antoinette, but him as well. He’d survived getting his body nearly cut in half once, but it was a very close call. He wouldn’t be able to survive what Antoinette could, what Viktor could. So he did the only thing he could do as more robed Kindred approached him: he backed away, down the stairway and out of the lobby.

Below him was the underground network of the Prince's facilities. Black marble walls, a stairway, multiple floors, and deep rooms filled with all sorts of luxuries. But there was no escape from down there. Secure to a fault. Still, it was either that, or deal with the two Kindred who were now at the top of the stairs. They wouldn't kill him, like they wouldn't kill Natasha, unless they had to.

But that didn't mean they wouldn't put twenty bullets into his feet just to make sure he didn't interfere. And he really wanted to interfere. He could hear the gunfire, he could hear the odd sound of bullets colliding with ash with his vampire ears, and he could hear the screams of terror of Kindred. He'd only seen Antoinette kill two of them before he was forced back into the stairway, but the sheer speed and brutal strength of it was sickening.

This time, he got a clear view of the brutality when his lover attacked the two approaching Kindred from behind. It was almost comical when both her hands appeared through the Kindred's robes, out through the chest straight through the center. Her hands were flat; she used the tips of her fingers like some sort of blade so she could jam her hands through their bodies.

That wasn't enough to kill a Kindred though, and Jack had to look away when the Prince swung her hands outward to either side of her with such force, the two Kindred ripped in half.

It only took a couple seconds, but both Kindred had just enough time to start screaming before their bodies fell to ash. One of them didn't fully turn to ash, but instead turned into a husk of withered skin and bone. A young Kindred, like him.

"Jack!" Antoinette said. "You must—"

A bullet tore through her face. One moment, Antoinette was standing at the top of the stairs, looking down at him, and the next she was missing a large chunk of her cheek and some teeth. The flesh ripped open, and her teeth provided just enough impact

resistance that the bullet continued forward and ripped one half-side of her lips to bits. The pieces of her flesh splattered outward, and turned into tiny flashes of cinder, then ash in a single second.

Before Jack could even say anything, she was diving forward and out of the line of fire. She scooped him up with enough force that he could feel a rib break, but he was too shocked to even react. All he could do was blink as she carted them down the stairway and into the first level of her underground facilities.

“If only I had listened to Tony,” she said. Her voice was quiet hisses between clenched, ruined teeth. “His network had many escape routes. Mine has none; I did not think them worth the risk of invasion.” She got around a corner and put her back to it, Jack still held to her chest. “I never thought someone would risk a kamikaze assault through my front door.”

He tried to speak, but instead he just gazed at the sight of her shredded face. It was healing before his very eyes, pale flesh reaching out with the thick, dark blood of Kindred and weaving strands of skin and bone. He could actually see her teeth reforming – not regrowing, reforming – in her mouth.

She set him down, and pushed him further behind the wall with her hand to his chest. “Stay down.”

“I—” As if they were waiting for him to speak, gunfire started tearing into the wall corner they were hiding behind. Bits of black marble chipped away in small explosions of impact again and again and again until the air was filled with dust and rock.

He looked around, panic creeping up his legs. Hiding wasn't an option, not really. They'd find them eventually and there was no escape route. They could hide until the police showed up? That would only lead to a mountain of dead police. They could fight? But then he was useless, and whatever that lightning did to Antoinette had gutted her ability to enchant.

Fuck he really wished he had a gun.

“Prince,” a voice called out. “Come out and die with honor.”

Antoinette scoffed. “There is no honor in death, worthless boy. Daniel should never have spared a zealot such as you.”

---

~~Damien~~

He gritted his teeth until his jaw cracked. “Spare me? I was just one of many fledglings, innocent and weak. I had assumed I simply escaped your notice as you slaughtered the priests we looked up to!”

He crept further along the wall, sword in his right hand, pistol in his left. The ridiculous weapon combination worked well for a Kindred who could handle the recoil with one hand, and he had spent fifty years mastering it. All for this moment.

The Prince stuck her head out from around the wall, just enough to take a peak, and he wasted no time taking a shot. He was fast, faster than any Mehket his age should be; fifty years of constant vigilance saw to that.

But she still managed to dodge it. She was an ancient creature, filled with oceans of vitae, and with far more experience than he and the entire mob he brought with him combined.

It was a good thing the mob were going to be his shield, to give him the moment to strike when it presented itself. With a low sigh, he sneaked a peak at his fellow Kindred. Some were still with Lucas in the building’s lobby, but many had joined him down the stairway into the snake’s tunnels. Thirty robed vampires.

Thirty meat shields.

He went silent, absolutely silent, like only a Mehket or Nosferatu could, and approached the corner of the wall. The others though, he

motioned for them to approach with no such subtlety, but out in the middle of the hallway the stair had opened up into. He could drink in the strange sights of the Ordo Dracul architecture later; the long, coiling dragons carved into the black marble with white streaks could wait.

Three of his mob jumped around the corner, all with pistols at the ready, but they did not fire.

Damien frowned and stuck his head around the corner. Nothing. Just a long, empty hallway that went on for some distance, with several doors along its sides.

He could keep going down the stairway, or turn around and go in the other direction of the hallway, but it was a fool's hope that they would connect behind the hallway the Prince had fled down. He stepped into the only option left and walked down the hallway with slow, testing steps. His army did the same.

"I see where Tony learned to love tunnels," he said.

"Tony learned much from me." Her voice carried in the hallway, and despite his ears he could not pinpoint it. There were vents, no doubt for the ghouls the Prince pampered to breathe. Perhaps she was using those to send her voice? That meant the snake was hiding in one of the rooms. He grinned. The hell he would unleash upon her once he found her would be all the sweeter if she was trapped like a rat.

The first door, he had one of his Nosferatu kick open, but inside laid only ornamental things. Paintings, drawings, and old, occult objects he did not understand. He grunted, and moved on.

"Tony was a vile snake," he said to the air.

"Agreed." Again her voice echoed off the walls. It had to be coming from down the hallway, but beyond that he could not tell.

“Don’t act like you’re so above him. He was your childe, and like you said, he learned much from you.”

The robes around him nodded and hummed agreement. He could see the fear and worry in their eyes, but also that powerful righteousness of a child of the Lancea et Sanctum. He tried to take pride in that, but found only bile.

“Tony is dead, and I have only regret for his actions.”

“Bullshit! Do you regret when he killed priest Marken? Or Bishop Vance?”

Silence.

“That’s right, your anarchist childe killed Sanctified! But his acts pale in comparison to what you, your sheriff, and that fool Garry Tones did.”

More silence. His anger was starting to creep up into his fingers now, up into his skull until it blinded him. He was very much aware he was letting his fury force him to speak, instead of controlling his tongue, but he no longer cared.

“Speak, demon! You killed so many of us! Servants of God!”

The mob at his side hollered and grunted and cheered, but instead of joining them, Damien only managed a quiet groan. They hadn’t been there, none of the Kindred at his side were old enough to have been present for the purge, and their enthusiasm for this snake hunt saddened him. A lust for violence was in them just as much as any belief in their God, but they had no reason to be so enraptured in the hunt, not like him. They were just thugs following Lucas’s orders, with an ache to fill their cravings for brutality.

They were his shield for God?

Again the voice whispered through the hallway. “You act as if Lucas is innocent. Your sire is a monster.”

“Lies!” This time it was his fellows who called out to the dark hallway.

Damien didn’t say anything. Natasha, now Antoinette, they both said the same thing. All Damien could remember from so long ago was a caring family of priests and Bishops, the great Lucas and his mighty word.

Not now, later. He could rebuild the shattered pieces of that serene painting later.

Another door. The muscle at his side tore this one open as well, with Nosferatu strength and claws and mutations working through metal and marble. A host of his bodyguards stayed out in the hallway with guns at the ready, but those that followed him into the room came to a stunned stop just as quickly as Damien did.

The room was massive, circular, like a stadium built into the earth. The floor was covered in white lines in what could only be described as a complex weave of mathematical patterns. Circles upon circles upon circles drawn in joined spirals at perfect angles, with every trigonometric math pattern he recognized, and many he did not, connecting into a tapestry of language. The walls of the room were painted with the same white dragons that were found in much of the Prince’s inner domain, and the ceiling held a hanging chandelier of twinkling crystal dangling below blue flames.

“What ... is this?” one of the Kindred asked. The Nosferatu approached the blue-lit room, got to a knee, and put his claws against the floor within the circle.

Everyone jumped back when the floor rippled, like water.

“What insanity is—”



“A Wurm’s Nest.” Damien put his hand onto the Kindred’s shoulder and pulled them back. “I am sure the serpent studies this, and attempts to circumvent God’s curse. Let us begone.”

“What’s a—”

“Do not ask.” He ushered the few Kindred who followed him back out into the hallway. What power the Prince harnessed there, he would let Lucas handle it. The Ordo Dracul held more secrets than any covenant, and their twisted, hidden ways were beyond him.

“You built your tower upon a Wurm’s Nest, snake? How arrogant do you presume to be?” he said to the walls.

The voice mixed a whisper with a chuckle. “Tony did the same.”

They all stopped. “W-what?”

No answer. Tony’s nest was built on a Wurm’s Nest?

“Bishop Damien, what does she mean?” A woman, Gangrel, came up to him and stared at him with scared eyes.

Damien shook his head. “Focus. She deceives, like the snake in the garden. Focus.” He pointed ahead, and they all started to march again.

Deep and deeper still the hall went into the earth, much as any of Tony’s tunnels did. Despite the loud march of his army’s boots, no words or actions from the Prince came. Eerie silence was all that awaited them. But after a time, the hallway came to a stop, and a single door remained at its end.

Damien motioned with his fingers, and again his mindless muscle tore the metal apart. Or rather, tried. The deformed Kindred wrap his claws around the handle of the rather flat and unceremonious door, but it did not budge.

Considering a Nosferatu or Daeva, even young ones, had the strength to throw a person like a baseball, this did indeed surprise Damien. “Zed, Karla, Casey, Mark.”

Two Daevas, another Nosferatu, and a Gangrel stepped up and joined their brother. Hands, claws, and animal ferocity join in. The Gangrel Zed, in particular, managed to morph his hands into monstrous claws that were just as strong as the dark metal they were trying to tear apart. With five sets of Kindred muscle, devoted and faithful, prying at the door, it finally began to bend. Metal and marble screeched in pain, specs and sparks tore at its structure, and the dark hallway of black was opened up to a cast light from the room that waited them.

It was like watching a group of monsters peel open a particularly stubborn can of sardines.

But with time, the door opened. Damien held his sword at the ready with one hand, gun in the other, and watched with careful eyes. She was in there, in this room. He could feel her. He could smell her. The light that crept around the corners of the peeled and bent door beckoned him like a beacon. She was right in there.

And once the door was open, it was the others who rushed past him to secure the room. His shields, Lucas had said. His brainwashed, sad, pathetic, idiot shields. His new friends. More of them were going to die, in the very room they were rushing into. Don't think about it, don't worry about it. Focus.

Before them was a large room with all the amenities any kine could hope for. Again it was black marble, but the color of the bed, the furniture in the corners, the desks and dressers and the fancy sink, all of it had the tone of life. Now that he was in the room, he could smell it too, the smell of flesh and blood.

The Prince's ghouls were in here. He couldn't see them, but he could smell them, and he could almost hear the sound of

heartbeats. This was their room.

“Her two ghouls are here. Find them. Kill one, and hold the other hostage,” Damien said. That would bring her out of hiding, and enrage her. A foe blinded by anger was an easy kill. He knew that all too well, and was doing all he could to keep his own rage from boiling over.

“You got it, Bish—”

A fist collided with Zed’s face so fast, the Kindred was left a headless corpse one moment, then a pile of ash and burning robe the next.

---

~~Antoinette~~

Jack and the girls were in the bathroom of the ghouls’ room. To think that all that stood between the death of those closest to her was just a flimsy bit of metal without even a lock, made her whole body vibrate with rage. She would not have this, could not have this.

The door to Ashley and Julee’s bedroom was strong, but it was not the vault door of her room. She could have tried to run past the mob and hid in her room when they had first attacked, but to do so would have doomed her ghouls and potentially her sheriff. This whole ordeal made it painfully obvious that she should have listened to her childe Tony, and used connected tunnels with more modern defenses, something that could be used to counter-attack. A giant vault door was useless for protecting those you cared about.

She was not in the bathroom. She was above the entrance to the bedroom, back to the wall and nails sunk into the marble, just beneath the high ceiling. The cost to repair all this damage was just icing on the cake for her hatred.

The sound of a group of Kindred peeling open the huge door was a screeching announcement of the inevitable.

They poured into the room, arrogant and bloated with defiance. Robes upon robes, guns of varying sizes, and every blood clan of the Kindred flowed into the bedroom of her ghouls like locusts. Once they were all inside, contained and within arm's reach, she would slaughter them. Patience. She did everything in her power to suppress her presence the way Daniel taught her, but she was no Mehket or Nosferatu; they would find her above the doorway sooner or later. All they had to do was look up.

Then Damien walked in last, her target. The other robes were pressed too close together, too many knives and swords at the ready, for her to jump into the middle of the swarm without losing her head. Just step away from the crowd, little Mehket, and I will clean up the mistake Daniel made fifty years ago sparing your worthless second life.

“Her two ghouls are here. Find them. Kill one, and hold the other hostage.”

A flash of red drenched her eyes. Rage so thick it blinded her, coated everything blood red, and had her body tremble with anticipation. Kill them. She was going to kill every last one of them. She would not let them kill her precious ones, not again, not this time.

One of them was turning around. He was going to see her.

“You got it Bish—”

Her fist found this one's face. One moment she was on the wall, and the next she was on the floor, on her feet and hands. She landed with enough force that her claws dug into the floor, and she skidded along it from the inertia. Her fingernails left trails of ruined marble

where they scratched through the floor. She had already turned around when realization dawned on everyone's faces.

To her, it was slow motion, a dance of ages. The Kindred she had killed was crumbling beside her, his head was rolling on the floor already, and in the moment he burst into the smallest spark of flames in second death, she pounced. Thirty robes entered the room, twenty-nine remained.

“Kill her!”

The bishop. Damien. His face seemed determined, yet morose, and split with bitter anger, but it was no matter. He was going to die along with the rest of them.

The nearest Kindred had a knife, long and shining; it even had a cross carved into its blade. There was just a flicker of awareness in this enemy Daeva's mind that they were not going to survive, just a blink of sadness, but Antoinette did not care. What sympathy she may have had was buried in centuries of shell and concrete, well beyond the reach of this poor fool, even as her hand snapped out with a whip crack and her fingers sank into his skull. She did not bother to hold eye contact as she drove her other hand into their chest, and ripped their head off.

Bullets. A swarm of shards of metal fell upon her, each with their own crack of lightning and resounding thunder. She was fast though, and she did not stop moving just to kill one Kindred; that was done in a flowing motion of momentum.

One bullet managed to clip her shoulder. She could feel the metal tear through her pale flesh and into withered, dry insides, but her vitae was quick to repair and close the hole. It did not matter, she could barely feel it with all her focus on the kill, and she kept pushing forward into the crowd of confused and panicking vampires. Another clipped her leg; again she ignored it. Once she

was close to the sea of robes, the bullets stopped, and they had no choice but to engage her in melee.

A Nosferatu with a classically deformed face came at her, and she reached out to grab their jaw. But with all the impatience and lack-of-skill of a brawler, the Nosferatu did not try to engage in combat so much as throw himself at her. The weight of their large body was enough to hinder her forward movement, and then it only got worse when a large Gangrel jumped in beside Antoinette and reached out with her protean claws.

She would have none of it. It took both hands to keep the Nosferatu from pushing her over, and she dug both sets of her fingers into their hair and scalp before driving their face downward and into her rising knee. The pressure was enough to crush his nose and force her knee into their skull, like crushing a pumpkin with a mallet. The Gangrel got his claws onto Antoinette, but they were not strong enough to stop her from demolishing their friend's skull.

But now she had animal claws, huge and powerful, wrapped around her arms while two more Kindred stepped into the chaos and slashed at her with short swords.

She slammed her foot down onto the one holding her, straight into the middle of their own foot with her bare heel. There was a satisfying crunch sound from how the bones in the foot arch snapped, and the scream that followed signaled the Gangrel's grip loosening. She slammed her elbow back, hard enough to split the Kindred's chest open and break the bones of the sternum; not enough to kill a vampire but enough that they were out of the equation.

The two Kindred taking swings at her with their weapons found her arms were free, and she stepped into their swings to get her fingers around their hands, with the grips of the weapons trapped in their palms. Then she squeezed. Fingers snapped, wrists twisted,

and twisted even more when she yanked her hands back with enough force to send both Kindred flying backward. The force was enough to rip their hands from their wrists, and their mangled digits fell apart into ash within her grasp.

There was a third one with a sword. She hadn't noticed; so many robes, they all blended together like a cloud of fabrics. This woman got her sword straight into Antoinette's side, deep into her waist and intestines. The sensation of smooth metal passing through insides was cold fire. Idiot girl was young and didn't understand how to kill a Kindred. Antoinette backhanded her with a closed fist, which sent the unlucky assailant spinning down onto the floor, only to have the Prince step onto her skull and slam her foot down to pop her head with explosive force.

“Get her, get her!”

Antoinette turned to face the crowd, and she smiled at the sight of fear in their eyes as she plucked the foot of metal from her side like an annoying splinter.

But then two of them pulled out shotguns. A stab wound was nothing. A bullet wound was only slightly more inconvenient. A shotgun turning your torso into splatter art was another thing entirely. She put all her energy into a side leap, but the sea of robes had already started to circle her. Her body collided with several Kindred, and then everything became chaos.

Limbs piled over limbs. With robes in the way, everything became a mess of cloth, but it was alright as long as she felt flesh where her hands and feet were. She sank her claws into something, someone, and ripped whatever it was off of the body that held it. No time to know who or what, just tear and rip until she heard the screams of pain.

During all this chaos, Damien was watching. She managed glimpses of him between the Kindred as they swarmed her, but if he

did not want to join the madness, that was fine. She would kill him last if she had to.

A few seconds of killing later, her hand found someone's face, and she sank her elder claws into their eyes before slamming their head into the marble floor with more than enough force to crack bone. She used the momentum to push herself into a stand, half-covered in robes and ashes, but rising from the mess of limbs only earned the remaining Kindred a free shot at her with their weapons.

She tried to jump up and out of the way, but one of the injured at her feet grabbed her ankle. There was only enough time for her to curse. "Salaud!"

Bullets tore into her like paper. She was no elder Gangrel or Ventrue, she had no way to prevent the bullets from cutting into her and rending flesh from bone. The several Kindred that were near her were firing pistols as fast as their fingers let them, and another who had somehow acquired a fully automatic rifle was holding down the trigger. Even Kindred strength could not keep their panicked shots from firing wide, but from so close, all that meant was many of the bullets aimed for her chest hit her arms, her legs, and her face.

She reached down, plucked up the injured Kindred who had grabbed her leg, and held their body in front of her. Just a second, just a moment to force her vitae into her wounds to close them.

She had to keep going, kill them all, slaughter them, anything to stop them from taking what she held dear. Hers! They were hers, she coveted them, held them to her and took care of them, Jack and Ashley and Julee and even Daniel. Hers. She had to save them.

The Kindred shield in her arms fell apart into ash and sizzling robes. Their comrades had destroyed their body with such ceaseless gunfire, that the young Kindred simply died. She pushed through the ash and pounced at the one of the assault rifle, even taking yet



another array of bullets into her stomach as she did. Her suit was nothing but tatters, and much of her bone and insides were exposed.

It did not matter, she could not stop.

She swung her hand out toward the Kindred's neck in a slicing motion, but she came up shallow. Her strength was more than enough to make her fingers and fingernails cut through flesh, but only the first half of the vampire's neck was cut open. They fell to the floor and held their ripped open neck in their hands where vitae started to drip out. They were young, and would not last.

Some Kindred were trying to help each other, to cover up wounds that were so massive that dark Kindred blood was pooling out onto the increasing pile of robes of ash and cinder. She would kill them later, but more Kindred circled her, and what few bullets they managed to land on her moving form were no longer healing quickly.

When the bullets stopped, another vampire came at her, this one with a fire axe. The approaching Ventrue looked both determined and terrified at once, but Antoinette could only feel the violent need of the beast within her chest. She stepped in toward the axe swing, caught the idiot Ventrue by the throat, and sidestepped the axe before shifting around behind the Ventrue to keep a wall of flesh between her and any more potential bullets. Her grip was enough to crush the girl's throat.

The chaos only got worse. One of the Kindred with the gun ran at her – panicked reasoning no doubt - and another with a sword came toward the side she kept her new flesh shield. She snapped out with her right leg, cracked the one in front of her in the temple with her bare foot, and sent the Kindred spinning sideways through the air with a broken neck. Antoinette went with the momentum of her leg, spun around, threw the one she was clutching by the neck behind her – her finger nails tore the assailant's neck to shreds – and

brought the foot down into a sweeping kick. The Mehket running at her fell, only for Antoinette to run over his body and use it as a step. She made sure to crush the fool child's skull into a splattering mess of bone and ash, and used the force to vault herself into the crowd that stood between her and Damien.

They were all just young Kindred. None of them were even over thirty-years embraced, not even ancillae, let alone elders. None of them were a threat, not really, not with this meager assault of nothing but guns and claws and knives. They had no speed, no strength, none of them had even attempted a true discipline against her. The bullet holes, the stab wounds, they would heal, and she could heal faster once these puerile infidels were exterminated. These cockroaches, these 'judges' needed to die.

She bolted for Damien; if she could kill him then maybe the others would crumble under the loss of their Bishop. But the circling robes caught onto her plan like a hive-mind of ants, and overwhelmed her from the front.

The first one got her fingers in his eye sockets. The second she grabbed by the throat, but a shotgun shell clipped her wrist and tore it open before she could squeeze. With the bone of her arm exposed, the muscle simply wasn't there to constrict, and the Kindred she had caught managed to pull away.

But she landed a kick hard enough into their side that they bent into a pretzel.

She ripped her fingers out of the other's skull, with flesh and ash clinging to her fingernails, and punched outward into the one with the shotgun when she triple-stepped toward them. Her whole body was a blur of force and velocity, and the punch crushed the vampire's jaw inward into an explosion of bone shards and teeth.

Movement. A blur, like her. She twisted, turned, did everything she could to pull back from her hasty movement, but it was too

slow. The shade of dark was just enough to flicker, like a crack of black lightning between the robes that flowed around her, and just a glint of metal.

It past her and came to a hard stop, landed with a grace not dissimilar to Daniel, and turned around to face her with sword in hand. Damien.

Antoinette looked in front of her, down, and blinked at the sight of her arm falling onto the floor. She did not feel it, she barely even noticed it, but from the center of her bicep down, her arm was gone. Thick, dark vampire blood came out of the smoothly cut flesh in slow drops.

Pain arrived a couple seconds later, a tidal wave of mind-splitting agony. Move. Do not stop. Her other hand was starting to replace and regrow the shredded wrist, but where once it would have been almost instantaneous, now it was taking time. The oceans of blood in her were dwindling more and more, and each bullet that found her made it that much harder. It did not matter. Move.

Two more Kindred, seeing an opportunity no doubt, rushed toward her. Balancing with only one arm was beyond difficult, but she spun around and kicked outward with sheer brutality into the closer one's chest. Elegance was gone, all that was left was the frenzy of the beast inside her. She even bared her fangs and hissed – how disgustingly juvenile of her – as she sent the Kindred back with a crushed rib cage.

She tried to switch feet on the return and do the same to the other Kindred with follow-up kick, but with only the one arm, the balance was flawed and the spin was slow.

Damien must have seen it. The boy was fast, so fast for one only fifty-years embraced. He came at her again with the same speed she used, but she was broken, bleeding, tired and blinded with pain and rage. She could not withdraw her leg fast enough.

This time, she fell onto the floor with a thud. For a second, she felt embarrassed at having fallen over; so unbecoming the Prince of Dolareido. But when she looked out across the floor, and saw that her leg was there, separated from her, it seemed silly to be embarrassed.

She looked over her shoulder at her removed arm; it had fallen to ash. When she looked back at her removed leg, it too fell to ash. She looked down at herself, and the realization crept up her spine with a sickening chill.

She was a mess of bone, holes, vampire blood, her suit was ruined and left in tatters, and her hair was awful. With only one arm and one leg left, she could not even get off the floor. Failure rested in her guts like acid, and joined the new layers of visceral pain. She could not stop herself from grimacing.

Damien walked over to her, stood over her, and glared with a sickening mess of anger, exhilaration, sadness, disgust, and chaos on his face. "You underestimated me."

"... I did." It was true. The young man matched her speed and struck at just the right times. So much like Daniel.

Damien growled. "Say it, snake. Say it again, say that Lucas is a monster. Say it!"

She coughed on the vampire blood in her guts until it was on her tongue. What did he want? Why was he doing this? The robed figures around her were as confused as she was.

Part of her wanted to cry. She could not save her lover, could not save her ghouls, could not even save Daniel. She had grown complacent and weak in the half-century of peace, had let weeds grow around her city and in her tower. But then, even if she had known, she felt she would have done it again. How else would she have met that fool boy Jack she loved so much?

She coughed on a chuckle. Love. How droll. The idea was such a faded thing, crumpled and worn, and only now was she taking it out of the garbage, straightening it, flattening it out, and holding it under the light to see if she could still see what it once said. It was—

A boot to the face woke her from slipping into torpor.

“I said say it!”

“... you already know, stupid child.” She raised her only arm, winced at the pain, and gazed at the mess of torn open muscle, skin, and chipped bone. “And ... to a stupid child I beg. Do not hurt my loved ones.” Jack and her ghouls had no way out of the bathroom they were hiding in. They were at the mob’s mercy.

Her pleas earned another kick to the face. Kindred kick hard; she felt the bone in her cheek crack, but more pain was meaningless on top of her ruined form.

“What do you know of loved ones!” Damien stood over her and kicked her again, and again, this time in the chest. His boots were more than enough to crack her ribs. “You slaughtered my loved ones!”

The other Kindred had backed off, and were looking at each other in bewilderment. They must have never seen this side of Damien. Hate could change anyone at a whim, after all.

She no longer had the strength to even block his kicks. All her power, all her strength and speed, whittled away by hundreds of bullets, a damn Theban sorcery, and the conviction of this deluded fool. All her effort for peace, intelligence, awareness, all her trials and tribulations to grow Dolareido so Kindred could exercise some wisdom, all gone.

Her head turned back toward him, and she glared. “The Bishops, the priests, and Lucas himself, they all manipulated you. Under

their thumb, your peers were fodder for a war and pawns in the Archbishop's ploy to rule my city with massacre." She scoffed with the little bit of energy she had left, and let her head drift to the side with surrender. It was far more information than the idiot man deserved, but with her second death only moments away, she could not resist one last insult for his master. "Now end it. I have lost."

"No!"

Oh no. No, Jack please. Get out, get out while they circle her!

But her wishes were useless. Jack, the tiny boy, shorter than all the robes he forced through, found his way to her, and even pushed aside the other Kindred to get to her. All of them were older than him, stronger than him, and armed to the teeth. He could die, and she could not do a thing to stop it.

She could hear the faint sobs of her ghouls in the bathroom. Everything was crumbling.

"You won't touch her." Jack slammed his boot down beside her, and stood between her and the swordsman.

The mob laughed, but Antoinette could see it on Damien's face. No laughter, no joy, no glee or passion there. Just anger and misery.

"Jack ... please..." She reached out with her useless, ruined limb, but she could no longer even squeeze his ankle. "Go..."

"Listen to her, Terry." Damien pointed his sword at Jack, and stepped close enough that the tip of the blade touched against the boy's chest. "I have no quarrel with the Invictus or you. Begone."

"Fuck you. You aren't touching her."

This was not happening. Damien, showing honor, gave Jack an out, and the boy threw it away without hesitation at some fool

notion of saving her. If she could, she would be tearing Jack a new orifice.

The other Kindred stepped closer still, like circling sharks, but Jack did not back down.

Damien was practically vibrating with anger. “How dare you. This snake ki—”

“Shut up!” Jack brushed the sword aside. His words alone had everyone stunned, and his arrogance had them looking at each other bewildered. “You aren’t touching her. The fuck do I care what a brainwashed cultist says?”

Antoinette went rigid when Damien slashed. Jack stumbled back a single step, and half-turned just enough so she could see the massive slash that cut him from shoulder to hip. Jack, take the hint, please. Leave!

Jack fell to a knee, holding the huge wound, coughing and choking on small drops of dark Kindred blood.

“You try my patience, child!” Damien stepped closer and stared down at Jack. “Now get out of the way.”

Please Jack. She reached out, and managed to only lightly touch the boy’s leg with her ruined, only arm. Please, go. “Just ... go ... please...”

But he didn’t listen. He stood back up, trembling, but on his feet nonetheless, and stared right back at Damien.

“Fuck off.”

Antoinette coughed on her own blood, straining with all her might to grab Jack’s leg and push against him. The boy would not budge.

“Bishop Damien, we don’t want a war with the Invictus. Let’s just put him out and deal with the Prince.”

“You may be ri—”

Jack punched Damien, hard. The young man summoned some strength and put a knuckle into the other man’s face hard enough to make a cracking sound.

The silence that filled the room was colossal.

Damien stumbled back, rubbed at his jaw, and glared daggers into the boy. But Jack stood his ground all the more. He was a trembling mess, Antoinette could see that, but he did not move. Her last shield before death.

“You’re a brainwashed zealot. You’re worse than scum.” Jack spat Kindred blood at Damien’s feet. “You’re a tool, someone else’s tool at that. Can’t think for yourself, can’t think at all, can’t—”

Antoinette tried to cry out, but nothing came. She had nothing left, not even for when Damien’s sword stuck through Jack’s chest and out his back.

Jack looked down, and she was sure purely out of reflex, he grabbed the sword that was skewering him, but Damien gave his gun to a nearby Kindred, and used the now free hand to reach out and grab Jack by the shoulder. He kept the sword buried through Jack’s chest.

“I do not think the Invictus will go to war over a single fledgling,” Damien said. Antoinette could hear the venom drip from his tongue. “You die with your snake mistress.”

Jack, please ... run.



Jack raised his head from the blade, reached out with his hands, took Damien's shoulders, and pulled him in closer. Before she could see what madness would befall her love, the black of torpor pulled her under.

But she heard it.

"... look into my eyes."

---

~~Natasha~~

She had never felt so useless in her whole damn unlife.

She was on her feet at least, but Lucas had her neck in his fingers, and every so often the Elder gave her neck a bit of a squeeze to remind her. He may have been weakened with his long torpor, but that didn't mean anything compared to her. He could pop her head off like a cork with a moment's effort.

And there was still at least a dozen other Kindred around. They all had their guns pointed at her sire, and they kept taking quick glances at her to make sure she didn't try anything. Not that she could with her hands bound behind her.

"So, sheriff, what will you do once your Prince is dead?" Lucas said.

God he spoke just like a preaching zealot.

Daniel didn't move though. He just sat there at the other end of the tower lobby, kneeling, head hanging, and eyes raised just enough that Natasha could see them. He looked so broken.

"I imagine you have delusions of revenge, or justice, or some other ridiculous notion." Lucas tightened his grip, and raised Natasha up so her legs were dangling. She didn't need to breathe, but that didn't mean his fingers digging into her neck didn't hurt.

“But know that I will keep your childe hostage. If you force me, I will stake her and leave her buried deep underneath the city where only I know.”

No response. Her sire was a statue. He wasn't even holding his sword anymore; it was just discarded metal at his side.

It made no sense. They hadn't spoken in years, and even when she was just a fledgling, they could never connect. Not after she was embraced. Not after losing her life.

It made her sick. After leaving him, joining the Invictus, and just cutting the man out of her life, he was rendered broken and useless just by her capture. Her weakness, his liability, was going to get the Prince killed. Her self-loathing approached new heights.

She managed to look around at the robed figures. None of them were as old as her, and she was sure she could take any of them in a proper fight, if she had her sword and her gun. Any of them except Lucas. Think, think, don't stop thinking. Find a way out. Put that Mehket brain to use.

Her thoughts came to a grinding stop when Damien stepped out from the doorway that lead downstairs. He was covered in ashes.

“Damien! My childe, my prodigy, you live! Is the snake defeated?” Lucas lowered her and let her rest her feet on the floor, but his grip did not waver.

Damien was hunched over, tattered and worn, with bullet holes and cuts and gashes through his robes. He walked with a limp, and the sword in his free hand was a mess of Kindred blood that was fading to ash. When he came into full view, the cultists around her cheered, and Lucas's grip tightened with what was probably pure joy.

The Bishop was dragging the Prince by her hair. He'd won...

Daniel's head raised, and he stared at the body of the Prince. She wasn't dead yet, or there'd be nothing but ash, but Natasha was shocked at how Antoinette was still alive. She was missing an arm, a leg, and much of her flesh was missing. She was practically naked, as her clothes had suffered far more bullet holes than Damien. Why did Damien have any bullet wounds? Did the Prince have guns hidden away? Did she even use guns?

Damien came closer, his head lowered, his fingers wrapped into Antoinette's ruined hair. Natasha could see ribs, torn open pale flesh that exposed the cold and withered organs of a vampire. She could even see where a sword had cut clean through the bone of her arm below the shoulder, and the leg at the thigh, with enough speed that the cut went through clean. Damien's work, no doubt.

A part of her was relieved. It was over. They'd won. But the relief washed away the next second; she'd be a hostage until Daniel either died or left the city, or maybe Lucas would let her go once he had the entire city under his thumb and all the powers of his age returned to him.

Either way, it was not a city she wanted to be a part of. Christ, if she could just get away, right here, right now, Daniel would be free to slaughter them all. Poor Daniel. The man was looking at the ruined body of his oldest friend, and he looked even more broken. His eyes were shattered.

"Come closer my dear friend! I am most surprised you have managed to capture the Prince alive. And I see that you are alone. Most tragic, that so many of your brothers and sisters perished." Lucas raised Natasha again, but it was just so he could gesture with both his hands and preach to his group. "But rejoice my children! We have won! Only Garry remains an enemy, and that young fool will be no match without the Prince or the sheriff's aid."

Damien stepped in closer.

Lucas kept talking. He went on and on about the future, about building a new regime, about serving God as the damned children they were, about Longinus and monsters and their eternal duty. The Kindred around Natasha cheered more, and they raised their guns in the air, their swords and knives. They even jumped a few times. The Archbishop just couldn't shut up though, and went on about a future in God's plan. He walked over to Antoinette and put a foot on her torso to stand victorious while he gave the final words of some idiotic speech Natasha eventually tuned out. Disgusting.

But Damien only stepped in closer. Natasha didn't look at the mob, she looked at Damien. His eyes were still downcast, and the more she stared at him, the more she couldn't understand what he was doing. The Prince fought with her hands, so why were their bullet holes in Damien's robes?

Damien got so close, he could have reached out and touched Lucas. He finally let go of the Prince's hair, and just stood there. Natasha tried to glare at him, but his eyes were barren. No anger or turmoil or any of the depression she had seen when she was his prisoner in the altar room. None of that inner conflict that she had tried and failed to appeal to. She could tell the Bishop was not in agreement with Lucas's plans before just from the frustration on his face, but now, his face was void of anything. Like a doll.

“Bishop Damien, you shall be handsomely rewarded. You all shall be! This was the first step in our new church. The Lancea et Sanctum shall turn this city into a monument to—”

Natasha fell to the floor.

She sat there, on her ass, blinking in confusion and looking around in panic. Lucas was no longer holding her, no one was holding her hostage, no one was pointing any shotguns at her or running at her to try and cut her head off. No one was doing

anything. Everyone was just standing there, looking at Lucas and Damien.

A loud thunk made Natasha squeak. She looked beside her, and for just one fleeting moment, Lucas looked back at her.

His head rolled back and forth on the floor a couple of inches, eyes locked on Natasha, a shocked expression burned into his face. And then, he fell into ash.

Another thunk earned yet another squeak from her. Damien had fallen to his knees with no grace, and dropped his sword beside him. The blade clinked a few times on the floor, and in the dead silence of the lobby, it was like resounding thunder. For a single second, he looked identical to Daniel, a broken man with their weapon beside them, useless. His sword, however, was covered in a fresh coat of vampire blood.

The Kindred around Natasha freaked. They screamed in horror, looked at each other, screamed some more, and pointed their weapons at the sheriff, at her, at Damien who had just betrayed them.

“D-Damien killed the Archbishop!”

“Fuck! We—”

“N-no one move!” One of them said. A Ventrue, Natasha could see. Ever the first to try and control a situation. The Ventrue pointed their gun at Natasha. “Move and we’ll ki—”

Natasha screamed. The Ventrue split down the center, from the tip of his head to the crotch. The cut was so fast, so clean, that the Kindred just fell apart like two sticks that were leaning against each other. A shade, a shadow, just a split moment of an image of Daniel was there, and then he was gone.

The next Kindred to die was the one closest to her. A side swipe of the sheriff's sword cut through their waist, and then into the waist of the Kindred that was next to them. No one had even realized what had killed the first Kindred before the next two died. No one but her; they didn't have her eyes.

She couldn't use her hands, but she pushed herself across the floor, away from the panicking mess of robes. Another one of them fell apart, and again it was the closest one to her. Kindred blood splattered everywhere. Some of it turned to ash quickly, some of it took its time to fade, some of it even turned into light embers. But it was everywhere.

Now the Kindred knew what was happening. The sheriff was attacking, and they couldn't even see him. Natasha could, just barely, using her Mehket eyes to spot the fast movement of her sire. Even then she could only pierce his cloak of night and speed for that moment he stopped to cut one of the robed figures into nothing but limbs.

"R-run! Ge—" This one lost the top half of their head, between the teeth. Daniel had put his blade between their teeth and pushed through their spine, below the skull. What few Kindred remained, screaming and hollering in terror, unloaded all their guns at their now dead friend. Bullets and shotgun shots ripped them apart, but Daniel was just a dark blur, already gone.

Natasha couldn't watch anymore. It was slaughter. She rolled over onto her knees, got up, and sprinted for the other end of the lobby where there was a stairway down to the Prince's basement.

Jack! The boy was peaking his head out from behind the wall where the doorway to the stairs was, and once Natasha got close to him, she ducked herself around the corner to hide.

Jack managed a smile at her. He looked exhausted. Worse, he too was cut up. There was a hole in the back of his suit, and when she

had passed him she saw his front had been slashed open.

But the kid didn't sit down or take a breather. It looked like he was watching Daniel's slaughter, but when Natasha traced his line of sight, he was in fact staring at Damien and Antoinette.

The boy was dominating Damien.

"Madame ... Vola..." he said with a heavy voice.

Her jaw dropped. This kid, not even a year embraced, was dominating Damien? That's how the Bishop got all the bullet wounds; he'd been forced to kill his own.

"... Master T-t-erry. I'm glad t-to see you live."

Julias's childe, he definitely was. And it was scary. Julias was a very strong Kindred for his age. But this little boy in front of her was far stronger than any young neonate had any right to be.

Finally, the screaming stopped. Natasha poked her head out like Jack, and the beast in her gut at last relaxed. Daniel was standing there, sword at his side, surrounded by nothing but the robes of the second dead Kindred. Before him was Damien, still on his knees, but something was different.

The Bishop was trembling.

Jack collapsed against the wall and fell onto his ass, hands between his legs, and a smile on his face. Exhausted. Natasha looked past Jack toward the Bishop, and her heart sank.

Damien had reached out for Lucas's robes. He was holding the fabric in his hands, clutching the dirty and ruined fabric to his chest, and sobbing. Daniel stood over him, sword drawn, ready to strike, but Damien didn't seem to care. He just held the robes to his chest and rocked back and forth on his knees. His wails were loud,

screams of pain, filled with tears and cries. They tore into Natasha's ears, and she couldn't even raise her bound hands to cover them.

"Wait!" Natasha said. She got up again, but stayed by Jack. "Wait ... don't ... k-k ... kill him."

"I spared him once. I won't spare him again." Daniel threw his gaze at her, and Natasha stepped back. The ice there hit her hard, and the fact the man was covered head to toe in more Kindred ashes.

"P-please. Please he ... he d-doesn't..."

The front doors swung open. "What the hell?"

Everyone turned to face the front entrance. Julias was there, Beatrice too, and they both walked in looking ready to fight. Julias was decked head to toe in weaponry, and had a shotgun at hand. Beatrice, upon seeing the mess before her though, shifted to stay behind Julias.

Jack reached out for Natasha and braced himself using her shoulder. "Julias ... awesome. If you don't mind, could you ... yeah."

The boy started to fall, and Natasha turned to catch him. Her hands were still tied though, and the poor boy collapsed into torpor.



## Chapter 23

~~Julias~~

There were robes and ashes everywhere.

Julias just stood there, eyes wide, and his gaze panned over the room of dead silence so profound, he could hear the rubbing of fabric from Beatrice as she stepped behind him. Damien — he presumed based on Beatrice’s description — was kneeling, crying, and holding a unique robe to his chest. Daniel was standing over him, ready to execute him before the lake of ash-ridden robes.

Antoinette looked like hell had chewed her up and discarded the bones.

He could see Natasha in the back of the lobby, hands tied behind her, and Jack, standing on his own despite a nasty gash across his torso. Thank god the kid was still alive.

“Julias,” Jack said. His voice was labored, like he was running on fumes. “Awesome. If you don’t mind, could you ... yeah.” And then he collapsed like a sack of heavy sand. Even Beatrice winced when they all heard the loud crunch of what was probably the kid’s nose.

“Mister Mire.” The sheriff gave him a nod. “If you don’t mind, could you help Madame Vola?”

He quirked a brow. This wasn’t exactly what he was expecting to find. Though, looking at the remains of what was clearly a slaughter, he managed to piece together what happened. Or at least, that Lucas had lost and that Jack was still alive.

He walked past Damien, Beatrice still beside him, and kept his eye on the Bishop as he did so. The young vampire was pretty beat

up himself, but the sheer noises of the destroyed Kindred was what shocked Julias to the bone. He'd never seen a Kindred look so broken.

“Natasha,” he said once he reached her. He looked down at Jack, knelt down to roll him over, and grinned down at his childe. The kid was in torpor; he'd be fine once he got some blood in him.

“Julias,” Natasha said. “I guess you came t-to save Jack?”

“Yeah, but I guess the sheriff handled it?”

“Uh ... no, n-not really. No it ... it was Jack.”

He raised his head back to Natasha, eyes wide. “What?”

“He, umm – thank you ... Miss D-Damor.” Natasha gave Beatrice a thankful nod; the Nosferatu had stepped behind her to tear the binding off her wrists. “I didn't get t-to see the fight between the group and Antoinette, downstairs, b-but Damien came out dragging the Prince, and we all thought-t-t-t ... he had won. But ... Jack was ... c-controlling him. And used him to k-kill Lucas.”

Holy. Fucking. Shit. Julias just shook his head in utter disbelief. God damn it Jack, that's three elders now. What was it with Jack and Elders? Of all the problems a fledgling – not even a neonate – could have, killing off the city's Elders should not have been one of them.

Laughing, Julias scooped the kid up into his arms, and shook his head some more.

“Um, sensitive info?” Beatrice said.

“You came with Julias,” Natasha said, and she smiled her little smile at Beatrice. “I trust his j-judgment.”

She may have thought differently when she found out Beatrice was a witch now. Natasha's words had Beatrice blinking in her own surprise though, which earned another chuckle from Julias. Everything was coming up better than he could have hoped for. Part of him was waiting for the hammer to drop, but fuck that, the hammer could wait, wherever it was.

Damien, on the other hand, was a harsh contrast to the rest of them. The Mehket Sanctified, a bit small and lean looking man, hadn't moved from his spot. His cries and wails were starting to fade, but they were replaced with quiet sobs and a petrified pose. If Jack had dominated him and forced him to kill his sire, that was indeed something he could imagine breaking someone's mind.

Why hadn't the sheriff killed him yet?

"I uh ... I asked the sheriff to spare him." Natasha started walking with him as Julias made his way to the front door of the lobby. "I think ... I d-don't think ... he deserves to die. He was just ... he..." She turned the words around; Julias could see her struggle with thoughts through her eyes as she considered how to explain. "He was..." Whatever it was, she couldn't articulate it, and she eventually lowered her head and shrugged.

He nodded, but he couldn't understand. He had thought he knew Natasha, but he missed her sire being the sheriff, and he certainly didn't expect her to ask Daniel to spare their assailant, after what he did. The whole situation was making Julias feel like a fifth wheel.

"The fuck you letting him live for? He attacked, you guys won."

God damn it Beatrice, smooth as sand paper.

Natasha frowned at his lover with a strange determination on her face Julias had never really seen before. "Lucas manipulated him. He ... he deserves a second chance! I saw it! I saw it in his..."

Beatrice put her hands up in surrender. “Your choice, your funeral.”

The group of them reached Damien and Daniel. The man was just sitting there, clearly with no intention of moving, and the sheriff looked ready to cut his head off if he tried anyway.

The Prince was still next to him. Christ, she was missing a leg, an arm, and a lot of her was torn up, split open, ripped and shredded with what looked like a million bullet wounds. But she was still alive; she’d heal once she got some fresh blood in her. A lot of blood in her.

“Mistress!” a duet screeched.

Julias almost dropped Jack at the sound of two girls screaming up into a high octave. Ashley and Julee, the Prince’s two ghouls, came running out from the back stairway, and they fell to their knees by her body.

“She’s still alive. Still alive!”

“Mistress, oh god. We’ll—”

Daniel took a step toward them while putting his sword away in a smooth motion behind his back. “Ashley. Julee. A moment, please.” Adjusting his glasses, he looked to his childe. “If you could take the Prince to her chambers, Vola? Ashley and Julee will guide you. Girls, you will have to feed her yourselves.”

Daniel and Natasha looked at each other for a little while, like some sort of opaque wall was blocking their view of each other. They glanced at each other’s toes, then each other, then their toes again.

The barrier between Natasha and her sire was all too familiar to Julias. When was the last time Viktor had called him by his first

name? Had he ever? It was a barrier he fought to make sure never rose between him and the unconscious kid in his arms.

“Julias?” Natasha said.

“Go ahead. You can report to me tomorrow.” He let his gaze linger on her, with some extra eye contact to get across his meaning. Let him deal with Maria, Natasha. No doubt the girl was smart enough to have put together Maria’s involvement herself, and he didn’t want his friend getting herself killed by saying something she shouldn’t.

Natasha lowered her head, and nodded. The little girl was only the same size as the Prince’s two ballerina ghouls, but she scooped up the tall woman’s battered and broken body without issue. Even a Mehket had some strength to them, and she used it to hold Antoinette to her. It was a strange sight indeed, how the small Natasha wasn’t tall enough to stop Antoinette’s hair from reaching the floor with how her head drooped, but it was more than telling that Daniel had asked her to help the Prince. The sheriff really trusted her.

Then she turned, and left, with Ashley and Julee guiding her. They were panicked; they had never seen Antoinette injured like this, or injured at all, Julias was sure. But she’d be fine with a couple days rest and a lot of blood. More blood than the Prince’s ghouls could provide themselves, but the sheriff could handle that.

Julias frowned at the weeping man on his knees, and looked to Daniel. “What about him?”

The sheriff reached down and grabbed Damien’s wrist. The young fool didn’t fight him, didn’t struggle, he just dragged like dead weight.

“We have cells more than capable of holding him. Madame Vola insists we spare him.”

“Sheriff ... we all know about Natasha.”

Daniel raised a brow at Julias, adjusted his glasses with his free hand, and looked past him to offer Beatrice the tiniest frown. The Nosferatu almost squeaked, and again stepped behind Julias to keep him between the two of them. He couldn't blame her.

“I was a fool to hope it ... never mind. I will handle things here. Take care of your childe, Mister Mire.” With just the faintest smile, he turned and walked off. Julias wasn't sure if he was seeing things; he had always assumed the sheriff's face was carved from stone.

From the back, he just looked like a plain guy wearing a trench coat, dragging some punk kid by the hand across the floor. For just a moment, Julias swore he could see the weight of centuries on the man's shoulders, something that shined through his quiet demeanor.

Then the sheriff stopped, and looked over his shoulder to him. He really was smiling. “Mire? Your childe ... thank him, for me.”

And then he walked off.

Julias and Beatrice just blinked at each other, like someone had slapped them both with a hand buzzer.

“So, um ... holy shit, right?” she said.

“Yeah. Definitely, yeah. I uh, I'm going to take Jack back to my place.”

He turned and walked out of the lobby. The last thing he wanted to do was try and explain the mess behind him to the authorities. Despite the gunfire he'd heard on the way, there wasn't a single police officer in sight though. Of course not, but who was to blame, Maria or something the Prince had done? He'd find out later.

“Beatrice.”

“Yeah man?”

“You, you um...” It was just the two of them in the Elysium garden. No young Kindred fledglings or neonates were around, and the sound of gunfire had probably scared off nearby kine. The night sky was open, cool, and the silence was golden.

If it wasn't for the unconscious, cut open kid in his arms, it'd be a really romantic moment. But at least Kindred didn't make any noise when in torpor; Jack was as quiet as a corpse.

Julias stepped out a little further into the Elysium garden, stared at the sky for few moments, and closed his his eyes. “Thanks for coming with me, and ... and I wanted you to know ... I wanted to tell you—”

But Beatrice took a step in closer to him, and reached out to put a clawed hand on his chest. “You don't have to, Superman. The Prince spoiled it for me.”

“ ... what? Spoiled?”

“Total spoilers.” She stepped around Jack, leaned up, and gave Julias the most girlish peck on the cheek he never thought her capable of. “So we can bypass the awkward first time ‘I love yous’ and jump straight to the good stuff. I'll see you in a couple nights, k? Take care of the kid in the meantime.” She winked, gave a wave with a little curl of her clawed fingers, and walked off by herself. One moment she was there, the next, her cloak of night hid her from his view.

And he was dumbfounded. Spoiled? What? What had the Prince said to Beatrice?

He frowned down at the kid in his arms. “Your girlfriend is too damn smart. And she ruined my moment.”

But, as he left the garden and started down the street, with humans giving him a wide berth with confused looks on their faces, he smiled. Beatrice loved him too. She loved him. The damn psycho he loved so much loved him back.

His Nosferatu lover had never been in love, and for that he was jealous. It’d been a century of loneliness for him, and he wore it on his face despite his best efforts. She saw through it, called him out on it, and she was the first to do so.

He laughed. People were already looking at him like he was weird, carrying a boy in his arms, but now they openly stared at him as he called for an Invictus taxi with more laughter. Damn he was really looking forward to her next visit.

---

~~Jack~~

He woke up with blood on his tongue. More than just on his tongue, it was in his mouth and going down his throat. Warm, fresh, and whatever sense of taste he’d developed from becoming a vampire ached for the taste of that blood. Hell, he could tell he was drinking it down as part of his waking reflex, no conscious effort necessary.

Memories slammed into him like a truck. Antoinette! Damien. He looked around in a panic, expecting to see the chaos of the Prince’s tower, but there was only a giant bed, curtained walls, and Julias.

“Julias! Christ I ... yeah, I remember. You came, but ... shit, is Antoinette alright?”

“She’ll be fine. Most Kindred would have died from that much damage, but she is an elder.”



His sire was sitting next to him, his suit jacket undone, leaning forward with elbows on the bed, and his fingers netted together to brace his chin. There was a subtle smile there, a smile Jack rarely saw on his sire, a weird and kind of young looking one.

Beside him was a kine Jack had never seen before, some man also in a suit.

“Uh, who’s that?”

“Just lunch for you. You were pretty beat up. That Damien sliced you open.”

Jack chuckled, and winced with the pain of it. “Heh, not nearly as bad as Viktor had.”

“Viktor. Yeah, so that’s three now, Jack. You’ve killed three elders.”

“Um, the kine wi-”

“I’ll wipe his memory later, don’t worry about him.” Julias dismissed worry about the man beside with a simple flick of the wrist. The kine just nodded. Total drone mode. “You killed Viktor and Tony with some quick thinking and a lot of luck. But Lucas? How did that happen?”

Jack’s smile faded, his head lowered, and he put his hand on the huge gash on his stomach. The wound was closed, but his clothes were still cut open, just like that time he woke up in Antoinette’s office after Viktor.

“It was ... Antoinette was fighting Damien and his mob, down in Ashley and Julee’s bedroom. We were hiding in their bathroom. We could hear the slaughter...”

And just like that time when he'd awoken from a frenzy, on that rooftop alone with Mrs. Pavala's body, nausea flooded him. He pulled his knees up to his chest and hugged them to his body. Every time it came, he never saw it coming, but just a bad thought, a bad memory, and the nausea of murder ripped into his guts and made him want to vomit.

Julias called it humanity, something Kindred lost with ages, but to Jack it was just ache. Screams, the sound of gunfire, and the sickening crunch of bones. Him and the two ghouls, they were hugging each other and hiding in the corner of that bathroom, listening to the mayhem.

Flashes of memory hit him, and he hugged his knees closer. PTSD maybe, but to a Kindred, what was that? His family, Rebecca stabbing him, decapitating Mrs. Pavala, and worst of all, the way Viktor's face changed when Jack had defied him.

Where was all this coming from? He'd go days, weeks without thinking about this, and now it was hitting him in the gut. Again.

It sucked more because, for that split moment when Julias told him Antoinette was safe, he was so damn happy. And he still was. But now that the battle was over, and the beast inside him was calm, he did not like the black thoughts that crept up onto the edge of his consciousness. His eyes in Damien's eyes. His mind in his mind. His hands, Damien's sword, cutting through robes and Kindred. Seeing through Damien's eyes Lucas's head falling off of his neck.

It wasn't like in the movies, where a quick cut meant the head sat there on the neck before rolling off. And Lucas didn't stand there for a few seconds, like a headless chicken either. The man just fell apart, with Kindred blood splattering over the—

"Hey, you ok?" Julias said, and he put a hand on Jack's shoulder.

Jack shook his head, and hid his face in his knees. “Just ... remembering things.” He shrugged. Don’t dwell on it, Jack, don’t worry about it, just ... don’t.

“Jack, come on.” Julias reached out, took his wrist, and pried it away from his knee to force him to look at him. “I know kid, I know. The beast in your guts keeps that shit down, but just a moment of vulnerability and it hits you so hard you want to puke.”

He knew what it was like? Jack coughed on a half-sob. “I have a hard time picturing you feeling like this, Julias.”

But his sire rolled his eyes. “Jack, I didn’t have anyone when I was turned. Viktor didn’t care about things as ‘trite’ as empathy. I lost my wife, and I lost my life, same as you. You don’t think I hid in dark corners of the city and just cried for days? You don’t think I accidentally killed a human or two in my youth?”

The idea of Julias, tall, confident, and classic mobster, crying in a dark corner emo style was too much for Jack. He started laughing, but tried to hide it as best he could with his other hand. It was the sort of laughter that gently broke through quiet sobs, and turned them into more chuckles.

“Laugh it up,” Julias said, but he chuckled too. “But I’m not going to put you through what Viktor put me through. Talk to me, later tonight. Right now though, I need to know what happened.”

“Ok, yeah.” He lowered his knees, took a deep, unneeded breath, and thought back. “The sounds eventually stopped, and I heard Damien and Antoinette arguing. He was going to kill her, and ... and I ran out to stop it.”

“Fucking hell, Jack. How many of Damien’s friends were left?”

“I don’t know ... fifteen? I didn’t care, man. I just ... I just had to save her,” he said. Julias groaned with obvious frustration, but Jack

could only shrug. “So I stood over her broken body, and got in Damien’s face. He slashed me, and then he...”

“He what?”

“He ... he was cracked, Julias.” Jack put his fingers on his chest, and pointed where the slash had ruined his suit jacket. “I could see it when he slashed me, when he stabbed me, when he argued with me. He didn’t want to be doing what he was doing. He had ‘torn and unsure’ written on his face. So I ... broke him.”

Julias tilted his head to the side. “You dominated him?”

“Yeah. I saw the crack in his gaze, and I took it.” Pride rose up in him, Ventrue pride that was well deserved, he felt. “I grabbed his mind and controlled him and used his body to ... kill the others.” And the nausea returned. “I saw it through his eyes, but I just focused on taking advantage of their surprise. It was ... yeah, you saw the aftermath.” Despite the sickness in his gut, he could feel the beast in him stand proud for his accomplishment, and he straightened his back up to mirror that. “Then I tricked Lucas, made him think Damien had defeated Antoinette and was taking her unconscious body to him. I got him.”

He lowered his head again, and choked on another half-sob half-chuckle. “I ... got him. He won’t threaten her anymore. He...”

Julias nodded, but let out a long sigh to go with it. “On one hand, I am both very impressed with you, and very sad that you had to go through that. Full dominating anyone is difficult, and a thousand times more difficult on a Kindred much older than you. And you had to kill ... you even killed Lucas.” Then, much to Jack’s surprise, Julias frowned at him. “On the other hand, that was a mistake.”

“ ... eh?”

“You killed an elder, but this time more than just the Prince knows about it. I know, the sheriff knows, Beatrice knows, Natasha knows, and the Bishop Damien ... Worst of all, if any of them tell Maria...”

Shit. Shit shit he forgot about Maria. “Oh fuck, fucking god I ... oh no.” He put his hands on his face and clawed at his cheeks. “Even after Garry told us about those two! I ... I had to save Antoinette! I had to, and ... shit!” He reached out, grabbed his sire’s jacket, and started to shake the much larger man. “If she finds out, she’ll kill me! She’ll do more than kill me!”

There were no lack for stories among the other young Kindred who worked for the Invictus, and many of them spoke of what Maria did to her enemies. She had, apparently, the grandest mastery of the nightmare discipline of any Nosferatu in the city, including Jacob. She could make you live your worst nightmare, make you think it was real, make your brain tear itself apart.

Now he was really panicking.

“Don’t worry about it for now. No one’s going to rat you out, except for maybe Damien if he gets the chance.”

“You guys spared him? He cut off Antoinette’s arm and leg! He ... he...”

A flash of memory from the ball flashed in his brain. Epiphany hit him so hard, he blank stared at Julias with his jaw hanging.

I only know one other Kindred who has that weird, unknown quantity. Unpredictable. Hard to guess. I like it!

Damien. He meant Damien! No one had seen her heard of this vamp for fifty years, and the way his face looked when Jack stopped him, that man was beyond conflicted. And Jacob knew it.

“Jacob...”

“Jacob?”

“He knew about Damien. He ... he...” He could picture it so easily now, so easily that it was sickening. That old monster, manipulator, arranging events in the Danse Macabre, just to see ... just to see what Damien would do? What would happen to him, maybe? The fuck was that guy’s end game?

Julias got up and started pacing, hand on a chin, other hand under his elbow, with that classic thinking look on his face. “If he knew about Damien, then he probably was in communication with Lucas before their suicidal attack. They were friends before.” And then he punched his palm like a classic courtroom drama. “And he probably convinced him it was a good idea.”

His sire stepped near the bed and leaned back against the wall with arms folded across his chest. “That does sound like something Jacob would do. And now that Beatrice works for him, he—”

“What!?”

“Yeah. You can trust her, but ... yeah even without her, he’ll have some way to piece this together, eventually. Maria and Jacob aren’t enemies, but if Jacob sees a way to turn this info into something he can use, then—”

Jack put up his hands and called for a time out. “Wait wait wait. Antoinette and the sheriff are alive, right? I like to think I’m on their good side. If Jacob moves against me, he’ll be signing a death warrant.”

“You think she’ll fight for you, if it comes to that?”

“I do.”

The words were out before he even thought about it. Julias blinked at him, and Jack blinked at himself, but there it was, he just knew.

“ ... you love her, don't you? Not just kid stuff, but really?”

“Yeah.” He smiled again, and his mind drifted back to what he'd done just hours ago, himself standing between Antoinette and Damien. There had been no hesitation there either, once he realized she'd lost the fight. He just put himself there, between her and death.

Then Julias got serious. He walked up to the side of the bed, reached down, and held out a hand to pluck Jack up onto his feet. “Viktor was a very powerful elder, but I knew I would outmatch him if I survived the centuries. I'm good Jack, I am very good.” Then he put an arm around the kid, and gave him a half-hug while walking him toward the bedroom door. “And you'll outmatch me eventually too. I picked you for a reason, and you're proving it was the right choice.”

“Arg, my ego, it's going to explode.”

“Laugh all you want kid, but if you thought you had a bulls-eye painted on your back before, you're in for a surprise. I hope you're ready, because you're in the Danse Macabre deep now.”

---

~~Damien~~

He woke up with a scream.

The twisting world of black, death cries, and blood flashed in front of his eyes with the torrent of awakening. He tried to jump, to run like a terrified rabbit, but the chains that held him snapped with enough force to nearly break his ankles.

“Ah ... ah...” He looked around. Wrists were bound to the wall behind him, as were his feet. The room was just a metal box, not unlike Tony’s room they used to hold their Lancea et Sanctum objects. The only light source was one of the LED wall lights the Prince seemed so attached to. Was it because the light was white? Faux sunlight? It always was an interest to the dragons, he knew, to explore how to obtain what was lost to them in the embrace. The ability to see the sun was perhaps the most romantic fool’s hope.

The twisting of his flesh brought his attention back. Skin and muscled bound over each other to close the wound in his literal heart, and it was a painful process. Healing from the stake that someone had just plucked from his chest. Better than dying a second time though.

He looked down at himself. His clothes were full of bullet holes. Had he been shot?

Right, that’s right. He’d been shot by his own followers before he killed them. Before Jack, riding his mind, killed them.

Before his body had been used to kill Lucas.

The reality of that fact sat on him with so much weight, he couldn’t appreciate it. His sire was dead, and he had killed him. Jack, that tiny fledgling, had killed Lucas, but if Damien had been stronger and more secure in-mind, the Ventrue would never have gotten his hooks into his body.

They were disgusting memories, blurry images of his friends dying by his sword — not friends, he thought they were thugs. At the worst of the flashback, he saw his sword cutting off the head of his mentor so that it fell to the floor — mentor? He had never taught him anything, and Damien had spent fifty years alone.

“You look conflicted,” the sheriff said.



Damien gave a small grunt. “ ... you spared me.”

“Yeah, we did!”

Natasha. The girl’s voice had found a volume Damien had not expected. She was no longer bound, and someone how given her some proper clothes, something quiet and boring of course.

“ ... then. Not now, then,” he said.

This time it was the sheriff’s turn to grunt, barely audible. “Oh, during the purge. Was that a mistake?”

“Of course it was.” Fifty years, fifty fucking years he slunk around Dolareido like a weasel. For God, he had told himself. He was suffering for God.

Now he was suffering for nothing and no one and it was all meaningless.

He raised his head and forced himself to look around. Natasha and the sheriff were standing next to each other, close enough that their similarities were all too obvious. They were in the room with him, and behind him was a simple metal door, closed. They wouldn’t be able to get out unless they were let out, so one of the Prince’s thralls must have been on the other side.

They treated him like he was dangerous. That made him smile a little, but it didn’t last. All that work and now he was just a trapped rat with nothing left. Lovely.

“Perhaps. You did nearly kill Annie,” the sheriff said.

Annie? Ugh. Even Natasha looked at Daniel with a quirked brow. To hear the cold and quiet sheriff use such a cute nickname was very odd.

“But I failed.”

Daniel stepped in closer, but his expression was as blank as always, with monotone eyes behind boring teacher glasses. “Because you’re too smart.”

“ ... excuse me?”

“I spared you because I saw that look in your eye, kid.” Daniel raised a gloved hand and put a finger to his own temple. “When everyone else was just mindlessly following orders, Lucas’s orders, I saw your eyes. You were thinking, analyzing, trying to figure out what was going on, how, why, who, and where to go.”

Damien had never expected the sheriff capable of so many words. Had Damien been like that? The memory was a lifetime ago

Daniel reached out and put that tapping finger against Damien’s temple.

“And I knew you were worth sparing. The Prince does everything she can to encourage self-awareness in our kind, and when I saw you had those eyes...” This time, Daniel poked him in the chest hard enough to nearly break bone. “I saw the same look Natasha had. I embraced her only weeks before we started the ... you know the rest.”

Damien wanted to vomit. This waxing about self-awareness was garbage ... wasn’t it? He looked back, and thought of his sire, standing in front of over a hundred Kindred and giving a rousing speech about God, being God’s monsters, and serving in his grand plan. It had all made so much sense, without any real, concrete evidence to support it. And Damien could remember trying to push down that voice in his head that demanded he question it, and instead just accept it.

“You’re a very powerful Mehket for your age, Damien.” The sheriff reached into his trench coat and pulled out something wrapped in leather straps and old strings. With slow fingers, he unwrapped a small blade. An innocent looking thing, small, a knife you’d store in your sleeve. “So I know you have the sight. Auspex.” Daniel put the innocent blade into Damien’s hand, and leaned in a little closer, close enough that Damien could see past the glasses and into the man’s eyes. “So see!”

Both Natasha’s and the Bishop’s eyes went wide at the sound of the sheriff raising his voice. They didn’t recognize it, so completely alien.

Damien looked at the small blade between his fingers. He knew this blade; he’d seen the Bishops and the Archbishop with them, so long ago. Damien had never managed to get his hands on one. They carried them on their belts, and every newcomer had just assumed they were for protection, or decoration.

But the emotion that poured from that blade into his mind was not so innocent. For just a single moment, all he could see was the flash memory, blurry, a mirage of hazy faces and moving bodies. He recognized the church he used to go to after hours, after the sun had set, after the living had gone home and the dead came out to preach of their unholy mission.

Then the vision changed. One of the Bishops, and the Archbishop Lucas, standing about with a Kindred between them. Someone tied up, someone with their hands and feet cut off, someone they were killing.

“The city is ours,” Lucas said. “It is mine. And all will bow to me.” His voice sounded like one of those classic cartoon villains, complete with the blatant laughter with head raised to the sky.

Time froze on that single moment. He didn’t want it to, but the vision, the sight felt otherwise. His vision passed between each

Bishop and the Archbishop, all looking at each other and the Kindred they were butchering. They were all laughing. Arrogance was on their skin like boils. Pride dripped from their teeth. Righteousness and delusion soaked into their bones.

It made him want to vomit from his dry, empty stomach.

Damien dropped the blade. Again, the dead of silence was all that greeted him of the metal room, until the blade tinked against the floor. It might as well have been thunder.

He looked down at it, at the two other Mehket in the room, and then away. Everything was a joke, just one big fucking joke.

“Some will say Lucas only grew so desperate tonight because his half-century torpor damaged his mind.” Daniel shook his head, picked up the small, once-innocent blade, and stared at Damien from only inches away. “But we know different. Your sire was a monster long before then, and he slaughtered dozens of Kindred to spread his churches.”

“I ... he...”

“He sired you for the same reason I spared you, Damien. You have potential.” The sheriff poked him in the forehead, and eased his head back to keep it upright with his fingers. “You have a brain. So tell me if I’m wasting my time, and should I just kill you?”

“Longinus ... was it all a lie?” His faith, his beliefs, God, Longinus, the afterlife, damnation, was it all just Lucas and his plans for control?

Daniel sighed, stepped back, and started wrapping the knife up before handing it to his child. “The Lancea et Sanctum are in many cities, and many are just as violent as Lucas. Many are not though, and some even preach of tolerance. And ... you saw what Lucas did. His faith had some merit.” The sheriff winced then. The sight of the

Prince getting struck by a blast of lightning from the now-disintegrated blade had been nothing short of godly.

Even the sheriff was admitting to the possibility of God then? But Lucas was just a zealot with typical aspirations of control? Damien coughed on the laughter trapped in his throat.

“God should have struck my sire down.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t. So I ask again, should I just end you? Do I need to kill you to protect Jack?”

“The boy? ... no.” Damien shook his head again, and let out a blatant sigh of exhaustion and defeat. “I have only myself to blame for that, and...” And the kid just took advantage of the crack his doubt had already put into his walls. “... but all I have are my words.”

“My childe seems to trust you, and I trust her judgment more than mine.” Daniel sighed, shook his head, and stepped up to the door. A small knock-knock later, and it opened from the outside. “I’m leaving you here for now. We’ll be back later to discuss it.”

“... ok.”

What else was there to say? They were letting him live. Or rather, Natasha was keeping him alive.

He tilted his head to the side when he looked at her, eyebrows furrowed with confusion. It didn’t make any sense! He mouthed ‘why’ at her, and she returned his gaze with a timid smile.

“I saw your eyes when you k-kidnapped me, and ... when we were alone in your alt-t-t-er room.” She squirmed a little. Such a tiny thing, weak and pathetic, and...

No, not pathetic. Not weak. Lucas was still in his head, preaching about strength of faith, courage to follow orders. It made Damien squeeze his eyes shut to force the reflex down. Lucas was dead. Think for yourself.

If he wasn't chained up, he'd probably have fallen to his knees and starting weeping again.

"My eyes?" he said at last.

"I could t-t-t-ell you didn't want to be d-doing ... what you were doing. You ... you have..." She looked down, frowned, and stepped toward Damien. It was the first time he'd ever seen the girl look so certain. "You have nice eyes."

Eyes. All in his eyes? The image of Jack's eyes hit him then, big, green, and ripe with humanity.

Damien chuckled. He thought he'd crushed his own doe eyes long ago. Apparently not. He managed a nod then, smiled, and let his head droop.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said, "I want ... t-to t-talk." She even giggled, a sound that had Damien's eyes wide even as they were still looking at the floor. "I won't shoot you this time."

"... ok."

There was something peaceful about defeat. He couldn't really fight or struggle anymore, all he could do was accept it. He'd been wrong to listen to Lucas, and it had taken all this fucking insanity to make that finally click. Maybe ... maybe he could start over.

A second chance? Sounded like a miracle.

---

~~Natasha~~

One of the Prince's many thralls closed the door behind her. How many kine worked for her? How many was she capable of keeping seduced with her Daeva disciplines at once? It was scary just how strong she was.

Scarier was how just a couple hours ago, the Prince was a mess of flesh and ash and bone on the floor. Natasha shivered at the thought.

"... are you ok?" Daniel said. He'd been looking at her, and only managed to ask once he looked away, hesitant to ask probably.

The two of them were down in the tunneled halls of the tower. It'd been a long, long time since she had ever seen these halls. She was impressed that the Prince had managed to update the lighting.

"I'm ... ok, yeah. Ok." She hugged herself, nodded, and started walking. "... sire."

"Yes?" He didn't turn around to look at her, he just kept walking.

But before she could stop herself, she had reached out, grabbed his hand, and forced him to turn around and face her. She was frowning too, even glaring. She tried to tell herself to stop, but it wasn't working. Frustration was overriding her ability to think and calculate, but she didn't care.

"You ... you ... you idiot!"

"... excuse me?"

"Idiot! Y-you ... you d-didn't ... you shouldn't ... you're not my master anymore. Why did you let Lucas ... nearly ... k-k-kill the Prince!" Her other hand trembled, but she kept her grip on him with the other. His actions made no sense, and he had to answer for that!

She couldn't have been the reason. Daniel and her hadn't spoken in decades, not really. So why?

He looked at her, and the weight in his eyes struck her cold. Her hand fell away from his, and her eyes were trapped in his own. The sheriff removed the glasses too, as if he was trying to break her heart when he gazed at her. But, despite the sadness on his face, the lanky man offered her a small smile.

“Sorry. Sire and childe. You know the tale.”

“That t-tale doesn't ... it doesn't apply to us! I left ... left the Ord-d-do Dracula when I was young. We haven't ... we don't...”

Then, he turned around, and got down on a knee. Like some sort of knight, he reached out for her hand that she had let drop, and put it back into his.

“W-w-what are you-”

“I am old, Natasha. Four decades of us separated is not long. I watched you grow from a distance, kept my eye on you, and let the years go by. You grew into into a very intelligent Kindred, extremely useful to the Invictus, and ... someone the Prince and I want to keep around.”

They had been watching her? Both Daniel and the Prince?

“B-b-b-b-but ... you know why I left the Order.” Because your ideologies were terrifying.

“ ... I do. The Ordo Dracul seeks to transcend our curse, to understand it, and that is a scary thing to consider to someone like you, who prefers hard facts, numbers, money.” He chuckled.

Who was this man holding her hand? He never chuckled before, not ever. He never even used to smile, like he was now.



“I remember the work you showed me ... at ... that nest.” She motioned with her free hand to the tunnels behind her, where somewhere they had stashed away a Wyrms’ Nest. “It was supernatural!”

“Kindred are supernatural.”

“But—”

“You saw what Lucas did, Natasha. Do you still think we are nothing more than parasites, or a disease?”

She frowned and lowered her head. Truth was a harsh mistress, and it had slapped her in the face when Lucas had somehow called upon something divine or magical to attack the Prince. The lightning strike was seared into her memory.

“I...” Take a moment. Think it through. Be careful with what you’re thinking, Natasha. “I ... I want to know ... how he did that.”

“He called upon—”

“No, no I mean ... really understand.”

Daniel tilted his head to the side, got back up, and turned to put his back to the wall. His gaze was quiet again, but at least he kept his glasses off.

“The Coils of the Dragon, the Cruac of the Circle, the Miracles of the Sanctified. They do not easily fit into tidy boxes that you can file away, Natasha.”

“That’s fine! I ... want to learn.” She stepped toward her sire again, and offered her best ‘I’m sorry’ face. She knew how to look apologetic. Maria had encouraged that skill.

“You want to rejoin the Order?”

“Yes!”

“ ... what of Vivienne?”

“I ... she...” With a sigh, Natasha joined her sire against the wall, hands behind her and one foot kicking at the floor. “She ... she’s moved on.”

“Like you did with me?”

The parallel was definitely there, and it hurt. “Maybe. She’ll ... she’ll ... either she’ll rejoin the Invict-tus, or ... she’ll ... I don’t know.”

“Well, with Lucas gone, there’s no reason you can’t speak to her.” Sighing, Daniel looked down at the glasses in his hand, and mirrored his reflection in them. “Don’t do what I did, and just watch.”

Easier said than done. Natasha felt abandoned by Vivienne, betrayed even. But then, that was just perfect, wasn’t it? She knew how her sire felt now at least, and after a few seconds, she smiled up at the lanky man beside her. If this relationship could be saved, then hers and Vivi’s definitely could be.

“I’ll give her a few days and see what she does. B-but I will talk to her.”

“Good.” Daniel returned her smile – such a wonderful thing to see on his usually stone face – and gestured back down the hall with a nod of his head. “What do you plan to do about the Bishop?”

“You’re ... letting me choose?”

“Within reason.”

“I ... um...” She netted her fingers together, twiddled them in front of her, and chewed on one of her fangs. Damien deserved a second chance, she was sure. There was much more to him than Lucas knew, than the others knew, and probably anyone else knew except her and Daniel. But that’s how it always went; Mehket could see the truth behind the lies and the deception. That was what Mehket did. Mehket and secrets, moths and flame. “I think we should release him.”

“ ... you’re serious?”

“I am! You were right. And I’m right! He’s ... he deserves a second chance.” Saying it out loud was much more cheesy than she could have imagined.

But it only made her sire chuckle. “I understand, more than you know.”

---

~~Beatrice~~

Beatrice sat on the edge of one of the caves, deep inside the Circle’s cavern of total metal awesomeness; she really liked it. Ghouls wandered around, keeping the colossal underground cavern clean, changing the candles that sat on skulls in wall grooves, and dusting off the bones that decorated the rock. She was smiling.

Behind her, Jennifer was on her knees on the furs, and combing Beatrice’s hair. Behind Jennifer were a couple of male ghouls, sleeping, naked, and smelling of sex. Jennifer had just finished a bout of fucking when Beatrice had come back, and had insisted on chatting.

It was the first time a girl had demanded chit chat, and she really didn’t mind. Wow, how much had she changed? Soon she’d be wearing dresses – oh shit she’d already done that just a few nights ago!

“So you didn’t come back after the ball. Have a lovely night with Julias?” Jennifer grinned a sly grin, and kept combing.

“Yeah, I did.” The smile on Beatrice’s face could not be hidden, especially not with her massive crocodile teeth.

It had been a few nights since the ball. Memories of Julias eating her out in the dark alley were the kind of memories she was hoping to make, especially after seeing those hungry eyes in her white knight during the ball.

What she hadn’t expected was the night of being pampered like a queen, with slaves dotting on her, massaging and fingering her while she had her man’s cock inside her ass. Christ, the thought of that array of fingers rubbing her all over her bits while Julias watched her cum on him was enough to nearly have her running back to him.

But the guy could use some time with his childe. He deserved that.

“No details for me?” Jennifer leaned in closer, and wrapped one of her hands around Beatrice’s stomach. Yet she kept combing her hair, and damn it, Beatrice found herself loving having someone else comb her hair; it was new.

“You’re getting double penetration on a regular basis, slut. What details could possibly satisfy your curiosity?”

“Aww.” Jennifer pouted, but leaned back and resumed combing from a normal distance. “It’s not about me. Just the thought of that Mister Tall’n’Broadshoulders bringing you back to his mansion, you, Miss Scary’n’Sexy, is a real turn on.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes. Jennifer really was young, only ten years embraced, and it was starting to show. Beatrice knew it would

normally irritate her, but not this time. What normally bothered her was proving to be fun when on the greener, happy side of the fence.

“He used his jedi mind tricks to get a couple to come home with us. Lots of sex ensued.”

“Oh my, a Kindred pair sharing a kine pair?” She leaned in even closer this time, and put her chin on Beatrice’s shoulder. “Were you perhaps doubly penetrated as well?”

Beatrice slowly turned her head away. There had been dicks, and fingers, and stuff. She didn’t need to say it though!

“Delicious.” Jennifer squeezed in a little tighter, and put her cheek against Beatrice’s. “Can I come next time?”

So friendly, this Ventrue. That’d be two Ventrue getting into her pants, too. Maybe she put out some kind of air of vibe that attracted overly-confident Ventrue types?

“ ... I’ll ask.”

Hey, Jennifer was extremely hot. There’d be no harm in asking Julias, right? And Beatrice was getting kind of attached to her fellow witch. It was nice to have a proper girlfriend.

“I’ve never shared my bed with another Ventrue. Does he fight for the top position? That could be—”

They both stood up with a jolt.

They hadn’t heard them coming, no one had. The ghouls were carrying on about their business, and all the other Kindred hiding out in the cave hadn’t stopped whatever witch things they did. No one had given warning. But just like that, like stepping out of the air itself, the Prince and her dog of war were in the cave.

“H-how...” Jennifer stood behind Beatrice, practically hiding, and kept a hand on Beatrice’s side. She was trembling.

Beatrice was trembling too. The sheriff was there, standing in the middle of the grand chamber. His hands were folded across his chest, and his trench coat looked as boring as ever. Hell, even the flat, monotone look the school-teacher sheriff gave everyone from behind his boring glasses was the definition of dull, but when his eyes met Beatrice’s, she took a step back deeper into Jennifer’s little cubby-hole.

She could feel the anger pour out of the beast inside the dull man, and it was more than enough to bury the whole of the Circle’s cave. She could almost see the sheriff’s inner beast, like a titanic, coiling snake of shadow and venom. The moment he decided to strike...

And beside him was the Prince. Tall, beautiful, and just as pissed. At least she was wearing something more interesting, a lovely power suit with loose pants, and for just that split moment Beatrice was intrigued by it. But then Antoinette’s wandering gaze found hers, and again the Nosferatu was paralyzed.

If Daniel was the serpent, ever still until ready to strike, Antoinette was the tiger. Quiet when she wanted to be, and more than willing to be loud when she wanted to be.

Othello came out of his hole, and so too did Aaron. She had never spoken much with Aaron, a Gangrel pale-skinned fellow of average height and build. But he too, like Jennifer, blinked in dismay at the sight of the two suddenly in their home, and backed away.

Jacob was in the further end of the grand room, closer to the wall that held the largest array of bones in a grand decoration of patterns. He was just in his robe, like usual, and he’d been playing with a new pile of bones when the two dragons arrived.

“My Prince, sheriff, I’m humbled that you’ve both decided to visit!” Jacob raised a hand through the air, like he was parting a crowd, and stepped forward toward them. “What brings you to the Circle of the Crone’s little hole in the earth?”

The Prince walked forward to meet him. Othello was about to join Jacob, but one look from the sheriff made him back off.

“I nearly died,” she said. Just a whisper, but the solid walls of the cavern made it echo in the dead silence.

“I’m sorry?”

“I nearly died.” She got even closer, until there was only two feet between the two titans. “My ghouls could have died. Jack could have died!”

“I’m not sure what—”

The sound of her fist colliding with Jacob’s face was just a quiet thud, but the following silence was colossal. The ancient Nosferatu fell back in a spin onto his hands and knees. Even caught by surprise, he managed to land with cat-like grace, and he got up with a casual nonchalance before rubbing at where the Prince punched him.

“I take it your date with the Archbishop didn’t go well?”

Beatrice winced. Antoinette was shaking, fists tight at her sides, and her body screamed ready-to-kill.

“Why would you do this? I thought—”

Jacob was the one to step in this time, and he laughed right in the Prince’s face. “I didn’t do anything! I—”

“You goaded Lucas! You knew what he would do! You arranged this, you knew he would bring chaos to my door. You knew Kindred would die!”

Two elders screaming at each other. The tension had Beatrice crouched down and ready to bolt like a scared animal. Hell, no use denying it, she was a scared animal.

When Jacob punched Antoinette right back, everyone gasped. Only the sheriff didn't make a noise.

“How dare you,” she said. “I will—”

“You needed a wake up call, Prince.” He used air quotes around her title, and snarled more rebuttals. “When Tony and Viktor were vying for power and looking for ways to usurp you, what did you do? You waited, and came to me when you wanted a way to end them with minimal damage. Minimal damage!” His voice was a scream, but it deteriorated into a laugh. “You forget what Kindred are!”

The two of them were throwing around secrets that could shatter the Danse Macabre if abused, but it was like neither of them cared anymore.

Antoinette rubbed at her cheek where Jacob punched her, but she didn't strike back. Instead, she glared daggers into him. “It does not have to be that way. It does not!”

“Bullshit. You know it, I know it, and you need to accept that! You spent over a hundred years trying to raise Tony ‘right’ and all you managed was to create your typical scorned lover, with a good dose of obsession. How long did you try and convince Viktor to change!” Jacob stepped in closer again, and he shoved the Prince back with both hands.

This wasn't the battle of wits Beatrice had always pictured elder Kindred engaged in when they fought. This was too familiar. This



was no different than her arguing with Julias. And the sheriff was just letting it happen, but Beatrice could see the frown grow on him.

“Viktor was alone. Tony chose to be alone. But you, you had someone!” The Prince caught Jacob’s wrist, squeezed, and yanked him in until their faces were almost touching. “You had someone you loved! You know it does not have to be this way!”

“She’s dead!” Jacob yanked his hand free, and shoved her again. “She’s dead and you know why!”

“And you know it was worth fighting for! We do not have to devolve into savage beasts!” The Prince stood her ground, but lowered her head and looked to the side, toward Beatrice. Just a quick glance, just a small hint of knowing before looking back at Jacob. “Do you think Minerva would—”

Jacob growled, a real growl, a growl that did not fit a human’s mouth, and he punched the Prince again. This wasn’t the same as the others, the frustrated jabs and the childish shoving, this was a real punch, with all a Nosferatu’s strength put into it.

Antoinette went flying. She spun out of control in the air and collided with the front wall of the cave over the entrance. Bits of ash trailed in the air from where she’d been flying, and when she finally came to a stop, Beatrice could see much of the Prince’s face was destroyed by Jacob’s punch. The rock had cracked where her body smashed into it.

Daeva and Nosferatu were both very, very strong, but neither could take a punch like a Ventrue or Gangrel. Whoever got the first punch was liable to win the fight, and Jacob was the one who did.

But he didn’t follow it up. It wasn’t because of the sheriff, who just stood by and watched. Maybe Jacob didn’t want to follow it up, and instead fumed and snarled from where he was. He tore off the

bandage that covered his eyes to expose the empty voids of permanently seared, ruined flesh.

“Shut your fucking mouth. Fucking snake, do you have ... how dare ... you fucking...”

Beatrice brought both her hands up to her mouth as Jacob’s speech fell apart. Minerva? She looked down at Jennifer and mouthed the name, but Jennifer just shrugged and mouthed ‘I don’t know.’

The Prince put a hand to the wall and forced herself up. Beatrice could only imagine the elder’s stamina; it was only a few days ago she was barely in one piece. But the Prince shrugged off the damage, put a hand to her half-ruined jaw, and shifted bone into place. It regrew in moments.

God fucking damn she healed fast. The fuck happened to her in the tower that had her so near death before?

“Jacob.” She walked toward him, confident in her stride despite Jacob’s attack, and stopped before him. “You may have your witches fooled, but I remember the days when we came here, the three of us. And now there is two of us. You,” she said, and pointed a finger at him, “I ... I do not want to see you gone, as we saw with Viktor. We do not have to be enemies.”

Jacob didn’t seem interested in a nice chit chat anymore. He took another swing, but the Prince was ready this time, and she ducked under it with speed that had Beatrice’s eyes sting trying to follow it. Daeva were faster. Antoinette got her hand around Jacob’s throat, lifted him up, and choke slammed him into the stone earth hard enough Beatrice could feel the vibration.

“So you will listen!” She slammed him down again, and Beatrice gasped at the sound of breaking bone when Jacob’s skull cracked against the cave floor. “You know there is only hard times in the

Kindred's future, witch! You play your games and let us destroy each other, so only the strong survive, but your game makes us weaker! Soon there will only be a handful of us, strong, wise, and alone! What good is there in our second life if we are doomed to live it alone!"

"Not everyone wants—"

She cracked his skull again.

"You deceive yourself as much as anyone else! I remember how you laughed, full of joy and spontaneity when Minerva was alive. I saw what it did to you when she died. And now, like a child, you want to spread misery! Your culling is a lie, and I will not have it. I will see you dead before I let you risk everything I have worked for, for everything I have earned."

Beatrice got ready for the next hit. If the Prince really pushed it, she could probably punch straight through Jacob's skull and splatter his head; even Jacob couldn't survive that. But it never came. Antoinette gave a long sigh, let go of the Nosferatu in her hands, and stood up straight.

"I found someone, Jacob. Someone with whom I can lower my mask." She dusted herself off – comical considering the situation – and reached down to offer Jacob a hand. "You think us all animals, concerned only with survival. I think differently. Minerva thought differently."

Jacob tried to swat the hand away, but Antoinette caught his wrist and held onto it.

"Enough with your Daeva poetic bullshit, girl. Minerva is dead, and your—"

Antoinette yanked him to a stand with a hard grip and harsh glare. "You do not fool me, old monster. If you could just let your

misery go, you could move on.” She got in closer, until they were almost touching noses. If Beatrice didn’t know any better, she’d think Antoinette was going to kiss him. “And, perhaps, you could find someone again.”

Jacob lowered his head, looked away, and gave a small grunt. The dude looked ashamed, and even a little broken.

“But,” she continued, “if you try to test my worth with more of your games, I will not be merciful next time.” She pulled away and started to walk off, but stopped after a few feet and looked over her shoulder at the old man. “We do not agree on much, old monster, but...”

“Yeah, I know. I remember our promise.” He shrugged a little, and rubbed at the back of his head where a cracked skull was healing. “Besides, I knew you’d come out on top.”

The Prince gave him a mix of a smirk and a glare, and left through the cave’s tunnel entrance with the sheriff behind her. No more words, no ceremony, she just walked out.

Really? Is that what this was about? Jacob used to have a girl, dead now, and now he was sour about it? And what promise?

Beatrice leaned forward to hop out of the wall cubby, but Jennifer grabbed her arm.

“Might want to—”

“Fuck mights and wannas.” None of that shit. Done with that. She was in the Circle now, and part of the reason she was here was because of Jacob’s words to her that they didn’t beat around the bush.

So she walked up to him, stood in front of him, and reached over to grab his eye bandage from the floor. “So, uh, Minerv—”

“Annie ... she would say Nosferatu are such tragic creatures.”

Annie. Beatrice could only imagine the ramifications of calling the elder by such a nickname to her face, if she said it. But the Prince and Jacob had a history she had no idea of, and a huge one, apparently.

Jacob didn't look her way, but held out a hand. Putting the bandage into his palm, Beatrice found herself sighing with the weight of it. Jacob put the bandage back on over his empty eyes; the metaphor of it hiding his beast and curse was grandiose and disgusting. Nosferatu's curse indeed.

“Triss. You seem to really like that Mire fellow.”

“ ... I do.”

Jacob gave her that crazy smile of his, but after a while, the insanity of it faded away, and she was left with a sad smile from a sad man. “Enjoy it while you can, you know? It's worth it.” He didn't wait to hear what she'd say back, but turned around and started to walk out of the cave.

Jennifer jumped down beside her, jaw dropped and eyes wide. “Holy shit, right? I've never seen the master so ... human.”

“Me neither.” Beatrice looked down at the claws of her hands, claws that, like all Nosferatu disfigurements, made Kindred wear their curse on the outside just as much as the inside.

Claws that didn't bother Julias one bit, and that made her smile.

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~~Antoinette~~

To be kept in her basement, pampered by her ghouls and her sheriff, was sickening.

She wanted to be above the earth, in her tower, controlling her corporations and undoing the damage that fool Lucas had caused. But Daniel would have none of it. It had only been a few nights, and she had already undone the damage to her form, but for some reason her companions felt she needed more. Perhaps her visit to Jacob's domain had scared her friend? When they had returned, he had forced her to bed and brought her her ghouls, and more blood on top of that as well.

So she sat within the luxury guest room of her tower's depths, and worked on managing her city as much as she could from her large tablet. The wonders of technology made her ancient mind spin sometimes, but unlike others, she made sure to bury herself in the power of it. Today, she sat upon a bed with her back to the wall, her legs folded out in front of her along the blankets, and a host of tasks to accomplish on her woefully limited tablet.

Ashley and Julee were laying on the colossal bed, wearing their nighties, snoring, and very much drained of blood. They would not awaken for many hours, but she did not want to let them out of her sight.

She put the tablet down and smiled at the two creatures. Her two ghouls were such beautiful little women, but no one ever guessed how much she also enjoyed talking with them. They were ditsy things, but she had cultivated intelligence within them, and that self-awareness she valued so much. They were her sounding board for many of her frustrations, and they often offered simple but elegant advice.

And that idiot Bishop in her dungeon would have killed them, purely because his version of his beliefs of his archaic religion thought kine were to be kept separate from Kindred.

It took all her effort to not destroy the tablet in her hands. But Daniel had insisted. That fool man was being persuaded by his

childe over his friend, but then, the thought of Natasha and Daniel sharing words quelled her anger. Maybe her old friend would start smiling again? If Madame Vola could bring that out of Daniel, then it was worth it.

She set the tablet down on her lap, and stared into the empty void of nothing. Her mind wandered to that night Daniel had saved Jack, and returned him with burns and a huge gash from Viktor's sword. Jacob had been there, and he had insulted her humanity by suggesting she could not care for a fledgling such as Jack.

When was the last time someone cared for you, witch? The insult she had returned to the old Nosferatu rang clear, and dug at her own chest like old claws. She had struck a sore spot then, talking about Minerva, and she had done so again tonight. The old monster was never the same since then, and it hurt that she could not help him.

Jacob was smart, self aware, even wise, and she valued that. But...

Footsteps. She raised her eyes to the door at the end of the room of marble and curtains, and the joy that flooded her threatened to drown her. Jack was there, dressed in the most casual clothing she had ever seen him set foot outside his apartment in, nothing but a simple t-shirt and jeans with socks, and she could smell blood on him. He must have just fed.

"..." No words. She even opened her mouth to try, but it all just seemed inadequate. So they just smiled at each other, and she reached out for him to coax him toward her with a curling finger.

While her lover was dressed casually, she was in her black kimono robe. It was a soft and elegant fabric, and just slightly see-through, just enough that it would be unbecoming to wear in public.

Jack's smile only grew, and he climbed up the bed to sit down beside her.

Again, no words. With a slow hand he reached out, and took her hand in his; no coaxing was necessary. The boy netted their fingers together, rubbed her knuckle with his thumb, pulled her hand up to his chest to hold it dear, all before he settled his head against her shoulder, hip to hip.

“You fed,” she said. He still had a bit of the glow Kindred received fresh from a feast; then he must have fed only moments before coming.

“So did you.” He motioned to the two snoring ghouls. “And you regrew your arm and leg. That was ... yeah.” His fingers tightened around hers.

“Indeed. Thanks to you.” She squeezed his hand in return.

More silence. For a moment, she thought perhaps some horrible, uncomfortable wall had risen between them because of the attack. She had enthralled nearly everyone in the room, and that included Jack. But when she looked down at the boy resting his head against her, his smile never wavered. He started to rub his cheek into her shoulder too, and he put a small kiss on the hand he held.

“Jack,” she said. She could hear the weight of her voice, no matter how much she tried to lighten it. “I ... am sorry, for that night. For so many reasons, but ... at its worst, I enthralled you.” The way Rebecca did when she stabbed you.

“Yeah. That was a shocker.” He chuckled, and unlike her, there was no weight to his voice at all. “For a minute there, I couldn’t understand how you weren’t being worshiped as a god by the whole world.”

She groaned and looked away. “Fake admiration.”

“Yea.” But the boy just smiled up at her, buried his face against her shoulder, and squeezed her hand all the harder. “It definitely



felt different than usual. Nothing like how I normally feel. Nothing like love.”

The silence returned with a vengeance. For just a moment, she thought she would have to catch her breath, a reflex lost centuries ago and drawn up by the boy’s words. When she looked back to him, then away, then back again, the boy had put his face back into her arm. He did not look up to meet her eyes, and did not even tremble, as he always did before. He only waited, and squeezed her hand with a tighter embrace.

He was confident with his words.

She lowered her head, and started to comb her hair with her other hand. The phrase was like puzzles on her tongue, and every arrangement she tried in her mind was a failure. Elegance, eloquence, artful inflections, dramatic prose, nothing worked. This damn fool boy had rendered her speechless.

“I...” Her voice cracked. A quiet inhale, something like ... a sob? Was she crying? No, but there was just the hint of that emotion, rusted and forgotten, starting to fill her chest. The beast in her gut, her vampire instinct, was sounding howls of warning and vulnerability. Push him away, put up the wall, forget this insanity.

She pushed past it.

“ ... my little Ventrue.” She turned then, and Jack was forced to sit up straight when she removed her arm from his leaning.

She replaced it with her chest when she reached out, wrapped both her hands around him, and embraced him. He was perhaps a little unprepared, as her hug left him bent over in a weird arrangement, but she could not help herself. She had to hold him, squeeze him, bury him against her, feel his presence within her grasp. Her lips found the top of his head, and she kissed it.

“I love you too.”

“ ... wow,” he whispered, and he turned his knees about to face her. Her hug was returned, and when he looked up to meet her gaze, his green eyes swallowed her whole.

Another gasp from her, one she could not stop. Why were his eyes so powerful? They carried such emotion, such genuine openness and honesty, such brightness that it scared her. But they drew her in, and she was helpless but to kiss him.

Part of her felt cheated. There was no dramatic conversation or argument, no huge unfolding of secrets or opinions, no emotional music played by cherubs. But, instead of such fantasy, something real and tangible and heavy with truth was in her arms, kissing her, making her feel.

A tiny sob mixed with a sigh did escape her, and she did not care. Daeva were allowed a little lenience with emotional displays, she reasoned. She found her hands were trembling lightly, and with a moment to calm herself and settle her shaking fingers, she yet again squeezed Jack to her body with a constricting hug. Jack flailed a little, and she did not care, she simply had to hold him as close as possible, like a small child squeezing their favorite pillow to their chest.

It was an uncomfortable position for the two of them, trying to embrace in such an odd fashion on the bed. She chuckled at the silliness of it, let go of the boy, pulled her legs up beside her on the bed, and created lap for Jack. When she motioned to it, Jack’s eyes lit up, and he turned to lay down upon his back with his head upon her lap.

“How’d you know?” he said. He put his hands on his chest, and smiled up at her, beaming.

“Because you are a young man, and what young man does not yearn to rest his head on the lap of the woman he loves, oui?” Oh Jack, you delightful little boy, now she was using the L word. It was the first time it had been used for an age.

With a pleasant sigh, she put one hand on Jack’s chest to rest it there, and her other found his buzzed head and caressed along its curve. Such a tender position, her love laying down upon her bed, his head upon her lap, and her hands playing with his hair, caressing his ears and lightly dragging her fingernails along his scalp. The boy was melting under her touch, she could tell.

“I owe you for so much, little Ventrue. The last I saw before torpor took me, was you standing between myself and that vile Bishop.”

“Damien, yeah. That guy ... that guy was broken.” He sighed into her touch, and nudged his cheek into her leg as he turned his head, facing her. “I feel bad for him. I mean yeah, he deserved what I did to him, but ... but he was broken before I dominated him, let alone after I made him kill the Archbishop.” Jack coughed on the last few words, like he was trying to spit out poison.

“Do you wish for me to spare him?”

“ ... you’re letting me choose?”

“He is no threat to me, my love.” Ah, again, the L word. It made blood butterflies flutter inside her stomach; all the more, it made Jack smile. “He sits in my prison until I decide what to do with him. Natasha and Daniel think there is potential in him, but after what I did, and now what you have done to him...” She sighed, and continued to gently caress the boy’s head. “But as you said, he was broken before he attacked. They may be correct, and we should give him ... a chance?”

“I ... um...”

“Please be careful, Jack. If we were to go through all this hardship, only for some compassion to cost you your life, I would ... please be careful.”

He gave a nod, and nuzzled his cheek into her leg. “I’ll have to see him again, talk to him, before I can make a decision.”

“That is good. For now then, I will keep him locked away.” If Damien dare hurt her little Ventrue, she would not hesitate to use him to test every torture she had learned in her second life; half a millennium of undeath had taught her many tortures she had yet to try.

“But if Maria finds out I’m the reason Lucas is dead...”

“I would not worry about Madame Turio, my Terry. I will deal with this in the next primogen meeting. If she does manage to find out that you are responsible for Lucas’s death, she will know that only death awaits her if you suffer for it.” She grinned then, and the hand upon Jack’s chest picked up his chin and pointed his face up toward her. “Do you remember what I said, the first night we were together?”

“Um, mm ... you said you would ... kill anyone that threatens me.”

“And do you think that claim has changed, especially now?” She caressed his chin, and grinned down at him with her red eyes while her fingertip touched his lips. “After you have nearly died to protect me? After we have ... we...” More blood butterflies fluttered, but she closed her eyes for a moment and forced them to calm. “We love each other, and ... I am sure you must realize what ... what that means to me.”

“I wasn’t sure before, thought maybe I was just being a dumb lovesick kid.” He talked, but as he did she ran her finger lightly along his lips. More smiles from him rewarded her play. “Until ... until I was standing over you, and I dominated Damien and ... yeah.”

She winced. “That is the first time you have killed, is it not? I know you had an accident with a beastly frenzy your first night, and later you managed to kill Tony and Viktor. But to feel the death of someone with your hands is a different matter, even if you were inside someone else’s mind for it.” Her words were too vivid, she realized, when Jack winced after she said them. “My apologies, I did not ... that was rude of me.”

Everything their second life threw at them wore down on their humanity. That was what it meant to struggle against the beast, and that was the curse of the Kindred. And yet, while Jack had suffered enough to harden most, she saw no waning in his sincere nature.

“No no, you’re right. But ... no regrets though.” He kissed her fingers, and blew a little air against them. “And now I know what you meant when you said you’d do the same. Really get it and ... I...” He gave up on the words, reached up with a hand, took hers, and held it close to his heart. “No regrets.”

“None.” This time it was her that raised his hand, and she kissed it before placing it back on his chest.

Jack’s smile was so beautiful, it threatened shatter what composure she had left. She had no self-control left, so she leaned down to try and kiss him instead.

The position lead to a colossal failure. Her breasts were large enough and heavy enough that they had already been next to Jack’s face, with her robe grazing his cheek. Bending over just trapped the poor boy underneath them, head between her breasts and lap.

“Oh, my apologies once again,” she said, and she sat up again before smiling down at the young man.

Jack’s smile had turned into something of a sneaky grin. He scooted over across her lap so his cheek was directly against her stomach, and the underside of the breast closer to his face rested

against his cheekbone and nose. Only the thin layer of silk of her kimono robe separated her skin from his lips.

“Jack,” she said, and a coy grin crept onto her lips, not too dissimilar to Jack’s. “Are you ruining this romantic, and emotional moment by rubbing your face into my breasts?”

In the past, Jack would not have realized she was only playing with him. This Jack though, the new one on her lap with the mischievous grin, he nodded a yes and hid his face under her breast. Literally. He slid in closer, as close as the position allowed, and worked his nose about to create some slack in her robe. Then he pushed his face underneath her heavy breast, and nuzzled his nose against it.

Now that she thought about it, she realized it was the first time Jack had ever truly made the first move. And she would be remiss if she did not reward him.

She blushed life for him. When he blinked at her, perhaps surprised that she was so easily persuaded, she took the neckline of her robe at the chest, and pulled it down to hook it underneath the breast closest to his face.

Whenever she exposed her body, Jack’s face lit up with such excitement and awe that it always managed to make her insides warm. They had had sex many times now, many times, but all it took was one of her breasts left to hang outside of her robe to make the boy hypnotized, aroused, and nervous. His nervousness was considerably less now though, and she did not even need to tell him to blush life for her. He did it on his own.

Now her breast rested against his lips and nose, with no fabric to stop him from giving her skin a kiss. And another. And another. He let out a quiet moan against her while he took his time covering the underside of her breast in petite, loving kisses.

“My little Ventrue, forever infatuated with breasts.” She talked as if it were nothing but playfulness, but those kisses were making her skin grow more sensitive. And the loving position of it, just holding the boy’s head in her lap and letting him kiss her, his absolute trust in her, was arousing her. Her nipple was growing harder, rising on swollen areola, and the boy had not even touched it yet.

“Sorry,” he said between kisses, “but I can’t ... just ... it’s so soft! And heavy!” He leaned into her, pushed his face up a bit, and her breast overwhelmed his visage. When he pulled away, her breast slipped down from his face, and her nipple was now at the level of his mouth.

The warmth of her own laughter surprised her; the silly fool had seen her breast a hundred times, and yet he was still enraptured. She took his head into the nook of her left arm and helped prop his neck up to keep his lips level with her nipple. Her right hand reached up to her robe, and pulled it down across her chest to hook it underneath her other breast, so now both were laid bare. Then, she took one of his hands, and placed it upon her newly exposed skin.

“No matter their age,” she said, voice a whisper now and filled with summoned sultriness, “men love to be embraced and held to a woman’s bosom.”

Jack groaned with obvious agreement, and lightly wrapped his lips around her nipple. The sparks of pleasure were immediate, tingling waves of gentle sparks that spread out from her chest and down through her body. His other hand squeezed, softly, fondly, and ran its thumb over her other nipple in caressing circles.

His skills had grown considerably. Countless times she had let the boy devour her breasts, and with time, he was learning exactly what touch worked best on her. Both nipples were now engorged, sensitive, and his touch was just the perfect level of obsessed but

gentle to coax more of those sparks of bliss from her body. His lips pulled at her nipple in a slow, soft tide of gentle suckling, and between suckles his tongue massaged the swelling flesh with caressing circles.

She still had one arm free. While the left held the boy's head just slightly propped so he could suckle upon her, her right slid down to find his waist. With smooth dexterity, she undid the button of his jeans, and unzipped them.

“If you could remove your pants, little Ventrue?”

The boy nodded and reached down with both hands to slip both his pants and underwear free of his legs. As he did, she took his shirt at the collar and raised it up and over his head. He was left nude, and with a hungry sigh, she eased him back into the same position so he could resume suckling and massaging her body.

She did oh so love the lean shape of his form, small but defined. The fingers of her free hand found his chest, and her fingernails traced lines along his hard body down his stomach, across his abs, back and forth along his pelvis and apollo's belt, until finally her fingers eased around the base of his erect member.

“God...” He broke away from her breast to let out a moan, and he gave his own sigh of bliss to mirror her own.

“I am surprised we have never enjoyed this position before, my love. I imagine it is much to your taste?” She drifted her fingers down along his scrotum, teased the soft skin with her fingertips, and then brought them up the underside of his cock where its softest flesh was found. Then, she fondly wrapped her fingers about the base of him, and gave his hard member a slow, gentle stroke. The texture of his swollen shaft in her hands, that pleasant mixture of soft skin and hard girth, had her body craving his touch. She was growing wet with arousal already.



“I ... it’s ... I thought it might have been a little pervy? You know? Mother son fetish stuff?”

She laughed all the more. Oh Jack, how were you always so capable of making her smile?

“I offer my lap for you, my little Ventrue, because I wish to be where you place your head when you seek rest. I wish to hold you to my breasts because I want that place to be warm, soft, and inviting. I seek your touch upon my skin because it both comforts and excites me. And I seek to touch you, because nothing delights me more than your pleasure.” To emphasize, she squeezed his cock harder, just enough to make him wince in surprise, before she started to lightly stroke the hard flesh in a soft rhythm.

“O-oh...,” he said, stuttering on the realization.

She cradled his head back into her breast, and blew a bit of air into his face to draw his eyes. “ ... could you ... say it.”

“Say what?”

“ ... what any woman wishes to hear.”

Jack blinked at her, removed his hand from her, and froze with bewilderment painted upon his face. But, after another moment, his eyes widened with realization, and that lovely smile of his joined it.

“I love you.”

Three simple words, so effective it was as if she had just been staked. Painful emotions that ached inside her, paralyzed her, blinded her with brightness, but she did not look away. She was embarrassed; they had reduced her to a lovesick puppy, only that was exactly what she wanted. Nothing else for now, nothing to think or worry about, just enjoy unearthed emotions she had left buried for so long.

“Thank you.” With a few second’s respite, she closed her eyes, sighed with euphoric release, and looked back down at the boy in her arms. “Please, continue,” she said, and she cradled his head back against her bosom. She started to stroke his length again as well. Romance was no reason to spoil the arousal they had both earned, after all.

He groaned into her skin, a quiet noise filled with vibrations that sent blissful sparks through her nipple, into her chest, and down through her body. She rewarded him with harder, faster strokes of his cock. Drops of precum started to form at the tip of his length, and with a fingertip, she spread it along his foreskin before peeling it down to expose his glans, ripe and swollen.

The poor boy was helpless under her touch. She knew just how to slide her fingers along the rim of the head of his cock to make his body tense and flex in need, how to make the pleasure spread through his length, and how to get his fluids to rise with the inevitable. Once she had him at the point where a few strokes would make him climax, she slid her hand down to his testicles, and cupped the softness in her palm while she gave the gentlest massage.

Jack trembled a little, the way he did when he was about to cum, but switching to caress his testicles let his fluids settle, and yet kept him on the edge. It was a familiar rhythm for them, but this time there was an emotional weight to it that made everything all the sweeter.

She was holding the man she loved in her arms, cradling him to her breasts, pleasuring him, and protecting him. He was hers, and not because she was his Prince, or his mistress, or his guardian, but because he loved her too.

She slipped her hand up onto his cock again, used her thumb to caress his glans and spread the moisture of his growing precum

against the underside of it, while also stroking the inch of his length just below. Her technique was perfect, a constant but adoring caress of her thumb along the wetness of his glans while her palm worked up and down him a single inch, and her fingers gave tiny squeezes in between each beat of her loving rhythm.

She was milking him.

“God,” he finally managed to say. “You’re so ... damn ... good at that.”

“Indeed.” She got her voice low for him, husky, and drawn out in a whisper. “Now, please bring me some lubricant. I would like to try something.”

“Ok!”

And off he went. He rolled off of her and off the bed with a bounce in his step and naked butt wagging as he hopped over to the bathroom. She watched after him, and licked her lips a little at his bouncing; he had a great, tight little butt.

Antoinette reached down and undid the belt of her robe, spread it wide, and got onto her knees and derriere. She reached for a pillow too, one of the large fluffy ones her ghouls kept, and laid it between her knees. When Jack returned, he hopped onto the bed in front of her, lubricant in hand, and only when he went to get back in her lap did he notice she had changed position.

“Here,” she said, and reached out for the lubricant. He handed it over, perplexed. “I want you to lay here. Place your legs around my hips, and your butt upon the pillow.”

“I ... oh ... oh!” His eyes lit up yet again, and looked up and down her body where she had opened her robe. His lips and tongue kept trying to form words, but nothing came out, and eventually the boy gave up.

He oriented his pelvis toward her and put his butt onto the pillow between her knees. Her hands took his hips and pulled him closer, close enough that his inner thighs rested on her hips, and his testicles were resting against her stomach. The position put his pelvis up at an angle on her lap, and his lower back rested on the pillow while the rest of him laid back against the bed.

It was a glorious position, with her on her knees and butt, and Jack laying back with his butt on her lap. He was laid out before her like a board of meat she could not wait to dig into.

“I imagine this is also a position you have wanted to try, yes? My little Ventrue.” One of her hands reached down between her breasts, took the boy’s cock into her grip, and raised it from where it rested against his abs to place it into her cleavage. Her breasts were large enough that they rested against his pelvis on either side of his cock, and that was where the delight in the position was; all it took was a little lifting of his member toward her chest with her fingers, and it settled his length between her breasts.

“God yes, just ... I mean ... you know.”

Again she giggled, a sound so unbecoming her age, but her love’s utter inability to understand her desire to satisfy his fantasies was too precious. She had taken care of one fantasy tonight, and now she would take care of another.

While one hand kept his cock raised and pressed along her sternum, the other turned the bottle of lubricant to his glans, and let it pour. Only when the thick liquid had coated his glans, his length, all the way down to his testicles, did she start move the bottle to pour the liquid onto her breasts. Jack opened his eyes so wide, she was sure he would hurt his face; his jaw dropped in pure awe once she had thoroughly soaked all of her chest.

His erection stood upright, but also collapsed upon his abs; she had to use a hand to guide it between her breasts, and hold it there.

That was fine, it just made it all the more interesting when she used the other hand to massage the lubricant into both her breasts in playful, sweeping motions that lead between them. Her nipples had grown so sensitive from all this play, that every so often she stopped to take the time to massage them individually. Her fingers circled them slowly, tenderly, and buried their pointed, swollen tips in the viscous fluid.

Her eyes never left Jack though. She drank in his enraptured expression with hunger, and delighted with each sigh of bliss she pulled from him. After a moment of trying to watch her, he reached out for another pillow to prop up his head, and then set his hands on her knees. Yes, little Ventrue, get comfortable and enjoy yourself.

Her breasts and his member were both soaked now, so with one hand around his cock, she started to stroke his length with a tighter grip than before, and brought her fingers all the way up to his ripe glans to massage it with each stroke.

“Ah ... fuck...”

“Mmm, too tight? Perhaps this will be softer.” She loosened her grip, and with her other hand, pressed one of her breasts against his member while keeping it against her sternum. His cock was buried in her breast, and she rubbed it against the wet and slick weight of it while she continued to stroke his length, from the base to the tip. With one hand pushing her breast against his shaft, and her other arm hooked around her other breast to hold his cock in place, she had quite thoroughly squashed it between them until it was completely hidden.

Jack was paralyzed. He could not tear his eyes away, or move, or do much more than let out the occasional whimper of bliss when she took the time to guide his cock into the side of one of her breasts, and stroked the ripe glans into her wet skin.

“I had been hoping my little lover would ask me to let him enjoy my breasts so, but such a request never came.” She put her free hand against his hard stomach, so her breast was no longer pressed to his member, and traced her wet finger along the indentations of his abs. Her other hand, still wrapped around his cock and stroking it in a slow rhythm, guided Jack’s glans onto her nipple.

“I ... I just—”

“Do you not even realize that you saved my life, little Ventrue? I am more than pleased to indulge this fantasy of yours.” She slid his cock across her breast and onto the other to again repeat rubbing his glans along her nipple. It was all a slippery display of pure sexuality, and she bathed in the opportunity to put herself on display for her little Ventrue. “More than pleased.”

“I...”

His voice was mixed with layers of pants and quiet groans. He was so close to cumming, but each time he started started to involuntarily push his hips upward, or flex his cock in her hand, she eased her motions and grip until his pleasure settled.

She would not let him cum until she was satisfied.

“And I have told you I would love to indulge your fantasies before, yet you refuse to approach me with them.” Again she slipped his cock between her breasts, and used her arms and hands to keep it buried there in the slick, wet, soft skin.

“But ... but I...”

He started to inch toward climax again, so she slipped her hand further down to find his testicles, and caressed them in a loving, circular motion, until she was sure he was no longer in danger of cumming. The frustration, mixed with his awestruck eyes and begging expression was beautiful.

“So then, I will have to convince you.”

She pushed her breasts together around his cock with her arms, tightly and firmly, so to create a bed of cleavage that completely hid the boy's length. One arm wrapped them entirely, while the other only pushed one of her breasts against his cock so her hand was free to stroke, squeeze, and milk his soaked length. With her breasts pushed together so tightly, her hand did not have the room to work the whole length of his shaft, but with her fingers around around the bottom half of him, the top half of his cock was treated to the softness of her bosom.

And she did not stop this time.

The poor Ventrue had been on the edge for so long, the orgasm must have been painful. There was a small wince on his face, but it was washed away within seconds by raised eyebrows and rolling eyes of bliss as he started to cum. He flexed his cock, causing it to slide against her cleavage, which made him wince again in that perfect amount of stimulation: painful but pure bliss.

His cum started to pool between her breasts, warm, sticky, thick. Jack was struggling to stay still, and he had to grip her knees tighter as she milked more of him. She could feel his cock pull against her hand with each spurt of his fluid, a flex of where his length connected to his pelvis, and each time the boy trembled against her.

And there was his eyes. His green, open, pleasure-struck eyes that were gazing at her work. She drank them in and his overwhelmed expression. When she squeezed tighter and worked her hand up his length, his whole expression changed into that blissful state she craved. When she lowered her hand and squeezed her breasts around him tighter, his eyes locked onto how her bosom buried and overwhelmed his cock, while more of his cum filled her cleavage.

Eventually his cock stopped flexing in her hand, and the boy's eyes relaxed with the gentle glow of after-orgasm pleasure.

Then she let go of his cock, placed both hands upon the sides of her breasts, and pushing them together. Without her hand to hold his length against her sternum, his cock slipped free and fell against his abs, but that did not stop her. With his cum coating every inch of the inside of her cleavage, she pushed her breasts down against his pelvis and cock. His cum overflowed, spilled down all sides of her breasts, soaked her fingers, and dripped down onto his abs as she rubbed her heavy breasts into his body.

She took special care to make sure she massaged her hard nipples, and spread the boy's cum around her areola. When his jaw dropped, she blew him a small kiss, and gave a subtle wink.

"You ... uh..." He forced himself up onto his elbows, but his gaze never left her chest and the mess she was making across both their bodies. "You ... don't think it's gross? All ... everywhere." With how he was gazing at the mess, he certainly did not find it gross.

"No, because it is yours." She sat up straight, and jutted her chest out just slightly, just enough to arch her back and show off her figure for her little Ventrue. Then, with bedroom eyes, she again started to massage her swollen, sensitive nipples with his cum. Such fake fluids left by a vampire would only last a little while before fading, but for now, she continued to play with herself.

His eyes, hypnotized by her play, had more than warmed her body with need, but lightly pinching her nipples and stroking the outer edges of her swollen areola was also sending sparks of pleasure into her chest and down into her thighs. She knew she was soaking wet with arousal, but the longer she drew out the build up, the better it would be.

At last she let go of herself, and set her hands down onto the boy's stomach to gently caress his abs, wet with lubricant and cum. "Now please little Ventrue, share with me a fantasy." She licked her lips



for him, slowly of course, and drifted a single finger up and down the underside of his cock.

“Fuck, I ... um...” Oh how he struggled, eyes closing and opening, body squirming. He was having trouble. What sort of fantasy could he have been dwelling on? “Could you ... um...” The boy pulled away and sat up in front of her. “Could you ... turn around ... get on your elbows and knees ... and ... not talk, or stop me?”

Oh my. It was a domination fantasy. She brought a hand up to her chin and touched her lip with a knuckle in pondering. Now that she thought about it, she realized she had never truly given up control during sex in a long, long time. Never with Jack.

“ ... as you wish,” she said, and she made sure to indulge the phrase with accented, sensual layers. A little roleplaying would be fun; even just the words were enough to make Jack’s face light up.

She put aside the now-ruined and soaked pillow, gave Jack a rather sultry and inviting look, and then turned around for him. It was not a position she was used to, being on her knees and elbows. With her robe still on, most of her body was covered, but she pulled aside where the robe covered her lower half and let it dangle off the side of her torso to expose everything behind her.

On her elbows meant her back was slightly arched, and her ass was raised. So she could not help but play with Jack a bit, twist her hips a little to move her body side to side, and squeeze the muscles of her soaked pussy. Her dance earned a groan from the boy.

“You’re wet,” he said.

She almost said something, but his fantasy was her goal. Instead, she looked up over her shoulder at him, and offered some girlish, embarrassed eyes. She exaggerated for him, but the truth was there; she truly was soaked already and he had yet to touch her.

That changed when he slipped two fingers into her, and she let out a tiny squeak at the sudden penetration. Already, she trembled with rising, dancing sparks of pleasure along her thighs.

She could not see what he was doing, and that did make her a little nervous, something she had not felt in ages. What was he going to do, would he know what she liked? And yet, not knowing what he was going to do at all was making her excited. Her muscles squeezed down on his fingers, and with two digits inside her, it was enough to make some of her juices drip onto the blankets between her knees.

It would take very little to make her cum. Perhaps this would be proof enough for Jack to indulge in some breast play more often? The feel of his cock between her breasts, rubbing his cum into her nipples, it had all set her body on fire. She looked forward to doing it more.

She shivered when Jack put a thumb onto her clitoris, and started to lightly stroke it in gentle circles. As he did, he also started to softly press his fingers down against her g-spot in a slow, loving curl of the digits. Just the right tenderness and softness that her orgasm started to build, but could not be reached. She squeezed down on his fingers harder, even pushed her ass toward him, but he was in control, and it seemed he wanted slow.

For five minutes, he caressed and massaged her clit while milking her g-spot with his fingers in slow, deliberate motions that she could feel in her pelvis. She grabbed another pillow, put her head on it, and let out a low moan as the pleasure coursed through her. The boy's delightful caresses did not stop at just her g-spot, as he also pushed his fingers in to the knuckle, and pressed down against the deep spot within until she could feel it in her belly. It forced the pleasure tremors to spread outward from her cunt, up into her chest, down her quivering thighs, and into her curling toes.

So very close. So damn close she could taste the building orgasm tremors on her tongue, but the damn Ventrue refused to let her have it. She pushed her ass back toward him – it was the only thing she could do – but Jack did not give in. She even moaned, loudly at that, and squeezed her cunt on his fingers hard enough to hurt him, but still he did not give in.

She was a fool to let a Ventrue have power. He must have been bathing in the control she had given him! She had even started mewling, tiny whimpers started escaping, and her insides were boiling. Like a cat in heat, she put on a display, arched her back, and pushed her ass back toward him faster, but Jack just kept her on that edge for longer, and longer.

Just when she was about to turn around and demand release, he started fingering her harder. Much harder. The thumb on her clit grew rough, and the two fingers scooping out her pussy started to move up and down with enough force to slap against her insides. The slap of fingers against the inside of her cunt and the mess of juices she was leaking made for a loud splashing sound.

Her toes curled tight enough to hurt, and her whole body went rigid with the waves of bliss that pulsed outward from where Jack was pressing deep down inside her. He eased his touch on her clit where it had quickly grown painful, but his fingers in her depths did no such thing. They pushed harder, worked faster, and made more of her juices leak from her until it was trickling down her thighs and reaching her knees.

He stopped, and she thought she would have a moment to enjoy the waves of orgasm spreading through her, but Jack resumed only a second later. Apparently, he had no intentions of giving her that moment's rest.

She looked over her shoulder back at him with wide, surprised eyes, but Jack was too engrossed in fingering her to look at her. The

boy's eyes were glued to her opened slit. He finally let her clitoris be, and put the soaked hand onto her leg, but the fingers inside her only went faster; she could feel them push down toward her belly hard enough that she could feel it against her abdominal muscles.

When a body wave of muscle-contracting pleasure hit her, a tiny squirt of her juices escaped her. She did not normally squirt, but the boy had her whole body locked in orgasm and was hitting her insides hard enough to bruise. She was still on her elbows, and when she raised her shoulders so she could look down the valley of her body between her hanging breasts, she could see the juices she was leaking drip. Unconsciously, she inched away from Jack to try and escape the onslaught, but Jack's free hand reached out to hook her hip and trap her.

And he continued. She squirted again, just a little, and this time she managed to keep her eyes open to see the tiny splash of clear juices hit the boy's knees. Muscles squeezed and her body shook with the forced pleasure that was quickly growing painful, but her trembling betrayed her. Another sharp clench of her cunt and again, another little splash of her juices. She was not able to keep her eyes open this time, and buried her face in the pillow she had started squeezing without knowing. The poor pillow had become nothing but shredded material.

She tried to crawl away one last time, but Jack's grip was absolute. Normally she would have the strength to pull away, easily at that, but her body was trembling with sparks of pleasure forcing their way down her thighs and into her toes. She could not find a second's respite to dislodge him! All she could do was remain on her elbows and knees, ass raised for her lover, while he fingered her. The sparks of bliss spread out from her center, filled her, made her eyes roll upward and her thighs quiver. Pleasure tore through her curves with reckless abandon, making her toes curl and her body tremble. Her breasts swayed beneath her, and her muscles milked at the fingers prying her open.

When she squirted yet again, the amount was not so small. Her pussy squeezed like a vice, so hard that Jack was forced to stop for a moment while another splash of her juices hit him. Her eyes rolled upward, her usually quiet voice came out in squeaks, and her ass raised higher into the air on shaking legs and toes. Reduced to a shivering, whimpering thing, cumming so hard she could not speak even if she wanted to.

Finally, Jack let go of her hip. She collapsed onto her side, hip to the bed and one half of her face resting on the pillow. Laying there, she could not stop quivering as orgasm waves worked up and down through her. They started from between her thighs, rose up through her chest, into her breasts, and up to the back of her neck to make her eyes roll, before coursing down through her to legs and into her toes.

Her current state was very unbecoming a Prince, but trapped in orgasm aftershocks, she could not summon the will to care. She could only lay there and let the pleasure waves continue.

Half a minute later, she finally found the strength to lift her head, and look at Jack.

Jack had been watching, and the boy must have been waiting for it. The moment they made eye contact, Jack straddled her leg closest to the bed and hooked her other leg over his shoulder. He kept her leg there with one hand, while his other wrapped around his cock, and he guided it toward her opened, leaking pussy.

Her orgasm had only just settled, and her cunt was still suffering spasms of pleasure that made her tremble each time. Perhaps that was what the boy wanted. There was a look of ravenous hunger on his face as he prodded the dripping lips of her cunt, and when she shivered or squirmed with more sparks of pleasure, he groaned with obvious rapture.

She almost opened her mouth to tell him to stop, to let her rest, to let the spasms stop so she could take a moment to recover. Even if it was his fantasy, she was at her limit. But Jack eased his cock's head into her squeezing muscles, and slammed his hips forward.

She reached out with a hand to press against his chest, but her insides were beyond sensitive to his touch now. The feel of his hard girth opening her again and burying itself into her balls deep with no ceremony or gentleness blurred pleasure together. Orgasm coursed through her again, re-summoned by his aggression, and with each following thrust from the Ventrue, she found a squeak coming out of her, a noise she could not remember the last time she had made.

It was all a sopping wet mess of cum, juices, and noises now. Jack held the leg he had hooked over his shoulder with both hands, and used it to help drive himself forward into her, despite how she pressed her hand against his chest in silent begging. He ignored her, and continued to fuck her, hard. The look in his eyes was one of pure sexual need, and she found herself delighted – if a little shocked - that he wanted to fuck her with such animal lust. But a moment later, her mind went blank and her eyes closed as pleasure again turned her into a trembling mess.

Several thrusts later, she gushed all over Jack's cock. With her leg over his shoulder, and her on her side with Jack's knees on either side of her, the mess of her cum went down one of his legs and down her pelvis. Warm, wet, messy. She had lost all control and could only lay there while the small man straddling her other leg fucked her. He was so rough, her heavy breasts bounced up and down against her torso and along the bed, but he did not stop.

If it had been Jack's first orgasm, he would have cum sooner, she was sure. But she had drained him of his first before, so she laid there, squeaking with each thrust, cumming again and squirting again, for several more painful, blissful minutes. Vaguely, with what

few thoughts she was able to muster, she was aware this was the sort of thing she often did to Julee, forcing her ghoul to cum herself into near unconsciousness.

She did not even realize when Jack had started to cum. Normally she would love to milk him of each drop, but she could barely control her position on the bed, and had no control over the powerful muscles spasms that had her trembling on his cock. He was gazing down at her, love and lust in his eyes, and perhaps a bit of surprise. He even kissed her ankle where it was resting against the side of his jaw.

Antoinette, on the other hand, did everything she could to get her body to calm down. Her cunt was squeezing down on his cock in the random spasms of orgasm, and had grown sore from his rough treatment. She had never expected the small man to have such an aggressive side, let alone to use it on her.

Jack had slipped free of her at some point; she had not noticed. The orgasm aftershocks were still working through her, and she delighted in their waves. Jack was still straddling her leg with one of his knees in front of her stomach; she put her hand on it, and rested her head on the pillow she had destroyed while the ebb and tide of climax drifted up and down her body, and finally began to settle once again.

“Jack,” she finally managed to say.

“ ... yes ... my Prince?”

She turned her head enough to look at him. He was caressing her raised leg with teasing fingertips, and the look on his face was one of utmost guilt. And a little mischievous joy. The rascal!

“Your fantasy ... was to ... force my orgasm so?”

“Sorry! Sorry I ... I just always ... it’s just always been a huge turn on, the idea of a woman cumming super hard, a lot, over and over. And then to cum inside her when she’s down, trembling, defenseless, and stuff? That ... I ... yeah.” He set her leg down, shifted over to sit on his knees beside her, and grinned like a thief who had gotten away with the treasure. “ ... you soaked me too.” The pride that beamed from him was cosmic.

With an inviting smile, she slowly reached for his throat, gently wrapped it with her fingers, and then yanked him down to slam him onto his back beside her. A chokeslam, she believed it was called. His eyes went wide with shock, but she loosened her grip and leaned over him to place kisses upon his lips.

She smiled down at him, and kissed him again. “That was very daring of you. My legs still tremble.”

He smiled up at her all the more, but with a healthy mixture of fear too. Good, she did not want him to get too daring after all.

“Are you mad?”

“No. I do admit I prefer to be in control of my pleasure, and enjoy slower, more manageable climaxes.” She kissed him again, and edged herself across the bed so her arm and leg were draped over his body. To hold him so while the final tingles of pleasure worked down her thighs was pleasing. “But, I understand. I do the same to Ashley and Julee every so often, and delight in making them cum until they’re exhausted, soaked, and begging for a moment’s rest.”

“So hot.”

“Indeed. And, as you said ... I soaked you.” She reached down and ran her fingers up and down his now flaccid and relaxed member. It was hard to tell where the lubricant ended and the mess of juices began.



“So ... so hot.”

“Perhaps a small warning next time, little Ventrue? Such rough sex was a shock.” She hugged the boy closer to her, and nudged her nose into his cheek. “I am a soft creature, am I not?” To emphasize, she pushed her wet breasts into his side and chest. They were more than large enough to overwhelm his small torso.

He shivered underneath her. “So ... soft...”

“But I look forward to such a display of aggression in the future, my Jack, and will delight in indulging more fantasies. Though I do hope you realize I owe you for such uncouth behavior!”

“You, uh ... you do?”

“Indeed. Tell me, little Ventrue, do you know the pleasure of a prostate massage?”

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The two of them basked in the warmth of her hot tub, with the blush of life still going so they could enjoy the tingling of hot water on skin. Perhaps it was the most cliché thing in the world, two lovers sharing a hot tub, but it was a luxury she felt earned. And it was the first time she had ever done such a thing with someone she loved.

Loved. She smiled, raised a hand to touch her lip, and put her other hand onto the boy’s chest. She loved him. He loved her. Just thinking it was making her giddy, young, and overwhelmed with a powerful ache to hold the boy closer.

But he could not get closer than he was. She was laying back on the slanted slope of the tub, and the small boy was between her legs, laying down and back against her with his head between her breasts, facing away. She did not raise her head though, instead she kept her eyes closed, smiled to herself at the feeling of the boy resting

against her body, and roamed her hands upon his chest with caressing fingers.

He took one of her hands into his, netted their fingers, and kissed her knuckles.

“I love you,” he said.

Butterflies in her stomach, that ache that demanded she hold him, warmth on her fingers even without the blush of life, it all mixed for a delirious need that made her feel like a little girl in her man’s arms.

“I love you,” she said, and she hugged him to her chest with a gentle squeeze of her free hand. Those three words may have seemed trite, perhaps even overdone to the modern couple, but to Antoinette, they were honest and powerful. Jack knew her well to not play with it, like Beatrice probably would with Julias.

“Hey, I heard you play the cello?” he said.

“The cello, where did – ah, one of my servants?” She raised her head for a moment to look down at the head of the boy between her breasts, but the conversation held no danger to her anymore. If she could not talk about what she remembered of her past with her love, who could she? “I did, decades ago. But ... where I learned is a lost memory.”

“Oh.” He brought her hand up to his face and held it to his cheek. “God I’m a jackass. I get mad because you never talk about your past, but ... I remember you telling me now about fading memories. Yeah, sorry...”

“Elders are often insecure about our lost memories, and I apologize for being distant about your questions.” She drifted her hand higher, up along his sternum, his neck, and his ear, until her fingers came to rest upon his buzzed head, and she stroked the

interesting texture lightly. “But, ask, and I will try to answer what I can.”

“Wow, ok! What music do you listen to most?”

“Do not ask silly questions. I listen to the greats, as does any elder Kindred. Beethoven, Mozart, and Bach, but the fingers of Chopin are perhaps the most intriguing.”

The boy laughed and turned halfway in her lap to look at her. “I could introduce you to some metal music.”

Oh no. “You will have quite the time convincing me to listen to such loud, vulgar noise!”

When she raised her head again and opened her eyes, she found Jack had turned around completely. He put his hands onto both sides of the tub, and leaned over her so he could lay upon her and nudge his nose into hers. Then he kissed her, with his mouth just barely open and a grin on his lips.

“Mmm?”

“That’s all I wanted,” he said. “That’s what was missing. A little banter, a little knowledge about you, a lot of touching.” Then the boy kissed her again, and again, no encouragement from her needed.

“Even more touching?”

“Yes! Yeah I ... want to do more things.”

“Oh,” she said, and she put her hands onto his back. Quite the ruttish little man, her Jack was. Good. “Now?”

“No, no not right now. Right now I want to just ... forget about tomorrow, forget about the Danse, forget about Damien and ...

forget about all that shit. Just want to lay here in heaven.” He turned around again, and slid back down into a comfortable spot between her legs.

She sat up and wrapped her arms around the tiny thing between her knees, her breasts to the back of his shoulders. Her hands found his again, netted their fingers, and she hugged him tighter while keeping his hands in hers. She kissed the top of his head, his ear, and pressed her legs together to push his together as well. He was completely wrapped in her limbs.

“You know I will not let tomorrow hurt you, my little Ventrue.” She rested her cheek against the top of his head and squeezed him a little more. That ache in her insides, painful, overwhelming, was only worsened the tighter she held the boy. And yet she could not bring herself to stop, she wanted more. “I will be the soft place you can rest your head, Jack, and I will be the force that destroys those that threaten you.”

He chuckled a little in her arms, but they were soft chuckles, and heavy. “I’m very grateful, but it’d be great if we could go a while without Kindred killing Kindred.” The young man turned his head enough to look up at her, and his eyes were also heavy, even sad. “Is it like this for vampires everywhere?”

“Often so. Usually the Invictus rule or the Lancea et Sanctum rule, as the First Estate and the Second Estate, and their rules are often stern, totalitarian, which leads to rebel violence. In most cities, Kindred often struggle to simply not kill each other.” She turned her head to meet his gaze from above, and leaned in to nudge her nose to his. “We dragons are rare, and dragon Princes are almost unheard of. It took the work of ages to give this city what little peace it has between Kindred.”

“Wow. I got lucky.” His silly smirk returned, and he pushed his nose back against hers. “Really lucky.”

“I am the truly fortunate one here, little Ventrue. Do you know how difficult it is for elder Kindred to find someone they can trust, let alone ... love?” That word ripped the confidence and control out of her like nothing else, but when Jack nudged their noses once again and gave her a quick kiss, he soothed her frightened soul. Even the beast inside her, ancient, patient, and never off its earned throne, was happy to share its seat with the little boy’s beast.

Like two purring cats, wrapped together in a yin-yang.

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. What could she say? It was a waste to even try, to even attempt to describe the lost treasure that she had found, that this boy had dug up for her. Every time she closed her eyes, it ached inside her, reduced her to nothing but a young girl, and she was forced to open her eyes and hug Jack closer to her body as if he were about to vanish.

But he didn’t vanish, he just blinked up at her when she hugged him, and returned her kiss when she kissed him.

“Do you ... think you could play the cello for me later?” he said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’d really like to hear that.” He nipped at her lip a little, something very playful compared to his usual nature, and nudged his nose up against her jaw before putting more kisses against her neck.

So long, so infuriatingly long since a man had put soft kisses on her neck of his own volition. She melted in moments.

“I will play you for, mon amour. My little Ventrue.”

# Part 3

## Chapter 24

~~Welcome to the world of Vampire: the Requiem~~

~~Two weeks later~~

~~Jack~~

He was in love. In love. He was in love he was in love.

Words failed him. He tried to capture the feeling he had in his chest, but love just seemed to come up short. No matter how hard he dug into the depths of his soul, he couldn't find some word to represent the blissful pain in his heart.

God Jack, you're becoming a fucking poet. He laughed and shook his head. Julias could have come up with something, something powerful and stirring, sobering but uplifting. Something undoubtedly cliché.

"Something amusing?" Antoinette said.

"Nope. No not a thing. Just ... thinking."

It'd been two weeks since they exchanged words. Two weeks since he'd told the ancient, deadly, Daeva Prince of the city that he loved her. Two weeks since she said it back.

And he spent most of that time in her tower. Even now he sat upon the black, silk sheets of her massive bed, deep in the underground fortress of her tower basement, her next to him. He'd visited Julias the next day of course, after Antoinette and him confessed to each other. He had to tell someone, and his sire was his best friend. And his boss. Julias had given him clearance to spend time away from the job, away from money management,

resource allocation, contracts, shady deals, all the Xnomina stuff. Some time to get to know his love better. A honeymoon, sort of.

His love. His love. Still didn't do it justice.

He snuggled against the back of the beautiful, white-haired woman. He was behind her, spooning against her, while the much taller, curvy vampire was leaning over a book, head propped up on her fist, elbow to the bed.

The two of them were naked, and on top of the blankets. No risk of being cold, vampires and all that. And, with the blush of life not on, their pale skin was in no risk of suddenly arousing. But that didn't mean he wasn't attracted to the gorgeous Daeva, just that he physically didn't want to have sex with her right that instant.

Which was good, because they'd had sex almost constantly for the past fourteen days. Any time Jack even looked Antoinette's way, she pinned him, and did things to him. Poor Ashley and Julee, unable to participate in their mistress's play; Antoinette and Jack drank them both dry during the past two weeks, thrice. The two girls spent most of the time asleep and exhausted, and if not for a ghoul's ability to regenerate, they'd have died from blood loss. Course they enjoyed it, the Kiss was pleasurable. But then the two were basically unconscious while Antoinette and Jack had fun.

Fun was not the right word. They made love. Love. Love...

He leaned in over her, reached out with his free hand to pull her hair back, and kissed her neck.

"Mmm." Her voice sent a chill down his spine, but it also warmed him at the same time. Her devious, powerful, confident smile, her red eyes that cut through him when she turned to look at him. "Again, my little Ventrue?"

"No. No I uh ... well, I mean if you want."



“I do believe my lust has been sated. For now.”

There was a sternness to her words, even when she flirted. A bite, something dangerous that made him shiver. Even now, after all they'd been through, he was still afraid of her. A little afraid, at least.

Antoinette turned over onto her back. Naked, smiling, she ran one of her feet up and down her other leg with a teasing toe, and with her further arm, reached across to touch his. He was still on his side, pressed up against her, nuzzled into her arm and leg.

Ashley and Julee were gone today. They had lives of their own, despite their servitude to the mistress. University lives, according to Antoinette. He wondered what sort of classes they took, but as his mind drifted, a finger and thumb against his chin guided him back to look down at the woman before him.

So. God. Damn. Beautiful. She was smiling at him, meeting his gaze with her own, with subtle shifts and grins of the eye. His hand reached up for her neck, her chin and cheeks, his fingertips lightly caressed the shape of her face, and her smile remained.

No words. No god damn fucking words for the feelings.

His hand walked down her neck and collar, and down along her sternum between her breasts. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't really, really into her huge breasts, the way their mass pulled to the sides of her ribcage, the way her dark nipples contrasted against her pale skin. No blush of life, so everything was a little less ... lively. But he'd gotten used to seeing a dead thing in the mirror, and dead or not, Antoinette was beautiful.

And the most amazing part was how she let him. She just smiled, purred, and combed her hair over her shoulder with one hand as his fingers danced down her flat stomach, wide hips, her slender waist, long curvy legs. Even as his fingers teased over her bare mons,

between her thighs, and back up along her waist, she only smiled; grinned a little too. If he wasn't careful, he'd provoke the playful feline and be quickly reminded that she was a tiger, not a house cat to pet.

He never did know when to quit. His fingers drifted up to her breasts, and he slid them underneath where the nearest one was flattened to her ribs with its weight. He cupped it, let the soft mass spill over his palm and fingers, and offered a couple of gentle, massaging squeezes. Fingers drifted up to her nipple, and he traced her areola with a slow touch, before he reached out to cup her further breast and do the same. He stared at how the weight of it made it shift and flow, jiggle lightly when he nudged it with a little more force, and how, despite its weight flattening it to her body, it was still full of volume and shape.

She had enormous breasts.

Each touch along her body was tempting fate. Would she pounce him now? Later? Pin him and do things to him? Threaten him with delights for tomorrow night? Or torture him sexually for crossing a line? He shivered with the memories. He was playing with fire, touching her so directly, obviously, without even asking. But she liked it when he did that, even as she apparently loved to punish him for it too.

But, for now, she did nothing. He shifted around a little to get in the nook of her arm and body, underneath her shoulder, and set his head against her chest above her breast. With his body still against her side, him on his side, his free hand held her waist, and hugged her close as he buried himself in her.

With one of her arms now behind him, her fingers drifted up and down his back, and danced along his spine before stroking his buzzed hair.

“You return to work tonight, do you not?” she said.

“Yeah. I ... really don’t want to. Madam Turio will—”

“Maria will keep her claws to herself, or I will rip out her innards and feed her the ashes.”

Jack gulped on nothing. A split moment of ice in the ancient Daeva’s eyes, and then gone a moment later as she smiled, and pushed Jack onto his back. Positions reversed, she was the one cuddling into his side, him lying down on his spine. Being much taller than him, she leaned over him, pressed her heavy breasts into his chest, and planted a kiss on his nose.

“I do not lie,” she said. “Maria knows her place. And besides, little Ventrue, she does not know you are the one who killed Lucas. She assumes it was I, or my sheriff, and that is an assumption she should continue to make.” Her hands drifted up and down his body, same as he had her, caressing fingers teasing along the indentions of his small, lean body, his abs, and down his legs before tickling back up to his chin. Each touch sent more shivers up his spine as she made the smallest growl.

The beast inside him trembled underneath hers, but at the same time, welcomed her.

And she knew it too. She put her lips to his ear, and sneaked soft kisses along his earlobe while her hand circled his navel. He dared not move, not when she was in this mood, unless he wanted to upset the ancient Prince. And he liked her in this mood.

Two steps away from a BDSM kink here, Jack. Nothing wrong with that though. Being tied up and at Antoinette’s mercy? He basically was every night anyway. It was a far cry from whips and chains, but that didn’t change that he was a slave to the whim of an erotic, deadly predator every time he stepped into her tower. And he loved it.

“Tomorrow night, I expect you to be here once more, two hours after dusk.” The Prince sat up, still leaning over him, and with one hand holding up her weight, traced invisible circles around his nipples with the other.

“Oh? Something important?”

“Not important, no. But Ashley and Julee are quite sad, and upset. They are my pets, but also my friends, and have had little contact with me as of late. So they shall be there as well.”

Oh. He nodded, and tried to hide his smile. The girls were fun, in many ways.

“But,” she said, “while it is a Daeva’s nature to favor and covet who they drink from, a Ventrue has no such need. And I would not be offended if you were to feed on strangers more often, my Jack. My pets need respite.” Fingers found his chin, and stroked it with teasing nails. “Though I do ask that you do not sleep with your prey. While other elder Kindred may not hold sex in such import, I do feel it serves as a bond between us.”

“Definitely, I ... definitely. I mean, I uh ... can’t really imagine wanting to sleep with anyone else, in any circumstance.”

“I did not expect us to spend many nights together, and for my pets to enjoy you as much as I.” She laughed, nodded, and slipped her finger into his mouth enough to pluck at his bottom lip. “I am elated, and would prefer you remain mine in affairs of the bedroom, and mine alone.” Another pat on the chin, and then she was up and off the bed. She reached for the corner of the huge mattress, plucked her silk robe — always silk — from the edge, and slipped it on with a casual but practiced flare. She didn’t tie it up though, but stood there, the hem of the robe against the sides of her exposed breasts. And when he looked her up and down, cause god damn he had to, she smirked.

“So, I um ... guess we’re different than what most vampires do?”

“Perhaps in some cities, controlled by other Princes. In Dolareido, I do hope to encourage physical pleasures as much as other joys.”  
And finally, with a tiny flick of her wrist he barely noticed, she pulled the robe over her and tied it before moving toward the door.  
“For now, I have business to attend to. I do expect to see you tomorrow night, Mister Terry.”

He nodded, and scampered around for his clothes. “I’ll be here! Definitely.”

“And ... you should speak with Damien at some point, my little Ventrue.”

He froze; bad timing. He fell over onto his knee and shoulder with one leg in his pants.

“ ... yeah, I should.”

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Xnomina. A black tower, monolithic, and strong. He stepped through the glass doors into the lobby, offered a nod to Madam Jennings, and made his way to the elevator in the back. Top floor. Every time he pressed it, the cold metal gave him a little shock, a jolt of memory he didn’t want.

The first night he’d ever seen the inside of the building, the elevator, that number pressed, the first night he’d fed on a human. Mrs. Pavala. Her dead eyes staring.

He shook it off, pushed the memories down, and waited. Hard to keep memories from running through the mind while waiting in an elevator though, and he grumbled as he started to pace. He’d managed to keep the ugly thoughts away when he was with Antoinette, but now that he was in the tower again, they crawled out of the grave to haunt him.

Haunting memories. Other Kindred suffered manias of all sorts as they aged decades, often caused by the memories permanently scarred into their minds. Try to let it go, or you'll become just like Damien.

When the ding announced his arrival, he shook his shoulders again, and walked into the meeting room.

The triumvirate. The council. The heads of the Invictus. He'd heard other names too, from the other Invictus neonates. The brains of the operation. The voices from on high. The overlords. A strange mix of respect and typical employee annoyance for their superiors; far better than at a typical job, at least. Xnomina was a company in good condition, despite Viktor's death.

He shivered. Now was not the time to remember Viktor; standing in front of the triumvirate was bad enough. He was happy his sire had replaced Viktor, but Michael considered him nothing more than an ant, and Maria probably even less. Probably a traitor, considering his relationship with the Prince.

But his relationship with her was purely romantic. He had no secrets of the Invictus to give her, and she gave him none of the Ordo Dracul's. A good arrangement really; he didn't want to get torn apart by the two covenants. If Michael and Maria continued to think of him as nothing more than the Prince's boy toy, all the better.

"Master Terry." Julias nodded to him. Maria and Michael were standing beside him, but their attention was elsewhere, namely at the devices in their hand. Like always. A neonate wasn't worth their time.

"Mister Mire. Mister McDonald. Madam Turio." He bowed to each, and they offered a subtle nod in return. Titles and formalities, the language of the Invictus.

Julias opened his mouth, but as he raised a hand, the elevator outside dinged.

Jack raised a brow and glanced over his shoulder. Amanda Pol stepped out from the elevator, though as she noticed the door to the main meeting room was open, she squeaked, looked down, and scampered into the room to stand next to Jack.

Amanda was a very thin creature, and as tall as Jack. A black woman with long black hair, a petite frame and shape, and a soft face. The two of them looked pathetic in their suits compared to the three Kindred before them.

“Miss Pol,” Maria said. Snarled.

Amanda shrunk.

Julias sighed and shook his head. “Miss Pol, I’m glad you could arrive before this meeting ended.”

Jack hid his grin, but he managed a quick glance at Julias to catch his gaze. Jack was better at this than her, and Julias knew it.

“Please excuse my tardiness, Mister Mire! Madam Turio. Mister McDonald. Sire Jennings had—”

Julias raised a hand and waved it aside. “Save your excuses and your apologies. I understand you normally deal with Madam Jennings, but we are the council. Be on time or you will be disciplined.”

And she shrunk again. Jack could see the slightest hint of a grin on Julias’s lips though. His sire was doing his best to save her from said discipline, rather than threatening her with it. Viktor wouldn’t have bothered with a warning.

“You two have been handling many of our contracts and dealings with Xnomina.” McDonald, barbarian in a suit, stepped forward and started to pace with hands in the small of his back. “But, it is time for you to earn your titles in the field.”

“In the field sir?”

“Yes. We’ve had reports of disappearances in the South East corner of South Side.” McDonald brought up a hand to the giant touch screen wall, and exposed the overhead camera shot of the entire city. Satellite imagery, terrifying. “Here.”

“That’s ... Devil’s Corner, sir.” Jack squinted at the map, and shuddered a little. “I assumed disappearances were normal.” It wasn’t a place he’d ever been; his mother had expressly forbid it. Prostitution and drug use were rampant, and not the high class, devil-in-a-suit type found in his current place of abode in South Side. Devil’s Corner was on the corner of Carthian and Invictus territory, and neither covenant wanted it. Sort of neutral territory, in a way.

“The devil’s in the details.” Julias tapped the side of his nose once, and took a stand beside McDonald. A small wave of his hand, a few taps, and he brought up police reports. Classified material. “The area’s fairly wide, a five mile radius, the whole of the Corner. And with each disappearance, there’s been ... marks.”

“Marks, Sire?”

“Yes, police reports indicate that many of these sites have had odd slash marks on nearby walls, or the asphalt.” Julias glanced back over at Maria, but the ghost woman said nothing. “It could be a vampire that has succumbed to the beast, and are no longer capable of escaping its frenzied hunger. Or it could be a serial killer with a strange modus operandi.”



“We are unsure.” McDonald swiped the screen, and pictures appeared. Slash marks indeed, and far thicker than a sword could cause.

Amanda opened her mouth, but one quick glance from Jack got her to close it. He knew what she was thinking, what everyone was already probably thinking. A Gangrel like Jessy could make claw marks like that. But if she said it, McDonald was liable to tear Amanda’s head off.

“Investigate.” Julias sat down at the table edge again, and made a sweeping gesture. “Find out what’s happening, find who’s behind these disappearances. If they’re human, find out how they’re making the marks, then you may do what you wish.”

Do what they wish? Jack made a tiny frown and looked down. He didn’t like the idea of a human going around kidnapping people and killing them; so Julias was offering him the option to stop them. He could do that. Play the hero role for once, could be just what the soul needed.

“But, if they are Kindred, report back to Jessy. She’ll handle the investigation from there as she sees fit.” McDonald nodded, gave his own dismissing wave, and sat back down to resume gazing at his tablet.

Julias nodded, and gave Jack a wink. “Speak to Ricardo if you need supplies. Dismissed.”

Both neonates returned the nod, bowed, and left.

Once the door was closed behind them, they both looked at each other, and took deep, unneeded-but-relaxing-anyway breaths. Amanda hit the button for the elevator, and they waited.

“So, working together,” Jack said. “Guess we’ll get to know each other.”

“Y-yeah ... I guess.”

And as typical for talking with the other neonates, they got nervous. Being the boyfriend of the Prince made conversation difficult, and being the childe of a council member didn't help; every attempt was met with anxiety and defensiveness. He was getting sick of it.

“Look, Miss Pol ... Amanda, just treat me like what I am, ok? A neonate, like you. Younger at that. My relationship with the Prince and Julias is of no consequence.”

Amanda eyed him, squinted, and looked him up and down.

“ ... no consequence?”

“No consequence. The Prince would dump me in a heartbeat if I used our relationship as a way of bullying you, or vying for a promotion.” Probably. Maybe. Maybe not. “So, I mean, unless you plan to literally stab me in the back, you're good to say or do whatever, ok?” He offered a nod and a smile, just a small one; wasn't good at the big, powerful ones like Julias. But a little could go a long way.

Amanda returned it, and nodded. “So ... Jack.” Struggled to say his name, instead of Master Terry. Cute. “Um, how has your unlife been treating you?”

Uh, god. Small talk. Shoot him now. Why'd he have to open his mouth?

“Fine Amanda, just fine.” Ding. The elevator doors opened, and the two little neonates stepped into the cage of awkward conversation.

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Well, maybe not so awkward.

“I loved the part at the end where Rick breaks down and starts crying on Villa’s knees. So romantic, how that hard, stone man breaks when he finally realizes he’s got her back. You can see the lifetime of anger and hardships melt away!” Amanda hugged herself, and swooned. Audibly.

“I am a sucker for a good romance.” Jack nodded, and rounded the corner of the next street.

The lovely nights of Dolareido. Not exactly lovely tonight, with the growing heat and humidity; not a problem for a Kindred though. The people, on the other hand, looked worn out, sweating, and struggling to keep up their usual pace as the heatwave rendered even the nighttime air unpleasant. It meant lighter suits, often with the jackets off, and women wearing far skimpier dresses, backs exposed and cleavage as well. Even the pimps were taking it easy, sitting around in the outdoor seating of restaurants, smoking cigars and having pleasant conversation with their near-nude employees.

“I’m surprised! You’re a guy. Guys aren’t into romance.”

“Hey now, unfair. I’ll let you in on a secret.” He leaned toward her a little as they walked, and lowered his voice a touch. “Guys love romance stories too, just not when it’s self-indulgent garbage.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Well ... you know how a lot of guys enjoy movies that are nothing but explosions, car chases, and gunfights?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re pretty awful, yeah? Just testosterone candy in movie form.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you can do the same thing with romance. Page one, introduce your two characters destined to be together. Page two through five hundred, have them be drawn to each other with attraction, desire, emotion, and have the writer throw every possible hurdle you can think of to make it so their relationship seems doomed and impossible. Have them get together in the end. Bam, you have the same idiotic, indulgent crap as a movie that’s nothing but explosions, just of the romance flavor instead of action flavor.”

Amanda blinked at him, and he smirked. He did love a good rant, and he loved it more when people actually bothered to listen. In love with the sound of his own voice, such a Ventrue trait.

“So On Morrow’s Break is—”

“Not garbage, because it has a combination of action and romance, and also quality pacing, introspection, meaningful character growth, and events that aren’t just formulaic cliches.” He laughed when she smiled, his whispering voice gone. “So yeah, I loved that scene too. It had weight.”

Some people glanced at them a few times as they walked by, but it passed. Just a young guy and girl on a stroll through Dolareido, middle of the night, wearing suits and looking quite dashing. Jackets on, to hide their shoulder holsters, pistol, some magazines, and a huge knife. Unlikely Jack would ever use them, given his Ventrue approach; words over violence. Powerful words.

But while the two Kindred kept their jackets on, the kine didn’t. And as they got further and further into the darker shadow of Dolareido, the clothes people wore changed. Less dress shoes, more sneakers. Less suits, more jeans. And as they went deeper, less shirts, more men shirtless and women in tiny tank tops. Pawn shops with bars on the windows, police sirens for background noise, and instead of restaurants with outdoor eating areas, convenience stores with parking lots and loiterers.

Soon, where people barely noticed the two little vampires in suits before, now everyone noticed them.

Amanda leaned over to him as they walked under the streetlights. “Think maybe ... we didn’t dress appropriately.”

“Can you hide us?”

“No. It’ll be years before I can hide us when we’re out in the open like this. But, let’s find a dark place, and I can.”

With a nod, the two neonates turned a corner between two buildings, only five feet apart, and went into the darkness. Where his neighborhood’s streetlights were in pristine condition, and the buildings had plenty of space, tall as they were, in the dark alley of Devil’s Corner the buildings were near each other, cramped, and only one light over a handleless door was lit. A couple people were sitting, torn jeans, sneakers with the toes worn open, tattoos of guns and faces on their shoulders, and a couple of fake-silver chain-link necklaces.

They looked at him and Amanda, shrugged, and returned to their conversation about music. A band he recognized!

“I love Russel’s voice.” Jack stepped up to the two strangers, men, probably in their thirties, and smiled at them. “That power! Oh god the compression he can put on his voice? That cord closure too! Fucking shivers every time I hear it.”

They blinked at him, looked him and his suit up and down, and said nothing. Jack looked to Amanda, and she blinked at him the same way, and said nothing. Nothings all around.

“I uh ... nevermind.” Chuckling, scratching his buzzed hair, he managed a shrug and kept walking down the alley. He needed to find another metal music lover to talk about this shit with, later.

Once down the alley where it met with the other buildings that formed the block, they were in almost complete darkness. Good enough for Amanda. He could feel the blood change, but as subtly as a light breeze on the hairs of his skin. Not noticeable unless you were looking for it. The cloak of night.

She put her hand on his shoulder, gave him a nod, and pointed up. He reached out for a windowsill and climbed. The thrill of strength, of power coursing through his dried veins, of the balance and animal instinct to pull his weight up and balance. One foot on the window bars, one foot up high onto the metal beam of what was once an alley light, he pushed higher. A glance behind him showed Amanda was following suit.

Once they ran out of things to brace their feet down against, they had to reach out to the wall across, both hands. Two feet against one wall, two hands against the other, they crawled up the walls like spiders, until they were twelve floors up. No fear, none at all. They could fall, and the worse they'd get is a broken leg they could heal in minutes.

So god damn awesome.

Once he got his fingers onto the roof, he pulled himself up, crouched low, and poked his head out to look over the street. One of the taller buildings in Devil's Corner, they could see out and into the nightlife below, the shitty lights flashing horrible signs for bars, brothels — illegal, but still blatant — and everything in between. People walked, chatted, and breezed right on by without hesitation as cop cars with sirens blasting drove past. Just a night in the life of Devil's Corner.

There were worse places in the world, far worse, but he had to admit, he much preferred his life of high class. If he had to dine on the kine on a regular basis, he preferred the cocaine addicts to the disease ridden.

Disease ridden. Sounding awfully judgmental and full of yourself, Jack. Ventrue side showing through a little more than you'd like.

Amanda squatted down beside him on the roof, and looked out over Devil's Corner.

"You're ... kind of nice," she said.

He quirked a brow. "I uh ... what?"

"Nice. I don't know, after learning you and the Prince were an item, I thought you'd be scarier. And then after ... after I ... came back from the Lancea et Sanctum, I thought you'd..."

"That I'd criticize?"

"Well yeah."

"Antoi—the Prince told me the underground network, that section of it that Tony used, that Lucas took over, was some sort of special ... thing. A wyrm's nest, with magical mystic jumbo happening there. Made people very subservient, easily controlled. Hence, Tony's brood. Hence, Lucas's brood. Hence, his control over you." He shrugged and looked out over the city below, to the police tape blocking off an alley a few blocks down. The wyrm's nest, whatever that meant, had been destroyed and collapsed since then, nothing to worry about."We should—"

Her hand grabbed his shoulder, and pulled him down so he stayed next to her. "It ... it wasn't just ... that." Eyes down and lip trembling, she shook her head so her long hair fell over her near-obsidian skin, until Jack had to lean out a little ways to see her eyes. "He said a lot of things that make sense."

"Lucas?"

“Yeah! And Bishop Damien,” she said. Good thing she couldn’t see his eye twitch at the name. “They ... they talked about god, and the origins of vampires, and our purpose. A lot of it ... rang true, you know? Maybe not all of it, maybe Lucas got a little zealous, but Damien talked about ... finding your purpose in God’s plan.”

Finding your purpose. Jack grit his teeth, and turned his gaze back to the street below. They were still wrapped in her cloak of night, so he could talk and move, as long as he stayed near her, and they didn’t get out into the open lights or close to people. Good enough for him to vent a little.

“A lot of circumstantial evidence, a lot of hearsay, a lot subjectivity, and a lot of blind concepts like faith. You’re talking to the wrong person about this, Amanda, I’m a scientist at heart. Got some evidence you want to talk about, or maybe analyze some deduced reasoning? I’m there. Want to talk about what you feel”—he air quoted—“and what you know in your soul, and your heart”—more air quotes—“then you should talk to Damien.”

A long sigh from her made Jack wince, and he stuck out his hand to touch hers.

“Sorry,” he said, “I uh ... threw that impression you had of me right back to where it was, didn’t I?”

“No, no. You’re honest, and direct. I like that.” Another smile from her, and a little warmer too.

Flirting? She couldn’t be flirting, girls did not flirt with Jack, he wasn’t Julias.

“So, you a devout believer?” he said.

“I ... don’t know? With Lucas, it was easy to believe I was. Now, I guess I’m just agnostic.”



“Ah, me too.”

“You too? Thought you said you were a scientist.”

He laughed and scratched his buzzed head. “A good scientist knows when to reevaluate the hypothesis, when new evidence is brought to light. I’ve seen some ... strange things, since being embraced, that I’d be a fool to ignore. Being dead and still talking, for one. The Prince’s wurm nest thingy, for two.”

Amanda laughed too, and smiled at him. Another one of those fun, sly little smiles. Maybe she was flirting? Was Julias rubbing off on him?

“Exactly! Others just ignore all the mystical, the magical. I mean, we can regenerate from bullet holes through the skull! I’ve seen my sire hide us from dozens of eyes. I’ve seen Damien read the history of items, just by touching them! It ... it—”

“—Would make anyone wonder if there’s more at work here than we can see.” Yeah, no denying that. After seeing Lucas disintegrate a sword with his hand, and then a bolt of lightning strike Antoinette? He had to question a lot of things that night. “So, how do you want to do this?” He gestured to the police tape down the street.

“Let’s stay up on the roofs and climb down into the scene. I won’t be able to keep us hidden if I’m scanning the area for evidence. If anyone notices us, can you make them go away?”

“No problem.” Brainwashing Dracula style, bending people’s minds to his will, turning them into puppets? He could do that. He could do that easily.

Cocky, Jacky. Pride comes before a fall. But a little pride was good for the soul, too.

The two of them resumed their journey, and started jumping across the rooftops. Neither had the proper strength to make enormous leaps, but they were vampires, jumping five feet across building tops was easy enough. A few seconds later, they were passed the police tape sectioning off an alley on the other side of the street. They made a quick climb down, across into another alley on the other side of the street, up onto the buildings, and down into the sectioned-off alley.

Not exactly the best entrance, but an entrance nonetheless; pretty damn good for a couple of rookies. The officer standing by the tape was a good thirty feet off, with the turn of a building corner blocking him off from the two Kindred. It gave them the room to wander around the dark alley, each bringing up the smartphones and taking pictures of things that looked unusual. What qualified as unusual, he had no idea. That's why Amanda was there.

"These claw marks are massive." She squatted down next to a blood splatter, and snapped a few pictures. "Look here. They cut in at a curve, and go a few inches deep. The slash itself is ... six feet long? Either the person was moving forward while attacking with a huge claw-like weapon, something with a pointed tip, or they held still, and attacked with such a weapon of absurd length."

"Former sounds like Gangrel behavior. Latter not so much," he said.

"Yeah. But in either case, I don't see a human cutting into asphalt like this. Or ... this." Another claw mark, on the wall. "Cut through brick like it was butter ... I've seen Jessy make marks like these, when she was upset and in a fight."

"I've never seen a Gangrel transform." How big could their claws get? Beatrice had some claws on her, but nothing that could make these marks. And it was hard to imagine a Gangrel sporting a transformation nastier than what the Nosferatu had all the time.

Amanda shuddered, stuck out her hand to touch her fingers along the gash, and traced it as she walked. Deeper into the alley, where it was almost pure black, Jack turned the light on his phone and started scanning the walls as well. Careful to avoid stepping in blood, but not for fear of leaving evidence; the Invictus owned the police. The shoes were too expensive to get bloody.

So damn snobby, Jack. Heh.

“They have lots of transformations, generally warping the body in a single way. They don’t normally do a proper transformation like a werewolf, usually just a body part or two. Gangrel like to give themselves massive claws, more than capable of gashes like these. And ... blood splatters like these.” She motioned to the red dots and lines along the wall. Not exactly red anymore; the blood looked a day old.

“I wonder if McDonald and Garry have ever gotten into a fight. I wonder how that’d go.”

“Probably bring a building down on them,” she said. They both chuckled.

The claw marks stopped, and so did the blood, as they neared the end of the alley. Only a manhole waited for them where the blood trail ceased. He stopped and looked down at it, then at Amanda, then back at the manhole.

“ ... shit. I really liked these shoes.”

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It could not get anymore classic horror than this.

Tunnels. Lots of tunnels, large ones, with cement bricks and a shallow amount of water at the base. No light to see by except for their phones. If there was one way he was going to die, it’d be by getting torn apart by a sewer monster.

And his shoes. Oh, his poor shoes. The water was over his ankles, and it most definitely did not smell nice.

“I’ve never been down here,” he said.

“Neither have I. I know when Antoinette, Viktor, and Jacob first came to the city, when it was just a tiny town of log cabins, they started digging.” She started walking, and he followed. At least she was a little more comfortable with the dark than he was, Mekhet and all. “They made sure that, as the town grew and more of it came under their control, that there were always tunnels for vampires. Lots of them, big, sturdy, with places to hide. Complex. Sire Gloria and Natasha, they know the sewers well.”

“I can’t picture Madam Jennings enjoying sewers the least bit.”

She chuckled and pressed on, scanning the light around up at the manholes above, the drainage pipes that ran across the concave walls, and the various large holes along the walls that lead to ladders. Occasionally there was a twinkle of light as his Kindred eyes adjusted to the dark, but nothing more than a glimmer of streetlight getting through some manhole covers.

The further they went through the sewers, the more lost he got. He was sure he’d figure out where he was once he climbed out, but until then he was just a rat running around in a maze. The noise above was muffled, cars and chatter, quiet enough he could hear actual rats squeaking and scurrying. They walked for a good while too, following some unknown trail. Amanda seemed to know where they were going, and she was the senior.

Let a Mekhet lead. He could just imagine Viktor’s reaction to that. But he wasn’t Viktor, thank god.

Stop thinking about Viktor. Stop thinking about Tony, or Lucas. Stop thinking about Mrs. Pavala, just focus on—

“I can ... smell perfume,” she said.

“You can smell perfume? Down here?”

She looked over her shoulder, grinned, and tapped the side of her nose. “You can keep no secrets from a Mekhet.”

“ ... can you tell me what cologne I’m wearing?”

“You’re not wearing cologne.”

“Touche.”

Amanda stopped, and looked around. When Jack made eye contact, she held up a hand and put a finger to her lips, before she started on once again. But as she did, she reached into her suit jacket, and withdrew her pistol.

Jack gulped, and did the same. The two of them were not so dumb as to not bring flashlights though, and better than their smartphones. Pistol lights, leaving both hands free to aim the gun, and see what they were aiming at; nothing but concrete brick and water dripping down the old walls. But he could feel the tingle on his arm hairs as Amanda once again enveloped them in the cloak of night. She was no Natasha, her skill with the discipline was a far cry from who Jack was used to working with. He wouldn’t be able to rely on her if something horrible happened.

Not that he’d do any better, especially in the dark. And it was better than nothing, maybe that one extra second they’d need to respond to whatever rotted zombie limb reached out from the black abyss around their feet to drag them into a second death.

The tunnel opened up into a junction, a large room with flat walls and half a dozen other tunnels connected. There were a few holes, large ones capable of fitting a person on their knees; probably opened into rooms with ladders to the streets, or down deeper into

the maze. Massive pipes crossed the open ceiling in a dizzying array of zigzags and twists, and metal doors lined each wall. At the end of a couple of the tunnels, he could see tall metal grates, bars thick and tight. Any second, he expected a wave of rats or cockroaches to pour out of the tunnels and swarm over them. Even the drip drop of trickling water in the black sent chills down his spine.

No place a beautiful redhead.

He blinked, looked at Amanda, and she looked at him, before the two pointed their pistols at the woman. Someone wearing jeans and a jacket, a decent looking leather one too, made for traveling. A bit short, curvy, with long red hair, a mane of frizzy curls. Her hands were in her jacket pockets, and her pale skin sported many freckles.

The beast in his gut growled, a cat with its fur standing on end. A quick glance at Amanda showed hers must have been doing the same, as she kept her gun pointed at the stranger, eyes locked and wide. Her cloak of night was gone too; not that it'd help much with the light of their pistols shining out.

No one said a thing. Just silent stares as the two vampires quivered. Who the fuck was that?

The stranger moved first, turning to face them straight on, and tilted her head to the side. Squinting, perplexed, she looked them up and down, before she gasped and took a step back. "Vampires!"

And she bolted. Panicking like she'd seen ghosts, she swung open one of the nearby metal doors and ran through it. The following slam of her closing it resonated through the sewers until the echo rang in their ears.

And then silence again. Jack stared at the door, then at Amanda.

"Um ... should we follow her?" she said.

“Dunno. You ever felt a vampire like that? ... or heard a vampire freak out at the sight of other Kindred?” First experiences with elders aside.

“No, and I don’t recognize her. I ... maybe we should report back.”

“We have nothing to report back.” Not good enough for the council or Jessy, anyway.

With a sigh, he stepped toward the door, and motioned for Amanda to get on the other side. She was quick to act, and pressed her shoulders to the wall, pistol up. He pointed to his ear and looked at her, but she shook her head. No sounds coming from inside then. Well, no use in waiting any longer. Get a bit more info, get out, report back to Jessy. Don’t do anything stupid. Not that what he was about to do wasn’t very stupid, but he needed something to report, or it’d look badly on his standing in the Invictus. Gotta play the game. Dance the Danse Macabre.

He pulled open the door, pinned it to the wall with his shoulder, and poked his head in along with enough of his hands and arms to point his gun into the darkness.

Nothing. He aimed up, down, left and right, but found only pipes. Not big pipes either, little ones, all connecting to varying junctions of other pipes, connected to a few large metal bins; no clue what they were for. There were dials, rusted and dirty, and everything was covered in a generous helping of spiderwebs.

A lot of spiderwebs. But no girl.

He stepped in, sweeping the walls as he did, eyes on the beam of light the pistol light gave. Amanda behind him, he trusted her to watch his six as he moved through the small room. No doors, no connected tunnels, no holes or vents or anything.

“ ... um, what the fuck?” he said.

Amanda frowned, approached the walls, and started touching various bits of the concrete, the pipes, anything that looked like it could be moved or twisted. Nothing did.

“Ah, damn.” Spiderweb clung to her hand, and she tried to shake it off. “Wow, this is—damn it, this is really strong.” A few attempts to get off the spiderweb only lead to her hands being coated in it.

“She’s gone.”

“Looks that way.” Amanda stood beside him, pistol pointed with one hand, the other pulling out her smartphone. Talented, or a major smartphone addict, she started taking pictures of the room with the one hand.

“Mekhet eyes see anything?”

“Um ... I ... no?”

“No?”

“Kinda no? There’s something, but ... it’d be like ... asking me to tell one cloud of fog apart from another, in the same fog cloud. There’s something here, but it’s in the sewer too, and ... I don’t know what it is.”

“ ... well, I vote we call this excursion over, and we report to Jessy. Also, shower.”

“Agreed.”

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Two hours after dusk the next day, and the walk back to the Elysium Tower. Elysium was a great place, the classy and pretty center of South Side, and the great glass tower stood before a garden of decidedly Gothic design. Antoinette was an artist.



Even the people were dressed for a ball, or cocktail party, or other extravagant events, so everyone was wearing grand suits or tuxedos, and all the women were showing off their greatest gowns or cocktail dresses, with as much leg and back and cleavage they could get away with. The heat was only getting worse, after all. He could smell the difference in people as they walked passed, the sweat mixed with an overall increase in sexual smells. Lot of skin on display; he couldn't blame them.

Through the great maze garden, and up the stairs of the Elysium tower. He made a small nod to the receptionist, received a salute in return, and walked toward the back elevator. He could feel his ego inflate with every second, and his smile grow. Not taking the normal elevators, no no, he got to take the private elevator down to the Prince's inner chambers; it'd be a long stair walk down otherwise.

The black marble with white veins, the glorious staircase that lowered into many floors, going deeper and deeper into the Prince's beautiful home, it all made his dead heart flutter when he looked at it. A massive lobby, hallways, giant rooms, all decorated with coiling dragons, and the same black marble the Prince loved so much. It'd become his second home.

He had a really nice second home.

Giggling drew his eyes. The great vault door at last, the final barrier to the Prince's sleeping room, where she put her head down for the day, deep and safe from the sunlight or would-be assassins. Perhaps too safe, as their meeting with Damien showed; no way out once you were down in its depths. But other than from kamikazes, it was a place anyone could feel safe. And the two ghouls felt quite safe.

He stepped through the vault door and stopped, gaze falling on the grand bed, and the two ballerinas sitting on it. The colossal room carried equally massive black drapes along its walls, standing

lamps emitting quiet white light, and the floor marble was colored with black and white dragons coiling each other. In the center of the room was the bed, enormous, ten feet on each side, and covered in black silk; pillows too.

For all his pride and inflated ego, the sight of Ashley and Julee on the bed ripped it right out of him. The two were wearing chokers, black necklaces snug around their neck. And were wearing nothing else.

He gulped, and started to walk toward the bed.

“Jack! We’ve been waiting for you.” Ashley slid up to the edge of the bed and sat, legs dangling. Devil grin, or impish smile, he couldn’t tell. The two girls were definitely getting more comfortable with him; pity he couldn’t say the same.

He’d be nervous around girls for the next century at this rate.

“You have?” he said.

“Mhmm. Mistress said you should wait here.” She gestured to the chair.

Chair? He blinked and looked beside the bed. There was a chair. Hard to notice with the two nude ballerinas on the bed, but indeed, there was a chair, a black leather one with no arms and wood legs.

He sat down, and smiled at the girls. They smiled back, and Julee slid up to the edge of the bed to sit next to her friend. Naked but for their chokers, he couldn’t take his eyes off their bodies, their lean little frames, small and pert breasts, smooth skin. He’d been inside each of them, more than once, and had drank their blood while doing so. No amount of willpower could stop the memories from rising.

And for them too. They both blushed, and snickered a few seconds later when his eyes still couldn't pull away.

What did Ashley and Julee do with their free time, when they weren't with their mistress? In all their times together, Antoinette controlled the conversation, and he never really got to ask them what they did. Were they her eyes and ears, spies for the Prince, or did they also pursue more human goals? They went to university, but what else?

"If I did not know better, I would think you are here for my pets, little Ventrue, and not I."

He looked to the vault door, and gulped again. Antoinette.

"I ... I uh—"

"Shh," she said, wicked smile adorned and red eyes devouring him. The Prince of Dolareido stepped into her bedroom, and started the slow dance of walking toward him.

Her clothes, oh god her clothes. She was wearing a corset, an underbust one, so her breasts were free to hang over it. The corset went down to the hip, tight against her waist the whole way, and it looked like it was made of leather. Black straps connected to high top leather boots that went all the way up to her thigh. Black lace underwear covered her privates, and her breasts were exposed but for the black, see-through robe she wore over her shoulders, with string at the neck and chest keeping it over her bust, but spreading out behind her at the waist. Like a queen's robe.

She looked like a dominatrix, a high-class, royal dominatrix. Now, he was officially scared.

"To me, my pets."

Julee and Ashley hopped off the bed and pranced over to join their mistress, each with beaming smiles. While Antoinette's long boots sported a few inches of heel, Julee and Ashley were barefoot, and being Jack's size, they looked like ants next to the tall, curvy creature of the night. Each took one of the Prince's hands, and held it to their chests with both of theirs, before the three of them started to walk toward him.

He managed a few quick glances around. No whips or paddles, thank god. But the look in Antoinette's eye had him shaking, and the closer she got, the more his beast struggled to keep still. She really did look like she was going to devour him; tiger metaphor taken a bit far.

He kept his mouth shut as she approached, and he stared. Two naked ballerinas, and one very tall, curvy queen, approaching him like he was about to be sacrificed in an ancient ritual. At any moment, they'd pull out daggers, and he'd have to watch as they cut itty bitty little pieces off of him. The dragon statues she kept around would come to life, eat him up, and he'd spend a thousand years in eternal torment in their fiery stomachs.

"Jack," she said, "stand." So close now, only two feet separated them, and she smiled down at him from above. The black robe she wore over her shoulders, tied closed across her chest, actually went out for a good ten feet along the floor behind her, like a majestic gown of night. And from so near, he could see the corset was not of simple make, but engraved with coiling black lines, with little spikes on them that made them look like dragon tails. The boots too.

He stood up, and stared up at the beautiful woman of his dreams.

"Arms out to the sides little Ventrue, while Ashley and Julee undress you."

Arms out to the sides then. The two ballerinas let go of her hands, stepped up to him, and reached out. Their small fingers found his

jacket, and slipped it off his shoulders. Then his tie, and shirt, and belt. Then his shoes, and socks, pants, and finally, his boxers. He hadn't blushed life yet, so arousal would not happen, at least not physically. Mentally, he was doing his best to keep his eyes on the dangerous woman in front of him, and not the two nude girls touching him all over.

"Blush for us, Jack," Antoinette said.

A little Vitae, a little mental effort, and his body renewed itself with life, with a fake heartbeat, with fake saliva and fake blood. Fake still worked, and as he stared at the tall woman with long white hair and red eyes, he could feel his erection growing. Her robe was see-through after all, and her underbust corset only emphasized her breasts, until he couldn't help but take quick peeks at them, eye-level as they were.

She blushed as well. Life came to her red lips, a shade darker than she normally wore. Her dark nipples looked amazing through the robe against her alabaster skin, and the very subtle veins on the underside of her breasts, little things that went with the size and weight of them, made him groan.

"Sit."

He sat.

"Hands upon the small of your back."

He put his hands behind him.

"Good. Ashley, do the honors."

Ashley pranced over to the bed, reached into the nightstand drawer, and withdraw handcuffs. Handcuffs! Jack gulped, and gulped three more times as Ashley handcuffed him. Not to the chair at least, but his hands were indeed cuffed, and he jingled them a bit

to test them. Normal metal, he might be able to break through them if it came to that, but that would upset Antoinette. And a part of him was interested to see where this would go. Scared shitless, but kind of thrilled.

Got a screw loose, Jack.

“Tell me Jack Terry, do you enjoy your nights with me?”

Trick question, careful how you answer!

“Most amazing nights of my life.”

Ashley and Julee, now standing in front of him and beside the Prince once more, nodded to each other. His response seemed satisfactory for this new triumvirate.

“Ah, little Ventrue.” With a sly smile, the Prince reached out for the back of his chair, and slid it across the floor until the chair was only a couple feet from the bed, and facing it. She stepped in front of him, long legs on display, boots past her knee, and she sat down. “I do hope you will indulge us. The girls have been asking to spend a little more time with you.” He blinked, and she smirked. “You may speak freely.”

“ ... with me?”

“Yeah,” Ashley said, and she climbed up onto the bed. On her hands and knees, she arched her back like a stretching cat; the choker made the image complete. “We see the way you look at us. Mistress always gets to spend time with you, but we only get to sometimes. Mistress has said all erotic play with her must include her love, the little Ventrue.”

“Um ... we uh...” Time with him? They were Antoinette’s ghouls, not his, they wanted her. He was a byproduct of that, attraction by proxy. Or at least he thought so, but the two girls were looking his

naked body up and down, and grinning. Maybe Amanda really had been flirting with him. “ ... why?”

Julee came up on Antoinette’s other side, and spent some time adjusting the Prince’s long, long robe, so the royal cape was settled on the bed instead of the floor. With some room now, the brunette climbed up onto the bed beside her mistress, and sat down with her legs dangling off the side, facing Jack. She slipped a hand around Antoinette’s waist to hug her, and her mistress did the same for her shoulders.

“Because we like you,” Julee said. Blush sparkled her cheeks, and she pressed it to Antoinette’s arm as she smiled at Jack.

Antoinette spread her legs. Jack stared at her black lace lingerie for far too long before he raised his eyes to her devil smile. And as she smiled at him, she reached over for Julee, picked her up like a weightless feather, and set her down between her thighs. The ballerina, facing Jack, blushed all the more, especially as Antoinette slipped her hands underneath Julee’s shoulders, down along her sides, and onto her stomach. Unlike Antoinette, Julee had some abs to her, the lean physique of an agile gymnast, like Jack. A bit skinnier than him though; he could probably fold her in half and she wouldn’t even blink.

“Hands down, my pet,” the Prince said. Her hands roamed high to find the small, pert breasts awaiting her, and her fingers cupped them to offer gentle squeezes and presses. She trapped the girl’s nipples between finger and thumb, and massaged them with tiny twists and pinches.

The effect was immediate. Julee squirmed and wriggled a bit, and put her hands on Antoinette’s legs, along the top of her boots. Groped by a queen of the night, in a leather corset and boots, wearing a robe that was more like a grand cape, and Jack to watch every bit of her from only two feet away. No use in trying to avoid

letting his eyes do what they wanted, not when Antoinette was actively trying to make it happen. He stared at the naked, lithe creature as she started to sigh with blissful moans, as her skin started to flush, and her breathing quickened. Horny in a single minute. Damn.

“I ... I uh ... why the handcuffs?” he said, once he managed to lift his eyes back to the Prince.

“So you do not accidentally begin touching yourself.”

“Acci...” His jaw dropped as Antoinette moved both hands down to Julee’s legs, slipped them in between her thighs, and pushed the ballerina’s legs apart. With Julee sitting between the far taller woman’s legs, Antoinette had little issue getting the girl’s legs wide enough to put her smooth, tiny pussy on display for him, and show off the girl’s growing arousal.

Yeap, he’d probably be masturbating right now, and not even realizing it. He managed a glimpse down at his naked self, and winced; so hard he felt like his dick would burst. Cock pointing up at forty-five degrees and demanding attention, but no one was giving it. All he had for stimulation was the feast for his eyes Antoinette was giving him.

“I spend much time as the focus of your gaze, little Ventrue, and I do adore it, truly. But my pets are my cherished friends, and they too wish to spend a little time under your gaze.” Antoinette’s hands reached down, and found Julee’s clitoris. The ballerina shuddered for a second as her mistress started to massage the little bud, and Jack felt a bit of drool on his lip as he watched the naked woman squirm under his lover’s touch.

“My gaze?”

“Yes my love.” Antoinette’s other hand raised to Julee’s chin, and she pointed her pet’s face at Jack. The ballerina’s eyes, barely open,



managed a heavy, pleasure-filled peek at him, and she kept them upon him as the Prince played with her body.

Ashley sneaked a bit of the Prince's hair, and she curled it around her finger as she leaned forward a bit to watch Julee. She had no shame, the blond ballerina, and as she coiled Antoinette's hair, she slid her other finger down her body, between her thighs, and started touching herself. When Jack glanced her way, she made no reservations about what she was doing, and lifted her leg to put her foot up on the bed, knee bent, everything on display. He met her eyes for a moment, and she winked at him as she slid a finger down the crease of her small, puffy sex.

"For tonight," Antoinette said, "I felt Ashley and Julee deserved more time in the bed with you and I. Are you comfortable with that, my love?"

"I ... god ... yes." It was always a bit strange, how Antoinette used her pets as a conduit for affection. He'd learned to take it as a sign of trust and love, since she was so extremely attached to her ghouls. And that she wanted them to join them during sex, was her way of saying she really lusted for him, and trusted him. Maybe his mind would work in such indirect ways when he was five hundred years old.

For the love of god, focus on the naked girl in front of you being jilled off. Focus he did, and groan he did as Julee kept her legs open for him, her hands on Antoinette's legs, and her eyes drifting between closed, and gazing at him, pleasure palpable on her face.

"Also, perhaps, a little hero worship, oui ma petite? My love risked everything to save me." Antoinette let go of Julee's chin, and roamed her hand down over the girl's naked breasts, all while without pausing her caressing fingers over Julee's clit. "Jack, quite valiant, jumping between myself and fifteen zealots."

"Well, I mean, we would have been next, and ... and..."

Antoinette pulled Julee's leg up, opposite of the other ghoul Ashley, and hooked it over her much longer leg. Now, everything was exposed, and Jack felt his inner muscles squeeze with need, causing his shaft to twitch and bounce upright. Ashley giggled, but Julee gazed down at his cock, at what she was doing to him, and mewled, squeaky little sounds that made him ache with need.

And her ache too, Jack could see. Antoinette used both hands to spread Julee's pussy apart with teasing fingers, and her juices trickled out of her clenching opening. Pink, swollen flesh squeezing in spurts, each causing a tiny drop of her fluids to leak out of her and down along her folds. From so close, he could see everything, every shiver, every muscle contraction as the goddess sank two of her fingers into Julee's gripping lips.

"And we have robbed these two of their blood far too often these past two weeks, my little Ventrue. They have not had the pleasure to stay up all night with us, as of late." Antoinette motioned with her head to Ashley, and the ballerina slid off the bed to walk behind Jack.

"Tonight, mistress said we get to play with you." She leaned down, put her chin on his shoulder, and set her lips to his ear as her hands slid over his chest, down his abdomen, and to his pelvis. "The whole night this time."

"I ... I uh ... umm ... don't know if I'll be able to ... last that long." Three girls, all night, and if he wasn't going to feed on the ghouls for the aphrodisiac, he couldn't see himself lasting.

"That is why we will take our time," Antoinette said, "and make sure to treat my pets well tonight."

Treat the ghouls well? He was on board with that idea, but Ashley's hands were all over him, fingers caressing and lining the muscles of his chest and abdomen. Her fingers eventually slid further down, along the smooth skin of his pubic area, and down to

his testicles, where her fingertips pressed into and teased him. Her palms cupped his scrotum, and with very, very gentle squeezes, started to massage him.

But it was hard to focus on her fingers touching him, when Julee was so close, their toes almost touching. Antoinette's fingers sank deeper, curled up into the girl's body, and forced more whimpers from her. Probably why she wasn't wearing long black gloves to join her ensemble; she wanted to be able to feel and touch with all the delicacy of skin.

She was so fucking beautiful. Much as Jack's eyes were drawn to what Antoinette was doing to Julee's pussy, his gaze drifted up to his love as well. Her white hair had fallen over the side of her neck as she leaned over Julee's head, so damn tall. With one of Julee's tiny legs draped over Antoinette's thicker, toned and curvy leg, Jack found his eyes on his love's leg as much as anything. Those boots. Damn those boots.

Antoinette started to finger the girl harder, hard enough Jack could see the juices on her knuckles, and could see Julee start to shake. The brunette was having a very hard time keeping her hands on her legs.

He was one to talk. Five times now he found himself, through pure reflex, trying to get his hands out so he could touch himself. The sounds, oh god the moans of the little ballerina as the tall devil fingered her more, and more. Ashley's touch never left his balls, gentle and playful, cupping and massaging, but not enough to provide any real stimulation. He'd never cum like this; by design.

All he could do was watch as Antoinette drove the brunette to orgasm. Julee raised her hands at last, one to her chest where she hugged herself, the other to hold onto Antoinette's wrist. The Prince didn't seem to mind. She continued, pumping the girl up hard

enough to make Julee lean back into her, and squeal. Hard enough to make a growing wet spot on the bed.

“Julee,” Antoinette said, as she at last removed her dripping fingers from the tiny, gripping lips of the girl’s pussy, “she does enjoy having your eyes upon her naked body.”

“D ... does she?” he said. Every word was a struggle with Ashley’s hands teasing him, her touch growing a bit more bold and sliding her fingertips up onto the base of his shaft. She never squeezed though, never gripped him or stroked him, only caressed with a soft touch. He managed a glance at the girl leaning over his shoulder, and found the girl’s eyes were locked on his body, his cock.

The two girls had their own unique kinks.

Antoinette set her wet fingers upon Julee’s mouth, and the exhausted girl spread her lips to let her mistress slide them into her. A practiced motion, from what Jack could see.

“I mean, I uh ... I’m just me. Little me. I was a virgin before you girls came along.”

“And that is perhaps why she finds your gaze so enticing.” Antoinette lowered her grip down to Julee’s neck, and wrapped her throat. Julee’s eyes opened wide for only a moment, before she melted back into her mistress’s body, and moaned. The girl’s body changed, her facial expression changed, and her noises changed. She got louder, looser, and let her grunts and groans come out more clearly as Antoinette kept a nice grip on the girl’s neck.

Until she squeezed harder. Julee went rigid for a second, and loosened up again as Antoinette fingered her, while choking her. Grip around the girl’s choker necklace, the Prince brought the girl’s face to redden as she sank her digits into Julee’s pussy, and pushed up.

What had taken ten minutes before, took twenty seconds now. The brunette managed weak whimpers through the Prince's grip, but her arms hung limp and her legs quivered with spasm until the wet spot on the bed was huge. Thighs spread and body leaning back, Jack was hypnotized by the convulsions of the ballerina's muscles, each making her back arch before collapsing against the Prince's chest once more.

She let go. Julee gasped, sitting upright again, and turned away as she shivered.

“He's ... staring.”

“Indeed.” Antoinette, smiling a devil's smile at Jack, leaned down to put a kiss atop the girl's head, before she let Julee lower her leg again. She picked up the ballerina, set her on the bed beside her, and motioned for Ashley. Julee, panting and exhausted, leaned against Antoinette's side, and she combed a bit of Antoinette's hair again as she set her cheek against the Prince's shoulder.

Ashley was very much not exhausted. The blond giggled, and slid around him to sit between Antoinette's legs, facing Jack. So little room between them, only a couple feet, she had a little trouble getting around him, but soon she was snuggled back into her mistress's lap, and she had no issues spreading her legs. Without waiting, she opened her thighs and exposed the small, smooth pussy she seemed very proud of. It was wet.

“Ashley, on the other hand, is a rascal, a mischievous creature. She enjoys play.” Antoinette set her hands on Ashley's shoulders, slid them down her arms, underneath them, and to the girl's gymnast stomach. Ashley didn't even blush. Shameless, far more so than the first time they'd had sex, Ashley reached out for the underside of Jack's chair, and pulled him forward.

The chair made a quiet groan as the wooden legs slid across the marble, before he was a single foot away from Ashley. She smiled at

him, grinned a grin he'd seen on Antoinette a thousand times, before she put her legs up and onto his shoulders. The angle put her butt up a bit, between his knees and on the edge of the bed.

“She does love to test me.” With a roll of her eyes, Antoinette reached out, set her fingers upon the girl's smooth, lithe legs, and traced her thighs. And from this close, there was no way Jack could miss a single moment of it. Antoinette slid a hand down the girl's mons, and started to caress her clitoris; a different rhythm than with Julee, more bounce and less depth. But it worked, and within seconds, Ashley started to pant, started to blush, and started to whimper. Her sounds were far less submissive sounding than Julee's, far more excited, and where Julee had looked like she was being tortured with bliss, Ashley was smiling and giggling between mewls.

“Can I, mistress?”

“Only if Jack agrees.”

“Agrees? Agrees to ... to...” He stared as Ashley put her legs down, stood up in the small crevice of space between the chair and the bed, and reached out to put her hands on his shoulders.

“Sex.” She leaned in closer, lips grazing his forehead, and she let her hands drift down upon his chest to nuzzle them into the lines of his muscles once more.

The ghouls were in their bed all the time, but actual sex with them, penetration, was a rarity. But whenever it happened, they always asked, and every time he double checked that it was actually something Antoinette wanted. A glance to her showed no signs of anger or jealousy; she looked enamored with the idea, even. Watching her pets fuck her love was a huge turn on for her, he could see.

Which of course made it a huge turn on for him. He looked up at the ballerina, up her smooth body, the subtle lines of her muscles, her flexible and lithe form, her tiny frame. Not as small as Natasha — no one was as small as Natasha — but small like him.

“You sure?” he said to Antoinette.

“Of course my sweet,” she said, same as always.

Though today, she felt like doing a little more than saying. She reached out with her hands, put them onto Ashley’s hips, and guided the girl forward. Ashley spread her legs around Jack’s, and lowered herself down to sit on his lap, almost bouncing on his legs. Her clit pressed up against the underside of his cock, and she slid herself forward across his lap — or Antoinette pushed her — to press the wet lips of her cunt to his testicles. She stuck out her arms to hook them around his neck by the hand, so she could lean back and smile at him while Antoinette’s hands continued to move over her body. The Prince grinned from over her pet’s shoulder, slid herself a bit closer so it was her sitting on the edge of the bed. And from so close, she let her hands roam up and down Ashley’s naked body, along her small, beautiful breasts, along her stomach and navel, along her back and shoulders.

Jack groaned as he felt the light creature’s liquids grow until his testicles were warm with them.

“Y-yeah ... I’d love ... to have sex with you.” When he said it, Antoinette let out a long sigh of satisfaction, and her smile returned, brighter. Seeing her smile like that, made his insides warm and his own smile show. Her ghouls were hers, and she was sharing what she cherished with her love.

And of course, beautiful naked girl, plus sex. Just a guy after all, barely an adult! Antoinette knew his weakness, and she was exploiting it. He was the victim!

Victim!

Ashley stood up again, reached down to take his aching cock into her fingers, and guided him. Her squeezing muscles found his glans, and she giggled as she clenched tight while lowering herself. And he groaned, louder than he wanted, as her tight, wet muscles found the already swollen-to-burst head of his cock. Hot flesh wrapped around him, squeezing the whole way down, until the little imp was comfortable on his lap. She nudged herself in a little, and sighed as she wriggled around until her lips were pressed to the base of him.

“Mmm.” She raised her arms like she was stretching, before she set them out again to hook her fingers around the back of his neck while she leaned against the Prince’s stomach. Her head settled between where Antoinette’s breasts hung over her corset, still partially hidden behind the royal robe. “I never really get to make this last, you know? Never get to just sit here, and ... look ... and feel...” Her hands slid down his chest again, down along his abs to his shoulders, and up to his neck, before finding his buzzed hair; more giggles as she ran her fingers along it.

Jack managed a glance at Julee, but it only made things worse. The brunette was masturbating, though she was trying to hide it. Hard to hide when she was sitting against Antoinette’s side, leaning against her, and had a hand between her thighs.

“Hey,” Ashley said, “look at me too ... please?” She slid her hands up her own body this time, found her pert breasts, and kneaded them with a few caressing presses before she put her fingers back against Jack’s chest.

“S-ssory ... just...” Just holy god fuck mother sweet fucking ham. Don’t cum, don’t cum. Gods she was so tight, and wet, and warm, warm with a kine’s blood. Biting her was off limits for the night’s plan, if the ghouls wanted to be more involved, but he could feel his desire to sink his teeth into her neck growing. Focusing on the



pleasure wasn't helping; his cock was so hard and already leaking precum into her, any sudden thrusts and he'd probably cum. The warm, tingling waves were building up underneath his shaft by then, demanding release.

And the Prince knew it too.

“To torment poor Jack is ... I admit, something she and I both delight in.” Antoinette settled her chin on Ashley's head, and let her hands roam down the girl's body, down to her thighs, and between her legs where the ballerina was taut around Jack's cock. Her fingers, dancing little devils, found Ashley's clitoris, and began to massage it.

Jack winced as Ashley clenched down. Her juices renewed, and only grew as Antoinette caressed the girl's budding clit with what must have been five centuries of practice. And far as Jack could tell, it was more than enough to rip the energy out of Ashley in seconds and leave her a squeaking, squeezing mess. She tried to keep her hands on his chest, to keep touching him, feeling him, but the faster and harder Antoinette got, the more she mewled, and eventually put her hands onto her mistress's wrists.

Antoinette wasn't looking at Ashley though, she was looking at him. A succubus smile, with half-closed eyes that failed to mask the evil glint he found there. She was enjoying this torture, making him feel every clench and spasm and squeeze of Ashley's insides as the girl was catapulted to orgasm. And as Ashley came, her cunt convulsing and making him shiver, Antoinette continued to watch him.

He tried to keep eye contact with her; he knew she liked that, after all. But he had to look away, if only for a second, to keep himself from thrusting into the ballerina cumming on his cock.

“Oh ... I ... mmm.” Ashley leaned her head back a bit and pointed her lips upward, and the Prince met them with a kiss, and a wink for

Jack. “I know you and the mistress, you’re in love, and ... and it’s romantic, and perfect! And ... and I hope we can be a part of that. We’re her ghouls, after all. We serve the mistress wholly.” Ashley leaned forward, hands out for his shoulders again, but this time she got in deep, put her head near his, and looked down. She watched where his cock was inside her, and where her clit pressed against his pubic area when she angled it right.

“I uh ... I mean...” Don’t cum don’t cum. “I love Antoinette with all I am, and ... and uh ... if she’s comfortable with this, then I am t-too,” he said. The girl refused to hold still, quivering on him, and grinding her hips a little. Antoinette’s fingers were still on her, and Jack couldn’t help but look down to see what she was doing that was making Ashley squeeze that way. Each one put a stutter or pause into his voice, where his panting tried to fit in.

And panting turned into more groans when Ashley came again. She bounced a little this time, squeaking and mewling, and squeezing his cock until he thought she might break something. So warm, so damn warm, and every little motion she made sent waves of pleasure down his length from his engorged glans, until his own muscle clenching caused more of his precum to join her wet insides.

But at last Antoinette stopped, and Jack collapsed back against the chair, panting not with exhaustion, but just trying his hardest to keep his cum inside him. Ashley seemed less tired, even energized, and she giggled as Antoinette picked her up off of him, and set her down on the bed edge beside her, opposite of Julee.

“On the edge, my little Ventrue?” Antoinette leaned in, put her hands on his legs, and brought her lips to his nose. From so close, her breast hung with their weight, like giant teardrops, and he made no effort to hide his staring.

“Y-yeah...”

“My love, I am feeling neglected, and envious of my pets.”  
Antoinette stood up, and pushed his chair back a couple feet so she had room. He stared up at her, jaw dropping as he watched the busty vixen from so close, the tight corset that was emphasizing the amazing hourglass curve of her figure, and the boots increasing the height of her already very, very, very long legs.

She turned to put her profile to him, lowered her hands to her hips, and starting sliding off her panties. Black, on the outside of the straps that connected the high boots to the corset, and she grinned at him every second of the slow process of sliding them off. Taunting, teasing, when she got the underwear down to her heels, she let go, stepped out of them, and arched her back as she raised herself to stand up straight once more, before turning to face him again.

He gulped, his cock twitched, and another drop of his precum leaked from the ripe glans.

“N-neglected?”

“Indeed.” She raised her right leg, put it on the chair next to his butt, and stepped around the chair with the other. So close, so tall, and with her one leg up and knee bent — oh my fucking god those boots — it put her smooth lips and bare mons only inches from his face. “Do take care of me, my little Ventrue.” She pushed her hips in, just a few inches, just enough so the bud of her clitoris was grazing his lips.

He opened his mouth, and devoured her.

Her moans, husky and deep compared to the ballerinas, sent shivers up his spine. He’d heard them so many times, over dozens of nights of sex, and they always got him going. A tiger’s groan, a dragon’s moan, a dangerous and deadly creature pushing her pussy against his lips, and awaiting satisfaction. And he gave it as best he

could, suckling on her clit and bathing it in his tongue. She was already wet.

Her hands found his head, and she ran her fingers over his buzzed crown. He felt a little bad for Ashley, because the Prince's caress along his head felt so much better. Like melting into a warm embrace, her fingers settled him and begged him at the same time, soothed him and lit a fire between his legs at the same time, made him want to touch her so damn much. Handcuffs made that hard, but using only his mouth was half the fun.

So damn beautiful. It wasn't just the proximity, of tasting her juices on his tongue, of feeling her clenching muscles nudge against his mouth as he licked, it was the view! Oh god the view, staring up at her, her heavy breasts hanging over his head, and the corset that would have probably left a human unable to breathe.

Ashley and Julee joined Antoinette, put their hands on the chair and his shoulders, and leaned in to watch.

"That looks amazing," Ashley said. Julee said nothing, but Jack could see her blushing in the corner of his eye, her eyes locked on where Antoinette was pushing her mons against his nose. The Prince moved one of her hands too, probably to give the girls a better view of what he was doing to her.

And they both let out long, deep sighs as Antoinette came. More of her wet warmth trickled into his mouth and onto his tongue, each renewed by a clench of her muscles he could feel against him. Lips locked around half of her pussy, he licked and suckled until he felt her shudder; she rarely moaned during orgasm, the Prince, but came with controlled pleasure and practiced bliss. He settled his tongue, and let her enjoy her orgasm for a few moments, before he licked again.

But the Prince had had enough. She lowered her leg, backed away, and sat down on the bed; Jack grinned when he noticed her legs

were shivering a little.

“Much better,” she said, and she raised her hands to comb back her hair, elbows high to show off her body. Such a showoff. “Much much better. That was delightful.”

“Thanks.”

She chuckled, as did the two girls still standing beside him.

“Come, we have tortured you long enough.” She motioned for him to come join her, and he had to fight the urge to jump and throw himself onto the bed. So hard his dick hurt. But, with a little—lot of mental effort, he walked over to the bed, and sat down beside the Prince.

She smirked at him, reached out, and lifted him. Just a feather to her no doubt, and she placed him on his back on the sheets.

The ballerinas, one giggling and one blushing, climbed up onto the bed, and lay beside him, one for each arm. With his hands trapped in the small of his back, he had to shift around a bit to get a comfortable position for his cuffs, and the two girls grinned as he did. They put their hands on him, on his chest and shoulders, and teased their fingers up and down his abs, and down to his shaft. Never up it though, never stroking him, just their fingertips dancing along where his cock met his pelvis.

“I’m all over him,” Ashley said, and she traced some of her wetness from his pubic area, up onto his abs. “And ... he looks like he’s about to burst.”

Jack looked down at where his cock was pointed up and toward him at an angle, at his cock’s head, so swollen and engorged. Fuck he needed only a little stimulation, just a little touch, anything, and he’d be over the edge in seconds.

Antoinette crawled over to him, her long robe dragging along the bed behind her as she straddled his legs. She got comfortable, put her knees on either side of his waist, and set her ass down against his thighs. Jack quivered up at the sight of the busty succubus straddling him, her pussy only inches away from the base of his cock from where she was sitting.

And then she disrobed. Ashley and Julee were quick to join her, and as Antoinette undid the many knots of where her robe was connected around her neck and chest, the two girls slid it down from her shoulders and back to fall behind her on the bed. Like servants disrobing royalty. Which she was, basically. He had the Prince of Dolareido sitting on his legs, straddling him, with her bare breasts now hanging free and visible before his eyes. The clothes emphasized everything, and he stared at where the teardrop shape of her tremendous breasts fell over the corset and pressed against where it hid her ribs.

She kept the boots on too.

“Perhaps ... a little more torture is in order?” she said.

“I ... I um...”

She chuckled all the more, leaned forward, and put one hand to his chest. The other reached down to wrap her fingers around his wet cock, and pointed it up toward her. With a slow, tantalizing cruelty, she started to slip him into her dripping, clenching pussy, so slow he found himself fighting his urge to thrust.

Eventually, the curvy vampire set her ass down against his thighs and pelvis, and got comfortable yet again, like breaking in a new chair. But she refused to squeeze or clench, refused to grip and shift and move, refused to do any of the things he'd need in order to cum. All he could do was stare up at the woman as she settled on him, and did nothing.

At least at first, but when she caught his eyes, she grinned her devil's grin at him, and started to sway her lips. Slow dips of her body to the sides, and then back and forth, a figure eight dance that made her corset move like a snake. Such a beautiful contrast against her pale skin, and her long white hair. She raised her hands, ran them back through her hair, and jutted out her breasts a little, showing off her physique.

And she squeezed, hard enough to make him gasp and squirm, more than hard enough to make each shift of her hips massage his ripe glans with her gripping insides. The pleasure sparks flooded his cock, poured down his length until it was between his legs, before his body returned it with a gush of warm, tingling waves.

He started to pant, and started to cum. The first wave always made him shudder, and he stared at the dance of the vixen as she clenched down on him in spurts. Between each clutch, his cum flowed into her, coating his cock and her insides, until his white fluid was dripping down his testicles.

“Ah, there. I trust that is better, my love?” Antoinette leaned over him, put her hands against his shoulders so her hanging breasts swayed over his head, and she squeezed more. Her dance never ceased, though it did slow a bit, and she used it to milk the waves of cum out of him, each sending jolts of bliss down his length while her pussy tightened on his cock. Julee and Ashley were staring, the blond groaning, the brunette blushing bright. Antoinette drew his attention back, her hair falling over the side of her head and tickling along his cheek.

“Much ... much better,” he said between pants. She was still dancing, just very slowly now, emphasizing each sway with a deep dip of her hips, and another clench of her insides to milk him. The pleasure started to fade, but it still lingered with little sparks of bliss that made his cock twitch, and Antoinette made sure to pull every last spark out of him; she always did.

And when the white of his cum started to trickle out of him where everyone could see, the two ballerinas let out their own moans. Julee stared, while Ashley reached out again, touched where Antoinette's pussy was pressed to his body, and ran her finger through his cum and up onto his abs.

"You are still aroused," Antoinette said. A little dip and sway of her hips proved it, and he shivered as her cum-soaked insides gripped and squeezed. Still hard, body wanting more. How could it not, with two naked, nimble women running their hands up and down his body, and the love of his life riding his cock.

Best he could manage was a nod.

"Good. My pets would prefer this last, I am sure," the Prince said. As she did, Ashley and Julee sat up and put themselves next to her. Tall as Antoinette was, with her sitting on his pelvis, her breasts were at eye level with the two ghouls.

"W-what ... do they want ... to do?"

Antoinette chuckled. "Ashley, Julee, Jack has given you permission to do as you wish, within reason. Please feel free to indulge."

Ashley thought the situation was perfect apparently, with her giggling and smiling and her roaming hands. Julee got closer to Antoinette, but Jack could see her looking at him, biting her bottom lip, thinking. Ashley wasted no time though, crawled over to his head, and straddled him. Facing down at him, she leaned forward, set her hands on the blankets, and lined her pussy up with his lips.

"Me too?" she said.

"Y-yeah, sure." He tried to return her smile, but half his mind got yanked away by the touch of roaming hands on his abs. He couldn't see anymore, with Ashley blocking his view, but he could feel hands



on his stomach, his chest and hips, four hands at that. Antoinette's touch he recognized, her confident and practiced fingertips teasing along his lower abdomen. But Julee was touching him too, a lighter and wavering touch that ran up to his chest and traced the lines of his pectorals.

Yanked back again to the ballerina hovering over his head as she lowered her pussy down onto his lips. Soaked, warm, full of blood. A heavy urge to bite hit him, but he pushed it down. He didn't need blood, so resisting was a bit easier, and he didn't want to ruin the ghouls' fun. He was the intruder in a bed they'd been sharing with the Prince for years, after all, least he could do was play nice.

A long, slow, deep lick earned a mewl from Ashley. She spread her legs out further, sinking herself down onto him and getting more comfortable as his tongue reached up to probe at her entrance. But it was her clitoris that earned whimpers of bliss. He suckled the nub out of its hiding place from within her puffy pussy that hid her lips, and he bathed it in faster strokes of his tongue. No need to build her up to it, she'd come twice before already, and was already panting with bliss. From between her thighs, he could see the contractions of her hard stomach, the gymnast abs, and the shudders of her shoulders. She gazed at him, smiling bright, and nudged her hips toward him.

He did his best to ignore the hands on his body from the other two women, and the noises they were making. Something that sounded like kissing, or suckling, and something that was making Antoinette move very, very slowly. The succubus wouldn't bring him to a second orgasm, not until she was satisfied, and she was bound to make every minute to it torturous bliss.

Ashley squeaked, and lowered herself down to rest her weight on one hand on the blankets. Cumming again already. He liked to think it was because of his expert skills, but he knew it was more because Antoinette had cultivated some serious sex drive in her two friends.

It never took time to bring them to orgasm; his only saving grace, or they'd have sucked him dry instead.

He smiled up at the ballerina as she shuddered, touched her breasts with one of her hands, and gripped the blankets with the other. She managed to return the smile, but it shattered as he suckled her swollen clit into his mouth, and again bathed her hot flesh with his tongue.

“Nn! Sensitive ... slow ... slow down,” she said. He did, but only for a moment, only long enough for her to think he'd stopped, and then he started licking again. “W-wait!” Ashley erupted into mewls, and her hands grabbed his head as she quivered. Her poor clit was probably a little sore, and very sensitive, from the abuse it'd been taking that night, but with each lick, he could feel the tiny creature tremble on his face, and leak juices onto his lips.

She rolled off of him, and lay down on her back on the blankets, hugging herself as she quivered. He managed only a quick glance at her, a second to admire the rise and fall of her small, pointed breasts against her lean form, before a quiet, deep, husky moan pulled his gaze back to Antoinette.

He almost melted. Julee, sitting on her knees and buttocks next to him, was leaning over him, one hand pressed to his abs to brace her weight, her other hand reaching around behind Antoinette and holding her waist. Her lips were on the Prince's nearer breast, suckling on her nipple. The Prince had one hand on her own hip to rest it upon Julee's fingers, and the other was on the small of Julee's back, returning the half hug while the ghoul gently feasted on her bosom.

“Thank you,” the Prince said, “for pleasing my pet.”

He didn't respond, eyes glued to Julee, and how she was nuzzling her face into Antoinette's breast, burying her nose and lips in the woman's massive tit, and suckling. He'd never watched this, never

got to see what it was like for the ghouls to play with her body the way he did; the two ghouls rarely got past the first ten minutes of sex, since they'd become food for two Kindred instead of one. But now, Jack found himself mesmerized. Antoinette smiled at him, and squeezed. Jack winced with the strength of her grip on his cock, but as she relented, he shivered as her caressing insides massaged him. She didn't move more than an inch in any direction, tilting her hips enough to make him groan, to make his cock sing with blissful friction from within her cum-filled pussy.

Julee took a quick peek at Jack, before she turned her head back to hide her eyes from him. As she did, she raised her hand from his stomach, set it on Antoinette's other breast, and started to squeeze it. Just like Jack would, Julee let the weight of the Prince's ample breast overflow her palm as her hand cupped it from underneath, before she let it fall under her hand, so her fingers could slide up its shape and caress the engorged nipple. Jack stared at Antoinette's breast and her facial expression alike, gulping as he watched the curvy succubus close her eyes and sigh with bliss.

"Julee, what do you wish to do?" Antoinette said. Julee's body went red, and she leaned up to put her mouth to her mistress's ear. Another chuckle from the Prince, and she slid herself off of him; cum and juices trickled out of her onto his abdomen as she did. Like a prowling cat, she crawled forward and lay herself down beside him. Once she was at eye level with Jack along the blankets, she pressed herself up against his shoulder, leaning over him a bit to press her breasts to his chest, and nudge her nose against his while her long legs hooked one of his.

"Enjoy yourself," she said, and she kissed him. He kept his eyes half-open, as did she, and she smiled at him with her red gaze as she plucked at his lips a little with her teeth.

He wasn't sure what she meant, until Julee took his cock into her hand.

“Ah, it’s ... wet.” Her grip slid up and down, slowly, and gave him curious and experimenting squeezes. Reminded him of the first time they’d had sex, outside the tower’s underground pool. Ashley had grown infinitely more comfortable with him since then, Julee not so much. But, as she held his hard, dripping cock in her hand, he could see bits of her shyness melt away. He knew the feeling; at a certain point of arousal, you were basically drunk, and nothing gave courage quite like being drunk.

She climbed over his hips, straddled him, and with a guiding hand, set his glans against her soaked entrance. Whimpering, she eased herself down onto him, and settled herself upon his cock. Jack panted, doing his best to keep his groans under control, especially with Antoinette’s lips against his cheek. But Julee shifted around as she looked for a place to get comfortable, ass and hips moving until she found a comfortable spot on his thighs and pelvis. Her insides were quivering, and Julee let out quiet whining mewls as she started to shift back and forth on his shaft.

Each stroke, each inch sent more blissful waves down his length. She didn’t dance or sway like Antoinette, but instead, she rocked back and forth with her hands on Jack’s waist. Her mouth was open, her head hung a little, and her legs squeezed against his sides.

As he struggled to keep from cumming, Antoinette put her lips to his ear, and plucked at his earlobe with her kisses and teeth.

“She is delightful, is she not?” The Prince let out a low growl into his ear, and reached out with a roaming hand to run her fingers along his stomach. “It pleases me, that my ghouls please you.”

“H-how could they not?”

“I have trained them well.” More chuckles, and more kisses, this time along his defenseless neck. “They only wish to repay the man who saved their mistress.” She pressed her breasts against his chest,

and with her leg hooked over his, he felt her wet folds nudge against the side of his leg. “And they find you very attractive.”

His turn to blush. Again. For the millionth time.

Julee leaned back, put her hands on his legs, and arched her spine. Apparently she found a position she liked, shifting her hips forward a bit while leaning back, to guide his cock toward her belly. Her mewls returned, louder, and she started to shift her weight into the new position. Jack couldn't help but stare at how her arched body highlighted her limber frame, and made each clench of her muscles visible.

Antoinette pointed at Ashley. The other ballerina had sat up at some point, Jack hadn't noticed when, and she crawled around them to come sit beside Antoinette, behind her butt. She lowered herself, and hid from view.

But when Antoinette started to shake a little, and her calm, confident demeanor started to crack with little moans and husky pants, Jack could guess what Ashley was doing.

Even with a ghoul doing things to her, Antoinette continued to tease Jack, continued to nuzzle her nose and lips against his jaw and neck, against his earlobe, against his shoulder. She knew what her body did to him, what pressing her breasts against him did, and she smiled her tiger smile while doing so. Eyes struggling to stay upon him as more quiet, husky moans escaped her, the Prince leaned over reached across his chest to his further shoulder, and hugged him.

“Cum for me,” she said.

Trigger. That deep, seductress voice slew him, melted him into the bed. His fluids built to burst, each clench of his muscles shooting sparks of pleasure into his length. Antoinette smirked at him, but smirk faded as she too started to shake a little, and her hair

bounced against his shoulder. He could hear the wet noises of slapping fingers from behind Antoinette, and each was accompanied by a silent shudder from the Prince.

His eyes switched back and forth between the red-eyed devil leaning over him, and the ballerina riding him faster. Julee was squeaking, and bouncing with a backward angle, making his cock almost bend as she started to slam her butt against him. Wet, and getting wetter, warm liquids dripped out of her and coated his cock all the more as she started to buck, and squeak. Too much.

He came, and quivered as the bouncing ghouls' clenching insides forced almost painful bliss through his length. She didn't stop, didn't look his way, far too lost in her own pleasure to see what she was doing to him. So tight, and rough, rougher than Antoinette liked to get. Julee pounded down against him, her light body springing up and down, back and forth upon his cock, as he started to fill her with cum. He winced with each bounce, the waves of pleasure met with her hot juices, and her gripping flesh.

Antoinette leaned in, her red eyes devouring him, and her grin ready to as well. "A little rambunctious, perhaps?" Chuckles and kisses. She nudged her nose into his cheek, lowered her lips down to his ear, and groaned. Not one to make noise during her orgasms, he knew that well enough after so many bouts with his love; if she was making noise, it was specifically to entice him.

And holy fuck it enticed him. The sound of her moan, the feel of her shuddering body pressed to his chest, everything. He made his own tiny groan, a pale comparison against hers, and squirted more of his cum into the bouncing ballerina.

It wasn't until he was done climaxing that Julee came to a stop. Unlike Antoinette, the brunette was a bit loud, and let out some whining mewls as she started to quiver. She sat up straight, eyes closed, and squeezed her cum-soaked insides hard enough to make

him gasp as she came. Her juices dripped down onto his abdomen to join his, and the juices of the Ashley and the Prince.

Ashley came out from behind Antoinette, around behind Jack, and lay herself down on his side the same way Antoinette did, chest against his arm and one arm reaching out to hold him across the chest. Julee stayed on him, quivering, whimpering, and she leaned forward to rest her hands against his stomach as his softening cock at last started to fall out of her, only for his cum to drip down onto it and down his testicles.

Three woman, on his body.

“I uh ... I’m reminded of a certain vampire that had three wives. Pretty famous guy, had a book about him and everything.” His hands squirmed underneath the small of his back. No good, trapped unless he was willing to break free. Which would probably seriously ruin the scene; if his words already hadn’t.

But Antoinette laughed, and kissed his earlobe. “Mon amour.”

She set her cheek down on his shoulder and neck, and nuzzled into him; like a girl with her teddy bear. Julee and Ashley, they wouldn’t get this comfy, this loving with him; this was her place. Even if the two ghouls were Antoinette’s pets and had shared her bed for years, to hold each other like this was for the two Kindred.

Ashley and Julee smiled down at him, but instead of joining, Julee slipped off of him and lay down with Ashley. With more room available, Antoinette hugged him tighter, and kissed his neck a few times before she resettled. Jack managed a quick peek at the two ghouls, and blushed all the more. They were both staring at him and Antoinette, and he could hear their minds swoon ‘awe’ at the two of them as they smiled.

He probably would have thought it too.

## Chapter 25

~~Jack~~

“Oh ... god...”

He couldn't cum anymore. Just the thought of another orgasm made his insides ache in pain. No more, his balls cried. We're dry!

The devil and her two imps didn't seem to agree. Ashley and Julee had both let him drink them, just a little, just enough to spark the arousal in his Kindred body once more, without either of them succumbing to exhaustion for it. And they took advantage.

“One more?” Antoinette said, smiling up at him. The Prince was on her back on her bed, head propped up on a couple pillows, and still in her corset; she'd taken off by the boots then.

He was straddling her, his knees under her arms, his butt on her abdomen and corset. Hands still cuffed behind him, and utterly helpless against the attack of the two ghouls.

They were kissing his cock. The two of them, at the same time. Ashley grinned up at him as she slid her lips back and forth along the swollen head of his shaft, while Julee managed a couple of quick peeks, each earning a huge blush from her. But she too was kissing the glans of his member, suckling, licking, sharing the wet of their mouths over the sensitive skin.

And more than once, the two started kissing. Ashley laughed the first time it happened, but the next time she did it on purpose, and angled where her lips met his cock so they'd meet Julee's lips too. And Julee reciprocated. Blushing so bright he thought she might die, Julee nudged her lips around to the front of his cock, and tried to keep his shaft along her mouth as she met Ashley's. Every so



often, his cock fell away as the girls drifted, and they continued to kiss each other without him.

The Prince chuckled. With her on her back, the two ghouls were on their knees on each side of her, leaning over her to come at Jack from left and right. It gave Antoinette a perfect view of everything that was happening. And gave Jack a perfect view of her as she watched her ghouls. She was smiling, laughing, and she reached up to guide her two ghouls back toward his cock.

And again, he found his shaft in the middle of their kisses. Julee slid her lips further down the side of his length, lips traveling his girth until she planted her kisses along the base of him. Ashley went in the other direction, and shifted around more toward Antoinette's head so she could lean at Jack more directly. From straight on, she put her lips over the whole of the sensitive, engorged flesh of the head of his cock, and licked. Her tongue slipped out from her lips, went around and around and around, before she started to suckle as she settled her tongue along his member's underside.

"I ... going to cum soon."

"About time." Ashley lifted her head and reached out to poke his chest. "Been at this for fifteen minutes!"

Fifteen minutes of pure heaven. Painful heaven, but heaven. Another orgasm was liable to kill him, or at least hurt a bit, but that didn't change that having two sets of lips kissing his cock was nirvana. Each lick, each suckle sent powerful waves of pleasure down through his length, and each made him quiver with the impending orgasm still building up. If not for his previous orgasms, he wouldn't have lasted fifteen seconds.

Antoinette slid her hands out along her corset, between the two girls, and out to his hips. She pulled him a bit closer, sliding him across her a few inches until his cock was over her sternum. She wanted to see everything.

He gulped and did his best to keep the building warmth from exploding. Too good, he wanted to keep this going, even sucked dry as he was. Julee once again found her lips upon the head of his shaft, and again Ashley was there to meet her, trying to kiss her and him at the same time. Julee returned Ashley's affection, kissing her friend more obviously, more directly, but doing her best to keep his cock against their lips as they did.

He couldn't last against that. The familiar waves of bliss started to spread upward from between his legs, up his length, and a drop of precum joined the lips of the two ghouls. Julee pulled away a little, eyes going wide and staring at where the clear fluid dripped out of his cock, thick enough to ooze from him instead of falling like water. Ashley on the other hand had no such reservations, and she caught the precum along her tongue before putting her mouth back onto him.

Pure stimulation on his glans. With no one stroking his shaft, his orgasm came through only the sharp pleasure sparks along the tip, each forcing his muscles to squeeze down and build up the fluids. Almost painful, but oh god so fucking good, the ghouls suckled and kissed as another drop of precum leaked onto their awaiting lips. Julee didn't pull away this time, and she looked up at him as she slid her tongue out to caress the underside of him once more, spreading his precum over the skin.

Too much. Another squeeze, another flex of his length, and the fluid came pouring out. Warm and thick, the white didn't squirt out of him this time, but trickled out in thick, dripping waves. Each flex of his muscles caused another wave of it, and it flowed out of him onto the awaiting lips of the two ballerinas. Ashley smiled into the kiss, and angled her head to make sure his cum landed along her lips. And from her lips, onto Julee's lips. The blond made sure to kiss Julee as much as she was suckling around the bulbous, engorged head of his shaft, until the thick white coated both their lips. When the cum started to pool along their kiss, no room left for

the copious amount of fluids, Ashley slipped more of her mouth around his cock, just enough to cover the tip, and licked up the dribbling cum as it fell onto her tongue.

He collapsed. Two girls, kissing, licking, suckling his dick. Couldn't handle it! He fell back and lay between Antoinette's legs on his spine, hands still cuffed and pinned behind him. But the girls were relentless. Ashley, giggling like a maniacal villain, crawled over to where he fell, and reached out with a hand to grab the base of his shaft. Pointing it up, she again put her cum-covered lips around it, and pulled half of his shaft into her mouth. Julee crawled over as well, but she sat beside him, and gazed down at him as she licked her lips clean.

But as Ashley cleaned him, Antoinette moved. She slid her bare legs out from around him, and got onto her knees over him between his legs instead. Kneeling, she touched Ashley to nudge her aside, before she put her dark red lips along his shaft, and while gazing along his body to catch his eyes with her ruby gaze, she lowered her lips to swallow every inch of him.

He started panting as the goddess licked and suckled at the base of him, while the whole of his length met the wet warmth of her mouth and throat. Julee reached out to move the Prince's hair aside to keep it out of the way, while Antoinette managed to milk a couple more drops of his cum out of him with painful bliss. The ghouls leaned in to stare at how the white-haired succubus kept the entirety of his length in her, and how her lips and tongue pulled at the base while she sucked him dry.

When his panting turned into whimpers, Antoinette lifted her head and wiped her lips with a single finger.

“Satisfied, my love?”

“Y-yes ... god ... yes.”

“Wonderful. Julee dear, please undo his shackles.”

Julee hopped off the bed and started digging around in the nightstand, for a key probably. Ashley on the other hand knelt beside him, and brought a finger to wipe her lips, the same way Antoinette had. Cute.

A minute later he had his cuffs off, and he was sitting up while leaning his weight back onto his hands behind him. The three women smiled at him, Ashley giggling, Julee blushing, Antoinette eating him with her gaze. Scary and thrilling at the same time.

“My pets, it is time for you to go. My love and I must spend time alone.”

Both girls whined their dissatisfaction, but turned and left as Antoinette shooed them away. Naked and bouncing, Ashley jumped off the bed, Julee close behind her, and the two strolled out of the inner chamber. Ashley made sure to take a peek behind her though, and sway her hips a little more than she usually did, before disappearing around the enormous vault door.

“Jack, if you would.” Antoinette turned around, and showed him her back, hand up to pull her hair out of the way over her shoulder. The corset was laced up from behind, with a layer of black between the strings and her skin.

He reached out and started to undo the knot, but not before he took a second to admire how absolutely, fucking amazingly hot the curvy Prince looked with the black corset emphasizing her hourglass shape. “So, tonight was ... yeah, wow. So many fantasies fulfilled.”

The corset was so beautiful, and tight. Damn tight. As he undid the crisscrossing layers of it and at last exposed the naked back of the Prince, he touched her where the clothes had left an imprint

along her skin. It healed quickly, vampire and all, but it couldn't have been comfortable.

"That couldn't have been fun to wear," he said.

"I disagree." She turned to face him again, reached out, and set the corset down beside them on the bed. Her eyes lingered on the fabric, and her fingers traced the lines engraved on it. "Kine would struggle to wear such a thing as tight, but, I am well versed in such attire. And we do not need to breathe; it is no concern." With a grin, she crawled toward him, and nudged him onto his back again. Her body soon lay upon his, her breasts squished to his chest, and her kiss on his lips.

"Still, couldn't have been comfortable," he managed to say between kisses.

"It was to your delight, was it not?"

"It was! God damn, you looked ... you look ... you always look amazing, you know that."

Chuckling, she set her lips to his earlobe again, and kissed it as she settled atop him. So much taller than him, she covered him almost completely, her legs between his own and her arms around him, elbows to the blankets.

"Such is the way of Daeva." Another kiss. "But, are there are other reasons you visit my chambers, my love?"

Ah, fishing for compliments. In another context, it would have irritated him. But for the mighty Prince to be doing it, and so blatantly, made it both adorable and fun.

"Other reasons I come here. Well, I like that you're scary and deadly," he said. More chuckles. "I like that you're smart." Less chuckles, more satisfied purrs. "I like that you can play the cello."

“Ah, the cello. One of the few skills I retained through the centuries.” She raised her head until she was looking down at him, long white hair spilling onto the bed next to his neck. “What else?”

“You’re introspective, and wise, and ... and ... delicate when you want to be, brutal when you need to be.”

Found what she was looking for. Her smile brightened, curling her cheeks more than he was used to seeing, and she lowered her head to put her lips against his once more.

“Come, let us bathe.”

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The shower again. They often took baths, but she had a really awesome shower, and he enjoyed it immensely. A large room connected to another room, one for changing, one for showering. No need to stay under a tiny shower jet here, hot water fell from almost the entire ceiling area along deep, sloped slabs of black above, so big and wide it was like walking under a waterfall. Black marble of course, with the cut holes above that held white LEDs.

Antoinette stepped under the falling water first, and he stared as she did. The wet hair, long and now slick to her spine, drew his gaze as she combed it back over her head with her fingers. Elbows up as she did, he stared at her breasts too; he was obsessed, and there was no denying it.

Kindred ejaculate was the same as dandruff or skin particles or hair, it all turned into the faintest hint of ash within five, sometimes ten minutes, once it was separated from the vampires body. They weren’t showering for that, they were showering cause Ashley and Julee were all over them. Which, Jack had to admit, was really hot.

Not fifteen minutes since you came four times in one night, with three women, and you’re already thinking about sex. Get a grip on yourself man.

Course, once he was looking at Antoinette again, his mind went right back to sex. The body, the long legs, the slim waist, wide hips. The huge breasts that weighed on her ribs. Such a perfect, defining example of a goddess, tall and curvy and strong.

Her makeup washed away as she rubbed an odd-looking cloth along her face, and let the water pull the colors into the drain. Beautiful, even as she exposed the pores and blemishes of her skin. Looked more real, less fantasy, now that he could see she had a tiny mole along her jaw line, the hint of a wrinkle along her forehead, and her skin was no longer perfectly uniform in color. Still so damn fucking beautiful.

“Jack? Ja—oh.” She caught his wandering eyes, smirked, and reached out to him to pull him under the water. The hot shower blasted his skin, and even with the blush of life off, he could still feel it warming him to the bone. “Dozens upon dozens of times you have shared my bed, little Ventrue. Dozens of times, you have climaxed within my body, upon my lips, my breasts. And yet your eyes stare with the same infatuation as the first night we spent together.”

“Sorry! Can’t help it, just ... just...” Just damn, the love of your life is a total babe.

“Then I am delighted. Kindred are eternal, and our bodies unchanging.” She hugged him from behind, set his head along her sternum and her breasts against his shoulders. Water fell from her face onto him as she leaned over him. “Truly, sometimes I fear my height may dissuade you. Juvenile fears, I admit, but they come nonetheless.”

“Your height? I’m a little short guy.” And Beatrice teased him enough about it too. Well, everyone had, growing up. Nothing major or problematic, but enough teasing to make it a sore memory.

Antoinette laughed, and slid one of her hands down his body to tease along his abs and the leanness of his stomach.

“And yet, it is your small frame I wish between my legs.”

“ ... god I love your legs.”

This time her laughter erupted, and he blinked up at the queen of the night as she shook with the warm sound.

“Jack, my love, you are too sweet, and too sincere. And I love you for it.” Her hands reached out for some soap and a loofah, and once it was lathered, she ran it down his chest and long his arms.

She was washing him. He had to fight the urge to fall back against her and relax into her embrace. Maybe when they were in a tub, but not a good idea standing.

“Have you spoken with Damien yet?”

Damn.

“No, not yet.” Too busy chasing ghosts in a sewer.

“Please do. It is important.”

He nodded, and turned his head a bit as her soaping moved over his neck before down his chest again. No qualms about washing his sex or under it either. Well, she was half a millenium old, no reason to be shy about anything.

She got down onto a knee, and turned him around. He blinked down at her, at how the water fell atop her white hair and flattened it along her back, at how her hand worked the loofah up and down his legs, at everything. The Prince on her knee in front of him, as if it was a perfectly normal or natural thing for royalty to bathe him.



“Ashley and Julee,” he said, once he found the willpower to stop staring. “They uh, I know they go to university. But, what other sorts of things do they do?”

“Are you interested in them?” She looked up at him with a quirked brow. And maybe a bit more than that too, maybe a hint of jealousy.

“No, I was just curious. Julias has talked to me about ghouls, and how to turn someone into one, and ... I dunno, part of it sounds a little tragic, you know? Addicted to Kindred blood, and slaves, and —”

She held up a finger, and stood. Uh oh. Too far. Abort!

But when she saw his panic, she sighed, and patted him on the head.

“Your concerns are justified. And there are Kindred who do abuse their ghouls, force the addiction upon them, turn them into slaves against their will. But do not worry for Ashley and Julee, they chose to become what they are. Ghouls do live for eternity, little Ventrue. As long as they taste a Kindred’s blood within a month as routine, they will remain ghouls, forever my pets, and friends.” Her hands reached down for his, and she put the loofah in his palm. “And for your first question, my ghouls live social lives. They enjoy education, and they enjoy artistic pursuits, when they are not with me. That is their life to enjoy, so that I may enjoy it through them.”

Oh. Ooooooh. Well, now he felt like shit. From borderline accusing her of owning slaves one minute, to sympathy for her cruel world and how she never got to enjoy the simple things of life the next. He blinked down at the loofah in his hand, then up at her, loofah again, her again, before he stepped in and hugged her, cheek against her collar.

“Ah, little Ventrue?”

“ ... I love you, so damn much.”

Silence, at least for a few moments, with only the noise of the waterfall rain around them as Antoinette slowly returned the hug, and squeezed.

But after a few moments again, she took him by the shoulders, and pushed him away a foot.

“Come, clean your Prince.”

He smiled up at her, and pressed the loofah to her belly. Didn't last long at the belly though, and his hand, as if possessed by some alien entity, guided the loofah up to her breasts. She laughed at him, and watched as he soaped up the valley between her breasts, up along the curve where they hung from her torso, and then underneath to soap up where they met her ribs. And again he pressed the loofah into the soft, heavy weight of her bosom, until one of them molded to conform against the loofah, before the weight slipped off his wrist and jiggled. So huge, so supple and cushy. Again, he soaped her large, dark nipples, and pressed his loofah into her breast to feel it give into his—

She bopped him on the head.



~~Julias~~

He didn't like this.

Him and his childe wore dark suits meant for foot work, and with pistols and knives holstered underneath their jackets; he was cool with all that. What he wasn't cool with was going to see Damien.

“Can't believe you let him live,” Julias said.

“Yeah, me neither.”

“Compassion could cost you your life here, kid.”

“Compassion’s also how you win allies, and break molds. And,” the kid pointed a finger at him, “correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re looking to break some molds. Or did I read you wrong, and you’re content with the way covenants are handling things here in Dolareido?”

Smartass. Julias frowned down at Jack, but frown turned to smile.

“I’d prefer we make changes on the backs of the ancillae and elders, not a neonate like yourself.”

“Yeah well, that’s why science advances one funeral at a time. Scientist’s motto. Old farts refuse to let things change, until they’re dead.” A shrug and smirk, Jack looked out the window of their drive at the passing sights. The car was taking them deeper into South Side, along the outskirts of Devil’s Corner.

Thinking of Devil’s Corner.

“So the woman just disappeared, hmm?” Julias said.

“Yes! Yes she did. I know it reads weird on the report, or whatever Jessy told you, but I’m telling you she disappeared.”

“Vanished.”

“Vanished!” Up went both hands. “We scanned that room thoroughly, every brick and pipe. Woman just vanished. And ... and I’m telling you Julias, she wasn’t normal. I mean she looked normal, and she reacted with as much fear as you’d expect a human to, seeing a vampire for the first time. And I don’t know how she knew what we were! We weren’t doing anything remotely vampire-ish.”

That was peculiar. He rubbed his chin, looked out the opposite window, and watched the streetlights and people pass by. Hot weather, getting hotter every day; unusual for this time of year. The Kindred didn't mind, but the kine did. And it did make everything smell of sweat and musk, which did all sorts of things to a Kindred's senses. He didn't look forward to a trip down into the abandoned subway.

A few miles later, Julias and Jack got out of the car in front of the subway entrance. People walked by, but no one went up or down the stairs that cut into the street. No reason to, the base of the stairs held thick metal doors, locked tight.

The two Kindred stepped down the stairway, stopped at the door, and unlocked it. The Invictus held all the keys, after all, and the old subway was no exception. They had a lot of Mekhet and Nosferatu who needed to get around, and that often called for a little stealth.

With the door locked behind them, they stepped out into the subway, and started to walk along the platform. The subway train was there, but empty, long abandoned; perfect for the Invictus to re-purpose. The power was on too, or at least whatever circuit the lights were on, and enough still worked to provide them a little light while Jack and Julias started the trip toward Damien. Assuming he'd be there.

He'd better be there.

"... so disappeared?"

"Yes!" Hands up again, waving about as he got enthusiastic trying proving his point. "Like, gone. Poof. Completely. If she had touched anything, the cobwebs everywhere would have given it away."

"A short woman, curvy, long frizzy red hair." He shrugged and hopped down onto the subway track. "I know of no Kindred that looks like that. You said she had a Scottish accent?"

“I think? Hard to tell from one word.”

“It’s enough to work with. Foreign accent, probably European, body description, and you’re sure she’s not human.”

“Very. I ... it was a little startling. She wasn’t human, but I didn’t get a Kindred vibe from her. Just ... just enough to ... to make me weirded out, you know?”

Julias blinked, and looked down at Jack. The kid shuddered, rubbed his arms, and looked up and down, left and right, and over his shoulder. Scared. A little fear was good, it kept you alive, but for such a tame encounter to leave Jack still afraid was enough reason for Julias to take this more seriously. He’d already put Jessy on the case, but if Jack was still shook up like this, he better give her back up.

Back up. Normally that’d be him, or Natasha. How quickly that changed. The right hands of the council were down to only one in just a short window, and Natasha had joined a different covenant. And with Viktor dead, the upper echelon of the Invictus was down by two. They had to be careful moving forward, especially with the Carthians stirring up trouble.

“Hey, Julias. You’re doing it again.”

“Oh?”

“That thinking thing. I can see your eyes wandering on the ground the way they do when you’re thinking.”

He smirked at the kid, and motioned to the tracks. “Just watching my footing, jackass.”

Jack rolled his eyes, and hopped up onto the metal of the subway track. Like on tightrope, he stuck his hands out to the side and balanced as he walked.

“You really want to see him?” Julias said.

“Yeah. Been a couple weeks since the incident.” Kid shuddered and shook out his arms, like throwing away heavy weights. “I ... guess I feel responsible. You saw what happened to him, after I ... yeah.”

After you made him cut off his sire’s head.

“You don’t think he’ll just attack you on sight?”

“Antoinette said she and the sheriff had him locked up, but dropped him off down here when I said he could live. Far as I know, she told him it was my choice.”

Well, probably not only the kid’s choice, Julias was sure. Antoinette was in love with him, but she wasn’t stupid. There must have been another deciding element. Natasha, maybe? She’d been kidnapped by him after all, used as a hostage, and now a member of the Ordo Dracul. Her words must have meant a lot to Daniel.

Skittering. Both Kindred raised their heads to look down and into the shadows of the subway tunnel, and listened for the subtle scratches of rats and bugs against dirt, rocks, and concrete. There was light, but not much, not enough for him to feel comfortable on a stroll, especially now that he was a member of the council. He’d never thought of it before, of being afraid of simply walking around; he took and dealt his lumps fine as a right hand of the council. But as an actual member, he had a much bigger target on his back. God he missed having Natasha to watch it.

Or Beatrice.

Maybe he could recruit her? No, she’d never. Going from the Carthians to the Circle was a step in the opposite direction from the Invictus. Now she was dancing around bowls of bone, naked, filling them with blood and drawing blood symbols onto herself. He had

no idea if that's what members of the Circle of the Crone actually did, but that was the stereotype.

And it kind of fit her, he had to admit, with the massive crocodile teeth and the snake eyes, the tattoos and the visceral attitude. It'd be a dance he'd like to see someday.

The two Ventrue went deeper, down into the tunnels, and then down into more tunnels, and then down into more tunnels. The network of connections was beyond complicated, as the Prince and Viktor insured the tunnels were expanded beyond what was needed. For each tunnel made, two more were made that were never used, or explained to the general public. The joys of having Kindred run your city, with all the money to support the role; they turned its underground into a haven for creatures of the night.

The topside was a Kindred paradise as well of course, with the city's blatant embrace of nearly every vice, often in large congregations of drug use, prostitution, and other sins that ranked low on the list. It made finding a meal easy, especially in the Invictus half of South Side, where people partied constantly, and no one bat an eye when someone else initiated sex in the dark corners of a dance club.

But not everyone had finding a meal so easy. And as Jack and Julias walked through the tunnels, they found them.

Nosferatu.

Not everyone with the cursed blood had disfigurements they could hide like Beatrice. Many were as damaged as Maria, but she was an elder, more than capable of hiding herself in plain sight with her obfuscate disciplines. These neonates could not.

One Kindred, wearing dreary, gray, stained robes over his body, was crouched into a high alcove of a platform. The waiting area had never been finished or set up with ticket gates or anything. Just a

big, empty room where Kindred could gather. And as they walked by it, still on the subway tracks, Julias spotted a few more vampires hanging out in its shadows.

Another one stepped out from the black to peer at them, but once she recognized Julias, she gasped and stepped back into the black. He didn't recognize her; must have been a Carthian. A huge growth covered half of her head and neck, tinted black. Another Kindred covered in a filthy sheet reached out to put a hand on her back, and offered Julias a harsh glare. Another man he didn't recognize, one with six, long, dangling fingers, with odd curling claws on each tip. Given time, they would have the power to leave the sewers and tunnels, when they could hide in shadow in plain sight. Until then, they hid here.

There was no use in denying it; he found them ugly, and revolting. The thought of someone like Maria naked and in his bed made him want to vomit. Part of him hated himself for being that vain, but a part of him also accepted it as natural desire. How Lucas had loved Maria, physically, he could not understand. And he dare not ask.

Beatrice's snake eyes, and the crocodile teeth instead of cheeks, were all interesting, and even sexy. Scary, but sexy. He doubted things would have gone so well between them if she'd had grotesque deformity. If a third arm had been growing out of her neck, or she had a giant mouth where her stomach was, that first night in the South Hill Cemetery crypt could have easily ended with him as dust.

Damn. Walking through the dark tunnels really made his mind wander. And as reflex, it drifted into self-loathing territory. But he smiled, and let images of Beatrice fill his mind instead. She'd tell him to accept the reality, get over it, and move on. Easier said than done, but it was nice to hear it anyway.



It took a little time to get to where they were told Damien was, a place Damien told the sheriff was one of his most common hideaways. An old monitoring room, supposedly, along the tunnel between Barker and Denver street. Sure enough, they found it, just a metal door up on a raised platform with some metal stairs to lead to it. A drawing of a spear had been carved into the metal, etched. Did Damien preach to the Nosferatu that hid in the tunnels and sewers? If there was any bloodclan that needed help finding a purpose in their second life, it was them.

Was that so wrong? Not like you can prove or disprove god, Julias.

Jack knocked.

Julias quirked a brow at him. “He’s forfeited his life, Jack. You don’t have to knock.”

“Don’t have to not.” He shrugged, and smirked at him. A nervous one though, with fidgeting fingers and glancing eyes.

“If he tries anything, I’ll deal with him.” Fast and brutal as Damien was, Julias was confident he could crush his mind, if it came to it.

The door opened.

Damien didn’t bother to say hello, or nod, or make eye contact. The man, haunched slightly and letting his arms dangle, sauntered back over to his corner, and sat down. In the dark. And dust. And rat shit.

“... Damien,” Jack said. No response. Jack looked to Julias, but he could only shrug, and motion for his child to try again. “Damien.”

“I can hear you. What do you want?” The young man was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt, each tattered and torn. Worn-out shoes,

and head hanging between his knees completed the ensemble of a broken man.

Around him were the old computers and dials of the monitoring station. Pipes cut through the room, across the ceiling before coming down against the wall, and Damien made his home under one of the larger pipes. Water dripped into a puddle next to him, but the Kindred didn't seem to notice.

He had a book in his hand, a large thing, black, a tome that Julias was sure held a plethora of ancient, dark things.

“Still reading the Book of Longinus?” Julias said.

Damien frowned up at him, and set the book down between his knees, against the damp floor. So much for a sacred object.

“I have read it a hundred times in my unlife, Invictus. I asked you a question, what do you want?”

Julias returned the frown, and made to step a little closer, but Jack put a hand up to his hip to stop him.

“Here to see you,” Jack said. Kid dug up enough courage to speak straight to the killer, but he was quivering a little, the beast inside him shaking. Julias could feel it, and Damien no doubt could too.

“... why?”

Shaking his shoulders out a little, Jack stepped in where Julias hadn't, and squatted down in front of the killer.

“Because I let you live, and after what happened ... guess ... I feel a little responsible.” Jack said. Damien glared at the boy with enough venom to kill, but after a moment, lowered his gaze back down to the closed book in his hands, and said nothing. “And after what what happened, I feel ... I—”

Damien raised his glare again, a bit of speed to the motion, enough to make Jack fall back and for Julias to reach for his pistol. But the Mekhet stopped, and turned away again. Fire one second, ice the next.

“I ... assume the Prince told you I let you live?”

Damien said nothing.

“Just trying to extend an olive branch here, Damien. I saw the look in your eyes, you—”

“You know nothing about me.” Damien shook his head, picked up the tome, and threw it the floor. A bit closer to Julius, he could see it was ripped and torn, edges frayed, corners bent, and the damage looked recent.

“I was there, remember?” Jack, shivering and fidgeting, got in a little closer to the assassin. “Heard every word Lucas said, every word you said, every word Antoinette said. Give me a little credit Damien, I know you better than most.”

Julias blinked, and looked down at Jack as the silence settled. Damien didn't throw back an insult or anything, but eased his head back until it was against the wet wall, and his unkempt hair fell over on his shoulder, half his head shaved smooth on one side, long hair dangling from the other. But no words.

“... the sheriff said you said you wouldn't kill me, if he let you go. I appreciate that,” Jack said.

Damien choked on a quiet, bitter laugh, and fell back into silence.

Jack didn't seem interested in the hint. “Everything that happened is on Lucas's head. No one blames you for what happened, hell barely anyone knows. Natasha does, and she seems adamant that you can change.”

Natasha, that got something out of him, a flinch and a clench of a couple fingers. Damien took a deep breath and forced his eyes open to stare at Jack.

“You do not understand, Ventrue. I have had my beliefs taken from me. The Prince has banned the practice of the Second Estate, and my mentor and guide was a ... a...”

“Well he wasn’t a fraud, if that’s what you were thinking.” Jack sat down next to Damien, and shrugged. “A zealot, sure, but I saw that attack on Antoinette much as anything. That sword disintegrated. Not exactly normal shit, you know?”

Julias smirked and took a step back. No use in interrupting the conversation, Jack had control. But seeing him in control was a bit of a shock, and Julias folded his arms across his chest as he slid his hand away from his pistol. Mostly.

When did Jack get so confident? Spending so many nights with the Prince, in her tower, with the sheriff nearby, could harden anyone he supposed. So could having slaughtered a group of Kindred using an enemy’s body. But seeing it with his own eyes was a little different, his childe sitting down — oh god the poor suit — next to an assassin, one who’d tried to kill him at that, with a sword through his gut. The kid had a way of talking that disarmed people, Julias always knew. What was different was, despite talking to a killer, his shivering was mostly gone, and the kid spoke with a solid voice, an ambassador’s voice.

“The sword, it ... it tasted the blood of Malchus. Lucas held it long cherished, and ... and destroyed it, to kill the Prince.”

“Malchus?” Jack said.

Damien turned to the boy sitting near him, and managed a small chuckle. “Read the Bible.”

“This thing? You have got to be shitting me, it’s bigger than a regular bible.” Jack reached out for the tome. Julias tensed as his childe picked it up, but Damien only watched with a raised brow.

“That is the Tome of Longinus. I meant the Christian Bible.”

“Ah, right.” Jack slipped his fingers along the dirtied pages. “You really are devout huh?”

“ ... I am.”

“And the Lancea et Sanctum, what’s your goal, your mission?”

Julias raised a finger to wipe away the growing grin. Kid really had a diplomatic side.

“The Sanctified seek to play a role, to fulfill our duty in God’s plan. He is the shepherd, kine are His sheep, and Kindred are the wolves. We hunt and kill the sheep who stray too far, and scare the others back into the warm embrace of the Lord. If Kindred are to ever be free of eternal damnation, the doom of hellfire, we must ... do you even care?”

“Course I care, Damien. Last thing I want is for us to be enemies. I mean fucking hell, I didn’t want any of that to happen! And ... and neither did you.” He closed the book, and put it onto Damien’s lap and chest. “Natasha saw it, and I saw it. Just today I was talking with Amanda, and she—”

“How is ... Amanda?” Damien asked. A spark of warmth in his voice?

“Little shook up over bouncing between covenants, questioning her purpose in life, all the typical first-year university student stuff. Fine otherwise. Went out with her just last night.”

“I know.”

“You ... you know?”

Damien nodded, and looked at the book back in his lap. “Little escapes my notice in the Devil’s Corner.”

Of course Damien would know, but the way he said it, sounded like he was watching them. Part of Julias could forgive him for spying, Mekhet did that as naturally as kine breathed, but part of him couldn’t. He stepped in closer, and squatted down in front of Damien.

“Jack may have let you live Damien, but no one has claimed sanctuary for you. Don’t—”

The man sighed and raised a hand, palm up and open. “I meant nothing by it, Julias Mire. I was investigating the disappearances in the Devil’s Corner, and noticed that Mister Terry and Miss Pol were doing the same.”

No secrets from a Mekhet. Julias nodded and stood, but kept his eye on the man as he took a couple steps back to give them room. His childe offered him a nod and shrug, but otherwise seemed unfazed by the threat Julias had just thrown at Damien.

“So you’ve seen the redhead?”

God damn it Jack. Don’t be so loose-tongued with everything.

“I have. There is something that connects her to the disappearances, but I do not know what it is.” Damien shrugged and smirked up at Julias, with just an edge of I-know-you-wish-I-didn’t-know-what-you-were-up-to in his eyes. “I have observed her from afar, but when I pursue her, she disappears.”

“Same.” The kid reached into his jacket, pulled out his smartpone, and started thumb-typing nice and quick. The joys of

growing up in the digital age, taking notes took mere seconds. “Any ideas?”

“ ... you’re asking me for help?”

Jack lowered the phone. “Yeah. You don’t want to?”

It was Julias’s turn to smirk. Jack reaching out with more olive branches, and this time Damien would look the petty one if he didn’t comply.

“ ... she’s disappearing from within Devil’s Corner, but I don’t know how she’s doing it. And I know the underbelly of this city better than anyone.”

Julias looked out the doorway into the abandoned tunnels. “Better than anyone?”

Damien motioned to the door. “These are my tunnels. I knew you were coming. I decided to see what you had to say.” Another subtle smirk, but after a while it faded. “I’ll help, Jack. Natasha and the sheriff assure me you deserve it, and after what happened, I ... yeah, I’ll help you.”

Likely story. But considering how the conversation was going, the Mekhet deserved the benefit of a doubt.

A sigh drew their eyes to Jack.

“Thanks,” he said. “I half expected you to try and fight us when we got here, or just not be here.”

“The thought had occurred to me.” From the shadows beside him, Damien pulled out a sword, a small thin thing like Viktor’s had been. More than strong and sharp enough to cut off limbs, Julias was sure. “But I ... I was shown something that...” Tripping over his

own words until Julias felt his grimace start to fade. “You killed my sire, Jack. Using my body.”

“ ... yeah.”

“But I now know it was necessary.” He shook his head some more, put the sword down, and cracked the black bible open. “So forgive me, if I still have the impulse desire to cut your head off. I know it is because of the Arch ... Lucas’s false teachings. Fifty years I spent coveting them, just a fledgling at first and younger than you when Lucas and I disappeared into the sewers come the purge.”

Jack’s jaw fell. “ ... wait, what?”

“I wandered the city underbelly for fifty years, Jack, with my sire sleeping and all the other bishops dead and the covenant scattered and ash. I read this, and ... and fell on Lucas’s words more than what I could gleam from this.” Eyes broken, Damien raised the book and held it in front of him. “And his sermons were ... more than a little biased, and manipulative. No wonder the Prince unleashed the purge upon us. Lucas was ... was ... a monster, a vile man.”

The air turned to ice. Damien was trying to smile, or at least maintain some sort of composure, but his head fell, and his shoulders shook a little as he struggled with it. Struggled with having a monster for a sire. Struggled with the brainwashing of your master, your mentor, the person you think you can trust the most only to realize far too late they’re not trustworthy at all.

God fucking damn it. Viktor. The parallel was nauseating.

“ ... I’ll talk to the Prince,” Julias said, “about the Lancea et Sanctum.” The two men looked up at him, as surprised as him, but he shrugged and offered his Ventrue smile. “You’re not Lucas. Your covenant deserves a chance if they have a new bishop, someone who doesn’t think killing other Kindred with differing beliefs is proper



recourse.” He squatted down in front of the smaller man, and glared down at him. “And you don’t think that, right?”

“ ... no, I don’t. But you have only my word.”

“Natasha vouches for you. Jack vouches for you. It’s enough reason for me to bring it up to the Primogen.” Especially considering Jack had been in the man’s mind. He’d controlled him, turned him into a puppet, butchered his congregation and killed his sire using the man’s body. Jack was too trusting, but after all that, Julias had no choice but to take his childe’s recommendation seriously. Julias wouldn’t have trusted him, and he could tell it was the Danse Macabre making him paranoid already.

Paranoid, or just smart, Julias? Trusting this man could mean your death, and Jack’s thereafter.

“I ... I don’t know if ... lead the Lancea et Sanctum? The Second Estate? I’m barely a bishop, just a—”

It was Julias’s turn to raise his hand, and shut the man up.

“A devout man of god, a believer of the message of Longinus, and the childe of the previous Archbishop. I can think of no one better to write the wrongs of your sire. Can you?” He stared the man down, glared at him with the weight and gravitas etched onto his face. His best Ventrue face, the face he took when crushing the will of others, molding them to his. At least Viktor had taught him something useful.

Damien stared at him, eyebrows furrowed but eyes open and considering. “I ... I would have no congregation.”

“Baby steps. Let me talk to the Primogen first and see if the Prince allows any of this,” Julias said.

Jack raised a hand. “Should I mention it to her?”

“No.” Probably a bad idea to bring political affairs into Jack’s bedroom. “Let me handle it.”

“... the Lancea et Sanctum ... allowed to practice once again in Dolareido.” The man smiled, and let his spine relax against the wall behind him. “The irony.”

“You don’t want to?” Jack said.

“I would love to. I would ... love to speak of Longinus to those who would listen once more. But I fear the wrath of the Prince. I did much to offend her.”

The little Ventrue stood up and tried to wipe off his pants, to no avail. “Lucas offended her. She blames him, not you. But she does have a hate-on for the Lancea et Sanctum. You’ve got your work cut out for you Damien if you want to try and change that image.” Jack turned to Julias and smirked up at him. “You too, if you’re going to convince her of this at all.”

“Maria will be glad for the return, at least,” Julias said as he stood up. “Speaking of, has she spoken to you at all, Damien?”

“No. I ... I do not know what she would say, nor would I.”

“She’ll ... she’ll be around eventually, but it may be best if you just let her say her piece.”

Damien stood as well, looked down at his tome, wiped off some of the floor water, and looked up at him with a strange, subtle smile.

“I’ve survived a long time in this city, Mister Mire. I can handle myself, in many ways.”

“Good. I’m putting the Invictus out on a ledge here, bringing this up to Primogen. The First Estate seeking to support the Second

Estate? It's a song they've heard before, and I'll have to work to convince them it's benign." If it was benign.

---

Maria's home, if it could be called that.

The Grand Cathedral of Dolareido. Gothic was not strong enough a word for the towering monolith of old windows, spiked towers, and enormous archways showing statues of angels. Not sweet little cherubs, but real angels, with swords and shields, with six wings, with eyes that cut into your heart. The church Lucas had commissioned long ago when Julias was still kine. Commissioned wasn't the right word, more like, coerced the populace into making a proper cathedral for the faith.

He'd manipulated the kine for his purpose, without talking to the Prince about it first. That'd been the start of the trouble.

Julias closed the car door behind him and waved off his driver, before he started the walk up the stairs toward the beast of a building. No denying it, it was a majestic and imposing edifice. Every inch he came closer, he could feel the eyes of the gargoyles on the high ledges staring down at him, the glare of the angels baring his soul, and the angry demons that held up the pedestals the angels stood upon glared with just as much malice. The crucifix upon the archway, the doves carved into the stone of the pillars, every step he made up the stairs made him feel like he shouldn't be here. Like a vampire shouldn't be here.

He opened the giant doors, massive and heavy, and stepped into the nave of the church.

The church had stopped seeing use since Lucas's disappearance fifty years ago, and police kept loiterers from breaking into the church come nightfall, at Maria's request; no one wants their bed covered in graffiti. Not that people liked to hang out at the

Dolareido Cathedral in the dark, as close to the Three Kings Cemetery as it was.

The sound of the organ greeted him, a powerful sound that almost shook the walls. Thick walls kept the sound from escaping beyond the vast empty gardens that surrounded the cathedral. A perfect place for someone who liked being alone, for someone who believed in god, for someone who loved Lucas.

He walked up the aisle toward the dais, the podium, the lectern that sat upon it, and the bible upon that. The apse back end of the giant, tall nave held the organ, and a magnificent one at that, with pipes big enough to crush the pews behind him if they fell. And someone was playing them.

There was only a little light, just a few lit candles on the railings and such near the ghost woman, just enough for her to see as she danced her fingers up and down the complicated instrument. Some old Gothic piece to go with the Gothic church that made him feel like he was living in a time from hundreds of years ago.

“Mister Mire,” she said.

“Madam Turio.” He walked up to join her, stood beside her and looked down as her fingers worked along the various levels of the pipe organ’s keys. Her feet too had keys to play, deep notes that Julias could feel in his bones when the sound filled the enormous room.

Beside the little woman, a glass of red was set upon a small wooden table, something for her to drink while she played no doubt. The instrument was glorious, a shine of ivory keys with silver-looking pipes. The pipes themselves bore statues of angels and demons, again with angels standing upon their prostrated bodies, many with swords drawn.

The music was very complex, but he didn’t recognize it.

“A piece by Louis Verne, Mister Mire.” She glanced over her shoulder at him, but continued to play, with each note driving home a harmonic sea of pain and sadness. But her voice was deadpan. “Why have you come?”

The corpse woman, with her small body, her long black hair, her white dress, the scarred and crinkled skin, the cold, almost invisible mist that fell from body, it all gave him chills. It was probably random sightings of Maria that stirred the rumors Three Kings Cemetery was haunted. But he’d gotten used to her, dealing with her for so long. Mostly. The raspy, dead-girl voice sent a shiver down his spine every time.

“I wanted to talk about Damien, and Natasha.”

She stopped playing.

“ ... why?”

“Because you owe it to me.”

The ghost woman turned her head to stare up at him, and he had to fight the urge to grimace. A corpse, someone who’d died from thirst, had their skin cut on, maybe drowned. Chills.

“ ... you grow more like Viktor every day.” Sighing, she turned back to the organ, the dozens of white keys, and the large wood-colored console that held them. “Speak quickly.”

Like Viktor? He could feel the bad mood crawling up his leg.

“You let Lucas take Natasha hostage.”

“Lucas assured me she would be safe. Lo and behold, she lives.”

Not good enough. He leaned in and set a hand on the organ console.

“She could have died, easily, and you know it. It was a kamikaze attack on the Prince’s tower, and you let it happen.”

With her black hair hanging over her cheeks and down over her chest, he couldn’t see her face with her head turned to the organ, but he could see her twitch.

“It wasn’t supposed to be a kamikaze attack. The Prince was to die, the sheriff too, and Madam Vola was to live. Lucas wasn’t ... he wasn’t ... supposed to die.” Her shoulder started to shake, just a little, a subtle thing that he wasn’t used to seeing on her. No stone face, no cold ice gaze, the typical council act.

Damn it.

“You really loved him, didn’t you?”

“ ... yes.” For a moment, there was silence, and stillness. But the organ erupted into noise as she slammed both her hands down on the keys. “And I was ecstatic he’d returned from his slumber. I thought he had somehow left the city. I didn’t realize he was in hiding until his childe...” Another sigh, and her shoulders slumped as she leaned forward so her hair fell over the keys. “Madam Vola is better off with the Ordo Dracul.”

He blinked, and stared. Where was the ice, the cold glare, the bone-chilling death that normally radiated from her? Just a few minutes of conversation and his vision of her shattered.

She was sad.

“If I had known about Daniel and Natasha—”

“You didn’t know Daniel was her sire?”

“I had my suspicions, but the Prince avoided a direct response when I asked her, long ago when Natasha fell into the Invictus

embrace.” With a deep sigh, she started playing Moonlight Sonata, gentle on the keys. So cliché, and yet so perfect for the ghost woman. And Julias did love a good cliché. “If I had known, I would never have taken her under my wing.”

“She wasn’t involved in the purge, Maria.” Forget the titles. “Far as I know, at that time she was just a fledgling, and Daniel’s little secret. You have no reason to hate her.”

“And yet I gave her to Lucas, knowing full well whether my love ... whether the Archbishop succeeded or failed, Natasha would leave. And I would do it again.” Her fingers continued to play, despite her head slumping and her hair shifting over the keys.

He gave his own sigh, and shook his head. “Lucas was a dangerous man, Maria. And violent.”

“He was. I had asked him once, to stop pushing against the Prince so hard, but ... but it only spurred him on.” She peeked up at him from behind her black hair. How quick her corpse features reminded him she wasn’t a gentle little girl, despite her words. “Over the years, I saw him deteriorate, as Viktor did.”

“And yet when he came back, you let him have Natasha?”

“I wanted him back!” Her voice punched through the melancholy melody of the song, but she didn’t stop playing, or break the mournful rhythm. “I wanted ... the Prince and the sheriff dead. The Lancea et Sanctum did not deserve the purge.”

“Maybe they didn’t. A lot of bishops, a lot of Kindred died. But Lucas was the most violent of them all, Maria.” Careful Julias.

“ ... he was.” Her eyes fell back to the keys. Silence but for the song, for several minutes.

“ ... and Damien?” he said.

“What about him?”

“He’s Lucas’s childe.”

“I’ve never spoken with him. He is a stranger to me.”

Well, no love there. No pulling on that heartstring.

“I have. He’s an intelligent man, and a strong believer in the Testament of Longinus, as you are,” he said. She stopped playing, and let the vibrations of the sound dissipate along the cathedral walls. But said nothing. At least she was listening. “And unlike Lucas, he’s willing to cooperate with the Prince.”

“ ... what are you getting at, Julias?”

“I talked to him, and he’s willing to bring back the Second Estate.”

She raised her head and looked at him, back straightening. “Public practice of the faith of Longinus? The Prince would never allow it.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. The Prince had issues with Lucas, and for good reason.” Every time he insulted Lucas, the little corpse woman flinched. He was playing with fire, but he had to drive home that Lucas was a violent, horrible man. She already knew it, but she wasn’t internalizing it.

“What do you plan to do?”

“I’m going to bring it up at the next Primogen meeting.”

She snarled and looked back to the keys of the grand organ, before she started playing something with a little more darkness to it. Bach.

“It will be as it was before, the First Estate attempting to justify the Second Estate. The Prince alone will fight to prevent it, let alone Jacob and Garry.”



“Things are different this time. Viktor isn’t trying to shove an agenda down their throat, and it won’t be Lucas leading the Lancea et Sanctum, it’ll be Damien.”

“You said the boy is but fifty years embraced? Hardly an appropriate age for an Archbishop.”

“I think Bishop will be enough of a title for now. Give it a hundred years and when he’s old enough to be a true member of the Primogen, he can have that power, assuming the nearby city bishops recognize him.” Giving her a smirk and a nod, he reached out to start tapping keys on the organ. “Besides, not all of us are as old as our station demands.”

She slapped his hand, hard, and returned his smirk.

“Perhaps, but Viktor fostered your growth for that time, Julius. Who is Damien? What do we know of him? The others were as surprised by the developments as us, that this boy had been hiding under our noses for half a century. Skilled, but unknown.”

“The Prince let him live. He must have made an impression.” Steel face, don’t let her know what you know. “I went to talk to him not long ago, and was surprised, Maria. He’s devout, a good man, just a ... a broken man, right now.”

“The Dark Prophet would laugh at your description.” And she did too, her raspy voice coming out in tiny chuckles that sounded more like quiet, dying gasps. “Perhaps ... perhaps it is time for a change. I would like to see this boy before I agree to this proposal though.”

A risk that Maria would find out Jack killed Lucas, not the Prince, but that risk was unavoidable either way. Trust Damien. Hard to do, even after having that conversation with him. If anyone misspoke, it’d be Jack’s head on a plate. Or worse, Maria would lock him up in the depths of the Cathedral, and torture him with her Nosferatu disciplines.

Steel face.

“I will visit him soon and tell him you wish to speak to him,” he said.

“Please do. I will interrogate Lucas’s childe, and I will see if he’s worthy to bear the title of his sire.”

Julias did not envy the man.



~~Natasha~~

You can do this. You can do this. You can do this.

Chanting a mantra wasn’t helping much, and the closer she got to the front door of the Elysium Tower, the more she felt herself shaking. The more she felt like people were staring at her, when she knew they weren’t. The more she felt like eyes were on her, dark hidden eyes, when she knew they weren’t. The more she felt like something was crawling up her leg, even though she was damn sure something wasn’t.

She was wearing a gray suit, open jacket with a black shirt and shoes. Business casual, sort of. Jessy had assured her she looked cute as a button, but also ready for her first day as a member of the Ordo Dracul.

Jessy. She hadn’t told her best friend what Maria had done, afraid it might put Jessy in a bad position. But, she was bound to find out sooner or later, and the longer Natasha put it off, the worse it was going to be. The harder it was going to make being her friend. Just telling her she’d joined the Ordo Dracul had been tough enough.

Mind racing, eyes unfocused, hands fidgeting, all the classic signs of anxiety. Just another day in her life, just another day for Natasha Vola, just another day being turned upside down.

She stepped into the garden of the Elysium Tower, and looked around through the curving walls of stone that were the garden maze. The benches were stone too, and stone vines curled and connected them with the walkway and walls. Bushes and trees dotted the garden, and within its walls many young Kindred grew familiar with their new lives as vampires. New being relative; some of the Kindred were several years old, and still struggled with the reality that they were now immortal, and blood leeches. In the Elysium district, where no Kindred feeding or violence was allowed, the young vampires—

Focus, Natasha! It's just your sire. Your sire. You knew him before he sired you, a quiet man who knew a lot about books. You talked to him in the university library, remember? He had a soft voice, and he gave the littlest smiles when you asked him questions about Twain and Hemingway.

And Antoinette? The Prince? So tall, so utterly tall compared to her. The French seductress was well over six feet tall, while Natasha was a four eleven on a good day; just being around her made Natasha feel like an ant.

Voivode. An Ordo Dracul title, and it alone was enough to make her shiver on top of her quivering. But the Prince had never been anything but nice to her, and Daniel had been nice ... if insistent, in his passive aggressive stops-talking-the-moment-you-argue sort of way.

She could handle the two of them, at least enough for conversation. It was the secrets deep in the tower she was afraid of.

She stood before the glass building, and started up the steps. The lobby awaited her, and she grimaced as she looked around at the glass walls of her new place of work; one mistake and she'd be fried in the sunlight. But the Prince assured her that was basically

impossible, so she shook off her shivers, and came up to the receptionist. A heavy, balding fellow named Chunk. How drôle.

Oh god she better not make a French joke around the Prince by accident.

“Hello,” she said.

“Oh hello there Miss Vola. You can take the stairway in the back down. You could take the VIP elevator in the back there too, but that’ll take you down to the bottom floor, past the Prince’s research floors.”

Research floors. Gentle way to put it.

“Thank you.” With a nod and a fake smile, she started down the lobby, past the normal elevators, and toward the stairway in the back.

She didn’t get far before she ran into Daniel.

“Sire,” she said, looking up at him, doing her best to not break eye contact.

The man raised a gloved finger to his glasses, pressed on the nose ridge, and offered her a small smile.

“Childe.”

“ ... Illuminus of the Void, K-Kr—”

He raised a hand and shook his head. “Just call me Daniel, Natasha, when we’re alone. Sire when we’re with the Prince is fine.”

First name basis it was then, when alone. Common titles when together. Had the Prince softened in the past half a century?

“What should I c-call the Prince?”

“Master. Or Prince.” A nod and a small dismissing wave of his fingers. “Or Voivode, if you prefer.”

Voivode made her think dark thoughts. Prince was better.

Daniel turned and started to walk down the stairs into the dark tower, but after taking a couple feet, he peeked over his shoulder at her, and waited. A change from the past, where he would have kept walking and expected her to follow. Had he softened too? Or was he going easy on her because of the nastiness with the Lancea et Sanctum and Lucas a couple weeks ago?

She could use a little softness for her first steps back into the Coils of the Dragon.

The two of them made their way down the stairs, and she looked around at the deep hallway she was moving down. Jack had spoken to her before of the black marble, and how much the Prince enjoyed it. It'd been a vague memory for her from so long ago, but it all came back to her as she smiled at the cracks of white veins, like lightning across the obsidian surfaces. She enjoyed the decor, much as it frightened her.

They turned into a hallway, and she frowned as she noticed the scratches along the walls. Some of the repairs weren't complete then, and bullets ricocheting down the halls had left damage. The flash memories of gunfire made her shivering worse, trapped in Lucas's grasp while a sortee of Kindred with guns unloaded ammunition upon the Prince. And then of course, the Prince ripping several of them to literal bits with her bare hands.

Natasha wasn't a stranger to violence. And when push came to shove, she knew she could handle it. Putting a bullet through Damien's skull just one example. But the sight of Kindred becoming an angry mob, and the following act of carnage and brutality, still made her stomach turn.

The two vampires walked down the hall, past the LED lights from carved holes above in the marble, past the quiet humming vents, past the various doors, before stopping at one particular door. She remembered this one, and she hesitated as Daniel reached out to open it.

“It’ll be fine,” he said, voice calm, face deadpan like always.

“Easy ... for you t-t-to say, you ... you’re...” You’re hundreds of years old and are comfortable with this insanity.

“You are not the child you once were, Natasha. And I ... perhaps a little different as well?” He managed a slight raise of the brow, caught between question and statement.

Natasha had no choice but to smile at his sad attempt at persuasion. Cute, adorable even, but horrible.

He opened the door, and the two stepped into the wyrm’s nest.

A giant room, tall but especially wide, and round. The walls were covered in white dragons painted onto the black marble, and a chandelier of crystal hung from above, a giant thing to match the giant room. The chandelier was lit with blue flame. How it made blue flame, if blue flame was toxic, if it was magical or scientific, she had no idea. But it was damn beautiful.

Perhaps more beautiful, or frightening, was the floor of the room. Upon the center, a white circle perhaps fifty feet wide was drawn, lines thick and arranged in patterns. Many, many patterns. As if someone obsessed with trigonometry had had too much caffeine and decided to draw every symbol they knew. Spirals, stars, pentagrams, cascading shapes of different sizes, to the point it was like trying to identify shapes in the stars.

Just being near it was enough to get her shaking again.

The Prince was standing by the circle. In front of her she held a large tablet, and beside her was a grand, half-circle desk covered in laptops and many objects Natasha did not recognize. As her eyes lingered on them, she winced as she realized one of the objects was a shrunken head. Other things on the desk also looked like shrunken body parts, fingers and hands. Some seemed attached to dolls that looked like dried-up humans, others attached to wood carvings like bowls. There were tied bags that looked like they were made of skin, and from within them stuck out bones that looked like they belonged on birds. Some feathers and sticks stuck out from the bags too, arranged deliberately.

“Miss Vola, how delightful to see you.” The Prince set the tablet down on the table, walked up to her, and reached out with a single hand to touch her shoulder. A light touch, momentary, before she pulled it away. “I am glad you have returned to us.”

“I am as well ... my P-P-Prince.” Miss Vola, not the Invictus title Madam Vola, but a regular way of saying a woman’s last name. She had decades of habits to change.

“We are colleagues, Miss Vola. Prince is fine, no need for my.”

Yeap, she’d definitely softened in the past fifty years. Or maybe since she’d starting dating Jack?

“Yes ... P-Prince.”

Antoinette chuckled, and reached over her shoulder to comb her white hair for a moment, before she turned back to the table before her.

“As you know Miss Vola, we are few in number here in Dolareido. I may be Prince, but I have not let the Kindred run rampant, nor do I wish for our order to become ... mainstream, as my Jack would say. There is much to be said for fostering refinement and an eye for subtlety, for detail.” The Prince started to circle the table, walking

around it with her tablet up, taking pictures and jotting notes. “And such a keen eye is lost, I find, when swimming in swaths of colleagues. Objectivity is destroyed, and keeping an open mind not long thereafter.”

Natasha froze. There was a but coming up. Where was the but, what was the but.

“But ... I agree with Daniel. It is time for a change. With Lucas gone, as well as Viktor and Tony, perhaps I can stand to be more welcoming to newcomers, to those interested in the secrets of the order.” A sly smile and a small gesture with her hand to Natasha followed. “Or welcoming back those that left before.”

Oh. Maybe she was bitter about Natasha having left the order.

“I ... I must apologize, Prince, for leaving! I ... I had t-t-t-t-to ... get away from...” Try as she might to not look at them, Natasha found her eyes stuck on the disgusting things on the table. Some of them had eyes! Little beady eyes that stared at her no matter where she moved.

“And that was our failing, Miss Vola. Do not worry, neither I nor your sire blame you for leaving. We introduced you to the secrets of the realm before we should have. But, you are much older now, are you not Miss Vola?”

She was older, much older. Half a century under her belt as a Kindred, and a lot of sights. A lot of things, a lot of misery and pain, a lot of victories and money. Stronger, faster, not necessarily braver.

But she could try to be, right?

“ ... what would you have me d-do, Prince? Sire?”

Daniel made his little smile, and the Prince mirrored it.



“For now, observe. There is power here in this room, Miss Vola, power of a sort beyond the simple understandings of science. Other members of the Ordo Dracul would perhaps say it is an act of god. But I know otherwise, little Mekhet. We shall explore these realms, you and I, and dip our toes into rivers sacred and forbidden, until secrets from the nether fill our minds. No mystery unexposed, no enigma we have not scrutinized.”

Natasha could already feel the tremors come back, the shaking in her knees that vibrated up into her skull. The dead heart in her chest felt like it wanted to beat, just so it could burst. Why did the Prince have to make such a grand show of this sort of stuff, this mystical insanity?

Daniel raised a hand, and walked over to stand beside the taller woman.

“Prince, perhaps we should ... ease her into this anyway?”

The Prince lowered her hands. Probably didn't even realize she'd started gesturing, like speaking to a crowd.

“My apologies Miss Vola. Needless to say, the studies of the occult fascinate me, and every night I am excited to see what arcane knowledge I can glean. And I am excited that you are here to help, as my time is fought for from many directions; some I enjoy sharing it with, some I do not.” She smiled, a mischievous smirk fit for a succubus. Definitely enjoyed sharing her time with Jack.

Trying to picture the little guy with the tall vixen was just impossible. Not that Natasha was one to talk, being so much shorter than an already short guy. Still, looking up at Antoinette made her mind wander, picturing the small, fit kid between her huge breasts.

Oh god she was turning into Jessy. She needed new friends.

“P-Prince, it's ... I ... it fascinates me too. And scares me.”

“Fear will take you far in this life, Miss Vola. Too much, or too little, and you are either paralyzed or dead.” Or both; it didn’t need to be said. “But with a proper amount, you will be cautious and observant. Take this, for example.” She set her tablet down on the table, and reached out for the shrunken head. No qualms about touching the dead flesh, the wrinkly skin or the old, frayed hair. “The Jivaro of Ecuador and Peru, famous for their practice of head shrinking. Again, mainstream. Now the power of this act, the implication, the belief of it, has lost weight. Wherever you go where the odd and peculiar are sold, fake bobbles next to fake shrunken heads rest.” She walked toward Natasha, and held out the small thing on her palms, seated so it was looking at her straight on. “To find a real one is difficult. To find a real one, made from a human, on the night of a full moon, of the chief of a tribe, with a Kindred soaking the head in his own vitae during the ritual? There is but one, and this is it.”

Natasha gulped on nothing, and stared at the little thing. Quite the resume.

“I uh ... um ... what’s special about it?” Other than its impressive and traumatizing history.

“Touch it.”

Oh god damn it.

The little Mekhet reached out, fingers quivering and arm shaking, and touched the thing’s forehead. Immediate jolts of something cold hit her, something colder than room temperature would suggest, like prickly bits of ice. The head sat there, eyes closed, sewn lips unmoving. Her imagination ran away with her, made her imagine it opening its eyes, or trying to speak through the sewn lips, but it remained lifeless. But the touch was real, as if electricity had been reborn as a dead spark, and danced against where her fingertips touched the thing’s ruined skin.

Intriguing and terrifying.

“Is it not?” the Prince said.

Natasha opened her eyes wide and looked up at her. No, not reading her mind. Natasha just wore her expressions on her face, and the Prince was good at reading people in general.

Now that she thought about it, she'd never talked with the Prince one on one, not really, not even when she was a member of the Ordo Dracul, protege of mentor Daniel. The Prince was talking to her like a proper colleague. What changed? The fifty years embraced, maybe?

“So it's uh ... m-magical?” she said.

“Magic is a horrible word, Miss Vola. There are secrets to the world we do not understand. Hidden things, machines of divine scale, realms that run the currents of many realities, lying on the edges of our own. In the Ordo Dracul, some of us hunt secrets of the flesh, others the mind, others the world. And I hunt the secrets of the worlds beyond.” The Prince walked into the heart of the circle, and placed the tiny head upon its center. “Energies, not magic. If we view them as things beyond understanding, we will never understand them.”

Made sense. And she did want to understand how people like Lucas were able to call upon lightning. The disciplines of the Kindred were odd enough, but after enough time, she'd grown to view them as nothing more than aspects of her race, evolved predators. A bolt of lightning though? That was eye opening.

“Is that what this room is for?” Natasha said. “Finding secrets?”

“Indeed.” Antoinette walked to the wall by the door, closed it, and reached over to the dial to dim the lights. The white LEDs faded away, until there was only the gentle blue glow of the chandelier

fires above. “For today, you are to observe, and become familiar with the process.”

What sort of process did one use for analyzing the occult and the mystical elements involved? Like asking someone who’s been blind their whole life to describe color. But sure enough, Antoinette got the tablet again, and started to film the shrunken head.

Or at least, Natasha thought she was just filming it. But as the little Mekhet stepped closer, she realized the Prince wasn’t using a common tablet. No brand on it, and it was very thick. She got around onto Antoinette’s side, and looked through the picture being shown on the weird device.

“... infrared?” she said. The picture did look different from what she was seeing with her naked eyes. Lot of orange.

“No Miss Vola, but you are close.” The Prince smiled at her and returned to the picture. She lowered it too, enough so Natasha didn’t have to crane her neck to see. “Watch closely.”

After a glance to Daniel to catch his nod, she set her eyes on the device, and watched the tiny head sit in the circle center. It just sat there of course, lifeless, because that’s what dead things did. The irony.

Motion on the picture made her gasp, and she leaned in closer to stare harder at the picture. There was movement! Tiny, little wisps of color, a glint of blue mist that drifted with invisible currents. She snapped her head up to look over the device at the shrunken head, and where it sat upon the grand symbol. Nothing, just the quiet blue light from the odd chandelier above. But when she looked back at the tablet to watch the feed, she gasped again at the faintest wisp of moving blue against an otherwise very dark, orange-tinted image.

The wisps started to make a shape. Eyes glued to the screen, Natasha got closer until she was right next to the Prince, but she

barely noticed. The wisp of blue was making an actual shape, a thing, something that stood on two legs. A person! A ghostly image against the orange background of the tablet's image, the blue shadow gestured, or at least looked like it did. Natasha could see what seemed like a head, legs, and arms, but no features, no eyes or fingers or toes. Still, with a few more minutes of staring, the image settled into something that did indeed seem human, and it started to walk around.

It came toward them. Natasha squeaked and jumped back, but the ghost thing didn't react. It turned around and back toward the circle center, and proceeded to pace around within it.

“ ... is ... is it-t-t trapped?”

“Yes, but not by the circle. Whatever it is, it is bound to the head.”

Chuckling, the Prince handed her the tablet. It was heavy, and thick. Expensive. Whatever technology the Prince had put into its development was not normal, not something the Invictus had, and probably not something any kine-run organization had. And, Natasha had to admit, there was a thrill to having a fortune at her back to fuel her new covenant's interests. The Invictus had money, but all they ever did with it was make more money, and vie for positions of power, to make more money. With the Ordo Dracul, they had a purpose.

But the purpose was terrifying. She could see a thing, an actual, real ghost thing, blue against the orange of the screen. Maybe blue because of the strange chandelier?

“D-do you know what it is?” she said. “ ... who it is?”

“I do not. Communication has been difficult. It does not see us or hear us. At least, not until I do this.” The Prince reached out over the table of occult objects, grabbed a small, brown, flannel bag on a string, and hung it around her neck.

“What’s in that?”

“The bones of children, and the dust of graveyards. The cloth is a burial shroud.”

“ ... w-w-what?”

The Prince nodded, and stepped into the circle. “This charm was made a millenium ago.”

Oh, not of her own making then. Good. Well, don’t put it past the Prince to do something that gross in the pursuit of secrets either.

The white-haired woman walked up toward the shrunken head, and stood before it. As she did, the blue figure in the screen reacted, stepping aside to avoid touching her when she came before the head. It circled her, reached out to touch her, but its arms went through her body and found nothing. It tried again, but the ghost thing was slow to do anything, and each gesture and movement took many seconds.

But it did react to her, specifically her and her location. It wasn’t just a weird movie on playback, or some afterimage of ... something. Whatever it was, it was aware of her.

“It-t-t ... it can see you?” You sound like straight out of a horror movie, Natasha.

“Or sense me. But it does not respond to my words, or my gestures. Only my location. And only if I am wearing the witch’s charm.”

Witch’s charm? Oh god what crazy world had she let herself get pulled into. Just as she started shivering again, Daniel put a hand on her shoulder. He too was looking at the screen, and despite his glasses and deadpan face, she could see the same hint of intrigue

there she knew she was wearing too; just without a bunch of a fear mixed in.

They were staring at something beyond the realm of the physical. There was a real, existing thing, moving and reacting to Antoinette as she walked around in the circle. Real. It was real.

Her knees started to rattle, and Daniel gave her a little shake of his own. A nod and small smile from him, and back to the display.

“Hidden things that Mekhet disciplines cannot see.” Daniel let go of her and walked toward the table, where his gloved hands drifted over the many objects and items. “Just a handful of the strange objects we’ve collected over the centuries. Other members of the order have given them to us, hoping we can discover more about them. A daunting task, but we’ve been diligent.”

Natasha raised a brow. Her sire, talking, for more than two sentences. He did that rarely.

“Tell me Miss Vola, what did you observe?” The Prince left the circle, returned the shrunken head and necklace charm to the table, and turned the lights back on.

Natasha looked back down at the tablet in her hand, and aimed it at the circle once more. Without the shrunken head or the dim blue light, all the screen showed was what her eyes could see.

“... whatever that was, it-t ... it didn’t leave the circle. And when you put the shrunken head down, it t-t-took time to appear.” She looked back to the circle, then to the Prince. She wanted more. “It reacted-d to you only when wearing the charm, and it tried to touch you. It ... it only appeared through whatever wave spectrum this device is listening for, and only when the only light visible was from the chand-d-d ... d-delier. The ... thing, was the color of the blue fire, despite the filter on this device being very orange. So the d-d-device

was filtering for something that only the blue light can expose. But I cannot tell if the symbol on the floor is ... relevant.”

Tough, to talk that much. Each stutter was an annoyance, each pause an embarrassment. But the Prince waited, nodding with each statement, patient.

“A thorough breakdown to be given in such a short time. Excellent. That is what we need, what I need, in a new member of the Ordo Dracul. I cannot abide Kindred throwing subjectivity and bias into their analyses.”

“B-bias?”

“Yes. Can you imagine the sort of drivel I would have to contend with if your friend Miss Herrington were asked to make an objective report of what she saw?”

Natasha giggled, and swung a hand up to her mouth to cover it. Probably something along the lines of ‘blue ghost thing danced around the Prince and tried to cop a feel’.

“Do you have the gift of spirit touch, Miss Vola?”

“Spirit touch? You mean, see an object’s past? Secrets? No. Sire can, and Damien can, but it isn’t a skill I’ve learned.” It came easier to some Kindred, but never her. She wanted to see things clearly, and her brain just didn’t like the vague imagery of what the auspex showed.

“Just as well, such images can be misleading. And your sire explains that you have an unnatural talent for clear sight, even in the darkest corners?”

“I d-do ... Prince. I can ... I’m good at that.”



“Excellent. With the recent deaths of three elders, I am afraid the climate of the city has changed.” The Prince walked around the table a bit, sliding her finger along its edge, before picking up another one of the strange objects. This one was a human hand, a dried and wrinkled thing but still at full size. An eye was tattooed onto its palm, and string was wrapped tight around the cut wrist. And of course, a stick the size and length of a forearm was fixed to the wrist. Because that’s what people wanted to wave around like a wand, a human hand on a stick.

“A hand of glory,” she said. “This one, I have not the details save for three. It is of a woman’s hand, that a thousand lives perished for her cruelty, and that the hand is at least five hundred years old.” Delicate fingers held it horizontal, and she set it upon Daniel’s open hands. Vampire skin had no harmful oils unless they were blushing life; probably a key part in how long the objects had survived in such good condition.

Daniel looked down at the hand, face deadpan save for a small twitch of his right eye, before he looked back up to the Prince. “As always, I see a woman wearing silk, laughing, bathed in blood and surrounded by corpses, a sword in hand.”

A woman, sword, silk? No historical figure jumped to mind.

Daniel held it out to her.

“ ... I uh ... I shouldn’t.”

“Come now.” The Prince gestured to her, and her eyes betrayed no mercy. “Hold the object. You must become comfortable with these affairs if you are to become a member of the order; they are not always so bloodless, or dead.”

So much for only observing. Shaking hands and trembling fingers found the object, palms up, and Daniel set it into her grip.

Gross. But, even with the grossness, the skin of the object on her skin sent little sparks into her. Unlike the shrunken head and its icy touch, the dried hand felt alive. Odd, considering it was a dead thing just like the head. Natasha turned the hand about to point the palm tattoo toward her face, and she stared into it.

And as she stared, it stared back at her. She couldn't see for sure, couldn't tell, but it did seem like the eye was adjusting itself to keep eye contact with her, like a creepy portrait might. The longer she looked at it, the more it felt like staring into the eye of something alive.

“Should ... should I start wearing gloves like you Sire?”

Daniel smirked, and raised a hand to his face to adjust his glasses, middle finger against the bridge. “It helps.”

Mental note: buy gloves, multiple.

The Prince took the hand, and set it back on the table. “We will do much of our experimenting in this room. It is the only locus within a hundred miles that is stable enough, and it is why I have built the tower here.”

“Locus?” Natasha said.

“A tear, Miss Vola. But, the details should come later. For now, let us focus on the occult, and the ways early kine and Kindred managed to see the hidden and touch the incorporeal in ways we have forgotten.”

“Forgotten.” She followed the Prince back to the table, and stared down at the objects. So many creepy things. “I wonder if ... the Circle of the C-Crone remember any of them?”

The Prince smirked at her. “If you can convince Jacob to share his secrets with me, I would be delighted.”

Yeah, fat chance of that ever happening.

The next few hours were a blur of lectures and demonstrations on various occult items. The Prince seemed to be an intellectual at heart, which she already knew from when she was first in the order for a paltry time. But it was Antoinette's passion for the items she described that surprised Natasha.

There was a vase with Egyptian hieroglyphs on it. Ashes were inside, and when placed upon the circle and viewed through the display, again they found blue wisps, this time two people, walking around the vase, holding hands. There was a mask with many lines of silver drawn on its black surface. Said to possess the powers of doom, and when put into the circle, it showed a black — not blue — cloud of some sort. There was a voodoo doll, which Natasha thought looked a little silly with pins sticking out of it, until that too was put into the circle. Another ghostly image was found, lying on the ground, with what could have been swords or spears sticking out of its chest. Hard to tell with wisps of cloud, but it looked dead.

Most disturbing, Natasha found, was the wedding dress. The Prince removed it from a garment bag and laid it out over another table in the large room. A few hundred years old, dirty, tattered, and with a very obvious blood splatter along its front. But when she put the dress into the circle, the viewed image froze Natasha solid. The ghostly images were clearer this time, as if the youth of the object compared to its older siblings affected them. And the image was of a woman wearing the dress, stabbing two other people, a man and woman, while they were in bed. It was all in blue wisp and fog, but the dress's images were so detailed, so exact, Natasha found herself mesmerized by the vividness and brutality. Whoever wore the dress stabbed the two in bed, and stabbed them, and stabbed, and stabbed, for ten minutes.

Hell hath no fury. Damien would probably say something like that.

After each event, the Prince asked Natasha to recite it back to her in detail. Now that she knew what her master was looking for, it got easier for her too, and lots of little details she'd normally leave out, she started to add in. And each one earned a smile and nod of approval from either her sire or the Prince. They wanted her to embrace her attention to detail and obsession with accuracy, instead of summarizing things into neat, inaccurate little boxes like Maria would. And as much as she was glimpsing into something disturbing and horrifying, she was enjoying herself. The nightmares would be worth it, hopefully.

“You may leave now, Miss Vola. I do expect you back tomorrow night. We have more to show.” The Prince offered her a nod and a tiny dismissing wave, before she returned to her table of occult objects. “Daniel, you may escort her.”

Escort. She didn't need an escort, but she really wanted one. Maybe the Prince noticed?

Natasha returned the nod, made a small bow, and as Daniel came up beside her, she turned and left the room of ghosts. Out into the hall, her knees started to shake again, and she forced herself to smile up at her sire as they re-entered the large stairway and started up to the tower lobby.

“That was t-t-t-terrifying.”

“Indeed.” He didn't return her gaze, hands in his pockets and glasses pointed forward. “The first night the order introduced me to the experiments they did, I was also terrified.”

“What sort of experiments?”

“The branch I was introduced to was not interested in the mystical, they were interested in blood and vitae. Experiments were performed on the bodies of Kindred, some willing, some not. Scalpel's were a common sight.”

Oh god. She clutched her stomach at the old vomit reflex. Vampires cutting into other vampires was a sickening prospect. You could cut into a vampire, cut deep, without them dying.

As they rounded the corner of where the stairway connected to the lobby at its peak, she blinked and glanced down at some moving black dots along the wall and floor. A few spiders. Funny, she doubted the spiders had much to eat in as sterile and lifeless a place as the tower.

The walk back to her apartment building was not so fun. If she'd been alone, she would have run it rooftop style, not to enjoy being juvenile like many young Kindred did, but just to get home faster. Every shadow seemed like it was moving, every kine walking past looked like they had some dark, disturbing history, and the crescent moon above gazed down on her like it was watching her. There were things that existed just beyond what her eyes could see, and now she had proof of it.

If she were kine, she would not be able to sleep. At least a Kindred never had to worry about insomnia. That didn't mean she wouldn't be imagining dead girls crawling out of her TV, or rotting limbs grabbing her from her closet.

"You look worried," Daniel said, once the two of them had walked a few blocks away from the tower and were exiting the Elysium zone.

"Course I'm worried! Now ... now I know there are ... I had no id-dea! No idea. I ... ugh. Ignorance is bliss."

The sheriff chuckled, only for a second, and adjusted his glasses before slipping his hand back into his long trench coat.

"Sorry. Your fears are mostly unwarranted, but only mostly. Ghosts, spirits, the stuff of ephemera? You don't stumble into those

sorts of things, Natasha, you have to go looking ... and we will go looking.”

Ephemera? Ghosts? Spirits? Hearing it put into words was the knife that jammed home reality. Her shaking only got worse.

Outside her apartment building, deep in Invictus territory, Daniel put a hand on her shoulder. She really needed to move out of the Invictus half of South Side, find a place more neutral.

“You will be fine, Natasha. Before long, the secrets we hunt will no longer frighten you as you master them. As much.”

“I ... I hope I can live up to that expect-t-tation.”

“You dealt with Maria for decades, Natasha. You’ll find the Prince and I easier to deal with.” And again, her sire gave her a smile. So many smiles in a single night. Was he really that happy working with her again?

That made her smile too.

Daniel adjusted his glasses, nodded, and turned around.

“W-wait,” she said. Wait, wait what? He turned around, head tipped to the side. Waiting. Well, at least he was listening, a far cry from how things went back then. “We uh ... we should ... c-catch up somet-t-t-time? Maybe ... get a drink together?”

Another smile. “I would like that.”

## Chapter 26

~~Beatrice~~

Climbing down into the cavern was getting easier. But no matter how good she was getting at it, if the clouds decided to cover the night sky, the obsidian shadow below her was an easy way to get some broken, mangled limbs. God damn the canyon was a bitch, with no good footing anywhere, and enough jagged rocks to kill any kine who fell down, guaranteed.

But she was familiar with it now, knew where the good rocks for grabbing were, knew where to put her weight into a crevice to get a foothold. Easy does it, easy does it. Through the sharp stone and sharper twigs and brush.

The tunnel into the cave was far more forgiving. Hard to find, but smooth and inviting compared to the canyon it connected to. And once through that, she was greeted by the colossal cavern of the Circle of the Crone. So damn metal, with bones on the walls for decorations, a blood bowl of bone in the center, and with rooms and hollows carved into the rock walls.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” She gave Aaron a small nod as she stepped in. The pale-skinned Gangrel returned it, but his eyes were busy, looking the contents of a book up and down. Not sure what kind of book had your eyes going up as well as down, but she didn’t bother to check.

“Mission go ok?” he said.

“Yeah. Garry’s got people riding the Invictus edge on purpose, like I thought.” She shrugged and raised a claw to pick at the crocodile

teeth along her cheek. “He knows it’ll cause trouble. Thought he was done with trouble.”

“Carthians, done with trouble?”

“Hey fuck you, we didn’t all just look for trouble all the time. Dickhead. Carthians just try to change old stupid shit. Or do you enjoy that Dolareido is practically a monarchy?”

He mirrored the shrug and smiled. “Prince lets us do what we want. Mostly.”

“Yeah when the mostly part changes, you’ll understand.”

She really had no business getting in Aaron’s face. Man was nice, for a Gangrel, but a bit naive, and kind of the odd man out in their weird little cult. Too nice.

Ugh, for a second, she wanted to use the term ‘beta’ to describe him. Joe was the sort of moron to think in terms of alpha and beta; and if she was turning into Joe, she’d be better off ash.

Moans grabbed her attention. At this point, moans when entering the cavern were more common than silence, since Othello and Jennifer often liked to bring their meals to their rooms, instead of showing a little decency and fucking them where they found them. Want to fuck them in the club? No one would even blink. But bringing them back to fuck in the cavern, where the stone walls captured sound so everyone could hear everything, was rude.

And she was too weak to not sneak a peek. As long as she didn’t do anything, it was alright. Right?

Definitely do something nice for Julias later, Beatrice, you guilty bitch.



Smirking to herself, she walked over to Othello's room, and stood in the opening of the large alcove. Othello was lying on top of a woman, and beneath them was a bunch of blankets, with a pillow underneath the girl's hips. And of course they were fucking, with a deep and heavy, fast-but-not-too-fast rhythm. Anal sex of course, Othello's main interest, and the girl underneath him didn't seem to mind.

In fact she barely seemed to be aware. Her arms were limp along the blankets, and her moans were quiet, exhausted things. Othello must have already drank from her. Poor girl was borderline comatose while the muscley, dark-skinned Daeva sank his cock into her ass. Comatose or not, the kine was soaking the pillow underneath her cunt, and her body was trembling, toes curled and thighs quivering. A long, deep, slow stroke, and the girl squirted onto the pillow, with a wavering, weak moan to follow. Another one, and another little squirt; girl was cumming her brains out.

Ok, enough staring. You have a boyfriend, and this is very uncool.

She kept watching for another ten seconds before she moved on. Course then she was just watching it in her head, and she raised her claws to her hair as she shook her skull.

Jacob was sitting in the back of the cave on a chair, a simple thing of wood with a leather cushion. For some reason, it went well with the bones that covered the rock wall behind him. The ancient Nosferatu was wearing some old brown pants, black shoes, and an open brown vest, with nothing underneath. She could see his chest and arms, and found herself a little surprised; the man was in good shape for what would have passed for a fifty-year-old kine. A bit thin, but strong. Whoever had sired him had picked a weird time for the embrace.

He had the usual bandage over his eyes though, to hide his empty eye sockets.

“Beatrice, how goes scouting?”

“You were right, Garry’s stirring up trouble. I know the Invictus have been taking more territory with Xnomina on the border, but it’s not like that’s a declaration of war.”

“If your neighbor, someone you know doesn’t want you around, starts marching troops up and down your fence line, would you not respond?” Garry smirked his crazy smirk at her, and leaned back into his chair to bring a leg up onto the other. Knife in hand, and a piece of wood too, he started carving. He’d only just started working on it, so all he had was a block of wood the size of a brick.

“I guess I would. And didn’t know you did wood carvings.”

“Good.” Another grin for her, before the eyeless vampire started back into the wood with the blade. “What is Garry up to, specifically?”

“He’s got multiple cells causing mayhem for the encroaching Xnomina institutions. Breaking down machinery, causing accidents for the kine, shit like that. He has other cells, his older Kindred, roughing up Invictus who walk the neutral line. No one’s been killed yet thank god, but some kid is going to go too far eventually.”

“Undoubtedly.” The old Nosferatu worked quick, shavings of wood falling and exposing a knife-like shape from the block. “Probably what Garry is hoping for.”

“Say what?”

“Two dogs, one bone. Garry and Michael butt heads a lot, and overtly.” The bastard smirked at her and waved his small stick around. “It’s in the nature of women to sneak and manipulate, in men to break down walls with their skulls. In this case, each other’s skulls instead of a wall.” He chuckled and resumed carving, with the

occasional pick of his teeth with the blade. “Both see an opportunity for power and growth, at the other’s expense, and they’ll pursue it.”

“I guess, yeah. Just didn’t expect Garry to do something so juvenile.”

“The Invictus want to control all, and the Carthians want a democracy, no matter how foolhardy the notion with Kindred as your populace. Both see their ways as correct, both see them worth fighting for. Wars are fought for less.”

Yeah, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t stupid.

“Feel like I should do something.”

“Oh?” He threw a sly, toothy smile her way.

She nodded and stepped in closer. The old bastard did love to try and intimidate her, and she resisted every time, despite the shivering beast in her gut. Besides, she had bigger teeth.

“Feel a bit guilty about just watching the catastrophe waiting to happen.”

“Understandable.” He carved a couple eyes around the center of the piece of wood. What had seemed like a blade was turning into a bird beak. “Your lover is an Invictus and your old boss and friend is a Carthian. Quite the pickle.”

“Fuck you.”

He laughed. “No judgment here, Beatrice. We all have our baggage. And you are free to do what you want, you know that.”

“Unless you want something.” Snarl and hiss.

“I think I’m entitled to a little request every now and then.” The monster leaned in closer, enough so this time she did take a step

back as his smile turned into a grin. “Aren’t I?”

Yeah yeah, he was the leader of their fucked up little pack, after all.

“So, I can do what I want about this?”

“Sure. Just don’t throw the Circle into the middle of it, and you’re free to fuck Garry and help Julias all you want.”

Fucking bastard knew he got that backward too.

“And ... about Maria?”

Jacob put the knife and wood down to his knees, and looked at her. The bandage wasn’t see-through. You couldn’t see the empty eye sockets. But she could tell he was staring right at her.

“What about her?”

“She’s been pushing on Carthian territory too.”

“Her motivations are much simpler, and deadlier.”

“ ... you mean about Lucas.”

The eyeless nodded, and resumed carving. Where he’d once been enthusiastic and speedy with the crafting, now he was slowed, and each incision was deliberate.

“He’s dead, and she blames Garry on some level. Much of what happened during the purge happened because of him, because he sided with the Prince, because he...” The old man sighed, and slit some random lines into subtle curves along the sloped back end of the wood. Barbs of feathers? “Now that he has truly perished, Maria no doubt feels unhinged and looking to start trouble. That may change as she calms ... it may not.”

“Fucking wonderful.” She threw up her hands and started pacing. Two dudes having a pissing contest was a stupid thing she could get behind stopping, but a woman angry about the death of her love wasn’t exactly an easy thing to fix.

“Take my advice, Beatrice: stay out of her way.”

Not the first time Jacob told her to avoid Maria. Jacob was so much older than her, why did he fear her? He was twice her age, fucking twice. He was ancient. Maria wasn’t even alive when Jacob became elder.

“Fine, fine, I’ll avoid her.” Hands down again, she turned and walked away. Didn’t bother to wave or anything, not the Circle’s way. She liked that.

Ok, maybe Jennifer would have something different to say. And, well, she kinda wanted to see Jennifer. The two of them were getting along more and more; probably cause she reminded her of Julias. Damn Ventrue.

Her friend had a fur blanket hanging from her alcove, but she’d given Beatrice permission to walk in whenever she wanted, even if the blanket was pulled across to cover the hideaway. So Beatrice walked in.

“Jennifer, we—damn it.”

Of course. Of fucking course. The Nosferatu was too busy running scenarios about Garry and the Invictus through her head to be paying attention. She’d thought all the moans were coming from Othello and his girl, not Jennifer; which was pretty damn stupid of you Beatrice considering Jennifer has sex almost every night.

Sure enough, the woman was nude, and straddling a man who was lying on his back on some fur blankets. No wonder Beatrice hadn’t heard their moans, they were having really gentle, slow sex.

A surprise, considering there was also a man behind Jennifer, kneeling behind her, and though Beatrice couldn't see from the angle, he was definitely penetrating her.

Jennifer smiled at her, and slowly rocked herself back and forth. The man underneath her held still, hands on her hips, while the man behind her met her rocking with gentle thrusts of his own. No one had issues getting in there, nice and deep, and everyone was smiling.

“Hey Beatrice,” Jennifer said. Her hands were on the man's chest beneath her, or at least they were. But when Beatrice entered, Jennifer always changed her body language, got a little friendlier, a little more inviting. She put her weight onto one hand, still on the man's chest, but the other raised to her breast, and she cupped it into her palm while finger and thumb caressed her swollen nipple. All while looking at the Nosferatu.

Beatrice couldn't help but stare a little. Catching the girl mid threesome was routine at this point, a routine Beatrice could probably break if she really wanted to. But damn, seeing Jennifer surrounded by legs sent a thrill down her dead spine every time. Something about how Jennifer looked just like her with the shoulder-length black hair that framed her face, the confident grin, the lean-and-mean body; all that without the Nosferatu disfigurements.

Watching her reminded Beatrice a lot of her fun days back when she was kine. And, evidently, she really turned herself on.

“Jennifer. I uh...” Focus damn it, stop staring. “Wanted to talk about Garry.”

“Go ahead.” Smiling at her, Jennifer leaned down to squish her breasts against her ghouls' chest, and arched her back to show off the curve of her spine. Not doing it for her ghouls either, definitely doing it to entice Beatrice.

Or maybe she just liked showing off? Cause you love to do that too, Beatrice. You love the look in Julias's eyes when he watches you do anything sexy. Maybe that's all it was, Jennifer getting off on being watched, same as Beatrice did. She'd prefer Jennifer enjoy such a vice with her ghouls, not her, but at least she could understand it, if it was true.

"He's up to something. I know Xnomina is buying up territory near there. Maybe they're going to expand the police force in the area, and McDonald will probably point them in Garry's direction." Much as Garry was a great guy, Kindred did illegal things all the time by kine rules. Where Invictus broke the law through manipulative lawyer garbage, Carthians broke it in much more direct ways. Easily caught ways, usually, if you knew where to look. And the Invictus knew where to look.

Jennifer nodded, and her eyes looked up as she considered, before she pushed against her ghoul's chest to sit up straighter again. The woman had the same slightly tanned skin tone as Beatrice, but no tattoos or piercings. The clean look was good on her.

"Do you suspect Maria, or Michael?" she said, face calm and straight. Or it was for a second, and then the man behind her gave her a little thrust, harder than the ones before, making Jennifer squeak. She reached back and slapped the man on the hip, but she didn't really seem like she minded. Her nipples looked so damn hard and swollen, despite her putting on her business face. Her rhythm never stopped either. Girl was damn comfortable with sex.

Which was weird, now that she thought about it. Beatrice slept around a lot as a kine, but she never got as comfortable with sex as Jennifer. The Ventrue was only ten years embraced; must have been a sexual animal while still alive.

"Thinking Maria mostly? Since Lucas is dead, and she might think Garry had a hand to play in that; she could be looking to start

something. But then McDonald hates Garry too.”

“Any evidence for either?” She sat up straighter still, and the man behind her had to lean back to make room for her. But he just rolled with it, reached his hands up from her waist, and cupped her breasts. And with more room, the man underneath reached down to where her smooth pussy was wrapped taut around his cock, and started to rub his thumb along her clitoris.

Both men earned some quiet moans from the Ventrue, and she tilted her head a bit to catch the man behind her with a kiss on the jaw. Just another ordinary day for Jennifer.

“Not to call them out individually, no.”

“Why would you call them out?” She reached down for the man beneath her, and pulled him up to sit, his head against her collar. Her fingers found his hair, and she combed the curls of them as she gently fucked her ghoul. “Let them fight it out. You’re not supposed to interfere, just have the information.”

“A war will benefit no one, Jennifer.” She had to leave out the ‘when you’re older you’ll understand’ speech. Beatrice had a couple decades as Kindred, but that wasn’t a lot. Besides, it was people older than her trying to start the wars.

“You sure about that? I don’t know about you, but I think it’d be nice if the Circle could pick up the pieces left over from a silly Invictus Carthian war. Take the city for our own, let the Crone run free.” Jennifer smiled at Beatrice over her ghoul’s head. Still fucking, even as she moved her legs out so she wasn’t on her knees, but had them wrapped around her ghoul instead. Which meant the ghoul behind her had to sit down on his butt too, and get in close, legs out to the sides. Everyone so damn comfortable with each other, the guys didn’t mind touching legs and bits to make sure their master enjoyed a proper, deep, double penetration in a leisurely bout of sex.



“I have friends in the Invictus. You know that.” Julias of course, her big shiny white knight. But there was Jack too. “And the Carthians.”

“Split loyalties. You’re lucky this isn’t like other cities, Beatrice. A lot of places, the Kindred act in open war of each other.” Her hands drifted up and down her ghoul’s back, even as she grinned at the Nosferatu. Legs locked tighter, and her rhythm increased; now everyone had a bit of motion going in their hips. Like watching gear cogs work together, the three bodies kept rubbing up against each other in a perfect, synchronized dance.

Beatrice had been in threesomes before, when she was kine; they never went this smooth. Jennifer must have spent time training her ghouls, just so she could get a proper good fuck every night.

Yeap, Beatrice was jealous. Course, the grass was always greener on the other side of the fence, right? She had a great man in her life now, a powerful, rich man at that. They were sexually compatible too, and sometimes had fun with their meals. Be satisfied with that. Just hard to think straight when staring at your body double having oddly romantic sex with two guys at once.

“I like that I can go out into the street, even into Invictus or Carthian territory, and I don’t guarantee a fight.”

“Not a guarantee,” Jennifer said, “but always a possibility. We’re animals, Beatrice, trying to share a food source. Violence is inevitable.” As if to make her point, Jennifer rolled her eyes up into her skull with a low groan, and sank her teeth into her ghoul.

The effect was immediate. The man shuddered, let out his own groans, and started to fall back. He lay upon the fur blankets once more, and his hands fell to the sides as well. Whole body, trembling and shivering, as Jennifer sank her fangs deep into him and started to drink him. Course, the woman had been working them up to it

with sex, so Beatrice couldn't help but stare as the two also climaxed.

Ok, maybe she could watch just a little longer.

As Jennifer drank the man, Kissed the man, her ghoul behind her roamed his hands up and down her curved back, and started to thrust into her ass a little harder. Couldn't thrust hard, now that he was on his ass, but more than enough to get some mewls from the woman. But she kept her fangs deep in the other man's neck, and suckling and drinking, as he himself quivered. Beatrice could tell he was cumming inside her, no doubt absolutely pouring into her; no kine could resist the pleasure of the Kiss. And a Kiss with an orgasm to go along with it must have been amazing.

Finally, Jennifer sat up, and leaned back against the man behind her. With their bodies out of the way, Beatrice bit her lip, staring at where Jennifer's smooth pussy was spread open on her ghoul's cock. White drops were leaking out of her, onto the wet skin of the man's pelvis, wetter than sweat would cause. Course, sex addict that she was, Jennifer had soaked the man in her girl cum, and the kine's fluids mixed into it as he slipped into a post-Kiss coma.

Jennifer leaned back even more, and let the ghoul in front of her fall out of her body. With her legs spread, there was no hiding the dripping white that spilled out of her lips and onto the softening cock of her pet. The remaining ghoul backed up a foot to give them more room, while Jennifer remained in his lap, leaning back and up to kiss at the man's neck. Her ghoul slipped one of his hands between her thighs, and sank his fingers into her cum-filled snatch.

A couple thrusts earned some mewls from Jennifer, and her exposed lips dripped more of her juices as the man behind her started to cum as well. Without the Kiss to render him comatose, he was free to keep thrusting, his own groans coming through as the two climaxed. Jennifer made sure to push her ass back into the

man, her back too, and spread her legs so Beatrice didn't miss a thing.

God damn it.

After a minute of gentle thrusting and cuddling, the man fell out of her, and she sat down on his legs, cum dripping down her ass and thighs. But she barely seemed to notice as she got comfortable straddling his knees, and stretched out her arms above her head.

"Thank you," she said. "You watched a lot longer than normal. I like that."

Course she did.

"I really shouldn't. I have a boyfriend, Jennifer."

"Did you ask him yet? About my proposal?"

"... no."

Jennifer frowned and folded her arms across her bare chest. "Why not?"

"Can ... can we just focus on the problem, please?"

"Fine." Beatrice's clone leaned back and pat the man behind her. "Be a dear, get the wash ready?"

The ghoul nodded, and without so much as wiping off the cum still on his cock, got up and headed out of the room into the main cavern. Beatrice quirked a brow and watched; no one else reacted.

"So, Invictus and Carthians. I do happen to know that it is Maria being a thorn in Garry's side in the Mirrden area, where all that construction is happening. She's pushing to have old homes in the area torn down, and for the Mirrden company to set up some quote-unquote business facilities." The Ventrue raised her fingers to

literally quote 'business facilities' before she crawled over to the comatose ghoul still on the blankets, and straddled his chest.

"Any idea why? Not like she couldn't expand Xnomina into other areas."

"Well you know about them and Lucas."

"Yeah but, is that it?" Beatrice said.

"Hmm. A friend of a friend of a friend said Garry was found in Tony's old tunnels, the ones Lucas took over, and he destroyed some pretty important objects to the Lancea et Sanctum."

God damn it Garry. Dude really had a hate boner for the Longinus lovers.

"Thanks Jennifer. I'm gonna go talk to him."

The Ventrue frowned at her, nose scrunching up and lines creasing her forehead.

"... be careful."

Beatrice again raised a brow. But nodded, and left.

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The Carthian half of South Side. Bars, steak restaurants, hardware stores, garages, a pleasant mix of crime and old fashioned grit. Neighborhoods with people sitting on the front porches, drinking beer or smoking cigarettes. Old cars parked on the streets, and grocery stores with signs in the parking lot advertising food on sale.

Much as she liked the high-class half of the Invictus territory, there was something more real about the Carthian half. People here weren't full of themselves, at least not in the same way. They knew the price of milk, they knew doing cocaine could get you arrested, they knew what noodles and ramen tasted like, they knew the

names of local cops. A place where your neighbors had names and faces, even in the apartment buildings. You didn't necessarily like them, and some you probably hated, but you knew them. A far cry from the nameless, faceless, weightless anonymity of the richer half of the city.

She stuck to the rooftops. In the middle of the night, only streetlights were going to expose her, so the rooftops made traveling easier for a Nosferatu; better than having her face spotted by a kine. It took a while, but she found the familiar rooftops of the Carthian district, of old schools and old homes, old apartment buildings and older corner stores. The further she went out, the more rundown everything got.

Damn she missed this place. She missed the cars with the cracked windshields and dented bumpers, she missed the homes with the stained siding, she missed the roads with the asphalt patches. Hell, she missed the noisy loiterers who liked to hang around on street corners with a stereo playing. Course over the past twenty years of her embrace, it went from boomboxes to cars with loud stereos to the latest incarnation, jackasses taking selfies doing stupid shit. And yet she still missed it. It was home, for a damn long time.

Been a while since she'd left these people, would they just let her in again? Other Kindred stood around, talking with each other, leaning against walls and streetlights and gesturing and nodding with enthusiasm. Some sounded angry, some sounded happy, everyone did a double take on her as she passed by once she got back onto the street. A few of her acquaintances managed some nods, and a few of the people she'd bashed horns with growled or groaned, depending on how much she annoyed them back in the day. But at least they were a familiar pain; she knew them, they knew her. Good enough to let her go on through.

She found the apartment building Garry lived in. The one she used to live in. Front door was never locked, and she stepped in, but

not before a little hesitation.

Couldn't help but smile as she looked at the walls with peeling paint, the cracked windows and water-damaged stairs and carpet. No, it wasn't home anymore, and she honestly preferred the badass metal cave of the Circle of the Crone; didn't mean she didn't miss this one too.

“Beatrice, the fuck you doing here?”

Ah, Joe, of course. Guard dog.

“Here to see Garry.”

“About?”

“He said he wanted to sell your ass to a local pimp.”

“Fuck off.” Joe frowned at her and pushed her shoulder hard enough to make her take a step back. Mr. Big-n-Bald wrestler man getting some major balls on him.

Whatever, she could take him. He had maybe five or ten years on her, nothing she couldn't handle. She reached out, and pushed him back, foot against the wall behind her so she had something to brace against. Dude was double her weight.

“How about you fuck off? I want to talk to Garry.”

“You can't just—”

“I'm not some random fuck off the street, Joe! You know me well enough to know you can trust me, so how about you get the fuck out of my way?”

Mistake.

Joe punched her, hard. She expected he might throw a swing, but not that he'd throw a swing hard enough to smash her head against the lobby wall. Bone nearly cracked when her skull collided with wood and drywall, before she fell down onto her knees and hands.

“Damn right I know you. Two fucking decades you lived here with me, working for Garry when the Invictus were breathing down our necks. Two fucking decades you were part of this family, and we looked out for each other.” The brute stared down at her, hands in fists at his side, eyebrows furrowed to the point he looked like an angry rodent. “Now you think you can just waltz in here? Fucking an Invictus, that was strike one. Leaving the Carthians for the Crone? That's strike two.” He reached down and picked her up by the neck.

“Where's strike three?” she said through the pain and groans.

“Never could count very high.”

Again, fist collided with her face, crushing her nose and sending her into the wall again. She rolled like a bag of sand, heavy and bending until she settled on her back along the floor by the door. Leave it to Joe to put a damper on her nostalgia.

“I'm still your ally,” she said. Jaw still working, but the nose was definitely a flat smudge on her face. Vitae was quick to start healing it, but actually realigning a nose took some physical force, and she groaned as she put her hands to her face, and twisted the cartilage back into place.

“Says you. I say fuck you.”

“And Garry? What does he say?”

“Garry ain't said shit. And I figure it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission.” He started walking toward her again, and along with a very inhuman growl, inhuman claws started to grow from his

hands. Long claws, thick, massive, and heavy. “So I’m going to smack you around a bit before then. Hope you don’t mind.”

Well, at least he didn’t plan to kill her, that was nice of him.

“Joe, asking you one more time, get the fuck out of my way.”

“Oh I hope you can stay so confident when I’ve got a few claws jammed up your cunt. I’m going to—”

Fuck. Him.

“Alone,” she said.

“What?”

“You’re alone.”

“I ... I...”

She stared at the man, at the big, dumb man, and stood up. Joe had stopped moving, and the frown of his eyebrows faded as he met her eyes.

“You’re alone. Everyone’s abandoned you. Alone in an empty city, with no one to talk to, no one to feed on, no one anywhere.” The power poured up into her, through her, into her fingers and claws, into her spine, and up into her eyes. But it was her words that carried the weight. “All. Alone.”

“Alone...” Joe fell to his knees. The Gangrel claws of his hands faded away, and the anger along with them. Open eyes stared up at her as she forced the nightmare upon him, drilled it into his Kindred mind, and down into his stupid bald soul.

Sighing, she shook her shoulders out and dusted herself off. Fuck that hurt. Fuck Joe. Fuck him. Fuck him fuck him fuck him. She stood in front of the kneeling man, and waved a hand in his face.



He didn't move. Didn't blink. Didn't look at her in any way. Just stared into the distance, with fear etched all over his face.

"Someone ... anyone?" he said. "Someone help me ... someone ... anyone..."

Fuck, now she felt horrible. The big guy was just one of the guard dogs for the Carthians, and dogs were pack animals. He cared for his family, to a fault, just like all dogs did. And now he was trapped in his mind, thinking they were gone, that everyone was gone, and that he was alone in the whole god damn world.

Sympathy passed as she rubbed her jaw and where her nose was struggling to heal. Fuck him, he'd be fine come tomorrow.

She started up the stairs of the apartment building. There were over a hundred Kindred in the Carthians, last she knew; would she have to fight more of them? Did she piss off everyone as badly as Joe?

Garry's door. She swung it open, smile on her face. Maybe she could surprise him, delight him with a visit from an old friend?

Surprised was not the right word.

The man was on his bed, naked, and someone was underneath him, someone the fighter was giving an anal pounding.

Mike?

"Beatrice, what the hell?" Garry said.

"B-Beatrice?" Mike started squirming. Garry had his hands on kid's shoulders, keeping him pinned on his stomach against the bed. But Mike didn't seem like he was unhappy about the situation. The young hacker punk looked at her, blushing bright with life and

embarrassment, and arousal, before Beatrice finally managed to come to her senses and close the door.

“Just uh ... getting some things I forgot,” she said, before she started to head toward her room. The groans in the room resumed, and she smirked; she must have been trapped in her own damn mind again to not hear them before opening the fucking door.

Back in her old room, she started digging through her things. Laptop, smartphone, some USB chargers and shit, and some headphones. None of it would last long without power in the cavern, so she'd have to charge things somewhere else. Maybe—

Oh fucking god, she just found Garry fucking another guy in the ass. She never wondered about his sex life or orientation, it never came up. But now she had a very real image of Garry, naked, on top the scrawny punk Mike, and giving him a thorough anal fucking. Like she'd seen two other people already get tonight!

Don't think about it, don't think about it, don't think about it.

Do anything but think about it.

Not like it wasn't a sexy image though. Mike was in decent shape for a scrawny kid, and Garry was like her, lean and mean and built for fighting. Dude was the definition of street rugged. Seeing him, naked on another man, dick inside him?

She took her old booklet of CDs and started smacking herself in the face with it. Fuck, her nose! Pain, oh fucking gods pain. She clutched her damaged nose and sat down on her ass by the bed.

Few minutes later, Garry stood in her doorway, a raised brow on his face and arms folded across his chest. Man was wearing some torn jeans, and nothing else. Went well with the shaved head, facial scruff, and steel jaw.

“The fuck you doing here Beatrice? And don’t say it was for your shit, you could steal this from anywhere, any time.”

“ ... yeah.” Ass on the carpet, she leaned back against the bed’s side, and threw the booklet away. “Came to see you. Not like that, mind you ... so you and Mike, eh?”

“Kid’s got a great ass.” Garry shrugged. And unless she was seeing things, he made a small grin.

Too much. She burst into laughter and fell onto her side, muscles refusing to cooperate. Too god damn much. Garry kept watching her, that tiny grin still there, and when she took a peek at him, she broke into laughter again, until she was on her back and waving a hand up at him.

“Oh fuck, god damn it Garry. Fucking ... god I needed that.” She climbed up the bed and got to standing. No way to behave in front of the leader of the Carthians after all.

Leader of the Carthians. He was always just Garry before, badass and her boss. Now he was a title and representative of another group. Hard to think of him like that though. He was ... Garry. Guy hated that shit as much as she did.

But she was a witch now. And she had good reason for being one.

“Sorry about barging in unannounced. Overstepped my bounds.”

“ ... yeah, it’s alright.” And just like that, his grin was gone, and he was all business. Shit hurt.

“ ... and sorry about fucking with Joe. He started a fight, so I left him in a nightmare.”

“You what?”

“Down in the lobby.”

“Joe that fucking...” He frowned as he stared down, and folded his arms across his chest. In the past, he’d have shrugged and said it was his own damn fault, but before he got there, she saw the hesitation in his eyes. “Next time, let me deal with mine, Beatrice. You’ll start an incident doing that sort of shit.”

There it was, a cold wall. And now that it was right in her face, she realized it was the thing she’d been avoiding, the reason she hadn’t come back to pick up her old things.

“Yeah, my bad. I apologize.” Ugh, the words tasted like vomit. “I wanted to talk with you about the Lancea et Sanctum.”

“Why?”

“Little birdie told me you might have an issue with them. Maybe destroyed some of their artifacts and shit?” The birdies were more than just Jennifer. Sometimes they were her. She’d gotten very good at the spying thing the past couple months.

“... and if I did?” Cold wall turned into steel.

Beatrice held up her hands, and started to pluck at her earing chain that connected to her nostril piercing. “Just keeping an eye on things, Garry. We do that in the Circle, and ... and it looks like a storm’s brewing between the Carthians and Invictus.”

“A storm’s always brewing.”

“How so? Far as I know there hasn’t been a real war between them since before the purge. I—”

Garry raised a hand and wiped her words away. “You weren’t there.”

“I know, and I’d like to keep it that way. I’m on your side Garry, witch or not.”

The Gangrel frowned, turned, and started walking to his office in the same standoffish way he always did when upset. She followed behind him. Office was a hilarious word to describe the rundown room with peeling paint and bending ceiling; it had a desk though, at least that was office-like.

He sat the desk, and she closed the door behind her.

“Shit’s going to happen at this rate,” she said, “and for once I can see it coming before it does.”

“Enjoying your new position with the witches then?” He leaned back in his chair, put his boots up on the table, and started picking his fingernails with his knife. Classic business pose.

“You can say I enjoy having a bit more freedom, yeah.”

“Freedom like wild animals.”

She walked forward and slammed her hands down on the table. “You really want to make this about the Circle? I came here to talk about the Lancea et Sanctum, and an obvious shitstorm about to happen.”

“ ... alright Beatrice, shoot.”

“You know Damien survived Lucas’s death.” She twisted a bit to put her ass up onto the desk edge. Garry could try and hold her at a distance if he wanted, she wasn’t about to let him get all imposing. He may have been an elder, but he was still Garry.

“I do.”

“Another little birdie told me he might start reviving the Lancea et Sanctum.”

Bam. That got a small eyebrow raise out of him.

“The kid is going to revive the Second Estate in Dolareido?”

“He might, depends on if the Prince agrees.”

“Then she’ll bring it up at the next Primogen meeting, where I can politely tell her and Damien to fuck off.”

“ ... I don’t think you should.”

Garry raised both brows this time. “Why the fuck not?”

Because I’ve seen Damien, I’ve seen that kid before and after Lucas’s death. I’ve seen the broken man’s eyes.

“Because he’s not Lucas.”

“The First Estate and the Second Estate, at the same time, Beatrice. We have enough trouble with the Invictus breathing down our throats as is.”

“I know McDonald’s being a pain in your ass, and probably pushing for a fight. Maria though? She’s coming up right behind him, and I think she’ll ease up, maybe get McDonald to back off too, if you let the Longinus dude start preaching again.”

“Sounds a lot like a concession, Beatrice.”

“Yeah well, you might think differently if you talked with Damien.”

“ ... how much you know about this kid?” Garry stabbed the knife into the table, and glared. “He’s Lucas’s childe. You weren’t there Beatrice, you didn’t hear the sermons, see the bastard murder and

slaughter anyone he thought was a risk, or anyone he could somehow accuse of being against god.”

“I get that, I fucking get it, but Damien isn’t like that.” He’s something, but he ain’t that.

“You really sticking up for this guy just because you want to avoid a war?”

“I ... I’m not sticking up for him, not really. Just saying he ain’t Lucas. Talk to him.” She shrugged, grabbed his knife out of the desk, and started cleaning her claws. “You might not think so, and apparently Joe doesn’t think so, but I still care about you guys. Last thing I want is to see the Carthians stuck in a war with Maria and Michael. And Julias.”

It was the truth. She had friends on both sides at this point; well, friends on the Carthian side, and her lover on the Invictus side. Even that dumbass kid Jack would get put into a dangerous spot if the Invictus and Carthians went at it.

“ ... I’ll think about it. Message received. Now get out of here.”

“What?”

“Did I fucking stutter? Show up uninvited, unannounced, fuck with Joe’s head; you crossed the line.” He glared, and reached out to snap his knife out of her hands. “I could bring this up with the Primogen, but I won’t. Now get out.”

She stood up, and stared at him, but the man was looking at his knife and picking his nails with it again.

Oh, she got it. Like a fucking classic movie, with the ‘shoo the dog’ scene. He was trying to get rid of her cause he cared. And he did care, much as the fucking bastard was trying to show he didn’t. But

if he wanted to do the drama thing, put on a scene, everyone pretend they were enemies now, fine.

She stormed off, flipped him off, and slammed the door behind her, grin on her face once she was outside.

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Back in the cemetery. When she wasn't hanging out in the Carthian half of South Side, she was here, South Hill Cemetery and the catacombs it contained.

Or at least that's how it used to be. Now she was either hanging out with Julias in his mansion, or hanging out with the witches. No wonder the Carthians didn't care for her anymore, hanging out with two other covenants, one of them a long time enemy. The other, loose cannons who'd probably destroy the city if Jacob ever got to rule it.

"I like the witches." She shrugged to no one, and started to walk the walls of the catacomb. Kine avoided the place, for various reasons; her scaring people off being one of them. It meant she got to enjoy the shelves of stone, the bones they held, skulls, and a couple of candles she brought and lit.

"Jennifer trying to get into my pants can be a little annoying, but other than that, I do like her a lot, and them." Othello was a nice guy, and he had a Carthian background too. Sometimes they talked about what it was like to be a rebel, fight the man, push for more rights. Aaron was usually a quiet guy, liked to read, made her think of a pale owl. Most Gangrel came across like angry dogs, but she supposed a Gangrel could emulate an owl too.

And Jacob. Bastard had a habit of saying things that grated on her, only for her to realize he was poking at the truth. He liked teaching her, but he also liked for her to learn things the hard way.

Her new family, and she did like them.



She smirked and licked her crocodile teeth as she grabbed a candle, and started to wander the deep halls of the catacombs. The Circle of the Crone would love this place, but their cavern off the edge of North Side was better, and even more metal. These catacombs were hers though, and if she was going to take a trip down memory lane, she might as well visit it too.

“First came here when I was, what, a month embraced? All alone, all the fuck alone.” Laughing, she went deeper into the furthest room the catacomb had to offer. It wasn’t a huge thing like the one in Paris, but it had enough to hold a few dozen coffins, enough for someone to get scared if they went all the way to the bottom. Where she normally hung out.

But now she hung out in the Crone cavern, or at Julias’s mansion.

“Julias.” She tapped a claw against one of her larger crocodile teeth. Being in his arms, feeling his kiss on her lips, waking up in his bed, getting into his bed, she loved it all. Wanted to feel more of him, listen to his voice, analyze the things he said; bastard loved to act dumb when he was actually really fucking smart.

If the Invictus started fighting the Carthians again, it would not be a good thing for Julias. Was she really trying to stop the two covenants from fighting, just cause she loved him? Ugh. Ugh! Objectivity out the window. Now she was being a juvenile brat who thinks their love is more important than lives.

It was easy to be a bitter asshole who wanted everyone else to die when she was alone. A lot of Nosferatu are alone, hideous and cursed. But now she had someone, and she was getting out of her shell, meeting people, making friends, being a sociable and productive member of Kindred society.

She laughed again, and set the candle down on one of the shelves. When had she become so introspective? What the fuck happened to her? Julias happened to her, the handsome bastard. Owed him a lot.

She blew out the candle, and headed out of the catacombs. Julias would be back at his mansion in a few hours, she should surprise him.

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~~Antoinette~~

Weary, jaded, and as Jack would say, burned out, elders suffered such inevitabilities as they grew in years, and so too they suffered a growing bloodlust. Only a torpor of decades could settle the bloodlust into manageable levels, but she would not need such sleep for many years yet. Weariness and losing the joy of unlife, on the other hand, were a constant danger for her.

Jack was like fresh air on embers, rekindling her soul. She felt like a young woman once more.

The two of them were in her hot tub, the same room where her pool was. The room where Jack had first tasted the insides of Julee and Ashley, her cherished pets. Her two ghouls were not in her tower tonight, but in their apartment, sleeping hopefully. They needed rest from the frequent feedings; they had two feed two vampires now.

That was an interesting point. Her Jack did occasionally hunt on his own, but Antoinette was guilty of practically forcing her ghouls upon him, so they could experience the bliss of the Kiss during sex. And him, to experience the Kiss while within them as they succumbed to its pleasure. Kindred were not to feed on Kindred; they could not experience such bliss with each other. And she wanted him to feel such bliss that she once indulged in, centuries ago.

She relaxed back along the seat of the tub. The hot water was up to the underside of her breasts, and the jets massaged along her bare skin. To truly enjoy the tingling sparks of hot water on the

skin, both she and her love had performed the blush of life, and were both letting the tub wash away their stress and woes.

Her mind wandered back to the Kiss, and how to enjoy it during sex. When she was ancillae during the 1600's, she had enjoyed every conceivable act of sexual bliss she could imagine. The memories were such hazy things, blurred from centuries of daily sleep and powerful dreams even her dragon coils could not completely settle. But she remembered some of her greater nights where she had experimented, let her desires guide her, pushed her limits to see what joy lay beyond convention.

At the height of her obsessive pursuits of sexual madness, she had fifty men and ten women at once, all night. Enough fluids and sexual pleasure to satisfy a nation, contained to a single night of ceaseless heat.

And it had left her hollow. Centuries more, pursuing greater delights had failed, and as she fell into her elder years, she found as many did that sex, contact, skin on skin, would never entice as it once could. But she was Daeva, and Ordo Dracul; to fight against such a fate came back to her with time.

But neither Daeva or her order were the source of her new delight. It was the boy, a small man, snuggled into her side with his lips wrapped around her nipple, that made her shiver.

While the water stopped shy of her nipple, it almost reached the boy's shoulders when he was sitting next to her. And it did when he'd decided to lean in, sneaky as a house cat, and began to kiss her breast. Jack's courage had grown, substantially, and she let out a low moan to encourage him as he suckled upon her and her areola. His skills had grown as well, and each time he set his lips upon her skin, she found his touch, his tongue, his suckling and licking, warmed her in mere minutes.

Without a word, she let her closer arm slip behind him so her hand could rest upon the back of his head, and cradle him to her breast as he fed upon her. He returned her touch with his own, arm reaching across her stomach to find her other breast, and began to caress along its underside beneath the waves. It was a dance they'd played many times before, but one of the few times Jack had initiated.

She melted into his kiss. Nothing for her to do, no guidance needed anymore, she was free to close her eyes, rest the back of her head against the tub's wall, and let the boy enjoy himself. And for her to enjoy it too. His constant, unending obsession with her breasts had been a delicious way to tempt, tease, and pleasure her lover, but with time, she found his kiss upon her swollen nipples more and more pleasurable. With each night they shared, her body ached with a growing need to feel his touch upon her skin, to feel his caressing tongue along her areola, and his lips pulling her into his mouth.

Her moans persisted, and no longer of her own choosing. Gentle waves of bliss, each a subtle but delightful shiver, danced along her breasts. The pleasure sparks started to build, spreading from her nipples and into her chest, each causing her inner muscles to gently clench with need. Never powerful, never sharp enough to bring her to orgasm, but consistent, tender, and playfully euphoric. Her moans grew deeper, quieter, and some turned into sultry purrs as she basked in the gentle fever of his kisses.

His lips ceased. She smiled, head still pointed up and her eyes still closed. Her skin was on fire, demanding something to touch her between her legs, and were she younger, she would have grabbed Jack's head and forced it under the water to satisfy her. But she waited. What would her lover do? She grinned, eyes still closed.

Jack began to move, and her hand upon his head moved with him. Oh, the little rascal. His lips found her other nipple, and she

groaned as he bathed her puffed areola with his tongue. He'd gotten off the seat of the tub, and stepped around her leg before slipping between her knees so he could lean into her bosom from straight on. She let go of his head, hooked both hands onto the wall of the tub, and sighed.

Even her ghouls would be looking for her to touch them in return by now. But Jack, obsessed little Jack, seemed more than content to continue kissing her body, suckling on her, and massaging her. Every so often, he trailed his lips down from her nipple and onto the underside of her breasts, along their outsides, their insides, kisses planted along her sternum and collar, and up to her exposed neck as her head continued to tilt back and rest to the tub wall. His fingers drifted down her sides, touching and caressing the curves of her hips and waist, her legs and thighs, before they again drifted up to her breasts, cupping their weight and coddling them with light strokes along their contours.

Her nipples could not swell anymore, aching with the stimulus of his suckling, her areola standing tall from her alabaster skin. For so long, so blissfully long, the boy massaged her body, never rough with her, but growing a little firmer as time went on, until his suckling was strong enough to make her quiver. Playful fingers caught her exposed nipple, and pinched it lightly, barely more than a caress that twisted with a teasing, kneading motion.

Her sex begged to be touched, to put her over the edge, but she waited. She was ancient, and patient; to indulge the boy his obsession was a treat, for the both of them. That he could carry on for so long doing nothing but massaging and kissing her breasts surprised her, but when she looked down, his eyes were closed, an aroused, glowing smile danced on his lips, and every so often, he moaned into her skin. He was enjoying this as much as her.

So she smiled, leaned her head back again, and let him pamper her.

His hand upon her breast at last let go, and drifted down her stomach. Fingertips along her ribs, her navel, along her bare mons, and onto her clitoris. Swollen as it was, just the smallest touch sent powerful sparks into her body, and made her groan. She didn't raise her head though, more than content to feel rather than see what her lover would do to her. And the excitement of not being able to see only made it all the more delectable as Jack used two of his fingers to begin massaging her clitoris.

The climax tore through her quickly, and suddenly. She closed her mouth, tensed, and let the pleasure spike run down through her legs and up into her chest. Jack knew to cease his caressing and suckling as she came, and to keep his lips and fingers upon her too. The still contact and heat of his lips around her breasts, and his fingers around her clit, let her enjoy the tingling muscle clenches that ran down her spine and into her toes.

When the quivering past, she sighed, and relaxed once more with post-orgasm bliss.

Relaxation vanished as Jack slid his fingers down further, and into her squeezing insides. She almost raised her head to say something, but melted back into the tub seat as the boy switched breasts again, suckling her tender nipples as his fingers curled toward her g-spot. He wasn't done.

Her poor breasts, forever the fixation of the young man. Were she not Kindred, his almost nightly play would have left her sore, but come the day her body reset such minuscule irritation, and welcomed his touch every night with renewed desire. His dotting, loving, indulgent touch. She spread her legs, and shivered as she let the boy finger her pussy, until the pleasure waves started to build once more, deeper in her body. With his lips around her nipple, tongue caressing her engorged and puffed areola, the fingers within her caused the sparks of pleasure to meet, and fill her whole body.

A second orgasm took only moments. Jack's lips ceased once more, kiss still upon her breast, but holding still as she came. His fingers did no such thing, and they continued to curl and press against her inner walls, harder. Her back arched, her toes curled, and her mouth parted as the tingling pleasure coursed through her, each earning tiny muscle spasms that made her shudder. Jack only fingered her harder, enough to make her ass bounce lightly in the water as his digits slapped against her inner walls, and her insides squeezed like a vice.

It took effort to not look, to keep her head back, eyes closed, arms up on the tub wall, and simply let him finger her again, and again. Part of her wanted to grab his wrist, to give her a moment to recover. A different part knew to spread her legs more, and relax her inner muscles for a moment before clamping down on his fingers. Her wet, flowing orgasm lost to the hot water made her tremble, blanked her mind, and reduced her to a quivering mess as her squeezing insides tried to stop the boy's hand. But as they tried, Jack fingered her through her waves of bliss, and earned more squirting orgasms that filled her core with explosive, sweet agony.

Only once she'd risen and fallen upon several tides of bliss did the Ventrue stop. He let go of her body, her breasts, slid his fingers out of her, and stood up to look down at her; though, not down by much. He was a petite creature after all.

She raised her head, and smiled at the boy standing before her. He looked so proud of himself, beaming, and delectably cute.

"Merci," she said. "I had expected us to relax. That was the plan, non? To sit and let the warm water wash our troubles away."

"Yeah but, I mean ... damn." He gestured to her, all of her, no doubt eying how her body still quivered, and her nipples were still swollen.

She looked down through the water, and smirked. As the boy was standing in front of her, his erection touched the surface of the water, most of it submerged but standing at an angle. The water didn't hide how swollen it was, and how at some point the boy had peeled back the skin to expose the engorged head of his cock. He deserved a reward.

“Come,” she said, “relieve yourself however you wish.”

His smile brightened. “However I wish?”

“Indeed.”

“Uh ... um ... can you ... sink down a bit?”

Ah, she thought this might happen. With a wiggle and shift of her legs and butt along the tub seat, she sank herself down a foot, her lower body coming forward so she was sitting back at an angle. She let her arms fall into the water, and the waves of the hot liquid splashed along her collar. Low enough to have the water almost over her shoulder, Jack grinned down at her, leaned in, and stepped in closer between her legs.

Antoinette grinned up at him. Such a delightful body on her little lover. She set her hands on his legs, squeezed the hard muscle, and raised them to dig her fingers into his ass a bit. He squirmed a little, and she licked her lips in a slow, blatant manner as she gazed up at him while kneading the hardness she found; her little lover had a great derrière. Her hands roamed higher and back in front of him to touch his abdominal muscles, to trace the lines of his defined stomach, the navel, the Apollo's belt his small body carried wonderfully.

Her fingers found the scars of where Rebecca had stabbed him, unable to ever truly heal due to his embrace minutes later. Her eyebrows furrowed and her touch grew lighter. If she had known



back then what she knew now, she would have ripped the girl open and set her aflame.

“You ok?” Jack said.

“Oui. Please, enjoy yourself.” She leaned back again, let her arms dangle beside her, and relaxed into the tub wall. Do not dwell on the past so much Annie, it ruins many an elder. And besides, the delight of your life is in front of you now, bathing you in both sexual pleasures and doting love at once. There was no reason to be upset.

She smiled to herself. None at all.

Jack leaned forward, put one hand against the tub wall behind her, and the other grabbed his shaft. From so close and leaning in, he had but to take a single step forward to press his cock against her breast, her nipple, and rub the red, swollen glans along her skin. She watched, eyes drifting up the lean form of the creature, and then back down to where his hand wrapped his girth. He was stroking himself as he caressed her breasts with his cock.

For a moment, she thought perhaps the boy would want her to help, to touch him, lick him, maybe tease and join in stroking his girth. But he looked positively enthralled as was, grinning one moment, jaw dropping in bliss the next.

“Can you press your breasts together for me?” he said.

More chuckles. Of course. She slid her fingers underneath her bosom and did as her lover asked, until her breasts overflowed her fingers, and created a large bed for the man’s member.

“It does surprise me my love, that you would prefer to cum here, when you could ask to cum within me.”

“Sorry! I ... just...” He groaned, his stroking growing faster as he slipped the head of his cock between her breasts, and pushed it into

the squished walls.

The water, hot enough to almost sting, was a delightful sensation on the engorged, aching parts of the body. And while she was letting her arousal settle, no doubt the heat was providing the boy with a delightful combination of pleasure along his ripe shaft, and the swollen head that sat between her breasts. The boy probably thought such acts as lewd, lecherous, obscene, and that perhaps she would not indulge him his fantasies, no matter how many times she proved him wrong. She smirked to herself at the memory of a dozen men doing the same thing he was currently doing to her, at once. If only he knew.

But it wasn't the dozen men she wanted to touch her, it was the young man before her, the pleasure on his face palpable, the unabashed joy pouring off of him. To see his eyes drift closed with bliss, to hear his quiet groans, to feel his muscles flex in spurts with rising orgasm, it all sent warm waves through her body that made her lightheaded, and perhaps even a little giddy. Such was love, unearthed and laid bare.

Unable to stop herself, she started to knead her breasts together. A little force was all it took to massage the heavy, supple pillows against the ripe head of his cock. Jack's groans turned into little pants, and Antoinette grinned up at him and encouraged his masturbating with her rubbing presses of her skin along his glans. Water made for a poor lubricant, or the little Ventrue would have undoubtedly started to fuck her breasts properly. But there was a distinct tone and joy to simply letting him masturbating into her cleavage as she squished and rubbed her bosom along the plump head of his cock.

She let out a low growl mixed with a sultry moan as the boy started to fill her breasts with his cum; for his pleasure, of course. The sound of a woman moaning had power, especially over her little Ventrue, and she exploited it. Another moan, quieter, teasing, as she

pushed her breasts together harder to catch the pooling cum that now coated along her sternum and where the pillows were squished.

Her poor Jack struggled to stay standing. He continued to masturbate, though he had only enough room on his length to stroke at the base of his cock. It was enough, and his frantic pace slowed to a slow crawl as he squeezed, milked his length, and pulled several more waves of his cum into her cleavage. The hot water helped wash it away, but much of the boy's fluids were trapped between her breasts, perfect for her continue massaging his twitching length.

As he finished, he slid his cock out of her, and she chuckled as she let her breasts go. He was still masturbating, drawing out those final drops of his cum, and with her arms at her sides once more, he was free to rub the head of his shaft along her breasts wherever he wished. Such a joy her little Ventrue. No matter how often, no matter what she did, the young man gazed upon her and her body with such ravenous need, he had no choice but to rub his cock along her breasts as if possessed.

He guided the twitching length along the undersides of her breast, let the weight of it rest upon his glans so its softness overflowed his cock and nudged his masturbating grip. Groaning, he moved his cock up onto her areola, and gently pressed his engorged glans against it as he squeezed his girth. A final drop of his cum found her, collecting along her hard nipple, before at last the boy let go of his cock.

Once he was done, she sat up so the water stopped at her sternum. Jack, smiling like a smitten kitten, sat down next to her again.

“God you must look amazing in a bikini.”

She laughed, and peeked down at Jack.

“Is that a not-so-subtle hint, little Ventrue?”

He grinned up at her, a cross between shy and coy. “Yeah.”

More chuckles. She would have to indulge his fantasy, later.

“How fair your hunts?”

“Ah, well, since Beatrice showed me a few tips, things are alright. Taught me how to trap someone in an alley, someone small enough for me to scare a bit.”

“Perfect. And gentler ways to feed?”

“Well, I can dominate a person easily enough with the discipline, but—”

“Without using a discipline.”

“I uh ... you mean ... seduce?”

“Indeed.”

Jack looked down, and squirmed. “Haven’t tried that yet.”

But of course the little Ventrue had yet to. And you are partly to blame, Annie.

“I know I said to not have sex with the kine, Jack, but you are permitted to seduce them. It is the way of many Kindred to lure unsuspecting humans into their arms, and to drink of them when their prey expects a kiss.” She touched him on the nose, and let her finger slide down to find his lip and chin before pointing his gaze back up to her. “Will you not try?”

“I, I mean, I could try, you know? Just don’t think it’ll turn out all that well. Not exactly a big guy, can’t pull off dark and sexy, can’t

really do any of the things I'd need to do to seduce someone in a single visit to a bar or club. Not without using a discipline at least."

And it was true. Much of what attracted her to the little Ventrue were not the most obvious qualities to the typical social woman. Julias's were. The boy's sire could walk into a club, make eye contact without fidgeting a moment, and say hello to a stranger without a stutter or break in his voice. The confidence that so many women craved, her lover did not express. At least not on the surface; she knew his confidence was there, hidden underneath his squirmy anxiousness, fidgeting, and head rubbing.

He reminded her of Natasha. She did so enjoy the shy girl's thoughtful mind, and timid nature.

"Then, perhaps, I could help?"

"Eh? How?"

"My love, I will teach you in the fine arts of seduction."

"... what?"

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~~Damien~~

From his tower well above the city, he looked through his telescope at the buildings below, a city he knew like the back of his hand. He knew the face of every Invictus and every Carthian. He knew the faces of their ghouls. He knew the locations they gathered for their secret meetings; hardly secret. He knew the underground network of tunnels and sewers better than any of them, lived and breathed them, made the forgotten undercity his home.

But he didn't know what tomorrow held.

Lead the Lancea et Sanctum in Dolareido? Could he do it? He knew how to teach the word of Longinus, preach to those who would listen, but the role of a proper bishop included more than that. It included political elements, dealing with contracts, places, permits, licenses. He didn't know how to do any of that.

He looked through the telescope at the windows of nearby buildings. He could see Jessy Herrington, a woman trapped in the 90's with her short blond hair and love for leather. Built though, tall, with enough muscle to her she could have been a professional fighter when kine. From tower eight, he could see through her window without issue, as the window was almost the size of the wall, and Jessy rarely closed the curtain. And like usual on her Saturday, and Monday, and Wednesday, and Friday nights, Jessy was standing in front of her window, naked.

Exhibitionism was a common trait in vampires. When you no longer have to worry about getting pregnant or impregnating someone, no menstrual cycle, no bowel movements, no urination, nothing, everything between the legs became free for sex all the time, every night, constantly. And vampires melted into it, latched onto it, women in particular. Not that the men didn't bathe in the debauchery of their new sexual freedoms; more like, the women joined them in total sexual obsession.

And that was fine. Kindred were not under God's rules for kine. Longinus's testament had different rules for the first dead. So, Damien shrugged, and looked through the telescope at the Gangrel. She was very attractive, no doubt about it, but her crass and dramatic attitude annoyed him. Too many 90's action movies.

Four ghouls joined her, men, tall with broad shoulders and defined abs. All naked, and all aroused. Damien rolled his eyes and pulled his face away from the telescope. Lucas had taught them that ghouls were kine, and kine were not to sleep with the dead. But, Lucas taught him a lot of things that were archaic and draconian,

and he had to learn to let them go. So he looked through the telescope at Jessy, and watched as the blond woman put her hands against the glass, spread her legs, and let two of the ghouls get down on their knees around her. One began to devour between her legs from the front, the other from behind.

Ok, he may have to undo his sire's brainwashing, but that didn't mean he had to watch such a blatant orgy. Not that it wasn't an arousing sight to see the fit woman being devoured by two mouths between her thighs, but perhaps a bit too much for Damien.

He moved the telescope to Natasha's window. Closed curtain, but he could see her shadow cast upon it by her laptop.

Natasha. Such a little thing, fast with a pistol. And intelligent. He should talk to her, apologize to her properly, do something to alleviate the growing frustrations in his chest. Guilt was a heavy cross.

His mind drifted back to the conversation with Julias. About the future, about the Second Estate, about the Prince and Maria and...

The disappearing woman. Easier to focus on the disappearing woman than the future. Who was she? She didn't feel like Kindred, but there was no doubt something was strange about her. Every time he got near, he could feel the beast in his gut get ready for a fight. But, not like with other Kindred, where the animal within could recognize the other's, and size them up accordingly. His beast didn't know what to make of the redhead.

Plus, she kept disappearing. Literally. Only an elder would have such a powerful cloak of night to be able to hide from him, and elders didn't exactly grow on trees. Maybe she was of a unique bloodclan? Lucas had mentioned there were other bloodclans, rare offshoots of the primary five he was familiar with.

No. She was not a vampire. He smelled her blood, could see the skin pulse with life, and not fake life. She was alive, whoever she was.

Damien pressed his eye a little closer to the telescope, and smiled lightly at the sight of Natasha. She'd gotten up and moved her curtain aside. Like a typical vampire, she gazed out over the city, arms across her chest, face tense. Something on her mind too, no doubt. What sort of secrets was the Ordo Dracul showing her? Blasphemous concepts of mysticism, of science that questioned God.

Lucas talking in your skull again. Damien sighed, and forced the tightening knot in his sternum to relax. If you know it's Lucas talking, you can make the active decision to not act on it. Don't let a dead man control you.

"You're just trying to avoid dealing with the Lancea et Sanctum issue," he said to the night sky. "It'll be on your head this time. Your time, your hands, your efforts. Got to lay it out for the Prince to accept, and then you have to build the foundation from nothing. It'll take years of hard work."

He let his head fall from the telescope. Years of hard work, what a joke. He spent fifty years wasting his life on a cruel man's ambition; a few years spent on his own would be easy.

The problem wasn't the effort, it was the fear. Fear of failure, of his own weaknesses, of all the typical garbage that stopped someone from pursuing something they wanted.

He climbed down the ladder, and took the elevator back down to the street. His mind could wander while he looked for the mysterious woman.

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Devil's Corner was the perfect example of everything his covenant wanted to fix. The Prince seemed content to live and let live, despite the growing cesspool of sin. But, that was an old reflex, to think this was her fault, and that she had the power to fix it; the reflex deserved to be reexamined. Antoinette would not be able to wave a wand and fix the ingrained life of over a million kine, after all, and that was Devil's Corner's population alone. Wouldn't hurt to give the local churches a little support though.

He smirked, and combed his half-shaved head's hair back with his fingers. Maybe, if Julias's motion passed, he could ask the Prince to aid the local churches of Devil's Corner? They had no Kindred roots, and were legitimately trying to help their neighborhoods with charity and benevolence. Respectful kine who deserved help, regardless of their religious motivations.

There was a busted streetlight up ahead, with a dozen men and women standing around it, smoking and talking. Tattoos, torn clothes, piercings, and an air of boisterousness that made nearby kine nervous. Damien walked past them, and give them a nod as he did. They returned it. Some recognized him, the stranger and bible thumper who occasionally helped deal with truly unsavory folk. A preacher who didn't mind getting his hands dirty, or bloody.

He kind of liked the reputation, juvenile as it was.

He let his legs take him through the city, into alleys, into the darker corners of the already sin-filled city corner. Part of him hoped he'd get mugged, so he'd have an excuse to tear someone apart. Maybe put the fear of God in them, if they were open to the concept. Perhaps he'd kill a rapist or murderer, hang their body on an alley wall, and leave a message in blood: for He cometh to judge the Earth.

Such shows of blatant violence rarely turned people to the church, but it would satisfy an itch in his head nonetheless.

He slipped into an alley, and bound his way up rusting fire exit stairways. Just a few seconds, and he was up on the rooftops, free to look down at the people below, and scan the streets for the disappearing woman. He drew his binoculars as well, and peered deep into the alleys of distant blocks. The cloak of night kept him hidden from anyone who bothered to look up, and let him observe people who thought they weren't being observed. Knowledge was addicting.

It took time drifting around, hours, checking alleys, more alleys, more alleys, and more alleys. And there was a good chance he wouldn't find the disappearing woman. She had a habit of disappearing after all. But many of the victims he'd discovered were drunks. Loud, angry drunks. A motif, perhaps?

He settled above some of the rowdier bars, and waited. Nothing to do but think about the Lancea et Sanctum, and Lucas, and God and Longinus, and—

There she was. Wow. Divine providence, saving him from his sinking thoughts? He stared through the binoculars, down into one of the alleys outside Joe's Hole.

No doubt about it, it was her. The woman was backing away from a man, deeper into an alley. Frizzy long red hair, a bit short, curvy, jeans, and an open brown leather jacket. Pretty, in a girl-next-door sort of way. He always did like how she looked, but he'd never been this close, never enough to see her freckles.

He focused his hearing as best he could, and tuned out the background noise of the distant street crowd.

"I didnae say that!" She backed away, one hand on her lips, one hand out in front of her to keep the drunkard at bay.

It wasn't working very well. The man, a big man with a balding head and stains on his t-shirt, chased after her, swaying with every

step.

“I said get over here! Think you can shoot me down like that?” He threw his bottle to the shadow of the alley around him, and it shattered over torn garbage bags and rusting dumpsters. “Should teach you a lesson! Insulting me in front of my friends. The fuck does wee scunner mean?”

Damien choked on a chuckle.

“I didnae mean it! Just ... dinnae have be such a jerk, aye? Let me go, an’—”

“Shut up!” The man picked up a peice of wood from the asphalt, and started to tap it against his other palm. “I’m going to break your nose, then we’re going to have a little fun.”

The woman, panicking and squeaking, continued to back into the alley. Damien could almost see tears in her eyes.

“Stop! I ... I have ... tomorrow, I have ... ye’r blooterred, an’—”

The wood cracked her on the head, hard. She went down with a thud, body slumping to the ground before she started crawling away.

Damien hissed. He should intervene. But then, the girl might disappear the moment he jumped in; he’d have to wait a bit and see what happened.

Pouring his vitae into his cloak until he was nothing more than a wisp of shadow against a night sky, he put down the binoculars and jumped across the rooftops of bars and convenience stores. He had to be careful, the girl had good eyes and had spotted him a few times in the past. Back then, she’d squinted at him from a distance, and then ducked around a corner, only to vanish. This time, he wouldn’t underestimate her.

And it was easy to underestimate her. The drunk grabbed her jacket collar, lifted her up, and looked behind him. Not far enough from the streets, people could still hear. Deeper they went then, into the shadow of busted lights and handleless back doors. Only when no one would be able to hear muffled screams did the man pin the short girl against a wall by the neck, one hand around her throat, the other groping her breasts through the jacket.

“Gonna have some fun with you,” he said.

Damien grit his teeth until his jaw clicked. He sat upon the building the redhead was pinned against, and stared down at the bastard and his blatant abuse. There was no excuse for people like him. He’d killed dozens of such lowlifes in his fifty years in Dolareido, but dozens was nothing in a city of millions. His sword sung its desire for blood, until Damien put a hand on its grip and readied himself. The girl was still squirming, groaning, and trying her best to fight off the big loaf molesting her.

She slapped him. The big loaf took a step, glared fury at her until murderous intent dripped from his limbs. But when he tried to yell, all that came out was a muffled word.

His mouth was covered in white webbing.

He blinked, hands reaching up to pull at the webbing, but it didn’t come off. Nose clear though, so he could breathe, and scream and yell through it, but the sounds weren’t loud enough to attract attention.

“Ye’v been a naughty wee jimmy, Mr. Tenmer. Abusive. Hurting folk wha dinnae deserve it.”

Mr. Tenmer, apparently, turned and ran off. But the man managed maybe five feet before a long slash of force cut through the ground in front of him. Something invisible, unseen, something

massive and heavy that cut a few inches deep into the alley along the asphalt and the brick of the building opposite of the girl.

For a moment, for just a split moment, a giant, curved thing of black had struck out from the girl's position, and had rend the street and wall. But then it was gone.

What the fuck.

Damien stared down at the Scottish woman, and she stared ahead at the man. The crack of the cut asphalt had sent him back onto his ass in alarm. He raised his head to stare at the girl, eyes in a panic like hers had been. Sweet sweet revenge, her body language said as she smirked.

"I have to murder ye, Mr. Tenmer; ye dinnae deserve to live. Ye'r a minging excuse for a man." She stepped forward, and reached out for him.

The man bolted in the other direction. The alley was a four-way corner with building walls on every side, some of them with zigzagging. If the man ran, he could get out onto the street, and get away from her.

But again, maybe five feet before a monstrous claw-like shape erupted from the girl. Damien kept an eye on her this time, and his jaw dropped. She'd pointed her hand at the ground in front of Mr. Tenmer, but the shape didn't come from her hand.

From her back and over her head, like a hidden limb, a blurry, see-through wisp of sharpness snapped out, and sliced across the wall once more, cutting off his retreat. And cutting off significant chunks of brick and shattering asphalt. A spray of the debris landed upon Mr. Tenmer's fallen body, and he screamed through his nose as he got up and tried to run away again.

This time the girl stuck out her hand from underneath, like low-pitching a baseball. The enormous claw-like shadow appeared again from around her feet, and tore through the ground before stabbing into the man's leg. The sound of something visceral, hard, and angry piercing his calf muscle and shin bone was very real, even as the see-through appendage vanished once it'd made its mark.

The woman snorted, walked over to the fallen man, and picked him up. Up, like he weighed nothing, up by the shoulders where she squeezed. He tried to grab her, push her away, but two of the colossal spikes emerged from the quivering shadow, and skewered his shoulders, front to back. Again the man screamed, but the webbing prevented enough of the sound from escaping the alley into the bustling night streets of the local bars.

The claw-like shadows had come out of her back, gargantuan, seven-segment things that reached back before skewering forward, only to disappear once they had put holes through the man's shoulders and bones. Like insect legs maybe, curling back before stabbing forward as smooth, sharp blades.

The redhead ran her hands over his shoulders, and legs, and around and around. Webbing, lots of it, coated around his limbs and body. Seemed to stop some of the massive bleeding, far as Damien could see, but his body was also immobilized. Like a spider wrapping its prey.

Not an insect. An arachnid? But she looked perfectly normal! Normal, and yet, Damien's insides were ice, his eyes wide and jaw dropped, his inner beast reeling. What the fuck was going on? She wasn't Kindred, and Gangrel couldn't do any of this anyway.

The man fell to the ground, and the girl sighed before she reached down, and started dragging the bleeding fool along by his ankle. Dragging him toward the sewer. It'd all been a ploy to get the man alone.

Obvious, now that he thought about it.

“Much as I hate men like ye, Mr. Tenmer, I’m glad minging, abusive folk like yerself exist. Who would I eat otherwise?”

Damien kept low, low enough he had to peek his head up over the building roof edge to see the girl. Not normal, this wasn’t normal, something wasn’t right, what the fuck was going on. Every time he took a peek at her over the roof, cold ran down his spine, lead filled his stomach, one hand gripped the sword tighter, and the other forced himself to a complete standstill lest she notice him.

She wasn’t human, and she wasn’t a vampire.

He kept after her. Because he was an idiot. A curious idiot. The weakness of the Mekhet. His smirk was momentary, wiped away as he watched the blood trail left behind by the cocooned man. His head was exposed, and the abject fear in his soul was bared for Damien to see. Tears streamed down his wide eyes, and his cries never ceased. No one was coming to save him, and he knew it. Save him from what, he didn’t know.

The sewer manhole. The redhead reached down with her free hand, and lifted it just as easily as she was dragging the big man behind her. Each weighed two-hundred and fifty pounds easy, but a couple fingers into one of the holes, and she slid the thing out of the way. The man went in before her, lowered down until she could follow him in with him dangling from one of her hands.

The last thing he’d see of the topside world was the blood trail in a dark alley he left behind.

The girl pulled the manhole over them, and was gone. But not completely gone. Damien jumped down, light as mist, and squatted over the manhole. Ear to the iron, he listened, and waited. The girl said a few more things, Scottish colloquials he didn’t understand,

some he did. But he could hear her, and that meant she was still around.

A minute later, he pulled off the manhole cover; took him two hands once he got his fingers into the holes. Holy shit she was strong. He shivered, and shook off the growing bits of ice along his skin. You're a Kindred, Damien, an undead creature of the night. Stop being afraid.

He crawled into the darkness of the sewers, sewers he knew well, and looked down into the black depths. There was noise ahead, some patter of feet on the shallow water on concrete. She hadn't vanished yet. Taking a deep, unneeded breath, he let go of the ladder and started along the path.

The sewers weren't the same when you had no light. Normally he'd have something, a little flashlight, a phone, something. He had none of these things, and even if he did, he wanted blackness. Kindred eyes could see much in near dark, but they saw little in total blackness. He had to put a hand out to the curved wall, and walk on the tips of his toes. At least he was wearing decent running shoes for quiet; black of course. No self-respecting Kindred would wear colorful sneakers.

He was making gains on her though. How she moved without a light source, he couldn't tell. How she moved through the sewers at all without getting lost, he didn't know. The underground network was massive, complex, a maze of modern connecting to archaic tunnels. You were lost without a map, or a few decades of experience. The little redhead didn't seem to mind or need either, and she continued along, occasionally stopping to yell a few more slurs at the man. Bawman, fud, dobber. Sounded like she was both happy, and upset.

Hard to be afraid of her, cursing like that. But he was. Before, from a distance, he hadn't felt anything out of the ordinary,



anything weird except for the odd texture to the air in places she disappeared. Now, every step closer put weights on his feet. The beast in his gut was screaming at him to turn around.

But he kept moving, because he was an idiot, and that's what idiots do.

The tunnel curved around and caught some light, a bit of flicker from a grate opening above. Her shadow ran along the shallow water and the curve of the sewer wall, and it looked human enough. Looked human. The guy covered in spider webbing disagreed.

“Friend of a friend told me a Mr. Tenmer liked to hit women, men too, wee ones. Like to throw yer weight around, pick on folk.” The humor in her voice was gone, replaced with an edge. “Folk like ye deserve to be punished.”

She went past the grate, and into the darkening tunnel beyond. Where the sewers connected between North Side and South Side was a change in architecture, as the older half of the city met with the newer half. Much as Damien rarely ventured into the North Side underground network, with as little to offer as it did compared to South Side, he had on occasion. And that's where they were going.

Or that's where they should have been going. But he didn't recognize the tunnel ahead. It was dark, the tunnel a bit larger than he remembered, and quieter. Normally there'd be some machinery to hear, but all was quiet, as if a heavy blanket had been laid across the city streets to block it out.

He tripped.

Too quiet, too dark, he fell forward onto his hands, complete with a bit of a splash in the water, and an obvious sound to match it.

“Damn!” The redhead stopped, threw her eyes back his way, and looked through the darkness at him.

Damien had to squint, and only the tiniest bit of light along the water from the open grate above let him see her enough to know she was looking at him. Straight at him.

“Vampire!”

She threw the massive man onto her tiny shoulder, and ran into the black.

Damien stood up and ran after her. She knew he was a vampire with just a glance, and where he'd fallen, there wasn't a scrap of light. How did she know? What was going on? His light feet almost skipped the water as he sprinted, while hers made heavy thuds, each landing hard with a big man on her shoulder.

Or at least they did, but as he ran after her, the sound of her footsteps splashing turned into muted splashes and the groan of opening mud. Mud? A second later, he almost tripped again as the toes of his sneakers sank into the wet earth. And then he did trip again when they caught on something sticking out along the ground, high enough to get his foot under, low enough so he flew over it and landed onto his hands and chest and face.

Mud greeted him. Soft soil, with bits of spongy things that crumbled when he pressed down on them. He raised his hands and wiped off his face and shirt as best he could, but it was all soaked to the skin with warm water and dirt and twigs and bugs.

He grabbed one of the little twigs and held it out in front of him. Enough moonlight cut through the new darkness for him to see; yep, a twig, covered in mud and insects. Which seemed kind of normal for a sewer, except for the amount of mud. And the chirping insects and birds.

Damien quirked a brow, and slowly stood up as he looked around. Moonlight penetrated through the dense array of black limbs above, like a canopy of a jungle.

He blinked, and looked behind him. He'd tripped on a vine.

He gulped, and looked in front of him at the ground. The mud left an imprint of where his body had smacked into the soil, and around it were twigs and vines, much of it decomposed so it was soft enough to crumble upon touch. When he kicked out with his foot to move aside a rock, a myriad of crawling things scattered from their upturned refuge, and vanished into the underbrush that surrounded him.

Chirping, bird calls, insects, distant high-pitched howls, it all filled his ears as he drifted forward into the ... the ... jungle?

He turned around. There was no tunnel, only a black wall of shadowy, dense trees and God knows what, and a spread, convex section of trees that could act like a path if one wanted to walk through it. But it was a forest, not a tunnel; it only looked like a tunnel.

The heat was like fire on his undead skin, and the humidity drenched him along with the mud water. A breeze swept past, dense with the smell of trees, rotting leaves, fecal matter, and the heavy moist air made each scent stick to his nostrils. And clothes. And skin.

“What ... in God’s name...” He took more steps forward, and into a sliver of light that cut through the black ceiling of branches and leaves. It was moonlight like he thought, but the canopy wasn’t his imagination playing tricks on him, it wasn’t actually the sewer grate, the sounds weren’t actually pigeons, crows, and city crickets, and the smell wasn’t human shit.

He was in a jungle.

He drew his sword, and crept forward along the wet jungle floor. Every step required a glance down, and he made each one with his toe first, testing the earth he could barely see. The only light he had

was what little moonlight reflected against the soaked leaves above. The only guide he had was moving in the opposite direction of where he came in.

His foot touched something more solid, at least for a second, before it cracked and gave way. His body tensed hard, pulled his foot away, and looked down. A skull, half buried in the soil, and soft enough for his sneaker toe to break in the forehead.

And more skulls. He squatted down and poked at them with his sword. The bones were discolored, rotted and soft, and several cracked from the slightest pressure. A couple did not. A valley of skulls, and only skulls, with centipedes the size of his sword climbing through their eye sockets and out from underneath their jawless mouths. Why only skulls? He looked up again, and winced.

Bodies. A lot of bodies. A dozen in view, each a silhouette against the canopy, each wrapped in spiderweb, each with clothes still on, clothes you'd expect from city dwellers, from people in Devil's Corner.

His heart wanted to beat faster, but it couldn't. His lungs wanted to seize and constrict, but they couldn't. Only saving grace from a panic attack; he was already dead. That didn't change that he could feel the sickly warm of the water around those skulls and mud soak into his shoes. He could smell the blood in it too, once his nose adjusted to the rot and foliage.

"It followed me," the darkness whispered.

Damien spun around, sword out and cutting through vines. No one there. The voice held a hiss to it, a layer of rasp over top another human voice. But it didn't sound like the girl. The accent sounded ... Portuguese? Almost, but not quite.

Focus, you dumbass!

Damien started to back up, but the trees and black changed with the breeze, vines swaying for only a moment, but a moment enough to destroy what little sense of direction he had. He glanced down to find his footprints, eyes in a frenzy, looking in every direction between scanning glances to find the mud that marked his path.

“Vampire,” it said, “you ... you followed me. Vampire!”

Louder, the voice cracked against the trees, and he jumped to turn around again, slashing at the black. Nothing.

“I ... I followed a redheaded woman,” he said.

“Me!”

The blackness struck back. A long blade of onyx snapped through the space between the trees and vines, aimed for his chest.

He ducked. Mekhet reflexes kicked in, vitae pumping through his husk, but the massive limb cut across his shoulder and sliced along the flesh and bone. His shoulder split open a couple inches deep, and he fell backward, rolling onto the ruined arm. Pain tore through him, made him scream into the bones and mud around him.

“Stop!” He forced himself back up to his feet, and started running. His arm dangled on muscle and torn tendon, each step sending searing pokers through his flesh and into his fingers. Holding onto the arm with the other arm didn’t help much, and his good shoulder crashed against trees and brush as he tripped again. Skin tore like saran wrap as his ruined arm smacked against another tree.

He was going to die. In a fucking jungle.

No light, dropped his weapon, arm dangling on exposed tendons and bone. He couldn’t see anything except for a bit of moonlight against the muddy puddles he was soaking in. Dirt and rock ground into the exposed flesh, and bugs buzzed around it and his face.

Kindred blood was thick and heavy, and it stuck to his wound like liquid glue, but it did nothing for the pain of pebbles rubbing on severed muscle.

He could hear something move. Twigs snapped, vines rustled, and the canopy shifted, letting bits of moonlight sneak in through the dense branches and leaves above. A hiss, a snarl, getting closer.

Up, up, get the fuck up! Get the fuck up and get moving.

He pushed against the ground with his arm, ignored the scorching agony of his opened shoulder, and started running again.

He got maybe ten feet before something caught his body. Something soft but strong, a rope like a vine across the chest, and stomach, and legs. Across his face. He tried to pull away, but it stuck to him, gripped against his clothes and skin and hair. What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck. He couldn't see it in the black, until the rustling mass above him pushed aside the canopy for a moment, enough for moonlight to strike the white threads.

A spider web.

He pulled against it, but he couldn't anchor his weight against anything, feet no longer rooted to the muddy ground. He twisted and turned, and screamed, jaw wrenching against the thread as the web pulled back against his ruined arm. The bone wasn't in the socket anymore, and it twisted into the coiling white until he thought his arm was going to tear off.

He was going to die.

“Vampire.” The voice drifted around him and over him, still a hiss with snarls layered underneath it, and a woman's voice underneath that; but not the redhead's.

There were no shadows; everything was already black. The only light was the occasional flicker of moonlight, each giving him a tiny glimpse of his surroundings. Of the thing approaching him.

It moved on long, smooth, black blades, or legs? He squinted through the black and stared at the long blades, each segmented at several feet with ... joints. Legs, very long legs. Well, that made sense, with the webbing he was currently trapped in, and the webbing the girl had cocooned Mr. Tenmer with. He was going to die to a giant spider monster.

Lovely.

## Chapter 27

~~Antoinette~~

“Oh god oh god oh god.”

Jack, trembling and ready to sweat — though thankfully unable without the blush of life — looked out over the crowd. The two of them were in Bloodlust, one of her fonder establishments to enjoy. The pulsing music, and the dark red lightning with the occasional white light strobe made for a combination of sinister, sexual, and theatrical visual stimuli. Everyone in Bloodlust felt as if they were partaking in a movie.

Everyone except her poor little Terry, who more likely envisioned himself trapped in a comedy for his current predicament.

The two of them sat on the ground floor this time, in one of the booths near the bar. Her lover was wearing a button-up white shirt, black pants, a loose, black jacket, and some nice Chelsea boots. She spoiled him with her shopping, and so did Julias, but the boy was utterly incompetent with fashion. That was ok, she enjoyed dressing her man. She had undone the first few buttons of his shirt as well, to expose his lovely skin and a little of his muscle. As much as her Jack felt self conscious over his size, he was a lean and strong little creature.

“You uh ... really want me to do this?” he said, once he’d leaned in so he didn’t have to yell. It was a club after all, and while perhaps not as loud as many, still loud.

“Yes. As we practiced.” Winking, she pointed to the bar, and to one woman in particular. “She will make for fine prey.”



“Ok ... ok. Ok, I can do this, I can do this.” He stood up, rubbed his buzzed hair a few more times, and walked toward the bar.

Oh her little Ventrue. He did not notice how he swayed a little with his walk, how he cast nervous glances, how every motion spoke volumes of his anxiety.

But he went, and that was something.

They had talked much, her and her love, about how to approach women. The art of eye contact, the subtle smile, the push and pull of body spacing. She explained to him how to thread conversations, pull a woman’s — or man’s if one wanted — interest into a story. How to break the ice with gentle humor, or with a tactful use of criticism; a little insult with a coating of intrigue worked well to disarm a stranger. She taught him how to look for signals that the boy seemed utterly blind to: adjusting the hair over the ear, turning to face you, smiling with the eyes.

It was a dance for women, and men did not learn it easily, Jack more so than most. But it was a skill she felt he should learn, and trusted him to learn. What would happen if Jack was left without enough vitae to perform the Ventrue discipline of domination? Unless he was willing to wrestle and pin a kine, seduction was the most common second option.

And besides, she found it oddly enjoyable to watch her love squirm as he approached the stranger. Perhaps she did have a bit of a sadistic side? How drôle.

The stranger was a woman of similar height to the little Ventrue, a sharp chin, and long blond hair with streaks of blue, though lost to the red light of the club. A thin thing, barely a curve to her, but Antoinette could see in the girl’s posture, in how she sipped her drink and looked about, that she was an experienced woman. On the prowl, perhaps. She was wearing a black dress meant for a club, with a short skirt split at the thigh, and tiny straps for shoulders. Simple,

elegant, but sexy and refined. She knew what she liked. The perfect prey for Jack.

Jack, fidgeting and squirming, stood beside her and met her eyes. The stranger returned them, and looked him up and down for a second. The face first, and then the shoes. She liked what she saw, as Antoinette knew she would, and she turned to face the boy more. Eye contact, with one brow raised. Just a hint, just a small thing, but the Prince could see the spark of intrigue in the woman's face as she looked little Terry in his green, beautiful, honest eyes. She was interested in him, his cuteness, in how odd he looked in the setting of a club.

Jealous, Annie?

Daeva are jealous of everyone and everything; curse of her bloodclan, to desire. She knew better than to let it control her. And Jack needed to learn.

Jack rubbed his buzzed hair, and made a remark, something about the music from what little Antoinette could read of his lips. Of course. But it was enough to make the girl laugh, and she turned to face him fully, still in her seat. And as she laughed again following another remark, Jack laughed, and reached out to lightly touch her hand in the sharing of laughter.

And that was it. A little physical contact from someone you thought was appealing, intriguing, and it was over. As long as Jack did not say anything colossally offensive or foolish, the girl would grow more and more fond of him, until he could deliver the twist: he had a lover, and was looking for someone to join them.

Perhaps an unnecessary trick in his bag, now that she was watching him. The plan had been for him to use Antoinette as a spicy treat for an interested kine, to propose a threesome for them to enjoy. And once the prey was in their booth, she would be easy to drink. But the Prince had chosen their target well, and Jack's

disarming, genuine dialogue and expressions were working beautifully.

Her eyes jumped from her love to the door past them, and her joy faded away. The evening was coming to a short end then. Such a shame.

Daniel. The man could not have looked more out of place, still in his trench coat, still wearing his dull glasses. If only he would listen to her, and dress for his outings. But no, the stubborn man refused to listen. It was charming, in an infuriating way.

He walked past everyone at the bar, past the various tall tables with people standing around, drinking, talking. Not even a glance for the kine. Her sheriff walked past the booths and into the main area, where the booths lined the walls before the dance floor. Annie laughed at the image of Daniel dancing. Could he? Was it something the machinery of his mind could perform? More chuckles.

Jack didn't notice him, too busy with his prey; they were both quite enraptured with their conversation. The boy looked elated, shocked by the ease of his task no doubt. Perhaps she had unlocked a new, social side to him? Alas, it would fade she was sure, once they left the club. But, that was a good thing, was it not Annie? As much as you wish to teach him the skills he needs to survive, less time spent seducing kine, more time spent with you, was a good thing.

Or are you just concerned he will become another Tony?

Daniel sat down next to her, adjusted his glasses, and set his elbows upon the table, fingers netted together and placed under his nose. Ready for war by the looks of him, but that was as always with her sheriff.

“Yes Daniel?”

“Annie. Azamel has returned.”

Straight to the point then. Antoinette sighed and combed her hair back.

“Azamel has returned? Why?”

“I don’t know. She says she wants to talk to you personally, in her home.”

Her home? Another leech content to suckle on the marrow of Antoinette’s hard work, of her city, of her triumphs.

“She has gall.”

“Indeed.” Daniel leaned over the table a little ways to look through the dark red of Bloodlust to Jack. “Your love seems to be committing adultery.”

She looked back over at Jack, who was having a pleasant conversation with the stranger. Certainly not adultery, but she knew Daniel was teasing her. He said it without a smirk or smile though. He would be a genius comic, if he ever pursued the craft.

“You came here to tell me of Azamel?”

“Athalia seemed insistent. I can see her myself if you wish?”

“... want a moment with Athalia alone, old friend?” she said. Daniel twitched. A slight thing, a subtle shift of the eyebrow, but it was more than he normally gave, and Antoinette smiled her best devil smile with her victory. “We should go now, before Azamel comes to think that she is welcome. Egotistical woman.”

“What of Jack?”

“Yes, I should wait for my love to finish, but I must also deal with Azamel immediately.” She tapped her finger against her lips. What

to do what to do. “I will be along shortly Daniel, maybe twenty minutes. Azamel can wait a little while longer.”

“As you wish.” The man nodded, got up, and walked out of the bar as simply as he had entered. He knew how to balance the cloak of night so the eyes of others glazed over him, slipped off of him, and let him pass by without notice. A talented man, her sheriff.

Antoinette looked back to Jack. He glanced her way a couple of times, no doubt waiting for her signal. Laughing, she raised a hand, and motioned for him to come join her. That was the plan after all, for Jack to propose the three of them get to know each other intimately. Once the kine was securely enthralled and in the booth, Jack could kiss her neck, and then Kiss her neck.

And it was going according to plan. The Prince was shocked. She loved her Jack, but seducing a kine on first approach? To see it happening made her laugh, and she smiled her Princely smile as Jack walked over to her with the woman following behind.

“This is your friend? Daaaaaamn.” The girl slid into the booth and stared at her. She had a tattoo on her neck, one Antoinette had not noticed from her angle earlier. And from how the woman was speaking, she was more than a little drunk. Perhaps that had been the key to Jack’s success?

“Hello,” Antoinette said, grinning her devil’s grin at the woman.

“This is Alex,” Jack said, sliding into the booth. “She listens to that god awful dubstep crap.”

Alex punched the Ventrue in the arm. “Sorry my stuff makes you want to move your body, instead of put in earplugs.”

A bit of that playful banter Jack enjoyed, when criticizing. Bite. Antoinette liked that.

“Have you been enjoying the conversation with my love?” she said.

“Love eh? Didn’t uh ... didn’t think kid here was serious when he pointed you out. I mean ... damn.”

Antoinette slid in a little closer to the prey. Jack did the same once he realized, and the Prince could see the anxiety fade, replaced with hunger.

“Quite serious.” Close enough for her leg to be touching Alex’s, Antoinette got in closer still, so the stranger was pressed against her. She hooked her arm around the back of the booth as well, to completely trap their prey.

Jack got in closer as well, and smiled a devious little smile of his own. Such a rascal, when he felt comfortable.

“I uh ... Jack wasn’t kidding eh? About you two looking for a third for the bedroom.”

“Truth,” she lied.

Alex laughed, a warm and fun sound. There were small sways in her movement, in her fingers, and her eyes had trouble focusing. Pleasantly drunk no doubt, and riding the waves of courage such levels of alcohol brought.

The prey adjusted her hair over her ear and smiled up at Antoinette, but it was Jack she offered a true smile. More interested in the small man, perhaps, now that his story about his date turned out to be true.

“Jack says your name is Antoinette?” Alex said.

Antoinette tapped a finger on her lip, before settling the hand on the table in front of Alex.

“It is.” Not a fake name, but a part of her had considered them, a fun way to add some spice to their little hunt. At the same time, it was interesting to share her real name with prey; it had been a long time since she had hunted normal prey at all.

Experiencing the thrill of youth through her little Terry. Shallow of her perhaps, but Jack enjoyed it, and she enjoyed it.

“Jack and Antoinette eh? Pleasure to meet you. I uh ... so you two ... you’re looking for ... a little more fun?” Alex looked nervous, now that Jack and Antoinette were both leaning in toward her. A rabbit between two foxes? No, much as she was starting to glance between the two of them with faster eyes, and her breathing was getting faster as well, her skin was starting to flush, and her small breasts poked against her dress.

Antoinette looked to Jack. Let the boy lead. It was his hunt, after all.

“Yeah,” Jack nodded. His eyes were looking the girl up and down, but not with the lust of a drunk or high clubgoer, no. Antoinette knew that look from long ago, the ravenous hunger that worked through the body the closer you grew to your prey. Like a salivating wolf. “And we both thought you looked beautiful.”

Ah, the direct compliment. Bold, and too much when strangers. Just right, when the ice was broken and intrigue had rooted.

“Beautiful?” Alex said. “You’re just saying that.”

“And delicious,” Jack added, leaning in closer, his lips almost upon the girl’s ear.

Alex glanced up to Antoinette, and Antoinette grinned at the prey. The woman was clueless as to what was happening to her, no doubt surprised at the sudden luck to be invited into the bedroom of two

handsome strangers. And she did not move away from Jack; if anything, she was craning her neck more for him to find it.

Antoinette leaned in closer. She wanted to see this.

Jack, following Antoinette's teachings, put a little kiss on the girl's neck. She went stiff for a moment, a split second of indecision, before the combination of alcohol, arousal, and the power of present circumstances melted her into the booth seat. She looked up at Antoinette, blush growing, nipples hardening, and her hands drifted around until one found Jack's leg.

A touch of jealousy once more for Antoinette. But, Jack was not Tony. He would not sleep with his prey, would not indulge his sexual desires without her, his love. She could trust him, wholly, completely. Such was love. All Antoinette had to do, was stop thinking about the bastard her love had killed, and instead, focus on the pleasure before her.

When Jack finally opened his mouth, and set his fangs upon Alex's neck, Antoinette moaned quietly, lost to the noise of the club music, and the noise of Alex's own moan. The prey gasped once the moan was done, only to moan again as Jack suckled upon the woman's neck.

"Oh ... god..." The prey met Antoinette's gaze, and the Prince smiled as she returned it. The delight of watching kine succumb to the Kiss, of their bodies going limp, of the relaxing bliss that washed away every tense muscle, every sore joint, every worrying thought. There was such joy on her face, with her mouth open and her breath turning to pants.

No words needed, no explanations required. Humans melting into the Kiss were as concerned with explanations as anyone mid orgasm. Such things became irrelevant against the simple pleasures of the body, of finding your energy gone and your mind lulling you into gentle sleep with the waves of contentment. Some, such as



Alex, started to touch themselves, unable to resist the pleasure. One of her hands pressed to her chest, weak touch and wavering hand groping her breast and nipple through the thin fabric as Jack drank her.

But her aroused and delightful play lasted mere moments. Her hand fell, and her eyes drifted closed. Only then did Antoinette tap Jack on the shoulder, and smiled.

“Did you enjoy that, my love?”

The boy lifted his fangs from the woman’s punctured neck, offered it a couple licks to heal the wound, and wiped his mouth with a finger. There was exhilaration in his eyes, pupils dilated, fangs out and long. The smell of blood on his tongue.

“Wow ... she um ... wow.”

Alex had fallen into the typical post-Kiss coma, breathing deep, head heavy against the booth seat.

“You succeeded.”

“I ... I did, didn’t I? Didn’t use dominate on her or anything.”

“Impressive. And you looked like you enjoyed yourself. Perhaps there is a social side to you yet my love?”

Jack chuckled and rubbed his head. “I like socializing! Sometimes. With you, and Julias, and ... yeah.”

“The unlife can be long, little Ventrue. Learn to find friends where you can.” Or you’ll turn into Jacob. “But, you did succeed. With but a few jokes, some pleasant conversation, a smile, and eye contact, many women would be more than willing to talk with you.”

“Sure it didn’t have anything to do with me telling her I had a girlfriend, and we were looking for a third member for the bedroom?”

“Did she not seem intrigued before then?”

“I ... I mean, I guess she got interested when I started talking about music.”

Silly boy. She reached out, and stroked her love’s ear, Alex between them and almost snoring.

“Learn to be confident when speaking, and women will find you appealing. Speak to women as people, instead of legs and breasts, and they will find you intriguing. The combination is the key, little Ventrue, to seduction.” She tapped her lip with her finger, and hmmm’d. “That said, everyone is different. Some women do prefer to be approached with a more sexual tone. Some women prefer to be seduced over several days or weeks, rather than moments. To read the signs before your approach is another key to the game.”

“The game. Not exactly a strong suit of mine.”

“You will learn, my love. You will learn.” And he would. Jack was, as Minerva would say, cute as a button. “I do hope you will not abandon me for such frivolous exploits.”

For a moment, a split second of shock, Jack’s eyes widened. But as he realized she was teasing, his eyes settled and his smile grew.

“Never.”

Smirking, she looked back to the sleeping woman.

“It is no wonder so many Kindred become addicted to sex in their younger years, non? But a Kiss and she is defeated in bliss. If you had wanted, you could have stopped the Kiss early, left her

exhausted but awake, and very aroused. A whisper, and she would have climbed into your lap, slid your shaft into her wet insides, and relaxed upon you as her ripe body forced her to cum with but the smallest thrust. She would drench you, soaking you in her juices as you rocked her hips back and forth. Some of the other people nearby would come closer to watch, drawn by the quiet whimpers and mewls of the woman trapped in pleasure. Only once you had filled her with your own fluids would you bite her again, and in the darkness of the club, be free to drink her a second time, until she was a trembling mess. She would slip into a deep sleep, but not before her clenching insides had her cum dripping down your testicles. Then, you would ease her off of you, set her next to you, and with your cum-soaked shaft resting against your abs, you would smile at the nearby onlookers. One of them, a more daring woman, one enjoying a delightful mix of drugs and alcohol perhaps, would slip off her underwear, pull up her dress to the hip, slide into the booth next to you, and sit on your cock. And you could enjoy it again, indulging in pure gluttony as you drank a second woman for the night, until your belly was full, your beast satisfied, ears buried in the sounds of her pleasure, and your body singing with the joy of the Kiss and orgasm combined.”

Jack’s jaw had dropped open at some point in her little story, and his cock pressed hard to his pants. If she had had the time, she would have played the role for him, slid off her underwear, climbed his lap, and milked him dry. But, even with little time to spare, his blatant arousal was her own doing, and she should help him.

Grinning her Daeva grin, she slid out of the booth, walked around, and slid in beside him.

“I know that grin,” he said. “You ... you uh...”

She put a finger to his lips, and slid it down his chest to his pants. The poor boy’s crotch looked tight enough to be painful, and she

could not have that. With grace and precision, she undid his button, eased the zipper down, and slipped her hand into the fabrics.

Jack blinked, several times, and his eyes wandered the Bloodlust club with a touch of panic. People could see what she was doing, even if the booth table blocked a direct line of sight with her hand from distant onlookers. But people near the sides of the booth could.

Poor Jack was helpless to stop her, trapped between lust and panic, eyes darting around over the club, the people dancing, the couples in other booths. And some eyes were indeed cast their way, as she slipped the boy's cock out through the flap of his underwear, and started to stroke him.

“People ... they're uh ... looking at us.”

“Let them look. This will take but a moment.”

She didn't necessarily wish to indulge in exhibitionism like many Kindred did, but a little taste every once in a while was fine, and it was a first for Jack.

She blew him a little kiss, and lowered her head down to his shaft. His went rigid, no doubt surprised, and she smirked as she put her lips to his cock while enabling her blush. His body full of fresh blood, his blush had already begun, and she was free to begin milking her love. A little moistness to help expose the ripe, swollen head of his shaft, and then her lips found it all. Her tongue caressed along the base edge of the bulbous tip, and lapped up the precum already forming. Her story had aroused her love greatly.

He was squirming. Poor boy. She smiled around his shaft, and worked faster, stroking the base of him harder while suckling, pulling, kissing the tip. More precum spread along her tongue, and she worked it along the engorged flesh filling her mouth. It must have been quite the sight for anyone who decided to watch, the

taller woman giving a blowjob behind the booth table to the small man. And his facial expressions must have been delicious.

He started to pant, his cock started to flex in her mouth, and a moment later, his cum started to flood her. She drank it down, and slid her lips back and forth along the edge of his glans between each spurt, driving him close to painful stimulation but never reaching it. Perfect for encouraging his groans, his twitching, and milking every last drop of cum from his length.

She sat up, adjusted her hair, wiped her lips with a finger, and kissed her love on the cheek.

“Far be it from me to tempt you with tales of sex with the kine, and then leave you aroused, surrounded by kine.” She pat her finger on his cheek. “While other Kindred will indulge sex with kine in ridiculous excess, I hope I can keep you satisfied.”

“I ... oh god, you do! But, I mean, even if you didn’t ... I wouldn’t do something like that. Never without you.”

“You would not, I know.” And it was true. He would not, her little Ventrue, honest to a fault. She loved him for it. “Now, fix your jeans, and let us be off.”

Alas, she had trouble to squelch. So, she leaned in, kissed the boy’s lips, and motioned them toward the exist. A smile and a nod later, the two stood up, and began to walk out of Bloodlust.

“She going to be ok?” he said while gesturing to the unconscious woman in the booth.

“She will awake in several hours, and with the amount of people nearby, she will be fine. Come.” A hand on her lover’s back, the two stepped out into the street. “I am sorry Jack, but I must go.”

“Go?”

“Indeed. Daniel has requested my aid, and my duties cannot be squandered.” Much of her time that had once been spent plotting, scheming, was now spent with Jack. While her joy in her unlife had increased dramatically, so too had its risks with her neglecting her role. Lucas’s kamikaze attack on her tower had been a perfect example.

Kindred did not kamikaze. That was simply not a thing they did. Kindred fought, manipulated, controlled, built, and conspired to gain every advantage they could in insuring their second life, their food sources, their power. Not in five hundred years of her embrace had she ever seen such an absurdity from a vampire! She was a fool for thinking it an impossibility though. And now that she had her precious Jack to protect as well, she would have to make changes. A vault in her tower that could protect herself was no longer sufficient. She had to be proactive once more.

And that meant dealing with Azamel, now. One of many things she would have to do sooner rather than later.

“I have been eating up a lot of your time, haven’t I?” he said.

“Oui, but that is my burden to bear, little Ventrue, not yours. I would love to talk more, but I must go. Shall I see you in a few days?”

“Unless the Invictus tie me up and pin me with a job, a few days it is.”

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Antoinette and her sheriff walked down into the subway tunnels of her city. It had been some time since she had walked these tunnels herself. Not since during the purge had she run their lengths, hunting and killing the bishops, searching high and low for Lucas so she could rip his insides out through his mouth. But the labyrinth of tunnels had grown into its own city for its size; and the city had cockroaches.

Not the Nosferatu, they were not the insects that plagued the undercity. Poor unfortunate souls. When they saw her and her sheriff, they disappeared into shadows and other tunnels, some giving a gasp of shock at the unexpected visit. There were perhaps thirty, maybe forty Nosferatu who chose to live their second lives in the tunnels of her city, the ones with extreme deformities, and she gladly let them. Other Nosferatu, ones with smaller deformities, or ones strong enough to hide themselves in plain sight, walked the streets of Dolareido, but down in the tunnels, the rest of their brethren lived.

But, as Maria showed, you could work past your deformities, and become something more, with time.

Her mind wandered, and she could not help it. How rare it was to be on an outing with her sheriff anymore; quite rare, since her fingers had grown long and rooted into the corporations of her city. Xnomina did not know which corporations she controlled, which banks, which facilities, which companies, and they did not know which kine she had enthralled into her service. Many services did her bidding, some willingly, some not, some unknowingly. During the purge, she had brought hundreds of kine to her side, police officers in particular, armed and ready to fight the Lancea et Sanctum at her whim.

And they did fight. And it had been bloody. Many kine had died, as many as Kindred, and in the end, such souls were mere sheep lost in the crossfire.

Would Jack think her cruel, if she indulged him such secrets? Would he look at her the same way if she explained that there were dozens of kine in the city enthralled in her spell, serving her, risking their lives? Well, few lives risked since the purge. But that did not mean her kine were so lucky as to escape notice from spying Invictus or Carthian eyes on occasion. Some had lost limbs or kneecaps in such dealings. All for her.

She did not normally feel guilt. An antiquated emotion for an elder. And yet with Jack, with his terribly honest soul, she did feel it when her thoughts drifted toward her role as Prince. How—

“Annie?”

“Ah. Apologies, my friend. You were saying?”

Daniel raised a brow, barely, before he pointed his small flashlight down toward the older tunnels.

“Athalia said Azamel would be hanging out at the stage beneath Morning Street.” A flick of the wrist lit the tunnel. “This way.”

She turned and followed beside him. The stage was one of the earlier, deeper areas Viktor had built, a place where he could speak over a crowd when he wanted, before the Kindred had found ways to stay above ground in Dolareido.

A smile forced its way onto her lips. There was a time when she, Viktor, Tony, her lovely Daniel, and Jacob had sat around in a tunnel they had dug underneath the village, and talked of their vision. A city where Kindred could live in peace, and where the very city itself allowed for vampires to feed and rest without fear of the sun or dangerous hunts. Where kine would gather en masse and crane their necks for them. A new era for a new world in America, where Kindred could live long lives filled with vice and delights and where violence was unnecessary.

Such fools they'd been. Successful, but with each success, their paranoia of each other grew. Battles were fought, skirmishes at first, but sometimes full on war between two covenants. Lucas's arrival had not helped.

Sighing, she shook her head, combed back her hair, and dusted off the sleeves of her suit. She had changed her clothes; she could not



visit Azamel wearing a dress meant for a night out on the town, after all.

The stage was actually a large room of concrete with little in the way of ... anything, except for connecting tunnels, and a few light sources that were ancient. But the Invictus and Antoinette did like to keep the tunnels maintained to some degree, so such lights were replaced when they broke. A fact Azamel and other cockroaches liked to exploit.

And sure enough, there she sat on the raised platform. It stood a foot off the concrete floor, a slab of yet more concrete, a literal stage for the room. And while before there had been nothing, Azamel had decided to decorate much of the room like a cottage in the 1800's. The woman had confidence, Antoinette had to admit that. And nerve.

She was a small woman, very old, with wrinkled white skin hanging off her face and arms. Skinny and frail. It was hard to see her eyes, partially closed with age, and her long silver hair was thin.

So much older than the last time they had spoke.

“Time,” Azamel said, voice quiet and filled with rasp and groan, “is not as kind to us as it is to the vampire.”

“No, it is not.” Antoinette stepped up onto the stage and stood before the small woman. She sat in a recliner, one with red and blue flowers, and covered in a horrible, horrible shade of green. The sort of chair you might expect to find in your grandmother's house, with an ashtray on the arm, and cigarette burns along the cushion. Underneath her was a rug, a circular thing with color patterns of maroon, brown, and olive.

“But, I should be happy with what I have done with my time. For over two hundred years I have lived; I should be content. Shouldn't I?”

Antoinette glanced toward Daniel, who returned it with a small shrug while adjusting his glasses.

“We did not part on the best of terms, Azamel,” Antoinette said. “Why have you returned?”

The old woman looked up to her left and right.

“You know Athalia, yes?” Azamal gestured to the woman on her right.

Athalia nodded to them, arms folded across her chest, eyes heavy and the hint of a frown on her lips. A slender woman, somewhat tall, with a soft face that did not match her steel gaze. Black skin and long black hair that reached her hips, with some baby blue jeans and a nice white sweater.

“We’ve met.” Daniel nodded her way, and offered a tiny smile that lasted only moments.

There was a small spark there, Antoinette knew. Athalia had showed up a couple decades ago, when the change had struck her. The Begotten often had no one when it happened, and through sheer dumb luck, Daniel had stumbled upon her. Friends for only a short time before friction ruined the friendship.

“This is Mark.” Azamal gestured to the man on her left.

Another with dark skin, though his hair was curly and cut short, tapered, with a clean-shaven face and a harder glare than Athalia could muster. But where Athalia looked to be in good shape, Mark was overweight, but with a decent amount of muscle to go with it. He too was in jeans and a white shirt, forgettable.

He didn’t feel forgettable. Antoinette found her eyes lingering on the Begotten, and despite herself, she frowned. She did not like him. Being near him made her skin crawl, and she could not tell why.

The three beasts before her all made her skin crawl and her inner beast growl and posture. But Mark made her take a small step back, for fear he might touch her.

“Athalia is welcome in the city,” she said, “and if Mark has lived here and managed to not cause issues despite his condition, then he is as well. But you Azamel, you are not welcome. You cause trouble every time you stay within my walls. My walls.” Antoinette took a step toward the old woman, and glared down at her, even as she felt a little bit of ice run down her spine. “Why are you here?”

“I seek my inheritance.”

“... your inheritance?” She looked over her shoulder to Daniel, but he offered nothing more than his usual deadpan gaze.

“It is not something you would understand, but know that I plan to seek it here, within your walls.” Azamel smiled, and leaned back into her grandmother’s chair.

“You try my patience, Azamel. Do you not think I will force you out?”

“Why would you? You did not banish me from your city, only expressed a strong dislike to my presence. Are you escalating your claim?”

Antoinette grit her teeth. She did not want to fight Azamel. A fight with a Begotten would not end well for anyone involved, and the old woman was not incorrect, Antoinette had not banished her.

Maybe she should have, instead of risking the trouble her kind could bring.

“You have requested my presence, Azamel, as you squat in the underbelly of my city, knowing full well I do not want you here. You try my patience.”

The old woman put up her hands, and offered what she probably thought was a heartfelt smile, and not the sinister sneer it was.

“I’m here for my own purposes, true, but I asked to speak to you for two reasons. First, I’m not here to start a war with you, Antoinette,” Azamel said. The Prince twitched at the lack of title use. “But the city is large, and prime for my goals. Second, something has been stirred, and I offer you that knowledge as a peace offering.”

“Stirred?” She looked at Daniel, but he could only shrug.

“Yes, something has come to the city, recently, and has been killing your precious ‘kine’ in the tunnels. No bother to you, I’m sure, but I fear it will attract unwanted attention. And neither I nor you want such attention.”

Antoinette sighed, and stroked her chin. “You know who has been behind the recent disappearances then, Azamel?”

“I do. But there’s more happening here, vampire, than the disappearances you are aware of. So, I propose a deal.”

Azamel was sounding more like Viktor every minute.

“A deal?”

“Nothing horrible, I assure you. I simply wish for an exchange of information. I will tell you who has been behind the disappearances, if you can tell me where the spiders have been coming from.”

Antoinette quirked a brow and looked the old woman up and down. Hard to read her, old as she was, and the Prince’s beast could make little understanding of whatever Azamel was peacocking. If she was peacocking at all. Such a deal sounded harmless, but it was not; a fact of history.

Azamel's expression was solid, and she waited with a finger tapping on the arm of her chair. Antoinette was the one in the dark in this conversation, not her. And she was not used to being in the lower dealing position.

"I can tell from your silence that you don't know about the spiders." Azamel shrugged, and motioned her head toward Mark. "Mark is the one who has spotted them, and he is the one who assures me a threat is growing."

Again the man stayed silent, but a dull glance from him set her on edge all the same.

"And he is sure there is weight to this fear?" she said.

"He is."

"... does he not speak?"

Azamel chuckled, coughed, and wiped a bit of drool from her mouth. "Only when he has to. Better for everyone that way."

Delightful.

"You are correct Azamel, I do not know of these spiders." It took her hundreds of years of practice to hide the contempt in her eyes. Admitting ignorance was painful at any age, and potentially dangerous in her position. "But I will investigate, if you are concerned."

More laughs from the old woman. "You sound like you're doing it for my sake. This is a warning for you, Antoinette, not me. If the spiders are not dealt with quickly, a rain of fire will land upon your city. I don't want that, you don't want that, but it's you that will have to scoop up the ashes."



~~Natasha~~

A few days later, and the nightmares only got worse. Now she was dreaming of muddy hands reaching out from under her bed, grabbing her ankles, and pulling her down under the bed into god knows where. Now her nightmares hinted at eyes in the shadows, faces behind the mirror, movement in the darkness, of souls forever enacting their final emotions. Usually murderous anger.

So she had Jessy over. Because Jessy was big and strong and could scare off the monsters under her bed.

Fifty years embraced, Natasha. You're over seventy years old in total. What the hell is the matter with you?

Ghost in the walls was what was mattering her! The shrunken head sat outside her room, she was sure! Sometimes when she awoke with the passing of dusk, she opened her door just to make sure she was indeed alone, and no shrunken head or hand of glory was there waiting for her.

Worse was the wedding dress. Such a classic tale, and that the whole scene was permanently scarred into the dress? All those stories about ghosts and poltergeists she'd heard throughout her life started to sound a little more real. She knew other monsters existed in the world; Kindred weren't the only humanoids with special teeth. But ghosts? Ghosts!?

Ok, different topic, different topic.

Natasha sat at the counter, browsing on her laptop as per usual. Or at least trying to. Jessy was on the couch, watching TV, some MMA fight.

"So how're things with the crazies?" Jessy said.

"They're ... g-good. Just scary."

“Scary?”

Not a different topic!

“Um, so, how about you? How are things with the Invictus?”

“Not gonna lie, pretty fucked up. You gone and Viktor gone means we’ve lost a lot of senior staff. There’re like twelve Kindred we could promote, they’re as old as us, just not used to how shit rolls at the top level.”

“Yeah, I guess. Mister Vanna maybe? He—”

“Hey, Natasha, come on. Tell me.” Jessy turned around on the couch, got on her knees on the cushions, elbows on the back, and looked at her. “We’re best friends, think you can tell me.”

Tell her why she left the Invictus. She hadn’t yet, and she really should, but she didn’t want to create a problem. Or she was just afraid of how Jessy might react, maybe disagree with her choice, maybe back up Maria? What about Daniel, how would Jessy react to that?

If you want her to stay your friend through all this Natasha, you’re going to have to throw her a bone.

“ ... Mada—Maria, she ... let Lucas use me ... as a hostage ... when he attacked the Prince.”

“Huh? What? How’s that make any sense?”

“ ... the sheriff is my sire.”

Bomb dropped.

Jessy raised a brow, looked at her, looked down, looked at her, looked down, looked over at the kitchen counter, then back to her.

“Fucking ... wow.” Jessy sat back down on her butt, and threw up her hands before hooking them on the couch back. She leaned back, let her head dangle over the back of the couch, and looked at Natasha upside down. “Fucking wow.”

“ ... yeah. Sorry I never t-t-told you.”

“Maria? ... what a bitch.”

Natasha laughed. Damn it, the serious of the situation was gone. Jessy never could take things seriously for long, but that was a good thing with Natasha brooding all the time.

Brooding all the damn time now, and being scared, and alone. Not really alone; she could always rely on Daniel. But it wasn't the same as having a friend, and she didn't want to ruin that when she moved. Hell, she'd given up the Invictus and made a major life change, time to stop brooding and do other new things. Now was the perfect time, wasn't it?

“Hey, Jessy.” She reached deep down into her gut and looked for some courage. Something about the whole mess had left some in there, she just had to look for it. “I'm ... hungry.”

“Cool, I'll hold the fort.”

Arg. Jessy was going to make this difficult without even realizing it.

“I mean ... can you...”

“Can I what?” Jessy's head was still hanging off the couch back, upside down, looking at her.

“You ... know...” Natasha just squirmed like a fish on a hook. How could she say it?



“What?”

“Last time you ... offered.”

“Oh. Oh! Ooooh shit.” Jessy rolled over and hopped off the couch to join her at the counter with such speed, like a dog with a treat. “You want me to get the boys over? For serious?”

She couldn't even look in Jessy's direction, let alone in her eyes. “... yes.” As if to finalize the decision, she put her hand out on her laptop and closed it.

“Fuck yes! Um, what day is it? Yeah I can get them over!” Jessy jumped up and down. “Fuck I'm getting horny just thinking about it.”

“Slow down! I ... p-p ... p-p-p-”

“I getcha! I know, I know. Come on Natasha we've been friends for decades. You think I'd just throw you in head first?” The blond slid up onto the counter to sit, and put her hand down on Natasha's laptop, as if she'd somehow conquered Natasha's love for solitude. “Slow as you want. No rush.”

“Ok. Ok I...” She frowned at herself. They were just ghouls. Kine! She was fifty years embraced and still, the thought of having sex made her extremely nervous. You're in control Natasha. They're just ghouls, Jessy's ghouls, your friend's ghouls! There's no reason to be nervous.

Except for the typical, stupid reasons; she was a short, flat-chested pale skinny girl with no figure. The idea of a ghoul not wanting to have sex with her because she was—

“I can already see where your mind is going Natasha. And I can officially confirm for you that the boys all very much want to fuck you.”

Natasha's jaw dropped. Since when was Jessy so perceptive? And ... really? "Really? They ... you know." She looked down at herself.

"Hell yes. You got that little yoga girl body that drives them nuts. No worries there." And then the phone was out in her hand.

"Wait! Wait I ... um..."

Jessy held the phone in her hand, but did stop. Thank god her friend was her friend, and not some bully. Well, a bit of a bully, but not a big one.

"Any time you want to stop we can stop, you know that girl! But we'll be in charge, and I'll be right next to you the whole time."

"... the ... whole time..." She nodded, and gave Jessy the go-ahead.

Right next to her. Jessy had said that every time, but it never really occurred to Natasha what that would entail. She'd never run through the thoughts to that point. They were just words before, but now, now she was visualizing what that meant. Her and Jessy, next to each other, while having sex.

And that, she admitted only to the darkest corner of her mind, was enticing. So much of her porn collection focused on group sex, but for some reason she just couldn't picture herself in that scenario. At least until Jessy finally dialed the number.

"Hey Brad, get the boys together. Got a treat for you tonight. I expect you all here in thirty minutes." Beep. "There! Done and done. Oh man this is going to be great ... hey, c'mere." Jessy hopped back off the counter, reached out, and took Natasha's hands to pull her off the stool until they were both standing.

"... w-what?"

Jessy blushed life, so the darker colors of permanently tanned skin filled out her cheeks, and darkened her lips. “Blush for me.”

Natasha sighed. She was in it now. But she did as requested and blushed life. Her skin barely changed.

“You are so pale!” Jessy said. Now Natasha blushed with embarrassment, and the fake life immediately made her face glow red; she could feel it in her cheeks. “And now you’re blushing! Oh my god that is so adorable.”

“Don’t t-t-t-t-t-tease ... me...”

“Sorry. Really. I’m being an ass. Come on.” Jessy pulled her along and into Natasha’s bedroom. Just a simple king bed and a closet. “You’re probably wearing some boring underwear though. That’s the only thing you’ll have to fix.”

“My underwear isn’t...” Yeah, it was boring.

Jessy started opening her drawers and digging through clothes. Jessy was always at Natasha’s apartment just hanging out, and was quite comfortable digging through her things all the time. They didn’t share a size but that didn’t stop her friend from being nosy.

“Aha! Here, put this on.” She tossed Natasha pair of boy shorts. Tiny, tight purple ones. “Boys see you wearing only that and they will get on their knees begging for a piece of you.”

“ ... just this?”

“Yeah! Nervous? It’s no big, come on.” And like it was absolutely nothing, Jessy threw off her t-shirt.

Natasha’s mouth fell open. She’d seen Jessy naked before, but always in a more professional setting, generally when having to quickly change when doing Invictus work. But this time, Jessy was

facing her, and standing there in nothing but a pair of jeans, Natasha couldn't help but stare.

Jessy had a lot of muscle for a woman, and her stomach was a cut figure of bumps and grooves of definition. Her breasts were larger than Natasha would have expected on a powerful, ripped figure like her friend, and her nipples were small and dark like her lips.

Jessy hardly noticed Natasha staring. Instead the Gangrel whipped off her pants too, and was now standing there in absolutely nothing but a thong, one of those black ones made to go with gym wear; when exercising wasn't enough, but you had to look sexy while exercising too.

“ ... you ... you're um ... you wear that? All the t-time?”

“This? Hell yeah.” Jessy turned around, slipped a finger under the thong's waistband at the hip, and gave it a snap. “Hugs the ass, emphasizes the shape.”

“But it looks so uncomfortable!”

Jessy shrugged. “We all have things we're vain about, right? I love my ass and legs. I bet Beatrice is probably the same. Fit girls love their legs and butt.” The Gangrel turned around a little, did a one-eighty, and stopped when facing away so her ass was on full display for Natasha. “You like?” The girl was devolving into a teenager right before her eyes.

Natasha's whole body was blushing. She could actually see her own fingers turning red. “T-t-too much!” It did really emphasize the shape though, and Jessy was a fit woman. She had a large, toned butt.

“Aw come on. You know you're going to be having sex right? With four guys? You have to get at least a little comfortable. Come on, strip. It's just me.”

She wasn't a virgin. She had sex before. Decades ago ... but still, she did not appreciate Jessy's patronizing.

"Ok just..." She couldn't say don't look, because it made no sense. So she forced herself, with shaky fingers, to start undoing the buttons of her sweater.

Jessy moved over to sit on the bed, and watched. She made no efforts to cover up her breasts, and in fact, she let one hand's fingers drift up and down her legs, then up her stomach, and eventually up to her breasts to caress a nipple in slow circles.

Apparently, just getting undressed was turning on her friend. "Are you ... always ... so horny?"

"Yes! Come on Natasha, you don't get it. You're a Kindred, fifty years embraced! If there's one thing, just one thing that makes this second life worth it, it's the sex. Can't get a disease, can't get pregnant, anal is on the menu twenty-four seven, and I don't know about you but I haven't had my period since being turned. And every stupid hangup from society is gone. No one cares if you fuck everyone on the planet. We can fuck whenever, with whoever, however, and we can go as long as we want. Free to be as sexual as we want."

The moment Jessy realized she was in charge of her sex life in a way only a Kindred can be, the girl had apparently become ravenous. And, had never stopped being ravenous. When Natasha was young and had just left the Ordo Dracul, she'd joined the Invictus and befriended Jessy. From day one, Jessy was a sexual creature, brazen and open about it. And while it made Natasha squirm, other Kindred didn't flinch when Jessy mentioned orgies and double penetration and orgasms so powerful she soaked her kine in her juices. The male Kindred often engaged in conversation with her to share similar stories. And women sometimes did too; perhaps not with stories as absurdly extreme as Jessy's regular

trysts of ten legs, but with stories of seducing kine, and engaging in sex with a man under their control. And how powerful it made them feel, how orgasmic.

Natasha had missed that bandwagon. Only elders or older ancillae seemed to stop talking about sex, while everyone Natasha's age seemed content to delve into sex with unending fervor.

“M-Maybe you can be that sexual, but for me it's ... hard.” And she most definitely didn't want to fuck everyone on the planet.

“Girl, I am telling you, you are sexy as fuck. Is this a Mekhet thing?”

Maybe it was a Mekhet thing, a little. It was in her bloodline to prefer shadows. Jessy and her Gangrel blood on the other hand, seemed to thrive on being a pack leader of a group of ghouls.

“Hey, don't stop. Come on.” Jessy, impatient, got up and reached out for Natasha's buttons.

Natasha smacked her hand away. “I'll do it!” Grumbling and muttering, she kept going, and eventually removed her sweater. Underneath, she was wearing a soft fitness tank top. Comfort over fashion.

Jessy licked her lips and reached out again, but got nowhere when Natasha slapped her hands twice.

“Aw come on. Please?” Jessy gave her the biggest pair of doe eyes she'd ever seen.

It was comically out of place on the rough-loving Gangrel.

“ ... fine.” She raised her arms.

Jessy's face erupted with so much cheer, it was like Natasha had just given her a surprise party. She reached out, slipped her fingers under the sides of the sports top, lifted it up and off of Natasha, and tossed it aside.

“God damn! Your breasts ... fucking god that's hot.”

“They're small.” She covered them with her arms.

“Yeap, and that is very fucking hot on you. And your nipples have that bright pink color!” Jessy reached out yet again, but stopped herself short this time of groping Natasha's breasts. Her hands went lower, and with ninja fingers she undid the zipper of Natasha's skirt and slid it off of her in one fell swoop. She was still wearing her simple white underwear.

“Jessy! You're ... not being nice.”

“Can't help myself. And I know you need a little push, y'know? The guys aren't here yet, it's just us.” This time, she scooped her fingers into the sides of her panties and yanked them down before Natasha could stop her.

“Hey!” Both Natasha's hands went down to cover herself, but were grabbed by Jessy's hands. Natasha squirmed to try and hide her privates, but Jessy was so much stronger. “You're ... you said ... you wouldn't push me.”

“I won't, really. But it's just us and I really have to see ... I have to.”

Natasha blinked. Jessy was just ... staring at her, between the legs, as if entranced. Her friend's voice had sort of faded too, as if something had taken her breath away. If Natasha didn't know any better, she'd think it was lust and admiration both in the Gangrel's eyes. And the way she was staring at her sex was making Natasha's

whole body blush red. Jessy was getting aggressive like an aroused animal, and it was a bit scary.

But knowing her friend was getting so worked up just because of her was sending all sorts of signals to Natasha's body.

“ ... god,” Jessy said.

“What?” Natasha squirmed some more, but the way Jessy was staring at her was making her strength fade. She knew that look, but she never really thought about it. Jessy joked a lot about it, sure, but they were just words. To actually see her Gangrel friend staring at her exposed parts with her ‘I want to fuck that’ eyes was shocking.

“It's smooth.”

“I ... shaved it years ago, and ... d-decided to not regrow it.” Kindred could choose what parts of their body to revert to natural state in their daily sleep. It's how Kindred kept their tattoos and piercings gained post embrace.

“And it's so small! Barely any lips. It's ... so tiny, and it's just this tiny little slit! Fuck I'm so jealous.”

Jessy analyzed the anatomy of Natasha's vagina like it was perfectly ok to say those words. It was so crude and blatant, but ... jealous?

Jessy just kept looking at her with arousal painted on her face, and the way her eyes were glazed over and drinking in the sight of Natasha's body, it was starting to make the Mekhet feel warm. Jessy wanted her. That was why the Gangrel kept bugging Natasha about sleeping with her ghouls.

Glass shattered, and the night took on a different feeling. Natasha was no longer nervous about the ghouls, or at least not as nervous,



instead she became nervous about the blond creature gazing at her exposed parts.

“Jessy, um ... the guys...”

“Right! Right ... yeah, here.” She finally let go of Natasha’s wrists, and fetched the boy shorts before handing them to her. “Fuuuuuuck you’re going to look so hot in these.”

“This girl t-talk is horrible!” She stepped into the boy shorts as quick as possible, then stood back up and folded her arms across her chest again. Stark naked except for the boy shorts, she waddled over to the mirror and took a peek. Not even five feet tall, with black hair reaching halfway down her back, and pale skin. She was very thin, but at least you couldn’t see her ribs. Much.

Jessy’s phone buzzed. “They’re here. Come on.”

“Wait! W-wait I...”

“Natasha, they’re just my ghouls. Bloodbags. Don’t like what they do? Tell em to stop or to change it up or whatever and they will obey like dogs. And I personally guaran-fucking-tee all four of them want to bone you.”

From a hermit’s life to an orgy. She was really in it now.

“ ... ok.”

“Fuck yeah.” Jessy took her hand and pulled her out into the living room.

Just ghouls, just ghouls, they were just ghouls. Kine that were bloodbound to Jessy. She fed on kine all the time. This was no different, she’d just get to enjoy it a little more. Maybe. Hopefully.

“Hey guys, get in here!”

Fuck, she was lost in her thoughts again, and didn't notice Jessy opening the door, or ushering the ghouls in. Natasha did her best to hide her body with her arms, but also appear nonchalant. It most definitely was not working.

“Hey boss, topless already? Hey—whoa! Holy shit it's Madam Vola.”

“Vola? Holy fuck ... look at that.”

The four men were all tall, broad shouldered, with muscles, scruff and military cuts. Two were black, two were white, and all of them looked like they'd spent their lives in the gym. Jessy definitely had a type, but at least she enjoyed a little racial diversity.

Jessy stepped over to Natasha and stood beside her. “Guys, my partner here normally doesn't do this sort of thing. If you ever want to touch her, you will do exactly as she says and no more, no less. She says eat shit I expect it done. Got it?”

“Got it boss!” they said at the same time, like some sort of squadron.

“Go ahead Natasha, give em an order.”

Natasha blinked up at her tall friend next to her, then back at the quartet before them. Orders. Orders orders. “Um ... you two,” she said, and pointed between two of them.

“Chris ma'am.”

“Isaac ma'am.”

“Chris, Isaac, you two ... kiss each other.”

The other two guys laughed, but Chris and Isaac didn't hesitate. They didn't half-ass it either, and in moments had locked lips. And

kissed. And kissed some more.

“Ok, you c-can ... stop.”

“Ha,” Jessy said with a laugh, “I do that all the time.”

“Yeah?” Suddenly, ideas of having the four men, naked, doing things to each other, were dancing through her mind. Hehe.

“K boys, follow us.” Jessy snickered, took Natasha’s hand again, and walked her back into her bedroom. Once back in Natasha’s room, she slid onto the bed and put her topless body on display by lying on her side.

Natasha, unsure of what to do, sat down in the middle of the bed with legs folded, arms across her chest, and watched the boys walk in and line up side by side.

They were all blatantly aroused, with erections poking against their pants and eyes drinking up the sight of Jessy’s body. But, they were staring at her too. A lot. Natasha couldn’t stop blushing.

“Strip!” Jessy almost shouted.

One of the boys put down something. Lube, it looked like. And then all four of them stripped down. Belts, shirts, jeans, all were removed until four nude men were standing before them. And all of them were just as muscled and ripped as she expected.

“You ... definitely have a pattern,” she said.

“Ha! I know right? Lot of muscle means a lot of blood. Hey Brad, get over here.”

Brad walked up to the edge of the bed and waited. Natasha, realizing that she was the only one in the room hiding her body, suddenly felt awkward for doing it. She lowered her arms to expose

her breasts, and blushed all the harder when Brad started to stare at them.

“Lie down on your back right here,” Jessy said.

“Yes boss.” Brad crawled up onto the bed, turned over, and lay on his back along the bed between Jessy and Natasha. The bed was full of bodies now.

Jessy sat on her knees beside him, and put her hands down on the boy’s chest and stomach. Abs, pectorals, he was a valley of meat.

“Taking care of yourself? My blood won’t stop you from getting fat!” She pinched his nipple hard enough to get a yelp out of him, and Natasha had to cover her mouth to not giggle.

“Boss! I am taking care of myself, boss!”

Oh wow, she treated them like it was boot camp. But all four guys were smiling; they seemed to enjoy it.

“You better.” She reached over, and wrapped her hands around his member. The man’s pubic hair was kept short, trim, and his member was quite large. Jessy probably picked these ghouls based on their proportions, penis included. So vain. But, now that the man was just lying there in front of Natasha, naked and smiling up at her, she couldn’t deny a certain primal appeal to it.

And it was all making her very hungry. Her eyes went down to where Jessy was lightly stroking the man’s shaft. Jessy herself looked more than aroused by now, to the point her dark nipples were standing on swollen areola. Both of them were hungry in more than one way.

“So I can ... eat?” Natasha said.

“Sure! And I always get the guys to pop some blues before coming over, so you can fuck em, bite em, and even when you’re done they’re still hard for a good while.”

Natasha put her hand on her neck. “Oh ... my.” She was going to protest about the health concerns with constant use of erection aid drugs like sildenafil or such, but ghouls would regenerate from such potential harm.

“Yes boss, I—”

Jessy put the finger of her free hand on Brad’s mouth. “Shut up.” Despite that, she continued to stroke the man’s cock, and Natasha found her eyes locked on the sight of Jessy’s hand squeezing, gripping, working the length in the slow massage. “Come on Natasha, do whatever you want.”

“O-ok.” It took a lot of courage just to keep her arms from covering her breasts, let alone touch the big naked guy on her bed. But Jessy was right, she was Kindred and they were kine and that meant they were bloodbags. Delicious, beautiful, warm, sexy bloodbags. Jessy bossed them around like slaves, and they enjoyed it. And Jessy had given her full license to do whatever she wanted.

And that was finally sinking into her mind. Full freedom to do whatever she could possibly want with the ghouls. She had the power in the room. If she wanted, she could have all four of them lay upon her bed on their stomachs while she stood on their backs and danced. Is this what it felt like to be a Ventrue?

Bolstered with courage, Natasha slid over to sit across from Jessy, with the man’s pelvis between them. Jessy noticed, removed her hands from Brad, and with trembling grip, Natasha put her hand around the man’s cock.

How many years had it been since she wrapped her hands around a man’s dick? Decades. She gave it a tiny squeeze, and Brad let out a

small moan. Warm, hard, and now that she was looking down at it, she could see the moisture building at the tip of his glans. Brad was circumcised, and his glans looked so ripe, full of blood and need. Her other hand reached out, touched a finger to the tip of his cock, and started to spread the single drop of warm precum that had started to leak.

“Fucking god that’s hot,” Jessy said.

Natasha grinned like a satisfied kitten. This wasn’t so bad. When she glanced over at the three men still waiting, they were all gazing intently at her. Not Jessy, but her. They were eating her up with their eyes, and doing their best to keep from masturbating while watching what she was doing to their friend.

It was all making her so damn wet. She could feel her juices start to cream her boy shorts. She had left her breasts exposed, and she no longer cared. Being the only shy one in a room full of sexual extroverts was making it a little easier to just give in, blend in, ride the sexual waves. Drunk with arousal.

Then of course Jessy upset the status quo. The fit vampire lay down on the bed again, motioned for two of the boys to join her — Chris and Isaac again — and right before Natasha’s eyes, they got down on their knees and leaned over the bed to put their heads against Jessy’s thighs and ass. They reached up, shifted the woman’s thong aside, and began to bury their faces into the crevices of Jessy’s butt and pelvis.

Jessy kept her eyes on Natasha though. Lying on her side as she was, she took one of Natasha’s pillows, put it under her head, and got comfy while watching. Her mouth was already parted, and small moans escaped the Gangrel while the two men devoured her. Natasha couldn’t see exactly what they were doing with their heads and hands in the way, but it was obvious that Jessy was enjoying two sets of lips and tongues against both of her holes.

The image of two tongues, one on her pussy and the other on the rose of her ass, had Natasha's fake breath quickened in no time. She dared not speak of her porn habits, and how much of that frequently involved double penetration; she was already overflowing her embarrassment quota and anymore might make her explode. It's not like a vampire needed to worry about cleaning themselves before some anal play, so of course she'd experimented! And ... kept experimenting. A lot. Privately.

Jessy mewled, and Natasha was struck dumb watching her friend reduced to the most sexual sounds she'd ever heard come from the Gangrel.

Unable to take it anymore, Natasha slipped her fingers into her boyshorts and forced them off. Clumsy, but done. The look of absolute bliss coming from Jessy sent tingles up Natasha's spine. The fact that Brad and the remaining ghoul both groaned at the sight of her naked sent more.

"Brad, uh ... um ... I want you t-to ... lick me." Just ghouls, they were just ghouls. Hell, Brad seemed overjoyed at the chance to touch her, and he helped her when she started to shift down toward his face. In fact, he picked her up. She was such a tiny thing, a light and skinny little girl, and the large kine had only to slip his hands under her thighs to lift her and ease her down until she was sitting on his lips, facing his stomach.

She was sitting on his lips.

Before her was a valley of blood-filled muscle. The big kine's huge phallus was lying across his abs now, begging to be touched, rising a few inches every so often as he flexed it. But when she put her hands on his chest, her knees on the blankets around him, ideas of touching him vanished, replaced with pleasure when his warm, wet tongue found her pussy.

“Ah ... nn...” She put her hands to her mouth to stop the sounds, but it didn't help much. Tongue, someone's tongue, on her clitoris. Something warm, warmer than her, and wet and soft and moving and wriggling and nuzzling into her. Licking her. The sparks of pleasure shot out from her clitoris into her legs and core, sharp and hot, until she was forced to put her hands against his stomach to keep from falling forward.

With her fingers on his body, she dug them into the dents and shapes of his muscles a little. Warm, blood, alive, breathing. God she wanted to bite him, drink him. But, she wanted him to keep licking her too. The little bumps on his tongue, the wet heat that coated her tiny labia, the flicking and massaging motion. Don't stop.

She looked to Jessy again. The woman was still on her side, one leg up, two heads between her legs. Her mouth had opened, and guttural groans were coming out of her, closer to an animal than a woman. One of her arms was wrapped tight around the pillow her head was against, and the other was holding the hair of the man in front of her.

And she was looking at Natasha, staring at her. There was hunger in her eyes when she looked at her, and it only grew as the two men devoured her. Natasha managed a little wave at Jessy, and her friend returned it with a chuckle. With the tingling sparks of a coddled clit warming her body, Jessy's primal gaze stirred something in Natasha. From uncomfortable, to enticing.

The little Mekhet looked at the final ghoul. The man looked like he was going to die from sheer arousal, with his cock twitching and jumping every so often, stuck out from his pelvis at forty-five degrees. The head of the shaft was swollen, ready to burst, and Natasha could see a drop of moisture on the opening.

“W-what's ... your ... name?” she said. Little squeaks got into her voice, try as she might to hide them. Her whole body was blushing



bright red, and her pink nipples stood from her petite breast, defiant against her small bosom. The mixture of embarrassment and arousal was already making talking hard, but to look at the big man in front of her, talk to him, while another man was suckling on her clit? Overload.

“Vincent ma’am.”

“V-V-Vincent, you ... come ... here.” She gestured to the spot beside her. No room left on the bed, but that didn’t mean Vincent couldn’t get closer.

The man came and stood beside her, hands at his sides. His cock was only a foot away from her now, and she turned to look at it. The height and angle put it all directly beside her face, and she stared at the engorged glans, then at the man above her. Like Jessy, he had hunger in his eyes, locked on her and her body.

Everyone wanted to have sex with her! Jessy included! So ... so...

She came. Her back arched toward the man beneath her, and she dug her fingers into his muscles as the tingling waves hit her. The blissful muscle clench, the pleasure sparks that worked down into her legs, to her toes, made her voice come out in short squeaks, she did it all. Any sense of self control she had, she knew was gone, washed away as the tingling clenches worked up through her squeezing muscles.

Natasha looked over at Jessy. The tall woman was getting comfortable on top of her ghoul now, pulling him up to lay on the bed, the same as Brad. Without so much as a glance, Jessy grabbed the man’s shaft, guided it toward her entrance, and sank down onto his cock to the hilt. Once she was comfortable, hands on Chris’s shoulders, she smiled at Natasha.

“Looking good,” she said.

Really, straight out of a bad action movie. Natasha tried to roll her eyes, tried to dismiss Jessy's compliment for the cheesy thing it was, but Brad started to lick her sensitive clit once more, and she squeaked.

Jessy laughed, and snapped her fingers. Isaac grabbed the lube they'd brought, and with a practiced hand, began to apply it along his length until it was glistening. Natasha stared, a little dumbfounded as Jessy leaned forward toward the man beneath her so Isaac could begin to apply the lube to her ass.

Then he set his swollen cock's head between Jessy's ass cheeks, and started to step in.

Natasha looked at Jessy, eyes wide, drinking in the facial expressions of her friend. Jessy's mouth was open, and as much as she was trying to look back at Natasha, her eyes drifted up into her skull as Isaac sank an inch into her ass, and then another, and another. And once he was completely within the vampire, Jessy growled, a deep animal sound, and began to ride her ghouls. Both of them, at the same time, on her own. The two men barely had to do a thing, just hold on as the woman started to shift her hips back and forth, with a small bounce too.

Ok, that might be a bit too far for Natasha, especially for her first time trying the orgy thing. But that didn't mean Natasha didn't want to watch Jessy, her bouncing breasts, her large ass molding to Isaac's body with each impact, and the pleasure dripping from her friend's face.

Natasha crawled off of Brad's face, turned around, and sat on his stomach facing him. It'd been a long time since she'd had sex, decades. Orgasms were a frequent part of her life; she had the internet after all. And vibrators. But actual sex with another person? It'd been so damn long.

She leaned forward to raise her butt, reached down between her legs to find the man's cock, and guide it up to her wet slit. Fingers around his girth, she shivered over the size of him, and squeezed the hardness with more experimentation. Why did Jessy have to get such big ghouls with such big dicks? A girl didn't need to feel like she was giving birth every time she had sex!

A glance over to Jessy told Natasha otherwise, at least in Jessy's case. Girl was arching her back and groaning more as the ghoul behind her gave her long, deep plunges of his huge member into her ass. She still had her thong on too, pulled over onto her ass cheek. And it looked so damn amazing, how the strong woman fit between the two big ghouls, and took both of them into her at the same time.

Small bites first, Natasha. Nodding to herself, she smiled down at the subservient creature underneath her, and started to sink herself down onto his shaft.

The sensation of being opened, of wet, hot lips being spread taut and the bumps and ridges of flesh rubbing on flesh made her mewl. Her squeezing pussy found the base edge of his glans, and she shivered at how much his cock's head opened her tiny body. Her fingers grew wet as her juices trickled down his length, and wetter as she sank more of his length into her, until her liquids collected between her fingers. Deeper again, her little canal filled to the end, and she shivered as the man's tip pressed to her cervix.

But she was so aroused, what little pain it brought was replaced with a deep wave in her core that made her groan, tremble, and sink down further. Still a couple inches to go, and she started to gasp and pant, no matter how useless oxygen was, as the ghoul's oversized phallus pushed her insides deeper. Everything was stretched to the limit, and her poor muscles were quivering as she shifted on the girth rubbing along her g-spot. Mental note: if you ever get a ghoul for a sex slave, check penis size. Any bigger than this and she was liable to break.

But, as her little lips found the base of him, she leaned forward onto the man's chest, hands to his pectorals, and she moaned, loudly, as the man started to move. Just a little, just enough to make her squirm.

Poor Vincent, forced to watch. She wasn't up for something as lecherous as what Jessy was doing, but that didn't mean she should ignore him, right? She reached out for his cock with her hand, and pulled him a little closer, until his phallus was in front of her face again.

"Brad, you um ... t-take my hips, ok? And ... and ... keep it gentle! While I..." While I pleasure Vincent.

The big guy beneath her nodded, put his hands on her hips, and started to rock her back and forth. Certainly not like Jessy beside her, who had cum again, and collapsed on her ghoul's chest. Chris and Isaac slowed down, gave her a break while she recovered, and fucked her in a slow, delicious rhythm that had Natasha watching, and mimicking. Brad caught on quick, and shifted her hips back and forth in that same, slow, perfect way that had his cock rubbing against her insides while her clit tickled along his body.

And Vincent, she squeezed his girth, one hand wrapped around it, the other pressed to Brad to keep herself balanced. But, as she squeezed and caressed his cock, she opened her mouth, and wrapped her lips around the swollen tip.

She hadn't thought about it, hadn't meant to, but it was right there in front of her, with her fingers around it and its smell of sex and blood and life. And she'd never tell anyone, but ... she really wanted to. It always seemed like such a carnal thing, so salacious, so ... empowering. The look on Vincent's face, the deep, quiet moan, the way his cock flexed in her grip as she licked the ripe flesh, made her head swim.

"That ... is so ... fucking hot," Jessy said, staring.

Natasha managed a small, coy smile at her. Coy? She never did coy. But, she couldn't help herself. Everything was making blood rush to her head, fake life or not, and her whole body was tingling with impending orgasm. This was fun.

“Hey, Chris.” Jessy pat the man beneath her on the cheek, and slid off of his cock. “Go join Vincent.”

Natasha let go of Vincent, and twisted to look at Jessy full on. “W-what?”

Jessy, smirking and grinning, raised a knee so Chris could get out from under her. The man got on a knee beside Natasha on the bed, one leg off and on the floor so he was half standing, and he waited. They had self control, she had to give them that. He looked ready to burst, with precum dripping from the tip and down the cock's underside. Even more so, his whole cock was dripping with Jessy's cum.

Just as Natasha was about to protest, Brad found a perfect, oh god so fucking perfect rhythm, enough so she could feel his thickness drag along her swollen insides. She was soaking him, a copious amount of her fluids leaking onto his cock. Never, in all her masturbating sessions, did she ever get this wet. But having the man rock her with a gentle sway, while two other men waited for her to pleasure them? She was sinking into a pit of pure, lecherous sex.

And as much as she thought the night would be spent with her telling the ghouls what to do, she shivered when she put her lips onto Chris's cock, and heard him groan too. The power of it, of holding his pleasure in her hands, of a single suckle along the fat, swollen tip forcing the man to shudder, it made her feel ... high.

Or it could have been Brad, and the man's perfect rocking of her small body on his cock. She weighed nothing, and he was more than strong enough to lift and move her enough for the both of them.

The constant, blissful stimulus was making it hard to think straight, to do anything other than mewl, squeak, and moan.

One hand around Vincent's cock, the other around Chris's, she forgot about her new covenant, her issues with Maria and Daniel and Damien, her need to find a new apartment, all of it. Just let herself go, and stroked the two men faster. Every so often, she changed who she was kissing, suckling, but she managed to keep her hands moving on the two men, enough so the both of them were smiling down at her with voracious eyes.

She didn't have much practice with this sort of thing, but she'd seen enough porn — the good stuff, the stuff that indulges in slow, sensual, detailed scenes — to know what a good blowjob looked like. With suckling lips she slid the moist folds along the man's ripe flesh, down to the rim of the bulbous tip, and worked her lips back and forth along the base edge. Chris put a hand on her shoulder while his other struggled to find something to hold onto. Vincent also put a hand on her, and she smiled, giddy and drunk, before putting her lips onto his cock instead.

“Look at you.” Jessy, grinning like a devil, rolled over onto her back, and got closer. A lot closer. She shifted her way over until she was lying down next to Brad shoulder to shoulder, so Chris was on a knee between where their legs would have touched. On her back now, she put a pillow under her butt, and got comfortable with her legs wide.

Natasha looked over at her, at her hard body of lean muscle and beautiful curves, at her smooth legs, her smooth pussy, her breasts jiggling against her body as Isaac fucked her. He'd slowed down, a little at least, and hooked her leg further from Natasha over his shoulder. Her other leg was out to the side so everything was visible, and Natasha found her eyes locked onto where the man slid his cock into her ass.

Jessy was loving it. With her back arched, butt on the pillow, and hands underneath her head, she was relaxed and perfectly at home with a man fucking her ass, sinking himself into her until every inch was gone. The woman's pussy was leaking juices down onto the man's shaft, and leaking more as he worked his length back and forth inside her. More than enough apparently, for Jessy to groan and shift her hips as another orgasm went into her legs and curled her toes.

Look at you, she'd said. In a small amount of time Natasha had gone from sheepishly touching a man's cock, to riding it while stroking and blowing two other men. There was no word to describe the depths she'd sunk to, and the freedom she felt.

She stroked Chris faster, and put her lips back onto him, licking and suckling. Couldn't imagine her skills were any good, but it didn't seem to matter to the boys, who were all making tiny moans and groans as she played with them. And their eyes, their hungry eyes spurred her on, until Chris started to shudder and his cock flexed within her mouth.

His cum flooded her. She was most definitely not prepared for the taste of it, which she'd never tasted in her whole life, dead or not. Some salt, some bitterness, and most definitely not Kindred friendly; she wouldn't be able to digest it. If he'd been a vampire, it'd have faded to nothing before that became a problem, but a ghoul was flesh and blood and life. So she opened her mouth, and let it fall back onto the man's cock, down her chin, and onto her chest.

Everyone groaned. Natasha blinked up at Chris, but glanced at the others in the corner of her vision. They were all staring at her and her breasts, where she felt the warm drops of cum land. Thick, heavy globs of the white liquid fell from her lips, some of it trailing along the corner of her jaw before sliding down her neck and onto her chest. And she wanted more. She licked along the man's glans,

suckling and kissing the swollen tip, until more gushes of his cum were falling onto her chest.

Only when Chris had to back away, overstimulated, did she let go of him and turn toward Vincent. She gave him the same treatment, suckling, kissing, doing everything her mind told her she should be embarrassed about. But that little voice was gone, and the beast in her belly was happy to indulge in raw, sexual freedom, before the meal.

Vincent came quickly, and she peeked up at the kine, at the muscles and blood before her as she worked her lips back and forth. She let it spill from her mouth the same, and down her tiny body until it was trickling down her stomach. Two hands free now, she put the other on his leg to brace herself in toward him while she milked him of his cum.

When he was done, she let him go too, and both men sat down on the other end of the bed, looking over the lying Brad and Jessy to her. Bodies squashed together on her bed. They looked at Jessy a little too, but mostly her, and the cum dripping down her body.

Brad started to thrust up into her. She hadn't asked him to, and if he'd said he was going to start shoving his hips up to meet her, she probably would have stopped him. But the big ghoul started to pound upward, and she was left to bounce on his cock as he held her hips and pulled her down to meet each thrust.

She turned into a squeaking mess, weight falling forward and hands grabbing his chest as best she could. Didn't work very well, and soon she was on a hand and elbow, almost falling over but unable as the huge ghoul drove his cock into her little body, just enough to hurt a little. More than enough to make her start to tremble as her insides squeezed and the pleasure ripped through her. Composure — not that she had much left — was out the window, and she collapsed completely onto Brad's chest as he sank



his cock balls deep into her with a hard thrust, again, and again. The audible splashing sound was her cum, and she knew it. It was on her pussy's lips, on Brad's pelvis, and all along her thighs until it dripped down to her knees.

“Brad, you dickhead, ease up. She said be gentle.” Jessy gave him a slap on the shoulder, and he stopped.

Thank god. Quivering, tender insides clenching with each wave of orgasm, she set her hands against Brad's chest, and forced herself to sit up. Didn't help much. The tingly waves, right down into her toes and up into her shoulders, every one had her trembling and her squeaks coming out. She sounded like a mouse, but she couldn't help it.

When she at last got control of her muscles again, she looked down at Brad, and giggled. Another very, very not-Natasha sound, but the man had cum on his stomach from when it'd dripped off of her. Damn she was a giddy mess. A hungry, horny, giddy school girl. Ugh.

Grinning, wiping her wrist across her lips to clear them of cum, she reached down, and let the beast take over. A different sensation to a forced Kiss, and one she hadn't experienced in a long, long time. The beast in her gut was normally content to stalk from the shadows, grab someone with her Kindred strength, and drink of them. But now, it was getting a taste of sensual feeding, sexual feeding, with all her nerves firing bliss as a precursor for the impending meal.

Brad sat up as she pulled on his shoulders. He had to slouch a bit, big as he was, petite as she was, but with a little work, he managed to get down low enough so she could get her lips up to his neck. Big, muscled neck, filled with warm blood, something she could bite, drink, devour.

“Hold still,” she said. The moment before the Kiss was like edging an orgasm, and the sweet release of sinking her fangs into skin and blood and life was every bit as sweet.

He may have held still, but she didn't. Moving her hips just enough to keep the friction going, a subtle and playful motion, she started to drink him.

It was enough to send the man into orgasm, and she grinned as she felt his whole body flex for a moment, before the man relaxed into her. Warm cum flooded her insides, but she was already stuffed to nigh painful capacity, and it leaked out of her by the second spurt. It wasn't the cum she was paying attention to though, it was the blood.

Sweet, delicious, warm blood flowing into her mouth. Each wave drowned her in a potent concoction of bliss, satisfaction, hunger sated, and muscles relaxing, only for the grinding of her pussy along Brad's cock to stoke the heat between her thighs. Part of her mind drifted down to the sensation of her pussy squeezing, pulsing, little spasms making her own cum drip into the mix of white oozing out of her. Most of her mind remained fixated on sucking every drop of blood out of her prey.

She slid her knees out from under her, and wrapped her legs around the man. So big compared to her, she fit inside his arms and legs, disappearing in his lap and embrace. But it was him that was trapped, unable to move, groaning, pumping seed into her until she was sure the man was going to drain himself dry. And still she drank down his blood. He was huge, he had a lot! And she indulged, gulping down the thick liquid as the two of them came.

It wasn't until he started to fall back that she let go. He went down like a bag of sand, back to the blankets, panting, exhausted. She was still sitting on his cock, and shifting her hips a little to milk her own orgasm aftershocks, taut muscles squeezing on his shaft.

Every motion, every inch of him she worked in and out of her, had her trembling, and her back arched and body spasmed as the sparks worked through her.

She looked over to Chris and Vincent. The two of them were on Jessy again, sort of. Chris was massaging her breasts, and Vincent was fingering her sex, while Isaac continued to fuck her ass. Three men, touching her and rubbing her and feeling her and fucking her. She'd just been in that boat! A foursome! The little Mekhet blinked down at her cum-covered chest, her hard nipples on her small breasts, and where her lips were spread open on Brad's girth. He was still hard; because of the drugs no doubt. So, Natasha, powered with a belly full of blood and unable to help herself, started to grind her hips a bit on the exhausted man. Six people on her bed, every bit of space taken up by panting, sweating, moaning bodies. And Chris and Vincent were hard once again.

No wonder Jessy was a sex addict. She could get used to this.

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Focus on the ugly thing in your hands, Natasha. Focus. Focus.

No use, it wasn't happening. She had one thing on the mind, and that was sex. Sex. Sex. And more sex. Memories of Brad and Vincent and Chris, their warmth, their blood, their cum, covering her, surrounding her, one on each side and one underneath her, between her thighs. She couldn't stop thinking about it! But being a vampire had its advantages: without the blush of life on, her arousal was kept to the mind.

The mind was a powerful thing though, prone to wandering, exaggerating, and crafting little universes all its own. And Natasha's was a potent one. It had no trouble crafting glorious scenes of her and the four ghouls, and Jessy too, wrapped in lust and sex and cum and orgasms and flesh and heat and delicious, delicious blood. Many scenes, in many circumstances. Most of them with her in the middle, being lathered from head to toe in sex, pampered in some

fantasies, held down and forced to enjoy it in others. She and Jessy had been the dominate ones, from beginning to end, but she had to admit, the idea of being pinned down by those men, and having things done to her...

Any minute now, she was going to buy a trash erotica novel, indulge in the trite romance, just so she could experience a little more of that heat that had somehow brainwashed her. And then after that, watch some porn. And then, maybe ask Jessy about doing that again, if she could muster up the courage. Now that she was out of the heat of the moment, she had trouble even imagining it'd been her in the middle of an orgy. Cum was all over her by the end of it when Chris and Vincent rejoined her. She Kissed Isaac too! Her belly was still full of blood, and she felt high on the energy, and the memory. Maybe—

“Natasha?”

“Ah, sorry Sire. Just, distracted.”

He nodded, and returned to his dictation. It was a nice room for quiet conversation, an office in the underground of the Elysium tower, with the typical black marble walls, but some normal chairs around a table for their laptops.

“This bowl was found in Egypt, from likely before 1000 BC, and as you can see from the bones, these belonged to a human child.”

Ok, thoughts of sex gone. She'd thought they were just animal bones, but human bones, a child's at that, soured her train of thought. Probably for the best, her distracted mind was ruining her focus.

“Why human? Why a child?”

Daniel shrugged, and reached for the bowl in her hands. More than happy to give it back now that she knew what it was, and her

sire put it down next to the bowls holding other body parts. Next to them were carvings in clay, old old clay.

“Before the end of the classical antiquity period, we have evidence to suggest the Greeks and Egyptians practiced haruspex and other divinations from human bodies as much as the bodies of goats and sheep. The records are difficult to decipher, hieroglyphs and whatnot. But we do know that certain groups would practice this darker form of haruspex and bone studying, and from it, acquired knowledge considered evil.” Her sire raised his hands, and quoted ‘evil’ with his fingers.

Natasha laughed. “You are t-too old to do that, Sire.”

He managed a tiny smile, and returned to the table the two of them sat at.

“These are diagrams of the liver, created by ancient Egyptians, not dissimilar to those created by the Etruscan centuries later. Many of the symbols here a have never been translated; much of it hidden or lost to time.”

“C-Can we translate?”

“No. But, we can observe them through the same lens we use on the other occult objects. They have power, but what that power is, we do not know.” Adjusting his glasses, he peered down at one of the clay molds, and ran his gloved fingers along the symbols carved on its face. Make no nevermind he was holding a clay mold of a human liver or anything. She needed gloves.

“What does the lens show?”

“The symbols glow, but that’s it. There’s no chemical here that would make them do such, so whatever it is, is of the same nature as the ghosts the lens is also capable of showing.”

He said it so casually, ghosts, like they were normal things. They weren't! He might have accepted them as a factual part of life, but to her, they were just blurry images she could only see when looking through a weird device they called the 'lens' when the room was lit with blue flame light. Scary hands reaching out and grabbing her ankles whenever she closed her eyes.

Course now those thoughts were fighting for space against the plethora of sexual thoughts in her head. Chris's groans as she milked him. Vincent covering her breasts in cum. Brad filling her as she drank his warm blood down. Jessy, watching it all.

Enough. You're not a horny young man, you're a professional. Act like it.

"M-Maybe we should ... see about connecting items?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we have a lot of occult things, and ... and we know the lens shows something. We know certain items can interact, like the Prince showed with the charm and the ... the ... shrunken head." Bringing up the memory made her face scrunch up. "P-Process of elimination. Check each item against each item."

"Could take a lot of work. The inventory on these items is large."

Her bosses had a treasure trove of the world's darkest, vilest, vilest, most disturbing objects. Wonderful.

"If it's the only way we can look for other interactions, then—"

The door swung open, and cracked against the wall. Daniel didn't react, but Natasha jumped in her seat with a meep, and looked to the storming Prince.

She was normally so calm, so calculating, so strong and confident and everything a leader should be. The woman before her was a raging typhoon, and Natasha's beast curled up and whimpered inside her gut. This was a look behind the curtain she wasn't looking forward to.

"I should kill her," Antoinette said, hands in fists at her side.

Daniel shook his head. "You know it will only cause more trouble, Prince."

"She dares to squat in my city, and proceeds to taunt me with her bargaining? I should rip her limb from limb."

The sheriff sighed, put down the clay mold, and turned his head to look at her directly.

"Could you?"

Natasha smirked. Of course the Prince could kill ... whoever this person was they were angry about. Woman was five centuries old, and she'd seen the Prince slaughter Kindred with her bare hands, while being shot from several guns.

But Antoinette snarled and looked down.

"Perhaps, but ... perhaps not." She sighed, long and heavy, before she joined them at the table. "With Viktor, Tony, and Lucas all dead, I thought perhaps calmness would settle upon the city. But now that damn Begotten has—" She stopped short when her eyes met Natasha's. "Ah, I am sorry my dear. This is horrible of me, to lament to you and your sire like this."

"Ah, it's ... it's ok, Prince." Mental note: ask what a Begotten is later.

“You will get to see a side of me only Daniel is familiar with. And Jack on occasion.” She smirked, leaned back in her chair, folded a leg over the other, and rested her chin in her palm. Like a young girl, fantasizing. Like Natasha was just a few seconds ago. “Poor boy. I scared him terribly, that night Lucas arrived at my Black Hall uninvited.”

Natasha blinked, and tried to offer the ancient creature a genuine smile, but all she managed was a nervous tick. Genuine, one-to-one normal talk, with the Prince. Jack may have gotten used to it, but she certainly hadn't.

Silence followed as Natasha waited for the Prince to finish her thoughts. But that might have been a bad idea, as with a slow dawning of some hidden realization, the Prince eyed her, quizzically, and Natasha froze. Uh oh.

“My dear Natasha, I have a job for you.”

Daniel raised a brow, and looked between the two of them. “I thought the investigation was to be my concern, Prince?”

“I need you looking into Azamel more, old friend. She is hiding something, and that Mark fellow ... well, you were there.”

Secret information. Secret information. Natasha was tempted to raise her hands and cover her ears rather than listen. She was used to dealing with such things with the Invictus, but the Invictus were a large corporation of contracts and money and power, with one hand oblivious to the other's actions. The Prince was all that and then more, condensed into a single person; every limb knew everything. One misspoken sentence from her, and Natasha could be walking out of the office with information that could land her dead by sunrise.

Or you're just exaggerating everything because you've become a scared baby, Natasha. You used to be a right hand of the Invictus,



what's the matter with you?

“Natasha,” Antoinette said, “we have been warned of an unusual threat. We do not understand its nature, or understand its motives. All we know is that our old acquaintance Azamel has warned of us spiders.”

“Sp-p-piders?”

The Prince nodded, and reached across the table to grab one of the bowls. This one had tiny bones in it, some feathers, and some dried up bits that looked like prunes that Natasha was pretty sure weren't prunes.

“Azamel is holding information from me, Miss Vola, and I do not appreciate her nerve, her bargaining, or her gall. But, in order to play the game, I need to know every detail.”

“Every d-detail?”

“Of course. How do you think I became Prince? To risk is to throw away what could be yours, if only you were to exercise patience, and cunning.” She leaned in, put her elbows on the table, and smirked at the tiny Mekhet. “And while Azamel may think I have grown lax or careless in my time, she will learn otherwise.”

Natasha wasn't so sure. The Prince was a softer person now, even with her anger. But then, she was ten fold older than Natasha, so perhaps it was the young Mekhet's ignorance. She couldn't imagine what sort of roots Antoinette had planted in the city, what sort of safeguards. The Invictus often suspected a corporation, a talented agent, an unusual city district, were all her doing, but they had no way to be sure. She was crafty.

“I ... I d-d-did see spiders.”

“Oh?”

“Just regular spiders! Regular sp-piders, my first day. On the stairs.” They were just regular looking spiders after all, and she dismissed the silly idea with a hand wave.

Daniel and Antoinette both hmmm’d their interest though.

“All the more reason I am giving you this task, Miss Vola. You have a great eye for detail, and that is what I need. Azamel told us the spider threat grows in the tunnels, beneath Devil’s Corner. You are to investigate and discover what you can.”

Spiders, ugh. She may have been a Kindred, but she was still a girl.

“Yes P-Prince.”

Maybe she’d get to see Damien again?

# Interlude 1

~~2010~~

~~Ashley~~

Ashley sat up. Her bed. Her lovely, awesome, comfortable, super amazing bed. And normally it'd be empty.

“Julee, get up.”

“Nnnng.” Her friend rolled over and sank her face into her pillow.

“Get up!”

“Nng. Nnnn.”

Ashley rolled her eyes, and pulled down the blankets to expose the brunette. Both of them were in pajamas, pink for Ashley, purple for Julee.

It was Ashley's bedroom, and the pink blankets were covered in pictures of kitties with big anime eyes. Julee preferred darker colors, and dogs instead of cats. Cause she was dumb. Cause cats were the best.

“Don't you have classes today?” Ashley said.

“Nnnnno. Professor taking day off.”

Lazy ass professor. Julee was breezing on through her writing class cause the man was content to let his students not bother with class. Ashley's Language Arts teacher wasn't so nice. Second year university introduced some odd professors with weird habits.

Ashley crawled over onto Julee's back, and straddled her. Her friend didn't respond with anything more than a whimper and groan, and tried to dislodge her with as much effort as a comatose bear. Pathetic. Ashley laughed and lay down on her friend, elbows to the blankets.

"Got a boyfriend yet?"

Julee groaned and shook her head. "No. I thought Rick liked me, but I tried getting his attention a little more. Smiled at him, batted my eyelashes and stuff. Nothing."

"He's just a man, dumbass. You can't flirt and expect him to pick up on it. Get some of those marshalling wands those airplane guide dudes use, and guide him right to your pussy," Ashley said. And she laughed. Julee didn't think it was so funny though, and she whined into the pillow. Ashley's extra pillow. "Well fine, if you're going to be a baby, go to your room."

"No. I'm lonely."

"Oh I get it. You want love." Ashley snuggled her chest into Julee's back, and squeezed her legs around her hips a bit.

"Not from you anymore! Meanie." Julee squirmed a little more, but gave up a few seconds later. As per usual, girl gave up on anything after three seconds, even escaping Ashley's advances.

"I don't believe that."

Ashley put a kiss on Julee's ear, before her lips lowered to find her friend's neck.

Friends with benefits. Neither of them had boyfriends yet, or had ever slept with a man. But they'd found each other when they came to university, and when Ashley had flirted with her a little, just for fun, she'd been surprised to find Julee receptive. University was a

time for experimentation after all, and a little alcohol later, the two got naked and spent the night having sex.

And kept having sex. A lot. University had a way of destroying inhibitions. Something to do with all the alcohol probably. And the weed. And just being surrounded by horny young adults all the time. And it was easier than finding boyfriends, men they could get along with.

Ashley leaned her weight onto one elbow, and slid the other hand down Julee's body. The brunette didn't resist; never did. Much as Ashley was often the initiator, Julee was always ready to receive. She slid her hand under the waistband of her friend's pants, down the crease of her lovely dancer's butt, and down to the folds of her delicate little pussy.

Julee wriggled and squirmed, but only enough to give the pretense she didn't want this. Ashley was a hornball, but Julee was like paper in front of a fire. Normally, perfectly calm, but the moment someone touched her with a flame, Julee was primed for major fucking. Any guy would be lucky to have her; a kiss on the neck and she was wet. Literally. Ashley's fingers found just a hint of moisture budding in the entrance of her canal, and she'd been teasing her a total of one minute.

“God you are such a slut.”

“Not ... nice...” Julee's voice melted into little murmurs, and her wriggling ceased. Which was Ashley's signal to get off of her, and pull off her pants. Girl didn't resist, not even a little. Not even as Ashley flipped her over, and grinned down at her.

“Legs all nice and smooth. Pussy too. Looking to jump Rick on the first date?”

“ ... maybe.”

Ha. Ashley got down on her elbows between her friend's toned thighs, and leaned in to put a gentle kiss on her friend's clit. Immediate mewls. Ah, Julee Julee, acting so sweet and shy and innocent all the time, and craving sex more than any guy she knew. Ashley blamed the internet and all the porn.

Chuckling, she started to plant tiny kisses on Julee's swelling clitoris. But five seconds in, the door knocked, ruining what could have been an orgasm-filled morning.

"Yo, Ash! Come on, you're going to be late." Brad, yelling outside the apartment door.

"Shit, right. Coming! Twenty minutes!"

"What the fuck, twenty minutes?" he called. Yeah they were going to be late at this rate, fuckity fuck.

"Up up," Ashley said, and hopped off the bed. "Got twenty minutes to get dressed."

Julee sat up, and glared daggers at her. "Yooouuu bitch."

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Ashley sat down in the seat, and grinned her biggest jackass grin at the old fogy next to her. He had no business staring at her like she didn't belong. She was dressed nice! It was a beautiful, strapless thing with poofy shoulders, black with black gloves, and tasteful cleavage. Probably just staring cause she was young; his wife stared at her the same way.

Julee sat down next to her, and Ashley leaned in to her friend.

"We're surrounded by old farts."

Julee giggled, and pushed her back into her seat. She was wearing a similar dress to Ashley, but she opted for white instead of black,

and her dress went down to the heel while Ashley's stopped at the knee. They were a matching set, as per usual. She liked that.

"Yeah well, I hear the Pale Lady likes to mix things up with her playing. Attracts the young and old."

"Yeah." Brad, looking delightful in his tux, leaned in over Julee to join the conversation. "I hope Chris was right."

Brad's boyfriend. The man had great musical taste, and he managed to find something most people could enjoy. But Ashley and Julee were different, they listened to music for more than just background noise. So, a little skepticism was warranted.

It was a damn nice place though, and Brad had the tickets, so it was a free nice place. The Grand Manorla Opera House! Fucking massive, with rows upon rows of seats, and a balcony, box seats, a fancy chandelier, and glorious, grand, red drapes. Drapes that would kill a man if you dropped them on him. The seats were so soft and lined with the same red color, and the railings between rows were colored ivory. And the stage, oh god the stage was massive. The red drapes were down, lined with ivory thread, and above were ivory dragons carved into the decor. So beautiful.

The building housed fifteen hundred people, and from the looks of it, every seat was full. Lot of talking going on, everyone some degree of excited or worried the show would be bad. No one had ever heard of the Pale Lady before a few weeks ago, when she'd suddenly started doing shows. No advertising though, just pure word of mouth that spread. And while Ashley and Julee weren't really into classical music, they appreciated it, and a lot of their musical taste included music with a lot of depth and complexity. Just because it was played on a synthesizer instead of a cello didn't mean it couldn't have depth or beauty!

The lights started to dim. The crowd started to quiet. Ashley's legs started to bounce. What would she sound like? What would she

look like? Didn't matter, so excited! Just visiting the Manorla was a treat.

The curtains parted, and the crowd went silent. A woman sat in the center of the stage upon an armless chair, a simple thing of wood and black cushion. The lights were dim except for a single one pointed at the musician from a distant corner, casting her shadow long behind her. The cello stood proud on the stage, and she held it by the neck with finesse. Ashley didn't know what graceful looked like, until she saw the pale woman holding the monstrous instrument.

Whoever she was, she wore a black dress, sleeveless, with tiny straps over the shoulders. The skirt was long, very long, longer than her legs so it hid her feet. But it was the black veil over her head that had Ashley staring. It was see-through, and the light exposed the shape of her, the long hair that fell behind. White hair? It went well with her pale skin. Maybe she was very old? She was too far for Ashley to see her skin well, but she certainly didn't seem old.

And she seemed ... majestic. She wasn't doing anything, just sitting there and waiting, bow in her hand and still upon the strings of the cello. No sound, no movement, nothing. Pure, distilled silence. Ashley listened, straining her hearing as best she could, until the sound of people breathing around her, and the sound of her own heartbeat was apparent. Everyone in the room waited, doing the same thing she was doing, until she was sure some people started holding their breath in hopes to hear the Pale Lady do something. Anything.

At last, she started to play. Slow, quiet, a deep note that she dragged out for a long time, with a touch of waver. Like a crying mountain. The urge to start writing danced on Ashley's fingers, but she'd have to wait until the show was done, then she could vomit words on the page until she had something worth sharing. Focus on



the show for now. Another note, higher pitched, but still slow, shaking, a lamenting breeze.

The Pale Woman started to play faster. And louder. What were once quiet notes rose until the stirring and breathing of the audience was buried in the power of the instrument. Other instruments joined in, invisible until more lights joined the stage to expose the new musicians. A drummer, a bassist, a guitarist, and a keyboardist — definitely not a piano, as each note hit wasn't the typical vibration of piano string, but the digital-yet-beautiful sound of a choir. And the bass and guitar were electric! Electric, with distortion, but it was the cello that lead them with a louder, heavier sound. It was her show, and everyone else was there to support her playing.

And play she did. What had started as gentle melodies and eventual loud melodies, evolved into a flurry of notes that grabbed Ashley's ears, and pulled her into a skyward journey. The girl struggled to keep her eyes open; she wanted to close them so she could let the sound take her into the clouds in a rapid ascent before the turbulence and shredding notes spun her around. But she kept them open, desperate to see the motions, the way the Pale Lady almost banged her bow against the strings. The guitar was playing the classical melody, the cello was playing the shredding solo.

For an hour. Over an hour, the song went through movements, evolving the melody but keeping its structure. Key changes, time signature changes, tempo changes. For an hour, the Pale Lady and her four companions mixed classical music with metal with unique blends, with pinches of jazz, blues, and rock. But always it came back to the classical sound, controlled and dominated by the cello.

When it was over, the curtains came down, and the crowd roared with clapping. Not many cheers; such was the nature of the old and conservative. But when Ashley glanced their way, she could see they

were smiling, nodding, looking at each other and chatting about the unique but enjoyable sound.

“Wow,” Julee said, “that was ... really good.”

“An hour is too short!” Ashley whined, threw her hands up, and collapsed into the seat. “I mean, I guess it was one song from beginning to end.”

“Yeah.” Brad nodded and got up from his chair. “I owe Chris. Come on, let’s get out of here, I want to tell him about the concert. And I got an essay to write.”

Bleh, no time to bask in the post-music bliss. Ashley nodded and got up along with Julee, and the three of them shuffled there way out into the isle.

“Excuse me.” A man came up to join them, an usher, dressed sharp and offering a warm, gentle smile. Guess he didn’t hate his job. “The Pale Lady noticed a few rather young faces in the audience, and she was hoping you could join the post-show reception.”

The two girls squealed and jumped up and down a few times, before they stopped, looked around at all the old people staring, and blushed.

“Fuck. I can’t,” Brad said, “gotta go. You girls cool taking a taxi home?”

“I am,” Ashley said. “Julee?”

Her friend nodded.

“Very good. If you’ll come with me.” The man bowed, and started walking toward the reception hall.

Night was getting better and better.

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Wow. Wow. Wow.

Ashley couldn't stop fidgeting. Where to put her hands? Where do you normally put your hands!? She held them to her stomach, and squeezed on her fingertips, one at a time, as she watched the Pale Lady move down the isle. Still wearing her veil, but the lighting was strong enough to show her face through it, and expose the woman underneath as more than a silhouette.

She was beautiful. Ashley thought maybe she'd be the type to look great for her age, one of those sixty-year-old actors who still have smooth skin and great figures. How they did that, no one knew. Fountain of youth, deal with the devil, who knows. But the woman behind the veil looked to be in her thirties, despite her long white hair. Maybe she dyed it?

The Pale Lady did not do autographs. People tried to get them, but she smiled and shook her head as she walked past the rich and old, people dressed in all sorts of fancy clothes that had Ashley jealous. Not that she wanted to look like a plump old lady, but that she wanted to wear an expensive dress that looked like it came out of that Titanic movie, giant jewel necklace included. But the Pale Lady didn't seem to care about the jewelry, the dresses, the men attached to the dresses, or any of that. She looked only at the faces as she passed by, looking through them as much as anything.

The isle was lined with black stanchions with white ropes, easily knocked over if someone wanted to. But the Pale Lady needed little in the way of security; a couple of guards at each end was plenty. There was a man too, someone wearing a trench coat and glasses walking behind her. Husband? He wore gloves, so if he had a ring Ashley couldn't see it, and the Pale Lady didn't wear a ring anyway. Who was he then?

“She’s so tall,” Julee said, leaning toward Ashley to put her lips against her ear.

“I know. And ... curvy.” Possessed by evil gremlins, her eyes wandered up and down the woman’s body. She hadn’t really noticed it from so far, and with the Pale Lady holding the cello in the way, but the woman was voluptuous. Like, really. How did a woman with a small waist have such wide hips, and such a massive rack? Ashley snorted on a chuckle, and Julee elbowed her in the side.

The Pale Lady grew closer, and closer, and Ashley and Julee stared up at her as she started to pass.

But then she stopped, and turned to look down at the two of them. Ashley’s mouth parted slowly, and her eyes stared through the veil at the beautiful woman. Luscious red lips, and ... red eyes?

“You two are quite young to enjoy such an event, non?” she said.

Talking. The Pale Lady was talking to them. A subtle French accent, and a subtle smile to go with it. Ashley had to say something back. Say something back!

Julee tried first. “I ... um ... we’re...”

“We were really moved!” Ashley said. Or squeaked. She had to speak up to get over the volume of the surprised crowd; everyone had leaned in to hear the Pale Lady speak.

“Y-Yeah! It had layers, but also, catchy riffs. Instead of just being snooty, it was emotional, and accessible, and ... and...” Julee blinked, and looked left and right. The crowd had gone quiet in seconds once she’d started talking. People were leaning in for more than just the Pale Lady, they were leaning in to hear the two young girls talk about the famous cellist’s music. Some had taken out notepads, and others had taken out cameras.

Their pictures would be in the paper! Quotes taken out of context!

Ashley's palms started to sweat a bit, and she made her best fake smile.

"It was beautiful," she said. Something nice and quotable, right?

The Pale Lady chuckled, and turned to face them completely. "It is rare to find the young interested in such music. Would you like to return with me to my suite? I would love to speak with ones of your age."

"Back to your place?" Julee blinked, looked at Ashley, and gulped. "What do you think?" she said.

"I think hell yeah!"

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She hadn't expect the night to go like this, not at all. By now she expected to be back home with Julee, texting Brad about the show, maybe eating ice cream and watching some TV. Definitely giving Julee that orgasm she'd teased her friend with. Hell, maybe getting one herself.

She did not expect to be sitting inside a luxurious changing room, complete with those silly old mirrors with the light bulbs fitted to them, and a purse on the desk. The room had little else besides that, some cabinets, a fridge, and a couple of very, very comfy couches. No dresses though, or all the stuff a performer might need access to. Whoever this woman was, she didn't like to expose herself or her wardrobe.

"I wonder what she wants to talk about?" Julee said. The two of them were on the couch, hip to hip, and rocking a bit with their anxiety.

“Guessing our lives and how they relate to her music. You gotta admit there weren’t many young people there.”

“Yeah but the old people looked like they were kind of surprised by the music too.”

Ashley nodded, got up, and started to pace, each step a little kick of the foot in front of her while she had her hands hooked behind her. The Pale Lady didn’t exist except for a few concerts. No CDs, no radio, no MP3s or whatnot to be found online, except for some shitty recordings from people who managed to sneak in some devices. What a weird combination of conspiracy and classic intrigue.

The door opened. Ashley squeaked and jumped onto the couch, put her hands on her knees, and beamed an awkward smile.

The Pale Lady came into the room, still wearing her veil, but alone this time. So tall and curvy, and the way she walked, so calculated and refined, so controlled and deliberate. Such a stereotype! The powerful, intelligent woman who controlled people’s desires with the sway of her hips, and their thoughts with the sound of her lips.

Ooh, she’d have to write that one down later.

Smiling at the two of them, the Pale Lady removed her veil and set it aside. Long white hair, not wrinkled or thin, came down to her hips, thick and wavy. Her skin was pale and her lips dark red. And she did have red eyes! Such fancy contact lenses. She looked like some sort of beautiful succubus with the red gaze, and she met Ashley’s blatant staring unwaveringly.

“Bonjour,” she said.

“H-Hello,” they said.

“Quite in sync you two are. Close friends?”

Ashley and Julee nodded, but only Ashley spoke up. “We are. And, uh ... we um ... we really liked the show, and—”

“Please, we need not speak of the music. I understand you enjoyed it, and your summary of why at the reception was fitting.” Nodding, the Pale Lady came and sat upon the couch that sat at an angle across from them.

Well, guess she didn’t want what Ashley figured she wanted then.

“Then, um ... what do you want to talk about?” Julee said.

“You two, of course.”

Ashley blinked several dozen times. “Us? But ... but we’re just a couple of university students.”

The Pale Lady smiled at them, and folded one leg over the other while one of her hands drifted down her leg. Ashley couldn’t help but follow the fingers with her eyes before forcing herself to look back up. The long skirt had some heft to it, and it molded to the woman’s legs enough for Ashley to see their curves a little as well.

“You two have a spark in you,” she said. “If I may ask, are you two artists?”

“We are, we are!” Ashley leaned forward and set her hands on her bouncing knees. “I write a lot, romance sorta stuff. Julee writes music, and paints. We also do dancing stuff, and sometimes gymnastics!”

“Delightful.” Her eyes scanned them up and down a few times, but they lingered on Julee for a little longer. One of her eyebrows raised inquisitively before the Pale Lady let her eyes drift with thought. “You two have passion.”

“Y-Yes,” Ashley said. She looked over at Julee too, but her friend was looking down, squirming. The Pale Lady’s look must have stirred something in her. “We both really like what we do. Julee’s trying to learn how to sing too. But she’s a quiet songbird, hasn’t found her wings yet.”

“Ashley!” Julee blushed and wriggled, like a worm on a hook. “I ... I uh...”

“Do not worry, Julee,” the Pale Lady said, “from one musician to another, I would not ask you to perform without planning for it. Such demands can be cruel, even from supportive friends.”

Oh damn, that was a really elegant way of calling Ashley mean.

“S-Sorry,” Ashley said.

Julee shook her head and smiled at her though, both of them. “It’s ok.”

“We may all be perhaps somewhat tense. Here.” The beautiful woman got up, and retrieved a bottle of wine from the cabinet. “To loosen our tongues and our legs.”

Ashley snorted on the laughter that jumped out of her. “Um, sure! But uh, you sure you want a couple of university students getting drunk? We have a tendency to ... I dunno, get rowdy.” Wow, no idea the Pale Lady could be this fun, or make jokes.

The Pale Lady smirked. “All the better.”

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“Ok, ok.” Ashley leaned in toward the Pale Lady. Antoinette was her name apparently—French! So pretty. “Ok, I have a confession. This ... mmmay not be the first time I’ve been drunk ... this week.”

The three of them were sitting on the same couch now, Antoinette at one end, Julee at the other, Ashley in the middle. Even



drunk, Julee was a quiet little butterfly, but at least she smiled a lot instead of being shy, more eye contact and more giggles.

“You are university students,” Antoinette said, “and artists as well. I expect some adventurousness from women your age.”

Adventurousness! Yes, awesome. “Yeah! Total adventurers. We do crazy things, like ... well, we came here!”

“Oui. Imagine my surprise that a few younger people were in my audience.” The beautiful, busty, gorgeous, crazy hot woman smiled down at them, and slipped an arm behind Ashley to set it on the couch’s back. Slick and suave.

“We do more than try out new things like this though!” Ashley took another long, long sip of her drink, and elbowed Julee almost hard enough for her friend to drop her glass. “Julee here poses for an art class! In some very skimpy clothing.”

“Shh ... you’re yelling.”

“I am not!” Maybe she was. “Julee and I both do gymnastics, so sometimes we’re asked to do poses. I got bored, but Julee, I think she likes it, everyone staring at her beautiful body.”

“Ashley!” Her friend frowned at her, but it faded quick as alcohol overpowered it with more smiles and giggling. Followed by more drinking of course.

“You two are delectable,” Antoinette said. “Your boyfriends must be quite enamored.”

“Psshaw. I’m single, Julee’s single. I mean we keep each other company in bed sometimes, but no boys in our lives yet. Ever. Sad!” She threw up her spare hand and lamented to the cruel universe. “We’re going to die virgins.”

“Ashley!” Like a parrot Julee was. “TMI.”

“It is ok, Julee. I find this all very endearing. And besides, you have had sex with each other, you are virgins no longer, despite what some may say.” Antoinette grinned down at the two of them, and dragged a finger along her lip in that slow, obviously seductive way. Wait, was she seducing them? God Ashley hoped she was. The Pale Lady was so fucking pretty. “And I am sure that, when you are ready and if you desire them, bountiful sex and fulfilling relationships with men will be yours.”

“Easy for you to say!” Ashley downed another glass, and started pouring another. The Pale Lady wasn’t having any though. Weird. “You’re so beautiful and curvy. You could have any man or woman right now if you wanted. And those boobs! Are ... are they real?” She leaned in, and stared at the enormous sweater-puppies filling Antoinette’s lovely dress. The tiny straps, lack of sleeves, formfitting bust, it all accented her breasts perfectly.

“Ashley! I think you’ve had enough.” Julee reached out for her drink, but missed, despite Ashley making no attempts to dodge.

“Me? Pffft you’re falling over in your seat.”

“You’re the one hitting on our host!”

“You’re the one—”

“Girls, girls, believe me, your honesty and joyfulness are a wonder and delight.” Her chuckles were sultry, and her gaze almost predatory. “But, yes, my breasts are real you silly imp.” The goddess lowered her gaze, eyes wandering, considering, before she looked back to the two girls. “Perhaps, you would like to confirm?”

“ ... w-what?” they said together.

“Would you like to see for yourself?” The gorgeous woman didn’t even blush with her words. Instead, the arm she had draped over the back of the couch slid down to find Ashley’s hair, and the curvy woman combed it with her fingers before her palm settled on Ashley’s shoulder. Touching her, the woman was touching her.

Ashley looked over at Julee. Her friend was staring at the two of them, dumbfounded. Good, it wasn’t just Ashley confused as fuck then. Confused, surprised, and very, very tempted.

“I uh ... I know I’m drunk, so correct me if I’m wrong, but I think you’re trying to seduce me.”

“Oh, you wish that I would not?”

“No! No no. God no.” She drank some more, set the glass down, and turned on the couch to stare whole body at the beautiful woman. Julee copied her, even leaned over her shoulder a bit to join in the staring. “Just ... d-didn’t think you’d be interested in a couple of girls like us. Or girls in general.”

“Quite interested. And quite hungry.” She licked her perfect lips, and turned to expose her back. “Please, unzip me.”

Ashley gulped, and reached out for the zipper. It moved out of the way and she missed. She tried again. It moved. Everything was moving, just a little, just enough to make it hard to aim her hands. Not her first time getting drunk, but it wasn’t just that. It was her pounding heart and her flush cheeks and panting breath and everything hitting her at once that was making it so very hard to concentrate. And that back, oh god the glorious back of the beautiful goddess. No bra; that’d clash with the perfect dress and its tiny straps.

She started to unzip it. Slowly, cause that’s about the only way she could do it steadily. But damn the zipper went down far, and far,

until it passed the small of Antoinette's back and exposed the waistband of what was, evidently, very pretty lace underwear, black.

The tall, voluptuous goddess stood up, took her shoulder straps into her hands, and pulled them down as she also leaned forward to let the dress fall from her torso. With her fingers, she pinched on the waist, and pulled it down over her hips, and further until the dress fell to her feet.

Both the young women on the couch watched her with wide eyes and dropped jaws as Antoinette stood there, naked but for her underwear that hugged her curvy figure so amazingly, Ashley could feel her body respond just staring at her. She was so tall, and the hourglass figure was almost inhuman.

The goddess turned around, and smiled down at the two girls. "Please, make room."

Fucking god yes. Ashley slid over, and almost started to bounce as she waited for Antoinette to sit. She did, slowly, emphasizing each motion, making her long hair pour down her back, making her ridiculously huge, alabaster breasts hang beneath her for the moment she bent over slightly before her large, smooth butt hit the couch.

Ashley was so going to write some erotica about this, the moment she got home.

"It has been some time since I have enjoyed the touch of another." Again she looked at them, red gaze and red lips devouring them. She said she was hungry, and she looked it. "Touch me, if you wish."

Touch her if she wished? Fuck she wanted to. Yeap, going for it. Alcohol be my guide.

Ashley gulped again, and reached out for the naked goddess next to her. Her fingers found the woman's breasts, and offered some gentle squeezing, including a little lift and nudge to see them jiggle a little. So fucking real. So fucking soft, and heavy, and fucking huge.

Chuckling, Antoinette hooked both her arms on the couch's back, and smiled down at the two helplessly enamored women. Julee had reached out as well, and started caressing the woman's nearest breast, just as awestruck. Drunk Julee was fun Julee.

"You two remind me of boys," she said, devious and seductive smile never leaving, "to be so brazen, and captivated." Ok, so it might have been a little objectifying, and maybe a little boyish to obsess over breasts like they were, but how could she not? "I feel embarrassed, being the only one so exposed. Come, undress for me."

Oh god oh god oh god. Those red eyes were peering into her soul! Or something cheesy and romantic and sexual she'd have to write about later. But, damn, looking into those red eyes, Ashley couldn't stop herself from getting up, and starting to undress. Julee stared at her too, until Ashley frowned at her friend.

"Get up here too!"

Julee squeaked, but joined her, and the two girls started working on each other's dresses. Though, as they began to slip the fabrics from their shoulders, Ashley kept glancing at the Pale Lady watching them. Being under her gaze was sending all sorts of thrills and tingly feelings through her body, getting her hot, wet; no doubt accelerated by being drunk, but those eyes! Those dangerous, hungry eyes were eating the two girls up like a dragon.

The woman licked her lips, and her teeth plucked at them in that super sexy, hot, oh-god-melting way. "I will drink of both of you tonight."

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~~Today~~

“What’re you gonna do this time?” Ashley said.

Julee shrugged, and rolled around a few times on Antoinette’s bed. “I dunno.”

“You never know! Come on, you gotta have something you wanna try.”

“I ... I don’t know. You know me, I like doing whatever the mistress wants.”

“Yeah but she’s letting us pick!” Ashley crawled on the bed toward her friend, and flopped down on top of her once Julee was on her stomach. Her friend squeaked, but surrendered quickly, as usual.

“I don’t like picking. I like letting her pick. I like letting Jack pick.”

Ashley rolled her eyes and straddled Julee’s back, weight on her knees, facing Julee’s feet. The two of them were wearing some silk boy shorts and some tight little tank tops. Lots of bubblegum candy sort of colors, blues and pinks and purples. The two of them enjoyed pairing colors off of each other, and Antoinette liked it when they did.

Ashley put her hands on Julee’s butt cheeks, and gave each of them a gentle slap. It didn’t jiggle much; the two of them were thin, lean things, after all. But, it did jiggle a little, with the small-but-toned shape of a small, fit girl’s butt. And she did love that butt, so she slapped it again, a little harder.

Julee groaned and kicked the bed a few times with her feet. “Hey, stop.”

“So I’m thinking, I’m riding Jack cowgirl style, and Antoinette can be standing in front of me, and I’m going to lick her and finger her

while Jack is fucking me, and—”

“You’re being ridiculous. That position wouldn’t work, and it wouldn’t be easy or fun if it did anyway.” Julee twisted underneath Ashley until she managed to roll over onto her back, Ashley still straddling her hips.

“You’re right, you’re right. Got to think about this logistically. There are three girls and one boy. Already we’re at the issue of ... well, he’s a guy, he can’t go as long as we can.” Even if they gave him blood, eventually Jack would succumb to sexual exhaustion trying to satisfy three women.

“Unless they decide to drink us dry at the start,” Julee said.

“Not gonna lie, I’d be ok with that too.” Cause having Jack inside her when his fangs pierced her neck was a whole new level of bliss that had her quivering just thinking about it. Didn’t matter how many times she had sex during the Kiss, it was always a shock. “But it’s nice to try out new things.”

“Where are they anyway? Mistress said to wait here for her.”

“Been waiting fifteen minutes, calm down,” Ashley said. She peeked over her shoulder to find Julee frowning, and she laughed before lying down on her friend, back to Julee’s chest. “ ... you ever wonder if Mistress will ... you know.”

“ ... change us?”

“Yeah. She said that, someday, she might do that. If we really wanted her to.”

“Lot of negatives with becoming a Kindred.” Julee hugged her and pat her bare belly a few times. The tank tops were barely more than bras and didn’t cover any of their stomachs. “No sun for one.”

“No more getting Kissed by Mistress or Jack.”

“But, we’d be vampires. Immortal. And we could be the ones Kissing humans instead.”

“We’re already immortal, as long as we keep getting Kindred blood.”

Julee shook her head. “You know that stops the moment we stop getting blood. If we were vampires, we could take any human’s blood, and live ... live forever.”

Wait, when did the conversation flip?

“You sure you don’t want it?” Ashley said.

“I ... no, not yet at least. I like working on my music, my stuff, you know? If we’re Kindred, we can’t just have fun anymore, we’d have to ... be a part of their world, in a real way. The sort of way that ... has things like Damien at our door ... with his goons.”

Yeah, that had not been a good time. Not a good time at all.

“Not sure I want to be part of that world either.” But, at the same time, being Antoinette’s ghouls, awesome as it was, was a dead end. No need to say it, Julee knew; Antoinette had told them about the Kindred world not long after they became ghouls, and the potential for them to join it. And that while they were ghouls, she’d protect them from all things, and they’d be free to live lives pursuing their interests.

But once they were Kindred, the rules would change. They’d be subject to all the harsh realities Kindred faced. And maybe worst of all, they’d no longer be Antoinette’s pets. No more nights with Antoinette, no more cuddling into her arms and pretending all the problems Kindred had didn’t exist. She doubted Antoinette would ever share Jack with another vampire.



She laughed and shook her head. The worries of a ghoul. She had all the time in the world, literally, to make her choice. And that was even assuming Antoinette ever gave it to them. They'd become Kindred, young and easy targets for other Kindred to exploit, trick, and manipulate. Like Jack.

Ashley giggled again as she thought of the man. Lately he'd been hunting more on his own, coming to join them with more blood in his belly, instead of getting it from them. Meant he didn't have to drink from them as much, which meant more time spent having sex, which was always awesome.

Speak of the devil. Antoinette and Jack came down to the stairs, side by side, both in suits. Jack looked so adorable in his suit, a cross between manly and charming. Mistress on the other hand looked like a modern day queen in her gray power suit, long skirt, low-heel shoes, and a white shirt underneath. Ashley and Julee never wore business clothes, way too uncomfortable, and way too not-what-an-artist-would-ever-wear sorta stuff. She had her pride as a writer to think about.

"I am sorry we are late, my pets," Mistress said. "Jack and I were discussing manners upon which Kindred can hunt. My love is becoming quite the seducer."

Ashley blinked, looked at Julee, and blinked a few more times before she sat up on her knees on the bed.

"Um, you're teaching him to seduce people, Mistress?"

"Only so that he may feed when he wishes, when he requires nourishment. Jack shares his bed with no one but myself, and my precious ghouls." Mistress walked over to the wall, and hung up her jacket on a dragon hook. "Do not worry, I believe I promised you both that tonight, you would be in charge of the bed, yes?" Antoinette laughed, a lovely, angelic sound, before she started undoing the zipper of her skirt and slid it off.

“Y-Yes!” Ashley bounced on the bed a few times, until the bouncing made her drift into Julee and knock her onto her side. “Yes, and I have lots of ideas.”

“That is good.” Mistress nodded, and undid the buttons of her shirt, which always grabbed everyone’s attention. Her black bra was huge; it had to be to contain her bosom. “Jack fed on two kine tonight. I do believe he is quite satisfied for blood, and aching to indulge in the touch of a woman.”

“Two?” Julee said, and they looked to Jack. The man squirmed and shifted around, little smiles coming through.

Once upon a time, Ashley thought maybe his shy attitude had been a facade, but she soon discovered the boy was both shy and intelligent. And blunt, when outside the bedroom. A certain personality she knew had a brutal side; she’d seen such types at university, and when they got truly upset, their words destroyed people.

But in the bedroom, he was a timid thing. Slowly but surely, he was growing more confident in his sexual side, and every night Ashley and Julee spent with him, they could see more of it. Still mostly timid though.

Ashley grinned. Human blood was quite an aphrodisiac for Kindred when they let it, so if Jack was filled to the rim, they could have some fun with him, and perhaps coax a little more of his sexual beast out of its shell.

She hopped off the bed and jogged over to Antoinette, before standing up on her toes to lean in and whisper.

“I don’t think Julee wants to decide things in the bedroom.”

“Yes, I expected as much. And you?” Mistress whispered back, grinning a sly little devil grin. The ancient Daeva was more than

willing to indulge Ashley her silly games, and she adored her mistress for it.

“Maybe ... you could drink her, but not too much. And when she’s super exhausted but still awake, Jack can pound her rough. Really rough.” Rough stuff. They rarely engaged in the rough-and-tumble sort of sex; Antoinette preferred a slower pace, and Julee was too submissive to challenge it. Not Ashley though! Nope, fuck that, she wanted to see the sheets move and the bed shake tonight.

Antoinette’s grin remained, and she pat Ashley on the shoulder before sliding off her pantyhose. Oh, those long long alabaster legs, thick and toned and curvy and smooth. And the Prince wore black underwear that bordered somewhere between work clothes, and sexy lace with a high hip, almost a thong. Such was the way of Daeva, to always look pretty, even if it was uncomfortable to wear all night.

The Prince walked to the bed, sat upon its edge, and motioned to Ashley.

“Ashley will be in charge tonight.”

Julee squeaked. “She will?”

“Indeed.” Antoinette reached out to pat Julee’s leg, and smiled her benevolent goddess smile. No need to say that she knew Julee didn’t want to be in charge; they’d known each other a long time. “Jack, please disrobe completely, blush for us, and come sit in the center of the bed.”

Little Jack — well, little for a guy — nodded, excited smile sneaking its way onto his face, before he started undressing. This was a pretty normal part of the routine, the girls watching him as he got naked, and then watching him as he blushed.

Such an attractive little man, Jack Terry. Ashley and Julee had been dancers and gymnasts when they became ghouls, and they kept up their physical activity to maintain their lean, agile bodies. Jack's body was similar, if more defined with muscle, abs, a beautiful iliac furrow on his hips, and pleasantly strong shoulders on his small frame. She'd worked with male gymnasts of a similar shape, though they typically stood three or four or twelve inches taller than the tiny Ventrue.

That didn't change how sexy he was. Every day he got a little more confident, and every day it made him a little sexier. Even now, as he crawled onto the bed with his shaft already hard between his legs, he offered Ashley a tiny grin. Not his usual, shy, quiet smile, but a real grin, a sexual I'm-looking-forward-to-this grin. Made her want to wrap her legs around him right there; but she had to wait. Not part of the plan. And she had to be careful. Jack was Antoinette's romantic love, and if Ashley got a little too bold, she might get a slap for it.

"Ok, Julee! Get naked, and lie down on your back."

Her friend, grumbling and giving her the evil eye, slid out of her underwear and shirt, and lay on the bed. On her back like that, she looked like a meal, and Ashley shivered when she looked at the mistress and the mistress's love. They were looking at Julee like she was, indeed, a meal, licking their lips and eyes roaming her body. Guess Jack could still eat, despite his full belly. Kindred could do that, she knew, eat until they were overindulged. Didn't do anything to a vampire other than give them more energy.

"Are we to enjoy ourselves, my pet?" Mistress said.

"Yes, yes! Feast on her." Ashley, vibrating with energy, sat herself by Julee's head, and grinned the biggest, vilest grin she could as Antoinette and Jack got onto their knees beside the meal. Girl probably thought she was going to feed both vampires in a glorious

double-bite Kiss. Very pleasurable, but not what Ashley wanted to see tonight.

Antoinette leaned over, whispered something to Jack, and offered Ashley a sly, devil wink, before the busty woman knelt down over Julee's side. Jack took up a kneeling position on her other side. All three of them, smiling down at the defenseless Julee. It was enough to have her friend squirming, nipples hardening, and her thighs pressing together. A bona fide feast.

The Prince held up her hand, stopping Jack from joining in. Oh, oh! The Prince wanted Julee first, before Jack got to have her. She lay beside her ghoul, huge breasts squished to the prey's chest, and she set her lips upon Julee's neck while her fingers danced down the girl's naked stomach, before finding her clitoris.

Julee's moans were quick to come. The Prince was a true master, able to summon the girl's arousal in mere seconds with just the correct amount of pressure, the right motions, the gentle caress that trapped her clit between two fingers. Ashley bit her lip at the sight of Julee's bare, smooth pussy under the Prince's finger, and how her thighs rubbed together while she wriggled like a worm on a hook.

"Are ... you are all going to ... watch?" Julee said.

"No." Antoinette leaned in closer, and put her lips on Julee's neck. "I am preparing the meal."

Julee's moans turned into a squeal, and then quiet mewls, as Antoinette started to drink her. God, it was so hot how Julee's arms came up and half-hugged the Prince, even as her blood drained away, and the Prince continued to play with her clit. Far faster a jump to the Kiss than Julee was used to, no doubt. She probably thought Ashley was getting her out of the way, so Ashley wouldn't have to share the mistress and Jack with her friend tonight.

Oh how wrong she was.

Antoinette was so good. So good, and beautiful, and amazing, and so skilled! She drank Julee very slowly, slower than Ashley had thought possible, and she leaned over her friend to smile down at her as Julee melted away. All the while, the mistress continued to gently massage Julee's pussy, her labia, her clitoris, in that special way she did when she wanted to get the girl's horny, but not let them cum.

Until she got just a little rougher, and pushed her over the edge. Julee whimpered, almost sobbed, as her hips pushed upward against the Prince's hands, and her body shivered with the pleasure waves Ashley knew well. That sweet, delicious orgasm during a Kiss, the way bliss rippled through the muscles down to the toes, and the Kiss forcing the muscles to relax between clenches so the pleasure wouldn't stop. It just pulsed through you, flowed outward from between the legs up into your chest and forced you to feel every wave of the orgasm. Even a sharp, quick one from the clitoris was an exhausting experience during the Kiss. Exhausting, and soaking.

Antoinette raised her head, and smiled down at the victim. Ashley did too, cause damn how could she not. In only a few minutes, Julee had gone from zero arousal, to arousal overload. Blushing skin, wet thighs, panting whimpers, and half-closed eyes. The Kiss was so damn awesome. Ashley could have breathed on Julee's neck and probably made her cum again.

“Still with us?” she said to her friend.

Julee managed a wavering squeeeee.

Laughing, Ashley lay down by her friend's head, and waited. The Prince tapped Jack on the shoulder and motioned for him to move to Julee's legs. And as he did, Antoinette picked Julee up like a feather, and flipped her over.

“Mm ... what ... what're you...” Poor girl was totally exhausted, drained of blood, and oozing sex. Literally. Flipping her showed the

copious amounts of her juices dripping down her bare thighs; damn girl didn't need the Kiss to get super horny in seconds. But the Kiss made it all the better.

Jack got behind her between her legs, and pulled up on her hips. Poor girl was soon on her knees, ass in the air, arms limp and strewn across the blankets, face and cheek to the bed.

"I know you've been wanting to ask Jack to give you a proper fucking," Ashley said. "Welp, you took too long!"

"Wha ... what? Nnnnn!" Her silly attempts to communicate disappeared into a loud squeak as Jack lined his cock up with her entrance, and yanked her toward him. Her tight little butt jiggled for a moment as it impacted against the boy's lower abdomen, complete with the wet smack of flesh against soaked flesh.

"Oh my," Antoinette said. She lay down as well, opposite of Ashley alongside Julee, so all three of their heads were next to each other with Julee between them. "A beast has taken you, my precious."

"W ... wait ... please, I ... can't..." Julee was too exhausted to do much with her arms. They were limp on the bed, but as Jack again slammed his cock into her hard enough to make her shake, she managed to slid them forward along the blankets, and grip them in her fingers. Trying to pull herself away from him.

God that was hot.

Ashley adjusted herself a bit so she was laying parallel to Julee and Jack. She leaned in, and kissed her friend on the cheek, the ear, the neck, the lips. Had to be careful with the way Jack was pounding her; each thrust made her whole body shake, and each earned a whimper from her. Normally, such rough treatment might have earned louder grunts and moans, but the poor girl was drained. Helpless. Unable to escape Jack's rough thrusts.

Julee's eyes rolled upward as she started to shake. Her whimpers turned into tiny gasps as she struggled to breathe, and her body started to tremble on its own as Jack fucked her harder. Ashley raised a brow as she looked over at the boy, and licked her lips as she watched his muscles flex with his thrusts. Such a sexy little man; couldn't wait to ride him after, assuming Antoinette would let her.

Familiar squeaks came out of Julee, the delightful, intoxicating sound of orgasm. Ashley set a hand on Julee's naked spine, and tickled her fingers up and down her body as her friend started to cum. The girl's hands squeezed the blankets with all the strength she could muster — which was fuck all — and Ashley giggled as she leaned down to kiss the girl's shoulder while Julee trembled. Jack slowed down, eased his rapid thrusts into slow, deep motions. He'd learned from Antoinette well.

Antoinette did the same as Ashley, sliding down a little so she too was parallel to Julee and Jack. "Already? My sweet little pet, I'm afraid the beast has only begun with you."

Ashley giggled. Calling Jack a beast. He was a Kindred, but he was a small man. Deliciously sexy, but hardly a beast. Antoinette was stroking his ego; the key to any man's loins, she'd told the girls before. And it seemed to be working, as Jack grinned down at the helpless ghoul, and started to pound into her again.

"P ... please ... need ... breath..." Again, her words were cut short as Jack's thrusts reduced her to a shaking mess.

Antoinette leaned in, planted a kiss on her ghoul's cheek, and set her hand along Julee's back next to Ashley's. She joined her in teasing the girl's back, her ears, her neck, her shoulder blades, the small of her back. All a pleasant juxtaposition to Jack's rough pounding he was giving the woman. Wasn't like a man would last very long fucking that hard and fast, but where Julee had already



been reduced to a sopping wet mess of arousal before Jack had even touched her, Jack hadn't been touched at all. He still had a good few minutes of some hard fucking in him, Ashley bet.

He may have, Julee may have not. Her whimpers melted into gasping pants, and her legs started to tremble. She was trying to fall over, her last defense against the boy's relentless assault, but he had her hips tight in his grip, and he continued to plunge into her despite her attempts to escape, despite her begging, despite her blatant need for a break.

So. Fucking. Hot.

The sound of wet flesh slapping grew louder. Ashley craned her head to see under where Julee's torso was collapsed to the sheets, ass in the air. Hard to see with the shaking body parts and the darkness underneath her, but with a little effort, Ashley got to watch where Jack was penetrating her.

Juices were trickling off his balls and splashing over the girl's stomach with each thrust. A lot of them. Every so often, Jack slammed into her and stayed there, balls deep, and he groaned as a tiny trickle of fluids ran down his balls again. He withdrew until only the tip of him was still inside her, and then he slammed into her again. And again, Julee's cum dripped from his body. He pulled out completely and set his cock underneath her cunt. Without his cock filling her, Julee squirted another tiny stream onto the shaft between her legs, before Jack realigned himself and buried his dick to the hilt again.

Julee, squirting. She only did that when Antoinette decided to get really dominant with her, choke her and finger her into oblivion. Ashley had a sneaking suspicion her friend would let loose more in bed with Jack if she was rendered an exhausted mess from the get go. Plan successful.

Julee's hands were no longer gripping the blankets; they'd gone limp instead, fingers lax, just like all of her despite her quivering. Even her panting had grown quiet—but still consistent. And Jack had slowed down to a more manageable fucking rhythm. Guess he wanted to last a little longer.

Ashley got onto her knees beside Jack, and hooked one arm across his back, hand over his further shoulder, so she could look down at Julee and see what he saw. Damn, that tight little ass really was jiggling with the impact. She reached out and put a hand on Julee's butt, squeezed and gripped it, and her hand rubbed up against Jack's as he continued to pound into the girl.

“Gonna cum soon?” she said.

“Y-Yeah, just ... she's ... soaking me...” His eyes were staring, on fire, penetrating the limp thing skewered on his cock. Almost looked like he was in a frenzy of need.

“My my.” Antoinette leaned down over Julee's face, turned it to look at her, and she planted a few kisses on her cheek. “Are you drenching my love, Julee? Naughty girl.” She slipped her beautiful fingers around Julee's neck; always a turn on for Julee. She didn't squeeze though, didn't tighten or choke, just wrapped the girl's throat in a gentle grip while Jack fucked her, fucked her into a wet mess.

They definitely had to do this again in the future.

“Jack,” the Prince said, “would you like to finish the Kiss upon your prey?”

The man needed little encouragement, apparently. He reached down for Julee's body, pulled up on her waist until she was kneeling upright, back to his chest, arms dangling, head hanging forward. A little maneuvering caused her head to lull backward onto Jack's shoulder, and Jack obliged with a bite to her neck.

Ashley crawled around to kneel in front of Julee. Watching her spasm, convulse, shake as Jack started to Kiss her, suck the last bit of energy out of her, was euphoric. Jack's hands were all over her, hugging her, desperate to keep her snug to him as he continued to fuck her. Fucking his meal, as he came inside her.

“Fuuuuuuck.” Ashley looked down, and felt her knees quiver as she watched the cum leak out of Julee. Both of their cum. The girl was slipping into full-on post-Kiss coma, but still barely conscious, free to moan as Jack suckled on her neck. Moan, and not much else. So weak, so tired, body collapsed backward against Jack's chest as she shivered, and more of her cum dripped from his cock. Every so often, she squirted a tiny splash of juices, making a great mess of cum along their legs as she trembled.

And even once she was out like a light, Jack continued to fuck her. He squeezed her body tight to his, licked the bite wound until healed, but the boy still had a few more thrusts in him. Poor, sleeping Julee, cum dripping down her thighs into a pool of wetness between her knees, unable to defend herself from the 'beast's' advances, from his lust as he spent the last spurts of his cum into her sleeping body and drenched pussy.

Definitely do this again, and film it, so they could show it to Julee ... and then do it to her again.

Jack set Julee down gently beside him, and looked down at himself. Some of his fluids were still on his cock and testicles, but really it was Julee who'd made the huge mess. Boy was still hard though; belly full of blood did that. And both vamps in the room had exactly that going on.

But Antoinette had more self control than the three of them combined. With a slow, hypnotizing sway of her body, she undid the clasp of her bra and let her massive breasts fall free. And then she tossed aside her underwear, leaving her curvy body naked for the

two of them to gawk at. She pushed herself back along the bed until she put her back to the bed's mountain of pillows braced against the headboard. Sitting up like that, she spread her legs a little, and motioned for Jack to come to her.

“Come to me, mon amour,” she said, French accent dripping. So cheesy on anyone else, so perfect and earned on the mistress.

Jack crawled over to her, between her spread legs, and kissed her. She was so much taller than Jack, she was like a comfy bed Jack could lay into. And he did. Often. Ashley couldn't blame him, she did too. She crawled over as well, and cuddled up against Antoinette's side. Jack may have been Antoinette's romantic love, but she was her precious, her ghoul, her friend, all before she ever met Jack. She deserved some of the action too.

“Have I been neglecting you, ma petite?” Antoinette reached out with her closer arm and slipped it around Ashley's shoulder and back. Perfect for cuddling. It was also the perfect position for Ashley to nudge her nose into the side of Antoinette's breast.

She may not have been as obsessed with the mistress's breasts as Jack — typical man — but that didn't change that Antoinette had absolutely massive breasts. Like, ridiculously massive. And so damn soft, with just the right amount of firmness to keep a good shape and—ok maybe she was a little obsessed.

She smiled into Antoinette's breast, and planted a few kisses along the underside. Jack had to move a little to make room for her, still kneeling between the mistress's legs. But, he grinned at her as he watched, before he leaned down to plant his own kiss along the same breast.

“No, get your own.” She pushed at him with her arm, but only lightly, enough to inch him toward Antoinette's other breast. The mistress laughed, and ran her fingers through Ashley's hair. Mmm, fingers, in hair. She melted into Antoinette's touch, placed a few

more kisses along the contours of her breast, before her lips found the Prince's nipple. Large, puffy, aroused.

Jack did the same with her other breast, though he cast Ashley a few glances as he did. She knew that look, that was a sneaky playful look. And getting a sneaky playful look from the gorgeous boy as he gently suckled on the mistress's nipple was god damn fucking arousing.

“Am I still in charge?” she said.

“Mmhmm. For tonight, you may do as you wish.”

“Then, uh ... can Jack and I ... play with you, for a while?”

Antoinette smiled, a loving, tender smile, and her roaming hand found the back of her head to cradle her. “Oui.”

Jack slid out from between the Prince's legs and lay beside her, opposite of Ashley. Antoinette brought her legs together, one knee slightly bent, and hooked her other arm behind Jack's back and neck to cradle him the same way she was with Ashley. Tall as she was, the two shorter people in the bed fit into the crevice of her arms against her sides, and suckled on her breasts.

Ashley peeked down the mistress's legs to Jack, and licked her lips at the sight of his cock rubbing against the Prince's leg. Still wet, still soaked in cum. But the boy was more than content to wait and shift the focus to pleasing the mistress, based on the look Ashley found in his eye. On his side, he set his free arm upon the mistress's stomach, and teased along her flat belly while his lips planted more kisses along the breast that fell toward him, spilling off the sides of Antoinette's ribs with its size and weight.

It was really distracting. He was just so into it, gentle despite the hunger in his eyes, circling Antoinette's puffy nipple with his tongue so Ashley could see it peeking out from under his lips. Then he

leaned in closer, let the softness of the mistress's breast mold to his face lightly, and suckled. Like a baby. Like a sexy, lean, handsome baby. Weird train of thought.

Ashley did the same thing as Jack. She snuggled into the Prince's side, and started to suckle on the mistress's nipple. In the past, breast play with the Prince was always arousing and enjoyable, but it was a precursor to sex. With Jack, he seemed almost satisfied with nothing but suckling on the Prince's nipple, and Antoinette seemed ... overjoyed with it. Not overjoyed like giggling and squealing like Ashley or Julee might, but her subdued smiles and quiet moans had mountains of weight, mountains of bliss held within them. And arousal. There was no denying the Prince was getting very very horny as the two younglings suckled on her breasts, her body letting out tiny shivers every so often, and her nipples hard and engorged. Far more aroused than she normally became from having her breasts touched. Jack had learned to not squeeze breasts, but to instead caress the curves with his fingers, and to kiss more than just the nipple, but around it, below it, beside it, all around the areola and everywhere else.

Ashley giggled. Antoinette raised a brow when she looked her way, but Ashley hid her face in her breast, and resumed suckling on her body. A kiss here, a kiss there on and around the swollen nipple filling her mouth, and Antoinette again moaned. Those quiet moans were her real moans, the ones she gave when she was getting close to cumming. Testing her hypothesis, Ashley slid a hand down Antoinette's waist, along her bare mons — so perfectly smooth — and down the lips of her pussy. Completely drenched. Hypothesis was now a working theory, Jack's persistent and consistent breast worship was turning Antoinette into a hornball for breast play.

Unable to stop herself, she sank her fingers into Antoinette's pussy. Three of them, more than enough to stretch the mistress's cunt open.

“Oh. Little imp.” Antoinette’s hand gave her ear a little pinch, before resuming cradling the back of her head. The mistress melted back, and a quiet purr escaped her as she relaxed against the bed, closing her eyes, and letting her hands drift down until they too were limp along the blankets.

To see the mistress relax so was ... amazing. She never did that with her and Julee, but the woman’s body had gone completely limp along the blankets, and more of her delicious, sultry moans escaped her. And as Ashley pushed up against her insides in slow, gentle strokes, Antoinette started to shiver.

She was cumming. Ashley had barely done anything with her fingers, only probed up against her insides a few times, and the mistress was already cumming. Juices dripped between Ashley’s fingers, and Antoinette continued to quiver as her cunt clamped down on her fingers.

Ashley raised her head and looked at Jack. The boy kept his mouth on Antoinette’s nipples, but he’d stopped suckling during her climax, and he tilted his head enough to look at Ashley as Antoinette shuddered a few more times. Before long, Jack started to suckle on the Prince again, and the woman smiled as he did, eyes still closed. Antoinette raised her hand behind Ashley, and guided her head back to her nipple before letting her arm go limp along Ashley’s back.

She wanted more.

Ashley resumed her suckling, and got a little rougher, licking with a little more force, pulling her mistress’s whole nipple and areola into her mouth and bathing it in hungry suckles. Right about now would normally be when Antoinette would pin Ashley down, finger her, Kiss her, and tuck her in goodnight. But the Prince was too busy unwinding, keeping her legs spread while Ashley fingered her instead, and let the two small people suckle on her huge breasts.

Jack's hand drifted down the mistress's belly, and down her smooth mons to find her clitoris. The Prince tensed for a second, and relaxed once again as the boy began to gently massage the nub in the way the Prince had taught him. Slowly, gently, trapping it between index and middle finger and massaging it in a consistent rhythm. Ashley had to share room with him between the mistress's legs; totally hot, two people fighting for the space to get her off. The ghoul giggled into the mistress's nipple, and started to press up against her g-spot yet again. Like Jack's touch, she kept it slow, gentle, and focused more on the woman's breast instead.

Both she and Jack snuggled into the woman's sides, and started to suckle harder. Their fingers between the woman's thighs remained gentle and tender, but their kisses and licks grew rougher. They buried their faces into the massive, soft pillows, nudged their noses into them, and pulled the mistress's areola into their mouths with suckles hard enough to make her shiver.

Antoinette's hands cradled both of their heads once again, as her muscles clamped down on Ashley's fingers. Her juices trickled down over the ghoul's knuckles, and soaked the sheets as Ashley pressed up against her insides. The beautiful mistress shivered, even squirmed a little, all so very unlike the mistress, but she let out low groan and arched her back as her orgasm worked up and down her body. The mistress knew how to milk her own pleasure — half a millennium gave a lot of practice — and she squeezed down in rhythm with their fingers, until her juices were dripping off of Ashley's hand.

God damn she was soaked. At last she and Jack stopped, and Ashley sat up to stare down at her mistress. She looked totally relaxed, totally in the moment, leaning back on her mountain of pillows, melting into her bed and shivering with her climax. Her huge breasts jiggled every so often as a tiny tremble worked through her body, and Ashley and Jack both stared at how the heavy breasts weighed down on Antoinette's chest.



“Ok ok my turn!” Ashley hopped up onto her feet and pointed at Jack. “Jack, you lie down on the mistress!”

“Oh, I see what she plans,” Antoinette said, grinning up at her. “Let me move for a moment.” Still grinning her devil’s grin, the mistress pushed herself up a bit so she was sitting almost completely upright against the bed’s headboard, pillows moved aside. It was perfect for scooping up Jack, laying him down upon her stomach and between her legs, and setting his head between her breasts, him on his back and facing up toward Ashley.

“Yes!” Ashley, giggling and blushing and almost jumping up and down, got down on her knees straddling Jack’s thighs. Such a glorious display, handsome little Jack lying between Antoinette’s legs, with his head and shoulders propped up on stomach with her sitting and leaning back position. Perfect for Ashley to watch the two of them at the same time.

If she did a good job pleasuring Jack, that made the mistress super happy. And making her super happy made Ashley super happy. And horny. Seeing the mistress grin and smile at her with satisfied eyes was such a rush, such a thrill even after all these years. And seeing her hug Jack’s torso and trace his abs with her fingernails while watching Ashley, was too damn arousing.

Ashley shifted forward a little, and set the small lips of her pussy along the base of Jack’s cock. Still a little wet with Julee’s cum, and now, renewed wetness from Ashley. Cause she was wet, damn wet after watching Julee squirt her brains out, and feeling the mistress cum around Ashley’s fingers. Wet and horny and very much looking forward to indulging. Jack had drunk two people before even coming over, and then half again on Julee; perfect for a good, proper, long bout of fucking with her.

Giggling, she slid her cunt forward until her wet lips nudged along the boy’s swollen glans. He moaned. That look on his face, of bliss,

of relaxation, of euphoria, no wonder Antoinette loved to pleasure him so much. The little blond ghoul felt her whole body warm and a thrill run up her spine as her simple act of rubbing her lips along the engorged head of his cock made him moan again. The boy had some sort of magic power that had seduced the mistress, despite their claims that it was Antoinette who had seduced him. And Ashley could feel the effects of such magic every time she looked at the boy's pleasure-laden face. She wanted to pleasure him, to see him squirm and wriggle, so she could hear more of those soft sounds and watch his eyes roll upward as they closed.

She reached down, took his wet cock into her hands, and slid it into her awaiting insides. The spread of her clenching muscles along warm, hard flesh had her moaning too, and she wiggled her hips the whole way down. Half cause that's how Antoinette liked to do, half cause it felt wonderful to stir her insides with his cock.

“... god damn,” Jack said, and his hands settled on her legs and hips. “You really are beautiful.”

Oh! Compliments! She giggled and leaned in, putting her hands on his chest and above where the mistress was still tracing his abs. A quick glance to the Prince showed that Antoinette was not jealous of Jack's attention toward Ashley; if anything, her grin suggested she wanted to encourage it.

“You're beautiful too!” She quivered as she pushed her hips forward a little, rubbing her clitoris against his body, while her hands slid up to press onto his shoulders. “You have a great body Jack. Reminds me of the boys in my gymnastics. Except even better. Mmmmm abs.” Her fingers found his abs and joined the mistress in caressing them, tracing them. “Hope you don't mind a little sexual objectifying. Just ... love ... abs.” She dug her fingers into them a bit, her thumbs especially, and Jack flexed them in reflex.

“I uh ... I'm cool with that.”

“Good!” More giggling, even from Antoinette, though hers were deeper, more sultry, more sexy. Ashley sounded like a squirrel when she giggled. But Jack didn’t seem to mind, and his smile remained as his hands held onto her waist. Like him she was a lean thing, and gymnastics and dancing kept her from getting soft. She had abs too! Not like Jack’s, hers were more subtle, but she could tell Jack was staring at them as much as the rest of her. And as his eyes roamed her body, she shivered; real magic eyes.

God damn she loved to ride him. She continued shifting her hips and ass back and forth, and angled them down so she could grind her clit on his body. Much as she was already horny as a bunny, she didn’t want to end this too quickly, so she kept to a slow motion with zero up and down movement. Didn’t want Jack cumming for a while.

“ ... fuck,” he said, staring at her movement, eyes wide.

“Ashley my dear.” Antoinette chuckled, and reached out to put a hand on Ashley’s shoulder; easy for her to reach with Ashley still leaning forward and touching Jack’s torso. “Are you trying to make me jealous?”

Ashley froze. “N-No!” Careful, careful, don’t get the mistress upset.

But Antoinette laughed again, and pat her ghou’s cheek lightly. “My precious, enjoy yourself. I am happy to see you being so seductive. Perhaps you can dance for my love? You are a lovely dancer.” More compliments!

The mistress did not have the edge Ashley was accustomed to, that hint of anger, a subtle pinch of jealousy and protectiveness. She really was getting soft. A good thing, or a bad thing? Ashley didn’t know. Jack was softening her, and that made Ashley a little worried. Just a little. It mostly made her super fucking happy! Antoinette may have lost a little of her dangerous side, a little of her tiger eyes,

but they were still there, just buffered by Jack's touch. And since Jack was currently lying between the mistress's legs and breasts, it made Antoinette particularly soft. Perfect for Ashley to take advantage of. Muahaha.

Ashley sat up straight again, and beamed with pride. She did know how to dance, dirty naughty dances; she'd been practicing.

She put her hands on her hips, and started to sway. It was a dance the mistress had taught her; not that she didn't know how to sway her hips, but to do it during sex was a different beast. The goal was to put on a sexual display, to drive the man wild with the sight of you accenting all the curves of the female body, while at the same time providing only minimal stimulation for the man's cock inside you, but plenty to your clitoris and insides with the angles of your grinding.

She'd practiced on dildos and toys with Antoinette to guide her, but she wasn't prepared for the effect it'd have on Jack. Antoinette had done the dance for him before, and every time it not only resulted in pleasure for the mistress, it melted Jack into a puddle, desperate for his own release but unable to achieve it. And sure enough, as Jack's eyes settled on her stomach, her waist and hips, she saw the look of complete, utter surrender on his face. He melted onto Antoinette's body, and his grip on Ashley's hips went limp until his hands fell to the blankets. He was mesmerized.

Holy fucking god that was hot.

Ashley raised her hands higher and let them drift outward, riding the slow, gentle waves of an invisible beat. They came up to her head, and she combed her blond hair back as her elbows came up, and then her hands went higher, over her head, all in dance where her body moved like a ribbon. Waves, it was all about moving in a wave from the top to the bottom, and as the wave came down her body pulled in then came out in a roll as her hips followed, abs

crunching with every weave, each motion rubbing her lips and clit all over Jack's body.

Jack was almost drooling. " ... holy ... fucking ... god that's hot."

She almost broke the dance when she started giggling. She'd thought the same thing!

Seeing the boy melt because of her was intoxicating, and addicting. Her muscles clamped down, and she sighed joy as the heat between her thighs grew; and the wetness. This wasn't just fun, it was blissful. Rubbing her bits all over the boy while he stared at her like she was some sort of goddess, it was too good. Everything was getting tingly and sending pleasure sparks through her pelvis, into her chest, and down into her legs. His cock fit so nicely inside her, and she could feel it shift with her as she moved, pressing against her clenching muscles.

Antoinette held out her hands for her. Oh, oh, fun! Ashley took her mistress's hands, and held onto them as she continued her dance. Back and forth, side to side, she leaned forward a little more to make sure she was feeling it all along her swollen clit. The mistress chuckled and guided her hands back down to hold onto Jack's shoulders.

Ashley took a good grip of the boy's nice shoulders, and started to move faster. A lot faster. At a certain point it stopped being a dance and started being her trying to get off. No up or down motion, just pure grind, and she could feel her juices soaking where her lips rubbed against the man underneath her. So sweet, delicious, shifting back and forth faster and faster like building a fire between her legs, desperate to build the embers.

She came, and she grinned down at Jack as she did. Release, oh god release, the clenching muscles, uncontrollable spasms inside her that gripped and milked at Jack's cock, while she trembled on him. Half the pleasure was seeing his face, how he groaned as she

clenched his cock like a vise. The other half was the waves of pleasure working up and down through her body, to her curling toes and up into her chest. More of her juices joined their connection, and when she looked down, she mewled at the sight of her lips soaked. Jack was just as smooth as her, and she reached down to touch where her juices were coating the base of his cock. It was only a small orgasm, and she wanted more, now.

“Ok, ok, more!” Still trembly and shaky, she turned around. Jack groaned audibly; she didn’t bother getting up to turn around. Half the fun was the challenge of keeping him inside in the motion. Silly, fun. Once she was straddling him in reverse, she put her hands on her ass and looked over her shoulders at the boy trapped underneath her. “You almost always have sex with the Prince facing her! Women have asses too ya know.” And to emphasize, she lifted up on the meat of her ass, spread it, squeezed it together, and leaned forward between his legs, ass rising to expose where the boy’s cock was penetrating her.

“S-Sorry! You have an amazing ass.” Jack, nodding, grinning — he was getting the game now — reached out and gripped her glutes where they met the small of her back and around the tail bone. “A beautiful, amazing, toned little butt.”

She frowned and slapped his knee. “It’s not little!” To prove it, she raised her hips a few inches, and slammed her herself back down onto him. A good, hard fuck. It was enough to make her ass shake a bit in Jack’s hands, and earn some groans from him from the sudden fucking, wet flesh sounds and all.

“Right! Sorry, not little. Just very toned, firm, very tight.”

“Hehe, I know!” She giggled, but mewls and whimpers were mixing into her laughter as she started to move her ass up and down. Like Antoinette taught her, she squeezed on Jack’s cock in rhythm with her motions, and after a few strokes, sank all the way

to take him to the hilt, and wiggle around a few times. Good opportunity to show off her perfect ballerina ass. And fuck it felt good, squeezing her muscles on him nice and tight as his hard cock filled her.

Jack's hands again kneaded the buns of her butt, and she giggled between her groans as she bounced on him. She looked over her shoulder again, both to eat up more of Jack's pleasure-filled expressions, but also to gauge the mistress. But Antoinette looked quite happy, and her eyes were locked onto where Ashley's lips were spread around Jack's cock. That alone, seeing the Prince so enraptured by what Ashley was doing, was making Ashley shiver with excitement.

She bounced on Jack a few more times. Nope, wrong angle. She leaned forward a bit. Still not right. She leaned back, far back, until she had to put her hands on Jack's chest for support as she almost fell backward. But right there, with her almost falling back onto his chest, the angle put his cock against the front wall of her pussy, and she groaned like Jack did. Perfect, just perfect, feeling the hardness of his girth pressing toward her abdomen. Hit those spots she wanted just right.

She did not have the patience of Antoinette, not at all. The mistress could make this last, make it take half an hour of constant dancing, but Ashley could not. All she could think about for the moment, was cumming again, and she started to bounce on Jack in that perfect, delicious way that pushed his cock toward the front of her. The bed started to shake a little from how her light body managed to get a good, hard fucking rhythm. Jack and the Prince were often tender and gentle with each other; Ashley wanted some bounce!

After a couple more minutes of bouncing on his cock, she heard the boy start to cum. Felt it too, as he started to push up to meet her with his own thrusts; small, but very welcome. His groans, quiet but

so very arousing, made her squeeze and clench on him extra hard, just so she could hear him groan louder. And push herself over the edge.

Her legs started to tremble, spasm, and her hands slipped out from underneath her. Almost about to fall onto his face, but Jack caught her, and gently lowered her down so she could lay on his chest. She set her head into the groove of his neck and shoulder, and quivered as her insides convulsed. That delicious, tingling warmth, right into the toes, into her chest, robbing her of breath and making each attempt nothing more than a squeaky pant. Her cunt squeezed on the boy inside her until she felt his cum dripping from her tiny folds, all joining her own. Quivering, smiling, and panting as the pleasure waves moved up and down through her.

She liked being in control of it, like the Prince did.

Once the pleasure settled, she opened her eyes and looked up. Antoinette smiled down at her and set her hands on Ashley's chest to lightly tease and caress her breasts. Delightful tingles to go with the aftershocks of orgasm.

“You do realize, my precious, that I must give Julee the option of revenge?” Mistress said.

“Bah, what's she gonna do? Worst punishment idea she could come up with is a firm spanking.” Which was hardly a punishment. Jack laughed; probably reading her mind.

Ashley sat up and looked over at Julee beside them on the bed. Girl was fast asleep, complete coma style. So cute.

Sitting up didn't last long. Mistress took her by the shoulders and pulled her back down.

“You, my little pet, need to learn patience, and to enjoy the moment. You and Jack have both climaxed. A perfect opportunity to



lie down, and bask in each other's pleasure."

She wasn't on board with the idea. Didn't like to cuddle all romantic-like. But as the mistress began to touch her forehead, her lips, her neck, her ears, and comb her hair, Jack started to play with her breasts. And like he did with Antoinette before, the boy caressed their undersides, their contours, tickled along her swollen areola, offered tiny, gentle pinches of her nipples, and cupped them ever so softly. Gentle little tinglies worked through her breasts into her chest, and before long, she felt her body embrace the pleasure.

She melted. Ok, maybe some cuddly post-sex stuff could feel good too.

A few minutes went by, and she realized something: Jack was still hard. She looked over her shoulder at him, and made a tiny gasp sound as the man flipped her over.

"W-What the ... You can't be serious."

"Sorry," he said, "just ... lot of blood, really ... really feeling it." He lifted her like she was a feather, and set her down on her stomach to replace him as the one between Antoinette's breasts and legs.

"But this wasn't part of the plan!"

"Ah, ma petite." Mistress grinned down at her, and slid out her hands to run them down along Ashley's back and arms. "It is a Ventrue's prerogative to take control when they feel the need."

Kindred politics, in the bedroom! Not the plan. She frowned over at Jack, and tried to sit up, but the man put a hand to her back and pushed her back down until she was hugging the Prince, cheek between her breasts, hands against the blankets around her sides.

Jack lay upon her, between her legs, and slid his hard, wet cock into her cum-filled insides.

“W-Wait ... still ... a bit ... sensitive.”

Antoinette smirked a devil’s smirk, and shook her head. “If only you had paid such a courtesy for Julee. Jack my love, please, indulge yourself.”

Ashley managed only a squeak before Jack slammed his hips forward. Much as she liked hard sex, rough poundings, and really getting a bounce going, it was a different story when she was tired and still tingly from cumming earlier. And Jack was pounding into her as hard as he pounded into Julee too, straight down onto her butt and into the bed.

The angle drove his cock down against her g-spot mercilessly, and she looked up at the mistress with pleading eyes as she bounced against the bed. It shook with the impact of the boy’s body against hers, and Antoinette chuckled down at her as she shook.

“Wait! Wait wait. Not ... fair!” She was cumming. She collapsed onto the Prince again, and held on as she started to squeeze Jack’s cock, muscles gripping in random spurts, warm liquids coating him. He’d just came twice though; not going to be cumming again anytime soon. All she could do was hold on, and whimper as the pleasure started to get too much, started to make her legs shiver, her toes curl, and her breath reduce to pants.

He stopped. Thank god, a moment to breathe. But, Jack only stopped long enough to kneel up straight, and take her hips into his hands. Same thing as Julee. And just like Julee, he started to pound into from behind, holding onto her, and pulling her toward him as he jammed his hips forward. He was fucking her, hard, like a piston, each thrust met with the sound of wet flesh, his testicles soaked in her cum and slapping her clit.

She managed to stay in a doggy position, weight shifting to her hands between Antoinette’s legs as Jack took control. Ashley tried to reach out for her mistress, but the Prince just grinned and kissed

the air as she watched her. No one was going to save her! Not that she really wanted saving, but too much! Too much. She couldn't breathe, every attempt turned to a useless whimper or squeal, and she was starting to see some white spots.

And again, the pleasure waves coursed through her, pouring out of her pelvis from between her legs. Her arms gave out, and she let her chest and face collapse to the blankets between her mistress's thighs. She could feel her cum trickling down her legs until she was sure it reached her knees. And Jack still wasn't stopping. She managed to look over her shoulder at him, to find an almost predatory glare in his eyes; he was devouring her, and she was his prey. The same sort of look the mistress gave her when the Prince got very, very, very aroused.

Sometimes it was easy to forget Jack was a vampire. He had that need, that bloodlust, that desire to hunt and drink prey. And now she'd gone and turned herself into prey.

She came again. Her eyes closed, and she felt her pussy clamp down as hard as it could, almost hard enough to give the boy pause. But he didn't stop, he kept pounding her, and pounding her, until she could only make the tiniest squeak with each thrust. She was wet, very wet, wet enough his testicles slapping against her were getting her cum on her stomach, joining the little trickles working down her legs. Even with her eyes closed, she was seeing more white spots.

And then Jack stopped. Breath, thank god oxygen. Short lived, as Jack reached down and grabbed her, one hand taking her waist, the other her shoulder. He lifted her to kneel up like he was, and pinned her to him, the hand on her waist rising to grab her breast instead, the hand around her shoulder slipping under the arm to hook it from underneath, and take her by the throat.

She was a bundle of nerves, helpless, quivering, shaking, as the boy sank his fangs into her neck as he held her to him. The Kiss. The instant, inhuman sensation of calmness, pleasure, bliss and relaxation flowing through the body. If she was helpless before, she was practically lifeless now. Her arms started to get heavier until they went limp, dangling. Her body stopped listening to her attempts to escape his grip, and she relaxed back against the boy as he found the angle to thrust up into her a few more times.

Warmth trickled out of her. Her cum, and his. She whimpered, almost crying as the boy continued to drink her, continued to draw out her blood as she came on him, as she trembled and milked his cock, as the magical sensations of the Kiss ripped away her senses until she was flying on a cloud of bliss. She managed to raise her eyes to Antoinette, and found the Prince grinning at her, eyes looking her naked body up and down as Ashley shivered.

“No ... fair,” she said, pouting at her mistress as the darkness started to take her.

“Ah, my precious, I fear you tempted Jack with, perhaps, too tasty a meal.” The Prince sat up, got in close to her, and planted kisses on her free breast, the other still in Jack’s grip as he kept her tight to his body. Antoinette’s kisses were always perfect, always the right level of suckle and nibble on her nipples to get Ashley’s body tingly. But right now, her whole body as sensitive as volatile explosives, Antoinette’s kissing on her breast sent her mind into fireworks as she slipped under the heavy draw of exhaustion. The last thing she felt was Antoinette’s lips rising higher before her own fangs sank into her neck, opposite of Jack.

Falling asleep on the waves of overlapping orgasm spurred by the Kiss was a great way to fall asleep, she had to admit.

## Chapter 28

~~Julias~~

He still wasn't comfortable with the Primogen. Much as he had confidence in his abilities and intelligence, they were older than him, stronger than him, and, although he was loath to admit it, they were probably smarter than him. All his poker skills, tested every time he had a conversation. No wonder Viktor turned to stone over the centuries.

White walls, black ceiling, fancy leather chairs, and a glass table. A sight he'd grown to hate over the past few months. But at least the view from the glass wall out into the nightlife of South Side was beautiful; not that he'd get to look out it properly from his seat.

"Get your guys to back off, Maria." Garry, dressed for the street, threw some papers onto the table. "You're ruining good people's homes."

The ghost woman shrugged. "Only kine."

"My friends." The Gangrel glared at her, and Julias winced. Enough malice there to melt ice.

"Yes well, you make friends with kine and expect me to adjust my business strategies because of it. No."

Business strategies made Julias smirk. She'd said it with just enough inflection to imply the real reason: Garry had been seen destroying some of the Lancea et Sanctum's precious artifacts, after Lucas died. Not that Julias hadn't expect that. When your enemy dies, it was customary in many places of the world to burn everything they owned. But Garry had jumped on the opportunity to dig through Lucas's things in Tony's old complex very, very quickly.

The tunnel had since been sealed off, but too little too late. Would Damien care, once he found out? Maybe, maybe not.

Julias looked to the Prince. She was leaning forward to put her elbows on the table, fingers netted together and placed to her upper lip. Pensive. To Julias, it sounded like squabbling children, but maybe that was just something he'd have to get used to. When fighting over something, everyone turned into a juvenile delinquent, or at least pretended to be.

The sheriff wasn't here today though. Interesting.

"The Mirrden district is on the edge of our territories." Garry tapped the papers on the table. "And you're doing construction all over it. Not exactly a big leap to think Xnomina will push into the rest of the district."

And he was right of course. The corporation was run by Kindred, but it was a public and known corporation. Far as the humans knew, Xnomina bought the city rights to start construction on the Mirrden area. The process of moving who lived there out of there would be painful to them, no doubt, but Maria knew Garry was rather fond of the area and its people. Probably the tipping point on her decision.

"It may come to that. And if it does, perhaps the border of our two territories should be addressed? It ran down the middle of a small district; slide it over five feet and it will no longer." Maria reached out for the papers, the pictures, shrugged as she glanced them up and down, and tossed them back onto the table. "You have no legal claim."

"Legal? Who gives a shit about legal. I'm telling you Maria, you're stepping into my territory," Garry said.

Julias looked to Jacob. The Nosferatu was leaning back in his chair, wearing the dark robes he liked for meetings, and he was rocking back and forth a little with his hands hooked behind his

head. Not bored though; the conversation seemed to interest him. Probably fuel for more of his games.

But before Maria could respond, Michael threw a finger at Garry.

“You have nerve. I had three Kindred report in of broken bones. One lost a finger. All caused by Carthians.”

“You had your people running on my side of the fence, Michael.” Garry snarled, a real, Gangrel snarl at his fellow Gangrel. “And not just exploring fledglings. You had dangerous people looking into my business, so I roughed them up. So how about fuck you?”

An unusual amount of heat from Garry. Julias raised a brow, and looked back to Antoinette. She was steel, but she did glance his way a moment before looking back to the arguing group.

“How about you Julias?” Garry pulled out some more papers and threw them onto the table. “Think I don’t know what you’ve been up to?”

His raised brow raised more. But feigning innocence with the man was a bad idea. Much as Garry was loud and loved to push for a fist fight, he was crafty. Maybe that was why everyone acted like children the moment they were fighting over something, to make themselves look more stupid than they were? An interesting strategy. Good poker players.

“What have I been up to?”

“Some eyes told me you’d been talking with Damien.” The papers were reports then.

Everyone tensed, a single moment of tightened muscles, before they hid their response. But everyone saw everyone’s reaction. Kid was a hot button.

“I have been.”

“Yeah well, not sure I agree with where that’s going.” He raised his hand and started counting off his fingers. “Went to Damien. Then went to Maria. Some eyes told me you’re looking to revive the Second Estate.”

It was Antoinette’s turn to raise a brow.

“Is this true, Mister Mire?” she said.

“... it is.” He put his hands on the table, and looked to Maria. A wince from her too, but she shrugged and motioned to him. “I’ve spoken to Damien, and Maria about this. But we didn’t plan to bring it up until we’d discussed it further.”

Jacob laughed, a hard chuckle that shut everyone up and turned them all to face him. But he said nothing, only smiled his eyeless smile, until Antoinette groaned, rubbed her forehead, and looked at Julias.

“Arrogant of you, Mister Mire. You were there during the purge; it was a difficult time for all of us. And now you undermine me? You?”

He’d expected either coldness from the Prince, or some fire. But she was looking at him with a mix of concern and pain, as if he’d hurt her.

Had he hurt her?

“I’m not trying to bring about another Lucas, Primogen. Even Maria does not want that.” And she didn’t. She didn’t want the violence and mindless destruction Lucas brought, none of them did; except for perhaps Viktor. Good riddance.

“Then what are you doing?”



“Trying to give people a chance. Damien is not Lucas, and it was Lucas who made the Second Estate so violent, to push for constant expansion at the cost of the other cove—”

“The Invictus profited, remember?” Garry leaned in close, and stared Julias in the eye. A little more sneer and Julias was sure there’d be dog drool on his lip. “The First and Second Estate, lovely bedfellows.”

He really didn’t want to have this conversation yet. Not enough information, not enough feel for the mental state of everyone, trying to play poker without knowing people’s quirks or habits.

“Garry, you know me well enough to—”

“Viktor’s childe? Think I have the right to be a bit suspicious, especially after what you did to Mike.”

Mike, the hacker kid. Right, Julias had wiped his mind of memories, invaded his brain.

Shit.

“Viktor’s mission, Garry, his orders. I did what I could to—”

“You violated him.”

“I didn—”

“Don’t give me that shit Julias. You act like the nice guy, but—”

Enough.

Julias snapped his hand out and grabbed the man by the neck. At some point, they’d both leaned in more and more, until Garry was in striking distance. And he wanted to hit him, god he wanted to hit him in his idiotic, short-sighted Carthian face.

No one moved. Everyone went silent, and stared. Jacob's jaw dropped, but that didn't stop him from smiling like a jackass. Garry could have retaliated, but he just stared at him with wide eyes.

"Stop. Interrupting. Me." He shoved the man back into his chair before he stood up, and slammed his palms down on the glass table. Fuck these elders and their pompous garbage. "Shut the fuck up, and listen, you simple, myopic fool. Damien is not Lucas, just as I am not Viktor. Damien is willing to revive the Lancea et Sanctum, with the sole purpose of preaching his religion. And not the 'dominate everything' version either." He offered Maria a small glance before looking back to Garry, and the Prince. "No power, just a voice. He deserves a chance, and the Lancea et Sanctum deserve a chance."

He sat back down, and glared. Not like him to get angry, but at that edge there was a flash of white in his eyes, and he just wanted to rip Garry apart, get into his head and force him to tear off his own fingers. Bastard was too strong for Julias to get into his brain, but the imagery was pleasing nonetheless; at least, until he noticed Jacob in the corner of his eye. He was still smiling, and looking straight at Julias.

"Boys," Antoinette said with raised hands, elbows still on the table, "let us not revive old hatred, especially now that many of the people responsible for them are gone. Mister Mire, Madam Turio, you have talked with the boy about this?"

Maria shook her head. "I haven't yet, and I would have liked to before we proposed this. But we knew others, Garry in particular, would balk at the idea."

"He is not the only one who would." The Prince got up, and walked over to the window. No one joined her, they never did. But then, she rarely got up from the table to stare out the window like that. "People died, Mister Mire. People close to Garry, and others

close to myself. The purge was a horrible time for all of us. Not only the purge, but just a few weeks ago, I had the retired Archbishop, thirty of his subordinates, and Damien at my doorstep. Lucas died, I nearly died, and the blood of thirty Kindred soaked my hands, and my sheriff's sword. I listened to that man preach of Longinus's mission as he assailed my home with bullets. As Damien's sword tasted my blood. And you ... dare to ask Damien of this before speaking to me?"

No pause, no shift in inflection, nothing to give up the lie that she or the sheriff were the ones to kill Lucas. She'd be the sort to talk during poker, and dance around the lies she'd weave, the false tells, the fake reactions for each hand. Scary, when you were good at it.

And he didn't know what to say. He sat down, brought a single finger to his lip, and stared at the table. He was supposed to have a speech made, points to argue, evidence to overrule opinions. But Garry threw him a curve and he didn't have anything prepared. He—

"That is a good point."

They all turned to Jacob.

"What is?" the Prince said.

"Well, if Lucas and his little army got slaughtered, why is Damien still alive? Why'd you spare him?"

"I..." With a long sigh, Antoinette walked back to the table and sat in her Princely chair. What would she say? If it had been her choice, she wouldn't have spared him. The only reason Damien was still sucking blood was because Jack let him live. "I ... saw the broken look in the boy's eyes, before Lucas was dead. He was ... different."

Julias could feel his lip trying to smirk, and spent every reflex he had to keep it still. Jack's words.

Maria and Garry looked at her, then each other, and then lowered their eyes. Michael didn't look like he cared about any of this, but Jacob, the bastard Jacob was grinning as he listened, and waited.

"Then, you agree with Julias," Jacob said, "about Damien. He's different than Lucas. And you might not like the Lancea et Sanctum, but it was Lucas who lead to the purge, right? I say give the kid a chance. Worse comes to worse, you can kill him."

The Prince leaned forward over the table, and glared at Jacob. Oddly on the point of the Nosferatu. Did he know about Jack? No, he couldn't have, Beatrice wouldn't have told him. But the old bastard had a habit of knowing things he shouldn't; fact of history.

"... you make a solid point, Jacob. I will consider it."

Julias smirked, and leaned back in his chair. Woman was trapped. She could have exposed that Jack was Lucas's killer, and that she would have killed Damien otherwise, but it'd risk Jack's life to Maria.

She really did love him.

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Back in his mansion in Rich Side. Victorian building, big fancy windows, classic colorful furniture with curving wooden legs, and white pillars. Too old fashioned, even for him, or at least he thought it was. But now that he owned it, and walked around in it, part of him enjoyed the silence, the space, the vast rooms with massive curtains and massive paintings. He stood there, sipping a glass of blood, while admiring them. It gave him time to let his thoughts drift, wander, and reflect. The mansion was growing on him.

Did Jacob know Jack was responsible for Damien's survival? Maybe, if he managed to eavesdrop on their conversation with him. The bastard was too damn smart too, like Antoinette. And where was the sheriff? He rarely missed a Primogen meeting. The Prince

had seemed a little distracted during the meeting, but he'd thought it might have just been because of the typical Invictus Carthian bitching about territory.

He did wish his fellow council members wouldn't antagonize the Carthians so much, but their actions were reasonable, if aggressive. Xnomina was a corporation, it needed to expand, and it was in Invictus interest to defend its expansions, even if that meant rubbing up against the Carthian border. And it was in Invictus interest to guard itself against Carthian aggression in general; both sides itching for a chance to throw a punch, and the Carthians did love to throw that first punch. They could play victim all they wanted, the Carthians had a long history of starting wars.

The door knocked, the knocker resonating the whole building with its thunderous crashes. He sighed, walked down the curling stairway into the grandiose lobby, and opened one of the enormous wooden doors.

“Hey Superman.”

“Beatrice. Damn, I am glad to see you.” He stepped aside to let the Nosferatu in.

“Oh?” With a grin, she stepped into the lobby and over to the fancy couch. She had a big box against her hip, and was dressed in some jeans and a black tank top. He considered buying her some better clothes, but then, he doubted she'd be comfortable wearing a suit regularly as he did.

“Yeah. Mind stuck on work, need someone to yank it away.”

“I am good at that.” She put the box down by the couch, sat down, and hooked her arms over the back of the seat. “I mean, I could ruin it, and tell you I don't want the Carthians and Invictus fighting to get any worse, but I assume you're already fighting for that.”

“I am, ish. Turio and MacDonald have their reasons, and ... and...”

“And?”

“You remember what I said to you, that first night at my apartment?”

“Hit me.”

“That I was sick of Kindred scheming?”

She sighed, and nodded before motioning for him to come join her. “Yeah, I do. Didn’t take long to get pulled into it, did it?”

She knew where he was coming from, she must have. Becoming a member of the Circle of the Crone was a big change for her, and Julias doubted Jacob treated his people like Garry did. Girl was probably neck deep in his scheming, and Jacob played the long game, the big game. And now Julias was too, as a member of the triumvirate of the Invictus.

He sat down next to her, glass still in his hand, and eyes on the main door. “Life was simpler, back then. I miss it.”

“Do you? You’re making changes now.”

“I am but it doesn’t seem to be helping much. Viktor’s methods may have been brutal or manipulative, but they worked. I’m trying to play peacemaker with the Carthians, and Garry seems insistent on refusing my aid.”

“Can you blame him?”

“ ... no, I can’t. I ... let’s not talk about that. And sorry for dragging you into it.”

She laughed and shrugged. “It’s kind of nice, honestly. With the witches, every conversation I have I have to deal with their vices at

the same time.”

“Mm?”

“Yeah. No group meetings, we just talk to each other when needed. Jennifer and Othello always have some kine between their legs or on their laps, mid conversation.”

He tapped a finger against his chin. Figures the witches were brazen about their lust, but actually having conversations about covenant matters during sex was a step beyond.

“ ... like what you see?” he said.

Again she laughed, louder this time, and her mouth opened further than a human would be able to. Much as he loved her, and thought she was sexy as all hell, she did have crocodile teeth along her cheeks, and her jaw could open like a crocodile’s too. Scary.

“Not gonna lie, it get can pretty hot sometimes. But hey, we’re an item right? Trust me?”

He smirked at her, and slid a little closer on the couch.  
“Definitely.”

“Ok, good, cause I mean ... they have sex. A lot. And I’m just standing there, and, you know ... watching, and sometimes I watch for a little longer than I should, and then I feel guilty, and it’s very un-witch like. I’ll lose my license.”

She was showing a side he hadn’t expected. A dash of worry and sprinkle of shame. Adorable.

“As long as you don’t join in, watch all you want. I trust you.”

That put a smile on her face. “Awesome. And uh ... been meaning to ask you something related.”

“Mm?”

“Jennifer, she ... she umm ... she ... really wants to join us. In the bedroom.”

He raised a brow, and set his drink on a nearby couch side table. “Jennifer, the young Ventrue? Looks a little like you?”

“Yeah, she’s been pushing on that angle. Can’t help but say it’s a bit tempting.”

“Attracted to her?”

“Yeah! I mean, uh ... well, she is pretty hot.”

He chuckled and hooked his arm around the back of her neck and shoulders, so she lowered hers and slid into the nook of his chest.

“Sounds like I’d be a third wheel.”

“No! No ... well ... maybe?”

“Let me think about it. I don’t know her very well, barely ever said two words to her.”

“Perfectly get it if you say no. I really like this thing we got going here, and I’ve seen threesomes ruin more than a few relationships.”

The idea had appeal. Jennifer was a beautiful creature, and from what Beatrice said, it sounded like she had an attraction more to Beatrice than him. And that idea had even more appeal.

But Beatrice was right, it wasn’t a decision to make quickly. He’d have to think about it.

“Think it’ll take something a little more than a bit of sexual confusion to break us up, Beatrice.”



“I am a good catch.” She pushed against his chest until he was on his back on the couch, head on the couch arm, and she lay upon his chest, cheek to his sternum. He could feel the sides of her huge teeth touching him; scary, and thrilling.

He hugged her, hands to her back, one sliding up and down her spine. But, after a while, it slid up to her neck, along through her hair to comb it, before it slid to her jaw, and then along her teeth.

Such. Huge. Teeth. Terrifying sharp things that belonged on a crocodile. A normal, human looking mouth with normal teeth and lips from the front, and then monstrous teeth where her cheeks should be. Combined with her green snake eyes, she really had the monster girl thing going for her. She opened her mouth enough for him to slip a finger between some of her huge fangs, and he plucked at one of them with a fingernail.

She melted. Her mouth opened a little more, while her hands hugged his chest and tugged on his suit.

“I like that,” she said.

“Having your teeth touched?”

“That you like touching them.”

Maybe he was feeling a little guilty for this thoughts about the Nosferatu in the tunnels. Or maybe he did like her teeth; they were badass.

She pushed herself up a bit, elbows and arms on his chest, and opened her mouth while looking down at him. Open wide. He could see the long tongue she had, and its slightly serpentine shape.

“Jack used to describe for me a kink he had, involving monster girls. Things like snake women, or spider women, and such. Scary women, oddly sexy, powerful women.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I told him he needed to get laid,” he said.

She laughed, and leaned back down to put a kiss on his chin. “Is he why I turn you on?”

“Maybe a little? I thought about it after, and had to admit, there’s something alluring about it. Didn’t really understand though until I saw you.”

“Aw. Then I owe the kid.” She set her head back on his chest, and lightly stroked his arm as she got comfortable.

Just two lovers, lying on a couch. No drama, no issues. He was jinxing it, thinking such thoughts, but damn it was nice to be able to close his eyes and hold someone he loved.

“What’s in the box?” he said.

“Ah, sexy fun times.”

“Of course.”

“Right? So, find me the fanciest room in the whole place, so we can defile it.”

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~~Natasha~~

Find the spiders, find the spiders, find the spiders. Find a needle in a haystack, a poisonous, dangerous needle. Wonderful.

She walked the streets of Devil’s Corner the moment dusk arrived, and began exploring. A dangerous, horrible place Devil’s Corner come nightfall, especially for women, but she wasn’t afraid of the kine. And, like all Kindred, a part of her hoped someone

would try and mug her or such, so she'd have an excuse to break some bones. No vampire was immune to the temptation to indulge in a little power.

But, all was quiet in Devil's Corner. A man had been taken according to police reports, a Mr. Tenmer. One disappearance too many, and people were starting to hide in their homes more come dusk. A lot of blood and damage had been left behind. Weird damage, like in the other disappearances. Related? The Prince didn't know, and from what her source told her, the two incidents were only related by proximity, the spiders and the disappearances.

Which could have easily been a lie. The source also said the spiders were in the tunnels of Devil's Corner. Also could have been a lie, but it'd be a weird lie. The Prince assured Natasha her source was likely serious, likely genuine, and also likely hiding something. Typical Kindred scheming.

She'd poured through the records of the police, examined every detail of the disappearances, and the odd marks left behind. The Prince had access to all the police files, even the ones the Invictus thought they had under their thumb. Sneaky. And their files showed all the details, all the pictures, all the shots showing the carved up street and walls. So, being a thorough investigator, she was going to look into the disappearances too. Not like the few spiders she found at the Elysium tower were a good lead; it was a building, and they were normal spiders.

She still had one option though. She descended a subway stairway, and with a key given to her by Daniel, she opened the door into the city's underbelly. The covenants all had access to it, which meant she had to be on guard for running into other covenants. Maybe she'd run into Vivienne? A smile sneaked onto her face as she thought of her childe back in the Invictus fold. The girl was too much like her.

The tunnels, dark and comforting; or at least they used to be. She could see well in the dark compared to most Kindred, which meant she could see in almost complete black. Sith sight, according to Jessy. She chuckled and moved along through the old paths, but the chuckle sounded forced even to her. Not too easy to be comfortable in the tunnels when she still had images of ghosts grabbing her legs from the shadows. To top it all off, now she had images of spiders doing the same, or leaving giant webs for her to stumble into.

A particularly scary dream she'd had had her trapped in a coffin — so quaint — while being eaten alive by hundreds of spiders; not so quaint. Some Kindred she was. Really have become a big baby, haven't you?

She felt for the pistol underneath her suit jacket. It was there. She felt for the small sword beside it. There. If she had a flamethrower, she might feel a bit better, at least until she set herself on fire and turned into a puff of smoke and ash in half a second.

She shook out her shoulders, and stepped onto the subway platform she'd found. A few Nosferatu liked to hang out here, members of the Invictus but otherwise too weak and malformed to join them topside.

“Miss Halla,” she said.

Liliana Halla pulled her tattered old blanket down from her head, and raised her eyes to look at Natasha. The woman sat in the corner of the big, empty place of abandoned booths and ticket gates. Half of her face was covered in eyes. Actual eyes, with eyelids and eyelashes and everything. Maybe twenty eyes fighting for space along her cheek, jaw, temple, and a few on her neck.

But Nosferatu were Nosferatu, and such disfigurements were just that, disfigurements. She'd long learned to look past them, enough for conversation anyway.

“Madam ... I suppose I can call you whatever I want now, eh Natasha?” The woman, a petite thing like Natasha, rubbed some sleep out of one of her extra eyes, and smiled.

“Yeah, that is true isn’t it? Liliana.”

“How are things in the dragon order?”

“Little terrifying, really.”

She laughed, and gestured to the Nosferatu beside her. “More than Bob?”

Ah, Bob. Bob did not look like a Bob. Bob looked like a classic vampire, the ugly ones with a dozen large fangs overlapping the bottom lip, pointed ears, bald, no eyebrows, and veiny pale skin. Pale eyes too. He had long fingernails that looked like they belonged on an old corpse, and he used them to fidget with the big, dark, dirty robe he wore.

He offered a small wave, before he looked back down and continued fidgeting with his robe some more. Bob was a quiet man, a nice man. She’d personally given him assignments involving information warfare, and it’d been a failure. But when she gave him some assignments involving violence, roughing up some ballsy Carthians, he’d performed well. He wasn’t happy about it, but you couldn’t argue with the results. At least, the Invictus wouldn’t. Ends always justified the means in the First Estate.

“Yeah, more than B-Bob. Prince is Prince for a reason, and I’m reminded daily. Not that she reminds me, just that ... yeah, the stuff we d-d-deal with is terrifying.”

Lil nodded, and Bob did too. “What brings you to Vander Street?”

“Looking int-to something. I assume you know about the d-disappearances?”

They nodded. Course they did, they hung out beneath Devil's Corner. She didn't follow it by asking though; they wouldn't be able to answer her. Invictus, not Ordo Dracul, they weren't supposed to share information.

But maybe she could get a little something.

"How about spiders?"

They both blinked, looked at each other, then back to her.

"What about them?" Lil said.

"You tell me." Natasha put up her hands, and stepped up to the Nosferatu before sitting down on a nearby crate. "I'm calling in a ff-favor. Point me in a direction, anything that's unusual and spiders are involved."

She was showing her hand. Now they knew she wanted information about spiders, and that she probably didn't have any information of her own. But the Invictus weren't her enemies, and these people were her acquaintances, former partners. She could get away with exposing her neck a little. Hopefully.

"Spiders. Spiders. Bob?" Lil looked his way with a shrug.

"... spiders." A deep, rough voice on the gentle Bob. "... I avoid the tunnel beneath Ronder Street. The lights don't work there, and before they stopped working, I found a lot of spiderwebs. Large, and a lot of them."

Not exactly unusual, but not normal either. A cozy middle-ground of lukewarm that would probably lead to nothing, but was still a better lead than the nothing she had.

"Thanks a lot B-Bob. Lil. I owe you."

“A strange thing for one of the few Ordo Dracul to be looking into,” Lil said.

“Strange is what we do.”

“Wait,” Bob said. “You asked about the disappearances? What’s the connection?”

Lil elbowed him in the side. “Hey.”

Natasha put up her hands. “K, I think it’s ss-safe to say we’re all a little in the d-dark here. Which is why I’m looking into it.” Grinning a sly grin, a grin worthy of the Prince, she stood back up and waved. “But ... sorry. Can’t tell you anymore. And I wouldn’t p-presume to call in anymore favors of you. Let’s just pretend this whole conversation d-didn’t happen.”

Lil and Bob sighed, but nodded, and returned her wave. She had a few more favors she could call in if she wanted, and they knew it too. But, that was a bridge she didn’t need to burn.

She couldn’t tell them she had no idea if there was a connection. There was exposing your neck a little, and then there was exposing all of it. Way too in the dark to be exposing anything really. It was a gamble.

Ronder Street. It was on the edge of Devil’s Corner, where the city came to a hard stop with only a few buildings before the dry forests and rocks beyond awaited. Most of the action in the city’s dirty hole happened in the center, like the disappearances; she’d have never drifted to the edge if it hadn’t been for Bob’s tip. Still, could be a dead end. Only one way to find out.

A long walk through the tunnels to the Ronder Street subway. And, to her surprise, no more Nosferatu were found. Well, it was a big city, the chances of running into more Kindred randomly in the tunnels were small, but walk long enough and you were bound to

run into another eventually. And she walked a long time. Passed Ferning and Main Libera streets, passed Jameson, and Henmark street, and deeper into the older abandoned subway tunnels. Older and deeper both, because Jacob had a thing for them back in the day, according to the Prince.

And the lights did start to go out. At first it was just one, and one that could have easily been missed by the kine the Invictus hired to keep the tunnels somewhat lit. Missed or not yet examined. But then there was another light gone, and another light gone. Soon the amount of lights that didn't work outnumbered the functioning ones. And eventually, she stared into the darkness of the old tunnels.

Hard to see, but her Sith eyes could make out shapes enough for her to move. Just barely.

Her fingers started to shake. One hand had already pulled out her pistol before she'd told herself to draw it, and the other was holding her sword, digits tight around the grip. Very tight. Her fingers hurt, and her wrist locked hard, but she couldn't get the shaking to stop. Ice trickled down her spine into her toes. Her beast within bared its teeth and glared into the darkness, but for all its posturing, for all its growls and snarls, it too lowered itself to the ground and backed away.

But she pressed forward. Last time she'd done something like this, she had Jessy as backup. Now, she had only herself. And she was deep in the Earth, alone, on a mission to explore a threat involving spiders, warned to them by a strange source.

Kindred. You're a Kindred, Natasha, right hand of the Invictus retired. Member of the Ordo Dracul. Ancillae Mekhet. Grow a spine. And you can see in near total darkness, something no Kindred you'd ever known can do.



But she'd never explored the tunnels this deeply alone, especially not when the lights were out. Always with Jessy, or with Julias. Or with Vivienne.

Vivienne. She sighed, and pushed forward. Past behind her, future in front of her. Or some other ridiculous crap like that. Whatever, the ridiculous crap was convincing. Push on.

When the reflecting illumination of distant lights around several curving tunnels was no longer able to reach her, so only utter and total obsidian hell awaited her, she took out her phone and turned on the flashlight, weakest setting. Not in a hurry to give away her position, but she needed some light at least. Just enough for tiny flickers along the metal tracks to reflect onto the walls, enough for her to see the silhouettes of shadow in the unending black before her, and the tracks and concrete beneath her feet.

Dead silence. She didn't breathe, not even to enjoy the old reflex, lest she disturb the silence. Better the only noise was the gentle shifting of her soft-soul shoes against the dust and bits of powdered rock. So old, so damn old down here. If she shouted, she expected the tunnel to collapse on her. Bury her deep underground where no one would ever find her. She'd slip into torpor, and sleep, dreaming powerful dreams for millennia, until someone finally dug her up. Straight into sunlight.

The shivering got worse.

She stopped, and looked to the wall. It was sticky. She pulled her hand away, but the sticky remained on her fingers, and she rubbed her fingertips together trying to understand the unwanted texture. Stringy, soft, very soft. A little light from her phone pointed directly at it exposed some tiny white lines on her fingers.

Spiderwebs.

Ok, ok, no need to be alarmed. Just some spiderweb on your fingers, when you've been warned about a nasty, growing spider threat. Don't think about the scary jars filled with giant, dried spiders Antoinette has. Don't think about the ancient charms made with arachnid inscriptions on them. Don't think about the skulls she's shown you with spiders etched into their forehead. Don't think about real, gross, normal spiders, with their hairy little bodies, disgusting long, furry mandibles, and their eight legs and their fangs and their many eyes. The way their tiny legs itched on the skin when they crawled down your back or up your arm.

She wiped the spiderweb off on her pants, and kept going. But she turned up her light a bit, so her Sith sight could get a proper view of the whole of nearby walls and the ceiling and floor of the tunnel. Enough so another vampire would have seen her, and a white dot of light in her breast pocket. A human would have seen only a flicker of a light, like a firefly. More than enough to give away her position, more than enough to make her eyes dart around at the still shadows the light cast, expecting creepy legs to reach out from the black.

Only silence.

Did the Prince want her risking her life for this? Nothing Natasha had seen would suggest her life was in danger, but the warning was real, the Prince took it seriously, and that meant Natasha had to take it seriously. No idea what spiders meant though, as a threat. Creepy crawlies on her back, on her legs, tickling in her hair or on her face. Furry, spindly legs, those ugly long mandibles. The eyes! Fangs, biting. Fifty years as a vampire and the fangs of a spider were still creepy as fuck.

She could shoot an assassin in the face with a snap of resolve, but spiders stuck on her mind worse than their webs. Damn she missed Jessy.

She sighed, silently, and continued into the black. Dirty concrete above and below, and dusty, old platforms every so often greeted her. Stairways that led to nowhere, some sealed off with crumbled walls. Thick cables along the walls covered in grime, held to the old concrete with bent and failing hooks. The metal blocks of the tracks beneath here looked ready to fall apart; they wouldn't, but they had the look nonetheless. Every so often, an archway lined the ceiling and walls, decorated with faded colors and patterns weaved into the bricks. Doorways, empty save for hanging signs about danger: electrical equipment. Gaps in the walls like pillars.

All of it was covered in spider web, in varying degrees. Sometimes she could go fifty feet without seeing a web, and she was sure the previous was just a coincidence. Then she came upon a batch of it, thick, circling the whole of the tunnel walls, and stepping on it made it cling to her and drag along. Not strong enough to stop her, or even register as clinging to her shoes, until she looked behind her and found a few feet of it trailing her with dirt and pebbles in its sticky net.

Until she took a step, and fell. Kneecap hit the railing hard enough to make her petrify with the impact of metal against the joint, but she bit her teeth down to keep any noise contained as she brought up her other foot to try and stand. But the first foot took effort, and she had to try and lift it against whatever was pulling it down. Something springy.

Spiderweb. Big, thick, hard spiderweb.

She gulped, and twisted. A little effort to get her foot to fight the sticky material, but it wasn't strong enough to stop her once she was paying attention, and she leaned down over it. So close, the little light she had was enough for her to examine it.

Initial assumption correct. Spiderweb, but enormous. Spiderweb was a very strong material, but normally came so thin and light that

it was a paltry amount. This stuff was a few millimeters thick, and it had enough mass to it that, when she reached down to pluck at it with her free hand, it had weight. A spider would have to be damn big to make webbing this thick. Really. Damn. Big.

She stood up, forced her foot free of the webbing, and stared ahead into the tunnel before her. Nothing, but now the shadows looked like giant spiders. Her hand on her phone refused to hold still, and her eyes darted back and forth between it and the path back. She hooked the phone back into her breast pocket, and squeezed her pistol. Go back for the love of god go back. But all she'd found was darkness, silence, and some big spiderwebs.

She sighed breathlessly and pushed on. Just like with the Invictus, going on dangerous missions, except now she was doing them alone. The Prince trusted her though, and so did Daniel; a far cry from the half-trust half-distrust attitude of the Invictus, of Maria and Michael and Viktor. But at least she'd have a partner. She wasn't sure which was worse.

She turned the brightness up on her phone a touch more, so the tunnel curves beyond the way had shape, and she pressed on. Leaning forward so the light pointed down at the tracks, her eyes widened as patches of the webbing grew larger, and she had to take big steps to avoid them. A few slivers of the sticky string caught on her pants, her face, her hair, and she pulled it off as best as she could until it clumped on her sword hand.

When the webbing started to scale the tunnel itself, from ceiling to floor, in intricate patterns, she stopped. This wasn't natural. No large spiders were creating these webs. With a slow hand, she reached out for one in front of her, strand almost half a centimeter thick, and nudged it with her fingertip. It stuck to her as predicted, and when she pulled away, the web fought her. It fought hard, and she pulled harder with a flailing arm as the beast in her gut panicked.

But she got free, and pointed the light up at the vibrating web. Where were the spiders? No spiders, anywhere, just webbing, lots of it. Where—

Footsteps. She ducked into one of the wall alcoves, fidgeted with the phone, trembling fingers struggling to find the dial on the brightness, before she hooked her back to the corner with sword and pistol drawn. No one had any reason to be down here. Kine wouldn't come down, they had no access. The other covenants wouldn't come down this deep unless they were tailing her, or Azamel had told others. Someone else was in the tunnel.

The footsteps were light, quiet, soft things that made less noise than any kine would. But there were a lot of them. And without her light, all she could see of the tunnel and its curves and walls were blurry silhouettes of black against blacker and blackest.

The corner she crouched in was covered in webbing, and she grimaced as the sticky material caught into her hair, along her face and ears, and over her back. Covered. She could still move, but now she had to sit there, frozen, and wait in a spiderweb as the footsteps came closer.

But once they grew near, maybe twenty feet away, they stopped. Didn't turn around, didn't leave, just stopped. Natasha froze, didn't move a muscle, didn't blink. She strained her ear until she could hear a distant cockroach crawl along the wall.

There was breathing. Not a single set of lungs though, or whatever he, she, they, it had. Deep, slow breaths, doing their best to blend into the silence of the tunnel like she was.

Joys of being a Kindred. No need to breathe. She'd vanished into the black, and unless someone could smell her, or brought a light, they weren't going to find her.

A deep, hard sniff. She petrified, and gripped her sword until her fingers ached. More sniffs, louder, filling many lungs with air, and getting closer. The breathing was louder than the footsteps, smelling the air. Smelling her.

Movement. She dared not move, not a muscle, not an eye, not a single fucking thing. Solid stone. Don't move don't move don't move. The blurry shape came closer, something long, thick, large, something maybe three or four feet tall.

“Itch ... k'ra ... krmerh.”

Voices. Noises. And they weren't human noises. Guttural growling sounds, buried in a dark whisper. Another blurry shape stepped in next to it, again maybe four feet tall, and twice that long.

“K'ra threenk ... Azlu.”

Natasha squeezed the gun, and she had the barrel pointed in their direction. The barrel was shaking. Stop shaking. Stop fucking shaking. They might see it, stop shaking!

The thing aimed its head toward her, and came closer. Closer. Close enough she could feel the heat from its face, and hear the inhuman breaths. Too dark for it to see her, and her powerful sight could only see a blur.

Until it was inches from her face. Heat, breath, against her skin, her nose, her eyes. Don't move don't move. Oh please for the love of god don't move. She was a corpse, just a corpse, a dead thing, move along. Please, move along.

It pulled its face back into the obsidian fog, and walked down the path of the tunnel once more. Other blurs of black followed after it, each mostly of the same size, though some of the creatures were taller. She couldn't tell how many feet they had, but their bodies were long, with heads level with their bodies, and they moved as

silent as prowling death. A couple more came in closer to the alcove she hid within, sniffed a little louder, and each brought their silhouettes up to her as they sniffed. But she didn't reciprocate, and without pulling air in, she couldn't smell them in return.

Better that than they notice she wasn't really dead.

The last one moved on, and her body relaxed. Something was in the tunnels. Something alive. She waited for the gentle tap of their feet, legs, spider tips, whatever, to pass on, before she let her frozen body relax.

Get the fuck out and get back to the Prince.

She looked down at her gun. Couldn't see shit in the black, but she could see a blur of her hand, of the weapon. Her fingers had gone numb. She looked at the hand holding her sword. The metal was shaking again. At least she'd managed to hold still while those ... those things went by.

Lucky break. If they were smelling her, she must have smelled weird, like some sort of corpse hybrid. The thought made her smirk, and she shook her head, even as her legs struggled to push her back to standing. Get back to the Prince.

A soft tap ripped through the silence. She looked up to the tunnel, eyes wide, body rigid hard, and stared at the blurry silhouette. Another one of the huge creatures stood there in the tunnel, its head turned to face her, long body slowly turning toward her as well. A straggler?

She held still again, still as a statue, and stared at the thing. But it growled, and turned to face her head on. Fuck.

It dove.

Mass, enormous, heavy, crashed against her, threw her body into the wall, and slammed her against the old concrete. Her skull cracked against it, and she tumbled as the claws tore her clothes and ripped her skin.

It howled, a roaring noise that vibrated along the walls, shook the metal of the railings like death riding in on horseback. Burning tore through her as its claws and weight slashed her arms, and blinding white pain lit the blackness of the tunnel.

Bullet shots joined the roar. She fired the gun up into the thing's chest, six times in quick succession. Fuck this thing, she wasn't some prey to be devoured. Warm blood splattered over her chest, and she snarled her own beastly roar as it screamed pain. Its screams only grew worse as she swung out with her sword, and cut across muscle and flesh. More blood soaked her suit jacket, until the warmth of it reached her skin.

She tapped into her vitae, and jammed her hands forward. Kindred strength threw the thing back out onto the tracks of the tunnel, and she jumped onto the tracks. Her feet landed crooked, and she felt one ankle bend too far as the toes twisted over the metal, then down onto the metal blocks beneath. But the pain would have to wait, she had to get moving.

For a brief moment, she felt relief. To let the inner beast out, to let it guide her, let the panicked and scampering Kindred run through the blackness and away from the things behind her, was liberating. But the relief was short lived as the pain scorched her dried veins until the vitae flowed down into her twisted ankle. She ran on it, ignored the pain as best she could, and tore through the tunnel. No time to adjust the lighting on her phone, no time to fix her clothes or check her wounds, no time for anything but running into darkness.



And she could hear them behind her. They roared at her, and now their heavy bodies dug into the concrete and rock of the tunnel floor; she could hear their claws ripping up the subway tunnel. But she was a Mekhet. Fast. Agile. They weren't going to catch her.

But they weren't getting quieter either. She poured her vitae into her legs, forced her body forward, tripping and falling every so often and grinding ankle hinges as her weight drove down into her feet. The things behind her still sounded close. Closer. Growls and snarls on her heels, until she dared take a peek behind her.

Mistake. Toe crashed into metal, and she went flying. At her speed, she flew through the air thirty feet before she finally landed onto her hands, and came to a hard stop. Skin tore, palms shredded over the tunnel floor, and bits of rock ripped into her fingers. She got up, and kept running. The snap of teeth echoed from where she'd been a split moment ago. They were gaining on her.

Light. Oh sweet thank fucking god some light. One of the lights that still worked lit the walls of the curving tunnel, and she cried out with exhaustion and frustration as she sprinted toward it.

The wall in front of her, the curving twist of the corner, erupted. Concrete shattered and chunks of rock cracked against the neighboring wall. A rain of debris clouded the little illumination the single light gave, and the oncoming enormous blocks of weight and inertia drove into her side. She fell over and rolled, tucking tight as best she could as her body skidded and crashed over the tracks and up against the concave wall. The light flickered, flickered, and died.

Back against the wall, butt on the cold concrete, she brought up her pistol and started firing. Another light in the distance of the tunnel kept the obsidian from overwhelming her, but in the darkness and cloud of chaos and rock, all she could see was blurs. Tall, massive blurs. She unloaded the pistol, every bullet, into the colossal shapes, and grit her teeth hard with each shot. Each bullet

hit, and each earned a screech of fury and agony. The sound of bullets tearing into flesh made her nauseous, but she fired, fired until the magazine was empty. She ejected it, loaded in another magazine, and fired.

They kept coming. These things weren't the same size anymore, and instead stood nine feet tall. As the dust settled, the flash of the muzzle lit their bodies, and she could see limbs, two arms, two legs. They weren't the things that'd been walking around lower to the ground. Were they?

One of them, she nailed ten bullets into its chest. Each sunk with a tearing thud, and the thing fell over with enough mass to shake the ground around her.

But then it got back up, snarling, roaring.

She forced herself up to her feet, and started running again. But one of the titans jumped in the way, and slashed out at her with strength and claws. She brought up her other hand and sliced along perpendicular to the arm, trying to cut through it. Might as well have been cutting a tree trunk with a pocket knife.

The hand and claws slashed along her chest, cut open her clothes and skin and muscle down to the bone, and sent her tumbling. Mind again went blank as the pain blinded her. Ground. Darkness. Sound. Get up.

One of the monsters near her raised its foot. But before it managed to bring it down onto her, she brought her sword up again, and slashed up, hard. Whatever it was her sword was finding, it was tough, and she had to push with Kindred strength to cut through to the blood and muscle underneath, or whatever it was. Don't stop, keep slashing. Get out.

Daniel taught her that. You don't stop cutting and slashing until you're out. Don't pause, don't stop to think when in the middle of

chaos, don't try and predict. Just act, and act quickly. In the middle of a fight, when the bullets and claws are flying, smart is only as useful as how fast you can act on it.

She forced herself into a jump from the floor. The monsters swung out at her as she went over their heads, and she felt the snap of air along her split open skin as claws missed her by a single inch. Back on the ground, she forced her vitae into her legs, enough to get them working despite the shredded flesh. Enormous slash marks ran down her thighs and onto her calves, and each stab of dirt and air along the exposed muscle flooded her mind with misery.

But she kept running. Fast, Mekhet were fast. Use it, go faster.

She pointed her pistol arm behind her, didn't look at how the angle exposed some of the bone in her arm, and started firing. Bullets went wide, hit rock, concrete, metal, but flesh too. She managed a peek down at her sword, and found the thing dripping red. Only a split moment before she fired more bullets into the things chasing her. Click click.

She screamed at the empty pistol and threw it back at the things chasing her before she rounded another corner. The weight of the beasts pursuing her shook her, vibrations filling the concrete, working into her bones. Like being chased by tanks on legs. How could things this big exist? And they didn't look like that before. It had to be them though. There were around a dozen of them, and a dozen of them had passed her when she was hiding.

But what the fuck were they? They were huge, and so god damn fucking heavy. Like shooting grizzly bears with a BB gun. Whatever they were, she knew the tunnels better than most. She had to make use of that. Get moving, put some barriers between her and them, get back to the streets.

She threw open one of the doors along the tunnel wall, closed it behind her, and locked the bolt. A big door, heavy, metal, one of the

doors meant to block off important equipment. And thankfully, dual entrance. She dashed for the other door, threw it open so it slammed against the concrete hard enough to shake the old pipes on the walls, and jumped down from the small stairway into the neighboring tunnel. Trently Street was above her. Right? So fucking lost, and no time to check the signs.

But there were lights again. She could see where she was going, and had a second to look down at her damaged body. Still in one piece, no limbs missing, nothing hanging off of her in bits. And this tunnel was abandoned too, old as it was.

She wished it wasn't. Maybe those things wouldn't chase her into the tunnels if the trains were still running. Maybe one of them could just get run the fuck over.

Noise. Explosions of force shook the tunnels harder than her door slamming ever could, as the open door behind her revealed one of the monstrosities bashing in the wall of concrete. Slam. Slam. Fists and claws broke through the gray, sending more debris in a mess of clouds and dust through the room. It couldn't fit through the doorway. It was making its own door.

She got moving. She knew her legs had deep gashes in them, and each step was trying to force the torn muscle to rip apart completely. Her vitae did its best to keep the flesh from opening anymore, thick Kindred blood filling the wounds and holding them together. But each slam of her feet against the concrete of the tunnel was a jarring bolt of pain up through her muscles and into her skull.

But there was light again, and that was enough to keep moving. She ran, ran as hard as her body could take her.

One of the monsters behind her stuck its head out through the doorway she'd left open. It roared, voice sending vibrations into Natasha's skull as it resonated through the tunnel. And then the

thundering concussions of claw against concrete started again as it made its own door through the wall.

It was miles before she'd find another platform, and even then she'd have to dig out keys and open the exit. Or somehow lift the gate. Neither would be quick. No choice though. No fucking choice at all.

A quarter mile beneath her and she could no longer hear the crunch and roar of the monster tearing through the tunnel's concrete wall. Done making its door then. She let out a small whimper before she choked it down, grit her teeth, and kept going.

A train up ahead blocked her path. Maybe she could get around it? No, damn old tunnel didn't have enough clearance! Not unless she was willing to pin her back to the wall, or ... crawl under it.

She turned around. The beasts were closing quickly, and their steps weren't quiet. Like a herd of horses, galloping, thunder and earthquakes on their hooves.

Crawling it was.

She threw herself down onto her belly, groaned as her open wounds rubbed against the dingy water, concrete, and metal blocks of the old tracks. Not enough room for her to lift her head more than an inch, just enough so she could see ahead along the darkness of the train's belly.

The roars behind her reached the train, and she twisted her head sideways to glance behind her. The light showed their feet, the claws on massive feet ... paws? Not quite paws though, and the claws belonged more on a dinosaur than anything with a paw. They tore at the concrete by the train, and grew in number as more of the beasts came to stand by the vehicle.

And then the beasts tore at the train. Natasha winced as she heard claws rip into the metal, and start to rip into it. Several pairs of the feet behind her were up against the train, and they were digging into the concrete while they began to shred her only bastion of hope.

The train started to lift. She froze, and dug her nails against the metal of the old track as the massive train raised a few feet into the air. The beasts behind her reached in with their claws, stabbed at the ground where she used to be, and tore through the concrete of the tunnel floor. The metal rims of the train bent against their forearms, and ripped apart when some of the beasts turned their claws upward and tried to tear the train open from the underside.

Keep going, keep going, keep going. Listen to your sire, don't stop, keep going. Plan when you have the time, act when you don't.

She kept going, and kept her head to the ground. The train came crashing down, and her ears started to ring as the metal and wheels of the train ground and bent and twisted. She kept going, fingers clasp at the dirty shadows an inch over the tunnel ground to find more things she could hook her grip on. The train tossed and shook over her, and roars joined the ringing in her ears.

Finally she arrived at the end of the car. No proper gangway — old train — meant she had the room to climb up and get between the two car doors. Ahead, there were half a dozen cars. No lights or power in the train, but the tunnel had some light, enough for her to see ahead was clear. Behind her, the train bounced and groaned as the monsters ripped it open. They could barely fit in the car itself, but they forced their way in, shoulders and muscle breaking and spreading the bars and ceiling of the car.

The doors between cars were open, thank god. Some luck, some fucking luck, finally. She slipped between them and moved into the next car, and then the next. But behind her, the beasts had torn the front of the train open, and were forcing their way through the car.

Sparks flew off from where metal sliced against metal, and glass shattered like a symphony of doom coming her way.

But they couldn't work their way through the train as fast as she could. They screeched and roared, rip and tore, and warped the metal of the train with every heavy step, but all she had to do was run through its empty, dark content, and hop between each car. At least until she got to the last car.

The back door was closed, and locked. Shit. She slammed up against it, shook it, shook it until the door rattled the car. But it wasn't coming off. The beasts behind her were catching up, and two of them stood side by side ripping the car apart to fit the herd of beasts behind them. They were going to catch her in moments.

She slammed the grip of her sword into the glass of the door's window. Again, and again, until it started to crack apart and the shards of glass cut into her hand. Kindred strength drove each punch, or there was no way she'd be getting through it. When bits of her hand caught on the glass, she switched hands, and cracked more of it until the window was a flimsy shell of its former self.

And then she threw herself against it. Head and arms tucked in tight, the glass shattered around her like snow flakes, before the ground greeted her with a merciless punch to the spine. She rolled, and the rails of the track greeted each roll with walls of solid impact. But solid meant she could get her feet against it, and she broke into a run once more as the beasts behind her ripped the train into bits.

But it gave her time, and she ran into the tunnel ahead. There had to be a platform somewhere up ahead, somewhere she could get out of the tunnels. But the deep tunnels were so damn long, and it'd be a while before she could find a platform.

God, her mind was starting to empty. Her thoughts scattered, pulled away by the thud thud of her shoes against the concrete. Tired. So tired. More light up ahead, maybe she could—

Claws grabbed her shoulder, and yanked her back. Hard. Her body tried to follow through with its momentum, and whiplash forced her neck to wrench as her head, arms, and legs kept going without the rest of her. The concrete greeted her again, and claws pinned her chest to the ground. Weight pushed in, cracking ribs as the colossal beast pressed down against her, claws piercing into her skin, through her muscle, and into her lungs.

She screamed, cried, and slashed out at the furry arm holding her down, but as she sank the blade into the forearm of the titan, it slammed its other hand down against her arm. Bone cracked, and her hand jerked on stretched tendons before she let the thing go limp.

Done. She was done. Trapped. Captured. Dead. She thought about trying to kick out with her feet, but colossal hands held her down, and her chest had imploded with the weight of the thing pinning her. Claws pierced her deep, and her ribcage was ruined. She'd be dead twice over if she was human.

How? How had one of these beasts gotten ahead of her? How!? It must have reached out from an alcove in the tunnel wall, but how did it know? They couldn't have sent one of their group around when she jumped tunnels ... did they?

"Azlu," it said. Or growled. Somewhere in the layers of deep, roaring bass, and antagonized aggression, was a voice.

From the dark and cloud of dust, another came near. It rumbled over her, bits of drool falling from its chops onto her face. She didn't blink, only stared. A mouse staring at the cat.

The muzzle flashes of her pistol had ruined her night vision in the dark, but as the dust settled, her eyes adjusted to the darkness once more, and with a few lights nearby, she could see enough. And she whimpered at the sight of titanic fangs and teeth inches over her



head. Heavy breath stinking of life and animal. Eyes that caught hints of the distant tunnel lights, and reflected them.

“No. Not Azlu.”

English. She stared up at the monster, and choked on a gasp as she noticed the ears, the fur, and the muscle.

“Hithim?”

“No. Nahaka.” The other monster shoved its kin. Natasha screamed as claws pulled from her flesh, and she writhed as the burning agony ripped through her spine.

But she was alive. She stared up at the monster as it raised its hand and examined the sword she’d stuck deep into its forearm. Growling, gnashing the teeth of its snout, it yanked the sword out and tossed it aside. There were holes in its chest, bullet holes, but they had already begun to heal over. Fur, soaked in red.

She forced her blurring eyes to focus. The titans stood around her, though with how big they were, only three could be near her while the others had to stand back so the monsters had room. A few of them had bullet wounds, or had, but the little holes were closing, and the blood was stopping. As if she’d done no damage to them at all.

The one who said ‘nahaka’ stepped over her, and knelt on a single knee. Not baring its teeth at all, and it pat her leg with the giant hand of claws.

“Kindred.”

Dead, so dead. Choking on agony, body shaking, inner beast crying its death woes. No one in the world was as fucked as her.



~~Damien~~

He was totally, utterly, completely fucked. Arm twisted out of its socket on split-open flesh, and his whole body trapped in a giant spiderweb. New levels of fucked that deserved new words to represent his unprecedented degree of fucked.

“Why do you hunt me?” it said. She said?

“I ... not hunting you.” He tried to turn his head enough to look at his ruined arm. The vitae was trying to heal it, muscles and tendons pulling to twist the bone back into the joint, but the webbing refused. All his body gave him for its trouble was pain.

“Lies! Many times I have had the undead in my sight, and they hunt me.” Snarling, hissing, the woman’s voice was there but hidden in the layers of monstrosity.

“Hunt you? They were just ... investigating ... who’s been killing in their territory.”

“Territory. You make it sound as if vampires mark territory.”

“ ... they do.”

The voice from the black stopped before him. Whatever it was, it was huge. Each step was quiet as a mouse, but moved multitudes of the branches and leaves, as if they were moving aside for an elephant. Which was possible considering he seemed to be in a jungle. Were there any elephants in jungles?

Pain ripped the thought from his mind and replaced it with searing white. She was tugging on the webbing, and making it yank on his ruined arm.

“Territory? You are vampires. Hunters.”

“Hunters mark territory.”

“Only if they want to be found!” She yanked on the webbing from the black, and he screamed as he felt the skin around the open joint tear. “Vampires hide!”

“Stop! Please stop, just ... stop. I’m not hunting you, I was just investigating. Lots of vampires are investigating the disappearances. You left ... evidence, unusual evidence that warranted it. And vampires run this city.”

“Vampires ... run the city...” She stopped pulling on the web, and came to stand before him. Still too dark for him to see; Natasha might have been able to, but he couldn’t. Just glimmers of moonlight that caught along her body, nothing he could make sense of. But there were legs, massive, long, blade-like legs. Lots of them. “You ... were not hunting me?”

Thank Longinus, she was capable of conversation.

“No, I wasn’t hunting you. I was investigating the disappearing redhead, and the disappearances of humans. Not just me either, a few vampires from different covenants have been.”

“Covenants?”

“ ... I’ll tell you more, if you let me down.”

The blackness stared at him, and said nothing. But he could hear her breathing, calming. He could hear her heartbeat slowing as well, though it was an unusual heartbeat, beating a quarter speed of any human. Not as loud as he’d expect from a giant monster either.

“How do I know you will not run away?”

“Run to fucking where? I’m in a jungle. Last I knew I was in a city tunnel.”

The creature hmmm'd, and raised some of its legs from wherever it was. The weird, long blade-like limbs caught the moonlight between displaced branches and vines, and the sharp tips found where the thread above connected to the black. Like a spider weaving intricate silk, the monster pulled strands from the vines, strands from the leaves and twigs, from the rock and dirt and tree drunks, and far more from the onyx of the jungle night. A huge web.

She lowered him down, and he grit his teeth until his jaw clicked. The arm bent and twisted in weird ways, and more of the skin threatened to tear from how it contorted as she lowered him. But soon he was on his knees, and he reached over with his good arm to twist the bad one back into place.

And he screamed as he did. The monster in the dark took a step back as his voice echoed through the trees, but the scream died away, replaced by groans as he held the arm in place while he poured his vitae into the wound. Heal faster, God damn it. Each moment of the tendons and muscles pulling on the flesh made his body convulse as the fire worked through his limbs. But the fire was passing, and the more he concentrated, the faster it passed.

It was hard to concentrate as the creature came closer. She pushed her legs through the brush and stabbed the colossal blades down into the earth near him, and lowered herself. He winced as her body came closer; he didn't like spiders. But he didn't know what she actually looked like, only that she had smooth, blade-like spider legs.

Some sort of shape came closer, something humanoid. Closer, and closer, until she was only a few feet away from him. The legs must have been thirty feet long, each in seven segments just like a spider leg, but the one nearest him looked as smooth and sharp as a sword.

“ ... your uh ... your legs ... are dangerous,” he said. She pulled the leg back, and some others ones as well, until she was again too far in the oppressive night for him to see any of her. “I mean, that’s ok, not a problem, I think? Just a little scary. I saw what you did to Mr. Tenmer.”

“You were watching me during the hunt?”

“Yeah. Trying to figure out who you were ... what you were, I guess. So that was you?”

“ ... it was.”

“But you were a redheaded Scottish woman. Now you sound ... Portuguese? Not the best with accents.”

“I...” The shadows moved, and the trees shifted as the giant creature shifted around, over him, and settled somewhere in the dark on the other side of his body. “I am from Scotland, from Barrhead.”

“Don’t sound like it anymore.”

“Now, I ... I...” One of her blade legs peeked out from the blackness, and nudged at the dirt by his shoes. “I am different in here.”

“Yeah, about that. I mean, thank you for not killing me, I appreciate it. But, can you give me some information? Where is here?”

“My home. My ... home.”

“A jungle. In Dolareido?”

“We are not in Dolareido.”

“Oh. Well ... I suppose that makes sense.” A little more sense than a jungle being in Dolareido, at least. “How about some quid pro quo? You don’t seem to know anything about the vampires in Dolareido, and I know I have a lot of questions about you.”

The darkness pondered, and hummed its consideration. One minute he was spider food, the next he was talking to the spider. Strangely thrilling.

“ ... ok.” Blades reached out from the darkness again, and he froze as the sharp legs started to pluck at the threads on his body. One by one, she pulled off the white web from his face, his clothes, his hair; the webbing seemed to lose all stickiness when she wanted it to. “Vampires, are ... are they hunting me?”

“No, I wasn’t lying. Vampires were investigating because it was an anomaly. No other reason I know of.” He didn’t exactly like being so truthful with the stranger who cut open his arm, but she was sparing his life for now, and that was worth some honesty. “My turn then. Um, your name?”

“ ... in the world I am Fiona. Here, I am ... Vrallar’trakla of the Eight Blade Arach.”

He raised a brow, and squinted at the dark shape he guessed was her.

“Quite the title.”

“I ... it was not ... I did not ask for ... My turn.” The web gone, she pulled her leg blades back into the darkness, and drifted around some more, a haze blur of black against black. “Your name?”

“Damien. Your race?”

The darkness hissed, and poked at the ground and trees a few times.

“You do not know?” she said.

“No. I have no idea how you were able to tell I was a vampire on sight either.”

“ ... I can see it. Can you not see mine?”

“Your what?” he said.

“My beast.”

Oh, she could actually see a Kindred’s beast. That was ... terrifying. Whatever it was that lurked in the chests of vampires, he’d never thought it an actual entity or thing to be observed. More like reading body language, like instinct given a metaphorical body. Not so metaphorical.

“Kindred can only feel the beast of others; not very good at getting details.”

“ ... I am ... a child of the Dark Mother, same as you are. Different, but the same.” It came closer, and a few of its legs stuck into the ground by Damien’s shoes. Enough so he could see the blur of her body shape closer now. Whatever she was, she didn’t seem huge or anything, once you ignored the titanic legs moving the branches. “I am Begotten.”

“Begotten ... never heard the word before. Vampires call ourselves Kindred.”

“My turn. You ... you say va—Kindred rule the city, and that there are covenants. What are covenants?”

“Political groups. There are four ... well, hopefully, soon to be five. They’ve been here for hundreds of years.” He rotated his shoulder. Working, but still hurt like hell.

“Maybe I should have chosen another city. I ... I came here ... because my friends, they said it was a horrible place full of horrible people.”

“Well, I don’t know if it’s any worse than other cities. The Prince, the Kindred who runs the city, has more or less built this city to be a hive of vice. But as far as abusive people go, it’s no worse than other places I don’t think.”

“ ... you heard much of my hunt.”

“I did.” He smiled a little at the darkness, and stood up.

A jungle. An actual, real jungle. Was it real? He reached out a hand and ran it down the bark of a nearby tree. Felt real. Felt humid, and hot, and covered in bugs. Smelled like disease and rot. Sounded like distant, howling monkeys, squawking birds.

“So, you uh ... you hunt abusive people?” he said. His turn after all. “I can relate, but it sounded a little more important to you than that. Sounded like food.”

The shadow drifted over him again, and the blade legs found rock and earth and vine and tree to step upon, as easy as he’d walk a sidewalk.

“The Begotten have different hungers. Mine is ... to punish ... greatly. The hunger is ravenous, and ... and I say too much.”

Damien held up his hands. “Secret’s safe with me, Vrallar’trakla of the Eight Blade Arach.” First try. No harder to say than the names he read on a regular basis in the Testament of Longinus anyway.

The creature hissed and moved past him with a few quick steps. “Call me Fiona.”

“Fiona it is.”



“My turn. Is ... is my presence a problem? Will the Kindred not tolerate me?”

He winced and scratched at the back of his head. “You’ve been killing a lot of people. The Prince won’t necessarily mind, but she’ll want to meet you. It’s her city.” Still hurt saying that, but he kept the second wince out of his face. No need for this creature to know about his issues with Antoinette. “My turn. So, we’re uh ... in your home? But I mean, it’s a jungle. Fifteen minutes ago I was in Dolareido.”

“ ... can I trust you?”

He shrugged, and knocked his knuckle against one of the trees. “I wouldn’t trust any vampire, not fully. But for the moment, I’m trapped and utterly helpless. So, I mean, you could leave me here and go back to the city, I guess, and confirm what I’m saying. I’ll be dead come sunrise though.”

“The sun does not rise here.”

“Truly?”

“Truly? It is my home in the dream.”

He raised a brow again, and poked at the wood some more. “Doesn’t feel like a dream.”

“It is my lair, here in the realm of dreams.”

“I ... don’t understand.”

The creature chuckled, a weird rasp sound, and it reached one of its great laws up into the sky. The vines and branches parted, and the moon showed itself in the canopy. Moons. Damien froze solid, and his eyes drifted from one moon the other. One was much closer,

and it glowed soft red, unable to pierce the canopy compared to the smaller moon that glowed a strong white.

“It is a dream...”

“An old dream. I ... the Eight Blade Arach was ... it came from a time when the moon meant life and death to an old, forgotten people, hidden deep in the jungle. Vrallar'trakla took it as her home. Takes it.”

Damien turned around to look up at her. His jaw dropped, eyes locked to her body, to the massive spider legs, to her humanoid shape.

Humanoid, sort of. The eight legs were colossal, and they stuck out of her back before curving to stab down against the earth around her. The human shape they came out of looked like it had two legs and two arms and a head, but the color was hard to make out in the odd light of the two moons; a dark tint, but closer to steel than a human skin pigment. Her skin had a shine to it too, subtle, and it looked smooth like her blade legs.

But she didn't have toes. Or feet, for that matter. Her human legs ended in points, like her spider legs. She had hands though, but instead of four fingers and a thumb, she had three claws. Across her somewhat tall body, she had the curves of a woman, more slender than her human form in Dolareido, with a waist more slender than humanly possible. Across her body was a sash, something made of white; spider silk maybe. It covered her breasts and her sex — if she had that, she certainly had breasts — and it hung several feet past her blade feet. A dress.

For all her spider blade monster features, it was her face he couldn't stop staring at. She had a human looking face, with a sharp chin and small lips. But she had no eyes. Where there should have been eyes, was instead smooth, flat surface of onyx that curved into horns that coiled back over her skull like an alien crown. Enormous,

black horns, serrated with tiny spikes, and a couple of horns that coiled down and out from where ears would have been to form tusks. No hair either, but more horns coming out of her skull.

Holy Mother of God.

“You’re ... you’re uh...”

“This is Vrallar’trakla of the Eight Blade Arach. Not Fiona. Not ... but is ... me.”

Multiple personalities? He stroked his chin, and looked her up and down a few times. Maybe a few too many times. She raised one of her many legs, and poked him in the chest with it. A poke hurt, the tip sharp enough to pierce the skin and hit the bone. Those spider legs were dangerous weapons, and not in the cheesy compliment way.

“S-Sorry, just ... you’re uh ... you look so much different than I thought.”

“What did you think?” She lowered herself down to the ground and stood before him, her blade feet hovering a few inches above the mulch. Her spider legs kept her from ever touching the earth, so her dress nudged along the jungle grass while her humanoid half hovered.

“Thought you’d look like a giant monster spider.”

“Is that not what I look like?” Her head tilted down. He couldn’t see where she looked without eyes, but she did seem a little sad.

“You ... well, I don’t know. Sorta look like what I suppose some cultures pictured a spider goddess to look like?”

Fiona smiled, and reached up to run her long claws along one of the massive horns curling back from her forehead.

“You are the first monster I have talked with,” she said.

“First?”

“Yes. I came to Dolareido because some friends of mine said it was infested with scum. They ... they did not know that I needed food. They do not know what I am.”

Quid pro quo was gone. Now they were just talking. A vampire and a monster, a Kindred and a Begotten. No idea what Begotten were, except that he was looking at one, and she was a scary, strangely beautiful spider goddess.

He leaned against one of the trees, but regretted it immediately. Bugs, fucking bugs, all over him.

“I’m probably not the best first Kindred to talk with. And, and ... and I don’t suppose we can find a better place to talk, somewhere with more light? I can barely see you.”

“You mean ... back in the city? I cannot, not yet, I must feed. Vrallar’trakla hungers.” Again, referring to herself in third person. “And ... and I would prefer you do not leave, until I can leave with you. You must prove to me what you say is true.”

“So I’m a prisoner.” He nodded and rubbed his shoulder. Clothes were ruined, but the wound had closed. “Understandable. I was stalking you, after all.”

“Good. Come with me.” The creature nodded, crown of horns moving branch and vine aside, before she drifted between the trees. “In these jungles, I prefer to feed. But there are other places in my lair we can speak.”

“Lair ... dream ... Vrallar’trakla. This is all a lot to take in.”

“I am not Vrallar’trakla, I am Fiona, but ... I am not ... I am Vrallar’trakla.” She shook her head, and sighed. “It is all so new to me.”

“New? How old are you?”

“I ... I am ... I am twenty-one years old. Born in Barrhead 1997.” Every so often, a little bit of her normal voice and casual speech patterns poked through the spider monster’s rather bombastic attitude.

“Wow. And you said it was new to you?” He walked after her as best he could, but he had to keep his eyes on the ground. Every step was a trap of vines, roots, rocks, and insects he’d be happier not having in his shoes.

“I ... suppose I can tell you. If it turns out you have been lying, I will kill you. But if it turns out you have been telling the truth, I ... I could use ... someone to talk to.”

Her speech was becoming less and less imposing with every moment. He didn’t know what sort of way a spider monster goddess was supposed to talk, but with the little hints she was dropping about multiple personalities, maybe it was something different between her human form and the spider form? Natasha would probably analyze it the same way, intellectualizing it, ignoring the reality.

He was in a dream realm with a spider monster. Just a few moments ago, he didn’t believe in either.

“I am a good listener,” he said.

“I was ... I was ... in a dream, you see, devoured. And I woke up ... and I was Vrallar’trakla.”

“In a dream?” More dream talk. Woman seemed to be all about dreams. But then, he was in a jungle with two moons, and he’d gotten there through a tunnel in a city. Easier to just let the absurdity of that roll off of him until he could process it later.

“In a dream. I used to dream of ... of things in the dark. Spiders. They would trap me, and ... and pull me into darkness.”

“Recurring nightmares are pretty common.”

She turned to look at him. Or, at least he thought she was looking at him. The crown of black horns that came out of her forehead was quite beautiful, if a little disturbing in that they also came out of where her eyes would be. A mask, not unlike a masquerade ball mask that happened to cover the eyes ... that happened to spread outward beyond the temples and evolved into enormous, majestic, terrifying horns.

“Powerful dreams, Damien. Powerful, deep, and ... and one dream ... I let the spiders take me.” Even without eyes, he could see the fear etched into her lips. “And ... I changed. I saw the Dark Mother, vampire. I saw her, and ... and ... and I hungered.”

He followed her, and she went on about the Dark Mother, about hunger, about needing to feed on abusive people, but not only their flesh. She fed on their pain, on their fear, on their misery, but only if they understood, only if they realized they were being punished for their transgressions, for being abusive. All very, very weird and intriguing stuff. Kindred needed the blood of living people. She, whatever a Begotten was, needed to feed on people she was punishing for being abusive. Something about her hunger needing the person to be aware of it being punishment. Nothing like what Kindred needed.

She was a demon? No, not a demon, if they truly existed. The Testament of Longinus made mention, but it was always strongly

implied as a metaphor by Lucas. This thing was some sort of monster.

Pot calling kettle.

Eventually, she stopped. Damien had to squint to see her long legs reach down to pick up someone cocooned on the ground. Mr. Tenmer judging by his size. But he wasn't moving, and considering the size of his wounds, he'd probably bled to death.

"He seems to be dead," he said. "Do you ... do you still gain sustenance from him, now that he's dead?"

"A little. I admit you cut the meal short. I will need to feed sooner." She hung the body up, upside down near the others, and opened her mouth.

Like a vampire, she sunk her fangs into his body. Unlike a vampire, she started to drink like she was swallowing down gallons. Damien leaned in for a moment to see the reaction, and regretted it. Flesh was dissolving where she bit him. Not a vampire, definitely not a vampire. The skin and muscle of the dead man liquefied, melted away, mixed with blood, dripped down from the corpse and into the rot of the jungle. The spider monster drank most of it down, careful with where it found her lips so it poured into her awaiting maw.

He'd half expected her to be like Beatrice, open her mouth wide to expose hidden teeth, or such. But her mouth was a beautiful thing, tinted a brighter shade of the metal-like gleam of her skin. Chrome, almost, against the dark steel of her skin.

She drank, and drank, and drank. Drank until the man was gone, and all that was left was the skeleton, the web cocoon, and bits of skin and tendon. Poor Mr. Tenmer must have made for a big meal, big as he was, and Fiona sighed a happy sigh as she wiped her lips.

“He was not alive long enough for me to truly punish him, to feed deeply from him. Scum that he was. I ... I do not know,” she said, “how to ... to talk, here. I am sorry. It is ... new to me, to talk ... to someone else, when the horror and I merge.”

“Horror?”

“Vrallar'trakla. She ... she does not normally have visitors.” The monster shook her head, and wiped the bits of vine and leaf from her white dress. Or at least he figured; couldn't see much in the black. “But ... if the things you tell me are true, then I am very grateful to have you. And I am sorry to have hurt you so.”

He smiled. This wasn't so bad at all. Hell, this was a pleasant conversation.

“Is there a better place we can talk, not in the city?” he said. “I'd love to get to know more about you.”

“Truly?”

“Yeah. I mean, I came here chasing a redhead, and wound up in a jungle in a dream with a spider goddess. You can say I'm pretty damn curious.”

She smiled.

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“ ... God damn.” He really shouldn't be using the Lord's name in vain, but really. God damn.

“I found this chamber in the dream, near the city Dolareido. Upon my first visit to the city, too.”

He was looking out over a city. Dolareido, in fact. But instead of the moon or sun, there was a red moon. A blood red moon. Literal drops of blood fell from it and mixed into the red clouds, and red rain trickled down upon the city below. The cars, the people, all



were frozen as statues. Literal statues, with blood dripping down their stone faces. The people in the cars were statues. The streetlights were a normal color at least, but it was mostly lost to the red rain.

“You ... found this ... in Dolareido?” he said.

The two of them walked the streets, as if it were a perfectly normal thing to walk in the middle of the street instead of on sidewalks. But the cars were all still, so no fear of getting run over. The streets were wet with blood, and every step left blood tracks that washed away a few seconds later in the light blood rain.

“Yes. It ... it reeks of ... of fear. Someone who feared the city as a whole, who saw the blood rain, who ... who saw the city’s bloodlust. Perhaps in their last moments.”

“Blood.” He laughed, held a wet hand up to his face, and laughed some more. “Someone knew the truth about the city.”

“The truth?”

“Some of the most powerful Kindred on the planet came here when they were younger, and helped grow this city into a little utopia for vampires. Only half successful. The covenants have fought each other many times, and vampires have died for ... for ... differing beliefs.” He winced. No use trying to hide his anger over that. “And the kine — humans — have often been caught in the middle of it.”

“Sounds like Kindred are ... terribly human,” she said.

Damn, what an insult. He winced again, and stopped to lean against one of the cars. A woman was inside, just a statue like the others, eyes on the road. Eerie, but quiet.

“Yeah, I guess they do. We were all human once.”

Fiona nodded. While he had to walk around on the blood-soaked streets, the spider monster's human part hovered over the streets while her eight spider legs carried her. Every so often he got a glimpse of her from behind, and how the monstrous appendages hooked into grooves along her spine.

The blood rain was soaking her silk sash, and Damien found his eyes lingering on her. Much as she was a spider monster, she was oddly attractive. All the curves of a human female were there, just mixed with the dark steel-colored skin, the blade feet, the large claws for fingers, and the grandiose array of horns.

“So Kindred do not believe in the Dark Mother?” she said.

He shrugged again and rubbed where his shirt was torn open at the shoulder. All healed up.

“Not really. Many are atheistic or agnostic. The Ordo Dracul, the Invictus, and the Lancea et Sanctum generally believe in God, or something resembling Him.” The Dragons in particular were pretty odd with what they applied the word ‘God’ to. “The Carthians believe in whatever suits their whim, and the Circle of the Crone ... well, actually, I wouldn't be surprised if many of them did believe in the Dark Mother.” Another shrug, before he started walking again, and stared up at the blood moon that colored the city red. The metaphor was sickeningly correct.

Did Antoinette understand how much blood had been shed in her pursuits? A free city where Kindred could be left to their devices was a freedom bathed in conflict. Not that Damien felt his sire's plan had been much better, but peace of the sword was peace of a sort, at least.

“I would like to speak to these Circle of the Crone members then. I ... I know so little. Vrallar'trakla knew so much of an ancient time long gone, and knew of the other beasts that stirred in the shadows. But of Kindred, vampires, she knew little. And ... and I ... struggle,

to...” She shook her head some more, and raised her claws to grasp the titanic horns upon her skull. “It is ... it is nice, being able to talk to someone. I talk to my prey sometimes, but mostly to taunt them for their transgressions as I kill them.”

Brutal.

“You’ve seen other Kindred?”

“Yes. But I always ran away. I was afraid they might be hunting me.”

“Why?”

“Because I am eating their food.”

He chuckled, nodded, and started to walk the center street line once again. The blood was soaking them both through, but it was cool on his skin, and surprisingly calming. He doubted kine would agree, but to a Kindred, and to this spider creature, this Begotten, the blood rain dream was oddly settling.

“It’s an understandable fear,” he said. “But the Prince of Dolareido has pushed for peace between covenants. Talk to her when you can. The longer you put it off, the more upset she’ll become that someone’s been hiding in her city.”

“I see.” The creature raised herself high, high, and higher until she was thirty feet above and her spider legs were mostly straight. Mostly. “But if it is as you say, and the Kindred have covenants and organizations, then I have made a mistake, thinking you were hungry, mindless leeches.”

“Well, every vampire has a bit of the beast in them. When we’re hungry, really hungry, we can frenzy and just go nuts. Drink anyone in sight.” He followed after her, glancing up every so often along her long spider legs. From behind, he smirked at the shape of her butt,

and how the white sash did little to hide its curves. Especially with the blood rain soaking it tight to her skin. Tiny tiny waist, inhumanly tiny, with wide hips that exaggerated everything in a very pleasing way. Her legs had all the curves of powerful, fit, toned legs, and—

Stop looking at the monster girl's ass, you dumbass. She's going to kill if you if she thinks you're lying about the Kindred. You're not, but that doesn't mean it'll be easy to prove.

“I understand the hunger well. When Vrallar'trakla is hungry, and I am in the waking world, she will rampage through dreams. Create nightmares for humans, feed on their fear.”

“So Vrallar'trakla is ... I don't get it. You, not you, part of you?”

“She is the missing piece of me. And in that dream, when the spiders devoured me, she came to me. Replaced something in me that should not have been there. I feel whole now, but ... but Vrallar'trakla came with her own story. And it is hard for me to reconcile.”

“Are all Begotten this way?”

“I do not know. I do not think so. The Dark Mother, I saw ... images ... each Horror becoming one with their beast, but not like this, not with their own name, like Vrallar'trakla.”

“Do they all do what you do? Feed on punishing abusive people?”

“No. I believe many feed on ... many ... things. Many people, many reasons, many types.” She raised herself higher, spider leggings walking upon street lights, and then up on the sides of the some of the buildings. It was the South Side district, near Elysium, but as far as Damien could see, the streets that lead to other parts of the city were blocked by hazy walls of black fog. The dream wasn't the entire city then.

“Fascinating.”

“Is it?” she said.

“It is! There are many Kindred who’d love to do nothing more than bombard you with questions. I mean, look at this!” He waved his arm out to the blood city, to the statues on the sidewalks, to the blood moon. “It’s an actual dream I’m standing in. Or nightmare. Or, you called it chamber? Your lair is made up of these chambers? It’s amazing.”

“... thank you.” She smiled down at him, and lowered herself from her great height to walk beside him. Not really beside him, so much as her human, hovering half was beside him, while her enormous spider legs were everywhere. “I know there are other lairs, other chambers near Dolareido’s dreams. And I know some of them are inhabited by other Begotten in the city.”

“Wait, there are other Begotten in Dolareido?”

She nodded. “I can feel them pulling on the dream in their own way. One of them is ... is very old, very strong, and very hungry.”

## Chapter 29

~~Natasha~~

She coughed. Talking wasn't working too well. Lungs punctured, ribs cracked, and while her vitae was doing its best to heal her so she could talk, the thick liquid caught in her throat and on her tongue. Best she could do was nod when it said Kindred.

The beast stood back up, and turned to face its pack. Each put Goliath to shame, and she winced as she looked at the claws of the one who'd been ripping her apart.

Werewolves.

When she looked down at her body, she let out a quiet groan. So much of her insides were exposed. Dead. So dead. Couldn't do anything to defend herself, couldn't stand up, couldn't run or fight or anything. It'd take hours to heal, and she'd need blood to complete the process; not like they were just going to give her some. Good as dead.

The chatty one turned to face its pack, and started talking. Harsh, loud words. Something about Kindred, but also kuruth, and other things she didn't get. The titans, some around eight feet tall, some over ten feet, each wide and thick with muscle and mass, growled and snarled at the talking one, but they nodded. The werewolves ran the gamut of shades of gray, from black to light gray.

One of the werewolves, also a lighter color, didn't seem so eager to listen to whatever the black one was saying. They stepped up, and shoved their shoulder. Her shoulder, now that Natasha looked closer. The animals did have humanoid features, and the woman had a hint of bosom and hip under their fur, where the males had broader shoulders. The third werewolf gestured to its friend, the one

who'd suffered most of Natasha's bullets, before she barked her frustration at Natasha. No language barrier to understand 'fucking pissed'.

The black one didn't reciprocate. She waited, folded her furry arms across her chest, tail wagging in a slow, stiff manner. Dogs. Fucking dogs. Fucking gigantic dogs. Pack leader structure, complete with barking and shows of dominance. The black one stepped in closer, stared her female pack mate in the eye, and waited. Dead silence, even among the monsters.

The other snorted, threw up her arms, and walked away. And as she did, she started to shrink. The fur fell away from her body, the muscles, the height, it dripped away into the blackness of the barely lit tunnel. A woman emerged, and so too did clothes, fading in where the fur faded out.

The others began to change as well. Men and women, clothes on each of them, including the man she'd sunk a host of bullets into. Their clothes were undamaged, inside their bodies while they were transformed? What the hell?

The black one became a woman as well, a short one, only a few inches taller than ant-sized Natasha.

"I am Avery," she said.

Natasha squinted at her. Half to focus her blurry eyes, half to ignore the scorching sensations running along her skin. The woman was strong, fit, with a black ponytail down to her hip. Tanned skin, and unless Natasha was going crazy, she had silver eyes. Not extreme or obvious silver, but subtle, like a hue off of blue. Pretty.

"... I—" Blood, thick Kindred, heavy, sticky, caught in her throat again, and she forced it down. "... are ... you going ... t-t- ... t-t-to kill me?"

The werewolf shook her head. “No. You are not our prey.”

Natasha looked at herself, at the exposed bones, the ruined clothes, the tight muscle of a vampire’s pale body ripped open.

“ ... why ... d-d-did ... you d-d-d ... do this to me.”

She wanted to cry. God she wanted to cry. But she didn’t have the vitae to spare for the blush of life, so her dry eyes stared at the woman as best they could before rolling up when another scream started to bubble in her throat before she pushed it back down.

“Wrong place, wrong time. But you’re a vampire, right? You’ll heal.”

She coughed, and the agony swept through her again. But she was healing. The werewolves put her to shame for how quick they healed, but then, maybe they wouldn’t heal so quickly if someone had nearly cleaved off their limbs and stabbed a few dozen swords through their thorax. Closing the holes the enormous claws had created in her lungs, her chest and flesh, was a slow, agonizing process, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t keep back the whimpers.

“F-F-Fuck ... you...”

Avery laughed, and motioned to one of the men beside her. “Take her. She’ll live, but don’t give her any blood. I don’t want her up and moving again. Fucking fast little mosquito.”

Fast mosquito. Fuck her god damn fuck her. If she still had her pistol, she’d put a few bullets through the bitch’s head. Apt insult.

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They took her out of the tunnels and back topside; under threat of having her head ripped off if she attracted attention though. And they’d do it, she was sure. Considering the mess she was in, holes in



her body and flesh torn open, she wouldn't be able to defend herself. If only she still had her sword. Or maybe a high-powered shotgun.

One of the men was carrying her in his arms, like a doll held across them horizontal. Comfortable enough she could focus on fixing her body, now that she wasn't putting so much effort into running for her life. The sickening sensation of bones realigning before they pressed groove to groove made her groan, and every so often as the tendons started functioning again, she whimpered. But her wrist was working again. Now all she had to do was put a sword in that hand and maybe she could stab someone.

Dumb idea. The rest of her was still a mangled mess. The tips of her ribs were poking into her lungs and other withered organs. Her arms and legs were shredded like paper. The back of her skull was split. So she lay there in the man's arms, and healed herself.

"How ... how d-d-did you catch me?" she said.

"Hmmm?"

"You ... you had ... someone ahead-d of me."

He laughed, and nodded. "We hunt in packs, but we're not mindless animals, Kindred. When we realized you had slipped into another tunnel, we sent our fastest man ahead, and we herded you toward them."

Herded. Well, she could have taken a right instead of left when she got into the second tunnel. So fuck him, not as herded as he was acting.

"Just t-to catch me?"

"We thought you were something else."

“ ... why?”

“You smelled odd.”

Smelled odd? She smelled faintly of blood and maybe a bit of flesh; Kindred didn't go around smelling like corpses, or even smelling like kine.

She frowned at the man holding her. He was a tall man, with tanned skin and an athletic build. Course all the werewolves looked fit and strong, but this one looked fast, and agile. His hair came down to his jawline, black, wavy and messy. Clean shaven. Would have been kind of cute, if she wasn't imagining putting a sword into his stupid face.

“I'm Arturo Ibarra,” he said.

Arturo. He had a touch of Spanish to his accent, and he looked like he could be from Mexico. Dark brown eyes too.

“ ... you're the one that headed ... me off.”

“I am.”

Find a sword, or any sharp object. Stab him, stab him now. Anger was an effective pain suppressant.

Or it was for a few moments at least, but as her immediate rage subsided, and all she was left with was waiting as they walked toward the city outskirts, the pain returned. Her flesh was closing, but she was low on vitae and every moment awake was tiring. She needed sleep. She needed blood.

When she'd gotten out of this mess, she was going to ask Jessy for another night with the ghouls. And she was going to drink all four of them. One at first, to heal her wounds, and then a second to soothe her aches and pains. And then the other two, she'd drink

after having a nice, long, very very very very very gentle bout of tender sex. Because after all this, she deserved some serious pampering.

Her mind wandered like always, fantasizing, and she knew it was too. But she needed a break from current circumstances.

Maybe she'd march into the Elysium tower, point a finger at Daniel and Antoinette, and throw a temper tantrum about how she nearly died because of them. No more running solo. No more deep dives into old tunnels inhabited by monsters. No more getting cut open.

Now she was just being an idiot. She remembered how the Prince looked, her damaged body when Damien had dragged her out of her underground fortress by her hair. Missing an arm and a leg, full of holes, bone exposed. Enough to kill most vampires through sheer damage overload. Natasha wasn't even close to that.

But it was nice to dream fantasies of ranting at your bosses.

“How is our guest?”

A man's voice. The newcomer fell in beside Arturo, and smiled down at her. This one was very tall, ridiculously tall, and with shoulders wide enough to have trouble with doorways. His hair was a soft brown, came down to his shoulder, beige skin, and his eyes were green. A bright green that made him look like a gentle giant.

“She's fine, Matt. Healing, but after the shit we did to her, I'm guessing she needs blood.”

Natasha frowned at Arturo, but nodded. Let them think she was helpless without blood. She mostly was, but with a bit more time, she'd be strong enough to at least walk, and walk herself to safety. Unlikely, but possible.

“Blood eh? I’ve heard a vampire’s bite is quite pleasurable.” Matt leaned down over her. Closer, she could see the scruff of his face. He looked cute too, like a big teddy bear, that she could rip the fluffing out of.

“Going to let her bite you?” Arturo said, big smirk on his face.

“Maybe? Avery said it takes a lot more than that to turn you. And she’s a cute little thing, right?” Matt smiled at her, and leaned in a little closer. “Sorry. We’re being right asses, aren’t we?”

“... you are.” But a compliment was nice, every now and then.

“So, like Arturo said, I’m Matt. Matt Wilson. What’s your name?”

She raised a brow, and stared at the big, apparently dumb man.

“She’s not going to tell you her name dumbass.”

“She might.”

“Don’t be an idiot Lenny.”

Matt, or Lenny, frowned and elbowed Arturo’s side. Which made Arturo wince and shift, which made Natasha shift in his arms, which made her yelp at the sudden shift of his arms making her torn body bend.

“Shit! Sorry, sorry.” Matt backed away and fell in line a few steps behind, big pout on his face.

Lenny. Considering how comfortable they seemed with each other, Arturo was George. Natasha frowned, and twisted her neck a bit to look at the others.

Thirteen of them, of all genders and sizes. A few of them looked Mexican like Arturo, but some others looked like they came from

northern America, some others from Europe maybe. All around the world? Most likely not. But at least the group seemed race inclusive.

Avery drifted closer, and smiled down at Natasha as she took Matt's spot beside her.

"What's your name?"

Natasha scowled. "You expect m-me to give you my name?"

"I do."

"Why ... would I d-d-do that?"

"Why not?"

"Because ... I'm a p-prisoner, and any information I give you ... is more information to use ag-against me."

Avery laughed and pat Arturo on the shoulder. "Sounds like something Daniel would say."

"... you know Daniel?"

"I do. We didn't part on the best of terms last time I was in Dolareido. Well, better than Jacob." Avery reached behind her, adjusted her ponytail, and grinned down at Natasha. "If you don't know who I am, that means you weren't there at the time."

"Why were you here in D-Dolareido last time?"

"Same as this time. Hunting things. Your stupid Prince has a habit of attracting the attention of things that shouldn't be wandering around."

Antoinette attracting bad things to Dolareido? Understandable, sort of, given Antoinette's interest in the occult. But Natasha had

never seen anything truly odd in Dolareido. What could Werewolves want?

“What ... are you going t-t-t-to do with me?”

“Tie you up till you give me some information. I need to know who’s doing what in Dolareido. I want to know what the Prince is up to, but I really want to know what Lucas and Viktor are up to. That fucker Tony too, what’s he up to?”

Natasha blinked at her, then at Arturo. “I ... give you information, and you’ll let me g-go?”

“Need a couple more things, but yes. We ain’t here for you kid, we’re here for bigger prey. Seems like you’ve got an infestation. Something happen here? Something upset the balance or something? Cracks in the seams are showing, and shit is worming its way through.”

Cracks in the seams? Didn’t sound like anything she knew about. She didn’t want to give them information, but god she wanted to get back to her home, to Jessy, to her sire and her boss. Get away from the big bad dogs.

“ ... let me think about it.”

“Sure, think. I understand vampires can get pretty prickly when they’re hungry. Think you’ll talk if I hold a juicy blood bag for you?” The woman talked like Jacob, snide and joking, playful and threatening, all at the same time.

Natasha frowned, grit her teeth, and looked away.

“Fine. Think about it kid. Get back to me when you’re willing to talk.” She shrugged, and moved ahead to lead their pack again.

“Really should just tell her what she wants to know,” Arturo said.

“She your ... your ... I d-don’t know what werewolves have, pack leader? Alpha?”

He nodded. “She’s a smart woman. You’d be happier if you listened to her.”

“B-B-Be happier if her pack didn’t nearly kill me.”

Arturo leaned down over her, closer, and grinned at her with his dark brown eyes. There was a bit of wolf in them, even in his human form, just an edge of animal along the iris. Looking at her like a hungry beast.

“You were a hard thing to catch.”

“ ... you w-w-were the one to get ahead of me.”

“I was. Both times. The first time, I was lagging far behind. You thought our straggler was the only one in back, and when you ran through to dark to me, I tried to grab you. Hit the wall.”

Right, both times it was this guy catching her unawares.

“Smart b-bastard,” she said.

“I am, aren’t I?”

Cocky too, with a smarmy grin and a handsome face. Perfect. No remorse for when she’d eventually stab him.

“So ... werewolves. You weren’t big b-brutes when I first saw you in the tunnel.”

“No, we were hunting in our Urshul form. We must have looked like large wolves to you.”

Multiple forms? Interesting. “What else can w-w-werewolves do?”

The bastard grinned down at her. “Prying me for information?”

“ ... a little.”

“Transform into humans as you can see, and wolves, and the Gauru form, well, you saw that at work by the train.”

She shivered, and groaned agony as the small vibration shifted mending muscle against itself. Hold still, heal, that’s all she needed to do. And maybe get a little information while she did.

“Your kind are ... scary.” Not exactly what she wanted to say, meant to say, but it came out anyway, and she sighed as she closed her eyes.

“My kind? Your kind scheme and manipulate for centuries. Your kind cultivate humans like sheep. Your kind are immortal.” Arturo growled, a very animal sound too, and when Natasha opened her eyes, she found his grin had faded. She’d truck a nerve. “Worst a werewolf ever did was kill when he was hungry. Fucking vampires? Kill thousands, millions, in your games.”

“Don’t mind him.” Matt came back up beside Arturo, and smiled down at her again. Like they were friends. Like anyone who was anyone would want to be friends. His nickname fit. “Avery likes to scare us sometimes with stories about vampires. Is it true you sleep during the day, and burn from sunlight?”

She stared at the big, dumb oaf. Shouldn’t like him, but she kind of did.

“Are you ... g-going to leave me ... for sunrise?”

“What? No, of course not.” Matt shook his head like it was the most horrible suggestion. “We’re all terribly sorry about what happened. And Avery will let you go, no worries, once you tell us what’s going on in the city, and we have an understanding.”



As if she was going to do that. Matt could be as nice as a puppy, it wouldn't sway her. Nope, not one little bit.

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The pack didn't go very far from the tunnel exit. Half a mile at most, and they stopped at an old factory in North Side. The building was abandoned, but not condemned; someone was bound to buy it up for another ill-fated business venture at some point. Until then, it was just a big, empty building filled with big, empty tables. Old, dirty glass windows. Dead air vents with dust and cobwebs hanging off of them. Ugh, webs.

Arturo set her down on the table. She'd healed well enough to sit up, with less flesh cut open on her body. But her insides were hell, and the hunger was starting to make her dizzy. Starting to make her fidget and twitch. She needed blood, badly. All the signs of frenzy were showing on her fingers, in her toes, in her skull, and the moment she saw someone she could bite who couldn't tear her in half, she'd jump them, whether she wanted to or not.

But with the wolves, even the beast in her gut wasn't so mindless as to jump one of them. She wouldn't survive the encounter. But, with time, the beast wouldn't stay so smart. Eventually she'd be out of her mind with hunger, or she'd slip into torpor until someone fed her. Neither idea sounded promising.

“So, little vampire, ready to talk?” Avery stood before her pack, arms folded across her chest, small smile on her lips. She wasn't much taller than Natasha in her human form, but she looked like she packed a mean punch. The silver-blue eyes looked more like ice the longer Natasha met them. The woman appeared to be in her forties, but she was a werewolf, so who knew how old she really was.

God she was hungry.

“ ... ask. I m-might ... b-b-be ab—”

“I think she might have trouble sp-p-p-p-p-peaking.” While everyone was sitting around and getting comfortable, one of the pack came up to her and grinned down at her. A woman, tall, curvy, rich sepia skin, with a sharp face and eyes that threatened to cut Natasha up like claws. Scary. And mean.

Arturo stepped up to her and yanked on her arm, pulling her back toward the pack by the wall.

“Shut up Stephanie. Don’t be such a bitch.”

Stephanie yanked her arm free, and stared up at Arturo. She was tall, he was taller.

“We got no reason to trust this little blood leech. You heard what happened last time, Avery told us herself.”

Arturo shrugged. “No reason to insult how she talks.”

Natasha raised a brow and looked between the two arguing like siblings. Avery seemed content to let it happen too, but her grin was gone, replaced with patient waiting. Maria or Michael would have given a tongue lashing worthy a thousand deaths if Natasha and Jessy argued like this in front of them. Viktor wouldn’t have said a thing, just demoted them instantly.

“Fuck off. We can’t trust her. She could easily lie.”

“Just as easily as she could tell the truth. We let her live, and—”

“Could still lie and—”

“And risk running into us after the fact? She—”

“We can trust her.” Everyone turned to the new voice. This one looked quite young, but big and strong. Short blond hair, blue eyes, a soft face, and a softer voice. He fidgeted a little, a fidget Natasha

knew all too well, and shook his head. “At least, that ... yes, we can trust her. If she tells us something.”

Natasha frowned at the young man. His voice wavered a little; someone who had trouble speaking. But his eyes didn't just avoid eye contact, they drifted like they were catching fireflies.

Avery turned to her pack and gestured to the young blond. “David says we can trust her. Good enough for me.” And again the pack leader turned to face the little Mekhet, cocky grin on her like Arturo had before. “You wouldn't want to hurt David's feelings, right?”

David. Natasha watched him for a little while longer, and squinted. His eyes really were drifting around, but so were his movements, subtle and hidden in his old baggy hoodie and jeans. Like the man couldn't hold quite still. A condition, perhaps? She doubted human ailments troubled werewolves, but then what did she know about werewolves?

“ ... ask.”

“Wonderful.” Avery leaned her butt against the neighboring table. “Last time we were here, or I was here anyway, was 1955. Spent a couple years here, made some friends, some not-so-friends. So all I want to know is how the old gang is doing, before I make my presence known. How's Viktor and Antoinette?”

Well, it's not like she was asking for secrets, and the information was harmless. Probably. And maybe a little information would get her something to eat before she went insane.

“Viktor is d-dead.”

“ ... really?”

She nodded, and stroked her legs. Her suit was a tattered, ruined mess. Much of her skin was exposed, but at least she wasn't torn

open anymore. If she'd been in any worse condition, she'd probably be in torpor by now, and probably half naked for the damage to her clothes.

“Viktor and T-T-Tony ... dead, fighting, fire.”

“Well I'll be damned. Two major pains in my asshole gone ... and Lucas?”

“ ... also d-dead. Tried to kill the Prince. D-Died ... trying.” No need to bring Jack into this.

Jack. Heh, what would he do if in this situation? Kid had a way with people.

“Lucas dead too. God damn. Maria and Michael?”

“Alive.”

“Ah well, can't have em all. And I guess Jacob is still alive too? Apocalypse will come and go before that bastard dies.”

Avery knew Jacob. She knew of the others, but from the way she said his name, the tiny inflection of personal annoyance, she knew Jacob personally.

“He ... he is.”

“Damn. Old snake needs to die. But, three gone ain't bad. And with them out of the way, maybe I can get to know Garry a bit better.” Laughing, the woman pulled herself to sit up on the table, and her short legs dangled off the edge. “He's still alive right?”

Did she like him? Figures a werewolf would like a Gangrel. And she had a bit of an attitude to her, like Jessy, like Michael.

“He is.”

“Great. I’ll have to pay him a visit.”

Avery nodded, stroked her chin, and motioned for one of the pack to come closer. Another woman came over, tanned skin and dark hair, average height and a fit build. She had box braids for hair all the way down to her hip, and Natasha found herself admiring them. So pretty. Maybe related to Arturo, or from the same place.

“Yeah Avery?”

“Clara, keep an eye on things. I’m going to pay Garry a visit.”

“Alone? It’s almost sunrise too.”

“Yeah alone. He knows me, and I need to scout the place out anyway. I’ll be fine. Just want to double check on some facts and what our girl has told us.” With that, Avery gave Clara a casual salute, and walked for the door. “Keep her around, but give her something to eat would you? Don’t want to ruin any goodwill here.”

Arturo raised a hand with a dismissing wave. “She drinks blood.”

“So? Give her some of yours if you have to.”

Stephanie laughed, and wandered off as Avery closed the door behind her. The others shrugged and returned to their own conversation, though Natasha could tell they were avoiding using any words or references she’d understand. Lot of ‘prey’ and ‘target’ and such.

“You ... you guys are ... less like a p-p-pack and more like a ... family.”

“That’s what a pack is.” Matt came up and sat beside her. So tall, so huge, and the friendliest of the bunch.

Arturo sighed, shrugged, and came to sit across from Natasha where Avery had been. “Yeah, we’re a family. And you love your family, much as you hate them.”

She knew that feeling. Lenny and George earned a smile out of her, no matter how hard she tried to suppress it, and she looked away to the pack hanging out in the corner. They had cut her up and gave her a night of pain and agony she’d never forget, but at least things were looking up. Relatively.

“W-What time ... is it?” she said.

“Half an hour till sunrise,” Matt said. “Basement here should keep you out of sunlight.”

A basement? A far cry from her bed back home, but more than enough to block out sunlight. Probably. Should check it out, and with only thirty minutes to do so, she didn’t want to waste anymore time.

“C-Can I see it?”

Matt nodded, slipped off the table, and scooped her up. So huge! He tried to be gentle, but her insides were still a punctured mess, and she groaned with each shift of limb to get herself into his big arms. Bigger than any of Jessy’s ghouls.

Natasha, him and his buddies were going to kill you. They nearly did. Your insides are swiss cheese and your outside was shredded paper only a little while ago. Stop acting like horny Jessy, start acting like angry Jessy. Stop admiring his big, hard, muscled arms, and figure out a good time and place to stab him in his cute, cuddly face.

Arturo followed, and the two of them descended a stairway into the basement underneath. Building didn’t have power, but Arturo brought an LED lantern, and set it on the table. A big basement,

filled with old machinery. Something like a desk you could sit at, with spools on each side, and a motor that did ... something. And there was newer equipment too, pressing equipment of some kind. So not exactly new, but newer than a lot of the old North Side district.

But the most important part was checking for windows. No windows though, just basement wall and lots of cobwebs. Fucking webs.

Matt set her down on the table next to his friend's lantern, and she did her best to give him a smile. Hard, with the searing pain still working through her chest, but something about his puppy expression made her want to smile at him. Give him a dog treat.

Good god she was already thinking of werewolf jokes. Jessy would be proud.

“Cobwebs ... here t-too.” She sighed, and tried to dust herself off. Mistake. Groaning, she set her hands back down, and sighed.

“We won't ask what you were doing in the path of our hunt,” Arturo said, “but think you can spare us your name yet?”

“ ... Natasha.” Might as well. Nothing she'd heard would suggest she had cause to withhold her name. But they'd been hunting something in the tunnels, and they weren't telling her about it, so she wouldn't tell them about it either. Let Antoinette be the mediator of information in that department.

“Natasha. Cute little thing aren't you?” Arturo grinned, folded his arms across his chest, and looked at her. “Could fit you in a thimble.”

“If ... if I had b-blood, I'd...”

“You'd what?” His grin grew.

“I’d stab you.”

Arturo laughed, put up his hands before setting them down behind him on one of the machines he leaned against. “Can’t take a compliment?”

“You’re ... playing with me.”

“Am not. Sexiest little vampire I ever got my claws into.”

Sexy? He thought she was sexy? Cute, and ... sexy? He was a flirt, a sexy man, confident in his looks and charm, and smarter than he let on. He had those eyes, Mekhet eyes, analyzing and planning steps ahead, mind running thoughts when he wasn’t saying anything. She knew how he thought, and he thought like a snake, weaving and winding complicated paths of decision chains. He was dangerous! Dangerous, and ... he thought she was sexy.

“ ... you can ... m-m-make it up to me.”

“Ha, you want blood? I can’t just grab someone off the street without attracting attention.”

“ ... g-give me yours.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but stopped himself. He eyed her, thinking a million thoughts a second no doubt, same as she was. Could she drink a werewolf? Would he taste like dog? Would there be a bad reaction? Would he even give her blood, or deny her any for what he might consider an insult? She bit her lip, and waited. God, she was so damn hungry, hungry enough to ask her captors.

“ ... will it hurt?”

“N-No.”



“Will I sleep when you’re done? Comatose style, like I hear humans do when you don’t kill them?”

“Maybe? I ... I need ... n-n-need to drink, and ... need a lot. You might ... m-might sleep for a day? But, you’re a ... a ... werewolf. You’ll heal fast, right?”

Arturo tapped his chin, and looked to his friend. “What do you think?”

“Avery said don’t give her blood at first. But she changed her mind, so ... go ahead? I’ll keep an eye on her. Besides, she’s got maybe twenty minutes of night left. Not like she’s going anywhere.”

Natasha sighed, and rubbed her arm. The suit was ruined there, and her fingers found naked skin. She was pouting. On purpose too, like Jennings might if she wanted to manipulate someone, men in particular.

She’d changed a lot since joining the dragons. Had to think on her feet, instead of mindlessly following Invictus protocol.

“Alright.” Arturo walked up to her, and leaned in close. Very close. He put his hands on the table beside both her legs so he was nose to nose with her. Dark brown eyes, with an edge to them, a bit of steel in his gaze that his friend completely lacked. And with his jaw-length, messy black hair, tanned skin, and tall, lean build, he ... he was sexy. Or she was just so damn hungry she couldn’t tell the difference between attraction and bloodlust.

Or she’d combined the two. Some people did that right? Combined things in their minds, and became unable to separate them. Jessy’s fault.

She put her hands on Arturo’s shoulders. Warm, so warm. And ... inhuman. So close, she could feel the beast in her gut trying to read the beast in front of her. Drinking another beast? Kindred didn’t do

that, not normally. Kindred should never drink another Kindred, ever. But a werewolf was alive, so she didn't have to worry about vitae addiction. She did have to worry about not knowing what sort of madness this might bring.

So hungry though. So damn hungry. Her fingers were shaking, and her fangs were coming out before she wanted them too. It was enough to widen Arturo's eyes, and she could hear his heartbeat increase. He was anxious too. Good, it wasn't only her. The warmth of his skin around his neck found her drifting fingers, and she tugged on the thickness of where his neck connected to his shoulders to bring him closer. The werewolves were all fit, tough looking fighter types, types Jessy would no doubt love. And Natasha couldn't help but let her mind wander as she breathed in the smell of flesh, of human-yet-not-quite-human skin, oil, musk, life.

Matt was watching, she could see it in the corner of her eyes, but his expression was wide with curiosity. She didn't like having someone staring at her, but she could barely offer the mental awareness to notice him once Arturo's neck got within biting distance.

"Little vampire scared now?" Arturo said.

She growled, a dark, tiny noise, but a growl nonetheless, and bit him.

"Ow, hey ... hey..."

Oh ... god.

Life, warmth, the precious overflowing power of thick blood flooding the tongue. The taste, the sweet nectar, the heavenly drink. Ambrosia trickling down her withered insides, filling them with life long gone, sending tingling waves into her extremities as her Kindred body did what it did best: turned a living thing's blood into

vitae within her corpse. Her shredded muscles closed, and healed in moments, and her aching joints sang with relief.

But it wasn't the same. It was different. It was ... better. The flood of the Kiss was always exhilarating, and when you got to do it slowly, tenderly, it was pleasure and bliss. But this werewolf, this creature holding himself out to her, his blood was different. It was ... was ... she didn't know. Couldn't describe it, couldn't put her finger on it. But every gulp was a jolt of energy through her, a blast of power down her spine, of vitality into her core.

She didn't know what cocaine felt like, having never done it as kine. But this must have been a decent comparison.

And she wanted more. She tightened her grip on the werewolf's neck, and pulled him in closer. He was still conscious, and that meant she could keep drinking, drinking, and drinking until her belly was full, wounds healed, and her dead heart beating with more energy than she knew what to do with; a fresh meal awoke the blush of life whether a Kindred wanted it to or not. A little groan came out of the huge beast, and her hands drifted down from his neck to his arms, before one reached under it to touch his hard chest. More.

Arturo started to lean in closer, but not on purpose. The telltale signs of exhaustion were hitting him. Exhaustion, and the blissful pleasure of the Kiss done gently, sensually. But he was light now, with the strength of a vampire in her arms. She held him up, and suckled a few more mouthfuls of blood from the big man, and the hard muscle in between her fangs.

She stopped. So full. Anymore and she was liable to puke just from running out of room in her belly. Full, and high on the energy of it, of werewolf blood coursing through her veins. She licked the man's neck, sealed the puncture wounds, and moved the big guy over into Matt's hands.

“You ok buddy?” Matt said.

“Y ... yeah ... I um ... just let me sit for down a bit.”

Matt nodded, and helped sit his friend down against the wall by the staircase before coming back over to lean against the table. Natasha was still sitting on. And he stared at her, eyes still wide, and cheeks a little blushed.

Natasha looked down at herself. Her skin was no longer pale with a vampire’s typical corpse look, but flushed with the blush. Happened whenever a vampire drank, not her fault! Not her fault her clothes were torn open either, and a lot of her skin was exposed. Very much a lot of it, now that she looked down and noticed. Her breasts were only just barely covered by bits of shredded shirt, but her legs, stomach, arms, all of it was open to their eyes.

And the two werewolves were looking at her the way Brad and Isaac and Vincent and Chris had.

No, no no, stop thinking like that. Just the blood giving you a major high, like it always did. Borderline Stockholm syndrome here Natasha. These animals tore you up only hours ago. Remember the sensation of claws and broken ribs piercing your lungs?

“Thank y-you.” She shook out her hair, and hugged herself in a futile attempt to cover up some of her exposed body. “So, you um ... can you please make sure ... K-Kindred don’t normally sleep so exposed, and—”

“We’ll be taking shifts to keep an eye on you,” Matt said, hands up again. “I mean, we are sorry about what happened you know? Thought you were our prey and all that. Shouldn’t have happened.”

“Then why not let m-m-me go?”

“We will, once we know we can get back to the hunt without vamps getting in our way.”

“I ... I d-don't know if ... they'll step aside ... just for my sake.”

“We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. So uh ... you just want to ... lay down or something?”

Art chuckled. “Maybe cross your arms over your chest, Dracula style?” Laughing, but breathing deep, exhausted, and struggling to keep his eyes open.

Stab him. Stab him while he's sleeping.

She shook her head, got off the table, and found a corner to sit in. Once the sun started to rise, the overpowering urge to sleep would hit her, regardless of how she was positioned. She didn't like doing it in front of others, let alone dangerous strangers, but at least falling asleep wouldn't be an issue.

She gave Matt and Art a final look before she closed her eyes. Matt was smiling like a big dumb puppy, and Art was smirking like a sneaky cat. Perhaps a better comparison than Lenny and George.

~~Jack~~

Jack hid in the shadows, and watched. Not that he could do that very well, but that's why he had Amanda with him. Young as she was, her cloak of night was at least strong enough to hide them from some kine when combined with some sneaking and darkness.

He looked through the window of the second floor of the home. A woman was asleep, blankets tight to her shoulders like a cocoon. Every so often, she tossed, turned, and let out a little whimper as she trembled. But the noises passed as she wrapped herself tight, and drifted asleep once more.

God damn it.

Jack set his forehead against the glass, and stared. She was crying in her sleep. Every so often, he could hear her murmurs, mentions of his name, why did he have to die.

Amanda set her hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off. Not yet, he wanted to watch a little longer.

Mom got up from bed, and walked off for the kitchen. He listened, ear to the glass, and found the old, familiar sound of her steps. He found the hum of the air conditioner too, and the annoying whirr sound it made when it got too hot for it. Mom had given him the better air conditioner for his room, and she'd taken the noisy one. Still hadn't taken his back for herself.

She came back with a glass of water and some pills in her hand, popped them, and sat on the edge of her bed. All alone. She looked so damn alone.

The weight of the empty room crushed Jack until he felt his skull splitting open against the glass. He could open the window, say hello. Hell he could just knock, and she'd hear him, and he could wave. She'd be elated to see him alive. They'd hug, and he'd tell her everything was fine, and that he'd moved on with his life but needed to pretend he was dead. She'd understand, smile, kiss him goodbye, and forever be happy.

Yeah right.

Mom climbed back under the sheets, and curled up into the fetal position on her side. She shook a few more times, little tremors in her shoulders, before she drifted back to sleep again.

Jack pushed away from the window, and walked away, eyes still on it. Maybe something would happen that'd ... maybe something could happen ... maybe he could...

He turned, and walked away faster.

“She looked so ... so fucking sad,” he said.

Amanda nodded, and stepped beside him. Both of them were in suits and walking the streets; odd for two young people to do in the late evening. But any nearby police or prying eyes wouldn't be able to notice them with Amanda keeping the cloak of night up. It'd been tough to ask her for the favor, but he needed to see, he really needed to see. And now he wished he hadn't.

“It's ... it's really hard, Jack,” she said. “I spied on my family more than once. A lot more. It was over a year before my dad could sleep the whole night without getting up to work on things in the garage.”

“Time heals all wounds?”

“I guess, yeah. But I'm not going to lie to you, my dad is different now, and ... it's different for parents, when they lose a child.”

Well, he had to give it to Amanda, she wasn't as soft as he thought. He half expected empty platitudes, cheerful words encouraging him, explaining that his mom would be fine. She'd get over his death, maybe find a man; she hadn't had much luck with relationships after Jack's dad died. She'd be fine, he'd expected Amanda to say.

He smiled at her. “I appreciate the brutal honesty.”

She smirked and pat him on the shoulder. “I knew you would.”

“You did?”

“Yeah I got the impression last time we talked that you don't really care for typical social niceties.”

True that. He nodded, and smiled at the Mekhet.

“Sorry if that makes me a bit of a downer.”

“Not a downer, just someone who dislikes the subtleties of the game. I noticed it that first night we met, at the Invictus ball. You don’t like the Danse Macabre.”

“Does anyone like it?”

She laughed, and the two of them rounded a corner to find their drive waiting for them. One of Madam Jennings’s ghouls she was letting Miss Pol borrow. They hopped into the backseat, and started the drive back to the Invictus domain of South Side.

“Some people like it. Doesn’t the Prince?”

“Yeah, I think she does. She wants the break, but she also likes the Danse more than she lets on, I think.” He chuckled, rubbed his buzzed hair, and stared out the window at the passing street lamps. Careful to avoid details about the Prince, but he could chat a little. And Amanda was growing on him. She liked to gossip, and as much as he considered himself above it, it was a tempting vice.

Better than focusing on his mom, and how miserable she fucking was. If he’d been blushing life, tears would have been streaming down his cheeks. He might be able to be that open with Antoinette, but not Amanda.

A ten minute ride later, and the two of them were back on the street. The weather wasn’t as crazy hot anymore, and the kine were wearing normal layers, jackets and pants and shoes. Easier on the Kindred nose.

“So,” Amanda said, “you and the Prince.”

“Yeah?”



“I ... I mean ... I don’t want to pry, but ... the two of you were so beautiful together at the ball she hosted. It was so cute!”

Oh good god.

“What do you want to know?”

“Nothing! Noth ... ok, well, I am a little curious about the romance. It is a romance, right? I mean, I’ve asked around, and the Prince has never done anything like this, not since Tony so long ago.”

Tony. Jack had never said a word to the man, not really, and killed him. If only Amanda knew. Well, he wasn’t stupid enough to tell her, but that didn’t mean hearing his name didn’t bring up the images of the man disintegrating in the fire. Flashbacks of the pain of Jack having his face and chest cut in half by Viktor.

Now that he let his mind wander over it, he’d had a very, very eventful time as a fledgling Kindred. Other fledglings had easier times as they became neonates, young members of their respective covenants. Him, he was buried in violence and pain. A bit pathetic of him to wallow in that misery, but he couldn’t deny the truth. Every so often, images of Mrs. Pavala found his thoughts, like salt in his wounds.

But then he thought of Antoinette, and smiled. Amanda wanting to talk about her was probably her way of cheering him up then. Smart.

“Yes, we’re in love.”

“Oh my god!” She squealed, but brought her hands up to her lips once she realized what she’d done, eyes wide. “That’s ... that’s ... oh that’s so beautiful. She’s ancient! Ancient, and you’re so young, and ... and...”

“And she’s so much taller than me.” He rolled his eyes and gave Amanda a small shove of the shoulder. “She doesn’t mind, and I certainly don’t mind. We’re quite physically compatible.”

“I wasn’t thinking about that!”

Jack stopped, and raised a brow with disbelieving eyes blatant. “You weren’t?”

“... ok, I was. She’s so tall! And you’re ... you’re not.” She giggled some more, and stepped in closer. “I feel horrible asking about this stuff.”

“Well I’m not going to tell you what the sex is like or anything.” He smirked, but then chuckled as he raised a hand to scratch his chin. Would a girl really ask about the sex? Weren’t girls supposed to be a bit less crass than men? Less vulgar?

“Come on, please?”

Guess not.

“We have sex a lot, ok? I’ll give you that much, but that’s it!”

She giggled and jumped a little in spot a few times. “So adorable.”

He didn’t really think of it as adorable, but maybe it was to an observer. Still.

“And you? Anyone in your life?” he said.

“No, not yet. Sire says I should do what most Kindred do when they’re young, and enjoy the perks. Sleep around, basically. Not sure I agree.”

Jack scratched his hair, and thought about Antoinette’s story in Bloodlust, about kine crawling into a Kindred’s lap for sex. A hollow indulgence. He knew it, Antoinette knew it, but ... but for a lot of

Kindred, him included, it was rough going at the start. Very rough going. Mourning family was just the tip of the iceberg for what a lot of Kindred went through after the embrace. Some sex and blood could help.

“I wouldn’t judge a Kindred for enjoying it,” he said. “Hard time for many, you know? And now you’re a part of a society that gives absolutely no shits about who you sleep with, or how often, or how many. And it’s a great way to get a meal. I think Jennings has a point. Enjoy it.” He smiled at her when she widened her eyes. “Our second lives are pretty damn brutal. Can’t see the sun, can’t have children, and we’re part of the Danse Macabre, which would give any politician a terminal ulcer. So, if you don’t have anyone, I say indulge.”

“You’re just saying that cause you’re a guy!”

“Am not.” He raised his hands to the shoulder, palms out. “Don’t get me wrong, guys are pretty quick to jump on the sex bandwagon, but you telling me Jessy doesn’t sound like she has the time of her life?” Cause the damn woman spared no details about her sexual exploits.

“Jessy is just a man in a woman’s body.”

They both laughed, until Jack had to stop and lean against a lamppost to get back his balance. But there was some truth to that. Amanda was more like a ... well a girl. A different approach was required.

“Think of it like this,” he said. “As a woman, you’re being judged harshly from the moment you’re born based on how you look, who you talk to, how you act to people, who you date, who you sleep with, and every form of social peer pressure imaginable from all parties. You have to wear a mask of makeup every day just to look normal in society’s eyes. You wear shoes that literally ruin your spine and feet, modern-day foot binding. God forbid you have any

body hair. Women will crucify you for wearing the same dress twice. Many men arrange you into scores for how attractive you are, for whether they want to sleep with you, and that's a rigged game cause the moment you do sleep with them, you're conquered territory and they move onto another target. Women will socially castrate you, and men will forever measure you by the size of your bust. It's something on your mind all day, every day as a woman, whether you realize it or not. Subconsciously, you make decisions based on the maze of bullshit you've been navigating since you were old enough to turn on the TV and saw Wonder Woman wearing boob armor and high heels. Double standards, and women get the shittier end of the deal.

“So now, you're Kindred. That life is gone, you're not human anymore. Those old problems, those hangups, those barriers, it's all gone. No Kindred cares, or at least, not to nearly the same degree or in the same way. You want to wear a slutty”—he raised his fingers to quote slutty—“clothes, six-inch stilettos, plunging cleavage, whatever, Kindred understand it's just part of the game, play it however you want. Nothing to stop you from letting out all the desires that are perfectly normal, and healthy.” He grinned and folded his arms across his chest. “Cause one thing I've noticed in my time as Kindred, is that the women are just as horny as the men, Amanda. And without the old life nonsense making you feel guilty for every single fucking thing you do? Yeah, women Kindred get into the sex as much as the men. And all the power to them. Do what you want. You grew up in a world where women aren't supposed to have sexual agency, where women aren't supposed to enjoy sex. And now, you can have all the sexual agency you want, and enjoy it all you want.”

She stared at him, tilted her head, and then looked around at the people walking by. Jack kept his words quiet enough so it was only her hearing him, but she still had a look of guilt on her face, of shock.

“You make it sound like it’s empowering for women to sleep around.”

“Not what I meant. All I meant was, you grew up in a world where men were encouraged to pursue their sexual interests, and women were discouraged. Now you’re not.” He started walking again, and looked over his shoulder to Amanda until she caught up with him. “So when I say do whatever you want, I really mean it, you know? Hangups about sex are just that, hangups, social rules made by ignorant fucks from ancient, moronic, antiquated views. Have all the sex you want, or never touch another person for as long as your second life lasts. Just do whatever makes you happy, and for most Kindred, women included, that typically includes sex. Don’t adhere to a hypocritical ruleset that no longer applies.”

“ ... and you?”

“Me? I’m damn happy with the Prince, Amanda. We have a great relationship and I wouldn’t do anything to betray that trust. But if I was single? Yeah, I’d give into some of my baser desires, cause it’s one of the few good things about this second life.”

She nodded, and her smile returned as the shocked eyes faded. “I don’t think I have the same appetite as Jessy, but ... but yeah, I admit, it’d be nice to just do what I want for a change.”

“Agreed.” God damn agreed. “I—” A sudden vibration hit him, and he went rigid for a moment, before reaching into his pocket for his phone. As a human he’d gotten used to it, but as a Kindred, he’d have to get used to a cat-like response to the random texts.

Text said: Get the fuck over to my place. Wait outside for me. Bring weapons.

“What is it?”

“Ah, it’s Jessy. Wants us to meet her outside her place. Armed.”

“But we’re still working on the investigation.”

He shrugged, called in an Xnomina drive, and put the phone away.

“Could be about something else. Know anyone she’s looking to shoot?”

“Besides everyone?”

---

Standard Invictus loadout was a Glock G19, a couple magazines in a shoulder holster, and a sword. The Glock G19 was a very light pistol, reliable, and Glocks were as common as cocaine in Dolareido; nothing to give the holder away as a Kindred. The sword wasn’t really a sword, but a long, thin blade that was somewhere between sword and knife. It was custom, made by Invictus for Invictus, with no identifying marks of any kind. The ultimate in function over fashion.

Invictus cared about emblems and insignias and badges and flags when they socialized. They cared only for brutal efficiency when on the job.

He’d just recently achieved the status required to use the loadout at will, and he had to admit, it was a nice feeling. Julias was giving him no special treatment; he had to work his way up Invictus ranks same as everyone else, manipulating kine dealings, growing Xnomina’s corporation in less-than-legal ways, etc. Wearing the loadout was like wearing a badge.

Wow he was drinking the Invictus koolaid. He wasn’t so stupid to not realize it; but, even knowing he was just a cog in the Invictus machine, he was proud. If it were still Viktor at the top, he’d have been worried, but with Julias there instead, he felt he could get away with a little mindless loyalty.

Their drive stopped at the Xnomina building while they geared up, and then dropped them off in front of Jessy's apartment building. Jessy was waiting for them. With sunglasses. At night.

Jack could see Amanda struggle to hide her smile.

While Jack and Amanda wore suits, Jessy wore black pants and a black t-shirt underneath a black trench coat, with a slick belt and some straps from her hidden holsters visible along her thighs and waist. The shirt was see-through enough you could see the black bra underneath. She could not have looked any more ridiculous. But, the woman had enough confidence to carry the ridiculous nineties getup, and probably enough weaponry underneath the coat to justify that too.

“Bout time you kids showed up.”

“Sorry, Madam Herrington.” Jack offered a small bow, Amanda did as well, before they stood up and stepped in closer. “What’s this about? I thought Miss Pol and I were to continue our investigation of the disappearances in Devil’s Corner?”

“Related.” Jessy adjusted her coat, scanned the street, before she moved toward their drive. “I’ll explain more when we’re there.”

Kept in the dark. Well, Jessy was the only remaining Right Hand; that deserved some trust. Much as she was a loose cannon and everyone knew it, she got the job done. So he followed after her with Amanda in tow, doing his best to hide the grimace on his face.

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The car took them to Devil’s Corner, and the three hopped out with more eyes scanning the streets. Slightly less people; the disappearances were scaring the city. Hell, after what happened last time in the sewers, they were scaring him too. He remembered the sensation in his gut when he saw the redhead, of panic and fear and

all those things he felt when he looked at Jacob or Viktor. Different, but the same. Amanda felt it too.

And Jessy was taking them back there again.

“Natasha’s gone missing.” Jessy strolled down the street like she owned the place, and every gaze thrown at her by curious kine was like fire on her gasoline. She strutted, maybe even showed off a little; people looking at her must have thought she was a fashion model or something. Pretty, true, but so out of place.

“Natasha’s missing? How do you know?”

“We have a system. She texts me every second dusk, I text her every second night. No exceptions.”

“No exceptions?” Amanda said. Girl had a habit of saying just a little too much, and aggravating her superiors.

“Speak English? I said no fucking exceptions.” Jessy said. “We’re fucking Invictus, we’re prepared. Her phone dead? She uses the back-up. That dead? She gets me on her laptop. That dead? She fucking visits. I waited two god damn hours this evening and got nothing, so I went and visited her place. Nothing. So we’re going to investigate where she’s gone, and from what my eyes tell me, last she was seen was near here, going underground.”

Invictus eyes. Ghouls, subservient kine, or young Kindred could all be Invictus eyes, a network of information being shared to those who need it.

“She used to have a tracker in her phone, but since joining the dragons, she had to get rid of it. Think you can pick up her trail?” Jessy said, looking to Amanda.

“I ... maybe? Tracking the disappearing girl was doable, since I had a starting point. But Natasha? She doesn’t exactly—”



“I can find her.”

The three turned to the new voice.

“Vivienne?” Jack said.

Jessy motioned for the girl to come closer. “I called her up, but she was finishing a contract and had to meet us here.”

Vivienne was a somewhat short woman, with a small frame and black hair down to her shoulders, and pale skin. She looked a lot like Natasha, only taller. The two were quiet, antisocial types, but as far as Jack knew, the two didn’t socialize with each other at all anymore. Seemed to be a theme, sires and childe breaking apart at some point.

He really needed to visit Julias sometime.

“How can you find her?” Amanda said.

She shrugged, and rubbed one of her shoulders while avoiding eye contact. “I’m her childe. We’re good trackers, in her bloodline.”

Mekhet had a talent for it, sure, but Natasha was a special case. Jack didn’t think Vivienne had the same eyes as her sire, but then the woman could simply have been hiding the fact; not unprecedented among his company. Did Vivienne know the sheriff was her grand sire?

“Bullshit.” Jessy laughed and shook her head. “She just knows some of the sewer and tunnel dwellers. Natasha liked to make friends with em, and Vivi used to be by her side all the time, didn’t you?”

“... yeah.” Vivienne, dressed in a suit like Amanda, stepped down the stairs of the abandoned subway tunnel.

Jack winced. Jessy didn't like that Amanda and Vivienne had left the Invictus and then come back. Liable to get snippy, yell at them, maybe push them around if she got really angry. All within her rights as a senior member of the Invictus.

It was going to be a lovely time.

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He'd walked these tunnels with his sire not too long ago, to go see Damien. It never really occurred to Jack that much of what vampires did was underground, until he had to walk through the oppressive shadows on a regular basis. And it never occurred to him that the tunnels were so expansive either, until he actually bothered to look at the blueprints while digging into the disappearing girl.

Holy shit the tunnels. A lot of the blueprints were considered confidential, old, and if they became public someone would have to answer for why the fuck Dolareido seemed to have so many abandoned tunnels. The sewer system too was more expansive than it needed to be, and it connected into old subway tunnels in weird places. All so Kindred could have their underground city for their sun allergy.

He was kind of happy about it. If shit hit the fan for whatever reason, he could disappear into the tunnels, like Damien did. Dude managed to hide from everyone for half a god damn century, so Jack could manage a few days at least.

“So, uh, who we going to talk to?” Amanda said.

“Miss Halla, Nosferatu, only got a couple years on her. I know she likes to hang out around here under Vander Street with that Bob fellow.”

“Couldn't you have just messaged her we were coming? Or asked her to come in and tell us what you want to know?”

God damn it Amanda, shut up before Jessy puts her fist through your face.

The Gangrel looked over her shoulder, and growled. “I could have. Or I can ambush her, surprise her, make sure she’s caught off guard so I know she won’t lie to me.”

Jack sighed, but shut up quick when Jessy threw him a glare. Night was getting rougher by the second.

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“Where the fuck did she go, Lil?”

Yeap, rougher.

“I-I don’t know! She was just passing through, and—”

Not enough good for Jessy. The Gangrel threw the young Nosferatu to the platform hard enough Jack heard the impact of ass bone on the concrete. Liliana Halla’s hood fell back, revealing her many, many eyes, and each of them looked around in all directions. Looking for an escape most likely, but she knew she was Invictus, and escape from the moment simply meant dealing with it later. They all worked for Jessy, more or less.

“Yeah, and no doubt you and her shared a few words. So I’m thinking you do know where she’s gone.” Jessy reached down and picked up the woman by the robe collar, and whatever clothes were underneath it. Soon the woman was in the air, feet dangling a few inches above the floor. “And no doubt she asked you to not tell anyone, because she’s not Invictus anymore and yada yada. Except now she’s missing, and if you don’t tell me, your fate is hers. She dies, you die, get me?”

Jack winced. So many eyes looking panicked and guilty at the same time. He looked over at Amanda and Vivienne, and found a not-too-dissimilar look from both of them, winces and worrying and

discomfort bordering on panic. Jessy had that effect when she was upset and started pushing people around.

“Miss Halla.” Vivienne stepped forward and stood beside Jessy, hands fidgeting together in front of her. “I know you’re just protecting my sire, and doing what she asked. But I know she’d have come to you when passing through this area. You still owe her for that incident with Maria, don’t you?”

Lil, holding onto Jessy’s wrist and squirming like a fish on a hook, managed to look down at Vivi long enough to sigh and look away.

“Owe her a lot more than just for that.”

“Well, she’s gone missing,” Vivi said. “She may not be Invictus anymore but she’s still my sire. Still my friend, Jessy’s friend. We ... we’re going to go look for her.”

Halla looked to Vivi, then lowered her eyes again. She was torn, that much was clear; it dripped from her like the sweat she couldn’t give off. Would she answer? Jack glanced around, read people’s expressions as best he could, tried to put the skills Julias taught him into practice. Predict the situation, read body language, watch the eyes, feet, fingers.

Jessy was as easy to read as an angry guard dog. Vivienne was acting sad, with a touch of quiet and reserved, but every so often he caught a shifting glance from her, like she was reading people the same as Jack was. Probably true, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t sincere. Amanda was squirming like Halla, despite just watching. Probably didn’t know why she was called, why Jack was called, if Jessy and Vivi could handle everything.

But if Natasha was missing, Jessy didn’t know if she’d be able to handle everything. She was afraid too, Jack could see it in her fingers; they never held still. Afraid for Natasha though, not for her own well being, just like a good guard dog.

Jessy threw Halla a few more threats, and Halla squirmed with every one. She'd break, sooner or later, it was on her face, in her wavering jaw. Invictus defying Invictus wasn't good, but Jack didn't exactly like Jessy's approach to breaking Halla either. Girl was just trying to keep a promise to Natasha, not screw over her covenant.

Movement. Jack looked to the corner of the subway platform, and moved toward the shifting shadow. Just a subtle motion, enough to grab his attention. He had back up if he needed it, and it should be a safe location, so he shrugged and headed toward the shadow.

Another Nosferatu, hidden behind a subway gate.

"Bob, right?" Jack said. "Er, sorry, Master ... Bob?" Bob the classic vampire. Jack never said that, cause damn that'd be fucking rude. And Maria would rip him apart for the Nosferatu insult. Not like he needed to give her more things to discover about him warranting his death.

Bob nodded, and fidgeted with the edge of his robe. "Looking for Natasha?"

"We are."

Bob looked past him toward Jessy, who was shaking Lil a little too hard and wholly absorbed in the ordeal. Amanda and Vivi looked Jack's way, but their attention went back to Lil once she started talking about protecting her friendship with Natasha.

"... Miss Halla, she..." Bob put one of his hands onto the toll gate, and forced himself to stand. The nails weren't claws, just really long, gross nails, enough that Jack had to force down a shudder.

"She'll be fine. Not like Jessy will hurt her ... much." He shrugged, and gave his best I'm-in-control face. "You know where Natasha went." Not a question.

“ ... I ... I do.”

“You don’t want to tell me.”

“ ... I ... I shouldn’t. We’re friends, and she didn’t want to be followed.”

“Your friends? How old are you? How long you been embraced.” Older than Jack for sure, but there was an opportunity to exploit.

“I am four years embraced, Master Terry.”

“Madam Vola and Madam Herrington have been close friends for decades. And Madam Vola isn’t even an Invictus anymore, yet Madam Herrington continues to aid her, as she once did. She wouldn’t be asking if this wasn’t very important,” Jack said.

God. Damn. Kindred. Every request, every favor, every action, every nuance and detail, was a dance. Every word had three meanings. No sentence was overly committal, and yet every sentence said a dozen things. And it was starting to come naturally to him, the doublespeak and manipulation. His sire would be proud, but probably as sad about it as he was.

Not exactly the time to get dramatic. But, he couldn’t help but remember the Prince, and how much she loved his genuine attitude.

“ ... you’re right.” Bob sauntered over to Jessy, Jack beside him, before he made a small wave of his hand. Enough for Jessy to put the scared girl down. “Mada—Natasha went to the tunnel under Ronder Street. She was investigating the spiderwebs there.”

“Spiderwebs?” Jessy said. “Know why?”

Bob shook his head. “She ... she said she was investigating something involving spiders, and I mentioned I found a lot of spiderwebs in the tunnel beneath Ronder Street.”

The Gangrel smirked, set Liliana back down, and pat Bob on the shoulder, Lil too. “Ronder Street eh? Thanks for the info.” She leaned in toward Bob, close enough their noses were almost touching. “If it were anyone else, I would have phoned for the info. And if you hadn’t given it to me, I would have ripped off fingers until you did tell me what I wanted to know. If you’d lied to me to cover someone’s tracks, I’d have ripped out your intestines.” Jessy’s hand changed from a pat, to a hard shove, and both Lil and Bob crashed against an empty stack of crates behind them. “So consider it a favor that I don’t use rank and punish the both of you.” She gave a small wave, and started the walk to Ronder Street.

Jack winced again, but when he reached out to offer them help, they shook their heads. They knew the game as well as any. Don’t show weakness or expose your neck when you don’t have to. They stood up, dusted themselves off, bowed, and returned to their chatting. So much for not burning bridges; but then, Jessy had probably burned that bridge a dozen times, and only got to push people around because of her rank.

Much as he wished she was nicer to people, he also enjoyed having such an aggressive woman as his boss. Barriers could be broken down much easier. Sometimes. Hopefully.

The three young Kindred fell in line beside each other behind Jessy, and each took out a flashlight. Quality flashlights that lit the tunnel up to its end. It still had working lights, so the flashlights may have been overkill, but they had to keep an eye open for any signs of Natasha.

But, as they continued down through the depths, and found more of the tunnel lights no longer worked, the flashlights quickly earned their worth.

“So dark,” Amanda said.

Jessy pointed her flashlight back at Amanda, then at the ground around her feet, the tracks, then down the tunnel once more. Looking around for who knows what. What do you look for when someone disappears? With kine, you'd look for their last known whereabouts. Done. Then you'd move onto their property and personal information. Places they visited, personal errands, friends they knew. Sometimes you were looking for information on the disappearing person, sometimes on who could have done the kidnapping.

All they knew was Natasha was investigating spiders in the tunnels. So, unless they stumbled onto spiders or ... spiderwebs.

The four of them stopped, and pointed their flashlights along the concave walls. Glints of white marked the edges of concrete brick, casting weird, stringy shadows over the cracks as their flashlights buried them in light.

"I uh ... I hate spiders," Amanda said.

Vivi shuddered. "Me too."

"Bunch of pussies." Jessy walked up to one of the spiderwebs, light pointed, and she ran her fingers over the threads. The two Mekhet groaned and took a small step back, but Jessy raised her fingers to her eyes with the light pointed at them, before rubbing her fingertips together. "Yeah it's a spiderweb, but it feels different. Strong, I guess, for a spiderweb?"

"Madam Herrington." Jack stepped up to her and looked at her fingers too. "You realize we're deep underground and searching for Natasha, who's disappeared while investigating spiders. This whole situation reeks of trouble. I mean ... spiders? What does that mean?"

"Yeap, it does reek of trouble. That's why there's four of us." She wiped the web off her fingers on her pants, and kept moving. The



tunnel greeted them with more webs, and Jessy paused every so often to shine her light on them. “And if shit hits the fan, at least one of us will escape, and then we’ll have the whole of Invictus down here. If we have to fucking lock elbows and walk the tunnels to find her, that’s what we’ll do.”

“I—”

“Do I make myself clear, Master Terry?”

Yeah, there’d be no talking with her in this state. Dog with a bone. He nodded, drew his pistol, and flipped his light in his other hand so it was reversed. Pointing the light out toward the tunnel, he rested his pistol hand on the wrist of his flashlight hand so both were pointed into the black, and he started to move forward.

The two Mekhets sighed, and did the same.

It was a slow, quiet crawl in the darkness. The webbing only got worse, bigger, stronger, and the smell of stagnation was almost pungent. No one was talking anymore; for the best. The longer they walked, the more it felt like walking into a den, into something’s home, into a death trap, into a—

There was a giant hole in the wall.

The four of them pointed their lights at the enormous hole, and scanned its edges up and down. So much concrete debris everywhere, but also a bent metal door. Bent in half mostly, and a huge dent was also in it, like someone had smashed it in with a giant boulder. Concrete dust and bricks lay around Jack’s feet, and he got down to a knee as he shined the light on floor.

“Looks like there was a fight,” Jessy said.

“A fight?” Amanda walked over to the wall, light pointed into the black. “I can’t—oh shit, the ... the hole cuts through to the other

side.”

Everyone stood up and pointed their flashlights into the room. Inside there were old computers and monitoring equipment built into the walls, along with old pipes and dials. But all of them were destroyed, cracked, shredded, slashed.

The wall on the other side was gone. Just gone, like the first wall.

He pointed the light down at the blocks, and kicked some of them. Too damn heavy to move with his foot unless he wanted to break a toe.

“Explosives?” he said.

Vivi shook her head. “No, Madam Herrington is correct, there was a battle here. There’s claw marks, and ... and...”

“Looks like a few Gangrels went nuts and tore the place apart.” Jessy pointed her light up and down, and snapped her fingers each time she found what looked like claw marks. “I could make these, but not that tall or wide unless I was jumping up and actively trying to hit the ceiling. And the whole wall is gone. Eight feet wide hole in concrete? I’d take me a while, and it’d be pointless when I could ... fit through the door.”

Something had torn it down, ripped it apart, and threw the chunks of concrete aside. Something that couldn’t fit through the door.

“Out here!” They all turned back to Amanda, and pointed their lights where she was at the ground. “More claw marks ... and ... and I don’t know, footprints?”

Vivi knelt down and ran her finger along one of the grooves in the concrete. “If dinosaurs were running around, maybe?”

“What do you mean?” Jack said.

“Something huge and heavy left a bit of an impact print of talons against the concrete. So, I mean, unless there’s a Utahraptor running these tunnels, I don’t know.”

Jessy growled, knelt down beside the neonate, pointed her light down at the tracks, then down the tunnel into the black. “Claw are marks coming our way.”

“Then ... I guess they were running away from Ronder Street.” Vivi pointed the light back to the room that’d been ripped apart. “And they decided to switch tunnels?”

“Switch in a hurry. And ... and there are a lot of these claw marks,” Amanda said. “I doubt they were running from something.”

“Then they were running after something.” Shaking her shoulders, Jessy stood up and headed toward the ripped open wall. “Let’s get going.”

Amanda pointed her light back down the tunnel toward where the tracks came from. Thinking what Jack was thinking probably: should someone explore what Natasha was exploring? But, it’d have been ripped out of a bad horror film to split up. Besides, whatever lead led to Natasha, they were going to follow.

“Any claw marks going the other way?” Jack said. “Toward Ronder Street?”

“No.”

“Then, we follow the boss.” He brought his pistol to bear, and walked after Jessy. She offered him a happy smirk before she continued along, doing the same as Amanda now and scouting for claw marks.

In the past, she wasn’t his boss. He usually worked with Natasha, or other, lower ranks in the Invictus since he was just a fresh

neonate after all. But now Natasha was gone, Julias was far too busy, and with Viktor dead, everyone was sharing the workload. Jessy was now his boss, their boss. She was working her ass off, and now she was trying to save her friend who'd disappeared. Least he could do was back her up. And make sure she didn't get herself killed.

The tracks continued through the second subway tunnel, but the lights were working again, some of them anyway. Good thing too, with each step a careful one to avoid the mess of ripped up ground. Whatever these things were, they were heavy.

“So, uh.” Amanda stepped up to Jessy, peeked over her shoulder at Jack and Vivi, before shaking off her fears and looking back to Jessy. “Do you know what we're following?”

“I do.”

Amanda stopped, but Jessy didn't. She had to jog to catch up as the Gangrel marched on.

“Um, Madam Herrington, you ... you could ... tell us?”

“I'll tell you when it matters.”

Enough. Jack doubled his marching, grabbed Jessy's hand by the fingers, and let her own movement jerk her in a turn to face him. When it matters? When it fucking matters, they could all be dead.

“The fuck?”

“Jessy. I get it, Natasha's missing and you're terrified for her. I get it. We get it. But we're not your enemies here, we're your back up, we're your subordinates, and I'm your friend.”

“Friend? You fu—”

“Friend!” Jack yanked on her hand hard enough to bring her a step closer. One misstep and she was going to rip him in half with her bare hands, but if he didn’t do something, she was going to stay in guard dog mode. He needed her brain working. “I told you about Marv’s job last week. I told you about what Julias meant when he asked for that job the week before. I came to you when I needed help with that contract with Hovonar Industries, because I knew I could trust you. So, good friends? No, but we’re friends. Give me a little credit, and trust me.”

Too much? Maybe too much. But he understood Jessy enough to know he had to be blunt with her.

She raised her fist.

Shit. He closed his eyes and winced. Incoming punch, incoming punch ... no punch? After a few seconds he opened his eyes, and found Jessy looking at the ground.

“Getting good at this manipulative shit, Jack. You remind me of Julias,” she said.

“ ... did you trust him?”

“Yeah I fucking trusted him. Hated his guts sometimes, but I trusted him ... so if I tell you guys what we’re going up against, can I trust you to not freak out? I need your help.”

“In for a penny.” He smiled at her, let go of her hand, and started walking next to her as she resumed her march through the tunnels. A glance back showed the two Mekhet not so convinced, but they fell in behind them anyway, grimaces and frowns and frustrations fading away as they started focusing on the danger ahead. They weren’t happy, but at least they were professionals.

“Right, so ... it looks like a pack of werewolves.”

Jack froze, but forced himself to catch up when Jessy didn't stop. "Werewolves."

"Yeap."

"But I'd heard they hadn't been to Dolareido since the fifties," he said.

"Yeap."

"So—"

"So how do I know? Been dead a lot longer than you have. Smart Kindred prepare for shit, and at the time of my embrace, the Invictus were still recovering from that shit show. Natasha, me, we got thorough lessons in werewolves, what to do if you run into one, how to handle one."

Jack looked to the two Mekhet, but they both shrugged and shook their heads. Neither of them had taken a course on werewolves either, and Jessy had to know that.

"It was better if you didn't know," she said. "Didn't want you pussyng out."

"Think that low of us?" he said.

"Ha!" She smirked at him, and pat him on the shoulder as they walked. "Kid you got balls, and you do good work. Vivi and Amanda might be a pair of wimps, but they do good work too. Problem is, with werewolves, it's ... running away is the better option."

"They tough?" he said.

More laughter.

"Kid, if shit hits the fan, I'm using the three of you as cannon fodder while I get Natasha and run."

“... lovely.” He gripped his pistol tighter. Part of him thought she was kidding, but she had an edge in the voice that said otherwise. “Can we get a little info then?”

“Sire filled me in, about the werewolves in the fifties. What a fucking shit show. Some vamps got caught in the middle of the wolves and their hunt. The vamps died. The wolves didn’t.”

Jack lowered his gun and raised a brow. “Kindred didn’t get revenge?”

“Jacob tried. Didn’t work out.”

“Wait!” Amanda jogged back up to walk beside them, and Vivi too. “Jacob couldn’t kill a werewolf?”

“Hey, you want the nitty gritty of it, go ask Jacob. All I know is there was a throwdown, and Jacob had beef. Werewolves are not to be fucked with. They are ... well, you saw the wall. One werewolf could do that just fine.”

“... holy shit.” He lowered the pistol, looked at it, then her. “Then —”

“Keep the gun. It won’t kill them, but might slow em down for a few seconds.”

Great, just great. Great great great. He gulped on nothing, and looked to Vivienne and Amanda. The two were in sync, switching from depressed to terrified like a rehearsed play.

“Anything we can do at all?” he said.

Jessy shrugged. “Maybe if we had some silver. Cheesy as it is, it hurts them. No more cheesy than vampires and sunlight, I guess.”

“So if I stab or shoot them with something silver, they die?”  
Vivienne said.

“Nah, just hurt them a lot more than any pistol or sword would. Werewolves are fucking monsters, kids. God damn fucking monsters. They will tear a city apart with their bare hands, and you can’t do shit to stop them except get out of the way. So ... yeah, eyes peeled.”

The Ventrue and two Mekhet looked at their pistols, felt for their swords under their jackets, and sighed.

“We ... oh shit.” Vivienne pointed her light down the tunnel, jaw dropping, eyes wide.

Jack blinked, rubbed his eyes, and blinked again. “Holy shit.”

There was a train. Or at least, he thought it was a train. Metal shards the size of his body were scattered around, glass, bits of plastic and rubber, and a lot of claw marks. Hard to imagine claws tearing through concrete and metal like opening a tin can, but the train had been literally opened like exactly that. For a moment, he pictured people inside being picked out of the train, like sardines in a can.

“I ... it ... uh...” Amanda shined her light along the front of the train and the edges of where it’d been opened. It wasn’t like someone had carved a door into its face, more like someone had ripped the front of the train open wide enough to fit an elephant. Claw marks dug through the concrete and shredded the ground; they must have braced themselves against the floor as they tore the train open.

“ ... suit.” Vivienne climbed up into the train and through the opening the beasts had created, before getting down to a knee to scoop up something in her hand. “Black suit, piece of it. Torn off of someone.”



“Any blood?” Jessy said.

Vivi shook her head. “Bit of ash.”

“Looks like we’re on the trail. Of some vamp at least. Come on.”

Without pause or glance, Jessy walked through the train. Shredded from end to end. Someone must have been running through the cars, and the wolves had to give chase in the most efficient way possible: through the train.

“Any idea why werewolves are chasing her?” Jack said. He glanced around at the destroyed poles, the seats, grip bars, everything. Bent, cracked, ripped, shredded, everything was a warped version of its former self, along with claw marks on the subway train floor at each car’s end. Gripping their bodies down while they ripped the car ends into paper strips, probably.

“Guess she got between them and their prey. What’s their prey? No fucking idea. All I fucking know is what Bob just fucking told me, and what you and Amanda told me in your report. I got disappearing people in my city, I have spiders apparently in my city, and I have fucking werewolves in my city. Connection? Again, no fucking idea.” Each word, louder than the last, earned wincing from the three following her. “And since I’m not going to sit around and wait for the triumvirate to debate this and figure out what to do, I’m going to act. Natasha could be dead if we wait, and that possibility seems to be growing every god damn minute we’re looking. So, we’re going to do everything we fucking can to find her, and if the werewolves don’t let us, or they’ve killed her, we come back with the whole of Invictus with silver knives and silver bullets, and we hunt ourselves some fucking dogs.”

“... should ... should we go back and get Bob and Halla?” he said.

“Nah. Four lives is already a lot to ask for a first stab. We’ll get them and everyone else in round two, if it comes to that.”

“And if the four of us die on this trip?”

“Got shit set up so a message goes out to the council if I don’t log in tomorrow. Can’t text for shit down in the tunnels.”

“Oh.” Jack scratched the back of his head with his flashlight. It was a good plan for a spur of the moment thing. Jessy had maybe two hours of no check in from Natasha before she decided to go action movie hero and hunt down her missing friend. Probably planned for this ahead of time, now that he thought about it. Those two were an odd pair of friends, but then, Kindred friends were rare in and of themselves. For two Kindred to trust each other with their lives was a step beyond rare. Sad but true. It made him smile, knowing Jessy valued her friend’s life so much.

The train was ripped out from end to end, like some sort of hollowed out metal worm. They jumped out the back end, and both Mekhet pointed to the glass shards over the subway tracks.

“More pieces of black fabric. Bit of white in here too,” Amanda said.

Still on the trail then. Jessy nodded, resumed the march through the tunnels, and motioned for them to put their flashlights away. No need with the lights working, and now all they had to do was follow the claw marks.

Follow they did, but they didn’t get much further. Soon the four of them were standing around a set of claw marks, subtle against the concrete, as if the beasts had stopped running. Some more fabric pieces were scattered about, threads, and a bit of ash mixed into the dust only a Mekhet would have noticed. But the trail stopped, and they all looked at each other in waiting. No one said anything. The trail was cold.

“Thought I smelled a rat.”

Jack brought his pistol up and aimed at the new voice. Shit, shit shit. Bound to happen sooner or later, but hoping it'd happen somewhere other than an abandoned tunnel. No witnesses down here.

Jessy stepped toward the newcomer. Whoever this woman was, she was walking up to meet them, a small grin on her face and a big grin in her eyes. An average height woman, fit, tanned skin and black box-braid hair down to her hips. Looked perfectly normal, attractive, perhaps in her mid thirties.

The beast in his gut was screaming for him to run.

“And you are?” Jessy said. Voice was solid, but Jack knew she was feeling what he was feeling. And when he glanced back, he could see the two Mekhet were ready to bolt.

“Clara, of the Hunters in Darkness, pleasure to meet you.”

Everyone took a small step back. Except Jessy, who approached the woman until they were standing maybe twenty feet apart. Jessy was bigger than her, looked stronger, looked faster, but if what the Gangrel said was true...

“So you know who we are?”

“Well if you're looking for your friend, that narrows it down. Besides, you don't smell like regular people strolling through old subway tunnels.” The woman folded her arms across her chest, but otherwise did not move.

“You were waiting?”

“Yep, just hanging out to see if anyone would come looking.”

“... you came alone?” Jessy said.

The woman shrugged. “Figured a squad of vamps would come through. One of us is enough.”

Fucking hell. Jack kept his pistol pointed at her, but she looked at the gun and him like a god would look at a peasant farmer.

“Looking for a fight then?” Jessy said.

Clara laughed, shook her head and put up both her hands for a second. “No, not at all. Certainly a possibility vamp, but I’m here to talk.”

Jessy stepped in closer. “Talk? Where is she? Is she even alive?”

“Natasha is alive.”

Jack lowered his pistol, smile sneaking onto his face, and he motioned for Amanda and Vivi to do the same.

“Got proof?” he said.

The woman pulled out a phone. A few taps later, she pointed it at Jessy; pictures of Natasha were on the display. Kindred faces rarely, if ever showed up well on a picture or in footage, so if a Kindred wanted a good picture, they had to hold very still for the camera, like a statue, and suppress the beast’s reflex to twist or turn at the click of the button. Gave credence to the woman’s words.

“ ... pictures? How do I know she’s still alive?”

“I can’t call the pack from down here in the tunnels, dumbass.” Clara put the phone into her back pocket, and dismissed Jessy’s words with a small wave of the fingers. “Let’s go topside.”

“ ... or I take that phone from your corpse, and use it to figure out where you took Natasha.” Jessy stepped closer again.

“Yeah, that’s a possibility you could try. You got guts, vamp. Gangrel I take it? I like you.” Clara still didn’t move, even as Jessy got close enough she could transform and slice the woman open from skull to crotch. “Been a while since I’ve tussled with a Kindred. But my boss says Dolareido isn’t like Tijuana, and I should play nice.”

Jack walked up. This close, it was enough to make his feet itch with the need to turn around. Like the time with Viktor, and Antoinette, and Jacob and Tony and all the other big timers so ancient, getting this close felt like standing in front of a real beast, something hungry and large.

“Clara, I’m Jack Terry of the Invictus.”

“Jack eh? Cute little kid. Natasha your girlfriend? Right size for you.”

Jack raised a brow, and looked into the woman’s eyes. The laughing, the chuckling, the smirking and grinning, the monster did them all, and looked back into his eyes with all the intensity of a wolf.

But he was used to a little fear.

“What are your terms?” he said. Jessy raised a brow at him, but said nothing.

“Oh, terms. I like that. Invictus all business.” Clara tapped her finger on her chin, glanced at each Kindred individually, before settling on Jack again. “You, come with me, alone, back to our hideout.”

“Like fuck he is.” Jessy raised a fist, but Jack put a hand out in front of her. Course she could have just ignored him, or told him to shut up, but she frowned at him and lowered her hand.

“Why?” he said.

“Need someone to serve as a middleman. Want to see Natasha alive again, you do what I tell you and listen to us.”

“Why alone?”

“Cause you seem young, seem like you can talk, can look me in the eye unlike your two little friends, and with you alone, we can manipulate you toward our goals.” She chuckled, and waved off her joke like a bad fart. “Cause older vamps have a pretty fucked up opinion about us, and you seem young enough we might actually be able to get somewhere.”

Yeah, that was true. That was very true. A beacon of hope maybe, that the werewolves weren't the same paranoid leeches that Kindred could be? Fool's hope, and he shut it down quick.

“Are you telling the truth, about wanting to play nice?” he said.

Damn the woman did not blink. Not even a fidget.

“Father Wolf as my witness.”

“... then I'll go.” Because if there was one way he was going to die, it was to a bunch of werewolves in their den.

Jack looked at Jessy, but the Gangrel was gritting her teeth and clenching her fists like she was ready to fight. For Jessy, that normally meant an inevitable brawl, but not this time. She snarled, pointed her finger at Clara, and glared.

“If Jack doesn't check in tomorrow at dusk, you have no idea how much trouble is going to come shitting down your throat.”

Finally, Clara managed something more than a confident expression. She raised a brow, and looked at him for an answer. He

just shrugged.

“We look out for each other,” he said. Let Antoinette and Julias be a secret.

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Back up on the streets. Glorious moonlight, fresh air — not that he really needed to breathe it — some humans around, and lots of ways he could make chaos if it came to it. He didn't want to, but with a little eye contact he could dominate a nearby human, turn them into a shield. But it'd take too long, and he'd probably get himself killed just for the effort. No, stick to the plan, be the messenger boy for the werewolves. There were only a few souls around anyway, this edge of North Side.

“So, uh ... you really let Natasha live eh?” he said.

“Course. She wasn't our prey.”

“Who was?”

“Secret, and better for everyone it stays that way.”

Clara was only a little taller than him, and he found himself admiring the box braids of hers that bounced against her back. Bit of an accent on her, and from her skin color, he imagined she was from Mexico.

“Why'd you take her then?”

“She was in the wrong place, wrong time. Good opportunity for us though, and Avery doesn't waste opportunities.”

They were walking into North Side, and a mile from where Viktor, Julias, and Jack had all stood once, preparing for their unusual approach of a secret info drop. A fucking lifetime ago. Antoinette's secret manipulations, just to coax Viktor and Tony into a confrontation. Viktor had summoned an army of rats, a literal army,

thousands of them, and they'd swarmed the place. He tried to remember the Ventrue display with admiration, but memories of Viktor were always cold, and painful.

"Opportunity to do what?"

"Force a conversation. Last time Avery was here, shit didn't go so well, so she's expecting she'll have to force your elders' ear."

"How do you know Natasha is important enough to do that?"

"... she's a pack mate, isn't she? Well I suppose Kindred are just a bunch of blood leeches with no concern outside their next meal. Her clan would let her rot if it meant a safe food source in the future, wouldn't they?"

"Harsh. Not necessarily untrue, but harsh and a bit exaggerated. We're not all like that, and every situation has details, Clara."

"Smart little punk, aren't you?" She smiled down at him, and took a second to look him up and down. "How old are you? How long you been a vamp, I mean."

"About half a year."

"Damn kid, I like you. Bet those three girls you were with were all older than you too."

"... they were."

"Heh." She winked at him, and kept walking. Signs. These were signs, flirting signs. Flirting with little him? "So, Avery knows Dolareido a bit, and she knows how Kindred act. Since Natasha was in our hunting grounds, investigating, it stands to reason that she's important to someone."



“... if ... she was investigating the spiders, you’re hunting the spiders.”

Clara grabbed him by the neck, and slammed him against the wall of a nearby building. Not enough to hurt or injure, but enough to send a jolt of panic up through his spine into his eyes. The neighborhood was behind them, and only empty factories ahead of them. No one he could call out for, and even if he could, what then?

“What do you know about them?”

“N-Nothing!” Hard to talk with fingers squeezing the throat. And she was strong too. Really strong. It was weird, feeling the warmth and breath of a living thing, something he could normally overpower easily. But this living creature was pinning him against the wall by the throat like he weighed nothing.

Shit shit shit shit. Jack you dumbass, always say less than you know, always say less than you know!

“Didn’t sound like nothing.”

“Well, you saw the tunnels. They’re filled with webs. Some Kindred have been worried, cause people have been disappearing in the area, and giant spider webs? The tunnels are ours, and—”

“Do yourself a favor and don’t stick your nose into it. Consider the area our hunting grounds for now.” She let him go.

“S-Sorry, I ... we didn’t know.”

“It’s ok, just ... yeah, stay out of the way. Cute kid like you, getting caught? Shit, I’d feel horrible.” A gentle tap on the cheek before she smirked and resumed walking. “Don’t think I don’t know your friends are watching where we’re going either. I’m sure they’ll scuttle back to their bosses and tell them where our pack is hiding.”

Another laugh, closer to a sneering chuckle though. “Would love to see what they try.”

“... confident.” He rubbed at his throat a bit, and fell back in beside her again. Remember Jack, her kind tore the concrete wall open, ripped the train’s guts out, managed to catch Natasha, one of the fastest Mekhet in the city. Step lightly, this isn’t like your first conversation with Antoinette.

“Text your bosses yet?” she said.

“I ... I uh...”

“I saw you fiddling around with your phone in your pocket. I’d prefer you didn’t, if you don’t mind.”

“... what if I already did?”

“Well then you’ll have betrayed my trust, and I’ll be sad.” She offered a mock frown before chuckling. “Did you?”

“... not yet.”

“Thanks. Wait till we’re done, would you? Besides, your friends are watching us, they’ll notify your bosses the moment we arrive. Paranoid things, aren’t you?”

“We are.” Because it takes half a century before a typical vampire’s strong enough to break down a brick wall. Tear down a concrete one? Longer. “Kindred are ... we’re ... we die in sunlight, we die in fire, we slip into a coma without a regular food source, and we sleep like the dead when the sun rises. Paranoid, or justifiably cautious.”

“Never thought about it like that, I guess. Uratha typically only live two or three times as long as humans. You could say some us are jealous you can live forever.”

“But ... but you’re so strong. We saw what you did to the train. It takes Kindred many decades to reach that sort of strength.” Uratha? There name for werewolves?

“Cause you vamps are weaklings. But man that Natasha girl was quick on her feet. Fucking had the whole pack in an uproar chasing her, and we just ripped through that tin can.” Clara held out her hands in front of her, and squeezed them a few times. Invisible metal bent in her hands, and Jack could almost hear it crunching under her strength. “What a rush.”

He raised a brow and looked at Clara as they walked. Smile on her face and eyes drifting, she seemed lost in a pleasant memory.

“You like being a ... a ... Uratha, was it?”

“Yeah, and yeah. Nothing, nothing quite like the feel of ripping your prey open and biting off chunks kid. Nothing, nothing quite like that feeling of trapping prey with your pack, and everyone jumps in, tears your prey apart. The hunt is sacred, kid, especially to the Meninna. Wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

Not unlike the Kiss. Tempted to make the comparison, but he kept it quiet, and smiled at Clara as she reveled in what he could only imagine was animalistic bliss. Kindred enjoyed a successful hunt, but the Kiss was the goal. It sounded like Clara enjoyed the hunt as much as the kill.

“You’re very open about this, and friendly,” he said.

“Like I said, we’re just trying to avoid the trouble of last time.” She reached out, hooked her arm around his neck, and pulled him in. Only a few inches taller than him; a weird difference compared to Antoinette’s twelve. “And you kid, seem a lot more willing to talk than your brethren. Wanna go on a date when this is all done?”

Say what?

## Chapter 30

~~Jack~~

“I uh, have a girlfriend.”

“Oh, damn.” She let go of his shoulder, but shrugged and kept walking. “Glad you told me though. Surprising, given your circumstances. Figured you might have said yes to a date just to get on my good side.”

“The thought had occurred to me.” Except suffering Antoinette’s wrath would have been a million times worse than pissing off Clara’s whole pack, let alone just her.

“It’s not Natasha is it?”

“No.”

“That’s good. It’d really make this whole situation awkward wouldn’t it?” More chuckles.

Clara was a fun woman, Jack realized. Fun in the classic sense, in the go-out-for-drinks-for-silly-times fun sort of way. Not that he ever did much of that in his life, but the longer he talked with the woman, the more he felt like laughing with her as she chuckled and made bad jokes. An infectious personality type, good at making friends. Or just really good at the game.

They stopped in front of an old factory. The outside was run down but not to the point of destroyed or decrepit, and the windows were big and clean enough he could see through them up to the ceiling inside. There was some light in there, but not the building’s; some lamps or flashlights then.

Clara opened the side door, and waited for him to walk in first.

“Hope your pack mates are as calm as you,” he said.

“Hit or miss on that. Don’t worry about it though, we aren’t stupid. Just keep the pistol in its holster and I bet you’ll come out of this with all your limbs still attached.”

“ ... bet?”

She laughed and pat him on the shoulder as she followed in behind him. “I’m thinking ninety-nine percent chance you’ll be fine.”

One percent chance he was a dead man? Well, good odds at least. Not sure why it wasn’t a hundred percent chance of survival, but maybe Clara was joking again. Maybe.

“Clara, brought company?” a man said. Big guy, very very tall, soft brown hair. Enforcer type Jack would have guessed, but no one was wearing any clothes that would suggest a rank. Everyone was just wearing street clothes like the Carthians did.

Once he was near the pack, he glanced to each member. Yeah, Carthians were a good comparison of the werewolves, jeans and t-shirts included. He counted a dozen including Clara, and each looked strong, fit, built for fighting. None of them seemed dressed for negotiations or politics or such, and all of them were standing or sitting around with casualness.

“ ... Jack?”

The tiny voice of Natasha. He smiled as he came into view of her, and offered her a small wave. She was sitting on a table, legs dangling, and her arms tied behind her back.

“Natasha, thank god you’re ... where are your clothes?” She was wearing some simple blue pants and a white blouse, and that was most definitely not what she went out wearing last night.

“Got kind of t-t-torn up when these guys caught m-me.”

Jack raised a brow and looked at the wolves again. Guys. She called them guys. And they’d brought her a change of clothes? A little more comfortable than he expected of Natasha.

“Glad you’re ok.”

“B-But why’re you here? ... why not Jessy?”

Jack put up his hands a bit. “It was Jessy’s idea. We went looking for you in the tunnels, ran into Clara. She felt I should be the one to do this negotiation.”

“Negotiation, bleh. Why couldn’t we have captured a Carthian? Least this talk would have been interesting.” Clara shrugged and walked over to join her pack. She nodded to a couple of them, and one of them she did a small handshake with. “So Avery isn’t back yet, but I’m fine to handle this myself.”

Jack held up a hand. “Can I speak with Natasha for a moment first?”

“Fine fine.” She gestured to the other vampire, then grabbed a chair to sit; but not before she spun it around so she could sit in it with her elbows on its back. Comfortable about the whole situation, Clara was, and confident. No reason not to be, strong as she was.

She was underestimating Kindred. Good.

Jack nodded and walked over to Natasha. The big guy with the soft brown hair, and a slightly-smaller-but-still-huge guy with dark messy hair were both sitting near Natasha, and they offered him a

small nod of their own before they got up and went to sit with Clara. Friends of the Mekhet's? Would explain her almost familiar tone.

Once the pack was far enough away he could whisper, he went to the furthest end of the table, and Natasha scooted over along the table's surface to join him. Her ankles were bound as well; not running anywhere like that.

"They treating you ok?" he said.

"Yeah. Other than the ... p-painful introduction, it seems f-f-fine now."

"Clara mentioned someone named Avery. Pack leader?"

Natasha nodded. "Clara is second in c-command."

"They tell you why they're keeping you prisoner?"

"J-Just ... as a hostage ... to force a negotiation."

Well, he wasn't sure what Clara was thinking then, getting him for it instead of Jessy. Best he could do was be a messenger. Maybe Clara figured that was better than a pointless negotiation then. Better to ask forgiveness than for permission.

"Jessy, Amanda, and Vivienne have probably reported this location now."

"... Vivi came?"

He smiled. "She did."

The Mekhet lowered her head a little, her own smile coming through, before she took a breath and sat up straight once more.

"They're j-just trying to avoid a repeat of last t-t-time."

“We got any details on what happened last time? Jessy said some Kindred died during a werewolf hunt, and now Jacob has an issue with Avery.”

She shook her head. “Sounds like you know as m-m-much as I do. Maria never gave us many d-d-d-details.”

“ ... you sure you’re ok? We found bits of your suit, and we saw what they did to catch you. I’m surprised you still have your limbs.”

His words earned him some trembles and shivers from her, and she’d probably be rubbing her own arms in a self hug if they were free to do so.

“It was ... it was b-b-bad, but they let me feed on one of them. I’m fine n-now.”

Feed on a werewolf. He looked over at the pack, and a couple of them raised a brow as they met his eyes. One of them in particular was looking at Natasha, a small smile on his lips. The one with jaw-length messy dark hair, and looked a bit like Clara. Perhaps also from Mexico?

“Anything I should know?”

“Um, they ... they just want t-t-to get permission to perform their hunt.” She looked at him for a moment, then to the pack. “Or at least want t-to explain their actions b-b-before they do them anyway.”

“Sounds reasonable of them. Not sure what use I am in that though.” He scratched his head and looked over at the pack again, and Clara in particular. She was still throwing him the occasional smile, and sneaking glances at his shoes, his suit, his ... everything. Since when did girls notice him? They always just called him cute and adorable and kid and everything he took as an insult, or at least platonic. But after meeting Alex in the club, and seeing how easy it



was to open people up with some playful banter, even flirt, he realized he really had to reanalyze all those old conversations.

Such a stereotype, that he couldn't realize a girl was flirting with him unless she wrapped her legs around his head.

“Call Mire yet?” Natasha said.

“No. And I'm on board with what Clara said. I want to get their words first, before I get a biased opinion from people who were here last time they visited.”

Natasha winced, but nodded, and smiled again. “Thanks ... for looking for me.”

“Thank Jessy. Friends like that are hard to come by.” He adjusted his suit, took a deep breath — useless — and walked back toward the pack. “Alright. What do you want in exchange for Natasha's freedom?”

“Easy.” Clara waved a hand again, as if everything was ok, nothing was wrong, what could possibly warrant caution? Typical disarming tactic. Or genuine disregard and lack of concern for the seriousness of present circumstances. Julias would know. Jack would have to make his best guess. “I need you to tell the Prince that the tunnels in the area we found you are off limits.”

“Me? Talk to the Prince?” A little feigning innocence never hurt anyone. “What makes you think I can do that?”

“Avery assures me if a Kindred goes to your Elysium, and asks to speak to the Prince, she'll grant the audience just for the sheer curiosity. Perfect opportunity to bypass the bullshit and get to the head of the snake.”

He frowned and grit his teeth. “Why can't I talk to my bosses and have them carry the message?”

“Cause Avery rem—”

“Cause I remember Jacob, and Antoinette, and Viktor and Tony and Lucas and Garry and Maria and Michael.”

Everyone turned to look at the door as a small woman walked into the old factory. Lit by nothing but some LED lamps sitting on tables, it made for an interesting entrance as Avery came to stand beside Clara. Avery was short, only a few inches taller than Natasha, but she had some serious muscle to her otherwise small frame. She looked forty years old, maybe a bit older, lightly tanned skin, and a long black ponytail. And just like her pack, she was dressed in some simple street clothes.

But Jack took a small step back at the sight of her. Just a reflex, just a little thing he couldn't control, but the beast in his gut forced it, made him want to run and hide. A mouse before the barking, frenzied dog. The small woman looked perfectly nice though. This was the beast from the fifties who'd caused so much trouble?

“ ... Jack Terry,” he said, and bowed slightly.

“Heh, Avery Dunsbill.” She folded her arms across her chest, and looked down at the sitting Clara beside her. “This is who you got? Kid looks eight.”

Ok, Clara may have been flirting with him, but Avery was most definitely not. There was a sneer on her face when she looked at him, and she grit her teeth the same way he did. Her silver blue eyes cut into him like shining daggers.

“I had some options,” Clara said, “and I think this kid has potential. People seem to listen to him, and he's good at talking. Young too, like David said they'd be, so don't be a jackass and give him a chance. Try not burning this bridge again?”

For just a moment, a split-second image of two wolves growling at each other flashed. Clara, barking at her leader, Avery, and Avery defending her position as leader. It was in the eyes, in their sneers and quiet-but-there growls, in their posture where they puffed their chests up a bit and flexed some of their muscles. It was all subtle, hidden in clothes and some social etiquette, but it was there. Reading these people would be weird; they weren't people, they were wolves.

And David said they'd get a negotiator, a young one. Who was David, and why did he care? Jack kept adding notes to his mental list, until it was looking like an Invictus contract in his brain.

“Why didn't you ask Natasha to talk to the Prince? Why get another Kindred?” he said.

“David said she doesn't fit the bill. We needed someone younger, like you.”

David wanted someone younger, someone impressionable then. Well, at least they were honest about it.

“I am willing to talk to the Prince.”

Avery sighed, shrugged, and came a bit closer before leaning against a nearby table. “Judging by the suit, you're with the Invictus.”

“I am.”

“And from what Natasha's told me — and Garry confirmed — Viktor's dead, and now his child's taken his place. Julias seemed like a nice guy, so maybe there's hope for your kind yet. But, I digress.” She smirked when she said 'digress', dancing on the unspoken judgment she thought he held that she was uncouth or stupid. Well, there was no denying she was uncouth. “I was here before, as you probably know by now. The details of that hunt are

not for you, but it didn't end well for some vamps who got caught in the middle."

Every time they said the word hunt, they raised their inflection, and made sure to enunciate the word with some power. Whatever it was they were hunting, it was the hunting act that was important to the werewolves. Ideas or suggestions for hunting something else or changing their tactics were dwindling by the second.

"I understand."

"I'm sure. So, what we need is a middleman who we can explain our actions to. Explain, not request. We're here because your damn Prince invites major problems with her hobbies, and she can burn for all I care." Avery shrugged, and wiped off imaginary dirt from her shoulder, only for Clara to elbow her in the side. The Alpha sighed, but nodded. "We tell you what we're up to, and you tell us what the Primogen have to say about it. Middleman. Understand?"

"... are ... are you sure you need a middleman? Can't one of your pack communicate with the Primogen?"

"Tried that last time, and it only led to arguments. Your Primogen have giant pineapples up their asses; couldn't get them out even if their unives depended on it. Maybe Garry, but I'm sure the past half a century has changed him too." She paused on Garry's name for a moment, and her eyes fell to glance at the ground before raising to Jack once more. "So, you're the middleman. If the Primogen or anyone else shows up and tries to make a case for whatthefuckever, I can't guarantee it won't lead to more arguments, more confrontation." She came closer again, until maybe only five feet separated the little Kindred from the little Uratha. "And you won't win a fight with us."

He gulped, and glanced back at Natasha. She did the same thing.

"You're putting a lot of faith in me," he said.

“Putting faith in David. You’re just a mouthpiece kid.”

Yeah, sure, he’ll just walk into a Primogen meeting and explain that the werewolves have proclaimed a section of the tunnels their hunting grounds. Cause the Kindred would look so kindly on werewolves telling them what they do or don’t do in the vampire city.

But the Uratha seemed determined, and when he looked at them, they all looked confident in Avery’s decision. Confident and excited. Even Clara, who didn’t seem to like her leader’s attitude toward Kindred, looked intense and eager whenever someone mentioned the hunt.

“And if the Primogen say they would prefer a different middleman? I’m barely a neonate of the Invictus. There are older, trained, bet—”

“David says we need someone like you,” Avery said, “so if the Prince or whoever has a problem, tell them it’s not negotiable.”

Stubborn. Nothing he wasn’t used to dealing with, but it felt different coming from a pack of wolves, who seemed more than willing to get into a fight. Like dealing with a pack of Jessys, but with the strength to back it up if what he’d been told was to be believed. And he did believe it; every foot Avery got closer made him want to bolt.

Just another day dealing with predators who could tear him apart.

“Alright. I play middleman, I tell the Prince and Primogen that the tunnels in the far end of Devil’s Corner are off limits, and that if the Primogen have anything they want to communicate, it all has to go through me.”

“That’s the plan. Think you can handle that?”

No. Nope. No not nope cannot would definitely get everyone killed in a miscommunication oh god everyone was going to die.

“Yes.”

“Perfect. You can take your friend, and be on your way. But I expect you back here in a few days, to follow up.” Apparently, Avery didn’t like using phones.

Jack offered a small bow, and turned to Natasha. The rope they used to tie her up was boating rope, tied tight; no Mekhet was going to be able to break through that. But the knot was simple enough, and he watched the observing werewolves as he undid them.

“Sure you’re ok?” he said.

“Y-Yeah. They’re ... they d-don’t seem bad,” Natasha said. “Just d-d-determined.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” He looked their way again, and some of them smirked at him. One of them was sitting in a corner, rocking slightly, and hugging himself; talking a little to himself too, quiet enough Jack couldn’t hear him.

He took a check of each of their faces as best he could. Remember the faces, it’ll be important, Julias would say. Two of the faces kept looking at Natasha though, with glances reading her body up and down. The one with the jaw-length dark, messy hair, and the other with the shoulder-length light brown hair, the giant. The two that had been sitting close to her when Jack came in, and they looked like they wanted to eat her. Jack looked Natasha’s way, but the Mekhet didn’t seem to react to the lingering gaze of the two werewolves. Oblivious, maybe.

“Alright, let’s go,” he said.

“Y-Yes.” She got off the table, and the two of them walked toward the main exit of the building, past the werewolves.

Like walking in front of a firing squad and hoping to not get shot. Each wolf watched them go by, and Jack fought to keep down the reflex to grab his gun or sword. Avery was somewhere between a frown and grin, Clara was smiling at him, and the two men he noticed were smiling at Natasha like she was bacon.

What a weird negotiation.

Outside again. Air, moonlight, clouds and stars and the mostly-quiet of North Side’s night. They kept walking, both silent, both looking down at the sidewalk, both shivering a little.

“ ... werewolves,” he said after a while.

“Werewolves.” She peeked up at him before she put her eyes back on the sidewalk, and her pace increased slightly. “They’re ... they ... I...”

He pulled out his phone, and called Jessy. Jessy was her friend, not him, not the same sort of friend at least. But by the time it was ringing, he could hear the ring from down the street.

A woman in a trench coat came running. Natasha and Jack both stopped and looked at each other, and the little Mekhet smiled, before Jessy reached them and scooped her up.

“God damn it Natasha! Fucking disappeared, and then I go looking and find werewolf tracks, and bits of your suit, and Bob said you were looking into spiders? What the fuck?”

Jessy held Natasha somewhere between a hug and a grapple, and shook her friend as she ranted on about worrying about her. So damn cute, seeing the tall woman wrestle her friend; Natasha’s attempts to escape were fruitless.

“H-Hey, I’m ok! I’m ok.”

“Bullshit. How bad did you get hurt? Swear to fucking god I will —”

“I ... I got hurt, yeah. But then they let m-m-me feed, and apologized.”

“Apologized?”

“Sort of,” Natasha said. “It was an accid-d-dent. Wrong place, wrong t-time.” Once Jessy put her down, the three of them started walking in a row. Like old times. Not that Jack had much right to think like that, short lived a time as it was, but it made him smile when he looked there way.

Jack and Natasha recounted the events of the meeting, the werewolves they met, Clara and Avery, and Natasha filled in some blanks about others, David, Arturo, Matt, Stephanie, and some she hadn’t learned the names of.

“It was crazy,” she said. “I p-put so many bullets into them, and they just ... just got b-back up. They were big, and huge, and massive, and ... and ... the claws.” She hugged herself a bit, and when she looked down at herself, she laughed and shook her head. “I need a change of clothes, and I must report back t-to the P-Prince.”

“You’re telling me,” Jessy said. “The bosses are going to freak over this, Michael especially.”

“So ... you really ... looked for me?” Natasha said.

“Fucking course I did. We have a system, right? You would have looked for me. Besides, I finally got someone to share my ghouls with, think I’ll give that up?”



Natasha meeped and looked down, avoiding eye contact with Jack. Jessy really gave no shits about personal boundaries. But Jack shrugged and did his best apologetic smile for Natasha's embarrassment.

"Hey, I can't judge. I'm sharing the Prince's ghouls all the time." In all ways, as he was sure Jessy also meant.

"Dude, awesome." Jessy put up her hand and awaited a high five. Jack, wincing as the nineties came back and punched him in the face, gave her the high five.

Natasha peeked up at them, and a smile sneaked its way onto her face.

"So," Jack said, "werewolves."

Jessy nodded with a loud sigh. "Not just, but Avery you said? All the elders are going to be upset. But from what Michael told me, they can't just force them out. Not easily, anyway. Not without a lot of bullets and a lot of risked lives."

"... Jess," Natasha said, "I'm going to t-talk with Jack. I'll see you later?"

"Eh? You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Alright. I'll see you later then. Jack you fucking report this shit in tomorrow night, get me?"

"Sir, yes sir." Jack saluted, just the way Jessy liked. She smirked and walked off, offering a wave over her shoulder as she went.

"... I w-wonder why Vivienne and Amanda d-didn't join her."

“You mean just now? Amanda I’m sure has gone back to Xnomina to fill out a report or something. Vivi, she ... I don’t know. I understand you two don’t talk anymore.”

“We don’t. I ... perhaps I was t-too young, to embrace a childe.” She sighed, shook her hair out, and started walking with Jack once more.

“You were, what, over forty years embraced when you sired her? Don’t think anyone would call that too young.” He brought out his phone and dialed for an Invictus drive. “Sometimes people just having a falling out.”

“Falling out ... maybe. I think I made a mistake, siring someone similar t-t-to myself.”

Well, not as similar as she thought. Jack knew Natasha had an edge to her, a blade, a degree of will she could tap into her childe didn’t seem to have. Not from what little Jack had seen of Vivienne anyway.

“You must have given those wolves hell,” he said.

“What? I ... I mean, I guess I d-d-did? Shot them, stabbed, shot and stabbed a few more t-times.” She smiled at him and stood up a little straighter. “ ... hey, c-can we ... go to your place? I want to talk about what happened, but with Jessy, it’ll be ... b-b-be a bit awkward.”

“Cause of the ghouls thing?”

“N-No! You ... you said you share the P-Prince’s ghouls?”

He nodded and smiled at the tiny ancillae. “Yeah. I mean I just brought it up to try and make you feel a bit less awkward about what Jessy said, but it’s true.”

“Heh.” Her smile was growing by the second, and she stepped in a little closer as the two walked toward the pickup zone. “B-But, that’s not why. It’s cause ... she’s Invictus, and my friend. C-Could be a little weird. She’ll ... she’ll treat me like I’m in the Invictus, even though I’m not, and ... yeah.”

He nodded. Jessy would, no doubt.

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He kept his apartment in much better condition now. Not that he was ever a dirty guy, just never a clean guy either, always preferred to let things sit and accumulate dust until it was time to clean. Even the fancy apartment Julias had gotten him — that Jack now paid for on his own wages thank you very much — he let get dusty in its otherwise barebones content. But that was before he started dating Antoinette.

Jack opened the door for Natasha, and smiled a little smile as she stepped into his apartment. The couches were clean and aligned nicely with a large TV. The walls were no longer blank, but they held some posters of bands he liked; metal bands of course. And only tasteful ones that looked elegant or Gothic. He kept the sleek minimalist motif for the apartment, shades of gray and black, steel and such for colors, and he actually opened the enormous wall-window’s drapes so the light of the night city lit his place. He was adulting.

“Coming int-t-to your own,” she said as she sat down on his couch.

“Been an interesting time, yeah. Trying to grow up, and I figure decorating is at least a small step in that direction.” He sat on the other couch across from her and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Spent so much time relying on Julias, on you and Jessy, on Antoinette, I’ve been ... trying to get into this vampire life. I visited my mom just yesterday.”

“Oh ... really?”

“Yeah. Masochism written into my blood as much as Julias, I guess.”

“My m-m-mother died ... not long after I d-disappeared from the world. Sick. My ... my death killed her.” Natasha sighed, looked around at his posters, and then back to him, her soft face smirking as she delved back into half-a-century-old memories. “My dad d-d-died not long after. Suicide.”

“Oh ... damn.” He got up, disappeared into the kitchen, and opened the fridge. Only took a second to get a bottle of blood and return with some glasses. “Sorry I brought it up. If I speak my mind, I put my foot in my mouth, every time.”

“N-no, it’s ok. And ... and you d-d-did very well, with the werewolves. You’re ... you’re a good ambassador.” A shared nod as he handed her the glass, before he sat down and they began to drink.

“Am I?”

“Yes. You’re ... you’re good at d-disarming people. They talk more freely, and that helps when trying t-t-to cut through barriers.”

“Heh, you mean I’m a bumbling idiot that—”

“No.” She shook her head and gave him a harsh glare. Not that the little Mekhet was really capable of it, with her super petite size and soft eyes, but it was a rare look on her nonetheless, and he shut up as he looked at her. “You were g-good with the werewolves, and ... and I was there, remember? I was there when you d-d-dominated Damien, killed Lucas. I ... I was there when you saved my life, Jack.” She took a sip of the red again, before leaning back in the couch and sighing. “I am glad Julias chose you.”

Well. God damn. He could feel his ego inflate by the second. Ventrue weakness, but still.

“I was really just trying to save Antoinette—crap. See? Did it again.”

But Natasha laughed. “N-No, it’s understandable.”

“ ... you sure you don’t want to be with Jessy?”

The Mekhet fidgeted and shook her head. “No. I uh ... later. Later. For now, I wanted to t-talk with you, about the werewolves. D-Did they tell you what they were hunting?”

“No. It has something to do with spiders, but that’s all I managed to gleam.”

“How did you learn ab-bout the spiders?”

“Bob told us.”

“Oh ... oh Jessy. Did she hurt him?”

“She hurt Miss Halla a little. Nothing serious.”

“Poor Lil.” Natasha took a sip of her drink, but her eyes cast glances over its edge to the furniture in Jack’s place. It wasn’t interesting furniture, just sleek and modern, lot of blacks and whites, very Julias.

“What’s on your mind? You look distracted.” Part of him considered trying to trick it out of her, like Julias might have. But she was smarter than him, and his future of being a silver-tongued Ventrue was still a ways away. Closer, but still far off, and Natasha was not some drunk kine in a club he could wrap around his finger.

“ ... the werewolves said the P-Prince invites this trouble, whatever it is they’re hunting. You heard them.”

Oh, that. How quick he'd been to dismiss it. Biased of you much, Jack?

"I figured you'd know more about that than me. Antoinette doesn't tell me anything about what she does behind closed doors with the dragons." He rubbed his buzzed head, took a sip of his drink, and tilted the glass to watch the blood shift along its sides. "If it's your covenant's actions that are even responsible."

"... they could be." Natasha's hand around her drink trembled, and the woman set it down. "They c-could be."

"I—"

Knocks at the door. An unusual knock, four taps, quieter than Julias, different pattern than Antoinette. Any Invictus he had to talk to would call first. He raised a brow and looked at Natasha, but she shrugged and looked to the door too. People never buzzed from the entrance, they always managed to find a way to sneak up to his floor.

He felt under his jacket for his pistol and sword. Yeap, still there. He got up, tiptoed to the door, and looked through the peep hole.

"... it's ... Damien? Damien and ... and the disappearing girl." What the fuck, he actually found her.

Natasha hopped up and looked around, then at herself. Panic was blatant on her face as she tried to figure out something to do, like the two of them had had some sort of secret to hide.

"I ... I uh ... let them in, I g-guess?" she said. "M-Maybe they can provide answers?"

Yeah, maybe. Or dump a whole new level of problems on their lap. Jack winced but wiped off the expression before opening the door.

“Damien,” he said. Still hard to look the man in the eyes. “And ... and uh...”

“Nice to see ye again,” she said, bright smile on her freckled face. “I’m Fiona.”

From so close, he took a moment to look the vanishing woman up and down, memorizing her. She was a little short with an hourglass curvy figure, and her frizzy red hair was long and bouncy. He knew it was bouncy cause the girl was bouncing in place a bit, hands in her brown leather jacket pockets, no doubt fighting the fidgets of nervousness. Her eyes were brown, but not quite brown, almost gold, and she cracked him a grin that broke into more of an anxious smile.

Jack stared. So close. The monster was so close. Didn’t know how she was a monster, didn’t know what that even meant, but the beast in his gut was not happy being so close to it. Her. It.

But, she didn’t feel like the werewolves either.

“Natasha?” Damien said. “I ... hello.”

“Hello,” she said. Barely.

Well, this was awkward.

“Come in.” Coughing, Jack stepped back and motioned for the two to enter. Seemed like the thing to do after all, the assassin and the vanishing woman at his door. Tomorrow, it’ll be werewolves. Day after that, ghosts. Day after, demons.

“Thank ye.” Fiona stepped in first, and offered Natasha a little wave once she was in the living room. “Natasha then? So many vampi—er, Kindred.”

“Y-Yes, Natasha Vola, Ordo Dracul.” Natasha blinked at Fiona, then at Jack, then back at the redhead.

“Ooh, the dragons. Damien’s told me about yer covenant. Is it true ye dissect other vampires to see how they work?”

“Um, uh ... s-s-some have been ... known t-to do that.” Natasha tried to stand proud, but in her hilarious clothes, all her business-woman composure was gone.

“Scary.” Fiona drifted around, eyes taking in Jack’s apartment. “Fancy place ye have ‘ere.”

Jack smiled. If she thought his place was fancy, she wasn’t familiar with the Invictus of Dolareido at all. And she did look very young, maybe twenty; the beast in his gut said otherwise.

“What brings you to my place?” he said. “I’m Jack Terry by the way, Invictus.”

“I know ye’ve been looking for me. ‘Parently my appetite has been drawing attention.” Fiona hopped onto the couch and leaned back, arm on the couch arm. She may have been nervous, but at least she was the sociable sort. Unlike any of them.

“Appetite?” Jack said, and he sat down on the couch across from her. Natasha joined him, while Damien joined Fiona.

“Aye, I’ve been in Dolareido for about a year now, and I’ve eaten a fair amount of folk. I didn’t ken about the Kindred though, that ye run this town, and ... I guess I may have attracted some attention.” Sheepish smile and a small shrug later, she nudged Damien with her elbow. “Damien ‘ere says I should talk to the Prince.”

“Wait wait wait, back up.” Jack put his up his hands after setting down his drink. Too much, way too much. “The disappearing people, you’ve been eating them?”



“I have.”

“ ... and ... you are?”

“My kind are called Begotten, I suppose. Never met another one. But that’s what I learned from the Dark Mother, when I changed.” Fiona looked down at the glass of red, picked it up, and tilted it from side to side. The liquid’s thickness gave it away, and she set it back down with a smirk.

Natasha twitched, a little thing that could have passed as any of her usual ticks. Damien and Fiona didn’t seem to notice, with Damien looking at Jack and Fiona looking at the glass of blood, but Jack caught it in the corner of his eye. The word Begotten grabbed her attention somehow.

“Judging from your silence, you’re as surprised as I am,” Damien said. “I had no idea people like her existed. A giant spider monster? I was shocked.”

Both Natasha and Jack twitched this time. No hiding that one.

“Spider monster?” Jack said.

“Mhmm.” Fiona put the glass back down, offered another sheepish smile, and leaned in a little. “And she gets very hungry. I have a go to keep her fed, but it’s nae long before I’m out hunting again. Kindred are the same right? Crave prey?”

“Y-Yes,” Natasha said, “but ... w-we don’t eat humans. We drink their b-b-blood. And usually, we let them live.”

“And Damien says you can drink from anyone ye want?” Fiona said.

“ ... you c-can’t?”

“Na. Vrallar’trakla must feed on abusive folk, anyone who likes to throw their brawn around to make weaker folk miserable. Could be physically, could be in yer head, but ... if they’re abusive, minging folk, I can taste it, like spices in the air.”

“Vrallar’trakla is the name of her ... other self, before you ask,” Damien said.

“Oh.” Jack rubbed his head and looked between the assassin and the monster. “So, I have to ask then, why are you here?”

Damien gestured to Fiona. “Need someone to talk with the Prince and Primogen. I figure it’s better you do it than me. So, I ... guess I’m asking you for a favor. Take Fiona to Elysium and talk with Antoinette, and then the Primogen depending on how that conversation goes. I know Natasha works for her now, but you’re ... yeah.”

Of all the hell to land at his doorstep. Did this Vrall know about the werewolves, that they were hunting something involving spiders? And Natasha, she’d reacted to the word Begotten, so there was something going on there, something involving the Ordo Dracul maybe.

He kind of preferred it when people barely acknowledged his existence. Just a fly on the wall, content to hide and watch all the monsters of Dolareido fight each other, until he was strong enough to fend for himself. Now there were werewolves and monsters and vampires coming to him for help, and he was going to end up in the middle of a shitstorm. Again.

“What makes you think I’m a good choice? If anything, my relationship with Antoinette is going to make this murky waters.”

Damien nodded, and rubbed his chin a couple times before he sat forward, elbows on his knees, mirroring Jack’s position.

“Cause you’re the only Kindred in this city I trust,” Damien said.

“ ... you trust me?”

“After a fashion. You gave your life to save the Prince. I saw the look in your eyes when I stabbed you. You’re not a snake like most Kindred.”

Damn. Anyone else, it’d have been easier to dismiss their words as the typical Kindred manipulations. But Damien was ... different. Jacob said it, and the more Jack interacted with the assassin, the more he agreed with the elder.

Jack looked Natasha’s way, but she nodded slightly and took another sip of her drink. Snake insult didn’t offend her at all; in fact, she was smiling as she sipped, like it were simple truth.

He wanted to tell them about the werewolves; Fiona being a spider monster — whatever the fuck that meant — was way too much a coincidence. But then, were the wolves actually hunting a spider monster? There was a connection, and that was all he knew. He lowered his head and bit down on his teeth until the urge passed. He needed more information.

“Fiona,” Jack said, “the Invictus and others have been investigating the disappearances. We found spiderwebs near areas you disappeared, that time a companion of mine and I found you in the sewers. Your doing?”

Fiona sighed, but nodded. “I leave spiderwebs, a lot of them, and big ones, in areas I frequent. It helps me return to my lair faster, easier, when there’s a place that looks similar to parts of my lair.”

“ ... I have like four follow up questions then. The claw marks at the scenes were massive. How—”

Fiona stood up, stuck out her hands a little, and pointed her palm out toward an open area of the apartment.

Natasha and Jack jumped off the couch and back over it as a massive blade shot out from over Fiona's shoulder. A blur, shadow, see-through and alien ripped outward like a whip, but hard and ... segmented, like a blade with joints. It stabbed the air fast enough he heard the wind for a split moment. And long, so very long, it went down the hallway of his apartment before it hit the wall at the end.

Fiona winced. "Oops."

Jack and Natasha peeked over the couch back at Fiona, and she took another breath as the blade-like limb of shadow faded away.

"W-What was that?" Natasha said.

"The horror coming out to play." Fiona shrugged and sat back down with a flomp. "Vampires can do the same, can't they? I ken some of ye can hide in shadows by letting a wee piece of yerself out."

Natasha shook her head. "N-Not ... the same, I don't think."

"It's nuts none of ye believe in the Dark Mother. Ye can feel the beast inside ye, and ye said ye can feel mine. So ye can't see it like I can see yers, but I can see the shadowy hunger inside each of ye, with fangs. Spooky."

The three vampires stared at her, blinking, glancing at each other before looking at her again.

She shrugged, slipped her shoes off, and put her feet upon the glass table between the two couches. Getting comfortable, and quickly. An interesting change of pace compared to the constant on-guard attitudes of Jack's peers.

“And,” she said, “technically Damien is my prisoner, until he confirms everything he told me was the truth. Like, the four covenants that work in Dolareido, and that the Ordo Dracul run this town?”

“It’s true.” Jack smirked and looked at Damien. “Well, five, if Damien gets a little lucky.”

Damien looked away as he chewed on his cheek. Foot in mouth, Jack.

“I see. And I’ve had a few vampires coming through Devil’s Corner and the sewers and tunnels where I like to enter my lair. They all been investigating the disappearances I’ve been making?”

Natasha and Jack nodded in unison.

“Glad I let Damien live then.” She reached out and pat the man on the shoulder, but he winced a little when she did. Man didn’t like to be touched far as Jack could tell, but Fiona either didn’t notice or didn’t care, and she shook his shoulder a few times before putting her hands back to her knees. “It ... it feels great, to finally have some folk like myself to talk to.”

“Why didn’t you before?” Jack said.

“Cause I was so new to all this! I didn’t know vampires lived ‘ere, or ye ran the town or anything, and I once I realized, I was already moved in. I thought ye vamps were coming for me, to kill me or something. I thought maybe ye had yer own lairs and ye might attack mine and ... yeah.”

“Lairs?” Natasha and Jack said.

“My home, Vrall’s home in the dream, where she sleeps.”

“ ... dream?” Jack said.

Damien put up his hands and shook his head. “It’s uh ... you’d have to see it to believe it. I never thought such things possible, nor the Bishops or Lucas or anyone in the Lancea et Sanctum. The Testament of Longinus spoke of realms, but I had assumed metaphors, or things of God’s purview.”

“Maybe I’ll show ye sometime,” Fiona said. “Damien also says the Circle of the Crone might be more open to the concept of the Dark Mother? I’d like to speak to them.”

Jack scratched his head, and took a sip of his drink. “That can be arranged, but not through us. You’ll have to talk to their leader. Jacob is ... eccentric, to say the least. And dangerous, Fiona.”

“He’s a vampire right? Can’t be too dangerous.”

“Vrall is ... confident, in her strength,” Damien said. “She is but a year become a Begotten and she defeated me easily.”

Jack whistled. “Damn.”

“Well, ye were in my lair. I don’t think I’ll be kicking ass and taking names so easily out ‘ere in the waking world. But in the dream? In my lair?” She laughed, slung out her arm, and hooked it around Damien’s neck to pull him in for a half hug. “But, yeah, I’m sure hoping to be a part of this community. I’ve been hiding out in my apartment since I moved in. Only conversations I have are with friends halfway athort the world.”

“Um, well, I ... I mean sure?” Jack said. “Nothing wrong with hanging out with us. We all have our roles with our covenants, but we have free time too.”

“Great!” Fiona hugged Damien a little tighter — poor guy looked so uncomfortable — and jumped up to come join Jack and Natasha on their couch. Without so much as a gesture to make room, she sat down between the two of them with enough jump to make them all

bounce with the impact. “I mean when I’m in my lair I’m fine, but out ‘ere? It’s fucking scary. I don’t ken anyone.”

Jack smiled and looked over at Natasha. He thought Damien had looked uncomfortable, but as Fiona threw her arms around the two of them, Natasha looked new degrees of awkward. Three introverts and one extrovert. Jack was used to this sort of treatment from his old life, but Damien and Natasha had been vampires for half a century; extrovert strangers entering their personal space was not something they had to deal with anymore. How Natasha and Jessy became friends, Jack had no idea.

“Hey,” Fiona said, “what’s on TV?”



~~Antoinette~~

“... you are serious?” She unfolded one leg and placed the other over it. It was a great chair; she sat upon it for many hours deep in her tower’s underground domain. Soft leather, black to match her decor, with royal design to carry her with pride and prominence.

But with every passing moment, she felt less like a Prince, one who could sit in such a magnificent chair, and more like a fledgling Kindred, drifting through her second life without control or knowledge, a victim to the whims of reality. A disgusting feeling, losing control.

“Yes, P-Prince. It’s ... surprising.” Natasha stood there, squirming and wriggling, doing her best to try and find a nice way to say that the Prince had no clue what was happening in her own city. Bless her heart.

“You need not spare the cruel truth to protect my feelings, Vola.” Antoinette grit her teeth, and stood up. The chair would not do, she needed to pace. With hands hooked together on the small of her back, she started to circle the table. It was a simple thing of wood,

dark, with chairs surrounding it, similar to her Primogen meeting room at the top of her tower. Every lap made about the room caused Natasha to squirm more.

“The ... Fiona creature is ... she may be what Azamel warned us ab-b-bout.”

“Perhaps. What you described is a Begotten, Natasha, a beast of the dream.”

“She said that t-too. Dream?”

Antoinette waved a hand aside, dismissing the word. In-depth explanations could come later.

“Where her monster comes from. You said she demonstrated it?”

“A little, yes.”

“And that she appears to be similar to a spider, in some fashion or another?”

“Y-Yes, Prince.”

“And now, werewolves are in my city, claiming territory and hunting grounds as if it is their right.” That alone sent fire through her veins and into her fingers, enough so she squeezed one hand into a fist until her knuckles trembled. “And you believe they may be hunting Fiona?”

“It stands t-t-to reason. She’s uh ... a very strange creature, dangerous, and the werewolves were hunting ... s-s-something in the area with the spiderwebs.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.” Antoinette stopped beside Natasha, leaned her butt against the table edge, and motioned for the young ancillae to sit down in one of the extra chairs. “Azamel, Mark,



Athalia, they are Begotten as well. My interactions with those monsters have been few, but from what I gleaned, they do not normally betray each other. To them, beasts of all sorts, Kindred and Uratha included, are brethren.” She shuddered and wiped off her sleeve. To be associated with either was to be associated with creatures incapable of surviving the new world, creatures addicted to their hunger and desires.

“You d-don’t think Azamel was t-t-talking about Fiona?”

“She may have been. But for the wolves to hunt a Begotten is ... a strange circumstance. Unlikely.” Once Natasha was seated, Antoinette resumed her pacing, eyes down on the floor with a hand holding her chin.

“And ... um...” Natasha, squirming all the more, stared down at the table and twiddled her fingers. “The werewolves’ leader’s n-name was ... Avery.”

Antoinette stopped, and looked to the little Mekhet with a glare. The girl squeaked, bit her lip, and tried to disappear into her chair.

“Avery?” Antoinette said.

“A-Avery.”

Of all the problems, of all the horrible fates and events, of all the hell and torment and frustration to be dumped at her door, why did this have to happen now? For decades she would go with only her Primogen as the thorns in her side to deal with, and now that several of those thorns were gone, several more magically appeared to replace them. What divine comedy was this?

“Avery returns to my city, and declares a portion of it her hunting ground? She appears to be repeating the last incident, inviting the same troubles as Simon did.”

“Ab-bout ... that. Um, this time, they ... they um ... recruited a middleman, t-t-to be an intermediary.”

“Oh? That is a step in the correct direction. I am impressed Avery was capable of such a thought. And who did they decide to be this intermediary?”

Natasha shivered, looked at Antoinette like the Prince had become a searing sun, and winced. “Jack.”

Antoinette stopped behind one of the chairs, across the table from her assistant, and settled her hands upon the chair’s shoulders. She squeezed, and crushed. The chair snapped at the spine first, and bits of wood shattered, splintered, and sent shards across the floor and table as the leather ripped open. Not enough. She sank her fingers into it like claws, and tore it apart, so what was left of its spine went to one end of the room, and the feet went to the other, crashing against the walls hard enough to snap into pieces.

The little Mekhet squeaked again, put her hands in her lap, and shrunk. Still trembling though, eyes down, locked on her fingers that gripped each other underneath the table.

“I ... apologize, Natasha Vola. Not for my frustration, but that you underwent such trials. Such pain, claw and word.” Antoinette started to pace again, teeth biting down until her jaw ached and neck must have bulged muscle. “Those beasts are barely more than wolves. They hunt, it is their purpose, and they hunt with such single-mindedness, such ... fanaticism, to discuss alternatives with their kind is a pointless endeavor.”

And this would not be a repeat of last time. The beasts could blame her all they wanted, she would not bow to their absurd demands. The city was hers, and she would continue.

“And now,” she said, “you tell me Jack is to be their voice? And ours as well?”

“Uh ... yes. I d-d-don't think they knew I worked with you, Prince. And ... and they liked Jack.”

“ ... of course they did.” With a sigh, she sat back down in her chair, leaned forward to place an elbow upon her table, and rested her face in her palm. “Because he is unlike most Kindred.”

Natasha nodded, glanced at the remains of the other chair, and rubbed her arms a few times.

“I suppose he'll come t-to you soon, in an official capacity, after he talks with the triumvirate.”

Yes, he would, and it would be the first time the two of them spoke to each other in such a fashion. She did not want that. She did not want to stare him down, to bully him like she often had to with the others, to tear into his words and rip out the truth he might hide. And while her little Ventrue was an honest fellow, he had no doubt acquired some dialogue skills from his sire, and her as well.

She would have to look into her lover's eyes, and search them for deceit, for treachery, for half-truths and purposefully forgotten information. With werewolves at her doorstep, she could afford no mistakes. But the very thought of her little Jack standing before the Primogen, and being interrogated by them and her, was sickening.

“And...”

“Yes Miss Vola?”

“Avery said something ... about someone named D-David. Said he ... said that he said they knew their chosen intermediary was going t-t-to b-be small, and young. They trusted him.”

“Knew?” Antoinette raised a brow and looked closely at the little Mekhet.

Natasha nodded. “Knew, P-Prince.”

Uratha were strange creatures, and they tugged on threads connected to things beyond the imagination of most Kindred. If David knew, if he had predicted something, that was important.

“Thank you Miss Vola. Is there anything else?”

“N-No, that’s ... actually, where is my sire, Prince? If I may ask. I haven’t seen D-D-Daniel in several days.”

Antoinette shook her head. “He is investing something for me involving the new residents of our city, and I am afraid I cannot tell you where he is.”

“Y-Yes, I understand. I’ll take my leave then.” Natasha nodded, bowed, and walked away.

The Prince smiled after her little assistant. So tiny, a couple inches below five feet tall, and yet she had a strength to her to persist such hardship. She would go far, Natasha Vola. Right hand of the Invictus, and now a member of the Ordo Dracul. Their loss, her gain.

Alone in her office, Annie leaned forward, put her hands on the table, and sighed. Jack. What would she do? What could she do? With Tony, such differences had led to serious distrust, and she did not want that with Jack. Never with Jack.

She could visit her love, surprise him, remind herself he was not that man. Yes, yes that is what she should do.

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Her love’s apartment. She waited outside the door, knocked, and folded one arm under her bosom while the other reached up to tap her smiling lip. Again she had bypassed the elevator, and entered

through her own means. It was a fun vice to indulge in a vampire's abilities every now and then.

In the past, he would have opened the door too quickly. Now, he checked the peep hole before opening it; caution had become a part of his life. It saddened her, and soothed her. He was a smart boy, and with vigilance, he could live a long life, by her side.

“Antoinette? Man, how do you all get passed the front door? And I thought I'd be coming to the Elysium tower in a few hours?”

“A change of plans mon petit, if that is alright with you? I thought, perhaps, you would like to go out tonight with your love?” She blinked at herself when she said ‘your love’, a phrase that she would use to guilt Tony when they started to grow their first touches of distance. But the boy had done nothing to create any distance, and no such distance existed.

You are worrying over nothing, Annie. Be calm.

“Well now I feel like a jackass. I never show up randomly at your place. I never call, say I love you at a whim.” He stepped aside to let her in, and smiled up at her as she passed him. “I never take out the trash or wash the dishes.”

“I ... what? Oh, I see.” She chuckled, sat down upon his couch, and turned to face the boy as he sat down beside her. “Were our lives so simple, little Ventrue. A part of me swoons at the idea of hiding away, living simple lives away from other Kindred. The two of us in a tiny apartment perhaps, squabbling over dishes and garbage. We would argue due to proximity, forever touching elbows. But, after we argue, you would buy me flowers to show me you loved me. And with such a simple gesture, I would be reminded of how much we love each other. We would hold each other, and make love, more than happy our tiny space was as tiny as it was.”

Jack opened his eyes wide with the description. “You really have a way with words.”

“I do. And ... as will you, I assume, when you speak with me about the Begotten and Uratha.”

Wide eyes shrank, and fell. Jack twisted in his seat until he was facing straight out, and he sighed as he rubbed his head.

“Was kind of hoping Natasha wouldn’t tell you.”

“She had to, my love. I am both glad and saddened that she did; it was not news I was joyed to learn.”

“ ... it’ll be the first time I’ve had to talk to you in this sort of official capacity, won’t it?”

“It will.” She reached out, set her hand on his shoulder, squeezed it, rubbed it, and raised her thumb to nudge against his earlobe.

“ ... feel ... I should ... should tell you I won’t let our relationship affect how I perform the job.”

She raised a single brow, and leaned in toward her little Ventrue. He still was not looking her way, and he was squirming a little, as he no doubt dug up an ember of confidence he did not wish to use against her. So adorable, and painful.

Her hands found him, and before he could say anything, she pulled him into a hug, and buried him in her long white hair.

“We are not enemies in this new arrangement, but, I will do the same.” She kissed his ear, and set her neck over his shoulder to hug him tighter. “Unless our positions set us against each other directly.”

“What’s directly?” he whispered into her ear.

She pulled away, and set her hand on his head to rub the delightful texture of his buzzed hair.

“If members of my order demanded I ended my relationship with you, my love, I would not.”

“Oh. I ... I hadn’t even thought of that. I mean, I guess I didn’t cause it’s not like anyone in Dolareido would try and tell me if I could be in a relationship with the Prince or not. I’d never give you up.”

“Ever?”

“Ever. Course, I’m just a kid who doesn’t know shit about anything.”

Ah, ever self-aware, her little Ventrue. How rare a talent for someone to both analyze the reality of others accurately, but also the self. To admits faults as readily as skills. It made her swoon.

“I believe you know more than most, my love.” She reached out, took his head, and guided him toward her as she leaned back. A dance they knew well, as she set her head upon the arm of his couch, and the boy climbed between her legs before lying upon her stomach and chest. He put his cheek to her collar bone, and relaxed against her as she stroked his hair.

“Those werewolves were—”

“Ah, let us ... not speak of the wolves and monsters for now. I would hate to bring work into our private lives.”

“Right!” He pulled up with a jolt and smile, and she chuckled as she pulled him back down. “Right, good plan. So, outside of work, no work talk. Julias and Beatrice do that too, seems to work for them.”

Perhaps she should have tried it with Tony. The two of them considered their love and their goals with Dolareido to be bedfellows; and it poisoned them.

What they needed was a distraction.

“Mon amour, I had planned for the two of us to spend several hours in my bed. But, I do feel our lives has robbed of an indulgence that, perhaps, it need not.”

“Indulgence? What sort of indulgence?”

She grinned at her love, and licked her lips.

“Shopping.”

---

They took the time to dress for the occasion. It had been her plan, so she was already dressed in a nice gray suit and skirt, a jacket that preferred open to expose the white, almost silver shirt she wore underneath. A touch of cleavage, a dash of bust, and the skirt was above knee to expose her legs. A pleasant balance of sexy and tasteful.

For Jack, she dressed him in delightful black shoes, that went with skinny black jeans, and he wore a black suit jacket to match his white shirt underneath, no buttons, that showed off his lean and fit physique well. The two were a delicious pair, and she beamed as she held the boy's elbow in hers while the two walked the shopping center.

In South Side, her city was not dissimilar to Las Vegas; it never slept. The stores were open, and people walked its halls, chatting and eating and laughing. The joys of rich life.

Garry did not like how she let money grow in South Side, how she let it turn many kine into corrupted corporations and companies,



how she let the city become yet another example of the illogical premise of capitalism. She insisted that it fostered dynamism, that the city proved a better city for Kindred to rule it with its many levels of wealth. But, now was not the time to think about the Primogen, now was the time to spend money. And she had more money than she could ever need.

Jack looked at the stores they passed within the mall. Unlike such establishments nearer the rural areas, this mall was near Elysium, and with such a location came expectations of its customers. Everyone that walked its halls was rich, and the contents of the stores were grossly overpriced; and ostentatious. She loved it.

“Never been to the Franch Mall before,” Jack said. “I mean ... damn this place is expensive.”

“It is.” She leaned in, and put a kiss on her love’s ear. “But pennies to me.”

Jack shivered. Money was power, and a taste of such things would no doubt tantalize her little Ventrue.

Other people glanced at them, some young, some old, many in couples and all wearing clothes hinting at wealth. It was a social game, to wear your worth without crossing the line into tasteless. A game Daeva knew with all the intimacy and nuance of their own bodies.

They stopped in front of an electronics store, and Jack stared at the various televisions they had on display. But when he looked her way, she rolled her eyes and laughed. Men and toys. She could buy him a toy, perhaps? Maybe something more grandiose, such as a vehicle. But it was a dense city, and a car was far more hassle than it was worth. She would have to think about it, or ask him to bring her a suggestion.

Sugar daddy, Ashley had said. Be his sugar daddy. She laughed at the memory, and waved off Jack's curious expression when he glanced her way. The Ventrue could dominate any salesman he wanted, if the boy truly wanted a vehicle.

They stopped in front of De Rourie's Palace, a swimwear store.

"... you uh ... um..."

"You did mention something about a bikini, oui?" she said. "While my wardrobe is expansive, I do not own swimwear." The pool in her tower, she swam in the nude, and beaches no longer contained the appeal they once did without the sun.

"But I was kidding! I mean, you don't have—"

"You do not wish to help me pick out new clothes?"

"Help you pick? I ... I have the fashion sense of a nerd. I am a nerd."

"Then I will teach you a few things. Has Julias taught you nothing of fashion?" She took the boy's hand, and led him into the store.

"Um, he ... I think he gave up on me as a lost cause, in the fashion department."

She laughed once again, and a couple of shoppers awake at such a late hour glanced her way, and Jack's way. When she kissed her lover, many of them double checked to see if what they witnessed was true, and Antoinette grinned at them — all women in the store — as she ran her fingers along her love's buzzed hair. Let them gawk at the tall woman and her tiny man. They had no idea.

De Rourie's Palace was not a typical swimwear store, nothing in the Franch Mall was. De Rourie's could have become a lingerie store if it wished, selling only the most extravagant clothes, all

meant to look beautiful rather than be comfortable. She would have fun, trying new clothes and finding what captured Jack's attention the most. Perhaps she could find something for him as well. The store did not offer much in the way of fanciful men's swimwear, but did they ever?

The doors opened and closed behind them, leaving them surrounded by the various walls and stalls of clothes. The lighting was dramatic, quiet along the isles but emphasized and pointed along the walls lined with swimsuits of all sorts. Bikinis and tankinis, bandeaus and brazilians, micro to full, one pieces of every degree of exposure, from race to monokinis to string. Mannequins of women with severe anorexia — those poor dolls — displayed the swimsuits, each standing in fashion-show poses, each immune to the effects gravity had on bandeaus, each immune to the back pain caused by anterior pelvic tilt.

There were experimental pieces as well, the sort to be shown during a fashion show, but to be simplified before seeing the shelves of boutiques. Such degree of adjustment, between the runway and the shelf, varied depending on the brand and expense; and De Rourie's Palace spared no expense. Many of the offered pieces could not be worn and swam in, only stood in and admired. One piece in particular had a black cross-chest strap that went above the breasts, made of black-stone jewelry, with strips of white cloth that dangled from it over the breasts. The strips would cover the nipples and past them, and were kept in place only by some black gems weight at their ends. The bottom piece was a nothing more than a belly chain, again made of the same black-stone jewelry, with a strip of cloth for the front and back that dangled free, again weighed down by black gems.

She scooped it up immediately. Jack blinked at her, and she winked at him. One of the many treats she might share tonight.

“The issue with many of these,” she said as they walked past the bikinis, “is finding a size that fits the bust. Breasts come in such different shapes and sizes, with different angles and curves, upon different sizes of chest. And many women have one breast larger than the other. You would need hundreds of tops to cover all the possible combinations of human variation.”

“I do thank god I was born a man,” Jack said, grinning. “Shopping for bras alone sounds like hell.”

“It is.” Her little love earned another chuckle from her, and she guided him down the isles with renewed enthusiasm. “But do not let that affect your judgment with me, my Jack.” Jack was perhaps a bit of a feminist; she had heard him comment on plights unique to women before. Most of such concerns were a thing of the past for her, for Kindred, but his concern pleased her nonetheless.

She stopped before the smaller bikinis, and gestured toward a black one with a triangle top and a micro rise, cheeky bottom. Truly a classic, simple and elegant, powerful and commanding, sexual and beautiful. She grabbed two of different sizes, and set them upon Jack’s shoulder, her new shopping assistant.

“Two?” he said.

“And we will be lucky if one of them fits.” She pat her silly little man on the head, and moved on. “Please, feel free to suggest. Perhaps a certain color is to your liking? Or type?” A gesture to the others, many far more conservative, many far less.

Jack, regressed to a child in a sweets bakery, looked the various swimsuits up and down. Nearby women glanced between him and Antoinette, and she offered them a wink. Yes, he was her lover, and she enjoyed pampering him with sexual delights.

Jack stopped in front of some one pieces, open back with various patterns of straps. Some were tight, formfitting, some were loose

and meant to display cleavage, and some had open lace-up sides from hip to rib. Her lover's eyes were stuck on a particular piece, a one piece athlete swimsuit with skinny straps, fully exposed legs to the hip, and a single cross along the back. Color was a spattering of white paint along black canvas. Very cute. She set several of those upon her love's shoulder as well.

Perhaps she would have to nudge Jack in the intended direction? He may have thought she intended to swim with the clothes; she did own a pool after all, deep in her tower. So, she smirked at her love, took his shoulder, and turned him toward the more salacious selection.

"Which," she whispered to his ear once she had leaned down over his shoulder, "would you enjoy seeing me in?"

"I ... um..."

"Or, which would you prefer I wear, while you rest your cock inside me?"

That got him shivering. She had said it louder as well, loud enough for the nearby women to hear, to glance, for some to stare openly. They blushed, squirmed a little, and tried to speed up their shopping.

"Um ... how about ... these?" He stopped in front of the extreme micro bikinis, and gestured to one of white. To call it a swimsuit was silly, as it was nothing more than string with a tiny triangle to cover the sex, and two tiny triangles to cover the nipples. Barely.

She grabbed several sizes, and set them upon Jack.

The two of them wandered the store, grabbing various garments, and she taunted observers with the occasional wink, or yet another explicit description of what she was going to do to her man. They were kine, young things compared to her, concerned only with

social etiquette and niceties. She was behaving like a child, taunting them so, but Jack made her feel like a young woman once again. And she deserved to indulge such a forgotten feeling.

Once she had sufficiently buried the boy in dozens of swimsuits, she walked to one of the fitting rooms. De Rourie's Palace had private fitting rooms, full rooms with walls and a proper door, perfect to test clothes for your partner.

“Um, ma'am? Changing rooms are not to be shared.”

One of the women who had been watching her and Jack had finally worked up the courage to speak. An employee, and an unhappy one.

Antoinette raised a brow, looked at the fitting room, and then at the nearby women who were standing within earshot. Jack looked a little uncomfortable, half for the women comparing him to his love, and half for carrying around a mountain of clothes stacked on his arms and shoulders.

She was tempted to argue, to make a point about how the fitting rooms of De Rourie's Palace are full rooms with thick walls, not tiny stalls. But it would be a pointless argument, and not worth angering herself over. Instead, she opted for the simpler option.

“But, do you not wish to make me happy?” she said.

“I ... uh ... excuse me?”

“Do you not wish, to make me happy?”

Deep in her core, down in the depths of her Kindred body, she summoned her majesty. A drop of vitae, just a small one would be sufficient to enchant these women, to paint herself a goddess in their eyes for a few hours. The awe flowed from her, invisible but

thick in the air, and she guided it to each woman with a glance and smile.

“ ... I ... yes, yeah! Yeah, anything. What do you need?” The employee, a tall and thin woman with short blond hair, smiled her brightest smile and stepped in a bit closer.

“Anything from us?”

“How about us?”

“We could model for you!”

“Yeah!”

Within a minute, half a dozen women — the whole of the customers in the store — were upon Jack and Antoinette, smiling, beaming, grinning. Attractive women of varying ages, several of them Jack’s age. Enthralled to her by her spell, their desires replaced with an overwhelming urge to please her, to earn her attention. In awe of her. Fake admiration, created by a vampire’s power, to break their minds and turn them into adoring fans. Temporary, but useful.

“Jack, my love, would you enjoy having these women model swimsuits for you?”

“Wha?” He blinked up at her, then looked at the six women who had suddenly become adamant to please him, and by proxy, her. “No! No, I want to hang out with you, without an audience.”

The collective unhappy sigh from the women was too cute.

“Please,” Antoinette said to the small crowd, “it will make me happy if you continue your shopping. It would make me especially happy if you leave my love and I in peace while I try on some clothes for him.”

The women nodded, sighed a few more times, and stared with longing at the Prince as she opened the door to the fitting room, and ushered her love inside. Once within, she guided Jack to sit upon one of the armless chairs, and she took the clothes from him to set them upon a bench.

“You had all those women ready to jump into bed with us, just like that,” he said as he snapped his fingers. “That is ... that is really impressive.”

“Daeva can turn many into adoring fans. With practice and time, we learn to turn kine into confidants with but a glance. Come my age, a single word can turn a host of kine into loyal bodyguards, willing to sacrifice themselves to spare me harm.”

“Damn impressive.” He raised his hands and stretched out a bit before he wriggled in his chair. Excited, her little Ventrue. “Now that I think about it, you’re absolutely rich, but for things like shopping, you don’t need to spend a dime to you?”

“No. But it would attract attention if a store’s inventory of clothes were to disappear.” Chuckling again, she set her purse down, slid off her jacket, and set both upon the bench. “A Ventrue as powerful as yourself, my young Jack, would have no trouble amassing his own small fortune through the use of dominate.”

“I guess, yeah. I just ... dunno, never really craved being rich.”

“You crave music with complexity and emotion. You crave dialogue with depth. You crave a connection, intimacy.” She started to unbutton her shirt, and watched herself in the mirror. “It is no small part of why I enjoy our time together.”

“I ... yeah. You really do have a way with words.”

She did at that.



Piece by piece, she stripped in front of Jack. The shirt, the skirt, the shoes, all joined her suit jacket on the bench. Left in nothing but her underwear and bra. She had originally meant to wear her current lingerie to bed with Jack tonight, so it was a rather sexual set, black lace with see-through curves along its face.

Jack stared, jaw dropping. “ ... damn.”

“Blush for me, my love,” she said. The two of them began the blush of life, and each of them took a breath of air to taste the sensations. “And please, take off your clothes, all of them.” Her turn to watch.

Jack stood up with a bounce, and threw off his clothes. He tripped on a sock, groaned and fumbled, but soon the boy was naked and seated once more. More excited than usual, staring at her with wide eyes, and his shaft already hard. Not worried at all about the future, not worried about how they would soon come into a strange opposition, how he would have to stand before her and the Primogen, and be placed at the center of an old wound between Kindred and Uratha.

All he cared about was her. Such was the way of men she supposed, to focus on the moment more than a woman could. A blessing and a curse. But, it was also because Jack was hers, and no matter what would happen, they were in love. She had felt similar with Tony before though; if only she had Jack’s confidence.

She shook her head of such illogical thoughts. Jack was not Tony, in any measurable sense, and all the better for it. So, taking another breath, she walked over to her little Ventrue, leaned forward, reached behind her, and undid the clasp of her bra. Instead of catching it, she shook her shoulders a few times, and let it fall from her breasts, down her arms, and onto Jack’s rigid member. Her breasts dangled in front of his face, heavy, became teardrops with

their weight, and they trembled with the act of shaking off her bra. All a dance for her love. She did love to spoil him.

“God ... damn...”

“We still have many clothes to try on,” she said as she stood up straight.

“Then, um, you should probably stop teasing me so much. I’m only human.”

She laughed. “Are you? Then I have brought the wrong man into my fitting room.” She slid her fingers into the waistband of her panties, and slowly slid them off, making a grand show of it, emphasizing the curve of her spine, her ass, her legs as she edged them off. Once at her ankles, she stepped out of them, and reached down to pluck her bra off of Jack’s lap before tossing them onto her discarded suit.

What to try first, what to try first. Perhaps trying them in order of sexual allure? But then, there was a special allure to clothes that created the image of nudity while covering much of the skin, such as the one piece Jack had selected. Yes, that would do well for the first, to build the moment.

She kept her back to Jack as she slid the swimsuit up legs, hooked it over her ass and hips, up over her breasts, and slipped the straps over her shoulders. Ah, tight, as she expected. To find formfitting swimwear that fit her bust comfortably would be a trial, but showing off each piece for her love was a fun she had not experienced in centuries. To dress with her ghouls was a delight, but it was not the same as seeing the look of raw desire in her love’s eyes as she turned to face him, and combed her hair back over her shoulders with her fingers.

“Fffuu ... um ... looks a bit tight ... around the chest.”

“It is.” She sighed and slid it off, still facing Jack. He groaned, loudly, as her breasts came free of the restricting black and white fabric, and his shaft twitched upward before settling.

She tried on the other size, but where her bust was less crushed, the waist fell out and did not hug her stomach. Jack didn’t seem to mind, and his eyes drooled, looking up her and down as she again slipped out of the swimsuit. She tried on other swimsuits, all the one pieces. Many had plunging cleavage, many had open sides with lace, and many exposed the back all the way to the base of the tail bone. Each, she took her time displaying for her love, including some silly poses that earned a chuckle from them both.

One swimsuit in particular, she was eager to find the boy’s reaction. She grabbed the pile of string, unfurled it, and laughed. A micro monokini, it was called, which was nothing more than a bikini whose top piece connected to the waistband of the bottom piece, rather than behind the back with itself. But due to the angle of the strings, it emphasized both the length of the legs and the curve of the spine. So, she turned her profile to Jack, and smiled at him as she slid the few strings up her legs, and then once again hooked them over her shoulders. She faced him directly as she slid the straps over her breasts, and then again, posed for her love.

“Not sure ... I’m going to survive this, Antoinette,” he said. His hands were gripping the sides of the chair underneath his legs, and squeezing. An attempt to keep them there and not touch himself, no doubt.

“Whatever do you mean, my love?”

“You ... you look ... really, really, really really, really good in all of these. Going to explode.”

“Then perhaps you should masturbate? There are several more to try, and many I will have to try other sizes.” She winked, and blew him a small kiss. “And if you become drained, there is a host of

women outside waiting to be Kissed.” She walked toward her man, leaned forward, and set her hands upon his shoulders. In such a position, the weight of her breasts filled out the front straps of her monokini, but her breasts were too large for it, and they distended out over the sides of the straps. She knew they would, just as she knew Jack would be helpless to look away.

The look in his eyes. Melting, wax dripping down the candle. Steam on his skin. Fire in his green, open eyes that spread its warmth to her soul. He was her spark. It struck a chord inside her, regressed her to a young woman eager to bathe in the mesmerized gaze of her lover. Eager to please him, to be pleased by him, eager to feel his touch, and just as eager to hold him in her embrace as the sun rose.

She reached down, took one of his hands, and set it upon his shaft.

“Masturbate,” she said, “to your heart’s content. Do not worry, you will be satisfying me later.” A kiss for his nose, another for his lips, and she stood up once more. “Tell me when you are about to cum.”

“O ... ok.”

With a firm nod, she turned around, but managed only a foot before she stopped, and looked over her shoulder. Jack was staring at her as always, but the monokini forced his eyes to settle on her ass. She had always known her little Ventrue was a breast lover, but perhaps that was too simple a classification; his eyes lingered on her derriere as much as any part of her. And to know he was staring at how the tiny strings of the swimsuit highlighted the length of her legs and height of her thighs made her old, dead heart race. Already she felt the warmth between her legs grow, eager to be filled.

“It surprises me you do not ask me to dance for you, little Ventrue, with how much you enjoy looking at me.” She grinned at

him, and stuck her hip out to accent the curve of where her shapely ass met her hamstrings.

“C-Could ... you dance for me?”

Oh my. In the past, he would have squirmed, and tried to explain how he could not, or would not be so bold. But now with only a little nudge, he asked. Such boldness was to be rewarded.

She brought her hip in, and slowly turned herself around as the rotation of her hip went in an exaggerated angle. A sway of the hip, and a sway of the shoulder, to make her body flow like a dangling ribbon. Subtle, but sensual.

Poor Jack leaned back in his chair, and melted all the more. He openly masturbated, squeezing and stroking himself as he stared at her. Little groans escaped him, each more adorable and intoxicating than the last. They grew as she raised her arms over her head, and combed back her hair while jutting out her chest. And then, as she slowly turned full circles, she brought her hands down to her shoulders, down the straps of the swimsuit that covered her breasts, and down to where the straps hooked into the hips of the swimsuit bottom.

She sneaked her fingers under the tiny strings that were the waistband of the swimsuit bottom, and slid them back and forth, highlighting how they hugged her wide hips, and disappeared into the crevice of her ass as she turned. Each rotation, she noticed where her love stared, where his eyes fell, and she guided them up and down her body.

She was going to tease her man until he burst.

“I ... didn’t know ... you could move like that.”

“Oh? I have done this dance for you during sex.”

“Never that ... um ... while standing.”

“You mean never while I get to move about.” She stepped closer to him, and turned around several times with the slow sway of her body never stopping. Like a snake from head to toe, she caused her spine, her hips, her stomach, and her legs to all flow in waves. “There was a time, little Ventrue, when I would dance for a dozen kine. Incense filled the room, the floor was covered in exotic, soft rugs, and men and women as naked as you stared upon me as I moved by body.” Her hands found her shoulders again, and she slid them down her body with the rolling sway of her dance. Her fingers took the front straps that covered her nipples, and pulled them aside, so they rested outside her breasts.

“It’s ... hard to imagine. Like watching a queen dance for her subjects.” The boy was sinking into his chair with every stroke of his cock.

“You are not my subject, little Ventrue. You are my love.” She leaned forward over him, set her hands on his shoulders, and dipped her ass left and right as she lightly caressed the boy’s arms. When she looked down, she smiled and licked her lips as drops of precum coated the boy’s glans. “But, I admit, I do enjoy that you will sit and listen, while I guide many of our bouts.” A hand slid down his arm to his chiseled little stomach, down his pubic area — still smooth as per her preference — and onto his cock. When he tried to move his hand away to give her room, she guided his fingers back around his shaft. She only wanted to touch him for a moment, to feel the wet warmth of his precum on the tip of her finger, before she stood back up and walked over to the pile of clothes. She was such a tease, and no doubt Jack was getting close to orgasm, while doing his best to not cum, edging himself as he watched her.

The sight of him near orgasm had her wet.

She grabbed the black bikini this time, and tried on the bottom piece first. It fit well, hugging her ass and emphasizing the shape of her thighs and hips, without constricting the skin in odd angles.

As she reached down for the top, her love's groan grabbed her. Jack was staring at her as if she had exploded. His eyes were wide, his jaw dropped to excessiveness, and his hand increased in speed, masturbating fast enough to make quiet noises of flesh on flesh.

“Oh? Is this a particular interest of yours? A kink, or fetish?” She turned around again, and tilted out one hip while placing a hand on it; a fashion runaway pose. Wearing only a bikini bottom meant her breasts were free to hang and flatten slightly against her ribs, but Jack's arousal skyrocketed every second she stood there for him. “Being topless, with such a simple bottom?”

“It's ... uh ... I don't know, just ... it just...”

Well, what a delightful little discovery. She came closer to him, and closer, drawing out every step in a slow, exaggerated sway. When only a foot separated them, she resumed her dance, but in a slower form. Hands over her head, she swayed to the unheard music, like a silk sheet in a gentle breeze, and brought herself to stand between Jack's spread knees.

“God...”

“Will you cum soon?” she said.

“Y-Yeah ... just...” He had started stroking himself with the almost panicked need to orgasm, and his eyes were beginning to half close with the impending bliss.

She smiled down at her love, and got down on her knees between the boy's legs. Her fingers took his wrists and pulled his hands away from his twitching shaft; drops of precum were trickling down the underside. So close to orgasm, Jack almost fought against her with

his need to push himself over the edge, but he relented as she smiled at him. She could pleasure him, better than he could.

She set her lips upon the swollen, wet head of his cock, and kissed him. Groans of bliss filled her love, and she eased her lips in a tight suckle back and forth along the base edge of his glans. He was most sensitive there, and a little lick, a little kiss, was all it took to send him over.

Warmth flooded her mouth, squirting gushes of cum that made her little lover shiver. In their time together, she had learned to continue suckling him as he came, but in a slower and more gentle manner. Some men preferred for the stimulation to cease, some preferred it to continue, Jack enjoyed it when she slowed it for him, to milk more waves of his cum from him.

And he enjoyed it when she met his gaze, as did she. To see his green, lovely eyes struggle to stay open as she milked his length was euphoric. What was it about his gaze, his open, genuine, sincere expressions of pure joy and blissful agony in orgasm that aroused her so? Hearing his quiet groans, seeing him squirm, it had drops of her juices soaking through her bikini bottom.

As the boy's orgasm started to end, she slid the whole of his length into her mouth and throat. Once her lips found the base of his length, she gently suckled around it, and licked along his cock's underside as it twitched in its last moments of bliss. With no need to breathe, she was free to stay there, and let the boy melt into her as his cum dripped down her throat.

Jack collapsed backward into the chair. So delightful, her little Ventrue. She stood up, wiped her mouth with a single finger, and leaned down over her love to rest her hands upon his shoulders again.

“That ... can't taste very good,” he said.



She laughed and shook her head. “No, but to see you writhe? That tastes delightful.”

“You spoil the hell out of me.”

“I do.” Chuckling again, she spread her legs a little and walked forward. Once the boy’s legs were underneath her, she sat down upon his lap. The chair had no arms to block her position, so she straddled the sitting Jack, and slid her hips forward until the front of her bikini bottom was pressed to the underside of his cock.

“You’re ... wet. God that’s warm.”

“Indeed.” Sitting on his lap put her at a delightful angle with her love, her breasts to his chin and her hands free to slide over his shoulders, his hard muscles and slender body, and behind his neck to slide over his head. She stroked his hair a few times, and found herself growling as the boy purred. “You are still aroused.” The boy’s member had started to soften, but hardened once more as she dragged a finger along his buzzed hair.

“Yeah, I ... yeah.”

“Such vigor is to be awarded. Where would you like to cum a second time? Upon my breasts? My stomach perhaps? Within my mouth again?”

“Maybe, uh ... sex?”

“Ah.” It had been a little while since they had indulged in the classic. She reached down for the bikini bottom, slid a finger underneath where it covered her mons, and moved it to the side to hook it along the outside of her sex. With her wet lips exposed, she nudged them along the boy’s cock, against his testicles where they connected with his shaft, and caressed her clit along his flesh. After a few moments of teasing, she reached down for his member,

guided it between two fingers, and aimed it toward her entrance as she stood up.

To take him into her body was the most heavenly thing. Spreading her dripping lips, opening her, the feel of hard girth filling her, the angle sliding his swollen glans along the back wall of her insides, until she sank onto his lap and devoured him to the base. But what made it heavenly was the boy's writhing, subtle squirms and wriggles as he fought to control himself during her slow descent.

"Just ... oh ... god." Jack looked ready to devour her as she leaned back for him, so the boy could look at how the bikini bottom highlighted her hips, emphasized her slender waist, flat stomach, while its high hip increased the length of her leg and demanded attention for the curvy, toned shape of her thighs. Such a simple garment, and it worked wonders on the boy.

She reached underneath his arm to find the back of the chair, and held it for balance as she leaned back. Her other hand took his hand, guided it to her breasts, and then did the same with the other.

All the encouragement the boy needed. Wide eyes feasted on her body, and his hands attacked, fondling her breasts with his usual tender and care, and an edge of strength and desire. Where once he had been too timid to do more than lightly caress, now he explored her breasts with loving palms that cupped and held the weight of her bosom. He nudged her breasts upward with a little force, and watched them jiggle as they settled under gravity once more, earning a chuckle from her. His fingers explored her swollen nipples, massaged them, and sent warm sparks of pleasure through her chest, replacing her chuckles with quiet, warm sighs.

The joy of familiarity; their bodies were no longer new to each other. But where there had once been novelty, there was now practiced technique. He knew how she enjoyed being touched, which caresses she enjoyed, which she did not. And she him. Her

lover had a particular love for edging, to be brought to the brink of orgasm slowly, and dangled there until his need to cum subsided. And then she could bring him there once more.

She began to dance for him. With her hand holding the chair, she had the leverage to roll her hips and stomach back and forth, a gentle beach tide over her love's cock. She would not cum from this position; that tasty treat would be saved for later. For now, she danced upon Jack's member, each gentle thrust of her swaying body soaking him in more of her juices, each thrust met with a hard squeeze of her muscles that made the boy groan.

The man began to shiver, and she slowed her dance to almost nothing.

"Not yet," she said, grinning her devil's grin. "We have only begun."

"Sorry, I ... you're so damn hot, and..." The boy's eyes, usually locked to her breasts, were instead locked onto her stomach, her hips and waist, and the attire she still wore.

"Then perhaps a moment of respite, while I try another swimsuit." She stood herself up, and drank in every moment of Jack's blissful misery as his dripping shaft slipped from her insides. She walked over to the pile of clothes, and dug out another one of the bikinis, before glancing back over her shoulder at Jack.

"... I know that look," he said. "That's an evil look."

Evil? Laughing, she walked over to stand in front of the boy, and turning to show her profile to him once more, she slid off the bikini bottom. The pleasure was in the build up after all, and she did love to take her time. Once the old bikini bottom was gone, she set the new bikini bottom to her feet, and pulled it up until it hugged her body tight for Jack to see.

As she predicated, the boy groaned, loudly at that, an unusual volume to hear from her little Ventrue. The new attire was barely more than a thin piece of string, white rather than black, with only the tiniest triangle to cover her parts. The low cut of the front triangle meant the whole of her smooth mons pubis was visible; any lower and her engorged clitoris would have peeked over the fabric.

“Do ... do women actually wear that in public?” he said. “Cause, I mean ... damn.”

“Many women enjoy being ... as I once heard, eye-fucked.” Again she mounted her lover’s lap, and nudged her covered pussy against the boy’s soaked shaft. “And in the privacy of us two, I do enjoy such eyes from you.”

Jack reached up for her breasts again, but only stayed there for a moment before his hands drifted down to hold her hips, and massage her ass and waist as he stared at the thong.

“You keep surprising me,” he said. “I never thought you’d enjoy wearing stuff like this.”

“I enjoy that you enjoy it.” She reached down, slid the hilariously tiny bit of fabric to the side, and again, sank the boy’s swollen cock into her wet insides. “I prefer exotics such as a corset, or imaginative nighties, but to indulge your partner’s desires is a joy unto itself.”

“T-Thank you.” His body trembled as her sex found the base of him again, and his eyes locked onto where her bikini bottom was pulled to the side to expose her cunt’s lips. One of his hands reached down, and caressed along her mons, fingers indenting into the softness.

“You are most welcome, my love.” She sighed, leaned back to let her hair dangle behind her, and resumed her dance. Slow, deep strokes as she sank herself balls deep upon his length, and then

halfway off of him as her stomach and hips rolled like a belly dancer. So slow, she leaned back almost far enough to fall off, but holding onto the chair let her bend at extreme angles, and roll her stomach and body back and forth in a gentle wave. When she felt Jack twitch and squirm, she stopped, waited for his body to calm, and resumed her dance.

Jack's hands took her waist, her back, and pulled. Gently of course, tender, loving, he pulled her back up until she was seated upon him fully. And he hugged her. He buried his face in between her breasts, and hugged her.

When he truly wanted, her Jack could get rough, as he once proved the night they had shared their I-love-yous. But sometimes, he could be so tender it melted her into nothingness. She smiled down at her Jack, and leaned her chest in toward him. One hand took the back of his head, and guided it toward the nipple of one of her breasts, while the other held his shoulder so she could resume shifting her hips upon him.

Jack, eyes almost closed, pulled her nipple into his mouth, and suckled. One of his hands drifted down to her ass to hold the voluptuous mound and help pull her into him. His other found the small of her back, and his fingers teased up and down a bit of her spine, tail bone to the wonderful spot between the shoulders. All the while, he kissed her breast, lips caressing and moistening her areola, tongue tenderly lapping at where her engorged nipple filled his mouth.

His favorite position, she knew. Her upon him, straddling him, holding his head to her breast so he could suckle upon her as she rode him. And she quivered as the pleasure of his lips around her nipple warmed her all the more, causing her insides to squeeze and milk at the hard girth within. Looking down, she admired the boy, his beautiful face, his enraptured expression as he switched breasts, and resumed suckling her with all the same need as before.

It took time to bring him to orgasm like this. Rather than letting a frantic few thrusts push him over the edge, she kept it slow so each twitch of his cock was met with a moment of respite, and a powerful squeeze of her pussy that rendered him frozen. And then she resumed with her slow, gentle, teasing motions, to work him toward orgasm all over again.

And when he did finally cum, the boy's kissing stopped, and he hugged her body tight as he set his face against her sternum. He managed a few glimpses up at her, each a candy of delight for her to snatch up, before his eyes closed, and he quivered with each spurt of cum that gushed into her awaiting insides.

The moment of bliss. She held him close, as close as she could, and caressed his hair as the boy filled her. She met each flex of his cock with a squeezing, milking clench of her insides, nudging her hips toward him, and pulling each wave of the thick fluid from him with expertise. The longer his orgasm, the more of his bliss and cum she could coax from his quivering body, the brighter her smile grew. He was hers, all hers.

She put her hands on his shoulders, and stood up with legs spread. Jack's eyes fell to stare between her thighs, and he moaned as thick drops of his cum spilled from her insides. But, for as much as she wished to delight in the glow, she needed release. Unable to resist any longer, she took his hand in hers, and guided it toward her pussy.

Jack needed little direction in such matters any longer. He slid his middle and ring finger into her, palm facing him, and curled his digits toward him. Sweet agony hit her as the boy pressed against her g-spot, and she held onto his shoulders as he fingered her. A glance down showed his cum was trickling down his fingers, knuckles, and onto his palm before sliding down his wrist. But soon it was mixed with her own juices as her pleasure rose.

“You’re soaked,” he said.

“I have spent the past hour teasing, pleasuring, dancing, and enjoying sex with my lover. Forgive a woman some arousal.” She grinned down at him, but even she felt some embarrassment over the fluids dripping down her thighs and the boy’s fingers. Soaked was an understatement.

And it only grew worse as the boy fingered her harder, and the waves of pleasure started to hit her. Holding onto his shoulders, she trembled and struggled to keep her legs from collapsing as her muscles squeezed down, and the bliss rolled up and down through her body. The waves of climax, each earning a shiver from her, each earning a little more of her fluids to leak onto Jack’s fingers, to squeeze on them until the boy fought against the tight, clenching walls to keep fingering her. But he continued to do so, drawing out her orgasm until she closed her eyes, leaned down, and set her forehead against Jack’s neck as she came. Sweet, delicious release.

As the orgasm started to settle, Jack’s touch grew softer. But, through the dozens of bouts of love making they had had, he knew to keep applying pressure, to keep drawing out more waves of bliss from her with a tender touch. Milk the waves of the after orgasm shocks, let them roll down her thighs into her toes, through her pelvis and up into her chest. She had taught Jack to lightly massage her insides during the blissful afterglow, and he did so, until she was leaning against his shoulder, her face pressing to the hard muscle of his lean body.

Once it had passed, Jack slipped his fingers from her, and she stood up tall, satisfied. A finger found the thong, and she slid the ridiculous — but fun — clothes back over her sex. Their sexual fluids would turn to a trace, a tiny hint of ash in moments, so little as to be unnoticeable.

“Done?” he said. “You don’t want more?”

“Done, for tonight. In our next bout, I do expect to be spoiled in return.” It was only fair, after all, that she be the subject of pleasure next time. She laughed and shook her head. Such thoughts, of trading pleasure like a currency, were also an old reflex from her past relationship, silly and infantile. “If that would please you.”

“You know it would.” He stood up to join her, and leaned in to hug her again, head against her collar. More affectionate than usual, perhaps.

“Are you worried?” she said.

“ ... yeah.”

“Do not be. When you visit the Primogen, I shall be Prince, and you shall be a neonate of the Invictus, with a great responsibility thrust onto his shoulders. Outside of the meeting room, you are my love.”

Jack nodded, took a deep breath, shook off his shoulders, and smiled up at her. “Well, that’s part of the reason I’m worried. Soon I have to visit the Prince, and I hear she can be a ruthless woman.”

She laughed, deep in her belly, and took a step back from Jack so she could brace her weight against his shoulder lest she fall. It was true.



# Chapter 31

~~Jack~~

The meeting with the Invictus triumvirate went better than he expected. He told Julias first, about the werewolves, and then Julias insisted he tell the triumvirate as a whole; the problem was bigger than just him. So Jack scheduled a meeting to stand before the council, and like filing a report, detailed the issue with the werewolves.

Conveniently, he told no one he felt the werewolves might have been hunting Fiona. It'd have been an assumption, not enough evidence. And Fiona stuck around for a while when she visited that night; she was fun, and nice. Why would the wolves be hunting her?

Did Natasha tell the Prince though, that was the question. He wanted to leave Fiona out of it, and he didn't put it above the Invictus to throw Fiona to the wolves — literally — to keep the Uratha out of Dolareido. And he kind of liked her. He hoped Antoinette would like her too, or she was well within her right to do more than throw Fiona to the Uratha, she could just kill her herself.

He did tell the triumvirate that he wanted to introduce a newcomer to Dolareido though, a Begotten. It'd earned some groans from the three of them. Apparently they knew about such monsters, and none of them seemed excited at having one of them in the city. But none of them seemed overly concerned either, so that was good. He also left out the part that Damien and Fiona were friends of a sort. Didn't need to make that man's journey any harder.

A meeting with the Primogen though, he had no idea how that was going to go. Never done it, never wanted to do it. It was going to be his first meeting with the strongest Kindred of the city and he

was already trying to figure out ways to cut corners on information for his own gain, for his friends' gain. One misstep and he was going to end up pissing off everyone. And yet he stood in front of the Elysium building with Fiona beside him, staring up at the glass tower, sighing.

How many times had he stood in front of this tower and smiled, excited to get inside, to talk to Antoinette and chat about music or life? Dozens. Now he was fidgeting, anxious, and dread was sitting in his stomach like rocks.

“Ye alright?” Fiona said.

“Yeah, yeah I ... I don't know.”

“What's the worry?”

“I ... I'm dating the Prince.”

“ ... ye're what?”

“The Prince is my girlfriend ... we love each other.”

“Oh, that is nae something I expected. Damien said you stopped him from killing her — still very much in the mirk about all that by the way — but I didnae realize you two were an item.” Fiona grinned and bounced in front of him. “He said she was ancient.”

“She is.”

“And ye're very young. Young as me.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, ye love her. I'm guessing she's an intelligent, wise person?”

“ ... she is.”

Fiona shrugged and started to walk around him in circles. “Then what’s the problem?”

“I have to talk to her about city matters. I have to try and control a conversation about serious shit that has nothing to do with her and me, but it’s putting us against each other.”

“Against? I thought ye said the werewolves just wanted ye to be the middleman in their talks.”

The monster sat down on the steps of the tower, and stretched her arms over her head. Jack was in his typical Invictus business suit, but they had to find something for Fiona to wear; no way she’d be wearing jeans and a leather jacket to such a meeting. Natasha and Damien helped find her something a little less street, a little more business. Some gray business pants and a nice chestnut blouse with frilly cleavage. It looked good on the curvy creature.

“Yeah, you’re right, but I doubt things are going to go that smooth. I’m going to have to argue the wolves’ side, and then argue the Primogen’s side, and then her side.”

“I think ye’re making things bad before they’re bad. Besides, if ye’re the middleman, maybe ye can be a mediator? Ye’ll get to see both sides like ye said, so ye’ll be in a better position than anyone to stop shit from going crazy.”

Stop shit from going crazy. He laughed and set his face in his palm.

“My life has been one nonstop train of crazy since I was embraced, Fiona. I just ... was kind of hoping the train would stop for a while.”

Fiona hopped up, put an arm around his neck, and started to walk him toward the building.

“Sound like ye’re pretty happy with the Prince. Why Prince, anyway? Antoinette’s a lass, aye?”

“Old title Kindred have used for a long time. Not sure where it came from.” The Lancea et Sanctum records might, if Damien still had any, if Garry hadn’t destroyed it. “And we are very happy. It ... it’s fucking amazing, and I’m fucking terrified this is going to drive a wedge between us.”

“Ye trust her?”

“Yeah, a lot.”

“And ye ken she loves ye like ye love her?”

“Yeah.”

Fiona shook her head, frowned at him, and shook him a few times. “Then stop being a moron. Even if, for some silly reason, everything burns to the ground and ye’re stuck in the middle between wolves and vampires, yer relationship is the stuff of legends. Legends! Movies are made and books written about this sort of romance.” Despite being in the lobby of the Elysium tower, Fiona squeaked like an excited pig, a sort of squee sound, and jumped around a few times in a circle. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

Fiona reminded him of someone. His sister Mary maybe, only because she seemed to run with small romance ideas and explode them into grand tales. Mary had inherited all the enthusiasm and jovial romanticism. He’d inherited a sarcastic bite and realist mindset.

“Jacob and Garry will be there too,” he said. “You’re going to be in a room with a bunch of vampires, ages one hundred to five hundred. Ancient, hungry, and protective of their property. How can you be so excited?”

“Sorry, just how I deal. I get nervous, I get excited. Like skydiving.”

Jack felt his dead, withered stomach try and force up some nonexistent food. Jumping out of a plane was not something he could ever see himself getting excited about.

“You ok there Terry? Looking like you’re about to get bitten by a dog.” Chunk leaned over his desk and raised a brow at him as he walked by. “Got a girl with ya though, and ain’t she a cutie.”

Fiona raised a brow at the heavy, bald man sitting behind the front desk. There were some other guards sitting around too, working at their computers, tapping away at their keyboards — no idea what a guard did on a computer — while Chunk looked at the two creatures.

“Ye’re not too bad looking yerself,” she said, chuckling.

“The Prince won’t be too happy though,” Chunk said, “about you getting a girl.”

Yeah, cause that was the real concern, a miscommunication about a girl, not the horrors crawling into their lives.

“Friend of mine. Has the council meeting started?”

“Yeap. Just go right on to the top floor there, Mister Terry.”

If only an Invictus was calling him Mister, it’d have some real weight then. Mister Terry, like Mister Mire. Powerful, and buried in responsibilities. Halfway there.

Jack nodded, and continued walking to the elevators of the grand lobby. Each step heavy, and slow, dragging through mud and all the cold sludge of inevitability. As the guards resumed their work, each clop of his fancy shoes echoed, and each earned a small wince.

Fiona was fidgeting and bouncing behind him, glancing around and taking in the sights as best she could despite walking into the den of predators.

Come on Jack, you've walked this lobby hundreds of times, and you've talked with Antoinette hundreds of times. The Primogen are predators, yes, but their leader is your girlfriend, your love, not to mention Julias will be there too, and Fiona's done nothing to warrant any action against her. She hasn't given up the Masquerade, and she hasn't damaged the food supply too much. Calm down.

Or it wasn't Fiona he was genuinely worried about. The werewolves? He didn't know them, and as terrifying as the pack of wolves were — yep, terrifying, no getting around that description — he wasn't really worrying about them either. Not right now at least. His earlier night with Antoinette had settled his worries for a little while, insuring him this meeting would not affect them, but now, as he stepped onto the elevator with the Begotten, all his worries were coming back.

The whole situation reeked of impending struggles for their relationship. It was his first real relationship, and if he lost it, he didn't know what he'd do. The knot in his stomach grew, and he swallowed it down as the door closed. Everything was going to be fine, you're making mountains out of molehills.

You're not Tony.

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“As you all know, I am sure, a series of visits to our city has occurred in a rather condensed timespan.” Antoinette sat in her chair, back straight, legs folded, arms on the chair arms. Like she was sitting in a throne, giving her decree. “And I am sure I am not the only one to find this both unusual, and unnerving.”

Jack gulped, and looked around the room. Julias glanced his way a few times, even offered a tiny smile, but otherwise sat the same as

everyone else did, poker faces and steel bodies. The tallest room in the building, its gigantic wall window, the glass table, huge and impressive chairs; it was all very imposing. Jack could not have felt more uncomfortable standing a bit off to the side, near the Invictus triumvirate, and trying his best to not tremble. Fiona was outside the room, to be summoned later.

If Antoinette had had any feelings for him before now, they were gone. She looked his way every so often, and an ice glare froze him to the core. Never seen her red eyes do that, not ever. Sure, when dealing with Lucas her gaze had turned to fire capable of incinerating mountains, but ice was new, and painful.

“Yeah, it’s pretty fucked up,” Garry said. He wore some jeans and a black shirt; Fiona was overdressed in comparison. “Not gonna lie, I can’t imagine it’s a coincidence either. Wolves and monsters coming to Dolareido at the same time?”

Julias nodded and tapped his fingers on the glass table in a quiet rhythm. “But Avery and Azamel have no connection to each other.”

Jacob wiped off some nonexistent dust from the shoulder of his robes — Christ he looked like a necromancer or something — and leaned in. “We alright talking about these issues in front of the kid? Why’s he here?”

“Jack’s purpose will be explained momentarily.” Maria mirrored Jacob, leaning in before resting her elbows against the glass. Power pose. “In matters concerning the Uratha, Jack is welcome to what we know.”

“Is he now?” Jacob, brow raised and looking straight at him, leaned back in his chair, hooked his fingers behind his head, and smiled at him. Joker smile and a bandage across eyeless eye sockets was not a pleasant thing to have staring at you. “Everything?”

“What you wish to share.” Michael leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. “Out of respect for you Jacob, we haven’t brought up the details of the last visit from Avery.”

Respect for Jacob. Jack squinted one of his eyes a little and watched Michael, watched where his eyes went, what he did with his fingers, how his posture changed. It certainly wasn’t a happy respect, more like a begrudging one. And Jacob returned it with a nod, a begrudging thank you.

“Indeed. We do not want a repeat of last time,” Antoinette said. “Avery is now the leader of her own pack, and has returned in pursuit of prey. What that prey is we are not sure, but we do believe it may have something to do with the old tunnels in Devil’s Corner. We know the tunnels are in need of maintenance, but with the unusual activity in said tunnels, none of us have sent personnel to repair them.” The Prince frowned, brushed her hair back over her ear, and tilted her head a little as she looked down at the table with furrowed brow. “Naturally, wolves, spiders, and monsters have decided to nest there.”

Silence hung heavy on the room, and each Primogen looked to the other with slow glances and tensed shoulders.

“Surely this won’t be the same as last time,” Julias said.

“Indeed.” Maria motioned for Jack to step forward, and he did with a snap to his step like a good little soldier. “Avery is not Simon. She is open to a degree of communication. A small degree, but a degree nonetheless. She has chosen Master Terry to be an intermediary between the Primogen and the Uratha.”

Jacob burst into laughter, and slammed both his palms down against the glass table. No one reacted, except for Jack. Jack jumped a foot in the air, and winced as every set of eyes glanced his way.

“Avery picked a fucking ambassador?”



Julias shook his head and dismissed the notion with a sweep of his hand. “Master Terry will be an intermediary to help facilitate communication, and nothing more. Not a negotiator, not a mediator.”

“The fuck is the point then?” the eyeless said

Michael growled and looked Jacob’s way. “Do you think it would end well, having Avery and her pack in our presence again?”

“Doesn’t bother me.” Garry shrugged, and hooked his hands behind his head. Playing nonchalant, pretending to be comfortable with the situation maybe.

“Yes, we understand Avery visited you recently,” Michael said. “Would you aid those animals just to be a thorn in our side, Carthian?”

It was certainly a possibility, Jack realized. If Garry was willing to side with the Uratha — whatever that would entail — then the Invictus would have a problem. Everyone would have a problem.

But Garry shrugged. “I wasn’t happy with how things went last time either, but admit fault where fault is. If everyone had simply stepped aside and let the dogs do their thing, less people would have died.”

Good god would one of them share the details already. Jack couldn’t ask it, Jacob would probably kill him if he did, but the tiptoeing on the subject earned fidget after fidget, eye twitch after eye twitch.

“To prevent communications from escalating to such rancor, that is why Avery has chosen my childe.” Julias smirked and turned to look at Jack. “Master Terry has a way with people. I think you’ll find him a much better point of contact than any of the wolves, and they will be more receptive to him than they were to any of us.”

Jacob snorted and grit his teeth; didn't seem too convinced. "So if I want to tell Avery to drown in shit and vomit, I have to go through this kid?"

"Yes." Antoinette, sighing and tapping her fingers on the table, leaned her weight onto an elbow on the chair arm, and her eyes shifted between Jack and Jacob with scrutiny. "I would prefer such requests be done only during Primogen meetings, but ultimately, all that Master Terry learns and says in this matter will be the domain of us all, in or outside of our meetings."

Holy shit. He was going to have elders visiting his apartment or interrupting his Invictus work, so he could deliver messages to the wolves. Shit just getting worse by the minute.

"Master Terry." Jacob, lip raised in a snarl, leaned in over the table far and deep, and cocked a brow in his direction. "So, what do the wolves have to say? They just want their hunting grounds or what?"

The room went silent as all eyes — and Jacob's gaze — fell upon him. Heavy stone tied around his neck pulled him to the floor. Claws dug into his chest and opened his insides for all the beasts to stare. Even Antoinette, love of his life, was staring at him and waiting for him to say one thing wrong, one thing out of line, one thing that'd burn the situation to the ground, rubble and embers.

Kindred were paranoid creatures. He tried to convince himself he was overreacting, that they hadn't said anything disastrous yet; and they hadn't. But he knew there were layers to each sentence, most he didn't understand, but some he did. If the elders had a problem with the wolves, something worth arguing about, then it was a problem that cost lives.

He looked each elder in the eyes for a fleeting moment, did his best to hold their gaze, before moving onto the next, and gulped on

nothing. If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be pissing off every elder in his home town, lover included.

“Nothing yet, my Prince and Primogen. Only that we are to stay out of the tunnels in Devil’s Corner, and that all communication is go through myself. They will perform their hunt, inform me of their actions, and I am to explain them to you.”

“And if I said I wanted someone else?” Garry smacked his chops and glared at Jack, hard. If he’d started barking, it wouldn’t have been surprising.

“The Uratha said it was non negotiable, Lord Tones.” Maybe a lofty title of address would help the bitter truth pill go down easier. Or some peanut butter for the mongrel.

For the love of fucking god do not grin at that image.

But Garry laughed and shook his head. “Course she did. But, Maria’s right, Avery isn’t Simon, so maybe things will go a bit smoother this time? Intermediary is a step in the right direction. Maybe choosing an Invictus was a bad idea, but, I’ll give this a whirl and see how it goes.”

Jack lowered his head in a nod, and waited. The tension in the room seemed to lessen a little, and where everyone had looked ready to pounce with their leaning forward postures and hard-set teeth, the elders — and Julias too — started to lean back in their chairs and get comfortable again.

“Master Terry does have another point of business, unrelated,” Maria said, “but important.”

The Prince waved a hand for him, and Jack stepped a little closer toward her.

“Yes,” Antoinette said. “As if God were bored and seeking to humor himself, Begotten have begun sprouting in Dolareido again. It may be because of the passing of three of our elders, that we look weak and these wolves and monsters have decided to take advantage. It may simply be a case of bad timing. But Begotten now walk our streets once more.”

The whole room sighed. Not the same oh-fuck-not-again sigh bringing up the Uratha stirred, but a there’s-a-fly-in-my-food sigh.

“Azamel has returned,” Antoinette said, “but she is not Master Terry’s concern. This concerns a newcomer. And while all new Kindred are to be introduced to myself, I believe it is to the benefit of us all that new Begotten are introduced to the Primogen as a whole.”

Oh, an olive branch, maybe? She was the Prince, it was her job to keep everyone satisfied, or in line. She opted for diplomacy normally, far as Jack could tell, but he was sure she had to use force to get the position. He should ask her about it sometime.

“Master Terry, please fetch Fiona,” Antoinette said.

He nodded and stepped out into the hall. No doubt the Primogen already knew what he was doing. Not like they didn’t sense her from so close. So as he brought the small woman into the meeting room, they all glared at her like she was a pestering insect.

“Good morning!” she said, big smile on her face, hand waving. “Glad to meet ye.”

If looks could kill, Fiona would have exploded in a glorious display of bones, blood, and organs as each Primogen and the Prince glared at her. It was enough to get her to stop waving, but her smile only shifted from nervous to anxious.

“This is Fiona Young,” Jack said, “a fairly recent arrival to Dolareido. In her ignorance, she began to hunt kine without permission. She is responsible for the disappearances in Devil’s Corner.” He escorted her to stand before them in the most open section of the table near the Prince. He bowed, she didn’t; until he kicked her in the side of the foot, and she managed a nervous chuckle before bowing as well.

“Great, another pain in the ass. How old are you girl?” Garry said. “How long you been a monster?”

So much for proper introductions.

“About a year.” She stood up and, again, smiled. Just her way of dealing with nervousness, like she said.

It wasn’t just her though. The hard tension in the air was gone, but everyone was looking at Fiona with a little more scrutiny than Jack had figured. If the Uratha were here, he was sure they’d be looking at the wolves with a mix of anger and distrust, but with Fiona, they were looking at her with ... disgust?

“A year?” Antoinette turned her chair to face the Scottish woman, and looked her up and down. “You have a large appetite for someone your age.”

“Uh, sorry. I ... I can try and eat less.”

“See that you do,” Maria said.

Antoinette frowned at Fiona, but after a few moments of silence, sighed and let the frown fade. “What Maria means is that we have spent decades building Dolareido as a place Kindred can live more comfortably than other cities. I crafted this city for that purpose from its infancy. And Begotten have a habit of drawing attention we do not want.”

“Attention?” Fiona said.

McDonald groaned, loud enough to grab Fiona’s attention. “Yes, attention. Vampires and werewolves, and monsters, are known quantities in the world. You can find mentions of us in texts old and new. For Kindred, we preserve the Masquerade, the secret of our existence. If you had been Kindred, we would have punished you for your gross negligence.”

Jack winced. Fiona whistled, and squirmed.

“Sorry,” she said. “I ... I had nae idea.”

“And,” McDonald continued, “our reports suggest the disappearances have mostly occurred in the past four months. How long have you been in Dolareido?”

“About ten months ... sir. But, uh, about four months ago, the um ... the dream changed. Less oppressive. Less ... cruel. So I got a little comfier when the changed happened, and I guess I let my appetite run away with me.”

“The dream changed?”

Everyone turned to look at Jacob. The man had an intrigued expression, if Jack was reading his face right; never easy with the bandage tied around his head.

“Aye. When I first came ‘ere, dark chains cut through much of the dream, and my lair was ... uncomfortable. But something happened, nae idea what, and the chains went away. Been happy times since then, since—”

“Since Viktor and Tony died. It sickens me to know those two affected such things,” Antoinette said, her turn for the intrigued expression. Everyone mirrored it soon after, throwing glances each other’s way, and then settling on Fiona. “We have had little contact

with your kind outside a few encounters, Begotten, and they have not been ... good, for the city. I am sure you will come to discover on your own, when Azamel inevitably talks with you.” Venom dripped from her voice.

“Who is Azamel?” Fiona said.

The Prince frowned and leaned back in her chair as she looked Fiona up and down a few more times, analyzing her body language no doubt. “There are several other Begotten in the city. I cannot prevent you from interacting with them. But know that Azamel has been a problem for us before, and I cannot guarantee your life if you befriend her.”

“ ... my life?”

“What the Prince means,” Julias said, “is that Dolareido is run by Kindred and the Kindred are protected by our laws. Begotten are not. If a Kindred decides to end you because they want to, for any reason at all, you can’t protest using our laws. All you can do is hope a different Kindred claims sanctuary for you. Understood?”

Second class citizen. Jack winced again, and looked at Julias. His sire did a good job of avoiding eye contact, but when Jack looked to the Prince, she caught his glance. And twitched. Just a little, just on the lip, just enough to change her frown into something less, before she grit her teeth and looked down. She’d thrown Fiona a death threat, and Julias had backed it up. They were putting her in her place and she hadn’t done anything besides eat a few abusive bastards. The fuck did they have against Begotten?

Fiona nodded, sighed, and squirmed a little in her shoes. But she still had a smile, and an edge of a grin growing on it too.

“I understand.”

“Good.” Antoinette motioned for the door with her hands before looking back to the Primogen. “Thirteen kills since your arrival is far too many for Dolareido, despite the city’s population. Control your hunger, or we will control it for you. You two may go.”

Jack put his hand on Fiona’s shoulder for a passing moment, and the two of them walked out of the devil’s den. He glanced over his shoulder, but neither Julias or Antoinette looked his way, their gazes locked on the table. The others didn’t seem to mind looking at him though, Garry with a sneer, and the two Invictus with something close to a dismissing eye roll. Jacob though, he had a small smile on his face, and his eyeless gaze followed them out of the room.

Once the door was closed behind them, Fiona opened her mouth, but Jack shook his head.

“When we’re outside,” he whispered, barely audible.

Down the elevator, passed the lobby and Prince’s servants, and back outside. The warm night air and the beautiful Elysium garden maze. The familiar sights of suits and sexy dresses walking the streets, jewelry on display.

So much better than being surrounded by that pack of angry, surly, barking animals.

“What the fuck was that?” he said.

“I dinnae ken. I ... I felt they hated me.”

“Yeah, I got that impression too, like a brick to the face. I expected my night to suck, Fiona, but not because of you. Figured the wolves would be the main source of tension, and they were, but ... but with you, it was ... they really didn’t like you. I ... I have to apologize for them, cause that was ... I can’t...”



“It’s alright. I’m sure they have their reasons, aye? This Azamel might be a real bastard.”

“Yeah, maybe. But it doesn’t justify their behavior. They treated you like a...” Like a fucking bug infestation. He grit his teeth, and started walking.

Didn’t get far before he looked back up at the tower. On the tallest floor, he could see movement. Someone standing in front of the glass then, and that someone had to be Antoinette; no one else would get up in her meeting room.

He frowned up at her, and kept walking. Maybe he was overreacting. They were just protecting the city after all, and being cautious. And assholes. He’d expected Garry and Maria and Michael to be dicks, and they were, and he expected Antoinette to be cold, and she was. But Julias too? And Jacob was the only one who didn’t seem displeased about the situation.

“Hey,” Fiona said, “they said there’d been thirteen disappearances in Devil’s Corner?”

“Yeah.”

“Weird. Only killed twelve.”

He raised a brow. “That is weird.”

“Could be a mistake right? Coincidence?”

“Yeah ... maybe.” Maybe not.

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~~Julias~~

“ ... she isn’t Azamel,” Julias said. “We didn’t have to threaten her like that.”

“Yes we did.” MacDonald threw him a growl. “You didn’t have to deal with her, Mister Mire. Honors did. You want to clean up the mess of a hungry monster?”

“I’ve dealt with draugr before, Mister MacDonald.”

“It is not the same.” Antoinette got up and walked over to the window, a loud sigh escaping her once she looked down. Probably watching Jack leave. Whole conversation couldn’t have been easy for her. “A Kindred surrendered to the beast is a dangerous creature, yes. A Begotten that is hungry is...”

“You’re familiar with the damage Azamel caused before she upped and left?” Garry said.

Julias nodded. “Truncater tower and a couple nearby buildings were destroyed in the confrontation.”

Jacob laughed, a hard snort of a chuckle that earned frowns from everyone. “The buildings weren’t destroyed in the conflict, they started the conflict, Mister Mire. Azamel got too hungry for her own good, and lost control.”

“ ... she destroyed four buildings?”

“In a single attack.” Antoinette paced back and forth in front of the glass, hands behind her back, eyes still on the window and below. “As I am sure Viktor Honors explained to you, Azamel Venastroth hungers for power. And I do not mean in the classic sense. She once used the word tyrant to describe the hunger, the need to be a tyrant.” Snarling, the Prince dragged her nails across the glass, until the Primogen all winced as her nails began to cut into it.

The Prince got angry all the time, but she never showed it. Always steel, always cold and calculating; at least, during Primogen meetings. But she was visibly angry, shoulders raised and hands

gripping into fists as if choking someone. Not cold steel this time, all fire, like Beatrice. With Triss, he could hug her and force her to calm down; Antoinette would rip him into literal shreds in a second if he tried to console her with even a single word.

“She did that alone? That quickly?” Julias leaned back in his chair and brought a finger to his chin. “I underestimated the threat.”

“Alder Honors did not want the true threat Azamel posed to be known, Mister Mire,” Maria said. “She was not our enemy. Just a ... volatile presence.”

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. Just when he thought he knew the details of things, just when he thought he was getting a feel for what sorts of secrets Viktor had been keeping from him.

“What about this Fiona?” he said. “Not nearly as old as Azamel.”

Jacob clicked his teeth and leaned in. “Yes, but ... you all felt it. We’ve dealt with Begotten before, young ones like Athalia. This Fiona creature was not like Athalia.”

No. No she was not.

“But,” Antoinette said, “it is not the monsters that trouble me. They are but pests in my city. It is the wolves howling at the door that concern me. Us.”

Jacob nodded, and his fingers tapped on the table a few times with some weight. “Your boy toy is gone. Sure you want to talk about the wolves without him here?”

Antoinette turned, walked to the table, and set her hands down on the glass as she glared at the old Nosferatu. “Did it look like I treated him with bias or favoritism, Jacob?”

The eyeless man smirked, until Garry spoke up.

“No, it didn’t. Thank you for that.”

“I don’t think Jacob was intentionally insulting you,” Michael said. “Just ... being Jacob.”

It was true. Jacob could talk like Garry sometimes, and the reversal was a sight to behold.

The Prince sighed, but nodded with time, and sat back down to join them. “We do not need Terry here to speak of the Uratha, only if we wish to communicate with the Uratha. As we all know, the wolves will tear through whatever they perceive as a barrier, and that includes us.”

Michael shook his head. “We could take them in a fight.”

“Perhaps,” Julias said, “if we knew when and where they were coming, if we armed ourselves with silver weaponry, if we brought five Kindred for each Uratha.” And even then, they’d lose those Kindred in the fight. “But, if Avery is trying to communicate this time, at least somewhat, perhaps we can avoid violence entirely.”

The room looked at him like he’d grown an extra head.

“Hey,” Garry said, hands raised like he was surrendering, “of everyone in this room, I hate the werewolves the least. But I know a storm coming when I see one.”

Storm coming. Only storm coming was everyone looking for one and making things worse than they had to.

“With no provocation of any kind, they nearly killed Miss Vola,” the Prince said. “Simply because she was in the area of their hunt, she was ripped open and torn into. They chased her down like hungry wolves.”

Julias winced. He had a hard time imagining Natasha being eviscerated. Girl had spirit, and a major brain in that very tiny body, but being ripped open by Uratha claws was not something he'd be able to deal with well, let alone her. Maria knew it too, and the ghost woman plucked at one of her fingernails with each mention of her previous subordinate.

“... that said,” Antoinette continued, “they also let her feed to heal herself, once they captured her. And, once they had found their desired intermediary, they let her go.”

“Power move,” Michael said.

But Julias shook his head. “Maybe if they had known it was Natasha when they chased her down. Did they?”

“No. Natasha tells me they suspected she was the thing they hunted.”

“And what is it they're hunting?” Jacob tapped his finger, making a ding of fingernail to glass, and threw his masked gaze at Antoinette.

“Again, Jacob?” She snarled at him, a real snarl that Julias felt in his throat. “You know all that I know. They hunt things from outside our realm. If I had more to share, I would.”

Would she? She said it with a touch of inflection, the sort she would normally abuse to imply something specifically. This time she said the words like a younger Kindred might when lying. Julias looked at her for a moment, watched her; her gaze was solid and her body language unwavering.

Something was going on.

“Right, right, like last time.” Jacob, sighing, got up and headed for the door.

“Jacob,” she said, “do not do anything reckless. Avery has survived all this time, and for her kind, you know she will be strong.”

Jacob offered another snarl, and left.

Antoinette leaned back in her chair, and set the fingers of one hand against her forehead. No doubt analyzing the possibility Jacob might do something rash and irrational.

“I feel for the guy,” Garry said. “You telling me you wouldn’t want to kill Avery if you were in his shoes?”

The three Invictus nodded in unison, but Antoinette shook her head instead.

“If I were Jacob, and I had loved a creature such as Minerva for that long, only to lose her? I would not kill Avery, Mister Tones, I would destroy her. I would burn her world and force her to watch. And that is what scares me, that Jacob may be willing to destroy much of what we hold dear to pursue that vengeance.” She leaned in again, and looked at each Primogen with hard-set eyes. “Watch him closely, Primogen. I do not expect you to betray his trust, or to favor mine, but...”

The Invictus nodded in unison, again, along with Garry as well. Much as Jacob was a pain in their ass, they didn’t want him dead.

Funny how a force to unify against could bring out the best in people.

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“That could have gone better,” Jack said.

“Maybe.” Julias shrugged and leaned back on his couch. Jack had called him after the meeting, and had come over to his mansion to talk with him about it. Kid didn’t seem very happy.

“Maybe? The werewolves thing, yeah that went about as well as I could have hoped. No one’s happy about Avery or the Uratha, I get that. But Fiona? The fuck did she do? Worse she’s done is killed a few too many people. Abusive people, I might add. Seems to be the quirk of how she feeds.”

Julias was sitting, but Jack was pacing, hands up in the air and waving

“How long you known this girl?”

“A couple days.”

“You trust her that quickly?”

“Damien trusts her.”

Julias raised a brow. The hell was it about Damien that managed to affect everyone so much? Even Julias had been affected. Not that he brought up the Lancea et Sanctum thing at the last meeting; he didn’t have a death wish.

“Even assuming Damien and Fiona can both be trusted, she’s not the first Begotten to sneak—”

“She didn’t sneak, she came here in genuine ignorance.”

“Ok, fine, an honest mistake on her part. But Begotten like her have, both in ignorance and on purpose, caused problems. We preserve the Masquerade Jack, and we destroy things that threaten it. With the werewolves, it seems people who witness them have a tendency to go a bit crazy, so at least with the wolves the chances of a witness report is minimal.”

“ ... they go crazy? What?”

“Never heard of it? Moonstruck? Some people just go a bit nuts if they’ve been out and saw things in the woods? Uratha have that effect on people if they’re transformed and people see them.”

“Whoa. And—”

“Doesn’t affect Kindred, or Begotten I imagine. Lucky for the Begotten; they have enough trouble as it is.”

Jack, calming down and pacing less, sighed and hopped onto the couch next to him.

“I don’t get it, what’s the problem?”

“Ever heard the fable the Scorpion and the Frog?”

“What about it?”

Julias shook his head. Kid just wasn’t getting it. But then, Julias was doing a piss poor job explaining the problem.

“Ask a Kindred to stop drinking blood, and they’ll say no. But they’ll at least try and find a different way to get it. Long as we get it from a fresh living human, all the other details are meaningless. Not so with the Begotten. Some of them feed in ... in strange ways, Jack. You say Fiona feeds on abusive people?”

“Yeah, she punishes them. Says she needs to make them know they’re being punished for being abusive. Which is pretty damn strange.”

“Just one of many ways these monsters feed, Jack. Some of them feed by collecting people’s valuables, be it secrets or treasures. Some of them feed on fear. Some of them feed on human hearts. Some of them feed on destroying a person’s power.”

“Destr—”



“Azamel. I want you to avoid her at all costs Jack. Viktor told me the same. She feeds on crushing people’s lives, taking away their control. We don’t want her in this city.”

“Damn ... why’s she here then? Why isn’t Antoinette giving her the boot?”

“She’s never attacked a Kindred, and never broken the Masquerade even with her occasional destructive tendencies. Getting rid of her is doable, just difficult, dangerous, and possibly not worth the risk.”

“Difficult for Antoinette and the sheriff? I mean, I saw them both in action Julias, I—”

“Yeah, Jack, even for the two of them.”

There, that put an image in the kid’s head. Jack opened his mouth to say something, but looked down. He tried again, eyes rising, hand raising, but he stopped again.

“ ... damn.”

“Can you understand my concern about Fiona?”

“But she’s barely older than me, in monster years.” Jack raised his hands to quote the word monster, like it were some sort of title that didn’t fit, like it didn’t describe the Begotten to a tee.

“There’s something about her, Jack. I remember meeting Athalia when she was a new Begotten, I got an impression for what they felt like. Fiona was different. Can’t put my finger on it, don’t know what or why, just know it was different. I’m not going to tell you to avoid her too, she seems nice enough, just be careful, ok?”

“Yeah, ok.” Sighing, Jack leaned back into the couch as Julias did. “So, the werewolves.”

“Mmm?”

“I know Jacob has an issue with them. But everyone seems to dance around the subject.”

“ ... you should ask him.”

“You really telling me to go talk to Jacob?”

Heh, good point. “Better than me telling you myself. You—”

The door knocked. That stupid, massive knocker that shook the whole damn building. With a groan, Julias got up and headed down the stairways to the main entrance of his mansion, Jack behind him. Beatrice wasn't supposed to be visiting today, but maybe she was trying to surprise him? Smiling his best I-love-you smile, he opened the door.

“ ... Jacob?”

“That happy to see me?” Laughing, Jacob poked him the chest. “From the tone of your voice Mister Mire, someone's dancing on my grave.” The old bastard smirked, and stepped in. Least he was wearing some normal looking clothes; some black pants and a loose brown jacket was better than the robes he liked. “Ah, Master Terry, how was your first meeting with the Primogen? We can be right sullen dicks, can't we?”

Julias winced and looked back to his childe. Jack had walked down to join him, but was probably regretting it now, standing before Jacob and Jacob having no issues walking up to the boy and getting into his personal space.

“Julias.”

A woman's voice. Julias looked outside again, and tilted his head.

“ ... Jennifer.”

“Sorry about Jacob being a jackass. He wanted to talk about the dogs.” Jennifer, winking at him with all the subtlety of a catcall, stepped into his mansion. Dressed in a power suit and a skirt, she drifted around the mansion’s main lobby, and whistled as she looked up at the high ceilings and grand drapes.

Where the hell did she get a suit? He’d doubted a witch knew how to put one on, let alone where to steal a good one. But, it was a damn good suit, and she wore it with practiced ease.

“Elder Jacob.” Jack offered the man a bow, but Jacob laughed and nudged the kid back up with a few fingers to the shoulder.

“So you’re the middleman in this zoo, eh kid?” The Nosferatu looked up at the walls like his witch did, before he sat down—on the stairway. “And you’ve made friends with an unusual monster. Look at you, getting stuck in shit no matter where you step.”

Seeing Jacob get chummy with his childe set Julias on edge. What a way with words the old snake had.

“There does seem to be some dangerous people coming to Dolareido, Elder Jacob, that ... I keep stumbling into.”

Kid managed to keep a steady voice as he turned to watch the old man. Never easy. Jacob was as old as Antoinette, and being around him always fired Julias’s fight-or-flight reflex, let alone Jack’s.

“For what reason do I owe the honor of—”

“Oh stow the niceties, Julias. I’m not here on official business. I’m here cause I want to talk about the werewolves.”

Sounded like official business. “Couldn’t wait for the next Primogen meeting?”

“Prince said herself we can come to Jack. I knew he’d be here, after that shit show, to talk about the Begotten I imagine.” The old bastard laughed and shook his head a few times, like a condescending parent. “That Fiona was a cute little thing wasn’t she? Really liked the accent.”

Right, right, it was going to be like this, Jacob dancing around whatever information he was trying to get. Never direct. Probably wanted Avery dead, but it wasn’t like Jack would have any information to help with that. Then what angle was Jacob aiming for?

“I like her,” Jack said, arms folded across his chest, on guard.

Julias came to stand beside his childe, while Jennifer seemed content to walk up the stairs past Jacob, and start exploring. The mansion held nothing that she’d want to steal or pry into, but she looked intrigued nonetheless, eyes scanning the walls and paintings and fortune in meaningless furniture.

“What’s she like?” Jacob said.

Jack looked up at Julias before Jacob again. “Thought you wanted to talk about the werewolves?”

“Aren’t I?” the Nosferatu said. Jack flinched. Kid was doing good standing up to the fucking snake, but something Jacob said managed to break his composure. “Not like you need to be a genius to realize there’s a connection. Fiona starts indulging her appetite when Viktor and Tony die. Understandable. Her kind have a good sense for the predators in their area, and if two of the major ones die, she’d naturally feel more comfortable eating more. A few months later, werewolves are in our city, hunting something.”

“Well,” Jennifer said, leaning over a railing above them, “there’s always the chance of coincidence.”

Jacob snorted and looked up at his fellow witch. “You seriously believe that?”

“Are you suggesting the werewolves are hunting Fiona?” Julias said. “Why would she be their prey?”

“... what is their usual prey?” Everyone turned to look at Jack, and the young Ventrue met each of their gazes with something close to a frown. “I’ve been kept in the dark about this, but it seems pretty damn important. The wolves won’t tell me, the Invictus won’t tell me, the Primogen won’t tell me, and now I’m expected to be an intermediary for a bunch of dangerous beasts without even knowing what they’re after.”

“Tell you if I knew,” Jennifer said, still above them, still drifting around and admiring Julias’s decor. “Jacob figures only person who knows exactly what they hunt is Antoinette, but she denies knowing the details.”

“Really?” Jack blinked at Julias, and turned around a bit to face him, stepping closer to Jacob in the process. “Kind of figured the triumvirate knew their motivations at least.”

Julias’s turn to wince. “They hunt ... we’re not sure on the details. It’s something ... abnormal. Jacob might know more.”

Jacob lowered his head to look back at Julias, and Julias’s wince turned into a quiet smirk. No reason Julias couldn’t turn Jacob’s manipulation of the dialogue back on him. All’s fair.

And the look on the man’s face was perfect. Even with the bandage covering his eyes, his jaw clenched and his teeth clicked as they grit and ground. Julias knew better than to play with fire, to piss off his blatant superiors, his elders, but the damn witch really got under his skin.

“I don’t have the same knowledge on the situation as the Prince,” he said. “The talks between her and Simon didn’t end well, but only she knows what was said in that room. I assume Simon is dead if Avery’s running her own pack now. But ... but the wolves don’t hunt things of the world.”

“Not of the world?” Jack rubbed his buzzed head, and stepped closer to the witch. “ ... that’s the most ambiguous thing I’ve ever heard.”

Julias laughed. Kid was growing balls. Jennifer chuckled too, before disappearing into the hall of his mansion.

“Well, that’s part of the reason I came here to talk, Jack.” Jacob leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and stared ahead at the boy. “I want to know what they’re hunting.”

“I don’t know what they’re hunting. They wouldn’t tell me.”

“And Fiona, what do you think of my suspicion, that she and the wolves are connected somehow?”

“ ... there may be a connection, but I don’t know what it is. We don’t know what the wolves hunt, so I can’t piece together a hypothesis.” Jack took another step toward the ancient beast, and lowered his arms from his chest. “And if I knew, why would I tell you?”

Well. Damn.

Silence hung on the walls like ice, and Julias forced himself to stare at Jacob as the old man stared at Jack. Didn’t need eyes to show the frustration on his face, the annoyance with the muscles in his neck bulging and his fingers curling the air like weaving thread.

“ ... you going home anytime soon kid?”

Julias stepped in until he was beside Jack again. “You threatening my childe?”

“No, no.” Jacob took a long, slow breath, put up his hands, stood up, and walked off the stairs. “I wanted to talk to Jack in private.”

Jack blinked, and glanced between the witch and his sire. “Me?”

“You.”

“... um, I was ... but ... uh...”

“Jacob,” Julias said, “I don’t—”

“I’m serious Mire, I won’t hurt him, just wanted to talk to him alone. He’s neck deep in shit and I happen to know a thing or two about this particular flavor of shit.”

True that. Julias glanced between Jack and Jacob, and looked for any hesitation or worry. Jack dripped of both, but nodded to him, and stepped forward toward the door.

“Ok,” the kid said.

“Excellent. No worries Jack, Julias, just looking for ... some common ground.” Jacob saluted, stepped out the door, and waited for Julias’s childe to follow.

God damn the kid was getting tougher by the second. Jack peeked over his shoulder back at Julias, smiled, gulped, and walked out into the city night with one of the two oldest Kindred in the city. Kid had a knack for making friends; funny that it never manifested until he died.

“Guess it’s just you and me now.”

Julias raised a brow and looked up the stairs. Jennifer had returned, a smile on her lips and her fingers sliding along the rail of

the grand stairway as she descended.

“Jennifer ... I’m afraid I don’t know your last name.”

“It was Darla, back when I used it. What use does a witch have for it?” Confident smile, a smile he knew all too well as she finished her hip-swaying descent of the stairs to stand before him.

“I suppose the Circle doesn’t keep records do they?”

“No. We remember our deeds and actions, not titles.” Jennifer, looking him up and down, started to circle him in a slow walk, each step specific and exaggerated. “You, we remember as the man who survived Viktor and Tony’s squabble, survived the purge, survived the werewolves the first time they came, and survived Azamel’s hunger.”

He didn’t follow her with his head, but did with his eyes once she was in front of him again. Woman never stopped smiling, but it was becoming more of a sly grin as time went on.

“The other Primogen did as well.”

“Ah, but they were older, and had to deal with those out of a necessity for their positions. You were just a neonate when Azamel first arrived, no? And a young ancillae when Simon and Avery stuck their claws in our affairs. All before my time.” One of her hands reached out, and started to trace a finger along his shoulders as she circled him a second time. “And do not worry for Jack. Jacob does truly only wish to speak to him about our new troubles.”

“I think that’s reason enough for worry.”

“Ha. Jacob is a bastard isn’t he? A manipulative, smart bastard. But you should trust him more. He has the Kindred’s interest at heart.”



“Forgive me if I feel differently, specifically in the context of Avery.” The desire for revenge could turn anyone into an obsessed, selfish villain.

“ ... he still hasn’t told me about what happened with Avery,” she said, and she sat down on the couch with a sigh. Comfortable getting comfortable, with all the confidence of a Ventrue. Different from Jack, a Ventrue with tenacity but without the confidence. Not yet, at least.

“Horrible things happened, Kindred died, and Jacob suffered a terrible, personal blow.” Julias matched Jennifer’s poker face, and sat down beside her. “So we don’t talk about it. If you ask him, he might tell you.”

Jennifer put up her hands and shook her head before settling them in her lap. “All I need to know is that he dislikes the wolves. I don’t need to get on his bad side.”

“ ... why are you here, Jennifer?”

“Figured you knew.” She folded a leg over the other, and twisted on the couch to rest an elbow along its back, fingers to her chin and nudging her lips. A seductive pose, complete with a batting of the eyelashes. “We both have a common interest.”

“Yes, Beatrice tells me you’ve grown quite affection toward her. Color me jealous.”

“Jealous?” Chuckling, Jennifer slid a little closer to him, close enough so the leg folded over the other nudged her shoe against his leg.

He didn’t move. “Yes, I am. She tells me the Circle of the Crone have no desire for privacy, or need for doors.”

“True. We have little care for barriers about things like sex. We all enjoy our ghouls or meals in clear view of each other.”

Smirk. “Yes, but you don’t enjoy each other.”

“ ... oh, I see.” She looked away, and down at her foot where she bounced her leg lightly on the other. “It’s that I am Kindred, that’s the problem.”

“You could say that ... You ever been in love, Jennifer? Before or after your embrace?”

“Puppy love?”

“No, lasting love. Ever been in a long term relationship?”

“No,” she said, voice once crisp and clear, now quietening and lightly wavering.

“I have, before I was embraced. I know what it’s like to be in love, Miss Darla, deep love, the sort that’d last a life time. Even had the sort of marriage used as an ideal by wedding planner companies, to reel couples in.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and sighed as he looked down. “I know what it feels like to have to let that love go.”

“ ... you were married when Viktor embraced you.”

“Yes.” And the whole conversation was dragging his mind through the memories like he’d been tied to a horse and drawn, each memory cutting him open, rocks in the road. He just smiled, and let the pain pass, like it always did. Let her face fade with a century of experiences to bury her.

“Was it a choice for you?”

“No. Viktor forced it during the first World War.”

“ ... you did not embrace your wife?” Jennifer raised a brow and frowned at him.

“Almost. One night, I nearly broke into her room and turned her, but I didn’t have permission to sire a childe; I’d just be dooming us both. And ... and I’m not sure I’d have wanted this life for her, Jennifer.”

“ ... Beatrice warned me you’d be like this.” She slid in closer again, and frowned at him from close enough he could see the different shades of amber and brown in her eyes. “You always this morose? You hate this life so much?”

“It comes and goes,” he said, grinning. That managed to get a chuckle out of her. “Beatrice is the best thing to happen to me in a long time, and you’ll have to forgive me Jennifer if I’m hesitant to share our bed with another Kindred. With ghouls or a kine, it’s different; they’re food, and connections with them are fleeting. Did Beatrice tell you she’s the first Kindred I’ve been with in a very, very long time?”

“She did. And I get that you consider Kindred-with-Kindred sex to be special, meaningful ... intimate. How delightfully archaic.” Returning his smirk, she leaned toward him until their noses were only an inch apart. “You really love her.”

“Yeah, I do. You think I’m morose now? I used to dread every moment of this life, and I drowned my self in sex with my meals most nights to try and forget it.”

“I enjoy sex with my food almost every night as well, but I’m quite happy being Kindred. And besides, you’re not drowning yourself in sex with Beatrice?”

Good point. He laughed, leaned back and snapped his fingers.

“How much do you like her?” he said.

“I like her a lot. And that ass, oh my god that ass.”

They both laughed. The amount of sex he and Beatrice had had in the past month was astounding. Girl liked her ass more than he did, and anal sex was a frequent vice.

“Do you love her?” he said.

She shook her head. “Romantically? No. But she’s fast become a close friend, Mister Mire, and I ... well, I’d hate to ruin that.” Sighing, she got up, straightened out her skirt, and leaned against the stairway railing. “So, the offer is there. I don’t want to taint what you have with Beatrice. But, at the same time, I would not belong in the Circle of the Crone if I did not pursue my desires, Mister Mire.”

“You sleep with all your friends?” A little jab, to test the waters.

“No, I do not. I do with my meals, as you once did, but other Kindred? Not since the first year of my embrace.” She winked at him. Knew what he was getting at, no doubt. “And to think, I found this suit to impress you.”

Julias stood up as well, and as Jennifer walked toward the front door, he followed behind her before opening it for her.

“It worked. And ... let me think about it.”

“Please do. I think you’ll find I’m a joy to have under your sheets. I’d even share her.” The raven-haired Ventrue grinned at him, licked her lips, and finger waved as she walked backward through the doorway, and out into the night.

She was a very, very attractive woman. Julias couldn’t help but admire her butt when she turned around and put the rather tight skirt on display. Not as big or toned as Beatrice’s, but close.

He closed the door, and smacked himself in the forehead. Was he being too dramatic, being so careful about this? He was worried about damaging his relationship with Beatrice, the first relationship he'd had in decades, a relationship he was so damn thankful to be in. Threesomes didn't exactly have the best track record with relationships, in his experience.

But that was a long time ago, and things were different with Kindred. Sex was different. And Beatrice was the one who'd first mentioned interest in the idea.

He sat down, and burst into laughter. How much life had changed. Used to be all he was worried about was if he pissed off his sire. Now he was worried about whether a threesome with another Kindred would ruin his relationship, and whether the Invictus would suffer under the claws of visiting monsters and wolves.

All in all, a step in the right direction. Now if Jack survived his midnight stroll with the deadly Nosferatu, maybe things would start looking up.

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~~Jack~~

If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be on a stroll home with the deadliest vampire in the city as his escort.

He thought Daniel or Antoinette had earned the title, but the longer he walked beside Jacob, the more he was starting to feel he'd earned it instead. The way the other Primogen looked at him, even Antoinette, was one he hadn't expected. A weird respect, like you might give a bully in school or dangerous cellmate who needed to be kept at a distance. But then, maybe deadliest vampire was the wrong title; rather, he was the most volatile.

“Not taking a ride back to South Side?” Jacob said, voice casual and body language just as casual as the two walked down from the

Rich Side hills.

“I thought you wanted to talk?” It was difficult, finding a balance between defensive and not offensive with the elder Kindred. Didn’t want to help him necessarily, but didn’t want to piss him off. A tightrope Jack did not want to be on.

“Midnight stroll with old me? I’m touched.” Another laugh, but Jack didn’t join in. Jacob stopped laughing, suddenly, and frowned down at him as they walked. “You know kid, you got me all wrong.”

“Do I?”

“Yes, you do. Think I’m a villain, a devil, out for his own gain.”

“... do you think I’m stupid enough to blindly trust you?”

“Heh, touche. A little paranoia is perfectly healthy for a Kindred, can’t fault you there.”

Jack didn’t like the paranoia, he didn’t enjoy having to be suspicious of everyone. So he frowned up at the five-hundred-year-old vampire walking next to him.

“Are you going to try and convince me that you’re working for my best interest? The interests of Kindred?”

“I am working for that goal, Jack.”

“How’s that? Far as anyone’s told me, you create chaos so only the strongest are left standing.”

Another chuckle. They never broke their stride as they walked, even as more kine started to show up on the sidewalks. Where South Side and Rich Side connected, it was an expensive neighborhood, a large one, and it’d take a while to walk it. Jack could call for a ride, but Jacob wanted to talk; not like he could call

for an Invictus ride and just leave Jacob mid conversation, not without pissing him off.

“It’s not nearly that simple kid, and you know it isn’t. The Danse Macabre is a complicated thing, and we all have our goals. You think you can summarize me so easily? All I’d have to do is mention that you were the one that killed Viktor and Tony, and Maria and Michael would have your ashes by sunrise.”

Oh shit. Shit shit shit. Jack looked up at the bastard again, eyes wide, jaw dropping.

“H-How—”

“I was there when Daniel brought in your broken body, kid, covered in ash-filled burns. Saw you had a pretty nasty sword slice from head to crotch too. Sort of mark Viktor liked to leave on more than a few victims I’ve known.” Jacob grinned at him, showing off his teeth, and how his face could look fucking evil as hell even with a bandage over his eyes. “Tony and Viktor were elders. You don’t get that age being careless with fire.” He leaned in, close enough Jack could feel the creature’s gaze, eyeless or not. “And your reaction was admittance enough.”

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck him, fuck him god damn it. Don’t say another word Jack.

But Jacob started walking again, and with a glance back to him, motioned for him to follow. And now, Jack had no fucking choice.

“... you have no proof,” he said. Please don’t know about Lucas for the love of god.

“You’re right, I don’t; I wouldn’t need it. But this is just between you and me. And Annie of course.” Smiling, grinning, smirking, Jacob kept walking, and Jack had to jog to catch up to him. “I never did thank you.”

“Thank me?”

“Yes. Annie and I worked hard to get those two to meet head to head, but I doubted it’d end with either of them dead. Thanks to you, they both died! God damn what a fucking relief that was.”

Jack fell in step beside the old monster, and glanced left and right with quick snaps of the eye. Jacob was good at timing his words, controlling his voice, speaking in ways to prevent nearby kine from overhearing. But he was still risking Jack’s life just by bringing it up. Fuck him. Fuck him fuck him.

Wait.

“ ... you ... were working with Antoinette?” Jack reached out, and grabbed Jacob’s wrist.

Like grabbing a titan by the toe. Jacob stopped, and turned his head to face him.

Jack froze. The beast in his gut froze. The world froze. Not a single kine breathed or moved an inch for that split moment. Jack stared up at the thing turning to look at him through the eye bandage, and his dead heart caught in his throat; he could see the darkness of his empty eye sockets. Get away. Get away.

“Don’t do that.” Jacob yanked his wrist free, and started walking again.

And again, Jack stood there, watching the man’s back. What the fuck was that?

The leader of the Circle of the Crone in Dolareido. Rarely did Jack ever have to deal with them, and almost never Jacob directly, but there were tales of their behavior, of their sacrificial rituals, their collection of bones from victims, their primal ways. Witches. But, that wasn’t what Jack felt when Jacob had looked him. Just a



glance, just a turn of his head, and ... it was like a thousand hands reached out from the black, grabbed him, pinned him, and pulled him into the obsidian nothingness below.

He gulped, and jogged back up to stand beside him as they walked. The nearby kine didn't notice the predator walking the streets, or his bandaged eyes; just the right amount of the cloak of night to hide it, probably. But he wasn't hiding anything from Jack, any of the old beast in the bastard's gut that made Jack want to run.

“Yes, I was working with Antoinette. Your grandsire had become a psychopath, concerned only with his own survival. And Tony? Always hated that fucker. Conniving, manipulative kid, but not in the amazing way I am.” Jacob chuckled and licked his teeth. “He was a whiny brat who would have ruined Dolareido, just to hurt his ex. Fucking cunt.”

Jack forced his eyes onto the sidewalk. The creature next to him was tearing into elder Kindred like they were pests. Viktor had gotten half his head blown off and had managed to recover in minutes, and Tony had slaughtered a thousand Kindred-summoned rats in a matter of seconds as well, with his bare hands as far as Jack could tell. They were gods, not pests to be laughed at.

“Your girl Annie and I came to Dolareido when it was barely more than a village surrounded by woods, Jack. Her and Daniel, her boy Tony—just a young ancillae at the time, me, and that asshole Viktor. We worked hard to make this city a great place for our kind to live. And we succeeded, compared to other cities.”

Jack didn't ask for a lecture, didn't ask for his history or life story. But any information was better than none. So he pushed down the frown, and listened.

“So,” Jacob continued, “I consider this my city as much as the Prince does. Leeches come here, sucking on our success. Which is fine to an extent, it's a fucking city after all. But when people come

here and try and set the rules, dictate to us what we can or can't do? Fuck that, and fuck them. I'll burn this place to the ground before I let someone take it from me."

If I can't have her, no one will. What a classic, tragic motivation. Jack winced as he glanced between the elder and the sidewalk, and the nearby kine that barely seemed to notice them as Jacob kept them in the cloak of night.

"What does that have to do with the Uratha? I get that they're here trying to push us around while they do their own things, but I don't understand where the conflict is. Why do you hate them so much?"

"It ... it..." Jacob sighed, and raised his hands to look at his fingers.

Oh my god the ancient beast was speechless.

"... what did Avery do to you?"

Jacob stopped. Jack dug his shoe into the sidewalk, ready to bolt. Stop poking the bear you stupid man. Could never learn to keep his mouth shut, lesson that refused to sink in, and it was going to get him killed eventually.

"I like you, Clarice."

"... what?"

"I like you." The snake flicked his tongue a few times, and licked his lips. "I can see what Annie likes about you so much. All the vamps in this city dance around on their toes, afraid to sink their weight into anything. You and that Damien fellow are the only ones that don't let ceremony and the future dictate your actions. Unpredictable, compared to Kindred. Even Garry, even Beatrice, much as they like to think of themselves as ballsy, brave fucks. That just makes them as predictable as angry bears." The elder leaned

against a lamppost, eyes downcast but occasionally sneaking glances at Jack, complete with a few more smirks. “You really want to know why I hate that bitch?” The light of the lamp fell on him and cast him in a glow that reeked of film noir.

“ ... I do.”

“How long you think your relationship with Annie is going to last, kid?”

“With Antoinette? I ... I don’t know. I’m way too young to know that, and I’m not stupid enough to think I know the future. But I know that I love her, and ... and that I didn’t know what the fuck that really meant until I met her.” Love was a word, only a word, until you felt it in your bones.

“Lucky, to be able to feel that at your age, kid. Lot of people don’t find that until they’re way past their prime. Lot of people don’t find that ever. Me? Must have been ... nearly four hundred years old at the time, when I fell in love. Real love, the sort you don’t understand until you have it. The sort that ... gets into your bones,” he said, face pointed to the sidewalk. Well damn.

“Did ... did Avery...”

“Yes. Killed her. Minerva got in the way of their hunt—don’t ask, I don’t know why. But Minerva died trying to stop something. So, imagine my frustrations, Clarice, that I don’t know why that happened.” Jacob wrapped a hand around the lamppost pole, and leaned away from it so his body was tilted out on an angle, other arm dangling.

“ ... I am not FBI, and you are not a psychiatrist, Jacob.”

The old snake hissed. “What is one as old as I, if not a student of human nature, Master Terry? You, a social shut-in starting to blossom and open to the world of Kindred. Weight in your steps,

distant but heavy. Took on a burden when you were too young for it, when you were alive. Father dead, I imagine. Became quite the analytical fellow after your dad died, distant with people, distant with emotions, constantly intellectualizing when you realized it was easier to weigh things as evidence and matter, instead of emotions. That's when you realized people are stupid creatures, compelled by their emotions to the point of absurdities. And yet, where they could find happiness, these idiot insects following their chemical reactions, slaves to them, you could find none. You saw the veil of ineptitude that runs the world, and you decided to play it safe, to coast through the world on your intelligence, afraid to enter that world of stupidity. You thought you were above it, but now, as the power of centuries dance before you, you realize you were just afraid you didn't have the courage to expose yourself. So much easier to stay ... distant. Only now, do you realize you were a fool and a coward to hold everything and everyone at arm's length. You test the waters cautiously, now that you see the weight of eternity ahead of you. Like a fucking baby bird peeking over the edge of the nest."

Jacob snorted, and stared at the ground. "If not for being embraced, you would have gone through life alone, probably as a lawyer, something that would fit your tendency for inquisitiveness, and your tenacity. And if not for a forceful personality like Annie, someone willing to punch through your barriers, your fear, it would have taken centuries for you to meet someone you could love."

Jack took a step back, and looked down the same way Jacob was. He might as well have been eyeless too.

"Thought you said I was unpredictable, and ... that you liked me." Let's just conveniently ignore how accurate his analysis was, how much it resonated. Truth had a habit of doing that. Jack would have been a boring man, content to coast through life, if he'd never had his Requiem. If someone as amazing as Antoinette hadn't found his pathetic squirming and foot-in-mouth dialogue charming. Even

before, if someone as wise as Julias hadn't noticed the potential in him.

The old man laughed. "You ask questions where others won't, and have this nasty habit of surviving where you shouldn't. And that makes you a very, very dangerous person, Clarice. Dying seems to have agreed with you, made you into someone I'd like to keep around."

Never did Jacob act his age, like the ancient beast he was, like Viktor or Maria or Michael, or Daniel or Tony or Lucas or even Antoinette. They all acted ... old. They all acted like they were sick of people's shit, and were going through the motions for most things. Every time Jack caught a glimpse of Jacob, he didn't get that impression. The man called him unpredictable, then what the hell was Jacob compared to him?

"You want me to find out why Avery killed Minerva?"

"Yeap."

"... and if you don't like the answer?"

"What do you think?" Jacob said, face deadpan, smirk and grin gone, face pointed at the sidewalk.

A loud, high-pitched screech of metal and wire jolted Jack, made him jump a couple feet as his spine tried to leap out of his body. Jacob let go out of the lamppost, and started walking again, leaving behind the imprints of fingers — more like claws — on the pole deep into its body.

"Do you agree with Annie? That with some cooperation and some self-awareness, Kindred can grow past their animal urges? That we'll survive the future?" the old monster said. Not with a mocking tone either, like Jack expected, or with a sneer or grimace or anything. A dead, cold face that made ice drip down Jack's back.

“ ... I do. One of the reasons we get along and love each other, we have similar views of our kind, I guess.”

“She is a happier woman, since you came into her life, kid.”

Ok, enough was enough. Jacob was walking a line between tragic character and psychopath villain, and Jack couldn't get his bearings. He had to cut through the bullshit.

“Jacob, what do you want from me? Even if I do find out what ... what...” The two of them stopped, and stared down the sidewalk, past the few kine walking this far near Rich Side, and onto the two women ahead of them.

Clara, and Avery. The two weren't talking, weren't looking at each other or anything else, except for the two Kindred. Still in typical street clothes, and a little out of place among the suits and dresses of the several kine that walked past them. Avery had been smiling, but her smile faded away as the two came closer, close enough until Jack could see the subtle frown on Avery's lips.

“ ... getting old, Avery,” Jacob said.

She'd been around in the fifties, but she didn't look old enough for it. Werewolves must have aged slower than humans then, like the Begotten. In just a week Jack's world had gone from vampires, to vampires and werewolves and monsters, each with their own desires and hungers, each with their own motivations and physical capabilities. He was never going to get used to it.

“Jacob,” she said.

“So this is Jacob.” Clara came forward, flicked some of her box-braid hair back over her shoulder to get it behind her, and stood only five feet from the old Kindred. “Avery wasn't lying about the eyes.”

Jack winced and looked around. The humans kept walking by, Jacob's cloak of night insuring their eyes slid over the two Kindred like shadows on black, but the two werewolves seemed unaffected. Close as they were, Jack could feel the Nosferatu growing the aura to encapsulate the two wolves as well. Preserve the Masquerade above all else; even now Jacob obeyed that law.

"Clara," Jack said. "Nice to see you again."

"Ha, is it? You're hanging out with eyeless here, can't imagine the conversation was to our benefit."

Jack shook his head. "It wasn't like that."

"I bet it wasn't." Avery came up to join Clara, and the two stood side by side as they both watched Jacob. Neither of them looked Jack's way, not for long at least, eyes always coming back to catch the Nosferatu. "Any luck talking to the Primogen, kid?" Eyes still on Jacob.

Jack waited, and looked at Jacob. The man wasn't moving, and his hands were in loose fists that dangled at his sides. If he was angry, if he was fuming or livid or ready to strike, Jack couldn't tell, his beast couldn't tell. Like a perfectly calm animal, silent and waiting. Like a snake waiting for the right moment to strike.

Jacob didn't like to do that, far as Jack knew. The elder liked to dance, to play coy, to joke and poke. He never did the silent act.

"Spoke with them several hours ago," Jack said. Maybe if he kept talking, things could go smooth. "You hunted me down to ask that? No way we just stumbled onto you by accident."

"Perceptive," Clara said, grinning at him. "We got your scent, yeah, and Avery knows the city well enough to guess where you'd be near."

Scent. They're wolves, Jack, don't forget they're wolves.

"Jacob out walking with you, I'm guessing he wanted to talk about us," Avery said. Unlike her companion, Avery didn't chuckle or smirk or grin when she met his eyes. Her face was just as cold as Jacob's, and she let her arms dangle at her sides as she came close to stand in front of the Nosferatu. "What'd you tell them?"

"I uh, told them the tunnels under Devil's Corner are off limits, and that I'm to be the intermediary between our two kind," Jack said.

Avery nodded. Seemed to satisfy her, if he was reading her right.

"And their response?"

"... frustration, really. But they seemed to agree with the middleman idea, and to stay out of Devil's Corner, if only barely."

Clara chuckled, and came a bit closer to Jack again. "Telling Kindred what they can or can't do must have really gotten under their skin, especially when they know it's the right call. Damn I would have loved to have been there, to see them snarl and groan about us blocking off sections of their own city. Like taking away kids' toys and telling them to go to bed."

Yeah, Clara had them figured out there.

Quiet fell on them as Jack struggled to find the next thing to say. Jacob and Avery were only a few feet apart, and each moment Jack could feel the old vampire's insides twitch. If he was telling the truth, the man lost the love of his life to the woman standing in front of him. And Jacob likely was telling the truth, given what Jack knew about him. Manipulative, sure, but not the lying type, when the truth was the far more visceral, brutal tool.

"... Jacob," Avery said, "I wanted to talk to you."



“Use the middleman.”

“No, this is personal. I wanted to talk to you about Minerva.”

Jacob visibly twitched. “Is that a joke, tiny wolf? You refused to explain what happened, last I recall.”

“And I still do.” Avery got in closer. She had to look up to meet Jacob’s eyeless gaze, short as she was, but her thick, muscled frame betrayed no weakness. And from so close, Jack could feel the woman’s breath, feel her heat and her life. Feel her beast. It wasn’t the same as a Kindred’s; vampires’ beasts felt like shadowy things of hunger and deceit, eyes in the dark, and fangs. Her beast was colossal, and primeval. From so close, he could feel its animal ferocity and size pressing on him, barki—roaring at him. Not with real aggression, but to display dominance, like animals often did.

He was starting to miss the Danse Macabre. At least it was subtle. These wolves had all the subtlety of a nuke.

“Get out of my face, Avery. If you won’t tell me what happened, we have nothing to say to each other.” Jacob said.

“You don’t have to say shit, old man. Just listen.” Avery sighed and shook her head, before she reached out, and shoved Jacob. The man took a step back, and the loose fists at his sides tightened. “I am sorry that I killed Minerva. It was an accident.”

Holy shit. Jack stepped back with Jacob, and tried to swallow down the words. Jacob coughed them back up.

“I’m sorry, you’re what?”

“I said I’m sorry I killed her. I didn’t want that to happen. She insisted on getting in the way, and in the fight, she was killed.”

“She’s telling the truth, Jacob,” Clara said.

The old bastard sneered. “What would you know? You weren’t there, kid. I don’t know you, I know her. And I know how much of a fucking animal she is. Ever seen Old Yeller?”

Pot calling kettle. Jack wanted to say it, but he wasn’t that stupid. And besides, as he watched the argument, he had to admit, Jacob didn’t seem to have the bloodlust in him Jack had expected. Tony, Viktor, Lucas, they all had a snap to them, something that drove their eyes to wild abandon. Something that sank them into almost mindless obsession with the moment, with violence and death, almost like a starved Kindred about to frenzy. He didn’t see that in Jacob. He saw a lot of other horrible, twisted shit, but not that.

Avery came up to Jacob, and shoved him again. Again, Jacob took a step back, fists tightening until they were shaking at his side. The hell was Avery doing? Why wasn’t she afraid? The man was half a millennium old, and she had to know that, she had to feel that. She had a beast in her gut too; different than a Kindred, but she had it too. No ignorance or arrogance was going to mask the fucking elder and the sickening power that dripped from every action he made.

But Avery came closer, and got ready to shove him a third time.

Until Jack stepped between them.

“The fuck are you doing?” Jack said. Maybe when he was human and alive, he wouldn’t have said a thing. He would have coasted, like Jacob said. But now, he couldn’t. Cause he was a Ventrue, for better or worse.

Avery frowned at him. In the dark, her silver blue eyes caught the light a little more than they should, reflecting street light into his gaze.

“Jacob needs to let out some aggression, Jack. I killed his woman and you know what he fucking did? Fucking nothing. Fucking Nothing.”

Jack peeked over his shoulder at Jacob. Without eyes, reading him was so damn fucking hard, but the creature was staring at Avery as far as Jack could tell, staring and frozen.

Clara reached out, took Jack's shoulder, and pulled him aside to stand beside her.

"Let em talk kid," she said. "Jacob will keep it all hidden in that cloak of night crap right? Just let em talk." Her fingers offered him a small squeeze of the shoulder, and she smiled down at him as she did.

But she didn't get it. He shook his head, and tried to walk back to Jacob, but she tightened her grip a little and pulled him back.

"... he's going to kill her," Jack said.

"Heh, him and what army? Besides, she's a Cahalith. She'd welcome the fight just for the story."

"This isn't about that!" Avery said with a snarl and a glare for her subordinate. "Not looking for a story here. Looking to take care of this problem here and now."

"Why get a middleman then?" Jacob said between clenched teeth.

"For everyone else. But you? I felt like I should do this in person." And again, Avery reached up, and pushed the eyeless monster back a foot. "Much as you might like to paint me as the bad guy, I do—we do what we do because the world needs us. Sometimes people get stuck in the middle. Minerva? She put herself in the middle. So I'm sorry that I killed her, and I mean it when I say I didn't want to. Take a swing."

Jack stared at Avery and Jacob, back and forth, eyes snapping and fingers rubbing together. She didn't know what she was asking for.

Jacob snarled, quiet, deep and rumbling in his throat, and wiped his thumb across his lips. “You think I’ll be satisfied with a fist fight? You worthless, fuc—”

“No, but I’m trying, Jacob. Don’t want us to be enemies, I have nothing against you. Hell, I don’t have anything against Antoinette either, and she’s the one poking the veil, Jacob.”

“... the Prince forced nothing on Minerva. You, however, did.” The old Nosferatu took a step forward, and got into Avery’s face. “You think some violence will solve this? Are you this mindless?”

“I—”

“No. You don’t get out of this with a fist in the face, you fucking dog. Not enough. Nothing would ever be enough.” Jacob, shaking his head and grinding his teeth, stepped around Avery, and started walking. Clara let go of Jack and blocked the old man’s path.

Jack didn’t see the man’s arm move, but he heard it. He heard the crunch of knuckle against bone, and the snap air parting. Blood splattered over Jack’s face, and he stared down at Clara as she crumbled, a streak of red following the movement of her skull as she fell to her palms and knees. The humans continued to walk around them like nothing had happened, like the werewolf hadn’t just taken the back of Jacob’s hand to the jaw. Like blood wasn’t gushing from her mouth into the cracks of the sidewalk, and sparkling in the streetlights.

“I don’t know you, dog. Get out of my way.” Jacob walked on without so much as a glance over his shoulder.

“F ... fucker...” Clara said, holding her mouth, the split open lip looked like it belonged on a butcher’s table, and as she cradled her jaw, more of the red liquid dripped from between her fingers.

“Shit. You ok?” Jack said. No idea how well werewolves healed when in human form, but fuck that looked painful. Jack got down on a knee, and held out his palm. Clara took it, bloody hand and all.

“Yeah. Fuck, he sucker punched me.” Every use of her lip splattered more blood, and attempts to pronounce F were a slurred mess.

Don’t stare at the blood, don’t smell the blood. And whatever you do, do not taste her blood. Don’t lick the warm stuff off your hands. Just help her up.

“Sorry,” he said, “about Jacob I mean.”

“Nah.” Avery came up beside him, and the three of them stared at the old man as he disappeared into the crowd. “We knew how he could be. I was hoping he could take out a little anger on me, maybe avoid the future fight, or delay it. But, seems I only pushed it to happen sooner.”

Humans started looking their way, the three of them no longer protected by Jacob’s cloak, and many did a double take on Clara and the copious amount of blood trickling down her neck and chest. Jack had nothing to give her though, and all he could do was wince and offer a pained smile.

“... you know he’s half a millennium old right?” Jack said. “He’s ... I’ve never seen him fight, but I’ve seen elders do some pretty scary shit, Avery.” Viktor and Tony, Lucas, Daniel, fucking monsters. And Antoinette, slaughtering over a dozen Kindred with her literal bare hands, until she was covered in ash.

Avery shrugged. “Kid, what’d I tell you? You won’t win a fight with us.” She brushed him off, and started walking the opposite direction of Jacob. “If Jacob becomes a problem, I’ll kill him.”

“He just wants answers. You killed the love of his life, Avery, and he doesn’t know why.”

The woman glared at him, grit her teeth, and walked over to the nearby lamppost. Sure enough, she reached out to touch the grip marks Jacob had made. “He knows all he needs to know.”

“ ... come on, you want me to be the cream in the Oreo here, you’re going to have to give me something to work with.”

The two werewolves blinked at him. “ ... what?” they said, in unison. For a moment, they reminded him of Ashley and Julee.

“You know, Oreos? Cookie with cream in the center? And the two cookie sides are hard and rigid and ... make for a good parallel ... with Uratha and Kindred and...” Wow, tough crowd. The two werewolves were frowning at him hard enough to break glass, at least until Clara started laughing, then groaned as she cradled her ruined mouth. Avery just kept frowning though.

He was beginning to like Clara. The two wolves may have been terrifying, and being around them had his guts on edge and demanding he hide from them; Clara at least knew how to laugh at normal jokes and stuff though.

“We’re trying to keep your fingers out of shit they shouldn’t be in, kid,” Avery said, frown chiseled into her face. “Curiosity killed the cat.”

Jack sighed, and looked to Clara. “You really think that?”

Clara winced, looked at Avery, and then back at him. But she didn’t say anything, only shrugged.

Well, that went nowhere fast.

Sighing louder, maybe just a little louder than needed, Jack jogged after where Jacob was walking. But the man was gone. Just when he was finally starting to understand the man, the wolves had ruined it. Avery's approach may have worked for wolves, but for Kindred, you had to be more subtle, more aware of the threads they weaved. Willing to dance the Danse.

Jacob was going to visit him again, and try and get his fingers into him, try and use him to get revenge on the Uratha. Only person Jack knew who could keep him safe from the man's machinations was Antoinette. He could walk to her tower, and just ... ignore the shitstorm brewing. She'd give him sanctuary, hide him from all this fucking insanity until the Uratha left. One word, and she'd take care of everything for him. All he had to do was go visit her in her tower.

Jack rubbed his buzzed head, and started the walk home instead. You're a Ventrue now, for better or worse.

## Chapter 32

~~Jack~~

He pressed the button for the elevator to his apartment, and waited. Man, what a shit show. Walking alone with Jacob had been startling, but if his time with Antoinette had taught him anything, it was elders were like onions. You had to peel them to get to the layers. And they had a lot of layers.

It wasn't the first time Jacob had taken interest to him. He interested the elder, as did Damien, because they were unpredictable. Jack always figured the more impulsive and brash Kindred like Jessy or Beatrice were unpredictable, but now that he thought about it, Jacob had a point. They weren't unpredictable, just loud. So what the fuck was it about him and Damien that Jacob considered so unpredictable? What layer of Jacob would expose the fucked up thought processes of a five-hundred-year-old vampire.

Like trying to walk more tightrope, except made of spiderweb.

In the elevator. He sighed, looked around, sighed some more, and let his head hang as his thoughts drifted back to the Primogen meeting. Elders had layers alright, and one of those layers was painting Antoinette in a bad light. He hated it. It was easier to think of her as intelligent and wise, ancient but seductive and fun, not as a real person with issues and hangups and prejudice.

Course, the prejudice may have been justified. Fiona had already killed thirteen—twelve people, in ten months. Dolareido was a huge city, but that many kills in that amount of time in that specific area was bound to attract attention. The Invictus and the Prince could suppress the evidence, make it disappear, so the pictures of the claw marks and odd blood splatter didn't attract the wrong kind of



attention. But sooner or later, someone was going to wonder why people kept dying in mysterious circumstances in Devil's Corner. Investigations would start, kine would get involved, and eventually someone would discover something they shouldn't have.

With jangling keys, the familiar tink tink calling him home, he opened the door. Some peace and quiet, a moment to consider his thoughts, to—

“Hey Jack.”

“Mother fucking!” Keys up in the air, along with his hands, and panic levels. “B-Beatrice? The hell? Fiona?”

The two women were sitting on his couch, laughing and chatting, smirking and smiling, and all the things that came with breaking into someone's home when you knew you could at any time.

“Saw this girl buzzing your number, said she knew you. So I helped her get in.”

“How!?” he said, arms up and waving.

“Well the elevator can be bypassed by climbing,” Beatrice said, “and your lock I can open cause I got mad skills. And I relocked it with your spare keys.”

Spare keys. Fuck, the spare keys. He'd meant to give them to Antoinette, but Beatrice dangled them from her claws before tossing them his way.

“Right, right, so ... um, hello?” He stood in front of the two girls, and gave them both the most angry, scrutinizing eye he could muster. Didn't work; they just laughed and giggled.

“I wanted to talk,” Fiona said.

“Thought we did?”

“Aye ... I dinnae ken. Felt like talking, visiting a friend.”

Heh, friend. She really was the type to make friends easily, wear her emotions on her sleeve sort. It took months for Jack to make friends, but Fiona figured the connection was made in just several days.

Nodding, he threw his suit jacket on the couch arm and sat down across from them.

“Sure. Shit was pretty horrible today,” he said, “so I mean, yeah, hang out. Sunrise isn’t for a couple hours.”

Fiona smiled, beaming, and put her feet up on the table again.

“Jack, if Antoinette catches you hanging out with fiery Scots women in your free time, she’s gonna tear you in half,” Beatrice said.

Both girls laughed again.

“Beatrice, why’re you here? Figured you’d be at Julias’s place.”

The Nosferatu sighed, hopped off the couch, and helped herself to some of his blood from the fridge. His apartment was fast becoming a hangout.

“Worried about Jacob. This werewolf thing has him ... pretty fucked up. He’s gone silent psycho mode. Went out a few hours ago, still hasn’t come back to the base, so I figured I’d drop by and see you. Julias’s been worried about you. He couldn’t say why, official business and shit, but with werewolves — and monsters apparently — at our door, and you, well, being you, I figured you might have been involved.”

“... wait, what?” He threw up his hands again and slapped his knees. “You just assumed I’d be involved?”

“You have a habit of getting in the middle of shit,” she said. “Prove me wrong.”

Fuck.

“Not fair.”

“And to top of it all off, this gorgeous woman says she knows you, and she knew I was a vampire on sight. Tells me she’s a monster. Not a vamp or wolf, but a monster. Like, under the bed monster, in the closet monster, creepy things under the water monster.” The Nosferatu didn’t blink or anything, just shrugged and took a sip of the red drink. “She telling the truth?”

“Course I am!”

“She is.”

“Fuck me that’s scary.” Crocodile-mouth laughed. Scary, yeah right. Jack could see down her throat with how wide her mouth could open, the weird long tongue, the huge teeth where her cheeks should be. It was enough to make Fiona blink and stare, and then laugh too.

First it was Damien, and then Natasha, and now Beatrice. Fiona got along well with the younger Kindred, but seemed to irritate the older ones who knew about the Begotten.

“So are there others of your kind?” Beatrice said.

Fiona nodded. “Aye, all kinds, all sorts, with different hungers. I feed on punishing abusive, minging folk, but I know there are others. The Dark Mother showed me peeks of things in the ocean that fed on destroying ships, but nae folk. I saw things in the sky

that fed on flesh. I saw things in basements with hoards of nick-nacks, and others in corporate headquarters with hoards of secrets. They all feed so differently!”

“Holy shit, so many nightmares I had as a kid now seem justified,” Beatrice said.

Fiona nodded. “That’s where we come from.”

“Eh, wha?”

“Nightmares. Horrors. That’s where Vrall came from, and the others without their own names. They come from the dream, where they feed. Even now I can feel her drifting through my lair.”

Both Kindred stared wide-eyed at the monster, talking about dream monsters like they were normal things.

The Nosferatu leaned in. “So, you ... you just ... feed on abusive people?”

“Nae exactly, I have to punish them. They have to ken they’ve done bad things, and that’s where the food comes from, for my horror.”

“Damn.” Beatrice tapped her teeth with one of her claws before taking another sip. “This Dark Mother shit sounds right up Jacob’s alley.”

“Oh oh! Can ye introduce me? I heard the Circle of the Crone is sort of similar?”

Jack raised a hand. “I was with Jacob a moment ago. Got into a bit of an argument with the werewolves. He uh ... clocked one of them pretty good, but otherwise, things went ... better than I figured they would? Sorta?” It was true. The whole night felt like it was building

into a nasty battle, but through it all, Jacob hadn't even taken a swing at Avery despite her prodding.

The more he talked with Avery, the less he liked her. Confident as fuck, and more than willing to get physical about it, even against a crazy bastard like Jacob. She seemed like she was trying to keep her pack safe, to take the hit for them; Clara taking the punch was a perfect example of what was probably going to happen instead.

“What has Jacob told you? About the Uratha,” Jack said, looking at Beatrice.

The Nosferatu raised a brow and set the glass down. “Fuck all; he's avoided the topic. He mentioned the monsters, the, uh, Begotten, but didn't bother with details; didn't seem to worry him. Fuck me, if I had known scary ass shit like that was lurking in our city, I'd have ... fuck, I'd probably have sought it out.” Again, she laughed, Fiona right along with her. “But the Uratha seem to be his primary concern. If I had to guess, he had a personal issue.”

Shit. Shit shit. No one else talked about it, not their place. But...

“I'm sure Jacob will tell you when you speak to him next,” he said, “that the Uratha picked me to be the middleman for communications between them and the Kindred.” Beatrice nodded with his words, but her snake eyes squinted as she undoubtedly scanned him for hidden meanings. “But ... but, with Avery, you should ... walk lightly, Beatrice. Jacob has every reason to hate her. Every reason.”

“ ... Antoinette mentioned someone named Minerva,” Beatrice said, “one time, when she came to visit the Circle. She and Jacob got into a little fight, not long after Lucas died, and ... and she called Jacob out on being an asshole. And that, when he had someone named Minerva, he wasn't an asshole. If you're right, and he hates Avery that much ... guessing it has something to do with Minerva.”

He put up his hands. “Really, I shouldn’t talk about it. Ask Jacob.”

Beatrice eyed him closely, but nodded eventually and leaned back on the couch.

“Fiona,” Jack said, “you might want to find this Azamel.”

The redhead blinked at him, eyebrows raised and glancing Beatrice’s way. “Eh? Ye sure?”

“Yeah. Antoinette said she couldn’t stop you, and ... and I feel like there’s shit going on, but I don’t know enough to make a judgment call.”

“You two in cahoots or something?” Beatrice said.

Jack shrugged. Not in cahoots, he didn’t think so anyway. But Damien had asked him for a favor, and for some damn fucking reason, he wanted to follow through.

“There’s a connection,” he said, “between the Uratha showing up, and Fiona. Don’t know what it is, don’t want to jump to any conclusions, but from how the Prince mentioned Azamel, she ... she could have some answers.”

“I dinnae ken. Talking to Azamel could make me Antoinette’s enemy.”

“She doesn’t like you already.”

“Ha, true lad.”

Beatrice raised a brow as she listened, before eventually taking another sip of her drink and setting the glass down. “Azamel?”

“Another Begotten like Fiona. She’s ... well, I don’t know. She’s dangerous as all fuck, I know that much. But if she has information, I want it.”

“You’re biting off a lot to chew here Jack,” the Nosferatu said.

“If I can stop Jacob from doing something we’ll all regret, I’d like to.” Jack sighed, and buried his face in his palms. Monsters, werewolves, Azamel, and Jacob. If that was the list, Jacob was his biggest concern.

Beatrice didn’t look too convinced, but Fiona nodded and pat the girl on the back.

“Aye, I’ll find this Azamel, talk to her, see if she knows what’s going on with these werewolves.”

“And ... make sure you avoid the Uratha,” he said.

“ ... aye.”

No need to say it. The Uratha were hunting something. It could be her. If it turned out to be, Azamel might be her only hope.



~~Beatrice~~

Jacob didn’t come back to the Circle’s home last night. She awoke to a new night in her cubby-hole in the cave, moved the hanging fur aside — pitiful door drape curtain thing, really — and poked her head out to see what the others were up to. Still no Jacob.

Aaron drifted around, glancing between the book in his hands and the bone-covered walls. Some ghouls were around; they always were while the Kindred slept. They nodded, bowed to Aaron, and resumed cleaning the place, relighting candles or replacing them, adjusting where the candles sat upon skulls and such, or wiping excess wax from the bones. The ghouls were armed too, with shotguns. Shotguns hurt. A lot.

“Any idea where the boss is?” Beatrice said.

Aaron shrugged. “No. He never came back from the Primogen meeting.” Yeah, Jacob had a chat with Jack and the wolves after that, but the man had plenty of time to get back to base since then. “Well, he does like to disappear every so often, so I wouldn’t worry too much about it.”

“Even with wolves around?”

Aaron shrugged again, found a wooden chair, and resumed reading.

Man was useless. She’d never seen the Gangrel actually do something, but Jacob valued his presence, and even his input from time to time. She chalked it up to her simply not knowing what was really going on, since that seemed to happen a lot. Tonight being no exception.

She wandered over to Othello’s hole in the wall. Lots of furs all around, but no kine or ghouls. She knew he had one female ghoul at least, a frequent treat of his, but she was nowhere to be found. And it wasn’t a good idea to keep your kine meals around during the day; if they woke up to sleeping Kindred, it wouldn’t end well.

Othello, wearing only a pair of dirty black jeans, sat up and stretched himself out. “Yo Triss.”

“Heya. Any idea where Jacob might be?”

“Nah. Fucker does his own thing ya know.”

“Yeah, but ... shit is kind of hitting the fan. Couple weeks ago I was investigating Invictus and Carthian bullshit, now we have monsters and fucking werewolves in the city and no Jacob.” She leaned against the man’s wall, and felt some of the hanging furs with her claws. So soft. “Don’t see you not having sex very often Othello.”



“Don’t see you having sex ever, Beatrice.”

“Hey fuck you, I get laid all the time! Not that that should matter. The fuck is this, college?”

Othello laughed, and lay back down, hooking his fingers behind his head. “You started it. I’m sure Julias treats you nice though, in a mansion, full of pillows and money and free meals.”

He was looking for a fight. Was he looking for a fight? He chuckled and shifted around to get comfortable on the blankets; so exposed, she could drive her foot right into his balls. But the man was just probably just teasing her. Jacob liked to do that, joke with you, see how you reacted, try and pull some genuine emotion out of you instead of Kindred manipulations. She loved and hated that about her boss, as she was sure they all did. And Othello was probably just emulating him.

“Sorry I was smart enough to get in with good money,” she said, grinning. “You ever fuck underneath a chandelier, or lean back in a hot tub while a couple of kine massage your whole body while you fuck your lover?”

“Can’t say I have.” Bastard didn’t bother to open his eyes. “Did the hot tub thing sort of, just without a lover.”

“ ... ever have a lover?”

“Nope.”

Arrow to the chest. She didn’t react, didn’t give it away, but damn, she had thought Othello must have had at least some genuine relationships in his life. Nearly as old as Julias, and never had a real lover. Well, if it made him happy, good for him. But she couldn’t imagine going through a century of unlife without the tingling in her bones she felt when she was with Julias.

Jennifer hopped down from her hole; much higher in the cave wall than theirs. “We’re not all as lucky as you.” She walked up to them, wearing a simple black robe made for expensive bathrooms. The sort of robe you’d find in Julias’s place.

“Don’t suppose you know where Jacob went?”

“No,” Jen said. “I was with him, when he visited Julias though.”

Funny, kid didn’t mention her being there.

“Why?” She stepped out of Othello’s cave, and wandered back to her own to sit down on some blankets. Her laptop had no battery life left, and her smartphone was getting low too. She’d have to step out to get some power; probably to Julias’s.

“Jacob said he was going to go talk with Jack, and figured the kid would be at Mire’s, after that meeting. He only dropped by here for a moment before heading out again.” Jennifer shrugged and plopped down on the blankets next to her. “So naturally I wanted to go with him, and talk to Julias about my proposal.”

Oh god damn it.

“Really Jen? Kind of crossing the line don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t.” She smiled her cocky smile and sat, back against the little cave wall. “I was honest with him about everything. And he hit me with talk about love and stuff, worrying having another Kindred in the bed might ruin things, that he didn’t want to let you go blah blah.”

Beatrice smiled, not a cocky one though like Jen’s. Knowing Julias described her as his love to Jennifer, and purposefully dodging a threesome — a feat of willpower for any man, Kindred or not — was making her glow.

“What’d you tell him?” Jennifer said.

“Eh? Oh about you and your persistent horniness. I said ... well I said I was down as long as he was comfortable with it. If he’s not comfortable with it, then I’m sorry Jen but you ain’t getting a piece of this ass.”

The Ventrue sighed a dramatic, theatrical sigh, but nodded and adjusted her robe. “I’ll break him yet. Give me time.” They both chuckled. “Meet any of the monsters yet?”

“Yeah, a young one named Fiona, girl from Scotland. Short, curvy girl, huge rack, I’m sure you’d like her.”

Try as Jen might to keep her face straight, a grin and laugh worked their way onto her expression. “Maybe. Doesn’t sound like a monster though.”

“Yeah, she didn’t look or act like one. But damn, I felt something, Jen, in my guts. Girl looked fun, like a firecracker, sort of girl to take to a bar, get drunk, loves to party and dance and shit. But ... my guts didn’t feel that at all.” Felt like she’d been sitting near another Jacob. Something older even.

“I’m being left out then. Werewolves and monsters and I haven’t met any of them.”

“Well I got along with Fiona fine. I’ll introduce you sometime. You can try and get into her pants too.” Girl seemed friendly enough, at least enough to let Jen down easy if she wasn’t interested. “I—”

The familiar tap of soft shoes stirred them all to stand. Jacob walked into the grand cave, and all four Kindred came out to watch him, to read him, see what his attitude was.

Dude seemed kind of quiet, a little distant too. He didn't look in anyone's direction — not that it was easy to tell with the whole eyeless thing — and he kept his head pointed at the cave floor, fingers on his chin, and the occasional nod to no one.

Beatrice walked up to him. “Jacob, where you been?” Might as well dive in head first.

“Out.” The old man walked up to the blood bowl in the center of the cavern, and put his hands on the edge as he stared into it. It was empty. If he was planning on doing some more crazy Crúac madness, he'd be getting more. But the man just stood there, and stared into the bowl.

“I spoke to Jack,” she said as she stood opposite of him around the bowl. “Heavy shit.” No reaction from the old bastard though, so she tried again. “What's the plan, boss?”

He shook his head. “No plan.”

“No plan?” Jennifer came up to stand beside her. A little further back truthfully, and understandably. “Monsters and werewolves have come into the city.”

“Yeah,” Beatrice said. “I can understand no plan for the monsters, they're not causing shit. But—”

“Yet,” he said. “They're not causing shit yet.” Maybe he did worry about the Begotten then?

“... ok, yet, fine. But the werewolves? We not planning to do something about them?”

“As long as we stay out of their way, they well do nothing to us.”

Passivity, from Jacob? She leaned in a little, enough to put her chin between his gaze and the empty blood bowl.

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure out something happened, Jacob, with you and the werewolves ... and Minerva.”

Jacob raised his head, and she winced and jumped back. But the impending punch never came, thank god. She’d seen what it could do to Antoinette, and she doubted she’d still have her head if the old beast decided to hit her.

But he did no such thing. He looked back down at the bowl, but otherwise was as still as a statue.

“It’s not a secret,” he said, “that Avery killed Minerva. I prefer to not talk about it. Some memories are best left forgotten.”

Holy mother of god he was broken. No snap, no zing, no sneer or chuckle or even a smile. The old man just stared down at the bowl, dead still.

Beatrice stepped back in. “And there’s no plan? We’re not going to try and make them pay?”

The old man smirked. Finally, something normal out of him.

“It’s complicated Triss. Don’t get me wrong, nothing would make me happier than making them pay. Cause...” Another sigh before the old man walked away from the bowl and started to head toward his room. His was a hallway carved into the side of the grand cavern, and it winded like a snake into a larger room. Much different from the other holes the rest of them slept in.

And Beatrice followed him the whole way. Aaron had put his book down to listen at some point. Conversation had to be interesting if even he would stop reading to hear it. She shrugged at him, and followed the old beast. No one ever came to Jacob’s room unless it was urgent. But she wasn’t going to get an answer being passive about this.

“I won’t ask for details about Minerva. I figure she was important to you, very important, I get it,” she said. Jacob frowned over his shoulder at her, but she put up her hands in surrender. “Serious, I get it Jacob. And you’re telling me Avery killed her? Werewolf?”

“Werewolf leader now. The times they are a-changin’.” The Nosferatu sat down on his pile of furs, not dissimilar to the ones found in their rooms. The major differences were the ornaments he’d hung on the walls, bones with drawings etched into them, little flannel bags with feathers sticking out of them, some masks carved out of wood stained black, lots of creepy shit.

“She wasn’t before?” Most talkative-without-the-bullshit mood she’d ever heard Jacob in, might as well get some information out of him while she could.

“No. When the Uratha came to Dolareido in the fifties, they were lead by someone named Simon. Bit of an old man”—he was one to talk—“so he’s probably dead by now, either old age or a hunt gone bad. Hopefully the latter. Would have loved to see him get ripped open.” The old Nosferatu grabbed one of the skulls on the wall, a horse skull if Beatrice was right, and held it in front of him. Seeing an eyeless man examine an object was a weird sight.

“So ... Avery’s back. Older, and ... stronger, I guess? Back and in charge of a new pack?”

“Seems that way.”

“... got to be honest with you Jacob, I expected a little more of that fucking psycho I’d grown used to. And I expected that psycho to be full-on rage-boner hard right now, and concocting a plan to kill Avery horribly.” She leaned against the cave wall, and peeked behind her. Still just her, alone, poking the bear like an idiot.

Jacob frowned at her, but his gaze fell back to the horse skull, and he ran his fingers along its surface, its texture, its stained dirty

white shape.

“You ever fought a werewolf, Triss?”

“What? No, course not. Hell I borderline figured they were a myth since no one talked about them, except to be scary. They—”

“Imagine ... a creature of claws, and muscle, of bone and strength. Think a Gangrel gone draugr, transformed with as much malice and blood as they can muster, talons and fangs and all. Now make them nine feet tall, drooling at the chops.” Jacob set the skull down beside him, and reached out to the wall for a small dagger, still sheathed. “Imagine one of these beasts in a building, tearing through the walls, ripping the ceiling apart like tissue, slamming its weight against brick and wood and snapping them apart with explosive force. You and your friends, your fellow Kindred, have stabbed the beast enough times that a dozen knives protrude from its arms, its legs, its stomach. One protrudes from its neck, and each step the Uratha takes causes blood to drip down its fur, covered in drywall powder. It doesn’t slow down. You fire your pistol into its chest. Each bullet lands, and you hear the thunk of the metal hitting bone or meat, and barely getting past the first inch of flesh. You panic and run outside, and as your friends lay siege to the building with fully automatic weaponry, you set the building on fire. Through the sounds of machine gun fire and the roar of the flames, you hear something roar louder. The werewolf bursts through the wall, howling, as it runs you down, and kills you.”

What. The. Fuck.

“Did ... did that actually happen?”

Jacob nodded, and with a slow hand, drew the dagger from its sheath. It shined with a glint she knew well: silver.

“Not to me, not in Dolareido. But I speak with witches in other cities from time to time. The dogs pass through some cities, and

some have dogs that live there. Some of the idiot beasts hang out in the woods, in forests near villages. They hunt things, and they kill anyone that gets in their way.” He shook his head some more, and waved the small dagger in front of her. “I ask the Circle: how do you kill these fuckers? How do you make them suffer?” A deep breath and sigh later, he kissed the blade. “They say: don’t.”

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Knock knock.

“Triss,” Julias said, smile on his face.

“Every time you open that door, it’s like a scene from a movie. You need new doors.” She unfolded her arms from her chest, and gestured to the enormous things and the ridiculous knocker, before stepping inside her love’s mansion. Heh, mansion.

“It helps scare away young Invictus who’d treat me like a mentor otherwise, or something.”

“Yeah, I can see that. The young ones can be real pests.” How Garry put up with people like her, she didn’t know. “Maybe you should dye your hair? Blond slicked back like that is classic mafia stuff.”

“But the mafia look helps scare them off too.” He ran his fingers through his hair, and how it was combed back over his head, slick to his scalp.

Laughter. A nice change from Jacob’s new somber attitude.

The laptop made a quiet thud as she set it down on a nearby table. No need to explain, Julias knew she wanted to charge it. She started to walk the halls of Julias’s mansion, and Julias followed after her. One of their usual games, since the man had such a huge home and she did love to explore it. Every time she visited, she found a new room she’d yet to see.



“We never explore the basement very much,” she said. “How much of it have you explored?”

“All of it,” he said. “It’s about what you’d expect from a man like Viktor. Lots of tunnels, hidden rooms, all dead ends so no one’s sneaking into the mansion that way. But he’s got a lot of rooms down there, and a dungeon with some skeletons, real ones.”

“Real ones?” Fucking creepy. Not that she was one to talk, given her old hangout in the catacombs.

“Yeah. Did you want to see?”

“Hmmm ... sure.” She hooked her arm around his, and started to walk like a proper lady. If she had an umbrella and a vintage dress, it would have fit much better than her white tank top, black jeans, and army boots.

Sure enough, Julias broke, and laughed until he had to find a railing to stabilize himself. She tugged on him before he could though, and he almost tripped until she caught him, only for her to return his laugh.

Good god they were giggling like a bunch of idiots in love.

“So,” she said once they got their bearings, “guide me.”

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“Daaaaaaamn.” Her voice echoed down the hallway, and came back to her as a ghostly thing, drowned in the sound of old rocks and cold metal bars. It really was a dungeon, the sort of dungeon they had over a hundred years ago, the sort with old light bulbs hanging from dusty old cables from cracked concrete ceilings. “Must have built this during World War One?”

“Yeah. Earlier even, probably as a tunnel, and he had the cells and such added later.”

“Did Viktor never bring you down here?” she said.

“No. He was a private man from the day I met him.”

She walked ahead of him, and peeked around corners to look into the empty cells and their dangling chains, their metal chairs and tables, before looking over her shoulder at him.

“... Viktor was a real fucking monster.” Maybe too much, insulting his old sire like that.

“Before his long torpor, he wasn’t so bad.” The white knight came up to her, and put an arm around her shoulder as the two slow walked through the abandoned tunnels of Viktor’s underground dungeon. “In fact, he was a great mentor. I learned a lot from him, and he was happy to share his skills with me. He was brutal, ruthless, cold, but ... wise, and when others would get angry or irrational, he stayed cool, calm. He could cut through the shit and get to the heart of the problem; and come out on top. He taught me how to read people. He taught me how to play poker. He wasn’t ... actively vicious.” He hugged her a little tighter, and she sank her head into the nook of his arm. “Came back from sleeping for years a nefarious, diabolical creature.”

“Good word use.” That got some more chuckles out of her man. “I barely knew Jerem. Horrible monster of a man stalked me, I know that, before he turned me. I used to catch glimpses of him in the shadows, this weird man who kept popping up out of nowhere. He had this weird crocodile kinda mouth, and I thought he was wearing a creepy mask or something. Fuck, if only I knew.” She stopped by one of the cells, and stepped inside. There were a few bones on one of the tables, including a skull. Damn Viktor was a strange man to keep this shit in his home.

“We both had our embrace forced upon us, by our now dead sires.” Mire followed her in, and sat down in the chair with its back to his stomach, his arms across the top. Fit him perfectly, like he

was going to give an interrogation. “But, much as that was horrible, and royally horrible at that, I’m glad it happened. Wouldn’t have met you otherwise.”

“Yeah, me too.” She sat on the edge of the table and picked up the skull; held it out in front of her too, and smirked. “Alas, poor Yorick.”

More chuckles from the two of them. So completely at odds with a dungeon that must have seen more than a few deaths, and knowing Viktor, a chunk of them were probably innocent. The Prince always encouraged Kindred to only kill kine if they deserved it, but it wasn’t a rule.

“I learned a lot from Viktor, about reading people, and ... and you’re sending me a lot of fear signals.”

“What? The fuck I am.” She set the skull down and frowned at him.

“Yeah, you are.” He reached out for the chair behind him, and slid it across the cracked concrete floor. “Sit.”

More frowns, but with a humph and annoyed groan, she sat down. Fool her once, shame on him, fool her a dozen times, shame on her. The man had a habit of saying truthful things that really hurt, but once you got through the pain, you became a better person. Or something like that. She just knew that, if she gave Superman a chance, he found a kernel of truth she knew she liked to avoid.

With the table between them, it had suddenly become an interrogation.

“Alright Mire, hit me.”

Mire smirked. Yeah, that’s right, last name defense.

“Your eyes have been on the ground more often than usual. Your shoulders have been slouching a little more than normal. You’ve avoided eye contact, but at the same time hugged me more than normal. When I opened the door, your arms were across your chest. And your claws have been tugging on the bottom of your shirt.”

One of her claws was tugging on the bottom of her tank top over her hip.

“ ... fuck.” She lifted it and put it on her knee. “ ... fuck fuck, where do you normally put your hands?”

“So, you’re afraid. Want to talk about it?”

“No! I wanted to come over and have sex and get cuddly.” Which was totally true she thought. But he wasn’t buying it. Superman shook his head a little, and slid in closer to the table.

“Lot of shit happening these days, Triss. I know I’m afraid. First it was Garry and my colleagues getting in each other’s way, pushing for a fight, border skirmishes you know about. And I’m trying my best to keep that from happening. And now, werewolves are here, and ... and I remember what they were like last time they were here Triss. All I could do was stay out of their way. And Jacob, he ... your leader is a scary man when he wants to be, Triss. He’s smart, strong, and very, very ... very...”

She stared at her Superman, head slowly leaning in more and more as he confessed his fears. God, he was thinking the same things she was.

“Very psycho, when he wants to be,” she said. “ ... yeah, I’m scared. At first I was just worried about Garry and my old buds, but now Avery is back and, and ... Jacob told me what these wolves can do.”

“Has Jacob told you—”

“Yeah, he told me about Avery, and his girl Minerva. Was pretty weird, hearing my boss so somber and depressed and shit. I mean, fuck, he’s Jacob. Him getting quiet? Him getting ... normal? He’s going to do something.” Not like she was ratting him out. No doubt all the Primogen assumed the man was going to do something. “Just ... no idea what he can do against these beasts.”

“There’s a good reason we don’t try and force them out.” Julias got up off the chair and sat on the table edge in front of her. “You can kill them, if you’re willing to throw a wall of silver and bodies at them. They might have other weaknesses that we don’t know about, but the wolves keep to themselves and guard their secrets from us pretty closely. And ... better that they do, I imagine. Not sure I want to get involved in what they do.”

“Not going to hit me with that knowledge is dangerous crap, are you? I can’t agree with that, ever. Knowledge is knowledge, and knowledge is always useful. Only problem is with the people who get it, not the knowledge itself.” Well look at her, sounding all philosophical and crap.

Superman nodded, and reached out with a hand. She took it. The delightful rush of his grip, his fingers around hers, pulling her toward him, until he had her standing between his knees while he sat on the table. He pulled her hand up to his lips, and gave her knuckles a soft kiss too.

“Yeah, and Jacob can be one of those people you don’t want to have it.”

Ah, that. Right. “Yeah,” she said. “But ... but he’s Jacob. I mean, before when I was Carthian, he was always this imposing figure. Since joining the Circle though, I’ve gotten to know him a bit better, and I really...”

“Triss if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you liked him.”

“Hey!” She tried to step out from between his knees, but he kept her hands in his and pulled her right back to them. “I ... kind of like him, I guess. The longer I’m in the Circle, the more I respect him, and disagree with him about things less, and stuff.”

“Elders have that effect on people. Even Viktor had his moments,” he said. Hard to imagine that asshole getting on anyone’s good side. “But, yeah, Jacob is ... I’ll keep an eye on him Triss, see if I can head off any problems before they get rolling.”

Jack had said the same thing. Like sire, like childe.

“Good luck with that.” She sighed, and turned around before leaning back into her love’s arms. “If anything, he’ll be the one to make them.”

“Yeah well, I’m pretty good at what I do. I’ll keep him out of harm’s way best I can, even his own.”

She leaned her head back over his shoulder, and relaxed into his body. Superman was a smart man, but Jacob was Jacob. If she had to bet on one of them to win in a battle of wits, she’d pick Jacob, no question. Still, Julias was good at what he did, damn good. She should trust him.

She turned her head, and gave his jawline a kiss. “Love you.”

“Love you.”

“Good, through with the I-love-yous. I had a lot more toys I wanted to try in that box.”

“We’re in a dungeon. There are bones down here. And you’re thinking about sex?”

She reached down, grabbed his hands, and put them onto her tits, complete with a few shakes and rubs so her nipple piercings pressed

into his palms. “Yes I am damn it. Think this shit bothers me? I hung out in a catacomb for years ... but, I would prefer to fuck in a nicer locale.”

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~~Julias~~

“Daaaaaaaaamn,” she said again.

It was the closest thing the mansion had to a living room, one of its many, but its most luxurious. A large room with several tables upon a glorious, massive, soft rug of curling reds along a blue base. The walls were tall, maroon, with black and gold drapes against wooden frames. A chandelier hung above, a fireplace big enough to fit a car stood at the back, and long couches lined the walls. The sort of room you’d have your richest guests over for, to sample caviar while admiring the paintings of renaissance Europe.

“So, wanna bet if I dig up these floorboards, there’s a corpse underneath here?” She walked into the center of the room, directly beneath the chandelier and between the four tables. “I’m sure they’ve used this place for several murder mystery movies.”

“Maybe. It wouldn’t surprise me.” He sat down by the fireplace. Unlit; Kindred didn’t like fire. But they did like long, soft couches.

“I was disappointed with the size of my original sex box, and decided to raid Soft Touch’s shelves.”

“Oh, that’s why the new box was so huge.”

“Yeah. Come on man, I’m surrounded by sex all damn night. Forgive a girl for having it on the mind when she goes out.” She set the big box down atop one of the circle tables, and popped it open before she started placing various objects beside it. Dildos, lubricant, jewelry, lingerie, she piled it all atop the expensive wood of the table next to the fine china and such.

“I can see that.”

“And besides, you ever have anyone over to use these rooms? Viktor played the game with these rooms, had important kine over he could buy out. Or dominate if he couldn't, I'm sure.” She took off her jeans and threw them onto a nearby couch.

God damn her legs. The woman had a habit of wearing a thong when she came to visit, despite her frequent complaints about how uncomfortable they were. Ass floss, she called them; and yet there she stood with the black thong riding high on her hip and disappearing into the curves of her delicious, toned behind. She blushed life as well, and her pale skin darkened with her natural, lightly tanned skin tone.

Still wearing her boots though, black combat boots. Matched her white tank top perfectly.

“Should I—”

“Nope. Don't move for now. I wanna have some fun,” she said. “But you can blush.”

He laughed, folded one leg over the other, and hooked his arms onto the back of the couch. Beatrice did love to show off, more than most women. He loved that. She liked showing off her tattoos, her piercings, she liked showing off her muscles, her ripped stomach and lean figure, and now that she was comfortable with him, her teeth.

A little effort and mental focus, and the blush of life flowed through his dried veins, reigniting the warmth, the heartbeat, and the natural arousal that came with. Staring at her ass was always a guaranteed erection, and with the combat boots, it was a spice that teased him just right. Like her teeth did.



She grabbed one of the chains off the table, and turned to face him. A collar was in her hand, a dog collar, but big enough for a human.

“Always struck me as odd, how empowering it was to wear a collar.” Smirking, she put the black thing around her neck. And it looked so damn perfect on her, against the white of her tank top, and the myriad of piercings dangling from her ears, eyebrows, and nose.

“Well, it does really make you look really ... really fuckable,” he said, and she laughed with the word. “Puts the power in your hand, when you make anyone hard just looking at you.”

“Yeah, I get that. But at the same time it is a sign of submission, isn’t it?” She walked up to him, and slipped her tank top off, exposing all the tattoos along her body, especially the snake that ran from her mons, along her abs, and up to her breast where the snake bit into her nipple. Her nipple piercings were simple little silver rings, much like the ones in her eyebrow, her nose and lips, her ear. She was wearing a couple tiny silver chains that connected her ear to her nose piercings too. Silver wasn’t her usual color; she normally wore gray. Maybe she was trying to look fancy for him, in her own way.

“If I had to guess,” he said, “it’s because it represents owning your sexuality.”

“Makes sense.” She climbed up to his lap and straddled his legs, her knees to the couch. Sitting on him, she took the chain and hooked it to her neck with a bolt snap hook, like a pet leash might have. The chain came down between her breasts and split into two smaller chains, each with normal chain-link hooks at the end that she then hooked into the piercings of her nipples.

Julias did everything in his power to keep his hands at his sides.

“Sometimes,” she said, “a girl really does just want to give over control though. Get told what to do, taken for a ride, pinned down, have no say in the matter. Just give in, let the man take charge.” She slid in closer until the crotch of her thong rubbed against where his erection was pressed hard to his pants. Her body came forward, and she pressed her hard nipples against his suit jacket as her claws drifted along his waist. “Think you can handle that?”

He’d bedded plenty of girls who loved to be told what to do in bed. A lot of them found it freeing, allowed them to let loose and enjoy things they might not otherwise. Beatrice never needed the encouragement; she always told him exactly what she wanted.

But tonight she was different. She was feeling helpless in the dangerous circumstances that were pouring over them. And maybe she just wanted to feel protected.

He kissed her, and smiled. “Go get that plug that we didn’t use last time. And some lubricant.”

A tiny growl rumbled in her throat, and she kissed his neck as she purred. “Yes sir.” She slid off his lap, strutted back to the table, and grabbed two things. One, a bottle of lubricant that they’d both come to enjoy for its long lasting properties, and the other was a dildo with a plug end. Her grin had only grown when she came back to him, and set them into his awaiting palms.

“Turn around,” he said.

She shivered, and did as ordered.

He set the large dildo upon his lap. A bendable, somewhat soft creation, colored blue and rather thick and large; a larger toy compared to what the two of them normally used. He looked forward to it.

He set both hands on her ass cheeks, and squeezed. Beatrice, chuckling and squirming, pushed her ass back toward him, and he responded with kneading fingers. Hard muscle, with just enough fat on it to keep its round shape. Perfect. He took the lubricant into one hand, and used his other hand to pull her thong aside.

“Bend over.”

Chuckling all the more, she did as requested, and stuck her ass out toward him as she put her claws on her knees.

He placed the tip of the bottle along the crack of her glorious ass, and let the thick liquid drip down and onto her skin. She shivered; liquid was a bit cool compared to her body temperature, since she was blushing life. But in no time, it warmed as the fingers of his other hand pressed against the rose of her ass, and started to massage it into her skin.

The reaction was strong. Triss started to shiver some more, and she spread her legs another few inches as she got comfortable, still bent over, and glancing around her leg to smile at him. Her eyes rolled upward when he eased two of his fingers into her to the first knuckle, and started worming them around, insuring each not only began to soak her muscle with the lubricant, but also start to stretch her open.

Once her entrance was thoroughly lubricated, he set the bottle down, and placed his now free hand between her thighs. Getting warmer, and her folds were starting to glisten with a trace of wetness. And as he started to caress her clitoris with his newly freed set of fingers, Beatrice’s shivering grew.

“Been at this three minutes and you’re already wet.” He eased his two fingers into her ass to the next knuckle, and spread them apart, opening her and stretching the tight muscles within. All the while, his fingers upon her clit moved in a gentle, circular massage.

“Yeap.” One of her hands held her knee for support, while the other reached back to pull an ass cheek to the side, to expose more of herself to him, as her long tongue dangled out of her crocodile mouth.

He sank his two fingers deeper into her ass, to the last knuckle, and pressed down. The Nosferatu groaned, squeezed on his fingers for a moment before relaxing, and took a deep breath between her growing pants. Her squeezing resumed all the more as the two fingers on her clit offered a few soft strokes of her piercing dangling from her clit hood. It was the downward presses of his fingers inside her ass that earned the loudest groans though, made her legs shiver and her sphincter squeeze. She started to move her ass toward him, finding the rhythm of his fingers, and he reciprocated with a consistent pace, reaching deep into her and pushing down toward her belly while his other hand continued to caress her swelling clitoris.

He stopped.

“Wha? H-Hey, I was really getting off on that.” She peeked her head over to the side, and frowned at him. Paired with her begging eyes, the frown was comical.

He kissed the cheek of her ass, and slid his fingers out of her clenching muscles. Well lubricated, and slightly stretched; perfect. He grabbed the large dildo, and set its bulbous tip against the rose of her ass. Large indeed; pressing against her clenching hole met with no progress, and Triss laughed as she started to relax her muscles. Laughter turned to familiar moans as her wet muscle spread open on the dildo’s tip, and inch by inch, Julias slowly sank the object into her ass.

“Damn,” he said as he watched her muscles clench and unclench with each passing inch. Bumps and grooves lined the toy, and every so often, slipping one of the thicker parts into Triss made her

shudder, and mewl. Once it was in to the end, her anus tightened around the thin part before the flared tip. Secure.

He kissed her ass cheek once again, and slid her thong off her body down to her boots. She stepped out of it without missing a beat, despite her shivering legs, and kicked it to the side.

“God that’s ... fucking ... thick. Deep.” She turned around to face him, grinning large and exposing her many teeth. Once was a time where she wouldn’t do that, but as she quivered and struggled to hold still, her jaw opened inhumanly wide, and she moaned. Girl couldn’t hold still.

“Get one of your small chains, and come sit on my lap.”

“Ooh, ok.” She turned around and walked for the table again, making sure to sway her ass with every step so the blue plug’s end was on full display. “Weird as fuck walking around with this thing inside me.”

“Should have stolen one of the vibrating ones that come with a phone app to turn them on or off. Different vibration settings too.”

“... they make those!?” With a tiny chain in hand, she turned around and beamed at him, as if he’d given her the keys to happiness. “God bless technology.”

He had to admit, much as technology caused their kind many woes, it had brought many possibilities for an expanded sex life. Maybe he’d get her one of those toys, and perhaps other more modern, larger ones, with motors.

His eyes caught onto her body as she straddled his legs once more. Damn that body, the way her abs flexed and crunched when she shifted around, the way the chain pulled on her hard nipples as she got comfortable. He reached for it, and pulled down on the

chain, earning a small groan from the Nosferatu as she leaned in with his pulling, and put her lips to his.

“Put on the chain,” he said.

Claws found the jewelry, worked it along the pierced hood of her clit, and hooked it on. It was a few inches long, enough that each movement either of them made forced it to rub along the engorged nub.

Julias undid the fly of his pants, and pulled out his cock through the flap of his underwear. Hard to do with Beatrice fighting for all the room on his lap, but she worked with him, and groaned her animal growls when he held his length in his grip.

“Sit.”

Giving her orders was a dangerous game. Too much and he'd make her angry, ruin the mood. But she was going along with it, and judging from all her purring and smiles, she was enjoying being on the receiving end of some orders, a lot more than he thought she would. She slid forward and lowered herself, until the dripping wet folds of her pussy found the head of his cock. With her claws braced on his shoulders, body leaning back, she started to ease herself down onto him.

“Oh ... fucking ... god that is tight,” she said.

Julias couldn't say anything. He struggled to keep his hand where it was, instead of grabbing her hips and forcing her down. She was right, it was tight, much tighter than usual. So tight that it was almost painful how her taut entrance gripped and squeezed along his glans as she slowly sank herself down onto him. Her clit chain dangled over his length and nudged against his fingers holding his cock; wet already.

“Fuuuck that’s ... hitting me ... right ... fucking there.” She leaned in and hugged him, weight still on her knees so she didn’t sink down any faster. Still going slow, still taking her time, she started to wriggle her hips left and right as she clenched the top half of his cock, each squeeze leaking more of her juices onto his girth until he could feel her wet warmth along the base of his member.

He let go of his shaft and set his hands on her hips instead. They roamed, kneading the meat of her buttocks with one, the other tickling up and down her naked spine. Her spine was a weak point, and he exploited it mercilessly, fingertips tracing it, dancing along it, making her shiver and squirm.

“Keep going,” he said when she stopped.

“Trying, just ... don’t got any fucking room left.”

He could feel that, feel how the huge toy inside her was fighting for room, making everything tight, making every inch she managed to take of his cock a tight heaven of wet muscle milking him. So, with a kiss on her neck and one hand holding her thigh for support, he slapped her ass.

“Hey!”

God damn she squeezed hard, and Julias winced as her pussy gripped down tight like a vise. She sat up too, and frowned at him with her snake eyes. But a second slap wiped it away, replaced it with a dropped jaw and wide eyes, an expression he knew all too well.

She liked it.

“All the way,” he said, winking.

The Nosferatu managed to find her composure, and moaned at him as she started to lower herself down again. Clenching muscles

managed to relax for a moment, before they started again as the glans of his cock found her depths.

A little whimper sneaked its way out of Triss, and she blocked it off quick with sealed lips and clenched jaw. But she didn't stop lowering herself, and she groaned in her throat as a couple more inches of girth fit into her, stretching her inward. The tightness of her furthest depths along his glans was euphoric for him, but he could see being penetrated so deeply hurt Triss's insides. Her groans told him she loved it. And he knew she would, she always did. Girl got off on a little pain.

He put both hands onto her bare hips, and pushed down.

"Fuuuuuck." She hugged him as she devoured him to the hilt, and once she put a kiss on his cheek, she leaned back and hooked her legs around behind him. He had to slide forward a bit for her to fit her legs, but it was a big couch, more than enough room for her to get cozy on his lap.

"So you'll be my slave for the night, hmm?"

"Ha, yeah." She leaned in again and put another quick kiss on his lips before she leaned back, hooked her claws on his neck, and started to gently rock her body back and forth. "I'm a naughty girl and I need to be punished."

She did love to play games. And, the more he hung out with her, the more he enjoyed playing them. Before with the kine, his meals, the games were always fleeting things that rarely meant something to him. To have a night of silly, sexual fun was for the human to find joy, and for him to leech off of it. But with Triss, it was different, it was ... genuinely touching. It was like he'd regressed to a love sick boy, ready to rub noses and speak in baby talk. Not that he'd ever talk baby talk to her; she'd hurt him if he tried.



With her leaning back, he got to watch her body, her handful, amazing breasts, and hard nipples that held the chain connected to her collar. He reached out for the chain, and tugged on it, holding it in a spot to make sure the weight mostly tugged on her neck, but a little on her nipples too. It earned a chuckle, and something close to a tiny mewl from the beautiful monster.

“Slow down,” he said.

“Slow down? Come on, I’m fucking soaked, I got a giant dildo in my ass, and I got you fucking balls deep. You have no idea what this feels like. So. Damn. Full.” She did know her dirty talk.

“Slow down.” Again, he tugged on her leash, enough to make her breasts jiggle with the shaking chain. It forced her to a stop, and earned another mewl. “I want to take the time to enjoy this.” While his one hand held the chain connected to her collar and nipples, his other reached down for her clitoris, and he lifted the small chain connected to its hood. Touching the chain forced Triss to tremble, and shaking it made her squeal, a noise he smirked upon hearing.

“Come onnnnn, please?” she said, eyebrows raised with blatant need. Her claws tightened around his shoulders before one slid down to find his tie. He was still fully clothed after all, while she was completely naked. The tie, she loved the tie, and she ran her claw up and down it before her claws came to the end to tug on it in a similar way to his tugging on her chain.

He tugged on hers harder, and she meeped, let go of his tie, and put both her claws on his shoulders again to hold on.

“Bad girl. You deserve to be punished.” He reached up, and put his hand around her throat. Her eyes went wide, and she moved her grip from his shoulders to his arms as he started to squeeze. Not enough to hurt her, but enough to establish a firm grip around her neck, enough so she’d feel the strength of his hand. “Hold still.”

His other started to play with her clit, hard. He moved the chain, twisted it, shifted it left and right. Triss was reduced to a trembling mess of groans, and her insides squeezed in spasms that made Julias groan as well, deep in his chest. He could feel everything. So tight, so damn ridiculously tight in her with his cock fighting for room, every shift of her weight was divine, soaked insides milking at his length.

She came in moments. Muscles clamped down, and her body froze into an arched position, breasts pushed toward him for the few moments she stopped moving. Once movement came back to her, she started to pant and groan, and looked at him half-glazed eyes as her more of her juices leaked onto the base of him. Spasms, random and quivering, massaged his girth as she trembled upon his lap, until she started to settle.

“You ... you do this thing with your meals often?” she said as he let go of her neck. “Never really pictured you choking a girl.”

“Never really pictured you wanting me to.”

“Hey, a girl can want to try different things in the bedroom. Woman’s prerogative. Feel like ... I dunno, just ... really not controlling anything tonight.”

“Any Ventrue would be hard as a rock hearing those words from their lover. We love controlling things.”

He chuckled, she did too, and he set both hands on her waist to help stand her back up. The sensation of her boiling hot insides squeezing along his length was euphoric, enough to send sparks of bliss down between his legs as her muscles clenched along the ripe head of his cock, before he was free of her.

“New position?” she said. “We just got started.”

Smiling at her, he set his fingers around her neck again, and started to walk forward. She had to walk backward to keep to his pace, and she raised a brow at him as her ass came to rest against the edge of one of the fancy tables. His pants fell as he walked, and he stepped out of them casually, not breaking pace as he pushed her down onto the table.

She wanted him to be rough with her tonight, to hold her down and have his way with her. She didn't want to have to think about anything tonight, just let him take control; because she trusted him. God he loved her; knew just how to drive a Ventrue crazy.

He stood beside the table, and grinned down at his woman. Such a lovely creature, lean and fit, and her many piercings and tattoos accented the curves of her athletic body so well. She was lying on the table from head to buttocks, with her legs below the hip hanging off the table. Perfect.

He reached out with one hand, and again took her by the neck. His other hand slid down her perfect body, her breasts, her hard stomach, down the snake tattoo, and down until they were between her thighs. Took a lot of willpower to not grab her by the hips and get his cock back inside her; fuck he really really wanted to. But not yet. He wanted to prepare her properly.

He sank his fingers into her dripping insides, and pressed them up against her g-spot.

“Oh! Fuck, fuck ... god ... damn.” Her feet raised off the floor for a moment before she got comfortable lying on the table. One of her hands held onto the table edge, while the other grabbed the wrist of his choking hand. Trying to stabilize herself. It wouldn't be enough.

He started to finger her. Hard. With his index and ring finger inside her, palm pointed upward, he brought them up to slap against her insides, hard enough to hear the wet sound of flesh.

“Fuck!” She mewled, loudly, and began twisting and squirming. “Slow down!”

He squeezed her neck harder. Her eyes opened wide when she realized she was truly pinned, and unable to speak anymore. Kindred wouldn't asphyxiate, but it meant she wouldn't be able to communicate with him, tell him to stop or slow down or anything. It meant she had given him total control, whether she wanted to or not.

He smiled down at his prey, and continued to finger her, hard. Every so often, he slowed his hand down, and took the time to press long and deep up against her g-spot, forcing her back to arch and her muscles to clench down. And once she'd begun to settle down, he resumed the upward rapid slapping of his fingers, fast and hard enough to make her ass raise off the table an inch with each impact.

She stared at him, eyes wide, almost panicked, as the orgasm hit her. Her muscles clamped down, and she arched her back once again, eyes closing as her pussy squirted onto his palm. Her legs pressed together, thighs trapping his wrist, before they spread again as another muscle clench of her cunt forced another gush of her cum to splash over his hand. Between her clenches, he gently pressed upward toward her belly, earning groans in her throat that struggled to escape his choking grip.

But it wasn't long before he started fingering her again, harder still. Her eyes shot open, and this time the hand holding the table reached across to grab his wrist. She was strong, but in her predicament, she couldn't get the leverage she needed to do anything more than squeeze his wrist, and stare at him with begging eyes. In return, he gave her his Ventrue smile, and continued to finger her, even as her thighs squeezed around his hand to try and stop him as well.

It was hypnotic, watching her body writhe and squirm, watching how she arched her back before pulling it down when her ass raised high. One of her legs lifted, feet still in her army boots, before it came back down as her back arched again, as the fluids started again. And this time, he didn't stop fingering her.

She tried to keep her eyes open. In all her fighting and writhing, she tried to look at him, to get something across with her glazed gaze, but as the climax worked through her, her eyes rolled upward and closed as both her hands fell to the table edges to hold on. He watched, unable to look away from how her breasts jiggled, how her nipple chain bounced, how her muscles contracted with each spasm as she again came all over his fingers. The small chain that dangled from her clit hood rattled against his palm as he forced his fingers to slap upward against her insides, despite her clenching, despite her groans and writhing, despite how her cum was dripping off his fingers. He kept going, until her grip on the table loosened, and eventually her arms and legs began to dangle from the table.

Only when she stopped writhing did he remove his fingers from her, and let go of her neck.

She didn't say a word, just lay there, quiet moans coming out now, no longer being choked. Her whole body was vibrating, trembling, and her legs remained spread as her soaked thighs dripped juices until lines of the moisture ran down to her ankles. A small pool of her cum had grown on the table, but much of it had splashed up onto her legs and stomach from his forceful fingering. Her abs were soaked in her juices.

He started to disrobe. "Feel good?"

"F ... fuck ... too ... too much."

He chuckled warmly, and threw his jacket, shirt, boxers, shoes, tie, everything onto the nearby couch, before he came around to stand between the exhausted woman's legs.

“Just lay there, relax. I’ll take care of everything.”

“W ... wait...”

He reached down for her hips, and turned her over. Gently of course; it was a table, not a bed. And he doubted Beatrice was paying very much attention to the exact placement of her limbs so as to catch herself. So he went slowly, and turned her over so she was lying on the table on her stomach, and her legs again dangled off of the table edge.

Her ass was on full display. Large, toned, connected to thick legs of muscle, and the dildo still embedded deep inside her with its flared end between her two cheeks. He put one hand onto her ass, lightly kneaded the beautiful mound, while his other guided his cock at a subtle downward angle to find the entrance of her pussy.

Absolutely drenched. He groaned as he slowly sank his swollen glans into her clenching muscles, and reveled in the sparks of bliss her dripping, hot flesh sent down his length. Deeper, and deeper, each inch a struggle as her body clamped down, and what little room inside her was split between him and the large insertion in her ass. And each inch forced his love to groan into the table.

Once he’d sunk himself balls deep into her wet insides, he slapped her ass. Hard enough to make a sound, to make it shake with the impact, to make Triss stir from her post orgasm bliss.

“Hey...”

He slapped her ass again, and a couple more times. Each pulled a small mewl from the exhausted Nosferatu, and each made her cunt clench down on his cock until he felt new juices, hot and slick, start to leak onto his testicles.

Only when Triss started to push against the table with her hands to stand up, did he start thrusting.

“Wait! Need ... a break man ... please. I ... fuuuu...”

She set her head back down on the table, and went limp as he started to fuck her. Every thrust was met with resistance, tightening muscles that fought to stop him, to get control of the situation. And every thrust was met with the limited space of her insides. He could feel the plug filling her ass, fighting for room, making every stroke tighter than normal. He had to have more.

He grabbed her hips, and started to pound into her. Each thrust caused his balls to slap against her lips and the chain that dangled from her clitoris. Each thrust forced her to grunt, and shake with the impact. Each made her ass jiggle against his pelvis, before he slowly withdrew almost every inch of his length, and slammed back into her again.

She started to shake, her knees began to knock together, and her legs started to give out. With her body still laid out along the table, her sudden surrender to gravity made her boots spread outward along the floor. The table kept her torso horizontal, and her ass at a perfect height for him to hold her hips, and continue thrusting.

When warm gushes of liquid started to drip from his testicles, he slowed down. Triss's noises had reduced to tiny whimpers, and her body was stuck permanently trembling. But each time he pulled her hips toward him, and he pushed his own forward until the length of his cock was stretching her deeper, a gush of heat and wetness soaked the underside of his length at the base. She was squirting, a lot, far more than she normally did, with enough volume and force that he felt her cum dripping from his testicles to splash on the floor.

He buried himself to the hilt, and with one hand still holding her hips, he raised the other and slapped her ass.

“Nnnn ... please...” She stirred, head lulling side to side, and her hands started to press against the table again. Trying to get up.

Well he certainly didn't want that. He slapped her ass again, hard enough for a red blemish to spread over the cheek, hard enough for it to make a satisfying sound, hard enough for the girl to put her head back down, and squeeze her cunt until it was Julias's turn to groan. So god damn heavenly inside her trembling, soaked, boiling insides. The pleasure sparks were starting to build between his legs, along his length and testicles, demanding release.

Triss started to get up again, but he reached out with both hands, and took her wrists.

“S ... stop ... need ... break.”

“No you don't.” He brought both of her hands into the small of her back, and pinned them there by the wrist with the grip of one of his hands. “If I had known you'd get this sensitive from this sort of play, I'd have indulged a lot sooner you know.” She squirmed, struggled, tried to free her hands from his, but he kept a solid grip around both of her wrists with his one hand, snug to her back. And his other hand took her hip once again as he slammed his hips forward.

“Didn't ... think you'd ... like ... getting rough.” She lifted her head enough to peek over her shoulder at him. Eyes half closed and glazed with a subtle shine of tears. Maybe he was being too rough? But, there was no denying how tightly she was squeezing on his girth, how much she was soaking him, and there was a tiny smile on her lips, the mischievous sort she sported when she was happy.

He gave her ass another slap. She moaned and set her head back down, and her wriggling lessened. Surrender.

He growled down over his prey, and started to thrust hard once again. With one hand holding hers down to her back, his other holding her hip, he started to pound into her. The blossoming waves of pleasure demanded release, and each stroke of his cock along her gripping insides grew almost painful with the rising bliss. His glans



was swollen to the point of bursting, and each time he forced it into his love until her insides had to stretch inward to fit him, he felt another wave of his cum pooling inside him, preparing.

Before he came, she did. Her voice came out again as whimpers, and her insides clamped down as another warm gush of fluids splashed against his testicles. This time, he didn't slow down. Her whimpers turned into guttural grunts as he rammed into her squeezing pussy, and another wave of her cum splashed against him as her clit chain bounced and jiggled with each plunge.

So tight, it was making his eyes roll upward as well. Each time he slammed his hips forward, impaled her until he felt her lips around the hilt of him, felt her squirt and drench their connection, his cum started to build in his length, and he had to flex his pelvic floor to keep it from escaping. Not yet, just a few more strokes.

As the pleasure became too much, he sank himself into her hot flesh, and stayed there. He kept her pinned as he ground his hips into her, and let the clenching spasms of her muscles milk the pleasure from him, until his cum started to pour into her.

“F ... fucking ... finally,” she said between her quietened mewls.

Julias closed his eyes for only a moment, as the first gush of his thick fluid squirted from his shaft. He forced his eyes open, and stared down at the woman's ass, how the large shape was pressed tight to his body, how he could still see the flared end of the large dildo that penetrated her. He could still feel it too, fighting for room inside her, stretching her insides and pressing against his cock.

He started to fuck her again, but slowly, tenderly. His glans had grown so sensitive, each inch he managed to work sent almost painful waves of bliss down his length, until another wave of his cum flooded Triss's depths. Each gush of his warm fluid was a wave of pleasure through his body, and he let out relaxed, sighing groans as he felt the tension of muscles melt away. Slow, gentle strokes

were met with more of her squeezes, and soon, his cum started to trickle out of her and down his testicles. He let go of her hands, and set both of his to the table. A final squirt of his cum met her taut flesh, and he pushed himself balls deep into her to enjoy the wet warmth of it around his girth.

“Ok,” Triss said, and she put her hands to the table as well before she pushed herself up. The table shook with the quivering of her arms. “Ok, that ... maybe ... need ... a fucking break.”

He leaned over her and set his lips upon her ear as he continued to gently, lovingly fuck her. More moans, from both of them as they both shivered in post-orgasm bliss. And unable to stop himself, he reached out for her, and pulled her up to stand against him, ass pressed to his body and only kept level by her boots where he was now barefoot. And he hugged her, wrapped his arms around her, and set his chin to her neck. His cock softened, fell from her leaking body, and the woman purred as their juices trickled down her legs.

“You alright?” he said.

“Definitely. Fucking definitely, just ... tenderized now. And ... still tingly.”

“You soaked me quite a bit.”

“Yeah well, you know I do that, and ... you kind of caught me off guard, pinning me down and choking me and stuff. Didn’t think you’d go that far.”

“Seemed like you liked it.” He kissed her ear, her neck, and his hands drifted up her body to her nipple chain, underneath it, and to her nipples to lightly caress them. He cupped her breasts, wrists at a cross along her stomach, and massaged them with soft fingers along their undersides.

She melted into him, enough so when he took a step back, she went back with him. A few more steps back and they were back to the couch, and he sat down. She joined him, sitting between his thighs and leaning back into his chest, so he could resume massaging her body. The toy was still inside her, and she trembled with each adjustment of her position.

“Fucking loved it,” she said. “Just, uh, let’s not do this every night. Bit intense.”

“I see.” He switched to the other side of her neck, and sighed contentment into her ear before he kissed her earlobe and the chains that dangled from it. “Then perhaps next time, I’ll light some candles, massage your whole body, and then we can spoon in my bed. Tender, slow, gentle.”

She sighed, a not-so-content sigh, and laughed. “I mean, if we’ll get one of those wireless anal vibrators you were talking about, sure.”

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~~Natasha~~

It was a change, such a change, such a huge, weird, fun change.

Natasha sat up from Jessy’s bed, and looked over at her friend. The girl was on the floor, still between her two ghouls, and getting a rough pounding from them. At the same time. One underneath her, one behind her and holding her shoulders, hitting her hard enough to make her ass jiggle with each thrust. Way too hard for anal, way too hard! But Jessy seemed to enjoy it, to the point Natasha could hear the slap of flesh on wetness.

The little Mekhet looked over at the other two ghouls. They were satisfied, each having cum inside her; nothing as adventurous as Jessy though. But, she’d still enjoyed several orgasms while two men had taken turns in her. She’d encouraged them to indulge in

positions they wanted to try, again nothing crazy, but at the same time, she kind of preferred it when she let them pick the position.

Considering their stamina, ghouls and sex drugs and all that, they'd tried many positions, and by the end of the night, both had cum inside her sex, twice each. Both were spent, and both were smiling even as they struggled against the allure of post-orgasm sleep. She pat Chris on the chest, and he smiled up at her from the bed before his eyes drifted closed. Vincent too, though far more exhausted as she'd taken a drink of him. Jessy would have probably forced them to do some push ups or something. Natasha was content to bask in the afterglow of a belly full of blood and a good, long bout of sex with two beautiful men.

“Jessy,” she said.

“Y-Yeah?” Jessy put her hands on her ghoul's chest, and sat up a little straighter. Her breasts bounced up and down with the impact of ghouls, each thrust earning a quick, small groan from the Gangrel.

“What ... what do you do ... w-when men flirt with you?”

“Ooh, someone interested in you?” Without skipping a beat, Jessy reached behind her to hook an arm over her shoulder and behind Isaac's head. She combed his hair as she turned her head to meet him, kiss him, and suckle on his neck; no Kiss yet though. Knowing Jessy, she'd do that after.

“I ... m-m-maybe ... the Uratha.”

“Oh, details!”

Natasha had no idea why she was having this conversation now, just after she'd finished with two ghouls, and Jessy still busy with two more. Something about the setting, the blatant sexual openness of it unlocked Natasha's barriers. She found she could talk about

things she normally couldn't. It was hard to stay shy about as simple a matter as flirting when looking at someone being doubly penetrated by her sex slaves. And Jessy seemed to enjoy conversation mid-sex anyway. Maybe in fifty years of similar sexual conquests, Natasha would be able to talk in the middle of intercourse. Probably not.

“Well, when they captured me, t-two of them kept an eye on me, guarded me while I slept. And ... and ... I d-drunk one of them.” And, despite herself, despite the fact she was bringing this up in the middle of an orgy, she blushed at the memory.

“Damn girl. Did they taste good?”

“ ... very good. And ... v-v-very ... revitalizing.”

“Any sex with that meal?”

“W-What? No! I'd only ... just ... met him.”

“And you know he was flirting?”

“He ... they.”

“They? Oh ... nnnng.” Jessy's hands fell back to Brad's chest, and she sank her weight into them as Isaac took her hips and slowed down. He started to thrust a little slower, deeper, each motion a long and full stroke that made Jessy's whole body shake. Brad's hands found her breasts, and he held onto them as Jessy started to shake. Between index and thumb, he tweaked her nipples, far harder than Natasha would think pleasurable, but Jessy was a whole different beast. What Tasha thought was way too rough, Jessy seemed to melt from.

Tasha leaned in closer from her perch on the bed, and watched as Jessy came. The girl's body, all that lean muscle highlighting a feminine ratio, it was a visual treat she couldn't look away from.

Isaac knew his master well, and he continued to fuck her ass as she climaxed, each deep thrust making her large buttocks bounce and jiggle. Each thrust making the girl cream over Brad's cock, until visible drops of her cum were pooling and trickling down his hips.

Girl didn't even blush as she soaked Brad. Just came, came hard, not a care in the world or slightest sense of insecurity. Made Natasha jealous. To just let go like that and focus on the moment was very, very much not in her programming.

"Ok," Jessy said, "you said they? Was it more than one werewolf?"

"Y-Yeah. I drank from the one named Arturo, b-b-b-but ... but Matthew, his friend, he was there too. And, and they ... they were both ... nice to me."

"Nice?"

"More than n-nice, you know? Like ... like ... Art said I ... w-was cute ... and sexy."

Jessy grinned at her. "Sounds like flirting to me."

"Y-Yeah." Yeah, it did! He'd been flirting with her, genuine flirting, the sort of flirting she could reciprocate, if she didn't want to stab him. He was very stab worthy, after all. "And his friend Matt, he kept ... kept smiling at me t-too. The same way ... Art was."

"You mean this way?" Jessy used her hand to point Isaac's head her way. He'd set his chin on Jessy's shoulder, and he smiled at Natasha as his hands started to roam up and down Jessy's body.

"Yeah, that ... that was it." She blushed, horribly, as Isaac continued to smile at her, grin at her, even wink once, as one of his hands took Jessy by the hip, while his other reached down between her thighs. She couldn't see with his hand in the way, but Tasha could see the response from Jessy's body as her ghoulish no doubt

started to caress her undoubtedly very swollen, very sensitive clitoris.

“Sounds like they both definitely wanted to fuck you then.” She nodded, like it was no big thing, like it was perfectly normal. It wasn’t normal! Men didn’t give her those eyes.

Or did they? She never looked for them, never actually opened her eyes to see what sort of looks guys — or girls — were giving her. Always better to keep that sort of stuff in the background, ignore it, and focus on ... whatever. Bleh, what a stupid excuse. She was being dumb, and now, she had absolutely no excuse for not noticing these things, not after the sexual hazing Jessy had given her.

“ ... maybe I should ... pursue this?” she said.

“Maybe. Do you like them?” She lowered herself down to Brad’s chest, and kissed her ghou, tugging on his lips with hers before settling into a proper kiss. Never mind that Isaac continued to fuck her ass; it didn’t affect Jessy at all.

Tasha lay upon the sheets of the bed, and got comfortable on her stomach before reaching for a pillow and hooking it under her cheek, head turned to face Jessy, one arm dangling off the bed’s edge.

“I b-b-barely know them.”

“Well, sex is a good ice breaker.”

“I don’t want to have sex with them! N ... not ... not so soon.”

“Then I suggest you try a classic date. Dinner and a movie. Dinner, being them.” Jessy winked at her, leaned down, and bit into Brad.

God, the sight of the big man squirming with orgasm, with the Kiss, with his blood being drained while Jessy milked his cock of cum, it was too damn much. If she hadn't already had her fill for the night, the sounds alone would have sent Tasha right back to the ghouls for more. But, she was content to watch this time, just watch, and admire the sight of Jessy milking her ghoul of both fluids.

“So I should ... try t-to see them again?”

“Maybe. Not like we're at war with the Uratha.” Jessy sat up, wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth, and leaned back into Isaac's awaiting embrace. Now that his master wasn't drinking Brad anymore, Isaac resumed fucking her ass, even as Brad's cock was still hard inside the woman, and his cum leaked out of her. Tasha didn't try to hide she was staring at the connection, at the mess. And Jessy didn't try to hide it. If anything, she put herself on display for Natasha, spreading her legs more and pushing her hips forward.

“Then I ... I should ... t-t-t-talk to them again ... at least. He said I was cute, and sexy, and ... and Matt looked at me with the same eyes.”

“Then I fully endorse pursuing this. Just don't let it get in the way of your new job with the Prince. S'long as that's fine, I suggest testing those waters.”

“Y-Yeah, maybe I should,” Natasha said.

Jessy smiled, nodded, and got back into the rhythm of sex with her one remaining conscious ghoul.

“ ... that ... that doesn't hurt?”

“What?”



“What Isaac’s d-doing. That’s ... he’s ... thrusting kinda hard.” For all her experimentations over the decades, for all her toys and the different things she’d done with her own body, anal was always a delicate thing. Any attempts at hard or fast were painful, no matter how much lubricant she used. But Isaac was fucking her with all the enthusiasm of a young man who couldn’t control himself.

Burying his face into his master’s neck, he started to cum. He let out a low groan, and hugged Jessy tight to his chest as he started to climax inside her. Jessy reached behind her with her hands, one over her shoulder to stroke the man’s hair, one by her hip to hold his. And she pushed herself toward her ghoul, no doubt milking him, purposefully squeezing and drawing out every drop of his pleasure and his cum.

It was beautiful to watch.

“It used to, long fucking time ago when I was just getting into this.” She pat Isaac on the cheek, and crawled off of him and onto Brad’s chest. Poor man, she sat on his chest and got comfortable, arms up and stretching herself out. “But with some practice, I learned what muscles to squeeze, relax, or push on. Why, want to try some anal with the boys? We can keep it super gentle.”

“No! No, um ... no.” Way too much for so soon. She shouldn’t have asked; now Jessy was probably piecing together what sort of masturbation habits Natasha had developed. Woman was smarter than she let on.

“Well, I think there’s a kinky little woman inside you,” Jessy said. She crawled over to the bed, and sat down beside it, big wicked grin on her face as she set her chin on the sheets. Her left hand found Natasha’s naked back, her butt, and the Gangrel teased her skin with caressing fingers.

“Hey, d-don’t...”

Rolling her eyes, Jessy continued to caress Tasha's back, her spine, the curve of her shoulder blades, the dip of the small of her back, where her buttocks met her hamstrings. "Admit it, you're really happy you finally joined me for a feast with the ghouls."

Tasha, cheek on her pillow, still lying on her stomach, and arm dangling off the bed, looked at Jessy. The Gangrel was giving her that look again, that hungry look. Her eyes were devouring her, her naked body, and where her hand was tracing her butt. Not just tracing, squeezing too, a little.

"... I am happy. That I d-d-did, I mean." She blushed, but didn't stop Jessy's rather curious fingers.

In this bout, just like last time, Jessy had spent a lot of time watching her have sex. She didn't join her or anything, which Tasha was thankful for; she liked Jessy but she wasn't ready for something like that. But then, it seemed to satisfy Jessy just to watch Natasha have sex. Sexual satisfaction by proxy, maybe?

"You really have an amazing body, you know. So tiny, but you got this sweet little ass and it's just so damn cute."

She almost asked if Jessy wanted to have sex with her, just to satisfy her curiosity about Jessy's desires. Don't sleep with your friends! And besides, Natasha didn't find herself sexually attracted to women ... usually.

"Th-Thank you ... you uh ... you really do look ... amazing, when you're ... y-you know."

Jessy brought her face closer to hers, almost touching noses, and winked. "Damn right I do." With a chuckle, the Gangrel stood up, stretched herself out a few more times, and clapped her hands thrice. "Ok boys, get the fuck outta here."

Natasha watched, giggling, smiling. The close encounter with Jessy settled her a little; seemed like Jessy didn't want to actually do anything to her, just watch things get done to her. Which was an innocent enough kink to satisfy, and Tasha had to admit, she really enjoyed having sex with Jessy's ghouls. They knew what they were doing, and they were very fit. Maybe not as big and strong as the werewolves, but she doubted anyone looked as big and strong as them.

The four men left, two of them getting dragged out by their two companions, drained as they were. But all of them were smiling, and they saluted their boss before they left.

"Umm..." Tasha pushed herself up to sit on her hip, and she watched Jessy walk around, getting dressed. "I ... wanted to tell you. I'll b-b-be getting a new apartment soon, d-different building."

"Yeah, figured that'd happen." Jessy slipped on her thong — always with the thongs — and then her jeans with all the grace of an ox, falling onto her ass on the bed and getting her legs up so she could pull the jeans on from above. "Surprised Maria or Michael haven't forced you to move out yet."

"I ... I guess, yeah." She hadn't really thought about it. She was the wounded party, but it was their prerogative to force her to move out of a building generally considered Invictus territory. "B-But! But ... I ... still..."

"Girl, you know we're friends. I'll visit you wherever, you visit me wherever, wasn't even a worry." Jessy, topless and shameless, turned on her hip and butt to look at her. "And I do hope we can continue these little orgies of ours. Watching you ride the boys? Or giving them blowjobs? So hot, little you handling big dick like that."

The girl was absolutely carnal! Lascivious to the point of corruption, like she was possessed by a succubus. A real one, not a Daeva.

“The boys like you too,” Jessy went on, “and not just cause of the blowjobs; which is a major treat for them by the way. Normally I don’t cause I prefer to save their energy for fucking.”

“Oh, oh um ... I-I ... uh...” No idea what to say to that. She just ... liked doing it. It was nice, seeing the boys squirm in pleasure like that. Made her feel good, made her feel ... sexy. “I ... would like to keep d-doing ... these visits too.”

“Fucking yeah!” Jessy slid closer and gave her a punch in the shoulder. Such a tomboy. Tasha rubbed her wound and frowned, or tried to, but Jessy’s smile broke it easily. “Though, I mean don’t feel like you can’t go fuck someone else. One of those wolf boys tries to get into your pants? Bone him, bone him hard. And bring me all the details.” Naturally, Jessy’s distaste for the wolves went out the window the moment sex was involved.

Natasha rolled her eyes, slipped off the bed, and walked around to get her clothes; as expected, Jessy watched her every moment of her search.

“Th-Thanks ... again. And, uh ... I ... I mean, maybe?” Art was really cute, but he seemed like a devious bastard too. Matt was really cute as well, and he seemed so much nicer, and ... bigger. Giant big. “So, I should just ... ask one ... on a d-d-date?”

“Only if they don’t ask you first. When they do, play a little shy, a little coy; should be easy for you.”

“H-Hey!”

“And then bat your eyelashes, agree to do whatever they want, laugh at their lame jokes, and when they ask if you want to go back to your place or their place, you say yes. Don’t forget the yes part, it’s important to the process of getting laid.”

“B-But, what if ... what if they ... d-d-d-don’t ask?”

“I doubt Uratha are the shy type. But if you’re getting along, and they aren’t asking, just ask them. Give them the innocent-young-girl eyes too, and they’ll be on you in seconds.”

Once she’d gotten some pants and a shirt on, Natasha facepalmed, and groaned. Jessy’s dating advice, as antiquated as oil lamps. Not that Natasha had any right to judge. The thought of a date, a genuine date, had her feeling more jittery than having an orgy with Jessy and her ghouls ever did.

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Back at her apartment. Still a few hours until sunrise, but Antoinette didn’t have another day scheduled with her until tomorrow night. For now, she had nothing to do. If Daniel had been around, she’d be with him, either being tasked with learning about the occult from ancient, often dead cultures, or trying to chat with him. But chatting with him was like trying to get blood from a stone.

Who was he before he came to America? How many childes did he have before her? How did he and Antoinette meet, and become members of the Ordo Dracul? How long have they been in the covenant? Did the man ever have a romantic partner?

There were rumors about him and someone named Athalia. But the details of that relationship were nonexistent. Maybe she should just ask him about it, or ask Antoinette.

Laptop on in front of her on the kitchen counter, she was researching ancient Egypt and the various rituals they performed. The way they treated their dead, especially the royal dynasties, was fascinating, and normally she would have been very absorbed in her reading. The mummification process, canopic jars, the various positions and roles involved in the ceremony. And of course, the most grandiose of displays for their dead, the great pyramids. Not an insignificant amount of Antoinette’s collection of artifacts came from Egypt’s ancient world, and knowledge of their origins was important to Tasha’s new role. The problem was everything she was

reading also came with nightmarish imagery from her imagination, given new powers of torture by the Prince's device.

Just looking at pictures of the things they found inside old tombs was making her dead stomach churn. No doubt, putting old mummy wrappings or canopic jars or such under Antoinette's chandelier of blue would reveal nasties she'd prefer not knowing existed.

She'd be chasing the spider lead as Antoinette had asked, if she had a lead anymore. The Uratha calling the tunnels in Devil's Corner off limits meant—

Knock knock.

She raised a brow, and hopped on over to the door to peek through the hole. Two men waved, no doubt able to see her shadow underneath the door.

Arturo, and Matthew.

Shit! Shit, what should she do? She looked down at herself; jeans and a t-shirt. Change? No no, the Uratha didn't care about that. She jumped around a few times and spun around. Were they here to take her away again? No, they had no reason for that, with Jack as their new middleman. They had no reason to show up at her place at all.

Calm down calm down. Arturo and Matthew were the two that treated you nicely ... ish. They smiled at you, let you feed, flirted. Maybe you could just let them in? They were either here for business, or just to say hi. Either made her shaky.

After a few deep, useless breaths, she opened the door.

“H-Hello...”

“Hey there.” Art stepped in enough to get in the door frame, and he leaned against it, hands in his pockets. “Hard tracking you down. You jump rooftops all the time?”

“I ... oh. My scent. You tracked m-m-my scent.”

Matt stood behind Art, hands up and pressing against the doorframe. “Don’t worry, you smell perfectly lovely.”

She frowned at him. “I’m a vampire. I ... don’t smell.”

They both laughed. They were teasing her. The whole conversation reeked of high school, and she was suddenly tempted to get surly and slam the door. But, this wasn’t high school, and she wasn’t a silly little girl. Teasing was supposed to roll off of you as nothing more than a fun way to talk, and say that you like the person you’re teasing. If she got cranky, she’d be the one getting immature, not them.

She stepped back, and motioned for them to come in.

“Thanks,” Art said, and he followed her in. “Cozy place you got here. Room alone?”

“Y-Yes.”

Matt whistled, wiped his shoes off at the door, took them off, and sat down at one of the stools at her counter. Art kept moving forward, until Matt yanked him back by the collar. “Dude. Shoes.”

Art rolled his eyes, before he acquiesced. Once in his socks, he walked through her apartment, and offered a similar whistle to Matt.

“You Invictus really do like to splurge.” He gestured to the wide open living room, the various furniture, the enormous television, the large windows, the laptops.

“I’m ... I’m not Invictus, not anymore. But ... I still have the m-money.” She managed a tiny grin as she pulled herself up onto the stool next to Matt. Calm, no need to worry. “Money is ... rarely a barrier for Kindred.”

“That so? Sitting on a fortune?” Art said.

“ ... yes. A s-s-small one.” It was true, after all, she had a small fortune. She didn’t need to live in an apartment, but she liked the small space. Well, small-ish, considering how nice an apartment it was. “But, you d-didn’t track me down to ... t-talk about money.”

“No.” Matt put an elbow to the counter and rested his chin on his palm. He seemed quite calm. That was good right? “Much as we’re cool with Avery and David’s choice about Jack, Art and I wanted to talk to you about this.”

“Me? W-Why me?”

Art shrugged and joined them at the counter, opposite side, and leaned onto it with his elbows. “Instinct.”

“Instinct,” she said.

“Yeap,” the two men said in unison, and nodded in unison.

“Instinct?”

“Echo in here?” the two men said in unison, again.

She looked between the two of them with something between surprise and a frown; apparently, this was normal behavior for them.

“What d-d-did you want to tell me?”

Art nodded. “Well maybe we can do a little question trading? You were skulking around in our hunting ground, and we’d really like to



know why.”

So that’s how it was. They just wanted information. She shook her head and sat up straight as she folded her arms across her chest.

“N-No deal.”

“Come on.” Matt leaned in a little closer, elbows sliding along the counter. “Avery told us about how things went down last time, and we don’t want that. Last thing we’re hoping for is some Kindred getting killed on our hunt.”

“Yeah.” Art slid around the counter and sat down in the third stool. “Antoinette keeps calling shit in from the other side, and that Minerva girl bit off more than she could chew. We’re just trying to keep shit from getting out of hand again.”

“Antoinette is ... is d-d-doing this?”

“Mmhmm,” Matt said. “She fiddles with the Gauntlet. Things keep slipping through; mostly harmless, if a bit vice oriented. But she increases the risk of particularly nasty things from leaving the Shadow and coming over.”

“Gauntlet? Shadow?” Oh god, what was Antoinette doing? Wait wait, don’t let them know you work for her, not yet. They had information, and she needed that information. But if Antoinette was the reason these problems were even happening, if she’s the reason the Uratha were here at all ... what did any of that mean?

“Mmhmm,” Art said, the same way Matt did. “Avery doesn’t want us telling you vamps the details. Afraid another Minerva situation will happen. But she’s generalizing, afraid. She’s really changed from the girl Jacob and Antoinette knew, since her pack got wiped out.”

“P-Pack ... wiped out?”

“Yeah.” Matt turned around in his stool, and leaned onto the counter with his back to it. The two men got very comfortable very quickly. “Lost her old pack, her old totem, and ... things are very different now. We didn’t know her before then, but now we’re here, and judging from what Avery told us, you guys really hate her. Or at least your bosses do.”

“Understandable,” Art said, “given what happened. Avery told us everything. Nasty shit, when a host festers in the world, and Avery wouldn’t stop to bring one of those infestations down, now or then.”

Hosts? Totem? Minerva? So many questions.

“W-Why are you telling me all this?”

“Cause,” Matt said, “we’re not your enemies. We’re here to clean up a mess someone made, probably Antoinette. We can clean it up before it gets insane, thanks to David.”

She didn’t like how much they were accusing her boss. She didn’t like how much she agreed with them. The things that she’d seen, the strange ghosts, the objects, the weird symbols and laboratories the Prince ran, it all reeked of the sort of madness the wolves seemed to be hinting at.

“I ... I can tell you ... I can ... t-t-tell you ... I ... I do work ... for Antoinette.” Of all the knowledge she had to share, that was the only thing that was genuinely not a secret. They’d find out eventually.

“Oh ... well then.” Matt scratched the scruff of his chin, then his head, then the back of his neck, like he was embarrassed or something. “I guess you already know a lot about what we’re telling you.”

“N-No ... no, I don’t. Elders keep their secrets, for good reasons ... Like Uratha keep their secrets.”

Matt smirked, but nodded. “I guess that explains what you were doing in the tunnels then.”

“It ... d-d-does?”

“Yeah, to an extent. Antoinette would want you looking into the shit she might be causing. Sent you to the tunnels to investigate the disappearances, and the spider traces.”

That couldn't be it. They were warned about the spiders; it couldn't have been Antoinette's doing. But ... the disappearances, the spider webs. They ... they were after Fiona then. But that made no sense either, why would they be hunting a Begotten? They weren't a major threat, according to Antoinette. They didn't fit the bill of what Uratha would hunt, not according to what Matt was telling her. Or did they?

Something wasn't adding up.

## Chapter 33

~~Natasha~~

Art got up and started to look around her apartment, fingers dragging along her counter tops, her couches, her tables, her laptop. They stopped on the laptop in particular when his eyes found the screen.

“Researching ancient Egypt mm?”

“I ... I uh...” She reached over and closed it. Didn’t want them gleaming any more than they needed. Or at least that was the plan, but the two wolves were telling her a lot. Maybe she should reciprocate a little? “Why ... why are you t-telling me so much?”

Matt shrugged. “Like we said, we’re not your enemies. Besides, you seem nice.”

“Shit load nicer than the Kindred in Tijuana,” Art said.

“You came from T-T-Tijuana?” Art did look like he could have come from Mexico.

“Half the pack,” Matt said. “Clara, Art, Stephanie, Teresa, and Javier did. Avery drifted around the world after she lost her pack, so she tells it. Met some of us further North, met a bunch of us in Tijuana, and we’ve sort of wandered around.”

“Which no one likes.” Art ambled to her couch in front of the large TV, and he sat down with a bit of a bounce. Her poor couch; Art was a big guy. Not as big as Matt, but still, the man was big enough to make her couch creak with the impact. “We’re Meninna. We don’t want to drift around, we want a home.”

“A home? You mean ... D-D-Dolareido?”

Art shrugged, and started looking around the couch and the end table. “Maybe. Most of the pack is used to city living. You got a remote for this colossal thing?”

She blinked at the man, and pointed to the remote on the kitchen table. He fetched it, and immediately started one of the streaming apps on the television. Making his home already.

“What’s Meninna?”

“First Tongue word for the Hunters in Darkness, our tribe,” Matt said. “Sort of like your covenants. The Meninna don’t like to drift; we want a home. We were in Tijuana, and weren’t getting along with the Kindred there at all. Got to the point it was going to be war, so ... Avery decided to leave.”

“Leave? D-Doesn’t ... sound like something an Uratha would do. Thought y-you would fight for your t-t-t-territory.”

“We would have,” Art said, “if Avery was the person you all suspect she is, that Jacob suspects she is. Much as David guided us here, I’m sure Avery agreed partially cause she wants to fix the shit she stirred here.”

“I ... I know she got some Kindred killed, during the hunt. But how’s J-Jacob fit into this?”

Art looked over the couch shoulder at her, and raised an eyebrow. “Avery killed Minerva, Jacob’s sweetheart. More than sweetheart, from what she says.”

Natasha winced. She’d started putting that picture together, but to hear it put so directly was chilling. Jacob had someone he loved, and Avery took her away. Brutally, if Tasha’s own encounter with the wolves was any indication.

“Jacob is ... a dangerous man, Arturo. If he wants Avery d-dead, he’ll ... he’ll make it happen.” No getting around that.

Art shrugged, scratched his neck a couple times, and returned to watching TV. “He can try. Wouldn’t be the first elder we’ve had to put down.”

Natasha shivered again. These wolves had so much confidence, but the man seemed quite serious, and Matt nodded with his friend’s words. And worst of all, Natasha could feel the strength they radiated; the beast in her gut felt like a pup in comparison.

“Hey, how old are you?” Matt said. “Can never tell with vampires.”

“Me? I ... I was in my early twenties when I was embraced. That w-was ... about fifty years ago.”

Both men whistled in unison, with the same pitch. How long had these two been friends? Must have been decades to be so in sync.

“Art and I both experienced our first change when we were in our late teens. Must have been thirty years ago.”

That pulled a smile out of her, despite herself. She was older than them, but she looked younger. Werewolves seemed to age, albeit slower than humans. But, for all their strength, they weren’t immortal, the one advantage Kindred seemed to have over the Uratha. And it was quite the advantage, when you lived to be as old as Jacob or Antoinette, when you had multiple fortunes in funds, and dozens of loyal agents skulking in the shadows.

“The first change? What w-was that like?”

Art winced and looked back to the TV. Uh oh. She looked over at Matt, and the man winced as well as he looked down at the counter top.

“Tough question,” Matt said. “Some people just go nuts and destroy their gym, like I did. Some people can end up killing nearby bystanders, like Art.” He tilted his head to his friend. When Natasha looked back to Art, the man wasn’t looking their way anymore. He had his eyes on the TV, but she could see the side of his face, and the small frown he held. But he turned down the TV volume, and turned on the captions; nice of him.

“Y-You lose control?”

Matt nodded. “Yeah. After that, we’re Uratha. See the world differently, see it like wolves. Learn the First Tongue like a scene from the Matrix, injected straight into the brain. Some of us start hearing and seeing things, like David. And we’re all changed in unique ways. I became Rahu; Kindred in Tijuana called us warriors ... and barbarians, when they felt like being jerks. Art became Irraka; Kindred in Tijuana called them assassins.”

Art laughed, and rolled his head back to look over his shoulder at them again, frown replaced with a smirk. “I’m sure they were trying to insult me too. Not much of an insult, saying I’m good at my job.”

Natasha tilted her head and looked at the man. Art was an assassin? She could ... understand that way of thinking.

She touched her chest. “I’m Mekhet. We ... we’re ... sneaky.”

The two wolves laughed. Big, hearty laughs, and nodded. “Yeah, you are.” Again, in unison.

“I ... I don’t t-t-talk with Kindred in other cities ... almost ever. We keep to ourselves, usually. What were they like? In T-T-Tijuana.”

“Brutal,” Art said, “nothing like how Avery said Dolareido is. Much as shit ended badly last time she was here, she had nothing but good things to say about the Kindred situation. Other than the Prince messing with the Gauntlet.”

“D-Does her messing with the Gauntlet make her your enemy?” She had to talk to Antoinette about the Gauntlet. Did she know what that meant? The Prince must have, if she dealt with the Uratha in the past. But whatever happened with the Uratha back then, it wasn’t stopping Antoinette from experimenting with the occult.

“No,” Matt said. “It would, if she was causing some serious imbalances. But, honestly? I’m surprised. Despite Avery’s concerns, despite David’s warning, things aren’t bad here. Not yet.”

“That’s ... good then?”

“Maybe,” Art said, “maybe not. The hosts are sneaky fuckers, sneakier than any Mekhet. And we haven’t been here long enough to have scouted the whole city. Other things from the Shadow are hiding in the city too, we know that. And other things again.” The man sighed, ran his fingers through his black hair a few times, and motioned for the two of them to come to him. “Sit, watch. My favorite show has two new seasons I haven’t been able to watch, and I plan to binge.”

She blinked at him, got up off her stool, walked over to him, leaned toward his face, and blinked at him a few more times from close range. “Excuse me? This is m-m-my place!”

“What, you don’t like Game of Thrones?”

“I ... I do, but—”

“Come on.” He reached out for her, took her two shoulders, and picked her up like she was weightless. She squeaked and started squirming, but all it did was land her on the couch beside Art. “I sense an impending sex scene and I don’t want to miss it.”

She blinked a dozen more times, looked down at herself, then at the TV, then at herself, then over at Matt. The big guy winked at her



and came over to sit on the couch as well, trapping her between the two men.

Welp, self conscious didn't begin to describe what she was feeling. She had so much information to share with Antoinette, so much information she needed to filter through to see what was even safe to share with her boss. Too hard to focus on that when she was sitting between two huge wolves, and a combination of deadly circumstances and very hard nipples were on the television screen.

And to make everything worse, when she glanced at Art, he caught her glance and sneaked in a wink before she could snap her head back to the television. When she glanced Matt's way, he did the same thing! These two ruthless predators acted like a couple of silly buffoons.

Good god what had she gotten herself into.



~~Damien~~

Someone was looking for him.

Damien listened close, eyes closed, ears as open as he could manage, and he filtered through the quiet hum of the tunnels. At this depth in the tunnels, the sound of the traffic above still made noise, but barely more than a gentle purr. What made more noise was the whirr of ventilation, and computers. His current hiding spot was an old maintenance room off a functioning subway tunnel, for no other reason than sometimes, he wanted to hear nearby people.

Someone was walking down the tunnel to his little hideaway. The trot of high quality shoes on the concrete. Invictus probably. Knock knock.

He opened the door, and eyed the man standing before him. A tall man, dark skin, shaved head, very well dressed. And alive.

“Madam Maria Turio of the Invictus, of the council and triumvirate of the First Estate, would like to speak to you, Mister ... Damien.”

Mister Damien. What a joke. Damien sighed and looked the man up and down. Judging by how he carried himself, he was wearing a vest holster under his suit jacket, probably with two different pistols within if he remembered correctly; and he usually did. A high caliber pistol meant for punching holes through barriers, large holes. And likely the fully automatic pistol Invictus occasionally sported. Perfect for reducing a target to mulch. He'd seen the ghouls switch to such armaments not long after the Uratha became a known presence.

Course, they didn't know that he knew. He was very good at what he did.

“And you are?” Damien said.

“Mister Smith.”

“... sure.” Invictus had the imagination of bricks. “Do I need anything, to speak with the elder Maria?”

“No ... except, in the Invictus, we generally refer to people by their last name ... Damien.”

And of course Mister Smith didn't know his. Damien couldn't help but smirk at that, before he got up and shrugged off his shoulders. For all his cockiness, he was going to be talking to an elder. To Maria Turio. She had two centuries of Kindred life on him. She was an ancient entity, and he was a child next to her, a child who'd avoided other Kindred his entire second life.

It was going to be a weird encounter.

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The Grand Cathedral. Such a magnificent display, such beauty, such imposing brutality. The angels crushing demons, the cross, the virgin Mary. Standing before the enormous building filled him with awe, reverence, and fear.

“This way, Mister Damien ... I must say, it is not customary for Invictus to address each other so formally.” Mister Smith walked up the stairs, and pushed open the grand doorway. He made each step slowly, with weight and impact, as if his very walk was a ceremony to the grandeur of Lucas’s work. “Do you not have a last name we can address you with?”

“ ... been living in holes and tunnels for half a century, Mister Smith. Barely said a word to anyone in that time. Last names are...” He put his hand up to his face and shook his head. Dramatic, Damien. You don’t have to hide in tunnels anymore, so stop acting like the victim. “Burksen. It’s Burksen.”

“ ... very good, Mister Burksen.” The ghoul nodded, adjusted his tie, and stepped into the cathedral.

The nave of the huge building. Majesty and powerful elegance, it pulled at his memories and made his insides ache for the comfort of what used to be certainty, what used to be the simple joy of trusting someone else to guide your life. Candles were usually lit, back when he visited the cathedral when Lucas used it. And he saw such candles still existed, but were not lit. He knew Maria slept within the church, but not where.

His gaze lingered on the enormous pipe organ in the far back of the Cathedral. If God’s voice could be given sound, it would be the pipe organ.

Mister Smith waited for him halfway down the aisle, and after a moment to recollect himself, Damien walked after him. The empty pews struck another memory chord, each time he passed one, and he had to shrug the pain off. You’re a new man now, let it go.

By the pipe organ, there was a door. It looked like wood, and a crucifix adorned its face, but as Mister Smith opened it, the weight of its metal bulk became apparent. Damien had never seen the door opened before, but now he could tell it was most definitely meant to be a true barrier, something strong enough to stop Kindred—or at least explosives. Mister Smith took one of the nearby candles, lit it, stepped into the darkness past the door, and motioned for him to follow.

A stairway through darkness lit only by the candlelight of his escort. Every step fought to make him smile; such was a home he could agree with. The weight of the building above and around him felt less a cage, and more a foundation, of structure, of something he could lean his weight on knowing it'd support him.

Just delusions, Damien. You have a lifetime of beliefs to reevaluate, stop falling back on old views.

The stairway opened to a hallway of concrete bricks, not dissimilar to many of the tunnels beneath Dolareido. But this hallway was massive, easily fifty feet wide, twenty feet tall, and lined with candles that hung from braziers on chains, braziers with spikes that jutted from their bottoms, and small ones that lined the sides. Gates of a similar style blocked the tunnel at certain intervals, thick gates, closely knit, spiked bars, a formidable barrier to any humans that might try and break into the elder's sleeping grounds come daybreak.

Kindred were safe from each other during the day; they were not safe from each other's ghouls and subservients. It was not unheard of for ambitious — or stupid — Kindred to attack each other during sleeping hours using their servants. Sometimes it worked, but usually Kindred important enough to risk attacking were well guarded in such hours, like Maria.

There were other ghouls walking the underground tunnel, suits, each with a gun in hand; they had shotguns, and he was sure the pistols in their vest holsters were fully automatic. A single bullet was of little danger to a vampire, but a hail of them was a problem.

At each gate, a ghoul on the inside had to open it for them to continue. And not with some old fashioned lock and key or bolt, but with some heavy duty electronic, thick, tri-bolt locks with digital security keypads. The security keypads were subtle at least, likely to preserve the Gothic feel of the tunnel. He could understand; Lucas would have done the same.

With time and many gates behind him, the large tunnel opened into a larger room. Shaped like a dome, the huge room was lined with hanging drapes that covered where the curved concrete met the floor. Each drape was adorned with powerful imagery of history, of men with swords cutting down swaths of people, of victims being hanged by tree branch, of men riding into battle on horseback with bows and arrows. There was a painting of Jesus and the crucifixion, of Longinus stabbing him with the spear, and the following days of torment for Longinus.

Damien stepped closer toward the back wall where Maria was no doubt waiting for him, but his eyes continued to drift toward the decor. More of the hanging braziers with lit candles, but also many tables with various scatterings of objects: knives, swords, metal ornaments of similar intent. Other tables held shrines, more candles lit with tiny pictures surrounding them. But the center of the room and toward the back, it was open space save for a coffin stood upright against the the back wall, and a grand piano beside it.

Maria sat at the piano, dressed in a white nightgown that ran long, spilling over the floor in waves. Upon the piano were more candles, sitting on tiny metal skulls. One man, an ugly fellow with a hunched back and mangled face, slowly walked the room and swept, adjusted the candles, the drapes, everything.

He came close to Damien, and looked down at him from his great height. Big ghoul, one arm larger than the other, and one half of his face drooping so a touch of drool wet his lip. He wiped it away, nodded, made a tiny groan sound, and moved on.

“Forgive Matthias,” Maria said, raspy voice cutting through the quiet, “I rescued him from a mob two hundred years ago. He has since forever been my loyal ghoul and companion.”

“Two hundred years...” Damien managed a small nod for the sauntering man, before he walked past him and toward the ghost woman at the piano. The lighting was dim, even with a hundred candles, and the scattering of light sources made a thousand little shadows dance along every surface.

“Is that so long?” she said. Her fingers were on the keys of her piano, but she wasn’t playing anything yet. No music book either.

“It’s ... hard, to think about that long a life.”

“You spent half a century skulking around in the tunnels of this city, Damian Burksen. Half a century with only yourself for company. You are well aware of how long life can be, and how much longer that is when you are alone.” Her fingers started to move. Gentle sounds came from the piano, slow, deep, heavy waves that blanketed the room in the quiet tune. Deep and gentle? Quiet and heavy? Damien didn’t get music, but he knew enough to feel the emotion of the piece. “Frédéric Chopin’s March Funèbre.” Not a name he recognized, but the tune was a little familiar.

He watched and listened for a time, and looked around while the music’s gentle but depressing tone filled the room. March Funèbre indeed.

“You ... wanted to speak to me, Madam Turio?” She wasn’t his enemy, no need to make her one. Use her title and maybe this can go smooth.

“You understand this is the first time I’ve seen you in person, Damien? Impressive, considering how long you’ve been in the city. Very impressive.”

“ ... thank you.”

“You waited fifty years before you felt it was time for Lucas’s return. Patience is another trait I admire, Damien. But your ability to hide and your patience are not why I have asked you here. You are here because Mister Mire has brought your proposal to the Primogen. Or rather, it was brought up by Garry Tones before he was ready to speak of it; the mutt has his eyes and ears everywhere.” She smirked, and stopped playing as her eyes drifted from keys to him. “But, that would be hypocritical of me.”

Damien tried to not stare too much. But Nosferatu had disfigurements, and getting used to them was always a challenge when it was a new Nosferatu. He’d dealt with plenty in his small stint as bishop for Lucas; not enough time to become comfortable with them the way other Kindred had. And Maria’s disfigurements were not subtle. Such ruined skin; he’d seen fire logs that looked better. And the little bits of white mist that dripped from her clothes reeked of ghostliness.

“So ... everyone knows then, about Mister Mire’s idea.”

“Indeed.” Maria chuckled, a weird sound coming from her raspy, destroyed voice. “Needless to say, Mister Tones and the Prince are not thrilled with the idea.”

“I imagine not.” Damien looked down at the piano keys when Maria’s gaze became too much.

Seemed she got the hint, and started playing something different. When Damian raised a brow, she leaned into the piano a little to emphasize a note.

“Do you not recognize this piece?”

“It ... I recognize it, but that’s it.”

“Claude Debussy’s Suite bergamasque, third movement. Light ... of the moon.” She closed her eyes, and fell into each soft note. A very delicate piece of music, like floating on clouds. “Quite the famous piece, played everywhere and used in media all over the world.”

“I’ll have to take your word on that, Madam Turio. The past fifty years left little in the way of exposure to media.”

“ ... did you hide in a hole the whole duration of your secrecy, Burksen?”

“Mostly. I realized Devil’s Corner was usually ignored by Kindred, and the tunnels beneath it. So I hung out there a lot, but even then, I mostly stuck to the shadows.”

The elder nodded. “And that is where much of my concern lies. You were chosen by Lucas before such hardships, when you were a young kine, devoted and ... moved, by the enthusiasm Lucas carried.”

“ ... enthusiasm is an understatement, Elder. Lucas had the royal power of Ventrue and the suave wit of Daeva.” He winced as he looked down and let the memories come back. Easier to keep them buried and not think about it, but Maria didn’t seem to share that sentiment.

“He was also a tyrant.”

Again he winced, and not subtly either. Maria caught it, tilted her head to the side with his obvious discomfort, and waited.



“Yes, he was,” he said after a few far-too-long minutes of silence. “I ... regret that I did not see it in him, when he chose me, embraced me. Perhaps I could have done something to change him. But...”

“But?”

“I was just an ideological child when he embraced me. And before I could learn the reality, the purge began. We had to disappear into the tunnels, far into the depths, into tunnels only he knew about. Before I could learn what sort of man he really was, he went into torpor, to sleep until ... better times.”

Through it all, Maria didn't stop playing. “He trusted you with his life, Burksen. I remember, before Antoinette began the purge, before your embrace, Lucas told me about you. A bright young pupil, and loyal, and eager to read the full Testament of Longinus.”

“All too loyal. Yes, I was fascinated with the views found in the abridgment, and I devoured the full testament. I was ... so eager, to join the Sanctified. So eager to serve God, to ... please the Archbishop, and serve his goals.”

“Gaining the loyalty of the young is a common tactic of dictators, tyrants, and war mongers.” At last the elder stopped playing, tapped her chin a few times, and started playing once again. Started innocently enough, somber and slow, but soon her left hand was playing a complicated arrangement, while her right hand was a blur of notes, flighty, almost whimsical, before it descended into heavy steps spiraling downward without losing speed. And then back up again. Good god it was like watching a spider dance along the keys.

“How ... how long did that take to learn to play?”

“Days, but then, I was practicing the piano since 1823, Damien Burksen. Chopin, and this piece, Fantaisie Impromptu, is ... precious. The Archbishop first introduced me to the power of Frédéric Chopin. He...” She spoke without missing a single note, and

there were a lot of notes. “It might interest you to know, that Archbishop is not a title Lucas earned.”

“It wasn’t?” Damien came in closer, and put a hand on the piano’s body as he watched the ghost woman play, if it could be called playing. To play at that speed and without pause while she talked, the ghost woman may as well have merged with the piano and considered it a part of her. “I ... I knew he called himself Archbishop, as did the other bishops. And even the Prince called him that.”

“He became the most powerful bishop in the city within days of his arrival. And soon after, nearby smaller cities recognized his power. He took the title Archbishop to recognize his position, a title normally saved for a Sanctified Prince.”

“ ... arrogant of him.”

Maria smiled at him. “I enjoyed his bravado. I enjoyed his confidence, his wit and intelligence. He enjoyed mine.”

Damien’s hand fell from the piano, and he looked away. In all the chaos, past and present, it was easy to forget Maria and Lucas were romantic with each other. Easy to not realize this wasn’t just about her getting to know him, but him meeting the love of the man, the tyrant, he’d planned to serve faithfully.

“It ... is a shame,” he said, “that ... that everything ... fell apart. That ... the Prince and Daniel had to kill him.” One word, one name, and the man responsible for Lucas’s death would be a dead man. He could feel the J on his lips. Just say the kid’s name, and the boy’s death would be certain. He got into your skull, made you kill your fellow Kindred, made you cut off your sire’s head.

No. He wasn’t that much of an idiot. And he didn’t lie to Jack either. He hoped.

“How familiar are you with the Testament of Longinus, Damien Burksen?”

“Quite familiar, Madam Turio. The Malediction, the Torments, the Rule of Golgotha, the Sanguinaria, and Book of Eschaton. I have read them all ... hundreds of times. I still have the extended edition that Lucas owned, with thousands of interpretations of passages by various Archbishops.” Not that any of their interpretations had ever truly helped him find meaning in the book. The passages themselves carried weight, but ... tainted, colored by Lucas’s words. He had work to do, to undo that damage.

After a few minutes of music, she stopped playing and got up. He took a step back; didn’t mean to or try to, but he couldn’t help it. Having a near three-hundred-year-old vampire who looked like a ghost walking within a few feet of you was not something he was used to. She frowned at his mistake, and he forced himself to step back in toward her.

“And you feel comfortable teaching the word of Longinus?”

“ ... does any bishop feel comfortable teaching it?”

Maria smirked at him. “True enough, Burksen.” Trying to interpret the journey of Longinus was difficult. Trying to interpret the rules more difficult. Trying to interpret the prophecies into valuable wisdom nigh impossible. “If you become a bishop, and the Prince allows it, your job will be twofold. You will have to teach the Testament of Longinus to those who will listen, and that will be far more difficult without Tony’s old lair and its ... unnatural influence. But even more importantly Burksen, you will be a keeper and chronicler of history. What Garry has not yet managed to destroy, what I managed to salvage, you will maintain.”

Oh. He’d expected this meeting to be about his ability to teach the Testament of Longinus, not about becoming a chronicler. That was actually kind of uplifting.

“I have more faith in my abilities to manage books and—”

“It’s 2017, Burksen.” A frown followed, but not a harsh one. She almost seemed amused. “You won’t be living inside books by candlelight anymore. You will have to get used to managing a combination of the old and the new.” She stopped by some laptops sitting on a table, plugged in.

Electricity in such a Gothic setting; offensive, or at least that’s how Lucas would have felt about it. Old fashioned to a fault. Damien never held Lucas’s distaste for technology, but at the same time, the explosion of commercial computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, much of it had slipped by him.

God he wished he could be back in his tower, watching the city with his telescope.

“I think I can handle that,” he said. Maybe he could ask Natasha for help.

Natasha. He still had to visit her, without Jack in the way. Still had to apologize. That was going to be painful.

“Good. The digital era has brought with it a means for our kind to save our records in ways it could not before. But the digital world abandoned the soul of things, so you will have to hold the objects of the past in high regard as well. Preserve the soul with ways of old, and preserve the knowledge with ways of new.” She gestured to the paintings, the drapes, the various artifacts that sat around on many of the tables. Old knives, old books, crosses, swords and staves, chalices, shrines of gold, and carvings of skulls made of metal.

“Am ... am I to understand that ... you’ll be my goto in this pursuit, Madam Turio?”

“With all the bishops dead, Lucas dead, and the remnants of the Lancea et Sanctum in tatters here in Dolareido, do you have a better

idea?”

“ ... no, I don't.”

“Do you have an issue with me as your ... partner, in this endeavor, Burksen?”

“No ma'am.”

“Good.” She moved on, scarred fingers tracing along the tables she walked past before her journey took her toward the massive drapes that hung from the walls, and the enormous pictures weaved into them. “Have you encountered any of the Begotten or Uratha in the city, Burksen?”

Interesting direction to take the conversation. What was she driving at?

“I have not, Madam Turio.”

“Come now Burksen, understand that since we've been aware of your existence, all the covenants are keeping an eye on you in some fashion or another. The Invictus know you've talked with Fiona Young.”

Damn.

“I ... thought it best to leave Fiona out of this. She's young, and naive.”

“Hmmm. Maybe. That may change and change drastically once she talks with Azamel, as she no doubt will.”

“I wonder how that conversation will go,” he said.

“As do I.”

“You ... you wish I accompany Fiona, when she goes to meet Azamel.”

“Smart man.” Maria walked to the other side of the table, and smirked at him as she started to rummage through some more electronics on the table, tablets and such. “You’re not Invictus, so this is not an order. This is a partnership. I provide you with resources, both of the Second Estate’s property and the First Estate’s funds, while you provide me with information. Since ... since Natasha Vola’s departure, I have lost a rather talented set of eyes and ears.”

The delightful links between Maria and Damian continued to show themselves. Their love for a psychopath, and their connection to Natasha.

“I’m afraid I can’t replace Natasha as a right hand of the Invictus.”

“No, you can’t. But some information goes a long way, Burksen. Keep an eye and ear open for me, and I will support your role as bishop. To the Prince, as well.” After digging through a small shelf of what sounded like an array of tablets, she pulled out a smartphone and tossed it his way. “Here’s your new phone number. Do we have a deal?”

“ ... deal.”

“I have no doubt you will also run into the Uratha at some point. Take care with Avery, Damien Burksen. She may not have Simon leading her this time, but last time ... Be careful, she is all too willing get physical. Stay out of the Devil’s Corner tunnels, for now.”

---

That went much better than he thought possible. First encounter with Maria Turio, and she seemed to like him, maybe even trust him a little.

Being called Burksen twenty times in a conversation was not fun though. Invictus and their obsession with last names grated on him, but it was a small price to pay for her support. If it could be called that. Contractual obligation? He was going to be Maria's new eyes and ears. God, if only she knew about Jack.

He started the walk back to his normal hideout; knew the shortest route, and he slipped into the old subway tunnels as easily as kine breathed. The metal door still a ways down the tunnel, he stopped as he heard the knock knock of knuckles against it, and the clop of boots against the tunnel's concrete base.

“Fiona?”

“Damian! Been looking for ye. Wanted some help in the tunnels down ‘ere, under Devil’s Corner.”

Of course, where Maria didn't want him going. “You sure, Fiona? The Uratha have given orders to Kindred to stay out of there.”

“Aye well, I'm nae Uratha, and you're a sneaky, fast fucker, aye?” She hopped over to him, beamed up at him, and put her hands together in front of her, complete with squishing her breasts together with her biceps. Very blatant I-need-your-help-and-aren't-I-hot tactic. Made him chuckle.

“I'm serious Fiona.”

“Me too. There werewolves might be hunting me; I'm needing to clear my name.”

“Clear your name?”

“Aye! The werewolves are hunting for something in a place I frequent. And with the spiderwebs and the disappearances—one of which is nae my doing! There's something going on Damien, and I'm wanting to investigate.”

“I ... I don't think it's a good idea, Fiona. Better to just stay out of sight for a while, and—”

“I have to ken what's going on, Damien. How come werewolves hunting me? I haven't done anything that'd make them want to hurt me, I think?”

“For all we know, the—”

“Na na no!” She started turning around in spot, stomping her feet and waving her arms. “We have to go to the tunnels beneath Devil's Corner! The answer is there, it has to be!”

“... don't you contain some very ancient monster entity inside you?” You're acting like a child. Best to not say that out loud to the ancient monster acting like a child.

“Aye, I do, so ye better nae say na to me. And ... and that might have something to do with what the wolves want with me. If it's me! So I'm going down to the tunnels to see what's going.”

“You haven't been down there as of late?”

“Nae since we saw Jack, since he said Kindred were investigating those tunnels. Then when I heard about the Uratha hunting something, I ... something's going on. We're gonnae find out what. And besides, ye owe me for not killing ye when ye invaded my lair!”

Shit. This was a dumb idea. Very very dumb idea.

But the girl was giving him obviously manipulative, pouty lips and breast squishing and swishing her shoulders from side to side; it was too adorable. And she really was liable to get herself killed if he didn't help her. Girl was strong in her dream world, but in the real world, her tricks were nothing he couldn't handle. And if he could, the Uratha could.



Damn it, it was too easy to like her.

---

Shouldn't be doing this. Shouldn't be doing this. Shouldn't be doing this. Your new boss specifically told you to not do this. And yet he was doing it.

Not your boss. Partner. Hard to think of it as a partnership considering how the conversation with Maria had gone down; elders never engaged in conversations with younger Kindred unless they could control it. He was the submissive in that conversation, because had to be. Didn't like it, but it was kind of nice talking to a Kindred old enough to be in charge, to be powerful enough to handle their affairs without the Prince bullying them.

Focus. You're in tunnels the whole damn city is up in arms about, pay attention.

Fiona was walking, or marching like a toy in the Nutcracker play. Every so often she smiled at him, kicked her feet out as she walked, bounced a few times, and got ahead a few steps. There were far less lights in this part of the tunnels, but it was enough to see by. Which was enough for Fiona to feel comfortable goofing around, apparently. Girl could see in total blackness if his first encounter with her was any indication.

"You're awfully comfortable," he whispered.

"Aye. Spend a lot of time in the dark." She shrugged at him, hooked her hands in her jean pockets, and started walking backward. Not easy to do with every step a potential for tripping on the tracks, but she managed. "I came to Dolareido cause my online friends said my home town was dull, boring. And they were right, compared to Dolareido anyway."

"Your friends live in Dolareido?"

“Aye. There’s Zoe and Jen and Chloe. Right trio of sluts they are. But then Dolareido seems to bring that out in folk doesn’t it? Everybody ‘ere seems ferr comfy getting high and fucking in parked cars or clubs or the back of theaters.”

Yes, yes they did, much as he disliked it. Not God’s path for the kine; but then, if you considered the weight of a sin, fucking around always ranked pretty low on his list compared to theft or murder.

“The Prince and the others created this city to be a prime feeding ground for Kindred, among other things. So, vices like sex or drug abuse are ignored, and sometimes encouraged. The police are pretty tough on major crimes like murder, but people getting high on whatever drug, and fucking in each other in whatever place? The police ignore them. And they’re easy marks for a hungry Kindred.” And, he had to admit, he’d had his fair share of meals from such circumstances. Course he used the opportunity to try and guide them toward the church, a little scare here, a bible there.

“Beatrice tells me yer Lancea et Sanctum group dinnae like sex?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “The rules of God are for kine, not the Kindred. If I wanted to, I could indulge in every sin and not violate the beliefs of my order, as long as I encouraged the humans to look for faith in God.”

“Strange beliefs.”

“Yes, they are. And ... after Lucas died, I question them more and more every day.” Undoing brainwashing was a painful process. Ticks, habits, views ingrained into his very subconscious that he had to question. “I sometimes wonder if I understand my religion at all. Lucas’s views about many things were beyond strict.”

“Strict? So nae sex for ye?”

“Not with kine—humans, no.”

“Ah, that’s a shame.” She got in closer and started walking normally again, but not without the occasional nudge of her shoulder against his arm. Flirtatious, this girl. At least in human form. “Beatrice told me humans really get off on being sucked. Like, cum their brains out if ye touch them during the Kiss.”

“I ... wouldn’t know.”

“Nae with humans na. How about with Kindred?”

“No.”

“ ... at all?”

“ ... no.”

“Haven’t ye been a vampire for fifty years?” She raised a brow at him, like it was the most absurd thing in the world that he hadn’t had sex. “And ye were alive a good while before that. Nae even a quick lay then?”

“ ... no. When I was human, it was a ... weird time in my life. Then I was a fugitive and forced to hide for fifty years. Sex never came up.”

“That is buggered. Are ye still gonnae follow those super strict beliefs?”

He sighed and pulled some of the hair out of his eyes. Still wearing the half-shaved head look, front to back, so half of his head had black hair down to his shoulder.

“I ... think it is time for a change. If I’m going to be in charge of the Lancea et Sanctum in this city, I can’t ignore how much the world has changed in fifty years, and how wrong Lucas was about many things. And the Prince has bred this city to be different from

others; I can't deny her approach has led to less violence than other cities."

Fiona burst into laughter and punched him in the arm. "Ye won't be celibate anymore?"

"I was never voluntarily celibate, Fiona. It just ... never came up."

Again, more laughter, and another punch in his arm. "In my home town, my neighborhood, folk are kind of prudish. Just a wee bit. But 'ere, I've been 'ere one year and I've seen folk fucking in public places or in the window, almost every week! The folk in this town are so loose! Shameless!"

"Yes, Lucas felt he had much work to do, and that work evaporated in the fifty years he slept." And Damien didn't feel like that was a bad thing anymore. Not necessarily good either. God, every day for him was frustrating without a simple guide, simple direction to follow. The pains of being forced to use his brain and think about things. Ugh.

"Well if ye'r looking to expand yer boundaries, I do suggest ye get laid. In fact, from what Triss says about the Kiss, you could go to a club's back room, and just swim in sex!"

"... you are a demon," he said. Half serious, half kidding, but Fiona didn't seem offended at all.

"I was a bit prudish, before Vrall and I become one. I can see memories drifting, hazy images, folk in groups, naked, touching and fucking and smoking herbs and drinking strange liquids. Folk that ... worshiped me."

"Wait ... what?"

"Aye! Strange isn't it? But I can definitely remember it. I can remember the jungle, the heat and sweat, the moans. I can

remember folk locking legs in front of me and spilling juices. I can remember Vrall, eight legs and all, being bathed in sex.”

Well, he could see how someone could be attracted to Vrall. She was a monster, but a lot of her monster figure was an accented form of human curves.

“Did she eat any of these worshipers?”

“Na. Far as I can mind, she never hurt any of them. She hunted local tribes who didn’t believe her. Found the mean ones, the ones that bullied or killed other tribes. Fed on them. She had a body, like I do now, and she’d leave the dream, leave her orgies and followers, and pretend to be an innocent lass. Other tribes would be more than willing to rape her, capture her, hurt her, and she’d feast on them.”

Ok, maybe not such a naive young girl. But at the same time, she was. Having another’s memories inside your mind was not something he could understand.

“And now?” he said.

“Wha?”

“You said you were prudish, before Vrall came to you.”

“Oh! Damien Damien, aren’t ye nosy?” She beamed up at him, and wiggled her eyebrows. “I admit, in my hunts I’ve come across a few interesting corners of the town. Told myself I was just looking for more minging folk, got involved in some places where bastards might be. But often times, it was a perfectly innocent hole in the wall filled with sex. I may have stuck around to watch ... a few times. Maybe did a wee more than watch once or twice. Maybe I’ll take you sometime? Found strange places, unusual places just ... overflowing with sex. Unnatural even, folk just throwing themselves into these orgies. Felt like the sort of place Vrall used to hang out in.”

“Unnatural?”

“Aye! Folk just donder into the room, and like they passed through a magical, invisible gate, they take off their clothes and join the arms and legs. And I admit, it worked on me. Felt ... familiar too, like something Vrall had enjoyed.”

Damien ran his fingers along the bald half of his head before combing his long hair down the haired side. “That ... sounds familiar. Tony, and then Lucas, used a place where a leader’s voice was compelling. More compelling than it should have been. The Prince said the same. Maybe another place exists, with similar influence?”

“Na leaders there, just a lot of legs.”

“Still, the way you describe it sounds similar. Hidden influence.” Sex holes were a thing, he knew that. Fifty years skulking around South Side and mostly Devil’s Corner, he’d stumbled upon such places. He let them be, never went into them. Of all the sins he would punish kine for, guide them away from, people having sex with each other never seemed like one worthy of such treatment. Or, seeing people together like that just made him too uncomfortable to approach.

He never told Lucas that.

“Hidden influence. There could be something to that, aye. We should investigate later! I’ll get ye laid in the most glorious way.”

God help him.

“Like you did?”

“Hey! Just a couple times. Vrall had orgies in her past! And she’s me.” She giggled and jumped around in front of him. Ancient entity, or silly young girl? Leaning far more toward silly young girl when

she was outside of her lair. “It’s been a long while since I’ve been in these tunnels. I wonder if something’s happened since I left.”

“Maybe.”

“Aye. Maybe something’s happened down ‘ere since then, and that’s why the werewolves came?”

A coincidence? No chance in Hell. But, he nodded, and continued on.

“Have you fed since last time?”

“Na, nae since the Prince said I need to lighten up. I am very hungry. I can feel myself, Vrall, clawing at the walls, looking for food. I—”

He stopped. She stopped. They glanced at each other, and then back to the darkness ahead of them. It wasn’t totally dark yet; the black tunnels were still a ways ahead. So as the group of men and women came out of the darkness, the glares and frowns on their faces were obvious. Very obvious. Six people dressed in typical street clothes, some ripped jeans and shirts and tank tops, some tattoos and some piercings. They looked normal. They did not feel normal.

“Who are you two?” A black woman came forward, long black hair, slightly tall, and sharp features. And like all the members of her group, she looked very fit; the jeans and tank top left little to the imagination.

Fiona gulped, loudly, and leaned up to Damien’s shoulder. “That’s them.”

Yeah, he figured.

“I’m Damien. This is Fiona.” His sword was along his back under his coat; a quick flick of the wrist and arm and he’d have it out, but he kept it sheathed for now. Far as he could tell, the werewolves carried no weapons, and their clothes offered little place to hide any. They were confident in their hand-to-hand combat then.

“Stephanie.” She came closer, and closer, swagger to her step and curvy hips. An attractive woman to be sure, confident, and her dark brown eyes stared into him with all the intent and aggression of an animal whose territory had been violated. “You a vamp? Don’t smell human.” She came closer again, until she was only a few feet from him, and took a long sniff. “Definitely a vamp.”

“Then you must be the werewolves I’ve heard so much about,” he said. Fiona said nothing, but she’d drifted closer to his side, until her shoulder was nudging against his arm.

“We’re famous? Sweet.” She looked over her shoulder to her pack. “Hear that Mason? Fucking famous.”

Someone in the back shrugged and leaned against one of the concrete walls of the tunnel. “Suppose that makes you happy,” the man said.

“Careful,” another man said. “Careful with ... with them. With her.”

Damien leaned around Stephanie a little to get a glimpse of the new talker; another tall, muscled man like many in their pack, but this one refused to make eye contact with Damien, or with anyone around him. His eyes drifted and snapped around on the tracks beneath him, but never at anyone’s eyes.

“David says be careful with you.” Stephanie leaned down toward the short Scot, and tilted her head to the side. “Why’s that?”



“I dinnae ken.” Fiona looked up at the wolf, then around her and at the squirming man in the distance. “Looks pure barry.” Sarcasm dripped from her tongue.

Everyone raised an eyebrow at her, Damien included. The fuck did pure barry mean? Fiona smirked, catching onto everyone’s confusion; and refused to enlighten anyone.

Stephanie took a long sniff, and a sneer started to form, along with some growl sounds. “You’re not human, and you don’t smell like a dead girl.”

Another of the wolves walked up from the pack. Normal height, with tanned skin and box braid hair. “I’m Clara,” she said. Where Stephanie gave them nothing but sneers and growls, this Clara person seemed to at least offer a smile. “You’re awfully close to our hunting grounds. And I assume you’ve been told about them, so no excuses. Leave.”

“Clara ... you in charge?” he said.

“Second in charge.” She shrugged and folded her arms across her chest. So casual for someone in such a position. “Avery isn’t here.”

“Clara then. We aren’t under Devil’s Corner yet, not quite. We haven’t violated your demand.”

“Demand, heh.” Stephanie stepped in closer to Fiona again, and glared down at her. “I’m more interested in why David’s got a problem with her. You don’t smell like a vampire, but you don’t feel like a human. And,” she took another long whiff, “you smell ... weird.”

“And ye smell rank.” Fiona took a step back. Or she tried to, but Stephanie’s hand snapped out to grab her wrist and yank her back toward her.

Fiona punched her.

Damien jumped as Stephanie fell backward ten feet. Fiona hit hard. It wasn't just the little girl punching the big bad wolf, it was the thing inside her too. Vrall. For a moment, just a second or two, the colossal shape of the enormous spider goddess appeared, gargantuan legs erupting from Fiona's back as her fist collided with Stephanie's chest. And along with her human fist was Vrall's open palm, three claws, that slammed into the werewolf and sent her flying.

"What the fuck!" Clara jumped back over to Stephanie, and the rest of the pack joined her. They picked the woman back up to her feet, and Stephanie took a moment to get her bearings. But she had no balance, not with spiderweb wrapping her arms tight to her torso.

Fuck.

"Dangerous! Dangerous. Spider, she-spider." David came closer, and the others came with him. "Spider, she-spider."

"Damien," Clara said, and she came up to him with a growl and sneer just like Stephanie's. "Get away from her."

"What? Why? She's no threat to you." He started to back up, and drew his sword as he did. The blade grabbed their eyes for a second, but only one, before their gazes fell back to the little woman beside him. She even hid behind his arm, but when he looked down at her, she had her own sneer on her face. If she was afraid, he couldn't tell; she looked more excited than anything.

"Because," Stephanie said as she waddled over to them, arms still trapped in the webbing around her, "she's Azlu."

And then her arms were no longer trapped. Damien's eyes went wide, and he drew his pistol in his other hand. But he continued

backing up, and his eyes continued to widen, as the werewolves began to transform.

Fur overtook their clothes, and their clothes disappeared in the growing, overwhelming mass of muscle. Claws replaced their fingernails. Their hair changed, warped, turned into manes of different sizes along their enormous necks. Some of them had a couple beads in braids dangling from their manes. Others kept necklaces of string with teeth or talons dangling from their now enormous necks. All of them now with wolf heads twice the size of any wolf's.

He kept backing up. Fiona had frozen, but he pushed against her with his sword arm. Keep going, keep going. Slowly.

They were getting taller. The large muscles they'd already sported were now gargantuan walls of meat and strength. Some were eight feet tall, some nine, one of them ten. Their ears rose into points, and their mouths elongated into snouts with teeth bared. All semblance of their human gaze faded away, replaced with animal eyes, wolf eyes.

Fiona gulped again. He did too.

"Go. Kindred. Leave." The one that was Stephanie towered over them, and made a few attempts to brush off the webbing stuck to her arms. She wasn't bound anymore, but it was sticky stuff. "Leave girl here." Her voice was a snarled mess of deep growls and heavy slurs.

Good God, she was massive. She was haunched forward, like she'd start running on all fours at any moment, and a few drops of drool fell from her chops.

Run. Get the fuck out. The beast in his chest freaked, screeching in all the blind fear he expected of a scared, tiny animal before the wolf. Vitae jolted through his limbs, demanded he run. His weight

pressed into the balls of his feet, and he forced himself to stop shaking as he took another step back.

All of them had changed, and all of them were glaring at Fiona. The light caught in their eyes, reflected it slightly. Twelve eyes in the dark coming closer, and closer.

“What is Azlu?” he said. Should be running. Could he run with Fiona next to him? Mekhet were fast, but Fiona probably wasn’t. Probably.

“No talk! Azlu. Must. Kill.” Clara, or what was left of Clara, stomped toward them, in close, and growled as she lowered her head. A giant wolf’s head to match her absurdly massive body. “Go.”

He gulped. Like staring into a volcano. Way too close, way way too close.

“Wait, please,” he said, “Fiona’s done nothing to harm you. You have to explain why—”

Claws came down toward him, massive. For a flash moment, he thought he was looking at Jessy, and those enormous claws she’d attacked him with a lifetime ago. Claws big enough to cleave him into pieces. And this time they had what must have been six hundred pounds of muscle and strength behind them.

He jumped back. Her claws crashed against the concrete beneath him and tore through the metal of the tracks. The tunnel rumbled with the heavy impact, and the following roar of anger vibrated his bones and skin as it echoed. She was fast. He was faster.

He used his sword hand to grab Fiona’s jacket, and threw her back as the other wolf Stephanie jumped at her. The wolf’s immense body slammed both sets of claws against the tracks beneath them, and she tore through the metal and concrete with all the rage of Goliath.

“Stop! We must speak!” he said, but they weren’t listening. The other four werewolves broke into sprints, each of them a hulking mass of death and snarls.

He glanced behind him. Poor Fiona, he’d thrown her a good distance, some ten feet, and she’d landed in a roll over the tracks. Hopefully she didn’t break a bone.

Mistake, glancing back. Clara followed her swipe with another, and this time he wasn’t so fast dodging. Or she was getting faster. How could something that huge move that quickly? He’d danced around Jessy when she had gone full Gangrel psycho on him—no, not entirely true. Jessy had managed to cut into him. And Clara managed to cut him too, her claws finding his chest and tearing through it skin deep.

And just like Jessy’s monstrous claws, the werewolf’s claws did more than just cut cleanly, they burned. Like fire. Like fucking acid. He screamed as he jumped back to land beside Fiona, and grabbed at his chest. It was worse than Jessy’s claws, more like someone had taken a chainsaw to his ribs. Four long gashes ran down the chest of his shirt. His thick, Kindred blood held to Clara’s claws, but there was enough of it for a couple large droplets to splatter on the dark concrete beneath them.

The six beasts charged.

Fiona got back to her feet. He reached out for her to try and grab her, turn, run, get the fuck away, but she pushed his hand aside, and swiped her palm across the air.

In a flash of spider limbs, an eruption of white covered the wall. Damien jumped back again, gasping, eyes snapping left and right as the thick vines attached like living ropes to the tunnel walls. And when they tightened, they made a sound like metal.

A spider web.

The wolves crashed into it, and it stopped them. All of them, all six of them came to a halt as their fangs, claws, and mass collided with the wires of white. Some of the white wires yanked on the concrete bricks that lined the tunnel walls, and several of the bricks ripped free of their holds where the spider webbing was attached to them. The werewolves howled and roared, clawed and bit at the webbing, but they weren't going anywhere.

Or at least, they weren't for a few seconds. Clara snarled at Fiona, stared straight at her, and opened her palms wide before her claws began to glow a subtle crimson. Struggling against the white rope that stuck to her fur and wrapped around her the more she struggled, her claws found the webbing, and began to cut through it.

What the fuck.

“Come on!” Fiona grabbed his wrist, and started running. “Ye ken the way down to the maintenance tunnel below ‘ere? We can get back to my lair from there!”

Lair? Lair! He scooped the tiny girl up into his hands, and started running. The werewolves wouldn't be able to get into her dream lair. Probably.

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~~Antoinette~~

It was the third night since the meeting. The third night without talking to Jack, her love and joy. It was killing her.

The Primogen meeting had gone about as well as expected, at least until the Fiona girl came in. All of Antoinette's hatred for Azamel rose to the surface rather suddenly when the beast in her gut had jumped up and bared its teeth at the monster. The reaction had been abrupt, and she wasn't prepared for it, the strange presence of a Begotten, the way they dripped of something primordial and unknowable.

She had not been kind to Fiona, none of the Primogen had. And she saw how it upset her love. Fiona seemed like the friendly sort, the sort to shatter ice with her warm personality and joyful voice, and it had worked on Jack all too well. Manipulation? Unlikely, given her young age, but it did not change that Jack had become friends with the Begotten. And that terrified her.

Antoinette sat in the depths of her tower, the chandelier of blue flames lit, and her table covered in objects and laptops and devices calibrated to see ephemera, once lit by the blue. It was difficult to focus on her research and resume delving into the secrets hidden in Twilight. Twilight, a silly word to describe the hidden things in their world. She hated it, hated such dogma, hated how the Uratha held such things as sacred or as secrets to be kept. Knowledge of the world should be shared.

Fools. They would never understand how important it was for them to work together and share what they knew. In a hundred years when human kind would be colonizing Mars, when space stations would become vast cities, and the Earth could no longer hide their kind easily, what would rigid beasts like Uratha do? Let alone the Begotten, and their hungers.

“P-Prince.” Natasha stepped into the laboratory, dressed in her usual business suit. Though, instead of pants, she wore a skirt that stopped at the knee, some pantyhose to darken her legs, and her suit jacket actually sported some cleavage. It looked delightful on her small body and tiny curves. Perhaps someone or something had awakened her sexual awareness, or appetite.

“Vola, you look charming.”

“I d-do? Thank you, I ... I uh, have been ... trying to expand m-my wardrobe.”

“Oh? Then please, if you ever wish for aid in such matters, I would be glad to provide assistance. You are a dragon now, Vola,

which means I can help you in many ways. And your sire has as much interest in fashion as a rock.” Antoinette could — and did — dress her ghouls in many fashions for fun, but to play such games with a Kindred, one with many decades under her belt, could prove especially fun indeed.

“D-Daniel is ... yes, he is ... trench coat man,” she said. The two of them laughed; it was true after all. Natasha looked around a few times, no doubt coming to terms with her sire’s absence once more. If she knew where Antoinette had sent him, she would have been upset. Best to keep such matters a secret, even from her new student.

“Did you bring the object I asked for?”

“Yes Prince. It ... it took some thinking, t-t-to find what you wanted. But I found an old necklace, one that I wore a lot in ... that time. A gift from ... my parents.” Vola walked over to her and set the necklace down on the table in front of Antoinette. “It holds a lot of memory. Reminds me of that time ... b-b-before the embrace.”

Perfect.

“Thank you, Natasha. Your necklace will be unharmed, I am sure, but be prepared for the unexpected. What we are about to do is dangerous.”

“D-Dangerous?” Her brows furrowed, and she looked across the table of objects and devices, the room and its symbols drawn into the floor, and toward the center of the symbols where she no doubt anticipated her necklace would be placed.

“Indeed. Come.” Antoinette picked up the necklace with all the care of a great artifact, one tablet as well, and walked toward the center of her laboratory. “The ghostly images we expose with the help of these devices from the Ordo Dracul are ephemera. Ghosts, though more often, the shadow of them and their passing.”



“Those s-scary occult objects are possessed by ghosts?”

“Not exactly. These tools allow us to see the scars. You could think of them as the echoes of events, in much the same way ghosts are the echoes of people.” Such wonder and terror the Ordo Dracul had shown her long ago when she joined the order, centuries ago in Europe. All a blur now, faded hazy memories.

“Daniel discussed ephemera with me, but I’ve ... I don’t know. These words feel weightless. I just see ... images of things. They respond, s-s-sure, but—”

“Yes. You are a skeptic, Natasha Vola, and I appreciate that. I value that.” She pat the tiny girl on the shoulder, smiled down at her, and took the final steps into the center of the enormous symbol upon the floor. “Come.” Sitting down on the floor on the side of her leg, she set the necklace upon its center as Natasha sat next to her.

“I d-don’t understand. My necklace, I ... it’s just a necklace.”

“From your parents. And your parents, they cared for you?”

“ ... yes. They ... my disappearance, it killed them.”

The dark side of being embraced. Many thought it was becoming an immortal blood leech doomed to never see the sun that drove many Kindred to depression. But the harshest reality was the life you had to leave behind. Many left a cut in the world, others left a crater.

“I am sorry for your loss, Vola, I truly am. But, perhaps, this will provide you with a ... comfort, of a sort.”

“You’re n-not going to show me my p-p-p-parents, are you?”

“No, nothing so macabre.” She pulled the tablet onto her lap, and used it to dim the lights, increase the power of the chandelier, and

begin resonance level: light. Nothing to startle Natasha, not yet.

A quiet hum filled the room, a gentle and soothing sound. A familiar sound. She smiled as the hum filled her, and Natasha, and as the Mekhet made her own smile similar to Antoinette's, the Prince set the tablet aside. At level light, the resonance level was far from dangerous despite what she told her subordinate, but it was wise to instill caution in the woman.

“Are we w-w-waiting for something?”

“Oui.” She pat Vola on the shoulder, and resumed waiting, smile on her face unwavering. It took time, sometimes hours, but she doubted it would take as long this time, not for something as simple and powerful as what Natasha's necklace held.

The room was a constant blue, and even with the chandelier at full power, the room was dim. Bright enough for Kindred though. And more important, dim enough for the subtleties to show through.

“We d-don't need the filter lens?” Natasha said.

“It would spoil the surprise. Just wait.”

And wait they did, thirty minutes at that. Natasha did not seem to believe anything would happen without the device to look through and the filter it provided. If Antoinette fetched it now, no doubt it would have exposed the swirling ephemera growing, and the essence that filled the room that began to resonant since she turned on the resonance device. There was far more to the vibrations than mere kinetic vibration, but those were secrets for another time for her little assistant.

Color. Movement. Natasha gasped as a flutter of orange trickled through the air before vanishing, leaving behind a small cloud of glowing amber dust that faded moments after. But, as Natasha

stared at the tiny spark of color in the dark blue of the room, another appeared. It fluttered again for a few moments, moved through the air several inches above the necklace, before disappearing again.

“What ... w-what’s...”

“I do not know what will come through the Gauntlet, Natasha. But I can open the door, and unique to these wisps of ephemera, make the door more appealing to ... certain manifestations. That is what your necklace is for.”

“My n-n-necklace? I ... oh!” The wisp appeared again, and fluttered its wings a couple times before settling upon the necklace.

A butterfly. It glowed amber, orange, and varying shades of red against the blue of their surroundings. It was a small thing, only an inch in size, but its wings glowed with a subtle brilliance that covered several feet around them in its light. Its wings’ patterns changed and swirled with time, slow and gentle, and it fluttered its wings in a leisurely dance, each beat causing the swirling designs to change faster between its motions, only to slow down when it stopped.

“Beautiful,” Antoinette said.

“Wh ... what am I ... looking at?”

“Something alive, in its own, unique way.”

“ ... n-not a ghost?”

“No. Indeed, it is not.”

Another butterfly wisped into existence, larger than the other, and set itself to the floor near the necklace. Antoinette smiled down at the lovely creature, and reached out with her hand before setting

her fingers down on the floor beside it. It did not react, at first, but eventually, it fluttered its wings a few more times, and hovered over to her knuckles. And from there, it turned to face her, its body and face of gentle flickering amber without features, only subtle, swirling lines of black within the glow.

She felt it, a soft warmth, as if the glow it emitted was a blanket to wrap around her and cocoon her. Such silly, poetic thoughts, and yet those were the thoughts that flooded her as the creature turned around a few times on her hand. Another butterfly of amber appeared, as large as the one before, and it fluttered close to its friend. But, with her free hand, Antoinette blocked its path with a slow and soft wave, and ushered it toward Natasha.

The poor girl was stunned. Her eyes were wide and jaw dropped. She'd have asphyxiated for lack of breathing were she human.

“These creatures were beckoned by your necklace, Natasha.”

With shaking limbs, the girl raised her hands palm up and together, and stared at the butterfly of waving reds and oranges as it settled onto her hands. She gasped once it touched her, as if life had just forced its way into her chest.

“It ... it's ... warm! And I f-feel ... it...”

“I have summoned several entities with this technique. But never have I summoned something as ... gentle, and loving, as this.”

“My necklace ... I ... this...” Natasha brought the butterfly closer to her, hands cupping it like a large bowl. It did not fly away. As it came closer to her, it fluttered its wings, and several waves of amber filled the air around her, wisps of color that fell over Natasha and again earned a gasp from her. “It's ... it's the ... the same f-f-feelings I ... in my memory, when Mom and Dad ... gave me the necklace.”

“Can you describe the feeling?” She felt it too, but it was a feeling so long forgotten she could not describe it as anything more beyond a warm cocoon.

Natasha lowered her hands, and looked at her with the heaviest eyes. “It’s ... it’s hazy. So long ago, b-b-but ... it’s ... the feeling ... when you’re in bed, and you’re going to sleep, and your parents come in. They ... they tuck you in, kiss you goodnight, and ... and...”

“You miss your parents.”

“ ... I do.”

Antoinette sighed, and motioned forward, back to the center of the symbol. The butterfly left her hand and rejoined the smaller one by the necklace. “I must apologize, Natasha. I could not be sure what was summoned, and this was ... perhaps, painful.”

“No! No no, this is b-beautiful, and ... it’s ... it’s so—”

Giggling cut her off. Natasha blinked at her, and Antoinette her in return, before the two of them looked back to the circle.

Another wisp of color appeared in the blue over the necklace. And with it, another giggle, childlike. The butterflies started to hover around the necklace, and their colors shined all the brighter as they circled it and each other. Until another wisp of color, something white and golden, swallowed them up.

“W-What?” Tasha backed up, sliding her butt across the floor. “What’s going on?”

Antoinette peered into the growing streaks of gold and white, squinted for a moment as a burst of light flooded them, and then pulled back a couple feet like Tasha as light began to settle

“Hello,” the light said. A girl’s voice, maybe six years old. Bright. Innocent.

“ ... hello,” Antoinette said.

“Hello,” it said again. No longer just a sheen of light, it looked like an orb, perhaps made of glass and only a few inches in diameter, glowing white. From behind the orb, two wings were flapping in slow, deep waves, angel wings that glowed gold, each maybe three feet long.

Tasha got onto her palms and knees, and crawled forward a little to get in closer to the hovering orb. “I ... what ... who are you?”

The orb drifted closer to Tasha, and flapped its wings hard enough to make her hair move with the gentle breeze. “I’m Safe.”

“Safe?” Tasha said.

“Safe.” The orb hovered around Tasha, over her, and bits of golden dust fell from its wings onto her body. They faded, but only once they glowed extra bright upon contact. “Do you feel safe?”

“I ... yes ... that’s the word. That’s the word I needed t-t-to ... describe ... the feeling.”

Safe. This creature was Safe.

“Hello!” it said. “Please, be safe. I’ll keep you safe.”

“You are a young spirit, are you not?” Antoinette smiled at the unusual creature, and reached out to poke its glass-like body. It was not glass, but something warm, and somewhat soft.

“I am! And this place, I’ve seen this place. Before it was different, and there were different things here. Not safe. Now it’s safe. Are you safe? Big walls here, must be safe.” It hovered over Antoinette as

well, and over her, large wings covering her in its glow. “I’ll keep you safe. Do you feel safe?”

She did. A long forgotten sensation to feel safe, and one paranoid Kindred often never felt, ever, even in the depths of underground tunnels surrounded by metal and vault doors and security. But under this creature’s radiance, she did feel safe, to an unnatural degree. The entity made her feel safe by proximity then, or was it the strange glowing dust that fell from its wings? Or was it all a mere trick of the light?

“I do. Thank you, Safe.”

“That’s good!” Again it giggled, and started to drift around the two women in a slow figure-eight. “In the Hisil, this area is not safe! It’s tall, and big, and strange, and chaotic. But then you did something, and I came.”

Antoinette smiled. Chaotic indeed. Her experiments must have unbalanced the world in the other realm every time she performed them.

“Is ... is this the first time ... you’ve s-s-summoned something that’s talked?” Tasha said.

“No. I have encountered other such spirits.”

“Spirits ... spirits ... I ... it’s hard t-to...”

To accept that spirits exist. Such thoughts were long past for Antoinette, but there was a time long ago when she felt the same.

“The wolves would keep this world secret from us.” She reached out for the spirit, and it fluttered over her hand. The strange orb landed upon her palm, and giggled again. It was not just Safe, it was something slightly different, or perhaps more specific. Something her city contained, something the necklace resonated with.

The safety a child felt with their parents. Were the spirit older, it would not have been something as simple and delightful as the little angel sitting on her hand. Perhaps it would develop into a monstrous size, with six wings, and the sphere of its body would grow strong, and envelop all it wished to keep safe.

But for now, Safe was simple little thing, and adorable.

“It pleases me that such spirits exist within my city.” It was a haven for Kindred after all, and other monsters apparently. For such spirits to exist perhaps reflected on the state of her city, or nearby areas. That well of knowledge, all beyond her reach. She could do nothing but prod at it with her experiments, and hope to stumble upon new secrets.

“Yes yes! The blood tower is strange! It can be spooky and scary, but sometimes not. I can’t keep things safe here! Normally. But tonight it’s safe. Are you safe?”

“I ... I’m safe,” Tasha said. “W-Why did ... what called you here?”

“Blood tower changed! The locus here is very small, and weird, and it disappears and changes. Today it’s new! And warm. And safe. I must become bigger, keep it safe. Don’t change it! I can feed here, and keep it safe and get bigger and keep it safe.”

Antoinette sighed, long, heavy, and ushered the beautiful angel toward Tasha again, who put out her hands to catch it. The little girl’s eyes were wide with wonder now, no longer shocked, absorbed in the beauty of what she was holding, the expression so clear on her face it reminded Antoinette of Jack.

“I am sorry, Safe, but the locus will disappear soon. You will have to go back to your realm.”

“ ... ok. But stay safe!” Its wings settled as the spirit nestled into Natasha’s hands, and it pressed them to her chest. “You too? You



seem nice. I'll protect you."

From how Tasha was looking at the lovely creature, if she had been blushing like she would have cried a river of tears.

"D-Don't worry ... I'll be safe."

Oh, poor Vola. Antoinette would have cried as well if she were blushing, just for the proximity to such eyes. No doubt the spirit was stirring her memories, as it was her necklace, carrying her emotions embedded upon its body due to years of wear. Perhaps Antoinette's request for a personal object was misguided.

But, Natasha was smiling.

Antoinette reached over for the tablet, and disabled the resonance. As it began to fade, Safe began to fly higher, and giggled its sweet little sound, before it too faded away as the hum completely silenced.

"This was perhaps an error on my part, Natasha Vola." She got up, fixed her skirt, and walked back to the wall by the main equipment to turn the lights back on. Only her, her subordinate, and the necklace in the laboratory. "This equipment is a gift from the Ordo Dracul to pursue the secrets I yearn to discover, but there are many unknowns, forces you could even describe as magical. Such a disgusting word, but here we are, summoning creatures from beyond the Gauntlet and our understanding. So, in my infinite ignorance, I test it, and test what lies beyond. Your ... your necklace, summoned something that existed in that place, Natasha. And it was quite beautiful."

"Wow." The little Mekhet got up, grabbed her necklace, and held it in her hand with all the delicacy of holding one of Antoinette's ancient relics. Like a precious flower. "It ... it was ... wow."

“Your eyes remind me of Minerva’s eyes, the first time I brought her here. She would say you are cute as a button.”

“Minerva? I never did learn about her, b-b-but she’s ... I hear ... things.”

“It is a sensitive topic for Jacob, so we let him share the information if he wishes, and otherwise do not spread it. But, I must warn you since you are now a member of the Ordo Dracul and working for me, that ... she was an overzealous member of the order. She spent many years in this room when these tools were still new, experimented, desperate to understand things.”

“I d-don’t understand. Some Uratha told me ... that Avery k-killed Minerva, and that ... Jacob and she were an item. B-B-But I ... what happened?”

“Minerva found a way to pursue these interests outside of my tower. I do not know how; the Uratha destroyed the evidence. She tried to stop them...” She sighed, and sat down at the table to begin examining the many artifacts before her. “She was Jacob’s lover, Miss Vola, and I believe they could have lived centuries together, in love, if fate had been on their side.”

Better for everyone she not bring up how she had tried to stop Minerva, encouraged her to only practice such dangerous experiments in the safety of the tower where they could control the parameters, to stay with Daniel or Antoinette who were much older and stronger than her. The girl’s death was partly Antoinette’s own fault; do not speak ill of the dead.

“Oh...” Vola sat down across from her, head lowered, shoulders heavy, and she slipped the necklace back into her pocket as her eyes drifted over the objects in much the same way Antoinette’s did. “The Uratha are ... brutal, and m-m-mean ... some of them.”

“Some of them?” Antoinette leaned in closer and eyed her little helper. Cute as a button indeed, Natasha looked down, up, left and right, every direction except the Prince’s. “Judging from how you described your encounter, I had expected you to consider them all quite vicious.”

“They were! A-And they were ... terrifying. But Arturo and Matthew were nice, after.” A tiny grin sneaked its way onto her face, only to vanish once Natasha shook her head, no doubt realizing Antoinette could see it.

“Natasha, if I did not know better, I would think you found these two werewolves intriguing.”

“I ... I uh ... I t-told you they let me feed, right? I ... didn’t tell you, that they ... um...”

“Natasha Vola, did you Kiss a werewolf?” For all her attempts at being serious about the matter, the line sounded too silly to keep a straight face even for her, and Antoinette chuckled with its conclusion.

“I ... did. They offered! Sort of. And ... Art was ... r-r-really ... really tasty.”

Drinking the blood of an Uratha. She had to admit, she had never done such a thing. Her interactions with wolves were limited; they rarely came to Dolareido, and Antoinette had spent nearly half her life in the city. Before, hundreds of years ago, she had interacted with the Uratha, but she could not for the unlife of her remember the details. Always a blur, always a haze memories from such a time. But, if she had Kissed a werewolf, she would surely have remembered it.

“I see a twinkle in your eye, Miss Vola.”

“T-Twinkle?”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, leaned in, and set her elbows on the table before setting her chin on her knuckles, fingers netted together. “Yes, the twinkle a young woman gets when her mind wanders, and she imagines a certain person presenting her with flowers, or a love poem, or in this modern era, a text.”

Aha. The girl twitched, and her gaze cast down even as her shoulders came forward and her arms wrapped around herself. Defensive, no doubt feeling exposed. Then Antoinette had struck a chord, and Natasha’s imagination had indeed been pondering someone.

“Come now Natasha, I am five hundred years old and have dealt with romance in all its forms.”

“ ... all?”

“All.” The Prince smiled over her hands at her little assistant. “While I do not enjoy the implication this story of yours carries, it is true that the previous pack of wolves to arrive in my city were under a different leader. If what Jack tells me is true, only Avery is the returning party, so whoever it is that has attracted your flights of fancy, I do not know them. And, as you say, they let you feed from them. I must consider that perhaps they are not the angry dogs I dealt with before.”

“They ... they’re b-b-brutal, and d-dangerous! Their claws felt like f-fire on my skin, and their speed and strength ... their animal hunger. It was ... t-t-t-terrifying. But, after, when they calmed, Art and Matt, they ... they were ... they flirted with me.” A confident statement from her shy, stuttering little friend.

“Flirted? That must have been ... thrilling.” Antoinette set her hands down and leaned in closer. “In truth, Miss Vola, it has been decades since I have had a friend to speak with about simple, fun, silly things, such as flirting. Minerva was the last.” And she did miss her, but it had been many decades since the woman’s death.

Antoinette had moved on. Jacob had not. And as much as Antoinette loved her precious ghouls, they were not Kindred.

“Are ... are you ... asking me t-to be ... your friend?” Natasha’s eyes were wider than the Prince thought possible.

“Oui ... why does that shock you so?”

“B-B-B-B-B-Because you’re the Prince, and you’re ... you!”

Antoinette laughed and shook her head before leaning back. She pulled much of her hair over her shoulder, and combed its long, white waves with her fingers over her chest.

“You and Jack have much in common, Miss Vola.” Shyness and jitteriness among them. “Both of you view me as a monolith. And that is my own doing; I am to blame. I must be such to be the Prince of this city, to rule its denizens and protect them from their bloodlust. But do not forget I am Kindred, as you are, and a woman, as you are.” She smiled with the word, woman, knowing full well Natasha viewed the Prince as her total opposite, mentally and physically. Such a comparison was inaccurate, lacking nuance, and perhaps she could show her little friend the error of her ways.

“W-What ... would you ... want to uh ... t-talk about?”

“Why you of course. My ghouls are a delight to gossip with, but it is not the same as speaking with fellow Kindred.” Again she combed her hair, as the motion seemed to draw Natasha’s eyes, and settled her fidgeting. Normal women played with their hair, not monolithic Prince’s that decided the fates of Kindred every day. “I am not Daniel, and you will find me a delight to speak with if you wish to.”

“Gossip, gossip ... um ... uh...”

“I will start, if you are still nervous.” She had only one thing on her mind after all, and she ached to speak of it. “I am very worried

about Jack, Miss Vola. His new role as intermediary for the Uratha has put him in a prime position to be hurt, or suffer from the anger of the wolves, or mine. And his friendship with Fiona, a Begotten, is another strain.” She sighed, and used a thick group of hair to tickle her chin with its soft ends.

“I hang out w-with Jack, sometimes.”

“Truly?”

“Yeah. And ... and I know you have nothing t-t-to worry about, Prince. He really ... loves you.”

Like someone had taken the weight of worlds from her shoulders. Antoinette sighed, long, content, and resumed combing her hair as she folded one leg over the other.

“I do hope you are right, Natasha, about not having to worry. And if you are becoming his friend, then please, keep an eye on him would you, for me, s’il vous plaît? I trust him, but ... well, you were there when Lucas attacked. The boy has a habit of getting in the middle of things.”

Natasha giggled, and smiled a mischievous little smile. “He does.”

“So, Natasha Vola, you believe some rather dangerous, and I assume fit, powerful, handsome werewolves have been flirting with you?”

“Y-Yes. And ... and they visited me, last night.”

“Visited by the wolves. Do tell.” A little push for her little subordinate, to loosen her tongue.

“Well, Arturo and M-M-Matthew visited ... and they like to flirt with me. I thought they were t-teasing me, but ... I don’t know now.

They ... they smile at me and look me up and down and Art is a sneaky b-bastard and Matt a gentle giant. They're close friends."

Two wolves flirting with Natasha, two friends at that. Antoinette smiled and nodded. A similar situation to Ashley and Julee then, perhaps.

"B-But," Vola continued, "they um ... had more to t-t-t-talk about, and ... warn me about."

If only gossiping with a new friend could remain a fun and silly, relaxing activity, not devolve into more Kindred affairs. C'est la vie.

"What did the wolves say?"

"They s-said you were messing with the Gauntlet ... w-w-which, I guess is true. They said that, what you're doing is d-d-dangerous, but not a problem ... yet. They said ... hosts are sneaky."

"Hosts? I believe Simon mentioned the word, but not in a way to give context. If what you say is true, then the word does indeed carry meaning. Hosts."

"B-But if we stay out of the werewolves' way, everything will be fine, right?"

Another sigh, another painful memory. "Perhaps, Miss Vola, perhaps. So, these two beasts came to your apartment to warn you?"

"Warn me, and ... w-w-watch television." She squirmed again, and smirked. "They're funny guys."

"Please, go on." Perhaps listening to the young woman talk about her interesting new friends would take Antoinette's mind off of Jack.



~~Jack~~

His buzzer rang. Almost a shock, considering how many people liked to circumvent the elevator. He hopped up from the couch and pressed the button. “Yello.”

“Jack, may I come in?” Antoinette’s voice.

Jack did a double take at the buzzer. Guess she didn’t feel like circumventing tonight. “Yes, please.”

He pressed the button and waited by the door. Going to be a weird conversation. Maybe a painful conversation.

A minute later, he opened the door for her, and she offered a nod before stepping into his place and setting her suit jacket aside. Still in her power suit skirt and white blouse, she sat down at his couch, folded one leg over the other, and pulled her beautiful hair over her shoulder to begin combing it with her fingers. If he replaced it with a white cat in her arms, it’d have been hard to tell the difference.

“I ... am not sure where to begin,” she said.

He sat down on the couch across from her, leaned forward with elbows on his knees, hands dangling, and shrugged. Definitely a painful conversation. “Me neither.”

“You must have questions.”

“I do. Just ... figured you wouldn’t want to talk about the meeting. That was the deal, wasn’t it? We’d leave the business world at the office.”

She smiled her beautiful smile, and her heavy eyes fell down to her combing fingers. “Perhaps that was naive. I know you left the meeting upset, and I could not help but feel responsible.”



“ ... yeah, I was upset.” Time for a real conversation, a real-talk sort of conversation. The sort of conversations they had in romance dramas when the music stopped and the silence between words pulled the air tight with tension. “I understand having the Uratha in Dolareido again is making the Primogen upset, and I get that having to go through me with no choice in the matter is going to make everyone pissed. But the fuck did Fiona do?”

He almost yelled the last bit; it was enough to make both of them blink in surprise.

“ ... you have become friends with her, quite quickly.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his buzzed head and let it hang from his neck like a stone. Stop being a jackass. “She’s really nice, sociable, even with someone like me. Kind of reminds me of my sister.”

“Your sister.” Antoinette got up, and came to sit beside him. One of the few times she’d ever done that; normally he’d join her. “You do not speak of your family often, my love.”

My love. Good, good there was still that. Course it’d take more than a rocky meeting to break that, stop being so stupid.

“I told you about my mom, my dad, my sister. Just ... not much to tell.”

“I ... still would like to hear more,” she said, and she reached out to put an arm over his shoulders. “Later. For now, you must understand why I was harsh, why we were all harsh in the meeting.”

“Julias told me. Described the Begotten, scared me with talk about their hungers, warned me about Azamel and told me to avoid her. And ... I’m only half sold, Antoinette. A lot of what he said applies to Kindred too, especially elders.” Poking the bear, comparing Kindred to Begotten. Poking the bear with a hot iron poker, specifically comparing to elders.

“That may be true, but Begotten are ... difficult to gauge, little Ventrue. Athalia has done little to disturb the Masquerade, but Azamel and her hunger have caused destruction beyond my ability to hide. Until I can understand this new friend of yours, I am afraid I must be strict with her. And intimidating. A deterrent.”

“A policy of deterrence. I remember a cold war nearly coming to a very explosive end, due in no small part to that.”

“It is not the same my love. Please understand, I have ruled this city for a long time, and the beasts that roam it need to be controlled. Forcefully sometimes. Julias understood this, and he laid the truth at her feet with no illusion or room for debate, so she would know how deathly serious the Masquerade is.”

Yeah, he got that, but that wasn't the whole issue. “The moment she stepped into the room, I could tell you all thought of her as scum.”

“ ... that ... is perhaps true. I would not use the word scum, but it is a reality that we in Dolareido hold no love for the Begotten. They are slaves to their hunger, and many of them have hungers that are ... barbaric.”

He sighed, but nodded. It hurt hearing it, but when a prejudice was backed up by real examples, it was hard to dismiss it.

“So, if she's not a problem, like Athalia, your opinion of her will change?”

“Indeed it will.” Antoinette's embracing arm hugged him tighter, and her hand started to rub his hair in that soft way against the grain he loved so much. “Unfortunately, I do not have the option to risk leniency.”

She made him feel like a child, and for good reason. A city to rule, with risks to take into account with every decision, and centuries of

experience to guide her; that included a dislike of monsters. All he had was first impressions of Fiona, the first monster he'd ever met.

“Suppose I failed pretty hard at this,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Just ... always took myself for an impartial guy, good at being logical about things. That meeting really got under my skin.”

“Jack, would you care to know a secret?” She leaned in and put her forehead to his temple, complete with some gentle nudges and soft sighs.

“I think so.”

“Those meetings grate on me as well. I must be a harsh, ruthless as you said several nights ago. People know me as such because I must be, to be Prince of this city. Please do not think of me as such when ... when we are together, alone.”

He sat up straight and looked at her. It really bothered her that he might think of her as such. And hell, after seeing and hearing how they acted in their Primogen meetings, he had to admit, he gained a new appreciation for the cycled stories among neonates that the Primogen were giant assholes.

“I'm overreacting.” He leaned in toward her, and she met him with her own lean further down, so they could put their foreheads to each other. “Sorry, I'm being an ass, and a kid.”

“Perhaps. But your observations about our distaste for Begotten were accurate, little Ventrue. I do hope your observations about Fiona are accurate as well.” Her hands slipped down over his arms to find his, and she brought them together before bringing them to her lips for a kiss. “We will clash in that room in the future, no doubt, and there will be sides of each other neither of us will

enjoying seeing. We were naive to think it would not follow us home, but, with soft words, we may be able to soothe our tempers and worries.”

“ ... you really are too damn good with words. Put me to shame.”

She kissed his knuckles again, and then his nose. “You will learn. Now, lie down.”

“Oh, ok.” He turned a bit more so he could face her, and she pushed him so his back fell to the couch, and his head rested on the couch arm. Helpless and staring up at a deadly creature—not a deadly creature. Those weren’t the tiger eyes he was used to seeing when she was looking for sex, or any of the eyes she sported when angry, or feeling playful, or commanding.

They were soft eyes tonight.

The goddess put her weight onto her elbows around his chest against the bed, and lay on top of him. So much taller than him, he could see her feet were pointed up from bent knees, and much of her body was between his legs. Her breasts pressed to his chest, and with her elbows tucked in at his sides and ribs, she was free to slide her fingers over his chin, his lips, his neck and earlobes.

“I spoke with Natasha Vola today,” she said, and kissed him. “You were a topic.”

“Uh oh.”

She chuckled and kissed him again. “She told me you would love me no matter what occurred.”

“Well ... yeah.” Her worried about him not loving her, him worried about her not loving him. A couple of idiots at this point.

“Forgive a Kindred her paranoia, little Ventrue.” She let her weight collapse down on him, and buried her face in his neck. “Moments of joy are sand in my fingers.”

Ah, the old sand between the fingers parable.

“You can clutch me tight as you want you know, I’m not going anywhere.”

“ ... you are too good to me, my love.”

“Ha, me too good to you?” He brought his hands up to hold her, hug her tight, rub her back and squeeze the tall, voluptuous goddess to his body. “You spoil me constantly.”

“I do enjoy to spoil.” She raised her head again, and grinned down at him, her dangerous eyes returning. No matter how many times he saw those eyes, it always sent a thrill up his spine. “Shall I spoil you now?”

“I uh, I don’t have anything planned tonight. Julias might text me with a new contract I need to negotiate, but—”

“Then, since you have the time, I would very much like to spoil you some more.” She pressed her body down on him harder, purposefully squishing her breasts to his chest. Blouse and bra and his shirt couldn’t stop the wonderful feeling of her body on his. “So often we make love in my tower. We should enjoy your abode more often.”

“W-Well, I mean, my apartment isn’t nearly as majestic as the Elysium Tower.”

“But there is something comforting about an apartment, little Ventrue. A small home that feels complete.”

“Yeah, I guess there is.” That was true after all. A grand tower always felt more like visiting a mansion, than something homely.

Antoinette sat up on her knees, still between his legs, and began to undo the buttons of her blouse. In seconds, her black bra was exposed, and Jack groaned at the sight of her huge breasts contained within.

“Perhaps tonight, we can find different places for you to rest your cock between my breasts? Enjoying sex upon a bed does get old, with time. Possibly here? I could kneel on the floor, trap your cock within my bosom, and slowly bring you to orgasm over many minutes, until your white warmth drips down over my body. Or perhaps by the window? I could lie down for you on my back beside it, and you could straddle my chest, lean over me, and fuck my breasts until your cum coated my neck for everyone watching to see.”

Why was she so damn good with words? God he was going to explode in his pants and he wasn't even blushing life yet. He—

The door opened, and a short, older woman stepped in. Avery.

The werewolf smirked, animal eyes looking the Daeva up and down. “Nice rack.”

## Chapter 34

~~Jack~~

If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be between two dangerous women.

Antoinette's tiger eyes returned, with all the ferocity and rage of when Lucas had crashed her ball. Like a crushing storm, being so near her shook him to his core as the rage poured off of her, buried him in rolling thunder that vibrated his bones and pulled his gut up into his throat. She wasn't looking at him anymore, thank god; her eyes would have bore holes through his body and couch otherwise.

The love of his life got up from the couch, stood up, and stared at the intruder.

"You have nerve, Avery."

"Hey, I'm just here to talk to my middleman. Didn't think he'd be here boning his girl, let alone boning the Prince." Avery stepped in nice and close, and looked up at the woman over a foot taller than her, with something between a grin and smirk on her face. "Kind of young for you don't you think?"

"Kindred do not see years as you do, wolf. He is an adult, as am I."

Jack sat up, but stayed sitting, and quiet. Getting up would imply he wanted to get involved in the conversation, and he wasn't that stupid. Not yet at least.

"Right, sure." With a snort, Avery walked around Antoinette, exposed her back to her, and started to explore Jack's apartment. Every step dripped of confidence, but where Kindred would make subtle jabs at each other, a lot of passive aggressiveness, Avery's

jabs were blatant, aggressive, direct, and honest. Sort of. “Had a couple tips that you two were an item. Had to see it to believe it.”

“Is that why you have come to my love’s home?” Antoinette turned to face Avery, but the werewolf didn’t seem to mind having the elder watching her exposed back. “To insult me, pry into m—”

“Nope. Dead serious, came to talk to my middleman. Who’s doing a piss poor job right now.” Her fingers found his other couch, window, counter tops, his fridge, cupboards, and continued to glide until she found his hallway before disappearing into the bathroom. “God damn you Invictus love to waste money. This is a nice place.”

Oh god if Avery joined the group of people who kept randomly visiting his apartment, he’d have to move.

Jack looked at Antoinette. Safe to talk? A tiny glance from her suggested otherwise, but with a few more seconds, she let out a long, annoyed sigh, and sat down on the other couch while doing up her blouse’s buttons. Ball in Jack’s court then.

“You uh, wanted to talk to me, Avery?”

“Yeap.” The small, brutish woman poked her head out from the bathroom, smirked, and walked back down the hall to join them in the living room. “No wonder this building only gets one apartment per floor.” Once in the living room, she looked down from the enormous window nearly the size of his wall, and then around the curve into the other hallway. A short-lived hall that opened to his very, very large bedroom. “A Ventrue and a Daeva, bet you two brainwash dozens of humans to be your sex slaves.”

He frowned and said nothing. Neither did Antoinette. The wolf’s prodding wasn’t worthy of a response, and it was blatant instigating.

“So,” she said at last, “a few hours ago, half my pack were scouting the area near Devil’s Corner, and ran into some Kindred guy named



Damien. Don't know him. He was with some girl named Fiona."

Oh shit. He looked to Antoinette, and she looked at him. Hard to read her expression, solid and flat as it was except for a slightly raised eyebrow. Her silence was like a green light for him to handle the situation, and he was really hoping for a red light.

"... I know them," he said.

"Do you?" Avery came back to join them in the living room again, and she leaned against the wall as she wiped her bottom lip with her thumb. "Want to fill me in?"

He steeled himself, folded his arms across his chest, and looked at her. Antoinette was right behind him, if shit went badly. But then, she wasn't on his side either, not really. She'd keep him from getting killed, but she'd also take advantage of any information she heard for her own gains. Walk carefully Jack.

"Damien is a Kindred of the Lancea et Sanctum."

"Is he now? Thought they were done with Lucas gone."

Jack nodded. "Damien is trying to revive the covenant."

Antoinette scoffed, more than loud enough for Avery to understand her annoyance with Damien.

"Right," the werewolf said, "black sheep then. And Fiona?"

"... a young Begotten." Not like he could lie and say she was Kindred; the Uratha would find out he was lying. He couldn't lie and say she was human either, they'd figure that out too.

"Begotten? You mean a monster? Been fucking decades since I've run into one of them. The fuck kind of hole city you running here, Ann?"

The Prince stared daggers into the wolf, but said nothing.

Jack put up a hand. “What’s Damien and Fiona got to do with the Uratha? You said your pack were near Devil’s Corner, not directly under it, so it doesn’t sound like Damien was violating your rule.”

She snorted and walked over to his window. Not a care in the world, she put her hand against the glass. Smudges, ugh. He kept his mouth shut as he ground his teeth.

“Azlu are sneaky fucking things. Weird tricks up their sleeve—in their webs. David thinks one of those fucking spiders has set up a home here in Dolareido; that’s why we’re here. So, cats out of the bag, we’re here for a host, Azlu.”

Jack looked over his shoulder at Antoinette, but the Prince looked as confused as he did. “Um ... Azlu? Host?”

“Yeah I’m telling you more than I should. But, after poking around and getting a feel for the city, I have to say I’m pretty happy with how things are here. You”—she spun around and pointed at Antoinette—“are still a fucking hazard and are going to bring hell down on this city if you keep fucking with the Gauntlet. But, things seem fine at the moment; only reason I’m telling you any of this. We think you might have an Azlu infestation.”

Antoinette’s gaze was ice, but again when Jack checked to see what she’d say, she tossed him a quick glance and green light.

“What do Damien and Fiona have to do with any of this?” he said. Spiders, she said spiders. Shit.

“Azlu are a problem. One of them has grown, and they’re skulking around in your fucking maze of tunnels.”

“My tunnels are much of the reason Dolareido is the haven it has become for Kindred.” Antoinette switched and refolded her legs as

she leaned back and hooked her arms on the couch's back. But, once she opened her mouth, ready to snarl, she sighed instead, closed her lips, and looked back to Jack.

Trapped between the two most powerful women in the city, in the world for all he was able to figure. God damn.

“Yeah, I know. Good for you Ann, you put together a nice city for vamps. You also put together a nice city for nasty shit to hide. I'm not your fucking janitor. I—”

Jack got in her face. Again. Just like with Jacob, except now it was Antoinette, another Kindred elder, another person Avery seemed perfectly content to piss off. No wonder she wanted a middleman, if she treated everyone this way. Classic case of knowing she was trouble and not being able to help herself, maybe?

“Damien and Fiona,” he said, “what do they have to do with this?”

Avery snorted as she met him, eye to eye. Don't cower, don't show any fear. Like dealing with any animal, don't act afraid and don't run. Maybe he should have lay down and pretend to be dead? He was tempted.

“The girl is dead. Just a corpse walking around, possessed by an Azlu.”

“ ... she didn't seem dead,” he said, “didn't feel dead.”

Avery reached out and poked him in the shoulder. It was enough to make him take a step back, and the touch of her finger on his body sent a jolt of panic through his limbs. He suppressed it; he was a Ventrue after all. Didn't change that the touch of her fingers on his body made him want to bolt, shot vitae through his fingers and toes, ready for a fight. Made the beast in his gut growl and back up. Better than curling up in a ball on the ground at least.

Antoinette almost moved to intervene. Almost.

“Azlu are sneaky. I gotta repeat myself over, and over? None of you understand the threat this poses. The woman stopped my pack with a spiderweb. A fucking spiderweb. Think that’s a coincidence?”

“So they escaped.”

“Fucking vanished.” She snapped her fingers, hand outstretched and held beside his ear so the resounding snap was enough to hurt his hearing. Mean. “Running in the direction of Devil’s Corner at that. She’s hiding in there, fucking with the Wall. She’ll begin eating and absorbing people now, if she hasn’t already.”

Jack stood his ground. “She’s not Azlu, she’s Begotten. Damien said so and I believe him.”

“What, you think it’s just coincidence that the Azlu show up, and there happens to be a Begotten with a form like a spider, with abilities like a spider?”

“Or there are no Azlu,” he said.

Avery snorted and got in closer. “You don’t see what we see kid, don’t see what’s on the other side of the Gauntlet. You—nah, fuck it. I said my piece. You see that Fiona girl, avoid her.”

And with that, the werewolf left. No glance back, no check for confirmation, no further instructions, just a door slam to mark her exit. Did she want him to tell her if he saw Fiona, or Damien? Woman’s communication skills were horrible.

But then, he doubted she was the leader of her pack for that. Probably the leader cause she knew how to make smart choices on the hunt, and because she was strong enough.

“I am sorry for her ill manners, my love.” Antoinette stood back up and came to him, hugged him, and rubbed his hair in that perfect way again. “But, I must act. If what she says is true, I will need to investigate. Shall we continue this another time?”

Damn. Cock blocked, as Beatrice would say.

“Yeah sure. I’ll see you later then?”

“Indeed.” She took his chin, aimed it up to her, and smiled with her red eyes as she leaned down to kiss him.

“Love you,” he said.

“I love you, mon amour.” But of course that wasn’t enough for the busty goddess, and she took his hand to press it against her chest, to cup her breast through the blouse and bra. “And Avery may have upset our date, but do not think I have forgotten what I said. Next we meet, hopefully, we may resume.”

He melted.

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Knock knock.

“Oh my fucking god, someone kill me.” He stepped away from his once again clean window, and peeked through the peep hole. Beatrice. He smiled; someone he could get along with in a normal way, sort of. He opened the door. “Come in.”

“Yo, Jack. Seen Fiona around?”

“No. But Avery tells me the werewolves are hunting her. They say she’s Azlu.”

“Azlu? Fuck is that?” She walked over to the window and leaned against it, both hands to the glass. God damn it, the smudges.

“I don’t know. Some monster, I guess? Not a Begotten, but ... something else? Avery said it was a spider, or they were spiders? Just ... arg, that bitch refused to explain anything.”

“Yeah seems like that’s her shtick. Reminds me of Jacob.”

Jack reached out and grabbed the Nosferatu’s hand. Half to get her attention, half to get her claws off the glass. “Please tell me you didn’t tell Jacob that.”

“Fuck no. Kid you think I got a death wish?” Chuckling, she hopped over to the couch and sat down, as if she’d sat there a million times before. “So you were talking to Avery again?”

“Yeah. Seems like some of her pack ran into Damien and Fiona. And now they think Fiona’s this weird Azlu thing, so now they’re hunting her. She escaped with Damien into Devil’s Corner, but she’s vanished according to Avery.”

“Fuck. Hope the dogs don’t catch her, I like her.”

“Yeah, I do too.”

“She even likes metal music. You know how hard it is to find someone who likes metal? Like, quality good metal, long songs with good singers and shit.”

He blinked at her. She blinked at him. He tilted his head to the side, and so did she.

“ ... favorite band?” he said.

“Uh, not sure. Tough question. Probably Symphony X. Love the heavier sounds of their new albums.”

Jack’s jaw dropped, and he sat down on the couch across from her. “I. Fucking. Love. Allen’s voice, and Romeo’s solos? Orgasmic,

fucking orgasmic.”

“Fucking yes!” Beatrice slammed her claws down on the table in front of her. It shattered. “ ... shit.”

God damn it.

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Him and the Nosferatu, in the tunnels, with flashlights. Seemed to be the ‘in’ thing to do these days, go into the tunnels like they were exploring god damn ancient, abandoned tombs. In truth, there may have been such hidden secrets, considering the history of the tunnels and who used to lived in them, but he was perfectly content to leave them forgotten and lost.

But, he wanted to know what was going on, and so did Beatrice. If he asked Julias, his sire would have forced him to stay above ground. If he told Antoinette, she’d have probably locked him in her tower.

He was in a suit, Beatrice was in a black t-shirt cut short above the navel, and some torn up blue jeans and combat boots. An unlikely pair, doing unlikely things.

“Favorite guitarist?” she said.

“Tough call. I like Petrucci’s sound, but prefer Romeo’s solos. And if I’m in a heavy mood I prefer Loomis.”

“Fuck yes love me some Loomis. Your turn.”

“Favorite singer?”

She tapped a claw along her extra teeth as she shined her flashlight down the tunnel. “Probably Jørn. Can always rely on him for consistent belting power.”

“Yeah, I listen to a lot of Jørn, but doesn’t sing much of the heavier prog metal I like.” Jack rubbed his head as he let his mind wander over his favorite songs, singers, bands. “Personally I love Kelly Sundown.”

“Love me some Sundown too. That new album from Adagio? Some amazing shit in that album.”

“ ... so, I know you’re dating my boss and sire, and I’m dating the Prince, but I think we should dump them and hook up.”

She looked down at him and raised a brow, and he met her glance with the most steel, dead serious expression he could muster. Sure enough she broke into laughter, and stopped walking to reach out and lean against a wall.

“Maybe in the future kid. For now though I think they deserve a chance. Maybe we can convert them to the metal loving ways of our clearly superior musical taste?”

“Ha, maybe.” Probably not. Antoinette was into classical music, and a little of the modern era’s electronic movement; getting her to join him in loving metal was likely never going to happen though. “You got a plan about this, Beatrice?”

“What’s to plan? We’re just going to talk with Azamel.”

“Who I was expressly told to avoid, by Julias.”

“Yeah well, Julias is too protective. You’ve proven you got skills kid, Julias said as much. Said you had some interesting ambassadorial skills too. And besides, I’m here to protect your ass.”

He rolled his eyes. Triss was strong for her age, but she was no ancilla like Tasha or Jessy. If shit hit the fan, Jack had his large knife and his pistol, but neither would be of much use against the



Uratha, and likely not useful against the Begotten. But maybe? For all he knew, putting a bullet between their eyes would kill them.

He kind of wished they'd turn around and go get Tasha, but he could see Beatrice wanted to do this with just him. Bonding moment? Nah, she wanted him with her cause she trusted him; and apparently people were starting to value his skills as an ambassador. Which was really weird.

"I kind of miss the days," he said, "where I was just trying to stay afloat in this crazy new world, and trouble found me. Now I'm actively seeking out the trouble?"

"Not trouble! Bad way of looking at this, come on. More like, being proactive. We both know shit is about to explode, and now we know Fiona has something to do with it. So before Jacob and the wolves butt heads, let's see if we can gleam a little information first."

"Gleam? ... you want to spy on her, don't you?" Nosferatu could hide like Mekhet, but Beatrice wasn't Natasha.

"Maybe a little."

"Don't you have people in the Circle who'd help you with this?"

"Eh we all kind of do our own thing unless Jacob gives us an order, and Jacob's gone silent psycho mode. Half the reason we're doing what we're doing. The wolves are hunting Fiona, and Azamel knows something about it. I want to learn about that, help Fiona, and maybe stop Jacob from doing something he'll regret in the future. You said you were hanging out with him not too long ago?"

"... yeah." Memories of Clara's split mouth were not pleasant. One punch from the old man was devastating. Not even a punch, a backhand. "He can handle himself."

“I’m not so sure. He told me what it’s like, when these wolves go full war mode kid. Fucking terrifying.” Triss shivered and rubbed her arms a few times. “So, Avery says Fiona is an Azlu, some sort of spider thing?”

“Yeah, says she’s fucking with the Gauntlet, whatever that is.” And that Antoinette was also fucking with the Gauntlet. Ordo Dracul business no doubt, and if he asked, she’d tell him such. “ ... we sure we don’t want to go ask Tasha or Jessy to come with us? Or if not some Invictus, how about Othello or Aaron?”

“Like I said, doing their own thing. As for your buddies, you can tell them what we learn when we’re done. Sorry if I don’t trust them. I’ve been dealing with them longer than you have.”

“Ever get into a fight with Tasha or Jessy?” He never really considered that. Hard to imagine that these people had been getting into scuffs with each other for years before he ever learned of vampires.

“Not really. Back then it was the trio, the right hands of the Invictus, always together and getting in the Carthians’ way. Garry would ask me to go check out a new building the Invictus were showing interest in, I’d show up and they’d be at the doors, preventing my access. Or they’d be in the tunnels blocking my access to areas Garry wanted some info on cause he thought the Invictus were spying on him in the area.” She laughed again. “Good times.”

“I ... I suppose it must have been. Just a few covenants to worry about, and only one of real opposition. Then Lucas returned, and then he died and things were fine for a whole five seconds before monsters and werewolves showed up.”

She laughed again and pat his shoulder. “I got to admit, over half a year now since you’ve been embraced, and it’s been the most crazy year for Dolareido in a long time. Coincidence?”

“... fuck I hope so.” Tony, Viktor, Lucas, why the fuck did all the crazy shit come flying his way? What did he do to deserve such a role in their lives? Other than having a bad habit of putting his foot in his mouth, and putting the same foot into business he should have avoided. “So, where is this Azamel?”

“Aaron says there’s been some unusual people hanging out deep beneath Morning Street. He didn’t get close, but he says they’re just hanging out there, and one of them is an old woman. Sounds like it could be her.”

“Sounds like it could be a few human squatters too.” And he kind of hoped it was. He wanted to go back to Antoinette, get back to being underneath her, feeling her huge breasts pressing on him, her lips tugging on his. This whole trip was likely to put another problem in her lap, and he didn’t want to do that.

Maybe it was his Ventrue blood coming through. Maybe it was his natural curiosity. Maybe it was just Jacob being correct, and he really did have some sort of unpredictable tenacity. He kind of liked Jacob’s appraisal, insults aside; it stroked his ego, and all Ventrue loved to have their egos stroked. But if his actions meant being a pain in the Prince’s ass, he didn’t want to do that. But then, if he ever stopped pursuing his personal or Invictus goals, even the ones that got in her way, Antoinette would likely think badly of him for it. And he would too.

“So, Jack, you get laid on a pretty regular basis now right? The Prince, and her ghouls too right?”

“... you are worse than Jessy. Yes, I do, with Antoinette. Sometimes her ghouls join us, sometimes they don’t. Didn’t we talk about this before?” The Jessy comparison was enough to make the Nosferatu sneer.

“Yeah just, I dunno, you’re still young and your opinion on this is valuable. You think it’s weird? Kindred just fucking everything and

everyone all the time?”

“Um, not sure what you mean.”

“Yeah uh ... nevermind, forget it.”

He raised a brow as he looked at the deadly woman next to him. What was on her mind? No need to push though, not with Triss. If she wanted to talk about it, she'd talk about it.

It took a little while to get down to the tunnel beneath Morning Street. They passed some Nosferatu on the way, but no one Jack didn't know. A small nod was enough for him to go by with only an innocent question or two from them. It meant Julias and the others would know he was down here, with Triss, but that was inevitable. Besides, he wasn't doing anything wrong, he was nowhere near Devil's Corner.

Julias would have words for the two of them later, no doubt. But it was easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. That philosophy seemed to come up a lot lately.

They turned off the flashlights as they got closer to their destination, and Beatrice covered them in the cloak of night. An invisible force that made his skin tingle as he felt his new partner's vitae extend its influence out and over him. Like that force, they were now invisible. From a distance people would not be able to see them. From close, their eyes would pass over them like shadows. Not as strong as Tasha's, much stronger than Amanda's. Hopefully strong enough to let them approach the beast.

Humming. A voice. A quiet, gentle hum. Jack raised a brow and looked at Triss, but she shrugged and pushed on. The tunnels opened into a large room, and the two Kindred poked their heads out from around the wall into the enormous cavern.

A stage of concrete. Furniture. Some very ugly, old furniture that belonged in his grandfather's home. No bed, but there were some drawers and a cabinet, and a changing curtain on a rod. A horrible, ugly green recliner, color faded and stained and covered in equally dingy red and blue flower prints. Good god if he sat in the chair, he was sure he'd find cigarette burns and smell cat.

But there was no nearby cat in the huge room. Just concrete walls, old lights, and an older woman sitting in the chair. Eyes closed, faded silver hair, short with the way age could make you shrink, and skin hanging off of her withered frame.

It was like Grandma had moved her living room and bedroom — minus the bed — into the Dolareido tunnels.

“Two children have come to my little home. Come closer, before I kill you.”

Welp, fuck. Every time he thought he had his bearings, something flipped them. Antoinette and Avery were the deadliest women in the city, but just a peek, just a glance, just a single fucking moment of voice, and this woman joined the list. How quickly he was reminded that he was an insect before gods.

The old woman's voice was exactly what you'd expect from a old woman, complete with the history of smoking and screaming at children to get off her lawn. Her eyes were open but only a sliver, and she wasn't even looking in their direction. As comfortable with her surroundings as an old woman in her living room.

Sighing, Beatrice stepped out from around the corner, and turned off the cloak. “Yeah, sorry. Kindred habit, you know?”

“Yes, I know all too well. I'm Azamel Venastroth, as I'm sure you're aware.” Grandma leaned up from her chair and blinked her worn eyes at them, skinny and wrinkled fingers clutching at the arms of her recliner. “I said come closer.”

“Closer, right.” Shrugging off her shoulders, Beatrice started the walk toward the woman’s stage, and Jack fell in behind her. “I’m Beatrice, and this is Jack.”

“Little vampires that scurry and roam.” The old woman shrugged and brought a hand up so she could lean down, and rest her chin on her knuckles. “It was bound to happen with those dogs causing chaos above, I imagine. I wonder what they’re up to.”

She talked like a super villain, vaguely referring to things and letting their imaginations fill in the blanks; she knew more than she was letting on. The feeling in his gut as he got closer and closer to the old woman suggested as much, if not more, like instead she knew everything that was going on. Every step toward her felt like a step toward something terrible and vicious. Beatrice could feel it too; Jack could see her shivering a little as they came closer.

Begotten could see the beast in other creatures, according to Fiona. Kindred couldn’t, but they could feel something, they could feel an aura, something inhuman, some with hunger inside other Kindred, in the Uratha, and in Begotten. It was like trying to describe something you could only touch, its shape hidden in total black. You could feel something like teeth, feel something like bones and spikes and talons and claws and muscle and fur. You could hear the rumbling voice, silent but to the beast within. You could feel the heat of its breath, and taste the blood in it too.

This tiny, frail old woman’s beast felt like some lost, ancient deity, long buried in the desert, unearthed by curious explorers who didn’t know when to quit.

“Come then, speak little leeches, why have you come to my tiny hole in the Earth?”

Triss frowned and adopted a classic fuck-you-I-won’t-do-what-you-tell-me stance, arms across her chest and one of her feet out to the side. “We wanted to talk about Fiona.”

“Fiona.” Azamel shrugged, and sat back up straight in her chair. Her feet, complete with slippers, pushed against the concrete stage in a slow rhythm to get her chair rocking back and forth. Squeak. Squeak. “Why do you think I would know anything about her?”

“So ... she hasn’t come to speak to you yet then?” Jack said.

“Not yet, no. I’m sure she will, as all Begotten should.” The old woman started to cough, the deep gargling kind that came out of the lungs. “And if she did, why would that matter to a couple of young Kindred?”

“We’re her friends,” Triss said, “and we’re hoping to stop the Uratha from killing her.”

“The Uratha are hunting Fiona?”

Jack nodded. “We were hoping you’d know why.” And he doubted her ignorance was genuine.

Azamel stroked her spotted chin, and looked down as she contemplated. Such an odd scene, an old woman god thing, sitting in Grandma’s chair, in abandoned tunnels beneath a city.

“The Uratha,” she said, “are hunting spiders, as they are wont to do. Vermin according to them, relics from an era long gone, when their so called Father Wolf prowled the lands of flesh and spirit. Abominations, as they are. The wolves will not stop until the spiders are gone. I warned Antoinette these vermin would call attention to Dolareido.”

Jack came in closer, and stepped up onto the stage. A bit presumptuous maybe, but she did say come closer. “You knew the wolves would come?”

“Of course. It is in their nature. And if I had known those spider vermin were making their nest in the city, I would not have come.”

Triss raised a brow and came up to the stage, but not onto it. Defiant just to be defiant. “Why don’t you leave?”

“I have plans.” Grandma coughed a few more times, and gestured to the dresser near her. “Fetch my cigarettes.”

Jack shrugged, slid open the drawer and got her cigarettes, a lighter too, and handed them to the deadly monster.

She snapped them up, but her efforts to pull a cigarette from the pack took time. Arthritis maybe. Naturally, the old woman refused to ask for help, and with time managed to pull one from the pack and light it herself.

“Now,” she said as she balanced the lit cigarette on her lips, “you two either have a lot of courage or lack of brains to come visit me. And you Nosferatu are walking on thinner ice with each moment, so zip it.”

Jack choked down his desire to chuckle, and Triss lowered her arms with a grimace.

“I like to think we’re somewhere between,” he said. “We want to help Fiona, and we were hoping you could give us information about this mess of a situation.”

“Your goal to help Fiona is misplaced.” Azamel took a long drag of the cigarette, and tapped its ashes into the ashtray that sat upon the recliner’s arm. “But before I answer any questions, why should I help you? What does old Azamel get back for this?”

“An opportunity to help a fellow Begotten?” Triss said.

The old woman frowned at Triss, since she refused to ‘zip it’, but shrugged. “She’s not part of my plans.”

Plans plans. This Begotten sounded like a Kindred.



Jack scratched his buzzed head. The conversation was going well, surprisingly well. Just like talking to Grandma. “If the Uratha are hunting Fiona, they—”

“As I said, they hunt the spiders. What do Fiona and the spiders have in common?”

“Way Damien tells it,” Jack said, “Fiona’s monster half is very spider-ish.”

“Interesting.” Azamel nodded, took another puff, and blew the smoke toward Jack. “What else?”

“Uh ... um ... I don’t know? I mean ... wait, Fiona mentioned something about there being an extra disappearance in Devil’s Corner that she says she’s not responsible for.”

Azamel chuckled, coughed her lungs raw, and continued to rock. “If this extra kill is being attributed to her, then it must have happened around the same time, in the same area.”

The longer the conversation went on, the less she seemed like some unknowable monster, the more she seemed like a perfectly reasonable person. Maybe Antoinette and Julias were overreacting. They had a lot of hate for the Begotten, and so far he couldn’t see why. Kindred had fuckups too, draugr vamps and such, let alone the nasty bastard elders like Viktor, Tony, and Lucas. This old woman deserved a chance. Right?

Triss started to pace. “So these strange spider things show up in Dolareido, and ... the wolves show up to hunt it. There just happens to also be a Begotten here that is also a spider-like thing? So ... these spider things are—”

“Sneaky.” Azamel tapped the cigarette fresh of its ashes once again, before setting it down to rest. “They are not mere spiders. They can act with far more intelligence than such creatures should

be able to. And no doubt, they have been drawn to Dolareido, as its landscape has changed dramatically in a small amount of time.”

Jack winced. To say the Azlu coming to Dolareido was his fault was a scary thought, but at the same time, three elders dead at his hand was probably what Azamel was talking about.

“So they’re smart enough to take advantage of power vacuum?” he said.

“Nothing so political, I imagine. No, they took advantage of the chaos, and when they realized Fiona was here, they saw an opportunity to create confusion.”

“... fucking smart for spiders,” Triss said.

“I said they’re more than spiders, stupid girl. Would you ... it’s ok Athalia, these two children are just curious about the Uratha.”

Athalia? Jack looked around, but didn’t see anyone. For a second he thought maybe the woman was senile, but after underestimating crazy shit enough times, you learn to stop underestimating crazy shit. Someone else was in the room.

A woman stepped from a nearby wall. She hadn’t been there before, and as she came off the concrete, her whole body emerged from black. It faded with a few moments, and soon became a beautiful woman of dark skin, slender and somewhat tall, with long black hair and soft features. Looked a bit like that Stephanie wolf now that he looked at her, but a kinder face.

Kinder face on the monster. Fitting metaphor, or a mask?

Triss frowned at her. “What are you supposed to be?”

Athalia shrugged, climbed up onto the stage, and sat down in one of the wooden chairs. “The two of you have a lot of guts just

randomly coming down here.”

“I guess,” Jack said, “but we didn’t think you guys would attack us or anything. We’re all friends here, right?” Athalia and Triss both snorted, and Azamel coughed. Ok maybe not. “We’re confused as hell and we’re trying to save Fiona.”

Athalia turned the chair so she was sitting facing its back, and she folded her arms across it as she shifted eyes between Jack and Beatrice. “Give me one reason to believe you.”

“What?” the two Kindred said.

“Give me a reason to believe you. Kindred here don’t like us. Your Prince and Primogen would prefer we didn’t exist. Daniel and Jacob ... So, you have to convince us that you two are genuinely trying to help out a Begotten. If what you say is even true, and the Uratha are hunting her, which makes no sense.”

Jack looked to Triss for some sort of help, but she looked at him with as much confusion.

“Uh...” He hopped down next to the Nosferatu and turned to look at Athalia, his palms against the stage edge. “Fiona has come to me on multiple occasions, looking for help getting used to Dolareido. I was the one that introduced her to the Primogen, at my choosing.”

“And,” Triss said as she came up to stand beside Jack, putting her hands on the stage edge in the same way, “I don’t give a rat’s ass about Begotten, none of us do. The Primogen and older Kindred may have something up their ass about you guys, but Jack and I didn’t even know your kind existed a month ago. Far as I’m concerned, this Fiona is a fun gal with a big appetite.”

“Big appetite?” Athalia said.

Jack nodded. “Yeah, she’s eaten twelve people in less than a year, and I get the impression she could have doubled that number if she feasted as much as her hunger told her to.”

“ ... then, perhaps we should speak,” Azamel said, “sooner, rather than later. If she does not learn to eat without killing her prey, she’ll attract more attention than the Azlu and Uratha. Athalia, bring her to me.”

“Fine.” Athalia got up, tilted her head until her neck made a rather disgusting crack sound, and started walking. Without them.

“I suggest,” Azamel continued, “that you two go back to the surface, and wait. Stay out of the way, and perhaps, the deaths will be minimal.”

Minimal deaths. Not exactly the peaceful solution he was looking for.

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~~Natasha~~

Natasha opened her door, and did her best to hide her smile. Better to not let the two wolves know she enjoyed their visits; if they knew that, she’d lose the power. Or so Antoinette suggested as a means of seduction. Playing hard to get. Did she want to seduce one of them? She had to admit, as her conversation with the Prince had gone on, she’d found herself opening more and more to the idea.

Little her, seducing the big bad wolf. Antoinette had also suggested she wear a red dress with a hood, just to see if they’d get the joke. Look at her being all fun fun. She hadn’t played around and laughed and been silly about things since Julias and her were close friends.

She had to visit him sometime. It’d been so long since they talked.

“Hey Tasha,” Art said, sneaky bastard smile on his face. Matt was behind him, and the big guy offered a wave.

“Hi. What’re you guys d-doing here? I could have been gone; you should t-t-texted me instead.” She stepped back and motioned for the two werewolves to come in. Less stuttering finally, even when looking up at two frustratingly handsome, very dangerous men.

“We’re still working on the phone situation,” Matt said. As per usual, Art forgot to take off his shoes, and Matt stopped him from getting her floor dirty.

“Officially we’re here because we convinced Avery that you provide us with valuable insight into the Kindred situation.” Art shrugged, and slid onto a stool at her counter. “But we’re really just here for the TV.” He gestured to the enormous device against the wall.

“You know,” she said, “if you wanted, it’d b-be easy to get you a better place ... t-t-to stay than those old buildings in North Side. I c-could even get you a TV.” It’d be easy, very easy.

“Heh, maybe!” Matt took a chair from her living room table; easier to fit his body than a stool. “We still don’t know what’ll happen after we catch our prey. I’d love to stay, so would Art, but Avery seems to think Jacob will make life hard for us. Not worth dealing with according to her.”

They’ve loved to stay! She smirked and slid off the stool. Blood in the fridge awaited her, and she poured herself a glass as she struggled to contain her smiles. It was silly and dumb to get so happy just because a couple of guys were showing up at her apartment, but it was a first, and she wasn’t used to it. It made her giddy.

“Blood out of a fridge?” Matt said.

“Mmhmm. Not n-nearly as effective as drinking it out of someone, b-b-but this works enough to tide Kindred over for a couple d-days.”

“How do you get it?”

“The Prince owns many of the companies in D-Dolareido, including the hospitals. We p-pay kine to donate blood, handsomely. They d-d-don’t know where a lot of it goes.”

Art laughed and reached out to take her glass. She let him, and grinned as the man held it in front of his face and tilted it to watch the thick liquid move and dip. Satisfied, he gave it back.

“Cozy situation,” he said. “In Tijuana the vamps had nothing so symbiotic. Kindred killed humans without mercy.”

“That ... is sad.” She took another sip of the liquid, and stared into the crimson life. “I remember every kine I’ve ... k-killed. Sometimes, when we’re so hungry we can’t stop ourselves, w-w-we drain a human dry. But the P-Prince doesn’t like that, and ... and most of us agree.”

“What if they deserve it?” Art added, eyes darkening as a strange, subtle grin marked his face.

“Some Kindred take it on themselves t-to kill kine who deserve it, b-b-but I never ... did it on purpose, I guess.” Her kills were specifically only on kine who deserved it, but also only when she was so hungry she couldn’t resist; which was the typical approach for Kindred outside a few vigilantes. Her answer seemed to satisfy Art.

“The bloodlust in Dolareido is very low. Interesting feeling, being surrounded by Kindred but not worrying about a sniper bullet to the skull everywhere I go. Don’t see vamps fighting vamps in the streets, don’t see humans being torn up on a regular basis, don’t see

any of the violence in Tijuana. I guess those three elders dying really agreed with Dolareido.”

“It has.” Though, from what they were describing, Tijuana was a far more dangerous place than Dolareido ever was, even before the purge. “The w-worst you’ll find here is ... sex holes and d-d-drug abuse.” Not entirely true of course. Kine had their own ring of crime, but nothing worse than found in most cities.

“Sex holes?” Matt said.

“Y-Yeah.” She poured herself another glass of blood. “I—wait, did ... I uh, you t-two want food? I d-d-don’t have, uh, any meat.” Putting something other than blood into her fridge? She frowned at the thought, then laughed at the irony.

“Nah.” The giant shook his head. “We ate before coming over ... so all these cupboards are empty? You don’t put spices in your blood? I’m sure honeyed blood would taste pretty sweet.”

She snorted, something between a laugh and a groan. “Ick.” Another sip, and she started to walk around, the way she did when she was talking on the phone. “Sex holes are ... a f-frequent feeding place for Kindred. They’re clubs, sometimes just t-t-tiny rooms in the back of bars or similar, where kine show up for d-drugs, and sex.” Not exactly the sort of feeding ground she used, but the more confident Kindred, Daeva in particular, used them frequently.

“Man,” Art said, “Avery was right about that.”

“W-What did she say?”

“That the younger Kindred take every opportunity to get laid, as often as possible, and basically fuck all night every night.”

Natasha frowned, but the frown faded as she thought of Jessy and her squad of delicious ghouls. “Some of us ... d-do things like that.”

Art smirked, a knowing smirk, an evil smirk. Maybe he could smell the ghouls on her? She showered, but werewolves were an unknown quantity. Maybe they could smell all sorts of embarrassing things? But without the blush of life, she could be twenty sorts of embarrassed and not give it away with blushing. Her averting, fidgety gaze though, she couldn't help that.

Matt reached out from his seat and gave his friend a hard smack on the leg. "Dude, uncool."

"N-No, it's ok." She shrugged, swallowed her fear, and resumed walking around her apartment. It settled her. "We all have our vices. Uratha m-m-must have some?" Not that sex was the only Kindred vice, but it was definitely one the younger Kindred gravitated toward.

"Yeah." Matt pointed at Art, big smile on his face. "Some of us like to hang out at bars, just to cause trouble."

Art shrugged and slid off the stool. "Sometimes, it's just really satisfying to punch a bastard in the face."

"Or stab them," she said.

"Still looking to stab me?" Art came up to her, sly grin and evil eyes looking down at her from his great height. "Recreate a scene from Game of Thrones?"

She froze, and stared up at the big man as he came near. As Art got closer, his smile drifted between dark and sinister, to playful and fun, like he might start pulling on her non-existent pigtails. A nervous glance Matt's way showed he wasn't going to interfere. If anything, the gentle giant seemed intrigued, eyes watching her with as much intensity as Art; but at least Matt's intensity didn't also look like he might attack her.



“You ... y-you ... you’re not as scary as you think.” She put down the glass, and pushed at Art with her two hands. Of course, Arturo was a very tall, very athletic man, and likely weighed over twice as much as her very very short self did. Attempts to push him back were frustratingly futile; all she did was push herself away from him.

Which sent both wolves into howls of laughter, and Art leaned onto the counter with both elbows to catch his breath.

For a moment she wanted to be angry; they were laughing at her. But she caught Matt’s eyes, and even Art’s when he managed to recover from what was apparently a night deadly laughter. They weren’t laughing at her, they were just laughing. She started to chuckle too, and pushed Art again in the arm, though not nearly as hard this time.

“You t-two would like Jessy,” she said.

“That the Gangrel girl, works for the Invictus?” Matt said. “Clara didn’t have anything good to say about her. Said she was a bitch.”

“W-Well ... yeah, she can be. But she’s my best friend, and she ... reminds m-me of you two.”

Both men frowned and looked at each other.

“Should we be offended?” Matt said.

Art shrugged. “You can be a huge dick.”

“Me? You’re the asshole.”

“How you figure?”

“You’re the one that keeps hiding Stephanie’s shit.”

“She deserves it. And you? Pointing Mason at her.”

“Not pointing you dumbass, just—”

“You’re going to make things worse, dumb—”

“You’re the one ma—”

“Boys!” She stomped her foot down. Light or not, it was enough to make a thud, and both men silenced as they turned to look at her, eyebrows raised. “I didn’t mean you’re d-d-dicks, cause Jessy isn’t. B-But you can be ... boyish. Like her. Very...” Now that she thought about it, how could she describe Jessy? What was it about her that made her and Natasha friends? What was it about these two that reminded her of her friend? “V-Very ... fun.”

“Fun?” they said together.

“Y-Yeah. Fun, as in outgoing, and ... comfortable t-talking, and being upfront and fun about things.” Everything she wasn’t. She was trying to change, and succeeding according to Jessy, but it didn’t change that Jessy, and apparently Matthew and Arturo, were boisterous, jovial, aggressive, and confident in ways she’d never be.

They blinked at each other, until Matt shrugged, and Art pulled himself up to sit on her counter.

“Tasha,” Art said, “the only thing separating you from being as stupid and loud as Matt and me is alcohol.”

“I ... oh.” She looked down at her glass again, and tried to picture it as wine. No good. A lifetime as a Kindred had long destroyed any taste she had for human food. If she blushed life she could reawaken her old taste buds, but she couldn’t drink or eat human food; unless she wanted to vomit it all up later. “I’ve n-never been drunk.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Well,” Matt said with a small slap of one hand to the other, “that’s the problem. You don’t know what it’s like to turn off your brain. Which, I think, is perfectly fine.”

“Nah.” Art shook his head, reached out, and took her glass of blood again, only to set it down away from her, further along the counter top. “It’s healthy to turn your brain off every once in a while. Even Uratha aren’t in hunt mode twenty-four seven. We relax, get drunk, goof around.”

“Dude.” The gentle giant shook his head, and slid the glass back toward her. “You’re a fucking Irraka.”

Art smirked over his shoulder at his friend, and shrugged. “Yeap, so she has no excuse. Come on, want to go out?” he said looking to her. “We could go to a club, city seems to be swimming in them. Dance or get drunk. Or in your case, full on fresh blood with a very high alcohol concentration.”

“You sure you’re Irraka?” Matt didn’t look too convinced, and he got up to join them in the kitchen, butt to the counter as he leaned against it. “Aren’t your types normally anti-social?”

“H-Haven’t you two been friends for years?” Tasha said.

Art rolled his eyes. “Ignore Matt, he’s just being a dumbass. In Tijuana we didn’t exactly have the luxury of high living solitude. No offense.”

High living solitude. An interesting way to phrase her life. She giggled as she thought of a monk, living a life void of Earthly desires, and having Wi-Fi.

“You t-t-two might think I’m all nerdy and boring, b-b—”

Art put up his hands, palms out in surrender. “Ha, sorry. Nerdy, yes, but boring? You were exploring that tunnel alone, and the way you managed to put up a fight, gave us all a big chase. Certainly not boring.”

She beamed. That was true, she had done that all alone. “B-But I ... I was terrified, exploring that darkness alone.”

“You and me both.” Art shuddered and gestured to Matt. “Only a dumbass like him wouldn’t be afraid. Fucking Rahu.”

“Hey.” Matt looked down. The gentle giant looked genuinely hurt, but a moment later a smile blossomed, and he looked at Natasha. “Even Rahu get afraid. But we use the fear to fuel us. I—”

A buzz stopped them, and they all looked down at Natasha’s pocket. She pulled out her phone and quickly checked the text.

From Jack: Avery hunting Damien and Fiona. Thinks Fiona is something called Azlu.

Oh god damn it.

“Looks serious,” Matt said. “You went pale ... well, you know, you would have if you weren’t dead.”

Natasha winced and put the phone away, grimacing. “Apparently, Avery ... she ... she s-says you guys are ... hunting Fiona.”

Art got off the counter, and the two wolves looked at each other with a raised brow each.

“Fiona?” they said.

“A monster, a B-Begotten. Avery thinks she’s ... Azlu?”

“ ... a host,” they said again, each bringing one hand up to their face to cradle it as they groaned in pain.

“But she’s not! I’ve b-b-been with her, t-talked to her, she’s a ... she’s ... I’ve seen the monster inside her. That’s Begotten.” Shit shit, she shouldn’t have said anything. Ugh she was starting to act like Jack, saying things when she shouldn’t, giving away information. Used to be so good at information control, now she was acting like a child.

“It also describes Azlu pretty damn well. Come on.” Art pat his friend on the arm, and turned around.

“Sorry,” Matt said, “but if she’s Azlu, then ... she’s not your friend. You’ll thank us later.” He nodded, and followed after Art toward the door.

“W-Wait! I ... I can’t believe that. I saw her w-with my own eyes, and she ... she was a person. A n-n-normal person ... normal for a B-Begotten anyway.”

The two wolves looked at each other as they put their shoes back on. It was easy to see they didn’t believe her, and were trying to find a delicate way to break the news to her that they’d likely be killing Fiona. Or at least it was easy to see on Matt’s face; Art was better at hiding it.

“If Avery says we hunt them, we hunt them,” the Irraka said, and he opened the door without a glance back. “Sorry.”

She dashed past Matt, under Art’s arm, and into the hallway outside her door. Little her before the mighty wolves; they looked shocked. Good. She reached out with both hands and pressed against Art’s chest — which she had to aim up to even reach — to push him back into the apartment, before closing the door behind her.

“You t-two, you’re going to make it happen again!”

“What?” they said.

“What happened last t-t-time! Avery killed Minerva, and that ... p-probably could have been avoided! You have to—”

“Tasha, listen.” Matt came up behind Art, but couldn’t get around him with the tiny amount of space around her door. So the giant peeked over his friend’s shoulder, and shook his head with a sigh. “We have to act fast, or this problem is going to escalate, in ways you don’t realize. It could—”

“No!” She stomped her foot, and folded her arms across her chest. “You will n-not behave rashly, and make things worse. The P-Prince lost a friend because of Avery, and J-J-Jacob, he...” What to say about Jacob? She never interacted with him; she knew better. Stay away from the old man, from his games. But in her fifty years as Kindred, he’d never done anything to make her want him to suffer.

She could imagine the eyeless man, sitting in his cave, surrounded by bones and scary, creepy things, while he wallowed in misery after the death of his love. Antoinette had painted quite the picture, and let Natasha’s imagination fill in the blanks. Her imagination did love to exaggerate, but even knowing that, she couldn’t help but feel for him.

And she didn’t want Fiona to die.

Art, wincing, reached up to scratch the back of his neck. “Well Avery hasn’t contacted us yet, but we have to get back to the base by sunrise. And no doubt, she’ll want us hunting after we get some sleep.”

Damn it damn it. They could move in the sunlight, she couldn’t. She had to do something now while the sun was down and she had time to interfere.

“D-Damien ... could get hurt too.”

“Damien?”

“A Kindred. He was the one t-to d-d-discover Fiona was a Begotten. He ... he’s probably with her now ... and...” And she didn’t want him to die either.

“Our hands are tied,” Matt said.

“ ... no. N-No, we’re going to go find this thing now!” Again, she stomped her foot.

“Find the Azlu? Now?” The gentle giant looked down at Art as his friend looked over his shoulder at him.

“Well, if we can find the host and prove it’s not this Fiona girl, I’m sure Avery will listen to us.” Art elbowed his big friend in the gut, and smirked. “Think you can stop being a momma’s boy for five or six hours and come scouting with the two sneaky beasts?” Beasts? She was sneaky, all Mekhet were, and so were Irraka if the werewolves were telling her the truth. Calling her a sneaky beast was a strange but welcomed compliment. “Got your weapons with you Tash?”

“Y-Yeah, uh ... give me a second.” Finally, some progress. She slipped past the two titans crammed into her door’s little hallway, and went into her bedroom to get her spare gear.

“Not sure this is a good idea,” Matt said, loud enough for her to hear. “But, if you two idiots are going, I’ll come too. Keep your dumbasses alive.”

She came back with a sword and pistol, vest holster, and the appropriate suit jacket to hide them. “I can t-take care of myself.”

“You can at that,” the big guy said, grinning at her, and winking too.

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The tunnels once again. Still a little ways to go before before they reached the area under Ronder Street, but the lights were already starting to become sparse, fewer and fewer of them functioning and lit. And the old chill of its dark, awaiting lengths crawled up her spine again.

But this time she had back up, two big bad wolves, she shouldn't be afraid. Then again, if it was an entire pack's job to hunt down this thing, and they were normally thirteen, would two be enough?

"I thought about asking if you had a flamethrower," Art said, hands in his pockets. "We could really use one for this prey."

"... a flamethrower. Um, n-n-no, I have nothing like that. Kindred, we d-don't like fire." She wasn't even sure if they had such weaponry in the Invictus storage. Maybe her new boss did, but she doubted it. Sort of a rule of war for Dolareido, don't use fire. "W-Why would Uratha use a flamethrower?"

"We're going after Azlu." Matt came up on other side to walk beside her, eyes set on the darkness ahead. "Hosts, from before the Sundering. Abominations, half-spirit half-flesh nasty things. The Azlu are spiders. They crawl into people's skulls and eat their brains, take over their body, grow and mutate into monstrous ... monsters."

Natasha tried to not smirk at the man's poor vocabulary, especially as the image he was painting was not a pretty one.

"Uratha are half-spirit half-flesh too." Art shrugged and tilted his head to the side, until Natasha had to wince with the loud snap sound of his neck crack.

"Spirit..." She thought about the feelings the spirit Safe had bathed her in, the strange way it talked, the insanity that such a creature existed.

Matt poked her in the shoulder. "Interested in spirits?"



“I, uh ... you were r-right, about the Prince, experimenting with s-s-stuff. And ... some of the stuff I’ve seen d-d-does look ... interesting, and ... wonderful.”

Art didn’t look too happy about it. “The Hisil is just as fucked up and brutal as this side of the Gauntlet, Tash. Not sure what you and white hair have been up to, but don’t start trying to do ... well, what Minerva did, according to Avery.”

“C-Can you tell me what Avery was ... d-d-doing that—”

Art brought up a hand and shook his head. “No. Sorry.”

She sighed but nodded. “So, the Hisil, that’s ... I d-don’t really understand.”

“Better that you don’t,” the Irraka said.

“I disagree.” Matt reached down and pat her on the shoulder. “Some healthy curiosity in you. Avery doesn’t like it, but I think we can convince her to let us show you some things sometime.”

“Show m-me things?” She’d replace Jack as the intermediary at this rate.

“Art said it,” Matt continued, “we’re half-spirit. Maybe we could show you the Hisil sometime.”

“You’re a dumbass. Avery will never agree to that, and you’re going to get her killed.”

“She can handle herself, and she’ll be with us. You’re just as bad as her, thinking it’s the same as before, or like in Tijuana. Things are different here.”

“Lenny you moron. Shit will—”

She punched them, both of them, Art first then Matt. “We can talk about that stuff later. For now, w-we should be quiet, and f-f-find this thing.”

They chuckled, and nodded. “Yes Mom.” Again, in unison.

Art shook out his shoulders, and started to fall onto his hands. Matt stopped, and Natasha mimicked. What was going on, why stop, why fall? Why—

She jumped away as the man’s clothes began to vanish, only to be replaced by fur. Vitae jolted through her limbs and demanded she run away as the man began to change; she still remembered what it felt like to have those claws in her limbs and guts. But those beasts stood upright. Art was on all fours, and turning into a wolf. A really, really, really big wolf.

His hands became paws, but large, monstrous, with huge claws. His muscles showed through the fur as thick, hulking masses. He was four feet tall at the shoulder, and seven feet long, maybe eight. Ridiculously massive teeth jutted from his chops, head attached to a thick, powerful neck. More like a lion with wolf features. Her jaw dropped as the man came to end his transformation, and she gulped on nothing as she looked the unnatural creature from nose to tail.

“That uh ... w-wouldn’t pass ... for a wolf.”

Matt laughed and pat her on the back again, huge hand dwarfing her spine. “That’s Urshul form. We can go Urhan, Wolf form, but it’s not strong enough to deal with much.”

A form between the war titans she’d seen, and a normal wolf.

“W-Wait, this is ... when I first saw you in the tunnel, in the dark before you chased me. You were in this ... f-f-form.”

Art nodded his large wolf head, and stepped in toward her. She froze as the gargantuan mutant canine pressed his head against her arm, and then her shoulder.

Don't pet the gigantic wolf monster, don't pet the gigantic wolf monster, don't pet the gigantic wolf monster.

She pet the gigantic wolf monster.

Art crooned, a deep rumbling sound in his immense throat, and rubbed his head against her hand.

“Arturo Ibarra, you disgrace wolves everywhere.” Matt reached out and shoved the big beast's head away from her.

“Hey! D-Don't push him. He's ... he's so warm and ... fluffy.” Course he looked far more menacing than fluffy, with especially primal wolf eyes to match his massive, muscular wolf body. But that didn't change that he was, indeed, fluffy. The fur of his neck was particularly thick, almost like a mane, and she stepped in again to rub her fingers through the softness. Must touch the fluffy.

After what was probably far too long rubbing his ears and combing his fur, they started walking again, this time with Art out ahead of them. He was their scout evidently; probably why he transformed. And as she watched his shoulders shift with each paw's step, she realized she'd just spent five minutes rubbing Arturo's face and shoulders and back. He probably planned it, just so she'd feel awkward later. Evil bastard.

But, watching him prowl forward, she still wanted to pet him some more. She had to shake her head a few times to remind herself he was Art. Not a dog, not a wolf. But, maybe he could go full normal wolf mode, and sit on her couch, and let her pet his head? And Matt too? It'd been a long time since she'd owned dogs.

Werewolves, Natasha, they're werewolves, not wolves. Focus.

“Can you t-two see in the dark?” she said.

“Better than a human yeah, but nothing crazy. We were pretty surprised a vamp was exploring the dark; we had to go by our noses.”

“I can s-see b-b-better than most Kindred in the dark. But, m-maybe we should use a flashlight this time?” She brought one out, small enough to hold easily in one hand, and she held it reverse grip, pointed out toward the darkness. A quick snap of the other hand and she had her pistol out, held on top of the wrist of the other hand.

“Doesn’t look like the pistol model you used when you ran into us,” he said. They’d started walking, and sure enough the lack of lights would have left most Kindred totally blind in the absolute black, and the Uratha too.

“It’s n-not. We know these d-d-don’t do much, against werewolves. So now most Kindred who use p-pistols ... will use machine pistols. If we can’t bring a werewolf down with a few b-bullets ... a few hundred might d-d-do better.”

Matt winced, but laughed. “Yeah, they do. Tijuana taught us that.”

Course, machine pistols were the weaker choice over shotguns or sub machine guns. Or in the case of the Carthians, assault rifles. But it was easy to fit under the jacket, and unwieldy as a machine pistol was, Kindred strength made up for it.

They fell into silence as they continued along. Or at least, what Natasha thought would be silence, but something kept interrupting it every few seconds, a strange, straining noise of air.

Breathing. She was hearing the two werewolves breathe. Last time she was down here, the only sound was the rubbing of fabric from her movement, and her steps. Now she could hear the wolves

breathe, and as their ears adjusted, she could hear their heartbeats. Big, powerful heartbeats.

How long had it been since she'd heard a heartbeat? She hung out with Kindred so often, and when there were humans or ghouls nearby, there was far too much city noise to hear the quiet things. Down deep in the Earth, she could hear them breathe, and swallow every so often; perfectly normal for a human or giant wolf, but so weird to hear. Felt like being on a hunt, hearing things so acutely, hearing life so acutely.

“W-What are we ... looking for?” she whispered.

“The Azlu will weave webs,” Matt said, “that often look normal, and then huge. But it'll also weave invisible webs in the Gauntlet, trapping any who crossover.” The giant shivered and rubbed his arms. “I do not enjoy the thought of being wrapped in webbing and having those vermin crawling on me.”

“Spiders ... are s-scary.”

“They are.” He smirked down at her, knowing full well she was talking about real spiders. But it was nice to see the huge guy express the same fears she had. “So we're looking for those webs where we found you last time.”

She wanted a shower just thinking about those webs getting into her hair.

They continued on for another thirty minutes, deeper into the old tunnels and through the abandoned depths. All the lights were out, the only source of light her flashlight. If it went out or broke, the best she'd see would be blurry silhouettes, and her two partners would be blind. But they weren't down here for a fight, they just needed to find the thing and prove it wasn't Fiona.

Did she want to prove Fiona wasn't their prey because she liked Fiona? She did, but she barely knew her. Maybe it was Damien; she wanted to help bridge the gap there. Or was it Jack? She liked him a lot, and Julias too. She wanted to help him.

Did she have her own reason for being such an idiot, or was she just drifting through her choices without knowing why she was making them. She'd ask Julias such an existential question, and he'd probably say something like: you're doing it cause you're the sort of person who tries to make everyone happy, at your own expense.

Silence and darkness really did make her mind wander.

As they went deeper, she had to check herself for any spider webbing that may have caught on her. More webbing, and more, bigger and thicker. Ahead, Art came to a stop. Matt and Natasha stopped behind him, and she pointed her light into the distance before them. She expected to see a giant web perhaps blocking their path, but instead found webbing that'd been cut.

Someone was there, a woman, walking around in the darkness.

"Two Uratha and one Kindred. Odd arrangement." The woman walked toward them and dusted some spiderweb from her shoulder. "What're you three doing down here?"

"We could ask you the same thing," Matt said. "Tunnels are off limits to Kindred."

"Good thing I'm not Kindred." She came closer into the light, and spent a little more time wiping webbing from her pants. Dressed like a Carthian, wearing some black jeans and likewise black boots, along with a white t-shirt. "Asked you a question, what are you doing down here?"

Natasha took a step back, and looked at the two wolves. “That’s ... n-n-not Fiona.”

“Nope, I’m not Fiona. Looking for her though. Can’t find her in the dream so I figured I’d come looking where everyone seems to think she is.” The woman was a bit tall, black with long, beautiful dark hair that made Natasha jealous; so lustrous. Skinny but fit, and her face had a softness to it that her eyes didn’t agree with; they seemed angry, and comfortable being angry.

“How ... c-c-can you see ... in this darkness?”

She shrugged and folded her arms across her chest. Whoever this girl was, confidence dripped from her as much as the air of creepiness around her. “Most Eshmaki can.”

“Are ... you Athalia?” she said.

“Hey, you know my name. Kudos.”

“I ... there were rumors ... about the sheriff and a Begotten.”

“Just rumors.” Athalia sneered and shook out her shoulders, like she was preparing for a fight. “So if you don’t mind, leave. Way I hear it, you dumbass wolves are hunting Fiona, which is pretty fucking stupid. She’s not a host or what-the-fuck-ever you call your prey.”

Matt came closer, as did the giant wolf beside him, but Athalia didn’t move. Didn’t even blink, far as Natasha could tell.

“We’re hunting the creature,” the big guy said. “If it’s this Fiona girl you’re talking about, then she’s already dead, and I’m sorry. So we’re—”

“Yeah I don’t think so. Get out.” Athalia took a step toward them, sneer unwavering.

Matt looked down at Natasha, blinked a few times, and looked back at Athalia. “I—”

“You fucking wolves love to bite first, ask questions later. So how about, no. Get out, before I make you.” Again, she came closer, and her dark brown eyes glared death into the three of them.

The colossal wolf took a step forward as well, snarling and growling, rumbling in his throat, primal and angry.

“W-Wait! Please.” Natasha lowered her pistol and came closer, light pointed at the tracks beneath them. “This is w-what I wanted to avoid. We c-c-can work together, communicate, and p-prevent any more fights when—”

“I trust you as much as I trust your wolf buddies to not chase a squirrel. I. Said. Leave!”

Natasha’s light began to flicker as Athalia raised her hands. It should have been stable, but the light cut the darkness in periodic flashes, like panicked heartbeats, and all three visitors took a step back as a wall of obsidian nightmare filled the air behind the beautiful woman. They could see nothing between the flickers, but when the light shined on the tunnel, movement subtle but chilling drifted around Athalia.

Whatever it was, it was crouched forward to fit itself in the tunnel, its head of bone and teeth and spiked, serrated horns looming closer. It had arms, each also covered in what looked like spikes jutting from its black flesh, black that bled droplets of onyx onto the concrete before they faded. Like a giant, human torso, with arms and fingers, a head, all covered in spikes that poked through its dark skin and bled devil’s blood. Gaunt, with bone showing through so its face looked more like an ancient mummy armed with a thousand shark teeth. Where its waist should have been, its flesh fell away and exposed a massive, dangling spinal cord that sat behind Athalia.



And it had wings. Black angel wings.

The colossal entity slammed its immense hands onto the concrete beside them, and for the brief second the death creature existed, it shook the tunnels enough to send vibrations up through Natasha's bones and into her skull. And then it vanished in an instant, leaving the angry woman standing there and glaring at the trio.

“Azamel says I should see the horror in each of us, and respect each other as different forms of beast, as different children of the dark mother.” She scoffed, and came closer again. “Each of you think yourselves dangerous creatures of the night, the moon, of blood and hunger. Pathetic. You Kindred are nothing but blood leeches, and you wolves are animals. Just simple-minded animals.” Again Athalia brought her hands up, and again in the flickering waves of white from Natasha's flashlight, the torso of Death appeared, struggling to fit in the tunnel, great maw open so they could see the endless darkness down its throat. It roared at them, but its voice was a screeching wind and no more.

When the light was off, the only thing Natasha could see, was two white, glowing dots where the horror's eyes were, like small white pupils in the empty eye sockets of a skull.

The horror faded away, and again, only Athalia remained.

This was a Begotten? Fiona had demonstrated a little of her power, and she'd seemed like some sort of spider entity. This Athalia, she felt sort of like Fiona, but sort of different, and her horror certainly looked different. Like something out of a far more modern, more twisted nightmare. Like something out of a horror movie a little kid shouldn't be staying up to see, a movie with slaughter and gore and death cries.

Natasha took a step back, and stared. But Art barked — more like roared — and came forward. Matt did as well. Certainly not fearless,

not from what Matt had just told her about spiders, but they came toward her anyway.

“You’re the one starting a fight,” Matt said, “not us. Hell we’re here without our pack, just to see if Tash is right about Fiona. So ... so...” His voice died away as he looked past Athalia into the darkness beyond. Athalia turned around as well, and Art came closer to her. The opening was there, Art could take it any time he wanted, but instead the enormous creature stood near the other two, and stared into the black.

The little Mekhet walked over to join them, and in the dead black and cold silence, she pointed her light into the tunnel. There were more spiderwebs ahead, large ones, and they were moving, shaking a little, like someone was tugging on them. And now that she was listening again, it wasn’t cold silent anymore, there was noise, a distant rumbling sound. And scratching, like someone dragging stone on concrete.

Someone was out there.

“I ... w-what ... should w—”

The ceiling of the tunnel exploded. She had only enough time to point her flashlight up to see the webbing narrow with tension, and the sound of strings tightening like rope, before concrete slabs started to fall in. A lot of them. The rumbling rose to ear shattering, and an earthquake tore through the tunnel as more than just the walls of the tunnel fell apart, but the metal tracks ripped upward as well. For a split moment, the rails bent like a whip, before twisting into permanently bent coils that shredded everything around them, breaking like rope pulled too tight. And the four of them were on the tracks as they snapped.

“Fuck! Get back, get back!” Matt started to back away, arms out and up. Natasha managed a quick glance at him before every panic reflex she had had her turning around and sprinting at full Mekhet

speed. Matt was getting bigger than before, taller, thicker. Some of his wolf was coming out of him, making hair grow longer, muscles bigger, everything. One of the giant blocks of rock crashed against his shoulder and tore through muscle, but Matt stayed standing as he turned around to join her.

She didn't get far. The tunnel ahead had webs as well, and the domino reaction of the collapse was tearing through the darkness faster than she could move. One of the tracks ripped up from underneath her, and snapped to the side with a loud crack. She went with it as it caught her, and the blackness engulfed her as she collided with concrete. First the ceiling, then the wall, each got a turn to remind her how hard concrete was compared to skin and bone.

Matt was running for her, so was a giant wolf next to him.

She reached up to touch her head. It was wet, and covered in dust and dirt. Couldn't see it with her flashlight on the tunnel floor and pointed away, but she could feel it. She could feel bone too.

Then the pain hit her. White flash, but not from the flashlight, and she coughed from the overload, searing fire launching through her extremities before settling in her skull. Vaguely aware of the noise around her, blurry movements, massive walls of concrete and metal beams ripping the world apart, the howls of pain from what sounded like wolves, and a dark-skinned woman running past them.

And spider legs.

Movement followed the chaos, and enormous legs stabbing into the shredded floor followed, eight of them, spindly and hairy and long and sectioned into many joints, just like spider legs, just like the legs Fiona displayed.

But this wasn't Fiona. A man, or at least his torso, sat upon the spider body where its head would be, its form mutated and lined

with black discoloration to match the hairy, enormous, mutated spider body underneath it. Its face was a mess of ruin, spider eyes mixed in with human eyes, nose vanished, mouth expanded with a pair of fangs, and random patches of his—its hair and beard were gone, leaving bald, scarred flesh where they must have been before. Its arms didn't end in hands, but in giant bones that looked more like scythes or sickles.

It screeched at her, mouth opening and exposing a disgusting mixture of human teeth and spider fangs.

She tried to move, but her legs weren't working. Too hard to see what was happening to them in the black, with the flashlight still pointed away from her and sitting on the concrete before her, but the pain running through her limbs was buried by the pain in her skull. Again she tried to move, hands reaching out for the slabs of concrete sitting around her, still shaking as the giant spider before her yanked and pulled on its trap of web. More of the tunnel around them shattered and ripped open, like someone inside the belly of a snake making its body bleed around them. Damien would probably make a comparison to Jonah and the whale.

Athalia was gone, or at least Natasha couldn't see her; not that she could see much at all. She reached for her flashlight, and screamed out as the movement lit her body on fire. Her arms collapsed with a new weight, immovable, total and final, pinning them to her sides. Nothing on them, nothing holding them down, but she could no longer move them, dare not move them, even as the spider thing came closer to her, its many eyes blinking and hairy legs stepping over the flashlight.

A roar interrupted the rumbling of the tunnel's collapse. Claws and fur from a new source jumped across the light and against the spider titan, crashing weight against weight as a ten-foot giant of muscle landed onto the spider's side. The werewolf was mammoth in size, but the spider monster was taller, and five times longer and

thicker with its grotesque monster body, and human, mutated half far larger than any human should be. More than large enough to fight the werewolf.

Another wolf leaped onto the monster, almost as large as the first one. Matthew, and Arturo, in their full werewolf form, towering beasts of strength and primal rage filled with snarls and roars, were both latched onto the creature. They bit into it, clawed and tore at its body, red and black gushed from wounds, and its screeching sounds threatened to rupture her ears. Like lions trying to bring down an elephant.

It raised a bone claw, and slashed one of them along his side. More blood poured, and animal roars followed. But the wounded beast didn't relent, he leaned in and kept his claws sunk into the side of the creature and bit into it. He thrashed his head from side to side, like a wolf tearing meat from a carcass, and the monster spun and twisted on its eight legs as it tried to stop the beast from shredding it.

It raised both claws again, and slashed as it spun. The speed and inertia of its enormous size was undeniable, and the two werewolves were thrown from its body onto the debris around them. They rolled, twisted, and almost flew as their weight crashed into the rubble, sickening crunches of bone and flesh following each impact.

She had to run. Flee, get away. The tunnel was collapsing around them. Buried alive. Buried alive and she was going to wither into a husk and her two friends were going to die.

The spider creature slashed the walls and pulled on more of the webbing, bringing down more of the concrete and metal and god knows what into the black. Art and Matt were already up, bleeding, broken bodies healing faster than Natasha ever could. They threw themselves back at the creature, but found only a crumbling ceiling

of rock. What was once a tunnel of rubble became a wall, filled with steel bars and enormous slabs of concrete.

She looked to the right. Her flashlight, still on the ground in front of her, managed to light up the tunnel enough so she could see it, and the wall of rubble. She looked to the left and found the same thing, except with two giant wolves standing before the new barrier. The larger one was clawing at it, tearing at the mess and metal. His claws ripped through concrete one inch at a time, grating it down deeper and deeper until Matt dislodged a chunk. As the block fell to the floor, the tunnel rumbled, and more of the ceiling began to collapse around them.

“Stop! S-Stop before the t-tunnel caves in!”

He didn't stop. He continued to rip and tear, snarls and howling included, and more of the tunnel began to collapse as the beast shredded the barrier. Until Art grabbed his fellow werewolf and threw him to the ground.

“Enough!” Art said, or barked. “Look.” He gestured to the mess around them, barely lit by the flashlight.

Matt forced himself back to his feet, blood trickling over his fur, exposed wounds healing and closing, even as he turned and started back for the wall. “Must kill. Kill. Kill.”

“S-Stop!” Natasha tried to move again, but her body was rooted by pain and weight. Something was holding her down. “Stop please, you'll ... you'll g-get us all killed.”

A long time ago, maybe forty years, Natasha had a mission to kill a draugr, a Kindred who had succumbed to the beast inside. Much as Kindred liked to think of themselves as intelligent, superior to the humans they preyed upon, vampires had a beast inside them as mindless and bloodthirsty as a starving animal. It ate at the mind, the soul, and every Kindred fought against its desires to feast, to

hunt and kill, or they'd destroy the Masquerade, and their self in the process. If they lost that battle, they become draugr, a revenant, mind and soul gone, just a body for the beast within.

She found a woman, not much older than her, who'd indulged her beast far too long, forgot she was once human, and bathed in the hunt, the kill. Natasha had to end her; felt like shooting a rabid dog. But she remembered the look in the woman's eyes, the total and utter lack of humanity, the primal, animal hunger and aggression. Chilled her to the bone.

Matt looked at her just like that.

Art grabbed his friend by the snout, and yanked him down to look him in the eye. "Peace! Kuruth devours you. Peace, shartha escape ... for now."

Matt looked ready to rip his friend apart; and he could have, considering their size difference. Art was a big guy and a huge wolf, but his friend was titanic. The tension in the dead air forced Natasha to stare at the two of them, even as searing agony filled her skull. If she coughed, she felt like Matt would snap, and tear Art in two.

But the enormous creature started to breathe deeper, slower, and he let his shoulders drop. Art let go of his snout, and the two beasts stared at each other as the silence settled around them.

They started talking, in a language Natasha didn't know. Kuruth came up again, something she'd heard before, but everything else was new, hard guttural words that fit their mutant wolf mouths far better than English. They nodded a few times, mentioned Azlu a few more, and Fiona once, before they both started to walk around.

Art found her, winced — if it could be called wincing from a giant wolf head — and reached down to pick up her flashlight. His hands struggled to handle the tiny thing, now that they were beast-like, and immense. But, he came closer to her, and knelt down with the

flashlight. As he did he started to shrink, his features began to fade away, and not always with a smooth transition either, but sometimes with a disgusting crunch of what must have been bone. It didn't seem to bother the man, and he pointed the flashlight at her as he got smaller and smaller, until his clothes reappeared, and his dark eyes were human once again.

He shined the light along her body to her legs. Both were crushed under a metal beam, one of the tracks. But, there was more trouble than just her ruined legs, as she caught the man's obvious and loud wince and groan when he brought the light up to her head.

“You uh ... appear to be missing a chunk of your skull.”

She sighed, and nodded. “It'll heal ... g-get this ... thing off of me.”

Matt came over, and the two men scooped under the beam to lift it clear of her legs. And the pain came back with a vengeance, a thunderstorm with cracks of lightning that scorched her dried veins. If she were still alive and human, it'd probably have been better to leave the beam there or she'd bleed out, with how it had nearly cut through her shins. But Kindred blood was thick, powerful, and it stayed in her wounds as it began to heal them, reform the bones, bind muscle and skin, reattach tendons.

Or at least it tried, but she could feel her vitae struggle with the wounds. Missing a chunk of her skull, and probably her brain; probably why she couldn't lift her arms correctly, something inside her was damaged. She doubted her spine was intact either.

“S-So, we're ... we're trapped. Underground.”

“Looks that way.” Art stood up and pointed the light around them. Both sides of the tunnel buried, blocked off, and trapping them. “Fuck, with that Azlu fuck spinning its fucking webs on the other side, there's no way I can cross over. No locus around either.”



Matt sat down beside Natasha, and watched her like a doting father might, eyes reeking of pain and sympathy. Not her finest hour, being pitied by these two, but she'd been crushed by metal and concrete. At the moment, she didn't mind a little sympathy.

"Twice now we fucked you up pretty bad," Matt said.

She coughed, and groaned, almost screamed as the cough tugged at her muscles. "You d-didn't, that ... that thing ... that gross, h-h-horrible thing did."

"Unless Fiona is a man, I'm guessing that wasn't her. You could see the body of whoever it was before, yeah? Some poor sap the fucker crawled into, got into their head, literally, and did that to them with time." Matt shuddered and rubbed his arms. He'd said he didn't like spiders, but his behavior when in his werewolf body didn't betray any fear. "Looks like David was right."

Art chuckled. "Stephanie owes him an apology," he said, walking over to the rubble walls and running his hands along the concrete, guided by her light he carried. "We're trapped."

Matt shrugged. "For now. You know Avery's going to come here the moment she realizes we're missing. And they'll clear out the mess."

"M-Maybe." Talking didn't hurt as much anymore. When she looked down, she could see where her shins were starting to look like normal legs again; didn't feel it, but looked it at least. Her fingers were starting to work too. "If ... if the ... t-t-tunnel starts to collapse while they dig ... you might die."

"Heh, us? What about you?" Art said.

"Unless I'm ... crushed into paste ... I'll survive without f-food, or air ... or water." She looked around at the tunnel, the size of the space they had available, and sighed. "Dehydration is ... deadly."

Both wolves looked at each other, and sighed the same way she did. “What a way to go,” they said together.

She coughed again, and sobbed. The pain danced along the edges of her mind when she focused elsewhere, but something always brought it back like a sledgehammer. She set her head back, and sobbed a couple more times. Sick of pain, sick of getting ripped open or torn up or crushed. Sick of seeing her bones poking through her skin, sick of the sensations of muscles and cartilage rebuilding themselves with her vitae. Sick of how hungry she was every time it was done.

Matt reached out and set a hand on her, so softly and gently she barely noticed. “Need some blood?”

“ ... this ... is kind of ... l-like last t-t-time, isn't it?”

“Yeah. Starting to feel pretty guilty at this point.” Much as Matt tried to smile and laugh it away, every time he looked down at her ruined legs, the guilt was written across his face. If the pain hadn't been so bad, she might have wished he didn't feel for her, but there was no denying she was in utter agony. Jessy would say she was fine, if she'd been injured like this. Matt and Art probably would too. “Here.” He held out his wrist for her.

“ ... you ... sure? W-What if ... it comes back...” Not like she could fight it. Him. It. That thing. A fucking giant spider monster, hairy and gross and with giant bone scythe arms and a human, rotted, ruined half.

God, what the hell happened to their city?

“Don't drink me dry and I'll be fine.”

She blinked at his wrist, then at him. Well the man did probably weigh nearly three hundred pounds of muscle, more than thrice her weight; her stomach could only fit so much of that. She nodded up

at him, and waited as he brought his huge wrist to her mouth. Too big, his wrist was half the size of her face, and he chuckled as he turned it so she could find a better angle.

She bit down, gently, slowly, and even that was painful for her head. But the pain vanished under the warmth of life flowing through her corpse.

Werewolf blood. Twice now she'd tasted it, and her eyes shot open as the memory mixed with the present, as the heat rushed through her from only the taste, the anticipation, the sweet misery of waiting for it to enter her stomach. And when it did, she purred into his wrist, and suckled. These wolves weren't human, or wolves, they were something else, something delicious that shot life through her dry husk and set her skin tingling. Vitae pumped through her veins like a shot of adrenaline to the heart, forced it start beating with the shock it, her body blushing life even if she didn't want it to. It was too good, so good.

Her hands reached up, and took his wrist. At some point her body had started working again, and the pain of moving her damaged limbs paled in comparison to the pleasure of the Uratha's life filling her. She could almost see sparks through her closed eyes as she drew more of the ambrosia into her body, until her toes began to wiggle, legs no longer shattered. A little more, and the crying ache in her skull faded away into no more than a little whimper. A little more, and her nipples started to harden.

Definitely time to stop. She drew away, and let out a quiet moan of satisfaction; perhaps a little more than just satisfaction. Stop it, stop it you stupid woman, you're trapped underground in a life threatening situation. Now was not the time to get horny.

Though, as she bathed in the glow of drinking Matt's blood, she couldn't help but grin as she remembered the noises he'd made. The big guy had let out a moan or two during the Kiss, deep rumbly

sounds that went with his huge frame very well, very erotic and hot and—

Stop it. Focus.

“Th-Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Matt said, his voice quiet and subdued. She almost couldn’t see him in the black, but the silhouette showed him leaning back so his head touched the concrete behind them. Breathing deep, and a few quivers showing through.

“Feels pretty good doesn’t it?” Art said, chuckling, but still walking around and shining the light at the rubble trapping them.

“D-Didn’t you ... ever ... I d-d-don’t know, make friends with any Kindred in T-Tijuana?”

Matt shook his head. “No. The best we ever managed was a very weak truce, and they were short lived.”

“A shame.” She tried to get up, but pain still ripped through her legs, and she fell back down. “ ... I ... I’ll still need time to heal. B-But thank you! I’ll heal much faster n-n-now.”

“Any time,” Matt said. “ ... really, I mean, any time. That was ... wow, no wonder humans just line up for that.”

She chuckled and pulled her knees up to her chest; at least she could do that without debilitating pain. “The Prince really tries t-to encourage feeding like that. We get t-to feed, our victim lives, often to come b-back to ... b-b-be fed on again.” Julias was a perfect example, with kine lining up for a chance to get Kissed. And fucked.

Art came over to them, and sat on the other side of Tasha. He found a bit of rock and rested the light against it so it pointed up, and provided a little light for everyone.

“Some of the Kindred in Tijuana had a similar setup,” he said. “Though, they were dealing in drugs as much as blood. And they weren’t as nice about it.”

Dolareido really had the Kindred spoiled she realized, the more the two wolves talked about their previous home.

“S-So, that ... that thing. That was an Azlu?”

The two wolves nodded.

“Well fed too,” Art said. “Probably killed a few people.”

Natasha nodded, hugged her legs, and set her chin on her arms. Jack said, of the thirteen disappearances reported in Devil’s Corner that fit the MO, only twelve were her doing. One of them had no claw marks or blood trail, now that she thought back to the report. It’d been directly around the others though, and the disappearance was of a person no one was really sad to see gone. She’d assumed—everyone had assumed it must have been a part of the same group. Stupid of her.

“I ... I wonder where ... it got m-more of its ... kills. Is it smart enough t-t-to ... cover its tracks, and get victims from various p-places?”

“Yeah,” Matt said, “some of them are. Azlu are a fucking nightmare to deal with.” He laughed, and set his hand against her shoulder. Her little shoulder disappeared into his gigantic palm. “But, certainly seems like your Begotten friend is off the hook.”

“She’s not ... I ... I suppose she sort of is my f-friend? She’s super friendly.”

Art leaned forward from his sitting spot beside her, and quirked a brow. “Putting your life on the line for a sort-of friend?”

“I ... I uh...” She sighed, and looked down. Damien, she was doing this for him. What the fuck was the matter with her? She wasn’t attracted to him, or at least, she never really found herself thinking about him that way, cute as he was. But there was something about him that made her want to help him, like maybe she could help change him from the angry assassin he used to be. Like he’d be a different man, if someone gave him some help every once in a while.

You’re such a stereotype, Natasha.

“I g-guess ... I just ... want t-to help people.”

“Too nice for your own good.” Art sighed, and leaned back the same way Matt was. “Anyone got any ideas on what to do while we wait for rescue?” Matt and Natasha both shrugged. “Wonderful.”

“I’d ... I’d worry about oxygen,” she said, “b-but ... dehydration ... will come sooner.”

Matt laughed and shook her by the shoulder a little. “You know, Uratha often think ourselves superior to Kindred. You guys are soft compared to us, turn to ash in the sun, go up like kindling if fire touches you, and there’s only one thing you can eat. But ... here we are, two big bad werewolves who’ll die to fucking lack of water, while you’ll live.”

She chuckled, a sad and heavy sound. “M-Maybe. If someone ... d-d-digs me up in the future, and does it in daylight?” Trembling worked through her body again, and she took a deep, useless breath. “I’d be ash.”

“Aha!”

Matt and Natasha almost jumped as they looked at Art. The man grinned at them, and held up his hand. A pack of cards, faded and worn. Must have kept them in a pocket.

“... whatever you do,” Matt said to her, “don’t play poker with Art.”

“Hey jackass, I can’t hustle her if you tell her I’m good at the start.”

“Man, you’re going to make enemies of everyone if you try that shit again. Remember what happened last time?”

“Hey! Those two jackasses needed to learn a lesson.”

“And the fuck you doing with a pack of cards in your pocket anyway?”

Natasha smiled, relaxed against the wall, and listened to the two boys argue.

## Chapter 35

~~Beatrice~~

She slipped on her boots and stepped out of her alcove, her little cave in a cave.

“Going out?” Aaron said.

“Yeah, just to hang with Julias’s childe.”

“Right right, making friends with Invictus.”

She shrugged and gave the man a little push on the shoulder. “The Circle is small. Carthians and Invictus are huge. We’re not at war with them you know, make some friends.”

Aaron shrugged. He was sitting in a chair by the back wall of the cave, the one covered in bones like some sort of painting sculpture. Reading a book too, as per usual.

“Books are better friends.”

“Ha, fuck no man. Hey, I love a good story, and I love some fucking peace and quiet, but there’s something to be said for friendship. And no, I don’t mean a facebook friend you fucking cunt.” Head off that stupid joke before he made it. “A real friend, someone you can talk with all night.” Not that Jack necessarily fit the bill, but maybe.

“You’ve changed quite a bit the past year haven’t you?”

“Yeah, glad I’m did. Try it sometime.” She waved her claws at him, and started out of the cave.



Or at least, that was the plan. But some quiet moans drew her attention. Othello's alcove, with the door hang blanket pulled aside for all to see.

She hadn't heard anything a moment ago, when inside her room. Weird that she'd only hear the sex now. She looked at his little hole in the wall, then to the tiny tunnel leaving their enormous abode, then back to his room. Julias had said it was perfectly ok for her to watch. So, grinning, she walked over to his place, and leaned against the side of the opening.

"Hey Triss," he said.

"Heya."

"H-Hello," the woman said.

"Beatrice, I don't think I've ever introduced you to Madison. Madison, Beatrice."

The two women nodded at each other. Which would have been perfectly normal, except for the fact Madison was currently having sex with Othello.

Othello was lying down, and from the angle and position, Beatrice was basically looking straight down at his head, while the rest of him was pointed away from her. Which meant Madison, facing them, was on full display. She was riding him, her knees to the furs underneath them, and she was leaning back, holding onto Othello's legs with her hands to brace herself while she rode him.

Beautiful. A black woman with very dark skin, and short black hair, super short, maybe an inch at most, and super curly. She was average height, with luscious, thick lips, and a little meat on her bones. Not chubby, but with enough softness to give her body glorious curves, and her heavy breasts flattened to her torso as they drifted off the sides of her ribs with their natural size, and her

leaning back angle. She had a gentle looking face too, complete with shy smiles and guilty glances.

No wonder. The girl was riding Othello in a slow, almost dance-like way, and with her leaning back so her body was on display, it was easy to see they were having anal sex — as Othello always did — and her smooth pussy was completely in view. The pink of her insides was just visible between her dark lips, and her trickling juices glistened in such an appealing way.

Beatrice didn't hear them earlier cause they were having the most gentle, sensual sex she'd ever seen Othello have. But judging from the liquids the girl was leaking from her exposed snatch over the vamp's pelvis, they'd been at it for a while. And since the sun had just gone down an hour ago, it meant the girl was here during the day. So she was one of Othello's ghouls. Or his only ghoul? She should ask about that.

“Enjoying yourself?” Triss said.

Madison, making a little shiver of pleasure, looked up from Othello to her. “Me?”

“Yeah you.”

“... I ... I am.” She was rolling her hips back and forth, a position Triss knew all too well. Leaning back like that when facing the man made the cock press up against the front walls, toward the belly. Fucking euphoric feeling, and this Madison girl was milking that pleasure right in front of Triss's eyes.

The Nosferatu looked down at the lazy Daeva. Bastard wasn't doing a thing, not moving his hips or touching her clit or anything. His hands were netted behind his head, so the man could just relax, and let her do all the work.

But judging from the woman's expression, her shivering body, and hard nipples, she was enjoying doing all the work.

Triss kicked Othello in the shoulder anyway though. "Dude, help her out."

The man laughed, but shrugged and reached out to hold onto the woman's hips with one hand, while the other sneaked between her thighs to press his thumb against her swollen clitoris.

Like fireworks. Girl was obviously already close, but she'd been struggling to stay quiet. All bets were off when people were watching, and Othello was massaging her sweet bud. The moans started, and so did the bouncing, angled in just the right way to no doubt push Othello's cock up toward her abdomen, hit the walls of sensitive flesh, get the whole body buzzing and tingling.

She came in seconds. Her new bouncing lasted only moments before it slowed, and she let her head fall back over her shoulders as the moans grew louder, mixed with mewls, and a little squeak every now and then. Her legs squeezed on Othello's sides as he massaged her clitoris, and her body shook as a little trickle of juices leaked from her pussy onto his body.

"Fuck..." Yeap, that was her and Julias right there. Madison didn't have any piercings or tattoos, but other than that the position was one of her favorites, riding, anal, controlling the angle so it hit those spots inside that melted her. "Now ... now sit up dude, get in there, kiss her tits, rub her back, come on." Beatrice blinked at herself. The fuck was she doing, giving sex directions. And why was it so fun?

Othello laughed again, so did Madison, and he sat up to put both hands on the small of her back. With her sitting on him and having anal sex, she had to wrap her legs around his waist and hook her feet behind his butt to keep the angle right, and she leaned back a little as she hooked her arms over his shoulders too. And when

Othello craned his head down to start kissing her breasts, Madison sighed bliss, and cradled the back of his head with one hand.

Not a good angle for getting off, but a great angle for building up the pressure, getting more juices flowing, and it just looked really awesome. Her with her legs wrapped around him, leaning back, sitting on his lap, Othello leaning down to suckle on those huge tits and making a display of it. Dude was Daeva, he got off on being passionate; and being passionate with an audience must have stroked his ego in ways even Beatrice couldn't appreciate. But she knew it would, and sure enough, Othello was groaning into his meal's huge breasts as he kissed them, teased them, suckled on them hard enough to pull one away from her body a few inches, and then let it drop with gravity to jiggle lightly.

Madison enjoyed it just as much as Othello. Probably why Othello made her his ghoul, if the girl pressed all his buttons just right. Not that ghouls were always picked for sexual compatibility, but it was definitely a plus, especially to a Daeva. The woman squirmed and wriggled, and peeked over Othello's craning head to look at Beatrice, smile at her, and mouth 'thank you' silently.

Ok Triss, you're supposed to go meet Jack. Stop playing porn director.

... five more minutes.

"K, now, turn around, and Madison you get on your back. Othello on your knees, and hold onto her hips. Madison, put your legs over his shoulders.

Othello didn't even hesitate. Awesome. It'd probably lead to awkward conversations in the future, but for now, it was great how the man listened to her without skipping a beat, without her needing to ask, everyone was just going with the flow. Fun. This was fun. Holy fuck she was having legitimate fun with her fellow Circle members.

They got into position. Madison was on her back on the furs, with her legs hooked on Othello's shoulders. But since Othello was kneeling tall, her ass was a foot off the ground and held up by his hands. It not only highlighted Madison's beautiful body with a great curve to her stomach, and let her large breasts flatten to her chest and ribs in that heavy-and-real way, but it also made her pelvis angle upward, so Othello's cock pushed toward her belly again, hit those spots Triss knew well.

Cause apparently she missed her passion as a porn director.

"K, now ... start fucking her, Othello. Slow at first."

He did so, holding the girl's hips and keeping her ass off the rug, so none of the magic of the angle was lost. And since they'd rotated like she asked, now Madison was closer to Triss, and all the Nosferatu had to do to see all the juicy details, was look down at her.

Madison moaned, openly, loudly, and hugged herself under her breasts as she started to shift back and forth across the rug from Othello's deep strokes of his cock. She smiled up at her, full lips a slightly brighter shade of dark compared to her very dark skin, with a hint of pink from her lipstick. Othello really knew how to pick them; girl was gorgeous.

"You ... don't want to joint us?" Madison said between pants.

"Sorry, got a boyfriend."

"Mister Mire, right. Shame." Madison said. "Cause ... you ... you know ... the..." The girl's mouth opened, and her eyes closed as another long moan came out of her.

Othello didn't need any more direction. He started to fuck her a little harder, a little faster, and Madison started to whimper with each stroke. One of her hands reached down for her clitoris again,

and she started to massage the bud, the other hand reaching down lower to find her cunt, and slip some fingers into her. All while Othello fucked her ass.

So much stimulation, the girl didn't last. She managed two more minutes before she came, and both her hands left her pussy to come back to her body, to grip the furs around her as Othello sank his cock into her ass. A small splash of her juices hit the man in his lower abdomen, joined by a rather loud groan from the beautiful ghoul.

"S-Slow down," Madison said. The sound of a girl trying to talk mid orgasm was such a turn on.

"Don't stop Othello," Triss said. Girl was at that perfect spot for a sustained orgasm, whether she realized it or not. And making a girl cum harder when she was asking for a break? Hell, Triss had gone through that just a couple nights ago with Julias. Intense, seeing white spots and the whole body just starts to tremble and shake, toes curl, sparks of pleasure going through the limbs until your cunt's squeezing like a vise. And in Triss's case, squirting like a fountain.

And Madison's too. Maybe not a fountain, but the girl was getting soaked nonetheless, and a tiny splash of her juices hit Othello's abdomen again. Othello continued to pump her through her orgasm, until Madison reached up to press against his stomach. Trying to stop him. Fucking god that was hot.

"W ... wait..." Another mewl, and her shortened breaths were reduced to nothing but pants. She kept pushing against Othello, but her hands were panicky, shaking, and doing nothing to actually stop the man from fucking her. And seeing her struggle to stop him, seeing her press her fingers to his abs, begging for him to cease, as she again leaked juices onto his body?

Good god in heaven Triss needed to get a camera and do this professionally.

Eventually Othello slowed down. A couple of his own tiny groans marked his orgasm, and the two vampires traded smirks as the man held the girl's ass to his body until he was balls deep, pouring his cum inside her. Madison was spent, sweating and panting and hands limp on the furs, a mix of pleasure and exhaustion on her face.

“Not hungry?” Triss said.

“Nah.” Othello reached down, and scooped his ghoul back up into his arms as he sat down on his butt. The girl really was beat, and she set her chin on his shoulder with her arms hanging at her sides. “Maybe tomorrow I'll drink her. Hey, you want I should wait tomorrow night for you? We can do this again, this was fun.”

“Yeah, it was fun.”

“And Madison really gets off when Kissed. Girl cums too easily.”

If she'd been blushing life, she'd be blushing red. Girl got off easily, and so did Triss, from the same sort of stuff apparently. Certainly not a bad thing, and she was happy to hook up with a Kindred with a sex drive as large as Julias's so she could indulge. The thought of a romantic relationship with one of those Kindred that loses their sex drive? Ugh.

“Uh, don't wait up. But if I'm around ... yeah, sure.”

“Great.” Othello's hands were drifting up and down the woman's back, massaging and caressing in that post-orgasm way that was ever so delightful when Julias did it to her. “Didn't think you were into this so much. Kinda thought you were uptight.”

“Uptight? Dude, just cause I don’t bang everyone in sight doesn’t mean I’m a prude. The fuck you think Julias and I are doing—”

Othello put up a hand in surrender, and grinned at her over Madison’s shoulder. “Point taken.” And, as he smiled at Triss, he put both his hands on Madison’s hips, and started to gently shift her up and down. She still had her pelvis pointed toward him, still had his cock buried in her bountiful ass, and as the man’s cum leaked out of her, he started to softly fuck her again.

Triss had to give it to the man, he had the sexual stamina to match his sex drive. Surprising given his age of nearly a century. Supposedly, according to her elders, many Kindred stopped caring about sex so much when they approached that age. Course there were exceptions, like Othello and Julias and especially Antoinette. Made it hard to define Kindred so easily.

Othello gave his ghoul a couple of rather seductive, almost endearing kisses on her ears and neck, before he set the quivering, whimpering woman on her back again, on the furs. Triss expected the man to go hard, to pound her, but Othello continued to surprise her as took Madison’s arm, gently turned her onto her side, and then curled up behind her.

He spooned his ghoul, snug and comfortable in the rugs, and resumed gently fucking, hugging, and massaging. On his side with his head propped up on his palm, elbow to the rug, his other arm hugged around the girl’s side, up her chest to her breasts, where he pinched and teased her swollen nipples. And he did it all while he slowly ground his hips toward her butt, staying inside her as he tenderly fucked her ass.

Poor girl was still recovering, and she melted into the furs. Nothing but a big puddle of bliss and juices by that point, more moans escaping her as Othello leaned down to kiss her ear a few more times.



Ok, enough was enough. Triss managed a tiny, claw-wiggling wave, Othello returned it, and she stepped out of the cave.

Finally, she was outside in the canyon, surrounded by jagged rocks, some dried bushes, and a hell of a climb. Easy for a vampire, but not so easy she could afford not concentrating.

And concentrating was fucking hard. If she'd been blushing life, her jeans would have been soaked. She smirked as she considered the memory, telling Othello what to do, how it had all worked very well on the ghoul. She must have been a ghoul, and must have been in the cave before. But Triss had been trying to avoid looking into Othello's room too much, afraid she'd offend Julias; probably why she never noticed the beautiful woman.

Ok, Julias may have been fine with her watching all the sex happening in the Circle, but directing it may have been a bit much. She'd make it up to him, take them out for the night, find a nice woman they could trap and Kiss and do things to.

But for now, time to see Jack.

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Her catacombs. Well, not really, not since joining the Circle. She rarely came here anymore, and every time she did, she almost felt guilty, like she'd moved on and left an ex-boyfriend behind. And to make matters worse, this time she brought a guest.

Not Julias though. She'd feel extra extra guilty about violating her old lair if she'd done that. She brought Jack, Julias's childe. The thought made her snort on a chuckle; her step-childe if she married Julias. Marriage was very, very, very rarely something Kindred engaged in, for obvious reasons, and the image of her in a wedding dress — white of course — while Julias waited for her at the end of the isle, pulled more laughter out of her.

“What's so funny?”

“Nothing nothing, just thinking dumb shit. So, metal enough for ya?”

Jack smirked, and shined his light around at the skulls and bones. “Yeah, I have to admit, this is pretty badass. I wouldn’t sleep surrounded by bones or skulls mind you, Kindred or kine.”

“Bah, and you say you like metal.”

“I do! But I don’t moshpit or grow my hair three feet long and helicopter.”

Kid was just a kid. Still, kid had good taste.

“It goes deeper too, come on.” She moved along through the tunnels, where skulls and various arm and leg bones were jammed tight along small alcoves. Nothing as grandiose or insane as the catacombs beneath Paris, but still plenty of bones, plenty of death, plenty of artistic value. There were coffins too, and they matched the darkness like pillows matching the blankets.

“You used to hang out here?”

“Yeah. I did the stint in the abandoned tunnels, just the ones closest to topside, like the other Nosferatu hiding. And the Carthians have areas where Nosferatu can hang without kine stumbling in, seeing our fucked up shit. But I always liked it here more. Antisocial as all fuck.” Once they reached the bottom chamber, she reached out to lightly drag her claws along the skulls, soft enough to avoid scratching the bone. “You know how it can be when you’re young.”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t have crocodile teeth and snake eyes to deal with, but I went through rough times when I was embraced.”

“Yeah. That news about someone named Pavala seemed odd; Julius told me about it later. Rough shit man, frenzy kill on your

first night?” she said. Jack winced with the name, but Beatrice shrugged and flicked at one of her teeth. Kid likely had people treating the topic with careful tongues, like he was fragile or something. She knew better. Being treated with sympathy got old quickly, and insulting soon after.

“Yeah. Snapped back to awareness on a fucking roof with a body and ... had to figure out something. First fucking night as a vampire, no idea what was going on, no idea why blood was everywhere until I saw the fang marks. God that was ... sickening.” Kid squatted down by one of the lower shelves, and reached out to touch some of the skulls. “Suppose that was nothing, compared to waking up with a crocodile mouth, or extra eyes on the face, or looking like a corpse.”

Ah, corpse lady, his boss.

“Yeap. Lot of Nosferatu get pretty suicidal in the first few years. But like your boss has done, you can make the disfigurements a moot point. Who needs sex when you have the Kiss anyway?” She did. She needed sex. But, especially for older Kindred, the Kiss was everything, and provided all the satisfaction and bliss one could ever need.

He raised his hand. “I need sex.”

They both laughed. God damn it, why hadn't she hung out with this kid more before? She liked Julias, and if Julias liked Jack enough to sire him, there was a good chance she'd like him too. Or hate him.

“Get laid much before Antoinette?”

“Nope. She was my first.”

Damn she loved the kid's honesty. Dude said the truth like the idea of lying or twisting it never even dawned on him.

“First time you have sex is as a vampire. Not only as a vampire, but with the Prince of a huge city, with jugs that require custom-ordered bras to fit them. That is a strange bout of luck.”

“Yeah I guess my experience is weird. That said, may have been my first time having sex, but I masturbated like ... ten times a week for near a decade before then.”

Oh god. She fucking lost it, laughed until it filled the whole catacombs, and she had to sit down to keep from falling over. It was how the kid said it, like it was completely normal, like he was just sharing a fact, that had her almost doubled over.

“And you were friends with Julias before, for how long?”

“Several years. He was involved in some of the contracts my firm was negotiating, and I was just an intern at the time. We started talking, and hit it off.”

“Little kid like you talking to a big-n-bad-looking guy like Julias? Were you trying to get in with the mafia?” Cause, no two ways of looking at it, Julias looked like a mobster with his slicked back blond hair and suits.

“A little? Really I was just curious. He looked like a powerful man, and had this air about him, of ... confidence, but also ... dunno. Just seemed like someone that, if I asked him a question, a good one, a smart one, I could expect a real answer from him.”

Ah, the Julias effect. She knew it well. Man was good with his words, and unlike Antoinette, he seemed like someone you could talk to despite his obvious power and confidence. A classic leader of a sort. If only the others knew what he was like behind closed doors, sick of his Kindred life, depressed, attaching to kine to feed off their joy by proxy.

At least until they met each other. She smirked as she thought of the man, her stupid Superman, and what they did for each other, the changes they made for each other.

And of course thinking of him made her think about having her hands pinned to her back while the man fucked her hard from behind. Not really the norm for them, but damn it'd been awesome.

“You don't have any electricity here,” he said.

“Nah. Oh, fuck, good point. Let's go back to your place, I gotta recharge my laptop and phone and shit.”

“Sure sure, invite yourself over.”

She chuckled, got up, and got moving. “I'll try out some of your bands I haven't heard yet, as payment.”

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A quick trip to the Circle to pick up her shit while Jack went home, and then she met him at his place.

“So,” she said while plugging in her laptop, the two of them in his living room, “what bands you think I haven't heard of? I've been into prog metal since before you were born, twerp.”

“Yeah but you're a girl.”

“... what the fuck, the fuck is that supposed to mean? You little—” She was ready to get up off his couch and teach the little fucker some manners, but Jack smirked at her, the way Julias did when he managed to catch her off guard. Oh, he was kidding. “Not all girls listen to pop and shit you know.” He better have been kidding.

“Yeah I know, sorry. My sister, god damn she listened to nothing but. If there was any more than fives notes to the melody, and god forbid more than four chords, she'd call it too boring and not catchy enough.”

“Sure she’s your sister?”

“Yeah, looks like me and everything.” He shrugged and got some blood from the fridge, and for her too. At least Julias had taught him some manners. The absurdity of her worrying about manners made her smirk as she took the drink. “I could say the same thing about my whole family though. I was the apple that fell far from the tree.”

“I get the impression Kindred often are.” She nodded and took a sip. Cold blood had such a different taste and texture than warm blood, and she doubted she’d ever get used to it like the Invictus did. But it was fun to drink from a glass every once in a while. “I—”

Jack’s phone buzzed, and buzzed again as he took it out of his pocket. “Julias.”

“Better answer it.”

Kid nodded and raised it to his ear. Started drifting around his apartment too; he was one of those types. “Yello ... really? You sure? ... shit, you really think she’ll do that? I mean—fuck, right ... yeah ... I don’t know Julias, something else is going on. Like I told you, she said one of those kills wasn’t hers. I’ll ... fine, I’ll stay out of the way.” With a frown almost comical, kid hung up and put the smartphone back in his pocket.

“Personal news? Or Invictus business?”

Kid let out a long sigh and sat down across from her. No table between them anymore; her fault. “Julias says more people have been reported missing from Devil’s Corner.”

“ ... shit.”

“Yeah, they think it’s Fiona.” Jack frowned, grit his teeth hard enough she could hear it, and slowly shook his head. “No blood or

claw marks, but there's no ignoring the amount of disappearances. A few, in a week."

"That isn't good. Fuck that isn't good at all. You think—"

"Julias figures Antoinette's going to call a blood hunt on this girl if it really is all her."

Beatrice winced and leaned back. A blood hunt meant all the Kindred would be duty-bound to kill whoever was targeted. Course that didn't mean they had to do it, but it was a good bet the Prince would harshly punish any who didn't do as the blood hunt demanded. And a blood hunt was not called lightly; Kindred rarely disagreed with one when it happened.

Lucas would have had a blood hunt declared on him, if it'd been possible politically, Garry told her. But when a Prince can point at a single individual, and blatantly declare they are a menace to the Masquerade with evidence to prove it, no one would dare ignore the call.

Which was a problem if the person wasn't actually to blame.

"You don't think it's her making the kills?" she said.

"Do you?"

"I ... definitely not, not from the impression I got from her. Seemed nice, reasonable, intelligent. Seemed like she wanted to make the Prince happy, find a place to live here." Cause Dolareido was awesome. Shitty, and awesome. "Guess Azamel was right. There's something else going on."

"I—" Knock knock. Jack reached up and started tearing out his non-existent hair. "Might as well hang a sign on the door that says No Appointments Necessary." He got up and headed for the door, each step accompanied by Triss's laugh. People were showing up at

his place a lot, and no one bothered with the stupid elevator when everyone visiting could bypass it easily.

“Who is it?” she said.

“ ... fuck, it’s Fiona and Damien.”

Well, fuck indeed.

“Hmm, ain’t no blood hunt call yet. Your call.”

Jack sighed, nodded to no one, and opened the door. “Hello.”

“Hi,” Fiona said. “Think we can come in?”

“ ... sure.” Jack stepped back, and motioned for them to step inside.

“I—oh, Triss! Hi.”

The Nosferatu smirked and nodded to the monster. Hard to imagine the girl going on a killing spree, slaughtering kine like they were going out of style.

Damien came in behind her, and miserable thoughts dripped from him like black ink. The brooding sort no doubt, like Julius; after what happened to him, she couldn’t blame him. Cute though, with the weird half-bald head look and shoulder-length dark hair.

“Damien,” she said.

“ ... Beatrice,” he said, some worry in his tone. Understandable, two of them barely ever said a thing to each other. First time she’d seen him was when she spied on him from the vents in Tony’s old fortress. Third time, he was surrounded by ash, including that of his sire.

“Right horrible things are happening,” Fiona said.



“Tell me about it.” Jack leaned against the counter as he watched the two newcomers sit on the couches, Fiona next to Triss. “Avery came by and told me about your run in with the wolves. Glad you two came out alright though.”

“Mostly awright.” Fiona gestured with her chin to Damien. “Poor Damien got cut up a bit.”

“That’s of no consequence,” the Mekhet said. “The problem now is that the Uratha say Fiona is something called Azlu, and they’re hunting her.”

“It’s nae true!” Fiona bounced her legs and pounded her tiny fists against her knees. “I ... I’m nae that. Vrall remembers Azlu, and she’s nae that.”

Jack nodded, and with a few seconds of silence, came over to sit beside Damien. Uncomfortable, to be sure. “ ... there are more disappearances in Devil’s Corner.”

“More?” Damien said.

“Yeah. If things keep going this way, the Prince will call a blood hunt on Fiona.”

“I’m being framed!” Fiona threw her hands up and went sandbag on the couch. Triss struggled to keep from smiling, but the girl was too damn cute.

“You did kill twelve people before,” Beatrice said.

“But nae thirteen! Or any more since the meeting. I’m starving. Vrall is starving. She’s stomping around in the dream right now, and ... I’m so hungry.” She leaned onto Triss and set her cheek against the Nosferatu’s arm. “Wish I could just feed on blood like ye.”

“We talked to Azamel,” Triss said. “She wants to talk to you. Might be able to help you out with the hunger thing.”

“You talked to Azamel?” Damien looked at the two of them like they’d grown extra heads. “Why?”

“Figured she knows what’s going on more than we do.” What, did he think he was alone in helping Fiona? If that was true, he wouldn’t have come here. “Says there are spider things where you like to hunt, girl. Says something’s there taking advantage of the situation.”

“I knew it, I am being framed.” She got up and started to stomp around, face scrunched up like a squirrel. “We need to clear my name! Let’s go to the tunnels.”

Jack put up his hands. “Whoa, Uratha specifically said don’t go there. And if I go there, they will be pissed as fuck.”

Triss nodded. “Kid’s got a point. They come to him to be their ambassador or whatever. He should stay out of this ... How about that Natasha girl, Jack? You know she’s probably working on this issue same as we are.”

“Yeah, probably. Hold on.” He took out his phone again and called her; actual calling instead of texting. Good to see kids these days still knew how to do that. “ ... no answer.”

“Phone off?” Triss said.

“Natasha? Not a chance.” Jack got up, started to pace, and folded his arms across his chest before stroking his chin. Kid probably had no idea how much he looked like Julias right there. A few flurry taps of his fingers and he’d sent the woman a text no doubt. And then another, and another. “Should I contact Jessy?”

She shrugged. “You think Jessy will know where she is?”

“Jessy and her have a buddy system. But ... I ... I don’t think we should contact her.”

“Why not?”

“Cause Jessy is as volatile as these wolves. If there’s confusion about Fiona and this Azlu thing, and if Natasha is in anyway involved, she’ll only make things worse.”

Yeah, that was very possible. Beatrice could still remember the chaos that had started in the tunnels last time with Jessy and Natasha, when they dealt with Damien, Triss hiding in the vents. “Maybe Julias?”

“He’ll be mad we talked to Azamel, and will probably lock me up ... and lock you up too.”

“Ha, true that.” Beatrice smirked as they went through their list of options. Not many, but far more than their two buds had. Well, bud. She didn’t know what to think of Damien, but Fiona seemed to trust him.

God damn it was too easy to trust Fiona. Girl next door with just a hint of party vibe.

“She probably went to investigate the tunnels beneath Devil’s Corner.” Damien sighed and let his head hang as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “ ... wasn’t there a table here before?”

Beatrice shook her head. “You’re imagining things. So you think Tash went to investigate in the tunnels?”

The priest boy nodded. “I’ve seen her socializing with two of the Uratha. I’m guessing she saw an opportunity to prevent this matter from escalating. Or at least discover the truth of the matter, as the Prince has no doubt tasked her.”

“Where did you see her hanging out with Uratha?”

“ ... in her apartment.”

The Nosferatu raised a brow and leaned in to look closer at the man. “You were at her apartment?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know?”

Damien squirmed, and she leaned in harder, like putting weight on a rat. The man did have a certain sneakiness to him, an element of guilt hidden behind a calm face. She knew his type, spy types who could look you in the eye and lie, the sort that cracked when you put them under some pressure.

“ ... I’ve been in this city a long time, Triss. I observe everyone, all the time. It’s how I stayed alive, and how I know things.”

Fucking Mekhet.

“Spying on people?” she said.

“We all spy—”

“Until Lucas came back, the amount of spying had been steadily decreasing.” She gnashed her teeth a few times, just enough to make Damien wince and lean back away from her, like she was going to bite him. Tempted. “Way I hear it from Garry and Jacob, back in the day shit in Dolareido was a nightmare when Lucas was around, people spying on each other constantly, killing each other when someone let their guard down. You really are a relic from that age. Let it go.”

That’s what bothered her about him, that’s what got under her skin. The man was still treating everything like back then, like the

days Garry used to warn her about, tell her scary stories about. Much as the Invictus and the Carthians still got into fights and tussles with each other, sometimes broke a few bones or burned a house or two, the killing was pretty much a thing of the past. Things were good now in Dolareido, except for this dick bringing it all back.

She liked that she could go visit the Carthians again whenever she wanted, Garry's temperament aside. She liked that she could date Julias despite him being in a different covenant, and they didn't have to deal with any Romeo and Juliet bullshit. She liked that the worse she had to worry about was pissing Jacob off. Course none of that was entirely, perfectly true, but true enough.

“ ... I am trying to—”

Jack put up his hand with a frown and shook his head. “Come on Triss, you don't know all the details about him or his circumstance. Believe me, things are different.”

She frowned but shrugged and looked at Fiona. Girl was smiling at Damien and then her; probably wanted the two of them to be friends. Fat chance, she never got along with Mekhet. “Fine, my bad. So, what're we gonna do?”

“ ... I'm worried about Natasha.” Jack sighed and held out his hands in front of him, palm up, like weighing his thoughts on a scale. “On one hand, we really should just stay out of the tunnels and let the werewolves do their thing; don't want a repeat of the last time Avery came to Dolareido. On the other hand, they might come topside thinking Fiona is this Azlu, and hunt her up here. And Nathasha might be down in the tunnels needing our help. And if we can prove Fiona isn't this Azlu thing the wolves are hunting, then all the better.” With each option listed, the hand on the right went further and further down. “ ... guess we should go to the tunnels. Fuck me we are so going to die.”

“Perhaps today is a good day to die,” Triss said as she got up.

Damien rose as well, and he blinked at her several times. “Oglala Lakota, American settlers history?”

She blinked at him just as many times. “Dude, Star Trek.”

Course, Jack laughed, little asshole. “You watch Star Trek?”

“Fuck no, but I had TV growing up you know. That shit was everywhere.” Guess Damien didn’t have that luxury. Poor guy.



~~Jack~~

If there was one way he was going to die, it’d be with a Scooby-Doo gang, going on a really stupid mission.

He could turn around, go back to Antoinette, slip under the blankets with her and spend the whole night having sex. A smile found him as his mind wandered. He’d be on his back, and Antoinette would be on her side beside him, pressing her breasts into his neck and chin, his mouth, letting him suckle on her beautiful perfect nipples while she stroked his cock. The softness of her bosom against his lips, and her perfect grip teasing the length of his member. Or maybe she’d have the ghouls over? She’d still be lying on her side, letting him kiss and lick her nipples, but instead of her hand, it’d be Ashley on her elbows and knees between his legs, giving him a blowjob in that super enthusiastic way she had. And maybe after a little encouragement, Julee would lean in from his other side, and start kissing on the head of his cock with Ashley. The two would switch between kissing each other, and kissing his glans, all while Antoinette would tease his stomach with her fingernails. And when he eventually came, the two girls would take turns suckling on the tip while the other would kiss and lick his length, and—

“Jack.”

“Wha—yeah?”

Damien frowned at him. Apparently he'd snapped his fingers in Jack's face at least once, given the position and shape of his hand. “Pay attention.”

“Yeah, sorry.” But no, none of that, no super awesome sex with his love and her pets. Instead he'd decided to go on a suicide mission, cause he was dumb like that.

He looked at his companions. The assassin priest who was trying to find a new lease on life. The badass vampire chick with the scary teeth. The young girl with the monster inside her. And him, the little guy. Well, Fiona was smaller than him, but not by much.

The four of them walked along through the tunnel, disguised under Damien's cloak of night, a step up from Beatrice's. It was enough so he felt comfortable whispering, even as the tunnels grew darker.

“You hide down under Ronder Street a lot, Fiona?” he said.

She shrugged and shook her head. “I cut through it sometimes, but I don't hang out there. I have a few places where I can tunnel into my lair, and I aft place webbing in those spots.”

The dream, tunneling into it, entering it like it was somewhere you could walk, somewhere you could set your feet down and touch it. He couldn't imagine it, couldn't—

“Aye, he felt the same way,” she said.

“Eh?”

“It's written on yer face, same way it was Damien when I told him where he was. Had to prove he was in a nightmare.”

He shivered and rubbed his arms. “So not even a dream, but a nightmare! Christ, I can remember the nightmares I had when I was younger, after staying up late to watch a scary movie. Things with hands grabbing you from under the bed.”

She smiled, almost crooned, and stepped in closer to him to touch her shoulder to his, similar as their height was. “Us Eshmaki love to do that.”

“ ... you ... you uh ... actually do that?”

“Me, nae. Well, maybe? I could learn. I’m new to this, and I can tell Vrall isn’t, and there’s a weird back and forth where she hits me with some memories, shows me how to catch flies in my web. Hiding in the dark, waiting for a body to trip along the webs, and then drag them into the darkness?” Her turn to shiver, though from what he could see, she was smiling. “Makes me feel ... whole.”

“That is a very strange thing to say about ... well, all that,” he said. Beatrice looked over her shoulder at him and smirked at him the same way Fiona did. The two of them had a monstrous side they could both probably bond over, though Triss was a menace to society when she was in a bad mood, and Fiona seemed too nice for that. Hell, Fiona seemed too nice for everything she was describing, like this whole nightmare monster horror thing inside her wasn’t real.

It was, he’d seen it, but to call it a nightmare?

“I—whoa.” Triss stopped, and turned on her flashlight. The tunnels ahead had gone black, completely black. But they weren’t near Ronder Street yet. Hell they had a good while to go.

And worse, there were spiderwebs around. Large ones, a few feet tall or wide, splattered along various parts of the concave walls and ceilings.



“I didnae make these!” Fiona jogged over to them and reached out. Just like regular spiderwebs, they stuck to her fingers and wrapped them as she ran her fingers through them; more like purposefully destroyed them. She frowned with each one, stomping her feet as she moved back and forth between walls, swiping off the webs and jumping up to try and reach the spiderwebs above, and failing horribly. “These are ... these are strange.”

“Weird how?” Jack said.

“I dinnae ken, they’re just strange. I can feel a strange ... weird ... I dinnae ken. It’s strange. Sort of reminds me of those werewolves. Feels ... sort of like that.” After she’d accumulated enough webbing on her hands, she rolled it up into a ball and dropped it. How she managed to get it to obey her commands like that and not stick to her anymore, Jack could only guess was because of her spider horror.

Damien looked down at the odd ball of webbing, grimace on his face, sword in his left hand and pistol in his right. “So, unless an army of huge spiders has been down here, there is indeed some sort of spider creature, something the Uratha are hunting.”

“Framed. Totally being framed.” She stomped around, destroyed a few more webs, and a few more, and started moving further ahead as she did. But the webs were becoming more and more numerous, along with bigger and bigger. Girl had no choice but to give up after a while. “Arr, I’m hungry.”

Strange direction for her to brain to go. Strange, and scary. Started giving Jack images of her turning into a giant spider monster right in front of them, ready to devour. But she’d said her horror feasted on punishing abusive people; closest thing they had to that in their group was Triss, and she really wasn’t that sort of person. Fiona had no one to feed on.

“Azamel might be able to help with that,” he said. “Maybe we should go talk to her?”

“Later. Let’s go find this thing. Let’s go kill this thing!” Fiona air boxed a few times, wiping off her lip with her thumb after every two punches. “Then we can aw be friends. I saw some of them werewolf boys, damn they were cute!”

Jack blinked at her, and looked at Damien and Beatrice. They both shrugged.

“Natasha,” Damien said, “has been getting quite friendly with the two I mentioned. Friendlier than I suspect she realizes.”

“Hope she bags one of them.” Fiona chuckled and came back to stand between the group as they walked along. “The tiny lass hooking up with one of those huge beasts? Hot.” She hugged herself and spun around a few times. “Nothing like fitting in the arms of a man so much bigger than ye. Triss knows! Julias is a big guy.”

“You know, I could take offense to this.” Jack frowned, but it was hard to keep frowning with the silly girl twirling around in front of them. Didn’t she realize how dangerous the situation they were in was?

Triss laughed and gave Fiona a shove of the shoulder. “She does have a point though. Julias holding me in bed, and I can fit into the nook of his arm, snug against his chest. Makes a heart melt.”

Fiona squealed and shook her hands like she’d been electrocuted. Damien shushed her, but she frowned at him and shoved him before turning back to Jack. “Well ye got a different thing going! Some girls want to have a man’s arms wrapped around them. Some girls want to pin their man down and spoil him, getting on top for lots of tit action. Sound familiar?”

“ ... aren't you and I the same age? You can't pull this 'I'm so wise' angle with me.”

“Aye, I can. I'm a lass, and we're smarter than wee jimmies.” She giggled as she got in his face, and giggled all the more when he shoved her. “Am I wrong?”

“I'll have you know sometimes I do do the ... what, 'alpha' male thing.” He quoted the word alpha, and combined it with the most painful sneer he could muster for such an idiotic term. “I—wait, why are we talking about this?”

“Cause Fiona has sex on the mind,” Triss said, laughing as she shone the light around. “Maybe these scary life threatening situations really turn her on? Like taking a girl out to see a scary movie, gets the adrenaline going, stimulates. Fine line between fear and arousal.”

“Ha, maybe!” Fiona started walking beside Triss again, so close they were almost touching shoulders, like they were best friends or close sisters or something.

And Triss put out her arm to set it on the small woman's shoulders. So buddy buddy. “Welp, vamps need to blush life in order to get physically stimulated. So be aware of that before you go trying to seduce any Kindred. We can just go nope, and not blush life.”

“Ye telling me if I go to Damien 'ere, priest boy in desperate need of a sex life, and—” Fiona reached out for his hand, grabbed it while Damien raised a brow, and pressed it against her leather jacket, against her breast. “Ye telling me I cannae get him hard?”

Jack facepalmed. This girl was his age? Simultaneously much more immature than him, and yet sexually confident. Definitely his sister.

Damien rolled his eyes and pulled his hand away. “Kindred are, ultimately, walking corpses.”

“Lot of sexual attraction and activity going around for a bunch of corpses,” she said.

Yeah, that was true. Triss nodded too, no doubt thinking what Jack was already thinking. Old Kindred were boring, but young Kindred were sex obsessed. How Antoinette had remained such a lover of the physical for so long, he could only guess.

“You know we’re in a dangerous situation,” Jack said. “Think you can take this seriously for a minute Fiona?”

“Fine.” Frowning until her nose scrunched up, she started walking again, and the four of them fell into a tiny formation with only a few feet between each of them.

Maybe that’s who he was in this Scooby-Doo gang: the voice of reason. Or he was just being Ventrue about it and thinking too highly of himself.

A few more minutes of walking and silence, and the four of them came to a stop. Up ahead, in the darkness, someone was sitting against the concrete wall, someone bleeding. The smell of blood had no where to go in the tunnel, and it spiced the air enough for all three vampires to smell it. Triss took a large sniff, and the two men did in follow, as they approached the woman sitting.

“... Athalia.” Jack ran over to her, and shined the light up and down her body. Woman was alive, awake, and frowning at him as she struggled to breathe deep. Her right shoulder was hanging out of its socket, but her flesh seemed intact; at least until he looked at her opposite leg. Blood.

“Fuck. Better you than the creature I guess.” She shrugged her good shoulder and coughed. “God ... fucking damn it. You, Fiona

right? Get over here.”

Fiona squeaked, and jumped over to join her fellow Begotten.  
“Who are you?”

“Athalia. Look, just pop my shoulder in and carry me out of here. We got to get back to Azamel before that thing finds a way over here.”

Jack and Triss looked at each other with raised brow, but Damien walked over to Athalia, put one hand against her collar, other hand around the wrist of her bad shoulder, and yanked forward. Not a pleasant sound, and neither was the grunt.

“... thanks.” She frowned at him, and looked back to Fiona, as if Damien hadn’t just popped her arm back into its socket. Woman really didn’t like Kindred.

“What happened?” Damien said.

“Ran into that fucking spider monster everyone seems so fucking obsessed with. Natasha and a couple of her wolf friends were down here looking for it when I ran into them. Fucking creature surprised us.”

Strange to hear a Begotten use the word monster like that, made Jack smirk. Smirk quickly vanished as he processed the words.

“W-Wait,” he said. “Natasha and the two Uratha. What happened?”

“I just fucking told you. Fiona, help me up, leg is broken. Been down here for what, twenty-four hours, and I can’t get back to my lair from here.”

“Oh, ye have a lair? Can I see it? I—”

Jack stepped between the two Begotten, and frowned down at the woman. “Details. What happened? Where are they? Why are you injured? Explain.”

“Like I—” Athalia went silent as she looked up, and found four people looking down at her, frowning. Even Fiona, comical as it was. “ ... fine. The creature had set up a trap; probably to catch some lone werewolves and kill them. Guess it worked. Couple miles down the tunnel from here, the webbing got crazy big and thick, and me, the vamp, and two dogs were talking when the spider thing pulled the trap. Made the tunnel collapse. Barely got out of there, but I can’t get any further with this leg.”

“The tunnel ... collapsed on her?” Damien said.

“I don’t know. When thousands of pounds of concrete are falling on your head, you bolt. Not like I was going to stay behind for them.” The woman shrugged her good shoulder and shook her head. “You going to help me or not?”

Damien got down on a knee and examined the woman’s leg. He lifted it a little, and Athalia’s groans of pain confirmed. “Broken.”

“Like I said.”

It’d take a young Kindred some time to heal a broken leg; big bones took time. Older Kindred could do it quickly, but Jack certainly couldn’t, not without someone pouring gallons of fresh blood down his throat. How fast would a Begotten heal?

“ ... Damien, can you set the leg?” he said. Man seemed knowledgeable of injuries, at least enough to know what to do for a dislocated arm.

“Her break is severe but simple. I can enough so that she’ll heal ... assuming Begotten heal better than kine.”

“Do it.”

Athalia glared daggers into the Mekhet, but they closed as a scream tore through her when Damien yanked on her leg. Jack would have to ask him where he learned to do stuff like that sometime.

“Fiona,” Jack said, “can you make her a bandage of some sort? With your webbing?”

“Aye, that I can.” She got down on her knees next to Athalia, and with her palms, started covering her leg in webbing. It just came out of her, out of some invisible hint of her horror showing through, something in her hands they couldn’t see.

“Creating ... webbing ... like this?” Athalia said, and she stared as Fiona wrapped her leg up where her femur had been broken. Pain blatant on her face, but it didn’t stop her from staring at the girl’s work. “That’s not normal.”

“It’s nae?”

“No. You’re summoning the horror’s physical form in a very subtle, controlled way, with a persistent effect. That takes ... that takes skill.”

“Cannae take the credit then. Vrall showed me how to do this.”

“Vrall?”

“My horror.” Fiona nodded and continued wrapping away, until the top half of Athalia’s leg looked like it was legit wearing a real cast. “She’s ... arr, she’s hungry.”

“Then let’s go talk to Azamel, and we can show you how to feed without attracting so much attention. Before more shit like this happens, or before some fucking hunters or heroes show up.”

Every word this Athalia spoke was angry. Venom dripped from her tongue and teeth. Every time she looked at him, he thought she was going to bite and kill him. Jack eyed her closely as she struggled to stand until Fiona helped her, half convinced the woman was going to attack them with how she glared.

He understood the risk of hunters. But heroes? What?

“I cannae leave yet! I have to find this thing. And ... and ye said it killed Natasha?”

“Didn’t say that. That’s probably what happened though.”

Fiona frowned at her fellow Begotten, and started walking down the tunnel toward their supposed cave in. “Come on then, let’s go find Tasha.”

Everyone smirked. It was too damn easy to like her.

Athalia stared at them, somehow summoning even more malice into her gaze. What kind of monster was she, what sort of abilities, what crazy horror could she summon? Summon was the wrong word, more like, embodied, or simply was. Not so easy to like her.

The woman sighed and started limping along back the way they’d come, hand out to the wall and hopping a foot at a time on her good leg. No doubt it’d be a really rough walk out of the tunnel, especially considering she’d been down here a day. Jack felt a little sad about leaving her to tend to herself, but only a little. Woman was mean.

The gang didn’t have to go far to run into the larger webs. In fact, far as Jack could see, they shouldn’t have run into webs so soon, but within fifteen minutes they found the larger webs, strings thick as a finger, some as thick as a wrist, and a lot of them. No one had to say anything, and when Jack looked at the others, the two other Kindred looked around, at each other, then him with knowing. Would they get crushed in a trap too?



Fiona stomped her foot, and glared at the webs. She pointed her hands up, and unleashed the monster. Just like before, for a flash moment, long, enormous spider legs that looked almost like swords shot out from the air around her, attached to a blur of mass. The three vampires jumped away as the little monster started to dismantle the webbing around them, each stab of her spider legs severing webbing from the walls, cutting it with the grace of a scalpel.

“I’m nae stupid,” she said. “Nae gonna let the same thing happen to us. And this is personal. This thing used me to hide its tracts, it framed me!”

“Azamel did say they were sneaky.” Triss nodded and came in a little closer. Dangerous getting near the woman as she walked, each step met with a stab outward from one of the huge, phantom limbs. But Fiona kept them from hitting her easily; hell, her precision with them was awe inspiring. And as everyone grew a little more comfortable with Fiona’s plan, they all started walking along while the spider monster undid the work of the other spider monster.

When did his life become about monsters? He kind of preferred it when it was politics and money and territory. Now he was underground in a tunnel with a monster that seemed only interested in death, and also with a monster that was intent on clearing her name. Next, there’d be gigantic wolf monsters causing chaos and making a bad thing worse.

You did not just jinx it, Jack.

Beatrice and Jack kept their flashlights out, though as they got deeper into the tunnel, Jack also withdrew his pistol. A machine pistol, since the Invictus had updated the threat level of the city with the arrival of the Uratha. He’d never fired it before outside of a few training sessions, but he was confident; Kindred strength made dealing with recoil manageable. Damien had his sword in one hand,

pistol in the other, same make. Triss seemed comfortable with her bare hands, but she was a Nosferatu, and their insane strength justified it.

Fiona was the unknown quantity. How would she fight? What could she do? She had the weird spider limbs that stabbed like swords, and the ability to create spiderwebs, but was that it? Did she have other abilities? What happened if she took a bullet in the brain; Kindred would survive that, but would she? Learning on the field was not the Ventrue's preferred method.

"These webs are ... strong." Fiona stomped her feet a few times, frustrated, and cut some of the larger webs they came across with a little more impact, a little less subtlety. "I wonder if I can kick its ass, spider to spider."

"If this thing is as dangerous as Athalia says, as the Uratha think," Damien said, "we should focus on finding Natasha and getting out of here."

Triss laughed and shook her head. "Yeah but do you think it'll go like that? I mean, that's what I'd prefer too, hopefully prove Fiona's innocence in the process, but we're walking into this thing's world, its tunnels now. I'm guessing it's going on the defensive, and it's apparently smart enough to lay traps. Like a fucking spider." She laughed some more, then shivered as she tapped a claw against her crocodile teeth. "Keep cutting those webs though, and..."

Everyone went silent as they came upon a hanging cocoon. No denying what it was, given the shape and size: a person. Fiona sighed and cut the thread hanging it, and knelt down over the body.

"It even feeds sort of like I do." Her spider limbs struck out to split open the cocoon, and everyone groaned as the body inside showed itself. A corpse, with a withered face, dry of fluids.

"Looks like a mummy," Triss said.

“The mummification process does include using salt to dry the ins and outs of the dead.” Damien knelt down beside Fiona, and leaned over the face of the corpse. “But, this one is ... still quite wet on the skin, and the skin doesn’t show any serious discoloration. This corpse is fresh, maybe a few hours old.”

Jack took a step back, and pointed his light around along with his pistol. “I ... I guess it got cocky after dealing with Natasha and her two friends. Decided to start feeding. Julias sent me a message saying there were more disappearances. This must be why.” He left out asking why they thought it was a good idea to come down here. Complaining was only soothing for so long.

“Let’s keep going. But let’s be quiet from here on out.” Damien took a long, unneeded breath, and started marching once again. With the cloak of night to protect them, they were safe ... probably. The man was good, very good at hiding, and Jack was confident the Mekhet could keep them hidden.

But then, Natasha was his equal in that regard he figured. And she’d been discovered. She would have used a flashlight at this point, like them, and the cloak of night wasn’t going to cover a beam of light. But if this monster was just a mindless monster, it wouldn’t have launched a trap against some light with no source. Maybe it could see through the cloak?

Jack ran the possibilities through his head, analyzed them, even as the group walked through the webbing into the awaiting death tunnel. He had to plan this out, know what to do when shit hit the fan as it inevitably would.

But no plan was coming to mind, just regrets. Should have got Jessy, should have got someone. They were walking into black, just pure shadow, with dozens of feet of rock over their heads that was apparently collapsible by spider trap. One wrong step and they were going to be crushed, or trapped and left to wither over centuries.

A quiet rumbling sound started to fill the tunnel, like a distant train; no way a train was still running down here though. And in the endless dark, it almost seemed like the tunnel was breathing, the small rumbling sound the voice of the dying underpass, insides invaded by some arachnid. The webbing was thicker, and it crossed their paths with vines strong enough to strangle. Another body too, a smaller one, a decoration hung to adorn the spider's new home. And the deeper they went, the more the tunnel grumbled its discontent, until the grumbling sounded like rolling rocks.

The tearing sound of rubble crumbling and smacking into metal and concrete forced their little gang to creep along as best they could without touching anymore of the webbing. If it was ahead, they had no choice but to keep going; no branches in the tunnel yet, just a single path into the awaiting maw of darkness. He really, really didn't want to. Fuck he didn't want to. More sounds, growls and snarls, and rocks falling and cracking. A lot of rocks, being moved by a lot of hands. Spider legs? They couldn't see anything yet, and as they crept along they had to point their lights down at their feet to do their best at remaining invisible.

But when they rounded a sharp turn, it all fell apart.

Eleven men and women stood before a giant pile of rubble. The wall of debris, broken rock and metal and concrete reached all the way to the ceiling of the tunnel. No getting around it, over it, nothing. The eleven people were huge, utterly huge, seven feet tall on average, with muscles bulging through their shirts, and an unusual amount of hair coming off of them, their necks and arms.

They had a couple LED lanterns sitting around along the edges of the tunnel, and had cleared the area of the spiderwebs with all grace and care of raging animals.

He recognized some of them. Clara, Avery, Stephanie, David and his twitching. They were all bigger, like they'd gone halfway to

werewolf mode.

They all turned around, and looked at the gang.

“ ... you have got to be shitting me. Get the fuck out here whoever you are.” Avery took a few steps toward them, and Clara followed after her. The others snarled a few times, but got back to digging. “Turn off that cloak of night shit before I make you.”

Damien looked at Jack. Not sure why he was looking to him, but Jack sighed and nodded. They couldn't sneak up on a werewolf, not one as strong as Avery anyway.

The four of them stepped out around the curve of the tunnel as Damien turned off the cloak, leaving them exposed. Fiona stood beside Beatrice, and glowered at the glaring Uratha, like she'd been personally slighted.

“ ... I suppose this is the Azlu,” Avery said, eyeing Fiona with the same sort of expression Fiona was giving her.

Fiona, tiny before the grown Uratha — unusually tiny considering all the werewolves looked to have grown a foot in height — stood her ground, and marched up to Avery. Right up to her, glared at her, and frowned a frown so adorable it was enough to make Avery smile. Too damn easy to like her, even for the werewolf pack's alpha.

“And if I am?”

“I know you're not.” Avery shrugged, and motioned around them. “Sorry about the rest of my pack, none of them have ever been near an Azlu before; other hosts sure, but not Azlu. They don't know how it feels, or the scents to smell for. Plus,” Avery gestured to the tunnel the gang had passed through, “by the point they're harvesting kills, Azlu no longer look human.”

“So...” Jack walked up to stand beside his friend, and tilted his head to the side to look up at Avery. “So you made a mistake?”

“Yeah, we did.” Avery nodded, and gestured to her fellow wolves. “Not that it would have mattered if you and your friends would have listened and stayed out of the way.”

Jack looked back at Damien and Beatrice, and they frowned with the same thoughts. The wolves were ok with killing an innocent when on their warpath.

Not good enough.

“And?” Jack said. “What, you would have killed Fiona, chalked it up to an accident when you realized she wasn’t your prey, and continued your hunt?”

Avery nodded, even as Clara beside her grimaced.

“Exactly. The hosts need to die, Kindred. I don’t expect you to understand, just like I didn’t expect that Begotten back there to understand.” Avery gestured back to the tunnel, talking about Athalia. “If that means some people get caught in the middle, that’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

What a bitch.

“You can’t seriously—”

“Look, Jack,” Clara said, “you should get out of here. We’re trying to find our two missing, we know they’re down here. But we can smell the Azlu, and it’s going to rip you guys to bits. Leave and get somewhere safe. We won’t hunt Fiona.”

Jack sighed as he looked Clara in the eye. At least they knew now that the wolves weren’t going to hunt Fiona anymore. Fuck, if they’d

just let Avery see her earlier, the whole situation could have been avoided.

“But Natasha’s down here too,” he said. Maybe he shouldn’t have said it, with the hard glares the wolves gave him. They were pushing their luck, not listening, arguing.

Avery shrugged with all the compassion of a brick. “Yeah well, if —”

Everyone went silent as they turned to look back the way the gang had come from.

Athalia came running, or stumbling very quickly, each step carving agony into her face with a knife, but not enough to stop her from driving forward toward them. “It’s coming!”

And that was it. That was all anyone needed to hear to react. All the hate and rage and building aggression snapped like a guitar string tuned too tight, complete with the crack that cut skin.

The three vampires and the two monsters stepped aside as all eleven werewolves marched toward the tunnel, from where Athalia had been running. And as they marched, the beasts in them emerged. Jack’s jaw dropped and his body froze as the already unusually enlarged Uratha enlarged once again, getting taller, thicker, muscles threatening to burst through their attire; instead, fur overtook their clothes, and it vanished into their bodies. But no amount of fur could hide the almost grotesque size of their muscles, their power, their weight.

The pack of werewolves stepped forward, standing upright despite their titanic size. With their mutant wolf heads, Jack couldn’t help but picture the werewolves moving on all fours, but they walked upright, and their hands and feet weren’t paws, but monstrous appendages with claws, claws that scraped and scratched the metal and concrete underneath them through sheer weight and sharpness.

Holy fuck.

Fiona and Damien grimaced as they stared at the passing titans; they'd seen them before, but Jack hadn't, and neither had Beatrice. Jack's mouth was still open, and when he looked her way, hers was too, exposing all her extra teeth and wide snake eyes. No wonder people were afraid of these things, they were just like the beasts of legend, the giant wolf monsters that devoured and destroyed, unstoppable juggernauts. Mindless animals.

One of them wasn't transformed though. Still in his unusually enlarged human body, but at least still human looking. He came over to them, several huge duffel bags hanging from his also huge shoulders.

"... I remember you," Jack said. Saw him with the rest of the pack when he first met Avery.

"Surprised. Name's Mason." The big guy smirked, and set the bags down. After unzipping them, he started setting aside the contents. Bottles with rags in their tops, and some sort of large gun ... with a canister attached to its underside.

The three Kindred stepped away.

"Molotovs?" Beatrice said. "And ... a fucking flamethrower."

"Told you Kindred to stay out of this. Don't blame us if you get set on fire." The man shrugged, and pulled out a lighter. "But you're here now, stuck. Stay back here. Maybe try tearing down this wall while we're busy? Who knows, your friend might still be alive if she was down here with Art and Matt."

The gang was literally stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Athalia reached them at last, though the werewolves each gave her long, hard glares as she limped by, and more than a few snarls



and half-roar half-barks. But eventually she got to her fellow Begotten, and she collapsed against the wall again, enough hate painted on her face to kill anyone stupid enough to touch her. Jack was half tempted to ask why she was so angry all the time. Not the time, definitely not the time.

Caught himself before putting his foot in his mouth. What do ya know, growth.

“Ye saw it?” Fiona said, getting down on a knee beside Athalia.

“Yeah, giant spider monster, just like these bastard dogs said.” She spat on the ground and cradled her bad shoulder with her good hand. “Must have been down here for months, hiding.”

“So ... what do we do?”

“We get out of here and back to Azamel when we can, before these idiot beasts get us all killed.”

Mason didn't like that. He turned to look at the sitting woman, and offered her a scowl. “You really have a stick up your ass, you know that? Just shut up, sit down, and wait.” Another snarl later, Mason walked off to join his fellow wolves.

Leaving the five of them sitting there, in front of a giant wall of rubble, while eleven werewolves disappeared around the tunnel turns.

“I ... guess we get digging?” Jack said.

Triss, laughing and shrugging, approached the wall of debris and started sliding down rocks. Damien and Jack watched on while Fiona chatted with Athalia about being Begotten, until the Nosferatu stopped and looked at them.

“ ... what the fuck, why am I the only one working?”

Jack put up a hand. “I’m a Ventrue, I’m a talker, not a doer.”

Damien put up a hand. “I’m a Mekhet, delicate hands.”

Didn’t expect Damien to make a joke, and Jack found himself laughing despite the scenario, despite everything. Even Triss laughed, and laughed as she walked closer, and put her hands on their shoulders. Then she squeezed, and everyone stopped laughing as she threw the two of them at the rubble.

“Fine!” Groaning and whining, Jack gave Athalia his spare flashlight, put his gun away, and got digging. Ventrue were hard to kill, sturdy, good at using the power of the blood to become almost invincible. They weren’t good at lifting heavy objects.

For just a moment, he forgot there was a giant spider monster behind them, and a bunch of werewolves between it and them. But then the sounds started. Shrieking. One time he looked up a video of what it sounds like when a fox cries; a bone-shrilling sound. It was sort of like that, louder, heavier, enough that it almost shook the walls with the curdling screams.

Everyone got digging except Athalia. The only one with the strength to make any real progress was Triss, and she lifted rocks easily a hundred pounds and rolled them away. Tossed a few of the bigger rocks when she managed to get her claws on them, hard enough so they cracked or broke on contact. More than once or twice, Fiona stopped to watch Triss pick up things that were as likely as heavy as Fiona herself, nearly as heavy as Jack, only for Triss to chuck them away ten or twenty feet.

“What?” Beatrice said. “Your Vrall horror thing can’t lift heavier? Seemed like it could.”

“Maybe, but ... picking up rocks like that is ... nae exactly how she—how I’d do it. She’d use webbing, from above, likely.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhmm. She’s done things like in her jungle lair.”

“Jungle lair?”

“Aye! There’s this jungle with two moons. It’s dark there, the canopy is thick, and there are many dead there, from well before I became Vrall.”

“Two moons?”

Jack raised a brow, and looked Triss up and down. She kept asking Fiona questions, and Fiona kept answering them, talking about her dream world, her scary lair, how she met Damien there as Vrallar’trakla of the Eight Blade Arach, whatever that was. She went on about feeding, biting to eat but needing to punish abusive people to get sustenance from it, about how she used to have dreams about being devoured by darkness, by things in the shadows with webs and fangs. Went on about what it was like being devoured in her own nightmare, accepting it, and waking up as this horror, this nightmare incarnate. Her true self.

With every sentence, Triss nodded along, asked a few more questions, and tossed a few more rocks. Seemed to be how she liked to work, talking like this. Jack could never do that. Jack wanted silence, or music, but Triss seemed to enjoy the conversation. Which of course meant Fiona was excited to talk; just like Mary would have been.

He smiled. Triss probably would have liked Mary, which was a very very weird thing to imagine. But there it was in front of him, the badass and once quite the surly woman, chatting — mostly listening — to Fiona talk, and enjoying it.

Jack looked Athalia’s way. She had a brow raised as she listened. Probably because they were talking like nothing was wrong despite

death coming down the tunnel.

“Your horror,” Athalia said, “came with a name?”

Or maybe not.

“Aye. I guess that’s nae normal for Begotten is it?” Fiona stopped putting down rocks long enough to wipe some sweat from her brow and smile at the woman with the web-wrapped leg. “I—”

Another howl ripped through the tunnel, and everyone looked back toward the darkness. Mason had brought his two lanterns with him, but the light wasn’t rounding the bend of the tunnel where the wolves went. The Uratha were still out there then, a ways off, doing whatever it was they were doing. Every so often another roar filled the tunnel, distant but loud nonetheless, and Jack shivered as the strange animal sound filled his core.

Maybe that’s what Triss was doing, just keeping Fiona’s mind off of the terror behind them. Keeping all their minds off the madness happening behind them. Sounded like the sort of thing a Carthian would do; Invictus would just say ‘shut up and do it.’

“Careful,” Damien said as he climbed a few feet of the sloping hill of rubble. “The ceiling of this tunnel is a mess. More than the concrete caved in, but much of the earth as well.”

“Think Natasha survived?” Jack said. Dumb question. Foot in mouth again, damn it.

Damien sighed, and made a tiny wince as he started pulling down some of the smaller rocks from the top. “I have no idea. I hope so.”

“... you do seem to care about her.” He climbed up to join Damien closer to the top of the rubble, just a few extra feet off the ground, so they could start moving more of the higher rubble down to the bottom.

“Is that strange?”

“Yeah, it kind of is, considering what happened.”

Damien stopped digging long enough to glare at him. “You still doubt me?”

“No, no, you’ve proved you’re not the man I thought you were.” Jack shrugged and pulled down a rock, a big one, one Damien had to help him with. Perfectly timed to be nicely symbiotic; on purpose of course. “Just, you two seem to have this weird relationship. The way you glance at each other every so often, makes me think you’re old friends who had a falling out, you know? Sort of trying to ignore how much you hurt each other in the past.”

“You ... may have a point, Jack.” Another wince from the assassin before he grabbed another rock. “I owe her an apology, but I can’t seem—”

“Oh for the love of god!” Athalia threw up her good arm, eyebrows furrowed and dripping of more of that hate she seemed to carry around in infinite supply. “You understand the precarious situation we’re in? Stop gossiping, stop chatting, stop acting like a bunch of children, and do something!”

The four of them stopped digging, and stared at the woman. But, after a while, Triss started laughing, then Fiona, and everyone started digging again. Jack had half expected Beatrice to throw a rock at her, but the Nosferatu was smiling bigger than any of them; mostly because she had a crocodile mouth that could fit an unusually large smile.

“Let me have a go at something. Everybody get back.” Fiona put up her hands and motioned for the gang to step away. Once the three Kindred were behind, the little redhead motioned them even further back, until they were maybe fifteen feet away and spread out toward the walls.

Then the legs came out. Fiona pointed her hands at the rock wall, and eight of her enormous spider legs shot out from the air behind her. More than just her legs. Lit by their flashlights, the horror inside the little girl showed itself as it ... she stood behind and over Fiona, her immense legs striking out against the rock while she hovered. Jack could see where the legs connected this time, the body they were connected to, and his jaw dropped as he stared at the spider goddess Vrallar'trakla.

Goddess was the better word, now that he could see it. Her. She was wearing a dress of what looked like spider silk, dangling loose like a sash that hugged her curvy figure. Her very curvy figure, with a waist inhumanly tiny, but arms and legs of normal proportion. No feet, instead her legs came to sharp points an extra foot below where her feet should have been. No eyes, but giant horns that pulled back to join more horns that curved back from her skull. Her fingers and thumbs were three giant claws, and her skin was the color of dark steel.

The Begotten's horror's legs each stabbed at the wall, but also the ceiling above it, and stabbed, and stabbed, each leg sinking into rock and rubble. When they pulled away and stabbed again, webbing was left behind. Two webs began to form, one attaching a multitude of rocks together at the rubble while simultaneously pulling it down every so often, the other web covering the ceiling like a net. With speed and accuracy, Vrall reinforced the rock above them, web growing out and attaching to strong points along the ceiling to keep in the looser points, while she also pulled down the wall of rubble blocking their path.

“In her lair, she isn't separate from the horror's body,” Damien said, stepping over a couple times to stand beside Jack. “Truly terrifying.”

Truly terrifying indeed, but oddly attractive. Something about the way her human-like body held the silk dress, the way her tiny,

ridiculously tiny waist accented the hips and other curves. Jack always was kind of into monster girls — too much internet — and he couldn't help but stare at the lovely monster before him. He'd half expected her to have the big abdomen of a spider, but she didn't, her human half was more like some sort of ancient demon woman, who happened to have eight gigantic spider legs jutting out of her back.

This was the thing he felt from Fiona whenever he was near her, this ancient, deadly goddess creature. Didn't seem like Fiona at all, like it matched her at all, and yet there it was.

With a hard tug Vrall yanked down a bunch of the wall, and everyone jumped back as the shattering concrete spread out around the tunnel. Athalia sighed and shook her head.

“You'll bring the whole wall down on us,” she said. “Be careful.”

Fiona nodded and resumed, more webbing, more layers, more nets above to try and reinforce what was probably a lost cause. But something was better than nothing, and if Vrall's webs could keep the tunnel from falling down on their heads, Jack was all the happier to let her do the work.

More roars filled the tunnel behind them, closer this time. He could hear the shattering of a bottle, and an ear-piercing shriek to follow. Molotovs. What would happen if one of those things hit an Uratha? For a Kindred it'd be instant death. Maybe an elder Gangrel or Ventrue could summon the defensive reflex of vitae to deal with it, but even in that circumstance, being lit on fire was usually guaranteed death. For him, or Triss or Damien? No chance, they'd be ash.

More roars came closer. Jack looked behind him, along with Damien, and the two stared at the curve in the tunnel where the werewolves had disappeared, where Athalia had said the monster was. They could hear it now, not just its shrieks, but the stab of its

feet against the ground, each making a weird scraping sound like nails scratching concrete or metal.

“Um ... I think they’re coming this way,” he said.

Damien nodded “Plan?”

Jack sighed, gulped, and took a deep breath. He’d never get over that reflex, none of them would apparently. With a sigh, he drew his large knife and pistol. Damien did the same, sword and pistol, and the two of them waited for the oncoming chaos.

“Um ... can ye hear something?” Fiona said, still working at the wall.

“Can hear a lot of things right now.” Triss walked over to stand by the boys, off to the side though with her back to the tunnel against the inside of the turn. Maybe she’d try and leap out to attack whatever this thing was that was fighting off eleven titans and fire. Yeah, right.

“I mean, I think ... I think there’s something digging from the other side! Maybe it’s Natasha, or her two friends?” Fiona dug faster, more webbing coming out and yanking down the rubble wall as the spider goddess stabbed into the rock faster and faster.

Jack stepped back to get closer to Fiona, and peered at the rubble as Fiona peeled off the layers. “ ... yeah I can hear it too.” Scraping, claws maybe? Someone was on the other side for sure at least, someone strong enough to move rocks. Natasha did come down here with two werewolves, and Natasha was a Kindred herself; even Mekhet were far stronger than any normal human, strong enough to move some rocks. It could be her.

More rocks fell away, and more, until a small opening was created at the top. Fiona focused on that area, a host of webbing netting together against the rock and dragging it down together like a



fishing net. And as the roars and tearing sounds from behind grew closer, she worked faster, getting clumsy and yanking down a lot of rocks at once.

“Ok, that’s enough.” Damien climbed up the rubble and stood before the dip in the pile where there was room enough for him to go through it, just below the ceiling. He didn’t though, thank god; man wasn’t a total idiot. He did peer through the darkness though, and tapped on the rocks a few times with his sword. “Hello? Natasha?”

No answer.

Damien held out his hand, Triss gave Jack her spare flashlight, and Jack climbed up to join the man before giving it to him. Still no answer, and as Damien shined his light into the black, both Kindred squinted their eyes to see what lay beyond.

Just more rubble and darkness. Then what was making that clawing sound?

A rock jumped from the rubble, a large one, one both Kindred had been leaning against. The giant mass catapulted outward from the pile, knocking both vampires down. Jack tried to stay upright and see what was happening, but all he could feel was the shattering of a few teeth as the rock collided with his jaw. He screamed on the way down, and gasped as the slab of earth cracked and fell apart a foot beyond his head.

Too fucking close.

Groaning, struggling to push himself back to his knees, he rolled over and clutched his mouth in his hand. God, his teeth, his fucking teeth. Some of them were cracked open, and the pain throbbed through his skull like fire. When he was alive, a love of candy had lead to an abscessed tooth, and the pain it had caused him was incapacitating, as if someone had poured acid into his skull.

But now he was Kindred, and those nerve endings didn't have the same sensitivity if he wasn't blushing life. And yet, he still fell over and clutched his head; felt like a pipe bomb had gone off between his temples. Every drop of vitae he had to spare went into his head to repair the damage, even as his ears picked up the sounds of falling rocks and a crumbling wall. Even as he heard the screeching of something breaking through the hole they'd made.

He looked left and right. The spare flashlight was broken, only the one Athalia had worked; at least she was pointing it at them and the tunnel at large. But her jaw had dropped, the same way Jack's had before.

Shit.

Jack looked up, and felt his body petrify. You'd think after a certain point, he'd be saturated on shock, unable to be surprised anymore by the grotesque or strange or unusual. But the spider monster before him proved otherwise as it forced its massive body against the hole, and through it, screaming at him with a mutant face of arachnid and human. Like someone had begun merging or transforming a human into a spider, but stopped halfway through, with a weird mess of multiple eyes and spider fangs sticking out of human mouth trying to fit too many objects.

Its arms clawed at the rock, ripped and tore through it like curved blades carving striations through concrete; it had no hands, just bone blade things coming from overly muscled forearms. Its waist was connected to some sort of enormous spider body, and the colossal creature struggled to force its hairy, long, gross legs through the hole they'd made. Like watching a spider force its way out of a dug hole too small for its body. Not far from the truth.

Jack managed a glance to the other side and saw Damien, standing there giving the same look as everyone else. He looked the

other way, and sure enough Fiona was doing the same thing. Only Triss managed to react.

She threw herself at it.

Seeing a normal sized person land onto the spider's huge, hairy abdomen put the creature's size into a new perspective. Might as well have been a mouse trying to fight a house cat.

But Triss had arms and claws, and she used them to climb the beast's spider body with zero care that her claws were cutting, digging, and ripping it open. Small as she was compared to it, it must have felt like ant bites to the enormous arachnid, and ant bites hurt. The monster spun around again and again, faster, screeching until Jack covered his ears as he stumbled away.

"Someone get the fucking dogs!" Triss said as she held onto the creature. Like riding a bull, except the bull was the size of an elephant, and as it crashed around inside what was ultimately a tunnel barely big enough to hold its size when it stood up, its many legs and weapon arms destroyed everything around it.

A staccato cascade of harsh, loud snaps, along with a string of bright flashing lights snapped Jack's attention like lightning. Gunfire. Damien had his sword in his left hand, his gun in his right, and he was holding down the trigger, full auto. The recoil kept controlled by Kindred strength meant the man had little issue hitting his target, and a splattering of red and black liquids washed over the debris around them. Warm, and Jack threw himself back as more of its blood splashed against his face and body.

Not enough room. The thing was too huge, far too fast for its size, and its spider legs sliced into concrete as it thrashed, body hitting the walls again and again and again. It wasn't stopping, even as Damien's bullets peppered its exoskeleton. From the thunk sound Jack managed to catch between the loud pops of the gun, it didn't sound like the bullets were getting deep, despite the host of blood

they unleashed. If anything, each bullet made the creature louder and angrier, until Triss's legs were being tossed into the air; only her claw grip sunk into its back where human and spider merged kept her from being tossed.

Rock and a hard place wasn't a good enough metaphor. Maybe between two monsters? Two nightmares? Jack managed a stupid, reality-defying smile for a split moment as he held down the trigger of his gun. Monsters and nightmares. Not even a year ago and he thought his sister was stupid for still being afraid to close her eyes when showering, afraid of ghosts or evil little girls standing outside the curtain to get her.

His bullets went everywhere, many missing and striking the walls as much as the creature, and he cursed as he walked backward from it. Practice went out the window the moment rubber hit the road. But each moment alive was a moment to aim better, and he grit his teeth as he tightened the ring onto the giant spider monster. Not easy to hit a big target when walking backwards along rubble and tracks and when the damn thing refuses to stop trying to kill everything around it.

It came at him, like a scorpion with its pincers. It wasn't going to pinch him though, it was going to slice him in half with one of those bone arms, and Jack threw himself to the side as the arm came down hard enough to sink half a foot into the tunnel floor. Fool him once, he wasn't getting cleaved like that again.

There were still sounds coming from behind him, and they were getting closer, more roars, more monster screams that sounded all too similar to the ones in front of him. More howls, and some whines you might hear if you kicked a dog, a really really big dog. He winced with each one, but he kept getting closer to them as he got up, only to throw himself back again as the monster brought its other hand down at him. And the other again, and again. Jack kept jumping back to avoid the claw coming down inches in front of him,

but one jump too many meant his heel landed on a bit of rock the wrong way.

The world pulled out from under him like a rug as he fell onto his back. Everything flipped, and he was staring at the ceiling, more pain cutting through his skull. Biting down on half-regrown teeth was bad enough, but hitting his head against the metal underneath him hard enough to shake his brain in its bed was icing on misery cake. He tried to get up, to reorient himself before the creature brought its hand down to cut him in half, but feedback rippled through his limbs like tingling waves that held them still. He'd hit his head hard.

The creature was over him, screaming down at him with both hands brought to the air. Blood poured out of its human half, dripping off its waist and down onto the spider hairs of its underbelly, and onto Jack as the creature overstepped. Soon Jack was underneath it, and the world went crazy. The creature turned around again, reacting to more gunfire, and all Jack could see was the hard shadows of the light against the spider's body.

But he was underneath it, and he'd seen enough movies to know what to do. He yanked out his knife, and jammed it upward.

Like trying to cut through leather. Only his Kindred strength let him push the blade past the spider's exoskeleton, and even then only a couple inches in, enough to unleash a flood of black liquid onto his hands and chest. Sickly warm, and it did not smell like blood.

The gunfire stopped. Damien cursed and threw his gun aside before taking his sword into both hands. No more bullets probably, and Jack had heard him reload at least twice. The little Ventrue could see the man approach him, and the colossus turned to meet him. The Mehket became a blur of speed, and Jack had to squint his

eyes to see the man move outward along the walls to try and catch the rampaging creature from the side.

No good. It turned to meet Damien's speed, and stabbed outward with one of its spider legs into Damien's oncoming body, its own speed a blur, like a samurai drawing his blade in attack. Momentum, combined with the spider's strike, forced the creature's limb through Damien's stomach. And out his back.

A second of silence hit them all as Damien dropped his sword, and looked down at the enormous limb. It wasn't a tiny sword or bullet hole piercing him, but a spider monster's leg, half a foot thick. And when the spider yanked the limb free, the dried insides of Kindred fell around Damien. Everyone stared at the massive hole in his stomach that shown clear through him, before the man fell over, and the bits and pieces of him that fell out of his insides faded to ash.

## Chapter 36

~~Jack~~

“No!” Fiona got up from the corner by the rubble. In all the chaos and commotion, Jack hadn’t noticed, but she’d been hiding. Perfectly understandable, he’d be hiding too if he hadn’t nearly died twice before; already becoming jaded, ha. But Fiona, normally smiling and bouncing, ran over to Damien, and stood beside him as she pointed her hands at the monster. “Triss, get out of the way!”

Jack twisted around underneath the spider, and got to his stomach, facing Fiona, as the madness started. The spider goddess appeared, and all eight of her spider legs were pointed at the creature. It was enough to make the monster give pause as Fiona ran at the creature, tiny little Scot woman, frizzy red hair bouncing as she sprinted up to its waist where the beast’s human stomach met the spider body, and punched it.

The spider goddess that shared the same space as the little redhead punched as well, with all eight legs. From so close, Jack could hear the sickening crunch of flesh and exoskeleton being pierced by a host of sharp limbs. And the shriek that followed was just as sickening. For a moment he felt bad, like they were picking on some sort of animal that didn’t know better, didn’t know it was a menace, didn’t know it was being hunted.

Fiona didn’t seem to feel the same way. Screaming out, she punched the spider again, and again it stumbled, body almost collapsing on Jack as its many legs pushed and dug at the ground around him. Blood poured, trickling down its body, and splashed over Fiona, soaking her jeans and jacket in black and red. And she punched again, as if the very idea that she was taking this thing head on wasn’t a concern.

She took a few steps back, and pointed both her hands at the enormous spider. The demon woman appeared where she was, and Jack could see its many great horns, including the ones that jutted out and backward from where her eyes should have been. He could see the hovering body, the spider dress, the odd limbs, and above all could see the eight blades she sank into the animal.

The creature shrieked as its endless blood began to pour over the concrete. Jack couldn't see it, not in the dark and the flash of light from the one flashlight, but he could hear it, and feel it as the huge waves of disgusting black liquid splashed over his back and hands. In the flailing and swinging of limbs, the creature vaulted itself toward Fiona, and Jack froze as the titan ran over him at the small girl only three feet before him.

The beast leaned down and swung its arm outward at her, the bone scythe nearly as large as her whole body. It clubbed her with the back side thank god, but the small woman was still sent through the air like a rag doll. In the flickering black, it looked like nothing more than a ball of moving colors, until Jack heard the crunch of flesh on rock.

Fiona landed. She didn't get up.

"Fuck you! Die!" Triss, somewhere above him with the spider still between them, started tearing and clawing. He couldn't see it but he could feel the vibrations and weight, feel the rampage of the creature as it started throwing its body around to dislodge the Nosferatu. And the more she slashed and bit and screamed, the more the giant spider monster towering over Jack thrashed around.

Another minute and he was going to be paste. He picked himself up to a foot and knee, and threw himself along the tunnel path as best he could. Kindred legs sent his tiny body flying, and he landed with a hard bounce as rock and metal greeted his suit and bones.



Rolling, rolling, he came to a stop maybe twenty feet from the spinning monster, the Azlu now between him and his friends.

Triss was on top of it, on top of its grotesque and massive human half, with her claws around its neck and her crocodile mouth biting into its skull. Black blood gushed over her teeth and down her clothes, along with bits of spider, and bits of human flesh from the hybrid. Too hard to see, too hard to see a damn fucking thing in the darkness with only the one flashlight, but Athalia still had the light up, and was trying to get up as well.

“Athalia, stay down! Stay still!” he said. If she moved it might attack her, and maybe, just maybe, this thing would focus on the things dashing about instead.

He ran around and looked for his pistol. Nope, gone, he dropped it somewhere, where where. Fuck. Still had the knife though, better than nothing.

Not better than nothing. Running was better than nothing. In the chaos Jack had a moment to peek over at the body on the tracks, Damien’s body. He wasn’t moving, but he wasn’t ash. The monster had put a hole through him, actually through him, clean through his fucking body. There’d been a moment where Jack could see withered things fall out of him; withered was normal, they were Kindred, but to see the things fall out of him, spill, and turn to ash, was not the same thing as knowing they were there.

If Jack was still alive, he’d be vomiting. But he didn’t need to be alive to feel shock, to feel the muscles and brain refuse to work together. That moment of hesitation that’d get you killed, that—

Nope, fuck that, fuck that and fuck this. This thing wasn’t Viktor or Lucas, this thing was just a thing. A mindless, really big fucking scary thing, but just a thing. Just a fucking thing. Wake up and move!

He turned around, and sprinted down the tunnel. “Triss, keep it busy! I’ll go get the wolves!”

“What the fuck do you think I’m doing!?” A gargled mess of sounds came out of her mid yell; a mouthful of spider parts and human flesh. But as Jack looked over his shoulder at the raging monster, he could see the thing wasn’t slowing down even as the vampire started to get deeper into its meat.

They couldn’t kill this thing. Maybe the Uratha could.

He sprinted around the bend of the tunnel, toward the sounds of howling, roars, and screams. And fire. Mason had molotovs and a flamethrower, and both would be nigh-instant death if they got him. But a fucking spider monster straight out of a monster flick was behind him, ripping and tearing and killing his friends. He needed their help.

“Avery! Clara! Fucking someone!” The only answer he got was more wolf howls, deep and loud enough to echo in the tunnel and shake his brain in its skull. But there was some light around the curve, some orange and red, some fire light. “Someone, there’s another one of these fucking spider things! Someone I—”

The walls looked like a Jackson Pollock, covered in splatters of blood of red and black, and mixed with hundreds of immense claw marks. The subway tracks were gone, just shards of metal ripped up and tossed everywhere. The wolves still had their lanterns lying around, but they weren’t the biggest source of the light. The biggest source was Mason.

The wolves were still transformed, still in their Goliath bodies, except for Mason. The man’s sack of molotovs was empty, and he held the flamethrower in his hand. A stream of fire left the oddly shaped gun, and while it wasn’t the grand explosion of fire Jack had come to expect after seeing them in a hundred movies, that didn’t

change that the rampaging creature they were dealing with was covered in fire.

Covered in fire and still not dead.

Even as the spider half — more like spider nine tenths — of the monster hybrid burned, the werewolves threw themselves at it, at its bone claw arms, at its spider legs, and one of the wolves threw themselves onto the flames of its back. Avery.

The pack leader sank her claws into its spider back, through the flames that flicked upward along her body, and deep through the exoskeleton. Where there hadn't been enough light to see anything before with the other spider, now Jack raised a hand to block out the flashing waves of amber that scarred his vision. Seeing spots with his eyes closed, and the death cries yanked them back open.

He was supposed to be doing something, supposed to do more than just stand there and gawk at the nine beasts unleashing hell underneath Dolareido, fire included. But, before the thoughts could break through the shock seared into his eyes, the creature started to move toward him. The giant creature currently covered in werewolves and fire was moving toward him.

He took a step back. It was all he could figure out, could muster, as the hellfire ran at him. But before the heat devoured him, Avery jumped onto its human half. Big as the creature's human, mutated half was, Avery was just as big in her werewolf body, and she sank her claws down and into the monster's shoulders and neck. Fire continued to spread over its body, over the Uratha, and many had to jump off to stop from catching fire themselves.

Not Avery. The fire enveloped her, over her, encompassed her as she bit down onto the creature's face. Her enormous, monstrous wolf mouth took the spider by the head, and sank its fangs deep. The cry of pain from the abomination mixed with the roaring flames, until it was enough for Jack to flinch. Flinch was good,

flinch was a reaction, and he needed more of those. Get back, get the fuck back from the fire you idiot before it catches you. This isn't like with Viktor, there's no explosion to push you away, just pure flame.

As he took a few more steps away from the chaos, the creature fell onto its stomach with a loud crash, the weight of its body vibrating the tunnels and concrete. It'd fallen forward like someone had tripped it, and a glance around it showed multiple werewolves biting and clawing at its legs, enough of them to yank the creature down onto its stomach while Avery continued to wrestle with its human half. The bone scythe arms couldn't reach her, and thrashed around with less and less ferocity as Avery ripped, tore, and clawed at its shoulders.

Something. Supposed to be doing something, not watching. Fucking say something!

"There's another one!" was all he could manage before the rumbling behind him came to join the rumbling before him.

Several of the wolves got up from their death grips on the creature's thrashing legs, and stared at him with a weird mix of confusion and aggression, as if he'd dropped a water balloon on them in surprise. But their surprise turned to shock as the second spider came around the corner with all the grace of a steam train gone off the rails. The creature's mass, unhindered by the paltry damage Jack and his friends had done, crashed into the wall on the outside of the tunnel turn, but the spider pushed its legs against the wall as equally as the floor and catapulted itself toward the group of new targets.

Was Damien still alive? Where was Beatrice? She wasn't on the creature anymore. Was Fiona alive? Were any of them going to live through this insanity? Stop thinking and move!

Jack threw himself onto his stomach. The slam of his weight against concrete and metal was nothing compared to what would have happened if the creature hit him. And the creature ran over him toward the wolves, ignoring him, bleeding and hairy spider body flying over him. All Jack could do was stare on toward the wolves as the new creature bowled them over.

It didn't care about its companion, or the fire. It cared about killing, far as Jack could tell, and as the monster crashed into the body of its fellow monster, the werewolves did their best to compensate. But Jack could see it in their eyes, their movements, even Avery's as she jumped off the defeated and almost-still creature. None of them had expected this.

How Avery was not on fire, Jack couldn't tell, but the woman's claws had a strange glow to them, almost amber like the fire. And the glow vanished as the new monster ran her down, titan body colliding with hers and sending her flying backward until Jack heard her meat and bone crack and crunch against the tunnel floor.

The pack stood there for a second, and many of them cast quick glances at each other. A second too long, and the spider charged over them, feet and mass pushing aside the wriggling, burning body of the other. The new spider slashed out with its scythe arms while its giant legs shoved the flaming body of its companion aside, wreaking destruction like breathing. And sure enough, one of the werewolves didn't dodge.

The sound of blade cutting down through bone, muscle, organs and skin, all in the blink of an eye, was familiar. Jack had heard it before, when Viktor had cut him from forehead to crotch, sank a blade an inch through his body. Only reason he survived was because he was Kindred. But no Kindred could survive getting cut in half, not vertically. The wolf woman fell apart, two sides collapsing inward with the momentum and mass of the creature's blade arm, and splattering guts over the concrete.

The body parts began to transform back into a human, clothes and skin and organs and all.

The pack freaked. Howls turned into weird, half-roar half-scream mixtures. Their eyes opened wide and bloodied chops drooled havoc as they threw themselves at the new enemy.

Jack looked on. Hard to tell what was going on, with two spider monsters fighting for space, one nearly dead and on fire, but at least the far more lively one had gone past Jack and now stood between the wolves. Stood, spun, slashed, screamed, the creature was insane, ripping the walls apart as much as its new prey.

But the werewolves didn't care, they'd gone berserk. Blood filled the air, burnt flesh, ash, and it whipped everyone into a frenzy of bloodlust. Not the sort of bloodlust a Kindred had; Jack knew what that felt like. This was different, this was the bloodlust people got when every fiber of their being wanted to kill, was going to kill, when the primal instinct takes over and the whole of your existence focuses into a single thought and action. The slaughter.

Mason joined them, dropping the — now probably empty — flamethrower, and erupting into his transformation with all haste. Seven titans of claw threw themselves at the monster, two companions missing, Avery a broken mess in the darkness, and now a friend dead. It was not a good night for the Uratha, and it was only getting worse.

One of the wolves started to climb the creature's side, but the Azlu spun around and caught the wolf alongside the body with a claw. It cut deep, maybe six inches through flesh and bone, and sent the werewolf spinning through the air, adding to the red that decorated the lacerated walls. Another wolf jumped it, and again the creature spun. How could something so massive move so quickly? It got this wolf through the guts with its scythe arm, skewering them out through the back before tossing them aside.

The tunnel started to shake. Vibrations ripped through the walls and ceiling, cracked them like kitchen plates, sent dirt and rubble down on the madness around Jack. Down onto the pack and their target.

Like a whip crack for the brain. Get back, go find the others, see if Damien survived, if Fiona survived, see where Triss was.

He almost turned around, but a single step back summoned bad luck like a reaper to the door. The creature's frantic movement came his way again, spinning and turning, eight legs and two blade arms stabbing and crashing against the walls and ceiling. Each wolf that managed to get onto its back earned more death cries from it, and it responded with claws flinging wild, cutting deep into the concrete and metal. And it was all coming Jack's way.

The ceiling began to collapse. Rocks fell onto them, all of them. Gigantic slabs cracked open against the floor around Jack's feet, and the tiny Ventrue threw himself to the side as one bigger than him nearly crushed him. He was becoming intimately familiar with concrete, and sighed as again the hard surface greeted him with all the softness of ... concrete.

The creature turned to him. With all the wolves and chaos going on, how it noticed him and him specifically, Jack couldn't fathom, but in the tunnel barely wide and tall enough to fit the monster, it turned to look at little him sitting against the wall, and it screamed. But the ceiling was falling in, caving in, and the wall Jack had his back to started to collapse backward. The spider's arms raised again, and for a moment Jack thought it was going to slice him in half like that woman he'd seen before. But it tried to stop the ceiling instead, arms catching an immense chunk of rock the size of a car.

And it succeeded. Easily. But it was the chunk after that, and after that that beat the monster down, ripped into both its bodies, and made the creature fall forward toward Jack.

The world went black as it fell onto him. Something behind him gave way, but in the ear-splitting destruction and carnage, he couldn't hear it. He could feel something though, feel a wall crumble, feel the brick-shape of it fall backward, and him with it. And then the excruciating pain of having his back pressed to slabs of the hard material.

But it was enough to get moving, even as the spider collapsed and pressed its abdomen down against him, where the human and spider mutant merged. Heavy, oh god so fucking heavy. He poured his vitae into his limbs, and pushed, pushed until he thought his wrists would snap and his elbows would pop. But with some wiggling and shifting, he pushed against the monster's body hard enough to get himself out from underneath its stomach.

And into darkness. The wall collapsed; hell, everything was collapsing. And the flickering light from the fire was buried in rubble in moments. Only the lanterns the wolves had brought with them still lit the area, but all Jack had of that was minor reflections against stone. He was in a new area.

He kept backing up, a glance over his shoulder proving his fear. There was nothing, just black, just empty black. The ground beneath him wasn't level, no smooth surfaces, and as far as he could tell the collapsing tunnel was in front of him only, not in the new room he'd been pushed into. So, something carved into the earth then, dug out. Like a den.

Oh good fucking god he was in something's den.

He squeezed his left hand. Knife, the knife was there. Somehow he'd managed to pick it back up the half a dozen times he'd fallen. He put it into his right hand, and continued to back away from the large opening the spider creature was tearing through.

The wolves were relentless. They bit and chewed and clawed at the creature, even as rocks fell on them, even as the tunnel



continued to crumble around them. Jack stared on as slabs of concrete and steel rods rained on them, crushed some of them, their limbs, their bodies. They didn't stop. They sank their fangs into the spider, and one of the large wolves managed to rip a leg twice as long as the werewolf was tall from the spider's body. The monster's shrieks echoed in the chamber Jack had backed into, that the monster was crawling into, that the werewolves were being dragged into.

Eventually Jack's back found rock and dirt. So much softer than concrete. He touched it with his open hand, and gulped as he felt something too soft. Spider silk. No need to look, not that he'd be able to see it in the darkness. But after having touched, tripped on, gotten stuck in, and unfortunately tasted spiderweb in this unfortunate and, as predicted, suicidal mission into the tunnels, he was starting to recognize it on contact.

And as a tiny ray of light managed to break through the crumbling walls, he noticed some white shapes, hanging from the ceiling. Cocoon shapes. Human bodies, wrapped in webbing.

The wolves hadn't predicted this had they? They seemed just as surprised and confused as he was. They'd expected a spider monster, but they hadn't expected two. Though they'd long given up caring about the confusion, far as Jack could tell, as the wolves threw themselves onto the monster and tore into it.

But the monster wasn't getting slower. Maybe that's why they needed fire? Jack had stabbed this thing, him and Damien had sunk easily a hundred bullets into it, and now it had half a dozen titans of carnage ripping into it, and it still wasn't going down. Worse, it was still heading toward him, slashing and cutting into the werewolves while dragging its enormous body through the rubble and rock toward the little Ventrue.

So he turned and kept moving. Occasional flashes of light from above exposed the dug tunnel ahead, bits of moonlight or streetlight maybe showing through some old drain pipes or cracks in old, abandoned tunnels that were still lit. Just enough light for him to see, if only for the split moment it occasionally streaked his surroundings. Nothing but rock, with the occasional bit of root or vine, the occasional worm, occasional insect.

A flicker of light let him see movement below him, and he stepped on it with a quick snap. A spider. For a moment, he expected to hear the animal shriek louder than it already was. Either it didn't care about a random spider, or its shriek volume was already maxed out.

More of the webbing greeted him, but in the dark he couldn't see shit, just shadows and dark colors. Enough to at least dodge a few of the webs, but others found his feet, his legs, and one cut across his chest, big webs, enough to give his body pause before his weight pushed through. The texture was all wrong, like nothing a spider would make, and touching it made him shiver worse than a spider crawling down his back. It was all wrong. What the fuck was this thing?

Shrieking yanked his head back, and he choked on a scream as the creature jammed its body into the dug tunnel. It fit, just barely, and from how it moved, it looked like it was familiar with the den tunnel, familiar with the pressing walls and the height of the ceiling. Guess it was the one that dug it then.

But the spider didn't get far. It cried out and turned its human half around as much as it could to slash out at the wolves biting and clawing at its body. One of them climbed over its spider back onto the human half, and did her best to grab its shoulders, pin it, shred and tear open its neck. She succeeded, and human flesh came off in chunks, only to heal. Not heal in seconds, but fast enough Jack

could see the wounds close between each flash of light that managed to reach them.

“Go! Run!”

It was Clara. She barked at him, the words almost lost in the inhuman shape of her mouth.

“Where the fuck do I go!? I can’t see anything!”

“Try—” Her voice came to a sudden halt as the monster’s claw managed to reach up and over her, and come down, a giant trying to throw a pest off its back. It succeeded, and the titan wolf landed in front of Jack on her back, head closer to the creature than him.

She got up and turned to face it, backing up and snarling, barking, roaring at the spider as it came closer despite the host of wolves slashing and clawing at its body. But, at least now Jack had her between him and the animal coming to kill them all.

“Get back.” Her arm came out, and she reached down with her hand — fucking god a giant hand of claws and blood — to push back against his chest. “You found. Nest.”

“Wonderful! Fucking wonderful! I thought the nest was the tunnel we just came from!” He did as she asked, and kept backing up. The spider lunged at them, but the tunnel couldn’t fit the motion. Big enough for the creature to crawl through, but it was smaller than the subway tunnel, small enough to keep the creature from leaping.

Clara ducked the sideways slash, and stepped beside the following vertical slash. Big bad wolf was doing a dance, but Jack could only see freeze frames of it as they backed away through the tiny lights that managed to reach them.

The light! Fuck, the light coming from above meant there had to be some way to get to it, break through the layer, get up and out of the spider's lair. It had to mean that. Fucking had to. He was due some good luck right about now.

“Climb!” He reached out for the wall beside him, and fell.

A strange sensation when you reach for something expecting to go up, but you go down. Vertigo. Whole world flips upside down and you feel every instinct for what's up or down just vanish. Dizzy to the bone. And if you're falling for longer than you think you should, it's like the world has just imploded in your brain.

And it exploded when his back and skull collided with the ground, after cutting through a couple inches of water.

He sat up, panic gripping him, wrenching his heart up through his throat as he prepared to sink. But the water was genuinely only a couple inches deep, and he forced himself to stand as he looked around.

“ ... mother fucking hell.”

A waterway. A really, really, really big, old waterway. A vertical one that cut nearly a hundred feet up, like some sort of enormous drainage sewer, something that could handle flood levels of water if Dolareido ever got hit with that much rain. And as he stood, he turned around to look at their new area; like a fucking arena, round walls surrounding them, and a sky-high ceiling.

There were some tunnels that connected to the top of the vertical drain, way out of reach, with grating blocking them off no doubt. Course Clara would be able to open them, if they could climb up to reach them. The concrete bricks around them were smooth-ish, and not something he could climb, but werewolf claws could climb them probably, if she could sink her claws into the concrete.

His new partner in this chaos fell into the water with him, but at least she managed to turn and land on her feet. Like a cat. If he was Triss, he'd make the joke.

Triss. Fuck, Triss, was she alive?

“Did you see if any of my friends were alive?” he said.

Clara, still in her werewolf form, walked over to him, water and blood dripping down from her fur. He could see again thank god, now that the very old, very large manhole above cast some light down the massive tunnel hole to them. In the dark for as long as he'd been, a little light went a long way. And from so close, he did a double take on Clara's body. Much as she was a tall, muscular werewolf, she had the curves of a woman too. Weird thought to have, but there it was.

“No.” The she-Goliath stared up at the hole they'd fallen down from. The hole was ten feet up, something that'd been dug out of the wall, based on how weirdly the concrete was broken, and claw marks where the wall was opened up. “You. Escape?”

He pointed at the drainage holes around the base of the main drainage tunnel, near their feet. All of them were quite short. The grating covering them would be no problem for a werewolf to remove, but only a foot wide meant the small exits were just there to taunt them.

“Maybe the drains above us? They're much bigger, we can—”

Screams cut through their reprieve. The spider creature reached the tunnel exit, or entrance, and vaulted toward them. Or at least it tried to. Three of the wolf titans were at its side, and with claws wrapped around the beast's arms, they braced their feet against the walls to keep it from escaping the tunnel. Easier prey, Jack imagined, when the giant creature couldn't turn around very well.

Jack stared up at the menace trying to get them. Him. It was trying to get him. The fuck did he do? He did go into its nest, and he was the first one to do that, maybe that was why? The crazed monster's human eyes were staring death into him, and its mismatched arrangement of spiders eyes over its temples and forehead looked more like nebulae of obsidian death than eyes.

“Let's go.” Clara reached out, picked him up, and threw him onto her back like throwing on a book bag, with about as much grace as well. But the impact of his small body against her fur was surprisingly nice, compared to all the concrete he'd been hitting lately. Soft.

“Wait, your friends. Shouldn't you help them? I can take care of myself.”

“Idiot. Shut up,” she barked. The words were harsh, guttural, a struggle for her chops to say. But good enough to get the point across. The giant wolf ran up to the wall of the vertical tunnel furthest from the spider, and slammed both hands into the concrete. Inertia hit Jack hard enough to flatten him against Clara's back, and bounce, before the wolf started to climb. She got up a foot, and slammed her claws into the concrete hard enough to sink them into it an inch.

It was like a scene from a cartoon. She made a grunting sound for each foot she climbed, and they grew louder as she her feet lifted off the floor, and she had to carry all her weight and his weight on one hand at a time between each new hold she made. He'd half expected her to just jump, or maybe throw him up there first. But neither would have been a sure thing. Climbing up there was a sure thing.

The spider landed onto the sewer drain floor, its thrashing weight sending dirty water splashing along the walls and high up to where Clara was scaling the concrete. Werewolves jumped in after it, three of them. Not seven or six, just three. And those three were covered

in blood, leaking it, even as their wounds were closing with some insane healing only an elder Kindred could match. Staring down at them, with his hands hooked around the werewolf's shoulders, Jack could only wince as the three remaining wolves shrank as Clara took him higher and higher.

Kindred generally lost their fear of heights after a while. You'd need to fall a couple floors to hurt an ankle, and a couple more on top of that to even risk injury. But the higher he and Clara went up, the more he found himself terrified of falling as the spider started crawling after them.

Again, it didn't get far. As its spider legs started to dig into the concrete, and its scythe arms cut into it like soft dirt, the three wolves still chasing it sank their teeth into its spider limbs. Big as the creature was, it wasn't strong enough to climb after him with three werewolves biting and clawing at its legs.

But the three wolves lasted only moments. The spider swung its legs outward, hard, and now with more than enough room in the huge drain tunnel, it put its weight into the throws. Each wolf landed against concrete with a thud hard enough Jack could hear the bones break. And each wolf slumped down onto the water like broken toys. Still in werewolf form though, and guessing from what happened to the one that'd been split in half, if they died they turned back into a human.

Memory whip cracked his brain. One of them had died earlier, split in half, like a fucking tomato under a knife. Fuck, this was bad. So bad, bad for so many more reasons than just him coming down into the tunnels.

Clara reached the edge of the alcove above them, and pulled them both up with a quick hop before setting him down. Sure enough there were metal grates blocking their path, but without so much as a skipped beat, Clara ripped them out of the tunnel walls and tossed

the metal bars aside. Too hard maybe, as the bars broke apart and shattered over the small tunnel floor.

“Go!”

He started toward the tunnel. Typical sewer tunnel, which meant the city was above, which meant manholes and some ladders up ahead.

“What about you?”

“Must stay. Kill. Azlu must die.”

“It’s going to kill all of you!”

The titan stood over him, glared down at him with animal eyes, and set her blood-soaked hands on his shoulders. So fucking huge, she seemed more like a standing grizzly bear from so close.

“Our hunt. Go.”

“What about my friends? They might be dead! I have to go back and get them.” Because stupidity levels were sky high and any semblance of intelligent decision making was thrown out the window.

“Maybe. But if Azlu lives...” She sighed and shook her head before leaning down toward him. The breath of a werewolf; smelled like spider and blood. “Stay out of way.”

Another roar pulled both their attention back to the tunnel, and they looked down as another werewolf jumped from the hole the spider monster had carved. Avery. Her claws were glowing amber again, her eyes too, and she had a subtle flicker of red on the tip of her fur. And she threw herself up toward the spider already halfway up the wall.



Apparently being tossed hard and far enough to break every bone in the body wasn't enough to bring her down. She roared at the prey before landing on it, and her glowing claws sank through the shell of the creature's spider body like someone cutting metal with a blow torch. He almost expected to see flames as Avery's claws dug in, and started to drag down through the creature's body from her own weight, before at last stopping after a few feet of evisceration. The monster screamed the whole way, but did not stop crawling upward, toward little Jack and his new bodyguard.

“Um ... her claws look like they're on fire.”

Clara snorted, put her hand against his chest, and started pushing him down the tunnel again. “Go!”

“I can't just go! This thing is in the fucking tunnels, what the fuck happens if it escapes?”

Clara snarled and shook her head. “No time! Go! Tell Prince!”

The Prince could help, right? She'd march a hundred humans down here under her spell with torches, and they'd purge the whole damn place. Yeah, good plan, go get the Prince. And hope to god in the mean time his friends didn't die? It'd take the Prince a day at least to get that set up, and two of his three friends would be sleeping helpless during the day. He doubted the Azlu gave a shit about night cycles.

Clara shook her head and shoved him again. “Stop thinking. Can't save friends. Go!”

“And what about you? There's two of you left!”

She leaned in, put her werewolf face two inches from his, and licked him. Fucking. Licked him.

For an infinitesimally small amount of time, he wanted to laugh. A dog was licking him. Humor shattered as the snarling and roaring and screaming howls filled the background while the giant werewolf in front of him stood upright again, and pat him on the shoulder.

“Get Prince. Kill Azlu.”

And then she turned around, and jumped down. Her screams mixed with Avery’s a second later, but Jack was some ten feet down the exit, away from the tunnel’s opening where it connected with the drainage sewer the monster was in. Couldn’t see, could only imagine Clara getting ripped to shreds.

Leave. Do what Clara said. Everyone had gone haywire when a second monster showed up. Not one of the wolves looked even slightly prepared for dealing with a second one of these monsters. And it’d cost one of them their lives. Their hunt was ruined, and Jack’s attempt to find Natasha ruined along with them. Fiona being proved innocent was of little comfort at this point.

More screams yanked his eyes away from his exit, and back toward the main drainage shaft. Painful screams, from wolves, more than just two as well. Maybe some of the others had joined in from the subway? Or the Uratha the spider had thrown into the walls of the sewer were back on their feet? Judging from the sounds, they weren’t helping very much.

He crawled over to the tunnel edge that looked over the sewer. Literally crawled, on hands and knees, dirty water joining the mess of dirt and dust on his clothes. The suit was ruined anyway. He poked his head out over the edge, and bit down on his teeth. Fuck, his teeth! Pain racked his brain, and he squeezed his eyes shut until he forced it down. The teeth would regrow far better once he slept come the morning, if he lived until morning.

Four werewolves circled the spider. The three it had thrown into the walls were still down, but breathing, moving, struggling to get

up. One of them managed, but his leg gave out from under him, shin bending almost ninety degrees in a spot very much not a joint. He tried again, and with an audible crunch, the leg snapped into place.

These fucking werewolves were practically immortal, healing in seconds and refusing to get beaten down. Barring getting split in half, how the fuck did you kill one of these things? Fucking silver?

Jack reached for his knife, and considered—where the fuck was his knife? He fumbled around for it, pulled back and crawled around on his knees through the dark, hands swiping left and right in the inch-deep water. Knife knife where the fuck was the knife.

Gritting his teeth—fuck his teeth! Not gritting his teeth, but grimacing hard enough to hurt his cheeks, he poked his head out over the edge of his escape route into the death pit below. Something was glimmering, shiny in the water, catching the rays of light that came in from above. His god damn fucking knife.

Avery waited until the spider turned to face one of her pack mates, and then she threw herself at the bleeding creature. But it was ready for her this time and her burning claws, and spun around to face her, back of its claw arm hitting her head. Or at least it looked like that, but the spider found itself unable to turn as easily as a werewolf dangled from his arm. The woman had taken the ridiculous blow in the mouth, the same blow that had sent her flying earlier, and bit down.

And Jack thought his mouth hurt. Hard to see from such a height, eighty feet up at least, but he was sure bits of her teeth shattered and went flying. But she bit down and didn't let go, even as the monster threw his arm around left and right hard enough to swing her like a cat latched onto a sleeve. She managed to get her hands around the weird bone weapon of the creature, but that was it, all she could manage as it rampaged around the base of the sewer.

The other wolves jumped in, going for its seven remaining spider legs. Maybe too shocked by the fact one of the wolves had latched onto its arm, the monster could only stomp around, and did little to stop the other wolves from latching onto its many limbs. They pulled at them with claw and tooth, and with enough legs yanked out from under it, the creature fell onto its belly.

The others continued to pull and bite, doing their best to try and rip more of its legs off; no good, whatever this monster was made of, it refused to break. But it was down, unable to stand, unable to spin and attack nearly as easily. Queue for Clara to jump the spider's side, and start digging into its hairy exoskeleton once again.

Avery couldn't let go of the arm though. Her claws and eyes glowed with that strange red that seemed to make her claws cut with fire, but she couldn't use them. Every attempt to slash and swipe at the monster's human half was futile as the spider creature kept her at arm's length. It was up to Clara to kill it, and she wasn't having the same effect Jack had seen Avery cause when she'd mounted the last one.

At least the creature had forgotten about Jack. Hard to enjoy as he watched the monster start to rip itself free of the werewolves, spider limbs tossing aside the wolves that clung to it, one beast at a time. Clara was on its back, trying to reach its human half, trying to get to its head to start clawing, but the creature bucked so much she had to latch onto its spider body with all four sets of claws. And the spider, perhaps getting smarter as the fight went on, slammed its captured bone arm against the sewer floor.

Water and blood splashed as Avery's body collided with the floor. When the water settled, she was still holding on, and her claws started to tear at the monster's bone arm. No good, even her glowing claws couldn't do much to whatever this creature's weapons were made of. And again, it slammed its arm down so Avery's body

swung through the air before crashing into the concrete beneath her. And again, and again, and again.

The glow in her eyes vanished, and the glow of her claws soon after. When the spider lifted its arm again, the werewolf leader was no longer attached to it, and the arachnid screeched its triumph as it started to swing its human half around with full speed, full freedom.

First it went for the Uratha pulling on its legs. They were faster to dodge this time, now that one of their friends had died earlier to them. But faster wasn't fast enough to completely avoid this thing's ridiculous speed, and the first wolf took the slash down the side, almost halfway through the torso. The wolf fell away, half curled up in a ball in the sewer water, half dragging itself to a spot away from the rampage. Another wolf tried to replace Avery as anchor, and leaped for the bone scythe, but the spider spun its torso to catch the wolf in the back with the flat side of its other arm. The crack was audible, nauseating, and the wolf fell over like a bag of sand. And the other wolf still on its spider leg did her best to keep the creature from turning around completely. But the monster was too big, too heavy, too strong, and once back to standing on its seven other legs, had no trouble flicking her away and sending her into the concrete once again, again hard enough Jack could hear things break and see the concrete crack.

Only Clara was left, and she roared her frustration as she lunged for the human half of the body. She managed it this time, and got her claws into its back before trying to get her teeth into its skull. She really, really wanted to get its head.

But the monster was bucking around again and throwing itself against the walls. The werewolves may have had a hard time colliding with solid concrete at such velocities over and over and over, but it barely phased the spider. It crashed into the wall again, and then galloped into the wall on the other side with more speed,

angling its human half so both it and the werewolf slammed into concrete, hard enough to crack, and dent it.

One final crush was too much for Clara, and the werewolf fell to the ground, on her back and butt against the cracked wall around her. She stared up at the spider, even as it glared down at her in return with its myriad of spider eyes, many of them cut open or destroyed, and regenerating in front of her.

The spider reached forward with two of its spider legs to pin the woman against the wall, limbs skewering through her shoulders and into the concrete behind her. She howled, a defeated sound, a whining dog sound that made Jack's heart fucking break, even if it was deeper and halfway to a roar. What the fuck was the spider doing though? It brought in the tail of its spider body's abdomen, and set it against the pinned wolf's stomach.

Oh god it was going to cocoon her and eat her.

Ok ok ok, what to do what to do. Fuck what to do. With Viktor and Tony, he'd just reacted, dragged his bleeding ass across the floor until he found something he could do to stop them. With Lucas, he'd just reacted, threw himself in front of Damien before the man could kill the love of his life. Blind luck had saved him with Viktor and Tony; they hadn't expected an explosion, hadn't expected fire. Blind luck had saved him with Lucas; Damien was a broken man before Jack laid eyes on him, and found the man easy to dominate. Try to avoid the blind luck approach this time.

He got up, and looked around. No knife, but Clara had ripped the bars that barred the tunnel path behind him. He ran over to them; yeap, totally broken apart. And one of the broken off parts was a good three feet long, a thin metal bar maybe an inch wide, with the ends jagged and sharp.

Best he was going to get. He picked up the bar and walked back to the edge of the tunnel. Clara was barking at the spider, but for all

her struggling and wriggling, the huge creature was layering her in enough webbing to blanket her legs completely, and wrapped too. Just like Fiona had done to Athalia's leg, but in much thicker layers. And her howls turned into screams as the creature plucked its legs from the wall, but still skewered through her shoulders, and started to rotate her. Like a scene from the nature channel.

Last chance Jack. Do what she said, get out and tell the others.

Fuck that, the other Kindred would figure out what happened when a bunch of their members were gone, and so were the werewolves. They'd come to the tunnels, find all this crap, and take care of it. He didn't need to go back and tell them about it, Clara was just trying to save his life.

And if he left, Triss and Damien and Fiona and even that bitch Athalia were as good as dead. And so was Clara. And he really wanted to save Clara.

He touched his cheek where she'd licked him, and looked down at the drop. Sixty feet, seventy, eighty feet? Fuck it could have been a hundred feet for all he knew. He looked at the bar in his hand, squeezed it a few times, got a good grip on it. Him against this thing? This thing that'd been shot a hundred times, cut open, stabbed, bitten, clawed into, ripped and shredded and refused to go down. Even as it regenerated before his eyes, its regeneration wasn't enough to cover all the wounds, and the spider bled black and red everywhere it moved; still didn't go down though.

Maybe an ancilla could fight this thing in its wounded state. Maybe. Julias would probably get his ass handed to him; Ventrue were talkers, rarely doers. And here he was, with a piece of metal in his hand, about to do something really, really fucking stupid.

What happened to him? What happened to that kid that just wanted to go through life playing it safe? He could still remember the conversation he had with Julias, that night the man proposed to

him the deal of a lifetime. What was he willing to do to destroy his enemies? At the time, the worst he could imagine doing to someone was ruining their life financially, leaving them broke and without an asset to their name. To his enemies? Maybe kill someone in self defense. Apparently he was willing to do a lot more, if it was for a friend.

Fuck, Antoinette was going to kill him if this monster didn't do it first.

He squeezed the metal bar a few more times, and looked down. The spider wasn't moving much, human half holding still as the spider half was raised up slightly, legs twisting and turning Clara over and over as he cocooned her. Now or never, now or fucking never.

He jumped.

On the way down, he remembered a conversation with Fiona. She'd been nervous about seeing the Primogen, and it had her in smiles. Said it was how she dealt with it, with anxiety and fear, like with skydiving.

Jack was most definitely not smiling on the way down. It was an interesting sensation, free falling. He'd expected his gut to shoot up into his throat even though he knew that wasn't how gravity worked. Instead, just weightlessness, and some air resistance against his wet suit as he plummeted down toward the spider. He'd been smart enough to manage his jump so he'd come down feet first at least, and he pointed the bar down at the spider as he plummeted, held between his feet like a pogo stick.

A whole two seconds. A fucking eternity. Don't move don't move don't move don't move don't move.

Every muscle in Jack's body tensed as the bar landed on the creature's head. He squeezed the bar with everything he had, every



fiber, every ounce of blood he had into his hands, every bit of vitae he could pour into his grip, all into squeezing a bar, squeezing until his fingers felt like they'd break.

There was a moment of sickening crunch, and then there was chaos.

Jack's grip remained, even as every bit of his weight coming down at a pretty insane speed drove the metal down through his target, forcing his feet apart. Even as his hands ripped at the palm, dragging the dried insides of his vampire skin along the metal, he kept his grip tight. Even as the metal kept going down until his hands met the head of the creature, scalp pushing against his grip.

The shrieks were loud, only two feet away from his ears, as he held on for dear life while the spider freaked out. It bucked, screamed, twisted and stomped. It threw itself against the walls, human half swinging around in the air, and Jack holding on to the metal bar he'd stuck a couple feet down through its skull, neck, and into its chest. How it was still alive Jack had no idea. How he had managed to even hit the target, Jack had no idea. But there he was, holding onto a metal bar sticking out of the spider monster's skull, blood flowing and splashing everywhere, while it crashed itself against the walls.

And Jack held on. Fucking god he held on, even as the creature drove itself into a wall onto its side, and Jack felt concrete embrace him yet again. Something broke in his shoulder. Didn't matter, he held on. More screams, higher pitched, panicked, and another toss of its insane weight against the other side of the drain pipe. And Jack, swinging around like a tether ball, hands still squeezing the metal bar, crashed into the wall right along with him, breaking what Jack was sure was every rib in his torso. Didn't matter, he held on. The wall cracked, splits in the concrete rising a couple dozen feet; anymore of this lunacy and the creature was going to collapse the Dolareido streets above onto them.

But, after a couple more thrashes, it collapsed. The seven enormous spider legs gave out so the bloody mess of its hairy, fat, monstrous abdomen fell to the wet floor beneath it. The human half slumped forward, arms dangling, and Jack's weight pressed against the back of it. He still held on, squeezing, even as the agony shot through his broken shoulder for it. Didn't matter, still held on.

And then the platform Jack stood upon, the spider's exoskeleton and abdomen, gave way.

"Fuck!" He fell through it, the cloud of gray and black, the blackness that surrounded him for a brief moment before his body fell forward onto the leaning human half of the spider. He still held on, even as the angle forced him onto his side, holding the metal, and staring at a bag of skin. "Fuck me!" The pain of broken bones vanished as he stared at the corpse, the human corpse, red blood all over it, and its spider features gone.

And as he looked to the gray cloud, he froze. Not a cloud, most definitely not a fucking cloud. It moved, scattered, spread out over the shallow water, and poured out everywhere. Spiders, large spiders, tarantula-sized spiders and hundreds of them, crawling and swarming and running to the small drainage pipes connected to the main one Jack sat in.

"Kill ... Azlu..." Clara said.

Ok, sure, a couple hundred spiders, he'd get right on that. He groaned through his pain as he forced himself back up, and did his best to not stare at the mangled remains of a human's body. Ignore that he'd just skewered said human through the skull a couple feet into its torso; at the time it'd been a mutated monster and a couple feet wasn't much. But now that he looked down at where the bar stabbed through into the fleshy, ruined remains, he realized just how much he'd impaled his target with metal.

Ignore it, ignore it. Get up, squash some spiders. Pushing off his good hand and onto his feet, he stomped around after the spiders, and squished them under his foot, each stomp threatening to break his already broken ribs. Crunch and splash as his boots crushed arachnid, and they went splat with a stomach-turning sensation, the texture of an exoskeleton giving way to pressure. Like crushing hard grapes, so the guts came out from the impact. Very gross.

But after killing maybe twenty in a panic, the majority by far escaped through the small drain pipes that connected to the base of the main drainage shaft.

“Well fuck,” he said.

The other werewolves groaned, and Jack jumped around with a startle. They were awake, and looking at him, something between exhaustion and frustration in their animal eyes.

“You ... killed ... Azlu’s ... body,” Avery said. Even the pack alpha, beaten to a pulp and lying down on her side in the water, managed to force herself to sit up a little, palms to the water, enormous muscles struggling to lift her weight.

“That uh ... that was the plan, right? Kill it? I didn’t think it’d turn into a bunch of smaller spiders though...” He managed an awkward shrug, sucked in his breath between his teeth, and walked over to Clara. Holy fuck the holes in her shoulders were already closed; probably not fully healed, but not gushing blood anymore. Jack took the webbing and yanked on it with his good hand, but not only did it feel like trying to rip apart hard leather with the strength of a normal human, it also stuck to his hand. He had to put his leg to the wall to push himself away, abandoning Clara. Fuck his god damn fucking ribs. He screamed, and the werewolves laughed.

He walked around to the others, frowned at each of them for laughing at his pain — sorry he wasn’t a masochist like these wolves apparently were — and checked their injuries. Bones snapping into

place, wounds closing before his eyes, many joined by sickening crunches of what must have been painful super healing. His broken arm and ribs would take hours to set, and a good day's sleep to heal right, young as he was. He'd wake up from his daily slumber fully restored, but still, it'd be nice to not be walking around in agony, with every step sending scorching misery through his ribs, his arm, his skull.

With time, the wolves got to their feet, and one of them walked over to Clara to rip her free. Once done, they all reverted back to their human form, clothes reforming, fur disappearing, sizes shrinking, and shrinking, and shrinking some more until Avery was once again her tiny self and Jack could feel a little better about himself staring down at her.

“The goal was to kill the Azlu, not its body,” Avery said. “It escaped in one of those spiders.”

Well. Fuck.

“Considering the circumstance,” she continued, “killing the body was the best any of us could have hoped for.”

Well. Not so fuck then?

“Kid, I told you to fucking leave.” Clara walked over to him, human again, and glared down at him with furrowed brows. But, Jack could see a smile break through the expression. She was a very pretty woman Clara, and he really did like the box braid hair and tan-colored skin.

He shrugged his working shoulder, and focused his blood into his bad one. Heal faster damn it. “Saw an opportunity. Had to take it.”

“Azlu could have stepped to the side one fucking foot and we'd all be dead, you included.”

“Seemed pretty focused on wrapping you up for lunch,” he said, smirking up at the woman.

“You should have run—”

“Someone would have come anyway, whether I ran for help or not! I needed to—”

“You could have gotten yourself—”

“I wanted to save my friends! Hell I wanted to save you too.”

Her dark eyes faltered, and she looked down as she grit her teeth. But before she could say anything, Avery walked over to them and pat Jack on the back.

“Things did not go as planned, Jack. As you no doubt guessed, we didn’t expect two fully evolved Azlu. These creatures don’t work together like this, or hide their tracks nearly so well; they’re mindless animals, instinct driven. All evidence suggested one Azlu, but it looks like another one was working with it, and probably feeding from a different section in the city. That ... that is not something hosts do.”

Jack sighed, but nodded. “Animals do have this nasty habit of evolving instincts complicated enough to suggest intelligence.”

“To imagine Azlu changing with time is a scary thought,” another wolf said, a man now in human form.

“So,” Jack said as he gestured to the small drain pipes at the base of the wall surrounding them, “it uh ... broke into a bunch of little spiders? And fled?”

Avery nodded again, and walked over to the tunnel-hole dug into the wall. She had to climb and jump a little to reach it, but she got up there and turned around to motion for them to join her. “It’s why

we brought fire to kill the other one. It can't survive and spread if it's covered in fire."

"So I shouldn't have killed it, er, its body. The Azlu thing escaped in one of those spiders."

Avery shook her head. "It was either that or the pack dies. And Stephanie, she ... she..." The leader winced, closed her eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath. "Come on, let's go see if anyone else survived."

So it was Stephanie that died then. Fuck. Jack nodded, and walked over to the wall.

"Uh ... little help?"

Clara and the other wolves laughed, and helped him scale the wall, one acting like a step while the others pushed his feet and butt upward until Avery could grab his good hand.

"Much as I'm pissed at you for disobeying my order," Avery said as she turned around and started to walk the dark, dug tunnel, "I'm happy you did. If we'd had to fight both Azlu at the same time, we wouldn't have survived."

Well, big bad alpha woman wasn't too proud to admit fault or weakness. Kind of surprised him, he'd expected some defiance and denial.

"We wanted to find it, prove Fiona wasn't it, and when I called to see if Natasha would help, I couldn't get through to her."

"So you assumed she was down here?"

"Well, it is Natasha. She wouldn't turn her phone off, even at gun point. Too addicted to technology and schedules." She wasn't the

social addict type, that was for sure. “And Damien said she’d been making friends with some Uratha.”

“Fucking Arturo and Matthew.” Avery sighed and shook out her shoulders while stepping around one of the cocoons. She’d probably have to get rid of the evidence, if the tunnels hadn’t been abandoned and blocked off from kine by the Kindred. “Yeah, we smelled all three of them, behind those rocks. Didn’t expect another fucking Azlu.”

The two of them stepped into the subway tunnel again, and found several other werewolves sitting around a corpse. Stephanie’s corpse.

Jack approached them, softly as he could, and winced as each of them offered him a glare, a blaming glare, but Avery stepped in and shook her head.

“We owe the boy our lives, all our lives. Show him some respect. And Stephanie some respect.”

And they did. A word from their leader and their glares broke, sadness replacing it, long faces as they looked down at Stephanie’s corpse, two pieces that someone had brought together. Guts, organs and all.

He didn’t say a word, not a single word. He had no idea what sort of death rituals they had, hell what sort of attitude they even had toward the death of a pack member. Foot in mouth enough times to know to shut up in this sort of circumstance.

He looked over at the burnt body of the Azlu. It too was just a husk of human flesh now, the top half a bag of skin, and the spider parts gone. All around it were the bodies of spiders, incinerated, some burnt to ash, most turned onto their backs with legs coiled inward, bodies burnt to a crisp. So that was the plan then, kill it

while it was on fire. And if it'd broken into its smaller spiders while on fire, then the chances of catching the thing were higher.

So one of them was still alive, still in the city. Fuck fuck.

Noises from down the tunnel drew his eyes, and Avery nodded as she motioned to Clara.

“Go with him.”

“Right right,” Clara said, nodding and walking in stride with Jack as he made his way toward where his friends had been.

Still be alive still be alive please still be alive. Athalia dying would be an annoyance. Damien dying would suck. Fiona dying would hurt and hurt bad. Triss dying would hurt worse, and ruin Julias. Christ, he hadn't even thought of Julias in all this. What would the man do if he found out Beatrice was dead? If he found out it was Jack's fault? Bad, bad bad so bad. Bad—

Oh thank god they were alive. This far back in the tunnel, the wolves' lanterns didn't reach, but Athalia still had her flashlight, was still sitting against the tunnel wall near the rubble, and was still shining it around. Fiona was sitting beside her, injured, beaten, bleeding, and no doubt soon to be bruised, but alive, and smiling.

Triss was sitting over Damien, and as Jack approached, she pulled her wrist away from his mouth.

Shit.

Damien, unconscious, eyes closed and body slumped in Triss's arms, stirred and groaned. A giant hole still cut through his clothes, remnants torn and shredded over his stomach, but the hole in his guts was sealed.



Healing a wound like that would have taken a lot of blood, a lot lot of blood, and a good day's sleep, or week's sleep. Or a few mouthfuls of vampire blood.

“Jack, you're alive.” Triss picked Damien up and carried him over to the wall to set him beside Fiona. “Fuck, we've been trying to just get the fuck up for the past ten minutes.”

He looked between the Uratha and the Begotten. None of them seemed to care that Triss had just given Damien some of her blood. They must not have known then. That was good, saved them from having a horribly awkward situation.

“Yeap, alive. You're all alive too.” He walked up to her, and hugged her. “Fucking hell. Damn thing chased me and then we were in a sewer drainage shaft, and then it was beating the Uratha and—”

“And this little twerp skydived right onto its head and killed the Azlu.” Clara smirked and shook her head as she hooked an arm around him. Thankfully, avoiding the broken shoulder. The bones were aligning themselves, but it'd take sleep to set them healed.

“Really? You, mister Ventrue?” Triss hugged him again, arms fighting for space on his body with Clara.

“Girls, please, I have so many broken ribs and a fucked shoulder.”

“Ha, sorry.” Triss backed off and got back to the wall of rubble. The spider had torn through it, so a pretty damn large hole was open. Still a lot of rubble around and in their way, but it was cleared enough they could walk through it if they wanted.

But not yet. Clara let go of Jack's shoulder, and he walked over to crouch down by the two Begotten.

“Fiona, I think you'll have your work cut out for you in the monster world. This thing was fucking terrifying.”

Athalia snorted and shook her head. “That wasn’t a monster, that was some fucking animal. A weird animal, not entirely flesh.”

Clara nodded but said nothing, only combed her braids back as she paced. Guess she didn’t like sharing details about what these things were.

“I’m awright,” Fiona said, reaching out to touch Jack’s arm. “Need a week or two in bed though, heal some of this shit.”

“Tell me about it.” Jack nodded, pat her on the arm in return, and looked over at Damien again. He’d drunk Triss’s blood, enough of it to heal a huge wound like that.

Julias had warned him about it, about the addiction, and the Vinculum. The love, the adoration, the devotion that came with it. But it took more than one dose, right? Took three, according to his sire. Three doses, but ... was a belly full of it a single dose? Triss must have given him a good amount to heal a wound like that; though, Jack knew it was only healed on the surface. Damien would need days, maybe weeks to heal from a wound like that, even if the man had half a century under his belt.

He glanced Triss’s way, and she winced when she looked back over her shoulder and caught it. Ok, they could deal with that later. For now, look for Natasha.

“We uh ... we should probably keep an eye open and ear to the ground for any more of those Azlu,” he said.

Clara shook her head. “One makes sense, two adult Azlu sharing a tunnel has never been heard of. If there’s a third, well, we’re all fucked. But, yeah, keep our eyes open.” The werewolf walked over to Athalia and held out her hand. The monster handed the flashlight over with a grunt.

Armed with a flashlight, the two vampires and werewolf continued past over the rubble. And found another wall of rubble.

“Shit, Fiona, I uh ... think we could use your help. Place is collapsing in here.” Not that sticking a bunch of webbing to the underside of a collapsing ceiling was going to make it safe, but it was better than nothing.

“Aye, I’m coming.” The redhead came up over the mound of rubble into the new area, and sighed with the groans of injury. But even injured, she braced herself with feet apart, pointed both her hands toward the rubble, and unleashed the spider monster inside.

Clara jumped back and stared at Fiona, eyes wide as the horror faded into existence, sharing the same space with the little redhead. She’d seen it before, but Jack guessed you never got used to it; he wasn’t. Like sewing a giant sweater, the huge blade spider limbs poked at the ceiling like needles, each layering white thread along the crumbling concrete. While she did that, the rest of them got to work, rolling down rubble, and letting Fiona stabilize wherever they created space.

The werewolf was strong, even in human form. Not as strong as Triss though, who continued to throw giant rocks that weighed as much as Jack. Maybe not with as much energy though, and Jack caught her grimacing more than a few times to lift something she could toss before. Drained, from saving Damien’s life no doubt. She was probably starving.

Sure enough, as they opened up a hole at the top of the rubble, they found hands in there to greet them.

“Art! Matt!” Clara slapped a rock, and reached in to grab one of the hands sticking through. “God damn you fucking assholes, the fuck is the matter with you? You knew better than to come down here without the rest of us.”

The hand pulled back and a face stuck against the hole, Matt's face. Comical.

“Sorry! Tash wanted to prove this Fiona girl's innocence, and some other stuff. So we came down to help her.”

Tash. Certainly getting friendly with her. Well that was cool, a nice change of pace from Uratha and Kindred getting in each other's way.

Jack smirked and gestured down to Fiona. “Mission succeeded. And two Azlu dead, though one of them went full swarm mode and escaped.”

“... two?” Matt's eyes opened wide, and he pulled his head back from the hole to look behind him. “Kid says there were two.”

“Yeah.” Clara grabbed some of the rocks and started sliding them down while Fiona kept at the ceiling. “Pretty fucking weird right? Whole fucking thing is fucked. David will probably have something to say though.” Every so often they heard rumbling, and heard some rocks crack or shift above their heads as they moved more of the rubble down.

“C-Careful!” A squeaky little voice came through, and soon Natasha's head popped up to look through the hole. “We ... we couldn't dig out, cause the ceiling started t-t-to collapse.”

“Shit.” Triss touched the ceiling of the tunnel where it connected with the wall of rubble. “Yeah looks like it's being held up by the shit we're tearing down.”

“Awright, guess I've got work that needs doing.” Fiona, panting and almost falling over, pointed her hands up at the ceiling and started laying more webs. And more, and more.

Art brought his head to the hole, and blinked as he watched the spider goddess work. “Well no wonder everyone thought you were Azlu. Look like there’s a spider monster thing inside you. Should see a doctor about that.”

“Sounds awfully coincidental doesn’t it?” Clara said.

“Or the spiders are getting smart.” Art sighed and stepped away from the hole so only darkness remained, at least until Natasha came back up with her flashlight.

“Who came?” she said.

“Triss, Damien and me. And Fiona.” Jack nodded and gestured to Fiona as she worked. “Ran into the werewolves while we were down here, digging for you guys. But there was another collapse, and one of the Azlu was trapped in there. Everything went sideways. And—” Clara flicked out her foot to get him in the shin with the toe of her boot. Right, foot in mouth. Don’t mention Stephanie. “We managed to kill them.”

“We?” Natasha raised a brow at him. “Thought w-we were supposed ... t-to stay out of it?”

Triss laughed and shook her head. “Didn’t have much choice. It jumped us and tried to kill us on sight. Damien nearly died.” The Nosferatu tossed Jack a quick glance. Enough for him to know to keep his mouth shut about that too. He’d talk to her later about it, but for now no one needed to know what she’d done.

Natasha nodded, and sighed. “Y-You shouldn’t have ... shouldn’t have come down here.”

“We had too many reasons not to. Finding you was a big one,” Jack said. “Almost called Jessy, but I figured she might make things worse.”

Natasha smiled at him through the hole. “You came d-down here for me?”

“Friends do shit like this, apparently.” Jack reached for what seemed like a safe rock to move, and slid it down the rubble.

“Jessy is going to k ... k-kill me.” She chuckled, a tiny sound in her cage. “About now, she hasn’t gotten my m-message, and is about to go on a war path ... looking for me.”

“Then we better get ye out of there.” Fiona put up another web, and gave the ceiling a few taps with one of those massive spider legs. Enough to make Jack shiver, seeing them, seeing what the spider legs could do when controlled by something that wanted to kill you with them.

With some time and patience, a rock here, a web there, they created a hole big enough for the little vampire girl. Creating a hole big enough for Arturo took another thirty minutes, and a hole for Matthew took another thirty minutes. It was not a pleasant hour and a half of worrying about a tunnel collapsing on their heads, and by the time they were done, everyone was tired; Fiona was destroyed. She reached out to put her hand on the wall, and started to limp her way back to the first wall of rubble. Poor girl couldn’t even climb it, and Triss smiled at the redhead before jumping over to help her.

“Hungry,” Fiona said. “And tired.”

“Well I got nowhere to be. Let’s get you back to Athalia, and the three of us can head back to Azamel’s. See what she can do.”

“Is Azamel ... nice?”

“Not even a little,” Triss said. Fiona snorted on a chuckle, and hugged her arm around Triss’s shoulders as the taller woman

leaned down to hook her arm under Fiona's. "Hey Jack, can you check on Damien? Maybe get him some place safe?"

Jack nodded, a lingering second of eye contact carrying some weight. Check and see if the man was suffering the Vinculum as well, right. Better that she wasn't around for that.

Jack, Clara, Natasha, and her two friends followed after them through the hole. Sure enough Triss had Athalia's arm wrapped over her shoulder too, and she helped both limping women along out of the tunnels. Natasha tried to walk closer to the Uratha, to move with them like friends would, but Jack grabbed her shoulder and shook his head.

"Wha—"

He brought a finger to his lips. Clara kept walking, and the two wolves kept walking with her without breaking stride, just like a marching family. Good, gave them some distance.

Once the wolves had disappeared beyond the turn of the tunnel, Jack motioned toward Damien sitting against the wall. Natasha still had her flashlight; Athalia took Jack's with her. He really disliked that woman. Sighing, he leaned down over Damien and checked the man up and down, pulled aside where the flap of his shirt exposed his stomach, and moved his limbs around a little to make sure everything was connected and solid. Ready for transport.

Just as he started to pick the man up, the sound of rock cracking against metal rang through the tunnel. Curses followed, some yelling, some shouting, and a few more thrown objects.

"... Stephanie died to the creature," he said.

"... oh." The tiny Mekhet rubbed her arms as she hugged herself, and looked down the tunnel, the tunnel they'd have to walk through in order to leave. "Should ... should we wait?"

“I get the impression they’d be more annoyed if we stuck around.” Nodding to no one, he scooped Damien up into his arms and slid the man over his good shoulder. Damien wasn’t a large man, and even a Ventrue, a young one like Jack, could still muster some vampire strength to carry him.

And carry him he did, silent as a monk as he walked past the werewolves. They were sitting around the corpse, squatting or kneeling, and Avery was giving a speech. Well, maybe speech was too strong a word, but she was saying something about Stephanie, something powerful, enough to have the rest of the pack nodding.

And she gestured to Jack as he walked past, and without stopping to call his attention, made comment about how he was the one who killed the second Azlu, or at least killed its body. That earned some glances from everyone, weird glances, raised eyebrows, shock, confusion, and after a few seconds, what Jack could only imagine was an animal’s form of respect. Horrible way to get it, the wolves looking over the body of their comrade, their family member, but they gave it nonetheless.

It wasn’t long before him and Natasha were past the wolves, and into the lit tunnels where Nosferatu hung out, where Damien liked to hide, where he was at least slightly sure they wouldn’t be jumped by anymore spider monsters. They found an old platform, a place where he and Natasha could sit down, and lay Damien down beside them.

“I’d rather he wakes up before I leave him back at one of his hideouts,” he said. “Or I’ll have to take him back to my place.”

Natasha nodded and smirked down at the unconscious man. Well, unconscious but not really; torpor wasn’t about brain activity, it was a whole body healing and sleeping experience. He’d wake up once he’d healed enough.

“He ... he came with you.”



“He did.” Jack glanced between the two Mekhet a few times, and made it obvious he was doing so.

“ ... Damien and I ... it is a little weird.”

“Yeah, you two have this weird thing going on and I can’t quite place it.”

“I ... I told D-D-Daniel to spare him.”

“And I told Antoinette to spare him. Aren’t we a couple of saps?” he said, smiling. It got a smile out of her too.

“I t-told him we’d talk after, but ... we ... we never really did. I avoided it, and he d-d-did too. He ... probably feels guilty, about helping Lucas kidnap me.”

Oh, that.

“Yeah I’d feel guilty about that too. But, I can imagine doing whatever Viktor told me to, if he’d taken it upon himself to order me around. Ever heard of the Milgram experiment?”

“Mmhmm.”

“I was out of my element and told that this man was my boss, my boss’s boss. That he was basically my new general and if I didn’t do exactly what he said, I’d end up in the shitter, or ash. If he told me to do something horrible, in a situation like that experiment, I can guarantee I’d do it.” Jack motioned down to the sleeping Kindred beside him. “I can only imagine how fucked up that is when taken in a religious context.”

Natasha nodded and sighed some more, pulling her knees up to her chest and looking out to the train tracks below where the platform ended. “I guess being around him makes me a bit nervous. I’ll have to get p-p-p-past that.”

“So, you’ve been down here for over a day now? Must be hungry. You go on without me. I’ll get him back to his hidey-hole and make sure he wakes up fine.” Thankfully she wasn’t asking about how Damien healed from his injuries; he’d left the description vague for a reason. He couldn’t see himself lying to Natasha, but avoiding some details was at least doable.

“Ok ... thanks.” She got up, dusted herself off, and smiled down at him again. “N-Not hungry, the wolves let me feed.”

“Really? What was that like?”

“Very ... energizing.”

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~~Damien~~

He awoke to a pleasant sound, a familiar sound, the near silence of concrete, but the distance and gentle hum of vibrations moving through the earth and metal. The drip drop of water leaking from a pipe rang like a church bell. His favorite hideout.

So he was alive then. He looked down at his stomach and touched the wound. Tender, very tender, and pain shot through him as he struggled to sit up. No, don’t do that, lie down and rest. He recognized the pain signs well enough to do that.

“Awake,” a voice said, someone sitting beside him.

“ ... Jack. Glad to see you live as well.”

“Ha, barely. But both Azlu are dead and so are our friends. One of the Uratha died though, Stephanie.”

“Stephanie ... Right, I remember her. Aggressive woman. Quick to accuse Fiona.”

Jack put up his hands. “Let’s not speak ill of the dead.”

Damien nodded, and set his head back to the concrete. Everything was alright then. Mission successful.

“ ... wait, how am I healed so? That creature, it ... you saw it, it’d take me weeks to heal from that, if I even survived.”

“About that.” Jack, sitting on his butt on the concrete with one leg on its side, the other with knee up to his chest, rocked back and forth a little as he rubbed his buzzed hair. “I didn’t see how it happened; I got separated from the group. But when I finally got back to you guys ... Triss had fed you her blood.”

“ ... no.”

“Yeah.” The boy winced and nodded a few more times, sealing the truth in with each grimace. “She probably thought it was too risky asking a Begotten to do it. Who knows how we’d react to drinking monster blood? And we know vampire blood does better than human blood.”

Damien raised his hands up to look at them, before letting one fall to rest on his forehead, the other collapsing to the floor.

He could already feel it, already feel little nudges in his mind. How was Triss doing? Was she ok? He should go talk to her. Remember the tank top you saw her wearing? Could see the piercings of her nipples and everything. You should go see her, see if she needs help with anything.

He’d be punching the floor right now if he thought his insides wouldn’t rip apart, or his spine disintegrate. He didn’t like Triss. She was brazen and brutish, and unlike Jessy, had the nerve to consider herself as deeper, more emotionally self aware, lending to all the stereotypes of brooding and depressed; that all conveniently went poof the moment someone’s dick got between her legs.

No, no, stop. Stop, this isn't you, swinging from one emotion to the next about her.

"... how much blood did she give me?"

"Enough to heal a giant hole that'd been blown through your guts and out your back, spine and organs included."

A lot, then.

"Not ... completely ... healed."

Jack snorted on a laugh. "Maybe with another two hundred years under your belt. Viktor healed from some pretty ridiculous shit." The kid shivered and shook his head. "But, yeah ... I didn't know how to tell you, but I figured I should. Fiona and Athalia saw it, but they probably don't know why we're not supposed to do that, or even that we're not supposed to."

Well, at least there was that. No pity glances from Fiona.

"And Natasha?"

"She doesn't know how we healed you. And to hear it from her, werewolf blood is quite potent, so maybe she thought we gave you some of that." He shrugged, got up, and started to pace. Not much room for pacing in the little hideaway, the pipes and old, dead computers built into metal casings provided little in the way of living space. "But it might come up. If she asks me, I'll say Triss took care of it and leave it at that."

"Half truths are worse than lies." He sighed, sighed, and sighed some more, before holding out his hands in front of himself again and flexing them, analyzing the shape of his fingers clutching the air. "But, thank you."

“You may want to talk to her anyway. Not about this of course, and I’m sure Triss will keep it a secret. But Natasha and you ... well.” A shrug and nod later, Jack reached for the door and readied to open it. “You Mekhet really suck at approaching your problems head on.”

“ ... we do at that.”

Jack laughed. Damien didn’t, lest his insides rupture, but he managed a small, and a tiny wave for the man.

“Thanks,” Damien said, “for getting me home.”

“Dude, this isn’t a home. Julias tells me Maria is going to help you out? She could hook you up with a real home easy enough.”

A real home? The thought had never occurred to him. So used to sleeping in underground holes and hiding in shadows, it’d become second nature after fifty years of it.

“ ... I shall ask her.”



~~Beatrice~~

Fuck she was tired. What a night, what a fucking horrible, bad, weird night. Her laptop was still at Jack’s being charged, no doubt fully charged by now, but the sun would be coming up soon and she just wanted to get somewhere to sleep.

For a second she considered going back to the Circle, telling everyone what happened, filling in Jacob on the details. Man loved his details, the scheming asshole. Devil’s in the details he’d say, blah blah.

But, as she ran the memories of Damien’s skewering through her mind, a chill danced on her spine and skin. No, she didn’t want to go back to the circle to sleep in her new home. Awesome as it was, she

wanted something warmer. She wanted to let the day knock her out while in Julias's arms. Maybe ask Julias to brainwash her an easy meal, someone she could drink, and then get under the blankets with her man, get comfy in the nook of his shoulder, and fall asleep.

After sex, of course. God damn she was tired, but god damn tonight had been such wild ride, part of her felt energized. She'd jumped a giant spider monster, fucking tore into it, gotten dirty with its blood — still on her — and had hurt it. She'd hurt some horrible monstrosity thing that came straight out of a nightmare. Well, not technically, according to her new monster friend, but still, the thing was nightmare-ish and terrifying. She pitied the poor sap who it'd possessed; if you could call it possession.

And all that post-life-threatening-situation-but-you-kicked-its-ass energy made her want to go back to Julias and snuggle into his arms. Let the energy dissipate, fade away before the sun came up, Julias's chest pressed to her back, arms wrapped around her ... maybe lying on top of her, giving her that deep grind, balls deep inside her, and she'd be soaking—

Fucking god she had a problem. Couldn't go five minutes without thinking about sex.

Course all of that tasty sex goodness would have to wait. She still had Fiona hooked with one arm, Athalia with the other, and she was carrying them to Azamel's place. Azamel, grandma monster, the weird person in all this. Fiona, Triss understood. The werewolves, she understood, especially now. And she understood the Kindred and their games. But Azamel, the fuck was her game?

"I think, after this, I'm needing to find a boyfriend," Fiona said.

Ha, wasn't just Triss then, thinking about boyfriends.

"Cute girl like you doesn't have one?"

“No, it’s ... it’s hard.”

“What’s hard?”

“Being around folk, humans. It’s...” The redhead sighed, and her body grew heavy hanging off of Beatrice’s shoulders. Course heavy was subjective and the girl was as light as a feather to a Nosferatu, but still, felt like the girl was getting weighed down by something. Which was very odd for Fiona, normally so damn uplifting and fun, Triss figured she was full of helium.

“Kindred don’t usually date kine, humans,” Beatrice said. “Recipe for disaster. Sometimes we change them into ghouls, so they live forever and can be a persistent source of food. And sometimes we date them.” Though, far as she knew, if there were any Kindred ghoul relationships in Dolareido, they were strictly sexual. Romantically, it’d be a pretty weird thing, considering what drinking Kindred blood did to a kine’s mind.

Considering what it did to Kindred mind’s too, Triss. Fuck, she was going to have to talk to Damien, apologize or something. Saved his second life, sure, but that didn’t change she’d done something really, really fucked up to him.

“I cannae do that, that’s nae a thing Begotten can do. And with humans, it’s ... I ... I’m so hungry. If there was someone I could punish, someone Vrall could punish right now, I’d ... I’d...” She shook her head and let it hang all the more.

Judging from the sounds of it, Fiona had done some pretty bad things when Vrall got hungry.

“You need to learn to feed correctly,” Athalia said with a snort. “You’ll get us all killed attracting unwanted attention.”

Triss twitched a little at that, unwanted attention. Jacob mentioned the concept of hunters to her before, humans who knew

about vampires, or werewolves, or she supposed monsters. Hell monsters were an even older concept, more well known idea than vampires or werewolves. Been around since nightmares had been around, Triss imagined. And so too were humans who thought they could fight those nightmares.

Hard to imagine a human standing up to the spider monster hiding inside Fiona, but humans had this nasty habit of being really, really smart when properly motivated.

Fiona shook her head as she turned to look at the woman next to her. “Vrall ... she ... doesn’t ken that. She’s from a time when folk feared her, but also worshiped her.”

“Then this will be rough, because you’re going to have to learn how to not kill every target. You’ll have to learn how to take a sip, not guzzle. A nibble, not devour the whole thing. You need to learn to accept a little hunger as a normal, every day thing you’ll have to deal with from now on.”

“How do I do that? I ... Vrall, she needs to punish folk, bad folk, folk who deserve it.”

“Well for starters, instead of killing them, try letting them live.”

Fiona groaned but nodded. “I’ll ... I’ll have to eat almost every day, if I can only hurt folk, nae kill them.”

“Welcome to the club. You gorge yourself, and you’ll invite trouble ... but, stop eating or starve yourself, and you’ll invite trouble. I don’t know what sort of insane history Vrall has, but you’re in the modern world now, and you have to find a balance. Too much, and someone will show up to kill you, your horror, in her sleep. Too little, and your horror is going to spread nightmares to the edge of the city.”

“ ... what do ye feed on?” Fiona said. “Ye’re Eshmaki like me.”



Athalia sighed and shook her head. “Let’s talk when we’re back with Azamel.”

“Yeah yeah, keep your secrets.” Triss shrugged, which lead to comical results with both girls hanging off of her. “Whatever, we got out of that shithole alive, so ain’t nothing you can say to kill my mood.”

Fiona laughed too, but it died off as she let her weight drag again. “Noo don’t tempt fate like that!”

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~~Natasha~~

She considered waiting for Matt and Art. They spent over twenty-four hours together, trapped in that pit, thinking they were dead, goners. Not long enough to get all weepy and think their lives were over. But long enough for her to talk about personal stuff, tell them about Vivi, and how she regretted siring her; too young and immature to have a childe. They laughed at her, said she was an idiot, and other indirect compliments like that.

She enjoyed their time together. A lot. She hadn’t laughed like that since she’d gotten to know Jessy. They were a couple of fun, silly but intelligent guys. Who were good at cards.

The memory of playing cards in the dark, with their flashlight their only source of light, and their doom on their doorstep, was too funny, and she laughed again as she sneaked out of the abandoned section of the subway and back onto the streets. And of course the moment she did, her phone beeped with a lot of messages. Jack, and Jessy trying to get in contact with her.

First things first. She messaged Jessy back, said she was fine, that she’d fill her in tomorrow night. Then a message for Jack that he’d get once he was out of the tunnels: thanks for everything. The kid

was proving to be everything Julias said he would be, and more. She'd have to visit Julias later, and thank him.

Julias and Jessy, her old companions, her fellow right hands. Now she was hanging with werewolves and monsters instead. Well, not entirely true. She was having orgies with Jessy, so that was ... well, even more weird. She laughed to herself as she stepped into the crowd of South Side, and began a long walk home. What was it she couldn't quite settle her mind on, something in her brain running hamster wheels and making her turn recent events over and over again, in random order at that.

Nearly dying might have something to do with it. Meeting new friends and making huge changes in her life probably did more.

She looked down at her phone, and settled beside a lamppost as people walked past. Vivienne's number. She used to stare at it and sigh to herself, about how that relationship had been weakened by the embrace, and broken by Vivi joining Lucas for a while. Broken beyond repair when Natasha left the Invictus?

She sent her a text. Something short, nice, simple: hope you're doing ok.

She put the phone away. Not going to stare at it waiting for the response, nope. She wasn't that person now. She'd grown up. A little. Maybe. Smiling, she shook off her shoulders and headed back to her apartment. She'd tell the Prince about what happened tomorrow night, and Jessy, and maybe tell them about her two new friends Art and Matt.

Arturo Ibarra and Matthew Wilson. Not a word to them as she walked past them in the tunnels, and saw everyone sitting around Stephanie's body. Barely a body anymore. Split in half from the skull down, and the spider creature's weird scythe arms weren't sharp enough to do that cleanly. The werewolves had been mourning a pile of flesh. Sickening. Depressing.

Did she know them well enough to comfort them? No idea, no idea at all. For all she knew, the werewolves would get over their friend's death in a single day, or less. Or maybe they'd respect her death with song, and be glad for it to be in battle, on the hunt, like something an ancient Spartan might do.

She nodded to herself, and headed home. Sun would be up soon, and she was too old to be caught unawares by impending sunrise. But, as she walked the path home, she brought out her phone again — not checking for a message from Vivi, nope nope — and updated her to-do list: get Matt and Art some phones.

She wondered how Antoinette would react to the news. Not that she didn't probably already know; she generally knew everything going on in her city. But, she wouldn't be too upset, right?

## Chapter 37

~~Antoinette~~

“Did you truly think I would not find out? Or that I would not care?” Antoinette said, staring at the five idiots in her office. The floor below the Primogen meeting, this room was similar in its cold, simple colors and shape, the giant window behind her for a wall, and one of her chairs that rivaled thrones. Before her, a desk, simple and void of anything except a laptop. The lights, white and directed to create shadows from those who stand beneath them, to shrink any who stood before her and make them appear minuscule compared to the desk, let alone her and her throne.

“I—”

“Beatrice Damar, I did not invite you here to talk. I invited you here to listen. And you will listen or I will rip your jaw from your idiot skull. Understood?”

Beatrice winced, and stood a little straighter. She was used to such grueling lectures from Garry, when she worked for the Carthians, Antoinette was sure. The difference was, Antoinette would do it.

The five idiots included Damien, Fiona, and Beatrice. And unfortunately, Natasha and Jack as well. Fiona could not wipe the grin off her face, but it seemed to be the girl’s natural state; at odds with her existence as a literal nightmare.

“If I ask a question that is not obviously rhetorical, you may answer it. Until then, you five will be silent.” She leaned back in her chair, folded one leg over the other, and turned so her side was to the squirming group. Her nearest hand rested on the desk, and she tapped her index finger against it. “Dolareido is in a time of flux.

Since the purge, the covenants have begun to demilitarize, in a sense. The petty squabbles of the Invictus and Carthians notwithstanding, Kindred violence has been decreasing steadily. Not only the violence, but the spying, the deceit, the Danse Macabre, have all lessened.” And it was true. Her fruitful schemes to eliminate Viktor and Tony were, hopefully, things of the past.

But every time she took a moment to breathe, let her guard down, madness threw itself at her door. Lucas returned, but his return was short lived. His death, followed shortly by Jack’s confession of love, had painted the perfect picture. Her enemies dead, her romantic interest budding into love, and all the reasons in the world to simply relax and enjoy the things she had long forgotten how to enjoy.

But, as if her happiness summoned chaos, like blood in the water, wolves and monsters alike arrived to reek havoc on her city. And the five idiots in front of her were only making things worse.

“And yet, for all my work to create a utopia for our kind, and even visitors of other races, there are those who refuse to ... let the ripples settle.” She gestured out to those in front of her, these fools with no respect for her goals.

The idiot children were not convinced. If anything, they seemed confused about her anger. She slammed her fist down against the table, and all five of them jumped in place.

“The Uratha are juggernauts of animal instinct, with all the subtlety of a wrecking ball. They wished for us to stay clear of the tunnels under Devil’s Corner, to let them hunt their prey, for a reason. You five! Your carelessness, your interference. You could have reignited a conflict long buried.”

Jack and Natasha both stepped forward, at the same time.

“We wanted to—”

“We were trying to help Fio—”

“Fiona deserved a—”

“And then Natasha went missing and—”

“Some Uratha were with me and—”

This, from her lover, and her assistant and apprentice. No, this would not do.

Antoinette got up from her chair, and walked over to the now petrified group of troublemakers. Natasha and Jack were a foot ahead of them, and with a few feet separating them, they gave Antoinette a delightful angle for her to express her rage.

Her hands snapped out at the wide-eyed, frozen two, and grabbed their jowls. Her fingers hooking under their jaws, her thumb between their teeth and pushing down on their tongues, she brought both tiny Kindred to their knees. The look of panic in their eyes was signal to continue lecturing.

“Perhaps you think yourselves familiar enough with the Prince to speak out of turn?” She glared at each one closely, leaning in, and squeezed down on the mouths of their skulls. They squirmed, wriggled, in pain and very much uncomfortable with the position. Good. “Rashness and courage, stupidity and bravery, there is a fine line and you two stepped over it. If things had gone even slightly differently, we could have more dead Kindred like so long ago. But Avery’s new found prudence, reflected in her choosing Jack as the intermediary, is the first time I have ever witnessed these wolves display even an ounce of wisdom. And yet!” She squeezed harder, and both Kindred whimpered as she shook their heads like dolls. “And yet the very man she chose, violated her single request. And my fellow dragon, my subordinate, a representative of my covenant and myself, was half the reason for such madness!”

She raised her eyes to glare at the other three. Fiona had finally stopped smirking, and both Damien and Triss had taken small steps back.

She had demanded the five fools present themselves to her, after Avery had visited her to describe what had happened. Mature of her to come herself, to explain herself how the Kindred had sought Fiona's innocence, sought Natasha's safety. She had explained Jack's bravery as well, how the boy had saved their lives.

Bravery, or lunacy. Antoinette grit her teeth as she glared at her five guests. Best to squash this insolence now, before she let the Kindred under her rule turn into wild vigilantes, or other forms of courageousness risen to stupidity. The Primogen were not invited, and she would deal with their protests later. She was Prince, she had the right to demand audience with anyone she chose.

"Damien," she said, raising her eyes from the two at her mercy, "I understand you have made a contract with Maria Turio. How will she respond to this?"

The man considered, eyes falling, before he looked up to meet hers. No doubt meeting her gaze filled him with many unpleasant memories. And him her, of a sword cutting off her limbs.

"Madam Turio would ... tell me I was impulsive and foolish, for going into the tunnels. If I was her subordinate, she'd ... probably punish me for risking a war with the Uratha."

If only the boy knew how badly he would have been punished. Perhaps he could ask Natasha later, if Antoinette did not kill the girl herself.

"A poor start, to your new role with the Lancea et Sanctum."

He winced again and looked down. Perhaps that would bring him in line.

She threw her glare at Beatrice. Jacob would not punish her; he was the sort to let life lessons do the teaching, even if it meant killing the taught. A short-sighted approach. Antoinette had no qualms with punishing the Nosferatu herself, and Beatrice knew it.

Slowly, Antoinette turned her gaze to Fiona as well, and glared down at the small Scot. Not as small as the little Mekhet in her grip, but small nonetheless, and she squirmed and lowered her gaze as Antoinette glowered at her.

“And you, Begotten, your kind are on thin ice as is. You have killed many in your time here, and lo and behold, some monstrosity took advantage of your carelessness. What will you do if hunters appear at your door, with fire and acid and weapons of this age more than capable of dealing with whatever defense you and your lair may provide?”

“I ... um, Azamel is teaching me to feed better. It will nae be a problem anymore!”

“See that it is not. Far too much attention has been brought to my city, and the Masquerade is in danger. Do any of you infantile delinquents realize the danger of discovery? What would happen if our kind’s existence were brought to light? Across the globe, the kine outnumber us a hundred thousand to one. You think my purge upon that villain Lucas was an act of brutality and violence, Damien? You have no idea what will happen if the Masquerade is broken.” She squeezed harder, enough to make the two Kindred in her grasp whimper. Whimper turned to gasp as she lifted Natasha and Jack, by their mouths. Only the strength of their Kindred bodies kept their jaws from ripping clear of their skulls until they grabbed her wrists to keep that from happening. “So we will do all we can to preserve the Masquerade. You could have ignited aggression from the Uratha, and if pushed into their death rages, those wolves would not hesitate to take this battle to the streets and risk everything I have worked for. Instead of stirring a hornet’s nest and begging for



chaos, you juvenile miscreants will only do as your covenant leaders say from now on. Do I make myself clear?”

The four Kindred nodded, even the two with their jaws firmly in her grip and hands holding onto her wrists for dear life.

“And you Fiona, you will learn to hide your ravenous appetite under the tutelage of Azamel and Athalia, or I will paint the walls with your blood as a warning to other monsters to control your hunger. Understood?”

“Understood!”

“Now get out of my sight.” She threw the boy and girl away from her, and they fell back onto their asses as she glared her red stare upon them.

Fiona scampered out, Triss and Damien following behind her with attempts to walk calmly ruined by the hop in their step. Jack and Natasha picked themselves up and ran after them, stumbling on the way. As everyone disappeared through the doors, Jack paused at the entrance and looked over his shoulder to her.

She offered him rage, frustration, disappointment, and scorching fire with her gaze. He winced, head drooping, eyes falling, and closed the door behind him.

For a brief moment, a single flash of instantaneous regret, she wanted to chase after him, apologize, and hold his head to her bosom. It faded, and instead, she paced left and right in front of her desk before at last walking over to the window and netting her fingers together behind her back. She watched down from her tower, watched the odd group of mismatched friends leave, and took a useless breath as she organized her thoughts.

Why was she so livid? She could feel the heat through her dried Kindred veins, coursing vitae through her limbs until the beast

inside her roared its power, its rage and need for violence. She suppressed with practiced restraint, but that did not change that the beast within, usually steel and ice before the frustrations of her position, was boiling in a frenzy. It was her acting juvenile, or at least without wisdom, yelling at these children like a parent who does not understand how to temper their emotions, or use experience to guide outcomes.

But every time she imagined Jack dying to monsters in her tunnels, the fire returned all the more. Old memories, just faded and blurry things, danced in her mind, of others she cared for dying at the hands of others, bloody and ruined. Each memory, old and beyond her ability to draw into exact detail, taunted her, mocked her, and laughed at her misery.

She could not let it happen again.

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She sat in her fitting room, deep in her tower, and fumed. The smoke shot from her ears, lit by the fire in her eyes and the glare they held as she stared at the mirror.

“Mistress, please, you’re so stressed you’re going to ruin your hair.”

“Julee you are well aware Kindred suffer no such issue.”

Her and her two precious ghouls, her sitting in front of a mirror in one of her comfiest, most luxurious leather chairs, while the girls stood behind her and combed her hair.

“Still! You’re so angry it’s going to ruin my hair,” Ashley said, leaning down over her shoulder to smile at her before resuming her work. Work was perhaps a strong word, as the two girls were combing her hair merely to relax her; and relax her it did. The gentle tug on the scalp, the waves of it as the comb moved through her

hair, how the girls gripped it to keep it steady as they removed any knots.

“That idiot boy nearly ended his own life on a suicidal attempt to prove Fiona’s innocence. And Natasha, her as well!” Antoinette seethed, and tapped both hands’ fingers upon her chair’s arms.

This was not her usual anger. In the past, she would glare upon those who trespassed against her, and declare her punishment with all the passion of the reaper himself: none. The city was hers, and with cold, unfeeling hands, she would bend it to her will until peace was had. Peace of the gun, but peace.

The past year had shredded her composure, the past few months especially. She knew it, and her ghouls knew it. On more than one occasion, they had commented on her new attitude, how she had more fire, less ice. It was true, quite true, and as she let her mind wander over the changes in her life, she knew why. Her relationship with Jack in conjunction with the chaos being dumped at her city’s gates, the two forces combined had frazzled her. For all her wisdom and self control, she was not managing her circumstances well.

“I know that look,” Ashley said, coming about to lean her hip against the counter. Deep in her tower, the black marble motif was commonplace, and the counter reflected it. The mirror was built into the wall itself, massive and circled with dragons of silver. “That’s the ‘I’m going to need to get serious about this’ look.”

“You do not understand, my precious. A host of children risked the aggression of brutish creatures, without so much as a mention to their leaders. If their idiot pursuits had gone horribly, it could very well have lead to war with the Uratha.” And the wolves had all the tact of an avalanche. They relied on their lunar madness, a mysterious condition that fell upon any kine that witnessed a werewolf in their transformed state.

Hardly an effective means of defense in the modern age. Supposedly, the werewolves also valued the secrecy of their existence, but she had seen no such control when Simon had visited her city.

Was she the only one with the foresight to consider the future? To consider what the world would be like in a hundred years, when the Earth's kine found the stars, when space stations became normal, when the secrets of the night would be threatened by the growth of technology. Would the beast inside them all find a way to evolve, or would Kindred be at the mercy of science?

The Uratha and Begotten, she could understand ignoring the future, to a degree. They were not immortal. But her fellow Kindred should know better, and she would drill that wisdom into their idiot skulls if it was the last thing she would do.

"But..." Julee continued to comb Antoinette's hair, but her voice wavered the way she did when she wanted to say something, something Antoinette would undoubtedly not like. "But that ... that sort of stuff, you're normally very methodical and calculating about. This is different."

"Yeah what Julee said." Ashley pulled out a drawer, got some nail polish remover, and took Antoinette's hand before she began treating her fingers. "And we know Jack has something to do with it. You said he nearly died?"

"Avery said ... that the boy defeated the monster." The monster the werewolves themselves could not defeat. If there was one thing those animals were good at, it was killing, and for them to fail where Jack succeeded was a scary thought. The risk that boy must have put himself under.

"Sounds to me like you're just worried about Jack. Totally understandable."

Antoinette sighed, leaned her head forward to rest her chin upon a palm, elbow to the arm of her chair, while Ashley pampered her other hand. A Kindred needed no manicure, no lotion, but nail polish was susceptible to the wears of time as anything else.

“You believe I am being biased.”

“You’re too smart for that,” Ashley said, smirking at her as she started applying the new base coat along her fingernails. “I think anything you said you’d have said even before you met Jack. Just now, you yell it instead of just saying it.”

“Then I am being childish.” Which, all things considered, was a good thing for a Kindred to feel. So long buried in responsibility and ruling of ages, elders often deteriorated into monoliths of unfeeling cruelty, like Viktor. But it was not good for her position as Prince. “And ... in my juvenile frustration, may have offended my darling.”

“Offended?” Julee said.

“I ... may have took him by the jaw, and forced him and Natasha to their knees. And then ... threw them.”

Her two ghouls looked at each other, and sighed.

“That may have hurt his pride a little,” her little Ashley said, nodding as she focused on her nails. “And he is a man. Even Jack must have an ego to hurt.”

“Maybe?” Julee came around to stand more beside the Prince, still combing her hair with her eyes set on her task. “I think Jack will get over that quickly. He’s not nearly as vain as most men.”

Antoinette smirked at her two precious pets. To hear them discuss it, they must have had a wealth of experience with the opposite gender, when in truth Jack was their only true relation with men, beyond some platonic relationships at their university.

“But,” Julee continued, “I think you should definitely talk to him. Let him know you only got so angry cause you love him.”

Ashley nodded as she worked, soon applying blood red to Antoinette’s nails. “And from what you told us, what he did sounded very ... awesome, manly even. Risking his life like that? I don’t know, maybe it was stupid, but I know I’d be swooning if my boyfriend was doing stuff like that.”

Antoinette eyed her pet closely. The ballerina refused to make eye contact with her, instead deciding to focus on her fingers. But she was smiling as she did it.

And with a slow sigh, Antoinette looked to the mirror and watched Julee comb her long white hair. To her dismay, a sneer was on the vampire’s face, a sneer she had been carrying since she had heard what Jack and the others had done. Images of the small man, torn apart and melting into nothing more than a withered husk haunted her, terrified her, struck her paralyzed.

But, perhaps there was something to Ashley’s silly swooning. Jack, her little Ventrue, taking down a beast of such magnitude with his hands? For all his skills and natural talents, he was very young; such a feat was nothing short of exemplary for one his age. And while she wished he would stay safe, she was proud of him.

How stereotypical of her, to wish her man be filled with drive, passion, to accomplish things and acquire power to his name, but also stay safe and in her arms at all times.

She would make it up to him.



~~Damien~~

Well, that went better than he thought it would. Natasha had been surprised by Antoinette’s anger, which surprised Damien

considering how blatant the risk of their action had been. Pissing off the Uratha could easily mean dead Kindred, or Masquerade violations, or a host of other problems. Like a collapsed tunnel.

He shrugged to no one and waited outside, after the meeting. He wasn't sure where to go, what to do, or any of the typical garbage of a man with a new life. Felt almost like how he imagined a convict would feel once released. With no immediate, pressing concerns, what now?

Jack and Triss had already left, Triss avoiding eye contact with him, and him avoiding it with her. At least she wasn't rubbing his new problem in his face. If she did, he'd be liable to pin her down and drink her blood for another taste.

God he wanted another taste. He hadn't even been conscious for the first taste, and he wanted another one.

He shook his head and dusted nothing off his shoulders. Just the cravings Damien, it's just the cravings. They'll pass. Do not succumb to such base desires.

Fiona and Natasha came out moments later, and the redhead waved to him as she spotted him leaning against a lamppost. He returned it with a much smaller wave, a far more subtle smile, and stood a little straighter as the two of them walked over to him.

“Natasha wants to talk to ye!” Fiona said, nudging Natasha forward with her shoulder.

Damien raised a brow and looked down at the two women. Small Fiona, and super tiny Natasha. Fiona had no trouble with eye contact; if anything, she craved it. Whenever Damien met her gaze, she looked up at him with her beaming, golden eyes, as if all the horrible things that had just happened to him didn't. This girl was a nightmare incarnate? Still too hard to believe, even after seeing it all with his own eyes, and tasting jungle water.

“Vola,” he said.

“ ... D-Damien. Um, what’s your last name?”

“Burksen.”

“Burksen. Ok.” Natasha nodded, and stepped in a little closer, eyes down, every bit of her body language dripping of awkwardness. “Fiona, c-can I talk to Damien alone?”

“Awright. I will see ye two later then?” She waved and headed off, jeans and brown leather jacket a complete mismatch for her surroundings, this deep in South Side where suits and cocktail dresses were the norm. Damien had found some nicer clothes to wear for the meeting; he didn’t need to piss the Prince off anymore than he already was.

Natasha waved after her, a small one like Damien liked to do. “She ... she’s a lot of fun, isn’t she? I can’t ... c-c-can’t believe she’s what she says she is.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t either. But I walked in that lair myself, saw the two moons and the jungle she calls home. She showed me other parts too, a city of blood that looked identical to Dolareido.” He shivered as he started walking. Seemed like the thing to do, start walking, keep moving as they had the painful conversation he wanted to avoid.

New beginnings, Damien. New beginnings.

“I heard that Maria is ... going t-t-to help you ... with your Lancea et Sanctum b-business.”

“Yeah.” He pulled out Maria Turio’s phone that she gave him. No messages from her at least. Was he supposed to call her, text her, would it even be her answering them, or some of her ghouls or subordinate Kindred?



“I hope she ... d-d-doesn’t betray you too.”

Fuck. He winced as the low blow sliced through his still very sore insides, and he looked down at the little woman walking beside him. Her eyes were hard set and locked onto the large sidewalk, even as the two of them avoided bumping into the kine in their way with practiced ease.

“ ... I am ... sorry, Natasha, about everything, you know.” He glanced up toward the sky. Dolareido was a city of lights, a city that never slept; at least in the business and entertainment district. The stars couldn’t be seen, just buildings, tall buildings and their many windows, with bright lampposts, hundreds of cars driving by at slow speeds, and various night shows or theaters with their front entrances putting on lights. When he looked back down, he found the girl looking at him, and smiling.

“You d-do have nice eyes.”

Nice eyes, right. She’d said that, back when he’d woken from his sleep inside the sheriff’s dungeon.

“So you believe me?”

“ ... I d-do. Just ... wanted to hear it proper. But now you’re working for Maria, and—”

“Maria only betrayed you because she loved Lucas.”

“ ... loved?”

Did she not know? He looked at her as they walked, and raised a brow at the blatant confusion on her face.

“Yes, loved.”

“I ... I’d heard, and my research suggested, but ... I have a hard t-t-time imagining Maria ... loving anything.”

“You worked with her for decades.”

“But she always kept her distance. And ... I d-don’t think she ever really ... accepted me.”

Damien sighed. Guess it wasn’t just him feeling out of place. If Natasha had worked for that woman for so many years, never feeling like Maria accepted her, that must have done damage to her mind. Trying to meet the expectations of your superiors, only to fall flat because of things beyond your control, was a situation he could understand. Similar, if only slightly.

“Well, I guess I’m in the same boat now. I have no idea if she’ll accept me. But then I’m not Invictus, she doesn’t need to.”

“Still, you’ll b-be working with her.”

“ ... yeah.” As a constant reminder of the shit he did for Lucas. Lovely. He sighed and turned a corner, while Natasha went in another direction. “ ... hey, wait a minute.”

“Y-Yeah?” she said, peeking over her shoulder at him. A glint of hope in her eyes too. She wanted to talk to him, and he was making it hard. Or was she?

Two idiot Mekhets who couldn’t talk to other people to save their lives. Stereotypical.

“Come on, I want to show you something.”

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“Wow!” She pressed her eye to the telescope, and peeked out over the tower edge to stare into the heart of the city. The tower was conveniently located of course, to be able to see into many buildings from its angle and height, many windows, and watch many roads.

“This is one of the sites I use to ... ah, Beatrice would be angry with me, talking about spying on people.” Stop thinking about shark-mouth. Stop it. “I set many telescopes up so I could spy on Dolareido. It’s more difficult to spy on the Carthians though; no skyscrapers in their area.”

“There’s something t-to be said for low tech.” She hummed a few affirmations as she turned the telescope about, eye never leaving it. “The Carthians are d-difficult to spy on, I know. No database to hack, no cameras or other surveillance t-tools to hack either. And, I guess, even a telescope is only useful if you c-can find a good spot for it.”

“Exactly.” Spying on the Invictus was easy for the technically minded. He wasn’t that, but he still knew how to eavesdrop with a telescope.

“You can see J-Jessy’s window!”

“Yeah. Your friend has ... very...”—how to word this, how to word this—“exhibitionist taste.”

Natasha groaned and let one of her arms hang limp beside her, no doubt mentally picturing what he was talking about. “I can see her right now, d-dancing around to some horrible eighties trash rock, and ... d-doing it only in a thong.”

Yeap, that sounded about right for Jessy; no need for her to mentally picture what he was saying then. Right hand of the Invictus, a Kindred who’d entered her ancilla years, and had the weight of billions of dollars and the lives of her subordinates in her hands, using her free time to dance naked in her living room for everyone to see.

“Her ghouls in there too?” he said.

“No, Vincent and them aren’t there.”

“Oh, you know there names? Partaking in some of Jessy’s other extracurricular activities?”

“N-N-No! No I’m ... not.”

Well hell, he’d been kidding, but looking at Natasha from his seat on the tiny roof, he could tell she was trembling in that super anxious sort of way. The sort of trembling he imagined she’d do, her personality type would do, when trying to lie about something they were ashamed of.

“I didn’t realize you had that sort of side to you, Natasha.” Imagining her joining Jessy in her regular orgy fun was a strange image. But, he had to admit, much as he didn’t really think of Natasha in that way, she was a very cute, tiny woman. He may not have thought of her that way, but others must have.

“It’s ... it’s Jessy fault! She f-f-forced me, and ... and you!” Natasha finally pulled her eye away from the telescope to frown at him, sitting down opposite of him atop their small space on the tower. “Fiona says you’re a virgin!”

“Well if we’re going to get all juvenile about this, yes.” Much as he seemed to have offended Natasha, the conversation was proving too funny for him to not smile. Though, mental note, punish Fiona for being such a gossip.

“I ... I’d heard that Lucas ... had a strict policy involving ... Kindred and ghouls.”

“Oh. That.” He sighed, sitting forward and resting his elbows on his knees, hands dangling between. “Yeah, he taught in his ... dogma, that sex with kine, ghouls or otherwise, is prohibited.” He ran some fingers through the hair on the half of his head, and shook it once the pain of the memory eased. “If I can get the Lancea et Sanctum up and running again, a lot of those old lessons, idiotic doctrine, will be left behind.”

“That’s good.” She smiled and sat forward as well, getting more comfortable. “Cause, I mean, J-Jessy was right. I should have more fun. And so should you.”

He rolled his eyes, and thought back to his trip to the tunnels, and Fiona making him grab her breast. It’d been silly, but he had to admit, he liked the feel.

“I took you up here so we could talk more privately, not try and hook me up.”

“We are talking! You apologized for ... for what you and Lucas did, right? And ... and you’re different than him, a different person now too.”

He hoped so, cause the old Damien was dominated by a fucking Ventrue not even a year old. Embarrassing, and depressing, to have such a young neonate get into his mind and turn him into a puppet. Then again, for one so young to be able to dominate a mind at all was an impressive feat.

“What do you suggest?”

“I suggest you g-go to a club.”

He raised a brow at the tiny woman, and took a moment to look her up and down to make sure it was actually her. Yeap, boring black business suit with pants, definitely her.

“Are you serious?”

“I am! You know some Kindred feed in ... pretty sexual ways. And there are a lot of places with that v-v ... vise in buckets,” she said, and she blinked at herself after using the word ‘bucket’. Both of them chuckled.

“You know in the Second Estate, we try to encourage kine to not sin, right?”

“Yeah b-but, how bad a sin is sleeping around, really?” She shrugged, got back up, and looked back through the telescope.

As far as he was concerned, not a bad one at all. He smirked at the little creature and watched her watch the world. She’d changed. No longer the shy thing he spied on from the shadows, she was becoming far more confident in herself. He had never actually known her, not truly, but spy on someone for a few decades and you become intimately familiar with their body language. And hers read confidence, even after he discovered she’d been joining Jessy’s sexual activities.

“Oh god she’s ... at it again.”

Speak of the devil. Damien laughed as Natasha motioned for him to check it out, and he peeked through the telescope lens into the window of Jessy’s apartment.

Yeap. Girl was indeed partaking in her typical shower of sin. Kindred could sin all they wanted for all God cared, but seeing ghouls engage in such blatant sexual acts? It’d take some getting used to, for him to agree with it.

Maybe the problem was outdated views though. Instead of him thinking of everything as a sin, maybe the problem was the evolution of concepts and ideas, or rather, his refusal to see it that way. The same with cursing, insults, how these words changed and evolved with time, what was once offensive stopped being offensive, and things that were once benign became offensive.

Look at him, sounding like one of those new age preachers. Not exactly in line with the typical Lancea et Sanctum views, as far as he knew. But maybe Antoinette and her vision for the future carried more wisdom than he realized. Adaptation.

Course, baby steps first. Seeing Jessy standing around four men on their knees, with their fingers fighting for space to get inside both of her holes, was perhaps a bit much to jump into. He rolled his eyes and stepped away from the telescope, only for Natasha to jump back to it and look through.

“See something you like?”

“Hey! I ... I’m not you! I want t-to ... try new things sometimes. And ... wow they’re ... really opening her up.”

He laughed and watched her, how her hand gripped the telescope tight, and how her eye was pressed to it just as tight, as if she might miss something. Jessy had definitely awoken something in the girl.

“That might be a bit much for me, Natasha. If we’re going to toss my old beliefs out, let’s try and not throw the baby out with the bath water. Maybe start small?”

“ ... ”

“ ... Natasha!”

“What? What! I was ... just looking. D-Did ... you say something?”

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~~Julias~~

He sat on one of the couches in the mansion’s front lobby where it connected to the main door, and waited. Triss had texted him, saying she’d be coming over. Good, he had some words to share.

A lot of stuff happening underneath their feet, stuff he wasn’t involved in, stuff that should have been observed, not touched. The Uratha had a hunt going on, in abandoned tunnels blocked off from kine, so the Invictus had no reason to intervene; the council agreed on that. And yet he finds out Jack had gone down there. Jack. The

god damn last person to be violating what the Uratha demanded. And in the process, nearly got himself and Triss killed.

He was going to kill that kid. After he killed Triss.

He laughed and smacked himself in the forehead. Well, better he kill them than the damn werewolves; or apparently, weird spider animals that the werewolves hunted. Jack had filled him in on the details before rushing off for the Prince's very impromptu, very odd meeting. But, according to the text he'd just received, him and his gang had all survived her fury.

A monster, and four Kindred, each of a different covenant. Hell, five covenants if he considered Triss's previous membership with the Carthians. What a strange band of oddballs to be going on missions into the tunnels, against their superior's wishes. On one hand, Kindred were encouraged to be pro-active, to actively look for ways to secure their covenants safety and power. Course, if it came at the cost of the Masquerade, they were to be punished.

It wasn't his job to punish Triss, but he could still yell at her a little. Might make him feel better.

Eventually she stepped into his mansion, opening and closing the giant door like she lived here.

"Hey there lover boy." She grinned at him and started to walk toward him, hands together in the small of her back, and grin only growing as she got closer.

He liked that. Wait, don't stop being angry at her. She needs to be yelled at.

"Don't lover boy me. You nearly got yourself killed."

"Ah man! Fuck, how much did Jack tell you?"



“Everything.”

“ ... everything?”

“Yeah, everything. About this Azlu monster, about one of the Uratha getting killed, about Natasha being down there to prove Fiona’s innocence, and then you bunch going down there to do the same thing. About Jack nearly getting killed taking one of the monsters down.” He forced down his pride coming through and trying to make him smile. Not the time.

“Oh. Oh, then, yeah ... uh, sorry?”

“Sorry? You—”

“Hey! We didn’t go down there just to prove Fiona’s innocence. We went down there cause Natasha disappeared. And before you get on her case, she had the permission of two Uratha to go down there.”

“Did you have the permission of your boss? You think Jacob would have been fine with you risking your neck like that?”

“Of fucking course not, but he wouldn’t have said no either. Not how shit works in the Circle.”

Right, of course. Jacob would let her get herself killed as a way of teaching her a lesson. Ugh.

“ ... I could yell at you about Dolareido and the Masquerade.”

“Yeah but you won’t. Jacob will give me an earful for that, and the Prince already did.” She came up to him and pushed him, claws to his chest, hard enough to knock him back down until he was sitting on his couch.

“Hey, this—”

“Look, Superman, I get it. The idea of me dying terrifies you. Well, the idea of you dying terrifies me too. But I ain’t gonna let it stop me, and I hope you don’t let it stop you.” She climbed onto him and straddled his lap, knees to the bed. She was wearing the black jeans with rips in it she liked, black combat boots, and a white tank top that was cut high to expose her stomach, abs, tattoos, and piercings. And considering how tight it was, it showed the nipple piercings she was wearing as well. Studs.

“ ... I kind of wish you did.”

“No you don’t. You wouldn’t respect me or love me if I was a passive bitch like that.” She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned in to plant kisses along his jaw and neck. And as she did, she snuggled in, sliding her knees further along the cushions until her body was pressed to his. Claws slid down his arms, under them, and around his sides to hook behind his back and pull him close. “Instead of yelling at me, why don’t you tell me things like ... you’re glad I’m alive.”

“I am glad you’re alive. You know that.”

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.”

She crooned into his ear, and gave his earlobe a few kisses before she set her forehead down to rest against his neck and shoulder. “Tell me you’re happy that I’m a strong, confident woman that don’t need no man.”

“Wait, what?” he said, chuckling. She pulled away and frowned at him, but he hugged her back tight to his body, and set one hand along her back, the other into her hair to comb it with his fingers. “You’re a strong, confident woman who don’t need no man. And I’m thankful every day she lets me in her life.”

“Damn straight.”

He was sure this meeting was supposed to go differently. Wasn't he supposed to be angry at her for something? Couldn't stay angry, not as reasons melted away and his frustrations along with them. And holding her in his arms made him forget all the little reasons.

He could find the reasons later. For now, he held her against his body, kissed her head and hair, and hugged her tight. He wasn't stupid, he knew she'd broken him in a matter of seconds; and apparently, he was perfectly alright with that.

His arms encompassed her, held her to him tighter for a moment with a true, proper hug, that she returned with a quiet sigh. He relaxed, and let his hands drift down to hold her hips lightly as the two sat there in silence, Triss keeping her forehead in the nook of his neck while one of her hands found his tie, and began playing with it.

“Ok,” she said, “that's enough lovey mushy crap. Pants off. I'm thinking ... pool sex. You have a pool, right? Like a proper swimming pool?”

“No, I don't have a swimming pool. Why would Viktor need a pool?”

“You're rich! Go buy a pool!”

“Just so you can have pool sex?”

“Yes.”

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~~Jack~~

Finally alone.

Jack stood at the window and looked outside, a glass of blood in his hand and a million thoughts in his head. He'd taken a drink of someone earlier that night, so he didn't need to be drinking blood, but it seemed like the right thing to do when in pondering mode. Stand in front of the window, look down at the streets below, the street lights, the large, luxurious apartment buildings across from his, the people in their windows, and let his mind drift.

The werewolves hunted some pretty nasty things. Life was nicer when he thought the nastiest thing he had to worry about was other vampires, when Kindred like Tony seemed like the scariest thing. Compared to that monstrosity, he missed Tony. Well, maybe not. Tony and the others were manipulators, schemers, murderers. At least the monster was an animal with motivations far less insidious. Eat, kill, procreate, things like that. Just how it did that was nauseating. He could still remember the feeling of driving a metal bar down through its body. Ugh.

So, werewolves were a thing now, and he'd had the unfortunate fortune of getting a personal taste of what their hunts were like. Enough blood and screams to give anyone PTSD.

Then there were monsters, and not the Azlu. Fiona and Athalia and Azamel, and who knows who else. People with nightmares in them, actual nightmares, horrors, things that existed instead of just dreams people had at night. And these nightmares had lairs, in the dream world.

He tried to ignore the fact there was a dream world. Easier to just focus on the physical, on things that bled. And so far his only experience with them was a spider monster that looked more like some sort of spider goddess, like something you'd see drawn on a mural from an ancient civilization. Which, if Vrall was indeed what Fiona said she was, was probably a thing.

What else didn't he know about? With Kindred, he'd just assumed Kindred were the only thing he'd have to worry about. No one else mentioned things to suggest otherwise; maybe that was done on purpose though, to keep him out of things he should probably be staying out of, like werewolf hunts. Were there ghosts? Spirits? Demons? What else went bump in the night?

"Course, none of that is bothering you as much as Antoinette."

He sighed, and let his forehead hit the glass. Didn't care about smudges, just let his weight press into it as he ran the memories through his head.

She was furious. And not in the ice cold way he'd expected, but a fiery way that'd practically burned him when she'd grabbed his jaw.

Did he cross the line this time? He knew he'd crossed the line, in the sense that as Prince she was going to be angry with him; the Invictus council were too. But did he cross a line as far as their relationship was concerned?

No. Maybe. No. Right? Fuck he hoped not. But she'd been so angry with him, angry enough to pick him up and throw him, and Natasha. He had a hard time thinking they'd just be able to walk that of, to—

The door buzzer rang. Oh fuck what now?

"Hello?"

"... Jack, may I come in?"

"Oh! Oh, yea, please." He pressed the button.

Antoinette was visiting him. Kind of like last time then, after the Primogen meeting. But last time it'd been some days between the meeting and her visit, this time she was visiting him immediately

thereafter. Good? Bad? He started to shake a little as he waited for her to come to the door. Don't be bad please don't be bad.

She knocked, and he opened the door for her—for three woman to come in.

“Ashley, Julee?”

“Jack! Oh you have a nice place. All sleek and modern and stuff.” Ashley, once she'd slipped off her sneakers, jumped onto his couch and bounced a few times.

Julee on the other hand gave him a tiny finger wave, and stayed beside Antoinette as the woman walked over to him. Over to him, and past him to grab the curtain by the window and pull it closed.

“Um...”

“Jack, I felt it important to remind you, and myself, that my affairs as Prince should not affect our personal life.” The Daeva brought the curtain all the way to the end of the window before casually letting it go, and simultaneously walked into his kitchen. She fetched a glass, same as his own, and poured herself some blood as she got comfortable.

“Yeah, I know. Though uh, little rough on the jaw there.” He rubbed his mouth a bit and smiled at the woman. Thank god his teeth had healed before the meeting. “And ... I get it, I know I was doing stupid shit, risking my neck and—”

“You risked your neck to fight for your friend, and perhaps save Natasha.” She came over to him, swaying her hips a little more than usual — which looked amazing in a business suit skirt — and set her hands on his shoulders to guide him to his couch. “I am selfish to think you should never risk your life in such fashion. I want you all to myself, my little Ventrue, and as this city becomes more and more dangerous, I grow protective.”

“Well, I mean ... yeah, I get that, I—”

Her index finger pressed to his lips, and she pushed down on his shoulders until he was sitting.

“When I am over protective, please, do not think ill of me. And while as Prince, your antics infuriate me, as your love ... I admit, it pleases me that you have such drive.” She sat down next to him, turned to face him on the couch, and started to undo his shirt. He’d already had the jacket off, being home and all, and Antoinette seemed to want more off.

“Uh, kind of putting me between a rock and a hard place then. Make my girl happy, or make my Prince happy.” He managed a shrug, even as she slid the shirt off of him. “Not sure which one I should be striving for.”

“I think you should be striving to make your woman jubilant. And if the Prince grows sour with your shortsighted actions, then you should do all you can to make it up to her.” She leaned in, put a kiss on his neck, his shoulder as she slid the shirt off, and along his chin. “So, both.”

Both, right, keep both happy. He’ll just exist in two places from now on, no problem. Course, it wasn’t like everything he was going to do was going to piss off the Prince, but circumstances did seem to come up that put him in that situation.

Wait, he was shirtless, and the two ghouls were in his apartment. They’d never done this before.

“Did you not once have a table here,” Antoinette said as she teased her fingers along his stomach.

“Yeah uh ... got ... broke.”

She raised a brow, but shrugged and motioned for the girls. Ashley and Julee came on over and sat across from him, both dressed in some simple t-shirts and jeans. Stark contrast to Antoinette and her expensive business suit.

“It occurred to me, my love, that while us having sex in your abode is rare, more rare is inviting my pets over. So rare that, I believe, it has never been done.”

“Nnnope, never done,” he said.

The girls giggled and nodded. Ashley was a giggly sort, but today was extra giggles that had Jack raising a brow.

“I like the place!” Ashley said.

Julee ran her fingers along the couch a few times, enjoying the feel of the expensive fabric no doubt. Not that his stuff was as fancy as Antoinette’s, but he had money now, and he furnished his place the same way Julias would.

Circumstances struck his brain like lightning. Three girls, in his apartment. There were three girls in his apartment, and they were looking at shirtless him. So many fantasies jumped into his mind, a hundred of them, girls in underwear hitting each other with pillows, getting all sweaty and tired, lying down on the same bed, before spontaneously deciding to give each other oil massage for Jack to watch.

“Blush for me my love.” Antoinette set her lips to his ear, and plucked on his earlobe with her kiss. Already wet and warm; she was blushing.

He blushed as well, and immediately felt his member grow harder. Something about three girls in his apartment was sending all sorts of signals through his body, regressing him to when he first hit puberty, when he first discovered the portal to the porn world



that was the internet. Such silly fantasies back then, but god damn, they stuck with you.

And they were happening. God damn Antoinette really spoiled the fuck out of him.

“I do hope to keep finding ways to excite you my love, as the years go by. And even if we clash in my tower, I love that I can come to you now and let those worries go.”

“I ... I suppose it'd be really cliche if I said things like ‘I thought of you as I was fighting’ or something.”

“Oui. I hope you were focused on staying alive, not thinking of me.”

Well, he had been thinking of her. Glimpses, glimmers, little flashes of her in his mind as he jumped off the sewer ledge and onto the spider. Would he get back to her? See her again? How utterly pissed was she going to be when she found out he was dead? Would she cry?

“ ... you did sneak in there a bit.”

She laughed, and guided his chin toward her to put her lips upon his. Their kissing earned some sighs of longing from the two ghouls watching, and Antoinette smiled into the kiss as she turned her head just enough to peek at them.

“I believe I had promised you some delightful experiences with my breasts, non? Before that brute interrupted us.” She snapped her fingers and pointed at the door. Like a jack in the box, Ashley sprung up from the couch, jumped over to the door, and locked the bolt before coming to sit back down.

“Y-Yeah, but, I mean, the girls are here and—”

“And we are here to please you. After how I treated you tonight, the girls helped me realize much of my anger was due to my worry for you. In apology, tonight, we will be pleasuring you.”

“ ... really? Cause, I mean, sounds awfully one sided, and I like it when you get to enjoy yourselves too.”

“The girls will be more than satisfied with a Kiss when we are done. And I will be more than satisfied with seeing the pleasure on your face.” Her hand along his stomach drifted lower, and undid the button and zipper of his pants. She didn't even have to glance down to see what she was doing, pure skill guiding her.

He looked at the girls across from him. They were both smiling, Ashley in that bubblegum way, Julee in a subdued way that somehow seemed sexier, complete with a subtle lip bite that stirred all sorts of memories in him. They were there to please him, and judging from the looks Antoinette was giving him, she planned to do many things to him, with the ghouls there to participate.

Utterly. Spoiled.

“Stand for me Jack, and strip.”

He hopped up, and slipped off his pants. In the past he'd have hesitated, especially with three sets of eyes on him instead of one. But now he threw his pants away and hopped back onto the couch with a bounce, smiling. No hiding he was excited, and Antoinette chuckled at him as she slid her arm around his shoulders again.

She kissed him, stood up before her, and stuck her arms out to the side slightly. Queue for the girls to stand up as well and join her. They reached for her skirt, undid the hidden zipper in its hip, and slid it from her body. As they exposed her legs, her black thigh highs and the garter belt that held them up, they grinned at him from around her sides. The garter belt was less a belt, and more a skirt itself, though not long enough to cover more than a few inches of

her hips, with black lace — always black lace — designs in the see-through fabric. Her bra was of the same style, the black lace with curling black lines in the fabric, accenting the shape of her bust.

She kept on her shoes, black, with very high heels, almost stiletto.

He sat there and gawked up at her. No matter how many times, no matter how many fucking times she stood there before him, he had to pause and take it in. So much taller than him, a curvy body with a flat stomach and tight waist; the ultimate hourglass figure. The waves of white hair down to the small of her back, her red eyes and alabaster skin, the lipstick and nail polish she liked to wear; blood red today.

The girls on the other hand, threw away their clothes with all the grace of a university student. Which was what they were, far as Jack knew, with maybe a few extra years on their belt. Naked, the two ballerinas came over to his couch, but they didn't sit down. Grinning, Ashley winking, the two of them got down on their knees, and leaned their elbows onto the couch, each kneeling outside his legs.

Apparently making space for Antoinette, who also got down onto her knees in front of him. Antoinette. On her knees. Between his legs. His cock twitched and flexed, raising and pointing upward as he watched the love of his life get comfortable between his legs, her hands finding his thighs and slipping behind him. She tugged on him, bringing his hips forward a little, and leaned down to plant a soft kiss along his member.

He melted. Three girls smiling up at him, looking up at him from around his legs. The two ballerinas, nude, beautiful, leaned in to watch as Antoinette planted another kiss along his cock, and another, lips rising closer and closer to the tip. And she grinned up at him as she slid her lips around the head of his member,

moistened it with her warm mouth, and pulled back the skin with delicate fingers to expose the ripe glans within.

She let his cock slip from her mouth as she lifted her head, and leaned back a little. With some room available to them, the two ballerinas leaned in to get between his knees and Antoinette, forcing him to spread his legs wide. Not so wide as to be uncomfortable, and Jack shivered as he looked down at the three women fitting between his knees.

Shivering turned to groaning as both Ashley and Julee leaned in closer again, and put their lips to his shaft. Their kisses started at the bottom, drifting up slowly, each inch peppered with more kisses, until the two of them set their lips upon his glans, and began to kiss it with lingering licks. Like last time, Ashley seemed half intent on suckling on his cock, and half intent on kissing Julee. And it took Julee a few moments to reciprocate, but eventually she did, and smiled a tiny smile as she opened her mouth enough to catch both the head of his shaft, and some of Ashley's lips. With him sitting and leaning back slightly, his member was pointing straight up, and the girls took advantage of the position, sharing him.

"Have you fed tonight, my love?" Antoinette said, her hands reaching out to stroke the backs of her ghouls. While they were naked, she was still in her bra, panties, garter belt, thigh highs, and high heels. Gave her a bit of a dominant look, over her two pets. Perfect.

"I uh, yeah I did, couple hours ago."

"Good. My pets and I would like to play with you tonight, and see how many times we can make you cum."

"Um, yes please."

The ballerinas laughed and looked over at their mistress between them. Antoinette leaned in closer, and set her lips onto his shaft

where the girls had been before. And as she suckled, the blond and brunette leaned in again, and pressed their lips to him as well.

Three girls, three sets of lips, kissing and suckling on him, fighting for space on his cock's swollen head. If Avery or Triss or whoever decided to break through his door, he'd tell them to fuck right off, and he'd not move an inch. So amazing, looking down at the three beautiful women, and watching them play with him. Not just looked amazing, felt amazing. The sensation of wet warmth on his length as Julee brought her lips down his shaft, of suckling on his girth, of kisses working along the underside of him as both Antoinette and Ashley bathed the head of his shaft in bliss. Each kiss sent powerful sparks of pleasure down his length, making his cock flex and pull toward his abs, only to be stopped by the three women's lips. The bliss worked down to his testicles and between his thighs, starting to build the tingling waves of his fluids.

Ashley made a moaning sound, no doubt just to pleasure him; it worked. And as she did, she guided her kisses toward Antoinette, so her lips nudged against her mistress's, even as they wrapped around his glans.

“Ashley you imp, you are going to make my love jealous.”

“Sorry!” Giggling, Ashley resumed her work, and she bat her eyelashes at Jack several times as she slipped half his length into her mouth. She held him there, licking along the underside of him while Julee continued to kiss along the base of his shaft, above his testicles.

Antoinette, rolling her eyes, gently nudged her pet aside, and took Jack's cock into her mouth. And devoured him. Looking up at him as she slipped inch after inch of him into her mouth, she eased her tongue back and forth along the underside of his cock, and winked up at him as her lips found the base of his length. Julee and Ashley both stared on, a little wide-eyed at how the Prince held every bit of

his length in her mouth. And throat. God, he could feel his cock pressing to the back of her mouth, and she adjusted the angle of her head to let it slide down into her throat.

And she kept him there. No need to breathe, but that didn't mean a vampire didn't have a gag reflex, especially when blushing life. Antoinette had no such issue, and she made a little moan around his girth as she pulled back an inch with tight lips, before sinking down balls deep once again. Holding him so deep, she tilted her head from side to side, causing his glans to rub against her throat, all while she eased her tongue back and forth along the soft underside of his member.

“Pretty sure I'd vomit if I did that,” Ashley said.

Jack chuckled, but Julee scrunched her nose and stuck out her tongue. “Ick.”

Rolling her eyes again, Antoinette began the long, slow journey of raising her head. For each inch she let slip from her mouth, she bathed him in delicious licks all while she suckled, until her lips came to a stop at his glans, and she took extra time to cover his cock in her kisses before lifting her head completely. The rolling pleasure of his precum rising to the tip, only to be kissed away by the vixen, had Jack quivering.

“Ashley dear, you must learn to flow with the mood, and not speak of such things so uncouth.”

“Sorry!” she said, blushing, but Jack doubted she was genuinely apologetic. Not her style.

And Antoinette knew it. She pinched her ghoul's cheek as she sighed a mother's disappointed sigh, before she scooted in a little closer to Jack. She knelt up a little higher, reached for his cock with one hand, and guided it toward her to press it snug to her upper abdomen. With her other hand, she slid her fingernails under the

bridge of her bra, and lifted it away from her just enough so she could ease his shaft into the crevice.

Once she set the bridge of the bra against the base of his cock, she placed her hands back upon his legs, and grinned up at him. His cock sat between her breasts, held snug by her bra to her sternum. Where the bra fabric held him was only a couple inches tall, leaving most of his length exposed and begging to be touched. And, as Antoinette got comfortable, Jack stared at the beautiful, perfect sight of his shaft sitting between her two huge, alabaster breasts and the black bra that contained them. At a certain point, his jaw had dropped, and Antoinette reached up to close it before licking her lips.

“Avery will not interrupt our date this time, I am sure. And if she does...” Antoinette shrugged, and with both hands, pressed her breasts together to trap his shaft completely in the softness of her cleavage. “Then she can watch.”

Jack groaned, and melted back into his couch. Her bra was made to accent plunging cleavage, so when she pushed her breasts together, it was pure, warm, soft skin enveloping his cock. In moments, more than just his cock, but the growing wetness of his precum lined her sternum. The clear drops rose to the surface of his glans, and coated the valley of her breasts as she kneaded them together against his length.

“Uh ... uh ... more than her might show up. Been a lot of people doing that lately, you know? Triss, Natasha, Fiona, and Damien too.” Hard to talk with her treating him to the most glorious sight he’d ever seen, her beautiful, enormous breasts, wrapped in her black lace bra, squishing his cock between them, and hiding every inch of his length.

“One would be enough. After that, I feel I would be forced to protest, and remove them before we resumed.” She nuzzled her

body against his testicles, pressing her abdomen to them in a soft, rolling motion as she reached out take his hips again, elbows to the couch.

Seeing an opportunity, Ashley leaned in around Antoinette's arm in front of her, and set her cheek to her mistress's collar. Grinning at Jack, just like the imp Antoinette accused her of being, she rested her chin and cheek to Antoinette's closer breast as she craned her neck down to set her lips on his shaft.

And Antoinette did nothing to stop her. Instead, the woman reached up from underneath Ashley to slip a hand up her neck and into her hair. She combed the blond waves, and smiled up at Jack as her ghoul suckled on his cock, while it rested between her breasts.

Don't cum don't cum, not yet.

The Prince did the same for Julee, motioning for the girl to come closer. And when she did, Antoinette slipped her hand into her hair from underneath as well, and Julee set her cheek and chin to Antoinette's breast as she leaned in to place some kisses along Jack's cock, fighting for space against Ashley.

But, as Antoinette began to gently press her body against him again, her soft skin against his testicles and thighs as she leaned in, all while the two girls planted kisses and suckled on the head of his cock, it was too much. The warm, pleasure-inducing waves flooded the base of his shaft, and a hard flex of his muscles — along with a few quiet moans — sent the gush of cum up through his length, and a moment later, into the awaiting mouths of the two girls.

Julee pulled back, blinking, staring at the rising mound of white that leaked out of him. Ashley, on the other hand, continued to bathe his cock with her lips, and giggled as his cum coated her lips. All Jack could do was struggle to hold still as she milked the pleasure out of him, dragging the orgasm out, making each flex of his pelvic floor almost painfully blissful as another squirt of his



white fluid landed on her mouth, and onto the valley of Antoinette's breasts. Julee leaned in again after a few moments, and joined Ashley, planting kisses along the tip of his length and letting the cum splash against her lips. Most of his cum fell along the Prince's cleavage, and down along his shaft to coat between her breasts and the bridge of her bra.

"That's enough my pets," Antoinette said, devil smile never leaving as she watched him. And once the two girls pulled away, Ashley making sure to plant some kisses along her breast as she did, the Prince cupped the sides of her bosom, and again pressed her breasts together. Warm, wet, her soft skin enveloped his cock and massaged his own cum into his member, into the sensitive tip that sent powerful waves of pleasure down through his length in between his legs until he was quivering.

"Did you enjoy that my love?"

"God yes." He leaned back completely and collapsed onto the couch, arms falling limp at his sides. And his eyes were still locked onto the sight of his cock disappearing into Antoinette's cleavage; her massive breasts were more than enough to completely hide his length when she pressed them together like that. Another squeeze of his inner muscles forced a final drop of his cum to enter the growing pool of white she was creating, breasts together snug and letting zero of his fluids escape. Until at least she released her bosom, let the bra spread her cum-covered breasts, and let the pool of white drip down the valley between them.

"You are ready for more, non? Or do you feel the need for another drink, to revitalize." Antoinette smiled down at him as she stood up, his length slipping free from her cum-soaked bra. She stood there, thigh highs, garters, underwear, and still wearing her high heels. A perfect combination of sheer sexual allure, and staring at it was more than enough to keep him hard.

A belly still full of blood helped too; blood was the best aphrodisiac for a Kindred in the mood.

And of course, Ashley and Julee stood beside her, naked, Julee smiling and Ashley grinning, their hands behind their backs and jutting out their small, perfect breasts at him.

“Bring him,” the Prince said, and she gestured to him with a finger before she walked off down the hall toward his bedroom.

The girls, giggling like a couple of silly drunks, reached out for his hands and plucked him off the couch. They walked him after Antoinette, holding his hands, squeezing his fingers, glancing down at his hard shaft and how it dripped of his cum. Kindred fluids only lasted five, maybe ten minutes, but it was more than enough time for Jack to get an eyeful of Antoinette as she sat on the edge of his bed, and ran a single finger down one of her breasts. Spreading the cum like that, a trail of white over the black of her bra, he almost melted as the girls guided him toward her.

His bedroom, with the big bed, black sheets — seemed to be the norm for Kindred — and white walls. Well not completely white anymore. He’d started hanging up some pictures, even cycled some as he experimented, and in his room there were paintings of Gothic scenery. Paintings of black forests, cool and spooky castles, a murder of crows circling imposing towers. He thought they were awesome.

“I enjoy the motif, my love. Dark though. Perhaps you have a deep and troubled soul?”

“Nah, sorry, just think crows and shit are neat.”

The girls laughed and rubbed his arms as they guided him to the bed. His joke wasn’t that funny, but the girls seemed to enjoy it anyway, and the arm rubbing was very over the top. But that was the theme of the night apparently, to let him indulge in some very

ridiculous, over-the-top sexual fantasies. And after a night of brutality and pain, he was very much ok with this.

Antoinette reached behind her back, and undid the clasp of her bra. Leaning forward, she let it slip from her arms as she sat in the center of his bed, and tossed the bra aside. Still in her shoes, but she kept them from stabbing into his blankets, and with sitting toward one hip, legs out to the side, she was most definitely showing them off on purpose.

Topless Antoinette sitting on his bed, with his cum still coating the center of her breasts. Hard to focus on the shoes.

He climbed onto the bed along with the girls. Tough to fit four people on a king-sized bed, but the girls didn't mind. They pressed up against each other, and him, the two ballerinas crawling like cats along the bed to find better positions.

“Ashley my dear, come sit behind me, and put on a show for my love, s'il vous plaît.” The Prince smiled at her pet, and then at Jack, red eyes drinking him in as much as he was her. But Jack's eyes broke first, watching Ashley and her tight butt wiggling as she crawled on her hands and knees along the bed to get behind Antoinette.

And once she was behind her, she reached underneath Antoinette's arms to cup the woman's huge breasts, and began to massage them. Her fingers teased along his love's perfect, large nipples, and brought them to hard points as her fingertips circled them. And she made no attempt to avoid his cum; if anything, she was spreading it on purpose, fingers reaching between Antoinette's cleavage to find where he'd soaked her. Soon she'd coated the underside of the Prince's heavy, teardrop breasts with his white fluids, and continued to massage in circular patterns with her fingers to grab Jack's eyes and make them follow, hypnotized.

Julee reached over for their bag. At some point they'd brought a bag in with them, a purse, and she ruffled through it until she withdrew a bottle of lubricant.

“Come, sit upon my waist.” Antoinette held out her hands for him, and as she did, she leaned back against Ashley's body. Ashley was sitting against the wall where Jack's bed was snug to, and she spread her legs so Antoinette could sit back against her between them, her hair spreading over Ashley's naked body, and her head coming to rest against her pet's sternum. Antoinette stuck out her legs as well, flat against the bed, like a road for Jack's eyes to follow up to her body.

God yes. He crawled over to her, and did as she demanded, sitting on her waist, weight on his knees against the blankets beside her ribs. He nestled in a little, so her breasts rested along his thighs; they were big enough to pull to the sides of her chest, and with his legs currently snug against the sides of her chest, her breasts pressed and rested against his legs.

His cum was starting to fade into the smallest traces of ash, so small they were basically nonexistent. Meant her skin was no longer wet. But Julee slid up next to him, and leaned over his leg to begin pouring the lubricant onto her mistress's breasts. Jack could smell something too, a flavor, something subtle but there. Mint chocolate, maybe? Nothing he'd want, now that he was Kindred, but maybe the girls liked the taste of it.

With Antoinette leaning against Ashley's body, she was almost sitting up straight but not quite, so all Jack had to do was sit up straight as well, and with him sitting forward on her waist, his cock rested along her sternum. It was an angle they'd done before, with Antoinette sitting against the headboard of her bed, with pillows against the small of her back to angle her right. But instead of pillows and a headboard, this time it was Ashley, and she grinned up at Jack from over Antoinette's head.

And once Julee had liberally coated the woman's breasts in lubricant, and his cock, Ashley reached under the Prince's shoulders and arms, and started to massage her breasts again. She pushed them together, kneaded them with a gentle grip, and spread the lubricant around. And Jack got to feel every bit of it, his length sitting between her breasts and bathed in them as Ashley pushed them together, buried his cock in the softness, and giggled as she did so.

"Does it feel good?" the blond ballerina said.

"Fuck yes." The weight and softness of Antoinette's breasts, pressed tight to his cock, covering it and rubbing against the swollen head of his shaft, was divine. Every bit of friction the lubricated skin provided, all caused by Ashley's hands, was sending warm pleasure down his length again, a tingling sensation that made him shiver.

And through it all, Antoinette watched him, smiling, red eyes looking him up and down as he did his best to hold still. Her hands took his ass, and squeezed on the muscle before drifting up to hold his hips and waist.

"Julee my dear, please, massage my love. He must be sore and exhausted from his valiant efforts last night."

Valiant efforts, heh. Jack managed a tiny smirk between his small groans. She was toying with him and his ego, in a fun way, a teasing way that she liked to do. But, even if it was teasing, Julee came up behind Jack on her knees between Antoinette's legs, and pressed her breasts to his back. Her nipples were hard, very hard, and she set her hands to his shoulders to begin squeezing and massaging, all while pressing her body against his. Not exactly an effective massage — Kindred didn't get tight muscles anyway — but a very erotic, powerful sensation, her body and warmth against his, her breasts squished to his back and her hands squeezing his shoulders.

Not just shoulders. Her grip drifted under them and around his waist to find his abs, and she traced them with her fingertips as she leaned in to rest her chin on his shoulder. She was kneeling straight up, and since he was sitting, she was taller than him in the position, so she got to peek over his shoulder as her hands caressed his body.

He could feel her heat, her blushing. He could smell her arousal. He could feel Julee's desire as her hands drifted further and further down, until she eventually wrapped her fingers around his cock. She plucked it up from the valley of encompassing softness Ashley's hands had created for him, and held it more upright, stroking it with her grip, squeezing its girth, working the lubricant around as she brought one hand up to his glans and softly caressed the sensitive, ripe, swollen skin.

"Hey!" Ashley said.

"S-Sorry ... I'll ... just..." Panting in his ear, Julee set one hand to his abs again, fingers squeezing them instead, while her other pushed down at the base of his cock lightly to guide it down against Antoinette's sternum. And, looking down, watching, she started to push herself against Jack's body. Just a little, just enough to get him to move with her, to ease his hips forward a couple inches in a gentle rhythm, before she eased back and let him pull back as well.

She was fucking Antoinette's breasts with his body, his cock. And he was more than happy to let her. Ashley was too, as she made some aww and ohh sounds before she resumed massaging the Prince's breasts, though at this point, she was actively squishing them together around his cock more than anything.

Antoinette seemed to think the whole thing was cute, as she chuckled a few times and reached up to pat Ashley on the cheek, and Julee on the arm, before she settled her hands back on Jack's hips.

“Can ... you tell me when you’re going to cum?” Julee said, straight into his ear, her voice wet and heavy. “I want to ... to ... try something.”

“Um, sure, yeah.” He managed to turn his head to catch a glance of the brunette. Blushing didn’t begin to describe how red she’d become. Must have taken a lot of courage to bring up her own sexual desires in the midst of all this. But, despite her blatant embarrassment, her hand on his abs reached down further to find his testicles, and she began to gently massage the sensitive orbs within. She didn’t stop pushing against his body either, making him fuck the Prince’s enormous breasts all while the ghoul rubbed her body against him.

Too good. So many hands on him, so much stimulus, wet and warm and soft and perfect. He could already feel the pleasure growing, the telltale blissful sparks building underneath his testicles.

“I’m ... going to cum soon.” The building heat between his legs demanded release, and his cock flexed upward, against Julee’s fingers, against the bed of softness Ashley was creating for him.

Julee moaned, deliberate, intoxicating, and started to stroke his shaft again. She stopped pushing against his body though, instead focusing on massaging his cock, squeezing it, sliding her fingers along the veins. She kept the swollen head buried inside Antoinette’s bosom though, still enveloped in the softness rubbing up and down his sensitive skin from Ashley’s playing.

When the cum started to flow, Julee almost squealed. She pulled up on his length a little, enough to slip his cock from the tight bed of softness, and instead she started to rub it along Antoinette’s nipples. First the left, she guided his cock as she massaged it with slow, deep strokes, forcing a small groan out of Jack as the next wave of cum trickled out of him and onto his love’s areola. And then

another, as Julee again pressed his cock downward, rubbing his glans around in a circle motion over Antoinette's nipple until the next gush of his cum coated it in white. The friction of his glans along his love's breasts was euphoric, and Jack shivered as Julee's grip milked more of his cum out of him onto the awaiting bed of wet softness beneath him.

She did the same for the other breast as well, guiding Jack's length over to it to again begin coating her breast in his cum. Her ballerina hands both squeezed on his length, stroking, caressing with a tight grip, and milking yet another heavy drop of his white fluid onto Antoinette. And then another. A strand of cum connected her two breasts, the thickness of it leaving lines along her skin as Julee guided him around, all the while stroking his length until Jack felt the pleasure on his glans grow almost painful. But, as last the last bit of his cum was released, everyone stared at the great mess of white Julee had painted onto Antoinette's breasts using him.

Ashley moaned, loudly, and dragged both of her hands through the cum. "God damn, Jack. Cumming buckets."

"Perhaps sex with three women on regular occurrence has affected your sexual endurance, my love?" Antoinette said, again stroking his ego on purpose.

And he was totally cool with that, managing a smile between the post-orgasm moans. "Maybe. Three beautiful women in my bed? Can't ... can't really explain to you how hot that is. In a childish kind of way, but still..."

The two ballerinas giggled again, though Julee's voice had become a husky thing, a deep thing, and she crawled around him to sit on her knees beside Antoinette's chest and his leg.

Everyone raised an eyebrow as Julee, eyes locked onto her mistress's bosom, leaned down and started to plant kisses on Antoinette's nipple. Jack blinked, and watched as the brunette's lips



were soon white with his cum, and then gone as she licked her lips, only to spread the fluid onto the underside of her mistress's breast.

And Antoinette let out her own quiet moans, no doubt entirely controlled and mastered to be as enticing as they were, to encourage her ghoul's behavior. Encourage it did, and Julee continued to plant kisses, eventually settling on suckling on the Prince's nipple, tongue slipping out from between her lips to lap up his cum around her engorged areola, only to pull it into her mouth and continue suckling. With everyone watching her, Julee slid a hand down between her legs, and started to masturbate, fingers finding her clitoris and rubbing it side to side with two of her fingers.

Too much, way too much. What softness Jack's member was starting to experience vanished, cock returning to hard and rigid as he watched Julee devour Antoinette's cum-soaked breast. He leaned forward a little, enough to reach out and put a hand onto Antoinette's shoulder, so he could begin easing his body back and forth again.

"Again?" Ashley said, giggling. Her hand nearest Julee kept the breast up and free for her friend to continue her display, while her other hand massaged Antoinette's other breast in its entirety, top to bottom, fingers sliding the contours around and around. It spread his cum over her mistress's skin, massaging it into the lubricant, into her puffy nipple and swollen areola, into its teardrop shape that jiggled and molded to Ashley's hand.

And Antoinette didn't stop any of it. She seemed quite pleased if anything, and as she set one hand back onto Jack's hip, the other lifted to hook behind Julee, and she rested it on the girl's head, cradling it as her ghoul suckled on her.

Perhaps being too bold, perhaps a little too silly, Jack used his free hand to place it on Julee's back, and his other guided his cock along Antoinette's breast nearest her ghoul until the glans of his

length slid up along her soft skin toward her areola. And there, Jack nudged it against Julee's lips.

The masturbating ghoul didn't skip a beat. She managed a peek up at him, whole body blushing as she slid her mouth over a touch, enough to let his glans press along both Antoinette's engorged nipple, and Julee's lips. Her moans came through louder, and her fingers between her legs worked faster as she tried to balance masturbating, kissing and suckling on him, and the nipple he was rubbing his cock against.

And, of her own accord, she tilted her head more to face Jack, and took his cock into her mouth. She peeked up at him again through her almost closed eyes, blushing brighter and brighter until he thought she might explode. And as she caught his gaze, the little brunette started to work her mouth back and forth a few inches of his length, lips dragging tight to his skin, and tongue massaging the engorged tip of his length. More of her moans escaped her mouth, sending tingling waves of pleasure down his cock, all while her fingers between her legs grew faster and faster.

Maybe it was a little too much for Julee, having everyone stare at her while she did such lewd things. But after a minute of giving him a blowjob, with everyone staring, she removed her lips from him; a strand of saliva and cum connected her mouth to his cock still. She quivered as she looked down at it, and pulled away, falling over onto her side and then rolling onto her back. She was in the nook of Antoinette's side, now on her back with her head resting on her mistress's arm. And with both hands between her legs, Julee started to finger herself.

His bed was going to be soaked by the time she was done.

"My pet is trying to rob me of the spotlight," Antoinette said, smirking down at her ghoul.

“I ... no ... just...” Julee’s hands didn’t stop. If anything, her legs were spreading wider and wider, until Jack could see her juices trickling down the crack of her ass.

A sharp jolt of pain along his cock shocked him, grabbed his attention and yanked it back to Ashley. She’d flicked him, his glans, and smirked at him as she resumed her grip on Antoinette’s breasts with both hands.

“Don’t stop! I wanna see a pearl necklace.”

Julee may have had a sexual depth far greater than she let on, but Ashley wore hers on her sleeve, and she beamed with excitement as Jack again began to ease his cock into the awaiting bed Ashley was making for him. Feeling Antoinette’s breasts hug his length tight was heavenly, tight enough he couldn’t imagine it was terribly comfortable for the Prince, having her breasts pressed together that hard. But Antoinette didn’t seem to mind, and Ashley made a couple of her own tiny, experimental moans as she rubbed the Prince’s enormous breasts up and down against his length.

Jack rocked his hips back and forth, and found a pleasant pace, a gentle fucking rhythm that Ashley met in kind.

And throughout all this ridiculousness, Antoinette smiled up at him, red eyes looking him up and down, with occasional small glances to her ghouls. But it was him, definitely him, that she had her eyes locked on, her gaze devouring his body, his abdomen which flexed with each thrust, his arms that reached out for her to hold onto the woman’s shoulders. And, as he leaned down, craning his neck so his lips could find hers, she kept hers open a sliver to watch him as they kissed.

She only had one arm free anymore, with Julee lying on the other one while she masturbated. And like Antoinette, Julee was staring at him, watching him and where his cock was slipping into the crevice created by her mistress’s breast, watching his expression and

his body. He knew his expression must have been a constant o-face with the ludicrous amount of pleasure being dumped on him, visual and physical. The feel of his lover's breasts, coated in cum and lubricant, tight around his cock from Ashley's grip, had more liquids building up between his legs already.

He kept his grip on Antoinette's shoulders, still leaned in slightly, and continued to fuck her breasts. Every stroke of her soft skin on his girth felt amazing, and Ashley went out of her way to make sure every stroke was tight. Whenever he stopped, taking a moment to let his building fluids settle, Ashley let Antoinette's breasts part, and instead of squeezing them against him, she caressed the woman's nipples with soft fingers. Her fingers slid lower, trailing and working his cum into the underside of her breasts where they pressed to his legs.

Too good to stop for long. He started thrusting again, faster, with enough speed to make Antoinette's breasts bounce upward; just lightly, not enough to hurt. But he stared at them, how his cock disappeared between them, and how their volume rippled with the gentle impact of his pelvis against her. Ashley kept her hands along their sides, keeping everything perfectly tight, as he worked his way up to a third orgasm.

And when it came, his hands held onto Antoinette's shoulders as he looked down at the sight, unable to look away as he pressed forward, deep, far enough so the head of his cock poked through the bed of softness a sliver. Enough so that, as the first wave of pleasure flowed outward, the gush of cum squirted out onto Antoinette's neck.

"Oh my." The Prince chuckled, and offered him a devilish grin as her free arm reached up to her neck to touch where his cum pooled between her collar. Another squirt of his cum met it, causing the strands of white to drip to the sides of her neck. But, as he pulled his hips back to bury his glans inside the wet, warm softness of her

breasts again, the next wave coated the cleavage Ashley's grip was creating, and Jack shivered as the tingling pleasure worked down his length and up into his core, demanding he thrust again. And again, as he sank himself balls deep into the bed of perfect softness, a gush of his fluids poured out onto his love's sternum and collar until it was trickling around her neck to the blankets.

When the flow eased, he slid his hips back so her breasts buried his ripe, tingling glans. Even as he stopped pouring cum onto her breasts, he kept his cock within the softness, milking the pleasure from his engorged cock with subtle thrusts.

Finally, he slipped his length free. White coated his shaft, and more than coated Antoinette's neck and sternum; she was covered. He shifted back a ways and adjusted his knees so he was kneeling between her legs instead of around them, and he panted a few times as he tried to calm his sexual desires. Hard to do, with Julee bringing herself to what must have been a third orgasm, body shivering and her squeaks coming out as she fingered herself. No longer just playing with her clitoris, she was scooping fingers into herself, and earning more juices to soak his bed. He'd been so absorbed in Antoinette, he hadn't noticed.

Antoinette, now having some room, sat up and smiled at him. She slid her arm out from under the masturbating ghoul, and pressed it to Jack's chest. Fingers crept up his chest, fingertips dancing, before eventually hooking his neck and pulling him toward her to kiss her again.

"Be a dear and slide back a bit for me, my love? I must satisfy my pets."

"Um, sure. You uh, don't want me to help?"

"No. You, please, watch and enjoy."

Well, ok. He really did want to help, cause it was damn hot and satisfying to bring the ghouls to orgasm; least he could do after cumming three fucking times. He winced as he let his butt collapse on the sheets, as the ache of a thoroughly drained and exhausted prostate hit him. It passed quickly, and he got comfortable as he watched Antoinette put on a show.

First it was Julee. Antoinette pulled the ghoul into her lap and kissed her neck, her breasts, and turned her to face Jack as she bit into the girl's neck. Jack stared on, absorbed, hypnotized by the sight of Julee masturbating as Antoinette drank the girl into a post-Kiss coma. The act was more than enough to turn Julee into a squirting mess, fluids splashing over her fingers as she collapsed. Done and done quickly, which made sense considering Julee had already had cum a couple times, and needed little coaxing to cum yet again as Antoinette drank her unconscious. The wet spot underneath the little brunette's ass was huge.

With Ashley though, she had a little more fun.

“Ashley my pet, come lie down, like this.” She gestured to the blankets, Ashley's head away from Jack. The ghoul complied, giggling as she did, and on her back too. Not a care in the world, Ashley spread her legs and put her tiny, bare pussy on display. Soaked, and begging to be touched.

Which Antoinette did, with a tiny growl and a following chuckle. She slid off her underwear, climbed onto the girl, straddled her face while facing Jack, and leaned down over Ashley's legs, weight on one hand while the other reached into Ashley's insides.

She motioned with her head for Jack to come a bit closer. And as she began to finger Ashley's little pussy, she grinned at Jack and gave him a kiss.

Jack sat back down, and watched. With Antoinette sitting on Ashley's face and facing him, Jack could see the girl's tongue

lapping at his love's clitoris. Antoinette barely seemed to notice, but Jack knew that was just how she sometimes handled pleasure, moans that were almost silent, and shivers almost invisible. She was no doubt more focused on both fingering Ashley's insides, and putting on a show for Jack. Cause god damn, she blew Jack a kiss, and purposefully pulled her fingers up against Ashley's insides hard enough to both have the ghoul mewling into her mistress's pussy, but also cause Antoinette's wet breasts to sway and jiggle with her arm's force. With her leaning forward like that, her breasts were free to hang with their natural weight, immense teardrops, and ripple with each movement. Several strands of his cum had trickled down from her neck, and were now dripping down her breasts to her nipples; Jack couldn't stop staring at them.

Poor Ashley didn't last long, getting fingered so rough, and her cum was soon coating Antoinette's fingers. Chuckling, the Prince sat up and with both hands, pried open the lips and insides of Ashley for Jack to see her tiny, smooth little snatch clench and leak. But as Ashley started to squirm, Antoinette started to finger her again, rougher than before, rough enough Jack was worried she'd bruise the poor ghoul's insides. Hard to concentrate on that though, as he stared at Antoinette's cum-soaked breasts jiggling with her harsh fingering.

Only when Ashley's legs raised and collapsed back on the sheets did Antoinette at last stop, and she set both hands to the blankets as she started to grind her cunt down against Ashley's lips. That grind, swaying the hips in a circular motion, smiling at Jack with every motion. It wasn't long before she sat up straighter, weight on her knees, and as she continued her hip rolling dance, she started to massage her breasts. She cupped their weight, let their size spill over her fingers, and slid her fingertips up their center contours to trail through his cum before it began to fade. And of course, she never stopped looking at him as she did.

Finally, the Prince came over Ashley's lips, and as she did, she motioned for Jack to come closer again. As he did, she rested her weight on one hand against the blankets, while the other held his shoulder. Kissing distance acquired. She bathed his lips with hers, plucked at them, nuzzled into them, and let her eyes finally drift closed as her body shivered. Cumming, while kissing him. Part of him wanted to grab Ashley and drink her dry, just so he'd have to blood kick needed for more sex.

But the Prince seemed satisfied. She released him, and slid off of Ashley, only to pick the girl up and sit her between the Prince's legs, facing Jack. Girl's face had beads of wetness on her lips and cheeks, and a big grin, the kind she had when she'd come her brains out.

"I believe we could all use a shower," Antoinette said. "Does your washroom have enough space for three?"

"Um ... maybe?"

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His checklist on ridiculous sexual fantasies he wanted to fulfill before he died was getting shorter and shorter. Even this one, bathing with multiple girls while being washed by them.

Well, maybe 'them' was a strong word, as Ashley was the one doing all the work. The three of them were standing in his shower, which was a shower bath. His apartment had a pretty huge bathtub though, much much bigger than the one he had at his old apartment before joining the Invictus. So with the curtain pulled across and the water going, there was enough room for Ashley to get down on her knees and begin washing their legs, soap and loofah her tools.

"My love, I do hope that you will be careful in the future, with such reckless behavior. As Prince, I despise such actions. As your love, I find them ... endearing, but terrifying. If you died, I would be destroyed." Antoinette was standing behind him, holding him,



pressing her breasts to his back as she traced his abs with her fingers with one hand, and stroked his buzzed hair with the other.

“I know, and I really hope nothing like that happens again. Just kinda ... got stuck with a hard decision. I got a call from Julias about the new kills, and I figured you’d blame Fiona; I would have, if I were you. But I knew it wasn’t her, so before you called a blood hunt, I thought—”

“Jack, I am no fool. I would need proof before escalating to such drastic measures.” She set her chin on his head — so much taller than him — and hugged him with both hands to his stomach. “You do seem to often find yourself in the center of dangerous events, my love. Why is that?”

Cause he was an idiot and kept sticking his foot in his mouth, or in this case, foot into dangerous places.

“Not sure. I—hey!” He looked down with a startle, and frowned at Ashley as she began scrubbing his genitals. She was not gentle about it, and she giggled up at him complete with a chipmunk grin. “Guess I just can’t help but get myself into things when I ... think I can help.”

“I did not think you so altruistic.” One of her hands reached down to offer Ashley a flick to the nose, before she resumed hugging his abdomen. “A little selfishness and sense of self preservation is a healthy trait, my love. Please do not get yourself killed thinking you can help everyone.”

“Not everyone! Just oddly fun redheads.”

“ ... you do seem attached to her.”

Jack raised a brow and looked up over his shoulder. She sounded sad.

He rolled his eyes, turned around, and hugged the Prince. A little squirming from her, some shock, but he held on and kept her wrapped in his arms, his cheek against her sternum. Always her comforting him, but she had a jealous side, a paranoid side, and other things any person had. But, sometimes, it was easy to forget she was a person, and not just a monolithic entity of control.

“She reminds me of my sister.”

“Oh.” She laughed, and hugged him in return, arms dangling over his shoulders and fingertips tracing his spine. “Forgive me my silly concerns, my little Ventrue.”

“It’s ok. Makes me love you all the more.” Cause every damn time he thought their relationship was in trouble, Antoinette quickly reminded him how it wasn’t, at all. Nearly breaking his jaw in that meeting? No big. Hell, it’d probably happen again. “I—hey! What the fuck.” He looked down behind over his shoulder, down at the girl trying to shove the loofah up his ass.

“Oh come on, you have a really great butt Jack. And smooth too!” A sharp, momentary pain, along with some splashing water marked where she slapped it.

“Not ... completely smooth. I just trimmed the hair.”

“Which every girl appreciates.” Giggling, Ashley stood up and pressed her chest to his back, her nipples rubbing against his shoulder blades; they were getting hard.

At least until Antoinette reached out and pinched the girl by the nose.

“You, my little ghoul, are much too adventurous for your own good. My love and I were having a moment. That you interrupted.” Antoinette guided her by her nose around Jack, and Jack stepped out of the way while the Prince forced her pet back down to pick up

the loofah and soap. The whole time Ashley whined and complained about her poor nose, hands holding onto Antoinette's wrist.

“Aw, I was just trying to wash his back.”

“With your breasts?”

“ ... maybe?”

Her joke earned her a few forced head shakes, Antoinette yanking her around by her nose, each earning a wince from Jack. Well, at least it wasn't her jaw.

## Chapter 38

~~Natasha~~

“Holy shit,” Jessy said, eyes wide, leaning forward with hands gripping together. The two of them were sitting at Natasha’s counter in her apartment, her new apartment, sharing a corner and a bottle of blood. Antoinette had lent her some of her thralls to serve as moving crew, and they’d done quick work, so all her stuff was set up and ready for breaking in.

Natasha didn’t bother pouring a glass. She drank from the bottle directly, something she’d never do normally, and slid it a few inches across the counter to her friend.

“Yeah ... t-t-terrifying.”

“I mean, I knew about nasty shit like werewolves, but a giant spider monster? First it’s the Begotten, now it’s spider monster things taking over human bodies and ... fuck. Fuck fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.” Jessy got up from her stool and shook out her legs as she rubbed herself down. “Feel like I got them on me!”

Giggling, Natasha waited for her friend to recuperate from her well-deserved fear of spiders, crawling up legs and getting into her clothes.

“It was s-s-scary ... no d-doubt about that.” But, oddly fun. Well, maybe not fun. No, not fun, fun was not the word. And poor Art, poor Matt. Stephanie died on that hunt, and while Natasha didn’t—hadn’t like her, she got the impression her two new friends did. Or at least, thought of Stephanie as family; like a pack of wolves.

“Cool hearing the kid come through like that though. Glad he’s Invictus.” Jessy sat down beside her again and took a drink of the

blood with all the grace of a drunkard downing beer. “Wanna come back yet?”

“... no.” She sighed and shook her head. Not after what Maria did, not after what happened. Not after seeing all these things, and needing some sort of answer. “Come on, d-don’t ask me that.”

“I know I know, just kidding. So, over a whole night trapped with two of those sexy dogs. How’d that go?”

“It was nice! We p-played cards and talked and stuff. And Art told me about p-pack life a bit, and Matt and him joked about ... why are you looking at me like that?”

“You liiiiiike them.” Jessy grinned, and slid the bottle back toward her.

“I—well, um, I d-do like them, they’re—”

“No no, not this ‘they’re my friends’ crap. I mean you like like them. I mean want to wake them up with a good morning blowjob like them.”

“Jessy! Not everything has to d-d-d ... d-devolve into sex!” This woman, ugh. Natasha entertained her friend’s sexual obsessions to a point, but she had a limit.

“I’m not saying it’s only about sex.” The Gangrel leaned in, frowned at her, and gave her a shove on the shoulder. “I talked to Matthew and Arturo earlier tonight I’ll have you know, and I got that impression. They like you, and not in your typical I-really-want-to-fuck-her way ... well, I got some of that too, but I meant moreso the other kind.”

“You ... you did?”

“Mmhmm. You should go visit them.”

“Visit? Did they—”

“Yeah, gave me the place they’re staying at. Still no phones though.” Jessy reached out for her and scooped her closer, arm hooking her shoulders in a hug. “Much as I think those wolves aren’t much better than dogs, god damn they are cute.”

“You j-just like anyone with ... b-b-big shoulders and whose tall.”

“I know what I like. And I know I wouldn’t like hanging out with those two much. Too much like me.”

Natasha raised a brow at her friend. That was an oddly self-aware statement for her. Weird. Maybe Jessy was getting wiser in her old age. Natasha sure wasn’t.

“ ... w-what should I do?”

“Do? Girl it’s not complicated, go hang out with them! Go say hello. Here, I got their address; it’s on the edge of South Side near North Side, Carthian district.” She grabbed a pen and a notepad — sticky notes were Natasha’s vice — and wrote down some numbers. “And get those dumbasses a phone. It’s the fucking teens of the century, and they don’t have smartphones?”

Go hang with them. She made it sound so easy, like you could just drop by someone’s place without first arranging a meeting, setting up a schedule, or at least texting them to see if they were free. Randomly dropping by? This wasn’t the 1800s!

But ... maybe she could? They didn’t have phones, so it wasn’t like they were exactly modern age.

“I see those eyes shifting around, thinking up strategies.” Jessy bonked her on the head, and Natasha whined as was custom, clutching her skull. “Stop thinking, and just go. Have fun. Be yourself.”

“Be myself ... b-be myself.”

“Well, maybe a little more like your current self? You know, fun Natasha, horny and slutty Natasha! Natasha who I’ve seen enjoy some pretty sexy stuff. Natasha who I’ve seen ride dick, with two more in her hands.”

“Jessy!”

“But also Natasha who went down into the tunnels with her two new friends. A little spontaneous, you know? Come on, go have fun!”

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Nervous nervous nervous. So damn nervous. Why so nervous? All she was doing was visiting a couple of friends and saying thank you. That’s all. Nothing else to it.

So what if she’d drank both of them? Felt their warmth in her body? Their really ... really ... warm, thick blood. Felt their heat on her fingertips, on her fangs, smelled their musk. Animals, wolves ... men.

She shook her head, planted her palms against her eye sockets, and shook her head more until her hair was going everywhere. Grow up you big baby, and knock.

She knocked, and waited, and trembled. It was a different fear than being chased by monsters, but a fear all the same, the sort of fear that made her stutter worse, that made her mind race a million miles a second planning exit strategies.

But they deserved a thank you, and she did want to see them again. They were nice. At least Matt was nice. Art was ... not nice, in a fun way. Pushy, but also sneaky. Jessy was pushy too, but with zero sneak factor. With Art she could tell he was smart enough to trick her, but Matt counterbalanced his deviousness, made them

enjoyable to be around. Being stuck in that tunnel for a whole night and then some had actually been sort of fun, when she forgot about the danger they were in.

The apartment door opened, and Matt's face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Madam Vola!”

“Y-You ... you know to call me Natasha.”

“Right right. Sorry, come on in.” He threw open the door and motioned for her to enter. “Art and I were just watching some TV.”

It was a nice little apartment, something cheap and cozy. The whole pack had rented apartments in the same building, a favor from Garry to Avery, and cause the pack didn't want to ever be too far from each other. She understood that, sort of.

Arturo looked over the couch back, and grinned at her.

“Little vampire come for more blood?”

“N-No! No, that's ... I came ... c-came...” Arg, he was going to make this difficult, and smile at her the whole time. “Came t-t-t-t-to ... to say thank you.”

“Thank you?”

“Yes. For ... for helping me, and sssaving me, and ... and letting me ... drink when I had t-to.”

“Come on little vampire, you—”

“Stop t-teasing me!” She threw down her hands and stomped her foot. “I am ... I am older than you. I have d-done things you could never understand. I have ... I am not a child. Ssso you ... stop b-being an asshole.”



So much for thank yous. But Matt smiled, nodded, and motioned to Art. Neither of them had even winced with her sudden outburst. If anything, they seemed happy.

“We’re just teasing you cause we like you Natasha. Both of us. Come on in, get comfortable,” Matt said, before he sat down on the couch next to Art to resume watching the show. “After that fucking Azlu incident? Figured you’d know when we’re just playing.”

Art smiled at her, a new smile, the same sort of genuine smile Matt always used, and motioned with his head for her to do as his friend suggested.

Well, temper tantrum succeeded. She closed the door behind her, took off her shoes, and walked into the living room. Only the one couch, pointed at a nice TV showing a comedy drama. A witty one with dry humor, one she liked.

Should she sit down? The couch fit three people, but Art was a big guy, and Matt was an enormous guy; little room left in the middle of the couch. But Matt shifted over as best he could, and motioned for her again. So, she shrugged, took a deep breath, and sat down between the two werewolves.

Coming over to watch TV wasn’t exactly the plan, but she liked the show, and she kind of enjoyed the simplicity of the interaction. And better yet, Art and Matt were both watching it, without looking at her. Comfortable to watch the show with her, like Jessy would be. Like friends.

Matt and Art were both wearing jeans, though Matt had on a tight white t-shirt and blue jeans, and Art seemed to prefer a gray shirt and faded jeans. Both were a far cry from the suit she was wearing, so she took off her black jacket and set it on the end table. Now in black suit pants and a white shirt, she got comfortable, and laughed at the TV.

Ten minutes later, show over and a new one beginning, she looked to both of them, and tapped a finger on one of her hidden fangs.

“D-Do you only eat cooked meat?”

“You mean us two or the pack?” Art said. “Some of us need it raw, some of us need it fresh.” Art turned in his spot a bit to face her. “Some of us prefer to hunt in Hisil.”

Hisil? Right, the Shadow realm, where spirits like Safe existed. She shivered as she remembered it, and compared the beautiful, amazing memory against the creature the Uratha called Azlu.

“Eat spirits?”

They nodded as they watched the TV. They didn’t seem to mind that she was talking over the show either, and frequently broke eye contact with it to look at her. They were more interested in her than the show then.

Oh god they might eat Safe. She raised a hand to bring it up, but stopped herself. It was a big city, and she had no right to ask them what to hunt or not hunt in their world. Besides, Safe would stay safe, hopefully.

“ ... did ... d-did you ... umm ... Stephanie, I mean...”

Art and Matt both sighed, but Matt turned to look to her as he offered her something between a wince and smile.

“She died on a hunt, against the vilest, most dangerous prey. We’re sad she died, but—”

“But it was a good way to die.” Art peeked at Natasha for a moment, a crack of sadness there before he looked back to the TV. “Mason’s taking it pretty hard though.”

“Yeah.” Matt looked back as well, but she could tell he wasn’t really looking at the images anymore. “Those two hated each other.”

“They d-did?” she said. “Then ... w-why would he—”

“Hated each other like kids hate each other.” Art motioned to the TV, and the sitcom that had started playing. “Like a script from a show. I was sure they’d get together eventually.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t ever talked to Mason; hadn’t ever talked to any of them except for her two friends Art and Matt, really. Maybe she shouldn’t have brought her up. Yeah, that was dumb. “So, I should, uh ... I should g-get going.”

“Already?” Matt said.

“You should stay.” Art reached out and put a hand on her arm. “Nice having you around.”

“ ... what? W-Why? I just ... watched TV with you.” Touching her, he was touching her. And she wasn’t brushing his hand away.

“Trust us.” Art put his hand back in his lap, and smiled more of that frustrating smile. “Nice having you around, like talking to you. And the rest of the pack right now, after that double Azlu fuck up? Volatile as explosives.”

“That’s a common myth. M-M-Most explosives aren’t ... v-volatile...”

“Well, it’s nice having you over anyway. Maybe we could try one of those Kisses again? Maybe a little normal kissing to go with it?” Art said, a sly smile sneaking onto his face.

Whoa whoa, what? She frowned at the bastard, whose smile had turned into an evil grin. A most evil grin, worthy of stabbing. “Is ... is that why you think I’m over here?” Guess he wasn’t feeling too bad

about Stephanie. Or maybe this was just how Art coped? Making bad jokes. A lot of people used humor like that.

“We’d be lying if we said we didn’t think you were attracted to us,” Matt said.

Us. Us? She looked over at Matt, and found the big guy smiling at her, excitement in his eyes. Art she could understand making bad jokes to hide mourning, but Matt? It wasn’t his style.

“I d-didn’t come over for ... for more blood ... or anything like that! I came over t-t-t ... t-to say thank you!” She stood up, faced the two wolves, stomped her foot once, and folded her arms across her chest while she gave both men the harshest glare she could muster. It only seemed to make them smile more though, which made her frown more, which lead to a downward spiral she did not like.

“We were hoping you would.” Art reached out for her, and his fingers found where her shirt was tucked into her pants. She slapped his fingers away, and Arturo’s grin only grew. “But, we were really hoping you’d come over to just hang with us, not just say thank you, or that you’re sorry about Stephanie.”

“I w-was hanging!”

“And I hope you’ll stick around, hang out more. A lot more. With less clothes.”

The bastard! The slimy, conniving, manipulative, rude son of a bitch. He ... he ... wanted her naked. And he was so brazen about it. Rude and direct and ... and looking at her like she was a piece of meat. Or at least, she wanted to think of him like that, like he was some lecherous bastard she could justify stabbing. But the man had saved her life, let her drink his blood before, protected her from the Azlu, all the things that should make her want to swoon like a damsel in distress being rescued.

She most definitely did not feel like she was being rescued. Felt like she was a lamb before the wolves.

“D-Don’t think ... just because you ... helped me that I ... that I would...”

“What? No no, it’s not like that,” Matt said, hands up in surrender. “We like you. You’re smart, you’re clever, and you’re so damn cute.”

“You t-too? Do I ... d-d-do I look like a ... like a...” Like a whore, or slut, or some other stupid word that really meant nothing to any Kindred. “I’m not cute!”

“Could have fooled us.” Art got up, and started walking toward her. “We think you’re damn cute, and sexy. We’ve been wanting to do things to you for a while.”

She backed up, eyes going wide and staring up at the tall beast, and the hunger in his dark eyes. They ... they had?

“You ... you’re ... ummm.” Her back pressed to the wall beside the TV, and her hands did as well. Trapped, completely trapped. She looked past Art to Matt, but the big dumb puppy only smiled back at her, the same hunger in his gaze. He gave her a tiny wave too, like this was all fun times.

“I like that you squirm.” Art leaned down as he approached her, and he licked his lips in a very I’m-going-to-eat-you sort of way.

“I ... I um...”

“I like that you still act shy around us, despite the shit we’ve been through. I like that you’re smart, and clever when you start to feel comfortable. And I think you’re really sexy.” He got in closer, close enough she could feel his body heat as he leaned down to grin at

her, penetrating gaze only an inch from her eyes. “And I’m really hoping you squirm the same way when I’m inside you.”

Find a knife, a sword, a pen, anything. Stab him!

“You two ... can’t b-b-be serious. There’s ... t-two of you!”

“So?” Matt said, shrugging. “Art and I have been friends forever, and we share everything. And sometimes we find a girl who enjoys two men. Though Art can come on a bit strong. Dumbass.”

Art just shrugged when he looked behind him at his friend before bringing his mischievous eyes back to her.

For a second, she wanted to accuse them of being playboys, sleeping around with any woman they found. She knew it wasn’t true though, she was just looking for excuses to get out of the situation. Just like with Jessy and her ghouls.

But these weren’t ghouls. And Jessy wasn’t here either. Completely different situation.

Completely.

“You uh ... you t-two ... do this often?”

“No,” Art said, “gotta like the girl first. And she has to like us. Avery and the pack have been roaming for a while, but I’m hoping we can stay here. Dolareido’s a great place. And we can get to know the little vamp with some bite to her. We really like her.”

Hehe, bite. No, don’t laugh at his puns!

“You like me?”

“Haven’t I been saying that all night?” Art reached down, and took her hand. She didn’t pull it away, and instead bit her lip a little as she felt the heat of his body warm her corpse fingers. After pulling

her back to the couch, he sat down and grinned his evil grin. Bastard was so damn tall, he was eye level with her despite him sitting, her standing. Let alone Matt, who was a good five or six inches taller than Art, and probably eighty pounds of pure muscle heavier.

And they both wanted her. Both were looking at her like prey to be ravaged, but the more they kept talking, the less she minded.

“This ... this isn't ... and ... I ... I um...”

Matt reached out, and took her other hand. Hers disappeared into his palm, like a little girl's. She was older than either of them, but ... but they were so much bigger than her. Trapped, trapped trapped, standing in front of the couch with the two wolves sitting down on it before her, her hands in theirs.

“If you say you want to go, we'll let you go. This isn't like that time we captured you.” Art's eyes were only on her face half the time now, half the time running up and down her body. “You're not our prisoner. You have to say stop though. That's your safe word.”

“B-B-But ... you're...”

Her hands were trapped, one for each of them, while they each had a hand free. And they used them, Art setting his free hand on her outer thigh, while Matt put his hand on her hip.

“And we can stop anytime you want us to,” Matt said, winking at her. His drifting hand slid to the front of her pants, and found the button of her fly. “But, I'm really hoping you don't want us to. Cause damn, I really want to eat you.”

All she had to do was say stop. Good, easy! Easily done. All she had to do was tell them to stop, and the two handsome, gorgeous creatures trying to seduce her would stop. Yeap. Just say stop.

She looked down at Matt's hand on her fly. With one hand he managed to slip the button out of the hole, while Arturo had his fingers in the waistband. She made another tug on her hands, harder, but still she couldn't get away. Harder again, still nothing. The werewolves refused to let go of her fingers, and they kept smiling at her as they started to slide off her pants. Matt's grin had all the sinister intent of a puppy, but Art's grin was as villainous as ever.

"I ... you ... p-please don't? You're..."

"Just say stop and we'll stop," Matt said.

Saying it wasn't easy apparently; it was hard! And the harder she tried, the more she struggled to get the word out.

The villain of the duo chuckled, licked his lips a little — so damn sexy it hurt — and slid her pants down to her knees. "Or," he said, "you can ... think it's called blush?"

"W-Who ... told you ... about that?" Pants, around knees! They could see her underwear!

"Friend of yours."

"... Jessy!" Oh, that bitch. "She said ... you t-t-talked with her."

"We did. Earlier tonight." Art continued to pull her pants down, and she tried to pull away all the more. Like trying to move buildings. They weren't that heavy, not for a vampire, but she couldn't move them at all. Her strength was gone. "She said you might need a little push."

They planned this. They planned it and Jessy helped them. Her so called friend was going to get a mouthful when she found her.



Reality yanked her back when she found pants around her ankles, and the two werewolves working together to lift a foot out of one pant leg, and then the other. Now all she had on was socks and her shirt, and her boring pair of white underwear. But her underwear didn't seem to bother either wolf, who stared at her and her legs, and roamed over the smooth skin with their huge hands.

They really wanted her. Two werewolves, massive beasts, dripping of life and heat and hunger, they wanted her. This was nothing like with Jessy's ghouls, who wanted her like ... like an aroused man wanted what he was attracted to. Which, she admitted to only herself, she'd loved. But Art and Matt were ... they weren't humans, or vampires, they were wolves, and as their fingers roamed her small legs, leaving her wriggling, squirming, and trapped, their eyes devoured her like ... like prey.

“You ... wait ... p-please, I...”

“Not hearing the safe word,” Art said. His hand around her wrist pulled her toward him, until her legs were touching his and Matt's. Matt's free hand danced up to her shirt, and started undoing the buttons from the bottom, while Art's other hand reached behind her. His fingers cupped her ass, squeezed it through her underwear, caressed along the small of her back and tail bone, before sliding under the waistband.

Stop. All she had to do was say stop.

She pulled away again, futilely. The wolves weren't letting her go, and they weren't stopping. Their hands roamed her body, touched and massaged her thighs and ass, tickled along her ever exposing skin as Matt undid more of her buttons, and played with the edges of her clothes. Art's fingers slid her underwear down a little, and she almost squeaked. But he stopped once they were only a couple inches down, and he grinned his smug bastard grin at her before his fingers reached higher, and slid her shirt off her shoulders with

Matt's help. Whenever they needed to, they switched hands off on hers without ever letting her go. All her pulling and tugging and wriggling did nothing to stop them as the two beasts undressed her.

She stood there, wearing nothing but her white underwear and simple little t-shirt bra, pouting her best 'please stop' pout. It only spurned them on.

"God damn you are beautiful," Matt said, eyes stuck to her flat, toned stomach, her tiny breasts still hidden, her pale Kindred skin.

"It isn't 1920 Matt. She's sexy, and hot, those are the words you're looking for."

"I can't say she's beautiful?"

"Not if you're trying to keep the mood."

Matt just rolled his eyes, and pulled her in a little closer. She couldn't get much closer than legs touching theirs, so she leaned forward a little, held upright by the grip they kept on her hands.

"Blush for me, please?"

Oh ... oh god damn it. His eyes, big green puppy eyes. There was hunger there, ravenous, sexual hunger, but on top of it all he wore blatant sincerity that was too damn adorable. And handsome. She wanted to run her fingers through his long, dark blond, almost brown hair, touch the scruff of his face, kiss his lips.

And Art, Art she wanted to punch. After. For now, she stared at him, at the voracious need written on his face, his dark brown eyes, smooth face and hard jaw, his messy shoulder-length black hair, his ... his everything.

If she said stop, they'd stop. She could leave, and go home. Maybe call Jessy, berate her, and then maybe have some fun with her

ghouls. Or she could blush for the two beasts holding her hands, undressing her, touching her, and they'd ravage her. From the look in their eyes, she couldn't help but imagine them pinning her down, prying her open, forcing things into her, devouring her.

She bit her lip a little with one of her fangs. Didn't mean to, it just happened as she deliberated like a kid in a candy store, but it made both the wolves groan with blatant arousal, and then growl. A real, deep, quiet growl in the throat and chest that she felt through where they trapped her hands.

She blushed.

"... that is sexy," Matt said, eyes looking her up and down.

Even when blushing, she still had pale skin, but it wasn't her skin tone the two beasts were staring at. It was her breasts, and her nipples stabbing out against her soft bra. It was her flat stomach, and how the blush brought some life to her subtle abs and hips. It was her underwear, and how, only moments into the blush, a droplet of moisture was starting to form. Oh god.

She blushed a normal, human blush then, and her body went red. Head to toe, she felt the burn of red, and her cheeks wanted to explode.

"I think she likes it." Art leaned in toward her, still sitting so he had to crane his neck a bit to point his lips up at her, but they found her collar, her neck, her chin, and he put gentle, warm kisses along her naked skin, each accompanied with an electric tingle.

"I ... I um ... this ... this isn't f-f-fair."

"It really isn't," Art said, kiss slipping down to her collar, and then her sternum. "Been wanting to get inside you since the first time we met. Fucking killing me."

Before she could respond, Matt's free hand took the waistband of her underwear, and slid them down to her knees. She meeped and renewed her struggles to cover herself, but they didn't let her. There was a tiny strand of wetness connecting her sex to her underwear until it finally reached her knees. Once the white fabric was around her ankles, they again lifted her feet and forced her to step out of her clothes, like she'd become their doll.

"God damn," Matt said, eyes glued to her thighs, jaw dropped slightly. "That is the sweetest little thing I have ever seen."

"I am not a p-p-p-piece of meat!" More struggles, more futility. The two of them were staring at her sex, at her smooth mons, her puffy little vulva and hidden lips. Wet, and her clitoris was swollen enough to stick out slightly. Staring, and staring, until she was bursting with embarrassment and blushing to death. But they wouldn't let go of her hands, wouldn't let her cover herself, wouldn't let her escape.

"And yet, I really want to eat you." Art's free hand hooked the front of her bra, and pulled it up over her head. Part of her wanted to be obstinate, and not lift her arms. But it was too late to be so petty now, and once the two wolves let go of her hands, she lifted her arms so Art could lift the thing clear off of her.

Naked. Absolutely naked. She was so small compared to them, and naked, and naked, and naked some more. She covered her breasts and privates with her arms, finally having them free, but she remembered what it was like with the ghouls, and how silly it'd been. So, with a deep, useless breath, she lowered her arms, and tried to stand there with some pride. Or defiance, not sure which.

Matt leaned in, and growled. She squeaked and blinked at the gentle giant, but the man's eyes were half closed and not looking at her, they were looking at her breasts. Art did the same, pulling her in closer as he leaned in from his seat. Matt was leaning down

lower, and she could feel his hot breath on her nipple. Art was higher, his grinning lips only inches from hers, his eyes on hers. He took her hand again, and set it on his shoulder.

“Eat m-me?” she said, and she squeezed his shoulder a little. Didn’t mean to, didn’t try to, it just happened. He was so warm, and hard, and broad.

He came closer, closer until his lips were touching hers. Not kissing, not yet, but god damn she wanted to. His eyes, his damn, beautiful dark eyes, the heat of him so close to her, and much as she told herself not to, she breathed in his scent.

“I—” She squeaked again, loudly, and looked down at Matt. The giant had put his lips around her nipple, and was kissing it with the most tender, warm, wet lips. More sparks along her skin, tingly, electric. Her whole body started to shiver, and she squirmed as she tried to take a step back. Matt had one hand holding her thigh, the other holding her butt, and he refused to let her back away as he lowered his kiss to the underside of her small breast, and planted warm little kisses.

For a second she was going to say something, maybe ‘stop’, but when she opened her mouth, Art’s lips found hers. Time froze. Life and warmth on her face, on her lips, so close to her he ... he was kissing her. You couldn’t get much closer than kissing. He was kissing her, and nudging his nose into her a bit like a playful dog; his kiss was most definitely not dog-like though. His kiss was tender, and he plucked at her bottom lip after a few moments of her standing there like a statue.

“You’re smooth,” he said.

She gasped and looked down. Art’s fingers had found her mons, and were caressing where her pubic hair should have been. The soft mound of skin molded to his exploring fingers, his digits tracing invisible symbols.

“I ... I ... shaved it a long t-time ago, and ... chose to not regrow it.”

“You can do that?”

“Mhmm. It—nn!” The bastard’s fingers slid further down, and found her budding clitoris. She squealed, mewled, whimpered, and every sound she didn’t want to come out of her came out when she looked down, and found the large man’s hands caressing her folds. He didn’t stroke her clit directly, only nudged against it, teased it as he massaged her labia, wet his fingers with her juices.

Art’s head drifted lower, and Matt’s head drifted higher. Natasha wriggled some more, but at this point she was having trouble focusing, on trying to remember who she was or what her original plan had been. All she could think about was a set of fingers massaging the tiny lips between her thighs, sending warm sparks through her body. Her nipples were so hard they hurt, and her breath came out in tiny pants, pants Matt smiled into as his lips plucked at hers. She blinked at him, sucked into the hungry gaze, and let out a tiny whining sound as Art’s mouth found her other nipple.

Kissing. She was kissing him. Both of them!

“This ... isn’t fair,” she said. “You t-two ... you’re...”

“Still dressed,” Matt said. “Yeah, this is pretty mean.”

And just like that, both of them got up, and stripped. Natasha stared, jaw dropping, eyes wide, arms dangling, as the two men threw away their shirts and jeans, their underwear and socks, completely comfortable with each other.

Jessy would have loved them. All the werewolves had such strong bodies, fit, powerful, and naked she could see all the muscles, the indentations and striations and abs. Abs, hard, chiseled, defined abs. Art wasn’t as big or wide as Matt, but that was because Matt was a

wall of meat that couldn't fit through a doorway. Art was a tall man too, big and lean and ... and very hard, with his large member sticking out from his pelvis. She looked to Matt, and found the man's member growing to hard erection as well. She'd done this to them? She hadn't even touched them!

This couldn't have been happening. She must have been dreaming, and somehow stumbled into Jessy's dream.

Matt took her hand, and guided her toward the apartment's hallway.

"I ... I um ... you're..."

"You'll have to forgive us for being a little pushy with you," Matt said as he pulled her into the bedroom. Just a simple apartment, nothing fancy, white walls and a king-sized bed with some blue sheets. Perfectly innocent. "Jessy was right about you."

"J-Jessy!" That was right! This was all Jessy's fault! She tried to jump away, but Matt's hand was still holding hers, and he smiled as he sat down on the bed. The harder she pulled, the more he pulled her toward him, with all the urgency of a turtle. "You ... you planned this! And Jessy, she ... she ... b-b-betr—"

Art appeared in the doorway, and he leaned against the frame as he folded his arms across his naked chest. "No one betrayed you, Natasha. We came to Jessy cause Matt and I really like you, but we know your situation is complicated, and ... well, two guys one girl. Figured it was better to ask the girl's friend first about how viable this was, you know?"

"You—eep!" She'd never get a word out at this rate. Matt picked her up, laid her on the bed on her back, and he lay beside her on his side. But he was big, and heavy, and huge and big and mountainous, and the bed sank a little so he had to adjust to get comfortable beside her. She tried to get up and scamper away, but his hand

found her shoulder, and he planted her right back down against the sheets.

“She said you liked us too, and that you’d be willing to have us in your bed, if we gave you a little nudge,” Matt said, his lips to her shoulder, and planting delightful, warm kisses.

Natasha squirmed all the more, tried to get up a few more times to no success, and frowned at the wolf beside her holding her down. But Art drew near, and her eyes lifted to stare at the man as he too climbed onto the bed, large shaft hanging between his legs as he crawled over and lay beside her, opposite of Matt.

Warmth, muscle and skin, their bodies lightly pressed against hers, touched hers, their hard members nudged against her legs with the position, and their breath was on her neck. The two of them were so giant compared to her, she disappeared between them, like two walls of flesh that closed in on her, trapped her, buried her, refused to let her go.

“You ... y-you said you’d stop if I said stop.”

“Yeap. Moment you say it straight, we’ll stop.” Art leaned in closer, and put his lips on her ear. “I’m really hoping you don’t.”

“This is mean!”

“Yeap,” Matt said, his lips doing the same as Art’s. But his hands weren’t. While one of his arms was pressed to the bed underneath him, since he was on his side facing her, the other that had been holding her down eased up, and drifted down her chest. It tickled along her nipple, caressed along the underside of her small breast, before drifting down her belly and pelvis to find her clitoris.

And unlike Art’s infuriating, teasing massage from earlier, Matt’s fingers embraced her clitoris between two fingertips, and began to massage her.



She melted. She tried to find the anger, the frustration again, looked for some inkling of rage against Jessy for having betrayed her like this, for offering her up to these two wolves. But, as she looked between the two handsome men, lying on their sides beside her, she couldn't find it anymore. Sharp sparks of bliss danced along her clitoris and pulsed through her pelvis, earning squeezing muscles that had more of her juices trickling down her pussy.

Her hands came up to her chest, and she kept them tucked under her collar, elbows to her stomach. They didn't stay there long. Art's hand was free, and he used it to take hers, and set it on his cock. Tall as he was, tiny as she was, his length was resting against her thigh above the knee. She couldn't see, unable to raise her head with both wolves nibbling at her ears, kissing her neck, her lips. But she could feel it, the thickness of it, the subtle veins and grooves. The size. Matt did the same, stopping his caressing to take her other hand and set it on his cock as well. And once she gave it the tiniest squeeze, the man resumed massaging her clit, until it was singing and her body was squirming.

Two men, two shafts in her hands. She could hurt them, do something horrible to them, make them pay for humiliating her like this. But as Art raised his head a bit more, and put a few of his warm kisses on the corner of her lips, she turned to look at him. He was smiling at her, waiting, expectant, hopeful, and ... and ... happy.

Maybe she could stab them later. For now, she closed her eyes, leaned in, and kissed him.

Art grinned into her kiss, but he didn't pull away. Good, cause it took everything she had to find that courage. They'd been kissing her, touching her, stripping her, groping and fondling — gently thankfully — her body, but she hadn't done anything to them yet. So she kissed Art, and started to lightly stroke his member. Her efforts earned a quiet, deep rumbling sound from the titan, and she trembled as the vibration of his voice filled her.

A soft caress of Matt's fingers along her dripping pussy's lips jolted her back to awareness. She opened her eyes, and Art pulled away with a wink before his free hand reached up to tease her hard nipple the way Matt was with her clitoris. Matt nudged his nose to her chin, and she turned her head to look at him. Those deep green eyes, god damn it. She melted all the more as Matt leaned in, and she brought her lips forward to meet his. A couple of massaging squeezes and strokes of his cock for him too.

Art's fingers drifted down, walking down her ribs, her stomach, her hip, and between her thighs. She thought he was going to replace Matt's hand, but his fingers cupped her thigh, and he pulled her legs apart a little. His fingers reached further up her thigh, knuckles no doubt nudging against Matt's hand; didn't seem to bother them. Without pause, Art's fingers started to press between her tiny folds, until they found her entrance.

"You are drenched," he said.

"Cause ... cause Matt keeps ... t-touching me." She frowned at Art, but it only lasted a moment before her mouth opened, and a whimper came out of her.

Whimper turned to loud mewl as Art pushed two of his fingers into her clenching pussy, and pressed them up against her walls toward her belly. Matt didn't seem to get the message though, and he continued to caress her clit as Art pushed against her g-spot in slow, deep pulses. And each made her clench down on him, body desperate to control the overloading stimulus of two hands playing with her.

"W-Wait ... it's—"

"So. Damn. Tight." Art's voice came out as a guttural growl, and Natasha's eyes went wide as the wolf angled his head to set his teeth against her neck. No bite came though, except for the occasional playful nibble. As he kissed her neck, his fingers started to speed up,

pushing up against her insides a little harder, a little faster, catching up with the rhythm Matt had already been working on.

Too much too much. Attempts to continue stroking their members failed, and she put her hands on their hips instead, holding onto something as the orgasm hit her. She looked up at the ceiling, and closed her eyes as the bliss worked through her pelvis. Her legs spread more, and her hips pushed toward their hands to meet them.

“S-Stop,” she managed to say between her squeaks. Too much, almost painful stimulation on her clit, and her insides were squeezing hard enough to leave her a wriggling mess. Matt and Art stopped, immediately at that, and she managed to crack her eyes open to see their smiling faces as she came on their fingers. She could feel her juices dripping down her body, on Art’s fingers, a lot of it, and she blushed until her face felt like it was on fire. She covered her face with her hands, but continued to squeak and mewl as the sparks worked through her legs and made her toes curl.

But, at least they stopped when she asked, and once the waves started to pass, she lowered her hands again. The two wolves had their heads propped up on their palms, elbows to the sheets, and they slid their wet hands from her pussy to rest them on her belly. Smiling, grinning, eating her with their eyes.

“Did you want us to stop completely?” Matt said. “Or just for a second?”

“... s-second.” She bit her lip, and looked down at their huge hands on her small body. Two hands on her at the same time, making her cum, making her blush and mewl and soak the bed.

Art reached behind him. She couldn’t see what he was doing, but she could hear the drawer of the nightstand open, and see his evil grin. He brought his arm back over her belly, and set something cool on her flat tummy.

She blinked and looked at the small bottle ... of lubricant.

“Jessy insisted,” Art said as he leaned in, and put his lips on her earlobe again. “She really gave you up, said you enjoyed all sorts of experiments in your private time.”

“J-Jessy! I’ll kill her!” She tried to sit up again, but Art and Matt both had her pinned back down by the shoulders in an instant.

“Hey.” Matt’s lips offered her neck a kiss, and then her shoulder as he leaned back a bit. “Don’t have to do anything like that if you don’t want to. But, we know what we’re doing, and we think you’d enjoy it.”

Every inch of her was blushing red, and she raised her hands to cover her face again. No no no no no no no no this wasn’t happening. She’d told Jessy that in confidence, and she left out the details! That jerk didn’t know what Natasha experimented with ... with ... She was guessing! Guessing, right?

Jessy did know her well though, and it wasn’t like Natasha was the best at hiding her feelings about things. Jessy pestered her about anal and double penetration stuff before, and Natasha dodged the suggestion. Dodging was as good as admitting for Jessy, apparently.

“You ... you ... you know what you’re d-d-doing? This isn’t porn! You can’t just ... r-ram things in, and ... stuff.” Oh god what was she doing.

“Gentle as you want,” Art said. He put the bottle back on her stomach — it’d fallen in her fury — and popped it open. The evil grin of his wasn’t going away, and it only grew as he turned the bottle upside down, and started to trickle the thick liquid over her sex.

She gasped with the sensation of the cool liquid over her pussy, which was boiling hot and dripping already. The wolves didn’t care

about the blankets, evidently, and they coated her with the lube before closing and setting the bottle on the blankets.

Art was the first to put his hand between her thighs. He leaned over her as he did, smiling down at her. Big bad wolf and she was feeling more and more like Red Riding Hood every passing second. So cliché, but so very true; she was completely hidden on the bed, surrounded by muscle and heat and grinning beasts.

She shuddered, and frowned at Art as the man started to caress the rose of her ass. The electric tingles started up in seconds.

“You ... you’re a ... you’re mean.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Can’t help it. I really like you, and I hope to be doing things to you on a frequent basis.”

“F-Frequent? I—nn!” She covered her mouth with her hands, and glared at Art with as much malice and rage as she could muster as the man started to work a finger passed her sphincter. Her hands went higher, covering her eyes instead of her mouth.

More fingers found her, but she refused to look. Better to stay hidden, pretend this wasn’t happening, that she wasn’t trapped between two men and one of them was gently opening her ass. The other man’s fingertips tickled along her drenched and coated lips before he sank his digits into her pussy, and pressed upward toward her belly. She squeezed on both sets of fingers, hard, and trembled. Not fair not fair not fair.

“Certainly hoping this isn’t a one night thing,” Matt said. He pushed his fingers in deeper, and deeper, and pressed up toward her belly until she was gasping, until she felt the deepest spot inside her pushed up against her and making her whimper. That spot, deep deep, he pressed it up toward her stomach with a curled finger, and her ass raised to push her hips against him.

Couldn't help it, couldn't stop herself. Deep, so fucking deep. But pushing her hips up tightened her ass, and Art's probing finger was forced to stop as Matt stroked her insides.

But, Matt stopped. She still didn't expose her eyes, refused to look, refused to meet what was undoubtedly some very evil grins. He gave her a moment to let her butt come back down, and Art used it to sink his finger deeper into her. And deeper, finger finding the insides of her ass. Matt seemed content to only lightly press against her depths now, while Arturo started to slide his finger back out. Only to start pushing two in.

“W-Wait! Wait, please!”

“Not the safe word,” Art said. His lips found her ear again, under it, and trailed kisses along her neck as he started to work two of his fingers passed her sphincter. He went very, very, very slowly thank god, massaging the lubricant into the sensitive skin, and spreading the two fingers apart between nudges, stretching her.

He didn't stop until he'd sunk his fingers in to the final knuckle, and started to press up toward Matt's fingers. Two sets of fingers, inside her, filling her, and now pressing up against her. Matt resumed fingering the deepest spot of her pussy while Art pressed against it from deep in her ass; almost felt like they were in her stomach.

They pressed harder, working their fingers together in a rhythm motion, each press of their digits reducing her to a mewling mess. So deep, so full, and they knew how to get her body to respond whether she wanted it to or not, using that deep pressure that made her muscles clench and hot sparks run up and down her legs. And they worked with each other, each taking turns feeling her depths, massaging places she only ever touched with her toys normally. They were gentle, but persistent, curled fingers bathing her insides in pressure.

She lowered her hands from her eyes, and eventually set them back on her chest, palms over her nipples. Trying to hide the shame of her arousal, pathetic as it was at this point. She was whimpering, squeaking, and pushing her hips toward the two men's hands. Her juices were joining the lubricant, and her legs were spreading on their own, until they couldn't get any further apart with the two massive men's bodies blocking them.

They both set their lips on her neck, and started kissing her again, nibbling gently on her jawline, or kissing her when she turned her head ever so slightly. And as they did, they moved their hands a little faster, a little harder, fingers opening her up and stretching her deeper. They found a new rhythm, the two of them pressing up against her depths near her womb, toward her stomach at the same time, making her ass lift off the blankets a tiny inch with each thrust.

For a moment, Natasha remembered the sight of Jessy through Damien's telescope, and how it looked seeing the woman being opened up by the fingers of four men. Did she look like that right now?

Too much too much. She closed her eyes and pressed her arms tight to her chest as she came. The two men continued to kiss her, the heat of their bodies flooding her until she started to sweat slightly; the blush would let her do everything she did while alive, even the embarrassing things. And, as powerful waves of pleasure worked outward from her pelvis and into her clenching muscles, she squealed. They weren't stopping. They kissed her, suckling softly on her neck, while their fingers continued to fill her, opened her, stretched her ass and pussy with their deep, pressing fingertips.

Her squeals turned into broken things, barely more than squeaks as she felt more of her juices soak down the fingers of the two men, and down her thighs and butt. The bed was wet, and only getting wetter as the werewolves fingered her through her orgasm.

“Stop! Stop!”

Instantly, the two creatures stopped.

She reached out with her hands, and set them onto the hips of the two huge animals lying against her sides. Had to hold onto something, to brace herself as she continued to convulse and spasm, continued to clench on the fingers inside her and leak more of her cum onto them. They stayed inside her as the pleasure pulsed, but at least they'd stopped fingering her.

After a minute of horribly embarrassing noises and juices, she opened her eyes. The two wolves were smiling down at her, hunger in their eyes. Hunger, actual hunger, the sort that made her meep, and stare.

“Th-Thank you ... for ... stopping,” she said between pants. “I ... couldn't ... umm...” She'd started seeing stars, but she couldn't say something that awkward. No way.

“We weren't lying. Any time you want to stop.” Matt set his lips on hers, and nudged them in a slow, circular sway. He was a good kisser.

“Though I'm hoping we can continue,” Art said, his lips finding her ear, even as Matt's lips danced on hers.

“... ok.” Trying to think straight was pointless. She understood that. She was swimming in arousal and orgasm aftershocks and surrounded by heat and blood and muscle and she was dripping with sweat and so much cum and she still had two men's fingers inside both her holes and ... and she wanted more.

Art smiled down at her, slipped his fingers free of her squeezing muscles, and grabbed the lubricant once more. He spared no expense with the liquid, and thoroughly coated his large cock with the clear liquid. Natasha sat up a touch on her elbows, and trembled



at the sight of him working his length, spreading the lube along the veined girth and over the ripe glans; he'd been leaking his own droplets of precum before, and she could smell the arousal coming off of him.

He took her hip with his wet hand, and turned her onto her side. She squeaked again, and stared at Matt as Art turned her to face the blond man, her butt against Art's hip. They had to adjust positions to accommodate the height difference; she was tiny, they were very much not. So her head was only at chest level with Art, and Matt, and she had to look up to see the giant's warm, smiling face, as his bastard friend slipped his thick girth between her thighs. She quivered when she looked down, and found the bulbous tip poking out from underneath her pussy.

“You ... you're uh ... y-you...”

Art pulled his hips back a little, grasped the base of his cock, and nudged the swollen glans along the crack of her ass. She shivered all the more as he took his time, nudging it along her wet skin before easing it between her cheeks, and resting its soft tip against the rose of her sphincter.

“Just relax,” he said.

Relax. Relax! Easier said than done. She was about to take a large phallus in the butt. On the first date! It wasn't even a date!

She lay there on her side, and stared at the wall of muscle before her that was Matthew. The giant's free hand reached out for her, guided her chin to make her look up at him and his sweet smile, before it drifted down her naked body and down between her legs again. Fingers found her dripping entrance, and began to again gently massage her labia, riding a pleasant line between stimulus and relaxing.

Art pushed against her ass a little, and Natasha pouted up at Matt as he did. Couldn't help it. She squirmed slightly as the man behind her began to ease the head of his cock passed her muscles, still stretched open by his fingers from earlier. But she still had to take a breath, relax, and let her muscles loosen as the wolf began to slide his shaft into her. Matt didn't stop massaging her as his friend began to penetrate her, he only smiled, and adjusted his fingers to include her aching, swollen clit in his gentle caresses.

"You ... you're both ... s-s-s-so ... mean, and ... and..." She reached out with both hands to press against Matt's chest. Solid iron. She turned her head to look at the man behind her. Art had his elbow down against the blankets, hand raised to hold his cheek as he smiled down at her, while his other hand held her hip and kept pulling her toward him. She thought she was surrounded by men before, but as Art gently sank another inch of his cock into her ass, she gulped on her fear.

It felt amazing.

Once Art had the glans of his shaft inside her, he paused and eased back a little, giving her the room she needed to relax her muscles again. He went deeper, pulling her body across the blankets closer to him. The angle pushed his cock's head up toward her belly, toward her pussy, and she shuddered as she felt the pressure sensation work its way deeper. Again, another inch, and Art let her relax before he pulled her in more.

"Mean?" Matt said. "You look like you're enjoying yourself to me."

"I ... I am." She blushed again and looked away from Art's evil grin. At least Matt looked less insidious. "But, this ... we've ... jumped like ... t-t-ten dates worth of build up."

"Sorry," Art said with the most insincere pout she'd ever seen.

But before she could reprimand him, he sank deeper into her, deep enough she thought she could feel him in her belly. She pouted up at Matt again, silently begging for some help, but it only seemed to spur the man on, and his fingers continued to caress her soaked clitoris until the pleasure was building again. Art worked with the motion, and eased her onto him another inch between her muscle clenches. So full, she was so full, so utterly full.

Art leaned down over her, and growled, deep in his chest, when the cheeks of her ass molded to his body. Balls deep. She whimpered openly, until Art took one of her hands, and brought it down between her legs. Matt moved his, and Art placed her digits where his cock was spreading her open, where his girth had stretched open her small hole, where his testicles were pressed against her ass and inner thighs. All soaked.

“You feel amazing,” he said.

“I ... I...” She tried to hold still, but every breath the blush of life brought on made her shiver. Art was stretching her deeper, wide, and his cock pressed toward her belly relentlessly. He wasn’t even moving and she could feel his hard shaft rubbing against her walls, each passing moment causing her insides to adjust to take in his girth. And, despite herself, she reached down and touched where his cock opened her, teased her fingers down the hot, wet skin and veins.

Matt slid himself in closer, until his chest was almost touching Natasha’s nose. As if the heat wasn’t already overwhelming, now each breath was a powerful concoction of musk and sex as the werewolf put the wall of muscle of his chest inches from her. And from so close, his cock rubbed its wet tip along her flat stomach.

“You ... you’re...”

Matt growled. God, so close, she could feel the rumble in his chest. It made her clench on Art’s shaft, made her wriggle and panic,

made her whimper, and leak cream down her thighs.

Art's fingers, still wet with lubricant and her own cum, found her pussy, and started to massage her clitoris the way Matt had just been moments ago. The sparks were building again, making her squeak despite Art's refusal to thrust. But, Matt and Art must have known what they were doing. Without words they were in sync, and where Art continued to caress her labia, massage and bathe her aching, swollen clit in tender strokes, Matt moved his hips down, and at the same time took her leg. With her on her side and one leg pinned to the blankets, Matt's wet fingers found her thigh, and he pulled her knee over his massive leg while his cock slid down her belly, massive glans leaving a trail of precum down her stomach, her bare mons, and down to her clit where Art moved his hand out of the way.

"Wait ... wait, it's ... t-t-too much. I can't b-breathe, I..."

"Vampires don't breathe," Matt said, and he pushed the head of his cock against her entrance.

She put her hands to his chest, her elbows tight against her ribs as she braced for him. But he didn't thrust like she expected. No, the beast only prodded, nudged his fat cock against her clenching opening, and eased in the thickness of his glans between her squeezing spurts. She mewled, loudly, and leaned her head forward to rest her forehead against Matt's sternum as the wolf gently started to push himself into her body.

And Art! The bastard Arturo started massaging her again, two fingers pressed to her clit and caressing her, even as his friend began the long journey of sinking inch after inch of his girth into her. She had no room left inside her, everything was tight and stuffed, and she could feel Matt stretching her apart, opening her far more than his fingers did. Bumps and grooves, the slight give of flesh against her squeezing, soaked muscles, his thickness fighting

for room inside her. She squeezed, hard, but the man continued to fill her up.

“W ... wait... , “ she said. They weren’t listening. And she didn’t want them to stop.

Matt slid in closer, until his legs were cozy with hers. She had one leg still straight out from her body, and both of Art’s against it. And now, both of Matt’s against it, while her other leg was hooked over his leg, and held there by his hand. They clearly had no trouble dealing with the intricacies of this, of threesomes, of dealing with six legs fighting for space, of getting ... very ... very close. Matt kept getting deeper, until she was sure maybe he’d get self conscious about being so near Art’s body. But, he kept pulling her toward him with her leg, and shifting his hips closer to her, until she was looking up at him, touching his chest that was an inch from her lips and chin, and silently begging for ... something.

Matt looked down at her, and smiled, big and warm. And so hot. So dreamy, and hot, and handsome, and god damn it. She reached out with her arm further from the blankets, and hooked it around his waist, his massive body, his muscles, and hugged him close as the wolf started to stretch her deep. She’d run out of room, but the beast kept pushing in, and she squeaked as his cock started to press up against the deepest parts of her.

“Gentle! P-Please, gentle ... gently ... it’s ... nnnn!” Attempts to communicate with the deadly creatures came to a quick end as Art started to stroke her clit harder, even as Matt continued to push into her, pressing against her depths, pushing her flesh deeper, stretching her apart. But he was being gentle, despite Art stroking her clit harder as his friend spread her open.

Art only stopped once Matt had sank himself balls deep into her tiny body, and she was on the edge of orgasm. Squealing, she pressed her forehead to Matt’s sternum again, hugged him tight

with both arm and leg, and hyperventilated, panting into the beast's body. So close, so close she could taste the pleasure on her tongue. Just a few more strokes, a few thrusts, anything and she'd cum. But they'd both stopped, and both stayed inside her, buried to the hilt.

"You ok?" Matt said.

"Am ... am I ok?"

"Yeah." Art reached behind him with his free hand. She couldn't see what he was doing, but after rustling around for a moment, he put his hand back on her body, now dry. Must have wiped it off on a towel, or maybe the blankets. That hand, big, strong, evil, crept up her naked body, and hugged her to his chest, his elbow to her hip while his palm cupped one of her breasts. "Never had a woman as small as you."

"As small? I ... I-I'm just ... one of your conquests! I..." She managed a frown, but it melted away as Art's hand drifted higher, higher, and his fingers found her collar. Soon, powerful fingers wrapped her throat in a soft, huge grip, and she turned her head to look up at Art.

She expected an evil grin, but the man was giving her the same warm smile as Matt.

"Not true," he said. "Like we said, not a one night thing. I like you."

Matt nodded. "I like you too."

She looked down, blushing, somehow still able to blush despite the absurd lechery of her current predicament.

Blushing turned into more melting as Art squeezed her neck. Just a little, just enough for her to feel the strength of his fingers, a little firmness, a huge grip, just enough pressure for her head to press

back against his chest. Enough pressure so she felt completely exposed. Vulnerable. Defenseless.

Her hug on Matt loosened, and she put her hands back on his chest as her body went limp. Utterly defenseless. Trapped, captured. Trying to do anything, with two werewolves pinning her, fucking her, penetrating her, would have been futile. Right?

Her hand started to circle Matt's chest, just the little bit in front of her, the bit of hair she found, and she smiled despite herself. It was useless to try and escape, she might as well just ... moan.

Moaning earned two growling rumbles from the beasts. Deep, bass-filled noises that she felt vibrate through her body. With their chests, their whole bodies squishing her in a sandwich of flesh and muscle, she felt more than just their animal noises. She felt their breathing. She felt their heartbeats, powerful, getting faster. She felt their blood pumping through their titan frames.

She felt them both start to move. "Oh ... god."

Matt kept his hand around her leg so it remained hooked against his body, and he started to push into her. With the whole of his length already inside her, his motion rubbed his body against her, his cock against her depths, against ... against Art, against how his girth was filling her up too. No room at all! Every gentle rock of Matt's tender motion was making her whimper, especially as he started to ease his cock out of her, and her muscles clenched down as hard as they could. The friction of his girth along her drenched, taut insides, and how Art made everything so, damn, tight, was filling her body with tingling waves until she started to see spots again.

And Art started to move too. Matt gently fucked her with long, deep strokes, but Art stayed inside her, deep, deep enough she could feel him pressing toward her belly, toward his friend. Art's motions were shallow, fucking her in slow thrusts only an inch deep, but

staying as deep as he could, deep enough her ass was pressed tight to his pelvis. All she had to do was lay there between them, with Art's fingers around her throat, with Matt's hand around her leg, and try to survive.

Easier said than done. As Matt sank every inch of himself into her, until again, she felt him stretching her deep, her breath caught in her chest. If he had thrust hard it would have really hurt, but he kept it slow, gentle, the thick head of his cock rubbing against her deepest parts and pressing against where Art's cock was pressing against too. Too much, way too much.

She came. Hard. Her arm hugged Matt tight, her other underneath her gripping Art's wrist, and her leg hooked Matt's thigh, as the pleasure started to rock her. The two beasts sank themselves into her again, to the hilt, and slowed down for her. But they didn't stop. They continued to fuck her, gentle, tender thrusts, as she came all over them. Each spark of pleasure rippled out from between her legs and down into her toes, making them curl, making her body squeeze and tremble, making her eyes close and her voice come out in whimpering squeaks again.

Her cum came flooding. She whimpered into Matt's chest and hid her face against it as she quivered between spasms, each forcing her muscles to clench and for more of her fluids to leak out of her. She tried to stop, but the two wolves kept thrusting into her in a gentle, consistent rhythm, in sync with each other and each of them insuring they were both fully inside with each motion. Like cogs working together, working more of her cum out of her, until she could feel the warmth of it trickling down her thighs, over her legs, and soaking the sheets. She was leaking, all over Matt's cock.

The two beasts slowed to a stop, and she spent the next thirty seconds doing nothing but squirming on their cocks as the pleasure waves continued to work up and down through her body. She managed to look up at Art, and his fingers loosened into more of a



caressing grip, fingertips and thumb stroking the soft skin of her neck, as her ass squeezed on his girth. Matt did the same, grip on her leg softening but keeping her snug to his body, even as his fingers started to massage and knead the muscles of her thigh.

“You soaked me,” Matt said.

“I ... I-I-I ... um...” Good god she had soaked him. She didn’t normally do this, get this wet, only if she was very, very, very aroused, and feeling experimental. Not even with Jessy’s ghouls had she ever made a mess like this though. No use in denying it.

“You really like this sort of thing,” Art said. Before she could respond, or protest, he started to slide his cock out of her, only to push it back in once he’d removed half of himself. Her body fought to create room, to accommodate so much filling her up, until she was reduced to whimpers again as the head of his cock pressed against that spot, that deep spot where the head of Matt’s cock was stretching her inward.

Her insides felt like they were going to burst. They were both big guys! And she was a small woman! It was ... it was a lot of flesh trying to fit inside her. Warm, living, hard flesh, stretching her and ... filling ... her.

“You ... please, d-don’t ... tease me.”

“Us, teasing you?” Art chuckled

“You do tease her,” Matt said. His hand around her leg slid along her thigh, up her ass and waist, up her arm to grab her hand and bring it to his lips. Her fingers traced the scuff of his cheeks before Matt put her fingertips between his teeth, and ever so gently nibbled on her.

“I—nn!” She tried to say something, but Matt pulled out of her, and thrust back into her with a little more force. Not hard, not like a

normal sex rhythm might find, but with how big he was, and how little space was left inside her, a gentle thrust was more than enough to make her squeak, and make her arm and leg hug him tight.

They both started to fuck her. They'd been content before to keep their strokes gentle and deep, but now they were pulling out a large amount of their length, and again sinking into her. She could feel every inch of them sliding in and out, friction against the sensitive parts of her, aching, swollen, coated in more and more of her cum as she panted against Matt's chest.

Slowly, the two started to go faster. Over minutes, Matt started to thrust into her hard enough she felt her ass hit against Art. Thank god Arturo kept his pace reasonable, gentle. Rough anal sex was a no no for her, and Art knew it. Maybe he wasn't so evil. But Matt felt no such limitations, and he started to thrust into her harder, faster, each thrust earning a squeak. His thrusts were no longer as deep, giving her tender depths a break, but that didn't stop each stroke from rubbing along her squished flesh, from dragging along her g-spot until her body started to writhe.

She hugged the giant, and came again.

"You are a sexual little thing aren't you?" Art said.

She couldn't dignify him with an answer, only squeak with each of Matt's thrusts. They were hard enough to make her body bounce a little between the two of them, hard enough she could hear the slap of wet flesh, soaked in her cum. Hard enough to make her body spasm with each wave of bliss and heat.

But, at last, the giant came to a stop. He pressed his cock against her depths, and gently eased himself in further, stretching her deeper and deeper as he sank himself into her pussy until he was balls deep. And then, as he buried himself to the hilt and stayed there, more warmth began to leak out of her.

“Oh ... M ... Matt,” she said. Matt was rumbling, rumbling like a beast, and with his chest and throat not even an inch away from her face, every note filled her. So much life, heat, and the lulling glow of orgasm. She could feel it from him, even as she coated his cock in her cum. His own cum was filling her, coating her with each gentle nudge of the beast, and soon it too was dripping down her thighs. A lot of it. A lot lot of it. She would have peeked down to see if she had the room, but she could feel thick, flowing waves of cum pooling along her pussy’s lips and down her thighs to join the mess on the blankets.

Part of her thought maybe she should try and make his orgasm better, maybe try some of those things Jessy talked about, squeezing and milking and stuff. A much bigger part of her couldn’t get past her own pleasure as the bliss tore through her, as she gushed on his cock and hugged him tighter.

Art wasn’t stopping. While she came, while Matt came, the wolf behind her continued to thrust. He still never went hard, never hurt her, but that didn’t change that he was gently sinking his cock balls deep into her ass in a tender rhythm, while the two of them came. Every time the softness of the head of his cock reached that deep spot inside her, she moaned, a mewling loud sound, straight into Matt’s chest.

Only when Matt had stopped cumming, and she had finally stopped cumming, did Art give her a single, slightly-hard-but-not-too-hard thrust, and started to make his own rumbling groans. His hand around her throat tightened, and he pulled her back toward his chest. She was already against it of course, being pinned between the two beasts, but Art held her throat tighter, much tighter, and Matt slid his chest back a few inches to give her room.

She squeaked, just a helpless little mouse, as the two beasts filled her. Matt was done, but still hard enough to resume his gentle thrusts. Just to make her whimper no doubt. She couldn’t stop

whimpering! Couldn't stop mewling, and whimpering, and squealing and squeaking and getting juices everywhere, and now that Matt had pulled back enough for to see his chest and face, she blushed horribly. He was staring at her as Art came inside her, and dragging out the whole process with his gentle thrusts that had her melting.

Art's grip around her throat made her feel so ... powerless, defenseless. Vulnerable and unable to stop what they were doing to her. Not able to stop Matt from smiling at her as he gently fucked her taut pussy. Not able to stop Art from pinning her to his chest, from tenderly fucking her ass and pouring his cum into her. Not able to stop from mewling, rubbing Matt's chest of stone with her hands, and quivering as she squirted a little more on his girth. She forgot what the safeword was.

Slowly, Matt slipped his softening length out of her, and set the large thing on her thigh. Soaked, dripping with fluids, of several sources. The giant chuckled, a warm and inviting sound, and leaned down while shifting his body down as well, so his lips could find hers. Kissing. Tender, warm, delightful kissing, complete with his own quiet groans as his lips played with hers, tugging at them. And with Art still holding her throat, still milking the last few drops of his cum and pleasure into her ass, being kissed by Matt was ... so ... strange, and ... naughty.

At last, the evil man taking her from behind stopped. And when he pulled his cock out of her, she mewled into Matt's kiss. Warmth poured from her, flowing down her ass cheeks and joining the huge mess of fluids. He let go of her neck, and she looked down at her pelvis now that Matt was giving her room.

“ ... you ... you t-two ... are ... animals.” Her jaw dropped as she stared at the mess, at the thick streaks of white that lined her inner thigh of the lower leg, and at the literal pool of white beneath it. She

looked over her shoulder and down toward her ass, only to find the same massive mess, the same coating of white along her cheeks.

Art shifted down the same as Matt had done, and leaned over to take her lips into his. More kissing, more gentle, tender kissing. Kissing, as his hand roamed her naked body. Kissing, as Matt's hand did the same, caressing her leg, her hip and waist, her breasts.

"I think," Art said into her mouth, and winking at her when she opened her eyes, "we could use a shower."

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"Oh g-god oh my g-g-god."

She paced left and right on the living room carpet, towel wrapped around her. The shower had given her time to reflect, to think, to get the cum out of her. Very hot in the moment, not so hot in the aftermath. She frowned at them, then the carpet of the room, then them, then the room again.

"You ok, Tasha?" Matt said.

The two men returned from their showers, quick ones, but long enough to get the mess of sex off their bodies. Wearing nothing but a pair of jeans each, they sat down on the couch, and watched her pace.

She took a couple of peeks at them. Something about fit men wearing jeans and nothing but jeans was very appealing. And all the Uratha were fit as hell, built for fighting and hunting and tearing and clawing and ripping things open. Matthew and Arturo were no exception, and she had to force herself to stop staring at their bodies, their abs, their shoulders, their chests.

Like a young girl looking through a dirty magazine. The fuck was wrong with her? Blame Jessy!

“I’m ... I d-don’t know! This is v-v-very not normal. This is ... two guys!” She pointed at them with one hand, index finger for Art, middle finger for Matt.

Art shrugged. “So?”

“So! S-So, it’s ... weird. We, we’re ... this—”

Matt put up a hand. “You didn’t enjoy yourself? Felt like you did.”

She wasn’t blushing like anymore, thank god. She’d be a beet otherwise. “What about after sex! What about w-when we ... want to watch a movie, or g-g-go out, or ... or cuddle, and be romantic, and stuff.”

They both shrugged. “I like you,” they both said, in unison, again.

Art smirked at Matt, elbowed him in the side, and reached out to take Natasha’s hand into his. “Stop worrying about that. Matt and I are best friends, and we’re used to sharing everything.”

Yeah, she got that. Threesome sex was always fraught with complications; she knew that from her diligent research. Men were rarely comfortable with it, and that lead to problems. Then there were problems with positioning, where to put your legs and stuff. Then there were problems with the actual penetration, and how to go together at the same time, and things touching each other.

Matt and Art apparently had no issues with any of that. They were very comfortable with double penetration, and very good at it.

She yanked her hand free and used it to hold her towel tight to her body. “That’s not romantic! You d-d-don’t g-get it. I’ve always wanted ... a romance! A m-man t-t-to hold me, and ... and be ... kind and tender with me! You know? Hold my hand, and c-c-c-comb my hair, d-do my nails, and ... kiss me.” And doing all that stuff with two guys was weird. Weird!

They didn't seem to agree. Matt took her right arm, Art took her left arm, and they pulled her toward them. The towel fell, and she struggled to try and pick it back up, but they didn't let go of her hands again. Just like last time.

Naked, with her wet hair wrapped in another towel over her head. She looked ridiculous, but the two wolves didn't seem to notice or care. They looked her up and down like a meal, and pulled her in close until she was between their knees.

"We're not human, Natasha. Neither are you," Art said, grinning. "Think we give a damn about normal?" The evil, beautiful bastard put a kiss on her nose, then her lips, before kissing her fingers in his hand.

"Art can comb your hair, and I can do your nails." Matt, grinning the same evil grin as Art, also put a kiss on her lips.

"But ... b-b-b-b-but what if ... another girl ... you know."

"No other girls." Art let go of her hand. Matt too, only for Art to grab her by the waist and pick her up.

"H-Hey!"

Like a child, Art laid her across his lap so her head rested on his arm, her butt fell between the two wolves, and her legs fell across Matt's. She tried to get up, but of course her rebellious efforts were quickly squelched, Art using his other arm to pin her back down, and Matt pinning her legs down on his with ease.

"It's an exclusive relationship," Matt said. "Sorry if it's odd for you. But we really like you, and we're not letting you go." His hands took one of her heels, and he raised her foot before putting a kiss along her ankle.

Exclusive relationship. No one else, just her, and her two werewolves. She stared up at Art, and then at Matt, as the two huge beasts chuckled and smiled. It was going to be a very, very weird relationship.

God, they were going to spoil her rotten.

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~~Antoinette~~

Her. Alone. Floor twenty-seven of her Elysium tower. Around her, her circular desk, and upon it a dozen screens, each portraying information. There were news reports about the tunnels, what little information she let escape into the news. There were Invictus reports that she had acquired through her many fingers, and Carthian reports as well, though those were often word of mouth from her spies. She had blueprints of her city up, and many highlighted points where the Uratha and the Begotten had been sighted, where deaths occurred, and the degree of which each was a threat to her city's veil.

Many of the monitors showed live feeds; her kine servants wore glasses with cameras in the frames, and others wore breast-pocket cameras, subtle, hidden. With her in her seat, she turned to face one monitor for a while, and digested the information it provided. Eyes on the Carthians, upon a group of them sitting around a corner near a territory the Invictus were building. Another monitor showed live feed of the Invictus, and their attempts to set up monitoring of their own on the Carthians.

None showed the contents of the abandoned tunnel section. None showed the areas where Fiona had been finding her prey, where the Azlu took advantage.

She frowned, then sighed until the frown faded. Leaning back in her chair, she brought up her hands to her lips, fingers netted together, elbows to the arms of the chair. Had she been foolish to



trust the Uratha at their word? Perhaps, but not because the Uratha were lying; they had not. Rather, it was foolish to trust others that events will progress as they predict. Thus, it would have been prudent to begin monitoring the tunnels beneath Devil's Corner after Avery's message to Jack. But she had not; it would have been terribly difficult to monitor the tunnel depths without the Uratha knowing.

But maybe she should have. Doubts crashed against her, water upon the rocks of her mind. And they broke with time, as they always did. No, she had made the correct choice, when her two choices were poor. She had to entertain the Uratha their hunt, and be oblivious to it without the means to survey their work in those tunnels.

And that infuriated her. For so long she managed the silly games of her fellow Primogen, their spies, their espionage, their cold war. Dealing with their webs of deceit, and defeating them at their own game, was her world for so long. Such blatant violence from the werewolves, claw and muscle and savagery, so direct and aggressive that it made her methods inadequate. She would have to do better, adapt, break the wolves if necessary. If she could not, she would have to banish them. If they would not leave, she would have to kill them.

She reached across the desk and picked up her sword. Not since after Simon's departure had she created the blade, a short thing of maybe sixteen inches, with the simplest of handles: black, with a spiraled grip. The sword blade was silver, mixed with other metals to keep its hardness intact. More than strong enough to cut through muscle, sinew, and bone.

She put the blade down, and turned to look at Daniel

"I do wish I could meet Simon another time. I would plunge this blade through his idiot skull and be done with it."

“... understandable,” the man said, pressing his glasses to the bridge of his nose with an index finger. “But, Avery seems more reasonable.”

“Yes, she does. A pleasant, if unwanted surprise. I do wonder what happened to Simon; I should ask her. But I fear upsetting her...” Saying the word fear earned a scowl from her, and she slammed both her hands onto the flat side of the blade before her. “I should not fear her.”

“Fearing a werewolf is understandable.”

“I do not fear her strength.” For all Avery’s power, Antoinette felt confident she could best her. Indeed, she was more than capable of taking on that Goliath of raw, animal strength. It would not be the first time she had fought a werewolf; memories long faded, blurry, and filled with blood and pain. And this time, she was properly armed.

“But you fear the damage she can do to your city.”

“... yes.”

Daniel nodded, and started to pace in spot, slowly, eyes staring ahead like a statue, gloved finger to his lip. “Based on what you told me, this isn’t the same situation.”

She sighed, sat back in her chair, and pulled her hair over her shoulder to begin combing it with her fingers. “But Avery is still Avery. Eventually, Jacob will get involved.”

“I looked where you told me. Far as I can tell, Jacob was involved, but only after the arrival.”

“After ... There were two of those monsters, and Natasha assures me that that was, allegedly, a very unusual development. Perhaps Jacob is the cause?”

“Maybe.” Daniel stopped by the window and looked out over the city. The glass was a particular sort in its one-way distortion; they could look out, but others looking in saw only blurs. “He’s been doing something with his blood magic, as you suspected. But I could not figure out what.”

“ ... you could not?”

He shook his head. “I know whatever it was, was aimed at Avery.”

“Did he speak to Azamel?”

Daniel nodded again, and reached out to pluck her sword off her desk. No doubt Daniel had fetched his own silver sword, for the inevitable need. It was undoubtedly hidden within his drab trench coat even now, perhaps strapped next to his usual sword, far larger than hers, unwieldy and, in her opinion, almost absurd. But the man was comfortable with them, and had proven his skill a thousand times over during their partnership.

And as if he was unsatisfied with the size of hers, he swung it around a few times, each swing a perfectly balanced and natural movement. She raised a brow and watched him, and smiled after a time as Daniel nodded to himself, slashing the air a few times more for each nod.

“I’m not sure what he said to her either. Or Garry.”

“Garry.” She sighed and squeezed on her hair, before she resumed combing it. “I fear your outing was for naught then.”

He shrugged and set the short sword back upon the table. “Except we know Jacob has been talking to those two.”

“His talks with Garry are inconsequential. His typical games, pitting the Carthians and Invictus against each other.”

“Maybe. He talked to both, and then returned to perform his crúac ritual.”

“The same night?” That was unusual. She turned toward one of her monitors, and using the touch screen, expanded the view the camera had of the canyon at the edge of her city. Night vision, to deal with the darkness Jacob harnessed there. All quiet on the western front. Of course, Jacob’s gift for obfuscate rivaled Daniel’s; if he wanted to be hidden, she would have to catch him with her own eyes to find him, not a camera.

Daniel came around the opening in the surrounding, circular desk to stand beside her and look at the camera feed. It was pointless, but nevertheless. “I know,” he said, “that he’s pushing Garry to fight Turio, McDonald, and Mire about the Mirrden area. More so, as of late. But what he spoke to Garry about that night he visited Azamel, I do not know. And of the ritual, I heard only mention of Avery.”

“... no mention of Minerva?”

“No. But why else would he mention Avery’s name, other than in pursuit of revenge against her?”

“Why would he mention her name at all? Jacob is intelligent, and forever aware of his actions. He does not react, but acts. If he said her name, it could have very well been due to suspicion of eavesdropping. You did miss a Primogen meeting after all.”

He nodded, and turned to look at a different monitor. Antoinette followed his eyes to the live feed of one of her servants, and the thrall’s feed was pointed at Natasha’s new apartment building.

“She ... wasn’t there, when I visited.”

“Ah, then I imagine she is enjoying the company of her two new friends in Avery’s Meninna pack.” The girl seemed prepared to step out of her comfort zone with those two, and based on the details

Natasha shared with her, the two wolves both had an interest in her. More than the tiny Mekhet realized, Antoinette was sure.

“Is that wise?”

“No. Nor was it wise for her to join them on a misguided excursion into the awaiting webs of monsters. But she felt confident in her two new friends, and that she could trust them. Perhaps it is us who are biased and blind?” As painful as admitting it was, she had to concede that Natasha, perhaps foolish in her choice, was not a foolish person. If she felt she could trust the two Uratha, maybe there was a bridge to be built from that friendship. Antoinette had assumed Jack would be the tool for such political machinations, but maybe Natasha would be instead.

“Perhaps...” The man reached over his shoulder and withdrew his sword from behind his back, where it was hidden within the coat. Impractical place to hide a sword, but the man had half a millennium of practice. “I’m not convinced. Avery did not just kill Minerva, she tore her apart.”

The Prince steeled her gaze and looked her sheriff from sword to glasses. A silver sword, like her own, custom made and infused with other metals, but still mostly silver; the intent was to cleave werewolf flesh, not wood.

“... we will remain vigilant. If Avery oversteps her bounds, then ... instead of escalating to exile, it may be in our best interest to simply kill her and her pack.”

“Including Natasha’s new friends?”

Antoinette sighed, and motioned for Daniel to put the sword away. “A last resort. But, they are a pack. What one does, they all do.”

“... indeed.”

Indeed. They did not want to say it, and the two of them stared at the monitor displaying four different camera feeds of the apartment building the Uratha had been granted by Garry. And beside that monitor, two more, again with live feed from a host of hidden cameras and several of her thralls. And Antoinette was not the only source of eyes upon her inflow of visual information; a host of thralls within her tower devoured it with a fine-tooth comb, for any and all pertinent information.

It would soon be time for her to expand her purview from information, espionage, and politics, to also include brutality and violence. Not since the purge had she embraced such measures. But with monsters and wolves stirring chaos, the necessity was becoming apparent.

She sighed, and let her mind drift to Jack. If the boy could soothe the hearts of others as he did hers, perhaps violence with the Uratha could be avoided. But it did appear that the wolves were staying, and eventually, no matter how hard she or her love tried, sooner or later someone would respond against the other with violence. And, above all, she suspected Jacob.

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~~Beatrice~~

“Wow,” Jennifer said. “You’re like a super hero.”

Beatrice raised a brow at her friend, and shoved her in the shoulder. It was the two of them, sitting in her alcove and watching some trash show on her laptop. Not exactly what she should be doing, considering all the fucking insanity going on in the city right now, but she felt she deserved a break.

Still hadn’t told anyone about Damien though. Better for everyone that way.

“Don’t be fucking stupid. It was trying to kill me, and I was trapped. Did the only thing I could do.”

“If you weren’t trapped, would you have run and let your friends die?”

“No, but—”

“Hero!” Jennifer sat back up straight and got in close, legs nudging, before she started watching the show again. The girl always seemed ready to jump Beatrice, try and kiss her or something, but she never did. Must have respected Julias’s wishes, at least a little.

“I—” She stopped herself as she heard some clap clop of shoes to the stone, and a few words from Aaron. Jacob was back then.

Sighing, she got up and walked out of the alcove. Time to talk to the man, maybe get a second earful. Maybe some garbage about risking the Masquerade. Which wasn’t garbage, but the Prince was overestimating the threat of pissing off the wolves; they wanted secrecy as much as the Kindred did. The Begotten, on the other hand, Beatrice couldn’t put her finger on. Not Azamel, at least.

“Jacob,” she said, as old eyeless came walking past the blood bowl. New blood was in it, still wet, despite that Jacob had been missing for a couple days now. The fuck was he up to? “Suppose you know already.”

“Yeap.” He smirked at her as he walked past, and gave her a half reassuring, half condescending pat on the shoulder. “Surprised you’re still alive.”

Wow, she liked her new boss. Should have known he’d let her make her own mistakes, and not yell at her for them like some sort of dad.

“It was quite the shit show, but everyone lived ... except that one werewolf, Stephanie.”

Jacob stopped once he was a few feet past her, and took a moment to glance over his shoulder. The grin on his face froze her to the core.

“I know.”



# Part 4

## Chapter 39

~~One Week Later~~

~~Jack~~

“Second fire this week,” he said.

Amanda knelt down, and ran her fingers through the ashes. “Poor Barry.”

The two of them stood on the street corner, and stared at the destroyed apartment building. The edge of South Side, closer to North Side. Not far from the Uratha and the building Garry gave them, and touching Carthian territory too.

“First fire didn’t get a Kindred though.”

The Mekhet shrugged and dusted her gloves free of ash. “Yeah, but Monica used to live there. She only moved deeper into South Side two days before that fire.”

He sighed, but nodded, and squatted down beside her. Police tape around the place kept everyone at bay; everyone being no one. This close to North Side, people minded their own business and kept to a decent sleep schedule. A rough, but not super rough neighborhood. A nice neighborhood, kept that way by Garry and his covenant. Which, Jack thought, was pretty stupid. It wasn’t a Kindred’s job to cultivate the attitude of people. He smirked at no one and shook his head as he looked over the remains of the destroyed building. The Lancea et Sanctum would disagree with him, and Damien probably would too.

“What did she say about the fire?” He also picked up some of the ashes, and felt them in his gloves. He’d made a point to start

wearing gloves; seemed like the thing to do. Cool, badass gloves, black, leather and stuff, the sort of gloves a professional wears. A professional assassin maybe, and he grinned to himself as he rubbed his fingers together.

“Nothing,” Amanda said.

“Nothing? We know she’s been involved in that Mirrden business.” Cause starting fights with the Carthians over meaningless territory was a great way to spend their time. Maria and Michael said it wasn’t just about territory, but blood, humans, their sheep, their sole food source, and their future. Jack figured they just wanted to show the Carthians that the Invictus were stronger. They were right, but they didn’t need to make enemies over it.

“Yeah but she says there wasn’t any fighting over the area she’s covering. Told me things had been clear as day for her.”

Sighing, he got up along with Amanda, and the two of them stepped out onto the wreckage of the building. No one had died — except for Barry — but some humans had been burned, many inhaled smoke, and overall the area was now considered dangerous. Old buildings spread fire if they fell in a bad way, and while that hadn’t happened here, it didn’t mean it couldn’t happen. And this far from South Side’s main district, the buildings were old and flammable.

Kindred did not like fire. But more than that, they didn’t like it when the sheep were spooked. It was hard feeding on kine who were constantly glancing over their shoulder, so if an entire district of people were feeling nervous about burning buildings, it meant younger Kindred might trip and stumble on a hunt they’d otherwise be fine with. It only took one, just one vampire to royally fuck up and ruin everything for everyone. So, as per the Prince’s orders, it was their job to keep that from happening. Dolareido was a great

place for Kindred, and it was their responsibility to maintain that utopia, and the Masquerade within.

But that wasn't the main reason Jack and Amanda were investigating the fire. This was a second fire, one that killed a Kindred named Barry. A young guy, only a little older than Jack, and a Gangrel. Young Gangrels were often troublemakers, but they didn't set fire to buildings, especially not when they were in them.

And the biggest telltale that something was up was that Barry was the only one that died. Sure, fire was a bigger concern to a vampire than a human, since vampires went up like kindling. But Kindred were more than capable of dealing with it with a little foresight. Kindred like Jack slept in buildings that were secure and borderline impossible to burn down or whatnot. Kindred like Barry often slept in hidden holes, secret, safe, secure, and kept a separate den for their living arrangements. That was this building for Barry, his den; the fire didn't catch him sleeping.

"Barry was also working the Mirrden job," he said.

"Yeah. I have no reports of any incidents with the Carthians about it though, not since that whole business in the tunnels and the Uratha." Amanda followed him along the piles of broken wood and fallen walls. A lot of collapsed rooms, and the five-story building's top two floors had collapsed down onto the center fire. Meant that trying to recover anything was impossible, with Barry's den right in the dead center of the extinguished inferno.

"I can't believe this is an accident." He pulled out his phone and took a few pictures of the pile of rubble, ash, stained walls, melted kitchenware, and some ruined couches, all half buried.

"Yeah but, this is a bit extreme for the Carthians. It's not like they just burn down buildings. And besides, Barry could have gotten out anyway."

“Agreed.” He stepped down from the rubble and started to circle the building. There was a good twenty feet between it and the next building; normal for this far out from South Side’s central area. It gave him the room to walk the building’s contours, and stop to take some more pictures. Amanda did as well, and came to stand beside him.

The two of them had become work buddies. They got along, and had started handling contracts together, or inspections, or similar tasks. The sort of relationship that stayed at work, but had all the makings of a friendship despite that limitation. Jack liked it, kept things fun. Not that his work was supposed to be fun, necessarily, but if you can’t enjoy your work, bleh.

“What about the wolves or monsters?” Amanda said.

He shrugged, and climbed up onto the next floor. With so much of the building collapsed, gutted, exposed, little him climbing onto higher floors was easy.

“Can’t see any reason for it. I know Garry and Avery are on good terms with each other, and Garry isn’t happy about the Mirrden situation, but I doubt he’d ask for this kind of help from her. Not hearing anything from the network either.” He looked down at his partner from his perch, and squatted down near one of the melted ovens. Damn fucking hot to partly melt an oven.

“And the Begotten?”

That was a better question, and he hummed with his thinking. “We still don’t know what Azamel wants, why she came back. So, I won’t cross her off the list. But no reason to suspect her either.”

“ ... we still sure this isn’t a coincidence?”

“How often do buildings burn down in Dolareido?” Not very often. He sighed and rubbed his head—fuck now he had ashes in his

buzzed hair. Amanda giggled at him, and he kicked down a bent frying pan at her. “How much surveillance we got on this area?”

She dodged the frying pan with barely a glance, giggling the whole time. “Not much, nothing over here really to monitor. At least not until the Uratha moved in down the street. We got eyes on them, and reports say the Uratha haven’t been down in this area. At least not from that direction.”

“... I wonder if the Prince has more information.” He paced around the wreckage for a while, snapping some pictures, before jumping down the sloped mess and rejoining his partner. “Cause we got nothing.”

“How are you and the Prince anyway?”

“Eh? What do ya mean?” He raised a brow and eyed the woman closely. But she only returned the raised brow, like he was the crazy one thinking she was crazy for asking about his relationship.

“Jack, stop being so antisocial! You never talk about yourself, about normal things, you only ever talk about music and books and stuff.”

“Those are normal things!”

She rolled her eyes, and started walking, making their way around the building. She had better eyes than him, Mekhet and all, so maybe she’d see something he couldn’t.

“You don’t wanna talk about your relationship?” she said.

“I ... I mean I guess we can do that. What about you though, no relationship?”

“I um ... been getting kind of close to this kine I met.” She shook her shoulders a little, like a creepy crawly was going down her back,

and she giggled again as she took a few pictures of different corners of the ruined building. “And after that conversation you and I had, I started getting a little more aggressive with him.”

“Oh?” He never did quite understand talking about this sort of stuff, having a back and forth about the nuances of normal, everyday life. Much happier to talk about things he understood, like music and books.

“Mmhmm. I took him out to a movie.”

“You took him out? Not vice versa? I’m impressed.”

More giggles. “It was some shitty old movie, no one else there. So, after nudging against him and getting him to kiss me, I Kissed him.” More giggling, more squirming, and she almost jumped as she vibrated.

“A kine?”

“Yeah ... do you think that’s weird?”

He shrugged as he put his phone away, and slipped his gloves into his jacket pockets. They’d gone out wearing dark woolen coats; looked great with gloves, and gave them both a professional look. They could also have disguised themselves as cops or whatnot, brought fake badges, but Amanda opted for the nice coats. Jack had to admit, he liked the coat, a woolen trench coat that screamed ‘I’m an assassin and a lawyer’ all at the same time.

“No, but it is dangerous. I mean, sleeping with and drinking kine, even familiar ones, I get. But the moment it crosses the barrier into a relationship, you’ve got a classic dilemma. How much of your personal life do they get to see? How much truth are you willing to tell him?”

“I know! I know I ... I don’t know, you got me all excited to start being more aggressive and stuff.”

“Hey, I’m glad I did. Just be careful, you know? Make him a thrall if you want him around. Maybe a ghoul if you really like him. Just ... be careful.”

She nodded, and got in a little closer until they were almost touching shoulders. “I asked you first though. How are you and the Prince?”

“We’re fine.”

“Nooo! Not fine! That’s horrible.”

“I ... what?” He stopped, and raised both brows this time as the girl started shaking her fists in the air like she was freezing.

“Fine is bad!”

“ ... no it’s not. What the fuck? Fine is good!”

“No, it’s bad! Don’t you know girl talk?”

He facepalmed. “I didn’t mean girl talk fine, I meant actually fine. As in, we get along, we talk, about things I like, and things she likes. We have sex. We sleep in each other’s arms.”

“Oh, that is good.”

Yes, it was, and the memories made him smile. He nodded as they walked, and brought out his phone to call up an Invictus driver. “You going to the ball next week?”

“Mmhmm! But ... I shouldn’t bring Brad, should I?”

“Definitely not. I mean unless he’s the meal. Can he feed a couple hundred Kindred?”



She giggled again and made a small wave to the approaching car. “Nope. Oh, that reminds me of a scary story Michael brought up once, about the old Invictus balls Viktor hosted. Did you know he used to have a person tied down to a table, in the middle of a ballroom full of Invictus Kindred, and bled them dry. Cut their wrists and drained them into bottles for everyone.”

They both shuddered.

“I wonder what other sort of dark shit Viktor’s done in his past,” he said.

“I wonder what any of the elders have done. And so do they, I guess. You know their memories get hazy and their dreams get vivid and insane.”

“Yeah.” Weight forced his head down, and he sighed as the two of them stepped into the car. They stopped talking about elders once they opened the car door; didn’t want the driver to hear and report what they said. But his mind was already on the topic again, of Antoinette and her crazy long life, and that she’d eventually have to take a long sleep to suppress her ever-growing hunger. It’d be years, decades before she had to do that, according to her and Julias, but the thought still ate at him.

Him, without her, for years while she slept. And would she rise the same person? Apparently it was a thing some of the Ordo Dracul were good at, preventing the long torpor from affecting the mind.

He shook his head out, dislodging the negative thoughts as best he could. Stop thinking it about it, stop worrying about things you can’t change.

The driver took them back to South Side and back to the Xnomina headquarters. Amanda got out and waved at him, and he returned it with a nod and smile, before the driver started him back toward his place. He was getting hungry, and tonight was as good a night as any

to get some blood in him. Drop off the clothes, wear something a little less business, a little more street. Street for an Invictus meant a casual suit of course, without losing the edge of professionalism and the I'm-better-than-you shoes that cost as much as the suit.

Jack used to think it was a dumb game, dressing for the role, but it was starting to grow on him. It really was just a game, and putting on nice clothes was a fun way to play it, now that he had the money to fuel it.

He stepped out of the car, motioned for the driver to leave, and turned to face his apartment building. A few other Invictus Kindred lived here nowadays, and since the building was made by Kindred for Kindred, it meant burning down wasn't really a concern. Still, he wouldn't sleep well today, thinking of Barry. Someone must have killed him, or incapacitated him — a stake to the heart would paralyze a vampire — and left him for the fire. But who would do that? Why—

Clara waved at him from the front door of the building, smile on her face and arms folded across her chest, before one of them raised to comb her box-braid hair back over one shoulder. She really was a beautiful woman, a fit, lean body in jeans and a white tank top showing off her hard stomach, her tan skin matching her dark hair and dark eyes. Average height for a woman, which meant he was looking up at her by an inch or two. He was used to it though.

“Clara?”

“Yo Jack.” She grinned at him and motioned him over with her head. “Thought I'd drop by. Avery wanted to give you a heads up on some stuff.”

“You guys have phones now, ya know.” He shrugged but nodded, and stepped into the apartment building's lobby as he motioned for her to follow.

“Business talk should be done face to face, don’t you think?”

She had a point. Invictus did their important stuff face to face, half cause reading a person’s expression was just as important as delivering the information, half cause phones were not a secure means of information exchange in general. So he nodded again as he stepped into the elevator, and pressed in his number as Clara stood beside him.

She kept glancing his way, little glances, and she held her fingers in front of her together as she shifted her weight back and forth along her toes and heels. Sneakers. Such a stark contrast to him and what he was wearing, but then, that was Beatrice and Julias too. Maybe girls just liked men in suits? But he was taken, and Clara knew that.

And yet, the glances didn’t stop, subtle as they were. And when he caught one, she smiled, and held his eye contact for a little while before she resumed looking at the elevator door. He could smell life on her, almost hear the blood in her veins, and see it pulse on her neck. Kindred senses kicked into overdrive as he realized he was in an elevator with both a dangerous, deadly animal, and a woman who was attracted to him.

That was so very alluring, and he coughed as the Antoinette in his mind tore him apart. The Prince was the dangerous, deadly animal he was supposed to be attracted to, not this Clara. But at the same time, he was only human—er, Kindred. Not like he was going to do anything about it, but he couldn’t help but notice Clara’s movements, her body language, her interest in him.

He was an adult. A happily in-love adult. Totally an adult, who could be trusted to have a girl in his apartment who was attracted to him. Totally.

“So what did Avery have to say?”

“Just a heads-up that we’re looking into the burned buildings. Figured you guys are, but we’re curious too. We don’t want to go up in flames anymore than you do.”

Oh. Well, that was good to know.

“I was just going to get changed into something more casual before going out to eat,” he said. “I—”

“Oh, really? I’ve never actually joined a vamp on a hunt. Can I come?”

“I ... what?”

Clara chuckled as she kicked off her sneakers, and walked after him down the hallway of his place. Thankfully she stopped outside his room, and leaned against the wall as he mostly closed the door before he started getting changed.

“I want to come. In Tijuana we never got along with the vamps. Hell, it was war half the time. It’s a pretty nice change of pace here, not worrying about Kindred assassins and shit. Just being able to talk to you is unusual. Aaaaand I know people really like a vamp’s Kiss, when you’re not doing it mid violence and shit.”

“I ... yeah.” Yeah they do. A lot. He’d gotten better at meeting women in clubs and bars, and leading the conversation toward a romantic event. Course romantic event translated into him draining them dry until they went comatose; no sex or anything like that, he couldn’t do that to Antoinette. It wasn’t always easy keeping it sex free, considering how strong the effect was on some kine. There’d been one kine woman who’d started masturbating the moment he’d gotten his fangs into her.

The Kiss was good, but not so good as to turn anyone into a bubbling mess of arousal incapable of thought. No, it was Dolareido that was doing that, that had the kine so ready and willing to get

Kissed without knowing what it was. The Prince's city, breeding vice and comfort at the same time, and keeping the kine relaxed, horny, and ready for hungry vampires at all hours of the night.

“Ok, but fair warning,” he said. “Dolareido is ... well it's a pretty sexual place. The Prince and her companions built this city for hundreds of years to be a utopia for Kindred, and she runs the whole city, so—”

“Yeah yeah, Avery gave me the speech. You think I can't handle a little sexual awkwardness? Come on, I want to see the nightlife I've heard so much about.” More laughter, and she shrugged like she didn't believe it. “Hear her tell it, people are fucking in the club booths.”

Wouldn't she get a surprise then.

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“Holy shit.” Clara stared ahead at the pulsing lights of Bloodlust, and stood a little closer to Jack as the two of them moved forward.

“Never been anywhere like this?” he said. Or, almost yelled. The music was the same, bass-heavy, repetitive garbage that was closer to a heartbeat than music, and it was loud. But it did a good job of covering the noises people made.

“In Tijuana we had clubs and shit, but uh ... people ... mostly kept their clothes on.”

The two of them stepped past the bar near the front door, and toward the dance floor. As they moved on, Clara slowed down and stared at the booths, at the people in them. While people on the dance floor were dancing as expected, with revealing cocktail dresses and casual suits with shirts almost completely undone, it was the people in the booths that were the main attraction.

Jack recognized one of them, a Kindred. For a moment he wanted to panic, explain why he was at a club with a girl that wasn't Antoinette, but he poked himself in the temple a couple times and shook out the thoughts again. Stop feeling guilty, you haven't done anything wrong. If anything maybe Clara would get laid tonight with someone from the club; girl was so attractive that many people were glancing her way, and Jack was sure she'd have a few men, and maybe a woman or two, proposition her tonight.

Clara's clothes comment was more directed at the Kindred Jack recognized though. Clarence, a black man, Gangrel in the Invictus, with a shaved head and a few years on Jack. He was leaning back in his booth with his arms out limp at his sides, while a woman sat on his lap, her dressed hiked up so she could straddle and fuck him, and pulled down to expose her breasts. Hard to see much in the pulsing red of the light show Bloodlust provided, but there was enough light to see enough.

While Jack could simply not blush life, and keep any sort of physical stimulus or arousal at bay, Clara had no such tool at her disposal. He couldn't help but notice her nipples were getting hard, and pressing through her bra and tank top. But that was normal, she was alive and breathing and surrounded by sex, and probably feeling awkward as all hell. She did say she wanted to see the nightlife. Got what she wanted, but probably didn't want what she got.

After coughing a few times, she motioned with her head for them to continue. He smirked at the stubborn ox, and walked to the sides of the dance area, along the walls where the stairways were tucked away. Up and up, they stepped onto the second floor, where the music was a little quieter, and the booths a little more secluded. Where the kine felt even more comfortable getting sexual.

One of the booths held another Kindred, a woman of the Invictus, Ventrue, beige skin and short blond hair. She was still clothed, but two men on either side of her had their hands in her shirt, fondling,

fingering, and squeezing things as they both kissed her. For a moment, Jack thought she might see him too, but she started to Kiss one of the men, and any possibility of her looking beyond her current predicament was gone. Even noticing the presence of a werewolf would have been impossible in that state.

It wasn't just the two Kindred having sex either. One of the booths further in the back, one with no table so it overlooked the rest of the booths from a small stage, had two women and one man in it. One of the women was riding the man, and she'd taken off her dress entirely to do it. The other was leaning in, kissing the man one second, and kissing the woman's breasts the next.

"Wow," Clara said. First time he'd ever seen the woman looked so shocked. Normally, she dripped of confidence, but being surrounded by so much sex and flesh, in pulsing lights and pulsing music, seemed to break her composure. It earned a grin from Jack, but he washed it away quick before she noticed. Not like he'd been much better first time he came here. Hell, he'd been worse.

He nodded toward one of the empty booths in the dark, and the two of them walked over to sit within.

"This is how vampires hunt?" she said, sitting close enough to be touching shoulders. At first he thought it might have been flirtation, but as she looked around, he realized she was a touch scared. "This isn't hunting! This is fucking! This is voyeurism, exhibitionism!"

He shrugged and scratched his head before rubbing the buzzed hair a few times. "Kind of, yeah? Part of the deal here in Dolareido. There are a lot of ways to hunt, but seduction is a prime one in this city, or at least this part of it. Antoinette's efforts to keep it a vampire utopia at work."

"So ... what do we do now?"

“In Bloodlust? We wait. You’re here, so I’m sure we won’t have to wait long.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She turned her head to look at him, brow raised and the eye scrutinizing him.

“Just means that, when there’s a couple in a booth, any lone women are probably intrigued. Especially if the other woman is as attractive as you. Makes—”

She turned her head more, and smiled at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. Uh oh.

“You think I’m attractive?”

“What? Yeah, I ... er, well, yeah.” You dumbass. Foot, mouth. Antoinette is going to kill you. “You are, but I—”

“Yeah yeah I know, got a girl already.” She rolled her eyes, and reached out to set a hand on the table before them. Once she began tapping her fingers, she started to nod her head to the beat. “So, we just sit and wait.”

“Well, maybe if someone sits by themselves, we look their way and see if they look ours. Then, if eye contact phase goes well, we move onto engagement phase.”

“Phase?”

“Ah, yeah sorry. Just how I think about things.”

“Quite the nerd aren’t you?”

“Hey! ... yes, but don’t bring that up here. Video games, I’ve learned, are not a sexy topic of discussion,” he said, smiling and shrugging.



Clara burst into laughter, and elbowed him in the arm. “You might get along with David then.”

David? Oh David, he remembered him. Man could never look anyone in the eye, far as Jack could tell, but not because he seemed shy; man seemed like he was watching invisible butterflies or something.

“I—oh, there’s Natasha.”

“Natasha’s here?”

“Not Vola. This is Natasha Leblanc.” He gestured with a nod to the woman who was coming up the stairs. Leblanc was a beautiful woman, slightly tan skin, long blond hair, average height, and with a very pleasant hourglass figure. She wore a red cowl cocktail dress, tiny straps and plunging cleavage that showed off her massive breasts. Jack knew they were fake; didn’t have nearly the gravity, the collapsing weight, or the teardrop shape of Antoinette’s.

“You know her?” Clara said, one of her brows raising again as she watched the curvy woman approach.

“Yeah. Antoinette’s been teaching me how to hunt without using disciplines. I—hey Natasha.”

“Hello Jack. New girlfriend?” Natasha stopped in front of their booth and leaned forward to trace one of her fingers along it. Leaning forward meant showing off her cleavage, and now that her hair came down over her collar, show off the dyed color as well.

There was a time when Jack would have found her fake assets annoying, and his opinion of her would have dropped considerably. But, that was then. Nowadays people using fake anything as a part of their everyday life seemed like a small thing to get upset over. The ‘play the game however you want’ motto included kine and the nuances of the living’s life.

Looking at him, growing up a little here and there. Just a little.

“No, Antoinette’s still my girl. This is Clara, a friend.” He managed a tiny grin, slid out of the booth, and motioned for Natasha to sit down. She did, and he slid back in, to trap her between him and Clara. Much easier to convince her to do something if she felt trapped, make her feel helpless, like prey. Course that was all tactics for a first time seduction, while Leblanc had felt his Kiss once before already.

And he could tell she seemed excited, smiling, almost shivering as she made sure to slide up beside him when he sat back down. The dress had a mermaid sort of skirt, so no leg exposure, but it was also backless, and Jack could see how low the dress cut, almost exposing her ass. No underwear. Girl really was looking for some action tonight.

“Clara right? Looking for a good time?” Natasha said. “I know some men around here, and at least one woman, who would love to get their hands on a strong woman like you.” Easy to tell Clara was strong, considering the tank top. And Jack was sure Natasha was looking for signs of interest, of arousal, of intrigue and attraction from Clara. Hard nipples were a clear sign. “Or maybe some rock?” Or she was just selling drugs.

“I uh ... I’m good, thanks.” Clara smirked, but Jack caught a hint of embarrassment there. Funny, coming from a wolf, from someone who normally radiated self certainty and even a little animal aggression. From someone who’d licked him on the cheek.

“You sure? If you’re not Jack’s girl, you can—”

“I’m good, really.” She held up her hands and shook her head. “So you know Jack?”

“Yeah. Little man and his woman here really took me under, you know? Not sure how they do it, their secret, but they—have they

ever done it to you? The thing they do with their lips.”

“No, they haven’t. But I’ve heard good things. Wanted to see it in action.”

“Oh! Perfect. I really wanted to try that again.” Leblanc leaned in toward Jack, and then down to bring her lips close to his cheek. “Still won’t tell me how you do it?”

“Nope.” He shook his head, and smirked. “You know the rules. Gotta turn around though.”

“Done.” Natasha Leblanc turned to face Clara, and Jack could practically see the kine grinning through the back of her head. The woman knew what she wanted, and she had no hesitation in pursuing it. She wanted a Kiss, and she wasn’t interested in dancing around the subject for too long.

Lucky for Jack then. Dancing around the subject, flirting with it, playing coy, hinting without tipping his hand, he was utterly atrocious at all these things. Someone like Natasha made it easy for him.

She reached up, and pulled her hair to one side to expose her neck. “So, Clara, I’ve never seen you at this joint. Doesn’t really seem like your kind of club. I place you as more of a sports bar girl.”

“... I do enjoy sports,” Clara said. But Jack could see, over Natasha’s shoulder, that the werewolf wasn’t really paying attention to the conversation. She was staring at Natasha, and Jack, and her eyes had widened a little like she was about to see a mystery or secret. Which she kind of was, as Jack thought about it. The woman had never been friends with vampires, from what he’d learned about her past, her time in Tijuana and the violent history it held for Kindred and Uratha. This was a first for her.

It was kind of a first for Jack too. He'd done a couple of these sorts of hunts with Antoinette now, and was getting a little more comfortable with the sexual nature of it. Antoinette and him trusted each other, and the Prince wouldn't even sleep with her ghouls without his presence anymore. But that didn't change that, in a setting like a club already filled with sex, it plucked on his guilt, no matter how much Antoinette assured him seduction for a Kiss was perfectly acceptable. Doing it in front of Clara changed the pluck to a hard tug.

Just a hunt, Jack, just a hunt. You need food, and you're not sleeping with this woman, or Clara. The sexual nature of it all was a tool, as Julias and Antoinette have both taught you. Use it.

He turned to face Leblanc's back, and reached out to set a hand on her waist. She shivered a little, but settled and shifted back to push her body against his, bare skin of her spine and shoulders pressed to his suit. He breathed through his nose, and took in the smell of life, perfume, blood. So close, his ears adjusted to tone out the music, and focused on the sound of her breathing, her heartbeat. His fingers on her side squeezed a little, to encourage her to relax against him, until he could feel her body start to quiver again in excitement and anticipation.

And Clara was as well. She'd come in a little closer, until she was only a foot from Leblanc's chest, and her eyes looked the woman up and down a few times before they stayed on Jack's gaze. There was hunger in her eyes, a weird mixture of arousal, but also animal, or beastly hunger that Jack understood. Much as Kindred and Uratha were not the same, they both had a beast within, different but animal and hungry all the same.

Did werewolves eat humans? He had no idea. But, as he sank his fangs into Leblanc's neck, he did see an almost starving look on Clara's face. And he heard the tiniest moan from her, quickly overshadowed by Leblanc's.

“God ... yes.” The victim raised one hand to reach behind her, and stroked Jack’s buzzed hair. He smirked into the Kiss, and let the sweet, delicious, thick red pour over his tongue. It coated his taste buds, his mouth as he took the time to enjoy the taste, to pull the blood from Natasha’s body in a slow suckle. No need to rush, no hurry, enjoy the Kiss.

He peeked at Clara again, and smiled into his Kiss as he watched the werewolf stare. She was enthralled. She leaned in closer, and closer again, until she was only inches from Natasha, until it was too close and he started to feel a little uncomfortable. But she just wanted to see, and he wanted a drink.

Natasha on the other hand, must have thought something else.

“Oh ... you ... sure you don’t want to join in?” Leblanc said, and she raised her hands to Clara’s breasts. The werewolf sat up straighter, almost in a jolt, but didn’t move her hands. She looked down at where the kine was groping her, her tank top, and rubbing her breasts and nipples through the fabric.

“I ... um...” Much as Clara looked uncomfortable, she wasn’t stopping Leblanc either. “You just ... grab people’s tits on a regular basis?”

“When ... riding ... high? Yes, I do. Because ... I...” Natasha’s voice started to fade, but her hands continued to touch Clara. One of them drifted upward onto Clara’s neck, over her shoulder, and she gently held on as exhaustion started to take her. But even as the succumbing kine started to drift away in Jack’s Kiss, her other hand reached under Clara’s tank top, hooked the bra, and eased it up to expose one of the werewolf’s breasts.

Jack was sure the woman would stop Leblanc; no reason to just let herself be groped after all. But, she didn’t. Clara’s breathing got a little faster, and her eyes looked the prey before them up and down like a slab of perfectly cooked meat. Or raw, he supposed, if that’s

what a werewolf ate. And, because he was a total idiot, he couldn't help but watch, half absorbed in his Kiss, half stuck on looking ahead at how Leblanc's hand cupped the underside of Clara's handful breast, and circled her hard nipple with a thumb.

Such beautiful, tan-colored skin on Clara. The dark nipples, almost brown, were—holy fuck you stupid dick, this is how drunk people end up cheating on their partners. Abort!

He drank faster, and in seconds Natasha Leblanc slipped into the typical post kiss coma. A nudge and shift later, he had the girl sitting up straight again, head leaning back to rest against the curved seat of the booth.

“God, I am so sorry!” He said, forcing his eyes away as Clara, like himself, snapped back to awareness and pulled down her tank top.

“It's ok. Really. I mean, I knew what I was getting into, from the stories I'd heard about Dolareido since I got here. Just ... um ... little surprised.” She shrugged and smiled as she adjusted her bra and top, but she had a bit of blush to her; hard to see in the red light, but he could. “Didn't know they'd be uh ... throwing themselves at you vamps.”

“It's not like this everywhere, not this bad anyway. The Invictus district here in Dolareido is ... it's a pretty loose place.” Save the conversation, avoid the awkward, try and forget that you were staring at her breast. “If this was a bar in the Carthian district, I'd have to do a whole song and dance. Get the girl — or guy — drunk, manipulate their friends into leaving, get the person to like me. Then I'd have to actually pursue the Kiss a different day, when the person is comfortable with me, attracted.” He sighed and shook his head. All way too much song-and-dancing for him for a hunt. “Garry's people must hate having to deal with it.”

“I don't know. Lot of what you describe is fun for a lot of people. Flirting is fun.” She smirked at him, and winked. “It's almost too

easy, that they just ... I mean look at her.” Clara reached out, and grabbed one of the woman’s breasts. “Isn’t she worried about how she’s going to get home? Or getting molested in her sleep?”

Whoa. Jack watched Clara sink her fingers into the woman’s huge breasts, until Leblanc let out a groan. Still asleep though, no matter how much she stirred, no matter how aroused she got.

“Um, you’re the one molesting her in her sleep. And Bloodlust is a pretty safe place, all things considered. She’ll wake up, probably around sunrise, and drag herself home.”

He raised a brow as Clara continued to knead the woman’s breast, and raised it all the higher when she raised the hand to find the dress strap, slide it off Natasha’s shoulder to expose one of those ridiculously massive breasts, and again began to caress it. Leblanc’s nipples were still hard, and only getting harder and more engorged.

“I can smell the arousal on her. Moment you bit into her, it was all I could smell. This whole place reeks of sex, but it was just ... pouring off of her. I can smell how wet she is.”

Jack gulped. Until the blood in his belly dissipated, he was basically undergoing an unwanted blush of life; considering his circumstances, that meant an erection. Like being in high school again, getting boners all the time at passing thoughts of anything even remotely sex related.

“The Kiss is pleasurable, and relaxing,” he said, eyes on the table. Don’t look don’t look. “With the proper scenario and stimulation, it’s very sexual. If a hunt had to get violent, if I had to force someone, it wouldn’t be very sexual. Just a quick knock out, and—um, maybe you should stop groping the sleeping woman?”

“This is revenge. She groped me first. And god damn, these balloon tits. I could tie cement blocks to her and throw her in the ocean and she’d float.”

Jack coughed on laughter, and smiled as he turned back to Clara. She was putting the woman's clothes back on, thank god, and she smirked at Jack as she leaned forward to put her elbows on the booth. Still no hiding that she was aroused too, that everyone was, but Clara didn't seem to mind; at least not enough to maybe fold her arms over her chest to hide her nipples. Maybe she thought he couldn't see them in the darkness and pulsing lights? Doubtful, with how many Kindred she'd fought in her life.

"So ... we're cool to just leave her here?" Clara said.

"Yeah. If it were somewhere less safe, I'd have convinced her to come back to my place, drunk her in some alley, and then left her somewhere safe."

"Aw! That's so nice of you, after draining her blood and knocking her out like that." Laughing, Clara did some shifting and moving to switch places with Natasha. He kind of expected her to call the night done, after that little nuclear explosion of awkward; he'd seen her breasts and everything. Didn't seem to bother her though.

"You'd prefer I ... stopped drinking blood?"

"Well, when your only source of food is human life, you can say a lot of people would take issue with that." She got in closer again, and brushed her hair over her shoulder and ear. "The Uratha don't mind what you do here in Dolareido now, but I hear that some of your elders used to do some pretty dark shit."

"... yeah, that's true. Viktor did some pretty nasty things with kine, turning innocent people into buffets for his balls." Did Julias ever partake? Antoinette? Kindred were not kine, vampires were not humans, and they had the freedom to kill innocent people. But he never did, not on purpose, and as far as he knew, none of his friends did either.



But when you were a century old, or five, how much did the life of a random bloodbag matter? He shuddered at the thought.

“Things are pretty good here.” She nodded and gestured out to the people in the booths, the kissing, the fondling, the drinking. “Hisil is ... strange here, in Dolareido. There’s dark places, shadows that reach long, with the most nasty fucking things hiding inside. The history in this city has definitely bred some horrible crap. And the blood tower has things circling it I’ve never seen, spirits that look like they’re made of blood. Some aggressive, some not. And then there’s this weird ... I don’t know, peace I guess? Tranquility almost, despite the fact it’s a modern city. I’ve seen some serenity spirits drifting around in strange places, some others like love, safety, joy.” The werewolf laughed and leaned back as she looked up, digging through memories. “But god damn the amount of sex spirits? Dolareido could very well be the loosest place on Earth.”

He blinked, blinked, and blinked again. “I, uh, what?”

“Yeah I suppose you don’t know much about the Shadow world. You vamps can barely wrap your mind around your own fucking shit, far as Avery says.” She leaned in closer and smirked at him. “If you had any idea what was out there in the world, the whole world, not just the little corner of it that’s material, you’d shit yourself. I—oh, I suppose that’s a bad example for a vamp. But you get where I’m coming from.”

“More shit like that Azlu creature?”

“Yeah, and that’s just from our neck of the woods. The others don’t like to talk about it much, but there’s more out there than the Hisil. But I suppose you know that Begotten girl, you know there’s a dream realm where she’s from too.”

He coughed and looked around. Leblanc was going to sleep for a few hours at least, and the music kept any conversation from going far to listening ears. Plus Clara had her lips only inches from his ear,

whispering secrets that would make anyone tremble. He still remembered what it was like stabbing that spider, driving metal down through its body, how it had possessed a human, eaten others.

“I ... really kind of preferred it when science explained everything. Whatever happened to science?”

“Science can’t explain you or me or that Azlu or the other realms, or any of the things that go bump in the night.” She shrugged and motioned to the unconscious woman next to her. “How the fuck does your bite make humans melt, and give you sustenance? Could put it under a microscope, but any organic material a scientist could scrape off of you turns to dust. Convenient, isn’t it?”

“Very convenient.” He sighed and glanced past Clara toward the unconscious woman. It hurt, it really fucking hurt his insides to have to abandon science. Maybe not abandon it, but accept that there were things science couldn’t explain, maybe never explain. He’d spent so much of his life learning how to think logically, how to act instead of react, how to measure and weigh and analyze things objectively.

And every god damn night, his Requiem showed him that he, nor anyone, would ever understand anything. And that the things he didn’t understand were very much a danger, killing and slaughtering and devouring. Fuck whoever said: what you don’t know can’t hurt you.

“So,” he said, looking back to Clara and her slightly cocky grin, “Uratha go to this place called the Hisil?”

“Mmhmm. Probably a place you don’t want to go. You know how vamps are: love your cars, your money, your material things.”

“I ... yeah, that’s true. Though honestly, a lot of this stuff sounds like it’d be up Jacob’s alley.”

The werewolf sighed, but nodded. “That’s how shit with Minerva got started. But, if we’re staying — and it looks like we are — we need to play nice. Avery says we’re in the clear to talk about the Hisil, at least a little. And if I know Art and Matt, they’ll probably want to show it to Natasha.” She laughed and reached over to poke the sleeping woman. “Not this one, the tiny one, the cuter one.”

“Natasha, Art, and Matt?”

“Yeah, those three locking legs like they are, I’m sure the boys would love to show her interesting things. You ... you uh ... don’t know do you?”

“No, I don’t.” Well damn. He raised his hand and started rubbing his buzzed head, brow furrowed a little as he thought about it. It wasn’t like Natasha was sleeping with the enemy, but getting in bed with Uratha—”Wait. Both?”

“Ch’yeah. Those two are best friends, been sharing everything for some ... almost thirty years now? And they like to share girls, if they can find one into that that they like, who likes them. Guess your friend fits the bill.” She shrugged and motioned to all the sex and alcohol and dancing and drugs around them. “Considering the city, and considering she’s a vamp with quite a few years on her, I’m sure threesomes are pretty normal for her.”

He wasn’t so sure about that. Natasha was a whole new level of shy and closed off compared to most people. But, if it was true, good for her. Great for her even. But now he had the image of tiny Natasha between two werewolves, in bed, legs hooked up around each other.

Ugh, now he wouldn’t be able to look at her without getting the image in his head.

“The vamps in Tijuana were a mixed bag,” she continued. “Some of them liked sex, some of them loved it and had harems, basically.

But the older ones didn't. They just hid in their mansions or underground labyrinths, plotting, scheming, killing. Way I hear it here, your uptight elders are all dead now."

He nodded, and squirmed a little. Yeah, three of them dead, all his fault.

"Yeah I'm pretty lucky," he said. "I got into this mess, this crazy world, not even a year ago. My family lives closer to North Side, typical middle class you know? Had no idea this insane world of vampires and werewolves, and apparently sex and sex and more sex was going on right under my nose."

More laughter, from the two of them this time, and she leaned back in her booth before hooking one of her arms around Natasha. For some reason the werewolf liked her unconscious booth fellow.

"Guess the pack is going to have to get used to it, letting down our guard a bit. Seeing vamps fucking, without thralls and buddies and shit to watch their back? Feels weird. Hell even in Garry's area, much as the humans in the area act homely and nice, you can hear the moans through the walls, sometimes from different buildings. Everyone just lets loose in this town."

"It wasn't so bad where I grew up ... but maybe I just tuned it out after a while? I did love headphones."

Clara chuckled, and got up. With a few hand waves she ushered him out of the booth, and the two of them headed back down the stairs. Once they were outside, they both took in deep breaths.

"God damn fresh air," he said.

"The fuck you need air for?"

"Don't need it, but it smells nice. Feels good clearing out the nostrils of all that sex, and drugs, and sweat and drinks and who

knows what else.”

The two of them, on the street, laughing. Seemed fine, seemed ok, but a little voice in his head kept nagging at him. She likes you, despite knowing you have a girlfriend. This is unknown territory for you, be careful.

“But, officially, Avery says I should tell you that we do plan on staying, though I’m sure that’s common knowledge for you vamps right now, monitoring us and shit.”

“True, yeah.”

“So new info, she does want you to come our way in three days. You busy then?”

Three days? “Invictus don’t have any pressing concerns...” Other than the fire he’s supposed to be investigating. He kind of wanted to ask her, but maybe it’d be better to go through Avery? Clara would be more willing to share info, but Avery was the politically safer option. Less likely to make a misstep and accidentally piss someone off.

He’d wait for Avery, ask her.

“I’ll be there.”

“Good. Cya around kid.” The werewolf leaned in a little, and winked at him, before walking off.

And he watched her walk off. She was fit, with a touch of thickness to her arms with muscle, subtle broadness to her back, a tiny waist of abs, and a toned ass that the jeans hugged tight. And unless he was mistaken — and he wasn’t — she was swaying her ass as she walked, with more emphasis than usual.

Maybe twenty feet later, she was enveloped in the crowd, in the dresses and suits, the nice shirts and expensive shoes of the kind walking by. The flow of life and blood around him wasn't nearly as overwhelming with some blood fueling him, keeping his bloodlust low and his energy high. It let him focus on watching the humans walk by, and for his nose to adjust just enough for him to pick up on Clara's perfume.

She wasn't wearing perfume the first time they met.

Nope nope, not happening. She liked him, sure. He'd heard women found unavailable men more attractive, sure. But that was just a silly stereotype. And even if it was true, he had a woman, and a woman he loved. A woman who'd rip him into literal pieces if he betrayed her love.

Try as he might, he couldn't just suddenly forget Clara's beauty, or her beautiful breasts. Or that she'd licked him, down in the tunnels.

God damn it. He needed help. He trusted himself, but shit never went the way he planned. Hell, just putting his foot in his mouth could easily get him in trouble with the Prince, and it wasn't trouble he wanted.

He took out his phone, and called a ride back home. Mental note: call Julius later. Maybe he could help your dumb ass.

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~~Beatrice~~

She set the binoculars down to her neck to hang from the string, and sighed. Jack and that Amanda girl, investigating the fire she was investigating. Kind of hurt not letting him know she was looking into it too, but as much as the kid was her friend, he was still Invictus.

Probably trying to find out how their fellow Kindred died. The fire was made to look like it got him, but she doubted it; possible, just very unlikely. Younger Kindred died in such ways, getting killed because they underestimated sunrise, or not respecting how damaging fire could be. But this Barry fellow wasn't a fledgling, he didn't make mistakes like that far as she knew.

Her job tonight was complete. Now she knew the Invictus were investigating, but only sending a couple young neonates to do so. Gave her an impression of the severity factor, or lack there of, and that was something to report back to Jacob. But first, a little more recon.

She headed in the direction of Garry's, or more specifically, Garry's new werewolf buds. She knew he knew Avery, from what Jacob told her, but she didn't realize they were this close, for Garry to give her free reign of one of the apartment buildings. Not a big one, maybe only twenty rooms, but more than enough for the Uratha's pack, especially with one dead.

She winced as she remembered the look on Jacob's face. The way he smiled, the way he almost glowed with joy. He hated Avery, god damn he hated Avery, and that could have been enough of a reason to justify his happiness with the death of her packmate. But the way he said 'I know' made her think there was more to it. Made her suspect her boss of being responsible. How the fuck he could have been responsible, she had no idea, but it was the impression she got from his response.

Look at her, suspecting her boss. He'd have been proud of her, if she could tell him.

With her cloak of night hiding her, she climbed up onto a nearby building, pulled out her binoculars again, and watched the apartment she knew the werewolves were living in. One building dedicated to a group would have been dangerous in most cities, but

Dolareido was in a peaceful state, assuming Barry's death wasn't the work of some other Kindred. So having a bunch of vamps together in a single building was normal enough, and it wasn't like werewolves had the same weaknesses. If someone set their building on fire during the day, they'd just jump out the window or something. And pissing off tanks of death, tanks that could walk around during the day, was not a good idea.

So she sat there, and watched. Watched and listened. And listening turned into a more lucrative experience than watching the building, as the distant call of high-pitched moans tickled her ears. She chuckled and shook her head as she tried to find the source of the sounds. Maybe make her night of recon a little more interesting as least.

A few building hops later, she crouched low to the roof of one of the taller buildings, and looked down into the alley. She did miss this neighborhood. This place, this time of night, people were sleeping soundly. And the place was a pretty nice place, low income but with great people, nice people, so anyone who did bother going out this late wouldn't be feeling too threatened by nightlife. And that included young kine or Kindred looking to fuck in places they shouldn't be fucking. Exhibitionism was a kink she understood all too well, and with a pair of binoculars in her hand, so was voyeurism.

But she didn't expect werewolves to be fucking in an alleyway at this time of night. And fucking a Kindred at that.

Oh good god it was Natasha. Tiny, little, cute Natasha, with her pale skin and long black hair ... on her knees, with two Uratha standing around her. Arturo and Matthew, her friends. Both had their jean flies open, their cocks out — wow, fucking endowed, holy shit — and looking down at the tiny woman sucking on them, stroking them, playing with them.



Well, mind blown. Beatrice figured Natasha had a sexual side to her the Nosferatu didn't know, considering the girl was much older than her, old enough to discover kinks and desires people never knew they had, while she also wasn't old enough to become jaded to them. But she'd never expected sweet, innocent looking Natasha to be doing something this dirty, this submissive, in public.

Fucking. Hot.

Natasha was a Mekhet, and that meant she could spot shit others couldn't. And the two Uratha were god damn Uratha, and older ones at that. For all intents and purposes, they'd be able to catch Beatrice if they were looking for her, see through her cloak of night. But they weren't looking for her, they were enjoying some alleyway fun, so, Beatrice decided to stick around. What's the worse that could happen anyway, they spot her and the situation got awkward? Meh.

But god damn, seeing Natasha gazing up at the two wolves, that blatant look of meek and helpless on her face, mixed with so much arousal Beatrice could practically feel the heat coming off the girl's body from all the way up on the roof. Didn't figure Natasha to be that sort. Thought maybe the quiet little girl had a more of a dominant side, maybe liked to give orders in bed, tell her man — or woman — what to do, be a little dominatrix. A stereotypical view, that a girl's personality flipped once under the sheets.

Lesson learned. Natasha looked embarrassed, submissive, obedient, and horny-as-fuck all at the same time as she stroked their cocks. She took turns with her mouth, kissing the fat glans of one of the men, before the other, then back to the first again. And without either men even touching her except to maybe stroke her hair a bit, she was making more of those little mewls and moans, the sort of moans a girl made when she was really enjoying herself. A bit at juxtaposition with how both men were just watching, but that made it all the hotter. She doubted Natasha was the sort to fake anything in bed; meant she really was enjoying herself.

Beatrice, you're not here to spy on your friend's friend having sex. You're here to spy on the Carthians and Uratha and see if they're checking out the dead Kindred and burned building as well.

... five more minutes. This was just too good to pass up. Natasha was really, really enjoying herself, enjoying herself in that way that was intoxicating to watch. Sweet little girl, milking two enormous men of muscle and testosterone and blood, moaning and mewling onto their cocks as she tried to satisfy both of them at the same time. The way she was looking up at them with that half begging, half overwhelmed expression, was making Triss's knees shiver.

Ok, stop you pervert. Get going. Five more minutes? No! Exercise some self control.

With a silent sigh, Beatrice shook out her shoulders and forced herself to crawl away. A few building hops later, she found a different roof she could hang out on, hide in her cloak, and relax. Course relaxing was hard when her mind kept picturing what she just saw. People in Dolareido loved to find bad places for good sex, and alleyways often fit that description. Not that she had ever partaken in alleyway sex as a Kindred, being Nosferatu and all. And now that she was with Julias, she really enjoyed having sex in various places in a mansion instead. Because he treated her like a princess. A bad princess that deserved to be punished.

She giggled, and slapped herself in the forehead for daring to make such a sound. She did not giggle, she growled or chuckled. Princesses giggled; which upon considering, made her hate the sound a little less. There had been the occasional giggle sometimes, when she and Julias had experimented with some of the funnier options being rich provided: frilly dresses, expensive sheets, that sort of thing. The last thing they'd tried, was her with her hands tied behind her back — like that could ever stop a Nosferatu — and wearing a Victorian ball gown. Like a naughty princess that needed a thorough spanking and fucking.

As she thought about Natasha, she considered the whole blowjob thing. It wasn't something her and Julias ever really did, cause she wasn't exactly comfortable with the idea, not with all the extra teeth on her face anyway. But the two of them had been together for a while, and the man showed no signs of being turned off by her teeth, or her green snake eyes, or her claws. Or, when she felt like showing it off, her really long tongue.

Maybe she should try it? Was a fun time when she was human, making a man squirm like that, and Julias had certainly earned it, considering how many times the man had put his lips on her.

She slapped herself in the forehead again. Focus! Stop thinking about sex all the time! Ugh, being with the Circle was really doing a number on her sex drive, considering Jennifer and Othello fucked openly, and almost every night.

But, some movement drew her attention. People moving around, two of them, leaving the werewolves' apartment building. Avery and ... David, she believed his name was. A big, strong looking guy, bit young too, and he had this weird habit of drifting his eyes to look at random things. Every so often, Avery gave him a small pat on the shoulder, like calming down a fidgety dog.

God damn good thing she had some good binoculars, or she was sure Avery would be able to see her. No neonate's cloak of night was going to hide her from one of these fuckers from close, especially an older one. So she stayed a good ways away, and became a statue as the wolves moved around. Moved around. Moved around some more. And continued to walk around, until Beatrice realized they were just out for a fucking stroll and chatting.

Not like they'd suddenly go and do something super sneaky and important the first night she'd come to monitor them. Wasn't a fucking Bond movie. She wished it was, but it wasn't. And once Avery and David had dropped by a butcher to get some meat, she

realized she was wasting her time watching them. Ah well, at least she got to learn who was investigating Barry's death.

Sighing, she headed back to the cave.

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Thank god no moaning sounds tonight. Aaron was sitting around reading a book, and Othello was also reading a book. She was afraid to ask the Daeva what book. Jennifer was out, probably on a hunt, or maybe digging up some info. Jacob had asked them to dig up info on Azamel and the Begotten in general; she could have been out looking into that too. No idea where to begin looking into info about literal nightmares. Maybe ask Fiona? Nah the girl seemed ignorant of the details Jacob would be interested in, like what the Begotten were up to, or how they went about their business in the modern world.

But it'd be nice to take the girl out for a party or something. Not that Beatrice got to party with any kine, but maybe bring her to the next Kindred ball, or gathering or something. Could be fun. Girl would get under Invictus skin so badly, but probably really get along with everyone else. That alone would make it worthwhile.

With a sigh, Beatrice walked up to the blood bowl. Empty. Sometimes Jacob did things, alone, in the dark once he kicked the rest of the Circle of the Crone out of the cave. He did things with his blood magic, his crúac rituals, things that occasionally made some very inhuman sounds, more beast than anything. Rituals that allowed Kindred, according to him, to bypass the limitations of their vampire bodies and perform truly wondrous things.

What a load of shit. He just liked to be vague about his explanations. But that night when he'd bestowed her with the cloak of night strength of an elder Kindred was burned into her memory. Felt good to be that strong. And unnatural.

“Jacob in?” she said to Aaron. Othello was in his room reading something on his e-reader, but Aaron had a proper book, and he looked deep in it with his chair leaning back, and his feet against the stone around the giant mural of bones.

“No.” Without missing a beat, Aaron turned to another page.

Maybe it was time she found out what sort of stuff the Gangrel liked reading?

“Whatcha reading?”

“ ... you want to know?”

“Yeah man. We’re buddies, pals ... sort of?” As expected, the man raised a brow at her like she’d grown two heads, so she shrugged and grabbed a wooden chair to sit beside him on. “We should take a little time to get to know each other better.”

“Like you know Othello?”

“Hey, I ... well I mean, if you ever had someone over, sure I could give some direction? But like with Othello, I ain’t gonna join. Got a boyfriend.” And she loved her boyfriend damn it. “But I was serious. What’re you reading?”

“Journey Through the Rain, by Edward Fairchild.”

“Hit me, what’s it about?”

“A man in a coma confronts his inner demons. The road to recovering from the coma is through the hellscape of his thoughts given form.”

“Uh...”

Aaron sighed, closed the book, and set it on his lap. “You expected something more along the lines of a thriller, or perhaps fantasy, or

science fiction?”

“Well, yeah.”

“ ... you don't think our second lives have enough action as is? Yours especially?”

“Never thought about it like that, I suppose.” She spun the chair around so she was sitting with its back to her chest, and she put her arms across its back, her chin resting on her arms. “But I wouldn't want to read a boring book either.”

“Not boring, but it might take a little self awareness to appreciate the messages in the metaphors.” He popped open the book, and flipped back a few pages. “The forest cleared to an open field, where the grass bent in the waves of wind, blades of red like fire against the cold backdrop of the clouds of my family, friends, and colleagues. Damn them all. Where they float above the pain, here I stand, with thorns in my skin and embers upon my heels.”

“Doesn't sound like he's handling his demons very well.”

“No. No it does not. I look forward to learning if our lead here manages to overcome his demons, or if he's destroyed by them.” Aaron put his gaze back upon the page he was reading when she interrupted him, and vanished. Still there, still sitting and reading, but the man was gone. If she stared really hard, she could see the world he was imagining through his eyes. Yeap, gone.

She got up. No point in talking to him, not when he had a book in his hand. Now that she thought about it, she didn't really know what to expect from Aaron's books, but now she picked up on that philosophy vibe he was laying down. Dude might get along with Julias if she introduced them; not that they didn't know each other in passing, all Kindred did, but hanging out was a different thing than knowing names.

Jacob. The beast in Beatrice's gut stood upright as she, and her fellow Kindred all acknowledged the presence, the aura of the returning leader. He came into the grand cavern and headed directly for his private room, same as every night the past week.

“Jacob,” she said, and she fell into step beside him. “Couple of Invictus neonates are looking into that Barry dude's death, like you figured. Didn't see any activity from the Carthians or werewolves though.”

“Keep trying. No one thinks Barry's death was an accident. Someone killed him. Or he's been taken hostage.” Old eyeless shrugged, and sat down on his furs, once inside his alcove. Beatrice followed him, and stood in the doorway; if it could be called a doorway. The tunnel that lead to his alcove was kind of a door in itself.

She looked around his room. The scary masks, voodoo bags and dolls, the strange bones, the figures carved from black wood, it all reeked of Jacob and his obsession with scary shit. The occult, ghosts, and she supposed nightmares too, all of it was the sort of stuff she imagined Jacob tinkered with in his spare time. Maybe he had other blood bowls where he bled other kine, and himself, a place where he could use the blood to do his dirtier, deadlier shit. She wasn't stupid after all. An elder like Jacob would keep secrets, and then secrets, and then buffer secrets he'd leak to the Circle, and then secrets he'd share with them willingly.

“... do you have any secret places?” she said. Might as well be upfront about it. “I bet you have a secret stash of shit somewhere. And probably three more besides.”

“Are you suggesting I don't trust you, or your fellow members of the Circle?” He smirked at her as he leaned back, grabbed some weird, large black book, and popped it open. Nothing on the cover

for her to read, and she leaned forward a little to take a peek at the contents of the old, tattered pages.

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting.”

“Ha! Good call.” Joker smirked up at her, eyes wrapped in his bandage as per usual, and showed her the pages. Some symbols she did not recognize, some language that looked weird, old, something like Egyptian hieroglyphs but not. “Not that it’d matter when none of you could read half the things I deal in.”

“Well fuck you too.” She frowned at her boss as she leaned against the cave wall, folding her arms across her chest. “So, do you?”

“Secret places? Of course. So does the Prince, and the Invictus council, and Garry. When you get to be our age, you learn the value of not putting all your eggs in the same basket.” He got comfortable again and flipped another page.

“Yeah but ... what the fuck is an egg for you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” Again, eyeless shrugged, and flipped another page of his book.

Considering what the book looked like, Beatrice could only guess it was necromancy, or some other absurdity that shouldn’t actually exist, but probably did. And she knew Jacob had some robes — stored in one of those secret places probably — that looked like they belonged on a necromancer, or some other creepy occult shit. He also had some stuff that looked like it belonged on Genghis Khan, and she had to ask about that cause she kind of liked it and hadn’t seen him wear it in a while.

“I suppose I can share one egg with you,” he said, lowering the book again and smiling up at her. “How’s Damien these days?”



Oh shit.

“You—”

“Yes, I know what you did.”

“... how?” She looked around, over her shoulder, and stepped deeper into his room before pulling the hanging fur across the doorway. She lowered her voice, got to a knee, and stared at the man with a hard frown to go with. “How do you know?”

“I wouldn’t be a very good witch if I told you my secrets, now would I?”

This man. God damn this man. She really loved and hated him.

“You ... you won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“You fed him your blood once. He isn’t bound by the vinculum, and I doubt he’s become addicted to vitae. You have some awkward encounters ahead I’m sure, but his feelings for you will pass. A few weeks, maybe a few months at worse, and he’ll be back to normal.” He too brought his voice to a whisper, but his grin only grew. “But I’m sure if you dropped by his place, a few kind words could have him doing you a favor or two. Maybe join you and Julias for a threesome.”

“Ew, no thanks.” Not that Damien was unattractive. Hell, he was pretty damn sexy sometimes, but his churchy attitude grated on her worse than anything. “Feeding Kindred blood is ... I mean I got some earfuls from Garry when I suggested it once, as a way to get an advantage. Thought he was going to slug me just for using the word.”

“There are many ways to gain an advantage,” Jacob said, eyes back on the symbols in his book, “and many of them are dark, twisted,

manipulative, and underhanded. But to force the vinculum on someone is a special sort of rape that most Kindred find disgusting.”

“That is what you do when you create a thrall or ghoul though, isn’t it?” She sighed and leaned back as she let her mind wander. “Lot of them seem pretty happy. That girl Madison that Othello’s been spoiling has—”

“Othello’s sexual obsessions aside, he’s been teaching Madison to be well versed in the art of eavesdropping. And,” he said with a smirk, “she agreed to the vinculum, the nature of being a ghoul. The love of a kine for their master. Some Kindred have obtained it by force, and it has created some strange love hate relationships between ghoul and master.”

“Sound like you have experience in that department.”

“I’m five hundred years old, Beatrice. The fuck do you think?”

The two of them chuckled. Christ he was old, but he didn’t act like the other old vamps, not even a little.

She knew about the fading of memories Kindred his age had, and the strange dreams they went through when they took their long torpors. What was Jacob like when he was young compared to now? How accurate was his age of five hundred years anyway? By his own admittance, Kindred his age couldn’t remember that time, and for someone like him and Antoinette, half a millennium was a guess. Could be younger, or older, by a fair amount of years at that.

But it was enough to know the man was old, had earned his years, and she was better off listening to him rather than ignoring him. Give Damien his space until he was normal, and don’t even think about adopting a ghoul until you found someone who liked you enough to willingly accept the effects of drinking Kindred blood.

Next question.

“I’ve been thinking about that night,” she said, “in the tunnels. Two spider monsters. A second one no one had expected.” Again she kept her voice down, but she stopped looking her boss in the eye—bandage, and tried to read his expression. He seemed absorbed in the book, like Aaron would have. Not a flinch or nothing. He could beat Julias at poker. “Was that your doing?”

“Beatrice, please, how could I, a simple vampire, somehow manage to either create or lure a second one of those ancient beasts into our tunnels?” Again, without a flinch or even a shift of the eyebrow, he turned the page. “I was delighted, and surprised, to learn that one of Avery’s pack died.”

“I get you wanting Avery to suffer, but killing her pack seems like including innocent bystanders.”

“There are societies that punish the family for the transgressions of its members.” Again, another page, and this one had a detailed drawing of a skull, along with some feathers and some worms. No idea why, but there was, indeed, a drawn pile of worms on the picture. “One for all, all for one, and all that shit.”

“But—”

“And I didn’t kill her. You know that.” He smirked at her before he turned the page. Another picture, this one with a human heart with some sort of old knife sticking out of it. A very old knife, with a handle carved out of a tree branch maybe. And around the heart were some human teeth. What the fuck.

“Ok, seriously, what’s the book about? We can’t read it, but this is fucking creepy shit ... kind of metal though, and interesting. But also very creepy.”

That managed to get a raised brow from the man. “You’re interested in the occult?”

“I wouldn’t have been when I was kine, but after the shit I’ve seen? I’ve seen a girl unleash some sort of weird spider nightmare thing from the aether, I’ve seen half-spider half-human hybrid monster things nesting in the city underground, I’ve seen werewolves rip and shred and tear things apart in the most brutal way, like it was ... Yeah, I want to try and expand my horizons a little.”

“And you think I’m the man to do that?”

“ ... yes! Yes you’re the man to do that! You’re my boss, you’re old as dirt, and you know shit. So your subordinate, your fellow witch of the Circle is coming to you, requesting that you teach her.” God damn this man. Getting him to do what she wanted was like working with a child, an intelligent child that knew how to be obstinate. So maybe a really old stubborn fuck was the more apt comparison.

“You understand the depths of depravity and cruelty these rituals can descend into?” he said, gesturing to the heart on the page. “Many of the rituals the Circle of the Crone practice were first discovered by civilizations long dead. This here, a woman discovered by dissecting her husband. She sacrificed something truly precious to her, removed that which their tribe considered precious, and then burned them as she prayed to the spirits of the dark to grant her immortality.”

“ ... holy shit. Did it work?”

“Yeap. She was the first vampire.”

“Are you fucking serious!?” she said. But as she stared at the page, and then at Jacob, she could almost see him roll his non-existent eyes.

“No. The origins of Kindred remain a mystery. But the woman’s efforts did earn her a rather nasty case of dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yeap. Her tribe found her curled up in a ball by the altar. The ground around her had turned to black soot. No idea what killed her; but it was an ancient tribe, so it’s not like they knew how to do an autopsy and diagnosis.”

“Whoa.” She stared at the picture of the heart and teeth. Sacrificing someone you cared about, like a husband, to pursue the black arts? She tried to imagine cutting something out of Julias, but just imagining the hurt look on his face when he realized she betrayed him made her heart ache. “Did they write this book?”

“No, this was written by a Kindred centuries before I was embraced. And they talked to a tribe, who had talked to another tribe, who had told them the ancient legend of the wicked wife who sacrificed her husband.” He ran his fingers along the picture of the heart, and smirked, the sort of smirk someone gave when they were deep in intriguing thought about the subject. Kind of sick, but kind of interesting too.

“That’s a lot of hearsay.”

“Which is why various members of the order have tested it, using the power of Kindred blood to fuel the ritual.” His smirk turned into a chuckle, and he shook his head as he slowly turned the page. “Fools. To sacrifice the things that make existence bearable, in pursuit of power? Self destructive lunacy.”

“... d ... did it work?” Kindred sacrificing the things they cherish to pursue dark shit like witchcraft seemed pretty counter-intuitive and self destructive to her. Vamps sacrificed enough as it was.

“No.” Jacob laughed, loudly at that, and showed where the next page depicted someone lying on the ground, surrounded by what Beatrice could only describe as a circle of death. Someone with a decent hand had drawn a forest and field, and the area around the

lying person was withered of all life. “The Kindred were never heard from again. Whatever did this to the human who first tried it, we can only surmise killed the Kindred as well.”

“Jesus.”

“I’m sure Jesus was laughing at their idiocy.” He turned to another page, where an altar was shown, one made of wood and lined with skulls and other bones. Looked a lot like the one they had in the main cave. Above it, a person was hung by rope around their hands, and several knives were sticking out of their stomach and waist. Blood — or what looked like blood anyway considering the pictures were done in black ink — dripped from the person’s feet into the bowl.

“ ... this is some dark shit.”

“As you know, the Circle of the Crone embraces, explores these rituals, Beatrice. But as Kindred, we have a better way to approach these arts.” And again, to another picture, this time of someone cutting their wrist. But the blood coming out of the wrist didn’t pour; instead, it came out in a slow, single, controlled, thick droplet. Kindred blood.

“So if I know what to say and do, I can use my blood to fuel these rituals? Instead of ... cutting people up or getting my hands on ancient voodoo dolls and shit?”

“Your butchery of the terms aside, yes, many of the black arts that you yourself have no doubt surmised, you are capable of performing with the sacrifice of Kindred blood. Your own typically, but if there’s an enemy you’d like to bleed dry, powerful rituals would be at your disposal.” More chuckles, quieter though, before he slowly closed the book and looked at her. “Why the sudden interest?”

“Why? Like I said, monsters and—”

“That’s all? It couldn’t have anything to do with wanting to hurt someone specific? Or help someone specific?”

“I ... I um...” If he was asking the question, that meant it was worth considering. Why did she really want to know about this stuff? There was certainly appeal to the power it provided, but also fear, and overall terror. The pictures looked like they belonged on some serious death metal album covers, not in an instruction manual.

But, she wanted that power. She wanted to be able to help if the situation arose, even help Julias, or fuck it, even help Garry if it ever came to it. And after that run in with the spider monster, she felt it important to open her eyes to more than the typical Kindred politics that disgusted her. It was part of the reason she joined the Circle after all. Still didn’t feel like the whole reason though, still felt like she was missing something.

“ ... I don’t know.”

“Good answer.” He pat her on the shoulder, and reached out to grab a tiny burlap bag beside him, something that fit nicely into the palm of the hand and had some crow feathers sticking out of it. “If you knew the answer, I’d be hesitant to teach you anything. But you seem like you have an open mind.”

“Is that a requirement?”

“Yeah, it is.”

He put the bag in her hand, and she froze as the weight of death filled her. Ice. Rock. Something heavy and frozen stuck to her guts and pinned her to the ground. She couldn’t move, couldn’t blink, couldn’t even shiver as the waves of panic ripped at her, demanded she drop the bag despite her inability to do so.

“Feels pretty horrible, doesn’t it?” he said, and he plucked the bag from her like picking up a simple pebble. The moment it left her palm, she fell back onto her hands, and stared at the horrible device. “Othello, Aaron, and Jennifer long learned to stay out of my room.”

“You ... got that just to deter people from coming into your room?” She wiped off her hands, and looked around at all the other little objects sitting around she never touched. Would putting on one of those masks burn her face off? Would picking up one of those knives cut her hand off? What the fuck.

“That’s not what it was made for. But that is a nice bonus isn’t it?” He laughed as he held it in his hand, then between finger and thumb before he brought it to his bandage-covered eyes, and then held it out to her. “This time, take it in. You’re holding dread incarnate.”

Dread incarnate. Lovely. And Jacob was handling it like it was nothing at all.

She thought she knew dread, thought she knew fear and whatnot. Thought she knew a lot of things that didn’t know, apparently. Nosferatu had three natural talents in the blood: strength, hiding, and the ability to bestow nightmares. Nightmares of dread.

She didn’t know dread at all.

Gulping on nothing, she reached out, and took the horrible thing into her palm. And again, just like before, ice froze her guts, and stones tied to her feet dragged her down to the bottom of a black, ocean abyss. Sinking. Sinking. The further she went down, the more she was doomed, covered in oblivion, until it felt like fingers gripped her face and took her deeper into nothingness.

Just in your mind, Beatrice. Just in your damn mind. Whatever this bag was, it was forcing you to feel something. Just a feeling. A feeling.



She dropped the bag.

“Impressive,” her boss said, and he picked the bag back up. “Managed a lot longer than Aaron.”

“Aaron tried this?”

“Mmhm. But the Gangrel prefers his books to witchcraft. Can’t blame him.” A smile had sneaked its way onto the old man’s face, and he chuckled a few more times, quiet and genuine sounds, as he put the bag away. “If you really want to explore the dark arts, come to Three Kings Cemetery tomorrow night. I’ll show you a few things.”

“Um ... oh ... ok.” Her catacombs were in the South Side Cemetery, where everything was normal and dead. Three Kings Cemetery was avoided by most, due to some silly ideas that it might be haunted.

If Jacob was taking her there, he was probably the bastard haunting them.



~~Antoinette~~

“What do you plan to wear to the ball, my love?”

“Mmm?” The little man looked up at her from her nipple, and withdrew his lips with blatant reluctance written into his eyes.

“It is a ball for all, but held by your covenant. Your choice of attire is dreadfully important.”

The two of them were in one of her tower’s luxury rooms, where she sometimes changed and tested her clothing against different backgrounds. Drapes of varying colors and designs, a vibrant carpet floor — carpet was a delight when used sparingly — and many mirrors with coiling dragons that circled them, of colors to match

whatever drapes they were near. A few stools and chairs sat about, and the room was lit by hanging lights in what may as well have been miniature chandeliers. The room truly was with no purpose, other than to admire oneself in the mirror.

In the center was a large stool of soft design, perhaps four feet wide, and circular in shape. She had taken her love here so she could try clothing for him, but as per usual, his intoxicated gaze, and her need to satisfy him conflicted with her goal.

So now she sat upon his lap, her knees to the bed-like stool beneath them, and his cock buried within her. They had begun their love making with his lips and fingers upon her, and two orgasms later, she felt it her turn to repay him. She stroked his hair, and straddling him so, she cradled his head to her breasts. Such a wonder, such a delicious treat, to see her love squirm as she rode him in gentle waves, her dripping insides coating his member and milking at his length.

And to force him to converse during the act was sweet torture she did love to administer.

“I just figured, you know, my usual suit I take to these events?”

Ah, her little love was forever at a loss for the impact of clothing. There were kernels of growth and awareness, but she doubted he would ever truly grasp the art of fashion, and the power it controlled. She would eternally have to dress him, like a doll. The image made her laugh, and she hugged him tight to her body before she once again started to gently rock her hips back and forth.

“It will be the first gathering the Invictus have officially opened to the entire city in many years, my love. Carthians will be there. Perhaps even Jacob and his witches will be there. And I can assure you I will be there.” She gazed down at him, drank his open, honest, enthralled gaze, and slowly guided his lips back one of her swollen, aching nipples.

And the boy took it into his kiss with a quiet groan. The warmth of his tongue and lips, the wet suckling that coated her nipple, and soon her areola as suckled the entirety of it into his mouth, had her swooning. His persistent suckling, guided by her words, had long ago found the perfect balance of pressure and softness, so each kiss and lick filled her chest with sparks of bliss. And to enjoy such bliss within the afterglow of two previous climaxes made it all the more pleasant.

But, she was satisfied. It was her love's turn to climax, and she squeezed on his length hard enough to make him groan yet again.

"I believe," she said, "that not only will your sire have advice that you should adhere to, it is his ball after all, I also believe you should wear something perhaps a little less formal than usual."

"Less formal?" He raised his lips from her breast, and then a brow in confusion. "But all the covenants will be there."

"The covenants, and perhaps even the wolves. Perhaps even the monsters." She did not agree with either, and did not expect them to attend as well. But stranger things had happened, and she knew Athalia and Daniel had danced together in a ball, once or twice in the past.

"The Uratha might come to the ball?" That got his attention, and he looked down, and then around a few times as he dug through his thoughts. He looked almost guilty. What could be bothering her little Ventrue?

She almost giggled. The poor boy did not know that she knew.

"Perhaps. Though I believe you should dress to invite the other covenants to peace and prosperity." She set her lips upon Jack's head, kissed his fuzzy, prickly hair, and smiled into the sensation as she eased her hips back and forth. No doubt the boy was on the edge

of orgasm, but she kept him there, and would keep him there for some time.

“So, uh ... business ... casual?” His hands were on her back, her ass, squeezing and tugging at her, trying to get her to go faster. But she would not. Far more delightful to deny him his pleasure until she was satisfied with the conversation.

“A step in the correct direction, but not the conclusion I believe Julias will reach. He will want something with both the inviting quality of casual, but also the power of true formal wear. And he is intelligent enough to know that simply choosing something between the two will not quite fit the intent. No, he will ask you wear something both extravagant, but not formal. Something that speaks of warmth and joy.” The words were too perfect to not capitalize. She squeezed on his length yet again, hard enough to force her love to tremble, and she used her knees to raise her body higher before squeezing harder still, before sinking herself down upon his cock until her lips devoured every inch of him. Her insides were warm, and joyful; it need not be said.

Jack stopped suckling on her, and raised his hands to hold her shoulder blades before his fingers caressed her spine; for his efforts, she shivered as the tingling pleasure danced up and down her back. He set his cheek to her sternum, and let his head come to rest there as he approached the edge of orgasm yet again, and yet again did not cross it as she ceased her movements.

“I’ll ... I’ll ask him.”

“Good.” She put her hands to his shoulders, and pushed the boy down to lie upon the seat fully. It had no back to block him, it was simply a very wide stool. Once he lay there, she grinned her devil’s grin, and started her dance for him. She brought her hands up to her hair, and ran her fingers through the long waves of white, back over her shoulders so her elbows raised high. She jutted her chest

outward to accent the size of her breasts, the curve of her stomach and waist, and gently rolled her body back and forth to ease her dripping pussy along him. Always she kept him buried to the hilt inside her, and even as she started to rotate her hips in a figure eight, she kept him there to enjoy her efforts.

The boy had no idea how much it thrilled her to see him so pleased. His eyes struggled to stay open, but she could see that he forced them to stay as such, to stare at her as he put his hands on her legs, and to gaze up at the dance she did for him. Those beautiful eyes. To meet them felt like she was drinking his soul.

“I believe,” she said, “that I will wear something a touch revealing. I expect many women will feel the ball’s semi-formal dress code will be an excuse to show off their curves.” Men and women were customarily embraced when at their physical peak after all, and only once groomed into fitness. “Perhaps a backless dress, with sleeves, but also plunging cleavage, that reaches from here”—she placed one hand upon her collar—“to here.” She slid the same hand down to her sternum, then her stomach, past her navel, and down to a mere two inches above where her lips were spread around the boy’s cock, where her pubic hair would have been if she had any.

“That’s uh ... that’s a lot ... of cleavage.” Poor boy, so close to climax, and struggling to speak as she tortured him on the edge.

“The dress also has a long skirt, thin, and split upon both legs. The split is unique, in that it runs up to here.” She ran her fingers up her outer thighs, up her hip, and above it to the side of her waist.

“That’s ... a lot of leg.”

“It is indeed. I will have to be delicate with my movements, if I do not wish to expose myself. And for such a dress, undergarments would be a fashion faux pas.”

“ ... r-really?”

“Indeed.” She smiled at her love, and set her hands upon her hips. The boy was imagining her in the dress, and staring at her as he did with overwhelming need in his eyes. A perfect time for her to dance upon his cock, and with relentlessness, drive him over the edge.

To see her love cum, to see his eyes struggle all the more to watch her, to see his muscles flex, his abs and stomach crunch, to see his mouth part and hear his quiet moans escape him, was delectable. She drew out his orgasm, her dance shifting her hips left and right, dipping them side to side with each squeeze of her insides, until she knew the boy was both filling her with his fluid, and struggling to handle the pleasure she was bathing him in. With a touch of force, squeezing harder until she felt her juices join the growing mess of his cum, she brought him to groans, pushing his pleasure until it bordered on almost painful. She knew exactly how much pressure, exactly what motions to use to ride him at that sweet spot of total bliss.

Only when a combination of their juices started to trickle onto the boy’s body, did she ease her clenching insides. She set her hands upon his quivering chest, and traced her fingers along his flexing muscles, his abs, his jaw and lips, and leaned down to place kisses upon his nose, forehead, and soon his lips as well.

“Were it my gathering,” she said, “I would dress you. But for this, my efforts are in vain. I am sure your sire has picked something for you already.”

“You think so?” he said between kisses. His hands reached up to take her, sliding up her waist before hooking behind her to caress her naked spine once more.

She sighed into his touch, purred, and pressed her breasts to his shoulders and collar as she planted more kisses along his forehead. “But, you will sit with me. Understood?” Not a request. A commandment.

“No argument here.”

She grinned down at her love, and kissed him once again. “Good. You can, perhaps, introduce me to this Clara woman I see vying for your attention.” Ah, the look of shock on his face. She laughed, and stroked his lips with a finger. “Silly boy. I may not be omniscient, but I know much. And I trust you, my love, my little Ventrue. Do not fret.” She felt the boy relax beneath her, and again she laughed. “Were you truly worried?”

“I mean ... a bit, yeah? You are a very scary woman.”

She leaned in once more, put her lips to his, and gave him a lasting, proper kiss. “I am.”

## Chapter 40

~~Julias~~

“Tonight, you’re going to communicate with a rat.”

“Delightful.”

Julias smirked down at his childe, and gave him a pat on the head, the sort he knew would infuriate his friend. “Don’t like rats?”

“I think rats raised by humans are awesome creatures. Rats who grew up in a sewer? Not so much.”

The two of them stepped out of the car, and Julias waved the driver off before turning to walk toward North Side. Dolareido was a city, a very large city, and that meant crows, cockroaches, and rats. Maybe the kid would prefer trying this with a crow? Later. For now he knew where he could find rats in large quantities.

“I was hoping we could talk about relationship troubles,” Jack said.

Relationship troubles. Kid did love to be blunt. “Oh? Having issues with the Prince?”

The two of them walked further and further from any ears, any pedestrians, any traffic, and further out again toward the edge of the city. The driver had taken them out a ways, but Julias preferred to walk the remainder. And the kid had said he wanted to talk to him about something; so now worked.

“Not exactly? In fact, she seems to already know about Clara ... liking me. No idea how she knows, but I guess that’s why she’s the Prince.” He shrugged, hands in his jacket pockets, eyes on the



sidewalk. No one around anymore, just the two of them surrounded by empty factories and emptier streets. “Just, uh ... she’s, um ... Ok, yeah I ... saw her breasts.”

Julias rolled his eyes and combed his hair back with his fingers a single time. God damn this kid. “Alright, walk me through what happened. Spare no details.”

And thus followed an asinine tale of an idiot boy who didn’t know how to say no to a pretty girl. Jack could say no to most people about most things, with a straight face held in the cradle of cold logic. A valuable trait, that went out the window the moment a beautiful woman fluttered her eyelashes at him.

“She could have covered up!” He threw up his hands, utter dismay chiseled onto his face. “She didn’t have to let that woman lift up her shirt!”

“Sounds like she saw an opportunity to let you see something she figured you’d like.” He sighed and flicked the kid in the temple, hard enough to make him yelp and jump to the side. “Maybe you should lay off seduction hunts for a while, and do some regular hunts? Less sexual, less likely to get you into trouble with a girl trying to get into your pants.”

“Arg, I’ve never had this problem before! I didn’t really ... I don’t know, expect her to get that ... that...”

“She likes you. And she’s not some simpleton teenager, she’s a woman, and judging from what I know of the other Uratha, she’s older than she looks.” Clara was a beautiful woman to be sure, looking perhaps in her late twenties or early thirties, with the body of an athlete and a beautiful face. She took care of herself, and managing a full head of box-braid hair down to her hips couldn’t have been easy. “You seem to attract older women.”

“I guess so.” Upon reaching a corner, Jack walked into the lamppost. Into it, hard enough to make a clear, resonating thunk as he planted his forehead into the metal. The kid leaned against the pole, arms dangling like weights pulling at his wrists, and his forehead stuck to the lamppost. “Antoinette said she trusted me, but ... I don’t know, I’ve never been in this position before. Can I trust myself? I don’t think I’d ever betray Antoinette, but I’ve never had a girl approach me like this, not since her.” A low, whining sound came out of the kid, and he banged his head a couple more times against the pole.

“Jack. Come here.”

With time, Jack eventually stood back up, and waddled his way over to Julias.

Until Julias smacked him upside the back of the head.

“Ow! What the fuck man!”

“Kid, you’re an idiot. A lovable idiot, but an idiot. The fact you’re deliberating this so much, when nothing has even happened yet, means you’re giving this far more thought than any cheating man would. So give yourself a little credit, you’re a faithful man and I bet Clara could literally tie you up, pin you down, and rub her naked self all over you and you wouldn’t even kiss her.”

“I mean ... I guess yeah. I can’t get the image of her out of my head though.”

“Yeah, you have a sex drive, same as everyone else. Figured you’d be used to that by now.”

“But—”

“And you’re feeling super anxious and paranoid, which is making you run the thoughts through your head over, and over, and over,

like you always do. That's why you can't stop thinking about her. You and Natasha both, always running a million thoughts through your heads all the time, organizing and analyzing." This kid, god this kid. Such a great friend to have, someone he could trust, someone who would dig through things with the utmost tenacity until he'd filtered a million bits of information, and gotten to the bottom of things. Until he'd become an expert — or at least learned — in whatever he needed to know, he would obsess about something until it consumed him. Think about things until he paced his brain into a ditch, and then a grave.

"So I should do ... what?"

"Nothing. That's what I'm saying. Maybe next time don't take the girl who likes you to a sex club, but other than that, nothing." Chuckling, he put his hand on his friend's shoulder, and started walking them down the street again. "Really, you think too much."

"I know, I know. It's just she's my first girlfriend, and I really love her. God I love her, and she spoils the fuck out of me, and—"

He shook the little man by the shoulder, just enough to get him to cut his worrying to a quick halt. "Worry less about Antoinette. Worry more about the Prince. Do anything like that suicidal trip into the tunnels again, and if I don't kill you, she will. And, if by some strange fluke, she doesn't, then Michael or Maria will."

That got some raised brows. Good, kid needed to stop worrying about girls so much, and worry a bit more about his own hide.

"Rats," Julias continued, "are intelligent creatures as you know. Observant, but not the best eyesight. Great sense of smell, great hearing. And because there are so many of them, a Kindred would be hard pressed to suspect a rat. Be careful when using them to spy on particularly crafty Mehket, or any elders, and you'll be surprised at how much information you can get from a rat."

“I’m confused though. How’s a rat going to convey the information?”

“You’re going to talk to it.”

“ ... say what now?”

With a laugh, Julias brought him to the end of the street, where a couple of decayed large buildings sat abandoned and decrepit. Dolareido was an old city — for the US — and had gone through many phases, many revolutions of technology, many changes as the old died and the new arrived. Areas that couldn’t adapt fell apart, and such was the way with certain corners of North Side. Old factories that used to make things like string, or newspapers, or clothes, or anything that the manufacturer couldn’t update for the modern era lead to such buildings being vacated. Someone would buy them eventually, tear them down or replace them, refit them, but for years, sometimes decades, many of the buildings sat useless.

Rats loved it.

Julias slid open an old door, and brought out a couple of LED flashlights. No power and with old, dirty windows, the outside light wasn’t getting in; the rats counted on it. So Julias set the flashlights on the table pointed up to act like lanterns, and stood in the center of the empty room. A lobby of sorts, maybe for a small hospital, with a large desk and some doorways that led into dark hallways. Around them were a few small, worn couches, some stools, and some magazines on a table from the eighties.

“I can hear them,” Jack said.

“Yeah. Thousands of them. More rats in Dolareido than there are people. Ten million, twenty million maybe.”

“Damn ... reminds me of when Viktor summoned all those rats.”

“An advanced discipline. Summoning the swarm is something I’m sure you’ll be able to do someday, and with proper preparation, to far greater effect than Viktor’s on-the-fly decision to use it. We needed a way to get past Jessica’s rifle.” Not a fun night, dealing with that Daeva devil. But the memory of Beatrice ripping her in half, so her literal ashes scattered to the wind, was a happy memory indeed.

“I could summon a swarm?”

“Given the years to practice and grow your strength and skill? Yes, definitely. And more besides. There is far more to being Kindred than simply being strong or fast, or not needing to breathe, or being able to mesmerize kine with your eyes.” And, to demonstrate, he squatted down, and waited.

Rats were cautious and crafty creatures by nature, but given time, darkness, and quiet, they came out of their holes. First one, and then another, and then another. They scurried along the walls, into holes that must have taken years to make, up scratched door frames, down counters, and eventually onto the center of the floor.

And once one of them looked his way, Julias met its beady little gaze with his own.

“Come here,” he said, voice quiet, calm, and direct. Each letter enunciated, each marking the instrument of command to penetrate the rat’s alien mind. The bad eyesight, the great hearing and sense of smell, the tiny body, the feet and tail. It was one thing to own a pet rat, but to establish a dialog with such a creature took a different level of understanding. And to a Ventrue, animalism was simply giving commands to animals instead of people.

The rat walked up to them, and stood up on its hind legs.

“God damn,” Jack said, chuckling a little as he squatted down beside Julias. “Really doesn’t feel like a Ventrue thing to do, talk to

animals.”

“While both Gangrel and Ventrue have a natural talent for animalism, and animalism may seem, perhaps, a discipline you’d expect from only a Gangrel, to give commandments is as natural to Ventrue as drinking blood. Whether it be to kine, animals, or once you are strong enough, other Kindred, Ventrue are rulers.” The whole Damien situation aside.

“Daaamn.” Jack’s smile reached across his cheeks, ego growing before Julias’s eyes. He reached out as well, and touched the rat. Before the animal could bite the finger, Julias made a few, tiny chirp sounds and high-pitched clucks of the tongue, and the rat nodded, giving Jack freedom to touch it. “Did you just ... speak rat?”

“I did. Sort of. When you learn to speak in feral whispers, you can use words, but you’ll also find it’ll come natural to make animal sounds to better fit the way the creature’s mind works.” He held out his hand for the rat, and made a few more quiet clicks with his tongue. The rat nodded, and climbed into his palm. “It’s a thing we have in common with the werewolves, the beast inside us. Much as you don’t want that beast coming out and making a mess of your life, it does provide some significant advantages. It is an animal, it speaks animal, and can communicate with other animals.”

“I’ll say. So, I can talk with rats?”

“Talk, give it orders, ask it questions. Here.” He held the rat up in front of the boy, and gestured to it. “Tell it to turn around.”

“I’m ... not sure how I’m supposed to do this.”

“You have to stop thinking in terms of contracts, suits, shoes, clubs, taxis, and money for a moment. Let the beast in your gut come to the surface; it’ll show you how to think in terms of smell, blood, hunting, hunger, territory, and all the animal things you

normally suppress. And once you've let a little of that beast out of its cage, focus on the rat."

"Right, beast ... right."

A sore spot, and Julias knew it. Kid didn't like listening to that part of him, didn't like that he had a beast in there, something that had driven him to murder an innocent woman, Mrs. Pavala. Part of being Kindred was understanding that you were no longer human, but also never letting go of your humanity, lest the beast take you over and turn you into a mindless animal. Forever a tug of war, using but controlling the animal inside.

Kid was going to have to learn how to use both sides, sooner or later.

With a deep, unneeded breath, Jack set his eyes on the rat. Like watching a child learning to ride a bike, there was a balance to be found that took practice, that took trial and error, that had Jack frowning as he attempted to communicate with a rat. A weird direction to take the brain, which was exactly where Jack's problem was; his brain kept getting in the way. But Julias had given him decent instruction, and he trusted the kid to figure it out.

"... turn ... around," the boy said. The rat tilted its head to the side and stared at him. "God damn it." Again, the boy stared at the rat, and leaned in to make better eye contact. Julias almost interrupted with more advice, but he could see Jack was in 'Jack' mode, his 'don't disturb me while I figure this out, even if it takes days' mode. "... turn around."

The rat turned around. Jack grinned a grin Julias knew all too well, the Ventrue grin of 'I'm a god damn Ventrue and I did this' accomplishment.

Julias smiled at his childe. "Well done. Now, ask it a question."

“Like what?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want, right right. Um, how was your d—”

“Something a rat would understand, Jack. It’s a rodent that spends its days scavenging for food and fucking other cute little rats.”

Jack rubbed his buzzed head, took another sigh, and tried again. “... how many Kindred are in this room?” The rat stood there, unmoving for several moments, before it held up two fingers. And a squeak to go with it. “... did I just understand it squeak? Can I speak squeak language now?”

“After a fashion. The noises help bridge the gap for your mind to understand how the rat communicates. And now, if you tried to talk to the rat using rat-like noises, you’d find it quite natural.”

“Natural. Ok.” And the kid made a few little squeaks of his own, which enticed the rat to do a slow full body turn again. “Wow I’m the Rat Whisperer.”

“Viktor had a natural affinity for commanding others, as do you and I, be it Kindred or kine or animal. Viktor and I are also comfortable with physical combat, which, despite my best guess, you seem to be as well.”

“Ha, I doubt it.” The kid clicked his tongue a few times, and the rat crawled out onto his awaiting palm. Rat-equipped, Jack stated to walk around the abandoned building, and scanned the walls up and down with his eyes. “I got very, very lucky with that spider creature.”

“Still, given some training, I think you could learn to use more than a gun.” Julias shrugged and stood back up. Squatting for



extended periods was a bitch, even for a Kindred. “And it may come up, if things go sour, that all Kindred in the Invictus will receive some proper training with a knife.”

“A knife? Why?” Jack approached a corner where a rat hole was, and clicked his tongue a few times. A few more rats emerged, and they stood in a row while Jack put down the first rat to join them. The rats did not flee, but stood there longer yet, and nodded a few times as Jack offered them a few squeaks. Kid caught on fast, very fast. Scary fast even.

“You would be hard pressed to use any discipline on a werewolf, and unless you learn how to use a knife in proper combat, a silver knife will be useless.”

“Silver ... knife.” And reality came crashing down on Julias’s childe in the most obvious way, with collapsing shoulders and a low groan. “Thought we were on good terms with the Uratha.”

“We are. That’s why we’re slowly setting up our Kindred with silver knives, instead of arming everyone overnight with both those, and silver bullets.”

“Putting me in a weird position as the middle man for the Uratha and Kindred. You know Avery’s looking into Barry’s death too?”

Barry. Julias frowned as he started to pace, and raised a hand to stroke his chin. “Barry was nobody. That was part of why we liked him. I could trust Barry to pursue a goal, a contract, and not only would he do it, but I didn’t have to worry him drawing attention to himself. At least until this Mirrden business. And you know Avery and Garry are friends right?”

“Think she killed Barry to slow down our takeover, for Garry?”

“Seems extreme.” But the Uratha lacked the subtlety of the Kindred. What was extreme to a vampire was a regular night for a

werewolf. “Whatever’s going on, it has to do with the Mirrden business. Monica could have been caught in a fire as well if she hadn’t moved.”

“Yeah, but I found nothing that could help me track down who set either fire. No footage, or what little footage Amanda got was useless.” Jack stopped, looked at him, and then at the rats standing before him. “ ... I should have asked the animals.”

Now the kid was catching on. “Being a Kindred is a cold war, most of the time. Information. And the information you can learn from an animal is better than no information at all. Rats, and crows in particular, have surprisingly good memories.”

“But—”

“And you can use that information to prevent fights as much as win them, Jack. I’m happy with the way Dolareido is now, far more than my peers, and I struggle every day to keep them from ruining it. Garry, Michael, and Maria are almost desperate to fight each other, but a little nudge here, a hint there, and I help them settle their issues without Kindred getting caught in the middle.” He motioned to the rats. “Now, try again, more elaborate orders, more elaborate questions.”

The two of them spent the next two hours working on the kid’s feral whisper, and each passing moment made Julias all the prouder. Kid was good. Kid was damn good. Some Kindred bloodlines seemed to water down with the generations, but Viktor had been a natural, Julias even more a natural, and Jack was proving to continue the trend. Kid was going to become a powerful man, given the time to grow. It wasn’t long before Jack had several rats fetching him things, disappearing into rooms, only to return and describe the room contents, and he had some other rats besides standing in formation.

“Excellent,” Julias said. “Keep at it, and soon you’ll be raising similar animals from the dead to be your devoted familiar for a few nights.”

“Raise the dead? Are you fucking serious?”

“That is basically what I did to you when I sired you, Jack.”

“Touche.”

“Once you can do that, then we’ll see about summoning animals to you, and perhaps possessing one.”

Jack’s eyes opened wide as he looked at the rats, then back to him, then the rats. Kid just didn’t get it, didn’t understand how profound and insane a Kindred’s abilities could become, how amazing his abilities could become. Still thought small. Julias would weed that trait out of him, and then there’d be no stopping the kid’s growth.

Chuckling, he put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, and guided him back onto the street.

“So, only Ventrue and Gangrel can do do this?” Jack said, voice a tiny whisper now that they were out in the open.

“Other Kindred such as the Daeva can learn animalism with practice, and a Ventrue can learn to move with Daeva speed, but to dominate a mind like a Ventrue can would require teaching from a Ventrue. And vice versa. For a Ventrue to learn how to enrapture people with the awe and majesty discipline of the Daeva, you would need to learn from a Daeva. Each bloodclan comes with their own, unique discipline as you know.”

“Maybe I could ask Antoinette to teach me?”

Julias laughed, no longer whispering; no need for it when nothing they were talking about was secret. “There are Daeva in the Invictus who could teach you instead, but I think you’ll have your hands full learning from me for many decades yet. And besides, you’d need to taste a Daeva’s blood to unlock their unique discipline. Antoinette wouldn’t let you do that.”

“Oh ... yeah, you’re right. That makes me wonder, about Vivienne and Natasha—not the blood tasting, I mean, just the fact they ... don’t really talk anymore, not like you and I do.”

Julias winced, but nodded, and gave his little childe a half-hug, half-shake of the far shoulder. “I respect Natasha a lot, but I had my doubts she’d be able to be someone’s sire.” And it was such a shame, cause the girl was brilliant. Lot of similarities between her and Jack, not just their small size. “It’s ... it’s not the same, when you sire a friend.”

“Is our relationship much different, now that we’re childe and sire?”

“No, and that’s because I knew what I was doing.” He stopped by a lamppost, and turned to face the boy. This was too important to talk about casually, he needed to look the kid in the eyes. “The day may become when you want to sire someone, and you may get permission to do just that. If you sired someone very close to you, like your mother or sister, the relationship is going to be damaged. You’re not the same person anymore, the beast changes you, and your relationship with others. When you and I became friends, I saw potential in you, and made sure our friendship always had this sire and childe dynamic, right from the start.”

“That’s true, isn’t it?” Jack looked up at him, and smiled one of those smiles that was frustratingly good at disarming people, even Julias. The exact opposite of Viktor. “I ... sometimes I think about

my family, and what it'd be like to bring them into the fold. Just a fantasy, I know, but—”

“But it never leaves you. Letting my wife think I was dead, letting her move on without me? Hardest thing I've ever done.”

“Your wife ... you never talk about her much.” It was Jack's turn to reach out this time, and give Julias a small pat on the arm. “You don't need to start now. Shit must be fucking painful.”

“Yeah.” And that was one of the reasons he loved this damn kid. Never got a ‘cry on my shoulder’ request from him. “Yes it is. But that was a long time ago. Times are different now, and better in every way. I have a woman I love, you have a woman you love, Dolareido's in a state of peace, and even the Begotten and Uratha aren't stirring up much trouble.”

“Yeah, yeah we do have women!” Jack said, eyes lighting up. Figures the kid would focus on that of course. One of these days, Julias was going to have to teach him how to resist a woman's charms, before it got him killed.

The two of them started walking again, though Jack was closer to a skip than a walk. Very unbecoming the suit.

“Think we should go on a double date?” Julias said. Bad idea, hilariously bad idea, but the thought was entertaining nonetheless.

“How would that even work? Can you imagine Beatrice and Antoinette sitting across from each other at a table?”

Yes, he could. Strange, maybe even awkward, but the Prince had a way of cutting through those sorts of issues; in her favor, at least.

“You know, I know you've seen Beatrice's breasts,” he said. She'd sent the picture of her topless to the kid with Julias sitting right next to her after all. And that time in his apartment too. Girl was

shameless. “And Antoinette’s, and her ghouls’, and now Clara’s. Who else should go on this list?”

“Hey! Hey! D-Don’t say shit like that!” Jack checked left, checked right, and shoved Julias as best he could; not at all, and Jack pushed himself away a few feet for his efforts. “Christ. I mean, Antoinette’s been super forgiving about that sort of stuff, but even she must have her limits.”

“Don’t kiss or fuck any other girls and I think you’ll be fine. Same goes for me you know? This Jennifer woman has been pretty upfront with her desire to get into Beatrice’s bed, and by extension my bed. No idea if that’s a good idea or not.” Well, the conversation had taken a strange route. But the kid wasn’t a kid, he was an adult, and Julias had no one else he could talk to about these sorts of problems. There was Beatrice, but she wasn’t exactly a neutral body in the discussion; girl was practically a sex addict. Which he could understand, considering she had twenty years of unwanted celibacy to make up for. Understand and enjoy.

“I remember talking to Jennifer at the ball. Sexy, very sexy, and seemed pretty intelligent. I could see why she’d like you, but Beatrice?”

“Hey!” He gave his childe a small shove, but Jack being Jack, a small shove sent him a fair ways. “I like Beatrice.”

The little Ventrue smirked at him, and the two of them started walking once more. “So do I.”

God damn it was nice, to just walk down the street with his childe, and talk about girls.



~~Natasha~~

Natasha expected that, sitting around and talking about boys, would eventually get old. But for some reason she found herself smiling, and giggling more than a few times, as she talked with Jessy. The two of them were in Natasha's apartment, sitting at the counter and drinking a bottle of blood again. Far more giggling and laughing going on this time though.

"In the alley, really?"

Natasha nodded. With no blush of life, she was free to be as embarrassed as she wanted to be without having to blush red. And she was very, very embarrassed.

"Y-Yeah, they uh ... had to have me, and I had t-t-to calm them down ... B-But even after doing that, they ... had me anyway." And unlike Jessy's ghouls, they didn't use pharmaceutical aid. They were simply ridiculously healthy, fit, strong beasts. And apparently, extremely horny beasts.

"Wish I was there."

"Hey! D-Don't ... don't touch my boys. They're mine." Mine mine mine. First time she'd ever had a relationship this sexual, this searing hot. It was also the first time she found herself wanting to hang out with her lover, purely for the fun of it, to laugh at the TV or to joke about politics.

First time she'd ever had a romantic relationship that felt fun. And it was so weird that it was with two boys. Men. Wolves at that.

"Quite attached to your lovers. Am I sensing love in the air?"

"W-What? N-N-N-No ... I ... we only just ... it's only been a week together, and ... I only knew them a little while b-before then, and—"

"Yeah, it's good that you're going slow and not declaring your love the moment you felt a connection."

“Hey! I’m just as old as you, J-Jessy, I ... I’m not a child, some juvenile little girl.”

Her friend smirked at her, winked, and took another sip of their drink. “Yeah, but love can turn anyone into a silly little girl.”

“We’re n-not in love!” More frowns for her friend, before she took back her bottle and refilled her glass.

“Glad my advice for them didn’t backfire at least. I had a feeling you liked them, but I could have been wrong.”

“I still owe you f-for that. I ... they ... d-did things to me you know.” Pinned down on a bed, trapped between two massive walls of muscle, with the two of them buried to the hilt inside her.

“Bet you came your brains out too.” The chuckle Jessy made could have come from a hyena.

“That ... that isn’t important! You t-told them personal things! Things I ... things I never told you!”

“Yeah well, it didn’t take a genius to see where your eyes were going those few times we had fun with the boys. Speaking of, damn they are going to be sad.”

“Sad? B-But they still have you. With your thighs and butt and—”

Natasha squeaked when her friend flicked her in the nose.

“You’d think after all this, you’d have grown some confidence! My boys really, really wanted to have you, all of them, at the same time.”

Oh good god. She lowered her forehead to the counter, half out of shame, half cause she was picturing it now. Eight hands on her, four penises fighting to find somewhere to penetrate, her buried in flesh



and heat and sex. Too much, way too much. Two men was more than enough.

But the image made her smile anyway.

“They ... really were attracted to me, weren’t they?”

“Fuck yes they were. Tight little thing like you? And the way you spoiled them with the blowjobs, ugh, making me look bad.”

“I’m sorry! I ... I just...” Just seemed to really like it when men were groaning and squirming in pleasure because of her hands, her lips and tongue. It was a very unexpected development from the sexual hazing Jessy had put her through, but very real, and her two boyfriends seemed to love it too. And were more than willing to repay her for it.

Hehe, two boyfriends.

“Any bisexuality in there?” Jessy said.

“W-What?” Natasha sat up straight and raised a brow, then considered. Jessy’s ghouls were more than willing to do anything Jessy asked, and that occasionally included touching each other. “No, I d-d-don’t think so. They’re best friends, and, um, d-despite how close everything gets, they never t-touch or even look at each other.” Always her, always all their attention on her, spoiling her rotten.

“Well, I’m sad that you won’t be joining me anymore, but pretty happy for you. Enjoy it.” Taking another sip of the blood — from the bottle — Jessy reached over and slid the laptop closer. Pictures of the burned building were open, as well as pictures of the Mirrden area. Natasha and Jessy were no longer in the same covenant, but dead Kindred was a problem worth talking about.

“Invictus h-have any leads yet?”

“Nope. Dragons?”

“No. The Prince has D-Daniel keeping an eye open, I’m sure, but ... but there’s no reason to really suspect the Uratha yet.”

“How about those monsters? We know there’s this Azamel chick hanging out in the tunnels, just squatting and being ominous and shit. Think she has anything to do with it?”

“ ... maybe.” But unlikely. Someone killed Barry, but the Carthians weren’t so stupid as to invite war on themselves to kill simple Barry. Barry was Barry, and Natasha doubted Garry even knew the man’s name.

“Ok, enough talk about work,” Jessy said.

“W-What? We said three words about wo—”

“So you going to take the boys out? Or just eat in all the time? I wonder if they’d enjoy going to one of the clubs.”

Natasha frowned her meanest frown, but like usual, it did nothing to deter Jessy and her one-track mind. “I ... I might take them to a club.” Dolareido was at no lack of options, not in the Invictus part of South Side anyway. “But it’s really not me, you know? And I d-don’t think it’s them either.”

“Well you wouldn’t be taking them there to dance. You’d be taking them there to fuck.”

“W-We can do that at home!”

“Yeah but it’s not the same.”

“I p-p-p-prefer it when the city c-can’t all see me naked. Unlike you! Everyone looks at your wind-dow every Saturday evening!”

Insults were useless against Jessy, not when it came to her shamelessness and her sexual desires. The Gangrel shrugged and sipped more blood, as if Natasha had just commented on the weather.

“If they like what they see, all the hotter for me.”

Natasha frowned again, but quickly gave up. Jessy was Jessy, and there was no changing her.

“And you wear that thong, so uncomfortable! Whole city probably just—”

“How do you know I wear a thong when I’m having fun by the window?” Jessy’s smile grew into a terrible, evil grin, and she leaned further across the counter the more it grew. “Been watching me?”

“I uh ... sort of? Just once! B-By accident.”

“Uh huh.”

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“How goes your new relationship, with the two Uratha, my apprentice? Any new developments?”

Natasha whined and shrank into her seat; even Antoinette wanted to talk about her new boyfriends. Her and the Prince, alone in the laboratory where the Prince conducted her experiments, seeking to communicate with the other side, the Hisil. Perhaps Natasha would ask her boyfriends for help with that someday, if Avery didn’t kill them for it.

“You know about Arturo and M-Matthew?”

“We discussed them not long ago, did we not? You confided in me, told me you Kissed one, told me they flirted with you, that they were interested in you, and you them.” A wicked smile appeared,

and she shrugged. “And of course, information travels quickly in Dolareido.”

“ ... oh god.” She sank into her chair some more, and then let her forehead drop to the table. Everyone knew she was in a relationship with two men, two werewolves at that.

“Natasha Vola, are you embarrassed?”

“ ... yes.”

“Whatever for?” The Prince paced about, a tablet in her hand showing her some different camera feeds of the symbol in the center of the room. Each feed was fed through some sort of filter, so the feeds were different color. But the lights were on in the laboratory, letting Natasha take notes of the strange object in front of her: a tiny carving of a crow.

“For ... y-you know, d-d-doing ... b-being in a ... uh, relationship ... like that.” No use in denying it. If Antoinette knew—if everyone knew, then they knew what kind of relationship it was.

But the Prince just laughed, a comely and warm sound, before sitting down across the table from her.

“Natasha, my dear, you are a silly little creature. Being friends with that animal friend of yours, Jessy, I had assumed such trite shames were abandoned already. Or, soon to be.”

“ ... you did?”

More laughter, but not in a taunting way. The sound of the Prince laughing was almost soothing.

“You are precious. Part of me believed that your shy demeanor was merely the mask you wore in public.” She smiled down at her, leaned in, and set the tablet aside. “Half a century of unlife to your

name, and you are still concerned about sex, and the views Kindred share of it?”

“A l-little, yeah!”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, leaned back, and combed her hair over one of her shoulders onto her chest, where she continued to comb it with her fingers. “Jessy engages in such crude, sexual pursuits, because she knows that no Kindred — at least any older than a fledgling — care. And I encourage it. In so many cities, Kindred lose their taste for the physical as they age, and I have labored to prevent that from happening within my city, for myself, and for the others.”

“Y-Yeah, and I love that, b-b-b-b—”

“Natasha.” The Prince craned her head a little to look at the door; probably checking for Daniel. But it was just the two of them, thank god. “Do you have any inkling of the sort of sexual depravity a Kindred may sink to, seeking pleasure?”

“I ... I um...”

“When I was your age, little Vola, or perhaps a little older, I once had twenty men enslaved to the power of my discipline majesty. And while four of them were dedicated to pleasuring me, filling my body completely with finger, tongue, and shaft, the other sixteen bathed my breasts and body in their white seed. The stood about me, masturbating, and when one was ready to climax, they soaked my breasts, for another man to massage into my skin. And during all this, I sipped blood from a wine glass, and let the pleasure, and the overwhelming smell of sex and blood and life, let the moment lull me into contentment and orgasm.”

Holy. Fuck. Natasha stared at the woman, eyes wide, and taking more than few up-and-down glances of her. Twenty men, just covering her in cum, and massaging and fingering and fucking and rubbing and stuff? Good god.

“ ... all ... all over you? R-Really?” She almost said gross. And it was gross! In the after math when the arousal was gone and you had to clean up. But, in the heat of the moment, getting a man’s cum on your skin was ... carnal, and thrilling.

Antoinette nodded, and shrugged when they made eye contact. “It was an interesting time, exploring one’s body, one’s self, exploring desires and breaching barriers. Coming into the power of the age of ancilla, as you have, I took the time to discover what appealed or did not appeal to me. I wholly encourage your relationship with these two, Natasha, if for no other reason than to explore what will make you happy.”

“I sense a ... b-but coming.”

“But be careful, Vola. They are Uratha. You are not. We have different goals, different reasons to exist. And sometimes those goals do not mesh.”

“ ... you don’t think ... it’ll c-come to a conflict, d-do you?” Cause she really didn’t want that. Really really didn’t want that.

“Just be aware, my little apprentice. You are smart, clever, quick, and I will be relying on you more and more as the years go by. If it ever does come to blows with the wolves ... Fetch my purse for me, would you dear?”

Purse fetching? A little odd, but she nodded and got up. The purse the Prince was carrying was a black thing, fairly large, large enough to be gaudy and unusual; not something the Prince would wear in public considering her perfect fashion sense. And it felt a little heavy.

Once it was on the table, Antoinette opened it up, and withdrew a small sword.

“For you, my apprentice.”

“Uh, o-ok?” Not to seem ungrateful, but she already had a sword, and Antoinette knew it. “Wha—”

“Draw the blade.”

Natasha blinked, but did as requested. The sheathe was a simple thing, some sort of sturdy material, perhaps black leather, and maybe fifteen inches long. The handle was similar, though as Natasha looked at the grip, she noticed a subtle pattern carved into the hard handle: a dragon, almost invisible unless you were looking for it.

But it was the metal of the blade that locked Natasha’s vision. There was a glint to it, a shimmer, a shine she didn’t expect to find on metal.

“ ... s-silver.”

“Indeed. And I expect you to keep that blade with you, Natasha Vola. That is not a request. If you forget to keep it with you, I will do far more to you than shake you by the jaw. Understood?”

“Und-d-derstood.” She gulped, and ran her eyes up and down the shortsword. She didn’t normally walk around with her usual sword unless she felt the mission was dangerous, and now she was being ordered to keep a blade on her at all times.

What would Matthew and Arturo say? They’d understand, surely.

“And be under no illusions, Vola. The other covenants will be doing the same.”

“Feel like we ... m-m-might trigger something.”

“With luck, my love and his new role will prevent that. That does bring me to a new task for you, Natasha,” Antoinette said. New task, and she was holding a new silver sword. Uh oh. But, the Prince

shook her head, reading her mind. “Nothing to do with the Uratha. In fact, with your new relationship, I feel I should leave tasks involving the Uratha to Daniel. No, what I ask of you, is to keep an eye and ear open for a similar weakness in the Begotten.”

“Oh! S-Silver for the werewolves, but the monsters, I uh ... yeah, what is there weakness?” They were literal nightmares, but that didn’t explain any weakness, didn’t provide any real hints on how to deal with them if things went bad. “You’ve d-d-dealt with them before, and ... in centuries, you haven’t found a weakness?”

“No. They hold their secrets close.”

“I got the impression, from F-Fiona ... that they actually ... like bonding with other beings, like us, like the werewolves.”

The Prince sighed, got up, and began to pace about the room, her hands together behind her back, and her head down as she dug through her thoughts. “They do, from the few I have met. But they enjoy their own motives, Azamel in particular. Feeding their hunger is not just a need of the Begotten, it is their reason for existence. The ramifications of their ravenous appetites changes from monster to monster, and if at all possible, I require the means to defeat them should their hungers prove too great a thorn in my side.”

“I’d hate t-t-to have to kill Fiona.” Fiona was fun. Really fun. And nice. She needed to see her again, and thank her a few more times for everything she did with Jack and them.

“As would I, my little apprentice. But I have lived too long to make silly mistakes such as trusting others. We will look for a weakness, but only to use if absolutely necessary. And do not tell the beasts we are looking for this information. I do not wish them to think this will be a city operating under a policy of deterrence.”

“So ... if we ... d-d-discover a weakness, don’t tell them. They’ll think we c-can’t defeat them, but they’ll also be ... less l-likely to be



difficult to deal with.” It was a smart plan, assuming she could get such information without them knowing. And that was easier said than done, considering how alien these creatures were. Werewolves were weird and had unusual motivations, but the monsters may as well have been literal aliens from another planet, for all she could understand them.

“Indeed.” Antoinette walked over to the symbol on the floor where she performed her experiments, and stared at it. Apparently her mind was wandering, probably devouring some of the experiments they’d been doing in trying to summon different things. A few minor successes, summoning a few things that had as much intelligence as an insect. Nothing as profound as Safe.

“ ... d ... d-did you really ... have that many men ... cum all over you?” The image was too vivid to just drop it.

The Prince burst into a loud laugh, and winked at Natasha before she returned to her analyzing of the summoning circle. “I did indeed.”

“But that was so long ago! How ... d-do you remember something from back then?” Careful. Elders did not like admitting to their bad memories.

“It is true the memory is nothing more than a haze, but I quickly realized the value of journals when I was younger. I detailed such sexual exploration, and took note of many things.” She stepped over the circle, and analyzed it from the other side, fingers on her chin. “Perhaps you would prefer a more recent memory?”

“Recent? L ... like...” Oh, Jack. She was talking about Jack. “I ... um, that’s personal, right? You can—”

“Natasha, I know that you and that mongrel Jessy are close friends, and she has the tact of a grenade. If you would like to talk sex, then please, ask me. It is a passion of mine.”

Sex was a passion of the Prince's? Well, she was Daeva, but with her age, Natasha continued to have the impression that her boss didn't care for sex like younger Kindred. She knew that wasn't true, but she'd dealt with Maria for so long, it was hard to shake the idea.

"I, I uh ... um..." Awkward, so awkward. But then it was Natasha making it awkward. Jessy never felt awkward, and Antoinette was literally ten times older than Jessy. Making her feel ashamed, embarrassed, awkward, was impossible.

"Personally," the Prince said, "I prefer to have multiple women in the bed, with the one man. It is such fun to tease the man, to hang him on the edge of bliss, before the insurmountable size of three women's sex drive combined crush him." She came back over to the table, sat down, and took a few more hidden notes on her tablet. "With you, I imagine it must be quite different. Two wolves, aggressive animals, large, and tiny you?" With a twinkle in her eye, the Prince leaned in, set her elbows on the table, and netted her fingers together for her chin to rest on. "Delicious."

First Jessy, now Antoinette. But at least with Antoinette, she didn't feel like she was talking to a teenager in an adult's body. Antoinette was a real, mature woman, who could say a word like penis without laughing, and could describe sexual acts in extreme detail without ever breaking eye contact, apparently.

"They ... they uh ... sort ... p-pinned me d-d-down ... on the bed. And um, they both took me ... same time ... one in front of me ... one behind me." How would her boss react to that level of sexual admittance?

"Pinned?"

"Oh! Um, no no, I had a safe word, and it w-was ... weirdly romantic? Cause they were kissing me, and t-touching me, and then ... fucking me, at the same time, and they were gentle! Gentle, and nice ... b-but also ... aggressive and ... hungry."

“That sounds utterly rapturous.” Antoinette sighed, a long, calming sort, and let her eyes drift upward in some memory Natasha could not fathom. “I have forever been the mightier of my bedfellows. I do not know what it is to be in danger from the strength of whoever shares my touch. I envy you. It must have been intoxicating, little you, to be surrounded by such muscle, raw strength, blood and life capable of tearing you limb from limb, yet only concerned with two things: pleasuring you, and relieving themselves within your awaiting depths.”

Yeap. That was it. That was what was making Natasha’s head spin every time she remembered that night. The feeling of being trapped and helpless and even in danger, and yet knowing the two who could easily kill her, wanted only to fuck her into a helpless mess, was overwhelming and intoxicating.

“It was ... it w-was really good.”

“It must have been! In my own experimentations, I have found that I could never quite truly enjoy anal penetration, to my dismay.” The Prince shrugged, lowered her hands, and leaned back in her chair again so she could start combing her hair once more. “Of course, to each their own. And I must admit, the thought of you trapped between those two beasts is a very pleasing thought, Miss Vola. You are a beautiful little creature, and the juxtaposition of their size against yours, is a magnificently erotic image.”

“Th-Thank you.” Natasha smiled, even beamed with pride, and nodded a few times. The way the Prince described things made them feel so empowering, so delightful, so amazing. Not like Jessy who practically made her feel guilty; course her friend was only teasing her, but still. “You have such a b-beautiful way with words.”

“Thank you,” she said in return, smiling a warm smile Natasha found quite rare on her master’s face. “As I said, sexuality is a

passion of mine, and I am morose for not having a fellow Kindred to speak of such things with anymore. Would you care to indulge me?”

“Indulge, P-Prince?”

“Share with me details of your exploits, and I will share with you mine. Your relationship with the two Uratha is unique, and one I could not hope to experience on my own. Through your words, I may gain a taste of that experience. And I do hope you will enjoy my own tales.”

Girl talk! Except, not the sort of girl talk with Jessy where it was all chuckles and teasing and dirty gossip. Antoinette actually seemed to approach the topic with the heart of an artist, looking to find the joy and eroticism in the words. And that, Natasha could definitely agree to.

“Ok.”

“Wonderful.” Antoinette made another sigh, another smile, and let her gaze drift upward as she combed her hair over her chest. “But only a week ago, perhaps a day more, I was lying back in the arms of one of my ghouls, my precious Ashley. Jack sat upon my waist, leaning forward, shaft buried in my breasts. Ashley took me into her hands, and used my breasts to massage Jack’s length, until his white fluid coated me.” Another sigh! The third sigh sealed it; it was her dreamy sigh. This was the noise the Prince made when she was swooning. “The look of sheer, total, overwhelming sexual bliss on Jack’s face was enough to make my knees weak. And of course, to my ever delight, the feel of fingers massaging his warmth into my skin was lovely.”

Well, that was an image Natasha was never going to get out of her head. And yet, with how elegantly the Prince described it, she was more than happy to keep the image. Jack was a very attractive little man, and the scene Antoinette described was pretty amazing, if not

exactly Natasha's cup of tea. Perhaps that's what these exchanges were all about?

"Jack m-must have really enjoyed that."

"Oh, the boy is obsessed with my breasts." Antoinette chuckled, and shrugged as she looked down at her fingers, and where they mingled with her hair. "And I adore him for it. He has brought me to near climax through my breasts alone, ever doting on them, massaging, caressing, kissing, suckling. Sometimes, I will simply lie there, and let him feast upon my breasts. It will take him twenty, perhaps thirty minutes before he at last feels the need to move on, and by then, a touch of his breath on my neck is enough to bring me to orgasm."

And not at a single point in any of this vivid describing did Antoinette even blink. Not for jadedness though; if anything she looked head over heels in love, and swooned a fourth time.

"But, please," Antoinette said, "this is supposed to be an exchange. Regale me with a tale, Miss Vola, of what your two beasts have done to you?"

Natasha gulped, peeked left and right like someone might be spying on them, and leaned forward. "The ... d-day after our first ... time, they..." She almost squealed, and buried her face in her palms as she shook her head. "Had their tongues ... between my legs. B-B-Both of them did."

"Your new lovers sound quite comfortable with each other and your body."

"T-Too comfortable! It was ... I mean, it was ... really good, just..."

"Natasha, you are Kindred, and have been for five decades. You have no reason to be embarrassed by your body, or reason to worry for the hygiene issues of the living. Your lovers seem delighted to

indulge you such salacious acts; embrace it. You will be happier for it.”

Embracing it wasn't so easy when she had a couple lifetimes of antisocial behavior to fight, and one of those lifetimes included bodily functions that would deter someone from sticking their tongue in such places! But, like Jessy said, she hadn't had a period or bowel movement in half a century, so feeling self conscious about things like that was stupid.

“I did ... did um ... really enjoy it. And then they ... lifted me up, and both had me again. But this time ... it was standing up. My toes c-couldn't reach the floor.” And by the time they were done, their cum had dripped down her legs to her knees, and her own had reached her ankles. But she couldn't say that! Too much, way too much. For now.

“Truly delicious.” Another sigh, another smile. “Enjoy it while you can, little Mekhet. Such joys make our second lives worth living.”

“ ... uh, and—”

“And do not fret. Our tales are secret between you and I.”

Mind reader.

“Thank you ... f-for being ... I d-d-don't know, more mature about this than Jessy. I love Jessy, b-but she ... I could never talk about this in so much detail! She ... can't take anything seriously.”

“I understand, Miss Vola, quite well at that.” She leaned in to match Natasha's posture, like the two should have been whispering when they weren't. “You are not Jessy Herrington. Jokes and teasing are not how one such as yourself would prefer to discuss such delicate matters.”

“E-Exactly!” Getting exposed to this new side of the Prince was doing wonders for Natasha’s comfort. Always she thought of the Prince as some sort of deity, and always it came back to Antoinette being very much a woman. A confident woman, intelligent and self aware and all the things Natasha wanted to be.

A friend, maybe? The Prince seemed to like the idea, at least.

“If I may make a suggestion, my apprentice? One for the bedroom. And please, request that I cease if this conversation proves too personal for your liking.”

“N-No! Please, go ahead.” Sex tips from a half-millennia-old Daeva were bound to be good.

“I suspect that you keep rather girlish, cute things in your possession, yes? Stuffed animals, bright clothes with butterflies, similar things, and I suspect that you spend much of your time attempting to convince yourself that these are childish things? Instead of placing your animals upon your bed, you threw them away, and the few you keep you hide in your closet. Instead of embracing colorful thigh high socks, you force yourself to wear only regular white socks, and would never be caught shopping for such juvenile clothes. At war with your intelligence, you convince yourself to pursue cold efficiency in everything, despite a secret want to play with brighter colors, to experiment with different hair styles, to ... wear pink.”

She blinked at the Prince. Blinked, and blinked a few more times. Did she know about her stuffed animals she hid in her closet? Her pink journal she kept hidden in a secret drawer?

“I—”

The Prince put up a hand, and offered Natasha a gentle smile. “You are a clever, brilliant woman, Natasha. But like Daniel, I see that you deny yourself much of what you consider juvenile, when in

fact, it is these things that give you both such unique and compelling personalities.” The Prince raised a hand to her lip, eyes looking down as she vanished in thought for a moment. “ ... come with me.”

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Deeper into the Prince’s tower the two walked. Natasha had never walked these stairs, spreading out with flourishing designs that opened into entirely new depths, with black or white marble dragons on stands, and similarly shaped etchings in the black marble that the Prince loved so much. This tower was huge. Was it twenty floors deep, or maybe even thirty?

Antoinette stepped into a hallway, and Natasha scampered after her, though her eyes continued to drink in the sights. One of the rooms had a pool! A full sized pool, with a hot tub beside it. Another room was filled with mirrors and all sorts of colored drapes. One of the rooms was filled with metal, locked crates, that Natasha could only assume was either filled with gold bars, or dangerous occult objects.

Another room’s purpose was blatant, and Natasha stared at it as Antoinette brought her into its walls. Clothes. There were clothes everywhere, hanging from hundreds, thousands of hangers. Wardrobes too, many open with all sorts of clothes inside. But they couldn’t have belonged to the Prince, they were far too small for her, and much of the clothes came in colors like aqua, pink, lime, violet, and a dozen shades and variations for each.

“ ... Ashley and Julee’s clothes?”

“Oui. They are taller than you, but the clothes will serve well enough to demonstrate.” She reached into one of the wardrobes, and plucked from it a set of socks. Pink socks that went up to the thigh, and had little white flowers on them. “These to you, are silly, cute things, non?”



“I uh ... I d-do ... yeah.” Wearing something that ridiculous would make her die of embarrassment. But the color was appealing, the design was appealing, and she knew it was scratching that guilty pleasure part of her.

“And you, once tasked with the horrible burden of being Maria Turio’s servant, along with being the sheriff’s childe, must have thought such things were not to be worn by one in your position? Believed that you needed to prove yourself, due to your small size, that you were mature and reliable?”

“ ... y ... yeah.” It was true, much as she hated to admit it.

“Then you are a fool.”

Natasha lowered her head, and sighed. Ouch.

The Prince came up to her, and poked her once in the forehead. “While you performed business for the Invictus, and while performing business for me, a certain presentation is expected. But when time is yours, when you are free to be yourself? Please, embrace your guilty pleasures, Natasha Vola. I suspect it will not only make you a happier individual, but your new lovers as well.”

“Art and Matt? Why—”

“I suspect they are attracted to the qualities in you that escape your pitiful attempts to hide them.” Ouch. Again. Her new friend was proving to be real mean. But the Prince sighed again, and pat her on the shoulder. “This is a good thing, Natasha. It means you can indulge yourself in their presence. And, I suspect, if these two massive, deadly predators ever found their little Red Riding Hood wearing naught but red thigh high socks, and silk boy shorts of the same color, they would utterly ravage you.”

Ravage her. She squirmed, but raised her head as a smile forced its way onto her lips. “R ... Ravage?”

“Oh yes. Perhaps if also wearing a petit red tank top, the two men would be slaves to their own desires. They would pin you down, force themselves upon your tiny, wriggling body, and devour you many times, until you were a mess of exhaustion, sweat, and pleasure. And only then would they both take you between them, penetrate you, fill you, and fuck your weakened body until they were satisfied.”

Good god this woman! No idea, Natasha had no idea Antoinette had this sort of side to her. Dominatrix? Sure. Queenly and confident? Obviously. Motherly and tender with her lover Jack? She could even see that. But she never, ever expected Antoinette to be a connoisseur of sexuality. And to be so eloquent and ... arousing, in how she described it.

“How ... d-d-d-d—”

“Natasha, my sweet dear, you are terribly easy to read, as you no doubt know. And for ones as old as I, we recognize behavior in others, behavior we have seen over centuries, and sometimes expressed ourselves.” She sat down beside her, and set the silly pink thigh high socks on her lap. “Learn from my mistakes, and embrace that which you hide behind closet doors.”

“You ... weren’t always s-s-so ... confident?”

“My dear! Of course not.” She got back up, leaving the socks behind, and started rooting through more of her ghouls’ clothes. “I came from a time where women were to be subservient, not dominant. I have always been taller than most men. And, from a time before I can recall, I have had white hair. Much of my life, according to the few journal entries I still retain from that time, I was quite self conscious about those aspects of myself. To be meek, small, to be cared for by a man, that was what I wanted.”

Imagining tall, curvy Antoinette being self conscious about anything was a tough thing to imagine, especially with how

tonight's conversation had gone, with the Prince shamelessly describing sex and sexual acts and approaching her about them. Woman barely ever blinked, let alone stutter and fidget with embarrassment and awkwardness like Natasha did.

“It was decades,” she continued, “before I learned to embrace what I kept private. In today's age, it is preached that women should strive to be assertive; and yet, that has perhaps damaged what many enjoy in the bedroom: being submissive. Jack is submissive with me, and I expect you will enjoy being submissive with your two lovers. Submissive, and perhaps, a little ... girlish.” She returned from the wardrobe with some colorful tops, some various colors in underwear — bubblegum colors everywhere — and some more types of socks, different colors, different patterns, different heights.

“Your ghouls m-must have a lot of fun.”

“Oui. If only we Kindred could enjoy life as they do. But, we may try. Jack has awoken in me many pleasures I let lie dormant. Corsets, I must admit, are a guilty pleasure of mine. To create such unrealistic portrayals of a woman's waist? I should feel more guilty for the act, and yet I cannot help but indulge my vanity.”

Natasha giggled, and looked the Prince up and down a few times. Yeah, she definitely seemed like a corset woman. And, as Natasha looked at all the colorful, fun clothes the Prince was showing her, the little Mekhet couldn't help but picture herself in them. Cause they were fun, and silly, and all the things she never considered herself to be. That Jessy kept saying she could be. That Art and Matt seemed to think she was.

She scooped up the clothes. Not that they'd fit her, but it gave her some idea as to the brands she should buy. If a Daeva knew anything, they knew fashion.

“Feel like ... I'm b-betraying my bookworm self.”

“Nonsense. Embrace that as well.” Antoinette dismissed her puerile concerns with a small hand wave, and stood up again to go digging through more clothes. “And I do suggest some nighties to compliment your clothing rotation. Colorful ones. Unless I am mistaken — and that is rare — those two wolves would lose themselves in total, animal lust, if they caught you wearing a babydoll nightie, see-through, and nothing else.”

“Nothing else? N-No bottoms?”

“Non. It spoils the collective illusion of innocence such attire can bring. But of course, that is a small distinction, and if you would prefer to wear them, wear something that matches. In either case, the results will be explosive.”

And again, Natasha giggled at Antoinette’s perfect word choice: explosive. She felt like she should be at a salon, getting her nails done, her hair done, and gossiping about boys with the hair stylist. Course, Antoinette approached sexual details with a little more openness than a hair stylist might. But, at the same time, with total sincerity and maturity. It was refreshing, a total one-eighty from Jessy’s approach.

“Thank you.”

“For what, dear?”

“For ... I d-don’t know, talking about this sorta stuff with me, even though I’m ... p-pretty shy about this kind of stuff.”

“Ah, my dear, it is I that must thank you. Your sire does not share my passion for sexuality, and not since ... Tony’s youth, when he went by a different name, have I engaged in such delightful conversation. To gossip, and talk of men and sex? A guilty pleasure if there ever as one.” She removed another piece of clothing from the wardrobe, a nightie, a tiny thing that was very see-through, and very lime. And now that Natasha was staring at it and Antoinette in

this whole new, mind-shattering light, she realized the Prince was handling the clothes of not just her ghouls, but two women she'd spent many years having sex with on a regular basis.

Little bit of bias then, maybe, from Antoinette about the clothes Natasha should wear. Well, maybe bias, but still true. Maybe not so true that she'd start wearing pink all the time, or sundresses, but maybe, on occasion, for fun? It could be fun. It would be fun!

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~~Beatrice~~

She shuddered, and rubbed her arms. Not like she felt terribly cold, being Kindred and all, but it seemed like the thing to do while in a tank top, in the Three Kings Cemetery.

The Dolareido Cathedral, Lucas's masterpiece, wasn't too far away. Beatrice wouldn't be surprised if Maria was in there right now, playing some music like she knew the old Nosferatu could. Maybe Damien was in there too? Maybe. But, not why she was here.

Jacob was wearing his robes, long black things that reached down to his ankles, and worn with what must have been decades of use. Maybe even centuries, if it was treated to last. Whatever it was made of, it wasn't the sort of thing you'd wear in public, cause it screamed witchcraft and occult and other crazy shit; not good for blending into a crowd. The elder kept them both hidden in his cloak of night discipline, and considering his power, his age, it was more than strong enough for them to basically disappear from existence.

“We gonna dig up a corpse?” she said.

“Did you want to?”

“What? No. The fuck? I was joking.”

“Just as well, there’s no one in this cemetery worth digging up.” The old man shrugged and wandered through and between the tombstones, occasionally chuckling when his gaze landed on a tombstone he recognized. “The three kings were greatly overrated.”

Three Kings Cemetery, named as such for being the burial site of three kings. Not real kings, but three people who’d been quite famous early on in Dolareido’s life. Mob bosses maybe? Nah, earlier than that. Three criminals from when the city was damn young, and who’d managed to make themselves some tiny empires. But all things come to an end and their corpses were found here, in what had become the biggest and creepiest cemetery in Dolareido.

Withered trees. Dozens of mausoleums of varying sizes. Tombstones with statues on them, people on horses, of women in robes holding someone’s body, or baby angel things—cherubs. Bits of leaves blew by, along with some twigs that fell from the trees. The moonlight was casting powerful shadows, as the cemetery was far enough from brighter sections of the city to allow some of the sky to be visible. And without the tall buildings around it, the wind picked up enough speed to get the trees moving, their branches dancing, and the shadows coming to life.

Rows upon rows upon rows of graves. Sometimes it was easy to forget Dolareido was a pretty damn old city, even for Beatrice, who hung out in a fucking catacomb. And with so much age and history to the city, elders with some seriously old tastes got to indulge in their macabre delights. Which was cool and all, Beatrice did love that shit.

“I have to wonder,” she said as they walked past some of the larger tombstones, “what sort of shit you elders did when this city was growing up.”

“Oh, such a tale! That boy Tony — Jacques at the time — was always stirring up trouble in the quaint little village, while we

created our thralls, dug our tunnels, took over the whole town. They had a city council of nothing but our thralls. Such glorious days, when we only had to herd a few thousand, instead of millions. When there were no cameras or internet, and we were free to turn the town into our playground come nightfall.” He chuckled a few times, and came to a stop in front of one of the smaller tombstones. A carving of a cross was on it, and a stone rose. “I had three Kindred at the time in my circle, and we loved to catch bandits and sacrifice them; Antoinette preferred we spared those who deserved life even then. The blood poured, and we howled at the moon as we danced naked and summoned spirits you would not believe exist.”

“Jesus. What happened to them? Your circle.”

“Dead.” Jacob paused by another grave, this one with a tombstone that carried no statue, but held some words: Death Comes For Us All. Fucking delightful. “Hunters.”

“I’ve heard that word a few times now, but no one ever goes into detail. Hunters? We’ve had no hunters in Dolareido since I’ve been Kindred, far as I know.”

“And you are likely correct.”

“What happened to them?”

“Oh, they’re still out there.” He shrugged as he came to another tombstone, where another quote was found: Fuck You Carl. He laughed and continued on, glancing around at everything they passed like someone revisiting their old high school. “But like the Kindred, they had to adapt. Instead of marching into town wearing necklaces of silver, bones, charms, with pistols and swords and torches, now they hide in back alleys and with walls of meat and technology between us and them. Gangs, or organizations that seem innocent, but are very much not.”

“You mean ... in Dolareido?”

“Perhaps. I know much, as does Antoinette, and even the worthless triumvirate of the Invictus know plenty about the ongoings in the city. It would seem the city is free of that pest. But we cannot safely say that hunters do not hide in our midst.”

She shivered and looked around. “They uh ... must be doing a good job of hiding, if we haven’t heard of them in decades.”

“Far more likely they aren’t hunting in Dolareido. There are a lot of other cities with a Kindred presence who aren’t nearly as kind as we are. Lucas and Viktor and their cruelty are the norm for the elders, after all. Antoinette and I and our compassion are the exception.” He laughed again, knowing full well Beatrice didn’t think of either of them as compassionate. Maybe not insane with bloodlust and violent tendencies, but certainly not compassionate.

She shivered a few more times, and stopped to stare at a tall statue. An angel, with robes hanging over her whole body so the face was hidden in shadow. She was pouring a jar of water, the fluid carved of stone, onto the tombstone beneath her. Beautiful. And totally at odds with the overall creepy vibe the cemetery gave off.

“So, why are we here?”

“You wanted to explore crúac rituals, didn’t you?”

“Yeah but, I figured we’d want to do that somewhere private? This is a cemetery, a public one at that, and Maria’s not even a mile away.” Assuming she was in her Cathedral. Hers, since Lucas was gone.

The man chuckled, and motioned with his head for her to follow. He stepped into one of the mausoleums, and she stopped outside it to look up at the arch of the small, stone building. Pillars lined the sides of the entrance, and a cross decorated the arch’s face. Old, worn stone, and a gate made of two wooden doors, lined with metal. A single step lead up to the small gate, and beside it, statues of the



virgin Mary stood with arms outstretched. They too were worn with time, features washed away, and the stained stone looked almost like it was bleeding discoloration.

She stepped into the mausoleum, and shuddered. Mountains of nameless bones she could handle, but a mausoleum like this gave everything a name. It was just a big room, really, with most of the space taken up by shelves of marble, dark and dead. Coffins, each with a name, and each beside a drawer of some sort. Personal belongings probably. And some of the drawers were cracked, with bits of the rock on the floor so the cracks exposed the contents. One of them held what looked like a shaving kit from two hundred years ago. Another held a very creepy doll.

At this point Jacob withdrew an LED lantern. Not a real lantern, cause no Kindred liked using fire if they could avoid it, and not a typical flashlight, because that wouldn't appeal to an elder's nostalgia. No, the man had a lantern with an LED source of light, but also fashioned to look oldschool. She smirked at him, and he returned it with his own, before he pressed on a very specific part of a specific crack of one of the shelves.

The floor slid aside. Beatrice squeaked and jumped back as the sound of sliding stone filled the mausoleum. Straight out of a fucking eighties action flick, the stone moved aside to reveal a stairway, the only source of light being a glimmer of moonlight through the cracks in the roof, and Jacob's lantern as he approached the descending tunnel.

“Come on. Pussy.” He smirked at her again, even chuckled a little, and disappeared into the blackness.

Gonna kill him, gonna fucking kill him. She hopped over to the opening side of the stairway, and descended after him. A very tiny tunnel, so tiny she had to crouch to keep moving with the stairs; nothing she wasn't used to dealing with, considering the entrance to

their usual home. And once she had her head under the stones, Jacob pulled down on some sort of metal crank handle on the wall. The floor above her shifted, and slid back into place, giving her a little more headroom. Standing up, she glanced around at the darkness, at the long shadows cast by the one source of light, and how the stone under the earth was so very worn, and wet.

She could smell the dead. And more than just the very old dead, but also the recently dead. The fuck was Jacob up to?

“Guess this is one of your secret places then?”

“Yeap. Only Daniel and Antoinette know about this, and they respect my privacy.”

What a weird relationship between them, that Jacob could be building secret rooms, and they’d just let him.

“They don’t spy on you?”

“Sometimes they try, but it’s rare. Daniel has to go through quite the song and dance to try and spy on me, and what little he learns, most often, I let him learn it.” He raised the lantern up the spreading walls, and showed where strange symbols or runes were drawn in what must have been blood. Not like blood lasted forever, so, he must have been renewing them. “And with a few specific rituals, I can defend my ritual areas from his prying auspex.”

“Really? Damn.” Cause she knew how deadly that shit was in the hands of a master. Might as well have been trying to stop a ghost from spying on you. “And what sort of nasty shit do you practice down here?” That apparently he trusted her with knowing. Made her kind of proud and happy, but she wasn’t about to let him know that.

The tunnel was very oldschool, and she half expected it to collapse on her at any moment. But there were wooden beams

within, holding up the thousands of pounds of dirt and rock, and they themselves seemed pretty sturdy. Still, hard to ignore the fact she was underground, something that she was normally used to dealing with, but these wet, dripping rocks, and the complete and total lack of stonework or architecture, made it seem like she was walking through an abandoned mining tunnel.

At least until she came upon one of the support beams along the ceiling with an old wooden plank hanging from it. Something was burned into the wood: Continue Forth, and Death Awaits Thee. And hanging from the sign were several skulls dangling from chains, with hooks driven through their temples.

“Your doing I assume?”

“Actually that was Jean’s doing.”

“Jean?”

“One of my circle, when the city was still young. Three Kings Cemetery has existed for quite some time — for an American city anyway — and this tunnel was one of the first places I taught my pupils the dark rituals.” He brushed the skulls aside and continued on. Beatrice ducked.

“What happened to him?”

“Hunter killed him. Got him with a stake in the heart, then cut off his head when he was paralyzed.”

“Fuck, man. When was this?”

“The 1820s, I believe. Hard to remember the details. Except for, you know, the head removal part.”

Right, right, that memory. God she was following someone with a volatile memory, and that added a whole new level of fear to her

adventures. For all she knew, he was going to forget something important and get them both killed. It was like trusting herself to someone who was randomly senile.

Eventually the tiny tunnel opened into a large cavern, a very familiar one at that. She'd never seen it before, but the bone decorations were similar to the ones in their home cave, hundreds of them from every part of the human body arranged to create a tapestry of patterns and designs. In this cave, the pattern looked almost like the waves of an ocean, the sort of ocean where you could hear the howling of wind.

And she could hear howling. Quiet, distant, but there was some sort of howling sound in the darkness of the cave. No candles lit, so the only light source was Jacob's one lantern, and despite how it was a solid light unlike a candle flame, the shadows she found around her flickered.

In the center of the obsidian that surrounded them, sat a bowl. Unlike the blood bowl in their usual cave, this one sat closer to the ground, and was held above the ground by skeletons. Someone managed to get skeletons lying on their stomachs, some on their back, with arms up to press against the massive bowl's undersides. The bowl itself looked like it was carved of stone, and someone had chiseled some intricate lines along its edges, lines that looked like dripping liquid.

Above the enormous bowl, was a corpse. Some woman was hanging, naked, with arms up high and a chain around her wrists. In her stomach were several knives, still in there in places where it'd take a long time to die. The woman's face was aimed down, her jaw open, eyes wide; the pain and fear were still visible in her expression.

"I thought ... you used vitae to perform these rituals, vampire blood," she said.

Jacob set the lantern aside, and stood by the edge of the bowl on the other side. “Yes, but if you’re going to be bleeding yourself to fuel your rituals, it’s nice to have a snack.”

“That’s not a snack!” She pointed up at the naked corpse. Woman looked to be in her twenties, but her skin was sunken into her body with how drained she was. “That’s—”

“Please, your misplaced ethical dilemmas are unneeded. She came from another city and started peddling heroine to some youngsters. Dolareido embraces drug use, but not like that.” He chuckled a few more times, each chuckle a little louder than the last, before he reached out to push the feet of the hanging body. “This is a nice neighborhood, after all.” The corpse eased back and forth, just hard enough for Beatrice to hear the creak of the chain around her wrists against the wooden beam from above. The quiet howling was still there, but Beatrice couldn’t place its origin, as if the stone walls were echoing the dead woman’s cries.

The shadow of her swinging feet flickered on the walls.

“So you tortured her to death?”

“A few knives to the gut hardly counts as torture.”

“Most people would disagree.”

“We aren’t most people.” The man stepped around the bowl again to come beside her, and he leaned in closer until his bandage-covered eyes were only inches from her. So close, even in this darkness, the lantern provided enough light she could see the gray lines in his hair. “You want to explore the power to be found in witchcraft, in blood rituals, then grow up. There are witches out there who will bleed another Kindred dry, to fuel rituals so insane you could not fathom.” He came a step closer, and she had to take a step back from him to make room. “There are Kindred out there who have drunk other Kindred down to the fucking soul, absorbed

their entire essence, absorbed what made them who they are, just so their own blood would have the power to perform the most heinous of rituals.”

Diablerie. He was fucking talking about diablerie.

“ ... we wouldn't do that.”

“Oh yes we would. Perhaps not you, and, perhaps, not I, but diablerie exists, and it is a tempting proposition. The sweet taste of a soul.” He touched his lips, licked them, before he smirked and shrugged. “Not that I would know.”

Fuck. Now she had a new thing to suspect her boss of. Elders often did some pretty nasty shit over the course of their long lives, but diablerie was a whole different level of asshole, and she had a hard time imagining even Jacob doing that. But him just saying he'd never done it was no way a guarantee he hadn't. Fucker loved to lie, to see if she could figure him out. And right now she could not.

“So what now?” she said, stepping back and moving around the bowl to stand opposite of him again. The bowl was easier to look at than the hanging body.

Jacob frowned at her, and motioned for her to return. Sighing, she walked back over to stand beside him, until he sat down by the huge bowl, and she did as well. She did not like where this was going.

“You need to understand something, Beatrice Damor. If you want to learn crúac rituals, if you want a peek at what it's like to call upon things beyond your understanding, you're going to have to suffer.”

“Suffer?”

He gestured to the empty bowl. In the dark and hard to see, there were some objects lying in its base, and now that she was sitting by

the bowl, she took a moment to squint and peer at them. More knives.

“Why do you think I brought you here, to this underground cavern in an old cemetery? Here, we may pursue these dark arts, and the screams will remain within these walls.”

“ ... screams?”

The robed man leaned into the bowl, and withdrew one of the blades. Blade was a strong word for it, more like rock that'd been chipped into something sharp, and then tied to a wooden grip of sorts with string.

“The Circle of the Crone is many things. Some of us worship the gods of the earth. Some of us chant and dance naked in the moonlight to celebrate the blood of the cosmos. Some of us speak to spirits, or the dead, and offer our blood in communication or worship. But there's one thing you need to know, one similarity between all witches: the beast in your guts is going to come out.”

“I don't—”

“You may not know why you're interested in this stuff, but I do. It's because the beast inside you is a little closer to the surface than most Kindred. In this pussy town, everyone here is whipped. Fucking. Whipped. By that Prince, and the Invictus council, and even Garry.”

“ ... you mean we're all pussy whipped because we like peace? Christ Jacob, I'm not the violence lover you think I am.”

“Didn't say violence. That night I showed up in your precious catacombs to talk, you didn't shy away or anything. Like a fucking badger, you snarled and barked.” He put an arm around her shoulder, and gave her one of those buddy hugs humans give when

they're drunk. "If I asked you to rip someone in half with your bare hands, an enemy, you wouldn't have an issue."

She flinched, and looked down. Rebecca. Beatrice never thought back to the woman's death, not really, not for anything more than to smile at how satisfying it'd been.

"So I'm a little more in touch with my beast than the pussy-whipped Kindred of Dolareido. So what?" she said.

"So, that makes you a prime candidate for deeper levels of the Circle. It's why I invited you. It's why I knew you'd eventually wonder about these blood rituals. You remember the thrill of the night I put my blood on you, and bestowed upon you my power."

"You think I'm interested in dancing naked in moonlight?"

More laughter, and he reached out to grab a second blade from the bowl. Holding it between fingers along with the first in the same hand, he kept his other hand around her far shoulder. She felt trapped.

"I'm sure Jennifer and Othello would love that, and there are rituals often done in such a manner." Still with the two knives between his fingers, their blades pointed backward and toward his wrist, he pressed their handles together like cigars turning between his knuckles. "There's a bit of animal in you, Beatrice, that I like, that you like. Hell, that even Julias likes. That spice to you that makes you dangerous and interesting."

"You sound like you're trying to convince me to join a cult."

"That's exactly what I'm doing." He put the daggers in her hands, and smirked. "See a lot of myself in you."

Fucking god. "This some Nosferatu bonding shit?"



“Nope. Not at all. I could describe the things you’ve done, the things that make you who you are, and make the comparisons. But I think we’ve chatted enough. Spill my blood into the bowl, and I’ll show you.”

Hard to read. Why was he so god damn hard to read? A bandage instead of eyes was definitely part of it, but the man’s voice, his tone, he kept flirting with playful, and then serious, and then psychotic, and then compassionate. Couldn’t place him, couldn’t figure out his motives, couldn’t ever get a handle on it. But he wanted to show her, and that was a far cry from his typical manipulative ways. The dark secrets of the Circle of the Crone, blood magic, the thing Kindred whispered about in shadowy alleys, the thing that made witches so damn fucking scary. He was going to show her a crúac ritual.

With a gulp, she dragged one of the knives across his wrist. Jacob smiled at her the whole time, no flinch or anything, and reached out a bit further to make sure the large droplet of thick Kindred blood fell closer the center of the empty bowl, near the corpse’s feet. It landed with a quiet splash, but the echo of its impact resonated in Beatrice’s ears.

The howling in the walls grew louder.

“W ... What is that sound?”

“Not afraid of ghosts, are you?”

“ ... after the shit I’ve seen? Yeah, I’m afraid of ghosts.”

“Good.” He held out his other hand. And again, wincing the whole time, she cut his other wrist. The tiny splash of his heavy blood pulled her guts to her feet, laden with stone. The room grew darker, the lantern now fighting to pierce some invisible black that fought against the light.

And the howling in the walls grew louder still.

Whatever light the lantern was giving, she couldn't see it anymore. The floor, the bowl, the walls and bones, it was all solid black. She could see Jacob, and she could see the corpse hanging before her, but all else faded away in a black cloud she could neither feel nor smell. Not like there'd be a breeze in a cave underground, but she expected to be able to feel something on her skin; not anymore. Whatever texture the air once held was gone, until the feel of Jacob beside her was almost jarring against the backdrop of numbness.

“What’s going on?”

“Shhh.” Chuckling in his quiet, sinister little way, Jacob motioned with his head toward the bowl.

The blood was moving. It trickled down the shallow edge, and pulled its own mass behind it so no trail was left. More like watching a slug of liquid move. It dragged itself down to the center of the bowl, and once beneath the corpse with maybe four feet vertical distance between them, it began to spread. The pool of blood clawed outward, gripped at the bowl and crept up its sides in all directions, until it became veins for the bowl, black veins.

The black veins didn't stay in the bowl. Beatrice looked around into the oblivion swallowing her, and shrank into Jacob's side as her eyes opened wide. It may have been pure black around them, but something was moving. Tendrils, blacker than black in the endless shadow, crept along the walls, along the ceiling, over and around the lantern, until they reached up and touched Beatrice.

She felt these. Cold. So cold. Like ice but without the sting, only the weight and lifelessness of cold death pulling at her and her skin. The fuck did an undead creature like her have to fear from death? A lot apparently, as the shadows around her clawed at her skin, sank their fingers into her, through the skin without damaging it, but

filling her legs with more of the same cold weight. She looked to Jacob's legs, and found the veiny tendrils doing the same thing. Didn't bother her boss.

The bowl began to fill. Blood, black and thick, began to pour up from the bowl, managed to spout a few inches into the air before spreading out over the insides of the bowl. More, and more, until the large bowl was filled, and droplets of the heavy liquid fell over the sides onto the stone and dirt beneath it, until the black liquid dripped down the skulls of the skeletons holding up the bowl, and down their jaws like tears. She started to back up, but Jacob stopped her, hand to her leg to keep her from getting up until she calmed down.

Calming down wasn't happening. She looked around again, at the drops of black that started to drip out of the bones on the walls, and from the cracks in the stone. There were screams, still distant and hidden from her, but with the total silence falling on them with every moment, the quiet noise was free to grow louder, and louder, until her skull shook with the sounds of death wails. She looked around again, past the blood bowl and to the other side of the room, where a wave of the blackness that shouldn't be there came forward. Onyx mist, that crept along anything and everything until Beatrice, Jacob, and the corpse disappeared into black.

She could still see him though, could still the corpse, hell she could see the lantern now, when she couldn't before. But nothing seemed to be visible with light anymore. She could see it, but not because it was lit. As if someone had removed the need for eyes, she could see everything around her in the black, despite the total lack of light. Despite that it felt like she was drowning, when Kindred no longer needed to breathe. Despite how it felt like something was pinning her to the ground, something that wasn't Jacob, something cold and dense and smothering.

Something that grabbed the corpse, and yanked it off the chain.

Beatrice gasped hard and fell back, but Jacob's arm kept her from falling onto her ass. And, he kept her from not seeing what just happened in front of her, the black hand that gripped the body, big enough to cover the whole corpse in six fingers, before ripping the dead woman free of the chain. The corpse's wrists tore, and the sound of wrenching flesh forced Beatrice to look up, to see how the dead body's hands fell away from the chains to splash against the black blood in the bowl, while the body disappeared into the curtain beyond.

The howling in the walls settled, and instead, a deep rumbling came from the black before them. It shook the walls, shook them both, shook her teeth until she felt them rattling in her head. It couldn't have been real, couldn't have actually been doing that, more of the fake stimulus like that weird voodoo bag Jacob had back in his room. But the corpse, the dead woman, all that remained of her was her ruined hands floating in the thick Kindred blood.

"Malachi," the darkness said.

"Hello old friend," Jacob said back. "This is Beatrice."

"... Beatrice." The darkness moved. Something large, invisible but silhouetted against the obsidian that buried them. Its voice was a rumble, bass overpowering the room and the two Kindred in it, while harsh rasps scratched to the surface of its voice. "Hello."

She blinked a few dozen times, and looked into the shifting back. "Um ... hello?"

"Beatrice, this is The Black Blood of Dolareido." Jacob nodded a few times, but remained seated. Just a few friends sitting around the dinner table chatting. "Will the body do, old friend?"

"It will."

From the blackness, some scraping sounds ripped through Beatrice's head until she closed her eyes. It passed, only for another to happen, and then another. And then movement to go with it, familiar movement, the movement of a humanoid walking.

The corpse came forward. Each step she took, her feet scraped against the stones beneath them, ripped up the dirt as if weighed down by several tons of rock. But the corpse stood there, favoring one side, with one shoulder drooping too low, and her eyes wide to stare at the two Kindred. Her eyes were black, solid black, and more of the black liquid dripped down her cheeks, like she was crying black tears. The liquid dripped down her naked body, down to her gut where the knives remained and wounds leaked more of the same liquid, down to her wrists where the black blood continued to drip. The corpse had no hands, and the shredded, ruined wrists, with bones jutting from them, were dripping with the same liquid.

She—it sat down with them, legs apart and folding at the knee. The weird liquid dripped from its nostrils and mouth, and down between its legs as it leaned forward.

“Why have you summoned me, Malachi?”

Malachi. Another name Jacob had? Elders occasionally changed names as the centuries went by, but Jacob was an old name as is, no need to change it.

“Two reasons. First, to tell you that one of the Uratha died in their confrontation with the Azlu.”

The corpse laughed, and a splatter of the black liquid fell from its lips onto the bowl before it. “Delightful. My fellow spirits noticed the death. Still, we are unhappy about the presence of the Uratha.”

“No one is happy with their presence,” Jacob said.

Beatrice frowned. She didn't mind their presence, now that they weren't trying to kill Fiona.

“And?” the incarnation of everything Beatrice feared as a little girl said.

“And, I'm going to teach Beatrice here some of the basics in crúac rituals. Thought you'd like to help.”

Oh fuck.

## Interlude 2

~~The Year: 1986~~

~~Mason Harding~~

Being alone is horrible.

Lot of the people he knew — knew being a strong word — thought being alone was bad, and rough. But to them it was just a word. Being alone, well and truly alone, alone to the point you feel it in your bones, that it's a part of you, that's hell.

Something about sitting on a city bus really lets the mind wander, and Mason used it to write in his journal. Back angled to the window a bit so he could write without people looking over his shoulder, he jotted down notes about loneliness, about his past, in an effort to contextualize, conceptualize, and understand why his past affected him so. Over-analyzing? That was him, thinking was his favorite hobby. Thinking himself right into the grave.

Mother, dead. Father, in a ward. Siblings, one sister in prison for trafficking, and one brother dead. Friends? All the ones he'd made in high school had moved, and the ones that stuck around were in prison. Some for trafficking, some for fighting, breaking and entering. One for murder. All because they were stupid. They weren't good friends.

Did he try and make new friends? Sort of. There weren't many friends to make, working nights at a convenience store. Just him, alone, and the crazy sort of fucks you found drifting city streets at three in the morning. Not the drunk people getting taxi rides home; they were nice enough. It was the people dropping by the corner store, perfectly sober usually, with a dead look in their eyes that

Mason knew were dead inside. Drugs and/or a shitty life had a habit of doing that to people.

Didn't matter to him. Just a twenty-year-old dude trying to survive, making minimum wage and living in a shitty bachelor apartment that could fit into a closet. People showed up, went to the back corner, exchanged things in small bags, with chains dangling from their pants and wallets, and many with tattoos that read 'bitch' or 'nigga' and such. Posturing. Made him roll his eyes, but he kept his mouth shut. Stupid as it was, he didn't need a knife in the gut or bullet in the chest to prove it.

He sighed at the memory, and looked out the window until the bus pulled up to his apartment building. A shit shit, shit shit shit end of town. No cops, no cameras, nothing but bars on the windows and leaking roofs. No friends here, no family, no one to turn to, nothing.

He kind of liked it, but mostly hated it.

The front door of his apartment creaked like a dying siren. He put his journal down, walked past his busted couch, and stood in front of his dirty mirror. He was an attractive man, he knew that, with blond hair buzzed short, blue eyes, and a tight jaw. Average height, but he took care of himself; nothing else to do with his free time. So he spent his days exercising using a metal bar hanging from his ceiling that probably wasn't code, and anything he could do with his bodyweight. No money for equipment. But even if he did have money, he doubted he'd go to a gym.

All alone. Didn't know any other way. Wouldn't know where to begin to not be alone.

He sat down and grabbed a book. Long walk to the library, but at least the library was free. And he was enjoying this book. Journey Through the Rain. The passages about the man's hatred for his family alone made the book worth reading.



He tried to focus on the book, he really did, but memories kept moving through his mind. They were recent memories, new memories, or at least, memories being filed away in a different light compared to usual.

Prey.

He shook his head out and ran his fingers over the buzzed texture of his hair. Everything smelled different these days, everything tasted different, everything felt different. He couldn't look at someone anymore without wondering how fast they could run, if they could hit as hard as he could, if they could stop him if he wanted to rip their throat out.

As the people had come and gone from his store, each had warranted a far longer glance than was normal. Each had pulsed on a radar in his mind, until he managed to assess how much of a threat they were, and how easily he could kill them.

Was this what got all his friends and family into such trouble? Didn't sound like them, and they told him nothing of any feelings like this. But considering the sorry state his parents were in, dead and psychotic, it wouldn't surprise him if there was something wrong with him, genetically. Christ he hated them; fittingly, like the man in the book.

It didn't really matter. He had bills to pay.

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The next night at the convenience store wasn't any better.

A man came in, covered in tattoos, shaved head, a white dude that screamed biker gang. Mason watched him come in, watched him get some cigarettes, watched him get some milk, watched him help an old lady reach some crackers on a high shelf, and watched him buy his stuff. Nice man. Dangerous man. Same could be said for three black men and one black woman, wearing hoodies with low, torn

jeans, and each laughing and joking. He put each as large blips on his radar, but they were polite and patient.

Then several new people came in, college students by the looks of it. A delightful mix of ethnicities and arrogance, wearing fraternity shirts and varsity jackets, or whatever. And these fuckers sent his heart racing. These idiots, his age, were dangerous like a kid with explosives was dangerous.

“Hey man,” the woman said. She walked into the candy aisle, grabbed a couple packs of candy, and slipped them into the jacket. While she made a small attempt to avoid the camera filming the store’s interior, it didn’t take much to avoid the one camera. And she didn’t give a shit that he could see her.

There were a few customers around, some older people easing their way through the aisles to find bread and such. The college brats pushed past them, and not gently either. Mason grit his teeth, but said nothing. If someone wanted help, all they needed to do was ask, and no one asked. Not his place to impose.

Cowardly? Maybe. Not really. People needed to be able to look after themselves, or at least have the stomach to ask for help if they needed it.

Mason sighed and waited. Some of the jocks came up to the counter and paid for what they were getting, mostly cigarettes. But the beer was a problem, and Mason shook his head.

“Need some ID.” He could tell they were going to argue, and his could feel his muscles tense, the balls of his feet press down against the hard floor, and his heart rate increase again.

“What, we don’t look nineteen?” the woman said, standing in front of him, pockets filled with stolen goods. Whatever.

“Legal age to buy alcohol is twenty-one now.” He shrugged, and motioned to the small sign by the cash. The age to get alcohol was increasing across a lot of the US; it’d finally caught up on beer.

“Yeah, fuck that. That was what, last year? Come on,” one of the men said, complete with a little posturing of his chest. Might as well have been puffing up like a blowfish to Mason.

“Sorry. Need some ID.”

The stupid college brats glanced at each other. No doubt they were trying to figure out if it was worth it, to push him on this, which meant they weren’t twenty-one. Shoplifting some candy or other silly crap wasn’t a big deal, but taking alcohol while being underage was a bigger problem.

They glanced between each other a few times more. They weren’t sober. Three of them had been drinking, he could smell it on them, their breath. At least two of them were on some sort of drug, and it certainly wasn’t green. If it was weed, the worst Mason would have to be afraid of would be their extreme munchies. No, this was different, and he raised his lips in a small sneer as one of them, eyes twitching and blinking in quick succession, stared at him.

“Just let us buy the beer, man.”

He really should have just let them buy the beer. This part of town, it wasn’t exactly uncommon to let nineteen-year-olds buy beer. Hell, it was almost expected. But, these kids were his age, a year younger actually, young adults, and today, he just wasn’t feeling like being charitable to fucking kids.

He felt like sinking his teeth into something.

“No. ID.”

“Look man, you know who I am, you know who my dad is?”

Dad. Kid might have sounded slightly more intimidating if he'd said father. Slightly.

“That’s right!” The woman got in closer, and slammed her palms on the table. “Matt Turner is his dad! You know who that fuck is? Man owns half this city.”

Oh god, this was turning into a college drama. Who wrote this script?

They didn’t like his silence.

“Fuck you. We’re outta here.” College brat with the drinks in hand tried to walk away, but Mason moved his hand to rest it on the beer, and pinned it down to the counter.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to leave the beer. Want a drink? Go cry to your daddy.”

He really, really wanted to sink his teeth into something. Or at least, piss off some twerps who deserved to be reminded they really were twerps. Fuckwads.

The bunch of them looked at him like he’d grown an extra head. They glanced at each other, at the woman, who glanced at them, and around at the others, and it went around like that for twenty seconds as, slowly but surely, their shock washed away. The girl gave the biggest guy a nod, and the guy came in closer to the counter.

A college brat may have been a fucking moron, incapable of using the mystical power of thinking past five minutes into the future, but a college brat could still throw a punch. Much as Mason liked to think he was strong and fast — and he was — he wasn’t in a position to dodge that punch as he was trying to hold onto the beer. Plus he really hadn’t expected it, despite the situation. Now he was the dumbass.

Dumbass with a split lip and the world spinning around him as he spun around and collided with the floor.

“Yeah Joe, get him! A few more!” The woman, evidently, did not think a single punch was enough punishment.

A man jumped over the counter, and Mason managed to get his bearings long enough to see the sneaker coming his way. He tried to turn around to block it, but the man was already on him, and it crashed halfway across his forearm and his chest. And then again, into his shoulder, and then again, into his chest. And then, into the stomach.

All concept of breathing left his body, as if the dick’s shoe was possessed by a spirit of asphyxiation. Diaphragm ceased functioning as a shoe toe replaced it, forced the air out of him, and left him choking on his lungs. Pain put everything in his body on pause, and forced his eyes to stare along the floor as the man kicked his arm and chest another time, and another, and another.

A minute went by. An eternity. Someone else jumped behind the counter to kick him a couple times more in the back, adding to what was turning into an array of bruises and dents in his body, each a bomb of agony that forced his muscles to convulse. If they’d been wearing proper shoes instead of sneakers, they’d have broken his bones.

“Come on, let’s go!” the woman said. “Mr. Turner got us covered, right?”

“Oh yeah, definitely. I’ll make up some bullshit and this all disappears. Dad’s got the cops under his thumb. They won’t piss him off for a fucking clerk.”

They laughed, chuckled, laughed some more, and left.

It'd been a long time since he was beaten like this. Pain like this didn't go away quickly, kept the muscles from moving, kept the mind in shock until at least it stopped flooding the brain with panic signals. Having been beaten like this before didn't help him get over it any faster, but at least he didn't piss himself this time.

Other people had been in the store. They were gone now. The camera filming the floor didn't get audio, and it was blurry at best. And Matt Turner was a name he knew, typical corrupt politician and business man.

Really, who wrote this fucking script?

He forced himself onto his hands and knees, and then onto his feet, with hands braced against the counter and the coffee machine behind him. Last time this happened, it took a month for the bruises to heal, and a few months after that for the bones to stop aching. His cheek was damaged and split as well, so there was no hiding all the bruises.

He leaned his weight against the counter, and looked out across the isles. Empty. He looked outside through the glass doors, and winced as he saw some pedestrians, people passing by. Some of them must have seen what just happened. They winced, like he did, and walked on. Of course they did.

He looked down at the counter, and wiped his hand across his face. Blood from the cheek bone, blood from his lip, now all over his wrist and palm, now all over his shirt. Blood inside his pants, and trickling down his ankles, getting into his shoes. Blood in his mouth, coating his teeth and tongue, the taste of life.

Funny how much life tasted like metal.

He looked down at his hands. They were shaking. He looked across the counter where it now showed a couple bloody hand

prints. Blood hand prints, what a poetic way of showing the futility and fruitlessness of his job, his life, his predicament.

A really shit script.

His whole life was a really, really shit script. And every single god damn mother fucking cell in his body was screaming at him to go do something about those people, those punks, those pieces of trash. Those threats.

He walked out the door. The smell. He knew their smell.

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The brats were driving out to Makeout Hill, far outside the city. Mason had never been there, but he knew of it, a place where teenagers and young adults went to make out, kiss, maybe secretly fuck under the light of the moon.

It never occurred to Mason to stop himself, never crossed his mind to put an end to this insanity, and just go back to the store he was supposed to be watching. He hadn't called in the theft, or his assault. He locked up the store but hadn't closed it down. Cash still in the cash register. Just didn't fucking care anymore. He was on the hunt.

Running a few miles was hard, or it should have been. Felt good tonight. Felt right. He put a few miles under his feet in record time, and by the end of it, didn't have his usual exhaustion. Breathing deep, but fine. Felt good to be outside and putting asphalt behind him, until eventually he was outside the city and out into the woods.

The cliff overlooked a lake, and at the top of the cliff where it crested outward over the lake, there was grass, soft, and inviting. A few of the punk idiots were lying on the grass on blankets, kissing, fondling, and a few more were in parked cars, living out their greatest cliché fantasies. These idiots had seen Grease too many times.

Idiots. Prey. The words started to blend in his mind, or at least, the word prey was slowly replacing it for the tag he used to describe these people in front of him. He watched on from the shadows where the hill and the forest met, and licked his bloody lips and teeth. Someone was going to die tonight.

He squeezed the bark next to him, until his fingernails tore bits of it away from the trunk. Get a hold of yourself, calm down, breathe, let it go; none of those words of wisdom came to him, even though he knew they should, that normally they would. Not tonight. As he watched the idiot sacks of meat, he sank low to the bushes and let the adrenaline fill him until his fingertips and toes started to tingle.

“Bobby, there are people around!” a woman said, the woman who’d more or less instigated his beating.

“Come on babe, no one cares.” Her friend, the macho jerk sort, was lying on his side facing the woman, the two of them on a blanket, beer beside them. Far as Mason could see, Bobby had a hand on her side, and was slipping his hand up underneath her shirt.

“Bobby, you’re so bad.” All pretense of trying to dissuade the man’s sexual aggression tossed out the window immediately, she leaned in and resumed kissing her friend, while several men and women hooted or hollered from their cars, cheering on the increasingly erotic scene.

Maybe this would be like one of those scenes in those ridiculous slasher horror films, where every person running from the killer was suddenly struck with a terminal case of insanely-fucking-ineptitis. Perhaps they’d try to run, and trip over every possible twig or slippery bit of grass. He licked his lips as he remembered the film Friday the 13th. Maybe it’d go like that?

What would go like that? The killing spree. What killing spree? The one he was about to unleash. Why? Why would you do that?



Because every muscle, every fiber, every instinct he had was telling him to get rid of these fucks, that they deserved to die for attacking him, that his territory would be better off with them gone.

The world would be better off with them gone.

He started walking forward, out into the open. Some of them noticed him, some of them didn't; he was still far away and buried in the darkness of night. It didn't matter, they weren't getting away.

He knew what to do, somehow, just knew to let it out. Something in him snapped, and a part of him thought that it should have been a more explosive, more violent, more loud experience, this string snapping in his mind. But it didn't. No, it was more like a thin silk rope that someone cut with a pair of scissors, and the rope fell away, no longer blocking this thing that had been building inside him for weeks. Longer than weeks, months, even years, a shit life on top of a shit day on a shitty fucking job with shitty fucking people and these shit fucking kids.

His clothes were starting to fade away. A weird brown fur was replacing it. He seemed taller. He seemed faster. He seemed stronger. The distance between him and the parked cars was shrinking far faster than it should have. He wasn't walking on the ground anymore, he was tearing into it with the claws of his feet. Each step sent him ten feet, easy, despite the monstrous weight he felt sink into each bounding leap.

There was screaming. People running. One of the metal boxes two of them sat in started making noise, mechanical whirs that sounded more like roars. But Mason jumped through the air, landed upon the metal box's front half, and with one swipe, ripped out its guts. Black liquid squirted outward, and the noisy lifeless thing went quiet.

“What the fuck is that!?”

“No, no! Oh god oh god oh god, run! Run!”

Words. The meat was saying words. Meat wasn't supposed to speak, meat was supposed to die.

He marched over the length of the metal box, and swung his two gargantuan arms forward, with them both hanging at his side. They caught the meat at an upward angle against their chest and jaws, and his claws ripped through their skin-covering fabrics, chests, breasts, throat, and up through their screaming mouths. Blood was everywhere, and he roared satisfaction. Two less pests defiling his territory.

The other two in another metal box got out, and ran. He jumped after them. First the woman, he sank his claws in through more of the colorful, alien material that covered her skin, and deep into her body. His claws were long, and his hands titanic. She screamed, gargled blood as he punctured her lungs, and died seconds later as her insides were shredded. He tossed her meat aside, and leapt thirty feet to land upon the female's mate. Mason's new weight was enough to crush many of this trespasser's bones, and as the male cried out in agony, Mason reached down, and ripped his head off; no more difficult than plucking a dandelion.

The two who had been on the grass on a blanket were much further. They'd left their pack to die. Typical of pests. He roared his fury to the moon, to Luna, and bounded after the two.

It took seven breaths to reach them. He could hear their pants, their cries, the strange, hard things on their feet striking the grass. He could hear their heartbeats, loud as they were, almost as fast a hummingbird's.

First the male. He pounced this one, landed upon his back and legs with all of his weight, with his four sets of claws, and broke the man in many places. Bones snapping, cartilage tearing, his prey went down and screamed. Pitiful sounds. Mason stepped on the

prey's head, and crushed his skull and brain like stepping on a cockroach. Pop.

The girl he would deal with last, the one who had instigated the attack on him. She cried out, begged for mercy, but they were just words, words he barely understood anymore. Something about 'help' and 'please don't' or some such. Just words. Nothing, meaningless compared to weight, muscle, meat, blood, tooth and claw. The hunt, and the kill.

He ran her down, and bit down onto her skull. It shattered. Hair, brain matter, blood, it filled his mouth. He spit it out, tore off the strange fabric from some of her limbs, and sank his teeth into—

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He woke up with a snap, a crack of lightning, a slap of white against his eyes, and dampness on his body.

Grass. He was outside. The sun was up. What the fuck.

He sat up, and regretted it. Pain danced up on his back and arms, a burning sensation he hadn't felt in a long time, since the last time he'd been to a gym. He'd had a good workout yesterday then. The fuck did he do—

Blood. He could smell blood. How did he know what blood smelled like? He fucking knew, knew it down to his bones, knew it like it was a part of himself to know, knew it like he knew the smell of eggs and rice he'd been eating for the past ten years straight. Blood and the other things, the sinew, the bone, organs, those smells were in the air and in his mouth.

He looked down, and froze. Blood, everywhere, on him, soaking him. Blood and bits of flesh. Oh shit, oh shit oh shit. He grit his teeth down as the memories started to rise from their graves, each pulling him down into a hazy mess of blood-soaked carnage and mayhem. Something was stuck in his teeth, and when he reached

into his mouth to pull it out, he begged it wasn't something he didn't want to see.

It was a piece of clothing.

He tossed it away, turned, and vomited into the grass. Oh god, oh fucking god. More of the memories came back, blurry things, mixed together like a bunch of shit thrown into a blender. There'd been people, right? People, and ... he'd eaten them, or at least bitten into them, tore them apart, ripped them open and shredded them.

His vomit didn't show any of the horrible things he was remembering, but as the memories came back, he was sure he could taste them. And hear the screams of the humans as he bit through them. Humans? Right, because, he wasn't human, not then at least, not when he was killing these people.

He looked at his hands. There had been claws. Fur. He could remember having a snout. He could remember being tall.

And he could feel it now, inside him, something that was hiding underneath the skin before, but now it was out there, in his eyes, on his fingers, between his lips and on his tongue. He could feel the wolf there, almost hear it barking and howling. A wolf, a fucking wolf, no denying it, no escaping it, he just knew it.

He got up, and looked around some more. The mess wasn't as bad as the memories told him it should be. Where were the bodies? He must have moved on from the site where he'd killed them.

He almost vomited again. Killed. He'd killed them. Shit, they were just kids. Kids who'd beaten him to shit and—his wounds were healed. No pain, other than sore muscles, and no bruises either. The beating they'd given him was gone, and in return, they were dead.

He stumbled around, and pressed his hand against a nearby tree. Right, he was maybe a mile out from Makeout Hill, and had run

that mile as his ... other ... form ... in minutes. He hadn't had clothes then, just fur, but now he had clothes again. How the hell did that work?

Shit. Shit shit shit shit what was he supposed to do now? Go back? People saw what happened to him, saw him walk out of the store, after those fucking kids beat him to shit, and now they'd be reported as missing. By tomorrow, they'd be on the news, dead, killed by some wild animal. Police would come to him, interview him, find evidence, lock him up.

Mason shook his head. No, don't go back to the city, you don't need to. No friends, no family, no nothing. Just, stay out here, in the woods, and do what wolves do.

What the fuck did wolves do? They hunted. But he wasn't a wolf. Yes, he was, he fucking was. With a little digging, he found a piece of that wolf in himself.

The fuck was he doing? The fuck was he going to do? Why the fuck was any of this happening? Did he really want to do this? Did he really know how this was going to go, how it'd work, anything? Just up, and go? Leave?

The animal half of him, brand new but a part of him, brand new but as familiar to him as breathing, knew what to do. How? No fucking clue, no fucking clue at all. And either he could stand here, with the blood of a bunch of college kids he'd murdered on his hands and clothes, or he could leave this shit life.

Changing was easy enough. A bit painful, and he growled and groaned as the feel of muscles pullings and bones grinding filled him. His clothes vanished into his body, fading away like shadow, and he fell to his hands, almost signifying the lost of his human self. Hands became paws. Mouth became snout. Naked skin became fur.

Painful, but easy. Too easy. Should it have been harder? Did others of his kind do it like this? And there had to be others. He was a werewolf, a fucking werewolf, and he'd never been bitten by an animal his whole life. Whatever changed him could have changed others, must have.

Holy shit. Did he just accept abandoning his old, shitty life, accept that he'd killed a bunch of shitty college kids, accept that he was a werewolf, that other werewolves must exist, and did he decide to go on a mission to find some?

He looked at himself. A wolf. A normal, natural, normal wolf. Not the titan he was last night, but a normal wolf who could sneak and hide and leave, eat deer, and leave everything behind.

So he did. Being alone is horrible, and he had no intentions of staying a lone wolf. Maybe he could find a pack, other werewolves, if they existed.

God, how come this came so easily to him?

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~~The Year: 1991~~

Being alone is horrible.

He knew that, knew all along. What he didn't know was how different it'd be to actually have a family, and friends, to have people who watch your back, people who care about you and will put their life on the line for yours. Irritating to be around people so much, sure, but now he could sleep at night and not have to look over his shoulder. Sleep, actual real sleep.

Sleep under the stars.

Their pack was small, for now. Avery was certain they'd find more, and that their totem would grow along with the pack. Not like

Mason was in any position to complain. Woman had saved him from wandering the woods as a literal lone wolf. Now he had a purpose, something he could sink his teeth into and pursue, something that clicked and made sense.

He was a werewolf, and he had a duty to hunt. Except, not hunt mindlessly, but hunt with a purpose, like keeping a population in check. His new job was to guard the barrier between the physical and spirit realms, and manage the spirits and humans in both, the way a wolf knew best. Hunting.

He looked to his right. Avery, leader of the pack, a tiny woman who was a bit older than him. Blue eyes with a hint of silver, light tan skin, and a black ponytail that went down all the way to her hip. Lot of scars. The fuck kind of wounds she'd suffered to get those kinds of scars, especially as an Uratha, he had no idea, but she had them, a lot of them.

The pack sat by the fire, and waited. To his left were Erica and Stephanie. Erica was an adult, like him, but Stephanie had just turned eighteen, with a chip on her shoulder the size of a mountain. The change had come upon her a year ago, damn young, and it'd ruined her life. So now, she was a bitch. He could understand that, a little, but it didn't justify how much she liked to take out that aggression on him and the rest of the pack. She'd been a part of their group for a month, and the only person she treated with decency was Erica, and Avery by necessity.

Carter sat on the other side of the fire, closer to Avery. He was older than her, but the man followed her lead. Such was the way of Irraka, hunting from the sidelines, quiet, unseen, necessary. Brianna sat on the other side of her, a strong woman, tall, the Rahu and muscle of their small pack. Erica and those two had been with Avery when they found Mason, and before him, each of them had been a recruit to Avery's new pack. Avery rarely spoke of her old

pack, other than to say it was gone, destroyed, dead, and she was building it anew.

They were journeying south. Their pack was of the Meninna, Hunters in Darkness, and they did not like to travel. They wanted a home, a place where they could guard the territory, manage it, keep it balanced. Avery knew there were problems, major problems in the Hisil in Tijuana, and problems on this side of the Gauntlet as well, vampires wreaking havoc there. Seemed as good of an idea as any. And maybe they could find more for their pack there.

Heh, how long had it been since he'd just sat down, and entertained thoughts about his circumstance? He used to do it all the time, when he worked at a convenience store, lamenting his shit life. Times had changed, he'd changed. He learned he was an Elodoth Uratha, a werewolf of the Half Moon. Thinkers, according to Avery. He did like to think.

The night came upon them, darker, and darker, until the starlight above was a bright painting against the trees that surrounded the pack. They'd found a small stream to rest by, with a tiny waterfall that danced against an equally tiny pool peppered with pebbles. It was the perfect place and environment to speak with their young totem.

Avery stood up first. "It won't be long before we're in Tijuana. I have an old friend there, and I'm pretty sure he's in deep shit with the Kindred there." Words she'd said before, but it was normal for a leader to recap; in this case, for Stephanie's sake as well. "Erica, Mason, Stephanie, none of you have ever been in a city, not as Uratha, and not when it's a hotbed of shit. You'll have to get used to vampires trying to shoot you in the back."

"Why the fuck would they do that?" Steph said.

"Cause they know they'd lose if they tried shooting us in the front."



“No, I mean, why are they shooting us at all? We making enemies? This doesn’t have to be like those other cities you’ve been to. Doesn’t have to be like Dolareido.”

Mason facepalmed. This girl. Why couldn’t she just shut up and listen? Always arguing.

“Don’t start, Steph,” Avery said. Everyone else waited, and listened, because this song and dance had happened plenty times the past month, and now it was going to happen again.

“Why don’t we go someplace where the people there aren’t trying to shoot us in the back? Or hell, maybe some place without vamps? I spent a good chunk of my life in Tijuana, and I don’t want to go back there.”

Mason leaned back against a tree, and grit his teeth, silent. He had no words to interrupt this argument, none that wouldn’t explode in his face and get him skewered.

“We need to find a place where we can do some good, Steph.”

“We can do good out here, in the woods, just ... watching, taking care of the spirits that get uppity here.”

“These wilds are peaceful, Steph, for tens of miles in any direction. Balanced. The wild usually is. More often than not, it’s where humans congregate that everything gets out of balance.” Avery stood there, and tapped her foot on the ground, arms folded across her chest. Patient, more patient than Mason would be, and more patient than he had been.

“Yeah, I know that, you’ve told me. A dozen times.”

“Then why—”

“Because I don’t think we should have to put our lives on the line for a dead ancestor! Father Wolf is gone, if he ever existed, and children inheriting the sins of the parent is some pretty old world, illogical bullshit.”

Well, shit. Mason winced, and waited for the explosion, for Avery to tear into the young pup and set her straight. But the small woman didn’t. Avery sighed, shook her head, and sat down on the ground by the stream once more. The gentle splashing of water against water and rock was probably the only thing keeping her temper in control.

“Stephanie, I’m sorry that Luna has never spoken to you. You are Rahu, and it’s understandable for that to be the way of things. But I’ve been on this Earth far longer than you, and I’ve had the visions. Many Cahalith do. We’ve been tasked with Father Wolf’s duty. If you want to leave and—”

“It is, perhaps, best if she follows her heart.”

Everyone went silent, and stared on as a swirling mist of color rose above the stream. It wasn’t normal for Uratha to rest out in the open, but it was where the nearest stream was, and their totem found an easier foothold to manifest near water. Such was the way of Flowing Sanctuary.

They all turned, and watched the spirit grow, manifest, become visible as waves of blue and navy, azure and cerulean, flowing with the sparkling crystal of living water. Angel wings rose from the gentle waves, and the color of blue faded from them until only the white of pure, heavenly feathers remained. Flowing Sanctuary itself started to form and manifest its body, and everyone stared on as womanly curves joined the floating waves. Shoulders, but no arms, falling fog where arms should have been. And the spirit’s legs never solidified into more than mist, the upper half forming into

something almost human looking, carved of crystal-like blue, with hair like water flowing down its back.

“Even the damn spirit agrees with me.” Stephanie stomped around in place, pacing side to side as she threw up her hands. Here came the raised voice, right on schedule. “I don’t care what Luna’s tasked us with, I didn’t ask for any of this.”

They all looked at each other, and then Avery, and then Flow. The spirit hovered away from the stream, and toward Stephanie. Its wings, its mist, they did not touch the physical, but there was no hiding the light its body gave off, how a gentle azure buried them all as it radiated from its form.

“You Uratha, always seeking purpose,” it said. A lovely voice, almost a singing voice, feminine like its figure. Only the bright white of starlight in the spirit’s eyes looked hard.

“Don’t talk to me about purpose, spirit. You’re a fucking spirit, you don’t even know what it means to exist without purpose.” Stephanie struck out, but her hand passed through Flow without resistance. Might as well have been trying to hit actual mist.

“I know that without purpose, Uratha and humans alike, crumble into nothing.” Flow floated around Steph, getting between her and the rest of the forest. “Your pack leader found purpose when she found me, after the death of her former pack and totem spirit. It has given her not only purpose, but joy, something to pour her energy into, her essence.”

Mason winced with the spirit’s words. Yeah, no purpose was fucking horrible.

“I don’t need that purpose! I’d be cool being a Ghost Wolf and—”

“Would you?” The spirit flew into the air, gentle, a wisp of mist on the breeze, except six feet tall and a wing span of ethereal cloud to

follow. “A lost pup, wandering alone, afraid of the spirits with tooth and claw that do not appreciate an Uratha in their midst.”

“I’m not—”

“Be silent,” the spirit said, and shattered the air around them with thunder. Avery didn’t flinch, but the rest of them did. “Avery presented to you a purpose, and you chose it. What’s changed in that scant amount of time, little pup? I said it is best to follow your heart, and not long ago, your heart took you from your home, your city, and threw you into this wild journey with Avery.”

Yeah, what had changed? Flow was frustratingly smart, and Mason appreciated that; also appreciated how good it was at getting to the root of a problem.

“I didn’t ... I didn’t think it’d be like ... Arg, fuck this. Fuck this and fuck all of you.” She threw her arms up, and stormed off.

Avery got up, hand up to her neck and stroking little necklace it held. Just a string, a black string, and one the woman liked to touch whenever she seemed upset, stressed, or when Flow was summoned. He didn’t ask, because, yeah, no reason to.

“That woman,” Mason said, “is insane.”

Avery shook her head. “She’s not insane, she’s just young and confused. Go talk to her.”

“I guess she—wait, what?”

The small woman came up to him, sat beside him, and gave him a punch in the shoulder. Soft enough to leave him unmoved, hard enough to hurt a little.

“Go talk to her.”

“I uh, um ... why?”

“Because you two don’t get along, and this is a perfect opportunity to use some of that frustration for an eye-opening exchange.”

This woman was strange. His leader was very strange. Wise, but strange. Ugh, he threw up his hands, stood up, and walked after Stephanie. Wasting my time, wasting my time, wasting my time.

It didn’t take long to catch up to Steph. The damn woman had stopped only maybe a few hundred feet from the pack, and had sat down by a tree. He was approaching her from behind, bit of an angle so he could see her shoulder, but he could see the frown through the back of her damn head. God damn this idiot girl.

He found a tree maybe five feet from her, and sat down against the grass as well, back to the bark, arms hanging off of his knees.

“You’re a real bitch, you know that?” First words out of his mouth. Yeah, this was going to go real well.

“Fuck you Mason.”

“Serious. Avery gave you shelter and a group of people you can rely on, and you—”

“Sorry if I don’t feel like I should have to die for that.”

Oh, fear of death. Yeah, that should have been more obvious. Christ, why hadn’t that been more obvious? He was Elodith, he broke things down into logical equations, weighing the facts and the realities, while forever being disconnected from the emotional weight of them; so Avery told him, anyway. He didn’t entirely agree, didn’t like being put into a box like that, didn’t like how she bypassed the nuances with her generalizations. She called it good storytelling.

“You won’t die.”

“Won’t I? Avery’s old pack died.”

“Avery’s old pack was lead by some guy named Simon, and the man was asking for trouble. You know that, she told you that. Not all packs go out like that.”

“Bullshit. Avery’s taking us into a shit storm. I don’t want that, I want to find a calmer territory.”

“... you really don’t. You’ll die of boredom, and you said you didn’t want to die.” It seemed like such an obvious problem, with an obvious fix. Afraid of dying? Get over it. What else was there to it? Apparently a lot, because he couldn’t crack this egg, couldn’t figure this girl out. Christ she got under his skin.

“I wanted to let loose, go out there, be a fucking werewolf, fuck and fight and kick around some punks who have the nerve to waltz into our territory. She wants us to go fight someone else’s fight, and try to clean up streets, like ... like ... fucking cops.”

“We are cops.”

“Excuse me?”

“We are cops. We’re supposed to be keeping the—”

“Fuck that, I didn’t ask for this. I—”

“You wanted to join the pack. Avery offered, and you—”

“I didn’t want to be alone!”

He pulled his head back, and blinked. “... yeah, I know that feeling.”

“The fuck do you know about being alone? My family went and ... I ... Fuck it, I’m not going to give you some ridiculous rant describing my life.”

“Same.”

She threw her hands up, and snarled. “Like you know anything about being alone.”

“ ... I know a lot about being alone.”

“Bull shit.”

Ok, that was it. He got up, stomped over to her, picked her up by the shoulders, and slammed her back against the tree behind her.

“You’re a werewolf now, you idiot little child. Get used to it. You can either roll with us, be a part of this family, not be alone anymore, and try to make this world just a little less fucking shitty, or you can be alone, deal with this alone, hunt alone, live alone, die alone.”

“I—”

“So take your high school drama and shove it! What is this, a cry for help? Be loud, be obnoxious, piss everyone off around you, push them away, cause all you really want is for someone to reach out and save you from yourself?” This was the worst. God, he hated arguing with a teenager; they were too stupid to know why they were upset, or to articulate it to him.

Funny, now it was easy to understand why parents got so frustrated.

He opened his mouth, ready to keep arguing, ready to maybe drill into this girl’s head that she was creating her own problems, that she just needed to accept reality and stop treating everything like a

problem. She had a family now, and they'd protect her, be there for her. They'd understand her new life as a werewolf, they'd be able to offer advice, support, purpose. The need to hunt was in the blood, almost overwhelming sometimes, like a wild wolf raised to be domesticated, who could never quite shake the instinct to hunt.

But a fist to the mouth suggested he shut up, and he fell back onto his ass. Stephanie glared down at him, took a step forward, and started to change. Oh shit.

Height, muscle, those were the first to come. The woman put on two feet in height, her muscles grew thicker, and fur started to grow out of her dark skin. It was a visceral change for her, not smooth like Avery, and she screamed in what must have been pain as her clothes vanished with her human skin, and a titan of muscle and rage came out.

Mason looked back in the direction of the pack. Predictably, everyone came out of the woods to join him in the dark, even their totem spirit. But, as Erica came closer, Avery put her hand out and stopped her. And then, she nodded to Mason.

Finally. Time to let out some of that frustration. He got up, and let out the beast, let out the rage inside him, let it out until he could feel it on his skin, in his muscles, in his fucking bones. Like Stephanie, he started to grow in height, higher, and higher, and muscle mass filled him, building upon itself, defying physics and increasing his weight until his claws — not shoes — were digging into the forest floor. Clothes disappeared, fur replaced them, and his mouth grew longer, and longer, until he was looking down a snout.

If Avery was cool with it, then fuck it, he was going to smack some sense into this idiot girl; not so much smack, as tear and rip, though.

Gauru, the classic werewolf form, a goliath of power, strength, size, and blood-lust. You didn't change into this form for jokes, you



didn't change into this form for a fucking brawl, you changed into Gauru when you were ready to kill. He wasn't going to kill Stephanie, but he was going to make her wish he had by the time they were done.

They lunged at each other. No disillusions here, no dancing around the issue, they didn't like each other and now was as good a time as any to let loose some anger.

His claws found her chest, but before he could slice down, she slammed her forearm against the inside of his arm, knocking it aside as she slammed the rest of her weight into his chest, shoulder first. They bowled over, and rolled along the grass and dirt until they hit a tree. She came out on top, hands on his shoulders, knees outside his waist; a full mount.

But they weren't doing MMA, they were werewolves, beasts, and he slashed out with his claws at her arm. Blood gushed over him as it poured out from her, and she howled as the damaged arm lost its grip on him. His other hand struck out for her neck, but she rolled to the side and away from him and the tree. He leapt after her, throwing himself into the air toward her with the full weight of his body, claws first. Eight hundred pounds of pissed off.

She turned to face him, but still on her back, and caught his weight with her feet. Barking, roaring, she drove her legs back toward him, and sent him flying. The tree caught him with all the grace of a brick wall, and cracked, toppling over and cutting through nearby branches of other trees before crashing into the ground. If anyone was around to hear, it wouldn't be a good thing, but this was too important to stop, impossible to stop.

"You'd leave me to die." Her words were guttural, barely words, mixed with harsh, intermittent snarls. And they hurt.

"I would never!" He forced himself back to standing, but only in time for Stephanie to tackle him. Not a shoulder tackle, but a full

body tackle with arms wide and her head lowered. He went flying again, and the ground broke away beneath him as she landed on him, their weight and momentum splitting the earth and leaving a trail as they slid. But she kept her grip on him, and grabbed his wrists as she full mounted him again. Apparently, he really sucked at fighting other werewolves; he'd never done it before.

“You'd leave me to die! You hate me! You're not family, I'm not safe with you! I—”

“We said we'd protect you!” He almost brought his legs up, to maybe get one of them digging into her side; he was damn flexible when he needed to be, even in this form. But, he didn't. He stared up at the woman, the wolf, the enormous creature glaring at him and pinning him.

“You'd never protect me! Why the fuck would you ever protect me?” Her voice died away, but her grip didn't. She glared at him with enough hate in her eyes to cut a hole through steel, and panted fury down onto him until he could feel the heat of her breath.

Speaking English in this form was a bitch, but even if she was in gauru form, catching the inflection in her tone, the drop in pitch, was easy. She didn't think they'd protect her, because she figured they hated her. Because, as far as he could tell from the train wreck life they picked Stephanie up from, everyone hated her.

It'd be so easy to tear into her, verbally, knock her down a peg, expose to her her stupidity. Of course they were going to protect her, they were a family, and family protected each other no matter how much they hated each other. At least, that's what families were supposed to do, did in the Disney movies, and ... and Stephanie didn't know what that felt like, at all.

She was him, from five years ago. Well, way to be a giant fucking asshole, Mason.

“ ... I’ll protect you.”

“You—”

“I’ll protect you. Me, I’ll do it.” His transformation faded away, no more rage or blood-lust to fuel it. Now, he was just an average-sized guy, in the clawed grip of an enormous beast. “I’ll keep you alive, personally.”

She returned to her human form as well, until all that was left was a woman, tall, a sharp chin, sepia skin, and sad eyes.

“You will?”

It should have annoyed him, bothered him, that Stephanie could be such a child. He didn’t do this shit, didn’t throw temper tantrums, didn’t need anyone to draw him through a leading conversation to come to realizations about himself. Maybe Avery was right, and Elodoths were just good at thinking shit through, and Rahu like Steph had to say it out loud. Or, maybe, people were more complicated than that, and trying to wrap Stephanie up in a box was doing her a disservice. But, for some really stupid reason, he felt like maybe, he should help her. It was probably some sort of redirected desire to help himself, and escape his similar past. As good a reason as any.

“Yeah. I will, with my life. Ok?” He almost said something really, really cheesy, like ‘you’re not alone anymore’ or ‘I’ll be your friend’, but knowing Steph, she’d either take offense, or burst into laughter. Besides, ‘I’ll keep you alive, personally’ implied some degree of friendship, didn’t it?

He turned his head a bit, and caught Avery’s smirk. She probably thought it did.

---

~~Now~~

Being alone ... is horrible.

“You’re one of the Uratha, aren’t you?”

Mason frowned at the woman, and lowered his eyes back to his drink. He wasn’t so disconnected from his human half to have trouble with alcohol, like some of his kind were. Getting drunk took a lot though, more than he was willing to guzzle just for a buzz.

“Hello?” they said. Apparently his silence wasn’t clue enough to go away.

“ ... yeah. I am.” He shrugged, took another sip, and kept his eyes down. Maybe they’d leave if he just showed no interest.

“Mason, right?” The woman sat down next to him, and leaned forward over the table enough to catch his eye.

They were in a night lounge, some place close to Invictus territory, but still in Carthian territory according to Avery. The vamps suggested it as a quiet place where they could scout the populace.

The Cahaliths like Avery and Clara pointed the pack in the direction of trouble, based on their visions. David turned the vague direction into a more solid lead by talking with the spirits; a typical approach for the Ithaeur. And Elodoths like Mason analyzed the information to turn it into something actionable, if action was required. It was an important part of the job description, for Uratha to keep tabs on the ins and outs of the humans, see if they could pick up on any oddness before it evolved into a problem. What that oddness was, and what the problem would be, were to be figured out by people like him, people with their ears open and a mind for analyzing.

Garry had pointed him toward the night lounge Danny’s Dusk, and Mason liked to get his ear to the ground and see what he could

learn. Never hurt to get digging before trouble started.

Course digging wasn't going to happen, for two reasons. The first was the vampire beside him trying to get his attention. The other was that the only thing going on in the lounge was people genuinely having a good time. Getting drunk, getting laid — some in the club itself in their booths — and getting high. Mason wasn't a fan of all the drug abuse Dolareido had, but violent crime was low in the city, and it didn't seem like kids were getting dragged into the drug world, so—

“You're really good at spacing out. Mid conversation too.”

“ ... sorry. Just want some peace and quiet.” A good friend died and I can't stop blaming myself, so go the fuck away. He almost said it, too.

“In a lounge?” the vampire said, and she gestured to the booths around them, the dance floor further out, and to the corners where speakers were playing the music. Not as loud or as obnoxious as some other clubs, like that horrible place Bloodlust he'd tried once; not that Bloodlust was a loud club, just loud for a werewolf. And instead of red light pulsing with a flickering white light, the lighting here was just a simple, navy, subtle light, just enough light for people to see by.

“In a manner of speaking.” He shrugged, took another sip, and nodded his head in the direction of one of the booths. Two men were in it, chatting over an envelope. “Drug deal going down.”

“Yeah, that's pretty typical,” she said.

He frowned at the vampire, and gestured in another direction. A young woman was sitting with an older man, maybe in his forties, and the two were chatting while slipping some money across the table.

“Prostitute.”

The vampire shrugged it all off like it was normal. “Prostitution is a pretty ancient occupation. And besides, I’ve seen that girl around. She makes quality money, and picks her clients.”

“ ... this city is just asking for problems from across the Gauntlet.” It was a wonder more spirits of wrath or envy weren’t causing havoc as it was. Spirits of money, drugs, sex, and varying incarnations of their elder, more grown, more fed siblings had set up some powerful holds in the Hisil. How the city maintained its weird balance, its weird peace, he didn’t know.

“No idea what that is, but stick around for a while and you’ll learn to ride Dolareido’s strange groove.” She reached out for his drink, took a sniff, and grimaced as she put it back down.

He raised a brow at the vampire beside him. She had very short red hair, a dash of freckles, and pale skin. Average height, and quite thin, almost thin enough to be unhealthy until he took another glance at her neck, her shoulders, and noticed the muscle definition. A touch of muscle, the sort of you found on a dancer’s body. Very attractive. She was wearing a green dress, tiny straps and plunging, loose cleavage between her small breasts, with a split skirt that cut high enough on her hip to show the side of her black thong. Confident in her sexuality, that was for sure.

He sighed, and let his mind wander back to Stephanie. At least until the vampire flicked him in the arm.

“ ... you’re persistent,” he said.

“Yeah well, I heard your friend died last week, and I thought you could use some company.”

Even the Kindred were talking about it. How fucked was that, for Kindred to be talking about Uratha dying, and then one of them

trying to cheer him up. But, it was a much better direction than Tijuana would have taken it.

“I’d rather be left alone.”

“So I gathered, but you reek of all the typical self-destructive tendencies of a loner who really needs a shoulder to lean on.” The redhead shook her head, and flicked him in the shoulder again. “Trust a Daeva to know.”

Daeva, right. Artsy, passionate sort of Kindred. Ugh.

“And you are?”

“Tilly. Work for Garry.”

He sighed but nodded, and turned his gaze back to the crowd of people dancing. The music was slow enough to keep the mood at least somewhat calm, where the people were almost slow dancing, and the people in booths greatly outnumbered the people dancing.

“Garry keeping tabs on us?”

“Well of course, all the elders are. But that’s not why I’m here. I came for a meal, but saw you.” She slid in closer, until her leg was touching his. He was wearing some black suit pants, and a white shirt; just nice enough to fit in, without being so nice or ugly as to draw attention to himself.

“And you thought, a week after my friend died, was a good time to start pestering me?”

“Yeah, basically.” She chuckled, and set her elbows down on the table in front of them. “How long you been Uratha?”

This woman. Was this how Kindred operated in Dolareido? So blatant and direct? It was a welcomed change, just not right now.

“Bit over thirty years now.”

“Really? You don’t look a day over forty.”

“We age slower, once we’ve changed. And you?” Couldn’t have been very old. Every instinct he had told him he could tear this girl in half without her having time to blink. She looked about twenty, but that visual age meant nothing to an immortal creature like a vampire.

“About ten years now since I was embraced.” She nodded a few times, and turned her head to look him up and down a few times more. “I can tell you’re a lot, lot stronger than me, or my sire. No wonder Kindred fear your kind.”

“... being strong means little against the fortunes your kind grow, the hundreds of ways you can manipulate people, the empires you build.” Immortality provided a lot of benefits, if you got old enough to use it.

“And yet, all gone with the snap of a finger.” And on queue, she snapped her fingers. “One fuck up and we’re gone. One sunrise and it’s over.”

He nodded, and pushed down his smirk. The girl was actively trying to grab his attention, to keep his mind off of Stephanie. And it was working. Daeva indeed.

“You are paranoid creatures.”

“Wouldn’t you be? Centuries of potential power, wealth, pleasure, all teasing you, all so easily taken. So, yeah, we spend a lot of time scheming and setting up stockpiles of money, webs of deceit, and droves of servants and slaves once we’re strong enough, cause one bad night can ruin everything.” She slid in closer. Their legs were already touching, making closer very close, and she smiled up at



him as she flicked his shoulder again. “I could run you over with a train and you’d be fine.”

“ ... I suppose I would be. Wasn’t enough to save Stephanie.”

“With shit like that happening in the city now, I am pretty glad you guys showed up. Thanks for that. And sorry, about your friend.”

He raised a brow at the beautiful creature, and offered her a small smile. She was very pleasant, and continued to throw him intrigued glances, warm smiles of her own, and did not move from her spot with her leg against his. And despite all the smells in the dark lounge, he could smell her clearly, with her proximity and her blushing life. Perfume, and fake life. Not an offensive smell, just unique.

“You don’t need to blush life, just for my sake. I’m used to the smell of Kindred.”

“Yeah well, I like doing it when I’m here. I like the way it gets this dead heart beating when I watch some couples in their booths, doing things to each other.” She gestured to one of the booths in the far back corner. A woman had one of her dress straps pulled down, and a man was caressing her breast while kissing her neck. Tilly gestured to another booth, where in the dark corner, a man was looking down at the table like he was in heaven. Someone was giving him a blowjob from underneath.

“I’d heard you vamps hunt like this in Dolareido. Clara confirmed. People just throw themselves at you for a Kiss. Sounds reckless to me, putting your Masquerade at risk.”

“We’re more careful than you think, and there’s no trail back to us.”

No real trail, but hunters didn’t use real trails, hunters followed rumors and gut instinct and found their targets through sheer

determination. He sighed, shrugged, and looked to another booth where two men were kissing. At least Dolareido embraced sexuality in many forms.

“Surprised you haven’t eaten yet then,” he said, “considering the glances people are throwing you.” And there were many glances, men and women who were very attracted to Tilly; and him, now that he took a moment to look.

“Who says I haven’t?”

“I’d smell it.”

“Ooh, impressive.” She giggled, a wonderful little sound. Practiced no doubt, but that was fine, it was a nice sound anyway.

“Surprised people aren’t coming over to asking you out, or over, either.”

“They think I’m propositioning you.” Tilly traced a finger on the table, and slowly nodded her head to the slow beat. “Trying to sell you my drugs, my Kiss that they don’t understand. It’s pretty funny, sometimes when the kine try and get in on trafficking it, not knowing what it is.”

“That ... is a bit funny, yeah.” He chuckled too at the thought of a human trying to coax secrets out of a vampire. If they tried to bully a vampire, it’d only end badly for the human.

“So,” she said, “I am pretty hungry ... and I wanted ... to ask you ... you know.”

He furrowed his brows, and looked down at the gorgeous creature beside him. Not a touch of shame to her face. In fact, the only reason she hesitated was to try and add a touch of huskiness to her voice, a little seduction. It worked, but he wasn’t about to let some random Kindred drink him.

“You want to Kiss me?”

“Mmhmm. Friend of a friend told me it’s pretty intense, getting the blood from a werewolf.” Her hand found his leg, and her fingers reached out to start stroking his inner thigh. “And honestly? You’re very handsome, but you also look pretty depressed. And that’s just a recipe for attraction from a fucked up girl like myself.”

“Attracted to the depressed?” He looked down at her hand, and then back to her face. The pale skin, the blood red lipstick, her blue eyes, she was a very attractive woman. But he wasn’t really in the mood.

Tilly, apparently, thought she could change his mind.

“Like a moth to flame. I know you’re hurting, and if I see a cute guy brooding about horrible things, I want to help him.” Her hand drifted higher. He half expected her to grab his crotch, but her fingers found his shirt, and she reached in between two buttons to begin teasing a finger along his abs. “Daeva are horrible like that, you know? To me it’s like a really good story, the ones where bad things happen to the characters, and you just keep reading cause the drama is addicting.”

That got another smile out of him, and he nodded. He did know that feeling, and he knew Daeva lived for that feeling. She was honest, for a Kindred.

“You are very ... aggressive,” he said.

“Well you have to be, to get into the pants of scary, dark, handsome types, the ones who like to brood and get a girl all ... you know, wanting to take care of you.” A few more chuckles, and she raised her hand outside his shirt to set it on his chest. “If you were wounded, and I had to nurse you back to health? Ugh, makes me swoon just thinking about it.”

He was wounded. Stephanie's death hit him in a weird way, a deep way, some place in his fucking guts that felt like fire sizzling on his intestines. He hated her, and he loved her. Never even kissed her, and he never knew he wanted to until she died. Which of course made him hate himself, and it led to a delightful downward spiral of depression and negative thoughts. He'd seen what this sort of self hatred could do to people, and how bad it could get when the person closed themselves off to others. Worse for an Elodoth, over analyzing things and never letting them hit the heart.

Stephanie's death hit the heart though, hard enough to crack it. Fuck, he was starting to sound like a Daeva vamp.

"... I ... could use a little nursing, yeah." Hurt to say, but it was true.

"Wonderful! I like to think I'm pretty good at the nursing thing. I was a nurse, before I was embraced."

Oh, well, that might explain a little of her unusual desire to help him, to tend to his wounds and such. Maybe she became a nurse, in hopes of living that wounded soldier fantasy, and never having it? He knew the reality of being a nurse was nothing like that, but if it was how she wanted to pursue that—stop over thinking everything. Just, for once in your god damn idiot life, let the pretty girl make you happy.

"I worked a convenience store, before I changed."

That got a laugh out of her, and she got cozy against his arm, leaning her shoulder into his as she looked back out to the crowd.

"So, I'll take care of you, and then I can have a drink of you?"

He nodded. "Sure."

Not like he was in danger. That Mekhet girl had drained Arturo earlier on, and he'd survived just fine; didn't even get knocked out like a human would. And Avery seemed ok with the idea of the pack getting close to Kindred in Dolareido, what with Arturo and Matthew having permission to hang with Natasha. And, Arturo described the Kiss with some pretty enticing adjectives. Mason would be lying if he said he wasn't intrigued.

"Want me to get one of the girls over here? If you'd prefer someone else," she said.

"... what?"

"I am a Daeva. Want me to enthrall someone, a kine? One of the girls, or boys?"

"No. No, of course not. Thought it was you flirting with me?"

"Oh I was, just wasn't sure if it was me you wanted ... Sorry, guess that's just a Kindred quirk. We often kind of think of sex in looser terms."

"I see. That's ... a little crazier than I think your typical Uratha is looking for." Inviting random strangers for sexual favors, when the vampire on his arm was almost a stranger herself, was pretty crazy. Normal behavior for Kindred apparently.

"That's so romantic! And adorable."

He smiled, and frowned, at the little devil leaning on his arm. Perhaps he was a hopeless romantic, in Kindred terms at least, preferring to not involve random strangers in their flirtations. No need to mention that he hadn't had a relationship beyond the occasional one night stand in his entire life, Uratha or otherwise.

Her hand closer to him set on his leg again, and with the table before the blocking out a lot of what people could see, it seemed

Tilly had no hesitation to set her hand higher, further inward, and start to stroke his pants along his crotch. Never in his life had he ever found a woman so sexually aggressive. Damn this city was like a teenager, no cares in the world, just looking for sex and fun times. It was going to take some getting used to, but, as he looked down to see the beautiful woman start to undo his pants, he found his smile refusing to leave. It really was a nice change of pace from ... everything.

A girl, coming up to him, and asking to do sexual favors for him so she could drink him. And not a drop of shame or guilt or judgment anywhere. Liberating.

“God damn.” Tilly giggled as she slid her hand under the waistband of his boxers, and gently cupped his still soft flesh. “Warm. And ... damn, I can feel it filling up with blood.”

“Isn’t that normal for your prey?”

“Ha! Prey? You could kill me easily.” She leaned in a bit closer, head to his shoulder and looking down while her hand eased the length of his cock through the flap of his boxers, so it was laid across her open palm and out in the open. “Would it be really cliché of me to say you have a big dick? Too crass, or silly?”

“A bit ... a bit over the top, maybe.” He squirmed a touch, just a little, as the girl began to massage his length. No qualms or hesitation or anything, she just started to caress him and tease his cock with expert fingers. And, being surrounded by all the sex, not to mention smelling the arousal coming from the girl beside him, it wasn’t long before he’d grown erect.

“Well, it is.” She worked her grip higher, to the base of his glans, before she squeezed a little and pulled her grip to the hilt of his length. He glanced her way, and gulped as he found the vampire licking her lips. Her fangs had grown from their hiding spot, and he could see them through her slightly parted lips. Her nipples pressed

hard to her dress, and her smell grew increasingly erotic. She was wet, and getting aroused faster than he was. And unlike her, he hadn't been laid in years.

“The brooding, handsome guy, a loner, wounded, with a really fit body and a big dick, and in desperate need of a woman to save him. Sorry to say, Mr. Mason, that you really are a sexual stereotype and fantasy incarnate,” she said. Her breathing was picking up, getting faster as she stroked him faster as well, until his length was completely hard, and she was breathing in tandem with her strokes. No need for a vampire to breathe, but she was anyway, probably knowing full well how much more attractive it made her when her breasts and hard nipples kept rising and falling. She was right.

A handjob, in a public place. First time for everything. He glanced around at the people dancing, at the people in their booths, at new people coming and other people leaving. Many threw him a glance, but not a one of them so much as furrowed a brow. Many couples smiled, a few women and one man spent more than a few seconds looking at him, and one couple in a far booth started to copy them. Couldn't see through the table, but from how the woman's arm was moving, it was easy to tell she was giving her man a handjob as well.

“Maybe I should ... go out more then,” he said.

“Oh you should. Lot of Kindred in Dolareido who think you wolves are just ... really ... hot.” Her hand squeezed a bit harder, a tight squeeze, and moved faster, stroking the whole of his length before easing to a slower, gentler rhythm again.

He let out a slow, long sigh, and closed his eyes for a moment. Someone else was touching him, getting past his surly attitude, making him forget about horrible shit for a little while; it was really appreciated. Greatly appreciated even, and a quiet, low groan escaped him as he started to feel the liquids building underneath his

testicles, tingling warmth that made him sigh another long, content sigh.

“I know that sound,” Tilly said. “Gonna cum soon?”

“I ... might.”

Immediately, her motions slowed, and she giggled when she looked up to catch his expression. “Not yet, we’re just getting to know each other. Come on, tell me a little about yourself.”

He didn’t see this coming; but he should have. The Kindred in this city were all so comfortable with sex, far more comfortable than Kindred typically were — which was pretty damn comfortable — so it only made sense she’d want to have a conversation while jerking him off. He was ok with that.

“What do you want to know?”

“Not sure. Did you come from Tijuana like a lot of your pack did?” She reached over with her other hand, and pulled his arm up and over her shoulder. Now in the nook of his arm and shoulder, she had more freedom to massage his girth with relaxed motions, arm resting on his lap. Her further arm reached across her lap to find his cock as well, and she teased her fingers along the tip of his member, while the other continued to stroke him. Precum started to drip out of him, but she prevented any of it from spilling, instead using the liquid to wet his foreskin so she could peel it back. And when she revealed the engorged, pink skin of his swollen glans, she made her own groaning sound.

“I was with Avery, when she—” A small wave of pleasure cut him off, made his cock flex in her hand. She giggled and slowed her hand to a stop, fingers coming to rest at the base of his length in a gentle grip, while her other hand teased fingernails softly along the topside of some of the veins of his girth. “—when she drifted down to Tijuana. I was hanging outside Los Angeles when she met me.”



“Oooh, Los Angeles. Beautiful city.”

“Scary city.”

“That too.” She resumed her stroking, and nudged her head into the groove of his shoulder and chest a little harder. Like a nuzzling cat. “Got a girl waiting for you anywhere?”

“ ... no.” And it was true.

“Sounds like you wish a girl you knew was waiting for you.”

He smirked at the mind reader, but smirked turned into slightly parted lips, and half-closed eyes as he felt his liquids start to build again, more warmth rising underneath the base of his length and making his thighs spark with the growing pleasure.

“You really are comfortable with this.”

“I told you,” she said, “Kindred are pretty comfortable here, doing this sort of stuff. But with you, I got to admit, there’s a certain danger to it I like. Sire would kill me if she knew I’d approached you like this.” And, as if the situation was not sexual enough for her, Tilly removed her further hand from his length, and slid her skirt aside using its high split. With both her legs fully exposed, and her thong, she slid the hand underneath the waistband to find her sex underneath. He couldn’t see through the fabric, or hear quiet sounds through the music, but he could smell the sexual arousal pouring off of her. Her underwear was soaked.

With the way her hand lifted her waistband, he could see she was completely smooth underneath too. The wolves were used to roughing it, living in the woods for months or years at a time, surviving on nothing but wildlife and wild spirits; body hair was pretty normal. These vamps though, these city dwelling vamps, loved to shave their whole damn bodies smooth.

He kind of liked it.

“You vamps really that afraid of us?”

“Kind of. We got peace here, and we know that’s pretty rare. Wanna keep it like that. And we hear stories about what happened when Avery was here last time, some Kindred dying and shit.” She shuddered, but smiled up at him as she stroked his cock, and herself. Ambidextrous. “So you guys are kinda the bad boys — and girls — in Dolareido. And every girl likes a bad boy.”

Her hand got faster, and faster. As the warm liquids started to build up again underneath his testicles, making his breathing quicken and his heart as well, she slid her other hand out from her thong, and set her fingers onto the glans of his length. Her fingers were dripping of her juices, and she spread them over the engorged head, mixing with his precum, and forcing almost painful levels of sparking pleasure through the sensitive skin and into his pelvis.

With her teasing fingers, she reached out to grab an unused glass from the table. She held it underneath the head of his cock, angled to ensure it caught all of him, as her other hand massaged his girth. Her grip slid up to the base of his glans, and used her grip to nudge wet skin along the bottom edge of the bulbous tip, forcing Mason to rumble as the pleasure coursed through him.

“Milking a werewolf.” She giggled, and rested her cheek against the side of his chest as she stared down at her work. His first gush of cum came out as a squirt, splashing against the inside wall of the glass, before the next wave came out in a slow, trickling stream. “How does that feel?”

“Really ... good.”

“Sweet music to any Daeva’s ears.” She sighed into his chest, and snuggled up closer, close enough she was squished against his side as she continued to milk him of his cum. Each flex of his muscle

sent another wave of pleasure down his length, and another wave of fluid up his length to flow into the awaiting glass. All the while, Tilly continued to squeeze and stroke his length, timing her strokes to fall in rhythm with his flexing muscles, and drawing more and more of his cum out of him. “Wow, you wolves all cum this much?”

“We...” His voice fell to silence as he let the aftershocks of a strong orgasm settle. But, even as his cum finally stopped, Tilly didn't. She continued to massage his girth, squeezing at the base of him and drawing out more drops to drip into the glass. Each squeeze and stroke earned another wave of bliss through his insides, until he rumbled again. Rumbling in his chest earned a moan from her in return. “We are ... alive, and strong, and ... sexually ... a bit like humans. Just more ... more.” Stronger, hungrier, hornier, all the things that came with being the bigger, badder predator, with the bigger appetite.

“Really? So you're all just ... ready to fight or fuck, all the time? And you're all like you? Fit, strong, big dicks?”

“I ... wouldn't be able to tell you, about the dicks thing.”

“Ha.” Her hand continued to stroke him, slowly, gently, more of a caress than anything, and as she did, she set the glass with a fair amount of cum back on the table, and set the extra hand on her own leg. A second later, it was back underneath her thong, and she resumed masturbating as she snuggled into him.

“You ... were going to drink me?”

“Mmhm. But I kind of like this too. I'm really close, and you're still hard.” Strange thing to like, to snuggle in a booth in a club, and masturbate while jerking him off. “Want to enjoy this while I can.”

“ ... I thought you wanted to nurse my wounds?”

“I do.”

“That’ll take longer than a single night.”

“ ... that an invitation to do this again?” She swooned, literally, and turned her head to look up at him again while she continued to both masturbate, and massage his cock. He was still hard.

“We’re sticking around in Dolareido, and ... yeah, I think I could use your company.” He wasn’t so stupid to not see it. He needed company. He needed some socializing, with someone more aware of reality than a human, and less of a pain in the ass than a werewolf.

“Oh, be still my fake beating heart.” At last she stopped stroking him, and herself, and slid out of the booth. “We should go to your place to do this. Kiss might not knock you out like a kine, but it’ll still leave you drained. Probably wouldn’t be comfortable doing that, far from your pack, right?”

A girl inviting herself to his place. First time for everything.

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She stood in the doorway of his bedroom, leaning against the door frame, and grinned at him. The Kindred was completely nude, and he was right, she was completely hairless below the neck. One of her hands was holding the elbow of the other arm, while the other arm’s hand had found her clitoris again, and she continued to stroke it as she looked at him.

“You really are a horny creature, aren’t you?” he said, as he slipped off his pants. After that, all he had left was his boxers, but he didn’t take them off yet.

“I just jerked off a fucking werewolf in a public club, with my fingers on my clit. Yeah, I’m horny. And you got to cum once, I haven’t, so you don’t get to say anything.” Eventually she came over to his bed, and pressed her hands against his shoulders since he was sitting on the edge of the mattress.

This close, he took his time looking her body up and down. Skinny, almost too skinny, but she had a little meat on her. Her nipples stood out far from her small, perky breasts, pink and swollen against her alabaster skin, and her tongue licked her luscious lips as she looked him up and down.

“You wolves are all muscle, not a touch of softness to you.”

“The women have some soft spots.” But not much.

Giggling, she grabbed his boxers by the bottom hem, and yanked them down to his knees. “Come on, lie down. To do this fantasy right, my wounded soldier, troubled warrior, you’re going to give me a nice, gentle, couple of orgasms. Some gentle licking, some soft fingering, suckle on my clit for a while, k? And then after that, you’re going to pin me down, and fuck me senseless. Real rough stuff. Like, I’m the sweet, gentle thing who opened her arms to you, not realizing how strong and violent you can be. So you’re going to fuck me until I’m a broken mess.”

He raised a brow, and looked left and right. “I am?”

“You don’t want to?”

“I ... I mean, sure. I would like to.” That did sound rather enjoyable.

“Good.” She climbed onto the bed, but also toward him. The only way she got to keep moving was by pushing him onto his back, before she crawled over him, giggling a few more times as she lay on her side on the sheets. “Oh poor me! Opening my sweet, gentle arms to a wounded man, only for my kindness to be repaid in the most rough fucking ever. Alas, how will I ever walk again.”

Too hard to not chuckle as he slid his boxers off the rest of the way, and returned her smirk. She really was a gorgeous woman, and the very short red hair with the blue eyes and red lips was a killer

combination. Daeva knew their fashion and sex appeal, and knew it well. Lucky him.

Lucky him? When was the last time he'd ever thought that? Must have been before his first change.

She grabbed one of his pillows, and lay on her back in the middle of his bed with her head on the fluffy cushion. She spread her legs as well, and reached down between her thighs to pull apart her smooth lips to show the tiny slit dripping with juices.

“Eat me,” she said, and her giggles turned into a deeper, huskier sound. Almost a shock coming from her small frame.

He rolled his eyes, chuckled, and lay on his stomach between her legs. It was the most amount he'd laughed in a single night in a long, long time.

But, laughter turned to kissing and suckling, as he set his lips onto the soaked vampire's clitoris.

“Fucking ... finally.” She reached out and set her fingers onto his head. “Make sure to get your fingers in there. Devour that pussy, but keep it slow, gentle; I don't want to cum from my clit, too draining. It's your fingers that need to do the work, and press up against my g-spot a bunch.”

He shouldn't have been surprised, but he was. The girl not only knew her body and knew it well, but she didn't stutter or hesitate to explain exactly what she liked, and how she liked it. And he was more than willing to do exactly what she said.

He set his lips around her clit, and lightly suckled on it, bathing it in long, gentle licks. With most of his weight on his left elbow, his right arm got in closer, and eased two fingers into her, palm up. A couple inches in, he pressed his fingertips up toward her abdomen, while at the same time, his other hand pressed down on her lower

abdomen from the outside. The two hands working together squashed her g-spot between them, and as he pressed the two hands toward each other, Tilly let out a loud moan.

The woman had been close to cumming already, he knew that, from the constant smell of arousal she was emitting. But still, he hadn't expected how quickly she'd start cumming once he started to properly finger her, and how wet she'd be when she did. A couple tiny squirts of her juices, barely more than a few drops splashed onto his lips, and he pulled his head away from her clit to watch her clenching muscles force another little splash of the juices onto his palm. A few drops again, tiny little squirts, but squirting nonetheless, and he stared on as the woman's spread legs allowed him to watch her quivering muscles clench on his fingers.

“M ... more.”

He grinned up to her from between his legs, and put his lips back onto her clitoris. She'd just come, so he knew better than to get rough with what had undoubtedly become hyper sensitive little nub of swollen flesh. Her g-spot, on the other hand, was a different story, and he began to press up against it, while his other hand pressed down. Slow, deep presses of his finger thoroughly trapped and squashed the spot of flesh, and each pressing motion caused the redhead to groan openly, no effort made to stop her voice from filling the room. The neighbors were going to hear, his pack mates; probably her goal.

He got faster, pumping his hand upward hard enough to make a small, slapping down, while he refused to let up on pressing down against her lower abdomen, below her navel. It was earning the hardest clenches of her hot, soaked insides, and soon, her loudest noises.

She squeezed on his head with her hands, arched her back, jutting out her breasts, and set her delicious thighs on his shoulders as she

started to cum again. He kept his lips on her clit, but ceased suckling and licking, giving the small nub a break, while his fingers against her insides did no such thing. Her smooth pussy clamped down, hard, and another tiny trickle of her juices fell onto his palm, as tremors started to work through the girl's legs. He kept it going, kept pressing up against it, fast, hard, making her ass jiggle and her body bounce lightly, and soon, making her squirt again, forcing more little squirts of her cum onto his palm, just a few drops each time, but each time sending the girl into a quivering mess.

Only once her legs fell off his shoulders, did he stop. She let go of his head, and collapsed on the sheets, sweating a little fake sweat, and forcing herself up onto her elbows so she could smile down at him.

“N-Now, you need to unleash your animal need on me. Don't hold back.” She got onto her hands and knees, and backed herself up toward him a little so she had a couple feet between her head and the wall. Her legs were shaking. “I mean, you can start slow if you want ... in fact, maybe you should, until you can fit nicely. And then pound me.”

This woman, good god. He rolled his eyes, but laughed again — he almost didn't recognize the sound, to laugh so much — and got behind her. Much as she was a skinny little woman, she had a fairly large, firm ass. A dancer's ass. And he rumbled desire as he set his fingers against it.

“Do that rumbling thing in your chest more often. You wolves do that a lot? It's really sexy.”

“We do, when we're happy.”

“Oh so it's purring! Thought you were wolves, not house cats?”

He smirked at her as she looked over her shoulder to smirk at him. But her smirk melted away, and her eyes rolled up as he set the



head of his cock against her clenching entrance, and started to push forward. Immediately, Tilly started to groan, and she dug her nails into the blankets as she clenched down on the tip of his cock; he didn't have his glans inside her yet, and she was making it difficult.

He took her by the hips, and began to pull her toward him. With more leverage, he forced his cock into her squeezing cunt, and rumbled again as every inch he pushed into her sent warm pleasure down his length. It wasn't just that she was tight — and she was very tight — but also that she kept squeezing him, making it difficult, resisting him. Maybe that was what she wanted though, to be overpowered, taken, forced. So, with another deep rumble in his chest, he pushed past her resisting, squeezing muscles, and sank her down until his felt the head of his cock hit her depths.

“Oh ... god that's thick ... and ... fucking deep.” Her body quivered, and she grinned over her shoulder at him again. She liked it deep. Good.

He growled at her, and yanked her down the rest of the way, sinking another two inches of his length into her. She let out a loud squeak, and collapsed to her elbows.

“Fuck!” she said, and her head fell down to hang between her shoulders as she quivered. “That's ... really ... deep.”

It was really deep. He'd skewered her, stretched her until her hot, soaked insides were taut around his girth, until he could almost feel her fake breaths with the depth of his penetration. Every motion she made, the way she arched her back with her new position, the quivering and shaking, the wriggling of her legs, he could feel it all.

He gently, slowly slid himself back until only the head of his length remained inside her gripping flesh, before he, again slowly, eased himself balls deep into her tight cunt. The vampire moaned openly, loud enough for his pack mates to hear, loud enough he couldn't help but smirk at the small woman shivering on his cock.

The moans were embellished, but it seemed like she was having fun with it, not that she was bored; she certainly wasn't faking her juices. He gave her a few more test strokes, each always in a gentle and slow motion, pulling out till only his glans remained within, and pushing in until he was stretching her depths inward.

The few women he'd been with very much against going that deep. This girl though, her moans turned into these squealing whimpers when he bottomed out inside her, and kept her there. And, as he felt her pussy stretch around him, she ground her ass against him, trying to fit more of him into her, even though he was already balls deep.

She wanted deep. She liked deep.

He pulled his ass back half of his length, gripped her hips tight, and slammed into her.

"Oh! Oh fuck!" She threw her gaze over her shoulder at him, and offered him begging eyes. "Please, sir, be gentle with me. It's ... my first time, and ... I'm ... so scared."

God damn this girl. He laughed and shook his head, smirking at her. At this rate he'd lose his erection from laughter; couldn't have that. He ground her hips toward him, pinning her ass to his body, and he smiled down at the extreme ratio of her tiny waist against her ass spread against him. And, he slammed into her again.

Tilly gripped the blankets, and let her head hang as she moaned. She knew what she liked, exactly what she liked, and she let out a meek little growl toward the bed as she tried to meet his thrusts with her own. But she wanted to do a little roleplaying, wanted to be taken hard. And, he had a little frustration to work out. He reached out, and pressed down against her back, hard enough to make her squeak and collapse to the sheets. And once she was lying on her chest with her ass up in the air, he took her hips again, and pounded into her, fast.

With her down and unable to support herself, he had to admit, there was a sensation of power, of control. She couldn't stop him, even if she wanted to. Even if she legitimately wanted to. And as he forced her tiny pussy onto his length balls deep, she managed to peek up at him, her head turned to rest her cheek on the pillow. Her mouth was open, and struggling to get out more than the occasional squeak or mewl.

He looked down at where her tiny lips were taut around his cock. When he pulled out, he could see the pink of her insides pull out along with him, almost turning inside out despite the copious amount of her juices coating him. And, as he pushed back into her, slowly this time, he let out a deep rumble at how her pussy squeezed on him. More juices were coming out of her, until they were almost dripping.

The slow stroke gave her a moment to speak

“P-Please ... don't ... hurt me.” Much as she got the voice of a terrified little girl just right, the facial expression was all wrong, betraying her attempts at roleplay. She was practically drooling onto the pillowcase, and her eyes were half closed, struggling to not roll upward with bliss.

He started to pound into her again, with a hard, fast rhythm. Each stroke stretched her inward, as he made sure each sank her down the whole of his length until he felt her ass bounce against his lower abdomen, and he felt his balls slap against her. At first, the harsh thrusts earned some squeaks from her, but after a while he could tell she'd run out of air to make noises. And if she were human, he'd have stopped to give her a moment to breathe, or at least stop tenderizing her insides.

But she was Kindred, and that meant he could get a bit rough with her, by werewolf standards. By human standards, very rough. The bed started to rock, joining her panting noises with its creaking,

enough noise to let every neighbors know what was happening. Tilly didn't think it was enough noise though, forced in a breath, and started crying out, moans and mewls, the sort of stuff you heard in porn. He might have thought she was faking it, if it weren't for the way she was soaking him, his testicles wet with her cum and, as he continued to pound into her, eventually his thighs.

When she started to shake, he slammed into her, and again stayed there, holding her balls deep so he could enjoy the feel of her orgasm, of her insides squeezing like a vise. She squirted again, a little trickle of the hot juice hitting his testicles, and then another, each in time with how her muscles clenched. He didn't wait for her to finish. Grip tight on her hips once again, he gently eased himself out of her until only the glans of his cock remained within her soaked, trembling insides, and slammed himself back into her.

He knocked the wind out of her. Shaking like a leaf, she started to collapse sideways, but couldn't, not with his hands locked onto her hips. He pounded into her, each impact causing her ass to jiggle as it met his abdomen and pelvis, each impact causing the girl's last few breaths to come out as squeals, before she again ran out of air. Muscles squeezed, trying to make him stop, trying to force him and his cock to hold still, but he pushed through the clenching tightness to sink himself balls deep into her again, and again, and again. The feel of his testicles slapping her clitoris and smooth folds, of her squirting juices trickling out of her, slowing one moment and gushing the next, was all too damn amazing for him to stop.

Tilly didn't just like being sexual, she really enjoyed sex. There was something terribly arousing about that, about being with a girl who wasn't only using her body to be confident and manipulative, but also because she genuinely loved sex so much, she came her brains out. And as she whimpered into the pillow, body again trying to collapse to the side and away from him, he pounded into her harder as his arousal started to boil over, refusing to give her a break.

Only once he felt the tingling bliss of his juices start to flood upward from the base of his length, did he finally slow down his pace. He thrust into her, hard, enough to make the bed creak again, and make Tilly squeak with what little bits of air she managed to find. He stayed balls deep inside her, and ground her hips toward him, as he enjoyed both the trembling of her clenching, soaked insides, and the heat of his thick cum gushing up his length, and into her cunt.

Again, he slammed into her, no longer jack hammering her, but each stroke pulling out to the tip, only to bury himself to the hilt inside her and stay there for a second, to enjoy the feel of his cum pouring into her, and coating his length. The third stroke forced a louder moan from Tilly, and her legs shook as her insides convulsed, random spasms gripping on him, squeezing, milking his cum out of her. Poor girl squirted again, harder this time, a few tiny trickles of her cum splashing against his testicles, coating them, before both hers and his cum started to leak out of her folds.

He stayed there, inside her, and took a deep breath as he focused on the pleasure, and on the beautiful sight of the terribly gorgeous woman cumming on his cock. She was breathing again, and managed to force herself back onto her elbows, despite her trembling, trembles he could feel as her insides clenched on him.

“S ... see you ... in a couple d-days?” she managed to say, offering a grin at him over her shoulder, despite her wavering.

“You want to see me again?”

“G-God yes.”

Like a match to gasoline, she lit the fire inside him again. Arousal, hunger, desire, in the woman’s eyes, in her words, while she was in the middle of orgasm aftershocks? Nothing, there was absolutely nothing hotter in the whole damn world.

He leaned forward, and set his weight down onto her, until she had no choice but to collapse onto her stomach on the bed. He grabbed a pillow too, and forced it under her hips, between her and the bed.

“W-Wait, you can’t—nng!” She squealed, music to his ears, as he started to pound into her again.

It only took moments before she was cumming again. She gripped on the blankets, tried to pull herself away, to get away from him, even as she whimpered into the pillow, and squeezed on his cock. She managed to turn her head, cheek to the pillow, and look up at him with begging eyes. The poor woman needed a break.

He didn’t give her one.

Pinning the small vampire into the blankets, he growled into her ear, rumbled deep in his chest, and earned a quiet whimper from the redhead. She still kept trying to escape him, fingers plucking at the blankets with all the strength of a kitten. And as he slammed his body down onto hers, she squirted onto him for hundredth time, tiny little squirts of hot fluid that soaked his testicles, and mixed with his own cum as it leaked out of her, onto the pillow beneath her pelvis.

It took another five minutes of constant pounding to finally reach a third orgasm, and through it all, he’d grunted and growled down at the small creature underneath him. She hadn’t stopped cumming. Were she human, he’d be worried she’d dehydrate, or be thoroughly bruised, but she was Kindred, and he let himself go as he fucked the beautiful little vixen until she went limp underneath him, no longer trying to escape. Now, she simply lay there, and quivered as her clenching insides trembled on his cock, and milked him of his cum.

“You ok?” he said.

“Y ... Yeah ... I did say ... fuck me until ... I was a broken mess, right? M-Maybe ... um ... a little gentler? ... next time?”

Next time. She said next time. Maybe Dolareido wouldn't be so bad.

# Chapter 41

~~Jack~~

“You think I can have a mansion?”

Julias shook his head and smirked down at him. “Think you can afford one?”

“No, but, I have connections. You, for example.”

“I can’t afford a mansion either, Jack, not in a dense city anyway. You think I’m a billionaire? I inherited this one.”

Hard to believe Julias couldn’t afford a mansion, but then owning such a massive house and paying for the help to keep it in good condition must have had a deceptively large cost. Kindred in the Invictus had a way of getting around costs, but it only took them so far. Owning a mansion in a dense city probably was absurdly expensive.

They opened the enormous front door, and stepped into the grand lobby. It’d been a while since Jack had visited Julias in his home, and something was definitely different. So different it made Jack freeze for a second as he computed what he was staring at.

There were people walking around. New people.

“Um ... figured your help would be working during the day?”

“I do still have people who work on the house and yard during the day, but these are also here to work during the night.” His sire motioned to a couple of women who were walking around with smartphones and wearing earpieces, and a man who had a broom, also wearing an earpiece. And when they saw Julias, a bright smile



appeared on their faces. The men offered warm salutes, and the women offered warmer smiles, the sort of smiles Jack was used to seeing on Ashley and Julee's face when they were with Antoinette.

“Ghouls?”

“No. Thralls. I have bound these people to be my servants with the discipline of dominate, and a drop of my blood. The combination makes for ardent, loyal servants. And so it is for my servants during the day, as well.”

Jack whistled. A couple more people went by as well, a man and woman, and they both gave Julias a bow when he came by, before they moved on. The woman looked over her shoulder as Jack and Julias moved down the hall, and Jack managed to catch her licking her lips as she watched the taller Kindred.

“That all they do?”

“Ha, no. Beatrice does like to be pampered, in and out of bed.”

Ah, to be pampered by your food. Such was the unusual luxury of being a Kindred. Even a Nosferatu could be pampered if they spent the time to get humans to taste their blood. Frequently drinking a Kindred's blood, and the Kindred focusing their will upon the drinker's body to transform them, was how to make a servant into a ghoul. But a few tastes of the vampire's blood was enough to turn kine into thralls, servants. It was much easier to convince a person to drink your blood if they were brainwashed with dominate or majesty though.

Part of Jack felt guilty about it; a bigger part told him it was normal, and correct. He was Kindred, not human, and in the food chain the Kindred were the bigger predator. Course, that made him wonder if he'd feel the same if a Kindred killed his mother by drinking her to death, or turning her into a thrall. He doubted he'd hold his view unchanged.

“Must be a pleasant change for her,” he said. “She’s told me about her life as a Nosferatu, and how shitty it was. Hanging out in the tunnels till she could use her cloak of night, then hanging out in graveyards and the catacombs cause ... well, apparently Nosferatu just like to do that. More or less alone for a good while till she got in with the Carthians, and even then, never a thrall or ghoul to feed on or keep her company.”

“Indeed.”

“Bet you love spoiling her.” Cause the situation was at least a little similar to him and Antoinette, and Antoinette apparently loved to spoil the absolute shit out of him.

“I do. But we’re not here to talk about women.”

“You sure?” Jack said, snickering. Until Julias gave him a good punch to the shoulder.

“We’re here to pick what you’re going to wear to the ball.”

“Ah, right, that. Antoinette figured you’d want to pick my clothes for me. Said stuff about the unusual nature of the ball, half formal, half casual, but a middle ground wouldn’t do?”

“Leave it to a Daeva to know fashion.” Julias opened one of the many doors in his absurd, expensive, fancy hallway, and brought him into a changing room. Not too dissimilar to the changing room him and Antoinette had just been fucking in a couple nights ago.

“Oh, that reminds me. Antoinette told me about what she was going to be wearing, and daaaaamn. Not sure if I’m going to be able to keep my eyes off of her. How will anyone, with the amount of skin she’s going to expose?”

But his sire just shrugged and pulled open a closet door to expose the deep, dark cave of suits within. “Most people are terrified of her,

like you used to be. That's normally enough to dissuade too much staring. That said, I'm sure she'll enjoy a little staring. A lot from you, probably."

"Makes me wonder what the other women are going to wear."

"Like the Prince told you, it's a strange mix of formal and casual, but not a middle ground. You need to wear something that's both very powerful, but without the rigidity of a typical suit. With this sort of dress code, it's actually a bit easier for women; wear something that looks fancy but exposes more skin than usual."

Jack laughed and ran the images through his mind. He loved it when Antoinette exposed skin, wore things that highlighted her curves. God, the memory of her in a corset already—

"Jack, focus."

"Right, right. So, what's the plan?"

"A lot of the men and women will wear clothes that partly reflect the era they were sired. Such is the custom for balls, as you probably picked up on that first Invictus ball you went to."

Jack nodded. He remembered the strange mixture of old and new, expensive suits tailored to look a hundred years old, despite being new. Women wore frilly, fancy dresses, but a lot of them had sported some plunging cleavage, give or take depending on the vampire. Maria's clothes had exposed no skin, but that was understandable.

"What era am I from then?"

"The combination of money and technology. The dawn of cyberpunk."

"... wow that's depressing."

Julias laughed, shrugged, and returned from the suit cave with something in his arms. A suit, the color of silver. And not just silver as in gray, but a bit shiny with hints of black undertones. Silver silver.

“Strange color.”

“It fits your background and era. Come here, let’s get to work.”

And to work they went. Julias called in a man and a woman servant, and the two of them helped Jack try on different sizes of each piece of clothing, and what didn’t fit would get adjusted later until it would.

Black shoes of course, cause some things never changed, but the pants were indeed the sort of silver you’d find on a chain, or at least a fabric version of it. The suit came with a couple chains too, to connect a button to a pocket inside the suit jacket. The shirt underneath was white, and the tie black, but the tie also had some silver embellishment, designs that meant nothing but screamed ‘money’. The black buttons against the silver vest, the silver pin of the Xnomina symbol on the right lapel, the dangling bit of chain underneath the vest that held a small silver skull, it all screamed the modern age, technology, and money. But at the same time, the chains, the silver designs on the black tie, the color contrasts, it all had a certain pomposity, magniloquence, that screamed Ventrue, without being the dry, deadly suits Ventrue typically wore.

He kind of liked it.

“Look like I’m going to a very, very, very expensive party, with billionaires, and millionaire escort girls. And lots of cocaine.”

“That is more or less the feeling we’re going for. At the same time, the Carthians and, if they decide to come, the Circle will probably wear clothes not nearly as fancy. And that’s fine. Different strokes. This ball is about celebrating the peace in the city.”

“So ... jeans?”

Julias laughed. He was sitting on the nearby couch, tablet in his hand and scanning across what Jack guessed was Xnomina contracts. “I doubt they’ll come in jeans, but they’ll definitely wear something they like the look of. They generally don’t like suits, so don’t expect suits. You remember what Jennifer wore at the Prince’s ball.”

Ah, yeah. Damn that girl had looked stunning, gorgeous even, and terribly sexy in that skimpy little dress that barely covered her ... anything. And she’d worn it in front of all those Kindred, with no shits given. Out of shits to give, and she wasn’t much older than he was.

“So there’s going to be a lot of exposed skin?”

“No doubt. A lot of them will wear clothing that reveals their chests and stomachs, I’m sure, especially from the Carthians. The women will show off their cleavage, their legs, and those in the Circle will probably wear clothing that will expose near everything from certain angles.” He shrugged and swiped his fingers across the screen. “Neonates should be a little more conservative when exposing skin, but Jennifer, and a few cocky neonates in the Carthians and Invictus will gladly show off their curves and muscles. Dress shirts undone to the stomach, for example. Some of the women will have their breasts exposed entirely, I’m sure, if the dress calls for it.”

Fashion fashion fashion. It was sucking him in more and more every night, and as he looked at the fancy suit in the mirror — shoulders didn’t fit quite right yet — he smiled at how it looked both absurd, and perfect.

“Mr. Mire.” One of the thralls spoke up, the man, with his fingers to his ear to hold the earpiece in deeper. “Beatrice is at the front door.”

“Excellent.” Mire stood up, and pat Jack on the shoulder. “You can change back now. I want you to do some more digging into Barry’s death. Much as it’s easy to not care about Barry dying, turn a blind eye — and a lot of people are — I know there’s more going on here than it would appear.”

“Got it. Barry’s death.”

“Pay a visit to Madam Vendram as well. She says she has some information to share with whoever is investigating the fire.”

“Ah man.” This was going to suck. Madam Vendram was a Gangrel, and while that wasn’t really an issue, it was just that Vendram embodied a lot of the stereotypes of a Gangrel; almost like it was her personal mission to be a stereotype. “She still nest at the old theater?”

“Correct.” Mire got up, offered him a small wave, and disappeared down the hall. He could have gotten one of his servants to bring Beatrice here, but Julias probably wanted to go to her instead, get her himself. Cause he really liked her, and wouldn’t want her to be brought to him by a servant.

Jack really had to figure out something for Antoinette. Try as he might, he couldn’t find a way to surprise her or delight her with those classic romance approaches. He was sure a flower or similar would be met with laughter; not condescending laughter, but the Prince would find his attempts at romance adorable, not romantic.

He could ask her to dance? Julias was teaching him some basics, but it didn’t fix the size issue. Even if the Prince led, she was a foot taller than him at least, and that was without heels. Dancing would be difficult, and he could barely dance as it was.

She liked words. The Prince liked intelligence, wisdom, and introspective reflection. Maybe something in that department? Poetry? The fuck did he know about poetry though?

He sighed, and headed out the back door of the mansion. No need to disturb Julias and Beatrice, and what was likely going to be a sexual encounter if he knew Beatrice at all.

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His drive took him to the other side of South Side, and into a section where old buildings still entertained people. Movie theaters that were old but still standing, same for bars, and more than a few convenience stores, liquor stores, and local restaurants. A weird mishmash of old and not so old.

The old theater was straight out of Phantom of the Opera. Course the building was at least a hundred years old, so rather than being inspired by the play, they just had the same inspiration: Paris. Just one of those places in the city where the elders let their age show through and controlled some of the building construction.

He got out of the car, waved the driver off, and stood before the royal theater. A few floors tall, with dozens of windows lining each floor against the white stone of the walls. Large doors of black wood with no windows on the bottom floor made for an imposing but impressive entryway, and Jack let out a long sigh as he pushed open the door. He'd never talked with Madam Vendram, but every time he ever ran into the woman at the Xnomina headquarters, he found the woman being aggressive with other Kindred. She liked to shove, yell, growl. Jessy was the same way, but Vendram had a certain harshness about it that set Jack on edge.

“Sir.” An usherette walked up to him and shook her head, hands together in front of her. “I’m sorry sir but an evening rehearsal is in session.”

Jack nodded, and glanced around at the lobby. Red, white, and gold was the motif, with the white stones serving as the walls, the pillars, gold braziers — light bulbs, not fire — and gold chandeliers, along with red carpet and drapes. Beautiful, if very old. The gold was losing its shine, the carpet and drapes their luster, and the white

stone that must have once shone beautifully, was turning gray. The floors above had railings of white stone, with red drapes of triangular shape hanging from them, edges frayed.

The usherette looked him up and down for a second, and he returned her gaze in return. But when her eyes found his, she froze.

“You want to let me in.”

“I ... want to let you in.”

“And you don’t want to tell anyone I’m here.”

“I won’t tell anyone you’re here.”

Jack smirked at the usherette, and walked past. And she ignored him, as if he wasn’t there. God damn it felt good to be Ventrue.

He took the stairway along the sides, and let his hand run along the railing. Dolareido did have some really nice, fancy buildings. The Lamanar Theatre was no Black Hall, but still, it was damn nice despite its age, and he found himself smiling as he admired the chandeliers on his journey up the stairs to the second floor, and then again to the third. There must have—ah, a side door, that would inevitably lead to the rafters over the theater. And would probably stay locked at all times.

He wasn’t sneaking in though, he was here on official business. And in this strange, modern era of smartphones, he’d already texted Madam Vendram that he was coming. Lo and behold, the door was unlocked, and he opened it to step out onto the darkness of the rafters.

Rafters wasn’t really what they were. It looked to be a fourth balcony really, with a guard railing and such, with just enough head space for someone to walk along without their heads hitting the roof. It was above the lights, guarded by a curtain to keep it hidden



from the audience, and it eventually led out to connect to the catwalks over the stage; again, all hidden by curtains. Just being up here made Jack want to act like some sort of Daeva, overdramatic, excessively romantic, read poetry with absurd inflections, and him in ridiculous poses.

Maybe it was the big curtains? They did get one into the theater play mood.

He looked down over the edge and took a deep breath. Course the breath did nothing to settle his still heart; it was the beast in his gut warning him about how nasty it'd be to land on seats from this high up, not his organs. Not nasty enough to be life threatening to a Kindred, but it might break an ankle. So, he swallowed his silly fears from a life nearly a year gone now, and smiled down at the seats. Not even as far of a drop compared to the one he did onto the Azlu's back.

Cocky, Jack. You're getting cocky. Always remember how easy it is for a Ventrue to fall to hubris. Always remember that the spider monster only had to step aside a single foot to completely ruin that plan.

He sighed, swallowed down his pride, and continued along the upper balcony. There were some people talking below, chatting and whispering, analyzing the performance. And as Jack grew closer, he started to pick up on the verses of a few of the actors on stage.

Macbeth. Because of course it was.

As the balcony opened up onto the catwalk, he realized the catwalk itself was sort of blocked off and hidden from everyone else. It didn't seem like it connected to the catwalks over the stage, but instead went over top them against the roof where the light couldn't penetrate the curtains or dense metal mesh under his feet. But he could see the people below, down where the light was, and he

smirked as he leaned his elbows against the railing and listened to the ever so famous ‘Out Damned Spot’ scene.

Finding Hella Vendram wouldn’t be easy. Looking for her at all was probably a mistake. If anything, she could see him already, and was waiting to see what he’d do, what he’d say to the dark, what sort of gestures he might make.

So he stood there and watched, and listened. The woman would show herself eventually, and in the mean time, he could try and enjoy some Shakespeare. And he hated Shakespeare. Something about how the words were said, the language, the rhythm, it was like listening to a different language. Took time and practice to learn to speak a language, and he’d done it a few times in high school when necessary, but ultimately understanding Shakespeare dialogue slipped away the moment he stopped listening to it regularly.

But then you didn’t need to know it fluently to appreciate how an actor portrayed it, and the woman playing Lady Macbeth was putting her heart and soul into her performance. Heart wrenching, even if Jack found the overall plot and character motivations ridiculous. Fate and self fulfilling prophecies were gimmicks used by hack writers, and just because the play was old didn’t mean—

“Hello.”

Jack jumped. Literally jumped. He landed stumbling back, hand reaching out to flail and grab at a railing before he half fell onto his ass and back.

“Jesus!”

“Shhh.” Isabella Laeuvion. Daeva. From the strange tingling sensation Jack felt in his gut, he could tell she was using her cloak of night to hide them, and prevent his noise from attracting attention. Odd for a Daeva to be using that discipline, normally used

by Nosferatu and Mekhet, but it probably came with the territory of hanging out in a royal theater.

Wait. “Isabella? Er, Madam Leauvion? Why are you here? Thought this was Madam Vendram’s home,” he said. Isabella didn’t help him up. Wouldn’t really be fitting for someone of her age, a good seventy years embraced.

As per the stereotypical Daeva, Isabella was gorgeous. She had long blond hair, dirty blond, braided into a dozen ponytails of intricate design, coiling backward over her scalp. Looked like a queen, a legit queen; only thing missing was a crown. She had a hard face, a sharp jaw, and Jack couldn’t help but picture her giving orders from a throne, maybe one made of swords. Blue eyes too, bright blue, piercing, like sharp ice.

She was wearing a see-through cloak of black, something that hung over her shoulders and down to cover her breasts, but the front half came to a stop at the underside of the breast, while the fabric behind her continued down to her feet. Underneath the cloak and its fancy hem covered in spiraling black lines, she was wearing a black corset that covered her large breasts, and connected to a black skirt that went down to the floor along with the cloak. Of course, with the cloak being see-through, he could see the corset gave her an insane amount of cleavage, creating an interesting juxtaposition against the coldness of her face. Inspired by Antoinette, perhaps?

“Master Terry, you look upon them with both interest and scorn on your face.”

“Eh?”

“The actors.” She gestured down to the people below. Their rehearsal continued unaffected, thankfully. Be terribly embarrassing if Jack drew their attention and ruined his meeting with his clumsiness.

“Sorry! Sorry, just ... never really cared for Shakespeare. So, I mean, they seem like good actors, but—”

“But the medium destroys the joy in appreciation. I understand.” She nodded, and started walking past him before moving onto different sections of the hidden catwalk. Each step exposed a touch of her heel, and Jack saw what must have been some sort of soft shoe. It made no noise when stepping on the metal.

“Um, I—”

“You are here to see Madam Vendram. Come with me.”

“Yes ma’am.” He fell in line beside and behind her, and stared ahead. She was a beautiful woman, but he was getting a vibe from her that made it pretty blatant that staring at her curves was dangerous. And he could use some practice not letting his eyes wander away from him; already walking dangerous ground with the whole Clara incident.

She brought them to a part of the wall where the catwalk connected. Back here, there were no ropes or platforms, just metal catwalk; all the ropes and platforms were beneath on the catwalks used by the crew. It meant there was little place to go, and he had to wonder what her plan was, until she reached out for one of the circular wooden notches that decorated the walls. She pressed on an indentation six times, in a specific beat, before lowering her hand.

A small chunk of wood slid aside, just a square panel of the many, two feet wide and tall. All the panels, all the notches looked identical, and with this section of the catwalk walking parallel to the wall, there was no chance anyone would stumble onto the secret. And she’d probably change the pattern required to get it to open once he was gone. He didn’t mind though, that was just Kindred being Kindred.

He crouched down, and followed after her into the darkness. Half expected to be stuck crawling on his knees for a while, but the other side of the wall held a tall passage, and once Isabella grabbed a candle from the wall and lit it, the darkness was gone. He grimaced at the sight of the fire flickering on the wax, and considered bringing out his smartphone to help light the tunnel. But the Daeva would have probably taken offense to such a light source; she bled old fashioned tastes.

They continued their descent down the hidden path, down stairs of old wood that creaked, until they came upon a large room with dangling bulbs lighting the dull wood that surrounded them. Old, worn, just a big circular room that had many doors, just like the one he closed behind him as he followed the ancilla. A bunch of passages that all connected to the building above, no doubt.

He followed her through another door, as innocent looking as the others. As they walked through the endless tunnels, he had to wonder why Isabella wasn't one of the Invictus right hands. She was older than Jessy or Natasha, and so were a couple other Kindred in the Invictus. None of them were given the same responsibility as those two and Julias when he was still a right hand. Maybe she simply wasn't as powerful, or as driven, or as smart as them? Or maybe she just knew how to avoid getting saddled with those responsibilities.

He kept his mouth shut though. She was more than strong enough to tear him in half, and he could feel it; beast in his gut knew better than to poke the bear. So he stayed behind her, and kept his eyes on the darkness ahead of them.

“Forgive my silence,” she said, “but, I am not sure of which we could speak.”

“No apology necessary, Madam Laeuvion.”

“But there is, for someone as important as Master Terry enters my theater. Proper respect must be paid.” Her voice carried a hint of sarcasm, just a touch, a perfect level of passive aggressiveness he couldn’t call her out on. But when she looked over her shoulder at him, he stopped. A touch of fear in her eyes, maybe?

“You mean because of Mister Mire, and the Prince.”

“Of course.”

The opportunity to exploit his position and his contacts, handed to him on a silver platter. A simple sentence, something like: ‘yeah, my boss and my girlfriend run this city’, and the woman would find herself forced to treat him with undeserved respect.

“Don’t be, Madam Laeuvion. If either my sire or my love learned I was abusing my relationship with them, they’d punish me. So, please, treat me as I am.” Ugh, sometimes he wished he was more of a weasel.

What little trace of fear or apprehension she carried vanished, and a sly smile replaced it.

“Wonderful.”

Wonderful. Yeap, he just made things harder on himself; maybe for the immediate at least. But his respect should pay off in the long run. Hopefully.

The tunnel began to open again, and as they moved through the black, one wall fell away to expose a black chasm to the side. The wooden beams were replaced with stone ones, each ornate and decorated with swirling designs. The walls of the building faded away until there was only the cave rock of their path. The pathway became smooth, and worn, like rocks that had been walked on for decades. Centuries. And the path continued downward, in a spiral.

He realized, looking over the edge into the black abyss below in the center of the spiral, that he was staring into a hole.

“H ... How deep is that?”

“We’ve a few hundred feet to go yet. I’m sure you’d survive, Kindred as you are, but many bones would be broken; unless you happened to land neatly upon the pile of bones at the bottom.”

That was the smell. He thought he smelled stone, and water, and he was sure he did, but he also smelled something that bit at his nose. Death.

And sure enough, as they continued down the spiraling stairway, the light of Isabella’s candle exposed the water sitting at the base of the pit. It was shallow, with a couple of holes in the dark leading into what must have been underground currents. In the shallow pool, he could see at least twenty skeletons, with clothes rotted and faded with an eternity of cold water on their bodies.

“What happened to them?” he said, gesturing to the dead in the water.

“No offense to your darling, but the Prince often prefers to avoid mention of the seasons of violence Dolareido has gone through. Madam Vendram’s sire spent many years creating this cave, after she discovered the underground river. When some of the villagers at the time discovered her master’s actions, and realized she was Kindred, Vendram’s sire had no choice.”

Butchering a bunch of kine just to keep their vampire world a secret. He shivered as he considered the possibility. Dealing with the evidence of his frenzy fuck up with Mrs. Pavala had been horrible. Dealing with a whole group of people would have been life destroying.

He looked up. The light from Isabella could not light the abyss above them now, but it was enough to shimmer on the water, and light where the stairway connected to the floor, and where the turn of the cave ahead glimmered with some more candlelight. Part of him figured he should have expected something as insane as a colossal, deep, enormous cave with a stairway and a bunch of bodies at the bottom, all hidden underneath a play theater. He was used to such madness, just like Antoinette's gigantic Elysium tower that had a basement almost as large as the tower itself. But, he was still shocked, and his jaw dropped as he looked up into the black, then at the pool of skeletons, and then to Isabella.

"Is there any way out of here except that tunnel above?"

"Yes, there is." She nodded, turned, and continued down the path around the turning cave wall. Should have figured she wouldn't tell him about any other ways into this secret base. Smart. And Kindred could use the underground river, if they were willing to swim it and knew where the entrance to it was, he was sure. Good to know.

He followed her, only to be stopped by a large gate. Thick, metal bars with almost no space between them, and varying spikes designed to tear flesh stuck out from the bars. The bars cut deep into the rock as far as Jack could tell, and several broad bars of metal crossed the gate horizontally, locked in by some equally massive locks.

"And I suppose this blocks off where you sleep?"

"Indeed."

"And I suppose you have at least a couple secret exits from the den as well?"

"Aren't you a smart little Ventrue." The Daeva smirked at him, and knocked on the bars, like knocking on a door. "While Mister Mire knows much about the ongoings of the Invictus, and indeed



much of who is where in the city as a whole, all Kindred develop a need for their own secrets.” Stirring drew Jack’s eyes through the bars, and he glanced between the beautiful vixen and the oncoming body beyond the gate. Isabella made another knock, as if emphasizing her points. “Try it. You’ll live longer.”

“I would have to agree, except I think my young age makes me unworthy of killing.”

The body on the other side of the metal gate snorted, shook her head, and knocked on the bars. “If that was true, then Barry would be alive.” Hard to see her through the bars, with how little space there was, but Jack could see some motion. The hard, heavy clank of metal hitting metal did a better job of telling him she was moving the bars blocking their path. And after a few seconds longer than he figured you’d need to unlock a gate, Hella Vendram pulled the metal barrier aside like opening a giant door, complete with creaking metal against rock.

Hella was an attractive woman, but not in the same way as Isabella. The Daeva had an iciness to her face and frailty to her body common to city girls that he was used to, while Hella looked like an athlete from Brazil. Lightly tanned skin and dark eyes complimented a slightly tall, fit body, and where Isabella wore plenty of make up, Hella seemed far more comfortable wearing only a little. Handsome was a good word for her, especially with how she had a portion of the side of her head buzzed, while the other two thirds of her head sported shoulder-length brown hair that flowed in waves.

She sort of reminded him of Garry, and it wasn’t just the Gangrel thing. Both were very fit, with some sizable curves to both their legs and their shoulders. It was also the way she looked at him, grinned in a subtle way, knew she was both handsome and gorgeous. There were a fair amount of scars on her skin, cutting into her chin, one

along her cheek, and another along her eyebrow. Made her look dangerous.

That's what the similarity was, that he saw in her, Garry, Michael, and Jessy too. They knew they were dangerous, volatile, and they were proud of it. Fucking Gangrels, probably thinking that their dangerous side made them sexy as fuck. He wouldn't tell Hella that he did think it was kind of sexy on her, and Jessy. Didn't need any more trouble in that area on his lap. At least Hella wore something a little easier for him to not stare at, some simple jeans and a black shirt, that probably hid a rock hard stomach and some nice arms at that.

All the women in the Invictus generally wore some type of suit at work. He'd never really imagined them wearing anything else, for some reason. Guess it was time to start paying attention, if he was going to be visiting other Kindred in their homes.

Isabella stepped into the cave, and he followed in after her. Once they were past the gate, Hella closed it behind them, again with the loud clanks and clunks that made Jack turn around to look. Yeah, giant bars. No one was getting in here without a blowtorch and a lot of time.

He doubted Hella was the one pushing for using candles instead of proper modern light. And as an array of candles became visible, the fashionable display sealed the deal; Isabella was their decorator. Which made sense, if Isabella had taken the nest for her own instead of Hella. A hundred candles, burning, dripping wax, all hung from sconces along the cave walls, black sconces that had gargoyle-shape bodies. The little gargoyles had their hands raised, mouths open, with evil grins and eviler eyes staring at him as he walked by.

The cave opened up into a grand room with an unhealthy candle obsession. Candlesticks, sconces, candles candles candles on various curves of the cave. And it was a cave, a legit huge cave with dips and

valleys and hard arches. Much of it was decorated with silk drapes, mostly white, and there were several fancy, old-fashioned beds placed around, with half a dozen other Kindred sitting on them.

Wait, what? He raised a brow and looked to the other vampires enjoying Isabella Leauvion's den, enjoying the candles, enjoying the quiet stirring of water from somewhere Jack couldn't see, enjoying the pampering of what Jack guessed were a few ghouls. And everyone was wearing clothes fitting Isabella's obvious preference for theater clothing from a hundred years ago. The fancy dresses with frilly corsets, the suits with pocket watches on chains, derby hats, and vests under the suit jackets done up to the sternum to hide their ties. If he didn't know any better, he'd assume he was on the Titanic, and tonight was going to end very badly.

He recognized them all; part of his training was knowing the face of every Kindred. And he could always remember a face. Remembering a name, on the other hand, was borderline impossible, but he remembered enough to know the other Kindred were neonates, ages two to twenty.

"I'm confused," he said. "Thought I was here to talk to Madam Vendram, in private?"

Hella Vendram shrugged, and sat down on the foot of one of the fancy beds. She gestured to the other Kindred, some of them reading, some of them kissing in overly dramatic, romantic fashion, and she gestured to the couple ghouls walking around also wearing the Edwardian clothing. Seemed to be their responsibility to keep the rather prop-like decor cleaned and well lit.

"Barry was one of us," Hella said, "and we all want to know what you know."

He folded his arms across his chest, and glanced between everyone. All Kindred alive were older than him, but age didn't wholly dictate rank in the Invictus, and the only Kindred in the

room who outranked him were Hella and Isabella. He didn't like sharing information with his peers when they didn't need to know.

“One of you?” he said.

Isabella nodded, and walked over to the bed to sit down beside Hella. “While we are all Invictus, I do have my own little group of like-minded individuals.” And like Hella, she gestured to the group, but she also gestured to the candles, the cave walls, and more. The Gothic paintings, the candelabra, and what looked like room dividers made of some sort of fancy dark fabric he couldn't guess.

Isabella was over seventy years embraced, and considering how old she looked, she must have been about thirty when embraced. Trying to drown herself in the era of which she was born as a human then. He could understand that, to an extent. The other Kindred though? Seemed like posers, except for Hella who didn't seem interested in the fashion statement. What was her deal then?

Hella climbed up onto the bed, sat behind Isabella, and kissed the woman on the back of the neck. Oh, well then, that explained their connection.

He looked around, found a stool, sat down, and pulled out his smartphone. “Alright then, tell me what you know about Barry.”

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~~Julias~~

Beatrice would probably be pacing around in the main lobby, maybe kicking her feet out a little with each step. Not the most patient person, especially when she was happy and excited; which she usually was, when visiting him. And he was too. He smiled to no one as he moved down the hall and appeared at the top of the stairway.

But Beatrice was not pacing. The Nosferatu was sitting on one of the fancy couches in the lobby, and she had her head hanging, elbows on her knees, hands together. Looked like someone had tied a rock around her neck, back hunched and body still. Not his usual Beatrice, not at all.

He came down the stairs, and sat beside her. For a moment he was going to hug her with one arm, put it around her shoulders and hold her, but he needed to test the waters first.

“What’s wrong?”

“ ... don’t suppose I could say ‘nothing’ or ‘I’m fine’, right?”

“You could. I wouldn’t believe you, but if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine too.”

She sighed, nodded, and pushed herself closer to him across the couch. He raised his arm, let her snuggle into his chest, and set his arm around her so it draped over her side. And like lock and key, she reciprocated, and hooked her arm around behind his back and waist.

“Maybe later. For now, I just want to ... not ... yeah, later. Got anyone I could suck on? I could use a meal. Christ I’m drained. Starving.”

She looked drained too. Poor girl must have done something to be so tired, and her skin was sunken in slightly the way vamp skin did when starving, even more pale than usual. On the edge of frenzy? Probably not, but she did look like she needed a meal.

“Let’s go out on a hunt then. We can—”

“No. I ... want to stay in.” Meekness in her voice struck a chord, and she nudged her nose into the side of his chest. “And just ... I ... I dunno, let’s not have any kine guests in our bed tonight.”

“Oh? I thought—”

“Hey, I love the pampering. Love it when you got a few of them brainwashed and just rubbing me all down while we fuck, while we drink em. Love it love it love it,” she said. One too many ‘love its’ in there for him to quite believe it, or at least, for him to think she meant only that. Something else was on her mind. “Tonight I just want to relax in bed, just you and me ... and ... cuddle and stuff.”

Something was definitely up. And much as he knew he shouldn't, he wanted to ask her, pry it out of her. Really, really wanted to, like he would have with his wife. Different time, different man.

“Whatever you want.” He squeezed her close, leaned down to kiss her head, and raised his other hand. With a finger snap and a few seconds to wait, one of his thralls came out of the hall to join them. “Jackson, you need to be anywhere tomorrow?”

“No sir.” A thicker man, a bit of chub on him but not enough to mark him overweight, came and stood beside them. Julias liked to keep his help wearing a tuxedo shirt and a bow tie, but casual forms thereof. A nice balance of presentable but relaxing.

“Good. Come sit and let Beatrice feed.”

The man nodded, and tried to contain his smile. Not good enough though, and Julias smirked at the man as Jackson came over to stand beside Beatrice. The Kiss felt good, and while it left you drained the next day or so, his thralls, nor any kine really minded.

“Thank god.” Beatrice got up, and waited for the man to get in position. She got behind him, set her claws on his stomach and chest from behind, and dug in.

Julias watched, and tilted his head to the side. She wasn't making a show of it, or enjoying or savoring it. She was just draining him. At least Jackson looked like he was enjoying it, pleasurable as the Kiss

was, but Beatrice looked distracted. In the past she'd tease Julius, play with the meal a bit, draw it out, get the kine super aroused before they succumbed to exhaustion. Not to make him jealous, but to get him very interested in having his turn next. But she wasn't doing any of that tonight.

A Kiss was a pleasing sensation, when the Kindred focused on it. If they were doing it on a more violent, aggressive hunt, it was no longer a sexual sensation, but a satisfying one of a hunt complete, a filling one of a full stomach. And that was the sort of look Beatrice was giving off. Like she was on a hunt, like she was just getting blood into her before she starved. A lot closer to frenzying than he realized.

As Jackson began to collapse, she set him down on the couch. Julius got up as well to make room, and pull the man's legs up onto the couch where he could sleep off the exhaustion. His other thralls would be around sooner or later to move Jackson somewhere better. Beatrice stepped back, raised her arms, and stretched herself out, as if she'd recovered from a serious beating. Hint number two.

"You've been getting more thralls lately. Any ghouls yet?" she said.

"No. Takes a lot more to keep a ghoul than thralls, and ... a connection. Haven't made a connection like that with any kine."

"Me neither." With some color to her — a fresh meal did get the blush of life going — Beatrice came over to him, slipped her hand about his waist again, and guided him back onto the main stairway of the lobby. "Sorry I'm not telling you what's up. Personal stuff, nothing to do with you, or me and you, or anything like that."

He nodded, and made affirming noises. No need to talk; seemed like she just needed someone to listen. She guided them up the stairway, and toward his master bedroom, where the bed was massive and the walls were decorated with luxurious paintings.

Several enormous rugs, armoires, and mirrors, much of which Beatrice herself had moved in or out from other rooms.

Beatrice kicked off her boots and socks, slid off her pants so only her black thong and white tank top remained, and slipped under the covers.

“Always with the thongs,” he said.

“Yeah. Didn’t used to be like that, but then you and I started dating and I realized I had to be on guard for sex at all times.”

He rolled his eyes, kicked off his own shoes, and walked over to the bed edge nearest her. “You think I care if you wear a thong?”

“I care! I like looking good, ok? I got a great ass, and I like to show it off.” She reached out with her claws to find the bottom of his shirt, and tugged on it, pulling it out of his pants and yanking him closer to the bed and her. “Twenty years, Julias. Twenty fucking years of being a moron and thinking everyone thought I was ugly cause of the teeth and claws and snake eyes. No idea other Kindred didn’t think like that.”

“Yeah, that was quite stupid,” he said. But instead of a laugh, she yanked on his shirt harder, till he had no choice but to fall to his knees beside the bed. There was a smile there, on her lips, between the massive crocodile teeth; girl was trying not to laugh.

“Come on, get in here and cuddle with me. I’ve had a very, very rough night, and now I’ve got a full belly and am in desperate need of kisses.”

“Yes ma’am.” He slid out of his jacket, undid his tie, undid his shirt and slid that off, and then his pants and socks. All of which Beatrice watched with a small smile and wandering eyes.

“C’mere, I wanna be the big spoon.”



“How’s that going to work?” He was a pretty tall guy, a muscular guy at that. Laughing, he crawled onto the bed over her legs, and slipped under the blankets. It really was a nice bed, opulent but comfy, and the perfect hardness to support his body. Beatrice liked it too, and she turned to face him.

When he turned his back to her, she pressed herself against it, hooked her arm around his waist, claws to his chest, and buried her face in the back of his neck.

“ ... yeah this isn’t working,” she said. “You’re too fat.”

He rolled his eyes, turned around, and leaned in. With the two of them on their sides, facing each other, he put his lips to hers, and nudged his nose against hers too. His lips grazed one of the crocodile teeth where her cheek should have been, and he laughed as his lip tugged on it. He put his hand to her shoulder, and caressed her skin, the tattoos, the lean muscle, and gave her crocodile teeth a quick kiss.

She put both her hands against his chest, and gently stroked them along his tuft of chest hair. “Figure out who killed Barry yet?”

“You want to talk about him?”

“Not him specifically, but kind of yes, too. I know you got people investigating, and I’m pretty sure no one knows who did it. Not the wolves or vamps or anyone.”

Both of them in bed, nearly naked, and she wanted to talk about Barry, a dead vampire. Something was going on. Hint number three.

“The fact no one knows who killed him is pretty terrifying, yeah.” Not that he wanted to admit that, but she seemed willing to share information, if she thought no one else knew about Barry either. “You worried about me and the mansion?”

“ ... a bit, yeah.” She snuggled in closer, and leaned forward to put her forehead against his chest where they met the blanket.

“The mansion is guarded my servants of the Invictus during the day, and my own thralls now. I—”

“Still ... and I ... could use some safety right now.”

“ ... not like you to be scared.”

“Yeah, it’s not. Jacob and I ... he um ... yeah, don’t wanna talk about it. Just want to feel protected and safe.” She slid an arm up and over his waist again, this time hooking his lower back as she turned her head side to side so her forehead rubbed against him. “Still love me?”

“What, because you’re being—”

“A weak little girl.”

“Well aren’t you sexist.” He slid his hand around her, and hugged her in the same place she was hugging him. “Yes, of course I love you. Love you enough to tell you not to say stupid shit like that in front of Maria or Antoinette. They’ll tear you apart.”

She laughed, but nodded after a few moments. “Yeah but those bitches are old as dirt. I’ll be as hard and cold by then too.”

“I hope not.” His hand drifted lower, down her back, over the band of her thong, and down the curve where her ass met her hamstring. He cupped the large size of it, and offered her butt a kneading squeeze. “I like it where you’re soft.”

“That’s all muscle ... mostly. I am a girl.”

“Yeap.” He squeezed her ass again, and she squirmed a little against his chest.

“You taking advantage of me? While I’m feeling a bit scared, bit vulnerable?”

For a half a second, he thought she was serious. He could tell she was indeed serious about feeling scared, and vulnerable. Still didn’t know what it was that had her so upset, but he wouldn’t ask until she wanted to say. Something to do with Jacob, which was reason enough to be scared.

But she wasn’t being serious about not wanting him to take advantage. She chuckled when she caught his expression, and returned his ass squeeze with an ass squeeze of her own.

“How’s Jack doing?” she said.

“Very well. Kid is going to overcome me with time. You been watching him?”

“Of course. You know I spy on you Invictus all the time.”

The two chuckled. Halfway dorky, halfway dodging the issue that being in different covenants meant they weren’t allies, and things could go sideways at a moment’s notice. Such was unlife.

“Shall I blush?” he said.

“Course. Just cause I had a rough night doesn’t mean I don’t want to fuck. Besides, belly full of blood, remember?”

Good, cause the sight of her big, perfect ass in that thong always stirred him. He nodded, blushed life with a gentle sigh, and forced the subtle vitae through his limbs. Blood pumped through his dry veins once more, brought color to his skin, fullness to his body and muscles, and earned a longing sigh from Beatrice as well. She turned her head enough to set her ear to his chest, and listened to his heartbeat.

Julias lifted his head from the pillow enough to look to the bedroom door. Wide open. Triss used to close it, but after a certain point, she started to enjoy having sex with him in his mansion where the thralls could find them. And there'd been a couple occasions where Beatrice had invited a thrall to their bed, to get Kissed and touched, pleased, while the two Kindred drank their full.

But not tonight. She slipped out of bed, ran over to the door, and closed it with an almost loud thunk. And as she walked over to rejoin him, she slipped her claws under her tank top, and threw it away.

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~~Beatrice~~

She could always trust Julias to give her her space, let her deal with her own shit, her own devils, and at the same time be supportive, loving, and understanding. Part of her wanted him to not be so damn understanding, to push her, make her talk, but she knew she was just being juvenile, like an idiot high school kid looking for some drama to take her mind off the real problem. Jacob and his dark friend, the corpse it had possessed, the things it told her about.

Closing the bedroom door helped a little. Made her a bit sad, cause she did love to show off her sex skills for the occasional passerby in Julias's employ, but right now she wanted some walls behind her, wanted some distance and some protection against the sick, twisted shit of Jacob's world. Against the stuff he'd done to her.

She couldn't tell Julias about the knives Jacob had stabbed into her stomach, twisting them into her intestines. Couldn't tell him about the clawing and tearing the corpse had done to her back, once it had put its hands back onto its mangled wrists. Couldn't tell him

about having to close her eyes, as demanded, while Jacob cut at her, stripped her of skin so it faded to ashes, only to cut off more.

It'd taken all her efforts to heal the surface wounds enough so she could come here, and get Julias to give her a meal. She felt healed, mostly, thanks to the blood; still a few tender bits inside her but she could manage until a night's sleep or two fixed her up. It was the imagery she couldn't get rid of, the sight of the dead woman jamming her severed hands back onto the stumps of her wrist, the black blood everywhere, the sight of her own stomach full of knives.

Torture was a requirement, Jac—Malachi had explained, him and the spirit in the corpse. She needed to feel pain, needed to have the beast inside her come to the surface, to 'adjust' her self, whatever the fuck that meant. And it had come to the surface during the torture, snarling, roaring, screaming. How could it not, with an hour of those two fucking maniacs cutting into her?

Maybe this dark witch thing really wasn't for her.

Nope. Nope nope. Stop thinking about it, stop thinking about it. Look, you're in your lover's mansion. You have a full belly of fresh blood. Julias keeps the place safe, with thralls and servants and shit guarding it; dude probably had snipers posted in nearby trees and bushes and shit. Rest easy, Beatrice. Take your mind off of a grueling night of pain and agony and horrifying shit, and just relax in your lover's arms. And she relaxed best after sex.

"You ok?" Julias said. "We could just sleep, if you—"

"Hell no. Don't worry about my shit. I want sex, and then we can cuddle and you can tell me you love me and I'll always be safe in your arms."

"You'll—"

“After!” she said, grinning. She climbed onto his bed, and yanked the blankets down to expose his body. Some body hair on him, but not a carpet’s worth. Big, muscled guy, but he didn’t have the ripped six pack of abs she saw on some other guys like those werewolves. That was fine, his stomach was still flat and hard, with some definition to it. And, as she pulled his boxers down to expose his cock, she smiled down at him, and it. Some pubic hair, but he kept it quite short, trimmed.

And of course he had a really huge dick, cause that was apparently something that came with the job description of being big and dangerous in their world. Those two werewolves with Natasha had huge dicks too. Was Jack walking around with a dick hanging to his knees? She laughed at the thought. He might have, with all the crazy shit he was doing. Kid’s bravery must have been coming from somewhere, and giant balls and dick was as good a reason as any.

She climbed onto Julias’s chest, and set her knees onto the blankets around him. On queue, Julias put his hands on her body, her hips and waist. A little guidance from her raised his hands to her breasts, and she sighed into his touch as the man began to caress them, her nipples, until she felt her areola swell, and her nipple studs shift to adjust to the engorged flesh. And while the man treated her breasts to a loving, gentle bath of caresses, she set her claws on the outside of his biceps, and teased his skin with them.

But, after a few moments, one of his hands slid up her chest, her neck and jaw, and his fingers started to pluck at her lips. More than just her lips, they slid over, and started to creep in between her extra teeth where her left cheek should have been. The man really did not mind her monster teeth at all.

Exactly what this night of pain and brutality needed to offset it. Tenderness.

“So I know,” she said, “that I’ve never really given you a proper blowjob.”

“To my chagrin.”

“Ha! You want one?”

“What man doesn’t want a blowjob?”

“Men with girlfriends who have extra teeth.” She opened her mouth wide, showed off her assortment of extra teeth where the jaw met the skull, and she also let her tongue hang out a bit. It was just a normal looking tongue, but whatever the Nosferatu curse had done to her, had also increased its length quite a bit. Probably because it was extra freaky.

“You try being Kindred for a century, Triss. Things like that? It’s just spice on the meal.”

Spice on the meal. Fucking weird way of putting it, but it had her laughing and smiling as she slid backward along Superman’s body. He spread his legs, and she got comfortable between them, lying on her stomach and putting her elbows on the blankets between his thighs.

Big dick, right in front of her face. Grinning the whole time, she let one of her hands fall forward to scoop it up, and the other hand pressed against his thigh as she brought the phallus to her face. How long had it been since she’d done this? Over twenty fucking years.

“Ok, I’m out of practice. Let a girl experiment a bit here, k?”

Julias nodded, and grabbed a couple nearby pillows to help prop up his head and torso. And, returning her grin with his own, he hooked his hands behind his head, content to watch.

She nudged her nose toward his cock, and closed her eyes for a moment as she felt the hot, hard girth of it brush against her lips. She only used enough claws to keep it upright in front of her, not get a real grip on it. Instead, she lowered her head down to where her grip normally would have been, and with the room available, she started to plant slow, warm, wet kisses where the soft underside of his shaft met his balls. The big guy made a tiny groan, a little thing, but with where her head was, she could almost feel the sound.

Fucking hell she'd forgotten how exciting this could be.

She raised her lips higher, higher, each planting more kisses along the veined girth, until she reached the head of his cock. The swollen, pink head that had drilled her depths so many times, stretched her inward, sometimes a little painfully, but always a fucking euphoric ride. She kissed it, kissed along the base edge of its bulbous shape, kissed where it joined the underside of his length, and kissed the top of it. Each kiss grew deeper, longer, wetter, as she let her saliva coat her lips while she spread them back and forth over the swollen head.

And when Julias made a proper groan, one of those deeper, manly groans she didn't hear often from him, she shivered. Her body lit up like kindling, warmth shooting through her limbs, her crotch, until she felt wetness join the heat. Part of her felt embarrassed for how quickly that happened; just a touch, just a noise from Julias and her body was fucking ready. But the embarrassment passed quickly, especially as she kissed away a droplet of precum leaking out of the man's cock.

"Getting there already?" she said.

"Yes, I am. You can't see what I see. Your beautiful eyes staring at me and what you're kissing, your lips dragging along me ... and that ass sticking out, in that thong."



She set her head against one of his thighs, and laughed. Yeah, that was true, a glance back showed her large ass did kind out stick out from the bed with her on her stomach, with the thong highlighting the shape.

“Like some eye contact?” she said.

“God yes.”

Lucky him.

She raised her head, and opened her mouth wide, very wide, so wide she saw the startled look on the man’s face. Probably looked like a horror movie monster, all her extra teeth fully exposed, and about to bite off his dick. She winked at him, brought his cock in closer, and used her top lip to guide his shaft into her mouth where her teeth were normal, as she slowly leaned forward to take him into her awaiting maw. Deeper, and deeper, each inch of him she took made the man sigh bliss, breathe pleasure, and gaze at her as she gazed at him. She knew she had snake eyes, and she knew that, when she put her teeth on display, it made her look like a reptile. And the fact the man was only getting harder against her lip made the juxtaposition delicious.

She let her long tongue hang out, and pressed it along the underside of him as she slipped more of his length into her mouth. She didn’t know if other Kindred lost their gag reflex, even while blushing life, but she had; probably something to do with the crazy tongue and mouth. First time she’d gotten to really use it though, and she smiled around her lover’s cock as it slipped into her throat, and her mouth closed around his girth completely. Her tongue caressed against where his testicles met his cock, and as her mouth came lower and lower, her tongue went lower as well.

When her mouth found the base of him, and got snug and tight suckling at the bottom of his cock, her tongue slid out, and offered teasing, playful licks. And with how long it was, she could do more

than just a few, weak little licks. She gave her lover the proper treatment, massaging his testicles with her tongue, stroking, rubbing, all while she kept the seal of her lips around his length tight.

“ ... tongue ... wow,” he said.

God. Fucking. Damn. It was always a treat to see the man squirm when she took control, but to feel his groans and moans — controlled and quiet as they were — from so close, was holy shit intoxicating. She almost giggled. Couldn't, depthroating her man and all, so she smiled at him, gazed into his lovely dark eyes as she treated his cock to a bath.

“eel 'oo?”

“What?”

Too comical. She laughed, and to do that properly she had to lift her head.

“Feel good?”

“God yes. You know how long it's been since I've been treated to this kind of pampering?”

Rolling her eyes, she grabbed the base of his cock, and slapped it against his stomach, hard enough to get him to flinch. “You probably got one ... maybe two days before our first date?”

“ ... well, yes, but I assure you I was thinking of you the whole time.”

God damn him. She laughed again, and guided his cock back toward her face. “You barely knew my name then.”

“Nonsense. I knew you and I were destined to be together since I was Kindred. I—ow!” A good pinch to the thigh rubbed that smug, romantic look off his face.

Course she was just playing. Her white knight was too good with his words; better to just stop him from talking before he said something to make her want to get all lovey dovey, and ruin a perfectly good blowjob. So, with a few chuckles and some silence from her man, she got back to work, and tapped the glans of his cock against the side of her crocodile teeth a few times.

“Don’t make me mad now. I’ll bite this off.” Just a joke though. Julias could regenerate from it she was sure, but holy fuck that’d be a horrible prank. Worse than knives in her gut.

Stop thinking about Jacob’s twisted world. Your new twisted world. Enjoy your boyfriend’s hospitality, great money, half a dozen servants, and most of all, enjoy his great body and big dick. No, wait, enjoy his love. Cause love was more important than her boyfriend being handsome and having muscles and some serious endowment. Or both, why not both.

Back into her mouth. She couldn’t help but smile, and it took a little effort to keep from laughing at the thoughts running through her head. Julias didn’t mind. If anything, the man looked all the happier for her happiness, which was a really nice symbiotic feedback loop to be in. Made her feel giddier every moment, made her forget the dark shit hiding in old caves dug out underneath cemeteries.

All that shit kind of just faded away when she was looking at her man, his warm but simultaneously arrogant smile, his broad chest and shoulders spread since he had his fingers netted behind his head. And the look of pleasure on his face from having his cock deep inside her crocodile mouth, nestled snug between lips and tongue, made her wet. Something in his eyes, the way she could see the bliss

there, see how they half closed as he got closer to orgasm, a twinkle maybe, something that made it so damn satisfying to slip her tongue back into her mouth to stroke him, and ease her head back up to the tip of his cock with a tight lock of her lips the whole way.

More precum dripped onto her tongue, and she gazed up at Julias as she used her lips to spread the liquid around and around his glans. Throughout all the fun, she barely ever used her hands, mostly just resting them on his thighs while her lips and tongue did all the work. Kept Julias on edge, kept him from getting too close, so she could tease him, kiss him, and milk another drop of precum out of him as she locked her lips tight around his glans again. She eased her head back and forth an inch, making sure to slide her moist lips across the base edge of the bulbous tip, over and over, until she could see the pleasure drip from her lover's face.

But before he could start unloading, she removed him again, and grinned the most evil grin she could manage while one hand guided his cock to the right side of her face to gently tap it against some of her monster teeth.

“Beatrice, you're killing me.”

“Yeah, probably.” She set her lips on the tip again, but pushed out her tongue up and over to dangle a few inches of it atop his length. Then she brought it around and around in circles, caressing half his length with the wet warmth of it. It must have looked a bit strange, with how long her tongue was, and how each time she opened her mouth a bit to give her tongue room, it meant Julias could see her jaw open, see through the cracks between her crocodile teeth into the depths of her mouth.

Didn't seem to bother him. If anything, the big guy was struggling to keep his hands behind his head, and not get them into her hair. And she did love them in her hair, but right now she was enjoying doing everything solo. To bask in the man's lovesick, horny gaze, as

she pampered his cock, was really scratching the part of her that liked to be watched. And getting her really, really wet.

Winking at Julias, she slid the man's shaft back into her mouth, and took the thick girth deep into her throat. Again, she locked her lips tight — tight as they could with no cheeks — and let her tongue slip out underneath his length to start caressing the whole of his balls again. With no need to breathe, she kept him there, and watched him, met his gaze with her serpent eyes, and gently nudged her head back and forth to massage his cock with her throat.

Too much for him. His eyes nearly closed, and for a moment they rolled up as the man made a good moan, the sort of moan she wanted to hear. His hard stomach crunched a few times, showing some ab definition through, and she smirked at it, at him, the slab of muscle before her, at how his arms flexed underneath where they met his back, at how his hips pushed up a bit, at how his legs spread.

As his cock started to flex and press up against her mouth and throat, she settled in. In slow motions, she shifted her head back and forth an inch, milking the cum out of him while keeping him balls deep in her mouth. With how deep she had him, he was shooting his load down her throat, and she could feel the underside of his cock pump the liquid into her. And the more she massaged it with her tongue, the more it continued.

Her hands drifted up and out onto his stomach, and she rested them along his lower abdomen, teasing and caressing his muscles with her claws as she kept him balls deep in her mouth. All the while he came inside her, she gazed up at him, drank in his flexing body and blissful expression, and continued to bathe his testicles with her tongue. Only when his cock stopped flexing upward against her throat, and when his body stopped crunching his stomach, did she finally start to raise her head. She let her tongue hang out of her mouth the whole trip, licking at the underside of his shaft, and once

she'd pushed herself up, the long appendage dangled six inches from her mouth, with a couple heavy drops of white falling from its tip.

"That was ... damn," he said.

She climbed up and over his pelvis, and straddled his stomach again before setting her claws against his chest. Man still had his hands hooked behind his head, just letting her do things to him, with a big grin on his face the whole time. She liked that.

"Hey Julias," she said, claws sliding back and forth across his broad chest.

He quirked a brow, and set his hands on her hips. "Yeah?"

"I gave you a blowjob. You now owe me your life."

"Is that how that works?"

"Mhmm."

"Then I owe my life to a lot of girls you know, I—ow!"

She sank her claws into him, just a bit, just enough for the pinch to nearly draw blood. And as the man flinched, she chuckled at him, and guided his hands back to his head so he could slip them behind his skull again. It was a good look on him, a kingly looking, with his hands netted behind his head, elbows out, and watching.

"That does bring up a good point though." She slipped out both of her feet from beside her, and instead put them around Julias's head, against his wrists where they were beside his temples. "I ... don't think we should let Jen, or any Kindred into our bed with us."

"Oh?"

“Yeah. Just ... don’t really want to share. I mean with kine, a little bit of play is ok, cause they’re just food. And playing with your food is natural.” Maybe her beast was a cat? Maybe all Kindred beasts were actually cats? House cats, fat house cats gorged on blood.

“What brought this on?”

“ ... I don’t want to say.” Don’t want to say what? She was feeling clingy, cause Jacob scared the shit out of her? Didn’t want anyone else in the bedroom, cause she didn’t want to feel exposed to another Kindred when so vulnerable? Didn’t want to damage the closeness and intimacy — and protection — of Julias’s arms?

God, her own thoughts were sounding less and less like the badass chick she thought she was, the chick who jumped a spider monster without a second thought.

“You’ll get no argument from me Triss. I was worried about it as it was.”

“Course you were.” Cause you’re smarter than me and know better than to think with only your dick, unlike me. “So, just ... us. Doing comfy, cuddly things, with no one else.”

“Does that mean more spooning?”

“Yes. Yes it does.” Man did love to spoon. “But I expect to be fully compensated for it. And for the blowjob.” She reached back to her waist, slid her claws under the waistband, and slowly, teasingly, slid the tiny straps of fabric down her large, toned ass, her hard, curvy legs, and down to her ankles around Julias’s neck.

“Shopping spree?” he said, smile growing as she pressed her thong against his neck with her feet.

“Shopping spree. I got some clothes I want to try that you don’t have yet. Custom tailored stuff too. Maybe a really fancy wedding

dress, like one of those twenty-thousand-dollar wedding dresses.” She slipped the thong past her toes so it fell off of her and onto Julias’s face, and laughed when the man used his lips and teeth to grab it, and move it aside with a turn of his head.

“I’ll call my guy.”

“Good. Also, grab the lube,” she said, and she spread her thighs as she said it. The stud in her clit hood ached as she reached down between her legs to touch it. Soaked. She was dripping, her lips drenched, and she knew it was enough to be plainly visible, enough to grab Julias’s eyes, and make him stare. Hard to grab the lube from the drawer in the nightstand without looking, but he managed it, a twinkle in his eye the whole time too. He knew what was coming.

She plucked it from his hand, and slid herself back. After setting her ass between his thighs, she reached down, and as she dribbled a copious amount of the fluid onto his cock, her other hand rubbed it onto his skin. Man was still hard, and she had every intention of enjoying it.

Once the lubricant was dripping off of his testicles with how soaked his length was, she set the bottle aside, and climbed back up onto the man’s waist, her weight on her knees again. She grinned down at him, let her long tongue hang out of her alien mouth, and gazed upon his excited expression with her snake eyes as she reached between her legs, grabbed his cock, and pointed it upward. It took a little maneuvering, her weight on her knees and one hand on his chest, while the other guided his shaft, and she had to lean forward to get the angle. But soon, she had the tip of his fat cock pressed to her ass.

Getting him inside was a struggle. Always was. Muscles fought, and had to be coaxed to relax. Muscles were tight, and took time to stretch. Muscles were dry, and took a second to get soaked by the



lubricant. She made a show of it, swayed her ass from side to side a little, and chuckled down at her love as his eyes rolled up in bliss. She had a tight ass; could probably squeeze his dick right off if she wanted, and she gave some tiny flexes of her sphincter around the head of his cock as it slid into her body.

It felt good, to feel herself spread open around him, to feel her skin rub and massage against the girth of his cock. But what felt incredible, what left her weak and panting and shaking at the knees, required a deeper angle. She took more of him into her ass, more, and once she'd taken half of the big bastard into her, she angled her hips forward a little, and sank down. Had to find the right angle to force his dick toward her belly, toward her pussy, but once she found it, she let out a long, mewling sigh, set her claws against her lover's chest, and eased him into her ass until he was balls deep.

Pressure. Fucking delicious pressure. She could feel his cock pressing against her insides, pushing toward her cunt from behind another wall of flesh, of her insides. A lot of practice and a very patient lover meant she could take the time to get everything just right, angle herself perfectly to push her body down onto his cock. With her hips angled forward and her body sitting a little forward on him, keeping his cock pressing toward the front of her, she groaned as she felt the man press against her deep spot.

She found a bouncing rhythm, and got to work. Cause Julias had already cum once, and she was dying for some stimulation. Christ, watching the man watch her, his pleased face and the way he had his back spread on the sheets, hands behind his head, made her feel like she was fucking a lord, too arrogant to help her. Like she was a sex slave to be called on whenever the lord felt the need to relieve himself. Bit of that Ventrue arrogance showing through in him, instead of his usual Superman act. Fuck it was hot. And being the girl in that lord's bed, doing all the work while he watched, was doing a serious number on her. Boiling heat built up in her pelvis, and she shivered as the pleasure waves started to build.

She stopped, leaned back, put her hands against his knees, and spread her thighs a little. Pussy on complete display, smooth, dripping, clenching on nothing, begging to be touched.

But the bastard didn't. He kept his hands where they were, and watched her get into a better position.

“You're dripping,” he said.

“Hey, fuck you man, can't help it. I haven't done the blowjob thing in forever.” And for punishment, she squeezed her ass on his dick. Hard. He winced, until she let him go, and her smirk returned. “I was thinking, your tailor could make me something really ... I don't know, slutty? Something like Jen was wearing to the Black Hall ball. Feel like showing a lot of skin.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, and ... wear me on your arm too, please? Show me off, at the Invictus ball.” She let go of his leg with one hand, and reached down for her pussy. Careful with her claws, she set her fingertips along her swollen, dripping lips, and spread herself open. Sure enough, a couple more drops of her cream trickled out of her, down her skin, and joined where her ass was spread open on the man's cock. She fucking loved the enraptured expression on his face. Loved showing off, even if just showing off how fucking wet her dumb white knight boyfriend made her.

His brow raised with her request, despite his gaze being locked onto her pink flesh between her legs. “How revealing? Jennifer's dress was pretty revealing, but we've had balls before where some Daeva show up with their breasts exposed.”

“Sounds like ... fashion runway clothes.”

With another groan rippling through her, she put her hand back on Julias's knee again, and started to bounce herself. The extreme

angle, her hips forward a little and her body leaning back, made his cock press straight toward her abs, straight into her deep spot as she started to bounce on him. She sank her ass down, took him deep, deep until it felt like his length was reaching her stomach. She found a faster rhythm, using only an inch stroke, but picking up the pace until the bed started to creak and her ass was jiggling with the impact against the man's pelvis.

She came. Way, way too early to cum already, five minutes into penetration, but there it was. Her head fell back between her shoulders, and her moans grew louder, loud enough she knew the servants in the mansion would be able to hear her. The rippling waves in her pelvis spread out, powerful, consistent, and worked through her until her toes were curling, and her hands squeezed on her lover's legs.

She managed to raise her head and look down, mid orgasm. As her muscles squeezed and her bouncing was stopped, a tiny splash of her juices landed on Julias's hard stomach. And then another, as her cunt squeezed down in spasms and random convulsions, each causing deep waves of bliss to move up and down her body.

"Fucking ... damn..." She continued to watch herself, watch her defined abs flex and crunch with her panting and post-orgasm shivers. Watched herself leak a few more drops of juices down her pussy lips, and Julias did too. Man was drinking her with his eyes.

Too good to stop. She started bouncing again, harder, and deeper. With enough lube to drown someone coating the man's cock, she had more than enough leeway to pound him. She slid her knees out and up, and put her weight on her feet instead, setting them beside Julias's chest on each side of him on the blankets, and keeping her hands on his knees too. More range of motion leaning back like this, more freedom to push her ass up half the man's length, and then take it all back with a hard drop.

The poor man started to groan as well. She squeezed on him in spurts, each stroke of his length pressing his cock toward her pussy again, until she could almost feel him pressing against her abs. More. She bounced faster, desperate to get more of that pressure against her deepest place, to build that roaring fire in her body. Each time she felt his cock kiss that sensitive spot, press against it through the wall of her ass, the bliss started to build, and her liquids continued to as well. Something about that depth made her body sing, and made her pussy leak cream until she could feel her warm liquids mixing with the lubricant.

A final bounce built the fire into a scorching furnace, and she took her man balls deep again as she let the orgasm work through her. The waves of heat, of tingling pleasure danced up and down her body, her skin, to her toes then back to her spine and up into her chest. The center of the explosion, her cunt and belly, squeezed down again, and again, and again, each squeeze joined with a squeeze of her ass around her man's member. And as Julias's groans returned, she forced her eyes open.

She squirted. Hard. A solid stream of her clear juices landed on the man's stomach, enough for some of it to trickle off to the sides of his hard, wide, muscled body. And as her muscles continued to spasm randomly, another gush met his stomach. And another. She tried to bounce again, to maybe milk more of her pleasure, but her muscles refused to do anything other than tremble. All she could do was make loud moans, and watch her bare pussy soak her lover's stomach.

When the climax passed, and she was left a quivering mess in post-orgasm heaven, Julias spoke at last.

"I didn't say you could stop."

"I ... I ... fuck you," she said. "Christ I ... really did fucking soak you."

“Never met a girl who squirted as hard as you.”

Part of her thought she should be embarrassed. A microscopic part of her. A much larger part was basking in the glory of tingly waves of pleasure, and loving how much her man loved how much she made a mess when she came hard.

“Hey,” he continued, “if you stop now, I’m afraid I’m going to have to spoon you.”

She rolled her eyes, and sat up straight. Straight turned into collapsing forward a moment later as the tingly waves ripped away her ability to control her muscles. The waves refused to stop moving up and down through her body, and another hard clench of her pussy forced a few more drops of her juices onto the man beneath her.

“ ... gimme ... a minute?”

“Nope.” Julias reached out for her, lifted her off of his cock, and turned her around. Once he had his arms around her, he laid her across his body on her back, and then rolled onto his side.

Trapped, in the spooning position. Trapped in the man’s big arms and perfectly tender but tight hug. She melted, let her head relax to the pillow, and waited for the inevitable. She was still too tingly and in dreamy-relaxed land to be on the aggressive front anymore, and she knew he knew it too. And a few moments later, her patience was rewarded as Julias guided his cock back to her ass.

The man kept his head propped up on one arm, elbow to the sheets between pillows, while his other set the head of his soaked cock against her opening. Once he’d eased it back in a few inches into her clenching and unclenching muscles, he wiped his hand dry on the sheets in front of her, then set his hand to her breast, elbow on her hip. A half hug, half fondle, as he eased his length into her ass.

The angle was blissful. With him behind her like this, her back to his chest, it pushed his cock straight toward her belly, and she shivered as she felt his glans press along her walls. Deeper, and deeper, until he was balls deep once again, and she could feel him stretching her muscles inward. Now she got to relax, and let the man spoon her.

Julias leaned in, set his lips on her ear, and kissed her earlobe, before his lips drifted down another few inches to start kissing her neck. And as he did so, his hand drifted down from her breast, down her abs, and down to her clitoris.

“Ah! Hey ... sensitive.”

The man chuckled into her neck, and kept his touch on her clitoris soft. His fingers played with the stud in its hood, lightly stroking up against it, before he set index and middle finger on either side of her clit. After a few strokes, they dipped lower, coated themselves in the juices leaking from her smooth lips, and returned to massage her bud in the wetness.

God damn a century of whoring himself out had taught her man some serious sex skills. The right pressure, the right amount of stroking friction for post-orgasm clit play — very little — along with the ebb and flow to get the rhythm. And as he stroked it, he pressed his hips forward with the same motion. A gentle, rocking pace of sex that he liked to use when he wanted to make things take time.

“Come onnnn,” she said. “You’ve cum, I’ve cum ... twice! You gotta ... speed things up.”

“Why would I do that? Got the most beautiful creature in my bed, her huge ass snug to my body, and her juices everywhere.” He raised his lips higher, set them to her ear again, and offered a few more tiny kisses. “You’re dripping down your thighs, soaking me.”

Arg, it was true. She could feel where his balls were pressing against the base of her butt, and she could feel her juices dripping down her thighs. And she knew the bastard was going to do what he always did when they spooned: hug her, kiss her, and fuck her so slowly it took forever to get the fire going again. From a hard climax going cowgirl, to this slow sex that was practically foreplay.

No way she was going to tell him how much she loved the switch up. Man didn't need any more things to tease her and her sex addiction about.

“Besides,” he continued, “I'm a man. You drained me once, so now I have some work to do, to build up to a second orgasm.”

“Bouncing on your dick ... and ... stuff ... didn't ... get you closer?”

“That amazing blowjob really drained me.” He picked up the pace a little, rubbed her swollen clit a little harder, then slowed down again. Infuriating. Agonizingly perfect. “Afraid this might take a little while.”

“... ok.” She reached up with her free arm to pat his cheek, then down to set her hand on his where it played with her clit. It was nice, to just set her claws on his hand, and feel how he felt her. Man had so much god damn control, so much patience. Dude was inside her ass and she was utterly dripping, ready to squirt the moment he'd start pounding her. But he didn't. He stayed slow, and continued to bathe her clitoris in so much pampering she could feel the building tingles from it alone.

She had enough control of her muscles now to go on the offensive, and maybe start fucking him in return. Maybe get them both cumming a lot sooner. But, no, she'd asked him for spooning earlier, and he was going to spoon her. And it might take another fifteen fucking minutes to cum, which was a long time after having cum twice already, but she could use a little time in his arms.

“S-So,” she said, “you ... um ... how ... how’s it going at the top of the Invictus?”

“Pretty well, I must say. Planning for the ball has been interesting.” His fingers started to work her clit faster, a little harder, and his hips started to push into her the same way. Fucker didn’t even let his faster pace affect his speech. “Michael has insisted we try and encourage a sexual motif. Says it will serve to disarm everyone, make them more comfortable, with how rare it is for all the covenants to be in the same room.”

“Very ... rare.” So close, so damn close, waves of pleasure were already working their way down to her toes. Come on, faster for the love of god.

“Indeed. So Michael is going to have many kine there, thralls from many ancilla, and the two Invictus elders. He’s also extended the invitation to Antoinette, Jacob, and Garry. Should be an interesting evening, scantily clad kine everywhere, cream of the crop in physique.”

That actually did sound pretty interesting, and fun. She doubted anyone was actually going to fuck at the ball, but it sounded like it was very much setting up post-party sex for everyone.

“I ... think I’ll ask Jen for ... fashion ideas ... something extra slutty.” Images of her wearing something that spoke of both the Circle, its apparently justified and terrifying reputation for dark things, and her own tattoo and metal-loving ways, filled her head. Maybe a corset that fully exposed the back, and a cloak to go with it, or something?

“I bet Jen will show up with her two ghouls on leashes. She’s the most cocky neonate in the city.” Julias slowed down again, and she let out a long whimper. God damn him. “Think she will?”



“I ... didn’t think so. But I’ll tell her ... about the idea.” Cause no doubt Jen would love that idea. Fucking Ventrue. “Better not ... use a leash ... on me.”

Julias set his lips on her neck again, and bit down, almost hard enough to pierce her skin, but not quite. “You were fucking gorgeous, wearing that dog collar.” He gave her a hard thrust, hard enough to force a squeak out of her, and make a tiny splash of her juices leak. “Maybe not at the ball, but I do heavily encourage more of such wear when we’re alone. With a leash too.”

Of course he did, cause he was a Ventrue and those fuckers loved to control things. She almost felt guilty for how much it turned her on when he did.

“Not sure ... I should encourage ... this side of you,” she said. Totally lying, and she hid her face in the pillow so he couldn’t see her smile, or her eyes as she struggled on the edge of orgasm.

His fingers on her clit reached lower, and scooped into her. With practiced efficiency and rather intimate knowledge of her insides, the man started to press his fingers into her g-spot, hard. And as he did, he thrust into her again, and again, with enough force to make her body shake.

She came, and opened her mouth as she groaned onto the pillow. She turned her head again, putting her temple to the softness, and drooled onto the fabric as the man pumped her ass. All the lube made each thrust slide in easy, so all she had to do was lay there, and let the big guy fuck her with a good, proper, deep thrusting rhythm. He continued to finger her pussy at the same time, putting pressure on her depths, pressing against her spots until she squirted over his hand, and her juices dripped down over her hip and thighs. She almost heard the splash.

Julias slowed down, slower, slower, and eventually stopped as he removed his hand, slid it up to her breast again, before his fingers

found her throat. And as he set his fingers there, he squeezed, gently, enough so she felt the size of his grip around her. The whole arm hugged her tight, her body locked in under the elbow, and his forearm crossing up her chest and sternum so he could hold her by the neck. His hand was dripping wet. She could feel her cum trickle down her neck from his knuckles.

With grip tight and weight against her, he started to thrust into her again while pinning her back to his chest.

“W-Wait ... tired...” she said, squeaks and whimpers all she could muster. This wasn’t gentle spooning sex! The bastard tricked her!

His betrayal was very much welcome, and she turned her head enough to peek up at him. Man had that cocky grin of his, that Ventrue dominance look, that ‘I own you’ look. She knew he didn’t feel that way, but in the heat of the moment? Fucking. Hot. She reached up to hold onto the wrist of the clutching hand choking her, and melted into him as he fucked her, sank his cock balls deep into her ass, and hugged her tight to his body.

More waves worked through her as her snatch squeezed. Each clench of her muscles was met with one of his thrusts, his length reaching into her and pressing against her deepspot. Like an ocean, the waves kept coming back and back and back again, driven on by the man’s consistent thrusts. The tingling reached her toes until they curled, then up her thighs, her back, and up to where the man was choking. Each met with more hard clenching of her pussy, and her ass. Poor man must have felt like she was trying to rip off his dick, with how she was squeezing him.

She was squirting, a lot. She knew it, even if she couldn’t see it. The deep pressure of his cock pressing against her depths kept making her clench, and each clench was soaking everything between her thighs. The blankets were drenched. Kindred fluids would fade in five or ten minutes, but in the mean time, she was just a horrible

mess, and there was nothing she could do about it as the man kept her trapped, helpless to do anything but lay there and let him fuck her ass.

She managed a small smirk at the silly roleplaying in her head. She wasn't trapped, and Julias was the nicest man she'd ever known. But it was fun, and so very hot. God, she couldn't keep her eyes open, and the sounds coming out of her were barely more than whimpers. She was seeing spots. And the waves of pleasure kept working through her until her toes started to hurt from curling so hard. Each wave exploded outward from her center, from her stomach and pelvis, and made her whole body spasm weakly, until another gush of her fluids poured down her legs.

But, at last, the man came to a slow, gentle pace. Orgasm pace. She sighed relief, and felt her whole body start to go limp as Julias came inside her, deep in her ass. His grip around her throat tightened for a few moments, a few last second thrusts to punctuate his bliss, before he too started to relax. He melted against her, her body half turning over toward the blankets as the man leaned against her, and gently fucked her. Each slow, loving thrust was icing on a massive cake of orgasm overload that made it hard for her to reciprocate anything. She just lay there, trembled, and let the man fuck her as she tried to recover.

His fingers slid down from her neck to her breasts, and he started a tender massage of her nipples. And, chuckling, he reached down to her drenched thighs, soaked his fingers again along her dripping pussy lips, and brought his hand back up to her breasts. Fingers now utterly drenched in her cum again, he started to massage her breasts once more, gently rubbing and caressing her hard, sensitive areola with the liquid. All for one very awesome reason: drawing out the waves of her bliss.

The two of them lay there for a good five minutes, recovering, enjoying the quiet, the privacy of his master bedroom, the contact of

his huge chest against her back. And the best part, enjoying the final waves of orgasm, with the man gently fucking her, never removing anymore than an inch of his length so he could stay buried to the hilt.

“You are one sexual predator,” he said. “ ... er, well, you know what I mean.”

She laughed, and reached down and over her hip to set her claws on his ass. “You just like my ass.” His was nice too, hard and defined; but no one had an ass like hers.

“As much as you love your ass? I doubt it,” he said. It was true too. His arm hugged her closer, pressed her to him, and he nudged his hips into her to earn another mewl from her. He was going to get soft any second now, she knew, but in the mean time, the man seemed content to press his length against her depths and make her body quiver. “And I adore how much of a mess you make when you cum.”

“Didn’t ... always squirt this much, you know? I mean, yeah I made a mess when I was kine, but...” But you’re really good at sex and turning her into a gushing fountain. Too cheesy? Too cheesy.

Didn’t need to be said anyway. Julias chuckled, and hugged her close. Finally the bastard was getting soft, and she quivered as he fell out of her, only to pull her hip in tight to him so her ass was snug against his cum-soaked cock. Well, she’d already soaked everything, a little more mess didn’t matter. It’d all fade in a few minutes anyway.

“About the dress for the ball. You want to show all of Dolareido your body?”

“ ... maybe. It’s a pretty good body, right?” Again she reached down, this time to run her claws up and down her abs, and then up to her breasts to pluck at one of her nipples. Sensitive, nipple hard

enough to ache with the stud piercing in it. “I got twenty years of stupid to make up for.”

“Perfectly understandable, and you know I think you’re beautiful. But you also seem to be against having anyone else in our bed.”

“That is a bit of a paradox, isn’t it? I don’t know, I ... I like it when people look. But, touching is a different thing altogether.”

“Got it. No Kindred in the bed, just you and me, and the occasional meal when you want it.” Man hugged her, and started to caress her stomach with drifting fingers.

“Think the werewolves will be coming too? Cause, I mean ... could be interesting. They’re all so fit and strong and ... alive. Alive and surrounded by dead blood suckers.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Avery accepts the invitation. Which is a problem I need to plan for. Her and Jacob in the same room won’t end well.”

Yeah, that was most definitely a problem.

As she snuggled into Julias’s body, she frowned at herself, faced turned enough to hide it in the pillow. Thirty minutes ago, she was feeling scared, even a bit terrified, as she closed the bedroom door. Jacob, the rituals, how he was going to teach her. She could remember every detail of the knives cutting through her stomach, her musculature, and piercing into her Kindred withered intestines. Agony. She could remember that fucking thing, riding that corpse, cutting into her. She could remember the blood everywhere, black blood, unnatural and fucking dead. Dead blood. No, dead wasn’t the right word, dead didn’t do the black, endless oblivion justice.

The weird part was, not even two hours later, she was banging her lover. From a horrifying introduction to entities of the occult she could not have even begun to imagine, and pain, agony, misery, and

literal torture, to sex. Sex because she was horny. Sex, because dealing with Jacob and the insanity of what he hid in the black, had sent a thrill up her spine. Sex because, much as it scared her, much as it was painful, Jacob's dark secrets were exciting, electrifying. And she had to let out that electric tingle in her body somehow. It was only once she had the arousal out of her system, that she understood why.

Fucking after a night of torture and dealing with otherworldly terrors? That sounded like ... like something Jacob would do.

## Chapter 42

~~Jack~~

“Barry was on the Mirrden job,” Jack said, “monitoring the construction and expansion. So, my best guess is the Carthians killed him. But that doesn’t seem likely, so my best guess is a shit guess.”

Hella nodded, put another kiss on Isabella’s neck, and came around the bed to sit on its edge again, beside her lover. “Garry doesn’t like the way the Invictus run the city, sure. But killing Kindred? Been a long time since anyone’s done that. Not since the purge, and, well, that incident with Viktor, and then Lucas and his little army.”

Jack nodded, not a flinch or wince to speak of. He’d gotten a lot better at hiding his facial ticks whenever someone brought up those events. Much as the memory of riding Damien’s mind and body, and butchering a bunch of Kindred with his sword was never going away, he was getting better at suppressing it. Time heals all wounds, and more crap like that that turned out to be truer than he could have ever appreciated before he needed it.

“And,” Jack continued, “Barry was the only one to die in the fire. And I knew he didn’t sleep there, so the fire catching him seemed unlikely.”

Everyone in the room nodded. Those who’d been kissing stopped, and either moved to the edge of their beds, or grabbed nearby chairs. The ghouls about continued with their wandering, cleaning, and fixing blankets and clothes that were scattered about. Cozy setup the vamps had here.

Isabella sighed and brushed off one of her shoulders. “Poor Barry.”

“So I’m thinking,” Hella said, “that either someone killed Barry, and then burned down his apartment building to make it look like he died in the fire, or he’s still alive, and someone is just trying to make it look like he’s dead.”

“Sounds a bit extreme for Barry.” Jack shook his head, and put the info into his smartphone. Not that it was much to input. “Unless there’s something more going on than the Mirrden business.”

One of the others raised a hand. A man, a young Daeva, with short black hair and a lean build. Made for the stage, considering his smile. Apparently, he was waiting for Isabella to give him permission to speak. Leauvion’s childe, maybe? Fuck his bad memory.

“Yes my childe?”

Welp, that settled it.

“Barry had spoken to me about some unusual people hanging around the Mirrden district. Just kine, but he had approached them, and later he told me they seemed rather ... organized?”

Hella shrugged and waved a dismissing hand. “Protesters from the Carthian half of South Side, Zack. They don’t like Xnomia tearing down their old, crummy buildings and shit for our expansion efforts anymore than the Carthians themselves do.”

Zack nodded, but frowned as he dug through his memories. “Maybe, Madam Vendram. Just ... Barry seemed a little more insistent about it. And, I do believe he ... decided to follow them.”

The room went silent, and everyone stared at Zack.



“You tell us this now, boy?” Isabella almost got up, but instead, folded one leg over the other, and gave the man the coldest ice stare Jack had ever seen.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t think it was important. Barry told me later he came back, after not being able to track these people down. Whoever they were, they just blended into the night, the other kine, and ... yeah. He lost them.”

Isabella didn’t get up, but Hella did, and she started to pace around. “Well Zack, I’ll break your arm later for only bringing this up now. But at least that’s something to go on. Barry wouldn’t lose track of a kine he set his eyes on.”

“ ... who is Barry’s sire?” Jack said, eyebrow raised and eyes on Hella. But she shook her head, dismissing his suggestion.

“Not me,” she said. He should know that, but it wasn’t on any info he dug through. Who sired who was information the Kindred seemed reluctant to record. “Mia, Carthian, Gangrel too, left the city maybe five years ago. Barry was a Gangrel, and if he wanted to hunt a kine, a specific kine, he wasn’t going to just up and lose them.” She cradled her forehead in one palm, and then walked over to Zack to give him a rather harsh punch in the shoulder. “A Daeva wouldn’t understand.”

Gangrels were a step closer to their beast than anyone, no denying that. Tracking prey was second nature to them. And Zack, realizing his mistake, winced and lowered his head.

“Sorry. But, Barry did say it was probably nothing.”

“Probably nothing is a better lead than actually nothing.” Hella paced some more, chin in her right hand’s fingers, eyes down and analyzing. “Anyone else know what people he’s talking about? Anymore details you’ve left out, Zack?”

“Um, he said it was two men, two women, couple wearing trench coats, couple wearing leather jackets. They were just standing, and watching the construction crew from a distance. He said the strange part was they stuck around to watch for a few hours.”

Jack nodded and put the notes into his smartphone. The clothes weren't unusual, but the watching for a few hours was. “He say when?”

“Bit after midnight, a couple days before he disappeared.”

Yeah, that was weird. Dolareido had a very active nightlife, but that was in the Invictus half of South Side, where the vices congregated. Closer to the Carthian side, people were rarely out that late, and those that were were not walking around in trench coats. Course it could have all been a coincidence or strange circumstance that just led to the suspicious arrangement. But Hella was right, it was a better lead than nothing.

Another one of the young Kindred raised a hand, a woman, short dark hair and a dainty figure. A bit shy too. Mekhet, if Jack ever saw one. “Um, I've seen people like that too.”

“Where?” Jack said.

“Outside the club Bloodlust. Same thing, two trench coats, two leather jackets, two men, two women. I thought ... thought they were just observing the club, you know? It is a pretty crazy place for tourists to see, even from the outside.”

“And they probably were merely tourists, observing.” Isabella nodded, held out a hand for Hella, and squeezed it once the Gangrel returned to her side. “But, keep an eye out for these people, my students. Invictus Kindred often group at Bloodlust, and naturally at the Mirrden district until this expansion effort is complete. Two sightings hardly makes for proof, but it is enough to warrant concern.”

Jack nodded. Hang out in areas often enough and you eventually notice the same people, or people with the exact same dress code as others. And a group of four individuals with trench coats or leather jackets was common. And two men and two women, also common. Two sets of clothes, two genders, two of each, two locations. One too many twos to just chalk up to coincidence though, so it was worth exploring.

“You don’t think it’s hunters?” the Mekhet said.

There was a collective, hushed gasp from the other Kindred except for Vendram, Leauvion, and Jack. It was easy to forget that most young Dolareido Kindred had never really been involved in serious violence, or had their second life truly threatened. Getting into scraps with the Carthians, maybe breaking a few bones, getting a few of their own bones broken, was the extent of their Kindred-on-Kindred combat experience. What sort of violence they engaged in with kine, he did not know, but that wasn’t true violence, considering how one-sided it was. The idea of a kine being able to kill a Kindred was a level of violence his fellow neonates never considered.

So, as he glanced around at the Kindred, particularly the ones only a few years old, he winced. Other than the typical hardships a fledgling went through, learning to feed and hunt, and maybe an accidental frenzy like Jack had gone through, they were all green, soft. He could see the fear on their face at the mention of hunters, like it was some sort of mythic concept they’d never have to deal with, under the safety and protection of Dolareido’s utopian world.

Maybe Jacob was right. The city was soft. Was that a bad thing? It was, if hunters came to their dens and nests, looking to burn them out or stake them in their sleep.

Isabella sighed, but she didn’t say no. “It has been many years since hunters have made themselves known in Dolareido. All

Kindred deaths have been accounted for in that time, and none have been to hunters.”

“ ... something has changed in that time,” Hella said. “Something recent has happened. Hell a lot of shit has changed as of late. Viktor’s dead, Tony’s dead. Azamel’s back, and Avery’s back. The status quo is so fucked right now.”

Everyone nodded, and exchanged a few grunts at the mention of Azamel and Avery specifically. Racism. Speciesism? Whatever, it was shitty seeing how quick the Kindred were to judge the Uratha and Begotten for their current, wildly hypothetical problems. He did not like it.

And he knew, in the past, when he was fresh to the fold, he wouldn’t say anything. But now, his mouth was opening, and he didn’t know how to stop it.

“The Uratha showed up because a monster was under our streets, not the other way around. They helped us deal with a problem before it became too large to handle. One of them died in that pursuit. And the Begotten haven’t caused any trouble yet.” Except for maybe Fiona’s rather large appetite. He had to visit her again, see how she was doing, if Azamel was treating her well. “Have any of you spoken with any of them? At all? A single word?”

Each of them glanced between each other and Hella, before all eyes settled on Isabella. The Daeva ancilla was not happy, and she frowned at him with some grit to her teeth.

He gave her license to ignore his relationship with Julias and the Prince. He didn’t give her license to ignore his role as intermediary with the Uratha. No doubt the wheels were spinning in her head, juggling that information, wondering how she could dance the Danse and put him in his place without offending that position.

“You were not even alive when Avery was here the first time, Master Terry. I was but a young neonate when those wolves were here last, and I remember the fear and carnage those creatures spread.”

He'd put himself in a weird spot, getting on this girl's bad side. But at the same time, the Uratha and Begotten didn't deserve this bullshit reputation following them around.

“Apologies Madam Leauvion, but I've had the fortune of being thrust into the center of our disagreements with them. I can assure you that Avery is not the violent person she was when she was younger. Age changes many things.” Ugh, talking like an Invictus. He could feel the silver growing on his tongue. Julias would have been proud. “And the Begotten only wish to find a safe place they can satisfy their appetites. If anything, they will be the first to extend invitation to us for friendship.”

He didn't mention that he wasn't exactly sure about Azamel's motivations. Athalia, Fiona, they just wanted to eat and live their lives, according to them, but he had as much chance of understanding Azamel's intentions as he did a goddess's. And not a nice, loving, tender goddess, but some ancient deity of destruction, ruling with odd laws and an iron claw.

“The Begotten want to be our friends?” Hella said, one eyebrow raised especially high.

Jack nodded. “From what I can gather, and from what Fiona has told me, Begotten are...” How to word this, how to word this. He put his smartphone into the pocket of his suit jacket, and leaned forward. These people were theater lovers, theatrical types, who thrived on overdramatic presentations and flowery prose. People who thought purple prose were good prose. Gross.

Well, he could get a little flowery, a little poetic. Being around Antoinette was rubbing off on him.

“Begotten are monsters,” he said. The crowd blinked at him, obviously confused. “Vampires, werewolves, and other scary shit that’s out there, bumping in the night, are monsters. Cause as much as we’re Kindred, and we’ve gotten used to thinking of ourselves in that way, it doesn’t change that we’re monsters. We’re the thing humanity fears when it’s dark, and their imaginations run wild. They think they see movement in the shadows, and tell themselves there’s nothing there, don’t be stupid, monsters don’t exist.” He nodded to himself, and leaned in a little more, elbows on his knees. Everyone was listening, wide-eyed. “We’ve all embraced that role as normal for us. We’re Kindred. We’re the thing that traps people in dark alleys.”

Everyone nodded, understanding on their faces. It was easy to forget sometimes that vampires were, in fact, monsters.

“Werewolves, they’re a different kind of monster. These animal hybrids that are ... absurdly, ridiculously, massively strong.” He shuddered as the memory of the fight with the Azlu hit him. The screaming and blood and shredded rock. “And I’m sure there are more monsters, like Kindred, other races of beast that defy science and hide in shadows.

“But Begotten are ... more...” Wow, this was a difficult concept to get across, to word in a way that made sense. “Fiona says, she believes vampires are simply a type of Begotten, that for some reason, reproduced or spread in ways normal Begotten can’t. Same with the werewolves. We’ve integrated with the living, with cultures, with societies big and small. But for monsters, classic, true, real monsters, ancient and unknown, joining society is not so easy. They are the stuff of nightmares, literally.”

“Literally?” Three of the younger Kindred said, at the same time.

“Literally. Imagine if nightmares could be something you could literally touch, literally see while awake, literally have rip you to

shreds. According to her, dreams, nightmares, they're real things in some weird existence outside of this one. And monsters? They come from there, from the nightmares, from this dark place where all of kine's fears manifest, in some sort of aether. Now, imagine ... movies like *The Thing*, or *IT*, or storytellers like Clive Barker and H.P. Lovecraft's works, or ancient cultural beliefs like wendigo or dullahan or jorogumo, or what have you." After a couple conversations with Fiona, he did his research into ancient, mythological monsters. Fucking scary shit, knowing they probably existed in reality. "These creatures, these nightmares given form, they see us and ... it would seem they only wish to find coexistence among their brethren who've managed to integrate with the sheep far better than they have. Than they ever could.

"So while we think they're strange, and alien, and dangerous, they just want to ... fit in with us." A gross oversimplification, he was sure, but it served for the conversation, and the listening Kindred nodded a few times as they glanced between each other.

Isabella didn't look so sure, but after a few seconds of her own contemplation, she shrugged and nodded. "Unfortunately, none of that dismisses the danger these monsters bring. And as for the werewolves? If you believe age has changed Avery, I must insist on proof."

Step in the right direction, at least.

"Then I will make sure to ask her about Barry. They're nesting near, and I know they're already looking into the fire. I'll find out what they know, and you'll see, they only want to help." Because tomorrow, he had a date with a pack of werewolves.

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~~Eric~~

Eric watched the sun set, and sighed.

He was too young to be a taxi driver, way too young. Thirty wasn't young, but at the same time it was. Money versus health. In the modern age you got to live longer, and had less money to do it on, leading to a generation of men and women who were stuck between the glorious days of being a child, oblivious to the future, and the glorious days of being old, riding the economy of the baby boomer generation and their total obliviousness to the economic struggles of people his age.

So, he became a taxi driver. Because what the fuck else was he supposed to do now?

He sat parked at the corner of Fifth Vonta Street and Marian Street, a corner between North and South Side. He sat there, and watched the sun go down as the night shift started. It was nice to see, nice to remind himself something existed beyond the night, beyond the fake light and fake personalities and fake tits of the city life.

He took a moment to check himself in the mirror. He was a good looking man he thought, a black man with a shaved head, average height, and a stern face. The face was a problem; people didn't tip as well to someone with a stern face. He practiced a few smiles in the mirror, slid his fingers along his clean-shaven cheeks and jawline, and tried a few more. Nope, smiles never got out as anything more than a sneer.

Sighing, he put the car into drive, and headed back into South Side. Around this time of night, there was a drastic shift on what people wore, and what sort of personalities pedestrians had. People had less energy in the day, and wore normal business clothes. Come the night, people started to act differently, possessed by demons of greed, glutton, and lust.

As he drove by the ruins of the burned apartment building, he glanced out his window. Some suits were standing around it, taking



pictures, couple of youngsters. Weird. But, not his business, and he put his eyes back on the road as the traffic of cabs, limousines, and expensive cars with nowhere to drive started to greet him.

But something was different. Something in the air maybe. Something he could taste but couldn't see.

As a couple hailed his cab and he pulled up to let them in, he eyed them closely. The man's build, the woman's build, the thickness of their arms and shoulders and back, whether they could pose a danger. He glanced at the man's sides, and the woman's as well, for any potential firearms. Did they have knives hidden anywhere? Were they a threat?

Could he kill them?

He shook the thoughts loose. Random, to suddenly want to kill the first fare of the night. "Where too?"

"You know the club Bloodlust?" the woman said, brushing the blond locks from her eyes and smiling at him in the rear view mirror. Flirtatious, but not blatantly or with intent, far as Eric could tell, especially considering the man next to her was pressed against her and leaning in to plant a few kisses on her neck.

He could smell the cigarette smoke on them, a hundred times worse than usual. He could smell the sex on them too, and that was not something he wanted to last in his taxi.

"I do." With a small salute, he got moving.

Driving in a packed city wasn't fun. Stupid to even let his mind go in that direction, to look for fun in his job; just, holy fuck, driving in a huge, dense city was hell. A hell he'd been driving people around in for almost a year now. Not that Dolareido was the worst place, at least outside of Devil's Corner, but the stop-and-go of city streets was torture.

He looked in the mirror again. The couple were kissing each other, rubbing against each other, and as the man caressed the insides of the woman's thigh underneath her dress's skirt, the woman smiled at Eric again.

"Sorry," she said. "Just ... you know."

He smirked — a smirk practiced to handle all manner of social interactions — and nodded, before he eased into the front of the club. "Here you are. That's eight fifty."

Giggling and laughing, the couple started slipping out of the cab, and the man pulled out some cash before passing it to Eric.

"Thanks," Eric said, and gave the man another casual salute as the tipsy, high-as-fuck fellow waved back before walking into the club.

He found himself watching the man and his girl walk away, and again, he kept an eye on spots they might be hiding weapons, their posture to see if there was any aggressive intent, to see—

What the fuck was wrong with him? Man and his woman were just a couple of horny people with some alcohol in them, and cocaine. He could smell that too. And as the odor of other people came in through the opening and closing door of his cab, he took stock of each one. He could smell the bouncer at the door. He could smell one of the people by the street, smoking; their cologne too. He could smell one of the women come bouncing out of the club, giggling and squealing, her dress barely containing her breasts. He could smell cocaine on her too.

What the fuck. He could smell so many things, like each and every one of them was shoving a body part under his nose.

He squeezed the steering wheel until he felt his knuckles fight to circulate blood. The thump thump of the music of the club filled his ears, resonated in his skull, matched his heart rate. He growled at

no one as he stirred in his seat and felt his muscles tense, felt his teeth bite down, felt his blood kick into high gear and fill his muscles.

Calm. The fuck. Down.

He moved on, forcing his breathing to settle and his eyes to focus on the street. Lot of people, lot of pedestrians with no respect for the road, lot of people drunk or high stumbling onto the streets. Much as he wanted to run them over, that'd mean the end of his career. But maybe jail would be better than this job and a shitty apartment.

He got maybe forty feet before someone jogged up to him from behind. Him specifically, not any of the other cabs. Some guy in a suit, with a suit that probably cost as much as Eric's apartment. He had a shaved head too, a white guy, with some scars on his cheek and a thickness to his shoulders. And a big, bright smile.

Eric squeezed his steering wheel harder as he felt his arm hair stand up on edge. Dangerous. Man probably had a pistol inside his suit jacket. And from the way he carried himself, the man knew how to fight. Someone Eric would have approached carefully in the ring.

Eric pulled over, but the man didn't get into the taxi. Instead he came up to the window, and knocked on it twice with a knuckle. Going to be one of those nights.

With a sigh, Eric rolled down the window. "Yeah?"

"Eric Tanverson?"

"... do I know you?" He looked the man up and down again. Nothing about the stranger suggested aggression, except for maybe the snake smile he had. A liar, or a lawyer; same thing.

“No. I’m John Ganders, work at Bloodlust. I recognized you from the local MMA matches.”

Eric sighed, again, for the millionth time, and looked back to the windshield. “And?” Fuck this guy. His fighting career was over, and even if it wasn’t, not like he or any fighter would appreciate getting their life interrupted like this.

“And, saw what happened to your knee. Wife nearly passed out in the seat.”

Yeah, having your knee dislocated and its ligaments ripped apart often meant the shin got to move in a direction it was very much not meant to move. It also meant his knee was ruined.

“Yeah. And?”

“Heh, knew you were an asshole Mr. Tanverson.”

“Excuse me?” He glared at the man, checked him up and down again for any movement, or for a gun, before he put an elbow on the window trim, and turned in his seat to face the man. No need to check the mirror for what his face looked like, he knew he was carrying his ‘I’m going to rip your head off’ face. Local news used to love to bring that up.

“Had to see if your ring persona was real, or just bullshit. But luckily an asshole like you is exactly what I want in a new bouncer.” Mr. Gandra — or whatever his name was — leaned toward the taxi, rested his hand on the roof, and grinned at him. “I’m offering you a job.”

“ ... in case you haven’t noticed, I have a job, and you’re getting in —”

“Without cab drivers, the city would die. Far be it from me to judge you your choice of vocation, Mr. Tanverson. But, work for me,

bouncing for Bloodlust, and you'll be making triple what you make now. Better benefits too."

Triple. Triple. He could wipe his debts, he could settle his divorce, he could—no. He'd tried public work before. Never worked out, for good reasons.

"You don't want me bouncing for you, Gandra."

"Ganders."

"Whatever. Not going to bite my tongue for stupid customers. So —"

"And that's exactly what I'm looking for, Mr. Tanverson. An attractive man with a sharp tongue and a rough history. Bloodlust attracts certain types, and I need someone good with their words and a good looking jaw to go with it. You'll draw in a certain clientele, and get rid of others with a conversation. Only need to use your fists if absolutely necessary, but those situations do occasionally happen."

Attractive? Was the man gay? Maybe that was the unusual vibe Eric was picking up from him; which made sense, given the amount of times Ganders looked him up and down. He wasn't getting any aggression from him.

Or he was just the friendly sort. Not many of those in your life, Eric. Man said he had a wife anyway.

"Good with my words? You can't be serious."

"So you're telling me you didn't go on that five minute long, uninterrupted, flawless, not a single stutter rant about your Crowley match, a few years ago? A perfect stream of unending insults? It was like a scene out of Full Metal Jacket, fucking beautiful."

Crowley had pissed him off with some pre-match dissing. Man just needed to be put in his place. That had been a fun night though.

“ ... this some kind of trick? You offer jobs to strangers all the time?”

Laughing, the man reached into his suit jacket, and pulled out a card. “My business card. Think it over, give me a call. You’re already working nights, so you might as well make decent money while doing it.”

The grimace in Eric’s lips refused to leave, but he took the card anyway. That was enough for Ganders, and the man offered him a salute before he walked back to his club. Not his club, according to the card, but a club he worked for as a manager.

Eric set the card on the dash, and resumed his route.

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Back in his apartment. His shit apartment, the cheapest one-bedroom he could find that didn’t put him in Devil’s Corner. He growled at no one and tossed his keys onto the kitchen table before he stepped into the bathroom. More like a closet that just happened to have a small tub and a toilet. But it was enough for him to stand in, and look at himself in the mirror.

Mom always said if he didn’t stop frowning his face would get stuck that way. She was always right.

Eric sighed and looked down at the sink as he set his hands on the outside edges of the counter. He squeezed, and squeezed, and squeezed until his arms started to shake, until his fingers turned brighter at the knuckles, and he heard the tile on the counter top begin to crack.

Calm. The fuck. Down.

Deep breaths, deep breaths. He stared at himself in the mirror, the sweat that was beading on his forehead, and at his brown eyes. There was a spec of amber in there that almost made his eyes look like gold; his wife had loved it.

The night ran through his mind, with each cab fare planting a specific memory. There'd been a couple covered in tattoos, and he knew they had knives in their boots. There'd been a couple of women who smelled of cocaine, and one of them looked comfortable with her purse, like she might have had a gun in there. There'd been more than few guys who looked ready to fight with their bare hands. And there'd been a few dozen men and women so fat they had trouble getting into the cab, let alone pose a threat. Prey. They were just prey. Meat. Lambs for the slaughter.

He stared at the sink and watched it vibrate. His arms were still shaking, and his fingers were starting to sink into the counter, through the tile. He wasn't gripping the counter like something you'd squeeze in the palm either; instead, he was pressing his fingertips down on it like claws.

He let go of the counter, and stared at the indentations of his fingers. He was a strong guy, but not that strong. The fuck was eating at him so much? Handed an opportunity to get out of this hole and he couldn't even think about it, could only think about all the irritants in his life.

The smell of blood was in the air. Was it? There was no blood in his apartment. But, he could smell it, smell the life of it drifting through the air. An odor so thick he could almost swim in it, run his hand through it. Once his fingers let go of the counter, he raised one and stared at it, at how it flexed and squeezed and curled like there should have been claws there. Only way to describe it, only way it made sense. There should have been claws on his hand.

He slammed the bathroom door, and collapsed against it. Ass to the tile of his bathroom, head hanging, he gripped the back of his neck and squeezed on it. The muscles fought back, and pulsed. They felt bigger. His head jerked up with painful neck snap, and he raised his hands again to look at them.

Claws. There were claws.

He stared at the colossal hand, at the nigh black hair that was growing from the back of his knuckles, far longer than his normal hair. Hands big enough to crush. Hands strong enough to tear people apart. Hands fit for pinning down prey as he bit into them and ripped out their throat.

No air. No air! Couldn't breathe, couldn't get air, couldn't get above the blood. He stood up and turned around, but his hands couldn't grip the doorknob right. Drowning! Couldn't get out, couldn't breathe, couldn't—

His head jerked up from hanging between his knees. Breathing again, he could breathe. His ass was still on the bathroom floor, and his hands were normal. Normal, perfectly normal. Beads of sweat had started dripping down his face again, and he wiped them away as he forced himself to stand up. He wanted to vomit. Nausea ripped at him, and dizziness destroyed attempts to stand.

He should see a doctor. He must have caught some sort of disease, right? What the fuck sort of disease made someone hallucinate like that? No, not a disease. He must have just been stressed. Last thing he needed was to get locked up in a psych ward for something that was just his stress and imagination. And that's all it was. Stress, and probably malnutrition. Hell, maybe he'd just fallen asleep for a few seconds and his fucked up mind took the opportunity to hit him with a quick nightmare.

He needed to eat something. Groaning, he reached out for the bathroom countertop again, and forced himself to stand. Best he



had in here for food was a multivitamin, but he took it anyway, swallowed it dry, and turned around to face the door.

Blood. There was blood on the door. It was pouring down from the seams, trickling, thick and heavy. It came down over the smooth, boring slab of white-painted, worn wood, and buried it in flowing red.

He was hallucinating or dreaming or something. Snap out of it. Breathe! Fucking breathe.

“No. No it’s a dream. I’m dreaming. I’m fucking dreaming. This...” He reached out for the doorknob, and opened it. White flashed, buried him, blinded him, and he plummeted down through the floor as it gave way underneath him. Blood. He was sinking through blood. Drowning again in blood.

Before his lungs started to burn, the blood dropped him onto new surface, like he’d fallen out of the guts of a cow. Dirt in his fingers, blood dripping down from his smooth head and nose, from his shoulders, and down into the grass before it disappeared. After a minute of silence, of waiting for death or for this sick joke to be over, he stood up, gasping, staring, looking around. Where the fuck was he? Not his apartment. Jungle? Forest? There was grass, there was blood, and there were trees. The wind cut through the branches and howled like a banshee. The quiet hum of the city was gone, and instead he was surrounded in the silence of screaming winds and rustling grass.

No way this wasn’t a fucking dream. He slapped himself, hard, hard enough to cause his head to jerk to the side and for his neck to wrench. Pain hit him with all the bitterness and stinging aftertaste of a real slap. Not dreaming then. Maybe? Christ, he was in a forest, he had to be dreaming.

He looked around again. Blood on the grass, blood on the trees and their bark, blood on his clothes. He raised his hands once more,

and tried to wipe the sweat off his face. It wasn't sweat. His palms dripped of the red liquid, and when he tried to wipe it off his jeans, his fingers grazed something soft and squishy.

Flesh, not his, was on his leg. Something wet, warm, with a bit of fur, was stuck to his fucking pants leg. He gulped, body shaking and lungs refusing to breathe again, and he flicked it away. The air was cool against the wet skin. Cooling blood.

He turned around. A body, something with antlers, something with fur and hooves. A leg, a destroyed head, brains and eyeballs and teeth broken apart against the wood of a tree. And he could taste it. He could taste blood, and bone, and shit he didn't know the name for. He put his fingers to his mouth, and pulled out a bit something trapped between lip and teeth. It was meat. It was flesh.

There was only one source of light, and it was casting everything in the most sorrowful shade of blue his mind could comprehend. As if light itself could be sad. As if light itself could mourn. The full moon.

He fell to his knees, and stared up at the night sky. The moon stared at him, demanded his attention, demanded his eyes and for him to look at it and only it, before it bellowed a booming voice upon him. A woman's voice? If a celestial body could have a female voice, something that echoed with power and depth and noise beyond imagining, it would have sounded like that.

“Breathe!”

His eyes snapped open, and a lungful of air hit him hard enough to send him stumbling back.

His bathroom. The cold tile on his feet, with tiny puddles of his sweat. The shitty door, just old, worn wood with white paint. The dirty shower curtain and stained tub. The bathroom counter that

he'd just damaged. He was back in his bathroom, which meant all that insanity was just a dream.

It couldn't have been a dream. He hadn't fallen asleep, and hell, he was still standing up, hand on the doorknob. Hell, his face still hurt from the slap. Hallucinating, not hallucinating. Make up your fucking mind, brain. If you're going to fucking kill him, or turn him into a psycho or something, do it now, stop fucking with him.

Open the door, Eric.

He gulped, and stared down at where his hand squeezed the metal, arm quivering, doorknob shaking in its loose screws. Open the door. Open the fucking door.

He opened it, slowly, the creak of the metal hinges ringing out like sirens blaring in his ears.

A meow almost made him jump.

“Kat, god damn it girl. I could have...”

Kat rubbed herself against his legs. An American Shorthair, Kat was a beautiful little lady, with black and gray lines and a white tummy. And the softest, most elegant face. His total fucking opposite.

As she did circles around his legs, rubbing herself to his shins, he took another deep breath. The anger faded away, the shaking stopped, and he found his old smile again as he leaned down to pick her up. It was why he bought a cat after all, to relieve stress. Supposed to add years to your lifespan. And he fucking needed it.

“Girl, I may be going crazy. I think ... I ... I don't know girl. Could be going crazy. Could be ... just ... stress.” Just stress, that's all it was. He was fine two days ago, other than the inevitable peptic ulcer

from his regular job that was going to kill him. Just fine. Completely, totally fine.

Kat seemed to think so. But then, Kat was a very dumb cat. Like nothing was wrong, like he didn't just have a bunch of hallucinations, like he still didn't remember the taste of animal blood in his mouth, and the texture of its flesh, like everything was perfectly fine, she purred.

He needed to move on, think about something, anything.

“ ... you think I should take the job? Working as a bouncer is bound to lead to violence ... course, with the people I see in that Bloodlust club, a single punch would take out most of them.” Bunch of city slickers; of which he was too, but at least he wasn't soft. He shrugged, cradled his girl to his chest, and sat on his half-broken couch in front of his tiny TV.

Kat purred into his neck, and gave him a few headbutts, ears rubbing against his jaw and paws pressing against his chest. The cat odor was strong, but not bad. He'd changed the litter before leaving, but he could smell that too. Hell, he could smell old widow Ms. Swanson smoking cigarettes a few rooms down the hall.

And he could hear the televisions of nearby apartments, when he normally couldn't. He could hear the potheads talking down the hall. He could hear the barking of dogs; nothing unusual there. But he could hear the meowing of distant cats too, in rooms far down the hall, and from floors above and below him. And, as Kat continued to purr into his chest, he could hear the rumbling in her body almost overpower his hearing, like a lawn mower.

Good thing he loved the sound and feel of her purrs. He lay down on the couch, set Kat on his chest again, and pet her as he tried to let the thoughts pass. He knew what his own blood tasted like; a decade of fighting in a ring taught him that. The taste of that thing in his dream, that buck, was a different taste entirely. Hair, iron, and

other crap he couldn't guess. And he could feel his muscles ache, as if he'd just run miles, as if he'd just spent a night at the gym.

His knee was fucking killing him.

---

He woke up sweating, and gasping.

Kat flew off of him in a panic, and he winced as her claws nicked his skin. The tip of one of her nails got trapped in the fabric, and came off of her claw easily. Clip her nails, you lazy fuck.

Groaning, he set his feet down on the floor and forced himself to breathe. Still sitting on the couch, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, hands and head dangling. Sweat dripped from his forehead to the carpet, and he could feel it soaking through his shirt; goddamn underwear too. He needed to go pop a multi-mineral or eat some half-salt or something, before he compromised his electrolytes. The fuck was wrong with him? He couldn't stop sweating all the time, but it wasn't gross nasty sweat from the heat or exercise. It was a cold sweat, like someone was choking him to death and he couldn't stop them.

He brought his hands to his face and wiped away the drops. Dreams. Fucking nasty dreams, of animals chasing and biting things. Of roars and tearing flesh apart. Dreams about weird things, weird looking beasts with too many arms or legs, and him ripping them apart. The hallucinations fit much better in his dreams, made more sense to be there than when he was awake, but they weren't as bad as the hallucinations yesterday either.

Just needed a nap. That's all he needed. Now he felt better, with all the crazy shit in his brain firing during his slumber instead of while he was awake.

“You ok Kat?”

Kat meowed her annoyance, and hopped up onto the small table between him and the TV. Perched and frowning at him, she meowed a couple more times, and waited. A queen who demanded her respect, and her food.

“Sorry girl. Just ... really weird dreams.” He got up, did a few stretches, did some leaned squats on his bad knee to warm it up, and went to his tiny kitchen. A glance back over his shoulder showed the sun starting to cut through the curtains. Meant the sun was peeking over the neighboring building. Lunch time. “Shit, really sorry girl. Must have conked out longer than I thought.”

Kat followed after him, and as per usual once she realized he was going for the cupboard by the oven, she started rubbing against his leg. Queen wanted her food. And of course only the best food would do.

“You know you’re the reason I can’t afford good coffee?” Groaning again, he put the pot on between pouring the girl her food bowl, and filling her water fountain. She got the good food, and the fancy drinking gadget that created moving water. He got rice and shitty coffee.

Couldn’t bring himself to do otherwise. He smiled down at the little lady as she started to eat and licked from the tiny fountain, with the grace of a queen too. None. And as she ate, he scooped her litter box, swept up any bits of litter, washed his hands, and sat down with a bowl of rice. After the rice he’d shower, and then watch TV for a little while before getting some more sleep, and then going to work. Another regular, boring day, with a routine so dull it was undeniably a repeat of yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. Until someone knocked on the door.

He set the large bowl down, and squeezed the edges of the glass. His arms started to shake. His fingers squeezed in just the right spots to not break the glass; any other place and he was sure the

bowl would shatter. His muscles started to clench, flexing, bracing for inevitable combat. Calm the fuck down, calm the fuck down. Breathe.

This wasn't normal. And it wasn't PTSD; fuck was wrong with him for even thinking the thought? He'd been a ring fighter, MMA, not a fucking soldier. He had no reason to be shaking from head to toe, imagining scenarios in his head of the person at the door breaking it down, and trying to stab him, shoot him, jump him, ruin his home and take his life. No reason at all. But he was imagining it. And he was imagining the feel of their neck breaking in his grip. Bones snapping, cartilage tearing, the feel of skin and meat ripping apart in his teeth.

The sensation was very overt. He thought if he was going insane, the effects would be more subtle, sneak into his life and slowly take him over. American Psycho. Sociopathy, maybe even Hollywood's version of schizophrenia, leading to aggressive behavior and delusions, until he was killing prostitutes by dropping chainsaws on them. Real prostitutes, or hallucinations?

The door knocked again. And he was still shaking. Breathe, just breathe.

He got up, wiped away a fresh drop of sweat from his forehead, and opened the door. Fuck, it was Mr. Pitt.

"Got my money, Eric?"

"Fuck you. You want the money? Get it from Sheryl."

Mr. Pitt was a short man, white, bald, with bit of a belly, and a nice suit to match his better-than-you mafia attitude. Matched the big guy beside him, another white guy except this man was tall, huge, with muscles coming out of his ears. Face kind of reminded Eric of a refrigerator.

“Your ex-wife doesn’t owe us money Eric. You do.”

“Yeah well, she got all the money. So go bother her.” He tried to slam his door shut, but Mr. Pitt’s muscle stepped in and blocked it with his foot. And, like he owned the place, Mr. Pitt stepped into the apartment.

“You don’t look good, Tanverson.”

“Rough time sleeping. Get the fuck out of my apartment,” he said. His words got him some angry glares from the tall stack of steroids.

Every muscle in Eric’s body, every fucking instinct wanted to grab the guy and break his nose, and then his arm. And he could too, he knew he could. Big guy like that lived in the gym and pushed around weak fucks for a living. Eric doubted the man had ever fought someone who fought back, and he couldn’t stop imagining how it’d feel to crush the man’s neck inward with his palm. But he wanted to do more than that. He wanted to bite the man’s throat out. He wanted to taste blood, taste muscle and skin and bone and cartilage and—

Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

“Looking down on money, Mr. Tanverson. Not good. Mr. Montel wants his money, and I’m afraid—”

“You came over here to shake me down for money in the middle of the day?” He folded his arms across his chest, and glared down at the fat bastard.

Pitt shrugged, and leaned to the side to look past Eric into his shitty, rundown living room. “Rick’s son goes to the school in the neighborhood, and he forgot his lunch. We had to bring it to him.” The two morons chuckled.



“Want your money? Take it up with the law. I’m not paying you shit, how many times I have to say it?”

Pitt sighed and looked down, complete with a dramatic shrug. “You’re the one that agreed to the loan, Mr. Tanverson.”

“My wife—”

“I don’t care how your wife convinced you, you’re the one that agreed to it. And Mr. Montel has been very understanding of your circumstances. The divorce. The injury. He gave you a six month extension. At no interest! You’re a very lucky man, Mr. Tanverson.” Fat bastard walked past him, and when Eric moved to get in his way, moron number two put out a huge hand to block his path, letting Pitt explore his apartment.

“Sheryl got the jewelry, the car, everything.” Not like it was a secret. Still tasted like ashes though. The lawyer bills alone drained what little money he had left. “And—”

“As I said Mr. Tanverson, your loan, your money. Your head.” He walked around the couch, in his shoes no less, and chuckled as he analyzed the shit world Eric lived in. “Get a roommate, Mr. Tanverson. You’ll need the money. I—oh! What a precious creature.” Mr. Fat Bastard got down on a knee, and held out a hand for Kat. It’d have been nice if Kat was a mean feline, maybe take after her owner, but that just wasn’t Kat. Damn cat came up to the intruder, sat down, and stared up at him with her big soft eyes.

“Don’t touch my cat, Pitt.” He came up to the man, even as Rick stayed within an inch of him at all times. “Ever seen John Wick?”

Fat bastard laughed, got up, and walked past him. Stared up at him too, met his eyes as he pat Eric on the shoulder, and then moved for the door.

“One month, Mr. Tanverson. One month, before Mr. Montel loses his patience. And then a lot more than just Rick and myself will be back.”

Eric growled. A literal growl, something deep in his throat. It didn't sound terribly human, and Mr. Pitt raised a brow as he looked over his shoulder at him. But the little man shrugged it off, flicked his fingers in a dismissing wave, and walked out the door.

Going to kill him. Eric was going to kill him, and Rick, and any other fucker that showed up at his door. Kill them all, rip them apart, bite into their fucking throats and tear them open. He—

A meow broke through his maelstrom of violent thoughts. He looked down at Kat, and scooped her up into his arms. Soft, a little fat, face a bit flat; just made her face look soft and adorable. And he leaned in to rub his nose against hers, only for her to reciprocate with a few licks of her rough tongue. Totally oblivious to everything, to the danger, to the knife's edge Eric's life was balancing on. She just wanted to cuddle, eat, sleep, and chase the occasional laser pointer.

He walked over to his shit couch, Kat in his arms cradled like a baby. His free hand stroked her belly, then her ears, then past to reach for the table and pick up the card that man had given him. John Ganders, manager at the Bloodlust club. A very successful club, swimming in profit and with customers swimming in money and drugs and sex. Christ what a slutty city. Even the cops were getting in on it, Eric bet. Who cares. Adults could do whatever they wanted as long as they didn't hurt anyone, and Eric agreed with that philosophy.

He just wasn't sure he wanted to be there when adults were engaging in that philosophy.

“What do you think Kat? If you get sick, I don't have the money for surgery or medicine right now.”

She meowed.

“And if I get sick, well then we’re both fucked.”

She meowed again, longer this time.

“ ... ok, I’ll do it Kat. Not because of that fucker Mr. Pitt either, but because ... fuck we need a better place to live. And I don’t want to lose you.” Only good thing going in his life right now, the cat he bought on a whim cause he knew he needed to lower the stress in his life. And fuck losing the one good thing in his life.

She meowed.



~~Jack~~

This was going to be dangerous. Not super dangerous, he hoped. Mildly dangerous? Best he could hope for, walking into Carthian territory, and then surrounding himself with a bunch of werewolves, snarling and roaring and biting and clawing. Course they wouldn’t be doing that, but he had a pretty vivid memory of what they were like transformed. Titans. Indestructible titans.

Indestructible titans that were, according to a friend of a friend, as horny as they were fit. Word had already gotten around about Natasha and her two lovers, and by the time the information had circled the Kindred net a few times, the story was that the two wolves were fucking her multiple times a night, every night. Exaggeration, surely. Maybe? There was no denying that the wolves were bastions of life, of raw power, heat, blood, energy. Made perfect sense they’d be as horny as a vampire with a belly full of fresh blood...

The driver dropped him off outside the appropriate building, a shitty rundown apartment building. Just how the Carthians liked it. He doubted they actually liked it like that, but economics was a

cruel mistress, and capitalism bred inequality as consistently as people breathed. Money was different for a Kindred though, less important, just a byproduct of playing the game and herding the sheep.

The sheep around here looked at him with a few raised brows. A kid in a suit. He wasn't a kid, but he knew he looked like one, even with the fancy suit and shoes and tie. Must have looked like some sort of rich kid getting out of the nice car, with fancy rich parents and such. He laughed, and remembered the time he visited Garry with Julias. Did his sire look like his father in that scenario?

He stepped into the lobby, and started up the stairs. Room 312. Sure enough, once he reached the third floor of the dirty, water damaged, stained building, he found Matthew Wilson standing outside the door. Man was gigantic, utterly gigantic, with one of those happy, consistent smiles. The sort of fellow who was a genuinely joyful man. A rarity in the city, or anywhere really.

“Yo Jack,” he said with a small wave.

“Um, hello Mr. Wilso—”

“Whoa, just Matt little dude.” He held up his hands in surrender, as if Jack had just put a shotgun to his head.

“Oh ... ok.” So much for trying to be polite. Not that these wolves couldn't be polite, but Invictus tactics weren't going to work. He knew that too, but a part of him was hoping the form of politeness he'd been practicing for almost a year now would work on the wolves too.

But then, he smiled. Avery appreciated bluntness. Jack wasn't allowed to be blunt with his superiors, as it was very bad for Invictus business rocking the boat like that. Even with the Carthians, bluntness was dangerous if he touched a nerve. But the wolves were a different animal. Bluntness could work well, which

meant he could be himself with them. He just needed to test the water first.

Matthew opened the door, and Jack stepped in. The big guy followed in after him and gestured for him to move toward the couch.

Not a chair, a couch. There was no desk with someone sitting behind it doing a power pose, and there was no arrangement of chairs pointed at a center or main point. He'd walked into a literal living room of an apartment. Avery's apartment, if he had to guess.

"Hey Jack," the old woman said. Well, maybe not old, but older, looked like she was in her fifties. Fit as hell, and tiny like him. Hard to picture a small woman like her leading anything, but she did have these titans as her pack. And when she was transformed, she didn't seem so little, especially with the flaming claws. How the fuck did a werewolf get flaming claws?

"Avery." He walked over to the couch, but didn't sit down. A little too much too fast for a business meeting.

Avery on the other hand had no such issue, already sitting in the window sill, one of her legs up and her side to the window.

"Glad you could make it."

"That was the deal, right? I show up, tell you what's up, you tell me what's up, and I make sure no one kills each other." A little bluntness. Testing the waters.

"Yeap," she said. Water tested, be blunt as fuck with these people. "Hey Clara, get in here."

Jack flinched, and looked down the hall. Clara came out of one of the rooms, and gave him a wink before she came over to grab a wooden chair from the connected kitchen, and sat in it reverse style.

Only made sense for Avery's second in command to be here, don't look into it.

"Hello Clara," he said, official as possible.

It only made her laugh. "Hey kid."

Avery, rolling her eyes, gestured to the dark street through the window. "Weird to see buildings burn down in Dolareido."

Yeah, it was. "Mmhmm."

"In most cities, a lot of the older buildings actually burn slow. Harder material. It's the newer buildings that go up like kindling, made of nothing but cheap shit, filled with nothing but cheap shit," she said. "Back in my day, things were made of real wood, and shit burned slow. But these days, everything's synthetic and just looking to snap into a blaze in seconds. I could light a couch on fire, and bring down a building in five minutes." Random lecture? Oh good god, she'd gone grandma mode.

"Dolareido's a little different," he said. "Far as I know, Viktor and Antoinette and Lucas, they pushed for buildings to be built with fire resistant material, when the option became available. Cause, you know, Kindred. So the older buildings, like the one that burned down, are the ones we're generally a little more concerned with."

"Exactly." She nodded to herself a few times, scratched her chin a few times more, and gestured to the buildings across the street. "Garry's neck of the woods, the buildings are either old, or not built like your fancy shit is. That fire wasn't too far from this part of the city either. And Kindred don't risk spreading fire."

"Telling me there's no way Garry would risk killing Barry with fire? Or covering up his murder with fire?"

“More or less.” Looking back to him, she smirked. She liked it when he caught on to what she was saying, just like a grandma would, complete with the oddly warm smile.

“You assume I suspected Garry,” he said.

“You didn’t? You’d be the first Kindred I ever met that didn’t suspect an opposing covenant of foul play.”

“Touche.” His turn to nod, and scratch his chin. “Is this what you wanted to talk about? Barry’s death?”

“Only to tell you what Clara told you, that we’re looking into it too.”

Nice of her. And suspicious. But that was just a bit of his Kindred paranoia showing through, hopefully. “Keep an eye out for four humans. Two trench coats, two leather jackets. Two men, two women.” He shrugged as everyone in the room raised a brow. “Yeah I know, shitty lead, but they may be connected.”

“I’ll remember that.”

The strangest meeting of his life, so casual he felt like he should be wearing a t-shirt. Avery didn’t seem too concerned with a Kindred in her presence, and if anything, she almost seemed amused about the whole thing. There was a small grin on her lips, the sort of grin someone had when their mind was elsewhere and imagining, or remembering happy things. At least she seemed in a good mood.

“I understand the Invictus ball is open invitation to all covenants, and even the Uratha and Begotten,” he said.

Avery raised a brow and looked over her shoulder straight at him. “... part of me thought that was a joke.”

He raised a brow to mirror hers. “What? No, the Invictus have balls every so often. And, not long ago, Antoinette had her own, where all covenants were invited. The Prince wants to keep the peace that the city is enjoying, and the Invictus are on board with that idea. And, since now there are Begotten and Uratha in the city, they’re a part of that peace.” He rubbed his buzzed head, and glanced around at the crummy apartment. Would they have the money? Well, they were pals with Garry, and Jack knew that the elder had the connections to at least get well dressed when he wanted.

But Clara and Matthew looked interested, and the two of them looked up with wandering eyes. Picturing themselves in ballroom clothes, maybe?

“It’ll be a sort of casual dress code,” he said, “for a ball, I mean. Suits and dresses, but nothing as strict as black tie. Showing some skin is encouraged.” Finally knowing the meaning of black tie and other dress codes was a useful tool in his kit.

“I’ll talk to the pack. Jacob being there may be an issue.” Avery looked back to the window, set a hand on her knee, and leaned back against the frame of the window sill. There was weight on her, somewhere he couldn’t quite place. “What’s Maria been up to?”

Whoa, hard turn on the conversation direction.

“Maria Turio?”

“Of course.”

He scratched his head again, and looked to Clara. She’d gone serious mode too. What brought this on?

“Invictus business, nothing I can discuss. That said, the Mirrden business is pretty public at this point.” And he very much doubted Avery was asking because of the Mirrden business. She was getting



at something, but he didn't know what; question was out of left field.

“Yeah I knew it was a long shot, asking you.” She sighed, louder than Jack expected, and cracked her knuckles. “But I like you kid, so, fair warning. Don't trust her.”

“... honestly? That's status quo for Kindred, even here in Dolareido. I'm guessing in the pack, you all learn to trust each other with your lives, right?” he said. The three of them nodded, and he chuckled. Hey, this conversation was kind of fun, now that he was feeling more comfortable. “I can count on one hand the Kindred I trust with my life, with fingers to spare. Just the way things are. Madam Turio is pursuing her own agendas on top of Invictus agendas, I am sure.”

“No idea what those are?” Clara said, leaning forward on her chair a bit.

“Beyond the typical Kindred stuff? No. I'm the last person she'd tell her secrets to. I'm sure she's got plans on top of other plans to not only keep herself alive for a long time, but to achieve any motivations she has on top of that. Right now she's helping Damien start up the Second Estate once more, to sister our First Estate.”

Avery nodded, but frowned as her eyes looked down. Not satisfied, apparently. But after a few seconds of silence, she shrugged. “You're like a bunch of ... politicians, digging away at each other all the time, not realizing you're digging your own pits of hell.”

Pits of hell. The imagery was vivid. Thought for sure she was going to say they were digging their own graves, but pits of hell certainly carried some extra implications he couldn't deny. He winced as he considered each elder the city currently housed, each digging their own pit, each pit growing big enough to swallow the whole city and everyone in it. Certainly fit Jacob well, and the Invictus and Carthians a bit too. Antoinette though?

“I don’t disagree,” he said. “Mostly.”

Matt laughed at that, before walking over to the fridge and digging through assorted things. Things on plates? He pulled out an enormous steak, took off the plastic wrap, and set it on the counter.

“Want some?” Matt said, glancing his way.

Jack laughed. Matt didn’t. Wait, was he serious? Must have been, at least until he realized how absurd what he said was, and the giant started laughing too. Maybe he was trying to lighten Avery’s weird mood? Or he could have just been a big silly dope, and that would have partly explained why Natasha liked him. He was lovable.

“So we’ll see you at the ball then?” he said. “I have to warn you, it’s going to be ... well, maybe not as bad as Bloodlust, but it’s supposed to be about relaxing. Kindred relax by drinking kine, so kine will be there, and ... yeah, people can get pretty ... aroused.”

Avery rolled her eyes, and her two pack mates laughed. But Clara had a twinkle in her eye Jack recognized. She knew what he meant, but the others didn’t. They’d learn.

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~~Eric~~

The phone call went well. Too well. John Ganders was excited to hire him, and bombarded him with all the benefits he’d get if he took the job. It was a very weird situation to be in, to have someone trying to convince you to take the job offer, when the job offer was already a much better deal than your current job. The dental, the medical, discounts on alcohol the club served, entry into the club whenever he wanted, and a salary that was indeed triple his current income.

He wasn’t sure he wanted it. At least as a taxi driver, he could focus on driving. At the club, he’d be standing around and watching

people, interacting with them occasionally, making sure no one caused trouble. Cocaine and alcohol did occasionally lead to troublemakers, Ganders said. The man was so damn open about the drug use, but Eric doubted Ganders was distributing; no way it'd be worth the risk. Much as Dolareido was pretty light on punishment for trafficking or prostitution, it couldn't turn a blind eye to everything. Better for Ganders if he didn't touch the stuff, and just let his customers bring their own drugs and hookers.

Escort girls. Not hookers.

He chuckled as he slapped himself in the forehead, leaning back on his couch. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to bite his tongue enough to do this job. Not punching people would be easier than keeping his mouth shut. Maybe people would leave him alone? He couldn't get away with that, since Ganders wanted him to socialize, mingle a little, and make the customers feel welcome, protected. Desired. And despite Eric's protests that he'd suck at it, Ganders assured him his attitude was exactly what the club needed. A dark, brooding jerk attitude.

The man was wrong, and Eric's attitude would only cause problems, but whatever. He needed the money, as Mr. Pitt so eloquently explained, and if he could hold the job for a little while he might be able to make some dents in that problem. Not that he should have to, he felt. But maybe it was just dues, for being such a fucking idiot and trusting that woman.

He held out his arms for Kat, and after a few curious meows, she crawled onto his lap.

"If this doesn't go well Kat, I'm in shit luck. Quit my job for this."

She meowed.

"Not a care in the world. Good. Keep it that way." He picked her up, cradling her like a big, dumb baby, and went to his bedroom.

Hanging, hidden away in the storage closet, were his suits. He almost opened the closet before he realized a big problem.

“K girl, gotta try one of these on. Don’t touch. Cat hair not allowed on the suits.”

She tilted her head to the side, looking up at him, and meowed. Didn’t understand a word of course. But she understood plenty once he set her outside in the hallway, and closed the door. The meows were loud, and constant, each a ringing siren that might as well have said ‘blasphemy!’. But he needed to try these on.

The trip down memory lane was not fun. The parties, the Broadway shows, the quote unquote balls, the interviews with news crews inquiring about his next match. Ashes in his mouth. But the suits still fit. He knew they would; a bad knee and a shit life didn’t mean he stopped taking care of his body. It almost did though. Every night, it almost did. Fuck, if it hadn’t been for Kat, he’d probably be a fat angry drunk by now.

Sheryl had taken everything. Every god damn thing from him, but she didn’t bother with his suits. And, much as it was a tainted memory, he did used to live in decent luxury, with money to waste on quality suits that Dolareido’s expensive nightlife demanded. Maybe she left him with the suits as a way to rub his new, ruined life in his face. What good was an expensive suit if you couldn’t go somewhere expensive to wear it to.

He should have sold the fucking things. Might have gotten enough money to get that fat bastard off his back. And, much as he didn’t want to admit it, he was about to do just that before he’d ran into Ganders. Good thing he didn’t. Now, he could go look like a fool, bouncing for a club notorious for its sex, drugs, money, and everything in between.

He opened the door, and reached down to stop Kat from rubbing against his leg, as she inevitably would have. “Sorry girl, not tonight.

I'll be back in nine or ten hours." Had to hold her out at arm's length to minimize the damage, but when he set her down beside the food bowl, he put a treat into it, like he always did when he left for work. One tiny treat a day. Probably why she was a bit chubby. But, it was better to not have her see him leave, than have her meowing the neighbors into a stupor while he was gone.

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"Now that! Is what I am talking about." Ganders snapped his fingers, and pointed at Eric as he walked up to the front entrance of the club. Not many people around, with the sun only starting to set. Customers didn't show up in their typical waves for an hour or two yet.

"This'll work?" Eric said.

"Yeap. Gotta admit, seeing you in a taxi, and then talking on the phone, I was wondering if I should have called you back to inquire about a suit. But this is fine. Perfect even."

Eric sighed and followed the man into the club. No one was in yet except the bartender. The music wasn't on either. And thank god the lights weren't doing that flashy thing he hated so much. He was going to have to get used to it though.

"Derek, Colin, Teller. This is Eric Tanverson. He'll be joining you in rotation."

Three other men, all taller than him, bigger than him, and dressed sharp. He was dressed sharp too, but it definitely screamed 'bouncer' when a guy who was easily two-twenty of muscle was standing around in a sexy suit, and these guys fit that description better than he did. They all could have worked for Mr. Pitt.

A light switch flipped in his brain, turning on a searing beam of scrutiny that hit every man before him. One of them had a scar on his chin, and he didn't fold his arms his chest, so he kept them at

his sides and at the ready. Dangerous. Another one of them folded his arms across his chest, a small smile on his lips, and the most amount of meat on him. Dangerous only if someone attacked his ego, but otherwise probably the least dangerous of the trio. The other one came up to him and held out a hand. Thinner than his friends, but still quite tall, with a warmer smile on his face and some striations showing through on the neck. A white man, with a head shaved smooth except for a single, thin line of solid red hair down the center, front to back. Fashionable, eclectic without being ridiculous.

Most dangerous of the group, this Colin fellow.

“Mr. Tanverson,” he said, “glad to see you up and moving, after the shitshow that has been your life as of late.”

Eric raised a brow. Hell, everyone raised a brow. But as Colin stood there, hand out, smile unwavering, Eric burst into laughter, and shook the man’s hand.

“Wife left me, haven’t been laid since, debts to pay, and my knee is fucking killing me. Shitshow is a good way to put it.”

Everyone chuckled. A little self deprecation humor was a good way to break the ice, and these people seemed nice. Weirdly nice. Or maybe he was just a jackass who was too used to everyone in his life being a colossal asshole.

But that didn’t mean he stopped analyzing them, seeing if he could rip out their throats.

Stop it. Stop remembering it. Calm the fuck down.

“Teller and Derek are at the door today. Colin and Eric will be watching the floor,” Ganders said. “And Eric, since this is your first night, just remember that Bloodlust is pretty loose about a lot of things. See someone doing lines? Let them, as long as it’s in one of

the darker corners. See a couple fucking, or whathaveyou? Let them, as long as, again, it's not on the center floor.”

“ ... anything I should genuinely throw people out for?” he said. Teller and Derek moved on to stand by the door; probably waiting to go outside when the night officially started. Just him and Colin watching the floor then.

His partner for the night shrugged and gave him a tiny nudge of the shoulder with the back of his fingers. “People getting too aggressive with their flirting; not just the guys, but the girls too. It happens sometimes. Anyone asking for money for anything too, give them the boot. We're trying to keep it a classy place after all.” A few more chuckles. Man knew full well classy wasn't exactly the word people thought of when they thought of Bloodlust.

But, all things considered, it really was a nice place, both in presentation and in physicality. His first time being in the club in a while, and now with the lights on, he hadn't realized before how everything looked spotless, clean, and almost shining. They kept the place in very good shape. A surprise considering how much shit went on in the dark. And with the lights on, he imagined the dance floor could actually serve as a stage for a far more presentable affair like lounge singing. Now that he thought about it, the place did look like a fancy lounge, that morphed into a sex club once the lights went red and the electronic music kicked in.

The bartender, a woman, was wearing clothes not dissimilar to the bouncers, a suit with open jacket to expose a comfortable white shirt. Attractive, to say the last, and she winked at him as she wiped down the counter. He knew better than to dip his pen in company ink though, and besides, she was probably just playing her role as the flirtatious bartender who, if you tip her generously or buy just one more drink from her, will sleep with you.

Club might as well have had sex for a subtitle.

“How much freedom I got?” Eric said.

Ganders stroked his chin, and walked toward the center floor. Eric and Colin followed.

“Freedom? I mean if you want to sit down with a particularly horny guest for a quickie, go ahead. Just keep it under fifteen minutes.”

“... I meant with how I handle the people I’m throwing out.”  
Good god this man. No wonder the place was the way it was.

“Ah. You can get pretty rough, but if you break any arms or noses, you need justification. Feel free to lay down a bruise or two if someone deserves it.”

That was good, he could do that. Hell, he looked forward to it, to letting out some frustration. Tossing some dumbass punk onto the street with perhaps a little more force than necessary? Just what the doctor ordered.

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He didn’t like the music. Didn’t hate it, but didn’t like it. He thought he’d hate it, expected it, but something about his new role changed his mind. It was like listening to a heartbeat, strong, steady, and pulsing. Combined with the white light timed with it against the dark, red light that buried the club, it made the whole club feel like it was the heart of the city, a literal heart pumping sex and drugs and blood through its veins.

It definitely got people into the mood. As he stood by the wall, off to the side where one of the staircases rose into the second floor, he watched the nightlife of Dolareido. A strange mixture of millennial attitude and the freedom being rich provided made for rather adventurous, directionless customers. Rich, or at least well off people came in, and drifted around from table to floor, floor to booth, and around and around talking to random people. No one



knew what they wanted, they just knew modern life was a hollow existence, with every facet of reality succumbing to the destructive tides of the current world.

Sort of like the opposite of people in the sixties, but leading to the same behavior. Drifting, naive people, fucking and snorting and shooting and fucking some more, all the time.

He laughed, and took a deep breath to help cool himself down. It was a fairly cool night in Dolareido, the heatwave having finally passed a week or two ago. But in the club, where the bodies were grinding on the dance floor, the heat picked up again.

His senses were in overdrive, and it was making it difficult to breathe. He could smell so many things, so many people. Instead of just the odor of human skin in the air, he could smell individual people, individual colognes and perfumes, individual deodorants. Even as the music buried his ears with bass, he could hear people talking, overhear nearby conversations, hear a few mewls of some women. At first he thought he might have had some rescuing to do, but it was just how high pitched sounds were more piercing, and the women making them were very much enjoying themselves. One of them had a man on his knees under her booth, mostly hidden in the dark, eating her out. The other had a female friend beside her, drinking with one hand and fingering her with the other.

But at least most of the booths were of people talking, hanging out, socializing. He'd been worried that the whole club would be sex sex sex from ceiling to floor, but at any given time he found only maybe two booths on the bottom floor were actively engaged in sexual play. Maybe three on the second floor. And the people doing drugs were at least subtle about it. No one was doing literal lines on their table booths, and if they were, they kept it to the darkest corners.

All in all, standing around and watching people like this for eight hours was turning out to be far less stressful than driving people around. No more stop go stop go stop go. No more drunks and their ever-present threat of vomiting in his cab. No more awkward conversations about tips.

God bless cab drivers. He used to fight for a living, and compared to driving a taxi, fighting was easy.

The hours went by in a weird mix of joy and frustration. Happy to be standing around, watching people, making good money, wearing a nice suit, all around better everything. Not so happy that every single person that went by, he couldn't help but picture fighting, breaking apart, pinning down, tearing into. The tearing imagery was particularly problematic. Why tearing? Why the fuck was he imagining if he could rip out their throats with his teeth? Why—

“You're new.”

He turned his gaze to the woman approaching from the door. A woman about his height, or taller given her heels. She had a skimpy little black dress that only covered one shoulder, and the skirt was barely long enough to cover her ass. It was a really nice ass though, and he took a second longer than he should have looking the woman up and down. Short blond hair, a white girl with some bite to her eyes and the physique of a fighter finishing a cut. He liked what he saw.

Until the switch in his head turned on again. Look at her, look at her and see the truth. Breathe in the air around her.

She was dangerous.

“I am,” he said, a touch of withdrawnness to his voice. Apprehension, maybe. Sirens, or howls, were going off in his mind, and as much as he tried to keep his eyes on the girl's, they kept going to her arms and the power he could see in the slim-but-hard

muscles. Something else to her though, something else that was screaming at him to be careful. Something that screamed beast.

“You look familiar.”

“Watch any MMA?”

“Oh! Right. Saw you in an injury highlights playback.” She came closer, set her hands on her hips, and looked down at his knee. “Shit was fucking gross.”

“Gross and painful.” He smirked, the sort of smirk people put on when they were trying to seem a bit imposing; he was no exception. This girl didn’t seem to notice though, or care, and she raised her gaze to look at him straight on, meeting him in the eyes with zero awkwardness. Yeah, a little taller than him with her heels on.

“Name?”

“Eric Tanverson.”

“Right right. Rings a bell now.” She snapped her fingers, nodded with the unearthed memory, and came over to stand beside him. “Jessy Herrington.”

The hairs on his arms stood up, and goosebumps started to send chills into his spine. Be fucking careful.

“ ... did you need help with something?”

“Me? Fuck no. Just got here, looking for a snack, saw the cute new bouncer and thought I’d say hi.”

Cute. Something about the way she said it would normally have been irritating, like she’d normally be ripping up the buried memories of his divorce and making him hate her for doing it. But, for some reason he didn’t know, he didn’t feel that from her. Maybe

it was the strange, danger vibe he was getting from her, but the compliment came off more genuine.

“Thanks. You’re gorgeous.”

She grinned, and gave him a gentle punch in the shoulder, a buddy punch, something normally reserved for friends. As normal as saying hi for this girl, apparently.

“Fucking right I am.” She put her back to the wall, same as he had. And it wasn’t long before she had a knee up, foot to the wall, with her arms folded under her breasts and her eyes scanning the crowd. “Uncomfortable on your first day?”

“That obvious?”

“A bit. The other guys are a little more relaxed.”

“You want relaxed in a bouncer?”

She laughed, shrugged, and gestured to Colin. The man was standing beside a booth, and talking to the few in it. Laughing, gesturing with his words, telling a joke maybe.

“You don’t have to get drunk and shit, but in Bloodlust, you ... well, relax. No one’s going to cause trouble, and if they do, I’ll break em for you.” And to prove her point, she raised her hands and cracked her knuckles, putting a hand into the other’s palm for each resounding crack.

“Please don’t. That’s what Bloodlust has bouncers for.”

More laughter. This girl did seem to be actually having a good time, but he couldn’t smell any alcohol on her breath. He shouldn’t have been able to notice that in a club, where the smell was everywhere, but he could. The fact she didn’t have alcohol on her breath was the more unusual thing at the moment though.

“Not true. You’re here to stand around and look pretty, and make people feel more comfortable. Actual bouncing? Doubt it. Besides, lot more people here than me fully capable of taking care of any problems ourselves. Been working well for ... what, ten years now? Hell, longer, just had a name change at some point.”

Ten years to be running a club with this much illegal activity was a pretty impressive time running. He managed a small whistle.

“Well, I guess I’ll just stand here and look pretty.”

Jessy didn’t seem to like that answer. She looked him up and down, a few times at that, each taking him in like she wasn’t sure what she was looking at. Well, same for him. Each time her eyes caught his, they locked, and they stared at each other for a few seconds longer than was normal, than was socially acceptable. Attraction, sure, but he could tell she was sizing him up, the same way he was sizing her up.

“You should come hang out near our table,” she said.

“Our? You’re here alone.”

“Ha, observant fuck, aren’t you?” She shrugged, and gestured to the door, where some more people were coming in. “I’m with the two tiny chicks.”

Two tiny chicks. He imagined this Jessy character pictured her two friends as literal chicks, baby chickens, considering how small they were. A redhead stepped in first, quite short, curvy, with pale skin and freckles. The long red hair was frizzy, and he smiled at the sight of it. The girl that came in immediately behind her was even shorter, so short Eric doubted she cleared four ten barefoot. Long dark hair and a skinny frame, combined with her rather conservative business suit, painted her as meek. He doubted that was entirely true, coming to a club like this, but the first impression was loud and clear, especially compared to the redhead beside her,

who was wearing a green dress with a long, double split skirt, a stomach window, and plunging cleavage. The only thing holding her large breasts in was a tiny strap of the fabric across the chest.

“See something you like?” Jessy said.

“I do. Your friends are quite attractive.”

“I know right? Well Fiona wears it on her sleeve. Natasha though? Looks great when I can convince her to wear something more revealing. And she’s so damn tiny and tight you can barely fit a finger inside her.”

Eric forced himself to look away from the two women, and back to the one beside him. He expected to find her smiling a big smile, the sort you’d wear when being sarcastic, but she didn’t have that. Her smile was subtle, and serious.

“ ... I have to admit, that is a very appealing thought.”

“Ha! Well damn, I like you Eric. Normally I can get a guy either too embarrassed to talk, or reduced to a horny child too stupid to talk.”

He rolled his eyes, but his own smile refused to leave. This Jessy girl was fun. Would any of his passengers have been this fun, if he’d bothered to talk to them?

“Been around the block a few times, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t see a ring,” she said. She got what he was hinting at pretty quick.

“Divorced.”

“Ah. Shitty divorce?”

“Very.”

“That sucks. Single?”

“Yeap.”

She clapped him on the shoulder, winked, and motioned with her head toward the stairway he was standing near. “Come upstairs, stand around, be our guard dog. We could use a guy to talk to. And I’m single, after a fashion, so play your cards right and I’ll fuck you. Or the redhead might.” Not a blink or break in her smile or anything. She was serious. “The super tiny girl isn’t single though.”

“Might not be the best thing, flirting with customers on my first day.” Which wasn’t true at all, from what Ganders told him. His job was to be attractive and stand around. And occasionally sit down.

“Well I know that’s not true. Been coming here a lot longer than you have. Now come on, hang with us.” Damn, she knew the club better than he did.

“ ... alright.”

“Great.” She gave him another buddy punch in the arm, and walked over to join her friends. A few words to them, and the redhead Fiona started laughing, before she peeked past her friend to look at him. And, she finger waved as she walked past. Seemed damn young to be coming to a club like this. Hell both the tiny women looked to be twenty.

But, as they walked past, he froze. The same feeling went through him, the same chill down his spine that his body responded to with enough adrenaline to kill an elephant. He could feel his heartbeat pick up as he caught the shy glances of the tiny girl in the suit, and feel his stomach brace for a fight as he caught the gold gaze of the redhead. The same thing, the same damn thing he felt when he looked at Jessy. No amount of ass swaying she did — and she had the ass of an athlete — managed to wash away the terror filling his guts.

That's what it was. It had to be that. Nothing else explained it. Terror. A cold, heavy, sinking feeling in his gut that weighed him to the floor. Something that ate away at him, paralyzed him, felt like parasites devouring him from the inside out.

He was afraid of these women. A real fear. The fear that bit at the skin when you were a child, turned off the lights in your basement, and scampered up the stairs before the hidden things in the blackness around you grabbed your ankle.

His mind shifted, and things he didn't understand began to click, perspectives falling into place. Everyone else, the other bouncers, the customers he wouldn't be surprised to find armed, the women who had the pepper spray and knife combo in their purses, they all just faded away. All of them were prey. These women, these three perfectly normal looking women were the predators.

Go talk to them? Hang out? Hell, if the Jessy woman was being serious, and it seemed like she was, more than talk. Maybe he could find out what was going on, why he was freaking out, why his heart was beating a million beats a second, and why every muscle in his body was getting ready for a fight.

He gulped, and followed them up the stairs. Up on the second floor, the music was quieter, barely, and the lighting was darker. Still red, with flashing white with the music, but not so seizure inducing. More booths, with people in them drinking and relaxing and talking. Fucking. Maybe not actively fucking, not really, but there was one man leaning back with his arms up onto the back of the booth, with a woman on each side of him, their hands doing something under the table the angle hid. Handjob, from two women, at the same time, and they kissed on the man's neck and lips as they pleased him.

The sex play he'd expected, but Jessy came up to the stranger and said hi while her two friends found another booth, and that he did



not expect. Jessy laughed a few times, asked the man if he was enjoying himself, quiet enough that Eric shouldn't have been able to hear. But he could. She said something about a ghoul, too. Called him a ghoul, maybe? He didn't catch the details, but whatever she said, the man nodded after, called Jessy 'Boss', and then leaned his head back to continue enjoying the touch of the two drunk girls in his booth.

More laughter, all from Jessy, who walked away from the man and rejoined her two friends. She slid into the booth, trapping the smallest girl in the center. Well, maybe trapped was the wrong word, as Natasha seemed far more comfortable having some walls between her and the rest of the club. No doubt they dragged her here, forcing her to get some socializing in. Friends could be real assholes.

Eric walked over to them, and stood beside the booth on Jessy's side. But, he maintained his posture as bouncer, eyes on the floor and looking for anything that needed his attention. There wasn't, but at least he was doing his job.

"Ladies," Jessy said, "this is Eric. New bouncer here at the club."

"H-Hello," Natasha said. Quiet voice, bit of a stutter. Yeap, a bit meek, like he thought. Didn't change the feeling in his gut about about her.

"Good evening!" Fiona said. Bright, bubbly, and with some form of Scottish accent. And as he smiled at the curvy little woman, he felt the cold rock in his stomach grow. There was something to her, something in there, something different than Natasha or Jessy. Something he couldn't put his finger on.

She was beautiful though.

"Good evening ladies."

Fiona giggled, and took a sip of something from her glass. The other two had no drinks.

“Jessy says ye’re Eric?” The redhead took some time looking him up and down, and she squinted at him, as if she’d found ink on his shirt. No such ink was there, but the girl was looking at him anyway.

“I am,” he said, doing his best to sound friendly. Her smile faded, and for a second he thought he failed miserably, but she didn’t frown after like he’d expected. No, it was like the girl was looking at him as if she recognized him, as if she was trying to place him.

And, after a time, it was him who frowned. Which was apparently enough to snap her out of where her brain was taking her, make her sit up a little straighter, and redon her smile.

“Sorry. Thought I recognized ye,” she said. “Want to sit with us?”

“Can’t. Working.”

Jessy rolled her eyes, but shrugged and leaned back in her booth. “You can’t play hard to get to the point where you’re literally impossible, you know. That’s not how the game works.”

Natasha gave her tall friend a small shove. Comical, considering how tiny the girl was. “Jessy! Stop ... y-you know. I mean, Vincent, he’s ... he uh...”

“Getting a handjob from two strangers.” The blond shrugged, gestured with a flick of her fingers to her Vincent buddy, and then elbowed the tiny girl beside her. “He’s a ghoul, not my love. Sometimes I give the boys a week or two off, to do whatever, fucking other girls included.”

“Aye, I can see that. He do anything to get them both on him like that?” Fiona said.

“What? Nah. Vincent’s a sexy fucker; s’ all you need for a fling. Same goes for you ya know.”

The redhead raised her hands like she was praying to an ancient deity. “I’m trying! Just ... other than a few weird run ins in back alleys, and I ken I told Damien they were ... more exciting than I really got involved in, ye ken?”

Jessy laughed. “S’ why we’re here, right? Get you some dick, so your story to Damien won’t be a lie anymore.”

The tiny thing between them sighed and lowered her head until it was flat to the booth table. “I thought we c-came here to eat?”

“Ye two might be able to eat,” Fiona said, “but I need different.”

“How’s that been going?”

Fiona’s voice dropped to a whisper, and she leaned in toward her two friends. Jessy leaned in as well, until the three heads were all within an inch of each other. With the music to bury them, there was no way he’d hear their whispering anymore, a week ago. But now, as he looked down at the three women, these perfectly innocent looking women that had every instinct in his body flexed and demanding he respect their power, he could hear them. Bad idea to eavesdrop on these women, but then, he was never a smart man.

“Azamel’s been helping a lot. I dinnae kill them anymore, and instead of gorging, I take a wee bite every few days. Vrall’s nae used to being ... deprived like this. This constant state of mild hunger is hard on her.”

Ok, what? He raised a brow, and looked between the three women, but they paid him no mind. Whatever it was the Scot was talking about, Natasha and Jessy didn’t seem to notice the words kill and gorging and bite. Hunger? Vrall? He didn’t react, didn’t let

them know he was doing anything more than his job, standing around and looking pretty.

“What about this Eric p-person?” Natasha said. And in the corner of his eye, he caught her peeking past Jessy’s leaning in head to glance at him. “He’s a bouncer. M-Maybe he’s ... a big meanie you can punish?”

Fiona shook her head. “Does nae carry his-self like one. Vrall would recognize the signs. He looks like an asshole, but nae an abusive type.”

“How about some sex then?” Jessy said. “He’s got that hard, stern look going for him. Bad boy maybe, just waiting to have his hard heart melted by your soft touch. And his hard cock pampered by your soft tits.”

Oh good fucking god. Every ounce of training he had stonewalling his wife went into action. He wasn’t offended, but damn, this Jessy girl was shameless.

Fiona snorted on a laugh, peeked over Natasha’s head at him, winked, and lowered her head back to their whispering circle. “Sound like ye want him?”

“I mean, sure maybe. But I’m getting a strange feeling from this guy. S’why I brought him up here,” Jessy said. “I mean, other than him being sexy and very fuckable.”

Fiona snorted again. A strange sound, but it made Eric smile. The juxtaposition of their words and the jovial tone was sending strange signals, like what they were talking about was fine and dandy.

“I am too,” Natasha whispered. “I mean, c-curious about him. Could j-j-just be ... an interesting g-guy?”

“Let’s find out.” Jessy raised her head from the whispering triumvirate, and slipped out of the booth. “I’m gonna grab a quick snack. Be back in five minutes. And you!” She got into his face, set both her hands against his chest, and leaned in. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Fiona and Natasha exchanged a few giggles as they watched Jessy walk down the stairway to the first floor. She made sure every step was exaggerated, so her toned ass, hugged by her barely existent skirt, swayed.

“Y-You ... you’re t-t-tough, to resist Jessy,” the tiny one said.

“Yeah well, a rough divorce can do that to a man.” Regretted it the moment he said it.

Both women made longing sighs, like a scene out of a romance comedy. He frowned, and made his own sigh, a disgruntled one. Didn’t work. The two girls looked at him like he was a wounded puppy now, who needed some TLC. God damn it.

He raised a brow as four more people came up the stairs. Two men, two women.

The switch in his mind went off again.

## Chapter 43

~~Eric~~

Four more people who looked perfectly innocent, four more people putting his nerves on edge. Two men, two women. One white guy, and the other guy looked Hispanic. One black girl, and the other looked Hispanic as well. Mostly average heights for their gender, but they all looked quite fit. Well dressed, with relaxed suits and revealing shirts for the women that exposed hard stomachs. They had some tattoos, and carried themselves with a weird mixture of confidence, but also wariness, as if they were looking for something.

They caught his glance, and nodded his way. He was a bouncer after all, and some notice was to be expected. But beyond that, they moved to the center of the second floor and leaned onto the railing to look down at the dance floor. They moved with synergy, like four people who knew each other very well would. Like four people who would fight together if it came to it.

And they would fight. He could feel it. He could smell it. Was that wood? And ... something else, something he could barely smell. Something he didn't recognize, but made him think of metal. Metal working, maybe?

“A divorce ye say? That sucks. But, seems like ye got a nice job here! Must be a nice place to work,” Fiona said.

He forced his eyes away from the four strangers and toward the lovely, smiling redhead. Attracted to him, and she was the sort of girl who got happy, excited, bubbly, when she was into someone. It almost hurt how fun she seemed.

Some quiet, feminine groans drew his attention as well. The man who'd been calling Jessy 'Boss' was still leaning back, arms on the booth's back while he let the two girls do all the work. But now one of the girls had climbed onto his lap, sitting with her back to his chest, and had her skirt up to her waist. The girl next to her had stopped touching the man, and was now masturbating, based on what Eric could see from her arm angle, eyes blocked by the booth table thank god.

The noise drew the eyes of the two women beside him, and while Fiona outright giggled, Natasha's giggles were more subdued, as if she was nervous about making the sound.

"My first night, and ... you could say I'm a little surprised." He gestured to the man enjoying himself.

"F-First time in Bloodlust at all?" Natasha said.

"No, but I only came here a few times, years ago. And with a girl on the arm and a lethal amount of alcohol in the blood, you don't really notice the other booths."

"Still! Reputation must have p-prepared you."

He winced and scratched the back of his neck. Words never really did justice to seeing other people have sex.

"People here seem happy though." He shrugged, folded his arms across his chest, and looked back to the four by the railing. They whispered, tapped each other on the hands, made a few signs with their fingers, subtle, and not typical sign language either. Almost like he watching a football game, complete with a few tugs on their ears and brushing of their noses. Sly though, almost invisible, before the four walked away.

He watched them leave, until he was sure they were gone. Howls were still going off in his head, animal sirens, demanding he pay

attention to their threat, and match it with his own. Only after a few minutes did the blood stop pumping madly.

He shouldn't have taken this job. Everything was going fine until these girls showed up, and sent his senses into override. Then four more people showed up and did the same thing, only to leave within minutes of arriving. Suspicious. Tell Ganders? Fuck, tell him what? That you're losing you're fucking mind and suspecting his customers of being deadly threats? No, keep your mouth shut and do your job.

He glanced down at the two girls. Natasha looked around her like she wanted to leave, but Fiona was looking at him more and more, taking peeks at him, smiling when she caught his eyes. Bubbly young redhead interested in the older, clearly damaged divorcee? Maybe. And he'd be lying if he said he didn't think the curvy little creature was gorgeous. But, the last thing on his mind was sex. He couldn't get the dreams and images out of his mind, of tearing into things with his teeth and hands. Of the taste of blood and flesh.

It wouldn't be so bad if it he didn't know what the taste was, what the sensations were, if the warmth and metal taste on his tongue weren't clear as day. If the mental images, being inserted into his skull with a pickaxe, weren't so fucking vivid and detailed and filled with smells and sounds and textures, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. And this job, being surrounded by so much flesh and noise, was making it worse.

Quit. Quit on your first day? And what about Pitt and Montel? Sheryl wanted the shit, but he was the fool that agreed to pay for it. He'd made his bed, time to lie on it. The bed was looking more and more like a grave though, until he'd found this job, this job that was making him want to—

“Ye sure you want this job?”

“What?” he said, looking Fiona's way. Mind reader?



“Ye’re nae the bouncer type. The other bouncers here are big and tall and smile. Ye seem more like a fighter, someone who’d be good when the chairs start flying. I mean, I could bring ye home, back to Scotland, and I’d trust ye in a bar fight! But standing there in a suit? Sure ye don’t want to sit down with us?”

Her intention was blatant, but she also wasn’t wrong about him standing there in a suit, frowning and not smiling.

“Debts to pay and a life to rebuild. Bloodlust offered, and I’d be stupid to ignore the knocking at the door.”

The two girls nodded, but Fiona didn’t seem to get the hint that he wasn’t interested in being sociable. Or she did, and considered it a challenge. She got up, scooted around the booth, and sat in it so Natasha was further from him, her closer.

And then she reached out, took his arm, and yanked him down to sit with her. Strong, the little redhead. Plus he was standing while she was sitting, so she had the better balance to yank him sideways and force him to sit or fall. He chose sitting, and frowned at the girl as she grinned at him.

She and her friends had been talking about some strange shit only seconds ago, but now the girl was grinning at him with all the flirtatious need of a horny young woman. And, much as she seemed to be a really nice girl, something about her was scratching him the wrong way. Not the beautiful eyes — golden brown, hint of amber, like his own — or the warm smile or round cheeks that contrasted her obviously flirtatious nature. No, it was something he couldn’t see, something he couldn’t put his eye on or any of his senses on.

“Jessy could take care of those debts,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“Jessy. She’s got connections with Xnomina.”

Natasha turned to them, and raised a brow at Fiona before shrugging. “It’s true. If y-you sleep with Jessy, I’m-m-m sure she’ll help you out. If she likes it, and you.”

Something there, in the unsaid, that Eric could only guess at; apart from the blatant suggestion at selling his body for sex. Well, plus one for gender equality, sort of.

“Not sure you girls want to get involved in Montel’s business.”

“Montoya M-Montel?” Natasha said.

“... you know the man? Why’s a young girl like you know that man’s name?”

“I used to work f-for Xnomina. You ... you might b-b-be surprised what they have their fingers in. And Jessy can—”

“Can what?” The predator came back up the stairs with a bounce in her step, and wiped her lips clean.

The Scot chuckled and shook her head. “Ate already? Dinnae take long.”

“Some cute little blond girl was just sitting all alone, drunk and high and waiting for someone to do something to her. So I had to indulge.” Jessy stopped in front of the booth, and raised a brow as she looked between the three of them. “The fuck happened in the ten minutes I was gone?”

“Ye told me to be aggressive! I’m being aggressive.” Fiona leaned in closer to him, and hooked her arm with his. Even hooked their fingers together, holding hands. She was soft.

“You call holding hands aggressive?”

“Aye! We just met and all.”

“No no. Fiona, you don’t understand. Men are idiots. Braindead morons.” She slid into the booth too, trapping him between her and the redhead. “You have to look him in the eye and tell him to take you home.”

She wasn’t wrong. He wasn’t willing to have any girls over to his current, horrible apartment, but the girl definitely wasn’t wrong.

“Perhaps another time,” he said. The look of disappointment on Jessy’s face bordered on frustration and anger, but Fiona took it differently. Poor girl’s head lowered, and she pouted the biggest pout an adult could pull off without looking silly. Manipulation tactic if he’d ever seen one. “Maybe another night? And maybe a different place. My shithole living space is not exactly female friendly.”

Natasha snorted on a giggle. “Y-You might be surprised what girls c-c-can be like, for hygiene.”

“That was a stab at me, wasn’t it?” Jessy said.

“It was. And, uh, Eric, you said Montel is b-being ... a problem for you?”

Jessy smirked, and leaned in a little closer to him. She was a predator, and apparently a fed predator; he could almost hear her stomach purr its satisfaction.

“Oh man, you got into bed with Montoya Montel?” Laughter, not nearly as subtle as the giggles of her two friends. Jessy slapped him on the leg too, and winked. “I’ll take care of it.”

“ ... you’ll take care of it?”

“Yeap, I’ll take care of it. Cause I like you Eric, I want to keep you around.”

“Your friends suggested sex would be required as payment.”

“Ha! I’m just hazing you. I mean, not that I’d say no, but you’re the new guy and I just had to tease ya.” Jessy peeked past him to the other two girls, who were conveniently looking away, even the redhead still holding his hand, though every so often she threw him another glance that betrayed the jovial attitude. Something was on her mind, and it hit her every time she looked at him. “Serious though, about Montel. Consider your issues with him over. Cause for some reason, I think you’ll do good things for Bloodlust if we keep you around.”

He glanced between the three women. Jessy was a predator, and Natasha was a shy thing, but Fiona was smiling up at him, a twinkle in her eye and a unusual weight he couldn’t place. What was she thinking? Why did she keep looking at him like she knew him?

Hard to think about that with Jessy telling him she’d get Montel off his back. Lying? Crazy? Wouldn’t be the first time a beautiful woman had lied to him, but she had no horse in this race as far as he could tell.

“ ... ok.”

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Night was over, time to leave. Sighing, he wandered around for a little while and re-familiarized himself with the different sights of the club. An hour or two until sunrise, and someone turned on the light to give the cleaning crew what they needed to deal with the mess. And there was a mess. People fucking and drinking and doing lines, hell some people had even eaten food. Madness, but there it was. And all that made for a mess. Not as much of a mess as he’d figured, but there was garbage and condoms and some rather suspicious looking residue on tables and booth seats. The cleaning crew seemed thorough though, like they were used to this, and getting paid well enough to do their jobs proper.

More than just a cleaning crew though. The bouncers drifted around and checked the booths for anything that might be important to someone, or for people who hadn't left yet. Awfully nice of them, the bouncers, doing that; hell, bouncer wasn't the right word for what they did, for his job or theirs. Seemed to be the theme of the joint though, to keep the employees and the customers happy. Happy employees stuck around, happy customers came back. At least they did if either could stand the environment, and he wasn't sure he could.

He raised a brow as he stood by one of the booths. A woman was in there, half asleep, dragging herself up from the depths with a groan. A cute little blond girl. Like the one Jessy said she'd ... she'd what? She hadn't said, but it was implied Jessy had satisfied her hunger somehow, and the girl before him looked utterly drained.

"I ... oh ... oh damn. That girl..." The stranger forced herself up, and standing required some support from the table. Help her? He sighed, it was his job now, to make this a nice place to visit, so he held out his hand for her. She took it, and put all her weight on it. "This girl! A little tall, but really fit you know? She sat down with me ... can ... barely remember. I remember her ... kissing my neck..." The woman shivered, hiccuped twice, and started to walk toward the exit. "Mark is going to be sooo jealous."

He quirked a brow as he watched the woman leave. Hungover, sure, but that didn't explain the odd way she was looking at the ground, or struggling to find energy.

"Heard you kept a few women entertained for a good chunk of the night." Ganders came up to him, stepping in from the front door and saluting him casually. "I got a good eye if I do say so myself. Know just who to pick. And you my good man, are going to bring in many women looking to soften that hard exterior of yours."

Oh good god, he was being whored out by his pimp.

“Two of them tried to fuck me.”

“Understandable.”

“I turned them down.”

“Playing hard to get is perfect! They’ll come back and try harder to get you naked. Or at least with your fly down.”

Eric buried his face in his palm. Well, all things considered, the night had gone well, and he shouldn’t really be upset about Ganders’s prediction. Some sex in his life could be just what he needed to get his mind off the strange shit running rampant in his brain.



~~Julias~~

Beatrice spent the day at his place, sleeping next to him. Something was bothering her, that was plain as day, but he could also tell she didn’t really want to talk about it for more than obvious reasons. Something related to the covenants perhaps, or Jacob specifically maybe. Something had her feeling afraid, but also, wild. Charged, like someone who’d been rubbing their socks on carpet.

They spent the early hours of the next night having sex as well. He should have gone to the Xnomina HQ and taken care of his work, looking into the Mirrden business, examining the latest contracts Xnomina made, insuring profit was had. And of course he should have spent time looking into more direct Kindred affairs, chatting with the various members of Xnomina about what they’ve seen, what they know, and making sure they all knew the score about dealing with the Begotten, the Uratha, and the Carthians now that Barry was dead.

But a certain large, firm ass had demanded he spend the first couple hours of the next night with it. And he was a sucker for that

ass. The fact Beatrice enjoyed anal sex as much as she did was a guilty pleasure he was very happy to indulge. He'd been with many kine in his life, but it was rare to find one who climaxed from anal sex, let alone with as much intensity as Triss.

Not that his actions would have been any different if they'd been having normal sex. But, he'd be a fool to ignore how much synergy the two of them had in bed. He loved her ass, and she loved her ass. Everyone was a winner.

He sat up in bed, and looked down at her panting, exhausted body. Lubricant still coated his softening member, and looking at her naked skin, the tattoos that decorated her toned, lean body, and the size of her ass nudging against his leg, was almost enough to get him hard again. But two orgasms was more than enough to satisfy his sex drive, unless he had a meal to reawaken his animal need. Still, even with his sex drive satisfied, he couldn't help but stare down at her body.

Seeing her lying there on her side was too perfect. He set one hand on her ass cheek, and pulled it apart from her other cheek to expose where her ass was leaking his cum along her perfect skin. Wholly salacious. The sheets around her were soaked as well, mostly in her own juices.

Utterly naughty. He rolled his eyes at his thoughts, chuckled, and leaned down to kiss the side of her ass cheek.

"You ... want more?" she said.

"No. Well, not now. Maybe tomorrow night?"

"I might not be around. I'll try, but I can't promise anything." She rolled over onto her back, and raised her leg closest to him. On queue, he took her heel, and guided her foot toward his face so he could kiss her ankle, her shin, and her knee. Her handful breasts

flattened a little to her chest, and Julias stared at them as he started to massage her calf muscle.

“Ever think of getting any new tattoos?” he said.

“What? I got a lot already.” She put one of her claws on her nipple, where a snake was biting her areola, and she traced its winding, curving form where it lowered down across her abs down to her mons and further, where the tail tip stopped just above the hood of her clitoris. “I really like this one. Scary thing like a snake biting into me, but also kinda highlighting all my curves and tits and shit, you know?”

“I admit, it definitely screams you.”

“Eh? Whatcha mean?”

“Part of what makes you you. Part of what makes you so attractive and interesting are those sorts of things, the snake tattoo being a good example. Gives you an animal edge that ... well, most Kindred in Dolareido don't really have.” He laughed, as the most perfect example came to mind. “Jessy wishes she had as much of a beast inside her as you did, Triss. But, she'll forever be a nineties action hero. Aggressive, sure. Strong and violent, sure. But that animal edge that makes you both scary and alluring? Like a snake? She'll never have that.”

He watched for her reaction, using his poker gaze so she wouldn't realize he was analyzing her expressions. The extra teeth for cheeks, and the snake eyes made reading her a unique experience, but after almost a year of dating, he'd gotten pretty good at it. And her expression read ‘you just told me something in a way that put something I was thinking about into a new, valuable perspective’. Which was good. He hoped.

“Well, with talk like that.” She reached down her stomach to her pierced clit hood, and started to lightly rub the metal so her body



shivered a little, leg in his arms included. She spread her other leg too, so her smooth pussy was on display for him. “Sure you don’t want another round?”

“You know I want another round. But I do have a job. You should get one, make some money, pay rent.”

“Hey, witches don’t need money! We’re dark creatures of the night. We survive on blood and live in shadows. Don’t need no education or thought control.” She sat up, leg still up in his arms. Flexible. And, with a wicked grin she liked to use when she was feeling mischievous, she leaned in to give him a kiss. Still, with her leg up on him. Damn flexible. “See ya later then.”

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With Beatrice in his life, it was easy to forget sometimes that he was a member of the Invictus council. Easy to forget that he was given all the responsibilities of his sire Viktor. Easy to forget that the peace between the Invictus and the Carthians balanced on a knife’s edge every night, and the moment someone made a mistake, the balance was going to slip. Everyone knew it too. Probably why no one in the Invictus wanted to bring up Barry, in case his death was actually a precursor to war.

Julias paced back and forth in the meeting room. The twelve at his command sat at the table, a long slab of dark wood, likely from an endangered species, knowing Viktor. The larger of the rooms, but still high in the Xnomina HQ, with LEDs in the ceiling turned down to a subtle light, to give the room an imposing, secretive feel. To the Kindred in the room, it was just normal, natural, for the room to feel like a secret gathering of agents determining the fate of the city. They didn’t realize how much of that aesthetic was illusionary, fake, created by people like him. Real secret agencies didn’t sit around in dark rooms, discussing the future over folders filled with pictures of people, places. Real secret agencies simply had a group of men or women who came to a conclusion, brightly lit room and all, and

then dolled out the orders via the latest in communication equipment to their agents, without any of the artistic elements.

When Viktor was around, he engaged in the artistry of dark rooms and imposing suits as Julias did, but he did not entertain the words of his subordinates. The right hands of the Invictus had no say in what they did. The senior Kindred below them had no say. The younger Kindred below them had no say, and doubly so for fledglings.

But now he was a part of that council, and he wanted to get Jessy, and the other senior Kindred involved in making decisions. Maria and Michael approved. Much as they were a royal pain in his ass, they weren't the dictator Viktor was.

They weren't in the meeting though. Maria was with Damien, discussing matters of how those two would be working together and starting the Second Estate. Sort of. It'd be years before the Prince acknowledged the Lancea et Sanctum as a functioning covenant of Dolareido. Decades perhaps. And Michael was playing his own games, mostly about expanding Xnomina in ways as to show off its power, and his prowess. If he wasn't careful, the company would be caught creating monopolies on certain software venues.

But Invictus lived for the thrill of such economic exploits. To successfully set up a monopoly and get away with it? To have the entire world eating out of the palm of their hand, forced to pay absurd amounts for something they could only get from Xnomina, was a pleasing thought. Capitalism and Kindred were kindred spirits. Predators feeding on prey, the strong get stronger and the weak perish as food.

Too cruel? Perhaps. But it was a tried and true system developed by mother nature herself. The Carthians could disagree with it all they wanted, but their obsession with searching for 'better' ways to

govern territory and handle the economy was wishful thinking at best, dangerous delusions at worst.

He looked around at his fellow Kindred. Twelve of them, Jessy included, the entire population of the more older Kindred in the employ of the First Estate in Dolareido. Other cities had their own Invictus, and while they communicated with each other on occasion, cities were generally left to their own devices. So, for the Invictus in Dolareido, he had the twelve in front of him at his command.

“The Mirrden expansion is almost complete,” he said. He had his hands in the small of his back, and head looking down slightly to put on his thoughtful look. “And none of you have reported any new conflicts with the Carthians.”

Jessy nodded. “Seen a few of them hanging around. Last night, I think that Joe fuck tried to start something. Just barking though, nothing came of it.”

“And you Vanna?”

Bruce Vanna, fellow Ventrue, with a good thirty or forty years embraced under his belt. Potential replacement for him and Natasha as his right hand. Maybe. The man had a habit of being a bit too indirect and passive about things. That was fine, and an elegant way of navigating a snake pit, but not the best approach when the council needed something done immediately, no questions asked.

The tall man tapped his fingers on the table a few times. “The werewolves showed up, a couple of them at least, according to James. Asked some questions about the burned buildings, but otherwise didn’t seem to care about Mirrden.”

“Makes sense they’d be wondering about the fires. We—”

“They ... did ask James if he’d seen anything strange. The boy inquired, and they asked him if he’d seen any people acting out of character, or maybe movement in the corner of his eyes or in shadows. Asked if he’d seen things that vanished upon investigating.” Vanna tapped his chin a few times too, before leaning forward to rest his elbows on the office table. “This was last night. I do wonder what they’re looking for.”

Isabella shrugged and gestured to some of the pictures on the table. While there were plenty of the Mirrden construction, there were also plenty of the Uratha. While the beast within Kindred was a master at deceiving cameras, film, and all forms of recording devices, the special ability of Uratha to distort what people saw — and recording devices according to some myths — only occurred when they were transformed or transforming. To take pictures of them while in their human form was easy enough.

“Perhaps another hunt?” she said. “Your childe Master Terry was quite adamant that the Uratha were helping us deal with a problem, instead of having brought it with them.”

“Master Terry can be a bit naive in some ways, but also perceptive and objective in others,” Julias said. “I trust his judgment with the Uratha. And, as much as we have a troubling history with Avery, don’t forget it was her pack leader Simon who led to many of the issues we had with them, not Avery.”

The group nodded, though Isabella didn’t seem too convinced about the werewolves’ leader. Understandable. She was just a young neonate when that chaos had started.

“So,” he continued, “if the werewolves are asking about strangeness, then we should be looking for strangeness. Don’t throw yourselves into any madness though; leave the wolves to hunt their hunts, and stay out of their way until I say otherwise.

Understood?" The group nodded without missing a beat. "Good. Next point of discussion: living arrangements."

"I'm sorry, Mister Mire?" Vanna said.

"Barry's death and his burned down home are not accidents." He pointed to the pictures of the burned building Jack and Amanda had taken. A lot of duplicates on the table for the group to look at too. "Much as it's easy to dismiss his death, we're not going to do that. Something's happened. What happened, we don't know, but we're not going to simply ignore it. Some of us are investigating, as you can see, and as for the rest of us, we need to consider our lives in danger from an unknown threat. A threat that might be active during the day."

"Thralls? Ghouls?" Jessy said.

"Perhaps, but then we'd know it was a Kindred to blame, and we have no suspects. Mister Tones is unlikely to be the cause of this. Mister Burksen is just as unlikely. And the Prince? Or Jacob? The other covenants do not have a decent reason to kill someone like Barry, or burn down his nest."

Isabella tapped her fingers on the pictures a few times before raising one of them to examine it. "A shame they were not caught on camera."

Julias raised a brow. "They?"

"Two men, two women, two trench coats and two leather jackets. Kine who have been seen both near Mirrden, and once outside Bloodlust."

"Right," Jessy said. "I read that in Jack and Amanda's latest report about his investigation. Then again, I could put together a half dozen similar leads if I was willing to accept such vague and meaningless connections. I've got a sighting of a man with barbed

wire tattoo around his neck at Mirrden on three separate occasions. Looked into that already. Turns out he's just a kine who lives nearby and hates the noise."

The Gangrel had a point. Still.

"Keep an eye open," he said. "But, back to the matter at hand. Everyone will need to start taking defensive measures with their sleeping dens. Those of you familiar with, or alive during the purge era of Lucas and our constant struggles with the Carthians will already know what to do. Those of you who have not found a sleeping nest that is secure, do so. Ask your fellow Invictus if you need help."

Gloria leaned forward and made a small, opening wave with her fingers. "How secure are we talking about?"

"Secure enough that I won't be sleeping in my normal bed anymore," he said. The mansion had a dungeon, secure, safe, with escape routes within. Perfect for Kindred to sleep during the day. "I should have started sleeping in my secure location already, but, like you, I've been in denial about the dangers approaching the city. The ball will soon be upon us, and the Prince has highly encouraged the peaceful state we've managed to acquire."

Jessy laughed. A real, deep laugh, that had the rest of the room smiling eventually. "She's even giving Lucas's childe a chance to bring back the Second Estate. She really wants peace."

"And I know some of you think that's an opportunity for us," Julius said. "And if you think you have a plan to usurp the Prince, by all means, bring it to me, so I can laugh at your idiocy." That destroyed some of the smiles in the room. Good. "Back to my point. We're in a limbo state. One half pushing for peace, while the other must now be careful of violence. From now on, everyone is to sleep in a safe nest. Instruct your childe or subordinates in this, or at least make sure they are taken care of."

He began to pace around, and put on his serious face, a face he could adopt in any situation, and bring everyone in the room into line. And they did. They knew better than to joke around when he was instructing.

Sometimes, he wondered if they considered him a second Viktor. Did they worry he might cross a line, and start hurting, perhaps killing Kindred who antagonized him? He wouldn't, but it was useful that they thought he might.

“Get thralls. I expect each of you to have at least a couple of kine to watch your assets during the day. But, as always, keep your thralls in the dark about any and all Kindred activity. Those of you with ghouls are expected to do the same, and expected to train them in some basic combat and marksmanship. All Invictus Kindred are being armed with silver knives, but these are not to be used except as a last resort. Remember, we don't have reason to suspect the wolves of anything yet. If the situation does arise that the wolves become our enemy, we will start arming people with silver bullets. And if the situation escalates beyond that, shotguns and fully automatic rifles with silver ammunition are available. We're the Invictus, and we get the good toys.” A smile told the group it was ok to smile as well, and they did, Jessy including a chuckle.

“Moving on. Azamel.” That made him grimace, and everyone else too. “The deed is done. I will be meeting with the monster later tonight, along with Madam Turio and Mister McDonald. Some of you know the details, some of you don't, and it's to be kept that way. If she retaliates, report to your designated posts with your chosen weaponry. Understood?”

The group nodded, glancing between each other with worry on their faces. She could retaliate, and it could be as bad as last time Azamel decided to push her weight around. But not if he could help it.

“Dismissed.”

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The tunnels. He did not like the tunnels, but it was important for him to know them, and know them well. The same applied to every aspect of the city, but the tunnels were different. They were not only how many Kindred moved around the city without drawing attention to themselves, they were also occasionally shared. Carthians used them, and every so often the Invictus and Carthians ran into each other down in the Earth. So knowing the veins of the city’s underground was paramount.

But he wasn’t down here to deal with that. Part of him wanted to go check out the damage done by the monster as well, if only to see with his own eyes how much carnage these alien creatures had caused. The pictures had been thorough however, as was the clean-up. Reconstruction would have to wait, but at least the bodies, the webbing, all that was gone. The corpse of the Azlu creature was a pile of burnt flesh, unrecognizable in any fashion. The other one, the human half that remained, was disposed of. And no humans had access to these tunnels anyhow, but redundancy was the bedrock of consistency. You don’t gamble or take risks with the Masquerade, you doubled up on every security precaution.

He wasn’t down here to investigate the damage though. He, and the two elders beside him, were here to talk with Azamel.

Maria Turio, Julias Mire, and Michael McDonald. The two men wore suits, while Maria wore a rather ghostly dress of white that looked like it belonged in the 1920s, complete with long, ripped skirt that trailed along the tracks. Her mastery of the cloak of night was more than enough that any kine in the city would find their eyes sliding off of her, and any noises to fade into the background hum of the world. Just a ghost, wandering the darkness of the strange city.



Julias glanced back over his shoulder. There were ten people behind him, nine, thralls of Michael and Maria and his own. Each given three drops of Kindred blood to bind them, and no more, so they would forever crave the affection of their master without ever obtaining the immortality or strength of a ghoul. Cruel, but that was the way of Kindred. Each agent, seven men, three women, was a trained marksman, and each was armed with a fully automatic rifle of illegal make, using ammunition meant to pierce metal. They also wore an earpiece that matched their all-business suits. It was almost comical, as if he was seeing a scene from a movie, with professional agents ready to unleash a hailstorm of bullets or the full weight of the government's ire at any point.

The agents were needed. Bullets worked surprisingly well against most things, even monsters, when you used a few thousand of them at a time.

“Perhaps we should have brought your childe, Mister Mire?” Michael said. “He was the first Invictus to make true contact with her since her return. And he has been a successful intermediary with the Uratha, strangely enough.”

“Maybe. But I'd prefer to let him think we're trying to be friends with everyone, Begotten included.” True contact? What other Invictus had been sneaking down to speak to the old woman?

“The illusion you present him is not entirely incorrect,” Maria said. “We're not visiting her to cause conflict.”

“You don't think us oppressing her will lead to conflict?”

“Oppressing is a strong word.” Michael frowned as he almost stepped in a puddle, before he stepped around it with a careful sway, like each step could land him in shit. Walking through dirty old tunnels was not the business of elders, but sometimes a hands-on approach was required. “I prefer to think of this as an exchange of priorities.”

“You know full well she’s not going to think of it like that.” He sighed and pressed his hand to the sides of his suit jacket. Sword was there, as was the pistol, and the silver knife. Not that silver knives would be useful against a monster, but the mandate for silver on hand at all times was for everyone in the Invictus, him as well.

Maria shook her head, and gave him a small pat on the arm. “Your sire is not here this time, Julias. And, while you were always of great value to the Invictus, when you were young Mister Honors would often leave out important details. As for Azamel, your sire occasionally tried to force her into obeying his commands, even when such commands were to her detriment. She did not take it kindly.”

Their voices weren’t carrying like Julias would have expected. Maria, altering the perception of sound to keep their voices away from their little army. Such talk was not for the ears of kine, thralls or otherwise.

“You telling me Viktor was the one who drove her to violence?”

“After a fashion. Ultimately, she struck first,” she said.

Michael sighed, loudly at that, and shrugged. “Azamel plays her games, and destroys that which opposes her. And, more than anything, the monster craved power. She wanted to rule her own little world, and as she tried to expand that to include Kindred, Viktor and her naturally conflicted.”

“That,” Maria said, “is why the Prince is not happy she has returned. It appears to be a part of her desire, her appetite, to rule others.”

“I am aware.” He nodded as they continued along. They’d discussed this all before, but now, they were trusting him with a few details they hadn’t in the past. Slowly but surely, they were

confiding in him. Slowly but surely, he'd worm his way into being an even partner in their council, and he'd force the two of them into peaceful compromises with the other covenants with far greater success.

Big plans take time. And Kindred had all the time in the world.

“What you are not aware of is how many times Viktor and Azamel came to blows.” The Gangrel wasn't happy, but at least his anger wasn't directed at Julias. With unending frowns to join his chin strokes and thoughtful poses, he gestured to the path ahead of them. “And I am sure Lucas and the woman did as well.”

“True,” Maria said. “I will ask his childe if Lucas had anything to say about her, or perhaps left some information, or tool, for dealing with her. And you, Mr. Mire, has Viktor left any advice or tool for dealing with this tyrant? I fear your lack of addition to this conversation would mean no.”

“Correct. Beyond our reports from our last encounter with Azamel so many years ago, I am as blind as anyone else in this endeavor.” And no Ventrue was happy being blind. If he didn't know every possible detail about the scenario, manipulating people into doing what he wanted became exceedingly difficult. Azamel was a mystery, and that had to change.

The mission was simple enough. The three of them were to explain to Azamel that she was a visitor in the city, and the Invictus were the rulers. The old beast would respond with lies, or half truths, or straight defiance, and then it would be up to the council to force her to accept the situation, on the spot. Leaving with any degree of leeway in their role as rulers was unacceptable, not when the Invictus were finally stabilizing after the death of Viktor and Lucas. The Mirrden expansion was basically complete, and the Carthian's position in the city diminished appropriately; which invited retaliation. And before the inevitable shove from them, the

Invictus triumvirate wanted a handle on the Azamel situation before that bit them in the ass.

One did not rule over millions of kine through procrastination and wishful thinking. You had to be proactive, hunt for opportunities, and squash problems before they cascaded into explosive consequences. Plans versus reactions. It was what separated the Invictus from the Carthians, the ability to consider the future, and plan ten or twenty steps ahead, whereas Garry and his impulsive covenant could barely plan where they'd sleep before the sun rose.

“Sure I shouldn't call for Herrington?” Michael said. “Girl might be an impulsive idiot, but she can throw a punch.”

Julias shook his head. “I've worked with your childe many times, Mister McDonald, and I can personally confirm that a delicate situation such as this is better off without her.”

The big guy nodded and wiped away the corner of his mouth with his thumb. “We need to repopulate the right hands of the Invictus. It will be some time before we can find or train people to be as useful as the three of you were together, Mister Mire, but it must be done eventually.”

He nodded with the compliment, and took care to not look Maria's way, without giving away that he wasn't looking her way. The whole Natasha situation was still a sore spot.

The ghost woman sighed and brushed off a bit of dust from her shoulder, only for it to disappear into the subtle mist that fell from her body. “While you may feel it best to have this meeting in person, face to face with the monster, Mister Mire, it is proper for the council to delegate such tasks. The right hands would take care of this, and relay our wishes to Azamel.”

Yeah well, they didn't have right hands anymore. They had to make do in the meantime.

“Madam Vendram and Madam Leauvion, as well as Mister Vanna are possibilities,” he said. The others didn't look convinced.

“Vendram I believe is too impulsive,” Maria said, “similar to Madam Herrington, except without the strength to enforce it. Perhaps, once her power grows to the required levels, she could join the right hands. Until then she is a liability. Leauvion ... again, perhaps. The woman is more interested in her plays, her dramas, than pursuing Invictus superiority. And Mister Vanna is not skilled in the ways of combat.”

“Combat skills can be taught.” It's how he learned. Not everyone needed to be a natural at combat to be worthy of being a right hand. Natasha wasn't. It took a lot of effort to not say that, but Natasha was a good example of many great qualities they needed in right hands.

“Maybe,” she said. “But then, perhaps ... Damien could fulfill the role?”

“Damien? He's not Invictus.”

“No, he is not. But as we talk of the Lancea et Sanctum, I have come to find the boy both intelligent, and skilled.” She nodded to herself as she looked down. The sound died away as both Julias and Michael looked at her, both raising a brow as they watched the deformed woman smile. “I see why Lucas sired him.”

“That may be,” Julias said, “but that doesn't change that he's not Invictus.”

“No, but I think extenuating circumstances exist. And as my role grows in helping Damien with the Second Estate, I feel a business relationship growing as well. I will support him, and perhaps, he

will support me as my right hand.” Still smiling, she turned her half-rotted face to Julias, and looked into his eyes without a blink or flinch. “Natasha has left us, and I cannot fault her for that. When she has lived for centuries as I have, perhaps she will understand why I made the choices I did. Until that time, I must accept that she is gone, and if I were to attempt explanation, my words would fall on deaf ears.”

“You may find she is more willing to talk with you than you suspect, Madam Turio.” Worth a shot, but he doubted the ghost woman would listen to him. Still, big of her to realize Natasha’s departure was warranted.

“I ... perhaps, Mister Mire. Perhaps.”

The Gangrel raised his hand and wiped away the conversation with a subtle flick of the wrist. “We’ll discuss it later. We’re here.”

Deep underneath Morning Street was where Azamel decided to nest. A large room of concrete, metal, and a stage, a raised platform of concrete where the woman had set up the sort of things one might find in their grandmother’s bedroom and living room. From fifty years ago. He smirked at he looked across it, but the smirk vanished as his eyes landed on the old woman rocking back and forth in her chair.

“Figured the three of you would show up together at some point,” Azamel said. “And you brought friends?”

Julias sighed, and glanced over his shoulder at the ten men and women. Their rifles were at the ready, and their eyes were taking in every and all sights around them. No mistakes were allowed, or they could end up dead; Azamel or Maria would kill them, depending.

“Hello Azamel,” Michael said, arms folded across his chest and scowl chiseled into his face.

“Skip the hellos.” A drag of her cigarette later, she blew the smoke into the air with the practiced ease of someone who’d been smoking for over a hundred years. “Only one of you I haven’t had a private conversation with already is this Julias boy.” Tapping some of the ashes into her ashtray, she winked at him. “Glad to see Viktor’s death agreed with you. What an asshole.”

Of course Maria and Michael had talked with Azamel in private. And he hadn’t. Easy to forget sometimes that the two elders were older than him, smarter than him, knew how to take advantage of opportunities he’d yet to even see. Azamel was an opportunity, a powerful woman and a potentially powerful ally, if they could somehow get her on their side.

“Relax Mire,” the old woman said with a hoarse chuckle. “I can hear the gears turning in your head from here. Maria and Michael have nothing to offer me, no deals to be struck. Neither do you, before you ask.” Another puff of smoke, another chuckle, and then a coughing fit he thought for sure was going to be followed with her coughing up a black lung. “But, if it’s all three of you visiting, then I’m sure this is a more official meeting. What about the suits with guns? Brought me a snack?”

The ghost woman and the big Gangrel looked to him. Either because they valued his ability to speak fluently and convincingly, or because they needed a scapegoat in case the conversation went badly. Probably both.

“We’re here to discuss the inevitable conflict between us,” he said.

“Inevitable?” She tapped her cigarette against her ashtray, before flicking the butt down to join them. Like a queen on her throne, her ugly rocking chair upon a two-foot-tall stage of concrete.

“Yes, inevitable. We know you hunger for power, Azamel, in a way we can not understand. We’ll come to blows the same way you and Viktor and Lucas did, given time.”

“Damn vampires always approaching problems from the side, never straight on. Heaven forbid you speak plainly.” She shrugged and gestured to her sides, where Julias would have expected her supposed subordinates, Athalia and Mark, to be standing. But they were nowhere to be found.

Julias didn’t trust his eyes though, or Maria’s or Michael’s. Without a Mekhet’s auspex, there was always the chance a rather skilled creature was hiding under a Kindred’s cloak of night, or their own derivative. Never seen this Mark fellow before either, but rumors about him drifted through the Kindred web. A creepy man, to say the least. And Athalia, the woman was a ghost until recently, barely ever seen except for her awakening and interactions with Daniel, until Azamel’s return at least.

“Then we’ll be blunt.” Growling, the big Gangrel stepped forward and wiped away non-existent dust from his chest. “We don’t want you here, but, like the Prince, we understand forcing you to leave is more trouble than it’s worth.”

Azamel snorted a chuckle. “Naturally.”

“So,” he continued, “to prevent the issues of before, you must understand that if you step out of line even slightly, the Invictus will deal with the situation swiftly.”

She laughed, and fell into coughing fits once more. “How the mighty have fallen.”

It was the ghost lady’s turn to get angry. “Excuse me? You—”

“Silence.” The ancient woman stomped her foot, hidden underneath an old skirt and worn slippers with socks. It would have been comical, if the room hadn’t shook with the impact, if a thundering explosion of vibration and sound hadn’t ripped through the concrete around them, and if the lot of them hadn’t stumbled, many of them falling over. The three Kindred managed to stay



upright, mostly, but the host of guns at their call fell to their backs and sides with the invisible shockwave.

“You come here, and threaten me? When I’ve yet to even hurt a fly?” the old woman said. Standing up, Azamel gripped a walking stick, a simple thing of carved wood, and inched her way across the stage to stare at them from its ledge. “Stronger have tried, worthless leeches. Lucas, Viktor, these you know, and know these were but pests in my way.”

Julias forced himself back to standing, and glared at the old woman. Not an old woman, no. There was something there, behind her, around her, something that buried them all in its presence. At first it was only a blur, something gray and unfocused along the edges of his vision, but as he looked around, he found the entity did not flutter or disappear; not a trick of the light then. It stood there, towering over Azamel, on her, in and around her, and it held out four arms like mountains, each with man-like hands, though each as big as a person themselves. The thing inside her was gargantuan.

Before he could search for other defining features, the gray thing faded away, a mirage, flickering into the light. It’d been the size of the colossal room, literally, and even with it gone, he could still feel its titanic weight bearing down on him. Felt like he was trying to talk to a god, to control and break a god to his will. Oddly thrilling, and he hid the desire to smile behind his poker face.

“Here you three stand, dirt on your shoes and dust in your hair. How the might have fallen. Council? Triumvirate of the Invictus? Don’t make me laugh. Where is your army? Where is the weight of steel and money that the Invictus are known for? Where are the devils that sit in the darkness of candlelight, dictating the lives of millions as they discuss the growth of their empire? You three are weak. At least Viktor understood the power of his position, as did Lucas. But you three? More concerned with yourselves than true power, than true domination, than—”

“Azamel. Enough.” Michael stepped forward, and dismissed her rant with a wave of his hand like wiping a table clear. “The three of us do not seek to crush the world under our heel; at least, not with the same gusto as Mister Honors, or Lucas. But if you mistake our generosity with weakness, then we’ll have to set the record straight.” A wild smirk graced the Gangrel’s face, and he pulled from his pocket his smartphone to show the woman the screen.

“ ... and this is?”

Julias couldn’t keep the smile back anymore, and had to resist the need to jump in and gloat. But Michael was doing his thing, and while he may not have had Julias’s tact, the man could be imposing when he wanted to be.

“A video feed of some of the explosives we’ve set up in the tunnels. A couple of them, anyway.”

“ ... excuse me?” the old tyrant said.

Maria stepped forward, and brought up her phone as well, showing another video feed. “Thralls will be watching these tunnels, all the tunnels that we know you’re attached to. If any attempt is made to remove the explosives, they will be detonated.”

Such a beautiful sight, the three of them working together. In the past, Viktor was more or less the leader, and the council was often the voice of one man. Now, it was the voice of three.

Julias’s smile grew, into a mischievous grin, and he folded his arms across his chest as he looked at the tiny old monster on the stage. “We know you love these tunnels, Azamel. The Invictus have many reports of your activities last time you were here, and how often you fell back to these tunnels, how often you vanished into them. You have quite an attachment to them. Almost unnatural, according to the reports. Naturally, a plan was devised in case of your return.”

The old woman glared at him, eyes wide, jaw clenched behind the hanging skin. “You would damage your city just to spite me? You don’t even know why I prefer these tunnels as my home.”

Too bad for her, the Invictus covered their bases. “And yet, we have recorded over two dozen instances where, upon conflict with Viktor or Lucas, you returned to these tunnels. To this specific area, in fact.” He adjusted his suit jacket, his tie, and smirked Viktor’s smirk.

The old woman sat back down, sighed, and lit another cigarette. “You want war?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, we don’t want war. And we’re not here to force you to obey us, or bully you into anything. Except for one very specific thing: do not upset the peace. And before you suggest that you wouldn’t dare damage the fragile peace we have here, we are not willing to risk it. Consider the explosives a deterrent, nothing more.”

The monster squeezed the arms of her chair, and glared at him with the weight of a colossus. “Check your history, boy. A policy of deterrence has a habit of falling apart.”

“Enough.” The ghost woman sighed, and stepped back, signaling her desire to leave. “We will not let you scamper away into the dark, and enact your inevitable plans for control. But, we are also willing to leave you be, as the Prince already is. Enjoy it, old monster, and remain quiet. Or we will not tolerate your presence.”

And of course, the ghost lady kindly neglected to mention that the Prince, who undoubtedly knew the Invictus were setting up explosives, had not condoned the action. She’d bring it up at the next Primogen meeting, and be angry with them, but it was better this way. Easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.

“... am I to expect any other traps?” the old monster said.

“Of course.” Michael shrugged, and also started to turn to leave. The maneuver was excellent for giving the ‘over the shoulder glance’ that Invictus were ever so fond of. “But we tell you about the explosives to let you know we’re serious.”

Julias turned to join his companions. “In short, Azamel, the Invictus had plans in case something like this happened. We have other measures installed to deal with you, if it comes to it. And I should hope it does not. But we will not acquiesce the position of power to you. You are welcome to stay in Dolareido as long as you do not defy us.”

“And what is your first commandment then, oh holy triumvirate of leeches?” She was angry. Very angry. Julias could almost see the god entity around her form again, the strange giant with four arms. Just blurs of shadow.

“No commandment,” he said, “except that you mind where you step. If you try and take over any districts like the last time you were here, we will act.”

Her frown grew, and she sank back in her chair as if held down by a great stone. Trapped, and furious about it. “I have done nothing but sit here in the dark, quietly I might add, while pursuing my own, silent goals. This is how I am repaid?”

He shook his head. “And when you achieve that goal, will it be so silent? I doubt it. But, be warned Azamel, this is not a bluff. Push us, and we will respond with far greater force than Lucas or Viktor ever did.”

“ ... you’ll regret trying to corner me.”

“Think of it as self defense,” he said. “We know you’ll go on the attack eventually. In what manner, we don’t, so until then, safety precautions.” He turned to join his leaving companions, and the

squadron they brought with them, before offering Azamel a similar glance over his shoulder like Michael's. "We'll be watching."

The old monster scowled, and watched them leave. The looming presence over her buried the large room in its shadow, and a deep rumble he wasn't quite sure was real started to fill the room. Subtle, quiet, tingling on his shoes into his toes, a gentle vibration that had the kine glancing around with guns raised and looking for the source. It was real then.

A monster, a monster he didn't understand and could not understand; she never explained herself or her intentions. Far as he knew, previous attempts to learn about who she was, her past, what she was, were met with silence.

Natasha and Daniel were likely already looking into the Begotten, and Azamel specifically no doubt, to see if there would be a way to deal with her. Garry probably was too. Maybe he should ask Jack to look into it too? If there was anyone who could ask the woman about who she was, and not piss her off, it was him. But then, did he want to risk Jack like that. He didn't want to, but any information they got about the woman was valuable.

Once they were a good ways away, Michael and Maria started to laugh, again disguised by Maria's cloak of night to keep their voices from leaving their vicinity.

"What's so amusing?" he said.

Maria chuckled a few more times until she forced them down, and pat the man on the arm. "Viktor may have become a brute with age, and a long torpor that twisted his mind to madness, but I remember when he was young, Mister Mire. And in that encounter just now, you sounded much like your late sire."

"I was afraid of that." Easy for her to comment on it like it was no big, like it was a good thing he was becoming more and more like

that tyrant.

He could vaguely remember a time when he and Beatrice, still new to their relationship, were lamenting their hatred for the Danse Macabre to each other. A hate for Kindred and their scheming, a hate for deception and manipulation, and a hate for the feeling of never feeling like you could trust someone. And here he was, playing games with a monster, and gambling the safety of his city on how well he could do all those things.

Every night he had to play this game, now with newer, higher stakes. And despite it all, he found a certain joy in it. He always did enjoy poker. And he always did enjoy being in control. Controlling a city was like doing both.

What would Beatrice think? Well, based on the vibe he was getting from her lately, she'd probably admit to similar from her own end, and Jacob's games.

He smirked as he thought about the upcoming ball. Jennifer was going to be there, and despite what Triss said, Julias knew Beatrice really wanted a taste of her. Whatever had scared her last night would fade, and, if he guessed right, his lover would be playing in the Danse Macabre in ways only Jacob could understand. Once she realized her fear was transitory, she'd squirm a little and try and sneak in that she did in fact want Jennifer to join them in bed.

He'd only agree if he felt she was comfortable with it; Beatrice, not Jennifer. Jen he doubted had ever felt uncomfortable with anything sexual in her whole, short life. She was probably helping Triss try on some clothes right now, and was groping his girlfriend's breasts and ass at every opportunity.

The image was not an unpleasing one.



~~Beatrice~~

Two days until the ball.

She came back to the Circle's cave, and let her mind drift back to the wake-up sex she'd just had with Julias. Far less foreplay, far more her lying down on her back, pillow under her hips, while Julias fucked her missionary style. And with the ass raised on the pillow, the angle let each deep stroke of the man hit toward her belly, hit that spot along her pussy that just fucking slew her every time.

Spending the evening — morning to a vamp — squirting straight onto her man's stomach as he fucked her ass, was a great way to wake up. Made it easier to forget what Jacob did to her, and the thing Jacob called friend. The weird, alien, ghostly, chthonic, whatever-it-was thing had called him Malachi. She had to ask about that, once she got over the reality that Jacob was able to summon some strange death-like creature to possess a corpse. Christ, it'd possessed a corpse.

She stopped in the opening of the cave, the tight tunnel hidden in the canyon, and banged her head a few times against the rock. Yeah, she was a major sex addict, a nympho, anal lover, and all around hornball. But that didn't explain how she could let her mind go in that direction after what Jacob did to her. After what she'd seen.

She touched her stomach again, exposed by the tank top, and winced. Healed, but the memories were vivid. Stabbed. Jacob had fucking stabbed her. Several times! And that ... that ... thing, it fucking cut into her. Split open skin. Forced drops of her Kindred blood from her and spilled them onto the cavern floor. The man and thing had watched as she frenzied in pain and hunger from being bled, and had waited for her to regain control, before resuming their torture.

She'd agreed to it, agreed to being tied up and tortured, because she was a moron. A curious moron, who, despite looking an actual

corpse possessed by some death entity in the eyes, wanted to know. She fucking wanted to know what horrible things hid in the darkness that made fucking vampires look like chumps, like pussies, like house cats compared to tigers.

Was it because she'd spent twenty years thinking Kindred were the things kine feared in the night, thinking that her and her fucked up shark mouth was the scariest shit humans had to worry about, and now she realized they weren't? Vampires were just the tip of the iceberg, fucking blase and cliché compared to the true horrors Jacob was dealing with.

Why the fuck did it fascinate her so much?

She forced herself to keep moving. Afraid to see Jacob again. Afraid to expose her back at all, to anyone right now. Fuck, she was not used to this. Hadn't felt like this, this paranoid about anything and everything since her first few weeks as a Kindred. Thought for sure she'd seen things in the darkness, haunting her, following her. Maybe she'd been right.

She didn't sense the man in the cave tonight; usually, it was quite easy to sense the presence of an elder if they weren't hiding it. No Aaron either, alcove empty and not sitting around anywhere with his inevitable reading.

A bunch of moans and groans told her to look into Othello's room though. She stood in his doorway, and jaw-dropped.

Othello's ghoul Madison lay upon her master's body, her back to his chest, her head hanging back over his shoulder, the two of them lying down. Her legs were spread, and facing the doorway as well so Beatrice could see the man had his cock in her ass. Perfectly normal. What wasn't normal was Jen's two ghouls were also in the room, sitting back against the alcove's walls, drained of blood and of cum, with white fluid dripping down their abs and soft cocks. And Jen



herself, lying beside Madison, her hand playing with the ghou's soaked cunt.

“Umm, hello,” Triss said.

“Oh! Beatrice. How are you?” Jen said, glancing her way without pausing her pampering of Madison's insides. They were well past clit play, and into full on hard fingering at this point.

And now that Beatrice had a moment to watch, she could see Madison was barely awake. She was grunting and moaning, but quietly; Othello or Jen must have already drained her some.

“You two fucking each other now?” she said.

Othello turned his head enough to look down past his ghou's body to her. “Sometimes.”

“When we've both eaten, and want to eat some more. Sometimes.” Giggling, Jen winked at Triss, and returned to her poor, defenseless target. Girl wasn't just drained, she was a live wire of orgasms, leaking juices all over Othello's cock while Jennifer fingered her g-spot, fingers in to the second knuckle and pressing upward against her insides.

Beatrice wasn't here for this. She was here to talk to Jacob, not get sucked into another porn watching session, especially not after just having some great morning sex with her lover. But a little peek wouldn't hurt her.

God damn it, what was the matter with her? Why wasn't she curled up in a ball, crying on Julias's shoulder about what Jacob did to her?

Madison's shivers drew Triss's eyes like moth to flame. Her legs were spread wide, and her pussy was squeezing on Jen's fingers hard, hard enough the vampire had to fight the resistance to keep

fingering her. More juices, a lot more, started to leak out of the girl onto Jen's palm.

The exhausted woman started to quiver all the more as Jen slowly began to push her fist into the girl's cunt.

"Hey," Triss said, "um ... don't hurt her."

"She likes a bit of pain," Othello said. "I'm sure you can empathize."

"Hey! You ... you don't know me." She said it jokingly, cause she knew damn well she liked rough sex. And trying to deny that in front of these fellow sex addicts would have been pointless.

Jen made her own groan, a predatory one, half growl and guttural. "And besides, Othello likes the tightness. Don't you?" The Ventrue pushed her fist deeper into Madison's poor, stretched pussy, until she was in to the wrist. And while she forced her fist back and forth inside her, Jen's other hand reached down to begin caressing Othello's testicles. They were dripping with Madison's juices, literally.

Jen, Othello, Beatrice, the three of them had sex on the mind all night every night. And Jacob, well, he had the feel of a man who probably once did, before all the nasty shit in his life started happening. Aaron was the only odd man out, and Triss had a sneaking suspicion the man also had a huge sex drive, just kept private. Maybe she should track him during one of his hunts sometime?

Such a weird little family. And while she doubted she'd ever feel comfortable having any of them in her bed, she couldn't deny her sexual tastes were similar. Trapping a woman kine in the bed with her and Julias? Bit of that reluctant 'wait, please don't, I have to—oh!' pleasure on a kine's face when Julias and Beatrice did some

nasty things to her, was awesome. She just didn't want to share that fun with them, only share it with Julias.

Jacob was probably the same with Minerva, maybe.

Ugh, stop comparing yourself to Jacob! For fuck's sake, he's ancient and twisted and has been through enough shit to mentally break any person. He's a schemer, a liar, a manipulator, and a killer. You're nothing like him.

Mewls ripped her attention out of her dark thoughts and back onto the orgy before her. Othello was fucking Madison's ass from underneath now, a solid rhythm, while Jen continued to fist the woman. Must have been damn fucking tight inside there, a fist and cock fighting for room. Must have felt great for Othello, and euphoric for Madison. Maybe a little bruise inducing, but great.

She didn't have the heart to tell Jen she didn't want any other Kindred in her bed. But then, watching Jen grinning like the devil as she fisted the borderline unconscious ghoul into what was probably her twelfth orgasm, Triss doubted the woman would have been too upset. Ah well, no reason to tell her now and ruin her fun.

Triss stepped out, stopped, and poked her head back in. Just a minute more. Seemed like the end of the session after all; it'd be a crime to leave now.

Jen lifted her other hand from Othello's testicles and set it atop the girl's pelvis, below the navel. And as she fisted the whimpering woman, she pressed down against the girl's pelvis with the other hand, trapping her g-spot between the two hands and squashing it with pressure. All while Othello continued to fuck the girl's ass from underneath her, with strokes as deep as the position would allow. The pleasure must have been a blur, an absolute maelstrom of electric shocks coursing through the system. Poor girl. Beatrice licked her lips.

At last Othello started to slow down, with a few almost panicked thrusts to finish himself off. His cum started to coat his length from his strokes, but were soon washed away by the copious amount of liquids leaking from the taut pussy above. Madison's arms were out to her sides, dangling to the furs beneath Othello, and her legs were just as limp, despite the little quivers working up and down through her. Christ she was gorgeous, the dark skin, the curvy legs, the huge tits jiggling against her torso as she occasionally twitched or shivered. She—

No, wait, she came here with a reason, a second reason other than talking to Jacob; if she actually wanted to, and if she actually could.

“Jen,” she said, getting comfortable again against the entrance to Othello's hole in the wall. “I have a favor to ask.”

The Ventrue slowly slid her drenched hand out of the ghoul's pussy; Triss couldn't help but stare. The way Madison's pink insides gripped her wrist, then knuckles, then fingers, was too beautiful to not.

“Favor?” She stood up, naked as usual, and strolled out into the cave toward her own room, Madison's cum still coating her hand. Triss followed. “Oh, this about the ball? I haven't seen you try on any outfits yet.”

“Yeah. Julias will buy whatever, I just need—”

“Buy? Girl you're the same size as me. You know we can share clothes, right?”

“... do you ... have anything that'd look good on me at this ball?” Sharing clothes. The thought had never occurred to her, to ask or otherwise. Sharing sex partners, sure, but sharing clothes? How alien. The idiocy of her for not considering it made her smile.

“Sure. How much skin you looking to expose? Rumor has it the ball will be leaning a lot more toward the fun side of being Kindred. Still an Invictus ball, but I look forward to seeing some skin.”

Of course she did.

“I mean, I guess ... a decent amount? Like, some leg, some back, maybe a little ass.” You had to dress to accent your best features, after all. “That reminds me. Julias said there’d be a lot of thralls there, even some ghouls. Place is going to be packed, and some sharing of food is to be expected. If you wanted, you could bring yours? He suggested they could be on leashes, really paint you as a dominatrix type, but that’s a bit over the top.”

“Ooh!” She turned around, jumped a few times, and clapped her hands. Naked, the whole display was a weird balance of sexy and cute. “Perfect! I do have those.” No surprise there. “And for you, I think we need something that gives the elegant but sexy look, to be a delightful contrast to the tattoos and crocodile teeth. The claws and eyes too.”

Beatrice sighed with how easily Jen described her Nosferatu features. Still hurt, hearing them talked about from another person like that; just an old reflex. She knew Jen was attracted to her, so she had no reason to be offended.

“I do like the snake tattoo.” Julias liked it too. Damn man had a habit of saying the exact right thing she needed to hear even when he didn’t know what was up. She was a beautiful beast, like a snake. Hehehe.

“Alright, let’s go!”

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By go, Jen meant to a storage area the girl had acquired. Younger Kindred had a habit of doing that, of renting out storage rooms under fake names, for years. And then they’d break in at night, and

do whatever it is they needed to do with their amassed possessions in private. In this case, this particular storage room Jen had was meant for her clothes.

“You could bring all this shit back to the cave,” Triss said.

“It’d ruin the aesthetic of our home. And besides, home is for sleeping and fucking.”

Definitely one of the larger storage rooms, and filled with wardrobes and clothing racks on wheels. The two of them stood in the center, concrete walls on three sides, and the metal sectional door down so they had their privacy. A couch too, almost like the girl had planned this. She might have.

“This is a lot of clothes. Considering how often I find you naked, I’m surprised you have this much.”

“You know we often go out and do our thing,” Jen said. “You don’t know where I go or what I’m up to when I’m not at home, right? Well, often, I’m out making contacts with big names, and that requires clothes to match.”

“Kine?”

She nodded as she walked over to one of the clothing racks and started sliding apart clothes bags. “Usually. But on occasion, the Invictus or Carthians have their own, smaller gatherings, where we play dance the Danse. Isabella Leuvion does some pretty interesting things in her free time. I—aha!” She pulled out one of the bags and set it on the couch in the center of the room. But, apparently ‘aha’ was not the end of her search, as she dove back into the endless clothes again.

“Maybe I should hang with more Kindred then,” Triss said. “Make contacts too.”

“Well, you’re friends with Julias and Jack. Hard to beat that for connections. Ah, this would look great too.” And another clothes bag was thrown onto the couch. “Oh, can I see the whole snake tattoo? Might have something that goes with it.”

“You just want to see me naked.”

“That too.”

“... I told Julias that I think it’s a bad idea to have more Kindred in our bed.” Might as well tell her now. No, wait, should have told her after she picked the best dress for her. Damn it.

“Yeah, I had a feeling.” She shrugged, grabbed another clothes bag, threw it on the couch, and came over to her. “So that means one of two things will happen. Either we’ll grow to become good friends, or good friends with benefits once I convince you to let me fuck you and Julias.” Another shrug. “Come on, shirt off. You might as well get naked while I try and see what’ll work.”

Beatrice turned her head to the side. Trust her or don’t trust her? Being told no on the threesome business was, evidently, not enough to dissuade the girl’s aspirations. Girl hadn’t done anything to betray her trust yet. Hell, helped her out on more than one occasion too.

Sighing, Triss reached up and took off her tank top.

“Mm! God damn that’s hot.” Jen leaned in, and stared at her breasts. Took some willpower to not cover them up, but Beatrice kept her arms at her sides and frowned at the Ventrue with no concept of personal space. “The nipple studs, and the snake biting the one nipple? Begs for a dress that exposes the breasts. Exposes everything! Maybe a robe that hangs off the shoulders but doesn’t cover up anything in the front?”

“I ... think I’d prefer to keep my tits and cunt covered for this ball, thank you.” She had no issue showing off her body, but there were limits.

“Hmm, if you don’t want to expose the goods, then yeah, let’s definitely get something to show off what we can, in some way to contrast the tattoos.”

“Corset?”

“Ah, yeah I have some of those.” Back to the clothes again, this time the wardrobe. “Buuuut I think the tattooed girl in the black corset is too boring, and a white corset would be too cliché; typical badass chick trying to look maiden-like. What we need is something more elegant and sexy, something that says ‘I’m a beautiful queen that everyone wants to fuck’.”

“ ... and corsets don’t say that?”

“Not unless you wanted the giant Victorian skirt to go with it.”

“Ugh. No thanks.”

“I know right? Hard to pull those off. The Prince could. But I’m thinking she’ll be wearing something more modern and slutty. Like this!” Out came a long piece of black silk, like a toga or something. “Alright, strip! Have to be naked to wear this. I’ll find you some shoes after.”

“This better be worth it.” Groaning, Triss slipped off everything. The boots, the jeans, the thong—which earned a whistle from Jen, and more than a few hungry gazes.

“Love the piercings. That one hurt? On the clit hood?”

“Yes, yes it did.”



“ ... do anything sexy with it? Like, interesting jewelry and stuff?”

“Yes, yes I do.” She smirked at the woman, and scooped the dress out of her hands. Standing in front of the mirror, she slid it on over her head, and let the silver-colored necklace land on her shoulders.

Dress was a strong word for this. It was more like she was wearing two thin, silk blankets that hung from the necklace, looping down from it to connect behind her. The sheets came down to cover her legs, but when she turned her side to the mirror, the hanging loops of fabric fully exposed the side of her body down to the outer thigh. Her ass was completely visible, but only from the side, since the fabric hung from the front, down past her knee, then came back and up along the center of her back to connect to the necklace again.

“This is ... kind of perfect, actually.” She grinned into the mirror and turned around. Such a simple thing, just black silk hanging from a silver necklace, exposing so much of her body from the side without actually revealing anything. The side of her ass looked utterly glorious.

“A sideless gown. Sometimes simple is best. Here.” Jen handed her some fingerless gloves that looked more like silver jewelry than gloves. “Matches the necklace. For shoes you need some low heel shoes, because you’ll need to walk in a way that keeps the feet partly hidden underneath the sheets.”

Right right, made sense. From the front or back, she would look like a flowing, dark goddess. From the side, she’d look like a seductive devil.

“You really got this fashion thing down. You should be Daeva.”

“Ugh, don’t say that! I know fashion, I know sex, but you won’t see me throwing my life into either.” She went digging through another wardrobe, and from the thudding and clapping, Beatrice knew it was filled with shoes. “Speaking of throwing your life into

something, Jacob seems to have taken an interest in you. More than usual.”

Triss turned around a few times in the mirror as she slipped on the sparkling gloves. It was like she was wearing a blanket. So fun, how depending on which direction you saw her from, she went from super elegant, to super sexy.

“Isn’t he interested in all of us? S’why we’re in the circle.”

“Yeah but you and him seem to share an interest in the dark shit. Cruac rituals are ... well, I avoid it, Aaron avoids it, and Othello’s taken a few stabs at it, only to be deterred. He’s not interested in the pain.” She brought out some low-heel shoes, black and silver, to match the back dress and its silver jewel parts. “And from what he told me, there is pain?”

“Yeah ... yeah there is.” She sat down and let Jen slip the shoes on for her. “I guess I had assumed you all practiced witchcraft, before I joined.”

“Maybe some day. Jacob says he’s happy to let us just kind of ... coast, I guess. I—oh! Don’t forget.” Jen came up behind her, got her to stand up, and took the two pieces of hanging cloth behind Triss into her hands. Since it was just two sheets hanging from Beatrice’s neck, it meant that Jen was able to pull the two sheets aside where they overlapped, and expose all of Beatrice’s naked back, legs, and behind. “You have to be careful how you sit and how you move. But...” She came in closer, still holding the two sheets apart to keep Triss’s ass and back exposed, and hooked her hands around Triss’s hips while pressing her pelvis against the Nosferatu’s ass. “It does mean you’re functionality naked in all the good ways. Want to fuck Julias or some food right before, or after the ball? No problems.”

Triss rolled her eyes, and watched herself in the mirror. This woman could not take no for an answer. Hell, told her no just a bit ago, and still the woman was trying to get into Triss’s pants. And

watching in the mirror, Triss couldn't help but smirk as Jennifer put her chin on her shoulder, and slipped her hands out along her hips, and then her stomach underneath the dress.

“What about no other Kindred in the bed do you not get, Jen? And you know I'm not going to cheat on Julias.” She tried to step away, but Jen stopped her. Girl knew she wasn't as strong as Triss, not even close, but there was a glint of something in the Ventrue's eyes as she met her gaze through the reflection.

“Is it because Othello and I were enjoying a little orgy? Did that bother you?”

“What? No, I—”

“Cause you said it was you who decided to not have other Kindred in the bed. And I know you're attracted to me.” Jen's hands drifted up, and cupped her breasts under the sheet. The mirror hid what the Ventrue was touching, holding her breasts in a half hug, half hungry grip. “So it must be something else.”

What the fuck was it about Beatrice and Ventrue? Like she was crack or something to them. And why the fuck wasn't she turning around and clocking Jen in the face with a punch? Instead, Beatrice just looked in the mirror, and couldn't help but smile a little as she watched a woman who looked almost identical to her hug her from behind, palms on her nipples.

It was because she knew Jen knew she was strong enough to tear the girl in half, that Triss couldn't help but find the girl's advances intriguing. And it wasn't like Jacob would really care either, if Triss decided to get angry and put the woman in her place. Beatrice had full permission to break a few of Jen's bones.

She didn't though. Instead, she stared at her twin in the mirror, and watched the cloth shift as the woman started to caress her breasts. Dog with a bone. The Ventrue sighed into Beatrice's neck,

and watched the mirror too, grinning as she no doubt saw where the fabric shifted where her fingers were circling Triss's nipples. She plucked at her nipple studs a few times, before she settled her fingers underneath her breasts to cup them again, lightly stroke their contours, and gently squeeze. The whole time, Triss tried to keep a straight face, but it did feel really, really pleasant. Even without the blush of life going, Kindred could still feel, and it felt nice, having a woman touching her. Different than a man's, more delicate, more precise.

She should have been punching her, or at least stopping Jen. But something in Jen's eyes stopped her instead, a little more than just sexual attraction there, and she sighed as she watched and waited. She wanted to see where this was going now, where Jen thought her groping was going to get her.

“... you really want to know what happened?” Triss said. “What made me come to that conclusion? It's not the most endearing story.”

Jen removed her hands, smiled into the mirror, and turned around to go digging through clothes again. Just like that, from groping to digging for more clothes, as if it was the most casual thing. Like shaking hands. Once she pulled out a bag, she started undressing as well. Girl knew what she was going to wear already, and was going to show it to her apparently.

“Yes, I want to know. I am trying to be your friend too ya know. Just, a friend with benefits.”

That was true. Jen wasn't just trying to bone her, but also trying to befriend her, be someone she could talk to. And Beatrice hadn't really known anyone like that since Garry, and now Julias. Trusting Jen wasn't coming easy, because the girl screamed devious, but maybe Triss should trust her anyway. Learn from the past, stop being so against bonding with other people, and all that crap.

“ ... I ... realized ... I really rely on Julias a lot. A lot lot, for comfort, and happiness and shit, you know?” She rubbed her claws up and down her naked arms where the dress completely exposed them. “Just a year ago I was a miserable, sorry fucker, angry and angsty and everything. And now I’m not, and I owe most of that to him. A little to Garry, and Jacob too, but mostly Julias. And ... as ... Jacob ... fuck, he scared the shit out of me, Jen. Fucking scared me, really scared me. And then I was holding Julias in my arms, and I realized ... how broken I’d be if I lost him.”

“I—”

“I know, you wouldn’t jeopardize my relationship. But ... just ... I want to keep the feeling of being safe in that man’s arms.” She sighed, and plopped down on the couch beside Jen. “Yeah, I know, really pathetic of me.”

“What? No that’s not pathetic! Damn girl, didn’t think you’d be feeling self doubt like this.” Jen stopped unbuttoning her pants and slid across the couch to bump shoulders with her. “The fuck did Jacob scare you with?”

“He ... told me to keep it secret.”

“Then please don’t tell me. I learn Jacob’s secrets and I’m sure he’ll cut out my tongue, literally, every night for a month.”

Yeah, that did sound like something Jacob would do. And now that she’d seen the sick shit he was more than willing to do in pursuit of his black arts, Jen’s half-joke felt too real.

“I won’t tell you, but you were right that it involves pain. And more than pain. Just ... fuck, I felt like such a pansy after. I was screaming, crying, frenzying, and I ran to Julias for a meal so I wouldn’t fucking frenzy again and drink someone in the middle of the street. Just got into his arms and pretended horrible shit didn’t exist for a little while.” And then fucked, came her brains out, and

then fucked again just a few hours ago. But she left that part out. Dampened her point.

“ ... oh. I get it. Not just about maybe damaging your relationship, but my presence might damage that safe feeling.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, guess that just means you need more time for us to become better friends.” Jen hopped up like she knew all the answers to everything — typical Ventrue — and slid out of her shoes and pants. “Cause as much as I love to fuck my ghouls, and Othello’s ghouls, and our meals, and even Othello sometimes, that’s just sex. I’m not really friends with them. Othello and I don’t get along. And Aaron? He just reads, and then fucks off to do his own thing.”

“ ... I am the only friend you have in the circle, aren’t I?”

“Yeap.” A second later, Jen was naked. Again. And of course Beatrice had to look, cause the girl was beautiful. Ass didn’t have the same size as Beatrice’s, and while Jen was quite thin, she wasn’t fit like Beatrice’s more athletic, ripped body. But still, like looking into a sexy mirror. “Now, I found this cloak with a necklace, and it’s designed to go overtop a black chest wrap, but without the wrap, it looks like this.”

Triss watched, intrigued, as the naked creature picked up a long piece of slightly see-through black fabric, and held it by a necklace. Not too dissimilar to Triss’s, fabric hanging from a necklace. Except Jen’s was a single piece of cloth that circled her entirely, but hanging from the necklace from the front and back at a single point. The effect was a cloak that covered her lower back and ass, all the way down to the floor, but all the front of her was completely exposed except for where the fabric came across her chest, spreading apart at the sternum and just barely covering her breast. Fully exposed shoulders and upper back though.

“ ... can't lift your arms wearing that.”

“Sure I can.” She shrugged and lifted her arms. The fabric, already somewhat see-through, raised with her arms and fully exposed her breasts, only to cover them up again when she put her hands at her side. It was like a cape that only connected at the sternum, and dangled behind her while spreading apart to reveal her stomach, legs, and since she was bottomless, her smooth pussy.

“Bottoms?”

“Ah!” And out came the thong. A high rise thong, reaching up to her hips, barely anymore than a g-string. But the fabric was simple, elegant, and colored just right to fit the gold brooch the cloak was connected to at the sternum, on the necklace.

“Sure you don't want to just ditch the cloak and go in only the thong?”

“Nah, that's not pretty! Sexy, sure, but you need the other piece to be beautiful.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes, got up, and walked over to stand beside her. The two of them in revealing black dresses, hers quite revealing from the side, while Jen's might as well have been non-existent. And standing beside each other? Yeah, they were fucking smoking hot.

“What about my face?”

“A black veil to cover the face from the nose down, like last time.”

“And you? Sure you don't want anything to cover these?” Triss reached out and pulled the cloak's open front to the sides. Not like it was hard to do; a gentle breeze would have done the same. The cloak aside exposed Jen's handful breasts, and the Ventrue smirked as she stood there.

“Wait! I am missing something.” Jen spun around, which made the loose fabric swish in the air dramatically. Very fashion runway. She found some bracelets, gold and black, each covered in carvings of small skulls with fangs on them. Her shoes were at least a little less on the nose, black, with a touch of gold on the sides.

“Still going to be flashing everyone every time you move or take a sip of anything.” And, despite herself, she reached out, and again spread apart the cloak to hook it along the outside of the girl’s breasts.

“ ... sending me some mixed signals, Triss.”

“You could say I’m warming up to you.” Triss set her hands on the woman’s breasts, and cupped them in her claws. Basically the same size as hers, perhaps a little bigger, and the Nosferatu smiled at the feel of their softness in her grip.

Neither Kindred had the blush of life going, which was definitely a good thing, since the conversation kept going in a very erotic direction. And it was Beatrice’s fault. She kept letting it happen. Hell less than an hour ago she’d watched the woman fist Madison, and there was no use in denying that she’d love to have that done to her too. The sight of that ghoulish pussy clenching Jen’s wrist so tight, she could see the inner lips drag along her knuckles on the way out, only to squirt onto her hand once the girl was fully outside her.

And Jen seemed genuine about wanting to be her friend. A real, genuine, someone she could talk to friend. Who also just happened to want to bang her; and was nice enough to agree she’d only do that with Julias in the bed too. It might make for a very interesting friendship?

“Think of it like this,” Jen said, and she stepped in a little closer. She reached into the sides of Triss’s dress, and down along the skin of her back to find her ass. And, predictably, she cupped her ass cheeks, bounced them a few times on her fingers where Triss’s ass



met her hamstrings, and chuckled. “We could really blow Julias’s mind.”

What was it about this girl that made such contact feel so perfectly fine? Course she’d never kiss or fuck her, not without Julias around, but the girl radiated such honesty and openness about sexuality, that it was hard to not indulge a little. Someone who was truly, wholly comfortable with sex in all its forms, and just wanted to fuck people she was attracted to, and people like liked. And apparently, she felt both for Triss. Would it really be so bad to have this girl in bed, with her tongue and fingers on Triss’s pussy while Julias was inside—

Damn it, she was picturing it, and lightly caressing Jen’s breasts as she did. Ok, enough tempting fate, enough touching the girl’s really, really, really nice breasts. Triss smirked at the woman, and gave her a gentle shove to push her a couple feet away.

“Julias has probably had three or four women at a time before.”

“Women like us?”

“Touche.”

“But, I get what you said. Takes a while to build trust. Give it time, and get back to me. I’d never want to damage the love you two have.” Jen did a few more spins, and chuckled at how the cloak did indeed hover away from her a little to expose her back, her ass, and her breasts. “That said, I’m sorry about what Jacob did to you. Sounds awful.”

“Yeah ... it was fucking awful.”

“Don’t tell me anything you’re not comfortable talking about, but, I mean, go ahead, I’m listening.”

She couldn't talk to Julias about it, not really. But Jen? Jen was in the Circle, and was a girl. Maybe a close friend of her own gender wouldn't hurt. And she could talk about the torture, as long as she left out the Black Blood ... thing.

“Well ... there were knives.”

# Chapter 44

~~Jack~~

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

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

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

But maybe the animals knew more?

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

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

He took an unneeded breath, and met the gaze of one of the crows. Feral whisper, Julias had called it. Bringing up the beast in the gut, taking it to the surface, using its animal nature to communicate with other animals. He did not like the beast, did not like the predatory impulses it sent him, did not like how it forced him to think of other people in terms of dangerous or not, food or not, competitor or not. And, when hungry enough, the beast took over and sent the vampire into a frenzy. The aftertaste of its presence was forever on his tongue, and he could just barely make out the blurry memories of the insanity. Almost a year ago, the hazy images in his brain showed him grabbing an innocent women, drinking her dead, and dragging her corpse up a building like some sort of leopard taking its fresh kill into the trees.

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

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

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

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

“Come here.”

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

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

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

Crows had great memories, he knew that. Latest research suggested they had memories that lasted far longer than a day, that they could remember faces, that they could teach each other how to

use tools, and a host of examples of intelligence beyond that of most animals. Not only that, but crows had better eyesight than humans. A smart Ventrue — or any Kindred who used the discipline animalism — would start to use crows more and more as they grew in power, grew in strength, grew in their ability to command multiple crows.

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

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

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

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

The birds clucked a few times at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Holy mother of god.

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

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

The goddess chuckled, and did a slow spin, turning her head over her shoulder to watch him as he watched her. The skirt was indeed long, reaching her ankles, and split at the hip up all the way to her ribs. No underwear. A few bits of subtle white string held the sides



tight to her waist, and a single string held her cleavage together ... barely ... not really. The cleavage of the dress pulled apart so wide, it cut straight down across the center of each breast; a hint of her pink areola were visible.

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

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

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

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

“That was his goal, yeah. I ... just ... god damn.” He really couldn’t stop staring. She was still leaning forward, in the way she often did to draw his eyes to her cleavage. But the dress’s fabric was so thin,

hugged her so tight, and revealed so much skin, he felt like he was looking at naked Antoinette. And he loved naked Antoinette.

“Ah, I am sorry my love. I did not think this would be so troublesome for you?” She reached down, took his hand, set it on her stomach, and guided his hands down the deep cleavage. Soft, her skin was so soft, and alabaster, and perfect. And when she guided his fingers down to where the cleavage finally stopped, she slid his fingers down past the fabric a single inch while still against her skin. His fingertips found the folds of her pussy, and he groaned as he shivered at the touch of them.

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

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

“R-Right now?” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

She grinned down at him, one of those dangerous grins, and turned him around. With his back to her chest, she leaned down far until her chin was on his neck, her bare breasts pushed to his back and nipples pressing hard enough on the suit for him to feel it. She pushed him forward, toward the wall, so he had no choice but to reach out to brace his hands against it while she pressed her body against him, reached around his waist, and took his cock into both hands.

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

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

“Yes ma’am.”

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

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

“Yours.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I ... I dunno, um ... must be hundreds.”

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

“You ... m-maybe we could—”

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

God, she knew what she was doing, to such a perfect degree. The rhythm, pacing, getting into a nice and pleasant tempo, familiar, inviting, loving. She pressed her back to him, squishing her bare breasts to his back until he could feel her hard nipples pressing through his suit, the softness overflowing his shoulders. All the while, she kept one of her hands secure on his throat, pinning him

to her, even as she bent forward slightly so he did as well. He couldn't interfere, with her order to keep his hands against the wall. And he couldn't look down with her grip on his neck. Helpless, he closed his eyes, and let the woman work her magic.

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

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

"Say that you love me, my little Ventrue."

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

But that was fine, because he did love her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I would be lying,” she said, “if I did not find our regular bouts to have affected me, my love. Forever I have enjoyed touch upon my breasts, but, your persistent kissing, suckling, massaging, and

pampering has lead to an increase in my own desire, as it has apparently done in you as well.”

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

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

He came again.

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

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



natural sex was going to be on his mind, especially with Antoinette sitting beside him with her breasts almost completely exposed, and every inch of her stomach all the way down to her mons pubis also exposed.

Memories of so many nights, sitting on her waist and coating that valley of skin in his cum, refused to stay put. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop picturing the beautiful woman next to him, with her dress pulled apart again so he could caress and suckle on her nipples while she stroked his head, cradled him, while she jerked him off again.

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes ma'am.”

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

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

“Any ideas?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A surprise is a part of the experience.” Shrugging, her arm around his shoulders bent a little, so she could set her fingers on his ear, and lightly tug on and stroke his earlobe while still looking out the window. “But I can speculate. This is a ball to remind us all of, and embrace the peace the city holds. As such, I expect music, jovial and classical, while there will also be seating, with thralls being drained and blood set into wine glasses. Some of the more

adventurous will drink directly from the source, while some Kindred will prefer to keep such acts private, to at least some extent. So the wine glass will be a common choice for tonight; perhaps goblets, for the Primogen and myself. There will be no formal dinner, but rather tables along the walls of the main chamber, where people may sit if they wish, or rise and dance to the music if they wish. And, if the past is any indication, more than a few kine will be naked and thoroughly drained, of blood and more, before the night is done.”

“ ... you speculate all this?”

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

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

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

“Really?”

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

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

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

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

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~~Natasha~~

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

She wanted to wear the ivory one. Jessy told her she should wear the red one. But now she was alone, in her new apartment, without Jessy to bully her into trying something she didn't want to try. Jessy was so bold, she'd probably long forgotten that she was an aggressive woman at all. Just watching her and Fiona throw themselves at that Eric fellow was like watching two teenagers trying to out-slut each other. No, that wasn't fair to them. Still though, pretty awkward.

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

Stalling, Natasha, you're stalling. Pick a dress. She frowned, laid them both on the bed beside each other, and compared. Both

designed to fit her small body, but one was classy, the other looked like something Jessy might wear. Hell the other looked like one Jessy might fuck in, in Bloodlust.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dude, shoes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well ... n-no, but Jessy—”

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

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

She giggled again, and nodded as she scooped up the red dress before putting it away in her closet. But, as she did, she felt the



looming presence of people behind her. Turning around, she gasped as she found Art, once again, reaching out for her. His hands took her hips, and the man brought her in closer to him, pressing his hips to hers. Except he was so tall, it was more like him pressing his hips against her stomach and chest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ok, I have to get dressed n-now.”

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

“Boys! A lady, n-needs ... t-t-to...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

She looked down at herself. A tiny body, little breasts, a flat stomach and a skinny waist, but not very curvy hips. Antoinette’s words sprung up from her memory though, reminding her of what she’d said, about her, her size, her attitude and personality, and

wearing pink in front of the boys. And, it was working. The two of them looked ready to tackle her, grab her, pin her to the bed, pry her open with their fingers, and—

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

“Showing off for us?” Art said.

“What? N-No, just ... nevermind.” They were tempting fate, watching her change, but she'd told them no sex until later and she was going to stick to that. So, she slipped out of her pajama bottoms, and walked over to her wardrobe. A glance back showed both men had tilted their heads to the side, in unison, to stare at her butt. She frowned at them, but when she looked back to her wardrobe and pulled open a drawer, she smiled where they couldn't see. They liked her butt.

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

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

Or none at all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"H-Hey! We ... no no, we can't."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Keeping tabs on us?” Matt said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“W-What should I do with my hair?” she said. Asking her boyfriend what to do about her hair was a secret guilty pleasure

she'd long wanted to indulge in. Maybe he could do her hair too? That'd be perfect.

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

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

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

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

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

Boyfriends, plural. Hehe.



~~Jack~~

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

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

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

Massive chandeliers, enormous paintings on the walls of figures that must have been gods, red-lined chairs around the tables, each table covered in a red table cloth with gold embroidery. And on the

other side of the grand room, two stairways that curved up and in toward a balcony that overlooked the ball room. But this time, instead of Viktor and Garry have a conversation on said balcony, Jack could see the movement of a dozen hands playing instruments. A small symphony, playing the night's music.

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

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

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

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

"Jacob thinks he owns the city?"

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

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



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

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

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

“Master Terry,” the triumvirate said.

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

“Your excellencies,” he said, and bowed his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Garry Tones and his Carthians were mingling; which was a very good thing. The whole Mirrden business had put people on edge, but it wasn't stopping the covenants from interacting. Garry was wearing suit pants, but instead of the open jacket look, he was wearing a shirt, black, that reeked of that dark and handsome vibe

the dangerous man liked to put on. Many of his covenant men did the same, suit shirts with power colors and with the first couple buttons undone. Many of them had glasses in their hand, and a couple of the more daring ones even had a thrall or ghoul by their side — also dressed in the half suit ensemble — with wrists out or necks exposed. The female Carthians did as Julias predicted, wearing cocktail party dresses that were both eye catching, and sexy. A lot of backs and stomachs, a lot of cleavage and legs, and more than one woman wore a dress with loose cleavage that let the breasts nearly expose themselves with movement.

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

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

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

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

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

The Prince made a small, quiet snort, something between a chuckle and a groan. “We will speak of it later, but be content

knowing I am not angry over your actions. Upset you did not ask me first, but I would have agreed nonetheless.” She turned, and smiled down at him. “Jack my love, please feel free to mingle with your companions. Perhaps speak with the Uratha? I must do my rounds.”

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

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

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

“ ... yes sire?”

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

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

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

Isabella got up from her table, and Hella followed, holding her hand. Jack never picked up on the relationship vibe from the two of

them at work, but now that he'd seen them together in their private home, the clues were a lot more obvious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He looked around some more as he made the trip. So much to take in, so many sounds, so many people, far more people than he'd

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

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

Energy restored, he made his way through the crowd.

"... Natasha?"

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

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

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

"Your hair looks really nice."

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

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

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

"Hey Jack."

Oh shit.

Clara came up to stand beside the two girls. She was of an average height, maybe a bit taller, but next to the two tiny girls she seemed quite tall. Dwarfed by the two Uratha behind her, Matthew and Arturo, but still. And the beautiful woman was wearing a dress, black, strapless, something that squeezed her body and emphasized the athletic figure while exposing her strong shoulders. Gold-

colored, large earrings contrasted her bare neck, and the tight dress split over one leg above the knee, while the skirt went all the way down to her ankles where she wore rather fancy high heel sandals, black as well.

“ ... um, hey, Clara. You look great.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

“She, um, she’s—oh, over there.”

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

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

Jack nodded. It made sense, and he was glad the Kindred situation here was a million times better. “We do feel safe enough here to share. Mostly. Or, maybe, we’re just trying to pretend we do. Lots happened that left a bad aftertaste in our mouths, and now that it’s over and done with, maybe everyone just wants a taste of this

openness before it turns sour.” Everyone looked at him with furrowed brow. “Shit. If, if it turns sour!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beatrice came down the stairs first, black veil covering her shark mouth. Seeing her with a lot of mascara on was, just like last time, a bit of a shock. But it was the flowing waves of the black dress on her that were so beautiful, contrasting her hard body. And, as she came closer, when she turned, he could see the dress exposed the naked side of her body completely except for where the loops of the

hanging fabric curved upward at the ankles. Like liquid night. The silver necklace, and the silver, delicate chains for gloves, were like twinkling stars against the black.

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

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

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

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

An elbow in the side jolted him to awareness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Makes me regret never getting drunk,” he said.

“Ye ne’er been blootered?”

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

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

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

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

“Ok, you vamps may not be able to get drunk, but wolves can. Just takes a lot more than it used to. So my good man, keep em coming.” She waved off the sommelier, and downed the glass like it was going

to vanish if she didn't. "I'm going to need to get wasted to convince my brain to accept this."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ye’re strong.”

“Comes with the territory.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jessy and Jennifer looked at him like he was nuts, but Natasha nodded, as did Fiona, nearly falling over in the process. The werewolves on the other hand, were too busy looking around at the

feast that had begun. The three of them were obviously having trouble not staring at the half-naked woman in front of them, but the sound of moans and the trickling of blood down people's chests and breasts drew their eyes eventually. So wasteful, spilling blood like that, so decadent, so utterly fitting the extravagance of the party.

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

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

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

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

The four Kindred raised a brow. “Crazy?” they said.

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

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

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

Wait, what?

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

Ok, maybe a little mean.

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

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

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

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

“Wait, you just asked? Who’d you ask?”

“Th’ Prince o’ course.”

“ ... how did you arrange that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Y-Yeah, thanks.” The most disingenuous ‘happy you’re alive’ he’d ever heard. Not that you hear that line very often, but the

annoyance on the girl's face was only thinly veiled. His presence bothered her. Antoinette's presence bothered her. How the fuck did Daniel convince her to come? Why did he? Was that actually what happened? Mental note: ask Natasha later.

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

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

"You saved my new subordinate from an uncertain fate, my love." Again, Antoinette hugged him to her side, tighter than usual. Something about Athalia was putting her on edge, cause it wasn't jealousy he saw on the Prince's face, it was worry. Subtle, just a single line, a tiny crease on her brow. If her attitude toward Athalia was any indication, no wonder she wasn't excited to have Fiona enter her city. Big of Antoinette to help Fiona with this whole situation then; at least, if Athalia had actually wanted to come.

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

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

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

What was up with this woman? Exact opposite of Fiona. The redhead was bubbling with happiness and couldn't wait to socialize with other 'monsters' like Kindred or Uratha. Athalia was mean. Not even, mean wasn't a good enough word. Hateful, like she genuinely hated them for no reason. And Daniel wasn't exempt. Poor guy

looked utterly unphased by the girl's rudeness, but Jack could see Athalia wasn't too happy about having him on her arm.

"... sorry," she said, once she caught Jack's eyes. Shit, he must have been showing his own annoyance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If there was anyone in the room who couldn't do politics, he'd thought it'd be Jessy. But this Athalia woman looked like she was ready to start arguing the moment someone said something she disagreed with. Kindred learned to dance around the truth, lie,

manipulate, but, this girl was probably honest to a fault. He could appreciate that. And, she had said sorry, about the scowling.

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

God damn it.

## Chapter 45

~~Jack~~

“Um, sure. Is that ok, my Prince?” he said.

“ ... oui, mon amour. But, return to my side when you are done.”

He gave her his best ‘I love you’ smile, and with a small bow, turned and walked off to join Athalia. As he turned, he took a glance at everyone’s gaze, to see what they thought of this strange development. Bunch of raised eyebrows. People were as confused as him.

It took a little bit for the two of them to find a place that was a little quieter, a little further away from everyone else. With so many people around, a private conversation was basically impossible, but Athalia took them up the balcony stairway, and as they passed the symphony, Athalia guided them along the wall into a corner near a balcony railing. Best they were going to get.

“Jack,” she said, “I understand that you’ve been a bit of an ambassador for the Kindred to the Uratha.”

“Um, not exactly. I’m just a middle man, exchanging information between the two. If I was an ambassador for the Kindred, I’d have a little decision making power. Got none of that.”

She nodded, stroked her chin a few times, and turned to lean against the wall. And, much like Beatrice would, she folded her arms across her chest, and sneered as she looked out over the balcony.

“Your bosses tell you what they did?”

“ ... no.” Uh oh.



“Well, fuck em. They put explosives in the tunnels where Azamel lives. Remote detonators too. If she does anything to upset them, they blow the tunnels.”

Welp, shit.

“I ... I’m sure they’re just trying to deter—”

“Don’t even say the word.” Athalia sighed, and threw up her hands like she was ready to scream, but folded them under her bosom once more. “Now you know how serious the situation is, when I say Azamel wants a way to communicate.”

Of course she did. “And that way is me.”

“Seems to be the ‘in’ thing to do. No fights between the vamps and werewolves yet, so that’s a plus in your court. And you’re in deep with the Prince, so that’s a valuable angle right there.”

Don’t ask her why she hates Kindred, don’t ask her.

“ ... why do you hate the Kindred so much?”

God damn it Jack. If there is one way you’re going to die, it’s pissing off a monster with your big mouth.

“Christ you got balls. But, I am being pretty rude here. Not that I’m going to stop, but it warrants explanation. I lost important people to vamps.”

“Lost?”

“Yeah, lost you little fuckwad. Dead, killed, gone. I was just a little girl, and I lost a lot of important people to Viktor. You know, your grandsire?”

Oh shit. Shit shit shit. “I ... I’m s—”

“Stow it. I was just a kid then, long time ago. I was in my late twenties when I became a Begotten, and that was over twenty years ago,” she said. He took a moment to look her up and down. Begotten definitely aged slowly then, cause the woman looked no older than thirty.

He wanted to ask her what Viktor did to those people, specifically, but it could have been anything, including some seriously nasty shit better not asked about. Daniel would know, but he wasn't sure he wanted to pry. But, dead loved ones because of vampires? Yeah, he could understand hating a people, a race, because of that. He wasn't even that close with his family when he was alive, and the thought of his sister or mother being murdered sent a chill down his spine.

“And the Uratha?”

“Fuck the dogs. I've been to other cities, and the dogs there are fucking pricks. Call everything their territory. I try to be nice, and all I get is suspicion. Suspicion turns to a fight, and before you know it, I've got a pack of wolves on my ass. Killing a werewolf is not easy, let alone three.”

He blinked at her, a few times, and then stepped over to the balcony railing to look down at the socializing people. The buffet was getting a little heated, with more than a few of the kine there now naked save for some underwear, and hands rubbing them as a couple Kindred pinned many of them down onto chairs, or held them tight onto tables. The kine seemed more than happy to let the Kindred indulge, the Kiss being an enjoyable experience when the Kindred made it so, but he was surprised to see how loose everyone was getting with it.

Stop avoiding Athalia. She'd killed three werewolves? Her? The hell kind of monster was inside this woman?

“Well ... Viktor's dead, and the Uratha here are—”

“Viktor’s dead, the Invictus aren’t. And far as I can tell, none of you give a shit about your kine.” She raised her fingers to quote the word ‘kine’. “As you can see from the orgy below, they’re just bloodbags to you. So, fuck your vampires. And the wolves? Just angry dogs waiting to bite anything that gets too close. So fuck them too. And ... and I don’t have to justify my anger to you, that’s not why I invited you to chat.”

He’d expected someone a little more closed off, brooding and quiet, not this loud mouth ready to yell at anything that moved. This woman would have pissed off a tree, given time to shout at it enough.

“Then—”

“I invited you up here to tell you Azamel wants to speak with you. Alone.”

“But—”

“Don’t tell your giant girlfriend with the tits hanging out. Don’t tell your bosses or friends either. If you do, this whole ambassador idea is shot, and you vamps can go to hell.”

Volatile. He sighed, but nodded, and rubbed his buzzed hair as he considered the implications. Talk to Azamel, alone, without telling his boss or Antoinette? They’d be pissed. And now that the Invictus were apparently trying to control Azamel, they’d be super pissed if he talked to her without telling them.

But the other options were to tell them, and piss her off, or not go, and piss her off. Azamel seemed reasonable enough last time he spoke with her, and that meeting hadn’t exactly been planned, dropping by randomly like he did. But he trusted Julias, and Julias told him to stay away from her.

“... when does she want to see me?” Fuck it. Nothing risked, nothing gained, right?

“In a week. Show up around two, and be alone. No friends either.”

“Two AM, next Saturday. Got it.”

Athalia nodded, sighed, and moved toward the balcony stairway.

“Leaving?”

“Course I’m leaving. I don’t want to be here.”

“Kind of thought maybe Daniel had convinced you.”

“He offered, and Azamel saw an opportunity to get a feel for the situation here.” She shrugged, but at least she’d stopped and turned to face him. “Idiot is just trying to make it up to me.”

“It? What happened?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Fuck, you are a nosy kid. Want to know, go ask him.” And again, she turned to leave. But he stepped forward, and grabbed her wrist. “... what the fuck?”

Yeah, what the fuck Jack? Stop playing with fire, and let the volatile explosive in heels leave.

“Not everyone is like Viktor.”

“Kid, you have to have a death wish. Let go before I—”

“I’m doing you a favor, Athalia, because everyone in a ten-mile radius can see how deep you are in your hatred, to the point you can’t see out of it. You’re at the point of reflex, where it’s a part of how you think, how your subconscious works, to hate. If you pulled your head out of the black water drowning you for a moment, you might see that many of us are just good people trying to get by.”

She twisted, yanked her arm free, and approached him. Oh good god she was going to break his neck. Could a Kindred recover from that? Sure, but he didn't want to feel what that was like.

“You talk like you know me, you little brat.”

“Don't need to be a psychologist to see someone trapped inside their assumptions, Athalia, someone afraid to look outside their prejudices, in case they might be wrong.” Stop talking stop talking stop talking.

“You think cause your big bad girlfriend is here I won't rip your arm off?”

“I think you wouldn't get so defensive if I wasn't hitting so close to home. I know, I'm just a stranger, some kid you don't know, but I've known people just like you. Viktor's gone, and if you took a second to look around, you'd see how much better things are now that he's dead. No one's sad he's dust, and if you swallowed your hate long enough to look down over the balcony, really look, you'd see everyone, Fiona, the wolves, the humans too, are all enjoying themselves. Could be you.” Yeap, he was a total idiot. He had no reason to say this to this woman, no reason to try and yank her out of her pit of self-inflected despair. Let her rot in her own misery, let her stew in the pain she brings on herself. Why the fuck do you want to open her mind, when you barely know her?

“... you have serious balls, kid. And you love to open your mouth when you shouldn't, don't you?”

“Yeah, I do. Bad habit, and I know it's going to get me killed one day. Just ... some things need to be said, you know? And no one else says them. So I say them.” And he's been saying them more, and more, with more confidence each time. Or cockiness. Hubris, Jack, hubris. “Kindred are sneaky creatures by nature, lot of lying, manipulation, misdirection. I'm ... not a fan of that.”

“ ... neither am I.” The sneer on her face didn’t go away, but at least she walked over to the balcony, and took a long hard look at the people laughing, drinking, socializing. More than a few people had joined Fiona, and were chatting with the increasingly drunk woman; poor girl was going to need a chaperon.

Jack came over and stood beside her. This woman was dangerous, and he could feel the alien power coming from her, something dark and haunting and more than capable of tearing him to bits. It didn’t stop him. Maybe he was just getting used to that feeling, being around deadly predators so often.

He smiled down at the sight of four Kindred standing around one of the tables, with a kine lying upon it. A beautiful woman to be sure, with a black dress that barely covered anything. The four vampires were drinking her from different places, and holding her down as they did. It might have warranted interruption, if the kine’s face wasn’t smiling bliss. One of the Kindred slipped her hand underneath the woman’s skirt, and the kine’s moans joined the increasingly boisterous noise of the party. More hands reached out for her body, sliding into the cleavage and pulling it down to expose her breasts. Fingers all over her, massaging, groping, fingering the trapped woman into a very obvious slew of orgasms as the vampires very, very slowly drank her.

You could taste the difference in the blood, he knew, from his time with Ashley and Julee.

He’d never seen one of these balls get this physical, this sexual, despite knowing full well it was a very real possibility. Not a ball, it was never a ball. This was a party, just like Bloodlust, and the Kindred called it a ball in some weird sense of superiority. When the rubber hit the road though, the vampires jumped on the opportunity to get physical. If there’d been rave music and darker lighting, he was sure half the people in the room would have been fucking or dancing naked.

“Christ you vamps are fucking horny.”

“I, um ... I mean they keep telling me Kindred often lose their sex drive as they get older, and the bliss of the Kiss replaces it. So far, that does not seem to be the case for almost anyone I know.” Maybe Jacob, maybe Maria, but as far as he knew, Dolareido kept nearly every Kindred’s sex drive sky high at all times.

“I can see why you’re making the impact you are, kid.”

“Impact?”

“Yeah. Azamel described to me what this place was like, before I was born, and what it’s like now. A lot due to you,” she said. No mention of Jack’s direct influence over the fate of three elders though, thank god. “You do speak your mind. And you’ve got this cute thing going that makes it hard to want to hurt you for your big mouth.”

“ ... thanks.”

“And, it’s the whole sincerity thing, genuine ... giving a shit. Only vamp I’ve ever met who talks like that.” She shrugged again, and gestured to yet another kine. “Fuck, utterly shameless.” A man, one of Jennifer’s ghouls, standing, with four Kindred around him. A woman undid the man’s loincloth, and let it fall away, before she wrapped her fingers around his length, and started to stroke it. All the while, she was pressing her side to the man’s chest, and sinking her teeth into his shoulder, while the other three found spaces to bite along his neck and other shoulder.

“Shameless, but harmless,” he said. “The kine are enjoying themselves. Hell, even the Uratha and Fiona seem to be enjoying the show.” Fiona in particular had come to stand close to the four Kindred feasting on Jennifer’s ghoul, and Jack could see her blushing as she watched the man struggle to stay standing with four sets of fangs slowly draining him of blood. Girl was also very

obviously staring at the hand stroking him off to a quick orgasm. It made sense, being Begotten and not Kindred, that it wouldn't be the biting that'd interest her.

None of the Kindred got naked, or started having sex, or touched themselves. That'd be crossing a weird line. No, this was about Kindred indulging in the utter decadence of having a literal buffet at their beck and call. The worst any of them had to worry about these days was a disagreement over the Mirrden district, or maybe Azamel or Avery causing trouble. And the overwhelming majority of Kindred in the ball weren't even alive, let alone embraced, when those two had caused issues for Dolareido.

Everyone was ignoring the danger Barry's death represented.

So, like carefree teenagers, they embraced the deliciousness laid out before them. And Jack couldn't blame them. And he couldn't understand why anyone would. Hell, with the fucked up world they lived in, Kindred, Begotten, Uratha, they all in the shadows so the near eight billion humans didn't discover them and annihilate them. Yeah, some harmless sex wasn't just acceptable, it was encouraged.

Athalia kept watching, and he took a few peeks at her as she did. Girl could hate them for what Viktor did to her, what the Uratha did to her, all she wanted, but he could tell there was more going on there in her mind, whether she realized it or not. That was what spurred his random outburst to a stranger. He could see there was more.

And on top of that he could see she was getting aroused. Poor girl was no vampire, who could simply refuse to blush life to hide their arousal; unless they'd just ate of course. So he forced himself to look away as she squirmed a little, and her nipples started to harden against her dress. Considering how many Kindred were drinking the kine below, hard nipples poking through dresses were everywhere.



“Sorry I got into your face,” he said. “Normally I’d wait until the fourth time meeting you before violating your personal space like that.”

She laughed. A real, fun laugh, and turned to face him. “Yeah, watch where you step. But I appreciate it. Just, hearing that come from one of you was a bit of a shock. Guess there’s a reason Azamel’s asking for you.”

“I’ll do my best to see her, and not tell anyone. Got a real nice thing going here in Dolareido, and it’d really suck if something broke that.”

“I admit, it’s definitely not the place I remember. I—oh god look at that.” She motioned to one of the darker corners in the ball room. The lighting was never very bright, when Kindred had the option, and the ballroom’s lighting was soft enough for some shadows to exist. In one of those shadows, two male Kindred, Carthians, were getting very hands-on with one of the kine. “Surprised that wolf doesn’t just tear them apart.”

“Wolf?” He squinted his eyes to try and see. Wait, the woman being touched by the two Kindred, he recognized her. She was one of Avery’s pack. “You can really tell just by looking? From this far?”

“Fiona told me she explained it to you.”

“She did, it’s just ... hard to imagine that you can literally see the beast in us. For us it’s something hidden in the shadows of the mind. We can’t see it, only feel it.”

“I can see it, these wisp of black with fangs inside you. Sneaky, fast, a shadow with a bloodlust.” She shrugged, and leaned forward on her elbows a little further, eyes on the woman. “Begotten don’t crave blood, usually. We feed on ... well, it’s different for each Begotten. But, I can imagine a werewolf’s blood must be pretty tasty.” The two Kindred were in front of the distant woman, hands

on her, pulling down the straps of her chest and letting her breasts slip free of the black dress. One was leaning in, and was definitely kissing her neck. The other was fingering her, hard enough to make her body shake lightly, for her legs to tremble, and for her to hold onto the two men lest she fall.

“They lost one in that whole Azlu incident,” he said. “You were there.”

“I was. Saw the remains. Pretty horrible.”

“I’m guessing she’s trying to find some comfort, after losing a pack mate.” He nodded toward the werewolf.

“Yeah, some people do that, turn to sex when they’re sad.”

“Is that bad?”

“It can be, but ... in this circumstance?” She shrugged, smirked, and started to head back toward the stairway. “Looks fine to me.”

He smiled after her, and followed. Really shouldn’t have tried to get through to her, stupid of him to think he could break through years of her walls of hatred in twenty seconds. He was a stranger to her, and he didn’t have any of the details about what’d happened to her. Really, really stupid of him.

Still kind of hoped he did get through to her, though.

He stepped back down into the ball. Party. Rave? Well, no rave music, but the setting was becoming more heated by the minute. And as he walked past yet a few more kine giving their blood to various Kindred, he took more than a few peeks. Cause, wow, he really hadn’t expected to be seeing so much genitalia at this party, but there they were. A lot of humans, and one werewolf, enjoying the Kiss and having a set of fingers stroking or fingering or whatnot.

“I see the stress and tension of my city has built to a staggering amount.” Antoinette reached out for him, set her hand on his shoulder, and pulled him in until he was snug against her side, her arm wrapped around his shoulders. “There have been balls such as these before your time, my little Ventrue, where this display also occurred. Always, such lascivious delights followed times of stress, when Kindred battled Kindred, and Dolareido suffered.”

“Understandable, for people to relieve stress this way.” He looked over his shoulder at the werewolf in the corner. Another Kindred, a woman, had come to join them, and she was leaning in to suck on the werewolf’s breasts. The Uratha was definitely drunk, and being taken advantage of, and loving every minute of it, based on the noises.

Vampires, standing around in leather, corsets, fancy suits, revealing dresses, while their sources of food squirmed in pleasure as they gave their blood to the fangs awaiting them, all to the soothing yet jovial sounds of string instruments, violins and cellos and double basses. If a crueller, twisted soul was Prince, he could imagine there’d be far less moans going on around him, and far more screams of despair as kine were Kissed to literal death. Much preferred Antoinette’s version.

“One of the few things the Prince and I agree on.” Jacob. Old eyeless came up to them, grinned one of his trademark twisted grins, and gestured to one of the thralls being drained, a male, who also had a vampire’s hand wrapped around his shaft. “I encourage this! Kindred are animals, beasts, and the beast in us all craves satisfaction.”

“When is the last time you engaged in such animal lust?” Antoinette mimicked his hand gesture, and returned his smirk with her smile.

Jacob's grin faded, and a pause followed that forced a wince from Jack. Dancing on a dangerous topic, and the Nosferatu didn't appreciate it. But after a few seconds of deafening silence from the man, he smiled, and shrugged.

"Been a while, I must admit."

"There are plenty of women here who would enjoy a night with you, old friend, kine or Kindred."

"But would I enjoy it with them?"

"Perhaps," she said.

Yeah, dangerous topic. Jack tried to step back a little, but Antoinette's hug around him was secure. He wasn't going anywhere as these two gods traded veiled barbs and references he didn't understand. It had to do with Minerva, that much he knew, but the nature of that relationship was a mystery, beyond its importance to Jacob. Jack was actually pretty surprised Antoinette took the conversation in this direction, knowing it'd poke the witch in a sore spot. Maybe she was trying to goad a reaction out of him? Sometimes the best way to come to terms with something that was eating at you was to have a spontaneous reaction about it, make some painful revelations.

No way that was going to work with Jacob.

"Don't worry about me, Prince. I'm fine. And, considering the amount of sex that goes on in my home, I am surrounded by moans at all hours of the night as is."

That wasn't exactly a counter point, but Jacob seemed satisfied with his response. And it certainly put images in Jack's head. Othello and his ghoul, Jennifer and her ghouls, and Beatrice? Shark mouth had a great body, and he'd seen her breasts, and—yeah, this party was warping his brain. Couldn't think about anything but sex.

“Jennifer certainly has her eye on Beatrice,” Antoinette said.

“Does she?”

“Oh do not play coy, old friend. Look at her now, how she glances Beatrice’s way every few seconds, and looks the woman up and down. Even with such delights around her, she seems utterly focused on your new project’s derriere.”

New project? Whatever that meant, it was enough to stir a tiny frown from Jacob before it vanished behind his sly smile again.

“The love lives of my subordinates are not my concern.”

“With how close you witches are, I thought perhaps it would be.”

“A little drama only adds to the spice of unlife, non?” he said, complete with a fake French accent. Jacob shrugged, and gestured to the sheriff. “Perhaps you should turn your eye to Daniel. Forever on the sidelines, I fear he’s been neglected a woman’s touch far more than I.”

The sheriff had moved to the side of the room closer to the entrance, and was watching. The tux wouldn’t fit a sword, but Jack doubted the man didn’t have at least two hidden knives on him. His eyes were drifting between the members of the ball, and Natasha. Keeping a close eye on her, and the Uratha around her.

And keeping an eye on Athalia too. The Begotten had stopped closer to the middle of the room, and was looking around at the display of blood and skin that surrounded her. But she caught Jack’s eye, and he shrugged. Could be her, right? Could be her, just letting loose and getting Kissed, or having sex, or both.

No way she was going to abandon decades of hatred in a single night, just because he didn’t know how to keep his mouth shut.

Still, she offered him a small wave of her fingers, before walking out the front door.

“Daniel is as stubborn as you, old fool.” Antoinette rolled her eyes, but the smile remained. “I must speak with Mire and Damor. I will see you at the next Primogen meeting, Jacob.”

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~~Julias~~

“Jacob is going to cause trouble,” Triss said.

“No doubt. He’s your boss though, think you can stop him?”

“Nope. I’m surprised he’s as calm as he is, with Uratha around.”

Yeah, Jacob really hated the werewolves, no doubt about that. “And Athalia looks like she hates everyone.”

Triss laughed, and slipped her arm under his, behind him and around his waist. At least she’d taken off her veil, as no one outside could see into the ball. Not really a ball, just a party pretending to be a ball. And as he looked around at the nearby Invictus, he found less Invictus than before as people switched places, more Carthians coming to join them. Many were drinking blood in excess, and some were drinking from ghouls or thralls, kine that were not their own. Some were drinking of ghouls at the same time, and that was making the kine very aroused; Kindred too. That much blood, flowing, pouring, it got to the point some Kindred were purposefully letting blood slip free of their lips, so it dripped down onto the bare skin of their meals.

Most of the Kindred in Dolareido, or any city truly, were young. Ultimately, neonates were the overwhelming majority of Kindred, and neonates had very little sense of self control. Presented with food, with sin and bliss, they were at the mercy of their desires. And,

he could see the itch on Beatrice's face. She was young, so such needs were always bubbling at the surface for her as well.

Sometimes he felt like an old man, indulging in a woman far too young for him. He laughed, and shook it off when Triss raised a curious eyebrow. If that's how he felt, how did Antoinette feel about her relationship with Jack?

Speak of the devil. The Prince escorted Jack over until the two of them were standing with them. Jack made occasional glances at the vampires drinking of kine sitting in chairs; one kine was even lying on a table and having four Kindred bite into her. At some point, the woman's shirt had come undone, breasts exposed, and no one made any effort to cover her as she squirmed under the pleasure of a quadruple Kiss.

"Prince," Julias said.

"Prince," Beatrice said.

"You look lovely, Miss Damor. I am both intrigued and surprised at your choice of attire. It is perfect."

Triss squirmed, and hugged Julias's waist a little tighter. Even when she was being nice, sociable, the towering woman made all neonates feel uncomfortable, and intimidated. She radiated power, strength, and a 'fuck with me and I'll kick you out of my city' aura. And, she was showing enough cleavage to have everyone nearby staring with desire. Triss was no exception, but it was hard to stare at someone without being noticed when they were only a few feet in front of you.

"Thank you, Prince. Jennifer helped me."

"Ah, Jennifer. Lovely woman. Perhaps a little quick to indulge in her feminine wiles." To prove her point, Antoinette nodded her head back toward Jennifer, who was obviously enjoying the eyes of the

men and women on her. The girl raised her elbows a little higher than necessary when reaching for a glass of blood, so everyone could see how the flimsy fabric hanging around her chest raised as well, exposing her breasts.

“I’d be remiss if the women weren’t so eager to show off said features,” Julius said. And, winced when Triss elbowed him in the side.

But Antoinette laughed, and nodded. “As would many.” She turned her head, enough so she could look down toward Jack, and set her hand to his chin. With at least a hundred people watching, she guided the shocked boy’s face toward hers, and set her lips upon his. The act earned a momentary quiet from the crowd, as they watched in awe at the very tall woman kissing her short boyfriend. The two couldn’t be more different, and no one had expected the relationship to last.

Julius was glad it was still happening. He couldn’t deny Antoinette had really helped the kid through his fledgling months, probably more than he did. Couldn’t help but feel a bit jealous about that, being the kid’s sire, but at the same time he was happy the woman was able to help him in ways he couldn’t. Though, she did love to put him on the spot, to make him squirm. Kissing him in front of everyone, almost every single Kindred in the entire city? Might as well have been shining a spotlight on him.

“How has your time been with the Circle of the Crone, Miss Damor?” she said, pulling away from the long kiss with a smirk. Poor Jack, still shocked, caught between smiling and glancing around at the staring Kindred.

“My time? You mean, with Jacob? It’s been pretty ... well, scary sometimes.”

“Yes, the old man can be terrifying when he wishes to be.” She glanced over her shoulder toward Jacob, who was talking with



Jennifer, and the three werewolves. Natasha was caught in the middle, but no doubt was listening to every word. Spying overtly. “But it is not he I wish to speak to.”

“It isn’t?”

“Non. Come with me Miss Damor. I desire to talk, away from our other halves.” She pat Jack on the head, kissed it, and started to walk toward the balcony. The music was being played from there, but it was a large balcony, and Julias was sure Antoinette would find someplace the two of them could talk.

Why she wanted to talk to his girlfriend though, he didn’t know.

“Um, yes Prince.” Raising a brow at Julias, she shrugged, and followed after the Daeva.

“It’s the talking balcony,” Jack said, once the women were out of earshot.

“Magically imbued to make people talk.” Julias nodded, pat Jack on the shoulder, and started to guide him around the ball, like before.

But he could tell Jack was distracted, and it wasn’t by all the thighs and breasts surrounding them. A buffet of blood and a treat for the eyes, and Jack’s mind was elsewhere. What did Athalia say to him?

And he had to ask. Before he was in the council, he’d have let the boy have his secrets, but he didn’t have that luxury anymore.

“What did the Begotten tell you?”

“I ... shouldn’t tell you.”

Well, that was a lot better than lying to him at least. Kid avoided eye contact, but he didn't have the squirmy look he used to have when he was avoiding saying what was on his mind. Working on his poker face. Good.

“Shouldn't tell me? Because it's personal, or because it's Invictus business and it'd damage the Invictus to tell me?”

“Bit of both?”

Julias frowned. He didn't like not knowing, and if it was from Athalia and had to do with the Invictus, that likely meant Azamel was involved. Not knowing was dangerous. But, he was trusting Jack with bigger and more important tasks all the time, and the kid was doing good work.

“Alright, I trust you.”

“... thanks.” Kid nodded, scratched his head a few times, and sighed as he looked to the front door. “Pity she left. Woman really hates us.”

“I understand Viktor caused her great strife, but I don't know the details.”

“I ... shouldn't talk about it, I guess. It was really personal, and she didn't give me all the details either. And it seems like she's had a hard life in general.”

“Fair enough.”

“I'm kind of surprised about this party, er, ball. I mean, Barry's dead, and there's a genuine possibility he was murdered, with four humans as potential threats out there. But we're all here, drinking, having fun, socializing.” To make his point, the kid gestured to Amanda and Gloria. The two women had a male thrall between them, a new one, and both were suckling on his wrists. Gloria, older,

more bold, was doing more than that, with her hand on the man's crotch and rubbing him through his pants.

"How's your history?" Julias said.

"Academically? Awful."

"In times of war, life affirming acts often increase in frequency, not decrease." He sighed with the reality; Kindred were dead after all, but the philosophy still applied. "Keep looking for clues about Barry though."

"I am. More evidence pointing toward those four humans."

"Good. And, we're not ignoring Master Barry Tellern's death. Every Kindred in the city is finding more secure places to sleep from now on, as are you I assume." And if he guessed right, Jack would be sleeping at Antoinette's tower from now on. Kid hadn't asked him for help yet, and it wasn't like he wouldn't if he needed it.

"Antoinette offered, and I think I'll take it."

"Be careful. Cross a line and the Invictus may have to intervene," he said. Jack looked up at him, but he offered a small, dismissing shrug. "I doubt there will be an issue, but the closer you get to Antoinette, the more difficult it becomes for you to grow in the Invictus covenant."

"Because she's a dragon."

"Yes. The Ordo Dracul are not our enemy, but they are not our friends, Jack. And while I'm happy you and the Prince are happily in love, there's a fine line you're approaching."

"A fine line. Any hint as to where that line is?"

“If you move in with her, as a permanent arrangement that your living den is her tower, that will greatly compromise your position in the Invictus.”

Jack sighed, but nodded. He knew it, and the Prince did as well. The realities of the covenants, like bickering children that didn't like sharing their stuff.

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~~Beatrice~~

Oh god, this again. Last time she'd had a one-on-one with the Prince, Antoinette had told her she loved Julias. And she'd been right. Kind of took the fun out of the juvenile charm of not knowing, the mystery of romance, but it was a good thing Antoinette had told her anyway. Kindred could be stubborn.

But, just being near the ancient vampire was making Triss's muscles tense. So much like Jacob, and so different. No getting around the two were masters of deception, manipulation, and every tool Kindred had at their disposal to control others. And ultimately, she was one of those tools, someone they could break and mold, or twist and misdirect, someone they could have dancing in the palms of their hands without her ever knowing. She fully expected this conversation to be such a manipulation.

Or maybe Antoinette just wanted to be nice, and help her out like she did last time? Could happen.

The two of them stepped onto the balcony where Jack and that asshole monster chick had been a moment before. No idea what that was about, and she was tempted to ask the kid. Maybe next time when she visited him.

“Miss Damor,” she said, once they found a cozy little place on the balcony to speak, “I wanted to speak of Jacob.”

“Jacob? What about him?”

“Now that the Uratha have returned, I know Jacob has been pursuing his own agenda. Of course, the old bastard has never stopped, but Avery’s arrival has sparked his interest in some of his older, more sinister goals. And I am concerned for him.”

“ ... honestly, I picture the two of you as rivals more than friends.”

The Prince frowned at her, and Triss froze. Jack could probably get away with being so direct with her, but she couldn’t.

“I have known Jacob and have worked with him for longer than the whole of your life and unlife, Miss Damor. Such a friendship transcends petty labels and pettier generalizations. It would sadden me to see him hurt, and I fear his hatred for Avery will ultimately lead only to pain. For him, and for others.”

Beatrice rubbed her arm, and remembered the Black Blood of Dolareido thing. Jacob’s hidden agendas were beyond her imagining, if the man was conspiring with alien entities like that.

“I don’t know—”

“Of course you do not know. Sweet child, I am not here to ask for information. You have little to share with me ... except, perhaps, that is not entirely true anymore, is it? I know that Jacob has taken interest in you, and has invited you into his shadows, into the dark corners of the Earth where he weaves his webs. Where bodies pile high and he chases that which should not be chased. Should not be named.”

God fucking damn it, how did she know that?

“I still won’t tell you anything.”

“Of course not dear. And if I truly wanted it, I would take it from you, not ask.”

“You—” She stepped back a little when Antoinette turned to face her, and met her eyes. Red eyes. Fuck, it was like looking into the eyes of a real fucking dragon, Ordo Dracul or not. “ ... then what do you want from me?”

“To ask a favor.”

Sighing, Beatrice stepped back in again, and stood beside the towering woman. And, standing beside her, she couldn't help but take a few peeks at her body, and how the open cleavage exposed her nipples a little. Hell, from the side like this, Triss could see them pretty obviously. Each tit was as big as her head. Bigger! Fucking hell, Jack was sleeping on those puppies nearly every day too, and— holy fuck stop thinking about sex for one minute. Can't, can't stop, not with a dozen kine below her groaning and moaning as vampires drank and fingered and jerked them off.

“What favor?”

“I expect Jacob will move against Avery, in some way not obvious. Your leader is a crafty individual, and for all my powers, my sources, my abilities, I know I will not be able to stop him. I could deal with him now, but I have faith the man will change, if someone was to give him an open ear.”

“You ... want me to be his friend.”

“After a fashion. Would you? I know the man can be twisted, and he holds a tiny porcelain doll of a soul, hidden deep in the shadow of black talons, inside his tainted shell. But, I knew him from long ago, and there is a wise, sincere man with a shred of humanity remaining, buried within that broken husk.”

Holy shit. The Prince of Dolareido was laying some pretty heavy personal views on her, and asking her to try and break through to this old friend of hers. Break through to that twisted freak who stuck her in the gut with knives, who summoned fucking demon things from the beyond?

“ ... I can try.”

“Merci. I would hate for my old friend to become my enemy.” She leaned forward enough to put her elbows on the railing. Yeap, tits just hanging there in her dress, nipples almost out. God fucking damn those were some massive pillows. “Your friend Jennifer has quite the infatuation with you.”

“I ... wait, what?”

She nodded in Jennifer’s direction. “The girl embraces sexuality with a familiar zest. But tonight, much of her display has been aimed at grabbing your attention, and yours alone.”

Beatrice raised a brow, and looked in the Ventrue’s direction. The girl was with a stranger, some thrall or ghoul Triss didn’t recognize. Looked like they belonged to the Invictus, considering the kine was surrounded by suits. And the suits were either watching, or leaning in to Kiss the poor, mewling woman, while Jennifer fingered the shit out of her. Triss could almost see the juices from the balcony.

Jennifer wasn’t drinking the stranger though, she was watching, and her eyes were glancing around, occasionally flitting up to find Triss. Eventually their eyes locked for a while, and as they did, Jennifer fingered the girl hard enough to have her body shaking. Whoever she was, the only thing that kept her from falling backward onto a table were the other two Kindred with their fangs in her neck. Why Jen wasn’t partaking, Beatrice couldn’t figure, but the vampire seemed to not only be having fun making the helpless woman cum her brains out, now she was happy to keep looking at Triss from a distance while she did it.

Jen raised her free hand, and slid into the open cleavage of the woman's dress to lift and pull one breast, and then the other free of the clothes so they spilled over the dress's chest. The Ventrue kept her hand upon her victim's breasts, squeezing one of her nipples maybe a little rougher than she should have. The poor human didn't seem to mind. And with Jen's arm raised like that, one of her breast was exposed as well for all to watch, jiggling with the inertia of her arm moving up and down while she fingered the kine into what must have been a fourth orgasm.

Jen grinned at Triss, and looked back to her target, to continue forcing the now exhausted creature to cum yet again.

“ ... yeah, I guess she has been trying to grab my attention.”

Antoinette laughed, and turned to look across the way to other people, other Kindred who were enjoying a more laid back experience, drinking from glasses and sitting at tables.

“An enjoyable little minx, isn't she?” she said. “Such brazen confidence. And yet, she serves Jacob loyally.”

“Yeah, I guess. Damn girl has been trying to get into my bed for a while now.”

“Oh? She wishes to share you with Mire? A pleasant image, I must admit.”

Antoinette didn't find her shark mouth unappealing? Heh, points for her.

“I mean, yeah, it is, but ... not sure I want it.”

“And why is that?”

“ ... you want to talk about my sex life?” Weird thing for the Prince to be asking about.



“Look around you, Nosferatu. This is the utopia for Kindred I fought for, for so long the memories are but a haze. Here we group, share stories, and indulge each other our desires with our kine to satisfy them. I expect most Kindred, and Uratha and Begotten, to go home once the ball is done, to enjoy climaxes of their own. No judgment, no fear, simply Kindred being Kindred, letting the blood flow into their mouths.”

“Your vision for Dolareido was ... to turn it into the sluttiest city in the world?” Well, she’d succeeded, far as Triss could tell.

“No. My goal was to create a city where Kindred could exist without a constant, night-to-night struggle to survive, outwit each other, outwit hunters, or outwit our prey. And, to create a city where we may give in to our beastly urges in safety. Where the prey need not die, and where we need not as well.” She sighed, an almost longing sigh, as her gaze came back to the woman Jennifer was fingering into a coma. “I have not achieved that goal, not quite yet, but I will continue to try ... and, I suppose, this was a rather long-winded explanation as to my interest in your sex life. Yes, it interests me.”

Antoinette really had a thing for this sort of sexual atmosphere in the party then, almost like she had personal attachment to it. Like, she was seeing her dreams manifest before her eyes. Interesting dream to have, but, it was a pretty damn nice dream.

“I’m hesitant to let her in the bed, because I’m afraid it’ll damage the closeness I have with Julias.”

“Ah, that is a fear worth considering. Were you older, I would say it was unfounded, but you are young still, and Jennifer younger yet again.” A nod and smile later, she gestured with her head toward Julias and Jack beneath them. “Consider this. While you may worry for how it will affect your relationship, Julias is only concerned for you. The man is wholly in love with you, Nosferatu. For him, it

would be to see your pleasure, that would bring him the greatest pleasure. And, as long as you did not betray that love, the man would be overjoyed to sit by the bed, and watch Jennifer and you enjoy each other's bodies."

"I, um ... I mean I'd really prefer if he was in the bed with me."

"As would I, were I you. I always have my love in bed with me, to join me in feasting upon the sexual delights my precious ghouls bring to the act." And of course, the scary woman didn't even blink.

"... you really love the little twerp don't you?" Ah shit she called him twerp. Sure, calling him that around Julias, or the kid himself, was fine. But in front of Antoinette?

And she offered Beatrice a tiny frown as well. Shit shit. But, it passed, and the woman nodded before she reached up to pull her mane of hair over a shoulder. Combing it with one hand, she continued to scan the room beneath her, probably taking a hundred mental notes about each Kindred, and the Uratha and Begotten too.

"I do, with all my heart. For reasons that I am sure are obvious to any who know him."

Yeah, she could understand that. Kid was a weird combination of honest to a fault, and good-natured, while also being analytical. Probably a welcome change for the Prince, being with someone who just didn't know how to stop being genuine like that. Even if it did land him in hot water.

"You ... you said your ghouls join in?" Well, if the scary elder vampire was willing to talk about it, and was impartial — unlike Jennifer — then she might as well ask her for advice. Girl was as old as Jacob, so she must have had some wisdom. Maybe twisted and biased wisdom, also like Jacob's, but wisdom nonetheless.

"That they do."

“You ... feel comfortable? Sharing Jack? Don't think it kind of ruins the closeness you have?”

Antoinette stood a little straighter, and looked down at her from her great height. “My pets understand that Jack is my love, and that, while they are great friends of mine, the closeness between my little Ventrue and I is not to be challenged. They do not kiss him, or at least, not his lips.” The succubus grinned a small, sly grin with that. “They would never touch him without my presence, and I no longer touch them without his presence as well. But, when the four of us are together, it is an enjoyable experience, as my ghouls are my pets, and I wish for them to experience the physical pleasures he and I share. And, perhaps, give them a peek into the love he and I have.”

What a beautiful way of describing a foursome. Triss returned to looking back out over the crowd, and took a little longer this time watching Jennifer. The kine she'd been fingering was now utterly spent, comatose on a table. At least the Kindred were kind enough to pick her up and set her down in a chair off to the side, out of the way. Still mostly naked though, but it was the thought that counted. Heh.

“The details of your relationship with Jennifer are unknown to me, though it is not upon her I lay my confidence. Julias will hold you in his arms, Beatrice, and love you completely, whether it is you two alone, or with Jennifer undoubtedly trying to ... well.” Again, she gestured out into the crowd. Jennifer had found a new target, another woman. Not so aggressive this time, Jen was giving the woman what appeared to be a rather gentle clit massage underneath her skirt, while the kine got comfortable between a couple more vampires. And, of course, she peeked up at Triss and smiled while she did it.

“Dog with a bone.”

Antoinette chuckled, and turned her head enough to catch Beatrice in the corner of her eye. “Please, keep an eye on Jacob for me? He has taken an interest in you. And, he too is a dog with a bone, in this case with his desire for revenge.”

“I ... don’t think he ... yeah, I’ll keep an eye on him.” The fuck was she going to do, or say to the man? She’d been a witch, a member of the Circle of the Crone, for what, half a year now, and Jacob had only just now started to show her some of his secrets. None of them were personal.

The Black Blood thing, that stuff of nightmares, was happy one of the werewolves had died. It and Jacob were discussing it. Connection? Did the weird death entity thing — god, that was never going to be something she could easily accept — and Jacob somehow plan for the second Azlu to screw over the Uratha? How the fuck could they have done that?

Christ, she didn’t know how any of it worked. Werewolves, transforming into titans, monsters coming out of literal nightmares, spider mutation things taking over human bodies, and now Jacob’s friend? Some literal incarnation of ... of ... fuck it, too much to think about right now. She could think about it later, the next time she let Jacob ‘teach’ her crúac rituals. What would he do next time, drag barbed wire over her naked skin?

“Let us return to our men,” Antoinette said.

Right, yeah, the men. Right. Stop thinking about Jacob’s shit, and enjoy the party. Easier said than fucking done.

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~~Antoinette~

It was not her ball, and yet, the ball was progressing just as she had hoped. Just as she had planned. Months of subtle hints, directing the Invictus toward this sort of gathering, baiting them

with bits of candy. Good for relations, she would say. And it was good for relations, to remind the Carthians and Invictus, and others, that paranormals need not be enemies.

Cooperation was the way of the future; if, perhaps, a little guided, controlled, by someone such as herself.

She slipped by Jack, and kissed him on the delightful, buzzed head of his. "I will go mingle with the others. Come, join me."

"Yeah! Ok."

And just like that, she had stolen Jack away from his sire, and back into the hook of her arm as she took him around the room. Showing him off, though she knew the boy did not strike a good first impression. That was then, long ago, when people were surprised that the great Julias had sired a tiny childe, her included. But now, her little Ventrue was known to others for his dangerous stunt in the tunnels with the Azlu creature. And for that, he was admired.

They need not know of his trials against Viktor, Tony, and Lucas. Her alone was enough. And Jacob, as she was sure the old devil would be able to piece together some of his exploits.

For his growing prowess, abilities, and reputation, she could not help but feel pride and joy. To show him off on her arm? Such a vain, amusing indulgence, and she smiled at nearby Kindred as she took him toward a group of the hungry vampires. Many stopped what they were doing, greeted her with the utmost respect, and offered some respect to the little Ventrue as well. And more than a few eyes lingered on her love with hungering gazes. Power was attractive, but also, there was no denying her love was adorable, cute, and as delicious as blood fresh from helpless, exhausted, thoroughly spent prey.

The Daeva who had brought ghouls of their own did not taste of the others. Such was the way of Daeva, to become obsessed with those they fed from regularly, to make such targets a part of their lives. The thought of feasting upon kine other than Ashley or Julee made her frown, and she wiped it away quickly as she watched the other Kindred indulge in the orgy of teeth and moans.

There was no ruling that the Kindred would not join the kine in the mess of sexual delights, but the ball did imply that the Kindred were to remain above such base physical desires. Antoinette did not consider sexual urges to be base or somehow beneath Kindred, and she strongly encouraged Kindred in Dolareido to embrace how their unlife allowed them endless sexual satiation. Perhaps, one day, when any and all traces of tension between the covenants were gone, and perhaps when the Invictus were less obsessed with suits, they would encourage such joys as well. It would please her greatly, to see the Kindred bathe in sexuality during such balls, to penetrate and be penetrated, to enjoy climaxes along with their meals.

She laughed, a quiet and wispy thing, as she let her imagination roam. In the future, perhaps there would be a day when she would sit upon a circular bed, in the center of the grand ballroom, with her two ghouls and her love Jack. And the four of them would perform a grand display of sexuality while hundreds of kine and Kindred watched. The crowd would give into their lust, and would begin to masturbate, or touch each other, as they watched the Prince pamper her lover's shaft between her breasts. Once his seed coated her heavy bosom, she would mount him and sit upon his cock while Ashley and Julee devoured her breasts, massaging and licking, until they were clean and ready to be suckled upon by her love. And through it all, the sounds of moans and mewls would be their music.

A silly fantasy to be sure; but perhaps, not so distant from a possible future. Carthians were enjoying Jessy's ghouls, after all. Strange of the brutish woman to extend such an olive branch, but

she had, and it worked. Not only worked, but a rather large amount of the female Kindred, and one male, had included heavy petting while indulging Kisses upon the gifts.

She stopped before one such display. Three Carthian women were sitting about a table, and a male ghoul lay upon it, naked. He was an impressive display of meat to be sure, and the women looked upon their meal with hungry eyes. One woman sat by his neck, where his head dangled over the table's edge, another beside his chest where she indulged in both kissing, and Kissing his broad muscles, while the final woman sat between his legs. And she was not Kissing him. Rather, she had both her hands on his shaft, and was stroking the man's length, while holding his shaft only an inch from her lips.

And, when she put a slow, succulent kiss on the human's glans, the poor kine groaned his pleasure. Two sets of fangs already in him, very, very slowly draining him, meant there was plenty of time for the woman between his legs to have fun with her prey, before inevitable exhaustion and bloodloss would take away his ability to remain erect. Not all the time in the world, but more than enough.

"Prince!" The woman performing fellatio tried to stand up, but Antoinette waved a dismissing hand.

"Please, Caroline, continue, enjoy yourself. I am not here to stop you; in fact, I find this sight quite appealing." She grinned down at the three women, and the meal they were sharing.

Caroline, Darla, and Linnea. Carthians, and dressed for a cocktail party. But the ball was no ordinary ball, and the three fit in quite well. While Darla and Linnea were lean, fit looking creatures, Caroline was a more curvaceous woman similar to Antoinette, without her great height. And, like Antoinette, the dark-skinned beauty wore a dress that highlighted her large breasts.

She could not blame Jack for staring. A man's cock was in Caroline's hands, and with how the woman was sitting, leaning

forward slightly so she could kiss the man's shaft, it made her heavy breasts hang forward from her dress and threaten to spill out of the loose cleavage.

How often had the two of them enjoyed such a position, Antoinette and her little Ventrue? Dozens of times.

“Are you sure, Prince?”

“Yes, please. This feast of flesh has been a joy, and I am both delighted and encourage such pleasures. To see the Kindred of my city feeling comfortable, safe, to this degree? To partake of such pleasures in the presence of others, and other covenants? By all means, continue.”

And she did. The girl was ravenous, Antoinette could see it in her eyes and her body language; she wanted blood, and more. The fact the woman was going to pleasure the kine as her two friends drank from him, was oddly sweet.

Poor Jack. She kept the boy close to her, and could not help but find a strange glee in bringing him close to such public, salacious acts. Despite the unending bombardment of sexual delights she buried him with, it was still easy to bring a surprised, gawking stare from him whenever she wished it.

The women noticed he was staring, and they grinned with their eyes at Antoinette. The power of the little Ventrue's gaze was a very real force, and she returned their grin with her smile, knowing full well how intoxicating the boy's eyes were. Intoxicating to the point that, a woman might find herself wanting to show off.

Caroline combed back her short, black hair, turned her head just enough so she could see Jack's blatant staring, and smiled around the kine's shaft as she took his length into her mouth. Soon the man was buried to the hilt within her lips, a small distension on the woman's throat showing where his shaft filled her esophagus. And



she kept him there, nudging her head back and forth in slow, sensual motions. The poor kine was left a mess of quiet groaning and trembling as Caroline depthroated him.

Antoinette watched for perhaps a minute more than she should have, but could not help herself. Jack beside her looked so uncomfortable, and the genuine surprise on his face was like sweet blood to her palette. And she had to have more.

She offered Caroline a nod of approval, and with a slow, lingering turn, guided Jack toward another corner of the grand ball.

“Are you trying to break me?” her little Ventrue whispered.

“Of course.”

“Whyyyy?”

“Because, the expressions you make are too adorable to not, my love.”

They both laughed; her lover, a little more nervously however. But that only made her enjoy it all the more, and she kissed his head once again as they explored the sensual displays around them. At least, until Antoinette found one particular person she was not hoping to find.

Damien Burksen.

She offered him steel eyes, and waited for the man to make his move. He met her glare for only a moment before his eyes lowered, and turned to look at the flood; and yet, not with the awkwardness of a shy individual. No, with Damien, it was because he knew she did not like him, that the man took his gaze to his shoes.

How soft had she become? Once, she marched upon Lucas, his churches, and slaughtered Kindred by the dozens with her own

hands, with Daniel at her side and Garry as her back up. She was feared, and she was respected. Now? The respect was there, but it had changed as the fear vanished. People were happy with Dolareido, and happy with her. That was good, was it not? That was what she had always wanted, a peace where she ruled with a gentle touch, not an iron grip.

A gentle touch was dangerous. It invited idiocy from those with courage spilling into foolhardiness, and imbecility. It was why Damien had revived Lucas from his torpor when he did.

But the boy had changed, and that, she could not deny. Changed, and was perhaps never the cruel assassin she had thought him to be. He was only a boy, a young man barely older than Jack when he was turned, and fifty-years deep in ignorance at the hand of Lucas's dogma. Both Natasha and Jack vouched for him, and she was not so petty as to hold a baseless grudge.

Still, the memory of his sword severing her limbs was not a pleasant one.

“Mister Burksen,” she said. “You hide well.”

“Not a fan of crowds ... my Prince.”

No, she imagined not. Much like Natasha, or Daniel. A common trait among Mekhet, one they continued to perpetuate with their selection of childe. Lucas was an exception, and yet, his protege was not. Strange, and perhaps prophetic that it was the exception that had to be killed.

“Damien,” Jack said, complete with a tiny nod, a knowing nod.

“Jack,” Damien said, returning the gesture.

She should have waited for Maria, before interviewing the boy; the Nosferatu had decided to represent the young man after all. But

a few harmless questions would not upset her. Much.

“I understand that Maria has asked you to begin sermons? In the Dolareido Grand Cathedral no less.”

“... yes, my Prince.” He looked surprised. Good. Maria had not told her, and Damien had certainly not told her. She had learned of their sermons through her own means, and it was a sweet indulgence to remind the man indirectly that she knew what he was up to, without him knowing how she knew. Fifty years he had hid from her eyes, and she would allow that no longer. “Is ... that a problem?”

“Your means of acquiring followers has been passive enough to satisfy me. Keep it as such, and I see no issue.” Not that it guaranteed there would be no issue, but as long as the man acquired his followers through nothing more than a few words of encouragement from Maria, she felt it would be fine. The boy had proven he was not Lucas, and she had to respect that. “Are you enjoying the Invictus ball? I felt, perhaps, its inevitable sexual nature would offend you.”

“The First Estate’s ... openness, to adding this ... icing upon their meal, is definitely shocking.”

“Is it not? I must admit, while it pleases me the Kindred of my city are familiar enough to engage in such sexuality, I did not expect the ball to escalate to this degree.” She started walking. And, when Damien did not accompany, she gave him a look. The look.

He winced, and fell into step beside her. “The Second Estate ... or at least, Lucas’s version of it, would not approve of this.”

“And you?” she said, as she came closer to a delicious scene. A male Kindred had pinned a female kine to the wall, and was drinking of her neck while fondling one of her breasts. The woman’s dress had been pulled down to let them spill out, and she was doing

nothing to cover herself as the man groped her. Perhaps, squeezed a little harder than he should have, but the woman responded with only moans, and set her hands on the man's chest and arm as he drank her.

It was a bit cruel, to force Damien to be near such sights, when she knew the man was conditioned to find it unappealing, or repulsive, for Kindred to enjoy sexual pleasures with kine. But she had earned the right to be cruel, after losing her two previous ghouls to Lucas's tyranny and sword.

Damien watched the male Kindred fondling his prey, and then turned to look toward a table, where two Kindred were drinking from the wrist of another kine. Far less sexual, except that the kine being Kissed was looking rather blissful. Still, far tamer.

"It's hard breaking half a century of ... brainwashing. But, I try."

Brainwashing. That, was an accurate word, and she raised a brow as she looked down at the dangerous man beside her. Jack did as well. A powerful word indeed, and she nodded as she accepted it, its weight, its finality.

"I am glad that you understand that, and that you try. I am." She continued walking, away from the sexual displays, with no more urge to torture the brooding Mekhet. Softness, thy name is Antoinette.

She glanced around. Jacob was speaking with Fiona, as the Begotten was no longer with Natasha. Which put the young woman in a strange position, feeling awkward, looking intimidated, and trying to avoid staring at where the man should have eyes. Why was the old monster talking with her? The old man had undoubtedly spoke with Azamel, in pursuit of his agendas, but Fiona was of little value to the fossil. And perhaps Jacob was simply trying to misdirect Antoinette, convince her Fiona was of importance to the old man,

when in fact she was not. A wild goose chase, perhaps, to have Fiona monitored.

Or not. Such games took careful maneuvering, and she would play them.

Her wandering eventually took her toward her subordinate, and she smiled down at the beautiful little woman. The dress was lovely. Plain, but it hugged Natasha's body tight enough that every curve of her petite figure was visible, including a subtle hint of her nipples, and to the observant eye, that she was not wearing underwear. Perfect, and fitting the tiny, secretive creature.

And then there were the two beasts, the wolves, Arturo Ibarra and Matthew Wilson. Dressed nicely, but not too nicely, much like the Carthians; it fit them. And the two men hung around Natasha, often with a habit of setting a hand on her shoulder. They towered over her, and while Antoinette was eye level with Arturo, perhaps an inch taller, Matthew was a giant, and one of the few people she had ever had to look up to to meet his gaze.

Tiny Natasha, between these two titans of muscle? The image was a delicious one, and Antoinette raised a finger to graze her lip as she looked down at her subordinate. The girl knew what she was thinking, and she managed a tiny, sheepish grin before she squirmed and fiddled with her fingers.

"P-Prince," she said. "Are you enjoying the ... b-ball? And you, D-Damien? You haven't been ... mingling."

"Yeah, not really here to mingle. Just here cause Turio assured me it would be important for ... relations."

"Relations," Antoinette said, "are created by mingling. Though you need not be a butterfly, such as ... Jessy Herrington, for example."

The group of them followed her guiding glance, and took a peek at the aggressive Gangrel. Indeed, the woman was socializing, though she had moved on from the Carthians, to instead speak with her fellow Invictus, some of the younger ones engaged with prey. Two female and one male Kindred, and a male kine who sat between them. Through the crowd and music, Antoinette could make out the woman's loud voice, giving instruction on how to both Kiss a male kine, and have sex with him, without compromising his ability to maintain an erection. The Kiss was, essentially, blood loss for the kine after all.

“Um, I think maybe ... something a little more subdued might make for an easier first contact,” Damien said.

She laughed. Quite true. Damien, despite his age and strength, had hid from their kind for all those years.

Fiona, returned from Jacob's grasp, poked her head out from behind Matthew, glass in hand, and teetered left and right as she looked at the man. “Damien! Ah lied.”

“Fiona, hello ... what?”

“Ah lied! About the sex. Just wanted tae seem older, right? And ... and...” She stood up straighter, and looked around at the people staring at her. “Hullo.”

This girl, was ridiculous. She had marched into Antoinette's tower, and had asked for Daniel to speak with Athalia. The girl had been — and continued to be — so naive and bubbly that Antoinette could not help but entertain the silly child's request.

And then there was Clara. A beautiful woman to be sure, and her box braids were exquisite. The tan skin, dark brown eyes, and the strength to her bare shoulders were all delightful, beautiful, and compelling. It was easy to see the woman was doing her best to not look at Jack, and Jack was doing the same with her.

But, Clara had no trouble looking Antoinette in the eye. Defiant, in a subtle and silent way, a way Antoinette could not call her out on despite its blatant nature, as if someone had taught her in the ways of the Danse Macabre.

She liked Jack, this beautiful wolf. And despite herself, Antoinette hugged the obviously uncomfortable boy closer to her side. He was hers, and she was not giving him up.

“I am surprised your pack leader has not come, Clara Moreno,” she said. Yes, I know your name, wolf. “I understand with Jacob here, it would have been difficult. But, her presence may have generated some good will.”

“Maybe, Prince.” Clara nodded, before offering a small shrug. “I’m second in command. I’ll relay anything I learn.”

The smell of alcohol was on her breath, and Antoinette could see the woman’s stance was a touch unbalanced. As far as Antoinette knew, an Uratha had to drink quite a bit to experience the effects of alcohol, which meant that Clara had been drinking plenty, along with her two companions Matthew and Arturo.

And that made Antoinette content. And maybe a touch nervous. Content that the wolves, once her enemy, were comfortable enough to risk themselves so, getting drunk. Nervous, as a drunk werewolf could perhaps be a rowdy werewolf.

“What will you tell your leader, if you do not mind the asking?”

“I’ll ... tell her that you’re all a bunch of very horny vamps, but mostly an amiable bunch. You know, for vamps.”

She laughed once again. “Yes, that is an accurate statement, I must admit. And please, feel free to indulge. Dolareido is a city of peace once more, with vices flowing through the streets, ready to be gobbled.” The blood of her city, after all. “I am sure many Kindred

here would be glad to share their thralls or ghouls with you for the night. Or themselves, in some circumstances.” A glance for Natasha, who smiled a tiny smile.

“You offering?” Clara said.

Antoinette’s smile faded, and her arm around Jack tightened a touch more, enough so the boy went still. “No.”

She, the wolf, and the people around her went silent, as Clara and Antoinette looked at each other. At first, Antoinette had thought Clara’s fondness of Jack had been nothing more than mere flirtatious interest. But the wolf’s gaze did not break, spurred by courage or alcohol or both. Perhaps it was not simple, passing interest in Jack then.

Fiona stumbled forward, no longer with drink in hand, and leaned against Clara’s side. “Ah vote we bring a few of th’ sexy Kindred ‘ere back tae Bloodlust, an’ we don’t go home until I’ve got a man atween mah legs.”

This Fiona, silly child, was a confused woman, to be sure, a woman who wanted to explore her sexuality but seemed blocked by her own choices. She reeked of a woman secretly insecure about herself, who did things such as lie to Damien about having sex, in order to carry the impression she was a sexual woman. And, the petite, curvy creature was plenty attractive; the only thing stopping her sexual exploration was herself. But why?

Begotten were strange creatures. But, Fiona had disarmed the situation well enough, by accident, or perhaps on purpose. Perhaps, the delicious ginger creature was not as drunk as she let on? ... no, the little woman was indeed quite drunk, and young, and naive, and Antoinette could not help but feel herself brighten for being in her presence. A touch of similarity, Fiona and Jack, genuine and honest and young.



“Can I speak to you alone for a moment, Prince?” Clara said.

Alas, not entirely disarmed then.

Antoinette held her steel gaze, neither a smile or frown, and nodded. “Jack, if you do not mind?”

“Uh, sure, yeah.” The boy slipped out from underneath her arm, and walked over to stand beside Natasha. Damien followed.

With a gentle sigh, Antoinette walked with Clara. The two of them moved for the exit, side by side; and Antoinette did not like that. Others would have followed a step behind, while remaining at her side, but not the werewolf. No, Clara kept beside her shoulder to shoulder, and glanced around at the nearby Kindred as the two of them garnered gazes from others. No doubt this little excursion the two of them were making would be the focus of conversation for many.

Outside. With a more annoyed sigh, Antoinette tapped into the ocean of vitae in her core, and blanketed the two of them in the cloak of night. Not a natural discipline of a Daeva, but even a minor learning was of use to keep their voices from carrying out to be heard by nearby, passing humans. The two of them stood underneath the archway of the enormous building, and faced each other.

“This isn’t about Jack,” Clara said.

“Of course not.”

“ ... he is a great kid though. Bit young for you, don’t you think?”

Antoinette’s frown returned. So this is how it would be? To parley with barbs and poison.

“Are you not older than you appear, wolf?”

“Yeah I suppose. Got a couple decades on me I don’t carry on the face yet. You’re what, four or five centuries older than you look?”

“All the better, so that I may protect that which I love with power, and wisdom. And, pleasure him with experience.” Antoinette’s frown faded, replaced with a tiny smile that made her feel dark, sinister, and reminded her of Tony. “And unlike yours, my beauty will never fade.”

If she were not intoxicated, Antoinette felt the wolf would have kept her composure. But alcohol destroyed many things, including one’s patience, and Clara’s frown scarred her beautiful face.

“... Avery wanted to tell you, she knows you’ve been fucking with the Shadow more than usual.”

Antoinette brought a hand up to her chin to rest a single finger, and adopted a pondering expression. “Have I?”

“Like you’d know. You’ve never been to the Hisil, never seen the blood tower you’ve created there. And the black rivers haven’t left either, still here, still fucking shit up whenever anything touches it.”

Antoinette absorbed the words carefully, though each marked with feigned obliviousness. Each name and noun was more information for her to use, but ultimately Clara was correct about her lack of exposure to the other side of what Uratha called the Gauntlet. She had never seen the tower of blood, and had only heard mention of the black rivers from Simon.

“I am not Minerva, Clara Moreno. I do not, and will not make the same mistakes that she did. And, should fate conspire against me and such folly befall me, you would not be able to stop me.”

Clara snorted, and wiped her lip with her thumb. Uncouth creature. “Me, alone? No, I doubt I could take you in a fight, Miss

Big Bad Elder Vamp. Avery could. And the fuck would you do if the whole pack came marching to your door?”

She almost grinned. Since Lucas’s ridiculous kamikaze attempt, she had taken the time to increase the defensive measures of her tower. What would these wolves do once they realized the twenty thralls armed with fully automatic assault rifles in the lobby were firing silver bullets? Or, when Daniel and she exposed their silver swords?

Do not underestimate Avery, Antoinette. The woman had learned from Simon’s mistakes no doubt, and would not simply bash her head against your door in the same way. And perhaps a little compromise would be possible.

“ ... be specific with me if you would, Clara. What exactly is it about my experimentations that is risking Avery’s retaliation?”

“Spiritual activity that’s pretty chaotic around the blood tower is causing weird interactions between spirits. Clashes of ... You ever seen a Magath tear through the Gauntlet, vampire? Ever seen someone spirit ridden try and resolve a need to heal and a need to consume at the same time? Or maybe a—no, course you haven’t, I’m wasting my time.” Aggressive, the wolf was growling, and she stepped in a little closer to glare up at her. “Nothing bad’s happened yet. But then...”

A pause in the werewolf’s aggression peeked Antoinette’s interest.

“Yes?”

“ ... you’re not the only person fucking with shit in the Shadow, Antoinette. Someone else is, and ... Avery wanted me to ask if you know who.”

Well, this was a surprising turn of events. Clara, this obviously aggressive woman who had an eye on Antoinette’s love, was asking

for her help. And she did not seem too happy about it either. And it was an important question, dealing with things outside the Danse Macabre. Were the Uratha asking for information about other Kindred, or the covenants, Antoinette would have mislead her. But, with monsters like that Azlu tearing through her tunnels, she had no choice but to accept the reality. For all her exploring, for all her experiments, for all her attempts to understand what lay across the Gauntlet, it was the purview of the Uratha.

And that infuriated her. When glorious creatures such as Safe came through an invisible barrier she could neither see nor touch, to grace her with its presence? Large and small, entities of passion and grace and wisdom and love, with wings and hooves and glass and fur and metal. And other entities, dark and twisted things with many limbs and teeth, or things that defied description, with skin, scales, rusted iron, and bleeding eyes. For years she had dabbled, summoned these things in a controlled environment, and scratched at things that threatened to shatter a Kindred's understanding of reality. And, outside of the tower, she had journeyed to other locations. With methods beyond her understanding, spoke with yet more entities, creatures subtle and hidden on the wisp of shadow, and others as grand and towering as the oldest trees.

All of it, beyond her grasp of understanding, of experiencing. But not these Uratha, these brutes of strength, with 'wisdom' as meaningless as the ancient assumption that without sacrifice to the gods, the Nile would not flood that year, and Egypt would starve. Fools, blind, ignorant fools. And yet...

"I know of no one, Clara, that knows much of the Hisil, except for my subordinates. And Jacob."

"Yeah ... Jacob." Clara sighed, turned to put her back to the wall of the grand building, and sighed. "Don't think it's him. We don't know who it is, but someone else is ... reaching, poking holes, causing problems." She laughed, and kicked at the concrete beneath her a

couple times. “You think vampires are bad? Try playing politics with a bunch of spirits. It’d be easier to negotiate with a child.”

It was difficult to make use of her vague words, but Antoinette doubted she would be able to pull anything more specific. That spirits, those both wondrous and terrifying, played at politics was known to her, but to what degree, was a mystery.

“I am sorry, Miss Moreno. I do not know.”

“Yeah ... thanks anyway.” Sighing, the wolf pushed herself away from the archway wall, and started back toward the entrance. “Your boy Jack is pretty damn cute.”

“He is. Utterly delicious, is he not?” And he is mine, animal.

“And if I convinced him to take a younger woman?”

“If you—”

“Yeah, if I convinced him. Would you be that greedy? Hold onto the kid even if he wanted to leave? You wouldn’t be the first Daeva that plucked the flower, killing it, in their desperate need to own it.”

“Jack is m...” Mine. Mine! No one else’s. She would never let him go, could never let him go. Never!

She grit her teeth until her fangs came to bare, and she forced the rising inferno in her dry, withered insides to settle. Clara was not incorrect. Daeva grabbed things precious to them, held them close, held them tight, until the life was wrung out of them.

Dizzying images, blurry memories assaulted her, ripped the rock from her stance, rendered her asunder. She closed her eyes for only a moment, but a moment was enough to bury her in hazy pictures of a time long ago, when that which she held precious burned away, and those she clung to with all her might withered into dust. Tony,

once upon a time. Others before him she had buried in her unabashed need to own them, until they were but a shell of their former selves.

Jack. He would have made the comparison to the Phantom of the Opera; a silly story that failed to capture the nuance of obsession, Antoinette felt. But, ultimately, the musical did capture the overwhelming emotion, the need to turn the target of your desire into your possession. To own them, consume them, integrate them into every part of you, until they were wholly yours. The fear of losing that thing so precious was tantamount to damnation, and any Kindred, Daeva or otherwise, would be broken by such loss.

‘You will curse the day you did not do, all that the phantom asked of you.’

She turned away, and put her hands to her arms. “Nothing would hurt me more, but I would let him go.” No longer the child she once was, no longer the neonate or the ancilla. She had learned her lesson, painfully, time and time again.

Clara smirked at her, and dismissed the avalanche of pain her question had wrought with but a simple flick of the wrist. “Relax. Kid loves you, he made that clear.”

“ ... yes ... thank you.”

The wolf’s smirk grew, and she reentered the ball.

Antoinette took a moment longer. A night before and she was perfectly confident in herself, in her love, in her position, in everything about her romance with her loving, precious Jack. And this werewolf damaged it with a single question. Would she give Jack up, could she at all?

She shook out her hair, took a second to comb it with her fingers, and brushed herself off. Some others on the street nearby were

talking, but their eyes would slide over her, with the cloak of night hiding her. And she kept it that way as she touched her face — do not ruin your face — and attempted to wipe away the crease upon her forehead. She was the Prince of Dolareido, a monolith of strength, a beautiful, sexual goddess, seductress, and towering presence of intelligence and wisdom. You are Prince, and it is upon these virtues that you hold that position.

And yet, Jack did not treat her as such. Jack treated her like a person, once the shock of her presence passed. He treated everyone like a person, when given the opportunity. And she loved that about her little Ventrue. She needed that in her life, needed to hold him and hear his words settle her scarred heart. Needed to hear the honesty and sincerity in his voice, and see the depth of his genuine soul through the windows of his beautiful eyes.

If only her city knew the ridiculous, juvenile, disgustingly poetic thoughts going through her mind. There would be an uprising within the week. Sighing all the more, she adjusted her dress, checked her hair again, released her cloak of night, and returned to the ball.

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~~Jack~~

“Wonder what they’re talking about,” he said, once Antoinette and Clara were outside. Please don’t be talking about him. He didn’t want to go back to the Elysium tower and have a weird conversation about Clara. Antoinette wouldn’t be that insecure of course. Right?

He looked around. Beatrice and Julias were enjoying each other, holding each other as they drifted; almost looked like they were ready to dance. No one was dancing though. In fact, as far as Jack could see, almost everyone was getting far more into drinking the shared kine than anyone could have predicted. Jennifer and Jessy were no doubt a part of that reason, as the two women seemed

almost in competition for who could be the most sexual, without actually having sex on the ballroom floor.

Around him were Natasha, Arturo, Matthew, Fiona, and now Damien. Could have been awkward, but Fiona drifted between them, and reached out to put a hand on Damien's shoulder.

“Sorry ah lied.”

“Um, it's ok.”

“Na it's nae! Ah was just trying tae be ... ah don't know ... Vrall was nae like this! Vrall had orgies in 'er honor!”

Vrall, the spider goddess nightmare entity thing inside the bubbly little redhead. Still hard to imagine, but Jack did his best, and smiled as he watched Fiona struggle with her turmoil. To be upset about lying about not being a virgin? If that was the worst thing she had to feel bad about, she was a strange girl. She'd killed people, a lot of them, to feed her hunger. Didn't feel bad about them? Very strange girl.

“Damien,” Arturo said, still standing behind Natasha with his hands on her shoulders. “I understand you tried to take down the Prince?”

Wow, right to the sore spot.

“ ... Lucas did, and I aided him, yes.”

“Hey, not looking to start anything. Just thought that was worth bringing up, cause damn, that must take balls. Avery has some stories about the Prince and the sheriff getting into a fight with Simon and his pack. Scary stuff.”

Jack must have been going insane, cause he thought he spotted a smile on Damien's face.



“Well ... we had the sheriff trapped. So it was just me and our companions against the Prince.”

“Sheriff trapped?”

“I—” Damien stopped himself as he took a glance to Natasha, and Jack did as well. She managed to, without moving any part of her face, show that she didn’t tell the two werewolves the sheriff was her sire yet. “I had something precious of his, and private. He had no choice but to stand down.”

“Something so precious the sheriff let you fight the Prince?”  
Matthew said.

“Can we have it?” Art said. “For ... you know, peaceful purposes.”  
A joke, complete with a chuckle.

Every bit of training Julias gave Jack about the poker face went into action. Damien as well. Natasha as well, though she didn’t have the steel to her gaze that Damien had.

“Sorry, he has it back,” the assassin said.

The two wolves nodded, and took a few more sips of their drinks. Good, the more alcohol the better.

Antoinette returned, as did Clara, and the two of them walked back to join the group. Neither of them looked happy.

Jack took a step toward his love and slipped in under her arm. Not usually his place to be the first to engage, but something was bothering her, and for some stupid reason he couldn’t help but feel responsible, if Clara was involved. And she hugged him with that arm, with a little more weight than usual.

“If you will excuse me, Kindred, Uratha, Begotten, I have preparations to make for the future. Jack my love, please come join

me before the sunrise.”

“Sure you don’t want me to come with you now?”

The goddess smiled down at him, leaned down to plant a kiss on his lips, and let him go. “Non. As I said, work to be done. Please enjoy the party.” She traced her finger along his lips, turned, and left.

It wasn’t unusual for the Prince to leave the ball before others. Hell it was expected. They all watched her leave, and Jack took a few extra peeks at her before looking back to Clara.

“You—”

“Don’t worry Jack,” she said. “Just ... yeah.” Another shrug, and she gave her pack mates some gentle punches on the shoulders. “I’m out of here. Don’t break your girl tonight, ok?”

“Sure boss,” they both said, and both turned to look at Natasha with evil grins abound.

Natasha shrank against Arturo’s stomach, and gulped.

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The party continued for a little while longer, before everyone started to leave. Kindred here and there helped their exhausted kine get dressed and such, and many Kindred went home with another Kindred by their side; and some kine between them too. If any of the vampires in Dolareido were not planning on having sex tonight before they’d gone to the ball, that probably changed. Bellies full of blood and plenty more to be had from the many thralls and ghouls being shared had turned the air into a veritable ocean of sexual energy.

But, after Antoinette’s departure, the night lost its zest for Jack. Halfway through the party, he was thinking Antoinette was going to

do a host of nasty things to him when they went back to her tower. Now, he wasn't so sure. Something had shaken her, and seeing Antoinette shaken was weird.

He didn't stick around the whole time. Julias told him he could go, and so he went after saying goodbye to Natasha, Amanda, Beatrice, Fiona — all his friends were girls apparently — and just as he was about to say goodbye to Damien, the assassin approached him first.

“Can I talk to you, Jack?”

“Yeah sure.” Hopefully not as heavy a topic as Athalia's.

The two of them decided to walk home. Not far to get back into the main city district, or at least it shouldn't have been, but Damien nodded toward a dark alley, and Jack, like an idiot, followed him. He trusted Damien, but dark alleys weren't exactly doing him any favors. Memories of Rebecca were fresh and painful.

“Making me nervous, Damien,” he said, giving the Mekhet the opportunity to make a joking chuckle. He didn't.

“Those your two crows watching the ball?”

“I ... oh damn it, how did you know?”

“Two crows hanging out by the front entrance of a building for that long, when no other crows were around, were bound to be noticed.”

“Damn it.”

“Though, only a Mekhet would be able to see that the crows had indeed been touched by the animalism discipline.”

He sighed, put his hands in his pockets, and let his head droop.  
“How’d you know they were mine?”

“ ... I’ve been watching you.”

“ ... why?”

“I wasn’t watching you at first, I was investigating some unusual people. Four people, two men, two women, visited the Dolareido Cathedral at one point.”

Those four again, at Maria’s Grand Cathedral? “ ... I guess if you’ve been talking to Maria, you know about Barry.”

“I knew about Barry before you did.”

Of course he did, cause the man was forever sneaking and monitoring everything.

“Any information to share?”

“No. Except that those four were at the burned down building the day after you were.”

“Shit, really? They were there not long before the fire too ... Fuck, I knew I should have reported the new evidence before the ball.” He threw up his hands, groaning. “I already reported about the four, but there wasn’t enough evidence to really get the whole Invictus up in arms about it.”

The two of them nodded, and they both sighed. With both of their sightings combined, the pile of evidence was too big to ignore.

“What did they do at the Cathedral?”

The assassin shrugged and looked out to the street. People walked by, but they wouldn’t be able to see the two of them with Damien

covering them in the cloak of night. And yet he was still being cautious, about humans. Scary thought.

“They didn’t stay long, just long enough to realize it wasn’t actually abandoned. No dust on the pews.” The assassin sighed, combed the half head of hair, and met Jack’s gaze. “You know what this means.”

“Humans following us around? Barry’s dead and no one knows why? I ... it’s probably ... hunters.”

“Yeap.”

The two of them looked around again. They were in a dark alley, so damn dark they might as well have been hiding in a closet. And yet, he felt exposed. So did Damien, a vampire fifty years his senior, who was strong for his age at that. Strong enough to fight the Prince; when she had a handicap of course, but, still. Jack should have felt safe with Damien there to watch his back.

He didn’t feel safe. The stupid little nagging feeling in his gut just kept growing, and had been for days now. It was in everyone’s gut, and everyone was ignoring it; the near orgy in the ball was proof of that. People were getting so into it because it was easier to pretend everything was fine.

Kine were sheep. Kindred were the wolves in sheep’s clothing. Then what the fuck was a hunter? A sheep with a stake and a flamethrower?

“I’m going to go tell Maria,” Damien said. “You should just ... go to the Prince’s.”

“What? Why? I should report this to—”

“Think about it Jack. Youngest Kindred in the whole city, and the Prince’s lover? You don’t think hunters would make you a prime

target?”

“If these hunters have been here all this time, then—”

“Then either they’re waiting to make their move, or they just don’t know about you yet. Until we get rid of them — if they’re even hunters at all — you should be beside a Kindred capable of defending you.” Damien winced, looked down, and then back out from the alley to the street to watch the kine walk by. “You remember what ... I did with Natasha, against Daniel.”

“ ... yeah, I do.”

“Imagine the Prince in that position, with you.”

“I’d prefer to not.” Because either way, that was going to end badly. Jack dead and Antoinette devastated, or Antoinette dead and him devastated, or other horrible possibilities involving a lot of dead Kindred. “I get your point though. Ok, code red then.”

“Maybe not red yet. Code ... orange? What’s before code red?”

Jack raised a brow as he looked at the Mekhet. Was he making a joke? Didn’t look like it.

“I get you. We’re not at war, yet. And we don’t have proof, yet.”

“Yet.”

Yeah, yet. He sighed, for the millionth time, and rubbed his buzzed hair. “Telling them about this is going to have the entire city freaking out.” And with the Uratha here, and the Begotten wanting to meet him, it couldn’t have been worse timing. Wait. “ ... you think ... the Begotten or Uratha caused this?”

“You mean, their arrival caused the hunters to show up?” He shrugged, and pat his leg once, likely checking to make sure a knife

or sword was still there. “Maybe. People hunting vampires is more common, but, Dolareido is pretty low on that radar I imagine, with how low the death rates are here to Kindred. Monsters and werewolves? I ... don’t know. Fiona did let her hunger get out of control for a while.”

Right, Damien was friends with Fiona. Hard to imagine that, considering how different they were, Damien with unending bitterness and Fiona with her unending sweetness.

“We don’t have a choice,” Jack said.

“We don’t.”

“This really sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“We just had a party celebrating how peaceful Dolareido had become.”

“Yeah.”

This must have been what it was like for Antoinette and Daniel. Getting blood from a stone.

“I’ll head to Antoinette’s then, tell her what’s up, send a message to Julias, and tomorrow night, see how badly shit hits the fan.”

Damien nodded, and pushed off the wall. “I’ll tell Maria ... Keep an eye open, Jack. Any hunter who knows what’s going on in this city is going to have their eyes on you.”

“Right ... I’ll call up an Invictus driver, instead of walking the rest of the way.” Lovely, just lovely.

“Good idea.” Damien disappeared around the corner back onto the street. No goodbyes or anything. Was it a Mekhet thing?

Couldn't have been, Natasha was far more expressive than Damien; when she let her guard down anyway. Maybe Damien and Daniel were always on guard? Must have been exhausting.

Jack sighed, took another deep breath, and headed toward the street.

A sharp pain shot out from his chest. Before he could cry out, something covered his mouth and nose, tight, leather gloves, and strong.

Something was stabbing him in his back. In his heart. And, he couldn't scream, couldn't yell, couldn't do anything as his body started to slip into torpor. A face was looking down at him, someone with gray hair, and a scar along their nose ridge. Someone alive, and not one of the four.

As the darkness and paralysis took him, he had only one thought: you have got to be shitting me.



## Chapter 46

~~Natasha~~

They took a taxi home. She sat in the middle, and peeked left and right during the ride. Matthew the giant, and Arturo the devil; and, also quite huge. The tiny Mekhet disappeared between them, and she smiled a little smile as she took a slow breath through her nose in the proximity of their bodies. She could smell the arousal.

Much of the night had been spent looking at half-naked men, women, and then eventually completely naked men and women, the humans being brought up to orgasm for the joy of the Kindred feeding on them. Supposedly, you could taste it in the blood. And she had to admit, when she was sleeping with Jessy's ghouls, there was a change in the flavor when the man had just cum. So subtle you could mistake it for a placebo.

Kindred treated it like humans did caviar, or fine wine, or similar extravagant food. She could understand why.

With so many of the Kindred indulging in such a luxury, it'd created an overwhelming sexual atmosphere. At least any Kindred that wanted to could simply not blush life, and hide their arousal, but her poor boyfriends could not. And she couldn't blame them for peeking at all legs and breasts and penises being stroked and vaginas being fingered. At first there'd been only one or two, almost hidden as they sat in the seats while nearby Kindred leaned over them to touch them. By the end of the ball, many of the kine had enjoyed at least one orgasm, and at least one pair of fangs in their neck. Jennifer's targets — all women — had enjoyed far more, and had been reduced to exhausted, sweating messes, mewling and whimpering. Was she trying to impress Beatrice? It'd seemed so, with how often Jennifer kept glancing at her fellow witch.

She'd impressed a lot more than just Triss. Natasha hadn't been able to stop herself, or her boyfriends, from staring at the sight of one of the women lying down on a table, completely naked, while three Kindred gently drank of her blood. Until the poor kine had slipped into a post-Kiss coma, Jennifer had fingered her until Natasha could see the girl's juices trickling down her thighs.

"That Jen," Art said. Girl must have been on his mind, and she couldn't blame him, not after that display. "Got the impression she was trying to get everyone's attention."

"N-Not everyone's, just ... Beatrice's."

"Yeah?" Matt said. "Thought she was with that Invictus dude."

"She is. So I d-d-don't know what she's up to." Maybe she was just trying to get into their bed? Or something more devious, and break them apart? Doubtful, but she didn't know the witch well enough to make that call.

Once they were out of the taxi, outside Natasha's apartment building, they walked in and took the elevator. Still a couple hours until sunrise, and she'd made a promise. So, she stood in the elevator with her two boyfriends, and tried her best to hide her grin. Two boyfriends, hehe.

Her two boyfriends were drunk! Or at least tipsy. She could smell the alcohol on their breath, and their movement was a little sloppy. And, they kept sneaking glances her way, and looking her up and down like she was a snack; they always did that, but tonight their glances were a little less devious, a little more obvious. If only she could indulge in liquid courage like that.

She was hungry though. Seeing all those kine getting Kissed, drained, and all she'd had was a glass of blood. Not terribly satisfying to a vampire when it wasn't fresh; still good, but not as filling. So, as much as Art and Matt smelled of arousal, and kept

looking at her like food, she was doing the same to them. She wanted to bite them, sink her fangs into them, fill her belly with their essence.

And have them inside her while she did.

She opened the door and let them into her apartment, before turning around to lock it as the two wolves stepped around her. Always locked it of course. But, as she locked she, she heard a growl behind her.

She turned around, and squeaked. Both of the werewolves were approaching her, shoulders haunched and knees bent. Prowling!

Matthew reached out for her first, and she tapped into the vitae in her body to spur on some speed. A reflex, a life saving reflex, and she ducked under his enormous arms to try and get behind him.

“W-Wait!” she said, and stopped short as she almost ran into Arturo, who’d jumped back in anticipation of her.

The evil man only grinned, and tried to grab her. But she ducked again, and went through his legs. Being tiny has advantages.

She squealed as she darted around to the other side of the couch, and put it between her and the two wolves. “N-Now, boys! We were ... thought we were ... going t-t-to ... not be so—”

Again, she squeaked as the two of the beasts came at her, walking fast and blocking off both pathways around the couch. Closing in on her, surrounding her, like ... like wolves! And they weren’t listening either. Their eyes were squinting a little, and their lips were raised in small growls that exposed their teeth. They were both grinning.

They dived. Squealing, she tried to jump over the couch, but Arturo saw her plan coming. His hand was waiting for her, and she ran straight into it. Arm hooked her stomach, and pulled her in so

she was trapped with her back to his chest, her feet dangling a foot from the floor.

“You,” Matt said, stalking in closer, “should blush life for us.”

“I won’t!”

He growled, deep, rumbling in his titanic chest, and got in closer yet again. Art took her hands and lifted her by them, so now she dangled two feet from the ground instead, eye level with the giant Matthew. Or almost.

The blond-haired beast reached down, and started to slide up her dress. “After what Art and I just went through?”

“Pure torture,” the devil man behind her said.

“I ... I s-said it’d be ... sexual...” Trapped. Trapped trapped, unable to get away from her two boyfriends. Why would she want to? Cause they could get scary! So massive, and strong, and when they were hungry like this, it sent a chill down her spine. She remembered what it was like, in the tunnels when they chased her.

The giant continued to pull up on her dress. Higher, and higher, until she was wriggling and squirming as the man exposed her bare sex. They worked together to strip her, until she was dangling there in nothing but her shoes; but even those were taken from her a moment later.

Art brought her higher, and higher, and set a kiss on her ear. And then, her neck. With her naked, and him holding her up like this, she felt like a bug. A tiny, wriggling little bug.

“Blush for me,” Art said.

“N-No! You t-t-two are ... b-being ... mean...” Her voice died, melting away as Matt also stood in closer, leaning down to kiss the

opposite side of her neck.

“Blush,” he said. Rumbled. Matt, being forceful, being insistent? God, she blinked up at him, and did her best ‘please be nice’ eyes. They only made him growl, louder, until she felt the vibrations against her naked body.

She swallowed on nothing, and blushed.

The two animals rumbled their pleasure, and set her back down onto the floor. Art turned her around, and with his hands reaching down for her hips, held her tight to him as he leaned down, and kissed her. Matt moved with the flow, and reached down to squeeze and knead her ass while Art buried her lips in a rather forceful, powerful kiss, physically powerful. And as Art squeezed her tight, held her, buried her in his kiss, Matt set his lips on her neck, massaged her back, her shoulders, and her ass once again.

And then Art started to move down her body. His hands reached lower, and so too did his kisses, finding her neck and threatening to bite it out with a playful nibble, before his lips went lower to her breasts. Her nipples were hard, and she reached out onto Art’s shoulders to hold on as he suckled on the tiny buttons. Warm, wet lips on her nipples. Each kiss along her areola sent tingly little sparks into her chest, until she made a tiny mewl. He didn’t stay there long, and continued going down, and down, and down.

The man, on his knees, reached out for her legs, and squeezed on her thighs as he brought her in closer. She was standing, but Arturo was so tall compared to her, that as he brought her in closer, he lifted her. She whimpered at him, pouted her best pout, but to no avail. The man sat down on his butt and knees, and set her feet on his legs above the knee. With her height raised, standing on his quadriceps, he brought her closer yet again, and set his mouth upon her smooth pussy.

Tongue. Hot, wet tongue found her folds. No hiding it, she was already wet. In just a minute since her blushing, the two beasts had her wet, and mewling, and whimpering, and now she was reaching out to hold onto Arturo's head as the beast began to devour her.

Matthew disappeared, and she turned her head to try and find where the giant was going. But pressure, hot and dripping pushed along her folds and along her clitoris, ripping her attention back. The man between her legs was grinning up at her with his eyes, and she squeaked when he set his teeth against flesh. But he didn't bite, thank god, and resumed licking her. And growling against her smooth lips, rumbling, he licked harder.

"Art! S-Slow down ... p-p-pl ... you..." Too much, too fast! She needed to warm up first; or she should have. But her body knew better, and for all her begging, her nipples were hard enough to almost hurt, and her juices were already on her sex. She was all over Art's lips.

"We've been dating for several weeks now Tash," Matt said, returning, with a bottle of lubricant in his hand. Oh no. "We know what you look like when you want sex."

"I d-don't know y-y-nnng!" She squeaked, and dug her fingers into Art's hair as the man suckled on her clitoris.

Matt came up behind her, and also got down on his knees. "Hold still." An order, from Matthew, big, gentle giant man! He didn't shout it or say it with any harshness, but there was no doubt the man was giving her a command.

She tried to express her discontent, but it just kept coming out as whimpers. Art wouldn't stop licking her, and no matter how hard she tried to pretend it wasn't true, her body was on fire already. Embarrassing, to be so aroused, so quickly, and for the two men to be able to know it just by looking at her. And as Matt set his hands

on her ass again, her whimpers turned into an outright moan as Art slipped two fingers inside her aching, squeezing depths.

“Art, p-please ... sl...” He wasn’t listening. He gazed up at her from between her legs, lips still pulling on her clit between bouts of licking, and his fingers starting to press forward toward her belly. And he pressed hard. A bump showed along her lower abdomen where the beast pressed against her g-spot; a flat stomach, subtle abs, and very tiny body frame meant every bit of pressure the animal pushed against her depths toward her stomach was shown along her skinny belly, below the navel.

It drove Art wild, and he started to finger her harder, push against her g-spot further, all while soaking her already dripping folds with his tongue. All she could do was hold on as the pleasure forced her muscles to squeeze.

But when Matt started to press wet fingers between her ass cheeks, she squeaked, and looked over at the giant. He was on his knees too, and while one hand was prying open her butt, the other was pushing thoroughly lubricated fingers against her entrance. Always they both wanted her, always at the same time! And after that first time, their insistence, their need, their aggression, it was always so high, and overpowering.

It scared her, thrilled her. And her body had no such inner conflicts about it, more than happy to give away her arousal with copious amounts of her juices, and endless panting.

Her grip tightened on Art’s shoulders, and she whimpered for mercy as Matthew eased two of his large fingers into her tiny, squeezing body. Two sets of fingers, both wriggling, squirming, pushing and massaging against her insides, all while Art continued to gently suckle and kiss her clitoris, too soft to push her over the edge though. He didn’t want her to cum with her clit, he wanted to

her cum deep inside, where the muscles would spasm, squeeze, and fill her core with waves of deep, rolling bliss.

The two werewolves were far, far too good at what they were doing. Natasha knew the two men must have had a very large sexual history, but with both of them filling her and pressing against her spots, those spots, it was hard to care about anything else other than the pleasure tremors in her pelvis. Art took turns pressing her g-spot forward toward her belly, and then reached deeper, pushing his fingers against her depths toward her stomach as well. He knew where that spot was, deep inside, and he pushed on it hard enough to make a small bump along her abs just below her navel. All the while, Matt reached in deep as well, and pressed against her depths, finding the other side of her deepest place and pressing it toward Art.

It all left her a shaking, mewling mess. And a minute later, a cumming mess. She cried out, but her cries were quiet, without breath, nothing more than pants and whimpers as she held onto Art, and came onto his face. She could feel her juices, far more juices than there should have been, drip down onto him, and down her thighs. She could feel her inner muscles clench with all their might, before they convulsed in random spurts of bliss, and more of her liquids trickled out of her. The more they pressed against those deep places in her little body, the more her eyes rolled up, and the more she found herself teetering, body wanting to fall but unable to as the two beasts held her, and fingered her more, and more, and more.

When they stopped, she collapsed. Art and Matt both removed their fingers, and Art helped set her down on the floor, before the two of them stood up. In seconds, they tossed away their shirts, their pants, their underwear, their socks, until she was staring up at two very naked men. Her, on her knees, panting and trembling, while the two titans stood over her, members erect.



For a second, she thought maybe they would ask for blowjobs, and she didn't have the energy for that. She was still shaking, trembling, and attempts to stand failed as the pleasure coursed through her muscles and down to her toes. But, she knew they wanted more, and she tried to get away again as Matt reached out for her. Her attempt at escape was a pale comparison to last time, her legs refusing to work and all, and the giant only laughed as he scooped her up into his arms and cradled her as the two men walked toward her bedroom.

Arturo hopped onto her bed, grinned his evil bastard grin, and lay down on his back, his head on her pillow, and his hands out to motion for them to come to him.

“P-Please ... need ... break.” Her voice was starting to come back. Still mostly pants and wavering squeaks, but at least it was there.

But they weren't listening, as if arousal had clogged their ears. Matt climbed onto the bed, set her down on Arturo's waist, and she trembled as she placed her hands upon his enormous chest. Hard, rock, muscle and blood. And as she sat there, shivering, staring down at his wide valley of strength, the wolf beneath her reached out and set his hands on her hips.

She whimpered as the beast forced her forward, so her clit, aching, swollen, slid along the veined girth. Back and forth, Art forced her smooth pussy to drag along his cock, until it was coated in her juices. She was soaked, and dripping, and she reached up to cover her face as she turned beet red.

Maybe she shouldn't have done that. Hiding her face behind fingers, she peeked through the cracks to find Art's face mad with voracious hunger, and sending more shivers through her spine. He forced her forward until his cock's head was pressing against the entrance of her, and angled her pelvis so the thick glans started to force her open when he pushed her back down toward his legs. And

penetrated her. She gasped, reached down quick to grab his wrists, and held on as the man quickly sank his length into her. At least at first; he stopped once he had four of five inches inside her. With a few inches of his length still to go, she felt the man press against her depths, the swollen head of his shaft stretching her in deeper slightly. She meeped, and with a reflex, tried to push herself off of the enormous thing penetrating her, filling her, stretching her pussy taut with its thickness, and length. But Arturo growled, animal, vibrations she felt through her legs around his chest, and continued to push her down.

There was no getting around the size difference. She was a very tiny woman, and Arturo was a huge man. A huge, ravenous, overpowering man. She was thankful that, in the middle of what appeared to be borderline insanity, he still knew to take those last few inches slowly, to let her aroused body accept and adjust to fit him. It hurt, to have her depths filled like this. But in moments, her boiling insides sent powerful jolts of pleasure down her thighs and up into her core as the man sank her deeper, and deeper onto him, the head of his cock consistently but gently pushing and massaging against her depths. Pain faded away, and electric shocks rippled outward as she finally managed to take every inch of his length.

Whimpering, she forced herself to look down. Her little lips were stretched so wide, taut, struggling to fit the beast inside her, and her clitoris stood out from her smooth skin, swollen and aching. Whimpering turned into another squeal as Matt got comfortable behind her on his knees, and pushed her torso forward a little.

“Matt! P-Please ... I’m ... I need a b-b-break...”

He wasn’t listening either. Just like Art, there was a look on his face, of ravenous need, of overwhelming desire that both terrified her, and had her body singing with arousal. They wanted her this badly.

The giant set his glans against her ass, and started to press against her tight muscles. His shaft was lubricated now, she could tell, and with how much lube had already been worked into her butt, it started to slide in easily. At least, until the smallness of the hole, of her, her body, started to fight back against the man's girth.

She tried to sit up, to get back some measure of control, but as Matt began to sink his massive cock into her, he put one of his hands against her back, and pinned her. Wriggling, squirming, she could do nothing but lay there upon Art's chest, and tremble as Matt forced inch after inch of him into her ass. He was slow too, like Art, and knew how to make sure the lubricant and gentle, massaging rhythm worked together to allow her body to accept him. But she had no room! No space inside her, not for all this, for the both of them, filling her until she felt like she'd burst. Her sphincter squeezed down on the titan, the ring of muscle already taut with the girth of the man, but it did nothing to stop him. Pinned and helpless, Matt sank more of his cock into her body, more, and more, until she was sure the man was pushing into her stomach.

Somewhere, between getting pinned and Matt entering her, she'd started moaning. And as she did, she felt both the titans growl once more, deep rumbling sounds that sent vibrations through her. Trapped between walls of muscle and power, and all she could do was lay there, legs spread, and let the beast fill her.

Once her ass pressed tight against the wolf's pelvis, he removed his hand from her back, only to slide it forward over her shoulder, and around her neck. Matt scooped her toward his chest, again trapping her, but now with her back to his stomach, her head against his sternum — he was way too tall — and his arms around her. One of his giant hands trickled down her breasts, her belly, and down to her leg, while the other kept her neck in his hands.

His grip was almost big enough to completely circle her neck.

She looked down, and let out a quiet whimper. She was a skinny woman, with a touch of abdominal definition, and a small frame; which meant the sheer amount of girth filling her was causing a small bump along her lower belly, a subtle distension showing where the two beasts filled her to the point she thought she might split open.

“G ... god... , “ she said.

Matthew growled over her. With her head against his sternum, the power of his rumbling voice forced her eyes to roll upward, and she whimpered as she melted against him. The grip of his fingers did not loosen, almost tight enough to render her unable to breathe. She did not need oxygen, but that did not change that every muscle in her body started to go limp with surrender, and boil with need as the beast held her.

He started to fuck her. Slowly at first, easing out half of his long cock, before pushing it back into her. She managed to look down even with his grip, and mewled openly at the sight of the bump along her body shifting, becoming more pronounced as Matt sank his shaft into her to the hilt, and then eased out half of it once more. You weren't supposed to be able to see it! To see how they were stretching her insides like this. But, she stared wide-eyed at how the two men fighting for space in her quivering insides forced her lower abdomen to distend slightly around their girths.

She could feel it. Arturo seemed content to watch, to stare and gaze at her, her body, her hard nipples and her belly where the vulgar, obscene ... hypnotizing site was, the bump. And it reached her navel.

She started to whine, and whimper, little sounds that were barely audible. Each stroke of Matt's cock into her awaiting insides pressed toward her belly, pressed against the wall of flesh between her two depths, pressed against Art's shaft within her, and pressed against

her deepest places. Thankfully the giant kept it slow and gentle as he eased in every inch of him, and every so often, he stayed there, balls deep within her. Two men, buried to the hilt inside her, and she was helpless to do anything while Matt hugged her, squeezed her, choked her, and Arturo watched every bit of it.

The heat started to build again. Her whines grew louder, and her head fell back again to rest against Matt's chest as the man began to fuck her once more. She reached up with one hand to grab his wrist, but it did little to deter the man. He growled down at her, louder, and hugged her tighter to him as his fingers around her throat tightened as well.

For a split moment, she wondered how exactly Matthew was in the correct position for this. Kneeling would have put him too high. Maybe his knees were spread very far outward? That would have hurt the legs after a while, right? Her thoughts were ripped back to the present as a sharp jolt of pleasure erupted from her clitoris.

“Ar-nnn!” Her voice came out muffled, buried by Matt's grip, as Arturo began to massage her clit. Gently, he caressed the swollen nub, until the sparks traveled into her thighs and made her squeeze down on both of their lengths. Not fast enough to make her cum, but the consistent, loving pressure was more than enough to have her whimpering.

It wasn't her clitoris that was going to make her cum, it was the friction of Art's cock against her g-spot, and the length of him forcing her depths inward, constant pressure against her deepest places. It was Matt, and how each deep stroke of his cock reached far enough she could feel her body fight to accommodate his length. How each stroke made his shaft press toward all her taut flesh, and how each stroke joined Art in filling her to the brim.

She started to cum. Arturo wasn't even moving, only tenderly massaging her clitoris, while Matt continued to trap her, hold her,

squeeze her, and press her against his chest and abs. But she started to cum, and as Matt sank himself to the hilt inside her until she felt the head of his cock press against her deepest place with Arturo, she squeezed. Her mewls came through, louder, and Matt released some of the tension on her neck to let the sounds escape as she started to tremble upon their cocks.

Warmth. Wet warmth came out of her, and a peek down showed her juices leaking out of her smooth lips and onto the waiting pelvis of Arturo. The man set aside his fingers, held onto her legs as she came on him, and a quick peek at his eyes showed awe and craving. But her eyes rolled upward again, and half closed as she squeezed again, and again, each met with more of her juices soaking the wolf between her legs.

Arturo wasn't moving, but Matthew was. He growled down at her, and tightened his grip on her neck again while his other hand pressed on her chest, to keep her pinned to his colossal torso of rock. He stayed inside her, as deep as he could get, her ass molding to fit against his hips and pelvis, before he withdrew a few inches, and thrust back into her. She shuddered, managed to look up at him with begging eyes, before her squeezing muscles rippled waves of pleasure down to her curling toes. And more of her cum flowed out of her, until she felt it on her thighs, and her knees.

She was drenching him, as Matt continued to fuck her ass. And, each time the man forced his pelvis snug against her, until his glans was pressing forward so hard she could feel the bump along her stomach, she convulsed, and came. More juices, and more, until she felt it drip down Arturo's sides to reach her calves and feet where they were tight to his body. More, until she felt so embarrassed she would have made a beet jealous, and could do nothing about it as Matt held her tight in his grasp.

Finally, he stopped thrusting, and let her go. She collapsed, hard enough for her cheek to land with a quiet thud against Arturo's

chest. Her arms were limp, hanging over the man's sides and onto the blankets, and a touch of drool escaped her mouth, dribbling onto his sternum.

"You overdid it, you dumbass," Art said. The sound of his voice through his chest, her ear against his body, was powerful, soothing, and she smiled as she tried to get her energy back. Whole body tingling, and her insides refused to stop with their random spasms, each earning a delightful orgasm aftershock. Energy was nowhere to be found.

"Yeah. Maybe. You ok Tash?" Hands found her, took her shoulders, and pulled her up. She didn't help. Nope, content to just be limp, and tremble as the tingling waves took their time fading away. "See, she's fine." Matt's arms hugged around her this time, one hooking around the front of her chest, while the other reached down to hold her hip. "Right?"

"Need ... b ... b-break..."

"Break?" Art said, and he forced himself up on his elbows. No room left for Natasha, sitting between the two beasts, still inside her, walls of meat and strength burying her. "I'm so close."

"So am I," the beast behind her said.

She whimpered, and forced her heavy arms out to touch Art's chest. "Please, let me rest. I ... still ... t-t-tingly."

Her touch sent Art back to the bed, and he made another growl as he set his hands on her hips; Matt moved his out of the way, and held her stomach inside. And then, the devil forced his hips upward.

She bounced, and squealed. "Oh! N-Not so rough! Please, p-please, slow ... down."

Again, they didn't listen. Art continued to thrust upward, not so hard as to break her, but he wasn't gentle either, and he was deep. So deep, every thrust stretched her inward, and she felt the thickness of his glans against her deep spot.

And Matthew held onto her, hugged her, squeezed her, while keeping himself balls deep inside. Every thrust from Art was met with her tightening muscles, and so little room left inside her with Matt taking up so much of it. With so much pressure inside her, so much flesh, each stroke forced her g-spot to drag along Art's veined girth, until he forced his cock back into her to the base. And, with Matt no longer holding her neck, she was free to let her head hang, and watch the titan beneath her flex his hard abs, his broad back, and every muscle in his core as he pushed up to meet her.

Her poor, tender little pussy seemed more than happy with Art's aggression, and continued to squeeze on the veined girth spreading her lips taut.

Matt finally let go of her, and she collapsed forward again. She had enough strength to catch her weight this time, and she set her hands Art's chest as she continued to bounce on his length. Each thrust earned a squeak from her, sometimes a squeal, and sometimes a moan, until she could feel more of her juices start to leak from her. So much of her cum was soaking her, her legs, Art's pelvis, she blushed brighter every time she looked down at the mess. Never made this sort of mess before, not with Jessy's ghouls or by herself or ever, and every time the two wolves did this to her, it only got worse.

Art got faster, and started thrusting hard enough to hurt a little more. And, try as she might to tell him to stop, to slow down, to ease up, every time she opened her mouth all she could find was mewls, and panting whimpers. Pain melted away again, and her body, already boiling, melted away too.



Somewhere along the line, both men started to gently thrust. Art slowed down to almost nothing, giving her tender insides some deserved mercy, while Matt joined him, and the two beasts each fucked her in a soft, tender rhythm. More warmth was leaking out of her pussy, and not just hers. Arturo was cumming, and lovingly fucking her quivering body as he did, until his white fluid was leaking out of her, and soaking their connection. She hadn't even noticed when he'd started.

She tried to move her hands, or maybe join in and milk the man, but her arms were limp again, hanging over his sides and against the blankets. All she could do was lay there, wriggling, mewling, as both men fucked her.

“She’s all mine now,” Matt said.

“W-What? I—nnn!” She moaned as the giant behind her took her by her armpits, pulled her toward his chest, and lifted her. The dragging girth of Art’s cock sent more shocks through her, but after a few seconds, the large phallus fell clear of her body, and landed flat along the wolf’s abs. Coated in white, and her juices.

Art smirked, hooked his hands behind his head, and watched as Matt set her back down so her pussy rested along the underside base of Art’s length. And once she was comfortable with her lips spread apart over the man’s cock, pinning it to his abs, Matt started to fuck her again.

And Art watched. He grinned at her, gave her a devious little wink, reached out with one hand, and again began to caress her clitoris as she shifted back and forth over him a few inches. Matt held her tight to him, turning her into a tiny, limp doll against the vast wall of steel muscle and sweat behind her. Each thrust from the man was deep enough to force her ass snug against his body, but that wasn’t enough for him. Matt hugged her tighter, bear hug tight enough that her arms were pinned to her sides, and he sank himself

into her deep enough that each stroke forced her body forward, until Matt pulled her back.

She was sliding along Art's cock, while the man caressed her, massaged her clit, watched her and her soaking wet pussy slip over the cum-coated thickness of his girth. And each shift of motion was met with Matt, pressing his length toward her belly, hitting that deep spot through the walls of her flesh, her ass, her depths. Sometimes, he pulled out slowly, nearly all of his length so only the bulbous tip of him remained within her, before he thrust forward, the angle forcing his cock to press against her pussy, her g-spot, and the pressure reaching deeper, and deeper, deeper, until she started to tremble once more. Explosive pleasure hit her, robbed her of any body control, and reduced her to a quivering pile of bliss.

She looked down, and turned red from head to toe, for the millionth time. She was squirting.

Without Art's shaft within her, there was nothing to stop her muscles from clenching down with the waves of orgasm, and force the fluid to spurt out rather forcefully against him. Her cum washed over his cock and along his abs, mixing into the white of his semen and making a big, big, big mess of everything.

"Cumming this hard?" Art released her clitoris, and sat up again, still leaning back slightly with his hands behind him against the sheets. "How naughty."

"It's ... n-not..." She wanted to reach out and hit him, but Matt's hug around her body was absolute. And even if it wasn't, she was struggling to keep her eyes on him, to not show how she was still mid-orgasm, and that she wasn't overwhelmed by pleasure; it wasn't working. Her arms were limp, bear hug or not, and her head eventually fell forward, mouth open and her tongue nearly hanging out as she stared at another gush of her cum. Now that Art was sitting up, her pussy rested against where his cock met his testicles,

and she drenched the base of him with her warm juices as Matt started to pump faster, and faster.

And then slower, and slower. The giant slowed to a few, hard, deep thrusts that forced her to squeak with each one, and another squirt of her fluids to splash against where her pussy was rubbing against Art. Matt was cumming, and she was cumming with him. She forced her head back, and then let it fall backward to relax against the titan's chest. So close like this, trapped in his arms, she could feel him breathing, feel his muscles tense and flex with each spurt of his seed he poured into her, and feel his rumbling voice.

And she could feel his heartbeat. Blood, gallons of it, pouring through the enormous man's body, and being moved by a giant heart beating hard against the back of her head. Deep, rhythmic, enthralling.

“ ... yeah, let's go again,” Art said.

“W-What!? P-Please, I'm ... so tired ... need ... to...” To rest! She'd never cum this hard, ever, or for so long. She needed a break before she passed out.

The two of them worked together, lifted her enough so Art could set the head of his hard cock to her shivering lips, and ease her down onto his length. She whimpered openly, and as Art lay back once more, she fell forward as Matt released his grip on her body.

But it did not last. Even as white cum trickled out of both of her holes, Matt reached out for her arms, took her by the wrists, and pulled back on them enough to force her to dangle from them, a foot over Art's chest. With Matt holding her by the wrists, Art took her hips, and started to thrust upward into her, while Matt started to thrust as well.

The two of them, thrusting together, working like a machine of cogs. Both entered her, and then Matt withdrew several inches, and

then Art a moment later. Matt would thrust into her, and then Art a moment later again. She could do nothing but bounce and whine as the two men fucked her, until the blush of life had her a sweating mess, and another wave of her juices spilled out over Art's cock.

She was in heaven. She couldn't say it though! Way too embarrassing, and with how overwhelming it was to have both men take her like this, she could never ask for it. But, trapped like this, with no way to stop the two wolves from ravaging her? Totally helpless to prevent their advances, aggression, and strength, as they fucked her pussy and ass? Part of her wanted to feel a little bad for indulging in such a stereotypical loss-of-power fantasy. A much larger part of her never wanted them to stop.

She came again. Matt didn't let go of her hands, holding them at his sides, so her torso dangled forward and over Art, shaking with each thrust. Her small breasts shook with the impact of their bodies against hers; not that they were fucking her too hard, but rather, she was so small that each impact made her whole body shake. The only thing keeping her in place was Matt's grip on her wrists, and Art's grip on her hips.

At some point, things started to blur. They weren't stopping. The only break she got was when the two of them both decided to thrust into her at the same time, and stay inside her as she came. Five seconds at most, of being allowed to cum without the two cocks inside her thrusting into her depths, before the two beasts started to fuck her again.

Matt let go of her hands. She collapsed, for what must have been the fourth time, and let her body rest along Art's wide body of iron as she came. Everything was soaked, and her insides felt tenderized, a little bruised, and would not stop convulsing in bliss. Each shock of orgasmic bliss exploded outward from her pelvis, reached up to her head, and down to her toes. Each had her quivering, and her squeals were reduced to pants and quiet whimpers as she struggled

to get control of her body. It wasn't working. All she could do was lay there, and writhe.

Matt set his hands on her hips near Art's, and the two of them pressed down on her body. And as she lay there, trembling, they pushed down on her, trying to get as deep as they could as they came. Her pussy was already stretched to bursting, but Art wasn't satisfied, and he pressed down on her as he gently rocked her back and forth an inch, rubbing her clit against his soaked pelvis. Matthew did the same, leaning over her and pushing her ass to him until she was sure he was trying to reach her stomach.

They rocked her that single inch, back and forth in a gentle manner as the two beasts filled her with cum again, as they made quiet, deep, rumbling growls that vibrated through her. She couldn't cum anymore, and she didn't want to. Too much, way too much. She was glad to have a real break, and simply let the two animals pour their cum into her while she tried to recover.

At last she felt Matthew start to soften, and then Arturo. With Matthew the effect was a little more obvious, as she felt her ring muscles begin to tighten into their normal shape once more, while also leaking copious amounts of the white fluid from her. Such a mess, all over her sheets. And unlike hers, theirs wouldn't fade away! She'd need to shower, and do laundry, and shower again, and try and clean herself out a bit, and ... and she couldn't wait to do it again.

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The three of them, in her shower. She was renting a very nice place, so the shower was big enough to handle even Matthew, plus her and Arturo.

She was standing between the two of them, and stroking each of them, their cocks heavy in her palms and filling her grip. No getting around how big they were compared to her.

“How can you t-two ... still be horny?” They’d both cum, fifteen minutes ago!

“Wet hair,” Matt said, and he ran his hands over her head and down the length of wet hair reaching to her butt. She did her best to not sigh with bliss.

“Definitely wet hair.” Arturo nudged his hips forward, and pressed his hard cock against her stomach. She still had the large phallus in her hand, but the angle and height difference gave him a lot of control.

Matthew took his friend’s queue, and also nudged his hips forward. Both of them were tall enough that, when they got in very close so both of their cocks pointed upward while resting against her, they pressed to her breasts.

She was blushing life, at their request, just so they could see her get aroused right along with them; which also meant her nipples hard again, and despite herself, she rubbed the tips of their shafts along them. Tingly little sparks made her shiver, and smile.

They’d had far too much sex. Way too much ... Way way way too much. She was sore, and tired, but her body didn’t seem to mind, and she could feel her pussy begin to ache with need again as she held their enormous shafts in her tiny hands, as they pressed against her body.

“Sensitive, aren’t you?” Matt said.

“ ... I ... d-d-d—”

Arturo set his hand on her shoulder, opposite of Matt. “Been a while since we’ve had a girl. But, none of them hold a candle to you.” His other hand’s fingers found hers, and slipped between them so both of them had a grip on his cock. “And none of them cum as hard or as much as you.”

Blushing life meant her dead heart pumped faked blood through her veins, made all the signs of human life show through, and that included blushing. Felt like her body would explode from all the embarrassment she'd suffered tonight.

She'd squirted all over Arturo, multiple times. Once from only anal! Soaked him in her juices. Lost control of all her muscles so she was just a writhing mess of pleasure, a live wire flopping and convulsing with the sporadic pulses of orgasm. And they knew it. Any and all pretense of disguising her, evidently, sensitive body were out the window.

Matt bent down, used his free hand to guide her chin up to him, and put a kiss on her lips. "Very sexy, very beautiful, and a total nerd."

"N-Nerd! I ... grrr." She frowned up at the giant. His smile was too sincere and honest for her to remain angry for long though, and she sighed as she felt her own smile force its way onto her cheeks. One minute, they were hard men, rough, growling and rumbling and pinning her down. The next, they were boys, silly and dumb and horny.

She got down on her knees.

Both of the wolves let out quiet groans as she took their cocks into her mouth. One, then the other, a hand on each of them to continue stroking their thick girths, while she took turns suckling on their tips. A kiss here, a kiss there, and within minutes, drops of precum rose to the surface to be licked away by her roaming tongue. She couldn't swallow it, since it wouldn't just fade to trace amounts of ash like a Kindred's fluids would. But, she could still use her mouth, and look up at the two titans towering over her as she bathed their cocks with her tongue.

Soon, Arturo was cumming. She withdrew her lips so only the head of his cock was in her mouth, and she lightly slid her suckling

back and forth along the ripe glans as waves of his cum poured over her tongue. It flowed out of her mouth, down her chin, her neck, and down over her body, her breasts and stomach, only to all be washed away by the warm shower water that rained upon them. Then she took care of Matthew, turning her head to do the same for him, until his white cum was dripping down her body as well. And through it all, she stroked them both, tiny fingers squeezing and working their veined shafts, feeling the pliable but hard texture of them, the heat of them fill her palms.

Now, for her reward. Not that she didn't enjoy fellatio! Enjoyed it too much, to the point she could feel her juices mixing with the water as she forced herself back to standing, and reached up for Arturo's neck. He bent down, knowing what was coming, and grinned at her before his eyes disappeared beside her head.

She kissed his neck once, twice, and bit into him.

Warmth flooded her mouth, and she made her own, tiny, quiet little animal growl as felt a jolt of energy hit her exhausted body. Werewolf blood. Thick, powerful, delicious. The blood was so heavy compared to humans, so sweet, almost syrupy but not quite, and yet thick enough that she felt it coat her throat on the way down. Arturo let out a soft moan, and set his hands on her hips to lightly hug her, as the two of them enjoyed the Kiss.

At least at first. Another hand took her outer thigh, and then another found her pussy. She opened her eyes, but didn't stop drinking Arturo. No way she was going to stop, she was starving. But Matthew wasn't stopping either. In moments, he worked two of his fingers into her clenching insides, and his other let go of her leg only for his fingers to find her clitoris.

He started to finger her. Hard. She trembled and held onto Arturo's neck for dear life as Matt wasted no time, didn't build up to it, didn't prepare her for it, but simply took advantage of her already



dripping hot state, and started to drive his fingers into her g-spot. The fingers on her clitoris were gentle, loving, caressing and massaging, while the digits inside her drove forward into her g-spot until her hips pushed into Art's legs. Not gentle, or slow!

In seconds, her body was quaking. Still she didn't let go of the wolf man in her arms, and she moaned onto his neck as she drank down the sweet red liquid. But, as she held onto him, her eyes rolled upward, and her legs started to tremble as her juices trickled out of her. How could her body want more already?

The only thing keeping her from collapsing was Arturo's hug on her hips, and the renewed strength his blood gave her. Much as the Kiss had her whole body feeling warm, fuzzy, and blissful, it also jolted her with life, energy, and pouring heat through her limbs. Mixed with Matt and his rough fingering of her insides, she moaned loudly into Art's neck, and let the waves of tingly bliss flow outward from between her legs, up into her head, and down into her toes. Waves like a wave pool, back and forth, each flowing with the pleasure of climax. Each making her drip juices down to her ankles with the shower water.

Finally she let of the beast, and fell backward. Matt stopped, and caught her, letting her rest against his shoulder since he was kneeling, and her head dangled over it backward.

"Stop! Stop, p-please, I ... I'm going ... t-to be so sore tomorrow." She was shaking, mewling, and hugging herself as she vibrated in the orgasm aftershocks. "T-Too much." And it was too much! Much as she'd enjoyed it, at a certain point you had to call it quits. Otherwise they'd exploit their inhuman bodies and simply fuck all night, every night.

Art made a growl again, but when she opened her eyes enough to look at him, she sighed relief. He wasn't aroused, at least not physically, and she could see the titan was struggling to stay

standing. The Kiss, and blood loss, had a habit of doing that. He placed his hands against the shower wall, and let himself slowly sink down onto his ass, to catch his breath.

“I’m jealous,” Matt said.

“N-No you’re not.” She turned around and smiled at the juggernaut. “I’ll get you next t-time, ok?” Even with Matt on a knee, he was still tall enough to almost be eye level with her. Just meant she didn’t have to bend over very far to kiss him.

Kissing two boys, two different boys, was such a weird sensation. Part of her felt guilty every time, but the boys didn’t mind it at all; as long as they were both there when the clothes came off, they seemed perfectly happy with the arrangement.

“You really soaked us,” Matt said, and his hands reached out to take her shoulders to brace himself as he stood up. “Don’t remember you squirting like that on our first night.” So brazen, to say it so directly, and the man didn’t flinch or grin or blush or anything.

“I ... it ... it was ... r-really good.”

“Turning into a little hornball,” Art said.

She looked over her shoulder, and gave the exhausted man her best death glare. He only chuckled, and grinned at her.

“I have to admit, it is really, really hot,” Matt said. “Really ... really ... re—”

“No!” She poked the giant in the abs, his big dripping wet abs — focus! — and glared up at him. “It’ll be sunrise in thirty minutes. I n-need to check my messages, and go to the t-tower right after!” Sleeping at Antoinette’s place, trial run sort of thing. Had her

nervous, very nervous. “You know K-Kindred die in sunlight, right? I have to hurry.” Wouldn’t even have time to check her messages.

“Fine, fine,” they said in unison, complete with annoyed sighs.

Ugh, boys. Dog with a bone.

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~~Antoinette~~

Jack did not come to her tower.

She checked her phone again, and again, to see if her love had messaged her and she had not noticed. But there was nothing. She messaged him, and waited for his response. But there was nothing. She paced, long nightgown trailing behind her along the marble floor around her bed. Plans to hold the boy in her arms and fall asleep to the rising sun, dashed, as unease crept up her body. Where was Jack? Why was he not answering his phone?

Twenty minutes until sunrise, and Jack should have been in her bed, safe and sound. She glared at her phone, and squeezed it until she could feel the glass and metal within begin to bend. But, she did not break it. She needed it, in case the boy messaged her. And, she would need it, to receive Daniel’s messages, once she sent him on the hunt to find him.

Cold knives stabbed her feet into the black floor beneath her. Perhaps Jack was with Clara? The woman was interested in him, was beautiful, and the two had made some sort of connection during that incident with the ancient monster that had somehow manifested in her city’s tunnels. A mystery she was investigating; yet another hole in her knowledge. If Clara and Jack had—no, stop being infantile, silly woman. The boy loves you, Clara said so herself.

Antoinette grabbed the juvenile fear, strangled it dead, and tossed it aside. Jack was not with Clara, or if he was, it was not romantic. His disappearance was the cause of something else.

She marched out of her vault bedroom, and into a neighboring room where computers stood, ready to be used. The Invictus could be messaged with this, as she had long ago established the need to be able to communicate with the covenants by technology, in emergencies. And this was an emergency.

Was it though? Perhaps the boy was preoccupied, and ... no, Kindred were calculating and careful. They did not simply forget their arrangements or to check their phones. And with Barry's disappearance, now was not the time to be timid with conclusions.

First Daniel, then Natasha, then the thralls under her control. Then Julias. Then, the rest of the triumvirate. She messaged them all.

Jack is missing.



~~Julias~~

The bunker. It was a stretch to call it a bunker though. Viktor spared no expense, and had crafted himself a room of grand design, with an enormous, four poster bed of vermilion, a mirror to reach the ceiling of embroidered wood, wardrobes, and more. It was just as adorned and indulgent as the master bedroom of the mansion, except fifty feet below it, with a dozen gates of varying strength, each posing threats of their own. Traps with spikes and bullets and the like. And within the bunker room, an escape tunnel that lead into a random section of Devil's Corner in South Side, where the escape hatch was a hidden thing in a random wall of a random building in a random street.

Perfect for the ever paranoid elder vampire. Perfect for he and Triss to sleep, after they'd made love.

The two of them were facing each other, each on their side. She had her leg draped over him, the other parallel to his out along the sheets, with one arm snug between both their chests, the other reaching to hug him and hold him close.

He gently eased his hips forward, and sighed contentment into her hair as her pussy clenched down on him the whole journey. She'd already cum twice, and he was nearly to his own.

"Figured you'd want something a lot rougher and kinkier," he said, "after the sights we saw tonight." Antoinette must have said something to her that had changed her mood. Something about her seemed gentler, far gentler than he'd expected after the sexual madness of the ball.

"Yeah, but ... I like this. Can think about things while we fuck." She leaned in, kissed his collar and neck, and smiled a shark smile up at him.

"I was hoping you'd be thinking about the sex you're currently having."

"I am! I am." Chuckling, she squeezed him with her arm and leg, and pushed her hips forward to meet him. He could feel the metal piercing in her clit hood rub against him, along with her nipple studs. "But sometimes, a gentle fuck is the best fuck."

He nodded. True, very true, and he hugged her with his free arm as he continued to ease his hips back and forth. Like this, he could feel his warm cum building and building, but unable to escape, while drop after drop of his precum trickled out of him into her taut, massaging insides. Each drop was blissful, sending tingling waves of pleasure down into his pelvis, and he sighed with more pleasure as

he again came near orgasm, and again slowed down to let the fluids settle.

“Did ... you notice how Jennifer was trying to get my attention all night?” she said.

“I thought I noticed that, yeah. Lot of looking at you, while she put on a show for everyone.”

“She has great tits doesn’t she?”

He chuckled again. He knew where this was going. “I admit, they looked nice. But I think I prefer ones with piercings and tattoos.”

More chuckles. Yeap, he found the sweet spot, words hitting her ego with just the right brevity and gentleness to make her smile, and put her weight on her elbow so she could prop her head up, inch a little away from him, and caress her breasts with her free hand. All the while, she kept her leg hooked over his hip, and her dripping lips sliding back and forth an inch around the base of his cock.

“My piercings are pretty awesome.” She caressed one hard nipple, and then the other, before tracing the snake tattoo. “Still ... her tits were ... really soft.”

Oh my.

“Touched her, did you?”

“I ... did. Sorry! Just, she was all over me when we were getting dressed.”

“Did she cross a line?”

“Just a little. But she backed off. She ... I don’t know, really wants to get between my legs.”

Maybe he could prod her a little, tease her. A little humor could go a long way to helping someone say what they wanted to say.

“Not attracted to me at all, is she? Seems she only wants you.”

“What? She is! She plenty is, really. Sure she would do you in a heartbeat. Just really seems to have her eyes on me. Dog with a bone.” She laughed again, and set her free hand on his chest to trace his muscles. “And ... she uh, genuinely does want to be my friend. Friend with benefits.”

“Is that so?” He grinned at her, and reached out for her shoulder. Licking his fangs, he pressed over and onto her, and then lay upon her, trapping her beneath his wider shoulders and body. All the while, still inside her, still gently fucking her so he could feel her depths stretch against the head of his cock. She liked deep, and he liked being deep inside her. And sometimes, it was nice to just bring the sex to a slow crawl, and stay that way for minutes at a time.

She smirked at him, one of those devious smirks, that made her look like an evil, seductive demon with her extra teeth. A moment later she had a pillow under her butt, and her arms around his neck and back.

“Sunrise is in, what, twenty minutes?” she said. “Hurry up.”

“Fine.” He feigned annoyance, groaning frustration, and it earned a chuckle from her. But chuckling turned into squeezing muscles, and she pushed her hips up to meet up as she purposefully clenched on him.

They hugged each other, melted into each other, and fucked a little faster, a little harder, just enough to cause the stirring warmth beneath his cock to build again. And this time, they kept the pace, until sweet release hit him and each clench of his muscles squirted the hot fluid into her soaked, squeezing body. He sighed, maybe even moaned a little, and she returned it with her own as she forced

her hips up against him. A few strokes later, she was cumming, and Julias held her tighter as he felt her insides spasm and squeeze in random spurts, milking him until the pleasure was almost painful. Gentle, slow orgasms for the both of them, the sort that let them indulge in holding each other as much as the pleasure itself.

They held each other, hugged each other, and gently rocked their bodies back and forth as they each let the orgasm aftershocks work through their cores, their legs, thighs, and everything in between.

He sat up on his knees, and eased out his cock from her soaked, gripping lips. She had a tiny chain on her clit hood, dangling down half an inch, enough to tickle along her clitoris with every motion. And she mewled bliss as he rubbed his cum-soaked glans against it.

He rolled onto his back, lay beside her, and set his closer arm up behind the pillows so she could snug into the side of his chest. She did, and kissed his chest once, twice, and then nibbled on him a couple more times.

“Cumming at the same time? Ugh, so romantic it hurts.”

“Been a long time,” he said, “since I’ve had a woman I could do that with.”

“Maybe ... we could um ... see if we could get a third person ... in that rhythm?” Her attempts to be sneaky were so adorable, it almost broke his poker face.

“Like a kine on the regular?” he said.

“Um ... no ... come on you know who I’m talking about.”

“The Kindred with the nice, soft breasts?”

“Yeah, her! She who shall remain nameless.”



“Jennifer.”

Her frown was so large he could almost feel its aura. “You suck at this.”

He pulled her closer, so she had to slide up onto his chest a rest her cheek on his sternum, her arm draped over his body completely.

“Beatrice, I love you, and it’s not because of the sex, amazing as it is. You want to bring Jennifer into the bed? Go right ahead.”

“I know! I know ok, you just ... need to convince me.”

“Not like you to be so indecisive.”

She whined into his chest, quietly, and knocked her forehead against his sternum a few times, hard, and not so quietly.

“You remember the first time we went out?” she said. “You said you didn’t sleep with other vamps anymore. But you slept with me. And ... I ... I don’t know. For me sex is more than just fucking. I like this connection we have.”

His closer arm hugged around her shoulder, and his fingers traced along her back, her shoulder blades, before sliding up into her hair to comb it and massage her scalp.

“It’s up to you. Jennifer can get in the middle of this, but she can’t get in the middle of this.” The former being sex, the latter of course being what they were doing right now, hugging, snuggling, talking about things with emotions laid bare, unguarded.

“I think she likes me.”

“I think she likes you too.”

Triss raised her head, set her chin on his sternum, and looked at him with her snake eyes, curious and wary. “Think maybe she’s

interested in me romantically? Cause that could get super weird.”

“Honestly? I doubt it. But you’d be better off asking Jacob.”

“Jacob ... asking that snake about romance? Can’t even begin to imagine how that’d go.”

She’d never met Minerva, she didn’t know what sort of man Jacob could be.

“I—” His laptop dinged. The joys of modern technology meant that, even down deep in the Earth, he had a computer connected to the internet via ethernet cable. And the unique ding sound was set up for one very specific person. “Shit.”

“Shit?”

“That’s the Prince.” He sat up as Triss moved aside a little, and reached for the laptop. He couldn’t let Triss see the contents, potential Invictus secrets and such, but she was smart enough to not peek anyway. “ ... Jack’s missing.”

“ ... seriously? Like missing missing?”

“Missing.”

“Sure he hasn’t—”

“He was supposed to go to the Elysium tower, both for Antoinette, and because it’s going to be his sleeping den until the city is secure. If he’s missing ... shit. Shit shit shit shit.” He jumped out of bed, and started to pace, naked and all. “Shit.”

“It’s like twenty minutes until sunrise Julias. We’ll have to—”

He put the laptop down on the desk by the bed, sat down, and got to work. Twenty minutes until sunrise? More than enough time to

have every thrall and ghoul in the Invictus looking for him during the day.

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~~Jack~~

Pain sucked.

Waking up from a hole in the chest was a weird sensation. But, there was no denying that's exactly what it was, a hole in his fucking torso, and enough awareness came to his groggy, pain-ridden mind to manage a peek at his chest to see the hole closing. And a moment later, more realizations kicked in. He could see his chest, which meant he wasn't in his suit anymore. Still had his pants and shoes on, but no jacket or shirt, so he was topless. He was sitting. It was dark. And, he couldn't move his hands.

Movement in the shadows, in the blur of silhouettes. He should have been able to see in the dark, at least a little, and he felt he should have been able to in this room as well, but his body was too busy healing the hole jammed through his ribs and the heart. Scalding pain, incinerating, like molten lead being poured into his chest. Felt like it was melting his intestines and boiling his lungs. He didn't need them anymore, vampire as he was, but they still felt pain, and the gargled groans of agony slipped out of him. A few moments later, they silenced as the pain faded to only a harsh ache. He was healed, at least enough to cover the hole and have his heart back to its correct, withered shape.

He looked to his left and right. Darkness, but no longer total darkness as his eyes adjusted. A tiny seam of light poked out at him from underneath some sort of door in front of him, taunting him with the subtle, glowing white. As his groans died off, the silence around him was broken only by the heartbeat and breathing of nearby humans, and as his eyes started to work, he could see their bodies against the walls of his dark enclosure. They had pistols in

holsters at their hip, blurry in the black but enough he could see and recognize the shape. And, something in their hands glinted, caught the tiny bit of light from under the door. Large knives maybe, or small swords like many Kindred carried.

They weren't vampires. Vampires blushing life breathed and had heartbeats, body warmth, all the good stuff from their first lives, but it took more than that to suppress the aura a Kindred carried with them. An aura that, once you were close enough to feel it, any paranormal creature seemed to carry. Werewolves all felt like being near a Goliath with a lust for raw meat, and the Begotten felt like cold death crawling under the skin, like black venom swimming in shadows.

The strangers had none of that. He could smell the blood, the breath, the body odor of living things, but none of the extra stuff that came from the monsters that bumped in the night. They were human.

He sat up a little straighter. Metal chair. He tried to move his hands, and the rattling of metal on metal rung through the room. Concrete room then, based on the sound flutter. Room definitely needed some acoustic panels to help with—

“He’s awake.”

“I’ll get Jeremiah then.”

Jack winced as the darkness split, and a light cut across the dingy walls. Yeap, concrete.

A woman disappeared through the light and outside; enough time with the door open for him to see the door was metal, and outside the room he could see metal bars. A prison? There was a prison in Dolareido, and an old abandoned prison as well, in North Side. That’s where he was then.

Shirtless, chained to a chair, in a prison, after getting stabbed in the heart. Yeap, kidnapped. Ugh, why him? Why always him?

God damn it Damien, you jinxed it.

The woman who'd walked out of the room wasn't wearing a trench coat or leather jack, and didn't look like one of the women in the memories the crows had shared with him. Neither did the man still standing in the room. They both looked strong, and were armed with shotguns, and like he thought, large knives and pistols, complete with tattoos, scars, and worn street clothes. If he didn't know better, Jack would think he was looking at Carthians.

Maybe the two crows would come to his rescue, like Lassie or something? Doubtful. Animalism forced them to obey simple commands, and communicate with him. They weren't loyal. But, that could be kind of cool, loyal crows? Maybe he should try training some.

Entertaining fantasies to ignore the reality of the current situation. Wonderful.

A man walked in, and this guy was wearing a trench coat, brown. Still, not one of the four Jack expected either. This man was old, with pale skin sporting a few too many scars across his face and short, gray beard. Short gray hair combed backward showed a scar or two cutting across his forehead as well. And, Jack could see a hint of tattoos starting on his neck before disappearing underneath his black shirt.

Silence. The man looked at him, watched him, took the time to check him up and down and analyze the vampire. Gave Jack time to look him up and down, try and figure him out, figure out his situation. Other than the lighting from beyond the door, which was dimming now that his eyes were adjusting, there was no light to be had. He still had his shoes and pants, but he couldn't feel the weight of his phone in his pocket anymore. He was alone.

Alone, with humans, who knew what he was. For a second, he worried for the Masquerade, and what these kine might do with a Kindred in their possession. But then they'd have to go public, and they hadn't done that yet, hopefully. Find out later. First, find a way out of here.

"Hello Jack," he said. Gravely voice, hoarse, a bit deep, like he'd been smoking his whole life and singing too hard.

Jack met the man's gaze. Whoever this old man was, his faded blue eyes were hard, the sort of hard Jack figured you'd get if you were exposed to horrible things on a regular basis, like those movies set in the Vietnam war showed. Maybe military then, someone who'd worked their way up from private, and seen all the horrible things the barrel of a gun could accomplish?

Or the man just had that sort of look to him, and exploited it.

"Hello."

"Suppose you wonder why a bunch of humans have kidnapped you."

He called himself human. Guess that meant he knew he was a vampire for sure then. Made sense, stake in the heart and all that; or whatever they'd stabbed him with.

"You could say that."

The old man stood straight, and started to pace, combat boots landing lightly on the concrete. He was a little tall, this old man, and he had some thickness to his shoulders men his age usually didn't. Far as the beast in Jack's gut could tell, he was just plain old human through and through, except, that something was off. Like that time he had some tacos when he was younger, and something was off about the taste but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Food poisoning sucked. Not as much as a stake through the heart though. Delightful comparison.

“You’re taking this pretty well,” Jeremiah said. “Young guy like you, figured you’d be at least a little nervous.”

He was nervous. He was very nervous. But he was getting a lot better at his poker face. Besides, once he had a moment to get his bearings, he was going to brainwash these idiots and get the hell out of here.

“Not sure what to say to that.”

Jeremiah shrugged, and grabbed another chair beside Jack to sit in it reversed, facing him. “Don’t think we’ll kill you?”

“I ... guess you might. But you did kidnap me, so, I doubt you’ll kill me.”

“Yet.”

“ ... yeah, yet. Until I tell you what you want to know.”

“Exactly.” Jeremiah kept his gaze, and kept the door open too. Wasn’t trying to hide where they were then. “First, how much do you know about me?”

Jack remained silent. He knew nothing about this man, except that he was probably linked to those four humans he was on the lookout for. But he had to keep some control of the situation, and not letting the man know what he knew or didn’t know about him was better than nothing.

“ ... ok, Ventrue, try it.”

“W-What?”

“Try it.” The old man leaned in closer, and after pausing for a moment, slid the chair closer so he was only a foot from Jack, and staring him in the eyes. The man’s poker face was infinitely better than Jack’s; or he was just that sure of himself. “Try dominating me.”

Jack pulled his head back a few inches, but couldn’t get very far with the chair behind him not moving. It wasn’t moving? He looked down, and groaned. The feet of the chair were bolted to the ground. He turned his head again, and now with some light, he managed to look over his shoulder and get a glimpse of the handcuffs on his wrists. The cuffs holding him weren’t regular looking handcuffs, and they had weird, white symbols etched into the black metal. Normal hand cuffs he might be able to break, but these laughed at his attempts to even bend them.

Not good. Very not good. And, when he looked back to Jeremiah, tried to meet the man’s gaze again, he could feel the wall in the man’s eyes. A steel wall. Jack tried, stared into them, reached down into his gut with vitae as best he could, but nothing happened. He dug harder, groaned, growled as he let the beast in his guts fight against the barrier. Nothing happened.

“Nice cuffs, right?” Jeremiah reached out, and took him by the chin. “Daeva or Nos might be able to break them with some raw strength. You though?” The old man squeezed on his chin hard enough to hurt, and shook his head around a little before letting him go. Hard fingers.

A small twitch of the man’s eyebrow gave away that he was thinking about something else as he said it. More than just the cuffs then? What other tricks did these people have? He knew about the bloodclans, which meant he must have been doing this hunter gig for a long time, and was good at it.

“ ... how’d you sneak up on me?”



Jeremiah shook his head. “Secret.”

“I’m your prisoner. And ... and I’m guessing you’re going to kill me once you know what you want to know, I—”

The man smirked, and shook his head again. “We’re not here for you vamps, Jack.”

“ ... you’re not?”

Jeremiah shrugged, like the conversation was casual, breezy. “No, we’re not.”

“How do you know my name anyway?”

“We’ve been watching.” He shrugged again, and reached into his pocket to pull out a smartphone. Not Jack’s though, his own, and he brought it up to show Jack a picture of a burned building. Barry’s.

“Barry, you—”

“Your fellow vamp stumbled onto my work. Couldn’t let him see where I was setting up shop.” Jeremiah nodded a few more times, each subtle, each weighed with some secret or hint Jack couldn’t piece together, each painting a picture of history from his face, of killing vampires on the regular, like it was natural.

And the man had a powerful face, the sort of face you might expect to find behind a cigar’s tiny flame in the dark, with a knife in one gloved hand and a severed beast’s head hanging by the hair in the other.

“I’ve seen your shop though, so you’ll—”

“This old prison? No, this ain’t where I work. But it made for a decent site in an emergency like this.”

“ ... what about Barry?”

“That vamp? Shotgun to the head.” He shrugged, like he’d squashed a bug. “He resisted, and you don’t trust a vamp. You act fast, before they slip away into the dark, like the cockroaches you are.”

Jack pulled his head back, and stared. The man said cockroaches as matter-of-factly as someone describing literal cockroaches. Jack expected to see some hate there too, but if there was, it was the hate people had for ants. This man, this human, would kill Jack not because he hated him, but because he didn’t give a shit about him. This man considered his life as valuable as an insect.

The shivers started, trembling in his feet. Cold, like ice, started to work up his naked spine, and he felt the old urge to breathe in pants come back. He didn’t pant, didn’t show that he was starting to panic, didn’t show the stabbing ache that was starting to creep up through his muscles, the urge to flee tensing them. But the rattling of the cuffs was more than enough for the man to know what was happening to him.

“You burned down the apartment building.”

“I stirred the nest killing a vamp, so I watched who would come check it out. You can learn a lot by watching the fallout.”

This guy came watching? But he wasn’t one of the four. Or were they his lackeys? The man and woman he saw in his cell weren’t the four either though.

“ ... what do you want?”

“You kid, are going to tell me about Azamel and Athalia.”

Oh fuck.

“I ... don—”

“Let’s skip this part of the interrogation, and jump right to the good stuff, ok? I already know you’ve talked with Athalia and Azamel. I already know they’re monsters.” The old man leaned in closer, and stared him down. “Angela, get in here.”

The door creaked, and another person walked in, a woman, a bit tall, a bit thin, dark skin and short black hair, very short, almost buzzed like his. She too was covered in scars, including one across the eye. It cut deep, and Jack inched his head back as he realized the eye with the scar was a glass eye. The softness of her face didn’t match the steel, hard gaze.

She had a blowtorch in her hands.

“Angela here doesn’t really care for vamps.” Jeremiah shrugged, got up, and started pacing, body crossing the line of light that cut across the floor and onto Jack’s helpless body. “Bad history.”

Yeah, he was hearing that a lot lately.

“I don’t know anything about Azamel.” He sighed, shook his head, and struggled a little more. But as he struggled, Angela came in closer, and smirked at him as she took Jeremiah’s seat for herself. And just like Jeremiah, her eyes shut him down, locked him into his mind, put a dead halt on any attempt to break her with a domination discipline. It had to be the cuffs, right? Then why did it feel like it was Jeremiah and Angela blocking him instead, the same way an elder Kindred might if Jack was trying to dominate them.

Who the fuck were these people?

The woman smiled at him, took out a lighter, and flicked on it a few times, each creating a spark, each dancing along the blowtorch she held it near.

“You were seen talking with Athalia.” Jeremiah came up behind him, and set his hands on Jack’s shoulders. “And we know that, at

some point, you took a visit to see the old monster yourself, down in the tunnels.”

“How...” How did they know that? How long had they been in Dolareido? What the fuck was going on?

“Nevermind the how.” Jeremiah walked around some more, slowly circling the captured vampire and the crazy woman with the blowtorch. Easy to tell she was crazy, or at the very least eager to do things to him with that blow torch; it was in her eyes. “Tell me everything you know about Azamel and Athalia. Mark too, while you’re at it.”

Mark. Azamel’s other companion that Jack had never seen. No mention of Fiona though. Good.

“You can’t seriously think she told me anything important.”

“Why not? Seems you’re pretty important. Had the Prince’s attention.”

How the fuck did these hunters see into the Invictus ballroom? How did they get so close to him with Damien near?

Or, did Damien betray him? That was a possibility, and one he wasn’t eager to dwell on. If Damien had betrayed him, decided to get revenge for Lucas, handing him over to some hunters after Azamel was an easy way to make that happen. Or worse, he’d told Maria what he did to Lucas, and the two of them had betrayed him.

No proof though. Don’t jump to conclusions like a Gangrel.

“The Prince and I are a couple. But I have no pull with her or Azamel or Avery.”

“Avery?” Angela said. First time she’d opened her mouth, and Jack flinched back when she said it.

They didn't know Avery? Oh shit, shit. Think think think think.

“One of the Invictus, from another city, I ... I can't tell you anymore.” Poker face, do your best god damn poker face before these fucks cut off your fingers for lying.

The old man snarled, but shrugged, and rubbed a thumb across his beard. “Probably someone on Forner's radar. Not my business, and I don't want to step on his toes.” He came closer again, and put his hand on the back of the chair Angela was sitting in. Pupil, maybe? “Describe to me exactly what you saw when you visited Azamel.”

He could tell them, but then Azamel would find out. From what the others told him, if he pissed her off, that meant dead Kindred, that meant a monster they were trying to hold at bay with explosives flipping the fuck out and going on a rampage.

“I ... can't do that.” Christ he wanted to. He knew pain, he knew what unbearable agony felt like when Viktor had split his face and chest apart. He didn't want more of that, he just wanted to get back to Antoinette and curl up in her arms. “You don't know what she's capable of. If she finds out I've betrayed her, she'll—”

“Don't know?” The old man laughed again, hoarse, gritty. And as he laughed, he pulled out his knife, a large knife, and slammed it down against Jack's leg. The resounding ding of the metal blade hitting the metal chair, after having passed through his femur, resonated against the concrete walls.

It took a few seconds for his mind to realize what just happened, and then, bury him in the waves of torrid pain. A second later, for a scream to break through.

“Kid, you don't know shit about Azamel.”



~~Eric~~

The woods.

He shouldn't have been in the woods. He should have been in his apartment, feeding his dumb cat Kat, and getting ready for his job. New job, right. Bouncer, or something akin to.

But he wasn't doing that. He wasn't in his suit. He wasn't smiling at his bank account numbers. He wasn't worried about any of it either. The only thing on his mind, was his territory, and the pursuit of prey.

He looked down. Paws. Fur. He looked around. Rocks, earth, grass, and the moonlit sky. And he sat upon a rock, a large one that overlooked some of where the forest met the mountain, where he could get a feel for his territory before he resumed looking for food.

He was an animal, a beast, and with his pack, they'd bring down mighty prey.

Except, there was no pack. Just him. Just him, sitting on the rock, and caring for himself, alone. Something wrong with that. Something comforting about that too.

He looked at the moon, and let its grand light encompass him, bury him until his breath came to a halt. Tonight, the moon changed shape constantly, quickly, blinking her gaze over him as it revolved through its different phases. Tonight, the moon spoke to him, angelic, overwhelming, burying, and crushing.

Demanding.

“Breathe!”

And all at once, the moon stopped upon the Gibbous phase, and slammed him into the ground with blinding light.

---

He sat up in his bed, fast, almost whiplashing his neck, and sending his cat darting across the room. Sweat soaked his sheets, more of the same, cold sweat. Nightmares. Or not? He didn't mind the dream. If anything, he wanted to go back to it. Then why was he having this cold sweat again?

He looked at his hands in the dark. Since he'd started working night jobs, he'd started using blackout curtains to block out the light. But it wasn't enough, and he'd set up Velcro tape on the curtains to make sure they were snug to the wall, to block out all the light, every shred of it. So dark he normally couldn't see much beyond silhouettes once his eyes adjusted.

Now, he could see far more than silhouettes. He could see the grooves of his knuckles, and he could see where his heartbeat was pounding against his wrist, the radial pulse, like it was trying to jump out of his body.

Breathe, just breathe.

Groaning, he turned and set his feet to the tile floor. Cold, but not cold, like someone was running ice up and down his back, while his feet and hands and head were boiling. His body didn't like it, and neither did he. He groaned some more, and turned on the light.

"Fuck!" He threw his hands up to his eyes to block out the scorching flash. Searing pain dug into his eyes until they were filled with tears. He leaned forward, rested both hands against the wall, and forced his eyes open to stare at the floor as he opened the door. The pain slowly faded, but not before he felt his pulse in his eyes as well. At least it was slowing.

"Kat, you ok?"

She sat by the open door, and meowed.

“Right. Food.”

His body was heavy, and he had to brace himself along the tiny hallway wall as he walked toward the kitchen. God awful little apartment, and he couldn't wait to get a better one, once he started getting paid, once he got Montel and his maggot Pitt their money.

He perked up, and smirked as he reached for some coffee grounds. That Jessy woman had said she'd take care of that for him; and, despite himself, he believed her. This random stranger, who really seemed like nothing more than a horny woman, a bit younger than him, trying to show off her attitude, had something to her he couldn't dismiss. He felt it from her, from the other tiny girl, and even the redhead; something different from her, but something similar too. Not that it meant they were trustworthy, but he couldn't dismiss the feeling that she wasn't bullshitting him. And they'd known who Montoya Montel was too.

It was a nice change of pace. People bullshitting him was as common as breathing, back when he was a professional. Hopefully that trend in his life was over, or at least abated.

He went through his usual routine. Scooped the cat litter, drank some coffee, ate some shit food, took a shower, brushed his teeth, got Kat some fresh food, and then started the new routine. First, a treat in her food while he went to put on his suit. And then, once he was changed, a laser pointer to keep her at a distance and cat hair away from his suit. Another treat in her food bowl — poor girl was going to die young and fat at this rate — and then out the door while she was distracted.

Time for another night of standing around, surrounded by sex and drugs and money and everything in between.

---

The lovely sound of pulsing music and pulsing hearts. Ugh.



He stood in a corner, and tried to keep to himself. Ganders wanted him to socialize, but tonight, socializing wasn't feeling like too good an idea. Which, as Ganders predicted, seemed to invite the attention of a certain clientele. Single women, and the occasional man, sought his attention, tried to engage in conversation with him, and the more he tried to tell them to go away without quite saying that, the more interested they became.

So tonight he tried staying in the dark, and just watch.

The four people came in again, the two men and two women, each with eyes glancing around, reading the environment, the people around them, like any dangerous animal would. And as he stared at them, he adopted an innocent stance, pretended he wasn't watching them; at least, not watching them anymore than the rest of the club. They glanced his way, he offered the same semi-nod he offered everyone, and he turned his head to watch randoms, while keeping them in the corner of his eye. These four were not like the others, and he needed to watch them.

The other bouncers didn't notice. He could see they were watching the more obvious dangers, the big guys who got handsy, the women who leaned toward their purse like they might have something in there that wasn't legal or safe, and all the people who crept around more than was normal. It was a hard job, spotting those subtle nuances, when everyone at Bloodlust was all over each other, and everyone was at least some degree of sneaky, shady, or drunk.

But these four were different. All the others, every one of them, he could safely slot into his mind as not a threat; maybe annoying, but not a threat. The four though, with the jackets, the scars, the way they walked, the way they watched people in the corner of their eye without actually looking at them, like Eric did, these four were most definitely a threat.

And yet, they did nothing. Hell they didn't stick around for very long. They made some hand motions, subtle, mostly near their hips or when their hands were resting on tables, and the others picked up on it without ever moving their head to directly stare at the movements. Always about subtlety with these four, the sort of people who didn't just have things to hide, but were very practiced in hiding them.

He could smell the strange smells again. Metal working, wood, odd smells that didn't belong to Dolareido, that didn't mix in with the smell of life and alcohol. How he knew what smells didn't belong to Dolareido, he had no fucking idea, but the instinct was there, in his mind, screaming for him to notice. These people didn't belong, and they were dangerous. And, he could only relax once they were gone.

He sighed as they left, and forced himself to breathe. Just breathe, in, out, relax.

Five minutes later, Fiona came in, and his muscles tensed all over again. She wasn't wearing the same green dress as last time, and instead opted for a white tank top and black pants. It might have been a bit boring, if not for her vibrant red frizzy hair, and the large breasts filling the top.

This place really was doing a number on his brain. Half the time he was looking for threats, the other half the time he was doing his best to push down his sex drive.

Fiona looked around, and around, and then around some more. When her eyes found him, she grinned, waved, and hopped over through the dancing and bumping bodies, past the drinks and fondling and dance floor.

“Eric!”

“ ... hello.”

And like they were friends, best buds, she grabbed his hand and pulled him into a nearby empty booth.

“Eric! Have ye seen Jack?”

“ ... Jack?”

“Jack! Wee lad, buzzed head, adorable. Oft has a very tall woman on his arm.”

Little guy, buzzed head, tall woman? Didn't ring any bells.

“Oh ... wait.”

“What, what what!?”

“The manager mentioned the woman. White hair?”

“Aye!”

“Mentioned her, said she was to be given her space and treated with respect. That was it. I've never seen them though.” Plenty of types came into Bloodlust. Short, tall, small guys with tall girls, small girls with tall guys, and everything in between. But the manager had been pretty insistent about this super tall girl with white hair. Stay out of her way, or you get canned.

“Oh ... damn it.” She whined, threw up her hands, and grabbed his wrist. “I have to find him! Everyone's looking for him! Damien said there were these four folk, and they might have taken him. And—”

“Four people?”

“Aye! Two men, two women.” She scratched her head a few times as she thought about it. Girl wore her thoughts on her sleeve, like her emotions. “One dark skin, two with tan skin, one with white skin, I think he said. Some scars on them too.”

Yeah, that was them. He winced, and looked out to the crowd, to the jumping people, to the numbing sound of the heartbeat music. Tell her? Not tell her?

He took a moment to look at the panicked girl beside him. Yeah, those four people were dangerous, with edge that screamed hidden knife. As a fighter, he knew to fear the quiet guy who could look you in the eye. The loud ones were all talk, and the ones that couldn't maintain eye contact were pushovers, but it was the quiet ones that stood their ground that got his skin crawling and adrenaline jacked. Those four sent the same chills along his skin and up his spine, got him looking for when one of them would strike out, like a quiet snake waiting for the right moment.

And then there was Fiona. Bubbly, silly, ridiculous, curvy little Fiona. Fiona that looked so delightful and innocent, and fun. Fiona that made him want to avoid the shadows, afraid she was hiding in them, ready to rip out his innards. He couldn't tell why, couldn't see why, couldn't smell or hear or notice anything about her that made him think she was dangerous; and yet, he knew she was. Her friends Jessy and Natasha were dangerous as well, in the way a prowling, hunting animal was, and that was a danger he could understand. Not sure why they were dangerous either, but it was clear to see in their movements, their stances, the way they looked at people, that they were dangerous too. Christ, so many people he wouldn't have noticed before, and now they were sticking out like sore thumbs.

But with Fiona, every instinct he had told him she was more than dangerous. She was terrifying.

She raised a brow at him. He wasn't talking, he was thinking, and staring into the crowd. And he wasn't breathing. Just breathe. He forced his lungs to move, and looked down at her.

"Ye do that dark and brooding thing very well," she said.

"... takes practice." A stupid little joke.

Stupid little joke worked. She erupted into laughter, and pat him on the arm. “Ye dobber!”

He tried to smile, but it didn’t work. Tell her, not tell her, tell her, not tell her. God, what the fuck happened? In just several days he’d gone from driving a taxi, to being surrounded by sex, drugs, bad music, and the sort of people he was sure were doing crazy shit by moonlight. And, as for moonlight, he was going out of his god damn fucking mind, and the moon was haunting him every dream, every nightmare. And for the fucking life of him, he could not stop this overwhelming urge to ... to who fucking knows what. Something with ripping, tearing, biting.

“Ye’re doing it again.”

“Sorry, just ... I have seen those four.”

“Oh? Tell me, tell me!”

“Just ten minutes ago.”

“Perfect! Let’s follow them!”

“ ... I’m working. And my shift just started.” The night was very young.

“Yer boss wulnae mind!”

“ ... and they’re long gone by now, how do you expect me to find them?”

Fiona raised a brow in confusion, but soon raised both as realization dawned on her face. No what idea what she was realizing, but it had her scooting in closer on the booth seat, and leaning in to whisper.

“Ye dinnae ken, do ye?”

“ ... know what?”

“What’s happening to ye.”

He drew his head back, frowned, and glanced around. “Nothing’s happening to me.”

She rolled her eyes and elbowed him in the side. “Come on! Ye can tell me. Avery must have ... must have ... have nae talked to ye, has she? Does she even ken who ye are?”

He stared at her. Avery? What?

“Fiona I don’t—”

“I shouldnae intervene! Nope. Nope nope nope. But ... but I need to find Jack.” She leaned in closer, and reached to pull down on his shoulder until his ear was to her lips. “Help me and I’ll tell ye why ye feel different. Why ye’re ... why ye want to hunt things.”

Hunt. Hunt was the word he was dancing around, refusing to acknowledge, keeping at a distance. He wanted to hunt. He wanted to chase something down, sink his teeth into it, rip it apart, and devour it. He wanted to know his territory, scan for threats, chase them off, and own his land. He wanted to ... do the crazy shit he was seeing in his dreams.

“How do you know that?” Should have kept denying it, but she’d nailed the feeling so accurately, he couldn’t just ignore it. How the fuck this girl knew what was happening to him, he couldn’t imagine, but then he couldn’t figure out why he was so fucking scared of her either.

At this point, he was totally mind-fucked, and this girl seemed to be the only one offering an answer.

“I’ll tell ye ... if ye help me follow those four.”

“But I told you they’re gone.”

She shrugged. “Follow yer nose.”

Oh god, she was serious.

## Chapter 47

~~Antoinette~~

The next evening was not a pleasant one. She'd hoped to awaken to news from her thralls of the boy's whereabouts. She'd awoken to despair.

"Why am I not out in those streets, Daniel?"

"Because we're trying to find a needle in a haystack, Annie." The man stood and watched out over the city along with her, the two of them by the large window in her office, at the top of her Elysium tower.

"I am an extra pair of eyes!"

"You know that's not how you find someone in a city."

Her hands were in fists at her side, squeezing, clenching, shaking.

"It is my city."

"It is."

"And I should be able to find anything within its veins."

"You know that's not true. Millions of people, thousands of streets, tens of thousands of buildings, and a billion places to hide anything and anyone." The man shook his head, and gestured to the desk behind them, her main desk. The laptop upon it displayed various messaging windows she had used to communicate with the Invictus, and Natasha as well, about the boy's disappearance.



Part of her was tempted to tell Jacob or Garry, but she could not trust those two. Jacob may have been playing games with her, tormenting her by stealing away her love, while Garry may have been making a move for power. The man had been somewhat quiet, less aggressive than usual, at the ball. There had been times when Garry was quiet in the past, and it was purely because he was in a quiet disposition. Sometimes a cigar was a cigar, after all. But there had been times when his quiet behavior was a precursor to aggression against the Invictus.

And Jack was not Ordo Dracul, he was Invictus, a target for those such as Garry. That alone presented problems, as the Invictus would no doubt suspect her in some sort of trickery as well. Perfectly reasonable suspicion; it would not be the first time she had manipulated them to dance to her tune.

Still, Jack was missing, Julias confirmed it. The Invictus were looking for him, regardless of their potential suspicion of her.

She wanted more. She wanted to demand Garry search for her love. Demand it of Jacob. Demand it of Avery. Demand it even of that abomination Azamel.

“... should I bring this to the attention of the werewolves, and the monsters, my sheriff?”

“I’m sure Avery already knows. And Azamel probably does by now too.”

“And you are sure it was not your friend Athalia that is responsible? The entire Kindred population saw her speak with Jack.” And every ounce of willpower Antoinette had went into stopping herself from marching down to confront Azamel and her subordinates about that conversation. “Perhaps she spoke to my thralls, and is working with them, manipulating them, falsifying their reports?”

“I ... can't imagine she'd do that. Azamel might, but why would she? It's the Invictus she has a problem with, and the Invictus won't bend over backward to save their youngest Kindred. Jack isn't the bargaining chip Azamel needs with them. And, revenge against the grandchilde of the man Athalia hated, a dead man, seems too insane even for Athalia.”

She glared at her companion, stared at him with all the fury her eyes could muster. And the man returned it with a quiet, calm, almost cold gaze, before adjusting his glasses again.

Her fury broke, and she sighed as she stepped in closer to the window, to gaze out through the wall of glass from only an inch away. He was right, after all. While the Invictus would attempt to save their young neonate Jack Terry, ultimately, he was not of grand importance to the covenant. Of grand importance to Julias individually, as to her, but Julias was intelligent enough, wise enough, to not let his love of his childe destroy the Invictus if such an ultimatum were ever presented to him.

She was not so sure she could be that heartless anymore, not after Jack had touched her soul, ripped the roots clear that shackled her depths, deep down in the lingering black.

It had only been an hour since the sun had set. In that time, she received three hundred and twenty-seven reports from her dozens of thralls, all of which were of no value or use, except for one. A mention of four humans, seen together, skulking about. But attempts to pursue them by the two thralls that had spotted them were quickly rendered fruitless, as the four humans vanished.

She knew of these four. She had read the Invictus reports her network of spies had uncovered; nothing significant. But the report had mentioned four individuals seen more often, kine, with scars. They suspected hunters. And now, so did she.

For all her power, for all her intelligence and experience, it was her and Daniel running the city, two Kindred against hundreds. She controlled the ebb and tide of power, the flow of money and influence of Kindred and organizations alike. Macro, the Invictus would call it, macro management. To be the one in the street, giving orders, partaking in the hands-on digging for clues and evidence, that was not her purview. And no matter how logical that assessment was, how correct it was for her to be giving her orders from above where they had the greatest effect, it still hurt. She wanted to be in those streets, looking for her love with her own eyes.

Perhaps she was overreacting? No, it was foolish to think that Barry's death and the sighting of these four suspicious kine had nothing to do with Jack's disappearance. And Kindred were paranoid creatures by nature. They did not simply disappear for no reason, especially not at Jack's age, and especially not in the modern world, where technology had made constant communication as easy as it was. She had called him twice more upon awakening, texted him, but again, there had been no answer.

"Natasha's out there," Daniel said. "She's plugged into the network. Any thralls find traces of Jack, she'll know. And I'm sure Mire's got his own feelers out."

"Yes ... I know." And it was not enough. Not enough. "We should have looked into these suspicious kine earlier."

"We let the Invictus run much of the city so we can focus on our own affairs, Annie. You know that."

"Perhaps that is not enough anymore? We toil, exploring what mysteries lay beyond our grasp, for centuries now!" She grit her teeth, and forced her nerves to calm. A moment later her hair was pulled over her shoulder, and she combed it with both sets of

fingers as she watched her city beneath her. “When the greatest joys are to be found within our reach, within our presence.”

“ ... you want to stop?”

“No. When the secrets of existence are so near, to be beyond our grasp is but a question of time. Still, this dilemma has made it painfully clear that without the closer things, our second lives are ... void of value.” Void, in general. “If he is dead, Daniel, I ... I do not know what I will do.”

Her old friend winced, an expression she did not see him carry often. And as he came closer, he gave her a single, gentle touch of the shoulder, and stood by her to watch the city beneath them.

Neither of them said what had become too strong a reality to ignore. Jack’s disappearance was killing her, and threatening her objectivity, threatening her abilities as Prince. She would be quite the fool to abandon her role as Prince, abandon her role in the Ordo Dracul, in order to join Jack in romance, and protect him for all the years to come. And she would be quite the fool to abandon Jack, who wrested her soul from atrophy and sparked life into its withered corpse.

No matter the hardships her second life threw at her, should would find a way to have both. And with time, Jack would grow to become a Ventrue worthy of fearing, a greater power than his grandsire or even his sire, relative to their ages. With time, he would become as like her, a rock against the tide.

But it would be decades until he was strong enough to face the more dangerous threats of their second lives, and until then, she could only offer so much protection.

“ ... sometimes, my old friend,” she said, “I remember the faces of mothers and fathers as their sons went to war, almost seventy years ago. Do you remember?”

“Sometimes.”

“Some nights, I would hear crying, mothers learning of the deaths of their sons. Wives, who lost their husbands.” She stopped combing her hair, and let her hands fall as weights at her side. “Only now do I understand such pain, the desire to protect with all your soul, that which you cannot protect.”

Forever wiser than she, her old friend said nothing, and gazed upon the streets below them. Asphalt, black veins through the body of her greatest accomplishment, Dolareido. Her greatest accomplishment, and now her greatest enemy.

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~~Beatrice~~

Julias left the moment the sun set. He did his best to be lovey-dovey with her, to kiss her and say ‘I love you’ and stuff, but she shooed him away. No time for the romantic stuff when shit hit the fan.

As for herself, she had no idea what to do. Jack was missing, and with all the shit that’d been going on lately, she doubted it was an accident or coincidence, especially not with the girlfriend the kid had. Antoinette was wearing the pants in that relationship, and it’d be a bad idea for Jack to piss her off.

Plus, why would he want to? The two oddballs really loved each other, and with a rack like that, no way the kid wasn’t doing everything in his power to fall asleep on those things every dawn.

She slapped herself in the forehead. Stop. Thinking. About. Sex.

Crouched, upon the edge of a roof between North and South side, not too far off from the canyon where the Circle of the Crone liked to sleep. She needed to pay him a visit. Jacob had mentioned to her that they’d be preparing defensive measures of their cave, in case

someone managed to discover it. Unlikely, with how well it was hidden in the unclimbable canyon's base, but shit happened, and you didn't get to live to be Jacob's age without compensating for the shit-happens factor.

She jumped along the rooftops, and soon down into the canyon. Jagged rocks and steep cliff faces meant you weren't getting down here without a pulley system or something similar. Dangerous for even her to scale. Each step a trap capable of breaking a leg, each hand hold ready to break apart or slice open the fingers. But soon she was down in the crag, sharp rocks and prickly bushes everywhere.

She crouched low through the darkness and found the opening of the cave, and crouched lower again to move through the tiny opening. Didn't get far though, before she ran into bars. Giant, thick, spiked, metal bars.

“What the fuck.”

“Beatrice Damor?” A voice in the black, one she didn't recognize.

A man came out, wearing nothing but a robe like Jacob would probably wear, dark brown and leathery. Maybe in his thirties, healthy, strong looking man, and now that he came closer, she managed to recognize the silhouette of his body and blur of his face. This was one of Jacob's thralls.

“They got a thrall to guard the gate?” She laughed and leaned her crouched body against the tiny tunnel wall. “Any Ventrue or Daeva could break your mind and have you open the door.”

A sudden light forced her to block its glow with her hands until her eyes adjusted. Once she could see again, she squinted at the man, and the small candle he was holding. There was something around his neck, a necklace, something made of bone. It reeked of Jacob.

“The Master has protected me from such mental control. I guard the gate, until the city is safe once more.”

Anti-brainwash necklace? That was pretty awesome, actually.

“Cool. Let me in.”

“Yes, Beatrice.”

Oh god he really was a slave, a mindless servant sort of type. He had a small smile that never went away, the sort of person who was happy to serve their master. Well, the blood bond did that. Three tastes and you were bound to your master, devoted to them, for months, years even.

Kindred weren't immune to the blood bond. She had to visit Damien and see how that was going, cause the two hadn't even made eye contact at the ball. Hell they'd made damn sure to not even look each other's direction during the whole fiesta.

The thrall disappeared around the corner, back into the depths of the cave. And just as she was about to call out to get the fuck back here, the bars slid away, disappearing into tiny holes in the little cave wall. When the fuck did Jacob get this set up? Must have always been there, just never activated. And she doubted the bars could be taken out with anything other than a nuke. Made the cave a pretty damn safe place to stay then.

She crept through the tunnel, and winced as she heard the loud screech of rock and metal scraping against each other, bars sliding back into place.

Everyone was home. Hell, everyone was actually together, standing around the blood bowl. More candles were lit than usual, some thralls and ghouls wandering around and lighting them, tending to them, making sure they bathed the room in a pleasant,

creepy-as-fuck glow that highlighted the array of bones and skulls along the walls with defined shadows.

Aaron, Othello, and Jennifer. Each wearing robes similar to the thrall at the door, each watching Jacob as old eyeless, not wearing his eye bandage, dragged a finger across his chest to bring forth some Kindred blood. Thick, heavy, the powerful liquid coated into a single drop upon his fingertip, and he dandled his fingers over the blood bowl before him to let it fall into the red.

This blood bowl was a pale comparison to the one she'd seen in the secret underground lair in Three Kings Cemetery, and she was fucking thankful for that. No corpses dangling over this thing, dripping old, cold blood into it. No screams echoing in the walls. And the moving shadows were caused by flickering candlelight, not the stuff of nightmares.

She almost asked what was going on, but that'd have been pretty dumb. The atmosphere screamed silence, and maybe some chanting. No chanting though, much as it would have fit, but everyone kept quiet as they watched Jacob work his magic, his ritual. And, as Beatrice came in closer, she felt the chill work up her spine again, the same chill as that time in the cave.

“Beatrice,” Jacob said, his gaze still on the blood ... she thought. Hard to tell, being empty eye sockets and all.

“Jacob.” Hushed voices, as if volume would shatter the power of what they were doing.

Aaron and Othello stepped aside, and she stepped between them. The five of them, standing around the blood bowl. And just as she was about to make a stupid comment about her lack of proper fashion, Jen came around the group and tossed a robe over her shoulders. The woman smirked at her, adjusted the robe a little, made sure to spend a little more time than necessary adjusting it around her chest, then went back to stand where she'd been.



They did this every so often, watched Jacob do his work, to get glimpses into the true nature of the Circle of the Crone, and the Crone goddess herself, whatever the fuck that was. Occasionally, Jacob described various roles in the organization's structure during these demonstrations. The Whore, the Hero, the Maiden, the Fool, Father and Mother, Hermit, and others. Jacob had, on occasion, referred to himself as the Father of this particular little pod of witches, and also, the Fool.

The rest of them though? He gave no role. Or rank for that matter, other than that they served him. Serving him, for the most part, meant doing whatever the fuck they wanted. But, on occasion, he had requests for them, like the time Beatrice was sent to spy on the burned building and the Kindred investigating it. And then he'd go weeks, months, without so much as a single order or goal.

Fuck he was a weird dude, and Antoinette wanted her to connect with him. Yeah, sure, she'd get right on that.

"Jack is missing," she said.

"Yeap," Jacob said.

"Know who did it?"

"Nope."

She sighed, and looked at everyone else. The three others were content to listen quietly, or stare at the pool of blood with interest. It was moving, almost like it was boiling, but it wasn't. A couple bubbles came up from underneath it, and for a second, Triss thought maybe someone would leap out of the bowl, as if they'd been drowning. It was only a foot deep, but still.

"I want to find him."

Eyeless nodded, and chuckled. "I'm sure you do."

“Can you help me?”

He nodded again, and gestured to the bowl with his chin. “Watch.”

His hands disappeared into his robes, and pulled out objects. Objects was as best a descriptor as she could come up with, as each thing was unique. First, a crow feather, or at least something black. Then, a dead spider, a large one. Both into the blood bowl; or pot, now that he was tossing things into it like ingredients. Then, a rotted finger. Good fucking god

Another nod, and he took out a final item. A knife. A knife she recognized.

She stepped back.

“I had an interesting conversation with Fiona,” eyeless said.

“ ... don’t torment her, Jacob. She’s a really nice girl, and—”

He waved a hand over the bowl, dismissing her and drawing her eyes to the blood at the same time. Damn liquid refused to hold still.

“I didn’t torment her. But, her naivete is apparent. She did not realize how many questions she answered without answering them.” A chuckle, a laugh, like an old man might make when he managed to outsmart a young whippersnapper. “It seems Azamel is not in Dolareido just to chase something. No. Seems she’s in Dolareido to avoid something too.”

“Avoid?”

“Oh yes. The old monster’s caused a stir in many places in the world. Small towns in quiet, ignored places, have been damaged, or destroyed. Some not so small, in different corners of the country, gone.”

“ ... destroyed villages?” What the fuck?

“Indeed. Scary, isn’t it?”

“How do you know what—”

He gestured to the blood bowl. Right, of course, magic. Fucking blood magic.

“I am preparing a ritual, before I go and speak to Azamel herself.”

“ ... herself.” Yeah, if Azamel was destroying literal places, wiping them off the map, maybe it was better if they kept their distance?

“Sure you want to antagonize her?”

“My dear, sweet little Beatrice.” French accent included. “You want to see how dangerous a beast is? You have to poke it first.”

Cause that was a good idea.

“Seriously?” She mimicked his gesturing hand, and met his eyeless gaze as best she could.

He smirked. Always with the smirking. “Afraid of a little chaos?”

“I—”

He chopped off his hand.

The four of them jumped back, and raised their hands to guard themselves at the brief flash of light of the man’s hand disintegrating. It looked almost like fire, a brief touch of flame like a firecracker, but turning into ashes without a sound. The man was so old, antediluvian, severing a body part created instant dust. And as the four of them managed to lower their hands and stare at the falling ashes, they gulped.

The ashes danced upon the surface, before sinking into the blood. Aaron, Othello, Jennifer, they stared at the crimson liquid for a few moments before they looked to watch Jacob. Man was ancient, disgustingly ancient, and before their eyes, he regrew his hand. First it was the blood coming out of his wrist, binding on itself, turning into bone, into muscle, into tendons, ligaments, and skin. But Triss couldn't help but stare at the bowl of blood instead, at how the bubbling was getting worse, at how it churned, writhed, and breathed.

He was going to teach her crúac rituals, blood magic, and he'd said the way to do that was pain, because with pain, you could tap into the beast. Hurt someone enough, really hurt them, and the pain turned the ego off eventually. Instinct took over. For a vampire, that meant frenzy, that meant letting the thing with claws and fangs on the inside out onto the surface, meant giving it control. Jacob wanted her to let her beast closer to the surface, cause it was the beast in a Kindred that had true power. It was the beast in a Kindred, that could call upon the power in the blood, do shit like cross barriers, empower Kindred with insanity beyond understanding, and even communicate with madness like the Black Blood.

She licked her crocodile teeth, and watched, wide-eyed, as a single eye floated up from underneath the blood. An eyeball, an actual, white eyeball, with a dark blue iris. And then, another eyeball floated up as well, same color. It drifted around in the settling blood, the red liquid finally calming as it offered its prize.

Jacob reached down, took an eyeball, and slipped it into one of his eye sockets. The four of them winced, maybe even groaned a little at the unsightly display, and Jacob laughed at them as he covered the grotesqueness with one hand. The hand glowed red, subtle, between his fingers and from his palm where they couldn't see with it flat to his face and eye. But, when he removed the hand and lowered it, the fake eye had an eyelid, and eyelashes to match it.

“Handsome, don’t you think?” he said, Joker smile on full tilt. And when he moved his hand over to cover his other, empty, shredded eye socket, Triss stared at him.

He was kind of handsome, in that older man sort of way, salt and pepper hair giving him a sort of debonair appeal. With his lean frame and deep cheeks, it would have fit well in a soap opera, wearing a nice suit and running a massive corporation or something. Crazy to think so, but maybe there was some appeal to this man, sexually, even romantically, that drew Minerva to him.

“The eye, um ... what’s it for?” Why was she the only one asking questions? Why did the other three just watch wide-eyed, and not wonder how he was doing this insanity? For fuck’s sake he just created an eyeball out of blood, and random occult shit! But no, Jen, Aaron, Othello, they just watched on, intrigued and amazed, but silenced by their own hesitations and fear. Or laziness.

She wanted to know.

“Begotten are not creatures of blood and shadows, like Kindred. They aren’t beasts of muscle and aggression, like Uratha. They are nightmares.” He laughed again, and reached for the other eyeball. “They think they’re beyond our reach. But they’ll learn. I’m going to do a little hunting, for nightmares.”

“ ... I want to come.”

Everyone raised a brow as they looked at her, Jacob included, and he lowered his hand to expose the empty, ruined eye socket, while also looking at her with the good eye.

“You think they’ll know where Jack is?” Aaron said.

She shrugged. “I’m sure the Invictus and the Prince are throwing every resource they have into finding him ... well, Julias and Antoinette are at least. And I’d probably step on their toes. But the

Begotten know something, about something. Athalia talking to Jack, and Jack disappearing on the same night? Come on, fucking suspicious. And, I bet Jacob's thinking the same thing."

Her three fellow witches nodded, while Jacob held his chin in his fingers, and considered her. God, he had an eye, a fucking eye, and he was using it to look at her. Gross.

"You can come, if you'll be an asset."

"... and how do I do that?" Here it comes.

Eyeless snickered and gestured to the blood bowl. "You'll need one of these eyes."

Yeap, of course it had to be something really fucking gross and nasty. Something right off the cover of a metal album.

"The fuck am I supposed to do with one of these eyeballs?"

"Wear it."

She blinked, and stepped back. So did the others, wincing and each reaching up to touch a part of their face with caring fingers. Othello of course would be against the idea of damaging his face, even temporarily. Aaron and Jennifer, well, no one liked the idea of losing an eye. Replacing it with an eye from a dark blood ritual wasn't any better.

"I ... I..." Fuck it. "Fine, let's do it." She leaned forward, set her hands on the edge of the blood bowl, and stared the old man in the eye. "Take it."

"What? Me? My dear Beatrice, if you want to explore the depths of darkness crúac can provide, you have to learn to embrace the pain." He gestured again to the bowl, where the single eye rolled around half sunk in the liquid. Considering how much blood was in

the bowl, and how dark and thick it was, she imagined the reason Jen and them were at the bowl was to provide their own blood for the ritual.

“I’m embracing the fucking pain, just—”

“Just do it yourself.”

She let her head drop. Just do it yourself, he said. Easier said than done! The amount of reflexes a person had, Kindred included, to not harm the self, was high. Very high. Every instinct she had told her she shouldn’t be ripping off, or out, her own body parts. But it was in that darkness of pain and blood and the beast where the insanity Jacob demonstrated existed.

She remembered a story of Odin, Norse mythology, and how the god gouged out one of his eyes, in pursuit of knowledge. This shit was right up that alley.

“You ... you don’t have to,” Jen said, stepping in closer and putting a hand on her shoulder. “Jacob was going to do this alone. Azamel is dangerous, and we shouldn’t piss her off.”

Aaron and Othello nodded, but said nothing.

She looked between the three of them, and slowly, she felt a frown and harsh glare creep into her expression. The three of them did nothing but fuck all day, every day. Witches? Circle of the Crone? Suddenly, she felt insulted. These three weren’t witches, they were freeloaders.

“ ... why are the three of you in this covenant?” She pushed Jen’s hand away, and glared at her three companions. “Jacob offers us secrets, knowledge, power, and the three of you do nothing but fuck your food and do him the occasional small favor? Don’t any of you care about this shit? Don’t any of you want to fucking know what’s out there? Don’t you want to understand how the fuck he’s able to

do the shit he does, understand the things he communicates with? Christ, we're vampires, and all you three give a shit about is satisfying your hungers!"

The three squirmed, looked between each other and her again, and then back to Jacob. Eyeless shrugged, and waited, smirking at all of them the whole time. And when his one-eyed gaze met Triss, he winked the eye at her. So gross.

She wasn't done ranting. "The shit we've seen, the shit we've felt, and you three are concerned only with ... existing! Fucking god, even you Aaron, all you do is read. You can read until the god damn apocalypse, but they're just words, they're not real! And you two," she gestured to the Ventrue and the Daeva, "sex and blood and that's it, that's all you two live for. How the fuck Jacob lets you three just coast like this without actually giving a shit about this stuff, the Crone, the madness that hides beyond our view! How can you not care?"

The rant really came out of nowhere, and she was probably just redirecting her fear into an outburst. But, it was still true. These three did nothing to belong in this covenant, other than agree with its views. They barely helped Jacob in his endeavors, and their interest in the terrifying nature of their primal existence was nil. Well, fuck them.

Before they could respond, she used one hand to pry open her eyelid, and reached into the socket with the claws of her other hand.

She'd be able to regrow an eye, with a good night's sleep and a belly full of blood. Unlike Jacob, she wouldn't be regrowing any limbs in minutes, but still, losing an eye was temporary. And the pain was temporary.

Temporary, but the memory wouldn't be. The slicing of her claws along the soft shell of the eye earned a shudder from her as the scalding agony exploded outward from her face and down into her



body. Maybe she should have done this slower? No, fast was good, like tearing off a band-aid. Except, the eye. And as she got her claws around the squishy flesh of it, she screamed. Flesh, cutting and splitting apart in her fingers, Kindred blood fighting against the damage, and she having to tell her body to let it be as she forced the claws in deeper, behind the eyeball, pulling it out of her while the claws fought against her eyelids trying to close.

Her claws were sharp. It made the whole process a blurry agony of blood and distorted images as the eye was cut into by her fingers. She'd never really thought about it, what it'd be like to see through an eye as it was being destroyed, as the lens distorted under pressure, as the eyeball was punctured and the fluid coated her claws and eyelids. She screamed again, her other eye closed, the ruined eye in her grasp but still in her skull, and every reflex in her body telling her to let go.

She didn't. She tugged on it, and fumbling in pain, she swiped her finger along the backside of the eye. She knew enough about anatomy to know the eyeball didn't just float in your skull. It was attached, and she had to detach it.

The eye fell away, rolling off of her hand, and landing against the rock of the cave floor with a quiet plop that followed the silence of her cries. And as she forced her other eye open, she watched it fade away in a tiny ember, before it became ash. Her empty eye socket was closed, no opening that, and she felt her Kindred blood flood it to heal the wound. Regrowing an eyeball wouldn't be happening any time soon, and she could suppress the healing to prevent that, until they were done what needed to be done.

Holding her hand over the empty, agonizing eye socket, she forced herself back over to the blood bowl, and glared at everyone. First Jacob, who was smiling a smile so ... genuine, he almost looked like a father admiring the dedication of their child. Pride.

Ugh. The other three looked shocked as all hell. Good, fuck them twice.

She squeezed the edges of the bowl with the one hand, and, trembling, she forced down her other hand away from the other, empty eye socket so that it also gripped the bowl. A drop of Kindred blood trickled out of the wound, and down her cheek to land and mix into the crocodile teeth of her mouth.

“Do it,” she said.

One-eyed bastard almost looked ready to cry tears of joy, with the over-dramatic presentation of a Shakespearean actor. He reached into the bowl, scooped up the eyeball, and reached out for her face.

Every single god damn mother fucking reflex she had told her to yank her head away. A wounded animal. She gripped the bowl tight, and stared at the man with her one good eye, as another drop of her Kindred blood worked down her cheek bone and down onto her extra teeth.

Jacob’s smile hardened, became a determined, solid gaze as he opened her ruined eye, and slid the eye in. He was fast, smooth, delicate, precise and quick all at the same time. There was no describing the sensation of having a new eyeball inserted into an eye socket full of blood, and thank god Jacob was kind enough to keep the brutal sensation succinct; cause she couldn’t take much more. Didn’t want to start crying after that speech. She’d made a point, and to start crying now, she’d seem like a whiny baby instead of a proper witch willing to do the shit they weren’t.

He pulled his hand back, fingers releasing her eyelids, and waited.

She groaned, forced down her screams, and gasped on useless air as she squeezed the blood bowl. The liquid and the lighting wasn’t right for a reflection, poetic as it would have been, but she stared into the blood anyway as she felt the unnatural eye mold to fit her

skull. And, for her Kindred body to attach the optic nerve to the new vessel.

She could see out of the eye.

“That ... is fucking creepy,” Jen said, but she had a weird smile on her face, like maybe she was a little interested in what they were up to. Which made Triss happy, and pissed, cause maybe she wouldn’t have given a rant if she’d known. “You got blood on and under the new eye, and it’s very poetic. And it doesn’t match your other eye.”

She rolled her eyes — oh fucking god ow! — and wiped the Kindred blood away from underneath the new eye. It began to fade away, turning into wisps of ash along the back of her hand.

She had an eye now, a normal looking eye, next to her usual snake eye. Too late to worry about that now, she could get rid of the new eye later.

Oh shit, why hadn’t she thought about that? She had to get this thing out of her later, and go through this again.

“See anything?” Aaron said.

“I ... I can see with the eye, yeah, but ... nothing new.” She squinted at Jen, then the boys, and then around at the ghouls and thralls taking care of the den. Everything looked normal, once the dizzying pain settled. “How’s this work, Jacob?”

“Let’s go find out.”

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“You continue to impress me,” one-eye said. The two of them were sitting on a rooftop, in the middle of South Side where the casinos and high-price strip clubs were, where the most people were, where the most lights were, where a Nosferatu like Beatrice

knew her cloak of night wouldn't be able to keep her hidden if she even so much as tripped.

Jacob's could, without issue.

"Then you have low standards, cause I thought this was the sort of shit you witches do." Their legs were dangling, and she smirked a little as she let the heel kick against the building underneath her. Did this qualify as making a connection with the old man? It hadn't been her intention, but maybe she could get two birds with one stone.

"We do. We did. You know my old circle perished to hunters."

"So you got a new circle, of a bunch of sex-crazed slu—well, except Aaron. You know what's up with him? What's his deal?"

"He shares many of my views, but instead of enacting them, he prefers to explore their philosophies with dialogue. And often, just read." He shrugged, and offered her a small, holy-fuck-maybe-genuine smile, before looking out to the crowd below them.

Neither of them were wearing robes anymore, instead opting for some street clothes. He was wearing some black pants, probably something for a suit, with a white button shirt to go with, loose and undone to the chest. She was in her usual black jeans and white tank top, high cut and tight so people got to admire her abs and nipple piercings. Well, they would have, if her and Jacob had gone to see any other Kindred. Instead, Jacob took them out into the city, hidden, to watch and learn.

"Jen, Othello?"

"The same. They share my views, and they have no issue indulging their animal desires, as you well know. Jen get into your pussy yet?"

“W-What? No, no ... not yet.”

“Then we’re thinking about it?”

Oh good fucking god not him too. First the Prince and now the Joker.

“We are Kindred, aren’t we? Pretty open minded about this sort of stuff. Julias included.”

“So that’s a no. Wimp.”

She frowned at him, but he only laughed and shrugged. This was just how he talked, full of juvenile digs that were never meant to be taken seriously, but at the same time held little bits of wisdom. Useful, if she could swallow all the crap attached to them.

“ ... you think ... Jen might be into me? Romantically, I mean? I get wanting to fuck me. I have the nicest ass this side of the planet,” she said. Old man laughed, and for some reason, she smiled at the sound. “But sometimes I get the feeling she wants to do more than that. Wants more than that.”

“Well that’s just because you’re infatuated with yourself. Christ you carried that chip on your shoulder about the teeth for how many years? Could have gotten over that in a quarter the time if you didn’t have your head so far up your ass. No, she’s not in love with you, and doesn’t have a crush on you, but she does like you as a friend. Ya fucking nitwit.”

“ ... I think I liked you better when you were this mysterious figure I kept at a distance.”

He laughed, loud, boisterous even, and wiped a finger along his cheek bone beneath his new eye. “It serves any elder to seem inscrutable and unapproachable. But spend a little time with us and

you realize we're just like you, only smarter, stronger, and a lot more fucked up."

"I get that. I ... I wonder how Jack is with Antoinette then?"

"Oh no doubt that kid has seen a side to her no one else has, a womanly side, a loving side. And probably a lot of her other sides, dominant, motherly, queenly, seductive, everything in between."

"... you've known her a long time."

"Yep. But, she's practically a different woman now, now that Jack's softening her up."

She scratched her cheek bone underneath the new eye, and winced at how the socket was still sore. Maybe when she was half a millennium old she could grow a fucking hand in minutes, but for now a nasty gash took hours to heal, and a missing eye would take the night, and some blood.

"You think Azamel knows anything about Jack's disappearance?"

"No doubt."

"Oh ... kind of got the impression you weren't sure."

"She knows something. I don't know if she knows where the kid is, but she definitely knows something. And with these eyes we're going to pay a visit to her, a real visit."

"What're we doing here then?"

"My friend suggested I take a peek into a crowd, and see if we can catch a glimpse, before taking the plunge."

"Glimpse of?"

"A nightmare."

She shivered and hugged her knees to her chest. Her only true experience with the Begotten was Fiona; her experience with Azamel and Athalia had been short lived at best. With Fiona, there was a genuine ... thing inside her, something that was not only scary, but strong. Young, sweet, fun Fiona, controlling something that strong, that weird inside her, and they were going to go meet with her new mentor? Some super ancient entity that'd been destroying whole towns, a monster thing that could have very well been a god from ancient mythology for all Triss knew.

“ ... Malachi.” For some reason, the topic brought up that memory, of the thing in the darkness talking to Jacob like an old friend, with a different name.

“An old name, not used by any kine or Kindred anymore.”

“That thing, that Black Blood creature or whatever, it called you that.”

“Because I've known it for a long time.”

“ ... how long?”

Jacob turned to look at her, actually look at her, with an eye, an eye she was mirroring. The two of them must have looked damn weird; should have worn some eye patches.

“When this was just a small town, surrounded by dark wood, the harsh elements, and murder within, I met the Black Blood. I was already well versed in crúac, and both Antoinette and I had expressed interest in exploring what lay beyond our realm. She and I came here, and pursued our agendas on our own, but with the occasional helpful boon for the other.” He laughed, always with the laughing, and gestured out to the people below. “We exploited the sheep, and used them to build us our city. But, far before the village became a city under our rule, as I started poking at the barrier and looking across it, I found it.”

“So this thing was around before you guys showed up?”

“Yeap. You know anything about spirits?”

“Jacob, I didn’t know spirits fucked existed until you showed me that ... fucking ... thing. Happy to keep thinking the only supernatural shit I had to deal with was vamps and werewolves. You know, the classics.” But now a whole new can of worms was open, and she couldn’t walk in shadows anymore without thinking something was inside the black, following her.

“They reflect our world, spirits. One affects the other, like whipping a rope attached to something. The inertia affects it, bounces back, creates a loop. That world, on the other side? Crazy. Fucking. Shit. Mountains that can speak, floating wisps of glowing light get eaten by black shadows on wings, colossal giants walking around made of asphalt, and the tower of blood where the Elysium tower is, in a crazy man’s version of Dolareido.”

She blinked, and looked out through the lights of the city, and far away to where the massive tower of glass stood. “Blood tower?”

“Yeap, in that place, Antoinette’s tower drips of it. Straight out of a painting. Black Blood is on the other side of the wall that separates our worlds, a tempestuous spirit of death and pain. It’s not what it seems though, and it ... it...” Holy shit Jacob was speechless. First time for everything. “It’s shared with me a lot of twisted wisdom about the nature of death and pain, because that’s what it is, but also about existence, about the flowing connection of life. Like blood.”

Well, that would explain the ‘black’ part, and the ‘blood’ part she supposed. “That ... sounds like something that ... fuck, that sounds like the sort of shit you read about in old books, mythology and shit.”



“Many Kindred, even my peers in other cities, refuse to acknowledge or explore that world on the other side. Antoinette’s the only elder I’ve ever known also interested. And the werewolves, those fucking dogs, refuse to ... Fuck em, just fuck them.”

“Is ... is that what these eyes are for? We going to see that? The other side?”

“No. Like I said, we’re going to see nightmares. Completely different thing.”

“ ... how?”

He laughed, loudly, and reached out to set his hand on her shoulder to balance himself as he laughed more and more. Well, if she wasn’t making a connection now, she didn’t know how she could.

“You sound like Minerva.”

“I ... I uh...” Ok, wow, maybe that was how to make a connection with the old man.

“Ever curious, so ever curious. There are many realms, Beatrice, layers upon, underneath, around, and within. The realm of spirits, the Shadow, or the Hisil as the dogs and spirits call it, I am familiar with, as is Antoinette, and the Uratha march upon that land and guard the wall between us and it. Fucking dogs. But other realms? Those idiot dogs are blissfully unaware of things like dreams. The power in dreams. Nightmares. And the things that roam within them.”

“And ... Black Blood? It was ... pretty nightmarish.”

“Ah, now there’s a puzzle. Dreams are something the human mind creates, but can also reach, tap into, something out there that exists, a place. But spirits, twisted reflections of reality, do not

reflect humans themselves. Or vampires or werewolves, for that matter. What could they know of dreams then? Of real, true, powerful dreams, of life destroying nightmares only possible in a human's mind?" He reached up and touched his cheek below his new eye. "Some of them do happen to know a thing or two, and Black Blood has shared its secrets with me on occasion."

"... in exchange for?"

He winked his new eye, and stood up. "Come on, not seeing anything up here. Let's get down into the tunnels and head in Azamel's direction."

---

Back in the tunnels. She hadn't touched them much since that whole monster-from-a-shitty-sixties-monster-movie incident, cause a shitty monster from a bad sixties movie was pretty fucking terrifying when you had to deal with it face to face. The texture of its hairy spider body and mutated human flesh was still fresh in her mind.

"I really hope she knows where Jack is," she said. "I owe the kid a lot, and he's Julias's childe, and he's an awesome kid."

"He's an adult."

"I know! And fuck you, you call him kid too. He's small, and barely an adult, and ... and now I can't stop picturing him underneath Antoinette, her just squishing him with her tits and pampering him like some sort of milf fucking the kid next door for his eighteenth birthday present."

The two of them chuckled. Yeap, bonding. And she wasn't even trying, it just sort of happened. Talking to Jacob like an actual person actually had him responding like an actual person. Such a weird realization.

“I like the kid too. Clarice is bringing change to Dolareido, and in ways people can’t predict.”

“Yeah, I guess he is.” Clarice. Silence of the Lambs? Why the fuck was this ludicrously old vampire watching movies? She kind of liked that he did, but it was also unsettling, how this old fart was savvy on the latest references.

The two of them walked the dark tunnels, still masked in Jacob’s cloak of night. He never had to stop, or refocus, or deal with any of the strain of keeping up such a discipline constantly like Triss did. Fucking terrifying in a way, how easily he kept them as hidden as shadows in a dark room.

“I once thought Damien would also bring change, and he did for a while. But the man has regressed to a simple clergyman, and Maria’s right hand. Ah well.”

“... did you really convince Lucas to attack the Prince?” Really shouldn’t have asked, but she remembered Antoinette getting angry with him about it.

“I’d never have touched the situation so directly. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t plant the idea in his head.”

“Jacob! Christ man, a lot of Kindred died, and—”

Jacob put a hand up and waved it aside, dismissing her. “Let it go, Triss, I know what I’m doing. And besides, I didn’t convince him, he did that on his own.”

Yeah but, like one-eye said, he put the idea in Lucas’s head. Still, Triss couldn’t appreciate any of the details, the nuances, or scope of that situation. She hadn’t even been alive when the purge happened. So shut the fuck up and trust your boss, a little at least.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Last thing I want is for my witches to keep their mouths shut. Don’t like what I do? Bring it up, so we can argue, maybe throw a punch or two.” He came closer, and as they walked the dark and tracks of the abandoned subway tunnels, he hooked an arm over her shoulders to half hug her. “Fair warning though, I punch hard.”

“Yeah, I remember you hitting the Prince in the cave. I ... I did want to ask about Minerva.”

“You have balls. I like that.” And he did too, smirk and smile included, and the one-arm hug persisting. But as he dug through the memories, his arm grew heavy, slid off of her, and the two again walked side by side as normal. “Love of my life, all the cliches of life-changing romance wrapped into one.”

“And she wanted to see the other side too? Like you?”

“Like you.”

“I ... I don’t ... I mean I guess I do? I figured everyone in the circle did, see what sort of shit was hiding in the dark. You really let those three just sit around and do nothing all the time.”

“They do tasks for me every now and then. And this ritual? It took far too much Kindred blood for one Kindred to provide.”

“Yeah but, we’re in the fucking Circle of the Crone. I was expecting more shit like you told me you did with your old group in Dolareido, dancing naked to rituals and ... and even more stuff like that Black Blood thing. More things like this.” She inched her head toward him and pulled down on the cheek of the new eyeball.

“Christ this fucking hurt.”

“Ripping out your own eye was utterly delicious. And I was worried perhaps I’d scared you that night, with Black Blood and I, stabbing you until you frenzied.”

“It did scare me! It fucking terrified me, and it really fucking hurt you god damn fucking asshole. I can still remember the pain, and ... and there was more ... I want to know more.”

The elder’s smile evolved once again. He had a million smiles, each with its own persona, history, implications and flavor; this new one was a mix of intrigue and excitement.

“Quite the beast inside you.”

“ ... thanks, I think?”

“I—oh my.” His eye shot out to the darkness of the tunnel ahead of them, and he gestured to one of the shadows near a flickering light, cast by the abandoned stage of old, forgotten, locked away stations.

The shadow was moving.

Jacob let go of her shoulder, and the two of them came closer. Looked like shadow, didn’t make a sound or give off a smell or anything, just shadow, lack of light. But it was moving, shifting back and forth across the dirty metal and concrete of the subway tunnel, like hazy fog fighting against a breeze.

They approached. Nothing happened. They got down on their knees and reached out to touch it. Nothing happened. Triss covered her new eye, and the shadow returned to normal. She covered her old eye, and the shadow sprang back to life again, shifting against the ground and wall.

She touched it. Nothing happened.

“What the fuck am I looking at?”

“Not sure.”

“... not sure?” She threw up her hands and glared at the man. “I thought you knew everything!”

His laughter was howling, almost like a banshee's. “You and I will explore all sorts of depravity and insanity, my apprentice.” Oh fuck he was riding the Star Wars vibe and everything. “But, you decided to join me as I explore this new boundary that I have previously ignored. Dreams? Always I thought them just a fleeting wisp of the subconscious acting out its theater of thoughts, but with Azamel's return, Black Blood and I have refocused our efforts. This,” he said as he pointed to the eye, “is something it taught me, so that we could both understand these nightmares, it and I.”

Wonderful, she was wearing an eyeball given to her by what might as well have been death incarnate.

“So we're both going into this blind.”

“No, that's what the eyes are for.”

“You know what I fucking mean.”

A smirk and chuckle later, he got up and started moving again. The flickering shadow was just that, a flickering shadow, and as far as she could tell, it meant nothing, except that her normal eye couldn't see it.

“Azamel and her companions are burrowing.”

“Burrowing?”

“Burrowing. Those monsters, those nightmares, they tunnel through reality as we know it, breaking through and fucking with things. Nesting. They hide in this other world neither me or Black Blood have ever seen, and like ants they dig their tunnels into our existence. Except this time, Azamel is up to something.” They started walking again, and Jacob hopped onto one of the tracks to

walk it tightrope style. Hop, skip, hop. “In the old days, instead of doing this myself, I’d have my circle of witches investigating. But as you can tell, my current circle is pretty lazy.”

“Which is your fault.”

“Ha! True.” He started walking backward, while remaining on the subway track. No need to balance his movements with his arms either. At first it was silly, but now it was impressive. “Perhaps it’s time for a change? Everything’s changing, with Azamel and that bitch Avery returning, Lucas’s death, Viktor and Tony’s death. Quite the upset, and I’ve just been lazing about, doing fuck all.”

“ ... bullshit.”

“Bullshit?”

“Yeah, you fucking can’t trick me that easily you old bastard. You were involved in that Lucas shit in more ways than you’ve let on. You apparently had something to do with that fucking spider monster in the tunnels. And I bet you know Azamel and Avery in more ways than you’ve said. Fuck, you probably had something to do with that whole Viktor and Tony shit!”

He stopped. She stopped. That might have been too far. Yeap, too far. She froze a little, a lot, then petrified as the elder glared at her. He stepped off the track and came up to her, frown on his face, and his one eye cocked, ready to blow her brains out. So much easier to stare at him when he had no eyes, just a bandage, but now he had the one eye looking into her fucking soul, while the other socket was now visible, an empty eye slot where his Nosferatu deformity had blessed him with shredded and removed eyelids. Just an empty eye socket that looked like it belonged on a monster. Or a corpse.

“You really want to know?”

“ ... know what?”

“Secrets. You really want me to let you in, like I did with my circle in the days of yore?” Fucker smirked when he said ‘yore’ too. “You want to explore the cracks in the world, the blood that trickles through its seams, see what darkness you can summon from its crevices? I’m happy to drown you in the sick delights of blood magic, Beatrice. But if you want to know the secrets this city is built on, that’s a different matter entirely.”

“I ... I ... don’t know.” Fuck fuck fuck, what wasp nest was she poking now? “I used to be a Carthian, because I thought I wanted to flip the status quo, you know? Invictus run shit, money money money, and everyone bows to the Prince even though she’s the smallest group in the city. I—”

“Bullshit. Garry put a roof over your head and you thought you owed him.”

“I did owe him!”

The man came up behind her. Too fast for her to turn around, or she was still frozen. Both. His hands took her shoulders, and he held her that way as he came in closer until his chest was to her back, his chin beside her neck. Devil on her shoulder.

“Garry is no different than any Kindred his age. He’s got a goal and he’s willing to sacrifice the younger to achieve it. You owe him nothing.”

This conversation was going in random weird directions and she wasn’t sure she liked it. Flirting with some dangerous shit, and not the dangerous shit like the fucking madness of crúac, but the more evil shit. Secrets, the sort of shit politicians kept in their closets. Real fucking evil.

“Then—”



“I’ll let you in, Beatrice. You want to know the sort of secrets that could collapse the Invictus, destroy the Carthians, bathe the streets in Kindred blood and have everyone tearing each other’s throats out? Want to look old bosses in the eye, or the Invictus triumvirate, or the Prince herself, with knowledge in your skull that could bring the city to its knees, bring the covenants to civil war and ripping themselves to bits?”

“ ... I ... I ... don’t know.”

“Good answer.” Repeating the fucking past like it was a play he’d seen before. And probably had. He pat both her shoulders a few times, before stepping around and resuming their walk down the valley of the shadow of death. “But enough drama, we can talk about it later. For now, we’re going to Azamel’s little hole in the wall.”

“Yeah ... ok.” She gulped on nothing, and walked after her boss.

Fuck, that’d gotten dangerously close to signing her soul away on a dotted line, or joining a cult or something. Not that she hadn’t already done those things. Maybe she should just jump in and see if she could swim? Blood magic that screamed ‘you’ll go to hell for touching this’ was almost blase in comparison to what he was offering her.

How the secrets beckoned so sweetly, sirens on the rocky shore.



~~Julias~~

Dusk, a vampire’s morning. Many Kindred used it as a time to make sure they still had all their limbs, that they lost nothing to the sun or to an enemy while they were asleep. Of course, that never happened. You never woke up and found yourself missing a limb or suffering any burns. You either woke up fine or you didn’t wake up at all.

Jack could have been out there, in the sun, a pile of ashes. Though Kindred his age didn't truly turn to ashes, rather a burnt, withered husk. He shuddered at the thought of his childe, panicking in the streets, sunrise peeking over the buildings, and the boy forced to spend every ounce of vitae he had to fight the daily need to sleep. Exhausted and unable to find a safe place, he'd collapse, and cry out as the—

He slapped himself in the face. Hard. Maria raised a brow, and gestured to the large display on the wall that showed two dozen video feeds from their thralls.

“Mire, please, control yourself. We are doing all we can,” she said, raspy voice calm and collected. Too collected. He did not like that she was so calm about Jack's disappearance, and his poker instincts told him she was hiding something. Wouldn't surprise him if Maria had found out about what Jack did to Lucas, and had arranged for his death. Would Damien have killed him, for the Lucas incident? Maybe. Damien had seemed like he'd changed, but you could never be sure.

It was only the two of them, in the Xnomina headquarters, where Julias could monitor the inflow of information from their thralls. The Invictus network was massive, and it either controlled or monitored every organization with a notable amount of money. What corporations that dabbled in big money, that dabbled in enterprises worth billions, the Invictus controlled a large portion of their stocks; or all of them, if they were local to Dolareido. What branches of organized crime existed in Dolareido, they controlled. Any person with enough money to present a threat, the Invictus knew of, and were either ready to manipulate to their will, or already were. Money was power, and the Invictus were power.

None of that helped a fucking bit when you were down in the cracks of the city streets trying to find a single individual.

“I should have stayed with him.”

“You had no reason to suspect this danger would occur.”

“I didn’t have reason?” He turned to face the small ghost woman, and marched around the table to get nearer. She was sitting in her large business chair, a tablet in her hand, and was both watching the wall display while checking Invictus business, as if everything was perfectly fine. “Barry’s dead!”

“Missing. You know Kindred vanish, Mire, neonates above all. They underestimate the sun, or they misstep and find themselves without the blood needed to wake from their hiding hole. Or they leave, and find a city or town with people they do not know, to get away from the hooks of their old life.”

“Dolareido is—”

“Is not large enough to completely hide all contact with their old lives. Surely you are aware that Jack has, on occasion, gone to visit his mother and sister?”

“I ... I’d suspected, but I didn’t know for sure.” Groaning and running his fingers back through his hair, he sat his butt against the side of the massive table, and folded his arms across his chest. “With Amanda’s help, I presume?”

“Of course. They often partner, and she is young as well. She still feels such pain.”

Maybe the kid was just letting a part of him out that he normally suppressed? Jack thought himself the distant, analytical type, and he wasn’t wrong, but he was still human, or at least had a human soul. Even as a Kindred, he was far too young to have lost his humanity, which made old ties terribly powerful. It was one of the strongest reasons some fledglings fled the cities they were embraced in.

But Jack wouldn't do that. He'd just flip a switch in his brain, ignore the emotions, and make life choices logically, no matter how much it hurt him. It was part of the reason Julias admired him, and sired him. It was a unique skill most people did not have, and it served a Ventrue well.

But perhaps most of all, Jack wouldn't leave the Prince.

“He's still in the city, alive, I'm sure of it.”

Maria frowned at him, and met his gaze as he returned it. “Do not let your connection to your childe cloud your mind, Mire. Your blood connection to Master Terry has not provided you with any clear message, has it? Can you even be certain the boy is alive?”

Blood sympathy, the connection between sire and childe. The nature of it, the degrees to which it acted, how it felt, it was all an enigma. They knew of it, knew it existed, knew it was real, but beyond that, the only Kindred who had even scratched the surface of such mysteries were the Ordo Dracul, and it wasn't like they were sharing their secrets.

Worst of all, trying to interpret blood sympathy was like trying to predict the weather based on the pain in your knees. Not exactly consistent, and he usually ignored it. But not tonight.

“I can feel it in my gut. He's alive.”

The ghost woman sighed, but nodded, and set her eyes back upon her tablet. “You have almost every thrall and ghoul with at least a year's experience searching for him, Mister Mire. This will attract attention. And it may very well be that the boy is simply indisposed.”

“Barry's dead, suspicious activity has been seen, confirmed by Damien and Jack and Isabella's lackey, and we know the boy was speaking with Athalia. His phone's tracker isn't working! And hell,

he was supposed to go to the Prince's to sleep that very night. The only way he's indisposed is if he's been captured."

"... captured by the Begotten then, perhaps?"

"We checked all the footage we have of the tunnels, the ins and outs. Athalia went back there, alone." And as much as he suspected Athalia and her boss Azamel of any and all sorts of deceitful shit, he doubted they'd simply kidnap Jack. The repercussions were too obvious. And if Azamel was going to play that game, she wouldn't have started from a position of openness, the way she'd made herself known in the tunnels. Or she'd at least get a bigger bargaining chip.

Maria tapped a finger on her chin. "I understand the werewolf Clara Moreno is quite taken with Jack. Perhaps she played a hand in his disappearance."

"Now we're just grasping at straws."

"Straws are all we have, Mire. Damien has insisted that these four kine are likely to be hunters, and with the timing of Barry's death, and now Jack's disappearance, that they are to blame. But we have only conjecture."

Close, so very close to flipping the desk onto the tiny ghost woman and crushing her. It would have meant his death, or at least a very painful retaliation from the elder Nosferatu, but the urge still worked through his limbs. Jack was alive, he could feel it, and his fellow council member refused to acknowledge the very real threat of hunters.

They should never have had that ball.

"... Maria?" Enough with the last name only bullshit.

"Yes Julias?"

“What do you know of Athalia, and Viktor?”

“ ... you truly wish to know? I imagine you understand that your sire caused her great strife.”

He pulled out a chair and sat down beside the ghost woman, near her, ignoring the white mist that dripped from her cracked and decaying skin. This was important, and now was no time to be squeamish about her Nosferatu disfigurements. He slid the chair in closer, until he was only a couple feet from the small, rotted corpse, and met her gaze.

“I know Viktor became a horrible person over the centuries. I’ve accepted that.” I’ve accepted that it’s in the blood, that it’s a real possibility for me to suffer, and Jack as well. I get it. “So, if you know the details, I would like to know.”

Maria sighed and set her tablet down upon the table. “You think this information will help you find Jack?”

“There may be a connection. I was content to leave Athalia’s past out of this, but I no longer have that luxury. I need to know what happened.”

“So that you can manipulate her when the time comes.” She said it deadpan, no judgment, no insult, or pride or admiration.

“ ... yes.” He wasn’t Viktor.

“Viktor had become ... violent, as his age grew. As you know, the man’s gift for domination and animalism was great, and he used these to fuel his growth. Before his long torpor to squelch his bloodlust, he used such abilities to feast upon Kindred.”

“I understand he—”

“He hid his actions well, Julias. A master of manipulation, he used others, toyed with their memories as he drank Kindred, some until they ... died. He engaged in violence of an unsavory nature, of an indulgent nature, as he often satisfied his need for Kindred blood with barbaric cruelty.”

“Indulgent?”

Another nod before she looked away and back to the screen on the wall.

“He did not engage in diablerie, but I could tell his lust had grown to such a point. Michael and I convinced him to let torpor hold him for years, to suppress his need for such cannibalism. He awoke ... twisted, as you know.”

He did not like where this conversation was going. Before his long sleep, he'd known Viktor to be a ruthless but intelligent and patient man. He'd had no idea the man was involved in such disgusting brutality.

“I live in the man's mansion now. I've seen his dungeons.”

“Yes ... his desire to take the Kiss past the needed point, and into killing prey, did not abate with his torpor. He no longer craved Kindred blood, but the desire to feel prey die to the Kiss only increased. His indulgences continued, kept secret by his many talents and many connections. And he did more to his prey than simply kill them, he tested torture, of which ... are you sure you wish to know the details, Julias? He was your grandsire.”

Yeah, his grandsire was a monster. Kindred were not kine, even if they still had the memories of being kine. Many embraced killing kine as a sport, took joy in it, like hunting rabbits. The Prince discouraged such blatant cruelty, which was normally enough to make any Kindred with a sense of self preservation avoid doing it. But Viktor didn't bend so easily.

“ ... tell me.” He didn’t want to use the info. He was happier not knowing what sick shit the man who made him who and what he was today, did in the dark. But knowledge was power.

Knowledge and money, powerful bedfellows. He was Invictus to the core, just hopefully not like Viktor was.

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~~Eric~~

Chasing strangers through the city streets, for a girl he barely knew. This was strangely like the first time he’d ever really gotten to know Sheryl, except that’d been some punk that’d taken her purse. Eric had jumped to her rescue and ran the man down. Now, the memory made him want to vomit.

“Which way?” she said. Or yelled, really.

He brought a finger up to his lips to shh her, but he had to be subtle about it too, with the four they were following possibly nearby. Fiona didn’t get subtle, and he had to flick her in the shoulder and get her to look at him to pick up on the queue.

“Ever tail someone?” he said.

“No...”

“It’s simple. Stop acting like you’re tailing someone, and head in their general direction.”

“ ... done!” She stood rigid, taller, and walked like a robot. “Like this?”

Oh good god she was going to get them both killed.

He facepalmed, shook his head, and just kept walking. There were enough people around outside the club to hide tiny Fiona’s pathetic



attempts at blending in, their shoulders clearing her head. Should be enough to hide her antics for now.

Took a moment for him to realize he was walking, in a direction, without even stopping, like it was natural to stalk someone. He just knew, knew where the four had gone, where the prey had been, how to follow them. Dolareido wasn't only his home, it was a home he knew inside and out, every street and every corner, and evidently every smell. These four didn't belong, something they were carrying or doing marked them with a smell that didn't fit, and he could pick up on traces of it in the air, despite the amount of people around him.

This was really stupid. He should turn around and get back to his new, amazing job. Ok maybe not amazing, but better than his last job and paying infinitely better on top of it. Debts to pay, bills, real world shit to deal with. Everything that was happening to him, the dreams, the hallucinations, being able to smell and hear better than before, wanting to hunt and feed, it had to just be stress.

Don't be a fucking moron. Even thinking the thoughts sounded stupid; they'd have been gut-wrenchingly hilarious to hear out loud. They weren't caused by stress. Something fucked up was happening to him, and this girl knew about it, knew more than that too, knew a lot of things probably. And he needed to know, if only so he could find a way to make it stop and get back to his life. Pay his debts — assuming Jessy's promise fell through — and pay his bills. Get a new place, a car, maybe get a root canal for a tooth that was bothering him, maybe try hitting the dating scene again, and just living life.

The little glass of champagne beside him had wanted to go on a date, that much was obvious from the first night she met him. That Jessy girl didn't seem like she wanted to date, more so just fuck him. And maybe that wasn't so bad? Let go of his baggage for a

night, or at least thirty minutes, and enjoy some sex with a beautiful woman.

“Ye’re doing it again,” she said, and poked him hard enough in the side to make him wince. “Ye still on their trail?”

“Yes.” And he was. He was following the subtle scent like he’d done it a hundred times before, a thousand times, like it was normal, natural. Instinct. Hundreds of people walked past them every few seconds, suits and dresses, fresh fabrics, leather, cologne and perfume, drugs and alcohol, all the smells of home. The streetlights, the flashing signs of nearby casinos, clubs, fancy bars, the not-so-subtle advertisements inviting men and women into arenas full of vices, full of sex. His home, and these people didn’t belong.

“Talk,” he said.

“Talk?”

“Yes, talk. Walking in silence with someone isn’t casual, talking is.”

“Oh, right! Talking.” She nodded a few times, and smiled up at him as they worked through the crowd. “Jessy says ye used to be a fighter?”

“Yep.”

“And something happened to yer knee?”

“Yep.”

“How bad?”

“Ruined it. Lost my career.”

“... oh.” She visibly shrunk, and pouted up at him. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, it was quite the shit show.” Easier to not mention the wife, and the divorce, and—

“And ye’re divorced! Was it cause of yer destroyed career?”

Wow. He had to wonder if this girl had a single thought in her head, or if she simply was incapable of thinking them without speaking them. Honestly, that was a pleasant change from the snakes he was used to dealing with.

“Partly.” No longer being famous and having all his money evaporate put a strain on the relationship. And having no money exposed a side to that relationship he wished he’d never seen.

“ ... dinnae want to talk about it?”

“Not especially.”

“Sorry.” She stepped in closer, and hooked his arm. Taking Jessy’s advice of being aggressive then. “I could make it up to ye? Want to go on a date?”

“ ... I—”

“Though, Jessy does really expect payment for her speaking to that bawbag, Montoya. So, after she jumps yer bones, then we can go on a date.”

“ ... so we are going on a date?” He raised a brow at her, and she beamed up at him. Damn cute, no denying that.

“We are! Aren’t we?”

“How about we finish following these four and then we can discuss it?”

“If we go out on a date, I’ll tell ye more about what’s happening to ye.”

God damn it. He frowned down at the tiny redhead, and she grinned the most evil grin he figured she could manage; which, wasn't evil at all. Just adorable.

“How ... how do you know what's happening to me.”

“I ken ye can tell I'm nae normal.” She shrugged, and gestured out to the people around them that they pushed past. “These folk are normal. So many folk in Dolareido! Wasn't like this at home.”

“From Scotland?”

“Aye. Now I'm just a wee lass in the city, no money, working as a waitress now and doing her best to stay out of the porn industry.”

He laughed. He stopped for a second, and blinked. Forgotten what that sounded like, laughing. Fiona raised a brow at him, but he started walking again as he wiped away the smirk.

“Young girl leaves her small town home and goes to live in the big city? Does sound like porn is in your future.”

“I ken! Ugh, and this town is the sluttiest town. The things I've seen on my hunts! Holes in the wall, filled with folk fucking every hole each other has.”

“... hunts?”

“I'll tell ye later.” A wink and another elbow to his side, before they resumed their walk.

Naive as she seemed, she wasn't naive. Maybe wore her thoughts and emotions on her sleeve, but certainly not naive. Even if she'd pretended to be, he wouldn't have believed it, not when he could almost smell the invisible black drip from her, almost see it.

“ ... you’d really be comfortable going on a date with me, specifically after feeding me to your friend?”

Whatever he said, it hit the girl’s funny bone, because she erupted into laughter, enough that some people looked at her and stumbled around her as she struggled to not fall. He had to reach out to hold her shoulder to stop her from running into strangers walking by.

“Aye, fed ye to ‘er! Ye’ve no idea lad. But, yes. I mean, not before, but after sure, that’s normal for Dolareido. And I’ll likely get to see at yer goods, so that’ll be an interesting sneak peek at ye.” Giggling madly, she hugged his arm and resumed walking once more.

Dolareido definitely had that effect on people. If you weren’t comfortable with a sexual atmosphere, this part of South Side would make you comfortable with saturation therapy. He’d never been to one of the infamous sex holes, but apparently this girl had? Hard to imagine.

The smell continued, and he followed it, putting some briskness into the speed. They had to catch up, but from the smell, he figured they were nearby. How he knew that, he didn’t know, but that was why he was doing this insanity after all, risking his new job and potentially his life. He needed to know what the fuck was happening to him.

Fifteen minutes of walking, and the smell was getting stronger. More of that metal and wood smell he couldn’t place. And, eventually, how the strangers smelled, their flesh. Consistent, persistent, whiffs of various odors that were always around with those odd smells, the smell of people, individual people. He could smell them.

He didn’t like where the smell was leading them. If the smell had been going closer to Devil’s Corner, or maybe toward the more conservative area of South Side, it’d be understandable. But the trail was taking him toward North Side, away from where people

gathered, away from the familiar sights and smells. The city was as familiar to him as his own body, but North Side, not so much.

The people grew less and less, until they were no longer surrounded by shoulders to hide their actions, until there was only a few people, until eventually there were none at all. The smell was all the more obvious without the additional bodies, but Eric felt every muscle tense as he glanced left and right along the near-empty streets of where North Side met South Side. The neighborhoods were rougher, sometimes nicer, sometimes meaner, but the people were always tougher. Unlike Devil's Corner where everyone was broken by economic struggles, people here were just as poor, but they carried themselves, their own, and anyone who was stupid enough to try and rob a house or sell drugs on the street corner was bound to get shot. Shot by a gang protecting their turf from lowlife scum, or by a grandmother with a shotgun on the porch doing the same thing.

But there were at least a few people around, and with Fiona's more casual wear, it was enough that the two of them could walk without too much issue.

"So how did ye get in deep with Montoya?"

This girl, right for the jugular.

"I was young and stupid."

"Aye, I know that feeling." More giggles, and she wiped her smile away. "What did ye do?" He doubted she was trying to be nonchalant, to hide that they were following a trail. But whether she was trying to be casual or not, she did look it, when bombarding him with horrible questions and giggling about him.

"Bought my wife and I a bunch of stuff ... mostly her."

“Och. Och god that’s horrible. So now Montoya wants his money back and ye dinnae even have the lass ye borrowed the money for. Why doesn’t he go after her?”

“ ... cause I’m the one that borrowed the money, not her.”

“Wedding ring?”

“Engagement ring, yes, among other things.”

“ ... ever get the ring back?”

“You can’t legally force someone to give back a gift. We got married, verbal contract fulfilled. It just didn’t last.” His fingers tightened until he felt the knuckles turn white. How many of those final conversations with Sheryl had turned to screaming, yelling, throwing and smashing plates, and tossing each other’s things out the window? A lot of them.

Destroying his knee was the worst thing that had ever happened to him, brought to the surface just how fucking awful that relationship was, once the money started to run dry. Christ it ached. Each step ground on the bone and wrecked cartilage, and eventually he was going to start limping a little. It always healed enough for him to use it again the next day, but it never healed enough for him to do anything particularly stressful to it.

“What a twat! Worthless pile of shite.”

“I ... yeah, I guess.” He smirked at her, and shrugged a little as they walked. “Money brings out the best in people, and then the worst.”

“I wouldnae ken, have none. Jessy though? Her and Natasha, they’re rich.”

“ ... really?”

“Aye. Jessy works for Xnomina. Nathasa used to. The two of them have a lot of money saved up, wee fortunes. Their bosses are super rich.”

Well, damn. Hell if he made this Jessy woman happy, she could just pay off his debts instead of telling Montoya to fuck off. He kind of preferred the latter option, but anything to get the maggots off his back and let him rebuild his life.

“What have yer dreams been like?” she said.

“ ... my dreams ... you really know about this, don’t you? What’s happening to me.”

“Course. I am following ye, and ye’re following yer nose, literally. I’d be dumb to do that for no reason.”

Yeah, well, his sense of smell wasn’t perfect. It was definitely in overdrive, but every twenty feet he had take a few sniffs of the air, deep, and look around for contextual clues. Certainly didn’t have the nose of a hound dog, but no denying that his sense of smell was far better than it should have been.

“I dream about ... hunting things. I dream about biting and tearing into things. Flesh and blood. I dream about the moon.” So poetic. So stupid.

She nodded a few times and kicked at little pebbles on the sidewalk. “I used to dream about the dark. Nightmares. Started when I was young, never went away.”

“Pretty common nightmare.”

“Aye, that’s what I thought. But it kept happening, and happening, and in the dreams the shadows would grab me, tie me up like ... like a spider’s web. I’d get dragged into the black, screaming, kicking, ‘n



crying.” She hugged herself, hands rubbing her bare arms, and leaned in a little closer to him.

“You don’t seem the type to get those sorts of nightmares. Traumatizing past?”

“Na.”

“Feel extremely guilty about anything you did before the nightmares started?”

“Na.”

“Scared about the place you lived?”

“Na! Loved my home town.”

“Odd.”

“Yeah, and ... and the nightmares only got worse. Things changed. I closed in, held folk at a distance. Got scared of going to sleep. Eventually scared of my own room.”

He raised a brow at the girl. Heavy stuff, sort of stuff you tell your best friend or your therapist. Why was she telling him?

“Ye’re likely wondering why I’m telling ye this,” she said.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“I can see ye’re confused about what’s happening to ye, and ... well, it won’ t be the same as me, but it’ll be powerful. I thought maybe I could help a wee bit, before Avery finds ye.”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned Avery. Who are they?”

“Later! I’ll tell ye later. Or she’ll show up and tell ye herself.” The redhead shrugged and gestured out with her chin. “Where to?”

He stopped, sniffed at the air, and looked around. Moon cut in and out through the clouds drifting by, stars buried in the light of the city. Not much wind. He could still smell them. Why didn't they take a taxi or something?

He smirked. Old job habit kicking in.

"You said you were experiencing nightmares?" he said. "That have anything to do with ... why you're ... I don't know."

"Different? Ye can feel it can't ye."

"... yeah. I guess I can." Felt like admitting to a terrible secret, or admitting believing in some childish fantasy. Felt like admitting to crazy shit, and letting it in. But then, he'd already admitted that to himself, considering he was going on this ridiculous journey, risking his new job, and getting himself into who the fuck knows what.

It also felt like idiotic, teenage gossip. He smirked again as he imagined a couple idiot fourteen-year-olds, sitting around an ouija board, half laughing, half trembling in fear as the board spelled out a name. Something he was sure this girl beside him probably did when she was younger. She was ten years his junior at least. This silly, bubbly girl was dragging him through the city streets at night, away from the populated areas, and into the edge of North Side where there were no people out this late. If she pulled out some ridiculous, goth voodoo shit, it wouldn't have surprised him.

Or it might have, considering the circumstances, considering he was the one picking the direction, following the scent.

They rounded a corner between two buildings. "I—"

Something hard and fast cracked him against the jaw, and sent him down to the asphalt.

“Eric! Don—” A sickening thud of something against flesh, and Fiona fell down beside him onto her side, one hand clutching her face and the other bracing against the road. Her phone slipped out of her pocket and slid across the shadows.

A boot crushed it, hard, repeatedly, until the phone was nothing but bits of plastic and metal.

“Who are you? Why are you following us?” One of the four they’d been following squatted down beside Eric, frown on her face and a black baton in her hand. A police baton too, one of the more modern ones, expandable, so it could be held and concealed.

Funny, he really should have seen this coming. Every instinct he had told him following them was a bad idea, that they were dangerous. And yet he walked right into a baton to the face. Distracted by the cute girl, probably. History repeating itself.

He tried to get up. Mistake. The woman with the baton didn’t hesitate to use it again, and slammed the metal stick against his arm. He rolled with the pain, and groaned as his shoulder made friends with the asphalt.

“I didn’t say get up, I said who are you.”

“Dinnae hurt him! He—” She went silent as she looked at one of the four. Eric managed to glance in the same direction, and his body went numb as he recognized the glint of a pistol in the moonlight. And then, the moon disappeared behind the clouds.

What to say to these people? It wasn’t supposed to go down like this, it was supposed to be following at a distance. When they eventually spotted the four, he and Fiona would hide, observe from far away, and then she’d tell him why he was going out of his fucking mind. Too easy. Life never went according to plan. Hell, life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans, right? Fuck you Lennon.

He stayed down this time and looked over toward Fiona. Girl was still down, and had learned from his mistake. No getting up for either of them.

“I’m—”

“Dinnae tell them a thing!” she said.

Wait, what?

“You can’t—”

“Nothing!”

Eric blinked. The woman squatting over him with a baton in hand blinked. The other three were blinking if he guessed right. The tiny redhead was looking at a pistol aimed directly at her, and instead of cowering, petrifying, pissing herself, she was frowning and telling him to not give up his name.

Well he had his wallet in his pocket, so it wasn’t like they couldn’t find out who he was that way. But instead of grabbing his wallet, the three strangers still standing stared at the girl.

“She knows something,” one of them said.

“What’s she know?”

“Enough to follow us.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re blood suckers.”

“What other reason would they have for following us?”

“ ... this is the guy we’ve seen at the club a couple times. Bouncer, right?” The woman squatted beside him, a black woman with a scar cutting across her neck. Four scars actually, parallel, and nasty. Claw marks? “Hold still.”

“I—Arg!” She grabbed one of his hands and yanked it backward, behind him, twisting it in just the right way so attempts to free himself of the grip would mean dislocating a joint. If he was standing, he’d have a counter, twisting his body with the motion while reaching out to grab her shoulder and force her to fall, foot hooking her ankle. Not doable when on the ground, when your head is spinning and throbbing.

A clink of metal made him raise a brow. He couldn’t see what the girl was doing as she moved quick, but a second later, searing pain hit his finger. Quick, but painful. Burning.

“The fuck are you doing?” he said.

“He’s clean. No ashes.”

She’d burned his hand. Christ. He tried to get up again, but another swift crack of boots to the stomach made sure that wasn’t happening. Nausea hit him, and then a need to breathe as his lungs refused to work. At least trying to breathe was helping keeping him from vomiting up the rice this woman’s boot had worked back up his guts.

Fiona snarled, but Eric could see the flickering flame grow nearer to her. Another one of the strangers was approaching her, lighter in hand, while the other two strangers held their pistols at the ready. Or at least, one of them was a pistol. The other was a shotgun, and it was pointed at Eric. Shit.

The stranger took Fiona’s hand, prying it to the side so Fiona reached out to try and free herself. The stranger didn’t hesitate, and slammed his other hand forward, fist tight, lighter inside his grip to turn the fist into what might as well have been a brick as it collided with the girl’s face. Cartilage crunching, nose broken, Fiona went down, a streak of blood smearing across the asphalt. The man didn’t let go of her hand, and kept it twisted as he exposed the lighter from his fist again.

Eric got up. A burst of energy, adrenaline, a mountain of stupidity. The woman near him swung the baton, and she swung with zero hesitation or mercy. Metal cracked against his shoulder, but she'd aimed for his head; he'd blocked. Instincts kicked in, fifteen years of punching bags and faces, but also something more, something that wanted him to reach out and rip this person in half.

Ripping her in half was not in his power, much as every fiber in his body was telling him it was. He'd have to settle for punching her in the head; he'd had plenty of practice doing that too. She spun out and went down, rolling with the punch along the asphalt and landing on a knee and foot, facing him, snarl on her face. Hit her hard, and she was already getting back up. No ordinary woman. None of them were ordinary.

The one with the pistol pointed the gun at him, and fired. Shit.

Part of him was sure they wouldn't fire, that this was all a misunderstanding, that they were just crazy punk kids who wouldn't actually fire the gun. Normal people weren't so quick to take a life. Normal people avoided killing. As the gun let out a flash of light and crack of thunder, his mind wandered back to something he once read, about how soldiers in the World Wars often fired to miss, because they didn't want to kill. They had to change how they trained soldiers to break that reflex.

This person also missed. Didn't look like he was aiming to miss though, with cold hard reflex in his eyes; he'd fired because his training taught him to. He'd missed because a bunch of white webbing was grabbing half of his body and pinning him to the wall.

What in the fuck?

“Fuck!” The woman Eric had struck stood up straight, and pulled out a pistol from behind her. A necklace she was wearing started to pulse, a subtle white that had her looking down to stare at the strange, alien shape. “She's one of them! Shoot her! Before—”

She went down, body thrown across the alley and against the wall. Blood splattered over the bricks as something long, black, and blade-like cut across her forearm. She'd blocked it, whatever it was; girl had reflexes better than any fighter Eric had fought. Whatever the black blade shape was, it dispersed like a flickering shadow.

The man beside Fiona had turned to face him, but turned back again to face Fiona, only for the tiny redhead to backhand the man across the chest.

Not Fiona. Something else, something around her, on her, in her, something with a lot of long, sharp ... legs? Something that smacked the man to the side, and exploded a white web over half of his torso. More of the weird webbing, and it stuck the man to the wall like some ridiculous seventies Spider-Man comic. Not so ridiculous was how the man's skull cracked against the brick. An easy concussion.

The final woman pointed her shotgun at Fiona. The little redhead was standing now, eyes glaring daggers into the last stranger still standing. Blood was trickling down her nostrils, her face, chin and neck, soaking through the tank top.

She looked fucking terrifying.

Both of her hands came out before the woman could fire, and the monster came out as well. Eight blade-like limbs, nothing but shades of onyx against the night that surrounded them, and four of them struck out against the woman.

But she dodged. How the fuck she dodged, Eric had no idea, but the woman rolled to the side underneath the blades that struck out at her. Before she could roll again, Fiona ran in and slammed out with her human hand, unleashing another web of the white. A mess of aimless stickiness as far as Eric could see, ropes of the material sticking to random things in its path, including the woman and the shotgun in her hands. She half-rolled into a pinned kneeling

position on the ground, and tried to raise her shotgun to point it again, but couldn't get it pointed at them with webbing tugging at it.

“Let's go!” Fiona ran over to him, grabbed his hand, and started pulling him into the alleyway. Not out into the street where maybe they could find someone; not likely this far into North Side, but a hell of a better chance than between the old buildings. Apparently he wasn't moving either, and he stumbled forward as the bleeding little girl yanked on his hand harder.

As they vanished into the darkness between the many old buildings, factories and the like, gunfire erupted behind them. They were shooting at them, and Eric winced hard enough to hurt his teeth as a couple bullets slammed against the walls around his head. Holy fuck, they were actually shooting at them.

Wincing turned into gasp as Fiona screamed out and fell down to a knee.

“Fiona!” Shit shit shit shit shit. He reached down to help her up, and as he did, she turned around.

She stuck out both her arms, and swung them through the air, screaming in pain as she did. But as she did, more of that strange, white rope shot out of her hand, and connected wall to wall. A blockade, or spider web, something.

She fell. Shit shit shit shit. Shit! He scooped her up and rounded the corner. He knew North Side well enough to keep moving, and he broke into a run as he clutched the small woman to his body.

He could feel her blood soaking into him, warm, wet. He could feel her heart beating a million times a second, his as well. He could feel his knee grind itself into dust as he ran.

“Phone ... need to call ... Natasha...”



“Your phone?” he said between gasps. “They crushed it. We need to get you to a hospital!”

“N-No ... not ... hospital ... find ... darkness...”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Good god he should have brought his shitty phone.

She reached out to him with one hand, grabbed his collar, and stared at him. Blood soaked her grip, and her other hand clutched at her side. Shot. He was holding a gunshot victim. She was bleeding to death and he had to—

“Darkness,” she said, eyes hardening and glaring into him. “Now!”

# Chapter 48

~~Eric~~

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

He clutched the small woman against his body, tight enough so he could keep running, but there was no hiding that she was bleeding on him. Her blood was soaking through his suit and onto his skin. Each labored breath he took filled his lungs with the smell of it; and the smell was so damn familiar. Blood, life, from this dying creature in his arms.

He shook his head. What the fuck, get a grip.

“Just ... find me a place ... really ... really dark. Completely ... dark.”

“You have a bullet in your fucking stomach, Fiona!” He winced as another bullet snapped nearby, crashing into his shadow as he rounded another corner. Those psychos were a ways behind him, slowed down by that weird web thing the girl had made, but they were going to catch up.

“Darkness ... all ... I’ll need...”

“Darkness? Like, a shadow.”

“Darker ... complete ... darkness.”

“You need a hospital you fuck—”

“Darkness!” She grabbed his suit jacket, and managed to shake it a couple times as she raised her eyes to glare at him. Christ she was pale.

“Alright, alright! Fucking darkness, alright.” He looked around as he ran. Easier to ignore the grinding pain in his knee this way at least, panicking about the bleeding-to-death girl in his arms and trying to find some place where he could get the sort of darkness she was looking for.

It was night time, and he was on the edge of North Side and South Side. Only a mile from the neighborhoods, and he could run that. It'd destroy his knee, but he could run it. The girl was insistent though, very insistent on the darkness crap, and after seeing her defeat four psychos using some very weird shit, he really should just do what the girl said. If girl was even the right word to describe her.

Was she a monster? Or a regular every day Spider-Man? Far as Eric knew, Spider-Man didn't stab people with giant black blades. And that was a comic-book character. This girl had done insane fucking shit right in front of him, summoned something large, with eight legs that doubled as blades, and she'd attacked with them. Shadows that vanished after she used them.

She'd told him to not say anything, as if this was something she'd anticipated. God damn it, the fuck sort of ridiculous shit did he get caught up in?

Her blood was dripping down into his clothes. The feel of its warmth on one of his legs cracked across his brain like a whip. Find darkness, get to some fucking darkness.

A nearby building, some old, decrepit multi-floor building that was abandoned, waiting to be renovated and fixed. The door wasn't locked; most of the super old shit wasn't, worthless as the property was. He leaned down to open it, one arm hooked behind Fiona's shoulders, the other under her legs. With a little maneuvering, the two of them slipped into the darkness of the old building that was bound to fall on their heads at any moment.

He was panting, gasping, and every word stung his lungs. “You’d think ... with how much money is rolling around South Side ... they’d have enough money to fix ... all these abandoned buildings ... North Side.”

“Old ... town.” She was gasping too, coughing, choking, but no blood came out of her mouth. Not lung shot, but the bullet had definitely ruined her side, her waist, and he was afraid to look down and see. She could start vomiting blood any minute. Just keep moving, keep moving.

No wonder the place was abandoned. The brick walls were filled with half-broken slabs, bits of ceiling had fallen apart and rained wood chunks over the equally destroyed floor, and old lighting fixtures hung empty. So dark, so very dark, dark enough he had to squint to see the silhouettes of the walls, and that was with his better eyes.

“D ... Darker.”

“Darker, right, darker. You know you’re going to bleed to death? And I’m going to go to prison for it. You think a black guy won’t get pinned with first degree murder, getting caught with a dead white girl in his arms?”

She laughed, then let out a quiet, low whine as the pain ravaged her, left her shivering and curling up against him. Don’t make jokes, bad time for jokes.

The building looked like it must have been used as a private office building, probably for lawyers or accountants or something, with a secretary behind the large desk he found in what looked like something between a living room and a lobby. Falling apart benches lined the walls to his left and right. The drapes were rotting, and horrible.

“B-Basement ... hurry ... I have to see her.”

See her? Basement? Cold started to work up his toes and into his legs, until his heart sped up for more reasons than adrenaline. He gulped as he looked down at the bleeding woman, the bleeding monster in his arms, and winced as he noticed her getting paler again. She was already pale, redhead and freckles and all, but his eyes could make out the white showing through as the blood drained out of her.

Second time he'd ever met this girl, and she was going to bleed to death in his arms. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

Breathe, just breathe. Remember the shit in your dreams. Breathe.

He started wandering around, feet tripping over random bits of rubble. No time no time, go faster, find something. There were hallways lined with doors, and he peeked into them as he went past them as fast he could, but a basement wouldn't be connected by a door in the hallway. Think. End of the hallway? No, a lot of these old buildings put a basement door near the bathroom.

Bingo. He pulled the door open, and gulped again.

Blackness.

When he was a kid, he'd visit his uncle and aunt's place. A nice home, pretty big, fancy, old. It had a basement, deep and large, with stonework straight out of the medieval ages, exposed pipes and wall studs that still hadn't been covered in drywall. It was a great place to goof around with sticks or a soccer ball, but the light switch was on the wrong end of the large room, far away from the staircase that lead back upstairs. Come nightfall, turning off the light meant navigating the large basement in pitch black to reach the stairs.

He was always sure, each night that it had happened, that a monster was going to get him. It never happened, but he could still remember how fast it got his heart beating, navigating the blackness

to find the old wooden stairs. Stairs just like the ones he was looking at. Blackness, just like the blackness in front of him.

“Ok, yeap, I’m going to die. We’re both going to die, in a black abyss in an old building.”

“Please ... hurry...”

Gritting his teeth until it hurt, he started to walk down the stairs. His eyes were better now, so much better, and they couldn’t see shit. It was just blackness ahead, complete black, and with his hands underneath Fiona’s body, he couldn’t feel what was ahead of him either. Couldn’t reach out to brace the wall beside him, at least, until he turned his body a touch so he could nudge his shoulder and Fiona’s feet against it. A wall meant something, and something was far better than empty black, than endless nothing.

He’d probably make a horrible astronaut. Floating out there in the black, in the endless nothing? He shivered, and stared ahead into what might as well have been the same empty, colossal space before him. Breathe, just breathe.

Each step slow, each step painful as his knee fought against him, each step like walking into an obsidian chasm. He did his best, poking out with his foot and looking for the step below, and each time he managed to find it, covered in dust or bits of broken wood. If he stepped on a large bit of broken anything, good chance he’d trip, and tripping right now was a bad idea. Slowly, he took each step, and stabilized on each step before he took the next.

He almost tripped when he ran out of steps.

“We’re uh ... at the bottom. I can’t see shit.” He glanced back up to the stairway. Just a glimmer of a glow from the doorway above and behind them was the only light source, and it wasn’t reaching down where they were, in the pit of death.

“Put ... me down, and take ... my hand.”

“Girl, you’re bleeding out, and—”

“Just ... do it.”

God this girl. Not long ago the best he thought of her was that she was a fun, bubbly glass of champagne. Now, the girl had grit, serious grit, the sort of grit that made you keep fighting even when your knee was destroyed, the sort of grit that usually backfired and got you killed. Reality wasn’t a fucking movie, you didn’t get to succeed just because you were determined.

But at this point, she was going to die either way. She felt cold, and she wouldn’t stop shivering. Her voice wavered and cracked. She felt lighter.

He set her down, and kept one hand underneath her armpit, the other holding her free hand while she cradled her wound. He thought. He couldn’t see to be sure.

“Just ... follow me ... and ... d-dinnae freak out.”

“I’m beyond freaking out. You’re shot, you’re bleeding out, and instead of running to a hospital, we’re in the basement of an abandoned building. I ... I saw you do things, Fiona.”

“Aye. Ye’ll ... get to see more ... in a moment.”

Wonderful. Fucking wonderful.

He supported the girl as best he could. She managed a step, and then another, and her clothes shifted as she moved her hands in ways he couldn’t see. He could hear the drip of blood against the concrete beneath them, and each made his muscle tense and heart ache. Girl was going to die, and—

Something wet soaked through his shoes, his nice shoes too. He almost laughed at the concern, and raised the shoe to try and look at it. No good, still pitch black, and whatever the liquid was, it couldn't have been blood, unless Fiona had suddenly turned into a pool of blood ahead of him. Nope, girl was still holding onto his hand, his holding hers and the other under her shoulder. But, each step soaked his shoes, and each step sank his shoes into something soft. Soft but kind of hard though, like wet mud over earth.

He tripped. Fuck, fucking fuck. So careful, every step had been so careful, but whatever he was walking in didn't give a shit, and gripped on a shoe hard enough that it forced the step to follow shallow. Toe collided against something solid, and he spiraled with it, flopping forward and landing hard on his hands, both of them. Something wet and soft covered his suit head to toe, and soaked into it until he felt it on the skin.

Shit, Fiona! He turned to face where she'd be falling, and waited for the sound of her crashing into the wet crap beside him. But she didn't.

“ ... this is home...” She smiled at him. Smiled. He could finally see, just enough lighting, just enough of a shade for him to catch her silhouette, and then the most basic features.

She didn't look like Fiona. She didn't sound like Fiona. Accent gone, replaced, changed, and her body rising higher, and higher, before in a gentle sway, it melded into the bending shadows of the leaves and vines around him.

Leaves? Vines? He jumped up, and groaned as bone ground on bone in his knee. He fell over again, but this time managed to catch himself against a tree. Tree. A fucking tree. What?

Breathe, just breathe. And with every breath, his eyes opened wider, adjusted to the glimmer of light that was hitting him and the mud around him through the canopy above, and exposed more of



the impossible. A forest. A jungle. The heat was immense, and it wasn't long before beads of sweat started to drip from his body. The smell was intense, of plant life, of animals, of rot and shit and fungus.

Breathing wasn't so easy anymore. He forced it, made each breath happen, but each was flooding him with a billion smells, and he almost started to panic. He'd never had a panic attack before, but he could feel it coming, feel his muscles lock and started to shake, feel his lungs refuse to listen. He forced them to listen. Fucking breathe.

He gripped the tree beside him, felt the moistness of its bark, and whatever was growing on that bark. He felt his shoes push and shift against mud, and grass, and rocks and roots, and mulch. He felt the oppressive heat and humidity push through his suit. He felt eyes on him, everywhere, beady little eyes watching from branches and hanging vines from high above.

“ ... I'm in a fucking jungle.”

“You are.”

Her voice, not the same voice anymore, but someone else's. Or was it even the same girl? Someone in her spot had sort of just, lifted off of the ground, and vanished into the trees and darkness around him. Maybe something had dropped down from above, grabbed her, and yanked her away?

“Where's Fiona?”

“I am Fiona ... I am Vrallar'trakla of the Eight Blade Arach.” A raspy voice, powerful. Frightening.

“Those are two different names.” And one of them was a very weird name with a weird title attached to it.

“That is ... how it is for me, us. Not for most others of my kind, but for some, for me.” The invisible voice moved with rustling leaves, drifted above him, over and around him, like the shadows were whispering to him.

“ ... where are we?”

She laughed, a deep and powerful sound. Nothing like Fiona’s laugh.

“You remind me of Damien.”

“ ... what?”

“A vampire that stumbled into my home. Do not worry about him.” The voice sighed what sounded like relief, and pushed aside some of the canopy.

Only then could Eric see everything clearly, and he wasn’t so sure he wanted to. His eyes locked onto the two moons, one large, soft red, the other smaller but glowing a strong white. Not strong enough to provide much light beneath the canopy of what was apparently a jungle, but strong nonetheless.

But with the canopy pushed aside, he could finally see Fiona, or Vrallawhatchamacallit. And his jaw dropped as he stared at the exposed monster.

A humanoid shape floated many feet above the ground, and eight gargantuan spider-like legs came out of her back, long, slim, blade-like, with four of them stabbed into the earth while four others were touched and balancing against nearby trees and branches. The girl held by the legs looked absolutely nothing like Fiona, at all, not even close. Dark steel-colored skin, and instead of feet, her legs came to end in points, like her spider legs, like stiletto shoes without the shoe part, only the stiletto. Her hands were similar,

with only two fingers and a thumb each, and those two fingers were long black blades like the rest of her limbs.

She was wearing a white dress, of what looked like the same spider silk material he'd seen her use a few times already. It dangled off of her, loose, pretty revealing too, and as much as he was looking at some sort of monster creature straight out of a nightmare, she had curves. Nice curves. Inhumanely nice, in fact, as he noticed her waist was too small for all her organs to fit, or a human's organs anyway. But, a tiny waist paled in comparison to her other inhuman features. Especially the crown of horns.

She had a mouth and nose like a human, except for the dark, steel color. But she had no eyes. Black spikes curved outward from where eyes should have been, and joined many other spikes of similar shape that jutted outward from her skull, coiling backward and creating a sort of crown shape. Like some sort of beautiful, ancient creature, with a myriad of spikes flowing backward over her skull, instead of hair.

Beautiful, in a strange please-don't-kill-me sort of way.

She smiled down at him from above. Her new mouth was smaller than her old one, subtle black lips offering him a warm smile.

"You're ... you're um ... I uh ... dreaming, yeah I'm dreaming." He pinched his skin on the back of his hand. Still in the jungle. He slapped himself hard enough to spark a fresh headache. Still in the jungle.

"I have invited you into this little pocket of nightmares, Eric. I ... would have preferred to do this more gently. Or perhaps after Avery had spoken to you of your condition. None of this is as I had hoped." The spider creature lowered herself down to him, but she never quite touched the ground. Always her legs dangled underneath her a few inches over the mud, with her sharp, pointed blade feet grazing against grass.

“Ok, not dreaming. I’m not dreaming, and you’re a spider monster, and I’m in a jungle. Where ... where’s the city? What the fuck is going on?”

“ ... perhaps not so much like Damien. But then a vampire would have an easier time accepting this than you.”

“Vampires!?”

She chuckled. God, she sounded nothing like she did before. The weird rasp to her voice, its power and size despite her normal-sized humanoid body, it was hard to accept that this was Fiona. But it was Fiona.

“W-Wait, you’re not bleeding?”

“No. Vrall has healed my wound, but at a cost. I hunger.”

Yeap, that sounded straight out of a nightmare. He backed up again, but a tree was behind him, and he wasn’t about to dart into the dark jungle blind, with nowhere to go. Christ, he was in a fucking jungle! Where the fuck was the city, the abandoned building, the distant honking of car horns and the smell of asphalt and gasoline. Fuck, it was all gone, all replaced. Now there was nothing but jungle.

Breathe.

“Ok, um, my shit can wait. For now, can you explain to me where the fuck I am, and ... and ... what the fuck you are?”

She sighed, nodded, and reached out a hand for him. If she’d had a blue and red pill in that hand, he’d have taken the blue and just closed his eyes. But he was neck deep in this shit whether he wanted to be or not, so, he took her hand, and waited. Her skin was oddly soft despite its dark steel color, and despite how the two fingers and thumb looked like black blades more than anything.

“At least I know you better than Damien, the first time this happened. That man hunted me into my lair, and I thought for sure he was out to kill me.”

“Damien ... and—” He gasped and clenched his jaw as Fiona, or Vrall, started to pull him up, and up. Her other hand reached out to hook under his shoulder, and she steadied him as she took him higher. Strong, damn strong. Her massive spider legs had no issue carrying the two of them, and within moments she’d lifted them fifteen feet into the air, and set them both onto a large branch. Up in the canopy instead of underneath it, it was easier to stare out through the levels of vines, leaves, and branches to see how the white and red moons bathed the jungle in their light.

A small part of him thought this could be romantic. A much bigger part was flipping the fuck out. Fiona had set him near the trunk of the tree though, and he braced against it with one arm as he looked down into the darkness beneath him, and then out over the rolling land of jungle.

“My phone. I need to contact Natasha, and tell her of these four, that they were indeed hunters and are now chasing me. They may know where the boy Jack is.” She frowned, though without eyebrows, or eyes for that matter, it was hard to tell. Only the subtle scrunch of her small nose gave it away.

God, she sounded nothing like Fiona, not even in dialect, and he couldn’t place the foreign accent either. Brazil maybe?

“Like I said, uh, Fiona, your phone’s destroyed.”

“Damn it.” She sank some of her claws into one of the branches passing overhead, and Eric pulled his head back as it snapped like a twig in her sharp grip. “We made a mistake, a bad mistake, Eric. Now they know about me, and you, and ... I’m sorry, for dragging you into this. I thought we’d get to see what they were up to, and not get spotted.”

“I guess we underestimated them.” He said it with raised eyebrow and eyes darting around, both at the jungle around him, and the monster girl in front of him. Still had a million reflexes telling him this couldn’t be happening, but with the hallucinations he’d already started suffering—“Wait, am I hallucinating this?”

She turned to face him, blade legs hovering a single inch above the branch where her feet should have been. “Of course not.”

“You say that, but here I am, regular Joe, in some sort of nightmare jungle with a half naked spider lady.”

“ ... I imagine in your hallucinations, there is only the one moon ... and ... perhaps she speaks to you?”

“How do you know that?” He reached out for her, grabbed her bare arms, and shook her. The crown of enormous horns that coiled back from her forehead and eye sockets shined in the strange moonlight. All her skin did. She really was soft. “How ... I ... I don’t...”

“ ... perhaps, as you said, we should focus on our present circumstances? I can explain about you, later, but for now, you should understand that you are in my lair. Please, tread lightly. I am ... there is ... you are in a dream, Eric, but you are not dreaming.”

He frowned. This was turning into some ridiculous Disney movie spiel, about how he’d stumbled onto something magical, and his life would forever be changed after this moment. Yeah, changed, because now people were shooting at him, and he was going to go home with fucking malaria.

“A dream?”

“A pocket of dream. A nightmare. A ... very old nightmare, where ... Vrall nested.” She gestured to herself, her body. “I told you about my nightmares. I guess I was just ... trying to bond with someone

who was going through their own changes, not so long after I went through mine only a year ago.”

“And—”

“And you are not a Begotten. But changes are upon you, and ... ugh, this is a mistake. This is all a big mistake. I should not have involved you, I should have let you be, and later when you came into your own, maybe then...”

“Yeah, well, too late for that.” He sounded angry. He was angry. Christ, he was always fucking angry, and whatever was happening to him was adding some straight up hunger and aggression to go with it. Breathe. “I really am a fucked up person to help you with ... whatever it is you’re doing, you know. Did you not piece together the train wreck that is my life?”

She tilted her head to the side. Without eyebrows, he guessed it was the best way she had to express surprise, or interest, or something.

“That is a part of the reason I was delighted to see a change was upon you. You seemed so ... normal, compared to my vampire friends.”

“And vampires, vampires are a thing?” Again, his hands went up, and again he braced against the tree in case sneaky gravity decided to break his neck.

“Yes. But we can talk of them later. For now, just understand that you are in my lair, my home, a nightmare. I am a creature of the nightmare, and you are within that nightmare. Please stay close, or the nightmare may attack you.”

Ugh, this was some fucking Amazon jungle nightmare shit right here.

“Ok, I’m just going to turn off the smart part of my brain, and just go stupid kid mode here. I’m in a dream world, a nightmare, got it. You’re a nightmare creature, some magical, terrifying, creature. Got it.” He almost said busty, cause the little silk dress thing she was wearing was barely more than a sash, and it didn’t do a good job of covering up her exaggerated proportions. Made sense, he supposed, if she was a dream creature thing. Combining sexy with terrifying was a staple of nightmares, and slasher movies. “And those dudes chasing us?”

“Hunters. Killers of vampires and other creatures. Perhaps of Begotten as well. I wanted to follow them because it is possible they know where Jack is. A friend who has disappeared. A vampire.”

“O .. k. Friend, vampire, vanished, think he might be alive. So we were going to tail these four and now everything is fucked.”

“Yes. I—” Her body went rigid, her lowered head raised to stare straight, and then snapped around to look down and behind her.

Light beneath them, flickering as it passed leaves and vines, white light, the sort of light you got from LED.

“They’re here.”

“They followed us?”

“ ... they must have followed my trail of blood into the building and its basement.”

“You didn’t, I don’t know, close the crazy fucking magical gateway behind you?” Getting snippy wasn’t going to help, but then, this was why he normally just kept his fucking mouth shut, because he turned into a snippy asshole bastard when he started mouthing off.

“It takes a moment to close, and ... and the gateway is large, it filled all the darkness of the basement. They must have been right



behind us. It is closed now, but ... too late.”

Bad to worse, always bad to worse. Why the fuck did things always go from bad to worse?

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~~Jack~~

The pain went from bad, to worse. He was never going to get used to pain.

Part of him thought he might. Memories of what Viktor did to him weren't old enough to be forgotten. Memories of Damien stabbing him through his stomach were definitely not old enough to be forgotten. He still winced when he remembered Julius's lesson about how much fire hurt Kindred, and how the older a Kindred was, the more damaging fire and sunlight could be.

It all sort of amalgamated into a searing poker of experience that stabbed through his brain, along with the sword stabbing through his leg.

His screams continued for ten seconds, until at last the agony became manageable, enough so he could stop screaming at least. He stared at the hand holding the large knife, the knife itself, and where it penetrated through his suit pants, his flesh, and through the bone of his leg. Never, ever, had a pain hit him with such vivid clarity, as a knife jammed through his bone. Viktor cutting his face and chest in half an inch deep had been overwhelming, almost surreal. This was all easily defined, radiating from a specific point, and making the muscles in the leg flex in some sort of futile attempt to expunge the blade. Each flex forced groans from Jack, each blinding him with flashes of white pain, until he started to go limp.

He grit his teeth, started breathing through them, and forced his eyes to look up at the psychopath.

“Stop...”

Jeremiah twisted the knife.

All at once the pain renewed, bones bending, flesh scraping along the side of the blade, bone too, until he felt something snap. Pain worked up and down his body in waves, each hitting his skull and forcing his stomach to squeeze on itself. Trying to make him vomit. Kindred wouldn't vomit, not like this, but he could still feel his body trying to make it happen.

“Azamel's nightmares spread, vamp. She grows hungry. You don't even know what I'm talking about and you still defend her?” He almost snarled, but opted for twisting the knife more instead.

“Stop! Stop, please!” He wanted to vomit twice over, for saying those words. But for all the movies he'd seen and stories he'd read about heroes resisting torture, nothing could prepare him for real pain. Not resisting it, anyway. If some empty words could get it to stop, then he'd fucking say them.

He remembered once a book he'd read, where one of the main characters was a torture survivor. The man had described in vivid detail how his permanently ruined body had been flayed, burned, cut and dug through, but it was the passages about having his teeth broken apart and the nerves prodded that made Jack's body sick with worry.

The man smirked, and yanked the blade out. Jack screamed again, and threw his head back as he felt metal destroy muscle and skin and bone on the way out. But again, he grit his teeth, and forced himself to breathe on useless air; it stopped his screaming, and for the moment that was the only goal he could focus on.

The two guards at the door winced, a few times at that, and glanced between each other before looking to the two nutjobs intent on torturing him. They didn't seem the same as the psychopaths.

And, when he managed eye contact with them, he could feel the mind of a kine, like he should have been able to.

Not the two in front of him though. Jeremiah, and Angela, he couldn't get past their eyes. Something in their gaze, something in them in general was blocking him, holding him at bay. But if he could tap into the other two, then it wasn't the cuffs blocking his Kindred abilities, or not completely anyway. And his leg was healing, so the cuffs weren't working some crazy magic magic to keep his vitae-infused blood from healing him. The cuffs were doing something, but not that.

Ever since he'd seen Lucas summon a bolt of lightning, he tried to keep an open mind about magic. Antoinette had called it Theban Sorcery. Made swallowing the fact they'd put some sort of enchanted cuffs on him easier.

"You're young," Angela said.

"... y-yeah ... you could say that." Groaning, stifling a whimper, he looked down at his leg and the closing wound. His blood realigned the twisted and punctured bone, set its contents, and let him relax as the pain lowered from agonizing, to only extremely painful.

She reached out, grabbed his chin, and forced him to look her in her good eye. Hard hands, callouses and all. "What would Azamel want with you?"

Ugh, moving into territory of sensitive information. He shouldn't tell them he was sort of an intermediary with the Uratha; they didn't seem to know the werewolves were even in the city though. But Azamel wanted him for the same role, and he shouldn't bring that up.

Angela's grip tightened, let go, and then turned into a fist to crack backward against his jaw. She hit hard for a human, and his head jerked to the side fast enough to wrench his muscles. Bone to the

skin, hard enough to damage and split the skin at the lip. Kindred wouldn't bleed from that, and the wound started to slowly heal; which just pissed her off, and earned another backhand against his face, twisting his head the other way. A strange sensation, feeling your brain bounce around inside your skull. And then the pain replaced it, headache, then migraine.

It healed quickly, but he did his best to not let Angela know that. Better to act like he was in agony at this point. And he was, fucking hell he was, just not dying of it like a kine would have been. Silver lining, always look for the silver lining.

Scratching metal drew his eyes. Sparks, and then, flame.

“I asked you what Azamel wants with you.”

He pulled his head away, and tried to do the same with his body. But the chair was bolted down, and as he jangled the cuffs behind him, he could tell the cuffs were chained to it. He couldn't even shift his hands from side to side, which meant the cuffs were solid connected to the chair somehow.

He was avoiding the question, and that was probably the last thing he should have been doing. Angela brought the blowtorch closer, and closer, until the flame cut across his face only inches from his lips. Heat, fire, panic. He started fighting against the chair harder and harder, but all it did was jingle the chains louder, and earn a smile from the woman with the glass eye.

Jeremiah pushed down on her hand, and inched the fire away from his face. “You really have a lot of respect for Azamel.”

“... respect?” Jack said. “Just ... fear, really.”

Jeremiah raised a brow, wiped the ashes from his knife, and slipped it back into some pocket inside his trench coat. “Afraid of her are you?”

“Like you guys said, I’m young. Afraid of a lot of things.”

“Not of us it seems.” Angela brought the flame closer again, and Jack twisted his head side to side as he pulled it back. Maybe if he still had a functioning bladder, the piss soaking his pants would have backed up his claim.

“ ... you’re ... the first hunters I’ve ever seen.”

“Dolareido,” she said as she pulled back the flame, “isn’t too high on the local hunters’ list. You vamps keep a low profile, here in slut city.”

“ ... the Prince encourages Kindred to feed without killing.” Maybe he could talk to these people? No need for all this violence, right? Ugh, just fooling himself. They were going to stab him again, or punch him again, or torch a hole through his chest, and he was really just talking to avoid that from happening.

“Lucky you.” Angela shrugged, let the blowtorch go out, set it aside, and leaned over the back of the chair while she flicked the lighter. “In other cities, where the vamps are real fucking maggots, we’re not so nice in getting the info we want.” She brought the lighter closer, lit it, and held it inches from his face. Inches, only because he couldn’t pull his trembling head back any further. “Great thing about vamps though, is you can torture them so much more than most things. Ever seen what happens to a vamp when you cut off their arms, and their legs, with barbed wire?” Chuckling, grinning, she brought the lighter in closer still, until all he could see through one eye was the flame, and the death it represented an undead thing like him.

“Sounds ... horrible.”

“It was.” Jeremiah grabbed a nearby chair and sat down, though not reverse like before, like Angela was. He folded a knee over the other, took out a leather-bound journal, a pen, and started writing in

it. He was halfway in the beam of light that came through the open door, and he aimed his book toward the light as he wrote.

“Jeremiah is a little soft when it comes to vamps,” she said.

Oh Christ, if he was soft, the fuck sort of duo was this? Bad cop and sadistic cop?

“You’ll have to forgive Angela, Jack. Bad history. But then I suppose that’s how all of us get into this sick little game, a bad history.” He shrugged, jotted a few more notes, and gestured to the two guards. “Angela and I aren’t hunters though, not like the ones you’re thinking about, none of this Vigil shit. We’re not here for you worthless blood suckers. We’re here for bigger prey.”

“ ... Begotten.”

“Bingo.” Angela closed the lighter, putting out the flame. Once between her fingers, she gripped it in her palm, squeezed on it, and used the fist to punch him. Brain bounced around in his skull, headache throbbing and pulsing through his body. The damage to his face, his lip, his jaw, all superficial sharp stings compared to the migraine.

Hadn’t even asked him a question and she was hitting him. The fuck was he supposed to do?

“Azamel’s domain,” Jeremiah said. “Ever been there?”

“ ... domain? She ... she lives in the tunnels. You already know that.”

The man nodded and closed the book. “Well, she’s hiding down there. But that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m asking about her domain. Have you seen it, or any of its chambers?”

“No ... I’ve talked with her once, and it was in the tunnels.”

“Why?” And again, Angela drilled her fist into him. His chest this time, and he coughed up on the air he was going to use to speak. She liked hitting him. A human her size shouldn’t have been able to hit him this hard.

Before he could say anything, she punched him again. Crack. He groaned a scream, gargled messy sounds, and stared down at his shirtless chest, where her fist was pressing and grinding knuckles into his breaking ribs.

“Angela, he’s a vamp but he still needs lungs to talk.” Jeremiah opened the book again, and started jotting down more notes. “Jack, keep talking and she won’t cut a hole through your stomach with that blowtorch.”

The woman flicked her lighter a few times, and adopted her grin again. Jacob’s grin, when he was feeling playful. Jack winced as he saw it, and did his best to ignore the trembling in his legs and the pain in his chest.

“I don’t ... know anything ... She showed up some months ago, randomly.”

“Not so random.” Jeremiah lifted the journal, and showed him a page. A drawn picture of Lucas’s face. Made sense, since you couldn’t take a good picture of a vampire.

“H ... How did you ... manage to draw that?”

“I didn’t. A hunter did, many years ago. Way I hear it, there was some fighting between the vamps here some fifty years ago, and Lucas disappeared. Only to show up again after that Viktor vamp died. And then he died too.” The old man shrugged, leaned back into his seat and flipped to another page, slow and controlled. “Azamel didn’t get along with those two.”

“How ... do you know all this? I—” A fist crashed into his face, and his skull whiplashed backward, bouncing against tightened muscles behind him. Pain came a second later, and he choked down a sob as the pulsing agony exploded outward from his face. Not a good time to cry, so he wasn't going to cry. He was a Ventrue, and he was going to bite his lip and figure out a way out of this. And crying would let them know how fucking close to broken he was.

“Hunters are a pretty dedicated sort. Useful. Aren't you?” The old man looked to the two at the door, and they returned some sneers. Not happy to be working with this guy then, maybe. Made sense, given that Angela and Jeremiah were sending him all sorts of psycho killer vibes.

Hunters must have been in Dolareido for some time then, or at least, humans who knew about vampires, and kept their eyes open. Reporting information to someone? Kindred told him hunters were just people, or groups sometimes, wandering around and killing paranormals they got their hands on. For understandable reasons really, as vampires like Viktor or Lucas toyed with the lives of kine like cats toyed with mice before killing them.

A lost family member, a lost love, killed by a hungry Kindred that made a mistake in their hunt, got seen, or let the other person go. Said person gets it into their head to get revenge, and gets sucked into the world of paranormal. Might make a good novel to read, if said persons weren't currently beating his face in.

“What did Athalia want to talk to you about,” Jeremiah said.

Jack winced, and looked down. Mistake. Angela cracked her fist against his chest once again, and he whined as he felt knuckle crash against muscle and bone. A second punch caught him when he didn't expect it, couldn't brace for it, and the pain of a wrenching neck joined the breaking agony of knuckles, again, colliding with his face.



His head fell forward, but not because he was looking down. He wasn't looking at anything. Body refused to work anymore as everything went blurry, as the waves of pain had him shaking, spots filling his vision, tremors working down his chest and into his core. Part of him wanted to ask, beg her to stop beating him, but he knew she wouldn't. He knew that, despite their words, they weren't going to let him leave alive.

Two options then: stall until someone came to his rescue, or figure a way out of his current circumstance.

Well, there was a third. Tell them everything he knew about Azamel and Athalia. They might let him live, at least for a little while. Hell if they were nice they might let him go; no fucking chance. The thought almost made him smirk, but a nauseating wave of pain had him choking on air instead. He could tell them all he knew, little as it was. It might make the pain stop for a little while, if nothing more. Or get him a death with less torture involved. No, fuck that, he wasn't going to die here.

Only reason he wasn't telling them everything was because he was afraid of Azamel, afraid of what she might do if she found out a vampire spilled everything. But he had nothing to spill! At least, he thought he didn't. Did he? What detail would be the detail they needed to do whatever, he didn't know.

Angela lit the blowtorch again, and brought the insane flame closer to his face like before.

“Talk.”

“I ... I don't know ... anything...”

“That's not true. You spoke to Athalia, and you spoke to Azamel. You know something.” Jeremiah jotted down a few more notes, and shrugged as he brought the pen up to his lips to nibble on it. “Did you see the heart of her lair, hmm? Did you see the great temple?”

Great temple? He managed to raise his head and look at the man, only to draw his head back as Angela moved the torch in close enough for him to feel the heat waft against his eyes.

“I’ve seen where she’s staying in the tunnels! But that’s it, I swear!” Please take the fire away please take the fire away.

She lowered the torch, but didn’t pull it away. She traced the waves of its heat over his chest, held to the side so it didn’t hit him. But it was fire, insanely hot fire, melt through metal fire, and being anywhere near it was terrifying. Just a tiny little blue flame sticking out of a metal pipe, but hot enough to annihilate him and the metal chair he was sitting in if she wanted to.

“And the others?” she said. “Where are they nesting?”

“Athalia? She ... she’s with Azamel I think. I’ve never even seen Mark!” What details could he give them that wouldn’t have Azamel coming to kill him? Best he could imagine was avoiding telling them that the Invictus were holding her home hostage with explosives, and that the woman had wanted to speak to him privately about becoming a new intermediary. Everything else? Any detail he could use to keep that blowtorch away from him, the better.

“Why did you visit her the first time?” he said.

“We ... we had an infestation, in the sewers.” Careful, leave Avery out of this. She might be your only hope for all you know. “Some sort of mindless monster thing. Looked like a spider. Azamel showed up not long before they did, so I asked her about it. She helped us pin down their location.”

“Monsters in the sewers?” Angela turned off the torch again, and shrugged as she looked at Jeremiah.

He returned the shrug, and took down a few notes. “Arachnid monsters hiding out in old tunnels and sewers are not unheard of.”

Jack doubted they meant Azlu, which meant there were other kinds of monsters that were spider-like. Ugh, why was the world dumping all this scary shit on him now, when before it'd been perfectly happy to let him live in ignorance of all this paranormal insanity.

“Something to tell Joanna about?” Angela said.

“Maybe. I—” A phone rang. Jeremiah sighed, put his journal away, stood up and pulled a smart phone out of his pocket. “Yeah? ... shit. Angela.” The man nodded his head to the side, toward the door. She made an annoyed groan to match his, and walked after him.

“Wait,” one of the guards said. “What do we do with the vamp?”

Angela shrugged and pointed at Jack. “Kid isn't even a year embraced. He's not getting out of those cuffs and he can't brainwash you with them on. Don't be an idiot and you'll be fine.”

And with that, they were gone, leaving Jack alone with the two guards. Finally, a god damn moment of peace, a moment to heal, to get his vitae working and fixing his wounds. Broken ribs, a concussion, lots of split skin, a hole in his leg. And it was only going to get worse. They were going to come back, and they were going to use that blowtorch to cut off his limbs, and then draw the alphabet into his stomach. They were going to fucking kill him.

“Shit, another? Stay on their tail.” Jeremiah's voice, from down the hallway.

He had to get out of here, back to Antoinette, back to Julias and the Invictus, back to a simple vampire's life of manipulating kine for money, for blood, but no one getting too hurt for it. Back to hiding in the shadows and, much as hiding in shadows sucked, back to enjoying the joys of his second life. Back to enjoying being in Antoinette's arms, his face in her breasts, melting into her. He was

going to get back to that life, he was going to escape, one way or another.

Jack let his head droop, and let the pain make his body shake, let the quivers work up and down his legs, and let some small sobs break through. He wanted to cry, but right now, he wasn't sobbing to let out the need to cry. He was sobbing, quietly, barely, so the two hunters would think he was broken and weak. He wasn't. He was a Ventrue. A fucking Ventrue. He would not be broken by this.

He was stronger than Kindred his age. He knew it, Julias knew it, and other people were starting to realize it. But these hunters didn't know it. To them he was just another young Kindred they could bully because they knew what vampires were weak to, what they were afraid of. And yet, they were kine, and that meant they were his prey, not the other way around.

The two psychos may have been able to block his mind, his brainwashing abilities, but he doubted they could block bullets.

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~~Eric~~

What drugs had he taken to get him this high? Alice in Wonderland much? Maybe he was still falling down a well, or rabbit hole, and just going down and down into a pit of insanity that made no sense.

“Beast! Show yourself!” The four hunters moved through the black, two of them holding rather powerful LED flashlights, held reverse grip under hands holding pistols. They were trained. The other two walked forward with shotgun in one hand, knife in other, hacking and slashing away at the vines of the jungle.

But Eric and Fiona had gone higher, and higher. She took his hand and guided him up branches, and branches, and more branches, until they were a hundred feet up in the canopy. He could

hear howling, like monkeys or apes. And every so often, he could hear a growl, and as far as he knew, big cats didn't go around randomly growling.

This jungle wasn't normal. Fucking felt like he'd been dropped into Jumanji. God he wished he was dreaming.

"Stay here," she said, raspy voice almost inaudible in the jungle's breathing.

"... what?"

"I must deal with these hunters. Please stay here, remain safe." The spider monster pat his shoulder, and hovered away, her spider legs moving through the canopy of trees and green with barely a sound.

It was more than just barely a sound. It was without a sound. Her spider legs brushed against the foliage and leaves, but the foliage and leaves didn't respond. And as he squinted to see her movement, she faded away.

Faded. Just fucking faded. Vanished. It wasn't that she was just a dark-colored creature in a dark place, but something caused her body to blend into the black far more than she should have. The only thing he had to go by was the direction she was originally moving in, toward the hunters beneath them.

One of the hunters had a glowing necklace as well, something that was emitting white light in a slow pulse. The necklace had begun glowing when Fiona had started doing inhuman shit, attacking these 'hunters' with the crazy comic-book insanity.

Monsters. And apparently vampires? Wait, she'd laughed herself into stitches about the him getting fed to Jessy comment. Oh fuck, were Jessy and Natasha monsters too? Or vampires? Oh god oh fucking god what crazy fucking world had he—

Gunfire. He almost jumped, but his grip was a constant vise on the tree trunk beside him. He was in dress shoes though, and they had no fucking grip for a mother fucking god damn wet-from-the-humidity tree branch. Fuck. Fuck fuck. He crouched as best he could, one hand still on the trunk, and another testing a vine. Stable. He held it tight, and stared down into the blackness below.

No way the hunters would be able to see him. From below, he'd just look like a part of the canopy, pitch black as it cast overwhelming shadows upon those under him. Their sources of light couldn't penetrate the canopy, and it was enough for him to see them, a little at least.

Whoever these people were, they were organized. They moved as a unit, even as they cut apart a jungle. Other than some mumbling curses, or demands for Fiona to show herself, they kept quiet. Not like people couldn't hear them, with all the chopping they were doing, but they didn't waste words either. Sometimes they turned to face each other, and in the light made some hand gestures; very trained, very professional.

Hunters, she'd called them. She was a monster. They were hunters. Was he on the wrong side in this? Why wasn't he running up to the hunters and asking for their help, for them to save him from the terrifying monster?

Ugh, cause if anything, you're part monster, with all the fucking crazy shit happening to you, and Fiona was a monster willing to help explain it. Lovely, just lovely, he was a bad guy in this shit show. Maybe he should just run up to them anyway, ask for their help, throw Fiona under the bus. He'd never done a damn fucking thing to deserve getting lumped in with monsters.

And he considered doing that for a second. Climb down the tree, hopefully not fall to his death in the process, and ask for their help. Explain it was all a misunderstanding.

Cause sure, that'd work. Just as likely to get a bullet between the eyes. And he couldn't do that to the girl. She'd done nothing to earn any ire from him. Hell if anything, she was the nicest girl he'd ever talked to, and that included Sheryl during their honeymoon phase. Monster? Yeah, apparently she was a monster, at least in the physical sense. A monster with a tiny waist and a huge rack.

That was kind of strange, wasn't it? The monster in the jungle looked like she had a rather sexually exaggerated figure, with a bunch of spikes and sharp limbs on top of it. It was creepy. Beautiful, and creepy, and scary. But, it wasn't as scary as it should have been. Rewind a few weeks and he was sure it'd be terrifying, sure that Fiona's monster side would have rendered him paralyzed in fear. Not anymore. A bit scared, yeah, but not terrified.

He stared from above, and tried to see if he could spot Fiona. Vral. Whatever. Couldn't see her, but he could see some leaves and vines adjust ever so slightly, enough so he could get at least some idea of where she was. But those massive spider legs made it difficult.

She was doing something, ahead of the four. Unseen, silent, she was weaving something, drops of white flicking across the tree trunks and buried in the shadows. She worked fast, still borderline invisible, but the white lines she created were not. He stared on, squinting to see through the darkness, and watched as black blades flicked through the dark, each planting another white line in the shadows. She was weaving a web, a big web, big enough for a human.

A spider in the dark, setting up the trap.

She'd told him about nightmares, her nightmares, from when she was younger. It was obvious she was looking for someone to put her woes on, to share some of her baggage with, and find a shoulder to lean on. Maybe he should have listened more, because it didn't

seem like such juvenile baggage anymore, having a bunch of nightmares. Now it felt real. Now it felt like he should pay more attention to his own dreams, if this girl's nightmares about something dragging her into the dark was now what she was actually doing herself.

Gunfire. He almost fell off again, and dropped down low to squeeze the trunk and stabilize himself as best he could. In the hushed whispers of jungle life, and even the loud howls of nearby animals, it paled in comparison to random gunfire. His heart nearly jumped out of his mouth, and he swallowed it back down as he stared into the black. White flashes joined the lights, and again, more bangs.

“Get this shit off of me!” a woman said. Someone was trapped in one of the webs.

“Shit is fucking tough.”

“Here, I got it. Watch my back.”

Quick, seamless, a unit used to working together. They didn't hesitate to cover each other's backs and help each other the moment one of them was trapped. Really did make him wonder if he was actually helping the bad guy in all of this, and these hunters were the good guys. Good guys covered each other's backs like that. Good guys helped each other without hesitation. But, he didn't feel that, didn't sense that, didn't get any of that from these four from the way they looked at him, and Fiona. The sheer hate in their eyes, when they caught him and Fiona off guard? Now that had been terrifying.

“There!”

A shotgun blast. And then, screams, inhuman, loud, ear piercing. A weird rasp that would have fit a banshee. Eric winced and pulled



his shoulders up to his ears, and another blast forced them higher. No scream this time.

“Jeremiah better get here soon. No fucking bane for this monster.”

“He didn’t mention anything about this Begotten.”

“Think he set us up?”

“Unlikely. You saw the size of his troop. Others hunters seem to think he’ll do right by them.”

“Or he’s just a good liar.”

“Stow it. And he did say use the knives. Better than nothing.”

“You really want to go melee with this thing?”

“Better than wasting bullets.”

They were whispering. Eric could hear them, over the jungle noise and through the canopy, ears straining but hearing. The four kept moving as they talked, and as they moved, two new blades were drawn. He could see the blades by the glint of moonlight; really fucking shiny knives. Too shiny, unnaturally shiny. Yeah, those weren’t regular knives. No idea what was special about them, but seeing them move through the jungle night, he felt his hairs stand up.

“Get out of my home.” Vrall’s voice, bouncing off of trees and mixing into the vines. Couldn’t locate the raspy voice, but its power echoed through the life and death of the jungle without issue.

The hunters said nothing, but their knives cut through more of the vines, and more as they pushed forward. Fucking fearless.

“Get out!”

Fiona's body slashed through the walls of the jungle, appearing from the side, and half of her massive blades sliced down through the branches, vines, and trunks of nearby trees alike.

The four hunters dived out of the way, rolling in the mud, catching twigs and roots and rocks on their bodies. Groans and curses abound, but their reactions were fast and harmonious, each throwing themselves out of the way with full commitment, and then rolling onto their feet and unloading their ammo. Two kept their pistols up, firing into the black and lighting it with their flashlights, while the ones with knives slashed out at the nearby limbs, their spare hands holding flashlights.

Fiona screeched, a splatter of blood painting nearby trees in red, a brighter shade of it than Eric expected. Again she disappeared into the black, and Eric winced for the hundredth time. They'd hurt her, bad.

"Get out!" Again the monster cried out, but remained hidden this time. Learned her lesson he guessed; the hunters were too damn fast.

"Fuck you, monster. Working with Azamel, or that psycho Athalia? Her daughter's going to do her in, Jeremiah's going to do Azamel in, Mark's next, and then we're going to clean this city up," one of the men said.

"Derrek, shut up."

Derrek shrugged. Probably thinking there was no way Fiona was going to get out of here alive, no harm in spilling info. A fatal flaw, or earned confidence.

So many names he'd never heard. Remember them, could be important.

“I’ve done nothing to harm you!” Fiona said. A blur of her shadow shot across the dark, and the two hunters unloaded more shells into the black. They missed. Fiona was dark, and right now, so dark even Eric couldn’t see her unless she was moving.

One of the hunters leaned in to her friend, shotgun still held up and aiming at anything that moved. “How the fuck is Jeremiah supposed to get here from the prison?”

“He said trust him.”

“I don’t fucking trust him.”

“I—shit!”

The four hunters dived out of the way, each throwing themselves at full force into different directions, whatever got them out of the way of the collapsing tree. A big tree, a tree so tall it reached past the top of the canopy, and its weight tore through the limbs of its brethren. That included Eric’s branch.

Shit.

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~~Jack~~

“Then follow them!” Jeremiah’s voice echoed through the hallway outside Jack’s cell. Metal and concrete had a habit of doing that.

The conversation didn’t stop, but it did go further away, two steps of boots thudding against the hard floor. Thank god, thank fucking god. He choked down a sob, but another one came after, and he let it leak out of him as the pain blinded him. If he got out of this alive, he was going to go to Antoinette’s, not leave her tower for the next month at least, and fall asleep holding her tight every morning. Cause fuck this, fuck this shit, fuck these hunters and these fucking

psychos. Fucking having them in the city, skulking around, hunting, killing. Killed Barry for nothing.

Anger. Anger was good. Anger he could use. Pain invited anger, and anger was one way to get the beast to the surface, to get that creature in his guts to bare its fangs and tear into something.

He inched his head upward enough to glimpse at the faces of the two remaining hunters. These two weren't the same as Jeremiah and Angela. They—fuck, what was it about Angela's face that seemed so familiar? Certainly not the glass eye. He'd probably remember meeting someone with a glass eyes. Either way, these two weren't the same as those other two. These two felt like normal kine, and when he managed eye contact with them, they adjusted their eyes and posture like normal kine would. Like nervous kine would.

He tried to pull up his vitae, to empower his body, to regenerate his wounds, and maybe tap into some of that resilience Ventrue and Gangrels were known for.

It wasn't happening. Not easily, at least. It had to be the handcuffs suppressing it, making it difficult to pull and manipulate the flow of vitae, it had to be. Enchanted fucking handcuffs. He pulled at them, squeezed on his muscles hard, and pried against the metal.

“Give it up kid,” one of the hunters said. “Vampires a lot older than you have been trapped by those.”

He kept trying, engaging his shoulders and pulling his arms apart harder, and harder. The metal started to cut into his wrists, splitting the skin enough to make him bleed if he'd still been human. Kindred blood took a more serious wound to warrant coming to the surface, but he was getting there, twisting and grinding his wrists and hands against the metal. Deep in his guts, he pulled at the pool of vitae in his core, in his being, in his beast, and forced it through the murky waters that buried him. These handcuffs were a pale

comparison to the sorcery Lucas had used, and if Antoinette could still fight an army after that, then the least he could do was escape some handcuffs.

That's what he would have liked to think. And maybe if he could summon the raw strength of a Daeva or Nosferatu, or a Ventrue a hundred years older than him, he'd do that. But the metal wasn't bending, and he doubted most Kindred, Daeva or Nos or otherwise, would be able to get out of those cuffs at his age.

But he wasn't most Kindred.

"... how many vampires have you killed?" he said.

"What?"

"How many of us have you killed?" He grit his teeth and started to squeeze on his muscles again. The hunters were watching him, but he needed them to lower their guard, to not fear him. To get closer. "I'm ... pretty young, and ... never really ... thought hunters would come here."

One of them scoffed, and adjusted how she held her shotgun, unnecessarily.

"Been hunting for almost a decade, kid. How many do you think?"

He sighed and twisted his head a little. He could feel the vitae in there, buried and suppressed. But he could get it, he could find it, scratch it out of the weird layer of what-the-fuck-ever was keeping it down. These handcuffs weren't perfect, and he was going to get past them.

"... A few?"

"Try dozens." She came in closer, and leaned in to glare at him. A hard face, someone who'd seen a lot of shit, someone who wanted

vampire dead cause she was a vampire hunter. What sort of twisted story did she have? Something worthy of a book, surely.

“ ... why?” Let’s find out. Get her closer.

“Why? Cause you fucks are a menace, spreading like flies and hiding in the shadows, killing people, ruining lives, why—”

The other hunter reached out and touched her shoulder. “Stace, he’s just goading you.”

“I’m ... not goading.”

“How many people have you killed?” the hunter Stacey said. She came in closer, and poked his skull with the butt of her gun. “You started this. How many humans have you killed?”

One human, just the one, and it wasn’t his fault. Not his fault. Not his fault.

“ ... one. I ... it was an accident.” Should have lied. Why didn’t he fucking lie?

“Yeah, hear that a lot. But here’s the big secret, fucking vampire.” She leaned in closer still, got right into his face, and glared at him. “You wouldn’t be the first vamp with only one or two kills under their belt, where it was an accident. In fact, it’s pretty god damn common. Strange how that keeps happening, isn’t it? Almost as if vamps are a bunch of rabid monsters that can’t control themselves, and need to be put down.” She poked him again, harder, and got into his face until he could feel her breath and fury against his skin.

He almost said he was sorry. He almost said that he regretted his one and only human kill to this day, that sometimes it haunted him, that sometimes he checked on Mrs. Pavala’s family, just to torment himself, just to remind himself how easy it was for a vampire to

become a fucking monster. He almost spilled his guilt, his self loathing and pain over her, and asked for her forgiveness.

And then he grew the fuck up. He wasn't human anymore, and he had to accept that. He'd had. It wasn't murder anymore, it was feeding. A predator feasting on prey. They didn't have to kill their prey, but sometimes it happened, and sometimes that hurt. That was the struggle of a vampire, balancing the beast with their humanity. A kine would never truly appreciate that until they had a beast in their guts, changing their instincts, their reflexes, changing how they felt about everything. He wasn't human anymore, and that was that.

And that's how it was going to be, he realized. There'd be no even ground with these kine, these hunters, no way to get them to accept that Kindred were higher on the food chain. And maybe that's how it had to be, maybe that's how it should be, with hunters killing vampires who got too cocky, and vampires forever hiding in the shadows, protecting the Masquerade. No way for Kindred to ever truly reach a sort of compromise with kine. How do you convince sheep to let the wolf suck their blood on occasion, along with occasional fatalities? You don't.

Strange. Staring this livid woman in the eyes, it was oddly freeing, realizing that he could not ever come to peace with her. A ceasefire, maybe, hell maybe even a tense truce, but peace? Vampires preyed on humans, and no human would ever accept that. Why would they?

A small smile crept onto his face as he met her gaze of fire. No need to ask her to look into his eyes, none at all. And through the heavy weight of the handcuffs, he found his depths, found his beast, and pulled it up through the weight pinning it down. No, not pulling it. Breaking the chains that held it.

“You ... are mine.”

“What? You can’t be fucking serious. Kid you are a twerp, a tiny little vamp, young as fuck, and you’re wearing those ... hand ... cuffs...”

He smirked, and tore through her eyes and into her soul. “You. Are. Mine.”

“Stacey, the fuck?” The other hunter stepped in, and Jack threw his gaze at him as well.

“You. Are. Mine.” This was one easier. This one didn’t have fire to break through, tempered steel. This one was a pawn, a puppet, mind unguarded and soul exposed. And Jack reached out, and grabbed it.

The two hunters stood in front of him, and with wide eyes, jaws dropped, they waited.

“Good. The two of you will guard me with your lives until I am safe. I am your master from now on.”

“Yes master,” they said, in unison.

Jack breathed deep, and sat up straight. This wasn’t the usual way to dominate a mind, this wasn’t the gentle caressing he normally used to coax people’s thoughts, to mesmerize. This was different, this was total domination. Through the weight crushing his insides and trying to keep his Kindred disciplines at bay, the beast in him roared, snarled, free of the chains binding it, and unleashed its will upon the two helpless fools in his cell with him. This was something Viktor would do, break people and turn them into meat puppets; Julias didn’t like it, and neither did Jack.

He was going to get out of this prison though, one way or another.

“Where are the keys for the cuffs?”



“The handcuffs do not open with a key, or anything, master. They cannot be removed.”

God fucking damn it.

“How are the cuffs bound to the chair?”

“A padlock, master.”

“Keys for the padlock then?”

“Angela has them, master.”

Mother fucking piece of god damn worthless fucking shit fuck.

“Either of you have a crowbar, or can you get one?”

“No, master.”

Fuck. Fuck! He twisted and turned and banged his cuffs around against the back of the chair. The chair was bolted down, and the padlock wasn't going to break this way. If Angela had left the blowtorch, maybe that would have worked, but she hadn't.

Ok, maybe crushing their minds into mindless puppets incapable of a coherent thought wasn't the best plan. At the time it was the only way he could push past these damn cuffs, and the only way he'd get these two pawns doing what he needed them to do. But now his plan hit a wall, and quickly at that. So much for feeling so damn superior. Hubris, fuck you.

No, no, no. Fuck that. Fuck that, he wasn't going to just sit here and die to a couple of torturing psychos. He was getting out of here, no matter what it took.

“... You.” He nodded to the man. “Get out your knife, and cut off my hands. And do it fast.”

His whole body paralyzed. He'd said the words. He fucking said them, cause it was the only plan he could come up with. Hands off, handcuffs slide off, and he'd be free. Regrowing hands? Sure, he could do that, right? Probably. Maybe. Hopefully.

God, he was going to need a lot of blood, and several nights sleep, to regrow two hands.

Flip the switch in the brain, make logical decisions, and ignore the emotional state of the mind. Emotions are not logical, emotions are reactive and mindless and without concern for reality. Emotions did stupid shit like make you not do something because you were afraid of pain, even if you logically knew the outcome was worth it. He was good at flipping that switch.

But he wasn't good with pain.

The hunter didn't hesitate. He grabbed one of Jack's hands, and started cutting. Jack thought he knew pain, but every fucking day of this second life, it found ways to introduce him to new levels of it.

Metal, cutting through skin, slicing through muscle, tendon, cartilage. And then, using pure strength, the hunter cut through bone. It took a moment for the pain to kick in, just like getting a really nasty paper cut and the sting only happening a second later when the body realized what just happened. Except a million times worse.

He started to shake, and then, to scream. They'd hear, and they'd be running down to see what was going on. He had maybe twenty seconds he figured to get control, to manage the outcome, to guide the events a way a Ventrue should.

"The other! Quickly!" God, his voice was a wavering, cracking mess. Anymore and he was going to burst into tears, and he wasn't even blushing life. Fuck, please, let this work, he couldn't take any more of this. No more, no more pain for just a few seconds.

And then the hunter started cutting off the other hand, with just as much brutality and brevity as before.

The sound of his hands falling to the floor, withered husks quickly drying to a corpse, were the biting ice on the scorching inferno of pain working up his arms. Any and all DNA evidence was ruined, just a pile of compromised ashes in the shape of a hand. Older vampires would leave nothing but ash behind, but not him, he was way too young.

It wouldn't have been so overwhelming if he'd only needed to get one hand off, but the cuffs wouldn't fit through where the padlock was locked to the chair. He needed both off. And now with both off, he forced himself to stand, and looked at the jagged stumps of his limbs.

Stay. Standing. Stay. Standing.

Bone and flesh, the dried and withered flesh of a vampire. The thick Kindred blood that coated the bones worked quick to keep more of the blood from pouring out, but the wound was too great to stop it completely. And, as he let his arms drop to his sides, he heard the splish splash of his blood hitting the floor of the prison.

Stay. Standing. Ignore the pain. Ignore the agony, the searing fire working up through your limbs. Every part of him wanted to squeeze on something, and every time his muscles made the attempt, his body started to shake with new waves of pain. He had no hands. He had no fucking hands. Another scream escaped him as the pain struck him like a steel pipe against his skull, acid working down his limbs and back up into his brain until it felt like it was going to explode.

Footsteps, rushing down the hall. No time, no time to stand here and agonize over his agony. No. Fucking get ready, get ready. Get ready!

Two hunters came through the doorway. “What the fu—”

“Kill them.”

The two hunters at Jack’s side unloaded their shotguns. They weren’t just kine with shotguns, they were trained marksmen, trained killers. They didn’t miss or hesitate or any of the things he’d have to worry about with dominating normal kine. These tools were perfect.

The two other hunters managed only a second of surprise, eyes wide, panicked, torn, before they both went down. His tools didn’t aim to wound, they aimed to kill, as he instructed. The enemy fell backward, chunks of their faces and skulls splattered against the cell wall. And Jack should have looked away. But it was only a second’s time, just long enough for him to see the look of death in their eyes before they were murdered.

Don’t think about it, keep moving. He couldn’t wait, couldn’t stand here and get trapped, get pinched inside the cell. He had to get out there and get moving.

“You, what’s your name?”

“Henry, master.”

“Henry, you will cover our back. Stacey, cover the front.”

“Yes master.” Again, in unison.

Jack marched forward, two living tools at his side, and stepped over the bodies. Ignore the fact they were the first humans you’d ever killed while in control of yourself, ignore that, ignore that you’d turned these kine into tools and were probably going to get them killed as well. The pain of his wounds was constant, unending, like he’d stuck his hands inside boiling water and he’d just left them there. And he ignored it. Lament the pain later, when it was safe,

when he could take the time to get a proper meal. Flip the switch. Logical choices only.

A prison. Cells, bars, and lights. He didn't know how they had power going in an old abandoned prison, but then maybe that's why they picked this place to take him. So they must have known. Jeremiah and his psycho partner may not have been setting up a base here, but it wasn't just some random drop off zone for him. That meant there may very well have been more hunters.

And there were more. He could hear them, boots hitting the floor, many of them ahead. Had Jeremiah lied to him about this not being his base? Either way, there were a lot of people coming to investigate the noise.

He walked forward, passing the empty cells, stumps dripping blood at his side for each step. Shirtless, pants a mess and with a big hole through one leg of them. He wasn't blushing life, so his skin was pale, body thin, musculature more defined like a dehydrated person's would be. Hell, he must have looked like a zombie. He smirked through the pain, and kept walking.

Someone must have seen what was happening, and communicated it out to the others, because instead of another hunting running in blindly to see what the shooting was about, three hunters poked their heads around the doorway at the end of the hallway. And then they opened fire.

Crushing minds and communicating with animals, Jack knew these skills were coming to him quickly. Ventrue were also naturals at resilience, to be able to take a bullet to the chest and get right back up. And Jack knew he sucked at it. He threw himself to the side and into one of the cells, and screamed as he landed on his side, one of his stumps smacking against the concrete floor.

His two slaves opened fire, each ducking into their own cells and poking their heads out only long enough to unleash some bullets or

shells.

“Jack you fucking little shit! Let them go!” Angela’s voice echoed down the hall. Sounded pissed. “How the fuck did you get out of those cuffs? Should have locked down any piss-ant vamp!” And when she was pissed, she had a habit of saying too much, giving stuff away. Good to know. “Where are Mitchell and Jacky?”

Damn it. Would have been easier if he didn’t know their names. Attaching names to their shocked expressions before shotguns tore them apart was not a good thing to do.

“Dead.” Maybe, if she was pissed off enough, she might make a really bad mistake.

“You’re fucking dead! Dead! I’m going to split you open, rip out your guts, and send the ashes to your girlfriend, you fucking shit welp! Dead!”

Holy crap. If he couldn’t get out of here, she really would do that shit, and it’d take him days to die as she slowly tortured him to death. Christ she was terrifying. And insane. And stupid.

No Jeremiah though, where was he? The fuck had the phone call been about? Whatever, an opportunity was an opportunity and—a rat! Hiding in the corner, in the darkness of the empty cell,.

Jack almost rolled onto his nonexistent hands, before he stopped. The pain had become a constant drumming, persistent, almost overwhelming but not quite, enough that he could function. And, with a single glance at the rat, he grabbed its mind. “Come here.”

It sprinted over to him and stood at attention.

“Good. Now, get your friends. I’m not getting out of here without an army. I need an army.”

The rat nodded, and scurried out into the hallway before disappearing down its length, away from the gunfire.

Jack forced himself back to his feet. Don't use your hands, don't use your fucking nonexistent hands. If anything, keep your mind half on the pain, to remind yourself you don't have hands anymore. Once standing, he looked out past the bars of the cell enough to see the hunters waiting for him. They'd stopped firing. The only people still launching bullets were Jack's new bodyguards, and only when they saw an opportunity to try and land a shot. But so far, no one had shot anyone. Angela's hunters were reluctant to shoot their friends, and reluctant to stick their own heads out and get shot.

A minute or three was exactly what he needed. Rest for a second, tap into his core, pull at more of his vitae, and wait for his army to amass. And he knew he could do it. Somehow, he fucking knew it. He should have been wiped, should have been on the ground screaming about his hands, crying out in agony and then falling into torpor, no energy to remain conscious. But he wasn't, and he knew, as he grit his teeth until his jaw clicked, that he could do more.

“Let me go and no one else has to die.”

“Like I'm going to let some fucking vamp outta here!” she said, voice bouncing down the hallway.

“You started this!” He poked his head out enough to see down the hall, and glanced around to take some stock of his situation. No catwalk over him or anything, just a single floor hallway with probably eight cells on each side, and he was close to the wrong end of the hall.

“You're just a leech, a stupid fucking blood leech. Your words mean nothing. Lay down and fucking die.”

“... you're not making a good argument for me to spare the lives of your friends.” He looked across the hall to his tools. Man and

woman, each poking their heads out just enough to keep an eye on the enemy, each with empty gazes almost like porcelain dolls.

“This isn’t a fucking conversation you fucking insect. Let them go and I’ll kill you quickly, best offer.”

“ ... you suck at negotiating. You wouldn’t last five minutes at an Invictus contract meeting.”

“Shut up! You’re a cancer, a fucking cancer. You’re all ants to be walked on to get to my real goal. Housing fucking monsters, fucking Azamel, and just letting them nest? I’m going to rip out your fucking throat and film it all so your fucking bitch girlfriend can see it. And then I’m going to burn down this city, all of you, and record the fucking screams for a nice fucking lullaby to sleep by!”

Wow. Just wow. Psycho was right on the money. And, as he listened to her insane babbling, a familiar chill worked through his body, fear on his toes and traveling up his spine. This woman was terrifying. Reminded him of Athalia, hate and anger included.

Some squeaks behind him drew his attention. More rats, a dozen, and more coming in through the cracks of black, through the shadows, quick scurrying in front other cells, and more through the holes years of neglect and weather caused. More, and more, and more. They kept coming, droves of them, dozens, and then dozens more, and then hundreds. They stood in lines, rows and rows of beady eyes starring up at him. And more. And more.

He stood there, and watched the cell floor around him grow into a carpet. So many rats. His voice had carried far more weight than he’d realized, and it’d somehow echoed throughout the rats that had spread it. That wasn’t normal. But, normal or not, it’s what was happening. More rats came in through the holes in the walls, and many from other cells did their best to remain hidden to join his growing army.



There must have been food, rations or something in the basement of the prison, some place where they stored provisions, for so many rats to be here. Negligent of the government; nothing new there. He smiled as he watched the army grow, and felt his pride begin to swell as his army swelled along with it. It was almost enough to make him forget the pain he was in.

Would Viktor have been proud? Did he want that old monster to be proud of him? Viktor had been a powerful Kindred, even for his age. Julias was the same, better even, relative to his age. And Jack was following in that path, he knew that, and this was proof. What sort of history did Viktor have, where did his bloodline come from, did bloodline even play a factor in any of this? No one fucking knew, except for maybe the Lancea et Sanctum and their records.

Mental note: ask Damien. For now, survive.

He looked at his amassing army, and again reached down into his gut, into the pool of unlife, of energy, of vitae he had within him to enact his commandments.

“All of you, protect me with your lives.”

The multitude of rats nodded. Unending, alive, an army of claws and teeth and scurrying little bodies.

“Now, come, we—” The tink tink of metal rolling along the floor yanked his attention, and he spun around. Grenade? No, Angela wanted to save the lives of her hunters.

The object rolled onto the floor by his cell. Longer, thinner than a grenade. And a lifetime of video games told him what that was. That was fucking flash-bang.

“Cover it!” He threw up his arms to cover his eyes, and screamed in agony as once again, muscles squeezed down to try and work hands that weren’t there anymore. But he kept his arm there,

turned around, and waited for inevitable explosion, the sound, the light. It didn't come. Instead, a loud but pale comparison to the expected noise erupted, nothing more than a muffled cry. And no light followed.

He turned around. In the center of the hallway, a pile of rats were spread about, dead or injured, and dragging their half-torn bodies across the concrete with trails of blood. The shards of the flash-bang sat in the hall, surrounded by dead rats.

He frowned, and again began to grit his teeth. Enough of this fucking absurdity.

He stepped out into the hallway, and pointed his bleeding arms down its length. His two hunter friends jogged ahead of him, each ducking into cells and readying their guns. But it wasn't them that he was relying on to get him out of here, it was his army of rodents.

The rats came to him, and swarmed ahead of him, each only a tiny body, but together they flooded down the hall as a battalion. Perhaps it was his blood, how it still dripped from him, how he'd left a trail of it behind him as he walked that had summoned so many rats? Viktor had done similar to summon his army, and perhaps Jack had accidentally done the same. No, that wasn't how disciplines worked, you didn't accidentally do them. And yet, the rats came to him, rushed past him, and flooded him, just like that night Viktor had summoned thousands of them.

“Hunters, guard me. Rats, ahead.”

The rats didn't hesitate. The unending swarm flooded ahead, and as they poured through the bars guarding the ending of the hall, the screams began. Then, the gunshots.

“Get off me, get off me!” Angela's voice. No girly screams though, just pure rage, frustration, and more shotgun shells met with the squeaky deaths of his army.

His two hunters each took a side at the end of the hall, backs to the wall, each guarding the other's six as they both peeked into the hallway that they were trying to reach. The hallway gate was closed, but not locked. They probably couldn't find the key to lock it, thank god; he couldn't mind control a metal door to open. He groaned as he stuck his stump through the bars, and forced the gate to slide over.

He looked down the hall, both sides, and frowned. The hunters were retreating down one of the halls, shooting at the rats, or tearing them off of their legs. One of the hunters had fallen, and was roaring agony as he ripped the biting, clawing little balls of fur off his body. He was close, close enough for Jack to see his eyes.

“You. Get over here. Now.”

“Fuck you! Fuck ... you...”

Like crushing grapes. He could feel it, feel their mind even from such a distance, even through this chaos, even with only glancing eye contact.

“Come. Here.”

“Don't listen to him Johnny, don't—” Another shotgun blast into the unending flow of rats. The swarm was unending, and the hunters knew if they didn't keep it at bay, it would overrun them. To be devoured alive by rats, even he did not wish that fate on these hunters. But if given the opportunity, he'd take it.

Johnny came closer, and closer, until he stood only inches from Jack. Eyes, empty. Arms limp at his sides, gun loose in his hand.

“Lower, so I may drink.”

The mindless man leaned down, and Jack did not hesitate to crane his neck to meet him. He sank his fangs into his neck, and

began to kill the man.

“Johnny no!”

The drama of it all. It was sickening. In another circumstance, he might have laughed at how bad of a ridiculous action movie this whole situation reeked of, hunters on the retreat from a swarm of mind-controlled rats, and screaming out for their doomed comrade. Being in the situation destroyed any humor for it. This was horrible, and every passing moment he felt more horrible. But he needed blood, and Johnny was going to give it to him.

He spared no mercy with the Kiss. Done hard, done fast, done rough, there was no pleasure to be given to the prey here, only a nigh paralyzing exhaustion. For the Kindred performing the act, it was exhilarating. It was a rarity for Jack to ever feed like this, brutally, but each time it was a mark on his memory, each time it left its imprint in him, how satisfying it was to give into the beast's desire to satisfy its hunger. Blood, sweet, delicious, thick blood coating his tongue, his mouth, his throat, filling him with life itself.

He growled. The beast growled. The man fell to his knees, exhausted to the point he couldn't stand anymore, but still Jack didn't let go, bite secure on the hunter's muscle. More, and more. He drank it all, drank it until it stopped coming out easily, drank it until it stopped coming out on its own at all, drank until he had to suck on the puncture wounds to pull out the last of the blood. Only then did he release his bite, and let the man, the corpse fall.

He stared at the empty eyes of Johnny. God he wished Angela hadn't said his name. Like Mrs. Pavala, more names he'd never forget, and that was not a good thing. It would eat at him when this was over, claw at his conscience, gnaw at his heart until he was a mess. A weak, crying mess.

But it wouldn't do that now, he wouldn't let it. For now, he growled a vampire's growl, and let the flood of energy fill him. He

wouldn't be regrowing his hands yet, but the stumps healed over now that he had fresh blood within, and the pain greatly subsided.

As sickening as it was to be killing, murdering, a small part of him was enjoying how good he was as it, too good for a vampire his age.

He looked down at the rats that still surrounded him. "Destroy the evidence, destroy the body."

Loyal to the core, the rats pounced upon the corpse of the hunter. They bit through the clothes, swarmed over his flesh, and began to devour him. No time to lick the fresh bite wounds closed, and the body had to be removed regardless. A bloodless corpse would attract attention, especially considering all the other traces of paranormal violence that were being left around.

Jack felt alive again, as much as a vampire could be. The blood pulsed through him, and he growled louder as he felt the sated beast purr its satisfaction, inside his guts. Satisfied, but also, empowered. He could keep going, he could go on. He could break these hunters, and get out of here, back to Antoinette, back into her arms, even if he had to walk over the corpses of a hundred hunters. Even if he had to make a bridge of corpses to cross.

"You," he said to a group of the rats behind him. "Spread out, find more, bring more of your kind here. Bring all that you can find to me."

He stepped out into the next hall, and continued his march. His two guards dashed in after him and darted ahead, each taking up positions along the long hallway. Nothing to duck behind this time though. There were other cells, but they were isolation cells, closed. Behind him was a dead end, and ahead of him was Angela and more of her crew. How many hunters did she have?

He marched forward, rats pouring in from more cracks, more and more, until they poured over each other to try and fit along the

hallway floor. The hunters at the end of the hall, poking their head around the corner and looking through the bars, gasped.

“Get out of my way and you get to live.”

“Fuck you! What the fuck is this? You’re just a fucking kid, a fucking fledgling vamp, you don’t get to do this!”

She wasn’t doing a very good job with the morale. The hunters looked panicked, eyes wide. And why wouldn’t they be? He was coming for them, bloody stumps for arms, shirtless, and with an army of rats at his beck and call. He only now realized that blood was on his lips, his chin, and some had run down his neck and onto his bare chest. The blood of their friend, their comrade Johnny.

He must have looked like a god damn monster.

He snarled as he marched forward. A glance left and right showed more beady eyes, more rats poking their noses out of their hiding holes. Instead of running from the madness, the echoes of his command drew them.

“You. Are mine. Defend me with your lives.”

The new rats nodded, and jumped into the fray, chittering, scurrying, and they joined the flood of brown fur. Many stayed close to him, flowing around his steps, avoiding getting crushed by his shoes, and yet pouring over them at the same time. They joined the teeming masses of his army, and poured out into the hallway, like ocean waves.

Is this what it felt like for Viktor? Did the elder find it so strangely easy to break the minds of others, to grab their conscious thoughts and crush them until they were mindless, obedient puppets? Did he find it so easy to summon animals to his side, to defend him and be his scouts, be his army of teeth and claws? Did it feel so empowering, so amazing for him too?

Jack walked forward, and the rats flowed around him, an aura of squeaking death. Another flash-bang was tossed into the hallway, and again the rats swarmed it, far more of them this time, a couple hundred piling into a riling mass of little bodies. Many died to the resulting explosion, but the sound, the flash of the device was suppressed to nothing more than a quiet plop, and Jack continued on without stopping. If the enemy had been smart, they'd have tossed a grenade or molotov, and accepted the loss of their friends Henry and Stacey. Probably still hoping they could save them. Their hopes would be their undoing.

He felt good. He felt great, pain and death and the taste of blood mixing into a crescendo of euphoric violence, silencing his grief over the murders he'd committed. He felt Viktor's bloodline coursing through his veins. He felt like crushing more of these idiot hunters beneath him. How dare they underestimate him because he was young, the youngest in Dolareido. How dare they try and bully him, torture him, break him. How dare they injure him. How dare these lowly bloodbags try and manipulate him.

He could hear shouting from beyond the hall of metal and concrete, the loading of weapons, the hollers of commands being given. 'Spread out'. 'Get behind these tables'. 'If we have to kill Stace and Henry then do it'. They'd learn, they'd all learn.

At first, he was only going to kill if necessary. But now the sweet blood was on his tongue, and he couldn't help but lick his fangs as he continued into the awaiting maw of his enemies.

If there was one way he was going to die, it wasn't here, to this, to them. He was going to kill every last one of them.

# Chapter 49

~~Beatrice~~

Nearing Azamel's hole in the ground, back in a place she very much didn't want to be. But this was how the magic happened, throwing yourself into the deep end and seeing if you could swim. She had Jacob with her, so at least he'd help her out if she started drowning. Hopefully. Maybe.

Azamel's place was still maybe a quarter mile ahead, and each step down the abandoned tunnel sent larger and larger chills up Triss's spine. She could feel it, her, the old woman, feel the oppression the monster radiated, like something thick in the air. Felt like trying to swim through some sort of sludge, something that made you not want to be there.

And it wasn't like that the first time she'd come here. It was there, but it wasn't like this, not like this.

It wasn't just a feeling either. The tunnel was flickering, fading in and out, and the moving shadows weren't rare anymore. They were everywhere. And to make it even creepier, they weren't always black. Sometimes, bits of purple or red sneaked into the waves of shadow, and sometimes bits of gold.

It only got worse the closer they got to Azamel's place. Sometimes the tunnel faded out, pitch blackness swallowing them, only for a brief flash of something to appear. White pillars with golden platforms circling their contours every twenty feet or so, with small lighthouse-like shapes on the top, and red drapes with gold embroidery hanging from them. And then they were gone, and the two vampires were again walking in a long, boring, abandoned subway tunnel.



Then again it flashed, back in a dream, back in some sort of madness of long stretches of green grass, trimmed, tall, weird bushes, and a river that flowed. Again, gone, replaced with dirty train tracks, concave walls of concrete brick, and the old, dusty floor around them.

Again, more flashes, except now puddles of blood lined white stone floor. Guillotines beneath a red sky, a dozen of them, each with a fresh body to bleed red into the puddles. The pools of red connected into a small, carved ravine in the white floor, and followed its twisting snake-like shape into the river, where the blood flowed away. Then they were back to the tunnel, and its curve at the end where it opened up into Azamel's home.

A big, empty room of concrete, with a stage a foot or two high off the floor. Here, Azamel had set up Grandma's place, rocking chair and shitty furniture included.

But it wasn't Grandma's place. Holy fucking shit. Beatrice gasped and stepped back as she looked up, gulping down nothing and eyes widening until her new eye started to hurt. A blood moon, literally. A giant red moon far far far too close to the planet, so big it filled half the sky. It bled red, thick, a liquid that fell upon the palace that stood before her, some sort of palace made of white stone, smooth, carved, ornate, with tall pillars surrounding it, and multiples domes on its roof topped with gold spears.

Guillotines were spread around the palace courtyard, and they bled into the twisting, turning man-made stream of red that leaked out into the river beside the palace. More than just guillotines added to the death show, but spears with corpses mounted on them, skin flayed or backs split open from what had to be a hundred strikes from a whip. And then gone again, back to the concrete, the shitty old lights that were somehow still working, and the god awful lamp plugged into an extension cord on granny's stage.

Her, sitting in her chair, rocking back and forth and smoking a cigarette, an old book in hand. Triss tried to hide her trembling.

“What are you doing here, old man?” she said.

Jacob laughed, predictably. “Pot calling kettle.”

“And you have an eye. You looked better with the bandage.”

“Yeah well, I couldn’t see you all too well without the eye.”

“See me?” Azamel coughed, coughed, and coughed a few more times until Triss was sure she’d cough up a lung. But it passed, and she tapped her slippers on the stage floor twice as she took another drag of her cig. “I had always assumed you could see without eyes.”

“I can, but now, I can see you.”

“You ... can see me?” She leaned forward, set an elbow against the chair arm, and her chin in the palm, cigarette between her fingers. Her eyes, old, worn, stared into Jacob with a piercing gaze Triss didn’t expect from an old woman.

And then the world changed around her again. The guillotines, the spears, and other devices of torture were set about, some with people still in them. Screams filled the air, and Beatrice raised her hands to cover her ears to block them out. But they were constant, rising and falling in volume like waves in a sea of torture. The palace was closer now, and the blood that poured from the moon above dripped down its shiny white walls like slime.

But now there was something in front of the palace, and Triss backed away again until she felt her butt hit the concrete behind her. An elephant? No, some sort of person with an elephant head, but from head to toe they had the skin of an elephant. Four arms, human, but each hand held a chain, and from each chain dangled something Triss did not want to see. A corpse from one. A giant net

filled with fresh skulls in the other. And finally, a sword in both of the remaining hands, scimitars. They were coated in blood, and dripped of it, unending, as if they themselves were bleeding.

The size was impossible. No way, there was no fucking way something this big was real, no way it could have existed. It towered over them, fifty feet tall sitting down, with legs folded in front of it crossed at the ankle, knees apart.

She recognized that figure. She knew absolutely shit all about religions or Hinduism, but she recognized an iconic figure when she saw one, looming over her like a god ready to squash a buzzing insect.

The image faded away, replaced with the sobering world of concrete and tunnels, electricity and shitty green chair that should have been burned for its crime against eyes everywhere.

“... you can see me.” Azamel blew smoke toward them, but it dispersed long before reaching them. “No, silly girl, I am not who you think I am.” Another deep drag of her cig, and she shrugged as she leaned back in her shitty, creaking recliner. “I’m not even from the East.”

“I ... I ... uh ... I—”

“And I do not appreciate prying eyes!” She slammed one of her slippers down. Not a slipper, not a fucking slipper at all. As the images of the two realities overlapped, the giant elephant thing raised a leg, and slammed it against the white, bloodied stone that it sat upon.

And the world began to quake. The rivers of blood began to boil, rippling with the vibrating world, and the blood moon cried out its agony, a deep bellowing sound like a great whale speared through its side. The corpses began to moan, the heads that sat about their prostrated or pinned bodies crying out to the sky. Blood leaked from

their nostrils, ears, their mouths, and their eyes. It flowed into the twisting blood river, and the edges of the small stream splashed up, over, and onto the white that surrounded Triss.

Back to the real world, back to old granny sitting in her chair, glaring at the two vampires who had the audacity to enter her shitty home.

Oh good fucking god they were going to die.

“A big girl, aren’t you?” Jacob said.

Triss grabbed him by the arm and started to shake the damn bastard. “I’m sorry, did you not see the giant monster woman. Did you not see the fucking corpses? Don’t piss off the giant monster woman!” she said, listening in close to whisper.

Jacob snickered, and kept his eye on the granny in the chair. “So you old bat, I have some questions for you.”

She snorted, and flicked the cigarette his way. He dodged. Even a lit cigarette could be nasty painful to a vampire.

“You bring your blood magic to my home so you can pry into my world, sneak a peek at my true self, and now you have questions for me? The nerve.”

“That I do. Turns out you’ve been busy in the time you were gone. I’d heard you’d destroyed villages before your first arrival in the city, but even after you left Dolareido, you destroyed some towns. Why oh why would a nice old lady like you do such a thing.”

Poking the bear with a hot iron poker. Dead. Yeap, they were dead.

“I pursue my inheritance.”

“So I heard, but you’ll have to forgive me. I’ve no idea what that means.”

“ ... and how did you hear that this was my goal?”

Jacob shrugged, laughed, and did a small spin in place. “My secret.”

The old woman snarled, and reached into her god awful sweater vest to pull out a pack of cigarettes. Trembling hands struggled to retrieve another cancer stick, and she growled down at the package as it fought against her. But with time, one succumbed to her assault, and she set it on her lips and lit it like it was the most natural thing to her, like someone putting on their glasses that they’d been wearing for a hundred years.

It was probably Black Blood that told Jacob about this, but then how did that freak show know? And what the fuck was inheritance, if even Jacob and Black Blood didn’t know what it meant?

“Mark. Get rid of these two.”

Triss almost squeaked as a man stepped out from behind a four panel room divider on the stage, some shoddy piece of hazel crap that she could probably buy at a flea market for a dollar. The man looked entirely forgettable, dark skin, a bit overweight, clean shaven with short, curly hair. Some jeans and a worn out gray shirt covered what she guessed was a fair amount of muscle to go with that fair amount of fat.

How had she not sensed him? Jacob didn’t look surprised, but she was, and she snarled as the unknown man started to walk toward them.

“I’m not leaving,” Jacob said. “Jack’s disappeared.”

“ ... has he?” Azamel said.

“As if you didn’t know.”

“Perhaps I didn’t?”

“Well, you know now. And I bet you know what’s happened to him.”

Azamel raised a hand, and blocked Mark’s forward march. “What does a witch care for the Invictus boy?”

Jacob shrugged. “Kid’s great, isn’t he? Has this nasty habit of getting to the truth of things, and opening his mouth about it when he should probably just keep his lips sealed.” Old Joker started to pace, and put his hands against the small of his back as he walked around. Fucking Sherlock Homes being a jackass. “Avery asked for his help in being an intermediary with her and the Kindred here. Makes perfect sense, given this is a vampire’s city, and the werewolves are just guests. Given your recent strifes with the Invictus, Athalia’s talk with Jack at the ball was probably you asking him to be the same thing, wasn’t it?”

Well. Damn, she should have realized that. Or maybe she shouldn’t have, cause Azamel’s frown was only growing, and she lowered her hand once more.

Mark jumped down from the stage, and walked toward Jacob. The flickering realities struck Beatrice once again, and she sneered at the sight of Mark, at the weird, worm-like entities crawling on the man’s skin. Big, slimy, gross worm things, all over him.

Not all over him. Him. They were him. The worms worked into his flesh, and out again, out through his nostrils and where eyeballs should have been, then back into his ears. One worked up the jaw, the exposed bone letting it wriggle up into the man’s skull, and then down into his rib cage. A skeleton, but not. A cloak of something like dark, leathery, wet skin was draped over his shoulders, but the

chest was undone, and the skeleton inside was visible as Triss's eye exposed the hidden nightmare's form.

She could smell rotting flesh. Jacob's eye was doing a lot more than letting her see the nightmares these monsters brought with them. It was letting her experience them.

"You don't want none of this, Mark." Jacob raised a hand, index finger pointed down, and twirled it around. "Just turn around and walk away before I put you in the ground."

Mark sneered, raised his hands, and cracked his knuckles. Not a word from him though, the silent lackey type. If he'd been wearing some brass knuckles, it would have fit the motif perfectly. But not the rotting motif, the corpse walking around motif, the disgusting stench and stomach-turning display motif. As he came closer, Triss took another step back, hand raised to cover her nose.

"Hey, don't say I didn't warn you." And out came Jacob's fist. At first Triss thought her boss might give the Begotten a warning punch, something to let him know the man meant business. Surely something to let the idiot know what it meant to fuck with an elder Kindred, especially one as old as Jacob.

But, no, Jacob didn't do things the way you'd expect. He gave Mark a proper punch, the sort of punch he used on Antoinette, the sort of punch that destroyed jaws to the point they ripped off the face. This Mark fellow was going to die.

Mark fell apart. His body shattered around Jacob's fist, but didn't get sent flying backward. Instead, he fell to the ground, and him, his clothes, everything just fell away into a giant pile of really big worms. Like, foot long worms, an inch thick and shiny with their slimy, wriggling bodies. And not in the weird nightmare world either that Beatrice could see, or at least not only there. It was in both worlds, a big mess of gross.

“Couldn’t hold together, heh.” Jacob marched over to the pile of worms, and glared down at its writhing mass. “You’re not the first Begotten to try this trick.”

“Oh?” Azamel said. “I think you underestimate my companion.”

Jacob shrugged, and dusted off his shoulder. “We don’t have to fight. I came here for information, about you, and Jack. Just tell me —”

The old man jumped back, and frowned at the mess of worms. It was rebuilding itself, but coming for Jacob at the same time, spreading out over the floor. One-eye snorted and kicked at the pile, and a dozen of the giant slimy bodies splattered, guts and such landing around the concrete beneath them. But, the guts, the gooey skin, the slime, they started to pool back together, until the worms were whole once again.

“Ooh, impressive,” her boss said.

Yeah, she was going to stay out of this and just watch for a little bit. Cause, gross.

There were more worms though. Triss raised a brow as she looked around, and grit her teeth as the flickering realities fought to break her mind. A trail of worms, of big, fat, juicy worms were mixed into the nightmare world. She didn’t understand it, didn’t get it, but was pretty sure she wasn’t in the nightmare so it wasn’t like she had to worry about all the crazy shit she was getting glimpses of. They weren’t in the nightmare, right? Fiona said you had to go into it, that you couldn’t be in both at the same time. But, also, the beast and horror kind of were? Didn’t make any fucking sense.

But that’s what the eyes were for, to try and figure out how these Begotten things worked. And so far they worked really fucking scary like. She took another step back as more worms started to appear, and more, and more, until she could feel them pressing up against



the toes of her boots and she had to jump back again to get away from them.

Jacob felt no such compulsion. He folded his arms across his chest, and watched the sea of worms begin to grow around them. Deeper, more of them, until it was up over the ankles.

Time to nope the fuck out. Triss jumped, a good twenty feet through the air, to land on Azamel's stage. "Yeah, uh ... I'm just gonna watch if that's ok with you."

The old monster shrugged, and kept her eyes on the sea of gross surrounding her home. It was getting darker too, and Triss had to cover her new eye with a hand to make sure it was something actually happening, not more fake nightmare shit. It was real.

Mark's hand shot out of pile of worms, near Jacob's leg, and grabbed his ankle.

"The fu—" The old man went down, yanked and yanked hard. The teeming pile of worms was a foot deep, and it surrounded Jacob for thirty feet on all sides of him. More than enough space for Mark to hide and strike out. When he did, Triss covered her normal eye, and watched a skeleton draped in a cloak of old flesh strike out from the foul mound, bony fingers clutching the Nosferatu's leg and yanking on him to the side.

Like watching a shark thrash around, some helpless seal in its mouth getting torn to bits. Jacob didn't tear, but the comparison was apt. Mark's hand moved left and right through the ocean of worms, his form hidden underneath the surface, and Jacob's body was dragged along at speeds fast enough to break bone. Left, right, each thrash crashing Jacob's limbs against the worms, whiplash causing the sorts of sounds that made Triss wince and groan. Dislocating limbs.

Jacob reached down, wrapped his fingers around the hand, and returned the unwanted yank. Up came Mark, out of the mountain of death, and out into the open. Dislocated limbs or not, Jacob stared at the man, growled at him, raised him up by the collar of his shirt, and shook him.

“You’re annoying me, pest. You think you know nightmares? Think you understand nightmares? You’re just a fucking child, someone given a gift, and you didn’t earn it.” Jacob threw the man down into the worms, and glared at him as Jacob’s limbs, his knees, his elbows, all snapped back into their proper orientations, each with a crunch. “Want a nightmare? Here’s a fucking nightmare.”

Mark was unfazed by all of this. Didn’t say a word, didn’t grumble or groan, and his facial expressions seemed just as bored, as if none of this was a threat. If Jacob took another swing at him, Triss figured he’d just melt apart into more worms.

But then he started to grumble. Squirm, groan, and then the Begotten raised his hands to cover his eyes. His voice started to come out, a normal, a perfectly normal sounding voice, except it was getting louder, more pained, filled with rasped screams, until the screams were ringing off the walls.

The worms vanished, faded away, some melting into goo that dispersed into nothing, and others vanishing like dust in the wind. The poor man fell forward onto his elbows and knees, clutching his face, screaming into his palms as he was trapped between a sob and a death cry.

Jacob stood beside him, grinned down at him, and let out a long, warm sigh, the sort of sigh Triss made after she’d had great sex with Julias. Fucker was happy with himself, for what he just did, for forcing a nightmare on a nightmare. He was a Nosferatu, it was in their blood to make people fear, fear on a level they wouldn’t understand until the deformed vampire burrowed into their brain,

ripped open a hole, and dropped in a nightmare that could literally drive kine to commit suicide to escape it.

It was horrible. It was truly, utterly fucking horrible, and Triss hated doing it. She rarely did, and only to people who deserved it. A nasty kine who needed to die, or that Joe fuckwad. But Jacob took things to a new level.

The skeleton, the man, fell forward, and screamed into the floor.

“You really think I came here for a brawl with your buddy here, Azamel?” One-eye shrugged, and started to pace again. Chin in hand, he used his other to wag a finger around, Joker smile growing bigger.

“No ... I suppose not. Release Mark.”

“In a bit. Gotta let the bastard soak in the juices a minute, you know?”

Fucker thought he was on a cooking show. Beatrice winced again, and again, as Mark cried into the floor, screamed bloody murder, and fell onto his side. Poor guy curled up into the fetal position, and screamed. And screamed. And screamed.

“Dude, please,” Triss said. “Pretty sure point’s made.”

Jacob stopped pacing, raised the brow of his new eye as he looked at her, and shrugged. A snap of the fingers later, and the screaming stopped.

Mark sat up with a jolt, and turned over to look at Jacob. He was sweating, his eyes were wide, and his body was trembling. Triss covered her normal eye to get a glimpse of the other side, to see the nightmare inside this disgusting thing, to see what sort of shit Jacob’s nightmare discipline had done to the wretched soul. The skeleton thing was trembling as well, to the point its bones rattled,

and worms and insects fell from it and the skin cloak it wore, onto the bloodied white floor of the palace courtyard.

Beatrice had gotten the impression Begotten and Werewolves considered themselves stronger than vampires. And it was true for the most part. Elders were the exception to that rule.

Triss could tell she wouldn't be able to handle Mark in a fight, not easily. She was a young vampire, and that was to be expected, especially when up against major freak shows like these Begotten. But Jacob was a different story, a whole different story. So damn easy to forget when he started acting like a juvenile jackass, that Jacob was fucking ancient, and for a vamp, that meant fucking strong.

She had to raise a clawed hand to her face to hide how a grin was coming through. Proud, maybe, that her boss was that much of a fucking powerhouse? Yeah, she could be a little proud of that.

The man wasn't screaming anymore at least, but his eyes refused to blink, locked onto Jacob. No one said anything, moved, did anything, and soon Triss could hear the panicked man's heart beating up a storm in the silence. Fucker was still terrified, despite Jacob having released him.

Triss hopped down onto the floor, and stood beside her boss. Still moans and groans happening behind them as Mark continued to back away, sliding his ass on the floor until his back was against the concrete bricks.

Jacob winked at her. With the eye. Fucking gross.

"I think I may have overestimated Mark's abilities," Granny said.

"Underestimated mine, more like it." One-eye shrugged and resumed his pacing. A fedora or deerstalker hat with a pipe between his lips would have been a good fit. "I've been here, in this place,

since you were just an idiot child, Azamel. Antoinette and I let you stay because you are more trouble than you're worth to expel, not because we can't. Don't forget that."

She snorted, blew some smoke his way, and leaned back to begin gently rocking her chair. "So what do you want to know?"

"I want to know who you're running from."

The old woman snorted again, and slammed her foot. And again, the flickering images of the great beast she was, and the temple of blood she guarded awoke before Triss. Again, the room shook, and the alien monster trumpeted its annoyance. An elephant's trumpet noise, but thunderous, booming and layered with growling roars.

"I run from no one. I am the conqueror, idiot vampire. I am—"

"On the run from someone. Or something. Or maybe a group of people. How many did you piss off to make you want to return here and hide away in my city's underground?" Apparently giant elephant monster and her temple of torture didn't faze Jacob. It wouldn't surprise Triss if the old man had created a similar landscape in his youth.

"... and why should I tell you?"

"Because if you don't, I'll beat you up."

Another puff of smoke, and the old woman growled at the scary bastard threatening her. "Is this how it's going to be between us, Jacob?"

"Looks like. I got a good thing going in Dolareido these days and I don't want you spoiling it."

She tossed aside her cigarette, and lit another. The missing piece of herself, cigarettes. Triss had never suffered a true chemical

addiction before, and she could only imagine what that must have been like if you'd been smoking your whole life. Would probably have had an easier time convincing the woman to try metal music.

“It was spoiling when I arrived, old man.”

Both Nosferatu raised a brow, looked at each other, then at her. “How?” they said, in unison.

“Viktor, Rebecca, and Tony’s death did not go unnoticed. Hunters spread word of the change, so I hear. They came, and watched Dolareido tear itself apart with Lucas’s madness. Then he was dead, by the Prince’s hand, and a host of Kindred with him.”

One-eye sighed, but nodded, and walked over to Azamel. Cause, yeah, that was a good idea. He hopped up onto the stage, and started rooting around through the old lady’s things. Dresser, back of the chair, bed — she’d added a bed since the last time Beatrice visited — and some of her other things. Like a nosy kid.

“Dolareido’s a peaceful place these days,” he said. “Like I said, I got a good thing going.”

“You want peace? Don’t lie to me Jacob.”

“ ... What I want is a little more complicated than that.”

“Isn’t it for everyone?”

Triss shook her head and raised a hand. “No. Think I’d be happy with a regular source of blood, fucking, and a safe place to sleep. Call me simple.”

The two old farts glared at her. Yeah, not a good time for jokes.

“Hunters have come,” Azamel said, “and were coming all along. They have been silent, content to take their time in planning the

downfall of Kindred in the city. Four of them of particular skill have been here since Lucas's death, and they have begun working with ... an old enemy, that followed me here."

"An old enemy?" Triss said.

"Yes little girl, an old enemy. A killer of my kind. Jeremiah is human, but more, and he has recruited a host of hunters to join him in his crusade against me."

"So if I get rid of you, they'll leave?" Jacob said. Not really a question, given the huge smirk on his face.

"Not until every Begotten, Uratha, and Kindred are dead, I imagine."

"... so now your problem is our problem. Unless of course you're lying, and this Jeremiah fellow will leave once you're dead." One-eye came up beside the old monster, and frowned at her. Smirking, frowning, smiling, sneering, man was all over the place, and each expression was accompanied by a one-eyed gaze that kept ... looking at things. This whole night was filled with grossness.

"Or he stays, and you would be killing a powerful ally in this little battle that is now, as you say, your problem." Granny turned her head, looked up at the Nosferatu glaring down at her, and breathed smoke into his face. "If you can kill me, that is."

And, again, silence fell upon the room and everyone in it until all that could be heard was the breathing of the two living creatures, and their heartbeats. Mark's, loud, panicked, and Azamel's, steady, and soft. The two old monsters stared at each other on the stage, until Triss was sure a spaghetti western song would start playing. Or, maybe, some Japanese drums

Footsteps down the tunnel. Everyone turned, watched, and waited, for the source to make itself known. Athalia came out of the

darkness, a grocery bag in each hand, and an eyebrow raised to match their's.

“Um ... what the fuck is going on here?” she said.

“An interrogation.” Jacob smirked, hopped off the platform, and started to walk toward Athalia. “Jack’s missing. The elephant woman here says a mad fucker called Jeremiah is in town. Connection?”

Athalia set down her groceries, but didn't get to do much else as Jacob came in closer. Poor girl had no choice but to back up a few steps, and lean back as she noticed the bastard had an eye.

“Jack’s missing?”

Triss nodded, and jogged up to stand beside Jacob. And maybe stop him if the man got a little violent, or nightmare-y. She was starting to think that maybe the man took it personally, that these nightmare monsters thought they could be scarier than a Nosferatu and his unique ability to bestow hallucinogenic nightmares. Jacob probably considered himself the scariest thing Dolareido had to offer, and these Begotten thought themselves the same thing.

Professional rivalry? Heh.

“Jack is missing,” she said. “And we were hoping you'd know where.”

“I ... I don't know where. Didn't even know he was missing.”

Triss almost said something, but stopped herself as the eye in her skull did its magic. A flickering image, a momentary glimpse of the other side, of the realm these nightmare creatures called home. And more importantly, a glimpse at Athalia, at true Athalia.



Tall, dark, waving bits of shadow as a backdrop, and a massive skull in the foreground of this monster, this entity that filled the tunnel. It had horns. Spiked, jagged and sharp. Arms too, like a skeleton's, but massive and black, dripping a black fog too, like a toxic cloud. The arms were covered in the same spikes, serrated, and they reached out from the blackness that surrounded the monster, blackness that she wore like a cloak.

Triss looked up and up, and stared at it, her, the thing, skin so tight and gaunt she didn't notice it wasn't a skeleton at first. It had no legs; instead, a dangling spinal cord hung from a partly exposed rib cage in the waving shadow. Two enormous, black wings joined the darkness that surrounded it, as if someone had taken an angel and burned it to char.

The only thing that didn't scream darkness was the two, white, glowing dots in the center of its empty, black eye sockets. Like staring into the eyes of death itself.

Fuck, that was happening a lot lately.

Jacob must have noticed it too, cause he whistled and folded his arms across his chest. "You look like a bigger threat than that Mark jackass."

"Mark? What? Wait, the fuck did you do to him?" She looked past him, to where the man was sitting, and her shocked expression faded into a blatant I'm-going-to-kill-you face. Marched right up to Jacob, and jammed her finger against his chest. "The fuck did you do to him, fucking leech?"

Not a good idea, not a good idea at all. Triss winced as Jacob raised a hand and backhanded the girl. If it'd been a normal backhand, like a dramatic scene in a movie, enough to sting, maybe even knock the girl down, that'd have been one thing. But you never knew with Jacob, and apparently the old man felt like being a colossal asshole tonight. Athalia half spun, half flew through the air,

blood decorating the tunnel wall as it spewed from her lip, and she collided against the concrete bricks of where the tunnel opened up into Azamel's home.

Man had no issue making enemies; hell, he enjoyed it. Antoinette definitely had the softer hand, despite the reputation of her steel will. Pros and cons to both approaches, Triss supposed.

“Jack is missing, and everyone saw you talking with him at the ball. Any idea where he went?” One-eye walked up to her, a small hop to his step and a grin on his Joker face, before he reached down and picked the girl up.

“Jacob,” Azamel said, “release her.”

“You're not giving orders here, hag. Now, you,” Jacob said as he picked Athalia up by her throat with one hand, and pointed a finger at her with the other, “are annoying. You're loud, you piss people off, you piss Kindred off who haven't done a damn fucking thing to you. Just cause Viktor and his sick fetishes royally fucked you over, you feel the need to shit on everyone? Man's dead, get over it.”

“I—”

“Oh shut the fuck up.” He threw her aside and into the main room. A vampire would have handled the physical violence better, but these monsters seemed perfectly human out in the real world. Sort of. They ate and drank, they breathed, they bled and they broke. Athalia crashed against the concrete with an audible crunch, and rolled a few times to stop on her back beside Mark.

Sighing, Triss leaned in toward her boss. “Dude, seriously, you're going to burn some bridges here.”

“And if I do?”

“I want to find Jack alive, you know?” She really hadn’t expected Jacob to get this physical.

Azamel sighed, took another puff, and waved a slow hand. “Enough. I sense a disturbance in the dream ... in one of Fiona’s chambers.”

Athalia sat up, groaned a few times, and forced herself back to her feet. “Anything to do with these fuckers?” Woman was bleeding hate, and blood, and Jacob wasn’t making it any better.

“No. Humans.”

Everyone frozen. Humans probably meant hunters. Shit shit shit.

“Mark, go home. Athalia, take Beatrice here to Fiona. I suspect the girl has run into some of Jeremiah’s troupe, and they may know a thing or two about Jack’s disappearance.”

“You can’t seriously—”

“Now, Athalia.” Azamel’s voice was rough, grit and age and old as dirt. But solid, and Triss could see how Grandma’s words hit Athalia with more weight than the tone carried. Must have earned her role as leader of these freaks then.

“... fine. Come on leech.” Without bothering to look Triss in the eye, Athalia started walking in the other direction, toward a tunnel on the opposite end of the room. The lights weren’t working over there, so only darkness awaited them. And of course, the damn bitch didn’t even wait for Triss before she rounded the corner.

“Fucking hell, wait! God damn it.” She jogged after the monster, sighing the whole time. Jacob just had to make things worse. Now this Athalia woman hated Triss, and it wouldn’t surprise her if she’d leave Triss to die given the opportunity.

At least Azamel was extending an olive branch. A flimsy one bound to break the moment Triss put her weight on it, but it was better than nothing.

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~~Natasha~~

“Now it’s just us adults,” Jacob said.

“Indeed.”

“So, this Jeremiah man, got a description for me?”

“A bit tall, appears to be in his fifties, short gray hair, with many scars. Tattoos from the neck down.”

“I guess you’ve seen him in person then?”

“He has been a thorn in my side for decades.” The old woman shrugged, and blew another puff of smoke out to fill the room with more of the disgusting smell. “And has nearly killed me on two occasions.”

Jacob laughed, and started to pace in place, some fingers to his chin. Seeing the elder pretend to be a detective was odd, and off putting. The psycho did love to play games, keep people on their toes, Natasha included.

“A human nearly killing you, old monster?”

“... how is it that you are able to see me, Jacob? Where did you get that eye?”

“Think I’ll tell you just because my girl isn’t here anymore?”

“Yes.”

Again the elder laughed, and walked up to the stage to lean in against it with one foot raised to press on its edge.

“It was a gift from the other side.”

“... the other side? What would the world of spirits want with me?” Azamel blew smoke down at the man’s face, and tapped on the cigarette so more ashes fell into the ashtray. She didn’t bother to look either. Must have been smoking her whole life, however long that was.

“It’s all connected, isn’t it? This physical world of ours seems to be at the center of a lot of shit. You fuck with it, and they notice.”

“There is something special about this city though, isn’t there? For spirits to take notice as they do,” she said.

“Oh there is.”

“And that would be?”

“Like I’d tell you, old hag.”

Azamel snorted, and again blew smoke down at him. “You’re infuriating.”

“And you’re unwanted. But, now that the problem is here, I’m going to have to ask for your help in dealing with it, with Jeremiah and whoever the fuck else he’s got working for him.”

“How quickly you change tunes.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, let me rephrase that. Help undo this mess you’ve caused, or I’ll rip out your fucking spine and let Jeremiah have his way with your saggy, shit-filled corpse.”

Azamel laughed. A croaking, raspy sound that made Natasha wince with each gargle of phlegm.

“Come into my home, my real home, and you’ll find circumstances quite different, vampire.”

They both sneered at each other. Natasha crouched in the shadow as low as she could, half hidden around the curving tunnel, every possible ounce of vitae she had pouring into her cloak of night. Getting caught now could easily mean she was dead, but she needed this info, needed to know what the fuck was going on. Antoinette had asked her to find out the weakness of the Begotten, and this wasn’t exactly that, but it was a step in that direction. And, she needed to know, because these two old bastards knew what was going on in the city, knew about shit they didn’t want others knowing. Information that could save Jack. Hell, information that could keep anything else from going to hell.

Or she was completely wrong and was wasting her time. The sad truth about espionage was that it often led nowhere.

“So this Jeremiah. Think he’ll go after Kindred or Uratha himself?”

“Probably. His goal is to kill Begotten, but he has killed others, and often brings hunters with him, or attracts them to his cause. They will no doubt jump at the opportunity.” She chuckled, another hoarse, disgusting sound, and rubbed her leg with one hand while smoking with the other. “Could be fifty of those fanatics in the city by now. And more to come, surely.”

Oh no. Natasha had no real experience dealing with hunters. The few times an incident had ever occurred in her comparatively short life, older Kindred had taken care of it. She knew Dolareido had it far better than most cities with Kindred, but now Azamel’s presence ruined that. No wonder Antoinette and Jacob were so upset. Azamel said the city was already spoiled, but that could have been a lie.

“... I’ll be back, Azamel. You and I are going to have a chat, a proper, lengthy chat someday. In your lair.”

She snorted, and flicked some of the fresh ash of her cigarette at him. “You’ll find I’m not so friendly there, Jacob.”

“Yeah well, private, right? Good place to get away from prying eyes.”

And then the man looked at her. Looked at her, with his new eye. She froze, stared at the man in the distance, and became stone. Don’t move don’t move don’t move. He can’t see you, your cloak of night is strong, and Jacob was no Mekhet, he didn’t have auspex to see you. Or maybe he did? She knew there were ways to learn the bloodclan-specific disciplines of a bloodclan different to your own, but as far as she knew, Kindred rarely engaged in such pursuits. But then, Jacob was ancient; who knew what sort of crazy shit he did when he was younger. He might be able to see her?

Or she greatly underestimated his normal senses, and he could see her without auspex.

But the man looked back to Azamel, shrugged, and turned to start walking down the tunnel, toward Natasha. His hands were in his pockets, and his gaze was downcast, a small smirk on his lips.

“See you later old hag. Don’t bring my city down on my head while I’m sleeping, k?”

“ ... my desire isn’t to destroy Kindred, Malachi.”

He stopped, grit his teeth hard enough Natasha could hear the bone grind. Smirk gone, shoulders shaking, the one-eyed beast squeezed his fists at his sides until they were trembling. But he moved on. With some time to calm down, he wiped his shoulder clean, as if he was dusting his sandals free of the dirt of Azamel’s presence, and continued on down the tunnel. Toward Natasha.

Natasha slipped back around the curve of the tunnel, and faded into the darkness of a doorway. No lights in this small section of the

tunnel worked, and the doorway, though locked, had flat walls carved into the tunnel side. She sat down on her ass and feet in the corner of it, her side pressed to the wall, and her cloak of night dialed to the point she was struggling to maintain it. Draining, so very draining to keep it up this strong, but she wanted to know more. Really, really wanted to know more.

What was it about Mekhet that they just couldn't help but be drawn to secrets? Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid. She should have just bolted the moment Jacob turned around. Run like a smart person. She was a young ancilla, and Jacob — or Malachi apparently — was very old even by elder standards. Vampires got stronger as they got older, and everyone knew Jacob, Antoinette, and Daniel were ancient.

So she should have been smart enough to just run away when she noticed Jacob had turned around. But, nope, here she sat in the corner of an alcove in the subway tunnel wall, in the pitch black, doing her best to not let two old monsters realize she was spying on them.

Jacob came closer. Came closer. And then, passed her. Further, and further. She tensed every muscle in her body, stared at him from her pocket of darkness, and waited. He might still turn around, might still notice her, might still chase her down and tear her a new one for eavesdropping. Hell, he could kill her if he wanted to, and no one would know, no one would be around to report it. She'd be another disappearance, like Barry, like Jack.

She crept along after the terrifying, horrible, nasty man, and chewed on her bottom lip as she kept him at the edge of her sight, where the tunnels turned. Face against the concrete brick, she inched forward, each step soft and perfect. Not a sound, not a breath, not anything, just pure silence as she followed after him for another ten minutes. Ten minutes of walking, ten minutes of her



draining her vitae until she was starting to feel the hunger of its absence, ten minutes of quiet stalking in darkness.

At least it wasn't like the last time she was stalking in the tunnels, when it turned pitch black and she'd run into all those spider webs. Ugh. She shivered with the memory, and dusted her shoulders free. No webs, but it still felt like they were on her. Spiders were nasty, and gross, and she didn't care if that sounded horribly juvenile and girly, because it was completely true.

She rounded the next bend of the tunnel, and petrified. Gone. Jacob was gone.

She put one hand on her sword, and stared. Where was he? He couldn't have just vanished. Did he use his cloak of night to hide? She could—

Tightness grabbed her neck, and lifted her into the air. She tried to scream, but the grip on her throat was too tight to let air through. She tried to kick, to punch, but her assault bounced off the bastard's body as he held her at arm's length. She reached for her sword, but his other hand found her wrist, squeezed it hard enough it forced her grip to deadlock too loose on the sword grip. Helpless, in a split second.

"You're probably wondering how I noticed you. Mmm?" He pulled her in closer, and grinned a psycho's grin as he eyed her with his weird one eye. "Mmm?"

"G ... g..." Couldn't talk, couldn't say anything, couldn't even argue that he shouldn't be doing this. She kicked at him again, and again, and again, but her shoes bounced off his legs and stomach. She considered kicking him in the balls for a second, but even if that did manage to loosen his grip, it would surely spell her death.

The psycho witch chuckled, and began walking down the tunnel again, away from Azamel. Still holding her by her throat, and her

wrist, and grinning his crazy grin between insidious chuckles. Please please please don't kill me.

“Too bad for you, I won't tell you. Hmmm, hear anything interesting while you were spying?”

“G ... g...”

“No? Well I thought perhaps my mention of where I got this eye, the talk of spirits, or perhaps this Jeremiah fellow, that all of it would be interesting to a little sneak like you.”

“G...” She couldn't talk! He refused to let her breathe, to use the air to speak. If anything, his grip was only getting tighter, and she stared wide-eyed as his grip started to do more than just block her windpipe. It started to hurt, a lot, muscle and cartilage crushing under his fingers until she felt things bend that shouldn't bend. Pain came a moment later, and she squeezed the wrist of the offending hand with both of hers, desperate to get him to let her go.

“Yes, I knew you were following me from the onset, little Vola. I have more tricks up my sleeve than a young creature like even knows exist. Don't try and spy on me, or I will rip your arm off.” His other hand let go of hers, took her arm near the shoulder, and began to squeeze. Nosferatu were strong, like Daeva, capable of punching through rock, concrete, even steel if they had enough age and power to back it up. Jacob had it in spades, and she squeezed her eyes shut as the man started to crush her shoulder all the harder.

“P ... P...”

“And unlike your two boyfriends, I don't think you're cute. I think you're weak. Typical Mekhet, sneaky little fuck, with prying eyes and a fast step, useless without a sword and more useless when someone shines a light on you.” He brought her in closer, closer, until his face was only an inch from hers. “Think you'll survive when a true veteran like this Jeremiah fuck starts hunting us, starts

burning us out of our little hidey-holes, starts finding our hideouts in the day while we're asleep, starts laying traps with fire and shotguns, and silver for your fuck buddies?"

At last he let her neck go. Or not really, but he did relax his grip enough she could use her lungs again.

"I ... I was j-j-j-j-just ... I um ... w-w-was..." Ok, she could talk now but didn't know what to say. Uh oh.

"You might survive, now that I think about it. Sneaky types do have a habit of doing that, surviving, where others perish. So, Natasha Vola of the Ordo Dracul, you and Annie stumble onto anything interesting lately? Perhaps some spirits of note or renown have visited your tower?"

This bastard knew everything. How did he always know everything?

"M ... m-maybe?"

"Well aren't you a cheeky little shit." Jacob brought her so close their noses were touching. Gross gross gross, staring into his eye and his empty eye socket. No eyelids on the empty one, just destroyed flesh.

"You ... you shouldn't d-do this."

"Do what? Haven't hurt you yet."

"B-But you're going to."

"Am I? Not exactly sure what I'm going to do with you yet. I don't like being spied on."

"You ... must have known I w-w-was spying on you ... b-before you started talking to Azamel though."

He nodded, smiling and nodding as he held her out at full arm's length, and started walking. "Smart little fucker."

"Th ... thank you."

"You're welcome." A chuckle or two later, he did a few hops, some of them landing on train tracks, some on the ground, each random and way too much like a young ballerina being silly. "We don't talk much, you and I," he said, her still dangling from his hand.

"... yeah." Elders generally only talked to elders, or their subordinates. She was neither.

"Your dainty, weak shtick grinds my gears. Really makes me want to slap some sense into you. Fucking half a century of being a vampire, and you still can't take anyone in a straight fight. And probably never try."

Ow.

"I ... it d-d-doesn't ... there's usually a w-way to—"

"Oh good god, get a spine, you worthless little mouse. You can't always solve everything by being smart, or quick, or sneaky. When push comes to shove, it's often the strongest who comes out on top, and you? You can't even form a sentence. You're so weak you—"

She shot him.

Somewhere along the line, her hand had snapped to her pistol instead of holding his wrist. Being insulted like that burned, and after a few of them, she didn't want anymore. Art and Matt told her to be more aggressive, or people were forever going to tread on her, to steal away opportunities from her, or maybe even get her into danger. It'd do her some good, they told her, to run on instinct for a second here or there and see where it took her.

Probably a bad time to do that.

She landed on her feet once Jacob dropped her, and took out her sword with her other hand. Definitely a bad time to do that, as Jacob snarled in pain and stepped back several times. One of his hands came up to his face, to his neck where she'd put the hole, and covered the wound for a moment, only to pull his hand away and look at the Kindred blood that coated his palm.

“You shot me.”

“D-D-Don't ... think just cause I hold my t-tongue, or use my ... b-brain, that ... that I'm weak, Jacob.” There was flirting with death, and then there was pissing on its face and seeing if it decided to retaliate.

“Well, color me surprised. Those wolves rubbing off on you? Well, rubbing and getting off, for sure.” The psycho licked his lips, and leaned his head to the side. In mere seconds, his neck healed, a wound that would take her a day to restore.

“And st-stop making fun of my relationship with them! It ... it's private, and ... and least I have one!”

Jacob's lips settled on a snarl, and he started to walk toward her. She really should have been running, or maybe shooting him a whole bunch and running at the same time. Yeah, running was actually a pretty good idea, she should be able to outrun him.

“You got bite, Vola. I like it!” He stopped walking toward her, shrugged, and licked one of his fangs in obvious, dramatic fashion. “Been a while since a Mekhet has surprised me. Damien did, at least for a little while, before he replaced you as that bitch's slave.” Wiping his thumb on his lips, he motioned for Tasha to stand beside him.

She gulped, and with trembling hands, put away her sword and pistol. If he wanted her dead, she'd be dead, sooner or later. Even if she hid in the Prince's tower, she couldn't hide in there for forever, and eventually the man would find a way to kill her. But if aggression was how to appeal to Jacob, maybe she could work with that.

"I'm ... I-I'm looking for Jack," she said as she stood beside him. Kept him in the corner of her eye, ready to bolt, but he did start walking again just like before, along the tunnel toward wherever he was planning to go. Maybe he was genuine. So damn hard to read him, this Malachi.

"You and everyone else. Triss has gone to lala nightmare land with that bitch Athalia, in hopes she may find some clue as to his disappearance. Want me to ask Azamel if you can go in with her?"

"Um ... n-no, I think uh ... think I'll d-d-do better out here, with my feet firmly on the ground."

He chuckled, and faced her as he raised a hand to the cheek of his new eye. Pulling down on his cheek, his smile grew, and he stared at her with the strange, normal looking, but very weird eye.

"You work for Annie now, so get used to seeing some strange shit."

"I ... there has been ... strange things, y-yeah."

Another laugh. Man just loved to laugh, and each time he did, he put a different angle on it, a twist, each with its own personality. This one sounded intrigued almost, like she imagined Hannibal the Cannibal would sound when having a delightful conversation at tea time.

"How goes your search for Jack?"

“I c-can’t find him. He’s gone, and the P-Prince is furious, and I thought maybe Azamel would know something ... b-b-but then I saw you and Beatrice, and...” And she decided to sneak sneak, because like Jacob said, she was a sneaky person. Apparently, a ballsy sneaky person.

When did that happen? Used to be a time she would timidly obey Maria’s orders, and nothing more. She became a right hand to the Invictus because she was smart, and fast, good at sneaking, and had a talent for auspex most Mekhet did not. Maria gave her an order, and Natasha could get it done, quietly, with no traces and no suspicions.

Then, she’d asked Julias to kill Viktor. A scary request to say the least, and from then on, each month had been pushing her just a little further into making rash, dangerous moves that were liable to get her killed. Shooting Jacob in the neck was the culmination of a lot of changes, and it could have easily ended her second life. Except, it seemed to be exactly what the man wanted, for someone to show some spine and have the guts to challenge him on things. Dangerous, so very dangerous.

“It’d be a shame if the kid’s dead,” Jacob said. “Hopefully Triss and that cunt learn something.”

“ ... do ... d-do you think this Jeremiah person has Jack?”

“Probably. Or he’s killed him already.”

She shivered, rubbed her arms, and looked up at the elder. “Sorry ... for shooting you.”

“No you’re not. Don’t be a bitch now and ruin what goodwill you just earned.”

“S—” No, wait, not sorry. “ ... you deserved it.”

“Heh, damn right.”

Oh god trying to get along with this man was like trying to get along with a volatile explosive. Perfectly content to sit there, quiet, not exploding, as long as she treated it just right, and how it liked to be treated was a gamble to figure out.

“And J-Jeremiah is hunting Azamel?”

“Yeah. Probably a Moby Dick situation if I’m guessing right.”

“ ... so Jeremiah is Ahab? And Azamel is the w-whale?”

“Correct. It’s just a hunch, but a good one, if this human has been hunting Azamel all this time.”

Not good. Ahab got his crew slaughtered on a futile quest to kill something that had hurt him. An insane man willing to get other people killed in order to reach his goals. And he was a captain at that. If Jeremiah was of that disposition, then Natasha could understand Azamel’s retreat to Dolareido. Putting a bunch of vampires between her and Jeremiah was a smart plan.

For someone like Azamel to fear a human had Natasha shivering again, and she rubbed her arms a few times more as she and the scariest vampire in Dolareido walked the abandoned tunnels. She could run from a vampire, could sense him, spot him, or at least rely on the political situation of the covenants to hopefully not get killed by them. With Jeremiah or his hunters, she wouldn’t be able to do any of that.

A few seconds of silence went by. She was waiting for Jacob to talk, to offer information; but, that was dumb. He liked aggression, so be aggressive. Ask questions.

“You have an eye n-now.”



“Yeap.”

“H-How?”

“Blood magic.”

Oh god.

“W-Why di—”

“Begotten are nasty fucks, and they hide all sorts of surprises. Eye let me get a better look at them, at what they are; for the night at least.” He laughed, leaned in toward her, and pulled down on the cheek with the eye to expose the white of its sphere. “Sexy?”

“Um ... it-t might have been ... if you had two.”

“True. Triss took the other one.”

Oh god oh god. Ok yeah, no more asking about the blood magic. If Triss had a new eye, that meant she had to get rid of the old eye somehow. She winced just thinking about it.

“ ... w-want to tell me anything about them, the Begotten?”

“Ha! Want to know how to knock them down a notch, don’t you? I’ll give you one hint, Mekhet, just because you’ve impressed me.” Jacob hopped up onto an abandoned subway platform, and walked over to the ladder, used by repairmen back when the tunnel was used. “Begotten are like vampires, in a way. We’re killed by fire, and sunlight. Werewolves, silver rips them a new one. What are Begotten weak to?”

“I ... d-don’t know.”

“The problem isn’t so much that we don’t know, but rather, Begotten are each unique in a way. That Mark fellow is some sort of

corpse, a skeleton, and he's also the insects inside it. His weakness will have something to do with that, I'm sure."

"Unique..." Oh. Well, damn. Finding out the weakness of the whole race wouldn't be possible then, but rather, she'd have to learn about each individual Begotten and figure out their weakness that way.

"Fiona's your friend, ask her if she knows much about Azamel or Athalia. Don't let her know why you're asking of course, but keep an ear open. Azamel herself is a very old monster, and I'm sure her weakness is rooted in the nightmare that she is."

"... w-w-what nightmare is that?" she said. Didn't bother to ask why he was being so helpful, gift horse and all that.

"Oh, a very old nightmare, a twisted thing from a twisted mind, surely. People, many of them, somewhere, hundreds and hundreds of years ago must have dreamed up that monstrosity. What horrible history could have led to such a horrible thing, I don't know. A butcher maybe, a king or queen, who abused a godly image? Who knows. Certainly wouldn't be the first time someone's used the image of a god to fuel their own, blood-soaked agenda." The elder tapped his nose twice, and winked. "Some poor soul dreamed a nightmare, and now this woman looks like a giant with an elephant head and four arms, some sort of twisted, horrible abomination of the original."

"Ganesha? Hinduism?"

Jacob shrugged, and began his climb up the ladder. "Ganesha, before an ancient, Eastern temple, surrounded by tortured kine. Granny has quite the eye for decor." Laughing all the way up, Jacob gave her a tiny, finger-wagging wave, and disappeared. No goodbye or stereotypical parting words elders often had.

That description didn't sound like what Natasha knew of Ganesha, not at all. But, it was a lot more than she knew about Azamel five minutes ago.

Triss was in a nightmare world now, apparently. Natasha wasn't able to watch Triss's departure from her hiding spot, but Triss was indeed gone, and she too was looking for Jack. So, Natasha pulled out her phone, and—shit, no reception in the tunnel. She almost followed Jacob out, then, decided against it. Better to find her own exit.

Back on the surface, she again tried to call Triss. No answer. Either she was still deep in the tunnels, or she was in, as Jacob put it, nightmare lala land.

Ugh, she was never going to find Jack at this rate.

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~~Jack~~

The prisoner main lobby. Two floors, with some stairways rising from the tile floor to balconies, where more gates were half opened into more hallways. The lobby was also blocked off by a gate, that lead to a proper lobby where civilians could come and go. An old fashioned building to say the least, old, run down, with decades of use under its belt.

The room had a large counter in the middle, circular, with several shitty old chairs in its center. In a newer prison, computer terminals would have been set up there to control all the gates electronically. But in this prison, everything was old, and the keys were nowhere to be found; which meant the gate to the civilian lobby was unlocked. Good thing, cause Jack wasn't strong enough to break open gates made of metal bars and locked in with steel.

Did the hunters have more chains and locks? It'd have been smart to lock the place down somehow at least, but after looking around,

he found no chains on the gates. Or, maybe one of the five hunters now dead or brainwashed had been responsible for managing padlocks and chains. In either circumstance, it was obvious his escape was unexpected, something they hadn't planned for because the idea of young, little him escaping seemed absurd to them. He had an advantage, and he was going to take it.

He stood at the gate before the prison lobby, and looked around. His two guards stood in front of him, each with shotguns raised and checking out the million places the enemy could shoot at him from. The circular counter in the center was obvious, and Jack couldn't see into it to be sure it was empty. It looked like the balcony around and above him was empty too, though the gates they held were all unlocked, and more hunters could have been waiting for him in there.

He looked down at his army. "You, check the counter. You, check the hallways down here. And you, check the hallways below. Report back if you see any humans."

A host of the tiny bundles of fur nodded, and ran out onto the dingy tile of the prison floor. Twenty for each command, more than enough to survive any potential gunfire. And Jack braced for it, for the explosive sound of guns unloading bullets upon his army as they scouted the area. But none came.

No way the hunters just left him to his devices. No way they'd just let him escape. But the rats eventually returned, and each of them reported no one.

But, they could smell something. Hell, he could smell something. A chemical?

He raised the corner of his mouth in a snarl, and motioned for his two guards to go forward. "Stay near me, ahead of me, and protect me with your lives."

The two tools nodded, and stayed at his side as he walked out into the exposed position of the prisoner lobby. No one behind the counter. No one above him, at the dozen perfect positions for someone to shoot at him. The lights were on, but no one was home.

No way it was this easy.

“Jack.”

He spun around. In the distance, past the lobby, past the gate, past the civilian lobby, and at the open front door of the prison, stood Angela. Five hunters stood with her, weapons at the ready.

“Angela.” He stared at her in the distance, and his two guards sprinted forward. “No, wait. I want to hear this.” Without skipping a beat, the two tools came back to his side, and waited.

“You killed three of my men.”

“You were going to kill me. You honestly think I care?” The concrete walls and the empty hallways did wonders for carrying the voice, and the two of them talked as if only a few feet from each other.

“Your life is worthless, vamp. Fuck, you’re already dead, and you have the fucking nerve to compare yourself to the lives of the living?”

“ ... I am what I am, human.”

“Yeah, a cancer.”

“I don’t blame you for hating me. The mouse hates the cat that kills it.” He snarled again as he stepped forward. The distant humans took a step back despite the range, except for Angela.

“You don’t get to kill me.”

“ ... you are different from your hunter friends, aren't you? You and Jeremiah, not entirely normal.”

“Fuck you, I'm human.”

Jack took another step forward, and again the hunters stepped back, except for Angela. The humans were retreating, she wasn't. What was she? What was so different about her and Jeremiah? Christ she looked familiar.

“I'll say it again, get out of my way, and you get to live.” And he knew that wouldn't happen. Empty words, meaningless, and he wasn't sure he'd let them live even if they let him go. Way too dangerous to keep them alive. And, he really wanted to inflict pain on that woman, grind her face into a bloody mess under his heel, break her limbs, and drink her dead.

He licked his fangs as he came closer still, his two guards in front of him at each shoulder, and his rats flooding over him. Many climbed up his pants, some settling on his knees with claws digging into the fabric, while others poured over his ankles, and several took anchor on his shoes. Others poured around his two guards, and of their own volition, climbed up their bodies to perch on their shoulders, their heads, all their limbs, scurrying and squeaking.

Eventually Jack and his bodyguards stood at the gate between the prisoner lobby and the civilian lobby.

Angela took out a lighter, one of those larger ones with the flip top. She flicked it on, then closed it. Opened it, flicked it on, closed it. Her smile grew as she did, and she took a step closer to meet his gaze as she played with his bane. And then, grin growing so big she'd have given Jacob a run for his money, she lit the lighter, then dropped it.

As it fell to the floor, he realized what that smell was.

It spiraled around the lobby ahead of him, flicking left and right, snapping at the air and whipping through the only exit to the prison available to him. Red, scorching, the searing death, vampire's bane, engulfed the room, up and down the walls in zigzags, and racing across the floor in swirling spirals. Fire, dancing across the trails of gasoline.

He jumped back, threw himself back, every Kindred reflex taking over and shoving him away from the red death as it sped at him. No idea, he had no idea fire could run across gasoline this quickly, and it licked at his shoes as he flew through the air, back and away ten feet. The fire stopped short of him, its wicked flame not passing the gate. Angela must not have had time to coat the prison lobby, thank god.

It didn't stop there. Laughing, maniacally at that, Angela held out a hand to one of her fellow hunters. He set a glass bottle in it, with a white piece of fabric jammed into its mouth, on fire. A molotov cocktail.

She threw it. She had a really, really good arm, and with the front entrance of the building opened, she had a clear shot across the lobby to the gate that separated him. The glass flew straight, like a fucking professional pitcher, and smashed against the bars near Jack.

Fire. Everywhere. It exploded around him, engulfed everything in the red death, blanketed his eyes and screamed its fury at an undead thing in its presence. Dead, so very very dead.

Except, not dead. In a fair bit of pain from many claws digging into his skin, but not dead. He could not say the same for many of his army, his loyal subjects now screaming shrill squeaks and squeals as they burned. The smell of burning rat fur and flesh curled his nose, and he jumped back from the shrieking chorus, arm raised to cover his eyes from the wave of heat. So close, so very

close to the fire hitting him, every vampire instinct he had was shrieking right along with the hundreds of dying rats.

But, sad as it was, it was only the rats who were damaged. They worked as a carpet and had covered him and his two hunter tools, some leaping out to block the flammable liquid as it splashed through the air from the bottle's impact against the bars. The only reason he was alive was the sheer amount of rats that had come to him, to block death for him. So very close to dead, and so very close to his two hunter tools being set on fire right along with him.

He snarled as he stared on, through the flames ahead of him, through the flames that flicked across the bars of the unlocked gate before him; except, now the hallway was barred with flame, and flame was a better barrier than steel. Another growl escaped him, its inhuman sound alien to his ears, but another again came, until the hunters in the distance took another step back, their eyes widening. The psychopath, on the other hand, barely noticed.

“You don't get to leave,” Angela said. “You get to burn.”

“It's a concrete building! The fuck do you expect it to do, melt?”

She laughed. Her fellow hunters laughed as well, nervously, and seconds later. Girl reeked of a super villain, with the dramatic poses and pompous speeches to go with it.

“You're mind controlling a bunch of shit right now, stupid vamp. You can't keep this up for forever, and this exit's the only way out of the prison. Sunrise will get here eventually, and we have all the time in the world. You on the other hand, are running out of it.”

“Did you read that speech on the back of a cereal box?”

“Ha ha. Fucking joke all you want, fucking Ventrue, but you're not getting out of here. Trapped, like a rat. Fitting, huh?”



He grit his teeth until his fangs came out again. She was right. This insane, ridiculous nutjob of a woman was correct, and that boiled his blood almost as much as the fire covering all his exits.

He backed up until the counter of the prisoner lobby was against his back, and looked around. Above him were the catwalks that led to other hallways, probably of the exact same style as the one he came from. To the side, similar hallways. Behind him, another big gate that opened up into what looked like an outdoor area of some sort, some place where the prisoners went to do their allotted exercise. It had no ceiling, but there was no way he was going to be able to climb out of there, with its smooth, high walls and barbed wire.

“Panicking yet?” Angela yelled out. She was maybe a hundred feet away, and yelling super loud wasn’t really necessary. Or at least, it wasn’t, until one of the hunters threw another molotov down the lobby again. Glass shattered, gasoline went everywhere, and Jack stepped back again as he watched the flame snatch up the liquid. Bits of fire flew through the air like evil fireflies, and they landed on his escape path with reckless abandon.

And just as the fire was starting to die down, things only started getting worse. There were still a few hunters around Angela, but some others had disappeared, only to return with torches. How the fuck they had torches, he didn’t know. They were hunters, and if there was any paranormal creature hunters were used to dealing with, it was probably vampires, which meant they had the means to burn him alive. Lots of different ways to burn him alive, probably. Considering the amount of people he’d already dealt with, and the amount of people he still had to go through at a minimum, there was probably a lot of tools they had at their disposal.

His one advantage: they hadn’t expected him to get out of his cell. Their tools weren’t on them, and they had to fetch them; at least, fetch the fancier tools. Except, one of them did just that, and Jack’s

heart sank as one of them handed Angela a large gun-shaped tool. A blowtorch was bad, but a flamethrower? That was not something any vampire could handle easily, free of shackles or not.

He stepped back again, or tried, but the counter was behind him, and going further back was pointless. Every path he could take was a dead end. It was a fucking prison after all.

“Henry, Stacey, either of you know another way out of this prison?”

“No, master,” they said. He knew they’d say that too, god damn it.

Angela, armed with a flamethrower, stepped ahead of the hunters behind her. They had molotovs, pistols, torches, and god only knew what else. He was sure they’d tie him up and burn him at the stake if they weren’t afraid he’d brainwash them first. Angela was laughing, each step she took marked with more laughter, and every so often she shot the flamethrower. The spewing beam of liquid carried the red death on its wings, and the flame whipped the air into a hazed frenzy of blurry chaos as fire marked the walls, and the floors around Angela’s path, but not in front of her path. Whenever her and her hunters came upon a patch of burning, they hopped around it or over it, except Angela. Angela stepped on it and kept walking. As long as she walked quickly, the fire would not catch to her, and no doubt she did it because she thought it would intimidate him.

She was right. She could get close to fire, have it touch her, tickle her boots or pants, brush against her skin, but for a human it was as simple as not standing in the fire for more than a second to prevent skin or hard fabrics from burning. For a vampire, each second in a flame would have meant serious damage, and the agony to go with it. Fucking hunters knew his weakness, knew how to exploit it, knew how to embrace flame and its fickle nature, knew how to wrap it around themselves and protect themselves with it.

It wasn't him using a surprise advantage to take down a few hunters anymore. Now it was him, trapped inside a rabbit hole, and the hunters were after him. So close to getting out, but he'd underestimated how quickly they'd have reacted to his escape. He'd stirred the hornets' nest.

Whatever happened to those action movie scenes, where the hero, once captured, manages to escape, and then proceeds to slaughter everyone in the facility that held them? Why wasn't it that easy? Why couldn't these hunters just be really dumb, and stand around waiting for him to come to them, so he could kill them one by one, or in pairs? Reality wasn't so kind. These hunters had brains, and once they'd realized what was happening, they'd retreated to a bottleneck and reestablished the offensive using the one weapon he couldn't fight.

The one weapon he couldn't fight directly, at least.

"Stacey, Henry, march forward. Fire at will. We're leaving." The longer he sat back, being defensive, the more they'd box him in. Now or never.

"Yes, master."

Their minds crashed against the shackles he'd placed upon them, pushed against the boot crushing them beneath him, and cried out for mercy. But as each tool glanced at him, he gave them a glance back, and offered a quiet, rumbling growl. Their tiny minds broke once again, silenced beneath his boot, and they began their march of death.

They weren't going to survive. And that was fine.

"Hey, guys! Come on, you still in there? You keep doing this and I'm sorry but you'll have to die to get to the kid." Angela stood in the center of the civilian lobby, fire surrounding her, fire on the main, large desk in the center of the room, fire on the walls, fire trickling

from her flamethrower. There was a grin there, mixed with a touch of concern maybe. Maybe she did actually care about these hunters she was going to get killed, but if she did, she cared about killing him more.

It was a half-ass attempt to break through his mind control, and token, futile, and she knew it. Not the hero she was pretending to be, not the hero she probably convinced these hunters she was. The hunters weren't nearly as quick to kill their friends, he could see it in their eyes, in their movements, in their everything. They wanted to save Henry and Stacey, save their friends from the horrible vampire that had taken their minds and already killed three others.

Fuck them.

Jack's tools raised their pistols, and began their assault. He followed after them, and as the two tools stepped over the fire, gunshots started to fill the air.

"Don't make us kill you!" One of the hunters said, a man, tears in his eyes and on his cheeks reflecting the flickering flames that surrounded him. Their original plan had gone so wrong, usurped by the monster they hadn't suspected capable of this madness. Just a simple catch-and-kill job for them probably, just another day breaking a demon, learning what they could from the soulless monster before dusting him.

The drama would have been overwhelmingly sad, if he wasn't the monster on the other end of that plan. Instead, the sight of the man in tears over the inevitable death of his friends was frustrating, and infuriating. How dare they, how dare these fucking ingrates be upset over this outcome. They started this, this was on them. Fucking insects.

Again, his tools hesitated as they aimed their pistols. They paused, each casting a glance at Jack. He returned it, and offered them each a soul crushing word.

“Now.”

Henry and Stacey stepped forward once again, and began firing.

“Henry don’t!”

The hunters jumped out of the way, each diving behind various tables, chairs, and Angela herself jumped back to get into the circular desk in the center of the civilian lobby. She was still too far to attack him with the flamethrower, but the others had pistols, and molotovs. They seemed hesitant to use them. Their loss.

Jack pointed his hands forward. “Go. Kill them.”

The army of claw and fur ran before him, and all was brown and flame. Many rats succumbed to the fire they ran over, and some were no longer enslaved as the fire took them. They shrieked their death cries and ran against the wall, while others ran forward, bodies of writhing flame entering the second lobby, only to die to the flame’s power.

Each rat that died so horribly hurt him, made him wince, made him grit his teeth all the more. The beast in him identified with these little scavengers, scurriers in the dark and hiding from humanity, more than it ever could with the humans trying to burn him alive.

His tools took advantage of the chaos, stepped into the second lobby, and fired. Their bullets tore into the furniture and the desk, ripping shards of wood up into the air, only for it to join the fire that surrounded them. It kept the enemy hidden behind furniture, and an opportunity for rats to pour out into the frenzy. The hunters were quick to use torches to fight off the rats at their feet, but it kept them pinned down, as planned.

Jack followed the rats, slow steps, many soaking his shoes in the blood of his dead servants. No time to pity them anymore, he had

hunters to kill. The hallway of fire could not be escaped, it surrounded him, covered the floor ahead of him, and as he approached the flame, more rats threw their bodies onto the red death. Their fur burned for only moments before only their corpses remained, and he again stepped on them, spreading their blood and soaking his steps in death.

“Forgive me!” One of the hunters popped up from behind a nearby overturned table, and fired. Stacey went down, a splatter of blood coating Jack’s body as God apparently thought the situation needed to be more horrible. Jack stared at the shooter, only for the offending hunter to point his pistol at Jack, and begin firing.

Bullets hit him, tore through him, ripped apart his insides and got lodged against his bones. Two ribs cracked as the hollow-point rounds collided with them. Another bullet hit him in the stomach, and he stumbled back several feet as it lodged into his guts. And yet another slammed him in his leg, and he fell to a knee as the muscle gave way.

He glared at the offending hunter, and watched as karma reaped its vengeance. Bullets slammed into their shoulder, their chest, and their neck. The blood sprayed, followed by the bits of tearing flesh, and the screams. Jack’s remaining guard had adjusted his aim, fired upon his comrade, and didn’t stop firing until the offending human fell back, clutching their neck with their only good arm.

Fool would have been fine if they had ducked behind their table more quickly. Shooting their friend Stacey had no doubt given them pause, a pause Jack’s tool did not reciprocate.

“Fuck you! Fuck you!” Another one of the hunters unloaded their ammo, poking out from behind the same desk Angela was hiding within. Bullets whizzed past Jack, slamming into the wall, into the metal bars behind him, chunks of concrete showering over the fire and dead that surrounded him.

Not just one hunter shooting at him now, three of them were. They poked out from behind their chairs and overturned tables, eyes locked on him, wide, glaring. They were shooting at him, but not at their friend Henry, who slid down onto a knee beside Stacey, picked up her pistol while tossing his aside, and began firing that one instead.

More bullets flew past Henry, aimed at Jack, many going wide as the hunters were forced back into their hiding spots by Jack's only remaining guard. No time to set up good shots on him, not as Henry continued to shoot at them, and not as the rats continued to pour over the floor, earning their ire. Half the time, the hunters were tossing molotovs at the floor or waving their torches at it, blocking the path of the rats as best they could, then resumed shooting at Jack.

They were good shots. Jack forced himself back to his feet, only for another bullet to slam into his shoulder and force him back a foot. In the chaos, in the flames and the screams, dodging bullets and holding an army of rats at bay, the hunters continued to shoot at him. Another bullet sank into his other leg, and he screamed as his body tried to stumble with it. Tensing muscles and aching bones kept him upright. Another bullet caught him in the waist, tore through his obliques, and created a hole to his insides. Another again caught him in the neck, took a chunk of the side out, exposing the throat within.

He stayed standing, and pointed with one of his stumps. "Get him first."

The army of rats picked a new objective. Instead of swarming randomly, they changed to his target. No longer rapids of random brown joined by burning fur, the rats pooled together, piling high until they flowed over the table the hunter was hiding behind. His army met fire, met gasoline, met bullets, but there were simply too many of them, and they flooded over the man.

His screams joined the inferno as a thousand rats began to tear into his body. Jack had hoped he might stand up, so Henry could shoot him, and Jack could guide the rats to a new target. But the man fell behind the table, rolling, screaming, but out of sight.

Angela stood up from behind the counter, and unleashed hell upon the dying man. Somehow, she held the flamethrower in one arm, and unleashed the river of fire on her doomed comrade. At the same time, she fired her pistol at him with her other hand. No need to see the carnage to know what was happening. Angela was killing the hunter and his rats at the same time, putting her follower out of his misery while destroying hordes of the little scavengers while they were vulnerable.

Henry was still standing. They didn't want to shoot their comrade. Or at least, the hunters didn't. But once Angela was done with the man covered in rats, she turned to face Henry. The tool had been shooting at another hunter, and Angela took the opportunity, firing the flamethrower around the desk, while at the same time firing the pistol through the flames at Henry. One hit the man in the shoulder, and he went down.

Too much chaos, too much insanity. Jack could barely see through the flames anymore, as the bodies piled high and the thick smell of burning flesh filled the room. It was a horrible smell, sizzling fat and blood and muscle and skin, not too dissimilar to pork, but pork or not, none of it appealed to a vampire's nose. It joined the maelstrom of death surrounding him, crackling fire and licking flames on the walls, and the air around them bending and twisting with the fumes and growing heat.

His mom used to cook chicken wings in the oven, and he liked to stare into the oven through the glass window as they baked. The sounds and sights that surrounded the chicken wings, the glowing heat, the wavering air, the crackling of flesh, it sometimes made



him wonder how horrible a torture it'd be to be in that oven. He didn't wonder anymore.

More bullets came for him, but they went wide again as Henry got up on a knee, began firing more to keep enemy heads down, rather than trying to pick his shots and go for kills. But, even in the scorching inferno and roars of hundreds of rats, Jack recognized the sound of an empty magazine.

Henry dropped the gun, took out his knife, and ran for the side of the counter where a woman hunter was standing up and aiming for Jack again. The tool jumped at her, knifed raised, and the woman had no choice but to turn to him, raise her hands, and catch him. An opportunity for Jack then. The hunters would probably all come to the same conclusion: if they could get Henry's knife away from him, they could save him.

Bingo. The three other hunters ran over to Henry, and jumped him. A brawl, arms and legs kicking out, and Henry slashing at his friends as they did their best to catch his wrists. A perfect opportunity for an observant Ventrue to get in close, and break them to his will.

Or at least it would have been. Angela didn't turn, didn't try and save Henry, didn't even so much as throw the man a glance. Angela slid over the counter, and started shooting at Jack.

Surrounded by fire, its whispering curves along the walls and tile floor, he could do nothing but send more of his rats forward. Angela waited for them, a big grin on her face as she unloaded bullet after bullet after bullet through the haze and dancing fire, while at the same time, spreading more of the fire around the floor. He was still too far away, a good forty feet, for her handmade flamethrower to reach him directly, but each bullet she shot landed against his chest, some skimming along his face, and one ripping the side of his cheek bone off.

The pain was excruciating, but its claws could not sink into his mind, not now, not as the beast in his gut roared its anger. Angela would not be able to hear it, feel it, human as she was, but that didn't change that the beast in Jack's hole-ridden corpse was screaming bloody murder at her. Every muscle, every fiber of his undead being wanted to sink his teeth into her, and end her.

He stood there, growling, arms dangling at his sides and Kindred blood dripping from the handleless stumps as the thick liquid trickled down the wounds in his neck, his face, and the copious holes now filling his chest and shredded insides. Angela was laughing, loudly, her cackles breaking through the yelling hunters behind her, the roaring fires around her, and the burning shrieks of hundreds of rats yet again dying horrible deaths to hungry flame.

“Thought you could get out? Thought you had us beat just because you caught us off guard?” She laughed again, louder, enough so her voice boomed through the hall between the two lobbies, where Jack stood. “Or maybe you thought you scared us off, that your hat trick kills overwhelmed us? Kid, you're just an idiot vamp who got lucky.” At first she laughed again, then roared, and so too did the flamethrower as she aimed upward, and blasted the ceiling with the liquid flames. Where her roars ended and the fire's began, Jack could no longer tell.

Jack looked down at himself. Belly full of fresh kine blood also meant some of that was leaking out of him, and he snarled at the sight of his meal's lifeblood trickling down his abs and pants. Holes, everywhere in his flesh. Still not as bad as that night Antoinette had fought Damien, but he was getting closer to that point. And closer again, as Angela sank a couple more bullets into his chest, each forcing him back a step, each forcing his muscles to tense, to fight the need to fall over.

Just keep distracting her for a little bit longer. Look for an opportunity, any opportunity.

He found no opportunities, only bullets. Again and again they crashed into him, until Angela aimed lower, and another bullet slammed into one of his knees. The distinct sensation of a hollow-point round shattering his kneecap was a very unique feeling, followed by a very unique pain, enough to pierce the numbing of his bloodlust. He screamed as he fell back, no longer able to stay standing, and writhed on the ground as the joint ceased to function. Kindred blood flooded the wound quickly, prioritizing it above all others. Heal the knee or you can't move, and if you can't move all the other wounds were meaningless.

Angela got closer, and closer. Laughing all the more, she fired the flamethrower into the air again, decorating the walls with living flame. But once she entered the hallway between the two lobbies, where Jack was currently lying prostrated, she let the flamethrower be, and held it to her side while her pistol was out, pointed at him. She took a step, and fired, slamming her foot down as she did, sinking the bullet into his guts. Another step, another bullet, tearing through his arm. Another step, another bullet, ripping into his other leg's quadriceps, this one joined by chuckles far, far darker than the earlier ones.

She was right over him.

He stared up at her, snarled, growled, bared his fangs, did all the things a vampire about to frenzy would do. Pain was back, and worse than when he had his hands cut off, but the roaring in his gut buried it once again. Pain could be ignored. Pain didn't stop an animal from chewing their leg off if they were in a trap, just like he'd done with his hands, and pain wouldn't stop him from trying to kill this woman with the gun pointed at him.

She got in closer, and closer, and once she was over him, she slammed her shoe down against his gut. Boots, hard boots. She twisted her heel, tore his skin, and forced another scream out of him as the agony stabbed him. Seconds into the scream, more of his

snarls came back, but they were weak, pathetic, and worthless. He could try and hit her with his legs, but both of them were barely working. It was taking every ounce of effort he had to force his vitae to heal his legs as fast as possible, and ignore the growing wounds in his torso.

“Thought you had us, fucking leech? Christ you caused a lot of fucking damage.” Her heel ground harder, hard enough he could feel his punctured guts squash against his spine. “Almost got out. You’re a real fucking Viktor, aren’t you? Killing cause you like it, brainwashing people, using rats like ... like this.” She nodded to his left and his right. Dead rats were everywhere, many still on fire, while others had been crushed in the mayhem, their blood and guts coating the floor. “Regular fucking animal, a hungry animal, a monster.”

Oh god if she didn’t kill him soon he was going to do it himself, or at least vomit his guts out at the the sound of her juvenile bullshit. What person could possibly think it was ok to give this child a gun? Let alone a flamethrower.

“Fuck ... you.”

“Ha! Say it again, cause damn that’s music to my ears.” She got in closer again, put the pistol to his jaw snug up underneath it, pointed upward, and she smiled a big Jacob smile. “Lost good people today because of you, leech. Bunch of my hunters down, but there’s plenty more here, and more coming. And you didn’t get Henry.”

Henry, Jack’s last remaining tool. Jack could still hear his yelling, his hollering, as the man fought against the several hunters trying to keep him down.

“You ... deserve to die. I never ... did anything ... to you.”

“You’re a vampire. Isn’t that enough?” Laughing, always with the laughing, she got even closer again, and put her nose to his. Her

glass eye was tame compared to the real one, and it glared into him, cut through his soul, as she pulled the trigger.

Click. Empty.

This woman was a fucking nutjob, a sadist, and fucking deadly. But she was young, probably his age, and really, really full of herself. And that meant liable to make mistakes, like not paying attention to her pistol, and how the slide was open, indicating the magazine was empty.

She laughed, rolled her eyes, and tossed it to the side. “Wanted to see your brains splatter. Ah well. I’ll just—”

She stopped. The world stopped. The fire went silent, and the squealing rats faded away, as Jack stared up at the woman. She forced herself to stand, the flamethrower falling from her hands and clanking against the prison tile floor.

A knife, coated in blood, stuck out from her stomach, a few inches to the side. She put her hand to it, felt the blood, stared at how it coated her hand, and then turned around.

Henry was standing there, but only for a few moments before three hunters jumped him. He must have gotten away.

“You ... stabbed ... me...”

Go. Now!

Jack stood up, forced his vitae into his knees, his legs, forced his power through him, forced his limbs to heal faster, forced his body to obey. Forced it, controlled it, dominated it like a Ventrue should. And, as Angela turned around, the sight of her wide eyes was the sickeningly sweet dessert to join the crunching sound of his shoe colliding with the other side of her stomach, hard enough to break

ribs. She fell, hard, and the knife skidded along the floor from the impact.

He ran toward the exit, and ignored the fire as it turned his skin to ash.

# Chapter 50

~~Beatrice~~

She was starting to become envious.

Athalia was a bitch. A real, horrible, nasty bitch of a person. Only vamp Triss had ever seen talk to Athalia and not get chewed out or glared at was Jack, but it wasn't Jack that Triss was envious of. It was Athalia, and that monster chick vibe she had going for her. Badass monster chick on the inside, perfectly normal, attractive woman on the outside.

"Fiona's told me about you," Triss said. "About your ... form, I guess?"

"... horror."

"Sorry?"

"It's our horror. The horror that lives in the nightmare. It is the nightmare." She shrugged, and continued down through the black tunnel. Unlike the tunnel Beatrice had come from, this one had no working lights at all, and the further they went, the darker it got.

"That does sound badass." And it was making Triss jealous. Nosferatu and horror were kindred spirits, but with Athalia, seemed like she was more than that. "And I've seen Fiona do some oddly impressive shit. It's pretty neat stuff. Makes me kinda wish I was a \_"

Athalia stopped, looked at her, and frowned. "You don't really mean that."

"I don't?"

“ ... you’re a vampire. You don’t know what it’s like to ... be changed like this.”

“Fiona says—”

“Yeah well Fiona’s a stupid idealist. We’re not the same. The little thing inside you, hiding in shadows, tiny little wings and tiny little talons, is not the same as us. So fuck off and shut up.”

Oh god the melodrama was going to make Triss puke. This woman wasn’t just angry, she was anger incarnate, just a walking pile of livid and hateful.

“ ... so I’m a little thing?”

“You are. The thing inside you is.” She waved a hand aside like she was dismissing a fly. “Sometimes it looks like a rat, sometimes a bat or snake, and often, an owl. An insignificant creature that loves to hide in the shadows, instead of using them as the weapons they are.”

“And that would make Jacob what?”

Athalia snarled at her, even as she continued to walk without pause. Yeah, Jacob was one of those vamps she hated, with one of those tiny little shadow creatures in him, part of him, was him. A tiny creature, and this woman probably could not understand how it was able to kick her ass like she was a child. Worded like that, Triss would be angry too.

But Athalia didn’t retort, just chewed on her hate and kept walking.

“So, uh, Azamel is uh ... a pretty terrifying looking ... thing.”

“ ... she showed herself to you?”



“No, that’s what this eye is for.” Triss turned and pulled down on the cheek of her new eye. “Jacob had one too.”

“ ... I ... don’t understand.”

“You monsters think you’re so scary. Athalia, I have seen Jacob do shit that makes you monsters look like pussies. This eye is just a little bit of the crazy shit that man can summon.” Ok, maybe she shouldn’t have been rubbing it in the girl’s face that her boss was scarier than Athalia’s boss, but she couldn’t help indulge a little. My dad can beat up your dad. Or mom, in this case? “I can see little bits of the nightmare. And I can see you.”

“ ... and what do you think?”

“Kind of envious, honestly. You look like something from a Motorhead album cover.”

“And I suppose that means a lot of skulls and claws and black wings and shit.”

“Exactly.” Triss snapped her fingers and pointed at her, summoning her inner Fonzie. Athalia was a scary woman, but compared to the shit Jacob had been showing the Nos as of lately, it was manageable. And besides, Athalia was once human, and that was some even ground.

“ ... well, you would have gotten to see anyway.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“You heard Azamel. There’s something going on in one of our chambers. And you’re tagging along while I investigate, apparently.”

“Yeah, but where’s that? Other side of town, or ... or ... in the nightmare.”

It was Athalia's turn to smirk, and she stepped into the final shadow of the curving tunnel. This far out from Azamel's little nest, the shadow was now the unending blackness, and as far as Triss could tell, it went on endlessly. Pure, delightful darkness. Normally Triss would be fine with that, but after the Azlu shit, she didn't want to be in the tunnels like this. The thought of getting more spiderwebs on her made her shiver, and rub her arms to try and dislodge the nonexistent, sticky webs.

Triss set her hand on the wall of the tunnel, and slowed down her pace. Couldn't move quickly in this without risking tripping. "Fucking dark."

"Monsters have different worlds, different realms, different things they like. The Eshmaki, like Fiona and myself, need darkness."

"Darkness, right. So I ... shouldn't pull out my phone then. Cause, you know, it has a light and—"

"Not yet."

Alone in the dark with the scary-but-cool-but-major-bitch woman, Triss continued walking forward, and let the darkness swallow her. Nope, nothing wrong here, just a stroll through old, abandoned tunnels in complete black with a darkness nightmare monster thing. She kept walking, squinting, trying to see something, but it was no use, too damn dark. No choice but to keep walking, and listen to the quiet clack of her boots on concrete.

At least, until her footsteps started to change sounds. Weird, and worthy of her stopping to kneel down and touch the floor. Stone.

And that's when it kicked in. Like a scene from Pulp Fiction, a needle full of adrenaline straight into the heart, every reflex in her body kicked in. Overload. She jumped up with a spin, and looked around. Still darkness, couldn't see shit, and every muscle was

tensing hard enough to hurt. She wasn't in the tunnels anymore. And like a cat dumped into a new home with no warning, she wanted to get somewhere protected and safe so she could get her bearings.

“W-Where am I?”

“You may turn on your light now.”

White dots, two of them in the distance. They didn't give off enough light to illuminate whatever it was they were in, but they were there, two white dots she recognized. Gulping all too loudly, Triss pulled out her phone and turned on the light.

Athalia, in all her angel of death glory. An enormous torso, skin taugt and bones exposed, covered in serrated spikes. A skull, with a tiny white dot in the center of each large eye socket. Enormous black angel wings. And best of all, Athalia had no legs, just a dangling spinal chord that followed her as she flew—hovered around. Her wings weren't flapping, just taking up space as the abomination moved along the cave floor and through the darkness.

Cave floor. For a second she thought maybe Athalia had found a cave entrance in the tunnels; certainly possible with the shit Jacob did in his free time. But, no, this couldn't have been a cave like that, cause when Triss looked up, she could see stars.

She shined the light at the cave walls, and gulped again. Her new eye wasn't showing her any flickering, waving, or oddities anymore. Now, she was in the nightmare, and the eye had no more secrets to expose. Just darkness, endless, and deep.

“The fuck...” It was some sort of vertical cave, a pit, a giant hole in the ground. A spiraling edge followed the contours of the enormous hole, and went down, and down, and as she shined the light into the black, she stared down into its depths. The light couldn't reach the bottom. She pointed the light back up against the walls, and tried to

see to the other side of the cave, but the light couldn't reach. Back up, she stared at the twinkling stars, their light unable to penetrate the depths of the hole. Hole wasn't a strong enough word, more like someone had taken a drill a thousand feet wide, and decided to try and dig to the depths of the Earth.

Terrifying, and thrilling.

The angel of death continued on. It really didn't fit; or at least, Athalia didn't fit her horror. The shadow, the dripping black mist, the onyx wings, the giant torso and dangling spinal cord, all just silhouettes in the darkness except under the light of Triss's phone, that were right at home in the cave. But Athalia herself was a bitch, a mean, hateful bitch, and the form she carried with her looked like it belonged on some sort of greater entity, like a personification of death or inevitability or something.

Then again, woman hadn't said a thing since she transformed, or exposed her other half, or whatever was a politically correct way of describing her horror half. And from what Fiona said, the nightmares this woman had as a child had something to do with this horror, this thing, this death personification floating before Beatrice. What sort of horrible things would those kind of dreams do to someone, with those wings haunting their thoughts, those white, glowing dots for eyes in the black, and those claws tearing at the ground? The sort of nightmares that made you pull your arm and legs under the covers nice and snug. The sort of nightmares Triss wished she had the power to inflict with her nightmare discipline; purely for defensive purposes of course.

Much as it must have been a horrible experience, to have this creature haunting her dreams, she did look god damn badass.

Triss had to jog a few moments to catch up, and jogging wasn't so easy with the stone beneath her being an unpleasant mix of smooth, wet, slippery, and randomly jagged with tiny drops. But she caught

up, and started walking beside the angel of death. Just, a giant, floating torso thing, with its spinal cord hanging out and almost hitting the dark stone Triss was walking on. Christ.

“I uh ... don’t suppose I should try and pull a Jack, and start talking about personal shit, right?”

The creature turned to look at her, enormous skull blending into the obsidian around her except for the two white dots, a foot apart. “I do not suggest it.” Oh damn that voice, a whisper in the dark if there ever was one.

“Can you tell me something about where we are then? Cause, I mean, yeah, this might be the norm for you guys, but vamps spend their every night and day in the city. I mean, I haven’t left Dolareido since I was embraced, cause it’s not like I could handle sunlight.”

The enormous creature turned to look at her, but didn’t stop its slow hovering down the sloping path that circled the giant hole. With the darkness as her backdrop, it was hard to ever truly see any of the monster’s features, just bits and pieces as she swayed, body catching hints of starlight or Triss’s phone light.

“We are here to ensure Fiona is not in danger, and to kill her attackers if she is. I have no reason to share my secrets with you.”

“Not like I’m trying to—”

“Aren’t you? Jacob and his eye allowed him to see me, Mark, Azamel, as you explained.” Her voice caught between a whisper and a harsher rasp, and clawed down Triss’s spine. “The same eye you now have.” She didn’t use her lips to speak; barely had lips at all, skin so tight on the face it was basically a skull. No nose. Her voice just emitted from her, as if using a mouth with a tongue was something this entity was beyond needing.

“Yeah, the eye lets us have a peek at you guys and your nightmare worlds. But—”

“Leeches. Sneaking, cowardly leeches.” The arm came out, and pushed Triss. Not the arm of the tall, slender black woman Athalia, but this dark shadow creature, and its enormous arm, with bone claws that dripped more of the black mist around her. It was more than enough to knock the vamp over, and she cursed as she started to roll down the slope.

“Fuck!” She didn’t go far, but a little ways was enough for her to roll against the wall of the enormous cave where it met the path, and come to a stop in some bones resting against the stone. “You bitch, I could have ... have ... holy shit.” She pointed her phone at the bones, at the walls, and then, gasped.

The tunnel wasn’t just a big hole drilled into the Earth, with a pathway that circled the side all the way down like a screw. It was a graveyard. Bodies, randomly spread out against the wall and ground. Limbs with clothes still on them. Some fresh, or at least only a year or so old. Most were far older, skeletons, of varying sizes, some far too small to be adults.

“There was a time, centuries ago, when bandits and raiders were as common as fleas.” The angel of death hovered past the corpses and skeletons where they amassed in a pile against the wall, before passing it and moving further down the slope. And once Triss caught up with her again, she couldn’t help but notice more, and more, and more bodies they passed. “There was a legend, of a horrible place where these bandits and raiders would toss their kills. And, so the legend went, many of those tossed into the great hole of the dead were still alive when thrown in.” The demon motioned with one of its giant hands of bone toward the wall, where another pile of bones had grouped up in the grooves of dark rock. “And some survived the landing, only to die of their injuries, screaming up into the emptiness above them for help.”

“ ... yea, that’s pretty fucking dark.”

“Indeed.” It, she, nodded, and continued once again. “An exaggeration. In my travels I found this place, I found the bones, the dead, centuries gone and buried. Not so nearly as large as this, but then dreams are prone to exaggeration. The fears of the dying carved this chamber into the primordial dream.”

“ ... I thought you weren’t going to share your secrets with me.”

“There is power in legends.” The dark angel shrugged, a strange motion for shadow to make, and gestured to the pit in the center of the vertical cave. “Begotten feed on fear, as Fiona has no doubt told you. For the others to fear us, fear me, is to my benefit.”

“You think I fear you?”

“Of course you fear me.” Athalia came closer, and Triss stepped back. The fuck was she supposed to do? Athalia might as well have been a literal angel of death for all Triss could see, and the fucker knew it too.

“You really underestimate vamps.”

The monster snorted, a weird, half rasp half groan noise that echoed off the rock walls, before she, it, they continued along. “Perhaps. It is easy to underestimate a cockroach until you try and kill one yourself. You are notoriously difficult to kill, and you spread in much the same way.”

“Yeah well, a great man once said eventually we’ll all be dead, and the only ones left are gonna be five cockroaches and Keith Richards.”

“ ... and you take pride in this?”

“A bit, yeah.” She shrugged, adjusted her tank top, and resumed the walk into the endless pit of black. “So, pit of death, some sort of fear-created ... thing, place ... thing?”

“Yes. You vampires know of only the physical. Azamel tells me both Jacob and Antoinette have long sought to touch the borders of other realms, but you ... you’re so limited. What could you know of spirits, or the other realms, the layers of existence where the universe is ... no, I waste my breath.” The monster waved a dismissing, titan hand, and floated out over the empty hole. Triss had to jog down the slope — fucking scary — to catch up as Athalia landed on the other side, before continuing down. What a bitch. “What do you know of H. P. Lovecraft?”

“Just the basics. Cthulhu, fish men, knowledge so unimaginable that it’s capable of making you go ... insane...”

The monster turned to her, and Triss froze solid as she came in closer, and closer, until the colossal face of nigh bone was almost up to her. The dark skull was easily five times the size of a normal skull.

“If you dreamed a dream, infantile vampire, a dream that let your mind go, that let it reach up and out of this single realm of the physical, it could scrape against the walls protecting it from the outside.” The thing hovered down the cave slope further still, until at long last their walk came to what seemed some kind of bottom. “If you had any idea what sort of entities waited for you, just waiting for you to be stupid enough to leave the safe confines of your little world, you’d never sleep again.” The floor of the pit cave was covered in the dead, in bones and clothes and empty bags. Some bones belonged to horses, and others to dogs. “You think Azamel is terrifying? You have no idea, cockroach, just how terrifying the grander existence of things beyond understanding can be.”



“I never really did get the cosmic horror thing.” She shrugged, and gestured to the graveyard they’d started walking through. “Call me simple but I think spooky things in the black are scarier.”

“You are simple.” The entity returned the shrugged, colossal shoulders move its colossal wings with the motion, before it continued along up and over a pile of bones.

Climbing bones didn’t go as easily as Triss figured. They moved or broke under her feet, and thrice she fell down onto her face, bones meeting her and jabbing up into her. Many shattered where they were once connected, and hands or feet fell apart, raining down the sides of the hill of the dead and sending Triss sliding down along with them. Like trying to climb a hill of nothing but ice and loose snow, ugh.

She gave up, and walked around, one hand to the stone wall, the other pointing her flashlight at the bones beneath her. “This isn’t real, right?”

“It is real.”

“Thought this was a nightmare?”

“It is.”

“I ... oh.” Ok, that put it into better perspective than all of Jacob and Athalia’s ranting combined. Nightmares were real, actually real. The crazy shit the mind could only manage a glimpse of during dreams, was real. Yeah, ok, now she was starting to get a chill.

“This way.” The monster disappeared into another hole in the wall, big enough for her wings and titanic bones to fit through. Triss jogged after her, hopping up over bones and onto any rock or empty space where her feet could land on stone. “Turn your light off.”

“Right.” Fiona had said she was a monster that dealt with darkness, and had said Athalia was the same. Did they need it to function, or did they just prefer it? Everything was such a mystery with these damn things, and Fiona either didn’t know the details, or wasn’t willing to provide them. She didn’t blame the girl, but then maybe she and Jacob wouldn’t have had to come here, with a witch eye each, if they knew as much about the Begotten as they did Kindred, or the Uratha for that matter.

Christ, what the fuck else existed out there she didn’t know about or had never seen. Ghosts? Mummies? Fucking fairies?

She almost tripped as her boot got stuck in mud. If it was mud. She froze again, and took a long sniff of the air. Humidity, heat, water, rot, and mulch. The cave had connected to some kind of jungle or something.

“Is this—” Gunfire cut her off. She ducked low, and blinked into the darkness ahead of them. Or, ahead of her. Athalia was nowhere to be seen in the black, and the damn thing hovered around so it wasn’t like she made footsteps, or breathed. Triss grit her teeth and waited, listening, straining her ears to adapt to the new environment. A jungle, an actual jungle, humidity and heat and weird noises and all.

It couldn’t have been the same place she just came from. Wherever she’d been, whatever nightmare that was, it’d be silent, and cold. But without a door or gate or some magical, mystical watchamacallit to make the transition more notable, she’d entered someplace new, someplace hot, someplace where the environment itself pressed down on her.

She crept along, crouched and silent, claws against the mud, the roots and shit beneath her. A jungle, it had to be a jungle. Fiona’s jungle. Girl had mentioned it but Triss hadn’t really given it much thought, since Begotten were strange and it was easier to think of

them like that, easier to dismiss the girl's words as weird metaphor or something. Not a metaphor, not a metaphor at all. And as Triss moved forward, some light started to reach her, enough for her eyes to adjust and see the bark, the mud, the moistness and moss and fungus and mushrooms and fucking insects. Oh god the insects, everywhere, creepy crawly things with a thousand legs and others with none at all.

More gunfire, and screams. She continued along, summoned her vitae, and hid herself in the cloak of night. With this much darkness, trees, and vines dangling around, she'd be able to walk up to someone and punch them before they realized she was near.

Or at least, that would have been nice. But as she came closer to the gunfire, the sound of voices joined in, and then lights, far stronger lights than Triss's phone, cut through the black. And then the toppling of a tree.

She'd never heard a tree fall. How could she have? City girl her whole life, and second life, and the closest she'd ever heard to a tree falling was in movies. But there was no mistaking the creaking of wood, and then the tearing of vines and breaking of branches in a crescendo of weight and an impending crash. The tree was huge, so very huge, so very fucking huge, and it tore a through the canopy until moonlight bled through the wound.

Two moons. Holy shit.

Holy shit! She jumped back and scampered as someone fell in front of her, and landed hard enough to splat against the mud and splash it against her clothes. Some black dude in a suit. The fuck?

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~~Eric~~

That hurt. That really fucking hurt. His head didn't hit anything too hard on the way down, but riding a giant tree down as it tumbled

onto its brethren through the black night of a jungle, wasn't fun. Close to the bottom, when gravity decided it didn't like Eric anymore, the man fell and crashed down through brush, vine, and darkness. Mud greeted him, and softened his landing as much as a bellyflop in a swimming pool would. Better than breaking all his bones, but it still really fucking hurt.

He sat up, groaning, rubbing his head. Covered in mud, and Fiona's blood, and god only knew what else, whatever sort of shit, literal or not, you found on a jungle floor.

He froze. A woman was staring at him. The light from the torn-open canopy hit her enough he could see her decently well, or at least he should have been able to. Something was making it hard, something pushing at his eyes, causing them to slide off of her, and he had to squint and focus to force his gaze back onto the stranger. She was only two feet away, in literal punching distance, but it was damn hard to look at her.

She had one normal eye, and one snake eye. Fucking weird. They stared at each other, both unmoving, his heart pounding and his breath panting. But not hers. No breath, no heartbeat.

And just like before, his gears kicked in. Again, adrenaline spiked his system, and he found himself breathing in the scent of this newcomer, trying to analyze the threat they posed, trying to figure out friend or foe, or where they fucking came from.

She was doing the same thing. Expression on her face was—holy shit she had extra teeth, extra teeth where her cheeks should have been. Her raven hair hid it by framing her face, and so did the darkness, but the piercing moonlight and his new eyes managed to catch glimpses of them. Weird crocodile teeth, sharper though, and big enough that it was easy to imagine them tearing off limbs whole.

“ ... I ... uh—”

She held up a hand and put one of her fingers to her lips. She had claws.

“Don’t move, don’t speak, or I’ll rip you in half.”

He almost said something. Very a much a ‘don’t look down’ sort of situation, being told not to say anything so suddenly. But after he stared into her very, very weird eyes for a moment, he nodded. Girl was sending him the same sort of signals Jessy and Natasha did, some sort of sneaky-but-deadly vibe, the sort of vibe he imagined anyone would get when walking around poisonous snakes.

“Work for Jeremiah?”

One of them had said that name, Jeremiah. He shook his head. Girl didn’t know he wasn’t one of these hunters Fiona was dealing with.

“How can I trust you?”

He gulped, and gestured to his clothes. Not like these hunters were in suits, and unlike him, they had weaponry.

“... good enough I guess. But, tell me, name of the person who let you in here?”

“Fiona. Scot girl. Asked me to help her follow four people. Said she wanted to find someone named Jack.” Spilling the beans. Well, in all the chaos, this girl with the crocodile mouth seemed like she was on Fiona’s side, and that was his best option at the moment.

“And—” She raised her hands to protect herself as the sound of gunfire, and the sound of tearing trees started up once more. He did too, and threw himself to the side behind a trunk as gunfire ripped through the leaves.

And then, claws. Bone claws. Giant, massive, black claws tore through the leaves around him, over him, and black feathers covered the sky over their heads. Spikes, serrated, jagged, ripped at the bark and the vines, pulled down the forest with the motion of the titan, and earned the ire of the hunters. Shotgun blasts fired in the direction of the damage, and both he and the new woman found themselves face down in the mud.

Another monster. This one had wings, and some sort of torso of bone. Its beady white eyes, tiny, betrayed what must have been a huge skull. Streaks of reflecting black cut through the jungle, curved, showing only glimpses of its form, of spikes and horns, of ribs. No legs. No fucking legs. As it moved, hovering through its new path of carved and ruined jungle, he could see its spine dangling behind it.

Death. He was looking at death, moving around, and hunting in the darkness.

The hunters appeared in a clearing, their backs to each other, pistols and shotguns and two special knives drawn. The moment something moved, they shot it, and Eric winced as he recognized the sound of Fiona's new, monster scream. But, as he peeked out from behind the tree trunk, he caught a glimpse of the spider woman. Wounded, but alive, and still trucking, pulling herself up into trees and slashing out at the four hunters.

Damn the four shmucks were so outclassed, but they kept on fighting, each firing into the black, and every so often, they earned an alien snarl from the darkness. This time it was one Eric didn't recognize, some sort of raspy thing without the texture of a human voice. The other one, the other thing with black wings, it hissed and rasped and disappeared into the black as quickly as it came. A bullet managed to hit it, clipped one of the bones, and only then did Eric notice it had skin, gaunt to the point it wrapped the bone like saran

wrap clinging to leftovers. Bits of the black material tore away, and blended into the mud of the dark jungle.

And then shit got even more crazy. Universe just felt like dumping it on, shutting down his throat with as much insanity as he could possibly handle. Another dude showed up.

“Get down!”

The crocodile mouth girl didn't listen to the new voice. Instead, she sank her claws into one of the trees and started climbing, while Eric was more than happy to throw his body to the muck and cover his head, as he watched the man pull a grenade from his trench coat, and toss it into the forest.

An explosion, his first explosion. He wasn't prepared for the kinetic force of it striking out like a wave, or the sound of it. And he wasn't prepared for the debris, the shredding bark and branches cutting through the air. Somehow, crocodile lady was prepared, and she held on as she climbed higher.

“How did you get in here!?” Fiona called out from the black.

The newest newcomer laughed, and wiped his thumb on his lip, content to keep his secrets. He took out another grenade. And then, another. And the jungle forest screamed in agony as the man destroyed it with reckless abandon. Two more grenades immediately after, into the darkness, into the chaos. Not like the stranger had to worry about casualties, not with his four buddies beside him.

Eric certainly had to fucking worry. He did his best, stayed down and covered his head, but this fucker was tossing his grenades around like confetti, and they got closer, and closer, until everything around Eric was shredded trees falling over. If he didn't move, he was dead. If he got up, he was dead; the hunters weren't asking questions, just shooting first.

He started rolling, staying as low to the ground as he could, but there was only so much he could do to avoid what was turning into a giant fuckfest of carnage and mayhem. Get up, and die. Stay down, and die a bit later once one of those grenades landed beside you, or one of the hunters noticed him. More and more of the forest was being destroyed, so more of the dual moonlight was reaching them.

“Such a young monster,” the trench coat fucker said. Might as well have been wearing sunglasses at night. “Got a name?”

“I—”

“Don’t tell him anything,” the blackness said. That angel of death thing, no doubt. Both Fiona and its voice sounded horrific, but the death thing’s voice was the sort of raspy you expected to hear in a graveyard when you were looking for ghosts. Almost like a whisper that was somehow louder than yelling.

“Athalia, you really should just come out and let me kill you. Think your daughter is going to be as nice as I am?” Man’s voice flirted on playful, and angry. Reminded Eric of a bar before a fight erupted, when people were pounding their chests, but thought they were being sly about it by using shitty jokes and sarcasm.

“You ... brought Angela ... here?”

The sound was more focused, coming from somewhere past the five humans — christ, identifying people with ‘human’ was fucking weird — and showed a touch of shadowy movement. The guy with the grenades took advantage, drew his pistol, and fired. Eric didn’t see the movement, just the result, his gun aimed. Fast.

His bullet hit something, and something hissed its fury as it faded back into the shadows behind the trees.

“Lovely girl. She’s really looking forward to repaying you.”



“I did nothing to her!” Again the voice came from the black, but Eric couldn’t pinpoint it this time, and neither could the man. Jeremiah, according to the hunters and what they said earlier. And he’d also said something about ‘her daughter’. So, that made this death angel creature a woman, and a mom too. Creepy.

“Guess that whole wandering life, getting into fights with the werewolves and the vampires, making enemies of everyone, having it follow you wherever you went, didn’t agree with her.”

More movement, shadows slipping by the trees still standing. Jeremiah shot his pistol just once, straight into the darkness, and earned another loud hiss of pain. How the man could hit anything in the jungle, let alone through the parts of it that were pitch black, Eric had no idea, but he was.

“You ... poisoned her against me.”

“No, you did that. I just found her. Gave her a lift. Gave her a gun.” The man marched forward, pistol in one hand, and he eased a sword out of a hidden sheath into the moonlight. And it shined with the weird shine the two hunters and their special knives did. “Who’s your new friend? Another Eshmaki vermin to hide with you in the shadows?”

“She is none of your concern.”

“I think I’m going to have to make it my concern. Hurt one of my friends here. And besides, can’t let a monster live.”

“Get out of my home.” Fiona’s voice, or Vrall’s, Eric supposed. Making heads or tails of this whole situation was getting insane.

Fiona lashed out, massive legs coming in from above and stabbing down at the ground. It was her home, she had the advantage, and she was a fucking monster. The fact the humans were standing their ground was hard to comprehend, but they were, and they rolled out

of the way as massive blade-like legs stabbed down from above. When they all started firing upward, Fiona had already moved on, legs carrying her back up into the canopy in another direction, dark skin fading into the shadows.

As they got up, one of the hunters leaned in, and whispered something to Jeremiah. The man nodded, and began looking up, but not in the direction Fiona's shadow had moved. He was looking for something else, and he squinted hard as he panned his gun over the black canopy above.

He fired. Someone screamed. A woman's voice, a normal, human-sounding woman's voice.

Eric almost stood up as the woman from earlier came crashing down beside him. She screamed fury and pain, and rolled to the side to get behind a tree trunk as a hail of bullets followed her. The ground and mud and roots ripped up, rocks and insects scattering over the jungle floor as lead decorated the wet moonlight beside Eric. The girl's shoulder had a hole in it, and she covered it with her hand as she pinned her back to the tree. No blood, or at least, she didn't gush blood like he expected from a wound like that. There was something red between her fingers, thick and slow, and it didn't smell like human blood.

Nothing about her smelled human.

"Triss, get out of here! Take Eric with you."

"What?" Crocodile face said, and she looked across the cut ground to him. "Are you fucking serious? Let me—"

Both Triss and Eric flinched, covering their heads, as an enormous splatter of white coated the trees around them. Webbing, a lot of it, not arranged into any pretty patterns or elegant strings, but thick, heavy vines of white that splattered around randomly,

chaotically, painting the trees and forest and everything between Eric and the humans with spin art.

“Get out Beatrice! We’ll be fine. Mark will be here soon.”

Triss winced at the word Mark. “He uh ... might be? Jacob—” Another grenade landed by their way, slipping through the webs, and splashing in the mud between Eric and Triss.

The two of them stood up, and threw themselves to the darkness. The landing didn’t go so well, and Eric felt rock and branch rip through his suit and into his body. Skin tore, his blood joined the fabric, and his knee was fucking killing him.

“Mark will recover and be here shortly.” Athalia this time, her voice somewhere above them, flickering bits of dripping black mist sliding off the branches overhead.

“R-Right ... well, you’re the boss.” Coughing, groaning, and still holding her punctured shoulder, the crocodile lady started pushing herself up to her feet, back to the bark. Eric couldn’t help but stare. Certainly an attractive woman, with a very lean, fit body, with the muscle and abs to go with it. But as her head hung forward, her long tongue dangled out of her mouth, and Eric shuddered. Perfectly normal human lips from the front, but where her cheeks should have been, crocodile teeth chomped together. Not the time to be staring at her extra teeth, but something about them made him do a triple take. Something about the idea of biting someone with those teeth was oddly appealing.

“How the fuck are we going to get out of here?” he said. Don’t ask why this random monster woman would bother saving him, just assume she would for now. He had to do something, anything. Bullets whizzed by his head, and he again rolled onto his stomach. Crawling, dragging his body, he wormed his way through the jungle floor and toward another tree further from the gunfire and yelling men and women.

“Back the way I came. Christ that fucking gun is strong. The hell is this.” She motioned toward him with her shoulder, and he winced as he managed to peek through the hole and out into the jungle for a second. “I can’t leave until I have some fucking clue about Jack though.”

“You’re looking for Jack too?”

“Yeah, I am, I—” A chunk of the tree beside her head exploded outward, and she ducked as the bullets started ripping the trees around her apart. Then she vanished. Like a fucking ghost fading out of existence, she was gone, and Eric stared on as he gulped down his surprise. Just gone, vanished and—she appeared in front of him, and grabbed his wrist. “Stay close, and—”

And he punched her.

“Shit! God fucking damn it, christ woman. You fucking startled me.”

She picked herself back up off the mud, now coated in the slimy earth, and snarled at him. The hole in her shoulder was starting to close, right before his eyes, the weird blood, thick and heavy, filling the wound and pulling in skin and muscle, or making it new. But, before he could apologize again, or comment on the fucking insanity of her healing something so fast he could actually see the flesh rebind itself, she reached out, grabbed him, and started running.

He tried to move his legs to run with her, but they weren’t touching the ground. Like one of those silly videos with someone picking up a dog and carrying them just over ground, and the dog tries to walk or swim but can’t reach the water or ground. He was that dog. This woman, average height, built like a rock climber, was far stronger than even her impressive muscle mass would allow. Carrying him like a fucking child. And he was kind of glad she was, as more bullets started to slam into trees around them, causing the

wet bark and vines to explode and shower them in plant matter, and god knew what else.

She threw him down into the muck, and she threw herself down next to him. Bullets crashed against rock, a couple creating some small sparks as they hit the minerals. There was a crag ahead, some sort of wall, some sort of cave.

“Stay close,” she said. “You’re invisible now, sort of, just stay close and stay quiet. Assuming the way back actually takes us back to the real—er, the material world, you’ll have to run out without me.”

“Cause of this Jack guy.”

She nodded, crawling on her belly right along with him. Her shoulder was working again.

“Kid needs saving, if he’s alive. And this Jeremiah fuck or his buddies might know where he—”

“I ... did hear these fuckers say that Jeremiah was coming from the prison.”

She stopped, turned to look at him with her normal eye, and her crazy green snake eye. The smile was unsettling.

“You just saved the fucking day ... Eric, was it?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t know why a human is with Fiona and in this shit, but if we make it out of here alive, we’re gonna have a lovely chat.”

Human. She called him human. Every warning signal was going off in his brain, telling him that this girl was dangerous, but it was a shit load better call than going back toward the psychos behind him.

They continued crawling along, bellies to the mud, darkness covering them again as the sounds of gunfire, screaming, monster roars, and howling animals came and went. Laughter too, that guy in the trench coat, but not the sort of laughter you might expect to hear from a guy in a trench coat in a jungle with grenades and swords and guns. This guy's laugh was heavy, hoarse, smoking and yelling his whole life, but only strengthening his voice instead of damaging it. The sort of guy who could scream his fury at the ocean, and it'd notice.

It started to rain. It was a jungle, so of course it started to fucking rain. Not just rain, but flash flood, water pouring down the enormous leaves and twirling vines above. With Triss and Eric back under the canopy, none of the rain hit them directly; instead, it hit them as waterfalls flowing from the branches above. And it was strong enough, heavy enough, to leave the man gasping for breath with each forward swing of his elbows. Drowning in the mud of a jungle was not fun.

They continued the crawl toward the cave, and once they had their hands against the rock, they got to their knees and moved into its welcome embrace. Anything to get away from the hail of gunfire slamming into rocks and trees behind them.

Beatrice grabbed his arm, pulled him up, and the two of them broke into a jog. Or at least, that was the plan, but he fell, groaning and clutching his knee. Soaked, in pain, exhausted, and scared. What a fun night.

“The fuck is the matter with you?”

“Fucking knee. Old injury.”

Crocodile lady mimicked his groaning, and got down on a knee. Too dark to see much in the cave, but he could tell what she was doing by the feel of her arm holding his.

“Hop on.”

“ ... seriously?”

“Seriously. Two seconds before I leave without you.”

“Fucki—fine!” He got behind her, hooked his arms around her neck, and then his legs around her hips.

And then she got up and started running, as if she wasn't carrying a middleweight fighter on her back. Hell, he'd seen people struggle to run this speed with a heavy backpack on. She definitely wasn't human; not that he needed more proof, what with the crocodile face, but it was a sight to behold — or feel in the darkness — that she was carrying him. No wonder she'd been able to throw him so easily.

Hope she didn't run into a wall in the darkness, or he'd have to add broken nose to the list of tonight's delights.

She didn't go far. Maybe a few hundred feet before she stopped, and looked up. He did too, and sucked in his breath hard at the sight of the sky and moon. The moon, but not the moon, something alien but familiar, around alien but familiar stars. And the smell, alien but familiar. His new nose told him it was old rot and bones, a different smell to the jungle. Wet but not soaking wet, barren, rock, and while the jungle was half alive, half dead, there was nothing but dead awaiting him in this new nightmare.

But he couldn't see shit. He hooked his arm around the woman's neck, reached into his pocket for his phone, pulled it out, and— “Oh fucking hell it isn't working.”

“Phone flashlight?”

“Phone flashlight.”

“We’re so wet we might as well have been swimming. I probably can’t use mine either.”

“Then what the fu—” Gunfire snapped past them again, hitting more rock while others slammed into the bones before him. So damn dark he almost couldn’t see it, but with the stars and moon way way up there, and them apparently at the bottom of some giant hole in the ground, he could just make out the silhouette of a mountain of death before him.

Beatrice jumped forward, and onto the bones. And then again, jumped, each jump going a fair bit higher than was possible, each landing into the bones and sending them scattering in random directions from the weight of their combined bodies. Bones cracked and shattered, many exploding and sending their shards down the hill of the dead.

“The fuck is this?” he said

“Another nightmare. Athalia’s.”

“Right, that ... that...”

“Yeah, I know. Fucking spooky. And she has a daughter apparently, working with that Jeremiah fuck.” Through her scaling over the mountain of bones and toward the other side of the enormous vertical cavern, she didn’t break her words at all. Almost as if she didn’t need the breath. “I—” And then gravity decided the two of them needed to join the dead beneath them.

Gunfire, several shots, shattering the silence of the cave. Beatrice went down, slamming into the mountain of dead, and launching Eric to the side as she spun. He only had time to realize she was falling harder than a simple trip would have caused, before the dead decided to ensnare him. Hands, arms, skulls, they all took liberties with pushing against his clothes and rubbing against his mud-soaked face as he rolled down the hill. At least he was rolling toward



Beatrice's goal, but every roll was a combination of a horrifying dance with the dead, and scraps and bruises peppering his already very beat up body.

"Fuck!" Crocodile face fell down the hill somewhere beside him, and he had to blink a few times to find her silhouette in the darkness. She was holding her leg. "Fuck fuck fuck. Give me a few minutes," she said, dropping her voice to a whisper.

"A few minutes to what?"

"Heal."

"What happened?"

"Someone's coming up behind us. One of those hunter fucks must have got past Fiona and Athalia. Put a hole through my shin."

"... and you're going to heal that in a few minutes."

"Enough to put weight on it again at least."

"Are you fucking serious? Christ, you and Fiona and that corpse angel thing, the fuck are you—"

"We can discuss it later. We—" They both turned and raised a hand to cover their eyes as white light blinded them. A flashlight. And as he tried to block out the searing in his eyes, the sounds of gunfire joined the white beam.

Not for him though. He would have recognized something like a gunshot wound in his body, even with his eyes covered, he was sure. Seems the hunter was aiming for crocodile face, and was a good shot from the sounds. Each was followed with a shriek of pain, and the thud of a bullet hitting flesh. The creature fell backward, screaming again, and again as a bullet ripped through her and splattered a mess of her flesh out over the dead that surrounded

them. The splatter, lit by the hunter's light, vanished as it moved through the air, turning into tiny flickers of ember and ash.

Eric threw himself to the side and out of the way, but once he was on his knees and palms again, he stared at the hunter at the top of the mountain. One of the woman hunters had managed to follow them, and she sneered from atop the hill of bones, gun still pointed at Triss. So much for being invisible.

“H ... how—”

“You were moving the bones while you walked on them. Idiot.” The human managed a quiet chuckle, out of breath and covered in sweat and jungle muck. She loaded in another magazine, smooth as butter, and pointed it at Beatrice.

Eric managed another glance at crocodile face, and winced. She had a bunch of new holes in her body, lit by the flashlight the hunter was holding underneath the pistol. Seven shots fired, seven hits, and each straight into crocodile face's torso. Enough to make the monster cough up some of that weird, thick red liquid that wasn't blood onto her extra teeth.

“ ... fear...” Some of the red liquid trickled from the woman's tank top and stomach, too thick to go far, and some of it slid back into other holes, as if something inside the monster was pulling it back into her guts. “Fear.”

Eric expected to hear the click and boom of another bullet, but none came. The hunter stood there, shaking, glaring, and fresh sweat started to drip from her forehead, lit by the glow of her flashlight. Her breathing quickened, and Eric blinked as he watched her gun and light start to jitter. Her heart was beating faster too, and she raised her flashlight to her face to wipe away the sweat drops threatening to touch her eyes.

Something was up, something was wrong, something was weighing down on the area and burying it in the cold, suffocating grip of terror. He gulped and stared on as crocodile face, sitting on the side of her hip with her hands to the ground in front of her, looked up at the hunter, stared at her, and growled. It came out of her, out of Beatrice, something invisible, something that clawed at his skin and told him to get away from her, something that felt wrong.

“I’m not afraid!” Click. Bang. The shot went wide, missing crocodile face and slamming against the rock wall behind her. There was a ramp, some sort of path that led up the side of the vertical cave, some way to get out and escape. But what really got Eric’s attention was that somehow, the hunter missed. She fired again, and again it missed, as crocodile face stared down the woman above her.

“ ... fear.”

Panting and panicking, shaking and fumbling, the hunter woman started to mumble to herself, words of encouragement like ‘it’s not real, it’s not real’ and ‘she’s just fucking with your brain, it’s not real’ over and over. Didn’t change that the girl was trembling, and the bones around her were rattling right along with hers.

Triss jumped up, and growled. Not a human growl, not a human sound, something far closer to an animal, something that would hide in shadows and bite with the ferocity of a badger or wolverine. Something that told Eric’s gut that she was a creature of shadow, a hunter in the night, something that told him she was like a wolf—no, no. He had it all wrong. Not a badger or wolverine or wolf.

An owl, waiting in the night for prey. An owl that could growl, that could roar, that could sink fangs into you. The imagery struck him still.

The human screamed and ran. Eric gulped and looked after her, but with her went the light, and soon he and the thoroughly punctured monster were left in the dark again.

“The fuck did you do?”

“Lot of vamps have ways to fuck with a person’s mind. I mean come on, you must have seen Dracula.” She sighed, a dreamy sort of sigh, and as his eyes adjusted to see her silhouette, he noticed she was fanning herself. “Gary Oldman back then? Fuck, I’d let that man do a million things to me.” Acting like she barely noticed she was horribly injured, and perhaps she did barely notice.

Wait.

“ ... you’re a vampire.”

“Yeap.”

“ ... Fiona mentioned vampires ... do ... do all vampires have mouths like yours?”

“Ha, fuck no. Nosfer—you know what? How about we get out of here first. My phone is...” She reached into her jeans, soaked in blood, mud, water, and covered in bits of dead everything, and pulled out her smartphone from the rather tight confines. Girl definitely had a thing for her ass, with jeans like that. “Yeap, my phone’s fucked too. Fuck fuck, why does this fucking nightmare shit affect us like it’s real? Oh, right, cause it is real.” She started crawling, but crawling fell to groaning and grunting as her body fell too. “Ok, switch. You carry me.”

“You can’t be serious. I can’t—”

“It’s either that or you leave me here, and I can personally guarantee my boss will do worse to you than I did to that hunter if you do, so come on.”

Yeah, point taken. Grumbling, he forced himself to his knee, and held his hand out to her.

And then began the crunching, the grinding, and the pressing bone against ruined cartilage that could not protect the joint. Knee injuries were the fucking most horrible thing, because of how much they lied to you, how much they tricked you, how easy it was to think your knee was functional, that it could handle something, that it'd be ok if you pushed it a little. It was good at this lie, and Eric fell for it far more often than he liked to admit.

He groaned once, grit his teeth, and forced down the next dozen groans as he started up the cave ledge. It was a wide ledge, no real risk of falling down the hole in the cave's center, but each step on the slope was precarious, and falling down it to roll a rather painful trip was not something he wanted to experience. And each step, his knee tried to make that a reality, each step putting the weight of this bleeding, swiss cheese vampire on his back into his knee. She wasn't extremely heavy, but with a body like that, she had enough muscle mass to put a decent amount of weight on him.

He almost laughed. Bad time to tell a girl she was heavy.

“You are slower than molasses going uphill in January.”

“ ... the fuck kind of expression is that?”

“Had some relatives from Canada. Newfoundland I think.”

He groaned a few more times, and came to a stop. He managed maybe a hundred feet before his leg started to buckle, and he fell to his good knee. But falling to a knee was a painful position to be in for his bad knee, no matter which knee he landed on, and he groaned again, louder, as the fucking thing clicked.

“Sorry,” she said, “didn't know you were eighty.”

“Fuck ... you.” He almost told her to get off and carry him, but he could feel the holes in her flesh with how her body was pressing against him. Vampire indeed, a walking, talking corpse. No wonder she didn’t sound winded earlier, since she probably didn’t need to breathe. But despite that, he was better off than her, and it was the better call that he be the one carrying her. He got moving again, but the best he could get was a slow walk. No way they were outrunning anyone chasing them like this.

But it seemed like no one was chasing them anymore. Thank fucking god.

“Shit, I hope Fiona’s alright,” she said. “We just left her.”

“She told ... us to leave ... seemed ... confident.” Every word was labored, sweat dripping down his forehead and chest, each step a shaky mess.

“You’re handling this insanity pretty well.”

“Just ... guess I ... was getting used to ... crazy shit.”

“Oh?”

“Just ... nevermind ... Fiona can tell you ... later.” If Fiona and this dead thing on his back were friends, well, maybe she’d tell Triss about his dreams later; hopefully after telling him about them.

“K, I can walk now. But christ, that hunter pumped me full of holes. Only walking.”

“Walking ... better ... than this.” He got down again, and the vampire hopped off. She put a hand on his shoulder, and the two started walking. Fuck fuck fuck every step was painful, every step made his leg wobble, and every step made him grumble.

“You’re a whiny fuck, aren’t you?”

“ ... you can't be serious. My knee doesn't work you—”

“I know you can't see it in the dark, but I currently have a bunch of holes in my chest and the lead's in there too. I'd be dead twice over if I was human. Oh, and you saw what that Jeremiah fuck did to my shoulder. So, yeah, I still feel pain. Get over it.”

Damn this girl had bite, crocodile teeth or not.

“ ... so vampires exist.”

“Yeap. You really shouldn't know that, but you seem to be helping Fiona out, and me out now, so I'll cut you some slack.”

“ ... and if I wasn't?”

“Well then you'd be dead, or forcefully turned into a thrall. Masquerade violation, letting you know about us, about any of this shit.”

“Violation?” Even with her off his back, his breathing, his words, all of it was getting weighed down by his exhaustion, his pain, every step up the slope draining him. This night was brutal. Walking with Fiona, then running with her in his arms, then the trees in the jungle, then belly crawling along the jungle floor, then this shit in the cave. He wouldn't be able to stand for days, maybe weeks, once he got to sleep. Hopefully his boss would let him sit at his new job, assuming he still had it.

Fuck, he really hoped he still had that job.

“Yeah. There's a reason you didn't know vamps existed until now.”

“Shit. Am I fucked?” Fuck, did he just stumble into the mafia, except, vampires? Fuck. Fuck fuck.

“Well, maybe. We’ll see. But stick with me and I’ll see about getting this sorted out.”

“ ... and if I don’t stick with you?”

“Then I have to tell the boss, and you’ll be dead within twelve hours. Or worse.”

“ ... guess I won’t need to worry about my new job at the Bloodlust then.” He really should have just told Fiona no, and let the girl do this on her own. Doubtful she’d have found the hunters then. Probably wouldn’t be fighting them now, or had gotten shot earlier, or any of this shit. Bad decisions loved to create cascades of horrible leading to more horrible.

“You work at the Bloodlust?”

“I do. I did. Started just a little while ago, bouncer.”

“Heh, you’ve probably met other vamps then.”

“ ... really?” Wait wait wait. Those two Fiona was with, what were their names? “ ... Jessy, and uh ... Natasha?”

“Ha, yeap.”

“Shit. Fucking shit, Jessy agreed to do me a favor.”

“Getting a favor from an Invictus? Might as well have been getting a favor from the devil. Expect to be repaying that favor,” she said. Great. Fucking great. Life was just a lovely avalanche of shittyness shitting down his shit-filled throat. “How’d you get mixed up in all this anyway?”

He almost told her, about him and Fiona, about her saying she knew about his hallucinations, his dreams, all that shit. Life or death kinda did that to people, apparently, got them feeling truthful



when they really should just shut up. He didn't know if this woman would actually help him, or if she was just using him to get out of this nightmare and back to Dolareido, where she could then suck his blood out and leave him a withered corpse. So he decided to keep the truth to himself, and wait.

“Met Fiona at the bar. She came to me tonight, asking if I knew where Jack was. I didn't, never seen the guy, but she mentioned she was also looking for four strange people, which I had just seen. We tailed them.”

“You left your job randomly, to tail some strangers, cause a girl asked you to?”

“ ... she was very convincing.”

“Uh huh, right. Well, whatever, we're friends so she'll tell me about it later.” She shrugged, and then screamed before falling down to a knee again. “Forgot ... about ... the fucking shoulder.”

“How the fuck do you forget about a hole in your shoulder?”

“Fuck you dude, let's see how well you last with a fuckload of holes in your body.”

“Pretty sure I'd just die.”

“Then don't fucking complain!”

“I've earned the right to complain.” With one arm hooking around her waist so she could hook his shoulder, he gestured to the stones and rock beneath them with his other. “I can't see shit. I'm in a nightmare. I'm going to have to see a doctor about my knee, for the tenth time. And now you're telling me Jessy is a fucking vampire, and Invictus, whatever that is. I ... she said she'd take care of Montoya, and then she'd fuck my brains out. Please tell me she wasn't making some sort of metaphor.”

“Jessy? Well, I have no idea who Montoya is, but yeah, fucking the bouncer from the club sounds like something she’d do. Probably while you’re in the club too. Don’t be surprised if she wants a Kiss though.”

“A kiss?”

“Vampire Kiss, you know? Suck your blood.”

“ ... Jesus! What—”

“Don’t worry about it. Feels good, won’t kill you, and knowing that whore, she’ll fuck you and do it at the same time.”

The strangest. Conversation. Of his life. Pit of dead beneath them, bones and random crap like bags and clothes littering his route, a precarious walk up a very long path up the inside of a cave, all inside a nightmare world. But it was the realization that the girl he owed a favor to was a vampire that poked his brain more. Please just mean sex, please just mean sex, he didn’t want to be a vampire or some vampire’s slave.

The path came to a stop, almost at the top of the cave, where it turned into yet another cave, small, but tall enough and wide enough for the two of them.

“You came in through here?” he said, and as she nodded, he guided her through the passage. Yay, more absolute darkness. Fucking annoying.

“Yeah, Athalia was walking me through the dark and then bam, I was here.”

“Sounds like me and Fiona. I—holy shit.” The sweet sweet clack of his shoes against something man made: concrete. Yes, finally, back to city, back to reality, back to hum of cars and other machinery, echoing down as near-silent vibrations through the earth.

The jungle had been overwhelming. He much, much preferred the breathing of the city, even if he was... “Where are we?”

“Beneath Morning Street. The old tunnels.”

“Right ... I—”

“You, are going to get my ass topside. We got a prison to get to ... and maybe ask Azamel for a phone.”

Do what she says you dumbass, or you won't live to regret it.

“Think ... think Fiona and them will be alright?” he said.

“We'll find out tomorrow. Right now we got a dumbass kid to save. Fuck, if he's not there or if he's dead, the Prince will burn half this city to the ground to get revenge.”



~~Jack~~

Fire hurt. Getting shot, stabbed, cut open, beaten, broken, dismembered, all of that was horrible, painful, excruciating, agonizing, and made each undead nerve in his body scream bloody murder. But fire was different. Fire was alive, and it laughed at him as more than just his nerves screamed in pain, but as his beast did as well. The licking flames filled him with both pain, and dread, and struck terror into his gut until it felt like ice cold enough to burn.

Ice, burning his insides, while fire burned his outsides. The clash of pains sent his whole being into a frenzy, sent his beast roaring into its own level of agony, and overwrote every thought he had except for one: get out.

One of the hunters got up from their friend. They'd managed to get him down and pinned, but only after he stabbed Angela. And after they hit the man several times in the face, Jack could tell his

brainwashing was broken. Henry was borderline unconscious though, with the beating they gave him, so that was another hunter Jack didn't have to deal with at least. The one getting up though, she was in Jack's way, and Jack bowled her over, hard enough he could hear the crack of her skull against the floor.

Probably not dead, or at least, not if someone pulled her out of the fire along the wall.

He didn't stop to see if they did. No, he couldn't stop, couldn't control himself, couldn't do anything other than ride the overwhelming, overpowering need to get the fuck out of the fire. It took all his willpower to guide the beast toward the other entrance, instead of letting it pull him back to the safety of the prison cells, where there was no fire. Ahead, was fire, and it clawed and scratched at him as he ran past it.

He managed only a momentary glance over his shoulder to see what the psycho was up to. Angela was on her knees, bloody knife beside her on the floor, and she was screaming. Screaming, and standing. That deserved another glance, and he winced as the woman turned to face him, reached out, grabbed the knife soaked in her own blood, and started running after him.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" Her voice mixed with the fire, like someone bellowing over the ocean. She ignored the hunters, ran past them, clutched the hole in her stomach with one hand and squeezed the blade grip in the other. The other hunters, their voices blended with the fire, were buried by it as they tended to their wounded, got people away from the flames. But not her, her voice vibrated along the walls and slammed against his ears, piercing the flames like a siren.

That woman was not human.

He jumped through the lobby. If he went fast, the flames had only a split moment to touch him, grab at him, dig at him. Surface

wounds. His skin burned away, sending more searing pain up through his body and into his skull. He had to wonder if spontaneous human combustion was really a story about vampires catching fire. Or at least, he tried to wonder, but the beast in his gut suppressed the thoughts, pushed them aside, pushed the pain aside, and let the fear of its bane drive him through the lobby.

His skin was leaving him, ashes, dust to the flames. He was moving fast enough to keep his pants and shoes from catching fire, but his torso, his arms, the flame caught his skin and took it like peeling a sunburn, times a thousand. And it hurt, it hurt until he felt like he was back in that mill with Viktor and Tony.

But the fire was starting to fade, and once he burst through the wall of flame into the center of the civilian lobby, he found much of the fire had faded. Gasoline or other flammable liquids on concrete meant it wouldn't last, and he thanked fucking god that he didn't have to run through more halls filled with vampire bane.

He kept going. He could hear screaming him, all coming from Angela, the others defeated and exhausted. But not her. The psycho continued after him, and made a few loud clicking noises of metal on metal. She was reloading.

Gunfire. Bullets ricocheted against concrete, slammed into the counter as he got past it, and sent sparks flying as some found the bars of the gate ahead of him. Normally he wouldn't be concerned about some bullets, but if she nailed him in the head, he'd be down and wouldn't be getting back up without someone spoon feeding him a mountain of blood. And in his current condition, even a shot to the heart or spine would probably do that as well.

Outside. Oh thank god the outside. The beast finally calmed down, let him take in his surroundings, let him make some decisions, let him think about things other than the overwhelming need to flee, and feed. He just fed, ten fucking minutes ago, but it

was gone, used up, bleeding out of him or healing his wounds to at least get his legs working.

Working was a strong word. As he got out onto the street, he fell, and screamed out as he landed on one of the stumps of his arm. Legs collapsed, muscles refused to contract and tendons refused to bend to pull on the bones.

Outside though, he was outside. Good, and bad. Gunfire out here meant cops would be coming, eventually. Cops were also good, and bad. The hunters wouldn't want to be around for that, to have to explain to cops what they were doing with their weapons, or to—bang! More gunfire, more bullets whizzing past him, hitting nearby buildings, shattering windows, and hitting parked cars. The fuck were this many parked cars doing here in the middle of the night in this part of town? Half a dozen more cars than seemed normal. The hunters, maybe? Too many cars for this part of town to be just civilians, and a van was parked beside the prison too.

For a second, he thought maybe the hunters would come pouring out of the cars, each armed with guns and stakes and fire, but they were empty, and he leaned against one as he forced himself back to standing. Running wasn't working anymore, and instead, he limped forward, one leg refusing to propel him like it should, so each step was weighed down by it.

He looked back toward the prison. Only Angela came out. Now holding her wound with her knife hand and bleeding down her leg, she limped after him, gun hand aimed and wobbling. She fired again, and again. One of them caught him in the back, and he screamed as he fell over again, landing on an elbow. But, the pain blended into the mess of agony writhing up and down his punctured, burnt corpse, almost fading away as he got back up, and started limping away again.

The other hunters weren't with her. Why? For fuck's sake don't look a gift horse in the mouth, just move. Go.

He couldn't go, not very well anyway. Best he could manage was limping, dragging his body against the cars, each step a painful lesson in how heavy even his light body could be when injured like this. Antoinette had fought with injuries like this, and only when she had lost an arm and leg did her wounds bring her to a halt. She was a Daeva though, and it was Ventrue and Gangrels that were the more resilient of the clans, that could get a chunk of their skull chopped off and shake it off, that could get up from a train wreck, that could march into a hail of gunfire and ignore the bullets tearing through them. How she managed to do it as a Daeva, he couldn't imagine.

Ventrue resilience was the only thing keeping Jack from slipping into torpor. He grabbed his Ventrue blood, forced it up, felt that piece of Viktor inside him, and Julias, and used it. His body was holding together, just barely, just enough he could keep moving, keep dragging himself away from the maniac with the gun.

"Get back here you fucking leech!" Another gunshot hit the windshield behind him, and the glass exploded over his body as he limped over to the next car.

How the fuck was she keeping up with him? A glance back showed she was struggling, bleeding, limping, but it didn't matter to her, like a wound wouldn't stop her. It was a fucking knife wound, through the back and out the stomach; it should have been enough to stop her. Streetlights lit the red path she was leaving behind, and she announced each drop of blood with a curse, a scream, and many were paired with more gunshots.

She pulled out another magazine, and loaded it, letting go of her wound to do so. Jack looked over his shoulder as he heard her scream, then grunt with impact. She'd fallen. It might have been a

good opportunity to turn around and kill her, if he hadn't been in the same boat, stumbling, dragging, fighting the urge to pass out as well. No, he had one option here, and that was to run.

“Fucking killed Johnny, and Mike, and Fran, and Stacey’s dead because of you. You don’t get to just walk away!” She got herself up again, put her hand back on the hole in her gut, and leaned against the cars as she limped toward him. More gunshots, all misses, all decorating the streets beneath him and shattering the glass of car windows beside him. At least the newer cars had windshields that didn’t explode, but older cars weren’t so nice, and bits of the sharp material showered Jack like rain.

Eventually, he ran out of cars to lean against. In this part of North Side, there were no houses around, no neighborhoods, just factories and business buildings. Empty streets, old roads, and older buildings with alleyways between them. Darkness. Some of the streetlights weren’t working anymore, and as he passed through the black spots, Angela stopped shooting. The moment he was back out into the light, more gunfire came for him.

“Stop running and die!”

He only offered a growl. Part of him wanted to insult her, throw a scathing remark or two, but buried in pain and wounds and ashes, with bones and guts exposed, all that came out of him was the noises of the beast. More growls, a few snarls, and one scream as one of her bullets caught his leg.

Not just his leg, his ankle. The shattering of bone was too much, and his shriek sliced the night air apart as he fell down again. Asphalt greeted him with a punch to his arm and chest, and he screamed again as he tried to get back up. Bones broken, muscles punctured, tendons torn, skin peeling off of him as ashes, he lay there and managed to roll onto his back. Get up. Get up. Get the fuck up.



No one was around to help him. Middle of the night, no one was in North Side, not near the abandoned prison anyway. The cars they passed had to be more of her hunters, but they weren't here. Off scouting, planning, taking notes about vampire whereabouts maybe? Either way, no one was around to hear him scream, hear him snarl, hear him shout and curse at the fucking woman as she limped her way over to him. The best he could hope for was the echo of gunshots being enough to entice someone to call the police.

He drove his heels against the road, pushed his body away from her with his weight on his elbows and ass, and ignored the grinding of his bones against the street. Keep moving, don't stop, you're not going to die here.

She came in closer, and closer, hissing a dark laugh and firing her gun again. Missed. She fired again, missed, and fell to her knees with a crunch.

“Kill ... you ... fucking ... vampire.” Even crawling she was still faster than him, and after a few feet she forced herself back to standing, gun hand weighing her down like an anvil tied to her wrist. “Going to ... fucking ... kill you...” She got closer, and closer, blood dripping and her curses growing louder with each drop.

He only snarled.

“Mother ... was right ... about vamps.” She reached him, and stepped onto his ruined leg. She'd probably have kicked him if it didn't risk her tearing open her insides any worse than they already were. “Look at you. Fucking ... growling like a wounded animal. That's all you are, a wounded animal that needs ... to be put down.”

She fell forward, right onto him, but she was smart about it and landed on her knee against his chest. The crack hit his ears first, and then pain came after, but all he could manage was more snarls and growls. Thoughts were almost gone, just noises to his brain now,

just meaningless words, and all that came up instead were more animal sounds.

“We’re going to ... purge this town, you fucking ... leech. Going to burn you all out. Vamps, the fucking monsters, whatever else is hiding ... in the god damn cracks of this slut city, they’re all dead.” The knife came out, the one soaked in her blood, and she brought it up as she glared down at him, glass eye piercing into his soul.

She was going to kill him.

He tried to find more of that power, that will, that beast inside him that let him defeat those weird handcuffs, that let him summon thousands of rats, that let him break the minds of three hunters easily. Gone, all gone. He was just a defeated corpse now, holding together as well as a paper bag held water.

But, a smile sneaked its way onto his lips. “The Prince is going to kill you.” A threat of posthumous revenge? A very real threat though, and he let his head settle back on the street as he went limp. God, he wanted to see Antoinette again, so damn badly; the only damn thought to break through his frenzy. Just hold her one last time, say something poetic, kiss her again, and—

Angela’s skin started to light up. Heaven, maybe? White light at the end of his puny existence? The dark skin, the soft face but steel gaze glowed brighter and brighter as more light shone upon her; so familiar.

Honking yanked his attention back up from the depths, and he turned his head enough to see an oncoming car. Maybe he could get run over, squash his brains into pudding. Better than letting this psychopath cut his head off.

Angela sat up and held one hand over her eyes, trying to pierce the blinding light of the incoming car. High-beams. And the car wasn’t slowing down. In fact, it was speeding up.

Only at the last moment did Angela actually force herself to stand up.

“What the fu—”

Jack stared on, and watched as the car came for them, the two of them. Two tons of metal roaring, wheels spinning with all the care or delicacy of a child given a rocket launcher. A split second, for a lightning moment, he managed to see the bumper of the car slam into Angela’s body and send her flying. The next moment, a wheel was on his stomach, and he got to feel what it was like to be run over.

It wasn’t that bad, actually. Massive weight crushing his punctured guts into his back, spinning rubber tearing up the already ruined skin, and the impact forcing him to roll were all horrible. But it was disorienting, overwhelming. He didn’t even register the second tire, just a blur of sensory input, of lights and noises and some sort of extra pain adding to the mix. He didn’t make a sound, didn’t move, just let the insanity take him and turn him into a skid mark on the street.

Or at least he thought he’d be a skid mark, but there was a curb. The car hit it, and somehow, some of the crushing weight didn’t press down onto him. He rolled a few times before hitting against that curb, and went still as his mind tried to make sense of what just happened. He’d just been run over, literally, a car had just run over him with its two right tires. Did the left tires hit him? No, almost hit his feet but not quite. He tried to move them; still working.

A groan escaped him, and it turned into a gargled scream as he tried to sit up. Ok, ok, no sitting up. He touched his stomach with his stumps. Still had a stomach, just a mangled, flattened, ruined one. Still intact. Ok, everything was still together, or at least, just as intact than before the car hit him. Ventrue resilience indeed.

Still in one piece other than his hands, and the moment of relaxation ripped away the pain suppression of the beast's anger. The pain returned, the agony, and he let out a wail as his skin, his guts, his bones, everything told him he was dying, like he was being boiled alive, like he was being dipped in acid, like he was being set on fire. Close to the truth, too close, and another groan turned into a gargled sob as that pain came back to him and danced along his charred body.

He turned his head. The car had run into the parking lot of one of the business buildings. Angela's body was over there too, off to the side. Must have been launched like a basketball to land over there. She wasn't moving. Good.

He tried to move, to take advantage, to do something to get away from his current situation, but trying to move his arms was met with one, two, maybe three inches of movement, and other than his head, they were the only things moving much. Couldn't go anywhere, couldn't get away. So close, so damn fucking close, but he couldn't move.

The car was coming back. There was yelling, but not from the car. Somewhere down the street he could hear yelling, from several people, and then gunshots. He had trouble making out what was happening, but, once he heard the sound of bullets hitting metal, he was starting to put together a picture. People were shooting at the car.

And the car came to a stop on the street between him, and the sources of the gunfire. "Get in!" Someone's voice, from the window. A man's. "Holy fuck how is this kid still alive?"

"Jack! Jack you fucking idiot. Holy fucking shit." Another voice, a woman's. A voice he recognized. Triss.

Another sob broke through, but he choked down the second. No time for crying, not yet. Get up. Get up get up get up get up get up.

Wasn't happening. He raised his arm, and managed a small wave of the stump toward the car. Blurs of color and light was all he could make out anymore. That, and the feel of something slipping under his shoulders and legs. Someone else's arms.

"I've seen roadkill in better condition than you." Triss's voice again.

"You ... r-ran ... me ... over." Did she really have to make a stupid joke like that now? He was literal roadkill.

"If I had known you were this fucked up, I might have tried something a little different. Seemed like the only option at the time though, considering a second later she would have cut off your head."

"I—aarg!" He had enough energy to scream, but that was it. Just scream, and groan as the Nos picked him up. Arms dangling, legs swaying, every fiber of his body started sending him warning signs that he was falling apart, that his limbs were going to slip out of their sockets, skin was going to tear in half, and his guts were going to fall out.

It didn't happen. Felt like it would, but it didn't happen. Triss didn't waste time coddling him either, and threw him into the backseat of the car hard enough he bounced a little. More screams.

"Eric, get back there and let him drink."

"What!? You can't be fucking serious," the stranger said. Eric. Jack tried to look at him, to see this man driving the car. Couldn't, not as everything grew heavy, and the blurry colors started to fade into a gray mess.

"Do it! Just put your wrist on his lips and help him bite down."

“You fucking do it! I’m not—” Gunfire again, more glass shattering, and the harsh tink tink of bullets slamming into metal. It sounded so distant now; it shouldn’t have.

“Do it! You’ll be fine. Vamps shouldn’t—I don’t have time to explain shit! Do it, I’ll drive.”

Lots of yelling between these two. They threw some curses at each other, some more noises, and created an almost settling atmosphere of panic and anger, a pleasant change from the torturing chaos of moments before. Almost felt like he had a sitcom on the TV in the background.

Eric jumped in back with him while Triss got into the front seat. Did she know how to drive? Lot of vampires didn’t drive, not in a dense city where it wasn’t needed, where driving came with risks; an accident that showed a vampire surviving a car crash was always a potential problem. For all he knew, Triss behind the wheel was just as dangerous as being under Angela’s knife.

The thought made him laugh, for a moment, before the pain punched him in the sternum and reminded him he was nearly dead and looked dead twice over.

“Fuck, you vampires can survive a lot.” Eric’s voice. He was leaning over Jack, looking down at him. A black man in a nice, casual suit, but covered in what smelled like mud and blood. Weird.

“Admire how awesome we are later, just—fuck!” Triss slammed on the pedal hard, hard enough for the screech of tires skidding on the street to ring loud and split Jack’s ears. He started to slide along the seat with the shifting inertia as Triss made some turns, but Eric held him down. Gunfire joined the screeching, and Eric ducked down against him as glass and metal were pummeled by incoming lead.

“Where the fuck did you learn to drive!?” Eric said.

“I didn’t!”

Fuck, he knew it. Jack would have loved to say something, to protest, but as much as he tried, all he could get out were groans.

“Every cab driver in the city just clenched hard enough to shit diamonds, fucking city girl!” Eric seemed to agree with him.

“Fuck you, cab drivers are horrible drivers.”

“Fuck you we are! You’re the—”

“Just feed the man!”

Eric yelled some more curses, and put his wrist to Jack’s mouth.

One taste was all Jack needed to know there was something weird about this guy. One more taste of the sweet, delicious, amazing, perfect concoction of life-giving power in blood form, to not care that something was weird about this guy. Give it to me.

He reached up with his hands to try and grab him, to pin the wrist to his mouth, to devour him, to absorb his life and sate the beast in his gut that was roaring for more. But he had no hands, and the attempt to squeeze filled Jack with pain. No, just lie down, lie down and relax and drink as much as this man is willing to give you. This strange man, and the strange, amazing blood he was giving you. So good, so fucking good. Was it because he was starving? Near death? It was so damn good.

“This ... feels ... weird,” Eric said.

Triss laughed, the gunfire getting quieter and quieter behind them. “Just wait till Jessy does it the right way. Won’t be weird, just fucking awesome.”

“ ... terrifying.”

“Ha,” she said. The car started to slow down, and Jack felt parts of him relax as both fresh blood entered his punctured body, but also the fear of dying horribly in a flaming ball of metal death abated somewhat. “I called Julias, kid. He’s got a bunch of vamps on the way over, and a bunch of thralls and shit. They’ll clean up the mess, maybe catch some of the hunters. Maybe get that girl’s body and get some answers.”

“Christ, I’m getting lightheaded here.” Eric pulled his wrist away from Jack’s mouth. Or at least he tried, but Jack had bitten down, and the man had to put his other hand against Jack’s head and force it back to pry his wrist loose.

“ ... s-sorry,” Jack said.

“ ... yeah.” Eric, on his knees in the leg space, crammed and twisted, looked at his wrist and the holes Jack’s teeth had made. Didn’t have the time to lick them closed. Didn’t have the energy. “You lost your hands.”

Jack groaned. Triss laughed.

“He’ll regrow them with a night or two’s sleep and a few meals,” she said.

“Regrowing limbs ... you people are fucking insane.”

“As insane as nightmare jungles and a giant spider lady and floating death angel monster.”

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~~Julias~~

“Julias!”

“Triss?”



“No time to talk, on Azamel’s phone. Jack might be at the old prison. Heading there now.”

It took ten seconds to finish the conversation with Triss. It took thirty seconds to send out the message to his nearest Kindred and a host of thralls and ghouls, and have them begin moving to the location. Another five minutes to double check that the occupied prison was running as usual, to confirm it was the old abandoned prison that Triss meant. An hour to beginning cleaning up the mess, and another hour to finish.

Police were directed elsewhere easily enough, and records adjusted to make sure no mention of gunfire in that section of the city existed. Thralls and ghouls poured over the scene, cleaning up blood stains, removing bullet casings, and cleaning out the abandoned prison. No bodies though, despite Jack’s testimony. For the hunters that had died, the blood traces suggested their bodies were taken away. But the body of the hunter hit by the car, the blood pattern suggested she got up, or was picked up, and managed to move some distance before a vehicle took her away.

Supposedly this woman, Angela according to Jack, had been stabbed through the back out the stomach, and then hit by a car moving at a decent speed. He also said she was immune to his mind control, and had a glass eye. A strange woman, the sort that just refused to die. So, maybe she was alive. Or maybe they just read the blood patterns incorrectly, and she was in fact dead. Either way, when his troops arrived only minutes after Triss left with Jack, there was no sign of any hunters, no bodies, and most of the cars around the prison Jack reported were gone, the van too.

What did remain was the bodies of rats.

The phone call hadn’t done the situation justice. The kid had sounded horrible, voice hoarse and quiet on the phone, like he was nearly dead, but he’d managed to get across the details, about being

captured by some hunters who wanted details about Azamel. He told Julias about Angela, about Jeremiah, told him about the torture, told him about the threats Angela had made, the suggestions that a lot more hunters were in the city, told him about their plans to cleanse all of Dolareido. And, he'd told Julias about how he escaped.

The cuffs weren't there. The hunters must have removed them from the chair before leaving; made sense if Jack was right and they were special in some way. But there were two withered, bony, disgusting hands, smashed against the wall like someone had kicked them aside, the two hands Jack had told his dominated prey to cut off so he could escape. Quick thinking, rational thinking. He could have hesitated, and looked for another way out. But that could have easily backfired, or cost him precious seconds. No, he'd made the correct call, getting out of the cuffs and chair ASAP so he could react to the situation from a position of power.

But, damn, it took some cold logic and will to make a move like that. Very impressive, very Ventrue. And it would have made Julias smile with pride, if not for Maria's stories about Viktor's hobbies in their last conversation.

Looking around at the hundreds of dead rats, Julias sighed and brushed back his hair with his fingers. A truly horrible sight. Jack had sounded quite sad about their deaths on the phone, but his words hadn't prepared Julias for the amount Jack had summoned, and sacrificed.

Julias would have trouble summoning this many rats.

"Holy shit." Jessy came up to him, stepping around the dead rats in the hallway of the prison. Thralls and ghouls were about, and a few of the younger Invictus Kindred as well, cleaning up the rats and such with harsh chemicals and garbage bags. "Jack fucking did this?"

“ ... apparently.”

“I mean ... god damn. He’s certainly your childe, Julias.”

“ ... or Viktor’s.”

“His childe’s childe then?” she said. He frowned, but she pat him on the shoulder and smirked her jackass smirk. “Viktor was fucking deadly for his age, we all know that. So are you. And Jack is ... um ... well, this is pretty nuts.” She gestured around to the bodies of burned and squashed flesh as the two of them walked into the prisoner lobby, past the thralls cleaning it up, and then to toward the civilian lobby.

Woman had a way with words. Triss would have been as blunt, but purposefully so. Jessy was so blunt because she was oblivious to how direct she was being about a sensitive topic. Made him smile; like old times.

“Did you see him?” he said, “when Triss drove by?”

“Yeah. God damn that kid was wrecked. Really, really, really wrecked. What’s the plan with him?”

“Triss said she’d already got him a quick meal, and now she’s on the way to let him sleep in my mansion stronghold.”

“Trusting a witch with your childe?”

“Trusting my lover with my childe, Jessy. Don’t push it.”

She shrugged, like usual, and walked beside him as the two of them made their way for the prison entrance. The smell of chemicals was in the air, but buried by the smell of burned flesh and hair. So much death surrounded him, he had to wince as he looked around and tried to piece together the insanity. Jack had done his best to recount the tale on the phone, but like with the rats, the

exhausted boy couldn't do justice to the madness. Shards of glass were all around, and the bullet holes or marks were everywhere. He'd mentioned a flamethrower too. Damn.

"What's the footage on Azamel's tunnel show?" Jessy said. "You said Triss used Azamel's phone?"

"Triss left the tunnels with the Begotten Mark, and a man I do not recognize. She called me, gave Mark back the phone, and then ran off toward the street. Far as I know, she caused quite a stir on the street. Used her cloak of night enough to keep her teeth hidden, but otherwise caused some mayhem as she and this Eric fellow stole a car from some kine hopping out of it."

"Eric ... black dude? Average height? Shaves his head?"

"Yeah. Know him?"

Jessy grinned a pretty damn big grin, and rubbed her hands together. "I think I might just."

"I'll let you follow up on him then. I have work to do."

"Yeah, deal. And ... I mean, you should be proud, right? Your childe is barely a year embraced, and he's taken down a bunch of hunters and pulled some pretty hardcore animalism shit here." She crouched down next to a pile of the dead rats, and whistled. Gangrels were naturals at animalism in much the same way Ventrue were, though with them, it was more a question of being more in tune with their beasts, rather than a Ventrue's natural affinity for dominating the minds of others. Still, she knew what she was talking about. "I remember Viktor had some pretty impressive stories about when he was younger, and summoning a bunch of animals and shit to his side to wreak some havoc."

"Yeah ... that's what scares me."

# Chapter 51

~~Eric~~

“How the fuck did no cops follow us?” Eric said. Beatrice had to stop driving and let him take the wheel, before the dumb woman ended up getting them all killed. “I mean you nearly hit a hundred pedestrians, and I’m pretty sure you killed a dog.”

“I did not kill a dog, Eric. I’ll fucking kill you if you don’t shut up.”

“ ... I’m pretty sure you—”

“I didn’t hit any fucking dog!” She smiled as she said it, or, yelled it. For some reason, it seemed like she was enjoying this, both the life-or-death scenario, but also the bickering.

“We really going to Rich Side?”

“Yeap, my boyfriend lives here.”

“ ... your boyfriend lives in Rich Side.”

“Yeap.”

“You got piercings coming out of twenty different holes in your body, and you got tattoos covering probably half of you. How did you bag a rich guy?”

He expected her to punch him. He’d have deserved it too. Bitter, just so damn fucking bitter whenever the topic came to money, and women, and it went full on acidic when it was the two combined. He didn’t need a fucking therapist to tell him that. Part of the reason he told Ganders he didn’t want to the job was cause he knew what

would happen if conversations ever steered in this direction. Didn't know how to shut the fuck up.

But crocodile face laughed, and winked her snake eye at him. "He bagged me, you fucker. Now hurry up."

Bagged her. Rich guy bagged the punk rocker girl. Sounded like something out of a trash romance novel, and considering the smile on her face, it may very well have been a happily ever after ending that would have made Eric puke. But circumstances being what they were, a giant shit show of blood and insanity, he let it slide.

She guided him up to one of the bigger mansions topping one of the smooth hills. He almost suggested she was lying, but she hopped out, pulled Jack out of the backseat into her arms, and started toward the mansion like she knew the place, like she knew the long walkways up to the huge doors, like she knew the guy who owned it like he was her lover.

Well, damn.

"Should I—"

"Come on, you're helping me, in case I need some extra hands. And besides, I have to keep an eye on you. You know you're the only human in the city who knows about us who isn't on a leash?"

"A leash?"

"Brainwashed, dude. You really need to watch some vampire movies." She adjusted the kid in her arms as they walked. A lifeless corpse. She said it was torpor, some kind of deep sleep for vamps, and the lack of heartbeat or breathing was perfectly normal. And it was, considering she wasn't doing them either.

"That mean I can use garlic or a holy cross to—"

“Ahaha! Oh fuck no, oh my god please don’t. If you tried to fight off a vamp with garlic, they’d shove that shit down your throat. With a cross? Well, they’d probably stab you to death with it.”

“ ... lovely.”

“But, hey, Fiona’s a good friend to me and a bunch of the vamps down here in the trenches, Natasha and Jack and Damien, and apparently even that slut Jessy. You did her a solid, so I’ll do you one.” She stopped at the door, and knocked.

Thirty seconds later, it opened, and a man in a suit offered a small bow. “Madam Damor. I—oh my, is that the young Master Terry?”

“Yeah Alfred, it is. Julias’s gonna let him use the basement tonight, already unlocked the shit remotely.”

“Very good Madam. And is this a new member of the fold?” The dude nodded toward Eric. Pretty lame of Triss to call him Alfred; guy wasn’t even old. He didn’t seem to mind though, and he stepped aside to let them in.

He seemed kind of creepy too, and it only got worse as Eric stepped into the mansion. A few more people came by to see who had showed up, and they all had the same sort of subtle smile, the smile a person had when they were happy. Brainwashed? Brainwashed.

Eric couldn’t help but whistle. God damn this was a nice mansion, a classic mansion, the sort of mansion rich people had a couple hundred years ago, except now with air conditioning and LED lights instead of shitty old bulbs. LED lights in chandeliers, what a delightful statement of the sort of place Dolareido could be: classic meets modern; also more commonly known as: pretentious as all fuck.

“Come on.” Triss adjusted Jack in her arms, and continued down the hall, past the ‘humans’, and around a corner to find a door, that led to a hallway, that led to a stairway, that led down, and down, and down.

“Want me to ho ... no, I suppose you don’t really need me to hold him, do you?”

“Fucking course not. Christ man, I’m strong enough I could rip you in half and I mean that literally.” She looked over her shoulder at him, and laughed. Not angry then, just boasting about how badass she was. Reminded him of that Jessy vampire, sort of, in a way.

“I guess, yeah. I ... yeah.” Yeah, he was walking down the stairs of a mansion, with two vampires. The mansion was filled with brainwashed servants, or assistants, or whatever it was called when someone was both a housekeeper, and a slave. They seemed happy, but did it count if it was brainwashing happy? “So who lives here?”

“Not sure what name he uses for records and shit, but we know him as Julias Mire.”

“Doesn’t ring a ... a...” Shit. He stuck out a hand to catch the hallway wall, and breathed deep. Stars speckled his vision, warning him that his blood pressure was low. Well, no fucking duh, he’d given a bucket of it to the kid in Triss’s arms.

Kid looked better, at least. Instead of looking like roadkill after a few crows had had their turns with it, now he just looked like fresh roadkill. All things considered, that was a pretty miraculous recovery. He still had no hands, but there were some weird lumps where the blood, flesh, and skin was at his wrists, like bone was trying to get out. Gross.

“Don’t pass out on me. Or I’ll lock you up in the dungeon until Julias can deal with you.”



“Dungeon, yeah ri—there’s a dungeon, isn’t there.”

“Yeap. Viktor, Julias’s sire, used to own this place. Sick fuck, powerful as hell, did some nasty crap, tortured people, shit like that. He was this kid’s grandsire.”

“You’re telling me an awful lot about your secret vamp society.”

“Nothing that’s dangerous, nothing you can use to prove we exist or somehow attack us. The fuck do you take me for?”

“A loud mouth punk.”

Again she laughed, and the two of them stepped into a tunnel. More tunnels, god damn it not more tunnels. At least these were well lit, with flat walls instead of the curved walls of the old abandoned tunnels. There were half a dozen gates, each that looked ready to kill him if he said the wrong password. But they were open, and Triss walked through them without fear.

“Ah, this is a nice bed. Was fucking Julias on it when we learned Jack here had disappeared. Hope he doesn’t mind.”

Imagining crocodile face having sex was a weird image. She had a killer body, the sort you’d find on a fitness model advertising her dance routine. Muscles, but no steroid abuse, lean and ripped but without hitting the point of amenorrhea. Probably could be one of those new internet ass girl sensations, putting pictures of herself in a thong online and letting the money roll in, if not for the claws and crazy eye and the teeth. And the weird, long tongue he got a glimpse of too.

He looked around the room. A rich man’s underground bunker, with a huge fancy bed, four poster, with big wardrobes on the wall, and a laptop.

“No bathrooms?” he said.

Dumb question, and she looked at him with a raised brow before laughing.

“Vampires don’t shit or piss, man. We’re dead. We drink blood and sleep during the day.”

“Right, right...” He leaned against the wall, and looked around some more at the indulgent decor while the woman put her friend on the bed. “He safe here?”

“We just need to close the gates behind us as we leave, and it’ll lock down until someone either undoes the locks remotely, or at the digital padlocks at each gate.”

“Sounds high tech. Not worried about a hacker trying to get in here while you sleep?”

“It’s also got some giant-as-fuck locks that you lock from the inside, big metal bars and padlocks and shit, old school. If we were staying in the room, I’d get those too, but Jack should be safe with the high tech shit until Julias returns.”

“ ... that is pretty damn secure. Next you’re going to tell me you sleep inside unbreakable coffins that are locked from the inside.”

“I don’t. Pretty sure my boss does, wherever he sleeps.” She set the kid down gently, and pat his head a few times. “God damn this kid, constantly getting into shit. Poor guy can’t go five feet without vamps or monsters or werewolves — or hunters apparently — fucking up his day.”

“ ... werewolves exist?”

“Oh yeah. You think vamps are strong?” She shivered, rubbed her arms, and motioned for him to join her as they left the kid in the bunker. “You saw the shit Fiona and Athalia were doing in that nightmare world. Imagine a ten-foot-tall wolf beast capable of doing

that, being that strong, except out here in the rea—physical world. Fucking juggernauts.”

Werewolves. Werewolves. He started breathing faster, and his eyes went wide as he watched the girl’s back and followed her. Werewolves. Wolves. Shit, who had Fiona mentioned?

“ ... Fiona said something about a woman named Avery.”

“Yeah, pack leader of the werewolves here in Dolareido. Why’d Fiona bring her up?”

Shit shit shit. Quick, think fast.

“She asked if I’d seen her, said she might be looking for Jack too.”  
Fuck. Fuck fuck.

“Ah, yeah, she might be.”

Shit. Fucking shit fuck. Avery was a pack leader. Pack, leader, of werewolves. Wolves. Oh god, oh christ, fucking hell.

The moon, its voice ... her voice. The taste of blood, of flesh in his mouth. The dreams, running around at night, hunting something. The hunt, the need to hunt, to defend his territory, to scout and smell and feed. He wanted to sink his teeth into something and tear it apart. He wanted to hunt.

Oh mother fucking hell. Every part of him wanted to faint, faceplant right there in the scary hallway underneath the vampire’s mansion; the low blood pressure didn’t help. But he held his weight up, hand to the wall, and forced himself to walk after the scary vampire lady.

“Still lightheaded?”

“Y-Yeah ... definitely ... need to get back home, rest, eat and drink, feed my cat, and call my boss.”

“Ah right, Bloodlust. Just tell your boss you were doing a favor for the Invictus and everything will be fine.”

“ ... Ganders works for the Invictus?”

“Eh the Bloodlust situation is a little weird. But for conversation’s sake, yeah, he does.”

“The fuck kind of world did I get pulled into?”

The two of them walked back up the stairs and back into the hallways of the huge mansion. Triss walked its massive corridors like she knew it inside and out; very much at odds with her punk rocker aesthetic.

“In here, come on.” She pulled open a door, and walked through. It was some sort of meeting room, or living room, or tea room. It was some kind of big waste of money, a room that obviously served no purpose other than to be fancy and entertain guests while they sipped expensive drinks and talked politics or stocks. He felt annoyed just being in it.

He sat down in a chair at one of the tables, and she sat down across from him, a strange expression on her he couldn’t place. Scrutinizing him was his best guess.

He could tell her, tell her he might be a werewolf, tell her about the dreams, tell her ... tell her nothing. You have no proof, no idea if it’s true. Just shut the fuck up and don’t say shit.

“You’ve stumbled onto a big secret here, Eric.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

“It’s a vampire’s city, and I mean that. Vampires own this city, we run it. The Invictus in particular own and run it like a well oiled machine, all money money money, but they bow to the Prince, the ruler, who’s from a different covenant, not Invictus. And Jack? Jack’s the woman’s lover.”

“Prince? Woman?”

“It’s a weird title, genderless.”

“... right.” He set his elbows on the table, and clutched his temples in his palms. “So I’m in deep with the mafia now.”

“Well, I mean other than you owing Jessy a favor, the Prince and the Invictus now owe you a favor ... though I wouldn’t push them on that. They won’t kill you or turn you into a thrall, and you should consider that the favor returned.”

“Guess I should be thankful then.”

“Very. Though a lot of thralls are pretty happy with their setup. Not gonna lie, Dolareido is probably the nicest vamp city in this country, Eric. You got lucky.”

Lucky, yeah, real fucking lucky.

“I ran someone over. Might have ... killed her.” And that was going to make a lovely addition to his nightly nightmares about hunting, this woman’s face the moment the car hit her. Maybe she’d show up as a ghost in his next nightmare, and scare him to death.

“Heh, yeah, she went flying. Surprised that bitch didn’t crack her head open on the hood of the car.”

God damn this woman was callous. She shrugged at him, tapped a claw against her teeth, and waited for his response. This conversation was important; fuck it up and she’d drag him back to

the other vamps for a thorough brainwashing. Or, let her know he was thinking he might be a fucking werewolf, and who the fuck knows what would happen.

“You’re being awfully informative.”

“I saw a random human keep it together and help out both a friend of mine, and a vamp with crazy teeth.”

“And a crazy eye.”

“Ha, this?” She pulled down on the normal eye’s cheek, and leaned in a little so he could see it more clearly. “Blood magic made this shit. It’ll probably melt away or something in a few hours and I’ll have to regrow my normal eye.”

“... oh.” The snake eye was the normal eye. Well. Fuck him. “So ... what do I do now?”

“Not exactly sure. I can’t let you just walk out on the honor system. My boss would kill me, or the Prince would.”

“But you said—”

“Yeah yeah, I’m not going to kill you, but I do need to get you under surveillance. I don’t know where my boss is right now, and I can’t take you back to our lair. Guess that means we’re going to Elysium, after I give Superman a call and throw him a quick update.”



~~Antoinette~~

Jack was alive.

She sat in her chair in her main office, and smiled. The Invictus were on the site of the violence, and were cleaning up the mess as

per her rules as to how Masquerade risks were to be managed. Some of her thralls were there as well, mostly to observe and ensure the Invictus were doing things correctly. No doubt they thought their methods perfect, and they were methodical, but still, she had cause to make sure they did things correctly.

The video feed of three thralls showed the cleanup, and one of the thralls was standing shoulder to shoulder with the Invictus Kindred, to let them know of her presence. They were all friends after all, cooperative, the covenants in Dolareido. They had no reason to deceive her.

She smirked. Of course they did. If presented the opportunity, the Invictus or Carthians would take her head and then her city, and that was the spice in their relationship.

“How was he?” she said into the speaker on her desk.

“Well, Triss says it’s pretty damn surprising he’s still alive. Said he looked like you did after Lucas’s assault on your tower.” Julias’s voice.

That was hard to imagine. Such damage would kill most Kindred twice over, and to picture Jack with such horrible wounds made her withered heart ache.

“Does he need blood?”

“Triss got him a meal. He’ll need to sleep for a few days, and I’ll make sure he gets some more blood. He’s still young; regrowing his hands will take time.”

She squeezed on the arms of her grand chair, and grit her teeth as she imagined the sight of her poor little Ventrue with his hands chopped off. Such brutal, vivid imagery, one she was quite familiar with from a different age. But to imagine her love, torn, shredded, with hands removed and bones exposed, was too much, and she

wanted to tell Julias that his childe should be with her, being cared for by her.

But that would be overstepping her boundaries. As Prince, she had no true boundaries, but it was to the respect of both Julias and the Invictus that they manage their Kindred's condition, and ensure his recovery. Politics.

“Yes ... I imagine it will. I trust you will instruct the boy to come to me once he has healed?”

The man made a small, warm chuckle. Julias was a delight when he wanted to be, when he put aside his new position as council member of the Invictus, and returned to his playful ways.

“I will, Prince. And I know it'll be the first thing he'll want to do when he can.”

She nodded, smiled at the speaker, and pulled her hair over her shoulder to begin combing it with her fingers. “I trust the Invictus are pursuing these hunters with every resource they have available?” A subtle nudge to remind him that the Invictus were ultimately under her control, here in Dolareido.

“Yes Prince. We ... we fucked up pretty bad. We knew of the four hunters from investigating Barry's death, but we didn't know anything about this Jeremiah bastard until Triss brought it up today.”

Ah yes, the man with a name. The taint on her city.

“I will bring this up in the next meeting of the Primogen, Mister Mire. We can discuss the specifics then.”

“I see. Fair well then, Prince.”



She pressed the button to hang up, sighed, and eased her chair about until it was facing the window, and Jacob.

“Jeremiah,” she said. “I did not expect the man to come to this city.”

“You knew his name?” the old monster said.

“A human who has hunted monsters for many decades, but I know none of the specifics.” Trusting Jacob with such information was dangerous, but this problem was bigger than their squabbles, as Jacob proved when he came to her only an hour ago to share what he learned of his meeting with Azamel; or rather, what he was willing to share of it. “I did not suspect the man to come here, quiet as Dolareido is.”

“He wouldn’t have if not for that old bitch.”

She nodded, and sighed as she combined in her mind the joy of Jack’s safety, with the frustrating circumstances that continued to assault her city. Jack had been kidnapped, and not far from where the Invictus had had their ball as well. Was he betrayed? Her sources said the boy had gone to speak with Damien before his capture, but for all the possible reasons Damien might have to betray Jack, she doubted he would. Not for fear of death at her hand, but because the man was not Lucas. Maria, on the other hand, might have orchestrated his death, and adjusted events to make Damien seem the guilty party. But did Maria even know that the boy was the one who had killed Lucas, and would she respond to the knowledge by plotting the boy’s death if she did? Too many unknowns.

The old man headed for the door, and offered her a casual salute as he left. “I’m off. Glad your boy toy is still kicking.”

Boy toy. She smirked at the man, and offered a small wave. His meaningless barbs were just that, meaningless, and if anything, his

insults were his way of showing approval. A typical man. The thought made her laugh; Jacob being typical was a pleasant surprise, and one that made her happy. So long ago, the two of them had been friends, of a sort, and perhaps that day could come again.

Alone once more, she let her mind drift to Jack. Daniel was headed toward the old prison, where he could put his mastery of auspex to use to perhaps find where this Jeremiah fool was hiding. How ridiculous, a human hiding in her city, and yet, how very problematic. Kindred, Uratha, and Begotten she could hunt down, use her tools and her sheriff to track down the strange tracks they often left. There were others too, other entities that either hid in the darkness, or in plain sight, such as the Prometheans, the Changelings, or the infernal Mages who forever reaped only chaos for their efforts. She was confident none of these were in her city.

But humans were a more difficult enemy to manage. How does one find and expunge a kine, hidden within the millions of her city?

She sighed, and grit her teeth. On top of all this, Clara's words still echoed in her mind. Someone else was tampering with the realm of spirits, according to her, and it had the werewolf concerned. If it concerned Avery, then it concerned Antoinette.

A new mission for Daniel.

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“Beatrice Damor, and ... Eric, was it?”

“Eric Tanverson,” he said, nodding. An elbow from Triss in the side was enough to get the man to bow in a similar manner to the Nosferatu.

“I must thank the both of you. If not for your interference, my beloved would be dead.” She waited, to see if either of them would speak, or if they understood that it was best for them to be quiet. Eric opened his mouth, but he caught on quickly, and closed it as

she smirked, and stood up. “Miss Damor, I understand that you not only rescued Mister Terry from hunters, but that you went into the realm of the Begotten.”

“Yes, my Prince,” she said. Oh, delightful, that she was learning to play the game, titles and all. “Pretty terrifying shit, nightmare realms. Saw a huge cave, and a giant jungle with two moons. The scariest shit though was that Jeremiah person. Man knew what he was doing. Him and his hunters had special knives that seemed pretty weird, oddly dangerous somehow. And they were really good with their pistols, and Jeremiah himself had grenades coming out of his ass, and—”

Antoinette held up a hand, and nodded. “Hunters are forever experts at the tools of their trade, young Nosferatu. And to our chagrin, their tools have grown impressive the past couple centuries. Where once our largest worries were torches and swords, now we deal with rifles, flamethrowers, grenades as you mentioned, and worst of all, digital communication. In the past, for news to spread between hunters took weeks, or months, and through word of mouth, misinformation was common. Now, if one of these hunters manages to capture a picture of something important, they can share it with their associates anywhere in the world in the blink of an eye. Now, more than ever, we have to be careful.”

“I uh ... maybe I shouldn’t have driven in there with a car then,” she said.

“Perhaps. No doubt the hunters are now educated to your presence and visage, but for the moment, my concern is more so about the revelations you have made to this man.” She gestured toward Eric. Like Beatrice, he was a mess, but unlike Beatrice, he was alive. Flesh, a man, who smelled of blood and the mud of a jungle. A strange odor, to be sure. “I understand that Fiona accidentally brought this man into the fold. Is that true, Mister Tanverson?”

“Er, yeah.” He squirmed. There was something to this Eric Tanverson, something odd, something she could not quite place her finger on. “She was looking for Jack, thought I might have seen him, since I work at Bloodlust. But she mentioned four people, and I had seen those. We managed to follow them, and ... everything ... went to hell.”

Sunrise was in an hour. It had been a long night for everyone involved, but perhaps no one was suffering the stress of tonight as much as this poor fool. Eric Tanverson, an attractive man, black, with a shaved head and face, and some grit to his dark brown eyes. Ganders no doubt hired him due to the sexual allure of his hard personality, the brooding, dark, handsome motif. The total opposite of Fiona.

Such a strange girl. First Damien and now this Tanverson. The girl was too young to understand these bitter fools were sexually appealing, but emotionally damaged, and often incapable of maturing past the point of that damage. She would learn some day, no doubt, about why a girl flirts with a bad boy, but does not bring him home.

“But, um,” Beatrice said, “I am worried about them, or Fiona at least. That Jeremiah fuck was ... he wasn’t normal, my Prince. Didn’t feel normal at all.”

“The hunters have fled the abandoned prison, but I suspect you are right to fear this Jeremiah. I will direct my concerns to him, and see that Daniel’s eyes are kept open for this man.” She stepped around the desk, and began to pace to and fro in front of it, with the two visitors waiting on her word. It was clear to see that Eric was surprised by her; the white hair and red eyes were no doubt the cause, as well as her height. But the man adapted, and she smirked as he stood up straighter. “Have either of you spoken with the Begotten since the encounter with Jeremiah?”

“Um, no, my Prince,” the Nosferatu said. “But, she’s friends with a lot of us. And on our way out, Azamel said Jeremiah’s intrusion was probably just him testing the waters of the lair. He wouldn’t be able to get anywhere from his ... uh, position in the lair? Whatever that meant. She was sure he’d run when Mark arrived.”

Antoinette sighed, a disappointed sigh, and emphasized the sound a little to let Beatrice know she was not happy about the lack of information. And Jacob probably would not be either. It had been a prime opportunity for the girl to learn something about this human named Jeremiah, and instead she had rushed toward her goal. Her goal to save Jack though; thus, Antoinette could only summon so much annoyance.

“And now we have you, Eric Tanverson, a human, who knows of us. A Masquerade violation on Fiona’s part. It—”

“It wasn’t a violation. Shit went to hell and the only way I could save her life was by getting her back to her nightmare world lair thing, or whatever. She—”

Antoinette sprinted into the man’s personal space, appeared there in but a fraction of a second, a window of time the man did not have the reflexes to react to, before she set her hand around his throat. She squeezed it as she glared down at him, cut through his eyes with her own, and forced the man to his knees as he reached up to grab her wrists. The need to breathe was a terrible weakness to have.

“Do not interrupt me, Eric Tanverson. In any other circumstance, I would either see you dead or a thrall at my whim. The only reason I spare you is because your interference has ultimately led to my beloved’s second life being spared. You are in my world now, child. I rule this city, and you are but a tiny cog in its machinery. I am the Prince of its denizens of the night, and people like yourself are normally food. Expendable. Understood?”

The fool man managed a nod, despite how tight her grip was, and despite how she could see the asphyxiation start to manifest on him, with veins bulging and eyes growing wide. Fear. Good. Fear was a powerful teacher.

She let him go, and he fell to his knees, coughing. No room to be kind, no room to spare his feelings, as every month brought with it new hardships that required a firm hand. Her city was falling apart underneath her, and she would have to fix it.

“You will be watched, Eric. I have eyes everywhere. If you so much as even entertain the notion of exposing our kind, then you will join my dungeon as a food source. I will remove your hands and feet, tie you to a wall, drip an IV bag into your veins, and give your blood to hungry Kindred for months before I finally decide to simply stop replacing your source of nutrients. I will let you die of thirst, cold, and alone. Do I make myself clear?”

Her words earned a greater fear still, proper fear, the cold sword strike of fear to the heart, that lasted and carved into the soul. She did not enjoy the use of its power, unlike Jacob, unlike Nosferatu in general, but it was a valuable tool nonetheless. He stood up, nodded, and adopted the most rigid, military posture she imagined the man capable of with his apparently damaged knee.

“Yes ma’am.”

“My Prince, Mister Tanverson. I am your Prince.”

“ ... yes, my Prince.”

Again, something told her there was more to this man, but she could not understand what it was. Perhaps the thrall she would have shadow the man would answer the peculiarity, with time.

“Now that you understand how we do business, here in the heart of my city, you may rest easy, Mister Tanverson. You have done me

a great service and I will be sure no Kindred or Begotten or Uratha harm you. Given time, you may find yourself to grow fond of the night life, and of the creatures that live within it.”

“ ... yes, my Prince.”

Utterly, deliciously perfect. The man was afraid of her, and a terrified being was one that could be crafted, molded, altered to fit the desired role. Lucky for Tanverson that she was a kind ruler.

“Since you work at Bloodlust, you will no doubt encounter creatures of the night on a regular basis. They will undoubtedly come to know you, and you will come to know them. And now with the threat of these hunters knowing your face, I will instruct the Invictus to keep an eye on Bloodlust, with a constant Kindred presence. It is in there territory, after all.”

Triss raised her hand up to her shoulder height, like a child trying to get attention without seeming too obvious. How quaint. Antoinette nodded in her direction to give her permission to speak.

“Erik’s actually already in it deep with the Invictus. Jessy’s doing him a favor with some kine business, so now she’s got her eye on him. Pretty sure she wants to bang him.”

Antoinette laughed, and leaned back to set her butt against the edge of her desk as she folded her arms underneath her bosom. “My dear boy, if Beatrice speaks true, you will be bathed in the pleasure of sex and the Kiss all too soon.”

The man squirmed, winced, but nodded. Other men would jump for joy if they knew of the pleasures Antoinette spoke of, and even in ignorance, they would still be excited. Not Eric Tanverson though. No, as she suspected, the man had baggage, was emotionally damaged, and likely wanted nothing more than to disappear from all the changes in his life, these new twists that were thrust upon him against his will.

Perhaps a night with Jessy's flesh wrapped around his member and her teeth in his neck would change his mind? Antoinette tapped a finger on her chin as she looked at the man, and considered. Probably not, but, the man's presence would at least bring a new life to Bloodlust, in a strange way. She looked forward to seeing the results.

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~~Jack~~

Jack woke up.

Well, that was a pleasant change from what a part of him was expecting. How he knew he might not wake up, when he was asleep, he wasn't sure, but there was a tiny part of him that was genuinely surprised that he got to open his eyes and see the ceiling of—where the fuck was he? Groaning, he sat up, pain working through him as the wounds of the previous night struggled to heal.

He had hands. Oh thank fucking god he had hands again. He wasn't sure he'd be able to regrow them at his age, and might have spent a few years without them. Fingers worked, thumbs worked, he could squeeze and grip again, and he tested them all as held them out in front of him.

He was lying on a bed, a nice one, elegant, big. There was a desk against the nearby wall with a laptop on it, and the room had wardrobes and some curtains and a rug and all the fancy frills the rich liked to waste on decor. Seemed like Viktor's sense of decor too, so that would make this the underground bunker in Viktor's mansion.

He looked down. Still in the clothes he was wearing yesterday, and still with some very blatant holes in his body, flesh torn open, parts of his musculature exposed; Kindred insides were dried, withered things, and didn't look very nice with the skin off. He slid



his feet off the bed and tried to stand, or at least that was the plan, but the moment he tried to move his feet he fell back and groaned into grit teeth. The ankle still wasn't healed, so he wasn't going anywhere without a wheelchair.

No wonder he'd managed to regrow his hands. All his healing had gone into regrowing them, and hadn't managed to fix anything else.

“Still alive I see.”

Jack twitched, and looked to his side. Julius slid off the bed, and straightened out his suit pants and his white shirt. The suit jacket was on a chair by the desk, and the man sat down as he put on his shoes. Must have slept beside him on the bed; it was certainly big enough.

“I want to say no thanks to Triss, she ran me over. But, considering the circumstances, yeah, I owe her my life.”

His sire smiled, nodded, and turned the desk chair around to sit in it reverse while facing him.

“The Invictus owe you an apology.”

“Because you didn't see this coming?”

“Exactly.”

“Eh, they're humans, Julius. Kind of hard to figure out what they're up to when they blend into the rest of the city so well.”

His sire sighed, but nodded again. No doubt the man was feeling guilty, and every time he glanced Jack's way, he winced.

“You managed to escape though. Maybe not fully escape, but you ... managed to do some impressive shit, Jack.”

“ ... thanks.” Jack lay back on the bed, and gulped on nothing as he pushed aside the pain. Hungry, very hungry, all his vitae gone to try and heal, and he needed more. But Julias already knew that, and would get him a meal from one of his thralls or something. This conversation was too important to interrupt.

“Fill me in on the details.”

Jack nodded, and recounted the tale. He told him about Jeremiah and Angela with the glass eye, told him about being tortured, told him about the handcuffs, told him about how he managed to push past its weird magic, dominate the two hunters, summon an army of rats, told him about dealing with the backlash, running through fire, and told him about getting run over. What a night, what a horrible, shitty fucking night.

“I was ... surprised,” Jack said, “about the rats. I ... I didn’t expect that to happen, to be able to summon so many of them.”

“We were equally surprised by the amount we found. Jessy and I were there to monitor the clean up. Amanda was there too. No one expected to find what we found, to see that many dead rats.”

Yeah, dead rats. Sounded so simple to say, but he didn’t like that so many died for him. Killing humans, seeing them die, drinking someone to death, those were eating him up too, but the dead rats, that was different. The beast inside him didn’t getting them killed.

“ ... so ... what now?”

“Now,” Julias said, “the Invictus act. The hunters underestimated you, and you hurt them for it. So now we begin the hunt, and start the search for their group. Jeremiah and Angela are the x-factors we didn’t see coming, but now we know about them. We won’t make that mistake again.”

“Guess we were too focused on the four humans to consider that something bigger was going on.” Jack sighed, and stared up at the ceiling of the luxurious bunker room. Weight pushed him down into the bed, and more than just his body’s. “ ... do you think Damien had anything to do with this?”

“Because you talked to him last, before you were kidnapped?”

“Yeah. I ... have trouble suspecting him. After all the shit that’s happened between him and I, I can’t see him just betraying me like that. And he did warn me that something like this might happen. I should have been more on guard, more careful.”

“Hard to be on guard for humans, especially in Dolareido where there’s millions of them in a tight space.” Julias turned around, and typed a few things into his laptop before looking back to Jack again. “I’ll get a couple thralls down here for some food for you, kid. Drink up and sleep. You’ll need another two or three days of sleep to heal the rest of your wounds I imagine, at least to the point you can move again.”

Sleep, yeah, he could do that. He could feel it, feel his body, his beast, wanting to slumber and let the damage fade away; once he’d eaten.

“I—”

“I’ll look into the Damien thing, Jack. He might not want to kill you anymore, but Maria might if she ever found out about Lucas. Then again, maybe not. Last I spoke to her, she seemed to understand how vile a man he was.”

“Maybe ... people in love don’t usually act rationally, Julias.”

“True, too true.” The man adjusted his suit, his tie, and started toward the exit. “You did damn good Jack, and it’s no secret this time. Every vamp in the city, and werewolf and monster too, is

going to know what you managed to accomplish. The Invictus will honor this, promote you, give you a raise, and see that your future tasks reflect someone of your stature.”

“ ... Julias, give it to me straight ... is this how Viktor started out?”

His sire froze. Rare, to see Julias freeze, to see his shoulders and limbs come to a dead stop, and his hand reaching out for the exit lever froze too.

“You’re worried about it too, then?”

“ ... I guess I am, yeah.” He raised his hands again, and squeezed at the air to make sure they were working, that they were real. “And you are too, apparently.”

“None of us will ever be able to predict where we’ll be in a century’s time, Jack. Viktor was a ... different man. He changed with time, in strange ways, and—”

“I get it, I get it. I have no idea who I’ll be in fifty fucking years, after I’ve killed how many more people. Twenty-one years old, and I’m starting to build up a list.”

“ ... you had no choice, Jack.”

“I know. I know and I get that, and I don’t need you to convince me it’s ok for a Kindred to defend themselves. Hell you don’t even need to convince me it’s ok for Kindred to kill kine; we’re not the same species, we’re the predator, I get that. Just ... fucking christ. I...” Maybe he did have some growing up to do. But he didn’t want to grow up into Viktor. Where the fuck did that leave him? What sort of stupid, sick, twisted game was this, walking some sort of knife edge.

Julias came back to him, stood beside the bed, and looked down at him with a strange look. An adult look. God, Jack hated that look.

Reminded him of the conversations his mom would have with her friends, not long after their dad died. That serious, adult, sympathetic but serious look. A look he didn't want to be on the receiving end of, but he knew he probably damn well needed it.

“Kid, you have me, and you have Antoinette. You have a lot of years to go before you ever have to worry about the things that made Viktor who he was. Honestly, I'm surprised you asked.”

“I ... when I reached out to break their minds, those hunters, and I realized I could, that I could break them like puppets, I ... thought of Viktor, I guess. I knew he could do that too, that he had a talent for it, and then I remembered all the rats he summoned, and ... and I knew, if I wanted to get out of their alive, I had to be able to do what Viktor would do, and willing to do it too.”

His sire winced, reached down, and touched his shoulder. “It was a smart play.”

There was more. He remembered how much he wanted to kill them, these humans that had the fucking nerve to try and capture him, torture him. He remembered the taste of violence on his tongue, and how satisfying it'd been to wreak havoc on the hunters who had the audacity to try and kill him. It was the words, it was how his mind had formulated the thought that got under his skin, that made him think about Viktor.

‘How dare they.’

---

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~~Eric~~

He still had his job.

One call to Ganders, a five minute call after the meeting with the Prince, to get the situation sorted out. Apparently knowing the name ‘Invictus’ was enough to get Ganders nervous, and excited.

When Eric mentioned meeting someone by title of 'Prince', Ganders about lost it, exclaiming things like 'I knew you were the right choice!' and such, all while Eric just listened. Man loved his job way too much. Dracula's thrall then, maybe? Eric smirked at the thought of the man haunched over, saying 'master, master' over and over.

The only problem was Ganders was only willing to give him two days off. He had to be in for the third. Told him he could sit down for the shift, but he needed to be there, because if what Eric was saying was true, then the Invictus would want him there. Apparently, they'd probably have someone over to talk to him, and set things straight. Delightful.

So, he sat in a booth on the second floor, since the other three bouncers were downstairs, and he waited, and watched. The red lighting, the club's white pulsing light that joined it like a heartbeat, and the darkness of the second floor combined to create an atmosphere he could let his mind wander in. Processing everything that had happened was difficult, and he was worried about Fiona. But as much as the redhead was on his mind, the bigger thing on his mind was the werewolf thing.

Was he a werewolf? Not like he could ignore the dreams and hallucinations, couldn't ignore that the moon had spoken to him, told him to breathe. The moon was whole at first, but the subsequent dreams had shown him the gibbous moon, and those dreams had him out in the wild, howling, hunting. He'd been a wolf. A wolf. A fucking wolf.

Breathe. He just had to breathe.

Fiona said she saw something in him, and she knew about his dreams and shit. He'd love, just fucking love to chalk it up to bullshit, and dismiss everything, but the girl had turned out to be a literal monster. Why would a monster lie to him? Hell, the fact she was a monster meant her words had some credibility, a shit load of

credibility, considering the topic. And fuck, that crocodile mouth vampire only had to say the word werewolf, and it clicked like someone turning on a light switch in his head.

Christ, his knee was killing him. If he was a werewolf, wouldn't that fucking heal or something? He assumed if he was a beast of legend, maybe he'd heal shit like—

“Eric!”

A young, bubbly voice yanked him out of his thoughts. Waving hands, bouncing red hair, and a green dress jumped up and down a few times from the stairway top, before running over to him, slipping into the booth with him, and hugging him. Hugging him full contact too, arms wrapping him and body snug to his. Soft.

“Fiona. You're alive.”

“Well dinnae sound too excited.” She rolled her eyes, and plomped down next to him, tight against his side. “Ugh, it got pretty bad after ye left. That ... that Jeremiah beast, he managed to stab me, and Athalia. 'twas horrible! But Mark showed up eventually, and we managed to force them to retreat. Took him a while to show up though, and Athalia got hurt. She'll be fine though.”

Athalia, right, the other monster, the one with the daughter. He almost brought it up, but if Fiona wasn't bringing up this daughter, he probably shouldn't either.

“... I am glad you're alive. Really.” He tried to look sincere, or at least happy, but it just came off as fake. So he adopted his usual, dry face, and Fiona giggled as she smiled up at him.

“She is alive, thanks to you.” Another voice from the stairway. Jessie was back, with Natasha too. Jessie was in a black dress that barely covered her skin, and Natasha was dressed a little more conservatively, a blue dress with a longer body. Why did this

Natasha girl insist on coming, when it was obvious she didn't like the club atmosphere, even a relatively tame one like Bloodlust?

"Thanks to me?"

"She t-told us ... that you ... got her t-t-to the nightmare, when she was ... shot." Natasha came up to the table and stood by its side, while Jessy slid into the booth, opposite of Fiona, trapping him. Jackass woman smiled every second she did too, and like Fiona, got snug against his side and pressed her breasts to his arm.

"A kine with some balls," Jessy said. "And hey, now you know about us vamps, and even the monsters. That makes you special, only human in the city not on a leash." She set one of her hands on his leg, and stroked the tender muscle. At least she was being softer than he expected of an aggressive woman like her.

"I understand that ... the P-Prince has some ordered some ... Invictus eyes here all the time now?"

"Yeah." Jessy looked around, tapped her chin a few times in thought, then nodded. "Oh, right, that's me tonight."

His life was, apparently, in the hands of a buffoon. Lovely. It had Fiona in giggles, and she reached out over him to poke at Jessy.

"I need a drink! And ye said we get the booth, Jessy?"

"Yeap."

"... Fiona, unless I'm mistaken, Jessy and Natasha aren't going to drink, and I'm working." Bloodlust wasn't New Vegas, people didn't come to the club to get bottle service, convince girls to sit with them, and waste their money on ludicrous expenditures, modern-day peacocking. People came to Bloodlust because, compared to other nightclubs, it was subdued, quiet, discrete. Hilarious in



retrospect, but true. Bloodlust was a dark place, where people came to drink, do drugs, fuck, and do it all with plenty of elbowroom.

Now that he thought about it, Bloodlust was more a lounge pretending to be a nightclub, but it was a specific motif that attracted a certain clientele. And, as he looked at Natasha and Jessy, he smirked. Vampire. The motif was dark, slick, deceiving, sexy, and dangerous. Bloodlust was made with vampires in mind.

“Let the girl have some fun, Eric.” Jessy shrugged, reached out across him to return Fiona’s poke, and laughed. “Just tell the bartender that Jessy sent you and you can get whatever you want for free.”

“Really?”

Oh good god he was going to get puked on before the night was done.

Fiona, giggling, hopped out of the booth, and ran downstairs. Only one waiter or waitress in Bloodlust usually; didn’t fit the vibe to have more, he guessed. People tended to themselves, and they enjoyed their privacy. Semi privacy, considering it was still bright enough to see nearby booths, and the people in them, a little anyway.

“... now that I think about it, I have trouble imagining this place making a profit,” he said.

Natasha chuckled, a couple squeaks almost lost in the repetitive heartbeat music. “It d-doesn’t.”

“No?”

“Nope.” Jessy leaned back, folded one knee over the other in a very obvious manner, and winked at him. “Invictus keep this place running as a place for Kindred to feed.”

“Kindred?”

“Our word for vampire.”

Guess he was right on the money then. The club was made by vamps, for vamps. And he was a bouncer for a place that didn't need a bouncer, for a place concerned far more with creating dark corners for these creatures of the night to get their blood fix.

Sweet mother of fucking god, he was pulled into this crazy world before he ever even met Fiona.

“I'm g-going to go downstairs, Jessy, to talk to Ganders. P-Please be nice to Eric? He helped saved Jack, and—”

“I am going to be nice to him, in all the right ways.” She winked again. Too many winks. Woman had seen far too many movies, nineties movies by the look of her hair, her dress, her attitude, everything.

But, she was gorgeous, no denying that. A little tall, the short blond hair, the built body, muscular and lean but still feminine, but at the same time with broad enough shoulders to show should could throw a mean punch. And she was rubbing his leg.

Natasha rolled her eyes, and walked back toward the stairs, dodging Fiona as the Scot came back up to join them, a bottle in hand. The redhead jumped back into the booth, and set the bottle down on the table. Vodka. He almost laughed. Shouldn't have expected something sweet with a swirly straw, but he did.

“Dinnae judge me!” She poured herself a shallow glass, and took a sip. “See, I can be sophisticated too.”

Uh huh. His smirk, or smile, stuck to him and refused to go away, even as the girl frowned at him, all the while sliding in closer on the booth, and taking a proper gulp of the drink.

“You know,” Jessy said, “this is a rare opportunity for us.”

Eric raised a brow. “Is it?”

“Not for you, for me, and Fiona. You’re the only human in the city that knows about us, who isn’t one of our servants.”

“What ... does that mean for us?” Fiona said, a bit of coyness to her voice; she knew he wasn’t human. And judging from what Jessy and Natasha had said, they didn’t know he wasn’t. It was their little secret then. Or, huge secret, that could get him into serious trouble if he didn’t tell the vampires who now controlled his life.

Eh, he’d hold onto it, and see where this new life took him first.

“That means we can have some fun with him. Kindred manipulate kine all the time, but they’re always oblivious to it. With Eric here, we can make him dance to our tune, and the best part it, he won’t be oblivious to it.”

“And ... I’m supposed to just sit here, and be manipulated?”

“You are, if you don’t want to wind up pissing off the vamps who have been so courteous as to leave you with your freewill intact.” Her hand found his leg again, and then his crotch. “I don’t think you’ll mind the sort of fun I plan to have with you though.”

Giggling all the more, Fiona took another gulp, and reached across with her other hand to slap Jessy’s hand. Which made Eric wince, as impact against his crotch was never a welcome feeling. Both girls giggled.

“Sorry,” Fiona said, and she raised her hand to rub his arm while the other got some more vodka into her. “Jessy, ye hae to be so aggressive, with sex and aw that?”

“Hell yeah. Besides, I took care of that Montoya business, told him to wipe Eric free of his debts and to leave him the fuck alone.” Her hand raised, and she took his chin a bit to direct it toward her, and shake it lightly. “So now he owes me.” Her dominant, assuming gestures would have been offensive, if the woman wasn’t eye-fucking the shit out of him as she did them.

“You took of Montoya, just like that?” He snapped his fingers in front of him.

She mimicked him, snapping her fingers, and gave him yet another wink. “Just like that. Invictus own him. Hell, if there’d been a real problem, I could have paid him off anyway. Not like you owed him that much.”

“ ... it’s a lot, when you have nothing.”

“Well, now you got something. Did the Invictus a favor, so we’ll keep you here at Bloodlust, making decent money and access to all the pussy you could ever want.”

Decent money, fucking hell. He was making great money now, and this woman was treating his new job like it was pennies. How fucking rich were these Invictus vamps?

“Somehow I doubt pussy is going to just walk up and—”

“Eric, really, you have got to get your head out of your ass. Ugh, the dark and brooding thing gets old after a while.” Jessy put her hand back on his crotch, and began to rub, massage, and caress in a surprisingly perfect way, enough to send the signals to his body, and make his shaft start to harden.

Damn, his body was going to betray him that fast? Shit, maybe he did need this more than he thought.

“He does ‘at a lot,” Fiona said. Girl was already getting tipsy.

“So I’ve noticed. Eric, serious question, you want to have sex? With women?”

“ ... I do, yeah, but—”

“And do you want to have sex with me, right now?”

Ok, aggressive was not aggressive enough of a word for this woman.

“ ... you are ... attractive, and ... I mean, I’d be lying if I said—”

“Good. So, servant boy, you are going to get a fair dose of pussy right now, and I’m sure plenty more in the future. Mine, and others.”

He gulped, and blinked several times at the blond next to him. Girl wasn’t blushing, hell she didn’t even flinch, or break eye contact as she met his stunned gaze. She batted her eyelashes a few times in ridiculous flirtation, and continued to rub his crotch until the hardness of his erection grew uncomfortable in his pants. Her abrasiveness and honesty was damn refreshing, and he had to admit, a real turn on.

“ ... ok, what do I—”

“Do absolutely nothing, just sit there and let us girls show you a good time. I’ve been a vamp for over half a century, and I can promise you, you ain’t fucked until you’ve fucked an older woman.” The grinning beast hiked up her skirt, and slid off the thong. She tossed it to Fiona, who giggled, already getting drunk and teetering a little, before she put it in Jessy’s purse on the table.

He gulped again, and waited. Part of him was a little afraid, as he realized this woman must have been at least seventy years old. Holy shit.

“Ever wonder why these booth seats are so damn huge?” Jessy said.

“ ... figured it was to give the place a bigger-than-life feel.”

“Maybe that too, but I was here when the old shit in here was taken out, and Bloodlust put in. Sex was the name of the game, and you can’t fuck in a tiny booth. Now, no more talking while I have some fun.”

He’d expected the brute of a woman to start mindlessly rubbing and really trying to be sexy without knowing how to be graceful or precise with her movements. He was wrong. He wasn’t dealing with some young woman who had a bit of a power trip, he was dealing with an older woman who just happened to look like a younger woman, who had a bit of a power trip. She knew exactly what she was doing, and her hand rubbed up against his crotch in angles toward its base that quickly had his breathing shortened.

Pulsing blood flowed into his crotch, and he looked down to watch as the shape of his erection started to show against his pants.

“If I was a Daeva or Ventrue, I could snap my fingers and have some chick over here sucking you off in seconds. Not really a Gangrel’s thing. Wouldn’t want it to be. We like to get our hands dirty, sink our teeth in, get sweaty.” She chuckled, and leaned in closer to put a playful bite long his jawline. “Well, sweaty when we’re blushing life anyway.”

“Think Julias does ‘at wi’ Beatrice?” Fiona said. Despite the blushing she was radiating, she didn’t move further away. If anything, she was getting in closer, pressing her body against his other leg, and a moment later she turned toward him enough that she put a hand on his leg. Every bit of her smelled of arousal.

“I know he does. Hell I’ve seen the two of them with a woman kine now and then, Kissing them in here, fingering her or having

her pleasure the two of them under the table.” Jessy laughed, loudly, not a care in the world for the nearby booths where some people were starting to glance their way. “The bouncer getting it on with one of the customers?’ they were probably thinking.

Eric was powerless to stop his present circumstance. And, maybe for once in his life, that was a good thing. Just lean back, relax, and have sex with the beautiful woman who’s done nothing but favors for you. She’s not Sheryl, she’s not deceiving you; manipulating you sure, but all her manipulations were laid bare for him to see and evaluate. No lies here, just a hot girl taking advantage of you in a way you can’t really say you dislike. If Fiona had protested, he’d have protested too, but a glance down to the small girl beside him showed the opposite. Girl was terribly horny, her heavy breasts pushing her hard nipples against her dress, and her hand on his leg unable to hold still, stroking his thigh slowly.

She stopped stroking, and stared, as Jessy undid his shirt buttons to expose his abs and chest, then undid his pants, and pulled out his shaft. Damn woman winked at Fiona, and gave his hard length a few strokes. Eric had to fight the reflex to cover up, being in a public place, but Jessy’s grip and hungry eyes forced him to hold still.

Fiona stared at his member, and licked her lips. But when she tried to say something, she just let her mouth open, slightly parted, and watched the vampire stroke him.

“Slide forward.” The vampire woman climbed up onto his lap, and put her weight down against the booth with her knees.

He gulped, and slid forward half a foot. The booths were plenty big for it, and he had to admit, it was a more comfortable way to lean back and relax against the back of the seat.

“You’re a damn handsome man, Eric.” Jessy lowered herself down, spreading her legs out a bit more, and a bit more, until the

smooth lips of her pussy brushed against the underside of his cock. Wet. God damn. "I look forward to our continued partnership."

"Hey, he's nae thraw." Fiona frowned up at Jessy, but frown melted away as the girl stared at Jessy's slit, at where the girl's pink flesh was spreading further and further apart as she sank her weight down onto Eric.

"Yeah, no thrall. I'll keep him vitae-free, s'long as you keep him on a leash, girl."

"... ah ... aye ... ok." Fiona stopped moving, stopped responding, and stared on as the vampire started to shift her hips back and forth.

So. Fucking. Warm. Wet warmth started to coat his cock, and a small groan escaped him as he melted into the booth while the beautiful, deadly creature grinned down at him.

"Since you know about Kindred, I don't need to give you any BS about going bareback." She slid her hips forward, pressed the opening of her pussy against the head of his cock, and then slid herself back down until her wet lips were snug against where his cock met his testicles. Not penetrating, not yet, girl wanted to tease him apparently, and rub her swollen clit up and down the underside of his length.

He was about to fuck a vampire. Or rather, get fucked by a vampire. He gulped again, and blinked a few times up at the creature as she grinned down at him, her grip on his shoulders and her legs tight around his. Five minutes in and she was wet enough to coat him, for him to feel her hot juices start to trickle down his length and get onto his abs and testicles. Girl really got off on being in charge.

"Fiona, hold him up for me would you?"

"W-What?"



Jessy laughed, winked, and raised her hips. “Come on, it’s fun. Take his cock in your hand, and point it up for me.”

Eric almost said don’t, like maybe it’d have been the nice thing to do, to defend Fiona from this girl’s ridiculous request. But, he didn’t. Maybe he realized Fiona had wanted to explore her own sexual side more, or maybe he was just a man and couldn’t deny how hot it’d be to have the beautiful little redhead next to him get involved in like that.

Her shock and surprise turned into a giggle, a very drunk giggle, and with a shaky hand, she reached out and took his shaft into her grip.

“Oh ... warm...” She offered him a few, testing squeezes, and bit her bottom lip as she shifted her hand up and down the base of his length. “An’ wet.”

“I’m dying here,” Jessy said. “Come on.”

More giggles. Fiona squeezed him a few more times, gentle, and tilted his cock back and forth along his abs. Like a cat playing with a toy. Or a drunk girl playing with one. But, after yet a few more giggles, she solidified her grip, and kept his cock pointed upright.

Jessy laughed too; the Scot’s joy was contagious. Hell, just having the redhead next to him, leaning in, snug to Jessy’s leg, and smiling at him, was making him smile back. Smile turned into a soft moan as his eyes came back to his cock, and watched the vampire begin to sink herself down onto him.

Tight, wet, hot flesh coated him all the more, and he struggled to keep his eyes open as the woman devoured him. She danced a little, swayed her hips from side to side, made each inch send sparks of pleasure down his length as her squeezing insides massaged his glans. Purposeful squeezes, muscles clamping down in spurts, milking him as she worked inch after inch into her.

When her lips found the base of his length, she let out a long sigh, and ran a finger down his cheek.

“I can tell just by looking at you that it’s been a while.” She reached up to one of her shoulders, and eased off the strap. Then the other, easing the strap off until both were falling down her strong arms. She slipped out of them, let them fall off her hands, and she smirked at him as the dress turned into nothing more than a belt around her waist.

Eric gulped, stared, and nodded. Been a while, yeah, and his eyes were locked on the beauty of the creature like an awestruck kid. Jessy was strong and built like Beatrice, but a little taller with a little more muscle to go with. A lean, strong body, muscle, a hard, flat stomach, and somewhat large breasts that almost looked odd on her muscular body. Odd, but beautiful, and the vampire winked at him as she brought a hand up to one of those breasts, and began to cup and massage it in a slow, teasing dance.

“Normally I prefer a rough fuck, beginning to end, but Fiona’s here and I don’t want to frighten her off.”

“H-Hey ... I’m ... nae frightened.”

“Yeah?”

“Aye! Seen worse than this in mah hunts ‘ere in Dolareido.”

“Then...” Grinning a grin Eric recognized, the ‘evil woman concocting an evil plan’ grin, Jessy reached out, and slid two of her fingers into Fiona’s neckline. “Then take ‘em out.”

“ ... I ... ye...”

“You got an amazing looking rack, Fiona, and I for one would love to look at it while I work a couple of orgasms out of your new boy toy here.”

This woman, holy shit this woman. She talked about sex like it was a sport, something to play with, boast about, master. And god damn had she mastered it. Eric could do nothing but sit there, and try and stop gawking so much as the woman began to slowly grind her amazing body back and forth against him.

Fiona peeked left and peeked right. Very dark on the Bloodlust second floor tonight, almost as if Jessy had planned this. Fuck, she had planned this. It wasn't so dark they couldn't see each other's bodies or the other booths, but it was dark enough that people outside the booth would only see silhouettes. The silhouettes would have been blatant though, and there'd be no denying that a near-naked woman was riding Eric's cock as he leaned back and enjoyed it.

The Scot hiccuped once, peeked twice, and then slid her hands up to her shoulders. Her open-back dress was easily undone, a lift of the strap along her neck up and over her hair, and then down onto her waist to let the chest of the dress fall to her legs, and expose her.

They were huge breasts, with swollen, puffy pink nipples against white skin. They were already large, but against her tiny body, they appeared massive, and both Eric and Jessy groaned at the sight of them.

"That," Jessy said, "is an amazing set of tits."

Eric nodded his agreement. He wasn't supposed to speak, but if he could, the only thing he'd have to say would be shitty compliments that didn't do the small, curvy woman's beauty justice.

"... thank ye." Fiona was blushing, but she wasn't covering herself back up either.

Jessy leaned in, planted one hand against the back of the booth beside Eric's head, and tilted her body toward Fiona a little. And,

grinning that same evil grin, she reached out, and cupped the girl's nearer breast.

“God damn.”

“H-Hey! Jessy ye wank-stain, ah dinnae say ye could touch!”

“Yes you did. Your nipples are standing up like they're giving an ovation, Fiona, begging to be touched.”

“I—” Jessy put her finger against his lips before he could say anything.

“Ah still ... dinnae ... say...” Fiona's voice faded away as she looked down, and watched Jessy's fingers. The vampire seemed content to bounce Fiona's breasts, pressing up on one of them hard enough to make it jiggle, to make its softness ripple against Fiona's chest, before she did the same to the other. The little woman looked up at Eric beside her, and offered an embarrassed smile.

How easy it was to overpower someone's brain when they were horny. Drunk and horny made it far easier besides that, and the young woman beside him was definitely both of those.

“Come on, it's supposed to be fun, Fiona. Do whatever you want. Touch yourself if you think it'll be hot.”

“Touch myself? Ye stole mah date! Ah'm watching ye fuck 'em right now!”

“I'll give him back when I'm done with him. Then tomorrow you can fuck him all you want.” Jessy ran her other hand up and down Eric's chest, and made some animal growls as she leaned back, letting her hand fall from Fiona so she could put both her elbows upon the booth table behind her. “Unless you're too scared to get sexual?”

Eric winced. Ugh, dirty, so dirty, and ruthless this Jessy. Fiona definitely had a large sexual need, but it was plain to see she was shy and new to all this. Jessy was super old, human and vampire years combined. Not a fair contest.

But Fiona blew up her cheeks like a puffer fish, and snuggled in closer, pressing her body against Jessy's leg and Eric's side.

“Ah should ... do whatever ah want, ‘en?”

Jessy nodded, and started her dance again, but with her elbows still on the table behind her, so her leaning back position had her whole body on display. God damn that stomach, crunching and sliding as the woman squeezed down on his cock and slid her ass back and forth a couple inches.

“Anything you want. I mean, I'm not gonna stop fucking Eric till he's good and dry, cum and blood. But yeah, anything you want. Join in. I think you're fucking gorgeous, so does Eric, and the man has no choice but to listen to us.”

Woman didn't know that Eric may have been something far less manipulatable. Fiona did, but she giggled and nodded, going along with the game apparently. Not like, even if he was a werewolf, he could stop these two women in his current predicament. Trapped.

Fiona turned to him, and slid her closer arm under his, hooking them at the elbow, and pressing her bare breasts into his suit. God damn they were huge breasts, soft except for the puffy nipples pressing into him. She twisted enough to face him more directly, and with her further arm, reached out and across to run her fingers down his body, his exposed chest and stomach.

“Is it horrible o' me tae say ah absolutely loove men wit' ... these?” She traced the lines of his pectorals, lean and defined. “Or ... these?” Down they went, to trace the lines of his abs. “Or these? Ah ... ah loove these.” Her fingers found his hips, exposed as his jacket

and shirt were open and spread, and she traced the iliac furrow of his hips and pelvis. Her accent was getting thicker as she got drunker, and it made Eric smile. She sounded lovely.

Jessy laughed, and reached down to grab her dress at her waist. She slid it up and off with all the grace of an ox, and put it beside Eric on the booth as she got comfortable again, leaning back against the table. Completely naked, in a club. If she weren't a vampire, Eric would probably have Ganders up here telling him to make it a little more discreet.

“I think it's ok for women to indulge in a little objectification of men's bodies every once in a while.” The vampire reached out, and set one hand on Fiona's back, since the girl was so close. Fiona flinched, but no dismissing shrug or pushing hand followed; rather, a quiet moan. She wanted to be touched. “Well, I mean for me, I do it all the damn time, but I'm a bitch like that.”

The redhead giggled, and turned a little to face more toward Jessy again. “Yer built like an Amazon warrior, lass.” Her exploring hand traced a few more muscles on Eric's chest and stomach, before they inched their way onto Jessy's leg where it was snug to Eric's side. Like a sneaky spider, she took small steps with her fingers, and walked her hand down Jessy's leg, down her thigh, and onto the woman's stomach as well where she began to do the same thing.

“I know, right? Built for fighting and fucking. The Gangrel way of a second life.” She reached up to get her arms over her head, and showed off her figure, her proportions, her muscular body that worked with her feminine curves and tight waist, and her plentiful breasts that she made jiggle with a few bounces. “But hey, got some soft parts too.” Grinning an animal grin, she reached down for Fiona's hand, and nudged it down lower, and lower, until it found the smooth mons of the girl's body, and then, her clitoris.

“ ... Ah ... oh...”

Eric stared on, and didn't try and hide the groan that came out of him. Jessy leaned back again, and began to grind her hips back and forth in slow, deep, perfect sways, each accented by a hard squeeze of her insides that had pleasure sparks dancing down his cock. But Fiona's touch on the animal's clit was what had Eric awestruck. A woman, massaging another woman's clitoris, while said woman rode him, so he could feel every clench, squeeze, shift, grind, and twist of her body? He had no idea, no idea at all how good this would feel, how arousing it would look, and how much it'd make him melt. No blood left to power his brain, to think about all the shit happening in his life, when all the blood he had available to him was currently between his legs.

"I know that look too," Jessy said. "That's the 'first time with two women' look." Again she laughed, even as her pace grew faster, and some moans started to slip into her voice. "Or at least, first time you've ever enjoyed two women at once, who're actually enjoying themselves."

Not allowed to talk, not allowed to defend himself. Other than a failed threesome that had been awkward, his sexual history had always been one on one. So, he really had no defense anyway. Damn woman was such a jackass about it though. A really, really hot jackass.

Jessy raised her elbows, gripped the table edge with her hands, and increased her speed. Back and forth, she pushed herself faster, fast enough Eric started to move with the impact of each thrust. And then faster again, until what was once an almost hidden bout of sex in the dark, became an obvious affair of rough sex for anyone nearby to notice. And people did notice, though as far as Eric could see, anybody nearby who were staring, stared only long enough to get aroused, and begin their own sexual experiences in their booths with their partners.

Despite Jessy's increased speed, Fiona managed to keep her thumb on the animal's clit. She had to lean in snug to Eric's side, her closer arm still hooked behind his, and she braced against him to keep steady as she kept a thumb against the swollen nub of Jessy's pussy. The blond was half fucking Eric, half forcing her hips forward to rub herself against Fiona's thumb, and the longer she went on, the wetter, and wetter she got. But she didn't blush, or so much as glance over her shoulders to see if anyone was staring. The animal grew faster instead, and growled down at Eric as she squeezed on him hard enough to almost hurt.

Just as the pleasure sparks were starting to grow, and he could feel his warm juices begin to build underneath his testicles, Jessy slowed down. Her insides clamped down, and as the random spurts of clenching waves worked through her muscles, Eric made a quiet moan as he felt her cum start to coat him.

"Feels ... fucking ... amazing ... doesn't it?" Talking mid orgasm, Jessy winked at Eric as she continued her dance at a slower speed, still holding the table to brace herself as she pushed her hips back and forth. Showing off. Each wave caused her flat stomach to roll with the motion, a wave of perfect skin and sexual allure flowing back and forth on his body, all the while trickling more of her juices onto his cock. Her orgasm earned some dark, quiet animal growls, and she quivered a few times, making her breasts bounce lightly against her. But she didn't stop dancing, only slowed down as she milked the waves of her orgasm aftershocks.

"Ye're ... making me jealous..." Fiona set her hand aside, resting it on Jessy's leg and giving the woman's clit a break. Or, maybe the Scot just wanted a better view of where the blond's cunt was spread open on Eric's cock. So very wet.

"Aw, don't be like that. I'm four times your age, Fiona. I had to work my way up to this level of awesome. Besides, nothing hotter than a young woman learning what she likes." Jessy sat up straight,



set one hand on Eric's shoulder again, while the other reached out to touch Fiona's leg, and slipped a hand underneath the split of her skirt. "And you, Fiona, I bet you got a wild girl side, right? I think a part of you wants to meet Mister Right, curl up in bed, and have slow, tender, loving spoon sex all the time. But another part of you loves the idea of suddenly finding yourself sitting next to a man and woman having sex in a booth, while the woman reaches under your skirt, and starts to finger you. The thrill of not knowing what might happen next."

Fiona opened her mouth, but instead of a protest, she gasped. Gasp turned into mewl as Fiona turned straight on toward Jessy, pressed her back to the booth, her side to Eric's arm, and began to ease her legs apart. This Jessy was too damn good. A young woman having a wild girl inside of her who wanted to experiment was pretty normal, but to be split between that and a girl who wanted a far more vanilla sexual life was a bit more unique. And Jessy seemed to see that, catch onto it quick, and delight in seeing the conflict on Fiona's face as she eased her hand underneath the girl's underwear, forced it down enough to expose some of the girl's milky skin, the tiny, trim bush of red hair, and then slip her fingers into the girl's body.

Much as this Jessy was a brute, a bully, and an almost savage woman, she certainly knew her way around sex, both physically and mentally. Fiona was helpless to stop her, and stared on at the animal and how her palm was upturned while two fingers eased their way into her folds. Her underwear was still on, but Jessy had managed to pull down the front of them enough for her hand to have free access, and for Eric to see everything, juices included.

Jessy started her dance again, grinding her hips toward Eric's body, grip tight on his shoulder, while her other hand's fingers probed upward against Fiona's insides. And Fiona, snuggling into Eric's side, drunk and topless and so horny he could smell sex coming out every pore on her body, raised her further arm from him

to her breasts. While her other arm was hugging his, the further arm reached up to cradle one of her breasts, and began to caress one of her nipples with circling fingers.

Too much, too damn fucking much. He closed his eyes for a moment, breathed deep, and focused on the pleasure starting to flow down from his cock, between his legs, and into his pelvis. Jessy's muscles were working his length without break, back and forth, stroking, massage, soaking, wringing pleasure out of him with practiced perfection. He was helpless, totally outclassed, and could do nothing but force his eyes open, and watch the two beautiful women as he started to cum.

“Hey, you dick.” Jessy slid the hand from his shoulder to his neck, and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Not even a warning?”

“ ... s—”

She put the hand against his lips, shook her head, and laughed as she slid it back to his shoulder, and continued to grind against him. Each pulsing wave of pleasure forced his inner muscles to flex, forced a gush of his cum to pour up his length, and forced him to tremble ever so slightly. And as he did, Fiona turned, and stared at him, his body, and his cock where the vampire's pink lips were spread around his dark skin. His cum was starting to leak out of the vampire, spreading over his skin as her clenching pussy milked it out of him.

Fiona started to squeak like a dog's chew toy, a bunch of little squeaks, adorable, cute, and very sexy, as each squeak made the woman tremble, and hold his arm tighter as she came onto Jessy's fingers. Her breasts shook with her, jiggling with their heavy size, and the softness of them, no longer held in her hand as her free arm reached out to hold onto Jessy's wrist. The vampire growled a little louder, hungry, and she leaned in to Eric until she was only a few inches from his face. She never stopped her dance, muscles

squeezing in spurts, each timed with her swaying, and each timed to milk the fluid out of him as it filled his length before flooding into her.

What sort of fucking insane sex world had he been dragged into? A warrior, fucking him dry, while a soft, beautiful little creature clutched his arm, squeaking and mewling, as said warrior fingered her harder. Dolareido was sometimes called Slut City, but fuck, this was a new level of sexual confidence than he was prepared for.

It was sort of amazing.

“If we were back at my place or something, I’d get messy, and rough, you know?” Jessy withdrew her hand from Fiona’s insides, and raised it up to set it along the girl’s breasts. Poor Fiona was gasping, panting, trying to get oxygen into her as she quivered, all while Jessy left wet lines over her pink nipples, alabaster skin, and a splattering of freckles, lit by the pulsing lights. “But I think this will still work.” The vampire reached down for Eric this time, his free arm, and set his hand on her ass. Firm, hard, and large. She took his other as well, and pulled it forward, out of Fiona’s embrace, then back and over Fiona’s head so he could lay the arm upon her shoulders and behind her head.

He almost opened his mouth again, but shut it quick. Not the game. Jessy wanted him to nod, to submit, to just do whatever she told him to do. And hell, he kind of wanted to do just that.

He looked down at Fiona beside him. With her dress pulled down and skirt opened and pulled to the side, she was basically naked, and he gulped as he stared at her body, her short, curvy figure, her huge breasts, and listened to the sound of her panting and exhausted moans. Her underwear glistened with how wet it had become.

“Jessy, ye ... ye’re ... a real slut, ye ken?”

“Yeap.” The vampire took Eric’s hand dangling about Fiona’s side, and guided it to press it to one of her breasts. “Feels good, doesn’t it? Nice, big, heavy, fills the hand. Play with her while I make us all cum again.”

So. Damn. Soft. With his arm out of the way, Fiona was pressing against his side, and only Jessy’s knee between them prevented any major contact. It didn’t stop Fiona though, and she snuggled into him as best she could as she looked up to him.

“ ... Ah think ... Ah may be a bit blootered,” she said.

He rolled his eyes. Yeah, no duh.

“B-But, Ah ... came to Dolareido for a few reasons. Mah home town was boring, an’ Vrall needed prey. But, ‘twas also boring for me too, and Ah needed ... something ... wild.” One of her hands found his where it rested on her breast, and she helped press it to her body, her hard nipple, until the softness of the alabaster breast overflowed his hand. The Red Shoe Diaries confession would have been horribly cheesy and ridiculous, if he wasn’t smack dab in the middle of it, with his hand caressing her breast and his other holding the ass of another woman riding his cock.

Jessy had all the control, and she used it, bathed in it, grinned at him as she started to ease her body back and forth again in a slow sway, each causing her stomach to roll. Those abs, holy fuck. Each slow, rocking motion of her body was joined by a long, massaging squeeze of her cum-soaked insides, and Eric shivered as he felt her warm juices renew. So damn warm, tight, and her squeezing muscles knew just what to do to leave him breathless, each motion causing her wet pussy to massage along his swollen, sensitive glans, and every inch of his length.

But as much as she was fucking him again, she kept it slow, teasing; it was Fiona who was getting the brunt of Jessy’s aggression. The vampire slipped her two fingers back into the little

woman's slit once again, and began to finger her, but this time she pulled the hand up with a rough motion that caused the tiny Scot to bounce slightly in her seat. She was going to finger the curvy little woman, and finger her hard.

Eric gulped, and watched, hand still holding onto the redhead's breast as she began to mewl. To hold a woman, hold her breast, feel her snug against him, as another woman fingered her hard and fast, was really hot, no two ways about it. He went comatose mode, mouth parting a sliver as he stared down at the tiny thing beside him, her bouncing breasts, and her spread legs.

“Consider this your introduction to a Kindred's world.” Jessy chuckled, and continued her harder fingering of the tiny woman. Relentless. She started to work her own body a little faster, but it was all secondary, an afterthought, based on where her eyes were: Fiona. Both of them were staring at Fiona, and listening to her bubbly mewls. Such a young thing compared to either of them, and drunk; made Eric feel a bit guilty. But she was more than just a young woman, and Eric forced himself to remember she was more than human too.

Hard to focus on the non-human element, when the very human, very beautiful half-naked woman was cumming again. So soft and curvy, her free breast jiggled and bounced, while the other in Eric's hand struggled to free itself of his grip as Fiona's trembling grew. He didn't let it. He began to caress it, massage it, two of his fingers circling her puffy nipple while the others held the large shape of her breast secure.

Fiona reached out, and grabbed Jessy's wrist with one hand, while her other pressed against Jessy's leg. “S ... slow ... doon...”

The vampire did, for a moment. But after a sinister chuckle, Jessy resumed fingering the curvy redhead, fingers thrusting upward hard enough to make all of Fiona's body shake against the booth, and for

her squeaks to return. Squeaks, and juices. Even in the darkness of the club, Eric could see how wet Jessy's fingers were getting, and he could smell sex, smell the body and heat and need coming out of Fiona. The small woman's grip on Jessy's wrist was futile, and the vampire continued to finger her, despite her mewls and squeaks growing quieter, becoming breathless pants as the girl ran out of air.

He held her as she came, felt her heart beating a million times a second, and felt her soft body quivering in orgasm, while bouncing from Jessy's forceful fingering. And through it all, Jessy's dance on his cock got faster, shifting back and forth in a rolling tide. The impact of her arm was making her own body tremble, and Eric's eyes drifted to Jessy, her hard stomach, her smooth lips spread open by his cock, her shaking breasts, and her sinister grin. It felt good. It felt really good.

He was starting to get a picture of what these vampires were like. Maybe it wasn't a very accurate picture, given the few vamps he'd ever known, but this Jessy girl had so much confidence in herself and what she was doing, all Eric could do was watch, and let her shaking, dancing body work him toward a second orgasm.

Fiona went silent. Not because she passed out, but she simply had no air left. Jessy, perhaps feeling a bit lenient, slipped her hand out of the girl's body, and set her soaked fingers onto Eric's chest. The small woman's squeaks returned, as did her trembling, and she leaned her head onto Eric's shoulder as she shivered.

"God damn she's a firecraker," Jessy said. "Look at her, shaking like a leaf. And she drenched me." She traced Eric's chest with her fingers, drawing lines with Fiona's juices along his muscles. "Your turn."

"I—"

"No no, no talking. Just sit back, relax, and cum all you want while I get a drink." The vampire leaned in, grinning the whole way,

and put her lips to his neck.

A part of him, the animal in him, wanted to push her off and fight her. She was dangerous, and that new instinct in him was feeling fangs on the neck, feeling vulnerable, feeling exposed, feeling like this dangerous animal might take advantage of him. But, the man in him was a bit too busy melting in a bath of pure sex to care.

When the fangs pierced him, there was a split moment of pain, so short he almost didn't notice it. And then, pleasure. Overwhelming waves of relaxation flowed through him, pouring up and down his body, his tense muscles, settling the pain in his knee and all the bruises. Pleasure amplified, turning the pleasant, massaging grip of her pussy around his cock into an overpowering bliss. Orgasm came moments later, and he let out a low, quiet groan as his cum started to gush out of him once again.

“Jessy, Ganders says we—what are you d-doing?”

Eric forced his eyes open, and looked out to the open space between the booths. Natasha stood there, hands on her hips and a chipmunk frown on her lips.

Jessy's head was on Eric's neck, between him and Fiona, so Eric got to watch Natasha stand there, tapping her foot and growing more and more annoyed. Eric, on the other hand, was doing his best to not pass out, as the vampire's suckling lips poured a strange euphoria over him. He couldn't focus on anything anymore, could barely see Natasha beside him, only aware on the relaxing waves working up and down his body. Each wave earned a gush of his cum, and he made another small groan as he felt the warmth of it coat the vampire's tight, soaked insides. And, as she suckled, her own juices joined his, her insides trembling and squeezing in random convulsions, milking him of his cum.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

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~~Natasha~~

Oh god damn it.

“J-Jessy, you ... you’re naked!”

The evil vampire woman chuckled, raised her lips from Eric’s neck, and wiped a hand across her lips. She was shaking, in a way Natasha knew meant she was cumming. Right in front of everyone!

“God damn this fucker tastes good.” And of course, not to be deterred by a conversation, the animal woman talked, and moaned at the same time.

“D-D-Don’t drink too much! He gave Jack some b-blood, remember?”

“Yeah yeah. Still, seems he’s got a good amount of blood. I’m pretty happy with him.” Jessy raised her hands, then leaned back as she ran fingers down her breasts and abs, little orgasm tremors still working through her. “Mm, nice and full.”

Natasha stepped around a little closer. Yep, suspicions confirmed. Jessy wasn’t just drinking the man, she was fucking him. Natasha couldn’t help but stare at how her pink lips were spread over the man’s dark skin, and how ... utterly delicious that looked. And then they drifted over to Fiona, and Natasha squeaked as she realized the redhead had her dress down, legs spread, skirt hiked up, underwear pulled down a couple inches, and looked exhausted.

Fiona was only four inches taller than Natasha, which barely put her into the five foot range. A small girl like her, but wow, Fiona had large breasts. The Mekhet smacked herself in the forehead, and shook herself out. Now was not the time to get drawn into Jessy’s insatiable sexual appetite.



“Sat-t-tisfied?”

“I’ll have you know, I am. Since you won’t play with me anymore, I’ve been lonely! The boys have been lonely too. Needed to spice up my life a bit.”

Right, cause sleeping with four ghouls, at the same time, and on a regular basis, wasn’t spicy enough for Jessy. As if to prove that true, Jessy started to work her hips back and forth, hands holding the table behind her, and moans escaping her fangs.

Natasha watched her for a few too many seconds before she reached out, and flicked the naked woman in the shoulder. “Come on, get dressed! And ... cleaned up.”

“Fine fine.” Jessy slid off the man, slowly, teasingly. Natasha again couldn’t control her eyes, and watched as Jessy’s pussy slid off of Eric’s cock, and the thick phallus fell loose against his abs. Traces of juices, and white cum, joined its veins and girth. It was enough to have Natasha craving some alone time with her boyfriends; thank god she wasn’t blushing life. Jessy reached into her purse for a wetnap, and wiped away all the sex that had accumulated all over them, in mere seconds at that, her decades of practice showing through. Nice of her. She half expected Jessy to force the two exhausted victims to clean themselves up.

Fiona and Eric were still conscious. Fiona was understandable, but for Eric to still be awake was surprising, given how much blood he must have lost, feeding two Kindred, and how one Kiss was normally enough to pull a kine into a blissful sleep.

“S-Sorry about her, Eric,” Natasha said. “She um ... she’s ... she’s a slut.”

“Hey, don’t poke the bear. Think I don’t got some juicy stories I can share about you?” Shrugging, Jessy stood up on the floor for

everyone to see, slipped on her thong, and then her dress. She made a show of it too, offering a few enthralled viewers a wink.

It probably was best to not poke the bear. Jessy could easily begin a tale of Natasha's sexual exploits with the Gangrel's ghouls, and all the kinky things she'd done with them. Apparently, all a precursor to her new sexual life with two werewolves, that Jessy had somehow orchestrated. She was dumb brute of a woman, and yet, frustratingly intelligent and manipulative when she wanted to be.

Jessy cleaned up Eric, pulled up his boxers and pants, and did them up to hide his privates. And then she began to do the buttons of his shirt, smirking at the bouncer with each one.

"You ok there, man?"

"Yeah, just ... very ... drained."

"Ha! Yeah, Kiss will do that." Jessy pat the exhausted man on the hand, and then walked around the booth to slide in with Fiona. And just as with Eric, she helped put the girl back together. Fiona had not been Kissed, and yet, she looked spent, as if someone had forced a dozen orgasms on the girl; no doubt Jessy had. Well, Fiona had wanted to experience the sexual side of Dolareido, a side she said she'd seen a lot of, but had never actually partaken of.

A first time with Jessy was like learning how to swim in the deep end.

Natasha smiled at Eric as the man struggled to regain his composure. "D-Don't ... be embarrassed, ok? This sort of stuff happens here in Bloodlust all the ... t-t-time. In fact, um, if you're single, I suggest you ... enjoy it."

"Aye!" Fiona shouted, earning a small jump from Natasha. The girl had a bottle of some alcohol, and she poured herself some more of it to drink. "Ah think ah will!"

Oh no, Jessy had corrupted her.

## Chapter 52

~~Natasha~~

The Grand Cathedral of Dolareido was a terrifying place, she found, especially from the outside. The statues on the railings of the stairway, on the archways, and on the outcroppings of carved stone along the cathedral's high walls, were nightmare fuel. Six-winged angels destroying demons beneath their feet, and gargoyles with mouths agape and fangs exposed within them. The archway over the main door had a crucifix, with doves perched upon it, as if the only way to find the peace those doves had, to escape the horrors displayed on the outside of the cathedral, was to pass through the gates beneath the cross.

She eased open the giant door of the cathedral, and slipped in.

She'd never understand why a vampire would agree to the philosophies of the Lancea et Sanctum. She wanted her feet firmly on the ground, rooted in evidence, not beliefs that were created to fill the hole evidence hadn't filled yet. So what if vampires didn't know where they came from? That was no reason to suddenly go believing in a higher power, believing that vampires were damned and doomed to suffer lest they fulfill God's plan for them, to be monsters that scare the sheep into the protective arms of the shepherd.

But then, in absence of evidence, what do you do? For her, it meant a lifetime of digging through books and research articles, and now, relics and tomes, searching for truth. Damien was different than her. He had faith. A powerful weapon, and a massive weakness, depending on circumstance. She wanted to know if that circumstance was now, and if Damien had anything to do with what happened.

Maria wasn't here, she knew that; it's why she came now and not later. Still avoiding that conversation, still tiptoeing around that bitch of an elder, still being passive and refusing to be aggressive. She got aggressive with Jacob, maybe she could get aggressive with Maria? No, that wasn't the same circumstance, not at all.

Natasha walked forward, slowly, and took a moment to straighten her business pantsuit. A pistol and two small swords, one of silver and one of carbon steel, were not easy to fit into a pantsuit jacket, but she made do. It would have been easier to leave the silver sword behind, and avoid potential questions from her boyfriends. They'd yet to ask about the extra sword; maybe they couldn't tell it was silver? She did keep it in its sheath. Either way, she had to keep it on her at all times, but it wasn't a strong enough material for proper sword work, hence the need for the other.

She made sure they were all there as she walked through the cathedral toward the dais, and the apse behind that that held the enormous pipe organ. Someone was playing them.

"D-Damien?" she said.

"... Natasha. I wasn't expecting you."

She came closer, and watched the man as his fingers moved across the keys. A pale comparison to Maria's expert fingers, Damien's playing was slow, imprecise, and lacked any texture. His timing was off too. But, he was playing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, the famous first movement, and that wasn't exactly Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

"Is Madam Turio ... Maria t-teaching you how to play?"

"Yes. I expressed interest, and she was more than willing."

"She d-does love old, classical music a lot."

“Indeed. And for good reason. It deserves to be loved. Modern music is ... well, that’s a rant I’m sure someone else could deliver better than I.” The man started playing again, and Natasha watched, a small smile on her lips. Something sexy about a man playing an instrument; a stereotype, but true.

“I’m not hearing the f-f-full p-pipes?” The sound was quiet, subdued, and didn’t have any of the power she assumed a pipe organ would have.

“No. This organ has a digital structure built in. I need to flip a switch to actually use the pipes. But, I foresee months, years of practice, before I’d be willing to try them.”

She nodded. Practical, sound, logical. You build up to something as grandiose as using the pipes in an actual full sized pipe organ.

“Is ... is it harder? Playing an organ, instead of a piano?”

“I wouldn’t know, haven’t played the piano. Madam Turio ... Maria, she says that, when all its elements are engaged, it is the most difficult instrument to play. It is a wind instrument at its core, and ... and I suspect you did not come to talk to me of music, Madam Vola.” The man didn’t know when to use titles, or he didn’t feel comfortable addressing her as Natasha. Maybe some time together could fix that?

“N-No, I ... wanted to talk to you about Jack. And, and you know ... t-t-to call me Natasha. You’re not Invictus, n-no need for the titles.”

“Very well, Natasha. Yes, I assumed the only reason you might visit now would be to talk about Jack. I may not be Invictus, but Maria keeps me in the loop. This whole right hand but not Invictus position she has given me is ... weird.”

“You thought I’d want to talk to you about Jack?”

“You suspect me, don’t you?”

“I ... I mean ... a little?” She squirmed, and leaned against a nearby railing that separated the organ from the rest of the stage. “You can ... imagine why.”

“ ... then let’s go talk to him.”

“What?”

Damien stood up, adjusted his tie, and turned to look at her. The half-shaved head, hair falling down his temple on one side of his head, was oddly fitting his dark suit, something Maria no doubt had him wearing. Sexy.

“Let’s go talk to him.”

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Julias wasn’t home, but that’s why Natasha called him ahead of time. She couldn’t lie to him though, and spilled the truth that Damien was joining her. The man was hesitant, but he agreed to let them into the mansion and its underground bunker. It wasn’t like Damien would be able to kill Jack and make it seem like Natasha did it or something, and the man had had ample opportunity to kill Jack if he was willing to do it overtly.

So, Natasha knocked on the front door, and waited. Huge place. So huge. To own a mansion in a dense city, in an area where the real estate was kept free of any extra homes or anything that could possibly lower its value, was expensive. Of course the Invictus not only had money, they could bypass the money issues altogether, and turn such fantasies into reality. Only elders got to do something as extravagant as a mansion though.

“Madam Vola, and ... Mister Burksen, I believe?” A kind looking woman in a modern, but not too modern maid outfit answered the

door. “I am sorry to answer myself, but Nathan has just let Master Terry feed, so he is sleeping.”

“Y-Yes, um, d-d-did Mister Mire call and—”

“Yes yes, come in, please. Master Terry is awake and expecting you.”

“Oh.” Natasha smiled, and followed after the thrall with Damien behind her. As they walked, several of the thralls stuck their heads out or up from their activities in cleaning the enormous house, and they watched Damien with squinted eyes. Well, they certainly didn’t like him, which was probably because of Julias. In fact, she imagined they were on standby to lock Damien into the bunker room, if something happened to Jack.

Well, she trusted him. Maybe she didn’t trust Maria, but she trusted him. A little.

The servant took them down a stairway, a long and deep stairway, before she gestured with open palm into the hallway ahead. Natasha had seen this bunker before, but Damien hadn’t, and the man stopped to take careful note of each barrier they crossed in the underground.

“... I would say these precautions are overkill, but I guess recent developments would prove me a fool.” He reached out, and ran his hands down one of the spiked gates that lined the path. Natasha pat his hand away from the metal. The gates were pulled aside, out of the way, but Natasha got the impression they’d come out with a hard snap and skewer trespassers if fiddled with.

It was a long tunnel, hardened with concrete. Viktor always thought for the future, and built things to last; understandable elder paranoia about preserving their long lives. In this circumstance, it was protecting Jack, and letting the boy sleep his injuries away. Triss had described the injuries to Natasha, and Natasha had winced



with every mention of bone, flesh, sinew, and organs. Her first encounter with the werewolves had been a visceral amount of pain and injury, but she doubted she could compare it to what Jack had gone through with these hunters.

“Hey Natasha,” Jack said. The boy was sitting on the bed, dressed in suit pants and a white shirt, no jacket. He looked gaunt, despite the fresh meal Natasha knew the man had had. Recovering from such life-threatening wounds took time, especially for one as young as Jack.

But he was healing faster than a one-year-old neonate should, from those sorts of injuries at least. Impressive. Julias’s childe, he was.

“Hey Jack,” she said. How nice, to not have to call him Master Terry, or for him to call her Madam Vola. “The P-Prince has been anxious to see you.”

“Yeah, and I’m anxious as hell to see her. Moment I can actually walk around, I’m there.”

“You ... d-don’t want her to visit you here?”

“She could, but she thought it best to let me rest. We’ve sent each other a few messages.”

“Oh, sorry then, f-for ... int-t-errupting your rest.”

“It’s ok. I should be good to go after one more night’s sleep.”

Natasha smiled, sat down on the edge of the bed near the boy, and reached out to touch his shoulder. Even little Jack was much bigger than her, but she still felt the bigger Kindred. She was half a century older than him, in Kindred years; and yet, it didn’t feel like that anymore. The beasts in their guts, hidden, forever tugging at their impulses and instincts, could sense each other, and hers found the

boy to not be the little Ventrue he once was. Where before, she knew she could easily best the boy, now, she wasn't sure it'd be so easy.

A powerful ally for the Invictus, indeed.

“Jack,” Damien said. “Glad to see you're well.”

“Thanks. Kind of surprised you came though.”

“People suspect I had something to do with your kidnapping.”

“Ha, yeah I figured they might.” Jack shrugged, and turned a little on the bed, earning a pained wince. “They didn't see how much you pulled through in the tunnels, against that giant spider monster.” The three of them shivered with the memory.

“That is true,” Natasha said. “B-But ... if Maria finds out—”

“I have told Maria nothing.” Damien offered a tiny frown, and slowly paced about the room, eyes wandering its extravagant decor. “Julias, Beatrice, the Prince, the sheriff, Natasha, Jack, and myself all know about what really happened to Lucas. That's a lot of voices that could accidentally let slip an innocent detail that allows the elder to piece together what happened. But, I'm sure we all monitor our words carefully. We're all glad Lucas is gone, and that includes me ... and Maria, to some extent.”

Natasha raised a brow as she watched Damien. It was rare to hear him speak so deliberately. The man who showed up at her door once, stabbed her in the heart, kidnapped her, his voice and his eyes had been wavering and weak. The man who spoke to his congregation, on the other hand, spoke with a solid voice and with solid eyes. That was this Damien. It was a pleasant sight, but also a frightening one; the man was scary when he was an enemy.

“I’d prefer to not let Maria find out, in either case.” Jack fell back against the sheets of his bed, head to the pillow, and looked up at the ceiling. “That Angela woman was a fucking psycho.”

Natasha raised a brow. “The hunter?” Antoinette had briefed her on the Invictus reports, Jack’s reports.

“Yeah. Damien was right that they’d target me, cause I’d be an easy target. But they didn’t come here for us vamps, they came for the monsters.”

She could tell them, about her conversation with Jacob and her eavesdropping of his conversation with Azamel. Always a tough game, figuring out what things were ok to tell your friends, and what you shouldn’t, to keep an advantage in the Danse Macabre. She told the Prince everything of course, but telling the other covenants every little detail was probably a bad idea. Exercise discretion, as Maria would say. Exercise wisdom, as Antoinette would say.

“So n-now, we have a bunch of hunters in the city, and they want Azamel.” Natasha pulled a knee up to her chest, and held it with wrapping arms as she teetered on Jack’s bed a little. “Poor Fiona. When she f-finds out, she’ll ... she’ll feel guilty.”

“They didn’t know about Avery,” Jack said. “They know about the Kindred here, know a lot, but they didn’t know about the Uratha. So, if I can convince Avery to help us out, we might just be able to turn this around.”

Damien came to stand beside Natasha, and he looked down at the two of them with a raised brow. “Easier said than done. Avery hates Maria and Michael, and all Invictus. Only reason she’s dealing with Jack is ... well, he’s Jack, I presume.”

Natasha smirked. Jack was Jack.

Jack raised a hand. "I'm Jack?"

"Y-You know, you're Jack. You um ... you ... um..." How best to describe the Jack effect? "You t-talk where m-m-most wouldn't."

"... so I don't know how to shut up."

"Exactly." Damien nodded, like it was very matter-of-fact information that everyone knew. "The Uratha couldn't understand discretion to save their lives, so they appreciate your forwardness. Perhaps you can get them to help deal with this Jeremiah and Angela, and their hunters, but I think you'll be hard pressed to convince them."

The boy sighed, nodded, and raised a hand to scratched his buzzed head. "Avery likes Garry, or at least, they know each other, and don't seem to hate each other. I might be able to use that angle."

"H-How?" she said.

"Gotta become friends with Garry."

Damien frowned, but shrugged as he took a seat by the desk. Natasha didn't like the sounds of it either. Garry was volatile, like any freedom fighter was, especially when they already had freedom, were convinced that they didn't, and continued to look for things to fight over. Rebels without a cause, damn Carthians. It would be one thing she'd carry with her from the Invictus, a dislike for the Carthian ideology.

"I'm glad you guys decided to visit," Jack said. "Been a bit lonely. I've been ... wanting to break, ask the Prince to visit, but it really is best to wait until I don't feel like my spleen is going to fall out."

Damien shrugged. "You don't need it." Natasha and Jack both raised a brow, and stared at the man, until again he shrugged. "What, I can't make a joke?"

“You c-could say, we might b-b-be a bit surprised.”

Jack nodded, and laughed, and almost screamed as he fell back onto the bed again, holding his side. “Fuck, fuck fuck fuck ... yeah, that’s why I can’t see Antoinette.”

“Sorry!” Natasha said. “Sorry, s-sorry. Um, yeah, you rest.”

“So, I’ll make friends with Garry. And Azamel. Already got Antoinette and Julias and ... Jacob, surprisingly. I’ll make friends with Avery and Michael, and hell, Maria too.” While still lying down, staring at the ceiling, he pointed his hands up at them like the ceiling was going to fall on him. “Cause these hunters are going to kill us all if they get the chance.”

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~~Julias~~

He squeezed his arms around Beatrice, tight, close, as close as reality allowed, and groaned softly into her ear.

“Feeling awfully clingy, aren’t you?” she said.

“Very.”

“Needy guys are such a turn off.”

He chuckled into her. Juices, warm, heavenly, were dripping off of his testicles, despite her words.

The two of them were in Bloodlust, second floor as usual, and she was sitting on his lap, leaning back against him. She’d worn a short leather skirt to go with an almost fashionable black tank top, but had also worn a thong that went high enough on the hip that he couldn’t stop staring at it. Which led to present circumstances, her, sitting in his lap, facing away from him, her legs spread around his, and her slit spread open on his shaft.

She leaned forward, set her elbows on the table, and grinned back at him over her shoulder as she ground her ass down toward him.

“I needed this,” she said. “Just some nice, gentle fucking. Fucking hell, I’m still sore.”

“Getting filled with lead will do that.” He reached out with one hand and set it on her hip, while the other slipped underneath the bottom of her tank top to find her naked spine. Dancing fingers sneaked their way up her back, and caressed the grooves of her spine, and along various tattoos that played with her vertebrae, making beautiful, dark artwork of her lean body.

She moaned, and pushed herself back into him using her hands on the table. “See the Eric dude downstairs?”

“I did.”

“Heh, yeah, I winked at him as we came up here. Fucker knows what we’re up to.”

“Were you hoping he’d come up and watch?”

“... maybe. No secret now, I got a huge love for it. Call me an exhibitionist, but, god damn, something about people seeing me while you and I fuck, really turns me on.” And to prove her point, she raised her hands up from the table, slipped her claws under her tight tank top, and pulled it up enough to hook it over her breasts. There were people in nearby booths, watching, but with how dark it was and Triss’s hair over her cheeks, they wouldn’t be able to see her teeth. And Julias would wipe the mind of any kine who noticed anyway. A bit risky, fucking like this, but she initiated, and Julias could hardly say no.

He looked over at the woman beside them in the booth. A kine, a younger woman, maybe twenty years old. A short human, lacking in curves, but very, very cute. Drained, exhausted, and passed out, her

shirt open, and her skirt zipper as well. Comatose, and thoroughly spent, as both Triss and Julias had fingered, licked, suckled, massaged, caressed, and forced the girl to cum her brains out several times as they drank her. And a full belly of blood was more than enough to have the two Kindred on each other immediately thereafter, high-riding thong or no.

Triss was trying to make him not think about Jack, not think about Dolareido, and worry about the hunters. She was trying to make him focus on something more positive, he could tell. And he loved her for that. Antoinette would probably do the same for Jack. Shit, he was already thinking about shit he wasn't supposed to be thinking about. Focus on the beautiful woman in front of you, and how amazing her tight, wet, hot insides felt squeezing your cock.

“So I should have some people over more often?” he said. “Maybe some of my thralls, with a camera?”

“I ... wouldn't mind a camera, actually. Could put it up on screen to watch while we fuck later.” She started to bounce faster, more of her juices trickling down his testicles as she got closer to orgasm. He'd had sex with women who squirted during orgasm before, but with Triss, it was a bit different. The more comfortable she grew with him, and herself, the more she let loose. He loved it. Though, if not for how their fluids would fade away in a short time, he'd be worried about the mess she'd leave on his clothes and the booth.

“I remember a time when you would have stabbed me for the suggestion.”

“Apparently, I've changed. You have too, right? Used to be all happy on the outside, sad on the inside. Seeing a bit of the reverse these days,” she said.

“ ... do I seem sad on the outside?”

“Like you got the weight of being a member of an Invictus high council on your shoulders.”

“Sounds suspiciously like reality.”

“But I know you’re a happier man than you used to be; mostly because I’m in your life, and I’m awesome.” Proving her point, she leaned forward more, weight on her elbows, and started to dance on his cock, literally. She dipped her hips left and right to the beat of the music, each dip causing her insides to clench, and for her small clit-hood chain to dangle and rub against his testicles. She didn’t always wear it, but when she did, he could tell every motion she made was sending pleasure sparks through it and into her, along with everything else.

He leaned back, and watched the most amazing ass in the world grind into him. She still had the thong on, and had her tiny skirt pulled up to sit on her hips along with it, thong pulled aside to cut across one of her large ass cheeks and stay out of the way.

Cumming was inevitable. First him, hands taking her hips and squeezing on her body as he felt the warm fluid gush up through his length, and into her squeezing insides. Moments later, she did as well, and her head fell to dangle between her arms, elbows still on the table, as she started to tremble. She still danced, still kept swaying, but no longer with the beat of the music. Woman was having trouble staying in control as the orgasm worked through, and Julias had lost all control already, just holding on as she milked him, and soaked him.

“At the same time again,” she said, looking back to him. “I’m getting good at this.” And, like she was getting comfortable in a lounge chair, she sat back, and put her back to his chest. Her pussy continued to shiver around his cock, and small trickles of her cum ran down his length to warm his testicles, along with his own. Divine.



His hands slid up, and found her breasts. Firm, handful breasts, and he massaged them as he hugged her against his chest. Nipple piercings were a delight, and he caressed them — and her — until she was melting into him.

“This quick fuck turned into a fifteen-minute tryst,” he said, “not even counting the meal.”

“Fifteen minutes is quick, you jackass.” She elbowed him in the side, but did nothing to stop his caressing of her body. Still sitting on him, still moaning, still shivering as the final waves of orgasm aftershocks worked through them. His were done long before hers though, and he delighted in feeling her pussy trembling, until it eventually forced out his softening shaft.

“I could do five minutes.”

“I’m sure you could do two, Superman, especially with me at the helm.” Instead of covering herself up, she let her head fall back and dangle onto his shoulder. Completely at ease with the idea of anyone seeing her with her tank top up.

The girl really did like to be watched. And whenever a third party was involved, the girl often came her brains out, very quickly. Something about another presence, a third — or fourth — body, being in the room, or sometimes in the bed, that set her blood on fire. If it was possible — and it was — he was sure she’d love it if he was having anal sex with her, lying underneath her, while six thralls stood around her and touched her, caressed her, and fingered her. Mental note: consider doing that for her birthday.

She slid off of him eventually, adjusted all her clothes, and adjusted the sleeping kine next to them so she wouldn’t fall over while Triss got snug against Julias’s side where the kine had been. Arm behind him, his arm over her shoulders, they held each other, and let the blood digest in their systems. The orgasm was the icing on the cake.

“So, you talk to Jack much?” she said.

“Yeah, was with him every day during his recovery.”

“Catch up with him?”

“He works for me, Triss. I’m always caught up.”

“Yeah but, I mean, stuff like ... you know, that emotional crap.”

Doing up his pants, it was hard to take the conversation too seriously. But after a moment, he thought about Jack, and let the gravity of Triss’s curiosity sink in.

“We all struggle with the beast.”

“Jacob doesn’t,” she said.

“No?”

She shrugged, and pulled at his hand that dangled from her far shoulder, arm hooked behind her head. And like a cat, she chewed on one of his fingers.

“Big part of who he is, who the Circle of the Crone are, and the blood magic shit; accepting the beast.”

“You sound like you’re fitting in then.”

“Yeah ... a lot more than I thought I would.” She chewed on his fingers a bit more, catching them between the points of the massive teeth along her jaw. Apparently she’d become a house cat when he wasn’t looking. “But Jack’s a fucking kid, and now he’s got kills under his belt.”

“He tell you about what happened?”

“Jacob did, filled me in on some details he got from the Prince. I knew about the kill on the first night, the frenzy kill, which is a major shitty situation. Dies and kills the same night? Definitely put a scar on him. Then the Viktor and Tony thing, then the Lucas thing, and then the spider monster thing, yeah, all crazy fucking shit, right? But this time it’s people, humans, and killing humans changes you, hunter or otherwise.”

He sighed, nodded, and hugged her a little closer. Killing Kindred was horrible, but at the same time, understandable. They were lone predators forced to share space and a food source; conflict was inevitable, including the occasional casualty. But killing humans was different. Killing a kine was like killing a part of yourself, your old self. Cliche, and true.

“I’ll have to spend some more one-on-one time with him, teach him some more things, maybe talk more about ... my past, I guess. Memories are starting to get hazy.” For the best. Memories of his wife, of his life before his embrace, it was easier to just forget them. Time heals all wounds because time tempered many things, like water against the rocks of a shore, until they were smooth. In this case, memories lost their details, and the visceral edge that they came with.

“Do you remember your first kill?”

“ ... I think so.”

“Cool to talk about it?”

“It was a hundred years ago. All I have are blurred memories. But, it was ... Viktor had me working a deal with a local crime circle, and I ... no, wait, that’s...” God, the memories, digging them up was painful in an almost literal sense. Internally resolved, externally forgotten. But, he could remember a face. “ ... someone I drank ... didn’t know when to stop.”

“ ... that’s rough. Fits right into the super depressed but confident, business dude you were when I met you.”

“And you?” He wasn’t sure why he asked. The macabre conversation was a weird aftertaste to seek after a great meal and great sex.

Many Kindred didn’t talk much about their old lives. All it did was bring painful memories to the surface, and force the particularly younger vampires into depression, as the sharp edges of their still fresh memories killed them with a thousand cuts. But if she wanted to talk about his past, he was happy to learn about hers. Almost felt like being human again, talking about old parts of life that didn’t matter, idle chitchat that lacked the usual emphasis on the now that most Kindred learned to adopt.

“My early years were pretty rough, you know? I figure it is for all Nosferatu. Waking up with fucking crocodile teeth, claws, and snake eyes? Yeah, angry. Then Antoinette executes my sire — deserved — and I’m left just ... yeah, not fun times. Found some scumbag kine, and let loose.”

Yeah, he remembered that. Invictus adjusted reports to hide the details on kills that looked odd, even if they came from someone not in the Invictus. It served no one to leave paranormal evidence lying about. A human getting ripped in half was paranormal evidence.

“Sorry I—”

She elbowed him in the ribs. “Don’t do that, jackass. You didn’t know me then, you got no reason to be sorry. And besides, it’s all turned around in the end. I don’t hate myself nearly as much anymore, and hell, find myself pitying other Nos a lot more than me. Some of them have it pretty bad.”

Yeah, true. Maria was one of the worst cases. To look like a deteriorating corpse for the rest of their second life was not a fate he

wished on anyone.

“Jack’s young,” he said. “Younger than you, lot younger than me. I’m worried that, after everything he’s done, it’s going to start eating at him. I warned him long ago that it would, that being Kindred would start to wear on him, his humanity, and he’d have to struggle with that. That was after he killed Mrs. Pavala. Since then, kid’s been through one shit show after the other.”

“Exactly. We got our shit figured out, mostly, long ago, and our shit mountain was smaller in comparison. I’m thinking Jack might need a little more ... I don’t know, just keep an eye on him?”

He smiled at the woman, and nodded. She really cared about the kid. Maybe they’d bonded over their love of metal music, or the fact they both had zero tact.

“I will.”

“Course, he’s also sleeping on Antoinette’s tits near every night, so, I’m sure she’ll help him ... you ever wish I had tits that big?”

“All the time.”

She elbowed him, again, hard. “I wouldn’t be able to bend over without breaking my back! And at the ball? Practically had them out.” She held out her hands in front of her a foot, as if holding giant breasts of her own.

“You really love breasts.”

“I ... yeah, I guess I do.” She pulled up her tank top over one of her breasts, and traced her areola with a claw, where the snake tattoo was biting it.

“ ... you know who had great breasts? Jennifer.” Time to test the waters again. Planting thoughts of Jennifer in Triss’s head, while

she was touching herself, was perhaps playing dirty, as Triss wore her arousal on her sleeve. But, sometimes, the best time to get someone to admit to what they wanted was when they were too horny, or drunk, to block their impulses.

“Ha, yeah, everyone got to see them. Certainly no Antoinette, but plenty big, and soft without being too soft.”

“That’s right, I forgot you were groping her while you were getting dressed for the ball.” Like a fly to honey, Triss was with this girl.

“I wasn’t ... ok, I was, a bit. She was all over me, and ... I ... really wanted to touch her, after a while.”

“As long as you don’t engage in full on sex without me, you know I’m ok with you and your Circle being rather open and handsy with each other.” If a hundred years in Dolareido had taught him one thing, it was to be a bit more open minded about sexuality.

“Thanks. I ... I yelled at her, a few nights ago. Kind of got angry at her, and Aaron and Othello, about some Circle stuff.” She pulled her tank top back down, and squeezed his arm as she turned to rub her cheekbone and sides of her crocodile teeth into his shoulder. “Jacob’s happy with me, but I might have upset them.”

He nodded, and hid his smile. Idea.



~~Antoinette~~

She sat there at the grand table of glass, and waited, Daniel at her side, standing and with his hands in the small of his back. Primogen meetings had become far more interesting as of late, to her annoyance and frustration. If all had been going well, then Primogen meetings should have been dull, and borderline pointless. Only when the affairs of her city were in disarray did Primogen meetings truly serve purpose.

Her mind wandered to Jack. One more night, and she would see her beloved. He would be healed, mostly, and she would bathe him in bliss and comfort to celebrate their reunion. She would hold him, squeeze him if his body could endure it, and kiss him a thousand times. She would set his head upon her lap, listen to his woes, and wash them away to the best of her ability.

A Kindred as young as Jack should not have to deal with such hardships, to carry such burdens, to be tormented so and be forced to bear responsibilities as large as his. He managed to pull through, each time, but it was still far too much to ask a neonate, especially one barely a year embraced. It both overjoyed her to know her little Ventrue was capable of such feats, but saddened her to no end to know a boy so young, barely a man, had gone through such strifes.

She smirked as she ran a finger along her jawline. In the future, she would be sure to enjoy all manner of fantasies with the both of them, tie him down perhaps, and torment him with bliss rather than pain. But upon their meeting tonight, she would need a more delicate hand, to hopefully alleviate his undoubtedly troubled, strained mind.

Maria Turio, Garry Tones, Michael McDonald, Julius Mire, and Jacob stepped into the meeting room, each dressed in clothing that spoke of their status and covenant. For the Invictus, that meant suits, except in the case of Maria, who preferred ghostly white dresses befitting women of two hundred years passed. For Garry, that meant jeans and a shirt, but at least they were clean. For Jacob, that meant a robe, something dark, and imposing, because Jacob was Jacob, and there was no changing that old man.

She waited for each of them to be seated, and leaned back in her grandiose chair as she watched them. They knew what this meeting would be mostly about, and it was not the squabbles over the Mirrden district.

“My Primogen,” she said, “I fear yet another source of frustration has crept into my city.” They all nodded. “A hunter, named and known, has journeyed far in pursuit of Azamel. This Jeremiah has hunted Begotten and other beasts for many years, decades, and he brings his hate and loathing to Dolareido.” Natasha had informed her of every detail of Jacob’s conversation with the old monster; no doubt the old Nosferatu knew it too, even as he also told her of Jeremiah before hand.

“We should have gotten rid of her before this Jeremiah fucker showed up,” Garry said.

Michael shook his head. “She’s strong. Getting rid of her would have been a violent affair, and would have cost Kindred lives.”

The Carthian shrugged. Like two dogs trying to intimidate each other, these two Gangrels, forever looking for weakness in the social armor of the other. “You’re the one who’s lost Kindred in this mess. Barry was his name, right?”

“You suggesting this problem isn’t your concern?” Julias said.

“... no, it’s my concern. What I’m saying is, we should have seen this coming.”

Maria raised a hand, like she was parting the ocean, instead of squabbling men. “A calculated risk was made. We didn’t—”

“And now, the person who’s at fault for these hunters showing up like a god damn plague, hates your guts because you’ve set up explosives all over her damn home.” Garry threw up his hands, an interesting counter to Maria’s gestures. She was behaving calmly, but Garry, angry and emotional, was addressing the elephant in the room. Antoinette could appreciate that, as much as the volume of his voice grated on her.



Michael leaned forward, and raised the corner of his lip in a snarl. “We had to get her under control. And now she is. Unfortunately, no one expected her to bring a host of hunters with her, like a bleeding animal on the run.”

Antoinette sat back in her chair, and combed her hair over her shoulder as she watched and listened. The Invictus had made the situation worse for themselves, and for all Kindred, by making an enemy of Azamel. And yet, it was not a decision Antoinette could judge them too harshly for, as she would have done the same, given time.

“I’m actually more interested about the other hunter,” Jacob said. He leaned back in his chair, one leg folded over the other, and tapped a finger on the glass table. A puppeteer, making his puppets dance; this was no doubt the thoughts moving through the man’s mind, as always. The others noticed it too, and they grumbled and groaned as they turned to face the man. “I’ve been informed that Jeremiah has a partner, a true partner, unlike the hunters with him, who are basically his cannon fodder as far as I can tell. His true partner’s name is Angela.”

“Angela?” Julias said. “She’s the one who was torturing Jack, and the one he had to deal with to get out of there. She’s dead ... hopefully.”

“Ah, yes, that makes sense. Then I highly doubt she’s dead, if she’s anything like this Jeremiah, these psychopaths who presume themselves heroes, holy crusaders on their ridiculous quest to annihilate the world of monsters.” He laughed at the comparison. “Did you know she’s Athalia’s daughter?”

Silence befell the room. Vampires did not breathe, and their hearts did not beat; silence was normal for them. But the silence that followed Jacob’s words cut the room apart, and Antoinette feared her glass table would shatter under its impact.

“ ... that ... is news to us,” Julius said.

Antoinette nodded, and gestured to the group. “I think it is safe to say, that it is news to all of us. Are you sure of this, Jacob?”

“Yeap. Beatrice heard it from the man himself. So did that human you’re leaving free, by the way.” Eyeless tapped his fingers in ornate patterns, as if playing rather complicated music, while weaving his web. “It was a tasty detail I was very tempted to keep to myself, but I couldn’t help it, just had to share. What do you think Athalia will do, when we put her between a rock and a hard place, when we have to kill the daughter while her mother watches?”

“ ... you paint an unnecessarily brutal picture, Jacob,” she said. “If what you say is true, and what Jeremiah said was true, then perhaps Athalia will understand that her daughter is a threat. Perhaps she will be reasonable.” Even as she said it, she knew her words ringed hollow. Athalia did not seem reasonable, from her few encounters with her. And no mother, no matter how logical, reasonable, wise or intelligent, could let their child be murdered without great effort to convince otherwise. “Daniel, old friend, you know Athalia better than us. What do you think?”

The sheriff raised a gloved hand, adjusted his glasses, and folded his arms across his chest. “ ... I don’t know. I didn’t know she had a daughter. She’s lived a secretive life, leaving the city, returning occasionally ... She’s intelligent, but volatile, angry, hateful. Fifty fifty that she’ll understand, if we have to kill this Angela. Or at least, fifty fifty she won’t declare war on us if we do.”

Fifty fifty. Those were not chances Antoinette enjoyed, and many years of experience had taught her the folly of gambling, even when the chances were in your favor. You did not create a foundation by taking risks, you created a solid foundation by being more intelligent, determined, and patient than others. The uncertainties presented by Jacob’s information was chaos to her law; which, he

no doubt knew, like a child delighting in dropping pebbles in the calm water to see the ripples.

“Assuming we can kill her,” Garry said. “Sure, in a straight fight it’d be easy, especially if Jack was able to handle her. Kid killed what, four, five hunters? Must be some real shit hunters we’re—”

Again, Maria raised a hand, cutting the Gangrel off and earning a frown from him. “Do not underestimate these hunters based on Master Terry’s success in escaping their torture. He has proven far more capable than most Kindred his age, Mister Tones, far more. He is to be rewarded for his advancement in skill, power, and for his determination in dealing with his kidnappers. And I note, that the boy has shown cunning and power most Kindred do not show until they are often twenty or thirty years embraced. You would do well to treat him with as much respect as you would your Carthian Miss Damor.” And, to sprinkle salt in the wound, she grinned at Garry as she leaned back in her chair, and folded her arms across her stomach. “My apologies, ex-Carthian, Miss Damor.”

Jacob choked on a chuckle. If a Kindred salivated when not blushing, Antoinette was sure Garry would have spit on the table in Maria’s direction. But with time, the man shrugged, and leaned back in his chair.

“Should we get the wolves involved then?” Garry said.

Julias nodded. “Eventually, they will be involved. It’s just a matter of when. Jack said the hunters were unaware of anyone named Avery, so it’s unlikely the hunters are aware Uratha are in the city. Why would they be, if they came for Azamel?”

“Well if your childe mentioned her,” Jacob said with a shrug.

“He said he lied about who she was once he realized they didn’t know who she was.”

Jacob tapped his temple several times. “That may have worked. It may not have. In either case, that bitch Avery may be useful.”

Antoinette slapped the table, enough to jar everyone and yank their heads her way. “Jacob, do not play this incident like a game. If you orchestrate an encounter between Avery or her pack and these hunters, purely for your selfish desires, you will damage the city, and the Masquerade along with it. Reign in your desire to see the woman suffer, and she will perhaps be a more strategic ally.” Wasted words. If Jacob was planning to lead Avery and this Jeremiah into a confrontation, he would no doubt perform such a feat with little trail for Antoinette to use to prove his involvement. Still, it was better she be upfront about her desire to prevent such actions, if only for the others to be aware of where she stood.

“If she’ll even be an ally,” Garry said. “She’s here to deal with that spirit mumbo jumbo crap, to bring balance to the Force and shit. For all we know, that could include all us Kindred dead and gone.”

“I thought you were friends with her?” Michael said.

“Friend is a strong word. More like, she doesn’t hate me, while she does hate you.”

Julias shook his head, sighing, and took out his phone to make a note. “In either case, I’ll ask Master Terry to talk to her about the situation. I’m sure Avery can be an ally in our corner, with a little incentive.”

Incentive? Antoinette smiled at Julias, and watched him close as he put his phone away. What incentive could he offer? Money? The Uratha cared little for money. Sex? It was certainly true that Kindred were both talented lovers, but also incapable of reproduction. If a werewolf wished to fuck a vampire, they could do so as much as their deadly, brutal bodies could desire. Oh, a delicious reminder, to ask Natasha about her latest endeavors with her new boyfriends.

“Please do,” Antoinette said. “Let us move onto the next topic. I am opening the door on requests for siring.”

“Are you now?” Jacob smirked, leaned in to set his elbows on the table, and grinned. “Want to build up numbers for the army?”

“No, old friend. It is true our numbers have dwindled, but young fledglings brought into the fold will be of little value in a war against these hunters. Jack is the exception, not the rule, and it would serve us all to remember that, before any feel inclined to throw their young neonates into the deep end.” She knew a time when some overzealous Kindred sired many progeny, in hopes of creating a personal army. It never ended well. “With the many recent deaths of Kindred, we are now tasked with tightening security and defensive measures, but also with rebuilding what was lost. Where we once numbered about three hundred Kindred, we have now dropped to about two hundred and fifty.”

Eyeless shrugged, and pulled on one of his knees to bring it up to his chest, heel to the chair seat. “Most dead at your hand, I might add, and all Invictus and Carthian.”

“Don’t twist the truth of it,” Maria said. “Lucas used the power of that nest to bend the will of malleable Kindred to his side. Lucas is to blame, not the Invictus, nor the Carthians, or the Prince for defending herself against his madness.”

His madness. Antoinette raised a brow, subtle, and watched the corpse woman as her gaze lowered to look at the glass before her. Powerful words to say, about a man who she once loved with all her withered heart.

“The rules are unchanged,” Antoinette said. “Speak with members of your covenant, those you give permission to sire must speak to me, and I will give them the final permission.” The group nodded with her words; the rules had not changed in decades, after all.

“Those two dolls you keep around looking to become Kindred?” Garry said.

“My ghouls are precious to me, Garry. They are not dolls. And, perhaps some day, they will join our second lives, but not now. No, I have no one I wish to sire.” She had not sired someone in a very long time, ages, since Tony. Such a long time ago, the memories were a haze, but she could recall ghostly images of her and her lover Tony, smiling, holding each other. So long ago.

The elders — and Julias — looked between each other, and waited. Not a one mentioned a desire to sire. But no doubt, some of their subordinates would wish to. As long as the Kindred with the desire came to Antoinette, requested the permission, and proved to be an intelligent and stable individual, she would give them permission. To be stable was important, and essential; many Kindred did not take to their second lives easily, and if they could not be a rock for their child, the vicious cycle continued. Beatrice’s sire was one such fool.

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Her poor little Ventrue. She needed to hold him, hug him, stroke his head and tell him all would be well. She needed to comfort him.

And as she dug through her wardrobes, she realized how true that was, but not because her love needed it; or rather, not only because he needed it, but because she needed it as well. Since his disappearance, all she could think about was holding her love close and washing away the pains of his young life. Such trials on so newly embraced a Kindred must have been terrible, and she wanted to free his shoulders of such a burden.

But that would be foolish. Jack was not a child, he was a man, if a very young one. Trials were important, and it was Jack’s ability to persist through such trials that made him a force to be reckoned with. It was why Mire sired him. It was why Clara liked him. It was why Antoinette found herself drawn to him, for more than simply

the honest gaze of his eyes that bared his soul. He would carry his burden, and that was to be admired.

She sighed, and reached into the wardrobe to withdraw a rather fanciful corset, something almost out of fantasy, with a bust carved to look like the hands of gargoyles to hold her breasts.

“What do you think, my pets?”

Ashley bounced once on the center couch of the changing room, and shook her head. “I’m sure Jack would love to be dominated with you wearing that. But you said you wanted to care for him tonight? Got the impression you meant sort of lovey-dovey tender stuff? Not really sexy’n’evil corset type stuff. Which I think makes more sense, cause from what you told me, poor guy must be exhausted.”

Antoinette sighed, but nodded. Despite Ashley’s poor descriptor, it was true Antoinette wanted to ease the boy’s pain tonight, not indulge rather playful kinks.

“... do ... you think Jack will even want sex tonight?” Julee said. She too sat beside Ashley, the two of them in jeans and t-shirts. They would not be joining Antoinette tonight, as the Prince wanted the Ventrue all to herself. “Maybe you should wear something that’ll be fine in case he doesn’t.”

Antoinette nodded and moved onto a different wardrobe. That was true, and perhaps Jack would simply want to hold her tonight, as she wanted to hold him. She needed something that would let Jack know she was all for letting the boy do nothing but rest against the softness of her bosom tonight. And yet, at the same time, make it clear she was more than willing to satisfy his sexual desires if they should arise.

She smiled as she withdrew a rather soft lingerie robe, somewhat see-through, and white in shade. The length reached her feet, and the material showed hundreds of solid white snowflakes of soft

fabric, sewn into the see-through flowing waves of its length. Cashmere. Soft, and comforting.

Her two pets clapped twice and nodded in agreement.

Antoinette set it aside, and walked over to sit beside her two precious joys. “Though this night is to be between my love and myself only, I will let him drink of both of you first. The boy has been through much.”

Ashley nodded and bounced a couple more times before hopping off the circular couch. “Definitely, yeah, makes sense. And I heard he got out of that place ... with no hands? Like, got them chopped off? I mean ... wow.”

Julee winced with the words, and shuddered. “Kind of like that time you got all shot up, and that Damien man hurt you.”

Yes, that had been a painful night indeed. But memories of Damien were not ones she wished to dig through, not now. Only Jack mattered in this moment.

A beep on her phone on the nearby nightstand warned her of Jack’s approach.

“Come now my pets,” she said. The two girls hopped up and came up to her. “Go, meet Jack at the stairway, guide him down to the foyer, and instruct him to drink of each of you. And after he has had his fill, he is to come to me in the main bedroom.”

“Yes mistress,” they both said, nodding, smiling. They understood how important this was to her, and they were delighted to indulge her her desire to be Jack’s support.

Perhaps it would serve to consider, if perhaps either or both of her pets contemplated the embrace. She would need to find new ghouls to feed from, new pets, and it would forever change the



dynamic of the bedroom. Would her ghouls be welcome in her bed with her beloved, once they were Kindred? Part of her suspected no, and that she would be far too protective of Jack to let other Kindred touch him as she touched him. But then, a part of her thought, perhaps, to let her pets pleasure her and her love, while they enjoyed the new strength and awareness that came with being Kindred, was delight and progression unto its own?

Thoughts for another time. Her love would be here in moments.

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Her love looked exhausted, weak, and weary.

She had changed her main bedroom, switched blankets for white, added many large, soft pillows to the enormous bed, and added white silk to dangle from the bed's canopy. It was a realm of softness and white elegance now, to offset the trauma the boy had suffered. The plan had been to sit there, upon the edge of the bed, and wait for her love to come to her and enter her embrace. But, that would not do.

She got up from the bed, and walked over to her love, her robe trailing behind her along the marble floor, secured tight around her with its white belt. Her poor love, her poor little Ventrue.

The boy was standing, wearing black suit pants and a white shirt. But his eyes were downcast, and his limbs heavy, one hand raised to push and rest against the vault entrance of her master bedroom.

“Sorry,” he said, “if ... I seem a bit ... shitty, tonight. Just ... ju—”

She hugged him. She set her arms about the boy, and pulled him to her, tight against her, and pressed his head against her sternum as she wrapped him.

“You have been through a horrible nightmare, my love. Please, do not apologize. All I care is that you are well, and safe.”

“ ... thanks.”

She kissed his buzzed head once, twice, and thrice before she finally released her hug, and began to guide the boy toward the bed. Once they reached its edge, she slid her fingers down his chest, and started to unbutton his shirt. “We need not make love tonight, my little Ventrue. Please, I ... whatever it is you desire.”

He managed a small, weak smile, and a weaker chuckle to go with it. His body was limp, and though he had feasted upon her two ghouls, she could see he was still weary. Perhaps not with physical exhaustion anymore, but mentally, each of his motions labored and slow.

“Yeah ... I ... yeah. Guess I’m not feeling too manly for admitting it, but ... yeah I could really just ... use a shoulder ... to cry on.”

She bit her lip, and leaned down over the boy from behind, until her chin was upon his head, and her limbs circling him. “Not manly? Do not be foolish. Boasts of bravado and manly displays of silent endurance? Many a man has been destroyed by the social faux pas of expressing their emotions. And you know that.”

“Yeah ... just ... needed someone else to say it.” He turned and sat down on the edge of the bed, and with a little help from her, slipped off his pants. Now only in his boxers, he crawled backward a little further on the bed, and a little further still, until he was seated upon its center. “You look lovely tonight, by the way.” The weight in his eyes did not leave. If anything, they were pulling his gaze back down to the blankets, instead of her.

That would not do.

She climbed across the bed after him, and sat down upon her butt with her legs folded to one side. A lap, for her Ventrue, on an angle so he could rest his body along the sheets, and his back and head upon her lap. And he did, slowly, like dragging bags of sand behind

him as he turned to set his bare shoulders upon her thighs, and his head near her hip.

She smiled down at her little Ventrue, and he smiled up at her, as best as he could muster she was sure. She set one hand upon his forehead, and lightly stroked his hair as her other set upon his abs, and caressed his body.

“Thank you, my love. And you look ... mournful.”

“Yeah, mournful is a pretty good word for it, I guess.” His arms were limp at his sides along the blankets, legs as well, and his head nudged into her stroking hand with gentle need. “Killed a lot of people this week.”

“ ... yes, I heard.”

“And ... had to do some ... painful stuff.”

“Yes. I am ... sorry my love, for more than just your pain.”

“Sorry?”

“Dolareido is my city. For hunters to hide within its walls and enact such cruelty, I am responsible.”

The small boy shook his head, raised his hand, and took hers where it sat upon his stomach. He held it, squeezed it, and stroked her knuckles with his thumb.

“It’s a city, not a fortress, Antoinette. And from what I know, it’s one of the best cities for Kindred. You’ve managed to make a great place for both of us to live. But, yeah, it’s not a fortress, you can’t expect to control everything.”

She frowned at the boy, but the touch of his fingers stroking hers settled the fire. The boy smiled up at her, lighter, and it melted her

frown as she held his hand, while her other continued to stroke his head. Buzzed hair was a unique texture, and whenever she ran her hand against the grain of it, Jack's eyes closed in bliss. More than enough reason for her to continue.

“You are correct, my little Ventrue. Still, I cannot help but feel partly responsible. And worse, I cannot help but feel powerless. I admit a part of me would love to lock you up in my tower, so that you would be forever safe.”

“ ... convince the Invictus and I'd love to hang out here for a few nights straight, at least.”

“Good. Convincing them will be easy. And I would love to indulge you some more of my time than usual, my love, with these turn of events.”

“Yeah?”

“Oui, mon amour. And ... you said you wished for a shoulder to cry upon.”

“I did ... yeah.” He sighed, and turned his head a little to face more toward her stomach. “I killed them.”

“You had no choice.”

“Yeah, I know. And you don't need to convince me it was necessary, I know it was. Just ... I had to look into their eyes, you know? Crushed their minds, turned them into puppets. And then there were the rats, and—”

“I understand you summoned many to your aid?”

“Yeah, I used a bunch of them, swarmed the hunters, killed one of them just ... gnawed him to death with rats.”

That was gruesome, and terribly bleak. She felt the weight of his words pull at her, until her eyebrows drifted down to match it. She almost told him such cruelties were a necessity, to defeat your enemies with whatever tools you had at your disposal. But words were not needed here, only her ears.

“Horrible.”

“Yeah, it was. And ... fuck, getting my hands chopped off. I thought I could handle that pain, and I did, but...” He brought his hands up above his head to look at them, before he managed a small sob, and set them to lie upon his face. “I ... didn’t know ... I don’t want to do that anymore. I don’t ... want to deal with that anymore.”

Oh god. If her poor little Ventrue was going to start crying, she would undoubtedly start crying, and that was not something she had truly done in centuries. She slowly pried his hands away from his face, and set them back on his stomach so she could resume touching them, while her other hand once again stroked his head.

“Sorry,” he said, and he forced himself to smile up at her from her lap. “I’m being a baby. After what Damien and his group did to you? I still remember what you looked like, missing limbs, full of holes, and your voice didn’t even waver.”

“Jack, I am older than you can imagine, my sweet little joy. It is not a fair comparison. Never is a Kindred your age forced to deal with such hardships.”

“ ... I take a strange pride in that, I guess.”

“As you should. You have done and managed things that would have more than broken other Kindred of your age. Horrible things. And it hurts me to see you in such pain.”

“I’ll be fine.” His eyes closed, and he leaned his head toward her stroking hand as he relaxed against her lap. “I have you.”

She sighed, long, sorrowful and yet content, that the boy would put his heart in her care. “That you do.”

This was what she wanted. This was, as far as her eyes and her instincts could tell, what Jack wanted as well. The boy simply lay there, resting, eyes closing more as she stroked his head, caressed his ears, and massaged his body with her other hand. Yes, little Ventrue, let your pain melt away.

It was twenty minutes, before she noticed the creases in Jack’s forehead, and the hard clench of his jaw, completely fade away. Exactly as she planned, and all she could have hoped for, to watch his stress disappear, at least a little of it, as she held him, touched him, and smiled for him. For him to let himself be so vulnerable with her, so open, pain laid bare and misery exposed? She loved him, loved him for his honesty, loved him for so many reasons.

The wounded soldier fantasy. Such a cliché that it made her smirk to herself. Had she known that she would ever succumb to its juvenile but poetic allure, she would have denied it. But now, it was simply love.

“I trust Ashley and Julee helped fill your belly?”

“Yeah, thank you for that. I mean, I’ve been fed a few times since the incident; Julias took care of me. But ... yeah, I was still feeling drained, and I greatly appreciate your help.”

“You are most welcome, my love.”

“ ... I love you.” He shifted his head in closer, and rested his cheek against her lower abdomen.

“I love you.” Such powerful, pleasant words, that always forced her old, withered heart to flutter with new wings.

“And ... this is really soft.” He turned his head slowly, slightly, just enough to rub his nose against where the robe covered her stomach.

“It is cashmere.”

His head turned, and his nose pressed up against the underside of one of her heavy breast. “This is really soft too.”

She smirked, chuckled, and leaned down to kiss the boy’s forehead. Which of course, as the boy’s head was pressed to her belly, squashed his face underneath her breast.

“Do you wish to make love, my little Ventrue?”

“I ... not sure, really. Kind of torn. Part of me wants to do nothing but sit here, and just ... rest, rest on you, rest with you.”

“And I would be glad to have you rest upon me, little Jack.”

He smiled up at her, a touch of life returning to his dead eyes. “Part me thinks, maybe, sex would be a great way to take my mind off of this stuff instead. And sex lets me be closer to you. I love being closer to you.”

The desire to be closer, when already close enough to touch, was a delightful ache she knew all too well with her love. She raised her hand from his stomach, and tapped her chin a few times. “Perhaps you should do both? Please, lie here with me, relax, do nothing, and let me take care of you.”

He sighed, each breath useless to a Kindred, and yet so important, so personal how each wavered slightly as the boy again crested on emotional strife. But after a few moments to think about it, he smiled as he handed control to her.

“Yeah ... ok. That sounds perfect.”

It was perfect. She smiled down at her precious little Ventrue, and slid her hand down his stomach to find his boxers. With a little cooperation, she slid them off and tossed them to the floor, so the boy lay naked across the bed, his head and back upon her lap.

She blushed life for him, and kissed the air as she smiled for him. He blushed life as well, and pushed himself a few inches further up onto her lap. His head would have fallen off of her leg, if she did not slip her arm behind and underneath his head, to cradle it against her breast.

Her other hand reached across her chest, and tugged at the robe to loosen its hold, until the robe's bosom was loose about her sternum. She pulled the fabric aside to expose her breast nearest Jack's face, and held him snug to her as she leaned forward slightly so the softness of it pressed to his lips.

His gaze melted, his eyes closed, and he kissed the softness of her. More than kiss, he snuggled into her, against her lap and belly, against her arm cradling his head, and pressed his lips and nose to her as he took her nipple into his lips.

That was all it took, to light her body on fire. She shivered, perhaps trembled a little, as she watched her delicious lover suckle on her breasts, and gazed upon his small body, adorable, and yet defined with lean muscle, so terribly inviting. And she watched how he was relaxed against her, how he was vulnerable and precious, as he suckled and kissed her. To see him so was an utter delight, and she let out a quiet, gentle, long moan as the boy offered her nipple several roaming licks. It felt wonderful, little sparks of bliss that danced along her swelling skin, and tickled their way into her core.

She looked across the boy's body, his delicious, hard abdomen, and down to his rigid shaft. Hair trimmed to nothing, nothing blocked her eyes from admiring the sight of the veined girth rising, and rising, until it came up and over to nearly rest upon his



stomach. She reached out for it, and almost mewled as she took its base into her grip.

With one arm and hand holding the boy to her breast, and the other gently encircling his cock, she again released a quiet, long moan, and began to stroke his length. Slowly, very slowly, each inch of his shaft she teased and played with, fingers circling and dancing along its underside as she played with her love. There was no rush, and tonight was about relaxing, melting, letting the boy fall into tranquil bliss as she took care of him. She wanted to take care of him, to let his pains fall away, to feel him unwind within her embrace.

But, as much as her intention was to pleasure her love, she could not ignore the growing heat in her body. His lips, circling her areola, bathing the swollen flesh in kisses and loving, tender licks, was all too pleasurable. Forever obsessed with her breasts, the boy played with them, massaged and caressed and kissed them at every opportunity. With time, he learned how to draw more of her subtle, hushed moans with his breast play, and she had encouraged it. And now, there was no denying that the sparks of pleasure were growing stronger, radiating outward from her breast and down her body until she felt the pleasure between her legs. She was wet.

“My breasts grow sensitive, little Ventrue.”

He pulled away, and smiled up at her as he nudged his nose into the softness, until it spilled over half of his face. “Should I stop?”

“... no. Please, more.” She reached out for his further arm, and guided his hand to slip past the robe, and to her other breast.

He needed little encouragement. Roaming fingers began to caress her, tender and exploring, each digit tracing gentle lines along the underside of her breasts. He cupped its weight, experimenting with how it overflowed his hand, and he massaged it with the softest touch as he did. But soon his fingers found her nipple, her swollen,

puffy areola, and he traced its circular shape before offering it gentle tugs, and only the lightest of pinches.

The little rascal managed to crack open his eyes a bit, and smile up at her. Those green, beautiful eyes, melting away, closing once more as he snuggled into her, and suckled on her.

“Forever infatuated with my bosom, my little Ventrue. There is much more I could do for you, besides simply letting you kiss my breasts. Perhaps dance upon your cock, sheathed inside me, and rain delights upon you?”

“Maybe ... later? Just, for now ... just want to ... regress a little, be childish, you know. And ... your tits are so big.”

She laughed, and nudged his lips back to her breast with her cradling arm. She did not want him to stop. Her skin was tingling with bliss, each minute the boy spent kissing her nipple filling her with rising warmth, until she could feel more than a little of her juices on her sex. All the while, she stroked his length, never enough to bring him toward orgasm, but more than enough to be pleasant, and soothing. The feel of him, his cock in her hand, his body snug to hers, was intoxicating, and she shivered as another spark of bliss filled her chest.

And then another spark, and another. A short pant escaped her, just a soft little sound, before she set her hand onto his stomach, and let the pleasure fill her. Jack's eyes opened, but she had trouble meeting his gaze as her eyes half-closed in the bliss of orgasm. The warm sparks filled her chest, reached her sex, and pleasure flowed outward through her body, until subtle tremors danced upon her legs. She cradled the boy to her, and managed a smile during the bliss of it all.

“I am ashamed,” she said. “Here it was my wish to ease your pain, and yet ... you pleasure me.” She sighed openly, almost loudly, and let out a groaning moan as another spark of bliss worked through

her core and down to her thighs. For many, many months now the boy had pampered her breasts, and with each night she found them growing more and more sensitive to his play. Or, perhaps, the boy was simply becoming more skilled.

Jack stared up at her, shock written into his face. She came from her breasts, from her nipples, and he could see it.

“Whoa.”

“Ah, do not stare so hard. Is it so shocking? You play with my breasts without end so constantly ... it was bound to happen sooner or later.” She almost blushed. Almost. Such sexual explorations were not new to her, but it had been a very, very long time since someone had brought her to climax from her breasts alone. Her whole body refused to stop tingling, electricity upon her skin.

“Can I ... keep going?”

Another chuckle escaped her. She reached across his body to find his nose, and tapped it with her finger twice before setting her hand upon his pelvis. “Please.”

And as she watched the small man’s eyes light up, she smiled, and held him to her so his lips could envelop her nipple once more. She shuddered, the sensitivity of orgasm only just beginning to pass, and now replaced anew with more suckling.

Her grip upon the boy’s cock tightened, and she began to stroke him in earnest. A drop of precum raised to the tip, and she sighed joy as she pressed a finger to it, and spread it along his exposed glans. Soon the ripe, swollen head of his shaft was coated with it, and she again resumed stroking his length, the new lubricant allowing her fingers to gently nudge and massage the base edge of the bulbous tip.

Through it all, his suckling continued. He started softer this time, perhaps to give her sensitive body a moment to recover, before he started to suckle harder. Lips pulled and tugged at her nipple, before drifting away to plant kisses along the contours of her breast. He came back to her areola, licked it, set more kisses upon it, as his hand began to caress her other breast once more.

A second orgasm did not take long. She cradled her man, held him close, and let go of his shaft to slip her hand about his waist and hold him tighter to her as again, she came. A tremble, a quiver, and her breasts shook, heavy weight and softness shaking against him, his lips, and his hand. She was so terribly wet, and it only grew worse as the boy kissed her breast while she came for him.

Stimulation growing a touch too much, she eased his head down so her nipple was out of reach of his lips by an inch. He smiled at her, and kissed the underside of her breast as she climaxed, each passing minute leaving behind more of the melancholy he had brought with him into her chamber. She returned his smile, and gently eased the boy off of her lap so he was lying upon his back in the center of the bed. She found one, two, eight pillows, and placed them about his arms and behind his back and head to lightly prop up his torso, so that he may relax, and watch.

She kept the robe on. Such clothes play was always a delight, and she laughed as she found the boy's eyes looking at how the robe hugged to her, its belt tight but its chest now loose so her breasts were free. All the better, as she crawled over him, set her knees outside his, and her hands along the blankets beside his shoulders. Her breasts dangled over his face, and she shivered as she leaned down enough to run the heavy, sensitive masses against his lips. He got the game quickly, and did not move his head even as he opened his mouth to kiss her breasts as she slid one over him, and then the other.

A silly game. It made her chuckle, and feel young again; he was good at that, her little Ventrue. She slid further back, lowered her body further upon his, and leaned forward so gravity pressed her breasts to his pelvis. His cock stood at forty-five degrees toward him when this hard, this aroused, and she exploited it, letting her breasts fall with their weight to encircle and bury the rigid shaft. With her knees still outside his and her thighs pressing his legs together, she had more than enough leeway to simply kneel there, ease her body back and forth, and let the angle of his cock guide its path within her bosom.

“Your breasts are so heavy,” he said. She could see his body relax more and more, tense muscles easing into the pillows she set for him, his expression softening into an almost half asleep gaze. Perfect. To hold him at such a precipice of relaxation and arousal was her goal after all, to bring him to climax, while at the same time, letting him sink into comfort and tranquility.

“And now, I confess, very sensitive.” It was no lie. How she let gravity bury his cock between her breasts caused her rocking to lightly nudge her nipples against his abs. They were swollen, very swollen, engorged and tingling and filling her core with the sparks of bliss. She would not cum from anything less than the boy’s lips and fingers upon them, but still, the act of massaging his cock with her breasts was tingling and pleasant as her nipples grazed his abs. Far too sensitive now, but once she recovered, she would want more.

“So I should ... play with them more often?”

“My love, you cannot do more than always.”

“I don’t always ... ok yeah I guess I do always.”

More chuckles. She leaned a little further forward, and brought her chest down toward his body just enough to completely bury every inch of his cock within the soft confines of her breasts. More

than large enough to spill over his abs, pelvis and sides, she trapped each inch of his length within the depths of her bosom, and kept him there. His glans was coated in his precum, and as she eased her body back and forth, more joined it, wetting her skin.

It took time to bring the boy toward orgasm this way. Without the proper grip or strength of her fingers or mouth or insides, only the heavy softness of her breasts pressing and surrounding his cock, spurred by gravity, the stimulation against him was gentle. Gentle was enough, enough to have the boy sighing bliss, moaning it, and for more and more drops of precum to coat her breasts as she edged him toward orgasm. Slowly, so ever slowly.

She shivered as she settled back, rested her weight on her ass against his shins, and looked down at where his cock poked out from her breasts. No motion, no more movement, she simply watched, and licked her lips as another drop of precum rose to the tip of his swollen glans. She did not touch it, but instead, let it build on its own, until soon the clear, viscous liquid dripped down onto his abs where they met her breasts. More, she wanted to see more. His body fought for stimulation, cock twitching and pulling toward his abs, begging to be touched, but she would not, and she smiled down at the delicious thing as more, and yet more drops of his precum leaked out of him. A small pool of it began to form near his navel, a testament to his need. Poor boy, gravity was enough for her breasts to squish against and tenderly caress his cock, but not enough to push him over the edge.

It was not until she leaned in, and began to suckle on the head of his cock, in much the same way he did her breasts, that Jack groaned openly, and came.

He flexed his core, and let out a more obvious moan as his eyes half-closed not with calmness, but bliss. And as he did, she lifted her head, and pressed her arms together against the outside of her breasts, so that they hugged tight to his cock. Now, each gentle rock

of her body provided proper, tight friction against his cock as his cum gushed out of him, and into the valley of her breasts.

“That ... is ... perfect.” If the boy had not melted before, he was certainly melted now. He struggled to keep his eyes on her, but she could tell he did not want to miss watching, to not see how with each gentle rock, more of his cum dripped out from the crease of her breasts and onto his abs. More, and more, warm, wet, the thick white fluid flowed into the cushioned valley she created for him, until she felt how his cum coated the entirety of where her breasts were squashed against each other.

She continued to rock her body, keeping every inch of him hidden inside her cleavage, until at last the final squirt of his cum coated her. Only then did she cease pressing her breasts together, and again resumed gently rocking her body back and forth over him, so only gravity let her breasts squish around his cock. Cum dripped from her, and covered the boy’s pelvis as she swayed for him.

“Such a delightful mess.” She shivered joy as she looked down, and admired how much he had coated her. Still hard, and the angle created a pleasant sight of his cock poking out from between her breasts, the wet pillows easing back and forth and spreading the mess. “Were Ashley and Julee here, I would have them clean my breasts as I sat upon your cock.”

He quivered a few times, and managed to raise his head up from the pillows enough to look at her more directly. “Sorry, I drained them pretty good. Like ... you just did me.”

“Ah but you are still hard.” She crawled forward, sat her dripping wet sex along his wet abs, and grinned down at him as she looked down at her cum-soaked breasts. “Perhaps instead of Ashley and Julee, I shall do it.”

“I uh—oh ... god.”

She grinned at him, almost beaming with bliss at the sight of his pleasure. She slid back, and started to ease her soaked pussy against his equally soaked cock. Ah, the sensation of his wet, hard girth opening her, the unique texture of an aroused man's shaft, its hard body yet soft skin slipping into her, soaking her with his cum. She inched herself back slowly, until she sat upon his pelvis with the boy fully sheathed inside her. A favorite position of hers to be sure, to sit upon her love, hold him inside her, and control the pace of their love making. As much as Jack had become a talented lover, she was unrivaled.

And like this, she could indulge her vanity. She grinned down at him, his starstruck gaze, and raised her hands to her hair. Arching her back, she jutted out her cum-covered breasts, little droplets of it running down their curves and onto her stomach, and she combed her hair back with her fingers. His trembles told her how enraptured he was, and again she chuckled as she slowly, teasingly, brought her hands down to her breasts.

She cupped their heavy weight, let the size of them spill over her palms, and guided one of them up to her mouth.

“So I just sit here and ... watch you be the most erotic and beautiful thing in existence.”

“But of course.” She grinned all the more evilly with her eyes as she ran her tongue along the surface of her breast. Pleasant tingles returned, and she lightly squeezed on the boy's cock as she felt the pleasure return. With several drops of his cum upon her tongue, she captured the boys eyes, held them, his green into her red, and swallowed down his seed.

“You're going to kill me.”

“Oh? Whatever do you mean?” Again, she ran her tongue down what parts of her breasts she could reach; which was much of the mountain of softness. And with each lick, she kept his gaze, and



grinned her succubus eyes at him as she eased another wave of his cum into her mouth. There was no avoiding how her chin and lips pressed to her breasts with each lick, and soon much of the white seed was on her jawline and neck. So much, enough to almost be dripping off of her chin.

Jack set his hands on her thighs, and stared.

It was only a Kindred's seed after all, and it would fade into the tiniest traces of ash in five, perhaps ten minutes. And for that time, she could play with the boy's arousal, bring it to bursting once more without so much as a thrust.

She brought her nipple into her mouth, and suckled, holding her breast with one hand, while her other hand massaged her free breast, trailing lines through his cum and caressing the warmth into her hard nipple. And as she smiled down at the boy, she continued to suckle, and kiss, and lightly lick around her engorged areola, swallowing his cum and letting much of the white fluid coat her lips. She felt the tingling return, the sparks of bliss from having her nipples pampered, caressed, and teased. The pleasure worked through her, filled her chest, and as much as she had planned to hold still during the visual feast for her lover, she started to ease her hips back and forth.

It was almost embarrassing, how quickly she felt the pleasure start to build again. She forced herself to slow down, used her many years of practice and patience to bring the joys to a crawl, to bask in the boy's wide, entranced gaze as she played with herself, and tasted his cum and her skin. There had been many times in the distant past she had enjoyed her breasts on her own, massaged her nipples, kissed them, brought herself to near orgasm, and sometimes into it. Hazy memories from a time long gone. Seeing the look in the boy's eyes as she masturbated with her breasts though, perhaps she should enjoy it more often.

Soon his cum started to fade, and she at last let go of her breasts as she found herself so close, so very close to climax. To be on the edge, to feel her inner muscles squeeze on the boy in need, to feel her juices soak his cock, and to feel her thighs press to him in anticipation, it was all so perfect.

“My breasts are clean once again,” she said, and she ran her hands along them to prove it. “And ... I am ... so very close, my little Ventrue.”

He held out his hands for her.

She sighed openly, lovingly, and let her body fall forward toward him. Her hands found the pillows he rested upon, and she put her weight onto them as she let her breasts dangle underneath her, the heavy weights becoming teardrops over his face, each teardrop larger than his head. Jack opened his mouth, and where she had once been suckling, he began to suckle, pulling her nipple into his mouth with more force than before. One of his hands found her other breast as well, and began to massage her other nipple, pinching it lightly, but not so gently anymore. Enough to send those sparks of bliss through her breasts and into her chest, down through her core and into her pelvis, where bliss flooded outward and down her legs into her toes.

She began to orgasm, rocking waves of bliss working through her as she trembled over Jack. Not a sound from her, only pleasure, her pussy squeezing his length like a vise until she could feel more of her juices leaking from her. She forced her eyes open, but she could only manage a tiny crack through her eyelids. Enough, it was enough to gaze upon her lover as she came upon him, enough to see his closed eyes, his face awash with relaxed joy. He devoured her, suckled upon her, massaged and caressed her, and she melted into his touch.

“S ... stop ... please...”

Immediately the boy let her breast go, and his head relaxed onto his pillow. “Sensitive?”

“Oui. Very.” She leaned in closer, squashed her breasts to his chest and neck, and craned her neck down to kiss the much shorter boy’s head. “I shall let you feast upon me more, soon. But for tonight, please, lie back, and relax.” She leaned in closer still, until her weight was fully upon him, and her tall body covered his in shadow, her lips by his ear. “Relax.”

The boy’s breath came in pants, excitement filling him, and she chuckled as she kissed his ear.

“I said to relax, mon amour.” She started to grind her body against him, pressed her breasts to his chest as her hips began to move back and forth. Wet, so deliciously wet. And the boy was nearing orgasm as well; she could see it in his muscles that refused to completely relax, and his expression that refused to ease.

“Relax, yeah...”

There. All it took was a little coaxing, a little guidance. She planted more kisses upon him as she slowed down yet again, kissed his ear, his buzzed hair, and squeezed her pussy upon his length to edge him closer to orgasm, without ever crossing it. Each stroke brought him pleasure, and with each stroke, she ran her hands up and down his arms, his neck, his buzzed hair, always slow and gentle. Tranquility was the theme tonight, and she milked the boy with total serenity, until he had no choice but to relax into the blankets, and go limp.

Only then did she start to work her hips faster, and only then did she sit up so she could bury every last inch of him into her. She danced upon his cock, set her hands upon his chest, and began to thrust harder. Certainly not rough sex; in fact, she kept the pace quite slow, only barely faster than before. But that was fast enough.

As orgasm danced in the distance, coming closer and closer, she pressed her hands to Jack's chest, and used him for leverage as she drove her hips back and forth in deep thrusts. Her breasts bounced and jiggled with the impacts, and Jack stared at her as she fucked him. His arms were no longer holding her thighs, now limp along the blankets between her legs and the pillows. His head was much the same way, except now it bounced lightly against several pillows with each of her thrusts.

Delightful friction, her swollen clitoris pressing to him with the forward angle. But she wanted a stronger orgasm, and brought her body a touch more forward, so the angle of his cock pointed it toward her navel. Perfect. Delicious pressure, each drive back of her hips causing his cock to hit that spot, to send pulses of pleasure out from her pelvis, and again build the growing warmth of orgasm.

“If you ever feel weary my love, please, come lay beside me, and let your troubles fade away as I tend to you. Let me care for you with the softness of my body.”

“You're uh ... starting to sound like a wife in the 1930s.” He smiled as he said it, again struggling to keep his eyes on her as they drifted half-closed. “Very 1930s. Think I read something like that on a vintage poster, one of those colorful, super sexist ones.”

She laughed, and reached up to jut out her breasts once more as she combed her fingers back through her hair. “I was alive in such a time, my love. Women were to be seen, not heard. It was a man's world, and it was a woman's job to please him.” She rolled her eyes. Such games she and the boy played, and they both chuckled as she again combed back her hair, except this time emphasizing it with dainty swishes of her fingers, as women in such times were encouraged to do. “But I do not lie. It brings me joy to see that I may ease your pains. Great joy.”

“ ... thank you.” His eyes, renewed with weight, but weight of a caring nature, of a sort where she could feel the openness of his soul laid out for her to drink from. Eyes of love.

Oh, her little Ventrue, how those eyes stirred her. She brought hands back down to the blankets around his shoulders, and arched her back as she picked up the pace. His eyes closed once more, but opened yet again, just a crack, just a sliver, enough so he could watch her as she bounced upon him. And, as he began to fill her with his cum, his eyes raised into his eye sockets, and waves of pleasure at last forced them closed.

She needed only three more strokes, before she too was upon climax. As the tingling waves filled her, curled her toes and forced her thighs to squeeze around the boy between them, she leaned herself down upon his small frame. Again she squished him beneath her breasts, and as his eyes drifted open, she kissed his forehead, and continued to ease her hips back and forth. Each gentle sway of her body earned a gush of his cum to fill her, and each clench of her insides earned a wave of her own bliss to join it.

A perfect, utterly perfect way to climax. She held her man, buried him in her softness, and milked his cum until she felt it join her own juices where they connected.

“My insides quiver, little Ventrue. How does it feel?” To talk mid orgasm? Another fun game, and she smiled as she forced her bliss to continue, more clenching of her muscles spurred by her efforts. Each, no doubt, stimulated and caressed the cock inside her, and Jack trembled as her play earned another gush of warmth to leak out of her.

“ ... just want to ... lie here ... forever.”

“One of the few joys of being undead, my love. Forever is within our grasp.” Her orgasm began to fade, as did Jack’s, but through it all she held him, pressed her body upon him, and planted several

more kisses to his forehead. Only when the random convulsions of her muscles upon his member ceased, did she sit up straight, and grin down at her little Jack.

“You offering me eternity here, in your bed?”

“You did say you wished for it.” She reached behind her, set her hands on her plentiful ass, and pushed forward on it to bring her hips forward. The angle of course pushed out her breast, but that was also a part of the game, to slay the boy with her body, visually and with its touch, as she began to dance upon his cock. To drag out those last few tingles of orgasm aftershocks was a skill she had mastered, both for herself, and for her love.

“I did...”

The boy’s words sent her withered heart into a flutter, and she stopped her dance as, slowly, gently, the sexual energy of it all drained away, replaced with an overwhelming need to hug her love.

So, she did. She slid off of his softening member, and lay beside him upon the blankets and pillows. Still in her robe, she pulled the boy close to her, and turned him enough so he could face her.

“Such words are dangerous, little Ventrue, and women are particularly vulnerable to them.”

“I—”

“Non non, no words. We have eternity to test these waters. And, I do sincerely hope, my love, that we will spend that eternity together.”



~~Jack~~

He wasn't sure what he did to have deserved such an amazing woman in his life. Was this how Roger Rabbit felt? He'd always envied that rabbit when he was younger, when his mom showed him that movie. Jessica Rabbit woke some strange feelings inside him.

The amazing body Antoinette had was only the tip of the iceberg; though, he did have to wonder about it. She was very tall, and the white hair and red eyes, along with her early-thirties complexion, were a weird mix, biologically. People from Europe at that time period didn't look like that, not even in the slightest, from the height, to the tight waist and massive breasts, to the particularly unusual hair and eyes. She was Ordo Dracul, known for their experiments and search for secret knowledge of what vampires were on a grander scale, so maybe that had something to do with it? When he'd first talk to her and had asked, she said it may have had something to do with Dracula, or something.

But, yeah, tip of the iceberg. It wasn't the ridiculously awesome body she had that was making him relax into her, it was how she wanted to hold him, embrace him, and give him a place to rest his head that was melting him. God he needed that. May not have been the manliest thing, to need someone's shoulder to lean on, but he didn't give a shit. He couldn't imagine a better place to be right now, then in Antoinette's loving arms, and how accepting she was of him. An intelligent, wise, confident woman, who'd never say anything as absurd as 'man the fuck up' or 'walk it off' or any of that shit. Someone he could just be a young guy with, who was having a really fucking hard time.

She cradled his head, and held him to her as he hugged her back. He didn't cry; one step away from it, but crying wasn't really what he needed right now. He needed a soft, safe place to rest, and she wanted to give him that. It was perfect.

They held each other for an eternity; or, twenty more minutes. Still perfect, relaxing, and he took a deep breath as he let the tension fall away. He shivered a few times, some trembles as the body struggled to let go, but, as Antoinette stroked his head and rubbed his back, he melted into heaven.



## Chapter 53

~~Jack~~

There was still plenty of time before sunrise, and Antoinette felt like pampering him a bit more. To the pool they went, but instead of using the pool, they stepped down into the hot tub.

“I’m ... pretty drained, Antoinette,” he said. “Came twice, you know?”

She laughed, and reached out to touch his nose as she stepped into the water. “I am sorry, my love, but I know you drank of both my ghouls only a couple hours ago. I suspect you have much sexual energy left for me to feast upon.”

“I ... I mean, yeah I guess.” There was usually some more give and take in their sex, but tonight, Antoinette wanted to do all the giving. He’d asked if she’d wanted him to do more for her, but she’d insisted she wanted to treat him a thousand times over. He could only resist that sort of temptation for so long.

The water level of the hot tub was set to shallow, so when he sat in one of its seats, the water stopped at his knee, and cut halfway along his thighs, covering his testicles but not reaching up to his shaft. Antoinette got on her knees in the water, smiled up at him as she wet her hair, and pulled the long, soaked, heavy strands of white over her breasts. Wet hair, god he loved wet hair.

“I have opened the door for covenants to begin siring again, my love.” She crawled through the water toward him, put her hands on his knees, and eased his legs apart. “Do you have any kine that you wish to see enter their second lives?”

“Um, n-no, not really. And I’m way too young for that, don’t you think?” Though, it would be an interesting thought, to maybe sire some of his family. Recipe for disaster, but the thought was there nonetheless.

He gulped as he stared down at the tall, busty queen while she crawled in closer, and got snug between his thighs. She had to use her hands to lift her breasts, and set them onto his pelvis, each pressing against his legs with his cock between them. With how close she was, and him leaning back like he was, her stomach brushed up against his testicles, and his cock pointed up from between the two enormous, heavy pillows.

“Far too young. I would not encourage you to consider siring until you were at least twenty years embraced, and preferably fifty, to enter your ancilla years. But, you grow strong, quite quickly my little Ventrue.” While her heavy breasts pressed down on the groove of his leg and pelvis each, weight causing them to mold and fit tight to him, she smiled at him as she got comfortable. So, utterly, huge, that gravity caused them to squish and spread out over his lower abdomen, his inner thighs, and his pelvis, their size burying almost every inch of his cock between them.

“Still think it might be a bit beyond me. And I wouldn’t have a clue on who to sire.” He swallowed again as he watched her, how she got comfortable, and adjusted where her wet hair covered parts of her breasts like a dress. She was leaning very far forward, so her ass was in clear view behind her, and the delicious shape of it swayed as she got cozy against him.

“With time, years, you will find yourself involved in the affairs of kine, and some will impress you. You may find them worthy of the embrace.” She reached up, and set her hands on the sides of his waist, her elbows against the hot tub seat he was on. Her smile never faded as she leaned down, and planted a kiss on the head of his shaft where it poked up between her breasts. Instantly, Jack

shivered as the pleasure sparks filled his cock, her lips easing back and forth in a slow, succulent kiss, until they wrapped around the base of his glans.

She had cum with those breasts earlier. Actually orgasmed. His suckling, his massaging, had made her cum from having her breasts and nipples played with. He was going to do that every chance he got from now on, but she wanted to pleasure him right now, keep it one sided. And now that she had him in her grasp, he was perfectly ok with that.

“And y-you?” he said. It was the game she liked to play, to keep talking while they had sex. She was a lot better at it than him.

She lifted her head, and pushed her chest forward a little using her knees and arms to brace herself. Using only the sheer size of her bosom, and how gravity kept it squished to his pelvis and thighs, she gently rocked her body back and forth, and tit-fucked him. Gentle, soft friction, each back and forth motion causing her breasts to lightly caress his cock with their weight and nothing more. Normally she used her hands, or squeezed her arms together, to make the contact much tighter. But tonight, she seemed intent on pampering him with soft, gentle sex.

He was pretty sure the next time they had sex, she'd flip the coin and do something far more dominant, dominatrix, but tonight, gentle was the name of the game, and he was loving it.

“Non, it is not something I have considered as of late. Not since Tony have I sired someone, and it will be quite some time before I decide to again.” She slid her hands down from his waist, and pressed her breasts together with her palms. God, his cock completely disappeared inside the mountains of softness, and he shivered as the skin of her breasts pressed against his swollen, ripe glans. Precum rose to the top, and as the woman softly kneaded her breasts together, more joined it.

Satisfied, she let her breasts go, let gravity again cause their massive size to conform along his pelvis, thighs, lower abdomen, and let the tip of his cock poke out from between them. Her lips found it, and she began to suckle on it once more, head inching back and forth so her lips could caress along its sensitive edge where his glans met the rest of his cock. More pleasure sparks, each causing his inner muscles to flex, and each sending warm tingles through his length until he felt the building waves of warmth underneath his testicles again.

The heat of the water on his testicles, as the busty woman bathed his cock with her breasts, was euphoric.

He didn't last long. She was right of course, about the belly full of blood; a powerful aphrodisiac when combined with the right stimulus, like a beautiful naked woman rubbing her breasts on your body. His eyes nearly closed, but he forced them to stay open, so he could look into Antoinette's eyes as she grinned up at him, and raised her head.

She brought her hands back to her breasts, pressed them together, and buried his cock in the softness of her body. The delightful friction of her soft skin rubbing against him, of her breasts hiding and covering his hard girth as it twitched with need, sent more waves of blissful sparks down his length, each earning a hard flex of his inner muscles, and each of them earning a gush of his cum into her cleavage.

"I understand the Invictus plan to promote you," she said as she kneaded her breasts together around him. "Not that the Invictus deal in a simple employee structure, as you know. But I am sure they will provide you with something, beyond fortune. Perhaps a title?" She didn't stop, hands tight on her breasts, making sure each gush of his cum was trapped, until it coated her skin and dripped down onto his abs.

“I ... I uh ... maybe?” He squirmed, wriggled a little, and became one with the seat as he collapsed against it while Antoinette continued to milk him, until his cum pooled into her cleavage, and trickled down over the sides of her breasts, and down strands of her wet hair where they traced the contours of her tits.

Only when the final gush of his cum leaked out of him did she ease up her grip. She smiled up at him from her place between his knees, a smile so warm he thought he'd dissolve into the water, melting away. She set her hands back on his waist, elbows to the seat, and began to gently rock her body back and forth, her cum-soaked breasts molding to his pelvis and thighs once more. His cock still stood upright, poking up from the mess of his cum, while trickling drops of the white fluid slid down off of their bodies and into the shallow, hot water beneath.

The feel of his cum being gently massaged onto his cock, post orgasm while everything was still sensitive, forced him to groan, and reach out to set one hand on Antoinette's shoulder. She turned her head enough to plant a kiss on his hand, before she took his hand in hers, both of them, and set them both on the seat beneath him. She held his hands there, under the water and out of the way, trapped in her grip, as she gently fucked him with her breasts. With both their hands on the hot tub seat, only the weight of her tits provided friction. Gentle, slow, tender breast sex. He was in heaven.

“We should celebrate once it occurs, my love. The Invictus, as always, will be slow to act on such matters. But in about a month or two I presume, you will be honored, and I expect on that night, to celebrate with you.” She leaned down, planted a few kisses on his cock, and some exploring licks too. “Perhaps you should enjoy a night with Julee and Ashley at your mercy? I will be there of course, but I will give you free reign to order them to do whatever you could wish.”

“I ... I admit ... that time the three of you were ... giving me a blowjob at the same time ... pretty amazing.” Three sets of lips, fighting for room on the head of his cock? Felt amazing, and watching Ashley take every opportunity she could to turn it into kissing Julee instead was like watching a boy’s sex dream come true.

“Understandable.” She worked her lips back and forth again, same as before, suction pulling at him and bathing his cock in bliss as her kiss massaged the sensitive skin. “I will leave the choice to you, my love. Anything you wish of them of them.”

“Anything?”

“Ha, anything within reason, but I suspect that will encompass anything you could want.”

So he could make Julee and Ashley do whatever he wanted. Kid in a candy store.

“So ... if I ... wanted one of them to ride me ... facing me ... and you sit behind them, and finger them and Kiss them while I’m inside them?”

She rolled her eyes, chuckled, and resumed the gentle rocking of her body. “Of course.”

“Or ... maybe ... I could lie down, head in your lap again ... and the girls each giving me a blowjob, and—”

“Jack, whatever you wish, they will perform. And I will join them ... to an extent, of course.” She chuckled, that womanly, dominatrix sorta chuckle, a chuckle that told him she’d only entertain requests to a point, before she took control. She did like to do that.

He could tell what she was up to, trying to put some zing back into him, get back that spontaneous, excited spark of his that he

knew was suffering as of late. Well, he was a guy after all, and trying out crazy new things in bed was definitely a way to put some spark into him. And to offer him such bliss while currently massaging his cock inside a bed of breasts and his own cum, was catching him when he wasn't in a mindset to possibly say no, or be surly.

She let go of his hands, but he knew to keep them out of the way; it's what she wanted. Grinning, she raised her hands up, combed back her hair, and brought her hands down to press against the sides of her breasts. The soft mounds of perfectness were far too large for her hands to fully grasp, and her fingers partially disappeared into them as she squished his cock with them. Layers of his cum rose up from the tight contact, and trickled down the crevice of her tits once more, flowing down to land on his lower abdomen.

She started fucking him in earnest, faster, using his cum as a lubricant before it faded. Each tight squeeze of her breasts on him was heavenly, the cum-soaked skin gripping and massaging his cock, and sending more waves of bliss down the length of it as his glans disappeared into her cleavage.

He came again. So damn fast, but the sight was too intoxicating and alluring to not have him ready to burst just by looking at it. And of course, she was really, really good. His voice turned into pants, quiet groans, and he watched with wide eyes as another gush of his white cum flowed into her cleavage. She adjusted her grip, slowed down her thrusting, and smiled at him as she buried his cock until it vanished between her breasts. The slow, tight, massaging valley of her tits soon overflowed with his cum, and a small pool of it formed against her sternum, held by the slopes of their size. Hot, wet, tingling, he shivered as the pleasure sparks rippled outward from his legs, and flexing inner muscles caused another gush of his cum to spill onto her body. It trickled down over her skin as it overflowed, and lines of white traced along the outside contours of her breasts, to drip into the water.

When he finally finished, little aftershocks working through his insides, Antoinette chuckled, and sat back, heavy breasts falling off of his lap and jiggling against her chest. The shallowness of the water kept her bosom above the surface of it, and she smirked as she looked down at her bosom, and how it was covered in his cum, to the point some lines of the thick liquid were dripping off of the bottom of the heavy, teardrop-shaped mountains.

“Four times in one night,” she said. “I should let you feast of both my pets before our fun more often.”

“I ... yeah, I mean ... damn.” He tried to make eye contact with her, but it was really fucking hard when she was sitting right in front of him, enormous breasts weighing down on her chest, literally dripping of his cum. And he’d cum so fast the second time, the first coating was still there.

“I hope I have helped relax you, so that you may sleep well today.” She ran one of her hands down her chest to one of her breasts, and traced lines through the white cum, drawing circles onto her swollen nipple.

“I’m staying here to sleep until the city’s clear of these hunters, right? I’ll sleep well every day.”

“Good.” She stood up, and walked out of the hot tub. A minute later, she returned, and the water level of the tub started to increase, surface level rising until it reached Jack’s chin. She let herself sink below the surface until the water reached her shoulders, and washed away his fluids before she came back up.

“I have a confession to make,” he said.

“Oh?”

“I ... really, really love the look of wet hair.”



She burst into laughter, almost a giggle, and swam over to sit beside him. “Hardly a secret, my love.” Her arm found him, hooked around his shoulder, and pulled him to her.

He turned his head enough to snuggle into her side, chin near her breast, and sighed. She’d drained him enough that he could go the next five minutes this close to her tits without turning into a sex-hungry maniac. Five minutes he could spend snuggling into her.

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They returned to her room, and climbed into bed. Still another thirty minutes until sunrise, but it was thirty minutes to hold each other, snuggle, and actually talk.

“No talk of the plights of Dolareido,” she said. “Talk of normal things, joyful or sorrowful, but of normal things, not of hunters or werewolves or monsters.”

He nodded. “Right, sure, I can do that.”

The two of them were facing each other, Jack in his boxers and Antoinette in a silk nightie, but not a see-through one though, thank god; needed to sleep at some point. She was more lying on her back, and Jack was on his side, his chest pressed to her side, and one arm draped over her stomach. Hers was hooked underneath his neck and was stroking his back. The whole night made him feel like a mix between a woman’s boy toy — no problem with that — and a wounded animal, being nursed back to health by the lovely nurse who found him.

“Been thinking about my family lately,” he said.

“Yes, I can imagine. You are newly embraced, after all.”

“Yeah, I guess. Little things just randomly slip in. I wasn’t very close with my sister, but my mom and I, we ... couldn’t have been more different. We weren’t close, but we weren’t far, either.” His

mother was a dumb person, no way around that assessment. Dumb, with a big heart, and with zero desire to analyze reality; he, on the other hand, couldn't stop analyzing it. "She was an airhead."

Antoinette laughed, and her hand upon his back rose to find his head. Scratches, fingernails on the scalp, fingertips rubbing the buzzed hair. Euphoric.

"And you were close?"

"A little. Not sure why, we didn't have a single thing in common. But, I guess my constant complaining and unending attempts to make her do things more efficiently just washed off of her, water on a duck's back."

"I am afraid she and I would not get along then. Such types frustrate me."

"Yeah, she frustrates ... frustrated me too. I'd tell her that too, but she'd shrug and smile, ask me if I wanted some juice, as she was already pouring the glass." He laughed, and let his head fall, relaxed against the nook of Antoinette's chest and arm. "After dad died, she didn't grow bitter or pessimistic, like I did. She got sadder, yeah, and ... and it never really changed. I moved out a few years after that." Much of what he was saying, he'd already told her, as pure data for a conversation. This time it was different. This time it was him talking about his life because he wanted to share it with the woman he loved.

If she could remember the things that'd happened to her five hundred years ago, he'd love to hear about her life too. But, those long-as-fuck torpors elder vamps liked to take, to keep their blood-lust in check, fucked with their minds, supposedly. Maybe Damien's records might hold some information about her past? Doubtful, but there could be a hint about something, somewhere. Maybe they'd hold records about Viktor too? More likely, and worth asking about.

“And your sister?”

“Like repelling magnets, her and me. We never got along, but never really argued either. I ... ran into her, not long after my embrace.”

“ ... that is a very dangerous situation to be in, my love. If she—”

“She didn’t. I ... wiped her memory of our encounter.”

“You managed to wipe the memories of a kine, at that age?”

“ ... yeah.” Reached into her mind, broke it, warped it into a new shape, one with a convenient hole where that memory would have been. Probably the first time he noticed he was using the dominate discipline a bit easier than was expected of him.

“I am sorry that you had to do that, my love.” She hugged him, kissed his forehead, his lips, and his nose. “That must have been a painful experience.”

Yeah, it was. But as Antoinette kissed him, he kissed her back, and smiled at her. It was nothing he couldn’t handle, with a little support from his love.

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~~Julias~~

“Jennifer Denver,” he said.

“Julias Mire.” Jen offered a small bow, and a big grin. She stepped into his mansion as well, once he motioned for her to enter. “And please, call me Jennifer, or Jen. The Circle cares little for last names. How may I bet at your service?”

“Oh, you work for me now?”

“No, but Jacob does suggest I learn to become friends with Kindred stronger than I, more influential than I. That’s you.”

Perfectly understandable, reasonable, and something he would expect a manipulative snake like Jacob to say. It made him laugh, and he motioned for Jen to follow him. She was wearing a dark business suit, knee-length pencil skirt and an undone jacket, white shirt underneath. It would have been odd with how boring it was, if not for how she had only the single bottom button of the shirt done so it was open, no bra, her sternum and the inner sides of her breasts exposed.

He couldn’t blame Triss for literally copping a feel of the woman; she bled sexual confidence, like a Daeva. Her body was a little softer than Triss’s, similar shape but with a touch less muscle, larger breasts, and no crocodile mouth or snake eyes. Same hair too, raven black down to the jaw, though Jen had half of it combed back behind one ear. Her brown eyes were forever both playful and calculating; reminded him a lot of Jacob.

And that was part of his worry. Jacob played the long game, and it wouldn’t have surprised Julias if Jen was manipulating Triss to get to him, in an effort to control him or sway his actions in some way. Time to test those waters too.

He opened the door to one of the living rooms, and once Jen stepped in, he closed the door behind them.

“Sit, please.” He slid into the chair at a table, folded one leg over the other, and set his hands on the knee, fingers netted together. A pompous pose, like a wealthy PhD involved in a conversation about the latest rendition of a famous play. Bombastic. It served the conversation’s purpose.

She grinned a sly grin, and slipped into the seat across from him. “A truly fancy room, Mire. How many living rooms does this home have?”

“Half a dozen, I think? Still haven’t managed to map the place out, might take a few more months of exploration.”

She chuckled, and he listened, and watched, for the telltale signs of misleads. The inflection was normal, and genuine. The change in direction of her gaze was normal, and genuine. The texture of the sound was normal, and genuine.

“I thought, perhaps, you wanted to talk about the troubles of Dolareido, these hunters that plague us,” she said. “But now, I’m getting the impression this conversation is going to be more personal.”

“Astute of you.”

“Thank you.”

“I wanted to talk about Beatrice.”

“Delightful.”

“You’ve managed to worm your way into her heart, in a strange way.” He watched, and waited, expression casual but every faculty he had available to him digging into the girl’s reaction.

The center of her eyebrow’s raised slightly, and her lips parted a sliver as her smile softened. “ ... really?”

Despite himself, a small smile sneaked its way onto his face as well. She wasn’t just glad to hear what he said, she was touched.

“Yes, your combination of honesty, sexual allure, and genuine interest in being her friend has worked. She may not realize it quite yet, but I can tell, she’d like to involve you in our relationship.”

Jen almost started to shiver, like a young girl excited to go out to a party. “I wasn’t sure she took me seriously. I admit I express my

sexuality and enjoy it quite openly and often, and thought maybe it'd dissuade her."

"If she agrees, we'll both want you to tone that down. I haven't talked to her about this yet, but I imagine she'll want you to not sleep with any Kindred, or join other Kindred in sexual affairs, if you're going to join us under the sheets." Jen was a Ventrue after all, and she spoke a language he knew all too well: lawyer speak. Like negotiating a contract, he laid out the rules.

"Ah, poor Othello and Madison. But, yes, that makes sense. Honestly, if Triss really wants me in her bed, I think I'd be against sleeping with Othello and his ghouls or conquests anymore anyway. What about my ghouls though?"

"Yes, Triss tells me you have two ghouls of your own. Sleep with them as you like, they're yours, and you might not always be there when Triss and I decide to make love. I—"

"Make love." Jen swooned, and brought a hand to her sternum in a dainty 'catch me I'm about to faint' sort of way. "You two are so delicious together."

Julias smirked, and leaned back, unfolding his legs. "She's my everything."

Jen giggled. That deserved assessment, and he blinked once as he looked at the girl. A giggle, from Jen, when the topic came to romance? Like peeling an onion, this girl had layers he had not expected.

"She's become my best friend, Mire."

"I'm glad she has someone in her covenant. Far as I know, she wasn't friends with anyone in the Carthians. Not good friends, anyway."

“ ... and what of you, Mire?”

“Me? I think you’re an attractive woman, very attractive, Den—Jen. Call me Julias, by the way,” he said, and she grinned playfully as she nodded. “And I greatly appreciate that you are an intelligent person.”

“A shame we never became friends.”

“A shame.”

“Ugh, Julias! That wasn’t your queue to agree, that was your queue to offer ways we could.” She stood up from the chair, and stepped over to stand beside him. “I would be interested to learn your hobbies, your likes and dislikes, and perhaps share with you mine. I’m not looking to become a third wheel or tag-along, Julias.”

“ ... then what are you looking for?” Woman was surprising him every damn second now. Layers.

“I’m not like most girls. I’m not really interested in having a happily-ever-after ending for myself. Not interested in settling down, monogamy, or soul mates, or anything like that. But, to be friends, close friends, best friends, with two people who are? To share the bed of two lovebirds, my friends, as more than just a fling, but as something that will last? Call me weird, but that appeals to me greatly.” She leaned down toward him, and brought in her face until she was only inches from his. “Great writing fuel.”

He tried to smile, but after a while it turned into wonderment, eyes a bit wide and lips lightly parted. “You write?”

“I do. Don’t tell anyone, ok?” She set both her hands onto his shoulders, and slipped onto his lap, both of her legs off to the same side since she was wearing a skirt.

“What’re you doing, Jen?”

“I am ... how would the mighty Mires probably say it ... testing the waters?”

“You don’t need to worry about proving you’re attractive, I—”

“Not about attraction, it’s about connection. Triss is my best friend, but there will be three of us in that bed, and I can say without a doubt, that I would like to form a connection with you, Julias.” One of her hands found one of his, and she guided it to her chest. His fingers found her sternum where her shirt was open, and she smiled down at him from her perch on his lap as she nudged his hand to the side further, and further. Her shirt opened more, and soon his hand found her breast, its size filling his palm, and more.

“You’re going to seduce me to make a connection?”

“No, of course not. But, like I said, I’m not most girls, and how you and I will connect will be a unique experience.” She set her hand upon his where it cupped her breast, and guided it in a circular, massaging motion. Even when not blushing life, Jen’s body was beautiful, and her breast large, skin soft, and he couldn’t help but get drawn into how pleasant it felt in his hand. He also couldn’t stop picturing how alluring a sight it must have been when Triss had her claws on them. “For example, I would love to play poker with you sometime; I can tell you’d be great at it. And I wouldn’t even make it strip poker ... the first time.”

He chuckled, and relaxed. She wanted to be friends with him, a real friend, and not just a set of legs like kine often wanted to be. She wanted more. He had to respect that. Hell, it was exactly what he was hoping for, that this Jennifer Denver wasn’t just looking for a mindless lay; there was a reason he almost never slept with Kindred, after all.

He looked at her breast, and gently nudged his thumb along her nipple, a little larger than Triss’s, with no piercing. It looked amazing, with the open shirt of a great suit nudged aside for him to



massage it. And, as Jen lowered her hand back to his shoulder, he did massage it, a little more, and a little more, until the woman made a quiet moan and a small shiver to go with it. Yeah, he couldn't blame his girlfriend for touching them.

There was no chance in hell he'd ever betray Triss, but he wasn't about to invite Jen into their bed without seeing her reactions, without looking into her eyes and fishing out any deception, manipulation, or disingenuous desires. Did she really want to be his friend, Triss's friend, and join them in the bedroom on that level, or was she just a smooth talker looking for a good fuck. The glint in her eye, and the warmth he found there whenever he said Triss's name, suggested the former.

He set his hand down on his leg. "I'd love to play poker sometime. Maybe for higher stakes, like sexual favors? We'd have to invite Triss ... though, if we did that, I'm pretty sure she'd just be under the table all night, serving the two of us."

She erupted into more giggles, and slid off his lap as she pulled her shirt back across her breast to hide it once more. "Friends are hard to come by, Julias. I knew I'd like to be yours for many years now, but I didn't think we'd have anything to talk about, any connection for a bridge to form. Now I realize that was silly, and I'm sure we do, and more than just Triss." She leaned in again, and put a kiss on his cheek, another on his jawline, and then another on his neck. "Please, give me a call, when you're ready to get Triss and I in the same room, hopefully on the same bed."

He pulled out his phone, and pulled up Triss's number. Thankfully, he knew Triss had already gotten her hands on a new phone. "Call you? I was thinking we'd get her over here right now."

"Ha, typical man, no patience."

Julias frowned; a mock frown, but he had a good mock frown, and he lowered the phone.

“No, wait! ... please?” she said.

He smirked at her again, and raised the phone back up as he dialed Triss’s number. Jen could be cute when she wanted, really cute. He couldn’t wait to hear how Triss reacted.

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~~Beatrice~~

She had not expected ‘the’ phone call, not at all. But, fuck it, if Julias was offering to share the bed with Jen, she knew the man would put in due diligence before agreeing to something like that. And she could not deny how excited the phone call had made her. Jen, that fucking fox, in their bed? Fucking yes. At least, hopefully yes, hopefully a good night. Maybe, probably. Should be?

Please don’t be a bad idea.

“Finally! The bed of the great Julias Mire. Lot of Kindred ladies been hoping to get into this.” Jen crawled up onto the bed of the grand master bedroom, and made sure to show off every curve she had as she did, before sitting in the center.

“You seduced my white knight, didn’t you?” Triss said. “Got him to feel your tits and shit, and now you’re taking advantage.”

Julias rolled his eyes, but Jen put a hand to her cheek, like she’d just been accused of stealing a priceless artifact.

“I would never!”

“Grr, don’t make me regret this you bitch.” Beatrice crawled in after her, and pushed the woman hard enough to make her squeak, and bounce across the enormous bed toward the pillows. Had her giggling, a very strange sound to hear from Jen.

“No regret! This is still the bed only Beatrice has managed to get into for ages.” A smirk and a wink later, she sat up on her knees, and started to slip out of her jacket, still in her white, open shirt. She knew what she was saying, that Triss was the first Kindred in a long time to sleep with Julias; which always made Triss feel a little prideful.

Beatrice scrunched up her nose and glared at her. “You better remember that, I—” She almost jumped as Julias dropped a big box on the bed. Her sex toys box. “Julias! You fucking bastard.”

Her Superman grinned a very not-Superman grin, and slid the box in Jen’s direction.

“What’s this? Oh look at this!” Jen tossed her suit jacket aside, and beamed a smile as she stared down into the box. She kept her shirt on, distracted by Triss’s secrets that her asshole boyfriend just exposed to the evil woman. “I see some very large toys.”

“What girl doesn’t have large toys?” Ugh, she was going to have to defend herself now.

Jen, smile getting bigger and bigger, pulled out what was probably Triss’s biggest vibrator, massive, covered with various bumps and grooves. The plug shape of the bottom made its anal purpose obvious. Jen flipped the switch, and dropped her jaw as she watched the huge thing vibrate and swirl in her palm.

Triss slapped it out of her hands, but all that did was spur Jen to dig for new toys. Out came the other vibrators, the various lubricants, the arrays of piercings, and chains to go with them. The choker came out too, which Jen held in front of her for a few moments with wide eyes of wonder, before setting aside, as if it were too sacred for her to touch. She wasn’t entirely off base, with how submissive Triss usually liked to be when she wore it, and how much of an intimate feeling that was with Julias.

Her boyfriend took off his suit jacket, tossed his tie aside, and pulled over a large, fancy chair to sit in reverse style, arms across its back. Not a word, just a big grin as he watched the two women on his bed.

“Oh, you have to wear this.” Jen pulled out one of the nipple chains, and shifted the heavy metal from hand to hand as she slid in a little closer to Beatrice. “I don’t have any piercings, and this just looks like it’d be so amazing.”

Like a kid in a toy store. Triss couldn’t hide the smirk; she knew the feeling.

“ ... fine.”

“Yes! And this one too! And this one. And this one.” First she pulled out a thin chain clearly meant to circle the waist and dangle freely. The next chain was much tinier, and was only a few inches long, meant to be dangled from her clit hood piercing. The final one wasn’t a chain, but a tiny loop, meant to accent her navel piercing, without possibly snagging on anything.

“Going all out on the bling, aren’t you?”

“You’re the one who’s got the piercings, not me.” Giggling all the more, she reached out, and took the bottom edge of Triss’s tank top.

Triss hesitated for a moment. A point of no return, letting Jen begin to undress her. She glanced Julias’s way, and her knight smiled at her, warm, cozy. Her choice.

She rolled her eyes, and raised her arms. Jen didn’t hesitate, and slid the tank top off of her before tossing it aside. Her eyes lit up all the more, and she stared at Triss’s breasts as she reached down, and slid off her own pencil skirt.

Triss, wearing nothing but jeans, and Jen wearing a white shirt with one button done, and underwear, black lace. Much as this was Triss's choice, she had to admit it must have been a very appealing sight to anyone watching, and a glance Julias's way proved it. Man was glancing between the two of them, already blushing like hell and licking his lips.

The two Kindred on the bed blushed like hell as well, no words needed. And, despite herself, Triss felt the heat hit her body in moments. She was excited.

Jen slipped off her shirt and tossed it aside, a smooth motion Triss almost didn't notice, but the topless Ventrue reached out and started yanking on Triss's pant leg. Jen's breasts, soft, heavy, bounced with each yank. "More!"

"Settle down! Christ, you fuck a couple dudes almost every night. Figured this would be pretty normal for you."

"Hell no, they're kindred. This is different. And you're different." That almost sounded romantic, if it wasn't for the mad grin on Jen's face as she pulled on Triss's pant leg hard enough for Triss to fall over onto her back on the bed.

"God damn it girl, fine already." Now she was laughing too. She rolled her eyes again, undid the button and zipper of the jeans, and instantly they were off before Jen threw them to the floor.

Jen was wearing black lace panties, the sort of lingerie that was expensive and meant to be admired. Triss was wearing a plain black g-string, because damn it made her ass look great, and she smirked as Jen stopped her almost frantic motions to stare and admire her body. Her hands slowly reached out, took Triss's thighs, and moved her legs to the side so they were across the sheets together, showing off her ass for the Ventrue. Triss let her.

“Hope your lover doesn’t mind,” Jen said, “if I kind of just ... play with you for a little bit? God that body, like a fucking Amazon warrior.”

“No problems here,” the man said, still watching. Self control in spades. Any other man would have had his pants off and a hand in his boxers by now.

“So you’re both just gonna stare at my body the whole night, is that how this is going to go?”

Jen shrugged, and offered Triss’s ass cheek, the one over its partner and above the bed, a rather hard slap. Predictably, it jiggled slightly, and again Triss rolled her eyes, while Jen’s stared on in amazement, and hunger. Triss tried to be a little more subtle about watching Jen’s breasts, and how they dangled like heavy teardrops with the Ventrue’s sitting forward position.

The evil woman reached out for Triss’s arm, and helped sit her up again, only for her to dig through the pile of jewelry and find the nipple chain once more. Once she was in nice and close, legs touching, Jen leaned in toward her breasts, and used both hands to take one of them, remove the piercing already there, and replace it with one end of the chain. And then, the other, taking her slow time to slide metal out of her flesh, and replace it with fresh metal.

Only once the heavy, black metal chain dangled down almost far enough to reach Triss’s navel, did Jen stop to admire her work. Stare, stare, and stare at her some more.

And it was driving Triss wild. She had an exhibitionist side. She knew it, Julias knew it, and Jen was going to figure it out any second as every moment the girl stared at her, Triss’s body grew hotter. Her nipples were hard, her skin was starting to turn a touch red, and her voice was begin to waver a little. Just a little, just enough that she could notice it, and so could Jen.

“More!” Jen grabbed the waist chain, and hooked it around her. Small enough to rest on her hips without falling any further. And then was the navel piercing, a hoop that lay flat to her abs, larger and fancier than the tiny stud she had in normally. “Last one can wait, cause we have to do some poses.”

“ ... poses? Are you fucking serious? This isn’t a photoshoot.”

“No but, I know if I had the two most beautiful women in the city in my bed, I’d want to see them show off a little.” The girl winked at her, and then nodded with her head toward Julias.

Course he’d want to see that, he was a guy, and everything he got to see was a taste of what he’d get to experience once they got to that part. And Jen seemed more than happy to make it take a while to get to that part. Triss couldn’t help but smile a little at Julias’s own smile, and his rather uncomfortable squirming; dude was super horny and forcing himself to just watch. She and Jen would definitely repay him, but until then, yeah it would be kind of nice to show off.

Just thinking the idea was enough for Jen to giggle, reach out, and pull Triss toward her. Soon Jen was on her back on the bed, her legs spread, while Triss knelt over her, hands against the blankets by her shoulders, her knees between the girl’s thighs, and her nipple chain dangling and resting across Jen’s breasts.

Julias groaned.

A shiver went down Triss’s spine, and she looked to her man to see what he was looking at. Her ass, and Jen’s too, the both of them topless and wearing underwear that really showed off just how fucking awesome their legs and butts were. With Triss’s back arched forward the way it was, it really put the S curve into the length of her body. The chain did work too, pulling on Triss’s breasts enough to make her nipples stand out; not that they needed help, hard as rock by this point.

Triss looked down at Jen's body, and despite herself, licked some of her teeth with her long tongue. Raven hair to the shoulder, like her own. While Triss's body was lean and hard, Jen's was a bit softer, just as thin but instead of abs, a flat stomach. Just as toned of a butt, if a bit smaller than Triss's. And her breasts were larger, softer, all natural, and squished against the girl's chest with the angle. Her nipples were just as hard, standing out on swollen areola, and begging to be played with.

Didn't seem to be what Jen had in mind though. The girl reached up, and grabbed Triss's breasts instead, cupping them and letting the chain spill out between her fingers as she began to massage and caress them. Triss peeked at Julias in the corner of her eye, and shivered again as she saw how much the man was struggling to stay put, to not jump in and take her hard like he sometimes did. Jen could see it too. The girl was putting on this show specifically to drive the man wild, and Triss as well.

Triss hated how well it was working. Fuck, having Julias stare at her like that while another woman played with her breasts was getting her wet, and much as she tried to stop it, a little moan managed to escape her. Little moan turned into a surprised groan when Jen leaned her head upward a bit, and took one of Triss's nipples into her mouth.

Yeah, Jen was good. Jen was really fucking good at putting on a show, too. The girl's hands switched to roaming up and down Triss's back and sides, but also pulling her closer in so Jen had an easier time suckling on her breasts. And she was definitely suckling, pulling on them with suction and lightly shaking her head from side to side to make the chain dangle and bounce.

Triss didn't normally ask for breast play. It felt good, sure, but Triss didn't usually need the foreplay, embarrassing as that was. A kiss on the neck and she was ready to go. But, something about having some fun, letting Jen suck on her tits and rub her body up



and down while Julias watched, was fucking intoxicating. And it was definitely too late to hide that she was enjoying being the center of attention. So, she spread her arms out a little, and pushed her breasts down toward Jen, giving the girl a free feast of her aching nipples.

They stayed that way for a few minutes, Triss leaning over Jen and letting out soft moans as Jen bathed her nipples with her lips and tongue, sending little warm sparks into her chest. Girl was good. God damn Ventrue, both of them, fucking sluts and really fucking good at it.

When the growing heat between Triss's legs was enough she felt her thong was starting to become wet, she pulled away. Blushing a little, panting a little more, she sat back on her butt, and looked down at her saliva-coated nipples. Girl had sucked on them hard enough to engorge them.

“Julias, get in here,” Jen said as she sat up. “I want to see how you two fuck. Something slow pace.”

Triss rolled her eyes; sure to be a common occurrence tonight. “Christ, why not just dictate the position.”

Jen's eyes lit up. “Sure! Based on the toys, seems you really love anal. How about some anal spooning? That way I can have some fun with you.”

Oh good god what the fuck was she thinking, hoping the sarcasm would be noticed by a Ventrue. She offered the control freak control, so naturally, she took control.

Julias seemed perfectly fine with it though, and he walked over to the bedside as he began unbuttoning his shirt.

“I don't ... love anal,” Triss said.

Both Ventrue raised a brow at her. And when Jen noticed Julias's disbelieving expression, she giggled again and clapped her hands. Christ she really was like a kid in a toy store.

“Alright, Julias's turn! I wanna see the—whoa.” She leaned back a bit as Julias slid out of his shirt and set it aside on the chair. “Big man.”

“Come on, don't stroke his ego. It's nearing a bursting point.”

Then, with his usual jackass grin, Superman slid off his pants and socks, then his boxers.

Jen's smile only grew, and she started fanning herself with ludicrous overreaction. “Oh, he is a big man.”

Ego successfully burst. Julias lay on his back, big smile, set his head on a pillow, hooked his arms behind it, and watched. The grin lessened with time, but only so he could keep it more subtle as he watched the two women near his body. Fucker was loving this.

Triss crawled over to him, got between his legs on her knees, and poked him several times in his flat stomach with her claw, each earning a deserved wince. “Stop smiling so much you bastard.”

“Sorry.”

“Ah Triss, come on.” Giggling, almost shaking with excitement, Jen reached into the box for some of the lubricant, and once she crawled over to kneel beside the man, she smiled a more subdued, manipulative smile, just like Julias's. “Take off your thong please?”

“... you two god damn dirty rats.” Grumbling, frowning, she sat down, and slid it off and down to her feet.

“God yes. Please, put this on.” Jen set the final, small chain on Julias's leg, since Triss was still sitting between the man's knees.

“Yeah sure, whatever you want, princess.” Every attempt to glare and sneer at the woman backfired, as Jen’s eyes only grew more and more entranced watching Triss. And being watched like that was setting her body on fire. Worst of all, there was no hiding it as she spread her legs, and exposed her bare, wet pussy for Jen to see while she put on the new piercing, replacing the stud with the couple inches of dangling chain.

Triss shivered. The chain ran against her clitoris as it dangled from the clit hood, and each motion she made caused it to gently nudge against the swollen nub. She was wet, and it was blatant. And it was only getting worse as Jen gazed at her smooth, wet lips.

The evil woman scooted in closer, and licked her lips once for looking at Triss, and then again as she looked down at Julias and his relaxed body.

“I won’t cross any boundaries you don’t want me to cross,” Jen said as she took the lube again, and popped the top. “And no hard feelings either. Just tell me if I overstep.” She turned the bottle over, and dripped the thick liquid onto the man’s cock where it lay upon his hard stomach. With one hand holding the bottle, the other reached out, took Julias’s shaft, and began to massage the fluid along its length.

Yeah, ok, there was something really hot about that. For a moment Triss thought she might be jealous, seeing another vamp with their hands on her lover. But Jen was just so into it, into getting to join her in bed, it was like sharing a little taste of something special with a friend. And Triss stared on, only getting wetter as her friend worked her fingers on the man’s large cock.

“Your turn. Back that ass up over here.”

Oh god. Rolling her eyes again, and soon to be doing it many more times she was sure, she turned over onto her hands and knees, and backed up toward Jen. She had to get her legs over

Julias's, so she was on her hands and knees with his leg underneath her, her ass right in front of Jen.

"This little chain is so beautiful." Hard to see what Jen was doing, but Triss craned her neck back enough to look over her shoulder behind her, and watched Jen reach in between Triss's legs. Immediately, jolts of tingling pleasure started to spread out from her clitoris, as the damn Ventrue started to jingle the dangling chain.

"That ... isn't ... preparing ... my ass." Fuck fuck fuck. Her voice was a mess of wavering pants already. Not good.

"Sorry. Here." The girl poured a liberal amount of lube onto Triss's ass crack, and grinned a devil's grin as she put the bottle aside.

And then she began her work. Triss tried to frown at her, but after a few seconds, she had to let her head drop as Jen gently began to massage her ass open. Girl knew what she was doing, naturally. Ugh, total slut. Pot calling kettle. Triss sighed some fake annoyance, and looked over toward Julias to see what he thought.

His eyes were wide, and staring at her and her ass, where Jen had her fingers probing and massaging.

"You're just gonna fucking stare?"

"Hey, I'm only a passenger on this ride." He shrugged, mock innocence all over his face.

"You fucking bas—nnnng." Her body started to shiver, and her back arched down, pushing her ass toward Jen, whether she wanted to or not. Fingers were opening her, working into her, two of them massaging the lube into the skin and tight ring of muscle. It felt good, having that spot massaged, made smooth with lubricant, and filled with fingers. But Jen wasn't content to just prepare her, no.

God damn Ventrue started to slip her fingers in deeper, and pressed them down toward Triss's abdomen as she did.

Pressure. God, that pressure sensation of something filling her, and pushing toward her g-spot through the wall of flesh that separated her insides. Every time, every god damn fucking time it sent sparks of pleasure down her thighs and into her toes. Made her groan. Made her moan. Jen pressed down in beats, like a slow, deep fucking motion, sinking her fingers into their final knuckle and pressing down each time.

Moans turned into pants, and more than a few mewls, as Jen's other hand again reached between her legs, and started to play with the chain. Soon her fingers on the chain rose, and Triss started to quiver as the damnable woman started to caress her clit directly with two fingers. Icing on the cake, sweet delicious icing. It was the two fingers pressing her g-spot toward her abs, deep and far, that had Triss's body trembling though.

She fell down to her elbows, ass in the air, and body trembling as she felt the waves of orgasm start to build. Her thighs flexed, her toes curled, her feet panicked and kicked at the blankets a few times, and her insides gripped on the woman's fingers as hard as they could. Didn't stop Jen, only encouraged her. Triss looked to her lover for help, but Julias was awestruck, eyes wide and a smile on his lips as he watched Jen at work, his gaze devouring Triss's body.

She came. Jen was too fucking good, and Triss was helpless to it. Julias's hungry gaze only made things worse, and Beatrice glanced between him and the starving woman behind her, before the waves of climax started to work through her. She squeezed on the blankets, and on Jen's fingers with her sphincter as she felt her pussy clench like a vise. Sparkling heat worked through her, exploded outward from her pelvis, until her whole body was trembling, and her eyes rolled upward with the bliss of it all.

With nothing filling her slit, there was nothing to stop her from squirting hard. She knew a solid squirt of her cum must have hit Jen, probably splashed all over her wrists, but Triss had a hard time caring right then. She was still cumming, and Jen was still fingering her ass. She'd let up on her clitoris thankfully, the poor nub having gone super sensitive, but the fingers inside her were content to keep pressing down toward her g-spot, over, and over, and over, until Triss mewled openly, and squirted again.

“S ... St...”

“Ah, yeah, sorry.” Jen finally stopped, and removed her hands.

Triss almost fell over. Arg, she didn't want to cum this hard, not like this, so fast, so messily, right at the start. This was embarrassing! It only got worse as she, panting and mewling like a cat in heat, looked over her shoulder again to see Jen sitting there, ass between her ankles, smiling down at how breasts now glistened, soaked in Triss's juices.

“I ... I um...”

“Triss, I think an apology is in order.”

“What?”

“You call me a slut and whore, but here you are, four minutes into some fingering and you cum like a geyser.” Jen reached out, and slapped Triss's ass. The large mound of firmness jiggled lightly with the impact, and Triss glared daggers at the evil woman. It made Jen grin more. “You're the most sensitive woman I've ever had my fingers on!”

“ ... I...”

“You can apologize later. For now, Mire, I want to see some of that spooning.” She snapped one hand's fingers twice, pointed at

Mire, then at Triss. God damn bitch was going to dictate everything tonight.

But instead of saving her from this embarrassment, Julias saluted Jen military style. Arg, where was his Ventrue pride when Triss needed it? He sat up, reached out for Triss, scooped her up, and turned her around so she was on her back along his chest. He rolled over to face toward Jen, Triss still with her back pressed to his chest, so now she was on her side as well, and also facing Jen. His cock was between her thighs, poking out from underneath her dripping cunt, and one arm was wrapped around her chest to hug her close.

“Oh this is perfect. Nosferatu, creature of darkness, in the arms of her valiant lover for some tender, heartwarming sex. Except, anal, because kinky girl need kinky sex.” Jen nodded to herself, tapped her chin a few times, and looked up on an angle for a couple seconds. Like a movie director planning out scenes in her head. Christ. “Can you hook your leg back over his, Triss?”

“What? That’s not comfortable.”

“Yeah but it looks better. I can’t see anything if you have both your legs closed.”

Kill her. Yeap, kill her. Later. For now, Triss snorted, and did as she was told, raising her leg and hooking the foot behind Julias’s legs. It put her pussy on display, and Julias’s cock along with it.

Jen licked her lips, crawled in closer, and reached out. Julias shuddered; must have had the girl’s fingers on his cock again. But a moment later, it was Triss shuddering as she felt her man’s girth start to open her ass. Lube, lots and lots of lube, and a thorough fingering had prepared the Nos, and she tried to keep frowning at Jen as the woman helped Julias ease his cock into her tingling body. Didn’t work. Her head collapsed onto the pillow, and she let out a

quiet groan as her lover eased inch after inch of his large phallus into her ass.

“You ever see this?” Jen said. “God damn.”

“H ... how would I be able to see this?” Triss tried to force the moans out of her voice, but Julias had already sunk every bit of him into her, and was busy trying to grind his body deeper into her. He liked trying to get balls deep inside her, and the size of her ass made that difficult sometimes.

“Well obviously you have to set up some mirrors. Or film it. Oooh.” Jen clapped once, hopped off the bed, wiped off her hands, and yanked out her smartphone from her purse. “Tada!”

“You can’t be serious.”

Jen climbed back onto the bed, sat on her knees and ass once again by Triss’s legs, and actually started to film her. A panning shot at first, aimed at Triss’s face; vampire face wouldn’t show up well on camera, but that didn’t seem to bother Jen. The Ventrue, smiling like a satisfied cat, continued to move the camera around over Triss’s body, aiming it at her breasts, her stomach, her piercings, her abs, until eventually it was pointed at her pussy.

Jen reached out, and with one hand still holding the phone, began to jingle the clit chain.

“H-Hey! Come on, I’m ... still fucking sensitive.” She’d just cum two minutes ago after all. Make no nevermind that Julias was balls deep inside her ass, filling her, his cock pushing toward her belly and making her body sing.

“I thought Othello’s Madison was a kinky thing. You, are delectable.” Her exploring hand continued to play with the chain, little tugs, gentle bouncing of it along her fingers, before the Ventrue’s digits found the folds of her pussy and began to caress



them. “Juices trickling out of you along your smooth lips, while Julias fills up your ass? Bet you can cum just from anal.”

She came from only anal all the time. She knew most women didn't, but for her, it was that sensation of being filled, of having her depths pressed against that lit a fire inside her. And for some reason, combining that with the naughty side of it being from her ass, with the right angle to press things toward her pussy, usually had her cumming in minutes. Yeah, she usually came easily, and hard, and now Jen was going to get to see all of that, and fucking film it. Every moment of this was making Triss blush red.

Julias's hugging arm reached a little higher, and his fingers slowly wrapped around her neck. Oh god.

“I wouldn't mind watching that later,” he said, voice a whisper against her ear. Jen could still hear it, but damn the sound of whispered voice on the ear was sexy.

Neck. Neck. He was holding her neck, squeezing it lightly, that gentle choking that screamed 'you're mine' and 'I love you' at the same time. She melted against him, mewled a little louder than she wanted, and held onto his arm with hers.

“O ... ok.”

Jen almost squealed, and again began to roam the camera over Triss's body as Julias started to fuck the decidedly subdued Nos. Yeah, no escaping this, no hiding how good this felt, and how infuriating and intoxicating it was to be filmed during it. Exhibitionism fetish in full tilt now, god damn it. Triss tried to turn her head, to hide her face in the pillow, but Julias's grip decided different. It turned her head the other way, until she was facing upward, and her lover grinned down at her with that jackass grin of his.

He leaned in closer, and as his grip on her neck tightened, he started to kiss her.

Kissing was romantic. Kissing was lovey-dovey. Kissing was very personal, when done like this, in the middle of sex and in such a deep, passionate way. Triss was worried this would be the sort of thing Julias might be hesitant to do, to get vulnerable like this when a third party was in the bedroom. But, her lover didn't seem to mind at all. He hugged her, squeezed her, buried her in his kiss, and choked her in the way she loved, as he began to slowly, deeply fuck her ass.

Jen swooned, audibly swooned, blatant cliché sound and all, before she crawled over to sit in front of Beatrice's chest. Still filming, still grinning.

"I don't get any of this with Madison and Othello, and my ghouls are just dicks on legs. This is too cute!" She crawled in closer, and aimed the smartphone down at both Triss and Julias from above to get some panning shots. "More kissing please."

Triss reached out to swipe at the camera, but Jen was prepared, and dodged with a chuckle. And, despite Triss's protest, Julias guided her head back to him, and resumed kissing her. Even in the middle of this ridiculousness, her love wanted to love her, and show it on camera too. Christ that was fucking melting her into a puddle and she hated him for it.

Julias started to fuck her faster. Jen giggled, crawled down the bed to kneel in front of Triss's legs, and brought the camera around to focus on all the juicy bits. And Triss still had her leg up and hooked around Julias's, putting everything on display. Seemed to turn Julias on too, cause the man fucked her faster again, ramping up to a proper fucking speed pretty quick compared to his usual, slower pace. In a single minute he was up to a good, deep fucking

rhythm, and his grip on Triss's neck only tightened, until she could no longer speak.

Her chains started to jingle, hitting each other as she rocked on the bed up and down, each thrust from her man shaking her body. They were almost like warning bells, getting louder as she felt the heat growing again, felt more of the tingling sparks start to build inside her where she felt his cock press against her depths. God that fucking spot, he hit it again, and again, and again. She tried to say something, but no words could come out, his grip on her neck absolute.

So she did the only thing she could do. She sank into him, one hand holding his wrist, the other squeezing the sheets, and closed her eyes as she felt the sparks build again.

Not fair, so not fair. Helpless, vulnerable, exposed, and it was making her so damn hot. A minute later and the pleasure tremors started to work up and down her legs, forcing her toes to curl as her pussy squeezed hard. Bliss poured through her, flowing out from her pelvis and through her muscles, each accompanied by another clench of her cunt, and her ass around the cock that refused to stop drilling her.

She squirted again. A tiny one at first, splashing along her leg. And then another, harder, hitting the sheets, and probably hitting Jen too. Couldn't tell, not with Julias pinning her head to his chest, grip so tight he'd have choked a human to death; but not a vampire. She wriggled in his grip, tried to pull herself away a little, maybe get in a second to recover. But he just pulled her back in, and resumed fucking her, each thrust shaking both her and the bed, and making her ass jiggle with impact.

Fingers. Jen started touching her, her pussy, her lips. Triss braced for another clit massage, but instead, Jen only spread the lips of her slit with one hand, and continued to film with the other.

“Holy shit,” she said. “You just ... god ... damn that’s hot.”

Triss so very much wanted to get revenge, maybe kick Jen really hard. But she was too busy, too busy cumming over and over and harder than usual. And Jen got to see it all. More than see it, she was filming a documentary, including close ups and a curious hand reaching out to expose more. Jen could see how Triss’s cunt kept squeezing, and she could see how the pink flesh of her insides leaked juices between the harder squirts.

Julias finally let go of her neck, and eased his rhythm. He wasn’t cumming yet, just doing his usual thing where he liked to mix it up, go hard then go slow, keep her on her toes. It was enough for Triss to get some control back, and pull her leg up off of Julias’s so she could get into a more relaxed fetal position, and enjoy her orgasm aftershocks.

“Aw, now your shins are in the way,” Jen said. Triss used one of those shins to give Jen a good kick in the thigh. “Ow! Ok, ok. Sorry. Just ... I mean, at first I was impressed, but now I’m jealous. You two just curl up like this, and fuck hugging each other like this ... and Triss cums her brains out.” Jen set the phone aside, lay down on her side in front of Triss about a foot away from her face, and smiled at her. “I take a good ten minutes to warm up at least, and that’s with two guys rubbing me down.”

Triss listened, and quivered a little as the pleasure tremors worked through her. Julias was still inside her, and he offered the gentlest deep pushes of his body, so her body could continue to sing as the pleasure waves finally started to fade.

“You going to spend the whole damn night admiring how easily I cum?”

“Yes.”

God damn it.

“I know I do.” Julias leaned down over her, kissed her neck, her crocodile teeth where her cheek should have been, and her jaw.

“Ok, more poses! Mire, on your back,” Jen said. Bastard nodded, and did just that, rolled onto his back, and took Triss with him. Now she lay upon his broad chest, and had to turn her head to frown at Jen some more. “No no, no frowning! Come on, you have no idea how hot you are. You have the body of a fucking superhero, and you’re blushing and shivering with those good orgasm vibes! Looks fucking great on film.” Damn Ventrue grabbed her phone again, and started filming once more. “Mire, legs spread out. Triss, can you arch your back a bit, really highlight that lean body you got, show off those breasts and the chain and stuff!”

“ ... I’m currently in the middle of having sex, Jen.”

“Exactly.” Now that she had room, Jen scooted in closer, and while one hand was still holding the phone, the other reached out to land upon Triss’s abs. “Fucking damn I could wash clothes on these.” Her hand went higher, found Triss’s breasts, and began to massage one of them, fingers caressing and circling the frustratingly hard nipple.

Triss sighed, rolled her eyes again, and did as Jen said. She arched her back, pushed out her breasts, and rested her head and shoulders against Julias. And naturally, she bent her legs at the knee, feet on the blankets between Julias’s thighs. Posing like a glamour model, except, with a guy underneath her, and inside her.

“I can’t fuck like this.”

“No, but gimme a sec.” Jen got up on her feet, and started to walk around, blatantly holding the phone with both hands and filming everything in slow, panning shots. Eventually, she got down on her knees between Julias’s legs, and used one of her hands to nudge open Triss’s thighs. All on camera. “K, you can relax now.”

Triss groaned, let her legs collapse around Jen, and let her back flatten to Julias's chest. Her arms relaxed too, her claws finding Julias's arms so she could rest her hands upon them. Queue for Julias to resume fucking her, in slow, deep, wonderful strokes. They didn't normally fuck like this, her lying on him on her back, but it probably did look good on camera.

Triss lifted her head, and raised a brow at Jen. Girl was sitting between her thighs, and staring at Triss's pussy, where Julias was penetrating her ass. Hunger in her eyes, and more than once the Ventrue licked her lips. She leaned in too, got right close to Triss's body, and set the phone aside so she could reach out with both hands, and pull apart Triss's slit.

“God damn you have a tight little cunt.”

“F-Fuck ... you...”

Jen almost purred with the sounds Triss was making; evil woman was loving this way too much. She leaned in closer, until her face was maybe six inches from Triss's pussy, and instead of purring, growled. Before Triss could say something, Jen put her lips onto her clitoris, and began to lick, tongue playing with the chain that dangled over the hyper sensitive nub. Gentle thank god, very gentle, and Triss let out a long moan as she melted against her lover beneath her while Jen kissed her clitoris.

Moan turned into gasp as she felt Jen start to press knuckles against her clenching entrance.

“Hey, what're you doing?”

“You know. You saw me doing it to Madison, remember?” The evil Ventrue woman laughed at the worry on Triss's face, and began to push knuckles forward, against Triss's cunt. “Damn you are tight though. This'll be tough to fit.”

“W-Wait, come on, that’s—” She gasped, and sat up, hands planting against Julia’s chest as she stared down between her legs, at the woman sinking her fist into Triss’s insides.

Jen knew what she was doing. It wasn’t a punching fist, rather, one sort of compressed and with a thinner shape. But it was still a fist, and Triss stared at the sight of her pink flesh slowly spreading around the thickness of four fingers and a thumb.

She thought she might explode. Thickness, so much filling her, fighting for space inside her. She panted like a dog as her jaw dropped, and Jen’s fist began to open her up. No need for lubricant, soaked as she was, and the fist of the Ventrue started to get into her, past the squeezing muscles and taut lips. A fist, inside her, along with her lover’s cock.

Her groans turned into whimpers, as Jen pushed her fist in further, and further, until it completely disappeared inside Triss. Now her pussy was visibly wrapping around the woman’s wrist instead, and a very noticeable bulge was on Triss’s abs beneath the navel.

“... I uh ... christ, I...” She sat up straighter, reached out, and set a hand on Jen’s shoulder, the other still behind her and braced against Julia’s chest. “Fucking ... p-poor ... Madison.”

“She doesn’t cum at the drop of a hat like you do, though.”

“I don’t—nnh!” Attempts to defend herself of ridiculous accusations proved horribly pointless, as Jen started to move her fist. Knuckles, hard, but soaked in her cum and softened, pressed against her everything. Jen pressed upward, hardness against her g-spot, grinding, thrusting. But Jen didn’t stop there, pushing her fist in deeper, slow and gentle, but deep, very deep.

“You know, you really got that ‘like it so deep you can feel it between your tonsils’ vibe to you.”

“You fucking—” Pleasure, deep, overwhelming, hit her as Jen pushed her fist in a little deeper, causing the bulge along her abs to move higher. Triss fell back, and lay upon Julias as she started to cum. She could feel her juices flowing, her clenching muscles forcing her to squirt, for the millionth time, all over Jen’s wrist. Each pulsing wave of pleasure worked from her head to her toes, causing her legs to tremble, and her hands to squeeze onto Julias’s sides as she came.

Jen took the opportunity to keep pushing her fist into her, until Triss knew the woman had long ago reached the depths of her pussy, and was pressing against those deep places Triss really, really, really fucking loved. It hurt getting it that deep, but god, it fucking felt good, and the Nosferatu trembled all the more as she felt another gushing orgasm work through her. Cumming so much it was starting to get painful, muscles forever clenching, squeezing, and toes threatening to cramp from the constant curling, but Jen didn’t care. The damn Ventrue just kept working her fist back and forth in a deep rhythm, lightly rocking Triss on Julias’s body.

Somewhere along the line, Triss could feel Julias start to cum. She was vaguely aware that, as much as she was getting fucked by two rather large insertions, it must have felt great for her lover too, to be inside her while Jen fisted her. Bonus. But, as much as she tried to be happy about that, she could barely hold the thought as pleasure wiped her mind, Jen still fisting her, deep enough Triss was sure she’d skewer her stomach eventually.

Only when Julias stopped with his smaller thrusts, did Jen stop stretching Triss’s insides deeper into her. She kept the fist as deep as it could go, gently rocking it back and forth, but no longer tried to push it into Triss’s torso. Pleasant, delightful, and so damn fucking full, Triss lay there, and let another orgasm work through her, her trembling causing her clit chain to jingle as it bounced around on Jen’s wrist.



It took a little while, but Jen's fist got slower, and slower, and as the tremors faded away, Triss sat up again, and looked down at the mess. Oh god, not only was the woman gently milking Triss of her orgasm shocks like a god damn pro, she was massaging Julias's testicles in her other hand, with his cum. And her cum.

"Like that, Julias?" Jen said.

"Y-Yeah. That is damn tight."

"Ha, isn't it? Must be. How about this?" Jen pushed her fist down, and again started to gently fuck Triss's insides with it, massaging Julias more than anything.

"Ok! Ok, that's enough. God ... damn, I'm going to break here, Jen. You ... fucking bitch, arg." Triss reached down, grabbed the girl's wrist, and pulled her hand out of her. She stared down while she did it too, cause, holy fuck, it was a sight, to see someone's hand sliding out of your trembling, clenching folds.

Julias sat up, slipped his hands underneath Triss's thighs, and lifted her up enough to let her sit between his legs once Jen backed up, his cock falling out of her. "I'll have you know, I was really enjoying that."

"Yes, I'm sure getting your cock massaged through my god damn insides must have felt amazing. Ass." She could feel Julias's cock against the back of her now, and as he scooted forward a bit, his cum and lube-soaked length rubbed against the small of her back as he put his chin on her shoulder, and kissed her ear. His cum was leaking out of her, and he was snuggling her like he loved to do when that happened. And Jen was watching it all.

Much as Triss was bad mouthing the two of them, she couldn't deny she was really enjoying this. And, having Jen there, watching her, getting involved, even smiling her intrigued smiles as she watched Julias get romantic with Triss, was ... oddly enjoyable too.

Triss shivered a few times. Still had tremors working through her, and she turned a bit to hold Julias's arm with one of hers, so she could hold him while the tinglies continued to work through her. Loved the tinglies, the little sparks that worked through her thighs, made her feel vulnerable and a bit clingy. It was a part of her worry, that she wouldn't feel comfortable being like this, holding Julias while she came, getting vulnerable and girly with him, when she usually acted like a badass rocker chick in front of other Kindred. Jen was getting to see her girly side.

But Jen wasn't teasing her about it, like Triss suspected she would. Hell, if anything, Jen's smile, her grins and smirks, they all faded, and as she watched Triss and Julias hug, her eyes filled with wonder. Fucking wonder, like seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time. She even pulled one knee up to her chest to hug as she watched the two of them, gaze stuck on them. Like seeing a young girl watching a romance movie, and adoring the happily-ever-after ending.

Ok, Triss was touched. Jen deserved a reward.

Smirking, the Nos turned her head, and put her lips to Julias's ear. "Fuck the shit out of her."

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~~Julias~~

Everything was going well, and better than he could have hoped for.

Triss was loving it, having Jen in the bed with them. His fellow Ventrue fed right into the sorts of things Triss liked, even if the Nos didn't want to admit it. She would later, he knew; she'd matured a lot since their first date.

The thing he was worried about, and he knew Triss was worried about, was whether having another vampire in the bed would

damage the intimacy. Triss liked to play the badass girl, and Julias liked how that melted away when the girl snuggled with him, particularly after some great sex. Kissing, hugging, holding hands, he thought maybe Jen's presence would make doing any of those things awkward, and he knew Triss was doubly worried about it. But, it didn't. Something about Jen's genuine interest and sincerity about the nature of their relationship made it feel safe to be intimate and vulnerable.

Plus, being inside his lover's ass while another woman fisted her, so he got to feel every bit of it? Yeah, could not deny, that felt amazing. He was still hard, hungry for more, and Triss wanted him to fuck Jen, hard. He could do that.

Triss giggled — holy crap an actual giggle — and grabbed Jen's wrists, before pinning them to the bed in front of them both, so Jen was on her knees.

“Um ... what?”

“Oh, nothing,” Triss said, chuckling.

Julias rolled his eyes, but found himself chuckling soon after as he crawled along the bed, and got behind Jen. The Ventrue blinked at the two of them, several times, before she started wriggling to try and free herself. Not happening. Triss was far stronger than Jen physically, even if Triss was still shivering with post-orgasm bliss. It made it all the hotter, watching Jen try and get out of Triss's grip while Triss herself still quivered, her nipple chain dangling and trembling.

Julias got behind Jen, pushed her knees together, and then put his down outside hers, trapping her knees between his.

“What're you doing back there, Mire?” Jen said, looking over her shoulder at him with a raised brow.

“You know Jen,” he said, “you are a very attractive woman. You had almost every Kindred in the city staring at you during the ball, Triss included.”

Jen smiled, pride showing through with the typical subtlety of Ventrue pride: none. “I am fucking gorgeous, I don’t blame her. How about you? Were you staring?”

This woman, ha. Even trapped between two Kindred stronger than her, she acted like she was in charge. He looked to Triss, whose smile only grew, and she nodded back to him with a wink.

“I was,” he said.

“That, is damn hot.” Jen swayed her ass a little, its glorious curves still hugged by her black lace lingerie. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think about the two of us having some fun together too, Julias.”

“Pretty sure you feel that way about everyone,” Triss said.

“Not true! I’ll have you know I rarely sleep with Kindred, sometimes Othello. You two though? God damn.”

Well, color him surprised. Triss too, by the way her eyebrows raised. She didn’t let go of the woman’s wrists though, and licked her lips with her long tongue as she looked between the trapped Ventrue, and Julias.

It really was too damn perfect. Julias took Jen’s underwear, and slipped it down to her knees. Several trails of juices connected from it to Jen’s pussy, where the smooth, pink lips were coated with wetness. Her clitoris looked swollen, and her legs trembled lightly. The girl was on the edge, close to cumming; must have been masturbating between bouts of playing with Triss, or him.

He’d planned to finger her to a couple orgasms before taking her, but like this, and with Triss staring at him, hunger in her eyes and

excitement making her almost bounce, he couldn't stop himself. He took his cock into one hand, pressed the dripping, hard shaft against the girl's quivering cunt, and started the long, slow journey of sinking himself into her awaiting insides.

"Oh ... g-god..." Jen shook like a leaf, and let her head fall between her arms as she wriggled. "F ... finally..." Soon she was on her elbows, ass in the air, and head turned to peek up at the girl holding her hands hostage.

Julias thought Triss might have taken the opportunity to tease Jen, to rub it in the girl's face that she was breaking so easily, that the woman was so obviously ready to cum from so little done to her, like she had to Triss. But instead, Triss stared on, snake eyes looking up and down the curve of Jen's back, as the girl was down on her elbows now. Jen's attempts to keep her smile on faded away, as did her grinning eyes, replaced with a parted, moaning mouth, and eyes rolling upward.

Her insides felt divine. Soaked, quivering, squeezing. She didn't squeeze as hard as Triss did, or start pushing toward him as eagerly as Triss did. Jen seemed to prefer to wait, to let someone else do the work, like a spoiled Ventrue would. Supposedly the girl was being pampered by two ghouls on the regular, and while she was certainly a pro at sex, she wasn't used to losing control.

Triss wanted to make her lose control, and as Julias felt the woman's drenched pussy squeeze on him in gentle spurts, he could feel the urge hit him. But first he'd take his time, and see how Jen responded as he, slowly but surely, sank every inch of his cock into her shaking body. Lot of girls didn't like it deep. Triss did, and as Julias felt the head of his cock start to gently stretch Jen in deeper, and deeper, her trembling and squeezing told him she did too.

He squeezed her hips tighter, and after drawing his cock out of her until only the head of his length kept her dripping folds open, he

slammed himself balls deep into her, hard.

“Oh! Oh, oh f-f-fucking ... fuck! Not so hard! Fucking ... god.”

Triss grinned down at the trapped woman, leaned down, and put a small kiss on her ear before sitting up again and blowing Julias a kiss. “Go nuts.”

“W-Wait, come on, you—” She squealed with the impact of another thrust, and started to tremble, a lot. Julias stayed balls deep inside her, filling her, stretching her, and smiled as he felt the woman clench on him until her juices were dripping down his testicles. Jen fell, elbows giving out, chest and head coming to rest on the blankets between her pinned hands.

“Two strokes and you’re down,” Triss said, crooning. Not a tease from the way she was staring, but rather, admiration.

“Not ... not fair, you—nnng!”

Julias didn’t wait long. He started to thrust into her again, grip on her hips tight and absolute, forcing her balls deep onto him with each stroke. Each earned a wet smack as his testicles slapped into her folds and clitoris, and each pulled more mewls from the woman, growing increasingly high pitched. He wasn’t gentle, he thrust hard, with his grip yanking her hips toward him fast enough for her ass to jiggle with each impact.

It didn’t take long for a second orgasm to hit the woman. She tried to pick herself up again, to push herself onto her hands, maybe get back some control, but Triss put a hand on her back, and pushed her down, pinning her chest to the blankets. Again Julias expected her to chuckle and tease, but instead, Triss stared at him, at Jen, at where her ass was bouncing against him, and she licked her lips and crocodile teeth with increasing fascination.

“P ... lease ... slow ... down...” Cumming, trembling, she squirmed and twisted with all the power of a worm on a hook. Her moans ripped away what little strength she had, and her fingers waggled in the air, pinned by Triss at the wrist, desperate for freedom.

He didn't give her any. He pounded her hard enough to make the bed creak, to make her squeals melt into exhausted pants, and to make her insides squeeze in random spurts as another orgasm tore through her. The only break she got was him deciding to sink himself into her to the hilt, and stay there, stretching her depths inward and enjoying the tight spasms of her pussy around his length as she came.

“Hey Superman ... flip her over.”

God yes. Julias flipped the girl over, and grinned down at her. Exhausted, trembling, and still squirming with attempts to sit up, maybe escape, but Triss didn't let go of her wrists. Even as Triss got down beside her, she still held Jen's hands, and snuggled into the girl's side as she pinned Jen's wrists over her head inside one of Triss's hands. With her other hand now free, she squeezed Jen's nearest breast, cupping it, as she placed her lips upon the girl's nipple, and started to run her long, long tongue along it. Not just licking her breast, but devouring it, like she was ravenous for it.

Julias was a gentleman though. As much as this was very much a loss-of-power scenario for poor, whimpering Jen, he knew how to make the position work for her pleasure. He grabbed a couple of thick pillows, put them under her ass, and spread his knees to get a bit lower. He slipped off her underwear too, and grabbed her legs. With her thighs hooked around his hips, he slipped his cock back into her dripping folds, and slammed his hips forward again.

“W-Wait! Fucking ... god ... christ ... merciful ... fucking ... nng!” Jen twisted left and right, but couldn't get away from Triss, from her claws, from the long tongue bathing her breast. And, as Julias

continued to thrust into her, she let her head collapse back onto the blankets. Triss wanted him to fuck her hard, so he continued to fuck her hard, each slam of his body forward causing Jen to shift back and forth on the sheets, and for her free breast to bounce along her chest.

And, again, Jen came. For all her teasing of Triss's rather sensitive body, she was cumming easily as well. A night of playing with Triss's parts must have set her on fire far more than Julias could have anticipated. And as he forced his cock into her, despite how much her squeezing muscles were trying to get him to stop, her juices renewed, enough so drops of her cum trickled onto his testicles. Forcing his cock into her as she clenched, with the angle of her hips on the pillows forcing his cock upward toward her belly, he knew each thrust was hitting her spots and forcing her to cum. The girl had probably never been fucked like this as a Kindred, forced to cum like this, hard, pinned, unable to escape, unable to stop the two people in the bed who wanted to see her cum her brains out. Triss was loving it, moaning as she licked up Jen's breast like chocolate. It was surprising. Triss really enjoyed it when they invited a kine into the bed, but she never went crazy with lust like this, groaning into Jen's skin like an animal, while her free hand slid out to grab and massage her further breast.

Julias groaned as well, as he felt the warm pleasure build between his legs again, fluids rising as Jen's flooding insides massaged the length of him.

"I know that groan," Triss said, finally pulling her tongue from the girl's breast. "... yeah, cum inside her."

He smirked at his lover, and looked back to Jen; she was almost weeping, little tears in her eyes as she struggled to make any sounds, efforts to speak proving futile as her panting and whimpering left her breathless. She couldn't stop shaking, and between each of his hard thrusts, she managed a wavering mewl.



Her legs were trembling to the point he had to move his hands from her waist to her thighs again, and clutch them from the outside to keep them hooked on his hips. But he couldn't stop, the need to cum rising as he felt the waves of pleasure growing stronger, glans growing more and more sensitive, more swollen, as it pressed against the girl's depths.

As he felt his cum start to gush, he slammed the girl against him. She squealed, and he kept her there, balls deep on him as the cum poured into her. He thrust again as another wave of his cum poured into her. And again, and again, each a hard thrust, each making the woman shake on the bed, each earning a loud squeal from her and another squirt of his cum. But, after the first few thrusts, he kept her against him, his cock buried inside her, and lightly shifted her up and down an inch to milk the orgasm.

As his pace settled down, he managed to focus his eyes again, and he stared on as Triss let go of Jen's hands. She didn't move them, not at first, her body trembling like a leaf, and her breath still a mess of pants breaking her whimpers. And as she recovered, Triss's lips raised from her nipple to her neck, where she began to suckle, and kiss, and lick. Her hand caressed Jen's nipple, growing softer, less squeezing, more gentle massaging, all while the woman snuggled into Jen's side.

To say it was a visual feast to gorge on, while he enjoyed the bliss of orgasm and Jen's quivering, clenching, soaked, hot insides, would be an understatement.

"I ... I ... mmn. You ... big, bad man." Jen threw one hand up like throwing a baseball, only for it to bounce on the sheets beside her, limp. "Tender." The orgasm aftershocks were still working through her, and Julias continued to gently pull her hips up and down an inch against him to spur them on, each causing her insides to milk his length of his few remaining drops of cum. He could feel it, hot,

thick, dripping off his testicles, each joined by several of Jennifer's juices.

Triss, without removing her lips from Jen's neck, raised a hand and motioned for Julias to come over. He slipped his cock out of the woman's clenching folds, and shifted around to kneel beside Jen, opposite of Triss. His shaft was covered in cum, coated and dripping of it, a large pool of it thick and resting along the topside of its base. Triss at last raised her head, and moaned openly as she looked at his shaft.

"I ... have to admit Jen, I really loved this, a lot more than I thought I would. Lot ... lot ... more," she said.

"Glad ... you ... liked ... it." Poor girl was still trembling. Had it really been that long since she'd been fucked that hard, if ever? He almost felt bad. Almost.

Triss motioned Julias forward with her claws, and pointed down at Jen's lips. Smiling, he scooted in closer, leaned forward enough that he had to place a hand on the blanket above Jen's head for balance, and guided his cock down to the Ventrue's lips with his other hand. His shaft was still mostly hard, still soaked, and he groaned quietly as he placed his glans upon the shivering vampire's lips.

Jen blinked up at him, surprised, but managed to open her mouth after a few moments, and offered some weak, exhausted kisses.

"You've shown restraint, leading up to this point," Triss said. "Well, a little, anyway. And ... I ... yeah, really want you back in this bed. Frequently."

Oh boy. Julias did his best to contain his smirk.

"Yeah?" Jen said, a cock on her lips and soon coating them in white, and her own juices.

“Yeah, and ... I ... fuck it.” Triss leaned in, and started to kiss her.

Did not see that coming. Julias’s cock hardened fully within seconds as Triss set her lips upon his glans, and began to bathe it in kisses, while pressing it into Jen’s lips at the same time. Triss’s lips were perfectly human from the front, and she used them, suckling on him, offering him little licks, and moaning onto him as her kisses met Jen’s. The woman’s eyes had opened wide for a moment, but seconds later they half-closed like Triss’s, and soon she began to smile as she got control of herself, exhaustion passing.

She returned the kisses, managed a peek up at Julias as she did, and winked at him. Woman loved it when a plan came together, a feeling any Ventrue knew all too well.

After a few more licks, Triss pulled her head up again. “Just to be clear, I’m still Julias’s girlfriend, and I love him. But ... I mean ... you know? I ... kind of ... wouldn’t mind you being a part of this.”

“Friends with benefits,” Jen said, one arm reaching up to comb aside some of Triss’s hair over her ear. “Best friends, with the best benefits.”

This was a strange circumstance to be in. Should he say something? His girlfriend had basically invited another girl to be a part of their relationship. Someone who had, over the months, become her best friend. Someone who liked Triss on every level, monster parts included. Someone who Julias had to admit, he liked. Girl bled confidence, and she was far smarter than she often let on. And, she was utterly, fucking, beautiful.

Triss put her lips to his glans once more, and guided it down to press against Jen’s lips again. Her hand found the base of his cock as well, and she used it to guide thick globs of his cum down onto their awaiting mouths. The kissing resumed, constantly burying, massaging, and caressing the head of his cock, until the stimulation was almost painful. He couldn’t look away, awestruck by the waves

of white that coated their lips, that connected the two women, and soon started to run down Jen's jawline. Triss licked it up, and set the cum back onto Jen's lips before she resumed kissing her, and his cock's tip.

They didn't stop. For ten more minutes, they played with each other, tested kissing each other, tested kissing him, tried different ways to suckle and lick on him at the same time, until his cock was completely clean of cum. Jen's juices had long washed away any of the lubricant before getting to this, so they didn't hesitate to take turns wrapping their lips around different places on his length with wandering, caressing licks. And as the tingling of impending orgasm started, he began to gently nudge his hips forward; the girls parted both their mouths just enough so two sets of lips trailed along the sides of his cock's head as he did.

As more of his cum started to flow down his shaft, he forced himself to hold still, and let the persistent, suckling sets of lips begin to milk him. Triss turned to catch the first wave, and she smiled up at him as it landed gently into her mouth. Instead of swallowing it or wiping it away, she let it flow back onto the head of his cock, and down onto Jen's mouth, who returned the favor with parted lips, suckling on his glans at the same time. Cum overflowed once again, too much for Triss to lick up, and she chuckled as it ran down Jen's chin and jaw to flow down the sides of her neck. More thick, warm cum escaped him, coming out in slower waves now, filling Jen's mouth as she let it slip between her lips, and as Triss guided it into them. They kept at it until his orgasm was done, drawing more drops of white out of his cock, and moving it around with their lips before letting much of it slip into Jen's awaiting maw.

Julias sat back, and stared on. No need to say anything, no need to comment on how amazing that had been, how pleasurable, how lascivious. No, he just sat there, shivered a few times, and watched on as the two ladies smiled at him, before looking at each other. They started to kiss, plucking at each other's lips, and letting their

tongues graze each other. Jen's mouth was full of his cum, and she pushed small waves of it up to catch Triss's lips, so as she raised her head, strands of his cum connected the two women. Triss kissed her again, slowly, playfully, and took a few peeks at Julias as she caught more of his cum on her lips from Jen's, earning another strand of white.

And just when Julias was sure this couldn't get any kinkier, Jen forced herself up onto her elbows, and opened her mouth completely. His cum flowed out of her, off of her chin, off of Triss as she sat up as well, and it trickled down over the Ventrue's large breasts.

Seeing streaks of white run down Jen's heavy tits was apparently too much for the Nos. Triss climbed up onto Jen's waist, straddled her, and cupped both of the woman's breasts, catching the trickling rivers of white, and massaging it into the woman's nipples. Jen trembled, and fell back again, setting her head on a pillow and shivering as Triss rubbed the white cum into her swollen nipples, and around the underside of each breast.

"Are you trying to kill me?" Julias said, gesturing at the blatant male fantasy playing out before him. "I don't think I can go a fourth time."

"Oh, um ... uh ... shit, yeah." Triss raised an arm to wipe away his cum from her lips. Jen did as well. Though, despite that, Triss put her hands back onto Jen's breasts, and continued to grope them, massage them, and work his fluid into them. "Just ... gimme five minutes."

"This go well, Julias?" Jen said, voice breaking a bit as Triss massaged her. "Wasn't sure if I overstepped during this. I know you're not normally a fan of Kindred in the bed, or ... you know, one of them kissing your girl."

Julias waved a hand, dismissing her worries. “I like you, and Triss really, really likes you.”

“But!” Triss raised both her hands, as if in rebellion. “Julias explained the rules. You cool with those rules?”

“I am, I very much am, cause ... yeah, I’m a bit surprised, and ... and this has been one amazing night. Haven’t had a night like this in forever.” Like a kid given permission to go play outside, Jen sat up straight with Triss still straddling her, nudged her nose into the woman’s breasts, her nipple chain, and set her lips onto Triss’s nipple.

Triss moaned, and looked at Julias. Asking for permission, or at least, agreement, with her offer to Jen. He nodded, and lay down beside them as they touched each other. The night really couldn’t have gone any better than—

“Shit, my phone!” Jen reached out blindly, fingers tugging at the blankets. “Must take pictures!”

# Chapter 54

~~Jack~~

Alone, in the old, abandoned tunnels, and soon to enter Azamel's hole in the ground. He didn't want to be here, but it was important, too important.

With the Invictus, meeting the elders was an imposing affair of big leather chairs and long hallways. With the Uratha, meeting Avery was as cozy as sitting down on a couch, next to a bomb. With Azamel, meeting her was like walking through a tunnel into some sort of nightmare realm — probably was — and talking with the monster under the bed. They were monsters, she was a monster, and the feeling in his gut told him he was going to be speaking with something akin to a clown demon, whispering to him from a gutter drain in the street.

Prickly, crawly things, invisible but there, tickled along his skin as he got closer and closer to where Azamel lived. The lights were flickering, but on, some of them at least, and they made a buzzing noise as they struggled to remain lit. Quiet screams echoed along the concrete bricks of the concave walls of the tunnel, so quiet he was sure his imagination was being a giant asshole and making things worse than they actually were. But the fact Azamel was a genuine monster, a thing of legend, a fucking nightmare, casted doubt on whether it was his mind playing tricks on him.

The Invictus knew he was here. He hadn't told them, but they knew, they had to. They'd set up explosives, so no doubt they had cameras watching those to some extent or another. Hell, even without the explosives, Invictus used technology like a weapon; there'd be cameras all over the city they could either tap into, or had set up themselves. And since everyone had seen him talk to Athalia

at the party, no doubt his bosses could piece together why he was here, and that it was requested he not talk to them about it, lest the encounter be canceled and all hell break loose.

Why couldn't old demons use e-mail, or texts?

He shivered and rubbed his arms. Dressed in a good suit, the sort he'd wear to an official meeting with the Invictus, hoping to make a good impression. It was probably wasted. Still, he adjusted his tie, rubbed his buzzed hair a few times, and stepped into Azamel's home. A vivid imagination painted for him a merry picture, lots of ways he could die down here, probably while having a private conversation with a monster out of a Stephen King novel.

But she wasn't there.

He stopped at the stage, where the old woman kept her furniture, and raised a brow as he looked around. The lights were on, including a god-awful lamp on the stage, but no one was home.

"... hello?" he said. His voice echoed against the concrete walls. No one. Maybe—

"This way."

He jumped. Oh good fucking god it someone's voice, a whisper, like ice on his neck. He turned around, but no one was there. It could have been a vampire, someone using their cloak of night, someone who was enough of a master to both hide themselves in it, but also let their voice out? No, no fucking way, vampires didn't feel like this, like needles stabbing him up and down his body.

But the voice did come from a direction, and, gulping down on nothing, he headed toward the sound. It was coming from down the other tunnel, where none of the lights worked.

"This way..."



Dead, so dead, so fucking dead. He hadn't even seen anything yet, and he could feel that panic crawling up his legs and down his spine. Like someone with a needle and balloon beside his head, ready to pop it at any moment, he could feel his muscles tense and his teeth clench until they were grinding. Weight shifted onto the balls of his feet, and his fingers clenched at his sides. It hadn't been nearly this bad last time he was here, but last time Triss was with him, and Azamel had simply been on the stage, rocking back and forth in her chair. This time he was alone, and everything felt different.

He stepped into the tunnel, but managed only ten feet before he noticed the floor of the tunnel gave way into a stairway.

A stairway? What the fuck. Where there should have been subway tracks and concrete, instead, a large square hole was the subway floor instead, thin and long, like the sort you found under cellar doors leading into basements. And, with the hole into hell only a few feet in front of him, he could more clearly hear the screams. The tunnel past the stairway wasn't there anymore, blocked off by a giant wall of tattered and cracked concrete instead. That wasn't supposed to be there either.

"Down ... here ... Jack," the voice said, mixed in with the howls and shrieks.

Yeah, if there was one way he was going to die, it was right down this stairway. A clown was going to jump out at any moment, and rip the soul right out of his fucking body. The fuck kind of vampire was scared of the things in the dark? He fucking was.

Again, he gulped on nothing, and took a step down. His shoes clacked on stone, heavy stone, the soft thud ringing down into the stairway. Just like walking into a basement, right? Walking into a basement filled with cries of what must have been torture. And, he couldn't see anything past ten feet, endless black awaiting him with its gaping maw.

“And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you,” he said, a whisper too quiet for himself to hear. Butchering a quote and dropping half its meaning, but, he was a product of his generation, after all, internet snippets and a short attention span.

He pulled out his smartphone, and shined the light into the stairway. It added a whole six inches onto how far he could see. The darkness wasn't a lack of light, not wholly, but a fog, a black fog that tugged at his fingers as he held the phone light out. Cold. He yanked his phone back, and winced as he took a step into the obsidian shroud, so its icy embrace swallowed him. With one hand still holding the useless phone for its buried light, the other reached out to the stairway beside him for balance, and he began the descent.

“You idiot Invictus think you can control us, control nightmares themselves, with explosives.” The cold voice matched the icy fog and unending obsidian like a creepy laugh fit a clown. God damn it, stop picturing clowns with psycho eyes. There are no clowns!

“... Athalia?” He kept walking. The stairway kept going down, and down, and down, each step echoing the soft clack of his shoes down into the depths. Stone above him, stone beside him, stone below him. The light of his phone was enough for him to see the ones directly near him, but all that got him was a glimpse of old, worn, black and gray rock, blurred by the icy fog of death.

“Keep walking, little leech.”

Yeap, definitely Athalia. That alleviated his fear, a little. He knew Athalia, seen her injured back in the tunnel when he first met her, then later at the ball, surrounded by sex. A person, a woman, who got up and walked around and ate breakfast.

It didn't feel like that, not this time. As that icy voiced floated through the black, it felt more like the time he was lost in a sewer

once when he was a child, one of those walk-in water tunnels on the edge of town. Endless black. He was only four at the time, and when he was older, he realized it was a very small tunnel with only a few forks that were all dead ends, none in use. Perfectly safe. At the time, in the nigh pitch black, the chill had scared and scarred him to the bone; thought for sure something was in the dark chasing him. It was years before he could walk past a dark room without hurrying past, hoping to dodge whatever nightmarish arm would reach out from the shadows to yank him into the death onyx.

It felt fucking just like that.

“Athalia, come on, I’m—”

“I. Said. Walk!” The darkness shook around him, vibrations quaking and tearing the air asunder, like glass shattering over his head. The voice lost its whisper, and became an ear-splitting shriek, knocking him onto his ass against the hard stone.

Further down the stairway, he could see movement. Twitchy movement, something jerking to the side, then to the other side of the thin stairway tunnel, something white. Then it was gone. He reached out for the wall, hands shaking, slipping on the stone as if it was slippery. But, it wasn’t slippery, it was his fingers refusing to hold still, unable to stop trembling as he tried to brace his weight against it. He almost fell over again, but, forced his knees to stop wobbling. It was a stairway of stone, steep, and if he started falling down it, he probably wouldn’t stop until he reached the bottom, and broke every bone on the way.

The weird, white thing in the distance flickered again, then faded into the black, gone. He walked after it, like a moth chasing a light in the darkness. What was that Metallica line? The soothing light at the end of your tunnel, was just a freight train coming your way.

“You ... you trying to scare me for a reason? Cause, I mean, it’s working, but I thought we were supposed to be working together,”

he said. Silence greeted him. “Athalia?” Nothing.

Yeah, successfully terrified. He pointed the phone down as best he could, enough so he could see his shoes reach each step, and stared on into the darkness that swallowed him. It never ended, just kept going down, and down, and down, dragging him deeper into some ridiculous metaphor for hell. Did he find himself in a David Lynch film? Or maybe he was in 1990’s Jacob’s Ladder, and this was all in his mind, cause he was fucking dying and the afterlife was greeting him with a very, very, very deep grave.

He kept walking. Down. And down. And down. Endless, fucking endless, for thirty minutes he kept walking into the black, the engulfing obsidian, until he felt dampness in the air, on his skin, in his lungs; couldn’t stop himself from panicked breathing, despite the lack of need. Down, and down, until he felt the pressure of depth in his ears threaten to pop his brain. But still, the stairway went on, and because he was an idiot, he kept walking.

Finally, floor, and not stairs. He almost tripped when he found it, foot slamming into the floor of dark stone when he expected to be going down another stair. It was a room, the black fog not as thick, enough for his light to almost reach the walls, exposing what looked like small bumps along their surface. The room was maybe twenty feet long and wide? He stepped forward a little further, and then stepped backward.

Death was waiting for him.

Slowly, turning around with all the urgency of a mountain, black wings drifted across his path and before him. Two glowing white dots hovered in the distance, eyes in the black, but the face that held them was still hidden by the black mist. But it came closer, and closer, and when he kept thinking it’d have reached him, that the two white, glowing eyes were normal human-sized eyes, they kept getting closer. Like seeing something in the distance, but thinking it

was closer and smaller, the two white dots came closer and closer again, until he realized how huge the face was. A skull, with dark skin, gaunt skin to the point of skeleton-like features.

He fell back, on his ass, and gasped. It was its eyes that he'd seen when he was on the stairs earlier.

“You deserve a taste,” it said, she said, “of a nightmare.”

“M-Me? The fuck did I do?” Natasha had told him about Athalia, what her form looked like, a form Tash had gotten a peek of when Athalia got in her way, that time Tash and her two werewolf friends were looking for the spider monster. But the description didn't do it justice, this giant skeleton torso with enormous black wings. Worse, she blended into the black fog, so he couldn't really see any of her limbs, any defining features other than the white eyes a few feet in front of him. Any movement she made was a ghost on the still air.

The screams had stopped. At some point, they'd faded away on his journey into Hell. Where the fuck, why and how would a chorus of death cries vanish?

There was more movement in the room than Athalia. He blinked, panicking, trying to see. His eyes had trouble focusing on anything in the dark, but he tried again with his phone, hoping maybe a sliver more of the light would reach the walls.

He wished it hadn't. Subtle reflections caught on eyes, tear-filled eyes. Dozens of them. There were faces on the walls, staring at him, each twisting and turning their heads as much as they could, but their heads were only half emerged from the blackness of the barrier. Thick thread the color of rotted skin cut in criss-crosses along where their faces emerged from the wall, stitching them into it like they'd been grafted there, bleeding skin struggling against the strands. Their faces were all the color of char, their eyes crying clear tears down the black skin, with red irises. Not red like Antoinette's, which were a step closer to amber, beautiful and alluring. No, these

faces on the walls had irises like blood. He almost expected them to cry tears of crimson, but the torn skin on their necks, temples, scalp, wherever the thread was, did plenty to keep blood trickling down the walls and onto the faces below them instead.

The faces were trying to speak, but like their heads, their lips were sealed with thread as well. Mouths tried to pull apart, obsidian skin tore, and thick red droplets fell down their chins. They were dead silent, despite the tears, the blood, despite their desperate attempts to cry out to Jack; he could see it in their eyes.

It isn't real, it isn't real, it isn't real.

He looked down. The floor was stone, black, but as he stared at it, he started to notice more lines in the subtle bumps. The stones he'd been walking on, hard and rock, were shaped like body parts. Too damn hard to see in the black on the stairs, with the dark fog blocking much of his light, but now, he could see knuckles, elbows, arms and legs, all piled over each other and compressed down to create a flat surface, small bumps and grooves where hard bone would be. Like he was walking on a stairway and floor paved with corpses.

"You don't respect us," she said, hovering backward a few feet, so all he could see was the two glowing dots in the eye sockets of her huge skull-like head. "You ask me to stop hating you, your kind, when it is your kind that treats us as second-class citizens of the night. And yet, it is you vampires who are fragile things."

This whole conversation felt weird. Talking to a giant floating torso of what looked like black bones, black spikes and claws, black wings, and a dangling spinal cord, was terrifying in and of itself. But, it wasn't that he was talking to some sort of death-monster incarnate that was weird, it was the words Athalia was using. She was trying to manipulate the conversation, lead him into a corner maybe, get him to trip over words.

He'd be fine with that, and fully capable of dancing around that sort of conversation, playing the game and all, but it was hard to talk and not have a quivering lip as he stared at the monster. Felt like that time he was dealing with a giant spider monster thing, something his mind was sure didn't exist, and yet his eyes were telling him it was.

“ ... you're right.”

Athalia turned to him again, and came closer. Her bone hands walked on the floor, acting as her legs, and her spinal cord dragged along the stone, ceiling too high for her to float much.

“Explain.”

“W-Well, I mean, just looking at you, I doubt any neonate or ancilla vamp could handle you in a fight, especially ... in here.” He gestured to what might as well have been Hell's basement.

“ ... yes, that is true.”

“We die if we catch a sunrise. We sleep half the day. We light up like kindling. You're right, we are fragile...” He got up, dusted off his knees and ass, and adjusted his tie again. “You could probably handle ten, or twenty of us in a fight, in here.”

“ ... I could.”

“And yet, you've requested I come here, so we can talk, and find a way to work together.”

“Azamel has requested you. I just delivered the message.”

“Athalia, face it. Kindred may be weaker than your kind, weaker than Uratha too, with only our few elders as a real threat, but we're very, very good at what we do.”

“... and that would be?” If skulls could frown, he was sure Athalia’s gaze would be fury incarnate. But, instead, she could only stare at him; it was enough, and he stepped back a couple times as the two glowing dots in the center of her large eye sockets bore a hole through his sternum.

“Living in cities with the people, controlling them, manipulating them, hiding among them. And by doing that, with decades, we can turn cities into havens for our kind. Not just our kind, but your kind too.” He gestured to her, open palm up, extending the metaphorical olive branch. Or handing her a sandwich, depending on the metaphor. “How often do Begotten manage to turn a food source into a home, with a support structure?”

The monster snarled, and black mist flowed out of her mouth, over her exposed, dark teeth and gaunt lips.

“We—”

A door opened, creaking, heavy, stone grinding on stone.

“Rarely, very rarely do Begotten ever find equilibrium with their food source.” Another voice, another he didn’t recognize, one with some rasp to it, and some depth as well. A lot better than the banshee shrieks and death whispers of Athalia; damn thing’s voice was like ice in his skull.

As the door opened, the black mist faded away, or at least dispersed a bit, some of it flowing into the new exit and vanishing into the new source of air.

“Athalia,” the voice said, “you were supposed to let him through.”

“I wanted to talk to him ... and ask him about Angela.”

Angela, psycho hunter woman with the glass eye?



“She nearly killed me,” he said as he followed Athalia. How she’d fit through the small door in the weird room, he had no—oh, she phased through it, body turning into black mist and moving through the door like a gaseous blob. Yeah, the sort of monster who could sneak her way into a closed off room through the cracks under the door. That’s ok, he didn’t need to sleep later or anything anyway.

He stepped out into Dolareido.

“Wait ... the fuck?” He looked around, down at himself, and froze. Blood was raining on him.

“Hello Jack,” the raspy voice said, with an accent he couldn’t recognize. But he recognized her, sort of, as she stood before him, waiting.

“ ... Fiona?”

“Indeed.”

Gone was the Scottish accent, and gone was the bubbly champagne of her voice and body language. Instead, a woman hovered before him, a woman with no eyes, giant black spikes like horns curling backward over her head like hair, serrated and covered in little spikes, two of them coming from where eyes should have been before curving back over her forehead to join the others. Skin the color of dark steel, and instead of feet, she had long shins that came into knife-like points. At least she had a mouth and nose, lips a darker tint, thin, and her chin sharp. It looked like she was hovering in the air at first, but as he took in the sight of her, he recognized the spider legs coming out of her back, massive, long, each blade-like and similar to her feet; they were holding her a few feet above the pavement. He’d seen those, back when Fiona had helped him in the tunnel with the spider monster.

No wonder the wolves thought she might have been an Azlu or whatever, she was a spider monster. Except unlike that gross

abomination, Fiona's monster form was strangely beautiful, wearing a white silk — spider silk? — dress that hugged tight to her curvy, curvy, curvy body. Holy crap she barely had a waist, and her breasts were massive, bigger than Fiona's human breasts. Nearly as big as Antoinette's, and considering the blood rain was soaking the dress, he could see the nipples, and—for the love of god, stop staring at the spider monster's enormous breasts.

Once he managed to tear his eyes away, he looked beside him. Athalia reformed, black mist coalescing into bones, wings, and spikes. And without a ceiling over her head, she spread her black wings and hovered higher into the air, without bothering to use them. The blood rain mixed into the black mist that dripped from her dark bones, same as it did to Fiona and him.

“I ... recognize this city,” he said. The three of them were stepping out of a dark alleyway, an alley he walked past on the way to Elysium usually. Sure enough, once they were out on the street, he recognized the buildings. Except... “What the fuck.” The buildings, their signs, normally a subdued Las Vegas, looked warped, strange, like they were melting. They weren't melting, as far as he could tell, but the blood rain made it look like that, as if they were being destroyed by the flood of crimson that fell upon them.

None of that compared to the fact the moon in the sky was red; and really fucking close. If he'd had a plane, he could fly into it. And to make it all perfectly terrifying, the red moon was dripping blood, oozing it down onto the city, almost as if something had wounded a god in the heavens.

Athalia hovered to his right, drifting over cars and the people inside them. People on the streets. People in the cafes and pizza joints. People in the bars. Not a one of them moved, all holding perfectly still, all ... all ... actual statues, made of stone. He approached the ones on the sidewalk, and touched one in the shoulder, some older man with a belly, in a trench coat. Stone.

“A nightmare,” Athalia said, whispering voice cutting through the rain. “I found this chamber, many years ago, a good example of the horrors your kind have inflicted on someone, someone who felt fear, someone bathed in it. It scarred the Primordial Dream, forever a nightmare. Fiona found it as well.”

“W-Wait, we did this?”

Fiona shook her head, massive array of glorious, horrifying horns of black turning with it. “Not directly. Someone, probably human, must have ... glimpsed, the sort of world Kindred have here, and saw something they probably shouldn’t have. Something that terrified them to their soul.” Fiona raised herself higher, walking on four of the massive, segmented blades that served as spider legs, while the other four reached out to poke against and balance on nearby buildings, street lamps, and cars. “It isn’t only us Begotten that can be monsters.”

Athalia snorted, a strange sound considering her voice was nothing but loud whispers, like a howling wind given the ability to speak.

“I uh ... um ... so, I’m in a nightmare?” He stared up at the blood moon as he walked along with the two monsters. Trying to be prim and proper, all business and such, wasn’t going to work anymore since he was soaked to the bone in blood. And despite himself, he licked his lips to taste it. Tasted ... weird ... and wrong, and provided no filling sensation, no tingling warmth in the core. But at the same time, it did fill him with something else, a colder sensation with stings of pain, like swallowing frozen thumbtacks. Yeah, don’t do that anymore.

“You are,” Fiona said. “The lair, our lair. The Begotten of Dolareido share this chamber.”

In a nightmare, a literal, actual nightmare. A real place, in a dream world, that was apparently a real thing too. Fiona had told

him all these things, but words were meaningless compared to the sights he was seeing, to the nightmare fuel before him. A giant, red, bleeding moon, titanic drops of red falling like a waterfall onto some of the larger buildings, while other globs turned into misty red above, becoming rain. The more disturbing part was the people, the cold, dead, stone people, their empty gazes, and how the blood running down their heads looked like tears on their cheeks.

He looked at Fiona, her large ass wrapped tight in the partly see-through, white silk dress, and then looked at Athalia, the bones and black wings and dangling spinal cord, a hovering torso. Couldn't be more different, and yet, he could see how Fiona would be the more deadly monster. Damien said she lured men in to her, abusive men, and she punished them for being lowlifes, before killing them, a regular black widow; or at least she used to kill them. He wasn't sure how she was feeding anymore, but he hadn't seen any reports about strange, butchery murders since then.

Athalia's nightmarish form was far more chilling, far more direct, far more 'the thing in your closet' sort of horror. Or maybe, the thing in the tomb, in the old mausoleum, in the empty grave, the thing that would snap out from the darkness and drag you screaming into the dirt and bones beneath. Both were horrors of darkness, both were terrifying in their own way. And both were escorting him down a street in a literal nightmare.

He shivered.

"I can taste your fear," Athalia said, voice slithering across the blood drops and into his ear.

He swatted away the sound, and frowned at the colossal entity. "Where are we going?"

"To speak with Azamel," Fiona said.

"I got the impression Athalia here wanted to talk about Angela."

The reaper monster drifted head of them, and began to hover backward a few feet above the bloody street, eyes locked onto Jack. “I suppose you must know by now. Jeremiah said it, so Beatrice heard it, and I assume she would tell Julias, and you. I ... wanted to ask ... how is my daughter?”

He stopped, and stared at the skeleton, at her giant skull, at the glowing white dots within. Hard to remember the actual woman’s face, Athalia’s face, when he was looking at the reaper version, but he managed, after a while. The dark skin and black hair, the soft face, and the steel eyes. Just like Angela.

“ ... she’s your daughter?”

Sucking in a breath through her teeth, Fiona stepped to the side, her spider legs drifting her some five or six feet away from him; predicting an argument, no doubt. If Angela was Athalia’s daughter, yeah, an argument was likely.

“She is.”

“That ... psychopath, is your daughter?”

Predictably, the reaper monster snorted again, the harsh whisper cracking the soaked air.

“She isn’t a—”

“I was bound.” He marched up to the giant skeleton, up to the skull nearly half the size of his body, and poked the floating monster in her giant sternum. “Tied to a chair. Your psychopath daughter put a blowtorch up to my fucking lips.” He jammed his finger into the monster hard enough to make her hover back a few inches. “That maniac hit me, and hit me, and hit me.”

“She—”

“Fuck you! Your daughter cut me, shot me, laughed at my misery, taunted me. She treated her fellow hunters like cannon fodder. I’m glad she’s dead, I’m glad she—”

“She’s not dead.”

He stepped back from the reaper, and stared at her as hard as he could. Maybe, just maybe, if he thought about it really hard, wished for it really hard, she’d explode. No such luck.

“She’s not dead?”

“I would know if my daughter was dead, and I know that she is not.”

“She was stabbed! She got hit by a car!”

“ ... injured then, but not dead.”

Fuck. Shitting fucking shit!

“She ... she hated me, Athalia, hated me like ... like you hates vamps but a thousand times worse.” He lowered his gaze to the bloody street, and tried his best to keep calm. Again, no such luck, and his arms started to tremble slightly as the memories of being captured, tied up, stabbed, punched, shot, burned, all slammed into his mind with the grace of a nuke.

The reaper monster sighed, black mist flowing out of her skull mouth, before dispersing on the bloody street around his feet.

“I am surprised your Invictus council did not tell you, if Beatrice did not. I’m sure they know.”

“I haven’t had the opportunity to meet with them yet, none of them, not really. We’re ... they’re ... giving me a vacation.”

Fiona drifted back toward him, and lowered herself down until she was beside him. Much as he barely recognized her, it was Fiona, someone he'd hung out with on several occasions, someone who had helped him look for Natasha. A new friend. He let the monster slip her strange hand, two large claws for fingers, and one large claw for a thumb, around his shoulder. And with her enormous spider legs still holding her sharp feet an inch above the pavement, she started to walk forward, nudging him along with her.

"I only learned a few days ago, myself," the spider monster said, "about Angela, and Athalia."

"Fiona, he's not going to—"

"Athalia, you underestimate vampires, and you underestimate Jack. Even after his escape from those hunters, you underestimate him."

How Fiona knew about Jack's encounter with Angela, or any of the details, he didn't know. But then both she and Athalia were monsters of darkness, according to her, and they lived and breathed shadow as well as any Nosferatu or Mekhet, or better than. They probably got their hands on the information in ways his superiors wouldn't appreciate. But, that was fine, and he sighed as he looked at the woman beside him. Those massive black horns coiling back over her head, from her eyes, from her scalp, looked almost like hair.

"I ... didn't come here to talk about that night," he said.

"It deserves to be talked about." Fiona rubbed his head a few times, not unlike how Antoinette would have, though she was only average height in her spider form, other than the extra legs. And the feel of her black claws on his head was strange, but welcome. "I know you came here to talk with Azamel, but she knows we're talking to you first. She'll understand if we spend a moment talking."

“ ... will she?” he said.

Athalia snorted again, but nodded, and hovered with them, beside him again, as Fiona walked him along. “She will. And she knows I wished to ask of Angela.”

“Angela ... your daughter. I ... did you—”

“I did not know she would come here. I ... abandoned her, years ago, left her with an orphanage in a distant city. She knew about me, what I was, and it had created ... problems.” Seeing and hearing an angel of death give a confession was a strange sight to behold, from how her enormous skull head couldn’t provide any facial ticks, to how her voice was a harsh whisper with very peculiar inflections. Like listening to a graveyard wind confess its sins.

“She knew you were a monster, back then?”

“She did. I left her because it was the only hope I had of keeping her from the life, before you ask.”

He put up his hands in surrender. “No judgments here. Not like a vampire would have any right on judgment in the reproduction front anyway.” Vampires spread like a disease, no other way to think about it.

The winged monster nodded, and sighed as she dragged her claws along some of the still cars. “But she disappeared several years later. I’d heard sightings of her from elsewhere, then once again a couple years later, before she showed up here, with this Jeremiah bastard using her against me. Against us.”

“ ... fuck.” He sighed, and bit his tongue before he said something he’d regret. No use in blaming Azamel now, for Jeremiah following her to Dolareido. “Did ... you want to ask anything about her?”



Athalia stopped, and floated their, enormous spinal cord dangling half a foot above the red and black street, before she resumed again. Hesitation, maybe?

“ ... I ... don't know. I guess I can piece together her life from what you told me, and her new role as Jeremiah's partner. She must have ... got into ... hunting very young, to be who she is now. Lost her eye in a hunt probably. Became ... hateful.”

Jack winced as the reaper's voice died away. No need to say it, no need for him to call attention to it or blame her either, for Angela's attitude. Like mother like daughter, times a thousand.

Wait.

“ ... Athalia,” he said, “Angela's your daughter, but she's here to kill us, me, Azamel, and...”

“And me.” The reaper drifted ahead of them, and fluttered her onyx wings a few times, black mist and black feathers alike falling into the street of consequence and bad decisions that lay ahead of them. “But she's my daughter. I can't kill my daughter, Jack.”

He opened his mouth, and then shut it. To make a comparison between Angela and Tony was a bad idea; childes were not true children of their sires, the relationship was different. It had been painful for Antoinette to orchestrate Tony's death, he was sure, but he was her childe, not child, and she'd had over a century of being the man's enemy to steel her heart. Athalia had ... how long?

“How long have you known Angela's been hunting monsters?”

“As I said, I heard that she'd resurfaced a couple years ago, but I had no details, nothing I could ... I had no idea it had progressed like this.”

He had to admit, there was a bit of sympathy for the devil going on here, between him and Athalia. What a royal bitch Athalia was, but she'd lived a very hard life, gave up her daughter, and now that daughter was a psychopath who probably wanted to kill her monster mother. That sucked. Anyone would think that sucked.

And it was going to suck a thousand times more if, and when, he killed Angela.

Again, he bit his tongue, kept the words down, no need to say them and make things worse when Athalia was probably already thinking them. Angela and Jeremiah were now primary targets, and in a city filled with vampires and werewolves and monsters, being a primary target meant death. The hunters had bitten off more than they could chew, and one way or another, it was going to cost them their lives. He'd make sure of it.

He could still remember the look in Angela's eye as she brought the blowtorch in toward him with a practiced hand. She was excited to see him turn to ash. She'd done it before.

“ ... I couldn't break her.”

“What?” Athalia and Fiona said.

“Angela, I couldn't break her. The hunters got in close, made eye contact, underestimated me, and I broke them, dominated their minds. But Jeremiah, well I didn't try on him, but Angela? I tried, and I really tried. The others hunters I broke like toothpicks, but her, I couldn't get through. There was ... it was like, a wall, in her mind, that blocked me out.”

Both the monsters looked at each other, and shrugged.

“And in the fight,” he said, “she was ruthless, but ... really, really good. I mean, it ... it didn't feel like I was dealing with a regular human, you know?”

Athalia sank, body inching closer to the bloody pavement, until she no longer hovered, but stood there on her bone hands, spinal cord dragging along the bloody street. She looked down at the ground, black mist trickling out of her, and raised her gaze to look at Fiona.

“Jeremiah,” Fiona said to her monster companion, “felt the same way. The four with him, the weird knives they had, they were dangerous. That Jeremiah though, he ... it didn’t feel normal.”

“Azamel wanted to talk about that, about him. Let’s go.” Athalia continued on, and with a sigh, Jack followed after her.

Why didn’t Julias or Antoinette tell him about Angela? They had to know. Jacob too, though, Jack had no expectations of that Joker to tell him anything. The others though, why hadn’t they told him? Surely they would have, sooner or later, but it’d have been nice to know ahead of time. Arg, that was partly his fault, not telling anyone he had a meeting with Azamel, even though they’d have probably guessed it. They couldn’t have guessed the day though. Or, maybe, they just thought he should hear it from the mother herself? Nah, they trusted Athalia less than he did. They were going to tell him, they must have been. Maybe they thought everyone else would do it, so they didn’t have to be the bearer of bad news.

He could worry about that later. For now, he had to worry about himself, about the secret meeting he was having with the old monster partly responsible for the newest threat in Dolareido. Newest, and likely one of the biggest.

When they turned a corner, Jack froze, and looked up. He had to look up a little to look at either Athalia or Fiona, but for this new beast, this new monster, he had to look way, way up.

“Holy ... fucking...” He stumbled to the side, and stuck out a hand to catch a car to keep from falling over. It didn’t help much, and he kept stumbling against it as his muscles refused to work, fingers

slipping on the wet car hood, and elbow slamming against the metal. He barely noticed, eyes locked onto the giant elephant creature sitting in the middle of an intersection.

There was no traffic since the cars weren't moving, so the monster was free to sit there, in what Jack had to guess was the center of the weird nightmare city. Nightmare, he was in a fucking nightmare, looking at monsters, and this monster in front of him was the most twisted, weird thing he could have imagined. Ganesha, even he recognized that. He didn't know shit about Hinduism, but he was pretty sure this incarnation of the god was very much not accurate to Ganesha.

There was the body, the two legs and four arms that looked human, and the large belly too, but the head was an elephant head, and the blood rain dripped down from its tusks. Each hand was wrapped with a huge chain, and from each chain was dangling shit he did not expect to find, but probably should have. A giant net, like a fish net, except one big enough that a boat would have had to haul it in, not human hands; and it was filled with human skulls. Another hand's chain held a dangling corpse, a curved spike skewering it through the stomach, like the corpse was fish bait. It was almost as if he was looking at a fisherman of human flesh. The swords in the other hands looked like scimitars, but in the context, he could only imagine them cutting up human bodies on a butcher's table.

He forced himself to stand up straight, and stare up and up at what he could only assume was Azamel. Sitting down on the pavement, the monster was at least fifty feet tall, and as it, she, breathed, he could hear the rumbling of titanic lungs, and hear the beat her heart. Slow, pounding, and colossal.

“Jack Terry, of the Invictus,” she said. Her voice was almost pure bass, and Jack winced as it vibrated through him. The puddles of blood trembled all around Azamel for hundreds of feet in all

directions, as if a herd of dinosaurs was marching through. But there were layers to it, human layers, enough that he could understand the words.

“ ... Azamel?”

“Indeed.” She didn’t move much. She was a monster, a nightmare incarnate, sitting in a world where she reigned supreme; he should probably go up to her. Hell, he was surprised she didn’t ask him to bow. “I am surprised you came.”

“I did say I would, didn’t I?”

“ ... then either you are a fool for ignoring the threat these hunters and Jeremiah pose, or you thought me so incapable of logical reasoning, that you risked your life to see me and ensure I am placated.” She laughed, a booming and roaring sound that made her elephant trunk trumpet a little. Fucking weird, and terrifying when combined with the blood flowing down her body, tusks, and the dead in her hands.

“Little of both?” he said.

“Perhaps.” She reached out with a hand holding a scimitar, chain gripped tight in her palm, and used three of her human-but-giant looking fingers to gesture him to come closer.

Sighing under his breath, he forced himself to stand straight, stand tall, and walk toward her. Athalia and Fiona stuck with him as he approached the gargantuan entity. Good, cause he was three seconds away from panicking and bolting. He’d seen vampires do crazy shit, he’d seen fucking magic at work, he’d seen a pack of werewolves unleash their inner titans, he’d seen a spider monster mutation thing, and he’d seen legit nightmare monsters, Athalia and Fiona. But Azamel was a new level of holy fucking shit, and he wasn’t sure how to process what he was looking at as he got closer, and closer, and closer.

Her foot was bigger than him.

“As I’m sure you guessed,” the giant god of death said, “I asked you here, because I need a way to communicate with you Kindred that will not escalate into conflict. Surely you know what your covenant has done to my home in the physical world?”

“ ... the explosives, right?”

“Your superiors are fools to think they can control me with such a small measure. I could make my home elsewhere.”

“ ... could you though?” He tilted his head to the side, and rubbed the back of it a few times as he let his mind piece together the puzzle. “The old tunnels are used by Kindred, and most of them are located in parts of the city where either the Invictus or Carthians consider it to be in their purview. I know Jacob uses some of the tunnels in a different corner of the city, so you’ll be avoiding him too. It seems you need a foothold in the physical world”—oh good god he called it the ‘physical world’ like that was a normal thing—“in order to pursue your agenda, but you also need some degree of privacy, and defensibility. If it was just privacy, there’d be a million places in Dolareido you could hide, but you need walls, some way to guard yourself from ... hunters, and other dangers, while you’re in the physical world. Hard to beat fifty-foot-thick walls of rock lined with concrete in that department. But the Invictus explosives would cave in all entryways into this particular alcove, which could cause the whole tunnel to cave in if it dominoes, spoiling your defensible position. And ... you like this spot, in the tunnel depths. You often came here before, last time you were in Dolareido. Something about it resonates with you, and from what I know about Begotten, that’s important.”

The three monsters stared at him, until all Jack could hear was the heartbeat and breath of the god giant before him. He looked around for the fourth, for Mark, a man he’d never seen but had been

described to him. No one knew what the man's horror might look like though, or at least no one had told him. For all he knew, Mark was watching him right now; certainly felt like he was being watched, especially with the three monsters staring at him. He really should have tried to word the breakdown better, maybe in a less offensive way, but like usual, once the thought sparked in his head, it just came out of him.

"Fiona, you tell this little Kindred too much," Azamel said.

"Nothing he and the other Kindred hadn't already learned." The spider monster shrugged, and lowered herself until she was beside him again, stiletto feet grazing against the blood puddles around him. "I told him we can't simply walk in and out of our lairs wherever. Something I know the Kindred have managed to pieced together on their own."

Azamel snorted. Even as a giant elephant god thing, Jack could tell that snort was a 'there's more to this than we're saying' snort. He'd figure it out eventually, but for now, it was one more secret on a pile of hundreds.

"Yes, little Kindred, I value the local in the tunnels. My statement was true though. I could make my home elsewhere. But I would prefer to keep what I have, and you would be better served to keep that a reality."

How the fuck did the giant elephant monster articulate so well? The heavy, booming voice alone should have made that difficult, and yet its echoing, wall-shaking power was enunciated without issue. It, or she, didn't have human lips, and yet he could see her mouth move between the tusks to speak as a human would. Nothing in this nightmare world made sense. Everything in this nightmare world was determined to get under his skin. He would not sleep well today, even in Antoinette's arms.

“If you’re willing to keep the peace,” he said, “willing to keep your appetites under control, and willing to help us deal with Jeremiah, Angela, and the other hunters, then I can’t see any reason the Invictus will ever detonate the explosives.”

“... our hungers are not always easily satisfied,” Azamel said. “Perhaps, one day, a Begotten will make a mistake, their hunger seeping out and infecting the humans with nightmares. On that day, the Invictus may respond with cruel swiftness. I hope that you can help create understanding with them, that that need not be their response.”

“Spreading nightmares ... I’m pretty sure I can get the Invictus to take their itchy fingers off the trigger, with a little show of good faith from you.”

One of Azamel’s scimitar-wielding hands stabbed the sword into the ground, the enormous blade cutting down into a car like stabbing a sausage with a fork. The blade stood up on its own when she let go of it, metal cutting clear through the car and into the soaked pavement beneath it. Hand free, she held it out before Jack, and set it on the street, palm up.

She wanted him to get into her hand.

He looked at Athalia and Fiona, but they said nothing. They waited, Athalia resting her weight onto her large hands — nowhere near as large as Azamel’s — against the street, while Fiona gently drifted in place, with her weight hanging on her eight spider legs. Athalia might let him die to Azamel if her boss decided to kill him, but Fiona would probably protest, and she seemed ok with him getting into Azamel’s hand.

Trembling, shaking in his blood-soaked three-hundred dollar shoes, he stepped into the monster’s grip.



Azamel rumbled contentment, and raised her hand. Enormous things moved slowly, relative to their size; it was physics. Nine point eight meters per second squared was gravity, so a giant trying to walk looked like they were walking slowly. On top of that, square cube law said enormous heavy creatures simply couldn't exist, as the surface area to support their weight increased at a slower curve compared to the weight itself. None of these seemed to apply to Azamel. He squeezed her thumb where it stood upright beside him, and held on tight as she lifted him into the air, like a human would lift a pebble. So fast he felt his guts pull down into his pelvis, like a roller coaster pulling up or down too fast.

He always hated roller coasters.

“There are forces at work, child of the night, that you cannot comprehend. Jacob and Antoinette test their knowledge upon the shores of existence itself. But this realm is but one of many, and your idiot elders flirt with forces beyond their understanding. Beyond my understanding.”

Ok, Antoinette and Jacob fucking with crazy shit, he could understand. The two of them were ancient, and if they were flirting with dangerous shit Lovecraft style, he couldn't really blame them. If he was half a millennium old, and had dealt with shit like vampires, werewolves, and monsters his whole life, he'd be curious to know about what lay beyond the veil too. But if the giant elephant god monster thing in front of him said it was beyond her understanding too, was willing to admit ignorance, and since these monsters were capable of insane shit like entering nightmare realms, then he had to consider that.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because, you asked for a sign of good faith, and I have been assured you are unique among your brethren. Fiona and Athalia vouch for you, and events to this point suggest they are correct to do

so. I tell you this, in confidence and trust, that you will do what is necessary to keep the peace.”

“I ... I don’t get it. What’s one got to do with the other?”

The god snorted, and Jack clutched her thumb tighter as her hot breath slammed against him. Smelled of rotten blood and a damp cellar.

“I seek my own goals, and Dolareido is the stage for my pursuits. Your kind need not be my enemies in this journey of mine. But, someone is poking holes through the walls of realms, and I believe they are attempting to upturn the city in its entirety. Someone is hiding in the wake of Jacob and Antoinette, hiding their actions, their flirtations with the other realms, and using those two as a smokescreen.”

“Upturn the city? What’s that—”

“Destroy, little blood leech. Dolareido and its humans are at risk, to something ... someone, here in the city.”

“ ... that is the most vague and useless warning ever, Azamel! How am I supposed to keep the peace and—”

Her fingers wrapped his body, and began to squeeze. Oh shit, oh shit oh shit. His arms were free, and they pressed down on the colossal fingers surrounding him; might as well have been trying to move a building. Her grip was absolute, and she squeezed tighter, and tighter, until his ribs were threatening to break.

“Do not test me, vampire. Since I have arrived here, I have attempted to make peace, despite the trials I faced last time I nested within your city’s walls. Your superiors were not innocent, but the two who were most responsible for my suffering, are dead. So now I attempt peace, and it is thrown back in my face. I offer advice, I offer knowledge, and again and again, it is thrown back in my face.”

“You ... b-brought ... Jeremiah ... here...”

With another snort, and a trumpet sound from her alien trunk, she loosened her grip. He was still trapped, but at least he wasn't at risk of being turned into paste.

“ ... what did you tell Jeremiah of me?”

“Nothing! Christ, nothing. They fucking tortured me, tortured me! I fucking bled and killed and nearly died, and it's because Jeremiah and that psychopath Angela are here for you. You ... you knew he would too, didn't you? Chase you to Dolareido.”

“ ... I made a tactical decision, vampire.”

“I almost fucking died! Barry died! They—”

“Hunters were already here, preparing in wait, when Jeremiah arrived pursuing me. Do not mistake his presence for the entirety of the troubles that plague your city.” The giant monster sighed, and brought him in closer, closer, until he was only a few feet from her enormous eyeball. She released him, and kept her hand out, palm up for him to stand on, beside one of her tusks. “You truly told him nothing?”

“Well I mean, I don't have any way to prove that to you, but no, I told him jack shit. Figured it'd bite me in the ass if you ever found out.”

“You are wise,” she said. A compliment from the beast he suddenly so very much wanted to kill. He wasn't sure if he wanted her words to make him feel pride, but they did anyway. “You would do well to avoid Jeremiah and Angela, little vampire. They are hunters that have progressed past the limitations of a human. They are far more dangerous than you understand.”

“Past the limitations?”

“Surely you felt it, when dealing with them.”

Yeah, yeah he did. Angela’s unbreakable mind was what she was talking about. The fuck else did those two have going for them?

“Any other tips for me about them?”

“I am sorry, but the nature of their ... inhuman abilities eludes me. They are tough to kill, and will not be broken easily.”

Well, better than nothing.

“Ok, so, you say something’s happening in the city, something that’s threatening the whole city? And it’s probably not the hunters? Some ... magical sorta stuff?”

“Indeed. And while I have asked you here to agree to be my voice for your infuriating superiors, I have also asked you here to keep an eye open for what troubles may brew in the dark corners of the Earth.”

“Because ... if Dolareido is destroyed, everyone’s fucked. Me, you, the wolves, everyone.”

“Correct.” And, with a long sigh, she reached up with her other arm, the one with the sword, and used it to scrape at her tusk. “I so despise this game.” She lowered him back down to the street, and he hopped out of her palm. Maybe she had wanted to look him in the eye, so she could be sure he was telling the truth or something. “But it is a game we must play.”

“Yeah, no argument from me here.” Sighing, and strangely enough, getting a little more comfortable with the company, he leaned against a nearby car. It was a shitty game, playing for lives. Just like politics, the smarter you were, the more you didn’t want to play it, but the more you knew you had to.

“Fiona, Athalia, and Mark will notify you if they discover anything about this unknown threat, Jack Terry,” Azamel said. “And, if the hunters make a mistake and expose themselves, we will bring it to your attention.”

Jack glanced the two monsters' way. Impossible to read either of their expressions, Fiona with the horns coming out of her eye sockets, and Athalia with the skull face. Fiona would probably be more than happy to help him, and Athalia would no doubt hate every second of it, but do it anyway.

Good god, Angela was her daughter. Angela was her fucking daughter. How the fuck was that going to go?

“I'll let my bosses know and—”

“Do not tell anyone else of this.” The monster ripped her scimitar from the skewered car, and offered him an annoyed, loud trumpet sound again. “Not your lover, nor your sire, or your friends. There is a strong possibility one of them causes the ripples I fear, or that the spreading word will cause the perpetrator to hide their tracks all the better. No, keep this to yourself, tell only the Begotten, and even then, be careful with your words. Whatever stirs the realms has touched their toes into many worlds, Jack Terry. The realm of spirits, the realm of dreams, the realm of the dead. Someone is searching for something, and leaving scars in their wake.”

This very much, super definitely sounded like something he should tell Julias. But, god damn it, she asked him not to, and she was the one telling him the info. And it wasn't like it was info he could action; it wasn't a lead or anything. Best he could do was keep an eye and ear open for strangeness. And fuck, strangeness found him every day these days.

“I will do as you ask,” he said.

Azamel groaned, a strange, satisfied sound, like a giant cat might make. Or a purring whale? It filled the streets around him with vibrations, causing the pools of blood scattered over the asphalt to tremble. Something about the way he said his phrase that appeased her.

She liked to be obeyed.

“Fiona, please escort Jack from the lair.”

“Yes Azamel.” Fiona nodded her giant head of horns, and turned to walk with Jack.

He kept glancing over his shoulder, at the reaper and the elephant god as they began to chat. But soon he was too far to hear them, as if the nightmare buried sound with its rain of blood. Down and along the streets they walked, Jack eventually walking the line of its center, moving between the still cars that looked like they wanted to go, to move and drive, but never would. The statues in their seats looked as zealous as their cars, but they too were only a decor for the stage of these deals with devils.

“Hey Jack,” Fiona said, lowering her human-ish body down to hover beside him while her spider legs continued to walk, height of them arching far over Jack before coming back down to the street. “I had sex! Well, sort of. There was a man and woman present, and fingers, so I think it counts.”

He laughed. Fucking hell this woman. He really needed to hang out with her more, she was awesome.

---

Jack stood before the triumvirate, and waited. The room felt different than it did in the past, where he'd feel trapped, weak, and at the mercy of his superiors. Tonight, he was the young blood coming into his own, rising up from the pool of tadpoles and making people notice him, making people respect him. Michael

noticed him, Maria noticed him, and Julias was happy with him, impressed, and grinning a sly, cocky grin as he watched the boy from his seat.

They were in the Xnomina headquarters building, where the Invictus usually had their meetings. He waited, standing before the council in the main meeting room, the three of them sitting and looking at him while he stood at the head of the table. But, it wasn't just the council he was dealing with, as Jessy was behind him, wearing a business suit with legs like she often did when doing business. And even scarier, was Damien was there too, standing beside Jessy, wearing a similar dark business suit, some shade of very dark navy, and a midnight blue tie to go with, with some jagged black lines down its length. Very slick, and it matched the half-buzzed head look Damien carried, dark hair running down the side to his shoulder.

The only remaining original right hand of the Invictus council behind him on his right, and the assassin and newest member behind him on his left. Hard to read their mood, and for Jessy's mood to be hard to read was a damn strange thing.

“Master Terry,” Maria said, a small smile on her cracked lips. “You have been through much in your scant time as Kindred. You have suffered under the quarreling of Tony and Alder Honors, and survived. You and your lover suffered under the assault of Lucas, and survived. And in the most absurd fashion, a monster from another realm sneaked into Dolareido, assaulted the Uratha, and you, and yet you survived.”

“But in all those situations, you were a spectator,” Michael said. Thank god he still thought that. “Even in defeating the spider abomination, you were taking advantage of an opportunity created by the Uratha. It wasn't until these hunters decided to make their move that you were given a real challenge, a direct challenge.” The Gangrel leaned forward, set his elbows on the table, fingers netted

together on it, and smirked at him. “You performed beyond our expectations, Master Terry. Vengeance for Barry Tellern, served.”

Holy crap. He could feel his Ventrue ego grow until it was threatening to burst.

Julias turned his chair to face him more directly, and tapped a finger on the table. “And on top of all that, you have managed to smooth relations with two ... three groups, from the past.” Three? Ah, right, Damien. If that qualified. “The Uratha owe you, and we have reports of the werewolves integrating with the Kindred in both the Invictus and Carthians, a far better situation than last time, where only Garry managed to find common ground with them. With the Begotten, situations are more tense, specifically with Azamel, but I assume your meeting with her went well?”

Ah shit. It wasn't like they weren't going to figure it out, or wouldn't have predicted it since Athalia talked to him. But still, it'd be nice if he could do something without everyone in the city knowing he was doing it, or knowing he'd do it before he did.

“ ... it did, sire. To a degree, at least.”

“Consider this your first report to the Invictus as our intermediary with the Begotten,” Maria said with a small hand wave.

“Yes Madam Turio.” He almost said ‘um’ to begin his report. But, that wouldn't do for an Invictus report. No um, ers, likes, no filler words. “Azamel is upset with the Invictus, as you know. But she is willing to cooperate with us, as defeating Jeremiah has become her new goal. To prove her ... harmonious intentions, she has asked me to be her voice, as you expected, but has also stated she will provide me information if the hunters expose themselves. In the nightmare, she—”



“You were in the nightmare?” Maria raised a hand, and gestured to Damien. “Then you two are to consolidate your knowledge. We need to know more about these monsters.”

“Agreed,” Michael and Julias said together.

Jack looked over his shoulder at Damien, and waited for the man’s reaction. A shrug, a small nod, and a smaller smile. Well, that was pretty good for Damien.

“This only lends more weight to our decision,” Julias said. “Congratulations Master Terry, you are now the third member of the right hands of the Invictus.”

He froze. Oh shit. Shit shit shit.

“ ... I’m sorry, sire?” If one more god damn thing was put onto his shoulders tonight, he was going to crack like a toothpick.

The man smirked at him, one of those manipulative smirks the man used on him frequently, from well before Jack was Kindred. “The combination of your surprising strength, tenacity, your relationship with the creatures of Dolareido, and your ability to foster such relationships, is a powerful tool. We would be fools to ignore that power, simply because you are young.”

“But we’re not jumping the gun here,” Michael said. “Madam Herrington is running the show. Both Mister Burksen and you, Master Terry, report to her. Understood?”

“Yes Mister McDonald, understood.” Shit shit shit.

“This is an important decision,” Maria said. “And not just for you, Master Terry, but for the Invictus. Younger Kindred will see that advancement occurs through accomplishments, and with great accomplishments, you receive great advancement.”

That was an interesting spin. Were other Kindred getting lazy? Dolareido was a nice, easy place for Kindred, relative to other cities supposedly, and he got the impression from the other Kindred, like Amanda, that they were a little unprepared for all the shit being dumped on them lately. Lucas's return, Azamel's return, Avery's return, spider abominations, and the newcomer Jeremiah, it seemed like the Kindred of Dolareido, or at least the younger ones, had no training on how to deal with these major threats.

But that didn't mean Jack should suddenly find himself on the frontlines, dealing with those threats!

He almost asked why him, why not one of the other Kindred, older Kindred, like Bruce Vanna, or Hella Vendram. Or hell, Isabella Leauvion, older than Jessy or Natasha, why not her? His eyes danced between the three councilmen before him, and they met his gaze with steel faces and subtle smiles.

"I can see that you are concerned with the choice," Julias said.

"... a little, sire."

The ghost lady shrugged, leaning back in her chair and licking a fang. "To be one of the right hands of the Invictus council in Dolareido, is not as simple a matter as who is the strongest, Master Terry. Madam Vola served me well, and not for her might. Your ability to impact a situation, and to steer the result toward our expectations, or simply in our favor, is what is expected of a right hand. You have proven capable of doing this in many situations where far stronger Kindred would fail."

Well, that was true, he supposed. Not necessarily true like they thought it was, since they didn't know about Lucas, or Viktor and Tony. Julias did though. Maybe he was the swaying voice in this decision.

"Thank you for the honor," he said. "I'll make the Invictus proud."

“See that you do,” Maria said.

At least Julias wasn't being so serious about it. “It's not all about extra responsibilities, my childe,” he said. “You have more freedom to enact your judgments, and your allowance has been tripled.”

Tripled? He raised both brows, and did his best to stop himself from smiling. Couldn't be done, and a little crack of a grin sneaked onto one side of his lips, and then the other. Course it was an allowance, not a salary; Invictus basically owned you, they weren't paying you wages. Still, that put him into pretty deep into the six figure salary range, and that meant nicer suits, a nicer apartment — and he already had a great apartment — and maybe some extravagant expenditures for Antoinette. Eh, probably not, she had more money than the Devil, and expensive purchases probably didn't mean much to her.

Shit, stop thinking about money, pay attention.

Michael got up, and leaned his ass against the table by his chair, signaling that the conversation would soon end. “We'll be hosting a ball in six weeks, in honor of both Mister Burksen's and Master Terry's joining of the council as our right hands. And of course, other Kindred in the Invictus will discuss their own advancements, agendas, and such. The ball will be for you two though.”

A ball for him in six weeks, just as Antoinette predicted.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, and offered Michael a small bow. It was a chance to glance behind, head down, to see what Damien was doing too.

The man noticed Jack's action, caught the queue, and gave a small bow as well. “Thank you, sir.”

“Mister Burksen.” Maria got up and walked around the table, soon standing beside Jack. She wasn't looking at him, but Damien

instead. Still, being this close to her, her ghostly clothes and more ghostly mist, always chilled him, made him feel like he was standing next to that girl from The Ring. “You are to use that ball as an opportunity to communicate with other Kindred. You may not be a member of the Invictus, but we are the First Estate, and as you know, the Lancea et Sanctum are the Second Estate. We have been partners since long before your embrace, or mine, Mister Burksen, and you are to foster that partnership by getting to know your fellow Kindred. Do I make myself clear?”

Poor guy. Jack knew an introvert when he saw one, hell he was one, but Damien was both introverted, and a troubled man. He probably wanted to do nothing more than hide away from everyone else, feel guilty about shit, and read the Bible a bunch. Being forced to go to a party and socialize with a bunch of strangers? Jack wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy.

“Yes, Madam Turio.”

“Good.”

Julias got up to stand beside her, arms folded across his chest, and that pleasant-but-cocky smirk on his face as he set his butt to the table behind him. “And we have a mission for you three.”

Jessy stepped in, as did Damien. “Yes sir,” they said in unison.

“Yes sir,” Jack added, a little late, a little surprised. Come on, a giant responsibility had just been dumped on little him, young him, inexperienced him. His sire already had a task for him?

Michael came up to join them, so that the triumvirate all stood with the table behind them, and their respective right hands in front of them.

“Yes. The Invictus have decided that we could be on even better terms with the werewolves. Garry is, and that would suggest Avery

is at least capable of some degree of compromise. Go, speak with her, and offer her incentive.”

Incentive? Jack raised a brow, and glanced between the three, as each of them offered him a small, knowing smile.

“Indeed,” Julias said. “We want you to explain to Avery that we’re opening the doors to her, inviting her into the territory. If she wants help with tracking down one of her targets, we can give it. If she wants a better place to live than a junk heap in the Carthian district, we can give it.”

Oh, that was actually a pretty good idea. Kind of like an open borders treaty between two countries, a step before trade agreements, two steps before a defensive alliance, three steps before a full alliance. He doubted it’d ever reach full alliance, but if they agreed on open borders, and if that worked out nicely, there was a good chance that could grow into a defensive alliance, where the Uratha and the Invictus could agree to help each other if one was attacked by a third party.

And perhaps most importantly, it stopped Garry from having a potentially disastrous advantage, since he and Avery were somehow on decent terms.

“Naturally,” his sire continued, “we’re hoping she’ll keep a nose out for the hunters, and help us if an opportunity presents itself. And Master Terry will be in charge of this meeting with Avery. So, the next time you and Avery plan to meet, please bring Mister Burksen and Madam Herrington with you. They don’t need to be in the meeting with you, if Avery demands, but they should at least be outside the door.”

Made sense, especially if he was going to be acting as a right hand now, something with a much bigger ‘official capacity’ stamp on it.

Michael nodded in Jessy's direction again. "But, again, outside of matters as intermediary with the Begotten and Uratha, Jessy is your superior."

The right hands nodded.

"Dismissed," Maria said, and moved back to her seat.

The right hands bowed, turned, and left.

"Oh, Master Terry," Julias said as they opened the door, "take another week off. You've earned it."

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The three of them sat inside Jack's apartment on the couches. Slick, sleek, it was a nice place that he was pretty proud of. He could move to a better place now though, if he wanted, a penthouse suite maybe, and indulge in a personal hot tub, a bed twice as big as king size, maybe even as big as Antoinette's, and maybe a sound system for some serious music listening.

"So, you two are my two new slaves, mm?" Jessy said, cocky grin on her face. She couldn't pull it off like Julias, hers being far more hyena-ish. "Just kidding."

"We are your subordinates," Damien said. "Close enough."

"Ugh, no it's not, church man. I was just joking, for christ's sake. You do what I tell you in the context of the job and only the job. Besides, it's a fluid position, considering it doesn't apply in ambassadorial matters."

Jack smiled at her. Didn't say he was surprised she knew the word ambassadorial though; didn't need a kick in the face from a new boss.

"So, I'm a right hand of the Invictus now," he said. "That's, um ... terrifying."

“Tell me about it. Kid, you just got in on a whole whack of shit.” Jessy got up, got a bottle of blood out of his fridge, and poured herself a glass. Not one of his preferred wine glasses, but a normal glass, and she chugged the blood down with all the grace of an ox. Probably best she didn’t get a wine glass. “I mean, I’m sure the triumvirate have secrets they don’t share with us, nasty shit like betrayals, ancient agreements, murders and stuff, bones in the closet. But they do share a lot with us, a lot of stuff that allows us three to run this city.”

“Sensitive information about political figures,” Damien said.

“Every. Damn. One of them.” She poured herself another, decided to sip this one, and came back to sit with them in his living room. “All the big wigs. Anyone with their name in drugs, money, or politics — listed from least to worst evil for your convenience — and we know stuff about them, shit that can either ruin them, or be used to hit them where it hurts.”

The Mekhet raised a brow, following Jessy with his eyes, though he didn’t move his head much. Seemed to like holding still while the world moved around him. “Do we right hands spend a lot of our time exploiting kine?”

“Kine number in the millions, Damien. Control them, you control the city ... for the most part.”

Jack nodded. Yeah, most part. Once you were as strong as an elder vamp, or these werewolves or monsters, that stopped being so clear cut. But for the majority of paranormals in the city, they were at the mercy of whoever controlled the teeming masses. Hence much of the tension between Carthians and Invictus.

Jessy finished her drink, and folded a leg over the other, elbows on the back of his couch. “Jack, Damien’s been at this for a little while, unofficially at least, so don’t feel feel like you need to worry about two freshmen dragging me down. Besides, Damien’s got a lot

of notches in his belt, knows his shit. Fucker was hiding from us for fifty fucking years, right?” The two men nodded. “Exactly. Damien knows the Devil’s Corner damn well, and that’s a feather in our cap we didn’t really have before. And you, you adorable little nitwit, can’t seem to stop making friends. And as you heard from the triumvirate, that’s becoming more and more important.”

He grinned at his boss, and settled a little in the couch. If he got along with Triss, he could get along with Jessy. “I’m not even a year embraced though. Barely a neonate, nowhere near ancilla. When push comes to shove—”

“You’ll do fine.” Damien nudged him in the side with an elbow. A grand gesture, considering who it was coming from. Jessy wouldn’t get the full meaning of the gesture thankfully, about what Jack did to Damien during Lucas’s raid. And hopefully, she’d never learn.

“Yeah, we saw the cleanup at the old prison,” she said. “You really fucked those hunters up. So, maybe it’s only when your backs to a wall, but you have a habit of pulling through, and that’s what matters.” Jessy winked at him, with all the subtlety of an action movie hero.

He nodded as he let that sink in. These vamps fifty years older than him in Kindred years, were trusting him with the rough stuff. Now if he could trust himself to be able to tap into that part of him again when he needed to, everything would be perfect. He didn’t, but, practice makes perfect.

“What about Amanda?” he said.

Jessy shrugged. “She’ll get a new partner. Not like you can’t visit her or something.”

Yeah, that was true. Amanda was the only one who knew he was visiting his mother and sister, hopefully, and hopefully she wouldn’t tell that to anyone. And hopefully she’d help him do it again.



“ ... I really pissed off that hunter, Angela,” he said. Better tell his new partners what was up before it bit him in the ass. “Athalia thinks she’s still alive, and she probably is. And ... and she’s Athalia’s daughter.”

Damien and Jessy both raised their eyebrows at that, and the Mekhet leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, hands together between them.

“ ... that does complicate things,” he said.

Jessy threw up a hand. “Fucking right it does. Can’t be much of an ambassador for monsters if you go killing their children. And as a right hand, if you do kill her, you won’t just be putting yourself into deep shit, you’ll be taking the Invictus in with you.”

Yeah, what wonderful world. “I’m sure my sire knew, they all must have known, when they gave me the position. So I mean, I guess ... they’re trusting me to figure out a way to kill Angela, or at least deal with her, without bringing down Athalia on our heads?” And he did not, not not not not want that reaper creature slipping under the crack of his door while he slept. Antoinette’s vault was air tight, but still.

“Quite the responsibility,” Damien said. “Or maybe, they don’t expect you to be able to kill her, not now that she’s prepared. Could be they’re putting off dealing with it.”

“And she could be dead,” Jessy said. “Everyone’s convinced she’s still alive, but you said it yourself, she was stabbed and then hit by Beatrice with a car. Besides, I’m betting that the Invictus don’t give two shits what Athalia thinks, aren’t afraid of her, and fully expect you to kill her daughter if the situation presents itself.”

Lot of ifs, lot of unknowns. This was the difference between reality, and the cute little plans he used to make for himself, his safe plans about where his old life was going to take him. Now every

night was an unknown, every night was an adventure! Except, unlike most people, Jack was familiar with many logical fallacies, including the survivorship bias fallacy. Adventure sounded great because you heard about it from the survivors. Adventure would be known as a minefield of death and trauma, if the overwhelmingly larger number of victims were ever given chance to voice their experiences. But the dead can't speak.

The Gangrel shrugged, switched which leg was folded over which, and snapped her fingers. "Either way, we keep each other covered now. Buddy system for all movement, except small trips in the center of Invictus territory of course; we're not joined at the hip."

The Mekhet, predictably, groaned. "That's dropped our freedom to go solo from ... the entire city, to a quarter square mile."

"Yeah," she said. "But that's enough room we can still live private lives, right? I mean I know the Cathedral is a ways out, but you shouldn't go there without Maria anymore anyway, not till these hunters are done. And that quarter square mile is in the dead center of the city. Elysium's there, Xnomina's there, hell Bloodlust is there. Oh, speaking of, you boys wanna go? We don't have to do that Avery trip thing till Jack's vacation is over. Could be a nice chance for us to bond."

Were she human, Jack would have found her suggestion a blatant attempt at getting drunk.

"How can you like it there?" he said. "The music alone—"

"Fuck me, man, you don't go to a nightclub for the music. You go to a nightclub for the people. Slip into a booth with a cute guy or girl, be flirtatious, aggressive, but not overbearing or—"

"Yeah, I know. Antoinette's been showing me how to ... bag chicks, I guess?" To speak in a language she would understand. "Not that I'd sleep with them. She'd kill me."

“Right right, you two are all lovey dovey with each other. Ugh, bleh.” She stuck out her tongue, as if romance were swiss chard, before she looked at Damien. “How about you? Rumor has it the priest has never known the touch of a woman.” The animal got up, and slid onto the couch between the two men as she raised an arm up to rest it around Damien’s neck. Poor guy was now trapped in her hug. “You have no idea how much playing hard to get can turn on a girl on. We should get you a ... a uh, that white collar thing priests wear.”

“ ... a clergy collar,” he said.

“Yeah! Girls will be lining up to bag you at just the sight of you.”

“Didn’t you just tell Jack that I should be flirtatious and aggressive if I want too—”

“Dude, no, you’re not getting it. With the priest setup, they come to you, like flies to honey.”

And just like that, it sounded like Jessy had a new goal. Get Damien laid.

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He still had two hours before sunrise. He’d prefer to spend at least one of that with Antoinette, but his fingers dialed a driver, and he set off toward Julias’s mansion. Damien came with. Vampires were on the buddy system now when leaving the safer areas of the city; which made taking Damien a funny irony that had Jack smirking. Damien smirked too, on more than one occasion. Maybe his new life as a right hand of the Invictus was agreeing with the assassin? Or at least, a score better than hiding in the city bowels for half a century.

“Visiting one of the council, after he’s given us orders? Highly unusual,” Damien said.

“Thought you could use a moment away from Jessie.”

“ ... thank you. But, honestly, I know she’s only trying to help me, and that’s a welcome change.”

The two of them were looking out their respective windows, elbows on the door armrest, chins in their palms. An occasional glance at each other to let the other know they were listening, complete with a small smile or nod. Two introverts communicating. All they needed now was Natasha nodding along and they’d be the smoothest trio of little nods ever.

“She is trying, I guess,” Jack said. “You ever been to Bloodlust? I don’t like it much there either, but it really is a prime place for getting an easy meal.”

“It is frustrating, being a Kindred of the Lancea et Sanctum, taught to steer kine away from sin, and then throwing myself into the center of it for my own needs.”

“I thought the deal with your religion was it’s the kine who needs to not be sinful, and that Kindred were under no such rules?”

“ ... yes, that is true. But, certain dogma is difficult to toss aside. And I would prefer to not encourage sinful ways in kine anyway.”

Jack shrugged, and tapped the armrest with his fingertip a few times. “Dolareido is Slut City, right? Adultery is rampant. But we have a low homicide rate, low assault rate, low ... most of the rates I’d be worried about, legally or religiously.”

“Agreed.”

“Then I suggest you stop sweating the minor stuff, and focus on the big stuff. There are still murderers, rapists, drug dealers peddling to minors, that sort of shit in Dolareido. I’m sure they could use a little fear of God in their lives, right?”

“A valid point. And I have been a bit ... directionless, without Lucas’s shadow haunting me.”

What a horrific way to think of the man who sired you. Julias had been nothing but supportive, instructive, and open-minded with Jack, while Lucas had royally fucked this guy’s head up, to the point he was now paranoid every action he performed was tainted.

“I suggest going to Bloodlust, and giving Jessy’s idea a try,” Jack said. The poor guy groaned, and Jack laughed as he reached across the car backseat to poke the man in the shoulder. “Jessy wasn’t lying, about the hard to get thing. Just sit there, look interesting, maybe look slightly out of place or unique, or even churchy, and some girl’s bound to take an interest.”

“ ... I could do that, I suppose.”

“Or hell, you can try and get Clara interested in you instead of me.”

“Yes, I noticed at the ball that she seems attracted to you. And as an Uratha, she is one of the few who could stand up to Antoinette. Or at least, not die instantly.”

Yeah, Antoinette was crazy strong and deadly when she wanted to be. Part of her charm, when instead of being the all powerful dragon of Dolareido, she was gentle, tender, and loving with him. But he doubted that she’d be so gentle in their next meeting. And that was exciting too; he couldn’t wait.

“Has she actively tried to sabotage your relationship?” Damien said.

“No. Just, made it very clear she likes me.”

“You have a habit of making people like you.”

“Somehow I don’t think I managed to do that with Angela. And I get the impression Garry doesn’t like me either.”

Damien nodded, and opened the car door as it stopped before Julias’s mansion. “He likes very few. But he’s also on your list, isn’t he? To be friends with.”

“Like trying to become friends with a very angry bulldog.”

The Mekhet laughed, or rather, chuckled louder than Damien normally ever did, and joined his side as the two of them walked up the grand walkway to Julias Mire’s massive abode. “Then you need to find bacon.”

Jack rolled his eyes, and knocked. Bacon was a halfway decent metaphor for getting some sort of treat for Garry, to get through that man’s aggressive exterior, his utter hate for the Invictus, and what Jack had noticed was a general dislike for any sort of social posturing. Jack could appreciate that, but trying to sway him would require a lot more than an agreement on how annoying social machinations could be.

“Master Terry?” the doorman said.

“Yes, here to see my sire.”

“Um, yes sir. He was not expecting you.”

Jack shrugged, nodded, and followed the servant in, Damien behind him. “I felt this conversation was best done face-to-face, and with a little touch of surprise.” Not that he could ever get Julias to be surprised, given the man’s penchant for prediction, especially of Jack’s actions. But he could try.

“Ha, yes, very good sir.”

The three walked along one of the rustic hallways, until the servant opened the door to usher them into one of the mansion's many meeting rooms. Which was kind of weird, actually, considering Julias didn't usually—

Julias, Jennifer, and Beatrice all raised their heads as he stepped in. The three of them were sitting at a table, and playing poker, but for some reason Triss wasn't wearing her shoes, or her socks, or pants. A double take showed the Nosferatu was wearing nothing but a thong and a tank top. At least Julias and Jennifer were still clothed, other than suit jackets tossed aside, and Jennifer missing her shoes as well. She looked good in the skirt and white shirt though, especially with only the one button done so he could see her sternum, lack of bra, and inside contours of her large breasts. Damn she was sexy.

Damien stepped in, looked at three of them, and facepalmed. "Slut city," he whispered to Jack.

"I wasn't expecting you," Julias said, eyebrow raised. "Actually, I figured you'd be at the Prince's, enjoying your vacation." The man looked past Jack to the servant who let them in, frowned at him, and the kine hid a grin as he speed-walked away. Good relations with the boss, maybe?

"I wasn't expecting you to have company. Um, hello Jen, Triss."

"Hello little Ventrue." Jen grinned at him as she leaned onto her elbows, and set her chin onto the back of her hands. Flirtatious did not begin to describe the look she had in her eye. "And hello to you too Damien."

The Mekhet offered a slow nod. He wasn't as shy as Jack used to be, but the man was clearly uncomfortable with looking at Jen, and how her breasts were nearly hanging out. Beatrice's warrior ass in a thong didn't help either.

“God damn it Jack,” Triss said, turned in her chair and elbow on its back. “Are you fucking Ventrue all experts at poker? This is fucking ridiculous. I can’t get anywhere with these bastards.”

He smirked at his sire, who returned the smirk. “I’m horrible at it. But, Julias is trying to teach me. I don’t envy you, playing against him.”

“Then maybe you and the Prince should play with us and take some of the heat off of me.”

“Strip poker,” he said, chuckling. They were playing strip poker. His sire, a hundred-year-old vampire, his lover, and his lover’s friend, were playing strip poker. Hunters at the door, monsters and werewolves ready to turn the city upside down if it got in the way of their goals, the city nearly in a state of martial law for paranormals, and they were playing strip poker.

Part of him thought he should have been angry they weren’t taking the threat more seriously. The threat had nearly killed him, killed Barry, and everything was going to cascade into a city version of a brushfire if they didn’t keep it under control. And they were relaxing.

It was a good life lesson. Learn to relax every now and then, or the weight of everything was bound to crush you. At least he hoped that was the lesson.

“I wanted to talk about Angela,” he said.

“Athalia’s daughter.” Triss got up, walked over to the couch in the very fancy, austere living room, grabbed her dark jeans, and slipped them on. Everyone in the room watched her force her toned, curvy, hard legs and ass into the jeans, but Jack noticed Jen staring a bit harder than the rest of them. Something happened there.

“Athalia mentioned you knew,” he said.



“Yeah, Eric and I overheard when we were in that fucking nightmare world. How did you hear? I assume Julias told you.”

“I had not, actually.” Julias sighed, leaned back in his chair, and put the cards down. “I knew Athalia would tell him though.”

Ah, yeah, that made sense. Man was good at predicting everything, damn it.

“Why didn’t you mention something during the meeting, sire? Or, you know, before I went to visit Azamel?” Maybe calling him sire was a bit too formal, considering the company. And maybe it was a bad question to ask, considering the company.

“Should we go?” Jennifer said, reading his mind.

Julias shook his head. “No, we’re all in this together, dealing with these hunters.”

Jen nodded, but when Triss sat down on the couch, she came over to join her, making room for Damien and Jack to sit down in their places at the table with the man of the mansion. It also got Jen closer to Triss, a lot closer, legs touching. Something had definitely happened; he could ask about it later. For now, he took a seat at the table, and Damien followed.

“She’s Athalia’s daughter,” Jack said again, “and everyone’s convinced she’s still alive, so I guess I should follow suit. And you guys ... you didn’t see how that conversation with Athalia went tonight. She doesn’t want her daughter to die.”

“She doesn’t get a say in the matter.” His sire steeled his face, a subtle frown not unlike Viktor’s, and he leaned back in his chair as he netted his fingers together on his stomach. “Angela’s not only a hunter, she’s an adult. Spare her no mercy. Catch her unawares? Kill her. I didn’t give you a heads up because Athalia’s relation to or thoughts on the situation are irrelevant.”

He winced, and shivered. “You haven’t seen her, Julias. You haven’t seen what Athalia is ... like, a fucking...” How could he get across that monster? “Like an angel of fucking death, Julias. And she ... she can get anywhere she wants to go. If we kill her daughter, and she can’t handle it, she’s going to take it out on us.”

Triss clicked a claw against one of her crocodile teeth a couple times, loud enough for everyone to look her way. “Kid’s right. I’ve seen all four of the Begotten, seen what those monsters look like, and Athalia? She’s ... like an angry dead god climbing out of a grave.”

Jack nodded. That was as good a description as any. He could see it too, the enormous bones pulling the colossal skeleton torso out of the ground, leaving its legs behind. It didn’t need them.

“Jeremiah stood his ground against them, and he’s human.” Julias did not look convinced.

“ ... Angela didn’t feel entirely human.” Sighing, Jack looked down at the table, and scratched his fingers along his scalp a few times. “I’m guessing Jeremiah is similar. Azamel thinks so too. Angela ... she felt like something more than human.”

“I’m less worried about Athalia though,” Triss said, “than I am Azamel. Did you see her Jack?”

He twitched, and looked at Triss. She looked spooked. He must have looked terrified then, in comparison.

“Yeah ... she was there ... The meeting we had was in the nightmare.”

“Then I don’t envy you. I only got a glimpse of her monster, or horror or whatever, and ... fucking hell.”

“Then the question,” Damien said, “if Azamel is our biggest concern, is if she’ll go on the rampage for Athalia, if and when we

kill Angela.”

Jennifer raised a hand. “Um, correct me if I’m missing something, but aren’t a bunch of you friends with Fiona? Why not convince her to help you?”

Jack, Triss, and Damien all winced.

“I ... I’ll ... talk to her,” Jack said. “Just ... we—”

“Fiona is probably the nicest person in the city,” Damien said. “We don’t want to throw her under the bus.”

“I remember when you brought her before the Primogen, Jack,” Julius said. “And she did seem like a nice girl, a very nice girl. But, Jennifer’s right. We need a way to deal with these Begotten that doesn’t result in a repeat of last time, but we can’t let Angela live if we get the chance to kill her.” The strongest Ventrue in Dolareido leaned forward, set his elbows on the table, and looked at Jack and Damien with harder eyes than Jack was used to. “I trust you two and Jessy to handle the situation as you see fit, but you Jack, are to do everything you can to keep the peace between Begotten, Kindred, and Uratha. Understood?”

“Understood.” If there was one way he was going to die ... well, this dilemma had a million ways to get him killed. One was bound to get him.

# Part 5

## Chapter 55

~~Welcome to the world of Vampire: the Requiem~~

~~One week later~~

~~Jack~~

Avery could wait a little while. Everything could wait a little while. He needed a vacation, and god damn it, he deserved it.

He spent the next week doing one thing: spending more time with the Prince of Dolareido. Every night had included sex, but since he was sleeping at her place now, and on vacation, every night now also included time to chat. Sit around and talk about music and movies and stories and whatnot, was a luxury he realized she probably rarely had with other Kindred. The only vampire she'd get to talk to so easily and frequently was Daniel or Natasha, especially now that Natasha was also staying at the Elysium tower. But he doubted talking to those two was terribly satisfying. With him though, he could see, she wanted to talk more, and more.

Now, spending day after day in bed together, Antoinette had time to chat with him before dusk and after dawn, those twenty or thirty minutes she spent getting dressed and doing her make-up, time they could talk. They could get a lot of talking in when they were around each other for the minutiae of everyday stuff. And when she was upstairs, either higher in the basement, in her research alcoves doing god knows what, or higher again up in the tower, doing Princely things, he spent his time relaxing, reading, listening to music, swimming, and other recreation activities her surprisingly robust underground fortress provided. She still had a dozen enormous rooms down here he hadn't even seen yet. But they could wait. Right now, his mind was on the woman on top of him.

Antoinette sighed, a long, satisfied sigh, and lowered herself back onto him. Softness. Weight. The best place in the world, underneath Antoinette's breasts. She was riding him, milking him, his cum pouring into her insides as she squeezed his length. Her juices coated him, bathed him in the heavenly heat, until his white, thick fluids were flowing back down his length. And as his orgasm turned him into a shivering, relaxed, defeated noodle of a man, Antoinette rested her breasts on his lips, bending over so her nipples grazed along his chin and nose. At least until he opened his mouth, and began to suckle on one of them.

She shivered, smiled down at him, and set one hand on his head to lightly tease and stroke his buzzed hair while he kissed her swollen, puffy, pink areola.

“My sweet little Ventrue, and now one of the right hands of the Invictus. I admit, I did not expect this, but I should have. Julius knows of your true accomplishments, and I am sure he would have found a way to reward you for them.” Slowly, with a teasing twist of her hips, she slid herself up and off of his shaft, and sat upon his pelvis. His softening member dripped of their fluids, warm, inviting him to melt beneath her breasts and into the blankets of her bed.

His boss knowing about Lucas, Viktor, and Tony was a feather in his cap, that was for sure. Not necessarily a good feather though, more like an albatross feather, since all these fucking insanities kept falling into his lap, and he kept having to claw his way out from under them.

“I can see that look in your eye, a look of worry.” She tapped a finger on his forehead, drew lines he couldn't see, and started to caress his head once more. God yes, fingers pushing against the grain of his eternally buzzed hair was euphoric, forcing him to melt and succumb to her touch.

His lips drifted away from her nipple, and planted kisses along her breast's underside, causing its size to spill over his nose and upper half of his face, hiding his forehead. But, she could still caress his hair, and she did as she offered him quiet little, husky mewls and chuckles, while he planted another kiss, and another along the heavy, soft skin of where her breasts met her ribs.

“It’s a big responsibility,” he said. “And I ... I’m never comfortable with new things. I like to research things to death before I put my feet in.”

“Admirable, but paralyzing. You will forever be more intelligent than others, and yet forever denying yourself the joys others find by trying new things at the whim of the moment. You must learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, my love.” She adjusted her torso angle so his face slipped between her breasts, and she slid back her knees so she could lay on him and bury him with her body. A kiss. Another kiss. She grinned a devil’s grin as she pecked him on the nose a few times, all while one of her hands continued to massage his scalp and play with his hair, elbows to the sheets.

“I think I’ve heard that expression before.”

“No doubt.”

“I think the dude was trying to explain the psychological benefits of cold showers.”

Antoinette shivered and shook her head. “Non merci. Without the subtle, blissful sting of a hot water, I fear I would never touch a shower again.”

The Prince of Dolareido did not like cold showers? Too cute. He laughed, and she caught his lips between a finger and thumb with her free hand.

“I uh, well we are vampires,” he said, voice mumbling through her grip on his lips. “We don’t really need to shower.” No body odor issues, and any grime and build up of crap sort of just fell off as a Kindred slept. Unless they were blushing life, they had no skin oil or anything. Maybe they shed a layer of their skin off as ash at night?

Antoinette slipped her hands down to his, netted her fingers with his, and raised his hands until they were pinned against the sheets by his head, over it. With a warm laugh, she set her lips to his neck, and continued to kiss him, slow, tender, her long white hair tickling over his chin and lips as she gently slid her roaming mouth from one end of the collar bone to the other. Lying on him like this, her breasts squished to his chest and out to the sides, like big pillows. And her feet reached far past his own, her knees along the outside of his shins and pressing his legs together.

“All Kindred are to now keep a partner with them, whenever moving through areas not directly next to their headquarters,” she said, nudging her nose into his chin. “I trust you will move with your fellow right hands mostly?”

“Yeah. Maybe Amanda too.” Take another sneak peek at his mom and sister again, maybe? Last he checked, they were doing a lot better. His mom was exercising a lot, getting back into shape, maybe trying to reboot her life. Good for her, and good for him. A little less guilt on his shoulders.

“And, it may be to your interest, that I have reports showing the witch Jennifer joining Beatrice and your sire Julias more often.”

“Are you spying on everyone?” he said, smirking up at the ceiling as she brought her lips to his jugular.

“Of course.”

“Understandable.”



“And, perhaps more interestingly, I have reports that the three have been seen at Bloodlust on a couple of occasions. To my surprise, the video footage showed your sire having sex with both women, and they each other.”

Well, damn. He knew there was something going on, considering how much Jen seemed to be on Triss, when he stumbled in on them playing strip poker. He hadn't really thought much of it beyond vamps being vamps though. He chuckled a little as he thought about Julias, caught between Triss and her twin. Same facial shape, same hair, same height, but Triss had the ass, Jen had the breasts.

Ugh, breaking women down into their body parts. He was hanging around Jessy too much; cause the job demanded it, not because he wanted to. Damn woman sexually objectified everyone, guys and girls alike, and sometimes Jack found himself getting drawn into her very 'bro' conversations. It was innocent good fun, and Jessy never let it actually affect how she treated people, but still.

Wait.

“Antoinette, you wouldn't be trying to gossip with me about what other people are doing, would you?”

She raised her head up and looked down at him, one eye slightly squinted, and a devious little grin on her lips. “Of course not, darling. I am the Prince of a city of millions. I am above gossip.”

“Uh huh.”

“I am merely sharing information I think would be of import to my lover, and now an influential member of Kindred society.” She kissed his forehead again, before she sat up, slid off of him, sat beside him, and caressed his abs with her fingernails. “And besides, if those three feel comfortable engaging in intercourse in public, then I am afraid they have forfeited their right to my silence.”

“Ah, true, very true.” Her argument was too precious, eloquent, but really a smokescreen for the excuse to gossip. “Then by all means, my Prince, what else have those three been up to?”

She chuckled as she smiled at him, her one hand continuing to trace his muscles, while her other tickled between her breasts before drifting underneath one to caress its underside; purely for his visual benefit, surely. “On two separate occasions this week, those three have enjoyed relations at Bloodlust. The video footage showed a rather ... interesting equilibrium between them. Kissing, each of the three, with each other.”

He raised a brow. That was a little weird, actually. He never kissed Antoinette’s ghouls, and since Antoinette and he had become lovers, she hadn’t kissed them either. It’d be too powerful a gesture for who were ultimately guests in the bed.

“Can’t see myself kissing anyone but you,” he said, one hand setting on her leg and stroking her quad.

“And I you, my little Ventrue. But I am glad you are comfortable with sharing a taste of our love with my pets.” She slid off the bed, walked toward her wardrobe, and of course he watched every second of it. That nice, big round ass swaying as she walked, her long white hair nudging against its curves, and the sides of her breasts visible from behind when she raised her elbows as she combed back her hair with her fingers. So beautiful.

She was such a unique person. Slim but curvy, buxom and tall, all traits he thought were beautiful and alluring, but they weren’t what made these conversations so intriguing, or what made her so unique and interesting. He wanted to know more, dig into her, find out why she thought the way she did, acted the way she did, why he was the sort of man she wanted to be with. It was hard, and made the relationship strangely one-sided in certain ways. All his memories were very much intact, while hers were wisps on wind.

But, even if they were wisps, subjected to years of fading and alteration, he still wanted to know them.

“You have any more memories of when you were younger, and ... I don’t know, discovering all the sexual freedom you had? That majesty discipline is a recipe for orgies.” They’d just had sex, so of course, he had to ask about sex.

His words yanked a surprised laugh out of her, and she brought a hand up to her lips to try and disguise it as she opened the wardrobe against the black marble wall, and retrieved a white robe, fluffy and furry.

“You truly wish to hear such tales? You are a man; I thought perhaps you would find such stories to make you jealous, other men and women with their hands upon me.”

The woman had been alone for so long, thanks to her crash-and-burn relationship with her childe Tony. To know that he managed to rekindle her desire for love, and better yet, find himself in the best relationship ever? How could he be jealous of a memory? He shrugged at her, rolled onto his side, and watched her as she sat down, and started to brush her hair.

“Hit me.”

“Then, I will need a moment to ponder. Digging through the haze is difficult, even for a dragon such as I.” She brushed the long waves of white over her shoulders, again and again, flowing strands reaching down and down the stool she sat on, in front of a rather grandiose mirror with a black, curving frame. It was hard for elders to piece together their older memories, and for one as old as her, it must have been like playing archaeologist in the dark. “Once ... I could not have reached my elders year by then, but I was strong for my age, as you are, and gifted in the ways of majesty. I owned a castle, I believe, something that overlooked a cliff’s edge and faced the ocean. I remember ... a young woman, perhaps eighteen years of

age. A sickly creature, and one that had scaled my walls, to hunt for food to steal from me.

“She found my inner sanctum, where I drank, where I laid with my many servants and meals. Upon realizing she was surrounded by a dozen men, and that I was a vampire, the queen of the castle, and lord of the estate, she ran. But my servants captured her, and brought her before me.” She stopped combing her hair, and stared into the mirror, as if entranced by a campfire. “She was short, with red hair and a splatter of freckles across the nose. And her eyes, green like yours, pierced my soul. She was afraid, and yet, determined. She fought and fought, despite the frailty of her body and need for food.

“I brought her food. Water, bread, meat, fruit and vegetables, that which I fed my finest servants. I, naked and sitting in my throne, told her to sit next to me, and eat of the dish held before her by one of my thralls. And as she did, devouring the food with terrible fervor, I asked for her name.” She lifted the brush in front of her, but invisible strings trapped it, forcing it back down to the mirror’s desk as she stared into it. “For the life of me, I cannot remember it. But, I can remember her voice, a charming, squeaky little voice. I remember the sight of her, her fear of me, her panic, but also her euphoria when given a meal. And as she ate enough food for three, I motioned for my harem to continue their love making. Soft fabrics, black silk upon furs, mountains of blankets, and wine, endless wine. Over a dozen men, and over a dozen women, with their hands and lips upon each other’s bodies. In the center of the room, three men indulged themselves with one woman, filling her in every way, and drawing endless moans from her white-coated body.

“The young intruder asked if she could stay. If it was the food, a roof over her head, or the sexuality on display that seduced her, I was not sure. I looked at her, her meal gone, her eyes locked onto the bliss before her, and I smiled. She was the first kine I had ever enthralled, without breaking her mind with majesty or forcing a

taste of my blood upon her. Over the next two weeks, she never left my castle, and followed me everywhere. Questions, she had so many questions ... I cannot recall them. But I can remember the pitch of her mouse-like voice, and the smell of her as she bathed. The first few times I had joined my harem, and let them shower me in pleasure, she had watched on, terrified to say anything or join in. And yet, she was hypnotized by the sight of flesh. The small woman could not look away as, while one woman kissed and filled my sex with fingers, another woman massaged my breasts, and each male thrall in my employ ... at least twenty, each two at a time, coated my breasts in their seed.

“Perhaps I broke her with the delights I showed. Perhaps her old life was too great a burden to bear, or pain to experience. But, with her eyes gazing upon my naked body, she asked me if she could stay with me, for forever. I let her taste of my blood, my will and strength infused into it, and invited her into my bed before the dawn. I taught her young body of pleasure she had never known, the same night she became my ghoul. I had had ghouls before, I believe ... but, never had I ... such a relationship with one. Ghouls before her were tools. This ghoul, was both my pet, and my friend.

“The next night, she was the center of attention. Lean, fit, strong, and now nourished, she sat before me, and lay upon the black silk of my inner sanctum as each thrall spent time pleasuring her, helped her drink wine, the women filling her with fingers, suckling her sex with their lips, and massaging her small breasts, as each man covered her in white. I knew she had fantasized about the experience after watching me, and I let her drown in the fantasy, in sex and sin. And when I thought she was spent, she held up her hands for me. I came to her, straddled her, pressed my breasts upon her cum-soaked chest, and kissed her. I can remember the taste of semen on her lips, from when some of the men had slipped their cocks into her mouth at various points, men she had happily pleased to orgasm. I can remember the feel of her small body

clenching in another orgasm, as I fingered her insides, while the women at my service massaged and caressed her limbs.

“ ... I ... cannot remember what happened to her, Jack. Of her own choice, she had become my ghoul, joined me in many years of decadence and lust, but also, served as a willing ear and joyful voice. A companion.”

Jack gulped, and blinked a few times as he stared at the woman in front of the mirror. The image she painted was a pretty awesome one, erotically, but also, moving. Girl stumbles into a vampire's home, and instead of being turned into a meal, finds a friend and a new life. On top of that, finds a new taste in extreme eroticism.

And Antoinette couldn't remember her name, or what happened to her. God that must have sucked.

“It sounds like a fairytale.” He got up, walked over to her, stood behind her, and started brushing her hair as he smiled at her in the mirror.

She returned the grin, and got comfy in her stool as she watched him brush her hair for her. “I was young. Indulging in fairy tales, both grim and enchanting, is a guilty pleasure for many Kindred in their ancilla years. The power to make your desires become reality enters your grasp, and suddenly, what were once silly fantasies become solid, obtainable.”

“I have to admit, if I could do it, I'd be pretty tempted to be having orgies every night too.”

She rolled her eyes, and leaned in closer to the mirror as she started adjusting her makeup, reapplying foundation or washing it off first with a small washcloth depending on where she deemed it necessary. Or at least, that's what he figured she was doing. The art of makeup was well beyond him. Mascara, eyeliner, lipstick, blush, concealer, it was like watching a crazy genius chemist juggling two

hundred chemicals at once; and she had two hundred things on the desk, little bottles and brushes and such.

At least as a vampire, the skin was easier to work with and manage, according to her. Without it, he could see the subtle lines of a thirty-year-old woman, beautiful and real, but Antoinette liked covering them. Putting on her mask, she said. Julias said everyone had a mask, and with women, it just happened to include an actual one.

“As a Ventrue, your abilities capable of manipulating minds are a little more direct, my love. Bending the will of an individual, or a small group, is where your talents are best served. Daeva are the masters of majesty, to enthrall entire concerts of people, have them eating out of our hands and begging for our attention.”

“I’ve seen Julias dominate some people, and have them enthralled like they were under majesty.”

“Your sire is quite skilled, and has found ways to manipulate the minds of kine in subtle ways, to mimic majesty.”

Maybe he could learn to do that some day, handle the discipline dominate with more finesse and accuracy, instead of the brutal, overpowering hammer he felt it as.

“You ever wish you could see her again?” he said. “Your ghoul.”

“I am not sure. Much has changed. And I am sure Ashley and Julee would be jealous, when ... when ... she, would inevitably recount the tales of our youth, of the swaths of men and women we’d share our bed with. They would fear her taking me away from them.”

“I don’t think they’d be that jealous. And, I have to admit, imagining you and a young woman, in the center of a giant orgy, is a pretty hot image. I prefer what we have now, but just, in my mind,

the mental image? Scandalous.” He came in closer, leaned in, and set his lips against the back of her head to kiss her hair as he put the brush down. Arms free, they drifted down over her shoulders, and down the open chest of her robe. She only had it done loosely with its belt, so pulling the chest open and down to expose her breasts was easy. She didn’t stop him either, chuckling as she continued to put on her makeup, while he started to caress her breasts again.

Sometimes he wondered if Antoinette had as large a sex drive as him. He spent at least half the night thinking about being between her thighs or breasts, and as he grew more comfortable with his vampire body, he was finding himself able to cum two or three times every session easily. Sometimes four. And now that he was sleeping in her tower, it was him often initiating sex. Bed time? He started kissing her breasts, and a minute later, had his cock inside her. Wake up time? He hugged her from behind, and started fingering her. A moment between her meetings in the middle of the night? Perfect time to get his head between her legs.

A tiny little voice in his head told him he might have been starting to annoy her with the constant sex, like a needy, hungry kitten. But then she told him this story, a long tale, detailing the sexual nature of Antoinette’s ancilla years. She made his constant seeking of sex seem tame in comparison.

“You do not understand the realities of such things, little Ventrue. Forty bodies in the same room? Legs, arms, heat, the body odor and other natural bodily functions of the living, they all provide frustrating nuance to organizing an orgy.”

“Yeah, but, imagining you, and these,” he squeezed her breasts softly, so they spilled over his fingers, “rubbing on your friend’s body, after a dozen guys came on her?” He shivered with the image, and shivered again as he started to gently slide his hands down Antoinette’s breasts to cup their undersides near her ribs, before drawing them up again, so her nipples slid back along his fingers.



And then back and forth again, all while Antoinette continued to prepare herself for the night. Maybe he could cum on Ashley or Julee's breasts a couple times, and see if Antoinette would remake the image in the story? He smiled at the thought.

To fondle and massage his girlfriend's breasts while she did her makeup, was a strange fantasy he didn't know he had. Something about the way she was perfectly comfortable with his touch, and perfectly comfortable to let him watch her in the mirror as she did her makeup, was both comforting and arousing. Intimacy made manifest, maybe? Whatever it was, it made him almost giddy as he leaned in closer, set his chin on her shoulder, and watched her touch up her mascara as he fondled her tits.

"Perhaps I should buy some pillows made to feel like breasts? There are materials that simulate the feeling decently well," she said.

"No no, that's not the same! These are attached to the most amazing woman ever."

"Yes, I suppose they are." With a long, playful sigh, she got up, and walked him back to the bed. "Very well, you may indulge yourself upon them again, little rascal. Quickly now, I must leave in ten minutes."

Ten-minute quick tit fuck? God yes.

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~~Natasha~~

Everything changed, now that the hunters had exposed themselves.

Antoinette warned her that, now that Natasha would be sleeping in her tower, she would also be running into Jack far more often, since he too would be sleeping in her tower. Nothing wrong with

that, being friends with Jack and all. The Prince had also warned her that, to celebrate Jack's new sleeping arrangements, and Jack's safe return, Antoinette would be making love to her 'little Ventrue' on a frequent basis. Natasha was invited to watch, whenever she wanted, if she found the two of them having sex outside the Prince's master bedroom. Maybe a bit too awkward for Natasha.

But for all the sex, Antoinette wasn't relaxing. If anything, the Prince was upset with herself for letting the city get as dangerous as it had become. In a single year, the balance had been upset in such massive, weird ways, that no one could have possibly expected her to be able to manage it all. The Prince expected it of herself though, a perfectionist to her core. Natasha was glad to be working for her again, especially now that Tash was an older, more mature Kindred, than when she was the freshly embraced child of the sheriff. Back then the Prince scared her, and her Ordo Dracul experiments had terrified her.

The Prince had now increased Tash's goals. Natasha was still to seek knowledge about the Begotten and their weaknesses, and also join Antoinette in her experiments involving reaching to the 'other side'. She was, as of now, also to help Daniel with investigating both the hunters, and the disturbance Clara warned Antoinette about, that someone was fucking with 'the other side'. Lot of things, a lot lot lot of things. She had her work cut out for her.

Some days would be spent dealing with her collection of occult objects, testing them against the Prince's strange tools, and seeing which items triggered effects. Nightmare fuel, seeing ghostly after images. But, also, they were damn fascinating, and Natasha could completely understand the Prince's infatuation with them. And Safe, a creature from another realm, summoned? Fascinating didn't begin to describe that.

She walked down the stairs of Antoinette's tower, its inner depths, and made for her new bedroom. Tomorrow night would be a

night for dealing with those occult things, and she both shivered and smiled in anticipation. Would they see a memory, a horrible memory, a murder from the past, echoed before them? Or would they try and see if they could summon a new spirit from the other side? They—

Moans. Natasha froze, and looked over at the hallway in the black marble beside her. Her bedroom was down there, but just past the hallway, only ten feet in front of her, was another opening in the walls of shiny black. One of Antoinette's many, many living rooms, filled with couches, fancy tables, some with chandeliers, others with actual working fountains, and others with musical instruments and acoustic panels, for Antoinette to play in. The room she was hearing the moans from was one with a dragon fountain in the back, and several backless couches and short tables. A great place for sitting around and chatting.

From the sounds, Antoinette was having sex. Julee and Ashley were still out of commission, far as Natasha knew, from a recent feeding for Jack, which meant it was only the two vampires in the room. Natasha smiled to herself, and moved down the hallway toward her bedroom.

And then walked backward a few steps, and put her back to the wall that led toward the guilty entryway, the one making noises. A little peek? Just a little one? Antoinette said it'd be fine, and there was a good chance Antoinette knew she was just around the corner anyway; moans were still going though, so even if she knew, she wasn't stopping.

Caught between a grin and shivering parted lips, she sneaked her way toward the entryway, and inched her head out just enough to get one eye a view of the room.

The lighting was low, all the LEDs set to gently pulse on a soft amber, as if a setting sun was gently rolling past the clouds. The

dragon fountain in the back of the large room had its eyes turned on as well, LED eyes, and they glowed red. She also had the LEDs in the actual fountain pool around the dragon set to red, so their red light shined up against the black marble cracked with white lightning. So beautiful, so utterly beautiful.

Jack was on one of the center, backless couches, lying down, legs dangling off the couch at the knee. His head was to Natasha, legs away from her, so unless he leaned his head back really far, he wouldn't be able to see her. Antoinette, on the other hand, was sitting on the boy's waist—no, wait, sitting on his pelvis, and she was facing him, and Natasha. She was having sex with Jack, had Jack inside her, and she was looking down at him from her perch on top of him.

The Prince took a quick glance at Natasha, and offered her a small, welcoming smile. She didn't have to say it, she didn't mind if Natasha wanted to watch. And Natasha didn't have a choice in the matter anymore, as her body froze, unable to move, eyes locked onto the sight of the Prince, nude, and her gentle, rocking motion on Jack's body.

It was one thing to see Antoinette wearing skimpy outfits that showed off her body to the point nothing was left to the imagination, and another to actually see her naked. How did a woman with a slim waist have such wide hips and such enormous breasts? It defied logic! And, it was hypnotizing, bewitching Natasha, paralyzing her.

It took Natasha a moment to realize there was something on Antoinette's breasts. Some liquid, thick, and—cum, her breasts were covered in it. Natasha raised a hand to her lip, and nibbled on her finger as she watched the curvy woman gently ride Jack, her hands pressing down against the boy's chest, and using the sides of her arms to press her cum-soaked breasts together.

Antoinette wasn't just fucking Jack, she was showing off! Just like Jessy would, Antoinette sat up straight, lifted her hands, and raised them up to her hair. Still rocking her hips back and forth, the tall vixen combed her hair back with her fingers, elbows up, chest jutting out and breasts lightly jiggling with her motions. So huge, so utterly huge, they turned into heavy teardrops that squished and spread against her chest and ribs, but pulled up slightly by her raised arms. Fashion model pose, and she held it with a smile as she fucked her love.

When Jessy did it, it seemed silly and obnoxious. When Antoinette did it, it seemed glorious and awe inspiring.

Jack raised his hands from her legs where her knees were snug against his sides, caressed her hips, caressed her waist, and brought his hands up to her breasts. But, instead of grabbing them, squeezing, all the things Natasha expected of young men who had no sense of delicacy, Jack's touch was tender, loving, and his fingertips found her large, swollen nipples. They traced lines through his cum, spreading it along the outside and underside of each breast, which had Natasha's whole body singing with excitement. A boy, young man, running his fingers through his own cum, on the woman's skin? Hot. Hot hot.

When Jack's fingers found Antoinette's nipples again, and began to caress them, Antoinette moaned. Antoinette, moaning, with a hint of a whimper and mewl. The other moans before had been quiet, little things, and only now did Natasha realize they were all Jack's. Antoinette's moans were also subtle, but god damn they were enticing, majestic, royal. Showing off in so many ways, just like Jessy did, but she was so much better at it.

Maybe ... maybe she should try that too? A little? Natasha struggled to picture herself performing such an erotic display with her boyfriends, but the more she watched, the more she wanted to try.

Jack's cum faded away, like all Kindred fluids did, and once it was gone, Antoinette lowered her hands, took his, netted their fingers together, and pinned them down above his head into the couch. So much taller than Jack, pinning his hands down like that caused her heavy breasts to pull down and sway over his face. She lowered herself a little further, until one of them was set on the boy's chin and lips, its size spilling over onto his neck and shoulder. And, once the boy opened his mouth and began to suckle on her, her moans returned, a little louder than before. She really loved having her nipples kissed and licked.

Antoinette offered Natasha occasional glances, tiny things, only enough to let Natasha know Antoinette knew she was still watching. The Prince wasn't showing off for her though, she was showing off for Jack; and showing off agreed with her. She was rocking her body back and forth on Jack's body, smiling down at her little lover like he was the most precious thing in the world to her, and she was loving it.

She came. Her moans came to a stop, and her rocking motion slowed down as well. Eyes half-closed, she still managed to glance Natasha's way, and smiled as she milked her own orgasm. Jack's suckling seemed to grow gentler, but it was hard to tell from where Natasha was watching. They must have, as his lips drifted away from her nipple, and started to plant kisses along the inner contours of Antoinette's other breast. Hands pinned, he only had so much access to move, but he worked with what he had, and kissed a little in one spot, then another, and then another, all avoiding the Prince's nipples as she came. Too sensitive, maybe?

Ok, you just watched your boss, and the Prince of Dolareido, enjoy an orgasm from having her nipple suckled during some rather romantic, slow cowgirl action. That's enough barrier breaking for tonight. Natasha turned to slip away, but, for some reason, raised a hand and offered Antoinette a tiny finger wave as well.

Antoinette pouted. Oh good god she pouted, an actual pout. Antoinette did not pout. The Prince of Dolareido did not pout! But, she offered Tash a small pout, before she slipped in a sly, quick wink, and looked back down at her lover. She started rocking again, faster this time. Queue for Tash to leave before she got hypnotized again.

The little Mekhet forced herself away from the beautiful display, and went to her room.

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The next night, Natasha was already in the primary research room when Antoinette came to join her. They were going to spend the next eight-ish hours researching the occult, and seeing what sort of things Antoinette's machine could summon. That was the plan anyway, but as Antoinette stepped in, all Natasha could think about was the beautiful woman, naked and having marvelous sex with her love Jack. If Tash could paint, she'd be painting that scene right now.

"I um ... I... , " she said. Stuttered. It was hard to look Antoinette in the eye anymore, and it wasn't easy to begin with. "I saw you."

"Of course, my dear. You may have noticed I saw you as well." She chuckled, hand raised to touch her grin with her fingertip. "Did you enjoy watching Jack and I make love?"

Make love, oh! It was so romantic, it made her tiny dead heart want to flutter. And then slap herself for being so silly.

"Y-You're really comfortable, being watched ... aren't you?"

"Of course. Dear, when I was your age, to indulge in feasts of a dozen bodies at once, sex and blood and semen, with more kine besides to watch, was a normal activity. I am afraid such memories are blurred, most but a haze, a fog I cannot grasp no matter how

hard I try. But I know they are there.” She slid into a chair at the large table covered in occult goods, and pulled over her laptop.

“Um, is ... is it a D-Daeva thing?” Mekhet were secretive by nature. Daeva were passionate by nature. It generally meant that Mekhet were anti-social and that Daeva were very social, but not always.

“Perhaps. It is certainly easier for Daeva to indulge in erotic play with kine. But to say that to find joy in being watched, as others admire you, your movement, your sounds, your beauty, as you milk another of his bliss?” The woman leaned forward with a slow, almost seductive motion, set her elbows on the table, and winked at her. “Do you not enjoy the eyes of your wolves?”

“I uh, I can’t really tell? They’re normally all over me, and p-pinning down, and before I know it, I have things ... inside me. I try to see, but they ... they’re ... they’re really good, and my eyes close and I can’t stop...” Can’t stop cumming.

“I am sure they would let you have a little more control, Natasha, a little more time to indulge in their gaze, if you ask them.”

“I know, I-I just ... not sure I could ... handle being the center of attention like that.”

The tall Daeva chuckled, a warm and lustrous sound, before she leaned back, opened her laptop, and starting clicking and type. They’d just imported a new piece that looked like it was from ancient Mesopotamia, some sort of necklace. The string on it should have decomposed by now, but it hadn’t, and some weird, small, smooth black rocks were dangling from it, looped in string. Metallurgical analysis came up with nothing.

“ ... H ... How, um, would ... would you go about ... b-being the center of attention, like that?”



“My dear Natasha, are you interested to know the ways in which I seduce my little Ventrue?”

“ ... y-yes.” Natasha pushed her laptop aside, and nodded as matter-of-factly as she could, considering the topic. But the topic was far too silly for her to stop grinning, like they were exchanging naughty secrets. Which they kind of were, except the only one who still thought of these things as secrets was Natasha.

“As much as I could offer suggestions for clothes, or ways to flirt, ways to drive the men wild and turn them into helpless pups in the palm of your hand, it truly only takes a word. I ask my love to sit for me ... which, I suppose, would be an apt request for your two canine bed fellows.” The Daeva smiled, bordered on a chuckle, and continued to type on the laptop. But her attention was mostly on Natasha now, with only the occasional glance at the screen. Natasha couldn't see what she was working on, sitting on the opposite side of the table, but it was probably the same information dumps about the Mesopotamia era that Natasha was looking at.

But sex was more interesting!

“You think if I t-t-tell them to sit, they'll ... sit?”

“Of course.”

“B-But there's two of them! And they're ... so much stronger than me.”

“Far be it from me to encourage abuse of the genders, sweet Natasha, but you are a woman, and there are ... perks, to being a woman in a sexual relationship with men.”

“P-Perks?”

“Ben oui. A little word, a petite smile, a quiet hush, and a devious grin, is all it takes to turn most men into love slaves, Miss Vola.

Even older men, familiar with the back and forth of sexual energies, the game of flirtation, will find themselves drawn toward a woman with hungry eyes and a knowing smile. Simply letting the two boys know that you wish to have sex with them will have them mad with desire, but doing it in a more controlled, tempered, playful fashion, will have them eating out of your hand.”

Natasha wasn't sure if Antoinette kept slipping in references that could be used for men or dogs on purpose, but it was making her giggle anyway.

“H-How would I—”

“Just say the word, to sit, and then ask — or perhaps tell — them to hold still. Smile as you instruct them, bat your eyelashes, show them bits of your body, expose your breasts, your sex, hypnotize them, and then order them.”

“ ... th-that's all?”

“Mmhm. The more you practice, the better you will become at seduction. Though with you, I get the impression this is purely an experiment, and that more often than not, you would enjoy the usual way in which you copulate.”

Natasha squirmed as she smiled, and tried to look like she was reading more about Mesopotamia. But, she wasn't.

“I d-do ... really like when they ... they grab my wrists, and hold me down. They ... they squish me, between them. Unt-t-til I just ... vanish between their bodies. And they're both ... b-both inside me, trying to get d-deeper, even though they're already in as d ... d-deep they can get.”

Antoinette raised a brow, interest on her face. Good, because it was taking every bit of courage Natasha had to talk about this sort

of stuff, especially with a woman she'd just seen naked fucking her own lover.

“That sounds deliciously primal, little Vola.”

“Y-Yeah! That's a good word for it. Primal. They're ... it's almost like they're desperate, you know? They start ... grunting, growling sometimes, and they're both pressed against me, and ... and they kiss me, and bite me a little sometimes, and...” She lowered her eyes as she let her mind drift to the thoughts of the two beasts, and how overpowering their sex could get sometimes. “I, I um ... not sure if I can ... control that.”

“Do not feel as if you must, Vola. It is purely for fun, after all. If you enjoy what you do, continue to do it. It sounds terribly delicious.” She sighed as she too let her mind wander, eyes looking up giving her away. Envisioning herself with two werewolves, or envisioning Natasha with them? “I must admit, now that you have seen myself make love to my little Jack, I would not mind seeing yourself between the two beasts.”

“Y-You would!?”

“But of course. You are a very beautiful, tiny creature, Natasha. It must be a deeply exciting bout of sex, to have both of those beasts penetrating you. One for your front, the other for your delicious little derriere? And, from the way you have described it, it sounds like you experience orgasm many times. Non?”

“I ... I um ... y-yeah. B-But I don't think they'd agree! To being watched, I mean.”

“Alas, you are probably correct. A shame.”

They both nodded, and resumed their work. Or at least, Antoinette did. Natasha tried, but after seeing Antoinette naked and having some beautiful, romantic sex with Jack, she got thinking

about Arturo and Matthew in a different light. She liked hanging out with them. They made her laugh, they made her smile, they made her try new things, made her feel exciting. But, romance? How would that work with two boyfriends?

And she did want romance. She wanted those little tinglies, the heart flutters, the excitement of being near the person she loved. Intimacy. She wanted someone she could confess her secrets to, and someone who would confess theirs. She wanted someone she could trust with her back, and her heart.

“ ... hey, P-Prince?”

“Yes Vola?”

“You love Jack, r-right?”

“Oui, beaucoup.”

“And ... Ashley and Julee?”

The Prince looked at her, eyes steady, fingers no longer typing, and took a long, gentle sigh. She knew where the conversation was going, she must have.

“They are my friends and my pets, and I love them dearly, but I do not love them romantically.”

“ ... I ... I wonder sometimes, about Art and Matt-t. I ... w-we get along great, but I ... d-d-don't know about ... romance.”

“I am afraid you walk in strange waters, Vola. Many cultures have embraced polygamy in varying fashions. Naturally most of these were in the form of polygyny, but there have been some to embrace polyandry. Were Arturo and Matthew brothers, I would call your relationship not so unusual, considering history.”

Natasha giggled and shook her head. “N-No, they’re not brothers, but they might as well be. They know each other v-v-very well, and, um, share everything.”

“Dolareido is nothing if not open minded about sexuality, my dear Vola, but I am afraid it would be difficult to find an example of such a relationship leading to romance.” The ancient Daeva tapped a finger on her chin, and slowly built a grin with each tap as she looked up, and then at Natasha. “I do suggest you not worry about it, my dear. If you enjoy being with these men, then enjoy it. I can understand the desire for romance, but if you seek it, it will never come. Love is terribly afraid of being in the spotlight, and if you shine a light on it, it will flee, or die.”

“ ... d-don’t look for it?”

“Non.”

“B-But, how do you find it then?”

“Love is found through the self first, creating a garden for your soul, an inviting place that you care for and enjoy, with gates open. As you go out into the world, interact with the world, and share with others the garden of your soul, you may find another who will do more than pass by to admire its contents. They may stay. They may offer to combine gardens ... perhaps I should have chosen a better metaphor.” Chuckling, she looked back down at her laptop, and got back to work, as if the topic was one she was all too practiced with, and could talk about it while she looked at Mesopotamian history. “First the self must be a place that you enjoy, and a place you nurture. Only then will you enjoy sharing it with others, and only then will love find you, when someone else decides, of their own desire and to your joy, to stay.”

It wasn’t a bad metaphor. Hell it was a good metaphor. Natasha smiled as she watched Antoinette working, and put her eyes back on the screen too. It wasn’t new advice, she’d heard it before; but she

didn't trust the internet at even the best of times. To hear Antoinette say it though, put some weight into the philosophy. You need to love yourself, take care of yourself, and be happy with yourself first. Then, go out into the world, interact with it, and with time, you'll meet someone. The key little bit there Antoinette had glossed over, that Natasha was terrified about, was the open gates part. You had to open your gates.

No Mekhet opened their gates easily. Arturo and Matthew had forced their way through hers, and that was just the front gate. There were many gates! She had her cute little garden she liked, but it was guarded by a fortress.

Step one then, was to try and be a little more open with Arturo and Matthew. If they liked her garden, all the better. If they didn't, well, she was thankful for the enjoyable, meaningful time they'd shared. Or at least, that's what she hoped she'd feel. She'd probably feel heartbroken. And being afraid of that, made her close her gates. Arg, vicious cycle!

Deal with it later, later. Antoinette was an amazing boss for these sorts of topics, but unlike Natasha, she had the ability to control her mind and switch gears quickly. Focus Tash, focus.

"I still haven't b-been able to ... to think of anything, or f-f-find anything, about Ganesha, that could be useful."

"Summarize, s'il vous plait."

"Um, Ganesha is the ... a deity in the Hindu p ... p-pantheon. M-Many groups worship him. He is usually revered as ... as a deity of wisdom, science, and art. And, um, also worshiped as a remover of obstacles."

"Yes, but that is Ganesha, a deity in the Hindu pantheon, as you said. Azamel is not Ganesha. She is a Begotten, a monster, a literal nightmare incarnate."

“I’m not sure how t-t-to use that information though.” It’s not like she could pop open a Wiki article about nightmare versions of ancient deities.

“Such is the mystery of the Begotten. Where do they come from, these horrors of the dream?”

“Fiona says it’s ... that it’s not the spirit world.” She looked over her shoulder to the large symbol on the floor. It was still an unnerving concept, that spirits existed. Safe had been the most adorable thing ever, but they hadn’t managed to summon anything like that since. A few wisps had come through, colorful things, glowing like big fireflies, and some other entities with slightly more defined shapes, but nothing as profound as Safe. “Begotten, and their ... h-horrors, come from the dream world.”

“It is both fascinating and unnerving, that there have been humans throughout the ages that have both spoken of a higher existence that can be touched upon by the dreaming, but also, that there are dangers, lurking outside the walls of our realm. Entities beyond imagining, beyond simple definitions, beyond the limitations of matter or dimensions.”

Fascinating was most definitely not the word Natasha would use to describe such entities. But, that did give her some clues.

“Kine, and ... and Kindred too, I suppose, since we all dream, they t-touch the dream realm?”

“So it would appear. Or perhaps, only some do. Mystery upon mysteries.” With a long sigh, Antoinette got up, took her interface tablet from the table, and tapped on it a few times. Soon the room was buried in the blue light of the strange chandelier, and Antoinette set the Mesopotamian necklace upon the room’s center, in the giant symbol marked on the floor. “Any predictions?”

“About the necklace? Um ... n-no, sorry.”

“And about nightmares?”

“I ... I ... I should ask Fiona.”

“Be careful with her, Vola. She may be a sweet, innocent creature on the outside, but you and I both know a monster rests within.”

She nodded, got up, and walked over to stand beside Antoinette. On queue, the Prince lowered the device so Natasha could see through it, and the two of them could watch through the amber screen to observe madness unfurl. But it would take time.

“H-Have you asked Jack?” Natasha said.

“I do my best to not speak of city matters when with my love.”

“I understand ... b-but, you’re both Kindred, and you’re the P-P-Prince, and ... and with these hunters...”

Antoinette lowered the device, and looked down at her, frown on her lips. “Speaking of this Angela and Jeremiah with my love is not how I wish to spend our time.”

Pissing off her boss was a bad idea. Pissing off the Prince of Dolareido was a bad idea. But it needed to be said.

“You ... you c-can’t completely separate them, your roles and ... your love life, your romance.”

“So you say. I have tried to mingle love with work before, Miss Vola. Tony was the result.”

“B-But ... but that’s not the same. You’re not ... trying t-to outwit each other, or ... I d-don’t know, I think ... even though you’re not in the same covenant, these problems threaten us all. And m-maybe, Jack will know something about B-Begotten, more than me.”



“ ... I will consider your words, Vola. You speak true, and I fight against inevitability, but I would fight against it for as long as I can. You though, perhaps you could ask Jack of the Begotten? Do not feel you should coddle my love because of his connection to me. As you said, these threats are for us all. In fact...” Antoinette lowered the device completely, turned to face her, and put her free hand on her shoulder. So tall. “My dear Vola, I am ordering you to not tell me which questions you will ask of Jack. Please provide me with all information pertinent, information that you may glean and learn from Jack, but I do not want you to let me prevent you from doing your job. Understood?”

“ ... understood,” Natasha said.

Asking her subordinate to pull some information out of her lover, and not let her know about the specifics, to avoid her interference, was an interesting approach. Very indirect, very complicated. Very elder.

She needed to learn about Begotten, to learn about ways to defeat them. Fiona had information, and Jack may know something from Fiona. Or Tash could ask her herself. Everyone liked Fiona, her included, but they needed information. Tash also needed to find information about the hunters, but they refused to expose themselves; almost two weeks since their attack on Jack and no one had found any evidence of them anywhere. Tash also needed to look into the warning Clara gave Antoinette, about someone doing ... something ... to something. And that was going swimmingly! Ugh.

But for the moment, they were going to spend some time pursuing the secrets of the universe. Natasha had laughed when Antoinette had said those words, but the Prince had raised a brow at her, as if the laughter were unwarranted. And it was, the more they touched the edge of what any sane person would consider to be normal. Antoinette said it was both important to her personally, and to her role as a dragon. The Ordo Dracul was a world Natasha had

not yet touched, except with limited conversations with the Prince or Daniel. What sort of figures, leaders, subordinates, and fellow practitioners existed out in the world? What sort of secret sciences and arts did they pursue? Maybe she'd met some someday.

The two looked back at the device, but still nothing came, nothing showed itself, no blue ghostly images danced or died in the amber screen.

“... surprising,” the Prince said.

Tash nodded, and peeked around the screen at the symbol itself. Not that she could ever see ephemera with her naked eyes, but she knew it was there, the Prince had proven it a dozen times over with the ghostly images she'd shown her. Still, no such after-images of death or love or trauma or whatnot appeared before them.

Antoinette switched the program to something else, something called Essence Resonance. And, nodding to herself, she set it to level: light.

“You think, um, the sp-p-pirits will be attracted to it?”

“The resonance will use the properties of this Wyrmn's Nest to ... create, in a way, essence that mirrors the resonance of the necklace.” Another hint of its power. Natasha appreciated it, considering how few she shared.

“Sounds like l-light, how surfaces reflect back light as a color.”

“Similar, yes. Now, let us watch.” The Prince nodded, and then handed her the device. “You may watch this time, and see if anything crosses the barrier.”

Oh yes! Natasha took it with a smile, and raised it up as she switched the device back to the previous program, the amber lens. The first time they had used this, Antoinette had wanted to keep the

summoning of something from across the Gauntlet a surprise. A success, considering the creatures Tash's necklace had summoned, and the eventual spirit Safe. To have the emotion of the necklace distilled into something so artful, beautiful, meaningful, had been astounding. What else could they summon? She stared on at the device, its amber screen, and watched the glowing white dot that sat upon the symbol on the floor, only visible through the screen's alien science.

Something! They could summon something! Natasha squeaked, and pointed at the device as blue swirls started to appear in the screen. If the glowing white was a hole, a cut, something that penetrated the wall between their worlds, the blue mist and rolling waves of dense fog that leaked from it, was something on the other side coming their way. The process wasn't instantaneous; whatever was crossing the Gauntlet, it took a bit for them to find their way here, and for them to cross the mysterious barrier.

She really had to ask Arturo and Matthew about it, the barrier, about the spirit world. It seemed so beautiful from this side. How bad could it be? Well, she wasn't so stupid or naive to think it had to be pretty and nice, just because those were the sorts of things she and the Prince managed to summon, but—

A black tendril slipped out of the hole. Natasha gulped, and stepped back as she lowered the device. Without it, she couldn't see the blue swirling energies, or the strange, white, glowing cut in reality that allowed things to come through. But she could see the thing, the black, squirming, wriggling thing, force its way into their realm. Like seeing a worm push up through dirt, something ebony, inky, like slime but solid, continued to crawl from the floating space, until it fell to the floor and sat upon the center of the symbol.

Natasha took another step back. This was most definitely not Safe, or safe for that matter. Antoinette took a step forward on the other hand, and knelt down to look at the strange thing. A squid? It

kind of looked like one, but as Natasha stared on, it started to float upward, its many tendrils leading its direction instead of following behind it. When it turned to face her with its tendrils, she squeaked, and almost dropped the heavy tablet.

It had an eye, on its main body, between all the tendrils. Ew.

“What manner of spirit are you?” Antoinette said.

It didn't respond. It did blink though, dark eyelid coming down over the large eye that sat between the dozen tentacles. The eye itself was perfectly circular, and the eyelid opened far too wide, so the whole of its shape was exposed. White eye, with a gray iris and black pupil. It had no mouth, even when Natasha stepped around to check behind it, on its main body. The main body was very bulbous too, and the skin bumpy, a bit shiny, and it looked kind of slimy. Far too much in common with a squid for her to want to touch it.

“M-Maybe it can't speak?” she said. “I, um, I've heard the Uratha —”

“Uratha.” A wriggling voice of quiet slurps came out of the squid thing. It shivered, and floated away from Natasha. It didn't get far. The necklace beneath it was both bait and a tether, so the spirit thing managed only a few feet from it before it drifted back toward its lifeline.

The Prince smirked, tapping a finger to her chin as she analyzed. “I know the werewolves are capable of communicating with creatures from the other side. But I had assumed that the spirits themselves were incapable of speech, except for the more developed ones. Safe, was perhaps, an anomaly. I wonder, if the Uratha speak a language unique to spirits?”

“... you want secrets?” The floating eye came closer to Antoinette, hovering higher. No mouth, but the weird, slurps and shlorps and

blops of its voice came from somewhere, quiet but there. “Trade for secrets.”

“I guess it d-does speak English.”

“Trade for secrets.” The tentacles swirled, causing the eye to slowly rotate. “Trade?”

“Spirits are awfully one-track minded, are they not?” Antoinette said, looking down to Natasha as the smaller vampire approached.

“It d-does seem like, that, that they’re ... um ... specific.” They knew that already, but it never ceased to be an interesting sight, these spirits and their inability to think beyond their purview. “And maybe more can sp-p-peak than we thought?”

“I will trade you for secrets,” Antoinette said to the creature.

“What trade? I know many secrets from Hisil. Know few from Gurihal.”

“Gurihal?” Natasha said.

“Here! Here! Tasty treat summoned.” The creature lowered itself down to the necklace, and hovered around it a few times before looking back to the two Kindred. “Trade secrets?”

The Prince set her chin in her fingers, and lightly stroked it as she contemplated. “I will trade you ... knowledge about a human politician’s love affair, if you tell me about the language spirits and the Uratha speak.”

The squid thing copied Antoinette’s motion, running one of its tentacles under its eye as if it were a chin. “Agreed.” Apparently, it knew what a human politician was too. Or at least, knew that it wanted to know more about them.

“Darla Copperman has been sleeping with her hairdresser.”

Natasha raised a brow and blinked at Antoinette. “ ... r-really?”

“Mmhmm. From what I can tell, it is purely physical, and perhaps a touch romantic. No ill intent; except, of course, that both are married and doing this behind the backs of their partners.”

A politician risking her career for something as simple as good sex was a surprise. Or, maybe not. Good sex was pretty great.

The tentacle rippled, as if someone had poked a puddle. “Secret! My turn. The Uratha speak Uremehir. Spirits too.”

“Uremehir?” the Prince said. “Is there an English word for that language?”

“The First Tongue.”

The two Kindred blinked at the squid, then each other. “First Tongue?”

“Yes, First Tongue. Old, very old. Uratha say maybe first language for humans.” The tentacle creature floated around some more, looking around at the room with the eye between its tentacles, before looking back to the two Kindred.

“I ... remember, Art and Matt t-telling me they learned something, called the First T-Tongue, when they were changed.” She nodded a little as she dug through the memory. “I d-didn’t really ... think about it, at the t-time.”

“Another trade?” it said.

The Prince nodded. “Very well. Perhaps for something of greater weighter?”

“Oh, dangerous trade. Yes, dangerous. Offer?”

“I will tell you of a secret of the vampire leader here, of the Carthians, Garry Tones. Something personal. In return, tell me what the Uratha leader Avery has been doing in the Hisil.”

The eye made a giggle sound, like a bunch of swamp bubbles popping. “Uratha hunting, always hunting, not secret.”

“Surely she has pursued something specific and worthy of note?”

The tentacle creature started to turn in place, one of its limbs occasionally rubbing its fat body. It didn't seem to care too much if it was oriented with the floor, and with time it started to adopt positions that were upside down from how it was before; which looked normal after a while, and Natasha's brain eventually identified the old orientation as upside down. Did this creature not care where gravity was? Creature was perhaps the wrong word for a spirit.

“Avery has secret, about hunts in Hisil. Trade!”

“Alright spirit, you speak first.”

“Can't.”

Antoinette frowned at the floating orb, and exposed her fangs as she grit her teeth. “I shared with you first on the first trade. Would it not make sense to share with me first on the second?”

“Can't.” And, as if the world were summarized in that single word, the spirit started hovering in random directions. Never far from the necklace of course, a few feet to the side, maybe six feet up, but always back to the necklace.

“It ... these spirits aren't truly ... c-capable of internal reasoning, I think,” Natasha said. “They seem bound to their ... to what they are.”

“... merde.” Sighing, Antoinette folded her arms under her bosom. “I know these spirits are defined by what they are, to an all-encompassing degree. But that does not mean they are incapable of lying.”

“Can’t lie! Must trade. Secret with lie, is not secret, just lie. Trade?”

The Prince was not used to being denied. Natasha had to fight to hide her smirk, at how this simple little spirit was defying her, especially over something like secrets. Secrets were Antoinette’s favorite dessert, Natasha was sure, and having it denied her was too cute. And scary. This strange magical machinery of the Prince’s made the spirits physical, in a way, and that meant Antoinette could rip the strangely adorable-but-gross floating eyeball in half if she wanted to.

“Alright, I will tell you my secret first.” With a groan, Antoinette gestured with her hand, as if the secret itself deserved an open palm. “Garry Tones once slept with a young man, Kindred, who was a member of the Lancea et Sanctum, during the years of Lucas’s rise. They were romantic together. Lucas found out, and killed the boy.”

Oh, eesh. Natasha squirmed a little and looked down, not wanting to make eye contact with anything as she visualized how horrible that must have been. The secret would not damage Garry’s life to be known, except perhaps that it would infuriate him to know others knew about such a horrible trauma. Antoinette could be ruthless in her pursuits of knowledge.

“Secret! Secret! Avery, Uratha, thinks someone named Maria is looking for a way to summon Black Blood. She—”

Antoinette’s hand snapped out, grabbed the creature, and sank her nails into it as she brought it up to her face. “Black Blood!?”



Maria would never attempt to summon that monster! She knows nothing of it!”

Natasha almost jumped away, but managed to stay put, and shiver a little as Antoinette’s eyes lit ablaze.

“But ... secret! I give, trade!”

“Um, I-I think ... this little guy really doesn’t know how t-to do anything else. Just, trade secrets. Maybe spy too, t-t-to learn secrets, but ... don’t think it can lie.” Black Blood? Who was Black Blood?

The Prince brought the creature in closer still, until it was only a few inches from her face. Fangs bared, eyes wide, she snarled deep under her breath, and glared into the pitiful thing hard enough to cut steel.

“Why does she think Maria is trying to summon that monstrosity? Consider the information a part of the secret we traded.”

“Avery found whispers! Whispers from Black Blood’s wraiths in Hisil! Someone named Maria was trying to talk to them. That’s all I know!”

Letting go of the black squid, Antoinette sighed, and began to circle the creature. The poor spirit was spooked, jittering, skin vibrating like a puddle, its eye tracking Antoinette. Poor thing. Except, Natasha knew she should know better, to pity it. It was a spirit, it didn’t ‘feel’ things like living creatures did. Its existence was devoted to fueling its purpose, feeding it, and anything else was not a part of its being. Being jittery and quick to panic was probably just a valuable trait to incorporate into its behavior, if it was a purveyor of secrets.

Still, it was oddly adorable in its simplicity, and Natasha pouted as she watched it grow nervous.

“ ... I will make you another trade, spirit of secrets,” the Prince said. “Tell me of Black Blood’s latest goals, its current agenda, and I —”

The creature made a pathetic, squealing shriek sound, and went poof.

The two Kindred stared on, looked at each other, then at the empty air where the creature used to be. They waited, for thirty seconds, but nothing happened. No more noise, no more spirit, no nothing. It’d gone home.

“Shall I ... t-turn it off?” Natasha said.

“Yes, you may as well.” Sighing, Antoinette scooped up the necklace, and walked back over to the table where they kept their laptops and the objects they were studying for the day. The only one they hadn’t already tested in the device was the new necklace, and now with test one complete, they both had some notes to take.

Natasha set the resonance level back to zero, and turned off the ephemera-exposing blue light. Back in normal lighting conditions, Natasha came over to sit with the Prince again. She thought to find the Prince typing away and filling in her observations, but instead, Antoinette was leaning back in her chair, her chin between some fingers while her other hand combed her hair over her shoulder, down her chest. Thinking mode. Natasha usually chewed on a pen or something, Antoinette seemed to comb her hair.

“ ... it ... ran away?” Tash said.

“Indeed. It is afraid of Black Blood, no doubt; if such a simple creature is capable of fear. I doubted it would answer my question, as that entity’s shadow has haunted Dolareido for centuries now.”

“Centuries!?”

“Indeed. My experiments with the Gauntlet, and testing what entities I could draw from the other side, started not long after I arrived here with Jacob. Before we Kindred had managed to manipulate the small village into our foundation for a future utopia, whispers of that name were on the words of the people, the kine. Jacob, deep into his own experiments, his dark magics and blood rituals, also discovered mention of the creature’s name. I know his relationship with it, if it could be called a relationship, has grown as well. They know each other.”

“J-Jacob ... knows ... this thing?”

“Oui. To my chagrin, I have not been able to discern the exact nature of that relationship. It ... Black Blood was involved, somehow, with the incident with Simon and Avery.” She frowned, hard, and grit her teeth until her fangs were bared again. So weird, so very weird, for Antoinette to carry anger on her face when she got frustrated. “But that is not what bothers me.”

“ ... is ... is it b-because ... this?” Natasha reached out, and picked up the necklace on the table.

“Yes. I imported this piece through my connections with the company Border Explorations, as I have done many times in the past. And yet, this time, not only does the object have no memory imprinted upon it, it resonates with the spirit world in such a way as to attract a spirit of secrets.” She reached out for the necklace, and Natasha set into her hand. “It does not surprise me such a spirit would exist in Dolareido, as both Kindred and kine grow secrets here like a garden of weeds. What surprises me, is the delightful timing of this necklace.”

“It ... it d-does seem awfully perfect, doesn’t it? We want to know more about Avery, and w-what she’s up to, and ... this necklace is perfect for that.”

Antoinette stared into the black orbs the necklace wrapped in its strings, and rubbed one with a thumb. Fiery eyes stared into it, and Antoinette's frown faded away as she slowly set the necklace back down.

"Someone has conspired to insure I would receive this necklace. They wished for me to know more about what is happening on the other side of the veil."

"Are we sure it c-can't be coincidence?"

"We coincidentally learn that Maria has been communicating, or attempting to communicate, with this creature beyond our realm?"

"... no, I suppose it ... it couldn't b-b-be coincidence." A lot of randomness involved though. Would Antoinette buy the necklace was a big roll of the die, and if the device would summon a creature that resonated with it was another roll of the die. Whoever had set this up knew the necklace was a necklace of secrets though, and had a clue as to what sort of experiments Antoinette did. That lowered the possible people down to a manageable amount, at least.

"I ... am also concerned ... about Maria." Antoinette set the necklace back onto the table, closer to Natasha. "Assuming that that spirit was incapable of lying, as you believe, then Maria is pursuing a course of action I fear has no happy ending."

"I d-don't understand. What is Black Blood?"

"A spirit, a very old and powerful spirit, my dear Vola. Unlike the innocent creatures we have summoned, this dark entity has haunted Dolareido for so long, it has ... it is beyond simple descriptions. It pursues death, murder, but it also pursues life, in a strange way, in a way only Jacob and his crúac rituals could understand."

This, was exactly why Natasha left the Ordo Dracul in the first place. She didn't want to deal with crazy alien creatures from the beyond! She wanted to sit down, deal with data, deal with money, deal with secrets. Those were things she could understand, and catalog, and control. Now she was dealing with sewer monsters, nightmare monsters, spirit monsters, and everything in between.

“So, um, m-my ... t-t-task now is to: discover the weakness of the Begotten, or at least Azamel; track down the hunters, p-particularly Jeremiah or Angela; find out more about M-Maria's motives; find out what Clara ... w-w-warned us ab—ooh ... m-maybe she warned us about Maria? And, um, I'm also t-to continue this research here.” She gestured to the room behind her. Conveniently, she left out how much work that was, how much life threatening work that was, and how much she would not be able to handle that all on her own. The Prince noticed it without her saying it, and smirked at her.

“Alas, you make a point, my dear Vola. I will continue my research alone; you need no longer attend these research meetings of ours. Daniel is already investigating Clara's mysterious warning, though I suspect the man will be able to find little. Perhaps, with this new information, he may find something by investigating Maria Turio's activities though. You, my sweet, shall consider dealing with the hunters your primary task, and discovering the weakness of Azamel your secondary task.”

“W-What about Maria?”

“Your sire will handle it, Miss Vola. Please leave Maria be. We do not know the extent of her pursuits, or her goals.”

“B-But ... I...” I feel like I should be involved. I know Maria better than most. I owe her a lot, too, like a punch to the face. “Yes Prince.”

Primary task meant put your life on the line for it if need be, like the time she was investigating the tunnels. Secondary task meant looking it up on the laptop when at home, or just keeping an open

ear for it when the opportunity presented itself. So she was being told to risk her life to deal with the hunters, but don't risk it for dealing with the Begotten. Reasonable, but scary, considering what the hunters had done already, killing Barry and nearly killing Jack.

Natasha nodded. "I'll see it d-done." And she would too. Hunting down humans, in a city, by being sneaky and smart and cross-referencing data in an increasingly intricate mountain of evidence? She was damn good at that, she just had to be careful to not end up like Barry. "... I rarely see my sire these days, Prince."

"Neither do I, my dear. I miss his company, as quiet as it was. But, he must disappear for days at a time, to find his prey."

"That worries ... m-m-me. He ... he d-didn't find Jeremiah or Angela."

"That worries me, as well, my dear. These humans hide themselves using the size of my city, and its teeming masses that they can blend in with as easily as they breathe. And worse still, they use strange tools to pursue their goals. Relics, artifacts perhaps, or rituals that tap into forces that defy my knowledge." The Prince lowered her gaze, eyes becoming red steel. If there was one person who hated not knowing something, it was her.

"I will m-make sure, to learn about how they're hiding so well t-t-too."

"See that you do. These pests are proving incessant, and that cannot stand. I will see this Jeremiah and Angela dead, and I will purge this city clean of their like, even if it floods Dolareido's streets in red."



~~Eric~~

What now?

Eric stared on over the deadly white sheets of the hospital bed. The distensions in the blanket marked the legs of the round man underneath the pale sheet. Some hospitals used green, some use mauve, some sky blue. This hospital liked white. Felt professional, and sterile.

“You see this?” The old man in the bed gestured to the TV on the wall, thrice as large and far newer than the one in the other hospital.

“Can’t not see it.” Groaning, Eric leaned forward, ass starting to hurt a bit as the cushions of the seat did not agree with him. Whatever, just a bit of pain to accent the futility of why he was here. Wonderful. He put his elbows to his knees, and looked to the TV. The Amazon forest was burning to the ground.

“I swear the world’s burning down around us,” his father said.

“Metaphor?”

“Of course it’s a fucking metaphor.”

Eric shrugged. “Thought maybe you really cared about the rainforest.”

The old man snorted, and put the TV remote back onto the sheets after muting the TV. “Makes me sick.”

“Then stop watching it.”

“I’m not going to ignore the world’s problems.”

Yeah, right. Old man couldn’t ignore a problem, no matter how small it was, no matter how much he couldn’t affect it.

“Could join the relief effort, help block the fire from spreading,” Eric said. “I’m sure you’ll be of great help.”

His old man glared at him, sneered, and looked back to the TV.  
“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you too.”

They both sighed, and let the silence of the muted TV fill the room. The captions were on. His dad could hear fine, but he found the quick talking of the reporters and civilians annoying. Poor fool wouldn't be able to stomach a single conversation with a Gen Z, let alone a Millennial.

“Nurses here treating you alright?” Eric said.

“Well enough. Shorter skirts and bigger breasts seem to be the only upgrade.”

“I told you don't harass the nurses.”

“I'm not harassing them.”

“Dad, saying to a woman that she had a nice rack is harassment.”

“Pretty sure that's a compliment.”

“It is, it's also sexual harassment.”

His old man sighed, and shrugged. “Can I at least say nice ass?”

“... better, but I still wouldn't advise it. These women — and men — are the only things between you and a shit-filled bed.”

“If they didn't want the compliment, why wear the short skirt?”

Explaining to his idiot old man the delicacies of flirting versus harassing was not how he wanted to spend his Sunday afternoon.

“They want you to notice, but they don't want you leer. Direct, tactless compliments are the verbal equivalent of leering. And



besides, it's not you they're trying to get to notice anyway."

"I can still bag the ladies when I want to."

Eric raised a brow at the old man, and smirked. His dad was normal height, like him, but he didn't shave his head like Eric, instead preferring some short hair; now white short hair. He had a bit of a beard too, trim at least, but otherwise a full beard. He wasn't extremely fat, but he had more flub on him than a health-conscious guy like Eric would prefer he had, and the soft roundness it gave his dad's face betrayed the darkness of the man's soul.

"You're a regular Bill Cosby, dad."

"I watch the news son, or did you not notice?" Old man gestured to the TV again. "So fuck you too."

And around, and around, and around they went.

Maybe you should try putting your good foot forward first for once, Eric? He thought he did that by getting his dad into a better hospital. Nah, best that managed was a single 'thanks' from the old man, before things went right back to normal. Well, old man take a look at my life, I could use a fucking olive branch, just like you.

Pointless attempts to mend burned bridges was only half the reason he was here though.

"Dad, serious question."

"Shoot."

"You ever felt ... like ... an animal?"

"Eric, I'll stop harassing the nurses if you—"

"No, not about that. I mean, literally, you ever felt like ... I don't know, someone eying you in the street, thinking you're an easy

target to mug, and you feel ... ready to tear into them?”

His dad raised a brow as he stared at him, before adjusting his hospital gown, and scratching at the tubes coming out of his forearm and nostrils. If Eric’s words had triggered some sort of memory, hidden reflex, anything like that, the heart monitor didn’t show it.

“We grew up in a rough neighborhood son, you know that. Did some things in my life I ain’t proud of, hurt people when I had to protect me, you, or your mother.”

“This isn’t about that either.” Thankfully, the two of them were past that part of the father and son relationship, talking about their shit life and the struggles they had growing up together. Now, it was figuring out how to not hate each other as adults. It wasn’t going well.

“The fuck is it then?”

“Ever want to ... not just kill someone, but...” Hunt them down, tear them open, eat their flesh. “Forget it. Guess I’m just still angry about shit.”

“If I was a dumbass like you, I’d be angry about shit too. How’s Sheryl by the way?”

“Haven’t spoken to her since last time I told you.” Not like his dad liked Sheryl. Old man had called her out for what sort of person she was long before Eric realized it. He’d called Eric out for what sort of person Eric had become before he realized it too. In both circumstances, his old man had had the tact of a fucking gun. Maybe if the fucker hadn’t been such a monumental asshole about it, Eric would have listened to him.

Too fucking late now. A delightful life lesson that he could never swallow. Just cause you don’t like how the truth tastes doesn’t

mean it isn't the fucking truth.

As he sat there with his dad, and the two of them watched the muted news, reading the captions, he tried to feel, to sense, look for any of the weird signals his new mind had been sending him. Was his dad dangerous? Was his dad an animal, like him? Was his dad something more than just his dad? No, it all seemed perfectly normal, perfectly dad-ish, perfectly human. For the best, probably. Unless, his dad might live if he became the sort of person Eric was becoming.

Eric looked down at his knee, and groaned as he flexed it. Still hurt. If he was becoming a werewolf, or whatever, why did that still fucking hurt? Wouldn't it heal? Is that something werewolves did? Christ, he needed to talk to Fiona, get some answers about who he was.

"Seeing anyone?" his dad said. "Must see a lot of nice girls at a nightclub." The sarcasm was palpable, and with just a hint of bitter for a delightful cocktail of fuck you.

"Bloodlust is closer to a lounge than club."

"Yeah, how so?"

"Less people, and you don't have to scream at the top of your lungs to speak to the person beside you." And it was a front for vampires to get themselves easy meals, using sexuality, booze, and drugs to turn humans into defenseless prey. Didn't seem like the vamps killed their victims, at least not at Bloodlust, so he had to admit, it was a pretty cozy setup for them, one he didn't mind.

And they were paying his salary, a pretty sweet salary, so he shouldn't complain. Hell, that Jessy girl did him a huge favor, and the only thing she wanted in return was to fuck him. Talk about a reversal of expectations.

Except, now, she knew he knew she was a vampire. Suddenly he was neck deep in a strange world, with vampires and werewolves and monsters, and they had a leash on him. He didn't like being on a leash, but as far as he could tell, the leash wasn't forcing him to do anything he wouldn't already do. New job with great money and great benefits? Yeah, he'd do that. Sexy woman with a hard body — the fitness nut in him creamed its pants at the sight of her — who wanted to fuck him? Yeah, he'd do her. And now, the sexy vampire and a beautiful monster were looking to make his nights more interesting on a regular basis. Yeah, he'd probably appreciate that too.

He looked at his dad. The man wasn't going to live much longer; at least, not at a health conscious guy's definition. Type 2 diabetes, a bad Trig/HDL ratio, obese enough to hurt his joints, and only enough muscle to get his ass out of bed in the morning. All in all, a very unhealthy man. That was the way of it since Eric's mom died some ten years ago, despite Eric's constant badgering for him to take better care of himself. Put down the bread and eat some real food for once in your life. At a certain point, he just had to let the man be, let him do his thing.

Then the man got sick. Queue painful conversations, lots of yelling, lots of object throwing, and an eventual new thing Eric had to pay for. A spiral, leading to one shitty thing after another. But now he was on the up, and at least he could get his dad some premium care.

Or maybe he should just let the old bastard die. Why the fuck was he helping him? Cat's Cradle situation? No, his dad was around for him plenty growing up. Hell, he'd been a great dad, just an asshole too. Eric didn't feel any son guilt either, he put in his dues with his dad, at various ages, now included. Why didn't he just let the god damn idiot die?

“ ... hey dad.”

“Mm?”

“You ever wonder what it’d be like to be a vampire?”

The old man raised a brow at him like he was crazy, before looking back to the TV and changing the channel to some sports channel. Baseball. His dad couldn’t be bothered to watch a real sport, of course.

“Whatchu talking about?”

“If I told you I could make you immortal, never age, but you’d be a vampire, could never see the sun again, had to drink people’s blood, what would you say?”

“I’d say keep your fucking shit the hell away from me, blood sucker.” He laughed as he said it, before breaking into a coughing fit. Eric got up, but the man motioned him back into his seat, and forced down the coughing with time. “I’ve had enough of this life, thank you very much.”

If you took care of yourself, got up off your fat, lazy, idiot ass, life would be kinder to you. Maybe you’d have found love again, or at least you might not spend your days in pain. Fuck you old man, fuck you.

“So vampires are off the table?”

“Good lord, Eric, the fuck is the matter with you? Just let me do what I want to do.”

Yeah, if I did that, you’d be dead.

---

Back in Bloodlust, he stood on the second floor again, elbows on the railing, and watched on from above. The smells and sounds were more distinct, each categorized, each apparent. People stopped being people, are started being persons, individuals, lots of them.

Colognes, perfumes, deodorants, different types of fabrics, and different degrees of sweat or sex on their skin. It would have been two, maybe three odors to his nose in the past, but now it was dozens.

He looked down at one of the corner booths below him. The dance floor had twenty people on it, and many of the booths around it only had two or three people in them. People were feeling more wild tonight than usual, and many of the booths had a lot of physical contact happening. One of the booths had a vampire in it, a man, and he had two women in his booth with him. One of the women was snug against his side, her tube top pulled down to her belly, exposing her fake breasts, and her hand reaching out to hold onto the back of the other woman who was riding the man.

The vampire looked up, met Eric's gaze, and winked.

Weird, so fucking weird. Eric's new instincts told him to be careful with this fucker, to worry about him, to keep note and be prepared to rip him in half, literally. He was a vampire, not one of these humans, and if he was going to kill him, he had to be prepared to do more damage than that Jack kid had suffered. So, rip him in half or tear off his head, or don't bother.

He looked in another booth. A man was getting a blowjob from another man from under the table. In the same booth, a woman was getting some cunnilingus from a woman under the table. Interesting setup. In another table, two people were stroking each other off, a man and woman. And up on the second floor it wasn't much better, people fucking and touching each other and filling the pulsing music with their quiet moans.

"It's fuck night."

He raised his head, and watched Jessy approach him. She was wearing a high cut shirt, high enough to expose the underside of each breast, and the top had a boob window before it reached out

into long, black sleeves that reached her wrist. Very slick, and it matched the short skirt she wore, with its crisscross thread sides exposing a lot of her thigh and ass. A lot, lot of her thigh and ass, all the way past her hip. No underwear.

“Fuck night?”

“This your first Saturday night here? First Saturday of a month, I mean.”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck night.”

He rolled his eyes, and looked back down at the dance floor. The men and women were grinding up against each other with the beat of the music, and people were happy to get their hands involved, touching and rubbing. At least they weren't having sex on the dance floor, even the Bloodlust crew would object to that. Keep it to the booths, and keep the moans below the music.

“I see you've met Josh.” Jessy came up beside him, leaned her elbows onto the railing as well, and made a small wave at Josh. The man returned the favor. “He's next in the rotation to keep an eye on the place for the next few days.”

“Looks like he's having fun.”

“Daeva are so fucking spoiled. He snaps his fingers and he'll have bitches in droves ready to fuck him.”

“Daeva?”

“Type of vampire, really pathetic, poetic types. No grit to them at all. Fucker could put stripper sparkles on his skin and it'd fit perfectly.”

Well, that was one way to summarize a type of vampire, he supposed.

“And you?”

“Gangrel. Pretty animalistic, I guess is the easiest way to describe it.”

He most definitely got an animal vibe from her, so that fit.

“You look good tonight.”

“I know, right? Just got this thing yesterday.” She gestured down to the skirt, and how the threaded side exposed her skin. And, waving a blatant ‘stare at my ass’ sign, she turned around for him, exposing the rather small black front and back that covered her sex and ass crack, barely.

“Be careful where you sit down, wearing that.”

“Ha, was hoping to be sitting on a rather attractive bouncer’s dick, actually.” She slid in closer, and nudged her elbow into his as she stared over the railing with him. “Or, we can stare down at people, that’s cool too.”

“It’s my job.”

“Eh, not really. Your job is to be attractive and attract the sort of kine we like having here at Bloodlust.”

“... and they would be?”

“People who are attracted to dark, brooding types. Those sorts are such easy prey, flies to honey.”

“... I’ll have to pass on the sex, sorry. Not in the mood.” And he wasn’t. Visiting his dad in the hospital left a rather bitter taste in his mouth. A wonderful way to remind him how meaningless his words



could be, visiting his dad. Shouldn't have done it. But he was a glutton for punishment.

"I'll bet you twenty bucks I can change your mood." She smirked, playful and flirtatious, aggressive and confident, all the things he liked in a woman. Usually.

"I guess I can't stop you from trying." Even if she broke the rules, her vampire world paid his bills.

"Right, so, get over here." She gestured to one of the empty booths, and slid into it. Empty booths in a nightclub, ha, place really had no business calling itself a nightclub. Sighing, he came over and sat down as requested. She was the boss. Do what she said. "You do look pretty fucked up. Something on your mind?"

"Typical family drama."

"Want to talk about it?" she said. He raised a brow at her, and she laughed as she ran a fingernail along the booth table. "I like you."

"How's that?"

"You really are the only kine I know of that's not a ghoul or a thrall, and that gives you an edge I really like. Thralls and ghouls, they break the moment a vamp makes eye contact with them. They got the addiction to vamp blood, and they got respect for us. Blood gets into their minds, makes them feel special about the vamp they're addicted to." She slid in closer along the booth seat, until her thigh was against his. "You're not a thrall or ghoul, but you know what I am, what I can do. And yet, you're still a stubborn dick, knowing I could full well do anything I wanted to you."

He didn't know exactly what she could do, no, but he could feel his muscles tighten and his eyes snap to her every time he felt he was exposing his back to her. Whatever she was, he was more afraid of her than that Beatrice girl.

“I guess.”

“Plus you’re really hot. Black dude with a shaved head, buff, in a nice suit? Arg, any Invictus girl would be wet just looking at you.”

“ ... I think you overestimate how easily women get aroused at the sight of me.”

“I think you underestimate.”

Persistent as fuck, this woman.

He shrugged, sighed, and leaned back. No use in trying to slide further away from her, she’d just slide after him.

“You ever think about asking?” she said.

“ ... about what?”

“Becoming a vampire.”

## Chapter 56

~~Eric~~

“No thanks.”

“Not interested in becoming immortal?” She ran her finger down his leg, before bringing it up to her lip to give it a small bite. “I think it’d really agree with you.”

“ ... are you offering?”

“No. Well, maybe? Siring’s been opened up, so I could get you in, if so inclined.”

“Just like that?” He snapped his fingers.

“Yes and no. Normally, the vamp should really get to know the human they’re going to sire, spend time with them, form a bond.” The finger she bit soon found itself on his neck again, and she slid it around his jugular. Took a lot of willpower to not swipe it away, not because he didn’t like it, but because he was very literally exposing his neck to a deadly creature. The glint in her eye told him to hold still though, and that, he wouldn’t mind what she had in store for him.

“You don’t know me very well.”

“Well that’s half the reason I’m here. Want to get to know the sexy, brooding bouncer.”

“ ... you said earlier I’m the only human who knows about you, who isn’t a thrall or ghoul.”

“Yep.”

“Why don’t you fuck some of them?”

“Ha!” She gave his chest a pat, turned to the table, and gestured to one of the nearby booths. Two men were in there, each with a woman sitting in their lap. The two guys were talking to each other, despite the fact the women on their laps, facing toward the table, were grinding on them. He couldn’t see from the angle, but they were probably having sex. “Two of my four ghouls right there. I fuck the four of them on a regular basis.”

“ ... at the same time?”

“At the same time.”

Well, damn. He’d clearly underestimated how sexual this woman could be, and he’d already guessed her as extremely sexual.

“Surprised you bothered with me then.”

“You men always think more is better. Sometimes, less is more.” Laughing, she leaned back in the booth again, snug up against his side, shoulder to shoulder. “Fiona being there really got me in the mood, too. Damn that little girl is like, half boob.”

“Is sex all you think about?”

She raised a brow at him. Flirting with her angry side, he could see, but he was starting to get a little annoyed with her constant sex talk. Didn’t the woman ever think about anything else? Ugh, his mouth was going to get him into trouble.

“I think about a lot of things, Eric. But I can’t talk with you about any of those things.”

“Secret night life of vampires?”

“Exactly. But, hell, you’ve seen Antoinette, you’ve seen Beatrice and Natasha and Fiona, and apparently you’ve even been in nightmare land. You got one up on me. Maybe I can talk to you about some things private?” Grinning, she held out her palms in front of her, as if cupping her own bosom, except far larger. “The Prince’s tits were something else, weren’t they?”

Oh for fuck’s sake.

“For one second, I actually thought I might have offended you, and you were going to prove me wrong by talking about something other than sex.”

“Fooled you.” She winked, laughing. “I know what I like. When I’m not dealing with the Invictus or worrying about the Masquerade or trying to play in the fucking Danse Macabre, I’m fucking. If I was still human, I’d be exercising all the time, putting my ass on the internet, and fucking in my free time. But now I’m Kindred, and my body is like this permanently.” Sighing, groaning a little too, she slouched and let her back sink into the booth. “So now I’m either fucking, or trying to be a vampire. And let me tell you, it’s no picnic.”

“I imagine not, with those hunters after you.” Maybe directing her mind onto more pressing circumstances would clear her head. Those four who’d nearly killed him, who’d burned him, were still a problem.

“And they’re new. They weren’t even a problem before, not really. Christ, it’s one thing after another.” She elbowed him in the side. “Got me talking about shit. Sneaky fucker.”

Despite himself, he laughed. “Sorry.”

“So where’s Fiona? Seen her lately? She take you out on that date yet?”

“I have not seen her lately, no.” And he needed to. He frowned as his memories drifted back to her, her knowing stuff about him, her refusing to show up and talk to him, and how much he needed to ask her questions.

“She’ll show up eventually. That girl can be pretty hard to find, when she doesn’t want to be found.”

“Yeah, I noticed she’s ... an unusual ... thing.”

Laughing, Jessy took his closer arm, and set it on her leg. No hesitation, not even a blink. Why would she be hesitant though, considering a bit over a week ago she was riding him, naked, and fingering another girl at the same time. And, as much as he wanted to be surly and be left alone, god damn her leg felt good. Smooth, completely smooth, and he could feel the muscle within, giving her shapely, curvy legs. Whoever she’d been when she was alive, she’d been a fitness nut like him, to get this sort of body.

He could feel his arousal stir. God damn he broke easily.

“Well, until Fiona actually takes you out on a date, I’m considering you fair game.” She helped guide his hand up her leg until it reached the bottom of the short skirt. And predictably, she guided it between her thighs. She had nice thighs.

“Do you know where she is?” Much as Fiona was very attractive, she was also very young, and he wasn’t sure going on a date with her was a good idea. That wasn’t the reason he needed to talk to her, but it might be a good plan to slip that info in.

“Either doing her nightmare thing, or hanging out with the others. Wouldn’t be surprised if she’s hanging out with Damien.” She pulled his hand higher, and higher, until his wrist was forced to push up against her skirt. Shifting from side to side, she helped him get his hand higher up her thigh, skirt inching higher with him.

“Damien?”

“My partner. Bit of an asshole, and loves to sit in dark corners and brood. She seems attracted to those types. Can’t say I really blame her.”

“Can I have her number? I need to talk to her.”

“Ha, you’re an asshole too. Got your hand on my thigh and you’re asking for another girl’s number.”

“I…” He tried to frown, but all he could do was laugh. This woman, calling him an asshole, when she wasn’t letting him move his hand away from her thigh. And, he really didn’t want to.

“If she didn’t give you her number or tell you where she lives on her own, then I’m afraid I can’t help you. Wouldn’t be very lady-like of me to give a guy another girl’s info without her consent,” she said, grinning at him. Which earned a sigh but nod from him. He had no choice but to wait for Fiona to come to him at some point then.

Her voice wavered, and she let out a long sigh, as his finger grazed along her clitoris. Soft, tender, the opposite of the hard body she sported. Her pubic area was smooth as silk, her skin’s delicateness highlighted by the softness of the perfect, inviting mound of her mons. Not a hair to be found, so the gentle pressure of his hand against it caused the soft skin to mold to his palm lightly.

She guided his finger down lower, to her clenching entrance. Wet. Jesus, this woman. He wasn’t much better, shaft hard against his pants already, in blatant betrayal of his earlier statement about his mood. And of course she noticed immediately, and chuckled as she reached out, and set her hand on his crotch to begin rubbing it.

“This qualifies as sexual harassment,” he said.

“Then it’s a good thing it’s a corrupt business. You have no HR to complain to. Besides, you enjoyed it last time.” She pushed his finger in deeper, and clenched. Fucking hell, her insides were so hot, and wet, squeezing in a pulse that had him remembering what it felt like the night they had sex.

“ ... I ... actually wouldn’t mind some information.”

“About?”

“Things, like ... the debt you wiped, with Montoya. Or maybe some things about vampires.” Might as well see if he could make some sense of his new, insane life.

“Alright, I’ll answer some questions. Some. But only while we’re having sex.”

Yeah, he saw that coming. Well, sort of. He figured she’d say after sex, not during.

“ ... alright.” What the heck, might as well. She was gorgeous, she was fun, and he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t been thinking about that night.

“Awesome.” And, like she’d done it a million times before, she undid his pants button and zipper, undid the button of his boxers, and slid out his member. Far too comfortable with herself, and him apparently, as she didn’t hesitate to slip onto his lap facing him, grab his cock, aim it up at her slit, and lower herself. From beside him to on him in two seconds flat.

He had to admit, he really did, that this was a perk of this new job he did not expect, and he was enjoying it no matter what he might say to Jessy or himself. A quiet groan escaped him, and he set his hands on the hips of the woman as she eased herself down onto his length until he was stretching her insides, until she too made a quiet groan as she forced in the last inch.



“Nice and deep. Love, fucking love that. Wait, hold on.” She adjusted her knees, her skirt a little higher so it stopped biting her thighs, and she adjusted him too so he was slid forward a little, now leaning back. Like moving a feather. He must have weighed nothing compared to what she could move.

“Comfortable?” he said, smirking up at her.

“Enough. You?” Without missing a beat, she put her hands on his shoulders near his neck, elbows hanging and nudging against his chest.

“I—oh...” He should have expected it. The moment he said something, she squeezed, hard, hard enough he groaned again, and he tightened his grip where he held her waist. “I ... wanted to know, what you said to Montoya.”

“Montoya Montel, as you know, is a business man who gives out loans to stupid people who think they’re rich. Because stupid people who think they’re rich, like yourself at the time I’m sure, spend money they don’t have. They get in deep, and he rakes in the interest.” She leaned in closer, got her lips near his ear, and breathed softly as she gently started to grind her hips. Every motion, she matched with a clench of her insides, rhythmic, milking. He was completely outclassed. “I imagine he was sending some fucker to harass you?”

“Yeah, Mr. Pitt.”

“Ugh, slimy fucker. Well in any case, Montoya works for Terra Den Industries.”

“ ... does he now?”

“Mmhmm. Terra Den does a lot of illegal shit. Course, you can’t prove any of it.” She growled into his ear, and ran her fangs along his neck. Fangs. Shit, he forgot about the fangs, and the way sex had

ended last time. Thinking with your dick, stop thinking with your dick.

Breathe, just breathe. Nothing wrong with this. If she does bite you, it won't kill you, won't hurt, and you'll feel great. Better than great. The thrill of it, of a predator, a hunter, riding his cock as she teased his neck with the potential bite, sent shivers up his spine, until he groaned again. Her nipples were swollen, and pressed through her shirt and into his suit's jacket hard enough for him to feel them. She really enjoyed playing the horny, aggressive animal. And, he seemed to like it too.

"I paid a visit to the CEO, Jeremy Long. We had other business to discuss, and I made a point of note that he was to insure Montoya knew your debt was cleared."

"Why would you be paying a visit to someone as important as Jeremy Long?"

"Because I'm Kindred and we own this fucking city." Chuckling, she moved her head around to plant her kiss near his other ear, lips and fangs both grazing the lobe. "You work for us too, remember? We own you."

"I ... guess you do." His hands drifted higher. It wasn't him, he wasn't telling them what to do anymore. Entirely on their own, they slipped up and slid under the shirt, its cut so high it was already exposing half her back. As his fingers slid in under the shirt, he caressed her spine, and breathed faster, deeper, as touching her earned some quivers and some more clenches from her. He'd barely touched her and she was so damn wet, it was amazing.

Look at you Eric, getting seduced again because a woman's willing to jump on your dick. Don't you ever learn? How many times do you have to go through this shit before you realize you should stop sticking your dick in crazy?

Not the same thing, asshole. Sheryl was using you for money. This woman is ordering around multimillionaires, and has the power and position to make any thing she wants a fucking reality, far as you can tell. It isn't the same thing. She doesn't need your money, and she isn't faking her arousal. Get out of your fucking head, and enjoy it.

“You don't mind if I have a little nip, do you?” she said into his ear. “You taste really fucking good.”

“Do I?”

“Mmhm. Different than most kine—humans.”

Ok, maybe there was something he had that she wanted, that she was using sex to manipulate out of him. His blood, since apparently she really liked it. But last time, she didn't know that, and she slept with him anyway. The woman just really enjoyed doing what she did. Hell, maybe she actually liked fucking him specifically; she did say she came here to get to know him.

So relax and enjoy it, for fuck's sake.

“As ... as long as I can still function when you're done. I have a few hours left tonight.”

“Sure. And, hey, this is kind of fun. I don't normally get to just talk like this.” Instead of biting him, she leaned back, put her elbows on the table, and grinned at him, the angle putting her rolling abs on display. Just like last time. “My ghouls aren't exactly great conversationalists.”

“And I am?”

“Course you are, it just needs to be squeezed out of you.” On queue, she squeezed, hard, almost hard enough to hurt him, and he winced as her insides wrenched on his length. But she eased up, and

chuckled at him as her tight, heavenly, wet, surprisingly deadly insides began to milk him with more rhythmic squeezing again.

“So,” she said, eyes on him as she gently eased herself back and forth, “you noticed those hunters that day?”

“I ... noticed four people, and Fiona’s description jogged my memory.”

“Next time you see them, run. They know you work here, and after that shit show, they know ... well, they’ll either kidnap you like they did Jack, or they’ll shoot you on sight.”

“Will the hunters come this deep into the city? Where I guess a lot of you vamps hang out.”

“I’m sure they’ll sneak their way in.”

Shit, that was a problem. “The Prince, she said she’d have someone watch me.”

“And I’m sure she will, and probably does right now, but you still need to protect yourself.” Her hands found his jacket, and undid the button below the breast to open it. And with the same casualness, she began undoing the buttons of his white shirt, top to bottom. “If you’re not already, you should find a place near here to live. The closer to Xnomina HQ, the better.”

“Xnomina?”

“Yeah, most Invictus vamps live close to it, so it’s our home beacon.” With his shirt undone, she reached down, and began to run her fingers up and down his chest, fingertips tracing his abs. “Course, you could go live in the Carthian half of South Side.” Laughing, like she said something funny, she brought her hands down to where the two of them were connected. She put her elbows on the booth table behind her again, and with one hand, started to

caress her clit while her other slipped under the bottom of the shirt, and pulled it up over her breasts.

“Carthians?” He tried to not stutter, to keep the wavering out of his voice, but it was hard when watching a beautiful woman playing with herself while riding him. Her breasts, large despite her leanness, jiggled ever so slightly with her consistent, smooth rocking motion. And he stared at them, because, boobs.

“Another group of vamps. You though, I think you’ll be happier here, with us. And you should definitely move into a place nearby if you haven’t.” She paused her self touching, and reached out for his hands. No point in resisting, he couldn’t even if he wanted to at this point, and he let her guide his palms up to her breasts. Soft, so damn soft, unlike the thighs currently squeezing on his sides.

“You really love your body, don’t you?”

“Fucking right I do. I remember, over fifty years ago before I was embra—turned, I was big into fitness. MMA for women wasn’t around at the time, but I was involved in a lot of fighting. And unlike girls like Beatrice, I got to keep my rack when cut my weight down.” Laughing again, she winked at him, and pressed her hands against his, to cause his fingers and palms to squish against her large tits. “Nice, right?”

“Very.” And they were. Though, much as the natural size of them was pleasant, it was how hard her nipples were that was more pleasing. She was enjoying herself immensely, sexually. No ulterior motive, no faking it, just a woman who enjoyed the fuck out of fucking.

There was something about that genuine, honest simplicity, that was calming on his soul.

“So, you should move somewhere nearby. I’ll set you up with one of the apartments in the Carlava Villa if you want.” She put her

hands on his shoulders again, and started grinding on him, harder. Juices dripped down his length, and he could feel them running down his testicles. He'd never had sex with a woman who got this wet, and he found himself staring at her, shocked, by how much she was enjoying herself.

“That’s ... an expensive ... place to live, even with me working here.”

“I can—ah, hold on.” Fingers tightened on his shoulders, and muscles clamped down on his cock, as she started to ride faster. Never up and down, never bouncing, but instead always grinding herself back and forth. She started to squeeze, and didn’t stop, making each inch she managed to work of his length around inside her drag along her insides.

She started to cum, and she grinned at him as she did. Holding his shoulders still, she ground her body on him, and clenched in rhythm with it again, mixing with the random spasms of her insides as she shivered in bliss. More juices leaked out of her smooth lips, and when he looked down, he groaned as he watched some of the slow juices trickle out of her onto the base of his cock. His hands continued to massage her breasts, thumbs tracing circles around her nipples, as he stared between his arms down at her taut slit. Her abs crunched with each tremble, highlighting the strong but feminine curves of her waist, and where it met her hips and pelvis in the glorious S shapes a woman’s body had in droves.

“Nothing quite like a guy staring at me like when I cum.” Still shivering a little, she resumed her previous rhythm. Orgasm was nothing more than a speed bump for her. “I was going to say, I can handle the cost of getting you a nice suite in the Carlava Villa, if you prove your worth.”

“Prove my worth?” Uh oh.

“Don’t worry, nothing you probably haven’t already assumed. Those hunters are going to cause problems for us, and we need eyes and ears open. Report to me information, anything unusual, peculiar, and I’ll treat you right.”

“ ... and what does treating me right include?” More deals with devils. Well, fuck it, in for a penny.

“Money, a better place to live, in a place where Kindred keep shit safe and peaceful.” She started to pick up her pace again, animal eyes devouring him, his body, and his eyes too. “I don’t think you’d make a good thrall or ghoul, too much spine, but a vampire? Mmm, you got a certain quality to you I like.”

This vampire could not tell what was different about him, just that he was different. He was pretty sure he was a werewolf, whatever the fuck that actually meant, but how was he supposed to know that for sure? He had to talk to Fiona, alone, but until she came back, he was fucked. And the fuck was going to happen if this Jessy woman tried to turn him?

“I uh ... think I’ll pass, on the being-turned-into-a-vampire thing.”

“I wasn’t offering. It takes time to build up to something like that. I’m just saying, I like what I see, Eric Tanverson.” She took his hands, and guided them down to her ass cheeks, exposed now that she had the skirt pulled up. Large, firm, they hugged his body tight, molding to the muscles of his legs near his pelvis as she ground on his cock. “I wouldn’t want to change you anytime soon anyway, or want any vamp to change you anytime soon. You taste way too good.”

“ ... thanks.”

“So, you’ll do it? Be another ear for Invictus vamps like me, and I’ll make sure you get some good living to go with your new salary.” She continued to grind herself on him, getting faster again, and

faster, until she went rigid, and started to shiver. Without breaking eye contact, she slid her hands down from his shoulders to his chest, and caressed his muscles as she came, as she soaked him, as she clenched down on his cock until he felt the warmth of his cum building up underneath his length. “And lots of sex, of course, as a bonus.” And of course she didn’t miss a beat, talking easily despite how he could still feel her shivers on his cock.

In for a pound.

“Sure.”

“Excellent. I’ll probably drop by every week for a quick check up. In the mean time, try and get laid some more? I can tell I’m the only pussy you’ve been getting.”

“I ... I was waiting for Fiona. The date, remember? And besides, you’re one to talk. You’ve cum twice and I haven’t cum once yet.” I’m rubber, you’re glue.

Laughing, she came in closer, pressed her breasts to his chest, and put her lips on his neck. “I’ll fix that,” she said. He took a breath, braced himself, and waited. But she didn’t bite him, instead, ground on him more, and pushed her breasts into his bare chest in small circles. “Relax, it’s not going to hurt, except that tiny pinch at the start. You remember, right? Just pumping cum into me as I drank you?” Her voice was heavy, hungry, and her hands slipped around his waist underneath his shirt to hold him tighter.

Relax, right, relax. Easier said than done. He had a million new instincts telling him this woman was deadly and he should be careful with her, not to mention relaxing was not a word in his vocabulary. Never was.

But, as she continued to press herself into him, grind into him, gently clench on his cock, and moan softly into his ear, he took another breath, and let himself relax. A little. It was enough to make



Jessy chuckle again, and after putting a kiss on his neck near the shoulder, she bit into him.

Breathe. Just breathe, like the dreams told him to.

He held onto the woman's waist and hips, and let himself melt into the booth as the waves of bliss washed over him. Whatever her bite was, whatever gave it such power, he stopped caring. All that mattered in the moment, was how it rendered him so relaxed, he felt every muscle unclench as his cum started to flood her insides.



~~Beatrice~~

What a weird situation to be in.

She sat up, and looked across the room. Julias's biggest bedroom again, the fanciest bed, and the nicest room. Being in it made her feel like a queen, or a princess, or something super ridiculous. Maybe some day she should ask Julias to get some thralls to custom fit her a really big dress, the ones with the huge ass, fancy Victorian dresses.

Julias and Jen were in bed with her. Sex over, the blankets all screwed up, and everyone naked. This was the fifth time they'd fucked, the three of them. Each time, Beatrice found herself enjoying it, a lot, and she could tell Julias and Jen were enjoying it a lot too. Julias, well, he got another set of boobs and legs in the bed, so, duh. Jen was enjoying worming her way into their lives. Hell, she was snuggling into Julias right now. Triss's damn fault for leaving Jen in the middle when they were done.

Jen caught her glance, sat up, crawled over, and put Julias between them. "Come on, there's plenty to snuggle." Naked body pressed up to Julias's chest and side, she set her chin on his chest, and smiled at her.

Triss rolled her eyes, and slid into the nook of Julias's arm as well. Part of her wanted to be jealous that maybe Jen was taking her man, but the emotion never came. Why wasn't she annoyed that Jen had her naked body snug against Julias's leg and side like that, rubbing her big breasts into him, and teasing a finger along his chest and stomach? Somehow, the sneaky Ventrue bitch had successfully become her friend, wormed her way into their bed, and gotten comfortable. And Triss liked it, liked the strange, cozy, relaxed smiles Jen had on her. The girl had one right now as she watched Triss, chin still on Julias's chest.

Triss caught Julias looking at the Nos, and her Superman hugged her in closer. His arm behind her reached up to slip his fingers into her hair, and she melted as she settled her cheek on his chest, body lifted a little so she could rest on it, face only inches from Jen's.

"Your man is great a poker," Jen said.

"You're both sneaky bastards. What the fuck is my tell? Tell me!"

Both Ventrue bastards shook their heads, in sync.

Grumbling, she lowered her forehead down to Julias's chest, and hit it against him a few times. "Dicks."

Julias laughed. Jen laughed. The two had a lot in common, and every time she was with them, she noticed more and more of it. If Jen had another ninety years of vampire life under her belt, she'd probably have gone through the same emotional life phases Julias had, now that Triss thought about it. Maybe that's why she liked the two of them so much, because they were kind of similar? Or, she was a glutton for punishment, cause the two sneaky fuckers loved to tease her.

"What're your plans today, ladies?" Julias said. "I have to get back to HQ in a moment."

“Do you?” Jen climbed up onto the man’s waist, straddled him, and put her hands to his shoulders.

With Triss already snug in the nook of Julias’s arm and chest, she got a front row seat to Jen’s blatant attempt to seduce her boyfriend. It was strangely adorable. Julias was impervious to direct seduction, and Jen knew it too, but she tried anyway. She traced one hand down the man’s body, his broad chest, his flat stomach, and her other reached up to caress one of her breasts, before cupping it and lightly bouncing it in her palm. It was more than big enough to fill her hand, and jiggle as she bounced it.

“Not going to work,” Julias said, grinning his typical jackass grin.

“You’ll make a lady sad, ignoring her advances,” Jen said. But, as if a light bulb clicked on over her head, she slid off of him, and onto Triss. The Nos squeaked as she suddenly found herself underneath Jen. The girl wasted no time, got Triss onto her back, and set herself down onto her, chest to chest. “How about Triss and I give you a treat? Should only take a few minutes.” The evil woman leaned in, and put a kiss on Triss’s lips, all while looking toward the other Ventrue in the bed.

Triss let her. Hell, her claws found their way onto Jen’s waist, and half-hugged her as she returned the kiss. She managed a glance Julias’s way as she kissed Jen too, and grinned as the man’s expression broke. Yeah, that’s right you cocky dick, even you can’t resist this.

Jen sat up, and straddled Triss’s waist, like she was on Julias a moment before. And like a kid drawn into a silly game, Triss raised her hands up along the woman’s waist, belly, her sides, and up to her breasts. The game was to try and seduce Julias, make him late for his job, and Triss knew they couldn’t; man was too good at being Ventrue, and loved the Invictus too much. But it was fun to try anyway. Triss cupped Jen’s breasts, holding them with thumbs

along their inside contours, fingers along the outside. Soft, inviting, Triss squeezed them a little harder than she should have, to see them conform to her fingers. And of course, so Julias could too.

“Not going to work ladies.” The bastard winked at the two of them, climbed out of bed, and started getting dressed.

Jen sighed, and rolled over to lie beside Triss again, before the two of them rolled over to watch the man get dressed, Jen behind her. And also just like a kid, Jen started playing with the various piercings in Triss’s ear, and the chain that connected ear to nostril, while the two of them watched Julias.

Triss let her. Facing away like this, it was easier to smile where Jen couldn’t see how much she was enjoying it, especially when Julias smirked at the two of them.

“Something about a man putting on a suit,” Jen said.

“I know right? Arg, makes me want to ... put on his tie, kiss him goodbye as he goes to work, while I stay home and clean the house.”

The Ventrue pressed to her back laughed. “Can I move in next door, and be your friend? We can have book night every Saturday, and secretly get drunk.”

“You know ladies,” Julias said as he came around to the foot of the bed, straightening his tie, “you’re painting an awfully lovely picture.”

The two girls sat up, facing the man. Must have been quite a sight, two girls naked, sitting in a man’s bed, and try as she might to stop smiling, Triss couldn’t help herself. Julias was smiling at her because she was smiling, and she was smiling because he was smiling. And damn it all if the two of them weren’t smiling because Jen was smiling like a satisfied house cat.

Kindred were weird.

“White picket fence?” he said. Turning, he offered them a small wave, and looked over his shoulder to wait for Triss’s response.

Triss winked at him, and waved back. “Of course.”

Jen waved too, grinning at the two of them. She really ate up their romance. Every time Julias and Triss got tender with each other, kissed romantically, hugged and cuddled and stuff, Jen squealed or mewled liked she was watching kittens. Made sense, considering the house cat comparison.

Julias closed the door. Now, it was just the two of them.

“Ah well, I tried. Damn man is too resistant to my seduction skills. Frustrating.” Jen slipped out of bed, and started getting dressed.

“Figured you’d try and continue on me,” Triss said, “once he was gone.”

“Course not. You two are lovers, I’m the friend.” She scoffed, an actual scoff, as if already wearing the queenly dress Triss was imagining earlier. “I won’t violate that.”

“ ... thanks.”

“That said, I reserve the right to admire a naked Beatrice as she gets dressed. And maybe feel her up every once in a while.”

“Perfectly reasonable.” In fact, Triss got up off the bed, and started helping her. The pencil skirt, the shoes, those Jen put on, but the shirt and suit jacket, Triss slipped onto her arms. And of course, no jacket buttons done, and only the bottom shirt button done. “Jesus, wear a bra.”

“Why would I wear a bra?”

“Etiquette.”

“Ha.” Jen laughed, and followed Triss as the Nos started getting dressed. Putting on a thong, a g-string at that, was always an exercise of pure decadence, underwear meant for nothing more than to let a viewer know what the body would look like naked, without being naked. She liked it. And Jen liked it too, cause the woman groaned as she watched on, staring at Triss’s back while the Nos slipped on the underwear, and then her black jeans.

But before Triss could slip on her black tank top, Jen came up to her, and put her hands on her hips from behind. Evil, devilishly evil hands sneaked up her stomach, and caressed her abs, fingers tracing through the subtle indentations, before rising higher to find her nipples. “You should wear a bra.”

“I have half the rack you do.” Two girls, talking about and fondling each other’s tits. Were they inside Julias’s head? Or Jack’s?

“Yeah but everyone can see your nipple piercings through your top.” And, to prove her point, she continued to play with her nipples, tugging on the piercings and caressing them between finger and thumb. If Triss was still blushing life, it’d have been enough to have some delightful sparks starting to warm her.

But she wasn’t blushing life, thank god. Rolling her eyes, she put the tank top on, pushing Jen’s hands out of the way at the same time.

“Come on, let’s go. Jacob said he wanted to continue my lesson,” Triss said. She really, really, very much did not want to continue that lesson, but she was committed. Treasures macabre were promised to her at the end of this hellish journey, and fuck it all, she really wanted a taste of that madness.

And out they went. The servants nodded to them, they nodded back, and everyone was perfectly at home with the two witches inside the Invictus mansion. It was weird, so very weird, and she prayed it'd stay weird, and not turn to suspicious.

“I was thinking, about what you said in the den, before you took out your eye. It's true. The rest of us don't really pull our weight for the Circle.”

“I wasn't asking you to pull your eye out too, you know. Just—”

“Yeah, just that, shit in this city used to be great, and now it's not, and we're not really stepping up to do anything about it. So I was talking to Aaron and Othello about it, and we all agreed, we need to start doing more shit.” Jen followed her out the back door, the two of them nodding to the informed thralls.

Outside, Dolareido, the night sky, way up on Rich Side. It was a few miles to the edge of the city where their den was, a secure den now that Jacob had updated it. But most nights, Jen and Triss were both at Julias's mansion. It'd only taken a couple nights of some rather awesome sex before Triss felt comfortable asking Julias about Jen sleeping in the basement bunker at night with them. Going out at night, alone, anywhere that wasn't within throwing distance of your fellow Kindred, was no longer allowed. So Jen leaving the mansion every night before dawn was problematic anyway.

Plus, Triss kinda wanted her around. She ... really liked having her around. Not as much as she liked being with Julias, but there wasn't anything wrong with having your cake and eating it too, right? It'd been so damn long since Triss had a friend, an actual friend friend. The sex was bonus, a very tasty bonus.

Triss buried them both in her cloak of night, and they started walking toward the den. Grass, random trees, rocks, some small smooth sloping hills, and decent open sky. The city's edge. No

chance they'd get ambushed out here, unless the hunters felt confident enough to hang out in trees with rifles or some shit, instead of hiding in the comfort of walls and locked doors. Not like they'd be able to see cloaked vamps from a distance anyway, hopefully.

“What're you going to do?” Triss said.

“Aaron and Othello are partnering up. Jacob's pointed them in the direction of the hunters' last known location, but he expects they'll find nothing. Still, they're going to try and dig up some evidence, some clue or trail they can use. Whatever, right?”

“Sounds good. And you?”

“I'm going to be helping you with whatever you're doing.” Jen winked at her as they walked, the long grass reaching up to their knees. “ ... and ... that includes the lessons you've been taking with Jacob.”

“You want to get involved in crúac?”

“ ... yes.”

“Jen, think twice about this. You don't know what you're getting yourself into.”

“How terribly cliché.”

“I'm serious! I told you what happened, what he did. I told you about ... the knives. I wasn't exaggerating, Jen.” She stopped to touch her stomach under her tank top. Pain was becoming normal, considering Jacob had already done a couple sessions of stabbing her a dozen times, and then the night with the hunter pumping her full of lead happened. Ugh, she didn't want it to become normal, to become something she could handle, cause then Jacob would find new ways to make sure it still had some spice to it.



“I don’t expect to be part of the ritual on the first night ... unless, Jacob is feeling particularly mean.”

“Which you know could happen.”

“But even if that happens, I want to be a part of this. You’re my friend, and ... and I didn’t join the Circle just to be a freeloader off that psycho.”

Triss stopped, and looked at the girl. The business suit with the pencil skirt and open shirt was becoming Jen’s favorite clothes to seduce Julias with, and Triss by proxy. She looked good in it, great in it even, but she didn’t look like a member of the Circle. Hell, now that Triss thought about it, the only people in the circle she felt actually fit the role, was her, and Jacob.

“Why did you join the Circle?” she said.

Jen sighed, shrugged, and stopped as well, turning to face Triss. “My sire left not long after he embraced me. He was a member of the Carthians; you might remember him, Marcus.” Triss did remember him, but barely. Not a guy she’d ever engaged with. “I got a little taste of the Carthians, their borderline anarchist ways, and ... ugh, hated it. I’m not interested in fighting for a cause.” The wince on her face made her look guilty for the admission, like it pained her to say it.

Triss put up her hands. “No judgment from me, Jen.”

“You certainly sounded like you were judging, when you yelled at us.”

“Er, well, yeah, kinda. But I mean, not wanting to fight for a cause, just want to do your own thing? I get that. But you don’t need to be a part of a covenant for that.”

“Unfortunately, if I left the Carthians and went covenantless at the time, Tony would have considered me a part of his group, whether I wanted to be or not.”

Ah, right, Tony. “God I’m glad I ripped that Rebecca bitch in half.”

Jen raised a brow. “ ... you killed Rebecca?”

“Shit, did you not know? Crap. I probably shouldn’t have said that. People think Julias did it, and it’s better it stays that way.” People wouldn’t question why Julias killed her, considering the nature of the incident. But, why Beatrice was there, would have garnered questions, and questions could have led to talk of what actually happened. If people found out about Jack... “I followed Julias, and ... yeah, big fight of a situation. I took advantage of it, and killed that fucking bitch.”

“Why?”

“ ... why not?”

“Because as much as you’re a loose cannon, you’re not that much of a loose cannon, to go killing Kindred. Garry asked you to kill her, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. Can you blame him?”

“No, I can’t, I suppose. I heard about what she did to Jack too, the night of his embrace.”

“Back on topic. Why are you in the Circle now, if Tony’s dead? You don’t have to stay anymore if you would prefer to be by yourself.”

“ ... because I like it.” She started walking toward the den again, a bit faster, and Triss had to jog a moment to catch up to her. “I like the philosophy, the views, the beliefs. I like how open we all are,

sexually. But it's not just that. I like Aaron and Othello. I like the skulls with candles in them. I like the painting of bones on the walls. I get a tingle up my spine each time I see Jacob use that blood bowl, and do some crazy shit ... Fuck, it turns me on, you know? We're vampires, we're beasts of blood, and ... gives me shivers."

Yeah, Triss knew that feeling, and knew it well. The same night Jacob had exposed her to Black Blood, and spent a little time introducing her guts to knives, she fucked Julias. Not long after either. Went to him, a little startled, a little scared, sore and hungry, and a little afraid to admit the whole ordeal had sent a tingle up her spine. A creature of the night, practicing dark rituals with entities colossal and terrifying? Yeah, it had sent a thrill through her she doubted she'd find anywhere else.

"I get that," she said. "I get it ... more than you know. But, I'm not kidding Jen. It's scary shit."

"... bring it."

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"I suppose it was only a matter of time," Jacob said. The man was in his black robe again, hints of stained red around the thread. He stood with a very Sith style, hands slipped into the sleeves of each other arm in front of him so his hands were hidden, head hidden in the robe's hood, body beneath the gate of the cemetery. His cloak of night was impenetrable, and no one would be able to see him until he wanted them to.

"... I suppose it was," Jen said.

Triss frowned at Jacob, but didn't say anything. She could warn him to be nice to Jen, but that was pointless, and would have invited the bastard to be more of a bastard. Better to let things unfurl naturally, and for it to scare the fuck out of Jennifer at a normal level.

“You coming because you’re genuinely interested, Jennifer?” The psycho started to walk along, slowly, making sure to take his time and let the mood sink in, let the inevitability of pain and screams soak the two younger Kindred. Like marinating god damn steaks. “Testing these waters because you want to get closer to your girlfriend won’t end well.”

“She’s my friend, Jacob.” Jen fell in step beside him, and offered him as hard a glare as she could muster. It wasn’t normal for the girl to carry a frown, let alone a harsh glare; anything but a seductive smile looked strange on her. But, it was better than nothing, and Jacob laughed as he continued along. “And, I am interested for my own sake too.” The cemetery was silent, and yet, Triss thought for sure it was laughing at Jen too.

“As long as you’re here to taste of the blood, to give it a chance peek because you’re interested in what the blood has to offer, then you are welcome to come.” The Joker shrugged, chuckle coming and going. “Three Kings Cemetery will be a place you come to know well then, Jennifer. I hope you agree with it.” Not ‘hope it agrees with you’ of course.

As they walked, he hopped onto one of the graves, one with a very large, fancy tombstone with an angel on it. A warrior angel, with sword drawn and pointed upward. Truly amazing craftsmanship, and Jacob leaned out to catch his weight on its raised sword like someone swinging on a stripper pole.

“Did I ever tell you the story of Captain Darmer?” he said.

The two women raised a brow at each other, then at him. “Um, no?”

“Well, in the 1500s, pirates started to become a thing. Colonization was common, and not long after, trade by boat. Countries had to police their own waters, but it was proving impossible to actually police the open sea. It was an interesting time

for vampires, as while a major focus of crime — always a tool for Kindred — was turning to the sea, vampires found themselves grounded. What vampire would dare sail open waters, when a sunrise could kill them?

“There were a few, actually. Most died, horribly, a victim of their circumstance. One died when his ship was blown apart by cannon fire during the day. Another starved, and probably sits at the bottom of the ocean as we speak, deep in torpor and likely dead from barnacles eating his poor ass. But, Captain Darmer was smarter than that. A woman, she used her feminine wiles to lure men and women into her employ. Soon she had a small army of thralls as her crew. They raided at night, sailed at night, and during the day they docked inside a hidden base, within a sea cave.

“Now old Captain Darmer, she was smart in many ways. The crew served her faithfully, as thralls tend to do, but they were also afraid of her and her powers. Darmer kept the skull of one victim of each city she raided in a chest, usually a politician or someone of importance. She spoke to those skulls, listened to their whispers. The crew thought she was crazy at first, until she started asking the skulls for secrets, about things, random things, weird things, the things you could only know if you were a politician, or a rich bastard.

“She spoke to her crew about the whispers of the skulls. When they doubted her, she guided them to raid a city, or find a sailing ship carrying expensive cargo. Time after time, she was correct in her predictions about the bounty. The whispers of the dead guided her, as they were bound to her, unable to escape to whatever afterlife awaited them.”

Both girls squeaked, paralyzed, as Jacob turned and grabbed both of them by the shoulders. He had the bandage covering his empty eyes, but the smirk said it all.

“She bound these skulls with crúac, forced them to speak to her, took away their freedom and rendered them helpless voices.” He leaned in closer to Jen, and licked a fang as he got in her face. “Are you prepared to walk such waters, Jen? To feel the souls of the damned tug at your bed sheets every night?”

Both Kindred tried to shake themselves loose, but the old man’s grip was absolute. They weren’t moving unless he wanted them to move. Bastard was obviously exaggerating the nefariousness of his tale ... at least, a little.

“ ... what happened to Captain Darmer?” she said.

The old fucker started to laugh. “Alas, poor Darmer, dragged into the depths of the sea by those she had cursed to serve as her tools.” Jen gulped, and so did Beatrice, but Jacob let them go, and dismissed them with a small hand wave. “I kid. She tried to raid a ship she wasn’t sure about and found herself in battle with a navy ship. She burned.”

Laughing all the more, Jacob started the long walk through the cemetery, and toward the mausoleum deep within the gathering of the dead. Pillars on the sides of the stone building’s entrance, and a cross on the entry’s archway, greeted the three of them with its intimidating, awe-inspiring magnificence. Jacob started up the small stairway, and stopped as he came to the statue of the virgin Mary. With a small chuckle and smile, he reached out and touched the worn statue’s face, before he opened the gate into the building.

In the darkness of the mausoleum, Jacob withdrew an LED lantern, and took a second to examine the various coffin shelves within, before he pressed on a nook in one of them. The floor began to slide to the side, exposing the old, stone stairway beneath. Triss glanced Jen’s way to see how she reacted to exposed stairway, and blinked as she noticed Jen stare at it with eyes wider than normal. She was afraid.

Triss took the woman's hand. Jen squeezed hers in return, offered a smile too, before she let go. Much as Triss wanted to be supportive for her, this was serious, neck-deep Circle of the Crone shit, and they had to be able to handle that on their own; to a degree, at least.

Jacob started down the stairs, and the two of them followed. Tiny stairway, short entrance, and they both ducked to get their heads under the old stones. Jacob pulled a crank ahead, and it closed behind them. Jen began to shiver, and set a hand on Triss's shoulder as they walked down the narrow stairway into the blackness of the depths. The smell of dead flesh, old and new, filled their nostrils, and Jen raised her wrist to her nose. She'd have to get used to it, if she was going to be joining Triss down here.

"How many times ... have you done this?" she said.

Jacob turned around, and walked backward, lantern held up so the two girls could see the bloody designs drawn on the walls as it turned from stone bricks, to a cave. "Oh, hundreds."

"I meant Triss." Fucker knew Jen meant her too.

"This is my third time coming down here." Third time she was going to attempt to learn a crúac ritual. It was going to hurt.

They continued, into the depths of the Earth, passing pillars of wood that held the cave up, and various rocks and small cuts in the dirt beneath them. It felt like walking into a catacomb, an old-fashioned catacomb not unlike the one Triss used to hang out in. They were beneath a cemetery, so it certainly fit, but it just felt so god damn macabre each time Triss came down here. She liked macabre, and hell, she even liked this, but it could be a bit much. And Jen kept her hand on Triss's shoulder, her fingers clutching and shaking a little as they went deeper and deeper. Kindred their age wouldn't be able to escape a cave-in, and that sucked.

The sign ‘Continue Forth, and Deaths Awaits Thee’ came up, and Jen stared at the skulls dangling from it. If any human found this place, they’d find that, report it, and the Invictus would immediately suppress the story. But there was no chance anyone would find this place. Even if they did, all they’d find would be bones and corpses, nothing that could risk the Masquerade. Hopefully. But Masquerade risk or not, it was fucking spooky as shit to see that sign, in a pitch-dark tunnel, with the two of them being led by a creepy man in a dark robe holding a lantern. She couldn’t blame Jen for squeezing her shoulder tighter.

Eventually the room opened up. There wasn’t any howling this time, thank god, but the blood bowl was still there, held up by the dark skeletons underneath it. Jen let go of Triss’s shoulder, and drifted closer, eyes drawing across the terrible sight of the large blood bowl that put the one she was familiar with to shame. She froze when she looked up, and noticed the enormous hook hanging there.

Jacob reached out, and pulled her back.

“W-What? I haven’t touched—”

The man shook his head, and pulled her back further, until she was beside Triss. Triss almost said something, almost asked what the fuck he was doing or getting at, but the man offered them only a small frown before he turned toward the bowl, and stood before it.

“Come out.” Jacob pulled back his hood, exposed the white bandage that circled his head to cover his eyes, and he scanned the darkness with his lantern raised.

The two girls looked at each other, then at him. Black Blood? No, couldn’t have been. Jacob looked spooked, or annoyed, and he and that Black Blood entity were on good terms far as Triss could tell. Try as she might, she couldn’t sense anyone else except for Jacob though, and judging from Jennifer’s eyes, she couldn’t either.



But there was someone. The soft clack of boots against the stone floor echoed in the silence, and shadows twisted and turned as someone exposed themselves from their cloak of night.

Face as deadpan as ever, the sheriff came out of the black, wearing his usual trench coat and his usual glasses. He had both hands in his pockets, until one raised to adjust his glasses. He looked so dull, he looked so boring. The presence of him had the same cold steel Triss imagined the empty gaze of a jaded executioner would.

Jen and Triss backed away, and stared on, shivering, as the sheriff approached Jacob.

“Hello Jacob.”

“Why hello there Daniel. The fuck are you doing in my home away from home?”

Daniel sighed, and looked over to the blood bowl. Triss couldn't see into it from where she was, but the sheriff reached in, and pulled out flesh. A human head, a man's, and he dangled it by his hair. Poor dude's eyes were open wide, and horror was etched into his face, frozen in death.

“I'm investigating possible leads into disturbances. More than one finger has been pointed at this.” The sheriff motioned to the blood bowl, and then to Jacob, as if the two were the same.

“I doubt my decor is the cause of these disturbances,” Jacob said, hands raised to quote ‘disturbances’. “And I never gave you permission to be in here, Daniel.”

“I don't need your permission.” The sheriff walked up to Jacob, looked at him, face as still as a tombstone, and past him toward the two women.

And the two women were struck still. They stared up at the man, both not moving, but trembling a little, both waiting. Being near the sheriff at a ball or Kindred gathering was one thing. Being alone with him was another.

“I, um ... w-what sort of disturbances?” Triss said. Probably shouldn’t have said anything, but the silence was killing her.

“That is part of the mystery.” The man sighed, and continued to walk around the room, hands in his pockets, as casual and calm as ever. Far as Triss knew, Daniel was younger than Jacob; not that it was easy for elders of that age to remember their exact ages, but everyone was under the impression Jacob had a century on him. Did it even matter at that age? Or, was Daniel just that good, he didn’t give a shit about Jacob as a threat?

Triss winced as she noticed the hard, long flat bit along a portion of the back of his trench coat. His sword. She was tempted to make a joke, something along the lines of ‘is that a sword in your coat, or are you just looking to fuck?’ but it was probably a bad idea.

“What have you and Black Blood been up to, Jacob?” Daniel’s wandering took him around the room, and he paused every so often to look at the various patterns etched into the walls with rock. Other patterns were drawn with blood, and they stained the dirty stone like a timeline of torture.

Jen mouthed ‘Black Blood’, and looked Triss’s way. She mouthed ‘later’. Best not to throw gasoline onto this fire.

“Ask him yourself.”

“It, ask it.” Daniel shook his head, and reached out to touch the edge of the blood bowl in the center. “Remember what it is, Jacob.”

Jacob, groaning, tossed the lantern backward, and Triss had to scamper to catch it. Not like she was going to let their only source of

light go out, this far underground. Jacob approached the sheriff, rolled up a sleeve, and ... held his own chin, like he was thinking about something. She thought for sure he was going to throw a punch.

“Black Blood and I have a mutual and beneficial relationship, Mr. Sheriff, and it’s none of your concern. You and your pretty lit—tall lady can continue your experiments, continue poking through to the other side in your own way, and I’ll continue with mine.”

“Not good enough.” Daniel continued around the bowl, beyond it, so it was between him and the girls. Past the bowl into the black was where Black Blood had appeared last time, where it had snatched the corpse Jacob had prepared for it.

And then they were gone. Blackness. A side of the room Triss had never seen. It was just a room, a wall, a cave or something, but she never went over there, because that’s where that thing had come from. Good a reason as any.

Clanking. Metal, chains, stone hitting other stone, and some other metal sounds she couldn’t identify echoed through the room.

“How many have you killed in here?” Daniel’s voice.

“You follow the news. You control the news. You should know.”

“ ... and this?” More metal clanks, and some fleshy thuds.

“She was selling drugs to kids. Apparently she’d never heard that song. You know the one? Drugs drugs drugs. Some are good, some are bad? Far as I can tell, she thought they were all pretty good.”

Triss facepalmed. Why, why was her boss such a fucking weirdo?

More metal clanks continued, Daniel examining what Triss could only assume was some sort of torture wall. He had a few more

questions too, about kine Jacob had obviously killed and was hanging up back there. The smell of rotting flesh and blood was constant, and Triss had expected it coming down, but whatever techniques Jacob used, kept the smell from escaping beyond the stairway. Good, cause even this smell would upset a grave keeper.

Daniel returned to the light, and stood by the bowl. It was like watching a fucking FBI agent investigate your shit, with you right beside them, unable to stop them for fear of retribution. It was a wonder the sheriff didn't flip the enormous blood bowl just to make a mess.

She stood up straight as Daniel came up to her, and looked down at her. The angle of the lantern lit up his lenses, one of them allowing her to see his gaze. Cold. And, as his eyes switched between the two women, she almost thought she saw a hint of sadness. Was he pitying them, the two witches?

“And you two. What have you done with the veil?”

“N-Nothing!” Jen said. Triss nodded. Hell, the fuck did they know about it? Triss, almost nothing. And Jen, probably less.

He stared, still, silent, not even a twitch of the lip to indicate any emotion. After a while of what Triss could only guess was staring into their fucking souls, he walked over to one of the walls where Jacob had painted various symbols in blood, and dusted with bone. The sheriff raised a gloved hand, and ran a finger around the symbol.

“You really like to walk a fine line, Jacob,” Daniel said.

“You're one to talk, dragon. What sort of nasties have you summoned? What sort of experiments have you performed on the kine, hmm? Does your precious Natasha, or Annie's precious Jack, know about the shit you two have done in the depths of your tower?”

Oh good fucking god why weren't they discussing this shit in private, and not in front of the two little neonates who were well beyond their pay grade? This sort of conversation belonged in a Primogen meeting, not out in the open world. But then, they were underneath a graveyard, in a sealed room. The only people hearing the things they shouldn't be hearing would be people in the room, which were just the two neonates, currently standing shoulder to shoulder, and staring at the two elders having a tiff. And if Daniel thought it was too much information for them to know, he could kill them, and there wasn't much Jacob could do about it.

What a lovely night.

“ ... I can't stop you from acquiring new subordinates, Jacob. But understand the Prince and I will only tolerate your games to a point. If you stir the carnage that occurred before we—”

“Have you so little faith in me, Daniel? How long have we known each other, hmm?” Jacob came up to him, stood beside him, and offered him a weird mix of frown and smirk. Joker put a hand on the man's shoulder too. “And, if you wanted to observe me teaching my subordinates here a crúac ritual, you had only to ask.” Up and down, left and right, damn fucker's personality was all over the place.

“ ... No, I don't want to witness that barbarism.” He pushed Jacob's hand off of him, and again approached the blood bowl. It was impossible to tell what the cold man was thinking, or what he'd do, but he was searching, and a Mekhet searching was a pain in the ass. They always found something with that auspex shit.

And like he was reading her mind, Daniel looked at her, and set a hand on the blood bowl. A flinch crossed his eyebrows, and another, as he looked at her, glasses catching the LED lantern's white light, hiding his eyes. But she managed a glimpse of it again, that weird

look, that pity look, as he touched the blood-stained metal where a corpse's parts lay, where Triss had lay when Jacob cut into her.

She knew a little bit about auspex, that Mekhet who had a lot of years on them could take that ability into ridiculous realms of insanity. Supposedly, powerful ones could see things, touch things and divine knowledge from them. The Carthians didn't have any particularly strong Mekhet, so she never got to ask. Which just reminded her she had to talk to Damien at some point.

And there was that. Watching this man, this cold guy as he examined their world, he had an air to him she couldn't quite put her finger on, until she compared him to Damien. A quality, a certain something she found in both their eyes, beneath the surface. Something cold.

And to have a cold thing look at you with a degree of pity, was a strange sensation indeed.

"... be careful, Jacob," Daniel said as he began walking toward the exit. "Things are different this time. The city is built, the people are content, and ... yeah. Think about Minerva, would you?"

And all the voices in Hell went silent.

Triss looked at Jen, who looked back at her, and they both looked at Jacob. The elder had his back to Daniel, his eyeless gaze on the blood bowl. Daniel had his back to him, and never once glanced over his shoulder as he walked up the stairway to leave.

Maybe Triss should have used this opportunity to try and be Jacob's friend a little, like Antoinette had asked her to. Be his buddy, be his support, help him out and maybe stop him from doing reckless shit. Bringing up that the Prince asked her to do that could maybe brighten his day, let him know she was looking out for him. Or, backfire horribly and render Triss's tenuous connection cut. But

Daniel had brought up Minerva, and that put a stake straight into the old man's back, and out through his heart.

So, she stood there, and waited for the man to do something. It wasn't until they heard the sliding of stone and grinding rock, announcing Daniel's departure, that Jacob turned around.

"Nosy fucker, isn't he?" Jacob said, half grin, half frown.

"Yes..." Jen, shivering enough for it to be visible, walked forward and peeked over the bowl. Body parts, no doubts, and she made an 'ick' face like an upset squirrel before backing away a little.

"How may kine have you killed?" Jacob said.

"Killed?"

"Yes, killed, you silly girl." He reached into the bowl, and started throwing the body parts around. Legs splattered flaps of skin and wet meat against the walls. There were a couple more skulls too. Good fucking god.

"I ... just a couple, you know that. When I was young."

"Triss, how many have you killed?" the bastard said.

"... I didn't count. A fair bit. Kine who deserved it, when I was in a bad mood."

Jen raised a brow at her. Yeah, that wasn't something they'd discussed yet. For all Jen's confidence, and her delightful embracing of the Circle's philosophies, her hands were surprisingly clean. And then there was the whole thing with Rebecca too. Fuck, now she could see Jen's eyes changing, adjusting, adopting a new perspective on Triss. If she was scared or perplexed or surprised, Triss couldn't tell, but the lady was thinking something new about her.

“You’re going to have to get comfortable with death, and blood, Jennifer.” Once the bowl was empty of bodies, Jacob motioned for Triss to come over. “And don’t worry Beatrice, Daniel pissing me the fuck off won’t make this any worse than I’d already planned it.”

“... right.” Wincing the whole way, Triss handed Jen the lantern, and got into the bowl. She took off her top too, and tossed it aside. It wouldn’t survive if she kept it on, and it wasn’t like Jacob was some sort of pervert. Well, maybe not entirely true, but he hadn’t done anything perverted to anyone as far as she knew.

She put her arms and legs out, and stared at the ceiling, the dirty bowl pressing to her ass and back, bits of the dead rubbing into her skin. The chain hanging over her had flakes of dried blood on it. Sighing, she turned her head to watch Jacob as the man walked over to the wall where the light couldn’t penetrate, and he started ruffling through what sounded like a box. Out came candles and a lighter, and the man began to decorate the bowl with the candles along its edge. Vampires hated fire, and elders really hated fire, but Jacob didn’t so much as flinch as he flicked the lighter on, and lit each candle.

He gave her the necklace, and she put it on. An ugly thing, old string she was sure was coated in the blood of a thousand dead; smelled like it. Or maybe it was the tiny skull on it that smelled so bad. A crow skull. Bird skulls were surprisingly neat looking, and a crow skull just reeked of witchcraft. Triss was almost surprised at how cliché it was that Jacob had asked her to wear such a thing during the first lesson.

But the surprised turned into panic, when Jacob had locked her wrists and ankles down, as he did now.

“... Triss told me about this,” Jen said. “About how this is done.”

“Ah, good, then I don’t need to ease you into this.” Jacob, still not done lighting the candles, yanked a knife out of somewhere in his



robe, and slammed it down.

Beatrice had expected him to finish lighting the candles first. Shouldn't have. She needed to be prepared, she needed to use her fucking brain and stay aware. But, not like it would have helped much, as she screamed out, the blade cutting into her intestines. She knew what that felt like now, knew it intimately. No amount of bracing, no amount of preparation would ever be enough, for the feeling of metal cutting through the muscle of the abdomen, and the stabbing into the guts. Parts of the body that were never intended to have anything more than food — or a meal's blood — pass through them did not know what to do about metal puncturing through the wall of flesh. The only possible response, was pain.

“Oh god.” Jen took a step back. Probably for the best; Triss was going to start spitting up blood sooner or later.

“Crúac is blood magic, Jennifer. But at the same time, that is such a poor descriptor, that fails to capture both the power of the Circle of the Crone, and of the Beast in us all.” Another knife came out, and slammed down. Triss was prepared this time, but it didn't matter. The most she managed was to grit her teeth and not scream, her crocodile teeth filling the gaps between each other snug, to the point of grinding on each other.

“You may have noticed, Jennifer, that when I perform my rituals, blood is always needed. Typically Kindred blood. But that is fuel, essence, for the ritual. It is not the vehicle.”

“Vehicle?” she said.

“Mmhmm. Dolareido is such a cozy place these days, I honestly didn't think this would be necessary to teach you or Aaron or Othello. But, Beatrice is interested, and with everything that's happening in Dolareido these days, I think it's important. So I am teaching her at her request.” Done with the candles, he picked one up, and dripped some of the wax droplets onto the bird skull

between Triss's breasts. "So, you're going to have to get used to something I think even an open-minded person like yourself will have trouble with."

"... which is?"

Jacob grinned at her, and with a snap of his wrists Triss almost couldn't see in the black, he yanked out the two knives, and stabbed again, higher, getting between ribs and reaching her stomach. Blood flowed up her withered insides, vampire blood, thick, heavy, desperate to stay inside her. Its rise was joined by a flood of searing misery, pain like acid coursing through her flesh. Triss yanked against the chains, yanked hard, putting all her Nosferatu strength into trying to snap the chains. Should have been easy. Steel chains, small ones at that? She was Nosferatu, and she was a strong Nosferatu. Steel was her bitch.

They didn't budge.

Jacob chuckled, pat Triss on the head, and smiled at Jen. All a blur in Triss's eyes as the agony fought to overwhelm her senses. Don't let it, don't let it overwhelm you.

"Letting out your Beast."

"... frenzy?" Jen said. "You can't be—"

Jacob grabbed one of the daggers, and forced it across Triss's body.

There was agony, and then there was this. Bone, fighting against blade, before it gave way. Muscle slicing apart, tearing or cutting, she didn't fucking know. But she felt the fire scorch over her, her entire body, head to toe, until she threw her head back, and thick Kindred blood splattered over her crocodile teeth. Her mouth opened wide, full size, to expose the depths of her torment.

The scream echoed for ages.

The first time they'd gone through this, Triss had asked him to stop. He didn't. She learned for the second time to accept the reality of the situation, to try and embrace what this fucking lunatic was trying to teach her. You had to be crazy to see what this fucker was talking about, the way the beast in a Kindred's guts had more power than they realized. It didn't only speak in terms of animal, it spoke in terms of blood, and things beyond.

Pain, and blood loss, brought that beast to the surface, screaming and roaring the whole way. But she wasn't there yet, and she glared up at Jacob with her snake eyes as the man grinned down at her. She managed a glance at Jen too, and grit her teeth at the sight of the woman, her wide eyes, and the panic starting to rise in them. Despite her confidence, Jen was not hard, not like Jacob wanted from his witches.

Would she be able to handle it? Triss didn't know, and as Jacob twisted the knife, she didn't care.

"I told you to stop trying to control it!" Jacob yanked the knife out, and she screamed as the man made sure to do it on an angle, tearing through ribs with the motion. "If only you were Gangrel, letting your Beast out would be so much easier." Spinning it around in his fingers, between his knuckles, he walked around the blood bowl, smiling at Triss with every step. Fuck him, fuck him and his stupid fucking smile fuck him fuck him.

Again, Jacob dropped some wax droplets onto the skull crow between her breasts. The sting of hot wax was buried in the waves of agony. Her toes stretched outward inside her boots, her fingers and claws tried desperately to grab onto anything; the only thing they found was the blood bowl's edge. She could feel more of her blood pooling inside the bowl, until her ass was splashing in it as it faded into ash. Hungry. So hungry.

“I ... I don't understand. How is she going to learn anything from this?”

“Her mind is in the way. Crúac isn't about learning a set of ingredients, it's about scarring your soul, letting your soul taste the Beast within.”

Triss twisted, squirmed, struggled, tried to break free of the chains. Hungry. So fucking hungry. Had to get blood into her. She was losing more of it, losing all of it, and as her Kindred body started to heal itself, Jacob laughed, and stabbed the blade into her leg. For a faint moment, she wanted to complain about him damaging her jeans, before she screamed, coughing up blood over her chest. Jacob hit the bone, and went into it, twisting the blade around and churning her flesh like potatoes and butter.

Her voice started to go hoarse from her constant shrieking.

“Pain is delightful, isn't it?” The psychopath walked up to her side closer to her head, leaving the one knife jammed into her femur, while he brought the other up to her neck. Then, up her chin, and toward her mouth. “If I bury you in it, let it wash away your thoughts, your feelings, your everything, the Beast within you can actually touch your soul, Jennifer. Like tea time, between these two Brobdingnagian concepts. I have taught Triss the rites for this particular crúac ritual. Now, I must force the communion within. And”—his knife came up at an angle, up through the base of her jaw, and up into her mouth—“that's half the fun.”

Triss's scream turned into a roar, and she twisted her head from side to side to try and dislodge the metal skewering up through her jaw, hitting the roof of her mouth through her tongue. Get out get out get out, eat, eat, let me feed!

To a vampire, the beast was both a problem and an ally. It gave them their instincts, their abilities, it gave them their acute senses and their love of blood. It also took over if a vampire got too hungry,

went too long without eating, or suffered so many wounds that they bled away all they had. Any animal went frenzy if dying of hunger, but for a vampire, it was like letting an entity off its chain, Mister Hyde on the inside, something that was there all the time but you kept it down because if you didn't, you'd break the Masquerade and quickly find yourself dead. More than that, you kept it down because you could feel the thing that was still human inside you slip away every time the fucker got close to the surface.

Giving into it was freeing.

Thoughts vanished. Images vanished. Ideas, concepts, vanished. Triss vanished. All she wanted, all she cared about, was getting this fucking thing, this sharp and painful thing, out of her body, and devouring something. Someone. Anything! Anything with two legs, anything that bled.

There were two things, things like her, in the room with her, near her. She could drink them! Have them, drink them, take their lives and fuel hers. Law of the jungle, law of the wild, law of the fucking world, the strong prey on the weak. Break free, break free!

The chains would not break.

One of them was still talking, making stupid noises. Woman beside him was also making noises. Again Triss struggled against the chains, harder, every ounce of her Nosferatu strength pulling against the weird metal. Steel? What was steel? No, just hardness, just a thing she wanted to break through, but she couldn't. Fury and fire mixed together, and the thing inside her guts roared until the walls became an echo chamber, the blood bowl vibrating with her voice.

And then, everything froze.

White. She saw white. Going to die? Bright light? Snarling, twisting, turning, she stared at the white light, and drew her head

back to the bowl as it grew brighter. What the hell? What the fuck? Silence came second. She turned her head to look around, but all she could see was white. Yeap, she was dead, this was death. That man killed her ... Jacob, Jacob was his name.

No longer bound. No longer in a blood bowl. Her, standing, naked. She looked down, and sighed relief at the lack of knives puncturing her, her guts or her jaw. Naked, but still with her tattoos and piercings, still with her claws and her crocodile teeth. The beast was no longer roaring in her skull, and the pain was no longer the fire on its tail.

She walked around, on the white endless. It had no feeling, no texture, and she had no weight; strange to be walking around then. She turned around, and around, and around, until a black wall in the distance caught her eye. Wall was a strong word, more like a pocket of shadow, some weird hole of darkness against the endless white that surrounded her. And, there was movement in its embrace.

She walked toward it, but arrived instantly. Wherever she was, this heaven, or hell, or purgatory or whatnot, it didn't care about the physical. Land of the mind, or something. Was this all in her head? But if that was true, then what the fuck was she looking at?

Before her, against the small pocket of blackness, was an altar. A dead crow's body sat upon the small wooden table, candles burning all around it. Its head was already removed, and its feathers, brains, and eyeballs were scattered upon the alter, around the candles. Its skull sat in the center. But she'd seen the altar before, in the real world. Jacob had showed her the ritual, demonstrated it, this ritual, the Crow's Eye ritual. But, words, all words, just words. Feathers and brains and eyeballs, crows, and ... the thing that sat before her.

The beast.

Shadows, flowing, flicking at the whiteness around it, a cloud of onyx with wings and talons, a snake tail, claws, a beak with teeth. It

had all these things, wrapped in obsidian and flowing in and out of existence, shadow swirling in and out against the white. Like a tide in the ocean, or blood in a sacrifice.

The beast looked at her, eyes blood red, nothing but blood, only blood. And, with its wing arm claw limb, it reached out, picked up one of the candles, and dripped wax onto the crow's skull. It set the candle down, stepped aside, and waited. Well, far be it from her to keep the beast waiting. Wax on, wax off, sensei. She stepped in, got down on her knees before the altar, and did the same thing, a drop of wax for the crow skull.

The beast reached out with its wing arm claw limb, and cut its talon claw knife fang across it. A drop of blackness fell upon the crow skull. Triss reached out, cut her wrist a little with her claw, and forced out a drop of her vitae onto the crow skull. The beast nodded.

What the fuck was this zen horse shit? This wasn't the fucking Matrix! Oh god, she took the red pill. When did she take the red pill? Why the f—

“—UCK!” Pain snapped its ugly maw and devoured her whole once again. Weight, blood, knives and twisting and bone and sinew and tendon and muscle and organs and stained, rusty metal, all came crashing back. Back to the real world, back to heavy, back to two people looking down at her, one of them looking like she was about to cry, one of them grinning an evil, mad doctor's grin, as he stared down at her with no eyes.

He raised his knife.

“Jacob,” Triss said, “... something happened.” Something, something happened. Like a dream, it all faded, hazy, wisps of images and sensations dispersing into the whiteness of wherever her mind had taken her. But something had happened, something had changed. Something in her trumpeted triumph. Something in her roared its power.

Jacob leaned over her, looked into one of her eyes, then the other, and smiled. “Welcome to the fold, witch.”

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~~Jack~~

As much as he loved his vacation, spending every moment he could in Antoinette’s arms, it was time to get back to work.

“Finally done fucking your girl?” Jessy said. “Been at it for a week now. Poor woman must be painted white.”

He laughed. Crass and crude, but at the same time, that was how Jessy gave compliments. It was Jessynese for ‘glad you’re back, hope you had good sex’.

The two of them were in his apartment again, on the couches and opposite of each other, ready to get to work.

“It was pretty great,” he said. “Ever had a stronger person pin you down and pamper you in sex, Jessy? Like, someone who could turn you into ash before you even realized they wanted to hurt you. And instead, that person is making you cum again, and again, and again?” He almost surprised himself with how direct he said that.

The Gangrel raised an eyebrow, and took the glass of blood he handed her. “Can’t say I have. Been that girl, thousands of times. Never been on the receiving end.”

“Hmm, actually, you might be able to try that on Damien. I mean, he’s too strong for that, but, you know what I mean.”

“What?”

He shrugged, and took a sip of his drink. Damien wasn’t around, and both Jack and Jessy knew the man was entertaining the possibility of sex. Seemed safe to talk about, a little at least. And



honestly, he was a little happier to talk about something like sex, instead of Angela and Jeremiah and shit.

“You were getting kind of buddy buddy with Damien. Thought you might have wanted to show him the ropes on a few more things.”

“Ha. Kid, are you trying to hook me up with the priest boy?”

“He’s almost as old as you, and I can see that glint in your eye when you tease him.”

“Bah, he’s too small.”

“I’m smaller than him,” he said.

“And I’m not trying to get into your pants, am I?”

They laughed. It was true, and it made being friends with the aggressive animal easier.

“You do have a type.”

“And that type isn’t you or Damien. But, it’s not like Damien isn’t a sexy fucker, just not in my wheelhouse. If I got him into Bloodlust, I could get him laid before the night was over.”

“New mission?”

“New mission.”

“I do suggest you don’t try and get him laid in the actual club; send him somewhere quiet instead, with walls.”

She snorted annoyance, but nodded once she thought about it, and sipped her drink as she leaned back in his couch. “That Fiona was a firecracker though, damn. Didn’t have to do much to get her tits out and legs open.”

How had he not predicted it was Jessy who got into Fiona's pants? Not paying attention.

"Be nice to her," he said. Jessy had gotten into the Fiona friendship circle a little late, and he still wasn't convinced the Gangrel knew how to be gentle with her. The monster inside Fiona may have been something epic and terrifying, but the girl was young, younger than even him.

"I was nice! She had a great night, and so did Eric. I made sure of it."

"Eric, right." The guy that drove Jack to safety. "I've yet to speak to him directly. I have to thank him."

"He works at Bloodlust most nights. Drop by, say hello. Though fair warning, I might be on him at the time."

"Like him?"

"Yeah, I kinda do, actually. He's not as big or tall as I usually like my guys, but still, sweet body on that guy. Used to do MMA."

"I meant do you like his personality." He tried to not laugh, but it came out anyway.

"Not sure yet. He's got some serious grit and bitterness to him. I can like that."

Ah, yeah, gotta love a dark, brooding dude. Ha. He laughed some more and shook his head. Time to move on.

"I suppose we should talk about work," he said.

"It's not work, kid. It's life. You think about it like work and it'll eat you up. Think about it like life and it becomes a motivation on

its own. Live and breathe the struggle, and it stops being an annoyance, and starts being as natural as breathing used to be.”

He raised a brow at her, and looked for the joke, the smirk. Not a one. She meant what she said, and despite the messenger, it was advice he had to admit sounded plausible, and useful. Tracking down the hunters, building relations with the neighboring monsters, cultivating the kine into a manageable food source, and establishing defensive measures against all the above, was work, but also not. It was life. Becoming good at it was becoming good at what Kindred did, at their second lives. It’s how you got to live to be five hundred years old.

“That is a pretty awesome way to think about it,” he said. “Guess ... I still think about shit like this in terms of my old life, work as a barrier to get out of my way so I can get back to living.”

“Ha, yeah, you’re a real product of the new world. Well, you’ll get in the groove eventually. It is so god damn satisfying to see your efforts bear fruit when it’s your life we’re talking about. The money is just a nice bonus, the real reward is knowing you can rest easy and drink of the kine, because you defended your territory.”

“Speaking of defense. Any new developments?”

“Not a one. Those hunter fuckers just vanished. Sometimes I wish we lived in a smaller city.”

He nodded, and rubbed his head as he considered it. “Smaller city means this many vamps would draw attention more easily though. We could sire a bunch more vamps here instead; city could handle a thousand or more.”

“But then we’re at each other’s throats fighting over kine. You think it’s tense with the Carthians now? Mob mentality is a ruthless, fickle bitch, and she grows more ruthless and fickle the bigger the crowd.”

“Which reminds me, I should visit Garry.”

Jessy quirked a brow, downed her drink, and got up to get some more. Girl acted like she lived there, but he didn't mind. “Why?”

“He's friends with Avery.”

“Yeah but, we're trying to get around that, not use that. The deal was to give Avery a treat so she'll like us too, right?”

He dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand. “She'll see through that. The council knows it too. They're trusting me to think up something better, some way to get her involved, get her on our side, and get her out there looking for those hunters.”

“ ... and Garry's the key?”

“Sort of. Wanna be friends with someone? Be friends with their friends.”

She sighed, but shrugged. “I don't see that happening, but, whatever, you're the voice. You gonna arrange a meeting with him?”

“Eventually. For now, let's take a trip back to where Barry's den burned down.”

“What? Why?”

“Need to recruit a couple friends.”

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“Where is Damien anyway?” he said. The two of them were standing on the building Jack had used, when he talked to the two crows. It wasn't so long ago, and he knew crows had good memories.

“Hanging out with Maria, doing churchy things, I assume.” Sounded like she didn't care for the Lancea et Sanctum either.

Jack looked up at the sky, and around the nearby buildings, the old antennae, the vents, steam exits, and the crows that made their living up here on the city's rooftops. Rats and cockroaches too, but they stuck to the insides of buildings, while the crows perched and made the outdoors their home.

“So, uh ... what're we doing?” she said.

“Waiting.”

“ ... uh huh.” She shrugged, folded her arms across her chest, and waited. Sometimes, he really liked her simple mind.

It took a little time, but eventually, two crows took off from some nearby power lines, and flew over to perch atop a jutting vent over their heads. But, once he looked up to meet their gaze, they flew down to land on the building roof a few feet away from him. The two crows hopped over to him, cawed a few times, and fluttered their wings a few times more. He crouched down, and motioned with them to come closer. Without hesitation, they closed what little distance remained, and hopped up onto his arm.

“Careful of the suit,” he said, clicking his tongue to articulate that he meant his clothes. And they obeyed, claw grip growing softer as they hopped higher up. Though, defeated by the lack of space, one of the crows hopped off, catching flight and turning around to land on the other shoulder.

“You're good at animalism,” Jessy said, “damn good for a vamp your age.”

“Thanks.” He looked to his right, and smiled at the crow, made eye contact with it, looked into the black gaze it offered him. She offered him, apparently. He looked to his left, and nodded as he looked into its eyes too. His eyes. A male and female, the two crows cawed at Jessy, who came closer and leaned in to click her tongue at

them a few times as well. She could speak to them as well, anyone who knew animalism could; Ventrue and Gangrel, specifically.

“They recognize you.”

“Mmhmm. They tipped me off about the four hunters scouting this place out. I had them watching the ball too, watching me.”

“Smart.”

He nodded, and looked at each crow once again, taking turns. “Did you keep track of me when I left the ball with Damien?” They nodded. “Good. Show me.”

The mental connection required vitae, required him to tap into a part of him inside, animalistic, a creature that spoke in body language, smells, snarls and howls when angry, or purrs and gentle bites when pleased. He didn't do those things, the beast in his guts did, silent but there, and with his vitae acting as the bridge to connect with these creatures, they could hear the beast.

And his beast was stronger than it was when he talked to these birds the last time. They fluttered a little, cawed a few more times, and looked past him at each other with frequently tilting heads. They were asking if this was the same two-leg walker from last time. Looked the same. Smelled the same. Didn't feel the same.

“I am the same.”

The birds shrugged, as much as a bird could shrug, and continued the mental story. An alley. Dark. Damien walked out of it. Jack was still in there. They flew in closer and watched Damien walk away in the direction of the Cathedral. When they landed on the building above the alley where Jack was stabbed, they looked down, but he was gone.

“Didn’t see anything strange? Like, anyone stepping out of thin air? Or something stepping out of shadows when there shouldn’t have been anyone there?”

The birds shook their head, and cawed thrice more. They showed him again, the blackness of the alleyway, and hints of him, hands grabbing him from behind, stabbing him through the heart from behind, and dragging him away. Well, it was another point for Damien; not that Jack still suspected him, but more evidence that the man probably hadn’t betrayed him was good.

“Hey ... you two, you want a home? Easy access to food?”

“Jack, are you turning these two into pets?”

He turned to face her, shrugged, and nodded toward each crow. “Why not?”

“Because you’re controlling them with animalism.”

“I am not, I’m communicating with them, and asking for a favor. Just ... slightly influenced favors.”

Jessy rolled her eyes, but shrugged. “Plenty of Ventrue and Gangrel raise pets, in smaller towns and stuff. Feed them some vamp blood and they’ll be loyal, and addicted.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” And he found it a bit cruel. Forcing the blood vinculum on humans, turning them into thralls or ghouls, was a bit cruel as well. But sometimes it was done with good intent, with permission, like with Antoinette’s ghouls. Sometimes it was done simply because Kindred were higher on the food chain, and knew how to use the resources available to them.

Maybe one night he’d have a thrall or ghoul of his own, but not tonight. The two crows looked at each other, then at him, then at each other, and went around and around for a little while, until he

pulled out some rolled oats, and tossed them on the ground. He squatted down as well, and smiled as the birds hopped down his arms like a diving board, jumping off, and began poking at the oats.

“I’ve noticed,” he said, “a lot of the Kindred in this city rely on thralls and ghouls for their reconnaissance and labor. Hell, almost overwhelmingly.”

“Viktor didn’t only use thralls, and neither does Julias. Both used animals frequently.”

“Guess I’m continuing in their footsteps. There’s a goldmine of information to be had by making friends with animals.”

Jessy frowned, for a moment, before wiping it away and shrugging. “It’s not easy managing a bunch of thralls. You think you’ll do better with a bunch of crows?”

He looked into the crows’ eyes, and as they poked at the rolled oats until satisfied before eating them, they looked back at him. Something there, something that clicked, something that made sense, something that worked like the right cog to fix a clock.

“Just call me Poe.”

“ ... Edgar Allan Poe? Dude, that was a raven in the poem.”

“ ... shut up.” Ok, maybe she wasn’t so simple. “Alfred Hitchcock then?”

“Better.”



# Chapter 57

~~Natasha~~

In the end, she couldn't ask Matt and Art to listen to her. When push came to shove, when rubber hit the road, she was so swept up in the moment that she was reduced to a whimpering set of legs and a river of juices in minutes. But she was going to give herself an A for effort anyway.

She smiled to herself as she washed Matt's body in the tub. Maybe next time? In the meantime, maybe she could try doing a little more ... gate opening? Their gates of course, not hers. Hers could come later.

She smiled down at Matt's back. Art was standing beside them looking into the mirror, shaving, while Matt and her were still in the tub. Bathing together had come naturally, a byproduct of the fact both of her boyfriends were werewolves, and had voracious sexual appetites that manifested biologically. They came buckets. Which, in the moment, during the sex, was so terribly arousing that it melted her into a puddle. After sex, it was a giant pain, sticky and gross and ick and ew! So, bath.

Such a huge back on the gentle giant. So. Utterly. Huge. She couldn't wrap her arms around Matt if his arms were in the embrace, too big. Or, she was too small. Either way, it was quickly becoming a sight she was growing fond of. She rubbed soap along it, and licked her lips at the shape of his muscles, broad, hard, and how they fought against the pressure of the soap.

Wait, you're supposed to be gate opening. Stop admiring his broad shoulders. Less sexual stuff, more romantic stuff.

"You t-two should tell me more about ... how you met," she said.

Art shrugged, tapped his blade in the sink — he shaved with a knife, eesh — and resumed shaving. “Avery’s pack had just arrived in Tijuana. Stephanie was with them, and she knew the place a bit.” Right, Stephanie, the one who died. “I had just suffered my first change ... some people died. It was on the news. I was on the news. I went into hiding, and Avery tracked me down.”

“We found him pretty beat up. I’d only been part of the group for a short while, and eager to prove myself.” Matt turned around in the tub for her, and she began washing his chest. As much as Matt and Arturo were big burly guys, she was thankful they didn’t have too too much body hair. Plenty, but not enough to seem like they were wearing sweaters. Still, she’d prefer they trim some of their pubic hair off, as was fashionable in the city. Maybe she could ask them later?

“So of course Lenny starts a fight with me the moment he finds me.”

Matt chuckled. Mmm, such a warm noise, from so close.

“Hey, you threw the first punch, Art.”

“You grabbed me by both shoulders. From behind!”

“I was trying to catch you. You Irraka are sneaky fuckers.”

“Pretty sure the grab was followed by a tackle.”

And back and forth they went, earning some giggles from Natasha as she listened to the two boys argue. Each had their way about it, an approach, a style. Arturo Ibarra had some grit to him, a touch of anger, a touch of the bad boy, but mostly a playful sort. Matthew Wilson was the gentle giant, and she could tell he didn’t have Art’s wit or grit; words and insults rolled off his back like water though. It was easy to see why they got along. Art was rough, in a way. And Matt was soft, in a way.

“W-What about b-b-before you became werewolves? What was life like? Or ... or um, d-don’t tell me, if you don’t want to.” She offered her best apologetic shrug at Matt, and continued to wash his body. Hard to focus on the questions, when rubbing down his enormous chest and abs and arms. She could fit into the grooves of him, between his arms and legs, and just disappear, if she wanted. No! Bad Tash. Focus.

“It’s a touchy question,” Matt said, “at least for some Uratha. Leaving behind the old life isn’t always easy, you know? I ... I guess you would know all too well.” The giant turned his head to the side, exposing his neck to her a bit, and he looked at her with the corner of his eye. Quizzical, curious, expressions she didn’t normally see on his face. But, it faded a few seconds later, and he smiled his usual smile. “I lost my family when I was very young, well before I became Uratha.”

“Oh...”

“Don’t worry, I was young, it’s a faded memory. I lived far up North, and sometimes the conditions can get you killed, that far up.”

“Far up North? You d-don’t sound like ... you’re from Europe. Oh, Canada?” Must have been living in Nunavut or Labrador.

“Mmhmm. Eh.”

Heh, her gentle giant was a stereotype.

“Do you ... s-say sorry a lot?”

Arturo laughed, hard enough he had to put the knife down. “He does, because he keeps knocking shit over, a regular klutz.”

Matt rolled his eyes, reached out, and picked Natasha up. She squeaked, squealed, and squirmed, as the huge man pulled her, wrapped her legs around his waist, and set her down so her butt

pressed against his pelvis. He wasn't aroused since they'd just had sex, but she knew what these werewolves were like, and if she didn't get control of the situation, they'd be doing things to her in two minutes.

The gentle giant smiled down at her. The water of the tub reached their waists, hot, tingling. She wasn't blushing anymore, but from the look on his face, she knew what he was going to ask. Or maybe ask her when he was done kissing her, because he leaned in, and set his lips to hers.

Arg, it was just so damn easy to simply let go, stop fighting, and let them — or in this case, him — take control. She sank into his waist, his shaft underneath her butt and getting harder by the second, as his kiss grew more and more passionate. His eyes were open a sliver, enough so she could see the joy in them, as his hands held her tiny body. Soon he was leaning over her, and she pressed against his chest to try and get him to stop. He didn't stop.

“Matt!” Art said.

“What!?” Matt sat up straight, and dropped her.

Water overwhelmed her, and she disappeared beneath the surface, frowning up at Matt the whole time. The water wasn't too hot, so she had no issues looking up through the waves at the man, who had 'sorry' written across his face in big, bold letters. He scooped her up again, and guided some hair off her face so it was dangling behind her.

“Sorry,” he said, as if his puppy dog face wasn't apologetic enough.

She snorted, laughter breaking through her frown, and pulled on his neck to start kissing him again. Which, of course, caused the shaft underneath her to start getting harder again, and harder, until it was just like it was an hour ago, with the man ready for more sex.

Art was watching them now, standing beside the tub and rolling his eyes. “Matt, I was going to say, give the girl a break. But ... I think we got time for a quickie.”

Oh no. She tried to re-summon her frown, but Art set his hand on her hair, combing it along her scalp with his fingers, before he gently turned her head to face him. And, once he sat himself down on the tub edge, one leg in the tub, he began to masturbate. A few seconds was all it took for his shaft to grow to full length, and aim straight at her. And, as he smiled his devil smile at her, he pulled her head in toward his cock.

... ok, maybe a quickie.

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If she was human, she'd be sore. Sex, sex, and more sex. Two boyfriends made it hard enough to go five minutes without one of them trying to get into her pants, but the fact both of them were werewolves, and more or less in a constant of ready to fuck, made it impossible. And, the fact that when they got their hands on her, they were rather ... aggressive, about getting what they wanted, made it more impossible than impossible! And the fact that, every time they took hold of her, her whole body was set on fire, and she had to blush life and give in before it killed her, made it triple impossible.

But for now, they were done, and Art and Matt and she were out on the streets, walking toward Avery's base near the Carthian district.

“You sure you want to come with us on this hunt?” Matt said. “Claimed can be dangerous.”

“I d-don't understand what claimed are. So, I ... need information.” Information made the world go round. It made Antoinette happy. It made Natasha happy too. If there were things like urged or claimed in the city, she needed to know what those

things were. “And, you’re my b-boyfriends! I should hang out w-w-with my boyfriends.” And she liked saying the word. Boyfriends.

Art leaned in beside her, walking beside her, devil grin on his face. “Want to hold hands?”

“ ... no. I’m t-too small. I’d look like ... your daughter, or something.” Hand holding could come later, when they were alone.

Matt laughed, and turned to walk backward for a few moments while looking at them. “We know Dolareido is a strange city. But a lot of that strangeness, you Kindred don’t really understand, right?” He slowed down for a moment until he was beside her, opposite of Art, and he started walking in line with them as he leaned in, reigning his voice in. “The balance between Dolareido and the Shadow world is an odd balance, sitting on a knife’s edge.”

“B-But I ... d-don’t know what means.” And honestly, it wasn’t her primary or secondary goal at the moment. Still, it was terribly intriguing, knowing her boyfriends could interact with this Shadow world at any time, when Antoinette and Tash had to work so damn hard just to get peeks at it.

“Maybe we’ll show you sometime?” Matt said.

Art shook his head. “Avery would kill us. And more than that, it’s not safe.”

Natasha frowned up at Art. The three of them were walking the sidewalks closer to the Carthian district, which meant there weren’t many people on the sidewalks, at least not nearly as many as the Invictus half of South Side. It gave them the room to walk side by side, and for Tash to try and shove Art. Alas, too light, and she succeeded only in pushing herself into Matt.

“I’m older than either of y-y-you! D-Don’t underestimate me. I ... would love to see it someday.” Terrifying as that idea was. It also

wasn't one of her goals, but the idea of crossing to the other side, of seeing this strange world she'd only poked at, of seeing more things like Safe or that strange spirit of secrets, it was all so interesting.

And that was one of the primary goals of the Ordo Dracul, to gain knowledge. Invictus wanted power, money, and structure. Lancea et Sanctum wanted history documented and religious tenets satisfied. Carthians wanted ... well, borderline anarchy. The Circle of the Crone wanted to push their dark agendas, of instigating a predator and prey world filled. The Ordo Dracul wanted knowledge, all knowledge, especially about things that could be of use to a Kindred trying to learn more about themselves, about the nature of being a vampire.

At least, that was what Antoinette and Daniel taught her, and she bought into it, believed it. And now she was strong enough, old enough, to pursue it.

“Honestly,” Art said, “I’m surprised you haven’t been there already. Avery says Antoinette and Jacob have both been poking at the Gauntlet for centuries.”

“Yeah, b-but all we can do is poke.”

Matt nodded, sighing a little as he looked up, leaned back, and scratched his head through his shoulder-length dirty blond hair. “Honestly, I think we should take you. Dolareido’s a great city, a nice place, all things considered. You vamps are a part of that, you made that. You should see what sort of effect it has on the side of the veil.”

She perked up, blinking at him. She didn’t realize their actions could affect the other side directly.

But Art shook his head. “You know if we ask Avery, she’s going to say no.”

The gentle giant shrugged, and set his hand on Natasha's further shoulder, so he could pull her in a bit into a sort of half hug while they walked.

"What she doesn't know can't hurt her."

"The fuck? Of course it can."

"Tash will be fine."

"She might be fine, but she'll definitely be at risk."

"It's her choice."

"Yeah but curiosity killed the cat."

"She's been doing fine so far."

"We almost killed her when we met her."

It was weird listening to the two boys argue, because Art was being the cautious one, and Matt was being the adventurous one. Normally it was the other way around, and she changed from frown to smile and back again as she listened to them argue about her. Eventually, enough was enough, and she elbowed Art in the side.

"I can t-take care of myself, especially if you're both there to protect me. I really ... want t-to see..." See the place Safe came from.

"Arg, don't give me those eyes," Art said, covering his eyes with a hand.

"What eyes?" she said.

"The eyes! The cute, adorable eyes."

"I..." Who was she kidding? She was tiny, she could pull off adorable eyes if she tried. When Art looked at her again, she put her



forearms to her chest, hands in small fists against her collar bone, and gave him her best begging ‘help me please I’m so frail’ eyes.

The man groaned again, as if she’d shot him. She had, sort of, with cuteness.

“Fine, fine! If she dies, I’m blaming you.”

Both she and Matt chuckled. She was going to get to see the Shadow world. It wasn’t going to be an imaginary thing in her mind anymore, it was going to be solid and real and something she could touch and see and smell.

But, focus. Primary goal was to deal with the hunters.

“Hey guys,” she said. “You ... you um ... you t-talk to Avery yet? About the hunters?”

Both werewolves visibly cringed. “We did,” they said in unison.

“ ... she d-doesn’t want to help, does she?”

“It’s not like that,” Matt said, “but after what happened last time she was here, she says she’s not jumping headfirst into anything.”

“ ... I see.” Weight pulled her head down, and she let it hang in front of her a little as they walked. Maybe Jack could convince her? If anyone could, it was him, but considering all the baggage around the whole previous incident, with Avery and Jacob and Antoinette, there was a good chance Avery might be hands off. At least, until the hunters decided to hit the Uratha too. Would they do that? Of course not, not if their goal was the Begotten and any Kindred giving them refuge. Fighting a war on multiple fronts was never a good idea.

“On that point,” Art said, “Avery can go fuck herself. You need help with a hunter, Tash, just ask.”

Uh oh. She blinked up at the man, eyes growing wide again. “You’ll ... get in trouble.”

“She’s our pack leader, not our mom.” The Irraka shrugged, like it made sense. “Do your bosses punish you if you’re insubordinate?”

“Yes!” She squeaked, looking around after making the noise. “Y-Yes, they do. Violently, s-sometimes ... a lot of the times.”

Matt laughed. Maybe he didn’t understand, or take her seriously. But, his eyes changed after a few moments. “I ... suppose yeah, they probably would, wouldn’t they? I remember what some of the vamps did to their childees and whatnot, in Tijuana. Nasty. The church dudes were particularly brutal.” But he shrugged, and hugged her in a little tighter. “Avery might yell at us, maybe smack us around a little, but nothing like what you vamps might do to each other.”

Natasha leaned into Matt’s side, and shuddered a little at the memories. Strange, it was memories of Viktor being a colossal tyrant toward his servants, that made Tash appreciate Maria a little more.

“You’ll help t-too?” she said to the gentle giant.

“Not as excited to go against Avery as Art is, apparently, but yeah, I’ll help.”

Once they arrived at a corner, now bordering on Carthian territory, Art and Matt each came to a stop, and both sat on a nearby bench. Not sure why they wanted to stop here, but Natasha shrugged, and stood beside the lamppost, leaning against it.

“Jack will probably tell Avery more details,” Art said, “but you can fill us in too.”

“O-Ok.” She’d told them about the hunters before, but not details, not yet. Wasn’t sure it was her place to maybe cause issues, getting the Uratha involved when Antoinette hadn’t asked her to. Still, Kindred had to be proactive, they had to actively hunt down ways to solve their issues. It was true that action was not inherently superior to inaction, but that was rarely the case when Kindred were typically on the receiving end of antagonism.

“So, um.” Where to begin, where to begin. “W-We know the hunters came for Azamel.”

“The Begotten?” Matt shuddered, and rubbed his arms, kind of like Natasha did when she was disturbed by something. It was cute on him. “No one in the pack has so much as talked to her yet.”

“Exactly,” she said. “That’s p-p-part of the reason that ... that we haven’t talked to the Uratha yet about this. The hunters are ... they’re here f-for the Begotten. Kindred are in their way. But you guys, you’re um ... not really involved. And, w-we don’t want to ... make more enemies.” If they asked the werewolves to help, and some of the werewolves died dealing with the hunters, that was asking for a problem.

“You know much about the Meninna?” Art said. “Us, the Hunters in Darkness.”

“N-No.”

“We told you before the Meninna don’t like roaming. We want a place to live, to stay, to protect. Avery came back here cause she thought she could do some good, to a place that kind of got royally fucked last time she was here, so she says.”

Matt raised a hand. “And David told us the spirits were talking about this place.”

“Yeah, that too.” Art shrugged, and gestured around them. “And hell, we’d prefer to be living out in the wilderness, or maybe some quaint little village. We’re here because we think we can do some good, or at least Avery does. And, honestly? Like we said, Dolareido is a pretty good setup, and we’d like to help keep it that way.”

Natasha tilted her head to the side. That all sounded great. Then... “Then w-why are you all so concerned about ... stepping on eggshells?”

“Because you outnumber us thirty to one.” Art sighed, leaned forward, and let his forearms rest on his knees, hands hanging between them. “We’re on orders to be on our best behavior, because we’d like to stay.”

“ ... you’re afraid ... of us?”

Matt laughed, as if what she said was silly. “This is the only vamp city I know of, with six elders, who aren’t trying to kill each other. If you guys decided to work together, and use those silver swords of yours, yeah, we’d be fucked.”

She meeped, and moved her hand down to her hip. “You ... y-you noticed, huh?” It wasn’t like the sword was out and dangling. She had it hidden inside her suit jacket, above the hip.

“We’re not blind,” Art said. “We’ve seen you take off your clothes. Hell we’ve stripped you many times.”

Yeah, she was being delusional if she thought they wouldn’t notice the new sword. “ ... true.”

“And hey, we understand. It’s a weird situation for everyone involved. We didn’t know Begotten would be here, we’ve never really dealt with them before. We’re trying to be nice, and we almost got that Fiona girl killed.”

And there was that. Instead of Fiona dying, Stephanie died, and despite that, the Uratha were still playing nice, albeit very passively.

The more she learned, the more she felt the Uratha would be the perfect allies for Kindred in Dolareido. Maybe Jack would learn the same thing, and he could find some way to smooth out these issues? Ugh, it was horrible politics. Jacob had every reason to hate Avery, and Antoinette certainly didn't trust them, both vampires unhappy with the Minerva situation. And the wolves had a relationship with the Carthians already, which meant there was stress with the Invictus. Jack had his work cut out for him.

But maybe she could do a little work too.

"If ... if you help, w-with the hunters, I ... I c-can only imagine that ... everyone in Dolareido w-would appreciate that. All the covenants, and even the ... B-B-Begotten."

"Unless we get someone killed in the process," Art said. "We don't play nice, Tash."

"I know!" She fucking knew. Running from them, through the tunnels, and the way they literally tore through walls of concrete, and ripped apart an old subway train like a paper bag, was not a memory she was ever going to forget. "I-I know, b-b-b-but ... we've already lost someone, and almost lost another."

Matt sighed, slouching back in the bench, opposite of Art's forward leaning. "Yeah, it'd have really sucked if that Jack kid died. Dude really pulled through, jumping in there with the Azlu."

"Ha, yeah, now Clara's got a crush on him." Art laughed, and brushed back some of his dark hair out of his eyes. "I really hope she doesn't do something stupid and piss off your Prince."

"That ... is ... is that something she m-might do?"

Art shook his head. “No ... probably not? Shit I don’t know. She’s Cahalith. They’re always a bit emotional, and have a habit of letting those emotions make them do stupid shit.”

“It’ll b-be kind of funny if ... a strange love triangle brought the whole city down, r ... right?” she said.

The two men looked at each other, then back to her, before they broke into laughter. “Yes, it would,” they said together. Was it something they’d seen before? A scary thought, romance destroying cities.

“So, um ... w-what are we going t-t-to do now?” she said.

“Two choices.” Art counted them off, pulling down on a finger with each option. “Matt and I were going to investigate some reports that sound like Urged or Claimed, but nothing serious, nothing we can’t wait on. So instead, we can start showing you the world we live in, the Hisil, what spirits are, and where they live. Or, we can help you get a lead on finding these hunters.”

“I vote option B,” Matt said. “The former isn’t your problem, the latter is. And I’d really hate to see you get hurt in the Shadow world, just cause I offered. Worse, I’d hate to see you die to hunters here, in the physical world. Kind of gotten attached to you.”

“ ... thank you,” she said, smiling and walking in closer. There wasn’t any room on the bench for her, so she sat down on their knees, where their two knees were beside each other. A kiss for Matt, leaning back to give him one. And a kiss for Art too. Nice, big, proper kisses.

A kine walking by raised a brow, a woman, tattoos and dreadlocks. When Tash met her eyes, the woman mouthed ‘nice’, and kept walking.

It was nice.

“I ... I hope Avery d-d-doesn't ... get too upset.”

Matt put a kiss on her neck, and winked at her. “We can handle her.”

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The three of them took a taxi to the old prison, or near it, at least. They didn't anyone know where they were going after all. The taxi driver offered her a few curious glances through the rear view mirror when both men got familiar with her, touching her legs, stroking her cheek or neck, each putting a kiss on her head. And of course, she got flustered and tried to stop them, including some elbows in their sides. But, she couldn't stop giggling, which earned more touches from her boys, which earned more glances and raised brows from the driver.

Once the driver let them out, and she managed to get her laughter under control, the two of them made the five minute walk toward the old prison. She felt safe with them around. What hunter would be crazy enough to try and take on two werewolves and the red riding hood vampire they were with?

But she wasn't a moron. She kept an eye open, peeked around corners, looked buildings up and down, used her auspex to scan for nearby threats. It wouldn't be able to separate a hunter out from the people walking by, the other kine, but it was better than nothing.

A smooth walk to the old prison. No issues, no hiccups. The Invictus had already cleaned everything up, cleared out any evidence of the incident, and removed any police presence. The front door of the complex was locked, the outdoor gate, but that was easy to deal with.

They jumped over it. Natasha was light, and with a little vampire strength, she launched herself ten feet into the air. Grip managed to catch the top ridge of the gate, and she flipped over it with no issue. Art and Matt both looked at each other, and started clapping, quiet

little claps, like they were suddenly rich snobs applauding an appealing performance. Jerks.

The other two couldn't jump so easily; they had to make running jumps, throwing their weight into the pillars of the gate and running up it before forcing themselves upward, and managing the tip of their grip on the pillar top. The pillars were small, with only enough room for one hand, but each beast was able to pull themselves up with the one hand.

Damn that was impressive, for a living creature.

“Not much security,” Art said.

She shrugged, and gestured to the main door ahead of them. “It won't even b-be locked. There's n ... n-nothing going on here, nothing to steal or anything, so—” A hand on her shoulder brought her to a halt, and she looked up and over at Matt behind her.

“ ... something happened here.”

“Y-Yeah, Jack was—”

“No, I mean ... something horrible happened here.”

---

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~~Jack~~

Heading back to Avery's apartment, except this time he had Damien and Jessy with him. They took a drive, one the larger Invictus cars, one that let the three of them sit in the back. Naturally, Jack and Damien both took a window seat, and Jessy sat in the middle.

“Hey Damien,” Jessy said, “where's that Fiona girl been lately?”



“I have not seen much of her. I believe she is in hiding with her fellow monsters,” he said. “Why?”

“Thought you two might have been dating or something, and you being you, Mekhet and all, were conveniently refusing to share with me juicy details.”

“ ... and why would you think that?”

“She expressed interest, didn’t she? I remember what she was like at the ball.” Jessy elbowed the poor man in the side, complete with a nudge nudge wink wink. “She likes you. Apparently she’s got a thing for dark, brooding types.”

“She is what, nineteen years old? Perhaps twenty?” He sighed, and looked back out the window. “I am over fifty years her senior.”

“Not the same, and you know it.” She wrapped an arm around his neck and shoulder, and pulled him in toward her to face her. Well, face her breasts really, with the way she yanked his head in for a casual headlock. “If you don’t move fast, Eric will take her.”

“Eric? Ah, yes, the new bouncer at Bloodlust.” Poor guy squirmed some, but he wasn’t getting out of Jessy’s bro hug. “He is welcome to her, if he is as—”

“No no, god damn it Damien, you jackass. Fight for the feisty redhead.” Jessy reached out, and yanked in Jack’s head as well, so she had the two of them in headlocks. “Jack here was what, twenty, when he was embraced? And not long after that, he was in the Prince’s bed. And she’s got a lot of years on you, Damien, so I don’t think the ‘she’s younger than me’ defense really applies.”

No doubt Jessy was trying to cover up her own sexual adventures, and how the woman only ever slept with kine, all much younger than her. But it was true, so Jack smirked at her, and managed a shrug, despite the headlock.

“Think we can focus on the job?” Damien pulled away again, and Jessy let him go. But, not before a hint of a smile hit the man’s lips. Enough for Jessy to laugh and wink at Jack.

“It’s all on Jack,” she said. “Nothing we can do. You got a plan anyway, Jack? Wanna fill us in?”

He almost started with the crows. Jessy and Damien both knew he worked with crows, but he didn’t want them knowing everything he was doing. Not because he didn’t trust them, but because it was the safer way in managing a secret; the less people who knew the better. His two pets were watching them from above, and with some practice, the two birds would be his eyes in the sky from now on, permanently.

He was going to take this new position of his seriously. Right hand of the Invictus, with the paltry amount of experience he had? He could already picture the scenarios, some older Invictus questioning him, prodding him, testing him to see if he actually deserved his position. And when the cards were all laid out on the table, Jack would come out on top. Diligence and preparation.

It wasn’t the only reason he acquired his two new pets, but, he wasn’t so stupid to not see the eventuality coming a mile away.

“The plan is to convince Avery to help us.”

“Yeah, duh, I get that.” She let him go, but not without a shove. “I mean, details. How are you going to convince her to help us?”

“Two things. Julias gave us various things we can offer as incentive. But, I can already tell Avery won’t take that bait, not wholly. She’s like Garry, and has no issue living in a rundown apartment building, with cockroaches for neighbors. And she’ll want to do hunts without our interference or help anyway. No, we if want to make friends with someone like Avery, we have to offer her something more than open borders.”

“And that is?” the two of them said.

“Peace of mind.”

Jessy raised a brow. “I’m not following.”

“She’s a leader now. She wasn’t before. The last time she was here, her pack leader Simon got into it with the vamps here, right? But he’s gone, and now the shit show he stirred is on her. I get the impression if Simon wasn’t her leader, things with Jacob and Minerva would have gone differently. The backlash of that is on her, and she wants to fix that.” The memory of Jacob and him running into Clara and Avery in the street was a powerful one. Poor Clara, down in one punch from the Nosferatu. Not even a punch, just a backhand slap.

Both Damien and Jessy shuddered when he said Jacob.

“Y-Yeah,” she said, “good luck with that.”

Jack sighed. He knew what they were going to say. “You don’t think I can change his mind, do you?”

“Not a chance.”

Damien nodded agreement.

But, Jack wasn’t going to be dissuaded. “Look, I know Jacob’s old, very very old, and I know elders are pretty set in their ways.”

The Gangrel shook her head. “No, that’s not it. Jacob’s psychotic, Jack. You’ll be trying to argue with a crazy person, and I doubt you’ll make much headway.”

“I might be able to. Beatrice works for him, so does Jen, and I’m friends with Triss and ... Jen, sort of? Not really but she likes me well enough. I think I can make some headway that way.” As he

spoke, he noticed Damien fidget when he said Triss's name. A finger twitch, nothing that should have caught his attention, but Damien looked down at the same time. Weird.

“Alright, sure sure, but what are you going to tell Avery? What's the game plan for actually convincing her your efforts to make everyone sing kum ba yah will work?”

“I'm going to make some promises I may or may not be able to keep.”

Jessy facepalmed.

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Damien and Jessy stayed outside, in the hallway. Avery didn't want them in the room with him, and honestly, he was kind of happy they weren't with him either. Tense, having more Kindred around, when Avery was already annoyed at the prospect of having these meetings. It was her idea, but he could tell she'd only thought it up as a lesser of evils.

Clara was there, and she smiled as she met his eyes. She was leaning against a wall, and looking outside the window at the streets below, peeking into Garry's territory. No doubt the man kept a vamp or two around, scouting, hiding, keeping an eye on things. Could Uratha smell vampires? Vampires had a far more mild odor compared to their living counterparts.

Matt and Art weren't there, likely hanging out with Natasha, or doing ... werewolfy things, whatever that was. But, there were others.

Mason was a werewolf he knew about only indirectly. Apparently he'd become acquainted with a Carthian named Tilly; very acquainted, based on the sounds he heard walking through the hallways. He'd never heard a woman scream out like that, like it was porn, over the top and ridiculous, but considering the bed squeaking

that came with it, he could only imagine it was genuine. It was a wonder the floor didn't collapse. But at least he couldn't hear it inside Avery's apartment. Much.

Avery sat on the couch with two other Uratha, and he offered each of them a small wave. She was so small compared to her pack. Gave small guys like him hope for the future.

On her right was David, tall with short blond hair, the man who never looked at anyone straight. Fidgeting, and rocking slightly in his spot. Parkinson's? Doubtful. These werewolves seemed like they healed from anything. A woman named Monica sat on her left, a black woman with super short air, buzzed almost, and it looked pretty awesome with its naturally kinky curls. She was a fair bit taller than Avery too, almost as tall as Jessy.

They were all dressed in jeans or similar, with raggedy old t-shirts and tank tops and such. Now that he was used to wearing suits all the time, he had to admit, he didn't miss the old clothes he wore. Invictus rubbing off on him, probably, and Julias specifically. Something about a well-tailored, expensive suit, was satisfying to wear. Even now he wore a simple single-breasted dark gray suit, a white shirt underneath, and a solid black tie. It made him feel ... powerful.

Yeah, that was definitely Julias rubbing off on him.

"Avery," he said.

"Hey Jack. We haven't talked since you got all fucked up." She leaned back in the couch, and nodded her head Monica's way. "Monica's Irraka, she got me some nice info about the fallout from that."

Jack sat down in a chair, a half-broken wood thing that made him smirk when it teetered underneath him. "Yeah, fucked up is a pretty

good way of describing it. They ... tortured me. Suddenly all those war movies I watched before I was embraced have more gravitas.”

Clara frowned, and looked out the window again.

“Shit like that can put life into a new perspective, yeah. Lot of us have been there, in some way or another.” Avery nodded, and offered him a small smirk. “But you didn’t come here to talk about you. You came here to talk about the hunters.”

“It was the hunters who tortured me.”

“You know what I mean. You want us to help.”

“I understand that you’re hesitant to do that.”

“Wouldn’t you be? I came to the city because some spirits pointed us in this direction, talked of an Azlu, and also about some spirits ready to cause problems. We’ve dealt with the Azlu, one of them, but one of them lived. And the issue with the spirits isn’t dealt with; we haven’t even put a dent into that mystery. You’ll note the word ‘hunter’ has yet to be mentioned.”

“Yeah but, don’t you want to stay here?” He leaned forward, elbows to his knees. “Dolareido was a pretty peaceful place just a couple years ago, Viktor and Tony asshat-ary aside. Everything’s been flipped upside down since...” Since he became Kindred. “And I’d love to get back the old city. You guys could help make that a reality, and stick around to enjoy it.”

“The hunters are here for the Begotten, Jack.” She raised a hand and wiped it aside through the air. “And from what I’ve gathered, there are a lot of them. If we get involved, it’s going to be messy. Your precious, fragile Masquerade could come crumbling down.”

“My sire tells me werewolves have a strange thing about them, something that makes viewers suffer a sort of madness, lunacy, if

they witness werewolves performing ... werewolfy acts.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but it’ll only help to a point. You think if a fight breaks out in the middle of the fucking city, that widespread lunacy won’t attract attention? You think you got hunters now, wait till shit like that becomes a media sensation.”

He sighed, rubbed his buzzed hair, and looked over at Clara. Still looking out the window, but still frowning. Maybe she didn’t like Avery’s choice? He looked back to Monica and David, but their expressions were impossible to read. David looked like he wasn’t in the room, like he was outside and looking at clouds. Monica was expressionless.

“The Invictus are offering you open borders,” he said. “I don’t think it’ll be enough to convince you, but it’s a start.”

“Open borders?”

“Like you already have with Garry, I assume. Come and go through our territory as you like, and if you need help with something, a place to live or some equipment, we can give it.”

“... thanks.” She brought her fingers up to her chin, and held it, eyes down a bit and digesting. If that offer managed to sway her a little, maybe there was a chance for this to work out. “I actually think a couple of my pack would like to stay in some place a bit more glamorous. All-expenses paid deluxe suite sort of deal?”

“Um, yeah, sure, in all likelihood. Can’t promise the White House, but we can get you pretty close.”

“Perfect. Clara and Carter have been hoping to try living the rich life for a while. You can understand, Uratha don’t get to do that often.”

He nodded, and smiled. Yeah, Uratha weren't immortal, they died of old age eventually. They hadn't amassed fortunes like the Kindred had, the Invictus in particular. Maybe a taste of money would encourage them to try and protect what the Kindred of Dolareido had managed to build here, and were willing to share. Some.

"I'll make sure they get some luxury apartments then. I've been looking for a new one myself."

"Right, your promotion." Avery laughed, and hand gestured again, to the dingy, stained, white door of the apartment, where Damien and Jessy stood just beyond. "Your buddies and you must make bank."

"One of the perks of being Invictus."

"Really pisses Garry off that you Invictus swim in money, you know."

He put up his hands. Bad topic, bad topic. "Invictus and Carthian issues are uh ... not really my domain."

Again she laughed. "I know." Before he could respond, she leaned in, set her elbows on her knees like him, and met his gaze, a few feet away. "But that offer is not enough reason for me to risk the lives of my pack, for a problem that's not ours."

No, of course it wouldn't be. He couldn't blame her, much as a bird-eye's view of the situation told him the werewolves helping with the hunters made perfect sense. When it was your own people, you didn't throw them into the meat grinder without assurances.

"... I've been thinking," he said, "about that night Jacob and I were walking home, and you and Clara were there."



“Yeah, what a lovely night,” Clara said. “I’d really love to repay that fucker too. Nice candlelit dinner, and a claw down his throat, ripping off his jaw. See him sleep that off.”

He could sleep that off, Jack knew it. If Viktor could come back from losing a chunk of his head, in a matter of minutes, Jacob could survive more.

Avery shrugged. “What about it?”

“I think I can talk to Jacob.”

“And do what?”

“Get him to talk to you.”

“... the man is as old as dirt, one of the most powerful vampires on the planet, and I killed the woman who was basically the love of his life, Jack.”

“Minerva.”

“Exactly.”

“Jacob still wants to know exactly what Minerva was doing that warranted the incident.”

No good. She shook her head, and dismissed him with a wave of the hand. “We’re not telling anyone.”

“Not even wha—”

“Not even what kind of thing she was doing. I’m not an idiot, Jack. I’m not going to give info that can be extrapolated. And I suggest you don’t go digging. I also suggest you don’t bring this up with Jacob, because the man is not going to change his mind.” Sighing, she tilted her head from side to side, earning some loud cracks. “But I appreciate that you’re trying to help me out. You

probably think I'm unwilling to help about the hunter issue without bargaining, don't you?"

Ah shit. That was a very true, very callous way to word it.

"Invictus habit," he said. "And, you said—"

"I said I'm not going to throw my family into harm's way without a good reason. You vamps may think that means I need to be convinced. It really means I need time, get familiar with the city again, get a feel for its situation, on both sides of the Gauntlet. And get a feel for you vamps."

Ok, if she wanted a feel for the situation, he could help with that. "Invictus are worried about your relationship with Garry, as well. The situation is a little tense between us and the Carthians lately, and if push comes to shove, it'd be bad for us if we found you on their side."

She raised a brow, and looked over at Clara, who shrugged at her. Laughing, Avery shook her head again, and smiled at him. "Christ, you vamps are ridiculous. You think because Garry and I get along that I'll ever, ever let it affect my decisions with shit like that? Your political games are idiotic and self destructive."

"I ... don't disagree that they can be pretty stupid." The Danse Macabre was a painful lesson to learn, but it was the way of things. At a certain point, it was time to accept that vampires were immortal creatures, loners by nature, and forced to share resources; the environment bred deceit and manipulation. "But like you said, you're friends with Garry. If we showed up at his door one day, with intent to kill him, you're saying you wouldn't get involved?"

"If it ever got to that point, I'd have to be more than buds with Garry to risk my family in a full-on war." She got up, and stepped around behind the couch. Pacing. He understood pacing well, a way to let the mind function more smoothly. Never once in his life did

he manage to talk on the phone, without getting up and pacing around. “So calm the fuck down. I’m not going to go to war with the Invictus unless you guys do something that would deserve us slaughtering you.” Confidence dripping out of her pores, she ran her fingers back through her black hair, before pulling the long ponytail around her waist to hold it in front of her. Reminded him of Antoinette, and how she liked to play with her hair when she was thinking. “ ... you’ll still talk to Jacob though, right?”

There it was. He smiled back at her, a subtle one, one that spared her some face, instead of calling her out on it. “Yeah. Apparently peacemaker is my new role here in Dolareido, and ... well, I’m down for that. Gonna talk to Garry too at some point. But...”

“But?”

“It’ll be hard to convince Jacob to do anything, if you’re not going to spill the beans about Minerva.”

“ ... you understand what werewolves do, right?”

“You ... kill spirits. And other things, from ... that other place.” Learning anything about what the Uratha did was tough. The witches and dragons both kept their secrets about their mystical pursuits, like the Invictus and Carthians kept their secrets about their tactical decisions. But with the Uratha, it was like trying to piece together a mystery, using the evidence left at the scene of the crime. It wasn’t that the Uratha were actively hiding what they did, they just didn’t bother to share the details, and the Kindred were hopeless to piece together anything from the aftermath.

It must have drove Jacob and Antoinette both insane.

“We prevent the two worlds from fucking each other up. Mostly, the Shadow world wants to get its claws into this one, and most spirits do all they can to worm their way over here, and spread their influence ... you know what? I’ll show you.”

“Um ... what?” Uh oh.

“I’m not going to take you into the Hisil, relax. I am going to show you the sort of shit that happens on this side of the wall, though.”

“Uh, um ... sure, but uh, what about Damien and Jessy?”

“They can wait here. We’ll keep an eye on you.”

“I’m not sure that—”

“Either they wait here, or I don’t show you shit. Your choice.”

“And the Prim—”

“You can talk to your Primogen about this; it’s nothing they don’t already know, if only a little. But, you’ll probably want to keep this to yourself, Jack. I’m giving you a peek of what’s out there, what’s in this city you’re ignorant of, and your elders are barely aware of.”

He sighed, looked down at the scuffed and dented floor, rubbed his head back and forth, and juggled words on his tongue. He needed to get Avery on his side, as per his Invictus orders, and get her to commit to helping with the hunters. He also needed to be an information exchange point with the Primogen. But, if this information let him make better decisions in pursuit of any of those things, then...

Do it. Get the information, figure out what to do with it later.

“Alright.”

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Damien and Jessy weren’t too happy about the arrangement. He wasn’t either. But, no risk no gain, supposedly. He wasn’t a fan of that philosophy, and would argue that risk was a great way to get yourself fucked; he knew Antoinette would agree. But, Avery liked him, far as he could tell, and she wanted to throw him a bone.

For the love of god, don't make a dog pun out loud.

Clara and Avery were with him, leader and second-in-command. She had a lot of faith in her pack to be able to monitor and guide themselves, keep themselves in check and under the radar while she was gone, considering the circumstances they were in. But then, she was also willing to split some of them up, and let two of them live in the Invictus territory. Almost sounded like a student exchange program, considering he was currently neck deep in werewolf business, and soon Clara and Carter would be neck deep in the Invictus half of South Side. Hopefully they knew that meant they'd be monitored even more than they were now.

The three of them headed to Devil's Corner. Jack left his jacket and tie at their apartment, not wanting to attract the attention of muggers. It'd really suck for the muggers, to try and jump him and the two women with him. Would the Uratha kill kine that easily? It was better for everyone if they didn't, and besides, the less eyes on him the better. His mother and sister were still alive out there, living their own lives, and one fuck up had already nearly broken the Masquerade.

They stopped in front of a hotel. Except, not really a hotel. A brothel, sort of. Restless Nights was one of the few places in Dolareido that sold sexual services, that had worked out a deal with the Invictus to avoid legal ramifications. Far as he knew, it was a pretty sweet deal for everyone involved. The kine who sold their bodies were kept in good health, provided with health care and such, and the management staff weren't abusive pimps. And those doing the fucking also got to pick their clients; but considering it was commission work, and everyone in Devil's Corner was poor, he was sure they usually said yes.

Course, no one knew about all these details, the broken laws and the hidden dirt, except for the higher ups and the Invictus. And, of course, Vicky and Parker, the two Invictus who ran the joint.

“You ever been here?” Avery said.

“M-Me? No, course not.”

Laughing, she took them around back into a dark alley, and around behind the building. “It has a very low turnover rate, so I’ve learned. Turns out, the whores who work here, actually like working here.”

“ ... maybe it’s because of the benefits? Parker and Vicky keep it in good shape.” They kept other joints in good condition as well. At this point, knowing that Kindred were running brothels in 2018 was almost quaint.

“Maybe. But that’s not everything.” Avery knocked on the back door, no doorknob. It was the sort of back door you expected to find on the back of a suspicious building, the ones that hid their contents inside their basements, making meth or selling children. The latter, definitely not in Dolareido, but the former, probably lots.

Someone opened the door, a portly woman, big cheeks and frizzy black hair. “Hello? We don’t have any appointments with—”

“Take us to the room,” Avery said.

“W-What?”

Ah, the stutter, the classic sign of someone being both surprised, and finding themselves in need of hiding a secret.

Jack waved a hand. “I’m Jack Terry.”

“Oh ... oh! Right, the Master Terry.” The woman nodded, and backed away to let them into the building. “Didn’t know the Invictus were making a visit. Madam Goldman and Mister White aren’t here, but—”

“No no, it’s fine. This isn’t about them, or anything like that.” He nodded a little as he and the two werewolves stepped in, and he leaned forward to look around. Vicky Goldman, Parker White, neither were here, so he could take a peek. A couple of offices, and around the corner, a small hall leading to the front desk. An old, rundown building, like it belonged in the Carthian district, but Devil’s Corner was harsher, meaner, dirtier, than the Carthians like. No money to be had for the Invictus, and no loyalty to be had for the Carthians. But, there’s always money in sex. Maybe not a lot, considering the locale, but there was some.

“Right this way, Master Terry. The room, right. I’m surprised you know about it. Five of our girls and one of our boys is down there now. Looking to meet someone? Of course you’re not, not with that Prince as your arm candy. Good lord, you’re so small, I have to wonder what that’s like. Sorry, never been to any of the meetings myself, I—”

Jack raised a brow as the woman prattled on, and on, and on. A thrall, and one Jack could tell her sire kept out of the loop. But she knew who he was, and knew he was dating the Prince, so, either she knew at least a little, or he was famous enough for all the thralls to be talking about him. And, he had to admit, that kinda stroked his ego a bit.

Instead of taking them into the lobby, she took them into the other office. Old, half-rotting wood, white walls dented or stained, desks with piles of papers on them. A computer with a CRT monitor running Windows Vista. Good god. He looked back at Avery and Clara, and laughed, louder than he meant to, at how the two of them looked around at the place like someone might when entering a lovely wood cottage for the first time. They probably thought the place was homely.

The thrall opened a door, and started down the stairway. The smell of weed and other drugs wafted up into the air. He expected

old wooden stairs, damp and scratched concrete walls, and exposed wiring, maybe a dehumidifier sitting on the floor, trying to keep the place from collapsing into a swamp. But, the room greeted him with white walls, cleaner than the ones upstairs, and as they descended, high ceilings showed dangling bits of ... beads? Dark beads, hanging like curtains, hundreds of them, ends connected to the ceiling of polished metal grating, so they came within inches of touching the floor with curving lines.

The sound of moans filled his ears before he could spot the source.

He looked down. The stairs weren't wood, but soft carpet, thick shaggy carpet, maroon and clean. When they got to the floor, the same sort of carpet greeted them; wait, there was a door mat with a bunch of shoes on it, before the door. They should have taken off their shoes. He reached down, but the thrall laughed and shook her head.

“Don't worry about it Master Terry. You and your friends can do whatever you like of course. We'll clean up any dirt, don't you worry none.”

“Thanks.”

“Can you leave us alone?” Avery said.

“... um, if that's what the little Master wants. Not sure the Prince would appreciate this though, Master Terry.”

“W-What?” He raised his brows, looked at Avery and Clara, who were laughing like a couple of jackasses, before he looked back to the thrall. “No, they're my friends. They wanted to show me something, and it's ... kind of private?” Yeah, now that he took a second to consider the situation, it did seem like he came here to fuck, didn't it. Shit. “I'm not here for anything sexual. This is business.”



“Well, whatever you say Master Terry. Just come get me if you need anything.” The big woman smiled at him, offered a small bow, and started back up the stairs. Slippers. Big, fuzzy slippers.

Clara started her way through the beads, though she slipped off her boots before she did. Avery too. Heh, well, if they were going to, he might as well. He slipped off his dress shoes, and smirked down at the feel of the thick carpet giving into his weight. He smiled more at the sound of beads knocking against each other as Clara and Avery started to move them. What sort of secret wonder would they find?

They'd find ... an orgy.

He rolled his eyes as he stepped into the center of the room, the hanging beads creating thick walls around them. Blankets and pillows of all shapes and colors covered the floor, and from the ceiling hung by a white cable, was a small, dangling statue of a naked woman and naked man, wrapped around each other. Shining like silver, it gently turned in spot, as if nudged by the rising smoke of the humans beneath it.

Like the thrall had said, five women, one man. The man was on his back, laid out upon a purple blanket, hands behind his head, while another woman sat on his pelvis, fucking him. The four other women were interacting with the couple, touching, massaging, caressing, suckling, kissing. All of them were smoking, smoking various things as far as he could tell.

They all turned to look at Avery, and froze.

“Uratha!” one of the women said. “We ... we have not spread! We have not devoured or consumed or infected! Only gentle, only urge. Please, you do not need to—”

Avery raised a hand, came up to the orgy, and squatted down beside the group of people. Course she took a peek, smirking as she

eyed the veritable feast of flesh before her. Restless Nights kept their workers in good health.

“Not here to send you back, spirit. You’ve shown a lot of self control.”

“Yes, self control!” another woman said. “Do not need to hunt us.”

“But, I do want you to show yourself. Present yourselves to the vampire here. Or I will send you back.”

The six kine looked at her, and then, like a choir, turned their heads together to look at Jack. One by one, they all started to drift to sleep, bodies slipping into a restful coma on top of each other, chests rising and falling with their dozing. They were all attractive and fit. Restless Nights knew what it was doing, and Jack couldn’t help but admire their bodies. No sweat, and the room was a pleasant temperature; must have preferred slow sex. Maybe they—

He jumped back, and opened his eyes wide, as a pink fog began to seep out of their bodies. What in the ever fuck. He froze, stared, and glanced Avery and Clara’s way to see what they were doing, if they were going to freak out like he was. But the two of them didn’t move, Clara with her hands in her jeans pockets, and Avery only moving enough to get up from her squat. Just watch and wait then, he guessed. They may have been used to seeing strange, bright, gaseous blurs rise up from the sleeping bodies of kine, but he sure wasn’t, and he found himself reaching for his knife, kept under his pant leg. Clara stopped him though, putting a hand on his shoulder and shaking her head, while keeping her eyes on the pink display.

Pink began to form into something solid. Six figures, hovering a foot in the air, each about five feet tall. Arms began to form. Hands, fingers. A waist, hips. No legs though, as if he was looking at six genies from a cartoon. Faces formed upon heads with slender necks. And, as he stared on, he found one of his eyebrows lowering, the other raising higher, as breasts began to solidify on their chests.

Some small, some large, and one spirit displayed a set of breasts big enough to dwarf Antoinette's; almost comical, and yet, not, considering the spirit was floating around with no legs. All the curves, the hips and waists, the shoulders into the arms and neck, the back curve into shapely asses, all were emphasized or accented.

Their faces lacked defining shapes, except for solid, glowing blue eyes, and glowing blue lips. Seductive lips, some thick, some thin, but all with small smiles and subtle grins. The pink skin of their forms was see-through, like looking through stained glass art, thick enough it was hard to see to the other side. But as they finished ... coalescing, or whatever it was that they were doing, he gulped at the sight of their nipples, blue like their lips. The obviousness of their sexual nature was almost palpable.

“As you can see Jack,” Avery said, stepping over the sleeping kine and between the slow hovering spirits, “Vicky and Parker have stumbled onto something they may or may not understand.” She reached up, and grinned at him as she flicked her fingers against the small, dangling statue of the two lovers. “This place, one of those ‘sex holes’ I’ve heard about, is frequented by sex spirits.”

“Sex spirits?”

“Mmhmm. Spirits that live on, feed on, the essence that resonates with sexual pleasure. They’re everywhere in the Shadow, in Dolareido. Slut City, right?” She gestured to one of the hovering pink things, and set a hand upon her—its back. Pushing it toward him, Avery laughed, and the spirit, eyes wide with fear upon being touched, grinned after a moment, and let the werewolf push her into him.

Physically touching a spirit. What? He looked at her—it! It, and it put its hands on his shoulders. Without irises or pupils, solid blue eyes were hard to read, but from the slanted squint, and the curling grin, it looked like the spirit was having fun. She dri—it drifted

around him, came up behind him, and pushed its breasts into his back. Soft, so very soft, and it felt like human skin, human tenderness, human heat.

“Spirits spread their influence,” Clara said. “It’s what they live for, it’s why they exist. They’ll do anything they can to do that, barring getting themselves killed. They pursue it with total one-mindedness.”

“But, we do not ... spread needlessly. Understanding, yes? We have understanding.” The spirit behind him put its chin on his shoulder, and hugged him all the harder. “Much sexuality from this little one. Can taste it. But, you are dead thing. The Parker, and the Vicky, they can ... blush life, it is called? Join us. We will pleasure, prove we do not overstep.”

Avery rolled her eyes, but Clara smirked at him. Yeah, being called out as having ‘much sexuality’ by a sex spirit was a little strange, and if he was blushing life, he’d be blushing until his face bled lava.

Clara must have been thinking it too. “Much sexuality? Hearing that from a sex spirit, call me impressed,” she said.

Another spirit floated to him, one of the thinner ones with small breasts. And then another, the one with the absurd breasts, both reaching out and taking his hands. They tugged on him, tried to pull him toward the sleeping humans, and they giggled as they did. Such lovely sounds, very feminine, very siren. They were very stereotypical too, bleeding sexuality in such obvious, ridiculous ways, to the point it felt surreal. They felt surreal.

“... why do they all look like women?” he said, doing his best to ignore the beautiful creatures tugging on him. Their tugs were gentle enough he could resist them, and dig his socks into the carpet.

“The form spirits take when they manifest isn’t always specific. For a lot it is, but some look different or change in certain ways.” Avery shrugged again, and gestured to one of the spirits. The spirit, on queue, changed forms, adopting a very masculine figure, with the classic V shape for the shoulders to hips, thick arms, defined abs, and ... a penis dangling down almost a foot long. Well, shit. Still a pink, floating genie looking entity though, partly see-through, with glowing blue eyes and glowing blue lips.

Both werewolves licked their lips at the same time, at the sight of the spirit, and its new, masculine form. Clara laughed, and stepped in closer to the ‘ideal’ male specimen, almost like she was going to kiss the man. But instead, she grabbed hi—it by the shoulder, and pulled it in close.

“You better not be ruining these humans’ lives, right? If people start dying to drug overdoses here, or fucking till they starve, we’ll —”

“Not! We are not. We do not claim, do not harm.” His new, deep, manly voice came through, such a jarring juxtaposition to the feminine giggles of the others. These spirits were ridiculous.

He was looking at spirits. The absurdity of that took a while to sink in, but right in front of him, pink genie things were hovering around, with tits and dicks and an apparent need to possess humans and fuck. Spread sexuality? If spirits liked to spread their influence, create more of whatever it is that they were, then these spirits wanted to spread sex and bliss above all else. And from what Clara said, it sounded like spirits were willing to do that at the expense of humans. But, they couldn’t, because if they did, the Uratha would interfere. So many questions, he had all the questions, every possible question, he had. But he knew Avery wouldn’t answer them. He had to piece together things from the few words they said about it.

Avery gestured to the pile of humans sleeping. Sleeping or, as Jack looked closer, he realized they were high as a kite. It'd take a lot more than some weed to get humans fucked up like these humans were. They groaned, moaned, rolled their heads a little, and made little attempt to do anything other than lay there. At least they looked happy.

“This,” Avery said, gesturing to them, “is odd. The spirits here in Dolareido, in Slut City, are understanding and cooperative. That’s weird. Normally fuckers like this,” Avery grabbed one of the spirits still appearing as a woman, and shook her jaw with a hand, “will do everything and anything to keep spreading whatever it is what they embody. It gets out of control, it takes over, it becomes unstoppable, until a pack of wolves thins the herd.”

“... was it like this last time you were here?” he said. “Spirits being unusually cooperative.” Asking questions was dangerous, but if he was careful, maybe she’d answer some. The spirit on his back started to run her hands down his shirt, and with little giggles and mewls, her hands found his stomach, slipping into his shirt and rubbing his body.

Clara smirked at him. “Yes. Like Avery said, Slut City is a strange place. Plenty of other cities, especially with ones poking at the Gauntlet like Jacob or Antoinette, are a fucking mess. Spirits of murder, spirits of money, spirits of drugs, spirits of concrete and asphalt, even spirits of howling winds or flickering street lights. These can get out of control and destroy ecosystems, turn nice cities into slums, or turn quaint villages into horrific murder fests for snuff films.” Ok, well, at least Clara was being a little more informative than Avery. But at the same time, she was grinning at him as the spirit behind him continued to rub down. “Very sexual, mm?”

“I, um, I don’t know—get off me!” He grabbed the spirit’s wrists and pulled her off, and she giggled before drifting back toward the

pile of humans. “So spirits possess people?”

Avery nodded. “They can. These idiots here,” she gestured to the pile of flesh, “are prime real estate for spirits. They can worm their way onto your side of the wall, and attach themselves to a person, urge them to do things. When it gets really bad, they completely take them over, and do whatever they can to keep spreading whatever it is they like.”

“Sounds ... dangerous. Wait, that Azlu thing, what was that?”

Clara shook her head. “Different thing. Don’t worry about that, just tell us if you see the shit you saw in the tunnels.”

“The point of this little exercise,” Avery said, walking over to him, “was to show you the sort of shit we do. We manage a very elusive prey, Jack, and we keep it from growing out of control. Sometimes that means being strict about things. Minerva started doing things that risked ... risked a lot. We told her to stop, and she didn’t listen. So we went to stop it ourselves, but she got in the way, and died for it.” She grabbed his shirt by the collar, and brought him in closer. Such a scary, small woman. “So don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong, and everyone will be happier. Capisce?”

“ ... yeah, I getcha. Except this—this is probably not a topic to be had around these,” he said, gesturing to both the humans and the spirits.

“May we return to our feast?” the spirits said, as a choir.

“Go nuts.” Avery waved a hand back at them, and made for the stairs.

The spirits sighed, in sync, relieved and content, and slipped back into the bodies of the people they were possessing. Avery had nothing but their word that they weren’t ruining these people’s lives, turning them into meat puppets and possessing them and

doing nothing with them but fucking all day, until their lives were in shambles. Then again, the Uratha prowled the city, and far as Jack knew, they also prowled the other side of the 'Gauntlet' and did their hunting thing there too. Maybe if the spirits got uppity, it showed up there as well?

His second life was so much easier to wrap his mind around when it was just blood, sex, and money. Now he had monsters, werewolves, gross abomination things, and for the cherry on top, spirits. If a ghost showed up at his apartment one day, at this point, he wouldn't even blink.

Clara followed after Avery, grinning at him as she slipped past the beads. Once she was through enough of them they could no longer see each other, he looked to the people, the kine, and watched as they came out of their blissful comas. Without losing a beat, they got their hands on each other, into each other, stroking and rubbing. The woman on top of the man started to grind her hips on him, her side to Jack so he couldn't see what their bits were doing. Probably for the best, he had a hard enough time not thinking about sex with Antoinette every moment of the night, he didn't need more imagery in his head.

He looked up at the dangling statue of the two lovers. Vicky and Parker probably put it there, and knowingly, knowing what sort of situation would arise from its presence. How it interacted with spirits, what it did, why it did what it did, he hadn't the foggiest, but maybe they did.

Did Bloodlust have something like this?

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Back in the apartment with the werewolves, he grabbed his jacket again, his vest holster and gun, and his silver sword. In its sheath, it looked like a regular sword, and hopefully—Clara snatched it out of his hands, and took it out of the sheath. Fuck fuck fuck.



“We’ve been meaning to talk to you about these,” she said. “Invictus are carrying them, your Sanctum bud waiting outside has one, and according to the boys, even Natasha has one.”

“ ... we don’t have a choice,” he said.

“Don’t you?” Clara looked to Avery, Monica, and David, but the three of them sat and listened, giving Clara the clear to push the topic. He wished they hadn’t. “You want to be our friend, get us on your side, but the Carthians aren’t walking around with silver swords.”

He winced. They knew it was silver, and the Carthians weren’t walking around with werewolf bane, painting the Invictus and everyone else in a pretty bad light. What do what do what do.

“ ... you ever hear of the Prisoner’s Dilemma?” he said.

Clara, frowning, tossed him the sword, and he snatched it out of the air. “No.”

He hooked the sword onto his side near the shoulder blade, inside the jacket on the vest holster, out of sight. “Two criminals that were partners in crime have been caught, and are now being questioned in different rooms by the authorities. They are not allowed to communicate with each other. Both are offered a deal. If you both refuse to testify against the other, you both get one year in jail. If you both try and rat each other out, you both get two years in jail. But, if one of you rats the other out, while the other keeps their mouth shut, then the honorable guy, the guy who keeps his mouth shut, gets four years in jail, while the rat gets to walk free. What do you do?”

“Easy, keep my trap shut.” Clara shrugged. Easiest problem in the world, right? She leaned back onto the windowsill, folded her arms across her chest, and raised a brow. “I don’t understand the dilemma. If they both refuse to testify, they only get one year in jail

each. It's measurably the best outcome. The other two options both have a total of four years in jail. Both keeping quiet has a total of two years in jail, one each."

"It's easy because you trust the people you're working with with your lives, Clara. Because, your pack is your family, and you know you'd die for each other. That's not a normal circumstance, Clara, that's an exception. For the overwhelmingly majority of people, the only thing that makes sense is to try and defend themselves against the worst outcome, at the expense of others."

"... I don't understand."

"Each prisoner has incentive to defend themselves by trying to screw over their partner. If you rat your partner out, and they do you as well, you get two years. If you rat them out, and they don't rat you out, you get zero jail time. In both results, you avoid four years in jail for yourself. But, if you try and be honorable, to protect your fellow prisoner, you open yourself to the possibility of being betrayed, of getting four years, while the rat will get to walk."

"That ... that's bullshit! That doesn't make sense, that—"

"That's people, Clara." Sighing, he walked for the door, put his hand on the knob, and turned around to look behind him. Everyone was looking at him, eyes intense. They wanted to hear what he had to say. "People don't think in terms of a group first, they think in terms of themselves first. That's normal, instinctual. And, when you look at the incentives of that dilemma in the sense of an individual, that individual can defend themselves from a four-year sentence, while at the same time getting either two years in jail, or even zero, by testifying. People think in terms of the self first, and in that mindset, it's objectively better to rat the other person out. Werewolves don't think in terms of the self first, I assume; you're a pack, and you'll always be a pack. You think in pack terms."

“... then what hope do you vamps have?” Avery said, one eye squinted as her gaze cut into him. “Humans distrust each other. Vampires distrust each other and everyone, even more. You guys are the rat in this example of yours.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “But, give it time, and we’ll come around. You said you wanted time to get a feel for the city and situation, Avery? We’ll need time, before we can trust you. In the meantime, we’re not stupid enough to trust the other guy, and risk us getting those four years.” He pat his jacket where the silver sword remained hidden. “It sucks, and I hate it, but ... yeah, give it time.” Turning and opening the door, he looked over his shoulder at the wolves, and smiled. “And that’s one thing we vamps have in spades.”

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~~Julias~~

Time to make sense of the chaos.

He stood before his covenant, his two fellow councilmen, the three right hands of the council, and all the Invictus Kindred considered to be of senior rank. Isabella Leauvion and Hella Vendram. Bruce Vanna and his friends Vicky Goldman and Parker White. Another eight Kindred were there, each more than twenty years embraced, such as Gloria Jennings; though, Julias wondered if he should talk to that woman. She was getting lazy, and not presenting herself as a good role model for her childe Amanda.

If current circumstances didn’t spark her to be more proactive, he’d make her.

Everyone was sitting around the large table of glass, the room dark, with the LED lights above set to dim. The two elders McDonald and Turio sat at the one end, Jessy at the corner by Michael, Damien by Maria opposite of his partner. Damien being there was a little odd, but they were going to have to get used to it.

Maybe one day, if the Second Estate ever became a power again, they'd no longer be privy to these meetings. But for now, Damien was one of them.

Jack sat at the other end of the table, near him where Julias was standing, here where all eyes were turned, and Julias had his back to the colossal touch screen that covered the wall. A map of Dolareido was displayed, with every minute detail etched in. Blue lines highlighted streets. Black lines highlighted buildings, with every color in the spectrum used to detail things about the buildings, were shown. Sewer entrances with grades of color representing degrees of safety, and how easily they could disappear into the known abandoned sewers from them, were shown. Symbols with different colors representing Carthian or Invictus control were shown. And points of tension of late, namely the Mirrden District, were highlighted with a gradient of red.

But the map had changed. The building that burned down that held Barry's den, was now in red. The old prison where Jack had been tortured, was now in red. The alley where Jack had been stabbed and kidnapped from, got a little highlight of red. Another map, the sewer map, was displayed beside the Dolareido map, and the area where Azamel had made her home, was now in red.

"There is too much red on this map," he said, frowned at it, and then at his Invictus. In particular, he did not like that little strip of red near the Invictus ballroom, the Fall Palace. It was deep in South Side, and was the only bit of red in such an inconvenient place. "Do we have an explanation for this hole yet, Isabella?"

She shrugged, and leaned back in her chair. "Thralls were around, guarding. Not only ours, but reports had sightings of some of the Prince's thralls as well, blending in with nearby crowds. Video footage of the area is plentiful, except for the alleys around behind the building, for no other reason than the target is not a priority to our enemies."

“Enemies?” he said. “Be specific.”

“ ... sorry, I meant the Carthians. I know, they’re not our enemies, but ... apologies.”

He gave Isabella some leeway. Some. She was one of the older Kindred, and she was around during tenser times with the Carthians. Plus, she was Garry’s opposite, and the two of them hated each other. Hostility was to be expected, but not tolerated.

“This brings up a valuable point,” he said, and he gestured to the group. “Unless the Carthians stir trouble, you are not to provoke them. I hope that is obvious. Even Alder Honors made attempts to keep relations smooth with Garry.” The man had been invited to their balls, after all. “Master Terry insists Avery won’t show up on our doorstep looking for a fight if we start pushing Garry around, but that’s not the point. Until these hunters are expunged, the Carthians are our friends. understood?”

Hella leaned forward onto the table, eyebrow raised. “Our friends? You know that Joe fucker broke my arm a year ago? I still owe him som—”

He snapped his gaze to her, shutting her up. “Madam Vendram, if you so much as look at Joe with anger in your eyes, I will break your mind and force you to cut off your own fingers, and eat them. Do I make myself clear?”

“ ... yes, Mister Mire.” She lowered her gaze, and leaned back into her seat. Not happy being pinned in by a ruling, but too scared of him to argue the point. Good. If he had to use fear to get these idiots to not make things worse, than he would.

He started to pace, with occasional glances to his childe. Jack had raised a brow at him, when he threatened Hella, but he recovered quickly. It wasn’t like his childe would disagree with him, but Julias didn’t like encouraging the boy to do what Ventrue often did to get

their way: break the minds of whoever they wanted to do their bidding. Then again, when trying to corral a bunch of vampires to use their brains and consider the future in their actions, he'd use whatever worked.

A slippery slope. What separated someone like him from a dictator? A totalitarian? He thought what he was doing was for the best of the city, and the Invictus. But then, leaders of totalitarian governments sometimes did as well. It was so easy for a Ventrue to be convinced they knew what was best, that they should be obeyed because they were smarter, better, than the others. It was a slippery slope he had to navigate carefully, before he fell and smashed his skull open on the jagged rocks waiting beneath him.

“Moving on,” he said. “Areas where Kindred congregate are now considered priority targets. The hunters are not Carthians, they're not looking to spread territory or establish footholds. They're looking to kill us.”

Bruce raised a hand, and Julias nodded to let him speak. “I thought the hunters were here for Azamel, and the other monsters. We could step aside and—”

“We've considered the option,” he said. That got a little more of an eye raise from Jack, but the boy sighed, nodded, and put his eyes back onto the map behind Julias. It'd only been logical to consider that option, and his childe would know that. Hopefully. “But it would be a fool's hope. These hunters are experienced, and this Angela and Jeremiah are particularly deadly, and driven. They are zealots. They'll burn this city to the ground to get to us, if only because we helped the Begotten once already.” He reached out to the screen, and swiped. A picture of a man came up, an older man, with tattoos on his neck, but otherwise his body was hidden in the trench coat. “This is Jeremiah, correct Master Terry?”

“Correct.”

“This picture was taken by Invictus in another city. Jeremiah passed through that city, after ten Kindred deaths.” Communicating with other Invictus, and asking for information, was always a mixed bag. The more autonomous a city, the better. Signs of weakness could be met with other Invictus coming to take command, or sending enforcers to deal with imbalances if they thought it worth the trouble. But interest in Dolareido from outside establishments was rare; Antoinette kept the city in good control, comparatively speaking.

“Confirmation that they’re his kills?” Damien said. Everyone in the group looked at him, each with a degree of annoyance, each with a bit of surprise. It wasn’t entirely normal for Invictus Kindred to question their superiors. For someone not Invictus to do it was fingernails on chalkboard.

But, Julias didn’t mind so much. Skepticism was intelligence made manifest. “The Invictus are nothing if not thorough, Mister Burksen.”

“I see.”

The man in the picture had a distinct look, with the faded remains of scars cutting across his nose, some scars along his jaw interrupting the short gray beard, and one along the head exposing some of his scalp through his short gray hair. He oozed experience, a veteran of his twisted sport.

“Take a good look everyone, this is the man we’re worried about. This is a hunter with a lot of years and a lot of kills under his belt.” Again Julias began to pace, now with his hands in the small of his back, head down. Classic pensive, thoughtful pose, and with the hands behind him, it no doubt made him look like a contemplating, wise leader. Image was everything.

“An attractive, older man,” Isabella said, which got a weird glance from everyone, before she chuckled and shrugged. “For some, I am

sure.”

Julias pointed to the man’s neck. “You can see he has tattoos, but hunters do not normally have many identifying marks like this, unless they have a good reason. Based on Jack’s report, it would appear the man has access to some unusual items as well, perhaps enchanted. Jeremiah would not be the first hunter to tattoo enchanted markings onto his body.”

Jessy raised a hand. “Um, enchanted? I mean, I read the report, and enchanted sounds like a bit of a stretch.”

Julias motioned to his childe. If there was someone he could count on to be both methodical, and to not exaggerate in his reports, it was him.

“I’ve seen magic at work before,” Jack said, turning to look back at the table and toward Jessy. “I don’t use the word enchanted lightly. I—”

“Wait, you’ve seen magic at work before?” Hella leaned in again, and tilted her head to the side. “Magic?”

But before Jack could say anything, Maria raised a hand, and waved it aside in a gentle dismissal. “Master Terry was present when Lucas assaulted the Prince. Both he and Mister Burksen can testify that the Archbishop used magic to assault the Prince. Theban Sorcery.”

Damien lifted a finger off the table. “We of the Lancea et Sanctum consider them to be miracles of a sort, but only those of both great power and great faith can summon them so readily.”

Maria shook her head. “We have seen other, magical acts and objects, done outside the grasp of the Second Estate. The Circle of the Crone perform their blood rituals, and the Ordo Dracul have ... flirted, with similar tools before.”



Hella winced, leaning back in her chair again. Perhaps the Gangrel had been living in denial that magic existed; it was certainly easier to pretend it didn't. Far kinder to a Kindred's mind to consider themselves the only supernatural things walking around.

"I felt the difference," Jack said, "between having those cuffs on, and off." Looking down at his wrists, he took a little time to rub one, then the other. Getting your hands chopped off must have been horrible. Being the one that forced that madness must have been a strange feeling indeed. "It was hard, pulling up my vitae, when I had them on. Very hard, like it was being suppressed. On top of that, I looked Angela and Jeremiah in the eyes, from only inches away. They didn't feel normal, they didn't feel like kine."

"Elaborate for the others," Julius said, gesturing to the table. The report had explained, but only the council and the right hands had read it. Time to get everyone up to speed.

"... they felt like ... they felt indomitable. They felt like the sort humans that would walk into a monster's lair, and without hesitation, throw themselves into a pit of snakes to fight the gorgon. Real, crazy, psycho types, you know?" He shivered, and rubbed his head a few times, before he forced his hand back to the table. Old habits die hard. "The others, the hunters they had working for them, felt like normal kine. They were afraid of me, and had all the stress signs of normal humans. But the other two, Jeremiah and Angela, they ... no, they weren't like the others. They weren't normal."

"Then what are they?" Bruce said.

Jack shrugged. "Not Kindred, not Uratha, not Begotten. They looked human, and they smelled human, but..."

"There are other things out there," Michael said, leaning forward onto the table, elbows against it, fingers netted together, "than those things the good Master Terry has mentioned. Dolareido has rarely, in its history, had to deal with them, but there are other terrors in

this world of darkness we live in. I do not think such terrors are what we're dealing with, though. No, it would be a strange thing indeed for anything other than a human to be working with these hunters, especially in this manner, with this goal to kill the Begotten, and us."

Jessy looked confused, eyebrow raised, and eyes glancing between Jack and Michael's contradicting statements. "Then what are they?"

"We're ... not sure," Julias said. "Azamel might know something, but as informative as Jack's meetings with the old monster have been, she's refused to give us a direct response on anything. Until we know more, assume that Jeremiah and Angela are both extremely dangerous."

The group of Kindred sighed, but nodded. 'Extremely dangerous' carried some implications with it, and no one liked them.

"Master Terry's latest meeting with the Uratha," Julias said, "has gone both well, and poorly. As I said earlier, we are less concerned that Avery will become a threat to us, but at the same time, she is unwilling to help us with the hunters until she feels more comfortable with the situation and the city. Master Terry has told me she wishes an exchange of trust, before it can progress further. Two of her pack mates will be moving into Carlava Villa, and we will be showing them the utmost respect. Understood?"

"We bending over for these people?" Jessy said.

Her words got her a hard glare from her sire, and she shrank into her seat.

Julias squinted his eyes at her. "Some minor gamesmanship is hardly bending over, Madam Herrington. And last I checked, you've submitted for one of the grand suites in the Carlava Villa to be given to your new friend, the kine who saved Jack's life. Should I question your motives there?"

Bringing in the woman's personal decisions into a business meeting might have been unwarranted or unprofessional, but Kindred were different. There was no separation between work and life, they were the same thing, despite how some Kindred did their best to keep them separate. And Jessy knew that, better than most.

“Wasn't suggesting it was a bad move, Mister Mire,” she said, a grin sneaking up onto her lips despite her resigned pose. “Just wanted to know how far we're taking this. And Eric will prove a valuable ally with time, I'm sure.”

Turio didn't look convinced. “He'd be better off a thrall or ghoul, Madam Herrington. Trusting him is foolish.”

“... I think I can understand Madam Herrington's decision,” Jack said. “Thralls and ghouls are tainted, their minds warped in ways that make them ... reliable, but they lack the spark of a wildcard. Eric's behavior, what little I saw of it, and from what Beatrice and Fiona have told me, is a defining example of that behavior. As long as he does not learn anything that can be used against us, or tortured out of him for that purpose, I agree with my partner's course of action. He will be of use.” Everyone looked his way, Julias included. Jack didn't normally talk to Maria, if only because it was probably easier for him to not, not since he'd killed Lucas. And for a fresh neonate to talk without being asked was almost insubordinate. For him to speak to her in the middle of an important Invictus meeting, and to go against what she said, was a huge step out of his comfort zone. Julias smiled.

So did Maria. “Well said, Master Terry.” The ghost lady offered him a nod, and sat back straight in her chair. Jessy's grin turned into a warmer smile, and she shared it Jack before she sat up straight too. Kid's knack for smoothing out bumps of tension manifested everywhere.

“Back onto topic,” Julias said. “If you see Jeremiah, and you think you have an opportunity to kill him, take it. Understand the danger of the situation, and that in all likelihood, you thinking you can kill him is actually a trap set up by him to bait you. But I’m not going to say don’t try if you think you can do it. He needs to die.

“This brings us onto our final point of this meeting. As some of you know, the woman Jeremiah has recruited, Angela, a person Jack considers to be of similar ... degree of danger, as Jeremiah, is Athalia’s daughter.”

The right hands and the council were unfazed, but for everyone else, this was new information. Isabella, Bruce, Hella, Gloria, Vicky, Parker, all of them raised a brow, and looked at him as they sat up straight and put their hands on the table.

Julias swiped the screen again. No picture this time, but a drawing, made for them by a forensic sketch artist in their employ, and Jack’s description.

“The picture doesn’t do it justice,” Jack said. “The glass eye, I mean.”

“As my childe says, she has a glass eye, so identifying her will be reasonably easy. Unless she exchanges it with a less-obvious piece, which is possible.” But, he pointed to the huge scar that cut across the forehead, down through the eye socket, and down into her cheek. There were other scars too on her face, similar to Jeremiah’s, though less in quantity. “Black skin like her mother, but she buzzes her hair. Remember this face. Master Terry assures me it is otherwise an accurate picture.”

It was Gloria this time to raise her hand. Strange, considering how much she preferred to shut up when in meetings.

“I uh, I think I ... yeah, um, I remember Athalia. Stirred up some trouble, around twenty years ago, right? Very dangerous woman?”

We were told to avoid her and let the sheriff handle her?”

Ah, right, that.

“The sheriff didn’t kill her, Madam Jennings, if that’s what you’re wondering. She was a new Begotten, and the Ordo Dracul are more familiar with them than we are. But, after some time, she left the city. She’s returned on a couple of occasions, never for long.”

“I get that, b-but, I mean, if ... we kill Angela, then—”

“Then nothing.” Enough of this. “We owe Athalia nothing, and we have a right to defend ourselves.” He slammed his palms against the table, and everyone jerked in their seats; except, of course, for the council. “We have a right to do more than that. Dolareido is our city, a Kindred city. The kine are ours, we’ve cultivated them, spent decades, centuries for some of us, raising them. We protect them from themselves and keep this city a safe place, statistically speaking. If anyone encroaches upon it, we are beholden to no one but our own. Kill her if you get the chance, and if issues arise with Athalia, then we will kill her as well. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir,” they said.

“Good. Dismissed.”

## Chapter 58

~~Natasha~~

“Something ... h-horrible?” she said.

Art stepped forward into the buildings, into the civilian lobby, and sniffed the air. “Monica told us she found out that, apparently Jack managed to bust his way out of here, and kill a few hunters on the way out. I assume you know more. Can you spare us any more details?”

What details could she share that she’d read about? Antoinette had her ways, and especially so did Daniel, to get detailed reports about what happened here, more than what the Invictus were willing to share. Some things they read were vague, but her two bosses were both more than skilled enough to fill in the blanks based on implication. And Jack was her friend, he’d told her some things, things she’d managed to extrapolate from. Once she’d put it all together, it was a very scary tale.

“Jack ... was tortured, and I g-guess it ... it pushed him over an edge. He dominated three hunter minds, and summoned an army of rats.” She shivered at the image. Rats, swarming, overwhelming, killing? “It sounds like something Viktor w-would have done.” Oops. She’d meant to say that in her head.

“Right, his grand sire.” Matt shivered, and rubbed his arms, in the same way Natasha did. Made her smile, for a moment. “Avery had some stories for us about him.”

“D-Does she? I, um ... not sure, about what ... what happened back then. Avery showed up in the ... fifties, right? I was sired around the purge, in the sixties.” A wonderful ostrich tactic, conveniently ignoring the warning about the horrible thing right in front of her in

the prison, to get information about the past. Typical Mekhet, need knowledge knowledge secrets secrets.

The two werewolves continued along through the lobby, sniffing, sniffing, sniffing more, picking up something her nose couldn't, before moving on and heading down the hall toward the prisoner lobby.

"Mmhmm," Matt said. "Don't normally run into Ventrue who give Uratha much trouble. Hard to kill, but it's not like they give us much trouble when the fists start flying. Except, this Viktor fucker, he could dominate Uratha easily."

"... he c ... c-could?"

Art nodded as he circled around the center desk in the prisoner lobby. "Yeah. Uratha aren't immune to you Kindred and your fucking mental powers and shit. Normally, the younger Kindred can't touch us, mental powers or not. But the older ones, you get your fucking fingers into our brains? It's ... never a good thing." He stopped before the gate leading down one of the hallways, where another hallway turn waited, with cells waiting beyond, Tash imagined. "Christ, this wasn't just Jack escaping and killing, this was a bloodbath. The whole place reeks of blood, human and rat, and gasoline. Death."

She couldn't smell any of that.

"According to Avery," Matt said, "Viktor dominated a couple of her companions, at the same time. Forced them both to transform, full on gauru mode, and made them fight each other." He followed after Art, eyes scanning up and down the bars, the floor, everywhere. All clean, all washed, all evidence gone, but whatever the Invictus did to clean it, it wasn't enough to hide everything from the Uratha. "Not a secret, really. Your elders are fucking terrifying."

“I ... I guess. I d-didn't know Viktor did that though.” Viktor's strength was well known. That combined with his growing insanity and paranoia — according to Antoinette — were the reasons Maria and Michael were afraid to challenge him. “D-Did ... anyone die?”

“To Viktor being a jackass? No, no one Avery's told us about anyway.” Art shrugged as he continued down the hall, deeper into the complex, Matt and Tash following after him. “He couldn't break Simon though, apparently.”

The gentle giant stepped ahead of her, and got down on his knees beside one of the cells. “... that kid really left a scar here.”

A rat squeaked, and disappeared into a large crack in the concrete. Where rats were once quite bold, she imagined all the rats for a mile in any direction would be afraid to be seen by anything on two legs, now.

“Scar?” she said.

Art came to a stop by one of the cells. “Yeah, the sort of shit that resonates, creates essence, creates problems. Seems like he's tainted this prison with ... I don't know. Rage? Hate? ... a lot of creatures died here, painfully.”

The rest of them came up to the cell door, and looked inside. Natasha could see nothing out of the ordinary, but both Matt and Art were twitching their noses and looking around, fidgeting fingers and snapping eyes. They didn't like being here.

“Hard to make out their scent anymore. So many vamps came through here, and washed the place down.” Walking into the cell, Art cringed as he approached the metal chair, and knelt down in front of it. “... something happened here. Jack must have been in this chair. He ... was in pain, a large amount of pain. Panic, pain ... then ... revenge?” He got up, and turned to face the gate of the cell. “He ... broke two minds here, I think. Took them over.” He walked



back out into the hallway, before turning to face the direction they came from. “Two humans died here, shot down. Then...”

Natasha did her best to not imagine a music montage, of a song shrinking an effort of days down into seconds, like typical TV forensics drama scenes. But, she stared on, wide eyed, as she listened to a bass-heavy alternative rock song play in her head, while Art managed to come to conclusions from utterly nothing.

“Then the madness started. You said rats, right? Lot of ... lot of dead rats. Hundreds ... They started here.” He motioned to the crack in the wall. “And from similar holes in this old place.” He gestured around to the others cells too. “ ... they didn’t die quick either. Most of them died in pain.”

“That’s what it is,” Matt said. “Christ, kid was in pain ... and inflicted a lot of pain.”

“The hunt-t-ters, they ... used fire, and ... burned all the rats,” she said.

Art nodded, and followed the hall back out to the lobby again. “Yeah, death death and more death, all marked with pain. All starts with that chair. And, everything has a generous, heaping pile of hate on it, like ... tar.”

“ ... in the report, it said ... that J-Jack, that um, he had to cut off his hands, t-t-to get out. He d-dominated the two hunters watching him ... despite, um, enchanted hand cuffs, designed to work on vampires we think. He forced them ... t ... t-to cut off his hands so he could escape.” A Mekhet would have used the situation to get a quick phone call out, not cut off their own hands. But she wasn’t there, maybe it wasn’t reasonable.

Both werewolves winced, sucking in their breath between their teeth. “Damn,” they said.

She winced as well. Yeah, damn. “He, um, summoned rats. All Kindred know animalism, you p-probably know, b-but, Gangrel and Ventrue are good at it, naturals at it. And ... Jack, he’s ... he’s Julias’s childe. Julias is a p-prodigy, sort of. Very, very strong. Viktor was ... also very, very strong, and ... and J-Jack is...”

“Is following in his sire and grand sire’s footsteps.” Art knelt down by the desk in the civilian lobby, the three of them almost back out of the building. He ran his fingers along the tile of the floor, and smelled them. “He’s not the first vamp to have an explosion in skill at a young age, but this is pretty big. This whole place reeks of death, pain, and panic. And ... disgust.”

Matt nodded as he walked around, wincing every so often. “We’ll have to keep an eye on it, in case any wraiths show up.”

“W-Wraiths?” Wait, didn’t that secrets spirit thing say something about wraiths? Something about them, and Black Blood?

“Yeah. Not ghosts, though I wouldn’t be surprised if ghost wraiths existed. No, these wraiths are a type of spirit that have grown in Dolareido. Mix of death and fear. There’s not many of them, but enough to be a problem.”

Ok, moment of truth. Tell her boyfriends she knew about Black Blood? Don’t tell them? They might not like her knowing about it, and she didn’t want to become another Minerva. But, Antoinette knew of it, and the werewolves weren’t trying to break down her door or anything.

“ ... d-do they ... do bad things?” she said. Ok, so she wasn’t going to tell them. Yet. She had good reason though, because, secrets and stuff. Mekhet needed their secrets, and it was part of her job to acquire information. If they didn’t know that she knew about Black Blood, they’d be more likely to accidentally tell her things, things she could deduce conclusions from that they wouldn’t expect her to be able to.

Harmless information gathering. Harmless.

Matt nodded. “Yeah, they can get involved in some pretty dark stuff. Seems they’re working together with some other shit, and we’re not sure why.”

“David knows more, but getting straight answers out of spirits is never easy. Always comes with a fucking price tag.” Art shrugged, and continued along until they were back outside, the outer gate they climbed over before them. “And ... you might want to talk to your buddy, Jack, about this. To leave a scar like this, from one incident? It was nasty. I doubt the kid is even aware of how badly this must have fucked with him.”

“I ... I’ll t-talk to him.” She wasn’t sure what she could say that Antoinette or Julias couldn’t, but there was no harm in checking up on her friend anyway. And, she was sure Antoinette was doing her best to soothe the boy’s soul.

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~~Julias~~

He really wanted to go back to his home, the mansion, lay in bed with Triss — and Jen — and stop thinking about all this garbage. He was going to kill these hunters, if only so he could take a single day to truly, wholly relax again. No matter what he did now, the hunters were on his mind, squirming into his thoughts, until it ate at him.

The Primogen meeting room. He was there, as were all the Primogen. No one had missed a meeting since Tony’s death, since he was the only fucker who had the nerve to ignore them at his whimsy. Good riddance.

Christ, he was sour. No word, no sighting, nothing about the hunters. And it was all he could think about, all his mind was concerned with; which made it hard to focus on what Jack was saying.

“Carter and Clara will be staying in the Carlava Villa soon,” the kid said, looking to each elder around the table as he updated them on Invictus business deemed shareable. He stood at its end, opposite of the Prince, hands at his sides and posture rigid. If he’d been wearing a military uniform, the hair would have fit even better. “For an indeterminate amount of time.”

“This some desperate ploy to make friends with Avery?” Garry said, rolling his eyes as he leaned back. “You Invictus are fucked in the head, especially if you think you can bribe her.”

Michael frowned, leaning forward to put his elbows on the table, eyes cutting into Garry. “We offer her a roof, same as you. And we want what you want, Tones, to encourage her aid in dealing with these hunters.”

The two Gangrels frowned at each other. There’d be barking soon, if someone didn’t do something.

Jacob, of all people, leaned in first, and swept the antics away with a hand gesture. “Jeremiah is a deadly beast, to be sure. I spoke with Azamel myself, and while that old bitch refuses to be straight with me, she was obviously afraid of the man, in some capacity. It would appear we’re stuck in this problem she’s created. I don’t blame the Invictus for trying to get some extra help on our side.”

The Prince sighed, tapping a finger on the glass table, the other hand gently combing waves of hair over her bosom. “And we are certain that the damage is done, and the Kindred are bound to this conflict?”

Everyone else sighed, and looked to Jack, knowing what the kid was going to say. He winced, and nodded.

The Prince met his gaze, looked down at the table, and sighed as well. “Merde.” With a growing frown, she gestured for Jack to continue.

“Avery isn’t against helping us,” the boy said, “just ... she doesn’t want a repeat of the last incident, with Simon.”

Maria sighed and shook her head. “She is paranoid. Viktor and Lucas are no longer with us, and they were Simon’s two biggest antagonists. Even Tony didn’t cause too many issues with the Uratha when they were here.”

Jacob laughed and snapped his fingers once. “Were, they were her two biggest antagonists. She can fucking die in a fire for all I care.”

“We need her help, Jacob,” Garry said. “I know Avery did some horrible shit, but she was working for Simon and it was his call. She doesn’t work for him anymore, if he’s even still alive, and she’s here to try and fix some of the crap Simon left behind. Cut her some slack.” If there was anyone on the Primogen council who could convince Jacob of something, it was Garry supposedly, at least according to what Julias knew about them. But Julias wasn’t so sure it was that simple, that Garry and him were simply friends helping each other out. Nothing was ever that simple with Jacob.

But, with a few moments to ponder, the old Nosferatu offered Garry an understanding nod, before leaning back in his chair again. Poor Jack was standing closer to Jacob than others, due to the position closer to the door, and Julias could see Jacob’s quick tongue got the boy anxious. Elders arguing with each other was not a sight his childe was used to.

“In the mean time,” Jack said, “she’ll continue ... pruning the weeds, I suppose is the best metaphor, hunting what Uratha hunt. She says she’s happy with the state of the city, though.”

“And yet, she does not leave,” Antoinette said. “In fact, she intends to stay.”

“... yes, my Prince.” Jack rubbed his hair, before snapping his hand back down once he realized he was doing it again. “Issues with

the Circle of the Crone aside, there are many advantages to her staying, and she's being quite reasonable ... about most things."

Sticky situation for the kid to be in, having to argue and make points on behalf of the Uratha, without pissing off his superiors, particularly the Nosferatu with the Joker smile. Julias hid his smirk. He didn't envy his childe, but he was happy with the job he was doing nonetheless.

"Reasonable?" Antoinette said, glaring at him. "She has taken residence in my city, without my permission. What is reasonable about that?"

A pin drop would have shattered glass in the silence that followed, as the Prince glared at the boy. If there was any concern Antoinette would play favorites with her lover, she was successfully crushing them.

"My Prince, she has no intentions of disrupting the Kindred world here, in Dolareido. She only intends to help. That Azlu monster in the sewers was here before she arrived, not because of her arrival, and she dealt with it. Apparently, other such dangers may exist in the city, and one of those Azlu monsters survived the encounter as well. She is doing all that she can to deal with these issues, without damaging the Masquerade."

"... we did not ask for her help with these matters," Jacob said, snarling.

Jack met the old man's eyeless gaze. "Not everyone that needs help is willing to ask for it, elder Jacob. I wouldn't ask for a werewolf to help in matters of nuance, of money or politics or controlling a city, but I know that we Kindred are barely aware of ... the strange things, hiding in the darkness. They are more aware, and more equipped to deal with it."

And again, the silence was profound. Everyone knew about Jacob's constant probing and exploring into such darkness, such secrets and madness, and Jack was straight up calling him out on it, saying the werewolves knew more. Ok, it was fine to be proud of your childe, but at a certain point Jack was going to cross a line; he was already flirting with it. One step too far and he was going to really piss off the old witch.

Jacob laughed, and winked at him. "True that. Much as I hope that Avery bitch dies a horrible death, she has her uses." Winking with no eyes, a bandage covering them, was weird, and only noticeable from the muscle of the eyebrow and cheek moving.

"... you may continue to placate them, and perhaps recruit their aid with these hunters, my Primogen," the Prince said, "but I assume you are all pursuing measures to deal with this threat without their aid?" The group all nodded. "Good. Keep me informed of any discoveries, as I will you."

Much of this had already been said in the emergency meeting following the incident with Jack's kidnap and escape, but Julias appreciated the Prince's thoroughness. Pretty sure she was also doing it to remind everyone they were in this together, not against each other; nice to have her in his corner.

Maria leaned in. "What of Azamel? She and her subordinates have done surprisingly little, when it is they that have brought this trouble to our door. We pester the werewolves, when it's the monsters that created this problem."

"Azamel will help us," Jack said, nodding with the statement. "She is ... concerned about the city, in her own, weird way. Not like the Uratha though, I wouldn't trust her that much. For her it's more a tactical thing. But, she's more willing to form an alliance with us than Avery, and more committed to taking down Jeremiah than any of us."

The Prince mirrored his nod, but her eyes looked into each Primogen as she tapped her fingers once again. “Then I must address the elephant in the room. If Azamel is willing to help kill Jeremiah, is she willing to help kill Angela.”

Julias almost said something, almost got angry. But, no, ill-timed and misplaced. As much as he was frustrated so many people were concerned with upsetting Athalia, Antoinette’s worry was about Azamel. That worry was justified. He didn’t want to deal with an angry Azamel, none of them did.

“I ... don’t know,” Jack said. “Athalia is torn. She says she ... she...” Kid scratched his head some more, giving up all pretense of being professional. No one minded, not at this point. “She doesn’t want to kill her own daughter, but if push comes to shove, I’m not sure it’ll be that simple. Maybe not kill Angela, but detain her or subdue her, maybe? As for Azamel, I get the impression that if the opportunity presented itself, she’d kill Angela, but attempt to detain her first.”

“... I suppose that is better than nothing.” The Prince leaned in, like many of them already were, and set her elbows to the glass table as she looked at each of them. “It has been weeks since they have shown themselves, these hunters. And the Begotten have become scarce, hiding in their tunnels — my tunnels — and hiding in their dream world. Everyone must both remain vigilant, and cooperative. That includes with the monsters and the werewolves, to an extent. If you see an opportunity to earn the help of these groups, consider taking it. We must expel these hunters above all else.

“That said, do not risk your own lives or the Masquerade for these trespassers. I do not want them in my city, but, they have not earned my wrath. Yet.” Her face steeled, and she looked at each individual with a long, determined stare, yet again. On the surface it was innocent enough, a disgruntled boss. Behind that, where the skin didn’t show it, where only the beasts in them could hear the



silent growling, she bore into them with her gaze. “Not all of you agree with me, for enacting the purge. On that, your opinions do not matter. It was the correct option, and following it, we had decades of peace. Even Tony’s infantile meddling did not disrupt that. But now I find the city growing more, and yet more unruly, at the hands of these newcomers. If I have to, I will call upon a purge once more, to remove either the Begotten, or the Uratha, or both. And in that matter, I will demand the aid of all covenants should I decide to exercise my right. Do I make myself clear?”

Jack’s eyes were wide, but everyone was looking at Antoinette. The kid hadn’t expected those words. Hell, Julias hadn’t. But, they all nodded, and let the implication sink in. If such a thing happened and one of the covenants disagreed, vampire ashes would rain down on the city as much as blood and bone.

After a few more minor points to clear up, she dismissed them, and everyone got up. Jacob first, offering a small wave over his shoulder, then Garry, grunting and putting his hands in his jean pockets, and then the council triumvirate.

“Mister Mire, Mister Terry, stay a moment, s’il vous plaît? For a personal matter.”

Personal matter, hmm. He could understand her keeping the kid around, but him? They had no business outside of Jack, so he thought. But, he nodded, and stayed seated as the others left. They offered Jack grins, smirks, even a nod or two. Hell, Garry chuckled and pat the kid on the shoulder; which put Jack on edge like nothing else, to the point Julias had to hide his smirk.

But, eventually, the three of them were alone.

“Jack,” Antoinette said, small smile, small grin. Subtle, like she was comfortable with the gentle expressions. It was cute. “I hope my words did not stir your malcontent. Please understand that I

would not remove, or kill, your friend Fiona unless she stood with Azamel in such a circumstance.”

“That makes me happier, yeah.” He scratched his head, and came in a little closer until his hips touched the other end of the table, him looking across it to his lover. “I’m trying to keep everyone happy, getting along with each other, and talks of purge ... yeah. Scary.”

“And such a circumstance would be unusual. Even when Azamel was a larger thorn in my side, I did not call for such an act. And when the Uratha caused chaos in the corners of my city with their trespassing and uncontrolled hunts, I did not call for such an act. Only on Lucas, who had every intent to ... well, I am sure you can remember the man’s zealotry.”

“Yeah, no forgetting that.”

“And ... I will see you tonight, non?” she said.

Julias couldn’t help but let out a little grin with that. Big, bad, dangerous, intelligent and confident Antoinette, worried about Jack not being there. It was delightful to see. God damn it made him miss Triss. He hadn’t seen her in a couple nights, and fuck, he really wanted to see her, hold her, forget all the troubles in the city for an hour or two before their daily sleep took them.

And Jennifer could watch. He didn’t mind that Jen seemed infatuated with watching Julias and Triss be romantic with each other, and Triss seemed to actively enjoy it, if anything.

“Yes, of course, my Prince.” Jack offered a small bow, and the same sort of subtle smile. Smooth.

She nodded, and a small finger wave sent the boy on his way. He returned it, before he stood up straight as Julias caught his eye.

Yeah, your sire is still here, kid. But Julius shrugged, and smirked at Jack as the boy disappeared behind the door.

“Now, Mire.” She turned in her chair to face him, leaned back, and set both her hands around the knee atop the other. “I had been meaning to speak with you of personal matters. There has been little time as of late to catch up, and I thought, perhaps you could share fifteen minutes with me?”

“Of course, yes Prince.” Strange. The first time this happened, she’d just showed up at his new mansion randomly, expecting the conversation. Now she was asking.

“I ... had hoped to grow my relationship with your childe. But I am worried.”

“Worried?”

“Oui. There are a host of reasons that I should keep my relationship with the young man the same as it is now, permanently in its waves of honeymoon bliss. When such dreamy thoughts fill our nights, it is easy for the boy and I to rest in each other’s arms. But, when realities seep into the air, and crawl under the door, I grow ... afraid. I worry for the past, of how my relationship with my own childe went. I worry for the future, and how the strife my city suffers will extend to our relationship, if such topics entered our dialogues.”

“I see.” The woman did love to consider the future. It was why she was a good Prince; that, and the strength to back it up. Where was Daniel anyway? “Jack has never been in a serious relationship, and his relationships before were not relationships at all. You’re treading new ground in his life.”

“ ... do you have any suggestions, Mire? I feel like a fool, worrying about this. Natasha herself has suggested that I am fighting inevitability, keeping my relationship with the boy focused solely on

ourselves and each other, and not letting the affairs of the city or the harsh realities it brings taint our personal time. But ... but I held that boy in my arms, and watched him struggle to not break into tears, as he recounted the details of his torture.”

Julias winced, groaned, and looked down. Yeah, that must have been painful for her. Hell, kid hadn't filled him in on every single detail, just the basics, and it was painful to hear, let alone see the kid struggle with the misery in his eyes. But at least Antoinette didn't see the physical aftermath like Julias had.

“ ... I don't know why you sired Tony, honestly, Prince. I heard he was a great artist when he was younger?”

“Oui, a great artist, passionate for so many things.” Like washing away a layer of dirt, she wiped her knee at the mention of the man's name. “Why do you ask?”

“Jack is not that. Jack is ... well, Tony was juvenile. No offense.”

“Mire, I am glad my childe is dead. It had to be done. You need not mince words over his image.”

“ ... alright. Well, Jack is not Tony. Tony may have been a delinquent, but Jack is a surly old man in a young man's body.”

That got a chuckle out of her. “Oh? How so?”

“Harsh and analytical, and very much with a ‘I ain't got time for this shit’ attitude, when the man isn't old enough to even know what it sounds like when a music generation changes.”

More chuckles, from the two of them.

“That does capture the harder side of the boy's personality, I admit.”

“I knew Jack pretty well when I decided I wanted to sire him, Prince. I knew he’d be determined, intelligent, methodical, and I knew his small size was no indication of his tenacity. The kid ... can be ruthless, when he needs to be. And honestly, I think you sense that, and you want to keep him from becoming a key figure in the world waiting for him.”

She raised a brow. “And what world would that be?”

“Our world. Viktor’s world. Violent, and filled with responsibilities that wear on the mind. And ... the bitterness that comes with it, maybe the paranoia, maybe the jadedness.”

“ ... yes, I would prefer to keep Jack from suffering such a fate. Or at the very least, I wish to be a soft place he may rest from such tribulations.”

“I sired him for a reason, and as much as it looks like Jack’s getting pulled in that direction, yanked into the Danse Macabre well before others of similar age, he’s the one Kindred I trust to not let it turn him into a jaded, empty husk.” Christ, he hoped he was right about that. “I think you do him a disservice, by babying him.” Bad word choice?

Her eyes narrowed, and squinted at him. Ok, bad word choice.

“Do you think it is wise to continue burying the boy in responsibilities and trials, Mire? I find myself trying to pamper him, because every time I speak with him, he is buried in new pain. You promoted him to being a right hand of your Invictus council, which I agree is warranted, but not in the boy’s best interest. His reward for surviving, where most would perish, is to risk his life yet again.”

“ ... and you keep calling him boy.”

She opened her mouth to retort, but closed it with a hiss, sucking in her breath through her teeth as she glared at him. “He is too

young to have such trials thrust upon him so quickly, Mire.”

“I disagree. I think, as painful as this is for me, as much as I don’t want to see him suffer, Jack will manage, and not only will he become a powerful Kindred for it, the city will benefit. Your city.” This conversation was turning sour, and he ran his fingers through his hair, back over his head, as he leaned in toward the Prince. How to fix this. “I understand you love him, but I sired him for a reason. I saw the grit in his eye when he was just a teenager, Prince, just a kid who looked around him and wondered why everyone else had so much trouble managing their vices or futures, when for him, it was as easy as flipping a switch in his head. I could put that kid into that chair again, with Jeremiah and Angela, and I know he’d do the exact same thing to get out, because he knows how to ... flip that switch, how to grab the cold hard truth of situations by the horns and get shit done.”

The Prince’s expression broke. The steel melted, her features softened, and her red gaze fell to her knees. “Yes, I am sure he would.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Prince. I’m doing everything I can to make sure shit like this doesn’t happen, but I’m making the right choice for him, the Invictus, and the city, by putting him in this position. Maria and Michael agree with me.” Fuck last names, they were well past last names. “Maybe he’s growing up too quickly. Maybe ... maybe it’s good that you’re letting him be young. But, Jack thrives on adult conversation too. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised at how useful his insights can be, and how much he enjoys giving them, if you talk to him about more mature things. He’s not Tony, he’s not going to get bitter or resentful if you call him out on something, point out a flaw in his reasoning or ignorance in his knowledge. Hell, knowing Jack, he’d thank you for proving him wrong; a trait I wish more people had.”

Her smile returned. Thank god. Making the Prince frown for too long was never a good idea. He trusted her to not let her emotions lead to biased decisions, but nobody's perfect.

"Then, I guess I am the fool, for handling my love with silk gloves." She leaned back in her chair once more, warmth on her face as she hooked her hands around her knee again. "I want to help him, Julias. I want to ease his burdens."

"He probably feels the same way about you."

"... I should treat him with more respect then, and involve him in my life. I admit the notion of laying my burdens upon him, in hopes of being soothed by him, had never occurred to me. Always the boy ... the young man, is someone I have wanted to protect, even from my woes."

"I definitely think you should involve him more, treat him as older than he is, because, mentally, he is."

"May I ask something a bit more personal then?"

"By all means." He leaned back as well, arm settling on the table beside him. Far better atmosphere, far more relaxed.

"What sort of things does the boy like?"

"You don't know?"

"I know many things about my little Ventrue, but I know there are many things he does not share, in fear that I would find it juvenile. For example, he plays video games, but does not discuss them with me. Understandable, as I know little about them, but that does not mean I am not willing to find some sort of bridge for us to connect upon."

“Ha, I strongly suggest you don’t get into video games. Definitely a product for a different generation ... that said, Jack has a taste for art that dances on the macabre.”

“I was aware he enjoyed some ... perhaps morose pieces, that I expect you graced upon him.”

He laughed. Yeah, some of his art tastes had rubbed off on Jack. “Before I came along, he was enjoying macabre art too, just with a more fantasy flare.”

“ ... did he now?”

“Mmhmm. Skulls piled into mountains, black knights and evil sorceresses, things like that.”

Something caught her eye, stirred around in her mind until a tiny grin sneaked onto her lips. She tapped the corner of her mouth with a finger as her eyes wandered, arranging thoughts into something he couldn’t imagine.

“Thank you, Julias. I appreciate your help.”

“My pleasure.” He got up from his chair, but the Prince raised a hand, and he stayed there, standing with a brow slightly raised.

“I had meant to ask about your relationship with Jennifer.”

“Oh. That.” He chuckled and scratched the back of his head, not unlike Jack would. “That is ... an unusual development.”

“May I ask for a detail or two? It is of interest to me, considering you are now sleeping with all female witches in the city.”

“I ... I guess I am, heh. Jen had a thing for Triss, and she sort of wormed her way into our bed with time. There’s no romance between us and her, but she seems to prefer it that way, to be our



friend ... with benefits.” So cliché, so very cliché. And yet very accurate.

“I am delighted. When Jennifer’s sire left the city, I was saddened. A Ventrue with as open a mind as his is rare, and Miss Denver takes after him; a pity she was not sired Daeva. You are lucky to have her in your midsts.”

“ ... you might just be right about that.” What did Antoinette know about Jennifer? Far as Julias knew, Jen was just a young Ventrue who drifted into Jacob’s employ, no one special, no one the Prince would keep tabs on. But, considering Jen’s attitude, confidence, and the way she handled herself at the ball, half naked for all to see, maybe he should reconsider his impression of her.

“ ... Julias, keep an eye on Maria, would you? I am sure you already are, but I have ... new reasons, to suspect the woman may be getting into affairs she should perhaps not touch.”

“I’m not sure I understand.” Wait, what?

“Then that is probably for the best. But, please, watch her carefully? This is not about Jack, I do not think, but ... something ... something to keep an eye on.”

“ ... will do.”



~~Jack~~

The Primogen meeting was last night, and he wasn’t sure he liked where things were going. But tonight, he wasn’t going to worry about that. He was going to take the night to himself, and share it with Antoinette, who was also taking a night to herself, mostly. She had a few things to do before, but still, her dedicating most of her night to him was nice, and he wasn’t going to waste it.

Upon entering the Elysium tower, the receptionist had a message for him. Go down to F and go to room 4. A surprise was waiting for him.

Surprise? What sort of surprise did Antoinette have? She surprised him all the time, but she didn't announce them. Hence, surprise, usually. Now he knew about it, so he was surprised about the surprise, and now, a little excited about it too. Just a kid on Christmas morning.

It was nice, getting excited about silly stuff again. He missed that.

He took the stairs down to floor F, and turned for room 4. He flicked on the light switch, and started down the hallway. He'd never been down this hallway, like many others; a damn labyrinth down here, and a massive one too. Centuries building in a specific location, how many thralls did she have down here at any given time, expanding her network? Hell, how deep could you dig into the ground before you ran into lava or something? Before you hit some sort of gas pocket and erupted the whole building?

He laughed, smacked himself in the forehead, and continued on down the hallway of black marble, covered in cracks of white lines, like thousands of bolts of lightning. Once upon a time, they were intimidating. Now, they were a second home. He ran his fingers along the smooth surface of the wall, occasional glances upward to smirk at the LED lights curved into holes in the ceiling.

Now that he thought about it, he must have been dating a billionaire, or someone near it. Little him, dating a billionaire, wisped away from his boring life to a new life of money money money, and sex. Ha. Not nearly so simple or shallow, but, the comparison could still be made. Except of course his billionaire delight was an ancient vampire. Even better.

Eventually the hallway did a sharp turn, and once he made it, he stopped. It opened up to a grand door, one of metal, and locks, bolts

of shining steel. It was the door he was supposed to open, but it didn't look like it wanted to be opened. He went up to it, and looked around. Double door, and the gleaming metal looked strange against the black marble. Well, not that strange he supposed, as Antoinette's master bedroom was protected by a literal vault door.

He pulled upon the small latch, and opened the door. Not locked, then.

Darkness awaited him, with flickering touches of blue. LED colors? Maybe, but once he was inside the next hallway, and closed the door behind him, he could see the ebb and flow and light fighting against darkness along the walls. Not LED, but fire, blue fire. He gulped, and started down the hallway straight out of a fantasy novel.

It was again the black marble walls, but mostly covered in hanging waves of blue silk. A rich, royal blue, and it caught the waves of ghostly blue light, as every ten feet, two braziers of blue fire sat between the hanging silk waves. And if it was only that, he'd have thought it quite artful, if a bit dangerous. But it wasn't only silk and fire, as each brazier was a statue, metal forged and molded into a shape over each flame.

A black skull, with vampire teeth.

He gulped as he looked down the hallway before him, long, the ends hidden by hanging silk and beads and ... bone? No, it couldn't have been bone, but he couldn't see it from here. He walked toward the barrier at the end of the hall, the dangling silk and chains, and peeked at each fire he passed. The skulls were large, black metal, and they captured the flame as it rose up into them from underneath. Their eyes flicked with the blue fire, small crests of the living death creeping up through the holes. Almost like someone was burning souls to keep the fires lit.

Upon reaching the barrier, he took a second to examine. Hanging silk, blue, like on the walls, many layers of it, and what must have been two dozen hanging chains dangling to the floor, made of links of black metal like the brazier. The links looked like bones, black bones. He touched them, and sighed relief as his fingers recognized the metal texture; not that he would have minded too much if Antoinette was decorating with bones, now that he thought about it. Triss used to hang out inside a catacomb, which was kind of badass, and he imagined the Circle had bones and shit everywhere.

But, maybe he was feeling a little afraid, because he was walking into a dark hallway with blue fire and black skulls, with no idea of what was ahead of him. And maybe seeing legit bones would have been slightly more unnerving, given the circumstances.

A small note, a slip of paper, hung along the silk. A black wax seal kept it folded, and what looked like a claw of some sort jutting from one of the chains skewered its corner. He gulped again, plucked the note from the hook, and broke the seal.

‘Disrobe before entering.’

He shivered, and tossed the note into one of the braziers. Gone in a poof of red, before everything was blue once again. Why was he nervous? He’d had sex with Antoinette hundreds of times already, and he knew what she liked decently well, by this point. Every time he got in bed with her, it was like riding a tiger, or better yet, a dragon, a deadly creature that had taken an interest in him. There was always a thrill in that, and it sent a tingle down his spine as he thought about the first time he’d had sex with her. Every time he touched her that night, he felt like he was trying to steal a dragon’s treasure, and one wrong move would turn him into food.

And he still felt like that, each time the deadly woman took him between her legs. On nights like tonight, maybe he felt like that a little more. They loved each other, and she’d never hurt him, but

still, when things like this happened, hallways full of skulls of blue fire, and hanging chains with little black bones and claws on them? It made him nervous. Who the fuck wouldn't it make nervous?

And stripping down until he was naked, before pushing through the silk and chain barrier, made him a hundred times more nervous. It was a few feet of the material, and it became total darkness that he had to feel his way through, pushing aside the dozens of hanging waves, and the dozens of chains that nudged against his naked body.

Wait. For all he knew, they wouldn't be having sex, and on the other side of this barrier were a dozen awaiting Ordo Dracul, ready to interrogate him. Maybe Antoinette would have him tied upside down, naked, while her fellow dragons poked and prodded him, to see what made him tick? Wouldn't that be a fun 'surprise'.

Once he stepped through the barrier and into the next room, he gasped.

He raised his gaze, and looked over the grand room before him. This room, he must have seen this room before? The throne room in Conan the Barbarian, maybe? Or, maybe a throne room in Game of Thrones? No. Maybe ... a throne room in some fantasy book he read? It was something ... beautiful, and scary as all fucking hell.

Far in the distance, was a throne, and Antoinette sat in it. He wanted to look at her, to see what she was wearing, what she was doing, but his eyes drifted around the enormous room, caught in the flowing blue light. A thousand people could stand in the grand chamber, if pushed in to the shoulder. It was tall too, maybe twenty feet high, and silk ropes and sheets connected points of the ceiling with hanging curves of the lustrous blue. Beauty, against the dark of the dangling chains by the pillars. Such a large room, so deep underground, needed pillars of course, and colossal pillars of the black marble lined the room, with a few more toward the center. Decorations dangled from the pillars, black bone, and as he

approached one, he gulped at the sight of expertly crafted black skulls dangling from the chains. Dozens of them.

The braziers of metal skulls lined the enormous walls, well out of the way and distant from the queen sitting upon her throne. They were too far to provide much light, but something sat in the center of the room that did the job instead. A statue, a classic Grim Reaper statue, a skeleton with a cloak over its head and body, the robe covering its legs and the statue platform it stood upon. Hidden inside the cloak, a powerful blue light, the same eerie ghostly light, burst from the reaper's exposed chest and face, bathing the room in a more consistent, powerful glow.

There were more statues too, standing between the braziers by the walls. Cloaked figures with ghastly claws poking out from long, heavy, hanging sleeves. It all gleamed with the ghostly blue glow, black metal polished to a shine.

If a necromancer had a throne room, this is what it'd look like.

Eyes enchanted by the beautiful, terrifying display of art and death, he almost didn't notice the moans. He walked — crept, really — toward the noise, slipping past the enormous Reaper statue, and headed toward the throne. There were two bodies before the colossal chair, upon a mountain of the same navy silk that dangled from everywhere, along with dozens of black pillows. Surrounding the mountain of silk were dark skeleton hands, large, jutting from the black marble of the floor, and all facing inward with palms open, fingers up, to catch and keep the blankets from spilling outward. A bed of softness, trapped by hands of black death.

Within the center of the mountain of silk, was a table, an altar really, something topped with black leather, and with a base of black bone and skulls. Uh oh.

The pile of softness sat before the throne, maybe teen feet away, and Ashley and Julee were within it, beside the altar, half covered in

the silk waves. The two creatures were naked as well, with their legs locked, smooth slits rubbing against each other, while the two of them were leaning back, hands to the sheets. Closer now, he could smell the sex, the arousal, and he groaned quietly as he watched them shiver and mewl as they rubbed on each other. From the sounds, the sights, and the smell of sexuality, he could tell they'd been enjoying each other for a while already.

Both of them were wearing black collars, and the collars were attached to leashes. Metal, chain-link leashes, polished smooth and thin, but metal nonetheless, and the chains ran along the blankets, over the strange metal hands that surrounded the two ghouls, up the three steps of the throne, and into Antoinette's hand. The throne she sat upon, black metal with black leather cushions, displayed a host of obsidian, shining, metal bones, and a dozen skulls, each looking as if they had come from a vampire, each with a set of fangs. The chairs of the arm looked like skeleton arms, but for a skeleton of titanic proportions, as if she sat upon the corpse of a giant.

He looked at her, and dropped his jaw. Bathed in the deathly blue light, his eyes froze on her, her red gaze disappearing in the blue light as onyx, while her hair emphasized the blue to an almost pale glow. Her free hand was between her spread thighs, and gently caressing her clitoris, as she smiled at him. She looked like a sorceress, and what she was wearing sealed the image, seared it into his eyes and mind.

Upon her head, she wore a metal skull that was set to cover the top of her forehead and much of her hair, its lack of jaw exposing her sharp but seductive face. It had fangs, long, and they came down over her forehead, securing the black metal to her head like clasps. For earrings she wore tiny black skulls, dangling from equally tiny chains. Around her neck she wore a tight necklace, something wide and tall, something that fit the contours of her neck, the top of her shoulders, and it poked down onto her sternum. Little bone shapes

were carved into its body, and as he stared at it, he realized it was black leather, adorned with black metal designs. A neck corset.

Each bicep held a circlet, an arm guard, the same sort of design as her neck corset, wide, black leather covered in more black metal, this time with an obsidian skull face compressed to the fabric, with blue, glowing eyes. Blue stone eyes, maybe? Her gauntlets were the same, a black, metal skull face upon each hand and wrist, each with glowing blue stone eyes, and each with fangs.

She wore an underbust corset, and he gulped as he stared at it, at how it pulled her already slim waist into a tight, absurd hourglass figure. The black leather was covered in black metal as well, but instead of displaying a scary vampire-esque skull, it showed fingers, as if two large, black skeleton hands were clutching her waist from behind, into impossibly small confines.

Her breasts were nude, except, another set of enormous, black skeleton fingers reached up from her corset, and clutched each breast tight, four fingers each. Her nipples were exposed, sitting between the second and third skeleton finger of each hand, and he groaned as he stared at how the strange hands pressed her breasts up and together. So much cleavage, and he found his eyes locked onto it, on them, as it was obvious the metal fingers were clutching her breasts tightly.

A set of skeleton hands for her waist, and another for her breasts, as if multiple entities of death loomed behind her. God damn.

He would have said something, maybe something like ‘that can’t be comfortable’, but his eyes fell lower, and he melted. She wasn’t wearing any underwear, her wide hips and delicious thighs completely nude. Her boots covered her feet up to the knee, solid metal, knee guards showing another set of the spooky vampire skulls of black, blue stone eyes. Underneath the boots, and halfway up her thighs, was more of that black leather, pinching her thighs



tightly to emphasize their curvy, toned shape. With her thighs spread, she was leaning back into the throne like a comfortable queen, and she continued to gently massage her clitoris as her eyes shifted away from the two ghouls having sex, to him.

“My love,” she said. “My little Ventrue.”

“... A ... Antoinette.” He looked at her, then at the ghouls, back to her, then back to her ghouls. Ashley and Julee, mewling and whimpering, managed only glimpses at him, as they brought themselves to orgasm. He was hard in seconds. “W-What is all this?”

“Most of this is the artwork of a man named Farner Temperman. Dead now, alas. Had I known of his work when he was younger, I may have sired him, to save his artistic genius.” She jingled the chains in her hand, and the two ghouls unhooked their legs, hopped up, and came up to the chair. They sat on their butts, turned slightly, sex slave pose as they smiled at Jack, leaning into the chair. They were shivering with orgasm aftershocks, and the blue light caused the juices on their smooth thighs to glisten.

“You have ... a room, dedicated to this artist?”

“Non. This is a room where I indulge in the occasional art expose, my love. One does grow bored in their old age, and as my collection of art grew, I desired a way to express it more thematically.” A play room, for an elder vampire. Holy shit that was awesome. “And now that I have someone such as yourself to share it with, perhaps we can enjoy more games in the future?”

So very awesome.

“I knew you liked fashion, but this is ... I mean ... wow.”

The Prince smiled at him, a heavier, more seductive smile than she'd been using as of late. He gulped again, and froze as she

motioned for Ashley to stand up.

Antoinette stood up as well, turned the girl around to face him, and continued to look at him, gaze on him, as she lowered her lips to Ashley's neck, and began to drink. The little ghoul started to tremble, legs threatening to give out, but the Prince tightened her grip on the girl's neck, other arm hooked around over the other side of her. But she held there for only a moment, before the hand lowered, slipped between the ghoul's thighs, and began to finger Ashley, hard.

Jack stared on, and watched Ashley cum her brains out on Antoinette's fingers, as the Prince drank her down. Through it all, Antoinette continued to look at him, grinning at him with her eyes beneath the fangs of her skull headpiece.

She jingled the chain, and used the same hand to motion for Julee to go forward. Blushing and quivering, the other ballerina walked over to him, and stood before him.

"Ashley and I are your sacrifices for today. You ... you should drink, as much as you want, in preparation for your night with the Voivode of Dolareido," she said, grinning a sly grin he wasn't used to seeing on Julee's face.

Voivode of Dolareido, an Ordo Dracul title.

Fuck, it was easy to forget that, apparently, dragons had a habit of doing some seriously scary shit, experiments with sciences that any modern scientist would call obscene, forbidden, and supernatural. So focused on all the other insanities in his life, he'd sometimes fail to internalize that his love was a practitioner of equally terrifying, mysterious research. She was dressed like an evil sorceress, or a necromancer or something, and as the blue light bathed them, turning her red eyes into black, he could now imagine it, imagine the deadly woman performing dark, inhuman studies in the quiet light of her laboratory.

And of course, the image only made his dick harder, because his dick was like a moth to flame.

He took the naked, shivering ballerina by her bare shoulders, pressed her breasts to his chest, and sank his fangs into her. She melted in moments. But, as he met Antoinette's gaze, and how she was still drinking, sipping Ashley, and fingering the woman again, and again, and again, he mimicked her. With one arm hugging and pinning Julee to his body, his other hand slipped down, got between them, and he thrust two fingers up into her wet slit, palm upward.

She went limp in seconds, conditioned by dozens, probably hundreds of feedings from Antoinette, and lately, by him. Whenever a set of fangs pierced her neck and flooded her with the relaxing waves of the Kiss, a set of lips, or fingers, or a cock, were on or inside her every time. The ballerina was helpless to it, and she started to collapse, her pussy soaking his fingers as her insides clenched on him. The pulsing squirts of her blood, each spurred by the spasms of her muscles, were honey on his tongue, thick and warm, sending a buzz through him as he drank her down.

All a precursor to the main event.

Antoinette picked Ashley up, holding the young woman up by her wrists, both in her one hand. She did the same for Julee, slipping her fingers around the girl's wrist, drawing it around as Jack held her, and grabbing the other, before picking her up. One girl in each hand, Antoinette used her height to keep them from touching the floor, except for the grazing of their toes, as she walked them toward the throne again. And, adorning her throne with ornaments, she set them down against its front legs, laying them out, sacrifices well consumed.

When she turned to face Jack, she set down the leashes still bound to the two girls, and picked up another one, from her throne's arm. Unlike the collar on the girls, this collar was bigger,

thicker, fancier, with a skull with blue eyes where a large chain dangled from it, larger again than the chain the girls' leashes were. Antoinette walked up to him, grinned down at him, and handed him the collar. A small lock was on it, and if he put it on, he wouldn't be getting something this heavy and thick off of him without the key. It was heavy in his hand, and he stared at the jawless skull on its face, with the two blue eyes glowing and looking at him, daring him to give into this woman and whatever insanity she had planned.

He put on collar.

Antoinette sighed, long and pleasant, whole body visibly relaxing, joy on her lips and delight in her eyes. "Yes, my love. Mine. My own. No one else's." She tugged on the chain, gently, and guided him toward the throne. He followed, smiling, but shaking a little, as the heavy chain drew him toward the enormous chair. The queen of everything sat upon her throne, leaned back with a deep slouch, and slid her butt forward along the leather so her thighs were spread open and available. "Come to me, my love, and kiss me." Grin unending, she set one hand on the chair arm, relaxed, while the other did the same, chain held in her grip. She wasn't looking for a kiss on the lips.

"Can I ask what spurred this on?"

"Why, you did, my little Ventrue. Your questions about my past sent my mind wandering through faded memories, and thoughts of my old endeavors reminded me of times before I came to Dolareido. There are hazy images, dusty and blurred, of my reign, my power, my indulgences. This scene I have created around you is quite similar to one I enjoyed countless times, centuries ago." She tugged on the chain a little harder, and pointed down toward her smooth slit. "But do not ignore my commands, little Ventrue. You are mine, my love, and I would have you pleasure me."

He got down onto his knees, between hers, and leaned in forward to put his hands on the leather around her butt. With her leaning back, slouching like a relaxed queen, hips forward, legs spread, her beautiful sex looked dark against her alabaster skin lit by the blue light; when blue was the only source of light, red and pink became black. He could smell her arousal, her lips already a touch wet. Knowing she'd been masturbating while watching Ashley and Julee set his body on fire. Groaning quietly, he leaned in, and set his lips onto the soft folds of her pussy.

She sighed again, another long sigh of pleasure, as she relaxed into the grand throne.

“I asked your sire, my love, about what sort of tastes you kept secret from me. He insisted that you enjoy macabre delights, when approached with an artful, skilled hand.” She gestured to the room around her. “He also insisted that, while you share an appreciation of the more serious macabre arts with your sire, you secretly enjoy such exaggerated, fantastical, beautiful pieces.”

“I—” The moment he raised his head, her other hand pressed down on it, and guided his lips back to her slit with enough speed to feel some impact, his nose hitting her mons.

“I did not say stop.” Her eyes grabbed a hint of steel, solid, staring down on him and through him. A little of that dragon showing through.

He held onto her ass, hands sliding in closer so he could grip onto her for some balance, while he got comfortable on his knees, and began to suckle on her clitoris. Long, gentle licks, easing up the smooth, wet lips of her, while his lips buried the whole of her pussy.

“I have tried to suppress parts of me, little Ventrue, that enjoying being more ... dominant.” Despite his suckling, licking, bathing her clitoris in love, her voice did not waver. As she talked, she watched him, gaze upon him, his eyes, while he licked her. A regular

conversation for her, but he could feel the wetness of her pussy growing against his mouth, and it wasn't just his saliva.

He raised a brow at her words though. More dominant? Uh oh.

“Do not worry, I do not intend to harm you, my love. But, I do intend to enjoy moments such as these, a little more.” She jingled the enormous chain, lightly, teasingly. “I hope you will acquiesce. I would love to let a touch of my ... old self, emerge, with you. Oui?”

Despite being dressed up in armor that belonged on an evil sorceress, and him now on a leash, Antoinette was the vulnerable one in this conversation. She wanted to be a little more dominant with him, expose a little more of someone she used to be, or maybe was with her ghouls before he came along. Whips and chains? No whips yet, but there were chains now, lots and lots and lots of chains. What would she do next. Hang him upside down and give him a blowjob? Tie him down and force him to watch as she masturbated? He was down for all those things. Hell, the idea of those things ... kinda excited him. Giving her permission to get a little crazier with her desire to be dominant? He really was a moth to flame.

He nodded into her body, nose nudging against her soft, delicate mons as his tongue reached lower to prod at her entrance. And with his eyes, he smiled at her.

She relaxed, visibly; the question must have been tense for her. Her free hand found his head, and she stroked his buzzed hair, returning his gaze, his smiles with her own, and caressing his scalp, an ear, behind his head, and along his shoulder, before she started to cum. Without breaking eye contact, she brought her hand up from his head to her breasts, and began to caress the closer nipple where it sat between the black fingers of her corset bust. Swollen, puffy, she teased it, traced it in circles, as tiny spasms fluttered through her limbs, down her thighs into her boots, and up her flat

stomach, causing her belly to crunch lightly with her increased breathing.

Definitely, she'd definitely been masturbating while waiting for him to arrive, to cum this quickly. Fresh droplets of her juices met his tongue and lips, and slid down the curves of her ass as he rested his mouth against her. Stimulating the clitoris during orgasm would have been painful, but gently touching it, resting his tongue against it, as she came? He knew she liked that.

As if she hadn't just made a wet spot on the throne, as if it was just another day at the office, Antoinette rose from her seat, and began to walk. He got up and followed after her, eyes locking onto how the corset pinched her waist into a tiny sliver; a human would have trouble breathing. It made her hips and large ass look divine against the S curves of her waist, up to the curves of her back. The leather underneath her boots went past the knee a few inches, and pinched lightly on her curvy thighs, pressing in on them and highlighting how deliciously hourglass her figure was, all while giving her an edge of dangerousness. It was armor after all, black and covered in skulls with fangs and blue eyes, all buried in the ghostly blue light of the chamber.

He'd have to thank Julias later, for pointing her in this direction. Cause, god damn, he was enthralled. Antoinette grinned over her shoulder at him as she stepped over the black hands surrounding the mountain of blankets, and tugged on the chain to pull him toward her. Softness greeted him, the blankets of blue silk magnificent against his bare feet. The Prince tugged on him again, and he came to her side, obedient, little tingles dancing up and down his spine as he imagined where this would go.

She motioned for him to lie down upon the altar. Holding the altar up as if it were a great weight, the skeletons underneath it, with their blue eyes and vampire fangs, greeted him with almost smiling gazes. Did they know what was about to happen to him?

Had they seen it done to others? The altar was only a foot and a half tall, easy to sit on, or on this case, lie upon, while also long enough for the length of his body to sit cozy on the rich, black leather.

She came up to his head, and leaned over him. “To have you with me, dusk and dawn, has been a delight, my love. Do not think I find your unending desire for sex a bother; it is a joy.” She reached down around the altar, and pulled up some more chains from around its base, hidden beneath the silk. Uh oh yet again. She took one of his hands, brought it down beside the altar, and set the shackle around his wrist. With very little slack on the chain, he couldn’t get his hand higher than a few inches from the floor. It was comfortable enough, since the altar wasn’t very wide, only a couple feet, so his arms could dangle gently, and he could rest his palms against the silk. But if he wanted to lift them, he was boned. And from the size of the chains, he could tell he wouldn’t be able to break them with his strength. This wasn’t a ‘pretend to be bound’ roleplaying situation. He was genuinely trapped.

“I’m glad, because ... you’re not dissuading me from being aroused every moment I’m near you.” Cause, despite the growing shivers he felt dancing on his spine, warning him he was in danger, his cock only grew harder. Understandable at this point. His dick had the survival instincts of a dodo bird.

“Ah, little Ventrue, that is a comfort to hear. And, see.” Walking past his waist, she let one of her arms hang, and ran her finger along his chest, down his abs, and against his shaft where it stood, pointing up at forty-five degrees towards him. She continued down to his legs, and pulled out more hidden chains, these longer, able to pull over onto the altar, and bind his ankles. “It would take a Kindred of great strength to break these chains, my love. A Daeva or Nosferatu of at least twenty years of age, would be needed. But one such as you, is helpless.”



He squirmed a little, tested her theory, and managed a nervous smile up at her. His cock was already hard enough to hurt, and for some reason, being her captive was only making him harder. Any more and his dick was going to pop like some sort of blood balloon.

But then she walked over to his side, raised one of her long legs, and slipped it over the altar while reaching down to take his cock in her free hand; the other still held his leash, chain wrapping her hand and wrist. She tugged on the leash, pulling his head up a few inches, pointing his gaze to her, to her sex, as she eased her hips down, and devoured his cock inside her smooth, hot, soaked slit. He almost lowered his head as he groaned in bliss, but she tugged the leash again, forcing him to keep his head raised, and watch as her lips spread around his shaft.

Once her lips were pressing to his pelvis, himself balls deep inside her squeezing depths, she let her weight sink her body onto him until her butt molded to his thighs, her metal boots on the blankets around them. Grinning like the devil, she leaned over him, free hand pressing to the altar around Jack's head, while the other tugged on the leash yet again, up toward her and her breasts.

“I would have another orgasm, my love, my Ventrue. But do not move your hips, or I will punish you. No, you are infatuated with my breasts, and I would have you pleasure me with them.” And, with her hand still against the altar beside his temple, she leaned down further, and pressed one of her enormous breasts to his lips.

The eight, black metal skeleton fingers holding her breasts in were large, but her breasts were more than large enough to justify the size of the strange corset garment. Plenty of her skin was still exposed, the entirety of her nipples and areola as well, so he had no trouble pulling one of the engorged, swollen mounds into his mouth, as Antoinette pressed her breast into his face. With her pushing down on him, he could let his head fall to the leather of the

altar, and gaze up at her from underneath her, her tit burying most of his face.

Normally, her breasts were so large and heavy, they squashed onto him like giant teardrops, but her unique clothes kept them upright, firm, tight against her chest. When she leaned down more, instead of her breast gently covering and nudging onto his face, it pressed down on him, pinning his head to the altar. He couldn't lift his head. She didn't want him to.

She held perfectly still, and captured his gaze from where it poked out from around the huge curve of where her breast covered his mouth, chin, and nose. As he suckled on her, he saw her eyes waver slightly, half closing, her sighs of bliss coming through as she started to shiver, as her insides began to squeeze. The other hand still holding the chain pressed to her free breast, and he groaned into her skin as she began to caress her other swollen nipple. No movement, only the suckling and kissing of her nipples, and her insides responded with clenches, squeezes, trickling juices, and little spasms.

He lifted his hips. Shit.

She lifted her breasts, and tugged on his chain until his head was jammed up between her tits, eyes blinking up at her. "Do that again and I will make you wait hours before I satisfy you, if at all. Understood?" Despite the smile on her lips, she had a touch of danger to her eyes. Dragon was becoming a better descriptor every night he was with her.

"Yes ma'am."

Chuckling down at him. She leaned back onto him, pinned his head to the altar, and buried his face with her breasts once again, the other one this time.

“And call me Prince, when you are bound, my little Ventrue. I am your master, your lover, and your Prince.” She didn’t give him the opportunity to confirm, keeping her breast squashed to his face instead. And, while he wasn’t allowed to move his hips, she was, and she started to ease them back and forth, grinding her hips down toward him in a gentle flow, while he suckled on her.

He could tell, she didn’t want to cum from the penetration, she wanted to cum from his lips on her nipples. God, the thought of that, of how her breasts had become so sensitive, she could cum from them, from having his lips on them, suckling, tongue licking and caressing, was enough to have drops of his precum leak into her. Fighting the urge to drive his hips up into her boiling insides was almost impossible.

She started to cum again. Like before, she didn’t let it stop her, didn’t let it force her eyes closed or her actions to stop. Instead, she kept up her slow grind on his cock, and raised her breast out of his mouth, while she grinned at him. Her insides squeezed, trembling, spasms of random muscle clenches joined by her juices coating him, until he could feel them slide down his testicles. Each rippling wave of clenching bliss sent pleasure down through his sensitive, swollen glans, edging him closer and closer to orgasm, but not into it, not yet. The throbbing was starting to grow painful, and each pulse of need earned another drop of his precum.

“I have been waiting to speak with you,” she said, sitting up straight once more. “Natasha has suggested to me that, it may be foolish to try and separate our romantic life from our Kindred lives.”

“You want to talk about work? Er, I mean, Jessy says I really shouldn’t think about work and Kindred life as separate. I have to agree with her, now that I think about it.”

“Then it is as I feared, and I am doing our relationship a disservice.” Antoinette lifted a leg up and over the altar to join the

other, and sat sideways. Still on his cock, still with him inside her, so every movement was a vise on his aching girth. She set both feet on the floor, on the silk blankets, and then folded one leg over the other, the closer leg, like she was about to enjoy tea on the balcony. He could feel it, feel how the position tightened her insides on him, feel her juices leak down his length.

“Y-You are?” Christ, she looked so fucking amazing, sitting there like she was sitting in her office chair. He was that office chair. Why was that so strangely appealing? Probably because she treated her office chair good, as she looked at him over her shoulder, and traced her free hand up and down his chest.

“Oui. I have been treating you as my boy toy, when I should understand that you are an adult, as I am. We should both speak of real things, and share our experiences with each other, support each other.” Still sitting there, on his cock, legs off the side with one folded the other, she began to admire her fingernails, and took a moment to rub them on the chain in the other hand, as if filing them. “You may thrust now.”

Thrust, with her sitting on him, all her weight on him, and his arms and legs bound. Before, she had a lot of her weight on her feet, but now, almost all her weight was pressing down on his pelvis through her ass. She weighed a fair amount, considering how tall she was, with a touch of muscle to her curvy frame, but he was a vampire, and could handle a little weight. And, god, he really wanted to cum.

He put his palms to the blankets underneath him, put some weight onto his shoulder blades against the altar, some onto his heels as well, and started to thrust upward.

Antoinette chuckled, deep, husky, and again began to trace the muscles of his chest, as she bounced on his cock. She didn't help, didn't grind, didn't move, simply sat there, the leash in her further

hand, her closer hand caressing his chest, his abs, his chin, everything. Her breasts fought to escape the skeleton hands clutching them, but their grip was secure, and the softness of their squished shapes stayed put, mostly. And, looking at her from the side like this, he groaned openly at how amazing she looked, how terrifying and beautiful the black fantasy armor looked on her. God damn, she was too good to him.

“I ... really don't mind, being your boy toy.”

She slid her free hand down his abs to her closer butt cheek, and pulled up on it beneath the thigh, helping to expose some of where his cock was spreading her open. Soaking wet. “Yes, but, I also want something more. Do you not?”

Didn't even have to think about that. “Y-Yes, very.” So close, it was making talking difficult. Every thrust was causing waves of pleasure to surge through his cock, until the tingling waves were coursing up and down its length.

“We have love, and intimacy, and sexuality, but we lack the back and forth of shared support. I—oh my.” She smiled at him, that devilish smile, as he started to cum inside her.

Finally, release. He shivered and trembled, and his thrusts slowed, as he felt the glans of his cock grow hyper sensitive, so each tiny movement sent powerful pulses of bliss through him. A quick first orgasm, but damn it, the whole situation was filling him with thrills, tingling up and down his spine. He was tied to what might as well have been a sacrificial altar! And the queen necromancer was sitting on his cock, like he was a piece of furniture ... that she really liked, and let fuck her while she sat on it. No idea, no idea at all why that was such a turn on, but it was, and he shivered as he felt the heat of his cum drip out of her lips and onto his pelvis and testicles.

“Quick today, non?” Laughing, she stayed as she was, and again lifted up on her butt cheek and thigh of the closer leg to examine

where his cum was leaking out of her.

“Sorry ... just...”

“Oh, silly boy.” She tugged on the leash, causing his head to rise, so her other hand could caress his chin and nose. “Again.” God yes. He started thrusting up into her, forcing her to bounce, until she laughed, closer to a giggle, and tapped his nose. “Slower this time, mon petit.”

Sighing, but understanding, he pushed his hips up into her slower, no longer making her bounce, but the motion causing gentle, shifting friction of her tightened insides nonetheless. Milking the aftershocks of his orgasm with her tight, dripping insides, was divine.

“As I was saying, before I was interrupted,” she said, and tapped on her chin with the leash-wielding hand. “I hope to ... explore, perhaps, a more adult relationship with you. If you do not mind, I would speak to you of things I normally avoid speaking of, things about the city, about my own strifes. And I hope you will do so for me as well.”

This whole scenario was proving to be an interesting dichotomy. He was bound and helpless, but it was her asking him the vulnerable questions.

“I’d love to.” He knew she loved to protect him from that sort of shit, but, this was better. He wanted what she was offering. Maybe, someday, he could tell her about the weird shit going through his head, since escaping Angela. Maybe.

Her smile grew, dark in the blue light, and she unfolded her legs, only to refold them, other leg this time. And with him inside her to feel every shift and clench of her muscles, he groaned. She set her hands onto her higher knee, both of them, legs still off to the side with one foot to the blankets. A comfortable pose, one someone

might use when chatting with friends while sitting around in the living room. And, he couldn't help but thrust a little harder up into her when she got settled; she didn't even blink, despite how her insides clenched on him.

She lightly bounced her one leg where it was draped over the knee of the other. "Faster." Groaning again, he started pushing up into her harder, so her bouncing leg bounced higher, and her delightfully large butt jiggled with the impact. "Your meeting with Avery. Please, tell me more, whatever the Invictus do not deem secret, whatever you felt you needed to trim down for the Primogen meeting."

"I uh, she seems sincere about ... trying to right some wrongs from before," he said. God damn it, she was bouncing on him, soaking him in her juices, but her voice didn't waver, no stutters or pitch changes or gasps or moans. She watched him, gaze steady, almost as if she was uninterested in what he was doing to her. But her hot, drenched insides didn't lie, each thrust forcing the squeezing flesh to massage his swollen girth.

"That ... is good to hear. I worry about the Uratha and their violent tendencies."

"She also told ... t-told me, and showed me ... some spirits."

"Did she now? I am most definitely intrigued," she said, raising a brow as she looked at him. "I ... oh." A long, warm, glowing sigh finally escaped her, and she set her free hand onto his chest, as she started to cum. Her insides, quivering, unleashed a host of spasms, tiny random convulsions of heavenly tightness around his girth. She squeezed tight, very tight, wrenching his cock and almost crushing it with the power of her depths, until he was wincing, and her juices were leaking out of her, dripping down and mixing with his cum. "Please, continue." Back to normal, back to status quo, despite the continued trembling in her pussy. God damn, how did she do that?

“She ... she brought me to a sex hole, in one of the brothels in Devil’s Corner.” He started thrusting again, trying to keep himself from going too fast. The quick orgasm from earlier kept the next one a decent ways away, for now. “People there were being ... possessed, I guess. Avery told the spirits to expose themselves, and they came out, and they were these ... sex spirits. Pink, very sexual.”

“I knew wonders and terrors were hiding in my city, but I did not realize an aspect of it had manifested in such an interesting way.” She folded her arms under her bust, with her chain-wielding arm bending at the elbow to bring the hand to her chin, and tap on it a few more times thoughtfully. “Normally, such mysteries remain hidden to all, but these Uratha can bring secrets to the foreground.”

“It was pretty ... interesting.” More groans sneaked into his voice, and he forced himself to slow down. And he could use a break, some fake sweat starting to bead on his body from the blush of life. “One of them ... called me sexual.” No need to bring up that Clara was there to see that.

The Prince laughed, loudly too, and with a long, slow, drawn out motion, slid her leg off its sister, and brought it around, up, and over to the other side of the altar, so she was facing him again. Legs spread, he shivered at the sight of her smooth slit spread open around his cock, and her alabaster skin, now ghostly blue in the lighting. She leaned forward again, set both her hands down onto the altar around his head, and buried his face between her bound breasts.

“You are a sexual creature, little Ventrue, more than most. And, so am I.” She kissed his forehead, and pressed down on him with her breasts, hiding his mouth and nose between them while pinning his head to the altar. “Now, make love to your Prince, Jack. Hard.”

He moaned into the softness of her bosom, and started pounding his hips upward, hard enough to have her whole body bouncing. At



last, he managed to earn a proper moan out of her as he drove his hips upward, slamming them up into her, and causing her breasts and chests to shift back and forth along his face and chest, all while she smiled down at him. Much as he was able to pull some moans out of her, her expression remained unfazed, and she cooed down at him with her seductive, inviting huskiness. The bouncing caused some of her long, flowing waves of white hair to fall over her shoulders and around his face, painting the beautiful woman in pale blue, like a majestic painting, as she started to cum again.

He stopped thrusting as fast, slowing down the pace but keeping the strength of each impact, so she continued to bounce on him, and let out tiny moans through her shivering body, as she clamped down. More of her juices soaked him, leaking down his testicles, wetting his thighs, his pelvis, all while she clenched and squeezed on his cock, until it was ready to burst.

But he stopped before he came. Took everything he had to stop, but he did, and forced down the rising pleasure underneath his testicles. So close, one more thrust and he'd pop, but he wanted this to last.

“Oh, my love, resisting me, are you?” She sat up straight, and then stood up, his cock slipping out of her drenched folds, before it stood upright and pointed slightly toward him. It was hard enough the veins on it were bulging. And with her standing over him, armored boots to the blankets around the alter, a couple drops his cum, and several more of her juices, fell from her folds onto his abs.

“Trying...”

“If I had known being bound and helpless like this, truly and terribly helpless, was so arousing for you, I would have done this sooner.” She knew the other times he was bound, it was games, roleplaying, nothing he couldn't break out of. This time it was different.

She reached up, brushed back her waves of hair with both hands, adjusted her skull crown, and stepped over the altar to stand beside it. And, with another playful, long sigh, she got down onto her knees beside the altar, leaned over it, took his cock into her hand, and guided it up to her breasts. Soaked in juices and cum as it was, she didn't bother with lubricant, and instead, pressed the swollen glans of his cock into the crevice of her breasts near her corset. Easing herself down, Jack groaned openly at the sensation of her breasts, so very, very tight around his girth, from how the metal skeleton fingers kept her tits compressed against each other.

He lifted his head, and stared down his body at the sight of her two breasts completely burying every inch of his cock inside her cleavage. Not a single inch of his tingling girth managed to poke out of the bed of tight, silky pressure of her bosom. And, looking at her, at the corset and its skeleton hands holding her tits, at the wrist guards and bicep guards, at the beautiful black skull crown on her head, he moaned. It only took a few gentle, loving sways of her chest back and forth, side to side along his pelvis, to cause the bubbling sparks of bliss beneath his legs to send his cum gushing up his length and into her cleavage.

He held still and let the love of his life milk him of his cum. She didn't use her hands, she didn't need to, not with the beautiful corset keeping her breasts tight together. Tender sways of her chest back and forth was more than enough for her milky, soft skin to caress his glans to almost painful bliss, and cause spurt after spurt of his white cum to spill into, onto, and between her breasts, until it was overflowing and dripping down onto him.

“Again,” she said.

“I, I uh—”

She yanked on the leash, and offered him a steel gaze, a hard gaze, a ‘do as I tell you’ gaze. “Again. Thrust.”

He gulped, and started pushing his hips up, fucking her breasts under his own power, while she kept her weight down and forward, corset pressing into his side, the black metal fingers of the bust pressing against his pelvis and thighs. His cock was still hard, belly full of blood spurring him on, and with his own cum coating his cock twice over, in the tight softness of her breasts, the pleasure was immediate. He couldn't thrust too hard, not with Antoinette leaning over him like that, knelt beside him, but he could keep a decent, consistent, gentle hip thrust going, and he shivered as each inch he managed to slide his cock up and down between her tits filled him with growing heat again.

Her hand with the leash found his chest, and teased circles around his nipples, along his chest, down his abs and serratus muscles, and down to her own breasts. She dipped her finger between them, caressing the hidden head of his cock, its ripe, swollen body sparking with bliss. Now coated with cum, she pulled the finger out of her cleavage, and traced the white along his body, drawing the lines of his muscles with his seed.

Five minutes and he was cumming again. He collapsed his head back, only for Antoinette to yank on the leash again, and force him to watch, as his cum poured into her breasts. Cumming so quickly a third time was a pretty big flag over his head, saying 'you've found my kink' in big bright letters, almost as bright as the white of his cum pouring out over her cleavage, catching the eerie light and becoming a pale, glowing, ghostly blue. He stared on, hips managing small, trembling thrusts into her tits, until a few spurts of his cum managed to squirt an inch into the air up her sternum, hitting her neck corset, before splashing down onto her breasts, and leaking between the black metal fingers.

Finally, she let the leash slack, and his head fell back to the altar, body panting and shivering. Panting was unnecessary, he didn't need air, but the old reflex was hard to break, and he could feel it come to him naturally, along with a couple of tiny moans and a few

shivers to go with them. When he raised his head enough to look down his body, he caught Antoinette's eyes, and melted into her gaze, how her eyes were looking his body up and down, and drinking in the sight of him in orgasmic bliss, in the same way he did her earlier. He tried to pin her expression; happy wasn't the right word, overjoyed was too much, and content didn't do it justice. She looked ... peaceful.

She stood up. He looked up at her, head still resting on the soft leather, and he stared on at how the blue light highlighted his white cum against the black of the corset. His cum was trickling down her breasts, down her body, down the corset, and some of it dripped off of the underside of her breasts from the black metal fingers, and onto the blankets beneath them.

"Now," she said, grin returning as she sat down on the altar's edge beside his waist, "we may continue. How was your day, dear?"

"Um ... uh ... it was good. Met a sex spirit thing. Tried to make friends with a werewolf. Apparently going to be giving two of her pack some suites in Carlava Villa."

"Is that so?" She laughed. Retreading the notes of the Primogen meeting, in the new context of lovers talking about their day, was fun, and novel. "That may very well prove fruitful, if they have not tasted the joys of decadence and wealth before."

He smirked at her, and looked left and right, indicating he was trying to see his down and bound hands. Apparently, she didn't get the hint. He knew she did of course, but conveniently decided to ignore him, and leave him bound. Crap.

"You think?"

"Mmhmm."

“I get the impression Carter is set in his ways. I think he’s the oldest person in the pack. Clara might enjoy it though.”

“Oh, Clara ... I feel juvenile, letting that woman’s flirtations bother me so.” She tugged on the leash again, pulling his head up toward her, and she grinned down at him with a touch of a fang exposed. “It is foolish of me, non?”

“Terribly foolish.”

“Indeed.” She let the leash go, letting his head bounce on the leather. He chuckled. “Perhaps I should find her another man to direct her attentions toward.”

“Heh, is Daniel single?”

“ ... he is.” She tapped her chin again, folding her legs again too, and lightly bouncing the one foot while she pondered. A nice, casual conversation, in a necromancer’s throne room. “And dreadfully alone. His loneliness wraps him like a cold blanket, one he is too familiar with to cut from his body.”

Wow. He hadn’t expected her to indulge the topic of Daniel, or to speak about him, about personal things about him. Adult conversation about real things indeed.

“I don’t know Clara well enough to suggest she’d be a good match, but you never know, right?”

She nodded. “People may surprise even me, with time.” With a long sigh, she leaned back a bit, hand reaching behind her and across his legs to the other side of the altar to catch her weight. It caused her torso to lean back over his legs, and arch her back so the ridiculous curves of her massive breasts, highlighted by the suicidal corset, struck him dumb. Where did her organs go!?

“Makes me wonder if we should find Avery someone,” he said. “If we want her to help us deal with the hunters, I wonder...”

“Perhaps.” She picked up the leash again, and tugged on it, idly, like she enjoyed the feel of the metal in her hands. Probably did, especially with his neck thoroughly bound to the other end. “I—oh, I should let you up, should I not?”

He offered a slow nod, eyes scanning her for deception. There had to be deception, no way she was going to let him go that easily. A few moments later she started to chuckle, especially as his eyes squinted at her in their search for lies.

She reached down, undid the binds of his hands, and then again, for the binds of his legs. Oh thank god he could move again. It wasn't exactly uncomfortable, but being bound and unable to move more than two inches for too long was hitting him with a hint of claustrophobia. He'd get used to it, if this was going to become a regular thing, he was sure. Still, he sighed relief as he sat up, and put his palms to the altar's seat.

Only for her to gently push him back down onto his back. Still holding the leash, she slipped onto his waist, legs around him, metal boots to the silk blankets beneath them, and her hands down on his chest. She pulled on the leash, pulling him up to her, and putting his head to her breasts. His cum had faded away by now, so only the softness of her beautiful bo—ow, metal fingers, face, ow. He winced and looked up through the weird contraption up at her, and smirked as she smirked.

“I really do like the armor, by the way. On anyone else it'd be a bit ridiculous, but you pull it off, with the decor and the sex slaves and everything.” He nodded past her toward the two girls, sleeping by the throne. Ashley was drooling.

“Armor is a strong word for the ensemble. It is a dress I commissioned many years ago from a fashion designer, with

Temperman's work as their foundation. It is meant only to be used in sexual games. Had I known this drôle sense of fashion and art appealed to you, as it does to me, I would have invited you to share in this wonderful game with me sooner."

"Heh, when I was younger, I used to draw things like ... well, like that." He gestured to the Grim Reaper statue behind them, and the glowing blue light escaping its ribcage.

"And why would a young boy have an interest in such dark art?"

"I never found it dark, really. Just, interesting. A representation of death, this larger than life concept, personified. And, the human skull is ... surprisingly beautiful." He leaned back onto his hands as she let up on the leash a little, before reaching out with a palm to caress the corset underneath her breasts, then the bicep guards and the black metal faces they sported. His fingers drifted down her skin to her wrists, so his fingers could caress the blue eyes on those skull faces as well, before back to the corset where two metal skeleton hands wrapped the black leather.

She really did look like some sort of evil sorceress necromancer. God fucking damn, it was amazing. The fuck did he do to deserve such a woman in his life? His second life, anyway.

"It is beautiful, I agree." Still holding the leash, her other hand caressed the back of his head. His skull was on display all the time, considering his hair was now eternally buzzed very short. "It is an old idea, but reborn in interesting ways."

"What idea?"

"The woman, beautiful, mature, deadly and powerful, dressed in clothes such as these. There was a lengthy period in history I had to deal with, my love, where such imagery was considered offensive. And then the 60s happened. Suddenly, people were encouraging each other to test their limits, to break free of stereotypes, to

embrace sexuality ... and drug abuse, but let us focus on the former. Suddenly, women in bikinis riding white tigers were on the sides of vans on my city streets. But, more to my liking, were the images of women delighting in darker imagery, with tattoos of skulls upon their backs, and of snakes upon their breasts.”

“Then you’d love Beatrice’s tats.”

“Oh, you have seen Julias’s lover’s breasts?”

Shit.

“Yeah? Kinda just happens randomly sometimes, cause she’s around him all the time, and she couldn’t care less if I see her topless.” He winced as he said it, blatantly, hopefully putting a drop of humor on his response. Antoinette laughed. Mission successful.

“When such women also wore dark, long, black dresses, often with plunging cleavage, I delighted in its fashion. Visual artists naturally took such fashion to extremes with their brushes, and created imagery of women with their skulls exposed upon beautiful bodies, or with black wings, or wearing clothes ... such as these.” She leaned back, and gestured to herself, her enormous breasts being crushed in the black grip, her neck corset and the small skull on it, and everything else. Jaw-dropping beautiful. “And when you are as old and rich as I, you feel entitled to indulge in the whimsy of fashion movements, even that meant only for paintings.”

“By all means, please, continue to indulge. And if there’s any other fantasies you want to try out, hit me, you know? Doesn’t need to be aesthetics I like. Could be anything.”

“I will hold you to that, my love.” She tugged on the leash again, pulling him closer to her so he was leaning forward into her awaiting body. “I am half a millennium old, and I have, my entire life, admired and sought to explore sensuality in all its glory. I have



a refined and developed palette, my little Ventrue, and I will drown you in my imagination.”

That sounded both very sexy, and very sinister. He kind of liked it either way, but still, shivers.

## Chapter 59

~~Jack~~

“Name them yet?”

“No. Really torn on it too.” Jack leaned down, held out his hand, and smiled as the two crows each took some oats from his palm. “It’s gotta be something meaningful.”

“Bonnie and Clyde?” His sire laughed at his own joke. Tacky, but the mafia boss man made it work.

“I’m thinking something a bit less depressing. Just ... nothing coming to me.”

“I wouldn’t get too caught up on making the names special or meaningful. A name’s something that should resonate with the person giving it, not carry connotations or expectations on the person receiving it.” Julias leaned back against wall of his mansion. The two of them were outside, around back where there was a garden and some pretentious statues. Beyond the backyard, was the outside of the city, rocks and bits of trees and dirt and road. The mansion was surprisingly defensible, because no one could approach it without being seen. It was something Jack knew Julias would take advantage of. Man probably had snipers in lookout posts nearby, or maybe on top of the mansion.

“ ... Mulder and Scully.”

“You can’t be serious.” His sire facepalmed, loud enough for Jack to hear his soul breaking. “The great Jack Terry, rising star of the Invictus, watches too much TV.”

“Hey! ... does anyone call me that? Seriously?”

“That’s how I sold your promotion to Maria and Michael.”

“ ... you fucking liar.” He smirked at his sire, laughed a few more times, and lifted his hand. He wore a bird handling glove, a black one that matched his suit nicely, long enough to cover some of his forearm, but thin enough to be discreet. Crows weren’t eagles or owls, he didn’t need anything major, and the two crows perched on the glove beside each other without issue. “I was thinking G’Kar and Londo, if they were both males, but this one here is female. So, I’m thinking Mulder and Scully.”

“I hope you don’t tell anyone.”

“I’ll definitely tell everyone.”

“You’re not nearly social enough to use ‘everyone’ in a sentence.”

“True. But Damien and Jessy will know, at least.”

“How are things with the right hands, anyway?” Julias motioned forward, and the two of them started to walk the garden, and then further out, past the gate, and out into the endless grass, dirt, and rocks that surrounded the city. A casual stroll where the sun would be inescapable, if it decided to throw a temper tantrum and rise before it was supposed to.

“Good, actually. Jessy’s teaching Damien and I about the people we bully around to keep the city running smooth. I only just learned about this Terra Den company and the nasty shit their CEO Jeremy Long has been up to.” Cyberpunk mob bosses were a thing, he’d only learned in the past couple weeks. Using fancy tech to run his criminal organization.

“Yeah, he’s a tough one to keep under our thumb, but he provides a lot of benefits.”

Jack wasn't convinced. He frowned over his shoulder, and kicked at a couple of rocks, motion subtle enough to not disturb the two birds still on his arm.

"He traffics some pretty nasty drugs, Julias."

"He does indeed. Heroin, cocaine, barbiturates, others."

"Then why aren't we putting him in the ground?"

"Because he doesn't sell to kids, and he doesn't force his product on anyone. The only people getting addicted and involved in his business are people willing to ruin their lives, old enough and informed enough to make that choice."

"Just because someone's eighteen, and they've read the back of a get-help pamphlet, doesn't mean they're old enough or smart enough to make decisions for themselves." Jack groaned, picked up a rock, and threw it. Still the crows did not move, comfortable on his arm. It made him smile.

"There has to be a cut off point somewhere, Jack. Eighteen-year-olds are fucking idiots, but so are twenty-five-year-olds, and thirty-year-olds, and so on. They're all idiots, just slightly less idiotic than their younger selves. We draw the line somewhere, because the line has to exist somewhere." His sire walked beside him, hands in his pockets, eyes looking up at the night sky. Out here, the darkness was real, and the stars and moon had a chance to shine through. "Half the human adults on this planet aren't smart enough to think more than five minutes into the future, Jack. Don't feel bad because someone gave them some rope and they decided to hang themselves with it."

"Harsh ... but, yeah, I get you. You have to call them adults at some point, and let them do their own thing." They'd had similar conversations, before Jack was sired, when Julias took an interest in him and started asking him questions about things. He asked

questions, and Jack loved to think about shit, think out loud about shit too; answering them came naturally. Lots of conversations about the nature of people, that Jack had no idea Julias was slipping predator/prey bias into. Kine were prey. Kindred were predators.

The man had been training Jack on how to be a vampire for years before he ever became one. Damn, Kindred liked to think in the long term.

“So anyway,” Jack said, continuing, “yeah Jessy and Damien and I are getting along. Jessy’s easy, and she surprises me sometimes.”

“Smarter than she seems, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. Most of the time, she’s a crass, rude, sex-obsessed frat boy ... girl. Sometimes though, you can tell she’s got this Kindred thing figured out, more than most.”

“She’s Michael’s right hand for a reason.”

“And Damien is ... well, he’s Damien. I’ve caught him smiling on a couple occasions though, so I think that’s going well.” Getting through to that man was difficult. Half a century of self-induced brainwashing for a psychotic father figure wasn’t going to disappear overnight, or even over months. “Jessy’s got it in her head to get him laid. And I kind of agree with her, it’d do the man some good.”

“You know he’s a member of the Lancea et Sanctum, right?”

Jack shook his head. “He is, but their tenets are about the humans, not themselves.”

“Been researching the Second Estate?”

“A bit, yeah.” Knowledge, it was always about knowledge. If he knew things, he could make decisions predicting more steps ahead, manipulate outcomes, steer circumstances and events. He wasn’t

half as good at it as Julias, but fuck him if he wasn't going to do his hardest to get that good. "That reminds me. I wanted to ask Damien about history records. Did any survive?"

"Good question. The purge was a violent affair, but as far as I know, Lucas's records were not completely lost. Bu—" He blinked, and looked down as he folded his arms across his chest. "Garry destroyed a lot Lucas's stuff, during the purge, and then again after you killed him. He went to Tony's lair that Lucas was using, and let out a little of his rage, I guess, before the tunnels were collapsed."

After he killed Lucas. That was still a lot to wrap his mind around, killing such an older vampire, in such a powerful way. Dominating a vampire, even a broken one like Damien at the time, was not something Kindred his age were supposed to be able to do. At the time, both he and Julias assumed it must have been a fluke of circumstance, but after the incident with Angela, he knew it wasn't. He'd be able to do it again, hopefully, if someone put his back to the wall.

He stroked the back of the head of the closer crow, Mulder, and smiled as the bird leaned into the touch. "I knew about what Garry did, but Damien might still have some stuff. And now that he's working for Maria, I bet she's got him digitizing some stuff. Or at least has a thrall helping him out."

"Maybe. Were you looking to check into something?"

"Yeah ... you might actually be able to provide some insight." He leaned in toward the crow, and the crowd leaned in toward him. Nose bump. Scully grew envious quickly, pecking his glove, and he laughed as he started to stroke her breast feathers instead. "I wanted to ask about ... Viktor."

"Yeah? What about?" Julias tried to match his gaze, but he didn't hold it, looking away to the dark horizon instead. His sire didn't

want to talk about his own sire, Jack's grand sire, anymore than Jack did, really. But, again, knowledge was everything.

"I keep hearing that he was a very powerful Kindred. But, do we have any history on him?"

"No. Unfortunately, only the Lancea et Sanctum keep records about Kindred, but only those worthy of note, and only the most key points in Kindred history." Their walking took them around in the empty land, but they didn't go far, and soon they drifted back toward the garden behind the mansion. "Everyone keeps tabs on things now though, with the dawn of the digital age. At least, to a point. Detailed records about our illegal activities wouldn't be smart, and any records outright calling out Kindred for being Kindred, less smart. Only the Second Estate would do that, because they dedicate so much of their existence to protecting those records."

"... because vampire memories fade."

"More than fade. You've seen first hand what happens when an elder Kindred needs to take a long sleep, a long torpor, to let the blood lust return to normal levels. Those years of dreaming wreck the mind, turn memories into their playground. Lucas was far more stable before the purge. And Viktor was far more stable when he sired me, far more." Julius opened the back gate, and sighed as it let out a classic metal squeak. "Though, even then, he apparently had secrets from before that I was unaware of."

"Such as?"

"Just ... he was more of a monster than I realized." Back in the garden, they walked beside the statues, the fountains, and Julius gestured to the statue that looked like Viktor. "He had a taste for torture. His torpor twisted him into a paranoid psychopath, but even before then, he'd grown a taste for inflicting agony I was unaware of."

Ouch, so much ouch. Jack could see the pain dripping off his sire's body, like blood into the dirt.

"You're a century embraced and you're probably the nicest Kindred in the city, Julias," he said. "If you're worried about Viktor's past becoming your past, I—"

"I thought you were the one worrying about him?"

"I ... I am. I shouldn't, I know, but I am. Because..." He sighed, the exact same sigh Julias had made moments before. Lot of sighing going on, whenever the topic went in this direction. "Just worried Viktor's bloodline might rub off on me, us, and sneak into our lives in ways we might not expect."

The memory hit him with all the grace of a car crash. How dare they. That's how his mind had put the whole scenario, that's how his anger, his disgust, his hate, had framed the whole circumstance of his capture and his escape. How dare they. Something Viktor would say, to the point Jack could hear the sound of the man's voice ringing in his head.

The last words Viktor had said to him were: learn your place, and die. Christ, he'd wanted to say those same fuckings words during the whole ordeal.

No wonder so many Kindred were stereotypical, brooding, dark and dangerous types. Even knowing about it, even being aware of how ridiculous and silly it was to worry about this, he did, and he felt like hanging out in a dark corner to brood about it. Brood menacingly at that. Maybe it was just something Kindred did when they were upset, brood in corners, maybe with some kine around to provide a meal if they were drawn in.

"I worry about that too, but there's nothing to show that his ghost will haunt us. That's not how siring works."



Nothing to show, right. Nothing at all. Nothing, nothing at all.

“M-Mire?”

Both men stood up straight, backs to the Viktor statue, as they looked out over the bushes and garden railings to the familiar voice.

“Back here, Tash.”

Heh, Tash. Sometimes it was easy to forget Julias had worked with Natasha, for a very long time at that. Julias never hung out with the group of them, him and Tash, Jessy and Fiona, Damien too. The boss hanging out with the employees or their friends was always a weird dynamic. Dumb reason. Jack should ask him at some point.

Natasha poked out from behind the wall of the mansion, and offered a tiny wave as she walked up to them. “Hey g-guys.”

“You alone?” Julias said. “You—”

She put up her hands a little. “Art and M-Matt escorted me. And, um, I c-can call them again, to come by and escort me out. B-But, I was hoping to leave with Jack.”

She was? Strange, he had no meetings planned with her, and from the look on her face, it seemed like she wanted to talk serious talk.

“Um, sure,” he said. “Right now?”

“No, I wanted to visit t-t-too. I don’t see Julias much ... these days.” She came up to them, and smiled a little brighter, especially as her eyes found Mulder and Scully. “Animalism?”

“A bit, yeah.” Jack resumed stroking the heads of the two crows, smiling with the pleasurable texture of soft feathers. “But not as

much as you might think. Crows are surprisingly social if you give them a chance.”

She nodded as she came in closer, and Jack lowered his arm to hold out the two birds to the tiny woman. Copying him, she stroked behind their heads a few times each, earning some quiet caws. Not the delightful, pleasant whistling the typical pet bird made, but then, Jack always hated those birds. He'd worked in a pet store for a little while when he was younger, and he knew first hand that parrots of all shapes and sizes could be juvenile assholes. Corvids, on the other hand, or at least crows, seemed to have something else going for them. Like comparing dogs to wolves.

“I do plan on keeping them as pets,” he said. “Haven't fed them any vitae yet either, trying a more passive approach.”

“D-Did you name them?”

His sire shook his head. “No, he didn't.”

Laughing, Jack brought them in closer, and again nudged his nose against their beaks. “I'm thinking Mulder and Scully, but Julias thinks it's dumb.”

“It is dumb. You're a Kindred, a right hand of the Invictus, act like one.” Much as the words sounded like they should have had some bite, Julias was smiling as he said them. He was trying to say the things he knew he should say, Jack could see, but he didn't really believe them himself. Which earned some giggles from Tash.

“How ... about Huginn and Muninn?” Tash said, fingers rising to offer more head scratches for the two crows.

“Who're they?”

She nodded, smiling as Scully pushed her head into her finger. “Odin's t-two ravens, from Norse mythology. They flew around ...

M-Midgard, and kept Odin informed about what happened within.”

Well, damn, that was a pretty good comparison for what he was up to.

“Almost perfect, but they were ravens, right? And I’d like something a little more modern.” He shrugged a little, and adjusted his tie a bit, drawing attention to the suit to pair with his point. “Ugh, picking names for things is tough.”

“It is. B-But I think Mulder and Scully is fine.” Tash walked up to Julias, and offered her old partner a small nod, halfway to a bow. “Any sightings of the hunters y-yet?”

“No.” The older Ventrue found them a bench, and gestured for them to sit with him as he sat on the end of it. Tash sat center, and Jack took the other end so the crows had some room, his gloved hand further out. “It’s like they disappeared. No sightings of those four we’d seen before, and no sightings of Jeremiah or Angela.”

“And Fiona?” she said.

Jack’s turn to shake his head. “Haven’t seen her either. Jessy says she likes that Eric fellow at the club, so maybe he’ll know?”

The little Mekhet sighed, but nodded. “Y-Yeah, the Begotten are hiding more now. I ... I hope F-Fiona is ok.”

Jack hoped Antoinette didn’t get her killed if she did eventually decide to enact a purge. The possibility was there, despite his love’s attempts to settle his worries. No wonder the monsters were hiding, with hunters on one side, and an angry Prince on the other.

“ ... then pay her a visit,” Julias said. Both the tiny vampires raised a brow at him, and he laughed, offering a dismissing finger wave. “You know where Azamel hangs out, and you know she’s probably hiding out there. If she’s in her nightmare world, you know she’s

still got feelers on that hole in the ground she loves so much. She'll know where Fiona's been."

Jack shivered. Azamel was forever a giant, twisted, corrupted elephant god, in his mind, no longer the old woman in the rocking chair."You want me to pay Azamel a visit?"

"You visited her last time, without my permission."

Not this again.

"Azamel and Athalia didn't want my visit to be official business. They wanted something more organic, and I can't really blame them for that. We covered their tunnels in explosives."

Natasha shrank down between them as the air started to heat up with impending argument.

"I know you're not a fan of deterrence, Jack, but it's the lesser of two evils here."

"I ... I'm not disagreeing with you. But I'm not going to ignore the knock-on effects of that either. Azamel's pissed. We didn't strap explosives to Avery's home."

"Avery's home is not a stronghold, and not a place she's worried about defending, Jack. And we remember Simon was the true issue with the Uratha last time, not Avery."

"And yet the Uratha have caused more trouble for us in their time here than the Begotten have. They nearly killed Natasha." Not that he was unhappy about the Uratha being in Dolareido, but when compared side by side, the Uratha had already caused some problems with their aggressiveness. The Begotten, not so much.

Tash inched a hand up. "I—"

Julias cut her off. “Don’t forget the amount of kills Fiona’s ravenous appetite led to. And the Uratha didn’t bring hunters to our doorstep.”

“You didn’t know hunters were here when you set up the explosives.” The fuck did his sire not get about how Azamel was being treated unfairly?

“We didn’t know, but we knew trouble was going to follow her arrival, and unlike Avery, we knew it’d be Azamel’s fault. Last time her hunger grew out of control, and she destroyed entire buildings.”

Jack winced, and looked down. Yeah, there was that. “And we weren’t worried about Avery going full on aggro when she showed up, rinse and repeat Simon’s actions? Jacob certainly was, and is.” Why was he arguing so hard to give the Begotten a break? It wasn’t just because of Fiona, despite her being a perfect example of why they shouldn’t judge the hungry monsters too harshly. Maybe it was because of Athalia. The way she’d looked at him during the ball, that hate in her face, steel gaze cutting into him.

He wanted to make her not hate him, or the Kindred. And, he couldn’t imagine how rough things were for her, with her daughter in the city, trying to kill her.

“I know that look, Jack,” his sire said. “Stop it. Stop feeling sorry for other people and trying to save everyone.”

“This isn’t like with the kine, Julias, with the arbitrary eighteen-year-old cut off. This is a mother caught between who she is and a psychopath daughter trying to kill her.”

“It doesn’t matter that she’s a mother!” His voice split the air, going from a raised voice to a full on yell. Mulder and Scully took off, taking to the air and perching on top of the mansion. “I know your mother is still alive, Jack, but that’s no reason to sympathize

with Athalia. And don't think we don't know you're still visiting your family, your mother especially, with Amanda's help."

Shit. Shit shit shit shit.

"I ... She doesn't know, Julias. There's no harm."

"She might see you, your sister might see you, and you'll have to get your fingers into their brains again. And ... this situation with Athalia..."

Silence fell on them both, and they both leaned forward to set their elbows on their knees, hands dangling between. Yeah, no need to say it. Jack was letting his family issues cloud his judgment.

He wasn't supposed to have family issues. He never connected with his sister, and his relationship with his mother was 'fine', but just fine. Never a true connection, never any deep meaning, never any major value. He wondered if he'd feel sad at either of their funerals. He wondered ... he wondered why he was still asking Amanda for help, so he could spy on them.

"I ... I um ... uh..." Natasha, fidgeting her fingers like she was tearing apart invisible sheets of paper, stood up, and turned to face them. After backing up a bit of course. "Jack, um, d-do you want to walk me home? I wanted t-to talk to you about some stuff."

"... yeah, ok." He stood up, slipped off the glove, slipped it into his jacket pocket, and faced his sire. "Cool with that, Julias?" First names meant connection, first names meant he wasn't letting the weight of the argument put a wall between him and his sire.

"Yeah. Just be careful, Jack." Good, more first names, both signing a truce. "And, as for your visits to your family? I'd have stopped you already if I didn't trust you."

“ ... thanks.” Much as Jack appreciated it, the cut of Julias’s gaze said enough.

You’re flirting with pain, Jack, and it’s going to eat you alive.

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Jack called for a drive, and both he and Tash started back for his apartment. He didn’t go there much, but he still had stuff there, and sometimes it was nice to remind himself that he did actually own his own place. Now, he had money for a much better place, but would he ever move into one? The Invictus wouldn’t let him full-on live with Antoinette, probably. He had to keep his Invictus-connected laptop and stuff at his apartment, safe from the Prince’s prying fingers. Safe-ish. As if she didn’t already know everything the Invictus told him.

They got out before arriving at his apartment though, and decided to walk around. Mulder and Scully followed him from above, blending in with the rest of the crows that hid themselves on the rooftops. Plenty of the crows in Dolareido didn’t bother hiding, and perched atop street lampposts, or garbage cans, benches, and street signs. Some of the braver ones stood upon the signs of the local casinos, bars, and clubs. The bravest stood on the street with the kine, and picked up bits of food. He knew about crows that dropped nuts onto the streets in Japan, and used traffic to break them. They used the traffic signs or pedestrian flow, to wait to cross the street, and pick up their prize. And since then, crows had been spotted doing some fairly insane things, intelligence-wise, all over the world.

So Mulder and Scully had no troubles blending in with their neighbors, keeping tabs on his car, and then tabs on him as he and Tash got out of the car and started walking the sidewalks. Time to do some rounds, walk around, see if they spotted anything out of the ordinary. A quick walk around familiar territory just to make sure things looked normal. Chance of it helping with the hunter hunt was less than zero, but whatever, better than nothing.

“Sorry about that,” he said to the tiny girl beside him. “With Julias, I mean.”

“That’s ok. I know w-what it’s like to argue with your sire.”

“ ... Daniel knows how to argue?” Imagining the borderline lifeless man in a debate, let alone an argument, was impossible.

Tash giggled again, quiet and subtle. People were around, better to keep their voices from traveling too far. Normally, kine hearing some of their dialogue was harmless, but the conversation topic was sensitive, and with the risk of hunters hiding in their midsts, best to not get cocky.

“The same way that a s-st-s-stone does, or a w-wall.”

“Then he must be good at it, cause I’ve argued many o’ times with a wall. Lost every one of them.”

They chuckled. Yeah, both of them knew what that was like, rehearsing arguments, or having arguments with imaginary people. It never ended well, just going around and around with pretend situations, pessimism leading to the worst outcomes.

“I, um ... I visited the old prison, w-with Art and M-Matt.”

“Yeah? Invictus leave behind any evidence?”

“No, n-nothing anyone besides Uratha would find. B-B-But ... they ... they um...”

He raised a brow as he looked down at her. She caught his gaze, made a tiny frown, and took his wrist. With a small yank, the Mekhet took him into one of the dark alleys, maybe ten feet into its depths, so the neon lights of the nearest casino cut across the asphalt between the walls at an angle. She put her back to the wall



where it hid her from the light, and he stood next to her, both now in the darkness, and soon, both hidden in her cloak of night.

“What’s up?”

“They ... th-they wanted me to ... t-to ask you...” Sighing, she hugged herself, looked down, and shivered a little. Social anxiety, he recognized the signs well enough, but what did she have to be anxious with him about? “Are you ok?”

“ ... um, I guess?” Weird direction to take the conversation, and random. “What’s this about?”

“The b-boys, they ... they could feel the ... the um ... th-they think what happened at the prison, is ... is ... worse than ... than...”

He sighed, long, and hard. Seemed like the thing to do, to finish her sentence with a noise of blatant brooding. Just two vampires, in a dark alley, hiding in shadow, talking about their problems. His problems, this time. Did the cliches never end?

“They could?”

“Y-Yeah, they ... they noticed it, immediately, when we arrived.”

“You asked Matt and Art to help with the hunters, didn’t you? Avery won’t be happy, you stepping around her like that.”

Natasha shivered a little, rubbed her arms, and gulped. “Maybe. The boys, they say they c-can handle her, and that she ... won’t d-d-do anything t-too mean to them, for disobeying her.”

Must be nice, to have that level of freedom. Must be nice, to trust your bosses to be ... human, about things. He trusted Julias like that, but he trusted Michael and Maria a total of zero. If he stepped out of line like that, they’d punish him. No wonder Julias wasn’t too happy about him seeing Azamel without his permission.

“And ... they noticed what happened?” he said. “Thought the Invictus cleaned the place up. The usual evidence sweep.”

“Yeah, the d-did, and no ... no kine would find evidence. But the boys, they ... b-b-both noticed, how ... how bad it was, how bad it must have been ... They said you ... um, that the event, scarred the place.”

“ ... I suppose it'd be pretty stupid of me, to dismiss that, pass it off.” He swiped the air with his hand, like wiping the remains of a broken plate off a table. Part of him still wanted to not say anything, to act tough for others. He had let Julias see how damaged he was, a bit anyway. He had let Antoinette see more. He hadn't told either of them the extent of it, of what it was like for his mind to reach out, and crush the souls of human beings like they were ants, annoying, pestering, biting little ants that deserved to be squashed.

Antoinette said she wanted him and her to have a more adult, mature relationship, talk with each other about serious things, vampire things. At the time, he thought that meant talk more about the trials and tribulations on a larger scale. Now, he realized, it meant he could talk about this sort of disgusting shit, the shit that got under his skin and made him hate being a vampire. Tash worked for the Prince, and he trusted her, so, this could be a trial run.

“ ... it was horrible,” he said. “Yeah, it hurt being tortured, and they terrified me, and sometimes I dream about Angela's psycho eyes.” Fucking daily torpor dreams were never so vivid before. And you couldn't just wake up from a nightmare as a Kindred. You slept through that shit, and let it take you down into a spiraling pit of insanity until the sun set. You didn't have a choice. Kindred could force themselves awake during day hours, but the effort of being awake while the sun was up was like dragging a boulder on your back. You didn't do it to avoid scary dreams.

“That ... d-does sound bad,” she said, voice a hovering waver almost lost to the street noise.

“And ... and it was more.”

“More?”

“ ... you ever want to kill someone, Natasha?”

“I d-d-don’t kn—”

“I mean, have you ever wanted to kill someone. You ever wanted to feel your fingers around someone’s throat, because you know, you just know, deep down in your bones, that the sensation of their windpipe crushing and their bones cracking in your grip, would be the most euphoric sensation? Ever wanted to look into someone’s eyes, actually meet someone’s gaze, hold it from only inches away, and see the life drain out of them, see the terror in them as they realize they’re gong to die? Ever wanted to...” He held out his hands in front of him, and squeezed the air, like he was squeezing organs into mulch. Hate. He’d had no idea what hate was before that. In that moment, in that single night, he’d tasted hate to such a degree, it was scarred into his mind; and onto the prison itself, according to Tash’s wolves.

No wonder he was turning into a brooding cliché. Christ, just thinking about that night had him craving the feel of crushing their worthless minds with his superior Kindred mind. He was the predator, they were the prey, how dare they.

“ ... no ... I ... d-don’t know what that’s like.” The far, far older Kindred looked down, and Jack looked away, toward the street. She had fifty Kindred years on him, and she didn’t know what it felt like to hate like that. Wonderful. “ ... you ... you sounded like you wanted to help Athalia, earlier today, with Julias.”

“I do! Fuck, I do. I ... I don’t ... I don’t walk around, feeling like this. But sometimes, it hits me. Sometimes, I remember what it was like being trapped in that chair, with those fucking hunters holding me hostage, and...” He looked at his hands again. His hands were squeezing the air, like he was crushing minds, like he was crushing organs and bone. “ ... I feel like a fool.”

“W-Why?”

“I’m just over a year embraced, Tash. Who the fuck am I to be getting so morose about this? I survived hunters trying to kill little ol’ me, and dealt them a serious blow at the same time. I have the most amazing girlfriend. I’m swimming in money, sex, and blood ... food, for the metaphor. I ... I’m just a confused idiot who over thinks everything.” He shouldn’t be letting it get to him so much.

“ ... I would ... I would say you might be over thinking, a little? B-But ... all Kindred have to fight their ... b-b-beast,” she said, looking at him, weak smile on. “You w-want to help Athalia, and others. That’s good. You ... you’re tasting some ... some p-powerful feelings ... that Ventrue come t-t-to naturally. It’s your b-bane, right?”

He sighed, nodded, and leaned his head back, putting it to the old building’s wall so he could look up at the washed out sky. All Kindred blood clans had tendencies, weaknesses inherent to the blood, that manifested in their behavior. With Ventrue, it was perfectly manifested in that one moment where Viktor had cut him open. ‘Learn your place, and die.’ Only for Viktor to die, in the end.

He nodded. “Yeah, it is.”

“Then, you ... you ... I d-don’t know. You’re one of the nicest Kindred I know, Jack. I ... d-d-don’t think you have anything to worry about. But ... but the boys, they ... they were surprised, by the ... the pain and hate and death ... carved into that place. I wanted to make sure you were ok. Are ... are you ok?”

“ ... yeah, yeah I think I am.” He smirked at her. “Antoinette told me that you told her, that she shouldn’t try and keep the real world out of our relationship?”

She squeaked, and lowered her head. “ ... I d-did.”

“ ... thanks, for that.” And he shouldn’t try and protect Antoinette from this side of him, just because he thought he was overreacting. He probably was overreacting, and Antoinette could confirm, with her wealth of experience. Or, in either case, help him.

Natasha’s phone rang. She pulled it open, blinked at it, and answered. “Sheriff? ... um, Terry is here with me, should ... Oh, ok. Um ... sure, we’ll b-be right there.”

“We will?”

She smiled at him, a tiny, curious smile, as she put the phone back in her pocket. “He said y-you would want t-to see this anyway.”

What wonderful, delightful twists and turns was Dolareido going to throw at them tonight?

“Hey Tash?”

“Y-Yes?”

“Don’t tell the Prince about our conversation, if you don’t mind. I’ll tell her, eventually.” When he could wrap his mind around it a little better.

“Sure.”

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They took a drive toward Devil’s Corner, closer to the border with the Carthians. This late at night, and in this particular section of the dirty corner of the city, it was basically the most dangerous place Dolareido had to offer. The people who were outside hung out in

alleys and in groups, heads covered in whatever was a fashionable 'fuck you I'm dangerous' getup. Men were particular to tattoos on the chest, and jeans hanging down till they were basically falling off. Women were particular to fancy chain link piercings, and short haircuts, sometimes going bald.

Getting mugged was a possibility, for Jack and his little Mehket friend, but it would only be an excuse to let off some steam for him. And, he didn't want to let off steam by breaking kine minds and bones. Instead, he looked up and made sure Mulder and Scully were still there, before he headed down the alley for the location. A storage locker rental site, where storage lockers as big as small bedrooms were set up, hundreds of them.

Daniel was waiting beside one, back to the roll-up locker door, wearing his usual trench coat. Hands folded across his chest, holding his elbows, he was looking down at the facility's floor, mind wandering about god knows what. He didn't look happy, but the man never did, so that didn't tell Jack anything. The facility was no different than a garage for storing cars, multiple floors dug into the earth, with some above ground, pillars of concrete and other building materials, old metal, rusting doors, and the occasional puddle along the cracked ground.

In Devil's Corner, this was the perfect place for people to get involved in the really nasty shit, the visceral and hands-on brutal stuff, and hand-me-downs from Terra Den drifted this way. Drug dealers fighting over turf, or dealing in general, were not uncommon in the multi-layered dens of old buildings like this. And what sort of shit people stored in these lockers, he could only imagine. How Dolareido was, statistically speaking, safer than other cities, Jack didn't understand, when he first got involved in the nightlife. But seeing how Jessy bossed around big, bad corporations like Terra Den, and kept them in line, he understood now. The Invictus kept the titans with money from ruining everything, and

the Carthians kept their local population of ... rougher types, from getting too rough with shit.

But, Devil's Corner didn't have the Carthians, and the Invictus had no reason to deal with it either. So a trip to storage cell, in the middle of the night, with the sheriff standing outside it waiting for him and his childe, had an air of crime scene, murder mystery, or other grizzly discovery. The sheriff should have been smoking, and there should have been police tape around, to complete the image.

"D-Daniel." Tash walked up to him, and stood straight, smiling up at her sire. "You found something?"

"Indeed." He turned, and offered Jack a small nod, before leaning down to pull the roll-up door open. Darkness awaited them, and he ushered them in, before closing the door behind them, and turning on the light.

Jack wished he hadn't.

The Ventrue gasped, and stared. Walls, all the walls, all the fucking walls, were covered in symbols. The floor was covered in the biggest one, so large it covered the entirety of the room's base. Red, painted, etched and carved. They smelled, rotten blood, a smell all Kindred knew well, knew instinctively, knew to never ingest lest they wanted to vomit their guts out for hours. Joined with the sight, it created a nauseating mess.

He recognized the symbols. Anyone would recognize the symbols. Inverted pentagrams in circles. A bird skull. A cow skull. A horse skull. The skull symbols sat outside the flat edges of a triangle, a triangle that surrounded the pentagram. And around the triangle itself was another drawn circle, two borders, with symbols drawn within the two borders, letters of a language he didn't know.

"... what in the ever living fuck." He looked around and around, and gulped with each wall he looked to. The enormous symbol

beneath him was big enough to reach the three tables that were pressed to the walls, out of the way of the door. And each table was covered in more symbols, hundreds, thousands of them, many carved into the wood their surfaces, many painted with more dried blood.

“J-Jack.”

“This looks like something the Circle would do. But, why would they, in a locker in Devil’s Corner? The fuck?”

“ ... Jack, um—”

He turned to Tash, and gestured to the table and a stack of papers on it. Piles of drawings, done in pencil. Drawings of the symbols, but drawings of other things too, and he reached out to start pushing them aside. A drawing of a skeleton. A skull. A hand with half of its flesh eaten off. Whoever drew these was really talented, and sick as fuck, and—

“Jack!”

He turned around again, and looked to Tash as she tugged on his arm. But, she wasn’t looking at him, she was looking up. And, like being asked to not look down, he followed her gaze up to the ceiling.

There was a skeleton, nailed to the ceiling. Not a fake skeleton, not a drawing, and not an old skeleton. It couldn’t have been more than few months old, he could smell flesh and blood, but he couldn’t see them on it, minor traces of the smell a vampire couldn’t miss. String, or some sort of thin rope, tied the limbs to the nails, and they looked stained with blood.

Now they were knew where the blood came from, used to paint the symbols.



“Fucking god.” He walked over to it, underneath it, and stared up at it, slowly rotating in spot. “Sheriff, why d...” Why do you think this has anything to do with me, or that I’d want to see this? No need to ask, no, not when he was staring at himself.

There was a drawing, of Jack, on a necklace. And it was dangling from the skeleton’s neck.

“I’ve already dug up the records on this facility. No one was renting this locker, according to the manager’s records.” Daniel walked up to stand beside Jack, and looked up along with him, at the picture. Or probably, at least, but Jack couldn’t look at him to check, eyes locked onto the picture.

It was a really good picture. Someone with a great hand, a fan of the pencil, someone who could cross-hatch and capture the depth of a shadow, and the depth of an emotion. They caught the look of joy in his face, the total, overwhelming bliss he felt, when he put on his headphones and let music wash away his thoughts. The only thing that could ever truly, totally and utterly silence his mind, was music. And when he listened to complex, long music, with sprawling movements, let it take him away on a journey of pure sound, vibration, waves, energy, he knew he wore that emotion on his face.

Someone captured that expression, the unique expression he wore when listening to music, fucking drew it, and put it on a corpse.

“I ... I ... how? Kindred faces don’t show up on camera! Digital, or analog, or what-fucking-ever!” He gestured to the picture, and started looking around for some sort of reference. “How the fuck!?”

“Jack, p-p-please, calm down.” Tash grabbed his hand and tried to pull him away, but he yanked it free and gestured back up to the hanging picture.

“What is this? What’s going on?” Oh god, oh fucking god. He stared at the picture, at the portrait, and put both hands on his head to begin rubbing his hair. “They ... that...” He had headphones on in the picture too, big ones, open, supra-aural, expensive and magnificent. “My apartment! They ... they ... had to be watching me ... and drawing me...”

Panicking. He was panicking. He was legitimately, truly, panicking. He didn’t know what that was like, to lose control, have your body fight against you, have your impulses go haywire. If he was still alive, with a beating heart and dependent on oxygen, he’d be gasping and fighting his own body for air. He stumbled around, pushed past Tash, and fell toward the table. Still on his feet, he slammed his palms down against the wooden surface, and forced his eyes to focus on something solid, but all he could find was occult symbols, and drawings of dissected body parts.

Someone was stalking him.

Why did that hit him so much harder than anything else? He’d fought monsters, survived explosions, and had managed to withstand torture. Why did this get his skin crawling, run ice down his spine, have him trembling. It was a Kindred instinct to remain hidden, to never let anyone have a piece of evidence proving you were there, that you existed. Someone had a very, very accurate portrait of him, done in fucking pencil. It sent that part of him into hysterics, and he took long, hard blinks trying to reset his mind.

The fact that he was in a room where a human had probably been cut up, dismembered, blood used for painting and bones used for a ceiling decoration, wasn’t helping.

“How d-did you find this?” Tash said. The next moment, she was behind Jack, patting his back. He didn’t have the heart to tell her he would prefer to not be touched right now.

“ ... I can't share the details. Sorry.” Daniel, not sharing details with his subordinate. Strange.

Jack forced himself to stand up again, gulped on nothing, and turned to face the two Mekhets. “I imagine you're ... you're investigating ... the unknown threat.”

“Unknown threat?” Tash blinked at him, but with time, her eyes settled, and she looked down.

“ ... yes.” Daniel nodded and adjusted his glasses, glove to the bridge over his nose, as his dull eyes remained fixed on the skeleton above. “But we should not speak of it. With anyone.”

Just as Jack suspected. It wasn't just him keeping an eye open for stranger, dark things, miscellaneous things, things that would lead to Azamel warning him. Daniel was keeping an eye open too, and considering how often the man vanished, it was probably his full time job now, hunting down whatever the fuck it was that had Azamel so spooked. Did it have Jacob or Antoinette spooked too? Did they know anything about it? Antoinette must have, if Daniel was looking into it.

Jack sighed as he forced himself to look back up at the skeleton on the ceiling. His face. His god damn face, eyes closed, headphones on, and a serene smile. It was tilted on its side, but whether that was the paper or the angle of the portrait, he couldn't tell. The picture showed a fraction of his neck, but not enough for him to be able to tell anything else, except that he was probably sitting or lying down for it.

“D-Do you ... listen to your music with your curtains open?” Tash said.

“Rarely.” It was the portrait that was getting him so nauseated, and overwhelmed. The skeleton, the blood symbols, the blatant occult work surrounding him, all of that was blasé, dull, compared

to the god damn bit of graphite on thin white paper with his face on it.

The tiny Mekhet sighed, a tiny, mouse-like sound, and reached out for her sire. “Should ... should we ... t-t-take it down?”

“It’s been here for a couple months,” the sheriff said. “I think we’re safe to do that. I’ve already completed my investigation; what I can accomplish from here, anyway.”

Jack looked around, and groaned as the horrible smell took on a new meaning. “Couple months? So ... they ... they did this before they kidnapped me.”

“Correct.” Daniel pulled a small knife out of his sleeve — what a place to store a knife — and cut the string holding the skeleton’s right arm to the ceiling. And then another string, and then another. What flesh remaining between the joints keeping the thing together tore under the disturbance, and soon Daniel didn’t have to do much to make skeleton come down and apart. With quick, snapping hands, he grabbed the bones as they fell, like a professional juggler, setting each bone down to the floor in the same position they’d been in when above. Fast hands, very fast.

With the skeleton reconstructed on the concrete beneath them, Daniel held the picture of Jack in his gloved hands, and rotated it around.

“ ... here. Give this back before you leave.” The sheriff nodded, and handed him the picture.

“Shouldn’t I keep it?” Jack said. “The Invictus might—”

“We’ll be keeping it, for evidence, and to help with the investigation.” Daniel adjusted his glasses again, and began to walk the perimeter of the small room once more, one hand in a pocket while the other touched the tables and symbols. Not a request, a

demand. He was the sheriff, he got to make demands, and everyone else had to listen. But, Jack had to bite his tongue to keep from saying something anyway. It was him, god damn it. Him in that picture.

“D-Do you have any theories, sheriff?” Tash said, following after him and taking pictures of the symbols with her phone.

The tall, lanky man came back to the skeleton, now on the floor face up, and he squatted down beside it. Him and his childe investigated the place like a duo, detective and the rookie. Amanda would have done the same thing. Mekhet were like that, and he was glad to have some helping him, especially now.

But, Jack could see, the sheriff didn't want to share details. If the man was trying to keep details from the Ventrue about what he'd been doing during his recent disappearances, Jack could understand. Hell, if the man was keeping secrets from Tash, just to spare her from having to know things she didn't need to know, he could understand that too. Jack didn't tell Jessy or Damien about having Mulder and Scully shadowing him twenty-four/seven now, for the same reason.

Couldn't even be honest with your partners. The Danse Macabre was such a lovely bed fellow.

“ ... if I had to guess ... someone used this man's body—”

Jack stepped in closer. “Man?”

The sheriff nodded and gestured to the waist. “Shape of the pelvis.”

“ ... right.” Breathing deep, trying to stop the pin pricks dancing up and down his spine, he looked down at the portrait, and stared at his face. A portrait of him, a beautiful one, done in pencil and with such a delightful hand, was awe inspiring. And terrifying. The

juxtaposition was a cheese grater on the soft matter of his brain, tearing it apart and shredding it into bits until he felt the weight of its remains hit his feet.

Pull yourself together. You're a Ventrue. And this, this is nothing more than a threat to be dealt with. Right? Right.

"I believe someone used this man's body as part of the ritual." Daniel gestured around to the symbols, especially to the giant circle beneath them. "They wanted information. If this occurred before Jack's kidnapping, we must presume that whatever they learned from this was directly involved in the kidnapping, and perhaps the cause of."

Jack sighed, but nodded. "From how they were talking to me, I got the impression they knew a lot about us. Not just Kindred covenants or blood clans, but about how our covenants are set up here in Dolareido, about us, and about the Prince." They certainly had information, no doubt about that.

"Then ... w-we should ... look for more of these?" Tash said, gesturing around the room. "If this is some way for the hunters t ... t-to get information, or a location, or ... or anything, they'll p-probably do it again."

Nodding, the sheriff got up, and folded his arms across his chest as he stared down. "I'll check missing persons, and see if there are any other kine who've vanished."

"How are you going to be able to separate random missing people from the other death and whatnot?" Jack said. Much as Dolareido was a safe place for kine, it wasn't perfect. People died, were killed, sometimes by vampires with a motive, sometimes by vampires who got lazy. As long as the Masquerade was not damaged, Kindred were allowed to kill kine, and that made tracking down shit like this oddly complicated.

“I’m sheriff for a reason, Jack Terry.” Daniel didn’t shrug, didn’t roll his eyes, didn’t smirk or anything. He stared at the skeleton, and held out his hand to Jack, for the picture. “I’m good at what I do.”

Jack sighed, nodded, and handed the picture back to him. A picture of him. Of Jack.

Christ.

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He wasn’t going to go back to his apartment, not yet. No fucking way.

Not being able to go anywhere outside central South Side without a companion was a pain in the ass. He didn’t think it would be, considering he didn’t really go anywhere, but tonight he wanted to put a little distance between him and his apparently spied-on den. He also didn’t want to go back to the Elysium tower, and start dumping all these troubles onto his love’s lap.

But, he knew that was because he was an idiot. The night before, she’d asked him to start doing just that. More than just that, she wanted him to talk to her about things as an equal, not simply him dropping his woes onto her so she could soothe his pain. Actually talk about shit, actual real shit. If they weren’t vampires, it’d be the sort of thing two people looking to spend the rest of their lives together would do. It was the step up from enjoying chemistry, to establishing compatibility. Marrying Antoinette was an image he enjoyed, but it wasn’t how Kindred did things. Normally.

“What did you want to talk about?” Damien said. The two Kindred sat upon one of the man’s secret tower hideouts, way up high, an old radio tower. He had a telescope up here, and Jack looked through it with intrigue. You could see so many things up here, and he was sure Damien had probably looked at him in the past, spied on him, or some such.

“You any good with a pencil, Damien?”

“I am, actually. Had a lot of time to practice, hiding all those years.”

“ ... ever draw a picture of me?”

“No. A strange question.” He tilted his head to the side, eyebrow raised as he looked at him.

Jack, sighing and shrugging, sat down on the small tower roof. Only six feet wide, with a radio tower of rusted metal above them, and some concrete bench-like walls the tower stood from. Perfect for two Kindred to sit and talk about the scary shit coming their way.

He didn't suspect Damien, but it seemed prudent to poke about the topic a little. Later though. He'd ask about it later. The moment he steered the conversation into the direction of dark rituals, a stalker's portrait of him, and all the weird implications it brought, that's all the conversation would be about. But there were two reasons he wanted Damien with him.

“Damien, you ever worry about your sire?” Nice and quick, like a bandaid, one of the strong ones that rips out all the arm hair with it. How ladies could ever stand to wax their legs, let alone other body parts, he'd never be able to comprehend.

“ ... worry about him? You killed him, Jack.”

“I ... that's not what I mean.”

“You mean whether or not your grand sire's reputation will re-manifest itself in you.” Blunt and on point. Jack appreciated that, or would at least, if it didn't hit so hard right now.



“... yeah.” Jack sighed, leaned back, and looked up at the sky. In the South Side of Dolareido, the stars were invisible, lost to the night lights of the city. The natural stars of the universe were distant and weak, compared to the nearby lights of bars, casinos, clubs, and everything in between.

“I assume you’ve already talked with Julias and the Prince about this.”

“Julias, yes. With Antoinette? ... not so much.”

“May I ask why?”

Jack brought his head back up, and raised a brow, mirroring Damien. Surprising, for Damien to be so forward with a question about personal stuff. He wasn’t the man he used to be, whatever that meant, but it was plain to see in his body language and vernacular that the man wasn’t dripping with brooding hate, like he was when Jack met him. For a question about the sire Jack had killed to not faze him, was a better outcome than Jack could have hoped for.

“I assume you read my report about my escape.”

“I have.”

“And I assume you’ve acquired more details about it, from Jessy or Maria or elsewhere.”

“... I have.”

“I ... had to—”

“If you’re going to tell me you had to become the Alder Viktor Honors to escape the confines of torturous kine bent on killing us and our friends, and that you’re worried such a mental state will follow you home, then I’m going to have to insist that you’re being

paranoid.” The Mekhet shook his head, leaned back, and looked up at the sky, same as Jack had been. “How familiar are you with psychology?”

“ ... more than most, but not enough to call myself anything more than an interested amateur.” Where was he going with this?

“Then I assume you’re aware that it’s human nature to look back at our past to explain our present. And that, our past often manifests in our present because humans are drawn to the familiar.”

“Absent father leads to daughter who grows up to become more interested in emotionally unavailable men. Yeah, I get that.” As usual with psychology, the theory — hypothesis, really — was soft science, filled with examples but with no way to prove direct causation.

“Your father died when you were younger, yes?”

“ ... yeah.” Jack didn’t think about his dad much. But, it was true, the old man was a void to be filled.

“So now you look for him. You look for him in yourself, and your sire, and your grand sire.” Damien shrugged, like Jack would shrug after giving a simple explanation, before he leaned forward again, and set his knees to his elbows, eyes on Jack. “But, if you’re thinking that maybe there’s something more going on, something specific to Kindred, something in the blood, then I’m afraid there are few examples to back that up. In all likelihood, your ability to handle that situation the way you did, as brutally as you did, was you being you, Jack. Viktor’s bloodline is strong, but that’s it.”

If there was anyone who knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of desperate Jack, it was Damien, Jack supposed.

“ ... I’m not sure I like that explanation any more.”

Damien managed a smile. A small thing, the sort of smile Jack might have expected to find on Daniel, if the cold man ever heard something that tickled his funny bone in just the right way.

“Lucas was a powerful Kindred as you know, Jack. And, an unusual one. A Mekhet with ... Ventrue tendencies, I suppose is the kindest way to put it. Controlling others, ruling others.” The assassin wiped the definition aside, old dust on a tome. “From the moment I awakened him from his long slumber, I could tell that he and I could not be more different. I followed his lead, convinced myself it was the correct thing to do, blinding myself with a delusion ... be careful you don’t do the same. You’re you, you control you, and you can change you.”

Jack leaned in, mirror to mirror. “You’ve changed more than I give you credit for.”

“It’s easier to change, when you’ve hit rock bottom and have nothing to hold on to.”

Jack laughed. Ok, there was some wisdom in that, he supposed. Very Buddhist. Also very Fight Club.

And the man had a point. Jack was so convinced that his newfound desire to crush people was some carry-over from Viktor, and not just him being him. Was that better, or worse? No idea, but he felt a bit better about it, at least. If it was him being him, he had control of it, or at least more control than he did if it was Viktor’s ghost coming to haunt him.

“Course, I could just be making a mountain out of a mole hill,” Jack said. “Could all just be in my head, and I’m spiraling my brain down into a pit with this reductive reasoning.”

“Better that you think about things, than to not.”

“Jessy would disagree.”

They both started laughing. This was good, this was fun, this was growth. It'd been a while since the whole Lucas incident, and Damien was quickly becoming a Kindred he could trust with his life. From enemies to friends. Straight out of a romance novel, heh.

“Seen Fiona around?” Jack said.

“Not yet.”

“Julias said I should visit Azamel, to see what's going on, where the Begotten have been. And since we've both been to the nightmare, we're supposed to be working on that ... project?” Determining what that project entailed was difficult. Maria wanted them to consolidate their knowledge, but they'd already tried that. They knew fuck all.

“Then I suggest we pay them a visit.” Another smile sneaked its way onto his face. Jack was sure the man liked Fiona, but he wasn't sure if Damien knew he liked her. And he knew that he was the last person on Earth to be giving relationship advice.

Maybe this was that stereotype, that everyone in a relationship felt the need to get everyone else they knew into a relationship, or give relationship advice in general? His life was becoming some sort of weird, dark comedy sitcom. Queue dropping a chainsaw on a naked hooker's head from a stairway balcony. Queue laugh track.

“Alright. I have to call in a shit show first.” He sighed, pulled out his phone, and looked around for Mulder and Scully. Sure enough, they were there, sitting on a nearby building. They'd come closer if Jack asked, but he wanted them to stay at a distance for now, keep an eye on things.

“Shit show?”

“Long story. I can tell you about it on the way to Azamel's hole in the wall.”

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“ ... did you suspect me?” Damien said. “The question about my drawing ability suggests you did.”

“No, but I won’t let that bias affect decisions. Just cause I trust you doesn’t mean you might not be secretly planning to stab me in the back.”

“True.”

They chuckled again as the two of them walked the tunnels. Same night he learned he was being stalked by some sort of deadly ritual, and he was already laughing. Jaded, or growing accustomed to the life of a vampire, he didn’t know.

The lights were working, and many repairs were already completed; not that those tunnels were the tunnels they were currently working through, but still, it was nice to know that the tunnels were being maintained, even if they looked like they weren’t. The dingy, flickering old lights, the dust and dirt and rats and everything in between, it all screamed abandoned tunnels. And they were abandoned, as far as the populace knew, so he supposed it fit the disguise. Just in case a kine managed to get into the abandoned tunnels by accident.

“I don’t recognize your description of the ritual,” Damien continued. “It sounds like ... it sounds strange, in a cliché sort of way. The symbols you describe are classic symbols used in witchcraft, known by kine across the world. But, real ... supernatural things, rituals, sorcery, we know they don’t bend to such bastardizations.”

“If they’re bastardizations. Just because they’re popular today, used in media and shit, doesn’t mean they never worked in the past.”

Again the Mekhet nodded. “That is a valid point. The pentagram, upside down or what have you, in the circle, in the triangle, in the circle, with the symbols, definitely sounds like a ritual circle. The sheriff’s presumption is probably correct. What surprises me more is the presence of a skeleton.”

“ ... not the portrait of me?” Cause dealing with the dead was a not-uncommon act for Kindred.

“The portrait could be explained through multiple avenues. Did they use it during the ritual to learn about you, or did the ritual inform them about you, leading to the drawing? Did the ritual create the drawing? As much as the portrait is ... strange, a body being used is what surprises me more. A sacrifice is extreme.”

“I guess it is.”

It’d only taken them ten minutes to put some distance under their heels, deep under the city streets. So easy to get into the tunnels through the Invictus half of South Side, especially near the HQ Xnomina like Damien and Jack were. A casual stroll, two Kindred, two right hands of the Invictus, wandering around in the poorly lit tunnels. Dangerous, but not terribly. Invictus and Carthians used the tunnels regularly, and with the buddy system going, it was unlikely the hunters would risk getting caught in them. They’d get collapsed on from all sides once the Kindred found out. No, the hunters would likely remain topside, where they could hide in the thousands of buildings and alleys. Like cockroaches.

Unless they were hunting monsters. Azamel was down here, which meant the hunters would have to come down here eventually, right?

“You remember the details Beatrice shared with Julias, about the incident with Jeremiah?” Jack said.

“Mostly.”

“She said that Jeremiah guy showed up, in Fiona’s nightmare.”

“Correct.” The Mekhet rotated his shoulders a little as they walked. He was wearing a long black jacket over his suit, and from the way he held his posture, he probably had a sword in there, a long one like Daniel liked to use. And some guns of course, because it was the 21st century.

“The four hunters followed Fiona into the nightmare, but how did Jeremiah get in there?”

He shrugged. “I had assumed the same way the other hunters had. He—”

“He broke in.”

Both Kindred jumped, spun around, and pulled out weapons, Jack pulling out a pistol from inside his suit jacket, while Damien pulled out a sword from within his overcoat. Smooth, quick. For a moment, Jack felt some pride about that; for Damien it was expected, but for Jack, it was progress on his skills. Except, of course, that being happy he managed to do that as a reaction was his hubris kicking in at the worst fucking time.

“Athalia?” Damien said.

Yeah, Athalia. Jack lowered the gun, looked at the woman for a moment, then sighed and put the pistol away. Julias said kill her if she became a problem, but she wasn’t a problem yet. And if there was anyone who could keep it that way, it was him, supposedly, for some reason.

“Damien, Jack,” she said. “I’m surprised you’re both down here.”

With a small breath, Jack nodded. The situation hadn’t changed, despite Julias’s words. She was a reluctant ally until shown

otherwise. “Came to see how you guys were doing, actually. Haven’t seen much of the Begotten lately.”

Wearing some jeans and a black sweater, Athalia walked up to them, and motioned for them to continue walking. Attractive, with an icy bite in her eyes that always put Jack on edge. He’d gotten past it, when she talked to him at the ball. But now it was back, that wall of ice he’d have to break through if he wanted to make progress with her.

She’s not a wild animal you need to tame, Jack. Grow the fuck up.

“We’ve been spending more time in the nightmare, as you can imagine.” She got a couple feet ahead of them, and kept that pace. Yeah, it was her tunnels, in her mind. “With Jeremiah and Angela looking for more ways to get to us, we’ve been keeping an eye on things while remaining hidden.”

Damien looked at Jack, and Jack looked at Damien. Both shrugged. If she wanted to do the leading, whatever, that worked for them.

The Mekhet put his sword away, slowly, wearing his hesitation longer than Jack did. “Did you notice us coming down here, or did you stumble onto us?”

“Fiona sensed you coming.”

He raised a brow. “How?”

“She’s very skilled, especially for a girl her age. You tripped her threads.”

“Didn’t see any spider webs,” Jack said. Damn, that was an impressive skill, if Fiona could lay out trip wires like that. “There any news? Any sightings?”



A long sigh fell out of her, like she was rolling a heavy boulder off her back. “No. And that is a problem. Jeremiah has no reason to wait, not when his goal is simply to eliminate Azamel. Is he looking for a new avenue of attack? We do not know.”

“How did Jeremiah break in last time?” Damien said. “Into your nightmare world.”

“It ... it’s something some people can do. We don’t know how, exactly, but Jeremiah and Angela can break through to our chambers.” She shivered. Athalia, afraid, was a strange image. It was hard to think of her as anything other than the legless, winged reaper entity.

Heh, she’d fit in nicely in Antoinette’s collection of Temperman art.

“I could tell Jeremiah and Angela weren’t entirely normal,” Jack said. It was enough to pull Athalia’s gaze over her shoulder, catch his, and squint at him with her steel eyes before looking back to the tracks they walked.

“Elaborate.”

“Um, well, I couldn’t get through to their minds. It was almost like a wall was there, blocking me. The others were easy, but those two? Felt like trying to climb Everest.”

“ ... yes, that does make sense. You are the only vampire I know who’s attempted such a feat, and lived to speak about it at least.” Nodding, sighing, she slowed down a little, enough for the two Kindred to walk beside her. Good, progress. “I’m surprised you’re talking to me at all, honestly.”

“Because of Angela?”

“Yes. I’m sure your superiors told you to kill her, and now you all know she’s my daughter. And ... you know I do not want her death.”

Jack looked to Damien, but the man said nothing. He was good at knowing when to sit and listen, or walk and listen in this case. Another voice would have damaged the tenuous, fragile bridge Athalia was offering Jack, one of communication. It was times like this he was glad Jessie wasn’t with them all the time.

“Well, if detaining her is possible, then we’ll do that,” he said. Lied. Sort of. Julias and the council wanted him to kill Angela, but surely if he could capture her, they’d prefer that? It was his job to keep everyone getting along, and killing Athalia’s daughter was not a step in that direction.

And he was going to ignore the pulse in his brain that started to pump agony and fire the moment he thought of Angela’s face.

Athalia laughed, shrugged, and put a hand out to offer him a small pat on the shoulder. Her expression was both sad and humored, his words no doubt having dug up a mix of memories for her.

“You can try, boy, you can try. But she’ll kill you. She’ll kill all of you, and she’ll smile doing it. I know your bosses would prefer she was dead, and I don’t blame them.”

The Mekhet stepped in, small frown to go with. “Then you are putting us in a strange situation, Athalia. You won’t help us, but will you stop us?”

“I ... don’t know.” She might have been offering Jack some compassion, but steel would have been envious over the look she gave Damien. “Consider the circumstance I find myself in, blood leech. She’s my daughter. Do you have any children?”

“ ... no.”

“Any childes?”

“No.”

“Neither of you have the faintest idea what it’s like to be a parent, and being a sire doesn’t even come close. But I don’t need to waste my breath. Go read a book about it, there’s only been ... what, a hundred thousand books about the overwhelming power of parenthood written in human kind’s short existence?” Scoffing like she was talking to things less than insects, she looked back to the tracks ahead of them, and took them toward Azamel’s home. “So I’m struggling with the circumstance.”

“I—”

Damien flicked his wrist toward Jack, shutting him up. “I don’t deny the circumstance you find yourself in is a horrible one. But that’s ultimately irrelevant, and you know it.” Didn’t expect that from Damien, not at all.

“ ... that I do.”

Jack didn’t expect hard words to mean much to Athalia, but the topic was a strange one, and Damien’s cruel approach seemed to reach the monster woman between them. But with a few more seconds, she shrugged it off, steeling her gaze once again, as they followed the turns down deeper into the depths of the Earth.

“How’s Fiona handling this?” Jack said. “I mean, with people actively hunting your kind, it must be a pretty huge change for her.”

“Fiona is an interesting girl. Her horror is unique, in a way, with its own identity and memory to draw upon.”

“Vrallar’trakla, of the Eight Blade Arach,” Damien said, chin in his fingers, eyes down on the tracks.

“Yes. She has a reservoir of experience to draw on, but at the same time, is just a young girl.” Shrugging again, Athalia took them into the final tunnel to Azamel’s abode.

But the old woman wasn’t there. Fiona was there, and the Begotten Jack had to assume was Mark. They both sat on the stage, doing their own thing, Mark reading a book and Fiona watching something on her laptop. There wasn’t any internet down here, no WiFi or anything, so the only way she was getting things onto her laptop was trips topside.

“Damien! Jack!” The redhead hopped off the stage of concrete, and ran up to them. She hugged him, then Damien, full on tight hugs, with a little extra time for Damien too. Girl probably delighted in making the man squirm, as having a feisty, curvy redhead full-on bear hugging him had him squirming like a trapped pet, looking over the girl’s short height at Jack.

Jack shrugged back at him, smiling. “Hey Fiona.”

“Jack. How are ye? I’ve been meaning to talk to ye since the whole ... since that whole horrible incident. It sounds terrible!” She guided them over to join her on the stage, where she re-sat in Azamel’s chair. Why she was sitting on the old monster’s chair, Jack had no idea, and seeing her get comfy in the worn material was strange to the utmost degree. He expected Azamel to incinerate anyone who dared touch her cigarette-ash covered throne, but Fiona looked calm and comfortable. Athalia and Mark didn’t seem to care either.

“I’m fine now. It was pretty horrible, but smooth sailing since.”

“I hear ye were promoted too. Pretty young vampire to gie promoted!” She put her laptop aside, and rocked back and forth in the chair. There was nowhere else to sit, so the two vampires stood. There was something comfy and fun about the girl’s obliviousness to the fact the two guys were forced to stand while she sat. With

Kindred, especially older ones, he'd have to do a song and dance about making sure they had a place to sit, or he'd stand and let them sit instead.

“Yeah, promoted, and now I have a host of new shit to worry about.” He shrugged it off. Half joke, half serious, a lovely balance of sarcasm and witlessness. “It’s good, and bad. Things I’d normally pass up the chain, I’m now tasked with trying to figure out myself. That’s half the reason I’m here, really, to see what the Begotten are up to.”

“N’ I hear ye have a buddy system.” She gestured to Damien, smile growing when she did. “Protecting each other?”

The Mekhet nodded, but said nothing. When the redhead caught his gaze, Damien didn’t hold it for long, looking away and putting his hands back into his overcoat pockets. Uncomfortable, but at least his expression didn’t sour. It made Jack tempted to bring up Eric, and see what was going on there, see if Fiona was still interested in Damien. But he didn’t have the social maneuvering skills to do that without making shit awkward. Julias could do it, but he couldn’t.

“Damien’s protecting me more than I him.”

“True.” The Mekhet nodded, matter-of-fact. Heh, jackass.

“Did ye come aw the way down here to talk to us, ‘n’ me?” Giggling, Fiona started rocking the chair, but with her feet up on it, folded under her knees. “I was going to visit ye lads soon. But until we have a better feel for what’s going on, where th’ hunters might be hiding, we’re hiding.”

“I’d have greatly appreciated that, thanks,” Jack said. “Cause, information is at an all-time low right now, or rather, the need is at an all-time high. Shit just hit the fan and I’m scared shitless.”

“Wha? What happened?”

To share the info or to not share the info. Daniel and Tash would keep the scene locked down, prevent any kind of interference, and when the Invictus arrived, they'd do a proper clean up and cataloging of any evidence the sheriff let them keep. Ultimately, the sheriff dictated policy in such matters. But in the whole of that circumstance, at no point was telling the Begotten about the ritual, the skeleton, or the portrait, a needed step.

And yet, they might be just what he needed. The hunters were here for them, and Kindred — him specifically — were getting caught in the middle. They wanted to help, and considering it was probably the hunters that performed the ritual, the hunters hunting these Begotten, they might be able to help. Julius wouldn't like him sharing the info, but Jack was allowed to exercise his right as right hand of the Invictus, and make decisions, even bad ones.

“Have you guys,” he said, “ever heard of a ritual, involving a room filled with ... basically every occult symbol from the big book of occult symbols? Big ritual circle on the floor, pentagram in the center? Most done in blood, some carved with a knife, far as I can tell. And, uh, a skeleton nailed and tied to the ceiling?”

Damien poked him with an elbow, and Jack offered him the biggest ‘I have no idea what I'm doing’ shrug he could manage. The three monsters all looked at him like he'd lost his head, too.

“I have.”

The five of them looked down to the tunnel at the other end of the large room, and the two vampires tilted their heads to the side, as an old woman came around the corner. Mark, who'd otherwise been sitting around on the stage in jeans and a hoodie, doing absolutely nothing, hopped off the stage of concrete and went to the old woman's side.

Jack hopped off the stage as well. “Um, hi, Azamel. I was hoping to speak with you.” He glanced over to Fiona, but the girl continued to sit in the old monster’s chair, rocking back and forth, as if she wasn’t risking her life by pissing her off. Maybe Azamel wasn’t so harsh with fellow Begotten. Mark seemed more than invested in helping her, as he slipped his arm under hers, while she waddled toward the stage, leaning on a cane.

“About the sacrifice?” she said, offering him something between a smirk and snarl, before finally reaching the raised concrete of her weird home.

“No, actually. We came to ask about your scarcity as of late. We thought maybe the hunters got you, or that you were in hiding from them.”

“Hiding is a strong word.” With Mark’s help, she got back up onto the stage, and with a few thumb gestures, sent Fiona packing. The girl jumped down with the two vampires, while Azamel got comfortable in her chair, slowly, body creaking with the motion. “That bastard Jeremiah can break into our home, our true home, and I must be vigilant.”

Damien didn’t know what Azamel looked like in the nightmare world, now that Jack thought about it. Jack had described her to him, and he hoped a description is all he’d ever get.

“I see,” Jack said. “And, uh, you said—”

“I’d ask to see a picture of the ritual aftermath, but, I already know what happened.”

Oh thank god. “Please, by all means, fill me in.”

The old woman eyed him up and down, squinting. Probably wondering if the information was worth trading over, if giving it to

him straight wasn't as good as getting something out of him in return.

“ ... the picture was of you, boy, wasn't it?”

He winced, and nodded, head sinking between his shoulders. “Yeah, it was.”

“Then, it sounds like Jeremiah had his eyes on you, in more ways than one.” Azamel pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and got to lighting it. Or, trying, but it was easy to see her old, bony, veiny fingers couldn't go through the motions, not without causing the old lady to wince in much the same way as him. Mark came up beside her, and after a few moments of more failed attempts, the old woman grumbled, and put the cigarette pack and a lighter in the man's hands.

“More ways than one?” God, finally, some good news. Azamel knew what the fuck was going on. And of course lots of bad news to accompany it, but that was expected.

“I don't know how Jeremiah does it, but it's a ritual he's done before. He's got eyes on you now, and he'll find you, learn things about you.” The old woman laughed, took a puff, and broke into coughs. Deep, lung-destroying coughs. “Well, you know that now, since he kidnapped you.”

“ ... yeah.” He shivered, rubbed his arms, and looked to the rest of the group. The girls were looking at him, Athalia with something between pity and disdain, Fiona with straight up concern. It was sweet, and he gave her a half smile, half shrug. Yeap, this was just his everyday life these days. “Do you know about the person that had to die for the sacrifice?”

A puff of smoke later, she tapped the cigarette ashes into the ashtray, and sighed as she looked up, leaning back in the chair. “I'm sure Jeremiah picked some nameless fool off the street.”



“Wait,” Damien said. “These are hunters, convinced that, to protect their fellow human, they need to kill us. Why would—”

Azamel blew her next puff of smoke at the man. And considering she was up on the stage, Damien back on the ground, the fact the smoke reached him was impressive.

“You mistake Jeremiah for a hunter. The hunters, these cliché humans, bundles of hypocrisy, self loathing, and traumatized pasts, are his tools. He is not them. His purpose is grander.”

“Grander than lives?” Jack started to pace, rubbing his head as his eyes fell from the old woman, to the concrete beneath him. “... he killed an innocent person, to gain a tactical advantage on his hunt for you?”

The old monster shrugged, took another smoke, and looked to the side. Digging through memories. “I doubt Jeremiah would break into a person’s home and kidnap a loving parent, for this sacrifice. I am sure he took someone he thought the world wouldn’t miss, a thug or thief or some other ludicrous stereotype, drugged them to keep them under, and sacrificed them to the madwoman witch.”

“... I’m sorry, what? Madwoman witch?” He stopped pacing, and blinked. A lot.

But while he sounded confused as all hell, and was, Azamel shrugged again, casual, and blew some smoke at him.

“There’s an old woman, almost as old as I, that serves Jeremiah quite faithfully. Every so often, I can see her fingerprints on acts, such as the divining she used to learn about you.” A hand gesture to him, before she tapped the cigarette on the ashtray again.

Damien sneered. A hard expression and far more disgruntled noise than Jack had heard from the man for a long time. “And you didn’t think this important enough to mention earlier?”

Again Azamel shrugged. “Often, there are years between her acts, and it has been years since his companion has performed any of her rituals, to my knowledge. I thought she might have been dead.”

This bitch. Both Fiona and Athalia looked uncomfortable, wincing as Jack and Damien looked to each of them for a little support. But both seemed loyal to Azamel; hell, it seemed like they liked her. And for Azamel to not bring up information like this, was a power play, her indirectly reminding the Kindred that she knew more than them, and that they needed her. It was also her being a colossal jackass.

Mark didn’t seem to care either way, standing by the chair, hands in his pockets, with his bored expression on the vampires.

Her warning about mysterious forces, whatever the fuck that meant, was genuine, he had no choice but to believe that. Daniel was looking into something, and it was probably related. Anything to do with this witch Azamel was bring up now? No, it couldn’t have, Azamel acted like this woman was nothing more than another tool for the pest Jeremiah. Her warning had been far more heavy, and filled with concern.

“Is there anything we can do?” Jack said. “I’d prefer to stop this ritual from happening again. Innocents getting killed should be avoided, and prevented.” The only people who seemed to give a shit about the humans getting caught in this horribleness, were the vampires and the werewolves. How fucked was that?

Athalia hopped up onto the stage, and pulled out a wooden stool from around a changing wall to sit on. “You really care?”

“Of course I care. Kindred don’t kill kine when we can help it.”

“Here,” she said. “Kindred don’t kill kine when they can help it, here. I’ve been to other cities, and the Kindred there are far less worried for the lives of their meals.”

This again, ugh, retreading the same ground. He sighed, forced his body to relax, and walked up to the stage to look up at Athalia and Azamel.

“Yes, here. You guys know it’s not like that here in Dolareido. By far and large, we want to keep people alive. And not just for ‘waste not, want not’ reasons. So, yeah, we have a little more compassion than your typical vampire, and that extends to stopping a psychopath from murdering innocent people.

“And before you interject, yes, that also extends to stopping said psychopath from being a major tactical advantage for the enemy, against both Kindred and Begotten.” He squinted at Athalia, catching her retort before she managed to speak it, before he looked back to the old monster rocking in her old chair. “I stuck my neck out, giving you this info about this discovery. I’m hoping you can throw me a bone here.”

Mark snorted. Athalia snorted, quieter, but still a snort. Fiona nodded several times, eager but bound by Azamel’s ruling.

“Jeremiah’s witch is an old woman, very, and human. I have never seen her myself, but I imagine she is on death’s door,” Azamel said. “She will likely be in a wheel chair, and with several humans to take care of her. Fragile.”

“Thank you.” That was something he could work with. There were a decent amount of old women in wheelchairs in Dolareido, but it was a much smaller number than millions.

“And I suppose you want to know if I have made any progress in dealing with this menace.” Another puff of smoke, and a sneer to go with it. “That is why you’re here, yes? Not simply to check if I am still alive.”

“ ... a little, yes. I wanted to see if you guys were still alive, but I suppose you won’t believe me on that.”

“I believe you!” Fiona said, sitting down on the stage edge and kicking both her feet out.

Athalia snorted and shook her head.

“I believe you,” Azamel said. That got some raised brows from everyone. “You are young, naive, and foolish, Jack Terry. That’s a large part of why I trust you.”

“Thanks?” I guess? “I know Jeremiah managed to get into your nightmare world without being let in. And, considering how paranoid Kindred are of the idea of someone catching them sleeping, I can only imagine what that’s like.”

“There ... is a striking similarity to be had there.” Another puff of smoke later, she put the butt down, and fetched another cigarette. Good god, how was she not dead yet. “Your superiors and Prince may not be welcome, but a silly fool like yourself is a welcome sight, Jack Terry. And, if you need a place to escape to, come here and we will know. Someone will be along to take you into our home.”

“Wow, thank you.” Their home, right. Walls covered in bleeding faces. A bloody version of Dolareido. A malaria-filled jungle, supposedly. He shivered at the thought, and all four Begotten chuckled, each in their own unique way. Yeah, make fun of the vampire for being a little afraid of nightmares, jackasses.

“If something happens, I’ll find ye and gie ye somewhere safe.” Fiona hopped down to join him, hooked his arm, and Damien’s arm too, and started walking them back the way they came. “If I had known ye were worried about me, I would have visited sooner.”

Jack looked back over his shoulder, at the three monsters watching him leave. It was his job to meet with the monsters, be their friend — or intermediary at least — and see how things were going. If it was as simple as a casual visit to the tunnels, maybe he should be doing it more often? Probably not, with hunters around

making every journey outside a dangerous circumstance. Better they visit him.

“I’d come around more, but it’s dangerous these days,” he said. Damien’s cloak of night, or Jessy’s brute strength, were all well and good, but these hunters had too many tricks up their sleeves.

“Then I’ll come to ye! Me or Athalia or Mark. We can gie around a wee bit better. In fact, I’ll show ye.” Like a soldier, she turned around, pointed to the other tunnel, and marched. Damien and Jack managed some glances toward the three monsters on the stage watching, but they didn’t look interested in the silliness. In fact, it almost looked as if their minds were elsewhere. And for three monsters to be sitting and standing around, with half-glazed looks, minds elsewhere, was strange.

The other tunnel was dark, and it was where Jack had found the strange hole and stairway that led into a Hellraiser landscape. No hole this time, but the darkness was still there, more darkness than there should have been, considering Azamel’s room was lit, and they’d only just made the corner.

And as the darkness enveloped them, humidity took them as well. Oh shit.

The girl between the two Kindred started to change. It was all lost to the darkness, absolute, total darkness, but both Kindred had no trouble noticing that little Fiona was getting taller, considering she was holding their arms. Taller, and taller, and eventually, hovering, the natural impact and sway of walking gone. Rustling, branches and leaves, catching the impact of delicate, long limbs. All lost in the oppressive obsidian of their new surroundings.

Until his boots started to meet mud. Yeap, this was the jungle, the place Damien had told him about. Jack coughed, then gagged as the heat, humidity, and smell smashed into his nostrils. Dirt, rot, fruit and fungus and insects and life and death in its most compact form.

Another step almost had him tripping, but Fiona's hand found him, and caught his wrist.

And then pulled him up by the wrist, up and up and up. He gasped, and stared at the approaching leaves, the passing branches and vines, as the moon came into existence. Moons. More gasps as they went higher, and higher, passed what he was sure was monkeys howling in trees, and snakes waiting for prey to stumble into their thermal strike zone. Damien was beside him, but it was hard to see much with any clarity, not with how fast Fiona was lifting them.

Soon, they were high in the trees, high enough that falling would have meant death for a human. The canopy gave way, and the open sky was above them, the stars and moons shining with such brilliance, Jack had to gasp yet again. Gasp and slip, cause the branch Fiona set him on was slippery as fuck. She caught him though, one of those massive spider legs reaching across his chest, like a parent stopping their child with their arm during harsh stop in the car.

Damien was on a different branch, another tree, a sister tree Jack supposed, with how the branches were almost touching.

“Um ... why are we up here?” Jack said.

“I wanted to talk to you where it's a little harder for people to eavesdrop.” Scottish accent gone, this new, eyeless creature of curves, a silk dress, and blades, continued to hover, a single inch above the branch. “Have you talked with Damien about Azamel's warning?”

“... no, I haven't.” Ugh, Fiona didn't understand the dance, or Danse, didn't get how to word things in just the right way to avoid implying things, not commenting directly on things, and protecting information. Reminded him of himself, when he was younger.

“Oops.” She brought her claw fingers to her lips. If she was trying to look sheepish, she couldn’t pull it off without eyes. “Sorry.”

Damien, standing far more comfortably than Jack was, tilted his head to the side. “Something I should know? Or, shouldn’t know?”

Maybe he should tell Damien? Man was becoming one of the few Kindred Jack trusted. Or, he was the source of the problem Azamel warned him of ... nah. He was already trusting his partner with a lot of things, might as well go the whole way on the big stuff. It’d be nice to have someone to consolidate knowledge on.

“Azamel’s warned me that someone out there is up to nasty shit,” he said.

“ ... nasty shit?”

“Yeah, exactly, I don’t know what it entails either. But someone out there is preparing something, I guess, something dangerous that will probably get a lot of people killed.”

Damien sighed, and grabbed a nearby branch with his gloved hand. At least he was a little more familiar with the insanity of randomly being in a jungle than Jack was. “Any more to go on?”

“Nothing, except that it’s some magical shit. Spirits, monsters, dimensional stuff, the sort of shit that would have a creature like Azamel scared.”

“ ... Cthulhu?” he said.

God damn it. Jack laughed, and shook his head. He didn’t give Damien enough credit; the man could be funny when he wanted to be.

“We do not know,” Fiona said. Or, Vrall said, or something. “But, we Begotten are tuned in to far more of the hidden worlds. We can

... smell, that something is changing, and we can see the scars this thing's travels are leaving on the pathways." The eyeless monster sighed, enormous horns flowing from where her eyes would be if she had any, curling back into the grand crown of black horns. "And now that we know Jeremiah's witch friend has set her eyes upon Jack, I fear you will be targeted again."

The Mekhet sighed as well, and looked up at the moon. For a moment, Jack thought he might have been doing that ironically. But, no, he was doing it un-ironically, like Daniel would.

"I kind of wished you hadn't told me."

Jack laughed, shrugged, and gestured to Fiona. "Blame her."

"I do." He looked back to them, but there was a grin there, enough to pull a chuckle from the spider woman. "You said scars, Fiona?"

"Mhmm. Someone is breaking through to other worlds, and not gently. There are scars where they tunnel through to other realms."

"Other realms? Like, the spirit world?" Jack said. "Like, where the Uratha more or less tell us to fuck off and not touch?"

"... yes, that is one of the realms."

Yeap, this was one of those precipices Jack knew he should back away from, but was going to throw himself off of anyway.

"Show me."



# Chapter 60

~~Beatrice~

Part of her wanted to sneak up on Julias, try and catch him by surprise, see if her scant twenty years could get past the man's eyes. Have fun! Play with him, like old times. But, these weren't old times, and her sneaking into his mansion, or trying to at least, was a bad idea. He probably had lookouts about, snipers, and they'd shoot first if they saw suspicious rustling in bushes.

So the front door it was. Knock knock.

"Good evening Miss Damor, Miss Denver," the doorman said. "Please, do come in. The master is in his study."

"Study, eh?" She looked over her shoulder back at Jen. "Cool with just sitting around while Julias and I talk? Join in too, if you want."

Jen nodded and smiled. It was easy to see the girl wasn't following Triss in hopes for sex, but rather, because she didn't want to be alone. Learning the ritual, and testing the ritual, must have been horrible to watch. Going through the process was hell on Earth, but still, she didn't envy Jen having to see it all. Stuck on the sidelines while being forced to watch torture was a horrible way to get introduced to this stuff.

The Nosferatu touched her new necklace, a simple black string with a tiny, white crow skull on it, and followed after the servant.

The study was exactly what you'd expect in a building as old and as grandiose as Viktor's mansion. A tall room lined with bookshelves filled to the rim with books. Fancy, thick carpet the color of blood, against the gold trimmings of walls and columns that held the wood bookshelves in place. In the center of the large room

was a beautiful table, thin wood, almost as red as the carpet, and Julias sat before it.

There were a couple books on table, on Hinduism. Another on the history of monsters, vague as that was. Another she didn't recognize; something about artifacts. So, he knew that Azamel was some sort of twisted nightmare version of Ganesha. The book on history of monsters was self-explanatory, but the one about artifacts was odd. Maybe the man was looking into more of the stranger artifacts, things considered magical. Might find something about those handcuffs Jack mentioned.

“Light reading?” she said, coming over to sit at the fancy table across from him. Jen offered the servant a nod, and he returned it before closing the door behind him.

“You could say that.” He wasn't reading the books though. Smart phone in hand, he probably had other books opened on that, showing on the phone's screen. Such was the way of the digital age, sitting around surrounded by books and not using them, because ultimately, you had literally 100,000 fold the information available on your phone. Sad, but true.

Once she was comfortable, Julias put the phone down, and smiled at her. Hell, he got up out of his chair, gave her a kiss, a proper one, before sitting back down. Fucker knew how to sprinkle bits of love in just the right way. To inconvenience himself like that, to stop researching, and get up out of his chair just for a kiss? He was too damn good at being romantic.

Which Jen caught onto immediately, and swooned, before she started wandering around the library. Not library, study room. Much as the walls were covered in books, there weren't any rows of the bookshelves.

“How you been?” he said. “Haven't seen you for a few nights.”

Triss nodded, shrugging. “Been ... getting in deep with Jacob, honestly.”

Jen threw a glance her way. Probably didn’t expect her to be so forward with Julias about what she was doing.

“Sounds painful,” her love said.

That got a laugh out of her, and an eyebrow raise from him.

“I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

“By all means.” He put the phone down, and got in closer to the table, elbows down and eyes on her. “Did you see Jack leaving?”

“No. Was he here?”

“Yeah, got into a little argument.”

Ooh, argument between childe and sire. Something she’d never get to experience. Time to pry and learn.

“About what?”

Julias stopped for a moment. Might have been too sensitive to talk about, and if that were the case, he wouldn’t tell her. But he was contemplating, which meant he was evaluating; maybe it was Jen’s presence’s slowing down the evaluation.

“Kid’s trying to play nice with everyone. I appreciate that he’s taking his role as intermediary with the other paranormals seriously, but he fails to recognize how that niceness can backfire. The specific hangup was Azamel and Athalia.”

She winced, and nodded as she leaned in as well, mirroring his position, elbows on the table. “He probably wants to keep Athalia happy, doesn’t he? Not kill her daughter.”

“He’s going to do something stupid, maybe spare the girl’s life when an opportunity arrives to do otherwise.”

“Hard to imagine.” She remembered what the kid looked like when she found him, and how terrifying the imagery was, of Angela sitting on him and ready to cut him into bits. “And of course, she could still be dead. No one’s seen her since the accident.” Accident was a funny word to pick for actively running someone over, and she smirked.

“If only we were that lucky,” Jen said, sighing as she sat on a nearby couch, pulled out her phone, and ... probably checked her Twitter feed. Ugh.

“New necklace?” Julias said, hand gesture included.

She smiled. Just like Julias to notice; she loved that. It wasn’t like she hadn’t worn similar, things that matched her tattoos and piercings, and yet the man noticed anyway. Always the little things that made her smile grow.

“Mmhmm. Jacob’s been putting me through hell, and this is a first step to becoming ... his apprentice, I guess.” She flicked a fingernail against the skull, and cradled it between two claws. “I’ll show you later how it works.”

“You should have seen her, Julias,” Jen said. “It was ... disgusting, and brutal, and I know few Kindred who could stomach what she went through.”

Triss threw a grin her way. Yeah, it was disgusting and brutal. And it was so god damn empowering. The blur, the haze of her memory, she could still feel it, smell the scent of the beast and the touch it left upon her. It was exciting, thrilling, and it got her undead blood surging through her with a desire to taste more.

She really was a twisted fuck. Probably what led to Jacob being interested in her in the first place.

“Is that why you have a new necklace?” he said.

Triss nodded. “Yeah, but, it’s a secret what it’s specifically for, sorry.” Much as she loved her man, Circle secrets were Circle secrets. He’d understand of course; not like he dumped Invictus secrets on her.

“And Jen was with you during all this?”

“I was.” The other Ventrue got up and joined them, sitting beside Triss. She was in her usual suit, but the shirt was done up this time. The torture session put a bit of chill into her, Triss could see, and the woman had become a little less open to having her breasts hanging out, considering how gory and scream-filled the past couple nights had become. That’d probably change, now that Jacob had taught her the first ritual, and it’d be a little while before he’d teach her another. And of course, because Julias was here, and Jen did love to throw herself at him, she’d probably get the tits out sooner or later.

Except, she didn’t seem to want to right now. The woman was looking at Triss, her necklace, and then back to Julias, and just watching, thinking thoughts Triss couldn’t guess. Seeing the Nos get cut up, stabbed, bled, and screaming her head off, put a fear into Jen. It’d really suck if it damaged the relationship. Jen was her friend, but also a fuck buddy, and that fuck buddy dynamic was working out unusually well. It wouldn’t continue like that if Jen could only picture screaming, blood-drenched Triss in a giant, dirty metal bowl, with kine body parts sitting around in the metal basin with her.

“You look spooked,” Julias said.

“It was ... hard to watch.” Jen shivered, but slid in closer so her chair was almost touching hers. “Beatrice is a lot tougher than I expected. I used to think I was tough, but it’s a different story, when Jacob’s ... yeah.” They couldn’t share the details of the ritual, but no reason to tiptoe around how brutal it’d been.

“I know the Circle, and Jacob, can get into some horrific stuff,” he said, “but you girls are always welcome to visit me and wash away some of that horribleness. I get the impression blankets and pillows aren’t a luxury you get to have in your dark caves.”

“Ha.” Triss shook her head and leaned back in her chair. “We got it pretty cozy, actually. Not as cozy as here though.”

“No sign of the hunters?”

Jen shook her head. “No. And we have been looking. Aaron and Othello have been looking more than us, but they’ve reported nothing.”

Superman nodded, and pulled out a deck of cards from within his suit jacket. “We’ve been looking too, of course, and we have a lot more eyes than the Circle does. But still, these damn hunters evade us. It’s really starting to get under my skin, that they can hide so well.”

Both girls watched the man’s hands. Was he trying to be sexy? Hard to tell. He liked shuffling the deck, one-handed at that, showing off his skill like a god damn peacock showing off its feathers. And it was sexy, whether he meant it to be or not.

Her mind turned to sex the moment Julias was in the same room as her, and Jen was only making it harder to stop. And lately, with all the dark, witch stuff she was doing, she felt ... empowered. She wasn’t the little Nos girl watching insanity from the sidelines anymore. She was learning. She was becoming one of those creatures of fiction, the sort you read about, practicing dark arts,

exploring the boundaries of only god knew what. A witch. And that filled her with a tingling thrill.

She wondered how that made Jack feel, considering all the buzz he was getting. Did he get inta-horny when he was around Antoinette, ego as swollen as his dick? Heh, probably.

“Hey Julias,” Jen said, grinning at him, and the cards in his hand. “Looking to play?”

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The poker room. Triss was sure that’s what it was for, cause even though Julias had only moved in a nice, legit poker table recently, the room reeked of high-stakes gambling. Not a small room, not a large one either, with armless chairs with nice, red cushions. A fancy chandelier, a small one, hung from the center of the ceiling, and it cast a gentle light over the table, the sort of dim you wanted when eying other players to read their tells.

“How come we haven’t played in this room yet?” she said, pulling out a chair. “We’ve played in others, but not, what is apparently, a room designed for this?”

Julias shrugged, pulled out another chair, and sat down. “This room is meant for serious poker. Back in the day, I’m pretty sure Viktor did negotiations in here, while playing poker.”

“Well, deal ‘em up.” Jen rotated her right arm, then left, like she was prepping for a fight or a workout, before she sat down as well. Jen was likely to immediately establish the rules for the game, with sex as the intended outcome. Strip poker, or something like that. “How about a game of ... history?” Or not.

“History you say?” Julias smirked, for a moment. That look in his eye, of confidence and determination, faded. He wasn’t sure of himself, maybe, feeling a bit exposed. Not a look Triss was used to seeing on him. “Elaborate.”

“We play, and cash in chips to learn about one piece of history from everyone else at the table.” Jen gestured to the chips already on the table. It was normal for them to use chips when they played, and cash in your chips to earn something. It made strip poker take a while, but far more interesting than just comparing hands. These Ventrue loved to bluff.

“ ... personal history?” Julias said.

His nemesis nodded. “Personal history. I want to learn more about you, Julias Mire, and maybe a little bit about Triss here too.” The evil woman got comfortable, and waited for Julias to deal. He always dealt first, his house after all.

“I ... I’m not sure,” the man said.

Triss blinked, and so did Jen, both women looking the man up and down. Always so confident, and his suit betrayed no weakness. But his eyes betrayed plenty. They fell to the table, to the cards he was shuffling, and he winced every so often.

Triss didn’t go digging through the man’s past willy-nilly like this. It was enough to learn the man had once been married, before being embraced, and had to leave that life behind. Watched his wife move on without him, meet someone else, die of old age, all the classic turmoil Kindred went through, given enough years. Everyone human, everyone they let live their lives without becoming a ghoul, or a vampire, gave way to the years. Kansas had it right, people were dust in the fucking wind for someone like Julias. So Triss let the topic be.

Jen had no such compunctions. “Of course, if you do well, you won’t have to share anything.” Her slender fingers took a stack of chips, and lifted them, only to let them fall back to the table in controlled fall between the fingers. Satisfying click click click sounds, masking the gravity of what she was asking. And she was a



smart girl, she knew exactly what she was asking, for Julias to take a trip down memory pain lane. Strange timing.

“... deal.” He tilted his neck to the side, managed to get a small crack out of it, and started dealing the cards.

“Wait, Julias,” Triss said. “Come on, you don’t have to—”

He shook his head, a hand up, while he dealt the cards with a single hand, sliding a card off the top with his index finger. Fancy fucker. “It’s ok.”

Was it though? She eyed him closely, head drifting to the side as she tried to analyze his face. But he put on his poker face, and that meant she was fucked in that department.

She sighed, and tossed in a chip; no blinds here, just everyone putting minimum bid into the pot. She barely understood how to play poker, and shit like ‘blinds’ and ‘ante’ and fucking whatnot was hard for her to wrap her mind around. But Julias and Jen were merciless, which she both appreciated, and did not.

Texas Hold ‘Em. She knew how to play that, mostly, sort of, kind of. A little. The fact Julias and Jen liked to play with some house rule quirks made everything just a little harder to figure out, too. Julias tossed each of them a card, and then another. And she was going first, ugh.

Queen and an Ace. Good, yeah? Or not good? She frowned and made it look like she had bad cards ... which, she may have had, for all she knew. A glance at Julias and Jen was borderline pointless, their gazes showing their usual, calm, collected faces. Julias didn’t blink, or anything, as he waited for her opening bet.

“... I open one.” Woo, opening bet. God, she had no idea what she was doing.

“I’ll call,” Jen said, throwing a white chip into the pot.

“Call,” Julias said, mirroring the two women. With a devilish little smirk, Julias ‘burned’ a card, whatever the fuck the point of that was, and dealt the ‘flop’, three cards face up on the table. Queen, Seven, and a Five.

Triss felt the urge for a cheek muscle to twitch, but she didn’t have cheeks, so it caused the edge of the muscle above her crocodile teeth to shift slightly. Was that how Jen and Julias could read her? Her hair was covering her crocodile teeth though, so maybe not. How those bastards were able to figure her out, every time they played, was her new mission to find out.

But two Queens was good, so.

“I bet one,” she said.

“Raise you one.” Jen winked at her, earning a long groan from Triss, before she looked back to Julias as she tossed in two chips. “Did you play poker much, when you were alive, Julias?”

“I did, actually. But, isn’t that one of the pieces of information we’re supposed to be playing for?” He threw in two chips, and made an obvious point of showing another before tossing it in as well. Raising by one, then.

“Call.” Triss tossed in one again.

Grinning the biggest, most devilish of all devil grins, trying out out-devil Julias, Jen put her cards down, folding. All that confidence, and she wasn’t pushing forward. Did she have a bad hand, and was masking it with her control of facial expressions, or did she have a good hand, and was folding anyway, to throw people off the trail of her tells. Triss couldn’t recognize a tell to save her life, so it didn’t do much for her.

“I was hoping the secrets we’d be playing for would be of a more personal, meaningful nature,” she said.

“Trying to get your fingers into every personal aspect of my life?” Julias chuckled, and juggled some chips in his hand as he played around with his poker face. But, after a while, Superman nodded, burned another card, and tossed another onto the table. A Queen. Triss felt her finger twitch.

“I bet two,” she said.

“Fold.” Julias reached out, took back the cards, and started shuffling.

“God damn it.” She frowned down at her claws, and stabbed one against the table. Not hard enough to pierce the nice surface, but hard enough to make a click. She won, but she could have won double that or more, if she’d managed to pull Jen and Julias into the hand.

This wasn’t a game for Carthians, that was for sure.

“I am trying to get my fingers into your lives, yes. You may have noticed that I like Triss quite a bit, and I think you and I should connect as well.” Jen leaned forward over the table. With her shirt done up, it almost looked cute, how her breasts were concealed instead of being served on a silver platter.

Julias raised a brow. Not his usual ‘I’m surprised but not really’ eyebrow raise, more like his occasional ‘I’m actually surprised’ eyebrow raise. Knowing her man well enough to recognize those expressions wasn’t helping Triss with poker; if anything, he was taking advantage of it for his bluffs. But still, it wasn’t what she expected to see from him, to Jen’s statement.

“It may interest you to know the Prince keeps an eye on you,” he said as he handed Triss the cards. Her turn to deal.

Jen raised a brow, same way Julias did. “Does she?”

Two peas in a pod.

“She does. She wasn’t happy that your sire left.”

Rolling both her eyes, Triss dealt each player two cards. If the Prince was watching Jen, it was because Jen wanted people watching her, considering how she acted and the way she dressed. But then, there was that time where Triss and the Prince talked, on the balcony, and looked out over everyone, including Jen. Antoinette had taken particular notice of Jennifer, enjoyed how much the girl embraced sexuality. Her dream for Dolareido, or something like that.

Everyone threw a chip into the center of the table, before looking at their cards.

“Marcus felt ... wait, I’ll save that one, for after the game.” She winked at him, licked her lips, lifted the corner of her cards off the table to take a peek, and tossed in a couple chips. Opening two, then.

“I never spoke with Marcus myself.” Julias held a chip in his hand, and rolled it across his fingers, knuckle to knuckle. “I do remember he enjoyed wearing suits. A rarity, considering he was a Carthian.” Julias tossed in a couple chips as well.

And what did Triss have? A Two and a Five. Well, whatever. She tossed in a couple chips too, calling. Round over, Triss threw in three cards for the table. Two Sixes and a Five. Ooh la la. Feint having a bad hand, or push for a win? What to do what to do. But, not her turn yet.

Jen tossed in a chip. “Carthians sometimes wear suits. But they don’t always feel comfortable on the soul.”

“Believe in a soul?” Julias tossed in a chip as well.

Jen nodded, and nodded again in Triss’s direction. “After the things I’ve seen? I have to believe in something beyond a simple body.”

Yeah, no argument there. Triss nodded, and tossed four chips, raising by three. Jen and Julias called, so Triss dealt in another card to the table. A five. Full house! No, wait, don’t get excited, control yourself. Don’t start bouncing your knee, and don’t look to Jen in anticipation of the round starting.

“Do you not, Mister Mire?” Jen said, and tossed in a chip, betting one. It’d be nice if they could say what they were doing, to help Triss keep track. But the two Ventrue lived and breathed this atmosphere.

Superman tossed in a chip, and another. Raise by one then. “I’m not sure honestly. I consider myself a pragmatist, but I’ve seen enough in our world to believe in something beyond that.”

Triss smiled. Good, because she’d hate it if it turned out Julias didn’t believe in anything. It was rare for vampires to be atheist, considering all the shit vampires were, and could do. They were usually agnostic to some extent, believing in something beyond flesh and blood. And after the trip Jacob had sent her on, into the unknown of where-the-fuck-ever, Triss certainly believed there had to be something more than simple science. Part of the reason she was in the Circle, as was Jen. They believed the old myths, the old mythologies, in some form or another, that they were perhaps metaphors, or interpretations of grand designs.

She thought back to one of her first conversations with Jacob. ‘Do you think there is some hidden meaning to being a Kindred? Some explanation to our existence that will raise us to a new level of understanding?’ he’d said. And she’d said no, because of course she didn’t think so. A new level of understanding, like a religious person finding divine purpose for their life? Fuck that. But, as she hung out

with the others in the Circle, she started to notice Jen, Jacob, Aaron and Othello, everyone seemed perfectly open to the idea of there being higher entities, like gods, or greater aspects to the individual, like a soul. And Triss found herself leaning in that direction more and more.

Heavy topics seemed to be the theme of tonight, all driven by Jen.

Triss won the hand again. She felt like a bystander in the conversation though. Julias and Jen were fencing verbally, that much she could tell, poking at each other and looking for holes in their statements. Too preoccupied with each other to care about the game, maybe.

Triss slid Jen the deck, everyone threw an ante into the pot, and she dealt the cards.

“Sometimes I wonder,” Jen said, handing everyone their cards almost as smoothly as Julias would, “if the Invictus believe in anything beyond money and power.”

“Money and power are pretty appealing, and have proven their worth time and time again in the real world. The concept of a soul, or whatnot, hasn’t so much.” In went a chip from Julias’s pile, betting one.

Triss checked her cards. Five and a Jack. She tossed in a chip as well, calling, as did Jen. Her friend dealt three cards to the table. Three, Six, and a Queen. Nothing. But, the two Ventrue weren’t glancing her way, only looking at each other. Perfect time to try bluffing.

Julias tossed in one.

“I’ll see your bet, and raise three.” In went four more chips from Triss. Ahead, but if this backfired, she’d be hurt. Why was she

bluffing? No fucking idea, except that it was something people did in poker.

Jen matched Triss's bet, and raised by three as well. New raises always had to be at least as much as previous raises, according to them. "Has it not?" Jen said. "You Invictus deal in only the things you can touch. The Circle, the dragons, even the idiot priests deal with real things that exist beyond your money, or defined walls of power."

Julias threw in his chips, calling. "No one in the Invictus denies that the Circle touches on forces that defy science, and our understanding of Kindred."

Triss called, and Jen threw in another card. Queen. Still nothing for Triss then.

Julias threw in two chips. So did Triss, and another two. Jen saw it, and then raised four. Pot growing damn big.

"Sometimes the Circle gets the impression the Invictus look down on us," Jen said, playing with a few chips in her hand as she waited for Julias to make his decision. "You and Triss hooked up when she was a Carthian. She's a witch now, though, a member of the Circle. Would you have given her the same chance?"

Triss raised a brow, and almost said something. But the environment was perfect for listening, digesting, absorbing. She knew Julias didn't care she was a witch, hell if—

"If anything, Jennifer, I would have been more intrigued. I dislike the Carthians and their juvenile attachment to their illogical anarchy. But the Circle? I respect your group, quite a bit, and I respect your beliefs ... what I know of them." Julias called, throwing in enough chips to catch up.

They were playing for secrets, personal secrets. Kind of weighty, kind of a big deal. Twenty chips for a cash-in, to turn these innocent pieces of plastic into valuable information about the other players. It was a weird thing to play for, especially considering how open Triss and Julias were with each other. If Triss wanted to know about his past, she could just ask him. But, she felt it might be akin to torture for him.

“Triss hasn’t told you much, about the Circle?”

“She’s told me a little. She respects the privacy of the Circle.”

“I try,” Triss said with a grin, calling. Neither Ventrue looked at her, gazing at each other, or glaring. Almost made Triss envious, with how Julias was looking at Jen. Or maybe not, considering how much it was starting to look like a fight brewing.

Another card on the table. Better for her. Better for the others though? Their expressions were unreadable, but she was committed to the bluff. Julias threw in some more chips, so did she, and so did Jen. Only person looking at the chips was her though, the two Ventrue doing some sort of mind dance with each other. Now she was thinking about two cowboys dueling at the strike of noon, or two samurai, having a stand-off.

“I have to admit,” Julias said, “I do occasionally imagine you lovely ladies, dancing naked around a bowl of blood or something. Chanting and swaying, painting your bodies with charcoal, and praying to unseen entities.”

Triss snorted on a laugh. Half true.

“Maybe we could show you sometime?” Jen said, tossing more chips into the pile.

“I’m not sure your boss would be comfortable with that.” Chuckling, Julias threw in some chips as well.



“And if he was?” More clink clinks, Jen shifting chips around in her fingers.

“Then I would say yes, I’d be interested. To observe, of course, not to partake.”

“Does the concept of dancing naked around a sacrifice in the moonlight frighten you?” And of course, Jen had to add sacrifice to the description.

“Yes, but I also find it intriguing, and romantic in a way.”

Heh, yeah, he probably did. Considering the sort of paintings Julias liked to keep around, he had a love of macabre shit, and dancing around naked in moonlight around a sacrifice was probably a painting he had somewhere already.

The hand ended. Triss came out on top. Again. This was getting very strange, because it was the first time Triss had more chips than others, let alone what was turning into all the chips.

But the two Ventrue had enough left for some more hands. Chips were going fast, faster than usual. They could cycle them back in, but they’d put out enough chips for a total of five secrets, and considering how powerful each cash in was, getting secrets from all other players, too many chips would have been deadly.

Normally, with strip poker and the way they played it, it was each time someone lost ten chips down from their starting pool incrementally, they’d have to remove some clothing. Pair of shoes, pair of socks, pants, shirt, etc. Doing it this way, getting to cash in on secrets, everyone’s secrets, was weird. Why didn’t she notice it before? Jen proposed the rules, Julias accepted, and Triss just went along with it. It was a weird way to play.

Were they letting her win?

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~~Julias~~

Well, Triss figured it out, perhaps a little. Poor girl wore every expression on her face, beautiful snake eyes dilating with every good hand, every realization.

Julias had picked up on Jen's plan the moment she'd mentioned the word secrets about their past. Talking about the Circle, souls, everything, was just pretense, poking at each other and seeing where boundaries lay. Dancing around each other in silly circles, because Ventrue never liked to lower their guard, expose their neck when engaging in contract negotiations.

Which is what they were doing, in a way. How deep were they willing to take the secrets they were willing to answer? Jen brought up souls, and he responded in kind. She invited him to see her dance naked around a sacrifice, and he found that inviting. Scary, and inviting.

This woman would be amazing at the Danse Macabre, if she engaged in it more. Jacob kept his circle out of city affairs, mostly, so Julias had little exposure to Jen when it came to dealings about territory, or dinner parties with Kindred poking holes into each other's defenses. Did so and so do so and so to so and so. Answer a question without really answering it. Ask a question without asking it. Imply a threat, suggest a course of action, without ever exposing your own motives. She'd be really good at it.

Triss wouldn't. Poor girl was perplexed, and glancing between them, trying to understand what they were up to. It was so damn cute, it made Julias want to hug and kiss her. But that would break the duel he was locked into with Jen.

Another hand, another round. Julias folded earlier this time. Another hand later, and Jen folded earlier. Throwing Triss off the

trail. It didn't take long for the two Ventrue to run out of chips, and for Triss to have them all, leaving both Ventrue vulnerable.

If Triss had been with him alone, answering questions about his past would have been easy ... easier, at least. And probably likewise for Triss and Jen. But two Ventrue, in the same room, learning a bit more about each other? That'd never come easily.

"Guess I'm cashing in." Grinning a big grin, but still eying the two Ventrue with mountains of suspicion, the Nos counted her chips up. Enough for five secrets, from everyone else at the table.

"Secrets of a personal nature, correct?" Jen said.

Julias nodded, eyes falling to the deck of cards in his hand. Idle shuffling, a great way to mask fear. Few Kindred enjoyed talking about their past, and none of them enjoyed putting their neck out, over personal issues or otherwise.

"... you guys don't need to do this," Triss said. "This is starting to turn heavy. How about we all go to the master bedroom, fuck, eat, fuck some more, and sleep?"

Both Ventrue slowly shook their head. No, this was as good as it was going to get, to get both Ventrue willing to talk about shit like this.

"Marcus was a playboy, as you know," Jen said, swiping a hand across the table and snatching up a chip. "As often with sire and childe, our relationship was romantic, and sexual. But that faded quickly. The fallout of our splitting is one of the reasons I left the Carthians. And one of the reasons Marcus left Dolareido."

Now that was a secret. Julias looked at her, caught her eyes, looked into them and waited for the smirk or the grin to label it all a joke. Never came.

“... I never knew that,” Triss said. “Barely ever talked to Marcus, and you weren’t in the Carthians long enough for me to ever talk to you.”

“I noticed you though.” Chuckling, Jen mirrored Julias’s chip trick, rolling the chip between her fingers across her knuckles. “God, you were a bitch. Hated everyone, always hung out alone, listening to your metal music and hiding inside a tomb.”

“Hey! I was ... cultivating an aesthetic.”

Both Ventrue laughed, and Julias rolled a chip Triss’s way. Girl could be damn funny when she wanted to be.

“My turn I guess.” He sighed, and began cutting the deck with his one hand. Then shuffling it, with one hand. Decades with a deck in his hand, playing poker with kine in various circumstances, to sharpen his instincts and skills. It was always about the facade. “I was married when I was embraced, as you know. Viktor wanted me to stay here and help grow his arm of the Invictus.” Long sigh, for dramatic effect, and because it was sincere. “After the embrace, I visited her, and we got into a fight. I hit her.”

Both women sat up straight, looked at each other, at him, at the poker table, at him, and winced. Lot of wincing going on these days.

“Why?” Triss said.

“I was angry, at everything. My life was gone, and I had to leave her behind, and I couldn’t tell her why. We were screaming at each other, and I tried to convince her to understand, and ... and the argument grew larger, encompassing other things, earlier things.” He rubbed his temples with his free hand, trying to dig the memories out of the haze of years gone by. “It wasn’t the happiest marriage. It was a hundred years ago, and ... you know how it is, was. Not that that is an excuse, but, I don’t think she was ever truly happy, being my wife. The anger came out, from both of us, and ... I

let out a swing. Not a slap, but a punch, with a bit of my new strength in it that I couldn't control.

“She lived. I damaged her jaw, but didn't break it. I took her to the hospital, and vanished that night.” He couldn't remember much, couldn't remember the details, couldn't remember what they were arguing about. But, he could remember the anger in her eyes, and then that single moment of realization, and fear, when he threw the fist. “I came back to her, a decade later, to visit, to apologize, maybe give her some of my new fortune as a member of the Invictus. But I found she was re-married, moved on, had children, and ... and she looked happy.” Another delightful memory that would last with him for hundreds of years, scarred into his mind. His wife, ten years older, gorgeous, with a smile on her face as she enjoyed an evening with her family. “I left. Didn't say anything to her, didn't let her know I was still around, or anything.”

Both women stared at him for a while, giving up pretense of avoiding the awkwardness of it all. He sighed again, and stared down at the cards in his hand as he continued to shuffle them in the one palm. Never told anyone that story, ever. Not Tash, not Jessy or Jack, and certainly not his sire.

“I ... can't imagine you hitting a girl. I mean, not in that context, not like that.” Triss squirmed, and when he looked her way, she looked down. Yeah, painful.

“Me neither.” Jen didn't lower her gaze when he caught it though. “You've changed a lot since then.”

“Have I?” If Triss had said that, that he'd changed, he could understand. He'd had the time to prove to her and himself that he wasn't that guy anymore. But Jen, she barely knew him. Or that was the problem, that he thought she barely knew him, when she did. And in there, was probably the motivation for this dangerous game.

Maybe they should have played truth or dare instead, so he could at least take dares for the remaining secrets.

“You have,” Triss said, and she slid her chair in closer so she could reach out and poke him in the leg with a claw. “I’d make a joke, maybe something like ‘if you hit me, you know I’d hit you back, and I hit harder,’ but ... doesn’t seem like the time. So, serious note, yeah, I don’t get that impression from you at all. Hundred years of being a vamp has done you good.”

“Ha.” He laughed, barely, and set the cards down so he could take Triss’s hand in both of his. And, of course, kiss her knuckles, like a princess. Which got her chuckling, and then rolling her eyes and pushing his hands away. Which made Jen swoon like a school girl.

“Kindred are often sired for reasons more than obvious.” The opposing Ventrue reached out, took the cards, and began to shuffle them, in varying ways of fancy flourish. Not like Julias could of course, considering how long he’d had to practice compared to her. But still, he watched her fingers work the cards, and both he and Triss smiled at her.

“Do tell,” Triss said. “I can do that, right? Ask for a more specific secret? I did win, after all.”

“... alright.” She palmed the deck, and began cutting it, over and over, one-handed like Julias. “As I said, we are often embraced for reasons not so obvious. It comes out of us in strange ways, small parts of us we take for granted.” With a shrug, she started dealing herself a hand. Five-card draw. Two twos, two kings, and an ace. She dropped the ace, and drew a five. Two pair, mediocre, and she sighed as she put the cards back into the deck. “Marcus was hoping to use me, to play in the Danse Macabre, high stakes.”

“How?” he said. Night was getting more and more interesting.

“He knew I had a knack for political seduction. And he wanted me to use my personality to sleep my way to the top, in a sense, ridiculous as the notion is. When I found out much of our relationship was built on that assumption, that I’d do his bidding because I was his childe, I told him to go fuck himself.”

Antoinette had it right then, about Jennifer at least. Maybe not about Marcus, if the man was willing to use his childe as a stepping stone in the Danse Macabre.

Triss laughed, leaning back in her chair. But with a few moments, her laughing faded, and her expression grew heavy. Yeah, the grossness of the situation sank in, and she scratched the back of her head as her eyes looked left and right down at the table, piecing together the images. Girl was so damn readable.

It meant Jennifer’s new life as a vampire, was founded on a lie. Marcus didn’t love her, and her new eternity of being an undead creature, forced to subsist on the blood of the living, was bullshit.

“Damn,” Triss said. “That must ... really fucking suck. You know my story, that my sire was just an obsessed stalker. At least ... at least mine has some honesty to it.”

Jen shrugged, dealt herself another hand, and came out with a full house. “Marcus always did like to think long term, a trait sadly missing in most Carthians.”

“ ... you should talk to the Prince sometime,” Julias.

His fellow Ventrue laughed. “You can’t be serious. She’s ancient, and I’m a decade embraced. Everyone at this table is older than me.”

“Yes but not everyone at this table manages to capture the eye of everyone the way you do.” Winking at her, Julias held out a hand for some cards. She tossed him five, and after a quick peek, he held up two fingers. Four jacks. He showed the hand, as if it was prophetic

in some way. He smirked at the thought, but he could see the two women were a bit more moved by the lucky hand than he was. They were witches, after all.

“ ... you think I capture everyone’s eye?” Jen said.

A chip nailed the woman in the face. Incoming fire, from Triss.

“You go to a ball, basically naked, and have everyone staring at you? Not to mention I’m sure more than a few kine came their brains out because of you.” The Nos rolled her eyes, got up, and slipped behind Jen. Curious move.

Not so curious, when Triss set her hands onto Jen’s shoulders, then slid them forward to reach the woman’s neck. At the chest, she started undoing the buttons of Jen’s shirt. Jen was in a dark suit, jacket buttons undone, white shirt underneath, and a pencil skirt. Seemed Triss wanted to get her out of it, as her claws started to undo the buttons of the shirt, all the way down to the skirt. Jen never wore a bra, pointless as they were to a Kindred, and Triss set her claws along the inside of the shirt to spread it, exposing Jen’s breasts.

And Jen let her. She sat back, leaned her head into Triss’s neck, and kissed her jaw. But she kept her gaze on Julias as she did, both women did, subtle grins abound.

“I thought we were going to share more painful memories and secrets?” he said. Not that he minded, eyes drifting down the visual feast Triss was creating for him. Jennifer’s smooth skin, tinted slightly dark, and heavy breasts with red nipples, were beautiful. And Triss cupping her breasts, letting the size and weight of them conform to her fingers and claws, was an addictive sight.

That first night he’d gone on a date with Triss, helped her get a meal in the Bloodlust club, and the kine had actively sought Triss’s touch on her breasts, was a beautiful night. He’d never thought



things would progress this way, that he'd be waking up each dusk with her in his arms.

And Jen being there too was an alluring, fascinating bonus. He'd slept with multiple women at the same time before, but this was a strange dynamic that deserved to be analyzed. He loved Triss, she loved him, and Jen was the friend that enjoyed tagging along for that ride, in all its aspects. It was all new to him, waking up to someone who was there for more than sex; not since the marriage had he enjoyed that. Hell, sometimes, there was no sex. Double hell, sometimes Jen was there, for the day to sleep, when there was no sex.

His romantic relationship had grown terribly strange, and wonderful. And considering the grin in their eyes, they didn't seem to mind the horribleness of his secret. Thank god. Like a soothing balm on his guilt, he watched the two women, and leaned back in his chair as well.

"I still have three secrets to share," Jen said, "and you, four." Her hand reached up, caressed along Triss's jaw and neck, before her hands fell to relax against the table completely, like his own. And through it all, Triss grinned at him while massaging the Ventrue's breasts. "But if we share more, we might spoil the night."

Once Jen began to blush life, her nipples hardening before his eyes, Triss ran one of her hands down to the woman's stomach, and under the waist of her skirt. A shiver and tremble from Jen made it obvious that Triss had begun caressing the woman's clitoris, or at least, the lips of her sex. No need to jump to such powerful stimulus so quickly.

And then his phone rang. Jack's ring.

"Um, hold on ... in fact, don't stop what you're doing. It's Jack. I'll tell him to leave me alone or something." He pulled out the phone, and brought it up to his ear as he watched Triss and Jen both

continue to grin at him. Succubuses. Neither of them were Daeva, and yet, they both took a strange delight in acting like them. Hell, Triss was really getting into it, riding Jen's love of showing off, and joining her at every opportunity these days.

He loved it.

"Yeah Jack?"

"Julias, there's, um ... been a development," the kid said.

"Development?"

The girls remained silent, but didn't stop the show. Jen slid the shoulder of her jacket off so it fell back over the seat, and Triss took advantage, sliding the shirt apart further, and then undoing the zipper of the skirt. Black underwear of Jen exposed, Triss slipped a hand down underneath it again, and began to gently stroke the hidden flesh within, as the two women watched him on the phone.

"Yeah. If you give Tash a call, she can fill you in on more details. The sheriff found ... what looks to be something straight out of the Circle's ritual book, if I had to guess. We think it was done by the hunters though, but it certainly feels the same. Sacrificed kine, bloody symbols drawn on the walls, etc."

"... that ... does sound like something they might do." If Jack and the sheriff thought it was done by hunters, and looked like Circle work, that was worth looking into.

Looking into anything other than what he was looking at, was going to be difficult.

"Distracted?" the phone said.

"You could say that."

“Sorry, but this is important. It, it’s uh ... yeah, there was a picture of me, at the site. Hand drawn.”

What? Fucking shit. Julias forced his eyes away from the display, from the two beautiful women trying to seduce him, and got up to begin pacing.

“That is not good. Must have had something to do with...” He looked the women’s way. They caught on quick, Jen redressing fast as Triss let her go, and got up to walk toward him. “Hold on.” Hand over the phone, he winced the biggest wince he could, like he was a college student losing his one opportunity to get laid. “Business, ladies. Apparently, hunter business.”

Both sighed, and pat him on the shoulder as they started to walk out.

“Shame,” Triss said. “She wasn’t lying, you know, about showing you what it’s like in the Circle. Dance naked in the moonlight? Child’s play.” She winked at him, and walked out the door as Jen waved at him.

“Jack, I hope you realize I’m watching two very attractive women walk out the door because of this phone call.”

Both women laughed as they shut the door behind them.

“Sorry Julias, but, yeah, blood ritual thing, and my picture at the crime scene. Hand drawn, too. I’ll have a more detailed report tomorrow. Right now I’m going to take a visit to Azamel’s, see what’s up there. And, who knows, they might know something about this fucking insanity.”

“I’ll send over the clean up crew immediately.” He hung up the phone, looked at the table, and sighed. Time to head back to HQ.

He looked down at the cards, and smiled. One secret down, four to go, right? They were probably going to kill him.

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~~Natasha~~

“I ... I’m surprised, you d-didn’t let him take the photo,” Tash said.

“The ritual must have left scars on it. The only Kindred who could learn more are the Circle, and us.” Daniel walked around the room, with more attention paid to the symbols than before. Last time, the picture of Jack, and the skeleton it was dangling from, had been the stars of the show. But there were hundreds of symbols, and they had to be inspected.

“I know, b-but ... it must be terrifying.”

“I know it is.” Daniel leaned over a table, and snapped a picture with his phone. “Everything always is. Now come on and help me look for anything I might have missed.”

“R-Right, ok. What did you get?”

“A decent scan of all primary images, but I haven’t touched anything.” The sheriff found the stack of papers, and started taking pictures of each one individually, before setting them on the table. “Each of these will need to be cataloged.”

“Right.” She’d get into detail mode then, and look for the little things. With her own phone, she started snapping pictures of each, and every tiny little symbol. So many. So very many.

“Jack’s no doubt reported this. Let’s do a sweep, and take the pictures back to the Elysium tower. We can leave the clean up to the Invictus.”

She nodded, and hmm'd her agreement as she zoomed in on some of the symbols on the ritual circle. So many symbols, and lettering of some kind. She didn't recognize it though, and that was strange. What language had letters she didn't recognize? She was sure she'd recognize nearly any language written, even if she couldn't read it. Strange that it wasn't Latin, because she expected anything like this to be using Latin.

The symbols of skulls were more easy to recognize. Bird, various hoofed animals, but no human skulls though. Suppose that was the point of the human sacrifice, to complete the arrangement of skulls. Worthy point of note then, maybe something to do with the different animals in the total?

“ ... how are things?” Daniel said.

“Um, ok? These, um, skulls are—”

“Not with this. I mean, in your personal life.”

He did say that, right? It wasn't just her imagination. Her sire was asking about her personal life?

“Um, it's ... it's uh ... good, actually. Surprisingly g-good.”

“Still seeing those two Uratha?”

“ ... I am.”

“Is it a fulfilling relationship?”

Ok, wow. This was way too weird a topic to have with her cold and dead sire. But he was asking, and that deserved reward, some effort on her part to return the effort he was putting into it.

“It is. They, um, they're smart-t-ter than I thought.”

“Oh, you thought they'd be stupid?”

“What? N-No! No, I ... I thought maybe, they’d be ... like what the stories, about Simon p-painted them as. Aggressive, and ... yeah, st-stupid, I guess.” Thinking about it in that term, maybe she owed them an apology, when she saw them again.

“Uratha are stupid.” Her sire managed the tiniest chuckle, and she followed suit. Yeah, they kind of were. Were there any academics in the Uratha business? Instead of digesting mountains of books, she imagined their smartest sat around totems, and spoke to otherworldly creatures. Not exactly book smart.

Maybe it was better to think of them in terms of wisdom. A smart person knew a tomato was a fruit, a wise man knew to use it in a vegetable salad.

“B-But they do know a lot, and they show ... p ... p-patience, in a strange way. And, they’re ... sweet.”

“ ... I appreciate that you’re in a unique relationship, Natasha. Understand that Antoinette is my friend, and has been for centuries; I am all too familiar with unique relationships.” A less-than-subtle hint about the Prince’s rather sexually diverse past. It made Tash smile.

“Th-that is true, b-but, a girl doesn’t t-t-talk to her dad, or sire, about the boys she brings home.”

“True,” he said. Tash glanced over her shoulder at him, and managed a peek at her sire’s quiet smile. Typical, that he had to be surrounded by the remains of a deadly sacrifice ritual, and investigating it, to be able to let a bit of himself out.

She was just like him. Antoinette’s guide to finding love was still on her mind, cultivating the garden of the self, letting others see it, and all the silly, romantic comparisons that came with it. Opening the gates for others was something she’d find easier doing while

working, and, that's what her sire was doing. It was cute in a way, and she mirrored his tiny smile as she watched him work.

With a heavy sigh, the sheriff took another picture, and flipped the paper to the next one. "I do not understand why this artist bothered to draw scenes from this ritual. The result is Terry's face, but these other drawings seem pointless." He turned, and showed a picture of a knee being cut open. "At least, whoever this kine was, they didn't suffer."

"D-Didn't suffer?"

"Not likely. No signs of struggle, all the bones are undamaged, and these drawings are ... detailed. They show signs of dissection, of detailed inspection of tendons and muscle fiber." He showed her another picture, of the skin of a finger being peeled off. "... it's almost as if ... whoever was drawing these wanted to show someone something."

"I don't—"

"Ever read a medical textbook, perhaps on muscle tissue?"

"N-No. Glanced, once, maybe?"

"They're filled with diagrams of muscles and bones. They look similar to these, except without this rather ... macabre approach." Another picture showed skin being pilled off the shin. Another showed muscle being pulled aside, and then cut apart, to show what looked like the bones of the forearm. "Someone was doing a demonstration."

"... horrible." She shivered, and resumed looking at the symbols. At this point, she was glad she was looking at the strange occult markings, and not vivid images of a body being dissected. The sort of nefarious purpose would lead to a dissection of a sacrifice, she

couldn't guess. "How m-much of this ... w-w-will we leave behind for the Invictus?"

"We'll be taking the skeleton and the images. Invictus will handle disposal of the locker's contents."

"... skeleton?" she said. Daniel nodded, and gestured to a duffel bag by the closed door. "... ugh."

"... do you trust those two boys?"

"Um, Art, and Matt?"

"Correct."

"... I ... I am starting t-to, yes. I wasn't sure at first, b-because of what I'd heard about Simon, and ... and um, how I m-met the ... boys."

Daniel nodded, eyes on the papers. Diligent, giving no pause except to examine his evidence more thoroughly.

"A painful introduction. I would tell you to be careful with them, Natasha, as they are wolves and aggressive by nature, but ... I won't tell you that, because I trust you."

She chuckled, and peeked at him again. Like a hardboiled detective, he continued his work without looking her way, but she knew he was probably smirking with his joke. At least, as much as his face was capable of smirking.

"I asked them, Art and M-Matt, to ... investigate the old p-prison with me."

"Putting your boyfriends in an awkward position. Help their girlfriend, and upset their boss. Obey their boss, and upset their girlfriend," Daniel said.



“ ... yeah, I g-guess.”

“No, you made the right call. We need information about these hunters, and if we can get the Uratha to help, then by all means.”

Heh. She took pictures of each individual letter in the circle, tilting her head around and around to see if she could figure out what they meant, or where they were from. Nothing, no memories triggered, no awareness raised. Utterly clueless. Sighing, she moved on to take detailed pictures of some of the symbols on the walls, zooming in to inspect individual ones. On close inspection, she saw a lot of the symbols were repeated, placed in varying sizes, but usually oriented upward.

“Should ... sh-should I ask them to come here?”

“ ... that may be prudent, before the Invictus arrive and contaminate the scene.”

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“Sheriff,” the two wolves said, at the same time.

Daniel raised a brow, and looked down at Natasha beside him. Yeah, talking at the same time was something they did, a lot. She thought it was delightful, but her sire, probably not so much.

He stepped back, and gestured them into the locker room. Both boys stepped in at the same time, and each whistled as they looked the walls up and down.

“ ... I smell humans,” Art said. “A few humans were in here.”

Matt took a long sniff as he went down into a squat beside the skeleton. “Smells like this poor bastard’s blood on the walls. Couple months old? Ugh, reeks.”

Dogs had a sense of smell so much stronger than any Kindred’s, let alone kine’s. Tash did not want to be them, in a room reeking of

old blood.

“Never seen symbols like these.” Art leaned over one of the tables, and ran a fingertip along the blood. And then tasted it. Ugh, ugh! Tash gagged at the sight, and the wolves chuckled. “Yeah, human.”

“I thought that was considered a ... sin, of a sort?” Daniel said, gesturing to what Art just did.

“Eat not the flesh of man.” Shrugging, Art ran a finger along one of the carved symbols, while Matt came to join him. “It’s old, rotten blood. Not exactly a problem.”

“It’s a good thing you called us, Tash.” Matt took some time beside the skeleton as well, and sniffed the air several times, loudly, drawing in each breath with slow, calculating depth. Twice now she was seeing them play detective. It was a good look, she liked it, put them in a more respectable light than just her silly boyfriends. They were professionals, and dedicated.

“Why d-d-do you say that?”

“Spirits were here. Summoned.”

Daniel stepped in, and held out a picture. “Anything to do with this?”

“Shit, Jack?” Art took the picture, and compared it against the others on the table. “ ... fuck, this is some ... horrible shit. What happened here?”

“You don’t know?” the sheriff said.

“Nope. Never seen anything like this. All I know is, someone cut a hole through the wall. It’s gone now, but someone cut a hole, a tiny sliver, and was ... probably talking, or showing...” Arturo held up the picture of Jack, and a picture of a human heart, free of its ribcage,

drawn in the same style, same hand. “I assume Jack’s still alive and kicking, as much as a vampire can be alive. And being Kindred, not like you can just remove the heart and draw a picture of it. Then again, how did someone get this angle on him, on his face? Quite the mystery. And I always did love a good mystery.”

“Thought you just loved shadows, hiding like a pussy?”

Art threw Matt a punch in the arm, and Matt returned it. And then another round, punch for punch. Daniel looked at Tash, and managed a subtle eye roll. Tash did her best to keep the laughter between sealed lips, but it didn’t work too well. Leave it to these two goofballs to go from professionally analyzing a blood ritual, to making jokes, in the middle of what looked like hell.

“Wraiths?” Art said.

“Wraiths,” Matt said.

Tash glanced Daniel’s way, but the man said nothing. She expected a ‘Wraiths?’ from him, to roll with the flow of the conversation, but that was her naivete showing through. If he knew or didn’t know anything about what they were talking about, it was advantageous for him to not let the Uratha know what he knew. Like her earlier, when they mentioned wraiths at the prison. She knew, and Daniel knew, wraiths were connected to Black Blood, and, maybe Maria. But that was all, and that wasn’t enough.

Art turned to face them, wincing as he looked down at the portrait of Jack in his hands. “I’m getting some familiar scents, but nothing I can pinpoint. I can’t track it down, but ... hunters talking with wraiths gives us something to look into. We’ll get back to you, or Jack, if something comes up.”

If something comes up. That meant something. Matt made a quick peek over his shoulder, and when she caught his eye, he offered a small wink.

They were going to show her something.

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~~Beatrice~~

Back in the Three Kings Cemetery, Triss looked up at the sky. Too close to South Side to see any stars.

Jacob probably hated that. A member of the Circle, long as he was, as old as he was? Man was probably born under the stars, and danced naked in the moonlight on regular occasion, back in the day before electricity, and phones, and cameras. Did he sacrifice humans callously? It wasn't hard to imagine, a Nosferatu getting hardcore about his delving into the dark arts, sinking deep into a pit of cruelty, malice, and madness to join it.

Hopefully, the mental image wasn't entirely accurate. Jacob seemed to have a soft spot, enough to at least do as Antoinette asked, and keep kills to kine who deserved it. But, she doubted the man, back in the day, realized he'd lose the stars by helping create a city. Probably didn't realize how much stuff he'd lose, going down that route.

Sympathy for the devil. And the devil, was whistling what she was sure was a Saturday morning cartoon theme from the eighties.

“Your sacrifice doing ok?” Jacob said.

“Um ... she's a sacrifice. Do we care?” Triss adjusted the body on her shoulder. Unconscious. A heavy woman, some muscle and fat to go with. Supposedly a killer, drug dealer, and a lot of things in between, according to Jacob. But considering the hellhole they picked her up from, a dark, dirty crack in the ground in Devil's Corner, she bet he was right.

The joys of cities, for Kindred at least, was that the population drifted into group categories, whether they wanted to or not. Certain

categories were easier prey, easier to make vanish. Certain categories were asking for it. Certain categories bred unjust, unfair environments, that naturally lent toward self destructive behavior. Sad as that was, deadbeats wanted by the police and liable to get thrown in jail for a few lifetimes, were perfect prey for Kindred who wanted to remain on the down low. Not all Kindred were concerned with the validity of the charges though, and she had to trust Jacob put in due diligence. Not the easiest thing to trust in him for.

No chance of them being seen, in Jacob's cloak of night. She and Jen were free to walk, skip, jump, or do whatever. Jacob took full advantage, while the rest of them were a lot more comfortable feeling the vibe of the cemetery: dead. They walked slow, somber, while Jacob hopped around, climbing up some tombstones, and offering a kiss to one of the larger angels.

"We care a little," Jacob said. "Don't damage the goods."

"She's a person." Jen sighed, rubbed her arms, and looked around. Didn't take her for the type to be afraid of cemeteries, but after what happened below, maybe that had changed.

"A wanted criminal, and justly so. As far as we're concerned, she's just a sacrifice." Jacob, in his dark robes, slid down the angel's side and approached Jennifer. "You wanted to go deeper down this rabbit hole, Jen. You'll have to get used to killing kine."

"I thought we fueled the rituals with vitae?" She said, bite in her voice as she pushed past Jacob. Took guts to push around the elder, but at this point Jen was familiar enough with the man to know he enjoyed it when people got snippy with him, pushed back. More familiar than Triss really, but unlike Triss, Jen's punches were harmless.

"We do, usually. But fresh blood can be used in different rituals, in different ways. And besides, we need the body. Gonna introduce you to an old friend."

Triss jumped over to Jacob, and reached out with her free hand to pull down on his robe to get him to walk beside her, lean in to her so she could whisper as they moved.

“The fuck, you’re going to summon that thing again?”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s my friend. He’ll want to meet Jennifer, and—”

“Black Blood? That ... that thing, that possessed the corpse first time you sent me into this mess? That thing is a god damn fucking ... thing! You seriously consider it a friend?”

“Ha! Sent you? You volunteered. And besides,” he draped his arm over her shoulder, and onto her other shoulder where the kine lay, “Black Blood’s eager to get to know you better. I trust him, he’s my friend, like I told you.”

“ ... better? It”—and it was an it, according to the sheriff—“is a fucking ... spirit. An actual, real, fucking nasty son of a bitch spirit, Jacob. The fuck sort of game are you playing at here?”

“Whatever do you mean, sweet Beatrice?” Chuckling, Jacob walked up to the mausoleum, and opened the stairway down into their lovely little slice of hell. He put a little distance between them so she had to speak up to keep the conversation going, meaning he didn’t want her to whisper anymore.

“I mean, that thing ... that thing scared the fucking shit out of me last time, Jacob. You can’t be—”

“I can be friends with whoever I want, Mom.” Bastard laughed, a little louder, as he pulled out his LED lantern, and started down the stairs.

They never talked about Black Blood. Jacob avoided the topic the few times she tried to bring it up, or kept his answers short and vague, like that time they were visiting Azamel. Figures, that Jacob wouldn't reveal more details about the alien entity that had possessed a corpse, and joined in torturing her that first night. She shivered as her mind delighted her with unfortunately vivid memories of the corpse staring down at her, laughing, as she, it, stabbed her in the stomach, and let Jacob explain the whole technique of learning a ritual. Empty the mind, let the beast through, and find your fucking zen.

They weren't doing that tonight, no plans to teach her more crucial rituals any time soon, thank god. Tonight Jacob was going to demonstrate a ritual, with Black Blood there, for whatever reason. Poor Jen, girl had no idea how deep this insanity went. Neither did Triss. And that was exciting, and terrifying.

Down into the depths and darkness. Down beneath the hundreds of dead of the cemetery. Down into the Earth where the light couldn't penetrate. Down into Jacob's home away from home. Triss adjusted the unconscious woman on her shoulder, and followed the robed man into the black, lit only by his lantern. Jen stayed close, and squinted her eyes to try and see ahead of them. Last time the sheriff had been waiting for them, and that had been scary in its own right.

"... you got another hole in the ground like this somewhere?" Triss said.

"Of course."

"Yeah, that makes sense. If Daniel knows where this place is, and I assume so does the Prince, you ... probably have some place that they don't know about." To do your more heinous, dangerous shit.

"I suggest you girls do the same. Find a place no one knows about, or make one. It might take a few decades, but with diligence and

determination, you can have your very own underground hole in the wall. Collect your favorite possessions. Bring your enemies so you can torture them safely, without fear of interference. Learn to play the drums without bothering your neighbors.”

Triss could almost hear Jen roll her eyes.

Slowly, they approached the bowl. It didn't take long for the bowl to mean something new to Triss, after the few times she'd seen it. Every time, it was pain. Every time, it was screams. Even now, she ducked her head and looked around at the walls of stone, sure she could hear the sounds of people dying. Her voice was mixed in there somewhere, had to be, still echoing from those nights of torture.

She set the kine down beside the bowl, and she squatted down next to them. Here, it was plain to see the dark skeletons holding up the bowl, the great weight on their bodies, crushing them, destroying them. She almost wanted to ask if Jacob had carved them, or sculpted them or whatever. Hard to tell what the material was, old as it was. Smooth stone, or old metal. Could you make something like this out of metal, back in the old days? Was it from the old days? Lot of questions, and she wasn't sure if she'd ever ask them.

Nah, she would eventually. It'd take time though.

Jacob picked the sacrifice up, and jumped into the bowl. Up and up, he raised her until he got her hands over the hook that dangled above, and let it catch the rope holding the kine's wrists. Dangling. Meat on a hook.

“Back in the days of yore, Kindred, or everyone really, thought that without pain, a sacrifice was meaningless. Burn the witch? She had to be awake for it, otherwise what was the point? Hang the criminal. Make sure they squirmed. Wasn't until the late 1800s they came up with humane neck snapping hangings. Heh.”



“So I guess we’re civilized, because we’re doing this with drugs? Keeping them under?” Jen circled the bowl, arms folded across her chest, and a touch of a sneer on her nose and lips. She wasn’t used to killing kine, and this display was closer to hanging and gutting a deer, than any sort of way a Kindred normally killed kine.

Triss was used to it, to separating herself from the reality that she was killing something she used to be, letting out her young Nosferatu frustration and beast on humans that deserved death. She’d developed quite the reputation in her younger years, and had had Garry talk to her multiple times about her bullshit. The Masquerade was more important than her life, and if she continued to increase the body count, the sheriff would put her out for sunrise. Probably nailed to a cross too, for dramatic effect at the Prince’s request. Her siring had been done without permission, after all; each day she was alive was a gift, according to Garry.

Jen’s younger years, on the other hand, had been lacking in the violence department. Sleeping around was about the worst of it, which meant nothing to a Kindred. She did have a couple kills to her, the typical accidents a young Kindred might have. But Jen didn’t have the animal inside her that was comfortable with killing prey; yet, according to Jacob.

“Indeed we are civilized, little lady, indeed we are.” Jacob hopped off the bowl, and started toward the other side of the room, where the darkness was impenetrable. “At least, relatively. It’s all relative. Everything is.” He tossed the LED lantern over his shoulder as he walked, and Triss jumped for it. If it broke, they’d be fucked, and have to feel their way out of here. Fucking bastard.

Snarling, she followed him.

“The fuck are you keeping back here?” she said.

“You probably don’t want to see.” The old man glanced over his shoulder at her. It was getting easier to read his body language,

despite the bandage over his eye sockets.

“Why would I—oh fucking god.”

The lantern reach was less, in the strange dark side of the room, like there was a fog fighting it. There was no fog though, just oppressive blackness, and Jacob’s wall of what the fuck. From this close, she could see he had chests, old fashioned wooden chests that you’d keep large blankets in, except in this case, it was bones. At least, one of the chests had bones sticking out of it, human bones. As she looked around, lantern raised, she noticed the other chests were partially open, one with handles sticking out, weapon handles. Knives, swords, similar. Another chest had limbs, rotting limbs. The smell hit her, and she gagged, causing the lantern to shake around in her hand as she struggled to remain standing. The smell was localized to this side of the room though, mostly. Maybe it had something to do with the weird blackness.

She raised the lantern, and tilted her head to the side. More symbols. So. Many. Symbols. Hundreds, thousands of them, many spattered with a language she’d never seen before, letters she didn’t recognize. Circles and triangles, in and outside each other, and various drawings of bones, of skulls. Cow skull, bird skull, others. No human skulls though, except for one, in the center of a triangle, in the center of the wall.

On the wall were chains as well, dangling, each lined with hooks, and many of the hooks held a body part of some kind. They seemed preserved somehow, as if someone had dried them, but without them shrinking. A hand. A foot. A leg. Limbs, angled and hung in a pattern, and Triss raised the lantern higher to scan the wall. The pattern was a loose circle, and a triangle of limbs within.

The wall was bleeding. Black? She stepped in closer, beside Jacob, and reached out with her free hand to touch the onyx liquid. Cold. But, as it coated her fingertip, it faded away, dripping off of her like

oil, but evaporating quickly like alcohol. This is where that alien thing came out of last time, then.

She looked at Jacob, and he looked to her, big Joker smile on his face.

“It was a long, long time, figuring out this ritual,” he said. Meandering along, he ran his fingers across the stone of the wall, the chains, the body parts, and smiled as he stopped in front of one of the symbols. A painted bird skull. Probably a crow, considering Triss was wearing a crow skull around her neck.

“What’s this ritual for?” Jen’s voice. Triss looked over her shoulder to find her fellow neonate hugging herself, and looking the wall of death up and down. Her eyes lingered on one of the chests, and the body parts it was full of. Like a heavy blanket, the smell enveloped her too, and she gagged, taking a step back.

“You’re about to find out. And, do keep this a secret, would you, Jen? The Prince knows, but as you can tell, the sheriff doesn’t appreciate what I’m doing. You can only imagine the sort of dirty looks I’d get if more people knew.”

“And what is that?” Jen said, gesturing to the wall. “I ... I don’t—”

“Words can’t do it justice.” Jacob chuckled a little more, opened one of the chests, and pulled out a large knife. “Come on. We get to eat!” With a slow, wandering sway, Jacob returned to the bowl, knife hand taking practice swings at the air. Like a child testing his new toy sword. “Did you know, my ladies, that I once met a Kindred, before I came to Dolareido, that didn’t eat only blood, but also flesh?”

“Flesh?” Triss followed him, Jen a moment later, and the Nos looked up at her boss with a raised eyebrow. “Doesn’t sound like a vampire.”

“And yet they suffered all the same weaknesses. Fire, daylight. Unfortunately for them, they had an extra weakness: the need to eat fresh flesh.”

That was some classic movie monster madness, by the sounds of it. “Sounds like ... sounds like something different. And how the fuck do you remember something that long ago? Thought you elders didn’t remember shit from that far back.”

“You wound me, Beatrice! Some of us remember better than others. Some of us take the time to write down important things, and reread our journals back to ourselves, to break through the illusions torpor brings.” Shrugging, Jacob gave the body a push, so she ... it swayed back and forth over the bowl. “I helped her. For a while, I hunted with her, back in the old days when ... when we embraced our beasts with reckless abandon, in the dark corners of the world. Even took a bite of flesh, to try it. Alas, couldn’t digest it.”

Jacob kept journals? What fortune would the Prince give Triss in exchange for those. What secrets, what power. Triss smirked, and looked back up to Jacob.

“What happened to her?”

“No idea. It was hundreds of years ago.” And with all the grace of a shitty butcher chopping up meat with a cleaver, he ripped the woman’s clothes from her body, and took a swipe at the hanging, naked flesh. The belly. Jen and Triss both jumped back, gagging, Jen choking along with it, as the woman’s guts fell into the bowl. Jacob didn’t let them fall out either, but made them come out, using his free hand and yanking the globs of meat free. “She fucked like a minx, though.”

Both women stared on, eyes wide, jaws dropping, as Jacob emptied the woman of her insides. Drugged to high heaven, she wasn’t waking up, and after this, she never would.

“Jesus, Jacob.” Triss walked around, held the lantern up despite herself, and peered into the bowl. Rope and rope of intestines. Kidneys. Liver. He ripped the diaphragm open and tore out the heart and lungs. He kept yanking things out, ripping, tearing, blood gushing over his robes. He managed to avoid other juices, other things that came out of the body and its organs, but he more than embellished in getting blood on himself.

The girls said nothing. Triss couldn't say anything, and a quick peek at Jen showed the same paralysis. The fuck. The fuck fuck fuck.

Jacob, laughing, chopped off the woman's leg. A hard hack, knife carving through skin and muscle and bone with a single swipe, before it got stuck in the other leg. Jacob grabbed the removed leg before it landed, hopped down off the bowl, and smiled at the ladies as he held it over his head. He let some of the drops of blood fall onto his tongue, then held it out to them. “Quickly now, before it spoils.”

Leg. Leg. He was holding a leg. As if to show off his trophy, he rolled the leg back and forth in his palms, and held it out to them. Muscle, fat, fresh dripping blood. Down deeper, and deeper, into this private pit of hell of theirs.

Oh, what the hell. She grabbed the limb, held it up by the knee, and let the blood drip onto her tongue.

This bloody display was disgusting. It was barbaric, and horrific, and ... thrilling. So dark, so wrong, so bad, that it stroked a little part of her brain, somewhere, that liked being bad. Life in the palm of her hand, life in so callous and visceral a form, a limb from prey. Part of her wanted to make a comparison to a chicken or cow leg, but that didn't do it justice. A human life, even a scumbag life like this kine's, someone Triss would have gladly killed in her younger years, was still significant and special. To feel a kine die in her arms

as she drank them to death, was a feeling she knew well enough to recall from memory. But this approach, dismembering, spilling all the blood everywhere, and tasting it from a limb? This wasn't feeding, this was a ritual. This was special too.

She held out the leg to Jen, and waited. Sure enough, after a few useless breaths, Jen took the leg, and did the same thing. A hunk of meat, of sacred meat, of something worthless and special, all wrapped in one.

Jacob nodded, smiled a quieter, more sincere smile, and tossed the leg into the bowl of death and pain. "Now, each of us will spill a drop of our blood onto the mess."

"Mess?" Jen, gagging some more as she leaned over the bowl, gestured to the entrails. "This was ... ugh."

"Kindred these days." More laughter, always with the laughter, Jacob slipped a knife out of his robe, and sliced open his palm with all the grace of a bulldozer. "You drink human beings, you drink their blood. Never forget what they are. A soul, wrapped in guts and muscle, sinew and bone, tendons, and"— he reached into the bowl, and pulled out something wet and dripping, something that fit into his palm—"organs. A divine combination of meat and something more. And, how easily, it all slips into nothing but a bowl." After tossing back in the lump of guts, the psycho reached his other hand out over the bowl, and squeezed his palm until a thick drop of Kindred blood fell into the gory mess. Without looking, he tossed the knife Triss's way.

She snatched it out of the air, and slit her palm open as well. Long passed giving a shit about being careful or gentle about knives and flesh. She stepped in toward the bowl, forced herself to look down at the abhorrent jumble of death, and dribbled a couple drops of her blood.

Jen took the knife, and cut her palm, but with a blatant wince and hiss. Not used to pain. She would be, if she continued down this road. Sighing, she dripped some blood onto the mess as well.

“Sure you don’t want to be back in the cave with your kine bedfellows, Jen?” Jacob said. “Or maybe Julias’s bed?”

The Ventrue rolled her eyes, and threw Jacob the knife. Almost threw the knife at him, too, but Jen seemed to calm down at the last moment. And once disarmed, she looked down at the cut on her palm as it healed.

“You’re just like Marcus. All you think about is sex,” Jen said.

“You’re the one sleeping with everyone in the city, not me.” The eyeless bastard shrugged.

“That’s not what I meant. You keep reducing people and their actions down to sex, and only sex. You don’t know me, Jacob.” She stomped over to him, and jammed a finger into his chest. “I like sex. That doesn’t mean it’s all I think about, or that I am defined by it.”

The old man laughed, and gave her a poke in the sternum too. “I know. Lighten up, girl. Been working for me for what, six, seven years? You need to let your tongue fly loose more, loose as your legs.” Without skipping a beat, the jackass pulled a necklace out of his robe, a string with various small animal skulls dangling from it, and started to shake them over the entrails.

Triss said nothing. Better to let these two hammer out their issues, than for her to jump in and make things worse. It was plain to see that Jacob kept the circle at arm’s length, and Triss was the first one, since his original circle, to really try and break through to the man. She was an asshole though, and could match Jacob’s asshole attitude easily. Jen was a calmer, more articulate, elegant sort, who didn’t like to get her words dirty.

She was going to have to learn. With all the blood and guts that'd be falling on them, drowning them in no time, Jacob wouldn't hesitate to get just as visceral with his language.

Jennifer snorted, and folded her arms across her chest once more. "When's the last time you gotten between anyone's legs, old man?"

Ok, maybe she could throw an insult or two.

Jacob, laughing like fucking Santa Claus, reached into his robe again, and pulled out another necklace. This one didn't have skulls, but it did have some stones, smooth black stones, wrapped and looped in the string the necklace was made from. He dangled it over the bowl, and shook it as well.

He began to chant. A language she didn't recognize. Sounded like it came from maybe the Middle East, but she didn't know shit about languages, so maybe not. Whatever it was, it sounded melodic, and almost hypnotic. Until the silence around them joined in, with the screams of the dead.

Hell opened its gates for them.

Drip. Drop. Drip drop. Black began to ooze from the walls, heavy, thick, sliding down the crevices of the stone like molasses. Scary, black molasses. It churned and bubbled, splashed and boiled, and splattered out over the stone floor of the cave, as it crept out toward them. Like a scene from a James Bond flick, the water in the cage rising to drown them. Except, this black liquid wasn't water, and Triss stepped away from it as it came closer, and closer.

Jacob did no such thing. With a big smile on his asshole face, the eyeless Nosferatu squatted down, and let the couple inches of heavy obsidian liquid roll across the bottom of his robes. He ran a finger through it too, scooping it around and around like a child playing with his pudding. Heavy and sticky, the strange liquid coated his fingers, and he laughed as he stood up to let it drip off.



“Um ... uh ... what do we do?” Jen said, backing up toward the exit.

Triss sighed, and held up a hand. “We wait ... Malachi here is going to show you ... well, some strange shit.”

“Malachi?”

The old man walked up to Jen, hooked an arm over her shoulders, and pulled her back toward the bowl. “An old name I sometimes used when communicating with the other side.”

“ ... the other side? Like ... the Disney song?”

“Shh!” Jacob shuddered, and pressed down on her shoulders, so the two of them started creeping along. “Don’t say the D word!”

Ok, Jen might have been annoyed and scared by the whole situation, but Triss couldn’t help but laugh.

“I ... I...” The Ventrue winced as she looked down, and shivered as the black ooze started to pour over her feet. “Is this ... what happened when you ... did this, Triss?”

“Nope, Jacob had already done his madness when I arrived.” Her turn to wince, as the ooze started to coat her feet. It felt cold, and alive. “Or at least, some of it.”

“Indeed my beauties, indeed. But this ritual is not always done in the same manner. There are many ways to break through the wall. Especially when you have help from the other side.”

“You sound like a cartoon villain,” Jen said. But, even as she tried to make jokes, come off strong, she was staring down at the cold, rippling liquid creeping up her ankles. Past the ankle, to the shin, and she started to shake. “I ... I still don’t know what’s going on. You mention Black Blood, but ... I thought we were here to learn crúac? I

thought we were going to ... to delve into ... the dark arts of the Circle?”

“Oh, but we are.” Jacob hugged her shoulders again, and gestured to the bowl.

The skeleton sculptures beneath the bowl were crying black tears. Heavy, thick globs of the onyx liquid fell from their empty eye sockets. If a skeleton could make a facial expression, horrified would be the word Triss would use to describe them now, as if their eyes had widened, as if their lips had pulled back, as if their pupils had dilated, mouths open and screaming their fear.

The ooze started to climb. Not up the girls anymore, or Jacob, but up the walls, the same walls it'd bled from. Defying gravity, it started to climb the stones, the symbols, the crevices, until all the walls were a mix of black flowing both up, and down. The ooze that surrounded them, covered their feet in the cold, started to creep along the ceiling. Gravity reversed, the ooze covered the stone above in the same way it did their feet, and, as if to taunt them for being bound by physics, it started to rain black. And then the pool of black around them started to rain upward.

It was no longer a question of avoiding or dodging the drops; they were coming from everywhere. The lantern fell from Triss's claws, and she cursed as she reached for it. Too late, it fell into the black, and floated. Thank god. Or, not floating, but rather, hands, obsidian hands rose from the goop, and kept the lantern aloft, four hands together, palms up. The only source of light, and the black ooze knew to keep it above the suffocating blackness.

Triss and Jen each turned around, slowly, stopping to stare at the floating hands for a minute, then looking at the raindrops of cold darkness going up, and down, up, and down, and then back to the floating hands. The skeletons holding up the ritual bowl continued to cry tears, but the skeletons on the top layer of the metal bones

cried tears downward, and the skeletons beneath cried tears upward. A pattern.

Then the screams erupted.

Triss and Jen threw their hands up to their heads, and covered them as best they could as a woman's shriek split the soaked, dark air. A man's followed, a bellowing holler that caused the black ooze to ripple. Another woman's, and another man's cries bounced around in the cave, echoing over the death water and into the Earth.

No wonder people called Three Kings Cemetery haunted.

Black mist began to roll over the area, swallowing everything as it crept over the black water. This part she recognized, this part Triss was here for last time. She forced herself to hold still, except for a couple steps toward Jen to get closer to her, as the rising onyx fog grew. There were screams in the fog tonight, far louder than last time, and Triss took Jen's hand, squeezed it, and closed her eyes as the mist swallowed them.

She opened her eyes. Just like last time, she could see. The black ooze was gone, no longer raining up and down, no longer coating the walls, no longer falling from the skeleton's eyes. Instead, mist leaked from their eyes, mixing into the gentle haze of darkness that swallowed them all. The lantern was gone. The light was gone, but she could see, and she knew the others could see too. The screams started to fade away, and a calmness settled over them. The sort of calm you'd expect to find by surrendering to hypothermia in an icy river, letting the numbness of your body sink you into sweet oblivion.

A hand snapped out, enormous, solid black ooze with mist dripping from the claws, and the hand ripped the corpse from the hook.

Jen screamed and jumped back, crouching, ready to fight or flight. But, both Jacob and Triss raised a hand, and motioned for her to come back. Impressive that the Ventrue responded that way; Triss figured she'd fall on her ass.

“Oh my, three blood of the undead tonight. Why, I can feel a certain tingle to that, if I may say so.” In the darkness beyond them, beyond the bowl, in the black where Jacob's wall of goodies sat, the sound rolled out from, as if the abyss was speaking to them. And, unless Triss was going out of her mind, the abyss had ... a bit of a southern accent?

“Trying a new voice today, old friend?” Jacob said to the darkness.

“No, old friend, this is an old voice.” The deep, bassy rumble defied gender standards. Multi-layered and thick, the strange sound vibrated through the air, through the bowl and metal, and into the bodies of the Kindred staring, one of them with jaw dropped. “This one, you brought me ... a hundred a fifty years ago, Malachi. I remember. A Mister Gardener? What a fine man he was. Fine man.” The laughter was deep, melodic, almost soothing, like as if someone gave a blue whale a southern drawl, and a cigar.

“Ha, did I? Christ, that's a fucking long time ago. Was he fat?”

“That he was.” Black Blood's laughter drew them in, or Triss at least. The rumbling grumble, from beyond the veil of shadow that swayed in the black beyond the bowl. That was a sexy voice. A sexy, alien, unimaginable voice.

Twitching movement. Flesh, naked, sagging and thick, flopped and stumbled as it came out of the blackness. Unnatural movement was easy to see, for any person. A subtle twitch, a sway that didn't make sense, something that broke what humans learned were common movements to all other humans. Horror movies took advantage of that, made ghosts or whatnot twitch in unnatural or

impossible ways. The uncanny valley, something that looks human, but a part of your brain knows it's not.

Jen and Triss groaned, quietly, in disgust at the sight of the sacrifice's body coming forward. The removed leg was reconnected to the pelvis, but hovering maybe half an inch beneath the joint, with black mist seeping out of the empty space. As the corpse came forward, knees crunched, ankles twisted and broke, and the body's right arm snapped back and forth at the elbow, ninety degrees in the wrong direction. Crack. Crunch.

"That ... that is ... w-what..." Jen stared on, hands fallen limp at her sides, until one hand managed to rise and touch a couple fingers to her bottom lip. Jaw still dropped.

The corpse came closer, and as she—it opened her mouth, black mist seeped from over its teeth. The closer it got, the closer the wall of black behind it came, a second wall of black fog Triss did not want to touch.

As it stood there, one of its arms snapped off completely, tearing, twisting like a crocodile death rolled it. It grew still after, arm now hovering to the shoulder, attached by black mist instead of tendons and ligaments.

"Come, stand by the offering." It waved them in, motion jerking, not smooth at all, as it walked over to the bowl.

Gulping, Triss did as requested, and walked over to stand in front of the entity. Jen did as well, after a moment or two. Jacob was already there, waiting, arms across his blood-soaked chest, and a warm smile on his face. So very, very creepy.

"And who is this fine lady?" it said, nodding in Jen's direction as it leaned over the bowl. Twitching grip found one of the organs, the liver, and Black Blood raised it from the bowl to examine it. Triss

was sure the entity would have begun eating it, but, instead, it inspected the liver bringing it up to its face, and eyeing it.

“ ... Jennifer.”

“Well Jennifer, pleasure to make your acquaintance. I do hope this meeting leads to a grand friendship.” The corpse winked at her, and squeezed the sacrifice’s liver, until it popped.

# Chapter 61

~~Jack~~

“Promise me ye’ll keep this a secret,” Fiona said to the two of them. “Azamel’s warning wasn’t for aw folk to hear. I screwed up.”

“I hadn’t told anyone about this before you brought it up.” Laughing, Jack gestured to the darkness ahead of them. “How’d you get us here? One moment I was in a jungle, next I’m walking through dark again, now I’m ... in a warehouse?” Yeap, warehouse. The large, dirty windows high above, the towers of metal beams holding rows upon rows, shelves upon shelves, of boxes, the forklifts, and all the amenities. He did not envy anyone a job moving or boxing products, dealing with nothing but enormous walls of capitalism personified. Slave labor.

“Mmhmm.” Giggling, the Scot tugged on their hands, and dragged them both through the warehouse, between the isles of boxes piled sky high. A big damn warehouse, exporting some sort of toy or blanket or something equally innocuous. “There’s a lot of tricks I’ve learned from Vrall. And, both in the dream, and in the physical world, I can see the gates.”

“... gates?” Damien said, glancing around. “This is Banner’s Fields warehouse. They sell ... I don’t know, really. Nothing anyone cares about. I don’t see any gates.”

Jack nodded. “And we should be careful. Could be people working late.”

Fiona took a moment to glance around, and everyone took a longer moment to listen. But other than distant cars, it was unlikely anyone would be around this late in North Side. Damien shook his head too; no one around.

“Lads, there are tunnels atween worlds. Ye ken nae everything is limited to the physical world, to these flesh and bone things we all like so much. There are ... strange places, in the beyond. And ye ken who can see those places? Visit those places? This lass.” She pointed her two thumbs at herself.

“ ... what sort of places?” Jack said.

“I’m nae sure, honestly.” She shrugged, and skipped ahead, sneakers kicking along the concrete, and fingers touching boxes as she moved by. “There’s the Shadow world, that the Uratha deal with. Begotten don’t normally go there, according tae Vrall. Nae reason to. The things there are ... they aren’t what we need. We cannae feed off them.”

Jack tilted his head to the side as he followed after her. “Something monsters can’t eat? The spirits?”

“Exactly. That place is ... it’s a shadow, and it doesn’t have what we need for food, like we find in folk. Nothing for us to devour. And, it’s a dangerous place.”

“More dangerous than Dolareido?” Damien didn’t sound convinced. “Considering the ritual Jack described, I find that hard to believe.” Walking slow, he continued looking around, eyes open for anyone that might be nearby, and no doubt ready to turn on his cloak of night if needed. “And, we have assault rifles and explosives here. Shotguns too.”

“They have entities that defy reasoning!” She leaned in toward Damien, hugged his arm to her chest — hoodie and jeans were hilariously cute on her — and waved across the empty air over her. Parting the night sky they couldn’t see. “Trees that talk. Deer with wings. Roads that walk.”

“ ... roads that walk?” Jack said. What? How the fuck did that make any sense?



Fiona laughed at him, and poked him in the shoulder. “Ye’ll find out soon enough. But, be careful to not ... do anything? I dinnae ken much about this world, except that it’s dangerous, and there’s these ... we’ll, maybe ye’ll be able to make sense of it. I can’t.” At the end of the warehouse, before a roll-up door, she held out her hands.

And the world changed.

Damien and Jack stepped back, and drew weapons as the wall started to vibrate and screech with a loud hammering, as if a hurricane had shot itself across the ocean and decided to pay them a surprise visit. The walls shook, trembling with the weight of the impacts Jack could not identify. The walls began to do more than vibrate, they began to bend. Both vampires ducked, expecting the twisting material to shatter or explode with the colossal pressure, but the walls had no intention of losing their solidity, bending with a curve of the air like looking through shaped glass.

It was like looking into a black hole. Fiona kept her hands up, fingers trembling, the horror inside coming out and engulfing her in its form. No longer simply Fiona, but the Vrall creature as well, both standing there, both with hands outreached. Vrall had a lot more limbs though, and she used them against the air, pulling it apart to expose the guts of the universe. The universe didn’t like that, and the little bit of light in the warehouse flickered, lost to the void descending on them. Jack expected the light bulbs overhead to shatter, and rain down sparks, or for fire or lightning to crack the air. Instead, he stared into a void, a black void that cut into the emptiness before them. Black didn’t do justice to describe the depth of the abyss.

What was the name of that new black, blacker than black black? Vantablack? Blackest? Like that, something that pulled his eyes in until he felt like he was sinking.

“You ... found this?” Damien said.

“Mmhmm. Someone, or something, made it, a long time ago. And there are others, in the city. The wolves don’t know about them, or at least don’t use them, but they don’t need them to get into the Shadow world. And these gates can go other places too, if you can find them.”

Jack gulped, and stepped beside her, and the deadly spider creature sharing her space. “You can’t make them?”

“Maybe some Begotten can. I can’t. I can tunnel into the dream, and into this physical world. But other places? I have to find those doors, like this one, and they’re almost always locked. But...” With a big, happy grin, she winked at him, and looked back to the portal before them. “Begotten are monsters. True, real, monsters. We go where we want.”

She yanked her hands apart, and tore the blackness open. It bled gold and white over them, a rushing water that had both vampires reaching up to block it with their hands. But it did not touch them, despite washing over them, covering them, burying and drowning them in the flowing colors. Plenty to see, colors shining, but nothing to touch them, like it didn’t exist.

“I ... holy shit.” Jack lowered his gun, and looked out to the sides of golden road ahead of them. Not a road, no, an unending wall of fog, that was a road, that was surrounded by swirling gray cracking against an endless tapestry of blacks and vortex whites.

“Stay on the road,” she said, hand gesturing out to the gold before them. “There are ... things, in the black out there. And ye could get stuck, or lost, or ... or things. Vrall has memories of things in the black, dangerous things.”

“In the black?” Damien caught up, and looked out to the void around them, the dark gray of a storm incoming, with ebbing onyx tipped with curving sparks of silver. “Something ... something lives in there?”

“Something lives everywhere.” Fiona shrugged, rubbed her arms a little, tiny shivers working up and down her arms and legs. “I dinnae ken what or how something can live in this wall, this strange wall, but things do. Other things live in the Shadow, where we’re going, and other things live in ... other places. Live, in their own way.”

“Nightmares,” Jack said.

“No, that’s where I come from. That’s what I am.” Fiona hip bumped him. Her horror was gone. Now, it was only the girl, a small, curvy little redhead with a grin on.

He remembered the bloody Dolareido nightmare. He remembered the stairway to hell, where Athalia waited for him. He remembered the jungle, dark, filled with rot, insects, howling monkeys and growling jaguars. The smothering humidity that threatened to drown him, if he needed to breathe. The two moons.

None of that was as scary as the wall he was walking through, the unimaginable, the strange, a wall he couldn’t begin to think about in terms of measurements. Might as well have been an optical illusion.

At least nightmares made sense, in a way, a thing born of human fear, and human imagination. His simple, weak little mind couldn’t handle the width of a literal dimension he was walking through. Would it even look like a gray and black void filled with white lightning to others? What would the Uratha see? What did Fiona see?

Maybe he’d be better off not seeing where this rabbit hole took him. Ah well, too late.

The golden road was a gateway Fiona had found, not created. That alone was terrifying enough. But, as they moved along, and the golden road came to end, a wall of a new color presented itself, silvers, with black jagged streaks running down through them.

“Someone tore this door open from the other side,” Fiona said. “Ye can see it ‘ere. Can ye see it? There are ... na words I can use to describe the shape or color, na English words for them.”

Guess his gut was correct then. A simple little vampire; Athalia called his kind nothing more than blood leeches. Now, looking up at such alien and colossal constructs, things well beyond him, things that monsters touched upon in their everyday life, he couldn't blame her for looking down on him.

“I can see ... a little of damage, I think?” Damien said. His sword was still in his hand, but Jack doubted it'd do anything to anything in this place.

“It's closed now. I'll open it.”

Jack leaned forward past Fiona a few inches, eyes staring at the bleeding, crackling colors. “I don't understand how you're doing this.”

“The world is our playground, Jack.” Her voice dropped deeper, losing its giggles and chuckles as she stuck her hands out, Vrrall shadowing over her once again. “The physical world is our feeding ground, but the whole world is ... well, ye'll see.”

The white cracks of lightning broke away, and the silver cascade of waterfall aether started to split, as Fiona's arms began to shake harder. Big grin on her face, despite the tonal shift of the voice. She was happy to be doing this for them, taking them along on this perilous journey into fucking only God knew where. She knew, but she was some sort of inter-dimensional traveler! Biggest leap Jack had made this far out of his comfort zone, of his own choice anyway, was visiting a club. This was a bit bigger a jump.

He tried to imagine Azamel doing this, the titanic, giant elephant monster, opening doors for the two little vampires. He couldn't.

The door, or silver waterfall, or whatever the fuck it was, split apart, and the next world greeted them. The gold and white of the road, the black, gray, and white lightning of the wall between realms, it all collapsed and shattered, crashing down around them with explosive effect. Jack and Damien jumped, smashing into each other as each leapt away from the walls that had once surrounded them, threatening them with its void. For a moment, Jack thought he was inside a mirror, and someone had come along and smashed it, like falling sparks, bits of mirror glass splitting and crackling around the asphalt around them.

Asphalt! Street! Oh thank fucking god. Jack climbed off of Damien, and tapped on the street a few times with his palms, before bouncing up onto his feet. Yes, asphalt, something he understood. Damien held out a hand, and Jack yanked him up so the two of them were standing, and looking behind them. The wall of the factory where Fiona had originally opened the strange gate. Now they were on the other side, out on the street.

It looked like a dinosaur had gone to town on the wall. Enormous claw marks decorated it, jagged, snaking, black lines left in their wake; the poor building was ripped into. The claw marks didn't penetrate the wall, but they looked deep enough, big enough, like they should have. Instead of being able to see through the giant slash marks, he found only a strange blackness inside the slashes. Staring into the void? No, the void, or wall between realms, had been black and gray, with white lines, to his simple Kindred eyes. Whatever he was seeing beyond these slash marks, was solid black.

“Torn ... open... ?” He looked to Fiona, and she nodded as she scanned the scar marks herself.

“I guess ye cannae see it? I can see the gate, and the damage this thing did, opening the gate. But nae on the other side where we entered the gate, almost as if someone opened the other side with a key.” She shrugged, and reached out a hand to press against the wall

of the factory, beneath one of the enormous scars. "I've seen other gates too, with this sort of damage, opened from the physical world's side though. Someone or something is traveling around, and doing ... something. Lot of somethings. But that's why I brought ye lads! Ye're the smart ones, sneaky ones. I bet ye'll be able to find out who." She shrugged, and gestured back out to the street behind them.

Jack and Damien stared on, and gulped.

The Shadow world. The most ridiculous name he'd ever heard, but, as he looked across the darkened asphalt, the twisting and bending street lamps, the moon above fading in and out like a heartbeat, and the skittering black wisps on the air, he couldn't think of a better name.

It was Dolareido! It was, and it wasn't. What the fuck was going on? He stepped out onto the street and peeked left and right. It was North Side, not too far from South Side at this point, and normally there'd be visible traffic no matter the time of night in this area. Not here. And yet, it was Dolareido, sort of. The street lamps all had a bend to them, and a bit of a corkscrew twist, each pointing toward South Side. Bats flew by, but they weren't bats. Eyeballs? They had tendrils, tentacles even, so they looked a bit like a squid, who happened to have a giant eyeball in the center of the main body.

The insanity didn't stop there. It wasn't obvious at first, hidden in shadows and the uneasy lights that never stayed perfectly consistent, but there were things, moving things. Jack drifted toward a sidewalk, and looked up and down the building. The windows were solid black, and they dripped of a clear liquid. Water? He bent down by the building's side, and squinted at what looked like rats. Except, not rats. Their features weren't defined enough, as if someone had only done the basic layout of a rat, and forgot to tighten it up with specific fingers and toes or a face. And it wasn't running, it was floating, a couple inches over the pavement. Three

of them hovered together, and moved along the base edge of the building, into the shadows beyond.

He looked up, and gasped. A crow! Except it was huge. Gargantuan and overwhelming, the great creature flapped its wings once, twice, and settled on the top edge of the building.

“... from Gurihal?” it said, blinking its immense black eyes at them. The head tilting was very birdlike, but it was talking English. The voice was crow-like though, a half caw, half croon sound.

Either this was a strange coincidence, or crows and Dolareido had more of a connection than Jack thought. Mental note: get back to the real world and give Mulder and Scully some attention. They deserve it.

“You speak English?” Damien said.

“Yes. I speak English. Give me your names, tiny bugs.”

So very tempted to say ‘well fuck you too’, but, that wouldn’t work so well on this side of the wall, he imagined. Oh good god he was going to play intermediary to spirits, or at least, first contact ... ambassador?

“I’m Jack Terry, Kindred of the Invictus,” he said, to the giant talking bird. Hard to wrap his mind around, hard to accept, but there it was, sitting on a building with black windows that continuously dripped rain despite the lack of rain. “I’m investigating this.” He gestured to the damage behind him.

He had no idea if it was a good idea to be honest with this giant bird thing. It wasn’t like it was a secret, but having these spirits know who he was wasn’t the smartest idea. Lying wasn’t necessarily better. Welp, when in doubt, go with your instincts. Something Jessy would say, he was sure, and something he’d never do in the past.

“ ... so you are the Terry.” The enormous creature flapped its wings once again, before settling down, and began preening itself.

“The Terry?” Fiona said, standing beside him. “I’m sorry, ye know about Jack?”

“ ... you wish to know?” It flapped its wings once again, thrice this time, and the heavy air fell on them with the gust. Jack couldn’t identify the smell. Kind of like Mulder and Scully, but not. “Trade.”

Damien frowned, and came in close to the two of them. “We should leave. We have seen what we wanted to see.” Hand back and pointing to the enormous claw marks and the dark abyss they left behind, he came in closer until he was almost touching foreheads with them. “This place is unnatural.”

Fiona shook her head. “It’s nae unnatural. This place is old, Damien, just as old as the physical world that ye think is the normal world. Been ‘ere since...”

“Since the divide. But, that is not knowledge for me to share.” With a long, gentle caw, the bird entity stuck its head out, and tilted it to the side to look at them with one eye. “I will tell you why people know the name Terry, if you will tell me why you have come.”

“ ... you could lie,” Jack said.

“Could I?” The creature shook its head, ruffled its feathers, and clawed at the building’s roof edge a few times.

Damien did not like that. Frowning all the more, he began to walk around, pacing, steps slow and calculated, eyes darting around. Normally he’d walk with his hands in his overcoat pockets, but he had them out, sword drawn and free hand ready to draw his pistol at a moment’s notice. Would those things even work in this place?



This was the third Dolareido the three of them had seen, now that he thought about it. The physical one, the specific nightmare version that Fiona had found, and now some sort of mirror world of Dolareido. Why, why couldn't things remain simple, grounded in solid matter? This was turning into witchy magic overload. He had to get back to the physical world, go hang out in a club and seduce some ignorant kine, or maybe stalk the alleys and catch one by surprise. Hunt on the asphalt, hunt in the buildings made of wood, brick, marble, concrete, and steel. Wear sunglasses at night and edgy trench coats, typical vampire stuff. Solid things he could wrap his mind around. Looking around at the spirit world was giving him the impression it wasn't solid at all. Felt solid, but whenever he let his eyes linger on something, he started to notice a piece of it wasn't holding perfectly still.

Poor Damien couldn't have been happy about this. Visible confirmation of a parallel world probably didn't jive too well with his beliefs. Jack didn't think they were mutually exclusive, but he was no expert.

“Ye cannae lie?” Fiona said.

The crow shrugged. “Maybe?”

Ok, diplomatic moment. Trust the bird. Don't trust the bird? He knew nothing about negotiating with spirits, and he doubted any Kindred did. The Uratha did, but they wouldn't share that information. What did Avery say about the spirits? They existed for one purpose only, to spread their influence, and for the case of spirits, that was a far more impactful, palpable thing. And how they went about doing that wasn't something that just happened to be a motive, it manifested in the spirit itself, if those sex spirits were anything to go by.

What did that make this bird? It was enormous, and it was a crow. A bird well adjusted to living in the city, smart, observant. And

maybe it wasn't only the bird itself, but what did crows represent? He had no idea if what they represented would affect its portrayal here, but, crows were often considered signs of death in some cultures, signs of messages and revealing information in others. In Dolareido, they were the denizens of the sky, as much a part of it as the humans living there, so people generally felt. Maybe that was it.

“ ... like I said, we're investigating,” he said, and he gestured back to the cut in the world, the slithering black lines, and the deep crevices they'd left. “We want to know who or what is causing things like this, as there are more damaged gates like it.”

“Oh? You search for knowledge about the scars?” The bird picked at a feather under its wing a few times, before eying them once again, head to the side. “Why?”

“That wasn't part of the deal. I told you why we came here. I don't need to tell you the why of the why.”

“ ... I see why the eyeless one mentioned you.”

“ ... w-what?” Jack looked to Damien and Fiona, and his fellow Kindred winced as he grit his teeth. Fiona did too, a moment later once she pieced it together. “Jacob was here?”

“The eyeless one may or may not have been. I tell you that he mentioned your name, to some denizens of the Hisil. I need not tell you how.”

Heh, yeah, fair play. But, why would Jacob bring him up? And who did he bring him up to?

“ ... two minute conversation with the first thing that can talk in this realm, and we're rendered confused as all shit.” He looked behind him, to the enormous scars. Go back? They probably should go back, it wasn't sa—Damien tapped him on the shoulder. Jack looked at him, and followed his gaze up, to the sky.

A cloud was coming. Massive, black, and unless he was hallucinating, it had wings. A lot of titanic, black wings, that spread across the sky. It cut through the moonlight, and shimmered as the moonlight struck it, caused it to gleam with far more presence than any cloud should have. And, after a quiet moment with everyone staring, it cracked lightning, a streak of blinding white that hit the city somewhere in the distance. But a second later, the skull-rattling thunder said it wasn't so distant.

“Um, Fiona?” Jack said, backing up.

“Y-Yeah, let's go.” She tapped Damien on the shoulder, and began to back up toward the scar.

The bird didn't like that. It flew down, and let the impact of the wind gush knock them back a few feet as it fell in front of the damaged wall. “Why do you leave?”

“Um, because of that thing?” He pointed to the incoming cloud.

The crow shrugged, if that's what a shrug looked like on a crow anyway. Jack's crows never did that, never raised their wings up at the tip toward their heads. Human gesture on a crow was strange.

“The Harrowing Provisioner? It will come, it will go. You three, you must stay. Talk with me.”

Come and go? Giant death cloud will come and go?

“I don't trust you,” Damien said.

“Smart, smart to not trust.” The crow nodded its head up and down a few times, each time turning its skull to look at them with a different eye. “But, safe with me. Jacob is no friend of I. Black Blood and his agenda do not concern me either. Come, I'll show you.” The giant crow started walking, same as Jack's crows would. Which made no sense, because the larger an animal, gravity and mass

distribution across surface area worked differently. But, it did anyway, same as Azamel's giant horror did. Nothing in these worlds ever followed the rules.

Ok, follow the enormous spirit crow, or run away, from a possible treasure trove of information. He already had his hands full with hunting down the hunters, and trying to learn more about the ritual that had the picture of him. He really shouldn't be biting off more than he could chew. But he wanted to know more about this Black Blood too.

What the heck.

"Alright," he said, and shrugging at Fiona and Damien, he followed after the enormous bird. "What's your name?"

"I am the City Sky." It nodded, cawed, and continued along. Birds could walk, and it was often easier for them to do so than fly, from Jack's experience. But seeing a giant bird do it was bordering on hilarious.

"City Sky? I ... I suppose, yeah, crows do represent the sky of a city, in a way." The name made him smile. Fellow citizens, denizens of the sky. He had it right.

"Jack," Fiona said, catching up to them, "this is dangerous. We cannae trust this spirit, and who the fuck knows what's waiting out 'ere for us?"

"You don't know?" he said.

"Na! I don't explore this place. This isn't for Begotten. These spirits have as much mind as the wind or stone. They are wind and stone! Without a subconscious, there's nothing for me to feed on." Shivering again, she rubbed her arms, and looked out into the city streets, and the twisted reality it had. "And there are things 'ere we should be scared of."

“Black Blood is busy,” Sky said, turning its head and pecking Fiona in the arm, hard enough to make her squeak and jump away. And Jack laughed, cause it was damn funny to see a huge crow peck at a person smaller than them. Funnier, to see her punch back, and miss, as the crow yanked its head back and hopped away.

He really needed to go find Mulder and Scully the moment this insanity was done.

Damien came up on the other side of the bird. “Busy? Do we care about this Black Blood?” For all the madness being dumped on them on the reg, Jack was surprised the man was looking the bird up and down like it was a mythical, dangerous creature of legend, and not just a big bird. Jack was starting to become jaded, at this point, to the wonders that existed beyond what he knew only a year and a half ago, much as he preferred the solid world. And Fiona might as well have been walking down Ordinary Lane, despite the fear she was showing.

“Black Blood has much to say, much to control, in Dolareido,” the bird said.

Jack chuckled. “I’m surprised you call it that, Dolareido. I figured it’d have a more spirit-y name.”

“It does. Translates to: Blood-Flowing-Sex-City. Jacob laughed, when he heard that. Called it Dolareido.”

“You met Jacob?” he said. Blood-Flowing-Sex-City was a bit of a mouthful, but apt.

“Yes. Trade?”

“... do we have to trade? We are trading anyway, that’s what a conversation is.”

“Spirits trade.” The bird laughed, if it could be called that, a weird cawing croon sound, and pecked at its breast feathers some before it resumed walking. “But, not all trades must be so exact. So, yes, conversation. Yes, half-head,” the bird said as it glanced Damien’s way. Jack had to try doubly hard to not laugh at the hair remark, and Damien’s half shaved head. “Yes, Black Blood is dangerous. Very dangerous. Controls much of Blood City. The Harrowing Provisioner does not get along with him. Neither does Red Tide or Street-Tail King.”

“Who are they?”

“Powerful. Powerful entities.” Caw caw. “Politics in city are dangerous. Uratha meddle, try and fix problems. Sometimes work. Sometimes. You?”

“Ha, yeah, not too dissimilar a boat, actually. Uratha causing trouble for us, but helping us out too.” Careful, don’t throw away information by being too honest. Control your Achilles heel. Oh, oh, oh! “Does the name Minerva sound familiar to you, Sky?”

“Yes.”

Yes! Oh shit, he was dancing on the edge of another precipice, and this one was pure information. Even more dangerous.

“What can you tell me about her?”

“Nothing. Know nothing.”

“... shit. Where did you hear her name from?”

“Where did you?” Caw. Good play though, good play on its part.

“Jacob and the Uratha said her name. She was Jacob’s old love. Killed by the Uratha over sixty years ago.”

“Oh! Big info, big. Very big.” It nodded, a bunch of times, never stopping its bird walk though. “Black Blood once mentioned her, to his wraiths, long ago. Maybe sixty years ago. Something about failure. That’s all I know.”

This creature had gone from uncooperative, to very, in a small amount of time. Either Jack had a natural affinity for crows, or this spirit of the city sky spoke a language Jack understood: city gossip, the sort of gossip an eavesdropping crow might be interested in.

A hand on his shoulder pulled him back. Fiona, eyebrow raised, and glaring into him.

“Jack,” she said, “this isn’t a good idea. What are ye doing?”

“Sky is giving us info, info we so terribly need.”

“It’s a spirit, Jack! Spirits give nothing for free.”

“So I’ve noticed. We’re trading information.”

Damien stepped in, pushing Sky’s beak out of the way so he could stand in close. “You’re trading information with a spirit, and you have no idea what the repercussions of that will be.”

Typical Kindred. He could understand the paranoia, the concern, always looking over the shoulder thinking an enemy was on your tail. But they were flying blind, in trying to figure out this warning Azamel gave them. They had to try something.

And maybe, City Sky might know more.

“Sky, do ... have you ever heard of a ritual, involving a human sacrifice, and drawing body parts?”

“I have, I have.”

“Know anything about it?” Booya!

“No,” it said. Fuck. “But Street-Tail King does.”

He looked back at Damien and Fiona again. Both were shaking their heads. What do what do what do what do.

“Where is Street-Tail King?”

“Near the Blood Tower.”

“ ... can—”

Damien and Fiona both grabbed him, and started dragging him back to the gate. Shit.

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~~Eric~~

“You ok Kat?” Eric said. The little dumbass meowed at him, and rubbed against his leg. “Probably didn’t even know I was gone.” Meow meow.

Rolling his eyes, he sat down on the couch, lay down, and put his feet up on the arm. Kat wasted no time, and jumped onto his chest. Within moments, she had her head against his neck, forehead pressing into his jaw and under it, body vibrating with purrs. Not a care in the world.

He looked around at the boxes lying everywhere, and smirked. Other cats would be upset, other cats would be freaking out, other cats would be backed into a corner and hissing at anyone nearby, if their home was getting uprooted. Not Kat. Kat was beyond dumb, and he appreciated it. Loved her for it.

Maybe he needed a woman in his life, of similar temperament and intelligence? That Fiona girl was a joyful sort, and perhaps not the sharpest tool in the shed. A lot of similarities between Kat and her, young and stupid and eager to make friends. Then again, so was



his wife, in a way; her joviality hid the insidiousness underneath, though.

He set his hand on Kat's ears, and began to scratch. Gentle little strokes of the fingertip along her cheek, under her chin, around and over her eyebrow, and the inner tip of her ear. She wasn't a big fan of the full body stroke, much preferring to keep it localized to the head and neck. So he did, and smirked as her purring increased in volume, until it was like a massage against his chest.

"Tomorrow, Kat. Tomorrow we'll be moving to a new place. Bigger, better, a lot more room for you, and less smell." The scent of pot and cigarettes was soaked into the walls at this point, and his new nose did not appreciate it. "You'll probably see Jessy at some point, more than likely. And maybe that Fiona girl."

He closed his eyes, and let his mind drift to the two women. Fiona's body, curvy, hourglass, short, stacked. Her cute button nose, her long, frizzy red hair, her bright smile, her gold eyes. The feel of her insides clenching on his finger had been heavenly. The sight of her large, soft breasts jiggling as she came on his fingers, had been intoxicating.

And then there was Jessy, his new boss. Muscle, lean and curvy, plentiful breasts bouncing against her defined chest, abs crunching and rolling as she ground on his dick. The blissful smile.

He was getting hard just thinking about the two of them.

The divorce had put a serious dent into his sex drive, he knew that, but since the changes had started to happen, his dick had returned with a vengeance. Sex was on his mind all day, every day, since that first night at the club with Jessy and Fiona. He tried to pass it off, and not let the manipulative vampire realize how much he was hurting for it; but no doubt the woman could read through him. She had a lot of years on him, and probably knew how to manipulate men — and women — easily. So he cut himself a break,

and didn't beat himself up over letting her manipulate him. Win win scenario for everyone involved, far as he could tell.

He spent a lot of time looking for a catch in the deal too. The dangers were upfront and spelled out for him though, and the new rules and walls on his life were plain to see. If there was a catch he couldn't see, it was hidden damn well, because everything else was told to him straight. And the perks? God damn, the perks were amazing. Getting his idiot dad to a better hospital was great. Getting himself into a luxury suite on top of that was even better.

Getting his life controlled by vampires and their dark agendas, not so much. A gilded cage.

“... the dreams haven't stopped, Kat.” Sighing, he sat up, and adjusted his baby so she was on his lap instead. Damn girl didn't even bother to open her eyes. “They're only getting worse.” Nightly, vivid dreams, or nightmares, about hunting and defending territory, about howling at the moon, about the moon trying to talk to him, none of that was stopping.

Where the fuck was Fiona?

He got up, set Kat down on her tower, and walked around. Boxes all over the place. Ultimately, not as many boxes as he figured most people would need. He threw out most of his old shit from his old life, or sold it. Paintings and crap, sold. Pictures of him and his wife, thrown out, sometimes burned. The really nice blender he used to have? Sold. The pillow cases that his wife had picked out? The texture alone warranted burning, tainted by the whole experience.

Something about divorce brought out the worst in people, the thousands of idiosyncrasies that grated on each other building up to explode over years of being at each other's side. A lot more going on in that marriage than just her being the asshole; he'd been one too.

He sighed, set his hands down on the counter top in his kitchen, and took a moment to do some exercises for his bad knee. Slow, gentle motions, keep things aligned, keep things flowing smooth.

The box on his counter labeled KITCHEN SHIT was filled with nothing but utensils, plates, cups, and some other bare bones miscellaneous crap. Maybe now he could afford some fine china again? Ha, no, never again. Fuck the useless crap, fuck anything that weighed him down with pointless burdens. From now on, if it wasn't something he was going to use at least once a month, he wasn't going to buy it.

Maybe he'd try living without a car for a while? He was within walking distance of his new job, and if he wanted to go anywhere, the thought of driving there made him gag. Then again, the thought of being in a cab made him gag twice over. Never again.

Kat jumped up onto the counter, rubbed against a box, and then against his arm. Needy, so needy. He chuckled, and started to scratch and stroke her chin once again.

“What do you think, girl? Think you'll like a luxury suite? Expensive furniture included, ready for you to destroy.” Meow. “A hot tub for you to avoid like the plague.” Meow meow. “And I'll start getting you the best food, all wet food, chicken and turkey and duck and rabbit.” Meow.

Knock knock.

He raised a brow, and looked down at Kat. The idiot did not hesitate to jump down from the counter, and walk from the kitchen, through the living room, and up to the front door of his shitty little apartment. Meow. With a sigh, he followed after her.

“Kat, that could be a huge dog barking itself hoarse and you wouldn't care. Come on, get outta here.” He scooped her back with his foot, and stepped up to the door. But, didn't open it, using the

peep hole instead. Something told him not to look, to step back, something in his gut. His gut had been talking to him a lot lately, telling him so and so was dangerous, so and so was not, and so and so was easy prey. His gut helped keep him alive during that whole fiasco with Fiona and the hunters. And his gut was telling him to step away from the door. Maybe he should listen to it more.

Too late. The door greeted him with all the enthusiasm of an avalanche, and his attempt to peek through the peep hole gave it free reign to destroy his face.

The world went black, and then red, as he fell back onto his ass and spine. The cheap, thin carpet of his living room said hello, and slammed into his skull, two-teaming him with the door. The world got blurry along with the red, and pain joined in a moment later.

He knew his nose was broken. The sound of crunch combined with the blood splatter, and the warm sensation filling his sinuses made that easy to discern. And there was a certain sort of pain that came with a broken nose, a lovely mix of a high spike, and then a gargling headache. All his new senses, undone by the constant smell of smoke, the background noise of an apartment, and the idiocy of thinking his door would protect him.

Wolves were right to stay in the woods.

He forced himself onto his palms, and looked up. Through the swirling images taunting him, he recognized two faces, and didn't recognize two more.

“Hey there, buddy,” the short fucker said.

“ ... Pitt.”

“Mr. Pitt.” The bastard snapped his fingers, and the two new faces came into his apartment, with Pitt's usual henchman following suit. They grabbed him, the two new fuckers taking his arms and yanking

him up to standing. All of them were bigger than him, heavier than him, stronger than him. Came with the territory of steroid abuse, and hiring people only for their size.

Pitt's favorite henchman punched Eric in the gut, knocking the wind out of him, and the thoughts. So much for Jessy's promise.

"Montel got specific instructions from Mister Long, that he was to avoid you, leave you alone, not touch you. Debt cleared, supposedly." The short fuck came up to him, and, sly grin chiseled into his face, kicked Eric in the knee. The bad knee. Eric tried to scream, but the big guy in front of him grabbed him by the jaw, covering his mouth. Steel palm against his lips, the henchman glared at him as he squeezed until Eric could hear his cheek bones creak. "And you see, Montel, he's got the boss's back. Mr. Long's gonna make things happen, Eric. And you, you stupid fuck? You're gonna be the message."

Eric glared at the fucker with every bit of malice he could. Worthless shithole on his left, worthless shithole on his right, big guys with tiny brains. They didn't know what they were doing, mindless thugs following Pitt's word. Pitt didn't know what he was doing, doing what Montel told him to. None of them knew what they were doing, and that was going to get Eric killed.

Eric shook his head. Bad idea. One of the fuckers holding his arm punched him in the lower back, beside the spine. Going for the organs. A second punch joined in, higher, getting the ribs hard. Nothing broken, yet, but the familiar pain of collision on flesh caused Eric's body to wrench, and for the pain to jolt through him. Without being able to lower his arms, and a dumbass's disgusting hand on his mouth, he couldn't brace for the hit, couldn't prepare for the pain, anything.

Get out, get out, free yourself. Free yourself and kill these fucking slabs of meat.

“Now, you’re probably wondering to yourself, ‘what sort of message, Mr. Pitt?’”

Kill him. Kick your legs out, get them around his neck, and kill him. Break bones. Break all their bones.

“The man asked you a question!” Goon number one tightened his grip on Eric’s face, jaw, and mouth, forcing him to breathe through his broken nose. And naturally, he followed the yelling with a punch to Eric’s gut, causing him to hunch over. He couldn’t hunch over though, not with goon two and three keeping him upright along with goon one. He had to stand there, and take it.

A few more hits to his body mixed the pain into a whirlwind in his head. His eyes began to close, a moment of weakness, of agony blinding him and forcing his eyelids to press down. He knew it was a mistake to close them, but he couldn’t help it, and goon one took full advantage, driving his fist into Eric’s gut once again when he wasn’t looking, wasn’t ready for it.

He couldn’t answer the question. They didn’t want him to.

“You see, Eric Tanverson, the sort of message we’re gonna send is ‘fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me.’” Laughing, thinking his RATM reference was genius, Pitt paced around in front of him, and kicked him in the knee again. Eric got some sound out through his broken nose, and some gargled splattering of blood running over goon one’s hand. Bastard didn’t blink. “We got plans, Eric. Mr. Long is going to push those shit wipes out, and we’re going to take over this city. Xnomina? Fuck them.”

The idiot was telling him a lot of stuff. Either he loved to monologue, or he knew Eric wasn’t going to survive this encounter. Or both, probably both.

Eric started panting, eyes snapping around. Each goon was a big threat, but the Pitt fucker wasn’t, just a maggot with a mouth

waiting to be torn apart. He had to kill them first, break them apart, tear into them, rip and tear and shred. But he couldn't. Fucking christ, he couldn't. He tried, pulled on his arms, tried to break them free, but their grips were absolute and their weights bigger than his.

“And since that bitch Jessy has her eyes on you, what a perfect place to leave a message.” Chuckling, Pitt pulled out a knife, and twirled it around in his hand.

A door at the end of the hall opened. A woman came out, flab hanging off her arms, gut hanging out from her t-shirt and between her stained bathrobe, cigarette between her fingers. Everyone looked at her. She looked at them, eyes wide, flicking between everyone a hundred feet from her.

She backed away, and slammed the door. No chance in hell she was going to call for help, call 911, the police, nothing, not now after the criminals saw her face. Had to protect herself of course, not do anything to attract attention from the wrong sort of crowd. God, he fucking hated this place.

Knife. The fucker had a knife. And from the look in the stupid little man's eyes, it seemed like he was going to use the knife on Eric, probably with intent to kill. Message, he was a message for Xnomina that Terra Den wasn't going to get bossed around anymore. They probably had no fucking idea about Xnomina's true nature, that they were going up against vampires. Idiots, fucking idiots.

The fucking idiots were going to kill him.

“Any last words, Tanverson?” The short stack of meat said, standing a foot from him, knife up and picking at his nails.

Now or never. Eric kicked out—goon three caught the foot with his own, a preemptive trip, and goon two kicked him in the bad knee, causing Eric's weight to give out from underneath him. The two

assholes holding him let him fall to his knees, including the bad one, and Eric screamed into the hand of goon fucking-one as his weight crunched against the kneecap.

“Now now, that’s not a word, Tanverson.” Pitt winked at him, and came in closer, taller than Eric now. To be looked down on by this tiny, pathetic, weak stack of flabby meat, was infuriating.

Eric forced himself to breathe harder, and faster, forced air into his lungs as he felt his blood begin to boil. He shivered, eyes snapping around, heart beating into a frenzy in his chest until it was a machine gun in his ears. He started to struggle, harder, hard enough to feel his muscles strain to pain, hard enough he could feel his bones ready to break. One time, in a match, he’d blocked an opponent’s kick with his shin, and the impact had nearly broken the bone; it did break the opponent’s. The sickening texture of breaking bone, and the feel of it, was a scar on his mind. He could feel his bones approaching that point, going too far.

But something in him didn’t care. Bubbling, groaning, rising to a roar in his mind, between the eyes. It told him to keep fighting, to push against these idiots, these fools, this prey that was stupid enough to challenge him in his territory. His! It was his territory, and they were violating it. It was his life, and they were threatening it.

Move, fight, rip and tear and shred. Bite them! Go for the neck! The stomach! Soft spots, kill spots, the belly and throat. Survival of the fittest, the strong eat the weak, the strong kill the weak, the strong build their futures on the bones of the weak.

The knife came closer. The fucker’s smirking, shithole face came closer.

Spill their guts.

Break their bones.



Bite into their lives, and end them. Bite into them! Bite into them! Bite!

He struggled, panic mixing with anger, until bile rose in his throat, burning his esophagus. Closer, cold metal held by a cold, idiot prey. Eric was the wounded predator, and this prey was taking advantage of it, rats attacking the sickly, injured cat. A sickly, injured cat deserved such a fate if it couldn't defend itself, but Eric was not a sickly, injured, fucking cat.

Oh god, Kat.

Oh ... god ... Dad.

Pain, pain he could not imagine, started up from his stomach. The tall, muscly thing in front of him holding his jaw did not let him look down, and Eric wasn't sure he wanted to. Metal, cold and cruel, eased its way through his shirt, his skin, his stomach, and into the things inside. Soft, belly, no bones to protect the contents.

He was going to die, in this most pathetic way. The most possibly pathetic way he could imagine.

Boom.

Boom.

Time slowed down. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he dug up, through the fog of rage and hunger, the memory of a movie he once saw. It said time slows down when you're about to die. Life flashes before your eyes. But all Eric was seeing in his eyes, was misery, and a short, stupid stack of meat that needed to die. The moving pictures had been right about the slowing down though; his pulse was like a whale's, thundering in his skull, slow, and overwhelming.

Boom.

Boom.

His eyes looked up at the big prey still holding his jaw. This one met his gaze, but Eric could see the meat was too stupid to appreciate what was happening, that he was committing murder. Eric tried to look to the others, but they'd pulled their heads back, and watched from above, beyond Eric's line of sight. No stomach for the kill.

“Eric...” The small meat's voice was slow, almost warped, as Eric's eyes snapped to and fro.

Boom.

Boom.

“You're ... going ... to ... die ... as ... a ... message.”

Slower, slower. Time pulsed in his skull, joining his heart, joining the life-ending headache that worked down through his spine. There was a piece of something in his gut. Something hard. What was the word? Metal? Something, something sharp. A claw. This meat's claw. This meat that didn't have his own claws, had to use something hard from the ground, something it tore up from the ground, and cut into him with.

Stupid, idiot meat. Meat was only good for one purpose. And this meat, the stinking pile of meat didn't have claws, or fangs.

This wolf did.

Boom.



~~Julias~~

It was one thing after another in Dolareido these days.

Julias stared around at the mess, at the red that coated the walls, the curtains, the floor, the couch, the boxes, and sighed. What in the ever living fuck.

He wandered around, inching his way through the shitty apartment. The blood coated the walls in streaks, like someone had been finger painting in some places, or trying to do a Pollock. Randomness, and yet not, a moment of action given form. Someone had done something, something visceral, and it'd led to the deadly paintings of blood around him.

The fact it was a shitty apartment kind of ruined the artistry though. In a nicer place, a house or some such, it would have been oddly beautiful. Might have made for a good painting in his old apartment. But here, the cheap carpet embraced the blood to the point he had to avoid the puddles.

A meow drew him into the kitchen. He raised a brow, and entered into the tiny thing, to look down at a cat on the counter.

“ ... the hell?”

“Eric’s cat. Kat,” Jessy said. She was in the kitchen with the creature, and sighing as she stroked the small animal’s cheek. “Said she was a dumbass. Considering she’s still here, after this fucking insanity, and has zero issue with strangers? Yeah, total dumbass.”

“Ferret, trapped in a cat’s body.”

“Excuse me?” She raised a brow at him, and scratched the cat behind the ears. Audible purrs followed.

“Never seen a ferret before?”

“Cat snakes?”

“ ... um, sure. I owned some, in my early experiments with animalism. Give them five minutes around humans, and they become sociable with them for the rest of their lives. Zero survival instincts.” Cute as buttons, though. There were few animals that personified playfulness and obliviousness quite like a ferret.

Jessy smiled, for a moment, but he didn't manage to get a laugh out of her. She looked sad. That was surprising, considering how the girl never looked sad. Angry, sure. Happy, often. Sad? Never. But her eyes were downtrodden, and her shoulders hung heavy as she slipped past Julias and back into the crime scene. He followed after her, but made a glance back at Kat the cat. The animal sat there on the counter top, and did nothing.

Back through the apartment, small as it was. The knocked over boxes were almost tragic, with how few things were in them, some clothes fallen out of them and scattered about onto the soaked crimson carpet. This Eric fellow must have been living a sparse life.

“Any signs of struggle in the bedroom?” he said.

“No, everything is localized to the living room and the front door.”

“Any idea what happened?”

“Sort of.” Jessy waved a hand over. A couple of ghouls were walking around, taking pictures while also preparing cleaning supplies. One of them was Jessy's. The man nodded to Julias, almost a bow, and Julias made eye contact with him, enough to accept the gesture, ghoul to vampire.

“What have you got?”

“Arm,” Jessy said.

“Arm?”

“Arm.” She squatted down, and pointed to the corner of the apartment. Behind one of the blood-splattered boxes, was an arm, sleeve wrapped around it and half-soaked red. The arm wasn’t cut off, and Julias doubted it could have been shot off, despite all the bullet holes and casings lying around. No explosives had been set off either. But arms didn’t magically fall off, someone had to have removed it from someone else.

Someone must have torn the arm off.

“It’s not Eric’s arm,” she said. “I ... oh shit.” Waddling forward, still in a squat position, she reached out, and pushed aside some more boxes, ones that had been sitting underneath the most bloody wall.

Body parts.

“ ... Pitt, you fucking little sack of garbage.” She reached out, and yanked out a head from the pile. His dead gaze stared up at them, mouth open, fear etched into his paralyzed muscles. It would have been more normal to see such a head on a pike. “See this fucker? This is Pitt, works for Montel.”

“Long’s man?”

“Yep.” She stared at the head, glaring, grimacing, lip curled into a sneer as a tiny growl escaped her. “Always wanted to kill this fucker, but it’d be juvenile of me. No reason to make things harder with Terra Den either.”

“Why’s he here?”

“Eric had a debt with Montel. I told Long to drop it.”

“A large debt?”

“Nope. Pennies. I’m guessing Montel overstepped, or Long was looking to piss us off on purpose.” Shrugging, she pulled the boxes further away from the wall, exposing more body parts. Some more heads, two of them missing significant chunks of their skull. More arms, more legs, many again having been torn or otherwise missing too many pieces to complete the limb.

The smell wasn’t too bad yet. Scene couldn’t have been more than six hours ago. Happened before Jack called him about the ritual then.

“How’d you know to come here so quickly?” he said.

“Ganders called me. Said Eric didn’t show up for work.”

“He called you?”

“He knows I hang out with Eric at the club sometimes. And he knows that Eric knows about Kindred, so he knows Eric wouldn’t just randomly take a sick day with him under our thumb, especially not without telling him.” She shrugged, but every time she said the man’s name, her shoulders slumped a little more, and her head fell down a little more. Poor girl probably didn’t realize it, or what it meant.

But, not his place to pry into something like that.

“Anything here that could be him?” he said, gesturing to the pile of body parts. The fuck was in the Dolareido air lately, that could cause these sorts of scenes? Jack’s report about the ritual was barbaric and brutal enough, but now it was Julias standing before a disgusting sight, not Jack.

“Nah. I’m seeing ... well, I mean I guess I’m seeing ... three?” She got up, moved over to a different corner, and pushed aside some more boxes. “Make that four bodies. Missing a lot of meat though, lot ... ugh, ok, well, the guts are here.” Gagging, she stepped back,

and brushed her fingers off on her jeans. “And ... there ... and over there...”

The blood on the walls that surrounded the apartment, was because someone had flung the limbs, the torsos with opened bellies too, into the walls like water balloons. Splat. That explained the patterns.

“Not enough mass,” he said, stepping around Jessy’s ghoul, and pointing to the body parts. Another box here, another box there — most of them were mostly empty, poor guy owned almost nothing — pushed aside revealed more shreds of flesh. A hand with a ring. A shoe, quality, with the attached foot and leg coming halfway up the shin. The bones were broken, cracked like twigs.

“So many claw marks.” Jessy gestured to one of the legs, where another ghoul was taking a picture. “This is nothing like that ritual site Jack found. That was planned, and meticulous. This is chaos incarnate.”

Two clean ups in one night was unheard of, and they were of polar opposite nature too. Chaos didn’t begin to describe it.

“Gangrel gone on a frenzy, perhaps?” He walked over to the front door again, and looked down the hall. The walls were damaged, and now that Jessy said the word ‘claw’, he had no choice but to frame everything in that mind. The trio of lines down the wall, all the way down the hallway? Claw marks. Enormous claw marks. Something had been dragging their claws against the wall as they moved.

“Maybe. We could do that, make some claws big enough for that. Doesn’t seem Gangrel style though.” She followed him out into the hallway, where two more ghouls, and Vivienne Maorie were standing.

“This ... is pretty bad,” Vivi called out from the room at the end of the hallway. “Old woman in here, scared senseless. Alive though.”

Nodding, Julias looked down as he walked. There was some blood splatter in the hall, but not where Julias wanted it, on the feet. A bloody footprint would have been great, something he could use to identify. Instead, there were various puncture marks along the shitty ceramic tile. Weird patterns, weird scratches.

No, not so weird, not if he let himself consider the possibility.

“Someone tall made these claw marks?” he said, looking over his shoulder to Jessy as he walked to the other apartment.

“Someone, something, yeah.”

“Someone or something that can rip apart people like paper.”

“... I see where you’re going, Julias.” She jogged up to him, shaking her head. “No chance in hell one of Avery’s people did this. I mean, why the fuck would they? The hell reason would they have to be here?”

“Mister Mire may be correct.” Vivi came forward, and offered him a bow. Natasha’s childe, a meek and shy girl, offered her best smile, and most confident stance. Not very. “If you look here, you’ll see the weird scratches in the floor are mostly in line with each other, and there are four of them at a time, the two in the center slightly ahead of the others.”

“Claw marks on the feet?” Jessy got down beside one of the long stretches of slashed tile, and looked back over her shoulder. “The fuck ... we got any surveillance on this building?”

“Only the entrance to the building, outside.” Nodding as she looked down, Vivienne walked up to Jessy and offered her her phone. On the screen was a camera feed, and Julias stepped in to look over the Gangrel’s shoulder to watch.



A shitty angle, providing little detail. Blurs from cars driving by, and a long distance, meant the footage wouldn't be providing much.

But the three of them gasped when the front door of the building smashed open, and a blur came out. Well, that explained the front door of the building being busted open and sent into the street. It didn't explain the blur though, a smudge darting down the alley, and into the darkness. A large blur.

“... can you enhance this at all?” Jessy said.

Vivi raised a brow at her. No, technology couldn't do that, it couldn't fabricate accuracy from nothing; or at least, not technology that was being circulated yet, or available to the Invictus. Julias tried to hide his smirk, but he could see Vivi struggle on how to tell her superior that she watched too much TV, and the zoom in and enhance thing was bullshit.

“Um, no, sir. That technology is still in the works.”

“Damn.” She threw up her hands, and leaned in closer, as if a few more inches gained on the blurs would help identify. “This ... this blur doesn't look like the rest of the blurry shit though. This is extra blurry. Like it's warped.”

“... didn't we have reports that pictures of the Uratha, when Simon visited, were warped?” Julias stepped away from the two, and walked down the hall into the where the claw marks continued. They went down the stairs and out the door as well, a mix of slashes and cuts that, now in the new context, did indeed look like the marks a huge wolf might leave behind. He started down the hallway, away from Eric's apartment, and toward the door at the end of the hall that was forced open. “I remember cameras were new technology at the time. We chalked it up to bad tech. But, if this is something that Uratha lunacy can do...”

“Similar to Kindred, in a way ... except for this.” Vivi followed after him, and cut by him. Surprising, but she had the look of someone determined on her face, lost in her moment of realization.

She guided him into the apartment ahead. No blood except for some around the claw marks. The door had been kicked in hard enough that it came off the hinges, and slammed into the wall of the small home. And there, a raggedy woman sat in a chair, hands on her temples, rocking back and forth.

“I ... I ... my door is gone ... I ... I...”

Julias looked back to Jessy, but after settling in the room, she raised a brow at the woman, and shrugged. “Looks pretty loony to me,” he said. Terrible, terrible way to describe it, but it was accurate enough. Her eyes were all over the place, or staring ahead into nothing, as she cradled her skull like it might fall off if she didn’t. “What did you see?” He squatted down in front of her, and waited.

“A ... b-blur ... blur ... blur? It ... the bad men, they came and ... they were hurting him, and ... blur ... and ... blood ... and ... screams and yelling.”

He raised a brow and looked at Vivi. “Bad men?”

“She means Pitt, and his goons,” Jessy said. “Fucker was a slimy piece of shit, and you could tell just by looking at him.” Jessy moved in front of the kine, and waved a hand in front of her eyes. No reaction. “Yeap, loony. What a fucking stereotype.”

It was a silly stereotype. The vampire stereotype was that they didn’t appear in mirrors, or on film, which was absurd. They appeared, but in pictures or footage, the faces were always a touch blurry, or never met the lens straight on. The fact this woman was actually confused, and dazed, almost to the point of appearing like a lunatic for the Uratha sighting, was so on-the-nose as to almost be

drôle. The fact the footage of the werewolf was blurry, blatantly blurry, was just as aggressive and obvious as Uratha were in general.

Maybe Jack was right. He was hard on Azamel, threatening her and her hole in the ground, but he was kind to the Uratha, asking for their help and giving them their space, when the evidence was here in front of him that maybe the Uratha were a bigger issue. He hadn't seen damage like this since a young Gangrel had gone frenzy in their apartment building, and had killed their neighbor. A blood bath, and a lot of work for the Invictus to clean up, and hide from the media.

That Gangrel had been found, and once it became clear they were lost to their beast, in a near constant state of frenzy, they were executed. If they found this Uratha in the same state, the result would be the same, no matter what Avery said. The Prince and the sheriff would deal with it, and as much as the Uratha were brutally strong, the dragons would be able to handle it. But if they did, Avery's backlash could be catastrophic.

This night was turning into a pain.

“Ma’am.” Julias snapped his fingers in front of the woman’s face. No response. He touched her shoulder, and her gaze snapped to him. Better. “Ma’am. Nothing happened here tonight. Nothing happened to the man down the hall, and nothing happened to your door. It was all a construction accident.”

He stared into her eyes, her trembling gaze, and reached into her mind. A spark, a white spark, floating around inside her, something he could see as he reached out for her mind. Something mystical, something beyond definition, except that it was inside the shell of her mind, and a mind was something he could define, and rewrite.

His thoughts drifted to Jen, and her verbal jousting. Did he believe in a soul? Yes, he did. He believed he could crush it, too. But he had no need to crush it, he wasn't Viktor. A subtle touch, gentle

fingers on the mind, to wipe aside the memories until they were nothing but blurred tracks in the sand, was more than enough.

“Sleep.”

Down she went, head rolling back, body collapsing backward in her chair as she went limp.

“Fucking impressive,” Jessy said.

“Yes, very.” Vivi smiled up at him, nodding.

Nothing like compliments from a couple of beautiful ladies to stroke a man’s ego. He winked at Vivi, and motioned for them to come back out to the hallway, then down the stairs to the front door of the apartment building.

Several cops stood around, with police tape blocking off the scene. Thralls, and one ghoul. The residents who came home from work stood outside, waiting to get in, arguing with the cops about how their oven might be on, or their cat needed to be fed.

And, thinking of, Julias looked behind him, and raised a brow as Jessy came down with Eric’s cat in her arms.

“ ... what? She needs someone to look after her, until we find him.”

He came back in, and stood with the two women on the stairway, small glances over his shoulder to make sure no one could hear. “You don’t think the Uratha got him? Assuming it was an Uratha, and not something else.” Always the possibility it was a Begotten, after all.

“I...” Frowning, she looked down at the cat in her arms. The cat was oblivious to what was happening, except that someone was holding him, and that that meant snuggles. Cute, but kind of

pathetic too. Pathetic could be cute though, when it was on something like a cat. “I’m not sure he wasn’t the Uratha who did this.”

“ ... say what?”

Vivi turned around as well, both eyebrows raised. “Why do you say that?”

“He felt ... different, you know? Didn’t feel like other kine. And I tasted him. Fucker tasted damn good.” She held Kat to her chest, and the cat had no issue rubbing herself into her neck. Perhaps she smelled Eric. “But, yeah, I didn’t think he had this in him. So, I dunno, it might not be? I ... oh fucking shit, Fiona.”

Julias motioned for Jessy to follow him, and continued outside. “What about her?” The police had the alleyway blocked off as well, and the two of them went down the path. Invictus clean up crew included Vivi, and she nodded to Julias as he nodded to her, before she stayed behind.

“Fiona had an interest in him, kind of out of the blue. And ... and didn’t she go to him, asking if he’d seen Jack and whatnot, when he disappeared?”

“That’s what the Prince told me, with what she was willing to share in her report. So Eric told her, anyway.”

“I wonder why she was so interested in him, why she went to him specifically.” Shrugging, she jogged to catch up to him, and walk beside him shoulder to shoulder. “She’s a monster, right? Jack says she can see us, see other paranormals, see what we are with only a glance. So, if she saw something in Eric ... knew he might be able to help finding Jack...”

“ ... that does make sense.” He stopped at the manhole between buildings, and peered down into the black. Someone had yanked

manhole cover off, and thrown it. A hundred-and-fifty-pound disc, embedded into a dumpster thirty feet further down. God damn.

“We going down there?” she said.

“I shouldn’t, supposedly. I’m supposed to be working on the macro, and letting you do the micro.”

“Yeah, but Jack and Damien aren’t nearby, and neither is Isabella’s crew, or—”

“Exactly.” Sighing at himself for being such a moron, he started to climb down the ladder. “Bring the cat. If you’re right and it’s Eric, and he’s going berserk, then maybe the sight — or smell — of his cat will make him hesitate.”

“And if it’s not Eric?”

“Then the cat’s owner is dead.”

She winced, and looked back to the alley they came from.

It was written all over the girl’s face, and she didn’t know it. A lot like Beatrice in so many ways. But he couldn’t tell her, it’d only damage the outcome; what that outcome would be, he had no idea, but best to let it progress on its own. Maybe she’d figure it out, with how much she’d suddenly developed an attachment to the man’s cat.

A cat. If Eric was a werewolf, it didn’t make much sense that he owned a cat. Then again, Kat the cat seemed more than stupid enough to not care. Lucky for Eric, if Jessy’s hunch was correct.

And she probably was. She was an Invictus right hand both because she had brawn, and she had a knack for good hunches. Worked well with Natasha’s analytical side.

God damn, he missed Tash.

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~~Eric~~

Bite.

Kill.

Tear.

Shred.

Eat.

Hunt.

Hide.

Hiding was strange, and weird, and wrong, but a part of him, somewhere inside the pulsing waves of his mind, knew he had to hide. They'd be coming. He had to defend his territory, defend himself, but he couldn't do that if he was surrounded. He needed a better place, someway to defend himself, and then return to his territory. His territory. His. No one else's.

He looked at the walls of the tunnel. Hard wall. Man's wall. The shapes in repeating patterns made him growl in frustration. Flickering light ahead, from the walls above him. Dead silence ahead of him, unending, deep into the ground where it was safe. Safer.

Get back to the top, kill everyone and everything.

No! Safe, find safe place, let this pass, then go back, then make safe. Rip and tear and eat anymore who dare violate your home.

He licked his chops, mind swirling with the thrill of the kill, the taste of blood, of human flesh. Human, man, stupid prey, mostly bone. But that small human, the one he hated, hated with everything, was tasty. Fat was tasty.

Eric crunched down on his teeth, and let out a satisfied rumble as he felt the remains of human bone break apart between his back teeth. Yes, humans, in their stupid layers of color. The colors, blue and white and black, they did not taste good. But the meat inside, the flesh, the blood, was delicious.

There had been other humans, a couple, that had seen him as he ran for the tunnel entrance. They squeaked like rats as he tore the hard thing from the tunnel's mouth, and jumped into the blackness below, getting underneath the ground. He knew they would be no threat, and his hunger was satisfied.

The hunger was, the anger wasn't.

He knew which tunnel he picked, knew how to get to it, the tunnels beneath the tunnels where humans didn't go. There was a barrier between him and the tunnel, of that same hard thing that had cut his belly, but the word was long lost. Whatever it was, he tore it off the human wall, nothing more than a piece of grass in his path. Now, he was deeper, and deeper into the ground.

Alone, in the dark, he howled until it rang in his ears, until it echoed down the long darkness between the flickering light, man light, and he slashed the wall. The hardness gave way to his claws, like grass, like twigs, like skin. He slashed again, and again it split apart. Again, and again, he slashed, and slashed, until a roar was joining it. He didn't mean to roar, but it came out, came pouring out of him, echoing down the tunnel with more heat and impact than his howl could hope to match.

He wanted to kill.



He wanted to tear things apart.

He wanted to feel a living thing bleed in his mouth. Feel them die between his teeth. Feel them snap, break, crush. Nothing else mattered, nothing in the world. All that mattered was the hunt, the kill, the pulsing fire rushing through his veins, the saliva dripping from his chops, the hunger in his chest for violence.

Some inkling, some tiny spark of him knew what he was doing, knew he was stalking through the tunnels, knew he was bigger, and stronger. Knew he had survived getting stabbed.

Stabbed. Not clawed, not bitten, stabbed. Human word, stab, with metal. Metal was the word, to stab with metal. Metal knife, metal cover tunnel, metal door in the tunnel, and ... concrete.

He shook his head left and right, and smashed his shoulder into the human wall, hard enough for some of it to crumble away and fall at his feet. His feet? His claws. Talons. His paws.

Thoughts bubbled beneath the rage, but he couldn't pull them up. Every time an image, a word, someone or something that made sense, that reminded him of ... something ... it was washed away in a torrent of red rapids. Fight. Kill. Bite and tear. Rip and shred. Hunt.

He continued along the tunnels, and raised his nose as he sniffed the air. Dead things were walking around, dangerous. They weren't prey, he couldn't eat a dead thing, but he could kill them if he had to. Most of them were not dangerous enough to stop him; some were, but not most. None of them were around either, not as far as he could tell. The still air hid the scents of others, but only to a point. He was alone.

Or, wasn't. He came to a stop, crouched down low until his colossal claws found the old, worn hard things beneath him, two of them running together along the ground behind and in front of him. He licked his chops, felt his saliva drip from his tongue, and moved

forward into the awaiting blackness. The human's lights no longer worked, no longer shined upon the hard earth and tunnel around him. Darkness, around the turn, darkness ahead into the depths of the awaiting chasm. Darkness, to cover his guise for the two seconds he needed, before he could strike.

This one ahead of him, in the black, wasn't one of the dead walkers. This one was alive.

They weren't there a moment ago, though. Out of nothing, out of the ground or the sky, or the walls of human hand, this one came. This new prey wasn't human, but, was. He could smell it, smell the blood, the flesh, the breath. He could hear the beating heart, he could hear the swishing of human colors rubbing human skin with movement. And most of all, he could hear the tap of feet against the tunnel floor.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

The beat of it—her, from the smell, the beat of her heart matched her footsteps almost exactly.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Closer, and closer, the human came closer, unsuspecting, unknowing. Easy prey, easy food, easy to taste more of that flesh. More of that sinful flesh.

Sinful flesh?

Meat! Meat, organs, bone, sinew. Rip and tear. Kill them, hunt and hunt and hunt and drown in the taste of flesh. He threw himself at the oncoming movement, his roar shattering the silence as his talons sundered the hard ground underneath him. He was heavy now, massive, and yet, light, his strength having no trouble moving him with the grace of a hare. One leap, two leap, the ground underneath flew by as he sailed over it, pounced over it, and threw the whole of his body at the woman.

She threw her hand out at him, and from the darkness, movement came. In the obsidian depths of the tunnel, where what little light existed was lost around the corners, he caught a glimpse of the massive, skeleton arm, that greeted him with its knuckles.

He bit, and clawed, and tore into the enormous hand, but he was biting, clawing, and tearing into bone, a giant bone arm. This woman had bone arms?

The darkness was close to absolute, in this section of the tunnel, almost as if the female had wanted the darkness, had come from, or had sought the darkness. And whoever, or whatever she was, she could see him well enough to punch him. He had trouble seeing her though, the black burying him.

If only there'd been a flicker of moonlight, this alien thing would be dead and eaten.

He lunged again, and she threw herself back, rolling onto her shoulder and back onto her feet. All blurs in the dark, a subtle silhouette all he had to go on, and his ears and sense of smell. It was enough. He pounced at her again, snarling, roaring, and landed on her with his claws.

But again, hard bone formed a well between him and the soft flesh, between him and the thing that smelled of sweat and skin, between him and meat. It had to be an arm, enormous, and strong enough to catch his weight, and launch him back. He had no idea

how some sack of meat could be that strong, but he flew backward, and landed on his back, hard ground greeting him. Pain? A tiny thing, pain, background noise, lost in the raging, screaming tides of pumping blood in his skull.

Again he dove at her, this time going low. But, despite being on all fours, he was still as tall as the human-looking thing he was hunting. If only he could see her! See her, bite into her, rip her open, eat her muscles and taste the layers of fat under her skin.

For a moment, a fleeting second in the dark, he saw eyes. Two white, beady eyes in the dark, spread further apart than a human's eyes. This human thing had something with her, inside her, something defending her, fighting for her, with her. Something he could kill.

He rammed into her, shoulder first. She blocked with the arm again, and he knew she would. With the whole of his weight smashing into her, and his talons digging into the hard rock of the tunnel ground, he slammed her back. She flew, rolling against the floor, body almost bouncing. Opportunity! Throat, go for the throat, or the belly, tear open the soft flesh, bleed the prey. He dove at her again, claws first.

The giant bone hand came out from underneath him, up through the ground. No sound, no rumbling, and the ground did not break. Like a ghost reaching through the earth, the hand came into existence, materialized, and the enormous silhouette punched into his stomach and legs. The forward momentum caused the punching monster arm to crush his legs against the ceiling, and he thundered agony and rage as the angle caused his shin and ankle to bend, bend, and break.

He fell, body limp, pain causing the muscles in his body to clench, only making the pain worse. And then, the pain renewed, as he felt the muscles and tendons within the mangled and ruined limb force

the bones back into position, force the cartilage back into form, and seal, as if by fire. Crack. Crunch. His body was not gentle with the process. It did not care for his pain, for the misery coursing through his veins, it snapped back the flesh and sealed the wounds with all the grace of an earthquake.

But he was healed, and he could continue the hunt. All that mattered now was to get up, and pounce at her again. He was bigger than her, stronger than her, and—

In the darkness, the blur of onyx unleashed both fists, each fist almost as big as his body, and each fist made of hard bone. Each fist slammed into his body. The shock of impact was like falling into a frozen river. He slammed into the tunnel wall, and his skull crashed into the concrete hard enough to dent it, to earn crumbling bits of it onto his fur.

He recognized that arm.

“At ... thalia?” His tongue didn’t move the way he wanted it to. His lips didn’t exist. But he wanted to talk, had to talk.

And the voice, what did the great voice tell him? Breathe. He had to breathe.

“ ... you must be Eric.” The woman walked over to him, and stared down at him, from what he could tell from the silhouette. Down. He was lying down, on his ass, enormous legs out in front of him. Fur. Claws. “I suppose you know who I am because you saw me in the nightmare, after I showed up with Beatrice.”

“I...” I. Eric. Wake up. Wake up you fucking idiot, wake up and fucking breathe!

He looked back at the dent in the wall. A big fucking dent, made by his body. His steel body. He got back to his feet, easily at that, the wounds, the concussion, all fading away in moments. Some nicely,

some not so nicely, screaming their vengeance at him in a flurry of pain as the wounds within him healed.

He stood tall, and breathed deep, each breath bombarding him with a thousand scents. With this woman so close, most of them came from her. He could smell old bone. He could smell the stones of a cemetery. He could smell cigarette smoke, a complicated aroma. And he could smell rotting flesh. Most of those he could guess, but the rotting flesh?

He looked at her, then the ground, the wall, the ceiling, all details lost in darkness. But, a smash into the wall jolted his body just like an ice bath did, and he forced that little spark of thinking up through the lava coursing through his veins.

“I’m ... Eric.”

“Having trouble talking there, big guy? Christ, get out of that form before you give me a heart attack.”

Form. Form? He was in a form. He was so fucking tall! He put out his hands in front of him, and blinked at the titanic size of his claws, his palms.

He was a fucking werewolf.

“I ... I don’t ... I...”

“Sounds like you’re going through your first change? Well fuck me, if I hadn’t seen you coming, I’d be dead.” She gestured to the darkness around them, arm a blur in the black. “Perk of who I am, darkness is no issue. Now, let’s just step back out into the light, and you can take a breather and calm down.”

“C ... Calm down...” Hard to talk, but the words had to come. But, as he talked, so did the memories. “I ... trying to remember ... trying to—”

BREATHE!

The thunder of the moon's voice shattered his mind, and he fell to a knee as his claws grabbed his skull.

BREATHE!

He gasped, lungs fighting against him, muscles clamping down, air resisting until he forced it in. One hand fell to the ground, and he grumbled and groaned as agony shook him, paper cuts on his insides where he couldn't see or touch. Biting, gnawing, eating at him from the inside out. Something, he was supposed to do something.

He was supposed to calm the fuck down. Let it out. Let it go. Breathe. Just breathe.

Don't breathe! Not next to this monster, this alien, this deadly thing from the black.

Breathe. She is not your enemy. Those hunters are. This Athalia woman is not. Fiona is not.

He forced in the breaths again, each deep into his diaphragm, each causing a low rumbling sound, quiet but there, almost a purr. The monster next to him chuckled, and smirked at him, as the two of them walked a little further until they were under some weak light a ways down the tunnel.

Breathe, and relax.

He groaned again, pain working through his bones and muscles as they began to shrink, as the weight began to fade. The ceiling above him grew more distant. The claws beneath him grew closer, and smaller. The length of his arms decreased, pulling into him, as well as his claws.

Clothes began to reform. Human fabrics. His fur faded, along with his tough skin, and human fabric colors emerged, the black pants and the tight gray t-shirt, the nice shoes, all clothes he couldn't afford before he got his new job.

Job. He had a job.

Jessy. Jessy had said she'd dealt with his debt.

Pitt, Montel, and Long disagreed.

He'd eaten Pitt. Eaten. Eaten. Eaten.

Eric fell to his knees, and vomited.

“Oh god ... oh ... fucking god ... I ate someone, I—”

“Avery should have visited you to deal with this, help you deal before it got to this point.”

“Avery ... I don't know an Avery. Fiona mentioned her, but ... where is she? Where is Fiona? She was supposed to ... to tell me ... about who I am.” He stared at the mess of shit he vomited up. It was red in color.

More memories surfaced, digging up through the crimson rapids they were lost in. Faces. Clothes and flesh tearing in his hands, bones breaking. Screams. The sweet satisfaction of meat, of prey, breaking apart in his jaws. He was defending himself, his territory, and succeeding.

“I need to go back. I ... I have to ... my cat, and ... oh god, the damage, and ... and...”

“The Invictus will cover up the damage. Your concern should be whether or not you'll get in trouble for damaging their stupid little Masquerade.”



“... shit. Shit shit shit.” He forced himself back up to his feet. “I ... I must have destroyed ... so much. Fuck. What do I do?”

The woman shrugged, and rotated her shoulders a few times. Recovering from the fight. She looked like a regular woman now, but the monster inside her had managed to hold him off, hit him hard enough to knock some sense into him. Scary.

“I hate to say it, but I suggest you stay down here with us, honestly.” Sighing, she waved a hand in the direction he came from. “The vamps might shoot you on sight, if they think you’re too dangerous to keep alive. They might not, I don’t know. And they’ll use silver bullets too.”

Silver bullets were a thing? Shit.

“And ... and this Avery woman?”

“Werewolf. Bunch of werewolves here in Dolareido, a pack of them. They’ll want to talk to you.”

“Oh...”

“Just, follow me. Don’t do anything stupid, ok? Follow me, remain calm, and keep yourself under control.”

“You make it sound like I’m a wild animal.”

She laughed at him, and shrugged, complete with a slow head shake. The classic ‘you’re an idiot and what am I going to do with you’ sign.

“You are.”

“I...” He breathed deep, and his eyes went wide as the bombardment of smells washed over him. Sensory overload. He could feel every crevice of the soles of his shoes. He could feel the

ground, the hard metal of the old tracks, pushing through his shoes too, the specs of dirt. He could taste the stagnant air, and the individual smells of vampires that used it. His nose knew they were dead things, just from the smell. He could see better; not in pitch dark better, like this monster woman apparently could, but he could still see a shit load better than before. He could hear the distant vibrations of cars overhead, and their sounds echoing down and dancing through the tunnels.

“Yeah, your first change must be quite the night. So, keep yourself in check, or I’ll put you in the ground, ok?”

“Yeah ... yeah ok.” As he followed after the deadly monster, a big smile started to grace his face.

“The fuck you smiling about?”

“ ... my knee feels fine.”



~~Natasha~~

Cemeteries were cliché.

Such was the way of Dolareido, created by vampires over the course of its growth, from a simple village to a massive city of millions. The elders had shaped its growth and biased its construction, turning it into both a utopia for Kindred to enjoy sustainable food, but also, to enjoy other indulges. Macabre art? Check. Cemeteries and catacombs? Check. Hilariously common dark alleys were functional for Kindred to take advantage of too, but a lot of the lighting placement also emphasized the shadows in drastic ways, purely for edgy aesthetics.

It was Maria’s Cathedral, once Lucas’s Cathedral, that was perhaps the most impressive sight though. The Elysium Tower, the Black Hall, Xnomina HQ, the strips of clubs and high roll casinos,

they were all impressive sights to behold. But it was the Grand Cathedral of Dolareido that Lucas built, without the Prince's permission, that was the most grand site of all. Tash was surprised the Prince didn't tear it down after the purge. She knew Maria protested, but it wasn't like Antoinette couldn't do it anyway.

Maybe the Prince liked the giant, Gothic building, and refused to admit it?

Tash stared at the huge building in the distance, as she and her two werewolves stepped into the Three Kings Cemetery.

"God damn," Art said. "This place is fucking amazing." He walked on the path of stones interspersed along the smooth ground, and gestured to the enormous tombstones around him. "This is something straight out of a museum, or history, or something. Look at this." Eyes wide and jaw almost dropped, he stood before an enormous tombstone, an angel, covered in a cloak to hide her face. She stood over him, enormous, sword and shield dropped and sculpted into the base of the robe. "Here lies Carla Bianco, protector and saint."

Matt came up to join him, whistling as he looked up at the angel. "What's her story?"

Tash shrugged, and joined them. "1894 t-to 1905. Oh, I remember r-r-reading ... about this. She was a child, who saved s-someone from an angry d-d-dog."

"Oh fuck." Art stepped back, grimacing, and looked down to her with sad puppy eyes. "A dog killed her?"

Sighing, she shook her head, and walked along the path to the next grave. "N-No, it was the story that m-m-made her famous. She ... d-died of an illness." It was 1905 after all, and diseases were deadly back then.

“Hard to imagine that this city’s been around for centuries, with vamps here for most of it.” Matt gestured to the Cathedral in the distance, and then continued along the path up further, toward the mausoleums in the back. “Centuries is a long time.”

Yeah, it was. She was fifty years embraced, and it was a becoming a reality that was she becoming one of those older, stronger, deadlier vampires. Ancilla. Was it fifty-one now? It was a lot of years, and the earlier years, especially her human years, were blurs. Remembering the details of a former life was difficult.

She’d once heard a theory that people had trouble remembering their childhood memories, especially those before the age of four, due to the difference in how a person’s mind works as an adult. Incompatible. She had no idea if there was any truth to that, but, she felt similar, with how her mind had trouble remembering things from her time as a human. The disconnect between smells, hunger, taste, even how things felt to the skin, was too huge.

Not being able to feel the sun on her skin again, well, she’d always been a library geek anyway. The sun had been nothing but cruel to her pale skin, if memory served. Now it was doubly cruel, so no real loss there. Jessy, she remembered lamenting the loss for years. Said she was a fan of the nude beach. Dolareido didn’t have a beach; she’d meant tanning on the roof. And probably fucking on the roof, too.

Wow. She stopped, and blinked. Strolling through a cemetery was sending her mind into a stroll down memory lane, like a fly to honey. Arg, so hopelessly cliché! Bleh.

“W-Why are we here,” she said to the boys, as they started following her. It was their noses that took her here, after all.

Art caught up, but stopped the moment another tombstone caught his eye. “The sort of fucked up shit you found at that strange

ritual is the sort of shit wraiths are interested in, the weird kind of wraith spirits you find in Dolareido anyway.”

“W-What kind of wraiths are you ... more used t-t-to dealing with?”

Matt caught up as well, but like Art, stopped as his eyes locked onto the tombstone. “Well, your typical shadow wraith is your black shadow fear monster. Looks kind of like a ghost, all black and inky and shit, vague features, big glowing, scary eyes. They spread fear, they are fear.”

“But,” Art said, cutting in, “what you got here in Slut City is a bit different. The wraiths here are a bit bloodier, and a bit more interested in ... well, gore.”

“ ... gore?” She shivered again, rubbed her arms, and looked at the tombstone they were looking at. A man, a knight, carved into the stone, standing with his sword blade pointed down between his legs, hands on the hilt while the sword stabbed into the nameplate. The knight looked like something out of the age of King Arthur, fantasy and history combined, with many of his features hidden in a cloak billowing in the nonexistent wind. It would have been tacky, if not for the similar tombstones everywhere.

Dolareido was many things, but subtle wasn't one of them.

Art nodded. “Yeah. They like fear, but they also have this infatuation with blood, and guts, and bones and shit. I have no idea what sort of soil would grow fucked up spirits like that, but apparently that's what you got here.”

“And we know they come here regularly, this specific cemetery ... and ... I smell ... something weird.”

“W-Weird?” she said, looking up at the boys.

“Something’s going on,” he said.

Nodding, the two boys looked at each other. “Ruh roh. Time to investigate.” Together, in unison.

Oh god damn it.

## Chapter 62

~~Natasha~~

“This place reeks of wraiths ... but ... there’s more.” Matt pointed them toward the mausoleums, deep in the cemetery, raised up slightly on the gentle slope with platforms of stone, concrete, and stairs. “Someone’s been walking this path.”

“Can’t smell em,” Art said, “but yeah, someone’s been walking this path.”

“B-But, if you can’t smell em, how d-do you know?”

“Traces of difference in ... eh, it’s hard to describe.” The gentle giant shrugged, and started up the slope toward the back of the cemetery. Big cemetery. Walking there would take a moment. “And ... there’s ... there has to be a locus here. Has to be. Where is it?”

Art shrugged, and the two of them started poking around tombstones as they continued on. “Dunno Lenny, keep looking.”

Lenny and George; sometimes she wondered if either of them had actually read the book, or had just seen the movie. Gary Sinise was delicious in 1992, yum. She rolled her eyes at where her thoughts went, and refocused her mind.

“Umm, I know that B-Beatrice used to live in a different cemetery, South Hill Cemetery. But, um, I don’t think any Kindred live here.”

“I know I can smell something weird,” Art said, stepping around another enormous tombstone. A statue of an angel, again, this one with a skull face, armor, and six wings. The werewolf continued

along, bending down and over, and looking at various grooves in the ground and such.

“W-What’re you looking for?”

“A secret switch.”

“ ... a what?”

“Secret switch.” He shrugged, and gestured to Matt. The big guy was doing the same thing, down on a knee behind one of the statues, and running his hands underneath the grooves of the stone.

“Why ... w-would there be a secret switch?”

“City was built by vampires, right? I assume every major area has a half-dozen secret switches or levers, to open secret doors, to secret tunnels and whatnot.”

Laughing, she shook her head. “Um, m-maybe? I may be older than you, b-b-but ... still n-nowhere near as old as Jacob, or Antoinette, or the others. They m-might know, but they wouldn’t t-tell us if they did.”

Matt stood up, and looked at her like she was crazy. “Your bosses wouldn’t even trust you with things like secret stashes?”

“N-No, it’s not their fault, I w-wouldn’t either.”

“You wouldn’t trust your Vivi with a secret location?” Art said, moving his search further up the path.

“Not all of them, no. She understands. It’s ... it’s b-because ... Kindred live so long, and ... and you c-can’t trust someone to always b-b-be an ally. She might be d-dominated by a powerful Ventrue, or coerced by a p-powerful Daeva. Or, with d-decades of time, might no longer like you, m-might no longer be ... an ally.” No wonder so



many Kindred lives turned into soap opera dramas. They had the years and the motivations to make a soap-opera-esque string of ridiculous circumstances a reality.

She smiled at Art and his question, though. He remembered Vivi's name.

"Avery says you vamps need to learn to trust each other, and watch each other's backs," Matt said, heading in her direction, before passing her and heading up further through the cemetery. "Or rather, she says you need to, but it can't, and won't ever happen."

"That ... is accurate," she said. No hope there, despite Antoinette's best efforts, to ever get Kindred trusting each other. There were acceptable compromises though, and Tash felt Dolareido had found that, for the most part.

"Maybe it's a good thing we're here, then." Art winked at her, and gestured for Matt to follow as he walked up to the mausoleums. "Could be a case of a lack of proper role models. I, for one, would make an excellent role model for new Kindred." Placed at the top of the slope of the massive graveyard, the row of mausoleums overlooked the rest of the cemetery, the imposing buildings of stone and their adorned stairways and archways casting judgment over approaching explorers. Art and Matt shivered, and Tash did as well, eyes looking between each religious symbol that awaited her. Excitement, anticipation, or preparation, she wasn't sure what it was she was seeing in the two men, but the weight of their bodies shifted forward onto the balls of their toes more, and their fingers curled and uncurled at their sides. They were getting ready for something.

Hard to ignore a mental image of two dogs, excited before a front door as they hear the unique noise of the master's car pulling up the driveway.

The two of them stood before the mausoleums, and their eyes scanned over the beautiful artwork. The statues were impressive, and she spent some time re-imprinting the image of them in her memory. The one of the female angel, nude, with sword drawn high, and a man's collapsing body cradled to her side with the other hand, was empowering. But, the two boys were more interested in the statues of Mary.

The stairway up to the mausoleum wasn't very big or long, a single step in reality; the statues of Mary made it seem like an ascension into heaven, a long stairway rising from the hard cruelty of stone and life. The statues had their arms outstretched, and the features of their guises were washed away with at least a century of rain and wind. The discoloration was saddening to look at, and Natasha frowned as one of the statues caught her gaze. With empty eyes of stone, Mary gazed into her, faded and smooth face caught between a stare of longing, and one of horror.

Tash gulped, and followed the boys to the arch above, where a cross adorned the entrance to the old building of stone. If there was any place a vampire shouldn't enter, it was a church, or a cemetery beside one; so the myth went, anyway. Bogus, and incorrect. It didn't change she was unnerved to step underneath the cross, and let the large pillars that held the building and its walls up envelop her. Undead thing in a holy building, how did Maria do it? Sleeping beneath a Cathedral was asking for divine retribution.

Inside the mausoleum, they found exactly what she expected: shelves of dead people inside boxes. She didn't expect they'd also find smaller caskets, many partly broken open, showing weird things. She'd forgotten about such things, sometimes found inside mausoleums, storage for special items. One was cracked enough to see straight in to a doll inside; a very creepy doll.

Art and Matt didn't seem creeped out. They peeked at it, looked at each other, chuckled and nodded, then made reference to something

they both remembered. At the same time, no doubt. Then, they got to work, examining the small room. Mausoleums weren't huge on the inside to begin with, and this one had shelves of caskets on all the walls, leaving only the middle of the room open.

“Still looking f-for secret ... sw-switches?” She giggled, and shook her head, as she watched the silly men feeling up the old stones. “Hey! Respect the ... the d-dead.”

Art smirked at her, and winked, too, as he ran his fingers along some dust atop a coffin. “I am. I am also dating one.”

“H ... Hey.” Sometimes it was easy to forget she wasn't only a vampire, she was also a corpse. But she could tell Art was teasing her, and she kicked him in the calf for it, hard enough to hurt at least a little.

Matt laughed, but he, too, was feeling around the old caskets. “The dust and dirt around here has been disturbed. And I can hear something coming from somewhere.”

Click.

Matt and Tash turned to look at Art, and Tash's jaw dropped as the floor beneath her began to move aside. With a squeak, she jumped out of the way, over to Art, and stared at him.

“S ... Secret switch?” she said.

Art winked at her, and tapped the side of his nose a few times. “Irraka.”

Matt rolled his eyes, and looked down at the stairway. A tiny stairway, that led into blackness. “ ... um, can I fit in there?” He made the attempt, stepping down a little ways until it was time to duck under where the floor became the stairway's ceiling. “Yeap, barely.”

“W-We don’t know what’s down there!” she said. There was brave, then there was suicidal.

Art shrugged, and started down the stairs after Matt. “We can handle it,” he said, like it was a perfectly normal trip into the bowels of Earth. She grabbed Art’s hair once his descent brought his downward journey to her hip level, and yanked him back a bit, earning a quiet yelp from him. “Hey!”

“D-Do you wolves always barge in head first? Like you said, it ... c-could be a secret Kindred room. It ... it c-could be ... dangerous, with traps, and ... and things! Or hunters!”

Both Matt and Art looked at each other, then her, and shrugged.

“We’ll keep an eye and ear open,” Matt said. “We are pretty good at this, you know. Tijuana was a pretty big trial by fire sort of city.”

“Did ... d-did you kill many Kindred there?”

Art sighed, and nodded after a few seconds. “Killed some, yeah. Lost a couple of our pack, too.”

“Then you ... then you know how d-dangerous Kindred can be, w-when you ... touch their personal things.” Secret room underneath the Three Kings Cemetery sounded like either the Lancea et Sanctum, or the Circle of the Crone. The former was gone, but the latter was very much not. She shivered at the memory of Jacob grabbing her, the terror that had run through her, being in the grip of that psycho, before she shot him.

“Yeap, we do,” they said together.

“Then, the hunters c-can be found in a d-different—”

“This isn’t just about tracking down the hunters, Tash,” Art said. “Those weird red wraiths are up to something. We knew that before

you called us in for the ritual. There's a connection, and we're going to find out what it is before it leads to ... well, what you can imagine a gore-obsessed wraith might want to perpetuate."

Sighing all the louder, she nodded. They were doing their duty as werewolves. Duty. Werewolves. Why they had a 'duty', she couldn't understand, but apparently it was something they just had, something that was expected of them to do. Made zero sense to her.

She was thankful, since it meant monsters like that Azlu creature were no longer a threat. It also meant they were willing to help deal with the hunters, since the ritual was linked to these weird wraiths they kept talking about. Lot of things lining up, but now, it meant seeing her two boyfriends putting themselves in danger, straight up.

She didn't like that.

Groaning, she pulled out her sword, her pistol, and started down the stairs. "You t-two be careful, and stay n-near me, so I can cloak us." With a stern look up at Art, shutting him up before he protested, she pushed past him in the tiny stairway, and got between the two wolves. "L ... Let's go."

For a moment, she thought the two boys would stop her. Part of her wanted them to, but a bigger part of her didn't. She was more than capable of taking care of herself, and could handle Kindred better than they could; at least, when trying to avoid violence. They might stumble onto what Maria was doing, maybe something to do with what the secret the spirit had mentioned. They might stumble onto Jacob doing some dark ritual. They might stumble onto Garry, running a secret meeting of the Carthians, or planning a strike maneuver against the Invictus. They might run into the Prince, performing some dark, evil sciences where she thought no one would bother her.

It paid to be paranoid. Kindred were strong, but they didn't get to live forever by being careless. The two Uratha with her, on the other

hand, could get run over by a train and probably survive, so, maybe it paid to be more adventurous in their circumstance.

Tash set her phone to a dim light, and hooked it onto the breast pocket of her suit. The tiny bits of light broke through the fabric, and in the ensuing pitch black, the glint of light was enough to show the way ahead.

The tunnel was old. She expected something closer to what Maria had, a grand chamber built of strong concrete and metal. Instead, she found dirt and rock, and wooden beams, deep under the cemetery, beneath the dead and ash. Some of the rocks were a bit wet, but she wasn't sure where the humidity was coming from. The air was stale, stagnant, and she smelled death on it. Old, and new death. And if she could smell it, Art and Matt surely could. The two sniffed, and grimaced in tandem with the thought.

A large support beam, held up by two of its kin, braced the thousands of tonnes of rock over their heads, and the wooden sign that dangled from it, completed the lovely trip into hell they were taking. Continue Forth, and Death Awaits Thee. It was burned into the wood, and several skulls hung from the sign as well, with hooks rammed through their sides.

Circle, definitely looked like something the Circle would do. Jacob.

She tapped Matt on the back, and squatted down. The two boys got down as well, a knee each; maybe not flexible enough for easy squatting.

“This is p-probably one of Jacob's lairs,” she said, voice a whisper, and buried in her cloak of night. It wasn't going anywhere, unless she let it.

“We don't have much experience with the Circle.” Matt shrugged, and looked down the tunnel ahead of them.

Art nodded. “Even Avery doesn’t have much. They were pretty low key in Tijuana, and from what Avery tells me, her issues with Jacob when she was here last didn’t exactly expose the intricacies of the covenant to her.”

“Intricacies is ... a, um ... light w-way of p-p-putting it.” She peered down the tunnel as best she could, and pulled up her vitae until she could feel it in her eyes. Sith sight. Auspex was a discipline only the Mekhet knew, and she put it to good use. Why hers let her see better in the dark, she wasn’t quite sure, but far be it from her to not take advantage of it. She saw only empty tunnel ahead of them though, and heard nothing.

No, that wasn’t quite true. Screams. She could hear screams, little things that echoed down the tunnel, like ghostly wisps along the walls, hidden in the grooves of the rocks and dirt. Her eyes locked onto the walls, the wooden beams, the skulls above and the sign; her gaze darted around looking for the movement she was sure she could see. No, no movement, no ghosts, but no matter how many times she shook her head to dislodge the sounds, they came back, shrieks on the air.

Art and Matt both made quiet growling sounds. It’d have been cute, if it didn’t mean they could hear them, too.

“You ... you sure you want t-t ... to keep going?” she said.

Art touched his nose again. “There’s something going on down here. You don’t want to know what it is?”

“I d-do, b-b-b-b-b—”

Matt set his hand on her shoulder, and winked. “Relax, we’ll be fine.”

She punched him in the chest, and pointed up at the sign. “That is n-not fine!” And if Jacob found her snooping through his stuff, she

doubted that would go well at all. Or, maybe it would? He might enjoy her brazen disregard for his superiority.

Art gave her a small shove, and she squeaked as she fell onto her hip. Not sneaky at all! “Look, Tash, we have to investigate this place, anyway. If shit’s fucking with the Gauntlet, if someone, even Jacob, is opening up a can of worms they can’t control, we need to know.”

“We’re trying to shut this problem down before it grows any bigger. David and Avery brought us here for a reason.”

“I ... I d-don’t know what that reason is, you w-w-won’t tell me.”

“We’ll show you, eventually.” Matt nodded, and helped her back up into her squat. “But if you think this is too dangerous, then we can’t take you to the Hisil, either. Shit can be a lot worse there.”

Perspective, like an ice bath after being out in the heat. Or a slap to the face with a tire iron. They were about to do something dangerous, probably something that would upset Jacob, and that was the level of danger the Hisil provided. Either the Hisil was fucking deadly, or these two were underestimating Jacob.

Both, it was always both with these things.

Gulping, they resumed. Deeper, and deeper into the Earth, deeper into the awaiting screams that crept along the stone and wooden beams, that came up behind them in the black, and down upon them from the dead, above. Some tree roots reached them, aged and covered in dirt, like everything else down here. It would have almost been expected for a skeleton to pop out of the walls or ground, and come at them with ragged, rotted clothes dangling from their limbs. But only the mix of silence, and there-but-not-quite-there howls of pain greeted them.

Soon, her eyes could no longer penetrate the darkness ahead. It looked like the tunnel was about to open up into a chamber, but



instead, a wall of black blocked them, like a fog, except with no body, nothing palpable. More like, staring into a black hole, some abyss, some barrier of alien origin. As if Death itself had set up its home, and the little leech and her two canine friends had stumbled onto the deity's lair. As if the gates of Hades were—

Matt reached out, and touched it.

Tash and Art both slapped themselves in the forehead. The following pop, as if Matt had pin-pricked a balloon, caused the three of them to raise their arms in defense. Yeap, dead, so dead; Death's wall was going to eat them.

Except not. She blinked, and looked at her arms in front of her, before lowering them. Still alive, still in a tunnel, Art and Matt still with her. Art walked up to his friend, and slapped him in the back of his head.

“God damn it, Lenny!”

“Hey! I—” The two wolves went silent, and stared on into the chamber ahead of them, as a corpse collapsed.

Tash came up to stand beside her two werewolves, and peeked at the sight, at the symbols on the walls, at the giant bowl in the room supported on the backs of lying skeletons, at the corpse of the disemboweled female corpse on the floor next to it, and at the mess of blood everywhere. A hook dangled over the bowl too, the sort you might use to lug cargo with. What in the world?

“... Triss,” she said, and managed a small wave with her gun hand to go with it.

“Um, hey, Tash. And, uh ... this is Art and Matt, right?” The snake woman tapped on some of her crocodile teeth a few times with a claw, and looked left and right at her boss and her friend, Jen. “Whatcha doing here?”

“I ... I um, c-could ask you the same thing.” She gestured to horrific display, the two other Kindred standing around it, and the symbols that surrounded them all. She did not like that she recognized them from recent memory. “W-What’s going on here?”

“Private business.” Jacob took a step forward. Tash took a step back. The boys stayed where they were, lips curled into snarls. “You two have balls. I like that. You know, I knew a girl, a weird sort of vampire that needed to eat flesh to survive. She had a thing for eating the testicles of men, especially the brave ones.”

“Was ... was that corpse ... standing up?” Tash, shivering, trembling, did her best to keep her hands tight on her sword and pistol. They’d be useless against Jacob, but it was better than nothing.

“Indeed it was! Your two boy toys have probably put together what I was doing.” The man reached into the bowl, and withdrew something red, and dripping. Something that belonged inside a human body. Chuckling, he whipped it at Matt, and the big guy knocked it aside with the back of his hand. Blood splattered across his wrist and over his face and shirt, but Matt didn’t flinch.

“We didn’t realize you were fueling Black Blood’s mutation,” Art said. He snarled a few times, loud, voice rumbling, getting deeper than a human’s could. “What was it originally, before you poisoned it?”

“Me? Poison a spirit? You must be joking. And besides, Black Blood was in Dolareido before I ever was.” Jacob came closer, and again Tash took another step back, now behind the two boys. They still didn’t move. “I think you two dogs should be moving on. Tell Avery I said hi, by the way. Next time I see her, I’ll make sure to give her a present.”

“Leave her alone.” Matt came in closer, balls of his feet pressing to the stone, ready to fight. “She tried to apologize, and—”

“I do think you should shut your mouth, child.” Jacob walked up to the huge man, stared up at him, and grinned. “And I think you should get out of my home away from home.”

“Do you even know what you’re causing?” Art said. “What sort of things those wraiths have been up to? Think they all serve Black Blood, or that they’re so void of will that they’ll line up for you? People are dying, you fucking moron, and this locus here you have under your control? You’re going to bring a mountain of trouble down on your whole city.” He came up beside Matt, reached out, and shoved Jacob back at the shoulder. Oh no.

Jennifer came up to Jacob; he’d let the shove push him back a few feet with a sort of drunken flow. She put a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off, bodyweight leaning from side to side, foot to foot, as the eyeless maniac grinned at the two wolves trying to stare him down. Bad bad, this was very bad.

Triss came up to Jacob too, and mirrored Jen, standing beside her boss and reaching out to his shoulder; he shrugged her off too.

“... no one’s been hurt here. Not anyone who doesn’t deserve it, anyway.” The younger Nosferatu gestured to the bowl behind them, apparently filled with body parts, just like the wraiths Art and Matt were hunting would probably like. “This human deserved it.”

Art shook his head. “And the fucker who died for the hunter’s ritual?”

A flinch, from all three witches. From Jen and Triss, Tash expected it, but from Jacob, that was a surprise. It was subtle, a nudge of the eyebrow, mostly lost and hidden from behind the eye bandage, but there. Julias’s lessons in tells were paying off.

“Ritual?” Triss said. “Hunter ritual?”

Matt stepped in closer, yet again. “Jacob isn’t the only one communicating with spirits. The hunters trying to kill you vamps are, too. It’s not like the spirits care who they use to spread their influences, just that they do. And you,” he pointed at Jacob with a stern finger, “are making things worse.”

Jacob didn’t like that. The playful smile turned into something heavier, and he licked a fang as he chuckled. “Black Blood sends his condolences about Stephanie, by the way.”

The roar that came out of Matt had the three women take a step back, and stare, wide eyed, as Matt uppercut the Nosferatu. Matt was a huge man, and Jacob was not. The punch sent him up and back, and he collided with both the ceiling of the cave, and the wall, before landing. But, as much as the ladies tried to watch Jacob, it was Matt that forced their gaze, as he began to transform.

His clothes faded into his body, as his skin erupted with fur. The size of him, his height, his muscles, all of it exploded with mass, with volume. Enormous and hunched, the beast towered over them, width growing, and growing, until there was no way the giant could fit back through the stairway they’d come from. His face erupted into hollering roars, again and again, as a snout burst from his face, the sickening sound of bending and breaking bones filling the silence of the deep cave as his body took liberties with itself, destroying and reforging itself into a beast.

Tash stepped back further, sword up to her chest, pistol pointed, at Matt.

She managed a peek at Art. Maybe he could stop this madness before it escalated. But, no. She winced, and stepped back all the more as he too, erupted into a beast. For a moment, she wondered why his clothes didn’t erupt. Not practical? The next moment, she had her gun pointed at him instead, as a shattering roar slammed

into the walls around them, echoing until it felt like the Earth was roaring at them too.

Both colossi jumped for Jacob.

Jen threw herself to the side, eyes wide and jaw dropped. Triss did too, but she wasn't as surprised; still surprised, but not as bewildered as her friend. She ducked around behind the two Uratha, ran up to Jen, grabbed her, and ran back to join Tash, a fair distance away from the unleashed carnage.

"They're ... they're ... huge," Jen said.

Huge, and dangerous. Tash could still remember that time in the tunnel, when Matt had trouble controlling his anger, caught under the rubble with her and Art. He'd nearly gotten them all killed in his mad attempt to tear everything down and apart. It was enough of a hint the Uratha were dangerous to more than their enemy, when in this form.

She scooted a little further away, and so did the two witches, as they stared on.

It was hard to see what was going on, with both of the giants crouching over Jacob, claws out, ripping and tearing. Bits of Jacob's robes started to fill the air as the wolf tore into him, and Tash chattered her teeth as she fought the desire to say something. Stop! He'll kill you! She knew she wouldn't be able to stop them, not when they were like this, not after what Jacob had said. There was a chance they'd turn and attack her, too. She couldn't imagine that happening, but now, seeing them scream and roar, bellow and cry out with rage in waves of magnitude she could not comprehend, she didn't know.

Matt's roar turned into a shrieking yelp, as he went flying across the room. The titan of muscle, ten feet tall and more than capable of ripping a train apart, spun through the air on his side, over the

strange ritual bowl, and crashed into the other wall. Crunch. The girls winced, each with eyes locked on Matt, as the brute slumped to the stone floor. His right arm was bent backward ninety degrees at the elbow.

He got up, pushing off the ground with his free arm, as the other arm snapped back into place, on its own, as if some invisible ghost had come up to him and bent it back the other way with all the empathy of a torturer. Matt let out a rumble of pain with the audible crack of bone.

Another yelp. Tash forced herself to look, and grimaced until her sight was blurry. Jacob had Art over his head, holding one of the wolf's enormous wrists in one hand, ankle in the other, turning Art into a pretzel. Art still had an arm and leg free, but couldn't reach or kick underneath him, not with Jacob holding him, almost folded in half.

The elder switched his grip on from wolf's wrist for his other ankle, and holding the titan by both feet, spun around and slammed him into the wall, repeatedly. Hundreds and hundreds of pounds of meat and strength, helpless, as the eyeless Nosferatu turned him into a slab of flesh being beaten against stone. Again, and again. Tash forced herself to watch, but didn't know what to do, didn't know what to say to stop him. All she could do was watch as Art's blood started to smear over the wall. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Each slam drove the poor man's face into the wall, and by the third slam, bloody wolf teeth were sliding across the ground.

Jacob used the werewolf's greater weight like a weapon, a heavy weapon, letting it cause his own body to swing with it against the friction of his shoes on the stone. In comparison, Jacob looked like a child, wielding a sword huge enough to leave him constantly teetering left and right to manage the momentum. He did it with ease, as if ... as if he'd done this before.

Matt sprinted forward. The ground beneath his talons ripped away, shredded open by the weight of his body and the force of his movement. His roar split the air, a ripple cutting through the emptiness like a shock wave, knocking the witnesses on their asses.

Tash squeaked as her pistol and sword went flying, smacking into the ceiling, then the floor. The bowl of body parts shook and rumbled, but remained where it was, while the contents inside splashed over the edge. Triss and Jen scampered to get out of the way as Matthew ran past them, each slam of his paws, monstrous mutations, filling the cave with more vibrations. It was like Jurassic Park, complete with the outcries and roaring.

Jacob was too busy with Arturo to dodge, and Matt's shoulder collided with Jacob, slamming him into the wall hard enough to crack the stone. The ceiling of the cavern began to rumble, and Tash whipped out her light to try and get a better look. The lantern the witches had provided some light, but with hers she scanned hurriedly, and managed a quick sigh of relief. No cave in, no cracks in the roof, not yet, but she was getting flashbacks of last time she was trapped underground with the—she wasn't trapped this time. She could leave, run, or do something! Get Avery's help!

She looked to Triss, and the two of them stared at each other. Fear, in her snake eyes. Jen's eyes were stuck on the madness, at the claws tearing and shredding, at Matt slamming his entire weight into Jacob, and sinking his claws into the vampire's stomach. Art, chest down, on the floor, was trying, but failing, to push himself to his hands and feet. His arms and legs weren't broken, but his face was bashed in, snout shattered, nose destroyed, teeth gone, tongue bitten off. Blood poured from his face, and he coughed up a river of saliva and crimson with it, pieces of his teeth, bones, and tongue, splattering over the cursed stone.

He got up, and looked at Natasha. Blood covered everything, his eyes, ruined face, and fur. It poured down the muscles, the

indentations of mass visible through the fur, down to his claws, until it was dripping down around his feet. He looked at her, and growled, as his snout started to reform, new teeth erupting outward from destroyed gums to replace broken ones, length of his snout snapping back into place with a sickening crunch, the nose reshaping itself before her eyes.

How the fuck do you kill a werewolf? She didn't want that thought going through her head right now, but it was there. She forced herself to look Art in the eyes as she reached into her jacket for the hidden chest holster, and put her hand on her extra sword, the silver sword.

Art snorted, another splatter of blood splashing over the stone, before he turned and ran to Jacob. Oh, thank god.

Matt, for all his trouble, got a fist to the face from Jacob. One punch, and Tash looked away as he spun halfway through the air. Not as far this time, but enough for him to do a half rotation before landing. Everyone heard the shoulder crack against the cave floor. Everyone heard the bones snap back into place.

"I tried to be nice," Jacob said. His robes were ruined, slashed open, a giant hole in the gut exposing some of his skin, and the bits of insides Matt had exposed of his withered intestines. "Do my own thing, let Avery do her own thing. But twice now I've had you fuckers try and talk to me. Didn't Clara tell you what happened?"

Art roared in his face, unleashing a hail of spit and blood over Jacob's visage. Jacob smirked at him, licking a bit of the blood off the corner of his mouth, as he held Art at bay, hand to hand with the titanic beast, palm to palm. Jacob's hands weren't big enough to wrap around Art's by much, but just enough to get his fingertips and thumbs around the edges. It was enough for him to squeeze.

Tash forced herself back to her feet, and held out a hand. She wanted to say stop. She wanted to do something. But, her stomach



turned upside down, and her gaze faltered, as Art fell to his knees, Jacob squeezing his hands until they broke like twigs. The elder put one boot to Art's neck, under the jaw of the snapping, biting, wild animal, and glared down at him with his eyeless gaze.

“I should rip off your arms. Think you can regrow arms? I'm not sure if Uratha can, and you know me, I'm a curious guy.”

Art's voice cracked, jumping octaves as Jacob began to pull the werewolf's arms, and push his boot against the animal's neck harder, and harder.

Matt was up again, and roaring thunder as he ran at Jacob again. Until Jacob looked his way, and Matt froze. As if his titan body had run into a swamp up to his waist, he came to a stop, and fell to his knees, sinking underneath the black surface of the invisible muck.

“You'd think Avery's story about Viktor would have scared you idiots straight. But, no, too stupid to stay out of trouble. You'd bite your leg off if you were caught in a trap, and it'd be the wrong leg. You fucking stupid, worthless dog.”

As Art's roars turned into yelps of agony, Matt sat there, colossal arms limp at his sides, knuckles to the floor, eyes looking up. Tears joined the blood on his face, and his mouth started to hang open. His breathing was fast, getting faster, and tiny yelps mixed into the heavy panting.

“... d-don't ... don't ... please get up...” The words were strange and guttural, wolf mouth struggling to articulate. But the tears and trembling limbs conveyed what was happening all too well. Matthew was in a nightmare.

“Jacob!” Triss marched over to him, now that the chaos had settled into a sea of still misery, and put a hand on his arm. “You've made your point. Come on, stop.”

“Made my point? These fucking dogs waltz into my city, my fucking city, and dictate policy to us, to me. They act like the other world and its denizens are theirs to command. They come into my home, and break my fancy new vase. They spit in my face!” The Nosferatu spit onto Art’s face, lowered his foot, yanked Art forward, and slammed his head toward him. The sound of Jacob’s forehead smashing down onto Art’s only recently reformed snout was like a scene from a movie, where all the sound effects are exaggerated. And when Art hit the floor, he bounced, head turning enough so the side of his face and snout smashed into the ground. Blood splashed outward, as if someone threw a water balloon filled with ketchup at the ground.

He didn’t get up this time.

Triss pulled on the man’s arm. “Jacob, come on. Avery will—”

“Fuck Avery! She killed Minerva! You have any idea, any fucking idea, what that—for fuck’s sake Triss, keep Julias in your life for another twenty years, then lose him. You might have some, some fucking inkling of what it’s like to suffer what I’ve suffered.” He drew his foot back, and kicked Art in the shoulder. More sickening crunches, and from the angle, Tash knew Jacob had shattered his collar bone.

“Yeah, but—”

Jacob turned, and looked at her. Through the bandage, from the corner of his eyeless gaze, Tash was sure she saw a glimmer of something, a tiny shimmer of color behind the gray fabric, where his eyes should have been.

Triss let go of his arm, and backed away.

The elder reached down for Art’s fur on the back of his head, and held him up enough for Jacob to look him in the eye. It was strange, seeing the normal-sized, perhaps small man, lean body now exposed

through his tattered robes, lifting a gargantuan creature so easily. The juxtaposition of difference in size and strength was unreal, and Tash stared on, as Jacob swatted away Art's swiping arm, hard enough to snap the forearm like a twig, earning a howl.

"I should kill you. Arturo, right? I should fucking kill you. I should fucking rip your god damn guts out and let Black Blood take a peek. But I suppose they'd return to normal before he could. Shame. You know how much he'd love to get a look at that? Oh, the blood would flow so sweetly."

"You ... you're ... you're making ... these ... dangerous ... spirits."

"You have no idea what I'm doing, worthless mongrel. If shit was as bad as you thought, the streets of Dolareido would be swimming in blood, black and red, and bodies would be flowing up to our doors like the fucking river Styx."

"Jacob!" Tash walked up to Jacob. Each step shivering, each step trembling, she forced herself forward, shoes pressing down against the increasing ocean of red blood the two Uratha were pouring. She forced herself to peek to the right and look at Matt, the biggest of the werewolves, a hulking titan, and trembled as she saw more tears pour down his furry face. Locked in a nightmare. Art was no better off than Matt, his broken arm not regenerating with the quickness of his injuries before, blood unending flowing down his face.

The eyeless man looked at her, and she froze. Blood coated him, werewolf blood, head to toe, mixing into his salt and pepper hair. It soaked through the gray bandage on his eyes, and a black glint shined against the red wetness. Something was behind the bandage, in his eye sockets. Jacob's lips curled into a snarl, and he glared at her as he back handed Art, sending the man spinning over the floor, limbs in a tangled mess, other arm now dislocated.

These beasts had torn through concrete, a metal train, and had managed to run her down, her, a Mekhet, when she was running

from them in the tunnels. They'd taken on a giant spider monster thing, an enormous mutation with scythes for arms. To the psycho elder glaring at tiny her, they were children, biting off more than they could chew.

“ ... let them go, p-please.”

“Let them go? Natasha Natasha, you're not your sire Daniel. You have no sway here.”

Jennifer looked at her, eyebrow raised. Well, no use in worrying about that secret anymore. It didn't really matter anyway, now that she was back in the Ordo Dracul. But the fact Jacob knew it was another reminder that the man knew everything, and that if Antoinette owned the city, so too did Jacob, in a strange way.

“They're d ... d-d-defeated.”

“Are they? You see that fuck?” He pointed to Art. “Another five minutes and he'll be up again. I should rip off his legs. And him?” He pointed to Matt. “Gentle giant over there is swimming in some horrible nightmare, half of his own making. But these fuckers have the mental depth of plates. He'll get over it, and come running back for another swing at me.”

“But they're ... they c-can't ... can't—”

“Can't what, hurt me? They're werewolves, stupid girl. Mindless, idiotic beasts, capable of nothing more than pursuing their instincts. If I let my guard down, I could find their teeth at my back. And, in case you haven't noticed, they like to use them.” A gesture, with a flippant twist of the hand, toward the lacerations of his robes. The giant gashes he must have received were already healed.

“I ... I w-won't let ... them attack you.” Not that it'd matter. Jacob had proven his superiority; he knew he had it from the start. The comment about Stephanie was bait, an excuse for Jacob to let off

steam, and maybe get Art and Matt killed in self defense. “P-Please...”

Jacob glared into her, and she forced herself to stare at the bandages she was sure were covering some sort of eyes. This wasn't the same as the time he caught her peeping. This time, she found him peeping, or doing something naughty at least. Similar situation, sort of, but reversed, except she was again on the receiving end of the man's random violence and random ... everything.

She managed a smile up at him, a tiny thing, meek and pathetic, but at this point, shooting him with a pistol wasn't going to work like last time. He'd tear her in half. And, this time, it was a good idea to back off on the violence, get everyone to settle down, maybe see past the insanity of this and let people recover and walk away.

She was fooling herself. This wasn't going to end well. Jacob was a psycho, a killer, a murderer, a witch, and a—

He let them go.

Art rolled away, coughing and mixing snarls with gargling on blood. Matt collapsed forward, rumbling breaths vibrating the room with its bass. And, with time, both titans brought themselves back up to their feet. Unkillable, without a silver blade to put them down, or an Elder to rip them in half. And aggressive described them perfectly, unrelenting, growling, leaning forward and ready to pounce at the Nosferatu as their limbs and minds reassembled themselves.

She stepped in the way, and held out her arms to the sides. “Stop!” Itty bitty little Mekhet in front of two Uratha, goliaths of muscle and strength.

The Uratha stepped forward, looking over her head

She stepped forward, and slammed down her foot. The sound was quieter than the breathing of the two beasts, but the motion was enough to snap their enraged, twitching gazes down at her. She was lost in their shadow.

“I s-said stop! Now!” Please listen please listen please listen.

They stood there, panting, growling and snarling, claws digging at the floor, hands twitching and squeezing. She was half sure they were going to eat her, but she stood her ground, and frowned at them, at their massive teeth drooling saliva and blood, at their eyes, lost in rage and madness. If she didn't stop them, Jacob was going to kill them, and she didn't want that.

Trembling with only God knew how much adrenaline pumping through their massive veins, the two werewolves looked down at her, then to Jacob behind her, then back to her, and around one more time, before their body language started to relax. Their colossal arms fell to their sides, their pounce poses stood up taller, straighter, and their heads fell forward. They began to shrink, hundreds and hundreds of pounds of muscle fading away, disappearing into nothing, as their clothes started to reemerge, taking over where the fur had once covered them. Eyes recolored, claws slipped back into their fingers, and lips replaced their snouts.

Both men, sweating and shaking, stared at her, eyes looking her up and down, breath coming in heavy and heartbeats loud enough for the Kindred to hear them. The only two heartbeats in the room, after all.

“... he killed Stephanie,” Art said. “I don't know how, but he's responsible. Him and Black Blood ... did something, must have...”

Tash looked over her shoulder at Jacob. The evil man smirked, leaned back into the wall of bloody and carved symbols, not unlike those found at the ritual site, and folded his arms across his chest.

“M-Maybe, somehow, but you don’t know! Let’s ... let’s go.”

Matt didn’t look convinced. He came in closer, and she put her arm out to block him. Like a wall of iron.

“He’s fucking with the Hisil, Tash. He’s causing mayhem, and he’s probably behind these fucking red wraiths. Look at this.” A sweeping gesture to the bowl, the room, and the smell of the dead. “He’s making deals with devils.”

Jacob laughed, and tapped a finger on his lip. “I wish.”

Tash looked back at him, blinking. What a strange thing to say. Sighing and steeling herself once more, she reached out, and pushed against Art and Matt.

“Let’s go. He ... he c-can do whatever he wants. We know he has this p-p-place now, and what he’s d-doing, that’s enough.” She put her hands to the chest of each beast at her eye level, and pushed. They didn’t know what he was doing, not really, just what he was using to do whatever it was he was doing. But, it was still something.

The two wolves gave in to her pressing, and started back toward the exit.

She expected Jacob to say something, to taunt them, to invite more of their aggression; he could handle it easily enough, and it may give him the excuse to kill more of Avery’s pack. Steel face! Don’t let him know you’re worried.

Too late. The evil man smirked at her, winked — she thought — and waved at her. The boys didn’t see it thankfully, their heads pointed forward for a few seconds, drooping, like sad dogs. Her sad, sad dogs.

Digging through the memories of her time as a kine, she found one, a tiny one, buried in dust and jadedness; once upon a time, she did want a dog.

“Say hi to Maria for me, Tash,” Jacob said. “Hope she succeeds.”

She peeked over at Jacob, and the corpse that had collapsed when they penetrated the fog. A corpse that had collapse, and a final poke at a secret about Maria, or the secret she was keeping. Jacob was a bastard, a royal bastard. But then, why would he say something like that, poke at something like that, point Tash in that direction?

Antoinette might know. She'd make sure to ask. But for the rest of the night, she was going to take care of her wounded dogs.

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“Th-thank you,” she said, as she invited the boys into her apartment. She hadn't slept there in weeks, but it was still home, for now.

“I smelled more than Jacob and his witches there,” Art said as he dragged himself in. Much as he looked fine on the outside, it was easy to see he was beat up bad, mentally and physically. “Smelled wraiths, and Black Blood, and the sheriff, too.”

“That ... d-doesn't surprise me. I'm sure my sire has b-been there, and ... y-yeah, him and Jacob d-don't get along.” No need to worry about the sheriff being her sire. They didn't care, and they were unlikely to repeat it to anyone but their fellow pack anyway.

“... Avery is going to be mad at us,” Matt said, sinking onto her couch. Poor couch, it struggled to handle his mass. “Those red wraiths are obsessed with blood and guts, are linked to this, to what Jacob's doing. It's very strange. It's not something spirits would be interested in normally.”



“B-But nothing bad has ... uh, I guess the ritual, but we d ... d-don’t know if that’s because of Jacob or not.” Jumping to conclusions was bad. They had to be scientific about this, or they’d end up blaming the wrong person. It wasn’t like vampires didn’t often try and misdirect.

Art nodded, not happy, but understanding at least. “We’ll talk to Avery about this, leave you out of it. If there’s some connection between Jacob and Black Blood, these red wraiths, and that ritual those hunters probably performed.” Nodding to himself again, he slumped down onto the couch beside Matt, and pat the man on the shoulder. “You ok?”

“Yeah ... yeah. He hit me with that dream, and ... yeah.”

“Dream?” Tash came up to the boys, Art scooted aside, and she sat between them. Her poor, expensive couch did not like fighting to support their weights, but she might as well have not been there, perched on the mound of couch between the two wolves.

Art looked to Matt, but Matt kept his eyes on the floor.

“A ... it’s a ... it’s so stupid,” the gentle giant said.

Tash blinked at him, looked back at Art, and found his friend with his eyes drifting to the floor as well, heavy.

“If you ... d-don’t want to tell me, it’s ok.” If anyone understood a desire for privacy, it was her.

“Nah, it’s not that, just ... it’s a stupid dream that’s been bothering me since I was a kid. Keep seeing my parents freeze to death, and ... and I wasn’t even there to see it happen. Fucking digs at the gut though, you know? Keep thinking I could have helped them if I was there...” The gentle giant let his head slump more, and his forearms dangle off his knees.

Part of her wanted to share the misery from her own past, her issues with her father, and what her disappearance had done to him. But, no, another time. Tonight had been rough enough on the two of them, especially Matt, if Jacob had forced him to relive such a nightmare. She reached out, stroked his leg, and nudged her head into his arm.

“Thanks, by the way,” Art said, “for stopping us. Damn easy to get caught up in it, in that form. Really want to sink your claws into something, tear it apart...”

“That was brave of you.” Matt leaned down over her, kissed her head, and set his hand on hers on his leg. “After what we did to you, when we met you? Very brave.”

She grinned up at him, and Art too. “You ... you t-two were ... scary.”

“Were we?” Art reached out, slipped his arm around her shoulder, and pulled her toward him. Didn’t have far to go with all their hips bumping, but soon her shoulder was leaning into his side, against his waist. “After what that vamp did to us? Figured he knocked us down a peg on the intimidation scale.”

“... n-not very much.” Seeing the two Uratha get royally injured had been startling. Seeing the two Uratha stand back up and regenerate in moments, more startling. “B-But, Jacob is ... Jacob is special. Him and the P-Prince, they um ... they are ... t-t-two of the most powerful Kindred ... in the world. Please b-be careful with him.”

The giant nodded. “Yeah, after tonight, I won’t be getting in his way unless the pack’s there.”

Unless the pack’s there. Could Avery and her pack kill him? Maybe. They were strong, and she was sure Avery was extremely

strong. But Jacob was Jacob, and there was no getting around that he wasn't only an elder. He was ancient, and wise.

Sighing, she buried her face into Art's side, and breathed him in. She didn't want them hurt. Knowing Matt was haunted by dreams of his family dying, family he didn't get to see die, put a new perspective on the indomitable werewolves: they were still human, deep on the inside, like her.

Art hugged her closer with his arm, and his hand drifted down her opposite hip, then onto her stomach, where his fingers started to pluck at her skirt's waistband.

"Arturo! You ... you can't b-be serious." She frowned up at him, and nodded her head toward Matt. "He's can't b-b—"

Matt slipped his arm behind her, around her to her other hip, and got his fingers under the waistband, as well.

She rolled her eyes, and slapped them both on their legs at the same time. It did not deter them, and she squirmed as the two beasts started to fight against her clothes. Off came the jacket, and out came the shirt from the waistband of her skirt. She squeaked, and stared up at Art as the man took her shoulders, and turned her around so she was facing Matt. Matt took her legs, pulled them up onto the couch, and slid his hands up her legs before finding her skirt and pulling it off.

Trapped! Trapped and about to be ravished by two beasts. She struggled to hide her smile. Apparently, their sex drives were indomitable as well, if a night of being thoroughly beaten by an old enemy wasn't enough to deter them.

"D-Don't you ... um, have to report to Avery, or ... or something?"

Matt shook his head. "It can wait till morning."

Right, right, morning. Not an option for her, but the werewolves had no trouble, and they often went long bouts without much sleep, so they could spend time with her.

She squeaked as Art started on the buttons of her shirt. Wait, didn't Antoinette suggest she try something? That she should try taking charge for once, instead of being on the receiving end?

After what she accomplished in Jacob's lair, maybe she could manage that.

She gave Art and Matt's hands a quick tap, a touch harder than usual, and they stopped, eyebrows raised. She stood up, only in her shirt and underwear now, and put her hands on her hips, in fists. Time to take charge.

"I ... I'm going t-to ... change into something sexier! And tonight, you ... t ... you two are going to let me give the orders!"

Art and Matt looked at each other, her, back and forth again, and nodded. "Yes ma'am," they said, in unison.

Wow, that was easier than she thought. No hesitation, no issue, no playful aggression she'd have to break through. They understood what she wanted, and immediately, at that. She beamed with triumph. Not that she was against letting the boys doing their usual thing with her, but tonight she was feeling bold. Tonight, she had wandered into one of Jacob's lairs, negotiated with him, convinced him to stand down, and had managed to stop two very angry, very deadly, hulking beasts of brawn, to calm them down. She wasn't some silly neonate anymore, she was ancilla; a deadly creature, powerful, and a force to be reckoned with.

"You, stay," she said. Both boys smirked, and she meeped. That was a dog command. Shrugging, doing her best to pass it off, she went to the bedroom. What else did she and Antoinette speak of? Clothes! Something girly, something silly, something fun. She didn't

need to always be bookworm Natasha, or sneaky, shadow lurker Natasha. She could be fun and spontaneous, like Jessy, and maybe feminine too, like Antoinette. And, maybe cute too, like Gloria.

Or, she could stop trying to label everything, stop trying to put all her actions into neat and tidy little categories, and just go with her emotions. Hard for her, very hard, but was getting easier, especially with these two boys making her laugh on an almost daily basis. Easier for her to do something like, grab the pink nightie and pink thigh high socks from her closet, and change into them.

A second to look in the mirror. She was a tiny, dainty little thing, a few inches shy of five feet, with a skinny body and small breasts. But, she looked like a woman too, a petite woman with sleek curves; she grinned in the mirror as she rotated to admire how the nightie exposed her stomach. No underwear. She shivered a little as she looked at her tiny slit in the mirror. Just a body part in the past, but now, something she was proud of, and eager to share with her boyfriends.

So salacious! So very much unlike her; except, not true, not anymore. There was that time that Jessy had complimented her sex, described its tiny stature with lascivious adjectives. At the time, it'd been overwhelming, and almost offensive. Now, she realized she needed to pay Jessy a compliment, for exposing a new side of herself.

Later. For now, she was going to ride the high of being in charge, and have fun with her boyfriends.

“Ok, b-boys ... come in.”

Like hungry dogs, they shuffled in quick, and both of them dropped their jaws at the sight of her, on her knees, on the bed.

“Damn,” they said together.

“You t-two ... Naked. Now.” Another order. She was on a roll tonight.

The two men didn't waste time, and tossed their clothes away with all the grace of children, jeans landing on the floor, shirts onto the wardrobe, socks lost to the closet monster. Once they were naked, she motioned them in toward her, and pointed at the bed. And, nodding, eyes wide and locked onto her, each of the titans slipped onto the bed, and knelt around her, one at each end of the bed, facing her.

She giggled, a bright sound she felt terribly embarrassed about, and more flustered as her skin, demonstrated her embarrassment with total body blushing. But it was ok to be embarrassed, she knew; Art and Matt didn't care. They both stared at her, licking their lips, on their knees with their shafts standing up at attention. All the control was in her hand, she could do whatever she wanted, and they would her. Not only that, but staring at her was enough to get them both hard, very hard, cocks twitching every so often, and their eyes eating her with ravenous need.

She was getting wet.

As her eyes drifted between the two large men, she looked their bodies of mass and muscle up and down, eventually settling on Matthew. So utterly massive, Matthew was, and his shoulder-length dark blond hair and face scruff gave him that rugged model look. And his green eyes were to die for. She crawled toward him, cat-like, or her best attempt anyway, and set her hands onto his naked thighs, then his hips, and then his steel chest as she got in closer, and closer. Soon she was on her knees between his, his cock against her bare stomach.

Near seven feet of titanic strength, size, heat, testosterone and desire, kneeling there, unmoving, and watching her with his hands

on his knees, his eyes wide. After what happened to him tonight, he deserved a little treat, first.

“You t-two ... you always get so aggressive, pin me down and ... d-d-do things to me.” She shivered with the memory, and shivered twice over, as one of her hands reached down to rest along the thick girth pressing against her flat stomach.

“We—”

“No, d-d-don’t ... apologize. I like it ... a lot.” Whole body blushing red, it was easier to say embarrassing things now, at peak blushing, when she couldn’t get any redder. And it was good to say it, they deserved to know she liked it; and it was good to hear them both groan with desire at her words. “But, sometimes? A girl ... she likes t-to ... to ... lead.” Her hand upon the man’s cock pressed down on it, while she herself knelt straight up. Matt was sitting on his ankles, which gave her enough leeway, with her hips raised, to guide his cock’s head to press underneath her folds.

In seconds, she could tell. She’d coated the first two inches of him in her juices.

“I can definitely say that Art and I are perfectly cool if you want to do that,” the giant said, breath quickening, heart rate increasing. From this close, she could hear it, thumping in his chest, demanding satisfaction with animal need. But he remained in control, if only barely, she could tell.

“Good.” She nodded, grinning up at the man as her one hand pressed against his hard, enormous chest, and her other began to tease and caress the top side of his cock. “I ... I mean ... d-don’t think you shouldn’t ... you know ... g-get aggressive and ... d-d-do things to me, like before. But t-tonight ... I want to ... b-be in charge.” After seeing Jessy and Antoinette both do it, and have so much fun doing it, she wanted to try it at least once.

She came in a bit closer, until her thighs were nudging against the giant's testicles, and his glans started to spread open her pussy. She shivered, mewled a little, and started adjusting the angle of her pelvis to help guide the man's cock into her, spread her open, and stretch her little hole taut. But with her on her knees, and kneeling straight up, that was the only depth the angle allowed. He could have easily picked her up, and slammed her down onto him, but he didn't. He stayed sitting, and gazed upon her as she trembled, his cock's head reaching only two inches into her depths.

She reached up for his neck, and guided the man's head down to find her. Her other hand slid up from his cock, found her clitoris, and began to caress that instead, all while Matt's lips found hers. She kissed him, eyes drifting closed, as the pleasure sparks flowed outward from the tiny, swollen nub. Muscles squeezed, heat rising to a bowl, and she mewled into Matt's lips as she squeezed harder on his cock, until her juices were trickling down the length of him.

And just as Matt started to groan, she slipped off of him.

"Oh, that's how it's going to be, is it?" the man said, smiling. He looked down at his shaft, the forty-five degree angle of which it stood up from him, and the drops of her juices working down its veins. As Natasha stared at it, a drop of juices dripped from the tip, from the opening of the fat, swollen head of his cock. His precum.

She stuck out her tongue at him, grinning all the more, and turned around to crawl toward Art. So utterly wet, to the point of ridiculousness. Each time she got into bed with these two idiots, she got wetter, faster, like her body was addicted; and it was. She licked her lips again as she got in close to Art, and did the exact same thing, kneeling up high between his thighs, and guiding his cock to trace along her stomach, down her smooth mons, and then under her. Its upward angle guided the swollen head to rub against her entrance, and she cooed up at the man as she got in closer again, nice and snug, and guided his cock into her. Just those first two



inches though, only enough to feel the fat thickness of his glans press on her g-spot.

She smiled up at the animal, and waited. The struggle was clear on his face, his breathing coming in pants, his eyes devouring her, his hands flexing and releasing at his sides. He very much wanted to grab her hips, and skewer her. He wouldn't, though, because she asked him not to. Because, she asked him to sit.

“M-Matt, get the lube.”

“Yes ma'am.” The giant, without hesitation, got up off the bed, and retrieved the lubricant from the nightstand.

She'd always considered herself a woman who'd own a cat one day. But now, she was definitely thinking dog. Obedient and loyal, and to feel protected was a warm, delightful sensation.

As Matt fetched — ha! fetched — the lube, Natasha slid herself off of Art's cock. The poor man whimpered his sadness, almost like a dog sad his owner was leaving for a day of work at the office. So cute, she almost exploded. Giggling at him, she backed up a little, and with one hand pressed on his leg for balance, she leaned in, and put a kiss on his cock.

The damn man was too tall! Or, she was too short. Both, definitely both. With him on his knees, and his butt on his feet, his pelvis was too high for her to get onto her belly and elbows for proper, intimate fellatio. She had to stay on her knees and lean in. It was only temporary though. She giggled at her silly thoughts as she put another kiss on the man's wet cock. She could taste her own juices. No wonder Matt and Art were always so eager to get inside her, with how wet she got, how quickly. She could see lines where droplets of her juices had run down his length to his pelvis and testicles.

Matt hopped back onto the bed, lube in hand, eyes wide with hopeful expectations. They got wider when she peeked over her shoulder at him, and wiggled her ass a little.

“ ... p-prepare me.”

The giant groaned, almost growled, and got in closer, leaning over her. So big, the bed threatened to sink into the floor; she had to adjust her knees to compensate, to stay between Art's so she could continue to plant gentle kisses on his long cock in her hand. Kind of a hard position to hold.

It got even harder, when Matt set one of his titanic hands against her ass, and drooled the cool lubricant onto it with the other. It warmed instantly, and she shivered as the beast began to rub it into the rose of her tiny butt. She'd gotten much more comfortable with anal sex, and at this point, happily embraced that vampires were forever anal ready. Of course, she'd never tell Jessy how much she was starting to enjoy it, or how much Jessy was right; the Gangrel didn't need anymore ammunition to tease Tash with.

It was when Matt slid a finger into her, spread open her muscles, that she started to tremble. Practice makes perfect, and she'd gotten good at letting her muscles relax, push out sometimes too, to swallow the penetrating digit. She mewled, louder than she wanted, and looked up at Art as she quivered all the more. Each quiver, each shake of her body, made the beast in her hand clench his jaw as he stared. He wanted to skewer her before, and now he wanted to fuck her into torpor, if his eyes were any indication.

Matt removed his finger, and she frowned at him, as she looked over her shoulder.

“D-Don't ... stop. Keep ... keep ... fingering me, there.”

The huge beast nodded, gentle face adopting a sinister smile, and he pressed his finger against her small ass once again. Two fingers

scooped into her, large, deep, lubricated, filling and stretching her clenching ring of muscle. And as the man sank his digits into her ass, he pressed them down toward her belly.

God. Yes. Pressure, hitting that spot, those spots! Hitting the wall of her swollen, aching depths through her insides, through that thin wall of flesh; it made her feel so dirty, so naughty, so very much not like sweet little Natasha who was shy and meek. She whimpered, body struggling to keep from collapsing as the pleasure sparks spread outward from between her legs. She wanted to keep pleasuring Art, to keep his gaze locked onto her; keep him on that edge of animal need. Her lips found his swollen cock's head, and put another kiss on it, beside it, lower and lower, suckling and licking, gently, as she put her head beside his length. The long phallus stuck up beside her head, and a thick, heavy, slow drop of his precum started to dangle from his ripe glans, down onto her shoulder beneath him.

She put her hands into the blankets between his thighs, and collapsed. Her ass stuck up in the air, back arched, chest and face to the sheets, and she trembled like a squeak toy in a dog's mouth, complete with the squeaks. Matt pressed down, and down, and down, each curl of his fingers pressing along her depths, and forcing waves of tingling bliss through her pelvis, into her thighs and up into her chest. And, as her toes curled and her feet kicked the bed a couple times, a hard clench of her empty pussy caused a squirt of her juices to shoot out toward Matt. She managed to peek beneath herself, and found the giant had gotten close enough, knees out and her between them, for her cum to soak over his hard, awaiting cock.

Cumming, from anal, from someone filling her ass with fingers. Jessy would have teased her to death. The boys did not.

“You are so beautiful, it hurts,” Art said. She managed to peek up at him, between the waves of sparks forcing her feet to twist. The hunger was palpable, and another drop of his precum dripped from

his glans, onto her shoulder, a long strand of the clear, viscous liquid connecting her to him.

“ ... M-Matt ... you c-can ... enter me.” Blushing until she was sure her face would catch fire, she peeked at the giant from over her shoulder again. He looked ravenous as well, precum building on his glans’s opening, his eyes devouring her ass, his free hand holding one of her butt cheeks while his other slowly eased out of her.

She forced herself back up onto her hands, and again, began to kiss Arturo’s cock. But, she wanted to do more, to keep drawing his eyes. With shivering lips, and eyes looking up at the man before her, she eased his thick girth into her mouth, guiding it further, and further. As she gazed up at the animal, the huge beast of muscle and need, she eased his cock down her throat.

“God ... damn ... Tash, you...” Arturo leaned forward, and set his hands on his knees, keeping his weight on them as if he was about to fall onto her. His lips were parted, almost drooling, and his eyes stared down at her as she looked up to meet his, with his cock filling her throat. Learning how to deepthroat in her personal time had been surprisingly easy; perhaps it was a Kindred thing? She smiled with bliss at the sight of Arturo’s eyes.

Keeping eye contact turned nigh impossible, as Matt began to ease his cock into her ass. She didn’t need to breathe, and keeping Arturo inside her was easy enough. The problem was keeping eye contact, not letting her eyes close or roll up too far, as the giant began to slip his shaft into her quivering insides. She managed some gargled groans, but if she wanted to talk, she’d have to lift her head off of Arturo’s cock. But, with her lips around the base of him, nose nudging against his pelvis, she could see the man was hypnotized by what she was doing. She doubted she was the first woman to deepthroat him, but she was probably the first one who didn’t need to breathe.

“Can I turn you over, Miss Vola?” Matt said.

She smiled around Art’s length. Miss Vola. The man had caught on, in ways she hadn’t realized she wanted him to. She pulled her head back slowly, let Art’s long shaft ease out of her, before she looked over her shoulder at Matt. The beast had half of his huge shaft inside her, and still a long way to go. Maybe he wanted to see more of her as he entered her?

“Y-Yes.” She expected him to pull out so she could turn over, but instead, he reached out, and simply, flipped her. Slowly, gently, but he stayed inside her, and she shivered at the weird sensation of his half-submerged cock rubbing against her walls.

On her back, she looked up at Arturo again, and reached out with her small hands to press them against the inside of his thighs. Both men were so close, their thighs created a cage around her tiny body. And both of them were staring at her, her belly and breasts, her smooth slit and swollen clitoris, and her black hair spread out on the blanket around her.

“So beautiful,” they said, in unison. Too cute, it made her chuckle. They had to have planned that.

She opened her mouth a little, licked her lips, and nodded Art’s way. More than enough body language for the man to get her meaning, press down on the base of his cock, and guide the long, thick, wet member onto her lips again. Now, the natural upright pull of its angle tried to make it press to the bottom of her mouth, and all she had to do was let it run along her tongue as she tilted her head into the blankets, and let the rigid flesh enter her throat again.

Something soft slipped under her butt. A pillow. Once Matt had her pelvis tilted upward, he again began to sink his cock into her ass, and she mewled onto Art’s cock as she felt the fat head of his girth push up toward her belly. Those spots; sensitive, and begging

to be pressed again, sent more waves of bliss through her, making her shiver, making her squirm.

Once Matt was balls deep inside her, so deep it made her head spin, he guided her tiny legs around his enormous waist and hips, nothing but hard muscle greeting her thighs as she rested her legs upon him. Both with their knees spread and around her, both staring down at her, both being so gentle with her. Art wasn't even moving, and she knew that man was the more aggressive of the two.

She reached up to her own body with her hands, on her exposed belly, and ran her fingers up and down her skin, before tapping their legs. Touch me, please.

She melted, vanishing, turning into dust and bliss, as both men set their hands upon her. Art was balls deep inside her now, and she giggled a little, throating squeezing his cock, as she felt his balls press to her nose and forehead. It was fine, she didn't need to breathe, and the feel of his growls rumbling through his body, into his cock, and into her throat, was making her shiver. And feeling his hands cup her small breasts, his thumbs caress her nipples through her nightie, his fingers massage the small mounds of softness, more than made up for the strange position. Matt's hands too, they ran along her smooth belly, teasing her navel, her thighs, her legs inside her long socks, her dripping folds, and her swollen clitoris.

“You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen,” Matt said.

She expected Art to tease him about his poetic words, but instead, Art ran a finger up her chest over the soft fabric, up to her throat, and lightly caressed it, the delicate skin, the distension showing where his cock filled her.

“You ... really are,” he said.

She smiled, butterflies filling her belly. Compliments, while on her back in a spitroast, with two very large cocks penetrating her,

one of them being in her ass. She expected compliments like ‘you’re so sexy’ and ‘arg I need to fuck you now’ and such, more the sort of thing you’d hear in bad porn. But, with a little guidance, and a little request here and there from her, the pace of the sex slowed down to a delicious dessert.

As Art stayed balls deep within her mouth and throat, Matt began to push against her ass, gentle strokes using only slow, deep thrusts of his hips. Art’s hands massaged her body, her neck, her breasts, teasing the skin with dancing fingers, and she returned his affection with a playful tongue, lightly lapping at the thick thing filling her esophagus. Or at least, she tried to, but as Matt continued to gently, deeply fuck her butt, pillow insuring his cock hit toward her pussy again, and again, and again, his fingers also started to play with her clitoris.

Fingers caressing, gently circling and teasing her clit; the final drop of water that broke the dam. Her muscles clenched down, and her hands reached out to press against Art’s knees, as she began to tremble. The man eased his cock out of her throat, and met her teary-eyed gaze, almost awestruck, as she raised her head, and looked down along her body, to Matt. A tiny squirt of her juices shot out of her, and splashed against the man’s lower abdomen, her cum coating his steel abs. Another splash came as well, and this one forced her head to collapse back to the sheets as her voice broke down into whimpering mewls.

She came again, and it wasn’t because of the fingers on her clitoris, at least not mostly. A wild beast was between her legs, a giant wolf man, and he was tenderly fucking her ass until she came on him, came hard enough to squirt onto him. So naughty, so ... utterly ... naughty.

She reached out for Matt, and made grabby hands at the air. “ ... p-pick me up, and ... and lie down.”

Matt beamed a bright smile, saluted, and reached down. Enormous hands took her small waist, and he pulled her up onto him as he lay on his back. A valley of muscle, with touches of sweat on his massive pectorals, his stomach, his arms nearly as thick as her body, and wet lines of her cum between his abs. Soon she was straddling him, staring at him, and gulping as she shivered, orgasm aftershocks still working through her and making her ass clench on his cock.

But then, she turned around, shivering again as she felt the turning of flesh inside her. Once she was straddling the beast, but now facing away from him, she motioned for Art to come closer.

“Cum ... on my breasts.” As she said it, she met the man’s hungry gaze as best she could, but she knew she was giving him begging eyes, giving him ‘please fuck me now’ eyes, no matter how hard she tried to put on Antoinette’s seductress eyes instead. But despite that, the hungry animal, rumbling deep in his chest, came closer, and closer, until he was kneeling upright in front of her. With her sitting on Matt’s pelvis, her knees out to the side, her bare pussy dripping juices down onto his testicles, she had to look up to meet Art’s gaze as he pulled up on her nightie, and gently lifted it off her body.

Now she was completely naked, only in her thigh-highs. And that, apparently, was enough to have Art almost shaking with hunger. But the man put a hand on her shoulder instead, leaned down, and kissed her.

She melted away, hands reaching out to hold onto the man’s waist, and gently run her hands up and down the solid meat of his body. He kissed her more, and more, and pressed his cock into her breasts, his kneeling upright position putting his pelvis at level with her chest; he had to lean down quite a bit to reach her lips. His other hand took his cock, and began to stroke it, his hips nudging forward gently to press his wet glans against her naked, small



breasts. With one hand still on her shoulder, he had the freedom to have a little fun, and slide his cock from side to side along her chest, drawing lines of moisture on her pale skin, until he stayed on one of her nipples. His large, hot glans circled it, leaking warm precum onto it as he masturbated, hand working his length while his hips gently eased him back and forth.

Matt's hands found her hips, and she reached down with both hers to hold onto them, letting go of Arturo. Another man, holding her, his fingers caressing her waist, her back, as the other man masturbated onto her breasts. If Matt had started thrusting, she'd have cum all over again, she was boiling so much. But he seemed content to let this play out, and she was thankful, because kissing Arturo while he started to masturbate faster and faster, was turning boiling into a scorching inferno.

A warm squirt of fluid earned a squeak from her, and she broke the kiss to look down at where Art was rubbing against her breast. After all the teasing she'd done to him, it was only natural he was going to cum a lot. Three squirts. Four. Five. Heavy strands of white splashed against her, up along her alabaster chest and neck, onto her collar, while much of it poured over the subtle curve of her small breast, coating it in the viscous liquid. So much of it, it ran down her petite frame and flat belly, catching onto her hips and thighs.

She met Art's gaze once more, absorbed the mix of hunger and bliss she found there, and lay back upon Matt's body. Turning her head to the side and craning it up to look at the giant, she reached up for his neck, and offered his jaw, his shoulders — arg, so massive, so hard — and his lips some gentle caresses, before she looked back to Art.

“ ... f-fuck me. Gently ... I ... I like rough, but when you go too deep, it can hurt a little.”

“So don’t go all the way?” Art said as he came in closer to her.

“Um, n-no, please keep ... getting ... as deep as you can ... j-just don’t thrust too hard when you do that. You c-can still go rough! Just, not when so d-deep. Ok?”

The man nodded, his smile softening as he leaned over her.  
“Done.”

“And, right ... r-right now, I ... I want ... gentle sex.”

She almost squealed when she felt Matt let out a long, deep, rumbling growl. Was he frustrated? She turned her head again to peek up at him, and shivered all the more as she met the gentle giant’s gaze. Not frustrated, just terribly aroused. Poor man had been inside her for a while, and had yet to cum.

Art got over her, set his cock on her clitoris, and rubbed against it a few times, before easing it down lower. He had to squat around the two of them to make the position work, awkward and hard on the legs she was sure, but Art didn’t care. Soon her legs were hooked around his hips, pink socks up in the air, and she stared up at the man as he got onto his knees, and sank his cock into her.

On her back like this, she managed to look down her belly, along her naked breasts and cum-soaked skin, to where the man was stretching open her tiny slit. Not a hair to be found on her body, the little budding clitoris between her petite folds stood up, announcing her extreme arousal almost as well as her shivering body and whimpering moans did. Deeper, and deeper, he forced in the thick, hard girth of him, fighting for space inside her with Matt already filling her up. It made every inch tight, made every inch cause his flesh to press and rub against her spots, made every inch send shivers through her body. Eventually his cock reached her depths, and she gasped, putting her hands to his chest. Arg, so much hard muscle, and blood, and now some sweat, and she could smell wolf,

beast, sex and need with every breath. Please go slow, please go slow.

As she had asked, Arturo gently eased in the last two inches of this long member, and stretched her inward with a soft pressure. She sighed bliss, relaxed her head onto Matt's chest, and let her arms roam up and over Arturo's body, his thick arms pressed into the blankets around them, and soon, onto her own body. Cum, werewolf cum, hot and thick, all over her. She ran her fingers through it, and giggled between tiny whimpers, as she remembered Antoinette riding Jack, with her enormous breasts covered in cum. Tash didn't have the breasts, but she had the cum, more than, considering how much these beasts came. And as she trailed lines through the white liquid on her nipples and subtle mounds of her breasts, both the men stared on, Matt's head raised on a pillow so he could gawk at her actions.

Both of them were staring at her, her doing lewd things, just like Antoinette had done with Jack. She could do more. Flexing her muscles and bracing her hands against where Art's were pressed into the blankets, her fingers squeezed his enormous forearms, and she pushed her hips upward, before letting gravity pull them back down.

Rumbles flowed through her, the two wolves making that purring sound that filled her with butterflies. They liked what she was doing. Managing her best determined gaze — weak and silly, but better than nothing — she picked up a proper rhythm pushing her hips up against Art, before pushing them down toward Matt, devouring and rubbing on them both a few couple inches.

It only took a few more strokes to earn a quiet sigh and groan from the gentle giant underneath her. He must have been on edge for some time, because of her. Men, eating out of her hand, like Antoinette said. She giggled, and looked up with a turned head to smile at the beast beneath her, and where his head was propped up

on a pillow. And as she smiled up at him, she continued to move her ass against him, and clenched on him in time with the rhythm. Each sway caused the friction of the two cocks inside her to rub against her sensitive flesh, sending more tremors through her, but she wanted to focus on pleasuring Matt for now.

“Feel ... good?” she said. The man was cumming inside her, pouring his hot fluid into her, and she could see the rapture on his face.

“God yes,” he managed to say. Twitches, a few shivers, and some hard flexing of his muscles signaled each wave of his seed gushing into her.

She continued to dance on his cock, each driving upward motion of her hips causing her ass to clench tight on him, and meet Arturo’s length until she’d managed to take him to the hilt, his length stretching her inward. God, that spot, deep, sensitive, but when he pressed against it like that, slow and filling. It sent the pleasure sparks tingling up and down her body again, and she collapsed onto Matt as she lost energy. She wasn’t cumming yet, but was getting there.

One of her hands took Matt’s, and made it secure on her hip so she wouldn’t go anywhere. The other, she guided up to her neck, and she melted onto the gentle giant’s chest as Matt settled his titan grip around her throat.

“Ok, you t-two ... can ... fuck me. Gentle, ok?”

They both rumbled as she closed her eyes and prepared for the two beasts to pound her into a trembling mess. But, they didn’t. Arturo leaned over her, his weight on his palms on the blankets as he put a kiss on her bottom lip, and began to gently thrust into her. Matt’s grip on her neck stayed, and squeezed a little, but not as tight as he or Art often did. His grip was gentle, tender, and his motion under her body with his pelvis pushing upward just as gentle.

Instead of deep, rough-but-wonderful sex, she felt like she was on the ocean, in an ebb and tide of gentle, wonderful sex. Both men found a rhythm with each other, sinking themselves balls deep into her until she could feel the heads of their cocks fighting for room in her depths. Both of them, pressing against that spot so deep inside her, stretching it deeper into her until she thought she'd fade away. Her hands, with minds of their own, drifted back to her breasts, and she again began to massage them, fingers tracing along her nipples, gentle, triggering the delightful sparks along her breasts she was hungry for. And tracing Arturo's cum along her skin was heavenly.

She came again, and sighed bliss. Not a powerful, mind shattering orgasm, but something a little more controlled, a little more subdued, something she could open her eyes during, and smile up at Arturo as she clenched on his cock, as well as Matt's. The sort of orgasm she imagined Antoinette often enjoyed, a mix of pleasure, and control.

It may have been a little too much for Art. He pulled out of her, set his cock on her pelvis, and began to stroke himself as he rubbed the head into her belly. She raised her head, and blinked down at him, at the valley of muscle above her, and the grip he had on his cock, as he started to pour another wave of it onto her body again.

"I'm ... going to be so st-ticky." She gulped, and stared on as the fat, swollen head of the man's cock rubbed along her already cum-soaked skin, and squirted another wave of the hot fluid onto her. And another. And another. Some of the harder squirts reached up to her breasts, and she gasped as it splashed over her fingers, getting between their knuckles. Hot, so very hot, and it smelled of sex and animal and ... beast.

"Couldn't help myself," he said as he smiled down at his work. "Hope you don't mind?"

“ ... I ... don't.” She didn't, she really didn't. Memories of Antoinette's cum-covered breasts flirted with her mind, and she sighed again as she relaxed onto Matt's chest again, and rubbed his friend's cum into her breasts. So much of it, so much, and it was so warm. And, most of all, massaging her hard nipples with it was causing both wolves to rumble with primal need, her display bringing them both to attention.

But they stayed gentle with her, even as Art slipped his cock back into her soaked insides, and squirted a couple more gushes of his cum into her. These werewolves were unending waves of sexuality, life, hunger, aggression, and they came like fire hydrants. And, at her request, they were being gentle with her, as they both fucked her at the same time.

She whimpered openly, and reached out to hold onto Art's forearms again. He wouldn't mind the cum on her hands.

“ ... faster.”

Art lowered himself closer to her, growled, the rumbling sound working through his body into her. Matt did too. So much vibration from their voices, filling her, announcing their new rhythm as they both started to fuck her. She held on, her voice fading away as Matt tightened his grip around her throat. They were both so into it, into holding her, touching her, staring at her, eating her with their eyes. The heat of them, the size of them, she was lost to it, and she shivered as they began to work together. Both in to the hilt, then one out, then the other, then both in again, like she was a cog in a clock.

Her little butt was filled with cum, and she could feel it trickle out of her, coating the giant's length as he eased a couple inches of himself in and out of her. Art had more to work with, his angle and position allowing him to draw himself back further, and bury himself into her with a little more impact. Each one would have

earned a squeak, but Matt's grip on her throat stopped her. If she wanted to stop them, it'd be hard to, at this point. She was a quivering, shaking mess, and the pleasure was starting to build up again. At their mercy, as they pumped into her.

It was enough to bury her mind in waves of bliss. Sinking into pleasure, lost in the back and forth of giving over control at the last moment to these two rugged animals, so they could have their way with her.

She closed her eyes, went limp, and came. They continued, thrusting, pushing, burying. Somewhere along the line, Art lowered himself closer still; her body sandwiched between the two walls of muscle and sweat.

Did Art cum again? He probably did. She couldn't tell, drifting away on a cloud, or some silly cliché that manifested as cloudy, glowing images with blurry edges. Limp and exhausted, she managed some quiet mewls as they pumped into her, until at some point, they started to slow down. Slower, and slower, until she could at last feel their lengths soften, and no longer stretching her tiny insides to bursting.

Movement. Art picked her up, and laid her upon her bed beside Matt, before he lay beside her.

"I ... I need to ... get back t-to Elysium Tower b-before sunrise," she said. She did say it, right? It was hard to tell, voice soft and blending into the background noise of two werewolves breathing, and their heart beats thundering, before they too began to slow. "Um, let's ... g ... get a quick shower."

"... hey Tash," Art said, looking up at the ceiling, and raising a hand to trace invisible stars, "I don't want to put you between us and your job, but, you might want to talk to the Prince about this Black Blood business, with it and Jacob."

“She knows, about it, and, um, I’m sure she’s d ... d-doing all she can.”

Matt forced himself up to sitting, nodded, and turned to look down at her. “Maybe. That Black Blood spirit is some sort of mutation, probably a Magath, and ... and it’s worse than we realized, if it’s talking on the regular with Jacob. If it’s possible, it’d save everyone a headache, and probably a lot of lives, if Antoinette could just stop the man communicating with it.”

Convince Antoinette to get confrontational with Jacob, and stop him from continuing his private pursuits, directly. That was very much not a Kindred thing to do, and very much not an Antoinette and Jacob thing to do.

“I’ll ... I’ll s-see what I can do.”



## Chapter 63

~~Jack~~

“Guys, guys! We need to stick around and figure out all we can.” He tried to get out of their grip, but it wasn’t going to happen. Fiona had a good grip for a small girl, and Damien had fifty years of his second life in seniority. Struggling was pointless, but he wasn’t about to throw this opportunity away. Sandbagging was the best option he had, so he let his bodyweight succumb to gravity. Unfortunately, they were both strong enough to drag him, regardless.

“Jack, you pride yourself on your reasoning, yes?” Damien said.

“ ... I do, yeah.” Fuck. Already knew where Damien was going with this, but he didn’t want to hear it right now.

“I know figuring what to do about this ritual thing targeting you is a top priority. But, we’re in over our heads. We saw what we came to see, but—”

“Azamel’s warning is—”

“Has nothing to do with the hunter ritual.” Damien shook his head, as he looked back over his shoulder at Jack. “We have an idea now of what’s going on, so we should get out of here. Report, meet up with Jessy, delicately avoid talk of mysterious warnings, and mention Azamel’s explanation of where the ritual came from.”

“ ... fine.”

Fiona, giggling and almost jumping in spot, helped him back to his feet. Turning fear into excitement was a skill she had in droves. “Come on! Who knows what ... what...”

Jack stood up, and turned around to face the direction Fiona and Damien were taking him. There'd be something bad ahead, something that warranted Fiona's pause, something that was going to make Damien right, and make Jack regret his one moment of spontaneity.

"Uh oh, uh oh." Sky came up behind them, and flapped a feather over their heads. "Leave, better leave!" And leave it did, flapping both wings and catapulting itself into the air, abandoning the three little monsters to find a perch on higher ground. That was fine, Jack couldn't blame any bird for escaping at the moment of danger, that's what birds did. But at the same time, he was really wishing the bird would have taken them with it.

They came out of the street, out of the cracks of shadow running along the uneven asphalt, out of the corner where building met pavement, out of the rainy windowsills, and out of the shadows cast by warped benches. Red bits of wavy fog leaked out of crevices, as if someone was smoking, and blowing puffs of crimson cloud. With each wave of the fog that crept out onto the street in front of the three; hissing began, quiet and taunting. Drip, drip, splashes of red liquid fell to the street, before disappearing into nothing, wisps of more red smoke, while entities began to form.

Most definitely not the sex spirits he had seen in Dolareido.

The red things had streaks of black moving through them, or streaks of red moving through masses of black; hard to tell as the two colors mixed and fought for surface area. But with time, it was apparent something black, something that looked like tar dancing with smoke, was draped in red which ran like blood. Drip, drip. The red things had human-like torso shapes, but without distinguished features; legs as solid as cigarette smog. With time, long claws of black crept out of their hands, subtle but massive. Worse were the eyes, glowing white eyes, slitted and slanted. Demon eyes.

And there was a dozen of them.

“Someone ... tore open ... verge ... who?” One of the strange, hovering spirits came forward from the group, and looked at them.

And that was enough for the weight of its presence to hit them. The three of them took a step back, and Jack gulped as he felt the ice in his stomach start to form. He stared into the eyes of the demon creature, until the bent streetlights started to flicker on and off, aware of the eye contact. Shit, shit, shit. As if the city itself was not happy about the creatures, the streetlights warped, bending away from their city-center hope, away from the hovering entities. The shadow was powerful as the lights began to turn off, one at a time; each a flicker, then a dying gasp, before it was gone.

As the strange spirits spread out to cover Jack’s exit back to the ‘verge’, darkness settled on them, until only the moon and its unsteady light offered them vision. Fiona might be able to see in total darkness, but Damien and Jack would be fucked. It hadn’t come to that, but it was getting a little too close for comfort.

Damien and Fiona nudged Jack in the back of his shoulders. Oh, right. Now that everything was going to shit, he was the ambassador, again. If it wasn’t his fault for them getting caught, he’d have kept his mouth shut. Well, would have liked to, but the situation wasn’t giving him any options.

“Um, uh ... verge?” he said.

The strange, shadowy figure of obsidian death and bleeding crimson, gestured to the wall of the factory the three intruders had come from. “Black Blood has claimed this.” The choir of entities hissed, one or two of them shrieking. The sound stirred the rat-like black blobs that ran along the building perimeters nearby, and sent them darting into whatever hole they could find.

“Black Blood has no claim to the old verges!” Sky squawked from his perch on a rooftop, and clawed at the roof edge a few times. “They’re from before!”

The dark spirit in front of its brethren moved forward again, without a glance to the bird. “You ... you two are Kindred. Dead things. Useless. But you...” It drifted toward Fiona, closer, drip drip of something very blood-like creating a trail behind it. “Skin. Sinew. Bone. Organs. Muscle. Fat. Let us see.”

“Oh, I dinnae think so!”

So much for diplomacy. Before Jack could reach out, stop her from turning a bad situation worse, the woman let out her monster.

The giant spider creature, the woman of blades, of horns covering the top half of her face like an elegant mask combining into a crown, of spikes for feet and fingers, of silk and shadow, slashed out. A flicker of shadow in the already dim light was easy to miss, but Jack knew what to look for. The blades Vrall used weren’t for slashing, they were for stabbing, like an estoc sword. A very, very, very long estoc.

Either the strange spirits didn’t recognize what Fiona was, or they underestimated her, and how quick she’d be to throw the first punch. Eight blades upon long, smooth, sectioned spider legs stabbed out, cracking the air with a snap, and stabbing into each spirit, through their chests; if that was a chest, on top of their legs of smoke. It must have been, because the eight creatures all let out a weird shriek, distorted with ear-splitting nails-on-chalkboard shrill sounds.

The eight of them fell to the ground. And then, started to get back up.

“Warned.” One of them said, spreading out, body disappearing into the shadow of a nearby bench.

“Warned about the Begotten.” Another, one getting up from the wound, stood before them, fearless. The hole in its chest showed only more of the black and red smoke that made its body, and the hole was closing back up.

“Begotten opened the door, without permission.” Another moved toward the building on Damien’s left, and its body pressed to the brick, flatter than it should have been able to. As it moved toward them, shadow spread out from where its body merged with the building, burying it and the surrounding asphalt in billowy onyx for a dozen feet. A smokescreen of bleeding tar. “Kill Begotten.”

Ok, yeah, that sounded bad. Sounded like they didn’t want Begotten opening doors that were otherwise locked. Sounded like covering up their tracks. Sounded like Black Blood was giving these things orders, too? He’d ask, but doubted they’d answer.

Jack stepped away again, drawing his pistol and sword, and began firing. No reason to be diplomatic at this point. “Shit. Shit shit shit. Plan?”

“Escape.” Damien mirrored him. Though his weapons were already drawn, he wasted no time following Jack’s lead, sinking bullets into the spirits.

The dozen spirits scattered, becoming smoke on the wind. Their eyes and enormous claws remained solid, but their bodies did not, half opaque as they took to the sky. The one against the building jumped for Damien, one set of claws slicing up through the asphalt like butter. But, a need for melee meant Damien had little trouble putting a bullet through the creature’s head, sending it toppling to the street, at his feet.

It started to get up, hole in its head filling in with a mix of the black tar, and crimson mist.

No one wanted to say it, but none of them knew anything about spirits. Jack was starting to learn a thing or two, but ultimately, he had no idea if spirits were immortal, or if guns and swords could kill them. And these spirits kept getting back, even as Jack and Damien continued to sink bullets into them. Another one dived at them, this one from the front, and Jack sank six bullets into its chest before it went down. It too started to get up, slowly but surely.

“Run!” Sky said, and it took to the air and flew away. Typical bird.

Ok, he took it back. Jack wouldn't blame a bird for running at the first sign of trouble. Strangle Mulder and Scully when you get back, just because.

Damien tapped him on the shoulder, and nodded his head back toward the path behind them. Empty street, no movement as far as Jack could see, and the curved streetlights pointed the way toward South Side. He was afraid to see what South Side might look like in this strange Shadow world, and it was a good mile or two run from here, anyway. Kindred could do that, no need for air, but could Fiona? It seemed like she couldn't transform into her horror, not completely, not unless she was in a nightmare.

“Cover me, Jack.” Damien got onto a knee, put his sword away, and nodded his head toward Fiona. “Get on.”

“Oh, my hero!” Giggling, always with the giggling. She hopped onto Damien's back, and like he'd done this a hundred times before, he started running, one arm hooked onto her thigh to keep her secure as she hugged him. With his other arm free, he continued to fire his pistol, and unlike Jack, he didn't miss.

Well, at least this way they didn't have to worry about Fiona growing tired now. Jack broke into a full on run, letting a touch of the beast out, a little of the hungry animal channel into his legs, tapping into that Kindred part of him that had no issue running. The

beast loved to run, hop building rooftops, stalk the shadows, and track prey. Running was all he needed, for now.

The spirits gave chase. Naturally. But they didn't run on legs to do it; hell, their legs had vanished. The dozen spirits floated after them, flowing left and right in the air like sharks, arms hanging underneath them and pulling back with the momentum of movement and the impact of the air they cut through. Some of the spirits merged into walls, others into the street. They flowed after the three running intruders like living shadow. As the three of them rounded a corner, one of the spirits hovered over a bench, and its claws sliced through its bent shape without resistance.

It was like running from a bunch of Wolverine ghosts. What the fuck?

“Fiona, can you not walk like you do in the nightmare?” he yelled, turning back and shooting at one of the spirits as it pulled ahead of the pack. Miss. Miss. Hit! It shrieked as lead tore through its demon eye, and it collided with the street, crimson and onyx splattering around, half of it in drops like tar, or thick blood. Half of it spreading into the air like mist. But, with time, the ethereal splatter of whatever the spirit was made of, began to pull itself back into its host.

“I cannae! Nae easily. Summoning Vrall out 'ere is hard. It's ... it's nae home, nae the nightmare. But if we can find a place dark and secluded, someplace quiet, I might be able to open a pathway back to my lair.”

Easier said than done. The whole place was dark, but secluded wasn't going to happen, as every corner, every building, every object they passed, Jack was sure he saw something alive, or at least moving. More of those rat-like wisps along the corners, or new things he couldn't put a name to, but looked like slugs creeping up old buildings. Hairy, old slugs.

A shriek sent him down, falling to his chest hard enough for the street to tear into his suit, and some of his skin. Ripped fabric and bits of ash, lovely. One of the spirits flew over his head, and he shot at it from behind as it darted through the air, left and right. But, if it was going to consistently move like a shark, he could use that, and predict.

Miss. Hit! Getting better. The creature went down with another shriek, higher pitched, full of pain, and frustration. Physical things hurt them, but were they dying? How the fuck was he supposed to know, they kept getting back up.

He threw Fiona a glance as he got up, while Damien waited for him. Nice to know the man wouldn't leave him behind, when the shit hit the fan. There was so much shit, Jack struggled to see anything else. Trapped in a parallel dimension, with ghost things chasing them. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

They rounded a corner, and Damien threw open a door of a nearby building. Front door of an apartment building.

“We’re going to be trapped in here,” Jack said, running up the stairs after Damien.

Damien shook his head. “We’re going to get run down, if we stay out there.” Once he stopped by an apartment door, he set Fiona down, and kicked it hard. Jack expected wood to splinter and the door to fly open; kicking open doors was a common Kindred tactic. But the wood did not budge. Tilting his head to the side, Damien tried again, driving his boot into the wood hard enough to send an echo through the hall. Nothing. “... what in the world.”

The door snarled.

The three of them jumped back, and stared at a door that just made noise. It opened a couple of eyes from the white coating of cheap paint. Small eyes slitted vertically with black pupils. A lipless



mouth followed, large and reaching from edge to edge, with bars for teeth, the sort of bars you'd find on a window in a rough neighborhood.

"Go away!" it said, voice full of deep thuds.

"Go away!" another door said.

"Go away!" said another.

"Ye've got to be shitting me." Fiona, caught between a laugh and hiccup, turned around and looked at the doors. They were all doing it, all sprouting eyes and mouths, all glaring at the intruders. Did people in Dolareido really live in this sort of paranoia? Maybe the Carthians had it right, and it wasn't as good a place to live as the Invictus and Antoinette liked to pass off.

Maybe he could talk past the door? Screams ripped down the hallway, putting an end to that idea as each door closed their eyes and mouths, becoming regular doors once more.

The three of them turned to face the sound, and began to back away from it. The hallway was lit with flickering light, bulbs that dipped in and out of different colors. Red to white, to black, and then back again, as if the light itself was bleeding on them in rhythm with the delightful ear-splitting shrieks that filled the corridor.

Silence fell on them, heavy and cold. They continued to back away from the stairway, pistols up, swords out, and the two Kindred glancing over their shoulders to look behind them. The hallway came to a stop except for strange windows, which looked like they were being rained on. Despite the lack of rain. The carpet was damp, dark, and stained. The walls were cracked, bleeding rust, and showing other signs of wear and tear. It was one of the apartment buildings built on the North Side's edge, where people could find a

cheap place to live without risking Devil's Corner shit. Maybe that's why the doors wouldn't let them in.

How much Dolareido reflected on itself, in this shadow world, was startling. But, it was also useful information. If he could predict what sort of reaction they'd get from environments based on what he knew about the city, maybe he could avoid situations like this.

Too little, too late. The silence pressed against them, and shadows beyond poked at the corners of the hallway. Outside, where they could run, the strange ghosts had been scary; inside a hallway, with no escape, the strange entities took on a new level of terrifying. Not Damien's fault, but Jack couldn't help but give the man a frown, as the shadows dancing on the edge of the corner ahead of them, started to emerge.

"Give us the flesh." Beedy eyes poked out from around the corner, but they didn't expose their bodies, yet. They carried darkness with them, like ink, or a poisonous fog. It hid their features, so only their glowing eyes cut through the obsidian nebula surrounding their guise.

"W-Why would a spirit want flesh?" Jack said, small sword in one hand, and pistol set to brace against his wrist. Whatever spirits were made of, they refused to die, no matter how many bullets the two Kindred sank into them. Fiona's monster limbs seemed to do better, but not much better. Would silver work? Probably not.

Another set of eyes poked out from around the distant corner, white slits cutting through the pulsing, bleeding light. Drops of black and red fell from wisps of onyx, and crept along the ruined carpet toward the three intruders. Every moment it got closer, darkness was drawn inward, like a vortex.

Vampires, and a Begotten of darkness, stepping back from shadows. Fucking lovely.

“Flesh, blood. Tools from the other side. Stupid creatures know not the power of their own bones, of their sinew.” Claws reached out from the black, arms misty red and flowing with waves of darkness, like food coloring dropped into water. Drip, drip. The claws came out further, then sank into the floor, as if the shitty carpet was nothing more than water.

The thing was talking about human bodies as if they were toolkits, as if the limbs, organs and contents thereof, were items to be used in ... in a ritual. Crúac? But, there was more to crúac than just guts and bones, as far as Jack’s paltry understanding was concerned. It didn’t make sense.

“Did ... did you have ... anything to do with a ritual ... with pictures? Drawn pictures?”

A laugh, a shriek mixed with ups and downs of tearing vocal cords. Another spirit crept in with the black, piercing eyes drifting down along the floor, then up against the opposite wall.

“One of us. Not one of us. Secrets, on the parchment, of the flesh and bone. A glimpse of who it is the monster speaks with. The trail for their goal.”

“W-What? I don’t understand, I—”

The chorus of shrieks erupted, and the eyes and claws came with it. Darting out of the black, the spirits ripped and shredded the floor, ceiling, walls, and doors as they dashed for the three intruders. The doors opened their eyes and cried out in pain, eyes flitting around in a panic as claws sliced them open. Some of the doors fell apart, revealing obsidian endlessness beyond them, cold and empty.

Jack and Damien started backing up, each unloading bullets into the oncoming swarm. Screams echoed through the hallway, against the hollering doors that cried in pain, as more claws came for them. Rabid animals.

Fiona swung both her arms from side to side, as if knocking aside a great tide. The monster inside her snapped out with its limbs, and splattered white against the walls. Webbing, a mountain of it, in a pattern of chaos. Ropes, and ropes of it, joined wall to wall, thick strands, more than big enough to hang a man, covered the hallway passage.

The spirits crashed into them. Either they didn't see, or didn't expect them, many getting their claws trapped underneath the webbing at angles they couldn't use to cut. And as they struggled, the three of them continued to back up, shooting, and shooting.

Jack glanced over his shoulder. Window. If the doors weren't going to open for them, though even if they did, nothing seemed to exist behind them, then the window was the only way out. Jump out the window? He could handle the fall, Damien could handle the fall, and Fiona could too.

"Go, go!" Jack yelled as he slammed his back beside the windowsill, reloaded, and fired into the approaching black cloud. Swirling bits of red followed the pairs of eyes moving up and down in the obsidian wall, and the webbing Fiona left disappeared into the rolling waves. Left, right, up, down, the eyes moved around and around, letting out shrieking cackles, and dragging a pair of claws up the walls, floor, and ceiling. Jack shot at them, taking his time to aim for a set of eyes each time, and squeezing the trigger with solid strength, Kindred strength. The odd sounding thud of bullets hitting spirit bodies joined high pitched shrieks, as pair, after pair, of slitted white eyes fell into the black. Then, got back up.

Damien shot the window. Jack half expected the window to not break, then announce its frustration to the intruders. But the satisfying sound of a bullet shattering glass filled the hallway, causing Jack to sigh, in relief, as he glanced at Damien, watching him work. Boot against the glass and wood, Damien made short

work of the window. Before he could say anything, Fiona jumped out.

“Fiona!” Damien threw his hands up, before he, too, jumped through the window.

“Give us the woman,” the spirits said, their voice a harsh whisper between the gunshots. Many voices, fading in and out, speaking out of turn from each other. Voices overlapping, cutting through each other. “Give us the woman, Jack Terry, and we will tell you more of the ritual of faces.”

Ritual of faces. Name? Could be, or just what the spirits call it. Better than nothing, though. He had something to go with, something to sink his teeth into, and learn about. Later. For now, Geronimo.

They weren't up very high, so landing wasn't easy. He was light, undead; the combination made falling a couple floors easy to manage. His shoes didn't like it much, but his bones handled it fine. Fiona landed on her spider legs. Jack expected her to descend to her human feet, but she turned around, and sliced several spider blades at the window. The monster's blades slashed over Jack's head, crashing into the window, and slathering it in webbing.

A moment to catch their breath. Or for her to catch hers. The Kindred looked at each other, the web-covered window, then around themselves. Two courses of action: run, or ask Fiona to cover the apartment building entrance with webbing, and then run.

A shriek from around the corner, outside the building, made the decision for them. Jack looked left and right, and let his shoulders drop, as more of the deadly creatures started to emerge from shadows. Their eyes blended into the flickering darkness, slits of white joined by dripping blacks and reds that leaked onto the street before them. Cracks in the sidewalk filled with the dark liquid,

mixing red and black into ribbons, little streams, and overflowing veins that bled onto the street.

“Leave the flesh.”

“Leave her to us.”

“Undead will be left alone.”

“But only if monster left behind.”

“Will dissect her.”

“See her insides.”

“Blood, muscle, organs, bile.”

“And the horror inside. Where is it? How does it work?”

“Taste. Let us taste the Begotten.”

If aliens came to Earth, and needed to ingest people to figure out how they functioned, Jack figured they'd sound like this.

“I’m nae letting ye touch me!” Fiona backed away, down the empty street toward South Side. But, even if they could run to South Side, there wasn’t anything there to escape to. Where were they running?

They weren’t running anywhere. They were just running. Sky said run, and unless the bird had some miracle planned for their rescue, their running was fruitless.

Damien didn’t agree. He scooped up Fiona, and bolted, making his way to South Side. “Don’t stop.”

“But—”

“Jack, keep running. We’ll figure this out.”

Easier for a Mekhet to say in the circumstance. He could run, he could hide. A Ventrue was at his best when standing his ground, preferably with army of thralls and ghouls under his command. An army of animals, at his beck and call, would not go amiss, either.

But, he had none of that, so he did the only damn thing he could. He ran, firing shots behind him. Was Sky overhead? He didn’t know, and couldn’t pause to look. Run. All he could fucking do was run. All he could do was—the two vampires, and the monster luggage on Damien’s back, came to a dead stop, and stared at the wall of water coming their way.

Holy fucking hell, had a meteor hit Earth? That’s what happens in all the movies, a giant wave of water followed the meteor’s impact, and half the world drowned, or some such. A quick glance up showed the moon was still there, so the Moon didn’t fall to Earth. And the water wasn’t coming at five-hundred miles an hour; maybe a tenth of that. But there was no denying, it was a giant wave of water, fifty feet high, hitting the rooftops of North Side factories and warehouses, as it crashed down and around them.

Jack threw up his hands, covered his face, and waited. He couldn’t drown, he hoped. He didn’t need to breathe but considering where he was, for all he knew a giant wave in the Shadow world was more than capable of drowning a vampire. Maybe he’d melt away, like in some vampire myths. Maybe he’d walk on water.

Whatever it’d do to him, he didn’t get to find out, as the crashing tide split around him and Damien at the last moment. Snapping out and back in, whipping around them with ferocious drive, the great water smashed into the oncoming, shrieking dozen of pursing death creatures. He turned, and stared on, as thunder rumbled through his body, enough to make his feet inch along the vibrating street. It would not have surprised him if one of the spirits had started to cry

out ‘Moses!’, as the collapsing walls of compressing terror crashed in upon the ghastly creatures. Poor Ramesses.

Like drops of red and black food coloring, lost to insurmountable amounts of crashing water, the spirits began to fade away into the unending liquid. They cried and shrieked, alien sounds that reminded Jack of a fox’s scream. Bone chilling. It was impossible to see what happened to them after the first ten feet of water, as the splashing white foam and rapid, crashing waves disguised their journey, well and beyond what he could see. But, with how hard the water was slamming against the buildings, any human would have cracked like an egg on contact.

With time, the water began to fade, and Damien set Fiona down before drawing his sword once more. Jack still had his, but the hell was a sword going to do against water? He stared into the path ahead, where they had planned to run; there was now a river cutting around them. Nope, no glass between him and the water, but Jack peered into the water anyway, wondering if fish would be swimming by, like in one of those underwater aquariums.

The strange places a mind went when death was on your door. Maybe this was why Fiona always turned into a weird, giggling creature when she was super excited.

The water was eventually gone, draining into the gutters and manholes, and leaving behind a goddess of the Nile. Jack tilted his head to the side, and stared at the beautiful entity, with white wings, rising high, and catching the moonlight. Whatever the wings were attached to, it had womanly curves, formed in the clear blue liquid body. The goddess had no arms, but a human-ish body nonetheless, with jaw, neck, shoulders and hips. Its legs merged into a flowing blue wave which seemed to churn on itself, over the asphalt. Mist sparkled and flowed out of the woman’s shoulders where arms should have been, and the sparkling crystal spread outward, nudging against the dead streetlights, rekindling them.



“... you are Terry?” she ... it said, as it came toward them. “And you two must be Damien and Fiona. You are lucky my pack did not catch you during the misunderstanding, monster, or your death would have been sure.”

“I, um ... your pack?” Pack? The misunderstanding had been with the werewolves, but—“You work with Avery?”

“She does.”

Jack felt every muscle, every tight, gripping, squeezing bit of his insides relax, as he recognized Clara’s voice. She stepped out from behind the strange spirit, wearing jeans, brown hiking boots, and a loose white shirt. Casual, comfy, and beautiful against her tan skin tint.

“Hey, Clara.” Wait, shit! They weren’t supposed to be here. Crap! This wasn’t a good thing, but at least it was better than being cut up by those other things. “Um ... how’s it going?”

“Oh, you know, fine. Was hunting some red wraiths, until apparently, someone stirred the hornets’ nest. Every red wraith in the area converged here.” She nodded up to one of the rooftop ledges, where Sky had perched. “And this fucker found me and Carter, said you were in trouble.”

Carter, right, one of the werewolves getting a new apartment, courtesy of the Invictus. Older, and tough as nails by the look of him.

“Um, er ... yeah, uh—”

“This one,” the water creature said as it pointed at Fiona with one of its angel wings, “tore open the verge ... but it is closed once more. So, not torn, then. Opened?”

Fiona, with a single nod and silly giggle, hopped off of Damien's back. "Aye! I go where I want. I'm a—"

Damien snapped his hand out, and covered the girl's mouth. Yeah, no need to follow that up, Fiona talked too much.

Carter stepped forward, snarling, and cracked his knuckles as he came in closer and closer. "If Begotten can open portals, then she's too dangerous to be left alive."

"Whoa, whoa!" Jack threw up his hands, and took a step forward, getting between the oncoming old man, and Jack's two friends. "No need for that, and you don't have the right to make that call. Fiona goes where she wants, and she wanted to show us the damage to the ... verge, whatever that is."

Carter didn't seem too convinced. He reached out, and shoved Jack aside, with all the grace of a bully. High school flashback. Funny thought, before the asphalt greeted Jack and his torn up shirt and jacket, again.

He wasn't worried about Fiona and Damien though; Damien was an assassin and Fiona was freakishly strong when she chose. The fragile truce between the wolves and vamps didn't need more shit dumped on it though, and someone did love to throw shit at it.

Groaning, he got back up, and marched back over to Carter. The old man was built strong, not fitting his age at all, but the scars and gray hair didn't lie. If he'd shaved or buzzed his head, Jack was sure he'd recognize the man as a drill sergeant from any number of old war movies set in Vietnam. Now if only the old wolf would unleash an either unrelenting wave of insults, or a particularly malicious insult that rendered someone a sobbing mess in only a few words, the image would be complete.

"Ye want to fight, old man? Fucking mon' then! Ye bawbag." The small girl took a few practice swings at the air as the somewhat

large, tall man, who might as well have been made out of steel, came in closer.

Then Damien stepped in the way. Without losing a beat, he ejected the magazine from his pistol, slipped in a new one, and manually ejected the old bullet by racking the slide, all without letting go of his sword. But, there was no need to manually eject the old bullet.

“You don’t own this world,” he said. “You want to keep things secret from us? Fine. But you have no basis for telling us we can’t be here. We’re exploring, learning, and you have no right to make us do otherwise.” Steel face, eyes locked, the Mekhet’s eyes might as well have been a pistol barrels, with the look he was giving Carter.

Both Jack and Fiona raised a brow, and stared at the normally calm man. So did Carter, before he smirked, and drew a hand back.

“You expect a bullet to stop—”

Damien pulled the trigger, and Carter let out a scream as he fell to his ass. Big and bad drill sergeant Carter gasped and clutched his jeans covered leg, staring at the wound, his mouth open and eyes wide. The blood splatter was unusually massive, considering it was a typical 9mm pistol, but as Carter’s scream turned into a guttural, growling snarl, hands still clutching the leg, Jack understood.

Silver bullet. It’d left a shredded hole through the wolf’s leg. The flesh bulged with veins and flexing muscle around the damaged skin. The veins show red, blue, and bits of black, as if the silver was poison. But then, if someone had shot a bullet made of fire at Jack, he’d be screaming in pain, too.

“You fucking maggot!” Carter struggled to get back to his feet, but the bloodshot eyes and trembling body made it all too obvious he wouldn’t be doing that for a minute or two. Caught by surprise by

his bane, the werewolf held out a hand, and Clara helped the man to his feet. Er, foot, poor guy forced to stand on the one good leg.

Jack expected a follow up: something to explode, Clara unleashing hell, or the strange water goddess-spirit thing with the soft, white eyes half hidden inside the flowing, crystal water face, to unleash a special kind of torture on them. Or maybe just for Fiona to take Damien's actions as an invitation to go all out on the offensive, instead of the warning shot that it was. But, no one moved, jumped or started shooting or slicing. The only person who made any more noise, other than Carter's snarling and growling — very guttural despite still being in human form — was Sky, crowing and cawing.

Jack sighed in relief, and stepped between everyone again. "Ok, Damien's views aside, we might have overstepped ourselves a bit here. We had planned to go back once we were done getting our toes wet, but ... those weird, um, you called them red wraiths? They ganged up on us. Apparently, they wanted to get their claws into some meat." He gestured back to Fiona, the only one of the three of them who qualified.

Clara smirked at him, but when she opened her mouth, the water creature spoke, instead, sliding forward over the shallow water beneath her.

"You wounded one of my pack," it said, billowing mist as a gesture at Carter.

"Your pack?" Damien said. "Thought it was Avery's pack."

"I have entered a contract with Avery. You need not know the details, except that if you wound one of mine, you contend with me." The angel of water started to rise higher, and higher, water pulling in from the gutters, from the windows that were forever wet, from the cracks in the old and worn asphalt, from everywhere. Higher, until she was ten feet up, and her white angel wings grew

larger along with her. “You need not permission to be here. I need not permission to kill you, either.”

Ah, shit.

Clara stepped around the flowing water, jeans getting wet as she stepped onto the curving waves which formed the spirit’s lower body. “Calm down Flow, he’s not our enemy. Much as this little fucker, and his friends, have a habit of showing up where they shouldn’t be, we owe him our lives.”

“... sympathy is disaster in the making, Clara,” the singing voice said, words cutting the opposite direction of the angelic voice. Flow shrank herself back down to normal human size, and flowed over to Carter, before encompassing his leg in some crystal blue. Within moments, the wound began to heal. Shards, of what Jack assumed was the silver metal bullet, were removed, and Carter breathed heavy sighs of relief as the wound closed.

“You didn’t say that to Avery the day you met her.” Rolling her eyes, Clara got down on a knee, and examined the wound, as well.

“That was not Dolareido. We must be strict here.”

“Uh huh.”

“Your juvenilism will get you killed, Clara.” Shaking her head and shrugging her wings, the water goddess flowed away, and took position higher in the air, waves pushing up her body until she was looking down at them and some of the shorter buildings. Nice vantage point.

Ok, time to take stock of the ridiculousness that was his current situation. He was in a parallel Dolareido world. He, his fellow vampire, and their spider monster friend, were just on the run from a bunch of weird wraith things who very much wanted to cut her open and play with her insides. Two werewolves were upset at the

three trespassers, because they were on the wrong side of the Gauntlet. And, the three troublemakers had been saved by some sort of water goddess creature thing.

The Prince was never going to believe this.

“Um ... Flow?” he said. One mystery at a time, what the fuck was Flow.

“Flowing Sanctuary.” Patting Carter on the shoulder, she nodded in Flow’s direction, and with a grunting sigh, the man walked off to join her. It. “Our totem.”

“Totem?”

“Totem.”

He tilted his head to the side, and rubbed his buzzed hair. Totem? “I ... I’m picturing Native Americans, or First Nations people, and totems.”

“Well aren’t you a racist fucker.”

“W-What? No! I ... um ... I plead ignorance.” He threw up his hands. No knowledge whatsoever on the topic. But, she said totem, and there were spirits, so of course that’s where his mind went.

She rolled her eyes, and laughed. Yeah, make fun of the young kid for not knowing anything about this stuff. Must be what she was thinking, cause she came forward, pat him on the shoulder, winked, and started walking, arm hooking around the shoulder too so he had no choice but to follow.

“Relax. You had a giant bird called City Sky helping you, so, yeah.” She smirked at him, then offered both Damien and Fiona a nod as she guided Jack past them, and back toward the road they’d been

running on. “And you’re right, we don’t have a right to keep you out of here. But that doesn’t mean we won’t.”

Yeah, saw that coming. He glanced over his shoulder, at Damien and Fiona, but the two of them were busy keeping a close eye on the strange water spirit, and the very angry Carter. The first time anyone had used silver on the wolves, as far as Jack knew. It could have gone a lot, lot worse. Fur flying, ashes too, lots of blood, screams, and carnage; that’s what Jack was expecting. Instead, a single incident shut down a wolf who thought a little too highly of himself.

He should have trusted Damien would make a rational decision, ‘cause he did. A leg shot was good. He could have shot him in the chest, and potentially killed him, or in the head, and guarantee it.

“We’re not here just randomly exploring,” he said. “A ritual’s been performed, back in the real—”

“Physical world.” She tightened her arm around his neck, enough to hurt a little, before releasing him. Sighing, she walked over to one of the wet, warped benches, sat down, and gestured to the bent street lamp which was turned almost corkscrew toward the city’s center. “Shadow world is as real as any other.”

“Right, I mean ... well, you know what I meant. Back there, a ritual’s been performed, and I’m trying to rack down details.”

“Ritual? Fucking Jacob up to more shit again?”

He sat down next to her, and looked around at the spirit world, the Shadow world. Still a little ways from South Side, and he was already starting to feel a bit overwhelmed at all the strangeness. The larger buildings in the distance didn’t look normal, some of them bent and warped in subtle ways only someone who’d been born in the city would notice. He couldn’t tell from here if they’d have the

same water running on their windows, but it wouldn't surprise him. At this point, blood on the windows wouldn't surprise him, either.

“We think it was the hunters.”

“Hunters, doing a ritual?”

“Jeremiah and Angela aren't exactly normal hunters. Azamel thinks some old woman who works for them did a ritual. It was ... pretty nasty.” He looked back down the road they'd run down, and gulped as he forced himself to examine the memory. Red wraiths chasing him, hovering after him, after his friends, claws and bodies dripping a weird blood as they moved, claws slicing through everything.

It wasn't so bad compared to what it could have been. The wraiths had come up to them, talked to them, practically introduced themselves. Of all the ways to meet sick fucks like that, wanting to claw up Fiona and dissect her, out in the open in the moonlight wasn't so bad. Except, now, he wouldn't be able to shower without thinking they were ready to pounce him whenever he closed his eyes. Great, just great.

“Natasha was examining the scene, too,” he said. “She might have told Arturo and Matthew.”

“Maybe. When was this?”

“Must be ... six, or seven hours ago.” Yeah, daylight was coming, and he didn't want to be outside when that happened, Shadow world or not. “At least, that's when we found it. Ritual was done well before that. Weeks, maybe months before.”

She threw up her hands before leaning forward, to let them dangle off her knees. “Well, you've seen them, and, yeah, I guess you know they're out for flesh. You have any idea how fucking weird that is? Spirits sustain on essence, not flesh.”



“I uh ... I don’t think they were looking to eat it. More like ... looking to ... study it?”

“Slightly more viable, but still fucking strange.” She looked left, looked right, and leaned in closer to him. Too close, close enough her breath was on his ear, close enough he could tell she was flirting him, indirectly. “Avery sent Carter and I here to check out where these wraiths were going. Where did they find you?”

“Don’t tell her!” A caw and a gush of air later, the enormous crow came down to join them. It stood on the street, preened its feathers a few times, and shook its head. “Uratha are bullies.”

“We already know Begotten can get in here,” she said. “But, if Fiona doesn’t want to share—”

“Aye, I dinnae want to share with the likes of ye.” The redhead marched up to Clara, and glared down at her, height advantage given by Clara still sitting down. “Sky is right, ye werewolves are bullies. Mean, loud, bullies.”

Jack started rubbing his head again. Being the in-between for the Uratha and Begotten, when dealing with Kindred, was tough enough. Please don’t make things worse, Fiona.

Flow flowed over to them, Carter behind her, and the waves lapped gently against the street and Jack’s feet as the spirit circled around them. Far as he could tell, the spirit was glaring at Sky, crystal white, glowing eyes piercing through him like an actual angel warrior’s might. Intimidating, to say the least, and Jack kept glancing her way as she gently moved about.

“Back to the ritual,” he said, before this spiraled out of control. Too much going on, and he needed to make something of this, before they were taken back to the physical world.

He described the ritual, in perhaps a little less detail than he should have; his Kindred prerogative to hold onto details coming through a bit, and wait for Clara's reaction. Some nods as he described the symbols, the skeleton, the blood and arrangement, but her eyes went wide as he described the pictures. She gulped when he described the picture of him.

"Everything sounds like someone was communicating with these weird red wraiths," she said, "but ... the pictures ... that doesn't."

"It's strange! It's haunting," he said. "Fucking has me looking over my shoulder all the damn time."

"Let's talk more, when we get back."

"I—"

"We're going. Now."

---

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~~Eric~~

So this was Azamel, old Granny sitting in a shitty old chair, smoking a cigarette. Like a scene from his childhood.

"This is the Eric Fiona spoke of?" She blew a puff of smoke at him from her perch on the weird concrete stage. "Attractive man. No wonder Fiona was interested in you."

"Um, thanks." He scratched the back of his neck, and looked at the rest of them. "Mark, right?"

The man shrugged, nodded, then returned to his book. Well, so much for conversation.

"I suppose you are looking for Fiona," Azamel said.

“He wasn’t, actually.” Athalia shrugged, and gestured to him once she’d climbed up onto the stage and took a seat. “Fucker just had his first change. And based on the few words I picked up, he’s killed some people, eaten them, and now he’s terribly worried about his cat.”

“... that’s the long and short of it, I guess. Athalia thinks I should hide out here, with you guys, for now, at least.” Which seemed like an unusual, and random offering of goodwill from someone he’d never talked to. Was Fiona talking him up? Having someone in his corner was a nice change of pace.

“That would be prudent,” the old woman said, blowing smoke out through her nose as she talked. “Of course, if we do you this favor, I expect the favor to be returned some day.”

“Of course.” He was in over his head, so deep, so fucking deep, that he needed to grab onto something before he drowned, anything. This old woman he trusted about as much as his ex wife throwing him a rope. “I ... I really would like to see if ... if my cat is alright.”

Mark smirked at him, but returned to his book. Eric was almost tempted to say something stupid, like ‘help a brother out’, but he would have choked on the cliché.

“When Fiona returns, she can go search. But I doubt the cat survived your anger, Eric, if this was your first change.”

“Any idea when that’ll be?”

“No. And I do not lie, about your pet’s chances of survival. The old myth goes that a wolf hunts those they love, when they change. Myths are born from truths, mixed with ignorance, in the dark.”

Shit. He couldn’t leave Kat behind. Not a chance, no way. Only damn thing on the planet he trusted, at this point, was that cat.

“Then, I decline. Sorry, but I’m going back. Thanks for the offer.” He nodded to Azamel, and Athalia, before he turned and walked away. He could be sneaky, right? Figure out a way back into the apartment, see if his cat was there ... see if he killed her. Fuck, what would he do if he’d killed Kat? Stomach full of human flesh, that was one thing, but knowing he’d kill his pet and only friend was a fate he wasn’t sure he could stomach.

“They might kill you,” Athalia said, unmoving from her perch. “You don’t want to hide here with us? We could use a werewolf who owes us. But if the blood leeches think you’ve violated the Masquerade to a large degree, they’ll end you.”

“Yeah, I know.” He shivered at the memory of the white-haired woman. Tall as the tower she commanded, her amber red gaze confident and calculating. The queen of Dolareido. Yeah, she’d kill him, and now that he could understand the memory, and understand the feeling looking at that woman put into his gut, he knew he wouldn’t have a chance against her in a fight.

But he needed to see, now, what happened, what he did, how bad it was. And god damn it, he needed to see if Kat was alright.

“I’ll go with him.”

Eric looked over his shoulder, and the two ladies raised a brow as Mark hopped off the concrete stage, leaving his book behind. A thicker man, dark skin like Eric, short curly hair, and some fat to go with what Eric could see was some muscle mass underneath his hoodie. Eric knew his type, from his drinking days, the guy at the bar who hangs by himself, watches people, gets drunk, occasionally gets into fights when they drift his way, and does more than hold his own. Some fat to go with the muscle was a very, very effective way to make a body strong and resilient, when weight classes weren’t a factor.

His voice sounded plain, but the man did not seem plain. He seemed gross. He smelled gross. He felt gross, the air around him, the presence he took with him. A glance down at Eric's arms showed there wasn't any creepy crawls on his skin, but this Mark fellow made it feel like there was, and it only got worse the closer he got.

"Why?" Eric said.

Mark offered a small, backward salute to Azamel, and nodded toward the tunnel Eric came from. Deep breaths, deep breaths, nothing to fear from these monsters, they were friends of Fiona's, and you know the circumstance they're in. If you're a freak, and apparently you are, other freaks should be your friends. He might not be the same type of freak, but a freak anyway.

Was freak PC? How the fuck do you ask a question like that?

"I want to see the fallout," Mark said. "We're not on the best terms with the vamps, and this situation is a good test."

"Test for what?"

"See what happens if a Begotten let their hunger out, and the vamps went on the offensive to stop it."

"... you'd eat people?"

"Depends on the Begotten." He shrugged again, and continued down the path, hands in his jean pockets, eyes on the tracks ahead of him. Casual, calm, creepy. "Some of us? Yeah, some of us would do exactly what you might have done. So, let's go find out."

"Alright, sure. Keep an eye open for my cat, too. Black and gray lines, white tummy. Soft face."

"... you're the only werewolf on the planet who owns a cat, I'm pretty sure."

Eric smirked, and shrugged. “She’s a dumbass. I love her.”

The two continued in silence after that. Attempts at conversation with the man went nowhere, as this Mark fellow was lost in his mind, thinking about God knows what. The most annoying thing was, as they walked for minutes, through the winding maze of the depths of Dolareido’s guts, the smell of rotting flesh. It wasn’t coming from Eric, and it wasn’t coming from the stuff Eric vomited earlier; that had its own unique smell. Whatever the scent was, it was distinctly the smell of rotting, decaying flesh. It made Eric’s hair stand up straight, despite Mark’s relaxed body language. Eric could feel that the man wasn’t using any aggressive body language, but that smell carried its own threats the man couldn’t put a finger on.

The smell of two undead joined the subtle smell of necrosis. Eric slowed down a bit, but Mark shrugged and gestured ahead. Keep walking then, it’s only two Kindred, what threat could two Kindred pose?

Or Mark was looking for an excuse to fight.

“Eric!”

“ ... Jessy? I...” God damn he was happy to see her; especially happy that she wasn’t greeting him with a hail of gunfire. He smiled at her, and his smile doubled as his eyes fell to the cat in her arms. “Kat! Oh thank fucking god, I thought I might have—”

“So it was you.” The man next to her was tall, wearing a suit that must have cost thousands. With his combed back blond hair, broad shoulders, and clean shaven look, he might as well have had ‘mafia’ tattooed to his forehead.

And Eric didn’t like the way the man was looking at him. It was obvious enough the big guy wasn’t happy, and was now thinking of Eric as the werewolf who had caused unwanted damage, but there

was something else to him, too, something in his eyes made Eric want to avert his gaze before it became dangerous. Almost as if the vampire — and he was a vampire, from the smell — was going to attack Eric with his eyes alone. Jessy hadn't exactly shared many details with him about how vamps worked, but he'd seen enough vampire movies to know some of them could use mind powers. Not that movies were the best source, but better than nothing.

“I ... uh ... yeah.” Eric folded his arms across his chest, and did his best to look apologetic, but not too apologetic, something in between, like ‘I’m sorry, but it was inevitable’ sort of sorry. Made him feel like a politician. “Apparently ... I’m a werewolf.”

The big guy snorted, and looked to Jessy. She had something between an awestruck smile, and a know-it-all grin. Meeting the man's gaze, she raised Kat up to her cheek, and rubbed her face into the cat's body. Kat, being Kat, responded with a quiet meow, some loud purrs, and full on return snuggles. Not like Kat would care she was surrounded by werewolves, monsters, and vampires; if anything, Kat was overjoyed to be rubbing against an undead creature. Damn cat.

“Sorry about Pitt,” Jessy said, still snuggling Kat. “You really tore the place up though, made a huge mess, and now we got a clean up crew working overtime dealing with it. Can you fill us in on what happened?”

“He—”

Mark held up a hand, turned around, and pulled Eric back with him a few steps. “Careful what you say,” he said into Eric's ear. “You want out from under their thumb? Don't give them information so easily.”

“The fuck do you care?”

“Azamel doesn’t get along with the Kindred of Dolareido. And now that you’ve pissed off the vamps, damaged their Masquerade, neither do you. We could use a friend like you.” Well, at least the man was honest.

“I get ... along...” He glanced over his shoulder at the two vampires. Jessy was grinning at him, in a way he hadn’t really expected, almost playful, as she gently swished side to side with Kat, cradling her. The other guy was in a permanent state of subtle frown. “If they wanted to kill me, don’t you think they would have done so by now? I’m sure the two of them have guns, and vampire shit at their disposal.”

“You underestimate how strong you are now, as an Uratha. And besides, Kindred never do things directly. You’ll figure that out soon enough.” The man nodded, turned back to the two vampires, and waited.

Never do things directly. Eric didn’t like the sound of that, and this big guy with Jessy did seem like that sort. But then, the fuck did Eric know about shit like this? Mark was being upfront with him about things, about needing a friend, but Jessy had been upfront with him too.

Sighing, Eric stepped forward to speak with the Kindred once again. Less reacting, more thinking, make intelligent choices about what to say next.

“Pitt showed up, said Long was going to send Xnomina a message, about not being bullied around anymore. My body was supposed to be the message, I guess.” Wouldn’t have surprised him if Pitt was going to write a literal message in his flesh though. Slimy fucker.

He ate the slimy fucker. The rush of the kill was pleasing and satisfying in his memories, like a warm blanket on a cold day. The feel of human flesh going down his throat and into his belly, was euphoria, ambrosia, divine and addictive. Nausea hit him again, and



he struggled to stay standing. Ignore it, ignore the fact you ate Pitt, that you ate his goons, ignore that you swallowed bits of their muscle, their limbs, their brains.

“We figured as much,” the big guy said. “But, instead of just killing them, you created a huge mess, woke up every person for half a mile with the racket, left a huge amount of evidence of a paranormal, and have undoubtedly turned a bad situation with Terra Den into a catastrophe.”

“Julias, come on, he saved your kid’s life. Cut him a little slack.”

Julias was his name, then. That was the name of the man Beatrice said she was dating, whose mansion she’d taken Jack to.

“... you’re Jack’s sire,” Eric said.

The vampire snarled, and glared down at Jessy. Both she and Kat shrank a little. No hiding that body language: Julias was a deadly man if he chose to be. Eric’s new instincts were in overdrive, in a very blatant screaming-in-his-ear sort of way. Be careful with this man.

“Your help in saving Jack’s second life has already been returned by the Prince, Eric. That deal she made with you was continued by us.” The man, arms folded across his chest as well, tapped his finger against his bicep. “And you’ll find disturbing the Masquerade is not only more important than a single Kindred’s life, but you were specifically warned—”

Eric stepped forward, and let his arms hang, available, in case he had to get physical. After everything that had happened tonight, he didn’t want to get physical. It was late, very late, and all he wanted to do was go to bed, curl up with Kat, and sleep.

“I didn’t know this would happen. I didn’t know a slimy loan shark was going to show up at my door and try and kill me, mister

big bad vampire. I didn't know I ... I'd change..."

"You didn't know?" Jessy said.

He shook his head. "No." Don't give them anymore details than they need, than will serve you. Much as he felt he could trust Jessy, Mark had a point. If he was going to get out from under their thumb, it was in his interest to not let them know everything, so he could get some damn control of his life back. "Hit me like a fucking train, out of nowhere, and I ... can barely remember what I was doing."

"... ok." Julias began to pace side to side, head down and chin in his fingers. "Much as I'm sure this Begotten here is trying to recruit the new werewolf, understand that this is a Kindred city, Eric. You do what we tell you to do. You caused some major damage, and the clean up is problematic."

"I can—"

"Unless you are versed in mind breaking or forensics, shut the fuck up. The issue is that news like that inevitably leaks, in some fashion or another. You know damn well we have a hunter problem, as is, and there's no way we'll be able to cover up every detail about this event so they won't know. And being that they're human, some we won't recognize could have already visited the crime scene by now."

Thinking ten steps ahead seemed to be the man's game. Eric could respect that, as long as it didn't mean biting Eric in the ass over something that wasn't his fault.

"... so what do I have to do to make the vamps happy?"

Maybe vamps wasn't the right word, cause Julias eyed him with a little more malice than Eric was hoping for. Learning how to be PC in this strange world of darkness was going to be tricky.

“Go talk to Avery and get yourself put on a leash.”

“Avery?” Play dumb, see what he says.

“Leader of an Uratha pack, the Hunters in Darkness, here in Dolareido. Jessy, take this man to his new apartment. He’s your problem until Avery talks to him.”

The Kindred grinned a sneaky, deadly grin, like a child given access to their first BB gun. “Yes, sir.”

“ ... ok.” So much for not being under anyone’s thumb.

Jessy walked over to him, winked, threw Mark a snarl, and nodded in the direction of a different fork in the tunnels. “What about you, boss?”

“Gonna head back to the scene, talk with Vivi, and make sure everything’s fine.” The man made the same sort of snarl Jessy did, again aimed at Mark, who stood there with all the defiance of a lazy statue.

No gunfire, no claws or fangs, no blood, no nothing. All in all, coming out of the altercation with his life was a pretty big step up from the horrible execution he was expecting. He wasn’t happy though, another leash on his life. At least Jessy was enjoying this, grin permanent and unending.

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“Holy shit.”

As a kid, it was always a delight to watch movies where someone who was poor suddenly became rich. Thrust into a life of money and options, thrust into luxury; the comparison of their old lives to the new life of indulgence was escapism at its finest. Those movies always ended with the poor-become-rich getting to keep their money, to some extent at least, and coming to some sort of moral

lesson that allowed them to become a better person. Eric would be content with the former; he didn't need the latter.

The whole place was reeked of slick, modern, rich, and technology. It smelled of chemicals, the sort used to keep a place sparkling clean and sterile. Sterile was a pretty good word to describe the giant apartment in general, now that he thought about it, as he kicked off his boots, and started walking around. The walls were mostly windows, but the drapes — with switches to control them — might as well have been made of black panther fur, far as his eyes could tell.

A giant, open kitchen, with an island, black upon the white tile floor. Not cheap tile either, but something that might as well have been expensive marble. There was a crystal thing hanging over the dining table, with lights inside bathing the table in gentle waves. The table itself was glass, thick glass, with red wood legs from a probably endangered species of tree. The walls were white like the floor, and the cupboards, the shelves, all of it was stainless steel color, screaming of professionalism despite how it was an apartment, not a chef's kitchen.

Jessy winked at him, and set down Kat. "I know cats can ... take time to ... the fuck?"

Eric laughed as Kat ignored Jessy's otherwise true comment, and walked over to the couch. Black, and from the scent Eric's new nose picked up, it was real leather. It wouldn't have surprised him if Kat started to scratch it, with no scratch tower in her new home, instead she jumped on its back, and looked out through the enormous window behind it. Perch mode.

"She'll be there for a couple hours," he said, sitting down on the couch as well and reaching out to pet her behind the ear.

"A couple hours? Analyzing her new view?"

“I doubt she’s analyzed a thought in her life, cat or not.” He shrugged and motioned for Jessy to join him on the absurdly expensive couch. “You know if you hadn’t shown up in the tunnels with Kat, tonight would have gone much differently.”

“I can imagine, seeing that we found you with Mark. We’re not on good terms with the Begotten, Invictus especially. How’d you wind up with them?”

“I was ... on the run, I guess. Hard to remember the details, blurry and fading, like a dream. I remember running into the sewers, because I knew ... the territory, the land, had a network of tunnels. Something in my brain kicked into ... a mode. I had to go to safe ground until I could take my home back. My ... den.” Den was as good a word as any, and it was how his mind was framing things. But now he had a new den, in the same territory. That was normal enough, he supposed, for his new instincts to adapt. A new, better den.

“The Begotten do hang out in the tunnels a lot,” she said.

“I ran into Athalia, and I ... tried to kill her. Didn’t go so well.”

“Ha! Beat up by a girl.” She sat down with him, gave him a soft punch, and winked at him. “I’ve never seen Athalia fight. What was that like?”

“Like trying to fight a monster. Bones, claws, and spikes ... and she could fight in total darkness. It was startling, to say the least.” He made a couple of quiet kissing sounds in Kat’s direction, coaxing the dumb cat to come his way. Meow meow and a hop later, she was on his lap, smiling up at him. Far as he knew, cats didn’t smile the way humans did, but Kat might as well have been, with the big grin on her face as she got comfortable on his lap. Purring like a motor, she looked between the two of them, before burying her face against his stomach. “She knocked some sense into me at least.”

“Still can’t believe you’re a fucking werewolf. That complicates so many things, but at the same time, it’s really fucking awesome.” She got in closer, and licked one of her fangs with blatant boasting. “Vamps could really use a Uratha in our corner.”

In their corner. Was he in their corner? He didn’t think he was, at least, not by choice. Far as he was concerned, they had a gun to his head and he had to play by their rules, or they’d shoot. That included Jessy, much as he was enjoying her company, and she him, evidently.

“The Begotten were sure you’d be a problem, that you’d kill me if I’d made too big a mess.” And he agreed with the monsters.

“We wouldn’t do that unless it was warranted.”

“What qualifies as warranted.”

“If you weren’t willing to reconcile.” She sighed, and looked down. Didn’t take a genius to read the body language; she’d been avoiding saying things directly, and he was calling her out on it. “You’re already working for us, so that’s fine. But, sometimes, a vamp can go frenzy, and they don’t come back. I imagine it’s an even bigger issue for werewolves.”

“Frenzy?” Asking about it was pointless; he could tell what she meant when she said it. He felt like he was in a constant state of frenzy the moment the transformation had hit him. Didn’t surprise him that vampires could do that, and it scared the shit out of him that they could succumb to it. Like she said, a bigger issue for werewolves.

“The beast inside craves blood, above all else. The hunger can overwhelm, and you give into it, ride it like a wave, and sometimes vamps don’t come back from that.” She shrugged, got up, and started to walk around the inordinately expensive apartment. “The mess you made is what a frenzied vamp might do, if they were

pissed enough, and ravenous enough. If you weren't able to come to your senses, we'd have put you down."

"Or try to."

That got her. She flinched, looked his way, looked at Kat, then started to drift again.

"Yeah. You're Uratha now, which means you're dangerous. Julias is going to make sure everyone knows that, and now ... now I don't know. It's a weird situation to be in."

"You're telling me," setting his hand on Kat's head, and scratching her cheek and ear, as he considered, " ... what am I supposed to do now?"

"Boss said talk to Avery, get a leash ... but, well, fuck him."

" ... I'm sorry, what?" He raised a brow, and tilted his head to the side. Kat didn't care, and pushed her head into his hand with the sudden cease of his scratching, demanding more.

"I'm saying, you're a fucking werewolf now." As if lightning had struck her, she paused, and looked up with a snap of her fingers. "A fucking werewolf, Eric. You have any fucking idea how dangerous that makes you? You know how few vamps can pose a threat to you? Ancilla and elders, that's it, and the city isn't exactly swimming in them. The overwhelming majority of vamps are neonates, no threat to a werewolf. That makes you," she pointed a finger at him, grin included, "a major player."

"And, I'm doing ... what, with that?"

"You're going to play the game! The Danse Macabre."

"I'm sorry, I'm really not following."

“You’re going to lie. To Avery. To Julias. To the Prince.”

“ ... you want me to lie, to these people I’m pretty sure are more than capable of tearing me in half with their pinky finger?”

She jumped onto the couch, her weight causing the leather to tremble, and bounce Eric an inch. “Well, before, you were agreeing to do what we told you, because you didn’t have options. Now you’re strong enough to give us pause. You’re strong enough that, you can just play along, knowing you could break out of your golden chains whenever you want to.”

Golden chains. Guess she was onto the gilded cage metaphor he’d been subconsciously framing this whole situation as.

“So in either circumstance, I—”

“In either circumstance, you get to have a sweet new place to live, lots of money, and get to slip your foot in the door with a lot of factions. The Begotten desperately want a werewolf on their side, cause they really are the underdog in this shitstorm. The Kindred will want to keep you even more controlled now; expect another meeting with the Prince, and maybe one with the other covenants, too. And most of all, the Uratha are going to want you in their corner.”

“What makes you think I won’t join the monsters or werewolves? It’s the vamps who tried to put me in a cage.” He brought Kat up to his shoulder, so her front paws could press on him, giving her easy access to rub her head into his neck.

“Because the monsters only know how to chase their hunger, and the werewolves are ... I don’t know, honestly. You’d be better off asking them, I guess. They seem obsessed with doing some sort of ancient duty, hunting spirits and shit.” She shrugged, scooted in closer, and set her fingers to Kat’s neck. Immediate purrs. Slut.



“Something to do with the moon, and some Father Wolf or some shit.”

Try as he might to hide it, her words struck something in his mind. Glass broke, and the splintering cracks wore away at the wall until it fell apart, shards dancing along the remains of his mind. Father Wolf. The moon ... Luna. Memories bubbled, new memories, images of things, of teeth and claw. They weren't his, he didn't own them, but they came up, anyway. Old claws, covered in ancient dirt and older blood broke free of prehistoric graves in his brain matter, each holding up signs written in crimson earth.

You're not the same anymore.

You can't run from what you've become.

You have a duty now, Uratha.

They'll come for you now, Uratha.

With web, with claws, with tail and fang, feather and tongue, they'll come for you.

They can see you now, Uratha, sense you. They'll come for you, find you, possess you.

Nothing will ever be the same for you.

Breathe.

“Yo, breathe Eric. Looks like you've seen a ghost.”

He gulped down the rising panic in his throat, and hugged Kat tight. Didn't care if Jessy got to see his vulnerable side. At the moment, he needed to hold his only damn friend in the world.

Jessy tilted her head, and watched him. No laughter or grins, despite his expectations. Nothing like that, only a small smile as she

watched him.

“ ... I have to get back, sun will be up soon. This place is pretty secure, Eric, so rest easy. I’ll see you tomorrow night to follow up.”

“ ... thanks, for everything.” Especially with Kat. Above all else, especially with Kat.

She winked at him, and left.



~~Natasha~~

“It’ll be d-dawn, soon,” she said, “so, I have t-to go.”

Both boys pouted, and transformed. She squeaked and jumped back as the two men began to shrink in size, clothes vanishing and fur popping in, instead. For a moment, she thought they were transforming into their larger forms, that she’d driven them to some sort of anger. But instead, a couple of wolves now sat upon her living room floor, giving her puppy eyes. Art with a darker shade, almost black, and Matt was a soft gray; both were too damn adorable.

“B-Boys! What are you doing?” she said. The two canines made whining sounds, sad puppy whining sounds, and walked over to her. They pressed up against her skirt, and pushed gently, nudging her away from the door. They were full-sized wolves, and she had no chance of pushing them out of the way with only her bodyweight. “Come on, boys! I ... I need t-to go, the Prince will be upset, if I’m late. She’s getting very ... p-p-protective of things lately.” Understandable given the circumstances, but now that Tash worked for her, it meant Tash had to appease her. If she showed up late, she’d get a firm scolding, or at least, a firm glare.

But the boys either didn’t get the hint, or chose to ignore it, likely the latter. They pushed against her some more, until she was

giggling. A signal of their triumph, as they each let out a quiet bark, before pushing her hard enough she started to fall. With a squeak, she went down, and hands reached out to grab their soft fur, as the floor greeted her.

“Come on, I ... I have to. I can’t stay here. I know y-you’d p-p-protect me, b-but it’s safer at the tower. And, it’s the P-Prince’s orders. And—” Knock knock.

“Madam Vola. It’s me, Madam Turio.”

Natasha jumped straight up, and spun around. What? Why? Why was she here? And why now? Gulping, Tash started pacing back and forth, and looked down at the two enormous dogs sitting by her. They didn’t transform back, content to sit there, eyes wide and looking at the closed door of her apartment.

Her boyfriends were here. That made a discussion with her old superior a strange conversation to have. But maybe it was good Art and Matt were here. She’d be able to rely on them, trust them to back her up if things got hairy, if things got violent. They wouldn’t get violent though, no way. Maria wouldn’t resort to violence against another covenant unless absolutely necessary, and if she wanted to be violent, she wouldn’t have knocked.

Tash looked at the two wolves, nodded, took a deep, useless breath, and walked to the apartment door. Slowly, she opened the barrier to an old wound she’d hoped to forget about.

“H-Hello ... Madam Turio.”

“ ... hello Vola. May I come in?”

“Y-Yes, please.” Tash nodded, and backed away while gesturing with her arm into the apartment. Maria was an elder after all, and respect was due, no matter their past or affiliations. “I, um, I’m v-very surprised, that you’d ... come here ... in p-person.”

“These are strange times,” she said, as she nodded toward the two wolves. “I am glad you’ve found company you enjoy. For all the years I’ve known you, the only one you could stomach were your fellow right hands.”

Julias and Jessy were her only friends, that was true. Not so true anymore, but the memory was a powerful one.

“Stomach ... is a strong w-word. It’s not ... l-like I ... didn’t...”

Maria turned to face her, raised a brow and chuckled, before moving into the living room. Without a glance or care for the wolves, Art and Matt were forced to step aside to make room for her. They stayed in wolf form, maybe to remind Maria that they were indeed werewolves, and were dangerous. Or because, dogs were loyal, and Natasha could use a couple of loyal companions right about now.

“I do not lie. I am ... glad, that things are going well for you.” The ghost lady sniffed the air, and chuckled again. No hiding the smell of sex, not with what the werewolves did.

It was hard to read Maria’s expression. She was wearing a white dress, something in fashion a hundred years ago, at least. If she was seen out in the open, anyone would have assumed she was a ghost, a pale lady, a woman in white, a specter, something that would have sent anyone nearby into a panicked run. But the elder was a master at the cloak of night and its derivations. If she didn’t want to be seen, she wasn’t going to be seen.

It meant that a ghost woman was walking around in Natasha’s apartment, white mist falling from her cracked and rotted skin. It was enough to keep both wolves away from her, backing up and staying out of range of the fog she leaked, wherever she walked. One of the more blatant examples of how vampires were, genuinely, supernatural and paranormal creatures. Natasha had dealt with it for years, but after not being near the woman for some months now,

it was a shock to be so close to a walking, torn up corpse leaking cold mist around her.

“ ... th-thank you.”

“This must be Matthew Wilson, Rahu Uratha. And this is Arturo Ibarra, Irakka Uratha.” The ghost lady leaned forward, hands to her knees against the dress skirt, and a half grin on her lips as her wavy black hair fell over her shoulders. “Don’t feel like showing your faces to me?”

The two canines shook their heads, and growled. A quiet growl, enough for Tash to tense, while Maria didn’t react. Stone cold, as always.

“If it’s any consolation, little doggies, I never agreed with Viktor’s rather harsh treatment of your kind, upon Avery’s last visit.”

It wasn’t. Art and Matt both growled again, and showed their teeth a little.

“B-Be nice, boys. Mar ... Madam T-Turio is only ... only ... I am not sure what she’s doing, actually.” Truth. Maria’s visit was unexpected, and more so was what she was saying.

“ ... may we speak in private, Vola, before the sun rises?” The ghost lady turned to face her, but backed away at the same time, before turning to look out the window. She nudged aside the drapes with a hand, bits of her peeling skin falling off and vanishing into ash, as some of the street light came into the apartment.

The two wolves came up to Tash’s side, and growling louder. They didn’t want to leave. Tash didn’t want them to leave either, but this conversation was important, and it was one they’d both been avoiding.

And maybe, Maria would drop clues about the secret the strange spirit was talking about.

“You boys, you can head on back. I’ll b-b ... I’ll be fine. She’s not the enemy.” Mostly, mostly not the enemy. It was hard to forget about the betrayal, but at the same time, Tash kept trying to put herself into Maria’s shoes. Give up your subordinate, who had a fifty-fifty chance of surviving, so the love of your life could pursue their wildest dreams? It was hard to think about the question objectively, and she had to accept that. Emotions got the best of everyone, given time, even Tash.

Art and Matt transformed, human skin and clothes emerging from the depths of animal muscle and fur. A smooth transformation, nothing like what it’d been when the two wolves were getting ready for war. Each giant of a man gave Maria long, harsh glares, before they stepped toward the door. When they left, they each gave Tash a kiss, Art winking, and Matt smiling, as they moved into the hall.

“See ya later,” they said together, before starting down the corridor.

Tash smiled at them, gave each a small wave, and closed the door.

“No longer being in the Invictus has agreed with your sex life, at least,” Maria said, still looking out the window.

“It, it um ... it’s been good.” No use trying to hide the grin. “B-But, um I don’t think that has anything to do with the Invictus, or m-me being in the Ordo Dracul now.”

“ ... we haven’t spoken, since that happened.”

“ ... n-no, we haven’t.”

The two of them sighed. Maria's sigh was far more bold, obvious and direct. That was Maria, never one to shy from direct words; it made the whole conversation very unusual, given how Maria was tiptoeing around the issue.

"Understand, my ... Natasha, that I ... I did what I did, because I assumed you would not be harmed. Lucas promised your safety, and that, if push came to shove, he would not kill you."

Not kill her. That didn't necessarily mean not hurt her, torture her maybe, in hopes of breaking Daniel. But, still, that was better than nothing.

"... th-thank you ... Maria." First naming an elder, let alone an Invictus superior, was dangerous business, but Maria seemed intent on making this personal. That was a huge step for the woman, even if it sounded like nothing. "That ... that w-wasn't the only reason I left the Invictus."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Um, p-people knowing that D-Daniel is my sire, that ... that proved to me, that maybe I ... I had what it took to follow in his footsteps. That I have what it takes."

"I'm not following."

Tash nodded. Not following because Natasha was doing a horrible job explaining it.

"P-People, they weren't ... too surprised to learn about it. Many, they just nodded like ... l-like it was to b-be expected." So either everyone already knew, or she'd made enough of a name for herself that people were expecting someone like the sheriff to be her sire.

Maria nodded, confirming Tash's suspicions. "You worked your way up our ranks quickly, Natasha. I'm surprised you were ever

concerned you weren't regarded with respect, and fear, by your younger Kindred. You were my right hand for a reason." Maria shrugged, stepped away from the window, and into Natasha's kitchen. "May I?"

"Um ... oh! Y-Yes, make yourself at home."

The elder nodded, and fetched a bottle of blood from the fridge. "I will not ask for your forgiveness, Natasha, over the incident; I do not expect it. Such is the way of things as old as I, to let transgressions marinate our souls." She chuckled, a coughing hoarse sound from the ghost lady, before she took a sip of the red drink. "Something Lucas used to say. I think now, perhaps, it was merely his way of avoiding asking for forgiveness, from ever having to say, he was sorry."

Talking of Lucas, with her. This was brand new territory, and Tash found herself tripping on her tongue. What to say, what to say?

"W ... What was he like?"

"You know damn well what he was like, Natasha. You saw his brutality and one-mindedness, firsthand."

"I ... I know, b-but, what was he like ... behind closed doors?" Very new ground, very new, and Tash held her unneeded breath as she waited for Maria to respond. Times like this, it would have been great if she hadn't asked Matt and Art to leave.

"... different." Sighing, Maria walked over to Tash's couch, and sat down. The apartment wasn't exactly high class, not the sort of class an elder vampire would want, but Maria didn't seem to care at the moment. Or it was all a ploy to get Tash to let her guard down, reveal secrets about the Uratha, or the Ordo Dracul. "As you can imagine, this body cares little for sexual stimulus, anymore."



“I ... I d-didn't know.” G guessed, she'd guessed, but never let her mind get that far, to the point of picturing it. But now she couldn't stop. Corpse, trying to fuck. Ew.

“We indulged ourselves in blood, drinking kine by the dozens. He was not disturbed by this body, and was more than eager to hold me and kiss me, when we feasted.” Ghost lady smoothed out her dress skirt, took another sip, and motioned for Natasha to join her. Still the boss, even though Tash hadn't worked for her for months.

And Tash joined her. Because, why not?

“When the blood was gone,” Maria continued, “and it was only Lucas and I, he would ... he would settle. The harsh wall that guarded his soul would fade, and sometimes, he would set his head upon my lap, and melt away. He'd speak of his trials, his doubts, of his pain.”

“This was ... b-before his revival?”

“Yes. Torpor did not treat him well, Natasha. Not once did I meet that man, the man who had doubts, the man whose resolve was only as deep as was ... reasonable. Lucas was hungry for power and determined to grab it before his sleep, but the awoken Lucas was a new creature entirely. I do not envy Damien, to have spent so long caring for the sleeping body of his sire, only for the raised Kindred to be a ... deluded fool, a zealot to the core.”

“Are ... you g-getting along with Damien?” Talking. A normal, natural conversation with her old boss; a Kindred over a couple centuries older than her. In the past, she'd defer such things to Julias, who'd handle conversations like this with finesse. This was Tash stepping well out of her comfort zone; Maria was too, though. So, even ground ... ish.

“The boy is devout, and diligent. At first, he and I agreed his becoming a right hand was not possible. Did you know that?”

“I d-did not.”

“But, with time, we’ve all grown to trust him. And, I admit, it is nice to hear him speak with me of the Testament of Longinus. There are few left that consider the word of such a figure to be something to consider. Few left who fear God.”

A million responses to that jumped to mind. It wasn’t scientific, it wasn’t evidence based, so how could anyone believe it. But then again, Maria couldn’t even walk two feet without leaving a trail of ghostly mist behind her, so, the supernatural was more easy to accept for someone like her. Or Tash just lived in constant denial of the supernatural nature of Kindred. Not anymore though, not after the things she’d seen, not after the things Antoinette had shown her.

Maybe it was time to consider that ... maybe, Maria, Damien and Lucas had decent justification for their religious beliefs.

“I admit m-my knowledge of ... Longinus is a l-little lacking.”

“The tale of Longinus, the Spear of Destiny, of Christ’s death, it is all very ... powerful, and fills a Kindred’s life with purpose. Lucas followed that purpose, and while I believe age and power corrupted his undead soul, as it does so many, I do believe his faith never wavered. I had ... I had hoped if I offered you to him, as a tool to defeat the sheriff, perhaps victory would soften him, and return the man I once loved.” She sipped her drink again, and traced her scarred finger along its contours. “A silly girl’s hope.”

Tash looked down, and let the weight of that sink in. Yeah, it was a silly girl’s hope, the classic ‘love can change him’ fallacy that destroyed so many relationships. It was stupid, and pathetic, and something Tash would trip and fall into if such a situation came her way; she had no right to judge.

Tash's mind began to drift to the events of the night. The ritual which had ended with Jack's face drawn on paper. Did Maria have something to do with that? No, Maria had no reason to perform such a ritual. But, Art and Matt said it likely had something to do with the weird red wraiths of Dolareido, and the trail led them to Jacob doing something weird with that Black Blood spirit. And there had been a corpse, a walking, moving corpse, which had randomly collapsed when the three of them had disrupted the ritual.

“ ... If ... if you could talk to Lucas again, M-Maria ... What would you say ... t-t-to him?”

Maria looked up from the glass, and met her eyes. Look down, look down, look down. No good, Tash's gaze was locked with the ghost woman's, and wasn't going anywhere.

“ ... I would say to him that I love him, little Vola. I would confess many things to him, and once the confessions were over, and I had recomposed myself, I would demand he cease his unending quest for power.” Again, the ghost lady's eyes drifted to the drink, and she took another sip as she stared into the void. “I would do almost anything for such an opportunity.”

That was very on the nose, and Tash had to focus to not let out a squeak.

“I'm sorry ... that it ended the way it d-did.”

“Yes, well, I cannot blame the Prince, or the sheriff, for killing him. Self defense, and Lucas had it coming. A tragedy, in all its manifestations. And as much as I would love to speak to Lucas again, to have that fool back in my arms, I would council against revenge.” She got up, and poured herself more blood from the kitchen. To see a corpse walking around her kitchen, reaching into her fridge, like she was a frat girl trying to get drunk and forget an ex boyfriend, was an image Tash would remember for years.

“D-Did ... did you come here ... for anything else?”

“Looking for me to leave, Vola?”

“N-No! No, just ... you never talked about yourself much, even when I w-w-worked for the Invict-tus.” Tash stirred in her spot on the couch. If she didn’t move, stayed put and listened, maybe Maria would confide in her, tell her about her secret involving spirits.

“What is there to speak of? You know of my past as much as I do, Tash. Blurry memories, a haze of pain and anger over the damage this transformation has done to me. It is a told story, cliché at this point.”

“ ... N-Nothing’s a cliché when it’s happening to you.” Much as she’d like to take credit for the line, she’d heard it elsewhere, and it stuck with her.

“Too true.” Maria didn’t rejoin her on the couch this time, instead taking a stool at the counter. Even more unusual for the prim and proper corpse. “ ... thank you, for listening to me, Natasha Vola. It has been a long time since I’ve talked with anyone openly. Not since before the purge.”

Not since before Lucas took his fifty-year torpor then. Poor woman. Tash had Jessy and Julias, and slowly but surely, her circle of friends was expanding to include Jack and Antoinette, and even Beatrice, Damien, and Fiona were not uncommon people for her to see. She could talk to people if she wanted, let out some of her troubles. Maria had no one.

Tash got up, stepped into the kitchen, and poured herself a glass of blood, as well.

“ ... you can ... t-tell me now.”

## Chapter 64

~~Jack~~

Getting taken back to the real world was a curse and a blessing. Everything, everywhere, was teasing him with answers he couldn't get to. What was the Ritual of Faces? Black Blood and the red wraiths, what did they have to do with the ritual, how were the hunters doing it, why were hunters and spirits working together, what did the red wraiths mean when they mentioned 'who the monster speaks with ... the trail to their goal.' Azamel? Were they talking about Azamel? If they were, how did they know Azamel was talking to him, and that he'd somehow be the way they'd get to her. How did the spirits know what he looked like?

All the answers were on the other side of the Gauntlet, and the Uratha weren't going to let him stick his fingers into their world to find out.

"You should recognize this place," Clara said, popping open a door behind one of the newer apartment buildings bordering on the Carthian edge of South Side and North Side. "Well, not this specific place, but you'll know what's going on."

"I don't—"

"A sex hole!" Fiona said, bubbling voice earning everyone's glance. Too loud, too high pitched for the somber surroundings, the darkness and flickering lights, and the curved, unnatural bend to the street lamps. "I've been 'ere, on the other side."

"I ... don't understand," Damien said.

Carter smirked at him. "You have no idea how much this side bleeds into yours, no idea how much of the insane crap you glimpse

is the work of spirits.” No doubt the older werewolf was looking for a chance to get back at the Mekhet; a little face rubbing of knowledge over ignorance wasn’t too dishonorable, evidently.

If Fiona was right, and it was a sex hole, Jack knew what he was going to find inside. Or at least, he knew what the physical version of it looked like. What would the spirit version look like?

Inside the building, there weren’t hallways or doors. Which made no sense, because it was an apartment building, like the one Jack and them had tried to find a hiding place in earlier. But this building, once they were inside, had none of that. The building was five floors high, and once inside, there was no ceiling on each floor; it was a big, open building.

The walls were pink and light blue, and curved in ways to emphasize the bumps and S shapes associated with flesh. From the ceiling dangled an enormous chandelier, twenty feet tall and a hundred feet in diameter, made of crystal, and lit with flames of mostly pink and blue again, with some lit as varying shades between. The human sexuality metaphor of the flame was blatant.

Some of the sex spirits Jack saw last time were here. Maybe not the same spirits, but the same idea, same premise, same shapes, colors and floating torsos of breasts, curves and musculature. They were swirling around what looked like, maybe, a five feet high mountain of pillows. It reached from wall to wall of the enormous building. That was a lot of pillows; thousands of pillows.

Near the center of the mountain of softness, was a larger spirit, perhaps ten feet tall, and with a shape far more developed and specific than the other spirits. She — it — looked human, to an extent. Curvy, with a flat stomach, wide hips, and heavy breasts that hung from gravity. She was lying sideways, her breasts smooshed to the blankets. Her multi-colored hair was unhumanly long, and flowing over the pillows, maybe twenty feet. Like the chandelier, her

hair was pink and soft blue, but changing from one, to the other. Her skin color was similar, drifting between colors you'd not expect to find on any normal human. As much as her body looked developed, with fingernails, nipples, toes and legs, her face was a nebula of color. Hard to describe, hard to nail down in absolute terms, as if a woman had put on make-up that was a portal into the endless nether of stars, energy, and souls. Pretty.

“You come to my home, Clara? Flowing Sanctuary?” it said. A heavenly, singing voice, layered many times over. A choir, both male and female voices filling the massive room with echoing rapture.

“Just using the locus to get back across. Got a problem with that?” Clara said. “You and your sisters”—she raised her hands to physically quote ‘sisters’—“walk on thin ice already, don’t—”

The beautiful entity shook its head. “No, of course not, I ... I am surprised at your company though. Sexual little creatures, aren't they?”

The two vampires and monster glanced between each other. “What?” they said.

“The one with no hair,” she said, and gestured to Jack. “Forever buried in sexuality, aren't you? You are aging like a fine wine, as the humans would say. Whoever is enjoying your many layers of flavor in the bedroom, I hope they are mature enough to appreciate the depth you offer.”

“I ... I um...”

“And you.” The goddess of sexuality looked at Fiona, and smirked. “Many women are flowers waiting to bloom. You are a volcano, waiting to erupt, and unleash your lust upon all you wish.”

Damien, Jack, Clara and Carter, even Flow, then looked at Fiona, as the small girl blushed red enough to hide her freckles.

“You, half-haired one,” it said, with a flick of her hand toward Damien, “are a conundrum. But, I’m sure once you pierce the walls of your inner bliss, you’ll find you have pierced a dam, holding back a river of desire greater than most.”

Ok, wow, what a way to meet a spirit: a sexuality reading that had everyone feeling uncomfortable, except for Clara, who was doing her best to not laugh.

“Um ... thank you?” Jack said.

The enormous creature shrugged, rolling onto her stomach and settling her chin on her forearms. She looked so human, but wasn’t a she, and wasn’t human; it was something which looked human, but fed on the sexual atmosphere created in parts of Dolareido. Hell, created in all of Dolareido. Slut City.

Clara took a little longer staring at Jack, than he liked. He, apparently, was a fine wine of sexuality. Maybe she liked the sound of that. He didn’t get to ask. She placed a hand on his and Damien’s shoulders, and the three of them fell into nothingness.

Fog, white fog. Endless, encompassing, burying. It wasn’t the road, the portal, Fiona had used to bring them to this world. Whatever it was, Jack didn’t want to be in it, touching it, swallowed by it. It was not good to touch it. It didn’t want to be touched.

Images of waking up, trapped inside a brick wall assaulted Jack’s mind. He was in a wall. He was in a massive, world-encompassing wall. He was—

He was in Dolareido. The bunch of them stepped out onto asphalt, and into the night of normal, good ole normal Dolareido. No spirits scurrying along the cracks of the streets, no talking birds in the sky, no thunderstorms with names, and no red ghost things hunting him down.



“Thank the Lord,” Damien said with a sigh.

Groaning, Clara offered them a salute, and started walking off with Carter. No Flow; the spirit had stayed behind, as far as Jack’s eyes could see. “Stay out of the Hisil. We won’t always be around to save your ass.”

And just like that, they were gone; leaving two vampires and a monster standing behind an apartment building.

“We ... we should get back,” Jack said, “before sunrise.” He desperately needed a quiet moment to process the what-the-fuck his night had been.

“Aye! Please, hate to lose ye to the sun.” Fiona smiled at him, patted him on the back a few times, and started to walk off. Pausing, she added, “Ye know where Eric lives? I need to speak with him.”

“Um, yeah, Damien? Can you fill her in on his new place?”

“Sure.” He nodded, walking off with the girl.

Jack watched the two of them as they left. Fiona walked a foot behind Damien, to his side, and more than once, glanced at his ass. Volcano, indeed. Now, if only she could pierce Damien’s dam, the former assassin could find a little happiness of his own.

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He dragged himself up the stairs of the Elysium tower. Tired, fucking God, oh, so damn tired. How much stuff could happen in one night? Sunrise wasn’t far off. All he wanted to do was lie down and let the softness of the Prince’s blankets lull him into the deepest torpor.

Sex? He didn’t think he wanted any, wrecked as he was, but seeing Antoinette had a habit of changing his mind. But, at least for the moment, he didn’t want sex. He wanted to melt into pudding

and become one with the pleasant contours of a glass bowl. He wanted to be the blood he sipped from a champagne glass, settled and still, except for maybe the gentle ripples caused by someone nudging it. He wanted to become a cow, and graze on grass, without a care in the world.

Brain fried, yeap. Complete and total exhaustion sending his mind through loops and into strange dementia, conjuring odd imagery like one might if they hadn't slept in days. He'd done that once, spent three days awake; using energy drinks to stay up, so he could study for exams and finish projects. Every illness around hit him after that, sinking him into bed with the flu, a cold, pink eye, and everything, in between, for three weeks. After that, he started taking better care of himself; he already was, thanks to Julias, but proper amounts of sleep became a priority after that.

He was hungry, starving, the need for blood itching in his veins. A strange feeling for a vampire, craving blood like a heroin addict, while needing sleep like an insomniac. Maybe Antoinette had Ashley and Julee nearby? A quick drink before sunrise, and he could pass right out. Like a kine, drinking a cup of hot chocolate, after a long day of skiing.

Mulder and Scully found him easily enough; not many short men walking around at this time of night, wearing a suit with shoes like his. They circled above for a little while, scanning the area, no doubt, before they came to him. Some thralls walked by, Antoinette's servants, wearing suits and earpieces similar to Ventrue gear. They nodded, offering small smirks as they watched the two crows come to him. Summoning crows to do his bidding must have seemed very vampire-ish, maybe even cool.

Jack stepped to the side, sat on the stairs, and held out his hands in front of him, turned slightly sideways, so Mulder and Scully could each perch on a hand. They'd gotten the hang of not piercing his

skin when they perched, making holding them so much easier and enjoyable.

“Anything to report?” he said. They both shook their heads. “Damn. Well, I’ve had a very productive night ... in a way. Keep an eye open for this.” He leaned in, and made a few clucks with his tongue, as he tapped into the minds of the two birds, conveying the best mental image he could of an old woman, a very old woman, in a wheel chair.

The two crows stood taller, cawed several times, and gazed into his eyes. Yes, they had seen someone like that, with several other two-legs watching over her.

“Could be a coincidence. Pretty sure most old ladies in wheel chairs would only be outside if they had friends or family with them. Still, if you see them, keep your eyes open.”

The two crows nodded. If there was one thing crows were good at it, it was keeping an eye on things.

“You two know I ran into a crow spirit? That a god you worship, or something?”

Scully tilted her head to the side, showing him her profile, and blinked her eye at him. Apparently they did not.

Jack clicked his tongue again, leaning closer. Trading images, scenes, and sounds with animals wasn’t easy. It required vitae to tap into the animalism discipline. Tired and drained as he was, he dug some up, and shared images of the crow spirit, City Sky. Mulder cawed in, what Jack could only assume was, envy.

But the idea of a deity, or worshiping something, was beyond their minds. Good. He smiled at his pets, set Scully on his other hand beside Mulder, and reached into his pocket to pull out some oats. It’d become an all-time thing by this point, to always carry

some. They plucked it from his palm with their beaks. Poke poke, careful to not hurt him.

“Sorry I was gone so long. Shit happens. But, I’m sure you have things to occupy yourselves when I’m not around.” They cawed their yes. “Good. I’ll see you two later. Maybe in the future, I’ll see if I can convince the Prince to let you come inside.”

To his surprise, the two crows hopped up closer along his arm, claws careful with his suit jacket, and they each offered a nudge of their beaks against his shoulder, before flying off. A goodbye kiss, sort of. Where’d they pick up that trick?

Once inside the Elysium Tower, he went down the stairs, down and down, deeper into the black marble with white lightning cracks, past the statues of dragons, down and down, toward the giant vault door leading to Antoinette’s bed chamber.

She wasn’t there. No one was there. Ah, well. He sauntered toward the bed, dragging his feet more with each step, until he was sure there were boulders attached. But once he reached the enormous pile of silk, he stripped until naked, and climbed into the sheets on his belly. With another thirty minutes until sunrise, he couldn’t really sleep, but that didn’t mean his body didn’t want sleep. A weird mixture of his old body’s desire to sleep, combined with his new Kindred body being worn out from the bombardment of stress.

Melt away, stress, please melt away into the blankets. Melt—

“Oh, dear Ventrue. Naked already are we?” Antoinette’s voice. Oh thank god. He tried to turn over, to give the elder vampire the respect she deserved, and because he loved her and the least he could do was get up. But, instead, he groaned into the blankets. “Tired, I take it? You look gaunt. My pets, help him.”

Putting his palms to the sheet, he pushed himself to his knees, as Julee and Ashley joined him on the bed. They weren't naked, or wearing anything sexual; either they knew he'd not be in the mood, or Antoinette wasn't in the mood. They didn't waste time either, getting close to him in their simple, colorful, pink and white pajamas.

He'd have said something, maybe how cute they were in the pajamas. But, no, too tired. They saw it, and a moment later, their necks were open to him, and he took a long drink from each. Two ghouls meant he didn't have to drain them; combined, they provided more than enough blood. After the quick feed, both girls were able to walk away from the encounter, but now, were as exhausted as when he arrived; they'd go to the room, next door, to pass out, and sleep the Kiss away.

Antoinette sat beside him on the bed, still wearing a business power suit.

“... busy day?” he asked, nodding at her clothes.

She chuckled, and gestured at his nudity. “I could say the same for you. You look ready to collapse.”

“I ... I am.”

Raising a brow, she reached out, and nudged his shoulder. Collapse he did, face down, while the tall woman looked down from the side of the bed. The best he could offer her was a weak smile, his face pressed to a pillow, and turned to face her.

“Daniel has reported the details of the ritual he discovered. And ... I admit, that is a terrifying discovery.” She sat down next to him, skirt nudging against his hip. Shuffling fabric drew his eyes, and he watched her slide off her jacket, dark colors with padded shoulders, before she set her hand on his back. The power suit looked great on her, with its dark skirt and white blouse. He managed to take a peek

at her legs, as she folded one over the other. Smooth, long, curvy, toned legs with milky, alabaster skin.

Got damn it, dick, stop! You're supposed to be exhausted.

Yeah but, you just had a bunch of fresh blood to drink. You're good to go!

He forced his eyes back to hers. No sex, stop it.

"That was ... honestly, only part of the mayhem tonight."

"You may speak of it, if you wish. Whatever you do not think should be kept to the Invictus alone, you may discuss with me. No more holding the city at bay, remember?" She ran her hand up and down his back, soothing his spine, while her other hand started to undo her blouse.

"... I visited Azamel."

"Did you, now? That is a dangerous game to play."

"I thought she or Fiona might have information. If the ritual was done by the hunters, and the hunters are here for the Begotten, they might know something. Azamel did. She thinks an old woman is working with the hunters, some woman capable of the ritual."

"That ... I did not know." Antoinette stood up, slipped out of her skirt and blouse, then sat back down beside him. White bra and underwear, perfectly normal, not sexy or anything. But, it still looked damn sexy on her, boring or not. The ridiculously huge cups were almost comical, doing their best to cover and support her breasts. "That is useful information, Jack. Thank you for sharing it. I will make sure Daniel is aware."

"... Fiona also took me into the Shadow World. We ran into some strange red wraith spirit things who are, probably, partly responsible

for the ritual. Communicating with this shaman the hunters work with, I guess.” And they were linked to Black Blood, and they were linked to the ‘verge’ thing that Fiona had opened, and someone had ripped their way through the portal, and it was all linked to the warning Azamel gave them, and it was linked to the mysterious dark threat Daniel was investigating. Good God, what had his life become?

“I ... cannot say I agree with your choices, little Ventrue, but I admit that you have seen things of which I have only dreamed.” She slid closer, nudging him aside on the sheets, and lying on her side beside him. Soon, she was pressed to him, her bare breasts — she’d taken her bra off in a smooth, slipping motion as she lay on the bed — pressed to his arm, her leg sliding over his. “What was it like?”

He was mostly on his belly, but turned on his side a little, to face her so he could lay his head on his arm and the pillow. With her in underwear, and pressed to him, the meal he’d just had started to tingle along his skin. Her amber, almost crimson, gaze from just a foot away, and her heavy breasts smooshed against his arm, were so terribly inviting.

“It was ... terrifying ... weird ... and ... and it was Dolareido.”

“A shadow of Dolareido, then.”

“Yeah, that’s as good a way to put it as any. It was filled with spirit ... spirit things. There were apartment doors that didn’t want to let anyone in. There were rat-like things, black wisps, sneaking around buildings. The windows were rainy, even though it wasn’t raining. The lights, not even the moonlight, were ever stable, always flickering. The streetlights were all bent and corkscrewing in the direction of South Side. I even met a crow, a giant crow named City Sky.”

“I ... I am ... mon dieu, I am envious.” She ran her hand down his shoulder and arm, his waist and hip, and down his leg. “I would

have enjoyed visiting such an interesting place.”

“Interesting ... terrifying. I can understand why the werewolves don’t want us there. Half to keep us from getting ourselves killed, half to keep us out of the politics.”

“Politics?”

“Yeah, spirits with big names, I guess. Black Blood,” — her right eyebrow raised slightly at the mention — “Red Tide and the Street-Tail King. It’s ... weird, I guess. From what little I could piece together, they have their own factions, same as we do.”

“Oui, of that I am aware. But the details are forever beyond my grasp, little Ventrue. Thank you for sharing this information with me. I would ... hesitate, if I were you, to be upfront with your superiors, about how much information you have given me.” Her questing arm reached across his waist to find the small of his back, and pulled him in a bit closer. Body to body, her breasts pressed straight into his chest, and she set her lips onto his buzzed head. “I am sure they would love to dangle such information in front of me, out of my reach.”

“This is bigger than the Invictus. And the Invictus, they ... well, you know.”

“They care nothing for such mysticism. A sentiment I do not share, but can appreciate.” She pulled him in closer, until his face came to rest against her collar. Melting, a perfect place for melting. He slipped his arm around her, and hugging her back, trying to merge them together. Two bowls of pudding, all mixed up.

But, as much as he would have lit up like a Christmas tree fire in July, if she tempted him, she didn’t. Maybe she was exhausted, too?

“How was your day?” he said.



“Horrendous, though while I had assumed I would be complaining to a listening ear tonight, I had not thought that your night would be worse.”

“Oh, shit, sorry. Please, complain away!” He lowered his head enough he could feel the softness of her breast, near her collar bone. “I’m all ears.”

“Ah, well then, I must take advantage of such an offer.” Sighing, a lovely, deep, long sigh, she started to stroke the back of his head. Fingers, against buzzed hair. Euphoric. “Much of my day is spent managing the Masquerade, as you know. There are squabbles that occur between Kindred, or mistakes made by Kindred, which must be hidden. Today though, a rather ... unusual event occurred, centered around that fellow, Eric.”

“The kine? The dude with Beatrice when they saved me?”

“Indeed. In retrospect, I should have realized something was strange about the man. His inclusion into the affairs of the night was quite random, but no longer. Evidently, he is a werewolf.”

Jack yanked his head up and blinked at her. “Really?”

“Oui. And now the man, once a small thorn, is a potential knife in my side. Julias has supervised cleaning of the man’s awakening — apparently this was his first transformation — to make sure the fool’s destruction is not known by the public.”

“This happened tonight?”

“Mhhmm.”

“Wow. Everything happened tonight.” He smirked, laughing, and settled his head back against Antoinette’s collar. Another werewolf, holy shit.

“Why do you laugh, my love?”

“Just ... just find it ... great, you know? That we’re talking like this, talking about the shit happening in Dolareido. We didn’t do this much before.”

The goddess nodded, leaning forward enough to kiss his head. “I was afraid it would taint our interaction. When we first met, you were a shining beacon of wonder, joy, and honesty. I would have done anything to keep you pure, isolated from the dirty machinations of the city.”

“Aw, come on, it’s not that bad, is it? I mean, yeah, I’m not the same guy I used to be.” And frequently, he was put into situations where he was forced to become like Julias, had to lie, or manipulate, or withhold information. On top of that, he’d discovered a new level of hate and anger inside him, sometimes to the point of paralysis. He’d confided in Tash, now he should confide in Antoinette.

Later, he could confide in her, later. For now, God damn it was nice to relax with her and talk about their day.

Antoinette got up. Jack raised a brow, watching; oh, she wanted to get them under the blankets. He rolled with her movement, making space for her to pull the sheets back, and soon the two of them were beneath the blankets, cuddling. Jack had not really cuddled with anyone, until Antoinette. It must have sucked, horribly, for two kine to cuddle; body heat alone made the idea nauseating. He’d die of heat stroke.

But two vampires? No heat issues to worry about. So, he hugged her tight, as her back fit against him. He got to be the big spoon. Which, of course, didn’t work very well. He chuckled again, as his face pressed against her hair for a moment, before shifting his chin over her shoulder, instead. With the blanket over their shoulders, he couldn’t see her body. But he could feel it, feel the way her large, curvy butt and legs pressed along his body.

Possessed by some evil spirit, or inspired by a sex spirit, his hand drifted over her hip, and up her flat belly, to caress her breast. Maybe one of those sex spirits he dealt with tonight had hitched a ride in his body? It wouldn't have surprised him, as the touch of Antoinette's skin against his body set him on fire, despite his exhaustion.

The best part was, she didn't stop him, say a word, or do anything to discourage him. All she did, was chuckle, as his hand slipped between her breasts, and began to cup and massage where the weight one pressed down on its sister, squashing it to the bed. The softness of it, combined with the weight of it, was the most pleasant feeling in existence, and he sighed joy as he softly squeezed her bosom.

“We have fifteen minutes before sunrise, little Ventrue.”

“Yeah, don't mind me.” No sex needed, but even without sex, there was no denying how great a breast felt in his palm. “If I had my own, I'd be cupping and massaging them all day.”

“Yes, I do believe you have said that before.” Chuckling, she brushed her hair with her fingers, finding a better angle for it against the pillows. “What will you do about Eric?”

“I ... I don't know. That's really Julias's decision.”

“Anticipate your superior's actions, my love. An important skill, to insure your future actions can be made swiftly, and in the correct context.”

“Good point. I suppose Julias will want him to see Avery at some point, turn him into a known factor. I might be asked to be involved.” His hand drifted down a bit, so he could hug her proper, arm cutting across the upper half of her stomach. “I ... don't think we'll kick him out of the luxury suite. Jessy put him there, since he helped us out, helped me out. She trusts him, a bit, and since he

works at Bloodlust, the arrangement made sense.” Comfy and cozy, she sank into him as he pulled her close. Her arm found his, rested upon it, her fingers settling on his wrist.

“I will have to speak with him, again. The poor man was quite nervous, when we met.” The tall woman chuckled, turned her head a touch, and waited. Message received; he leaned in, kissing her neck and cheek. “Fledgling Kindred have their sire to rely on, while this man does not. Whatever advice Avery gives him, I must give him context that it is my city, not hers, and that his decisions must be made with that in mind.”

“I don’t think Avery will use Eric to rock the boat, or do anything like that.” Avery does seem to have the city’s best interest in mind, even if that means wanting to do things her own way.

“Perhaps not on purpose, no. But I am sure she will attempt to convert him to her cause, and indirectly, that will create a barrier for me. Truthfully, I would be more content if he continued in his current capacity, as a bouncer for Bloodlust, and in his new living location. There, it is easy for us to keep an eye on him.”

“A werewolf bouncer ... watching vampires come and go, Kissing kine every night. That is an interesting idea.” It was a good one too. “But, Uratha aren’t like us, they don’t create their own reasons for existing. They have a powerful reason built into them, hunting spirits and keeping the ‘balance’.” He struggled to raise his hands, to make air quotes. Not easy to do, lying on his side, but it was warranted.

“Long ago, there was an Uratha who hid within my city for a short while. She did not serve any of the tribes. I asked her what she called herself, if not a member of a tribe, and she answered: ‘a ghost’.” Shrugging, Antoinette brought his hand to her lips, kissing it. “Perhaps Eric will pursue the same fate.”

“A ghost ... a ghost werewolf?” What a strange way to refer to oneself. He nodded, and hid his face in the back of her neck. “Maybe. It’d be nice if he could create a little stability out of this. Can’t go five minutes without something turning upside down.”

“Indeed.”

Exhaustion returning, he sighed, as the rising sun called for slumber. It didn’t matter he was deep underground where its rays didn’t reach him, Kindred knew when the sun rose or fell. When it started to rise, a Kindred’s body and mind grew heavy, eyelids too, until there was no choice but to give in, close their eyes, and turn into a corpse, until the sun fell, again.

“Love you,” he said into Antoinette’s ear, as he drifted under. If she said it back, he didn’t hear it, but she said it all the time anyway. He should say it more.



~~Beatrice~~

The next night. She awoke, stretching her arms out and yawning, exposing her crocodile teeth. Back in the lair with her fellow members of the Circle, back in her small hole in the wall, with all the blankets. All of them. She smirked at the pile, sure some real fur was mixed in there; not a fan of killing animals for a fur blanket, but damn it felt snuggly. Maybe she could convince Julias to spend some time here with her. Fucking with the curtain pulled aside so everyone else could watch.

Her long tongue licked her huge teeth at the thought. Yummy.

She got dressed: combat boots, gray jeans, and a black tank top. Kindred were creatures of habit, after all. But, mostly, she just liked to show off her ass and abs. They pulled people’s eyes down, away from her mouth; a habit she doubted would ever die. Jacob wore a bandage over his empty eye sockets though, so, she could justify

drawing people's gazes to her better features. Not that Julias minded her teeth, but still.

She slid out of her cave, and hopped up into Jen's, expecting to find four extra legs in the girl's room. But, no, just Jennifer, alone. She was wearing a ... Snuggie, one of those blankets with sleeves, designed for comfort above all else. A book was in her hand, and not an eBook reader, but an actual book.

"Whatcha reading?" Triss said, as she plopped down next to Jen.

The woman turned the page enough for Triss to see there were some pictures to go with the walls of text. "Manifestations of the Paranormal, by Terrence Moulovia." Nodding, Jen flipped back a page to show what she'd been reading a moment before; the picture was beautiful, if disturbing. A dissected crow, wings typically pinned, with its stomach peeled open and pinned apart, like the wings. "This book is a hundred years old, it has examples of myths, things witches were supposedly doing to sacrifices."

"The Masquerade isn't as well guarded as we thought, if this shit keeps ending up in books." She reached over for it, and Jen handed her the book without complaint. "Jacob showed me some inof his books from his collection. Similar stuff, but much older."

"Yeah, many cultures have been documented these rituals at different points in history. More surprisingly, the same rituals, but at different places in the world, often with an ocean separating them." Jen pointed at the dissected crow, then at the necklace Triss was wearing. "Makes you wonder what sort of ... things, really exist."

"You mean Black Blood."

"Partly, yes. That thing ... possessed a corpse, Triss. And it talked to us."

Triss nodded, flipping the page to another picture. “He’s used different voices before. Seems like he’s settled on the voice of a Texan now. I feel like he—err, it, would be right at home cooking us up a barbecue, or talking about cheese.” She laughed, but it was a cover. Black Blood’s jovial attitude, and undefinable nature, made the damn thing terrifying in a way she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

“I always imagined,” Jen said, “entities like that, colossal in scope, wouldn’t really talk. They’d exist, but do things on a plane beyond our understanding.”

“Well, that Black Blood thing is a spirit from the Shadow World. Far as Fiona has told me, that’s a sister world to ours. Things there can get ... pretty ... crazy.” Dark, bleeding, black ooze, obsidian death fog, encompassing and overwhelming them. Something that could punch through to their side of the coin, in the most sick, twisted, macabre way. What other entities existed in that world? “I wouldn’t be surprised if a lot of the gods of myth and legend were spirits.”

“Think they were all spirits?”

“Unlikely,” a third voice said. Both girls looked up from the pile of blankets and pillows they sat on, to the pale Gangrel, Aaron. He raised a brow when his eyes caught sight of Jen, in the blanket-with-arms, before shrugging.

“You know something?” Triss asked.

“I do.” He came in a little, and once Jen offered, he sat down on the blankets, facing them. “Jacob’s interest isn’t only in the Shadow World.”

Jacob wasn’t home. He was out, doing his usual sneaky sneak things. Probably sleeping in some hole in the ground he’d dug a century ago. It meant they could talk about him, if they kept their voices down. Jacob’s ghouls could hear them, if they got too loud.

Triss slipped Jen back the book, and tilted her head to the side, squinting at the man. “What are his interests?”

“No idea. But I’ve been around him long enough, seen enough of his artifacts and overheard his rants, to know he dips his toes into other worlds.” Aaron shrugged, reached out, and took the book from Jen’s hand. “And you, Triss, already know he has an interest in nightmares.”

Ah, yes, can’t forget about nightmares being an actual place. Professional envy there, Nosferatu and their ability to bestow nightmares ultimately outclassed by literal nightmares walking around. Athalia, and her horror, that torso of bone and wings, was just too damn fucking cool.

Footsteps turned their heads, and the three of them offered a nod to Othello, as the beautiful man jumped into Jen’s home.

“Talking about Jacob?” he asked, long hair falling over his dark, tan shoulders. Man never wore a shirt, showing off his muscles every chance he got. Fucking Daeva. Not like she was one to talk, though.

Triss nodded again. “We are.”

“I’ve known him longer than the rest of you. I can assure you, his interest in other realms is nothing new.”

“By how much?” Jen said. “How long has he been ... well, tempting fate, calling on entities from across God knows what?”

Othello shrugged, sitting down beside Aaron. All the witches, sitting across from each other. If they had a ouija board, it would have been perfect.

“Since forever. I suppose he became more interested in it after Minerva’s death.”



“... that’s a good point,” Triss said. “You’re pretty damn old, Othello. Been around longer than any of us. What was Minerva like?”

Her question hit him in a strange way. He lowered his gaze, and leaned back so his palms caught his weight on the blankets.

“She was nice, I guess. I never talked to her much. It wasn’t every day a Kindred got to be on speaking terms with both the Prince, and the Joker. But she was nice, and sweet, to the point it was almost sickening.”

Heh, Joker. Dude was far too old for comic book villains, but maybe Othello stayed up to date with pop culture. Daeva did that sometimes, obsessed with the material as they were.

“She talked with both Jacob and Antoinette?” Jen said.

The Daeva nodded, and adjusted his jeans a bit as he got comfortable on the blankets. “I get the impression she was involved in both their secret pursuits. We know Jacob’s agenda includes ... well, being an all powerful warlock,” he said. Right, not witches, it was witches and warlocks. “The Prince is a dragon, so her pursuits are undoubtedly similar, only pursued in a different way.”

Aaron leaned in, voice a whisper. “Operating tables and scalpels, computers and fancy tech, less chanting and blood rituals, more detailed notes and experiments.” He flipped through some pages, stopping at a page showing a human in a coffin, being lowered into the ground. “While we touch on topics like ... the meaning of life, or death, and which ancient gods drift among us, manifesting as unknowable concepts, the Ordo Dracul treat it like science.”

“Yeap,” Othello said, “and Minerva seems to have been interested in both worlds. Probably something to do with why Avery killed her.”

Jen's eyes lit up. "Were you there for that?"

"No. Glad I wasn't. I saw Jacob the day after, and he was beat up bad." Smirking, the Daeva leaned back a bit, putting his shoulder blades on the cave wall. "Then again, so were Avery, Simon, and the rest of the pack."

Triss tried to whistle. No good, damn it. "Jacob against a whole pack of werewolves?"

"We did watch him beat up Arturo and Matthew, Tash's two boy toys." Chuckling, Jen reached out and took the book back from Aaron. The chuckle faded, and her eyes fell as silence buried them. The boys waited, looking at each other and the women with raised brows, until Jen sighed. "It wasn't pretty. Jacob really hates werewolves, that mindless sort of hate, you know?"

"Yeah." Triss collapsed backward as well, settling her shoulder against the wall as she looked at the cave ceiling. "It was impressive, seeing a small guy like that decimate two werewolves in hand to hand, like they were fucking children. But at the same time, he goaded them, and took advantage of the situation." Not doing the best job keeping him cool, Beatrice. Prince asked you to, maybe you should try a little harder. "I should talk to him, later." After you go see Damien. Been putting that off long enough. Ugh.

"Where your boys been lately, Jen?" Othello asked, gesturing to the cave around them. "Used to be you and me stinking up this place with ghoulish sweat. Now it's just me."

"I ... honestly ... haven't really felt like enjoying them." She shrugged, the blanket-with-arms looking utterly hilarious, and cute, on her. "Been more than satisfied with Triss and Julias."

Triss winked at her, before looking back at the ceiling. Was Jen getting drawn into the lovey dovey romance Julias and Triss drowned each other in on the reg? Or was the sex that good, Jen

didn't need it from anyone else? Either way, it made Triss chuckle a bit, and earn an elbow in the side from the Ventrue.

Othello smiled smugly, then let Jen's admission pass with a shrug. "I remember the way Jacob was, after Minerva's death. It wasn't pretty. He turned into a stone. It was a long time before the Jacob we know and love, and hate, came out again."

"It was true love," Aaron said. "Rare among us vampires. I can only imagine what it must be like, to know someone for years, know you could spend the next century loving them, and then someone else tears them away, like"—finger snap—"that. I wonder if Jacob even realizes the powerfulness of his life story." God damn, Aaron did love to over-narrate things. Maybe a repercussion of his unhealthy love of reading. Why read when you could watch the movie.

"He's had no one to talk about it with," Triss said.

The other three vampires looked at each other. The guilt on their faces was blatant.

"Correct," Aaron said. "Approaching Jacob about the topic isn't easy, as you can imagine."

"Since her death," Othello continued, "Jacob's been buried deeply in his rituals and research."

"Research?" Jen said. "You make him sound like a dragon, not a warlock."

Triss snorted, throat catching on a small laugh. The word witches sounded cool, bad ass, and very dark and mysterious. Warlocks sounded like nerds.

"He's being a bit more thorough," Othello said, "than I remember him being before Minerva's death. Not that I know that much; we

avoided getting too involved in the crúac, Triss, until you called us out on it. Dolareido's been ... easy living, for the most part."

Aaron nodded. "We just sit here and watch the Carthians and Invictus get on each other's cases, while our boss explores the depths of madness, and other dimensions."

"You had a good thing going," Triss said. "I can't blame you. It's not ... well, yeah, I mean now that everything's turning to shit, monsters, werewolves, hunters, and fucking what not, I expected the you three to participate a more. But if Jacob's been hands-off with you this whole time, yeah, no wonder you haven't been involved." Leaning back in, she tapped a claw against one of her larger crocodile teeth, several times, as she looked at the others. "Within six months of working for the Carthians, Garry had me doing scouting missions on operations the Invictus were running. That bar over by Fifth and Darper Street? That was me."

That earned some oohs and aahs from the other vampires, and Triss grinned with the sound. Yeap, she'd done some damage that night, when she wasn't supposed to have. Broke some poor suit's arm too. Bitch had it coming, though.

Those were the good days. Instead of worrying about monsters, nightmares, spirits, and what might as well be gods, she worried about when and where to get her next meal, and how she was going to get away with breaking an Invictus woman's arm. In the end, the woman probably didn't report it, to save face, or whatever. Good for Triss, because it had been a stealth mission; one she fucked up. Now, if she fucked up, she'd piss off a demon, or an ancient spirit of the Black Plague or some such, and get everyone killed. Not only bigger stakes, but a playing field she wasn't comfortable with, not at all.

No, that wasn't entirely true. Now, she was dipping her toes into crúac, and overcoming her fear of pain. Now, she was talking to an

ancient, deadly spirit on something similar to a schedule. She was earning the title, witch, very much so.

“Any news on the hunters, by the way?” she said. The two boys were supposed to be looking into it.

Aaron raised his hand for a moment. “I spoke with some of my crow friends. I ... actually, did you know your little Ventrue friend Jack has been dipping his toes into animalism?”

“Has he?” she said.

“Mhmm. I don’t think he knows how many other Kindred have also made friends with the crows and rats of Dolareido. He’ll learn, eventually.” Holy crap, the Gangrel actually smiled. “My friends noted some weird activity in Devil’s Corner. Of particular interest was an old woman in a wheelchair, hooked up to a breather.”

Othello rolled his eyes. “Yeah, you told me about this. Lot of old people in the city, Aaron.”

“This one had an escort.”

Jen leaned in. “That’s not ... too unusual. There are...”

“It’s not just that. My friends told me they didn’t like what they saw. There was something unusual about it, about her, about everything.”

Triss shook her head. “That doesn’t mean she, or they, were hunters. Hell, Azamel is an old woman, sitting in a crummy chair, with a bunch of bodyguards around her.”

Aaron mirrored the head shake. “Based on what you told us about Azamel, this wasn’t her. This woman looked two days away from death. Only thing keeping her alive was drugs and the respirator.”

Shrugging, Triss got up, stretched a bit more, and headed for the exit of Jen's hole in the wall.

"Wait," Jen said. "We should ... we should talk about that night, with Black Blood."

Yeah, they probably should. Problem was, Triss didn't really want to talk about it. Much as it appealed to a dark part of her that loved scary shit, that loved she was a part of scary shit, there was no denying the chills Black Blood sent up her spine.

"We'd love to know the details," Othello said. "And if Aaron and I are ever going to join you in these secret rituals ... I know I'd like to know a little more, instead of going in blind."

"Yeah ... ok." Groaning, she sat back down. Maybe this was better than the awkward conversation she'd planned to have with Damien. "Black Blood is a spirit, and that's about the extent of my knowledge. That, and Black Blood knows Jacob, has known him for a long time. Calls him Malachi."

"Malachi?" The two men said.

"Yeah. No one else calls him that, and I don't suggest you start. Probably an old name from his younger days, when he first came here to Dolareido. Far as I can tell, Jacob was just as wild then as he is now, and had another group of vamps as part of his Circle. They got down and dirty with the blood magic, the crúac rituals, and all that shit. Jacob discovered Black Blood, on the other side of the wall, when Jacob and company were still newcomers to Dolareido." She looked up, letting her mind wander for a moment, to images of cowboys and farmers, old bars and streets of mud and horse shit, to brothels and prostitutes with warts on their faces. A time when superstition ruled the world. God damn, it must have been a paradise for Kindred; if they could find a safe place to sleep, far from mobs with torches.

“They’re friends, I guess,” she continued, “if you can be friends with a spirit. It ... it was like speaking with a shadow of a god, if you can imagine that. Something dark, something that literally oozed black stuff, black mist, black water, black everything. It took the place over, used all the symbols and shit Jacob had set up, and seeped its way into our world. It likes to use a corpse as a host, I guess, or at least, a tool. I don’t think host is the right word here, more like a puppet. And, like Jacob, or Malachi, it shares an interest in crúac, blood rituals, and other things. The two of them seem to be buddy buddy, and delight in...”

“In being gross,” Jen said. “Black Blood seems intelligent, really intelligent, the sort of intelligence that comes with not being human. Above human. It was weird, and as it and Jacob talked about the next crúac ritual like it was as mundane and predictable as the weather, I ... it was scary.” She shivered, and hugged the blanket tighter as she looked down, at the book. After flipping through pages to where she’d left off, she turned the page. A person burning on a stake greeted her. The artist had taken the liberty to not show the facial expression of someone being roasted alive; how nice of them.

Above the burning person, was a wisp of smoke. Smoke made sense; the drawing was detailed, and the artist didn’t spare details like flames on the wood, or the smoke it gave off. But the cloud above carried an expression, cuts through the smoke making the shape of eyes, and fangs.

“Ain’t no vamp surviving this,” Othello said, as he pointed to the picture.

After a moment of reading, Jen shook her head. “This account suggests the person was human all along, and was being possessed by a vampire.”

“Dominated?” Aaron asked.

She shrugged again. “This book wasn’t written by a vampire or anything, just a human touching on things when they’d only scratched the surface. I’m reading it because Jacob said it was oddly accurate in many ways, and a lot of the information was pertinent to the things we witches and warlocks can do with crúac.” Her fingers found the drawing, and she caressed where the smoke formed the grinning face. “I guess this is the sort of stuff we’ll be exploring, with Jacob and an otherworldly entity as our guide. Cheating death by possessing people? Seems doable, considering the things we’ve seen Jacob do. And considering what we saw Black Blood do.”

Silence fell on them again; no need to say what they were thinking: what boundary had Minerva crossed, to earn death at the hands of the werewolves? Was Jacob and Black Blood going to get them killed, if they pursued the rivers of blood and insanity the old Nosferatu was inviting them into?

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~~Eric~~

The forest. A bright, shining moon. A gibbous moon. Grass around his naked feet. Breeze against his naked skin.

He was dreaming.

Catching on quickly, aren’t you?

The voice in his head. His normal voice, his him, his me. Good ole Eric’s voice, internally narrating. Nothing wrong with that, everyone does that.

You’d be surprised at how many people don’t. You know who narrates their actions and motives in their heads?

Introverts?

Well, yes, them too. But so does a Cahalith.



Cahalith?

Mmhmm. You think all Uratha walk around, seeing things, hearing voices? The Ithaeur may be harassed by spirits, but what's happening to you isn't the same.

... am I sure this is me?

Yeah, just you who knows more than you. And I'm telling you, you're in for a rough ride, werewolf.

Eric breathed deep, and looked down at his naked body. Him, the man he knew. Average height, very dark skin, and well built. Muscular, with little in the way of body fat. Lean, abs and serratus anterior muscles, everything chiseled and ready for war. Old habits die hard, and keeping the fat mass low meant staying in a lower weight class. It also meant people underestimated you, when you were wearing clothes.

No clothes out here though, in the soothing, gentle breeze of mother nature. Out here where it was the rule of the world. Mother nature? Father wolf is dead, you coward. Your forebears ruined everything, and now it's on you to manage the mess. Mitigate, like a janitor cursed to wear a ball and chain while idiot school children continue to litter and spill. Poor fool, doomed to wander the halls in a circle, forever cleaning, never done.

Eric turned, and looked to the city before him. Dolareido had no forests, not like the one that surrounded him, but his dream felt different. He stood high on raised ground, sloping hills of grass, with endless trees behind him. The city of lights, drugs, and sex lay before him.

So I'm Cahalith.

Indeed.

What does that mean?

I'm sure Avery will give you a better breakdown. Or a worse one, depending on how much bias you're willing to accept. All I know, is that you're a storyteller. A fucked-in-the-head storyteller, Eric. Which is hilarious, by the way. It doesn't fit you at all. Or maybe it does? Forever in pursuit of glory, because glory makes for a good song; or good media exposure, in the modern world, anyway. That is why you got into fighting, isn't it?

That's how I destroyed my knee. I learned my lesson.

Well, recent events are giving you a second chance. Get to be big, bad, dangerous, and glorious! All the glory, all the fucking glory, all for you, Eric. That knee is fine now, nothing to stop you from going on a glorious hunt.

For ... Father Wolf? Or ... Luna?

You know her name. She's been talking to you, hasn't she? Because if she didn't, you'd have crumbled by now. You don't know how to breathe, how to take a moment, how to focus on the fucking moment. You should feel proud, special; Luna actually talked to you. Maybe she likes you?

Eric looked up at the sky, the few clouds that gently moved by, and the moon that cut through them with its light. Her light.

Were his ancestors' sins, his problem? No, of fucking course, they weren't. He didn't ask to be a werewolf. He didn't ask for...

Someone's here.

---

He sat upright in his bed. Kat was there, and her smell assaulted him from every direction; she'd been rubbing up against everything while he was sleeping, evidently. She sat beside him, meowing a few

times before stretching out. A few more meows, then she walked over to rub her face against his chest.

Fur was everywhere. The new bed did not appreciate it, its purple silk sheets exposing all of Kat's glorious colors. The maid was going to hate him.

He had a maid.

Eric laughed, crawled out of bed, and put on some loose pants. His new apartment might as well have been a mansion, far as he and Kat were concerned. So much space. What was he going to do with so much space? Laughing again, he stepped out of his room, and—

“Hi.”

“Sweet Jesus!” He jumped and spun around, bringing up his fists. The room was dark, the only source of light the crack of illumination getting around his black-out curtains. But it was enough for his new eyes to see well, and see that he was alone in the room. The door was closed, too; Kat's routine was to sleep with him for solid eight hours, every night, though there was still five hours of sleep left on the schedule. The joys of working nights.

No one else was supposed to be in the room. His front door was locked, and the bedroom was locked with a new, proper lock. He did recognize the voice, though.

“Fiona? Er ... Vrall?”

“Yes, that is who I am,” the spider woman said. Her voice was quiet, but not a whisper. She didn't need to whisper, given how much these fancy suites focused on sound insulation. As far as Eric knew, his neighbors might as well have not existed, sound-wise. Made talking with the monster who'd snuck into his room, and was now under his bed, easier.

“How did you get in here?” He squatted down by the bed, with enough distance that, if something decided to reach out to grab him, he could jump away in time. No reason to suspect Fiona, but there was no denying that a giant spider lady was talking to him from under his bed. He couldn’t see her, but she was there.

If there was one way to get arachnophobia, it’d be from something like this.

“Damien knows which room you’re staying in. He showed me.”

“How, exactly did he show you the place? I haven’t left here since last night.”

“You can’t hide from the eyes of a Mekhet, especially that one.” She chuckled. “But, it’s true that I’ve never seen the insides of this particular room before. I had to use Vrall’s past experience with half-blind jumps to ... well, find this delightful corner of shadow.” A hand reached out from the blackness. Her hand. Not Fiona’s, Vrall’s. Less fingers than a human hand. Each finger was a long, pointed blade. If she squeezed anything with that grip, her fingertips would sink in like a fat needle into an arm, hungry for blood.

“And why ... why are you ... like that?”

“Like what?”

“Why are you in that form right now? Where’s the pretty redhead?”

“Ah. Here in the dark, on the edge of the dream you just had, Vrall can come with me.” More chuckles, and another hand slipped out from the darkness. Two sets of claws began tapping on the floor, until at last the spider woman’s face peeked out from the black. Only the bottom half of her face emerged, so the top half of her head — which would not be able to fit under the bed anyway — was hidden. The seductive smile, thin lips, dark skin.

Damn she was beautiful, in a ‘come into my web so I can fuck you, then eat your head’ sort of way. But she was a spider, not a praying mantis. So she’d fuck him, then liquefy his insides and suck out the juice.

“Did you see my dream?”

“No. I have never been able to enter the dreams of others, only nightmares. Some Begotten might be able to? It would be interesting.”

“I ... I’m a werewolf, Fiona.” And she fucking knew it, too.

“Yes.” Her hands and face slid along the length of his bed a foot, then back a foot, without making a sound, without altering her angle; like she was sliding on a sheet of ice under the bed. “Did something happen?”

“You haven’t talked to your buddies?”

“Athalia? Mark and Azamel? Not yet. I only just arrived back from a rather long and dangerous journey. The sun is beginning to rise.”

The black-out curtains would keep the sun out for a long while, thank god.

He leaned down a little closer to the spider woman’s face, so she’d see his frown.

“I killed four people, and ate a chunk out of each of them.” He spared no expense on the malice in his voice. There was anger there, rage, maybe even a little blame, aimed at Fiona for not telling him more, when she had the chance, before the madness started.

“I ... can’t apologize, for that.”

“You fucking ... no, no, of course you can’t.” He sighed, and fell back, his ass meeting the hard bedroom floor. Right then, he kind of

missed his old apartment's shitty carpet. "Yeah, I know. I fucking know, but ... fucking christ, Fiona. I killed people."

"What happened?"

"Those fucking pricks working me over a loan came for me. Jessy had wiped my debt with an asshole, but apparently they wanted to kill me and send her a message." He laughed, a sad laugh caught in his throat. "I vomited up bits of human. I can still fucking taste it too. Blurry images, nothing specific, but there was a rush, a terrible, amazing rush, when I bit into them. It ... it's still there, on my tongue. The fuck am I?"

Cannibal. Cannibal? Was he actually a cannibal, if he wasn't human? And he wasn't human, not anymore. His dad was human though, so Eric had to be human, too, to some extent. Christ, Dad. He had to go see his dad again, and soon.

"If I had had time, I would have told you more, Eric."

"No time?"

"Correct. After the hunters showed up, my kin and I had to hide. I became distracted. I haven't been to the Bloodlust since then. And, I am hungry."

A hungry monster. He gulped, and found himself inching away. He was a hungry monster, in a way, but what was he compared to the nightmare under his bed.

"How do you satisfy your hunger?" How do you satisfy our own, new hunger, Eric? Far as he could tell, he wanted to eat what he always liked eating. Except, maybe, a bit more toward bacon and beef, spare the carbs.

"It's different for different types of Begotten, and not by our ... nature. I am a monster of darkness: Eshmaki." Without moving her

fingers or face, Fiona's exposed hands and chin flipped upside down, as if she was now clutching the underside of his bed. Fucking christ. "But, so is Athalia, and she doesn't eat what I eat. She doesn't find those who are guilty, and make them suffer for their violations."

"Violations?"

"It is different for each Begotten who satisfies their hunger in this way. Nemeses. I, Vrall, must find those who have mistreated others, bullied others, abused others. I devour the dread dripping from their pores. I inhale the fear escaping between their clenched teeth, then absorb the terror fleeing from their screaming mouths." She sighed, wistfully, and licked her lips. He still couldn't see above her nose, the shadow of his bed somehow hiding her enormous crown of horns. "When I first came to Dolareido, I let Vrall indulge her hunger, and torture prey to the point of death. I even devoured their flesh."

"How many did you kill?" This tiny girl — not so tiny right now, but still — was a killer, someone who had killed people before. A young, small woman, with blood on her hands. What did that make him?

"Almost a dozen, before the Kindred sought me out. I had crossed a line, damaged their Masquerade."

He winced, and nodded. Athalia was right, then, all of them were. Eric had come dangerously close to a precipice he didn't know existed. If he had damaged their Masquerade irreparably, those vamps would have his ass on a stake, no matter if he wanted to reconcile.

"I know the feeling," he said. "You've ... killed people ... coherently?"

"It was easy for me. The people Vrall wants to eat, or at least terrorize, deserve to be punished. Abusers deserve nothing but pain

and suffering.”

“Personal vendetta?”

“No.” Still upside down, the nightmare licked her lips, then opened her mouth enough to expose some of her fangs, this time. “Vrall is the horror, the monster in us all that ... it is too large a concept to explain so easily. There are men and women who have nightmares, Eric. Nightmares that haunt them because of a little kernel inside them. A little nugget of wisdom, a tiny voice they’ve buried speaks to them in whispers, begging for them to stop being such horrible people, to stop torturing others for their own sick pleasures. They ignore the voice. The voice crafts nightmares to persuade them to stop.” Grinning, her claws reach up to tug on his blanket’s edge. “Those nightmares extend, touch, and live in a realm beyond your imagining. The dream world touches everyone’s mind, and in an unconscious mass, horrors are birthed, to teach lessons. Fear the dark, fear the long drop, fear the greater predator, fear the wrath of the vengeful.”

“You teach people lessons?”

“Some Begotten think in such a way. Vrall does. Whether or not it is taken to heart, is up to the Begotten. But, I can tell you that Vrall, that I, am not some scarred and beaten thing that has come back from the beyond to enact vengeance. I am an idea, a nightmare, that has grown from a seed planted deep in the minds of billions of people.”

Ok, yeah, literal nightmare.

“Heavy stuff.”

“And you, are an Uratha. Vrall knew of your kind, centuries ago. You guard the wall, tend the herd, keep balance between this world and its shadow.”



So his dreams were telling him. It was nice to hear someone else confirm it, so he knew his new life wasn't just a delusion brought on by insanity.

“And, if I don't want to play guard duty, or worry about culling weeds?” He got up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Breathe, right? Breathe. A meow cut through the silence following the question, as he stretched his shoulders and opened the bedroom door. Kat knew where the litter box was, no need to help her.

Fiona, or Vrall, started to change. Maybe, because he was more awake, or from the light bouncing down the hallway, and little bits of the sun were working their way through the rest of his apartment. Whatever it was, as the room became lighter, until a normal human could see, Fiona was no longer the spider monster.

Out from under his bed, crawled the redhead. Wearing jeans and a jacket, she was the epitome of a casual, fun-loving gal. A tired gal, though. He could see the stress on her face and body, the weight in her steps. The strain of stress didn't erase the smile from her face, though, as she hopped onto his bed to sit at its edge.

“Fancy!” she said, accent returned. Kat returned from her outing, and hopped onto the bed, and looked at the short woman. Fiona returned Kat's curious look, tilting her head to the side. “Never seen a cat get along with a werewolf before.”

“Kat is brain damaged, I'm pretty sure.” He shrugged, and sat back on his bed, as well, with Kat between him and Fiona. Kat seemed hesitant with Fiona, looking her up and down. With Jessy, Kat was more than content to get affectionate. Fiona was giving her pause. Strange.

Fiona held out her hand for the cat, and Kat sniffed it several times, before at last rubbing her cheek against Fiona's hand, inviting pets. The redhead giggled, and began to pet the stupid

feline. Feet bouncing against the side of the bed, the monster smiled at Eric, and looked him up and down several times.

“I still owe ye a date,” she said. “And after that night with Jessy, I think it’s safe to say we can escalate!” Chuckling, Fiona turned on the bed a bit, pulling up one knee onto the blankets.

“You look exhausted.”

“So do ye!”

“I work nights, Fiona. I’m running on two hours of sleep. I should go back to bed.”

“... can I join ye?” She giggled, but she also looked down, and started tracing shapes into the blankets. Giggling was her nervous tick, then. Shy? No, but inexperienced.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said.

“Ye dinnae?” She frowned for a moment, before slipping out of her jacket, and setting it aside. Now, wearing only a t-shirt, she pulled that off as well, all with the grace of a drunk — or very tired — college girl. Her massive bra exposed, she lay on her back, making grabby hands at him. “Dolareido is called whore town, right? I’m very much looking forward to enjoying some of that.”

“You really ... should find someone closer to your age.” And maybe someone with a disposition a bit closer to yours. Maybe a giant sunflower.

“Come on, ye telling me ye dinnae want a piece of this.” She rolled over enough to stick her ass out. The jeans hugged her tight, showing she was a very beautiful woman. A beautiful monster, with a sunny personality he couldn’t wrap his mind around.

“I’m serious, Fiona. This is a mistake. I’m a fair bit older than you, and—”

“I dinnae care. Ye’re handsome, and ye’re nice, in yer own, strange way.” She sat up straight again, reached behind her, and tossed her bra to the side. “I’m tired, sore, and I ... I feel like I owe ye. I should have told ye more, before I went into hiding. From now on, I’ll be around more; so will Athalia and Mark.”

Kat, perhaps psychic and predicting, jumped off the bed and left, giving Fiona free room to crawl toward him. Suddenly, Eric found himself caught between staring, and laughing. It was true that Fiona was gorgeous, the frizzy red hair, the freckles, the pale skin, and the enormous breasts swaying beneath her were an overpowering combination of beautiful. But she had zero grace, and her attempts to be seductive were atrocious. Her cat crawl might as well have been a donkey crawl.

“Fiona, come on, I’m serious.”

She’d gone deaf; his words weren’t landing. She crawled onto his lap, smiling at him as she put her knees on either side of his legs, and hooked her arms on his shoulders, hands crossed behind his neck. Her body was on display, and she leaned back until her heavy breasts flattened against her torso with their mass. God damn.

“Ye didnae enjoy that night, with Jessy and me?” she said.

“I did. A lot.”

She took his words for invitation. Hands found his, and guided them to her body, her bare stomach, her soft skin, and her luscious breasts. He groaned quietly, as he felt his fingers sink into them, her breasts’ softness molding them around his hands. It earned a shiver from her, too. She giggled nervously as she looked him up and down, and re-hooked her hands around the back of his neck.

“If I ... if I had to guess,” she said, “ye’re interested in her.”

Shit.

“I ... um...”

“Nae, it’s a’right. Though I think ye might be barking up the wrong tree. She has four servants, and she bangs them on the regular. At the same time.” Fiona kept one hand on his neck, and let her other drift down his chest muscles. She licked her lips, and Eric smiled at the difference between her and Vrall’s lips. Much as Vrall was unusually attractive, for a monster, Fiona’s pink lips against her pale skin were far more appealing.

“Yeah, she does.” Though Jessy seemed to suggest her ‘ghouls’ were banging other people, and not her, as of late.

“If there’s a’body on the planet that won’t mind a lass having a taste of ye, it’s an open-minded woman like Jessy.” Still with one hand hooked behind his neck, she reached down to her pants, undid the button and fly, and reached in. “I was in the Shadow World last night.”

He tensed, hard enough for the girl to notice; she knew he knew what that was now, to some extent or another. With a nod, she smiled at him, and continued to touch herself, while one of his hands slid down to hold onto her waist. She wasn’t ripped like the girls he knew in MMA, or Jessy, but she was mostly thin, a bit curvy, and a touch of softness to her, that was so terribly inviting. His other hand continued to sink into her breast, now reaching under to cup it, letting its fullness overflow his palm. Warm and heavy, her swollen, pink nipple begged his thumb to touch it. It did, reaching up to caress while his fingers continued to cup the breast’s weight.

God damn, he broke easily.

“You were in the Shadow World?”

“Yeah, helping some friends learn some things. We met a sex spirit there.” Fiona slipped her hand out of her pants, and put it on his chest. Wet. Already. “She had some interesting things to say about us. Apparently, everyone in Whore Town is ... a slut. The vampires are the worst, but the spirit had some interesting things to say about me. Clara laughed at us.”

“Clara?”

“A werewolf, like ye. I’m sure ye’ll meet her, too. Bet she might even give Jessy a run for her money at stealing ye.”

“I’m not—”

“I’m just kidding.” Giggling all the more, her hand slid down his chest, over his abs, and down to his pants. Simple, loose sweat pants to wear at home provided no protection from her hands, nor did they hide how hard he was getting. He couldn’t stop caressing the woman’s breast, and that was only making things worse.

Her hand found his cock, then giggled and shivered all at once, as she began to gently stroke it within his pants.

“I still feel like I owe ye, for saving my life, and helping Beatrice save Jack,” she said.

“You don’t—”

“I want to.” She started stroking him faster, her grip at the base of his cock, working him back and forth similar to that night with Jessy. “It’s a treat for ye, and it’s a treat for me. My hometown was so boring, and Dolareido isn’t, and ... and I haven’t really gotten to partake! I get to see it, all the time, in my hunts. I lied to my friends, but it wasn’t until that night with ye and Jessy that ... that someone else touched me. A’m needin’ more.”

Horny girl leaves hometown, and struggles to break out of her shell in the big city. He could understand that, he supposed. But it only served to highlight how young the girl was, and how her aggressive, sexual attitude was far more 'fake it until you make it' than legit.

That didn't mean he didn't agree with her, though. And when a topless, beautiful woman is sitting on your lap, and stroking your cock while pointing it at her, it's hard to think clearly.

Whatever was happening to him, whatever it meant to be a werewolf, it was sending his body a very powerful message: you are alive, healthy, and ready fight or fuck at any time. And do it again, and again, and again. And god damn, he wanted to.

"Don't ... suppose you brought any condoms?" he said.

"What? No, course nae. Ye're the man, ye should have some!"

"Only thing I brought with me to this new place was Kat. Been a pretty hectic night."

"It's a fancy place, right? I bet the bathroom already has some." She let go of him, got up, and walked toward the door as she kicked off her pants. Left only in her underwear, she grinned over her shoulder at him. Simple underwear, blue, and terribly cute.

He got up, and followed after her. Early in the morning, sun rising, and he needed sleep. A middle-of-the-night tryst with a deadly monster wasn't what he had planned for his morning, not after what happened last night. But, watching the small girl's large butt, her curvy hourglass figure, and breasts so large he could see the sides of them from behind, he couldn't deny what he wanted, now. Typical man, breaks like a dry twig the moment a girl shows her boobs.

He got up, and followed her, only to find underwear on the floor outside his door.

“This place is nice! I like it.”

“It pays to have friends in high places.”

“The Kindred own the town, I admit that.” She found the bathroom down the hallway, and whistled as she flicked on the light. “Oh, oh! Hot tub!”

He laughed, leaned against the door frame, and watched the naked girl explore his bathroom. Yeah, it was ridiculously classy and sleek, a large scale bathroom with a middle of the floor drain, so the corner shower didn't bother with glass panels to contain the water. He'd heard of places like this, of rooms like this, called 'open design' or something. What the fuck would a couple do if one was showering and the other wanted to take a piss? Zero privacy. Well, the place probably did have an extra bathroom somewhere, considering how big the damn apartment was.

“Found some!” She drew some condoms from a cupboard, and waved them in the air, prize earned.

“I still think this is a bad idea.”

“So do I, but I'm a young lass, and I deserve to make mistakes. Tasty, delicious mistakes.” She wiggled the condoms left and right as she came closer, grin so big he could see her teeth. No fangs, nothing unusual.

“You're kind of skipping some steps, too,” he said.

“I am?”

“Yeah. Last thing you want to do is jump right to the sex, Fiona.” Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it. “Sit on the tub, and spread your

legs.” God damn it, Eric, you weak fucker.

She squealed, doing as directed, zero hesitation despite the blatant blushing. Redheads did blush easily, pale skin catching the red blood and putting all her emotions on display. Nervous. Giggling nervous. She set the condoms aside, put her palms on the white tub’s edge, and spread her milky legs apart.

Wherever the sun struck, there were freckles. Her face was covered with them, and so were her upper arms. But under them, everything from the breasts downward, was creamy, milky white, alabaster almost, and demanding to be kissed. She’d shaved herself smooth, normal for Dolareido, and her pink pussy shivered along with her trembling thighs. Very nervous.

“I wish I had a bevvvy.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m sure there’s something to drink in the place. I haven’t looked.”

“Later, then?” Grinning big once again, she reached down between her thighs with one hand, and caressed her folds. Very wet. What had that sex spirit said to get her so riled up?

Maybe you should stop worrying about why these beautiful gifts are being dumped on your lap, Eric. Your knee is healed, you feel as healthy as an ox, and you have a great, new place to live. Pitt is dead, your debt is gone, and you got some vampires in your corner, backing you, willing to deal with that Montoya fucker. And two women are throwing themselves at you, both fun, both gorgeous, both looking for something non-committal. Perfect, right?

Well, maybe he was looking for something a little more committed? He wasn’t young, anymore. Not old, not young, an age where the idea of getting drunk and sleeping with a stranger lost its appeal.



He shook his head at his thoughts, smiled at the beautiful creature waiting for him, and approached. He was still wearing his pants, but the loose fabric didn't bother him, despite how it hugged his upright cock. It'd be good protection for his knees, since he was going to be on them for a bit.

He breathed in, deep, and earned a sigh of desire from the small woman as she looked him up and down. She liked the look of him, and seeing a girl sigh with lust, was the biggest stroke to a man's ego he could imagine. It set his blood on fire, and filled his mind with imagery. If things continued, he'd have this tiny, curvy, busty creature in his bed, and he'd fuck her, and fuck her, and fuck her, until she wasn't able to move anymore.

All in good time.

He got down on one knee, set a hand against the tub edge outside her leg, while his other reached in, finding her sex. Warm, soft, wet and hungry. Fiona bit her lip, and chewed on it as she watched him, cheeks growing redder, and redder.

And all the redder, as he eased two fingers into her awaiting body.

“Oh! ... b-be gentle.”

He smirked at the trembling woman, but did as requested. He'd had sex hundreds of times, but she hadn't. How much did she know about it, about her own body, about pleasure. No reason to do things quickly, when he could go slow, and help her find what she liked.

With his palm up, his middle and ring finger together, he pressed them into her body a few inches, and looked up at her. Her expression melted, and her hand, once caressing her folds, reached out to grab his shoulder, instead.

“You ... you ... know w-what you're doing, right?” she asked. Poor girl was trying so hard to be the aggressor, bouts of shyness made

her so unbearably cute. Like sweet ice cream, almost too sweet to enjoy. Almost.

“I do.” He leaned in, breathed deeply the scent of her flesh, her soft skin and curvy thighs, then set his lips onto her wet clitoris. A sharp inhale confirmed her sensitivity; no surprise there. He set his tongue against it, and kept the pressure soft, gentle, with long and caressing licks. Her shivers increased, and little squeaks started to come with them. Her breasts shook with her trembling, their softness causing them to ripple from movement. Her quickened breathing only made it worse, and Eric found himself staring at her just to watch her breasts jiggle.

The young creature was too beautiful. He almost felt unworthy, touching something so pure. Maybe pure wasn't the word, but there was no denying the girl was a bundle of joy who wanted the experience of the pleasures life had to offer; she was untainted. Strange, considering she was a monster; a shining example of what all the monsters, vampires, werewolves, and God-fucking-knows-what-else should strive to be. She was happy.

It was infectious. He grinned up at her, groaning into the softness of her mons. Vibrations from his voice earned a mewl from her, and mewl became squeak as he pressed his fingers up against her g-spot.

“Oh! There, inside ... I like that ... more, there.”

Not afraid to admit what she liked. If only more people were like her.

She was already wet, and waiting; no need for him to gently warm her body. If she wasn't so ready and hungry for it, he'd spend time warming her up, kissing and suckling her clitoris while gently massaging her lips and labia. If there was one thing Sheryl didn't have any complaints with, it was the sex.

No no, don't think about Sheryl. Don't think about Sheryl, or werewolves, or debts, or your worthless father, or the fact you're probably still digesting a human fucking being. Think about the gorgeous woman in front of you, creaming onto your hand with only the slightest touch. And god damn it, just look at her, smell her, feel her. Her warm juices leaking down your knuckles feel great, and her mix of feminine deodorant and sweat — whatever she was doing earlier had been physically taxing — smelled better than than some fake scent perfume crap.

He groaned into her clitoris once again, and wrote some letters on it with his tongue, as he probed against her g-spot faster. Much faster. Her body started to tremble from the effort, and her breasts jiggled blatantly as she gripped the tub side with one hand, and his shoulder with the other.

She came in moments. Shaking like a leaf, she squeaked between her high-pitched, quiet moans, and squeezed his shoulders. As more of her liquids trickled out, he eased up the pressure of his tongue; no need to overstimulate the tiny nub he was suckling. But, by keeping his tongue on it, holding still while she came, he could tell the tiny redhead was forced to mewl as every movement brought friction against her hyper sensitive flesh. His fingers pressing against her depths forced her to become a shivering mess, though. Each upward thrust of his digits against her g-spot forced mewl after mewl out of her, in a blatant display of surrender.

She started to fall back, and he snapped out his free hand to wrap around the small of her back.

“W-Wait! Slow down ... I...”

He grinned into her smooth pussy, and drew away his face. His fingers within came to a stop as well, but remained within, as he enjoyed the random spasms of her depths around his digits. Warm, and tight, the juxtaposition of her hard, clenching muscles within,

compared to the softness of her body, was alluring. Christ, he couldn't wait to get inside her.

He started again.

“Wait! I said w ... wait ... nnnng!” The poor woman had little control of her voice. She set both of her hands on his shoulders, and pushed against him, trying to get him to stop. But her body responded with all the grace of lit kindling. She was sensitive, aroused, and her body wanted to be touched. She wasn't ready to be fingered so soon after an orgasm, but there was something deliciously primal about hearing a woman's exhausted moans, and small, begging words, as they were being forced to cum.

And she did. Poor thing looked at him with begging, golden eyes, and started to shudder all the more as her grip upon his shoulders renewed. To say she was sexually sensitive would have been an understatement, and Eric stared up the valley of her belly to admire her convulsing body and trembling breasts. Wow. It almost felt wrong, touching something as pure as this girl, his cynical and jaded mind unworthy of being near her. Her body came and came hard, her insides squeezing down on his fingers like a vise, causing more juices to leak onto his palm.

He forced his fingers through the clenching, and continued to finger fuck the trembling redhead.

“Eric! St ... stop ... I...”

Again, the sound of her begging for a ceasefire, between mewls and moans of pleasure, set his whole body on fire. If they'd been in bed, he'd have thrown her to her knees, and pounded her hard enough to wake the neighbors. The squeaks and squeals, mewls and whimpers, mixed in with moans, begging, and breathless words were intoxicating. Her words and sounds drove him to finger her harder. Hard enough to make her ass bounce against the tub edge, and her thighs to squeeze his arm in a futile attempt to stop him.

It wasn't until he felt her juices trickling down his wrist, that he stopped.

Poor girl collapsed forward, and he helped ease her down the outside of the tub to the floor, so she could sit with her back against the white tub. She sat there, legs spread, and shivered without stop. Panting and breathless, she looked at herself, where her legs were quaking; he doubted she was used to her body refusing to listen to commands.

"Ye ... bully..." She grinned at him, before her gaze fell back to her own flesh. Still panting, still trembling, her eyes traced the length of her legs, down to her curling toes, before up to her smooth mons. She cupped her breasts with both hands, and hugged herself, cradling her breasts with her forearms as she shivered. "Och, that is ... is so much better than ... doin' it by myself." Giggles mixed with the mewls, as she hugged herself a little tighter and her grin grew.

"You are a shameless woman, aren't you?"

"I have shame! Somewhere. I lost it, haven't found it." Giggling up a storm, she tried to reach out for him, but the trembling in her thighs stopped her. She hugged herself again instead, and bit her bottom lip while looking him up and down. "I'm all tingly."

He licked his lips, and growled. A growl, and a rumble, something close to a loud, bassy purr. He had never make that sound before, but it came out as naturally as breathing. It earned a wide-eyed stare from Fiona, before she reached up to touch her lip.

"... I like that sound," she said.

If she complimented him one more time, he was going to explode. He rumbled again, earning more wide-eyed stares of wonder from the beautiful, naked, and shivering woman sitting on his bathroom floor, her spread legs were trickling with her juices. How much his

life had changed. So many downs, so many ups. This one was a very, very good up.

He reached for his pants, and—

Knock knock.

He froze, and looked out the bathroom door into the hallway. Room service? It was an apartment, not a hotel. Landlord, or what-the-fuck-ever they had in a fancy building like this?

“Just ignore it,” he said. “They’ll go away in a minute. And I very much need to get inside—”

Knock knock, louder this time. “Eric! This is Avery. I know you’re in there, open the door.”

Oh god mother fucking, stupid fucking, shit, fuck, god fucking hell, shit, fucking cunt.

# Chapter 65

~~Eric~~

“I’m busy! Come back later,” he called out to the hallway. Please go away. He could have life-altering conversations with other werewolves later. Right now, he very much wanted to fuck the small woman giggling and trembling on his bathroom floor.

“Open the fucking door or I break it down,” the woman said. Avery, she’d said her name was. Hadn’t even seen her face yet and he was hating her guts.

Fiona managed to smile up at him, before she grabbed the tub ledge, and forced herself to standing. “I got mine. Ye can get yers next time we meet.”

Talk about a gender reversal, and not one he agreed with. Fuck. Shitting fuck shit, he was hard enough he figured the veins on his cock were going to burst and start squirting blood everywhere.

“Alright, I’m coming!” he yelled.

Fiona giggled at him. “Apparently nae,” she said, voice a whisper as she picked up her clothes, and slipped them on like a drunk girl trying to sneak out before her mistake for the night woke up. With a wink, she stepped into his bedroom, slipped under his bed, and was gone.

Holy fucking shit that was fucking creepy. Could she sneak in whenever she wanted? Supposedly a fellow named Damien helped her find him, and helped her see into Eric’s place; prerequisites for her strange abilities, maybe? She’d said something about Vrall having a special ability, too.

Eric's erection died fast. Girl gone as quickly as she'd shown up, new problems at his door, and he still needed another five or six hours of sleep. Fucking hell. Groaning, he walked to the door, dressed in only his pajama pants. Kat was at the door already, meowing a little, and he scooped her up into his arms before letting another set of problems into his life.

"You must be Eric," an older woman said. A short woman, about the same height as Fiona. Unlike the redhead, the older woman had some muscle to her small frame, and a black ponytail down to her hip. Light tan skin and blue eyes too. Attractive, in a 'could be a young grandmother' sort of way.

"And you're Avery?"

"I am."

Eric grunted. His nose told him she, and the few others with her, were all werewolves. But he didn't need his nose to notice that. Every instinct in his gut, every hair on his body, every hint of their body language all said the same thing: we're wolves, big, bad, unstoppable wolves.

"This," she continued, "is Clara and Carter. I figured you should meet them too, because they're your neighbors. Sort of. Different floor, but you get the idea."

Oh, wonderful. He looked to Carter, a man a bit older than this Avery woman. He was favoring one of his legs; a lifetime of doing that made it easy for Eric to recognize the signals. The long gray hair and beard were intimidating though, like a rocker who'd seen every side of Shitsville, and returned to tell the tale. And his body looked like it was carved out of wood.

Clara was beautiful. God damn. His eyes drifted up and down her body a moment, a reflex she noticed, and returned. He was shirtless, after all. Clara was average height, with the body of a boxer. The



dark tan skin, dark brown eyes, and long hair done in box braids, were all terribly attractive, and—Eric, you're just horny because of a severe case of blue balls. Stop thinking with your dick, and calm the fuck down.

“And,” Avery said, “this is David, and this is Noah.”

Eric looked past the two women and Carter, to the two men in the back. David, based on the gestures Avery made, was the closer of the two. A big guy, with broad shoulders and short blond hair, beige skin. He refused to make eye contact; hell, his eyes kept drifting around, or stopping on something random, like the floor or something on the ceiling. He looked young, too young for what Eric imagined was a rough life, based on the scars, clothes, and musculature on the lot of them.

The other guy was pale as fuck, dark blue eyes with a shaved head, and tattoos along his skin. A lot of his skin. Eric's eyes lingered on him a bit longer than the rest of them, picking out shapes and images from the lines that adorned the man's head and neck, and the arms exposed from his black t-shirt. Eric half expected to see images of wolves and shit, but no, the man had tattoos of dragons and mermaids and skeletons and flowers.

There was a theme to the tattoos, at least. One half of him seemed to be more uplifting, while the other had a darker side. Chainlink tattoos — a classic — circled and separated the two opposing themes. A man who took his ink seriously. Eric could respect that, to an extent, until your body started to look like a billboard for manifestos. This guy was riding dangerously close to that line.

“Can we come in?” Avery said.

Eric groaned, and nodded in toward the inner sanctum of his fancy, gilded cage. “Sure.” Sighing, he walked into the living room, and kept Kat in his arms.

The mood was strange. He didn't know these people, and they didn't know him, but they felt familiar. Maybe it was because they were werewolves too, but he doubted it. It was more to do with what they were wearing, their posture, their stances, the clothes they wore and the glances their eyes made.

They reminded him of that Beatrice chick, or even a bit of Jessy. Blunt and honest sorts. He'd take them over that suit Julias he met in the sewer any day.

Avery and Clara got comfortable, taking a seat on the couch. Noah and David didn't seem interested in sitting, Noah stepping to the window to pull the curtain aside and watch the sun peek over the buildings as it rose. David drifted around the apartment, slowly, eyes digging for something. If Eric didn't know better, he'd figure the man was looking for something to steal, or maybe clues to a murder.

Avery motioned for him to come sit on the couch opposite of her. "So, how much do you know about us?"

That you're a cocky, stupid bitch if you think you can order me around in my own apartment. He frowned at her, subtle but piercing, made sure she got the message, and stood beside the TV instead.

"Not much, just that you're the pack in town."

"Julias contacted me," she continued. "Surprising, but I guess Jack was busy. He said you had your first change early last night, and caused a mess."

"You could say that."

"We're not your enemy," Clara said, "you can lower your guard a bit, you know."

Eric redirected his frown to her, and checked Kat. Kat didn't seem very interested in these other wolves; if anything, she looked annoyed, and she gave them the same annoyed glare Eric was giving them. Filled him with pride, and hope, that maybe the dumb cat knew other people better than he gave her credit for.

The man at the window, Noah, shrugged. "We're here to dictate terms for his new life, which he's apparently been getting a lot of, lately. I wouldn't want us to be here either." Evidently, the man was good at putting things into perspective.

Avery rolled her eyes. "I'm not here to ruin your life, Eric. And fuck me, from the little Julias told me before he went under for the day, it seems like you got yanked into the night world by the monsters."

He said nothing. Nothing to say. So, he stood there, and stroked his cat.

"Look, Eric," Clara said, leaning in and putting her elbows on her knees. "You're a brand new Uratha. There's a lot of shit being thrown at you, and unfortunately, you're a problem now."

"Problem?"

"Yes, problem. You have no idea what sort of attention you'll attract from the other side, in your new state. Bewildered, and ... and ... is that a woman, I smell?" She lifted her head and looked down the hallway. "I know that smell."

"... Fiona was here, to check on me. She's gone now." No need to bring up the sexual encounter. Hopefully the smell of sex wasn't too identifiable.

"You're awfully buddy buddy with the vamps and monsters," Noah said.

“No reason not to be. They’ve helped me out.” He gestured to the apartment around him. As long as they ignored the fact it was a cage, and he was under the vampires’ thumb, his new life arrangement was pretty amazing compared to anything they could offer him. “And Fiona is a friend.”

Avery nodded, but the look in her eye made it obvious she wasn’t convinced. “And we have no problem with that. But, we are here to prod into your life a bit. Spirits are going to be a thing now, they’re going to show up in places you don’t expect, makes themselves known, dislike you, or attack you. And with a brand new Uratha like you, they could try and do more. You need to be aware.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

Wrong thing to say, when combined with enough sarcasm you could swim through it. The small woman got up, and jammed a finger into his chest. It was enough to make Kat hiss at her, but Avery glared at the feline with enough malice, Eric could feel the coldness of it. Shut poor Kat right up, and she shivered as she pressed herself back against Eric’s chest, hair standing up.

“You got a problem, Eric? I’ve come here to help you, to keep you from getting killed or worse, and to help stop you from doing more stupid shit like what happened last night. You think the vamps will be a problem if you fuck with the Masquerade? I will personally decorate this city with your innards if you fuck shit up for us.”

Eric stared at the small woman, and gulped. Ok, yeah, he felt that. Something in her eyes cut through the bullshit, and through the wall of sarcasm and cynicism he knew he carried everywhere.

“Alright, I’m listening,” he said. Truce.

“Good.” Avery sat back down, folded one leg over the other, and set her hands onto the back of his couch. Very queenly; and mixed with the jeans and shirt, made her come off as some sort of rocker

royalty. He could dig that, much as he didn't want to be dealing with it right now. "So what kind of wolf are you?"

"Kind?"

"You may not know. Not everyone gets the whole suite of info when they change. But you'll get some stuff. Basic understanding of the First Tongue, at least. For example, the First Change almost always brings on a bout of Kuruth."

Kuruth. Death Rage. He winced as the memories hit him, of teeth tearing through clothes and flesh, of the screams of his victims, before they turned into a gargling mess of blood. A flash of an image, of blood squirting from veins with the beat of a panicked heart. Ugh.

"I ... I know the word ... Cahalith."

Avery nodded, and gestured to Clara with her chin. "Clara and I are Cahalith, the Gibbous Moon. So are you, glory seeker."

Glory seeker? Right, the dream had said something about that. Ancient memories surfacing in his dreams, fucking great.

"And them?" he said, looking to the two men.

"Noah is Elodoth," Avery said. Half moon. The judges. "And David over there is Ithaeur." Crescent moon. Spirit talkers.

The meanings came to him naturally; he didn't have to dig them up, like he might if someone asked him to speak Spanish. These words were ingrained into him with all the subtlety of a chisel hammering stone. He wouldn't forget them, couldn't forget them, and he knew it completely.

Avery smirked at him. Fuck, he probably had realization showing blatant on his face.

“Our pack is of the Meninna,” Clara said. That one was a little harder to comprehend. Hunters in Darkness? Meaning came with it, something about defending territory, something about hunting... “Shartha. We hunt the Shartha, Eric.”

The Hosts. Whatever those were. But the mention of them was enough to kick start his heart, getting it pumping a little faster, and earn a quiet growl from him. Something about old things, terrible things, things from before the great divide, things to be feared.

Growling, in front of strangers. Good fucking christ, what happened to him? He knew what happened, he was a werewolf now. But the cliché sounds were so fucking horrible. Or at least, he thought so, but damn, the look on Fiona’s face when he started rumbling in his chest, made him reconsider.

Maybe it was ok to be a bit cliché then, if the results were so acute. And it wasn’t like he didn’t deserve to indulge a little, with all this shit falling on him, shit he didn’t ask for. Instead of brooding about it, maybe—

Finger snaps woke him up.

“Just like a Cahalith,” Clara said, smirking at him and lowering her fingers. Loud snaps, considering she was still on the couch. “Like to narrate your thoughts much?”

Shit. “ ... I do.”

Avery laughed. “And what kind of history do you have?”

“Used to be a fighter, MMA.”

“With cameras on you, I assume? And an audience?” she said. He snorted, and looked down at Kat as more painful memories stabbed him. Cameras, spotlights, announcers, and then fancy dinners, fans, photoshoots. “I can see it in your face. No need to continue, and it’s

not fair for me or Clara to pick on you for it. We're guilty of indulging in a need for glory as much as any Cahalith. What's the point in being in a story, or creating a story, if it's not a story worth telling, and retelling?"

Ok, a little admission of guilt on her part, he could appreciate that.

"Alright, so, what's the plan?" he said. "Far as I was concerned, I was going to continue doing what I was doing. Got a good job, good place to live." Money to keep my idiot father in high-grade hospital care.

The two women looked at each other, each raising a brow.

"Honestly?" Clara said. "End goal of the conversation is to make sure you're in the know about Uratha. You need to know spirits are going to make your life hell now, and you need to know you can come to us if shit becomes a problem."

"... and that's it?"

Noah stepped away from the window and stood behind the couch. "We also could use another member in our pack. The Azlu killed one of our kind, so we're down a member. And you know the city well; we're very out of our element, in this city."

A member of their pack. A new family. Ugh, he hated his current family enough, and that was only one other person. The fuck would he do in a pack.

"Not used to cities?"

"A lot of us did work in Tijuana for a while," Avery said. "But that is not the same as here. Most of my pack is not used to city life such as Dolareido's, closer to Las Vegas than anything else. We could use your help."

Monsters asking for his help, and werewolves asking for his help. He was surprised the vampires weren't, too. Then again, Jessy told him he should play the field, since he was strong enough to take care of himself against these inhuman foes. Not foes, come on, they're trying to help you out. It made sense they'd want something in return. But then, that put them on the same footing as the monsters, and no better. The vampires were the ones doing things differently, putting a leash on him while also giving him a new, quality life. Different, but not better.

What to do, what to do.

"I'm not sure what that entails," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

The pack leader cracked her knuckles, and made a sweeping gesture. "For now, nothing. In the future, we'll take you on a hunt, then the Shadow, show you what your new life is going to be like."

"And if I have no interest in joining you on a hunt?"

Noah frowned, but said nothing, and looked to Clara and Avery. Avery opened her mouth, but it was David who spoke up.

"The spirits will find you, Eric. They do not like Uratha, and they will make your life miserable." He came up to Eric, and looked down at him. David was a decently big guy, but the constant distraction he wore in his gaze made him seem shy; even now he didn't look Eric in the eye, his gaze on the floor, and flitting left and right.

"I don't care if—"

"You'll care." David reached up, and set a hand on Eric's shoulder. Anyone else, and Eric would have shoved him away, but this David guy didn't have any of the body language of an aggressive person. Sort of like how, if someone moved their hand slow enough, they



could slap you, and you wouldn't defend yourself due to the slowness not triggering a defense.

Eric tilted his head to the side, and tried to catch the man's gaze. No good. David's eyes weren't dodging Eric's, like a shy person's would. They were looking at things Eric couldn't see. Insane? No, he was a spirit talker. He was seeing things, things Eric probably didn't want to see. He was having enough trouble stomaching the mountain of shit falling on him right now; he wasn't going to go looking for more.

“Fine, I'll do the new employee dance, go through the indoctrination crap. But I'm telling you now, I have no interest in any of this shit. I didn't ask to be Uratha, and I have no interest in hunting, or guarding any fucking ... anything. Just want to live in my new digs, bounce at the club, and have sex with the pretty ladies.” Which you fuckers put a stop to.

Maybe Fiona was there, waiting for him, under the bed? No, she'd have left, or the Uratha would have sensed her presence or some shit. Fuck. Fuck!

The four werewolves looked between each other, and let the silence sit there, like a wet, cold blanket. Or they did, for a moment or two, before they all started laughing. Even the David fucker managed a smile.

“Give it time,” Avery said, “you'll feel different.”



~~Jack~~

“This is a pretty great place for a group meeting,” Jessy said.

Damien nodded, and gestured to the telescope he brought. Without hesitation, Jessy put her eye to the lens, and scanned the horizon. Horizon in Dolareido was nothing but a bunch of large

buildings, but Damien had found a convenient location on a high rooftop that allowed him to watch many of the apartment buildings Invictus Kindred slept in.

“I can see into my place from here!”

“Yes, you can,” Damien said, face completely deadpan.

Ah shit. Jack raised a hand to hide his grin from the man; poor guy just walked into it, and Jessy turned around to catch it like a frog catching a fly.

“Damien, you son of a bitch. You spy on me?” She grinned a hyena grin, and waited for his inevitably plain and easily teased response.

“I spied, and spy, on everyone, Herrington.”

“Seen me having fun with my ghouls then?”

“I have, yes.”

“Perverted fucker.”

The Mekhet frowned, slightly. “You put your body on display for the whole city. Some are bound to notice.”

Jack raised a hand. “That giant sex spirit did say you got a bit more to you than you let out, Damien.” Ah well, might as well throw a little gasoline on the fire.

“Giant sex spirit?” Jessy said.

Jack nodded, and motioned for her to sit down. The three of them on a rooftop, no one else around, only them and Jack’s two crows on his shoulder. He fed Scully and Mulder some oats, and told the tale of the sheriff’s phonecall, the strange ritual, the trip to see the Begotten, and his journey into the Shadow realm. No need for any

details about the mysterious damage, and looming threat over Dolareido; him, Damien, the Begotten, and the sheriff knowing about that was plenty.

It wasn't like he didn't trust Jessy, but the woman wasn't exactly good with delicate matters. If they told her some sort of evil, mysterious force was coming for them, she'd take it as a proclamation of war, and bring it to the council. No, better that others didn't know, so Jack — and now Damien — could continue hunting for the truth in secret.

“Those fucking wolves,” she said. “They really think the other world is theirs, don't they?” Damien and Jack nodded. “Well, fuck that. It's not theirs. You say it's a sister world of Dolareido, a shadow of it? Well, we own this city, and we own its shadow.”

Damien shook his head. “The Uratha would sooner say something like ‘we guard this territory, not you’ or something.”

Yeah, they would. Jack shrugged, and watched as the Gangrel returned to the telescope. “Prince tells me other shit happened last night too. Eric's a werewolf as well?”

She threw her hands up, but let them drop with a groan, before she resumed scanning Dolareido with Damien's telescope. “Apparently! Like, the fuck are the chances? I guess Fiona recognized it in him, before he ever truly became one.”

A raise in the pitch of her voice, and an elongated vowel every now and now, put Jessy's words in a new light. Normally she spoke with a bit of bite; it was her natural state, to bite and snip and snap with her voice, even when just being playful or kind. But there was a softness to her voice now, subtle but there. Julias's training paying off.

“What's the plan with him?” Damien said.

She shrugged, and turned the telescope around as she squinted the one eye with ridiculous exaggeration. “He’s gone from being a useful set of eyes and ears, in a high traffic zone, to being an extremely useful set of eyes and ears in a high traffic zone.”

That was true. Much as Kindred had great eyes and ears, Uratha’s were better, and they had a great nose to go with it. They also had aggressive tendencies to go with them though, which made Eric’s position at the Bloodlust an issue.

“If he doesn’t break someone in half for looking at him the wrong way,” Jack said.

Jessy laughed, and shook her head. A smile crept onto her face, one he doubted she realized was there. It was damn adorable on her. “Jack, you should see this man’s cat. Kat the cat. She is the nicest creature on the planet. You can’t be an asshole if you have a cat like that, unless she was fucking lobotomized. Never had a cat rub up against me like that, you know? Not since being embraced. It was so ... so ... why are you looking at me like that?”

Shit, he was wearing his expression on his face again. Shaking it off, he shrugged. “Nothing, just sounds like you two are getting along.” More than getting along.

“I haven’t seen you parading yourself in front of your window, as of late.” The assassin’s smile returned, and he held out his hand for one of Jack’s crows. With a small nudge from Jack, Mulder jumped to Damien’s hand, and the man fed the crow some of Jack’s oats. Good training, for Mulder and Scully to be comfortable with other Invictus. “Could it be you’re hesitant to engage in your typical sexual endeavors, if you like this man?”

“I gave my ghouls a break, Damien, nothing more. I’m too god damn old to be going one-on-one with any man, or woman.” She sat down beside him on the roof edge, shrugged, and pulled out her phone. Checking messages or news updates, no doubt. But the tiny

lip twitches, and quick glances of her eyes in Damien's direction, gave her away. "And besides, aren't you interested in Fiona? I know she likes Eric. And I know firsthand she's a firecracker."

They didn't need Jessy's words to prove that, not with the unusual sex spirit's words still clear in their minds. It was clear in Jack's mind anyway; no doubt it was for Damien too. The man looked down, tiny frown on his lips as he offered Mulder some more of his oats.

"You know I'm a man of the cloth, in a way, Jessy?"

"You didn't take a vow of celibacy." She shrugged, reached out, and offered Mulder some rubs of his breast feathers, before rubbing the back of his head. Scully, envious, pecked at Jack's hand, and bit him a little too, hard enough to earn an ouch, before he rolled his eyes and began to scratch her, as well.

"Can we talk about something other than sex?" Damien said.

"Can we?" Shrugging, Jack set Scully back on his shoulder, and Mulder flew over to join her, opposite shoulder. It earned a smile from him, when his crows willingly came to him. Animalism had been the tool to establish their first link, but since then, he only used it for communication. The crows came to him on their own, happy to help in exchange for food and attention. "It's Slut City, right? Sex kind of sneaks its way into everything we do."

The assassin glared at him, and Jack had to do his best to not grin like a giant jackass. The Julias grin, the grin the man gave whenever he let a conversation prove him right. Dance, puppets, dance.

"Unless the hunters hire a prostitute," Damien said, "and that somehow becomes a lead for us, I don't see it helping us in our main objective."

“All work and no play makes Damien a dull boy,” Jessy said. Heh, nice dodge on the Jack name in the original quote. “Much as I’m all for focusing on the job, because the job currently involves saving our asses from getting murdered, I do think we should always take time to enjoy our second lives, Damien.”

“I—”

“And hey, I know you’re a priest boy, but you didn’t take a vow of celibacy, and far as I know, your religion believes in embracing being a monster, right? Scare people into the awaiting arms of God, or whatever. Well, Fiona’s a monster. Should be fine to fuck her silly, right?”

“ ... I—”

“And yeah, I know, fucking a monster doesn’t really help in your religious goals, but maybe if you learned to relax a bit, you might recruit more followers. I mean, how many have joined your church since the Prince let you start practicing again.”

Ok, maybe it wasn’t a good idea to tease Jessy; she didn’t take it very well. Girl played dirty.

“I have yet to tell others the church is open. And the great cathedral is Maria’s home; I must contend with that barrier, that the place I will give my sermons is the place one of the more terrifying Kindred sleeps.”

Good to know it wasn’t just Jack that was scared of Maria. He knew that already, but hearing it confirmed, especially by one of the few ancilla Kindred of Dolareido, was reassuring.

“Mulder and Scully reported seeing a woman that fit Azamel’s guess as the shaman’s description,” Jack said. “But I’m sure a lot of women fit that description, in Dolareido.”

“Better than nothing.” Jessy took some oats from Damien, offered her hand, and the two birds pecked from it for a moment. “That ritual must have been a terrifying sight.”

“Yeah, that’s putting it lightly.”

“Nice of the sheriff to share the info. Good to have friends on the inside.”

No way was the sheriff his friend. He doubted anyone could be, considering the man might as well have been made of stone, or ice, or both. But, the first night Jack slept with Antoinette, on the journey down the tower, he still remembered what Daniel had said to him: ‘Be kind to her, young Kindred. She is more fragile than you know.’ The words were carved into his brain, never to be forgotten. But if they were true was another question, because, yeah, man was stone, and probably thought everyone was fragile. If that was the reason Daniel was helping Jack more directly, to keep Antoinette happy, well, he was cool to roll with that.

Would Antoinette be able to handle Jack dying, was not a question he wanted to think about, and probably part of why Daniel was helping him.

“It is,” he said at last. “I’m pretty sure I’m not the focus of Daniel’s efforts, but, yeah, nice of him to share. He’s going to keep looking, and so’s Natasha, for more leads linked to the ritual. Best we can guess is it was for information, and now we know it probably has something to do with spirits, and Black Blood. Why this shaman working with the hunters needs to ... do those things, with the pictures and the sacrifice and ... I don’t know. And Azamel said the shaman has done this ritual in the past, in different cities. Is Black Blood elsewhere? I doubt it; seems localized to Dolareido. The red wraiths seem involved, so maybe they’re elsewhere? Or ... or did someone come to Dolareido with the shaman?”

“That’s the conclusion I would come to,” Damien said.  
“Something must have come to Dolareido with this shaman woman, if Azamel was telling us the truth.”

And she probably was. The more they found out about the shit happening in Dolareido’s shadows, and the Shadow World evidently, the more it seemed like Jacob had been working with other-worldly entities for some time. The shaman, whoever she was, brought more insanity into Dolareido.

City Night had mentioned other names. Red Tide, and Street-Tail King? Maybe one of them.

“ ... do you guys ever miss when things were normal?” he said.  
“What was it, something like a year ago, I walked into Bloodlust, scared as all fucking shit because I ran into the Prince. She made me sit down with her, and flirted with me, just to watch me squirm. I remember before that, going to the Invictus ball, and being scared shitless of talking with Viktor. I managed, but it was rough. Not long before that, I’d awoken from a frenzy, and found I was on a rooftop, with the corpse of a woman ... Mrs. Pavala.” Pavala. Christ, that name grabbed his mind, dragged it through the blood-soaked mud, and made sure to sink some sharp rocks into his soul before he managed to pull it back out. “Honestly? I’d take all that shit, over this. I’ll take dealing with scary vampires, and still struggling to stomach drinking blood, over fucking Cthulhu and kin nesting in our city.”

The Gangrel raised a brow, and leaned in a bit toward him. “That include the werewolves and monsters? Figured, since you keep getting drawn into this intermediary role, you have to have a soft spot for them.”

He threw his hands up. “I do! Even Avery, a hard bitch, and Azamel, a colossal bitch.” Damien raised a brow, and Jessy laughed. Yeah, calling them both bitches was uncalled for; and it didn’t really



fit his normal dialect. Bit of Jessy coming out of him, there. “Because they’re still people, deep inside. We are, they are, we still got a fucking soul inside our guts, and it means something. We can talk, we can communicate, we can settle our differences with fucking words!” He got up, and started to pace. Just like on the phone, something about focusing on the words forced him to get up onto his feet, and move, so he could feel the feedback of solid mass beneath him. “Sometimes I feel like I’m the only person on this god damn planet who remembers we can always communicate, even with people we’d consider to be monsters. People, they’re people. Maybe not normal humans anymore, but still people, capable of fucking reason, and logic, and if we can just find a way to communicate, we can make progress!” Mulder and Scully stayed with him, and for a brief moment, Jack had to wonder what the image of him was like, pacing around with philosophical thoughts falling out of him while two crows adorned his shoulders.

“ ... and Angela?” Jessy said.

Fuck. Leave it to the damn Gangrel to shatter his dreams with a fucking sledgehammer, as if they were nothing but thin glass. The mention of that fucking abomination of a human brought him to a standstill. He lowered his head, clenched his fists at his sides, and bit down on his teeth until he heard his jaw crack. The name was fire on his spine.

“I’d love to be able to talk to her, and get through to her. But I looked that psycho in the fucking eyes, Jessy. I’d have an easier time breaking through an arctic glacier with my god damn face.”

She laughed. Hell, Damien smiled, too, but it was short lived humor. The silence that followed was painful, and Jack sat down again before he resumed feeding his crows.

“She sounds like Lucas,” Damien said. “A true believer in her cause, and also a twisted soul. There will be no communicating with

her, and if the opportunity presents itself, she will delight in torturing those that get in her way.”

Jessy nodded. “A zealot. You won’t be able to talk her out of anything, based on how you described her. Was your report objective?”

“Yes,” Jack said, sighing as weight started to pull him down. Angela was the perfect counter example to his views. “It was. We’re all in agreement here, there’s no talking with her or Jeremiah. The other hunters though? They came here with those two, and I bet we could come to some kind of common ground.”

Or could they? He remembered the words in his mind, clear as water, when he found the strength to break free of his capture. Hunters, kine, were lower on the food chain. There’d never be peace, not even a truce, as long as that continued, as long as Kindred required kine blood to survive. No one would ever accept being lower on the food chain, when they had every reason not to be, too. Billions of humans with shotguns and flamethrowers would be more than a match for all the Kindred of the world.

He had to wonder if hunters tried to prove their existence before, and just gave up. The media could spin anything to mean anything, and vampires had their fingers in that world, deep in it. Political matters, vampires were a part of it. Matters of global economy and trade, vampires were a part of it. Matters of religion, well, he was sure vampires were involved somehow. They were the puppet masters, and they were everywhere. It was probably true that hunters used to try and prove the existence of vampires, and stopped trying when vampires came to positions of power in the human world. Or maybe it’d always been that way, and hunters were screwed from the start. Perhaps with the dawn of the cyberpunk era, the Masquerade would prove too fragile to survive, Antoinette’s fears come true.

Capturing a young vampire like him wasn't too difficult, was the issue. He, and others his age, were Masquerade liabilities. He doubted a Begotten or Uratha could be captured, but young Kindred were a different matter. He'd hate to be the reason the Masquerade was violated to the point it led to a global extermination of his race. That would majorly suck.

"What are you going to do about Terra Den?" Damien asked.

The Gangrel shrugged, went back to the telescope, and began another scan of the buildings. "I'll pay them a visit, in a more official capacity. Michael will come with me, maybe Julias too, and we can scare them straight. As for Montoya, I'm sure that snake is trying to push things along in underhanded ways. We should pay him a personal visit." She stopped turning, and whistled before licking her lips. Probably some people having sex in clear view.

Jack raised a brow. "We?"

"Sure. He's yet to meet the rest of the new Right Hands of the Invictus. Should be interesting."

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~~Antoinette~~

"You were correct, Daniel."

She stood upon a rooftop with Daniel at her side. The man was a master of the cloak of night, and had no trouble keeping them hidden within the invisible veil. Anyone glancing their way would find their eyes sliding off of them, and their simple minds refusing to process the two people standing in the open.

She envied the Mekhet and Nosferatu clans their skill at the discipline. It was a skill she could use, of course, but she would never come to the same mastery as the other clans.

The two of them stood in the moonlight, and watched one of the outdoor restaurants. A quaint and homely little place, bordering between the Carthian and Invictus half of South Side. Less kine in suits or fancy dresses, and more people in jeans in worn t-shirts. It was an appealing distinction Antoinette had long realized, that people with less money walked differently, and talked differently, than those that had money to waste. They were all liars, as was the norm; only her little Ventrue was an exception to that painful truth of reality. But at least those with less money did not wear their lies on their clothes or in their gait.

With a sigh, she squinted her eyes, folded her arms across her chest, and stared at Avery. The small woman sat in the outdoor seating of the archaic-but-charming restaurant, eating what looked to be a blue-rare steak. A man sat with her, someone of similar age to her, at least in physical appearance. Avery was far older than she looked, perhaps a hundred years old, and the man she ate with was likely fifty. But the man carried his age well, with his long salt-and-pepper hair coming in waves to match his finely groomed, trimmed beard. He may have only been wearing jeans and a simple red shirt, but it was plain to see the man took good care of himself. He was likely built well under the clothes too; she expected no less from any Uratha, than for their sexual partners to share in a desire for fitness. Vigor was to be expected from werewolves, after all.

Had the old wolf found a lover? The signs of attraction were blatant, and so too were the signs of familiarity. The two chuckled as they shared small talk, words Antoinette could not hear from her perch, and they shared joyful glances too. Perhaps more telling was when the unknown man touched Avery's hand, and she didn't pull away.

The man was eating spaghetti. Antoinette doubted Avery could stomach such a meal.

"Reports say Avery visited Eric yesterday morning," Daniel said.

“Do we know the outcome of that conversation?”

“No, but I’m sure she will tell Terry soon, and we will learn after that.”

She nodded and sighed. Having Terry as an intermediary was proving fruitful; it lessened tension with the wolves and monsters, to the point Antoinette felt they were not both on a collision course with the Kindred of the city. But it did create a delay between events, and Antoinette learning of the details. In the past, she would walk down to Avery at this very moment, and ask to know what had happened, which would no doubt lead to an argument. It was better this way, frustrating as it was.

The two stood and watched, as Avery giggled. To see the small woman of steel giggle was interesting, and telling. Perhaps there were more feelings for this simple human than lust. Coming to Dolareido, meeting a man, and becoming involved in a sexual relationship was expected of anyone that came to her city, but a romantic one was a different matter entirely. And for one in Avery’s position, a weakness. Defeating others through indirect means was a Kindred’s greatest skill, after all, and any Kindred in Dolareido would be able to use this man against Avery. A simple matter, to dominate his mind or turn him into a slave with majesty. A simpler matter, to feed him some blood, and render him an infatuated thrall.

Such acts were cruel, malicious, and a part of the Danse Macabre. Play the game, or be destroyed by those willing to stoop to its disgusting lows.

She smirked as she watched the smile on Avery’s face, but despite herself, she could feel the smirk begin to soften. To smile in such a way, a genuine way, where the muscles of the face include the eyes, and the whole of the body leans into it, was a powerful thing. Melts the heart. It made her long for Jack’s touch, to feel his body hugged

tight to hers, feel his lips upon her breasts, find his gaze, and stare into his soul.

Annie, grow up. You are not a child, and your relationship with Jack is already many months in age. It is stable. You are a fool to let your mind melt with a simple thought of the boy. You can melt all you want when he is in your arms, but between such times, you must harden yourself. Her city was in increasing disarray, and it was time to take a more active role in settling it.

“I wonder,” she said, “about the things my love shared with me last night. There is a connection between Black Blood, these red wraiths, the hunters, and Jacob.” And she most sincerely did not want a connection of anything to Jacob. Why could her old friend not simply let things be, and enjoy his elder years? The damn fool was worse than any dragon, with his unending need for information and power.

Daniel nodded, and adjusted his glasses. “And Azamel’s warning?”

“Oui. But, whether Jacob is connected directly or indirectly, to such a grand threat, is an important distinction.”

“You could ask him.”

She chuckled, and combed some of her hair over her shoulder in front of her with her fingers. “Do you think he would tell us the truth? I am sure you offended him when he found you in his ritual chamber.”

“Our ritual chamber. It is our city, after all.”

So it was, officially. Jacob never truly agreed to that rule, that Antoinette was the Prince. In Jacob’s mind, he was equal party to ruling the city, and he simply chose to leave affairs in her control. If he decided to contest her on that, the fallout would be disastrous.

But, Jacob was her friend. A strange friend, but a friend, and his counsel was both appreciated and wanted. The issue was, how with every new discovery, every new piece of information that came into her possession, she found more reasons to not trust the man. Now, he was teaching his new students the power of crúac, according to Daniel, and likely involving Black Blood.

She would have to speak to the spirit, and soon.

And then, of course, there was the squid-like spirit she had summoned, that had told them of Maria. A strange coincidence, for the necklace to summon such an entity with its resonance. Talk of Maria could have been a mislead, a goose chase, but she doubted it. Even if the necklace had been tampered with, and the results of the summoning a consequence of that tampering, it did not cast much doubt onto the spirit's words. Spirits were strange entities, and the dance of lies was not one she suspected they usually joined in.

Oh Maria. Please, do not destroy yourself in some insane pursuit of resurrecting your fallen lover. If Antoinette had to kill Lucas herself this time, it would be horrible for the Nosferatu, a blow to her soul twice. The Prince doubted any vampire of serious age could survive such pain doubled, in so short a span of time.

In addition, the concept of resurrection itself was foolhardy, insane, and liable to lead to the deaths of others. An old tale, and one that always ended in disaster. What dark corners of the world would someone obsessed with bringing back their lover go to, was forever on her mind. She half expected Jacob had walking, talking, fake Minervas in a basement, made of body parts the man had collected from graveyards. The two elder Nosferatu were at the top of the list, for such audacious courses of action.

If the spirit's words were not about a futile attempt at resurrection by Maria, but rather, Maria's attempts to determine the details about Lucas's death, then that was less a threat to the city,

and more a threat to Terry. The details were unneeded, as Maria had no reason to not believe Damien's explanation: Lucas died at Antoinette's hand, and that was that. But Antoinette could not blame the woman for seeking more details about her love's death, either. If Jack had died, Antoinette would not rest until she had enough evidence to recreate the scene in its entirety, with exact detail.

If Maria was the cause of Azamel's warning, Antoinette would have no choice but to kill her, once she could confirm Maria was engaged in dangerous activity that risked the city. She did not want to do that. As much as Maria was a cold, harsh woman, she was one of the wiser Kindred Antoinette had dealt with.

"Thinking?" Daniel said.

"Oui, mon ami." She smiled at him, and motioned for him to follow. A small amount of strength was all it took, to send both Kindred flying through the air, back toward her tower. Once they were a few blocks away, they dropped down into the street, while Daniel's cloak of night kept their descent hidden and casual.

"While Jacob flirts with the other side," he said, "and perhaps, so does Maria, we ignore Michael and Garry. Those two dogs are bound to bite each other, sooner or later."

She sighed, and turned to watch the crowd they walked past. As they headed deeper into South Side, the dresses and suits returned, the lies that people wore on their skin, perpetuated with money, money, and more money. Prime real estate for any Kindred looking to trick, exploit, or flirt their way to a Kiss. Of no concern to any Daeva with some years under their belt, though, who naturally gravitated toward owning several ghouls, and only drinking from them.

She smirked at no one, and raised a hand to touch her lips. Her mind truly was wandering, drifting, as of late. The squabbles of



Michael and Garry were low on her list of worries, but that was because her mind refused to focus on the real threats, instead, preoccupied with the invisible ones looming overhead.

“You do not believe Julias will keep the Carthians and Invictus from conflict?” she said.

“I don’t. I admire the man’s conviction, in dealing with the hunters, and the Begotten, and the Uratha, but he forgets the troubles at his feet.”

Ah yes, another thing she had in common with the man.

“I wonder,” she said, “if Garry will take advantage of the rising stress, and create a scenario the Invictus will lose territory or power in. Avery is his friend, to some extent or another, and if Maria is truly entering dark waters, then Avery and Garry may both have reason to confront her. And if they confront her...”

“Then the Carthians and Invictus might have a reason to restart the violence of old,” Daniel said. If that happened, she would be forced to bring the two covenants in line; or worse, side with one.

“What has Michael done of late?”

“Some Invictus were seen in a Carthian bar, getting friendly with kine.”

A precursor to feeding. It was an easy way to test the waters, to show up at a location, and through simple flirtation, see what kine responded. And, to see what Kindred responded. If no Kindred did respond, the Kindred encroaching on territory would feel emboldened to continue violating territory, and perhaps begin discreet feeding. Like cliques in high school, poking each other, or the machinations of warring Greek states, testing each other’s borders. Juvenile idiocy that neither kingdoms nor people never dropped as they aged. Infuriating.

“As much as I would like to scare the children straight, please continue your search for the threat Azamel has warned us of. I will mention this in the next Primogen meeting. If something happens between the Carthians and Invictus, then I will insure they comply with my wishes from now on.” Even if it meant smashing their faces in with her fists until they both agreed to be good little children.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve meddled in their affairs directly. You sure you don’t want to do this a little more hands off, like with Viktor and Tony?”

“Perhaps. Not Michael, or Garry, or Avery will handle their situations with delicacy. Jacob and Maria will, but I do not trust the outcomes they will create. I will have to predict their motivations, and set them on a path of failure.”

“You could let them be.”

She stopped, and looked at the man. His face was still as always, almost cold, and he adjusted his glasses as he stopped as well. To let them fight would mean damage to her city, and moreover, a threat to her little Ventrue. But at the same time, it could be a way for the two covenants to settle differences; violence, despite conventional wisdom, was a profoundly effective means of settling many problems.

But it was not without its problems. The two covenants might find themselves in situations where they could damage the Masquerade, on a whim of self preservation. Or they could damage her city, in order to gain advantage in their idiotic cold war with each other, elevating it from cold into something far worse. In the modern age, that meant a combination of both cyber warfare, and tools of war beyond the easily controlled. Flamethrowers were easy to construct from any kitchen in the new world, and not her primary concern. She was far more concerned about the explosives that

could be attached to the underside of vehicles, or new age sniper rifles that could be fired from miles away.

She longed for the days of old, where the worst she had to worry about was a musket, and maybe a torch. Back in such a time, she, Jacob, Daniel, Tony, and Viktor had found this quaint little village, and had had no trouble setting up their plans. She broke the minds of the men and women with silk words and the majesty discipline, turned their leaders into dotting servants, and created safety for her fellow Kindred. They built their underground tunnels over years, and created a quiet utopia where their different covenants could co-exist. When Carthians came, she accepted them. When the blasted Lancea et Sanctum came, she accepted them. It was a utopia for all.

Sometimes, she wondered if that was a mistake.

“You’re going to think yourself into a hole,” Daniel said.

“Oui, mon ami, c’est vrai. But it has served me well. These are ... difficult problems, not only in complexity, but philosophically.”

The sheriff shrugged, and they continued along. Just two people, drifting amongst the growing crowd of citizens walking the sidewalks, with cars driving by at slow speeds, and with bright lights from casinos and clubs lighting their way.

“You and I could wipe the Carthians out,” he said. “Only Garry would pose a challenge, and I think I could take him out before he realized anything was up.”

“Do not hurt the man, Daniel.”

“What about Michael MacDonald? He’s just as much a mindless mutt as Garry. They’ll be at each other’s throats, despite all these problems falling down on us.”

“If we cannot keep the peace between the covenants, then we ... then I will have failed in my greater mission, old friend.”

The sheriff frowned. For a stone statue to frown was as powerful as a sword cutting through metal. “Or they’ll have failed you.”

“That ... may be a detail of truth, but one that reality does not care about. It is on me to insure these fools cooperate, and I will see it done, one way or another.”

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~~Julias~~

“I killed a child.”

The two women stared at him, and gulped. As Kindred got older, they dropped that reflex; not so with Jen and Triss, not yet. The two women were young enough to gulp, and stare, and look terribly uncomfortable by the reality of what he’d just said.

Two secrets down, three to go.

“H-How did that happen?” Triss said.

The three of them were in his mansion again, but not the negotiation room. This time, the descent into pain and misery would be had in one of the living rooms, where softness could do its job, and lighten blows. His thralls had changed the curtains, moved the couches, changed some of the chairs, so now the room was gold and white motif. He sat on the couch with Jen, and Triss sat in a chair backward, facing him, only a few feet away.

“I was young, and trapped in a cellar. I had to hide from the sunlight, and I’d suffered serious wounds in a fight with the Carthians.” The memory ran up his spine, like fire with a vengeance. It wasn’t Garry’s fault, but the man hadn’t done much to prevent the incident either. “Healing during the day drained me to almost

nothing. When the sun set, a kid came down into the cellar around the time I woke up. I went into a frenzy, and jumped him.” Eyes. He could remember the eyes, more than anything. Shock, fear, rising into a climax of terror, as he sank his fangs into his young neck.

Fiddling with her crow necklace, Triss looked down, and stared at it. Easier than looking at him, he supposed.

“Never killed a kid,” she said.

“Good.” He leaned forward, and let his arms dangle over his knees. “Took years to let that go. And I never really can.”

Jen tilted her head to the side. “Why?” She was wearing something more conservative than usual, a suit with a skirt, but with the blouse fully done up. The body language was different, too. She didn’t lean forward as much, no longer showing off her impressive bosom. And her eyes held a little anxiety to them, as if something had spooked her. Something probably had. Maybe Julias’s words, but he suspected it was more so something Jacob had done.

“Sometimes the memories start to cut, especially when I get very hungry. State-dependent memory, maybe? Probably not, being undead and all, but...” He shook his head, and looked down. Everyone was looking down at this point, and it made it easier to let the words resonate. But he didn’t let the silence sit for any longer than a minute. Any longer and the air would turn to ice. “It was a very long time ago, and, time heals all wounds, right?”

He chuckled. They didn’t.

“I hope it does,” Jen said. “So, um, my turn?”

The Nosferatu shrugged. “We really don’t have to do this, you know.”

“No no, this is good.” Sighing, Jen reached out, and pat him on the leg. “I’ve killed a youngling as well. But, not a human. A Kindred.”

Well, shit. “When did that happen?”

“Five years ago. A Kindred, not even a year embraced, had recently come to Dolareido, alone. They were testing the waters, learning about the covenant balance here.” She put a fingernail to her lip, and nibbled on it. “She cornered me. She had a problem with the Circle, and thought she saw an opportunity to ... impress the other covenants, I guess, if she took me out.” Shivering, she got up, and started to pace the room. “It got ugly. By the end of it, we were tearing chunks out of each other with our fingers. It ... it lasted a while, and killing her was ... was brutal.”

Triss got up, got behind Jen, and hugged her, setting her chin on the woman’s shoulder and looking at Julias. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

“No, it doesn’t. It stuck with me for a while. I can still remember her begging for her life, when I finally got the upper hand. But, I could tell she was just looking to make me hesitate, find an opening to take advantage of. I ... bashed her skull in, with a pipe.”

The unfortunate truth about killing a Kindred: it was a messy, brutal affair. They had a nasty habit of surviving ordeals that would kill a kine a hundred times over, as long as their body was mostly intact, and the head was still attached. Jack had gone through such trials, and he’d seen first hand Antoinette being put through much worse, at Damien’s hand. If Jen’s first experience with the amount of punishment a Kindred could take, was bashing in another Kindred’s skull until they were dust, a young Kindred’s too, he could sympathize. That was a painful lesson to learn.

He smiled as he watched Triss. The girl was hugging Jen from behind in a protective manner, chin still on her shoulder, and the

side of her jaw rubbing into Jen's neck. It was terribly cute, and Julias doubted Triss realized she was doing it.

The two of them looked to him again. Yeah, his turn. Secret number three.

"I hate the Begotten." Just tear it off, like a band-aid. A giant band-aid stitched into the skin.

"You do?" they said.

"Yeah. I can't shake it, I can't get rid of it, and Jack called me out on it. The Invictus are treating the Begotten more harshly than the Uratha, and not without just cause. But it's more than that, and the more I analyze it, the more I have to agree with Jack on this, that I'm being unfair. I really can't stand the Begotten."

Triss shook her head, pulling it back from Jen's a bit. "But ... but you're Julias. Silver lining guy, right? Superman. You look for the good in everything."

"Sorry." He leaned back on the couch, and offered his best apologetic shrug. Hollow. Sighing, he ran his fingers back through his hair, and let the motion roll his head back until it rested against the back of the couch. He could stare at the ceiling, that was less painful than the look they were giving him. 'What, Julias, hating someone?' Yeah.

Still a long way's away from Viktor's capacity for hatred and malice, but the path was there, in front of him. He didn't like it.

"Why?" Triss said.

"Because they're the worst of what we paranormals have to offer. They're devoted to one thing and one thing only: their hunger. Azamel will destroy this city if she had to pick between it and her hunger. Much as everyone likes that Fiona girl, I'm sure she would,

too. And Athalia, her inability to manage who she is, her hunger, led to this situation with Angela; a child abandoned by her mother, after exposing her to the darkest pits of horror this world has to offer.” He forced his head back up straight, and made eye contact with the two women. “We struggle, and we struggle, to stay above our blood lust, and to be better than the mindless, hungry predators these hunters think we are. We’re nothing but a plague of leeches to them, feeding on humans, and ... and we’re better than that. But no one will ever believe that with creatures like the Begotten showing just how bad paranormals can be.”

It was their turn to sigh. The secret about killing a child was easier to let go; it wasn’t his fault, it was a vampire’s instinct to frenzy when starving. But the comparison to a monster was there in that frenzied action, and his hatred for the monsters made the hatred for himself, and his inability to stop himself from killing a child, poignant. He couldn’t escape the self loathing, no matter how much he analyzed it, defined it, or intellectualized it. Such a horrible cliché.

What was the expression? Nothing’s a cliché when it’s happening to you.

“Superman is human after all.” Triss let go of Jen, stepped around her, and sat down on his lap, legs to the side. “Well, vampire. You know what I mean.”

“Thought you’d be upset with me,” he said. “I know you’re friends Fiona.”

She shrugged, leaned in, and rested her forehead against the side of his neck. “You make good points, and I’m sure a lot of Kindred feel the same way. I don’t, and I know Jack doesn’t, but we’ve been seeing them from a different side. So I get it, but maybe you should talk to Jack about it? He’ll be more upset than we. And maybe talk to Fiona too, so she can show you it’s not all bad.”



Nodding, Jen came over and sat down on the couch as well. “I wouldn’t feel too guilty about that secret, if I were you. Legitimate concerns.”

Well, color him surprised. It wasn’t in his nature anymore, to be hateful, to hold grudges, or to discriminate. He forever strived to accept others for who and what they were. Kind of had to, to not drag himself down a path that led many Kindred to suicide. But, he just couldn’t do that with the Begotten. As per usual, he was being over-dramatic, and turning his thoughts into comically sad compulsions.

Maybe Triss was right, and he should change the paintings he kept around the mansion. They were all dark, melancholy, somber, or otherwise depressing to most people. He thought they were peaceful or interesting; maybe he kept them around because they were familiar and comfortable to his psyche, instead.

“Three down, each,” Triss said. “I think that’s enough confessions for today.” Shivering, she raised a leg, and gave Jen a kick in the shin, earning a yelp from the Ventrue. “This is your fault! You two stubborn fucking oxes have to make a god damn game out of ... of private shit! You know this is the sort of stuff people slowly learn about each other through intimacy, not fucking poker?”

Jen and Julias shrugged, in unison. “Fair game.”

“Yeah, uh huh, sure it was. Fuckers.” Rolling her eyes, Triss set her forehead back to his neck, and sank against him. He reciprocated, setting his hands around her, one for the small of her back, while the other sat along her lap. “Jacob got into a fight with the werewolves, last night. Art and Matt.”

“He did?” Shit, of all the trouble he needed growing in Dolareido, Jacob’s tense truce with the werewolves was not something he wanted ruined. “How’d that go?”

“They lived, and walked away,” Jen said. “Tash stopped them. It was very cute, and endearing, seeing that little girl hold off two Uratha. Transformed Uratha, I might add. Very ... sexy.”

Julias laughed, but he noticed the glint in Triss’s eye. “You two got a thing for wolves?” he said, smiling.

Busted. The two girls looked at each other, and then away in random directions. Jen whistled, and Triss tried. The poor crocodile woman couldn’t whistle worth a damn though, and Julias laughed again as he stroked the small of her back.

“I don’t know about Beatrice,” Jen said, “but, seeing how colossal those beasts are, and knowing some men are inside those giants of muscle and animal aggression? Arg, so tasty.”

“I dunno.” The Nos got up, and slid into the groove between Julias and Jen on the couch, so she was squished between them. “I mean, I looked, and I didn’t see any place for a penis. Just fur, and a pelvis groove.”

Julias choked on a laugh, and buried his face in his palm. “Maybe I should ask Jack to ask Avery if Uratha are capable of sex when transformed.”

“Could always ask Natasha, too.” Jen winked at him, and reached out for the Kindred between them. Triss chuckled, and leaned back, giving clear access for Jen to start feeling her body. Triss was in her usual tank top and jeans, so Jen had an easy time lifting up the shirt to expose Triss’s breasts.

Triss didn’t stop her. If anything, she was hoping Jen would do that; might have felt guilty about winning the poker game and leading to this painful result, and was using sex to make him feel better. He’d be lying if he said it didn’t work, and Triss knew it. Hell, it was a part of how they met. She knew he was a playboy, and she wanted him to take her on a date.

Best thing to ever happen to him.

He turned on the couch a bit, and set his elbow against its back, so he could hold his head up against a fist while he watched. “I suppose this is a metaphor for a very strong positive to being a Kindred.”

“What positive is that?” Triss said as she slipped off the tank top. God damn, that body, the pierced nipples, the tattoos, the lean physique and defined musculature. His other hand reached out, and found her abs. Fingers traced along the muscles, before sliding down under the waistband, down her smooth mons, and to the piercing over her clitoris. She blushed life, silent permission for him to continue.

The crow skull necklace dangled between her breasts, and he found his eyes locked onto it. Something about it, about bone, about a dark pagan symbol sitting against her bare skin on her beautiful body, was delicious spice to her aesthetic. And when contrasted against her tattoos, it fit so damn well.

She moaned, and turned to face him. A girl with tattoos and piercings, topless, in jeans and combat boots, was damn hot. She knew it, too. And ever since she'd gotten over her hangups about her crocodile mouth, she embraced her sexuality with reckless abandon. At this point, Julias was along for the ride; and so was Jen. Good. He liked her, the sneaky devil.

Triss turned completely toward him, picked her legs up, and set them on his lap, as she leaned back onto Jen's lap. Her legs on his lap, her torso on Jen's lap, and her butt on the couch, Triss reached down, undid the button and fly of her jeans, and wriggled them off. Laughing, Julias helped, and grinned down at the woman sitting and lying between the two Ventrue. Soon, the only piece of clothing she was still wearing, was an itty bitty string thong, black.

“The positive thing,” he said, “is, we can always let time do its thing, and heal wounds.” There was no denying his past was some seriously traumatic stuff, filled with events that would have left any normal person buried in guilt or PTSD. Maybe it didn’t heal the wounds, but time blurred the details, and dulled the edge of the painful memories. Time let him get over his shit, and enjoy the here and now; specifically, the nearly naked, beautiful woman half on his lap, and the still-dressed woman across the couch.

“I hope that’s true,” Jen said. Her hand near Triss’s head began to play and tug on the woman’s piercings, while the other reached across her torso, down between her breasts, and followed the snake tattoo down to her crotch. The thong was small enough, it left her smooth mons almost completely exposed, displaying how the snake tail reached all the way to almost touch Triss’s clit hood. Jen slid her fingers under the thong, and began to caress the woman’s clitoris, as her eyes raised to Julias.

Those eyes. He knew those eyes. Those were his eyes. Smart, devious, and proud. As the woman began to massage Triss’s clitoris, and earn some moans from the deadly woman between them, it was him Jen was looking at. He returned her gaze, doing his best to read her. The two of them were sharing deadly secrets with each other, to get to know each other better; like wolves exposing their necks to each other. And now, she was preparing Triss like she was preparing a steak. Or like a wolf, offering a meal to the pack leader. Offering her to him, if he was reading her right.

He kind of liked that.

Triss nodded, teeth exposed from the smile Jen’s massaging was earning. “Me too. Cause, I mean, I look at Jacob, and he’s still torn up about Minerva. He hides it well, but yeah, it’s in there, digging at him.”

Nodding as well, Jen slid out of her suit jacket, and started undoing the buttons of her shirt with her left hand, all while Triss still had her head in her lap, and all while Jen continued to pamper her clit with her right hand. The Nosferatu moaned, closed her eyes, let her head fall relaxed on Jen's lap, and set her hands onto the couch. Spoiled princess was going to lie there, do absolutely nothing, and be coddled.

Or, so he thought. But Jen pushed Triss back up into her seating position, and stood up. Both Julias and Triss raised a brow, and watched Jen, as she stepped around and stood in front of him.

"I think I can fit in another secret," she said. And, winking at the two of them, she started to undo her skirt.

He shook his head. "You don't have to, really. I mean we—"

"This is important, in a way." Grinning all the more, she inched down the skirt, until the creature was standing in only her underwear. Black, and beautiful. Not underwear to wear for comfort, but something to wear to drive someone crazy when exposed. But, it was a bra, more than she usually wore underneath the shirt. And damn, it made her large breasts look all the more amazing. Even Triss whistled at the sight of them, or tried to, failing horribly.

"Important?" Triss said. Before Julias could say more, Triss reached across his lap, and started undoing his clothes. Quite the reversal, Triss being the target of attention, and now suddenly it was him, all at Jen's whim. Girl would probably take charge in every bout, if he let her. Maybe he should do that more often.

"Mmhmm." Jen came in closer, and got down on her knees. "I haven't been sleeping with my ghouls, as Triss knows. I said it was because, why would I bother, when I'm getting plenty here?" Between his knees, she reached out for the waist of his pants, and tugged on them. "But, actually, I'm not sleeping with them, because

I don't want to ruin this. I've gotten really comfortable with this arrangement, and dare I say it, happy." With Triss's help, the two girls worked to get his pants and underwear off, before Triss got to work on his shirt.

"Trying to worm your way into my man's heart, too?" Rolling her eyes, Triss helped slide his jacket off, and then his shirt. Naked, the couch fabric was soft and inviting against his bare skin. Not as inviting as the two women though, especially with their underwear on display. Triss in a thong, though predictable, was divine. And Jen wearing a full lingerie ensemble, was like watching a runway model getting down on her knees. It hypnotized him, and Triss too.

"A little. This ... isn't a fling, is what I'm saying. I don't want it to be." The Ventrue smiled up at him, eyebrows sinking as the weight of her words fell on the room. Once Julias blushed life, her eyebrows raised again, excitement filling her as she climbed in closer, and closer, until her breasts were pressing to his thighs.

A single glance down at the woman's large breasts, wrapped in the black bra, pressing against his thighs and shaft, was more than enough to send fake blood pumping into his length.

Maybe it was because they were sharing secrets, exposing their necks to each other, that Julias felt touched. Or it was the extreme arousal. Or it was the way Triss hugged his closer arm, and held it to her body, while she looked down at Jen with what looked like intrigue, and perhaps a little empathy. Jen glanced up at her too, and the two of them sighed with some gravity in their voice.

Something was happening between the two women, in their personal lives, that was increasing their friendship. The glances shared were similar to the glances Julias shared with Jack, when they both remembered something, or traded info without using words. He would have been jealous, if it weren't for how both their

gazes drifted back to his own, and both girls offered him melting eyes.

“I wouldn’t want it to be a fling,” he said. “You’re good for Triss. And ... hell, you’re good for me.”

Both women let out long, girly sighs this time, straight out of a bad romance movie. But they laughed it off, and earned some chuckles from him too. Once the dreamy, cheesy, but sincere noises had passed, Jen reached out, took his cock, and guided it to her lips.

“No wonder guys like blowjobs so much,” Triss said. With a small mewl, she hugged into his side nice and tight, pressing her breasts and their hardened nipples, nipple piercings too, into his arm. He lifted it, and she laughed before slipping under the arm, so she could press herself into the side of his chest instead, all while looking down at the woman between his legs. “I mean, god damn, look at that slut and her slut eyes, gazing up at you from between your legs.”

He did at that. Jen stared up at him, raven hair coming down her shoulders, matching the mascara and eyeliner she used to make her eyes pop. Blowjob eyes, Triss called them. Jen didn’t disagree. Moaning onto his cock, she buried the swollen glans of it with her lips, coating it in fake saliva. Her hands reached out, and settled onto his outer thighs near his hips. And, despite himself, he set one of his hands on one. Maybe a little too romantic, but Triss didn’t mind, and she joined in, setting her closer hand onto Jen’s hand as well.

“You call me a slut,” Jen said, rolling her eyes. “I think you like sluts, considering how many women Julias had been with when you went on a date with him.”

“Maybe I do.” Laughing, Triss slid her closer hand across his thigh, off of Jen’s hand, and onto the base of his shaft. Her fingers and claws squeezed it, causing it to stir inside Jen’s mouth. Sparks

of pleasure ran down the length, causing Julias's inner muscles to flex; the bliss of the woman's lips and tongue on his glans was extreme. "And, I really like his big dick too."

Jen chuckled, kept her lips on his shaft, and began working her head back and forth enough to drag her lips along the swollen tip. The hot, sensitive skin sent waves of pleasure down the length, each spark enticed and enhanced by Jen's suckling lips and playful tongue. Warm, wet, and delightful, the Ventrue moaned onto his cock with enough deliberate vibration for him to feel the buzz down through its length. Triss took it as an invitation to grow more playful, and she worked her hand up and down his length a little faster, grip tight enough to massage its hard girth.

He could tell they were trying to soothe him, considering how painful his secrets were. He never considered himself to fit the wounded soldier stereotype, but there was definitely something drawing the two women to him. And he'd done enough brooding and self loathing to satisfy a couple lifetimes; no reason to not enjoy himself. Time heals, like he said. Half lie, half truth.

And it was very hard to not enjoy himself right now. He sighed relief, and relaxed back into the couch, as Jen bathed his cock's head with her tongue. Around, and around, she licked the contours, the base edge, and chuckled around it when he let out a small groan. God damn, she knew what she was doing.

He looked over at Triss. She still had her closer hand around his cock, but she'd slowed her movements, distracted by her other hand and how it had reached under her tiny thong. Fingering herself. Her snake eyes were locked onto Jen, her mouth slightly open, and little pants sneaked out of her as she fingered herself faster. As usual, she put him to shame, with how quickly her body lit up, and his eyes drifted down her body to watch her abs crunch as her orgasm approached.



The Nosferatu hugged into his side, and let out a few whimpers, as her juices started to soak her thong. And through it all, she watched Jen, and kept her grip on his cock as she did.

Only when Jen started to slide her mouth down further, did Triss finally move her hand out of the way, setting it on Julias's thigh inside. Triss, shivering in post-orgasm, and Julias, shivering in impending orgasm, both looked on, as Jen worked his length into her mouth. She lowered her chin closer to the couch seat, and kept her eyes looking up to them, to give her mouth and throat a straight line to fit his cock as she eased it into her.

When her lips found the base of his shaft, she shifted around on her knees, got a little more comfortable, and set her hands onto his hips to hold onto him. Her tongue bathed the length of him from underneath, and her muscles gripped and squeezed around every inch, milking at every inch of him. She was an expert.

Triss stared on, locked on, more hypnotized than Julias. And she started masturbating again as well, faster, enough to make Julias's body shake slightly with the impacts of her hand against her insides. And through it all, Jen held onto his waist while she massaged his cock with her lips, tongue, and throat. Her gaze drifted between him and Triss, and she smiled around his girth as Triss's forceful fingering soon had her legs spreading, nudging against the two Ventrue, as she squirted a tiny stream into her thong.

Jen lifted her head, lowered a hand down to grip his cock, and rolled her eyes as she looked at Triss. "Twice already girl, and he hasn't cum once yet."

"Fuck you, this is hot." Triss slid off the thong, and kicked it away, exposing her smooth pussy and the tiny piercing hooked into her clit hood. Trembling, but apparently done for the moment, her other hand took his cock again, and netted with Jen's fingers.

The two of them squeezed and massaged his length, as Jen set her lips back onto his glans, and suckled. Waves of pleasure started up from between Julias's legs, tingling bliss, each earning a flex of his inner muscles, which caused a gush of the warmth to flow up his length, and into Jen's mouth. She moaned onto his cock, on purpose, using her suckling lips and vocal vibrations to fill him with pleasure. He started panting, struggling to handle the stimulation, as the two girls continued to stroke his cock while Jen kissed away each gush of his cum.

Getting milked by two women at once was a very good reason to enjoy the moment.

When only a few drops remained, Jen licked them away, and stood up. Triss and Julias looked up, and watched the beautiful woman slide off her underwear, and climb onto his lap. Triss shifted aside a few inches, to give room for Jen to fit her leg in between them, and the Ventrue took it. Straddling him, Jen reached down, took his still-hard cock, and guided it up to her wet folds.

She winked at him, and squeezed her soaked muscles around his girth on the way down. He groaned, louder than he meant to, and sank into the couch, as both he and Triss watched the busty creature — still in the amazing bra — lower herself down onto him. When the lips of her pussy devoured him to the hilt, and he felt his glans pressing against her depths, it was Jen's turn to moan, and she did it with her mouth closed.

She set her left hand on his shoulder, and held up her right to her mouth. Winking at him again, she opened her mouth, and let the heavy flow of his white cum pour into it.

“God damn,” Triss said. “What're you ... shit!” The Nosferatu let out a squeak, as Jen set her cum-soaked hand against the woman's bare, spread, smooth pussy. Chuckling, a touch maniacally too, Jen massaged Julias's cum against the girl's cunt, and lower, soaking

Triss's ass in the white fluid, before she began to push two fingers into her.

Triss spread her legs a bit more, and hugged Julias's arm as she edged her pelvis forward. Jen had more than enough access to sink her middle and ring fingers into Triss's ass, palm up, while squeezing Julias's shoulder. Comfortable, she began to finger Triss's insides, using her arm muscles and pushing up against Triss's insides, while rocking her hips back and forth along Julias's lap. Good at multitasking, to say the least.

Julias's arm closer to Triss hugged her, pulled her in, and kept her snug to his body and Jen's leg. His other arm reached out, and found Jen's breasts. No use in denying it, Jen had large breasts, and the subtle bounce her movements gave them were hypnotizing, along with the bedroom eyes she was giving him and Triss. Laughing, she reached behind her back, undid the clasp, and leaned forward to let the beautiful garment fall to the floor. Free of their cage, her breasts jiggled gently with her swaying, and drew the eyes of both spectators once again.

Jen started fingering Triss harder, enough to make her ass bounce against the couch lightly, and to make some wet, slapping sounds. He could feel it. With Jen sitting on him, and his cock buried inside her to the hilt, stretching her open, every muscle clench she made in her effort to finger Triss was a muscle clench he could feel. Tight, hot, squeezing like a vise. He hugged Triss tight to his side, and made a show of cupping and massaging one of Jen's breasts, half to enjoy the feel of its large softness molding to his hand, half to draw Triss's gaze to it.

Jen leaned in, and put her forehead to his shoulder and neck, turned so she could kiss his jugular and face Triss at the same time. "I like this."

“What’s this?” he said. With Jen so close to him, his groping hand slid behind her instead, and held onto the small of her back. Despite himself, his hand slid higher, and pressed against the middle of her back, encouraging the woman to press herself into him. Were it any other woman, it’d be crossing a line into romantic territory; romance was reserved for Beatrice. With this strange woman though, it was something else, something he wasn’t used to.

Friendship? Maybe. Maybe not. It wasn’t the right word, didn’t fully describe the strangeness this Ventrue had created.

“Indeed, what is this?” Laughing, Jen moved her head up to his lips, and gave him a quick kiss. A jolt of guilt ran up his spine, but it vanished as he listened to Triss’s moans. A glance her way showed she watched it happen, and if she had any complaints to make, they were lost in the onslaught of mewls that escaped her, as Jen increased the speed of her fingering arm.

Triss held onto Julias’s arm, and Jen’s leg, as she squirted onto Jen’s palm.

Julias looked down at the lean woman’s body, the tattoos of her skin, her abs crunching, and her small clit-hood piercing shaking, as Jen fingered her ass. Any other girl, and Julias would have expected to see them playing with their clitoris, or fingering themselves. Not Triss, who had no trouble cumming her brains out from only Jen’s fingers fingering her backside.

God damn, that was hot.

“I’m not entirely sure what this is,” he said. “You’re like a lovely parasite that’s attached to Triss and I.”

“Aw, you think I’m lovely?” Completely ignoring the parasite part, she chuckled again, and nudged her nose against his chin, before leaning down toward Triss. The Nos was exhausted, panting, and watching the two Ventrue with lazy, drifting eyes. Unlike the small

peck Jen gave him, she set her lips onto Triss's proper, and plucked on them with her own, while looking at Julias through the corner of her eye.

"I ... I think..." Still shaking, Triss pushed her head forward, nudging it into Jen's and pushing her away a few inches. "I think ... you're ... you're both Ventrue, and this is sort of, like, third friendship, third business contract, third sex. And—"

Jen didn't appreciate Triss's contribution, apparently. She put her lips to Triss's again, and buried her in a kiss, as her fingering hand resumed its work. Defeated, Triss collapsed back against the couch, into the nook between Julias's body and arm, and looked to him with half closed eyes.

He grinned at her, hugged her tight to his side, and watched her body as the pleasure started to ripple through her again. Completely defeated. Poor woman's eyes closed, and she whimpered into Jen's mouth, as the Ventrue fingered the girl's ass hard enough to have the large, toned curves of Triss's butt rippling against the couch. Each upward slap of Jen's hand hit toward Triss's stomach, hit toward those spots Julias knew well, and earned a tiny squirt of gushing cum from his love. And then another, and another, each splashing against Jen's palm.

"I think," he said, after staring for a little while longer, "that we should probably stop trying to define 'this'. I love Beatrice, and you haven't damaged that, like we were worried you might."

Giggling, Jen lifted her head back to him, and set her lips onto his neck. "You're fucking a couple witches, Mister Mire. A little open mindedness about sex goes a long way." She eased her fingers out of Triss, and brought them to his arm. Squeezing his bicep and soaking the muscle in Triss's cum, she pressed her breasts into his chest, and nuzzled her nose and lips into his jawline.

“I like to think I’m pretty open minded,” he said. Girl of his dreams sitting next to him on the couch, recovering from a slew of orgasms brought on by fingering from their friend, who was currently riding him? It was pretty outside the norm.

“You are. Fuck, turns me on so god damn much.” She kissed his shoulder, and turned her head enough to look Triss’s way, as she began to grind her hips down against him. “And, you may think the secrets you’re sharing paint you in a worse light. They don’t.”

He smiled, took a deep breath, and relaxed into the couch, as Jen’s grinding earned his second orgasm. Soaked muscles clenched on his length, working back and forth, leaking juices onto him, as his own juices flooded her taught depths. The feel of her heavy breasts pressing to his chest was heavenly, but it was the hard squeezes of her cunt along his swollen glans, that had him struggling to hold still. Each motion she made earned a gush of his cum, until it was trickling down testicles, along with her own juices. Warm, thick, it filled his length with pleasure ripples that spread out from his cock, and down into his pelvis.

And through it all, she kept her head buried against his collar, face turned to look at Triss. The Nosferatu was watching, exhausted but watching, and smiling at them. She reached out too, and set one hand onto Jen’s ass, squeezing and massaging it, and helping Jen grind back and forth on Julias’s cock. The pleasure sparks were almost endless, and despite the orgasm he could tell Jen was trying to recover from, she kept grinding on him to milk him, pleasure him, please him. She wanted to make him happy, and Triss; and she was doing a damn fucking amazing job.

“I think,” Triss said, nuzzling into his side, and leaning in toward Jen to kiss her again, “that we’re all just teenagers, exploring our sexual desires.”

Jen didn't agree, apparently. She sighed and shook her head. "Unfortunately, we're not teenagers. Our bosses keep dumping responsibilities on us."

He shouldn't say it. He really shouldn't say it. Every instinct in his body was telling him to go with Triss's view, and bask in the moment like a stupid teenager who only thought of sex sex sex and more sex. Forget the shit tide coming, stop thinking about it, and enjoy the tight confines of Jen's hot, dripping insides.

"I'm my own boss," he said, "and ... I guess I'll dump some responsibility on my own shoulders. Let's talk about Jeremiah, and Angela, and the ritual about Jack."

And so began another night of sharing evidence, theories, and strategies to be brought up at the Primogen meeting. Ah well, the moment of respite was nice while it lasted.

# Chapter 66

~~Jack~~

He hated waiting.

People handled waiting differently, and with different degrees of stress. Some people shut down, to save mental energy. Some people shut down because they couldn't handle the stress in general. Some people became antsy, anxious, and volatile. Some people panicked, and started spiraling down ridiculous trains of thought that were nothing but self destructive.

Jack became a planner. When he had no choice but to wait for the event, the action, the conclusion, the whatever, to happen, he planned. He was a good planner, and he enjoyed it. Spreadsheets of his old diet, before he was embraced, calorie counting and such, were a joy to craft. Writing out flowcharts of his various career choices, and where they could lead him, were too. It helped relieve and manage stress when he had to think about something coming his way that he had to deal with, but wasn't here yet.

These hunters were coming, and no matter how much he looked, no matter how much Mulder and Scully looked, no matter how much the Right Hands looked, or anyone else looked, no more details availed themselves. So, he did the only thing he could do. He went to Bloodlust.

“Hello Eric,” he said. “Long time no see.”

The man looked him up and down, before shrugging, and leaning against the wall. On the first floor, it was noisier than upstairs, more people around. Jack didn't like it, and from the way Eric was looking at the people around him, he didn't like it either. Strange job choice



then. Jack was almost tempted to ask him how he became a bouncer, but the look on his face suggested he shouldn't.

“Jack. Good to see your guts on your inside.”

Heh, yeah. Jack looked down, pat his stomach, and slid into the booth beside Eric. Empty, now that the couple that'd been in there were leaving. The werewolf probably scared them off.

And he was a werewolf. Jack hadn't been in a position to analyze him, the first time he saw him, and apparently the man had never transformed until recently. Whatever it was his first transformation had done, it'd changed him. He looked different, smelled different, and moved different. There was something animalistic to his stance, aggression, defensiveness, territorial maybe. Or Jack was letting his knowledge taint his view.

“How's it going?” Jack said. Yeah, small talk, with a guy Jessy warned was not interested in small talk. This was going to go well.

“What do you want, vamp?”

Damn. Spot on. Jack could relate to the antisocial tendency, but not the aggression. The fuck had Jack done to earn the glares Eric was giving him now?

“Checking in, to see if you've seen anything unusual.”

“Like those four hunters? No, nothing like that.”

“Would you know?”

“I'd smell them.”

Jack raised a brow up at the man beside him, and took a sniff of his own. Lots of smells, lots of sweat and alcohol and sex and drugs,

but he had no way of separating it from the more subtle smells. Man must have been a blood hound werewolf.

“You sure?”

“If not, I’d see something. I’d notice if something was off about someone, and if they weren’t something with fangs or claws, I’d know that that person was dangerous, and probably a hunter. I’d report it. So you can fuck off and—”

“Whoa dude, whoa. Not here performing any kind of check to see if you’re doing your job, Eric. Just here because ... need a place to wait for the shitstorm.” Not entirely true, but good enough to progress the conversation.

Eric grunted, a noise closer to a growl than Jack supposed the man meant to make, because his eyes opened wide after, and he shook his head out. “Fine. Shitstorm?”

“The hunters are going to do something. We need to find them, beat them to the punch.” Sighing, he shifted in the seat so he was facing out of the booth. It set his feet near Eric’s, so Jack didn’t have to yell; not like he wanted the nearby kine to hear. The pulsing music and background noise of sex and chatter was only effective cover to a point. “Probably something involving me.”

“You? Because you’re dating that tall, white-haired chick?”

Jack smirked up at the man. Tall, white-haired chick. He couldn’t tell if Antoinette would be upset or amused at the description. Probably both.

“Maybe. And because I know Azamel. It’s her the hunters are after.”

“Right, granny in the rocking chair.”

“Well, I’m sure after that daring rescue you made, they’ll be coming for me, other vamps, and maybe you too.”

Eric shivered, and ran his fingers along his shaved head. Jack knew the reflex well; buzzed head versus bald head though. Could be fun to try that haircut, and since he was Kindred, he’d only have to keep the change for a night. Eric raised a brow at him. “Why are you staring at me?”

“Oh, uh, no reason.” Chuckling, Jack looked to the door of Bloodlust. There was Damien, and Jessy, coming in to join him as planned.

He watched Eric in the corner of his eyes, and waited to see if his hunch was correct. Once the man looked toward the door, and saw the two vampires, a small crack showed through the wolf’s hard exterior. Chin raised, arms relaxed, Eric watched Jessy, and as she came in closer, the crack of a smile on his face grew. Eventually, the man realized he was smiling, and wiped it off with his hand, but Jack saw it all, through the pulsing lights of Bloodlust.

Jessy liked him. He liked Jessy. No issue there, as long as Avery didn’t create a problem, and get Eric dragged into it. Worst case scenario. Well, he was paid to think of the worst case scenario now, especially as a Right Hand.

“We’re heading up, team meeting,” he said, standing. “Wanna come, keep people from getting too close?”

“The fuck you having a team meeting in a club for?”

“Let’s us keep an eye on things,” Damien said, stepping in close enough for the conversation. Man had good ears.

“Yeah.” Once she was in close, Jessy walked up to Eric, tapped him on the shoulder, and winked at him with all the subtlety of a

firecracker. “Plus, think of it like a work meeting, right? We’ll grab a snack while we’re here.”

“Never worked in an office environment, or anything with team meetings.” He shrugged, and smiled for a moment when Jessy winked at him.

“Come with us,” she said. “Be a lookout.”

He managed a snort laugh, a quiet noise Jack had heard many dogs make. Sort of like a canine’s way of putting an exclamation point at the end of a sentence. Jack wasn’t exactly well versed in the man’s normal body language, but he assumed it used to be more human; it wasn’t anymore. Every glance, every breath, every tap of his finger on his own bicep, and every motion he made, had the calculated, prowling depth of a wolf’s movements. He might as well have been Clara or that Carter fellow.

And as the three Kindred went upstairs, he followed, up the stairs and to one of the booths in the back. Dark, secluded, where the music wasn’t as noisy, and where the kine weren’t. Back in the day, Jack would have found it a tad scary, maybe even spooky, to hang out in the shadowed corner of a night club. Now, he gravitated toward it naturally. Give him some mascara, an earring, a trench coat, and he’d wear them without irony.

Well, maybe a little irony.

The three Kindred sat down, and Eric stood by the booth. Took his job seriously, or knew to go with the flow to prevent issues. Jack made sure to sit down on the outside of the booth, beside the werewolf. Time for the part he wasn’t looking forward to.

“Jessy tell you about me?” he said.

Eric raised a brow as he looked down at him. “Not sure what you mean.”

“He means,” Jessy said, leaning over Jack’s shoulder and grinning at Eric once she was in the booth, “that Jack here is your new goto, sort of.”

“Did you three come here to have a meeting, or talk to me?”

Jack sighed, and shrugged. “Both, in a way. I need to know what Avery told you, what the Begotten told you, and ... well, what your plans are.”

Every muscle on Eric’s body tensed. Whatever Jack said, it was nails on chalkboard to this guy.

“My plans?”

“Your plans.” Ok, at least he was talking. Jessy warned him the man was a ‘bitter fucker’, her words. She also said he seemed to appreciate honesty. A fine rope to walk, as the truth was usually a tough pill to swallow, and in a bitter jackass, was liable to get spit back out. “If you’re going to join Avery’s pack, that’s fine, I talk to her regularly anyway. If you’re not, and you’re going to hang with the Begotten, you—”

“Why does everyone think I’m going to do anything with them?”

“You’re friends with Fiona, aren’t you?” he said. “And Jessy found you in the sewer with them.”

“That was ... that was an accident.”

Accident or not, the mention of Fiona turned his eyes downward. A glance Jessy’s way showed a knowing smirk from her though; which, from Jessy, likely meant some sexual manipulation. Ugh.

“Well, alright, if you don’t have any plans to side with—”

“What’s with this ‘side’ crap? You guys at war? Not what Avery told me.”

This guy liked to interrupt him. Jack didn’t like that. A quick glance to his companions showed some different opinions. Damien was annoyed, but not over the interrupting; probably just hated having to waste time talking to this extra thorn in their side. Jessy was smiling, and likely thought the man’s antics cute. Blatant bias. If he was anyone else, she’d have the man’s head pinned to the table while she drilled orders into his ear.

“No, we’re not at war, but...”

“But we could be,” Damien said. Stone cold face on, the man put his elbows and fists on the table, and glared at the werewolf standing beside the booth. “When we all thought you were kine, you’d be nothing but a worthless bystander in any potential conflicts. But now you’re not.”

“Jessy gave me the run down.” The man snorted again, and leaned against the wall before folding his arms across his chest. Defensiveness. He thought he was being attacked, but not from Jessy. It was Jack and Damien putting the man at odds. What did that woman say to him, before now?

“I’m sure she did.” Damien looked at her with the same cold face, and Jessy rolled her eyes in return.

“Whatever.” The werewolf shrugged. “My plan is to keep working here, and help out if those hunters show up.”

Jack shook his head. “What does helping include? You understand if those hunters show up, or anyone else does with a similar agenda, helping could mean listening to our orders, when we tell you what to do?” The man didn’t seem to get it. Another poor sap sucked into a world they didn’t want to be a part of, and their desire to stand on the sidelines was not acceptable. He was too

valuable as an ally, and too dangerous as an enemy, to ignore. “That could mean doing whatever Avery tells you. If things turn weird on us, it could mean doing whatever Azamel tells you. It will likely mean us telling you what to do. And that isn’t simple either. The Carthians might ask for your help. They might want you to help with the hunters, or they might pull you into some shit that will force you to make enemies of the Invictus; or at least piss them off. It’s a complicated world of darkness, Eric, and we’re just trying to stay afloat.”

Ok, rant over. It was enough to pierce this asshole’s shell though, and get through to him a little, based on the man’s expression. Pensive, contemplating, his eyes fell to the booth, and his head tilted slightly as thoughts undoubtedly rolled around in his head.

And Jessy winked at the man.

That wasn’t good. Jessy was talking to this man, and talking to him about more than just sex, if she was winking at him about this topic. What game was she playing? Much as he wanted to believe she was too stupid for the Danse Macabre, too stupid to be playing a sneaky game of her own, he doubted that was true anymore, not since he’d become a Right Hand and started seeing her intelligence shine through.

“I can’t just ... tell everyone who comes to bother me to fuck off?” he said.

Jack laughed, and shrugged. “You could try. It might even work. But we’re talking about strong entities, people with the individual power to pursue staggering agendas. They rarely suffer a neutral party. They’re with us or against us types.” He put his hands up in surrender before Eric could interrupt him again. “If you want to try and remain neutral, fine. My sire told you to talk with Avery, and we’ll defer to her about this. If she’s ok with you being neutral, then I hope you can remain neutral.”

Chuckling, Jessy leaned in, and pushed Jack in the shoulder, always buddy buddy. “Except, of course, if you try and play the neutral card, you’ll default to working for us Invictus, since we write your cheques. I assume you want to keep the job and the nice apartment and shit.” And, again, a wink.

She might have been smarter than she seemed, but the lack of subtlety was a nasty weakness. Her brute strength might have worked on weaker Kindred, and she was damn powerful, but Jack was starting to grow worried the woman was going to get them all in trouble. Azamel wouldn’t swallow her bull shit, and neither would Avery.

“The Prince told me a neutral party Uratha used to live in the city,” Jack said. “Said she was a ghost wolf, or something.”

“Ghost wolf?” Eric raised a brow, before a small smile came in. “I like that.”

The four of them looked to the stairs across the second floor of the Bloodlust, as a couple of women walked up to join them. Fiona, with her pale skin, freckles, and frizzy red hair, could not have looked more different than Athalia, with her dark skin and long black hair. Short versus tall, and curvy versus skinny, too. What they were wearing was just as contrasting, Fiona fully embracing the club label Bloodlust carried, despite its lounge nature. Athalia wore some torn-up, tight jeans, and a tight white t-shirt, while Fiona wore a dress, a green dress, straps tied around her neck, and plunging cleavage showing off her impressive breasts.

Jessy whistled, and motioned for her to come sit beside her. Giggling, Fiona jumped in place a little — boing boing — before hopping over to sit beside her. Damien was trapped between Jessy and Jack, but based on the look on his face, he preferred that to being closer to the other people joining them. Fiona getting into the



booth put him on edge, and it put Eric on edge, though he seemed a little more interested in looking at her, than looking away from her.

Fucking high school romance drama crap. At least they kept it to their body language, and didn't put any of it to words.

"You, you fucking little devil, looking fucking gorgeous in this." Jessy leaned in, put a kiss on Fiona's neck, and earned more squealing giggles from her. Ok, maybe not so high school.

"Keep it in your pants," Athalia said. "Not here to fuck."

"Could do you some good." Jessy, laughing, put another kiss on Fiona's neck, more deliberately this time, and she earned giggles weren't as girly anymore. There was a moan in there.

Talk about awkward. Either Jessy was a brain dead moron, or she was trying to pull some reactions out of Eric and Damien. Why, he didn't know. Could be trying to push Damien into fighting for Fiona, so she could have Eric to herself? Or vice versa ... or she could be trying to engage a foursome.

Jack choked on a laugh. A foursome as Damien's first foray into sex. The ramifications on the poor man's mind would be worthy of poetry.

Athalia wasn't amused. She sat down in the booth as well, and offered Eric a small nod. "Hey dumbass. Still alive I see."

"Yeah." The man shrugged, and forced his eyes away from the sight Jessy was creating. "You all here to talk about me?"

Damien shook his head. "No. We're here to talk about the hunters."

Fiona, finally free of Jessy's lips, nudged Athalia with her arm. "Tell them!"

Rolling her eyes, Athalia leaned in, and motioned for them all to, as well. “Saw an old woman fitting Azamel’s description of the shaman. We think she’s somewhere in Devil’s Corner.”

“You sure?” Jack said. “They brought me to North Side, when they caught me. Figured they’d have a base or underground hideout or something in that half of Dolareido.”

“Or they’re smart, and wouldn’t bring you close to their HQ.” Athalia shook her head, and took a moment to look around. “Sure it’s safe to talk here?”

Jessy nodded. “Yeap. Built by vamps, for vamps. The only people who could be eavesdropping would be other paranormals.”

Athalia frowned, and continued looking around. When she caught Jack’s eye, he shrugged at her, and offered her a small smile; like Jessy’s, but gentler. Bloodlust was a great place for what it was meant for: a place for Kindred to get an easy meal. It turning into a good meeting spot was a strange turn of events, not the intent. They could trust Eric’s nose though, to spot the hunters. And it wasn’t like the hunters would come waltzing into the center of Invictus territory anymore anyway.

Several of Jessy’s ghouls were around, too. And once the vampires, werewolf, and monsters were all together, the ghouls happened to start getting busy with some of their girlfriends. Their moans were background noise, joining other moans, groans, and thudding crap music from the rest of the club. No one would be able to eavesdrop through the noise, anyway.

Athalia’s gaze lasted on the sexual display longer than Jack thought it would. Maybe his talk in the Black Hall sank into her a bit more than his impression gave him. Something told him the woman could use a good lay; Jessy, specifically, told him that, on several occasions.

“Devil’s Corner,” Damien said, “is problematic to deal with. Lot of places to hide. A lot of people to make deals with, too. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve recruited, without explaining to who they’ve recruited exactly what they’re up against.”

Yeah, it was a messy place to handle. “I’d prefer to keep casualties to a minimum,” Jack said.

Athalia scoffed at him, but said nothing. Good. It was starting to get irritating, how she absolutely refused to give him or any Kindred an inch. How much of a paradise did Dolareido have to be before she realized Kindred weren’t all just looking for blood and slaughter.

Paradise by a vampire’s standards, maybe. Begotten weren’t having as easy a time of it, thanks to Julias and the others.

“We can try,” Jessy said, “but when push comes to shove, getting rid of these hunters takes priority. Besides, we don’t know if they’re hiring. That’d be dangerous to do, don’t you think? Hire random strangers. Might give away what they’re up to.”

“They’re good at hiding what they’re up to.” Nodding, Damien pulled out his phone, and brought up a map of the city. “Killed Barry here, kidnapped Jack here, brought him here, and then disappeared when the Invictus showed up. We found the weird ritual here, and —”

“Weird ritual?”

Everyone looked up over their shoulders, to see Eric looking at what they were doing. If the man wanted to remain neutral, his reflexes didn’t agree. Curiosity killed as many dogs as cats.

“Sure you want to know?” Jessy said, smiling at him.

“I ... you know what? Sure. If these hunters are doing something, I should know too. They know my face, know I helped Fiona. I wouldn't be surprised if they decided to shoot me on sight.”

Yeah, Jack could agree with that. Nodding, he leaned back a bit, so the man could see past him to Damien's phone easier.

“Here,” Damien said, “in a storage locker in Devil's Corner, we found a ritual. An occult ritual. Your imagination will probably end up closer than you think. Blood symbols, a fresh skeleton, the works. The peculiar thing was, we found drawn pictures of a body being dissected, rigorously, every detail. And, attached to the skeleton, we found a face.”

“My face.” Kind of Damien to leave out that detail, but Eric was right. The hunters considered him a threat, so there was no reason to not fill him in on the pertinent details. Hopefully.

“That ... is some seriously disturbing shit,” Eric said. Jack could almost see the man's brain collapse with the new knowledge that occult rituals existed, and likely worked. And from there, his brain would spiral Fibonacci style, adding more and more possibilities to the ever expanding pattern. The world of darkness was filled with so many new possibilities, each darker and crueler than the last.

“You're telling me.” Laughing again, Jessy leaned in close and motioned for Eric to lean in as well. “But what's truly disturbing is this was something done by hunters. Freaky shit like this? Vampires do this sort of stuff, the witch ones. Begotten are ... well, you know them.” With an eye roll and a flick of her wrist toward the two monsters, she continued. “And I'm sure you Uratha do some weird stuff. Dance in the moonlight naked, and devour the raw flesh of your prey, or some weird insanity, right? But humans doing that, is weird. And...”

And horrifying. Vampires, werewolves, monsters, they lived and breathed such absurdities, because it was in their nature. Even

vampires, relatively normal and nearly human, compared to the other two, got their hands dirty with some pretty disturbing shit. Humans had no business getting into that stuff, and if they could, what the fuck was wrong with them? Like cannibals in the woods, disturbing on a level monsters like Jack and his companions in the booth could never hope to reach.

Be afraid of vampires, of werewolves, of monsters, sure. But being afraid of humans was like being afraid of your neighbor. It was sickening, and he didn't wish that fate on anyone. No wonder that episode 'Home' from X-Files was so fucking scary.

"So, what's the plan?" Fiona said, leaning in. "I ... I dinnae ken if ... I dinnae ken if ye should go there, nae alone. B-But if ye go as a crew, they might catch ye, and it'll be dangerous for other reasons."

Damien nodded. "If only it was as easy as simply walking through the city and removing them. Unfortunately, they know our weakness, and they seem to have tools to deal with us."

"Your elders could—"

Jack raised a hand, cutting Athalia off. "If shit hits the fan, or we get solid evidence, they'll step in. But elders don't risk their lives on a whim. Much as I hate that we have back up we can't use, I can't ask for Garry or Maria or Michael, or the Prince or Jacob, or even Julias, to throw in their weight until we have something better to go on." And besides, elders weren't gods, they weren't invincible. He saw that first hand, too many times. Much as he hated that he knew they'd refuse to help until they had better evidence, he hated that he agreed with them all the more.

The covenants needed their rulers, or they'd collapse in a vacuum, or to each other. What a bitter truth.

"I'll talk to Isabella," he said. "Or Hella, rather. I know Hella likes to dig into Devil's Corner occasionally. So does Vicky and Parker. I'll

talk to them.” They ran some sex holes in Devil’s Corner, so maybe they knew something.

The rest of the meeting went about as well as planned. With a new target, Devil’s Corner, as the focus of their search, they had something to work toward. Athalia and Fiona would provide some support, and Jack was to come to the Azamel if he found Jeremiah. He could report back what he found to Julias, and see what they decided. It’d be what Jack figured, though.

Like Antoinette told him, learn to predict his superiors. Just, he knew they’d also try and take advantage of the situation in ways he couldn’t predict; the Danse Macabre was a bitch.

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~~Eric~~

“You look different,” his dad said.

Eric shrugged, and turned to look at the TV. Baseball again.

“You don’t.”

His dad shrugged. Probably where he got the habit from, when combined with the look-away. Delightful way to say ‘don’t fucking care’. “How’s your new job treating you?”

“Good, and bad, I guess.” Eric leaned back in the visitor’s chair, and took a moment to look around at the hospital room. Not much had changed since the last time he was here. Nothing had changed since the last time he was here. His dad had made no effort to get up off his fat ass, and Eric’s money was giving him an avenue to continue eating crap.

He should tell the nurses to only give him shitty hospital food; which, he supposed, they were probably supposed to be. Maybe he was bribing them, to get more crap shit sneaked in. Eric should

follow up, and see if he could make his dad's life more miserable. At least it'd save his stupid life and get him off the shitty food.

“What's bad?”

“The company that's hired me wants to do a song and dance.”

“Like back in the day? You gettin' on camera again?”

Eric shuddered. “No. I may be in a bit of a spotlight with these money types, though.” Money types described the vampires well enough. What type were the werewolves and monsters? Pains in the ass, for sure, but the vampires were easier for him to understand. Dealing with news crews, lawyers and accountants, the media, and celebrities, fit right into dealing with the undead fuckers.

He sighed, and looked up at the tile ceiling. Jessy put a small hole into that approach. She was the sort of woman he could trust, more than others. Came at him straight, put things into a realistic perspective, and gave him some options too. Play the field, she said. You have the power to defend yourself and pursue your own agenda now, she said.

His dad changed the channel. The news, volume low, captions on. Old habit again, or he was looking to continue the conversation.

“Make any friends?” the old man said. Guess he wanted to continue the conversation. Talkative today.

“In a way.”

“Woman?”

“A couple.”

“Don't fuck it up like you did with Sheryl.”

Sheryl. Just the mention of her name made his knee tense, which made his whole body tense in preparation for the pain ... that never came. Healed. Silver lining to all this hell.

“My knee is feeling great lately, thanks for asking,” he said. He was starting to wonder if maybe he should fake a limp, before someone started asking questions about the knee.

“She’s not to blame for the knee, boy. And I meant, you and Sheryl were a horrible pair. Do better this time.”

“I’ll get right on that.”

“Seen a few cute doctors around here. Go ask one out.”

“Think I’ll pass, dad.”

The old man rolled his eyes, groaned, and erupted into coughs. He winced once the grotesque noises passed, and scratched at the IV needle in his arm.

“When’ll I be getting out of here?”

“When your health starts to bounce back. Think you can stop eating cheeseburgers and potato chips for a few fucking days?”

“Son, let me do what I want, would you? I’ve lived this long—”

“You’d be dead if I didn’t interfere.”

“Says you. Remember O’Malley? Man lived to be eighty-nine years old, smoking every day of his life. Came out of his momma’s cooch with a cigarette between his lips.”

The idiot said it without irony. No point in trying to explain survivor bias to his stupid father. No point in trying to explain how pathetic it was, to trust the things you see with your eyes, as a representation of general truths. So, Eric sighed, shrugged, and



looked back to the TV. Some other place in the world was burning to the ground. Wonderful.

If Eric pushed him, said something like ‘fine, let’s go, I’ll take you home’, his dad would probably die. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but he’d deteriorate into a fat tub of lard until his heart gave up or his blood-sugar levels destroyed him from the inside out. And his dad didn’t want that. Stubborn and stupid as he was, he didn’t want that. But he was stubborn enough that, if Eric pushed him on it, the dumbass would agree to go home, and be done with the hospital.

Every time Eric was in the hospital, he juggled that fucking option in his mind. Keep his dad alive, because he knew his dad wanted to live, despite his stupidity and resistance. Or, let his dad die due to his own incompetence and laziness. Let him die, so he’d be out of your life. Just an anchor holding you down.

Anchor that kept you from going adrift in a storm.

“Question for you, pops.”

“Yeah? Thought you got the world figured out by now, don’t need no advice from anyone.”

“Yeah, well, lot of weird shit happening to me lately, making me question my omniscience.”

“Fine, ask away.”

“What would you do, if you were being asked to pick sides in a cold war? Got a few groups of people ... pushing for money, business acquisition type stuff. Some of them are your typical money snakes. Some others are honest, but I don’t trust them to not get rough, maybe even break some knees. And the others are—”

Steps at the door cut him off. “Oh, this has got to be good. What are we in your hilariously inaccurate breakdown?”

Eric froze, and looked to the door. Athalia.

“This fine lady looking for your help, Eric?” His old man sat up in bed, and winked at her.

She laughed.

Eric raised a brow at her. He didn’t know her well, but from that meeting last night, it seemed like everyone expected her to be a cold bitch. Nothing wrong with some ice, and Eric could do with some ice in his life about now anyway. Refreshing, when everyone else was trying to get him on their side.

But the look on her face, as she looked between him, and his father in the hospital bed, wasn’t ice. She smiled at his father, and tossed her hair over her shoulder a little. Flirting with the old man; not something an icy woman would do. Most definitely not the same woman who punched some sense into him when he was transformed. Not the same woman who had some sort of undead god horror inside her. And yet, he knew she was, he could feel it, could almost smell the disgusting waves of unadulterated terror made manifest dripping from her pores.

“I was going to say,” Eric said, “you’re something of the underdog, I guess. An underdog with nothing to lose.” He got up, walked over to the monster, and frowned at her. “Makes you dangerous.”

“Son, stupid boy, gonna introduce us or not.”

Fucking hell. If only the old man knew who or what this woman was. Not like Eric could share that information with him. And what the hell was she doing here anyway? The only people who should know about this part of his life were people either tracking his finances, like the Invictus, or people following him. He expected

Avery to be following him, to have someone tail him, though he hadn't seen or smelled anyone yet. The last thing he expected was a Begotten to show up.

"Don't mind Eric," she said. "I'm Athalia. And I got plenty to lose."

"What're you doing here?"

"Came to see you."

Why? He almost asked it, but a look in her eye made the answer obvious. To talk about dangerous shit. Sighing, he motioned to the door with his head.

"I'll be back before I leave, dad. I—"

"Boy, get out and go hang with the beautiful lady. Get me some fucking grandkids already, for Christ's sake."

A lovely way to be dismissed by his dad. Better than usual, he supposed, with the two of them usually growing increasingly irate until he simply had to leave. And Athalia's laughter was a delightful sound; not much of that going on in the hospital.

Rolling his eyes, Eric stepped into the hallway with Athalia, and the two of them made their way to the cafeteria. Big hospital with a lot of money meant a nice cafeteria for visitors and patients. The staff had their own he figured, since no nurses or doctors were around. Plenty of seating, too.

"You know," he said, sitting down at one of the tables by a window, "I was in a hospital when I was younger."

"Oh?" Ice expression returned, Athalia leaned back in her seat, and looked out the window. The hospital had a small garden view, a grassy area in the center, between its halls and walls.

“Terrence Hospital. Run down, horrible, barely functioning.” It was easy to argue for premium health care if you had money to spend on it. He’d seen the other side of the fence. “It’s almost sickening, how much better this is.” South Center Hospital might as well have been hospital care for royalty, as far as Eric’s upbringing could tell.

“I was there, once, when I was younger. Terrence Hospital, I mean. Pretty sure, if it wasn’t for my horror, I would have walked away from that hospital with an infection and disease on top of the wound.”

He smiled. Yeah, he got that. “What kind of wound?”

“Dislocated my shoulder.”

“Sports?”

“Fighting.”

“I—”

“Not fighting for a sport, like you. I got into it with some bully when I was younger. This was before Angela.”

He kept a straight face when she said her daughter’s name, but it wasn’t easy. “South Center is ... the people here are spoiled.”

“Very.”

“How did you find me?”

“Not telling.”

“Why?”

“Because, it’s my prerogative as a monster. You’ll never understand, anyway.”

“I get the impression you don’t like me very much, Athalia.”

“I don’t. You’re a dog, and all of your kind are aggressive brutes, incapable of controlling your impulses.”

If he didn’t know any better, he’d think that was a sexist statement, more than a racist one. But he noticed a lot of frustrated, annoyed looks at Jessy too, during the meeting. And Jack. And Damien. Only person she seemed ok with was Fiona; maybe because everyone liked Fiona, or because she had issues with werewolves and vampires. She apparently disliked werewolves, so the extrapolation was reasonable.

Fuck, stop running the thoughts through your head. What did Avery say, that Cahaliths like to narrate their thoughts, like spinning a story? Fucking stop it.

“Alright, so, why are you here?”

“Came here to re-offer Azamel’s offer.”

Ugh, this shit again. “I’m not taking any sides in anything, Athalia.”

“That’s just it. The vamps think this is about sides, and the fucking dogs think this is about sides. It’s not like that for us.”

“You telling me you’re all free agents? Seems like you all work for Azamel.”

“She guards us, but we don’t work for her. And we’re not a family, not a pack, not really.” Shrugging, she got up, and walked over to the selection of food. A few minutes later, she came back with some fruit, and a sandwich with beef.

The look of it turned Eric’s stomach. The beef was alright, but the rest of it? He didn’t want it. In the past, he’d have wanted it. The

fruit would have looked delicious, and the bread, an enticing base for other flavors to compliment. Now it looked like the shit prey ate. Athalia enjoyed it well enough, though.

“Surprised you’re eating that.”

“It tastes good.”

“Do you need to eat?”

“I eat.” She smirked at him, and took a bite of the sandwich. “I feast on destruction.”

“ ... destruction?”

She leaned in closer, and glared into his eyes, piercing him. Sheryl used to give him that look, when she was ready to literally pierce his eyes with her stiletto heels. A mix of condescension and anger, wrapped in a layer of ice. Unnerving.

“That’s the problem. That’s why I don’t trust you, or the vamps, as you’ve no doubt noticed. You’re just animals, looking for food. Begotten are more than that.”

His turn to lean back, and sneer. “Wanna fill me in?”

“No, but, Azamel thinks you can be of value to us, so ... Jesus, explaining this is like explaining science to an infant.”

This woman was begging to be hated. It was an act he knew well, too, actively making people hate you, so you could avoid ever having to connect with someone. No one can hurt you as much as a friend, so, better to not make friends. He didn’t want to agree, but, sometimes he did.

“I am basically an infant, in this new, fucked up world, Athalia.”

“... true.” She took another bite, and looked out the window. Felt like the sandwich was just a precursor to conversation for this woman, as if she didn’t need it. “Werewolves want to hunt, patrol, do their duty. Vampires have their squabbles and political agendas. You know what Begotten want?” She didn’t look his way. Rhetorical question. He almost answered it anyway, just to piss her off. But that was the old him, and the least he could do was shut up and listen. “We want to exist.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“So you’d think. It’s not.” She turned to him again, and leaned in. “I get the impression that’s all you want, too. You don’t want to serve in any vampire wars, and you don’t want to be doing some ancient duty for some ancestor you had nothing to do with.” Another bite. “No rules, no organizations, none of that shit. We want to exist, to eat, and be left alone. You want similar, and fuck me, if I didn’t see that, I wouldn’t be here. It’s what you want, and it’s what we Begotten want. So consider Azamel’s offer, and all we’ll ask of you is to be there for us if people try and kill us. Otherwise, you do whatever the fuck you want.”

He frowned, and looked out the window too. Yeah, she had him pegged. He didn’t want any of the bullshit the Uratha or Kindred brought. He just wanted to fucking exist, do his own thing, and eat and fuck and sleep and be left the fuck alone.

“... I’ll consider it.”

---

~~Beatrice~~

Ok, that was enough fucking for a while.

Beatrice sat up, and looked around. Jen was between her and Julias, and they were all naked. The room smelled of sex and blood and flesh. Not theirs of course; that all faded away once it was off

the vamp's body, fake stuff created by the blush of life. Julias had brought some of his servants into the guest bedroom, where they'd decided to fuck like rabbits. Yummy yum.

Two guys, two girls, passed out on the floor. Each had been drunk to exhaustion, and each thoroughly satisfied by fingers and tongues. Julias had watched, for the most part, while Triss and Jen had indulged in the four kine. Making the kine cum on each other, while drinking them, was such a power trip, and Triss delighted in it. So much easier to be a Ventrue than a Nosferatu, when all you had to do for a good time was look a kine in the eye, and tell them what to do.

Triss smiled at Jen, and snuggled into her side. Julias did the same, but he reached over, and pushed her onto her side, facing Triss, before he scooted into her back. Classic spoon position.

She was never going to get over how weird this relationship was. Jen got it; she slept with a pair of ghouls on a regular basis, before Triss came along. Julias got it; he was sleeping with kine all the time before Triss came along, sometimes two at a time. Antoinette got it, with her two little pet girly ghouls. Heh, what a kink, dominatrix with her harem. Jack must have been loving it, if he liked being a sub anyway. Clearly, Antoinette enjoyed being in charge, in and out of the bedroom.

Triss put a claw to her necklace, and flicked it. It was silent. Good. As long as the necklace was silent, she wasn't worried.

Jen smiled at her, reached out, and pulled her in. Bed hugs were weird to do, with the mattress blocking one arm, so Jen used the one arm to pull her in. Triss still had her nipple chain on — Jen's usual request — and it rubbed against Jen's larger breasts. Hard nipples. Sighing, relaxed, happy, Triss let the Ventrue pull her in snug, until their chests were tight to each other.



“How do you know if the ritual’s working, if no one triggers it?” Jen said.

“I can feel it. In the blood, in the bones.” Gave her a damn thrill, feeling blood magic working through her, through the necklace on her neck, through everything connected to her.

“I wonder what that’s like. I—oh!” With a squeak, Jen looked over her shoulder, to Julias.

The bastard grinned at her, then at Triss, and began moving his hips back and forth. Jen was reduced to moans in seconds. Surprise sex! Well, leave it to Julias to be bold when the mood struck him.

“How the fuck are you not satisfied?” Triss said.

He shrugged, set his head to rest on one hand, elbow to the pillow, while his other hugged across Jen’s body. Fingers found her breasts, and he began to fondle the large tit. With Triss so close, it caused Jen’s nipple to rub into her own. A pleasant feeling, but Triss was thoroughly spent. No more sex for her.

But watching her boyfriend and best friend have sex, while she felt her up, was a fun time nonetheless. Laughing, Triss leaned up and in, and Julias leaned in to match her, so the two could begin kissing. Oh yes, Julias was a good kisser. Being a royal slut for a century had bestowed the man with some amazing skills, and Triss’s lips were still human enough for kissing action. Doing it over Jen’s face, and earning some longing sighs from the observing Ventrue, made it all the better.

Better still, when Julias started thrusting again, and Jen let out a quiet moan. Triss pulled back, set her free arm on Jen’s hip, and watched as the beautiful woman enjoyed a spooning from her man.

“Julias fucked me this way, the first time.”

“Thanks,” she said, “for letting me try it, then. It’s ... relaxing.”

“I know, right?” Triss’s hand slid down her hip, down to the woman’s smooth belly, down her beautiful mons pubis, and then between her legs. Swollen clitoris, wet, and then a little past that, where Julias’s cock was spreading her tight little cunt open. “You can just lie there, let him do all the work, and take it easy. Read a book.”

“I sincerely hope you’re a little more focused on enjoying the sex,” Julias said, “than reading a book.”

Triss laughed again. She hadn’t actually tried reading a book during spooning sex, but she was definitely going to, now.

Sighing the same sort of relaxed, pleasant sigh as Jen, Triss put her other elbow to the pillow, and propped her head up, same as Julias. Her other hand continued to explore between Jen’s thighs, and offered some gentle strokes of her clitoris. Nothing rough, not the point of the position, or Julias’s aim. If he wanted to spoon, it was to relax, too.

Triss lay there, and watched. Jen’s expression was melting away, each thrust from Julias bringing her closer and closer to orgasm, but never over. It’d take forever to cum this way; just the way Julias liked it. And, it was a good opportunity to take a moment, and admire just how god damn fucking hot Jen was.

No wonder her sire did what he did. Christ, what an asshole.

Eventually, the two Ventrue started to cum. Triss leaned over Jen again, found her love’s lips, and made sure to give him a proper, long, mushy romantic kiss. Catching him mid-orgasm was fun, and bombarding Jen with the disgustingly tender display of her catching his quiet moans with her lips, was even more fun.

More fun than that, was lowering herself down to Jen's neck, and kissing the exposed skin. Poor woman's mewls turned into outright moans, and she gasped all the more as Triss pressed their bodies tight, and suckled on her jugular. Hickey time.

Except, not. Failure. Triss didn't have cheeks, but enormous crocodile teeth instead. Without cheeks, she couldn't create any suction. She could, however, use her long tongue, and lick the girl up like prey.

"Eeek!" Squealing, Jen pushed against her, but she had no strength. Not like a Ventrue could beat her in a competition of might anyway, but the busty lady was too busy cumming to fight much.

Laughing, Triss continued to hug her, hug Julias, and press against them as they came.

"Ya done now, finally?" she said.

Julias sat up, stretched his arms up over his head, and returned her smile. "Yeap."

Jen rolled onto her back, and closed her eyes as she sank into Julias's fancy bed. Everything the man owned was fancy, and the juxtaposition of all the sex and sin against the antique beauty of the mansion was a huge fucking turn on. Jen knew it too, as she spread her thighs, and reached between them to coat her fingers in the white cum leaking out of her, the master of the house's cum.

She trailed his cum up her stomach, and onto her breast closer to Triss, before looking up at her with expecting, hopeful eyes. Yeah, ok, there was sinful, and then there was this. But damn, Triss did like to get naughty. She leaned down, set her lips and long tongue against Jen's breast, and slowly licked up Julias's cum. The weight and pressure of her tongue was enough for the softness of Jen's breast to mold to the wet appendage, and Triss took advantage,

causing the big tit to bounce against Jen's chest a few times, up and down, up and down.

"Sunrise is in fifteen minutes," Julias said, "much as I'd like to go again."

Forever the voice of reason. Triss rolled her eyes, but nodded, and jumped out of bed. Underwear underwear, where was—ah, underneath one of the kine. She pushed over one of the men, and slid her thong out from where it was sandwiched between him and one of the girls. Still clean, thankfully.

Everyone threw their clothes on in a hurry. In the past, they might risk sleeping in the bed. The mansion was secure, and the thralls in Julias's employ would keep them safe. But, half the thralls were out of commission, sleeping on the floor, naked and covered in sex. The other half wouldn't be a match for hunters; hell, all of them wouldn't be a match for hunters. That meant the three vampires were going to sleep in Julias's secure bunker.

They might fuck there too, when they woke up.

"When's the next primogen meeting?" Jen said as she slipped on a robe. Julias preferred to put on his suit, and Triss only had her typical shit, jeans and a tank top and army boots, but Jen liked the mansion and the mansion-y lifestyle. Expensive, soft robes called Jen's name, like moth to a flame.

"Couple nights from now. I do not look forward to it." Julias finished getting his suit on, but kept the tie off. Better in his pocket, or at least more comfortable.

With the three of them wearing clothes, or at least two of them, Jen in a robe, they left the room, and headed downstairs. Stairs down and down led to the much creepier, much more secure bunker room deep underground that no one was getting into without a nuke.

“Why not?” Jen said, once they got underground, and started down the long halls of stone.

“Garry has been a pain in the ass lately. He’s not happy about the Mirrden situation. This hunters problem has everyone looking for hunters, but the council, Garry, and I assume the Prince and Jacob, are trying to play two games at once. They want the hunters dealt with, and they’re working to plan out the futures of the covenants at the same time. Garry and Michael, in particular, are...”

“Barking at each other like a couple Gangrels.” Triss shrugged, and stepped in beside him. “I can’t blame them. They’re elders, and they’re good at playing the long game.”

“True.” Jen ran one of her fingers along the old stones around them, and let her eyes drift about randomly. Such an old tunnel had an almost romantic feel to it, like something out of a story or play. “But if they don’t focus on what’s in front of them, it’ll kill them.”

“I’m with Jen on this.” Nodding, Julias opened the gates and doors, digital locks and all, to his underground room. “And I’m trying to make them see that. But to the Primogen, I’m just a young punk that doesn’t understand how long life can be. They want to weather the tide. Fuck, even Garry does, and I was hoping he’d be in my corner for a little more aggressive action.”

Yeah, Garry defied some expectations. He was the leader of the Carthians for a reason.

Once they were through the last gate, Triss waited for Jen to pass her, before she turned around, and slit her wrist.

“Um, Beatrice?” Superman said.

“Getting better at this.” With a deep sigh, she let the pain fade away, and forced out some of her thick blood onto her fingers. She reached up, and painted the frames of the door with her blood, her

vitae, and her will. A moment later, the blood began to fade, but it didn't turn to ash like usual. It left behind traces of black, almost invisible against the metal.

“What's that about?” he said.

Grinning all the more, she climbed onto the bed, and lay beside the man. “Witchy stuff.”

“Witchy stuff...”

“Mmhmm.” She kissed him, opened her mouth wide, and pretended to bite his neck with all her extra teeth. He shuddered, and she giggled. Such a lovely feeling, knowing she could still get a thrill out of him when wanted to. “Can't share the details though.”

Blood of the crow. Crows were very observant birds, knowledgeable, wise, and with a know-how other birds didn't have. According to Jacob, that translated into something real, something in the animal, something that the beast could identify. Something that the Crone could bestow. Triss didn't know if she believed in the Crone or whatever, but she believed the beast in a vampire's gut was real, and more real than most Kindred believed; crúac saw to that.

If anything came near the archway she painted, the crow skull would warn her. How exactly it'd warn her, she didn't know. Would it speak? Burn her? Start glowing? It'd have to do something impressive, because unless it could wake her during the day, it wasn't terribly useful. Jacob insisted it could, and that she'd be more than capable of dealing with the intruder, despite the overwhelming exhaustion daytime brought with it.

Hopefully, she'd never have to find out.

“Sure you don't want your suit?” Julias said, sitting up on his elbows and looking to Jen.

“I only wear the suit because I know you like it.” Laughing, Jen snuggled into Triss’s side, still in her robe.

The Nos nodded. “She’d be naked twenty-four-seven if she could get away with it.”

“Bah, you kids. You’ll change your minds when you grow up. A suit is a man’s — and woman’s — second skin. Clothes make the man, you know.”

Triss rolled her eyes. No denying that there was something damn sexy about a suit, though.

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~~Jack~~

Waking up next to the Prince was always a thrill. No matter how many times, no matter how often, no matter what, waking up next to the deadly woman sent the beast in his gut into a panic. It only lasted a moment, as his guts came to the realization that he knew this other beast in bed with him. It knew the colossal, ancient, grand creature, and its immeasurable strength. Immeasurable patience too, considering all the shit that came at her, especially lately.

He scooted in closer to her, and watched her eyes open. He woke up with a jolt, normally, but Antoinette woke up slowly and gently. Those red eyes, god damn. And the way she smiled, sent a jolt stronger than the kick that wakes a Kindred for the night.

He got in closer, pressed himself to her, and kissed her.

“Ah, feeling bold this evening, are we?” She returned his kiss, and pulled him in close with her free arm, other trapped between her and the mattress. It was just the two of them, Ashley and Julee nowhere to be seen. So Jack was in the clear to slide in close to Antoinette, hug her, and simply let the world come to a stop.

“Can we ... stay here?” he said. “Jessy’s dragging me around the city to do some crap, Invictus crap. You’d think with hunters at our doorstep, we’d focus on that and only that.”

“Unfortunately, my love, the world does not stop because hunters attempt to spoil it.”

“It should! If we don’t deal with this problem, we’ll all be dead.”

“Perhaps a metaphor will serve, in this instance. How familiar are you with chess, little Terry?” Her hand raised up to his head, and stroked the back of his skull. Mmm, fingers on buzzed head.

“I used to play it a lot, in high school. Decent player, I guess.”

“I suppose you would consider this war we fight against the hunters to be similar to a game of chess, oui?” She leaned down, and kissed his forehead. The position forced his head into the crevice of her breasts and sternum, and he melted into it as she continued to stroke his head. This is what it must have been like, to be a puppy and melt into pets.

“Yeah, I guess I do. They’re moving pieces, trying to control the board, and we’re doing the same, trying to catch each other and poke holes in defenses.” Sounded like a simple enough comparison.

“And while that is true, the game we play against these hunters is not of the grand scale I speak of. These hunters are a single piece on the board, and there are many others in their color. If we focus all our eyes upon that single piece, then we will surely be able to capture it, but we will leave holes in our defenses against the other pieces.”

“I ... I guess I am focusing a little much. Tunnel vision.” It was hard not to, after what happened to him. “Who are the other pieces?”



“There is the Uratha, and the Begotten, each a single piece. There are the covenants, each a piece. And then there are forces beyond our knowledge or understanding. Spirits flirt with my borders, and test their strengths. And, as you know, there is something amiss in my city, something that threatens us all. A cliché for the ages, and yet, something very real that must be contended with.”

“Nothing’s a cliché when it’s happening to you.” Where did he hear that before?

“Too true. As for all these pieces, they are controlled by life itself, the opponent. We forever battle its whim, and if we do not control the field, defend against all the tools it may attack us with, we will be destroyed.”

“Sounds stressful, trying to manage so much all the time.”

She laughed. The feel of her voice, with his ear against her chest, was delightful, and he hugged her tighter as she continued to pet his head.

“It is. One of the many reasons Kindred often seek delights to alleviate their woes.”

“Delights, you say?”

“Oh yes, delights.” Chuckling again, she pushed against his shoulder, and slid onto him. The blanket slipped down her body, and Jack groaned as he watched her beautiful figure expose itself. She sat on him, his waist, his stomach, and smiled down at him as she reached her arms up to stretch them out. The tug of the motion on her breasts raised them, and caused them to jiggle with the subtle sway of her body.

No way she was doing that just because. She was doing that to arouse the ever living fuck out of him.

She blushed life. Yeah, definitely had a motive. He blushed life as well, and a moment later, his cock was pressing up against the crack of her bountiful ass.

“You got time?” he said. “Thought you had a Primogen meeting to prepare for.”

“I have time, and the meeting is not until tomorrow night. If the worst comes, I shall tell those idiot children to wait. But it is not for some time yet, and I have done plenty to deserve time with my love.”

She always called him ‘her love’. Title of endearment, but also, how she felt about him. He didn’t say it nearly enough.

“... I love you.” It almost sounded forced and unnatural to say it like that. She didn’t care. She blushed a touch red to her cheeks, and leaned down, pressing her hands to his shoulders until her lips found his.

“Merci.” She gazed into his eyes, and he let himself relax into the bed as she shifted her hands onto the blankets above and around his head. As she began to gently grind her pelvis down, and rub her clitoris against his body, her heavy, enormous breasts swayed over his head.

He reached up for one, only for her to take his hands, and pin them down to the blankets, a foot over his head. Fine by him. He opened his mouth, and let her guide one of her nipples down onto his awaiting lips.

The feel of her tensing for a moment, and then relaxing against him, as he began to suckle on her, was amazing. How could such an ancient creature enjoy sex this much? Blew his mind, every time. He pushed his head up into her breast, and let the softness completely bury his face, as he sucked and licked. Her areola swelled in his mouth, half with her arousal, half because he sucked

on it, drawing blood to it. And when he could tell he was getting a little too rough, he eased up on any suction, licking gently instead.

Antoinette let out several, long, heavy sighs, as she ground her body against him. She was getting wet. A small trail of damp warmth ran along his skin, above his cock where she ground herself. It used to have trim hair, but now it was perfectly smooth skin, at Antoinette's request. No rough hair to bother her, as she rubbed her clit against him.

"I hope you are keeping your Right Hands friends close," she said, smiling down at him. "After the incident, I must insist you remain safe at all times."

He nodded, let go of her breast, and moved his head over to the other. She helped, leaning her other breast into his face, so he could pamper and bathe it with his lips and tongue, same as the other.

"How does your position in the Invictus fair, my love?"

He shrugged, and managed a smile with his eyes, before resuming sucking on the most amazing thing in all of existence: breasts.

"I suppose it is a mostly stable position now, is it not? You work with your fellow Right Hands, and are one of the primary drivers of prosperity for your entire covenant." Her eyes looked up, and her shoulders came down lower, smooshing his face in the whole softness of her tit, so he couldn't see her anymore. "In one so young, it must be quite the thrill. Have you any plans on how to spend your new found wealth, or perhaps enjoy your new power?"

At last, she let go of his hands, and sat up. And to his surprise, she pulled him up to sitting as well.

"Not sure. With the money, I figured I'd get a penthouse suite, or something? But I really like it here. And ... and honestly, I haven't thought about it too much, since the incident with Angela."

“And I enjoy having you here, little devil.” With an exaggerated sway of her head, showing off her long, flowing white hair, she hooked her legs behind his lower back, while lifting her ass so she could sink her pussy down onto his length. Hot, squeezing, and god damn heaven. Antoinette didn’t so much as moan, as she buried him to the hilt inside her clenching muscles, and got comfortable between his legs, hers now crossed behind him over his hips.

She was so much taller than him. Sitting on him, on his thighs and pelvis, it put her breasts at head height, and he melted into her chest as she guided his head back to her body.

“Do not fret, my love. As much as these hunters, and the other troubles on our doorstep, are a thorn in my side, our side, it is also true that such things will pass, if we are diligent. As long as you do not let fantasies of how to spend your wealth blind you to present circumstances, I see no fault from indulging.” She started to grind herself back and forth, eyes closing, head drifting back and letting her hair dangle behind her.

Jack was just along for the ride. Course, they’d been having sex for many months now, and he was starting to get more comfortable being proactive with her. She didn’t like having control taken from her, and it wasn’t like he could actually take it, even if he tried. But, she did like it when he followed her lead, and slipped into the groove of her rhythm.

He started shifting his hips with hers, back and forth a couple inches. Nothing crazy, nothing to push either of them to orgasm, but euphoric nonetheless. Each motion she made, she squeezed on his cock, and forced the vise-grip of her soaked insides to massage the hard girth of his length, and its swollen tip. The pleasure sparks came in a consistent, gentle rhythm, and Jack made sure to go slow, to hold off orgasm as long as possible.

It was damn hard, as Antoinette squeezed her curvy, toned, and fucking amazing thighs around him, nice and tight. As she did, she leaned back even further, and let her head dangle behind her completely, so her hair rubbed against the blankets and his knees. Leaning back so far, her breasts were no longer reached by his lips, and instead, were put on display, jiggling and flattening against her chest for the few minutes she hung back, her hands on his shoulders. Up and down, up and down against her chest in slow waves, like a tide.

Holy shit.

But eventually, she sat back up, and slid a hand up the back of his neck to hold his head again, and guide his lips back to her breasts.

“Natasha enjoyed seeing us make love.”

“Uh ... what?”

“In the third wing living room.”

The room with the pretty lighting. Right, he was lying on the couch, and—”She watched us?”

“Of course. We were in the open, and you know she sleeps here in my Elysium Tower, as well as joins me in affairs of the Ordo Dracul.” Laughing, she started to work herself faster, pulling some quiet moans from him, while she barely made a noise other than her words. Total control of her body, despite how he could feel her juices coating him, more, and more. “But do not worry. She enjoyed what she saw.”

“Oh.” Heh, that was good. Stroked his ego, knowing Natasha thought he was attractive. “ ... or, did she like seeing you naked?”

Antoinette shivered, and guided his head down to find her breast again. “I am a terribly splendid example of the human body, am I

not?” Her confidence was practically Ventrue level. So hot.

As he suckled on her nipple again, her insides clenched on him like a vise, almost enough to hurt. And with her constant rocking, the friction of her dripping insides massaging his girth and rubbing against his sensitive glans sent him over the edge. He closed his eyes, and sucked her nipple into his mouth, as if he was hungry for milk. He wasn't going to get that, but the more he bathed her breast in kisses, the more he circled her swollen areola with his tongue, the more she clenched on his girth.

She may not have made much noise when she came, but he did. Too much, too blissful, feeling her insides squeeze and milk him as he came, for a few groans to not escape him as the warm fluid gushed up his length. Soon, it was dripping out of her depths, onto him, along with her own juices. She pulled his head from her breast, and kissed him. Eyes half open, she gazed into him as she milked him, and as she came. He was hopeless to resist, and did nothing but stare back into her red gaze as he shivered, struggling to manage the stimulus of her gripping and squeezing.

He couldn't come forever though, and eventually he went slack in her arms. A signal for her to let go of him, slide her legs out from behind him, and let him fall to the blankets.

“You, my boy, my little Ventrue, are to be careful with your adventures. Trips to the Shadow Realm are dangerous at best, and as much as it is your duty to communicate with the Begotten and Uratha, you are not to throw your life to suicidal whims. Understand?”

Before he could respond, she stood up. With one foot beside each side of his waist, thighs spread slightly, she put her hands on her hips, and gave him a very ‘angry mother’ glare. Frowning at him, a one-eighty on the sex they'd had literally twenty seconds ago, she raised a foot, and pressed it down against his chest.

He could see a mix of their cum dripping down her thighs, until it reached the ankle of the foot pressing to his sternum.

“I’ll try, but—”

“But?”

Oh shit. She glared down at him, and pressed down on the foot. It wasn’t like she was very heavy, by vampire standards; even Jack could lift something a couple hundred pounds without much issue, these nights. So even if she put enough strength into the foot to crush metal, it didn’t matter if she only weighed as much as a tall-but-fit woman normally does. Thank god, because there was a bite to her eyes he hadn’t expected.

“I ... I mean, I’ll really try. I can’t guarantee it though, you know?” If there was one way he was going to die, it’d be by pissing off his lover. Probably the most dangerous of all his options, but he had to be honest with her.

“I understand the ritual showed your face, Jack, but that was likely due to your closeness to either Azamel or myself. For all the trials that may come your way, understand that you need not be the one that throws themselves into the fray to see them solved. Your partner Herrington, or even that fool Damien, are older than you, and more than capable of dealing with threats.”

He blinked up at the woman, and gulped. From sex to orders in a single minute. But after staring up at her for a while, he nodded. “I’ll be careful, and make sure someone else is there to deal with things if they get hot.”

“Good.” Stepping down from the bed, she sighed, and looked over her shoulder as she reached out to scoop up her clothes from the chair by the mirror.

“Something bring this on?” He jumped out of the bed, and walked after her, standing behind her once she sat down in the chair.

“Nothing specific, non. But, after the incident with that man Eric, and his random change, it is hard to not imagine what it would have been like if he had suffered such a change in your presence.”

“That’s ... a random thing, to be worried about. After all the things I’ve deal with, that—”

She picked up her brush with a snap. Mood swing? He wasn’t about to say it, or he was liable to get torn apart.

“Those were not things that should have been thrust upon you. The incident with Viktor and Tony was of my doing, and your presence was a regrettable accident. Lucas’s insanity and kamikaze assault were not for you to contend with, it was my problem to solve, and Daniel’s. That monster that plagued our sewers, the arrival of the Avery and her Uratha, the arrival of Azamel and the resurgence of other Begotten, and now the arrival of hunters? Please stop throwing yourself headlong into these situations, or you will find yourself in a crisis you cannot escape, if this continues.”

“That ... is a lot of things, now that you say it like that.” He came in from behind her, and as she started brushing her hair, he took the brush. With a sigh, she set her hands down, and worked on getting dressed. She slipped her underwear on, and did up her bra; did it so smoothly, she could probably do it all one handed.

“I apologize, but it bothers me terribly, to look into your eyes, little Ventrue, only to imagine them in such fraught situations.”

He chuckled, and brushed through the waves of white. “I seem to be pretty good at surviving those situations, don’t I?”

“Yes, and you forever impress me. But, no doubt this situation with Angela has led to a horrible outcome, has it not?”



Shit. Did she know? Know about his hang-ups and baggage about her? Shit. Shit shit.

“Um, what do you mean?”

“With Athalia. I remember her talking with you, at the ball. And you have met her on several occasions since then. I thought, perhaps, she might become a friend to you.”

Oh, right, Athalia. “She is, sort of. She was at the last Right Hands meeting, sharing with us some information about the hunters.”

“Oh? She has news?” She turned her head slightly. Either a queue to start brushing that side of her hair, or a way to look at him in the corner of her eye. The tone of her voice changed too, to something more analytical. Prince mode, he supposed.

“She does. The council will fill you in at the Primogen meeting.”

“You do not wish to tell me?”

“Oh! Um, I can, sure. Just figured you wouldn’t want a double dose? And, we usually avoided topics like this.”

Sighing, but nodding, she looked back to the mirror, and leaned forward to peer into it. With a quick but precise hand, she started applying her makeup. Again, something she could have done with her eyes closed, he was sure.

“It is good to hear it from you.”

He wasn’t sure it was. But, it was a part of being in a serious relationship, according to her. So, even if it wasn’t good, it was required, if they were going to be equal partners in their relationship. He never felt like an equal partner in the past, and she was making efforts to change that. With other couples, it’d be talk of student loans, or car repairs, or the uncle’s cancer, or mom’s

drinking problem. With them, it was about the hunters at their door coming to kill them.

“Since Azamel thinks the weird ritual was performed by an extremely old woman, Invictus and the Begotten have been keeping an eye out for an old woman.”

“Not exactly a difficult thing to find in Dolareido. There are many.”

“Yeah but this woman is supposed to be very old. Scully and Mulder told me they saw a woman on a respirator and in a wheelchair, so I’m thinking it could be her? And Fiona and Athalia say they saw a similar woman in Devil’s Corner.”

“That is a lead worth exploring. Well done. And your skill with animalism grows too.” She grinned at him, before returning to her mascara.

“Oh! Speaking of Devil’s Corner. I wanted to ask you about a ... a thing, a symbol, artifact, object, something or other, dangling in one of the sex holes. Vicky and Parker run that sex hole; doing a side business thing, I guess. You know anything about the object? Avery seemed to know something.”

“Ah, yes, I know of the object. I suppose if Avery shows interest in it, then that confirms my suspicions. It summons, or creates, an essence of sexual delight. And spirits come to feast, and spread, such influence.”

Antoinette sounded like Clara, or Avery. She knew a lot about spirits then. Maybe he should ask her more about them, in the future.

“You know where they got it?”

“Jacob and I, long ago, imported many objects of such a strange nature.” She moved onto her lipstick, and blew him a kiss in the mirror after applying the blood red. “And I continue to do so. I am sure Jacob does as well, though we no longer share with each other what objects we acquire. I am sure the man has had dealings with all the Kindred of the city, in ways you do not know.”

“But you know.”

“Ben oui, mon amour. But I cannot tell you how I know.”

He nodded, and laughed. Yeah, secrets. Much as they were in a serious relationship, quote unquote, they’d never be able to share with each other all their secrets, as long as they were in different covenants. Even if they were both dragons, he doubted the great Voivode of Dolareido could tell him everything she knew.

So, Jacob probably gave them the object. Or they somehow acquired it, and Jacob was the one who brought it to Dolareido. An innocent exchange, or was the old bastard manipulating Vicky and Parker? The rabbit hole was so deep in Dolareido, it might as well have been endless.

He watched Antoinette’s reflection for a while. She’d returned to looking at herself as she worked her face with tools and stuff he’d never truly appreciate. She looked smoking hot wearing make up, but damn, what a hassle; she looked smoking hot without it too, so it wasn’t like she had to wear it, or so much of it. A Daeva would never go without their mask, she’d say. Smiling at the memory, he kept watching her reflection as he brushed her hair. The mood swing earlier was a little strange. It was true his second life kept throwing shit at him, but he’d made it through so far. No reason to suddenly get angry about it.

Unless something was bothering her.

“ ... Antoinette.”

“Oui, mon amour?”

“ ... how much do you know about Black Blood?”

She froze. He froze. Yeah, that was a sensitive spot. He didn't know why it was a sensitive spot, or what Black Blood had done to make her so anxious, but something about it was connected to things. From her reaction, she definitely knew about the spirit; she'd reacted to his name, last time he mentioned it. He didn't pursue it at the time, though. Better to let that tidbit rest while they talked about other things. Not this time.

“It is an old entity, Jack. Ancient. It was here before Jacob and I came to Dolareido. It was here before we turned a tiny village into our haven.”

“You've spoken to it?”

“ ... I have.” Sighing, she got up, took the brush back, and started getting dressed in her suit. “I cannot tell you how I have spoken to the creature, but I have.”

Scary. He shivered a bit, and sat in the chair as Antoinette put on her shirt and skirt. “I'm only asking because the name comes up in strange places. It might have something to do with ... well ... everything.”

“I sincerely hope it does not. The beast inserts its tentacles in every facet of my city, in ways I struggle to understand.”

Hearing Antoinette admit to not knowing something was almost strange to the ear. She was usually confident, almost to the point of warranting a Viktor comparison.

“It does?”

“Yes. Dark currents forever sweep through my tunnels, through my streets, through the homes and business locales that pepper my city and fortress. It ... it has motives that I do not understand, and that Jacob has only scratched the surface of.” Fully dressed, she set her hands on his shoulders, leaned down, and set a kiss to his forehead. “It plays games in my city, and it is not above murder in its pursuits. Its name is Black Blood for a reason, little Ventrue. Please, be careful with it.”

Maybe it was his visit to the Shadow World that had her more anxious than usual. He'd said Black Blood was one of the powers there, and then other names, Red Tide and Street-Tail King. Big names, names that had her startled. He was poking at a world she didn't understand, and dealing with names beyond her comprehension. Beyond anyone's comprehension, except for maybe Avery. Maybe she felt helpless, that no matter what she did, he'd get himself hurt or killed, dealing with things outside of purview. And if there was anyone who couldn't handle not being in control, it'd be her.

“ ... you really think it's my proximity to you, or Azamel, that led to the ritual showing my face?”

Sighing heavy, she pulled him up onto his feet, and hugged his naked body tight to her. Tall as she was, she set her chin on top of his head, and squeezed him.

“Yes. Do you think it could be something else?”

City Sky knew his name. Jacob mentioned him. People and spirits were talking about him, for reasons he didn't know.

Jacob. What the fuck was that man doing? He had to be involved in the damaged portal door thing, and the other mysterious shit happening. Either he knew who was doing it, or he was responsible. But, to imagine the vampire tearing open holes across the worlds, was a bit much. Even Fiona, a monster and ancient horror

apparently, didn't tear open holes to the spirit world. She found doors and opened them.

God damn, he missed the old days.

“ ... Antoinette?”

“Oui?”

“I haven't seen you at the Bloodlust lately.” Maybe he could ask her to rekindle those old days.

“That ... is true. I have been buried in concerns and worries. I spend many of my nights standing at my window, looking at the city, and considering my options.” She let go of him, and started toward the vault door of her grand bedroom. “Perhaps tomorrow night, after the Primogen meeting?”

“Tomorrow night? I'm supposed to be meeting with Beatrice and Jen. Fiona too.”

“Oh? Where?”

“My apartment. We're going to talk about the hunters, but I think Triss is planning to just chill. But, I can ask if they'd prefer to another time.”

Antoinette smiled at him over her shoulder. “Perhaps, instead of asking them to reschedule, ask them to come to Bloodlust?”

“Um, sure.” He returned her smile, and finger waved as she disappeared through the door.

Beatrice and Jen, and Fiona, and Antoinette. That was way too many women. Hopefully she wouldn't mind if he invited Damien. Julias was busy, but Damien might have a few hours to spare.

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“What. The fuck. Is this?” Jessy swept her arm through the air, pointing to the vampires of the room.

The only vampires that should have been in the room were the Right Hands of the Invictus, but there were two more. Garry Tones sat on the edge of Jeremy Long’s desk, arms folded across his chest, and a wolfish grin on his lips. He was completely at odds with the aesthetic of the building, slick and modern, with a few warmer colors than the Xnomina HQ, but otherwise still similar to its motif of money money money.

Garry didn’t reek of money. Garry reeked of brutishness. He reeked of zero elegance. He reeked of being a bully. His shaved head, the jeans, the jean jacket from the eighties, and the scars, were perfectly at home on the elder Gangrel. It fit his aesthetic, but Terra Den’s HQ did not.

Jack looked around the room some more, and glared at the man in corner. Montoya Montel. A ghoul, apparently, based on the way he kept glancing Long’s way. Not the usual glances of an employee, but of a devoted slave. Of course, it was Long being a Kindred, that had everyone shocked.

“Jack, Jessy ... Damien, little fucker.” Garry rubbed his fingers on his jacket, as if removing dust. A classic display of nonchalance, to show that they weren’t a threat.

He was wrong. They were a threat, at least a small one, even if the man didn’t realize it. That knowledge was the only reason Jack wasn’t urging the three of them to split before shit hit the fan.

“Mister Tones,” Jack said. “I, uh ... am I to take it that Jeremy Long is your new childe?”

“Yeap.” The elder smirked, and turned slightly to give them a more clear view of the CEO of Terra Den.

Jeremy Long was of average height, and though he was wearing a suit, Jack guessed he had a decent build underneath. If he was Garry's child, it was probably more than decent, and actually tough as metal. Chinese heritage, though born in the US near Washington. Came to Dolareido for its prosperous industries of sin and vice, and created Terra Den.

Jessy was not happy. "When the fuck did this happen?"

"Jeremy's been my ghoul for some time, and now that the Prince has opened the door on siring, I embraced him." Shrugging, Garry hopped off the desk, and took a seat by a fern. At least Xnomina embraced its dead-and-professional look. Terra Den felt like your typical, slimy, evil, pretty-on-the-surface corporation. Very not-Garry, now that he thought about it.

"You fuckin' this brat?" Jessy said.

Christ. So much for trying to be Garry's friend.

"... not that it matters, but no, I'm not fucking Jeremy." Garry rolled his eyes, and gestured to Montoya. "Or his ghoul. Get your head out of your ass, Jessy. Idiot child."

If it was any other Carthian, Jessy would have torn into the man, verbally or physically. Not Garry. Much as he was the youngest elder in Dolareido, he was still an elder, and the power that radiated from him shut down the three beasts of the Right Hands, like whiny, scared dogs. Jessy's loud words were just barking.

"How may I help the representatives of Xnomina today?" Jeremy said. He had the jackass grin that you'd expect from an expert poker player, CEO, and all around evil asshole.

"... Christ I hate you." Jessy motioned to Jack. "This is Jack Terry. You already know Damien Burksen."



“Ah yes, Jack Terry. Your name has a habit of circulating conversations.” The man leaned back in his chair, and tapped one hand’s fingers against the table, while the other swished around a glass of red. Blood, instead of wine.

“Does it?” Jack said.

“Indeed. Your recent encounter with the hunters is a topic worthy of discussion.”

Montoya snorted on a chuckle, and wiped his thumb across his lip. “Hear you nearly died. Shame you didn’t. Could use some holes in the Invictus.”

What the fuck. Jack looked Montoya’s way, and stared daggers into the man. Long and Tones were happy to dance around insults without ever saying them directly, while Montoya didn’t feel the same, apparently.

Montoya Montel was a fat fucker, pale skin, and tall. Every step was liable to break the floor. His brown hair was long, wavy, and his beard was a bit scraggy. What was a lazy, unkempt man like him doing with Long? Long’s hair was very short, and he had a tiny chin beard fitting his Asian heritage; he looked damn professional, while Montel looked like he belonged in a fast food joint, eating burgers. All the burgers.

Damien and Jessy sneered, Jessy louder. Jack winced, and analyzed. This was a strange move on Garry’s part, and untimely.

“Mister Tones,” Jack said. Let’s see if he can salvage what was turning into a train wreck. “Are you aware Montel’s man Mister Pitt tried to kill Eric Tanverson? According to Eric, it was to send a message to Xnomina.”

Garry shrugged. “Kine lives. Nothing Jeremy can’t do what he wants with, as long as he doesn’t damage the Masquerade.”

“Except Eric isn’t kine,” Jessy said. “He’s Uratha.”

“He didn’t know that at the time,” Garry said.

Not good enough for Jessy. She marched up to the big wooden desk, glared at Long, before turning and marching over to Garry.

She reached out, picked him up by the collar of his jacket, and punched him.

Shit.

## Chapter 67

~~Jack~~

He would have facepalmed, if he wasn't too busy staring at the catastrophe.

If they were Invictus, they'd have been stunned at the sheer audacity of Madam Herrington. To a Carthian, it was an invitation to a fist fight. And Garry looked liked he pissed and shit fist fights.

He drew back his fist, and punched his fellow Gangrel in the face. A courtesy punch, maybe, because Jack knew Gangrels didn't use their fists when trying to hurt, they used claws. He'd never seen a Gangrel summon their claws, or use any of their protean abilities, and he didn't want to; Julias's horror stories about the damage McDonald could inflict when pissed was plenty.

Backing up, he reached for his pistol and sword, and kept his hands on their grips, as Jessy flew across the room, slammed into the wall, and fell to the floor. Dislocated jaw. Jack stared on as Jessy got up, grabbed her jaw, and yanked on it. Vitae and elbow grease to get her jaw working again. Fucking god, that was nauseating. She marched toward Garry again, straight toward his pissed off face, before Jack jumped between them.

“Jessy! Come on, stop!”

She didn't appreciate him trying to stop her, but at least she didn't throw him aside. “This fucker is a loose cannon! Hunters on our fucking doorstep, and he's looking to piss off the Invictus.”

“You're one to talk.” With a snarl, Garry sat back down, and adjusted his jacket. “Like I said, we didn't know Eric was Uratha

when Long decided to make it known he wasn't going to take orders from the Invictus anymore."

Jessy kept trying to push past Jack, and he kept pushing her back. Like trying to keep a bull back, but at least she wasn't so stupid as to throw herself at Garry full force again. With a minute to calm down, she backed away, and started pacing, fuming in place. Probably grinding her teeth into powder.

"Like it would have mattered!"

"It would have." Long stood up, came around the desk, and sat against its front edge. "He was just a pawn to be used in a little jab against the Invictus. A deserved jab, might I add."

Eventually, Jack pushed Jessy back toward the door, next to Damien.

This was strange. Garry may have been an asshole, but he didn't normally throw kine lives under the bus; typical Carthian drama, protectors of the people, shit like that. If he was willing to let Long kill kine just to piss off the Invictus, then he was looking to poke the bear, maybe start a fight, or instigate an outright battle. The timing was atrocious, or perfect, if Garry had some plan the Invictus didn't know about. Likely; Garry was smarter than he appeared.

"This is an awkward situation," Damien said, stepping forward. "We came here to talk to Long, and to make sure he realized Terra Den, and he in particular, were not in a position to challenge Xnomina. But if he is now Kindred, that complicates things."

Complicate indeed. The timing of Long's embrace was odd, and on top of that, Kindred usually groomed a kine before embracing them. So, Long might have known about Kindred well before his embrace, to the point multiple meetings with Xnomina were had with his knowing they were Kindred. It'd be tough to learn when and if Garry

told him anything, if he wasn't willing to share. And a punch to the face from Jessy probably shut the door on that idea.

"Long told me," Garry said, shrugging. "That's why I'm here. Making sure you don't hurt my childe."

"Antoinette is ok with this?" Jack said. Maybe he shouldn't have said it, though. Mister Tones threw him a glare, with a tiny smirk to go with it. Yeah, his relationship with Antoinette wasn't going to help him here.

"She is. As per the Prince's law, when she opened the floor to siring again, I talked with her to make sure this was allowed." The bastard licked his teeth, and his smirk grew. "Surprised she didn't tell you, short stuff."

"... did ... did you sire this guy, just to know if Antoinette was telling me things that'd help the Invictus?"

"Nah. I sired him because Long is a friend, and he's earned this."

Jack didn't believe him. Much as Garry was a typical Gangrel, aggressive and direct, he was also an elder, and that meant an ability to lie. Dance the Danse.

Damien sighed, shook his head, and tossed a glare back at Montoya before looking to Garry again. "This is ill timed, Mister Tones. We have hunters at our door, and—"

"Shut up, church boy," Garry said. "If it wasn't for the Prince, I'd kill you myself, right now. Lucas's childe? You're nothing but a thorn in my side. And you two?" Garry pointed to Jack and Jessy. "Invictus dogs, nothing more."

Something was off. Something was going on, something not obvious on the surface. Why Garry was pulling this shit, Jack didn't

know, but it wasn't for the reasons he was saying. Or maybe it was for those reasons, and Garry was combining two motives.

"I don't believe this." Marching left and right, Jessy kept her glare on Garry and Long, each turn of her body an opportunity for her to posture and growl. "You're messing in Invictus affairs, directly at that, Tones."

"Could say the same about the Mirrden district."

"We don't have time for this!" She threw up her hands, and stomped for the door. "Let's go, boys. This is a matter for the council."

"Speaking of the council," Garry said, eyes hard and glaring, "keep an eye on that Maria bitch, would you? She's messing with shit, and it's going to backfire."

Damien and Jack froze, while Jessy turned around again.

"The fuck you talking about?"

"I'm saying, Maria's fucking with nasty shit. I'm not sure what, I'm not sure how, but she's going to screw up, and bring hellfire on the city." He tapped his nose, and nodded. "A warning."

Frowning, Jessy turned back to the door, and the three of them left. With Jessy a little ahead of them, Jack and Damien looked at each other, and winced. Yet another possible source of the unknown danger looming over the city. Fucking great.

---

Isabella's hideout was beautiful, and creepy. The underground cave, the candles, the blatant Victorian clothing, and furnishings Jack was sure he'd seen in Julias's mansion. It wasn't like the underground labyrinth of the Elysium Tower, but it was still damn

impressive. It'd have taken many years to carve this hole out of the ground, and more besides to do it underneath the old theater.

“No no no! Passion, my dear boy. Passion!” Isabella’s voice. Her arms were around her chest, pressing to her breasts and raising them slightly; on purpose, no doubt. Other vamps were standing around, and watching a male and female vampire in the center of the group, kissing. Guess they were practicing for a play.

Jack smiled as Hella brought him into the main chamber of the cave, and gestured for him to sit in one of the fancy chairs. He did, and took a moment to admire its soft, red cushion, and the wood finishing. How did they sneak shit like this down here?

The girl backed off from her kissing partner. A skinny thing, with long blond hair and pale skin. Cute, and beautiful.

“Vanessa, it may be the boy cannot kiss you passionately, because you keep backing away!” Isabella said, snapping her fingers and motioning for the girl to step back in. Ok, she may have been cute and beautiful, but maybe her acting skills weren’t up to par.

“Or because Jeremy is gay,” she said, scoffing and and folding her arms across her chest. Unlike Isabella, she did it defensively; didn’t like having her acting questioned, apparently. It was enough to earn a chuckle from the crowd, and a scowl from Isabella.

“Irrelevant. We are acting.” Isabella marched up, grabbed Jeremy, and kissed him.

Jack raised a brow, and so did Hella, before the Gangrel laughed. Yeah, Isabella was dedicated to the craft, because god damn. She pulled Jeremy in close, and laid it on him. She was a tall woman, and the ornate arrangement of blond braids she sported were done up in a spiraling crown on her head tonight. Seeing someone like that, with her sharp chin and ice blue eyes, grabbing a man and kissing him, was kind of arousing. The fact both Jeremy and

Isabella were gay made it awkward, but getting over that sort of stuff was part of acting, he supposed. It was the similarity between them, and Antoinette and Jack, physically, that was arousing.

Isabella was fucking hot, in a classic Victorian queen fantasy sort of way. Antoinette was a bit taller, and her bust was bigger, but that didn't change that Isabella was both tall, busty, and lean and curvy with pronounced hips. Wearing a black see-through robe with a full corset and flowing skirt underneath, Jack couldn't help but let his mind wander. Isabella was gay, and Antoinette was hardly against have women in the bedroom; Ashley and Julee, of course. The idea of Isabella and Antoinette, legs locked, kissing, naked breasts pressing to each other? God damn.

Something about the sight of a busty lady in a corset, being aggressive, that made him want to lie down in her bed and let her do whatever she wanted, and ask her if he could do whatever she wanted. A glance Hella's way suggested she might have been into the same thing, considering the way she was smiling at Isabella's aggressiveness. He'd figured Hella was an aggressive type, but then, so too was Isabella. Maybe one of them was different behind closed doors, timid and submissive. Maybe not, and they liked to fight for the top position, heh.

For the love of god, Jack. Get your mind out of the ditch, and onto the task at hand.

"You see?" Isabella said, and stepped back. "Your movements must be exaggerated and pronounced. The audience cannot see the batting of your eyelashes, dear. They will see the bent knee, the pressing of your breasts to his chest, and the gripping of his back with your hands."

Made sense, like a book cover; useless if the thumbnail wasn't eye catching.



The students resumed their scene. Some more tips from Isabella, mostly about ‘passion’ this and ‘passion’ that, before they broke for the evening. Satisfied, Isabella came over to sit on the edge of her four-poster bed. The luxurious wood sat perfectly level, despite being on the uneven ground of the smoothed cave floor. White sheets this time, pristine white, in contrast — or in defiance — to the dirt of the cave. Then again, it was damn clean, for a cave.

Hella sat beside her, then slid behind her, reached around for her lover’s stomach, and undid the robe. Isabella kept it on, but with it opened, she leaned forward a little as she hooked her hands on her knees, one over the other. The angle and corset meant the upper half of her large breasts were on display like melons on a platter. No wonder it was hard to keep his mind out of the gutter.

Hella was beautiful too, in a ‘I’ll kick your ass at rugby’ sort of way. Her dark eyes, fit body, and tan skin were gorgeous, and reminded him a lot of Clara. Oh, reminder: go see Clara, and see how things are going with Eric.

“What brings you to my humble abode, Master Terry?” she said. “Or, Mister Terry, I would imagine? A Right Hand has earned his place, after all.”

He squinted at her with one eye, and looked to Hella for a read. The Gangrel smirked, for a second, before she noticed his looking, and wiped it away. The Daeva probably didn’t like that he got the promotion then; which made sense, considering she was one of the few ancilla in the city, and was passed up on the promotion for him. Must have bothered her. Hopefully her Invictus loyalty would keep this interaction fruitful.

“Madam Laeuvion, I had a couple questions for you.”

“By all means, ask. After the damage you did to the hunters who killed Master Tellern, I am more than willing to help.”

Oh, he didn't see that coming. Especially the flirtatious gaze that came after. She was manipulating, exploiting her body and her gaze, and trying to twist him around her finger. Well fuck, she was good at it. Fucking Daeva. But her thanks for his blow against the hunters, a sort of revenge for Barry, must have been legit, considering the original request she'd made, before he was a Right Hand.

“Unfortunately, Barry Tellern's real killers remain at large; the hunters I managed to catch off guard were only pawns. And the hunters are partly what this visit is about.”

“Yes, of course.” Nodding, she snapped her fingers, and pointed to one of the students. One of the actors from earlier, a woman, still around and chatting with some of the other students, ran up in a jiffy. A very attractive woman, tan skin like Hella, but with softer features and gentler brown eyes. Her hair was black, and came down to her hips as several ponytails with intricate braid work. Definitely Isabella's childe.

Jack hadn't seen this girl before, and the beast in him said she was a young Kindred, younger than him. That was damn rare. He knew Antoinette had opened siring, but embracing new Kindred was a largely private affair. Only when they were ready, would a sire bring their new childe to the Invictus council, and only after that, show them to other Kindred.

Jack's circumstance had been unusual. This girl's was more normal, he imagined. Normal, and probably filled with sex, considering her sire was a Daeva.

“Miss Danny Florence,” Isabella said. “This is Mister Jack Terry.”

“Hello,” she said, offering a small bow. Dressed in a thin, black dress with blatant Victorian inspiration, like everything else in the room, she squirmed a little as she made eye contact with him. What

had Isabella told her to make this new vampire afraid of him? Probably a comparison to Viktor, if he guessed right.

He raised a brow again, at Isabella, as she snapped her fingers, and pointed Danny at a nearby desk against the cave wall. Much as Isabella seemed to adore Victorian everything, she had a laptop on her desk. Power and internet, he was sure, with a wifi router hidden under the bed or something. He struggled to not smile at the thought, as Danny scooped up the laptop, and brought it over to Isabella.

“Your report to the council, about the old woman, was relayed to us. I have seen such a woman, in Devil’s Corner. Or rather, Hella has.” She turned the laptop, and showed him the picture.

Based on the angle, it was taken from a rooftop, similar to the mental images Scully and Mulder had tried to convey to him. A bird’s mind wasn’t a human mind though, and their attempts to convey details were pointless; might as well have been trying to understand colors outside the human viewing spectrum.

There was an old woman in a chair, with a respirator on the wheelchair’s back, and someone was pushing it. A random man with no identifying marks other than that he was wearing a gray hoodie that hid the features. He took a second to scan the hoodie for any brand marks, but there were none; a typical tactic to avoid being easily recognized. There were a couple other people as well, a man and woman, walking beside the chair. If they’d been talking to the old woman, it’d have looked normal, but they weren’t. Looked more like they were standing guard.

The next picture showed them entering an apartment building. Just some random, shitty apartment building in Devil’s Corner. But a specific building, with an address and everything. A million times better than anything he had.

“Amazing,” he said, and beamed at Hella. “Thanks.”

“No problem, kid.” With a shrug, Hella set her chin on the woman’s shoulder, as she also set her legs to dangle off the bed, around Isabella’s. “What’s your next move?”

“Not sure. Gonna take this to my sire. Finally got some kind of actionable evidence.”

“If she’s the woman you’re looking for,” Isabella said.

“Yeah, true. Think I should send a scout to find out, first?”

The icy woman shrugged. “A question for your sire, Mister Mire. But, a scout would be dangerous. If the scout alerts them to their presence, it could spell doom for said Kindred. Or the hunters will simply flee, and scurry into the cracks of the city like the cockroaches that they are.” Again, she snapped her fingers, pointed at Danny, and then pointed at the bed.

Jack raised a brow, and watched Danny sit on the bed’s side, and begin to undo her shoes. He glanced around, and noticed the other members of her group were gone. Just him and the three Kindred that, he assumed, shared a bed. Not an assumption anymore, considering Danny was peeking at him over her shoulder, as she started undoing the string-wrap buttons of her shirt.

She looked shy, and timid, just like he must have that first night with Antoinette. And he had to admit, that timid, shy look was a real turn on. If he was a more aggressive fellow, he could see how arousing that’d be, to have someone meek and shy under your touch, helpless to stop you as you make them cum their brains out.

But it was also terrifying to be that person, and he had no reason to make things harder on her. He got up, saved the apartment building’s address on his phone, texted it to Damien and Jessy — on delay until he was out of the cave — and nodded to Isabella and Hella.

“I’ll bring this up with my partners, and we’ll decide from there. Thank you again.”

“Oh? You do not wish to watch?” Isabella smirked at him, almost a sneer, and leaned back against Hella. Either they’d rehearsed this, or they rode the same wavelength pretty well, because Hella reached around her lover’s waist, and started undoing the lace of the corset. Each tug of her fingers caused the two large mounds behind its over-bust shape to tremble lightly with the movements, and he had to admit, he stared at them for a second longer than he should have. Maybe two.

“Watch? I uh, I have a girlfriend as you know, and—”

“Watch, not join. The Prince shares a passion for the theatrical display of sexuality, does she not?” Isabella’s smirk remained. She wasn’t offering to put on a sex show because she wanted to perform. She was offering so she could trap him in a bad situation, break him, manipulate him, like he was nothing more than a sex obsessed teenager. “The Prince enjoyed inviting others to create a sexual spectacle, at the ball. And I admit, it was a terribly enjoyable experience.”

He hesitated again. Not his fault! His penis had a mind of its own, and it was very much wanting to see the three women do things to each other. But he wasn’t thirteen anymore. He could control his dick. Mostly.

“Pass, but thank you for the very, very ... very tempting offer.” He made a small bow, and turned to leave.

“Mister Terry,” Isabella said, leaning back and setting her head against Hella’s neck, as the Gangrel slid off her corset. Breasts. Large, heavy breasts. Jack forced his eyes down and away. God damn it, woman. “Have you been watching the council?”

“Watching the council? You mean—”

“I mean, it is in any Kindred’s prerogative to keep an eye on other Kindred, Mister Terry. We are, after all, territorial creatures. And those who have been keeping an open eye and ear, will have no doubt noticed a buzzing noise. Something about the Madam Turio, and a dangerous game she plays?”

What the ever-living fuck. Garry had mentioned that only a fucking hour ago. What the hell.

“Where ... did you hear that?” He looked over his shoulder at her, half to hold a dramatic, Ventrue pose, and half to make it easier to not look directly at her naked torso.

“Vicky and Parker, through a friend of a friend of a friend.”

Vicky and Parker. This was getting ridiculous. How many things kept pointing at those two, and now several people pointed at Maria, too. Why Maria? What could she be doing that had everyone so concerned and aware?

“Thanks, for telling me.” Even though it reeked of manipulation.

Jack offered a nod, and gulped as he watched Hella and Danny both begin to kiss Isabella’s neck, while caressing and massaging her heavy breasts from behind her.

Yeah, get out now.



~~Natasha~~

They followed her to the shower, again. She was worried they’d want more sex, and kind of excited they might too, but three orgasms for each boy was enough to keep them satisfied for at least a couple hours. Werewolves were unendingly horny, she realized far too late into this relationship. Art grabbed the soap, Matt grabbed the shampoo, and they got to work pampering her; also, cleaning up

their mess, because both wolves had taken it upon themselves to coat her in their cum. Something about being covered in their seed was so dirty, and naughty, and primal, that it tickled something inside her, made her squeal and squirm and give her best doe eyes. And if she gave them those doe eyes right now, as they washed the cum from her skin, they'd probably fuck her again.

But, enough was enough. For now.

“You know Tash,” Art said, on a knee in front of her, and one of her legs in his hands as he soaped it, “we don't know much about you.”

“You d-don't?”

“Nope.” Matt stood behind her, and started working his fingers in her hair with the shampoo. Oh, oh, heavenly. The shower was becoming a frequent place for conversation, considering how often they had to use it, post sex.

“Yeah.” Arts hands worked the soap up and down her leg, massaging as much as washing. “Who were your parents? What sort of life did you live before becoming a vampire? That sort of stuff.”

“Oh ... um, well, Kindred don't usually talk about that kind of stuff, you know? It's like, um ... that p-p-part of us died when we were embraced. We're on our second lives n-now, and we ... we try and focus on that.” Not always successfully.

They nodded, and hmmm'd a few times, in sync with each other.

“All Kindred do that?” Matt said.

“W-We do, as we age. It's important, b-because if we don't, those old memories can really ... tie us down. We're n-not like you, alive. Kindred are undead things, and that means we can b-be a b-b-bit static. Old memories can be an anchor, in a b-bad way.” Trying to

explain it was difficult. How to get across that Kindred were literally dead things, pretending to be living things, and that it was easy for a dead thing to get trapped by the unchanging state of their minds, was more or less impossible. Torpor changed a Kindred's mind, not aging; they didn't age anymore.

“Still hard to believe that you're older than me. I mean, just look at this thing.” Art set both hands around her vulva, and pulled her apart, earning a squeak from her. “This thing is so damn tiny! And you shave it smooth.”

She pounded both her small fists on his huge shoulders, until the brute stopped opening her entrance like she was a bag of chips!

“You! You ... you two should trim some of that hair off. It's n-normal, in a city like Dolareido, t-to trim off or shave off p-pubic hair.”

The two wolves looked down at their naked bodies, and shrugged. “Sure,” they said.

Well, that was easy.

“You don't ... d-don't have to wax it, or anything.”

“Good fucking god!” Matt jumped back, and hit his back against the wall of the shower. Big tub, big shower, but not enough for the man. “I didn't even consider that!”

Giggling, she turned around, and pat the big guy on his stomach. “Relax! I s-said you d-d-don't have to. Just shave, or trim.” Matt was a typical mountain man, big and gruff, lots of body hair. It looked good on him, but she spent her first and second life in Dolareido. In such cities, fashion was always on the mind, and quick to adopt the newest fads. Maybe some day, it'd be with plenty of hair again, but for a good twenty years now, it was to go hairless.



Easy for her to do. She shaved her body down once, and simply didn't regrow it unless she wanted to. Laughing, she thought of Art and Matt shaving themselves down, only to regrow all their hair in a puff of comedic smoke.

With her back turned to Art, she should have predicted the man would take advantage. She squeaked, and tried to turn around, but he didn't let her, one hand gripping her hip while the other soaped up her butt. Ah well, it needed to be cleaned anyway.

"Prince tell you about the new Uratha in town?" Art said.

"Um, only a little. Eric, r-right?" Jessy and Tash had both seen him, talked to him, but before they knew he was a werewolf.

"Yeah." Matt set his hands on her head, and continued shampooing her hair, from the front this time. "We haven't see him yet. Avery's description is he's a black dude, average height, shaved head, clean shaven." His smile was so warm, and she returned it as she took a loofa, and started lathering his body too. Like washing steel.

Right. Nodding, she reached up, and washed the man's shoulders as best she could from so far below. "W-Works at Bloodlust."

"We should pay him a visit," Art said. "But, Clara said he's not too interested in us."

"He doesn't want to learn ab-bout ... who he is?"

Matt shook his head, and turned her around to begin washing her back. "When you first change, you get some memories bestowed on you, from Luna."

A cough drew both their eyes down to Art. "Just because the transformation gives us memories, doesn't mean it came from the moon." Apparently, he didn't agree.

“Luna is more than the moon.” Matt’s grip on Tash’s back got a little harder. Not uncomfortable, but awkward.

“Says you.”

“Come on, Art. David spoke to the spirits. They said come here. Avery herself said the visions—”

“You ever had a vision, Matt?”

“No, but—”

“How many times we have to have this discussion? We have no proof, just someone’s word.”

“You sound like Noah. You don’t trust Avery?”

“That’s not what I said.”

If Natasha could shrink her tiny body more than it already was naturally, she would. Art and Matt were joined-at-the-hip friends, and to hear them start arguing was very strange. Stranger, because they were all naked, and she was standing between them, getting washed.

She looked up over her shoulder at Matt. He wasn’t the same as Art. Art was a skeptic, and Matt was not. Tash was a skeptic, but that didn’t mean she didn’t appreciate the power of someone’s commitment to someone else.

And then there was Matt’s past. He lost his family. Part of her wanted to ask for more details about that, but then she avoided the issue when they asked about her previous life; quite the little hypocrite she was. She could talk about her parents, if she could dig up the memories, if she could find the strength to wade through that shithole.

“Let’s ... g-go see Eric,” she said. Redirecting their energy toward something more productive should hopefully be a good idea. Look at her, being a mom.

---

Eric did not want to be seen, not by Matt and Art anyway. One glance their way and the young Uratha scowled. He was a good scowler; maybe he practiced it, for his old fighting job. It was enough to give Tash pause, for sure. Matt and Art nudged her forward, and she gulped as she came in closer to the man. He was up on the second floor by the stairs, one elbow on the railing, and looking down at the small crowd below. So much more intimidating than that time she’d caught Jessy fucking him in a booth; his first change must have changed him in ways she could never fathom.

She managed a small smile at him. He looked great in a suit, but reeked of the sort of man who hated suits. A shame, Antoinette would say.

“Hello Eric,” she said. “This is Art-turo, and Matthew.”

“I suppose you’re with Avery.” Venom dripped from his words. Something must have pissed him off, and it had to be related to Avery. Weird, considering Avery should be helping the man. But Art and Matt said he wasn’t interested; still, she was hoping that was exaggeration. Apparently not.

Art raised a hand in a small wave. “Ni-zu tag,” he said. Tash raised a brow. Whatever he said, it was enough to make Eric snort, and set his gaze back to the crowd underneath them. “Knew you’d be an asshole.”

Natasha facepalmed. Ok, if Avery acted like that with Eric on their first meet, she couldn’t blame the bouncer for being annoyed.

But Art’s words managed to pull a small smile from Eric, before he turned to face them full on, one elbow on the railing.

“Seems to be a common attribute among our kind.”

Matt, behind Art, pat his friend on the shoulders, both hands. “I take offense to that. Not all of us are like Noah or Avery, or this asshole right here.”

Art elbowed Matt in the gut, hard enough to earn a grunt and backstep from him, before Art stepped around Eric and came to the railing as well. “Avery says she gets the impression you want to be a ghost wolf.”

“Ghost wolf?”

“Yeah.” Matt came in as well, but he made sure to put Tash between him and Eric, by the railing. Nice of him, to include her; or he was trying to keep some distance from the mean man. “Means you don’t bother with the joining a pack and being a part of the great hunt.”

“Not actively, at least,” Art said.

“Then, yeah, I guess that describes me pretty well.” Eric shrugged, and glanced up at both Art and Matt. Much as Tash could tell Eric was a strong, deadly fellow, Art was a tall guy, and Matt was a giant. He looked small, in comparison. “Got no interest in your pack, or whatever.”

Smirking, Art looked down at the crowd. “You don’t want a piece of the pack, I get that. But Siskur-Dah is in your blood now. It’ll come to you, or you’ll go to it. Unavoidable.”

“Says you.”

“It’s true,” Matt said. “You act like Avery came to you trying to recruit you, military style. Not true ... mostly. She’s throwing you a life jacket, because like it or not, this shit’s going to show up on your doorstep from now on.”

“I can swim fine on my own.”

This Eric man was obstinate. Tash smiled, and tried to hide it by looking down at the dancing crowd. No wonder Jessy liked him. The girl didn't normally deal with tough assholes on such terms, and Eric must have been a breath of fresh air for her. Or rather, a unique taste of blood. And the blood was most definitely a plus.

She licked her lips, and glanced up at Matt beside her. To sink her teeth into the massive meat of his neck, and let the ambrosia flow into her mouth, was scary addictive. Tasted so damn good. And Jessy seemed to be a bit attached to this man, so, the blood might have had something to do with that. Or it was his asshole behavior. Both, definitely both.

“They're only trying t ... t-to help,” she said.

“No one helps for no reason. And Avery already extended the offer to join her pack; though I could tell she meant as a rock under her foot.”

She raised a brow. “A rock?”

“Yeah. She didn't actually want me in the pack, just under her thumb.”

“Can you blame her?” Shrugging, Art turned to face the man. “We don't know you.”

“But,” Matt said, “we'd like to. You're Uratha now, and that warrants learning who you are.”

“ ... just a guy who wants to be left alone.”

Art laughed again. “Well, ghost wolf, you may want to be left alone, but you're in the shit now. You'll see them everywhere; maybe not like David, but you'll see them. You'll smell them, notice

them, and when push comes to shove, you'll feel the drive to hunt them down and fix the shit they fuck up.”

Matt nodded. “Father Wolf’s duty.”

“I have no interest in any ancient being’s duty.”

In any other circumstance, Tash would have watched and said nothing, let the people talk, argue their own stuff, stuff she had no business getting her nose into. She knew nothing about spirits, or Father Wolf, after all. But, things were different now, now that she was a member of the Ordo Dracul; not a real member, not yet, but serving one nonetheless. This sort of stuff was becoming her business, like it or not.

“What w-will you do then?” she said. “M-Matt and Art are sure that things will ... w-will happen, whether you want them to or not. And—”

“And they can all fuck right the hell off.” Eric put his hands into his pockets, and headed toward the stairs. A glance up at Matt was enough to make the giant move out of the way, so the man could continue on his way. No look back, no glance, no invitation to follow him, nothing. One moment there, next moment gone.

He was a mean guy.

“ ... I ... guess that was a b-bad idea.”

Matt shrugged. “Nah, that was fine. Some new wolves just take time to acclimate, and from what Avery tells me, this dude had a rough first change. Not the roughest, but rough none the less. I imagine it was rough for you, becoming a vamp, right?”

“It ... it was.”

Art headed over to an open booth, and the three of them sat down, her in the center. It was nice, with them around her, hiding her and protecting her from the annoying world of Bloodlust. Had a safe feeling.

A safe feeling. Been a long time since she had a feeling like that, to feel safe with other people, especially boys. It was strange, and, welcome.

She frowned, leaned forward toward the booth table, and set her hands on it as fists. “I t-told you that ... that Kindred don’t like t-talk about their past much, from when they were still alive.”

“Yeah,” Art said, “but I mean, you can leave it like that. You don’t have to say anything.”

Sighing, she shook her head. “It’s ok. I learned ab-b-bout you, Art.” The man had had a rough childhood, growing up alone in Tijuana. “And Matt, Jacob ... that m-must have been horrible.” And the gentle giant lived in perpetual sadness over the death of his family, that he did not get to witness. She knew things about them, and now, maybe she felt safe enough to return the favor.

“D-D ... Daniel,” she said, “he turned me. Embraced me. It was a ... w-weird ... moment. I was offered a cursed immortality, and he warned me ... w-warned me that it’d be hard, and horrible, and that I’d have to leave m-my parents behind. I was young.” And she would forever look young because of it. “B-But, I didn’t realize ... how bad it would be, leaving them. Or how bad it would be ... w-when parents think ... their child has died.” Her fists melted into flat hands, before she sank back into the booth, and hugged herself. “Mom got sick. It w-wasn’t long before she ... d-died. And D-Dad, he ... he killed himself, not long after.”

Both wolves stared at her, then each other, then her again, before they too sank into the booth.

“Heavy shit,” Art said.

“Yeah.” Nodding, Matt reached out, and slid an arm around her shoulders. She didn’t fight him. Normally, she’d very much want to be alone, thinking these sorts of thoughts, but she’d opened this door, this gate, and Art and Matt were looking on through it. They were stepping through it.

Art set his hand on her thigh, and gave it a light pat. “How are your memories? Not sure if that’s offensive to ask; I know Kindred and their memories can be shaky.”

“I haven’t t-taken a long torpor.” Not that the nightly torpor of vampire sleep wasn’t enough to twist memories with scary dreams, but a proper torpor, to let the blood lust settle, was not something she expected to deal with for many decades yet. Thankfully. “I can ... I was there for ... my mom’s funeral. And then later, my d-dad’s...”

Both men winced. Yeah, no more words needed on that. And judging from the reaction, they had gone through similar. Matt must have had to go through a funeral for his family, and judging from what he said before, she wouldn’t be surprised if there’d been no body to bury. And Art, she was afraid to ask for details on his situation; troubled childhood and forced to live alone could mean anything.

Maybe she’d ask for more, later, but—

“Wow, who died?” Jessy came up over the stairs, and walked over to them, head tilted to the side. The three of them glared at her. She threw up her hands, palms forward. “Whoa, sorry for asking.”

Tash shook her head, and let her eyes relax. Not Jessy’s fault, and her brutal personality was a nice change of pace from Tash’s inner monologue. And while she was a very forward woman, she didn’t have any of Eric’s bitterness. Maybe it’d be good if she rubbed off on him.



“It’s ok,” she said. “Um, just...”

“Heavy stuff,” Art said.

“Uh huh?” Shrugging, Jessy slid into the booth, and got cozy up beside Matthew. “You really are gigantic, you know that? Tash, you have to let me have a taste.”

“W-What? No! You have Eric, g-g-go find him. He was here moments ago.”

“Was he? Shit, I missed him. He was supposed to be working, but ... but you fuckers drove him off, didn’t you?” And, like she’d known Matt for decades, she punched him in the arm.

He returned it, and grinned. Buddy punches were a language he could understand.

“We didn’t drive him off,” Art said. “I mean ... I suppose we did. We’re just trying to help him out, make a choice, get him into the fold before he gets buried in shit. He’s Uratha now, and he’s not going to be able to ignore all instincts, the signs, the everything.”

Jessy shrugged. “He’s his own man, let him do what he wants.”

Art raised a brow. “Let him do what he wants? Don’t you have him under your thumb? Paying his salary, putting a roof over his head, and let’s not forget, threatening to kill him if he breaks your Masquerade?”

Uh oh.

The Gangrel didn’t like that. She leaned forward, one elbow on the table, and sneered at Art. “Our Masquerade, asshole. Don’t think just because we do a better job keeping the Masquerade safe, that it doesn’t also protect you. And besides, we were going to keep things

the way they were with Eric because it's a mutually beneficial relationship."

"As long as he doesn't go into a Death Rage at an inconvenient time." Sighing, Art shook his head some more, and waved his hand through the air. Dismissing. Jessy would not like that, either.

"We can handle it," she said, growling.

Tash gulped, and reached out toward Jessy to tap her hand. "Um, they're ... they're v-very ... d-d-dangerous when ... when they do that." Not that they were beyond recovery. She'd managed to break through to Art and Matt, but it was a close call.

Jessy shrugged, and mirrored Art's dismissing wave. "You telling me your two boys here never go wolfy on you, maybe during a good fuck?"

"J-Jessy! I'm not ... n-not into bestiality!"

"Of fucking course not. I don't mean fucking when they're wolves, but when they're in their big transformed mode, you know?" Jessy leaned back in her seat, and let her eyes drift upward as a goofy smile sneaked onto her lips. "I want to see you fuckers in that form. Must be wicked awesome."

Matt and Art raised a brow at each other, looked down at Tash, then Jessy, then around again, before Matt finally spoke up. "The Gauru form is dangerous, Jessy. Very. If we don't struggle to keep control, it can lead into a Death Rage."

"Yeah," Art said. "It's a fine wire to walk."

"But can you fuck in that state?" The stupid Gangrel woman shivered, and winked at Tash. "You guys get like, nine-feet tall, right? Human wolf hybrid monster things? Towering behemoths of muscle and raw power? Sexy as all fuck?"

Matt choked on a cough, while Art continued to raise a brow. There was no talking sense into Jessy. Tash knew that, and now so did her boyfriends.

“That doesn’t mean we couldn’t use Dalu,” Art said at least, and he grinned Tash’s way. “Bigger, stronger body, more muscle, but not werewolf mode.”

Werewolf mode? Ugh, these boys were regressing down to Jessy’s way of talking. Tash would not allow that!

“If y-you want t-t-to experiment, go find Eric, and ask him! I d-don’t ... do ... that.” She glanced Matt and Art’s way, and shrank into her booth a little. Now the image was in all their heads. Dalu mode, she hadn’t seen, but it sounded like a bigger, stronger person. Gauru mode, she’d seen too many times, and the idea of having sex with one of those titans of steel was scary.

Scary, and thrilling. Tash was the one who’d told Jessy she thought their Gauru form was a towering behemoth of muscle and raw power, and maybe she said it with a little more smiling and shivering than she meant to. Jessy interpreted that as her thinking they were sexy, evidently. And, well, they were kind of sexy, in a ‘oh god it’s going to eat me’ sort of way. Was that sexy? Maybe it was, a little. The idea of those enormous beasts pinning her down, tearing her clothes off, and ... and ... doing things to her? Would they even be able to fit inside her?

If she’d been blushing life, she’d be blushing beet red.

“K well, I’m gonna go look for Eric, see if he’s willing to give it a go.”

Art rolled his eyes, and threw up his hands in small surrender. Yeah, there was no talking to Jessy.

“Ok, well,” Matt said, “far be it from me to tell you how to live your life, or enjoy your sex life, but you’re poking at a dangerous place, Jessy. Gauru is sacred, and ... yeah, dangerous.” Poor man couldn’t find a better word for dangerous, and it wouldn’t have mattered if he did. Jessy’s mind was set.

“Good to know.” Jessy hopped out of the booth, and went hunting for her target.

“That girl is peculiar,” Art said.

“You’re t-telling me.”

“I mean, she really knows what she wants, doesn’t she?”

“ ... I d-dunno.” Tash shook her head, leaned forward, and set her elbows on the table, so she could rest her chin in her palms. “I think she ... she m-might want something a little more romantic. Rough! She likes rough, b-but ... I think maybe she’s...” Maybe she’s a little more like Tash than Jessy figured. Maybe she’d like a little romance too.

And of course, Tash was more like Jessy than she’d ever thought.

Her phone rang. Jack’s ring. “Hello? Jack?”

“Hey Tash. We’re having a bit of a get-together at the Bloodlust later this evening, talk about the hunters and stuff, you in?”

“Uh, s-sure. I’m already here.”

“Sounds good. Triss and Jen and Damien will be there. Fiona too, but she’s not answering her phone; probably underground. And Antoinette’s coming.”

“The P-Prince is coming? Um ... that’s ... s-sure, ok.” This was going to be a weird meeting.

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~~Eric~~

He didn't want to do this song and dance. He didn't want to hunt spirits. He didn't want to deal with any of this ridiculous crap.

Go home? No, Avery knew where he lived, and Clara and Carter were there already. He wanted to see his cat, but Kat would be safe there without him for a day. A day was all he needed, a day to clear his head. A day thinking about what Athalia told him.

Drifting through the dark streets of Dolareido, he let his wandering soul guide him between the grand buildings of sin. Once he was deep in an alley, he set his back to a wall, and looked up. Sun would be rising soon. Sleeping during the day was fucking weird, or at least it should have been, but wolves seemed perfectly capable of hunting at night; preferred it, even. He could feel that, sense it, feel the tips of every hair on his body tell him that night time was the better time to be up and doing things. Day time? Pointless. Prey hid during the day, slept, and other predators took the same queue.

Daytime was for the humans. For him and the other freaks, nighttime was the new life. It made visiting his dad a little problematic, but his new body seemed fine running on less sleep when he needed it to.

He smiled, and looked at the moon. His new body was fucking great. The new thorns in his side, not so much. But at least the thought of being forced to hunt things didn't make him want to gag, like driving a cab did.

Hunting. Hunting spirits. How the fuck did that work? What the fuck was a spirit? All he had were strange memories and knowledge that didn't belong to him, climbing up through the gravel of his brain, and showing him images of things. 'Things' was as good a descriptor as he could give, because it was everything and anything.

Spirits? Hithim, his new memories told him. And the hithimu and hithisu. They were things he was supposed to deal with, and he had no fucking clue how to do that, other than to kill it. Kill it with fang and claw and strength.

The Meninna preferred to hunt shartha. That's what Avery was doing in Dolareido, finding a home for her pack, and dealing with the shartha. The word itself sent ice up his spine, and he looked down from the moon to the asphalt. Cigarette butts. Those he understood. Spirits and ancient host creatures, that he was supposed to somehow hunt? That he didn't understand. He wasn't sure he wanted to understand.

“Why me?”

“Why you indeed.”

Eric jumped, and spun around. Someone had snuck up on him? He doubted anyone could sneak up on him, with his new senses to protect him.

“Who is this one?” the voice said.

“New. New Uratha.”

“New. Weak.”

“Weak and open.”

“Open to us!”

Movement caught his eye, and yanked it to the wall. The shadow was billowing, as if it could catch a breeze. Curves, cresting against the light like collapsing waves, the black reached out across the asphalt around him, and licked at the space beneath his feet.

Slowly, with all the haste of the ocean tide, eyes began to form in the shadows around him. White eyes. They glowed, casting subtle whites around him and sending fresh shadows out into the blackness of the alleyway.

“Fuck you.” Ok, spirits. Spirits were coming for him, like Avery said they might. The fuck sort of spirits were hanging out in shadows?

Shadow spirits. Literal spirits of darkness, probably with no other desire than to turn off lights.

No, it was more specific than that. A simple shadow spirit wouldn't do this, behave like this. These things reached out for him from the walls, from the cracks of black around dumpsters and building corners, from around old crates, from around broken bottles where the light was cast aside by the curving glass. They weren't simply shadow spirits, they were spirits of dark alleys, of hiding places, of the cracks in a city where the filth and sin welled up like pus around the scabs of a wound.

He knew that. Why did he know that? How? Memories, understanding, kernels of knowledge swimming in the gray matter of his brain, and rising to the surface. And cravings along with it. He wanted to sink his teeth into these spirits, tear them apart, rip them open and devour their essence. They needed to be thinned, before their rampant desires turned this whole district into nothing more than a shadowy corner where people could get lost in the worst humanity had to offer.

He ran. The eyes stayed in the dark, and they called out to him. Open to them. Let them in. He belonged in the dark.

He supposed, if it wasn't for all the other shit being dumped on him, white eyes in the darkness would have scared him; they did a little. But compared to all the other shit he'd seen in the past month, some white eyes looking at him from shadows was rather

tame. Didn't change that he didn't want to be near that, anywhere near that. Stay the fuck away from him. Just leave him alone and let him do his own thing.

Breathe, just breathe. Luna's advice? He didn't understand. How the fuck was he supposed to understand that?

He adjusted his suit jacket, and made off toward nowhere.

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~~Antoinette~~

Antoinette sighed as she watched the squabbles of her Primogen. Garry's choice of childe was going to cause problems, but she knew the man had been speaking with Jeremy Long on several occasions, and more besides, over the past few months before the embrace. There had undoubtedly been months before that, where the man was meeting with Long as well. Either way, his request was reasonable, despite her knowing full well it would lead to issues with the Xnomina.

The Invictus council did not agree. They leaned over her beautiful glass table, and barked at the Carthian leader. He returned their barks with his own. Bark. Bark bark. Woof. If she did not know better, she would have assumed she was in a room filled with Uratha, howling their complaints.

Why did she pursue this life, this role as Prince? Perhaps she had a martyr complex, and felt it her duty to bear the sins of her race. She did want to fix her species, prevent their self destruction. Truly, she did. But sometimes, only sometimes, she wondered what it would be like to abandon all responsibilities, and simply exist. Would it be so bad? No one was strong enough to challenge her, harm her. There was nothing and no one who could threaten her if she wanted to abandon this foolish crusade, and simply enjoy her second life.



She leaned back in her chair, and combed her hair over her shoulder as she let her mind wander. A terrible sin, not paying attention in her own meetings. But, at the moment, she was overpowered with the need to fantasize.

She could take Jack, and disappear into another city. Fresh people, fresh faces. There would be dangers, but she was confident she could handle them all. She and her lover would hide deep beneath the earth during the day, and come nightfall, they would do whatever whim came upon the gentle night breeze. Enslave several kine, and enjoy an orgy? A regular indulgence, to be sure. Ashley and Julee would come, of course; she was Daeva, and no self-respecting Daeva feasted upon random kine when they had devoted ghouls, whose blood they were already familiar with.

But then, perhaps she could embrace Ashley and Julee, turn them, welcome them as Kindred, and release them from her bind. They would be free to find men and women to seduce and devour to their heart's content. Other Kindred were not to touch her little Ventrue, but that did not mean they would not be welcome to visit. It would be fun, for Ashley and Julee, Kindred in their own right, to engage in their own sexual hedonism, with Antoinette and Jack watching. She could hold her Ventrue in her lap, facing the orgy before them, and softly massage his cock in her hands as his head rested between her breasts. And before them, Ashley and Julee could be surrounded by a dozen kine, all men, and each could bury her in white fluid, after pounding them into a slew of wet orgasms.

And once the sexual delights were done, Jack and Antoinette could move on, and worry for nothing but tomorrow night. Perhaps they could move to a different city? Dangerous for Kindred to go anywhere without protection from the sun, but she was strong enough to dig deep holes in the earth in an emergency. But holes could be found, and the two of them would be helpless if caught in torpor.

Reality shattered her dreams with a hammer of cold steel. Yes, there were realities that elder Kindred could not ignore. Risk-taking was how you died, and elders became elders by digging into whatever locale they chose. Drifting was not an option. If she moved to another city, it would be to live, not drift. But then, that did not mean she would have to become Prince once more. She could simply exist, live her unlife, and do nothing but engage in carnal delights with Jack until they were sore from the effort. Until they would be inevitably dragged into the squabbles of the local Kindred, or perhaps other paranormals, or even accursed mages and their insane pursuits.

And for all her fantasizing, she could not abandon the Ordo Dracul. The need to find truth and prepare for the future, were deep-seeded needs in her soul, and no amount of running would silence those inner demands.

“You can’t expect us to let this pass,” Michael MacDonald said. Such a loud man, with none of Viktor’s control.

Hell must have frozen over, for her to miss Viktor Honors.

“You have no say in who I sire.” Garry leaned forward, set his elbows and hands on the table, and offered something between a grin and sneer at the opposing Gangrel. Bark bark. “Only the Prince can deny me that right.”

“Did she know it was Mister Long you were grooming?” Maria said.

Spoken about in third person. Antoinette did not appreciate that. She sat up straighter in her chair, and glared at the rotting Nosferatu.

“I did.”

“I can’t believe this.” Julias stirred in his seat, as if sitting upon fire. “This timing could not be worse, Tones. We don’t need to be squabbling, when we have hunters in the city.” If this were an Invictus meeting, he would be pacing about, she was sure, and bestowing commandments from on high, as Ventrue were prone to do. But this was her meeting, her domain, and he was forced to temper his reflexes. Good.

“I do not need to justify my allowance for his choice,” she said. “But, in the pursuit of peace, know that Garry has been grooming Long for months. Have you not, Mister Tones?”

“Yeah. Known him for a while, and we’ve been working together on things for some time. He did me a solid, so I did him one and turned him into a ghoul. Things progressed smoothly, and he earned the right to be Kindred.” The subtle grin tainted his words. He knew Xnomina and Terra Den did not cooperate, and Long’s economic power in contesting Xnomina was icing for Garry’s choice. Of course, once the man was a ghoul, Garry’s manipulation of Long was complete; ghouls followed the orders of their masters with the utmost loyalty, after all. Embracing the man was a defensive maneuver, so the Invictus could not challenge Long directly without challenging the Carthians indirectly.

Killing another covenant’s ghoul was a terrible thing, but would not warrant war. Killing a member of a covenant, on the other hand, did. Bitter memories.

“Garry’s strange choice of friends,” Jacob said, finally joining the conversation, “is irrelevant. What matters more, is the unusual circumstance his game has brought to life. Eric Tanverson is Uratha.” The eyeless monster leaned back in his chair, and ground his teeth until Antoinette could hear the enamel tear away. “Another fucking wolf in our city.”

“That is a strange circumstance,” Garry said. “Long’s games against Xnomina were only in the typical kine context. He had no idea about Eric.”

Julias nodded. “None of us did. Except for Fiona, probably.”

“Yes,” Maria said. “Begotten can see far more than we expected, if they can tell an Uratha is Uratha before even they do.”

Fiona. If Jack’s request to the others went as planned, Antoinette would spend a couple hours at Bloodlust with her lover, and his friends, Fiona included. And perhaps Eric would be working tonight as well. The silly drama and interactions of the masses were not her concern, and yet, such silliness was where much of life’s joys were to be found. It might be good for her, to take a step back from her role for a couple hours, and simply watch others talk. Jack had said they were to talk of the hunters as well; a conversation worth hearing.

“Mister Tones,” she said, “see that Mister Long does not cause chaos for the Invictus. Terra Den and Xnomina are, of course, up to the management of their respective leaders, but any struggle between the Carthians and Invictus is to be done without the death of Kindred. The hunters are the primary concern. Do I make myself clear?” She met the Gangrel’s eyes, and stared into his depths, like slicing open his ribcage with a scalpel to expose his heart.

“Of course.” He met her gaze for a few seconds before looking away. Like with a dog, holding eye contact was a sign of aggression, and to hold it longer, a sign of dominance. She won, as she always did.

“Azamel,” Julias said, “gave us some info that we’ve been looking into, as you know. The old woman that might have performed the ritual. We’ll be investigating a possible sighting and location, in Devil’s Corner.”

“Get Avery under your thumb yet?” Garry said. “She might help if you ask.”

Julias sneered at the man. To see the Primogen meetings damage his patience was sad, but Antoinette said nothing. Not the time.

The meeting continued. Garry complained about the Mirrden district takeover by Xnomina. The Invictus council complained about Long and his sudden inclusion in the Danse Macabre. Jacob complained about another Uratha, though at least Jacob’s complaints were half in jest, as if to mock the others for their petty annoyances. Julias pushed for more awareness and aggression in dealing with the hunters, while the others cautioned patience, and to let Azamel handle her own problems.

A tug of war of topics, that led nowhere. Such was unlife. She looked forward to, what would hopefully be, a more enjoyable conversation later tonight.

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Bloodlust. In the past, she would come here with Ashley and Julee, and watch the world unfold. Her frequent visits to the night lounge were a part of her game to pit Viktor and Tony against each other, oh so long ago. Without such a reason, she rarely came here; that was more due to her need to deal with present circumstances, however. A friendly, innocent visit would be a welcome change.

Jack should already be here, waiting for her, with Beatrice, Jennifer, and Fiona. Others were likely to come, she was sure, such as Athalia, or perhaps Jessy. She had also messaged sweet Natasha about the meeting, only to discover she was already there, waiting.

What was the Prince doing, wasting her precious time on as pointless an endeavor as ‘hanging out’? It was not pointless, as she knew. Despite the overwhelming need to work, work, and continue working, it was a road to self destruction. One had to take time to

enjoy the simple things in life, such as a conversation with acquaintances, or there was little point in living.

And, the visit was not without other merits. Assessing the situation of those involved, and what they knew of the hunters, was valuable. Was Beatrice making progress with Jacob. Was Fiona a sweet, innocent little creature, or a master manipulator. Was Jennifer pursuing sexuality with the same intellectual standpoint as Antoinette; a potential ally, that one, if Jacob had not recruited her first.

She stepped into the night lounge masquerading as a club, and smiled at the kine that looked her way. Oh yes, she was a beautiful woman, she knew it, they knew it, and there was a game to be played when people made eye contact, under such a circumstance. Flirting with the eyes, saying things without saying them. 'If you served me, I would make your nights filled with bliss beyond imagining. Too bad.' Things of that sort.

She was a very tall woman, and that was intimidating for many, especially when combined with her long white hair. Kindred, Uratha, and Begotten cared little for the shape of the body when assessing threat, but kine were dominated by such measurements. She was a tower, and a deadly looking one at that, to the simple, living creatures indulging in her city. If only they knew she owned their lives. The thought put a smile on her lips, and she shared it with the kine as she walked past them, toward one of the stairways on the side of the dance floor.

She had decided to wear one of her dresses meant for a nightclub. It left little to the imagination, with its long, black curves covering only one of her legs, down to the ankle, while leaving the other leg exposed up to the high hip. No underwear of course, and anyone fortuitous enough for a convenient viewing angle would see her sex; fashion, in the new world. The dress's chest was barely more than a sliver of fabric for each breast, wide enough to cover her nipples,

and rise to hook behind her neck. It left much of her bust exposed, especially as the chest straps reached down to her stomach, with plenty of room for her breasts to sway with her movements against the small slivers of fabric. And, of course, the dress was open back, to complete the illusion of nudity.

People stared as she walked past. They knew her, here, despite many months between visits. It was a blessing and a curse, having distinct features. If she continued visiting for years yet, she would eventually have to stop, for decades, before the story of the white haired woman passed. It had happened before, and it would happen again; unusually tall with white hair made her hard to forget, and dark amber, almost red eyes, made it impossible. And if the story included the 'unaging' descriptor, it would attract unwanted attention.

But it would be many years before she would have to take such actions with Bloodlust. Perhaps she should visit more often, and enjoy its carefree, sinful nature with Jack and her ghouls.

She made her way up the stairs, and scanned the booths. The red light did little to expose the hidden faces in the darkness, but the light pulsed white with the beat of the bass-heavy music, visual flare to the heartbeat of the club, and exposed the people hiding on the second floor.

Two of whom, she recognized as Jessy Herrington's ghouls. Each had a kine woman in their booth, and were kissing them. Jessy herself was a sexually open-minded person, and Antoinette appreciated that, but letting her ghouls sleep with random strangers seemed crass. Then again, Jessy was Gangrel, and Antoinette would never be able to understand how those brutes thought.

Jessy though, was nowhere to be seen.

Jack was in the back, with Beatrice and Jennifer, and Jack raised a hand to offer a finger wave. Adorable. They had chosen the larger

booth, center and back, to make room for the other guests. Damien, she was not happy to see, but she could understand his presence. And the man was quite attractive, especially when wearing some business casual clothing, his suit jacket undone, and no tie. Natasha was there as well, and so too was Arturo and Matthew.

This would be Antoinette's first time speaking with the Uratha without Avery's presence. A potentially disastrous situation, but if Vola felt comfortable bringing her boyfriends to the meeting, then she must have felt comfortable with their interaction with her. Time to test those waters; with Jack's presence of course, in case she needed his skills as intermediary.

The two wolves were dressed in dark jeans, with Matt in a white shirt, Art in black. The two beasts were built from steel, and had no need for a jacket's fake shoulders to emphasize their builds. They came with plenty of emphasis. They were massive examples of male strength, testosterone, and mass. Antoinette could not help but smile at the thought of little Vola, trapped between the two enormous men, and struggling to hold on as they fucked her at the same time. Delightful.

Beatrice was in jeans as well, and a cropped tank top, black, that hugged her chest tight enough for everyone to notice she had pierced nipples. The girl was far more into her looks than she realized; Julius knew it, Antoinette knew it, and she was probably coming to learn it, too. Jennifer, Beatrice's opposite, wore her love of beauty and fashion on her sleeve, and tonight, she was wearing something meant to catch eyes. All the eyes, apparently. Antoinette could not see her skirt from the angle, but she was wearing a tube top, white, that also had sleeves; a pleasant contrast to its exposing nature. The tube top itself was nothing more than a thin strip, tiny enough that it would have been scandalous on a beach, let alone in a night club. The woman should have been Daeva. Jack, of course, was dressed as any self respecting Invictus Ventrue would: the full suit ensemble. A two-button single breasted jacket, gray, with a tie



to match. At least it was a casual suit, with notch lapels and fitted silhouette.

People started to shift out of the booth, no doubt to greet her properly, but she shook her head, and motioned only for Arturo, Matthew, and Natasha to step out. They caught on quickly, and slid out, so she could slide in there place, and take the center of the booth.

As much as tonight was about relaxing, it was also about official business. And in either circumstance, she would take the throne.

“Prince,” Damien, Natasha, Beatrice, and Jennifer said.

“My Prince,” Jack said, smiling up at her as he shivered for a moment. This was not a typical circumstance, her joining him in his social affairs. Perhaps he was nervous she might be cruel to him, like she had been at the ball, and bathe him in sexuality.

She might, but not yet.

“Prince,” the two wolves said, once they noticed the proper greeting.

“Kindred, Uratha,” she said. “I am glad my joining you has not dissuaded this meeting.”

Beatrice shrugged. “We were just gonna talk, maybe watch a movie before sunrise. This is cool, too.”

Antoinette nodded, and made subtle glances toward the rest of them, to see how they reacted to Beatrice’s tone. The Nosferatu was forever familiar, and Antoinette was sure Arturo and Matthew would be as well, once they realized it was acceptable to be so. She was not sure it was acceptable; perhaps it was better to keep that interaction formal.

Jennifer was staring at her, her bust, her dress, her everything. Maybe the Ventrue had thought Antoinette would come to Bloodlust in something a little more conservative. A silly notion. What was more intriguing though, was how the two werewolves struggled to not look at her. It was only natural of course, when wearing a dress designed to emphasize and display her beauty and sexuality. Natasha was looking too, which was terribly adorable. Had she told her two boyfriends that she had spied on the Prince while she made love to her little Ventrue?

No one said anything else, and Antoinette raised a brow as she looked at the rest of them.

“Please, speak as if I were not present.”

“Easier said than done,” Beatrice said. “No offense.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, leaned back in the booth seat, and slid out an arm to hook it over Jack’s shoulders. She pulled him, snug to her side, and grinned at Beatrice.

“Try.”

Beatrice would never be convinced with requests or bribes, no, but the juvenile woman would respond to challenge.

The Nos smirked at her, shrugged, and relaxed into the booth in mimicry. Antoinette could tell Beatrice, and all of them, were tense with her around, tense in the way someone might be if they expected a larger predator to randomly become aggressive and attack them. They did not know what to think about her presence. Antoinette did not, either. She was here as Jack’s date, more or less, not as the Prince, but that was an inescapable part of her life. It would be interesting to see if the others could move past it.

Arturo mirrored the Nos’s shrug, and leaned in. “What’s the news?”

“Isabella and Hella think the shaman woman is in Devil’s Corner, too,” Jack said. “She’s managed to get a sighting, a convincing one, and an apartment building to investigate.”

“That’s pretty damn good.” Matt leaned in as well, though Antoinette could see he kept sneaking glances her way. Both to check and see if she was agitated or looking to be aggressive, but also to examine her body. Poor man had no sense of subtlety, and when combined with his jovial nature, made him adorable. Art wore his grit and cynicism openly, where Matt did the same with his gentleness and kindness. What had Natasha said they sometimes called Matt? Lenny? The Of Mice and Men reference was terribly cute, and fit the two of them well.

“This shaman woman,” Jennifer said, “we think she’s the one that performed the ritual, that we think led them to Jack? We think this is her, and we think she might be in this apartment building? And we think all this because of Azamel’s vague description?”

“Correct,” Damien said. “This could easily be nothing. It could also be a trap. I should investigate first.”

“You volunteering?” Jack said.

“Yes. Though I would appreciate some nearby back up, in case things get sour.”

“Of course. I’ll be there.”

And just like that, Jack had thrown himself into harm’s way, again. Far be it from her to tell the boy how to live his second life, but that was exactly what she had done last night. At least this time, he would be on the sidelines, while the Sanctified boy would be the one risking his life.

“You coming?” Art said, looking at her.

Before she could respond, Jennifer leaned in. “Elders don’t normally do things hands-on, Arturo.”

Art raised a brow, before nodding his head toward Antoinette while looking at Jennifer. “This looks hands-on to me.”

Once he looked her way again, Antoinette returned his gaze, and looked deep into dark, brown eyes. A troubled childhood, a rough upbringing, and now the man relied on the honesty and closeness of his pack, to keep himself from ever feeling so afraid again. She wondered if the man realized how obviously he wore such a past on his face, borderline on his sleeve.

“We are all dealing with this hunter threat,” she said, “but Miss Denver is correct. I would not help with my own hands, unless absolutely necessary.” If she died, the city would fall into chaos, and the Invictus and Carthians would undoubtedly go to war. As much as she sometimes wished to risk doing things herself, it was better this way.

Arturo squinted at her, until Natasha pat his side.

“She’s right. It’s n-not smart, for the leader to go in first.”

Antoinette smiled at her little student, nodded, but said no more. She was here to observe, after all, and only interject when necessary.

“Avery goes in first.”

Jennifer shook her head. “Avery doesn’t have millions of people balancing precariously on a knife’s edge. Avery doesn’t get to live for forever either. Don’t think your wolf tactics apply, Arturo Ibarra, or hold a candle to Kindred tactics. We rule the world for a reason.”

Rule the world. Well, at least the Ventrue thought big. Kindred did rule the world as far as matters of kine were concerned, but it

was not so clear cut when considering the bigger picture.

“Guys, come on,” Jack said. “Not here to talk about this.” He offered the werewolves a quick glare too, before moving on. “I’ll try and play backup, Damien, but the hunters will recognize me on sight, and I’m sure they won’t let me get close a second time.”

“I’ll help,” Natasha said. “I can keep you hidd-den.”

Two Mekhet, and powerful ancilla at that, helping Jack, was a step in the right direction.

“Avery would prefer we stay out of this, for now,” Matt said, “but if Tash is going to risk her neck, we’ll go too.”

Art offered his fellow wolf a punch in the shoulder, a gentle one, buddy-buddy like. Too cute, how these boys were, indeed, boys. How someone like Natasha ended up with rough-and-tumble sorts like the two men sitting around her, Antoinette could not fathom. It takes all sorts, she supposed. And having Jessy as her friend no doubt prepared her for the uncouth stupidity of such types.

“Avery will get pissed,” he said.

Matt shrugged, and returned the punch. “Isn’t she always?”

Tash giggled. Charming and pleasant, Antoinette struggled to not beam a smile at her little student.

“Be sure to let us know how it goes,” Jennifer said.

Damien raised a brow. “Not coming?”

“Fuck no. I ain’t risking my neck unless I’ve got a few dominated kine with shotguns between me and them. And it’s a stealth mission, right? Not like you need all of us.”

“Besides,” Beatrice said, “we’re doing our own thing.”

“We noticed,” Art said.

The Nos met the man’s gaze, leaned in close across the booth, and grinned at him, a big enough grin to expose some of her crocodile teeth. “You weren’t invited to that meeting. Be happy Jacob didn’t tear you in half and throw your guts into the ritual bowl.”

Art returned the gaze, and leaned in just as much. Very similar, these two creatures. “Your boss is going to bring a calamity down on your heads if he keeps fucking with shit.”

“You don’t know Jacob,” Jennifer said. “None of us really do. The only person who could really understand what that man is up to, is the Prince.”

And, again, everyone at the booth looked to her.

“I will not speak for Jacob, and his actions are his own; if you get into a confrontation with him, do it at your own risk, young wolves. But, I will say that my old friend is not some idiot child pursuing grand agendas on a whim. Give credit where credit is due, Mister Ibarra, Mister Wilson. Jacob is no fool.” She hoped. “Is Jacob who we wish to be speaking of, tonight?”

“I hope not,” Jack said. “Where’s Fiona? Thought she’d be here.”

“She’ll be here soon, I imagine,” Beatrice said. “I spoke to her a little while ago. I’m still surprised about Eric being a werewolf. God damn.”

Matthew shrugged and shook his head. “Dude’s an asshole.”

Natasha choked on a laugh, and hit the man in the side with a tiny fist. “He’s just confused! He ... it’s n-normal to be lost, when your life changes, l-like that.”

“Agreed.” Jack nodded his chin toward Antoinette, before looking to the rest of the group. “Should have seen me when I realized I was dead now. Ran out of my sire’s bathroom in a panic, crying out to Julias ‘I’m dead oh fuck I’m dead!’”

Everyone chuckled, Antoinette included. It was a pleasing image, her silly Ventrue, tripping over himself with panic.

“I did think he was working today,” Damien said. “I’m surprised he’s not here.”

“He l-left,” Tash said, “to ... to ... go b-be alone, I guess? Jessy went after him.”

After a few more minutes, Athalia and Fiona appeared. Athalia was dressed for the street, which frustrated Antoinette to no end. She would look beautiful if she wore more dresses like that time at the ball. Fiona did. The saucy little creature was wearing a green dress with plunging cleavage, showing off her impressive bust.

“Wow, a ton of folk!” Giggling, Fiona came up to the booth, and leaned over the table. “Aww, no Jessy?” The growing smile, and a glance around with searching eyes put more weight into that question than Antoinette expected. “Or Eric?”

“He left,” Tash said again. “Um, I think J-Jessy was chasing after him.”

“I think she likes him.” Giggling yet again, Fiona slid into the booth, next to the werewolves. A moth to flame.

“Thought you liked him?” Jack said.

She shrugged, and traced invisible lines in the table. “He’s sexy! But I dinnae ken if I like like him.” Whether she knew it or not, Fiona slipped a glance Damien’s way.

The girl was a fool, a young, silly fool. Were she Kindred, such reckless sexuality and flirtations would be perfectly safe and acceptable. But as a Begotten, pregnancy was a risk, if copulating with non-Kindred; Athalia and Angela was proof of that. Then again, Antoinette was overreacting, due to her natural distrust of the monsters. She knew that, and she forced her reflex down, so she could reevaluate. There was nothing wrong with Fiona's unbridled whims, but, hopefully, the girl did not let her actions trap her in unwanted situations.

She was trying to make Damien jealous, this little redheaded monster. Antoinette smiled, and glanced Damien's way as well; the boy was glancing Fiona's way, before looking down. He found her attractive, naturally, and he squirmed a little. *Tres mignon*, but stupid. Fiona would need night marshaling wands to guide the man, not subtle eye glances. But she herself was far too young to know what she wanted.

Antoinette chuckled. This was delightful. Everyone here was silly and youthful, and making all the mistakes young people should. Even the older, such as Tash and Damien, were slaves to ignorance; to which, the only cure was knowledge and experience. Tash was frequently being buried in new experiences now, if the glances she was casting her boyfriends' way was any indication. Damien, on the other hand, had little such experience. Perhaps Fiona would change that, or someone else? The boy no longer worked for that psychopath Lucas, and maybe now could find a little happiness in the touch of another.

"Athalia, Fiona," Jack said, "we got some more information on a possible location of the shaman." The boy filled them in on the potential building the shaman may have been hiding in. Antoinette doubted the hunters would be hiding anything in an apartment building, but it was also true that the Kindred did not have many eyes in Devil's Corner.



A difficult game to balance. She had many thralls combing the city for hunters, many keeping an eye on the Carthians, and many keeping an eye on the Invictus. She also had thralls keeping an eye on the Begotten, and the Circle, though the latter was difficult, with Jacob's skills. Part of her was tempted to suggest she send some of her thralls to this building Isabella and Hella had discovered, but it could easily backfire. If discovered, it would spur the hunters to find a new hiding place. Hunters were undoubtedly trained in noticing thralls.

A difficult balance indeed.

"Hey Damien, how's the hole in your gut?" Beatrice said.

Damien tensed; a peculiar reaction. Antoinette watched the man meet Beatrice's gaze, before it eventually fell away, some hidden weight forcing his head down. A glance to Beatrice showed, she too, was displaying some awkwardness. Something had happened between them.

"Been healed for a long time," he said.

"That's good."

Another conversation that came to a standstill. Perhaps her presence was causing harm to the flow of their conversation. She had predicated it would, but it was a bit sad to see it happen. Unfortunately, she was Prince, their ruler, and despite Jack's efforts, she would never be able to simply sit, and converse with those she ruled. Not like how she conversed with Jack, at least.

Jennifer leaned in, and looked at her. Not Beatrice, or Fiona or Athalia, or the men, but her. And she took her time looking the Prince up and down, what she could see above the booth table. Some of her Ventrue pride, manifesting as a contest of wills, perhaps?

“You look fucking amazing in that dress, by the way,” Jennifer said, voice without break, eyes unwavering. “You could have come naked though. Same diff.”

Several of the people in the booth coughed, some choking on them.

Antoinette returned the woman’s defiant smile. “As do you. Though I fear if you tripped, some random man’s cock would end up trapped between your breasts.” It was a tube top after all, and would be perfect for such a sexual act.

Her words earned some more coughs, and some choking sounds as several of the paranormals at the table struggled to not laugh. The Begotten and Uratha, unfortunately, were slaves to their biology, and could not help but blush a little.

Jennifer, on the other hand, laughed outright, and sat back. Test passed. Yes, you silly Ventrue, I am as sexually confident as you, and all the more. If you had any idea, any idea at all, you would not have challenged me.

“That is a good idea,” Beatrice said, leaning back, and hooking an arm around her friend’s shoulder. “Keep that on, and we’ll test it out on Julias when he’s free.”

Athalia facepalmed, while Fiona giggled and blushed. Tash’s boys were squirming, obviously unfamiliar with women behaving so brazenly. It was their first trip to Dolareido after all, and their chosen mate was a shy thing herself. Mason had fallen in with one of Dolareido’s more outgoing Kindred, Tilly of the Carthians, and he no doubt knew how forward Dolareido Kindred could be. Natasha was the exception, not the rule.

Or at least, she used to be. Again, Antoinette grinned at her tiny student, and how she was squeezed tight between Art and Matt on the small amount of space available in the booth. Tash looked

uncomfortable with the conversation, but not with the two boys. In fact, she seemed embarrassed, probably because the conversation was touching on sexual acts she had performed. The delicious little creature.

“You vamps really do talk about nothing but sex,” Athalia said.

“Hey now!” Fiona shook her head frowned at her fellow monster. “I enjoy it! Left my hometown for this.”

“You left your hometown because there was no one there to feed on.” Laughing, Athalia managed something akin to a real, normal smile. “I think your choice of city was misplaced though.”

“Oh?” Antoinette said.

“Yeah, lot of adultery and shit in Dolareido, but that’s not what Fiona—actually, far be it from me to tell you what Fiona feasts on.”

The group looked to the feisty redhead. Indeed, what did she feed on?

“... I ... it’s um, personal, sort of.” Squirming, Fiona shifted around in her seat, and managed a small smile for Antoinette. “But, I feed on ... on abusive folk. I punish them.”

Yes, Jack had told Antoinette about Fiona’s hunger, what little she shared with him and Damien. It was not much to go on. Damien knew more, but the man had not shared those details; at least, not that Jack shared with her.

“I suppose you could feed on me then, mm?” Antoinette said. She had been plenty abusive toward people, when she felt they deserved it.

“Um, I ... I could have a go!” Giggling like a schoolgirl, Fiona squirmed and adjusted a strap of her dress. “But, but I cannae feed

unless ye're afraid. Normally, I'd take someone back to my lair, and tie them up in my web. The real assholes, the big meanies, the ones that bully folk hard, drive folk to suicide, or beat folk up. Those, I ... I had a habit of killing, and eating, too. Cause Vrall can do that, and that extra bit of terror, and punishment, was like icing on a magic cake."

Interesting. Was fear a prerequisite to all Begotten feedings? She was tempted to ask, but Athalia was already giving Fiona a rather pointed glare; she did not like having her species' secrets revealed, but it was Fiona's choice to do so.

Everyone else at the table raised brows. Yes, devouring a person whole was strange, and it had been at least a century since Antoinette had drank someone to death. The Uratha did not need to eat humans in any capacity, though she knew they enjoyed the taste of it, in the rare cases it occurred.

"There have been few reports of kine deaths that have gone unexplained, since our meeting about the issue, my dear Fiona. I am impressed with the control you and your fellow Begotten have shown." Credit where credit was due, there had been no deaths she could blame on the Begotten since then.

"Cheers! I've been getting better at feeding on folk lightly. I'm aye a wee hungry, but it's manageable."

"Hunger sucks," Beatrice said. "Those nightmare lair things you have, we can enter those when we're sleeping? It's a nightmare, right? I wonder if—"

A phone rang. Everyone pulled out their phones, even the wolves, checking their new phones. But all for naught, as Antoinette held up a hand to claim guilt for the disturbance. She pulled out her phone, and checked the message.

~I'm at 843 Baker's Street. Another ritual found.~ Daniel never did care for greetings.

Sighing, she quickly texted back. ~Terry's face?~

~No.~

## Chapter 68

~~Jack~~

The meeting at Bloodlust went about as well as he expected. There was awkwardness, and strangeness, weirdness, and all the synonyms. But once they realized Antoinette wasn't there to destroy them or spy on them, they seemed to settle in. Triss turned into a punk, Jen turned into a slut, Fiona was all giggles, and even Athalia managed to crack a smile. Damien got less defensive, and so did Arturo. By the end of it, Jack was finally able to relax.

And then the phone rang.

They didn't have long until sun up, maybe an hour, and doing more recon was a bad idea. But this was too important to not investigate immediately. Antoinette went back to her tower, where she could better relay the information to her thralls, through her network, and whatever it was a Prince did that kept the city running. Jen, Triss, Athalia, and Fiona all left, unaware of what Daniel had found, only that the rest of them had to leave asap. They'd find out sooner or later; this information went around the Kindred underground, no matter how hard people tried to keep it secret. Natasha, Damien, Matthew, and Arturo all took a ride in the Invictus car Jack called. A tight fit.

843 Baker's Street was the apartment building Isabella had given Jack. Now it was the apartment building they were driving to, at Daniel's behest. Part of Jack wanted to tell the man his solo efforts were getting in the way of their investigation, and that he might have compromised what could have been a good ambush opportunity; or worse, gotten himself killed. Bad idea. And besides, the man knew what he was doing.

The five of them walked through the front of the shitty old apartment building, down the shitty old apartment building stairs, along the shitty old apartment building carpet in the hallway, stained and dirty, past the dented, scratched walls, and down into the basement of the shitty old apartment building. Even if the ritual wasn't here, he wouldn't have been surprised to find a corpse or two buried in the building's guts. There were some storage lockers down here, with open fence showing all their contents; no rituals would be done in this room. But at the end of the room, there was another door, and the group of them moved through it a little slower now, as the lighting grew less, and the world grew quiet.

There was another stairway, going down, and at this point, he was starting to get the same vibes he caught from Athalia's stairway into hell. It was dark, it was deep, and it was confined. Claustrophobia. Gulping, Jack stepped along, Damien ahead of him, Tash and her wolves behind him. The door led to another door, one with an sliding view window, ready to accept passwords. This door led to a stairway. And this stairway led to a door.

And that door opened to show the same ritual.

"... wow." Damien stopped, blocking them, until Jack tapped him on the shoulder. "Sorry." Stepping in, the Mekhet looked around, in blatant shock over the sight.

Jack didn't want to look at the sight. Once was enough.

"Same as last time," Daniel said, and pointed up.

And like a bunch of lemmings, they all looked up, and gasped. The skeleton on the ceiling had another picture attached, but, like Daniel said, it wasn't Jack. Thank god, he couldn't stomach that a second time.

"Eric?" Matt said.

“Eric.” Art said.

Eric. Why was the picture of Eric? Shit. Shit shit. What was the pattern there? If the ritual was finding people the hunters could use to get close to the Prince, Eric did not fit that bill.

Like last time, the walls were covered in symbols, written in blood, and some in what looked like charcoal. The tables that lined the walls were metal this time, and someone had still carved symbols into them, scratching the strange shapes into the metal surface. Many had symbols painted in red next to them, and the smell of rotting blood was evident. If the old woman had been here recently, and the blood was already rotting, then the sacrifice might have taken multiple trips to complete.

A bird skull. A cow skull. A horse skull. Same as last time, symbols painted around a giant circle on the floor, something he would be sure the Circle were responsible for, if he didn't already have someone else to suspect. Jacob and his witches insisted it wasn't them, and Azamel was sure it was this strange shaman woman. But, it was hard to imagine humans, kine, doing this, stringing someone up, killing them, burying every surface around them in symbols, while dissecting them.

Disgusting.

“Wait,” he said. “Julias said he and Jessy found Eric in the sewers after his first change, with Athalia. Think he talked to Azamel?”

“I w-wouldn't be surprised,” Tash said.

Then Azamel was a link. Which made sense, considering she was the hunters' target all along. But others had talked to her as well. What made Eric and Jack different from the others? They were both young as fuck, in paranormal terms, but that hardly seemed like a decent link.



“This is sick,” Damien said, standing by one of the tables, and sifting through the piles of papers. “Someone drew a dissection.”

A dissection, for the most part. While most of the pictures showed calculated removal of skin and muscle, a few showed some rather barbaric tearing.

“I think it’s that Black Blood spirit,” Art said.

Jack froze, before slowly turning his head to look at the man. Art wasn’t looking his way, instead looking up at the skeleton pinned to the ceiling.

Jack did his best to sound like he didn’t know what they were talking about. “What do you mean?” Not that he didn’t trust Art and Matt; their hearts seemed to be in the right place, but he didn’t want them interfering with him learning as much as he could.

“Old, big, nasty spirit, an Incarna.” Art looked in Daniel’s direction, squinting at the statue in a trench coat, before looking back up at the hanging skeleton. “I don’t know, honestly. Those red wraiths seem to be interested in this stuff, and those red wraiths are connected to Black Blood, and—”

“And we don’t know.” Shrugging, Matt got down onto a knee, and looked over the enormous circle symbol on the floor. “I smell ... chemicals, old.”

Daniel nodded. “This was probably a bunker set up for producing or storing drugs. Professional.” As professional as you could get in Devil’s Corner, Jack figured.

Red wraiths and Black Blood. Connections he’d already made, but knowing that’s what Art and Matt were thinking meant it was a good one.

“Triss said something,” Jack said, “about you not being invited?”

“Yeah. She and that other witch are getting into deep shit with Jacob, and Black Blood. Everyone’s blowing it off, but—”

“We’re not blowing it off.” Daniel shook his head and adjusted his glasses, but otherwise did not move. “I’m well aware of Jacob’s interactions with Black Blood. These rituals are new, however.”

While they chatted, Damien did nothing but stare. Tash looked disturbed by the sight as well, but didn’t take long to push past it and start cataloging things. Jack joined her, and sighed as he looked at the pictures stacked on the tables around the room. What once probably held vials and jars, now held piles of evidence of the occult, with a blatant obsession with the macabre and grotesque.

He picked up one picture, and stared at the accurate, detailed tendons. Why the artist had to pay so much loving attention to all the minute particulars of what lay underneath skin and muscle, he couldn’t fathom. Those red wraiths wanted a piece of Fiona, to see her guts and whatnot, and he assumed that that was connected to this.

But was it? Those red wraiths were cutting everything apart and blatantly obsessed with getting their hands on flesh. The ritual was about gore as well, but different. The pictures in front of him would have been at home on a surgeon’s desk; most of them, anyway.

“Matt,” he said.

“Mm?”

“You interrupted something being done by the witches?”

“Yeah. Triss, Jen, and that Jacob asshole, were performing some sort of ritual, and communicating with Black Blood. There was a corpse there, and a ritual bowl, full of guts and whatnot.”

Jack winced, and held one of the drawings in front of him, facing the table, his back to Matt. “ ... messy?”

“Extremely.”

Then there was a disconnect. Black Blood and its red wraiths, if they were its red wraiths, had some sort of interest in flesh, but a total disregard for acquiring it cleanly or keeping it intact. The person performing this dissection and this ritual was far more concerned with exact detail, patterns, and a strange combination of anatomy and occult knowledge.

Much as it'd be easy to blame Jacob and Black Blood, it was seeming more and more like they and the rituals weren't connected; not directly, at least.

“We need to find Eric,” he said. “But—”

“But the sun will be up soon,” Damien said, finally lowering his eyes from the corpse above. “What do we do about this?”

“I'll lock it down.” Nodding, Daniel gestured to the door. “Let's leave, and get some place safe for sunrise. Take Art and Matt with you, Natasha, until you are safe at the tower.”

It was hard to not smile at that, Daniel, being protective of Natasha, in his own, official, cold and distant sort of way. Jack had no right to judge, but still, cute.

“I'll go with her, I suppose,” he said. They were going to same place, after all. “Thanks for showing me, sheriff. I know you didn't have to.”

“I messaged the Prince, Mister Terry, not you. But I do not disagree in involving you. You've proved your worth.”

Jack smirked at the man. Proved his worth. He was talking about Lucas; which Art and Matt didn't know about, if he guessed right.

They left, and headed back to Elysium Tower to sleep. Hopes up, hopes down, Hella's sighting proving very true, but in the end, wasted. At least her picture had confirmed they knew what the shaman and her companions looked like. Something was better than nothing.

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~~Eric~~

Come sunrise, he took the opportunity of his temporary freedom from the watchful eye of vampires, to do fuck all. He drifted around, watched a shitty movie, bought a couple burgers, only to eat the meat and nothing but. Someone asked if he was doing keto, and he almost said no, but on second glance, he had to admit he was. In the past week, he'd eaten nothing but meats, muscle and organ, and other strange things that were ultimately just parts of an animal.

He was tempted to visit Azamel. Of his three options, the Begotten seemed to be the only group willing to be basically hands off with him. Avery wanted him under her thumb to some degree, and the vamps were blatant about wanting to control him entirely. Jessy said he should just do whatever he wanted, play the field, like an athlete with options. A good idea, except that the three groups were liable to either kill him, or get him killed, if he fucked up.

The more he thought about it, the more he found himself leaning toward Azamel. The only thing she asked is for him to try and help her if she and the others were under attack. Of all the options, that seemed the nicest; except that, of course, hunters were already in the city, trying to kill her. But they were probably going to try and kill him too, so that was almost a moot point.

And for some stupid reason, he liked the monsters. He liked Fiona for obvious reasons, but Athalia? Bitch. Mark? Asshole. Azamel? Colossal bitch. Those three probably pissed everyone off around them, merely by existing. That was appealing, for whatever reason. Maybe seeing a bit of himself in them.

The werewolves all seemed cool, but he got a bit of a military vibe from them. One for all, all for one, no man left behind, blah blah. No thanks. The vamps wore their mafia motif on their sleeves; though, he'd yet to talk to a Carthian, so maybe they were different.

The vamps, the Invictus, were also writing his cheques. That meant they owned his new life. It also meant they owned his dad's life. If he did something to piss them off, that'd be the end of that. And it wasn't like he could just ignore everything Avery had to say; christ, he ran into some fucking random spirits just last night. Should he have hunted them down, or chased them back to wherever, or was there something else he was supposed to do?

Why did he care?

He went to a hotel. Random hotel, random room, paid in cash, nothing that would give him away. Kat had food; thankfully she could graze on food and not get fat, too lazy to make the effort to gorge herself. Here, he could close his eyes, forget about his troubles, the ridiculousness of his new life, and breathe. That's all he needed to do, breathe, relax, and let the stress melt away.

Of course, that wasn't going to happen.

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The woods. The forest. A riverbed at his feet. The gentle, lulling sounds of water cresting over small rocks and pebbles. Wind, soft and soothing against his fur as it rustled the leaves of the trees around him. He sat by the river on his haunches, paws wet against the pebbles that dipped into the water, gibbous moon above. In the

distance was Dolareido; he recognized the tall buildings, skyscrapers, and the glow of casino lights.

Would it be so bad, if he stayed here? The forest behind him, city in front of him, both in his world, both a part of him.

No, it wouldn't.

He took a long, deep breath, and sighed. If he didn't know any better, he'd think he was relaxed.

Breathe it again. Smell that? The woods, water, life and death in a nice balance. What else do you smell?

Asphalt and sex and metal and alcohol, from the city, on the breeze.

You breathe that, breathed it your whole life. The city is in your blood, in your lungs, and it's your duty to defend it.

I never asked for duty.

You never asked to breathe.

I should be thankful for a life I didn't ask for? Gracious? Sounds like a Johnny Cash song.

It could be.

He snorted, and looked down at the river. A wolf looked back at him, a normal wolf. Eric was a wolf now, a werewolf in truth, some sort of ancient entity's bloodline reborn in the human body. Father Wolf and Mother Luna were his new parents? Was Father Wolf a better parent than his dad in the hospital?

Yes and no. It was so long ago, I can barely remember. His children killed him. He prowled the borders between spirit and solid, flesh and ephemera, and kept things in order. A tough job,

considering how thin the lines between Hisil and Gurihal were. A horrible mistake, killing him, I think. It led to—

The river exploded, water erupting in a cloud of cold force that sent Eric flying back. He spun through the air before crashing into the ground, rolling and rolling, until rock and earth tore off clumps of fur mixed with blood. What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck.

Eric, shaking, head pulsing, forced himself up onto his paws, and stared out toward the river. It was a small stream, a foot deep; nothing should have been jumping out of it, let alone exploding out of it. But water continued to rain down from above, and the river itself churned and boiled, as if a million piranha were swarming some drowning fool.

Shadows crawled out of the water. Tall, wide, like curtains against the backdrop of the night sky. The city was behind it, and soon hidden from view as the curtains spread, edges smooth, and body completely opaque. Several hooks, or nails, were at the top of each curtain, a corner. It was almost like he was looking at a pair of enormous bat wings. Two pairs of wings? Four arches, four spans that covered the world in obsidian, before disappearing into the water below.

An arm shot out from the water, and slammed down into the ground before Eric. A mostly human arm, but the skin was dark, black, tinted with strange shades of gray, like metal, and enormous claws. Then another arm ... and another ... and another.

Whatever this thing was, this shadow clawing out of the depths of his dream, it had four wings, and four arms.

It roared, an alien sound, deep and rumbling, and with a vocal fry and tear like a metal singer scream. It came up onto the shore of pebbles, and the small rocks were crushed under the weight of its colossal talons. Two legs at least, but a long tail, slithering left and right like a fucking dragon's, dangled behind the entity.

“This is the one,” it said. It could talk.

Eric looked up. The moon was gone. There was still light; he was in a dream after all, and shit didn't have to be logical. But, the moon was gone, vanished, like it was afraid of this monster. And the voice was gone. Instead, a new voice replaced it, this thing's, a voice of guttural growls and harsh, raspy vocal fries.

Whatever this thing was, it was twelve feet tall. Good fucking god.

Eric backed up, and snarled at it, ears down and back against the fur of his head. He was a wolf, and these things came naturally. But he wasn't a wolf. He was Eric. And Eric was fucking terrified.

He backed away, and let out a barking howl at the monster. It stared at him, two giant horns piercing the sky. Its eyes glowed red and amber, like lava. Its mass caused the earth to break apart underneath it, as it shifted its weight with its new stance, standing tall in front of Eric. It spread its wings, and blotted out the sky.

“Jeremiah will have you, and you will answer his questions.” It took another step toward him, and Eric took a few steps back to keep distance. Each step the monster took, the claws sank through the rock beneath it, like butter.

“Jeremiah? The fuck does he want with me?” Hey, he could talk. Right, a dream, rules didn't matter.

But his dreams weren't normal dreams. He didn't control these things, these sleeping hallucinations; and this invader didn't belong. Every hair on his furry body stood up with animal aggression, and he bared his teeth as he snarled and barked at the titan walking toward him.

It didn't like that. It sprinted forward, shredding the ground while launching itself toward him. Eric turned, and fled. Run, get the fuck away, get the fuck away!



The forest. There was a forest. Safe place, his hunting ground, side by side with Dolareido, his other hunting ground. Two sides to the coin, wolf and man. He could hide here, or turn the tables.

The monster didn't agree. As Eric forced his aching, bruised body past a couple of trees, the monster slammed its mass into them, and broke them. Trunks three feet thick snapped, exploding bark and shards of wood, and sending the trees crashing into others. The forest died around Eric, trees spinning out of control and breaking upon others. The thickest trees survived the impacts, and the smaller shattered, showering the flattening land with twigs, leaves, and chaos.

Eric's dream body was big, for a canine, but still only a wolf. One-forty, maybe one-fifty pounds. This thing chasing him was at least twenty times that much. It reached out with one of its four arms, and slashed out, claws slicing through the wood and sending more trees toppling. All this little dog could do was run and hide, scampering underneath fallen trees that left a foot of room to crawl under.

Why didn't it answer his question? And if it wanted to catch him for Jeremiah, it wasn't doing a good job. It was going to fucking kill him, drop a tree on him, or fucking step on him. A glance back showed the beast kept its four wings against its back, folded tight, while the four arms rendered the forest into mulch.

"You can't hide, Uratha."

The blood curdling noise echoed through the trees, until Eric felt it dig into his spine, serrated, iron hot needles stabbing into his back. His muscles twitched and cringed, and Eric shook his head as he tried to dislodge the voice from his ears. He couldn't. Couldn't fight this thing. Couldn't attack this thing. Couldn't do anything but run. Run where? He was going to die. It was going to catch him and it was going to kill him.

He kept moving. The forest greeted him, familiar, home. The trails where prey ran, the sights and sounds and smells, he knew them all. The little flits of drifting essence, the ephemera entities, spirits, manifesting, growing, building up, becoming. He sped past a critter, a squirrel maybe, body glowing green and partly see-through, eyes deep and dark. There was an owl, with eyes like the night sky. There was a fox with several tails, and it screeched before disappeared into the forest, as did the others. Everything wanted to get away from the intruder, the Goliath, ripping and tearing its way through the green and brown of the woods.

Where was the voice? Gone. It abandoned him, left him to run from this monster alone. And it was gaining on him. He threw his belly to the forest floor, and forced himself under a giant log, something ancient and part of the land, something that offered him a nod with eyes opening in the lines of the tree's bark.

The monster didn't care. It slammed all four of its hands down into the enormous piece of ancient wood, and ripped it apart. In the shower of bits of bark and death, it threw its mass forward, taking down two more trees with each shoulder, and sending them forward in a mad spin of inertia. One of them hit another tree, and went into a spin, bouncing around against rock and earth until one of its branches caught Eric in his side.

Pain. He'd always thought you weren't supposed to feel pain in a dream, not pain like this, pain that scorched up the spine and gave you a headache, made you want to vomit. Pain silenced for a moment, before it doubled again when his body collided with something, the length of his wolf body curving around it before he slumped to the ground. A stump had blocked his flight path with all the grace of a car crash.

The world blurred around him. His body was heavy. His fingers didn't respond; right, he had paws now, not hands. But he knew how to use paws, and they weren't responding. His lungs had stopped

working, diaphragm no longer pulling down. Nothing was working. He was a lump, a pile of flesh, pulsing with agony and crying tears — that's why everything was blurry, his eyes were filled with tears. Or, blood.

The monster crouched down over him, glowing red eyes glaring into him. Its face looked human, for the most part, except for the massive horns, and as it growled, shark teeth joined the list of inhuman features. One of its four hands reached out, and picked him up. He was a wolf, against a twelve-foot gargoyle creature, and he was going to die.

The monster grabbed his head with one hand, his back legs with another, and started to tear him in half. No questions, no words, nothing to explain this pointless murder. Skin, muscle, tearing, bones separating, crushed into bits, grinding into—

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He sat up in bed with a jolt. Where, where was he? Right, the hotel. Where was Kat? Right, not at the hotel. What fucking time was it? Sunset.

Christ, sunset? How long was he asleep? Must have been over ten hours. What in the ... oh fucking hell. He looked around himself, and winced as he felt the wet sheets. A cold sweat soaked the bed, and himself. His dreams hadn't been doing that since his first change, but whatever that dream was, it scared him fucking shitless; evidence was there in front of him, whether he wanted to believe it or not. He'd probably have literally shit the bed, if it'd gotten any worse.

He got up out of bed, and headed for the shower. His feet were like cinder blocks, dragging, knocking against the door frame and the hallway. Some random, shitty hotel, so he blamed his clumsiness on that. And the weight of his body? Had to be the shitty bed. Shit bed, shit hotel, shit sleep, and now he had stubbed toes.

Even if the vamps can track you, you really should sleep in your proper bed, Eric. At least then you can sleep deep and proper.

He got to the bathroom, set his hands on the tiny sink, and looked into the tiny, warped mirror. Looked like shit. Felt like shit. Everything was shit.

“What ... the fuck was that?” He held a hand up to his face, stared into the mirror, and cradled his jaw. No idea, no idea what that fucking was. The dream was vivid, blatant. His dreams often were, since the changes had started hitting him. There was usually a voice in his dreams, and it talked to him, that much he managed to wrap his mind around. But that thing, that giant fucking gargoyle thing, was not like anything else.

It found him. It ran him down in his dream, and killed him. Holy fuck, he could still remember the sensation of pain, unimaginable pain, in his bones and muscles as they started to tear to pieces. Saran wrap being pulled apart, resistant and pliable at first, before it started to give way in a bloody mess. He now knew what it felt like to die, in the most horrible way possible. What a lovely memory to have drilled into his mind for the rest of his life.

Nasty nightmare? It was unusual for a nightmare. God fucking damn, he felt like shit, like someone had run him over with a truck. He didn't feel like someone had torn him in half; still breathing, after all. If someone had run him down though, hopped out of the truck, and beat his ass with a baseball bat, he might feel like this. Except the pain wasn't in his body, wasn't in his bones or muscles like it felt like it should have been, and it wasn't real pain. Something in his brain told him he was fucked, and needed to lie the fuck down, told him he was beaten and bruised, even though he didn't feel like it.

He stared down at the sink. Red eyes. Glowing, red eyes. Maybe a spirit, like the ones in the alley? No, those his instincts told him

were spirits. They smelled like spirits; what that was, his human brain wasn't able to put a finger on, but they did. There were spirits in his dreams, but they couldn't have been real, just dream things spawned by whatever was clawing its way out of the depths of his subconscious to talk to him.

He looked at the mirror again. Everything turned double, and started dancing around. Colors blurred, bleeding over each other. Hallucinating? No, he knew this feeling, the same feeling of being in a choke hold. Except you were normally lying on the ring floor during one of those, not standing.

He collapsed. One of his hands managed to grab the sink basin on the way down, but he went down anyway, bodyweight jerking on the sink hard enough to half-turn his body with his shoulder as a pivot point. He almost wrenched his arm out of the socket, but let go at the last moment, other shoulder slamming into the floor.

“Fucking ... shit...” He gasped for air. For a moment, for a painfully long fucking moment, he felt like the wolf in that dream again, after he was slammed into the tree trunk. A sack of broken flesh, lying down, unable to do anything. He turned his head and stared at the crummy ceiling. It was spinning.

Breathe. Breathe. Get some air into your fucking lungs.

He forced in the air, slow and deep. His body ached, or fake ached or whatever, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. The problem was his brain didn't want to function, didn't want to uptake the oxygen. Christ, was he having a stroke?

No, that made no sense. Wrong symptoms, and his new body didn't seem like it'd ever get a stroke. Something else was happening to him. Fuck, fuck fuck fuck, what was happening to him?

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He took a taxi back to his new home. Thinking he could get a better night's rest at some random hotel backfired, apparently. No, there was no way the shitshow that was his brain right now was caused by the hotel, unless there was a gas leak in the hotel and he borderline died. Now back at his Invictus-bought penthouse suite apartment, he could catch his breath, take a shower, get dressed, and get ready for work.

Hopefully. The ride up the elevator did not go well. He was in the suit he wore the night before, and that was the only thing that got him past the concierge, considering he was dragging his hands against every surface so he didn't fall over. It was a damn expensive place to live, and lot of the people coming and going were dressed in tuxedos or other expensive, ridiculous suits. Some women were dressed for nights at the opera, while others were dressed for high price nightclubs where they'd blow a blue collar's monthly wages in a single night, on heroine. Everyone looked like they bled money, and at the moment, he very much did not, tripping over himself like he was dying.

Fuck, maybe he was dying. Was that dream a premonition? That gargoyle, demon, whatever the fuck it was, belonged on a god damn cathedral, casting judgment on everyone passing by. It did not belong in his head. It wasn't supposed to be there, that much his new senses could tell him. If it didn't belong there, the fuck did that mean?

He pressed the button on the elevator, and did his best to not look at the tiny dog sitting in a woman's purse; dog didn't bark, so, props to her for good training. Concrete weighed on his shoulders, and pulled him into the side of the elevator. Stay standing, just stay standing. Another person came on, older dude in a suit with a mustache, maybe visiting someone. Eric managed a small nod. Be polite to the strangers, and let everyone look at you like you're drunk, just don't prove it.

His floor, finally. Only a few other apartments on this floor, as each apartment took up a corner of the large building; ridiculously fucking huge apartments. He forced in another breath, and made for the door, swallowing down the nausea in his stomach, and ignoring how the hallway attempted to thwart him like he was in fucking Inception.

He smelled someone, someone familiar, and recent. She'd been here before, and he could smell her again. Gulping, he opened the door.

Yeap, there she was. Sitting on his couch was Jessy Herrington, with Kat cuddling into her tits. She was wearing a white shirt, buttons undone far enough to show a bit of the black bra underneath. Looked great with the black jeans.

Even feeling like he was about to pass out, his dick loved to give him a quick rundown. God damn it.

“You look like shit,” she said.

“I ... feel like shit.” No use arguing, no energy for that. He dragged himself over to her, and collapsed onto the couch hard enough to launch her an inch into the air. “Tried to get some sleep somewhere safe, alone, away from fucking ... everyone. Guess it didn't work.”

“Didn't sleep?”

“I did, just doesn't seem to have worked.”

“I figured you wolves were basically unstoppable juggernauts, always at your prime?”

“Yeah, I was feeling like that for a while, too. Knee is healed, and ... yeah.” His head collapsed onto the couch back, and he turned it enough to look over at Jessy. The woman held his cat snug to her,

and raised her enough so Kat could put her two forearms against her shoulder, near Eric.

Kat offered him a few slow blinks, before turning her head to nudge into Jessy's neck. The purrs were audible, and ridiculous. Traitor.

"The place smelled like cat shit, F Y I. I cleaned your litter box."

"... seriously?"

"Well, I mean, I called the help and had them do it." Jessy laughed, and nudged her cheek into Kat's head for some rubbing. "I am far too important to be cleaning litter boxes."

He laughed, then groaned. Dizziness overwhelmed him, and faded away with each pulse of his heart. Ok, yeah, no laughing.

"You were supposed to work tonight, right? Take the night off."

"I ... I think I might just. The music would make my brain explode."

"Guess that means I won't be feeding on you tonight."

"Sorry."

"Ah that's ok. I wouldn't want to catch whatever parasite's fucking up your brain anyhow." She kissed Kat's head, got up, and started walking around, Kat's forearms still on her shoulder, and butt sitting in her arms. "How's your dad?"

Knowing the Invictus could monitor his expenses was horrible, and embarrassing. His life was enough of a train wreck, no need for all those eyes peering into it, with his purchases on a list they could analyze and laugh at.



“As useless as ever, and dead set on not getting better. Man just doesn’t fucking care.”

“Your mom died, right? Were they close?”

Eric lifted his head, and raised a brow as he looked at her. What a way to approach a sensitive topic, for any man; girl was exposing his psyche with all the grace of a wrecking ball.

“They were close. She died of cancer.”

“Cancer’s a bitch.” Sighing, Jessy continued around his place, and peeked into his cupboards. “Empty.” She checked a drawer. “Empty.” And another. “Utensils.” Then a cupboard. “Empty.” Then she checked the freezer and fridge. “And a whole fucking lot of meat. I bet Kat loves that.”

“I ... it’s ... it’s the only thing I can stand eating anymore.” There were other things too, bones, strange organs not normally sold that he asked a butcher for. He kept them in the back of the freezer, to avoid having to look at them until it was easier. And to avoid unwanted topic conversations.

“When did she die?”

“Must be almost twenty years now.”

“Dad ever find another relationship?”

“No.” Eric wanted to get up and watch Jessy closer, make sure she didn’t touch anything. Stupid. It was her apartment, really, and it wasn’t like he had anything in it to hide. The biggest secret he had was the brains and bones and hooves in the freezer, and she’d already moved on from that.

“Probably very depressed, especially after his son’s career and marriage were ruined by a knee injury.”

“Thanks a lot.” Groaning, he crawled over onto the rest of the couch, and lay on his back, head on the couch arm. “And you? Tell me some shitty stuff about your past.”

“Don’t really got one.”

“No past?”

“I mean shitty stuff. Got no baggage.” With a shrug, she came back over to him, and sat down on the glass table, Kat still in her arms. Damn cat looked perfectly happen to go coma in Jessy’s ever petting embrace. “Kind of silly, isn’t it? So many vamps got a story, some fucked up path that led to their embrace. That poor kid Jack was an attempted murder by an enemy vamp. Natasha, I know her siring led to the death of her parents. Julias, well, Viktor sired him without telling him what was happening; now that’s some fucking scary shit. And my sire, MacDonald? He’s old as dirt and can’t remember the details, but he tells me he had to fight someone else to the death for the right to be embraced, bare hands.”

Jesus, that was grim.

“But not you?”

“Nah. My parents and I never got along, so I ran off when I was pretty young. They didn’t try and find me. Years later, I’m working a shitty factory job in North Side, and got into a bar fight on the edge of South Side, near the Carthian district. Apparently I’d got into a fight with a ghoul, who are fucking strong as shit compared to normal kine. Still kicked his ass, though. Broke my arm, but kicked his ass. Michael thought that was boss, so he spent a couple years grooming me, then sired me. Here I am.” Shrugging, she gave Kat another kiss. “I had a cat, back then. But after my embrace, he didn’t like me. You know how cats can be, when they’re old and you try and introduce them to new cats; or in this case, a vampire. Too much of a change for an old boy like him.” That put a thought in her head, and her eyes looked up, drifting. “I suppose that is the biggest

baggage I have. Lost my cat when I was embraced. Maybe that's why I like you so much."

"Because I have a cat?"

"Because you have a cat. A dumb, loving cat."

She was definitely dumb and loving, no doubt about that. At least Kat didn't like the other Uratha; probably their military vibe putting her off.

"Guess that makes me lucky."

"Damn right. Lucky you have an awesome cat, because cats are awesome. Lucky you're a werewolf, because that's awesome. And lucky you caught my eye, because I'm awesome." Jessy winked at him, before she started rubbing her face on Kat's head. Kat returned the gesture, head bumping her and purring like a lawn mower.

"Not so lucky last night."

"Yeah, you really do look like shit. Couldn't have just been a bad day's sleep."

"I ... I had this dream. Do vampires dream?"

"Sorta." She came over and sat down on the arm of the chair his head was on, so only an inch separated his head from her butt. That was fine, it was a great butt. "Kindred have torpor, where we go comatose during the day. We dream then, pretty vivid, weird shit sometimes. It gets really nasty when we purposefully go under for years at a time, to suppress our blood lust. The dreams get nuts, and you're stuck in them, for years. Lot of vamps wake up from that a different person."

"... that is some scary shit."

“Right? I haven’t done one yet, and a lot of us don’t until we’ve got a century under our belt. It’s generally not something to look forward to.” Shrugging, she stood back up, and sat down on his stomach instead. He braced for pain, but, his new body handled her weight fine. He felt like utter shit, but at least his muscles weren’t fucked. “You?”

“Dreamed I ... dreamed I was a wolf, last night.”

“Sounds almost blasé, a werewolf dreaming of being a wolf.” She leaned back over the couch, butt on his stomach, and lifted Kat up and over her shoulder to set the feline on a nearby cat tower, before she got comfortable on his gut, her elbow on the back of the couch, chin in her palm, face toward him.

“Except my dreams talk to me. Talk talk to me, as in, call me out by name, and ... tell me things.”

“Sounds creepy. What sort of things?”

“This fucking Uratha shit came with baggage. Something about ancient beings and the duty I’ve inherited from them.” He threw up his hands, before setting one on his forehead. “I’d just love it if everyone left me the fuck alone.”

“That include me?” Raising a brow, she licked a fang, and waited. He thought she was joking, but, it seemed like she really wanted to know.

“Fuck no, you’re one of the few people that seems to be upfront with me.”

“Ha! Well, it is the norm for vamps to lie, cheat, manipulate; s’why I told you to play the field. What about the dogs and monsters, they fuckin’ you over?”

“Avery wants to ... adopt me into the fold.”

“Typical.”

“Azamel wants me on her side, but as far as I can tell, she’s got no rules beyond that. Simply help her out if she’s under attack. Otherwise, do whatever I want.”

“But Julias wants you to work with Avery, and the Invictus think you should stay where you’re at.” Laughing, she shook her head, like it was a song and dance she’d heard before. Probably was. “I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes, despite all the luck. I see the hospital bills.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I put you on the Invictus payroll, and that comes with chains. Course, that was before you got your paranormal badge, and now you have some rights; or at least, more than kine.” She reached down for his jacket, and spread it, before she started tugging on his arms. “Come on, help me out.”

He raised a brow again; doing that often with her. Eventually he conceded, and helped her slide off his suit jacket. She got to work on his shirt buttons next, humming as she undid them. No grins or mischievous smiles, despite his expectations, only a small smile as she undid one button, then the next, and the next. If he didn’t know better, he’d assume she was his mother, taking care of him because he was sick.

“Gonna get some vapor rub for me?” he said.

“Ha! Don’t think I won’t. You’re a man, which means you’re a big baby when you’re sick. A big, dumb, very sexy baby with a really nice six pack.” She whistled as she pulled his undone shirt out from the waistline of his pants. With some effort, she got the shirt off entirely.

“Strange looking baby.”

“Yeap.” She pat his chest, chuckling, before she undid the button and zipper of his pants, and yanked those off too, before sitting back on his stomach and pelvis. Now all he had left was his boxers. “But I’m not your mom, I’m your babysitter. Ever had the babysitter fantasy?”

“Hot babysitter sexually satisfies young boy?”

“Yeap.”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Didn’t want some busty lady to introduce you to the awesomeness of sex, with a tender hand and soft tits, when you were going through puberty?”

“Oh, I did. Just, all my babysitters were ugly as balls.”

She laughed, and set her elbows onto the back of the couch as she continued laughing. “Well, I’m your babysitter now, and your senior by a good forty years. And I’m a fox.”

His turn to laugh. Damn this woman was brazen, bold, confident, and fun. Sheryl had been a lot of those things, but in hindsight, he wasn’t sure she was ever fun.

“Get into Fiona’s pants, yet?” she said.

He hesitated. Any other woman, and he’d be sure it was a trap, but this Jessy woman was different; not necessarily a good kind of different, but different. He was a one-on-one kinda guy, when in a relationship. He wasn’t in one right now though, and neither was Jessy. But, that could change.

The thought of being in one with this playful tiger of a woman, was appealing though. She was fun, like Fiona, but instead of

Fiona's young, girlish joyfulness, she had a mature bite to her. And she was rich, no denying the appeal in that.

“Almost. She visited me, and I had her quite satisfied, before it was my turn. Then Avery interrupted us.”

“Ah, damn, nasty case of blue balls then. Jerk it out yet?”

“Heh, no,” he said. Nodding, she reached down beside her hip, slid her hand under the waistband of his boxers, and grabbed his dick. “Whoa, hey!”

“Too sick for a quick jerking?”

“I ... uh.” What was he supposed to say to that? He felt like shit, but, as he felt his blood flow respond to her touch, it didn't make anything feel worse. “I guess. But, I'm not really feeling up to sex.”

“Didn't say sex.” She rolled her eyes, leaned back onto the couch, her butt on his stomach, and her closer arm with its elbow on the couch back. Her other hand continued to stroke him, her body blocking the view. He could feel it more than well enough, and he groaned a little as his girth hardened, filling her palm. “I'll get mine, later.”

“Y-Yeah, ok.” He could work with this. He needed to relax, clear his head, see if the grogginess and shit would fade with time. “Your ghouls?”

“Nah. You, when you're feeling better.”

“Heh, thought you had a bunch of ghouls, for a regular orgy, with you as the center of attention?”

“I do. But, eh, been doing that sorta shit for decades. Sometimes it's nice to take it easy, enjoy a palette cleanser.”

“Is that what I am?”

“Not sure. I can’t turn you into a ghoul; don’t think so, anyway. And yet, I continuously find myself wanting to fuck you. Isn’t that strange?” She shrugged, stopped stroking him, and took a moment to toss aside her shirt, and then her bra. They went flying, the bra landing on Kat and her cat tower. Naturally, Kat didn’t care, and looked at the bra sitting on her body, before looking back out the window. “There, some eye candy for you.” Topless, she ignited something inside her, and his jaw dropped as he watched the difference manifest. Color came to her skin, and he could hear the dead heart inside her begin to pump.

Eye candy was putting it lightly. Like she said, she was a fox. As much as he loved Fiona’s softer body and enormous breasts, Jessy’s muscles, feminine but strong curves, plentiful breasts, and short blond hair, were all amazing. Reminded him of other fighters he met in his career. Maybe he should have hooked up with one of them, and not a spectator like Sheryl.

“It’s pretty great eye candy.”

“I know, right? Fuck, I am gorgeous.” She put her hand on his cock again, and slid down his boxers enough so she could hold it upright and stroke it more readily. Her thick thighs blocked the view, but he could tell from her grip how familiar she was with what she was doing. Comfortable. Might as well have been his own hand, with how she found the right pressure and grip style, each stroke working the bottom of his length before working up and nudging against the base edge of his glans. He might last five minutes, watching the topless woman work her magic.

“Sure you don’t—”

“Nah. Just stay there, relax. Hell, if I get into the mood, I might just masturbate and put on a show for you.” She winked at him,



grinning like a devil. “And I’ll call Ganders, tell him you won’t be coming in.”

“You’re being very nice. Trying to seduce me to work for the Invictus?”

“What? No, I told you to try and play the field, play all of us. Told you that cause I know, in the end, you’ll work for us. Avery’s too rigid, and expects you to step into line. Azamel can’t provide you with anything except for protection, and she can’t even protect herself, with these fucking hunters coming for her.” Shrugging, she took one of her breasts into her palm, other hand still stroking him, and gently massaged the soft weight of her tit. Big enough to fill her palm, even overflow it slightly, it had Eric’s eyes hypnotized as she bounced it with a couple fingers, purposefully showing off its natural size.

He groaned as he watched, and shivered as he felt his precum wet his glans. The growing warmth of cum pooling underneath his testicles, getting ready to erupt, caused his length and glans to grow more and more sensitive. Pleasure sparks grew, and grew, until it went into his core, causing his abs to flex underneath the woman’s ass.

She smirked at him. She knew he was going to cum, and make a mess on the very, very expensive couch; she didn’t seem to care. Her grip shifted higher, squeezing the more sensitive top half of his cock, as one of her fingers reached up to cover the hole of his glans. And as the first gush of his hot cum squirted from him, she gently blocked its flow, so it flowed back down onto his cock, and her fingers.

“Don’t worry about the couch. The help will make sure it’s clean.”

“N-Not sure I ... like the idea of ... of a maid in my apartment.”

“Heh, you will.” She continued to stroke him, far more gently, but consistently, milking another wave of his cum from him, and another. Soon his own fluids coated every inch of his hard, veined girth, and she massaged it into his skin with her soaked fingers. It was hard to not groan louder, as his cock grew sensitive, and she continued to stroke it with slow, firm grip, sliding fingers along his skin with his cum. “If I’m going to be over here on the regular, making a mess with you, you’ll be a problem. I’m a vamp, I leave no traces behind. But you? I’ll be coating this place in your jizz, and that’ll definitely get stinky. Poor Kat.” She glanced back over her shoulder at Kat. Lazy animal was content to stare at the window from her cat tower, looking down over the huge city of lights. Probably felt like a queen.

“This ... going to be a regular thing?” he managed to say between more quiet groans, as she pulled another wave of his cum, and another. God fucking damn, she milked him, squeezing him at the base and working it for a few strokes, before sliding her soaked grip higher, to draw out another few drops of his cum.

“Definitely. You’re the kind of asshole I like. Fiona likes assholes too, like Damien, but he’s a different kind of asshole, doesn’t do much for me. You though, I like.” She smiled at him, and blushed.

It was the first time he’d ever seen her blush. Stripping in a night club? No blush. Fondling another girl while riding him, in public? No blush. Admits she likes him, blushes. It was so god damn endearing, he couldn’t help but smile.

She started stroking him again.

“Oh...” He let out a long breath, and fell back, relaxed onto the couch.

“Tash tells me a little of her exploits with her two boyfriends. You guys can go two, three times easy. Sometimes four. Least I can do is jack you off a second time.” Laughing, she used his cum to gently

massage the sensitive, exposed skin of his glans, making sure to use a soft but consistent grip along the base edge. Girl knew how to please him better than he did. “I asked her if her boys had ever fucked her while transformed.”

“Transformed?”

“You know, that big form you guys got, Gauru I think it’s called? The big, huge, scary war form.”

“I can’t imagine that’s safe.” He melted into the couch, and struggled to keep his exhausted eyes on the topless woman. The subtle back and forth sway of her torso, with her up and down hand movement, made her far too hypnotic to not stare at. And her free hand reached down to his chest, where she caressed his muscle, his collar, and soon the front of his shoulders. He could fall asleep, right now, if she wasn’t also sitting on his abdomen.

“Probably not. But, fuck me if the idea isn’t really, really hot.”

“You into wolves?”

“I’m into the idea of a nine-foot-tall werewolf monster thing, with enormous hands fighting to tear off my clothes, and a giant dick rearranging my insides.” She stopped blushing. Talk of very, very kinky sex was as normal to her as breathing was to him.

“Are ... you asking me to do that?”

“Just putting that out there. I wouldn’t say no if you tried.” Chuckling, she looked down at her stroking hand, and took some time to work the base of his shaft, squeezing harder on the tougher part of his cock, and spurring some heat to build between his thighs. “Well, except for, you know, the begging and pleading ‘please no, it won’t fit, oh please don’t hurt me, oh god you’re splitting me apart’ sort of stuff. If you hear any of that, pay no mind. It just means you’re doing good. Oh!” He eyes lit up, and her smile grew; he could

almost see the fantasizing in her eyes. “Especially if I try and get away, and I’m all shaky with orgasms, and dripping cum everywhere and stuff? And I’m begging for a break? Arg, pin me down and just have your way way with me.” Nodding to herself, eyes drifting upward, she licked her fangs again, and shivered.

This girl, was insane.

“I ... I could really hurt you, you know.”

“I’m a vampire, dumbass. I’ll be fine. Besides, you won’t hurt me, not in any way I won’t like, I mean. You like me too much.”

As if to prove her point, she started to stroke his whole length, and quickly. Lubrication made it easy, and her firm, consistent grip, made sure each stroke sent a powerful wave of bliss and pleasure sparks into his thighs and core. A few seconds later, the tingling of heat underneath his testicles announced itself. A few seconds more, and a gush of his cum squirted into her palm. She shifted her grip higher to encompass the whole of his swollen glans with her grip, and used his cum to keep her touch dripping hot and heavenly.

He struggled to keep his eyes open, as he melted into the couch.

Laughing, she stroked him for a little while longer, and squeezed out a few more drops of his cum, before she let go at last. “Look at this.” She showed him her hand, fingers spreading and pressing together. “Tash was right, you guys cum buckets.” Strands of white, thick globs of it, coated her palm, her fingers, and a few drops dripped down her wrist. That was a lot, far more than he would cum in the past.

“You talk about that sort of stuff with your friend?”

“Girls talk about everything. Hell, Tash and I have a system. If we go too long without talking to each other, we know something’s wrong.” She shrugged, and got up. He breathed a sigh of relief; nice

to not have her sitting on his gut, no matter how amazing the sight was. “If we were gonna go again, I’d give you a proper show, and masturbate with this hand, get your cum inside me.” Winking, she played with his cum in her hand again, pressing her fingers together and making a fist, before she walked to the kitchen. “I’ll clean you up. You, relax.”

“Yeah ... ok.” And he was. The rippling bliss of orgasm aftershocks continued up and down his cock, and he looked down at the cum-soaked phallus, before letting his head fall to the couch arm again. Exhausted for two reasons, now. “Were you always this sexually aggressive?”

“Nah.” Whatever she was doing, she opened a few cupboards and drawers until she found what she was looking for, and got the water running. “Aggressive, yes, but not sexually. It took a few years as Kindred, before it really sank in.”

“What sank in?”

“Just how fucking hot we vamps are, and I was a dumbass for not indulging.”

He coughed on a laugh, before his body relaxed into the couch again. “How so?”

She returned, a wet rag in hand, and she sat down on his gut once again. He shuddered for a second, as a hot sensation covered his flaccid cock, and then, sliding texture. She was cleaning him, and still topless. If he stared at her too long, he’d get hard again; his new sex drive was proving to be insane, almost as much as the woman sitting on him.

“Well, as you can see, I’m a fox. Getting down to this low body fat percentage, as you know, is brutal. But as a vamp, all the issues with being super lean are gone. No more chronic hunger, or being cold all

the time, or energy issues, or mood swings. I get to keep this amazing fitness model body, without any of the downsides.”

“That is pretty great.” Women did a number on their bodies, getting as lean as Jessy, for things like bikini bodybuilding competitions. Not healthy, or fun. He’d had it rough too, staying lean for his career, for photoshoots, but not as hard as a woman for sure; and his new body made it easy.

“Yeah, I cut down as part of my grooming. Hated it, but Michael assured me it wouldn’t be a problem after the embrace. He was right.” She took some time on his testicles, wiping them clean, and grinned at him as she did. “There’s a lot of other things too. Can’t get pregnant, or diseases, so no reason to ever use a condom.”

“I have to admit, cumming inside you is wonderful.”

“Damn straight.” Once done, she aimed the rag, and threw it into the kitchen from her seat on his belly. Based on the sound of impact, and the smile on her face, she’d landed it in the sink. “Sexual endurance is another big plus. Gimme a meal and I’m insta-horny. Let me blush life and I can cum until I’ve soaked you. And I haven’t taken a shit in fifty years, so, this ass is one hundred percent for quality anal and nothing but, at this point.”

He raised a brow, and looked at the ass currently sitting on his abs. A very large, toned ass.

“I know, right?” she said, and gave her ass-in-jeans a good slap, hard enough to make her breasts jiggle for a moment. Woman knew exactly what she was doing. “But, you know, that’s all kind of secondary to the biggest change.”

“What’s that?”

“The overwhelming majority of Kindred don’t fucking care. Fuck everyone, fuck no one, Kindred just don’t fucking care. Got a high

sex drive? Have an orgy with a dozen kine. Got no sex drive? No one will bat an eyelash if you never fuck a soul. Whether you're a prude or a slut, no one fucking cares anymore, and I god damn love that. Do whatever the fuck makes you happy." Sighing, relaxing, she leaned back on the couch, and put both elbows onto the couch back. Still topless meant her breasts were on display, but he was sure that was half the reason she was sitting like that, to give him a treat. The other half was, she genuinely didn't seem to give a shit.

He really liked that. Sheryl liked to pose, and be sexy too, but the moment things winded down, she'd cover herself up. Terrified to ever be seen without make up. Terrified to ever let out a fart. Jessy, she'd probably fart right on him, if vamps did that.

"I suppose," she said, "I should tell you the other reason I'm here."

Ah shit. "Really would prefer ... you didn't spoil ... the mood." He struggled to find a little venom or bite to put in his words, but he was too exhausted. Despite what was turning into a pleasant evening, he still had trouble seeing straight, and every part of him felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. He would never get up from this expensive couch unless he had to.

"It's important. Last night, only a bit before sunrise, Jack sent me a message. Another ritual has been found."

"The weird one with the symbols and picture?"

"Yeah. Except this time it wasn't Jack's face. It was yours."

He forced his head up, and stared at the woman. Zero tact, off like a bandaid. He could appreciate that, usually, but knowing a bunch of psychopaths had his face, a little easing in would have been better.

"My face."

“Yeah. Jack thinks it’s a connection with Azamel.”

“Azamel? I talked to her once! I—” The memory slammed into him, and tore through his eyes until he shut them. Fuck. Fuck fuck. “The ... in the dream ... I was being chased by some sort of monster. And, and it said ... Jeremiah wanted me.”

“Fuck, that doesn’t sound like a regular dream.” She slipped off his stomach, and got dressed. “Try and get some more sleep, maybe sleep off some of whatever’s been done to you. I’ll watch over you for a few hours.”

“ ... done to me?”

“Uratha who’s wrecked like he’s been binge drinking, had a dream where a monster says Jeremiah’s looking for you? Yeah, I’m guessing something’s been done to you.” Shrugging, she reached down, yanked his boxers back up over his bits, and reached out for his hand. Of course, she didn’t bother to wait for him to brace himself, and instead yanked him up onto his feet with all the grace of an ox. “Come on, up and at ‘em.”

Dizzy as fuck, his weight fell onto Jessy, arm hooked around her shoulders. But she handled his weight easily, and guided him to his bedroom. Kat followed, offering a few concerned meows, and rubbing against their legs as Jessy dragged him.

“It ... it was a dream. It meant nothing.”

“Wish I could agree, but see all the scary shit out there I have, and you start being a little more open minded about ridiculous shit. Describe the monster.”

“The monster? It—” His voice caught in his throat for a moment as Jessy lifted him, and threw him onto the bed, borderline literally. “It was ... at least twelve feet tall, dark skin like leather, and ... and four arms, and four wings.”



“That sounds ... pretty rad, actually.”

Rad. Good god, the woman really was from an older time.

“It had a tail, and glowing red eyes, and ... it’s a blur. I think ... think I can remember its face. Mostly human, except for ... sharp teeth ... and horns.”

“Sounds like some sort of dragon. Well, leathery skin? Oh, a human-looking face you said. Maybe some sort of really big demon or gargoyle thing,” she said. He could tell she was saying these things with an air of sarcasm, but at the same time, her eyes fell a bit after she said them. Fun to joke, but not so fun when those were genuine possibilities. Christ, his new life was fucked up.

“It did have claws, and talons.” He remembered those all too well.

“I’ll give Fiona a text, see if it sounds familiar to her.”

He tried to sit up, but his body might as well have been upside down. The strength to move was there, but every attempt to use it made his brain disagree, like some sort of extreme vertigo that was convincing him he was heavier than he was.

“Think it was a Begotten?”

“Could be, right?” She shrugged, pulled out her phone, and got texting. “You were asleep, and those monsters can fuck with your dreams.”

“But Jeremiah is hunting Azamel, and vampires, and werewolves too, if he’s after me. Is he working with a Begotten?”

“Could be. I’m not coming to any conclusions yet. I’ll get Jack and Damien involved, and we’ll evaluate.”

It'd be damn weird, if those hunter psychos were working with a monster. Weird was normal at this point, though, so maybe it was a good idea to consider that. Either way.

With Jessy's help, he got under the sheets. On his back, he stared up at the ceiling, and looked over at the vampire woman.

"Wake me in a few hours?"

"That's the plan."

"What'll you do?"

"Figured I'd watch some TV in your living room."

"I—" Kat hopped up onto the bed, nudged against him, and found her usual spot beside the pillow. "I don't know how I feel about that."

"Not comfortable with me being around while you sleep?"

"What? That's not what I meant. Just, after what you just did for me, I figured I should ask if you wanted to stay the night."

Laughing, she tapped her phone against her forehead a few times, and smiled at him. "You mean in bed with you."

"Yeah."

"I'm Kindred. I go comatose when I sleep, and I sleep during the day. And unless those curtains you got are sealed to the walls to not let in a single crack of light, I'll turn into kindling come sunrise."

"Those ... are legitimate points."

"That said." Shrugging, she climbed onto the bed with him. Still in her jeans and shirt, but at least no shoes, she lay on top of the

covers. “Don’t think I’ve ever lain in bed with a man, and not had sex.”

“Heh, how about a woman?”

“Only Tash, and without sexual context. Tried to get Tash into bed a few times, for a proper fucking, but she didn’t really pick up the signals. And I don’t think she’s into women, which makes me all sorts of sad.” Smirking, Jessy turned on her side to face him, head propped up on a palm, elbow to the bed. “Got her into bed with my ghouls a few times though. You should have seen it, that tight little pussy spread open on a cock. Bet I could barely fit a finger inside her.”

Ok, yeah, this woman was a sexual animal. He could feel the blood start to work its way down to his cock again, the pulses of his heart each pumping a wave of blood into the member. But he took a deep breath, and forced his body to calm. You need some more sleep. Get some more sleep.

Except, he wasn’t tired. He was exhausted, and weak, and feeling dizzy and tender, but not tired. The weight of his eyelids never grew, and his body didn’t sink into his blankets.

“I think sleeping most of the day has fucked my sleep schedule,” he said. “I doubt I’ll be able to sleep.”

“Bleh, you’re going to need to feel better though.”

“Wh—oh, because you think hunters are going to try and do to me, what they did to Jack.”

“Yeap. Got Kindred watching the place right now. And right now, I’m texting Damien and Jack about the weird dream you had.” She stared into the glow of her phone, but she had trouble texting with the speed of the typical phone user. It made sense, he supposed. She was born before cell-phones existed, let alone texting. “It’s why I’m

dressed. Otherwise I'd be under the blankets with you. Way to a man's heart is his cock."

"Stomach."

"Cock."

"I'm pretty sure it's stomach."

"I've been embraced for over fifty years, dumbass. I've seduced hundreds of men, turned dozens into dotting sex slaves. Even turned some of them into ghouls, if they proved themselves capable in and out of bed. Never cooked a damn meal in my life."

He laughed, and looked up at the ceiling as he smiled. "You're confusing men, with boys."

"Am I?"

"Yeah. When the sex is over, and the heat has died down for the moment, is where the difference becomes apparent." And where he and Sheryl never really connected on anything, unless money was involved. "If you fill a man's stomach, that's where infatuation turns to love."

"I see." She nodded, checked her phone a few times more, and turned over onto her back next to him. "I suppose you'd know more about this, despite the age diff. Married and divorced, I imagine you have wisdom to share."

Wisdom to share about his failed marriage, and painful divorce. All the bitterness and constant thoughts about it running through his head, summarized in a word he didn't expect: wisdom.

"You know? I just might."



~~Julias~~

He was tempted to call Triss, and see if she had something to contribute. But he knew it'd be a bad idea. Much as he wanted to confide in her all the details of what was happening involving the hunters, at a certain point it crossed into needless, and potentially disastrous information overshare. If they got involved, they might trip over what the Invictus were doing, or give something up to the Carthians.

Was that a bad thing? Now that Garry was taking a more active role in fucking with the Invictus, Julias found himself hesitant to let him in on the details of Invictus movements against the hunters.

He sighed from behind his desk in the Xnomina HQ, and watched the video feed from a dozen thralls stationed around Carlava Villa. Snipers on rooftops, eyes in parked cars, and more than a few Kindred about, doubled up, each paired with at least one member that was good at the cloak of night. No one was getting into the building that didn't belong there.

~Just jacked Eric off a couple times. Now we're gonna take a nap on his bed.~

Julias looked at the text, tied into the network for the Right Hands. God damn it, Jessy. That woman, what the hell. Young kindred often let their sex drives get the better of them, until they were older, but Jessy was plenty old at this point. He figured she'd have calmed down by now. Well, at least she said she jacked him off, not fucked him; that'd be a hard position to jump out of and prepare to defend herself, if someone attacked.

The following texts about Eric's dream, were not so silly. Talk of a monster was understandable, dreams were weird. But the specific mention of Jeremiah seemed out of place. Combined with Eric's exhaustion despite his Uratha physicality, it was too much of a coincidence for Julias to pass it off as a meaningless dream.

Dreams were the purview of the Begotten. He was tempted to try and contact Azamel; easier said than done, with no actual way to message her, except maybe send a runner into the old tunnels.

The others should be here, but they weren't. MacDonald was off with a crew, investigating potential Terra Den issues; whatever that meant. Turio was doing something, by herself, about something she didn't want to talk about. In the past, he'd have chalked it up to Maria being Maria, pursuing whatever sort of creepy shit a devout person like her did. Why she never left the Invictus to join the Sanctified, he'd never understand.

That wasn't fair. Maria was a far more reliable council member than Michael was. She put her foot down and got things done, without putting the Invictus, or Xnomina, in harm's way. Usually. There was Antoinette's warning about her, and there was a buzz going around that Maria was dipping her toes into dangerous, nondescript things. What those things were, no one knew, but he didn't put it above Maria to pursue the strange sorceries Lucas was supposedly capable of. Jack confirmed that Lucas had actually cast a bolt of lightning, and hurt the Prince, preventing her from using her majesty discipline. Theban sorcery, supposedly. It was one possibility of what Maria was up to. He didn't want to consider others, not yet.

He held down the 1 key on the keyboard. "Jack, any sightings?"

"No."

2 key. "Mister Burksen?"

"No."

3 key. "Madam Lauevion?"

"No sir."

He went through a few more, and sighed with each one. No point in asking, they'd report in any sightings the moment they had any, but he was growing impatient. He hated that he was growing impatient. Impatience was not a good trait for any Ventrue, and it wasn't one he ever wanted to learn, before or after his embrace. The issue was, this was possibly pointless. Eric's dream, if it was an attack of some kind, was a giveaway, which meant the hunters knew Eric knew, and that the Kindred probably knew; assuming they knew Eric was working with the Kindred. Another maybe.

Considering the ritual was of his face, there was no way the dream was just happenstance. It had to be real, had to be something, had to mean the hunters were going to come for Eric. How. How was the problem. Would the hunters come in through the front door, or chopper in, or something ludicrous? The Kindred had every inch of the building's exterior monitored, under the assumption the hunters would come for Eric. There was just no way it was going to go the way their plan thought it might.

He looked at his phone, at another text from Jessy, this one for him specifically.

~Eric says the way to a man's heart is his stomach, not his dick. Thoughts?~

Sometimes, Julias forgot that he and Jessy had worked side by side for decades. To Jessy, that meant every detail of her personal life she felt sharing, was up for him to learn, whether he wanted to or not.

He facepalmed, before he texted back. ~A boy, a young man, can't think past their own dick. A man is capable of appreciating more. You could consider that to be a metaphor for the stomach, yes.~

~That's basically what he said!~

~Sounds like you got your work cut out for you, if you're trying to break this man.~

~Bah.~

He laughed, and put the phone back down. Break was the wrong word, but it was probably how Jessy was thinking about it. She had to break the man of course, not enjoy a growing romance like an adult, no no. To Jessy, he was a challenge to overcome, and puzzle to figure out.

Jack had told Julias that he was sure Eric and Jessy were interested in each other, and it was good to see his childe noticing details. A little tidbit of information could turn into a vital puzzle piece for a key issue, or valuable ammo in war. He was catching on quick. Poor Antoinette, forced to watch her lover become more and more of a schemer and typical Ventrue with each passing night. Julias was proud, but he had to admit, it was a little sad, seeing the kid's innocence melt away.

The Carlava Villa wasn't the only thing Julias was monitoring. There were thralls keeping an eye on the Mirrden District, in case Garry made a push for it. There were Kindred roaming South Side in pairs or triplets, hunting, keeping an eye open for anything and everything that might have been involved with the hunters. MacDonald had a bunch of Kindred keeping an eye on the Carthians, wasting time and man power over Tones's stupid crap. If the two damn dogs could stop fighting for one—his phone buzzed.

A message from Triss. ~Hey Superman. Jacob says you guys are doing a stakeout on Eric?~

Of course Jacob knew. No Invictus had told him, but at this point, it was expected the old man would find out what the Invictus were up to, except for the most private, and well-kept secrets.

~Sorry Triss, Invictus business.~



~Thought hunter business was for everyone?~

~It is, but coordinating with the other covenants makes things difficult.~

~True, I suppose.~

The Prince was the exception, of course. In matters dealing with the hunters, he kept her up to date. Unfortunately, she couldn't be bothered to deal with this matter personally. She had some thralls watching, he was sure, but she herself was attending to 'Princely' affairs; which likely meant putting counter measures in place against both the hunters, and the Begotten, Uratha, and even the covenants. She always did think ahead. The sheriff was off pursuing some mysterious agenda no one really understood, but at this point, Julias was sure he was doing something involving handling the new threats of the city. The man was a mystery.

~Guess what I'm doing?~ the phone said. Another text from Triss.

He was almost tempted to text her, and say he'd have to get back to her. The night was proving uneventful though, and with as many eyes as he had watching the tower, he didn't need to be watching the video feeds himself. It wouldn't be so bad, to text her back.

~What?~

~Got my hands all covered in kine blood, and I'm drawing patterns on Jen's big tits.~

~ ... what?~

~Ha, kidding. But we are doing some crúac shit. Jacob's showing me some rituals.~

~And you're texting me while doing this?~

~We're on the way. I'll send you a juicy picture if we get naked and rub blood on each other, or something. ttyl~~

Julias rolled his eyes and set the phone back down. He didn't mind the idea of Jen and Triss being naked around Jacob; he doubted the old man gave a shit about naked girls, at this point. There was concern about the dark and dangerous road the two witches were going down, though. Triss had awakened to a new level of confidence, since she started wearing that necklace, and watching her put her own blood around his door frame was an odd sort of thrilling.

He was in love with a witch, a practitioner of the dark arts, and an all around badass woman. Two, sort of, with Jen attaching as a friend.

He smirked, leaned back in his grand chair, and took stock of his second life. Dating an amazing woman, her friend too, he was now on the council for the Invictus of Dolareido, his childe was performing above all expectations, and Lucas, Viktor, and Tony were all dead. Everything should be better, but they weren't, not with the hunters, werewolves, and the damn monsters ruining everything.

Groaning, he buried his forehead in his palm. The Begotten were not the problem, not the way his reflex insisted they were. Hunters in the city, here to kill Azamel, were a problem, but as much as he'd like to blame Azamel, hunters were a problem all paranormals had to face. It was her fault, but at the same time, it was hard to blame her for simply existing. Not all paranormals were lucky enough to live in a city like Dolareido.

His phone buzzed again. He checked it, and chuckled at the picture. Triss, doing a stereotypical selfie for her phone, with her free hand lifting her tank top so he could see her breasts and nipple piercings. Jen was behind her, kissing her neck, and grinning at the phone as she did. The beast within would normally dodge or blur

such photos instinctively, but with a little mental effort, a Kindred could pose for a camera.

Where were they? Looked like a cemetery. Probably the Three Kings Cemetery. He knew Jacob performed a lot of his extracurricular activities in that area, but he wasn't in the picture. Either he was not in camera shot, or not around. Julias hoped he wasn't around, but he got the feeling the two witches were growing comfortable enough to not give a shit about posing for Julias, even with Jacob around. Not because they didn't respect the old man, but they were catching on that Jacob was happiest when people treated him like the asshole that he was; in this case, ignoring him to pose for the phone.

Another picture came in, this time with Jen's hands groping Triss's breasts, still suckling on her neck. Then another, groping her breasts still, but now kissing her.

~Evil.~ He texted before he rolled his eyes, again, and took a couple seconds longer looking at the picture, before setting the phone down. She knew she was torturing him. He'd have to repay her and Jen next time he saw them.

He looked back to the video feed. Carlava Villa was a fairly tall building, with many floors. It had to be tall, to justify the large size of the apartments. Most of the floors had eight, but the top few with the grand suites had only four, giant apartments worthy of millionaires and presidents fucking prostitutes in secret. Three were being taken up by Uratha now.

He frowned, and watched Damien's high perch camera feed. Through the curtains of the building, he could see the silhouettes of some entities on various floors. One of them was Clara, the werewolf who had an interest in Jack. It was a good thing Jack hadn't given into Clara's flirtations, but Jack had expressed some sadness over being unable to reciprocate. He liked Clara, he told

Julias as much, and he seemed to think highly of her, but felt bad about not being able to return her interest. Poor kid probably didn't realize that it'd offend Clara if she realized she was being pitied.

The silhouette of Clara was alone, sitting on a couch. Watching TV, or streaming a movie, perhaps. He could find out, if he wanted, bring up the Xnomina monitoring program, then use his Invictus passcode to get access to the private information. No reason to spy on what she was watching though, except to maybe piss her off later with the knowledge. No reason to do that either.

He set his curiosity aside, and moved his eyes to another video feed. Hella Vendram was watching from the street view, a distant position a good couple blocks away from Carlava Villa. Isabella didn't get her crew involved unless directly ordered, and even when ordered, she was hesitant to throw them into the direct line of fire. He could appreciate that; but it was also why she wasn't a Right Hand, and Jack was. Where Jack was both accomplished and trustworthy, Isabella was as well. The difference was Jack's ability and desire to get things done; case in point, he was sitting in a car with Natasha at this very moment, hidden in her cloak of night, almost directly outside Carlava Villa. Natasha could keep him hidden, barring some ridiculous counter card the hunters hadn't played yet.

And that was a possibility.

Julias sighed, and looked for that joy he had a moment ago, when Triss texted him. Gone. He grumbled, and dragged his fingers down his face. Being stuck behind a desk was man's version of hell. He thought things would be better as a council member, but having to be hands off with everything, so he could provide macro support and keep people aligned on objectives, was both infuriating and nauseating. No wonder CEO was considered one of the most stressful jobs on the planet; no amount of money can justify dying young to a stomach ulcer. Unfortunately, Kindred didn't have to

deal with stomach ulcers, so nothing existed to end this strange misery he'd found himself in.

He wanted to be out there, with Tash and Jessy, with Jack, getting his hands dirty. The oldest, strongest ancilla in the city, and he was trapped behind a desk. No, that wasn't true. He could go out there if he wanted. The problem was he knew it wasn't a good investment of his time, or a good use of his managing skills. From here he could give orders while monitoring the situation; maybe he should get a proper monitoring van set up, like a police crew?

If the hunters showed up and caused a ruckus, Carlava was only a five minute run away. But even in that circumstance, it was probably better to stay here and monitor the situation on the dozen video feeds. Viktor would say it was the responsibility of underlings to do the heavy lifting, and die, while it was the duty of leaders to oversee how. Grim, but true, unfortunately.

He leaned back in his seat, and checked Damien's feed again. The man was a stone, unmoving, and silent. Fifty years of sneaking, hiding, observing, learning the sword, learning to use guns, learning his disciplines. The man was basically a self-taught assassin, and had insisted on doing his stakeout alone.

And, no matter how much Julius found the man unnerving, he was proving to be both trustworthy, and a damn valuable Right Hand.

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~~Damien~~

Damien took a slow, deep breath. Pointless. He didn't breathe, no Kindred did, and the act had lost its value even as a nervous tick, long ago. Now, he was doing it to check if his hearing was still adjusted. If the breath was quiet, his ears weren't adjusted enough. If the breath sounded loud, they were.

The other Kindred weren't used sitting and watching silently. They were taught to be more proactive in their pursuits, to engage, that the best defense was a good offense. It was true, he supposed. In the modern world, with technology at hand, being passive meant losing engagements. He who struck first, won. This was especially true when using explosives.

But when it came to doing a stakeout, and waiting for an enemy to expose themselves, patience was required. The younger Kindred, and those his age, were spoiled by Dolareido. They had no patience. They wanted to run in, convinced they could take on any threat.

That was slowly changing though, as the new threats made it apparent how deadly they were. The Kindred were starting to understand that the Uratha, and the Begotten, were stronger than them. Only the ancilla and elders were strong enough to stand up to them, and the overwhelming majority of Kindred in Dolareido were neonates. Kindred ruled the city, but before the terrifying power of werewolves, or the sheer alien nature of the monsters, most vampires were weak and vulnerable.

And these hunters were hunting Begotten. They came here to kill Azamel, not Kindred. Sometimes Damien wondered if he was the only one putting that together, to come to the realization that these hunters were veterans, not to be taken lightly. Did it matter? He wasn't sure. What he did know, was that if he spotted Jeremiah or Angela, he would kill them. Athalia could burn for all he cared. He wouldn't let her daughter damage the fragile world Dolareido held. He wouldn't let those maniacs hurt this budding new existence he was carving for himself from the ashes of his sire's corpse.

He wouldn't let them hurt Fiona.

He shook his head, and took another slow, deep breath, to align his ears. It also sent his mind wandering to last night, and the small get-together with the Prince, Jack, Natasha, and the others. Jennifer

and Antoinette had, naturally, worn their sexuality openly, leaving nothing to the imagination. It wouldn't be long before Fiona would be dressing the same way, and he had to admit, he was looking forward to seeing her in yet more revealing clothing.

The girl was gorgeous, delightful, and her sunny disposition was soothing to his soul and mind. Not only gorgeous, she was beautiful, and sexual, and the sight of her heavy breasts struggling against the plunging cleavage of her green dress was—

“Damien!” Jessy’s voice, tapping into the open line. “Get in here now! I ... intru ... ck... —”

Static.

## Chapter 69

~~Eric~~

Someone was coming.

He sat up in bed, and climbed over Jessy, but she sat up at the same time, and he rolled with the momentum. The floor greeted him, and he wished he'd landed on cheap apartment carpet, not beautiful, designer ceramic tile that had all the softness of Sheryl's soul.

"The fuck?" she said.

"Someone's coming. I can hear them. Feel them." He tried to stand up, but the moment he was on his feet, everything felt heavy. Arms, legs, the head on his shoulders, it all increased in weight to the point he felt like a newborn unable to lift its own head.

Jessy was up a moment later, hands on his shoulders, stabilizing him. "You serious?"

"Someone ... familiar."

"No hunter's getting past the Kindred watching outside, Eric. The only people who could get in here without them knowing are other paranormals."

He frowned, blinked away his dizziness, and grabbed some jeans from the closet. "I don't know who it is, but I can feel them. Someone's here, in my territory. I have to—"

"Your territory?"



“I ... shit, I didn’t even think about saying it like that, it just came out.” He marched out into the living room, wearing nothing but his boxers and jeans. Good enough to answer the door. Good enough to punch someone in the face if they were looking to try and convert him to their side.

Not good enough to stand. He got to the door, before his hand had to brace his weight, fingers to the wall, head falling forward.

“You look really hot in nothing but jeans,” the vampire said, coming up behind him. “If you were cuddling Kat too, it’d be like a fashion shoot, specifically for wooing lonely, crazy cat women.”

“Can we stop joking for a second?”

“Fine, but I don’t see—”

The stranger arrived at the door. There was a coldness to the smell that crept under the door frame, an alien, and almost overpowering aura. He didn’t know what the fuck an aura was, or how he knew he could feel one, but he was. This person at the door had an aura, and it was dark.

Jessy pulled him back by the shoulder, and put her eye to the peep hole. Mistake. He tried to reach out, to grab her shoulder and yank her away, but the world wouldn’t hold still under his feet. Before he could say anything, the door opened with a loud crack, the door frame shattering open around the lock.

But Jessy jumped back in time. As she slid by, socks gliding on the floor, she grabbed him by the wrist, spun, and threw him into the couch fifteen feet away. Nausea hit him, but he managed to keep his food down as his back collided with the couch back. He tried to keep his eyes on Jessy, but she was twisting, moving, sliding—no, she was standing still now. It was the damn world moving around, refusing to hold still again.

“Who the fuck are you?” she said.

Someone stepped into the room. Some guy wearing a nondescript gray hoodie, blue jeans, and black sneakers. He was tall, broad shouldered, and brought his hands up like a boxer as he put the weight of his body onto the balls of his feet.

No answer.

He was familiar, whoever he was. Fucker smelled familiar, felt familiar, and Eric was sure he'd seen the man before. Where? Who the fuck was this guy?

“Jessy, he's dangerous!”

The woman snorted a growl, and came in closer. “Answer me before I—”

“I didn't come here for you. I came for the Uratha.” The stranger's voice was almost monotone, and for a moment, Eric almost expected him to say ‘I want to suck your blood’ or some other stereotype. Romanian? It was subtle, but there. Except, whoever this fucker was, he was no vampire; he didn't smell like they did, hints of ash and staleness. Instead, he smelled more of that alien smell from before, something his nose didn't recognize.

The man stepped in, and swung his hand upward. Whoever he was, he had balls, but he didn't smell like a vampire or werewolf. What was he, then? The fist collided with Jessy's blocking arms, and sent her flying, the impact of knuckles on forearms hard enough the sound was almost comical, like a scene from a movie. A growl filled the room as Jessy stumbled back upon landing, before dropping to a knee and onto her hands, like she was getting ready to sprint.

“Jessy, I—”

“Shut up and stay put, Eric.”

Yeah, that made sense. He wanted to get up, to fight, but the very thought of standing up was enough to have him reaching for the couch to brace himself. He was no use in a fight right now.

Maybe if he changed? Could he change? He knew he could, felt the ability in his guts as much as he knew how to flex a muscle. But trying to change right now was like trying to fly, and until whatever was happening to him settled, he wasn't doing anything.

Jessy said the place was being watched by Kindred, but she wasn't calling for them. She had faith they'd come in on their own, then. But then, this fucker wasn't supposed to be able to sneak in past them. They might not have been coming; and not like they could see in, since Eric had blackout curtains hung up everywhere. Really regretted that now.

He half expected the man in the hoodie to tell Jessy to leave. Another part half expected him to pull out a pistol and start shooting. He did not expect the man to run up to Jessy, and take another swing.

Jessy came in to meet him, and swung her arm down. Eric stared on, sure his eyes were playing tricks on him, as Jessy's arm exploded in size, spikes and thorns erupting from her bicep and tricep, from her forearm, from her knuckles, and the length of her fingers extending as they thickened into claws. The counter inertia was enough for the rest of body to get launched a foot into the air, as the colossal hand slammed into the floor.

Oh god, his floor.

The intruder dodged to the side at the last moment, throwing himself with a panicked jump. He slid into the wall, near a cat tower. Shit, Kat! No, Kat wasn't around, still in his bedroom, and smart enough to not come out with the noise.

His eyes locked onto Jessy, and he forced himself to sit up more, one arm gripping the couch back as he squinted. If the world could stop spinning for just one fucking second, he could get a better look at the vampire.

He gulped as Jessy's other arm erupted in the same mess of death, covered in the same sort of spikes, and fingernails elongated into massive claws from monstrous hands. She launched forward, weight on the balls of her feet, back raised, as if she had a tail to counter balance. She didn't. Instead of an animal, she just looked like a hulking monster, several spikes erupting from her back, her spine, and from her elbows. Others erupted outward from the top of her head, and others erupted from her feet, talons that shredded her socks.

The man sidestepped at the last moment again, but Jessy's speed was immense. Her claws snagged on his hoodie, and cut through the pockets.

"I don't know you, who you are, or how you got in here," she said, stalking back and forth, now that her prey was out of reach. "But I'm going to rip you to fucking shreds."

The man stood, looked at her, and frowned. His features were largely hidden in the hoodie, its hood pulled forward, and burying the man's face in more shadow than it should have. How he managed to punch Jessy so hard that she flew clear across the room, Eric had no idea, but the man grimaced as he looked the vampire up and down, his lips only barely visible. No banter, despite Jessy fishing for it.

Just as Jessy was about to pounce, the man ran in, sneakers gripping the floor as he vaulted up, drew his fist back, and slammed it down toward her. As he did, a flash of shadow blanketed the room, black, enormous curtains that jutted outward from behind

the man. The fist he drew back was enormous, black, leathery, and there were two of them for the one hand.

Wait.

“Jes—”

She leapt aside, talons tearing up the ceramic tile as her weight caught against it, skidding like she was ice skating. Her hand’s claws sank into the floor as well, helping bring her sliding body to a halt.

“I saw it, Eric. I said shut up!”

He gulped. Her voice had changed, some inhuman growl overtones mixing with the woman’s usual tone. It was like a demon was bursting out of her.

And a demon was trying to kill her. The intruder stood up from where he landed, and the tile around his punch splintered outward, a small crater around his fist. Any fighter understood that you could only put as much weight into a punch as you had weight attached to it; a light guy with a hard punch would send himself away from whatever he punched, if the thing was heavier than him. But seeing a guy jump, and then land as if he weighed a couple thousand pounds, was massive dissonance to Eric’s trained mind. This made no sense.

Jessy dashed for the man, and threw her weight at him, hands out to both sides with claws elongated. If the intruder dodged to the sides, he’d risk getting clawed. If he stayed where he was, Jessy’s weight would hit him, and then she’d close her claws around him.

The intruder turned his side to Jessy, and brought one of his wings down over his body, like a wall. Wings?

Eric squinted again, stared, breathed deep, and did everything he could to get the world to hold still for a second, so he could see what

the ever living fuck the guy in the hoodie was doing. Something was coming out of him. Not like Jessy's spikes and claws, which had erupted from her skin like bone growths, but something that faded from existence the moment it had served its purpose. Something black.

Jessy's body collided with the black wall, and before she could close in her claws around him, he snapped the black curtain away from him. It was a wing, it had to be a wing, something that connected to the man's back, and had bent around him like a shield. Wings, four of them.

The thing from his dream.

He sprinted after Jessy, sneakers making tiny squeaks against the fancy floor as he threw his weight into her. The Gangrel hadn't gotten up from her rolling, and only managed to get to a knee as he ran into her. He slammed forward his palm, the one motion sending two alien palms to reach out, one grabbing her face, the other grabbing her wrist. With a growl, a familiar, shrieking growl, the man in the hoodie slammed the vampire's skull into the wall separating the living room from bathroom.

The drywall gave way, bits of paint and white mist splashing outward like water, before it cracked inward and let Jessy's head to pass through it. It was like a fucking cartoon, half her torso going into the wall too, and the impact causing her legs to straighten out in the air behind her, before slumping against the wall and floor.

The man turned toward Eric, and marched his way.

Eric stared at him, and tried to force his body to respond; so far the only thing that was responding appropriately was the increased heart rate and breathing. The world wasn't going to hold still long enough for him to stand up, and every motion felt like trying to find where gravity was again. He was borderline helpless.

Borderline. Growling at the intruder, Eric dug his fingers into the couch cushions, and stood up. He expected his feet to land on the ground, but they didn't, tripping over themselves sideways, and sending him to the floor. It was like being very, very drunk, and as Eric reached over to the couch now beside him and tried to pick himself up, he groaned against the familiar struggle. Drunk as hell without any of the buzz, delightful.

A loud crack turned his head toward the door.

“What the fuck is this?”

Eric squinted at the apartment entrance, trying to make out who it was. But sound and smell filled him in a lot quicker than his eyes.

“Clara! This guy is ... trying to ... take me to Jeremiah,” he said. She must have heard the commotion; everyone in the building must have heard the commotion. The Kindred had to know what was going on, or at least that something was happening.

The man let out a single snort, before he swung his foot for Eric's chest. To try and dodge it was a reflex, but a pointless one, and Eric let out a loud groan as the man's sneaker crashed into his stomach hard enough to send him back a few feet. If he had anything in his stomach, he'd be vomiting as he spun over once before landing on his side.

“He smells weird,” Clara said, approaching, corner of her lip raised in a snarl.

“He's ... a Begotten,” he said between coughs and groans.

“The fuck is a Begotten doing working for Jeremiah?” Clara looked to the other side of the room where Jessy was pushing herself out of the hole in the wall, and then back to Eric's direction. Groaning, Eric put his palms to the floor, and twisted to look back toward her, and the fucker who kicked him.

Mister Hoodie hesitated, before he brought his fists up to his chest, and cracked his knuckles. As he took a step toward Clara, a shimmer of black filled the air around him, burying them in shadow. Flickering movements, each massive, each swallowing the air around them in its shadow. A set of dragon feet, then gone. Four arms poised to rip and tear, then gone. A long tail slithering behind it like a swimming crocodile, then gone. Four wings, with a pair of horns rising up between them from the demon's skull. Gone again, as Mister Hoodie came in closer to Clara.

“The fuck were you hoping to accomplish?” Clara said. “Not like you're getting out of here with Eric, or alive.”

The man snorted again, and a heavy blast of air shot out around him, as if a great beast had expressed discontent. He raised his hands, grabbed reality between his two and four sets of fingers and claws, and ripped out the curtains of the universe.

As blackness set upon them, he could hear Jessy, scrambling with her phone. “Damien! Get in here now, we have an intruder! I can barely see anything, shit is going black, and the ... shit.” She put away the phone, and ran for the monster and two werewolves, before everything was swallowed in the growing shadow.

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The blackness came, and fled, like a morning fog. Slow, heavy, cold, and unwanted. Eric groaned again as he reached over for the couch, and froze as his hand found something hard instead. Something hard, cold, and rough to the touch. Something that gave him a splinter as he slid his fingers along it.

“The ... fuck...”

“Eric?” the darkness called out. Jessy's voice.

“Yeah, I'm here. Clara?”



“Yeah, I’m here. Where’s here?”

“Dunno,” Jessy said. “But ... but if what Fiona told me is right, this fucking Begotten just pulled us into a nightmare.”

The following silence might as well have been the Funeral March.

“Shit,” Clara said.

Eric sighed, and stood up. Stood, standing, up! Fucking yes, finally. He couldn’t see much, only some barren walls in the dark and the two nearby women, but he could tell the world wasn’t spinning anymore.

“I ... am apparently feeling better,” he said.

“Might be because we’re in a nightmare?” Jessy came up to him, and put a hand on his shoulder. He expected to feel claws, but they were gone. She changed quickly. “If that fucker got into your dream, and did something to you there, maybe it’s broken because we’re here?”

Clara snorted, and came up to them as well. Until their eyes adjusted to the darkness, better to stay near each other; the fucker could still be around, too. “So you two might be perfectly fine with this, but this is my first time inside a nightmare. You sure we’re in a nightmare?”

Shrugging, Jessy brought up her phone, and used it as a flashlight. “My first time too, but we know what Begotten can do. If you have any other ideas, hit me, because I’m getting no reception.”

Eric smirked at the Gangrel. Panic was rising in his gut, and every sense he had told him he was in some alien location, but Jessy handled it in stride. He supposed her fifty plus years of being a vampire, and decades of being some sort of front liner for the

Invictus, meant she'd earned her scars and stars. Maybe they were in good hands, if the woman's volatile nature didn't doom them.

The world decided he wasn't ready for standing yet, and he reached out for Clara's shoulder. "Ok ... feeling a lot better, but not back to full speed yet."

The Uratha nodded, pat his arm, and looked around the room that surrounded them. It was a large room, with walls, and a similar layout to his apartment. But as he breathed deep, he smelled stone, and the ocean. He smelled wood, the forest, just a hint, but the stagnant air mostly held the scent of old stone, and the sort of water damage from decades of weathering storms. As Jessy's light came by, he squatted down and ran his fingers along the floor. Dirty, and he could feel the stone, smooth and worn, against his skin. He was barefoot, after all, Jessy too, and the stone was colder than his bare feet appreciated.

"Feel like I'm standing in some sort of old, fancy cottage with stone floors," he said. Back on his feet, he walked over to a wall, and touched it. "No, this is stone too. Stone walls and stone floors?" Looked like a wood ceiling though. Old, stained, and a bit warped, but yeah that was a wood ceiling, with planks showing many imperfections.

"Oh shit." Jessy pulled on something, and the two wolves turned to look at the incoming light. The sound of wood shifting on stone was strange, grinding, not the sound you'd expect from a cottage. Eric and Clara came over, and watched the gentle light cut across the floor, flickering, swaying. Fire.

Jessy winced, put her phone away, and pointed at the wall beyond the door. A hallway, with torches high up on the stone wall, lit. No, not a torch, a brazier, fancy, with a gargoyle shape holding the flame in its hands, the beast perched upon a stone outcropping.

They both stepped out into the hallway, and gasped at the size that awaited them. Eric looked left and right, half expecting the fucker in the hoodie to pounce, half expecting the four-winged gargoyle to pounce. But they were alone, and the hallway greeted them with nothing but silence, and the fire the gargoyles dangled over them.

The ceiling of the hallway was high, much higher than the room, at least twenty feet, and the hallway was wide, twenty feet as well. Several doors like the one they'd opened awaited, all closed, and while one end of the hallway came to a stop, a wall of stone and nothing more, the other end of the hallway looked like it opened into a turn.

“We’re not in Kansas anymore,” Jessy said.

Fuck him, if the damn woman couldn’t make him laugh.

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~~Damien~~

He took the stairs.

Wrapped in his cloak of night, he tapped into the speed of a Mekhet, and drove his shoes into the hard metal of the inner fire escape stairway. Kine were there, some fleeing the building, but not in a panic. As far as he could tell, they had thought the noises might have been explosions, or maybe a collapsing wall or structure pillar. But the noises were gone, nothing had happened, and no fire alarm had gone off. People began walking back up the stairs to their apartments.

Some of them paused, and glanced around, confused, as Damien sped past them, jumping along the railing and climbing it almost straight up. He was a blur to them, their eyes sliding off of him, and minds unable to parse the alien presence. Moving quick and silent

among the masses was as much an art as it was a blood discipline, and Damien was confident in his mastery.

Eric's floor was near the top of the tall building, and Damien frowned as the journey took seconds longer than he wanted it to. He'd said on the open line he was going in, and half expected Julias Mire to tell him to wait for back up. He didn't, and gave him an 'affirmative' instead. Perhaps the man was beginning to trust him.

It'd be a nice change of pace, for people to trust him. The only people he felt truly did so, were Jack and Fiona.

He steeled his gaze, sprinted down the hall, and went for the open door, sword in his right hand, pistol in his left. But the room was empty.

"What in God's name..." Sighing, he put his pistol away, and pressed in on his ear piece. "This is Damien. Eric's suite shows signs of melee combat, extreme damage, but there's no sign of him or Herrington."

"What about Clara?" Julias said.

"Negative."

Damien could almost hear Julias frown over the line. "Video feed saw her jump from her couch, and then run out of the apartment. I assume she ran to join Eric and Jessy."

"She probably did. And Carter?"

"Not in the building tonight."

"Roger that." Damien squatted down over the crater on the floor, and frowned. The floor was damaged as if someone had dropped a very large iron ball onto it from on high; but no iron ball was to be found. The hole in the wall could be accomplished by smashing

someone into it, and the claw marks along the floor were long and filled with cracks and shred marks; the work of a Gangrel's protean transformations. The crater in the floor though, that would have required a great weight.

An Uratha could make a hole like that, if transformed into their war form, and if they drove the entirety of their weight into a single fist, after jumping to a great height. There had been two Uratha in the room, but no howling or roaring. That could have simply been the building's good sound insulation though.

He raised his head, and offered Jack and Natasha a nod as they walked in.

"They really just vanished?" Jack said.

Sighing, he nodded again, and walked over to the hole in the wall. Clear through, studs smashed, with bits of fabric against the wood between the drywall.

"A bad fight," he said.

"Think ... m-maybe ... a Kindred did this?" Natasha stood by the door, and looked back out. The police would not be coming, of course, and the residents would be informed there was no cause for concern.

"You know a Kindred that can make people vanish like this?" Jack shook his head, and squatted down by the dent in the floor, as Damien had done. "Cloak of night can do a lot of things, but the only Kindred I can think of that could use it, and incapacitate Jessy and Clara, and take them and Eric out of here all at once, would be —"

"Jacob or the sheriff." Damien shook his head, and motioned to the claw marks. "Jessy would have called that in immediately, if it were Jacob. No, she called in something more vague after

hesitating, and based on these marks, she thought she could fight the intruders.” Jessy wasn’t stupid enough to try and fight those ancient undead, and if it was either of them, she would have called it in.

“Could always be an ancient elder we don’t know about,” Jack said, rolling his eyes with his own absurdity.

“The chances of that are ... v-very ... very low.” The little Mekhet came in and joined them, taking pictures of the damage with her phone.

“Yea, but the other three options suck.” Wincing, Jack sat down on the couch, and looked around with wandering eyes. “Either the hunters have a way of bypassing our stakeouts, getting passed all the Mekhet’s auspex on top of that, or the Uratha or Begotten have taken Jessy and Eric. And Clara ran up here, so...”

Damien shook his head. “I doubt Clara helped the intruder. Your sire says she ran up here after the noises started, body language surprised. Though, that does not dissuade the possibility that an Uratha is responsible; I don’t know what abilities they have, but I assume some would be strange and powerful, considering their ability to journey to the Shadow Realm.”

“B-Begotten then?” Tash said. “It w-w ... would make sense, with what Jessy’s m-message said, about Eric’s dream. We could ask them.”

“We?” Damien said. “You came along to cover Jack. That—”

“That’s still a thing!” Frowning, the tiny girl came up to him, and jammed in the chest with one of her fingers. “Trying to get rid of ... m-me?”

“No.” But he’d prefer to not involve her in the dark games he and Jack were drawn into. And that was a definite possibility, if the

conversation turned in directions Damien wouldn't be able to predict. "Fine." There was no reason to suspect the oncoming 'threat' Jack warned him about was linked to Eric's kidnapping, but, it never hurt to be prepared. Mekhet motto, or Mekhet paranoia, either or.

Their ear pieces gave off a quick beep tone, announcing an incoming message. "Jessy's phone is off the grid, no GPS, no signal." Mire's voice. "Think it was destroyed?"

Damien did a double check on the damage. "No sir, at least not here. It may have been, if it was taken elsewhere."

"Tracker history shows it didn't leave that spot," the ear piece said. "So unless she was teleported somewhere deep underground or into a jamming zone ... I suppose that's all very possible, if she vanished."

What a scary technology, being able to not only locate a person anywhere in the world if they had their phone with them, but to also have recorded where they'd been. Would Kindred keep maps, showing the life path of each Kindred and where they moved at all times? The Invictus would, surely.

"What do we do now?" Jack said, finger to his ear piece. "She's completely gone. The intruder, Clara, Eric, they're all gone like they stepped into the twilight zone or something."

The beep dialed in once again. "Unfortunately our options are limited. Is Natasha willing to help?"

Damien nodded. "She is."

"Ask her to visit the Uratha, and see if they have any ideas."

"Sure you don't want me to do that?" Jack said.

“You need to visit Azamel. Jessy’s description of Eric’s nightmare intruder, and his sudden incapacitation, are too specific to ignore.”

Damien winced, and looked to his companion. The expression on the boy’s face was obvious. Shit.

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Damien sighed. Jack sighed. The two of them crept into one of the old, abandoned subway tunnels, and through a locked door, into the depths of Dolareido.

Damien was not looking forward to this meeting; and yet, a smile kept sneaking onto his lips. A small thing, teasing him, sparking memories of Fiona, her giggling, her accent, her curves. A part of him told him he should be more concerned with immediate circumstances, about Jessy’s disappearance, and the two werewolves. There was a very real chance that the three of them were in the hands of the hunters, and Jessy could be killed as collateral damage to their real target, Eric.

Perhaps they should have asked the Circle of the Crone for help. Their blood magics were capable of extraordinary feats, and he wouldn’t have been surprised if divination or mystical viewing and tracking were among them.

His mind warped back to Fiona, and he slapped himself hard enough to pull a gasp through clenched teeth. Jack stopped, and raised a brow.

“Sorry,” Damien said. “Thinking about ... things.”

“Fiona?”

“ ... how did you know?”

“The only times I’ve ever slapped myself, and was thinking about things, was when it was about a girl.”



“Jessy and Clara are girls.”

“Ha, yeah, but you know that’s not the same thing.” Jack had a smile on, small but there. Perhaps he wasn’t worried, or had learned from Julias the value in not showing fear.

“ ... she is on my mind occasionally, yes.”

A strange look washed over the boy’s face. Relief, perhaps?

“She’s been flirting with you, so that’s understandable.”

“She has?” Damien looked at his companion, and raised a brow. “Isn’t she trying to seduce Eric?”

“She’s attracted to Eric, sure, but a lot of that seems to be about making you jealous.”

Madness. Damien shook his head, and started walking again. It was a mile to Azamel’s hideout, and they couldn’t dally.

“ ... are you sure?”

With a chuckle, Jack followed after him. “Julias — and Antoinette — have been teaching me a lot about social queues. Fiona’s young, fun, trying to discover herself, all that typical young adult stuff I’m still going through.”

“I spent those years hiding in sewer and subway tunnels, I’m afraid.”

“Which is why I’m telling you. I wouldn’t have said a thing, honestly, if you didn’t just say you were thinking about her. She likes you, but she’s all over the place, not sure what to do with herself, what she wants, or how to figure it out.” He put his hands up in mock surrender. “I could be wrong, but the signals aren’t subtle.”

“Then how come I haven’t seen them?”

“Because they’re not subtle by female standards. Flicking hair over the shoulder, frequent glances with smiles, sneaking peeks at you while drinking, turning to face your general direction. Women think these things are giant signs, big neon letters that say ‘I like you let’s chat’.” He shrugged, and took a moment to check his vest within his suit. Good to always check that your weapons were on hand. “But we’re guys, socially awkward guys at that. It’ll take a lot more than that for us to notice.”

He found this all hard to believe. It was a stereotype he was familiar with; he spent fifty years hiding in a city, not in a cottage in the woods. But he’d assumed it was exaggeration. Who’d be silly enough to play these games?

Fiona would be silly enough, and her silliness kept pulling smiles out of him, whether he wanted it to or not. She was his total opposite, bright and cheerful and forever giggling. But, how was he supposed to respond to flirting? He hadn’t a clue. His goal in unlife was to serve Lucas, and women were not a part of that plan. The plan was dead, along with his sire, but the wake of his inadequacies and ignorance remained.

“Damien,” Jack said, “has Maria been up to anything strange?”

“Are more things pointing to her?”

“Nothing related to this vanishing act, but, yeah, a few more people have mentioned they think she’s up to something.”

This again. “I told you, I don’t know what people are finding out about Maria that could suggest this. Everything she tells me, she tells the Invictus council, and all the Right Hands. The only things I know that you do not, are matters of the Lancea et Sanctum; and trust me, those topics are innocent.” Trying to establish the rules for the rebirth of the Second Estate in Dolareido was proving

problematic. People were not interested, and trying to bridge the gap between old and new, with an elder as his partner, was like trying to mesh water and oil. Stir them, and it seemed like they got along, but once things settled, the differences became apparent.

“I believe you. I’m just throwing shit at a wall, seeing what sticks.”

“ ... what?”

“Shit at a wall? Nevermind. We’re flying blind about this mysterious threat, and the only person who could probably answer our questions, is Jacob, the sheriff, and the Prince. I can’t ask the Prince, and we can’t ask the sheriff, or Jacob for obvious reasons.”

“Why can’t you ask the Prince?”

“Azamel said to not involve people, and I’m sure that goes double for the elders.”

Damien raised a brow at his partner again. “You love her though, and trust her.” It was a cold, logical decision to keep his lover out of such dangerous information trails. He hadn’t expected Jack to have that level of resolve. Perhaps he should have expected it.

“Yeah ... yeah I do. But I don’t tell her everything, just like she doesn’t tell me everything. Her Princely machinations, and Ordo Dracul things, I don’t know any of it.”

“Not the same thing. This thing threatens us all, and—”

“And she knows. I know she knows. She knows I know, and she knows I know she knows, I guess.” Jack frowned at the metal rails beneath them. “The problem is, this shadow game is deadly, and one slip up means someone dies. You knowing is a problem, but I took a gamble and trusted you.”

“Though really, it was Fiona’s slip up that forced the situation.”

“I could have not explained what she meant,” Jack said. “And I was going to tell you eventually anyway, cause I need a friend in this.”

“Thank you, I suppose.”

Smiling, Jack shrugged at him. “You earned it.”

Damien returned the small smile. He appreciated Jack’s reserved expressions, and how he didn’t explode into theatrics for interaction, like Jessy often did. The boy understand the power, and value, of stating things simply.

Funny, Damien enjoyed seeing Fiona explode with her dramatic exaggerations. He didn’t enjoy it when others did.

“You said you have not told her everything? The Prince? It sounded like you meant more than this vague threat we hunt.”

“Yeah, I ... haven’t told her about Angela.”

Damien raised a brow, and turned to look ahead as they talked. The matter sounded personal. In the past, Damien would have shied away from such interactions, but he’d been working with the Right Hands and the Invictus long enough to have developed a sliver of empathy for them; Jack, far more so.

“What do you mean?”

“Just been having ... rage issues, I guess, about Angela.”

“That’s understandable. I’m not sure I see the reason for concern.”

“Yeah, yeah, I agree. Not ... yeah, it’s not a big deal.”

Damien again raised a brow, but did not turn to look at the man. There was more to it than that, based on the tone in his voice; not that Damien's social skills were reliable. Was Fiona really flirting with him? He'd assumed the girl was flirtatious with everyone, and hadn't sent him any unique or specific signals. Maybe he was blind.

Or maybe, as Maria told him, he had an aversion to happiness. A common failing amongst the Sanctified, she confirmed, and assured him it would be something he struggled with for centuries; as she still did. Fiona was a walking, talking bundle of happiness. Why? She was a monster, a beast of nightmares that stalked, hunted, and fed upon the scum of the Earth. Why was she joyful?

Youth, no doubt, was a large factor. While the monster she'd taken into her as a part of her was old, with a name and history, Fiona herself was a young woman. Perhaps it was also her simple mind. She didn't over analyze everything, as Mekhet did.

Maybe he should listen to Jessy, and try the same.

A little while later, he and his Ventrue companion arrived at Azamel's 'hole in the ground', as Julius put it. He half expected to find it empty, but Azamel sat upon her chair, smoking, while Athalia sat reading a book. Mark and Fiona were nowhere to be seen.

"The boy returns, with ... the other boy." Azamel shrugged, blew some smoke their way, and coughed. A lot. "I assume this is about the appearance of the Begotten?"

"So it was a Begotten?" Jack said.

"Yes. We don't know who it is, or what they're up to, but there's a Begotten in the dream, nearby. They've shut their lair off to us."

How forward this woman was with information, suddenly. He didn't trust her. He was sure no one trusted her, except for maybe Jack, and the boy's naivete was a danger to everyone. But then, a

little trust could lead to positive outcomes; case in point, himself. It was hard to abandon fifty years of scurrying in the dark, though, trusting no one.

He had no reason to be, as Jessy would put it, a ridiculous, brooding stereotype anymore.

“The ritual has been performed again,” Jack said. “This time, it showed Eric’s face.”

“It did?” Athalia said, hopping down from Azamel’s stage to join them. While the two Kindred were in suits, she was dressed in blue jeans and a black sweater. “Strange.”

Jack, naturally, decided to tell them far too much for Damien’s taste, and recounted the tale of the discovery of the ritual, and their attempts to capture whomever was sent to kidnap Eric. “We had Kindred doing a stakeout while Jessy was in there with Eric. Clara was below, in her own apartment. But, whatever happened, drew her attention. By the time the rest of us came in, Eric, Clara, Jessy, and the intruders had vanished.”

Athalia sighed, looked to Azamel, and sighed again when Azamel blew some smoke, and shrugged. Giving her permission to do whatever she wanted, Damien supposed.

“Many things could make a group of people vanish,” Athalia said.

Shaking her head, Azamel managed to speak. “Nonsense.” Another coughing fit, lungs tearing them apart, forcing Damien to wince.

“Azamel’s probably correct,” Damien said. “More incriminating is a dream Eric shared with Jessy, which she relayed to us. Eric insists a monster, a gargoye creature with four arms and four wings attacked him in a dream. Since then, he’s been exhausted.”

“Shit, yeah, that’s probably the Begotten we sense.” Nodding, Athalia began pacing side to side in front of them. “Wait, the ritual is performed by a friend of Jeremiah’s. The fuck does a Begotten have to do with this?”

The little Ventrue raised a hand. “Jessy’s text said Eric’s dream monster said he was fetching Eric for Jeremiah.”

That was enough to earn a snarl from Athalia. “No Begotten is working for that psychopath, not willingly anyway.”

Damien shrugged. “Perhaps it is unwillingly.”

Athalia’s face turned from ice, to fire, as she considered the implications. “Jeremiah, or Angela, controlling a Begotten?” Fists at her side, she marched as she paced, feet growing louder, as if that would expel her anger. It wouldn’t. “We—”

“You didn’t tell us,” Damien said.

“I’m sorry?”

“You didn’t tell us, about a new Begotten in the city?”

“Why would I tell you anything?”

“When did this new Begotten arrive in the city?”

“A few weeks ago.”

A few weeks ago? This woman was infuriating. Did she not see the harm in not sharing such crucial information?

Jack sighed, and waved his arms. “Not the time, guys. We have to get Jessy and Clara back, and Eric. Tonight.”

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Azamel said Mark was busy and would not be joining them, but Fiona was at a bar in Devil's Corner. He knew the girl did her hunting there, at different bars, different alleys, different places where she was liable to run into someone who deserved to be put down. But she didn't put them down anymore, supposedly; Invictus police reports suggested few people had died, since her change in feeding approach, so it must have been true.

The Invictus car pulled up by the bar, and waited. Jack had his phone out, and was texting.

"Vola?" Damien said.

"Yeah. She'll meet us at the apartment. Arturo and Matthew will be coming, at Avery's behest. They want help getting Clara back, but, understandably, don't want to send the whole pack into a nightmare realm. Not familiar territory for them."

"Is it for us?"

Jack sighed, shrugged, and looked at him with a small grimace. It was their duty to learn all they could about the Begotten and the nightmares where they lived, but progress on that front was going slow. Maybe Damien should be more upfront about his curiosity with Fiona, and simply ask her? It'd be an excuse to talk to her, too.

Damien, you are a child.

Of course, Athalia was in the car, and she sighed and rolled her eyes. "If it were familiar territory, I'd wonder who's been letting you into our lair. Fiona is far too chummy with you."

"Fiona," Damien said, "understands the value in friends." Hopefully Athalia would notice his hypocrisy in that statement.

"She's a child. She doesn't understand anything, the value in anything."



Damien almost snapped at her, but Jack spoke up first.

“You’re protective of her,” he said, smiling.

“What?”

“My mom, she used to say the same thing about Mary, my sister, when she was being a bit too rambunctious.”

“Ram ... bunctious.” Athalia sighed, folded her arms across her chest, and stared ahead. Damien struggled to not grin at the sight. It was true then, that Athalia was being protective of the girl. And why wouldn’t she be? She was a mother who’d seen how badly things could go, and with her new family, was perhaps trying to prevent that.

Fiona came out of the bar, a grin on her face and bounce in her step. Wearing blue jeans that hugged her curves, she netted her fingers behind her, and skipped the last few steps of the way to the car. It was a large car, basically a limousine, and had no trouble fitting them all. But, with them all in the back seat, it made it difficult to not admire the green sweater she wore, and how it exposed the entirety of her shoulders.

Her large bundle of frizzy red hair against the pale skin and freckles of her shoulders, was beautiful, and he struggled to not stare. Jack’s words rung in his mind again and again, taunting him. Should he try and flirt back with her? How do you flirt? He could talk to her, but if he tried to say something flirtatious, or even slightly romantic or sexual, he was bound to fail. He had no idea how to do either.

“Damien!” Fiona said, smiling at him, and scooting in past Athalia to sit beside him. Crap.

“Fiona,” he said. He knew his voice was deadpan, and he made sure to only meet her gaze and nothing but. He did not lower his

gaze. No. No lowering of his gaze, despite his peripheral vision able to see how her low-hanging sweater hugged her breasts and waist tight enough to show the curves of her figure.

With a small giggle, she reached out, and adjusted his collar. “Suit and tie?”

He froze for a moment, before he forced his eyes in Jack’s direction. The kid was smiling at him. Damn it.

“Jack is wearing this too.”

“Aye, but he’s Invictus. Plus, I bet Antoinette likes the suit and tie.”

“I am a Right Hand of the Invictus. Some presentation is to be expected.”

She rolled her eyes, and tugged on his tie a few times. “I think ye’d look better dressed like the sheriff, maybe a wee more modern. Ever see the Matrix?”

Jack choked on a chuckle. Damien frowned at him, before setting a hand on Fiona’s, and guiding it away from his tie.

“Let’s focus on the matter at hand.”

“Fine fine.” She slumped into the car seat, a little frown of her own. It didn’t last. It never did. “I’ve felt a new presence in the dream, but I cannae find them.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Athalia said. “We need your help. Vrall is better at opening doors than I am.”

“But, opening a door into another Begotten’s lair? I ... I dinnae ken if I can.” Fiona’s frown returned as she folded her arms across her chest, and stared down. “Vrall has ne’er done that before.”

Jack nodded, and looked out the window as the car drove off to South Side. “I imagine tonight will be full of firsts.”

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~~Jack~~

Other than Fiona’s worry over opening another Begotten’s ‘tunnel’, everyone seemed confident, and he knew that was because he looked confident. He wasn’t. But, Julias had made it clear how important it was for people to trust in the confidence of the leader, and while he wasn’t the leader, Ventrue habit dictated he start acting like one. He only noticed after the fact, that he was the one doing things first, and encouraging others to follow. Case in point, he opened the door to Eric’s apartment first, and expected everyone to follow behind him.

They did, too. It was a bad time to let his Ventrue blood inflate his ego, but there was something damn satisfying about being in the front, and everyone following behind you without a complaint. He forced down the smile, and offered a small wave to Tash and the two Uratha. Three Uratha.

“Um, hello?” he said.

“Noah.” The man, covered in tattoos with a shaved head and pale skin, walked up to him, and extended a hand. Wow, a hand shake. Taking it, Jack couldn’t help but smile at the very old school form of introduction.

“Jack Terry.”

“I’m here to back up Matthew and Arturo. They have a habit of getting stuck in stupid situations.”

Art came up to the man, and shoved him, hard enough to make him stumble a couple steps.

“Don’t pick a fight with me, you asshole.”

Ok, that wasn’t as friendly as Jack expected. Some buddy buddy shoving and insults, he got, but Art looked more than a little pissed by that remark. Noah, on the other hand, sighed, shook off his shoulders, and walked back to where he was as Art walked back over to Matt. The two of them were sniffing as they walked around.

Tash walked up to Jack, and smiled up at him. “Noah is ... well, um, I wasn’t there, but the boys say Avery isn’t t-t-too happy about how often Art and Matt are with Kindred, so Noah is ... is—”

“Just making sure things are going smoothly. Besides, I want to help get Clara back.”

Message received. Noah was here to help rescue their pack mate, but also to make sure Art and Matt didn’t do something to compromise the Uratha. What that meant could be anything, but it was definitely casting the man as some sort of auditor. Poor guy.

Athalia offered the man nothing more than a short snarl, while Fiona bounced up to him, and looked him up and down. He was fit man, wearing a t-shirt and jeans, so he fit in well with the Begotten, clothes wise, while all the Kindred in the room wore suits, Tash included. The vampires were the only ones with weapons too, hidden under their jackets, while the monsters and werewolves were more comfortable killing things with their bare hands. The whole situation made Jack feel like the vampires were the civilized ones, and the others were not. Not a healthy image to have, but, it was hard to ignore.

“Noah,” he said, “this is Athalia and Fiona.”

Noah nodded to each of them. The introduction was unnecessary; the werewolves had already seen both of them, that time in the tunnel with the strange spider monster. Still, it was nice to do things proper, and maybe keep things civil. Three Kindred, three Uratha,

and two Begotten, working together, was going to test his skills, because an argument was going to break out at some point. Inevitable.

“So, mission breakdown,” he said. “This is a rescue mission, but also a recon mission. We don’t know where we’ll end up, and learning as much as we can about enemy territory is secondary to rescuing our companions. Every effort must be made to maintain a stealth profile, and we should only engage the enemy if absolutely necessary.” Remain calm, confident, don’t think about the dangers ahead, don’t think about Jeremiah or Angela, or this mysterious Begotten that might be an enemy. Stand strong, confident.

He winced as he thought about Antoinette. This was the sort of shit she was angry at him for, his natural tendency to put himself into harm’s way, and try and deal with issues. Half of him knew it was because he really wanted to help, but deep down inside of him, he knew there was another reason, arrogant as it was. He couldn’t trust anyone else to do it.

Where did that come from? It came naturally he supposed, with time, no matter the situation he was in. It was the same before he was Kindred; given enough time, he pulled ahead of others in his pursuits, and if it was a team effort, he could never quite trust other people to handle things, even if he knew they could. Ventrue hubris manifested in many forms, and that one was going to be a problem. Maybe he’d turn into an arrogant asshole like Viktor? He grinned at the thought. No way in hell.

He punched his palm, adopting the best hero pose he figured he could get away with. “Search and rescue. The hunters knew we’d be watching Eric, or suspected at least, so they sent someone or someones they could trust to get Eric out of here without getting caught. Based on information from Eric that he was assaulted in his dream, that whatever attacked him there was working for Jeremiah, and that the Begotten have sensed the presence of another,

unknown Begotten, we have to assume a Begotten is working for Jeremiah.”

“Question!” Matt raised his hand. Oh god, he acted like it was school. It was so damn cute, Jack had to look at Tash, who was smiling.

“Yes?”

“The monster attacked Eric in his dream?”

“Yes. Jessy said, after the dream, the man was wrecked, exhausted, dizzy.”

“And the monster said it worked for Jeremiah?” Big guy looked complexed.

“More or less. Yes, I know that sounds fishy. Why would the Begotten give up that information? The most obvious explanation is that this is a trap, and we’re walking into it.” It sounded so cool so say shit like that in the movies, but in real life, it just sounded dumb. He could see doubt manifesting in their eyes, and he raised a hand to cut in before they could speak. “But that’s why we’re bringing a large crew, with many skills. Far as we know, Jeremiah hasn’t had any interactions with the Uratha yet. But, considering the recon these hunters seem capable of, they might know werewolves are in the city. Kindred, Uratha, and Begotten all working together though? There’s a good chance they won’t see that coming.”

The group nodded, each looking down and then around as they considered his explanation. It was a good one.

“Sounds like an adventure,” Matt said, before a slap upside the head from Art earned a wince.

Noah sat down on the couch, chin between finger and thumb as he considered. “They also might not have expected Jessy, or Clara,

to actually be with Eric in the room. They may have bitten off more than they could chew.”

“Maybe.” Jack had never seen Jessy fight, but she was one of the few ancilla in the city, and a Right Hand largely because of her might. He had faith she could handle combat situations easily enough. And Clara was a veteran werewolf; he’d seen her fight, when up against that spider monster, and he had no doubt in her abilities either. It was quite likely the abductors had indeed bitten off more than they could chew.

If that was the case, then their search and rescue mission would be easy. If not, it was a good thing they were bringing a group as large and strong as they were.

“Make sure you stick with us,” Athalia said. “Fiona and I can break out of this Begotten’s chambers, burrow into the physical world here, but you can’t.”

Noah leaned in. “Uratha can—”

“You can’t do shit, you stupid fucking dog.” Athalia dismissed him with a hand wave and a snarl. “And we’re only bringing you because your companion is probably in the nightmare too. If it weren’t for that, you could go fuck yourself.”

The silence that fell on the room was cold, and painful. Only the ring ring of his phone managed to punch through the ice. Jack winced, sighed, and pulled out his phone.

“Sire?” he said, once the ringing stopped.

“Jack. Report.” Julias’s official voice. Jack smiled into the phone; he liked the official voice, efficient and prompt.

“Vola, Burksen, and I are here with Athalia and Fiona. We also have three Uratha for assistance”

“Three? I assumed Arturo and Matthew would be coming. Who’s the third? Carter?”

Carter was a good guess, but the old man was with Avery at the moment, Jack assumed, and not in the apartment building. A waste. If the man didn’t want to live in the luxuriousness of Carlava Villa, why’d he request it? Or maybe he was still pissed about the silver bullet Damien shot into his leg.

“Noah is the third. We’ll be leaving, I assume, the moment Athalia and Fiona figure out how to track down whoever did ... whatever.” The holes in their knowledge about Begotten were painful, and it was going to make Damien and Jack look bad for Maria. But it wasn’t like they could simply ask them for more details about how nightmares worked; Fiona’d already told them plenty, and was probably scolded for it. Knowing Azamel and Athalia, they likely treated her like a daughter who needed some rules to keep her safe. What a strange, twisted family.

“I’d say keep me posted,” Julias said, “but I assume you won’t be able to contact me from the nightmare. Stay close to Damien and Tash, Jack. And if you run into Jeremiah or Angela, keep your head on your shoulders. I know, believe me, I know what’s going through your head.” Jack highly doubted that. “But until you’ve got more years under your belt, you can’t take the offensive against threats like that. If worse comes to worst, let the wolves do what they do best, and provide support. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” What was that scene, in Game of Thrones, with someone getting their eyes gouged in by the opponent’s thumbs, lots of screaming, until their head exploded? Yeah, if he got his hands on Angela, he could see himself doing that. He could feel himself doing that. Press in, drive the thumbs through the soft eye, and drive the glass eye into her fucking brain, until he felt the soft matter of fleshy pulp splatter over his face.



He shook his head, blinking a few times, and took a few, useless breaths. “We’ll report back the moment we’re out. Cya then.” Beep. Nodding to no one, he put his phone in his pocket, and looked to the two Begotten wandering the room. “It’s up to you, ladies.”

“Make sure,” Athalia said, “to keep your dogs on a leash. I can trust the vamps do be quiet about things, but if you mutts so much as howl, I will personally put the three of you into the fucking ground.” The icy, beautiful woman walked up to Noah, and jammed a finger in his chest. “Or I’ll simply leave you there to die.”

Fiona squirmed, looking down and shifting her weight from side to side as she kept her fingers netted behind her. Yeah, awkward. “I can see the path the Begotten took.”

“As can I.” Athalia looked around at Eric’s apartment after giving Damien a little shove, walking past him. No reason, she didn’t walk in his direction. She just liked being a bitch. “Seems like ... the path connects ... over ... a building, filled with rooms, similar size.”

“A weak connection,” Fiona said. “I’m surprised they managed to burrow from here.”

“It’s different with each Begotten.” Shrugging, Athalia took a deep breath, and held out her hands. “Come on, it’ll be easier if we’re both opening it.”

Jack stepped back beside the wolves and vampires, and watched the two monsters. Uratha considered the world of spirits to be their realm to guard and maintain, and the Begotten considered the world of nightmares to be theirs. They had a point. Vampires could touch on those things, but couldn’t really exist in them, grasp them, bend them and bind them. Vampires lived in the physical, in flesh and blood, sex and bullets.

To the three Kindred watching, what the two monsters were doing might as well have been an act of god. To the Uratha, it must have

been like watching how your neighbor did laundry versus you.

The room's light began to flicker, before it settled on fading away, as if someone had blown out the fire. There was no fire, but if a cold breeze had come through the room, announced by billowing curtains and a spooky howl, it wouldn't have surprised him. More than darkness found them, weight found them, something heavy that pressed on their shoulders.

He looked beside him, and offered Natasha a smile. She returned it, but she was glancing around as well, barely enough light for them to see by, and getting darker. Art had a hand nudging against the back of her shoulder though, and Matt looked down to give her a smile too; big guy radiated safety and joy at the same time. Noah was looking around with an analytical eye, like Damien was. Jack was doing his best to not visibly tremble; his previous trip into the nightmare was not a fun one, and he didn't suspect this one would be either.

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~~Eric~~

“So, find someone to bang yet?” Jessy said.

Clara stopped, turned around, and glared daggers into Jessy. Oh shit.

“What the fuck is the matter with you?”

“What?”

“We're kind of busy right now. How about you focus?”

“I am focusing. Casual chat helps me focus.” Shrugging, Jessy took the lead, and marched down the hallway. It was a long, massive hallway, and while she made sure to stay away from the fires that lit the path along the wall, Jessy otherwise seemed incapable of fear.

No chance in hell that's what it was. She had to be afraid; it was her first trip into a nightmare, and everyone's first trip into this particular one. They had no idea what the fuck they were in for, and their lives were in extreme danger. But Jessy didn't show that, didn't shake or flinch or do any of the things he'd expect from someone unexpectedly pulled into a literal nightmare. Brave, foolhardy, both, he wasn't sure, but Eric was damn glad to have her nearby, because Clara looked nervous.

"Vamps like to fuck, a lot, we get it, calm down," Clara said, growling under her breath.

"You gotta be shitting me." Laughing, quietly under her breath at least, Jessy continued along the hall, glancing back to see if they were following only once, before she pressed forward. "I saw the look in your eyes, at the ball. I bet if the situation were a little different, you'd have joined in and made a few guys happy as a pig in shit. Maybe at least give a guy a blowjob."

Cat fight was on the tip of Eric's tongue, but through the infinite wisdom bestowed upon him by his experience with marriage and divorce, he kept his mouth shut.

"Sorry, I prefer monogamy. Guess I'm old fashioned that way." Clara rumbled in her throat, a growl deep in the chest.

"You're single. I didn't say cheat on someone, I said—"

"Not about cheating, fucking slut, it's about not opening your legs to everything with a pair of their own. I got a little more self respect than that."

Jessy rolled her eyes. She didn't turn around to look at them, so Eric couldn't see her eyes, but the woman's body language was blatant.

"You don't like sex?"

“I do, but I prefer to pair it with romance. I hear a lot of girls like to do that, too.”

“If you ever get to be my age,” Jessy said, voice getting lower as they grew closer to the corner ahead, “you might learn how to actually enjoy yourself. Romance is hard to find. A good fuck is a lot easier to find. Besides, if I was in a relationship, I’d be faithful as fuck. Got nothing against monogamy.”

“Word is you prefer orgies to relationships.” The venom in Clara’s voice was not masked, the werewolf cluing in that subtlety wouldn’t work with the vampire. Eric kind of wished it would, because subtlety was quiet, quieter than Jessy was being anyway. No sounds came from ahead, or the other rooms though.

Eric stopped, and eased open one of the doors along the hallway wall to peek into the darkness. Squinting until his eyes adjusted, he found nothing but another empty room. Mostly empty, with some old wooden chairs, a wooden table, and what looked like an empty fireplace. None of them looked comfortable, and it fit in nicely with the stone. It was like he’d been teleported into the guts of some sort of underground hold in a castle.

“I do love me a good orgy,” Jessy said. “You would too, if you knew how to have an orgasm.”

“Knew ... how to ... What the fuck?”

“Probably only ever cum with a vibrator on high power jammed against your clit, or a shower head on full blast set to incinerate. If only you knew how good it could be if you could get past your shit and relax.”

Clara turned her head enough to stare at Jessy, and give her a backhand slap against the shoulder.

Jessy turned her head, stared at Clara, and returned the favor.

Clara turned completely, and shoved her. Jessy shoved her back.

Eric ran up between them, and winced, ready to feel fingernails dig into his skin. But thankfully, the girls — not women, evidently — got the message, scowled at each other, and grew quiet as they came to the turn at the end of the hall. He hadn't expected Jessy to start an argument in this circumstance, especially about something this ridiculous. He hadn't expected Clara to be offended, and return the argument. Maybe Jessy hit home, then. Still, a petty thing to insult someone over. Maybe Jessy was offended about the slut comment? If she was, she hid it well.

Jessy poked her head out first, before motioning for the rest of them to follow. Breathing deep and slow, Eric came around the corner, and looked up at the enormous door that barred their way. A dual door, wood, almost as tall and almost as wide as the giant hallway.

“Think fuckers are waiting for us past this?” Jessy said, walking up to the door. It wouldn't have surprised Eric if the doors swung open the moment she touched them, but only silence greeted her exploring fingers.

“Yeah.” Clara went up, mirrored Jessy, before putting her ear to the door. “I don't hear anything. No breathing. And...” —a few seconds of silence went by— “no heartbeats, except ours.”

Jessy smirked. No heartbeat for her of course.

“How far you trust that?” Jessy said.

“Hearing a heartbeat? Ten feet maybe.”

“That's not very far.”

“It's a fucking heartbeat. I can hear breathing a lot further, usually.”

“Usually?”

“Smart people keep their breathing silent.”

“How about smell?”

“I can’t smell if anyone’s behind the door, when the door is air tight. I can smell a lot of scents, a lot of weird, old fashioned scents that make me think we’re in some old farm or something. But unless there’s a fucking breeze cutting through the door, I can’t fucking god damn well smell through it.” Clara was doing a good job of whispering, despite the blatant malice in her voice. If they weren’t trying to be stealthy, she’d be yelling. “If we had an Irraka with us—”

“Irraka?”

“Type of Uratha. Stealthy. Good at recon.”

“Sounds like a Mekhet.”

“And you’re a Gangrel.”

“Yeap.”

“So you’re useless.”

Jessy snarled at Clara, a little louder than she probably should have. “So are you.”

Eric walked up between the two girls again, and pressed his hands to the door. They both stared at him and what he was doing, but neither stopped him; yeah, no point in waiting around for whatever to whatever, they had to press on, and that meant opening the door into whatever dangers lay ahead. The girls backed up, put their weight onto the balls of their feet, and crouched slightly, ready to

pounce at whatever exposed itself as the two massive slabs of wood slid apart.

The classic sound of an old wooden door times a thousand resonated through the hall behind them, and into the grand chamber ahead of them. If their location was unknown before, everyone in the building knew about it now. The two women winced almost as much as Eric, as he lowered his hand. He only pushed one door open, and only a couple feet, but that was enough to make far too much noise. So dead, they were so fucking dead.

Jessy poked her head out first. Eric braced to hear a bang, a gunshot, an explosion, a sword slice, something to end Jessy's life; nothing came. After a few moments, she reached behind her, and motioned for them to follow with a few finger waves. Gulping, Eric followed, and stepped into the chamber.

The hallway had been huge, but the chamber was titanic. The roof was high, very high, so high he had trouble seeing it. Darkness along all sides in the colossal room, the small flames unable to light its size. The gargoyle braziers that lined the hallway behind them, instead lined the enormous pillars of stone before them, pillars five feet wide, pillars that went up at least a hundred feet. Each pillar was topped by a gargoyle statue, each statue with arms raised, holding another pillar that continued the pillar up and up, until it vanished into the darkness.

The gargoyles had four arms, and four wings.

“Fucking god.” He pointed up at the towering creatures. Far away as they were, a hundred feet up on the pillars, it was hard to make out details. But it was enough. “That’s ... that’s the thing from my dream.”

“Ever seen this place before?” Jessy said.

“Fuck no.”

“Then ... I guess we’re in this thing’s personal nightmare? Cause, yeah, if these statues look like it, then ... yeah, must be its own nightmare? Right?” Shrugging, Jessy touched one of the pillars, starring up at the titanic structure. “Badass.”

He facepalmed. Badass was not the word he would use.

The three of them drifted around a bit, but ultimately grouped back up, and stood in what they had to guess was the center of the room. The pillars were very far apart, and there were many of them, but at least they seemed to be in pairs; the giant room was actually a giant hallway. Standing between two pillars, in the center of the hall, the tiny fires on the pillars were barely enough to make the walls visible, and each end of the hall was nothing but a wall of darkness.

He looked up again, and again, and again. The gargoyle creatures were on a knee, all four arms up to hold the pillar above, like Atlas holding the world. Their four wings were spread, catching the tiny flickers of fire light that came from below. Their long tails wrapped around the pillar halfway, and their large, human-like faces stared down at them, horns visible. They really were like the monster from his dream.

“I guess ... that means the guy that showed up at the apartment was a Begotten,” he said, “and ... and he got into my dream somehow.”

Clara nodded. “Likely, yeah. You’re Cahalith, so your dreams are pretty powerful.”

“You know about the dreams?”

“All Cahalith have powerful, meaningful dreams, that reach beyond what dreams normally do. I ... I didn’t think it’d be anything the Begotten would be able to take advantage of, though.”



Jessy put a hand up. “Maybe the ritual told them more about Eric than just his face and location.”

Certainly possible for the ritual to tell the hunters he was Uratha, and Cahalith. The fuck did he know about occult rituals and shit? Fuck all.

“Do ... do you have the same dreams I do?” he said.

Shaking her head, she squinted as she stared in one direction of the new, gargantuan hallway. Trying to see the other end, probably, but it was useless. They may as well have been trying to see past the horizon.

“It’s different for all Cahalith. You’d know that, if you stopped being such a jackass and let Avery guide you.”

He snorted, clenched his fingers into fists, and looked around a few more times. Pick a direction, pick a direction. Couldn’t see the ends of the hallway, and couldn’t smell anything in the still air to give a direction; the air was thick with the smell of what he guessed was horse shit, hay, and old metal and stone, but it sat in the air, everywhere, without any inclination of source. But, he could hear something.

He and Clara both started walking in a direction, the same direction. Jessy raised a brow, but shrugged and followed after them. The sides of the hallway were much darker, so the three of them fell back into the blackness against the wall, and crept forward.

“Stay close,” Jessy said. The two wolves raised a brow as they looked back at her, but when a strange, almost cold sensation enveloped them, subtle but there, the vampire grinned. “I really suck at the cloak of night, but it should be enough to keep us hidden from any basic kine.”

He doubted they'd run into any normal humans in this nightmare, but, if they did, a normal human was perfectly capable of calling for help, or shooting a gun. The memory of Mister Pitt, and the way Eric had slaughtered him and his crew, bubbled up in his mind. A gun wouldn't do shit to him when he was transformed, but hunters were hunters, and no doubt they'd have some way of making sure werewolves were—

He stopped, and stared at Clara, as the woman fell onto all fours, and began to shrink. Fur popped out of her skin, replacing it, as her clothes disappeared into her. Why go into that form now? No, wait, she was shrinking, not growing. Her hands and feet turned into paws, not giant hands of claws and talons. Her mouth grew into a snout, but not a huge one with giant teeth. No, she turned into a perfectly normal looking wolf.

Because wolves could move silently.

Clara sat there, in the dark, her fur blending into the shadows, and waited. Ok, yeah, just transform, on the fly, he could do that. Right? Right, no problem, right.

Ok, breathe. You can do this, you can do this; without roaring or making noise or giving away their position any worse than they already had, hopefully.

“First time?” Jessy whispered. “Except for, you know, that other time.”

“ ... yeah.”

“The cloak of night will keep the sound suppressed ... a little ... just don't scream or anything.”

Easy for her to say. For all he knew, this was going to be painful.

Breathe. He took a deep breath, and another, and another, and looked for that part of himself. As much as he expected it to be a distant, strange, weird thought he'd have to pull out of a hazy memory, he could feel the transformations inside him. The issue wasn't finding the strange, new muscle to flex inside his soul, it was navigating forming the new muscle memory. Like playing the guitar, fingering a complicated riff used muscles you already had, but it took practice to perform the maneuver correctly, to establish the muscle memory.

So he did it slowly. With long, deep breaths, he tapped deep into his being, and flexed the muscle to be wolf, to be on four paws, to be low to the ground, to be a creature of fangs and speed and howls. Fur overcame his dark skin, and jeans vanished into his body. His spine warped, elongating, sprouting a tail. Fingers shrank, fingernails grew, and his palms raised before shrinking as well, the whole of his hands becoming paws.

A wolf. He was a wolf. He sat on his haunches, like a canine would, and looked around, tilting his ears in different directions as he listened. He could hear more, and his initial choice on direction was the correct one. There was noise coming from the darkness, far, subtle, like breathing, and maybe sliding of something soft on stone.

He was a fucking wolf. That was so hard to wrap his mind around! Like switching a gear, flexing a muscle, like breathing, he was now a different thing. He turned around a few times, and almost jumped at the sight of his tail, before he looked up at Jessy. Her jaw had dropped, and she stared at him with wide eyes as she brought her fingers up to her lips.

“You. Are. So. Cute!” Still whispering, thank god, she fell to her knees, and hugged him, wrapping her arms around his chest as he sat down on his butt. “Oh my god oh my god oh my god.” Squeezing him, she rubbed her neck into his, her cheek to his ear, and pet his fur.

His tail started wagging. He didn't tell it to, but damn if it didn't start wagging behind him. He could feel the mental connection, something in his mind as automatic as smiling; tail wagging. Being pet felt really good too, and all the nerve endings fired off little explosions of joy where her fingers ran.

Part of him wanted to lick her, too. But, too weird.

“Ok,” she said. “I can keep the cloak of night going while we're all transformed.”

Wait, what?

He stepped back from Jessy, and blinked, a lot, as the woman started to go through the same transformation. She winked at him as she began to shrink, as fur overcame her clothes, as paws emerged, and her mouth and nose morphed into a snout.

“Gangrel, mother fucker. I'm awesome,” she managed to say before her lips disappeared. With her ears up and her tail wagging slowly, she became a wolf as well, fur darker than Eric's or Clara's, but still gray.

What in the fuck. Vampires could turn into wolves? He thought that maybe, just maybe, they could turn into bats, but wolves was not on the list of things he expected to see out of Jessy. Panting a couple times, she walked over to him, paws quieter than her bare human feet could be, and nudged her nose into his side. Twice.

He had the sudden urge to pounce her, and play fight. Eric you dumbass, you're in a fucking nightmare and you've turned into a wolf because it's easier to sneak around this way. It's very dark, especially along the wall, and your gray bodies blend into the shadow. Your paws make less noise than shoes, or bare feet in your case and Jessy's, and both your hearing and sense of smell are greater than they were before. Stealth mode, not dog wrestling mode.

Maybe he could wrestle later.

He wanted to laugh, but laughter wasn't a canine reflex. His tail wagging spoke for him, and he pressed his body into Jessy's, both to play a little, and push her toward the wall so they could continue their stealthy journey into inevitable death. She made a couple whining sounds, not happy about his focusing on keeping them alive, apparently, but fell into a prowling stance as she started forward, behind Clara. He fell in behind her, and kept looking around, forcing himself back to awareness.

Looking up was proving surprisingly difficult. Could dogs look up?

Think about that later. He craned his neck to look behind him, and then to the right, where the enormous hallway lay, pillars lining its depths. A tail in front of him was wagging, only a little, but wagging, and Eric found himself looking at Jessy's wolf butt. It was a nice wolf butt; he had no idea how he knew what a nice wolf butt looked like, but it was. Oh god, this was a dangerous road to take the mind down. Abort, abort!

Again he found himself wanting to laugh. What was it about Jessy that made him laugh so easily?

They continued along, shoulders and heads low, each step calculating and silent. It may have been a pointless attempt at stealth, considering they made plenty of noise earlier, but maybe not. What he was more concerned about was whether heading toward the noise was the right call. They could simply go hide somewhere where there was no noise, and wait for rescue. Waiting for rescue was the problem though. He didn't say it, and the girls didn't say it, but they all knew the possibility of rescue from their current circumstance was slim. They'd been transported into a literal nightmare, not into some corner of Dolareido. Could Azamel's people reach them here? Would they even try? Maybe,

maybe not. But sitting around waiting for something to happen was a dangerous choice, so, he went with being proactive.

What'd he hear, once? Action is not inherently superior to inaction. This was a ballsy, risky move, and it could get them killed.

Christ, what he would do to be back in his new, fancy apartment, sitting in his hot tub, and sharing a glass of wine with Jessy. Except, she'd have a glass of blo—actually, she'd be sucking on his neck, and riding his dick as she did. After, after that, they could sit down in the tub, relax, and Eric could try and enjoy the new wonders of his life. If they lived through this, if spirits left him alone, if Avery left him alone, if the vamps didn't drag him into some war, if Azamel didn't demand he become her guard dog.

He glared at Clara, over Jessy's back. Her prowling was amazing, and Eric became very conscious of the sound of his own paws against the stone, barely audible to him, let alone anyone else outside Jessy's stealth aura. She was right, and he should have let Avery take him on a hunt or two, teach him a few things about being Uratha. But, he just wanted to be left alone.

That mindless attachment to this ideal of solitude and peace, was going to be his undoing. Old habits died hard though. He knew it, and he saw it in his dad every day. Christ, he was more like his old man than he wanted to consider right now.

It took a while to get to the source of the subtle noises, but with time, a wall in the distance appeared. Tall, almost unending, disappearing into the darkness above. Stone, and more stone. But it was the thing against the wall between the two final pillars, that had the three wolves staring. A chair of stone, big, heavy and thick, huge slabs of stone carved and combined. It was a throne, with two of the familiar gargoyle braziers in front of its arms, casting flickering amber light over the seat. Upon the huge chair's back, was another gargoyle statue, like the ones that held up the centers of the

hundreds of pillars. A colossal carving of darkness, four arms, each reaching down to grip onto the equally massive chair's back, along with its two legs. Its four wings were raised high, and Eric stared at them, squinting, looking for any signs of movement. No, they held perfectly still, as did the rest of the creature; a statue like the others.

The man in the chair didn't hold still. He breathed, he sighed with apparent boredom, and he twirled a knife along his knuckles as he waited.

Jeremiah. He wore the same trench coat last time, brown, and with many subtle pockets, likely filled with knives, ammo, and god knows what. Short gray hair combed back, and a short gray beard sliced with several scars. Tattoos started on his neck, before vanishing underneath a black shirt, and he wore a necklace with a coiling circular shape dangling against his chest.

Eric froze, and stared at the necklace. Last time he'd seen one of those, it was on the hunters that had jumped him and Fiona, and it'd been glowing white. This time it wasn't. Maybe it only reacted to nearby Begotten then.

Eric slid up further, enough for Jessy and Clara to see him, and he nodded his head toward the man on the rock throne, while baring his teeth. Both of them had no doubt read a description of Jeremiah, but Eric wanted to confirm. This fucker was dangerous, and out to kill things like them.

That was more than enough for Jessy, who lowered herself to the floor until her belly was almost touching it, and began to work her way into the corner of where the hallway wall met the end. A pillar stood between them at the throne, and little light reached past it. It was enough for a possible sneak attack, but it was also a really stupid idea to try and sneak attack a man who looked like he killed bears with his bare hands.

Clara didn't agree. She crouched low, and came up beside Jessy, blurring into the shadows behind the pillar, and sneaking up along the wall the throne sat against. They wouldn't be able to get behind the throne, its back many feet deep and connecting to the wall; a perch for the enormous gargoyle statue. But the throne's actual seat sat far ahead enough they could stick to the wall, get in close, and go in for the kill.

The monster had to be around somewhere, though. How he had managed to disappear after pulling them into the nightmare, Eric didn't know. Could have been a trick or something, but when he entered the nightmare with Fiona, she transformed beside him.

No, focus. This was an amazing opportunity to deal a blow to the fuckers threatening everyone and everything his new life had brought him. It could be a trap, or it could be an opening. Jeremiah was alone; maybe the Begotten apparently working for him got separated? If the Begotten didn't appear with the three of them in the room they arrived in, maybe he got separated, or was still back in the real world.

No more time to think. Clara and Jessy were both sneaking up alongside the long slab of stone that served as the chair's legs, and he followed up behind them. A few more glances up showed the enormous gargoyle statue, still as a stone, body dark and flickering with only hints of fire light. God it was creepy, being so close to it, where he could feel the heat of its body radiating.

Heat?

Something massive swung out, and slammed into his back. Tail! The fucking tail. Oh fucking shit. It crashed against his spine, and flattened him, hard leathery skin of the monster combined with momentum and weight more than enough to crush him into the stone below. Pain scorched through him, the cracking of ribs like



twigs, and the puncturing of organs. Like before, just like before, this monster was going to kill him.

He looked ahead, and barked fury as the beast reached down, and scooped up Jessy. Clara leapt away, but the beast swung out a wing, exploding air and sound and heavy mass in all directions. The tip of the enormous wing clipped her, and sent her spinning through the air, barrel rolling until she landed on her side twenty feet away, in front of the throne.

“Well well, I was wondering when you’d get here.” The old man chuckled on his throne, but Eric couldn’t see him. At least he couldn’t, until one of the massive hands reached down and scooped him up. Being in the monster’s grip, with his ribs shattered and poking holes into his innards, sent lava scorching through his body. The beast turned his head to them, most of his features hidden in the dark, but the eyes began to glow red all the same. Only now did an odor of leather and alien life emit from the entity.

It was a trap. Of course it was a trap.

Still sitting on his perch, the monster held out the two wolves in front of the throne, reaching over it and using his immense size for balance. Jessy and Eric could not move, as they were held before Jeremiah.

“Three werewolves?”

“No.” That deep voice, filled with bass, but mixed with weird overtones of vocal fry, harsh and raspy. “This one is Kindred.” The titan held Jessy closer to Jeremiah. She snarled, howled, barked, growled, and squirmed with all her might, but the monster’s hand was big enough to keep her canine waist completely circled, and trapped.

“She must have sucked a wolf dry at some point then.” Shrugging, Jeremiah reached out, and pat Jessy on the side. “No idea where a

city vamp would get a wolf for a meal.” Laughing, Jeremiah looked at Eric, and winked at him. “Hello Eric Tanverson. You’re going to tell us everything you know, and even things you don’t.”

# Chapter 70

~~Eric~~

Clara transformed into a human as she forced herself to stand. With a snarl, she shook off the injuries, and wiped her lip.

It was that easy? She was hit hard, hard enough to go flying, hard enough to have bones broken. But, she was Uratha, and that meant ... fuck, he didn't know what it meant. Strong, tough? Healing through anything? He didn't know anything, because he was too fucking stubborn to find out.

“So you're Jeremiah?” she said, pacing side to side. “How the fuck did you pull this off?” Snarling at the man, she pointed a finger at the colossal creature still perched upon the stone throne's back.

“Monsters aren't so hard to kill if you know their banes.”

Clara twitched, fingers squeezing into fists as her frown hardened. “And?”

“Discovering them can be tough.” Still on his throne, Jeremiah passed his knife from knuckle to knuckle, grin on his face subtle but persistent. Confident. “For a werewolf like yourself, silver. It's such a common bane, and known to everyone.” With a shrug, the man reached into his trench coat, and pulled out a large pistol, knife still in his other. “You're barely worth hunting.”

Snarling all the more, Clara continued pacing again, eyes snapping between the two trapped wolves, and the man with a god complex. “What does—”

“And vampires, sunlight and fire are so easy to turn into weapons, I'm better off wasting my time killing cockroaches,” Jeremiah said.

That earned a raised eyebrow from the werewolf. “You in this for the thrill?”

“I can’t deny there is an appeal in that thrill, but no. Werewolves are a menace, violent, stupid, short-sighted, and prone to killing random innocents every so often. Vampires? Smarter, with a far better eye for the future, but they’re just blood leeches. The amount of human deaths to them is actually manageable, and acceptable, as long as hunters get their hands dirty every so often. But monsters, monsters aren’t the same.” Chuckling, the maniac stepped down from his throne, and made a grand, sweeping gesture with his knife hand. “Monsters can destroy entire cities. Monsters can turn whole villages into food, for a single beast. Monsters can decimate ecosystems. Monsters can grow, and grow, until they’re no longer Begotten, and their true selves, confined to the nightmares they were spawned from, break free into the world of the living.” Smiling at her, he came closer, and closer. “I’m here to kill Azamel, and perhaps Athalia, if the opportunity presents itself. Tell me what I want to know, and you get to live.”

“I don’t know shit about Azamel.”

Jeremiah sighed, loudly, with some theatrical flair to his voice. He was enjoying this. “I didn’t think so. But the man here, Eric, he’s been to her lair, spoken to her, spoken to Athalia. And unlike a vampire, I have ways of removing the information from him.”

Oh shit. Eric started squirming, but his stubbornness only earned a tighter squeeze from the goliath holding him.

“Je ... remiah...” Everyone went silent, and turned to the new voice. An old voice, slow, weak, a sound Eric was getting too familiar with from his trips to the hospital. The sound of an old woman’s voice, someone old enough to warrant a deathbed. “Is ... is this the one?” An old woman in a wheelchair came out from the darkness,

the subtle noise of her respirator growing louder and louder as she approached. Where the fuck had she been hiding?

A group of hunters stood behind her. Eric recognized them as the four he ran into, with Fiona. And behind them came a woman, dark skin like him, and what looked like a glass eye. Oh fucking fucking fucking shit.

“It is indeed, Elen my sweet.” The psycho in the trench coat pointed the knife back at Eric, before turning his back to Clara. Confident, and maybe a bit stupid, but Clara didn’t take advantage. How could she? Any move she made in her current circumstance would either get her killed, or him and Jessy.

The monster with wings sniffed the air, and let out a long, crocodile-like groan, complete with rumbling that shook the air. “Master ... the nightmare is being entered.”

“The other Begotten?”

“Yes, master. They will be here in minutes.”

Nodding, Jeremiah pointed to Angela. “Earlier than I expected. Take the others, prepare the ambush. Slaughter them all.”

The sound of many feet joined Angela’s. There must have been another one of those hallways nearby, on the other side of the grand chamber they were in, like the one Eric had come from. As they came out of the dark, Eric let out a canine whimper at the sight of a dozen men, each armed with a host of weapons no civilian would be able to get their hands on. Assault rifles, what looked like a fucking flamethrower, grenades, and a bunch of shit he didn’t know by sight.

The four he recognized stayed with the woman in the wheelchair.

“I guess you have friends, Eric,” Jeremiah said, walking up to him. The monster held him at a height convenient for Jeremiah to look him in the eye. “We’re ready for them this time. Either they die in a hail of gunfire and wall of flame, or they run away, and we can continue this interrogation.”

God, oh fucking god they made the wrong move. They should have waited, should have fucking waited where they were. If they had just fucking waited, maybe whoever was coming to rescue them would have run into them. It was like one of those shitty horror films where people suddenly become outrageously stupid and throw themselves into precarious situations, because they’re too stupid to realize what they’re doing. Fucking shit fuck.

Clara didn’t move. As the hunters walked past her, she stared at each of them through the corner of her eye, body still turned to Jeremiah and the monster. The hunters sneered at her, some making a show of their knives on their belts, pulling them out a little to make the glint obvious. Some of those knives were the strange ones Eric saw in Fiona’s jungle, when Jeremiah showed up. Some were silver.

Silver. The sight of it sent a jolt through his body, and he blinked. What the fuck. The beast holding him, that thing was terrifying, and overpowering. The silver knives were different, they put a cold dread through his wolf body, as if someone had stolen a kidney and threw him into an ice bath. Pain, mixed with the searing rush of adrenaline and stimulus overload.

The old woman sighed long and slow, and raised a hand. Finger pointing at Clara. “Why ... is she ... free?”

“She’s not free, Elen. Unless she wants her companions to die, she’ll stay where she is.” The man smirked, and walked over to Eric. Tears blurred Eric’s eyes, and pain muddled his thoughts, the agony blaring in his head until headache and nausea mixed. “You, pup, are

going to tell me everything you know about Athalia and Azamel. Come on, Elen.”

Elen sighed, long, the struggle for her lungs to manage breathing, even with a respirator doing the work, blatant. The hunter woman behind her did the pushing, glaring at Clara and the two wolves as she did. These hunters hated them, to the point every one of them couldn't look Clara's way without wishing death upon her with their eyes. Christ, it was like watching a bunch of zealots. White, pointed blankets on their head with the eyes cut out would not have been out of place.

“Come here sonny,” Elen said, voice almost cracking like a weak, damaged speaker.

With a small twist of her wrist, she slid her fingers along the air, and cut through it. Each fingertip glowed a subtle black, almost purple, and traced lines through the air in front of Eric's face. All he could do was stare, and shiver, pain and misery mixing into a horrible cocktail of nausea. The beast's grip around him was absolute, and every breath was a panting mess, sending scorching fire through his limbs. But he could still stare, and watch the old woman weave colors in the air. Either he was dying and his brain was flooding itself with chemicals, or she was doing magic.

The colors combined into a single line, floating in the air, and the old woman reached through it, hand disappearing into the cut in reality. After rooting around in the fucking cracks of the universe, she slowly removed her hand, and exposed a scalpel. Shit, shit shit. She came closer, wrinkly face breaking into a smile, thin white hair falling flat over her skull and shoulders. Far older than Azamel.

Come to think of it, every old woman Eric had ever met was a horrible person. Azamel was horrible, this Elen woman was horrible, his grandmother was horrible and spanked him for not wanting to eat his peas. The pattern was undeniable.

She came in closer, breath ragged, fake teeth showing as she smiled. “If you could turn back into a man, my boy, that would be helpful.”

He snarled. Mistake. The beast holding him squeezed, and he let out a whimper, and gargle, as blood spilled up over his wolf tongue.

“That’s alright, deary. Whether wolf or man, the voices do not care.” She set the scalpel on his wrist, and his arm froze. Not because he wanted to freeze, but the limb came to a standstill against his will, unable to move, as the woman gently slid the insanely sharp blade down the skin above his paw. He howled, more blood coming up onto his tongue, as blood leaked out onto the fur of his wrist and paw.

“Voices?” Clara said. Her face was pained, and she fidgeted in spot. But the three hunters standing around had their pistols out, no doubt armed with silver bullets; knives out too. The hunter holding the old woman’s chair kept her eye on Clara, and so did Jeremiah.

“If only you knew what sort of forces exist in this world, stupid dog,” Jeremiah said, standing beside Elen, closer to Clara. “Nightmare worlds? The spirit world? If you only knew.” Laughing, the psychotic fucker held his knife up to Eric’s neck, where it was exposed at the top of the monster’s grip. “Cards, each of them cards, in a house of cards.”

This fucker delighted in not answering their questions, only giving them confusion and vague redirections. Much as Eric wanted to bite the man, pain drew his eyes back to the clean cut the old woman was making down his arm, through his fur. As his blood dripped down over his paw, the woman reached out with her other hand, and caught his blood in her palm.

“The ritual is very precise,” she said. “I have to find the elegance in the shapes. I have to find the beauty in the connections. I have to find the mastery. I have to find the machine.” Humming softly to



herself, Elen raised the bloody hand, and again, began to draw in the air. His blood crept up her fingers, defying gravity, and becoming crimson paint for her fingertips, cutting through the air and leaving trails of hovering red. “This would be easier if you would turn back into a human, but I suppose it is better if you are restrained.” Her energy was returning, like an artist taken up with passion, all encompassing.

“Stop ... stop fucking cutting on him! The fuck are you doing?” Clara took a step forward, only to have three pistols raised and pointed at her. Jeremiah didn’t bother turning around, keeping his eyes on Eric.

“Like I said,” Jeremiah said, “you have no idea. The ways things are connected, the things that exist in the dark, in the cracks between worlds, in the beams of light that seep in from above. You’re nothing but a stupid dog, mindlessly chasing a ball.”

After drawing a circle and a pentagram in the air, the old woman shook her hand in a quick circle, and the symbol fell to the stones below. It painted itself into the stone, and as the old woman continued to cut into his arm, she began to draw more symbols against the invisible canvas.

“When we are done, you’ll tell the voices everything,” she said. “Your insides will paint for them, draw for them. Life, blood, tendons, bones, sinew, ligaments, a divine merger of components. The machine of life. Vessel for the soul. I’ll find the root of memory, draw the connections, and—”

“You’ve said enough, Elen. We’re keeping the vampire and she-wolf because they’re valuable hostages, not companions to share our secrets with.”

Quite the fucking hypocrite, aren’t you? Fucking psychopath. The thought evaporated as the scalpel found bone, and Eric tried to howl his agony. The monster’s crushing grip didn’t let him.

He managed to look at Clara as a whimper escaped him. She looked worried, and angry, but she was paralyzed. Behind her, the hunters were preparing a trap for their friends. The sound of groaning wood against stone resonated through the hallway, burying the groans and whimpers Eric's wolf form was making. They must have closed the door Eric and them came through, to prepare their ambush. Who was coming to his rescue? Or Clara's or Jessy's? Did they need Begotten to enter the dream?

He looked over at Jessy. Still in her wolf form, like him, and struggling with all her might. The beast squeezed her hard enough Eric could see her limbs threatening to bend and break under the pressure, but she kept squirming as if it didn't matter.

Did it matter? She was a vampire, and he doubted a broken limb would stop her. Would it stop him? He was a werewolf, and as much as he didn't want to, he could remember bits and pieces of his fight with Pitt and his goons. He recovered from a stab wound, completely recovered, when he transformed. How strong was a werewolf? Was it strong enough to fight this monster? Strong enough to fight a psychopath?

He had to try. Now or never.

Eric closed his eyes, and pushed away the pain. The monster had him in his grip, and didn't seem to care that he was forcing bone to rub against his organs. It was pain he was used to at this point, enough to ignore it for a few seconds at least. Ignore it, find that new muscle, and use it.

As he began to change, the monster holding him screamed, and threw him down at Clara. Everything became a blur, pain mixing with the unpleasant sensation of his stomach pressing against his sides with sudden momentum. An explosive roller coaster, complete with the roaring machinery, except it was the creature's roar.

Attempts to transform were lost to the clenching of every muscle in his body, as his weight slammed into Clara.

She caught him. Holy shit. He managed to look up at her, legs twitching, tail wriggling, body panting.

“Jessy!” Clara said, looking over him and to the monster.

He managed to turn his snout to look to the vampire. She was human again, except, not. It was that shape she had, back in the apartment, enormous claws with spikes coming out of her knuckles, forearms, and now shoulders. More than that, spikes had erupted out of her back, out of her knees, out of her fucking head. Blood dripped from her, red, darker than red normally was, but blood nonetheless.

The monster let go of her, and held its hand up to look at the holes Jessy’s body had punctured into its fingers and palm. Jessy landed on her feet, shoulders raised and arms forward, back hunched, and eyes glaring fury at the monster as blood dripped over her body. Whatever she had done to her body, her human shape was twisted into a grotesque monster. Her teeth exposed as she snarled, massive fangs, many of them. Her back bulged with muscle, filling her blue sweater to near bursting. Her legs grew thick, torn in many parts with spikes, like her sweater. And blood dripped from everywhere.

“The hell?” Jeremiah jumped away from the vampire, brought up his pistol, and fired. Bullets shredded through Jessy’s body, ripping into her clothes and muscles, some shattering some of the bone spikes that jutted out of her skin. She regrew them in seconds. “Sándor, secure her! I want this bargaining chip.”

Eric caught sight of Jeremiah’s face, and grinned a wolf’s grinning. He new that face, recognized it, seen it in the ring far too many times. The face of someone who had a plan, and was surprised to see it not work out. He must have underestimated Jessy.

“Boss!” One of the hunters in the departing group returned, rifle at the ready.

Jeremiah waved him off. “We’re fine. Go with Angela. Kill the intruders.”

“Yes sir.” The woman ran off to rejoin her companions, and Clara glanced over her shoulder, before looking to the four with the shaman. They were stunned; Jessy’s insanity and recklessness was not something they predicted. She was just a blood leech, after all. What could she do?

She could solo a giant fucking monster, apparently.

Everyone’s jaw dropped, as Sándor the monster reached down for Jessy, and Jessy leaped onto the monster’s face. The beast’s shrieks and roars of pain echoed down the hall, and everyone jumped back as the gargoyle stood up, wings spreading, and arms snapping up to try and rip Jessy from his face. But she crawled over his shoulder, and dropped down between his wings, disappearing. Based on the new roars, and how the beast tried to reach behind him between his wings, she must have latched onto his back with her claws.

That was enough for Clara. She set Eric down, and erupted. Eric jumped back, failing, bones refusing to work, and fell over all the more, as Clara threw herself at Jeremiah. She transformed, body exploding in size, clothes disappearing, fur sprouting, tail reforming, and mouth becoming a massive snout filled with huge teeth. It only took her two seconds, two literal seconds, to complete the transformation. The titan within slammed its feet and claws into the stone floor, talons tearing into the stone, as the colossal beast threw herself toward Jeremiah.

The man dodged. He sidestepped the juggernaut of muscle, and jumped back several times while shooting at the beast. But Clara rushed past him perpendicular to his line of fire, and onto the throne, bullets whizzing past her. Eric could do nothing as the single

werewolf and single vampire, fought against the group and the monster.

“The vampire and she-wolf aren’t worth this trouble. Shoot them both!” Jeremiah barked his orders at the four remaining hunters, and the one escorting the old woman pulled her back, and quickly wheeled her away. The other three drew their pistols, and aimed their pistols at Clara, but she jumped against the enormous gargoyle’s leg, and tackled the beast in its chest. Off balance as it was, the gargoyle stumbled back, and fell onto its side before rolling off to the side of the giant throne’s vast back. The hallway vibrated with the impact of the creature landing

Eric watched the old woman go, doing his best to memorize her face. The sunken cheeks, the dazed eyes with little life left to them, the shaking limbs. She didn’t have much time left, aged to a point the body wasn’t willing to hold on. With how sickly she looked, he was surprised she was holding on at all. Maybe it was because of her ability, whatever it was that let her perform rituals, whatever dark forces of fucking Hell that let her pull a scalpel out of a hole in the universe, and draw symbols into the air itself.

She disappeared behind a pillar, and then the loud groan of opening wood filled the hall again. That confirmed it. There must have been another hallway with rooms, like the one Eric had come from.

He looked past Jeremiah, to the monster on the floor. Massive as the creature was, a crazy vampire and determined werewolf were on his body, biting and clawing and tearing into him; and even with its great size, a werewolf was a hulking, massive titan of muscle. It was like watching a lion struggle to take down a bull, a full grown, healthy bull, something a lion wouldn’t normally hunt. She did anyway, taking on a monster with over three feet of height on her.

Seeing another werewolf erupt with rage and power sent a jolt into Eric's body, called him, beckoned him. Howling rung in his ears, demanded he join the hunt, boiled his blood, sent energy and chaos pumping through his veins. Clara ripped and tore and bit into the monster's body, but its skin was thick, leathery, hard, and she only managed to draw small amounts of blood. But there was blood, and the smell of it filled Eric's nostrils. Blood. Alien, surreal, monster blood. Her roars called to him, invited him into the rush of the hunt, the thrill of the fight, and the glory of the kill.

Strength incarnate exploded inside him. Bulging muscles replaced frail wolf limbs. Serratus muscles wrapped his ribs as they mended. Trapezoids pushed out from his shoulders and neck. His lats rebuilt themselves in moments, realigning his spine with his rhomboids, and causing his shoulder and back width to increase to ludicrous sizes. Massive talons replaced the tiny claws of his paws, as did enormous hands. His snout grew bigger, thicker, longer, and his teeth did the same. Weight came from nowhere, forcing his new, larger rear paws into the stone beneath him. Two hundred, three hundred, four hundred pounds. He flexed his arms as the rumbling in his chest turned into a growl. Five hundred, six hundred, seven hundred pounds. More, until he was no longer a wolf at the knees of the hunters, but towering over them instead, their backs to him, his growls lost in the sounds of their yells as they tried to fix the chaos Jessy and Clara had caused.

He roared, silencing them all, and he dove into the fray.



~~Natasha~~

She was in a nightmare.

As she held up her phone to use as a flashlight, it was obvious that she was in a nightmare, and that sent a chill down her spine. The Prince would surely want as much information gathered as

possible, so she snapped as many pictures as she could, while shining the light about. Paranormals had ways to keep themselves out of pictures, but the nightmare itself? Time to find out.

As she scanned the phone around, eventually her lens landed on Noah, who was looking straight at her, a frown on his face. Yeah, she was being silly. They had more important things to worry about, like—oh my god.

Tash froze, and stared at the enormous, skeletal creature before them. It was colossal, and was missing its lower body, dark bones held up by its hands on the floor. Bone wings. Small white dots inside huge, black eye sockets. A giant spinal cord, dangling from a rib cage Natasha could probably fit inside of. She'd seen this monster before, when Athalia had gotten aggressive with her and her boyfriends, in the tunnels beneath Dolareido before the spider monster attacked. Azlu, they called it.

She turned, and almost squeaked. Spider monster! No, this wasn't the grotesque monstrosity from before, this was different. Very different. A woman's body, sort of, a white silk dress over a curvy figure, a face with no eyes, only enormous horns, shins that came down into long, sharp points, with no feet. She had less fingers, and her fingers were long claws themselves. Dark, almost shiny skin, and eight long, long, long long long spider legs that came out of her back, their multi-sectioned lengths smooth and almost metal like, and they came to sharp pointed tips, like her feet.

Athalia was terrifying. Fiona was both terrifying and beautiful. Maybe it was the thin white dress that barely contained her enormous breasts, or how it cinched tight around her inhumanly small waist. Maybe it was the small, dark lips that pursed into a very seductive little smile. Very much not Fiona!

Jack and Damien both seemed almost blase about the whole thing, though she noticed Damien glancing Athalia's way a little

more often. Maybe he'd never seen her monster form before, her 'horror'; or he was just scared of it, like she was. Tash looked to the others as well, and was happy to see the wolves were staring at the monsters as much as she was. They were scary! Athalia in an obvious way, Fiona in a 'I will seduce you, tie you up in silk, and literally liquefy and drink your innards' way.

Around the room were wooden tables, wooden chairs, all very old fashioned. The wooden ceiling above them screamed antique. If she knew her history well, and she did, they seemed like the sort of furniture you'd find in homes in the 1500s. Time travel? No, no of course not. The monster must have had a nightmare home in a place that was like the 1500s. A deep breath sold it, the smell old wood, but also manure and grass.

The group of them looked at the room's door. Same old wood, and it was open to let in a slice of gentle fire light cut across the room.

Nodding, Arturo moved forward toward the door, and crouched low. Tash engulfed the group of them in her cloak of night, as did Damien, and she nodded to them as she followed behind Arturo.

"We should be fine t-to talk, quietly," she said. "Smell anything? Other than ... what ... appears to be the insides of a castle, from f-f-five hundred years ago."

"That explains why I smell shit, horses, grass, wood, and stone. I can smell Clara and Eric, and ... yeah, that's Jessy," Art said.

Wow, what a nose. She pat him on his back, and he stood up as she poked her head out. With a glance back, she nodded toward the hall, and everyone came out.

"W-Wait, Athalia, how—" The giant dead god corpse thing, became black mist, and flowed through the normal-sized door. "Oh."



The skeleton beast snorted at her, and a gush of cold air hit Tash, as the odd monstrosity marched forward. With more room over their heads, Athalia drifted higher, hovering, her nigh-black skeleton wings grazing along the sides of the huge hallway. At least she was up and out of the way of them, but Tash didn't like it. Her spinal cord swayed around underneath the strange half-body corpse monster! Gross.

Fiona walked through the door, her long spider legs following behind her. Once she was out into the hallway, she started walking on the eight spider legs, and her human half began to hover behind Athalia. Long, such long legs. Tash looked up at her, and as Fiona drifted over her head, Tash covered her eyes. The spidersilk dress she was wearing did not have underwear! And the bits between her thighs appeared to be human.

Could Begotten have sex? Or rather, could their horrors have sex? Athalia, of course not, but Fiona?

Tash looked over to Art and Matt beside her. Matt kept his eyes on the multiple doors of the hallway around them, but Art glanced up and smirked as he looked up Fiona's skirt. Elbow attack! Tash drilled her elbow into his side, hard enough to earn a quiet groan from him, before he chuckled at her.

"Sorry."

"R-Right." Frowning, she continued along, and looked at the gargoyle braziers holding the fires. "These are ... b-beautiful."

"This a reflection of a real place?" Noah said. "The Hisil operates sim—"

"It is a nightmare, fool." Athalia turned to look down at them from above. How a skull could frown, with no lips or skin, Tash wasn't sure, but it did indeed look like it was frowning. Maybe just a trick of the eye, to match her upset tone. "It is not a reflection of

anything. It is a creation, and it stands on its own in the Primordial Dream. I do not know if this chamber is the heart of this beast's lair, but ... I do ... sense a presence."

Primordial Dream. Fiona had mentioned it, but neither she nor Athalia had explained it. At this point, it sounded like the dream world was an actual place. What were chambers? Lairs? How did you burrow through ... through ... what did you burrow through, to get from the dream to the physical? How did any of that work? Tash's priority was to deal with the hunters, but Antoinette still wanted her to learn as much as she could about the Begotten, the Uratha, and the worlds they policed.

Antoinette. Tash sighed, and looked at Jack. The boy stepped ahead of them, and walked with an upright pose, Athalia and Fiona over his head. Before departing on the mission, Antoinette had asked her to protect the boy; a request as a friend, not the Prince. She'd do her best, but it was hard to do that when Jack kept putting himself at the front. Maybe she could talk to him, tell him to stay closer to Damien? No doubt Julias had already told him that, though.

He was a Ventrue, and there was no getting around that Ventrue drifted toward leadership. Mister Mire had sired the boy for his tenacity, but as Jack grew comfortable, and confident, he became more and more like his sire. And then, there was his secret about his new, overwhelming hatred for Angela that he'd shared with her. While the boy was becoming more and more like Mire, he was also becoming more and more like Viktor. And that must have been terrifying for him.

She nudged Art in the side, and he leaned down for her, bringing his ear next to her lips. "Keep an eye on J-Jack."

"You know I will."

“I ... I m-mean ... more than ... than you m-m-might think is necessary.”

Art raised a brow at her, but nodded, shrugged, and continued walking.

Matt opened one of the side doors, and everyone froze with the quiet sound of wood creaking on stone. Rolling his eyes, Art walked up to him, slapped him upside the shoulder, and peeked into the room.

“Same as the one we arrived in.”

“Strange,” Noah said. “This feels less like a nightmare, and more like a ... like a museum, or medieval festival.”

“Not all nightmares show the pits of torture they can put you through so easily,” Fiona said. Her accent was gone! Now she sounded almost Portuguese. “My heart of my lair is a jungle. The pain it can inflict, the terrors it holds, are deep within its center. None of you have seen it.” Guess that ruled out Damien or Jack having ever gone that deep then.

Noah fell in behind Jack, and looked over his shoulder as he walked, eyes scanning around at everything. While Arturo looked like he was scanning for enemies, Noah seemed interested in the strange building itself. She didn't know him very well, but maybe he was a scholar or something, an intellectual; not that Art or Matt weren't smart, but ... but they weren't. Smiling, she pat Art on his side, and he raised a brow at her, confused. So cute. Her beautiful, awesome, big dumb boyfriends.

Noah, on the other hand, she noticed a glint in his eyes when he approached one of the braziers, and examined it. She knew that glint. It was the glint she got in her eye whenever she saw something new, something interesting, something to add to her catalog of memory.

“These braziers,” he said, far closer to the fire than she was willing to get, “are ... too detailed.”

“Too?” Damien said.

“Yes. Stone sculptures like these were typically not high in detail. And yet, these gargoyles have ... pores.”

Oooh! Tash wanted to look closer, but didn't want to lean in close and get a face full of flickering flame; the slightest touch was enough to be harmful. She'd have to suffice with looking at the gorgeous artwork from a distance, and take a few zoomed in pictures.

“Chambers are the culmination of fear, breaking points for the soul, and...” The skeleton monster above let out a long, raspy sigh, and shook its head. “Nevermind. It is not physical, it is greater than that. Do not trust your eyes.”

“I feel ... so ... naked here,” Matt said. “Nothing has a reflection. I don't smell or feel any spirits. But I can feel it's different.”

Tash couldn't feel that. As she kept the group in the aura of her cloak of night, she managed to look around a little with auspex, to see if there was something extra to see. With vitae flowing through her eyes, looking for ... for something beyond physical matter, it was pointless. Whatever it was that the monsters and werewolves could see or feel about the place, to her, it was beyond her ability to notice or differentiate. Could Daniel? Her sire's mastery of auspex was far beyond her own, and the man could use it to do unthinkable things, discover lost secrets, uncover truths from liars, and even glimpse into the past. Maybe someday she'd be able to, too.

“As we said,” Fiona, or rather Vrall, said from above, “we are in the Primordial Dream. The physical and spirit world are two sides of a coin, but here? It is the shadow the coin casts.”

Tash nodded as she digested the information. Maybe they should call this place the Shadow World then, if that was the analogy. Then again, who was they? Primordial Dream, Shadow Realm, where did these words come from? Who categorized and collected the information, gave it definitions, names, identifiers. And was it accurate information?

The group stopped before a door, giant, two wooden slabs barring their way. Closed.

Jack pulled out his pistol and short sword, as did Damien, and Tash. The hallway had been empty, and despite poking their heads in a few of the doors, all they found were empty rooms with old furniture.

“I can smell them,” Art said. “They moved through here.”

“I guess they closed the d-door behind them?” Tash shook her head as she considered. That was a possibility, but if it’d been her, she wouldn’t have closed such an enormous door after opening it, since it was bound to make a lot of noise. It also meant they’d have to reopen it, if they were going to run back.

“Think your cloaks of night can suppress us opening this?” Jack said. Both Mekhet shook their heads. “Figures.”

“Stealth will only help so much,” the skeleton said. “Forcing open someone else’s portal announces our presence, be it a Begotten’s lair, or some other entity’s tunnel through the worlds. Whatever beast waits for us within this nightmare, they know we are here.”

“... so much for the element of surprise.” Damien sighed, and pointed his sword up at the hovering monstrosity. “Could have told us that before we came here.”

“It would not change what we have to do. The hunters will be waiting for us. And the likely place they will, is on the other side of

this door.”

Sighing, Tash set her chin in her fingers, and analyzed. Yes, if the hunters were setting up a good place for an ambush, the other side of a thick door was a good place.

“D-Does anyone hear, or sense anything on the other side?” she said. Everyone shook their heads. “Should ... should we try and ... b-b-burst in?”

Everyone looked at Jack. Tash smiled at that, not only because the boy was turning into Julias far faster than he realized, but also, because she didn't want to answer that question herself. If the hunters were waiting on the other side, trying to sneak out of the hallway wouldn't work; whoever stuck their head out first would die. If they burst into the room, but the hunters weren't waiting, they'd give up the element of surprise by announcing their arrival even more than they already had.

“Can you investigate with that black mist form of yours, Athalia?” Jack said.

“No. My senses are gone while in that form. It is only for moving to locations, not scouting.”

Nodding, Jack looked to the three Uratha. “Can you transform into your werewolf form, and ... well, stay in control?”

Matt and Art smirked, while Noah shrugged.

“I can,” Noah said. “Not all of us are so well mannered.”

The two boys with Natasha rolled their eyes, but at least they didn't get angry. They weren't happy about Noah playing supervisor, but Natasha could tell the man was doing his best to help the pack. Art had said the man was Elodoth, and was good with his words. They also said he was a bit of a sociopath, and thought of his pack

mates as pieces on a chess board, not as people. A mean insult, but even now, the man's expression was more deadpan than Tash expected from anyone in this situation. She recognized the look of someone analyzing the moment, and detaching themselves from the emotional gravity of it to maintain an objective eye. Hopefully that wouldn't lead to rather harsh decisions, at the possible detriment to others.

She doubted it would. He was a member of their pack! Surely he'd protect his family above everything else. Matt and Art seemed to trust him, even if they didn't like him.

"Alright," Jack said, "the mission hasn't changed, just the method. Stealth isn't an option"—he threw a glare at Athalia as he said it—"so we should use a rushdown tactic instead. Even if the enemies aren't waiting in ambush, rushdown will work better because it will allow us to close in on the enemy quickly. Ever see SWAT tactics? Use speed and overwhelm the terrorists holding the hostages. Hesitate and lose, so we don't hesitate. We move quickly, and take down any enemies in our way. They'll hesitate, and we'll take advantage of that."

For a moment, Tash smiled at the man's wisdom. Then, she tilted her head to the side. Was he talking about a video game? It almost sounded like he was talking about a video game. It was still sound advice, and she pursed her lips as she kept her opinion to herself.

"Remember, rescue is priority. Second priority is learning more about the hunters and the situation, like how they have a Begotten working for them. We've been flying blind for weeks with these hunters, and that has to change." He checked his pistol, tightened his grip on his sword hilt, and took a breath; only Natasha and Damien would know how useless that was. "Ok, Uratha, you—"

Roars from beyond the door started to echo, loud, filled with inhuman shrieks. Moments later, more roars joined it, but not

layered with strange shrieks. She knew those roars! Those were the roars of a werewolf, a howl mixed with rumbles that grew into overpowering thunder.

Everyone froze when the sounds of gunfire joined it.

They all looked at each other, and Tash chewed on the inside of her cheeks as they listened. Gunshots, more of them, and then yelling. The noise's details were lost to the echo of whatever lay beyond the door, but it sounded like a man's voice. Clara, or Eric, or both, were fighting the hunters. Maybe Jessy was fighting too; knowing Jessy, she probably threw the first punch.

Natasha had faith in Jessy's abilities, as the girl had proven herself many times in combat, kicking Carthian ass. But this situation was different. The hunters weren't looking to have a brawl, or a skirmish fight that led to blood loss, but no deaths. No, the hunters were looking to kill, and they'd use fire and silver and shotguns and assault rifles. Could Jessy survive something like that?

Everyone waited for Jack's word.

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~~Jack~~

As the distant roars and gunshots ran through his ears, he tossed a few dozen scenarios through his head. Did they really have to do this? Did it really come down to opening a door and hoping for the best? Was it really the best idea to just, break their way into some unknown monster's dream, and force a situation? There had to have been a better way, a smarter way, something more elegant or precise or manipulative or ... or ... something. This rescue mission was foolhardy, and everyone knew it. He wasn't saying it, and they weren't saying it, but they all knew it.



All of their back-up plans for rescuing Eric, if their defense of him failed, did not account for a nightmare realm. If they'd had time, they'd have taken a few days to plan something proper. This on-the-fly rescue mission was going to be the death of them all, but it had to be done. It had to be done. He wasn't about to let Jessy go through what he did, or Clara. Or hell, even that asshole Eric.

"Let's take advantage," he said. "Uratha, transform and get ready to storm whomever's waiting for us. Damien and Natasha, ranged support. If there's any snipers waiting for us, use your speed to get up to them and take them out, but otherwise stay out of the fray. Fiona, close range support. Stick with the Uratha, distract, and incapacitate groups with your webbing if you can. If the werewolves go down, get them back through the door and into one of these rooms." He gestured to the normal-sized wooden doors around them. "Athalia, push open the doors as fast as you can, and since you can fly, try and get behind whatever's waiting for us.

"If I was Jeremiah, I'd have hunters waiting for me in a staggered formation. We're talking kine, with physical limitations; they have to rely on their weaponry to be dangerous, so they'll play to those strengths. Pistols and shotguns at medium range, rifles at long, with some kind of cover between us and them. They may have a sniper, but unlikely; sniping in real life is nothing like the movies. They'll also have molotovs, maybe flamethrowers and grenades, and silver bullets and silver knives, and..." He stroked his chin as he looked down, and ran through the scenarios in his head. Needed more time, needed a lot more time, but they had to go and they had to go now.

"And where will you be?" Athalia said.

He frowned at her. Trying to earn the woman's trust was going to be a lifelong endeavor, at this rate. "With Damien and Tash, as their support. Much as I'd like to be up front and center, I'm not an idiot. I've got a year under my belt as Kindred, and that's it. Tash and Damien are ancilla, and far more skilled in combat than I am."

Whatever fire was in his gut that survived his first encounter with Angela, he wasn't about to put it to the test without due cause. And, Ventrue as he was, he had a natural talent for resilience and animalism, the former not useful for a blitzkrieg, and the latter useless inside a nightmare, he figured. Dominate would serve him well, if he could get in close enough to use it, and no way they'd let him do that without filling him with lead and dousing him in napalm.

“If anyone has a better idea,” he said, “speak up. The hunters know we're coming, so this is going to be chaos incarnate.”

Noah stepped up. “Given how quickly we have to move, your approach is the best we can hope to achieve.”

Well, that was a point for him. He looked at the others, and they all shrugged. It was a weird balance between having a little — only a little — faith in his plan, and not having any better ideas. But everyone had a strong drive to make this thing happen. Werewolves wanted to save Clara and Eric. Vampires wanted to save Jessy. Monsters wanted to learn how Jeremiah was working with one of their kind; it was a scary thought, one who slays their kind working with their kind.

“Alright, get ready,” he said. The urge to hyperventilate hit him. If he needed to breathe, he'd probably be seeing stars, or passing out. This was the first time he'd ever truly gone on the offensive, against anyone, ever. That one time he, Viktor, and Julias were attacking Tony was sort of offensive, but Viktor and Julias did all the work; Jack was a spectator. Lucas? On the defense. That fucking spider monster in the sewers? They were ambushed. And of course the time he was kidnapped, his escape was reactive.

This would be the first time mounting a true offensive. The first time going into something, expecting to have to fight, and kill, and be the one actively causing the engagement.

Sighing, he nodded to the Uratha, and they began to transform. He offered Athalia another nod, and the monster set her colossal, skeletal hands against the door, and pushed.

The doors pushed back with the strength of an erupting volcano, shattering the wood. There was a moment, a single moment, where Jack could see the wood bend and warp like ripples in water, before it exploded into the hallway. Shards of it, some small, some massive, crashed over the group, and all of them fell back as the kinetic wave smashed into them. It pushed into them, through their bones, organs, and slammed them to the floor until they were sliding along the old stones hard enough to tear small holes into their clothing.

Slow motion, flying through the air, a vague awareness that he was going to be in pain when he came to, but until then, he was numb. The others were bundles of limbs and chaos around him, rolling, twisting, sliding. It was like God had chewed them all up, and spat them out.

The world went silent. Jack forced his eyes open, and stared up at the ceiling above, body grabbing at air it didn't need. Up and down, left and right, all lost. Like waking up on some mornings, and not having your natural, innate awareness of your position and orientation; it made you feel lost. But as the silence turned into a ringing in his ears, deafening and painful, he forced his weight up onto his elbows.

He was on his ass, and he was in pain.

Groaning as the scorching agony shot up his body, he looked down at himself, and groan turned into a grunt and growl; at least he thought he was making those noises. Hard to tell when you were suddenly deaf.

There was a shard of wood jammed into his gut.

He reached out, and ripped it out. Bits of his skin came out with it, and bits of muscle, hooked into its jagged edges. Don't waste time thinking about it, don't pause to let the pain enter your thoughts. Somewhere in the corner of his mind, he remembered the time that Rebecca woman had stabbed him. Viktor after that cut him open. Damien after that, stabbed him. Did the Azlu monster stab him? He couldn't even remember. All of that was washed aside by the memory of Angela, and the torture she had inflicted on him.

Yanking out a glorified splinter was nothing. He glared at the wound, and forced it closed, forced his vitae to pool into his muscle and skin, and demand it seal. It did. He was a Ventrue, resilience was in his blood, and he had to react before—

An arm, massive, and covered in fur, reached out over his head, slammed down into chest, and grabbed him. The hand was big enough for the claws to get around the sides of his ribs, and throw him. The world became a blur as he spun through the air, and crashed into one of the side doors. It swung open from the impact, and darkness greeted him, along with stone, and wood, as he rolled across the floor and slammed into a chair, and then a chair, and then a table.

Pop. Pop pop. Quiet, little popping noises rattled in his ears, growing louder and louder, as the ringing grew quieter and quieter. The headache came like a rising ocean wave, slamming into his brain as the realization finally clicked. The moment Athalia had touched the door, it had exploded inward. Nothing except for a military grade large explosive was blowing down that door, the way it had.

Jack looked around himself. With the door of the room open, and the gargoyle braziers outside providing a strip of light cutting into the room, he could see the smashed chairs and table around him. Bits of wood, cracked in half around his, yet again, thrown and beaten body. As the ringing went away, the pop pops grew louder

and louder, until it was obvious what they were. Gunfire. And not glocks, like he knew Damien and Tash used. He recognized the boom of shotguns, the loud cracks of higher caliber pistols, and the rain of bullets from fully automatic rifles.

God he hated being right all the time.

Two shapes threw themselves into the room. He tried to sit up, to use his—oh fucking god he dropped his weapons. Groaning, he slammed his palms against the floor, sending a painful jolt through his body. Get up, defend yourself!

“Jack,” one of them said, body a blur mixed with the dark, light hitting their colossal back, world spinning around them. “You ok?” Their voice was hard and choppy, almost a bark, mixed with depth and bass.

“ ... yeah, um—”

“Art.”

“Right, right. Matt?”

The bigger wolf grunted. Guess Matt wasn't much for talking when transformed then. But then, it looked like Art had a hard time, with a lack of lips, and the tongue and chops and yeah, hard to talk as a wolf.

“Thanks,” he said. One of them must have thrown him into the side room, before the hail of gunfire began. Matt shrugged, like it was no big deal. The man was way too nice.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and the two wolves fell into the shadow around the streak of light that cut across the floor, Jack stared at the two beasts. There were holes in their bodies, bleeding, and badly. He'd seen the wolves recover from extreme wounds in moments, when fighting the Azlu monster, but the holes in their

bodies trickled red down their fur, and both wolves were breathing hard.

How long had he been out? It must have been only seconds, and he'd managed to recover from a hole in his gut quickly. At least, recover enough function.

“... silver bullets,” he said to no one.

“Just pistols,” Art said, “and only a little silver.” He groaned, voice rumbling as he rotated his shoulder. The size of his muscle was so massive, his arm was almost as big as Jack's whole body. “Maybe shotguns had silver too. No time to check.” Each word came out as a half bark, but powerful enough to punch through the noise still coming from the hallway. Yelling, shouting, gunfire, and screaming.

If the silver bullets were only coming from the pistols and shotguns, maybe there were some issues with creating silver bullets? Expensive, or a metallurgical issue, he had no idea. But it was nice to know that, presumably, some rifle bullets had hit Art and Matt, and hadn't caused the sort of damage Jack was looking at.

“So much for the plan.” Groaning, Jack forced himself onto his feet, and dragged himself toward the door. Maybe, just maybe, he could get his pistol and sword back. Maybe, just maybe, he could do something to save this foolhardy plan. Maybe, just fucking god damn maybe, he could save the others, if they needed saving.

He stuck his head out along the door, just far enough to get his eye poking around the door frame of stone. The hallway was a mess, bits of wood everywhere, and splatters of blood, some of it too dark to be a werewolf's. Some of the darker stuff was fading into ash, vampire blood. But some other blood, even darker in shade, didn't.

Fiona. The spider woman lay on the stone floor of the hall, and Jack gulped as he stared at her. Other doors in the hall had been opened, likely hiding the other members of the ragtag crew; trails of

blood led into the rooms, same as Jack's. No one else was in the hallway except for Vrall, and the gunfire from beyond came to a stop as the dust settled. The blood was hers, and it continued to leak from the holes in her gut and limbs, as she trembled. Her long spider legs on her back squirmed, like a struggling spider unable to escape a sticky surface. Her human-shaped body was a dead weight, shivering, barely breathing, and the crown of many horns on her head shifted against the smoothed rock of the floor.

Why weren't they shooting her to death? They—no, they had ammo, they had the numbers, and they had the advantage. They weren't shooting her to death because they saw an opportunity.

Fuck. Jack stuck his head out a little further, enough to look down the hallway. A bullet whizzed past his head, and he ducked back into the darkness as it slammed into his door frame, opposite of the hunters. It'd only been a second of looking, but it was enough to see that a group of the hunters were waiting in the next room, a dozen of them at least. They were hiding behind some sort of giant pillar, in what looked like an enormous chamber.

His plan would have probably worked then, probably, if the hunters hadn't struck first. The fuck did they use? Some sort of plastic explosive, and a lot of it? Jack's ears were still ringing, and only his Kindred vitae kept it from becoming a lasting problem; kine would have taken days to heal the hearing damage, if at all. The hole in his gut wasn't completely healed either, just closed, and his limbs and torso ached with impact damage. If he'd still been alive or blushing life, his body would be covered in bruises tomorrow.

And like a giant fuck you to vampires everywhere, there was fire. The explosion hadn't created it, the hunters had, probably immediately after the explosion to prevent the vampires from escaping. The fire circled what remained of the door, bits of wood still attached to the frame, and one of the hunters was out in front of the pillar, closer to the shattered door. They had a flamethrower,

and every so often, they re-coated the area around the door, the floor, the ceiling, all of it in flame. No vampire was getting through there easily.

“Surprised you came, Jack.”

He froze, and looked at the two wolves with him. They shrugged, and waited, not recognizing the voice. He recognized it though, and god he wished he didn't.

“Angela,” he called out from his hiding hole.

“Stick your head out again, please. I missed.”

Jack snarled, gritting his teeth until his jaws clicked. “You survived getting stabbed, and run over.”

“I did.”

Sighing, Jack stared at Fiona. She'd been shot a half-dozen times, at least, and the wounds weren't small. How hunters got their hands on ammunition that could do this much damage to flesh, he didn't know; he didn't know if Fiona's skin was fleshy either. Whatever they'd shot her with, it had not only ripped clean through her arms, legs, and stomach, the holes the bullets left were far too large. Werewolves could heal from that damage, if it wasn't silver, unless it got one of them straight through the head. A vampire might live after getting shot in the head from bullets that large, maybe, but they'd go into torpor for a long while. Defenseless was as good as dead.

“A human wouldn't survive that,” he called out, “let alone recover so quickly.”

“And yet here I am. Gonna take more than a stab wound and a car bumper to kill me.”



“Are you even human?”

“Fuck yes I’m human! Unlike you. Unlike your wolf buddies and your monster friend. Unlike your vamp partners. All of you, hiding in Sándor’s nightmare. You are all so fucked.”

Sándor? Judging from what she said, it was the monster who owned the nightmare they were in, then.

She said monster friend. Singular? So she didn’t know about Athalia yet.

The door across from Jack was closed, but at least one of the doors, across the hall and closer to the hunters, was open. Jack and the pair of wolves got knocked back pretty far then. Hopefully Damien, Tash, and Noah were together. But where the fuck was Athalia?

Think, think. Athalia could transform into a black mist when moving around, but she said she lost the ability to sense things when doing so. He doubted she completely lost her whole sense of orientation and position though, cause otherwise, she wouldn’t be able to move around, or know when to come out of the mist form. Did she turn into mist when the explosion happened? The strange blood was Fiona’s, and he doubted a skeleton monster bled, so maybe she was unharmed. Maybe, just maybe, she’d be able to use the mist form, sneak in behind the hunters, launch a counter attack, and give the rest of them the window they needed to respond.

Could Damien and Tash sneak past the hunters with the cloak of night? Not if they’d been shot a bunch; they didn’t have the resilience of Ventrue or Gangrels. And no vampire except an elder was maintaining the cloak of night while jumping through a ring of fire.

Think think think think. If he had to rely on Athalia, there’d be trouble. Athalia herself hadn’t been able to confirm or deny if she

could attack her daughter, and it was her daughter blocking them from getting to Jessy and the others. It was her daughter and her gang of psychopaths stopping him from getting to Fiona.

“Jack?” Fiona said, voice quiet, wavering.

“Thank god. Fiona, you alright?”

“I ... I ... am surprised...” Her blade-like fingers pressed to the floor, trying to lift herself.

“Don’t! Don’t, don’t move.”

“I ... I’m bleeding ... badly. I have to ... I have to return ... to my ... lair.” The beautiful monster tried to move again, but her efforts failed, body flattening to the stones as she collapsed, spider legs twitching. “Have ... to ... return ... or I’ll ... die.”

“If you move, they’ll shoot you, Fiona.” With his voice low, and a wall of fire between them and the hunters, some whispers should be safe. “They want us to come to you.” Please stop moving please stop moving please stop moving.

“I ... guess I am ... the fly in the web.” She let her blood-soaked body collapse completely, earning a loud chuckle from the glass-eye bitch beyond the fire. “I cannot help but feel ... that we ... underestimated ... the threat.”

Hearing her new voice analyze the threat hurt. Better than hearing giggling, Scottish Fiona though. It’d be too heartbreaking, and he needed to use his brain right now, not listen to an aching heart. Think think think.

“Which one of you is faster?” he said to the two wolves.

Art raised his giant hand of claws, but Jack’s eyes fell to their bodies, and he winced as he looked at the bullet holes that remained

on their limbs. It was weird to see Uratha not heal, and weirder still to see the two, hulking, massive brutes, panting. The hunters must have bombarded the hallway with bullets when they blew the door. Jack went flying, got lucky with—

He blinked, and stared down at himself, as he noticed there was a gash through his pants, above the knee. A bullet had got him, two in fact, hitting the leg and tearing through the muscle. His undead body prevented blood loss from the wounds, despite each being an inch deep, and he stared at the open split of pale skin and dry muscle within. Only after realizing he was wounded, did the pain kick in.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and forced down the pain. No, he didn't have time for this. He had to save people, had to make a plan to deal with the situation, had to think. He tapped into his gut, his core, his beast, and told it to deal with it. Moments later, thick Kindred blood pulled at the wound, and the muscle and skin closed. Barely. It was nothing compared to what the Uratha could do, except, they weren't. The silver bullets had damaged them almost as badly as a normal bullet would hurt kine, or fire would hurt Kindred.

Asking them to do any running was going to be a problem, but what other option did he have? No matter what happened, they needed the Begotten for their escape plan. And, the last thing he wanted was for Fiona to get hurt in this. Much as Vrall was supposedly an experienced monster, Fiona was a young girl.

Then again, who was he to talk? Either way, the only one who could save Fiona was Art.

“Art, can you—”

A hail of gunfire cut through the hall, and Jack almost jumped off his ass. Both Uratha fell back as well, bodies rolling into the darkness, away from where the gargoyles' firelight cut along the floor.

The fuck were they shooting at? He forced his eyes onto Fiona, terrified he'd find her nothing but a pulpy mess of flesh and spider legs. But it wasn't her they were shooting at.

Jack stared at her as bullets flew past her, around her, slamming into the stone walls and tearing them apart. Many of the bullets went high, crashing into the braziers and sending bits of fire around in small splashes of flame; the nightmare's fire had more weight than it should have. Every so often, the telltale thud of a bullet hitting flesh was a small pause in the rain of death.

Someone in a suit, full of holes, came sliding in, momentum forcing them to skid foot first, their arm to the stone. Fast, very fast, but the man was trailing bits of blood, thick heavy blood that vanished into ash moments later.

“Damien! What the fuck are—”

The man did a running pick-up of Fiona, slamming his weight into the wall by Jack, before he scooped her up as he threw his weight toward the door opposite of Jack. It swung open with a loud crack as Damien's back and shoulder crashed into it, and both he and Fiona rolled along the floor. Fiona's rolling was a mess, her enormous spider leg blades coming out of her back, each many feet long, and having to twist and bend along their multiple joints.

“Damien! Damien you fucking idiot. Are you alright?” The gargoyle braziers cast their light into the room, and Jack stared at the two bodies strewn around against the wood chairs and tables.

Damien managed to raise a hand. His back was against the leg of one of the tables, and he was sitting, legs spread out, Fiona on the floor next to him. Alive, still alive, but Jack could see the myriad of holes puncturing the man's chest. Jack was in no position to judge his brash actions though. The little Ventrue was the moron in this circumstance, unable to stay armed, while Damien managed to not only save Fiona, he kept his weapons on him as he did.

“You fuckers have a lot of nerve,” Angela said, voice loud and burying the sound of fire. “You break into an unknown world, with absolutely no clue what’s waiting for you. How fucking arrogant can you get? Or do you think hunters are that stupid, that pathetic, that we’d let you just march in here and do whatever you want?”

He bit his tongue as he stared at Damien and Fiona. Both of them were a mess, and Fiona was bleeding everywhere. He doubted she’d be opening any doors to any other worlds or nightmares in her condition. And Damien looked bad, very bad, like that time he got stabbed by the Azlu monster. He was still conscious though, pistol still in his hand.

This rescue operation had gone from foolhardy and rash, to predictably disastrous in seconds. He just didn’t expect it to be this disastrous. Hell, with two ancilla, two Begotten, and three Uratha, he’d gotten cocky, and expected things to go well. Angela was right, and he was arrogant.

That was the problem with hubris, he supposed. You didn’t know you had it, until it was too late.



~~Julias~~

This was a stupid idea. He shouldn’t be doing it. As a member of the council, it was his job to dictate actions to his subordinates, and manage the outcomes. And yet here he was, in the tunnels, alone, walking toward Azamel’s den.

He took a moment to adjust his tie and make sure he was presentable. He was Julias Mire, youngest to ever step onto the Dolareido Invictus Council, and Alder Viktor Honor’s childe. He—

He stopped, and laughed, running his fingers over his head and through his hair. What was it he said to Triss, so long ago? Right, that he envied the kine and their ability to enjoy the moment. Get

drunk, get high, get lost in arousal and lost to the immediate, lost to circumstance, lost to whatever their whimsy desired. And then later, he told her that he was sick and tired of Kindred and their constant pursuit of the opposite, forever trying to plan for any and all possible contingencies, with a million plots and maneuvers in place to deal with them. Wholly incapable of enjoying the moment. Worse, their every thought was dominated with schemes and weaving webs of secrets and lies.

Here he was, doing just that, about to weave some webs. But was the problem his new attitude, or that his old one was naive, now shattered under the weight of reality?

Unlike his predecessor, when the night was done and he had a moment to breathe, he could go back home to his lover, and fall asleep in her arms; while Jen ooh'd and aww'd over the two of them cuddling. It made the games, the manipulating, the schemes, worth it. And if his schemes potentially saved Jack? It made it very worth it.

He wasn't completely alone on this dangerous quest. Four thralls were with him, loyal servants of the Invictus. No ghouls though, not worth the risk on what could easily become a very violent meeting. Ghouls were harder to kill, but far more precious to whatever Kindred had nurtured them. He had none of his own anyhow, and he was doing this without the knowledge of his fellow councilmen; couldn't borrow theirs. Hopefully the three men and one woman with him, each dressed in suits and wearing ear pieces, would survive the encounter.

He should have brought other Kindred with him. But then, who could he trust with this? If he told anyone else, they'd probably tell the rest of the council, and they'd stop him. He could tell Beatrice, but she was busy with Jacob, as per her text. Besides, he wouldn't bring her, not for something like this. Invictus business, and dangerous. She'd probably slap him, or claw him, for actively

keeping her out of danger, but at least she'd understand the Invictus business part. She had her own business with her new teacher after all, Jacob.

What was the man teaching her? Julias knew about Jacob's old witches from before his time, and how they died, generally for sticking their noses out too far in their pursuits and getting caught by hunters. If Triss died from similar, it'd kill him. It'd kill him, and then he'd kill the old man, if he could. Then again, Jacob wasn't the reckless man Viktor said he used to be. He could be trusted, to a degree. A small degree.

He shook his head. He was a happier man than he used to be, but right now, happy wasn't what he needed. What he needed was to be a cold, ruthless, powerful negotiator and master tactician. Thinking of Triss always got him smiling, and he needed to be not smiling. He was the great Julias Mire, strongest of the ancilla, childe of Alder Viktor Honors, and councilmen of the Invictus. The authority to do as he pleased sat with him.

Hopefully Azamel could see his side of the argument.

He found her doing what she always did, sitting in her chair, rocking, smoking, staring into nothing. Mark hopped down from the concrete stage, and glared at him, arms folded across his chest.

"Let him be, Mark," she said.

The man frowned, adjusted his black hoodie, and hopped back up onto the stage. He found his own place to sit on a couch, and pulled out an e-book reader. Did they just sit down here all the time, and read? No, they had to eat, but he doubted they left through the tunnels to do so; not Azamel, at least. Maybe Mark brought food to her? Maybe, but then Julias knew of no kine deaths that could be attributed to her. How the old woman, or how any of them fed besides Fiona, was still a mystery.

Julias looked over his shoulder at his four thralls. Each had their arms at their sides, ready to draw their pistols from their hidden vest holsters if needed. He doubted they'd be terribly useful in a fight against monsters, but then again, bullets could do a lot of damage if you used enough of them.

“Thank you,” he said.

“For?” She didn't bother to look his way, content to stare off into space as she blew some smoke, before clearing her lungs with some coughs.

“For helping us, for sending Fiona and Athalia along with Jack. The mission is ... dangerous, to say the least, but it was the best we could come up with in a single hour.”

“Considering the time constraint, it was not a bad move.” A compliment, from Azamel. He did not see that coming. “And in the dream, Athalia is more than capable of taking care of herself.”

“You trust her a lot.”

“I trust both Mark and Athalia to be capable of more than any Kindred, once inside the dream.”

“And Fiona?”

“She ... is unusual. It has been a long time since I've known a Begotten with her horror so developed unto itself. Vrallar'trakla of the Eight Blade Arach is old, very old, and very powerful, and yet she is tethered to a child. Perhaps with time, she will grow to be stronger than I? Like your childe, hmm?”

Julias frowned, but wiped it away. There was something to her voice with the Jack comment, something he didn't like but couldn't put his finger on.



“I came to ask a question.”

“By all means, ask. I don’t promise to answer, but you never know.”

Naturally.

“I wanted to know why you didn’t go.”

“ ... why I did not go?”

“Yes, why you, the great Azamel, did not go. I remember the last time you were here, old monster. I remember the damage you caused.”

“You understand the power I wield.”

“I do.”

“And yet you threaten me, and hold my favorite home hostage with explosives.” She blew smoke his way, and glared at him through the gray. For a moment, he could see something strange through the smoke, where her eyes were cutting through it. A shadow, a flicker of shape and darkness that almost looked like tusks.

“You know it was the right move,” he said.

“Do I?”

“You’re a threat, and unlike the Uratha, you have a tendency to cause major damage to the city when you decide to act out.”

“ ... that was almost ninety years ago.” She finished the cigarette, set the butt in the ash tray on the small stand beside her, and sighed. “Things change.”

“I’m not here to argue about the past. I’m here to ask why you’re not helping Fiona and Athalia. A Begotten is working with the hunters. That alone warrants your investigation, doesn’t it?”

“We are investigating it.”

“And?”

“And our investigations have proved futile. This monster hides from us, and forcing our way into his or her lair invites trouble.”

He could understand that. But it wasn’t good enough.

“Your ability to enter the nightmare world, and move around, is a deadly ability,” he said. “More than your other abilities, this way to bypass things—”

“We cannot bypass everything, or do it so easily, vampire. But, yes, the roads of the worlds, all worlds, are ours to travel as we desire. We are monsters, the true and original creatures of darkness.” She laughed. Laughing led to coughing, horrible, nasty, deep in her lungs, and she brought her hand up to her mouth as a fist to cover her lips.

“ ... you’re dying, aren’t you?”

“I am hundreds of years old, and I am no vampire. Of course I’m dying.”

Sighing, he came in closer, and stood before the decaying monster. “Cancer?”

“Were it so simple. No, it is not cancer, foolish boy. But, as you may now suspect, I do not waste what energy I have left on foolishness.”

“Two of your people are—”

“They are not property! They are individuals. We are friends, a family of sorts, and we rely on each other. But they are not my subordinates, fool. I do not need to bend or break them, and I do not need to order them. And, I am not beholden to owe them.”

He didn't believe that. Azamel was a monster, beyond the definition of a Begotten, and those under her protection likely did everything she asked of them. Her words weren't without merit though, since Jack assured him Fiona was still the ridiculously happy person she'd always been. If Azamel was the colossal tyrant the Invictus assumed she was, surely the Scot's attitude would have been affected.

“Jack's in a nightmare world,” he said, “with the best team I could imagine him getting in such a small amount of time. But I suspect the hunters are more prepared than we realized. With a Begotten working for them, Jeremiah and Angela's unusual tenacity, this shaman woman able to do some ritual magic beyond us, and an unknown-but-large force of hunters working with them, I have to assume they're more prepared than even our more pessimistic estimates.” Sighing louder, he held his chin in his fingers. “At first glance, it seemed like the right thing to do, sending him with such a powerful group. On second look, I think he's walking into a more dangerous trap than we assumed. Jeremiah would have a plan in place in case we followed Eric's kidnapper, one capable of stopping even an elder Kindred.”

“Yes ... that is possible.” Shrugging, she held out her hand to the side. Moments later, Mark joined her, set a cigarette in her hand, and lit it for her. She said she wasn't dying of cancer, but with the amount she smoked, he doubted even a Begotten was impervious to its effects. “Why don't you go?” And for good measure, she blew a puff of smoke at him.

“I would love to go, but my days of risking my life on random missions are over. I have responsibilities now.” He glanced back at

the four thralls. Each stood silent as statues. Well trained, and reliable. But if they'd been Jessy and Tash, as they once were, they'd have provided their opinions and support. Those days were gone.

“Ah yes, your empire of ... them,” she made a gesture to the thralls, “and of your fledglings and neonates. Like children, they must be nurtured. And you, their parent? An absurdity if there ever was one.”

“You're dodging my request. I want you to help Jack and the others.”

“No.”

“Why not? If you're dying of old age, then it's inev—”

“Do not speak to me of death and age, immortal leech. And what would you know of Begotten?” She took a long breath of her cigarette, and blew shapes into the air, circles. Impressive. “And my death is not inevitable. You, a simple blood leech, will never understand the destiny that awaits Begotten. I will make mine a reality, and you will bow and ... and...” With a sigh of her own, she leaned back in her seat, and tapped ashes into the nearby ashtray. “I am old, and decayed, and I dodge death's looming scythe with my effort. I did not make my requests of Athalia and Fiona lightly. Leave me be.”

“And if I promise to remove the explosives?”

That got her attention. She sat up, watched him for a moment, before she sank back into her seat. A weight was crushing her, pinning her. Maybe death was at her door.

“Even if, Mire. Even if,” she said. He glared at the old woman, but it was pointless. Someone as old as her wasn't about to change her mind, no matter how much he bargained. “But if you truly think my fellow Begotten are in danger, speak with Jacob.”

“Jacob?”

“Yes. The old bastard loves to dip his toes into my affairs. He is curious about nightmares.”

Nosferatu were masters of nightmares, at least compared to other Kindred blood clans. It made sense for the man to be interested in a species that literally embodied nightmares.

“Curious?” he said.

“Indeed. He is hunting something, pursuing knowledge. The realm of spirits, the realm of nightmares and dreams, he hunts them, and others I’m sure. He may know of a way to break into this unknown Begotten’s lair.”

“Thanks for the tip.” Maybe it’d be worth it to visit Jacob, and see what he had to say? “May I ask what he did to put himself on your radar?”

“He and that crocodile mouth friend of his tested the edges of my realm.”

Triss and Jacob. Two peas in a pod. He hoped the old man wasn’t turning her into a new version of him.

“I’ll go speak to him right now.”

“I imagine he’s dancing with death at this very moment, in his ritual chamber in Three Kings Cemetery. But make sure to leave the thralls at home, vampire, lest the old monster sacrifice them.”

---

He texted Triss, explaining his trip to the cemetery. If Azamel was right, then Jacob and Triss, and probably Jennifer, were already there. Alas, no response.

Ritual chamber, ritual chamber. He didn't know about the exact location of the ritual chamber, or that it qualified as a ritual chamber. Everyone knew that Jacob had multiple places where he performed his crúac madness; too smart to put all his eggs in one basket. And he was sure the Prince and her sheriff knew them, or at least this one, but the Invictus didn't.

So here he was, standing at the gate of Three Kings Cemetery, wasting his time. As Azamel suggested, he left the thralls at Xnomina HQ; Jacob preferred a more personal touch anyway. Adjusting his tie, he stepped under the gate, and looked around. The Dolareido Cathedral wasn't too far. Maria surely knew about Jacob's proximity and his blood rituals, but Jacob could hide a tank in his cloak of night if he wanted. He'd be more than able to hide himself so near, unless a Mekhet went hunting with auspex. With the loss of Natasha, the Invictus no longer had a powerful Mekhet; no, Damien filled that role now, sort of.

He should talk to that boy soon, and see if he could learn more about what things Maria was sharing with him.

He smirked as he looked around at the beautiful graveyard, and its royal tombstones. Going on a mission, a dangerous one, to deal with dangerous Kindred. Felt like being a Right Hand again.

Of course, if Jack returned from his mission, and shit had hit the fan, Julias not being at the Invictus HQ where he could delegate tasks, would be a problem. Michael and Maria left the task to him as they pursued their own interests, and while one of them would probably step in to manage the chaos, it should be on him to do so. It was such a horrible cliché, to be uplifted to a position where you were no longer able to get your hands dirty, and miss it.

Jack would probably mention Captain Picard, and his desire to remain a captain, never get promoted. Some of that nerd info had sunk into Julias's mind, he supposed, after numerous conversations

with the boy prior to his siring. But it was a valid comparison. And it was nice to be doing something himself, risking his own life, instead of risking everyone else's all the time. Part of him still thought maybe he should have sent Isabella or Hella, or Parker or Vicky, but he couldn't trust them with this, not with Azamel, not with Jacob.

He smiled as he looked at the graveyard. How many of his younger years did he spend hanging out in graveyards? Something about being surrounded by the dead was alluring, when you were a newly dead yourself. It grabbed Nosferatu harder than others though. He wondered if Jacob and Triss walked around the place, speaking about the dead, and being stereotypical vampires.

No time to daydream. Rotating his shoulders, he squatted down, almost touching the stones and grass with a knee, as he looked around for life. He needed something with eyes and ears, something to guide him, something that would have watched others of the graveyard. He needed a rat.

Sure enough, a rat exposed itself. It took a few minutes, but eventually one of the brown rats at home in the city climbed onto a tombstone, where it munched on a bit of nut. The rats in Dolareido were borderline fearless, and smart. Jack seemed partial to his crows, but Julias felt rats were the stronger choice. More limited with their inability to fly, but a rat could sneak into a house, into a facility, into anything, where a crow was lucky to not get noticed just perching nearby.

He reached into his core, found his beast, and brought it to the surface, wrapped in vitae to keep it under his control. "Have you seen a man, perhaps with two women? He'd likely have a bandage wrapped around his eyes, older guy. One of the women would have many teeth." The beast translated the words for him, turning them into images, with enough sound and scent embedded for the rat to make sense of them.

The rat nodded.

“Good. Do they have a habit of going somewhere?” Again, the rat nodded. “Take me there.”

Dropping in on Jacob unannounced was a dangerous game. Everything with Jacob was a dangerous game. But after dealing with the man for a century, Julias felt comfortable dealing with his insanity. Treat Jacob like an asshole about the small things, but with respect about the big things, and he'd most likely play ball. It didn't work every time, but often.

The rat guided Julias to one of the mausoleums higher up the gentle slope of the graveyard. Julias took a deep, slow breath, the old reflex returned from seeing Jack do it. The angels on the small stairway were imposing, and they'd make any vampire uncomfortable walking among them. Did the werewolves feel that way? Probably not. Maybe they felt the same when walking in areas that had suffered a massive loss of life? And monsters, true ones like Azamel, were there places or things in the world they preferred to avoid?

He wished he knew. Azamel's declining health was both a good and bad thing; dying people were often desperate, and did risky things. If he had some way to stop her beyond the explosives, control her, keep her under his thumb, he'd feel more comfortable about that arrangement. But then again, like Jack said, the Invictus weren't treating her with the same respect as the Uratha. Maybe it was time to stop thinking about her as the enemy, especially with her sending Fiona and Athalia to help Jack rescue Jessie, Eric, and Clara.

She shared information about Jacob, too, without requiring it. There were too many reasons to trust her, to the point Julias was suspicious of ulterior motives.



The rat guided him into the mausoleum, along the floor, and onto the back wall, where several coffins sat. It climbed up, and sat upon one of them.

Julias raised a brow. “In the coffin?”

The rat nodded.

Sighing, Julias pushed it open, and made the active effort to not breathe. He didn’t need to, and he didn’t want to smell the dead. He doubted the coffin would have any sort of serious smell, considering the corpse inside was over a century old, but still.

He pulled out his phone, shined the light, and found ... a piece of paper with a note written on it.

‘Get out of my cemetery, asshole.’

Julias facepalmed, and laughed. He got played. Jacob, you asshole.

His phone dinged, and he checked his texts.

~Yo Superman, just got your text. Looking to talk to Jacob? We’re at Three Kings Cemetery.~

~So am I.~

“Oh, so you are!” Laughing, Triss waved to him from outside the mausoleum. There was blood on her body, a lot of it, soaking through her black shirt and jeans.

Jennifer too. The woman was wearing something dressier, looser pants with a looser sweater of black, but she too had blood on her skin. Dried blood.

Jacob stood behind the two of them, jackass smile on his face, and eyeless gaze staring at Julias through his bandage.

“I wanted to speak with you, Jacob,” he said, stepping down from the mausoleum.

“Leave a message next time, Invictus.” While the two women were dressed normally, albeit soaked in blood, Jacob was in robes, heavy, dark, stained, and tattered. The sort of robes one would expect to find an occultist wearing while sacrificing virgins to dark gods, and eating their organs too.

“It can’t wait. I need your help.”

The old man laughed, the creepy kind, half quiet, half wheezing, chuckling while drawing in breath. The sort of a chuckle a ghost would make.

“Do tell.”

# Chapter 71

~~Natasha~~

It wasn't the first time Tash had been close to an explosion. Working for the Invictus, they had all sorts of toys for dealing with the Carthians. They weren't allowed to kill other vampires, lest they trigger a war, but sometimes blowing up a car, or a cellar, or even a whole building, was required to send a message. She was familiar with the kinetic punch, the wave of force that hits the body, and then the following wave. It was nothing like in the movies, where you could just hide behind a heavy object, and be fine. Energy didn't work like that. Pressurized energy moving outward at a few miles a second hit everything near it, and the only defense against that was distance.

They had all been within ten feet of the door when it had blown apart. Considering how big the door was, the kinetic force that had hit them was strong enough to damage organs, let alone impact damage from their bodies slamming into the walls and floor.

The strange thoughts that go through the mind when coming to your senses from what might as well have been a thousand simultaneous punches to her body. She could see the ceiling, and a giant floating skeleton thing, something with wings and no lower body. Oh, right, Athalia, and she was turning into black mist.

Athalia. Nightmare. Rescue mission. The world and its realities came crashing down on her mind like an ice bath, and she struggled to lift her head enough to look around. The explosion had slammed her into the wall, and gravity had brought her into the floor on her back. One of her legs was underneath her, backward.

Familiar pain ignited inside her, in an unfamiliar package. Reflex told her to flex her muscle, her leg, try and work it, but it was broken or dislocated, and the effort turned pain into scorching agony. Weapon, weapon, she needed a weapon. Door, obstacle, she needed something, do something. She squeezed her left hand; pistol there. She squeezed her right; sword there. She couldn't hear anything, only ringing. There were bits of wood everywhere, and one very large one on top of her.

Bits of the wood beam covering her body were breaking off, like small explosions, and she felt the impact of each random, shattering thud. Pop. Pop pop. Bullets? Bullets. They were shooting at her.

She looked beside her, at one of the doors that lined the hallway. It was blown open, broken in half, two parts still standing with their hinges. It wasn't the floor that had stopped her from moving further back, it was the door frame of the side door. Her head was propped up against it slightly, enough that she could see the remains of the main door too. Giant slabs of wood, shattered and ruined, still remained on its hinges. The door itself had been a foot thick; the explosives used to shatter it would have been very powerful.

The hunters had predicted their intrusion, and had brought the tools needed to deal with some of the most powerful creatures Dolareido had to offer. Jack and his group had gotten cocky, very cocky, and now they were a prostrated mess.

No time to complain; and Jack would beat himself up enough for it anyway, no need to throw wood on that fire. First things first, she had to move herself out of the door frame, and into the room. A quick glance, and use of her auspex — forever an oddity in her ability to see in near pitch black — showed another empty dark room, with some wooden tables and chairs.

Grinding her teeth together, she forced down the pain, and dragged herself into the room. She twisted herself, and screamed in

her mind where no one could hear, as her leg twisted underneath her. But, with the huge board sitting on her body, she had to get out from under it to get to safety, but leave it there until she was in the room. It was the only thing keeping the hunters from obliterating her in a rain of lead.

It made it easier to scream, so she kept screaming, in her mind. The pop pops were getting louder and louder as her hearing returned, and she matched her inner screaming to them, until it was all a blur of noise in her head.

The crunch of bone grinding on bone, the shards of broken limb cutting into meat and tissue, and crushing against each other, was agony. She ignored it. She forced her little body further, and further into the room, and as her leg twisted out from underneath her, she clenched her teeth down until she felt her jaw threaten to break, too. Bullets crashed into the wood, and others slammed into the stone of the door frame, inches from her head, each random impact a sharp spur in her side, demanding she keep moving.

The board slid off of her hip, and onto the foot of her bad leg, as she got herself into the room. No time to think, no time to lament the pain, no time to do anything, except put her weapons down, and yank. She couldn't help but scream out loud this time, and the sound of her voice echoing against the stone drew a silence from the unending barrage of bullets. Free at last. She grabbed her leg by the thigh, and twisted it back into a moderately normal rotation. Crunch.

Her next scream was for everyone to hear.

Panting, almost crying, she stared down at her leg. It was aligned enough for her body to begin healing it on its own. With shaking hands, she picked up her pistol and sword, and pushed herself out of the beam of light cutting into the room. She checked herself for bullet wounds as she moved; none she could see. If not for being a

corpse, she'd probably have a concussion, and ruptured organs from that explosion. Being pre-dead had many advantages, and she forced herself to appreciate that, as the burning pain of the ruined leg throbbed up into her body and mind.

She put her back to the wall of the door frame, further from the hunters. She wanted to be able to poke her head out and see, and maybe shoot, and until her leg was working again, she'd have to rely on her pistol over her sword. From here, she might be able to take some shots, and stop hunters from approaching. Maybe.

With a moment to gather her senses, she poked her head around the door frame enough to see into the hallway, and toward the shattered door. Where were the others? They must have got knocked back further than her, since she hit one of the side door frames.

Wait. She looked across the hall at the other door, opposite of her. Damien? And Noah. She sighed relief, and managed a small nod to them. They returned it from their side, both of them sticking their heads out from the door frame only enough for her to see them. Damien was still armed, too. Good. Noah was transformed; she surprised herself, being able to recognize that he wasn't Art or Matt. Both had been shot, Damien a few times, and Noah half a dozen. Some of the wounds looked like they were healing, but some weren't, leaking blood continuously. Silver?

Groans in the hallway, feminine sounds. Athalia? No, her skeleton form didn't sound like that. And her skeleton form had vanished, poofed, into black mist that faded. Had to be Fiona. Oh no.

Natasha cursed under her breath, and tightened her back to the wall, head poking out only enough to see Damien and Noah. Oh no no no, not Fiona. If it was anyone else, it'd be easier to accept; they

were all older and familiar with battles. But Fiona or Jack? They were kids.

She shook her head hard. Stop thinking that way!

“Surprised you came, Jack.”

Tash blinked, and leaned around the door frame a little more, to see one of the hunters behind the ring of fire circling the remains of the large, destroyed door. A woman, dark skin, and ... and a glass eye? It was hard to see through the flickering flames in the distance, but the eye caught the fire and gave a slight, amber reflection.

“Angela,” Jack said from somewhere further down the hall. Thank god he was alive.

“Stick your head out again, please. I missed.”

This Angela woman truly was confident, and from the way she spoke, she would grate on anyone who had a kind soul. Reeked of bully, bully with a gun. A psychopath.

The two threw some barbs at each other, but it was Damien Tash found her focus on. He was inching out from the door frame he was in. Not out, not completely, but he looked like he was getting ready to run. Bad idea, bad idea! A hunter stepped over the flame and entered the hallway, and Tash unloaded a bullet at him. But the hunter was fast, paying attention, and threw himself back beyond the hall the moment Tash moved.

She couldn't let the hunters come into the hall until they recovered, if they recovered. The explosion had been devastating, not to mention at least two of her companions were shot.

Damien leaned forward, weight on the balls of his feet, sword and pistol at the ready. Uh oh. Tash shook her head, and Damien nodded toward the hallway, further up. She couldn't see from where she

was sitting, her sitting on the wrong side of the door frame to look down the hall that direction without getting her head blown off, but some more groans made it obvious what he was aiming for. Fiona.

Now was not the time to grow a heart, Damien! Was Art and Matt alive? Or Jessy? She didn't know, and she couldn't think about that right now. She had to focus, and so did Damien. She shook her head at him, and pointed toward the destroyed, giant gate the hunters stood outside of. They were just waiting for someone to poke their head out, so they could blow it off!

More groans, from further up the hallway. Fiona, please, don't die. Tash grit her teeth as she forced her eyes onto what sliver of the big door she could see, and again took another shot as a hunter crept up to the fire. She missed, flame blocking her view, but she nearly hit them, enough to scare them back into hiding.

Damien got into a sprint start position.

Don't! You're going to get shot!

He looked her in the eyes, and smiled at her. Him. Smiling. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen that smile on him, not that sort of smile, a hopeless fool's smile.

And then he was running. The man had already been shot, several times, gaping holes in his body leaving small bits of ash behind. And as he exposed himself, a hail of gunfire was only going to add to it. He was going to get shot, again.

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~~Eric~~

Jessy had managed to create chaos. Clara amplified it. Now Eric was going to take advantage.



How cocky were these fuckers to think they could hold them in control, and rely on this monster Sándor to do all the heavy lifting. There had to be more going on, because everything about the situation and its sudden upheaval reeked of predictable cliché. How could they have thought this monster would be able to handle them? Either the man thought little of Eric, Clara, and Jessy, or he thought highly of Sándor. He couldn't have been expecting Angela and her group to cover him, since he sent them to deal with the intruders.

Maybe Jeremiah didn't expect the intruders to arrive so quickly? Eric had only been in the dream for what he guessed was an hour. If the Invictus were launching a rescue mission for Jessy, or Avery was launching one for Clara, it was record speed. It was also ballsy and reckless. He'd have to thank whoever it was, because it gave him the window he needed, to throw himself at four hunters instead of nearly two dozen.

Three hunters. The one with the old woman Elen was still helping her, with whatever. Better for him.

His roar caught Jeremiah by surprise, but the old bastard dodged nonetheless, rolling to the side and firing at him. But Eric's new body had no issues with speed despite his weight. His talons dug into the stones beneath him, weight driving them into the rock. It felt natural, to tear the earth beneath his colossal weight, not natural for a wolf, but natural for a werewolf. Traction let him pour his strength into his body, let him summon speed that defied his size, let him move under Jeremiah's bullets and close in on the three hunters. Payback.

The three hunters brought up their pistols, eyes looking up at him, wide, startled, scared. But despite the fear, they opened fire, and Eric roared fury as several of their bullets hit him. Silver. He knew it the moment it cut into his muscle. Acid, burning, melting, his bane in a stupid fucking hunk of metal shot out from a

peashooter. It wasn't pure silver, and from the way it felt in his flesh, he knew only a small part of it was silver at all, but it was enough. His flesh wouldn't heal fast like it should have, like he instinctively knew it should have, but it wasn't enough to stop him from slamming into the three.

They went flying. His weight was far more than their simple human bodies could handle, and smashing the back of one of his hands into one of the hunters sent them rolling through the air. The next, he swiped for, but the hunter fell back, collapsing onto their ass to avoid the swipe, and rolling to the side to avoid his incoming step. The next hunter tried to line up another shot, but he reached out, grabbed her pistol, and squeezed. She managed to let go of the pistol in time to avoid losing her hands, as he crushed the metal in his grip.

The feel of metal, bending, warping, breaking in his palm. Strength so massive and skin so tough, the metal broke, destroyed in his hand, bent into a worthless shape. What a thrill!

There was something so fucking satisfying about giving into the carnage, and letting his base instincts dominate. He looked at his enormous hand, at the darkness of his gray fur, at the massive claws. He looked at his fingers, and how the strength in them, the tendons along the bones, how easy it was to tap into them and bear down on something to break it. It was like crushing an egg in the palm. Popping a human skull would be like crushing a grape.

The sizzle of silver burning in his wounds snapped his mind back to present circumstance. A second pause was enough for the hunter who rolled out of the way to bring their pistol back up, only to have to roll out of the way again as Eric pounced at him. Not a cat pounce, or even a dog pounce, but a monster's pounce, a titan's pounce. The size of his limbs versus the weight they had to carry, and the momentum against gravity, made the motion feel more like he was a rhinoceros charging into prey. Even missing, his size was

enough to cause his leg to hit against the hunter, and knock them over like he'd smashed them with a giant hammer.

These bastards were good at avoiding. They'd had practice against other monsters, had probably hunted and killed other beasts like him. For a brief moment, images and memories ran through his mind, of old movies he'd seen, new ones too, depicting werewolves as ferocious monsters that needed to be killed. The idea cut through his animal mind, into the fury and rage, reminded him that he was the villain according to these humans, and he was a human only weeks ago.

The rage crashed against his insides, stirring them into rapids of adrenaline and hunger. He was not the villain. There were no villains in this maelstrom of carnage, no heroes, no good guys or bad guys. There were predators, and there was prey. These humans had threatened him with torture and death, and he was going to devour them.

He glanced over his shoulder. The leader, Jeremiah, he needed to die. Eric wanted to turn and attack him, shred him, tear open his guts and stomach, rip him apart, eat him. Eat him. Eat him. But he couldn't, the other prey was in front of him, and they had teeth and claws of their own. Clara? No, she was still fighting the gargoyle monster, using her weight to try and wrestle it, while Jessy remained behind the creature, stabbing and clawing, roaring and screaming.

Jessy. She was far more similar to beasts like him than he'd thought. Even now, she had her claws and teeth on the monster's body, was tearing into his shoulder, and roaring strange sounds a normal human throat couldn't make. She was ... enticing.

The smell of blood began to fill the room, his nose catching it, and he breathed it in deep. The rush of it sent life and heat through his veins, warming him, demanding he roar; he did. Jeremiah looked at

him, glared at him, and raised his pistol at him. Pistol. Metal pipe that shot small stones. But these stones were silver, and burned with the wrath of his bane.

Jeremiah turned the pistol on Clara, and started firing.

“No!” He threw himself at Jeremiah, but for all his speed, it was too slow. This bastard was far faster than an old man should have been, and he unloaded six bullets at his fellow wolf. Three slammed into the gargoyle monster, sinking through the leathery skin of Jeremiah’s comrade, but three more hit Clara, and the result was far more visceral.

She howled, a layer of pain in her roar as she fell to a knee, before turning around to look at Jeremiah. Three little sprays of red came out of her back, before turning into small blood streams leaking out of her. The fur blocked seeing the specifics of the wound, but Eric knew it’d be burning, veined, like someone poured acid into her flesh.

Eric slammed a hand down against Jeremiah’s arm, hard enough to send the pistol out of his hand, but Jeremiah didn’t hesitate to retaliate. The knife came up, and massive as it was, Eric couldn’t move his huge arm out of the way. Much as he still had his instincts as a trained fighter, his new body was huge, and wasn’t too concerned with dodging. Silver, sharp and surreal, cut into him and sent pain up through the flesh. It wasn’t like with the monster crushing him, blunt force trauma and pain. The special metal burned him like fire burned vampires, reduced his skin to a ruined, bleeding mess.

He ignored the pain. It was easy. Clara had called to him, her howls and roars woke him up, and the beast inside answered the called. Pain? Meaningless. There was only the hunt, the fight, the kill. There was only his prey, and his pack. This stranger wolf was a friend for now, enemy of his enemy, and his mate, the undead, was

now fighting for her life against a monster of insane proportions. He had to join them, had to help, had to end the threat, save his mate, defend his territory.

The beast in him didn't know how to plan. He was vaguely aware of it, of a haze, of something blocking his thinking; like being drunk, brain buzzed on a high of adrenaline and blood lust. Should he worry about the giant gargoyle, the man with the tattoos and knife, or the trio of hunters recovering from his attack? Should he worry about the hunter who took the old woman away? Should he worry about the tattooed man's pack member with the strange eye? All those questions faded away, as his instincts took over.

Cut off the head of the snake, and the body dies.

He dove for Jeremiah, ignoring the huge blade of silver pointed at him. The tattooed man was wise, white hair announcing his age, and scars announcing his experience. Old prey was weak, but old prey was smart, and this old prey kept the blade up and pointed at Eric as the werewolf threw his weight at him.

As cold metal slid into his chest, Eric roared into the man's face. The blade went low, the old human's height too low to be able to hit Eric in the heart. Eric felt it in his breath though, and as he roared over man, a splatter of the werewolf's blood washed over Jeremiah's face. Ignoring the pain, Eric drove his hands down against the human's shoulders, and with his weight, pushed him onto the ground, and pinned him.

The room shook as an explosion happened. Eric looked down the dark, enormous chamber, toward the path he originally came from. The explosion was loud, and a second later, Eric felt his body shudder from the force as it slammed into everyone and everything. Too far to hurt them, but enough to stun everyone.

No, it didn't stun Jeremiah. The human underneath him, glaring at him like he was nothing more than a rabid dog, pulled down on

the silver knife jammed into Eric's chest. Eric roared, more blood erupting over his tongue and onto the man beneath him. But the roar was weak, blood filling his lungs, his breath, and robbing his energy with each moment. He had to get the knife out of him. Ignore the explosion, ignore everything else, just deal with the dangerous prey in your clutches right now.

The knife was in his side under one of his pectorals, and try as Eric might, the arm closer to the wound did not want to respond correctly. Something was cut, torn, preventing the closer shoulder from rotating on the angle he wanted. But the rest of the arm worked, and he sank his claws into the prey's shoulder, earning a satisfying roar of pain from his meal. His other hand reached for the man's head, but the prey pushed against the silver knife, sawing through muscle and bone, and Eric had to grab the assaulting wrist instead.

At a certain point, pain took on a new voice, and it shrieked in his head, a wall of ice to block his way. He backed off, jumping back from Jeremiah, and held the massive gash in his chest. The flesh within tried to heal, tried to snap back into place, tried to stop the blood, but it didn't. It was nothing like that time the short man had stabbed him with his metal claw, this time his body couldn't manage. The silver cut through more than his flesh, it cut through the fury, the beast, the thrill and rush, it cut through his being.

Eric fell to a knee, hand still on the gash in his chest, blood gushing up and over his fingers. With a few seconds to breath into his bloody lungs, the blood slowed down. Even if it was silver, it wasn't pure; how Eric knew that, he didn't know, but something in him knew the knife could have done more damage to him if it was more silver, though it would have been too soft. Instead, the bastard found a balance between hardness, and wolf's bane. Lucky for Eric, it was enough that he could feel his body heal the wound enough to keep him from bleeding to death in minutes. Unlucky for him, that it almost could.

Footsteps behind him. He tried to turn, but the cut muscle in his chest roared in agony, stopping him, and six arms grabbed onto him. It wasn't a lot of weight, not even six hundred pounds, but with the hole in his chest and cut on his arm, each from silver, it was more than his body wanted to handle. He tried to reach back and grab one of the hunters, but the hunter grabbed his arm instead, while the one behind him wrapped him in a headlock. The remaining hunter grabbed his other arm, and a new set of footsteps announced the returning fourth hunter, who came up behind him, and threw themselves onto his back as well. He roared, twisting and turning, but his energy was gone, leaking out onto the stone floor beneath him as blood.

With a groan of his own, the old man stood back up, and rubbed his shoulder. He too was bleeding, but Eric had had the opportunity to do a lot more than give him a minor shoulder wound. Had it, and lost it.

“We need you alive, Eric Tanverson. Elen still has a lot of information to pull out of you. Sándor!” Like barking orders to soldiers, Jeremiah turned with a snap toward his monster.

The giant beast was still struggling with Jessy, but in the chaos, the monster had trapped Clara underneath its giant foot. Massive as the creature was, its foot and enormous talons were large enough to pin Clara on her back, talons stabbing into her shoulders. Blood pooled around her waist, the silver bullets not healing, same as Eric's wounds. She snarled, twisted, barked and roared, but wounded as she was, the four-armed, four-winged demon was large and heavy enough to keep her down.

The monster fell forward, keeping its one foot on Clara, and earning a shriek of pain from her as he forced more of his weight on her. Four hands fell to the stone, catching the beast's weight as he came to a knee, and he used the momentum to launch Jessy forward from his back. Her claws were sunk deep into its body, and

she kept one hand within the beast's flesh, but the weight and inertia was enough to spin her, and turn her upside down, legs on the beast's head. It was enough for Sándor to snap his hand up, and grab her.

For a moment, Eric expected Jessy's deformed body and array of spikes and horns to penetrate the beast's hand again. But the demon kept his grip loose, and threw Jessy down at the floor with all his might. The sickening crunch of bone filled the room as the vampire bounced against the stone, and bits of her bone spikes flew outward from her, shattering and breaking from the impact. More than just the bone spikes, but her bones as well. Arms twisted and crunched, legs snapped and bent, and joints dislocated, as the vampire bounced twice against the floor, before going still.

Her transformation began to fade. The extra muscle vanished. The spikes, what remained of them, pulled back into her limbs and under her skin, and the deformation of her form disappeared. A few seconds later, all that remained was Jessy, clothes tattered, body broken, arms and legs twisted around and bending in places they shouldn't have.

“Ok!” Jeremiah said, clapping his hands together one. “You gave Sándor quite the fight there, vampire. Impressive.” Laughing, the old bastard put his metal claw away, and pulled out ... metal rings. Eric struggled, dug through his mind, and found the word buried underneath rage and scents and blood and hunger. Handcuffs.

“Fuck ... you, you fuckin—aaaaarg!” Jessy's voice broke into screams as Jeremiah rolled her onto her stomach, and yanked on her arms as he drove the heel of his boot into her spine. He snapped each wrist into the cuffs, and let go of her hands. They fell onto her ass, trapped behind her. One of her arms was snapped at the elbow, the other at the forearm, shoulder dislocated as well, and until she healed, she wouldn't be able to use the arms anyway.



“You ... you fucker,” she said. “You put these on—”

“On Jack, yes. Tenacious boy, though. I didn’t expect the grandchilde of Viktor to be as resistant as he was. A mistake on my part. If I had known, well, I would have brought him back into Sándor’s nightmare instead.” Laughing again, he squatted down in front of Jessy’s face, and grinned at her as she raised her head to glare at him. “Now, really, stop struggling. I want Azamel’s head, not yours.”

“You’ll fucking kill us once you know what you want to know.”

“Probably, but not necessarily. Dolareido’s a nice place compared to many; not many paranormals killing people. If you vamps play ball, some of you will get to live.”

“Some.” Snarling at him, she twisted and squirmed, earning more screams from herself. It was turning Eric’s stomach, watching her limbs bend and twist in ways they shouldn’t have been able to.

“Angela warned me the vamps here were stubborn. I should have listened to her.” Sighing, the man walked over to Clara, and squatted down over her. She was pinned on her back, still transformed and massive compared to Jeremiah, but small compared to the gargantuan demon towering over her. Helpless. “And you, you’re going to tell me more about your pack. Werewolves weren’t on my radar when I first came here, and when I learned you were here, I was content to ignore you. But now you’ve made yourself a problem.”

“Fuck you,” Clara said, gnashing her teeth together.

“I’ve killed several werewolves in my time, woman.” Jeremiah drew his knife, and set the silver blade to the pinned woman’s furry neck. “But I’ve never had the opportunity to torture one. Your healing ability is immense, and—”

A howling shriek cut through the room, the chamber, and echoed against the enormous walls that surrounded them. Like a ghost choir, the inhuman screaming continued, long, until everyone was looking for the source of the deathly sound.

Jeremiah stood up, and turned to face the distance where Angela had taken her crew. “Athalia.”

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~~Damien~~

Well, this was going far worse than he had anticipated, and he had anticipated it going poorly. Hindsight was twenty twenty, and a bastard. Jack had said it was likely a trap, but they were arrogant in their abilities. They were all accomplished, powerful paranormals, and more than capable of killing multiple hunters at once; or they should have been. One mistake put them all on the defensive, and as Damien looked down at his body, he sighed. Holes. Many holes. But he was still conscious, a step up from his encounter with the Azlu creature.

He looked around the room. Empty, and dark, save for the light cutting across the floor from the open door, gentle, flickering fire light. With his back to the table leg behind him, he looked down at his hands. Sword and pistol, good. His legs were spread, and the holes in his gut and chest struggled to close themselves. He was no Ventrue or Gangrel. Healing wounds like this would take time. Better than the guaranteed death a kine would suffer, but if he couldn't defend himself, it was the same thing.

He looked at the spider monster beside him. Fiona. Despite the danger, despite the haphazard plan, he'd managed to save her. Wounds covered her limbs, terrible wounds that bled dark red, but she was breathing.

He reached out for her, and gently pulled her onto her side, facing him; didn't want her choking on her own blood. Pain ran through his body, reminding him that some metal was now lodged in his withered organs and bones. He'd survive. Would Fiona? Her eyes were—she had no eyes; made it hard to read her emotions. But from the shallow panting and small shivers, he could tell she was in a lot of pain.

“D ... Damien?” she said.

“Yeah?”

“You ... you've been shot.”

How could she see him without eyes? But then, how did Jacob? Not the time to think about that.

“So did you.”

She laughed, and a splatter of blood rained onto her lips. There was only one bullet wound on her stomach, but it must have hit something important. “I ... I ... could use ... a moment ... to heal.”

“Can you heal from this?” He forced himself to lean in toward her, and set one hand on her crown of horns. They were hard like metal, but the skin of her shoulder, despite its black, metal-like tint, was soft.

“Are you ... worried about me?”

“What? Of course I'm worried about you.”

“Just ... you've been ... ignoring me lately, and—” Another cough covered her small lips in blood, and Damien winced as he watched the dark red leak down over her cheek.

If he was a stereotype, so was she, he supposed. He was too blind to notice signals, and she was finding some where there were none.

Jack waved at him from his side of the large hall, and motioned for him to stay put. Not much chance of that changing at the moment. Sighing at his own stupidity, Damien reached down across his chest, and touched the bullet holes. Several of them had punctured clear through his body; a good thing if you were a human, to get the metal out of the body, but not so good when a vampire, and the metal was never the issue. Three holes along his stomach, and from the shape, he knew he'd actually been shot in the back. Each attempt to twist his body caused his muscles to tear, only for his vitae to work to repair them.

He was an idiot. If he'd stayed in the room he'd managed to drag himself into after the explosion, maybe a better situation would have presented itself. But no, he got emotional, lost his head, and did something impulsive.

Sighing again, he looked at the beautiful monster in front of him. He didn't want her hurt, and that led to a really, really stupid, impulsive decision. He wasn't used to that feeling. Didn't know it, didn't recognize it, didn't know what to do with it. Now he felt like a fool, like the time Jack had come out of hiding to save Antoinette from his sword. But, like then, the fool boy had managed to save the girl. Hopefully Damien's stupidity had managed to save the girl, too.

"I wasn't ignoring you," he managed to say at last. He forced his eyes up from her shivering body, to the hallway and door, to Jack, Arturo, and Matthew. The three of them were talking with each other, whispering, voice lost to the sound of flames and occasional gunfire. Noah and Natasha were safe for the moment, but where was Athalia? He didn't know. Whatever was happening, the hunters had the opportunity to storm in and finish the job. They wouldn't be safe much longer.

She lifted her head, a struggle for her, and pointed face toward him. “Yes you were, you ... you didn’t—”

“You want to go on a date?”

“ ... w ... what?”

“You want to go on a date, when this is over?” Ok, yeah, this was good. This was progress, character development, a step toward developing some sort of social life and not getting in his own way. A step toward abandoning Lucas’s brainwashing.

Unless she said no.

She started to laugh, but pain put an end to that quickly. With a small whine and whimper, she set her crown of horns against the floor again, and smiled at him. “Yes.”

He managed a smile back. A date after all this was over sounded good, because it meant this would end, and they’d survive. She believed it. He, on the other hand, was far too pessimistic to assume they were going to get out of here alive. Better if she did, though.

He forced his vitae to do its work, to close the bullet wounds enough so he wouldn’t leak everywhere. It took time, time they didn’t have, and Damien kept looking to Jack and the doorway as he did his best to speed up his healing. But he was no Ventrue, no Gangrel, healing would take time. Time, and blood.

He looked down at his waist. Three more bullets had caught him on one of his rebounds against the hallway wall, and got him in the side, by the hip. He could feel bullets lodged into the large bone of his pelvis, and the only reason the bones hadn’t shattered was his vitae forcing it to stay together. Even now, he could feel the almost self-aware, dark, crimson liquid in his body, thick, strong, forcing the bone shards together hard enough to function. With enough time, his body would force out the bullets, but he didn’t know how

long it'd take. As much as he'd suffered many scrapes in his time hiding in Dolareido, never anything like this, Azlu spider monster aside. And the time Tash shot him. What fond memories.

He gritted his teeth, and forced his body into action. Every moment drained him, emptied him of vitae, of energy, as his body rebuilt itself. No time. If he couldn't get his body working, they were dead, and he couldn't have that. But he didn't have time.

Fiona pressed her claws onto the floor, and pushed herself up enough to have both palms against the stones beneath them.

“You should hold still until—”

“We have to ... have to do something. Or we're dead.” Groaning, shaking, she lifted some of her spider legs from her back, and hung them over her head in front of her. Each spider leg shined a gentle black, like metal, and each came to a sharp point, like a rapier. But with them so close now, he could see that on the tip, at an angle along the sharp point, were tiny holes. As she pressed the four tips together, white liquid oozed from the holes, as thin as thread, becoming solid the moment they struck the air.

She was weaving web.

“What are—”

“I ... am going ... to patch us up.” Despite her shivering, her spider legs worked quick, her more human-ish hands still on the stone floor while her long blades did their magic. “I'm not going ... to just wait ... to die ... After this, I'm going ... to go on a date ... maybe somewhere nice. And then we're ... going to go hunting, for food, for both of us. And ... and then, we're ... we're going ... to date more.”

He coughed, caught between a laugh and the scorching pain of muscles clenching with the involuntary action. “We are?”

“Yes, b-because ... because I ... I am ... I deserve to live, and ... and I refuse ... to not...” Her words trailed off as she focused, the web she weaved tight and thick, becoming a large bandage.

It was strange to see, and hear such a deadly monster waver with her words. Either from blood loss or from nervousness, the beautiful creature’s voice lost its usual conviction, to the point Damien almost felt bad for her. Fiona always had conviction, reaching almost juvenile absurdity. And Vrall was Fiona, sort of. Considering her proactive, social nature, he had no choice but to assume it was blood loss. It was Vrall’s voice, not the Scot’s, and to hear the mighty creature speak like that, scared him.

As the bandage took form, she raised an arm, and the spider legs brought the bandage to her bicep. It was like watching a real spider wrap a fly in its web, except it was a quartet of silk strands spooling out and around her arm. The white material immediately turned dark red, soaking in her blood, but she wrapped and wrapped, and tightened the weave as she built upon it. It was a very thick, durable bandage. She moved onto her legs, the human-ish ones, and begin wrapping the holes that had punched through her. One had not gone clear through, but better to leave the metal in there and wrap it for now, he supposed.

“I’ll ... get you after,” she said.

He motioned to his body, and the holes that were mostly sealed. “I’m at no risk of bleeding to death. My insides are shredded, though.”

“Vampires are durable.” The creature smiled at him as she moved on to her calf, wrapping it faster than the other parts, her speed picking up as she got used to the motion. “Can you move?”

He tried to sit forward, but the motion sent scalding agony into his stomach. If he was alive, he’d have vomited with pain. Wincing, he leaned back, and forced one eye to stay open so he could watch

the door. “I can, but I need a few minutes to make it ... not tear my insides ... apart.”

Nodding, the spider woman worked quickly, wrapping her various wounds tight, including the hole in her stomach. That was a problem. For a vampire, the organs were pointless, and the muscles and bones only served as a frame for the vitae to enact its power. He needed his body intact, but it wasn't going to die on him. At worst, he'd run out of vitae, and go into torpor until someone fed him. Unlikely to happen in the current circumstance; they'd just cut off his head while he slept.

Fiona, on the other hand, was different. He didn't know how though. Were her organs necessary, did she need her blood, how much of her horror was like a biological creature?

He was running questions through his mind to avoid dealing with present circumstance. She was in worse condition than he was, and unlike him, she was going to get worse.

“You ... like to think a lot, don't you?”

He blinked, and shook his head. His gaze was still on the doorway, but he hadn't noticed Fiona had started dragging herself over to sit beside him. Her long spider legs pressed to the stones, and forced her along the floor, leaving a trail of blood behind her.

“It keeps me alive.” Heal faster. Heal faster. He needed to get his body working, now. Every time he looked at Fiona, he winced at the sight of her wounds and blood-soaked bandages. She was a monster, and a powerful one; he couldn't imagine a few bullet holes and a bullet in her gut would kill her. He hoped not. He really hoped not.

“Stuck in your head a lot?” Her voice was becoming less and less like Vrall. Not Fiona, but, not the same rigid and formal Vrall, the scary monster creature he'd once ran into in a jungle beneath the city. It was nice.



He didn't answer her question. Eventually she sat beside him, leaning against his shoulder. It was a struggle for her, moving a total of two feet, and he almost told her to go hide in the shadow instead. They weren't directly in the beam of light from the door anymore, but next to it, and not exactly hidden.

"... think you can open a door and get us out of here?" he said. "Back to your lair?"

"No ... not like this."

"Then anything we can do to get me back on my feet faster, the better. Think you can patch me up?"

"I think so."

Nodding, he pushed himself away from the table, and got onto his knees in front of her, butt against his heels behind him, weight on his toes. The enormous blades came for him, and he closed his eyes for a moment, reflex warning him they might stab him. They had before, once, when he first met her. Just think of them as sewing needles, only sewing needles, not ancient living swords that have killed likely hundreds of people in previous lives.

Fiona smiled at him as she used all eight of the pointed swords, the tiny holes almost invisible along their sharp angles. The small droplets of white emerged, and as some of her blades poked at his clothes to slide them up, exposing his chest, stomach, and holes there in, she began to weave her bandages. He wasn't sure if her smile was because she was feeling better, or she was feeling worse, and was facing death like she faced all her worries: with giggles. But it was a nice change of pace from the cold pit of his own thoughts, he had to admit.

Had to admit a lot of stuff when around her, lately.



~~Jack~~

“Ok, they’re alive,” Jack said, grinding his teeth into dust as he looked through the door across the hall. He never expected Damien to be so rash, though. Maybe the Mekhet thought his extreme speed would be enough to rescue Fiona without him sustaining more damage; dumbass. Ugh, Jack slapped himself in the forehead. He thought he could save Antoinette from Damien, back in the day, so he couldn’t fault for the man for being impulsive like him.

Except now the man had been shot, several times, on top of who knows how much damage from the initial assault. Jack couldn’t rely on Damien anymore, injured like he was. Maybe he’d be able to save Fiona from bleeding out, though. The two of them had moved out of the light beam from the doorway, so he couldn’t see them very well; hopefully they were still alive. Damien definitely would be, but whether he could still fight, still aim a pistol, still anything, was hard to discern.

Think think.

He looked to the two wolves around him. They were still healing, and from the sight of it, it was going to take hours. They feared silver the same way vampires feared fire, but the wolves would fight despite it, he knew they would. He could rely on them to fight until they were nothing but bone, until they were dead. But how to use them? They couldn’t move up, couldn’t press the attack, couldn’t do anything to break through the barrier the hunters had set up. And the clock was ticking.

“Athalia ... if you can hear me, wherever you’re hiding, we could really use your help.” He looked down and stared at the floor, as he started praying for a monster of darkness to come help him. She was the only true unknown factor, since Noah and Tash had to be in the other rooms. If they were alive or dead, he didn’t know, but they wouldn’t be able to press up either. Maybe—

A breeze moved through the hall, and stirred the flames in the grasp of the gargoyles on the wall. Jack raised his head, and stared at the flame as it danced in the cold air. The air smelled different.

The two wolves noticed it, too. They raised their noses, each wolf breathing the new air deep, and looking to each other with confusion in their eyes. A strange expression to see on giant wolf heads, eyebrows raising, eyes lifting. Stranger, was the look of shock.

Jack looked back into the hall, and froze, as darkness began to seep over the stones. Cold, quiet, the silent shadow crept up along the ceiling, the floor, the walls, and reached out with slow tendrils of obsidian fog. The distant roar of fire, the curses from Angela, the occasional gun shot, all of it became quiet, deadened, as if submerged in water, or behind a thick wall. The flowing black moved further, and the breeze that came with it attacked, slashing gusts against the gargoyle braziers, and ripping the fires from their hands until they were extinguished.

One by one, the flames went out. The encroaching darkness was cold, like ice, enough to send a painful chill down Jack's spine as the shadow engulfed the hallway. One by one, the fires died. One by one, the only sources of quality light available in the hallway of ancient stone, vanished. Jack gulped, and stared down at the shadowy movements as it trickled along the walls; far more than a simple shadow. It was like that scene from The Ten Commandments with the Angel of Death, the creeping fog that stretched out over Egypt, and killed the firstborn.

If only he had some lamb's blood.

He pulled out his phone, turned on the light, and pointed it down, but the light didn't reach far, the black fog blocking much of its power. He recognized this fog. This was Athalia's fog, the same icy

shadow that surrounded him when he took those stairs down into hell, into her nightmare world.

Distant hollers of trepidation reached his ears.

“What the fuck is that?”

“What’s going on?”

“Keep the fire going!”

The voices of the hunters struggled to reach him, unable to penetrate the fog easily, but he could hear them a little. It was enough to send another chill up his spine, as he heard the fear in their voices, the panic, as the creeping death came for them.

He stuck his head out from the stone door frame, and watched more and more of the gargoyles succumb to the black. Closer, and closer to the fire and remains of the giant door, and closer to the awaiting hunters, the blackness moved. Many of the hunters pulled out flashlights, others turning on mounted lights on their rifles, and the hunter with the flamethrower applied several coats of the liquid flame around the bottleneck between them and the paranormals. Their little lights might as well have been candles against the encroaching fog, and the fire was nothing more than a small thing, a tiny thing against the endless onyx. Like building a fire in the wilderness, the light it provided only highlighted how vast the darkness around them was.

All the gargoyle braziers died, leaving Jack and his two werewolf companions in the black, except for his phone. And like the hunters, his phone was barely more than a firefly.

The darkness continued, and Jack watched as it came into contact with the fire. The roaring flames struggled, but the darkness was cold, death in mist, and it killed the flame like smothering life was the black fog’s purpose. The hunter with the flamethrower tried

again, and again, voice rising into screams as they painted the area red. But with each moment, it was more and more like watching primitive torches fighting the inescapable blackness, and then eventually, nothing but tiny candles. All the new fires the flamethrower created died in moments.

And then there were only the hunters, and their flashlights, weak, and futile.

Jack raised his phone, and pointed it at Art and Matt. Both wolves looked scared, and that was not a look he expected to ever see on one of the titans.

“Matthew, Arturo, we have a window here. See if Tash and Noah are fine, but stay low, move slow, and don’t make any noise until you’ve got a stone wall between you and the hunters. I’ll go check up on Damien and Fiona.”

No idea, he had no fucking idea Athalia was capable of this. He should have, now that he thought about it. They were in a nightmare, and just because it wasn’t Athalia’s didn’t mean she didn’t have access to everything that made her a creature of darkness. A monster under the bed. With a few, slow, useless breaths, he prepared to sprint across the darkness and into Damien’s room. A glance at the two werewolves showed they were ready to move, too.

The world went red.

Jack froze again, and every nerve in his body went numb as a flash of screaming faces filled his vision. He wanted to fall back, to get away from the sudden death shrieks in his ears and the pained face of someone dying horribly away from his eyes. But he couldn’t move. The air became blood, and the wails of the murdered blazed in his face.

The world turned to darkness again, a little bit of light from his phone the only brightness to guide him. What the fuck was that?

“What the fuck was that!?”

“Guard up! I know who that is.” Angela’s voice. The other hunters must have seen that too. “Come on out, Mother!”

A shrieking howl filled the stone walls, erupting outward from the darkness and its origin, where it crept out from the hall, toward the hunters. Jack fell onto his ass, and closed his eyes, but it didn’t help. The red images came again, piercing his eyelids: dying faces, blood tears, throats being ripped open by claws. And then gone again, as silence crushed everyone. He raised his hand to his ears, but when another inhuman scream echoed through the hall, the hands did nothing. The bloody screams followed, and no matter how hard he closed his eyes, an image of death, gore, screaming and torture filled his vision.

When it passed, he forced himself out into the hall. Running wasn’t going to happen, and the hunters were too busy shining their lights around at random shadows. But after a few seconds, another shriek slammed into their souls, everyone’s, and demanded they stare at nightmares. Jack tried to ignore it, but the scream in his mind was a death cry, distinct, and all too familiar. It reminded him of the hunters he’d killed, that he’d sent rats to devour alive. It was a sound that stuck with you, scarred you, a sound you’d never forget. And if he guessed right, everyone was hearing it.

He pitied any of them who hadn’t heard that sound before. The nightmares, in bed and sleep nightmares, would ruin them for years.

He forced himself forward, on his hands and knees, and crawled across the hall. The hallucinations returned every few seconds, and lasted a second, but if he concentrated on moving, he continued to make progress. The hallucinations didn’t freeze him, only made him

feel frozen, feel like he was buried in ice, or frozen earth, or at the bottom of a lake of cold corpses. Keep moving, keep moving, ignore the death cries, ignore the eyes of the dying penetrating your eyelids.

Once he reached the next door frame, he brought up his light.

“Thank god,” he said. “Damien you dumb—” He winced, and lowered his head in reflex as a dying woman’s face hit his eyes, and then was gone. “You good?”

The man had bandages wrapped around a lot of his body. Legs, arms, his chest under his shirt and jacket, white bandage that looked like Fiona’s silk dress. Except, her dress was soaked dark red, and while she was covered in bandages as well, she was a panting, trembling mess, bandages redder still.

He braced for another scarring hallucination, but none came. Biting his teeth together, he slowly looked behind him at the darkness, and raised his light. He couldn’t see the door he came from, where Art and Matt still were. Or, might have still been. Subtle movements, silhouettes, moved through the black fog, and Jack squinted to see if he could identify them. No. All he could do was hope it was them.

“I’m good,” Damien said. “Was ... were those...”

“It was Athalia.” The spider monster next to him nodded, voice ragged and quiet. “She ... she is ... a better Eshmaki than Vrall ever was. She is the terror in ... in the dark.”

A glowing recommendation from a fellow monster. Jack nodded, and braced again as another shriek echoed through the stone walls. But nothing came. The inhuman sound was more distant, like it must have been closer to the hunters. Thank fucking christ.

His dreams in torpor today were going to be borderline PTSD.

“I guess we have an addendum to the plan,” he said. “We need to get out of here ASAP, once the primary objective is met. The werewolves have been shot with silver, Fiona here is bleeding, and Damien is beat up. My wounds are minor, but we still haven’t found Tash or Noah.”

“I saw Natasha,” Damien said. “She’s alive. Injured, but not as bad as me.”

“And Noah?”

“He was with me, before I decided to help Fiona. He was shot several times as well, and at least one of those was silver. Not in good shape.”

“Damn.” Grunting, Jack forced himself back up onto his feet, and held out a hand for Damien. The Mekhet stuck his gunhand out, and Jack lifted him by the wrist. “Fiona, how does this attack from Athalia work?”

“She ... she is ... she is lost to the darkness, Jack. She knows she is supposed to attack the hunters, but ... but you may not be able to approach with her also attacking you.”

“You mean the hallucinations? I—”

“No. Not them. Her ... from the black. She might attack you, and ... and anyone who is ... is where she is. Hide. Hide until ... the darkness fades. Or at least, don’t move.”

Shit. Shit shit shit. Things weren’t going smooth. Why didn’t things ever go smooth.

“Alright. We’ll ... we’ll try and get closer, but stay out of her way,” he said.



Damien managed a shrug, but winced, sucking in his breath through his teeth. “As much as we can stay away from fog.”

“Fiona, stay here. See if you can hide more, and don’t come out until we’re back.” He felt bad, sidelining Fiona, but the monster was shot up worst than any of them, and it was plain to see a gunfight was not where Vrall was at her strongest. If they had to fight in woods, or in tight hallways or something, her webbing and blades would be invaluable. But the large, open hallways and corridors provided no cover, no way for any of them to use their abilities easily. No wonder the hunters were setting up camp in this monster’s nightmare.

Jack got down on a knee by the door frame, and peeked his head out to look down the hallway. The darkness was thick, and the light couldn’t penetrate far. It wasn’t just light though, but sounds. Distant screams echoed from the black, as if from a great distance, like someone crying for help from the depths of a canyon. But the hunters were only maybe a hundred feet away, and he could see tiny white dots in the dark, their flashlights, struggle to find the source of their torture.

“I’ll be back ... I promise,” Damien said.

“ ... bye,” Fiona said.

Jack raised a brow at the man. That was very out of character for the once-assassin. Maybe the man listened to him, and talked to Fiona? He was tempted to look back at Fiona and check her reaction, but he’d barely be able see her if he tried. Better to ask about it later.

He got down on his knees, and crawled once again, pointing his light at the floor, and making sure every motion he did was subtle. It might have been unnecessary. The hunters could barely make sense of their own surroundings, let alone resume the attack on

Jack's crew. But Fiona had said something about Athalia, and not moving, so, subtle movements for now.

“Focus! She's out there, somewhere. Keep looking, get your backs together, and keep your lights up!” Angela's voice. Like the others, it was distant and submerged, but it hit with more volume. Woman was not afraid to yell, and make a stand. Something about her was unique, something that made the whole situation of her, fighting monsters and nightmares, almost seem to fit like a puzzle piece. Almost.

Jack forced himself along, taking each baby crawl step nice and slow. Closer, and closer to the next door along the hall, closer to Tash and Noah, closer to getting this group back together. If Athalia didn't kill them all.

The next door was indeed open, and he almost crawled into it, but held up his light instead. If it was him in this darkness, and some shadow poked its head in, he'd be liable to shoot said head.

“Noah? Tash?”

“J-Jack? Oh thank god. W-What's going on? Noah is across the hall.” Tash's voice. Relief washed over him. More of his group, still alive.

“I—” An ear-piercing scream sundered his skull, and he fell to his palms. For a moment it was there again, a group of faces, close enough he could see the white of their eyes as they rolled up in their unknown torture. He was too close to the next room, too close to Athalia, and her nightmare scalded his vision with the bleeding faces of the dying. When it passed, he shined his light on Tash where she was hugged to the wall by the door frame. “It's Athalia. She's—”

The door frame of stone exploded. Jack fell down onto his side, and stared up above him at the slice marks that appeared in the

stone. Massive slash marks, the sort of marks a werewolf's claws might make. Bigger.

“What the fuck!” Staring at the claw mark that wasn't there a moment before, he gulped at the bits of its rock that fell around him. “Damien, did you—”

Slash marks cut across the floor, next to him. Deep marks, and he rolled away from the sound of stone tearing apart in a split second. Gulping again, he pointed his light at the deep slashes, and drove his feet against the floor to push himself away and into the room.

Fiona said don't move. Why? The massive slash marks could have come from Fiona's Vrall, but—no, they couldn't have, they were way too thick. Whatever made the marks had thick, massive claws. Athalia had thick, massive claws, on her colossal bone hands. Shit. Oh fucking shit.

“Don't move!” he said, as Damien poked his head around the door frame, on his knees as well. “Don't move, don't move a fucking muscle, don't—” Again, the screaming hit him. Hit them. Jack managed to keep his eyes open for a split second, and saw Damien and Tash both freeze. Teeth gnawing, claws tearing, knives twisting, blood splattering, screams echoing. All in his eyes, in his ears, in his head where he couldn't get it out.

And when it was gone, Tash lowered her hands from her eyes. He shined his light down at the floor between them, so they could see each other, and he offered her a small smile. He wanted to roll over, curl into a ball, surrender, and try and block out the images; it wouldn't work, though. Whatever Athalia was doing, it was not something that could be blocked out. Unavoidable. Immutable. Like a nightmare that comes back every night to haunt you. Best he could do was give his friend a small everything-will-be-fine, lying smile.

No one moved a muscle. If the red flashes wouldn't hurt them, then all they had to do was not move a single fucking muscle, and whatever was—another quartet of slashes hit the ground, somewhere between the stone floor, and the gate that exploded earlier. Jack looked in the corner of his eye, and winced at the sight of Damien. The man had crawled forward a few feet, and drew the attention of whatever was happening; the claw marks had hit the stone floor in front of him.

“Wait,” Jack said. “Just ... just wait ... Hold still. Wait until ... I don't know, until these flashes are gone.” If that would ever happen. The hunters beyond continued to yell, but from the shape of their lights, he could see they were keeping some kind of formation. With the black fog between him and them, they looked like stars against the endless oblivion of space. Now there was a cold thought. “Noah, you there?” He had to speak up, almost yell, for his voice to penetrate the thick blanket of death, but he risked it.

“I am.”

Jack turned his head slowly, and only enough to see the other side of the hall through the corner of his eye. Noah's voice sounded almost like a bark, so the man was still transformed. How long werewolves could stay in their titan form, he didn't know, but he got the impression it wasn't forever. Everything felt like it was on a timer. They still had to rescue their friends, and now everything had ground to a halt.

“We're here too,” Art said from beside Noah. Good, they were all alive. Things were going better than—

Jack's head jerked up as impact sounds filled the hall. A slash mark appeared on the remains of wood still attached to the door frame of the large gate. And a blur of movement, of bone, of wings, came and went. And then another, against the pillar in the next chamber, the one the hunters were grouped around. Jack couldn't

see it, but he could hear it. So could the hunters. Their lights went up, all of them pointing at the pillar, before the little lights started aiming around randomly again.

No more flashes came. Jack gave it a moment, twenty seconds, and he counted them. No more flashes. As the twenty seconds went by, another slash landed against something in the other chamber. And then another, each announced by screams, the hunters still suffering the red hallucinations. By the twentieth second, a third slash hit something, and earned a scream. One of the little stars in the black flew up, and landed on the floor.

Athalia had hit a person.

“Fuck you!” Angela’s voice. Jack couldn’t see what she was doing, but that changed when she unleashed a wave of fire. The oppressive darkness might have put out the fires, but that didn’t stop the hunters from making new ones, short lived as they were. Shrieking with blood curdling cries of rage, Angela fired the streak of red death into the air. “Fuck you! Die! Die you fucking bitch! I’ll kill you!”

Jack gulped. He’d heard those screams before, from the psychopath. Part of him was happy knowing the anger and hatred she’d shown when the two of them were fighting wasn’t unique to him, but a larger part wasn’t. She was a menace. She had to be killed.

Another slash hit something Jack couldn’t see, but the sound was unmistakable, and Angela turned her fire on it the moment she heard it. The red light cut through the black fog, spreading it, dissipating it for a few seconds, and lighting up everyone and everything around it. Something large slipped into the black, dark bones and massive limbs fading into the obsidian, breaking into flowing black ink. Another slash cut through the onyx, and Angela turned faster, unleashing a spray of flame straight at the door. Jack

froze, only ten feet away from where the liquid stream of fire fell on the stone. Some of the red caught Athalia, and her enormous rib cage and dangling spinal cord lit up, red on the dark bone. For a brief moment, where the flame landed, the bone turned white, the black material on it burning away.

The following shriek froze everyone. A banshee's cry.

A couple of the hunters had glowing necklaces too, but the glow was subtle, only noticeable when Angela went nuts with the flamethrower. How much fuel did a flamethrower have? How long could you spray the fuel before you were out? He had no idea, but Angela didn't seem to be worried about it.

Another slash, and the sickening crunch of claws on flesh and bone. Someone screamed, a feminine cry that forced Jack to wince. But Angela didn't. The devil turned to the source of the sound, and unloaded a river of fire.

The banshee's cry returned times a thousand, as the death angel of bone erupted into flame. The colossal, flying creature raised her enormous hands to her skull face, and fanned her bone wings to take flight, high above the hunters. But she was on fire, and her screams were hot ice on his spine.

Jack stood up. Now or never. "Go! Now!"

The three vampires and three werewolves ran for the door. Damien handed Jack his gun, and kept his sword as he embraced himself in his cloak of night. He'd been shot many times, and a Mekhet wasn't going to be up for discipline theatrics soon after that. Natasha followed in after him, her phone raised as a light, other hand holding her pistol. Jack adopted the same stance, and frowned at how unwieldy it was. Mental note: next time, always bring a proper flashlight when dealing with monsters, or hunters, or anything.

The blanket of obsidian death that weighed on them all faded away, and the black fog sank into the floor. Their lights punctured the thinning mist, and the exposed group of hunters. The large group of hunters.

He was right, a few of them had some necklaces on that were glowing, gentle white light. The light lessened, and faded away as Athalia raised higher; necklace's glow must have had something to do with Begotten, or Athalia specifically. He looked up as the skeleton creature's shrieks continued, and winced all the more as several of the hunters raised their guns, and opened fire.

Shrieks turned into a staccato of interrupted howls and grunts from the monster. The black layers on her bones were on fire, and burning like dry paper, while bullets pelted her.

As another hunter raised their gun, the werewolves fell upon them. Three of them, each in the front row of the assault, each wounded and bleeding. But they pounced into the fray nonetheless, darkness embracing them as the flashlights of each hunter they jumped went down with them. Athalia's fog had put out all the gargoyle braziers, and that included the ones in the next, larger room; darkness to be exploited.

Angela didn't flinch. She turned the flamethrower to the wolves, and shot over them. She knew. The fucker knew. The three vampires jumped back, far back, putting a couple dozen feet between them and the fire as fast as they could. The werewolves threw themselves to the floor, under the flame. Much as fire was deadly to Kindred, it wasn't too picky about who it burned, either.

"Don't even think about it! Fuck all of you. You're dead! All of you!" Her screams were a crescendo, mixed in with the roar of fire.

The other hunters took advantage. Three of them were on the ground, and blood pooled around their bodies, gash marks an inch or two deep in their flesh. It was hard to see anything, now that all

the fires were out, but Angela was creating new ones, and the hunters all had flashlights. They were shining them around in a near panic, but there was enough of them to create enough light to move by. The three that were on the ground, the massive gashes exposed what looked like bullet proof vests.

These fuckers were far more prepared than he could have imagined.

The three werewolves all got up, and the hunters raised their weapons, each of them with barrels pointed at the closer, more obvious threat: giant wolves on two legs. The Uratha didn't wait to get shot this time, and jumped into the pack of humans. Athalia's earlier attack had brought the hunters together, herded them, and the beasts took advantage. Flashlights went up as hunters fell onto their backs, and the wolves sank their claws into them.

Or at least they tried to sink their claws into them, but there were more hunters than any of them expected. Several were beside the enormous pillar, half hidden in the darkness, and they came up to the werewolves. Melee range. With so many of the hunter lights not being aimed properly, it was a mess of flashing black as the lights snapped across in random directions. Wolf claws and wolf teeth bit and chomped, and hunters with silver knives swung at them.

The werewolves and vampires had better vision in the dark, Tash most of all, but in the chaos of swinging limbs, gunfire, knives, and claws, it was too hard to figure out what to do. Jack stood there, stunned, and looked around quick to find an option. But fire blocked their path, Angela firing the stream of flame at the vampires. Holding the flamethrower in her right hand, she pulled out a pistol in her left, and pointed it at the vampires as well.

The three of them dove to the floor and into the darkness of the hallway, as bullets flew past their heads, some slamming into the stone walls around them. They couldn't get closer. If the fuel so



much as touched them, there was a good chance they'd die in seconds, or at least lose a limb.

The sight of Athalia on fire was a fucking nightmare on a nightmare. But she had disappeared again, and her death shrieks were gone. If she was dead, Jack was going to fucking hate himself. If she and Fiona died, they were all trapped, and fucked.

“You fuckers helping Athalia, you all deserve to die with her. Come on, Mom! Get down here so we can end this! Show yourself! Show yourself you fucking—”

Athalia's wail cut through the noise of the fight like nails on a chalkboard. The black fog reformed above, in a random spot maybe a hundred feet away. Athalia said she couldn't tell where things were like that; the dozens of random claw marks everywhere proved it. But the corpses on the ground looked like they'd been mauled by a fucking dinosaur. Athalia was swiping at things without know what the fuck they were, or who they were.

Christ, that was cold.

Athalia, drifting like a fly with a damaged wing, fell to the ground slowly. She landed on her hands, enormous claws resting on the stone as she twitched and shook. Her bones looked white, as if someone had bleached them pale. Almost like a sick person losing all color in their face. The fact she was still alive was amazing; she'd been set on fire. But the white dots of her eyes, little glowing dots in the center of her skull eyes, were flickering in and out like a dying light.

Whether or not she was dying, it wasn't enough to stop Athalia. The skeleton creature roared at the group of hunters, and came running forward. The sight and sound of the death angel, running on her two hands, spinal cord swaying like a tail, and mouth opening wide to unleash the inhuman scream, forced everyone to look her way. The werewolves tried to take advantage of the chaos,

but the hunters opened fire on them, the men and women with knives ducking low so their companions could fire over their heads.

They'd practiced for this. They knew how to mix ranged and melee combat. The fuck kind of bullshit was this, a military squadron? The hunters had underestimated Jack when they kidnapped him, but now he was returning the favor. They all were.

The sickening sight of bullets slamming into fur and flesh forced Jack to take a step forward. He expected Angela to unleash more flame in his direction, but instead, Angela was looking at Athalia, and started shooting her pistol. Bullets slammed into the monster's bones, cracking them, and splinters of the white monster's body snapped off. Some bits shattered, raining down around Athalia, and others broke off in huge chunks, until Jack could see through holes in her titanic ribs. The monster ignored her wounds, screaming, shrieking, and ran at Angela. More bullets slammed into Athalia's face, and her jaw shattered, half of it breaking off and falling to the stone floor. Athalia didn't stop.

“Come on, Mom! Bring it! Fucking bring it!”

Oh good god what sort of family drama was he witnessing? And Angela, she had zero sense of reality. Her words sounded like a shitty soap opera, and her actions were the sort of temper tantrum he'd expect from a literal child. But the psychopath was fearless, and she fired again, and again, until the click click of no ammo sounded several times.

Angela reached down with her pistol hand, and tried to draw a new magazine, but the skeleton creature, full of holes, shrieking in pain and what Jack could only guess was morose fury, threw herself onto Angela. The woman went down, flamethrower falling away before sliding across the stone floor as the necklace on her neck began to glow brighter. The skeleton creature grabbed the woman with one hand, picked her up, weight balanced on her other

enormous hand, and threw her daughter at the other hunters, the ones firing at the werewolves.

Jack had lost track in the madness. The hunters shooting were trying to hit the wolves, and the wolves were running around in the darkness, leaving trails of blood everywhere they went. But with all the gargoyle braziers extinguished, and only the lights on their rifles or handheld lights to provide illumination, the advantage started to become theirs.

But the vampires were blocked. Angela had doused the doorway in flame, and it hadn't settled yet. What light the fire gave off, the werewolves were on the other side of the nearest pillar, keeping the shadow on their side. It also meant the vampires couldn't see them anymore, except for split moments where they ran from one pillar to the next. They could see Athalia though, see the ruined monster of bone and carnage whip her own daughter through the air toward the hunters around the pillar.

Fuck this.

With a deep breath — the habit would never die — and step forward, he got ready, preemptively winced, and jumped.

“Jack!” Tash and Damien said. He ignored them. A Mekhet was likely to die if they got too much fire on them, and both of them were more injured than he was. And he'd done this before.

The fire wasn't too high, maybe three feet. The flickering heat was great, but not as great as the last time he'd felt its bite. It took advantage of the hole in his stomach where the giant splinter had stuck him, and it took advantage of the hole in his pants where a couple of bullets had sliced him. Those patches of skin, and the fat and muscle underneath, were gone in seconds, turned to ash. And he felt every fucking wave of agony it caused. Burns were pain beyond pain. Burns, true, deep burns, were deadly, to the point a person could die from how stressful the pain was on the system. He

wouldn't die to that pain, but that didn't change that fire hit him with it, blinded him until he saw white, and wiped the world away until there was only the incinerating misery of his bane.

And then he was on the other side of the fire. He focused his vitae toward the burn marks, but there was something about burns that he knew he couldn't heal, not until he slept come the dawn. The werewolves weren't healing the silver wounds either. Did monsters have similar? Whether they did or not, being set on fire and then shot a dozen times would put almost anyone into the ground, but Athalia was still alive.

Except, barely. The titan fell to the floor, twenty feet from where Angela had slammed into some of the other hunters. Jack wasted no time, and ran over to the psychopath.

Angela dragged herself off of the bed of other hunters, and started to get up. "I'll kill you, I'll—"

Jack kicked the gun out of her hand, smile on his lips as he felt his boot slam into her wrist. He didn't break her bone, but he got close, and the yelp of pain she made was a siren's call to his soul. He kicked her in the stomach, and sighed bliss as he felt her guts ripple from the impact. He kicked her in the side as she rolled over, and groaned delight as he felt his boot crack ribs. He kicked her in the back, and grinned his biggest grin ever as he felt another rib crack, in the lower back by her kidneys. Another kick, in her chin, snapping her head back, and silencing her rage as her teeth slammed together. Another, and another, bruising muscle and damaging her guts, until at last she stopped trying to get up.

It'd only been three seconds. Three seconds of bliss.

As she stopped on her back, panting, wheezing, she looked at him, glass eye lifeless, while her real eye burned a hole into his skull. One glance from her was all it took, to light the fire in his gut, to send a scorching inferno up into his chest and out into his limbs.

The agony of his burns vanished, buried in the pulsing hunger in his brain.

And then he had a half dozen guns pointed at him, including a shotgun. Shit.

But before the hunter with the shotgun could put a spray of death into his face, a howl erupted over the hunters. Arturo burst from the darkness, as if ripping himself out of a literal wall of shadow. The titan of muscle grabbed the shotgun, and roared into the woman's face before he slashed across her shoulder. Claws sliced through muscle, earning a scream from the woman hunter as she fell, and the ire of the other gun wielders. But Noah and Matthew collapsed on them at running speed, on all fours, only getting onto their hind legs at the last moment, and bulldozing the hunters.

Jack could smell the blood on them, their own blood, and he could hear the panting in their breaths. They were exhausted, and wrecked. They had to end this soon. Tash and Damien would be joining them in moments when the flames faded, but in the mean time, Jack had to deal with Angela.

He brought up his pistol, and pointed it at her face, phone light held up in his other hand and shining it down on her.

He expected the psychopath to flinch, to raise her hands, maybe cover her face, maybe crawl away. He expected her to swear, curse, scream at him. He expected her to beg for her life, plead for him to not shoot her. He expected a dozen things from her, any of them, all of them, anything to add to his growing hatred for the fucking bitch.

He didn't expect her to close her eyes, and wait for it. A gentle smile graced her lips too, as she stopped moving, stopped struggling, stopped doing anything, and waited for him.

It was disgusting. He froze, pistol shaking in his hand, as his light shined on the woman's face, lighting it up so he could see every

detail. She really did look like Athalia, her human form. And he stared at it, the face with scars, the fucked up eye with the cut across it, the panting, exhausted woman. The world froze. The backdrop of the werewolves, fighting off almost a dozen hunters around him, preventing them from shooting Jack, vanished. The flashes of light from flashlights in the darkness around them were like slow moving spotlights. The rumble of the burning fire blocking Tash and Damien from joining was a gentle whisper.

The skeleton monster with the destroyed face looked at him. Half of her bottom jaw was gone, exposing the giant vertebrae behind it connected to her skull. Holes and chunks of bone were gone, exposing a strange, black inside. Her arms were crumbled and borderline ruined, but working enough that she pushed her claws against the floor, and dragged herself toward him. Slowly, but surely, the colossal skeleton monster, inched his way, ribs scratching against the bloodied stone floor.

“D ... Don’t... ,“ the monster said.

He stared at the skeleton creature. The death angel, the monstrosity, burned and broken, clawing her way toward him and her daughter, dragging her ribs and dangling spinal cord on the floor.

“Athalia, she has to die. She’s going to kill us. She—”

“Please ... she’s my daughter.”

He knew this was going to happen. He knew, if the opportunity presented itself to kill Angela, and Athalia was there, she’d do something. Maybe stop him, maybe attack him, maybe anything. But beg? He didn’t, couldn’t have foreseen begging, not from her.

“ ... I ... I’m sorry.” He forced his eyes off of the monster, and onto the awaiting Angela. The apology was for the mother, but there was a sickening ache in his stomach when he looked down at the

daughter. The psychopath looked over at her mother for a moment, and back to him. He couldn't tell if she was daring him, or asking him, to kill her. Either one made him not want to.

No, he couldn't afford mercy. He readied the pistol, and—

The world spun. White, then black. Colors. Spinning, flashing strobes of streaking chaos. He landed on the ground, on the stones, palms out, pistol gone, phone gone. The world was a mess, pain mixing with flickering colors, and an unbalanced sound. Something was missing, something was gone.

His left eye. His left eye was gone, and his left ear. He lifted his hand, and pressed it to the side of his head. Flesh. Bone. Ash.

“Almost missed him.” Laughter came from a distance, and so too the thud of loud, heavy, colossal footsteps. “You ok, Angela?”

## Chapter 72

~~Beatrice~~

This was going to be interesting. And dangerous. And scary. And exciting.

Jacob guided them back down into the chamber beneath Three Kings Cemetery. Guess he didn't care if Julias found out where this ritual chamber was. The dragons knew, so, it couldn't have been his most secret, most important, most diabolical location. And considering the array of limbs and blood symbols he had on the back wall, where darkness hid the collection, she could only imagine the sort of fucked up shit he had in his primary ritual chamber. Or primaries? Or whatever other chambers he had.

But this one was more than enough to have Superman staring, wide eyed, at the grotesque imagery.

Once they reached sacrifice bowl, wide eyed became stunned. There was a fresh corpse hanging from the hook, drooling guts and blood into the rusted concave metal, so poor Julias got an eyeful for his first visit into the depravity of the circle.

“ ... I saw a police report on this man,” Julias said. “A pedophile from another city, on the run.”

Jen nodded as she came over to the bowl. The woman wasn't entirely comfortable with crúac yet, but she was getting there. Triss though, for some reason the blood and slaughter came to her naturally, quickly, and she embraced it. She'd killed kine before she ever met Jacob, and butchering some sick, twisted, or otherwise needs-to-die fucks, in order to perform their experiments and rituals, was fine by her.



Maybe not so much for Julias, though.

“I drug them and keep them under,” Jacob said, smiling at Julias, while pushing the corpse so it started to swing on the hook. “There are some rituals, that require pain and torture and all that juicy goodness, but I don’t normally indulge. Especially not with the girls here.” There was still a chunk of intestine hanging over the pelvis, where Jacob had slit the bastard’s stomach open. It was connected to the ass, after all, so she imagined it was the large intestine dangling; Jacob had ripped out the stomach, she saw that. Kindred craved blood, not flesh. Seeing the man’s insides didn’t tickle her appetite, but it did tickle something else inside her, when she used his blood to paint symbols.

“Thanks for that, I guess.” Wincing, Julias came up to the bowl. Bold. He looked into it, and winced again as he no doubt noticed the mountain of blood, guts, and the way they’d been torn out, not cut out. “What sort of ritual were you performing?”

Triss and Jen looked at each other, and then to their boss. Of course, their boss laughed, and shrugged.

“Witchy witch kind of stuff.”

“... uh huh.” Rolling his eyes, Julias set his hands on the bowl. Blood on his palms and fingers now, but he kept them there. Very bold. “What do I need to do?”

“You need to cut off your hand.”

Beatrice and Jennifer both winced, sucking the air in between their teeth, as they looked between Jacob and Julias.

“I can’t just bleed for you?”

“No. We’re opening a door, and that takes a sacrifice.” Jacob reached into the bowl, moved aside some guts, and found one of his

rusty knives. Fucking bastard just had to make this as hard as possible for Julias. “Cut off your hand, and fill the bowl with your ashes and vitae. I will perform the ritual, and open the door to your childe. Lucky for you you share the same blood, or I wouldn’t be able to open this door.”

“You wouldn’t?”

“Of course not. How would I know where to go? I’ll be delving into a world of dreams and nightmares, piloting through an endless sea of fog and mayhem. Thoughts and fears and desires from the entire plane of existence. I’ll—”

“Ok, I get it. You’ll use my blood to home-in on him.”

“Exactly.”

“And if we didn’t have my blood?”

Jacob tapped his finger, big jackass smile on full display, doing the work of expressing what his bandage-covered eye sockets couldn’t. “Perhaps the sheriff’s blood, though it’s unlikely he’d willingly give me that. Without a strong guiding light, I won’t be able to find the realm, so if it’s not blood, it’s nothing. You are lucky Jack went on this mission.”

Triss pat her lover on the shoulder. She knew he didn’t trust Jacob, but Jacob was proving to be a very informative teacher. Sort of. If he said he needed this or that, he needed this or that. Sometimes he fucked with you, but it was always in good fun. Sort of. Lots of sort ofs, with Jacob.

“Have you done this before?” he said.

“I’ve been experimenting with the nightmare realm, yes. Azamel is a large threat, and so is her group of friends.”

“So you’ve found her nightmare lair before?”

“No. Like I said, I need a guide, something crúac can understand. Your blood. Your flesh. Your ashes. Without the guide, I’ll just be drifting around in the dreams and nightmares of the world. And fuck that, you know?”

Triss choked on a chuckle, keeping it down but only just. Her boss’s antics were growing on her, but she could see they were irritating to Julias. And it wasn’t a good time to chuckle. Jacob handed Triss the rusty, shitty knife, and gestured to the bowl.

“Ladies,” Jacob said, “a drop of your own blood, too. And a drop of mine.” The old man smiled at her, and waited.

Nodding, she put her hand over the bowl, and concentrated. There was more to this than just a drop of vampire blood. Crúac was about intent as much as anything else. The beast in her, that thing she had connected with somehow, it had crossed a barrier inside her, exposed her to something new and wonderful and thrilling and fucking dangerous, something in her blood. The vitae she concentrated and forced into her blood was the same mental effort you’d use to make a ghoul, or resurrect a fresh corpse as your childe. It was special, magical, and it deserved respect. It was what Jacob wanted, and as much as he joked and goofed around, she knew he had all the respect in the world for the power of their blood. And now, now that the beast inside her was whispering in her ear, she did too.

A single drop, before she handed Jen the knife. A single drop that was mentally draining, and left Triss a bit dizzy for a moment. That single drop did more than suck the energy out of her, it also quietened her mind, softened her thoughts, and let something with fangs and claws nuzzle a little higher up in her spine. It was almost like a purring sensation, coming from something that lived inside

her, something that was now happy with her. Something that wanted to go hunting later.

Julias raised a brow at her, and she smiled at him, before she looked over at Jen. The same look on her face, one of joy, of embracing a dark, dirty little secret, and relishing in the strange tingles it sent up the body. She was succumbing to it too, just like Triss, and god damn it was good to have a friend with her on this journey. They were witches, manipulators of blood and the occult, practitioners of scary rituals that could backfire, that could summon things they didn't mean to summon, that could spell doom for everyone involved.

Wow. She really was getting off on this. So naughty.

Jacob took the knife, and let out a large drop. It splashed against the guts of their kill, and burned away to ash. If it had entered someone's body, dead or alive, the vitae would react and do its thing, as if it really was sentient, as if it wanted to spread its vampire disease. Christ, she still hadn't talked to Damien to apologize to him, about giving him her blood. Ok, yeah, if the man returned from this alive, she'd visit him and talk to him.

Everyone looked at Julias, as the old man handed him the rusty knife. Julias looked at it for a moment, before he sighed, and took it.

Julias set the knife to his wrist, and began sawing.

Triss and Jennifer both winced, but Triss forced herself to keep watching, while her friend looked away. Yeah, it wasn't easy to watch someone cut through their own wrist, especially when it was a guy you happened to love. Julias bore the pain well, and considering he had a century embraced under his belt, she imagined he'd had many encounters that involved a lot of pain. Hell, she rescued him from a burning building where his head had been smashed in by Rebecca. The man was used to pain.

Cutting off your own hand was different from pain. Maybe if she'd given him a nice, clean axe to do a proper chop, it wouldn't have been so bad, but cutting off your own limb, with a knife, was a psychological nightmare. The mental barriers the brain had between you and such self destruction was immense; she'd run into them several times, in her crúac rituals. Pain was temporary to a vampire, but the mental struggle to not harm the self in a way the old living body would consider permanent, never went away.

Even the mighty Julias started to show signs of pain, extreme pain, as the knife pushed through bone. She put a hand on his shoulder, but the man was too focused on grinding his teeth together. And through it all, she watched. This was important. It was a sacrifice, it meant something, it was pain and limiting the self, even if only temporarily.

Thankfully, it wasn't too drawn out. He was a vampire after all, and had the strength to drive through bone with a knife in only a few seconds. The extremity fell to the bowl, and wiggled with the impact, before evaporating into ash. Several heavy drops of his vitae fell into the bowl after, dark red, almost alive in and of itself. Onto the pile of guts it went, fading into ash seconds later, little red flames, almost like sparks, dancing on the blood's surface as it went poof.

Groaning, Julias put his stump of a hand to his chest, inside his jacket. "There. Happy?"

Triss looked at Jacob. Jackass had a giant grin on, of course, and he drummed his palms on the bowl's edge a few times; for effect, she was sure.

"Very. If only Invictus would maim themselves at my behest more often." Chuckling, Jacob rubbed his hands together, and came over to join the others on their side of the bowl. "Beatrice, Jennifer, mood lighting."

Rolling her eyes, Triss pulled out her phone, pulled up a light program, and pointed it down at the bowl. The program had various settings, and used the phone's screen to display a rather trippy color effect; lots of bleeding reds mixing with white. Jennifer used the same program, and pointed the phone up at the cave ceiling.

“ ... you have got to be shitting me,” Julias said.

Jacob shrugged. “You don't like mood lighting?”

“There's a fucking corpse, right in front of you. There's guts in a bowl. I can smell the shit and blood and piss and drugs. Have you no respect for the dead?”

“I have the utmost respect for the dead.”

Triss and Jen froze. Jacob didn't say that with a joking inflection. Jacob said that in a serious, monotone voice. He never used that voice. The two ladies looked at each other, before looking at Julias to see what he'd say.

He said nothing. Sighing, Julias took a step back, and with his good hand, motioned for the man to continue.

That was a strange snap from Jacob. Respect for the dead? Wh—oh, Minerva. Ok, yeah, sensitive topic, and Julias had grazed it. But her man, all knowing and stupidly wise, backed off before he made things worse.

Jacob reached out both of his hands over the ashes of their sacrifice, and over the entrails of their kill. The corpse continued to dangle there, dripping blood, and Triss didn't know if it was required for the ritual or not. The specifics seemed to be something only Jacob knew, and Triss was half convinced they didn't matter. Intent, desire, and respect for the ritual mattered. Sacrifice and pain mattered. Blood and will mattered.

Jacob reached down into the mess of their kill, and touched his fingertips against the drying blood. Not dry yet though, and once the blood coated his fingers, he walked over to one of the nearby walls. Not the wall in the back, where the unusual shadow hid the gore display, the symbols and body parts, the chests of metal and limbs. All the walls of the cave had symbols drawn into them, etched or chiseled, many painted in blood, symbols she was growing to both recognize, and enjoy the sight of. They were beautiful in their own way, and represented the dark arts in a strange, media-friendly format.

Maybe she should make a Twitter account, and share? Ha.

She froze, as Jacob turned toward the back wall. Wait. “Jacob?”

“Powerful as I am, Beatrice, and as much as I know, navigating this realm is not something I can do alone. Not if I want to go with my own hands.” He offered a small wave over his shoulder, and disappeared into the black fog near the wall. “And you know, if Jack really is in trouble, I’d like to help.”

She blinked a few times at the man’s silhouette, before it was gone. Jen came close to Julias, and nudged her elbow into his side before looking at his fucked up wrist. Yeah, hand gone, god damn.

“You’re going to summon him?” Jen said to Jacob’s disappearing silhouette.

“I am.”

Triss shook her head. “Will he want a favor for this?”

“Of course. But I’ll handle that,” the Nosferatu said from the dark. “Julias, on the other hand, will owe me based on the outcome. If the kid doesn’t need help, a small favor will suffice. If I need to rescue him? Well, a big favor.”

Julias stared into the black, and Triss could almost see the man calculating a thousand outcomes based on this conversation alone. “Naturally,” he said, tone sarcastic, borderline mimicking Jacob.

That earned a laugh from Jacob, and the clang of one of his chests being opened with a snap.

“Though, I have to thank you, Mister Mire, for the opportunity to do this. This is a step I’ve been meaning to take, but I’ve had no beacon to guide me.”

“Does that qualify as the favor?”

“Ha. No.” Another clang resounded through the cavern, and then, the distant howling of corpses.

Julias raised his head, looked up, and around, as the quiet screams started to fill the air. Whether they were the echoes of the past, or their kills, Triss didn’t know, but whatever Jacob was doing on that back wall, whatever rituals he was painting or dancing or whatnot, it had tainted the cave with screams.

Black Blood’s body came for them. She wasn’t sure if it was his body. ‘His’ because his voice sounded masculine, but she was pretty sure spirits didn’t have genders. And this spirit’s body was an ocean of ooze, black and flowing and thick but not. It should have felt like tar, but it felt like nothing, and as it began to ooze down the cracks of the walls, Jen and Triss waited patiently.

Julias, not so patiently. As he cradled his stub of a wrist inside his jacket, he stared at the walls, before looking between the two witches. “Uh...”

“Just wait,” Triss said. “Black Blood can’t do his thing until he ... sets up.”



“Sets up?” Blinking over and over, Julias looked around at the rising tide of black, and lifted a leg as it started to come up over his boots.

Triss touched his arm, and nodded. Slowly but surely, the black ocean, bleeding up the walls, bleeding down the walls, and falling from the eye sockets of the skeletons that held up the ritual bowl, began to fill the room. She'd been through this a few times now, Jen too, and the two of them had gotten comfortable with it; as comfortable as you could. But her Superman looked disturbed, even a little scared, and she smiled at him as she waited.

Only when the strange, black liquid covered them, and filled the underground cavern to the ceiling, did Jacob return to the bowl. Triss and Jen knew what he did over there, painting his symbols, using the blood of corpses and metal of torture devices as his paint and brush. Probably not something Jacob would want others to see; hence, the black fog that covered that side of the cave. But then, she doubted he cared too much, if he was willing to bring Julias down into the cave. Maybe it was to keep people calm, if he was bringing them into the cave for the first time?

Unlikely, because no one was going to stay calm when the darkness started talking to them.

“Well well, if it isn't the mighty Julias Mire.” The spirit's voice rose from the shadow, and everyone turned to the bowl where the strange, deep, bassy voice came from.

“ ... you must Black Blood.”

“That I am.”

“I didn't think Black Blood would be from the South.”

Jacob, returning from the black upon blackness in the back of his cave, laughed, and set his hands on the bowl again. “He's borrowing

the voice from someone we killed.” Of course, Jacob called him ‘he’ as well, and the habit was rubbing off on Triss.

“Naturally.” Rolling his eyes, Julias looked down into the bowl. They were all standing inside black water, but there was enough light for them to see, and the blackness didn’t impede them like water would. It meant they could move around easily, and Julias took a step back as a face looked up at him from the contents of the bowl.

From the guts, intestines, organs and flesh, a face of oozing black smiled up at him. It was made of the remains of Jacob’s sacrifice, and Black Blood’s infestation had turned it black. Triss wasn’t sure if it was more or less disturbing than the first time she had met the strange entity, when it had possessed a corpse, walked around, and helped Jacob with teaching her a ritual. Most fucked up night of her life.

And this was probably Julias’s. He’d cut off his own hand, and was now staring down into a bowl of entrails, that were looking up at him and talking to him, all while being submerged into a black water. Yeap, that ranked pretty high on fucked up shit.

“Am I to understand, that we’re going to save the infamous Jack Terry?” Black Blood said. Wait, infamous?

“What has Jacob told you of my childe?” Julias didn’t like that very much. He put his good hand against the bowl, and stared down at the face. Ballsy. It was cute, seeing Superman get all fatherly.

“Only good things!” Jacob said, hands up, like he was afraid of Julias’s judgment. Course, he wasn’t, and he laughed a moment later as he climbed into the bowl. “We’re just going to check and see if things are going his way, Black Blood. If he needs rescuing, we rescue him.”

“And if he does not?” the spirit said.

“Then poor Julias owes me a favor for nothing.”

“And the boy is in the clutches of these hunters and their Begotten friend? I reckon he does.”

Julias’s frown only grew as Black Blood made it obvious that Jacob was sharing details with the spirit. More than that, that Black Blood knew details that Jacob had only just learned. At this point, Triss expected him to, with how much her boss relied on him for their rituals and whatnot. It must have been a shocker though, for Superman to hear his childe was a topic of conversation between a psycho and an alien god. The kid had a habit of causing waves, though, so it wasn’t like it wasn’t deserved.

“I can sense the blood of our beacon. Good to go. See ya later.” Jacob nodded, offered Julias a finger wave, and stepped into the bowl. Stepped into, and sank into, with a plop. Like as if he’d dropped into a deep pool.

And the black water around them vanished. As if someone had popped a balloon, it all went away in an almost explosive shattering of black winds and black splashes. It had no impact, but it sounded like it should have, and looked like it should have. It drained down into the floor like the floor had opened up to swallow it, and it was gone the next second.

And then there were the two witches, and a bowl of guts. No black bloody ooze stuff, no talking faces made of entrails, no nothing.

Sighing, Julias walked around, cradling his wrist, and Triss followed after him. Half to keep him company, half to keep him from touching anything he shouldn’t be.

“I’m sure Jack is fine,” she said. “And if he’s not, Jacob will do something. He likes the kid.”

“Why is that?”

“Dunno. Kid is good at making friends.”

“He ... he wasn't, when I was grooming him for the embrace. That kid was antisocial as all hell, and thought of everyone else as mindless sheep, slaves to capitalism and peer pressure.” Sighing, Julias looked at her, the bowl, Jen, and the dark end of the room where Jacob had done his ritual out of sight. “Suddenly he's friends with every vamp in the city, including Jacob.”

She laughed, shrugged, and tapped on his arm. Mistake. The gentle impact nudged against his wrist, and he groaned.

“Ah, shit, sorry. Um, well, Jacob's not so bad once you get to know him. He likes to keep Invictus at arm's length though, cause, you know.”

“Indeed.”

“Don't be like that,” Jen said, walking over to him and nudging up against his other side. “Really, you can trust the man more than you think you can.”

Triss raised a hand. “But not completely.”

“No no, not completely. That'd be a mistake, and Jacob wouldn't want that. But you can trust him with Jack's life, sure.”

“But ... maybe not the Uratha's. Jack took some on this trip, right? I don't know about them. Boss might leave them to die.” Jacob did absolutely hate them, for their meddling, their entitlement, and their involvement in Minerva's death. It was hard to say if Jacob was able to make smart choices when they were involved.

Hopefully their involvement wouldn't affect Jacob's rescue mission.

“Come on, Jen,” she said as she walked back to the bowl. “We’re supposed to be a tether.”

“He never did explain how that works.”

Shrugging, Triss held her hands over the bowl, and concentrated her effort and will into the area. Jacob said if they concentrated their vitae into their fingers, and kept it over the bowl, it’d work. Why’d he need a tether, if he had Julias’s blood to guide him? She didn’t understand, didn’t know how, but knew how to do what he wanted. Yeah, it made no sense, but these days, nothing did.



~~Natasha~~

Jack spun in place. His gun flew out of his hand, and his phone did too. Its light twirled as the phone spun repeatedly, streaks of light cutting across the chamber of madness, as werewolves struggled to handle the hunters surrounding them. Everyone froze when Jack went down, and the two vampires gasped at the sight of the boy’s head exploding.

No, not exploding, thank god. But for a moment, the side of his skull was gone, and Tash felt every muscle in her body clench as she brought her hands to her lips. The bullet had hit his eye, against side of the socket along his temple, and cut through the bone along his ear. Through the fires flickering in front of her, all she could do was watch as the boy collapsed backward, turning to land on his stomach. He touched the wound, body shaking, and bits of blood dripping from the wound before fading into ash.

Since Athalia’s strange shadow fog had dissipated, the fire that Angela had renewed was taking its sweet time burning away, leaving her and Damien stranded. She could jump over it, if her leg was working. Damien could jump over it, if he didn’t look like he’d been shot a dozen times, considering the bandages on his body. But she

had to get over there, had to save Jack, had to save Art and Matt and even Noah and Athalia. Had to save Fiona. Had to save Eric, and Clara, and Jessy! Had to do something.

“Sorry about that, Angela. Sándor and I had a bit of trouble with these three, and I’m guessing you had trouble, too?” An older man stepped out of the darkness, pistol in hand, other arm dangling weakly at his side. Blood. As he came in closer, the old man looked at the prostrated skeleton creature, then Jack, and chuckled as he held out a hand to Angela.

“... yeah. Athalia kamikazed.” She took the man’s hand, and dragged herself over to get her pistol.

The man had to be Jeremiah. But—oh god. Tash stepped back, as something stepped out of the blackness, something tall, something that earned the thud thud of a giant’s footsteps. Its horns came first, topped upon an almost human, but not quite human head of colossal size; no, its whole body was colossal. And it had four arms. Four wings! Some sort of gargoyle monster, something that walked on raptor talons, and leaned forward, counter balanced by a tail.

Three bodies dangled in its hands. His hands. Jessy, Eric, and Clara. Clara and Eric looked like hell, and they were in their human bodies, dripping small drops of blood as the beast moved in closer to the others. From the way they dangled, they looked unconscious.

Four hunters walked around the monster’s legs, and they looked beat to hell, too. Soon-to-be bruises covered their bodies, and gashes, patched up but otherwise a serious problem for kine. They limped and dragged, but remained at arms, guns held and ready to shoot. It was more than enough to bring the wounded and exhausted three werewolves near Jack and Athalia to a stand still.

“We lose anyone?” Jeremiah said.

“A few, yeah. Athalia killed a couple, and these fuckers hurt Jackson enough to kill him.” She nodded her way to a man by the pillar, slouched, and not responding. Blood was pooling around him.

“And the paranormals?”

“None dead. Two vamps right there.” Angela pointed to her and Damien. Oh no. “Three more dogs here. And Mom’s little friend is down in one of the rooms, bleeding out. We should go check and kill her.”

“That we should.” Jeremiah walked over to the flamethrower, and sighed as he picked it up. Damaged. He set it back down, and looked across the flames to the two vampires. “I’m not in Dolareido for you blood suckers. I’m here for Azamel, and the rest of her kind, true monsters. Bring the spider woman here, and you get to live.”

“W-What?” Tash said. “ ... n-no, we—”

Damien leaped. Tash jerked, and snapped her head to the side as the man jumped over the flames. No way his body could handle that, but he did it anyway, sword up and ready to slash.

His impulse earned him another bullet to the chest. Jeremiah raised and drew his pistol with the speed of a professional duelist, a subtle and quick movement that wasted no motion, hip firing. The pistol he had was something high caliber, and it slammed into Damien’s chest the moment the man had left the ground, putting a stop to his forward motion so he fell back to the ground beside Natasha.

“Is the spider woman a hot spot for you, boy?” Jeremiah said.

Tash shook her head. “She ... y-you can’t, she...” There were no words she could say to this psychopath. The look in his eyes was one of zero empathy, as if someone had ripped that part of him out

with bloody claws. It was the sort of look she expected Jacob to have, if the man had eyes of his own.

“Fuck ... you,” Damien said.

“Hot spot it is. Isn’t that cute.” Shrugging, Jeremiah walked toward the werewolves. Each of them had four hunters around them now, guns pointed at their huge bodies. The beasts struggled to stay standing, and both Art and Matt had blood leaking from their chops; their own blood, mixed with the blood of hunters they managed to bite earlier. Many of said hunters were the ones holding guns to the werewolves, and they did not look pleased. How they were standing, Tash couldn’t fathom, but these hunters had the resilience of ghouls, without a ghoul’s extreme healing or strength.

“Now, this little punk here lied to me.” Glaring at the Uratha, Jeremiah stopped beside Jack, who was still on his hands and knees, trembling. Jeremiah slowly, almost gently, put his boot on the boy’s back, and pushed down, until Jack gave in and collapsed to the floor. “He mentioned someone named Avery, and when I asked him about it, he lied about who it was. I only found out later from Elen about the werewolves. Took some digging to find out about Avery.”

The bastard pulled his foot back, and kicked Jack in the side, hard. Poor boy was knocked onto his side, trembling, cradling his face and trying to stop Jeremiah from kicking him again. No luck. Jeremiah kicked him again, and again, as if getting revenge for what Jack just did to Angela. Angela was beat up, and had had a gun pointed at her; he must have assumed, and assumed correctly.

“All of you, you’re all going to surrender, immediately. I can make use of each of you, and if you play nice, some of you will get to live.”

Matthew snarled. “Some? You—”



Jeremiah hip fired once again, and the bullet slammed into Matt's leg, sending him down onto his knees with a howl. Oh no.

"P-Please, don't," she said.

"Please don't?" The man looked her way and laughed, and with only a quick glance, fired at the two remaining, standing werewolves. The bullets slammed into their legs as well, and each went down, growling and grunting as their palms caught the stone floor. "You're our prisoners, monsters. You have no rights, and you don't get to beg. Do what we say, and if I'm feeling charitable, I'll let some of you live. But be under no illusions, you're nothing but pests, and we're exterminators. Only reason some of you might get to live is we're after—"

The world split apart.

Everyone turned, and looked at the cut through the universe. A seam, like someone had taken a sword and sliced through the fabric of space. Tash knew her brain was having trouble interpreting it, like an illusion, one made to defy the eyes and make them see something incorrectly, messing with depth perception and colors. But something had cut its way through the air, and was reaching out through it.

The seam began to bleed black. Tash froze to the point her body ached, muscles clenching, eyes stuck on the sight of air bleeding. Air didn't bleed, but it was. As if the universe could bleed, as if someone had cut through its skin, infected skin rotting with black ooze. And someone stepped out of it.

"J-Jacob?" she said. Everyone was silent, and her voice was loud enough for all of them to hear.

Dripping of black ooze, and yet with his dark robes and hair still looking dry, Jacob smiled at the group of insanity before him. The bandage that covered his eyes looked dry too, gray and worn like it

always was, as if it was decades old. There was blood on him, dried and crusted, but whatever the ooze was, it fell off of his body like it wasn't real.

“How the fuck did you get in here?” Angela said.

“How indeed.” Laughing, Jacob spread out his arms, and with him, spread the tear in the universe. Unlike Jack, Jacob didn't hesitate.

Everyone jumped back as the black liquid gushed out of the hole. Like water rapids, the blackness raged from the tear, and washed over the stone floor around the group of hunters, werewolves, and everyone else. The fire, already dying, disappeared beneath waves of black, as did the wood remains of the giant door, the stone floor, and all the fallen things. Guns, lights, the bodies, Jack, everything disappeared under the black waves.

Leave it to Jacob to have the perfect opportunity to monologue, and instead, laugh. Laugh, and laugh, and laugh. Defying expectations at every turn. Tash glared at the man, and the man offered her a tiny wave, as he let the gushing water pour around him. It didn't hit him, despite how fast it was rushing from the tear, as if the black liquid was sentient and avoiding him. Maybe it was. Maybe—hands, there were hands in the water! Black hands. Dozens of them. They poked up from the water, exposing scrawny wrists and skin so thin the tendons were defined, before they disappeared beneath the surface of the raging stream.

Raging whirlpool, more like it. As the insane amount of liquid gushed into the chamber, it defied every law of physics Tash could imagine. The water rose quickly, faster than the vertical geyser created, and dozens upon dozens of the strange, black hands reached out from the ooze to grab onto varying things, varying people.

But the fire was out, and that was good enough to get moving. If this was Jacob's rescue attempt, it was a good one, because every single hunter, and the four-armed monster, were struck dumb. It was entire seconds before they responded, all of them raising their guns, and firing upon the elder. As much as Jacob was easily one of the most powerful Kindred Tash could imagine still alive in the present day, a few hundred bullets traveling faster than sound, slamming into him over a whole two seconds, would turn him into pulp.

The water erupted. It shot upward from around Jacob, and only a subtle silhouette of the man remained as he disappeared into the black abyss. The force of it sent waves ten feet high, well above the already two-foot deep current, and the hunters screamed as it slammed into them. Even the werewolves, massive as they were, let out yelps of surprise as the dark ooze smashed into them, and sent them under. More than under, but pulled under, as the dozens of onyx hands, with their dripping fingers, reached up over the waves, and pulled the beasts into the black.

She reached down, and yanked Damien up onto his feet. The man groaned as he leaned on her, but he hadn't dropped his sword either. If anything, he was clenching it tight, ready to fight, despite the new hole that had been put into his chest. The bullet looked like it slammed into his sternum, through it, and was probably lodged in the organs inside him.

"Come on," she said. "Let's—"

A roar cut through the maelstrom of noise the black rapids made, and Tash stared at the colossal gargoyle as it struggled against the arms grabbing it. They were tiny, so very tiny compared to its immense size, but there were dozens of them grabbing at its legs, and trying to topple it. With its four wings folded snug to its back, it still had four hands to fight off the assaulting limbs, but three of them were full. Big as it was, holding a whole person in each palm

was a large task, and eventually, the monster was forced to let them go, all three of its hostages falling into the black.

“No!” Jeremiah’s voice. He unloaded bullets at the geyser, but as far as Tash could tell, it was an endless void of black liquid, ready to accept each bullet as the meaningless hunk of metal it was. Jacob had vanished, and the alien entity was making short work of the chaos Jack and his crew had been unable to handle.

Athalia was lost to the liquid. All three Uratha were gone. The tide raged, and slammed against Tash’s and Damien’s legs, and the black hands came for them too. They took their time though, more concerned with the other chamber, and dealing with the hunters struggling, twisting, squirming, and kicking at them. One hunter went under, screaming. Another did as well, but they slashed and kicked and fought, and broke free, before reaching down to grab and free any fallen brethren from the black.

The hands weren’t trying to pull the hunters under, not the same way they were trying to grab the werewolves. The strange, alien hands buried and pulled the enormous, unmoving skeleton monster into the black. They had long ago quickly pulled the injured, prone Jack into their depths. They grabbed the falling Jessy, Clara, and Eric, and pulled them beneath the raging surface of the dark ocean, where they disappeared. But the hunters, they fought against the unending ocean of hands, and began firing at the ghostly limbs.

Bullets worked. The hands shattered, tearing apart, and exposed strange liquids within. Black wasn’t a good enough word to describe the liquid void, so dark it confused her eyes all the more.

“F ... Fiona.” Groaning like a dying man, Damien pushed himself off of Tash’s shoulder, and started wading through the water in Fiona’s direction.

What had happened to that man? She suspected those two were interested in each other, but it was strange to see Damien go from

cold and detached about everything and anyone, to suddenly risking his life to save her, and going back for her too. She almost wanted to go with him, but she had to watch, to see what happened, to look for an opportunity, as the hunters fought against the raging waters. Hands reached up through the black around her, but she didn't resist them; no point. Whatever it was, whatever they were, it was from Jacob, and the man was going to help them. Probably. Hopefully.

An explosion of water erupted in front of the gargoyle monster, and it jumped back. It was such a massive entity, all its movements seemed a bit slow; it was the difference in size, not because it was actually slow. But either way, it was not fast enough to escape Jacob erupting from the dark waves. Like a shark attacking prey from beneath, the old Nosferatu threw himself at the gargoyle's neck, going for the kill.

To see Jacob punch a giant gargoyle in the mouth, and send the creature toppling over, was strange. It was like a scene from a comic book. Maybe that's what the old Nosferatu was aiming for, for something ridiculous, over the top, and all-around unnecessary. But whatever his goal with theatrics, it worked. He punched the twelve-foot-tall gargoyle beast of Goliath proportions in the chin, and sent it falling back. Jacob must have weighed only one twentieth of what the gargoyle did, and his strength ultimately sent himself flying back and away from his target after the punch. Like a gymnast, Jacob backflipped several times before landing on his feet in the waist-deep water. The black ooze was rising.

The gargoyle fell back, massive weight slamming into the dark ocean waiting for it, and onto dozens of black hands. Many shattered, snapping apart like bone and flesh should, before disappearing into the ooze. Others reached out and up, grabbing onto the beast's struggling limbs. They couldn't pin it down, and it thrashed against the hands, breaking more and more of them as it rolled back onto its knees.

The hunters were all standing again, the ones that were still alive, and each of them was firing at the oncoming hands. As the strange, dark limbs tore apart under a hail of bullets, the hunters backed up toward where Jeremiah had originally come from. They formed a line, those with pistols holding one of their wounded on a shoulder, and those with shotguns or rifles standing in front of them, all of them backing up. It was like watching military, or special forces. The synchronization, hand gestures mixed to signal movements and intentions, and a mix of fear and fearlessness.

No vampire in Dolareido had this sort of training.

“Come on!” Jeremiah, pistol in one hand, other hand dangling at his side with a bleeding shoulder, started to back up as well. Angela had found her pistol at some point, and draped her weight over Jeremiah’s shoulders with one of her arms, while the other continued to shoot at the hands.

Now, go now! They’re both distracted and slowed! Go!

Tash raised her pistol, and began to fire. But the ocean of black crashed against her legs, and the hands grabbed and pulled at her.

“No! Stop! Let m-me shoot!”

The hands, the water, the strange, black ooze didn’t hear her. Or didn’t care. The hands grabbed, yanked, and pulled her down, and she kept firing at Jeremiah and Angela as best as she could. She wouldn’t hesitate and lose this opportunity like Jack did, Athalia be damned.

One bullet hit Jeremiah in his leg, another hit his shoulder, and another hit Angela in her shoulder too. But she couldn’t get them in the neck, the head, anywhere that meant death! She tried again, and again, but the flowing water slammed into her harder, and buried her, soaking her in the strange, not-wet liquid, and blocking her vision as the hands pulled her into the depths below.

She forced her head above the surface long enough to hear Jeremiah say something.

“Elen, crash it!”

An explosion of white filled the chamber, and slammed down against the pillars, the walls, the hunters, the everything. What darkness was brought by Jacob was lost inside the overwhelming onyx that swam over them all. Black, on black, on black. Silhouettes of movement against the churning oblivion. And the sensation of being ripped out of the universe.

All was silent.

The hands pulled her under, deeper, into an endless black. The floor was no longer solid. The stones stopped blocking gravity’s will. The eternal void beneath her welcomed her with a silence and numbness, all sound and feeling gone as its black tendrils filled everything.

And then she was floating. Blackness everywhere, nothing but blackness. No, there was something moving, but it was black on black, and trying to see the details had her straining her eyes.

Liquid.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance,” the endless void said.

“ ... h ... hello,” she said. Texan accent?

“I see I may have startled you. And for that, I apologize.” The voice chuckled. A deep, manly voice, with extra bass mixed in that made it sound thick, and inhuman, even monstrous.

“Black Blood,” Jacob said. Whoa, wait, where was Jacob? “What happened?”

“It seems that the shaman woman in the hunters’ employ is capable of some powerful things. She has an understanding of the realms, greater than ours, old friend.”

Slowly but surely, the darkness presented something more than fuzzy silhouettes of obsidian against onyx. It was a road. Not a road like asphalt, but something glowing white. It looked like stars at first, distant, and weak, but with time more of the stars broke through the darkness and became a road of gentle, white light. Very gentle. It was almost like walking on the reflection of moonlight on broken glass.

Natasha was being lowered from above. The hands! They were still on her, holding her, and they drifted through the black, dripping water around them, as they lowered her and others onto the road. Gravity, solid ground, but not, because as far as she could tell, she wasn’t in a place where either would exist. Could exist. And yet, there she stood, looking down at herself and testing her feet against the soft white light.

Black, oozing, thick droplets fell onto the strange road, before dripping off and disappearing into the great endless void beneath them. Ok, she had no idea what she was looking at, but she sighed relief as she watched Eric and Jessy, Clara and Noah, and Art and Matt join her.

“Jessy,” she said, and she walked over to her friend. “You look ... b-beat to hell.”

“Ha ... fuck ... you.” The woman was on her back, and she wasn’t getting up. Her skin was full of holes, the sort her Gangrel spikes would make; a favorite of her transformations. But that stuff normally healed moments after she was done. “Thanks for ... coming to my rescue.”

“ ... w-w-we tried.” Sighing, she looked over at the rest of the crew. Art, Matthew, and Noah were all on their knees, panting, wheezing,



back in their human form, and bleeding, legs no longer working after Jeremiah's final shots. Their bodies were full of holes, and cuts caused by silver knives. She really, really, really hoped they wouldn't die; she was attached to two of them.

"Cl ... ara." Jack! The boy, still missing half of his face, forced himself up onto his feet. Drifting forward along the road of quiet stars, one hand pressed to his shredded skull, he made his way toward Clara. "Clara." When he reached her, he fell down onto his knees beside her, lowered his hand from his face, and pressed the ash-covered palm to her shoulder. "Clara ... you..." The sound of Clara's breathing cut through the silence, as Jack rolled her onto her back. He sighed relief, and looked over his shoulder to the rest of them. "Jessy. And ... where's Eric?"

"I'm here." Eric sat up, but stayed sitting, just as beat up as the other werewolves. "You guys really just threw yourselves into the meat grinder, huh?"

"Course they did," Jessy said. But she wasn't getting up, and her smile faded as she groaned in pain. "That said, um ... where the fuck are we?"

"Wait," Jack said. "Where's Athalia, and Fiona?"

Jacob, standing further down the road, walked over to them, and smiled. "Give Black Blood a moment. They're different, and not so easy to pull through this strange realm. I guess they got hooks in it that we don't."

"Well now, I do believe I have them," the hidden voice said.

And just like the others, black hands reached out from the ooze, and through the strange void around them, pulled two monsters. First was Athalia, the skeleton monster. The hands, floating and drifting, set her colossal form on the road by Tash. Next was the the

spider woman Fiona, or Vrall, and Damien next to her. Athalia didn't move, but at least Fiona was breathing.

“Athalia?” Jack said, forcing himself up onto his feet, and walking over to her as well. It was Julias all over again, looking for things to blame himself over as a reflex. Like sire, like childe, she supposed, but it wasn't going to do the boy any favors.

Athalia let out a low groan. How could she groan, she had no vocal cords! But then, the darkness was talking to them, something invisible and with thousands of hands, so talking without a throat wasn't so crazy. What was crazy was how much damage the poor woman had suffered.

And Jack had tried to shoot her daughter. She was going to hate him for that. He was going to hate himself for hesitating. A delightful mix of the most horrible outcomes imaginable.

“We have ... ways ... to take care of ourselves.” Coughing, Fiona forced herself up onto her fe—she didn't have feet. She forced herself up onto her points, where feet should have been, and used her eight spider legs to help keep herself up. “This is ... in between. We don't normally walk through this realm. But burrow through it.”

“Yeah well, I'm not a Begotten. Black Blood and I have to make due with what we have access to.” Chuckling, Jacob gestured to the endless void around them. “But there are many things you can find, if you look hard enough.”

“I'll get ... Athalia back ... to her lair,” Fiona said, and she dragged herself over to her skeleton monster friend. “I ... I think I could use ... a little help.”

Damien tried to offer, even raised a hand, but the poor boy fell to a knee the moment he did. He still had a hole in his chest, and his many bandages painted quite the image of broken bones and ruined insides.

“I’ll help-p,” Tash said. “Matt, Art, are, um, y-you guys ... gonna be ok?”

“We’re alive. We’ll heal,” Matt said. The three werewolves helped each other onto their feet, and their legs trembled, bleeding, earning groans from each of them. But they were standing, shaky knees, but standing. Super resilient, if also super stubborn.

Art didn’t look convinced. “Assuming Jacob and his spirit friend don’t kill us right now.”

The dripping ooze, around them and yet connected to nothing, chuckled. “Bless your heart, little doggie. To think I care about your intentions anymore? Well, you have no idea.”

“Then explain.” Noah pointed his finger out at the blackness, eyes glaring. It was surprising, seeing the bald, tattooed man looking angry, when he was so calm and composed in their initial outing. “Why’s an Incarnae working with this vampire?” A rather pointed hand gesture for Jacob, too. A lot of animosity, and as far as Tash knew, Avery’s pack had never interacted with Jacob or Black Blood directly. She had, but they hadn’t, except that one time with Tash.

Jacob walked up to Noah, and grinned at the man. Grin turned into something more sinister, before Jacob put a finger against the man’s chest. Noah didn’t stop him, only frowned. If Jacob wanted, he could shove the werewolf, and even a gentle push would be enough to knock the wobbling man over. He knew to not try and fight the elder.

Jacob’s expression softened, and he walked ahead on the road of gentle light. “You capable of getting back to your lair from here, Fiona?”

“I ... I am ... but, I warn you. Don’t reside in this in between world for long. Things exist here, old vampire, that should be avoided.” Vrral’s natural accent and speech mannerism came through more

obviously for a moment, and Tash raised a brow as she reached down to help the spider lady lift the giant skeleton. Heavy! And Tash's busted leg screamed at the unwanted weight. Her vitae kept it together though, well enough she could help with this.

"Why thank you for the advice," Jacob said.

"Appreciated, thank you kindly," the darkness said.

Tash looked around at the endless void, and shivered at the sight of it. It was the sort of endlessness that made her think she was in space, in a space suit, abandoned by her fleeing spaceship. Without a way to propel herself, she'd be lost to the void of space, left adrift in nothingness. Chilling.

More chilling, was when Fiona reached out, and touched the darkness. Tash stared on as one of the spider legs on Fiona's back began to tug and pull at the strange blackness, as if plucking and pulling on stretched skin.

The skin tore! Tash raised a hand to cover her eyes as a black fog washed over her. Why was everything black, solid obsidian black? Black ooze, black endless void, black fog; she was sick of it. After this, she wanted bright lights, colorful garments, pink pajamas and cute kittens. After this, she was going to sit down, surround herself with a billion pillows, and watch a romcom.

Sighing, she tugged on Athalia's finger, holding one of the bones of her enormous hand, and struggled to drag the colossal creature into the black fog with Fiona. After this, she was going to throw out all her black clothes, suits included.



~~Julias~~

The ritual chamber might as well have been under the ocean. The black ooze had filled it top to bottom, and any human was bound to

drown. But he didn't have the sensation of being under water, so maybe they wouldn't, but there was no denying that he was submerged in some sort of liquid. It was cold. It was unnatural. It was alive. He felt it pressing against his lips and nostrils, and if he tried to breathe, he was sure it'd enter his lungs.

And then Black Blood was gone, to somewhere with Jacob. Julias had no idea Jacob had become this close to the strange, alien entity. His departure meant the cave was no longer submerged in black liquid, and only silence remained. Even the creepy screams that had come from everywhere and nowhere were gone. Better for Julias to pace around, cradle his fucked up wrist, and worry about everything.

He looked over at Jennifer and Triss, the two of them standing beside the bowl, hands outstretched, and eyes focused. They were the tether. Jacob would find his way back using them, using Black Blood, and maybe his blood too. Owing Jacob a favor was not high on the list of things Julias wanted to have in debt, and this could prove to be entirely pointless.

No, it wasn't pointless. There was something going on. If he could help make sure everyone came back alive, he would. Stepping way out of his duties as a member of the Invictus triumvirate; he should trust the Right Hands to do this. But, no, he knew something was wrong, and if he had to owe the old monster a favor in order to make sure his childe came back alive, so be it.

Perhaps it was the fabled sire and childe link, warning him. Others had spoken of it, and Julias thought he felt it, but he could have been completely wrong. The flip-flopping in his mind grew irksome, and he shook the thoughts clear of his head. Having been submerged in what might as well have been death water didn't help any either, making him reconsider this choice of action. It'd been like swimming in the stomach of a ghost. Or the devil. Did he make a deal with the devil? He tried to tell himself no, but the encounter was not far off from how he imagined such a meeting to go.

Cutting off his wrist, with a shitty knife, like he was stuck in a bear trap and needed to get out. That was hell, in a way he hadn't expected. He'd been hurt plenty of times in his Kindred life, but something about forcing a knife through his own skin, muscle, flesh, and bone, was more than painful. It was sickening down to the soul; assuming vampires had one of those.

"He's back," Jen said.

Julias looked behind him to where they'd originally entered, but Triss touched his arm and pointed to the walls. They were bleeding again. The weird, black ooze trickled down over the cracks of the cave wall, over the red, painted symbols, and the etched carvings, seeping into the crevices as it leaked onto the floor. Other parts of the wall were covered in the strange black liquid dripping upward, and oozing upward, as if gravity was a joke to this monster. Maybe it was.

He sighed, and braced himself for the sickening sensation of being submerged. It wasn't too bad; he'd had to do stake outs submerged in water before, and as long as he didn't try to breathe, he didn't have to deal with water in the lungs. Drowning wasn't the issue, a strange form of claustrophobia and dread was the issue. He did not envy submarine crews.

Once the black liquid filled the cave again, a hand came out of the bowl, Jacob's. Triss and Jen both reached in without hesitation, and began to pull the man out of the bowl of guts. The entrails of his sacrifice had turned black, and it looked less like entrails, and more like some sort of swamp. Except, the swamp's mud didn't stick to Jacob's arm, sliding off of him cleanly as the two women pulled him out.

And after Jacob came more people. Oh shit. Several hands, from several different people. Julias reached out with his good hand, and pulled on one, as Jacob pulled on another, and the girls took one

each. Noah, Arturo, and Matthew. Clara, Jessy, and Eric. Then Damien, and finally, Jack. Each one climbed out of the black ooze of the bowl, and each one rolled over its edge to collapse onto the cave floor.

They looked like shit.

Once they were all out, Julias looked around for the others. “Where’s Natasha? And the Begotten?”

As the werewolves and vampires forced themselves to their feet, each finding something to grab or lean against, bowl or wall, Jack held up his hand.

“Tash is with them, helping them get back to their lair. They said they can heal better there, and she was the least injured of us.”

“Least injured.” Julias frowned at the group, but as he looked Jack up and down, the frown faded. The kid really did look like hell, and Julias set a hand on his shoulder as he looked the boy in the eye. Judging from the wound, a bullet must have clipped the side of his other eye socket and smashed out along the bone; the ear was gone, too. Painful, really painful. Only the unnatural vitae of the boy’s vampire body was keeping the wound from being fatal, with bits of the inside of his skull exposed.

“I’m fine,” the boy said. He was most definitely not fine. He was shaking in pain, and he looked downtrodden, as if he’d failed his mission. Julias knew the look, it was his look.

Jacob laughed, and wiped off his knuckles. “You sure, Clarice? Looked to me like you were all about to die.”

Jack winced, and looked over his shoulder at the elder. With a moment to wallow in misery, Jack let his head drop, and stared down at the floor. Julias might as well have been looking in a mirror. Considering the rescue mission seemed to be a success, the

boy had to be upset about something else. Something else was probably Angela.

They were all still in the strange, black water, but none of them were surprised. Must have been how Black Blood managed to get them out from wherever. The murky depths made them all look depressed though, and Jack looked like he was morose incarnate.

“The hunters,” Black Blood said, voice rippling through the currents of the black, “were more than prepared. Why, they even had someone familiar with the workings of the realms.” The bassy voice chuckled, in an all too familiar way, Jacob’s way. As it laughed, the water began to drain away into nothing, inch by slow inch, as if the spirit was delighting in reveling in the downtrodden group. “But don’t worry about that old bat. I’ll get my claws on her, soon enough.”

“You don’t get to touch anyone!” Matt said, swinging his arm across the air in front of him. Dramatic. “The hell do you think you’re doing, spirit? What—”

Everyone fell back as the draining water, waist deep at that point, shot outward, and a giant hand of black, leather skin, erupted from the raised waves. The crashing water, with a great mass it did not have before, sent everyone down onto their backs and stomach, everyone except Jacob. The hand, colossal, the size of a person, slammed down against Matt with all the grace of a car crash, and pinned him.

Everyone stared on, jaw dropping, as the raging spirit began to manifest. Something above them, connected to the ceiling, began to take form. The wrist of the giant hand had emerged from the draining water, but above them a face began to take shape, black, almost shiny with its ooze texture. The form remained vague, without details, but there were enough to see eyes, a mouth, and a nose. Enough for lips to move, and speak.



“If I had listened to my friend Malachi, you would be dead, idiot dog. So hold your horses. The only reason you and your pack get to stay in my town, is because I think you might serve a purpose. Red Tide and the Street-Tail King, they step onto my land and tarnish my waters; deal with them. Until then, dog, accept the truce I offered before, or I will end you myself. We done?”

Matt, giant of a man, was a bleeding, ruined mess. Black Blood hadn't hurt him, far as Julias could tell, the spirit was only taking advantage of Matt's wounds. Then again, seeing a giant face of shadow and ooze looking down at them from the ceiling, with a hand that belonged on a fifty-foot-tall giant made of black leather and metal, put this alien entity's power into perspective. Jacob had made friends with a god.

Matt grunted and groaned, but said nothing. The sort of man who'd die to uphold his views, conviction, honor, and all the stupidity that went with such concepts. Still, he seemed like a nice guy, and Julias hoped the alien creature wasn't going to kill him for the man's idiocy.

“We get it,” Arturo said as he walked over to Matt. “Let him go.”

Black Blood said nothing for a few seconds, as if contemplating killing the werewolf. It wasn't like they could stop him. The only people in the room not injured were the Circle of the Crone, and the two witches took their queue from Jacob, who would have probably delighted in the death of another of Avery's pack.

But, with time, the spirit raised its colossal hand. The limb disappeared into the draining, murky depths, and the face of ooze above them melded into the stone, before it disappeared.

“Y'all take good care of yourselves now, you hear?” Departing words from the alien entity. Jacob was struggling to not laugh, and Julias was struggling to not pull out his pistol and shoot the man.

“As you can see,” Jacob said, gesturing to the large group, “things went badly. Your instincts were right, Julias. Not your Invictus plans that you trust so much, but your instincts that told you your childe was in danger. An instinct of the blood.” The old monster came up to him, and pat him on the shoulder, same as Julias had done for Jack moments before. “Wanna come over to my side of the fence?”

“We’re already on the same side.” This old bastard was going to be the death of them all, if he continued to cause strife in such indirect ways. But, better indirect than direct, like Garry, he supposed. “Report. Everyone going to survive? Uratha need medical attention?”

“I ... I don’t know,” Eric said.

Noah rolled his eyes, and got down on a knee beside the sitting, trembling man. “Of course you don’t. You won’t let us teach you anything.”

Dragging himself back to his feet with Arturo’s help, he and Matthew knelt down next to Clara, and helped sit her up against the wall.

“You ok?” Matt said.

“Y ... Yeah. That ... gargoyle thing...”

“Gargoyle thing?” Julias said.

Jack stepped around the bowl, forced his head up, and cradled his face with one hand. “The Begotten working with Jeremiah and Angela. I ... christ, I’ll do up a proper report tomorrow night with the details. We hurt them, killed a few of them, and Black Blood forced them to do ... something. Not sure how they did it, but they pushed us out of the nightmare we were in somehow. No idea, except from what Black Blood said, that Elen did it.”

“That Elen woman needs to die,” Damien said. Many of the group nodded.

“I saw her,” Jessy said. The poor woman looked like someone had body slammed her from the Eiffel Tower. “Old woman. Should be dead yesterday.”

Jacob raised a hand, as if correcting a classroom. “Hmm, maybe not die? A woman like that has knowledge.” Everyone turned, and stared at the old monster, frowns galore, until he put his hands up. “Ok ok, maybe not.”

“So we have time to take a breather then,” Julias said. “That’s something. No paranormal died, and we have a lot more knowledge now than we did before. This is progress. Painful, but progress.”

“Painful?” Art said. “The fuck did you—”

Julias pulled out his stump and showed it to him, earning chuckles from the Nosferatu. Everyone winced.



~~Antoinette~~

“That ... that is good.” Antoinette sighed relief, and the tension in her body melted away, as Julias explained the rescue efforts of Jacob. “I am impressed with your actions, Mire. To owe my old friend a favor is a dangerous thing, and he will ask it of you in ways you will not be able to predict.”

“We’ll see. I’m pretty good at predicting,” the Ventrue said over the phone. “I regret ever letting the boy go. I let my emotions get the better of me, and thought rescuing Jessy and the others worth the risk.”

She did not agree with his plan, but she had to admit, it was a very time sensitive situation. Extreme acts of ludicrous bravery were,

sometimes, fruitful. Most often, they were not, and survivor bias was a deadly sin.

“I look forward to seeing my love,” she said, implying the obvious with a deeper tone.

“First thing tomorrow night. But, he’s in a bad way, Prince. They all are. Jacob and his ... friend, really saved them from what I guess was a battle they were losing.”

She was glad that it was the Ventrue that owed Jacob, and not her. And yet, she could not deny that she too owed Jacob in a way, for his efforts. Perhaps not in a capacity her old friend would hold her to, but nonetheless.

And Black Blood. That cursed creature was involved. She did not wish that, for that alien entity to seep its claws, its dark liquid, its insidiousness into her city, least of her all fellow Kindred, and lover.

“Thank you, Mire, for your ... for everything.”

She could almost hear the man smile.

“No problem, Prince. We both love that stupid kid.”

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If she would not be seeing her love until tomorrow night, then she had time to follow up on the new development.

She left her office, and moved down into the depths of her labyrinth. Daniel followed behind her, and she nodded at him over her shoulder as he stepped in beside her.

“How fair your journeys into the realms?” she said.

“Still having trouble tracking down the source. At first I suspected Jacob was causing these weird disturbances, but now I don’t know. It might be Jeremiah.”

“Ah yes, Jeremiah. Twice now the hunters and their plans have been foiled. I fear they will do something desperate, in retaliation.”

“Jeremiah seems like the sort of man who will respond harshly, but with some degree of intelligence.” Daniel adjusted his glasses with a single finger, before he slipped his hands into his trench coat pockets. “Unfortunately, he’s proving far too unpredictable.”

“Agreed.” With a begotten working for the man, his avenues of attack had increased tremendously, to the point she would not be able to predict his actions so easily. “It may be time we offer Azamel some freedom, in return for her help against the man.”

“I’m starting to wonder if she knew Jeremiah had a Begotten under his thumb, and waited on the info since the beginning, to put us in this position.”

“Perhaps.” The old creature was patient enough. “But, I do believe she is also too prideful to readily admit that, in all this, she is the hunted, and we are her walls. It is a difficult position to be in.”

“Are you excusing her behavior?”

“Non. The old monster will have to answer for her deceptions, but at the same time, we must ask for her help in dealing with Jeremiah, and his Begotten slave.”

“I see.” Daniel nodded, and followed her. She had not explained to him what she was doing yet, but he followed nonetheless. Loyal to a fault, her old friend. And he would be able to guess, soon enough.

There were many chambers in her labyrinth of floors and halls, of rooms and alcoves, that she did not allow others to explore. Off limits to her ghouls, to her love, and to her new student. Unsightly secrets, dark, dirty, in ways that did not become her, and the image she had crafted for herself.

She opened one of the doors, thick and sealed with many bars of metal. The mechanical padlock was old fashioned, but complicated, sturdy, and required a specific code that only she knew. It could not be picked. Perhaps it was time to move onto the digital age of locks, as she had done in many other places, but there was something powerful in the simplicity of the old. Unless someone came in with a blowtorch, they were not getting through.

She took a moment to look through the window of one of the cells. There were a half dozen humans, kept alive for one purpose only: death as the occasional, emergency meal, or sacrifice. There had been the time Jack was a mess of ruin, and she had fed him three souls, to insure his daily sleep would revitalize him. She did not tell him the details, tell him of how she kept the truly wicked here as blood bags, to be killed at her whim. Murderers, that she murdered without pity. It was better that such knowledge not be shared needlessly, lest it change the view Natasha and Jack had of her.

Perhaps Jack should know, though? It would be a step in their relationship, but not one she felt comfortable making, not yet. For now, she would keep her darker activities between herself, and Daniel. And for now, she needed one sacrifice.

She did not make a show of it, did not indulge in the kill or dance in the blood. She did not enjoy this, but it had to be done. A simple use of majesty to turn one of the sacrifices into a dotting slave, willing to do everything and anything for her. This one was a man who had killed his wife in a fit of rage. There was a certain justice to killing him, she supposed, but she tried to not frame it in such close-minded definitions. He was a sacrifice, and a kine who no longer deserved to live. She needed fuel. Nothing more.

The sacrifice followed them down, and down, and down into the deepest pits of her tower, far further than the undercity of Dolareido went. There was a secret route that connected the labyrinth to the

Dolareido tunnels, but it was old, and she had long sealed it off. With recent events, she considered re-opening it, in case suicidal hunters showed up at her tower, and decided to nuke her home, literally.

Deep, and deeper, until the air was hard to breathe for the sacrifice. Down here she felt comfortable with the more grandiose experiments, the ones she shared with no one save her fellow dragon Daniel, the ones she was concerned could implode and destroy much if not deep underground. Down here, she could pursue her desire for knowledge, and not worry for the ramifications.

“I know what you’re going to do,” Daniel said, following behind her in the dark hallway of metal.

“I have to speak with it, Daniel.”

“You really don’t. Last time—”

“Last time was different. There need not be strife between us and the entity.”

Sighing, Daniel shook his head, but followed. She did not like dismissing him so, especially when he made a good point, but it was a point she had already debated. This conversation needed to happen, and as the entity encroached on her city more and more, it would happen more often.

She opened the doors to her final chamber, and once the sacrifice had entered, Daniel closed it behind them.

Above her was the same chandelier as in her main experiments room. On the floor, the same symbols, drawings that represented natural balances and mysteries in the machine of the universe. The average person did not understand the power in the enigma of mathematics, how mathematics was the language of existence itself,

and how reality as they knew it existed upon the foundation of numbers. Many of those, she captured in the symbols below. With the wavelength provided by the chandelier, and the vibration provided by her machines, she created resonance. And certain things were attracted to varying types of resonance.

Black Blood required more than resonance to summon. The entity required sacrifice. It required blood, and flesh. Disgusting creature.

Antoinette did not waste time, and did not let the moment build. It was an abhorrent ritual, and she would not relish the kill, like the witches would. A nod to Daniel was enough, and her sheriff stabbed the man in the back of the head with a knife.

No pain, no misery, no fake words or fanfare. The man fell onto the center of the symbols, beneath the chandelier. The walls of metal, covered in more of the symbols she had spent decades perfecting, were the murderer's last sight, before he slumped to the floor. Daniel, with knife held, squatted down over the kill, and split them open from chin to crotch in one, clean slice.

Vampires craved blood, not muscle, meat, organ, or bone. To see a kine have their insides become their outsides was not a pleasing sight, and she frowned at the mess it made, a mess she would have to clean; no thrall or ghoul would be allowed down here to clean it.

But the deed was done. She walked over to the machine, a large thing of pipes, metal compartments, and digital readouts. It was a far older version of the resonance machine she used in her main experiments chamber, with Daniel and Natasha, but still young enough to have digital components. She set the frequency to high, and set the chandelier's wavelength to the strange blue.

Now, all that remained was to wait, as the humming sound vibrated along the walls, against the floor, and into the chandelier.



They did not have to wait long. The blue light faded away, hidden in the encroaching darkness, as black liquid began to drip from the metal ceiling. As if the ceiling had cracks in it, veins of black began to form over their heads, and soon began to bleed its ooze onto the floor. It was coming, and she folded her arms across her chest and suit jacket as she waited for the inevitable.

The alien creature took its time, ooze dripping both up and down from within the circle of summoning. It could not leave, or at least, if it did leave the circle it would have no essence to sustain itself. She doubted the creature needed to concern itself with such things, old and powerful as it was, and it remained within the summoning circle she had created purely for its own comfort.

The ooze filled the space, creating a pool of black two feet deep upon the summoning circle, as if pressed to glass around its edges. It also formed the same circle above, against the ceiling, over the chandelier, and the bleeding black dripped up and down continuously. The corpse disappeared underneath the slow waves, unable to float in the strange obsidian. At least, that was how it seemed at first, but one of its hands rose from the black. And then the other. And then, the corpse sat up.

“Well, butter my biscuits!” The corpse had adopted a new voice, and as black oozed from his eyes and nostrils, he looked at her as he stood up.

Antoinette raised her eyebrows, looked at Daniel, who only shrugged, before looking to the corpse. “... quoi?”

“Don’t worry yourself over it. Now, what can I do you for, high and mighty Prince of Slut City?” The strange corpse tilted his head to the sides, as if stretching his neck, and dusted off his shoulders. With body split open, throat to pelvis, much of what was supposed to be inside the body, fell out of the body. What things were not well attached, landed in the ooze, disappearing, while the man’s

intestines fell but remained attached to the body. Why the gory state was required, Antoinette did not know, but without it, the creature would not be summoned.

“I wanted to speak of your actions tonight.”

“Ah, yes, I figured as much. Love to have your fingers in everything, don’t you.” The corpse shrugged, and began to pace, hands in the small of his back.

“What is with the absurd accent? The last time we spoke—”

“Oh I dunno, just trying it out. This poor fool you brought me has nothing new. But Jacob, this one time, brought me a fellar from the South, and I—”

“Enough.” Antoinette shook her head, and glared at the body. “Show yourself. I have no intention of speaking with a corpse. Not this time.”

The corpse stopped moving, stared at her, and considered. For a moment she thought the entity might leave; it was her asking for its favor, in visiting after all, and yet she was demanding it abandoned the charade. But the entity, like Jacob, loved to talk, to toy with others, to be a thorn in their side. She had earned the right to see the creature itself.

“Fine.” The corpse fell back down into the pool. And once it was gone, underneath the waves of black, the room filled with darkness.

Antoinette took a step back, and looked around as the liquid fog filled the whole of the large chamber in mere moments. Daniel reached for his sword, and she did not stop him; she had expected the creature to at least stay where she provided it essence. It did not want to. The strange liquid crashed into the walls, but was weightless, not affecting her or Daniel despite it washing over them. It took only seconds for the two of them to be buried in its obsidian

depths. The blue light of the chandelier was almost gone, and Antoinette squinted to make out shapes in the dark.

There was a face, in the black. Except the face was at least twenty feet tall, and it floated over the corpse, looking at the two vampires. The eyes and lips, the nose and chin, all were vague blurs in the ink they swam in. But it was there, the creature, its actual body, encompassing them all in its presence.

It was terrifying.

She steeled herself, and frowned at the giant visage in the murky depths. This was the creature that haunted the shadows of her city, affected it in ways she could not understand, and undermined her efforts to control it. Determining how, exactly, the alien entity was undermining her was difficult, but in her studies, and Daniel's previous investigation, they had found many places where people behaved strangely, did strange things to each other. If she had not known better, she would have assumed them servants of the Circle of the Crone, these random kine who explored the functions of their own bodies with knives and needles.

This thing, this creature, was a menace, but she needed to know.

"Thank you," she said.

"Thank you?" Black Blood said, its unfitting Southern accent remaining, except now filled with overwhelming bass and inhuman depth that shook her body to the core. "You have nerve, little lady. I've offered you a truce, to let you be, while you leave me to mine, and you continue to poke your nose where it don't belong."

"My experiments do not affect you."

"Don't they?" The enormous face grinned at her as it chuckled, heavy voice causing the depths of the Earth to tremble. "You've

summoned denizens of my city. You acquired a seeing eye, at one point, didn't you?"

Seeing eye? The squid-like creature, she supposed, that had spoke of Maria's involvement. She could ask Black Blood about Maria directly, now that she had taken the time to summon the monstrosity, but that would expose that she did not know what Maria's intentions were. It would also expose that she believed the creature she and Natasha had summoned. Giving this alien entity any more information was not something she wished to do.

"I want to speak of your move against the hunters, tonight."

"Of course you do." The bleeding silhouette of black drifted around in her chamber; though, its size prevented much movement. Large as the room was, Black Blood's visage was enormous, and it had little room to move through the murky shadows. "Or, was it you want to know about monsters?"

"... both."

"And why should I tell you these things?"

"I believe it will benefit us both. You wish for things to continue as they do, do you not?"

"Heh. Well, Malachi might not appreciate me sharing the details. You want more info? Go ask my friend."

This new voice and attitude the spirit wielded was insufferable. She expected a colossal entity of unknowable intent, with voice as alien as the stars, to be difficult to understand. Instead, this creature dare impersonate a normal man, with a normal voice, and talk 'buddy buddy' about Jacob, as if Black Blood could understand friendship or comradery. It was a spirit, and understood only how to further its agenda, nothing more.

“But,” the spirit continued, “that boy you got under your thumb, the Terry boy. My oh my, I see potential in that little man. Jacob called it right.”

“W ... Why do you speak of my love?”

“Jack Terry? That kid is going places, Prince. And don’t worry about him, I’ll keep an eye out for him.”

The alien’s words only worsened her worry, a thousand fold.

“I ... I wanted,” she said, “to propose a deal.”

“A deal? With a spirit? Them’s dangerous waters, vampire. I’ll hold you to any deal you make.”

“I am sure you will.” Sighing, she began to pace, and did her best to ignore the black water that permeated everything. It was not real, or at least, it was not the physical body of Black Blood, only some effect of it. That did not make her feel better. “Chaos has come to my doorstep as a raging tide in a single year.”

“That it has.”

“And I fear these hunters will bring far more damage than we could have estimated.”

“Probably.”

“And—”

“And you want me to do something.” The inhuman voice chuckled, bassy rumbles vibrating her walls, and causing the black liquid to churn. “Me, who you have shunned and refused to speak with. Me, who you only discuss in dark corners, and ignore. Me, who rules the other side of your town. Our town.”

“ ... yes.”

“Well now, ain’t that something.” The voice chuckled yet again, breaking into more of a laugh, a very Jacob laugh. “Jacob and I have an agreement, little missy. You got a request for me? Ask him. And besides, I saved your boy, and the others. Way I see it, you owe me; but don’t you worry your pretty head none, Jacob will take care of it. In the mean time, how about you worry about yours, and I’ll worry about mine?”

“Black Blood!” She glared at the shadowy creature, its enormous face in the murky black, and clenched her hands into fists at her side. “Do not dismiss me so easily.”

“You had your chance. I’m done with you.”

And like someone had set off an explosive, the black liquid shot outward from the center of the room. The corpse upon the floor exposed, but unmoving, the dark ooze vanished into the nether as raging wind twisted and turned the onyx into the air, before it faded. In a single moment, like someone popping a balloon, Black Blood returned to its realm, leaving her and Daniel standing in the blue light of the chandelier, the hum of the resonance machine their background noise, and a corpse at their feet.

“Merde.” With a sigh, she turned around, and headed for the door.

# Chapter 73

~~Jack~~

Arriving in Jacob's cave was a weird experience. Climbing out of the remains of a kine's guts had been creepy as fuck, but not weird. It wasn't exactly something Jack hadn't figured the old Nosferatu had: sacrifice bowl, crazy symbols on the walls in blood, all the typical witchy witch stuff. The weird part was how there was a huge group of them, in what must have been a very private place. It had made him feel like he was crashing a séance or something. He was happy to get out of there.

Jessy, him, and Damien took a drive, and decided to drop by the Invictus HQ. There were thralls there they could feed on in emergency situations, and the three of them were beat up enough to warrant using them. Plus, they were the Right Hands of the Invictus, and had earned the right. The ride there was painful though, physically and mentally, and the three of them radiated depression with every long second.

Jack sat in the middle of the wide car, Damien and Jessy each taking a window. They all looked like they'd been through a war, and Damien's bandages only added to the painful image.

"How's your skull?" Jessy said.

"Throbs." Throbbing was weird. He didn't expect throbbing, since that was a function of blood being pumped through the body, irritated and swollen. The touch of air against the inner flesh and exposed bone insides, was agony, and every second he channeled his vitae as best he could into healing it. He could tell the inside of his skull was no longer exposed though, having healed somewhat, but

the eye was still gone, the bone still a mess, and he kept a hand over the wound half in fear of something inside falling out.

She pat him on the back and smirked at him. “You did good, coming to my rescue that quick.”

“Not quick enough.”

“Speed wasn’t the issue,” Damien said. “Unfortunately, they were more than prepared for any intrusion. Even Jacob and his ... friend, were expelled.”

Nodding, Jessy put her hands on her knees, and looked out the window. “I was out for most of Jacob’s crazy rescue. But, I think I was submerged in ... inside Black Blood? Fucking hell.”

Jack winced. Did they want to let the driver know about this? Well, it wasn’t a secret, he supposed, since the monsters and the werewolves knew.

“My sire cut off his hand for the ritual. Disturbing. And now he owes Jacob, I guess. More disturbing. And ... and...”

His two friends sighed, and sank into the seats of the car, as did he. Better to wait until they were out of the vehicle to talk about that.

---

After the three of them had a meal, and nearly sucked each thrall to death, they took time to sit down in one of the secure conference rooms. A big table for only the three of them, but Invictus knew their shit, and had soundproofed it.

“I let Angela live,” he said. Yep, off like a band-aid. Except the band-aid tore off hair and skin with it.

Damien nodded. “That ... was a mistake, I admit.”



“Yeap.” Nodding as well, Jessy leaned back in her chair, and slowly spun it around in a circle as she looked up. The three of them were still very beat up, but they would heal faster now, and once dawn arrived, their sleep would wipe the wounds away, mostly. “Can’t blame you though. You’re young, and her mom was right there, right?”

“My age shouldn’t be a factor.”

“Well, it is.” Shrugging, she continued to spin, like a kid who couldn’t sit still. “Julias, Maria, and Michael all agreed to make you a Right Hand, knowing full well you’re young. Embraced at, what, twenty? And with barely a year of your second life under your belt. They knew shit like this would happen ... not that they’ll be happy about it.”

“Athalia, on the other hand.” Damien pulled out his short sword, and began to spin it along his knuckles. Working on his control and dexterity, probably. “She was right there, and she asked you to stop. And I saw, Jack, that you were going to ignore her pleas, and kill Angela anyway. Too slow, though. So now Angela lives, and Athalia will not be happy with you.”

“Yeah, thanks for rubbing it in.” Jack lowered his head to set his forehead on the table; very, very gently. Still couldn’t see out one side of his face, and the attempt to open his eyelid was enough to shock his body still with pain. He was getting used to pain, but getting sick of it, too.

“Just assessing the situation. We were developing a strange partnership with Azamel, but now that you’ve offended Athalia, someone Azamel holds dear, the relationship may be strained.”

“That reminds me,” Jack said. “Damien, you almost got yourself killed!”

“I ... I know.”

Jessy raised a brow. “Think we all fit into that bill.”

“Damien did a crazy rush move to save Fiona.”

“Oh! Oh!” Jessy stopped spinning, and leaned over the table toward Damien. “Did it work?”

“... yes.” The Mekhet tried to hide the smile, but a small one got through.

“That is some guaranteed pussy.”

Jack lifted his head, and facepalmed; again, very gently. “It’s not guaranteed pussy, Jess. You can’t—”

“Sure, if Fiona was more of a feminist or something. But Fiona is a classic girly girl, who wants a man to rescue her, sweep her off her feet, throw her on a bed, and fuck her brains out.”

Jack stared at the Gangrel. The damn woman’s grin was big and unending.

“Jessy,” he said, “you are the most sexist person I know.”

“Pffft. Is it sexist if it’s true?”

“I...” Ok, weird topic, and he wasn’t exactly in a position to speak with authority. This was like a strange sort of sexual harassment from the boss, in a way, now that he thought about it. His senior making crass, rude comments about sex, and frequently. The Invictus had no HR department. And, just maybe, there was a little wisdom, in the asshole’s words.

“Um.” Damien squirmed a little, and twisted in his chair a bit. “I ... asked her to go on a date, when we escaped.”

“Aha!” Jessy slapped her palm against the table. All three of them groaned. “Shit, sorry. Arg, christ, my head.” Everyone took a

moment to let the pain settle, before she continued. “I’m telling you, Damien, she wants the D.”

“ ... the D?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “You spend too much time on the internet.”

“I do not! I just ain’t some antisocial twerp, like you!” She shrugged at him, and pulled out her phone. “But I got this Twitter thing going, and people just keep posting the most random, stupid, nonsensical shit. And for some reason, I keep reading it.”

“Stop.” Jack reached out, and pushed down on her phone. “Really, stop. It’s not healthy.”

She rolled her eyes, but put the phone away anyway, thank god. “She’s just a girl, so be gentle with her, Damien. But at the same time, she’s got a huge sex drive, so, be gentle with her, but make sure to fuck her lots. Here, I’ll give you some tips.” Jessy got up, walked around the table, sat beside Damien, and put her hands on the table. “So first you got the clit, right? You can treat that with some love, get some juicy orgasms, but it’s really an appetizer to better stuff. You got the g-spot, and then there’s these sweet spots really fucking deep in there, and—”

Jack threw up his hands. “Ok! Back onto the serious stuff.”

Damien nodded, and a quick glance from him showed his joy at being rescued. “Did you learn anything we didn’t, Jessy?”

“Not much. You know the monster’s name is Sándor, and he’s working for Jeremiah. Called him master. I did see that old bat Elen do some especially fucked up shit, drawing symbols in the fucking air with Eric’s blood! And she was nuts. Talked about voices, and treated the body like it was some sort of ... machine, I guess, like it was some sort of special, magical machine? And she was going to do drawings and shit, and somehow learn things from Eric’s body.”

Jack and Damien looked at each other, and winced.

“Yeah, that ... kind of makes sense, I guess,” Jack said. “Based on the rituals, we got the impression she was doing something with ... bodies, and ... haruspex.”

“What’s—”

“Divination by entrails,” he said. “Movies and stuff like to pass it off as a horror trope, as if religions thousands of years ago did it to humans. They really just did it to animals, but ... I mean, if this woman is doing this to people, in a way, then there’s something to the trope I guess.”

“Fucking nasty.”

Nodding, Damien shifted away from Jessy a little, who was still in close proximity. “The problem now, is that the hunters are likely to rely on this monster’s lair as their headquarters, and something tells me we won’t be able to get back in the same way. Jacob and his spirit friend either.”

Jessy put up her hands, and almost slammed the table again. Everyone winced in preparation, but she stopped herself in time. “I vote we stop feeling bad about the situation. We came out on top! You rescued yours truly, and two werewolves to boot. I saw that a few of the hunters died, so that’s a win. And we learned a shit load about what the hunters are up to. This Elen woman was trying to use Eric for haruspox, and—”

“Haruspex,” Jack said.

“Dude, whatever. She was using him to get information about Azamel. And there was a specific line one of them said, that he was going to give them information he knew, and information he didn’t know. This Elen is fucking scary.”

They all nodded. She sounded scary, yeah, and the picture Jack had seen of her made her seem like some sort of old witch. The new knowledge only added to that image.

Jack nodded toward her. “The gargoyle monster. Tell us about it?”

“Fucker was huge! I mean, when he came into Eric’s apartment, he was just an average looking white dude in a hoodie, bit of gruff on his face, some sort of European accent, and he could punch like a truck. In the nightmare though? Fucker pretended to be a statue, and got the drop on us. It was like fighting off a god damn giant, and the fucker had four arms and wings, so it wasn’t like a normal fight, right? I got behind him though, and Eric and Clara transformed and ... and...” Jessy smiled, dreamily, and stared off into space.

Jack and Damien blinked at each other, before Jack snapped his fingers in front of her face. “Allo?”

“Er, yeah. Werewolves get pretty big, right? But I can’t help but notice a lack of dick and balls.”

Jack exercised every ounce of restraint he could, to not slam his fractured skull and ruined face into the table. “You noticed that, while fighting?”

“Course I did. I have eyes. I notice everything.”

Yeah, no bias there, none at all, nope. Jack rolled his eye, and the sensation sent pain through him as his muscles tried to rotate the missing eye.

“But... ,” she continued, “you think that, like, it would come out, if they got horny in that form?”

“Jessy,” Jack said, “I’ve seen those beasts fight, and I’m telling you, the last thing you want to be thinking in the presence of a werewolf in their fighting form, is sex. They are titans of aggression

and animal instinct. They get caught up in violence like a human gets drunk. Blood drunk! You'll ... you ... you aren't listening to a word I'm saying."

Jessy had her elbow on the table, chin in her palm, and had resumed staring into nothing, with a happy smile on her face. At this point he was sure she was half doing it just to torment him indirectly with her refusal to take things seriously. But he was also sure she really did find a nine-foot-tall beast of muscle, teeth, and claws attractive.

Clara had been kind of attractive too, in a way, he supposed. Transformed, she did still have the curves of a woman, just put on an eight-foot body, with a short layer of fur all over it. Not exactly his cup of tea, but when she licked him, there was definitely a hint of femininity to her that had grabbed his attention.

Ok, now he was definitely hanging out with Jessy too much.

"I'm worried about Tash," Damien said. "She's still in the nightmare, and while I think we all trust Fiona, not sure we feel that way about Athalia anymore."

"Agreed," Jack said. "But I think she'll be fine. Athalia is too hurt to do anything, and I suspect she'll be out of commission for days. Azamel needs us to help with the hunters, so she'll push to make sure her Begotten don't harm us."

"Yeah, yeah ok."

"You should visit Fiona." Getting up, Jack stretched out, and regretted it. Old habits were going to kill him. He didn't need to stretch, didn't need to breathe, didn't need to do any of those things that he should stop trying to do while his corpse of a body healed itself. "Tomorrow night, I mean, after we've healed. After she's had a moment to heal, too, I assume. That includes you, Jessy."

“W-What? Hey, I will, I will.”

“And please don’t get yourself killed trying to seduce a wolf.”

“He’s a werewolf, Jack, not an actual wolf, or tiger or bear or whatnot. They can talk and shit while transformed.”

That all sounded like an admission of going-to-tap-that from the Gangrel, and Jack smirked at her as he started his walk to the safety sleeping vault. Julias didn’t want them making any trips outside the HQ for the rest of the night, and he could most definitely understand that. Time to get some sleep in the Xnomina basement; safe and secure behind many walls with a hundred thralls armed and ready.

But, would any of that stop a Begotten? It seemed like they could travel anywhere, and even around barriers.

He did not look forward to the nightmares that idea was going to give him.



~~Natasha~~

Nightmares. She did not like nightmares. Nightmares were a hot button for vampires, even if they tried to pass them off, because of how bad torpor could get for many of them. They were all afraid of them to some extent or another, and all of them were afraid of the long torpor, and how those nightmares could twist their minds. Seeing nightmares as actual things in front of her, that she could touch and taste and see and smell and hear with crystal clarity? She had to wonder if the long torpor would bring her nightmares like this.

She, Fiona, and the enormous skeleton in her hands came out of the darkness, and into more darkness. If she didn’t see another shadow for the rest of her second life, it’d be too soon. But, at least

this place had enough light to see by, and she groaned as she helped pull the giant skeleton into a graveyard.

It wasn't a classic graveyard, but something more like an elephant graveyard, if elephants were a hundred feet tall. The bones! The bones were so massive, and they had tusks and stuff, giant skulls that belonged on ancient, dead gods. They sat upon the sands, so colossal, they may as well have been buildings.

Tash gently set Athalia's arm down on the dark sand, and stood, staring. "Um ... if ... if the s-sun comes up here, will ... will it—"

"There is no sun here," Fiona said. "This nightmare, as most, does not change. If Athalia and I were not Eshmaki, then perhaps there would be cause for concern. But we are monsters of darkness, and our lairs are always dark." Sighing, exhausted, the spider woman let go of Athalia as well, and sat down beside a giant ribcage that was half buried in the sand.

Tash dragged herself over to her, and sat down beside her, each of them leaning back against a separate rib. Before her, was the endless desert, and the night sky, moonlight shining down on them all.

Total. Silence.

Tash strained her hearing as best she could, but all she managed to hear was Fiona's ragged breathing. There was no breeze in this graveyard, and no movement or chirps from any insect, arachnid, reptile, bird, or mammal. No clouds above. The moonlight was strong, the moon itself full, and the nightmare held no barrier between her and the sky. Everything was laid bare, and all that remained of whatever had existed here before, was sand, and bone.

It was a nightmare, and Fiona said these chambers didn't really change. So, it was someone's nightmare? What poor soul suffered this?



“A ... Angela...” Athalia managed to say, her once raspy, banshee screams and shrieks, now reduced to a pained whisper.

“She’s alive,” Tash said. “I tried t ... t-to kill her. So did Jack. She ... she—”

“Is a monster,” the skeleton monster said, half of her enormous jaw still missing. “I know. But ... she’s ... my monster.”

All Natasha could do, was frown at Athalia, and lean back. What words could she say? Athalia seemed like an intelligent woman, and no doubt anything Tash said was something Athalia had struggled with already.

“I appreciate ... w-what you did, though,” Tash said. “You helped us a lot. And even ... fought your d-d-d-daughter.”

“Seeing her again ... stirred memories.” With a great, heavy sigh, the giant skeleton tried to move. Nothing, only a few twitches of her arm. “She was always a problem child, and moving from city to city only made it worse. I left her with an orphanage, and ... only made things worse, I suppose.”

Seeing a skeleton creature lament past decisions about her daughter was a very strange sight, and all Tash could do was nod. It wasn’t a problem she’d ever have to deal with; that was a vampire’s curse, the inability to have children. Begotten? Uratha? Far as I knew, they could all procreate, if they had sex in their human forms. Uratha probably could if they had sex in their wolf forms, too, with normal wolves; weird thought. Vampires didn’t get to have children, they had childer. Not the same thing, not at all. Taking a tiny bundle of creation, and helping it grow into a human? There was something special and magical about that. A vampire spreading vampirism was more like a virus spreading the disease.

“I can’t b-blame you,” Natasha said. “I ... have a childe. Vivienne. I ... almost n-never talk to her. She’s her own woman now, w-working

for the ... Invictus. I ... I d-don't ... yeah." It was hard to convey the feeling of being inadequate at parenting. Harder, to convey the feeling of being inadequate at siring. There was no way to cross that communication gap, so Tash just shrugged, sighed as she pulled her knee up to her chest, and set her chin on it. "Will you be ok?"

"Yes. But ... I will heal faster, if you bury me."

Tash almost let the weirdness of that request shock her, but then she didn't. It was a graveyard, sort of, and Athalia was a skeleton when in the nightmare. Of course she'd want to be buried in order to heal herself. Some vampires did that, too, buried themselves deep where they felt more secure during the day. Gangrel could do it in strange ways, merging with the dirt and earth and stuff.

But burying a giant skeleton wouldn't be easy. With a groan, she crawled over to Athalia, literally, and started shoveling with her hands. The sand was cool, in the moonlight, so at least there was that.

"This chamber seems sp-p-pecial," she said. "Like, it was m-made for ... for someone like you?"

Fiona crawled forward beside her, and started cutting at the ground with her eight spider leg blades. They were sharp points, so not terribly good at shoveling, but it was better than nothing.

"Begotten have many chambers in their lairs, some more than others. I am young and have few, while Athalia has more. But we have hearts in our lairs, and those are precious to us, to our horror."

Heart of the lair. Interesting. And valuable information.

"Fiona," Athalia said, "don't tell her ... about things she doesn't need to know about."

"Friendship is founded on things like trust," Fiona said.

The skeleton grunted her disapproval, and the spider woman shrugged, but listened. No more info for Tash then. Hearts to their lairs? The heart of a building was a room, so she must have meant a room in her lair, a chamber, like the one they were in.

It took time to dig enough of the sand out of the way for the huge skeleton creature to get herself submerged. They only got her halfway into the sand, before Athalia set her enormous arms and head down against it. With a little wriggling, she got herself a little deeper, and nodded.

“Thank you,” the skeleton said, face down, head mostly submerged. Creepy. “We will talk ... again, I am sure. That Begotten working ... for ... Jeremiah ... will be a great threat.”

“Your w-w-welcome, bye.” She got up, and held out a hand to Fiona. The spider lady walked beside her, her spider legs all pressing to the sand behind her, but also her human-ish legs tip-toeing along the sand on their points. Fiona seemed to usually walk on her spider legs only, so, she was hurting pretty bad. A spider monster’s version of limping.

Once they were a ways away, Fiona guided them to a shadow behind one of the larger, strange, alien corpses, and again plucked at the darkness with her claws. Like before, she someone pulled open the shadow, like opening a door, and she motioned to the empty black she’d created before her.

“This burrow will lead into shadows around Bloodlust. I’m afraid a different burrow will be ... hard to make, right now. Is that close enough to where you’ll be going?”

“Y-Yes, it is, thank you. Will ... will you be ok?”

Fiona nodded her crown of horns, and gestured to the dark tear in reality she’d created. It was as natural to breathing to these monsters, moving between the dark corners of the Earth.

“Burrowing out of that gargoyle’s home would have been difficult in that situation, but my lair is connected with Athalia’s. I can get back home easily.”

Home. Fiona called her nightmare home. That was a key difference between monsters and the other paranormals, she supposed. As far as she knew, the Uratha, for Avery’s pack at least, they all considered normal, physical, planet Earth to be their home, like the vampires did.

Her home was in the tower of the most powerful vampire she knew; her boss, too. And her boss would be dying for an info update.

With a nod and smile, she waved to Fiona.

“T-Take ... take care of yourself. I think D-Damien likes you.”

She laughed, and ran a clawed hand along one of the massive horns on her head. “I ... I think you’re right.”

“Oh! Um, I m-mean, more than just b-b-because he rescued you, but also—”

“We’re going on a date, soon.” The spider monster smiled at her, a very Fiona smile, and pushed her through the black.

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Bloodlust it was, the alley outside, in the darkest corner.

Ugh! No more dark! No more dark things, no more shadows, no more black, obsidian, onyx, raven, jet, ebony, none of it!

She limped out into the fake lights of Dolareido streets, and sighed relief as she found herself able to actually see everything without having to squint or focus. It wasn’t a far walk to the Elysium Tower, and this close to it, she didn’t need a buddy to travel safely. Limping sucked, but a ten minute limp was a small price to pay to get to the safety of the Prince’s walls.

But, first, check in. She pulled out her phone and sent the Prince a quick message informing her she was on the way. And a message for her boyfriends, saying she was alright, and that they better be alright too. And finally, most importantly, a message for Jessy.

~Hey Jessy. I'm back in Dolareido. Heading to Elysium Tower now.~

~Hey Tash. We need to hook up and chat! Need to thank you for the rescue.~

~Thank Jack.~

~I did, no worries. Your boys alright?~

~They'll heal ... I think. And Eric?~

~He went back to his place. I got a bunch of ghouls guarding him while he sleeps. And the Invictus are going to be guarding the area from now on.~

~Smart, but after what happened, I think it'll be some time before the hunters make another move against us.~

~Probably, but I don't want to risk it.~

~Getting attached to Eric?~

~I think I am.~

~He strikes me as a monogamy lover, Jess.~

~Hey, I can try monogamy!~

~I think I remember you detailing to me, frequently, how much you dislike the idea.~

~Yeah well ... fuck you, that's what.~

Tash rolled her eyes. Jessy didn't really understand how much the tone of her words didn't come through in texting, and instead of her sounding fun and spontaneous, her aggression sounded mean and harsh. But Tash was used to it by now.

~I'll talk to you later, Jess.~

~Later.~

With a small chuckle, she walked up the stairs of the tower's front door. She waved to the man at the front desk, and started her way down the stairs in the back. Down a few flights of stairs, and into the Prince's main experiments room, where she usually found the Prince doing her work. Not there. Hmm. Shrugging, Tash moved down another flight of stairs, and poked her head into the Prince's favorite lounge room, the one with the dragon fountain. The lights were on, and set to white. Thank god, light.

"Natasha, my dear. Please, sit, relax. I am glad to see that you are safe." The Prince was sitting on the couch, but where she would normally be reading, she was sitting with nothing in her hands, body turned and staring at the fountain, her back snug to the couch.

"Prince, you seem d-distracted."

"Oui. Julias has informed me of the results of your mission. It displeases me that the entity Black Blood has involved itself so ... acutely." With a sigh, she looked Tash's way, and a frown graced her otherwise preoccupied expression. "Your leg?"

Tash was sitting, and the Prince noticed the bad leg. Impressive, and it made Tash smile. "It br-broke, when the hunters ... blew up the door we were going t-to open."

"These hunters are frustrating, are they not?" Sighing again, the Prince leaned back on the couch, and looked up. "I have dealt with hunters many times through my life."

“You have?”

“Indeed. None of them have been as tenacious, as well prepared, or grouped in such a large number as these. There were times, two centuries ago and before, when mobs would gather and burn down a vampire’s estate, under suspicion they were a vampire. One of the few times superstition worked against us, not for us. I feel like I am in a similar situation, where a mob has come to burn down my estate; in this case, my city. And no vampire, no matter how strong, dismisses the threat of a hundred peasants with torches; or in this case, flamethrowers and molotov cocktails.”

It was easy to forget that Antoinette wasn’t always the modern, mature, Prince of Dolareido. There was a time when she was young, learning her power, developing her connections in the Ordo Dracul, and growing her fortune and kingdoms. What sort of mistakes did Antoinette make when she was younger? Opening a door with explosives on the other side, probably not, but there was probably a similar comparison somewhere. Maybe, like she said, she opened a door to a bunch of peasants with torches.

The thought put another small smile on Tash’s lips. Antoinette making mistakes was a hard thing to imagine, and forcing herself to picture it helped put her boss in a more relatable light.

“Please, describe to me details that Mire may have left out.”

“Um, s-sure. The descriptions we have of Jer-r-remiah and Angela are accurate. But, I noticed, w-when they were retreated from ... B-B-Black Blood’s intrusion, that they are trained.”

“Hunters are notorious for developing skills a typical kine would not.”

“Y-Yes, but they were trained like ... like professionals. They had formations, signals they m-made with their hands, and they knew how t-to respond to chaos quickly.”

“That is a step above the typical hunter.” With another sigh, Antoinette pulled some of her wavy hair over her shoulder, and began to slowly comb it with both hands. “Most hunters are one, maybe two, sometimes three individuals, rarely with any training at all. But they train themselves, learn through trial and error, and become formidable. Never a professional though, as you describe.”

“Have ... have you known many hunters?”

“I have met several, in my life time. Some are from an age I cannot remember. But, perhaps eighty years ago, I met one. A man, with every classic issue you could imagine from a hunter. His wife had been killed by a Kindred only days after their wedding, and the man witnessed it. He went down a rabbit hole, buried himself in the lore of our kind, and of other paranormals. For ten years, he dedicated his life to hunting us, after he realized it was impossible to expose us to the public.” Kindred had their fingers in the police, media, and governments. Exposing them through those means would be borderline impossible. “A hunter’s life had destroyed any chance I had of speaking with the man. Ten years of dealing with monsters — and I do not deny that there are many Kindred worthy of the descriptor — had rendered him unwilling to communicate. In the end, I was forced to kill him.”

“You ... you sound sad, about-t-t that.”

The woman lowered her eyes to her fingers and hair, and went silent for a moment as she watched her fingertips coil the ends of white strands. “ ... I am, dear Natasha. He did not deserve death. A part of me wonders, if these hunters we kill do. From what everyone has told me, Jeremiah and Angela sound worse than the hunter I met, by far. They sound like...”

“L-Like psychopaths.”

The word earned the Prince’s glance, and nod. “Yes, that they do.”



“And Angela, she ... she seemed healthy and f-fine, physically.”

“Another anomaly. Considering the damage Jack says she suffered, a normal kine would be in a hospital for weeks, and unable to push themselves for months.”

“I shot her though! Shot her, and J-Jeremiah twice. B-But only the limbs.”

“A shame. But considering how the night went, you did better than the others.” The Prince smiled at her, and Tash beamed. Old as Tash was, she still got a schoolgirl joy out of making her boss proud, even when that boss was Maria. “Wounding those two should have bought us some time, then. Make sure to enjoy yourself for the next few days.”

Enjoy herself? She could do that. She was pretty sure she knew how Jessy was going to enjoy herself, too. Hopefully the girl didn't become a snack for a wolf in the process.

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~~Eric~~

The next night since the incident, and Eric felt a million times better. He healed fast, damn fast; though the silver bullet and silver knife wounds were still tender. Good thing he healed quick, because he had another shift at Bloodlust, and while the vampires seemed to treat the place like nothing more than a place to drop by for a cheap meal, it was his new livelihood. Had to earn it, keep the vamps happy, and keep a paycheck for his dad.

Christ, his dad. The fuck would have happened to the old man if Eric had died? The vamps owed him for helping save Jack, but he doubted that extended to his family members.

He had to visit his dad again, and get in his weekly allotment of guilt and self loathing.

With a groan and sigh, he sat up, reached out for Kat, and pet her. She was on his bed as usual, and let out a quiet meow to let him know she was aware he was awake. He smiled at the feline, and leaned in to kiss her head, which she returned with some head bumps against his chin. If he died, Kat would be fucked, too. He wasn't sure which one he cared more about.

Sighing, he got up out of bed, and peeked around his light-blocking curtains. Yeah, sun just went down, so the vampires would be getting up. He still had a few hours until his shift, so it was a good time to relax, eat something, take a shower, ponder life and the hell it'd dropped on his lap, the usual. The ghouls that had been watching him were gone; falling asleep with them outside his apartment door had been tough, but he could tell they were loyal. Once he was under, he slept like a stone.

First, a quick bite to eat. Some meat. Some raw meat. Something in him told him he didn't want to cook it, that he'd be happier eating it raw, and it wasn't like he had to worry with his new body. Delicious. He gave some to Kat as well; if he could eat raw meat, it wasn't like a true predator like her wouldn't be able to.

Second, a shower. He tossed his clothes onto the bed, stepped into the ridiculously fancy bathroom, and turned on the water. Pleasantly hot. With a long, heavy sigh, he put his hands against the shiny, tile wall, and let the water wash over his bald head. It was turning into a buzz, and he should probably shave it before heading out. The apartment was still beat up, too, but some patch work had plugged the hole in the bathroom wall. He—

He lifted his head, and looked to the door of the bathroom, as he heard the front door open. The footsteps were confident, but a bit light, and whoever it was took off their shoes; it wasn't the ghouls. Yeah, only one person would do that.

And only one person would hear the shower running, and take that as an invite to come in.

“Feeling better?” Jessy said.

“I am, yeah. If you keep walking into my apartment whenever you want, you’re liable to get a punch in the face, though. Especially my bathroom. Not on purpose, course, just a reflex if you surprise me.”

Jessy grinned, sat on the edge of his tub, palms to the white surface, and watched him shower. With the shower’s lack of glass barrier, the water was free to drain into the drain hole in the center of the bathroom. Bathroom was so damn big, Jessy remained dry as she watched him. And judging from the small points of her nipples against her tank top, she was already blushing like hell. He could hear her heart beating, despite the falling water hitting his skin; that was unusual. It sounded excited, very excited, more excited than he’d come to expect from the hornball. Why?

“You’re welcome to try. I love a good fight.”

“I noticed.” It was hard to not look at her, but if she wanted to watch him shower, then he was going to shower. And he was no boy, he was a man, with enough willpower to not throw himself at the pretty woman the moment she showed interest. At least, a little more willpower, enough he wasn’t getting hard, yet. “Where’s Fiona?”

“Hoping she’d come?”

“Honestly? Nah. That Damien kid—”

“Dude was sired young, but he’s got half a century of his second life under his belt.”

“Does he? From the way he acted at Bloodlust, I’d have figured he was a kid. Young, at least.”

“I guess he kind of is. He spent those fifty years hiding in the city underbelly. He’s a damn good Mekhet, but he’s had little interaction with people, outside of being a fucking zealot.” Shrugging, she got up, walked over to him, and leaned her shoulder against the wall only a few feet away. It was close enough for some of the water hitting him to mist over her clothes. She didn’t seem to care.

“I’m pretty sure he and Fiona are a better fit.”

“I guess. She’s young, and super sweet. He’s bitter as hell, and could use someone like her to lighten that a bit, you know?”

“I’m not bitter?”

“Ha! You are, but in a more masculine, badass, brooding man sort of way. Damien’s like an emo goth boy; I could put mascara on him and it’d fit perfectly. I’m sure he’d be a hit with high school girls, and young women who haven’t grown up yet, like Fiona.” Chuckling, Jessy undid the zipper of her jeans, and slid them off. Those legs, damn those were nice legs. “A shame. I was looking forward to getting her on your dick, and I could just play with her tits and stuff while that firecracker came her brains out.” She kicked off her jeans and threw them aside with all the care of the slob roommate everyone hates. The toned legs, large, firm ass, and the small underwear, basically a thong, alleviated any frustration he may have had.

“I guess I regret her missing too, then.” That was a nice image, he had to admit. And picturing the busty little creature sitting on him while Jessy played with her body, was getting his blood pumping. That was the vampire’s goal, no doubt.

“But you know what?” She scooped up her tank top, and tossed it aside as well, left in a black bra and panties. “I kind of want you to myself. At least for a little while.” He raised a brow, soaping his chest as he watched the beautiful woman undo her bra, and slip out of her underwear. God damn. Torturing him, she cupped both of her

large breasts in her hands, and bounced them a few times; the woman delighted in playing to stereotypical porn fantasies, and as ridiculous as that was, she did it with such confidence that he was entranced. She winked at him, stepped under the water, and took the soap. Standing in front of him, she guided the soap around his body, and chewed on her bottom lip as she moved the bar over his dark skin, his abs, his waist, and his shoulders. “Get a loofa.”

“Don’t got one. Never really saw the point in a loofa.”

“Because you’re a man, and men are dumb.” Shrugging, she leaned back against the wall underneath the shower, and spread her legs. “You owe me for the handjobs. Get crackin’.”

This woman, wow. Did all vampires get horny so easily? He grinned at the beautiful warrior, and how the hot water flattened her short blond hair to her head. She called Fiona a firecracker, but he could smell the arousal growing on Jessy’s body, see it in her hardened nipples, hear it in her quickening heartbeat. With a quiet, rumbling growl, he got down onto a knee between her knees, set the soap aside, and placed his hands on her thighs. Smooth, and hard with muscle.

“You want me to yourself?” he said.

“Yeap.”

“What does that entail?”

“It entails—nng!” She let out a moan, a loud one, and set her hands against the wall of his bathroom, as he kissed her clitoris. Completely hairless, there was nothing to stop him from bathing the little nub in slow, gentle licks, and offer a few suckles of her labia. “Fucking hell. It entails dating, you know? Like, monogamy, and lame shit like that.”

He pulled his head away, and tilted it a bit as he looked up at her. The way water ran down over her large breasts, down over her flat stomach, and down to her thighs, was intoxicating to watch.

“You into monogamy now?”

“I am ... willing to try new things. Because—fuuuuck.” Her voice cracked and wavered, as he eased two fingers into her clenching muscles. Middle and ring finger spread open her hot, gripping flesh, and her hot juices trickled down onto his palm, only to be washed away in the hot water. Aroused and ready, in a single minute. Holy shit. “Because I’ve been doing the single girl enjoys nightly orgies for decades now. Time to change things up, see what a relationship can be like.”

She’d never been in a serious relationship then. Did she even understand what that meant?

“I don’t think I can satisfy you as well as an entourage of men.”

“Heh, I think I’ll be fine. Besides, I—” She shivered, and reached down with both hands to touch his head, as he kissed her clit again. “I can get some more people into our bed, if I ever get bored. You cool with that?”

“Uh, well—”

“Yeah yeah, you’re a dude, and dudes got this weird thing with other dudes in the bed, hands on their girl. Ugh, Tash is so lucky.” She rolled her eyes again, before pressing on his head, and guiding it back to her clit. “You wouldn’t mind if I invited a girl or two though, would you? Not for a while, cause I want you to myself for now. But in the future, maybe?”

“You know you don’t have to do that. I’m plenty happy with a woman like you, and only one, in bed.”

“Course you are, fucking dumbass. I’m amazing.” She rolled her eyes again, reached down, and guided the wrist of the penetrating hand to continue fingering her. Curling the fingers, and pressing them against her g-spot, earned another loud moan from her, and she relaxed back against the gleaming tile wall. Satisfied. “I meant for me. More hands and fingers opening things up, right? And, when I was watching Tash fucking my ghouls, I really ... really got off on that. Girl had the tiniest little slit you’ve ever seen, no lips or anything, clit hiding between the folds. Wouldn’t mind seeing some girl riding you in the future some day, while I do things to her. Not like she’d be a part of the relationship, just some extra pussy every now and then.”

Trying to handle this woman’s sex drive was going to be difficult. Or it would have been, before his change. He had to admit, the idea of fucking several women with his new found endurance was appealing. But, not as appealing as fucking Jessy, and fucking her properly.

He started to work his hand back and forth, while curling his fingers toward her g-spot a little harder, and licking her clit a little faster. The moans got louder, constant, and she held onto his head again as her body started to tremble. With time, his fingers worked back and forth hard enough to make her wriggle, and for her large ass to bounce against the wall slightly.

A minute later, she was cumming. She reached out and grabbed his head, as she groaned, loudly.

“Fuuuck ... st-stop licking, but ... but keep ... fingering.” Talking, mid orgasm, and giving him directions. He almost laughed at how insane her confidence was, but the sight of her muscles crunching and body trembling, breasts jiggling, and ass jiggling as well with how hard he was fingering her, was too intoxicating to find funny. Her eyes were half closed, and she was smiling at him, that self-

assured smile, despite how obvious it was she was cumming and cumming hard.

After another ten seconds of fingering her, forcing her orgasm to go on and on, he eventually slowed down, and eased his fingers out of her. They were soaked in her cum, and he stared at how much of it there was, before the hot water washed it away.

“You act like you’ve never made a girl cum before.” Laughing, she grabbed the hand he was admiring, turned off the shower with the other, and started the walk toward his bedroom, him in tow.

“I have, just—”

“Wife a cold fish?”

“No ... well, compared to you, yes.”

She laughed, rolled her eyes, and slapped her wet ass as she reached the edge of the bed, hard enough to make it ripple. “Because I’m awesome. How many times I gotta say it?” She climbed onto the bed, got onto her hands and knees, and grinned at him over her shoulder. One of her hands found an ass cheek, and she spread herself, showing her soaked lips. “Get to it.”

Rolling his eyes, mimicking her, he climbed onto the bed as well, and knelt behind her. He took a moment to admire the size and tone shaped of her ass, and set both his hands on it to knead it for a little while. She was shivering; not afraid or embarrassed, but orgasm aftershocks were still working through her. To get up and walk around, talk, and act like nothing was up, when he could see her pussy clenching, leaking juices, sent fire into his belly. So damn bold, and he was drawn to it like a fly to honey.

While one hand held her hip, the other slid down to her thighs, and pressed his two fingers against her trembling entrance. Hot, and



wet with so much more than water. He eased the two digits into her, palm down, and curled his fingers, pressing down against her g-spot.

She arched her back, moaning, and he groaned at the sight of her cat-like figure bending. The vampire knew she had a large, shapely ass, and she was showing it off. His grip on her hip tightened, and he pushed his fingers down harder.

“Deeper,” she said, looking over her shoulder at him. “Know that spot? Deep as you can go.”

He grinned at her, and pushed the two fingers in to the knuckle. Deeper, deeper as he could go, so his knuckles were pressed to her labia, and soaking themselves in her juices, as he pressed against her deep spot.

The response was immediate, and loud. Jessy tightened her fingers around the blankets underneath her, and started pushing her ass toward his hand, until his knuckles were practically entering her. He had to fight against her motion to keep her in position, and he let out a quiet, rumbling growl as he watched the lean fighter begin to rock her body back and forth. Each time he pressed down on that spot deep inside her, toward her belly, her muscles clenched down on his fingers, and he had to fight the vise grip of her depths to keep his fingers moving.

She lasted five minutes, and came again. He stared on, and continued to finger her cunt as deep as his fingers could reach, as she started to tremble. She lowered her head to the pillow, and set her cheek to it, weight on her elbows and chest, ass in the air. Whether she was arching her back downward by accident, or to purposefully arouse him, he wasn't sure anymore, with how her muscles kept clenching and ass kept pushing against his hand. But either way, she created a long curve of her spine up to her ass, highlighting the shape of her body, to the point he was left staring until his jaw dropped.

“I ... know ... right? I ... am fucking ... gorgeous,” she said between her moans, eyes grinning at him from the pillow. No mewls or whimpers like with Fiona, only groans and animal sounds he expected Uratha made when fighting or fucking. “Come on, get in here.” Recovering, she pushed herself back up onto her hands, reached back, and pulled aside her thigh. It spread her vulva, exposing where his fingers were penetrating her, and where a couple drops of her juices slowly dripped from her smooth lips.

He knelt behind her, his knees outside hers, and eased his fingers out of her. A sultry moan pulled his eyes to hers, only to find her grinning at him, as he wrapped his cock in his dripping digits. He returned her smile, and nudged the head of his cock against her boiling entrance. Slowly, he slid his aching glans into her clenching muscles, and again the woman made a sultry moan, before she added a growl to it. Trying to imitate his, maybe.

The feel of wet, clenching, hot flesh around his cock’s swollen head sent sparks of pleasure down his length. He returned the growl with a deep, rumbling purr, something in his chest that vibrated out through his limbs, and earned another shiver from the vampire. With the tip of his length inside her, he set both hands onto her hips, and slammed himself into her. Like he’d hoped, her ass rippled with the impact, and molded to his pelvis.

“Fuck!” Groaning all the more, she let her head dangle between her shoulders. “Fucking ... caught me by surprise.”

After bringing the girl to orgasm twice already, and watching her amazing body wriggle, Eric could feel himself on the edge of his own orgasm, precum dripping into the woman’s cunt. In the past, it’d be a signal to slow down, but he knew his new body would be ready to go multiple times. And every bit of him, every shred of him, every instinct he had, wanted to take this lithe, strong, powerful creature, pound her into submission, and fill her with cum. The need, the

instinct, was new, and almost overwhelming, a drive added to what was there before, now a hundred times stronger.

He drew back his hips, and slammed into her again, hands on her waist keeping her from bouncing away as he sank every inch of his length into her. Moans filled the room. Jessy did not give a shit if anyone could hear her sounds, all she cared about was enjoying the moment; he loved that. Tightening his grip, he slammed his pelvis into her again, and watched her large ass jiggle with the impact. He could feel his length spreading her open, feel her soaked muscles clench along every inch, and feel his glans push in her depths; painful to some, but she'd made it clear that she liked it deep.

She arched her back deep, ass high in the air, and pressed it against him, meeting his thrusts so each slam of his pelvis caused her buttocks to ripple. A bead of sweat started to form on her body, and then another, fake sweat, but appealing nonetheless to see her beautiful body dripping. Nothing compared to the hot juices soaking his cock and trickling down his testicles, though.

They lasted only moments.

Jessy fell to her chest again, head to the pillow, turned so she could look over her shoulder at him. Her fingers dug through the blankets, bundled them up in her fists, and she moaned with each thrust as he continued to drive his pelvis into her ass. She was soaking him, hot juices coating his length to the point each thrust earned a tiny splash. The vise grip of her depths filled the length of his member with rippling bliss waves, glans growing hyper sensitive as he felt the warmth of his cum gushing up his cock. Soon it was pouring into her, and the third stroke was enough to have it joining her own juices, leaking down over his testicles and her thighs.

As the orgasm slowed, he buried himself to the hilt, stretching her depths inward, and ground himself against her body. She mewled like a cat in heat, kicked her feet into the blankets a few times as he

held her hips tight, and moved her butt an inch up and down against him. Her trembling cunt milked him, massaged him, pulled more of his seed from him almost painfully, as the waves of pleasure eased off.

Taking a deep breath, he sat back, and let his cock slip out of her. With a quiet plop, his swollen cock head fell from her shivering entrance, and he watched as trickling streams of white oozed down over her folds and clitoris, some catching along her stomach with how she was still on her chest, ass in the air. Her thighs were trembling. What a ridiculous amount of cum; something to do with his new body, maybe.

“M-More?” she said, voice wavering. “You ... can really let loose, you know? I mean ... really. Try it.”

This again. He raised a brow as he looked at the gorgeous woman, but his eyes drifted toward her ass, her dripping lips, and clenching entrance, as she started to sway her ass from side to side. Like tempting a dog by waving a bone in front of his face.

“You sure?”

“Yeah! Give it to me, whatever you want. Get aggressive, wolf man.”

Whatever he wanted. In the past, that'd have been to enjoy some good, quality, equal sex that both parties were active participants in. Still wanted that, of course. But he had to admit, a part of him really want to pin this rascal, this mischievous troublemaker, this trickster demon, to the bed, and take her. Not just take her, but take her with the wolf inside him, that was rumbling purrs at her temptations.

He got off the bed, and turned to face her, knees to the bed's edge. She smiled at him, until he grabbed her hips, and yanked her over to him, earning a surprise squeak from her; a very not-Jessy sound. He stared down at the sight of her large ass in the air, and the mix of

their fluids leaking out of her, down her thighs, and down her stomach where her chest was pressed to the blankets. He stared down over her at the sight of her curved back, her muscular and lean shoulders, the tiny waist and extreme hour glass figure. He wanted to devour her. He wanted to ravage her.

He began to change. A part of him knew this was dangerous and stupid, but a much larger part of him really wanted to give in, to let the animal in him out, and take this gorgeous thing. This gorgeous, little thing. As he felt the size and weight of him increase, as he felt the muscles expand, the bones grow, the fur emerge, Jessy grew smaller, and smaller. She forced herself back up onto her hands, but when she tried to turn around, he didn't let her, titanic hands holding her increasingly small waist and hips. Her jaw dropped, while his grew longer, a snout, fangs, and a deep, guttural, rumbling growl.

“Fucking ... god.” She stared up at him, up and up, as soon he had to lean his head forward, to keep it from hitting the ceiling. The room was barely tall enough to handle his height, and he licked his array of teeth as he felt power course through his limbs and body. He looked down again at Jessy, the vampire, the little creature on her knees before him, and he breathed deep in the scent of sex; overwhelmingly her.

Take her. Pin her down. She's yours. Dominate. Own. She's yours, enjoy her. Take her. Take her.

He looked at his hands, gargantuan around her tiny body; his new hands were large enough that one was almost able to circle her waist. He set one hand back on her hips and waist, capturing her, burying most of the lower half of her body in his single hand, while his other reached down for his cock, and raised it to set the heavy slab of meat along the crack of her ass.

His cock was much longer, and much thicker. The skin had changed, veined and engorged with red, every inch of the length sensitive and hungry for stimulus. The base of it was thicker, too, before tapering where it connected to him. Heavy, dangling testicles had emerged from his body, not usually there, but the need to satisfy his arousal had awoken a change in his body, a change he was going to indulge.

“E ... um, Eric, I ... I uh ... don't think ... that'll ... fit.” She gulped, and stared at the heavy thing sitting between the two delicious mounds of soft muscle and fat. Again, she tried to turn over. Again he didn't let her, grip around her waist tightening.

He growled down at her, deep, loud, until the vibration worked through her body. She squeaked, and stopped struggling, staring at him instead. He wanted her. He wanted to own her, be in her, dominate her, take her and make her his.

He guided his heavy, fat shaft to the entrance of her dripping pussy, and pressed the slightly pointed glans against her quivering folds. The woman stared at him all the more, and her body trembled as she pulled at the blankets. She was trying to get away. He didn't let her.

He rumbled another growl, deep enough to send vibrations through the bed. The tiny creature with cum dripping down her thighs gulped again, and again pulled away, using her knees to push against the bed. She was weightless in his grip, and could do nothing, as he began to force his cock into her quivering cunt.

“Fuck! Fuuuck ... oh ... oh god...” Her eyes were locked onto him, his body, the stack of abs leading down to his illiac furrow, and the enormous shaft he was pressing against her. Clenching, drenched muscles started to spread, forced open, as he slowly eased the first inch of his length into her, and then another, and another.

It was enough he no longer needed to hold his shaft in hand. He set the wet array of fingers and claws on his prey's shoulder, burying it, half her back, and much of her arm in his grip. Rumbling yet again, he pulled the tiny creature's ass closer to him, and his rumble turned into a low, long, deep growl, as her tiny entrance spread taut around his cock. He pushed deeper, sank another inch, and another, until his glans pressed against the squirming vampire's depths.

"I ... I know I said ... d-don't pay any mind to anything I might say, but ... holy shit, I'm going to—nng!" Her voice gave away, and a mix of groan and whimper escaped her, as he pushed in another inch. And another. And another. Her depths gripped all the tighter, earning more rumbling purrs from him as the hot, soaked flesh of her insides massaged his cock. Her pussy was taut around his girth, and grew tighter again as he forced in another inch.

He leaned down over her, his haunched posture keeping his weight on his feet, as he brought his titanic chest over her body. He took a long moment to admire the hourglass of her physique, before he brought his face, his snout, in close to her head. With her head lifted and turned, still staring at him, he was able to bring his snout down to her neck, and bring one of his eyes beside her face.

She gazed into it, trembling, frozen.

"Mine," he said, voice rumbling with bass. It wasn't his voice, it was the beast's voice, a giant wolf's voice.

"I ... w-what?"

"You. Are mine."

"Y ... I uh ... nng!" Her voice raised, before her eyes rolled upward, as he began to ease himself out of her. His new thickness left no space inside her cunt, and each inch he pulled from her was heavenly friction along his cock from her taut pussy. With each

inch, she squeezed, hard, and her juices coated the length of him, renewed again and again, until droplets of her cum were trickling down onto the fur of his testicles, and thighs. Each inch he withdrew, her inner lips exposed themselves as her clenching, soaked muscles, did their best to keep him from moving.

He pulled her back toward him, a little faster, and he kept his massive snout beside her head, burying her in his shadow, a couple drops of his saliva dripping from his teeth onto the bed by her hand. She continued to stare at him, eyes wide, her own mouth open as her moans escaped, unending. Grip solid and absolute, he pulled her deeper, and deeper, and forced her insides in deeper than before, until they began to resist. He kept going.

“Eric! F ... you’re going to ... to ... tear me apart.” Her head collapsed between her shoulders, and he leaned in to offer her shoulder and neck, where his hand left it exposed, a long lick. A distant memory told him, reminded him, that she’d said this was ok, that she wanted this, that he was to ignore her begging. But another part of him knew, even if her pleas were legitimate, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself, not now, not anymore. He needed to be inside her, every inch, now.

Growling into her ear, rumbling deep, filling her, the bed, and the room with its vibrations, he pulled her onto his body, deeper, his cock stretching her until the taut muscles of her drenched insides were almost painfully tight. With one hand circling her waist and hips, the other holding one of her shoulders and half her torso, he sank the thicker, bulbous shape of his cock’s base into her, and pinned his beautiful mate balls deep onto his cock. Pushing in the last few inches of his cock, where the thicker, round shape had to be forced in hard, made the vampire whimper, loudly, a desperate sound that sent his blood into a boil.

She collapsed, arms giving out as she trembled, more of her cum leaking down his testicles as he ground his weight against her. As



her torso fell to the blanket, he pushed down with his further hand, and pinned her chest to the bed. She did not struggle. Ass in the air, head turned on the blanket so she could look up at him, she shuddered, and let out a squeaky moan, as he eased an inch of his length out of her, only to push it back in, keeping the thicker girth of his cock's base inside her, her cunt's inner lips snug around its tapering edge.

He did not want to leave her. Her insides were divine, tight, trembling and clenching, milking, and soaked. Her sounds, grunts and groans, as he kept her pinned to the bed and continued to gently fuck her, were intoxicating. She was his. All his.

The first waves of pleasure, rippling down every inch of his length, earned more rumbles from him. Heat flowed up his length, and he leaned down over his mate all the more as he pressed his weight against her shoulder. His other kept her bountiful ass balls deep against him, as he offered small, weak thrusts into her stretched insides; gentle for him, but each pulled a little whimper from her, as his thick fluid poured into her. His cum overflowed her taut depths instantly, and white fluid flowed out of her, down his testicles, and flowed down her thighs. He thrust again, forcing his mate to squeak and mewl, as she gripped on his cock all the harder, and her ass rippled against the fur of his pelvis. Some of his cum splashed outward from their connection, hitting his pelvis, while more of it rolled down her thighs, and down her stomach.

After coating her depths several times, he pulled out his massive length, and set it against the crevice of her buttocks. The heavy thing molded slightly to the curvature of her ass under its own weight, and squirted a couple more, thick waves of his seed, only for it to land along the woman's back, soaking her curving spine, shoulders, and neck, in white. He let go of her waist, and offered a gentle nudge to the side, causing his mate to fall over onto her hip and side.

“F ... fuck...” She managed to keep the pillow under her head, but did not move, limp on the blankets, ass to the side, and fluttering eyes on him.

Rumbling more of his satisfied purrs, he set his cock along the side of her waist, and enjoyed the final waves of bliss, gently nudging his titan body back and forth to rub to swollen, hard shaft against her sweating skin, from hip to waist, to rib, to the underside of one of her breasts. Another gush of his cum poured onto her, coating her, flowing over her and soaking skin in his seed. Another, and another, thick droplets of the opaque fluid trickling down over her abs and the underside of her breasts.

With a minute to recover, his undead mate managed to turn onto her back, and stared up at him, gasping, panting, her legs spreading and hanging off the bed. She looked him up and down, and with him standing at his full height, his ears flattened against the ceiling as his skull pressed to it. Her eyes fell lower, to her own body, and the layers of cum that covered her.

“Holy shit,” she said.

He rumbled down at his mate, and lowered himself again, burying her in his shadow as he set both hands against the blankets around her. Squatting down low, his cock fell upon her abs, testicles pressing against her dripping pussy, and she stared at how the length of the heavy slab reached past her navel.

“You fucker, you ... that ... you...” Her eyes looked back up to him, and stared into his, as he came in closer, and closer, bringing his jaw to hers, until she could no doubt feel the weight of his breath. He rumbled, purring bass, and earned some shivers from his mate, as he offered the side of her face a gentle lick.

“More.”

“W-Wait! Wait, jeeze, shit, you just fucked me with a god damn log. I need a sec to—” She squeaked, all high-pitched sounds his mate did not normally make, as he stood back up, and took her with him. He held onto her waist and hips with both hands, fully encircling them and her ass with the length of his fingers and claws.

His cock stood upright, harder with renewed need, dripping with cum, and he guided her pelvis down toward it.

“Eric, come on, I ... I’m going to ... I need—nng!” Her thighs spread, and her legs stuck out to the sides, straight and trembling, as he pressed slightly pointed tip of his red, hard cock, against her dripping folds.

Holding her up in the air, she was trapped, and she could nothing but stare down at her smooth, cum-soaked lips, spreading open on his shaft. She leaned forward toward him, and grabbed onto his wrists; her fingers could only reach halfway around them. As drops of his cum eased down from the underside of her breasts and down over her abs, he lowered her squirming body onto his cock, taking his time, and rumbling more of his pleasure as her quivering body massaged and squeezed his swollen girth.

“Oh fucking ... fuck ... fucking fuck...” Still holding one of his wrists, she reached out and pressed her other palm against the steel of his chest, as he eased in half of his length; enough to reach her depths, and force her to grunt with animal sounds that made his heart pound in his chest. He still had half his length to go.

He continued, pulling her toward him, and letting gravity help with how he held her mostly upright, only letting her lean back slightly. His mate stared at her belly, and groaned loudly, as a distension formed along her abs, showing some of his girth, and how deep he was stretching her.

Jessy whimpered as her pussy’s lips reached the thicker, bulbous end of his cock; those last few inches required a thrust to force into

her clenching insides, earning more groans from his mate. But once it was within, he rumbled his bliss as Jessy trembled, her inner lips clenching around the thinner girth passed the bulbous shape.

If his mate were an Uratha, he would fuck her rough, take her with strength and need; but his mate was Kindred, a fragile thing in comparison, and he wanted to own her, keep her, take her, dominate her, not damage her. He gently bounced her cum-covered body down against his cock, working her two inches up and down, and keeping the thickest, bulbous shape of its base inside her clenching pussy. She erupted into moans as she did, and whether she realized or not, set her thighs against his hips, and eventually, bent her knees to press her calves and feet against his ass around his tail.

He was too large for her to hook her feet together behind him.

As one hand pressed to his chest, the other holding his wrist, she continued to stare at the bulge along her abdomen, grunts coming through her voice as she moaned. He stared down as well, and admired the sight of his mate's lean body, and beautiful breasts jiggling up and down. His cum on her skin shook with the gentle motion, and slid down her body over the bulge along her abs, and down further to join the mess already leaking from their connection.

“I ... I can see ... christ, it's...” Her voice was weak, wavering, and intoxicating.

He rumbled louder, letting the rolling vibrations fill him and his mate, as he pulled her off of him, every single inch. Groaning and squirming, she squeezed on his cock tight, her inner lips' grip tight enough to expose themselves, pulling out slightly with the outward draw of his girth. Then they disappeared into her, as he pulled her onto him once again. Once her clenching entrance found the thicker, round shape of the base of his cock, he gave her a gentle

thrust, enough to force her trembling, taut cunt around the thickest part of him, and make her squeal.

He began to bounce her, keeping the thick base of his cock buried inside her, but still managing to work her back and forth a couple inches. It was more than enough to cause her clenching muscles to bathe his pulsing shaft in delicious friction, and render the undead beauty into a mewling mess. Her cum dripped down his testicles all the more, and her breasts jiggled up and down the impact of her bouncing body. She stared at the bulge his cock created along her abs, and eventually, looked up at him, as she came.

The rippling contractions of her insides earned another orgasm from him. Heat poured up from underneath his shaft, and as her muscles within squeezed, milking him, the gushing wave of wet warmth sent pleasure waves down his length. Combined with the skin of his cock growing sensitive, only to be basked in the clenching of his mate, filled him with bliss, and he purred over the vampire skewered on his cock, as he held her balls deep. She struggled to hold onto him, but her fingers around his wrist went limp, and her other hand fell from his chest. Her legs clenched around him for only a few more moments, before they collapsed as well, and the woman leaned back in his hands as her head fell back to dangle, limp.

A wave of his cum poured out of her, and splashed along the floor around his talons. And another. But he wanted to do more. With one hand holding her waist, the other reached out, and took her hands, both of them. He lifted the trembling, limp creature up, until her hands were well above her head. He pulled her off of him by her hands above, causing her to whimper, as again her inner flesh exposed itself, gripping his cock tight, until at last she fell free of his cock.

With one hand holding both hers over her head, his other let go, and let her dangle, feet swaying a foot above the floor, with his cum

sliding down her thighs and calves, until it dripped off her toes. Rumbling at his limp mate, he laid her on the bed on her back, so her legs dangled off of it, while he knelt over her, and took the base of his cock into his hand. She managed to look up at him despite the apparent exhaustion working through her, and gasped, as he lowered himself over her, free hand pressing to the bed, as his other guided his shaft onto her body.

The waves of cum resumed, and he rumbled bliss, as he watched the white fluid coat her body. It poured over her abs, burying them, before he pressed the long shaft against the softness of her breasts, and hardness of her nipples. A gush of cum washed over the silk skin, and he rubbed his cock's head into the hot liquid, before guiding it over to do the same to her other breast. Heavy, thick waves of his seed coated her, splashing over her shoulder, her neck. Purring, he set the tip of his phallus upon her mouth, and as she gazed up at him, her panting was met with a wave of his cum on her lips and tongue. He was too thick to fit inside her mouth. Despite her blatant exhaustion, she offered gentle suckling upon the tip, and slowly licked at the streams of white that fell into her mouth, before flowing over onto the sheets. Another wave came, spurred by her weak efforts to please him with her lips and tongue, and she stared, wide-eyed, as his cum squirted out from around her lips, over her cheeks, chin, and buried her neck in white. It flowed down over her shoulders, her collar, and over her breasts, between them, and down onto her already soaked abs.

Satisfied, he stood up, leaning over his mate, and offered a quiet rumble as he breathed deep the scent of sex, of lust, and desire. Standing over her like this, his cock began to soften enough to bend gently with its weight, and heavy droplets of his seed oozed onto her awaiting body below. She was marked, covered in his seed, he was pleased by the sight. As was she. Shaking like a leaf in the forest breeze, she forced herself up onto her elbows, and sputtered up a little of his cum; yes, he'd forgotten, the undead did not consume such things. It flowed down her lips and chin, down her neck, and

onto the blanket of white that coated her body. Her nipples were no longer visible through the thick waves of it covering her.

“ ... holy shit,” she said.

He leaned down again, set his hands around her on the bed, and brought his jaw to her face. She meeped. Such adorable, enticing sounds to hear from someone normally so brazen and beastly. Unable to resist, he set his tongue to her forehead where she was still clean of his seed, and licked it. He could go again, take his mate, skewer her, force her to cum again as he bathed her in fluids.

But, no, something in his mind told him he was pushing it, getting too close, pulling at something alive inside him that wanted to come to the surface. This reckless indulgence in animal instinct and sexual greed was enjoyable, very enjoyable, and he could feel a part of him want to push for more than simple sex. There was a piece inside his chest that lusted for violence, that wanted to go hunting, to cause destruction, to flout its power and rip and tear flesh and ephemera apart. He could take his mate with him, and the two could create the borders of their territory and—

He gulped, and forced himself to breathe. And with each breath, he let the transformation fade. It wasn't as easy as transforming from the simple wolf. The Gauru form wanted to be used. It wanted to be let out of its cage, and released to wanton slaughter. It lusted for battle, even a one-sided battle that would be murder more than anything. Each breath was a splash of water on that roaring fire, settling it more, and more, until it was only a gentle ember in his chest, and he was in his human shape once again.

Just breathe.

Standing on the floor, between Jessy's legs where they dangled off the bed, he looked down at himself, the bed, and the vampire. Claw marks were everywhere, a couple on her body too, small ones. His bed seemed intact, but the blankets were damaged. His floor

seemed unscratched too; guess he had better self control in that form than he thought.

There was cum everywhere! What in the ever living fuck. He looked down at himself, and blinked at the huge mess of it along his cock, his pelvis and abdomen, and his thighs. But it was nothing compared to Jessy, who might as well have been swimming in a tub of jizz. From her mouth down, everything had splashes of the white fluid, to the point heavy globs of the thick seed dripped down from her large breasts, down over her abs, and onto the utterly drenched blankets.

“Jesus ... you ok?” he said, holding a hand out for her.

She took it, and pulled, shakily. With a little effort, she brought herself up to sitting, and looked down at herself as she put her hands on her knees.

“Feel like I just gave birth,” she said, voice wavering, and her body trembling. “Christ that was rough. And I haven’t been covered like this in ... ever.”

“Sorry I—”

“Fuck no, don’t apologize. That was awesome!”

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After a quick shower, the two of them hopped into the tub. He sat down in the huge thing, sighed bliss at the flowing jets of hot water, and let his head fall back onto the tub’s high wall. Jessy was beside him, and she did the same thing, letting her head fall back.

“Things changed,” he said.

“You mean, the balance between the groups? Yeah. No one died or anything, but ... but now Athalia’s gone and made an enemy of the



Kindred, and maybe even the other Begotten. I have no fucking clue how that's going to go."

"I couldn't begin to understand any of that. I meant you."

"Me?"

"Yeah you. I remember what I said, when I was changed there. It just came out, like, a new instinct took over, and ... called you mine."

"Yeah, you did."

"And yet here you are, still here."

"Expected me to run away?"

"... a bit, yeah."

She chuckled, made a few pfft noises, and raised her head as she did. With a grin, she brought in her face, and kissed him.

"You know what I did before coming over here?"

He smiled as he let the tension melt away. "No."

"I sent my ghouls to Clara's place, and said they should do everything they could to convince her they were her new fuck toys, and not mine anymore. A gift, olive branch and all that jazz."

He raised a brow, but before he could say anything, Jessy leaned over the tub, and down over the wall. With her big, toned ass in the air as all he could see, he could hear the shuffling of fabrics; she was digging for something in her clothes.

With a splash, she fell back into the tub beside him, and brought over her phone. With her income, she probably didn't care if she dropped it and ruined it.

“Let’s see what we got.” Winking at him, she brought up the gallery. “Oh wow, Clara really got into it.”

Eric looked at the picture, and gasped. Yeah, that was Clara alright, on her hands and knees, with one guy behind her pounding her. The other two ghouls were on the bed closer to Clara’s front, and she was trying to give them blowjobs and handjobs. It seemed like she was failing, with her head dangling between her shoulders in obvious bliss.

“You seriously asked your ghouls to try and sneak pictures of this?”

“Of course! Ugh, hate that bitch. But no worries, this is just for you and me to admire. I’m not going to use this against her or anything, and—oh my god look at her ass. That is a nice ass.” She swiped to the next picture. A shot from behind of Clara, naked, and now with wet hair. A shower? The next swipe showed a rather nice shot of one of the ghouls penetrating Clara’s ass, while a ghoul underneath penetrated her normally. Must have cleaned herself up for anal. “My boys are very good at DP. I’m sure Clara will have cum ten times, at fucking least, by the time they’re satisfied.”

“She looks drunk.”

“To agree to anal on the first night, with four dudes? Definitely drunk, definitely very drunk. But damn, look at that bitch smiling.”

It was true. Much as it was hard to see Clara’s face from a proper angle, the ghouls were hiding the fact they were taking pictures after all, some of them showed a glimpse of her face, and Clara looked like she was in rapture.

“I guess the lunacy trick thing only works on Uratha if they’re doing something werewolfy,” she said. “Good thing, cause otherwise these pictures would be blurry as fuck. I—oh god look at this!” She nuzzled her cheek into Eric’s shoulder, and pointed at the picture

she held in front of them. It was Clara, on her side on the bed, fetal position, no men in sight, and copious amounts of cum leaking out of both her ass and sex.

“You know she’s going to kill you if she ever finds out.”

“Bah, she won’t. I ... felt like I owed her a bit of an apology, and I know she’s had her eyes on Jack, but he’s with the Prince. Poor gal must be lonely. Nothing cures loneliness like four dicks and a dozen orgasms.” Shrugging, she swiped to a few more photos, and made sure to show off each one. One, in particular, was enough to have Eric blush. This was the sort of stuff Jessy used to do every night? “Besides, next time, the boys won’t take pictures.”

“Next time?”

“Course. I said they were her fuck toys now. I’m giving this monogamy thing a try.” The vampire threw the phone over her shoulder onto the pile of clothes, trusting the rubber guard to keep it from cracking. “But I’ve never really done this stuff before. So, be gentle with me, all right?” With a small, shy squirm that was too damn cute, she took his hand, and guided it up to her mouth. She set her lips to his wrist, and gave him a kiss.

“Breakfast in bed sort of stuff new to you?”

“Very, and straight up, it’s a little frightening, so bear with me. And it won’t really be breakfast in bed, at least not ham on toast and shit. More like, I suck your dick, then I suck your blood. Even trade?”

“You really don’t have—ow!” While she had her hand holding his wrist to her lips, it was in the clear for her to pinch his skin, hard.

“Don’t be a dumbass. I like sex, a lot. I love sex. The issue here will never be ‘do I hound her for sex too much’. The issue will be ‘can I keep up with her’. That isn’t me boasting, or trying to make

myself sound more appealing to a guy. That's me being me, knowing what I like, and hoping you'll be ... ok, with that."

This woman was asking him if he was ok with her absurd sex drive. That was a new twist he didn't expect. He should have, considering everything that happened, but he didn't. Hell, she even looked a little shy about it, despite her confidence. Her eyes glanced down, and she set his hand on her leg as her shoulders slumped a little. It was almost like she was asking if he was ok being in a relationship with a porn star; not that that description fit, but it seemed like how she was taking it. Maybe Clara's words had gotten to her.

"Jess, you could hound me for sex thrice a day, every day, and it wouldn't bother me, and I wouldn't think any less of you for it. I can't guarantee I can keep up, but I'll try."

And just like he'd given her ice cream, or blood sorbet or something, she smiled at him, beaming, and nuzzled her cheek into his shoulder. He was right then, and Clara's words had affected her. She was older than him, but he was the one with the experience in a one-on-one relationship. Now for the hard part: not repeating past mistakes.

"I won't cheat on you," she said.

"Course not. Didn't think you would."

"Though, I'm definitely gonna try and get some more pussy in the bed at some point. Maybe even a thrall or ghoul, someone you could transform around, and I could watch someone else's cunt try and take that log of a dick. You ever see that thing? It's huge! Fucking god I thought I was going to tear apart. And it had this thicker part at the base, and when you get it in, it's like I'm going to explode, but it puts so much pressure on my g-spot, it's insane. And—"

She continued, describing the shape of a werewolf penis with the enthusiasm of a devoted fan. The strangest conversation of his life. The change in her personality was large, too. Instead of the fun, badass chick who seduced him at the bar, she was now a fun, silly girl, a lot like Fiona, with a sprinkle of confidence on top.

After a while, she climbed up onto his lap, facing him, and set her fangs onto his neck. He set his hands on her waist, caressed her, and let his body melt into the tub as she put one hand on his forearm, the other behind his head. Nothing for him to do, but close his eyes, and let the relaxing bliss of the Kiss drain him of his energy.

“You taste amazing,” she said, before she set her fangs onto his neck again, and Kissed him until everything started to get heavy. If they’d been having sex, he would have cum instantly. But like this, recovering from sex, the Kiss dragged him down, and down, each step a beautiful journey into relaxing bliss.

She stopped, raised her head, and kissed him, closing her eyes, and pressing her breasts to his chest.

“Gonna fall asleep?”

“I ... I just might.”

“Let’s go to bed then.”

“ ... let’s?”

“Yeah. You’re coming to my place until we get a servant over here to clean the place.” Chuckling, she kissed him again, giddy either from his blood, or the prospect of an actual romance happening to her. Hopefully both. “I’ve never woken up next to someone before. I hear morning sex is really romantic; or, you know, evening sex for me. I expect to wake up and get some immediate cuddling, along with some nice, long, slow, spooning anal sex.”

He may have bitten off more than he could chew with this woman.

# Chapter 74

~~Damien~~

Damien looked over at Amanda, and she smiled at him before offering a small wave. She seemed like a kind little creature, dark skin and long black hair. Damien did not care for her sire, Gloria Jennings, who had a far larger mouth for gossip than any Mekhet should have, but Amanda seemed alright. Perhaps a little ditzy, but then, after being around Fiona, ditzy didn't seem to bother him so much anymore. Ditzy people had the amazing ability to be happy and enjoy themselves. For people like him, Jack, and others that fit into the stereotypical vampire definition, they did not.

Case in point, Jack was standing outside a forbidden window, the two Mekhet behind him keeping him and them hidden in their cloak of night. His hand was on the window ledge, and his eyes were locked onto the two women within. His mother, and his sister.

While Amanda stood back some ten feet, Damien eventually walked forward, and stood by Jack's side, maybe a single foot back to stay out of the boy's peripheral vision. It'd be disrespectful, to interrupt what was clearly an important moment to him, but at the same time, it was important to Damien to stop him from letting this blatant ghost of his past devour him.

"They look ... content," Damien said.

"Time heals all wounds, right?"

The boy didn't believe that. It was obvious in the bitter growl in his voice. But even if Jack didn't believe it, it was plain to see the two women sitting on the couch together were—oh, maybe not. The two women were looking at a picture album, and their looks of contentment faded as they turned the page. Only now did Damien

notice they had tears all along, and their previous looks of contentment were from the memories the boy's family was walking through.

“Why are you watching this, Jack?”

“Glutton for punishment.” He nodded his head back toward Amanda, before returning to his self torture. “Amanda's helped me out a few times, spying on them.”

It must have been frustrating, to have to rely on others in such a circumstance. All Kindred could learn the cloak of night, though the Mekhet and Nosferatu knew it naturally and instinctively. A young Ventrue had no chance of using it, not to the extent that would allow the boy to spy on his family through their living room window. In Jack's case, it was probably for the best, lest this masochism destroy him.

“But why—”

“Your family still alive, Damien?”

“I ... don't know. Lucas and his church became my family, and I didn't look back, even after the purge.”

Jack nodded to his family, sitting on the couch in the living room. TV off, the two women had a blanket wrapped around the two of them, shoulder to shoulder.

“When Dad died, things were pretty rough for us. Mom never got over it. And Mary, she did all the things a more social person probably would. Drinking, sleeping around — way too young — and probably trying a lot of drugs. And I ... became a cold, distant, critical asshole.”

This was unexpected. Damien didn't know what to say to people most of the time, let alone during an emotionally heavy



conversation; unless it were matters of the Lord and the Lancea et Sanctum. But then, maybe the boy didn't want a conversation, he just wanted someone to listen to him. Antoinette could listen, but perhaps the nature of their relationship made such a conversation difficult, or impossible. Julias? Maybe, but while sire and childe shared a connection, it was also a barrier, not dissimilar to parent and child.

So he said nothing, and waited.

“I never emotionally connected with Mom or Mary, not really. I was comfortable with them, though, and I did miss them a little when I moved out. Now? It's been slowly dawning on me, how much I fucked up, and missed out on something so damn important.”

Damien raised a brow, and glanced Jack's way, before he focused his gaze on the two women. They wiped their tears, and flipped to another page in the album.

“I guess, with all the shit that's been coming my way lately, it's nice to remind myself I used to be a ... a human being. A normal human being, who didn't spend his days figuring out how to kill people, and help monsters.” The boy set his forehead to the glass, and sighed. A Kindred wouldn't leave any marks behind, no skin oil or particles, and the boy took advantage, weight dragging his head down an inch along the glass. “And reminding myself of my past only makes me feel like shit, because I wasted it.”

It was clear there was more going on, and Jack was struggling to explain it. Something about Angela, and the rescue mission, had put the boy in a weird, analytical, depressed mood. Something was caught in his soul, and was struggling to make itself known. What that was, Damien couldn't guess. Jack had asked him for information about Viktor not long ago, was worrying about

becoming Viktor, and it struck Damien as likely that Viktor was emotionally distant from his own family, as well.

The boy was struggling to reconcile his past and present. It was a unique thing, and Damien couldn't begin to understand the nuances of it. But, there was something the boy could do.

“ ... you can change that.”

“What?” Jack lifted his head, and blinked at him.

“You can turn both of them into ghouls, or embrace them. Either way gives them endless life. The Prince has opened siring, hasn't she? Get permission from her, and bring your family into your new life.”

Glass shattered, plain on Jack's face, and the boy turned back to look at his family with new eyes, wide eyes. Had he never considered that before? Evidently not.

“You think ... she'd give me permission?”

“You've done a lot of things for the city, and have earned respect, and gratitude.” Damien looked down, and then at his hand. Touch the kid's shoulder? No, no, too far. Leave such emotional contact for Antoinette or Julias. “I'm sure she'd give it.”

“I ... I don't think ... I could handle seeing them as ghouls. Ghouls are so infatuated with vitae, and brainwashed to love their owner.”

“What about Antoinette's ghouls. Do you take issue with how they think of Antoinette?”

“That's different. They weren't family to her.”

Nodding, Damien looked back over at Amanda. The Mekhet had already stepped out of listening range; must have picked up on the

social queues.

“Then you could embrace them.”

“And ruin their lives?”

“ ... has your life been ruined?”

“I ... I ... I don't fucking know. It's been such a roller coaster, Damien. One minute, I'm having the best time of my life, with the best woman, swimming in money. Next minute, I'm handcuffed to a chair, getting tortured, and then I'm killing people. Next, I'm promoted to one of the most powerful positions in the city, and have massive freedoms. Next, I'm in a firefight, and people are getting torn up around me, and dying, and ... and ... and I hate myself.”

“Hate yourself? Why?” That was a powerful statement, and one he figured the boy would have dismissed in the past as cliché. Of course, nothing was a cliché when it was happening to you.

“Because I didn't shoot that damn woman when I had the chance. Like a fucking idiot, I let Athalia make me hesitate. And ... and the expression on Angela's face, it was like ... like ... like I'd be doing her a favor, shooting her. Christ I want to kill her, I want revenge, I want to rip that bitch in half and make her watch her guts fall out. And I let it slip away.”

This was turning into a confession, and Damien had to wonder how a normal priest would handle this. The Lancea et Sanctum did not look for confessions from its Kindred. Kindred were to be God's monsters, and were already damned. Sins against God were irrelevant and immaterial to Kindred. All that mattered was that they served their role. Damien had, on occasion, offered advice to the congregation, been a minister, but it was nothing like this, like listening to a man pour his heart out.

And as Jack looked at his family, the conflict between his sorrowful memory, and his present hatred for Angela, was cut into his face with a serrated knife.

“I’m a god damn trope. I let her live, and—”

“Jack, only a Kindred with decades of unlife and hundreds of kills to their name, would have taken that shot without at least a moment’s hesitation. Only a Kindred who no longer thinks about the family they once had.” After gesturing to the window and the painful past, he reached out, and touched the boy’s shoulder. He almost expected Jack to pull his shoulder away. He didn’t. Maybe a little contact wouldn’t be so bad, after all.

“If I was more of an asshole, she’d be dead, and we’d be better off.”

“Perhaps. Or, Jeremiah would have realized his partner was dead, and killed us all, instead of monologuing like a fool.” Nodding, Damien lowered his hand, and nodded back out toward the streets. “Come on, before this trip down memory lane ruins you.”

With a nod and sigh, Jack came with him, and Amanda fell in step beside him opposite of Damien, as they began the trek back to the richer side of South Side.

“Julias used to tell me I was handling my transformation well, too well, and for a lot of Kindred, staring at the past like this led to ... suicide.”

Amanda reached out, and put a hand on Jack’s shoulder. Either she decided to mimic Damien, or the girl’s attitude leapt over that hurdle without any of Damien’s hesitation.

“I don’t see you doing that,” she said.

“... me neither.” Sighing, Jack slipped his hands into his pockets, and glanced over his shoulder, back at the family he left behind over a year ago. “But maybe I am playing with fire.”

“Maybe. But, every vampire has to go through this stage, Gloria says.” Shrugging like all the misery was nothing, she pat him on the shoulder again, before she nodded back to the house they left behind. “They look great, by the way.”

“They do?”

“Mhmm. Your mom’s looks like she’s been hitting the gym, and taking Mary with her, from last I saw them.”

Both boys raised an eyebrow at each other. It had never occurred to either of them to analyze the physical state of Jack’s family.

“Maybe she’s trying to move on?” Jack said.

Amanda nodded, and added a little bounce to her step. “You’ve been gone a long time. I bet she’s getting over it, and finally moving on. Or, you know, trying.”

To become nothing more than a cherished memory to your own family, while you are still alive. It was an alien concept to Damien, but Jack smiled, and nodded.

“I bet she is.”



~~Antoinette~~

Her love looked beyond depressed.

With a sigh, she set her chin on the boy’s head, and hugged him from behind. The two of them were in her shower, the lavish one meant to emulate the feeling of showering in a waterfall. They had

cleaned each other already, and she expected to find some sort of smile in the boy's actions. But, no, her love was morose, and perhaps a little silence and physical contact was what he needed.

"I nearly got everyone killed," he said at last.

"While they may have taken your words for guidance, everyone there was an acting individual; you were not the captain."

"Yeah ... I guess..." Sighing, his head dropped, and she looked down at the boy in her arms as the water fell over his buzzed head. "What was I doing, giving orders? I was the youngest one there."

"You are talented, and a Ventrue. It is not unexpected."

"And ... and I let Angela live."

"From what you tell me, you were going to shoot her, non?"

"Yeah, but I hesitated. Like a shitty movie, I hesitated and let the villain escape."

"Her mother was only several feet away, little Ventrue, begging you to spare her life. And you are far too young to be killing anyone without hesitation." Words that would fall flat, but they needed to be said, nonetheless. "You may be a Right Hand of the Invictus, and for good reason, but these are trials that anyone your age is expected to fail. And you did far better than others would, in your circumstance."

"I guess. But ... but if Julias hadn't gone to Jacob, and gotten that ... that thing's help, there's a good chance we'd all be dead."

How painful, for the boy to summarize her dilemma so succinctly. If she could not control this spirit entity, then if similar circumstances rose, what could she do?

She could tie the damn boy to her bed and keep him there for all eternity. That was always an option.

“And everyone will learn from that mistake. It was an error on the council’s part, to send you and your crew. An error on everyone’s part, to underestimate these hunters.”

“I know. I know.”

He knew, but he would not let the reality wipe away the emotions he was feeling. He was young, and such lack of control over his mind was an unfortunate circumstance of his age. It was also endearing, that the boy’s soul still had such power over his mind, and she hugged the boy tighter to her as she kissed his head.

“Now that the hunters have proven far more prepared than we could have ever dreamed, I hope the Invictus, and others, will act with less haste, more discretion and prudence, from now on.”

“Yeah, no more crazy runs into nightmares without proper precautions,” he said.

“Mercy beaucoup.” Nodding, she turned the boy around, lifted his chin, and kissed him. It was enough to earn a small smile from him, one she could feel on her lips, and she returned it as she lowered her hands down his back. The feel of his hard body against her breasts was delightful, and she closed her eyes as she hugged him a bit tighter.

Something was bothering the boy, more than his words suggested. Kindred his age often went through a phase of identify crisis, as their new life as a vampire took form, and started to break down the walls of old. She knew the boy had a habit of visiting his living family, and had done so recently; her network of thralls missed little. No doubt that was part of what bothered him, but she did not see the connection between the mission, and the boy’s past.

But she would not pry. She was sure, with time, he would tell her more.

His own hands found her back, and her ass. With a little time, a longer kiss, the boy's hands started to caress her skin, massage the meat of her buttocks, and tickle up and down her spine. It earned another smile from her, and she lifted her head so she could show her joy to the small man in her arms. If he was able to feel aroused by her, then his misery was not permanent.

She nudged him into the wall of black marble, and got down on her knees. The sight of her beneath him, with her hands on his hips, was enough to break the boy's gloomy expression, and earn eyes of lust and desire.

"Blush for me," she said, as she blushed. Color came to her skin, and the joyful warmth of arousal tickled along her spine.

"I thought we were going to go hang with Tash and her two werewolves?" Despite his weak protest, the boy blushed, and his shaft lifted with life in front of her eyes. Delicious, how the hard thing stood out and up, his skin shaved smooth, and the muscle definition of his lower abdomen showed his inviting iliac furrow to great degree. Hopefully, Julias had instructed the boy, in how dangerous the Apollo's belt was; what woman could resist? She traced her fingers along its lines, from where it led from his hips, and down at a V ship toward his shaft and underneath it.

"We are. But, I will be wearing something quite ... uncomfortable, and I fear it will lead to your wandering gaze." With a devil's smile, she gazed up at him with her red eyes, as she leaned in, and set her lips upon his cock. Immediate, quiet groans from the boy, enough to send her heart fluttering. The look of sheer, rapturous joy on the boy's face, as she slid his foreskin back, and gently encompassed his swollen glans with her lips, was euphoric.

"I doubt ... you can ... ever make that stop."



She smiled around his cock, and suckled upon the tip, as one of her hands took his testicles to massage, and the other took his shaft around the base to massage as well. The boy had mentioned in the past he found wet hair attractive, and she knew her hair was quite wet, soaked in the falling water, and flat to her head, neck, and back. To show off for him, to let him drink her beauty, as she gently milked his length, was too delicious a moment for her to ever pass up.

Time was of the essence. The plan was for a shower, and then to relax at her pool, perhaps swim. Natasha and her boyfriends were coming as well, and she was curious to see how they would react to the sight of the Prince, and Natasha as well, in swim wear. If she guessed right, flaunting her body would lead to Natasha being ravaged by two aroused beasts, and Antoinette could not pass on the opportunity to give her Tash a delicious night, whether she wanted it or not. She had earned it.

Jack did not last long. Of course he did not, she did not wish for him to, as she set her goal to make him climax as quickly as possible. He reached down, and set his hands on her head, as she circled his swollen glans with her tongue. Her expert, tight, and consistent working hand on his length, would have any man cumming in minutes. But before he did, she pulled her head back, knelt higher, and guided his cock onto her breast. She lowered the hand around his testicles, and instead used it to cup her own left breast, so she could more easily press his swollen glans onto her nipple.

The poor boy set his hands on her shoulders, and shivered, struggling to stay standing, as she caressed her engorged areola with his hot glans around, and around, and around, until the first gush of his cum splashed over her breast. Jack's moans broke through his attempts to quiet them, and she smiled at him before looking back down at his shaft, as she guided it around her nipple. The hot cream flowed up and around her breast, coating it in his cum as another

gush squirted up to meet it. She kept out of the falling water for now, purely to let the boy enjoy seeing the sight of her bust covered in his cum. And, with the large amount of ejaculate the boy's adapting Kindred body was happy to produce in so little time, it was quite easy to soak her breast in white, until heavy drops of the thick liquid trickled down the underside of her breast, and dripped onto the shower floor.

She leaned down to kiss his glans, licked away the final drop of his cum, and smiled up at him as she began to massage his cum into her breasts. It was hot, and thick, and felt delightful on the skin. But that was not the reason she put on such a display. It was to see the boy's entranced gaze, that she took the time to spread the thick fluid over her breasts, under them, between them, and massage the white into her skin. With both hands, she cupped the undersides of her heavy bosom, and worked her fingers around her nipples, earning little sparks of pleasure into her core, as she caressed the engorged nubs.

She continued her devilish smile, well practiced and mastered, and stood. Hot water washed away his seed, and once she had cleaned the white fluid from her fingers, she ran them back through her hair as she lifted her elbows. Raised elbows tugged at her breasts, and caused them to jiggle lightly as she soaked them in the downpour of hot water. A dance she had perfected long ago, and she sighed bliss as she felt her insides warm with how her love gawked at her, paralyzed.

"If we had time," she said, "I would take you to the bed, where you could return the favor. But, I look forward to time with Natasha. Come, let us be off." She ended the blush of life, and walked back to the bedroom, her hand behind her, and Jack's hand in hers.

Holding hands. How naughty.



~~Natasha~~

The three of them each sat on a pool lounge chair, and sighed happy sighs, together. They were in the Prince's tower, and had decided to take the night to do absolutely nothing but relax. Pools were relaxing, and Antoinette had a giant pool with a hot tub and everything. Perfect place to relax where it was safe. Tash and the boys didn't bother with swimming though; instead, they were happy to just lounge around. Swimming took effort. Lying around took none.

"Never thought I'd be saved by Jacob," Art said.

Matt nodded. "Me neither. Especially not with Black Blood."

Yeah, none of them expected Jacob to rescue them. None of them expected him to use a crazy spirit entity to do so, either.

There was no point in lamenting how rushed their plan was, how ridiculous, how arrogant they'd been, and how they'd have to do better next time. And because of their stupidity, they all owed Jacob, the crazy old Nosferatu. Or at least, Julias owed him. Whether that was better or worse than dying to hunters remained to be seen; probably better, but it was hard to tell with him. For all Tash knew, Julias would have to participate in some crazy ritual with the man, and help him summon ghosts or demons.

That didn't sound too bad, actually. She'd summoned things with Antoinette already.

Tash looked over at Art and Matt, each lying on their lounge chairs, heads leaning back and eyes closed. Both were in swimming trunks, black for Art and blue for Matt. Both were, of course, very fit, and their muscles were highlighted with definition, even when simply lying and relaxing. Art was lean and mean like a fighter, while Matt was a wall of muscle. And, despite herself, she both smiled and frowned at the sight of their new welts, bruises, and

scars. Silver hurt them in ways even their special bodies couldn't fully regenerate from without days, which made her frown, but some scars on their bodies looked pretty sexy.

Ugh, she was turning into Jessy. Every day, her friend's infectious hedonism and sexual obsessions corrupted her mind!

"I do hope," Antoinette said, "that in the future, you will understand that to act with all speed is not always the smartest choice. Oui?"

Tash turned her head and lifted it enough to look at the pool. Antoinette was drifting around in the pool, her long white hair slicked back over her head, wet. Tash and her boyfriends had come in while Jack and the Prince were swimming, so they hadn't seen either of them out of the pool yet. But Tash had seen straps over Antoinette's shoulders, so, she wasn't naked. Good. That'd be awkward, and she didn't need her boss tempting her boyfriends.

"I th-think we do ... understand that n-now," Tash said.

"Bien. These are dangerous times, and I fear, due to the chaos and uncertainty these new elements have brought to my city, that it will be impossible to full prepare for them. Be careful." The Prince swam over to Jack, and swam around him. Jack returned the favor, nodding with the Prince's advice, and swimming around her as well. Two koi in a pond.

"I'm surprised you guys can relax, honestly," Art said. "Not worried about that Begotten working for Jeremiah showing up randomly?"

Jack poked his head up over the pool edge. "Fiona says Begotten can't just burrow to wherever they want. There's criteria. They have to have seen the place once, at least. And there's other stuff, about it resonating with their nightmare in some way?"

“So Eric’s place isn’t safe?”

“Normally no, but she says that Elen royally fucked the area, and no Begotten is burrowing through it anytime soon.”

Art nodded, satisfied, and hooked his hands behind his head as he looked up. “ ... this indoor pool could use a skylight.” Every Kindred in the room stopped, and raised a brow at the man, before he put his hands up in surrender. “Kidding.”

“It’s a lovely ... fortress,” Matt said. “Really, it’s beautiful. Just a little intimidating how it’s all underground, and massive. How long did this place take to make?”

“Many decades.” Antoinette came up behind Jack, and hugged him, her shoulders against his as she leaned her chin around his neck. Tash couldn’t see over the edge of the pool very much, but it was obvious to see she was squishing her breasts to Jack’s back. The woman was ridiculously confident, but unlike Jessy, it didn’t seem crass at all. Her friend’s sexual attitude was like a wrecking ball through a wall, while the Prince’s was like seductive music; you’d get pulled into its enchanting lullaby if not careful.

But, seeing her squish herself against Jack’s back, reminded her of that time she’d found the two of them making love. It’d been so sweet, and so erotic. Jack was built! He was a small guy, but Julias had definitely taken the time to groom him, putting some muscle on his shorter, thin frame. And seeing the curvy, busty goddess riding him while he suckled on her breasts, had been too lascivious.

She wouldn’t mind seeing it again. The lullaby already had her.

“Decades?” Matt whistled, and copied Art, hooking his hands behind his head and looking at the marble ceiling. “You vamps like to think long term.”

Tash looked at her boyfriends, and smiled. Much as Antoinette and Jack were both gorgeous creatures, her two boyfriends looked so handsome in their swimming trunks. And they were so huge! Even Art, who was by all accounts a fair bit thinner than Matt's huge, muscular body, was still a big, tall guy, with a broad back that he showed off with his hands behind his head.

She smiled to herself, and licked a fang. Vampires really did get spoiled—except for the Nosferatu. But other than the cursed Kindred, the other blood clans took the time to not only groom their chosen childe before siring, they picked them in the prime of their life, generally between ages twenty and thirty. Vampires were, overwhelmingly, handsome, beautiful, and fit. And Uratha seemed to be in a similar boat, as their lifestyles and inhuman element turned them into paragons of health, fitness, and strength.

How had she not indulged in this world of sex and lust before, she didn't know. But things were different now.

“Long term. That is an accurate way of describing it, oui.” The Prince swam up to the edge of the pool, set her hands against it, and pushed up, to lift herself above the water, wet hair flattening over her back and down to her butt. Tash, Art, and Matt, all lifted their heads, and watched. Because how could they not.

Tash froze as she realized the Prince was not wearing a normal swimsuit, but a bikini. And not normal bikini, or even a small bikini, but a micro bikini. The thing around her hips was nothing more than string, disappearing between her curvy butt, and providing only enough covering of her front to hide her sex. Everyone got to see that was she shaved smooth. And of course, the black straps of her bikini top were just as small and pointless, with only small triangles to cover her nipples. Except, they didn't completely cover them, and some of the pink of her areola was visible outside its edge. The weight of her breasts was enough to stretch the bikini, and the tiny string struggled to keep them contained. They were jiggling,

blatantly jiggling, with her swaying walk, as if some invisible person was walking with her and poking her giant breasts with each step.

It wasn't the first time Tash had seen her boss naked; or in this case, basically naked. But it was a first for Art and Matt. As much as the Prince's dress at the ball had been revealing, and the one at Bloodlust too, it was nothing like this, and both boys' jaw dropped as the woman walked by.

"I will be in my chambers, draining my love. Boys, feel free to use the facilities here; all rooms where you are not permitted are already locked. Enjoy yourselves." Antoinette smiled at them, and continued along, Jack's hand in hers as he followed behind her.

Jack offered them a small finger wave as he vanished around the exit, big grin on his face.

"That kid is dating a succubus," Art said.

"She ... sh-she is ... I guess, yeah." Nodding, Natasha sat up, and looked down at herself. She was wearing a one-piece purple swimsuit, but it had an open back, and a sliver of an open stomach leading up to her sternum. It was racy! Maybe not as racy as wearing literal string, but still. "She is v-very ... very beautiful."

Grinning at her, Art nodded his head toward the door Antoinette and Jack had disappeared through. "Want to go spy on them?"

"W-What!? No! N-No..." She got up off her lounge chair, and gave Art a good punch in the shoulder. "Pervert." Of course, she'd already done that, but she wasn't about to tell them that.

"Hey, I'm in a Daeva's basement. I'm hopelessly caught in her web. Seduced." The man got up, raised his arms as if now a zombie, and started walking toward the door.

She caught him by his swimming trunks, and pulled him back, until he had to fall back into his lounge chair. “Not tr-true!”

Matt did the same thing! He got up, started moaning and groaning, and began walking toward the door, arms out in front of him. She dashed around in front of him, and pushed against his stomach and chest, frowning up at him. Both boys started laughing, and Matt gave in, until she managed to put him back on a lounge chair, beside Art.

“You like ... b-big boobs?” she said.

“Of course,” they said together.

She folded her arms across her chest, and glared.

They both started laughing, and Matt reached out. Once he had one of her hands in his, she was helpless to escape, no matter how hard she squirmed; might as well have been trying to move a mountain. He pulled her up onto his lounge chair, and up onto his waist. This close, he had no trouble picking her up, and setting her on his waist, straddling him and facing him, where he could hold her hips. She tried to get away, but it was pointless, as the titan held her there, and smiled at her as he pulled her in close for a kiss.

She frowned at him, but kissed him anyway. His hands roamed over her body, enormous hands, and despite herself, she melted onto his hard, wide chest, as the man tugged on her to bring her closer. Higher up on his abs, she was at a better angle to keep kissing him, as he set his head back against the lounge chair.

“I’m ... hungry,” she said.

“How about a little of each of us?” Matt said. “You’ve never done that.”



“B-Both?” She tilted her head, considering. They didn’t usually do that. But, both boys shared her all the time, so her double dipping on their blood at the same time hardly seemed unreasonable.

Matt tilted his head to the side, and waited, smiling at her. Her big, gentle giant. Art was watching, half smiling, half waiting for his turn. They were looking at her with hungry eyes, too. In fact, Art was looking her up and down, licking his lips every so often.

Well, he could wait his turn! She stuck her tongue out at him, turned to Matt, and snuggled her face into his neck. A few kisses against the hard steel of his muscle, the bulging thing sticking out from his shoulder and neck, a massive trapezius muscle, before she moved her lips to his neck. The dirty blonde gruff on his neck was scruffy, and she used a hand to push on his chin and keep the sandpaper away from her lips. She was a soft, delicate creature, and men’s facial hair was most definitely not kind to such things; the gruff was very sexy, though.

She sank her fangs into his neck, and melted into him, as the warmth of his blood flooded her mouth. Those silver bullets and knives had done him damage, Art too, and she could tell the two of them were still hurting. But if they were willing to share blood with her, she was willing to take it; it was too delectable to not. It was richer than kine blood, almost thicker, and almost sweet. Decadent. The energy in it was immense, and each mouthful she gulped down sent a buzz into her head, into her body, into her fingers and toes.

A few gulps was enough. She licked the wound closed, sat up, wiped away her lips with a finger, and smiled at the gentle giant between her legs. He returned it, and his hands ran up and down her hips, her sides, her back, earning a quiet mewl from her.

“It’s neat how you blush life, when you get a meal,” he said, a dopey, relaxed smile on him.

“It ... it’s ... it can b-be problematic.”

“Oh?” Matt winked at her, his energy returning quickly; damn werewolves recovered so fast. His roaming hands slipped under her arms, cradled her ribs, and his thumbs pressed to her nipples. Oh! Little sparks announced that the small buttons had become swollen, and she swatted his hands away.

“Hey! Come on, b-be ... be romantic ... for a while, ok?” She nuzzled onto the man’s chest, and gave him a kiss on his chin. “You t-two ... you almost ... d-d-d ... died.”

“Yeah, it was a brutal night,” Art said.

Matt, on the other hand, shrugged. “I feel fine.”

He did not! Tash gave his chest a good punch, where she knew the man had been shot. Predictably, the gentle giant winced, sitting up and holding his chest.

“Ow!”

“See? You’re n-not fine.”

“Well not anymore!”

She frowned at him, but instead of punching him again, she leaned up, kissed him — dreamy, green eyes — before she slid off of him, and crawled onto Art’s lap. He was right next to Matt, only a couple feet away, so she only had to take a single step to start climbing up onto him as well.

Whereas Matt was giant, and all muscle, with shoulder-length dirty blonde hair and gruff, Art was a bit shorter, though still huge and fit, and she smiled into his brown eyes as she reached out, and touched his shaved face and tan skin. His dark hair was jaw length, a bit messy, a bit wavy, and terribly delicious. He was from Tijuana but didn’t have much of an accent. She should ask about that some day.

The man smiled up at her, and looked down to her breasts; and kept looking. Men! She punched him too, gently, on the sternum, and earned an ‘oof’ from the man. Good. She climbed up his chest, and kissed him, eyes half closing as she melted onto him. So much melting. The man hugged her, hands drifting up and down her back and shoulders, same as Matt did, as she slid her kisses down his jaw, and onto his neck.

She’d have to teach the boys to be serious about things, and romantic about things, later. For now, the Kiss dominated her thoughts, and despite herself, she pressed her hardening nipples into his chest as she hunted for blood.

As she sank her fangs into his neck, the man purred, a rumbling, deep purr in his chest that vibrated through her. It was such a lovely sound, and she pressed her body down on him as she made her own sounds: moans. Quiet, little things, but it was too good, how amazing he tasted, how utterly delicious and overwhelmingly pleasurable the buzz the Kiss sent through her body, into her core, and out into her extremities was. The fact the werewolf’s blood was ambrosia, so delicious it defied words, only made everything so much better.

She pulled away, and sat up. The feel of his life, thick and warm, coating her throat as it dripped into her stomach, made her tremble. She smiled at him, and made a couple more small moans, as she felt the energy pulse through body. Her fake heart was beating, fast, and her skin was flush with color; as much as a pale girl like her could ever get color.

“D-Don’t ... go dying on me,” she said. While Art held onto her waist, she ran one of her fingers down his chest, and traced the lines of his pectorals, his abs, and the iliac furrow that disappeared underneath his trunks. “I’d ... be v-very sad, if either of you died.”

Matt turned on his side to watch her, though it was clear the man's eyes were half looking at her, half looking at her swimsuit, and how the tight fabric exposed her back, some of her side, and was showing how hard her nipples had grown. She covered them up with her arms again, and when she noticed Art was looking at them too, she frowned her best frown.

“It's th-th-the Kiss!”

“Oh, we know.” Chuckling, Art sat up, took her shoulders into his hands, hooking his arms underneath hers, and pulled her into another kiss. “And we're not dying anytime soon, don't worry.”

“I ... I w-worry, because you wolves are so ... gung-ho when you ... when you fight.”

“Jack made the right call. We needed to be aggressive,” Matt said.

Art shrugged, and nudged his nose against hers. “Besides, you were there. We trusted you to back us up.”

The giant agreed, turning on his chair so his feet were down between his and Art's. “You did good in there. One of the few that kept their head. Noah will vouch for you, I'm sure, if we ask Avery to take you into the Hisil.”

“Into ... the Hisil.” Scary. Very scary. But exciting, and thrilling, and their compliments had her smiling. Confidence was always a struggle, and—“Hey!”

Art's hands sneaked around her swimsuit's open back, and caressed her skin, her spine, before sneaking under it, and down onto her butt. Both hands stretched the fabric out a bit, so he could knead her ass, while he kissed her neck.

“You smell amazing,” he said.

“It’s ... it’s just ... fake life. B-Because I ... ate.” She pushed against his chest, but Art insisted, keeping his hands on her ass, caressing and massaging the skin, and keeping her pressed to him. He was getting hard. “H-Hey, you ... you just ... lost some blood, you ... shouldn’t be...” One of his hands raised higher, and pressed against her shoulder blades, pinning her to his chest, while the other reached down, still sneaking underneath her swimsuit. Fingers drifted down her butt, between, and underneath her, to start caressing her folds.

“I have to have you,” he growled into her ear.

Too cheesy! So very, very cheesy. But the heat of his body, the growing erection pressing against her swimsuit, and the man’s hands, strong and hungry, refusing to let her escape his embrace, weren’t so cheesy.

“Art, come on, s-someone could ... could find us.”

“Something tells me the Prince won’t care.”

“B ... But, Art, you—mm!” Couldn’t talk, not when he put his lips to hers, and continued to hug her so tight against him, her back was arching, and her breasts were flattened to his chest as he leaned his head down over her. His member was only growing harder, and pressing up against her slit through his trunks, while his fingers were still scooping underneath her from behind to nudge and caress her sex.

A glance in the corner of her eye made her gasp, or try to, but Art’s lips didn’t let her. Matt was masturbating! Casually, slowly, eyes on her, drinking her in, his hand worked his length underneath his trunks, until he was hard, too.

“Let’s take her back to her room,” he said. “Can’t really do much to her out here.”

“Good point. No bed out here.” Nodding, Art scooped her up, and threw her over his shoulder, her top half hanging behind him, her legs dangling in front of him. She frowned at Matt, big nasty grrr frown, since she couldn’t see Art’s face when hanging over him.

“Hey! W-Wait! I never—eep!” She squeaked, as Art gave her butt a spank! Oh the nerve. She was going to punish them, punish them so hard. It wasn’t a hard spank, but her bottom was mostly bare, since the swim suit pulled up into her butt, almost like a thong.

The two evil, horrible men took her to her bedroom, through the halls of black marble. She was horrified she might run into the Prince; though, if she did, she might ask for her help, to rescue her from these two bad bad men.

Her bedroom was a simple thing, large, with old fashioned wardrobes and a large closet to hold her clothes. Mostly empty, since she still had her own place to store that stuff, but she had to admit, the giant bed was comfortable. The boys knew it too, and Art walked her toward it.

“You ... you ... b-big ... meanies!”

The two boys laughed, and Matt closed the door behind them. The black marble was everywhere, but Antoinette had holes in the ceiling where LEDs were, shining white light upon everything. The bed had white sheets, and a few large pillows. It wasn’t meant to be anything more than where Tash put her head during daytime, not for entertaining guests! But Matt and Art didn’t seem to mind. With a chuckle, Art tossed her on the bed, and she squeaked again as she bounced.

“Big b-brutes!”

Her words didn’t stop them. Both of them grinned down at her, Matt coming to join them at the edge of the bed, and they both slid out of their trunks. They’d shaved; well, trimmed, which was

perfect, their pubic hair reduced to a shallow gruff instead of big bushes.

No, wait, don't admire their naked bodies, and hard shafts. Be angry! They'd taken you to your room for inevitable sex, without your permission! Be super angry! Grr.

Art climbed onto the bed with her, and she struggled to not stare at how his lithe, lean, muscular body moved as he prowled across the sheets over to her, hard cock swaying underneath him. Big hands reached out for her, and she backed away from the wolf. He crawled faster, took her feet, and pulled her across the sheets toward him, like she weighed nothing. She squeaked and squealed, and pulled the blankets, but it did nothing, and soon Art had her in front of him. He turned her onto her back, so her legs were away from him, her head toward him. She squealed again as Arturo pinned her wrists to the bed, too.

“W-Wait!” They didn't wait. They never waited. They just picked her up and threw her down onto things when the mood struck them. She just ate, and couldn't turn off the blush of life for a little while yet; they were going to take advantage of it.

She wriggled and squirmed, and tried to get away, but Art didn't let her. He grinned down at her, and got down on his elbows so his head was right over hers. He was upside down to her, since her legs were away from him, head underneath him.

“You know I can't resist you,” he said.

“B-B-B—hey!” She forced her head up and looked down her body, to find Matt tearing off her swimsuit. Tearing! Her poor swimsuit. But, as she looked down at the giant between her legs, she froze as she recognized the animal hunger in his eyes. More hunger than usual, even. Scary hunger. Like, for a moment, she thought maybe the man was going to become a werewolf, and—

Oh my god he was changing. Changing! His body grew in size, adding maybe another six inches to his height, and his muscles grew larger, and larger. It stopped there, and she sighed relief as she stared at the colossal man between her legs, but he wasn't the same Matt anymore. He was bigger, bulkier, with fangs and more mass and more hair and ... and ... and like he was halfway between a werewolf and a man. Dalu form, they called it?

Art began to change too, and she stared up at the man as his body grew as well. Taller, bigger, thicker, and with a lot of the gruff she'd expect of a beastly man. She could smell it too, testosterone and blood, need and hunger, instinct and desire. They wanted her.

“W ... W-Why—nng!” She gasped, and struggled all the more, as Matt set his lips onto her sex. A belly full of werewolf blood had her body pulsing with satisfaction and human, living desires. It wanted to be touched, it wanted stimulation. It wanted a set of warm, wet lips on the set between her thighs, and burying it all in gentle heat.

She whimpered and squirmed, struggled to escape, but Art kept his hands on her wrists, and with his head over hers, he leaned down to set his lips onto hers as well. Upside down kiss. She frowned at him as best she could, and offered him her best angry glare, but it all melted, unable to sustain her frustration, as the man's kiss continued; not like his chin could appreciate the frustration in her eyes anyway. While Art kissed, Matt gently ran his tongue up and down her labia, until he settled on her clitoris, and began to massage the swelling nub. They always started gentle before they got rough, and no matter what she said or did, they had more than ample proof that she liked what they did. She was already wet.

Art lifted his head, let go of her hands, reached down, and tore the other half of her swimsuit apart.



“H-Hey! You ... you’re gonna ... have t-to ... buy...” Trying to argue about money was pointless. They knew she had plenty of money, and Kindred could steal things they couldn’t afford anyway; especially a Mekhet. And, worst of all, they knew she wore a sexy swimsuit, because she liked the looks it got from her boyfriends.

Art let go of her hands, and shifted along the bed a bit, so his right knee was beside her head, left knee beside her shoulder, his body facing her. With much of her torso between his knees, Art took his cock in his hand, and began to masturbate, a low growl escaping him as he looked her naked body up and down, the tatters of her swimsuit underneath her. His huge grip wrapped his veined shaft, and worked its length, sliding the skin up and down, and she stared at the swollen glans of his cock as he slowly exposed it. Just like the two beasts, it’d gotten a bit bigger too. Oh no.

As the huge man looking down at her masturbated, he leaned forward, and set his hot, swollen cock’s head against her lips. With his knees spread wide and her between them, he didn’t have to lean forward far, and he grinned down at her as she watched his body of muscle and heat pulse with need. She could feel his heartbeat on his cock as it pumped with blood, growing a little harder still. She could feel the gentle movement of his hand slowly working his length, each stroke pressing his glans against her lips.

His other hand reached down, and slipped around her throat. She gasped, and stared up at him as he offered her neck a gentle squeeze, just enough to let her feel him, let her feel the strength in his grip, feel the desire in the man’s body. It added to the heat, set her body boiling, and had both her nipples standing hard. But instead of raising her hands to grab onto his wrist, or maybe push him away, she reached down between her legs, and slid her fingers into Matt’s hair, as the man began to suckle on her clitoris, before burying it again in long, heavy licks of his tongue.

She opened her mouth with a moan, and Art slid his cock between her lips. The angle prevented any sort of depth, but it was enough for her to encompass the bottom half of his glans with her kiss, and begin licking the hot flesh. The rumbling purrs he made were intoxicating, and she quivered as she watched his eyes half close in pleasure, pleasure she was giving him. As she stared up at the massive beast, he kept his grip on her neck, and smiled down at her, the hunger in his eyes only growing as his hand grew faster. She could taste the precum as a couple drops of it leaked down onto her tongue. His grip on her neck made her helpless to move, to escape, and Matt had his grip wrapped around each of her thighs, pressing her legs down against his shoulders, so she couldn't move those either.

She was hopelessly trapped. Nothing she could do. Nope, nothing. Even if she begged them to stop, they'd probably keep going, and ravage her. Yep, that's what they'd do, pin her down and force it on her. Nothing she could do.

Might as well give in.

She tightened her grip on Matt's head, and stroked the waves of his dirty blonde hair in her fingers, as the man bathed her cunt with his lips and tongue. Sizzling heat radiated outward from her thighs, and sparks of pleasure traveled up and down her back and legs, reaching her chest, reaching her toes, and forcing them to curl. She moaned onto Art's cock, and the man responded by masturbating faster, grip on his shaft tightening, until she was staring at how his veined muscles shifted under his skin as his forearm worked back and forth.

Matt slid two fingers into her clenching pussy, and pressed up against her g-spot. His other arm reached around her leg from the outside to press down on her pelvis, and squashed her g-spot down against the assaulting fingers. Through it all, he kept his mouth pressed to her clitoris, bathing it with his tongue. Her moans turned

into squeaks, and she stopped trying to lick Art, unable to do anything but gasp, as the tremors of climax hit her. Her legs straightened out, and her toes curled all the more, as her thighs squeezed on Matt's head, and quivered.

She knew she was making a mess on his face. Ever since that night with Jessy and her ghouls, her sex drive had awakened, as if someone had found an ember and threw on logs. And then Matt and Art came along, and threw on more logs. And some paper. And gasoline. Now, she could feel herself cream the man's lips and tongue, coating them in her juices, as she shook like a leaf in the wind.

As her orgasm started to calm down, and the tingling aftershocks danced up and down her legs, Art's hand grew faster, working his length until she could see the pleasure rising in his face. He half closed his eyes, and only tightened his grip on her neck as he masturbated onto her lips. The first wave of cum was enough to overwhelm her lips, and flowed down over her cheek, her chin, and down over her neck as Art aimed his cock down toward her body. He kept the underside along her lips, and she did her best to kiss and lick it, but she was still shaky, and Art was still masturbating, causing his glans to gently bounce against her kisses. Another stream of his cum gushed out over her lips, onto her chin, and landed on her neck; Art moved his hand out of the way, and she felt the warmth trickle down over her chin, and onto her neck and collar. And again, and again. What did Jessy call it? Pearl necklace. Except this one coated her lips and chin, too. Anymore and she was going to drown. She couldn't drown, though, and the werewolves knew it.

Art sat back enough for her to lift her head. She set her hands on the blankets beside her, and put her weight onto her elbows, so she could better look at what Matt was doing. He was staring at her, the hunger in his gaze only growing as his eyes looked at her cum-covered lips and neck.

He stood up, took her thighs, and spread them as he stepped in closer. Too tall! Way, way too tall, and she stared up at the giant beast as he pressed his shins against the bed, standing between her knees. He reached out across the bed, grabbed a pillow, and slid it under her butt, pointing her wet snatch up at him. Licking his lips, he took his cock into his hand, squatted down a bit so he could adjust for the height difference, and laid his cock along her lower abdomen, his testicles against her pussy. The brute of a man, in his Dalu form, was gargantuan. Over seven feet tall! And everything about him was bigger, and ... and longer.

She trembled, and stared, as the giant guided his cock onto her dripping pussy, and pressed his fat glans against the tiny opening. For a moment, she thought he might want anal; they had it often enough, and she'd grown to enjoy it, despite her words to the contrary. Tonight, the giant seemed intent on penetrating the hole he'd prepared, and she whimpered up at him as she felt her shivering muscles stretch open around his cock. His girth was only a little bigger, but a little bigger was plenty when the two men had already been massive compared to her tiny slit.

“W ... W-Wait ... it's ... nnnng...” She reached down between her legs with one hand, and wrapped her fingers around the giant thing opening her, as if that might stop him. Her other hand reached out to try and push against his stomach, but she might as well have been trying to push a house.

She tried to keep her eyes open, but Matt was doing that thing he did, where he went really slow and teased her. He sank in a couple inches before he pulled out one, then did it again, slowly getting deeper, slowly stretching her more and more, until she felt herself grow taut around his hard girth, and her insides were clenching in rhythm with him. And the angle, with her butt on the pillow, made sure each inch forced his glans to press toward her belly. Her grip on his cock continued as he slid more of the length past it, into her

squeezing slit, and she squeezed the hard thing skewering her with her fingers as it grew wet with her juices.

Five inches into her, reaching her depths, and with a lot more to go; her hand holding his cock still had room for all her fingers. Her other hand found his abs, and pushed against him, silently begging for him to stop, despite her little mewls and whimpers. She knew what she looked like, with her mouth open, quiet gasps on her lips, and cum dripping down her chin and neck. She knew what she felt like, with her insides clenching sporadically, and her juices dripping down onto her butt and thighs. Pressing against his abs — hard, massive abs — to try and stop him? Utterly pointless. Except struggling meekly like a helpless lamb earned growls of desire from her wolves; it always did. And despite herself, she kinda liked those hungry growls.

Matt continued to push into her, stretching her deepest place deeper into her body, and she gasped louder. Very sensitive spot! She squeaked, and pushed against Matt's stomach with both her hands, but he kept going, slowly easing his cock into her body another inch, and another.

Art took her hands again, and with one of his, pinned both of them over her head. Oh no, helpless again. Grinning down at her like a devil, he began masturbating again, and pushed down on his cock to guide his glans against her lips.

“Turn your head,” he said, voice a low growl.

Between her shivers, she turned her head to face toward the beast kneeling beside her, and opened her mouth, to let him guide his cock against her tongue. He growled again, and rumbled, that deep purring sound, filled with bass and weight, vibrating into her, as she felt his shaft between her lips; she had to open her mouth wide to fit him. And as Art eased his cock into her mouth, Matt sank every

last inch of his length into her small body, until her depths felt stretched to the limit.

If he started ramming her now, she wouldn't be able to handle it. It'd be too painful. But, rumbling, and growling down at her as pulled up on her thighs, Matt took her legs into his hands, set her feet to his chest, and gently began to grind his cock against her. Balls deep inside her, she whimpered around Art's cock as the wolf against her thighs shifted his hips back and forth a single inch. It was a gentle rhythm, and her insides sent more pleasure sparks into her toes each time the man slid every inch he had into her soaked slit.

Her insides were so hot, and something about being skewered that deeply, when every nerve inside her felt swollen with arousal, made the deep penetration feel good. As long as it was gentle! And Matt kept it gentle, easing his massive shaft in and out a gentle inch, so her depths were stretched inward again, and again, and again, all while her taut pussy clenched on him, earning delicious friction.

She came again. With a few squeaks, she managed to look up at Art as her muscles trembled, and she felt her juices trickle down her butt. It was embarrassing coming so quickly, and her blushing only grew worse, turning her into a beet as she tried to keep pleasuring Art, mid orgasm. It didn't work, and Art pulled out of her mouth to let her mewl a few times. When her sounds started to quieten, Art slid his cock back into her mouth. His right hand held both her hands down over her head, and his left worked his length, masturbating, as he nudged several inches of his girth around inside her mouth.

"You ... are way too tight," Matt said, voice gruffer than it normally was.

“Ah ... uh ... oh!” Talking with Art’s girth in her mouth wasn’t working, but he didn’t remove himself, content to smile at her as she tried. She knew Matt was going to do something, teasing her after saying something. Right on queue, he eased out more of his length, and started to fuck her faster. A lot faster. He kept the penetration to a reasonable length, only lightly grazing her deepest places, while the shallower penetration let the beast pump his cock far faster. That fast, hitting her g-spot over and over, was reducing her into a mess of quivers. She tried to lift her head and look, but again, Art forced her to keep her head where it was, as he masturbated with his thick glans and a couple inches beyond past that deep in her mouth.

She really was helpless, at this point. And, god, that set her body on fire.

She squeaked around Art’s cock again, as Matt pulled out, no longer rapid thrusting into her. He let her legs fall to the bed, spreading around him, and he leaned forward over her as he took his cock into his hand, and began masturbating. As he did, he rubbed the head of his length against her drenched folds, soaking his glans in her cum, as he worked up to his orgasm.

She melted into the bed, as the man lifted his cock enough to rest it against her clitoris, and squirted his cum onto her belly. Masturbating all the while, gentle friction against her clit, another wave of cum splashed up onto her stomach. And another, and another. Soon it was dripping down over her waist and onto the blankets, as yet more squirts of his cum flowed down onto her, soaking her. Several gushes reached her chest, coating her breasts in the white liquid, and she quivered as the warm seed covered her.

And then he was back inside her. They were never satisfied, and they wouldn’t let her up until they were.

Five minutes later, Art finally pulled his cock out of her mouth. He didn't let go of her hands, but he did aim his cock over her body as he masturbated faster. She lifted her head, and stared at it, as the first drop of his white cum leaked out of it onto her neck. Then next drop came as a wave, squirting onto her breasts, along with another, and another. And when it finally slowed, Art continued to masturbate, earning heavy drops to fall slowly as thick strands onto her neck, collar, and shoulders.

Through it all, Matt fucked her, burying himself balls deep and gently grinding his cock's head into her depths, pressing against things and filling her up until she thought she'd burst. She came again, legs spread and dangling off the bed shaking as she squirmed. To have Art covering her in cum as Matt made her cum, was too much, and she moaned, loudly, at the sensation. Her insides squeezed on Matt as hard as possible, clenching, wringing, but the enormous beast continued to fuck her, pushing a little harder and a little faster, despite sinking himself to the hilt each time. Her tender insides quivered, soaking the wolf, as his thrusting forced her climax to continue. He kept hitting that spot inside her, filling her, and it refused to let the sparks stop pulsing outward, hot waves coursing up and down her core and into her limbs.

A gush of warm flowed out of her, far more than her own juices could account for. Matt was cumming inside her, already! She squirmed and wriggled, still unable to escape Art's pinning grip, and let out a loud whimper as Matt pulled himself out of her. He set his cock against her pelvis, and masturbated, same as Art. He rubbed his dripping wet, hot glans against her sensitive clit, earning almost painful sparks of pleasure through the engorged button, before sliding his length up onto her mons, and squirting more cum down onto her stomach. And more. And more.

She lifted her head up, and stared at the sight of the giant, his muscles lightly trembling with his masturbating, his eyes fixed on her, and his cock aimed over her mons. The thick head of his shaft,



leaking heavy drops of white, squirted again, and she stared at the stream of hot semen flowing over her stomach, and up her sternum with its impact, before trickling down her sides, down her ribs, down her waist and hips, and down between her legs. And through it all, orgasm aftershocks continued to work up and down her legs and into her chest, making her pant, mewl, and making her toes curl.

A moment to rest, finally! Art let go of her hands, and she pressed them onto the sheets around her to try and sit up. No good, body still quivering, not wanting to do anything coordinated like sit up. So she lay there, and looked between the two brutes gazing down at her cum-soaked body. She was drenched, and she could feel the heat of their cum soaking into her skin. Everything smelled of sex and testosterone, and she made a few, weak sighs, as she looked between the two slabs of muscle looking down at her.

They were still hard. How could they still be aroused!?! She'd had a Kiss of both of them, and they'd both cum twice, and—

Matt took her legs in his hands, and moved her, turned her, as he climbed onto the bed. He got on his knees, like Art, and turned her so she was between the two wolves. And then flipped her over.

“W-Wait! Wait, please, I ... need a b-b-b-break, and—”

Matt took her hips, lifted, and pulled her up onto her knees. She put her weight onto her palms, and looked over her shoulder at the man. Matt was normally so gentle, but she knew what he was like when he was transformed: aggressive, and hard to control. Maybe he was like that in this in-between form too? He looked like he was ready to jump on a gazelle and eat it, with the way he was staring at her back, and ass.

He used one hand to guide his dripping cock to her pussy's clips, and with his other hand, pulled her down onto his length. All of it.

“Nn! Please ... w-wait ... I...” Oh god. The beast had to spread his legs to get his body aligned with hers, her knees between his, but there was no denying the wolf was getting deeper than before. He set both hands on her hips, and pulled on her harder, forcing his glans to stretch her deeper and deeper, until Tash found herself falling forward, unable to keep her weight on her hands. It felt like he was in her stomach.

Her blatant inability to stay up didn't seem to bother Matt. He kept it slow enough to not hurt her, but he was still being a little rougher than before, and she squeaked with each thrust, as the giant sank every ridiculous inch of his shaft into her. With both hands tight to her hips, she could feel her ass lightly bounce against his abdomen, and she managed to peek over her shoulder to see her small butt jiggle with the impacts against his steel pelvis.

Fucked, doggy style, by a beast behind her, trying to penetrate her up to her tonsils. She whimpered up at him, eyes begging him for a moment to recover; he didn't give it. If anything, her tiny mewls and squeaks earned nothing but more hunger from the giant, and he squeezed his fingers into her body as he pulled her balls deep onto him, and kept her there. The fat head of his cock filled her depths, stretching her inward, and he stayed there, grinding his hips into her as he buried her butt into the grooves of his pelvis, hard enough her ass molded to the steel of his body.

With her chest on the blankets, she turned her head enough to look up at Art over her. “Art ... please ... I need ... a b-break...”

Art smiled down at her, and put his weight on his butt, his legs spread around her. He lifted her by the shoulders with one hand, and with the other, guided her mouth to his cock. They both wanted more.

She looked up at Art with her best ‘please don't, I'm meek and helpless’ look. It only earned a hungry, rumbling growl from the

beast, as he slid his glans into her mouth. She struggled to keep her weight on her elbows, but Art set his hand on her head, and continued to push down, causing her to slip further down, and down, until his cock was sliding into her throat, thickness filling it. Deep, deeper, and all the way. When her lips circled the base of his cock, again the werewolf growled at her, this time in satisfaction as he gazed at her.

Her boyfriends were such brutes! Both of them were staring at her, growling, rumbling, purring, and both seemed almost desperate to get more of her, like they couldn't have enough of her. As she looked up Art's body, up his abs and chest, up to the massive man's eyes rolling upward in bliss, she squirmed and wriggled, managing only to bathe the cock filling her mouth and throat with rubbing muscle and wet friction. Weight on her elbows, she placed her hands against his thighs near his testicles, and pushed against him, but he didn't let her up, trapping her between him and the giant behind her.

Matt continued the fuck her, frequently taking the time to bury his huge phallus balls deep into her leaking slit. And with her lips around the base of Art's cock, she couldn't move in any direction, backward or forward. Completely, utterly, hopelessly trapped, with one beast holding her down, cock filling her throat, and the other grinding the head of his cock into her depths.

She came. Quivering and squirming, she started to shake, hands squeezing on Art's thighs as the pleasure waves renewed. She looked up, eyes drifting up over Art's body before they closed when the sparks hit her. They pulsed outward, reaching down into her toes, her thighs, and up through her core and into her chest. Everything was tingling, everything, and despite the overwhelming tremors, neither Matt or Art let her fall. Art kept her pinned on his length, lips snug against the base of him, while Matt took her orgasm as queue to start fucking her with a beat again, keeping his cock all the way inside her and only withdrawing an inch or two

with each thrust. It felt like the beast was hitting her belly, and she felt her insides spasm as the man's girth rubbed against every inch of her taut pussy with each motion. And her insides, the deepest part of her, filled her whole body with waves, Matt's glans pressing against it persistently and forcing another wave to course through her, and another, and another.

Finally, Art let her head go. She didn't lift it. She was exhausted, and didn't need to breathe; far too much trouble to lift her head. And as long as the man didn't cum inside her — couldn't digest his fluids — she was safe to simply stay there, and look up at the man with tired eyes. Tired, and pleasure laden, she imagined. She didn't know what her O-face looked like, but she was sure Art was getting an eyeful of it, with her lips around the base of his cock, and his length filling her mouth and throat, as she came. It was almost painful, how the coursing waves of pleasure didn't let up, each driven on by Matt's refusal to stop stretching her depths further inward, until she could feel juices leaking out of her.

She was squirting, just a little, but enough for her juices to coat man's testicles, the soaked flesh gently slapping her clit with each thrust.

Art reached for her, and helped lift her, pulling up on her shoulders until his shaft fell free of her mouth. The moment she could make noise again, the squeaks started, quiet, high pitched mewls, barely more than panting, as Matt fucked her. She tried to make words, wanted to beg for a moment to rest, but all she managed was a few whimpers, each timed with Matt's thrusts.

But soon those came to a stop as well, as the man slid his cock out of her, and pushed her on her side so she could lie there, shivering as the sparks continued to pulse up and down her body. She managed to open her eyes, and found the two beasts masturbating again, each of them letting out rumbles as they leaned over her.

Art set his cock onto her cheek, and squirted cum over it, soaking the softness, before the next gush ran over her jaw and onto her neck. The next poured over her neck completely, drowning it in cum, before it washed over her collar and breasts, dripping down onto the sheets. At last, he set his glans against her lips, and rubbed it against her; she tried to kiss it, but she was too busy enjoying orgasm aftershocks, as his cum washed over her lips, and trickled down her other cheek, before falling onto the sheets.

While he soaked her top half in cum, Matt did the same for her bottom, rubbing his cock's head against her butt and hip, and causing waves of the hot fluid to pour over her waist, and down over her back and stomach. She managed a few murmurs, some quiet moans, as she felt the gentle giant rub the massive phallus along her ass, his cock's head almost boiling with heat as he pressed it along her butt, and soaked it in waves of white. Another gushed over her thighs. And another, he rubbed into her pussy, one of his hands pushing her legs up toward her chest so he could rub his cock against her dripping folds, and soak them in his cum. Even as his orgasm finished, he continued to masturbate, and milked the last few drops of his cum as he pressed his soaked glans against her sex, nudging her clitoris and earning some sparks as he coated it with his cum again.

Everyone was done. Finally. She took the time to lay there, quivering, a smile on her lips no matter how hard she tried to make it go away. The tremors continued to work through her for a while, making her toes curl a bit, and her fingers squeeze on the bed sheets. But with time, she managed to sit up.

Art and Matt were both back to their normal form, no more ridiculous giant beast man form. Their erections were gone, and both were breathing a little heavier than normal. She had drained both of them of a decent amount of blood, so, they should have been too exhausted for sex anyway, let alone go three times each!

She looked down at herself, and gasped. Soaked. Completely soaked, from lips down, every inch of her down to her thighs. So much cum, trickling down her breasts and stomach in thick strands, hitting her thighs and spreading before dripping on the sheets. Her lips, chin, cheeks, neck, her breasts and stomach, all of it was coated white. Matt had coated her whole butt in white! Oh gods, it was everywhere.

She ran a finger down her chest, and cut a line through the heavy layers of cum, before taking a moment to stare at the thick strand that now connected her finger to her chest.

“You ok?” Art said. “Got a little rough with you.”

She tried to frown at him, but her whole body was tingling, and making her smile, lips possessed and refusing to listen. Shivering, she stared down at the sight of her breasts, and hard nipples poking through the mess. Both men stared at her too, and rumbled their satisfaction as she set her hands on her breasts. They rumbled louder, when she took a moment to massage it into her skin, underneath each breast, and around, into the soft skin, and into her hard nipples. Wow.

“I ... I uh ... need a shower. And, um ... change the sheets.” Oh god, it was all over her. All over everything. So unbelievably ... naughty.

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~~Eric~~

A couple days later, and he and Jessy were already sleeping over at each other's place. Today, it was his place. She slept under the bed, quite literally, after she was satisfied with some security upgrades for his door, and that his curtains would keep all the sunlight out. If even a crack of sunlight had gotten through, the bed would be the only thing keeping her from getting turned into cinders, and she couldn't sleep unless she had at least two barriers

between her and the sun at all times. Understandable. Hell, he wasn't comfortable sleeping here at all, but she insisted it was safe.

He wasn't so sure. The Begotten working for Jeremiah knew where he lived, and had been in his place. He had 'burrowed' from his place into his lair, whatever that meant, though a text from Fiona said that this Elen person had destroyed the burrow, scarring the area and making it impossible to burrow through for some time. It was all mumbo jumbo to him, and he wouldn't feel comfortable until he talked to Azamel.

He slipped off the bed, and checked underneath it. The sun was setting, and he figured Jessy would be up any moment. Kat, on the other hand, hadn't bothered to wait, and was sleeping, nestled on the girl's stomach. The vampire was sleeping on her back, hands at her side, like a corpse. She was a corpse. She smelled faintly of ash, but otherwise, was pale and lifeless.

He was having sex with a corpse. Was he a necrophiliac now? Strange thought.

Damn beautiful corpse though. She was wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, nothing fancy; she was on vacation, apparently. And damn she had a body, large breasts pulling to the sides of her chest with their weight, struggling against the tight t-shirt. No bra. Her impressive physique and short blonde hair completed the image of the 'sporty' woman, and god damn, it was arousing.

He rolled his eyes, put on some pants, and walked into the kitchen of his absurdly fancy apartment. Not a child anymore, he could control his sex drive enough to think about other things for five minutes. Stretching his shoulders out, he opened the cupboards, and looked for something to eat. Except he didn't want to snack anymore. He wanted to eat a big slab of raw meat, something fatty, something with bones to gnaw on, with organs to

tear open. One meal a day, a giant meal of everything you'd find in a kill.

He popped open his fridge, and pulled out a slab of meat, with the bone, and skin. And a side of liver, heart, and brains and eyes. The local butchers were going to know him by name, going like this. How did Avery and her pack do it? Or did they eat like this at all?

He may have been half wolf, but he was still half man; that meant utensils and plates. Smiling and shaking his head, he put the strange array of raw meat on a couple plates, sat at the table, and used a fork and knife. But, he couldn't deny a part of him wanted to grab it with his fingers, and tear it apart with his teeth. There was a limit to how much he was going to let this new, beastly side of him take over his life, though.

Kat, summoned by the smell of meat, came to join him. And he gave her a bit, too.

"You know girl, I did a lot of research to see what the best kind of food to give a cat was, when I started buying this new diet." He smiled at the stupid feline, and pet her head and behind the ears, as she chewed on some raw meat he put on a small plate for her. It was quite the rabbit hole of info, learning what you could or couldn't feed a cat. Lot of controversy around feeding raw food to a cat, too, which—

"What the fuck."

Eric lifted his head, and smiled at the vampire as she came out of his room. Completely awake already, not groggy or anything. Must have been a trait of being undead.

"Good evening," he said.

"Dude, this is gross." She came up to the table, and gestured to the meal. "It's not even cooked. And ... are those eyeballs or



testicles?”

“Eyeballs.”

“And that looks like a chunk of brain. What the fuck?”

“I ... don’t know, honestly. I just listened to my gut.

“Your gut told you to eat brains? ... like a zombie?”

His turn to roll his eyes. “Only dead person walking around here is you.”

“Good point.” She laughed, sat down, and continued to pet his cat after he stopped so he could eat. Damn creature was getting spoiled to hell. “I was happy to see I woke up this evening. It’s not exactly easy to sleep over at someone else’s place, when sunlight turns you into kindling.”

“Been a while since I’ve had a girl over.”

“Wife really fucked up your life, eh?”

“I’d like to think it was mutual.” It wasn’t. As much as the hatred had been mutual, she was the one to walk out the door, took a bunch of his money, and left him with a debt to pay. Sour grapes. “Thanks for being gentle about it.”

“You want me to be gentle?” Shrugging at him, she drew shapes into Kat’s fur, while the cat was too absorbed in chewing. “Maybe when in bed.”

“I didn’t think you’d want gentle in bed.”

“We’re dating now, right? Figure I should try gentle sex at least once.”

“Once?”

“I’m sure I did it once or twice, decades ago.” Shrugging, she smiled at him, and licked a fang. “Besides, I was pretty gentle when I fucked you those times at the club.”

“True.”

“But you know what really turns me? What idea really gets me flowing?”

Good god this woman. “What?”

“First, we start off gentle. Maybe spooning, right? You’re holding me, hugging me, maybe choking me a little ... or a lot, and you’re balls deep in my ass. I’m masturbating slowly, and you’re taking your sweet time fucking my sweet ass, and I have a nice, gentle orgasm.”

Wow, that was pretty tame, and very vanilla, anal aside. “That does sound amaz—”

“And then you push me over, lie on top of me, put a pillow under my hips, and you transform. Get right into that big beast mode, full on werewolf, without ever leaving my ass. You’re inside me while you transform, and I can feel your weight grow, and grow, as you squash me into the bed. I can feel you get bigger, and bigger, until I can almost feel you in my stomach, and there’s a bulge on my abs from your giant, hard dick pressing into me.” Despite her continuing petting of Kat, it was clear the woman’s eyes were elsewhere, living in a fantasy and staring off into space.

“Would ... that even be enjoyable? I—”

“Oh god, I’d cum my brains out. Christ, if I was blushing life right now, I’d be soaking the chair. Oh! Then, you’d snuggle onto me, bury me in your shadow, completely cover me in your weight, and grind into me until I could feel your huge werewolf balls on my cunt. I’d be dripping all over them. And, and, then you could start

fucking me proper, staying nice and deep but working in and out a couple inches hard enough to bounce me a bit, you know? And I'd look up, and there'd be your huge teeth and beastly eye, looking down over me, head tilted, chops drooling cause you're a big, hungry animal. You'd start fucking me harder, as your huge claws pin my arms and chest and head to the bed. And I'd cum again, soaking your balls as your dick squashes all my bits into the bed. And you start painting my insides white, filling me up with gallons of cum, and—”

“Whoa, whoa.”

“What?”

“I'm ... kind of surprised. Not exactly ... what I expected from a girl who's been the dominant party in orgies for decades.”

“Is ... that a problem?”

He blinked, and looked at her. She lowered her gaze, and a small frown was there as her eyes stayed on Kat, as if she was afraid to look at him. Maybe she was. Maybe Clara's insult really had hit closer to home than he thought, and all of Jessy's aggressive attitude about sex was how she coped with being ashamed of what was proving to be an utterly massive sex drive.

Or she was just sad she might have shied him away from continuing what was, apparently, her first attempt at a monogamous relationship.

“Not at all,” he said. “Hell, you're turning me on just talking about this. Though, I am worried.”

Her smile bounced back, and she scooped up Kat before putting her on her shoulder, embracing her for proper petting. “Whatcha worried about?”

“That this kink you have for werewolves is dangerous. I’m not ... not really the same me when I’m in that form. I’m new to all this, don’t really know what I’m doing, and I could really hurt you.”

“You saw what I did to that gargoyle fucker. I can take care of myself. I might not be able to take you in a straight fight, but I’m sure I could throw sand in your eyes and run away if it came to that.” She shivered, and smiled at him all the more. “Arg, talking about it like my life really is in danger? That the giant, dangerous beast fucking my ass could eat me when he’s done fucking me? Such a turn on.” Apparently, life threatening situations were also a turn on for her. With a wink for him, she set Kat down on the couch behind her, got up from the kitchen table, and paced around the apartment. “You’re working tonight, right?”

“Yeap.”

“K, let’s have a quickie before you go. Actually, on second thought, I’m gonna go with you. I’ll fuck you there, and then drop Tash and the others a message, see if they’ll visit.”

Damn. He wasn’t regretting his choice to date Jessy, but he was concerned she was going to drain him dry, or break his hips.

## Chapter 75

~~Eric~~

Ganders was more than understanding of Eric's circumstance. Hell, all Jessy had to do was give him a few words and the man accepted everything with a smile. It really was a different universe these vamps lived in. They didn't worry about money, they worried about where their next blood bag was, or when the sun rose. They didn't worry about making friends, they just turned humans into slaves, and indulged in what a brainwashed ghoul would do for you. They worried about other vamps, and getting into turf wars. It was so alien to him, a guy who'd spent years now worrying about his next paycheck, and whether he'd be able to pay rent, and his loans.

He wasn't sure it was better. Since his new life had hit him, he'd gone through hell, and nearly died when a fucker put a silver knife into his god damn chest. It was still tender, and Eric rubbed the wound as he and Jessy found a booth. He was technically working, and was dressed in his suit for it, while Jessy had dropped by her place to get something more fitting a club.

Except, it was more fitting a beach than a club. The top was a black bikini top with some silver jewelry worked into the straps around the neck. And the skirt was barely a skirt, more like a small black piece of fabric that hugged the front of her pelvis, and another for her ass, with each piece joined by some straps that crossed her outer thighs and hips. An extremely short, extremely revealing skirt, that also made it obvious she wasn't wearing anything underneath it since it left her hips and thighs exposed. She did put on some heels, and Eric found himself quirking a brow at the sight of her in those deathtraps; they looked great, but he expected a sporty woman like herself to stay away from such unhealthy footwear. Apparently, she

enjoyed dressing up. And being the weak fool that he was, he enjoyed looking at her all the more when she did.

“Look over there.” Jessy nodded across the way to another booth. The two of them were on the bottom floor, where it was noisier, with people dancing, the music louder, and more people in booths compared to the second floor.

Eric followed her eyes, and like a firecracker went off in his mind, he immediately snapped to attention. A vampire, and a werewolf. He’d seen them before, and now he could make out their scents in the chaos of the club. There was more to it, too. His eyes noticed the way they moved, the way they looked back at him, and looked at the others. Subtle signs about who they were, what they were, mixed into the scents, confirmed what he knew.

“That’s Tilly and Mason,” Jessy said. “Tilly’s a Carthian.”

“A Carthian, here?”

“Yeah, and she shouldn’t be.” Frowning, Jessy glared at the two, and tapped her fingers on the table in front of her. “This is Invictus territory. She’s not allowed to be feeding here.”

“Doesn’t look like she’s feeding.”

“Vamps come here to feed.”

Eric shrugged, and watched the two intruders for a while. Mason gave him a nod, but otherwise turned to resume talking to Tilly. Tilly, on the other hand, seemed to take delight in Jessy’s attention, and blew her a kiss. She had red hair cut to only a couple inches, and was a thin woman, average height with pale skin, and a few freckles. Mason was also average height, buzzed head with blonde hair, and like all the werewolves, a very athletic, muscular build. Eric took note, and memorized the faces for later.

“Is it breaking the rules if she’s feeding on Mason?”

“I ... don’t know. I suppose not. We can’t feed in each other’s territory, but I guess the spirit of that rule has always been about not taking each other’s kine.” The reasoning didn’t seem to make Jessy any happier though, and she frowned all the more as she continued looking at them. “We’re not exactly on good terms with the Carthians lately. The Mirrden district takeover pissed them off, and then they did this shit with you and Terra Den, practically asking for escalation.” With a long sigh, she nuzzled up against his side, eyes still on the distant couple. “They’re damn hot, though.”

Eric laughed, and she raised a brow as she looked at him. “Sorry. Still not used to my girlfriend—”

“Ooh, girlfriend. Never had someone call me that before.”

“Never had a girlfriend so brazen about being attracted to other people, especially other women.”

She returned his laugh, and gave him a buddy-buddy punch in the shoulder. “Men are hot, but women? Women are fucking hot, you know?”

“Agreed.”

While the music continued, the hum of the crowd died down, and everyone looked toward the entrance of the club. Eric and Jessy both raised a brow at each other, before looking where everyone else was looking. Both of them dropped their jaws.

It was the Prince, Jack at her side, and two women the same size as the kid. Jack was wearing a nice suit, which Eric had come to expect from any dude in their Invictus covenant by this point. The two girls, who looked like they could be gymnasts with how lean their strong little frames looked, were wearing pink and blue tube tops, the brunette in pink, the blonde in blue; looked like cotton

candy, together. They both wore miniskirts of the same color as well, and each girl held one of Jack's hands. Eric thought he was escorting the two humans, but on second glance, it seemed Jack was being pulled by the two girls.

It was the Prince that everyone was staring at. How the fuck did she get into that dress? It looked like it was made of leather, black leather, and it was nothing but straps cutting across her in various patterns. The skirt was straps, exposing basically all of her ass and legs, with a single strap covering her sex with all the conservatism of a g-string. A black, tight corset circled her waist, underbust, and a couple straps cut upward across her breasts, barely managing to cover her nipples. She wore fingerless black gloves of leather that reached her elbows, and knee-high black boots, with shallow, thick heels, the sort made for stomping. The woman already was ridiculously tall, so high heels did seem a bit overkill.

The Prince and her entourage walked past the bar, and out to the cusp of where the club opened up. To the front of her, the open stage where some humans were dancing, grinding, kissing. To the sides, tables and booths that were pressed against the sides of the stairs, the stairs snug to the walls, leading up to the second floor that sat above the club entrance. She looked around for a moment, and smiled a demon's smile, as she noticed Mason and Tilly, but also Eric and Jessy.

If Jessy was right, the Prince might disapprove of Tilly's actions, and—nope, that didn't happen. The Prince offered them all a small nod, and guided her three little ones up the stairs, disappearing onto the second floor. With the second floor only using half of the room, the other half open above for the dancing area, the seating on the first floor was able to look up and see the railing of the second floor. There were always a few people standing around, talking, drinking, kissing and touching. But the Prince didn't come to the railing, likely taking one of the grandeur booths behind.



Eric breathed easy. She made him nervous. Very nervous.

“God damn, she has the most ridiculous tits,” Jessy said.

“ ... yeah, I’m gonna have to agree with that.”

“Something about her isn’t natural. She’s super tall, fine, that’s rare but not freakazoid weird or anything. White hair though? What caused that. And the tits with that tiny waist? That isn’t natural.”

“I assumed she dyed her hair, when I met her.”

“Nope.” Shrugging, Jessy pointed down at her breasts and the bikini top she was wearing. “I got big tits, despite being lean. I got lucky. When the first eight letters of the alphabet aren’t enough to cover your cup size, and you have a tiny waist like that? I’d vote fake, times a thousand.”

“I mean—”

“But the way they bounce and jiggle? That ain’t fake. And I’ve seen her wearing less, at some of the banquets. They jiggle for days.”

“Banquets?”

“Balls and parties and shit, that you haven’t seen yet. We gather up, get a bunch of kine in there, and go to town. Chow time.” Jessy grinned at him and gave him another buddy punch in the arm. “You should come. Vamps suck down a lot of blood, and we get the kine off too. Lots of blowjobs and clit sucking, fingering and shit. Some of the more adventurous vamps have given tit fucks, to some lucky fuckers lying on tables while other Kindred Kiss them through their orgasms.”

“Well ... damn. This is a frequent thing?”

“Nah. During my time as Kindred, we were recovering from the purge, and by the time that settled down and people were getting back to normal, the Invictus and Carthians were at it, Viktor being a giant jackass, and then that Tony fucker started causing more trouble with his own group. So each covenant did their own thing in this time, but occasionally it got pretty sexual at the Invictus banquets, especially ones the Prince attended. Just a while ago, the Prince ran her own banquet, same night Jack got kidnapped. Saw a lot of kine tits and dicks, and more than a few Kindred tits, too.” She held out her hands in front of her, cupping imaginary breasts. “Prince was wearing something that exposed the inside of her cleavage, right? But, like, all of it, half of each nipple and everything, no bra. Bounce, bounce bounce, with every damn step. Was like watching jello.”

He choked on a laugh, trying to keep it from getting loud, but damn it, he laughed anyway; she did, too.

He didn't know who Tony was, and only Viktor by occasional mention. It was hard to imagine that Dolareido had an entire nightlife, with giant figures of larger-than-life power, and he'd never known about it.

“Sounds like there's a lot I still need to learn about this world.”

“Damn right.” She lifted his arm up over her shoulder, and snuggled into his side. She was a bit tall though, basically his height, and it was a little awkward getting his arm around behind her neck; she didn't mind. Maybe she would have, if it was her arm being lifted up at an odd angle, but she'd have probably laughed and shoved him away.

So, he relaxed his arm over her shoulder, and gave her a half hug. She chuckled, kissed his jawline, and turned to watch the dance floor.

“Think you'd be comfortable coming to one?” she said.

“What, a blood banquet orgy?”

“It’s not really an orgy, cause the vamps aren’t getting off. We’re drinking, and getting off our drinks.” She gestured to the dance floor. “Like, anyone in there you’d like to see stripped naked, laid on a table, and have a couple vamps sucking dry while another eats out her pussy?”

“ ... I have to ask, what happened to this city?”

“Huh? Whatcha mean?”

He nodded the way she was looking, to the dance floor. One of the women was wearing a top that was, what would have been, the top half of a flowing gown, except the stomach was cut so high that it completely exposed the underside of her breasts; absurdly large breasts at that, fake and defying gravity. Every time she moved with the beat of the thumping music, the gown lifted enough to show her nipples. No one batted an eye. When a guy came up behind her, pressed his pelvis to her ass, and cupped her breasts from behind, she responded by pushing herself into him, and joining his rhythm with the beat.

“I mean, maybe I never really noticed,” he said, “because this really wasn’t my scene, when I had money to waste. But, I gotta ask, what happened to this city to get everyone in it so sexual?”

“You don’t like?”

“That’s not it. And don’t get it wrong, I like that you’re an insufferable horn dog.”

She chuckled, but also punched him in the ribs. Ow. Regular buddy punches were going to be a thing in this relationship, evidently.

He nodded to one of the booths. A girl in what must have a thousand-dollar dress was sitting cozy, a smile on her face as she sipped on something. Underneath the table was a guy, head between her legs.

“Looks like a man doing his civil duty,” she said.

Laughing again, he shrugged, and tapped on the table as he considered his words. “I’ve been to Las Vegas. I’ve seen how into the drugs and sex people can get. Dolareido’s the same way, except even more so. And, I guess the cops don’t stop it because—”

“Because we own the cops.” She nodded, and tapped a finger on the table as well, next to his. “Dolareido is Slut City mostly because of Antoinette, I guess. There are lots of cities with a dominant Kindred presence, big cities, and they all indulge in sex and drugs, and vamps take advantage. Dolareido’s a bit different, though, cause the Prince actually pushes for sexual ... openness, you know? The Prince controls so much of the money in this city, and I know she quietly pushes for more sexual expression and acceptance in everything. I don’t think anyone’s been arrested for sex-related crime in this city in forever. Prostitution is practically legal, as long as it doesn’t get media attention. And you can fuck in public areas and shit, and no one cares, as long as it’s not in the middle of the street, in the middle of the day.”

Eric had seen some very beautiful prostitutes in his life; never fucked one, but parties were parties, and in Dolareido, that often meant the birthday boy got fucked by a professional. Sometimes, birthday girl.

“That’s a lot of sex.”

“Yeap. S’what happens when you get a succubus running the city.” Shrugging again, Jessy took his finger, and guided it to her mouth, where she chewed on it. Not kissed, or Kissed, but chewed, like a bored dog. It was terribly cute. “If the Prince had it her way, she’d

legalize it all, unionize sex workers, and get them good benefits and shit.”

“That is strangely admirable.” He was all for live and let live. People wanted to get addicted to hard drugs and ruin their health and bank accounts? If they were old enough to make the choice, let them. People wanted to pay for sex, or make a living having sex? Let them. There were issues with those ideas, ramifications that weren’t obvious at first glance, but they were either solvable, or the lesser of two evils.

“Parker and Vicky do that kind of shit, particularly in Devil’s Corner. And I’m sure those two indulge in their work, too.” Laughing, she guided his arm off her shoulders, hand down to her leg, and set it on her thigh closer to him. Smooth, and hard. “I bet that Parker asshole has ten women, doing everything and anything to each other, while he sits on a throne, getting sucked off.”

“That does sound like a typical male fantasy.”

“Male? Ha. Women got that fantasy too, except, you know, I think I’d prefer half guys half girls, if I was going to have that many bodies trying to fuck me.” Laughing, she shook her head, and looked up, lost in a memory. “One time when I was younger, a Daeva I knew had seduced a whole fuckload of people with their Majesty discipline, and we legit just stripped down, and got into the fucking pile of kine. Must have been at least a dozen pairs of legs.”

“One time, I had sex when I knew company would be over at any moment. That ... is basically the most harrowing of my sexual adventures.”

She stared at him, for a good long while, before she erupted into laughter. “Sweet merciful christ, I am going to have so much fun with you. I—” Something cut her off. She looked to the door, and raised a brow, as another woman walked in.

Clara.

The werewolf found them, and walked straight toward them. Eric froze. She didn't look happy, box braids bouncing with her steps. She wasn't dressed for a club either, jeans and a tight white t-shirt. A gorgeous woman, to be sure, but a deadly one, and she looked like she was ready to do some stomping.

She slid into the booth next to him. The other bouncers knew to let her and her pack in, despite the street clothes, and it looked like she was comfortable enough to use that fact. Or maybe anger was driving her to not give a shit.

“Clara, how you doing?” Jessy said, big jackass grin on her face.

Clara glared at her, glared at him, before glaring at her some more. “You sent them.”

“I did.”

“Again.”

“Well, I mean, I told them to come by every second night. Thought maybe you'd want a break between visits.” Without ever breaking her grin, Jessy leaned back, and hooked her elbows over the back of the seat. “If you want them over every night though, just tell them. They got the stamina, especially if I'm not Kissing them.”

Clara's eyes could cut steel with the way she was looking at her. “You ... you can't ... just...”

“What? Make life a little more enjoyable for you?” With her elbows on the back of the booth, her arm closer to Eric reached out and started playing with his ear. He didn't move a muscle; maybe if he didn't move, he wouldn't get caught in the crossfire. And her touch was kind of nice. “I know you had a good time that first night. They told me all about it.”

It took every ounce of self control Eric had, to not wince or grin or something at that. They'd done more than tell her, and the image of Clara struggling to handle three dicks at once was permanently burned into his mind. Hell, he was having a hard time not imagining the beautiful woman naked right now. A glance at Jessy showed her looking Clara up and down a few times, too. She was imagining Clara naked, for sure.

"I—"

"Come on," Jessy said, "be honest. Think I'm gonna slam you for admitting you indulged? Christ, the last thing a vamp is going to insult you for is enjoying sex."

"I was drunk as fuck that first time! And alone ... and I ... I would have ... agreed to anything, like that." The vulnerability in the werewolf's voice was blatant. He didn't expect that from her.

"And the second time?"

"I..."

And like a dam had broken, Jessy sighed joy, smiled, and leaned in over the table, elbows on it and fingers netted together. Almost looked like she was making a business deal, and winning. "I know how to pick em, right? I trained them good, too."

Clara blushed, and Eric couldn't help but smile. Much as Jessy was being an asshole, it did seem like she was trying to help Clara, in her own perverted way.

"Yeah, they knew what they were doing."

"Right? Isn't it great, when you know the guy is going to actually get you off, multiple times, before he's done. You can relax, get into it, not fucking worry about getting off like it's a fucking race."

Something so fucking awesome about knowing for sure you won't be getting out of bed until your legs don't work."

"Fucking god, Jessy. I've met a few Daeva with the same obsession, but never a Gangrel," Clara said.

Jessy half snorted, half laughed, and shrugged. "Slut City is run by the Queen of Sex, and she's rubbed off on everyone. She's upstairs right now, with Jack."

Mention of the kid's name earned a wince from Clara. "Thought I smelled her. I'll go speak with Jack before I go." Nodding, Clara leaned in, and managed something close to a sheepish grin. "So you didn't ... do that to try and get back at me?"

"What? Fuck no." Rolling her eyes, Jessy slapped a hand on the table, as if lightning struck her brain. "And by all means, transform when you're with the boys."

"Excuse me?"

"Transform. Wolf out, full on werewolf form, you know?"

"That is dangerous! That is ... that is asking for someone to get really fucking hurt."

"Ghouls are tough, they can take it. And I'm sure they'd be down to try some new kink like fucking an eight-foot, lean and sexy furry thing." Chuckling, Jessy looked up at nothing, undoubtedly imagining it.

"I uh ... I don't think I'll do that, but thanks for the suggestions. You prob—you already did that with Eric, didn't you?"

"Ha! Yeah. It was awesome." Jessy slapped a hand on the table again, and snuggled into Eric's side. "Felt like he was in my god damn womb."



Clara facepalmed, shaking her head. “Please be careful, Eric. You’re still new to all this, and urges in that form are so fucking dangerous. Just being near another Uratha who transforms can lead to more transformations, and for some of us, there’s no getting out of that form until we’ve tasted violence. Hell, no one in the pack has even considered sex while in Gauru form; didn’t know we could, and not dumb enough to try.”

“Don’t worry, we got it under control,” Jessy said. Eric didn’t agree, but as long as they experimented in safety, he didn’t really agree with Clara’s concern either. Not that he had any idea what he was fucking doing. “Seriously though, I hope you have a good time with the boys. It must suck to have the punk you’re interested in, out of reach.”

Clara winced, and leaned back, folding her arms across her chest. “You’ve never been in that situation?”

“Never really wanted something someone else had, that I couldn’t just take. But I highly suggest you don’t try taking Jack from the Prince, it won’t end well. If she were someone else, I’d wonder if you could get into their bed. But, the Prince and Jack are pretty much joined at the hip in love, and the only people getting into that bed are her pets. Pretty sure they’re there to be a source of blood and pussy, not a romantic rival.”

Eric pursed his lips for a moment, and waited. The woman never handled anything with grace or care, always bulldozing through anything without a second thought. There was value in telling someone the truth without sugarcoating it, but then there was taking it too far and running the person down. He enjoyed the brutal honesty, and it was a great change compared to Sheryl’s passive aggressiveness, but he wasn’t everyone.

Sighing, Clara nodded, and hugged herself, arms folded across her chest as she looked to the stairway. “Yeah. That’s ... a part of the

reason I agreed to your ... sharing.”

Eric was a bystander in this conversation, and he was sure if he said something, he'd shatter the strange, fragile peace forming between the two women. Christ, they were being open about some pretty private shit, sexual and romantic. Did women always talk like this with each other?

“If you want, I can set you up with someone?” Jessy said.

“You ... already got me stepping well outside my usual comfort zone, vampire.”

“Heh, way the boys tell it, you agreed to a lot of stuff. Which is awesome, not trying to make a dig at you.”

Clara lowered her head to the booth table, set her forehead against it with a thud, and left it there. Blushing. “You vamps are turning everyone in the pack into sluts and whores. Mason, Matt, Art. I figured it was just guys being guys, chasing anything with a hole. Ugh.”

“Nah, with them it seems like romance.” Jessy looked over her shoulder to Mason, and to the vampire nudging her cheek against the man's shoulder. “You though? You looked like you needed some stress relief. So, I vote you give up on the Jack crush before Antoinette hurts you, and instead, look for romance elsewhere. And while you look, enjoy my boys; the best form of stress relief.” Chuckling, Jessy leaned in super close, and knocked on the booth Clara still had her head resting on. “Did Vincent do that thing with the fingers?”

From the look on Jessy's face, she was undoubtedly talking about something carnal. Anal fingering, Eric figured. The guilty look from Clara, head turned just enough so he could see her eyes over the booth table, sealed it.

“ ... yeah, he did.”

“Awesome. Bet you came your brains out.”

“ ... I did.”

“Awesome.”

“Ugh, no one’s—”

“No one’s going to care.” Rolling her eyes again, Jessy grabbed her top, and pulled it up over her breasts. Clara raised her head, though still leaning low, and joined Eric in blinking at the blonde next to him as she shook her shoulders a bit, making her breasts jiggle. “See anyone even looking my way twice? Except, you know, a few ‘I want to fuck that’ glances.”

Both Eric and Clara looked around, though Eric knew what he’d find: nothing. Everyone kept dancing, chatting, drinking, and only a few people bothered to look at Jessy for longer than a second.

“I—”

“You should stop worrying. What, is it because they’re ghouls? Those boys get to live for centuries now, s’long as I or any other Kindred keeps feeding them, and they’re glad to be living that long, getting to fuck and get Kissed whenever a need arises. Don’t worry about them, they’re happy to fuck a bombshell like you.”

“Bombshell? That is the cheesiest compliment I’ve ever heard. But ... thank you.”

Nodding, Jessy put her elbows on the table; without pulling her top back down. Eric struggled to not stare, or let his memories of how her breasts moved during sex, covered in cum, give him an erection.

“Hell yeah. Come on, seriously, the boys’ told me you’re a fucking fox. And if you’re worried about looking like a slut, I can guarantee you no one will give a shit. Hell, Jack is fucking three pussies and a set of tits the size of mountains on a regular basis. He won’t care. The mighty Julias Mire is fucking Triss and her friend. You remember them from the banquet? Crocodile mouth, and Jen was the one with the tits hanging out.”

“I’m ... aware. I’ve seen the largest, most developed sex and pleasure spirits in my life, ever, in this city.”

“Ha, figures. And I’m sure I’ll eventually find some pussy to join Eric and I. Can’t wait to—”

“Jessy,” a new voice called out, quiet and almost inaudible over the thudding music. Thank god, Eric could only take so much barrier smashing from Jessy in a ten-minute span. Clara either, from the looks on her face. “Oh, and Eric, and C-Clara. You—Jessy! P-Pull your top back down!”

“Hey Tash. Here to see your boss? She’s upstairs with Jack.” Jessy did as ordered, and gestured with a thumb to the petite vampire. “This one, ha. You know her deal.”

The little creature frowned at Jessy until she looked like a chipmunk. “Um ... h-how are you feeling, Clara?” Tash came up to their booth slowly, though Eric doubted she realized she walked slow. Timid. The girl was the tiniest thing, well shorter than five feet, pale skin with long black hair. She looked delicate. But, she’d gone on the mission with the rest of the rescuers, and was probably not delicate at all. And unlike Clara, little Natasha was wearing a dark dress with a surprisingly revealing amount of cleavage. Still, she acted shy, and that little bit of timidness in her body language set off prey signals in his mind.

Clara picked up on it too, and Eric noticed a moment of ... of ... of what? Animal hunger? The hunt? Something in the girl’s eyes

tagged the little Mekhet as prey, and it was a body language Eric never really noticed before. Maybe it was unique to wolves?

“I’m fine,” Clara said. “We heal fast.”

“That’s good-d.” Nodding, the little vampire pulled out her phone, checked something, then nodded before she poked Jessy in the shoulder. “I’m g-going upstairs, to t-t-talk to the Prince. Cya.”

The three of them made tiny waves, before Jessy leaned back in to Clara.

“She took years to break, but I turned her, with time. Got her ready for a two-boyfriend relationship, I guess.”

Clara squinted at her. “You’re a regular saint, Jessy.”



~~Antoinette~

She adjusted one of her straps as she sat down, and motioned for Jack to sit beside her. To her ghouls, she motioned for them to stand behind the booth; similar to guards. She would be indulging them later, but for now, it was time to spend a moment with her love.

“When was the last you spoke with your sire?” she said.

“Couple days.”

“I wish to know more about this favor he owes Jacob.”

“Me too. I want to know what Jacob is up to, and Black Blood. And ... anything else out there.”

She looked at the boy, and he looked at her. Awareness. What did the boy know of the mysterious forces that plucked at the delicate

weave of her city? Her love had a frustrating habit of getting involved in things that should have passed him by, things that went well beyond the purview of a neonate. She was partly to blame, she was sure, for the inevitable inclusion of the boy in events far above his ability. She was Prince, Voivode, and by virtue of that alone, a relationship with the boy meant he was in danger.

Except, that did not appear to be the primary driver of his involvement in many things. His own curiosity and tenacity had led to his participation in trials he should not have been involved in, especially where the werewolves and monsters were concerned. And it was they she had grown most concerned about, especially if the boy was involved in this hunt for the unknown presence. Were it so simple as to point the finger at the hunters, but she had a feeling it was something else.

Poor Daniel. How many nights now had he spent hunting things in realms beyond their imagining? How many nights had the man used his mastery of Auspex, and used his Twilight Projection to hunt for things hidden in the walls, hidden in the depths, hidden in the rock and shadow. There were other tools in his repertoire, and she was not happy he was forced to use them. There was something out there though, something that had to be found before it turned her city into chaos, or ashes.

And from the look Jack gave her with his words, it was evident the boy was aware. His green eyes met hers before falling away; he knew, and he knew she knew that he knew. Who had told him? Who had invited him on a quest to deal with such madness? Jacob? Black Blood? Azamel?

She set a hand on his shoulder, and smiled at him. “We will survive, my love, and I will win this game we play. Do not fret.”

No more words were needed. It would not surprise her if the boy felt guilty for not telling her that he knew more than he let on, but

such was the way of the Dance Macabre. Politics, deception, and death. A sad tale when such a deadly game got between two lovers. It had the Daeva in her aching to write poetry.

She shook her head, and offered her love a kiss on the forehead. Clear as moonlight, to see the boy was thinking the same, grim thoughts, and she would not have that.

“I’m on vacation,” the boy said, and he slid in closer so his shoulder was against hers. Closer still, when she raised her arm onto his shoulders, so he could slip in further. “That means we stop thinking about all the negative shit for a while, right?”

“Oui. I believe many are feeling this way. There is a moment to rest, thanks to your efforts. But, it is normal for many to discuss city affairs, even when on vacation, if you feel the need. Though, personally, I would prefer to discuss the next opera we should watch together.”

Jack laughed, and smiled up at her, warm, and honest. “Any electric guitars?”

“I am afraid not.”

“Bah, you can’t have an opera without electric guitars.”

“I am also afraid the many decades that came before the invention of the electric guitar would disagree.”

“It’s such a shame. I love the music, but all I can think while listening to it is how much better it’d sound with a metal treatment. Thundering drums, heavy bass, galloping guitars?”

Rolling her eyes, she gestured out to where the dangling strobe lights, hanging from the ceiling over the dance floor, bathed Bloodlust in red light, while some other lights pulsed white with the beat. “And this music?”

“Ugh, fuck no. Literally the same tempo from beginning to end, except maybe a half time. No key changes, no time sig changes, and the best it has for movements is your typical bridge. God forbid they try a triplet beat. Play this if you want me to fall asleep or zone out.”

Laughing, she nodded and ran her hand along the boy's head. He melted back into her palm, and she licked a fang in delight. So easy to make the boy become jelly in her grip; sexuality was not needed. Running her fingers around and around his buzzed hair, along his scalp with just enough pressure to scratch, nearly had the boy purring.

“Read any books as of late?” she said.

“Something came my way, from Triss actually, Journey Through The Rain. She said Aaron had read it. So far it's a story about how a man in a coma is confronting a lot of the shit in his mind. Lot of hatred, lot of revelations.” The boy nudged his cheek into her side, and looked out to the lights dangling above the dance floor. They could not see the dancers or anyone on the bottom floor, as was the desired privacy of the top floor, but the red and white lights were strangely enchanting, nonetheless. “That reminds me, I wanted to ask about the Circle of the Crone.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, like ... what do they do? No one at the Invictus seems to know much, or care.”

“A deep and interesting question, my love. I do know more than your sire, though the details of their nigh religious views are generally of little interest to those outside their circle.”

“It's interesting now, especially with Jacob getting his fingers in so many things, and Julias owing them a favor now, and ... yeah.”



She nodded, and tapped on her chin a couple times. “If I had my laptop, or we were in my library, I would show you. There are many depictions in both fiction and exaggerated history, of the sort of acts the Circle engage in. Naked, covered in bloody symbols from their recent sacrifices, they would dance naked around bones, or grand, sexual gatherings, and call upon their forsaken and outcast goddess, the Crone, for blessings; early forms of Crúac.”

“That sounds very metal.”

Metal, to describe something grim and macabre, yet awe inspiring, was an interesting evolution of the past few decades. It made her chuckle.

“They operate as a family, more so than a covenant. They have roles, titles to describe positions, though Jacob seems to have abandoned these, due to how small his group has become since his golden years. Father, Mother, but also oddities such as Maiden, and Fool, Whore, and Hermit. Others as well. The function of each, I am afraid is difficult to know in detail. They are loose in nature, these roles, but some have a duty to lead, others to teach, others to be rebellious, others to wage war. None of that is written in stone, and the Circle are ... tumultuous, with enforcing their roles. Of all the covenants, I would trust them the least, with managing a city.”

Explaining her old friend’s way of life was difficult. She did not appreciate the chaos he sowed, or the chaos innate to his covenant, and explaining it without letting her disdain color her words was problematic.

“And you? What sort of things about your Ordo Dracul can you share with me?”

Ah, this conversation again. It was terribly cute how thirsty the boy was for knowledge, but he poked and prodded at walls that were liable to crush him.

“Little. The Circle of the Crone are secretive, but the Ordo Dracul is a secret society, my love. Anything I tell you may affect all my fellow dragons.”

Nodding, he nudged his cheek into her side some more, as she played with his hair. “Part of me thinks Jacob will tie Julias to a pole, and force him to get involved in their rituals.”

“He may at that. But I trust Jacob to not overstep himself, and—oh, Natasha. Please, come sit.” Beautiful little Natasha, dressed in a long black dress — with an impressive amount of cleavage for the shy Mekhet — came up the stairs, and offered a small wave when she spotted them.

“Th-thanks.” With a nod, the petite creature came and sat beside her, and offered the dress Antoinette wore a few glances. The Prince’s dress was rather revealing, with only a single strap for each breast, three inches wide, rising up from the underbust corset to loop around her neck. A guilty pleasure, such clothes, and she was delighted to see her student was realizing the succulent beauty of her own petite body, accenting its delicious features with intriguing clothes as well.

“I noticed your night after swimming went well,” Antoinette said.

“W-What? You ... you um ... w-what?” Natasha looked down, and drew some lines on the table with her fingers.

“Do not worry, I saw nothing.” But your boyfriends are men, after all, and they leave behind traces of everything they do. The smell of sex was not difficult to notice, and the smell of what must have been a gallon semen. She did not say it, but a grin said it all.

Volta squirmed a little more, but managed a tiny smile up at her boss. “They’re a couple of ... they’re ... s-silly.”

From the expression on her face, she did not mean silly. She meant bold, shameless, adventurous, and hungry for her. Did they pin the small girl down, despite her pleas, and do things to her? Antoinette set a finger to her lip, and returned the smile. Such a delicious thought; a shame Natasha would likely say no to letting her witness the event.

Or would she? If the Mekhet continued to rest within her Elysium Tower, then—no, no it was unlikely. Daniel never shared any detail of, what she could only assume were very rare, sexual encounters, let alone perform them in clear view of her. And Vola was not the only creature that would need to consent; her boyfriends would, as well. But, as Natasha said, they were silly. Adventurous men with large appetites for their lady? She could convince them to put on a spectacle for her, no doubt. She was a very convincing woman.

“I hope ... m-my presence, isn’t intruding,” the little Mekhet said. “I mean, at the t-t-tower.”

“You have been with us for weeks now, my student.” Shrugging, Antoinette hugged Jack closer, and set her hand along the side of his head, so she could pull him into the side of her breast. The strip of fabric holding each breast left the sides of her breasts bare, making such skin contact possible; part of the purpose, and the fun, of course. “You are of no intrusion. While you continue your efforts in aiding me, my faculties are yours to use.” And then, a stern look, to seal her point. “I have explained this before.”

“S-Sorry! Sorry, um ... thanks,” Vola said. Antoinette’s frown hardened. “Um, I mean, n-not sorry! I ... will use them.”

“And, of course, as long you keep an eye on them, your delicious pair of wolves are welcome as well. You need not indulge them in only your room, either.” Another offer, to see if the little creature would bite.

“I ... I um ... m-maybe.”

Oh, a step toward confidence. Perhaps having Jessy for a friend was rubbing off on the little vampire more than she realized. Antoinette rewarded her with a smile and nod, before she released Jack’s head, and set her hands on the table.

“I assume you will be visiting Azamel and Avery soon, my love?”

“Yeah, definitely. Need to see how they’re handling all this. I imagine Avery will be pissed, nearly losing three of her pack. And Azamel, I ... have no idea.” Tapping a finger against his chin, Jack looked up to her, to Tash, then out ahead of him, mind wandering, plotting. The boy was cursed with wearing his emotions and thoughts on his sleeve. “But, it’s the covenants I’m worried about most. Jacob is doing God knows what, and Garry’s stirring up shit with Terra Den, and ... and I feel like...”

“Mister Tones understands that now is not the time to stir chaos.” She nodded as she mimicked the boy, tapping a finger on her chin. As predicated, the boy’s eyes widened a moment as he realized how obvious a gesture it was, and that he was doing it. “But I would be a fool to ignore the possibility. As much as the Carthians hate the Invictus, I am the barrier in that war. I do not let Garry, or your council, run amok.” His move to use Terra Den and Jeremy Long against against the Invictus was well planned, and she let Garry play his game, just as she let council play theirs, taking the Mirrden district. A balance. If she controlled each group with an iron fist, it would lead to rebellion. As strong as she was, if both the Invictus and Carthians threw themselves at her walls, she doubted she and Daniel would be able to regain control.

It was no wonder, that in most cities with a strong Kindred presence, it was either the Invictus or the Lancea et Sanctum that ruled, with their obsession with rules and structure, and their many followers. The First Estate, and the Second Estate. Wherever the

ancient groups had acquired those secondary names, she did not know, but they were infuriating to her. As if such archaic forms of governance could withstand the future. Idiot children.

“Clara’s downstairs,” Tash said. “She is ... I think J-Jessy is ... befriending her. M-Maybe trying to convert her to ... D-D-Dolareido’s ways.”

Antoinette nodded, and considered. It was good if Clara found someone else to set her eyes on, though she imagined Jessy could teach Clara much about pleasure, and little about romance. Then again, if this budding relationship between her and the werewolf proved fruitful, perhaps Antoinette was wrong.

Sure enough, the werewolf came up the stairs to join them. Clara was a beautiful creature, but was not dressed to exploit such. Kine on the second floor raised their brows as they watched the woman in jeans and a t-shirt step up and walk toward her booth, undoubtedly thinking the same thing Antoinette was. How beautiful Clara would be in something more fitting. And it was not as if Clara was unfamiliar with the topic; Antoinette had seen her wear more feminine clothes before.

If Jessy was befriending her, then it would not surprise Antoinette if she was burying Clara in her typical interest: orgies. That could awaken a woman’s sexual awareness quite a bit, as it had done with Natasha. But then, why the simple clothes? Guilt, perhaps? Of course, this was all conjecture, and not exactly worthy of Antoinette’s spying efforts. Still, half a millennium of observation had taught the Prince many observation skills, and as the once confident woman squirmed in front of her, it was clear the werewolf felt self conscious about something.

“Clara,” she said.

“Prince,” she said, eyes lingering on her dress for probably a second longer than the werewolf meant to. “Uh, just wanted to tell

Jack and Tash that I really appreciate what they did.”

“Y-You’re welcome,” Natasha said, voice raising in pitch and volume. The girl did love praise for a job well done. Adorable.

“I’m glad you survived,” Jack said. “You looked beat to hell.”

“We all did by the end of it.” Nodding, Clara watched Antoinette for a moment, and met her eyes. The werewolf was looking for something.

The Prince suppressed the urge to clutch her lover closer.

“I hope Avery recognizes the threat the hunters pose now,” Antoinette said.

“Yeah, getting a monster on their side has definitely got her attention.” Clara’s eyes lingered for a little while longer, before she shrugged, and offered a small wave. “I’ll see you at your next meeting, Jack.”

And then she was gone, leaving a wake of awkwardness behind her. The kine didn’t notice, the shadowed faces in their booths returning to their drinking and kissing, some fingering and fucking.

She looked down at Jack. He looked a touch mournful. From what she gathered of his past, from the things he told her, as well as Julias’s insights, the boy had never been on this side of a crush. It was painful to lust for someone, to crave them, and be denied. It could be a strangely sobering and guilty experience, to be on the other end.

But she would not let such thoughts dwell in his mind for long. “My little Ventrue, I do believe I wish to make love tonight.”

The boy shivered lightly, before smiling up at her, and leaning in to kiss her collar above her breast. “Oh?”

“Yes. I believe ... another session in my display room. Farner Temperman’s art is still set up, and I admit, such fantastical clothing and decor is fun to indulge.” She kissed the boy’s head, and leaned down further, so she could set a kiss upon his lips. “To dress as an evil queen, and force pleasure upon my slaves? Terribly amusing and enthralling.”

“U ... um...”

Ah, poor Tash, forced to hear. Antoinette looked over her shoulder, winked at her child, before resuming her kiss with her love.



~~Jack~~

Back in Antoinette’s deep labyrinth, and back in the art room, where she had said she liked to set up varying aesthetics for art ... displays? Display wasn’t the right word for what she’d created, a dungeon of black skulls and blue fire. The black skeletons, the dangling chains, the skull braziers of blue flame, the reaper statue, the throne, all of it reeked of macabre art, and Jack found himself staring at it all as he walked among the room. It was so damn beautiful.

He walked around the empty room, naked. The Prince had left him instructions to strip before entering, and at this point, he was under the impression she was going to make that request every time. Would she tie him up? Push on the leash? Something about being her sex slave, and utterly helpless to her whims, was a huge turn on, and he smiled to himself as he stood before the throne. She wasn’t here yet.

He was in a better mood, definitely. The whole rescue mission had been a painful failure, and yet a resounding success. The duality of it was strange, and he was struggling to let it go. Angela’s face, the

strange way she'd almost looked happy when he was about to shoot her, was scarred into his mind and wouldn't go the fuck away. If he'd still been human, still had a heartbeat, he'd take up drinking in exactly one of those heartbeats, anything to suppress the memories, drown them, blur them.

But, Damien, Antoinette, Julias, even Jessy and Tash and the others, supported him. A recent meeting with the council showed Maria and Michael were, while unhappy with the situation, ultimately satisfied with his performance given the circumstance. No one was too happy about having to rely on Jacob and his outside aid, but the only person who'd have to pay that piper was Julias. Poor guy.

And Clara. He'd been devastated when he thought she might have been dead, but the moment he realized she would be fine, he shut right up and played it cool. Platonic. If Jessy was helping her find happiness elsewhere, than—

No, no no, no contemplating the shitty situations befalling him and everyone else. Vacation time. Don't think about any of that crap, about the Begotten or Uratha, about the hunters or Angela. Don't think about your family, Mom and your sister. Don't think about the Invictus and your position as Right Hand. For a few more days at least, don't think about it, and focus on the good things.

Jack turned around and looked at the strange pile of blankets and pillows, the ones surrounded by the black skeleton hands that jutted from the floor. The altar where Antoinette had fucked him last time was gone, and instead, the pile of blankets and pillows took their place. It was basically a giant, circular bed.

Some giggles caused him to raise his head, and look to the giant reaper statue. Two delicious-looking ballerinas stepped around it, and Jack smiled at the sight of Ashley and Julee, each girl beaming



joy. They must have been fed by Antoinette recently, with how they were glowing and grinning.

While their skin glowed blue in the one-color light, each girl was wearing what looked like some very tight thigh-high socks, tight enough to lightly pinch their toned-but-thin thighs. Damn. They were striped, too, little white stripes circling them several times above the knee. No shoes, and Jack smirked at the sight of their feet in the socks on the floor. But his eyes raised, and stared, at the sight of their flexible, lithe little bodies, and the black thongs they were wearing, hugging their thin legs and pert butts tight enough to barely be visible.

They wore nothing else, and Jack licked his lips as he looked them from the feet, up their gymnasts legs, tiny waists, perky breasts, and to the collars on their necks. The same collars they had on last time, with tiny skulls of black, and a few blue jewels. From behind the collars, chains dangled, and Jack looked between them, to see the woman behind them.

Tall as ever, Antoinette stood more than a whole head above her two ghouls, both long chains in her hand. In her other hand, another chain, looped and dangling from her fingers, along with a collar. Jack's collar. She herself wore only two things: a see-through silk robe, colored black in the blue light, and the skull crown she wore the last time she was in here with him. The robe, combined with the skull crown, made it look like she was a necromancer on her day off, enjoying her kinks. Totally fine by him, he always had a thing for necromancers and vacation days. Corsets on work days, silk robes when relaxing.

The fact that the already see-through robe had no belt, and was open so it left the front of the woman's body exposed, robe spread by her breasts, sealed the image.

The three women stepped over the black skeleton hands that circled the enormous pile of blankets, and the two ghouls giggled as they threw themselves onto the softness. Plenty of slack in the chain, and the chain itself was thin and light. His though, was bigger, thicker, heavier, and Antoinette smiled a devil's smile as she curled a finger at him.

He gulped, stepped onto the pile of blankets, and joined his lover. No words needed, Antoinette gave him the large collar, and he put it on, the heavy chain now dangling off of it in front of him. The collar wasn't uncomfortable, built for comfort and control, not pain, and the heaviness of the chain was meaningless to a vampire. It dangled over his chest, and Antoinette gave it a tug, pulling him to her so she could lean down, and give him a soft kiss.

God damn she was so fucking beautiful, it was painful.

"Ashley and Julee have been neglected, I feel," she said. "And they are, perhaps, a bit jealous."

The two girls looked up from the pillows, and smiled, before Ashley began to crawl across the floor toward him. She made sure to sway her tight butt behind her as she prowled, arching her spine downward to emphasize every exaggerated motion.

"Mistress says her love could use a relaxing night," she said as she got onto her knees in front of him. "She says, we should be gentle tonight, and help you relax." Beautiful, lean creature, wearing nothing but thigh high socks and a thong, beaming up at him from her knees. God damn. Relaxing would be tough.

"I, um..." His dick sprung up, hard, pulsing with fake life, but very real arousal, and both the ghouls giggled, evidently quite happy at the reaction their bodies elicited.

Antoinette set her hands onto his shoulders, and pushed down on him, gently. The nudge guided him down onto the blankets next to

Ashley, and the creature giggled joyously as she reached out to help him down onto his back. Julee came over as well, knelt beside Ashley, closer to his legs, and blushed as she nuzzled into Ashley's side.

The two girls looked up, and watched with hungry eyes as Antoinette eased her tall body down. The Daeva sat on her knees with both legs out to the same side, creating a slanted slope lap. It wasn't the first time she'd sat in such a position, and same as last time, she reached out for him, picked him up like he weighed nothing, and set his back against the slope of her thighs, so his head rested against the higher leg.

Her heavy breasts were big enough that the one his head was closer to pressed against the side of his face, despite how high the tall woman sat above him. The open robe meant there was nothing between his skin and hers, and he nudged his nose and lips into the soft weight squishing against his cheek. With a long sigh, he relaxed against her body as she began to stroke his buzzed hair with one hand, and her other hand set upon his abs to tease and caress his muscles.

Him, lying down, head on her lap, while she massaged him. They did this many times, and every time, he felt the stress in his body melt away, as her fingers did magic on his skin.

Both ghouls aww'd, and Jack glanced their way through the corner of his one uncovered eye. They were blushing and smiling, but with eyebrows raised, like they were watching the climax of a romance.

"Ashley and Julee, as I said, have been feeling neglected." The busty demoness smiled at her two pets, before she returned her gaze to him, licking a fang before she resumed stroking his head. Buzzed hair, fingers, melting. "They should be witness to our love,

not just our lovemaking, perhaps a little more often than we have let them.”

“I ... didn’t realize.” Craving the sex, he could understand; the living had a habit of cumming their brains out, when Kissed during sex. But the romance? It wasn’t exactly a typical romance, with a manly man sweeping a lovely woman off her feet. Not like you found many romance novels written about this sort of stuff.

But both Ashley and Julee scooted in a little closer, and smiled so bright, it was almost painful, like staring into the sun.

“Mistress doesn’t tell us much,” Ashley said, “because it’d be dangerous. But she tells us some, and ... and that it’s been hard for you.” The topless ballerina slid in closer, her knees touching Antoinette’s underneath his back and shoulders. Her hands reached out for him, grabbed his closer hand, and brought it onto her lap, palm up. “But you’re only our age! Even younger, really.”

Julee managed a small nod, and after Antoinette made a subtle gesture to her with her hand, the other ballerina crawled in between his legs. She got in close, very close, and sat on her knees as she leaned over his cock. His shaft was pointing up at forty-five degrees toward him, but once Julee slipped her hands around it, she pointed it straight up. She didn’t stroke him, didn’t work its length or massage it, but held it still, encompassing it in all her fingers with a gentle grip.

It was enough to earn a quiet moan from him. He was surrounded by beautiful women, and being buried in their heat and touch.

“It’s—”

“It’s bad!” Nodding and glaring, as if declaring her anger to the gods above, Ashley pat him on his chest, his other hand still in hers on her lap. “You know what Julee and I do all day? Whatever we want. We spend Mistress’s money on fancy clothes, fancy meals,

and fancy lessons for fancy hobbies from fancy trainers. Though, lately, Julee and I have been forced to rely on each other for sex, because—”

“Hey!” Julee frowned at Ashley, and Jack winced as the angry woman squeezed his dick, unaware.

Ashley stuck her tongue out Julee, before leaning in over Jack, and smiling down at him from above. “Because Mistress and her love have been getting on without us, or Kissing us before we can have some fun, too. And, I think I can be ... you know, womanly, and soft and all that, and be ... soothing.” She giggled again, and moved her head over his chest, where she leaned in closer to Antoinette, until the ghoul’s chin was touching his sternum, and her lips and nose were nudging into the Prince’s other breast, where it hung like a giant teardrop over Jack’s chest.

Antoinette said nothing. She continued to smile down at him, and her ghoul, and stroked his head while caressing his stomach. Jack could feel the nipple, half buried against the top half of his cheek, start to swell, though. The Prince was growing excited. That got him excited, and he flexed his cock with need, earning a squeak from the ballerina still holding it.

“But,” Ashley said, “Mistress is the best at it, being soothing. Cause, I mean, these are so ... soft and...” Closing her eyes, Ashley pushed her face against Antoinette’s other breast, and began to kiss her nipple, capturing it in her lips.

Only inches away, a beautiful girl, was sucking on his lover’s breasts. Kissing, licking, suckling, all the things he loved to do to her. The reaction from the Prince was immediate, and her eyes drifted half closed, as her nipples swelled. Her lips softened in a gentle smile, and she let out a long sigh as she leaned forward a little, and pressed her breast into Ashley’s lips.

Jack groaned at how much more of the Daeva's massive breast covered his face. A slight turn of his head toward her was all it took, to guide her swollen, puffy, pink nipple into his mouth. Her alabaster skin overwhelmed his face completely, and he closed his eyes as he quietly moaned into the heavy softness.

And everything went silent, except for the sound of two mouths softly suckling and kissing Antoinette's breasts, the Prince's subtle moans, and the quiet jingle of metal chains.

Jack couldn't see anything anymore, but when Julee removed her hand, and another took its place, he recognized the longer fingers and more confident grip, Antoinette's grip. And most of all, he recognized the feel of lips kissing, then slowly enveloping his swollen glans. Not Antoinette's lips though, Julee's lips.

"Slowly," Antoinette said, "I do not wish for my love to cum yet." Her voice was smooth, husky, confident, but there was a hint, a telltale tone change, that announced her arousal. Having both of her nipples sucked was making her rock her chest back and forth slightly, nudging against Jack's side, and pushing the softness of her breast into his face.

Julee nodded — he could feel it around his cock's swollen head — and began to caress his glans with her kisses, keeping it in her mouth and easing her lips up and down the base edge of the bulbous tip. Sensitive, ripe flesh, sent a wave of pleasure sparks down his length, each and every time her hot, wet lips worked up and down the edge of his cock's head. Her tongue pressed against its underside, and licked him, in much the same way he was licking Antoinette's hard, engorged nipple. The center at first, before he swirled his tongue slowly around her the puffy flesh, and Julee did the same to him, swirling her tongue around his cock's tip, before returning to gentle strokes along its tip and underside.

Through it all, Antoinette's hand around his cock squeezed with perfect pressure, though she didn't stroke him. She wanted it to last, and as he felt his precum drip onto Julee's tongue, he knew he would, if only because Julee kept the stimulus at that perfect level of frustratingly pleasurable but not enough to push him to the edge.

"I hope I do soothe my love's soul," the Prince said. "Do I, little Ventrue?"

He nodded, smiling into the softness hiding his face.

"Bien. I may be Prince, and though people think me too far above them to notice, I have heard whispers of what some people have described me as." Her hand around his cock left him, and took the chain dangling along his chest and stomach. With a small tug, she pulled him out from under her breast, and Ashley backed away to let her pull on the leash. Jack blinked up at the Prince, and pulled his head back a bit as the Daeva leaned in. "I once heard whisper, that someone referred to me as a ... cold-hearted bitch, I believe was the term."

Everyone gasped, but Jack had to do his best to hide his grin. Antoinette seemed like she was made of ice, on the surface, depending on the situation. In political matters, she was definitely cold and ruthless, and had to make equally cold and ruthless decisions from a distance when governing the city. In person, though? Especially during things like banquets? She was a teasing succubus who enjoyed drowning the city in sex. Cold-hearted bitch seemed very short sighted. But then, he was pretty biased, at this point.

And she was wearing a crown and hair ornament thing that was a giant, black, metal skull. There was that, too. Her extreme fashion, combined with her confidence, white hair, red eyes, and alabaster skin, probably painted her as some sort of ice queen to those who didn't know her.

The Prince kissed his forehead, and let the chain slack, until his weight was back on her lap, shoulders and head resting on her bare, lovely thighs. The chain hand let go, and took his cock back into her grip, to offer it slow, gentle squeezes, while her other hand, reached under her breast over his head, and guided it, the heavy mass spilling over all her fingers as she set her wet, puffy nipple against his lips. Ashley wasted no time getting back to the other breast as well, and Antoinette released a very controlled, very purposeful, and very intoxicating moan, as both Jack and Ashley started sucking on her again.

He could smell his lover's arousal, vampire nose picking up on the scent of her juices underneath him. The fact she loved having her enormous breasts played with, touched, massaged, and most importantly, suckled on, was quickly becoming his biggest turn on, and he groaned into the heavy softness covering his face. It was the perfect way to indulge, to simply lay there on her lap, her huge breast covering his face, while he suckled, and suckled, and suckled.

She started to orgasm. Both Jack and Ashley slowed their suckling, and kept the stimulus to nothing more than the softest kisses, as the buxom goddess came. Antoinette kept her voice quiet, only the tiniest moan escaping her, as she pushed her breasts into him and the ghoul beside him. Her hand on his head, no longer stroking his hair, pressed his head toward her, cradling him and smooshing his face into her breast. He kept his mouth wide open, so her large, engorged areola filled it, and he placed a couple of soft licks as she came, earning some gentle tremors from her. Eventually, she leaned back, and let his head fall back onto her thigh, half his face no longer covered so he could see Ashley had backed off as well.

Antoinette smiled down at him. Both her nipples were as swollen as they could get, each glistening in the blue light with wetness. He gawked, blatantly, and did his best to not cum into the set of lips still holding his glans in a gentle, enveloping kiss. He managed to



look down at Julee, and he could see the ballerina looked delirious with need; he was too. The whole room was soaking in sexuality, in hard contrast to all the black skulls and skeletons everywhere. There was nothing quite as hot as watching the busty woman cum from nothing but having her nipples sucked on, and the ghouls felt the same way.

“To let Jack rest his head upon my lap,” Antoinette said, “to invite him to let me soothe his wounds, has become part of our romance, my pets. Each man is different, and where others may show their vulnerability differently, each man is vulnerable.” She nodded to Julee, so the ghoul raised her head, and crawled over his leg to come sit beside Ashley, by his legs. “Many men, if not most, have been conditioned by society to be emotionally reserved; women, far less so. And I am terribly lucky to have found a man who will open himself to me so, expose himself so, and,” she jingled on the metal chain attached to the collar, “be willing submit to me.”

Submit. Such a strong, naughty word, and he shivered as he met her red gaze. In the blue light, they weren't red, they were black, and he gulped as he stared up at her.

He gulped again, louder, as the Daeva slipped her legs out from underneath him, and crawled over him, massive breasts swaying underneath her. She straddled his legs, his knees underneath her butt, and took his cock into her hands, both of them. She leaned forward, far forward, until her teardrop breasts pressed to his pelvis, burying his hips and waist in their softness as the two pillows swallowed his cock between them, hiding Antoinette's hands as well.

“Julee, come, finish.” The Prince blew Jack a kiss, and nodded toward Julee, as the Daeva guided his cock out from underneath her breasts enough so his length was pressing up against her right breast, near Julee.

The blushing ghouel let out a tiny squeak, leaned in, slid underneath the black robe that dangled in the way from the Prince's side, and began to kiss his glans. Immediate pleasure shocks ran down the length, and Jack shivered as he felt the tingling warmth of cum begin to build up between his legs. Antoinette rubbed his glans against her nipple, gently easing it back forth just enough to earn friction, while allowing Julee to continue kissing the swollen head of his cock. Each kiss was joined by tongue, and the ghouel spared no expense in trying to stimulate him this time. She buried half the engorged flesh with each kiss, and pressed her tongue and lips against it hard enough to push it into Antoinette's puffy areola.

He didn't move his hips, no matter how much he wanted to. Hold still, and let the pleasure waves build, until his inner muscles flexed, and forced out the first gush of cum. A hard squirt, heat filling his cock and making him lift his head, demanding he watch as it hit both Julee's lips, and Antoinette's breast. It was a hard enough gush to overwhelm them both, and Julee squeaked as she pulled back, a thick strand of cum running down from her forehead, over her cheek, and onto her lips. She leaned back in at Antoinette's behest, and resumed suckling on the side of his glans, though not covering the very tip, so each squirt of his thick fluid gushed up over Antoinette's breast, and Julee's face. The stimulation was almost painful, but Julee knew to ease up, be gentler with her kisses, as the orgasm had Jack struggling with all his might to hold still. Antoinette's right hand continued to gently stroke his length, but her other, now soaked in his cum, reached down to begin caressing his testicles, making each fresh gush of his fluid fill him with more powerful pleasure waves.

Finally done, Julee pulled away, and looked at him. Several strands of his cum coated her face, dripping down from her forehead and cheeks, down over her lips and chin, and dripping onto his abs.

"S-Sorry," he said.

“Don’t be!” Ashley, groaning openly at the sight, climbed around Jack to sit across from Julee, Jack between them, both girls sitting around his hips. With a giggle, the blonde leaned in, gave her friend a kiss on the cheek, licking up a large glob of his cum, and winked at him as she pulled it into her mouth. She was delighting in playing to a typical fantasy for him, probably at Antoinette’s request; it was working.

With Julee’s head out of the way, Jack also groaned, a similar sound to Ashley’s, at the sight at Antoinette’s right breast coated in his cum.

“Ashley,” Antoinette said, smiling at her ghoul, and guiding his cock underneath the other breast.

“Oh, yes please.” Ashley pulled aside the other half of Antoinette’s dangling, open robe, and wasted no time, leaning down over Jack’s side and immediately setting her lips to his glans. His shaft was coated in his cum now, and Antoinette let out her own sigh of bliss, as she began to rub his hot skin against her other swollen nipple. And Ashley, mischievous imp that she was, made sure to both suckle and kiss his cock, but also her mistress’s areola.

Just as the queen intended, no doubt. She sighed bliss again, and nodded her head toward Julee. With a little shiver of her own, Julee reached out with both her hands, and began to massage Jack’s cum into the breast he’d already soaked. Waves of the white now coated the softness, leaving lines in the patterns Julee’s fingers drew, before some of it fell onto Jack’s waist and pelvis. While massaging, Julee leaned in, and set her cum-soaked lips to Antoinette’s wet nipple, pulling all of it into her mouth, and burying it in suckling kisses.

Ashley reached back and behind the Prince with one of her hands. Jack couldn’t see what she was doing, but judging from the tiny

shudder the Prince made, and the smile she gave her pet, he had to assume the ghoul was massaging Antoinette's clit.

There was a lot going on, and all Jack could do was watch. He did manage to grab a pillow, and slip it under his head so he could do that easier, but he knew the Prince would not want him to interfere; holding still was paramount. It was torture, every reflex telling him to get in there, do something, penetrate something, push himself to another quick orgasm. But Antoinette liked to make him cum using nothing but the sensitive skin of his cock's head, and he had to admit, if he could endure it, the pleasure of the orgasm and quantity of fluids, were far greater.

A part of him knew it was his Kindred body, adapting to the unusual stimulus, too. It wasn't exactly normal for a guy to go three times in a session, or for him to cum so much, but having sex almost every day with the insatiable succubus was demanding his new body accommodate. It was.

Antoinette came again. With both girls sucking on her nipples, one with his cock pressed against it, and Ashley pleasuring the woman where he couldn't see, the beautiful woman half closed her eyes, and moaned. She didn't make noise during climax unless she was doing it on purpose, making noise for the sake of sounding sexy; it worked. Her moans were husky, with the right depth to send a thrill up his spine. As she made the sound, she started to jerk him off again, hand around his girth and hand around his balls each massaging wet warmth into him, as she kept his glans against her nipple where Ashley kissed and licked.

His turn to cum again. Warmth flooded his cock, and he squeezed his fingers against the sheets around him as he watched the white fluid gush up onto his lover's breast. Ashley stayed in there, unrelenting, and buried his cock in enough kisses that he groaned at the almost painful amount of stimulus; Ashley just being Ashley, liking it rough and giving it rough. The ghoul moaned onto his cock,

burying it into Antoinette's nipple, and suckling on it as his thick cum splashed up over her face, and onto the mountain of softness of his lover's breast.

When she stopped and pulled away, she had the same mess on her face that Julee did, and she giggled as she reached up to wipe a strand off of her brow, so it could run down her cheek, jaw, and down her neck. Unlike Julee though, she didn't wait to be guided, and immediately set her lips back onto Antoinette's nipple, as she used a hand to cup, lift, and massage the newly cum-soaked breast. The other hand was still out of sight, still behind Antoinette, but Jack could hear the sounds of wet fingering now. Julee's further hand reached back as well, and Antoinette smiled with a long sigh as she let go of his cock, and set both of her hands against his thighs, elbows tucked in beside her inside her spread robe.

Still leaning forward as she was, his cock pointed up toward him, but upright enough that it was between Antoinette's white-covered breasts where they sat on his pelvis and hips. Ashley and Julee were devouring them, each using a hand to continue caressing them, massaging them. And with both girls pressing on her breasts, Jack's could feel the pressure and movement along his cock and his glans, earning some hard flexes of his inner muscles as the pleasure sparks tickled along the sensitive skin.

“Girls, use my breasts, and make my love cum again.”

The two girls stopped their suckling, and turned their heads to look at him, Julee biting her bottom lip, still somehow shy, while Ashley grinned like a madwoman. Both ghouls cupped the underside of each breast, and pressed in, forcing Antoinette's nipples to press against the bottom of his abs. Squishing her breasts together caused his cock to completely disappear, and Jack's eyes rolled upward as he basked in the wet, hot, soft skin of both tits now rubbing along his length.

Antoinette wasn't holding still. She rocked back and forth, maybe half a foot, causing her breasts to run back and forth around his cock. For a moment he thought maybe she was tit fucking him, but with how her eyes were half closed, and her smile was that scary-but-hot queenly smile, he could see she was actually fucking the fingers penetrating her.

“Deeper, my pets.”

The ghouls nodded, and Antoinette closed her eyes for a moment as she quivered, a single moment of weakness, before she regained her composure, and continued to rock her body. They were fingering her, two hands, at once. Not slow anymore, she moved back and forth in a proper fucking rhythm, and Jack stared at the subtle hints of pleasure on her face. She was cumming again, and it didn't stop her. Through her subtle expression of pleasure, she leaned into him while her two pets continued to squash her breasts together around his cock, each shift of her weight causing the wet, heavenly skin of her tits to bury his cock in blissful friction. A heavy drop of his earlier cum formed where her breasts were pushed together, before leaking down the crease between them, onto his body.

Good fucking god. He didn't last long, and moaned softly as he felt his warm, thick cum start to flow up his length again. Three times and it was still coming out thick, heavy, white fluid that immediately began to coat the inner valley of the Prince's already soaked breasts. With the two girls keeping Antoinette's bosom tight around his girth, burying it in her soft skin, each squirt of his cum was trapped, and flowed up, over, and around the crease where her breasts met each other. Eventually, it was too much, and it started to run down, trickling over the mounds and the ghoul's hands, before reaching his abdomen.

Finally, Antoinette stopped rocking, and sat up straighter. Both ghouls let go of her breasts, and stared at the mess of white that coated them, again, soaking them in multiple layers of cum.

“So much,” Ashley said, some of his cum still on her face. “And...” The ghoul gulped, and stared at his cum lathered cock, and how it was still hard. “How?”

It took a little mental effort to tell his Kindred body to keep the arousal spark alive, but after so many nights with his lover, it was getting a lot easier to control the subtle, undead muscle. He could tell his vitae to focus on healing, could tell it to strengthen his body, protect him from harm, and the more nights he spent in the Prince’s bed, the more he found he could tell it to rekindle his sexual desire. It was amazing, how much his new undead body had control of its fake biology, like a puppet on strings.

“Jack is quick to learn subtle skills.” Grinning down at him, Antoinette climbed over him, grabbed his cock, pointed it up to her slit, and sat down on him.

Fucking god. He stared up at the Prince as she adjusted herself, knees by his ribs, her pussy spread open on his shaft, and her juices dripped down to join the mess of his own cum already soaking him, his pelvis and waist. She sat up straight, so her heavy breasts flattened to her ribs, and he stared all the more at how his copious amount of cum dripped down her huge tits. He groaned, when both ghouls set a hand to her breasts, and again, began to massage them, his cum overflowing their fingers. The boiling, soaked, tight insides of the Prince squeezed on his cock, earning sparks along the sensitive skin, as she began to ease herself back and forth in time with their hands.

“Clean me,” she said to her ghouls. “Gently. My breasts have grown terribly sensitive.”

And thus began to most arousing, salacious, lewd act he could imagine. The Prince continued to shift her hips back and forth, squeezing and clenching on his cock, as she lifted her elbows up, and set her hands behind her skull crown to begin combing her hair.

Showing off. Elbows up tugged up on her breasts slightly, and the ghouls were quick to take advantage, each setting a hand on Antoinette's hips while their others cupped the underside of each breast. They massaged, caressed, and indulged, doing everything they could to put on a carnal display of sexuality, each girl leaning in to kiss, lick, and suckle on their master's bosom. While some heavy drops of white fell from her breasts' undersides, and others rolled down her stomach, and down around her smooth mons to land on his pelvis, others the ghouls were quick to catch, and rub around, and around their mistress's jiggling bust.

Eventually, her breasts were completely clean, his cum either fading into trace amounts of ash, so small they were basically non-existent, or swallowed down by the two ghouls. Their faces also cleaned with time, his fluids turning to ash there as well, falling away like the faintest amount of dust. That did not dissuade the two ghouls, and they continued to massage and pamper Antoinette's breasts with delicate hands, as the Prince kept her elbows up while combing her hair back. As much as she was showing off for him, she came first, and he stared down her smooth slit, as her insides clenched on him like a vise. He could see her juices, tiny trickling drops, leak down from her lips and onto his pelvis, catching the blue, flickering fire light.

He came not long after, eyes closing for a second as he let the tingling waves fill him. The way his cum filled her and coated his cock, increasing the pleasure sparks as she clenched on him, rendered him speechless. He managed only a couple groans as he watched the goddess continue her display, her smile pointed at him as she watched him cum inside her.

"Four times, my love. Using your Kindred body to its potential, I see." She lowered her hands, let her breasts fall into teardrops against her chest, and gently pushed away her ghouls as she set her fingers on his abs. Still milking him, still clenching, she squeezed on



his cock almost to hurting, and forced another couple drops into her depths.

At last, satisfied. He was panting, fake life demanding he breathe, despite the lack of need. Beads of sweat glistened on him in the blue light, and on Antoinette as well.

The Prince crawled off of him, his softening cock slipping out of her and dripping more of his cum across his body. “Jack, my love, my precious, take Ashley, and drain her.” The Prince reached for Ashley beside her, picked her up, and set the ballerina on her back between the two of them. And then she did it again with Julee, laying the girl on her back beside Ashley, before she climbed onto the brunette. With a devil’s smile, Antoinette lowered herself down onto the blushing, squirming little creature, pressed her breasts into her pet’s, and set her lips onto the girl’s neck.

Watching the Prince kiss, and Kiss, another girl, was so beautiful, and arousing. No, no no, no more getting aroused. Four times crossed some sort of barrier into absurdity. But he knew, if he really concentrated, he could tell his body to get ready again, especially if he had a fresh meal; like the one he was about to.

Ashley reached up for him, beaming and giggling, and pulled on his neck and shoulders. “Kiss me! And ... and ... use fingers too?”

He made a tiny groan as he lowered himself down onto her, and acquiesced, once he saw a nod from Antoinette. The two vampires sank their fangs into the topless ballerinas, and began to suck the blood out of them. Both creatures fell into a mess of squirming moans, and Jack couldn’t help but groan again, as the hot, thick fluid of her life flowed into his mouth. Her nipples pressed against his chest, her pert breasts squashed under his weight, as he pinned her to the blankets, and slid a hand down her body. The tiny bit of fabric covering her smooth slit was easy to slip his hand

underneath, and he eased his fingers into her clenching, dripping insides, to push them up toward her belly from within.

Ashley came in seconds. She'd probably been on the edge the entire time, and not allowed to touch herself until Antoinette said she could. Building up to this must have been one of the Prince's goals tonight, because, damn, Ashley's moans turned into loud squeals, and she wrapped her arms around him as she pushed her hips toward his hand. He kept his fangs deep in her neck, and gulped down each wave, as he started to finger her insides harder, hard enough he could feel her ass ripple, and hear her insides splash with her cum. He couldn't see Julee, but he could hear her, going through the same process, getting fingered into oblivion by the busty goddess pinning her to the blankets.

It lasted a while. Antoinette taught him well, taught him to Kiss slowly, to savor it, and when with her ghouls, to savor it twice over. Slow, very slow, drain the girls of all they could give before they passed out, while making sure to finger fuck them hard enough to make them cum, multiple times. He did just that, suckling as he Kissed the fit little woman's neck, making sure he drained the waves slowly. The buzz it sent through him was intoxicating, and to feel Ashley tremble as her tiny slit soaked his fingers, made him want to finger her more. It was only fair, after all she had done, and all she was still giving.

It wasn't until Ashley's loud moans died away, turning into desperate pants, and her ass fell back down to the blankets, unable to push toward his hand anymore, did he stop. For a second. He pushed back into her, and pulled a few more drops of blood from her quivering body, as he started finger her again. No moaning, only tiny whimpers, barely audible; she was going to pass out. But her petite pussy was still clenching in spasms, and coating his fingers in her cum, so he continued, forcing her to cum again, and again, until she made no more noise at all.

He licked the wound, healing it, and sat up. Ashley had passed out.

“Uh, shit. Too far.” He looked down at her body, lean, lithe, and he looked at her juices literally dripping off of his fingers, glistening in the blue light.

Antoinette was still going. Julee’s head was turned so she could look at him, and she tried to lift her hand out to him, eyes begging, as if looking for help, before her hand collapsed. She was getting fingered in the same way, maybe even harder, Antoinette working her hand up and down enough Jack could see the ballerina’s ass and thighs lightly jiggling with the harsh, wet slapping sounds. And then she went limp, eyes closing.

The Prince sat up, wiped her lips with a single finger, and smiled at Jack. She tugged on his leash, and pulled him toward her, until he was on his knees in front of her.

She took his shoulders, and pushed him down onto his back again. With a long sigh, she cuddled up against his side, pressing her breasts into his chest and side as she set her cheek on his shoulder, his leash in her hand on his waist.

“Be careful, my love,” she said. “It is impressive for one as young as yourself to learn to control their vitae so masterfully. It is normally a decade into their second lives, before Kindred learn to enhance the more subtle aspects of the Blush of Life, such as sex drive.”

“I guess I’m a quick study.”

“Indeed. But, again, be wary. Sexuality, and many other pleasures, are pleasurable due to their frequent absence. Take care to not become as some Daeva do, and spend every night amidst the legs of others.” She slid her body further up, heavy breasts sliding along his

chest up to his collar, as she leaned in to plant a kiss on his lips, then his nose, then his forehead.

“Sorry, I was just trying to ... you know...”

“I am partly to blame, of course. And I was one such Daeva, who spent so many nights lost, addicted, to sex. I have learned control since then, since the tale I told you of my ghoul. I will keep you in check. If you go too far, I will tie you to the bed, and tease you with my body for weeks, before letting you finally cum. That should re-sensitize you to the simple pleasure of a single orgasm.”

Oh shit.

# Part 6

## Chapter 76

~~Jack~~

He looked at his phone, and sighed. “Avery says meet her at Eric’s place.”

“Eric? Perhaps she is making progress in recruiting the man.” Antoinette looked up over her shoulder at him, combing her wet hair with her fingers over her chest and down between her breasts.

“Heh, maybe. She’s just as rude as Jessy, and he seems to like Jessy.” Shrugging, he eased the phone onto a towel outside the hot tub, and turned his attention back to the woman lying on him, back against his chest. He was sitting in the tub, hot water up to his sternum. The Prince was letting the buoyancy of the water let her half lie, half sit on him, her head resting under his chin against his chest.

He was in swimming trunks. She was in a g-string, and nothing but. There was no way that could be comfortable, but she wore it of her own volition. Hell, he’d said don’t wear it if it was uncomfortable, but she just laughed at him, and took him to the hot tub, topless. At a certain point, his brain shut off, and simply followed the boobs.

Her boobs floated. He stared at them over her head, and slid his hands underneath her arms, so he could cup her breasts. So soft, and normally so heavy, but the way they fought to rise to the surface in the water made them feel so much different. He raised one out of the water, groaned at how it became heavy, spilling over his palm and fingers and hiding the entirety of his hand, before he lowered it, and the mountainous volume floated out of his palm; until he started caressing it. As expected, it earned only a chuckle

from her, and she continued to comb her hair where she'd pulled a bundle of it down between her breasts.

“I remember, when we first started talking to each other,” he said, “you mentioned your eye color and hair color may have been because of your heritage?”

“Oui. I am one of the oldest in our order, and there is evidence to suggest a potential ... link, I suppose, to our order's origins. Though, I believe, I probably inflicted these changes upon myself.”

“What?”

“I am Daeva, and it is not uncommon for our kind to obsess over beauty, sexuality, or arts of any kind. I would not be surprised if I experimented on my own body in some quest for greater beauty.”

He frowned at the thought; it didn't sit well with him. He was against body modification of the deceptive nature. Piercings, tattoos, those were all awesome. Getting fit and healthy to look better naked, more awesome. But experiments to give herself her goddess proportions?

“I ... that's the first time you told me you suspected that.”

“A curse of my age to forget my younger years. A curse of my younger years, to perform such an act.” She sighed, and let her head roll back to rest beside his chin, so she could look up at him. “Do you think less of me?”

“No, of course not. Hell, reminds me that you're human, too.”

“Was human.”

“You know what I mean.” He kissed the side of her head, and started to trace circles around her nipples. There was something cozy about being allowed to play with her breasts while they talked

about things, non-sexual things. The casual way he got to play with them, and squeeze them, caress and massage them, and lift them, even jiggle them, while talking about other things, tickled something in his brain. It was warm, and inviting, that level of comfort. Intimacy made manifest, maybe?

“I am glad it does not bother you. I have learned to accept my unusual body, and use it to my advantage.”

“And, I have to be honest. I really, really love the body.”

The Prince chuckled, before she leaned up to kiss under his jaw, and resumed combing her hair as she looked back to where the rest of her was a blur under the water. “I had wondered if you were only attracted to curvy women, but Ashley and Julee lack such features, and you seem quite attracted to them.”

“So are you.”

“Vraiment.” Her hands found his wrists, and while she kept one where it was, cupping her breast with a finger caressing her nipple, she guided the other one down her flat stomach, underneath her g-string, across her smooth mons, and onto her slit. With a warm chuckle, she blushed life, and Jack groaned as he felt the warmth fill her body. “Any word from Julias?”

He winced. Yeap, she was going to do this to him, make him finger her, play with her, while having a casual discussion about work. Torture, lovely torture.

“Nothing yet, except to tell me Jacob’s hasn’t talked to him yet,” he said. Her nipple responded quickly, swelling against his touch. Maybe it was the hot water, but all it took was a gentle touch, a graze of the underside of his finger along Antoinette’s clitoris, to make her sigh again, and lean her head back onto his chest.



“And what of that rascal Jessy? My thralls have learned the woman has been enjoying Eric’s company.”

“Y-Yeah, she’s ... really roping him in. And I’m thinking she’s getting him to transform, full on werewolf mode, when they have sex.” If it were anybody else, he might hesitate to describe their sex life. But with Jessy, she probably couldn’t care less.

He trapped the Prince’s clitoris between index and middle finger, and began to massage it more directly. Consistent, gentle pressure, a soft rhythm of around, and around, and around.

Antoinette had other plans. She guided his hand a little further down, and used her fingers to push in on his. Two of his fingers slid into her clenching muscles, and Jack groaned, while the busty goddess leaned her head up to kiss his jaw again, as he started fingering her. Curling fingers in a slow fucking rhythm, hitting her g-spot again and again, earned a quiet moan from her. She kept her hand there, under her tiny, high-hip g-string, and caressed her clitoris under his hand. Her other hand went to her free breast, and caressed her nipple, plucking and twisting it in gentle, slow rhythms, like their fingers were doing to her pussy.

She was masturbating, while he fingered her. God damn.

“I hope she does not find herself terribly wounded, for such a feat of sexual curiosity,” she said.”

“I warned her it’d be dangerous.”

“I am sure everyone who knows has. But danger is a powerful spice, and some people, Kindred included, are addicted to its thrills. Imagine it, my love. A beast, a giant creature, still of form near enough to human for a viewer to appreciate its towering physique, and yet monstrous enough to elicit fear. Such a beast pins you to the bed, or floor, and glares at you with both animal aggression, but also inhuman, overpowering desire.” The woman on his body shivered,

and Jack groaned as he felt her pussy squeeze on his fingers. “I cannot fault a woman for wanting to taste such an exaggerated display of masculine dominance.”

“Gonna make a guy feel jealous, talking like that.”

Laughing, the Prince clenched her insides on his fingers, hard, and he had to force them up toward the ceiling with more effort, fighting her squeezing muscles. She didn't moan or groan, or whimper or mewl or any of that. She just lay back on him, and continued to caress her clitoris, as the two of them caressed and fondled her breasts with their free hands. Yeah, he got it. The fantasy she described wasn't hers. Sitting in a tub and getting fingered by her lover boy was, evidently.

“What of Fiona? Has she spoken to you recently? I have noticed her interest in your partner Damien.”

Course she did; the Prince missed nothing. “Just a few text messages, about Eric's place being safe from any Begotten burrowing in. I don't think she heals as fast as us, so she's still in her lair. Comes out for texting ... like a girl addicted to her phone.”

They chuckled. It was both cute, and a major juxtaposition to what was inside the innocent-looking girl. Made it easier to think about Fiona, and not Vrall.

“For all my frustration at the presence of those monsters, Fiona has agreed to my terms and no longer kills without restraint. She is welcome in my city, while she obeys the rules.” Antoinette lifted a single leg out of the hot tub water, straight up, and Jack stared at the long, curvy, alabaster limb, before she lowered it again. He didn't stop fingering her, and she didn't stop stroking her clit, either. Showing off, blatantly. “And she is an awfully adorable little creature.”

“Jessy seems sure she's got a sex-plagued mind.”

“Oh, she does, my little Ventrue. But she is young. Like you, she needs someone to siphon and nurture her desires.” Antoinette hugged her breasts, the one arm reaching underneath and wrapping the two of them together; barely. They were too large for her to capture so easily, but she managed, as she nudged her head up against his neck, and played with her clit faster. “If that someone is to be Damien, then I fear their first few times together will be clumsy. But, there is something delightful about two, unskilled partners, learning both each other’s desires, and honing sexual skills. An interesting way for two to grow closer.”

“I’ve been on the receiving end of all the teaching.” Now that Antoinette was holding her breasts together with her arm, they weren’t free to float around. But her nipples were still available, just above her forearm, and he started to apply a little more pressure to the swollen nub. In rhythm with him, she started to play with her clit faster, and he got the hint quick: finger her harder.

With her breasts wrapped, no longer floating in the hot tub water, they more or less stayed against her chest as he started to pound her. The water, already rolling waves from the jets, churned and splashed from the force of his hand moving up and down between her thighs. Antoinette’s whole body began to ripple, the impact of his fingers up against her g-spot spreading out and making her body jiggle. Of course, her breasts were like waves, bouncing back and forth against her forearm and chest.

Antoinette spread her legs, letting them shake and move with the water, as she started to cum. Without a word, she stopped massaging her clit, and raised the hand up her body to her breasts. No longer wrapping them, she set a hand underneath each breast, and caressed them, gently massaged them, and tweaked one nipple while Jack continued to play with the other. He knew to be gentle while she came, and she rewarded him with a tiny moan.

“I have been considering hosting another banquet,” she said, mid orgasm, voice only wavering with the impact of his fingers. “With increased security this time, of course. I will not let hunters prevent us from living our lives.” Smiling up at him, she kissed his jaw again, and clenched on his fingers with her cunt until he was the one groaning, not her. The tight, soft flesh of her depths, squeezing on him so tight he could feel her muscles spasm with pleasure, was euphoric. It didn’t need to be his dick for it to be pleasurable, just holding the goddess on his body, feeling her back on his chest, and flesh around his fingers, sent shivers up and down his body.

“You uh ... you have?” He eased his fingers out of her, and slid them up her stomach.

And just like that, like she didn’t just get thoroughly finger fucked to the point the hot tub water had been splashing everywhere, Antoinette nodded, and raised her hands to start counting things off on her fingers.

“Oui, but there are things to consider this time that I did not before. If I hold a banquet, it is to be protected, as I said. It is a way for me to prove to the covenants that these hunters do not control us, or frighten us to the point of paralysis. I must also consider that our relationship with the Uratha and Begotten have grown. Athalia and Fiona will take part again, I am sure, and perhaps Athalia will remain more than ten minutes.” Chuckling, she rolled over. The water made it easy, her body almost weightless, and she straddled his waist, knees against the hot tub seat edge. She grabbed his wrist, and guided his hand back to her slit. “Again.”

Gulping, he complied, and again, started to finger her. She put her hands on the hot tub edge, above the water, and smiled down at him, her breasts now free to dangle over the water surface. Dangle became wobble and shake, as he started to finger her pussy, and he groaned again as he felt more than just hot water drip down his hands.

“I think,” she continued, “more of Avery’s pack will attend this time, as well. It would be interesting to see if they would be willing to share their blood with some Kindred. I understand Natasha has grown to love the power of it, and so too has Jessy, I imagine. Tilly likely has as well. Perhaps we could find a male vampire to have a taste of Clara? Or female, if that would interest her.”

“You just want her away from me.” With a smile up at the goddess, he started fingering her harder, working his arm back and forth, hoping to hide the little bit of snark he put into his words.

“Oh, are you not a daring one today.” She raised a hand, and flicked him in the forehead. All this, while he continued to finger her, making her breasts sway in front of him, nipples grazing the surface of the water. They were still swollen, very swollen, and the Prince grinned at him as she cupped one breast, other hand on the tub ledge, and she began to caress and massage the engorged areola. “If she cannot have you — and she cannot — I would have her find someone else. I wish her no ill will, and it would be better for everyone if the Uratha, all of them, found happiness here.”

“You want them to stay?”

“I would be a fool to ignore their value, now that so many unwanted factors have disturbed my city’s once calm waters.” Antoinette set her forehead to his, red gaze grabbing his with all the subtlety of a dragon. “I also wonder if the Begotten might share some of their blood? But then, I imagine the blood of a monster of nightmares would not taste appealing.” So close, she grinned at him like a devil, like a succubus, and used both her hands to continue caressing her breasts, as he fingered her.

They both loved her breasts. There was something so insanely awesome about that. Maybe it was how he could lavish and fanboy over them, and instead of annoying her, she indulged in his attention. Or in this case, indulged in his enraptured gaze. The way

they rippled and swayed as they hung underneath her was hypnotizing.

Then again, he loved it when she pinned him down and put a leash on him, something she seemed to delight in doing. A century's worth of luck, distilled into the sexual chemistry the two seemed to have.

"Y-Yeah, maybe. I wonder if Damien has Kissed her? I could ask him."

She kissed his forehead, and nudged her nose into his for a moment, before she let out a long, slow, deep sigh, and came again. It was subtle, her shoulders raising and her elbows pulling inward, as her eyes half closed. "I doubt he has. The boy is undoubtedly timid, when the affairs cross into personal," she said, as her pussy gripped his digits. Her hands fell from her nipples, and instead clutched his shoulders, some of her weight still on where she pressed her forehead to his. Shivering, slightly, but her insides weren't so subtle, clamping down, until he had to use his arm muscles to push his hand back and forth, slapping his fingers against her g-spot and churning the water again.

Finally, she reached down, and touched his wrist; a signal to stop. He kept his fingers inside her, but stop pumping his hand, letting her body grow still while tiny quivers worked up and down her body. Eventually he eased his fingers out of her slit as well, and smiled up at the beauty as he pulled up on her tiny bikini bottom, to hook it high along her hips again.

"Merci." She leaned down, gave him a kiss, and stepped out of the hot tub. "I must begin managing and preparing my thralls now, my love. I will see you later tonight." If it were Ashley or Julee, they'd be panting and floating in the tub, unable to walk. Antoinette, smiling and radiating orgasmic bliss, walked toward her chair, her legs shaking ever so slightly with orgasm aftershocks.

“I ... I uh—”

“Oh non non, I will tend to your desires later.” She winked at him, ran a finger down her breast and the water that dripped from it, and fetched her robe from the lounge chair. Of course, she didn’t bother to close it up, and let it stay parted, exposing her breasts, and her still swollen nipples as she raised her hands to her hair; for no other reason than to torture him, he was sure. Combing back the long, wet strands up and over the robe behind her, she smiled at Jack as she did. “Knowing that you will lust for me, all night, as you tend to your tasks? That tonight, I will lay in bed for you, let you straddle my chest, and hold my breasts together for you to slip your length into? Knowing that such thoughts will haunt your mind all night long, pleases me.”

His jaw dropped. There was a reason she didn’t ask him to Blush for her: the blue balls would have killed him. She was a devil woman!

“And just a few nights ago, you warned me about getting addicted to sex.”

“Only to a point, of course.” She sat down on a lounge chair a few feet from him, and as she let the Blush of Life fade away, she started brushing her hair with a brush she’d brought. Still with her robe open, of course, so he could stare and admire her body. “There are cities where elder Kindred are addicted, combining the pleasures of the flesh with the pleasures of the Kiss, to the point it dominates their way of life. You think my banquets overly sexual, and yet I have once seen a council of Invictus, in another city long ago, three women and two men. Each had a ghoul with them, their blood in a glass to drink, while those same ghouls proceeded to suckle and lick their slits, or swallow their shafts. They had their meetings this way, cumming onto the warm mouths of their servants, as they discussed matters of the city. When the meetings were over, they would go back to their mansions, or into their underground labyrinths, where

they kept many thralls. For them, the Kiss was more pleasurable than sex, but they mixed the two, as all Kindred do. They mixed them while bathing in decadence, however, and would conduct other meetings, teach pupils, arrange tasks, and delegate responsibilities, all while their harems pleased their bodies and bled into their mouths.”

“Holy shit. I ... I guess, in comparison, we’re not nearly that bad.”

“We are not, non. But it is a slippery slope, my little Ventrue, one I have been down. Do not fret, I will make sure we continue to balance. Matters of business, or of survival, are not to be mixed with sexuality or the Kiss. But during our free time, when we have time to spare? By all means, let us indulge our desires. And if you wish to exploit the power of vitae, to indulge in sex for far longer than any normal human could, continue to do so. What matters is that you learn to leave it behind when the time comes to focus on other things.”

“That why you’re torturing me tonight?” He gave her his best pouting eyes.

She laughed. No dice. “Non. I torture you because you are mine, and a little teasing, or torture, is a part of that arrangement.”

Pouting failed, he climbed out of the tub, and reached for a towel. At least without the Blush of Life, he could walk around without an erection.

“I’m off to see Avery then.”

“Please do.”

“So ... how many thralls do you actually have bound to you?”

She laughed at him as she continued brushing her hair, before getting up and walking toward the exit, likely to go back to her room



and put on a suit. “I have eyes everywhere, my love. And you can tell your council that, for all their might, they lack the subtlety needed to rule a city.”

The Invictus wanted to rule with money and might, and that often meant a bunch of thralls with a bunch of guns, according to Julias. Unfortunately, they didn’t know much about where Antoinette kept her thralls, or what sort of training they had. It made large maneuvers difficult, and unnerving, knowing she was watching.

He put up his hands in surrender. “I’m not subtle?”

“You are about as subtle as lightning come nightfall, my love.”

“Bleh.”

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“You’re all fucking idiots.”

Jack winced, and looked down. Yeah, that was true, but Avery could be a little nicer about it.

“Kid did alright,” Noah said, adjusting the blinds so he could look out Eric’s window better.

Avery, sitting on the couch with Clara, looked over her shoulder and frowned at the man. But Jack knew she didn’t have much to say, if she was going to look for the specific flaws in their plan. There’d been flaws, but not in the choices they made once they were in the shit. They all knew it, too.

Except, Jessy wasn’t content to just know. “They rescued me, your girl, and my boy here, because they went in guns blazing. What was the time, from when we vanished, to when you guys were in there after us, Jack?”

“Bit over an hour.”

“That is fucking fast, considering he recruited two monsters and three werewolves, too.” Jessy snapped her fingers, summarizing speed with the sound. She was leaning against the kitchen table, arms folded across her chest, and Eric was next to her. Two vampires and four werewolves, discussing the aftermath.

“I’m sorry, I’ll rephrase.” Avery pointed a finger at Jessy. “You’re an idiot because you picked a fight whenever you could, instead of looking for information.” A finger for Eric. “You’re an idiot because you’re still green and refuse to let us teach you anything.” A finger for Clara. “You’re an idiot for thinking it was a good idea to push forward, instead of waiting for backup.” A finger for Noah. “You’re an idiot for getting decked by an explosive behind a door. You’re a planner. Plan better.” And finally a finger for Jack, of course. “You’re an idiot for going out of your way so hard, to help this Azamel monster.”

He sighed, and leaned back in the recliner. Eric’s apartment was a really nice place, massive, luxurious, and the repairs had been done quickly; Invictus money was a powerful thing indeed.

“Azamel has—”

“Done nothing.” Avery threw up her hands before resting her forehead in one. “She has done nothing, but you continue to go to bat for her.”

She had done something. She warned him about the inevitable threat Dolareido faced, something the Prince herself had not, despite her awareness of it. He understood why, but still.

“Fiona and Athalia helped rescue us,” Eric said. “They work for her, and came because she asked them to go, I think.” Everyone in the room looked at him, eyebrows raising. He wasn’t in a pack or covenant, so talking at all was kind of bold. And the awkward, slightly annoyed expression matched what Jack knew of the man.

He didn't want to be a part of any of this, but was getting dragged into it against his will. Poor guy.

“Eric is correct,” Jack said. “As much as hunters being in Dolareido is largely her fault, she's trying to help.”

Avery continued to sigh, but after a while, put her hand back down and leaned into the couch. “Sorry if I don't sound grateful. You saved my girl, and this fucker.” She made a small wave in Eric's direction.

“I resent that,” Eric said.

“Yeah, well, suck it up.” Avery leaned in, elbows on her knees, facing Jack. “On the other side of the wall, the city is in a strange state. You got those three fuckers, Black Blood, Street-Tail King, and Red Tide, fighting for sections of the city, but these hunters have introduced ... complications.”

Jack put up a hand. “Why are you telling me this? Shadow World isn't exactly ... well, you've made it abundantly clear you don't want vamps sticking their feet in it.”

“That was before things started getting out of hand. Besides, you've proven you're willing to go the extra mile to make sure shit gets done. Saving Clara—”

“Don't forget,” Noah said, “it was Jacob and Black Blood that saved us.”

“Yeah, that has blurred the lines on a lot of shit too.” Groaning, Avery got up, and started pacing around, arms across her chest and hand raised to hold her chin. Classic thinking pose, and Jack struggled to not smile as he watched the small, deadly woman walk around like she owned the place. “I'm not throwing my pack into a meat grinder, but the way things are going, it's looking like it'll be for the best if we help you out.”

Jessy cheered. Everyone stared at her, until she lowered her hands.

“Thanks,” Jack said. It was only a matter of time, he supposed. Avery wanted to stick around, to live in Dolareido, and she wouldn’t be able to do that if the hunters ruined things. Now that it was clear the hunters had far more tools at their disposal than anyone could have predicted, she felt inclined to help.

Or, it was because Jeremiah mentioned her specifically, before Black Blood saved them. The others must have heard it, and heard how Jack had tried to lie to Jeremiah about who it was. Point for him, he supposed.

“Yeah don’t thank us just yet.” Avery walked over to him, and flicked him in the forehead. Familiar. “There is so much crap rolling your way, it’s ridiculous. No wonder David guided us here. Every fucking day, the echoes of horrible shit hits everywhere nearby, in the Hisil. It’s not a coincidence so much insanity is hitting this city in such a small amount of time. Enough Azlu for two full grown hosts? Then hunters show up, and they have a Begotten with them? Something is going on.”

Something was going on, but no one knew what the fuck it was. He doubted the hunters knew, considering the nature of Azamel’s warning. She didn’t want him telling anyone else about it, paranoid about the information tipping someone off, and Jack couldn’t fathom that having anything to do with an army of bloodthirsty hunters coming for her head.

If the sheriff had found anything, he wasn’t sharing it, beyond his discoveries of Elen’s rituals.

“The ... Prince has a request,” he said. And now for the hard part.

Avery rolled her eyes, again, and sat back down with Clara. “Hit me.”

“The covenants are going to start putting teams together of Kindred they trust to handle themselves. Three Kindred to a team. They’re going to be doing sweeps of areas in the city, using what little we know to find them. And—”

“And you’d like one of my pack to come along with these teams.”

“Yeah. You got the nose and the ears for hunting, in ways not even our Gangrels can match.”

Jessy made a snort noise, but shrugged and looked to the window. “True enough.”

Jack threw a smile her way. Jealous, of Uratha hunting abilities? Weird. But then, he wasn’t a Gangrel. He didn’t know what it was like to have the beast riding the edge of his consciousness, unless he was utterly starving. Maybe she had some professional envy.

Avery looked up, eyes rooting through her brain, and she touched her chin a couple times as she juggled the thoughts. “Has our relationship progressed to that point?”

Oh boy, negotiating, with a werewolf. This was going to be fun. Not.

“I like to think it has. We worked together to save our kind from the hunters, and we worked together well ... more or less. And you just said you were willing to help, sort of.”

“Kid’s right,” Noah said. “Not that I think we should be throwing ourselves into this war with these hunters. David brought us here for different reasons, and so far it’s looking like they need our help. I vote we squeeze more out of them.”

Ok, Avery was brutal, but Noah was heartless. God damn.

“This isn’t about hitting them for money, Noah,” Clara said.

“You sure? Having a few million dollars under our belt could help us make some city renovations.”

Jack put up his hands. “The Invictus are willing to throw some money your way. Some. Millions might a bit much to ask...” Jack was making premium bank now, and he didn’t have anywhere near that much saved up yet. Xnomina did, no doubt, but their funds weren’t endless. “Far cheaper for us if you guys accepted assets that we—”

“Noah’s just being a sarcastic ass, Jack.” Avery wiped a hand aside, dismissing her comrade’s words. “Besides, this is a request from big tits, right?”

“I, uh ... yes.” Big tits was not a nickname he expected Antoinette would appreciate. Not because it wasn’t accurate, but the woman did not like the sort of friendly prattle or good-natured ribbing you found from people like the Uratha, or anyone in the Carthians. Jack could relate; he found it grating and juvenile, sometimes. This was one of those times, and he struggled to not frown. It could have been a test from Avery too, to see if he’d react, get defensive, and lower his guard.

“You let me see the teams, and let me choose which member goes with which team, and I’ll do it.”

Finally! Progress.

“Really?” Clara said.

“Yeah, really. But, you also have to convince Azamel to join in, have her buddies join some of these groups, too.”

He winced, and looked down. “I’m meeting her later tonight. I’ll run it by her. The Primogen and the Prince thought this might come up, but they’re not sure. Azamel’s half the reason the hunters are here at all—if not the full reason—”and the elders aren’t exactly

keen on having them work beside us.” As per usual, he pushed for allowing the Begotten to be a part of their efforts, as they were when they helped rescue Jessy. As per usual, the Primogen and Prince didn’t like it, but they managed to understand his position, if only a little.

“Yeah, well, those are my terms. Take it or leave it. The hunters have a fucking monster working for them, and I’m not stupid enough to risk joining your sweepers without a little help from people who understand how one of them work.”

“Understandable. I might be able to convince Azamel to get Mark to help, but Fiona’s just a kid, and Athalia ... well, yeah.” It was easier to think about Angela without his insides turning to fire, if he didn’t say her name out loud.

“Fiona’s a kid?” Noah came to the couch with the rest of his buddies, and set his butt against its arm.

“She is,” Eric said with a quiet grumble.

Noah shook his head. Forever calm, this man, such a juxtaposition to the fancy artwork of his tattoos. At first glance, he looked like a new age artist. The moment he opened his mouth, he sounded like a lawyer. “Last I checked, she’s got a very high kill count. Higher than a lot of us in this room, I imagine, if we’re looking at human kills only.”

“She killed people who deserve it,” Jack said, “but I see what you mean.”

Avery shook her head, not satisfied. “Get Fiona and Mark, and get Athalia too. I have to know she’s not going to stab me in the back, if we stumble across her insane daughter.”

Fucking lovely.

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“Jessy driving you to drink, yet?” he said, once they were outside.

“Heh, no. But she’s definitely a handful.”

Jack needed a buddy on his trip to see Azamel, for the buddy system, and Eric had offered. The man must have had an ulterior motive, something he wanted to ask of the old monster, but it was a good opportunity for Jack to learn more about the man. Knowledge was power; Julius rubbing off on him.

The two of them were in suits, Jack in his proper Invictus business suit, the sort used for deadly meetings, and seeing the other paranormals. Eric’s suit was a little more casual, and befitting the fun nature of a night club. All his suits were for that purpose, he supposed.

“Yeah, handful is a nice way of putting it,” Jack said.

Laughing, Eric shook his head, entertained by a memory.

The two of them walked the sidewalks, through the crowds of people, and past the glowing signs of open bars, casinos, and strip joints. Once, they’d been so intimidating. Now, they were a part of Jack’s nightlife. Hell, if he wanted to, he could walk into one of the strip clubs, sit down, and only feel partially uncomfortable, instead of horribly. In a bar, he could manage to flirt a bit, catch a woman’s eye, or a man’s if needed, and draw them into conversation. A little conversation made it easy to use Dominate, and turn his prey into his puppet for a quick Kiss, once out of the bar and into an alley. That is, if he bothered with Dominate. A kind smile and a couple drinks was enough to get many people to trust him, he was discovering.

“How did a little guy like you hook up with a femme fatale like Antoinette? If you don’t mind me asking.”



“I showed up at Bloodlust, really hungry and looking for a meal. I didn’t know what I was doing at the time, still brand new to being Kindred, but my sire wanted me to get used to taking advantage of the best place for finding a meal.” Laughing, Jack looked up to the rooftops above, scanning for movement. “I was antisocial as fuck, and very much out of my element. I ran into her at the club, and she threw me a bone. We talked, and we got along.”

“She seems ... a bit of an ice queen.”

Jack burst into laughter, and held out a hand against a street lamp to catch himself before he fell. “Y-Yeah, she can seem like that, until you get to know her. Except, unless you piss her off, then I suppose it’s apt.”

After a while, they drifted along and found one of the old street stairs down into the subway. No one looked at them for any longer than a second, likely thinking two guys in a suit walking down stairs to a locked door either wanted to chat in privacy, get a blowjob in privacy, or they had keys. People were so carefree in Dolareido. Vampire utopia, indeed.

As he went down, he looked up to the rooftops again, and continued scanning.

“Looking for something? Think we’re being stalked?”

“I hope we are.”

“Say what?”

“My—ah, there they are.” Jack held out his arm, and gave Eric a small nod.

The man jumped back, eyes wide as two sets of black wings came out of no where, flying in from above as silent as a grave. Mulder

and Scully perched on his arm, and then his shoulder once comfortable, Mulder hopping over to sit on his opposite shoulder.

“You two alright?” he said.

The two birds nodded, and pecked at his ears a few times with their beaks. Ow. It’d taken a lot of research to learn that birds pecked at each other for many reasons, often just to be friendly. Little nibbles were just a part of owning birds.

“You own crows?” Eric said.

“Not really own, no. But I started taking care of these two, not too long ago.” He set a hand to Scully’s head, and scratched gently under the feathers behind her skull. “Crows are damn smart.”

“Yeah, but, pets? I can understand parrots.”

“Not my pets. They’re free to come and go, but I’ve established a connection with them.” He leaned in toward Mulder, and the crow nestled his head against Jack’s jaw, under his ear. “Vampires can communicate with animals, and control them. Gangrels like Jessy, and Ventrue like me, can do it easily.” He wasn’t sure if giving Eric info about Kindred was the best idea, but the man seemed alright to trust with basic info, at this point.

“Did you name them?”

“ ... I did.”

“Pets.”

Rolling his eyes, Jack opened the door to the abandoned subway with the key. “You two going to be ok?”

The two crows nodded, fluffed their feathers a bit, and snuggled in close to his neck for a second. A couple of caws to confirm, before

Jack stepped into the underground.

The darkness of the tunnels. There were lights, but old and dingy. Mulder and Scully flapped their wings for a moment, before Mulder flew over to land on one of the many railings that sat on the abandoned platform. No subway cars. The ones that'd been destroyed by the Uratha were still fresh in his mind, many months later. Torn apart like toilet paper.

Jack pulled out some oats for the crows, but only a little. Hard to feed them and walk at the same time.

“Why you bringing them?” Eric said.

“They're my eyes and ears. And birds notice things humans, or vampires or werewolves, wouldn't. You never know.”

“You didn't bring them to visit Avery.”

“I did. They were watching from outside.”

The crows nodded, and Mulder cawed from his perch, as Scully turned to make a few quiet croons. Jack clucked his tongue at her quietly, some light touches of the tongue tip against the roof of his mouth. A bit of vitae, raised to the surface, raised into his mind, to turn the croons his feather friend made, into images, sounds, and smells his brain could understand.

The images filled his mind. The outside of Eric's apartment, viewed from a great height. Then movement, as Scully flew down to find a perch on a nearby building. Eric's apartment was high, but Jack had pointed it out to them before he went in. The blinds were closed, but unlike the bedroom window, the living room and kitchen windows had normal blinds. With the lights on, the silhouettes of people were visible.

But as far as Jack could tell, nothing seemed out of the ordinary; except, for the unusual amount of people on the rooftops. Normally that number was zero, but the birds, more than just Mulder and Scully, noticed many new human faces up in the skies with them. Three were nearby in the bird's memory, each on a different rooftop. Two he knew as Invictus thralls, and trained snipers. The other though, was one of Antoinette's thrall.

A bird's eye view put the strange tension between the Ordo Dracul and the Invictus into perspective. Snipers on rooftops, and spies spying on each other. They shared Dolareido's sky, and had to get along. How Antoinette managed that, Jack would never understand, knowing how much of a totalitarian Viktor had been.

"You vamps like to think in sneaky ways," Eric said.

"Unfortunately, being sneaky is the only tried and true way to survive for centuries."

"I guess."

Jack looked at the man for a moment as they walked. He looked stressed. But then, he seemed like the kinda guy who was always stressed. Jack knew where some of his salary was going, too, considering it was all Invictus money. One of the joys of being a Right Hand, knowing where all the money went, except for council expenditures.

Ask him about his dad? No, that'd be way too weird. They barely knew each other. And besides, Jack's dad was dead, and this guy's dad was dying. Not the same thing.

"Gonna join Avery's pack?" There, much better topic of conversation. Valuable information, and something that Eric was undoubtedly thinking about.

"I doubt it."

Uh oh. Julias wanted him to follow Avery's lead. So did Antoinette.

"Why not?"

"I'm not interested in a new family. Got enough shit with my own family."

"I uh, don't think Avery's pack is really ... no, you're right, they're a family. How about just taking some lessons from her, about the Shadow Realm?"

That managed to make the man twitch.

"I don't want anything to do with spirits."

"I got the impression you didn't really have a choice in the matter? Kinda like, I have to drink blood to survive. If I eat a salad or a piece of meat, I'll spend hours puking that up." He hadn't tried, but Julias had told him what happened to Kindred who had. And, by the grace of God or whoever, Jack seemed to have enough intelligence to not have to try something for himself to learn a lesson.

"Yeah, I guess. They ... they're ... yeah." Sighing, Eric stopped. Jack stopped as well, and raised a brow as he turned to look back at the man. "You seem like a smart kid."

"You could say that." Ah, the stroked ego. His Ventrue pride swelled, and Jack shook his head once to try and dislodge the feeling.

"I'm getting pulled in three directions. Really, I just want people to leave me alone. But I know that won't happen, so ... what would you do?"

“What would I do? I can barely understand your predicament. I have ... no idea what’s it like, to suddenly be a werewolf. I know what it’s like to wake up one night, dead, with a bunch of knife wounds in the stomach. I know what it’s like to suddenly crave blood like it’s heroin and I’m a junkie. I know what it’s like to see every human around as a source of food, instead of people, when the hunger rises. I’m sure you have your own urges, things that weren’t there before, things that dominate your mind now. Without help, without someone to explain to me what the fuck was going on, I would have been lost, and probably dead by now.”

“So I should join Avery’s pack.”

“I ... think you should do whatever gets you the most information. That means Avery. I’m sure she’ll tell you a few things, show you a few things, and at worst, you’ll owe her. Don’t need to join her.”

“And if my gut says—”

“Your gut is a child’s reflex. Everyone’s ‘gut’,”—he raised his fingers to air quote the stupid word—“is a childish impulse. Your gut is your emotions overriding your thinking. Your gut ... your gut is to be ignored, Eric, like the whiny baby that it is. Everyone’s gut feelings are useless, whiny baby noises. Sometimes it can help in a pinch, when you need to make a split second decision, and there’s some subconscious reasoning happening. Most of the time, it’s idiotic, shortsighted, emotional garbage. Ignore your gut, flip the switch, and make a decision using as much information and evidence as you can get your hands on.” At some point, Jack had started to raise his voice, almost yelling at the bigger, stronger guy. Jack was reasonably sure he could dominate this man’s mind if it came to blows, so he wasn’t scared of him. That wasn’t an excuse for getting angry with him, when Eric was making the same mistake everyone made.

“You sound like ... a smart guy.”

Jack smiled at the man, and continued walking once Eric started walking too. "I try." It was one of the ways he and Antoinette connected. Talking about things, real things, and peeling back emotional bullshit and dogma, so they could talk about any topic conceivable without prejudice or bias, was something they both enjoyed doing.

"Do you trust Azamel?"

"That ... is a better question." Shrugging, Jack held up some more oats for Scully and Mulder, as Eric and him rounded a corner in the tunnels, tracks beneath him growing darker in the flickering light. "I trust her more than others do."

"Sounds like she just wants to be left alone."

That was the connection, then. Azamel wanted to be left to her business, and Eric was identifying with that. It was a reasonable way for the two forces to see eye to eye, but Eric was young by paranormal standards, and easily controlled; as much as you could control a werewolf. Azamel had the chops to not only fend for herself, but the smarts to manipulate a man like Eric into helping her, serving as a bodyguard or something.

But then, if he tried to exist as his own person, and not affiliate with anyone, the Kindred would eventually force him into something. It was a weird position to be in, especially since his dad was in the hospital, care being paid for by the First Estate.

"She does want to be left alone. And she could have done that somewhere else," Jack said. "Not that ... I don't know, I don't understand the Begotten, no one does. Maybe running somewhere else would have meant starving to death. But she came here and brought a lot of trouble with her. I think she's trying to help undo some of that damage, but that doesn't change how much shit is happening because of these hunters. Barry's dead." And Isabella was

still royally pissed about it. “And you nearly died, twice now, because of the hunters, if I’m counting right.”

“Yeap, you are.” The man pat a spot on his chest. “I looked that fucker Jeremiah in the eye as he stabbed me. Dude’s a Hollywood psychopath.”

“Hollywood psychopath. I suppose that’s a way to put it.” And a good one. Jeremiah had the sort of charisma and determination you found in movie villains, and Angela was his psychopath twice-over student.

“You regret not killing her?”

Jack winced, and both crows managed a rather annoyed caw at Eric. He pulled back his head, until Jack reached up to stroke Mulder, the closer crow, on his breast feathers. No need to make enemies of Eric, guys.

“Yeah, I do regret it,” Jack said.

“Sore spot?”

“Very.”

Nodding, Eric scratched the back of his neck, and continued walking. Jack had expected an apology, but the man didn’t seem to have that inclination, as if the apology had been implied by his question of sore spot. Just like Jessy would have done.

Jack smiled at that.

Eventually they reached Azamel’s hole in the ground. Why the woman never bothered trying to spruce up the place, try and make it home, he didn’t know. It was a concrete stage, with a shitty bed, a shitty old rocking chair, some room dividers, a couple couches, and no place to poop. Did Begotten need to poop?



Azamel was there, as was Mark, and Fiona. No Athalia though.

“Eric! Jack!” Fiona hopped off the stage, ran over to them, and hugged them. If she noticed the crows or not, it didn’t stop her, and both birds had to make for the air to escape getting squashed. “How are ye feeling? Are—hey!” Scully didn’t appreciate it, and landed on her head, to begin a terrible assault of pecking her skull, wings flapping. “Sorry! I’m sorry!”

“Hey! Come on.” Jack reached out, and Scully returned, hopping down his wrist and arm, before returning to his shoulder. “Treat the lady nice.”

“Aye, treat her nice.” Beaming, Fiona smiled up at the birds on his shoulders. “This is very classic vampire. Sexy, with the suit.”

“Makes you wonder how many other Kindred are doing similar.” Nodding, Jack also offered a nod to Mark, and a proper deep nod to Azamel. “Hello.”

Azamel blew a cloud smoke his way, but otherwise, didn’t do much but continue rocking in her chair. “Hello.”

“Athalia still healing?”

Fiona jumped in front of him a couple times, before she walked back to the stage, and sat on its edge. “Aye, she was really beat up. Loads of bullet holes that are taking a long time to heal properly. She’s getting hungry, too.”

A hungry Begotten had a certain hint of danger to it that a hungry Kindred didn’t. A monster needing to feed was a whole different animal to a blood sucker, Athalia would probably say.

Jack glanced at Eric, who had taken a moment to find a wall to lean against. The suit, oh man, the poor suit. “Azamel, I wanted to

know if you had any ... updates, I guess? Just had a meeting with Avery.”

The old woman shrugged, blew some more smoke, and looked at Eric. “Why bring him?”

“Eric’s caught up in this, and—”

“You nearly got me killed, you old bat.”

Jack and Fiona winced, and looked at the man. Hell, he thought he saw Mark wince too.

“Excuse me?”

Eric pushed from the wall, and walked up to Azamel, glaring at her with every step. His glare didn’t have the murderous intent Jack thought he might find there, but he was annoyed nonetheless, hands in his pockets and a frown carved into his face.

“A hunter, a Begotten nonetheless, showed up at my apartment. Kidnapped me. Asked me questions about you. Some freaky shaman sack of wrinkles cut into me, looking to ... use my body to learn about you.” He gestured to Jack, and Jack froze. “I was going to be tortured, and probably have my guts spilled for that bitch to read, like ... like...”

Jack raised a hand. “Haruspex.”

Everyone glared at him. Yeah, smart to know, not so smart to say right now.

“Haruspex. I would have died, so these freaks could find you and kill you.”

“Then it’s a good thing I sent Athalia and Fiona to rescue you.” She let the smoke come out of her as she spoke. If smoking was a

sport, she'd be an olympian. "And I did not do those things to you, they did."

"You brought them—"

"If they were not chasing me, then they would be chasing someone else, fool. The vampires have not removed me because they understand that. And they understand that we have a better chance of defeating the hunters together."

And the vampires would have a hell of a tough time removing her, from what Julias told Jack.

Azamel's explanation seemed to calm Eric down, and he managed a small smile for Fiona again, before he leaned against the wall of dirty concrete behind him. If the man was ever going to make a decision about who he was going to lean toward, Jack couldn't tell. What did Jessy tell him? Probably something like 'dude you're a werewolf now, partner with whoever you want', which made sense if you were a wanted player. And Eric was a wanted player, if only because he was a powerful entity. His ability to enter the Shadow World was icing on that cake.

"She's right," Jack said, "to an extent. Dolareido's been low on the radar for a long time, and the Prince works hard to keep it that way. But ... but things have been happening, and we're drawing attention to the city, on multiple fronts." The deaths of three elders and invasion of two fucking spider monsters, one of which was still alive according to Avery, was a precursor to the arrival of the hunters. The mysterious warning Azamel had given him was a continuation of the shit rolling their way. "Azamel showing up, and all the shit happening she's getting blamed for, is more post hoc ergo propter hoc."

Everyone raised a brow at him.

“Post hoc fallacy,” Mark said, everyone jerking their head his way. The man barely ever said a thing. “Azamel shows up, and shit starts going horribly. People think she started the bad shit, when she didn’t. Not all of it, at least.”

Azamel snorted, coughed several times, and blew some smoke at her companion. “Thanks, asshole.” Sighing, she tapped the cigarette against her tray, and Jack winced as he saw a bit of the ashes fall onto her typical, old, dingy grandma clothes. There was a monster in that old woman, a colossal creature of nightmares, and he half expected her to pass out in her rocking chair with a lit cigarette, and set herself on fire.

She was desperate to get something done before old age took her. Nothing was as scary as someone pushed to the edge of their life, in whatever circumstance, with nothing left to lose.

“I also came to let you know,” Jack said, “that we’re going to start active sweeps of the city and the tunnels. Kindred are tripling up, and hopefully with Avery’s help, we can track these fuckers down proper.” Ok, time for the difficult part of the conversation. “We want your help with some of these groups.”

Azamel coughed once again, and hard. The room stopped and waited as the woman tore up her lungs, though from the way she tensed her body with each cough, it was obvious she was practiced. “My help?”

“Well, not your help, specifically,” he said. “Fiona, Mark ... Athalia.”

The woman lit up another cigarette, fighting her shaking hands every moment of the process. “You’re asking a lot, boy.”

His turn to frown. Considering how much of their predicament was her fault, directly or indirectly, it was not an unrealistic request. “The situation requires a lot. That shaman woman’s rituals are an

ever present threat. She'll kill again, find some other person to do her craziness to, and then Eric or me will have hunters tracking us down again. Because of you."

"Because of me?"

"You're the connection in these rituals."

She blew a cloud of smoke at him. There was a good fifteen feet between them, and yet she managed to spear the smoke enough so it hit him anyway. Impressive, and fucking annoying.

"Others have visited me. Many have, in fact. The difference between them, and you, is that you and Eric are young and weak. Easily beaten. Or so they believed." Shrugging, she gestured to Mark and Fiona. "I will speak with Athalia later. You two, think you can help the leeches and dogs with their hunts?"

"... fine," Mark said.

Fiona, as Jack figured, jumped up and skipped over to him. Skipped. With her large bust, it was pretty distracting, and he forced himself to not stare. After what Antoinette did to him a few hours ago, the last thing he needed was to see a pair of big breasts bouncing around. Weak, man, so weak.

"I'd love to! Who's going with who?"

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~~Damien~~

The Grand Cathedral of Dolareido. It was hard to look at it the same way anymore, for a variety of reasons. The most obvious, he supposed, was that it was once the primary HQ of his sire and master, Lucas. But now that the veil of that psychopath's teachings were fading, and the intrusive, reflexive thoughts of judgment and guilt were disappearing into the ether, the cathedral looked different

because of how much it did not fit the rest of Dolareido. If all roads went to Rome, then the same could be said for the gambling and club district of South Side. Money, sex, drugs, all things he'd been taught to despise in some form or another, to discourage kine from enjoying, and now, they were a frequent part of his life.

Or at least, money was. Sex and drugs? The kine he used to punish for such acts, he no longer punished. He wondered about the capacity of his new role as arbiter for the Lancea et Sanctum, and how it rarely involved punishing kine for their transgressions. It made him feel guilty, for daring to stand in the face of the Grand Cathedral, when he hadn't done what he was taught was a requirement of his role.

But, it was the dawn of a new age, and for a new approach. No longer a slave to dogma and mindless traditionalism, he had to reconsider a myriad of things in the light of, what Jack described as intellectualism, or healthy skepticism. Lucas would have called it a lack of faith in the Lord. The duality fought in his mind, and Damien had to make an effort to think through the fog and noise.

It was a mental battle he fought every time he walked up the stairs to the giant door, passed the gargoyles that sat upon ledges and railings, the angels and demons that sat upon engravings over the door, and finally, the crucifix above as he entered the cathedral. Empty. The many pews held no one, which made sense; for now. It was taking time to create an understanding between him and Maria, and the Prince, about what capacity the Lancea et Sanctum could operate in. If they weren't careful, Antoinette would shut down their efforts.

There was no music, either. Maria often spent the some late hours in the night playing, and introducing him to classical musicians: Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and others like Chopin and Vivaldi. Perhaps she was down in her bunker, with her piano, and the books and various artifacts of the Lancea et Sanctum. Cataloging

what she'd managed to save from Garry's vandalism, taking digital pictures, creating digital lists, had become a pastime for him. He enjoyed the peace and quiet of it, to be alone with the mountain of information, and glimpses into the past.

He walked through the nave, up past the raised platform with the podium, and past that to find the pipe organ. Such a grand, majestic instrument. An imposing instrument. He sat down upon the bench, and set his hands on the keys. Maria had said his lessons had progressed well, well enough to attempt playing the infinitely more difficult instrument. The issue was the complexity of four levels of keys, and the foot pedals. Maria insisted he need not worry about the dozens of dials that surrounded him, and only concern himself with the different octaves available to him.

He set his fingers on the keys, and played a simple chord. The difference between a percussion and wind instrument was blatant, and he stopped as he struggled with the way holding a key on an organ created a consistent note. There was no impact, no strike of the inner workings of a piano against strings, only the overwhelming power of the wind within the pipes, filling the church.

He tried again. Maria had insisted he learn Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, not as his first piece but as the piece that would hook him, pull him into the mournful beauty of classical music. It was a sentiment he was starting to agree with.

He set his left hand on the first layer of keys, low toward his lap, and his right hand a layer higher; manuals, Maria called them. This second one had a far more gentle sound, perhaps to offset the thicker chords played on the first manual? With the organ, the sound didn't die, but resonated as long as he held the keys down; it felt unnatural, and he was afraid it'd overwhelm the melody he played with the right hand. But he continued, and trusted the arrangement Maria had created.

It did sound divine. He was not skilled enough to close his eyes, but he almost did, as he let the somber, heavy sound fill him. No wonder the song was played everywhere, to the point of ridiculous cliché. The chills it sent up his spine, as the sound overwhelmed the church, was intoxicating, and he smiled as he began to melt into it.

“You need to wear a cape and some mascara, to get away with playing that.”

He jerked his head to the side, and sighed relief as he watched Beatrice saunter up to him. “Do I?”

“Yeah. You’d know that if you watched more TV. Aaaaand did I sneak up on you?”

“I was ... distracted. It takes a lot of focus to play this instrument, and I am a beginner.”

“And you’re here alone. What happened to the buddy system?” She slid up to the instrument, and leaned against one of the wooden panels that surrounded it. A crass woman, but not nearly as bad as Jessy, to his delight.

“Maria’s nest below is very defensible.”

“Ah yeah, I guess. She here?”

“I do not believe so.”

Nodding, Triss sat on a nearby railing, jeans on the wood. “Good. I wanted to talk to you solo.”

“About?” He looked back to the keys in front of him, and set his hands on them in preparative positions. He didn’t play, though. It’d be rude to interrupt the Nosferatu. But he couldn’t deny he was excited to play more on the strange, monolithic instrument.



“I ... wanted to apologize. About giving you some of my blood.”

“Ah yes, that.” Sighing, he turned to face her, one knee on the bench and foot out to the side to rest upon his other. “It was undeniable, that ... that it’d happened. I woke up with a strange desire to see you, for no reason whatsoever.”

“Creepy.”

“Worse were the cravings for more. I wanted another taste of vitae, from anyone.” Nodding, he gestured to her with a shrug. “It faded. A single taste was not enough to ruin me. And you saved my life with that move, dangerous as it was.”

“That’s true, yeah. I could have let you die.”

“Something tells me the other Kindred would have been upset you didn’t do the only option available to you.”

“Also true.” Laughing, she nodded again, and kicked her feet a few times down against the floor, as if to admire the sound it made, how it echoed out of the chamber before disappearing into the acoustic panels hidden behind pillars. “So we square?”

Square. Sometimes it was easy to forget the eras Kindred came from. Beatrice grew up in the seventies and eighties.

“I was never angry with you.”

“Good, cause ... yeah. I thought you might have been upset I might have gotten you addicted to vitae, or, you know, me.”

“I am not addicted to vitae, and it would take a lot of blood to get me addicted to you.”

Beatrice blinked at him, several times, before she laughed. Loudly. Her crocodile mouth opened wide, and her laughter echoed

through the church.

“Did you just make a joke?”

“ ... I suppose.”

“And here I was thinking you were incapable of anything other than cold, hard thoughts.” She smiled at him, which looked a little strange considering she had no cheeks, crocodile teeth along her jaw, but a normal looking mouth. All her facial expressions were a bit strange, as well, especially with her serpent eyes looking at him.

“I’ve tried to ... change, as of late.”

“Haven’t we all.” She winked at him, and leaned in. “A little birdie told me you and Fiona are getting along.”

Who was this woman? He remembered glimpses of the young Nosferatu when she was a Carthian, and hung out in catacombs. Like many of the cursed Kindred, she spent her younger years underground, hiding her disfigurements, and becoming as antisocial as he’d been. She was a completely different person now, who made no effort to hide her crocodile teeth where her cheeks should have been. Her small claws on her fingers, her snake eyes, all of that was forgotten to her, with zero body language meant to hide them.

Her new life agreed with her. A witch, and lover to the strongest ancilla in the city; along with her friend to share the bed. The typical Dolareido effect, dialing the sex factor of everything up to extreme.

“I ... do have a date planned with her.” For some reason, everyone had become interested in his dating life. It was annoying, but he couldn’t deny he listened to advice when it came his way, about this particular topic. He had no experience of romance, even when he was human. Blurry memories, at best.

“She seems fun. I wish you lots of great sex.” With a salute, Beatrice hopped off the railing, and started out of the church. “I—” She stopped, voice grinding to a halt, as the cathedral doors opened.

Maria.

She was wearing one of her typical white dresses, the sort worn a couple hundred years ago, with small buttons done up the front, connected to a multi-layered skirt. The dress was in good condition, and that always struck Damien as harsh contrast against her ruined skin.

Had these two ever met? Ever talked? He had no idea, and he stood up before walking over to Beatrice to stand behind and beside her.

“Madam Turio,” he said. “I was trying to learn how to use the organ, when Beatrice came by to visit.”

“Alone?” the elder said. “The pairing system applies to all Kindred in the city, Damor. Jacob will not be happy if a passerby saw through your Cloak of Night, and cut off your head.”

Nodding, Beatrice tapped her nose a couple times. “Jen isn’t far from here.”

Nose tapping, as if taunting the elder. Brazen. The comparison some people made between Beatrice and Jessy was warranted, to a point.

“Then do not leave her side.” Frowning, Maria walked up to, and past the two of them, a small snarl made for Beatrice before she continued on to the stairway in the back of the Cathedral.

Damien and Beatrice stood there, eyebrows raised, and listened to the sound of opening, and closing gates. After a few of the thuds, clanks, and squeaks of metal on metal, Damien set his butt against

one of the pews' arms, and gestured to the Nosferatu, who did the same.

"I don't think she likes you," he said.

"I guess not. I mean, I was a Carthian, and I caused a lot of problems for the Invictus, back in the day."

"I ... don't think that's what it is." It was far more likely that Maria was jealous. Beatrice, a Nosferatu who had once hid in the shadows to hide her disfigurements, now realized they weren't so bad, and engaged in frequent intercourse, while also finding someone to love. All things, denied to Maria Turio.

Beatrice sat the same way, butt on a pew arm, facing him, the two of them in the aisle. "Yeah, maybe not."

A downcast look from her said it all: she was strolling through her more painful memories. For a Nosferatu, her disfigurements weren't all that unappealing. She'd spent all her years lamenting her monstrous features, only to later realize other Kindred didn't mind them. Worse yet, other Nosferatu often had far worse mutations, and she'd had the audacity to wallow in depression for many years, as her kin did. At least, that was the impression Damien got from her face. Perhaps it was far more simple, like he imagined Jessy's thoughts to be.

No, Beatrice was a more complex creature than Jessy. Though, complexity did little except bury the mind in pain.

"When's your date?"

"In an hour."

"Ah. Looking forward to it?"

"I ... am."

“She’s a spunky little thing, isn’t she?”

“That she is.”

He wouldn’t mind enjoying time with someone less complex, someone who smiled because they meant it, because they couldn’t help themselves.

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~~Julias~~

He didn’t feel comfortable not wearing a suit. He felt less comfortable, wearing a robe. He felt extremely uncomfortable, wearing a thick robe of dark, stained leather, and absolutely nothing underneath.

“Aaron and Othello couldn’t join us tonight,” Triss said, wearing a similar robe. “So I thought, this could be interesting. Sort of a bonding experience.”

“You feel comfortable letting me witness a ritual?” he said.

Jen shook her head, and gestured to the metal bowl in the dirt. “If witnessing was all that was required, I’d be able to do them.”

“You can’t?”

“No.” Jennifer shivered a bit, and spread the blanket out for her to sit down on, legs folded, knees apart. “There’s something in Crúac, about it, that ... it’s too brutal, for me to ... give into. Maybe when I’m older. But in either case, Jacob doesn’t mind, because you can’t learn to do a ritual by watching it performed.”

Julias nodded, and adjusted his own blanket as he sat down. As much as it felt strange wearing such a heavy robe that looked like it belonged on a necromancer from Jack’s video games, it was roomy,

and he had no trouble sitting like Jen, knees apart and ankles crossed. Besides, when in Rome.

The moon sat high in the sky, crescent moon, with clouds peeking across every so often. For the most part, the moonlight came through, and lit the ritual the two witches were performing. The stars were brighter, out in the rocky landscape outside his mansion, about half a mile out into the empty wilderness. A few dry trees, large rocks, dirt and sand, and the quiet stirring of night animals. Snakes. Rats. He was sure an owl or two were nesting in one of the nearby, larger trees that survived in the dryer climate.

“To learn Crúac rituals is a merciless affair,” Triss said. “I’d never invite you, cause you’d try and stop it.”

“How brutal?” he said. Dumb question.

“To learn my first ritual, I would have died several times over if I were human. This ritual wasn’t nearly so dangerous, but ... barbed wire was involved.” Shivering, Triss sat down in front of the large, metal bowl, and held a bag in front of her legs. A leather bag, black, the sort one would hold the head of their kill in, a few hundred years ago. It was squirming, and every so often, it made a very chicken-like squawk.

She reached inside, and yanked out a chicken. This was getting almost cliché.

“Barbed wire and a chicken? Were you put into a chicken coop or something? Animal cruelty to still use barbed wire.”

Triss laughed, but Jen didn’t. His fellow Ventrue groaned and shook her head, hugging herself and clutching her shoulders.

“You cut off your hand with a knife. Try doing it with barbed wire,” Jen said.

“Oh ... that is brutal.” Yeah, if he’d seen Triss getting a hand cut off by sawing, with barbed wire, he doubted he’d be able to stop himself from interfering, even if it was her doing it to herself. He was afraid to ask if it was.

Nodding, Triss opened up her robe, exposing the crow skull necklace, her breasts, nipple piercings, the tattoos, and down to her stomach, more tattoos, and navel piercing. Without the Blush of Life, her skin was thinner, pale, and hugged her lean body tight. Still attractive, but considering she was holding a squawking, struggling, angry chicken in her other hand, the last thing on his mind was sex.

She twisted, and ripped the chicken’s head off.

Julias blinked, head jerking away. Blood squirted everywhere, and the dying chicken struggled in Triss’s grip. After a little while, and a little while longer than Julias expected a headless chicken to struggle, the corpse went still. Nodding, Triss chucked the chicken’s head into the old, rusted bowl, while she raised the corpse to her body.

Ok, no wonder they told him to wear one of their robes, and not his suit. Not only was Triss’s robe — and his — splattered with bits of chicken blood, but she drew a line of the blood with the chicken’s neck across her chest under her collarbone, and then down from her neck, between her breasts, to her stomach.

She handed the chicken corpse to Jennifer, who did the same thing; though Jen made sure to blow Julias a kiss before revealing her body. Maybe he could think about sex, despite the horrific act he was seeing? They had warned him that they, especially Triss, were embracing the whole ‘dark, scary witchcraft’ scene, full tilt. And, there was something enticing about how twisted, and occult, the act was. It was a dead animal, a sacrifice, and they were drawing symbols on their naked chests with its body and blood; their particularly amazing, naked chests, no less.

Jen handed him the chicken, and he grimaced as he held it by the neck. He'd held dead animals before, plenty of times; you live long enough and it was bound to happen. But this was the first time he'd ever held a headless chicken by the neck. He forced one eye closed, as if by keeping only one eye aware of what he was doing, he'd lessen the impact.

Nothing would lessen the strangeness of him spreading his robe at the chest, turning the chicken on its side, and pressing its headless neck against his sternum. Weird, weird weird, so very weird. But, he had to admit, the thrill was there. This was some dark, scary witchcraft stuff, as promised. Warm blood trickled down over the large girth of his chest, and then down his sternum and flat stomach as he drew the line.

Both Jen and Triss licked a fang as they watched him. Clearly, they were perfectly happy thinking sexual thoughts, comfortable with the act, despite the grossness of what he was doing.

Like a moth to flame, the sight of the two women smiling at him as he painted chicken's blood onto his chest, put a vivid image in his head of what sort of stuff the Circle might have done, in a different time. Orgies around a sacrifice? Someone painting symbols onto bodies, using the blood of their sacrifice, human or animal, while people fucked in a connected circle of carnal acts? He doubted the sexuality was needed, but the excitement and adventure of doing something this dark was undeniable.

Kind of like when the Invictus pushed through a particularly powerful and one-sided business contract; except, less evil.

"Now," Triss said, picking up a large knife from beside the bowl, "each of us puts a drop of blood onto the sacrifice."

"More blood?" Julias said.



Nodding, Triss was the first, and she cut a small mark into her wrist. With some concentration, she forced out a single, heavy drop of her blood, and it landed against the chicken corpse with the weight of mercury. Heavy, thick, and powerful.

“The rituals pretty much always require vitae,” she said. “It’s the connection. It’s the special element that makes Kindred what we are. It lets us communicate with ... whatever it is that’s inside us, and whatever it is out there that’s ... undefinable.” Smiling at him, a twinkle in her snake eyes, she handed him the knife.

A small spike of pain, and then gone, as he cut open his own wrist enough to force out a large drop of his blood. Jennifer did the same, and set the knife down. All of them kept their robes open, exposing the blood trails they’d painted there. Part of him suspected keeping the robes open, after the fact, was really just to give him the visual feast of their bodies, but he wouldn’t be surprised if it mattered to the ritual, too. It was hard to tell. If the ritual could not be learned through observation, then maybe intent mattered as much as detail.

“Touch the bowl,” Triss said. He put his fingertips on its edge, as did Jennifer. “Close your eyes.” He did. “Now, listen.” Listen, he did.

The world disappeared. The background noise of the desert, the wind, the tiny chirps, the occasional owl hoot, the shifting sand underneath rat tails, all vanished. Everything went deathly quiet, and Julias squeezed his eyes shut to fight against the urge to open them. This was very much not natural, and it felt that way, too. It was like someone had wrapped a thick bag around his head. The unnerving image of him, tied to a chair, with a leather bag over his head, the bag that had previously contained an angry chicken, did not sit well with him.

But he could see something. He raised a brow, but kept his eyes shut as he turned his head around. He could see something, blurry, and red, like a smudgy blob of blood on a glass. A large blob. One

was where Triss sat, and another was where Jennifer sat. He leaned left and right, to make sure it was indeed them, and not colors brought on by his shut eyelids.

“I can see you,” he said. Seemed like the thing to say, despite how ridiculous it sounded, said so plainly. “Sort of.”

“Good, it’s working.” Laughing, Triss the red blob nodded; he thought. It was hard to tell what was a movement or just the blob doing blob things.

“You didn’t know if it’d work?” Jen said.

“Nope.”

“What was the worse case scenario if this didn’t work?” He said.

The blob shrugged. “No idea. Maybe your eyes would have exploded?”

“Um, ow?”

“Nah don’t worry. Jacob said rituals either succeed or they don’t. He’s mentioned nothing about a failed ritual backfiring and tearing a face off or anything. That said, some of the rituals he’s described could backfire? I dunno, but they’re not rituals I’d be capable of for decades.”

“We keep our fingers on the bowl?” he said.

“Yeap.”

“And we can see each other with our eyes closed?”

“You can see any paranormal, with your eyes closed. And the range is fucking massive, far as your eyes work normally. Keep your eyes closed, and look around.”

He almost blinked, but shut his eyes tight again, and turned to look toward where he knew the city was. A sea of red blobs. He gasped, despite himself, and stared at the tiny dots, shifting and moving. There were a few hundred of them, but many were so small as to be no more than specs of red dust in his vision, only noticeable against the black and mixed colors of closed eyes. Sea was the wrong descriptor; more like, a black sky of red, gentle stars, gathered around.

He looked around and around, but other than the two blobs of red by him, he could see no other red blobs nearby. All the other red blurs were in the city, except a few seemed to be off to the side. Jacob, and maybe Othello and Aaron. It was far too inaccurate for him to track down actual places though, since all he could see was blobs of red, no buildings or roads or anything.

“This ... would be damn useful, if you were trying to see if any paranormals were nearby,” he said. “Might even be able to find the Begotten working with the hunters this way.”

“Yeah.”

Of course, there was one problem. “Gotta sacrifice a chicken every time?”

“A small animal, yeah. Many rituals don’t require a sacrifice, though, as you know.”

Ah yeah, the crow necklace. He didn’t know if she needed it, but when she painted her blood on the door frame of his underground bunker room, there’d been no sacrifice, just her fidgeting with the necklace. Supposedly, the blood would alert her if someone crossed through it, even awaken her from her daily torpor. A powerful tool, but if she had to lose body parts with barbed wire to learn these rituals, he was happy to never learn them.

“K, open your eyes.” Triss removed her hand from the bowl, and the blobs vanished. Queue for the rest of them to, as well.

Opening his eyes, Julias looked at the bowl with the bird corpse, then up at the moonlight, smirking.

“I still have two secrets to tell,” he said. Witchy witch stuff by moonlight? Perfect time to talk about heavy things.

His fellow Ventrue nodded. “One for me.”

“Got any a bit less painful to share?” Triss said, crawling over to him and snuggling up against his arm. “Hit your wife, hate some of our new friends, and killed a child. How about something less ... life-scarring horrible, and something a little more sleepover friendly?”

“Sleepover friendly?”

“Yeah.” Jen crawled over to him as well, though she made sure to take a little time to lean forward, so her breasts swayed and moved underneath her, until she also snuggled against his side. “I’m sure you’ve got some nasty, dark secrets that would make a politician sweat, but maybe something we can laugh about? Got any secrets you don’t want to share, but because they’d be embarrassing?”

He sighed relief, and smirked at the two women beside him. Yeah, he could do that.

“ ... alright. When I was young, maybe fives years embraced, and was getting more comfortable with being Kindred, I was in a sexual relationship with another Kindred.”

“Surprising,” Triss said. “You told me it’d been forever since you let a Kindred in your bed.”

“Yeah, she was from a long time ago. One of the reasons I fell into that relationship was ... I was bad with women, and she was showing me the ropes.” So much for cultivating an air of always being a lady’s man.

Both girls gasped, big and dramatic. He rolled his eyes and shoved both them both away, but they laughed it off and crawled back in.

“Playboy Mire used to be bad with the ladies?” Jen said. “I don’t believe it.”

“Hey, I told you I had a wife, and that ended pretty badly. I didn’t have much of a dating life before her, or after.”

Triss crawled into his lap, literally, and lay on his legs, on her back, head against his sternum and looking up. “Who was this Daeva?”

“It ... it was so long ago, it’s a blur. I think her name was Virginia? Barbara?” Sighing, he shook his head and shrugged. What good was immortality if a Kindred’s mind blurred the edges on memories? “I do remember her showing me how to talk to women, be confident, be funny. She also taught me a lot about sex, and the different places to touch a woman.”

“Then I owe her a lot,” Triss said, smiling up at him from below.

“A woman’s body and mind are a mystery,” Jen said, in a very dramatic, matter-of-fact deep voice. Everyone chuckled.

Nodding, he tapped Triss on the nose once, and again on her lips, before he slipped an arm around Jen’s shoulders. “So, I hope that satisfies secret number four.”

“It does.” Jen snuggled into his side, leaned in, and planted a kiss on his neck. As she did, she set a hand on Triss’s chest, and traced the snake tattoo biting one of her nipples. When her finger crossed

the drying blood trail, she smiled at Julias, brought the reddened fingertip to her lips, and licked the blood away. “We should—ugh! Oh god that tastes horrible!”

# Chapter 77

~~Damien~~

Beatrice's visit had been strange. Random. And late. It'd been months since that incident, and now she came, alone, to apologize for affecting him so? Peculiar. Perhaps she was feeling more bold, becoming an integral witch in the Circle of the Crone. Damien couldn't begin to understand what that sort of world was like, but it seemed to agree with the Nosferatu quite a bit. She'd smiled for most of her visit to the Cathedral.

Sighing, Damien leaned back, and looked up. The dark alley between some of the more unkempt bars was a disgusting sight. Sinners on every corner, and not the sinners he would have scared or harassed in the past. These were sinners he would have killed in the past, people not only throwing their lives away to whatever vice they chose, but also dragging other people into their inescapable pits of doom. Thieves. Rapists. Murderers.

This was a weird date.

"That one," Fiona said, pointing at the woman sitting on a food crate, across the street, and in her own alley. She was average height, Asian, tattoos and piercings, a half buzzed head not dissimilar to Damien's hair, and black jeans torn at the knee. A tight white t-shirt showed she had an impressively tough physique, too.

Nodding, Damien pat his chest to make sure he had his knife. He did. "I've seen her around Devil's Corner before. She leads a gang, sort of. More like a group of friends who are willing to get a fist or two bloody, if she wants them to." He wasn't sure if that really qualified as a gang, since she didn't bother with some delusional claim to territory.

“I’ve seen her too. She’s been quite mean to some folk, some store owners, taking things from folk on the street.” Fiona rubbed her hands together, and licked her lips. “I saw her and her friends beat up a man and steal his motor.”

“And you want to punish her.”

“Aye. Punish her, make her afraid. I have to make her afraid. Fear.” Again the beautiful creature licked her lips. She was wearing blue jeans and her brown leather jacket. Very much not the sort of clothes you found in Devil’s Corner, where tank tops and dangling chains reigned supreme, but it looked cute on her. “Let’s go eat her.”

“Hey, you’re not allowed to kill anyone.”

“I ken! I ... know, I know.” With a frown and grump, she bounced in spot a few times, and folded her arms. “And, she doesnae deserve to die, I dinnae think.”

“Have ... any of your meals been of people who didn’t deserve death?”

“I think they aw deserved it. A lot of them were men wha’ beat their wives.” She shrugged and set her back against the alley wall. “My favorite dinner.”

“I thought you were from a small place in Scotland?”

“I am.”

“Were the people nice?”

“Aye, very. Everyone thinks Scots are cursing and swearing and drinking all the time. Nae there,” she said. Didn’t sound like her. Rebellious teenager much?

“Why the particular favorite meal, then?”



“I dinnae ken. It must be from Vrall’s old lang syne. She’s so old, and I think she’s been inside many folk. Maybe something in the past happened?”

He nodded as he slid his hands into his pockets. “I ... still have no idea how that works.”

She laughed, and reached out to touch his chest for a moment. Unlike her, he was wearing a trench coat, and a suit underneath. Typical Mekhet fashion; and he had to admit, he liked the look of it on Daniel, so why not himself, too.

“I dinnae ken, either. But Vrall came to me, devoured me, consumed and became me. The others, they’re blank slates. With me, Vrall came with her own memories. I dinnae ken if she was a Begotten back then, or maybe something else, or a special nightmare. Aw I ken is, I’m Vrall, and Fiona. We’re nae separate.”

Not separate made it a little easier to understand, he supposed. The transformation from human into something else hit them all differently. For a vampire, it was awakening to a dark, beastly thing inside the chest, inside the heart, inside the soul. It wanted blood, as a managed resource. It wanted territory it could defend. It wanted a safe place to sleep, away from sunlight, safe from anyone finding them while they were a corpse.

“Consumed you.” Yeah, that was more terrifying than the embrace. At least, more terrifying than Damien’s. He’d accepted Lucas’s deal, and dying during the embrace was a blur. Jack, he supposed, must have been terrified during his ordeal, though.

“The nightmares hit everybody differently, but one thing’s always the same. Something comes for ye, hunts ye in whatever way is theirs, and they murder ye.” She shivered too, but all her shivers earned from her was a bigger smile. “I’ve never met any other Begotten, except for ‘ere in Dolareido. Azamel told me once about a

Begotten she knew a long time ago, whose horror was a giant squid monster!”

“ ... was he a fisherman?”

“Aye, that he was! And he had this recurring dream where, when fishing, a monster came up from underneath, and dragged him down into the depths. Long, inhuman tentacle arms, a dozen of them, giant enough to break his wee ship apart. And then they came for him, and pulled him down, and down, and down, into the drink. Down to ole Davey Jones.” Giggling, she bounced around a couple more times, shivering still. “Eeeeeeh the darkness of the ocean depths are terrifying.”

“I thought you were a monster of darkness? Eshamki, you said?”

“I am, but that’s not the same as a Makara. Monsters ... of the depths.” She rubbed her arms, as if fighting off the chills of fear. Maybe she was. It was hard to tell excitement from fear with her.

“Do you enjoy roller coasters?”

“I love roller coasters!” She stared at him with jaw dropped. “How did ye ken?”

“Lucky guess.” A young girl who seemed to enjoy thrills, enjoyed getting scared, and responded to it with giggles and bouncing. Amusement park rides of the scary sort were probably a favorite thing for her.

He couldn’t imagine himself dealing with the crowd, or the lines.

“So, we should go break her nose! Pow pow. And, then ye can drink from her, and we can really scare her!”

“Do we need to beat her up?” He raised a brow, and gestured to the woman. “You said you feed on her fear.”

“Aye, but it has to be a sort of fear. I have to make her be afraid cause of the bad things she did. I have to punish her. She has to ken. Know.” She emphasized ‘know’, as if it were decadent chocolate. “She has to ken she did wrong, and she’s being punished for it.”

“I see.”

“Come on, let’s go have a blether with her.”

“ ... what do I say?”

“Hmm. Actually, I’ll do the talking. I dinnae think ye like talking much.” She grinned at him, like a squirrel, a mischievous squirrel drunk on a fermented pumpkin.

“I’ll have you know I served as bishop and consultant for many Kindred of the faith.” Most of which were dead. The few that had not joined Lucas on his kamikaze attack, the few not dominated by the strange power of Tony’s old underground headquarters, had rejoined the Invictus.

“True! And—hey, let’s have a go at something different. Use yer cloak of night to hide yerself, and we’ll get behind her. Grab her, really scare her.”

Hide just himself? “How will you hide yourself?”

Laughing, she took his hand, and started to walk him out onto the sidewalk. Devil’s Corner, this time of night, was a dangerous place, and a young woman and the man she was pulling along looked like prime targets. If some kine tried to mug them, it’d be a way to get in a meal for him. But Fiona’s hunger was specific, and needed to be satisfied in a specific way.

It added a unique element to the hunt. Better to let her lead.

A moment later, they were standing in the darkness of the next alley, the two of them behind their prey. The woman no doubt considered herself dangerous and deadly, a woman to be feared, carving a slice of life for herself out of the shit of Devil's Corner. But, she was only human.

Damien extended his Cloak of Night, the invisible aura embracing all within range, and gave Fiona a nod. Again, grinning and smiling at him like she was, indeed, about to go on a delightful roller coaster ride, she hopped over to their meal.

But then she was gone. Blended into shadow, disappeared. Not like the Cloak of Night, which made the eyes slide off, but instead, she'd become darkness itself. Like trying to see a shadow in a shadow.

Damien half expected her to jump out of the darkness and yell 'boo!'. But instead, she reformed near their prey, like droplets of black ink in water, stopped, and motioned for him to come close. Show off. Grinning all the more, she made some grabbing hands, and wrenching arms in the air, indicating he should grab the woman from behind.

Shrugging, he stepped up behind the woman, and grabbed her.

"What the fuck!"

This kine had good reflexes. She almost managed to pull away, but he got his arms underneath hers, and brought his hands up behind her neck. A full nelson; hilarious position, and difficult to end a fight with. But it did render the other person incapable of using their arms. If done on the ground, she wouldn't be able to use her legs either, but they were standing, and she tried to kick back at him. All she got for her trouble was a hard jerk of her whole body, vampire strength used to whip her from side to side, and douse the flames of her struggles.

“Ye’ve been a bad lass,” Fiona said, stepping around Damien and standing in front of their prey.

“What the fuck are you—” A punch to the gut, from the tiny redhead, shut up the meal hard.

“Ye’ve been bad. Ye’ve been hurting people.”

“I ... what ... what’re you...” Gasp and squirming, the woman tried to lift her head up to look back at Damien, but with both his hands pressing down on her neck, it was easy to keep her head under control. If he wanted to, it’d be easy to dislocate her shoulders, or break her neck. They weren’t allowed to kill, though.

The twinkle in Fiona’s eye told him she’d be able to, if she wanted to. Maybe not this prey, who hadn’t done enough to deserve death, but it was plain to see the Scot didn’t have any of the struggles with violence he expected of her. Judging from what she’d told him, her life in her old home had been boring, and contained none of the violence or salaciousness of Dolareido. How had she’d become so confident, and perhaps a little sadistic? It was at such odds with her bubbling joviality.

“Ye’ve been hurting folk. Ye’ve been stealing from folk. Ye’ve been bad.”

“I—”

Fiona punched the girl in the face, hard enough to make her jerk a little. “Ye stole that lad’s motor, and hurt him. He was taken away in an ambulance.”

Perhaps Fiona was at peace with being a monster, as she seemed to be at peace with a lot of things. The secret to her happiness, or willful ignorance, he couldn’t tell. Maybe both. He was excited to learn more about her though, what made her smile despite the insanity thrown her way. She’d only become Begotten a year ago,

barely twenty years old, and yet looked comfortable with assaulting a thug.

“What’s it to you?” the prey said. Wow, she was tough. Courage and stupid went hand in hand.

Fiona leaned in close to her, and pulled out a knife. It was enough to stir the prey, make her squirm, struggle, but when she tried to use her legs again, Damien was quick to give her a hard jerk once more. Hold still.

“Ye ken what I do to mean folk?” Fiona said. “Minging folk like ye?” She set the blade against the woman’s neck, under the jaw, and pressed up. With her head trapped between the knife and Damien’s hands, it was enough to get the woman trembling. He couldn’t see her eyes, but from how she was shaking in his arms, he knew the prey’s eyes would be wide.

“P ... please don’t.” The threat of getting a knife up through the jaw and into the tongue would break anyone. No shame in that.

“Ye shouldnae hurt folk.” Fiona pressed a little higher, and Damien breathed in the smell of a drop of blood. Delicious, thick, warm life. The prey continued to struggle and squirm, doing her best to push her head up and away from the sharp thing pressing against the soft underside of her jaw. It smelled intoxicating, and he was growing hungrier by the second.

“I ... I won’t ... hurt anyone anymore.”

“Ye better nae. If ye do, I’ll be back with my friend, and I’ll jam this knife right into your head.”

“Please ... d-don’t ... do that.”

Smiling, as if someone had injected heroine straight into her veins, Fiona let out a long sigh of bliss, and nodded to Damien.

He adjusted his hands, one pulling the woman's head to the side, the other holding her torso against his chest, and he sank his fangs into her neck.

“What!? What are you ... do ... ing.”

The Kiss, hard, fast, left prey little option but to become weak, paralyzed, and exhausted within seconds. And as her blood gushed into his mouth, he swallowed it down, and her exhaustion became unconsciousness. He let out a small growl into her neck as he drank, and looked to Fiona as she watched him.

She looked hypnotized.

He growled again. Something about being watched by a beautiful creature, someone else seeing the dark, almost dirty act of a Kindred feeding, sent a spark up his spine. The two of them had found this woman, this prey, cornered her, and fed on her, together, without having to split the resource. He got all the blood, while Fiona looked quite happy with the result. She fed on the fear. How, he couldn't begin to understand. But it was obvious with how she smiled at him, that she was satisfied. More than satisfied. She looked like she was high, eyes almost rolling up, matching the intoxicating bliss of thick, warm blood coating his throat, filling his stomach, and sending pulsing life into his dry, withered veins.

He licked the bite mark until it was healed, let the prey go, and set her down against the wall, sitting. He'd drank her fast, and he quivered for a moment as he focused on the tingling bliss of the belly full of warm blood, spreading out. It shot life out into his extremities, forced him to Blush Life, and got his dead heart pumping. A shot of adrenaline, for a vampire.

“That was delicious,” Fiona said, coming up to him as she put her knife away. “When ye bit her, she must have thought ye stabbed her, cause she was terrified. Absolutely terrified.” She rubbed her arms, and came in closer. “Perfect.”

He took a deep, useless breath, and managed a small smile for the little redhead. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

There was silence for a moment. The two of them stood there, looking at their prey, and then each other. Of course he broke eye contact first. Eye contact was difficult. And with the meal's blood pumping through him, everything took on the edge of biological influence. A beautiful girl smiling at him filled him with ... fuzzies, he supposed someone might call them, goosebumps too. He wasn't sure, it being the first time he'd ever felt them.

She stepped up to him, reached out for his arm, and put it over her shoulder. A snap of her fingers later, the two of them stepped out onto the street, and began walking the sidewalk again. With his arm on her shoulder, it must have looked like he was leading her, when she was very much the one leading him.

"Ye should tell me a wee bit about yerself!" she said.

"Me?"

"Aye. I dinnae ken much about ye."

"Um." Ok, talking about the self, his favorite topic. He could do that. Sure. "I don't remember much about my time as a human. It was long ago, and there wasn't much noteworthy. Except for meeting Lucas."

She nodded with the man's name. "I dinnae ken anything about yer sire."

"He vied for power. Fifty years ago, Antoinette killed all of his bishops and any of his followers that stood against her. She'd have killed me too, if the sheriff hadn't decided to spare me back then ... and again, later. I helped Lucas go into hiding, in a hole deep underneath Devil's Corner. He went to sleep, into a deep torpor, so the sheriff would not be able to find him; as easily at least. It



worked. I waited fifty years for the right time to revive him. Within weeks of his revival, he had recruited a group of young Invictus and Carthians, and had concocted a plan to kill the Prince. It almost worked, but ... it didn't. In the end, most of his followers had died, and him as well. I almost died, but Daniel and Natasha saw that I was ... not happy, with the new Lucas. He'd been a zealot and dictator in his previous life, and when I revived him, I did not realize torpor would make the horribleness of him, things I'd been in denial of about my sire, even worse."

When he glanced down to the small thing under his arm, he blinked at her staring.

"Oh my god, Damien! When I said tell me about yerself, I meant, like, what do ye do with yer free time? What kind of hobbies do ye have?" Laughing, she pat his back, and nudged her head against his side. "Ye need to learn to relax, but I cannae blame ye for being stressed, with a history like that! Fifty years? What did ye do during that time?"

He raised a brow. Thinking about his past like that was normal for him. Maybe that was a problem.

"I hid. I rarely left Devil's Corner, but I quickly learned how to use the Cloak of Night to greater skill than most. I tried to enforce the Lancea et Sanctum's philosophies; punishing the wicked, scaring strays back into the arms of God, and the like. It ... it was hard, staying in the shadows for that long."

"Awww! Poor lad." Without a hint of sarcasm in her tone, the monster clutched him with her one arm behind his back as they walked. "That does sound horrible."

"I try to—"

"No no, come on, it was horrible. Admit it."

“ ... it was horrible.”

Nodding, she rubbed her cheek into his side and chest, and hugged him closer. “Ye were hiding in this sort of place for fifty years. I’m only twenty.”

“It’s not really the same. Kindred don’t age, and our minds don’t really ... change much, as we get older.” Outside of the horrible twisting torpor could cause, at least. “My personality will be the same for eternity, I guess.” A gift or curse, depending on that personality. He wasn’t sure, himself.

“Begotten age, but how we age is different per person. Azamel aged very slowly, and I wouldnae be surprised if I do, too.” Nodding, she squeezed his side a little harder. “And even if I don’t, I wouldnae let that worrying stop me from enjoying the now.”

“Are you sure? Remember what happened in Highlander?” Even he had seen a movie every now and then. Swords interested him. So did the band Queen.

“Highlander? Never heard of it.”

He laughed. “It contains a tragic tale of an immortal who finds love with a human, and stays with her until she dies of old age.”

“We could go watch it?”

“Um, sure. It has ... Christopher Lambert, French American actor, playing a Scottish swordsman. And Sean Connery ... playing an Egyptian ... Spaniard...”

She raised both brows, and tilted her head from side to side, scanning him to see if he was lying about the strange casting. He was not.



~~Natasha~~

She smiled up at Art, and melted against the man's chest. He was underneath her, and sitting in the tub, while she was lying on him, her head on his chest, and her ass snug to his pelvis. They were in their normal human form, Hishu they called it, instead of Dalu form; it meant a noticeable drop in their aggression, and a small drop in size. Gentle sex was back on the menu.

Jessy having sex with one of them in Gauru form must have been absurd. Dangerous! So dangerous, and ... strangely hot. But still, very dangerous. Their Dalu forms had been enough to give Natasha a fright, despite how awesome the sex had been. Awesome, and a bit painful, considering the size difference.

They were almost done now, she hoped. Much as she was loving gentle sex, she was exhausted. Matt had already cum inside her, twice, and Art was working up to a second orgasm too; and the man was in her butt, as he had a penchant for doing.

The water-resistant lube was working well, though, so that was a huge plus. And, much as she whined every time he penetrated her there, she'd couldn't deny how good it felt, feeling the head of his length pressing up toward her belly, as she relaxed on his chest and abs. The heat of the water against her skin, and the pressure of his cock against her insides, was lulling her into post-sex bliss, while still having sex.

Matt chuckled down at her, and looked between her, and his phone. "Avery says the vamps are going to be putting together teams of three, to sweep the city. They want one of us to join each team." Not in the tub anymore, the bigger man was doing ... something. She had a hard time caring right now.

"Each?" Art said.

“It ... it’s ... a good idea.” With a quiet whimper, she hugged herself as Art continued to gently thrust up into her ass, causing some of his cum from earlier to leak and coat him. “I knew the Prince ... w-wanted to ... take advantage of ... your abilities.” She reached down, spread her thighs, and slid a couple fingers into her trembling insides. The bliss of post-orgasm sensitivity. Just touching her clitoris was almost painful, but her insides were more accepting, and hungry, for stimulus. She curled her fingers up against her aching g-spot, and looked up to Art with a tiny smile.

The man grinned down at her, reached down, and pushed on her two fingers with two of his own. She mewled, and clenched on the man’s digits; it didn’t stop him. He pushed in his two fingers, and with his hand on top of hers, she couldn’t remove her own. And unlike her, he was a bit less gentle with fingering up against her g-spot. Waves of bliss began to pulse outward from her depths soon after.

The private bathroom the Prince was letting her use had many amenities; particularly, a door she closed before they’d begun bathing. It was far easier to feel less shame and guilt about enjoying something this lascivious, this carnal, with the door closed. No one would sneak a peek at her cumming on her boyfriend, his length in her ass balls deep, and her butt snug and molding to his steel body, as he fingered her. Matt watching her cum with his gentle eyes and warm smile was enough to melt her twice over. So carnal, being watched like this, so naughty.

Mixing business with pleasure wasn’t a very good idea, but inevitable, with how horny her two boyfriends always were. It was easier to give in and enjoy the ride, rather than try and pull their minds out of the gutter.

“D-Do ... you ... th-think you’ll ... help?” she said as she shivered. Talking, mid orgasm! God, she was devolving into more of a ridiculous vampire cliché every night. The pleasure sparks erupted

outward from her pussy, up into her chest and down into her thighs and legs. Trying to talk during that was difficult, but there was something empowering about it. Antoinette probably did it all the time. And it wasn't like vampires needed to breathe; the endless panting was a reflex, not required.

Art eased up on his fingers, but continued to gently push up into her ass, earning more sighs and mewls from her. "Yeah I'm sure we will. It's a good plan, as long as people know how to do recon."

Right, Arturo was Irraka. Recon and stealth were in his blood, like a Mekhet's. He didn't behave like any Mekhet she'd ever met though, and she turned her head to nuzzle her cheek into his chest.

"As long as we can get along." Matt stood in front of the mirror, and looked around at all the black marble everywhere, shaking his head at the undoubtedly expensive extravagance that was the Prince's obsession with the building material. "And honestly, Avery will want your teams to answer to us, not the other way around. Vampires are good with managing groups of people, but hunting? Legit hunting something down? That's our world." He pulled out a beard trimmer, and started on his face, getting his facial hair down from too long, to nice and short. Gruff length.

Watching a naked man, a giant one of muscle at that, trim his beard, was delightful, and relaxing. The fact his friend was currently having sex with her butt, was a strange spice, that made her melt onto Art's chest again, and again, as she felt the rising heat of pleasure begin anew; and not from her fingers. She removed them, lifted them, and started to caress her hard nipples where the water gently rocked back and forth. She was going to cum, from anal sex. God, if Jessy knew, she'd tease her for eternity.

"Matt's right. Avery's going to make sure the teams know it, which means your boss and the Invictus bosses, and probably the Carthian boss, are going to get a dose of something they won't want

to hear.” Art set his hands on her hips, and started rocking her back and forth in time with his thrusts.

She whimpered, and kept her cheek against his chest, getting comfy along his body of steel, as she started to cum. The head of his cock kept pressing up toward her belly, hitting her deepspot again, and again, as the thickness of him pushed up toward her pussy. Every gentle thrust was euphoric, and sent pleasure waves through her body in time with the waves gently splashing against her breasts. A tiny squirt of her juices escaped her, just a little thing, immediately lost to the water of the tub. And another, and another. Something about that deep penetration got her so hot and shaking, each tender thrust rocking the pleasure waves working down into her toes as much as it rocked the water. Slow, gentle, and so very deep inside her.

A few harder thrusts earned a loud squeak, before Art stopped, and had his turn cumming inside her. For the second time that night.

She reached out, took his wrist, and guided it to her mouth. Just a taste! Just a small taste. To have a Kiss while riding orgasm aftershocks, and give the pleasure of it to her man, as he filled her insides? Only a vampire could do that. And she moaned onto his wrist as she bit into him. He returned the moan, and she smiled around his wrist as she felt the man’s cock flex with almost desperate, small thrusts, coating her insides with his cum.

Matt smiled at her, and watched her in the mirror. “Think you’ll be put on a team?”

“I ... I um ... m-maybe?” She was one of the few ancilla in the city, and very good at the Cloak of Night, or any aspect of Obfuscate. As much as Julias and Jessy used to be her partners, the three of them often worked alone, because they were strong enough to do so. “And if ... I d-do, you know they w-won’t let us go on the same t ... t-

team.” She was getting better at it, talking, as the tingly waves danced up and down her limbs, along her swollen nipples, and down her legs.

Art let go of her hips, and hugged her. She looked up to him, beamed some joy his way, and relaxed as she felt his member start to soften. Finally.

The bathroom was a large, fancy thing, and it had a drain on the floor to handle both splashes from the hot tub, and the shower above. Matt took full advantage, turning on the shower — utterly enormous shower — and reached into the tub. She was far too relaxed to stop him, and she squeaked as he took her hands into his, and lifted her up. Smiling at her, he held her up and up, her arms over her head, and her feet dangling, as he held her under the shower head with him. He leaned in, held her at eye level with him, and kissed her.

She wriggled and squirmed, and did her best to ignore the feeling of cum leaking down her thighs before being washed away in the warm water. Grinning at her, Matt set her down, and she struggled to stay standing; legs muscles were still tingling, and did not want to work.

“You’re right,” he said. “I guess Jack will be involved, and try and find a way for all of us to get along.” Grin unending, the big guy got a loofa, soaped it up, and gave it to her.

Right, right, they were supposed to be washing. She returned his grin best as she could, and set the loofa on his body. With Art’s blood in her belly, she shivered as the warmth of it mixed with her fading tingles, and she let out a long, happy sigh, as she set the loofa onto Matt’s pelvis. One hand for the loofa, her other took his cock, and she shivered again as she admired the weight of it in her hand. It was such a Jessy trait, to lust after a big, strong man, who was well endowed; or as Jessy would say, big man with big dick.

She smiled as she pictured her friend with Eric. Eric was lean and strong, but he wasn't a big guy, and lacked the dumbness Jessy was normally drawn to. Hopefully he'd be good for her, before she inevitably corrupted him.

"You t-two ... b-be on your best behavior! Be nice, with whoever y-you get paired with."

"We'll try," Art said, sinking into the hot tub some more. The water got filtered, to clean itself of the mess they kept making in it, thankfully. "How are things going with you? With the Prince and the sheriff."

"I uh ... n-not sure what you mean." Professional question, or was he prying for secrets?

"Just wondering what it's like to have a sire who's so old, and a boss who's so old, and have both of them be the only other people in your covenant." Shrugging, Art rolled in the water, turned to face her, and set his elbows on the tub edge so he could put his chin on his forearms.

Oh. That was an easier question to answer. Kind of a 'how was your day' sort of question. It was nice to hear that from her boyfriend.

"Daniel is ... quiet. He d-doesn't talk much. We try and talk sometimes, b-but it's ... it's always difficult." And she doubted she was much better. Two stones trying to talk to each other. Sighing, she moved the loofa around Matt's body, mind drifting as she soaped up his legs. "Antoinette is ... a dragon, and a succubus. It's w-weird. One minute she's ... d-doing Ordo Dracul things, that I can't t-tell you about, but they're very scary. The next minute, she's being so ... sexual, about everything."

"Is she?" Matt said, eyebrow raising. "Example?"



“I’ve ... s-seen her ... having sex with J-J-Jack ... in the open.”

“Must have been a sight,” Art said.

“She is ... s-so beautiful. And...” She held out her hands in front of her small breasts, far away enough to suggest Antoinette’s size. “And they just ... jiggle everywhere.”

“Jealous?” the bastard in the tub said, evil grin on his face.

“ ... a b-bit.”

Matt shook his head, and got down on his knees. “Don’t be. You have the most amazing body. So petite, and your breasts are amazing. And good god, this,” he set his hands on her hips, and turned her around, before he pressed his thumbs into her butt cheeks, “is the most beautiful, tight little ass to ever walk this city.”

She rolled her eyes, and turned around. It didn’t stop him from continuing to play with her body though, and he pulled her close into a half hug as he massaged her butt. She was still standing, so him on his knees was good for her to wash more of him, though it was hard to do, with how much he was sinking her fingers into her ass.

“You b-both are just like her. Always thinking about sex.”

“Something tells me she thinks about other things too,” Art said.

“True.” Tash got the shampoo, and got to washing Matt’s hair. Shoulder length hair was fun, and she enjoyed running her hands through it. “She ... she controls the city, and tries t-to ... to consider the future in all things. I’ve n-never known a boss to think so far ahead.” The man probably had no idea how to properly take care of hair; not that she could judge much, since her hair was eternal. But his wasn’t, and could do with some shampooing and conditioning.

“How far ahead?” Matt said, staying on his knees for her. No way she could wash his hair unless he stayed down.

“She’s t-talked to me about ... about space travel, before. What will it be like f-for Kindred, when we start colonizing space? Who knows? Will ... w-will we be able to survive off the planet? We fight each other all the t-time, get in each other’s way. B-But ... that’s not even the biggest concern. What will happen to us, if we go into space, and ... and night and day are no longer things?” Nodding, she got a good lather going in Matt’s hair, before she guided it back under the falling water. “She thinks about ... about a lot of things, that other Kindred d-don’t, b-b-but should.”

Art whistled. “That is thinking ahead. I wonder if Kindred go into space, you’ll just go to sleep? Or maybe, the lack of day or night will cause you to devolve into monsters, mindless, bloodthirsty, and any spaceship or station unlucky enough to have a Kindred or two in their midst will find they’re now in a scifi horror story.”

Both Tash and Matt looked at the evil bastard in the tub, Tash’s jaw dropping.

“Th-That ... I ... that’s horrible!” Lovely. Now her dreams of the future were nightmares.

Matt threw the loofa at him. “Asshole.”

Laughing, Art ducked, before peeking his eyes up over the tub edge. “Hey, I don’t know what’ll happen. It’s impressive she’s thinking that far ahead, though. I suppose issues like these hunters are just a bump in the road for someone as old as she.”

“She really five-hundred years old?” Matt said, looking up at her, eyes wide with intrigue.

Shrugging, she leaned in, and put a kiss on his nose. “It’s d-d-difficult f-for elders to know. Memories can blur and fade, and ...

and it's hard to trust their old journals and t-tomes. But the Ordo Dracul handle the long t-torpor better than other covenants. Somehow, they ... they know ... ways to m-make it not so hard on the mind." While the Prince's works in Dolareido were primarily in pursuit of arcane secrets or whatnot, generally about spirits and other ephemera beings, she knew the Prince had delved into more vampire-rooted experiments in the past. And others in their order, that the Prince only rarely contacted, were far more devoted to experiments seeking to understand the strange life cycle of the vampire, she said.

"Jacob must be. Fucker kicked our asses like it was nothing." Sighing, Art slid onto his back in the tub again, and stared up at the ceiling as he hooked his hands behind his head. "Then he saved our lives, with a fucking Incarnae,"

"W-What's Incarnae mean?" she said.

"Spirits come in tiers," Matt said. "Sort of. When they get powerful enough to be ... gods, basically, we call them Incarnae."

"Gods?"

"Mhmm, in the classic sense. If you went into the Hisil in certain places, you'd find grand beings so powerful and defined, you might think of them as ... say, a bear god who resides in a mountain. Or maybe a god of change and destruction, who rests inside a volcano. There are larger things than Incarnae, but we've never had to deal with them, thankfully."

"And ... and B-Black Blood? What is ... it?"

"Something old," Art said. "Far as we can tell, it's been around for ages, centuries, longer than Jacob's been in Dolareido. It's good at hiding its nature. Doesn't let us know exactly what it's about, which makes finding its bans or banes such a pain."

Oh, oh, information! “Bans? Banes?”

“Bans are what rules a spirit has to abide,” Matt said. “They’re not people, they don’t have souls, they’re direct manifestations of things and ideas, and have to play by whatever rules their manifestation represents. A fire spirit, maybe one that’s been born in a city from buildings burning down, might be unable to cross a firefighter’s water hose.” Shrugging, Matt held out his hand, and Art tossed him back the loofa. “And banes are the things that hurt us.”

“Silver for us, and fire and sun, for you,” Art said, pointing at him and then her.

“Am I a sp-spirit?” she said, tapping a soapy finger to her chin, before washing it under the falling water, and reaching for some conditioner.

“Werewolves are, partly,” Matt said.

Werewolves were part spirit? That was worth noting. Nodding, she started working the conditioner into the ends of his hair.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the Begotten had banes as well,” Art said.

Banes she had been looking for, though not under that word. It was difficult to learn anything about the monsters because of how unique each one was, but if the werewolves did that on a regular basis for the spirits they hunted, maybe they’d know what to do?

Her priority was dealing with the hunters. Secondary was trying to find a way to deal with Azamel and the other Begotten, if it came to that. Investigations into spirits and the other side of Dolareido weren’t on her to-do list anymore; which was a little frustrating, because with Matt and Art right here, it was one of the easier things for her to learn about.

“Slut City is rubbing off on everyone,” Matt said. That was random, and she raised a brow as she looked at him. “Carter says Clara’s been getting visits from four rather horny ghouls.”

Ah yes, Jessy had texted her about that, in good faith; but if her boyfriends knew about it already, she could talk about it. It was nice Clara was getting to have a bit of fun, with Jack being out of her reach.

“I’m ... h-happy for her. It m-must suck, if she w-wants someone, but can’t have them. If Jessy’s ghouls can ... you know, make her a little happy f-for a while, that’s good,” she said. The two boys looked at each other, and smirked. “W-What?”

The man in the tub laughed, and climbed out to sit on its edge, facing her. “We know Clara. Once she sinks her teeth into something, it always comes back to haunt her.”

“W-What do you mean?”

Matt shrugged, and stood up again. “She seems to like Jack. It’s kinda been a thing in the past, that when something interests her, she sorta keeps going after it, even much later. Even when she knows she probably shouldn’t.” Smiling down at her from his tower on high, the gentle giant took his heavy cock into his hand, and began to stroke it. Slow, deep strokes. Uh oh.

“Props to Jessy for trying to make Clara a full-fledged member of Slut City, but she’ll swing back around to what caught her attention first. She always does.” Art, watching, started to masturbate as well, full, leisurely strokes that had his girth swollen with need in moments.

They were aroused, again. She tried her pouting face, as if that might stop them; it never did. Art got up, walked over to her, and as he continued stroking his cock with one hand, he set his other on her head, and gently pushed down.

She managed a weak whimper, and complied, getting down onto her knees. Both boys started to masturbate faster, growing to full hardness, as they each pressed their exposed, swollen glans against her cheeks.

With another little whimper, she put her lips onto Matt's cock, and offered the engorged head a long kiss, engulfing the whole of its pink flesh in her lips, before pulling back, and doing the same to Art. Long, slow kisses, lips wrapping tight around the edge of the glans, before drawing back with suckling pressure to the tip. While she kept her hands on their thighs, the two boys took turns, guiding their cocks into her mouth, and her doing her best to satisfy them both, one boy rubbing his glans into her cheek while she suckled on the other.

She should have known they wouldn't be satisfied yet. And from the heat growing in her body, she wasn't either.

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Ok, enough sex for now. Not that getting on her knees and giving both of her boyfriends blowjobs hadn't been terribly arousing, and the fingering and licking they'd given her after terribly satisfying, but sex all night every night since the Prince had given her a vacation was warping her mind. Time to get back to work.

Antoinette frowned, and typed a few things on her laptop, before looking back to the strange necklace. The tiny loops of string, each holding a small, smooth rock, yanked her attention like a pile of bills due might; the necklace that had summoned the spirit of secrets. Angry Prince was not a Prince Tash wanted to interrupt, so she let the Prince sit there and write whatever it was she was writing, while Tash took a moment to update her own reports on the shared networked.

They'd been on vacation all this time, so, there wasn't much to update. Still, any information was useful, and the Prince's network was secure times a thousand.

== Possible weakness for Begotten: banes. Banes appear to be something everything has. Spirits, werewolves, vampires. If ghosts are real, it's likely they also have banes; silver or iron or salt, or something related to their previous life. There may be a way to gleam a bane from this recurring thread. ==

It was a sad little entry, almost not worth writing.

“Vola,” the Prince said. “How was your time away from your assignment?”

“It was n-nice! Spent a lot of time with the boys, and I l-learned a thing or t-t-two about the wolves. I m-mentioned the sweeps idea to them. They agreed with it, b-but they're worried it'll ... um...”

“Cause tension.” Sighing, Antoinette leaned back in her chair, picked up a tablet, and pulled her hair over her shoulder with her other hand to begin combing it. “It seems so absurd, when looked at from a distance, does it not? Why would there be tension between us and them. But, such things are difficult to understand or predict, with nuance and details hidden until such situations are created. And the devil is, unfortunately, in the details.”

“I d-don't understand.”

With a nod and smile, she set the tablet down. There was a picture of Dolareido on it, a blueprint. She'd been analyzing the city. “It is easy to describe how people act and react, behave and respond, and easy for someone such as I to attempt to manipulate the output of their interactions. But any entity with a soul will render such predictions inaccurate at the best of times, opposite at the worst. Sentience defies prediction in the strangest ways. For all my expectations that people will behave reasonably, mixing people with people, is mixing oil and fire.”

“I ... I still d-don't understand.”

Laughing, the Prince smiled at her. She could be patient, when she wanted to be. It was good for Tash then, that teaching her philosophies about life, was something she enjoyed taking her time with.

“Even two logical people can be driven to anger, and blows, when situations filled with nuance and uncertainty arise. It is forever a goal of mine to lead and control, and I am forever usurped by this unpredictability. I fear that, if Avery agrees to sending one of her pack with each of our teams, that there will be tension, as said. The absurdity is that I cannot prevent it, no matter what I do, because people are ... people. I cannot predict them perfectly, only mitigate their random impulses.”

It sounded like she had a desire to control the human condition. Understandable. She probably wanted to control everything, and knowing that having Uratha with the Kindred would lead to arguments, arguments she undoubtedly considered stupid, grated on her.

“W-What do we d-d-do about it?”

“I am afraid there is little to be done beyond what I already do, except manage the fallout. Or rather, Jack will attempt to manage the fallout.”

“Is Jack d-doing better? He ... he must feel horrible, about letting Angela live.”

Nodding, she got up, and started to pace around the experiments room. “He does. I wonder if his rise in ability is due to a natural skill, skill of his bloodline, or because he is forever thrust into such extreme circumstances.”

“P-Probably both. Julias was always better than other Ventrue. But, horrible things didn’t ... d-didn’t fall on his lap every month or so.” Comparatively speaking, Julias and Tash had had quiet second



lives. Or at least, that was true of her. Julias did have fifty years of his second life before Tash had been embraced, fifty years she wasn't too familiar with. "Was ... was Julias involved much ... during the Purge? Or b-before?"

"The Purge was my doing, along with some help from the Carthians. Avery's last visit, I do not believe Julias was involved much, except perhaps to observe Viktor's aggression with them. With Azamel though, I believe he had multiple dealings with the old monster. But, her violence erupted on her environment rather than others, and Viktor was the primary wall between her and the Invictus, regardless."

Right, Viktor. Always Viktor.

"I wonder ... s-sometimes. About J-Jack, I mean."

"Oh?"

"He's b-been through so much, and now this hatred toward Angela ... it's scary."

"Hatred?"

"I—" Oh! Oh shit! Oh no no no, Jack had said to not mention it to the Prince. Recover! "He ... he's mentioned that the whole t-torture ... thing ... and that it's bothering him, and—"

Wham! Antoinette slammed her hand down on the table, hard enough to make their laptops, and the various priceless artifacts on the table, jump. If Tash was still alive, it'd have stopped her heart dead. The glare alone from the Prince was enough to borderline disintegrate her.

"I warn you, Vola, that while in matters of the city, of the Ordo Dracul, and anything you could consider official, I am a consummate professional. In matters of my love, I am a violent

aggressor who will do anything to defend him.” She leaned in, set her elbows on the table, and glared at her. “You do not hide your feelings well. Something is amiss, something to do with my little Ventrue, and seeing that you are not Invictus, you have no reason to not tell me. Speak. Now.”

Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god. This is what happens when you spend days doing nothing but fucking, fucking, fucking, and more fucking! Completely lost of her sense of professional control.

“He ... he t-told me not to ... to tell you. That ... that he ... w-w-w-would eventually...”

“How long ago was this?”

“Um, uh ... when w-we found the first ritual.”

“Almost four weeks ago, and he has not mentioned this thing to me.” Frowning at her like she was going to tear her in half, Antoinette leaned in closer still. “The look in your eyes says this is important, Miss Vola, and after what Angela did to my love, I will have you tell me.” Tash wanted to back up, but she was paralyzed. Antoinette looked angry, really angry, like, ready to hurt her angry. Daeva obsession screamed in her eyes. “The boy is too young to know what is best for him. I know better. Tell me.”

Did she really, though? It was hard to tell if Antoinette was being hyper possessive like Daeva often were, or simply being wise and efficient, at that moment.

But, Antoinette deserved to know, if only because of how much she’d done for Natasha already.

“ ... J-Jack’s ... angry, with Angela.”

“Are not we all?”

“Y-Yeah, b-b-b-but ... he’s ... he’s uh ... really angry. Like ... like ... not natural anger. He’s ... it’s ... b-bad, he says. Like, b-b-b-blinding ... murderous ... rage ... B-But, I think he’s exaggerating ... a little.”

The fury in the woman’s face broke, and her eyes softened. She leaned back, let out a long, slow sigh, and began using both hands to comb her hair down her chest.

“Jack is like you in a way, Natasha. Despite his best efforts, he wears his emotions and thoughts in his eyes. He does it differently than you; for him, it is a display of his soul, breaking through in his gaze, genuine honesty tearing its way to the surface. It is one of the reasons I love him.” A snarl cut across her lips, and she glared down at the table. “Something has been bothering him, and I was waiting for him to tell me. I ... am frustrated with myself, for being unable to wait and let him come to me on his own, and for being so direct with you, demanding you answer me. I apologize, Vola.”

“It’s ... it’s ok. You w-were just concerned.”

“I did not respect his privacy.”

“Um, it’s not like y-you’re ... digging through his phone, looking for conversations with women you s-s-suspect him to be ... cheating with.”

Nodding, she sighed, and looked up at the ceiling. “I suspect, if this anger issue is as he believes, then I would not be surprised if he turned his eyes toward a potential cause. Introspective to a fault, that boy. Ventrue are prone to arrogance and pride, but anger? Jack has never struck me as the angry sort; a bit cynical and bitter, but only enough to add flavor, like dark chocolate, supposedly.” She made a tiny shrug. No doubt the Prince had no idea what dark chocolate tasted like. “Julias has an edge to him, a quality, where I could see him unleashing his anger if circumstance demanded it. But ... Viktor had a dark side. That monster used his fury as a

weapon, like how Gangrel use the rush of the beast, or how Nosferatu use fear.”

“Yeah, Mister Hon—Viktor, w-was ... a monster.” She shivered at the man’s memory. Having him for a boss had been horrible. One wrong word and he was liable to stare you down, or cut you down.

“I can imagine those thoughts weigh heavily on my love’s mind.”

“About Viktor? You ... think he’s ... afraid of ... d-d-doing the things ... Viktor did?”

“Do you not see traits in your sire and in yourself, you do not agree with? That, perhaps, you wish to break free of?”

“ ... yes.” Definitely. She definitely wanted to break free of some the sheriff’s mold she was growing into. She didn’t want to die alone, lonely. She didn’t want to be a stone that no one could talk to. She enjoyed privacy, solitude, and quiet, but Daniel took it too far.

“There are traits I witnessed within Tony, that I ... confess, haunt me. It is easy to become obsessive, as I just demonstrated to you, about Jack.”

“It’s ... ok.”

Shaking her head, she leaned in toward her, and offered what Tash could only assume was an apologetic smile. “Thank you for telling me. I will ... see what I can do, about Jack. To imagine the boy with anger, to the degree you describe. That is worth considering.”

“It w-was ... eating him up inside.”

Oh no, the smile was destroyed again. Antoinette lowered her gaze, reached out to pick up the necklace again, the necklace that had summoned the secrets spirit, and sighed.

“It seems many Kindred have something eating them up inside, in these dark days.”

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~~Beatrice~~

They went back to Julius’s place, washed off the blood, and put their proper clothes back on. But, that was stupid. All of them had a buzz going, something tingling up and down their skin, something that made them feel special and powerful and fucking badass.

They grabbed the first servant Julius had, and drained him dry. Triss and Jen smooshed their bodies against him, buried him in boobs, and Kissed him. Before he passed out, Julius got a quick taste too. The joys of owning a mansion, lots of money, thralls for servants, and being able to do whatever the fuck they wanted.

Now, they had two buzzes going. Some blood in the belly, and the knowledge they’d fucking sacrificed a chicken in their depraved, witchy witch ritual. That went double for her. The others, they didn’t know what it felt like to have Crúac flowing through the veins, filling the mind. It was scary, strange, overwhelming, to have the beast so close to the surface, to have its roar and purr in the ears, as something inhuman reached across from where-the-fuck-ever to work its magic. Her magic? The Crone? Something was out there, something that existed, something that spoke to the beast in Beatrice’s gut, communicated, worked with, and used, to create the insanity of Crúac.

Christ that was so fucking awesome.

The three of them started the walk down into the bunker where they’d been sleeping most nights.

“Think Jacob minds us sleeping in the enemy’s basement every night?” Triss said.

Jen shrugged. “Maybe a little? Fuck him.”

“Hey now, the Invictus aren’t your enemy.” Superman rolled his eyes as he walked behind them, until they got to the next gate, which he opened for them, before they passed through first.

“Don’t ruin my ‘sleeping with the enemy’ fantasy.” With a big grin, she looked over her shoulder at her lover, before coming up behind Jen, and hugging her. Of course, she made sure her hands landed on the girl’s breasts, and she squeezed them through Jen’s shirt, massaging and kneading; no way she could judge Jack anymore, cause big tits were addicting to play with.

“Instead, you could think of it as, girl seduces billionaire?” He opened the final gate, and motioned toward the bed.

Jen chuckled and shook her head as she moved forward with Triss. “Bah, you’re a millionaire, not a billionaire. It’s just not the same if there isn’t a few more zeroes on the number.”

Laughing, Triss pushed Jen onto the bed, and crawled onto her. Straddling her helpless victim, Triss reached down, and started undoing the buttons of Jen’s shirt. Julias whistled at the sight, and she laughed at him, winked at him, and returned to her work. Tonight was a good night, and she was going to have some fun. Fun at Jen’s expense, of course.

“Superman, get the lube!”

“Yes ma’am.” Chuckling, the big Ventrue stepped around the grand bed, and fetched her box of toys. Read her mind, knowing she’d want more than just lube. He set it on the bed, started to undress, and sat on the edge of the mattress, watching. His patience and desire to see Triss do her thing was such a fucking turn on.

“I—”

Shaking her head, Triss put a finger and claw on Jen's lips. "You've been taking charge a lot in the bed these days. Tonight, I'm in charge. I'm the queen, and you'll do what the queen says."

Jen blinked up at her, before laughing and nodding. "Yes ma'am."

Julias laughed at the mirrored affirmation, and tossed aside his clothes. Well damn, he sure got naked quick. Lying on his back, the man turned on his side, elbow to the bed so he could prop his head up on a fist, and casually began to stroke his cock.

Damn, her man, masturbating, watching her. The fire lit up inside her in seconds, and she shivered as she started working faster. It was hard to look at Jen though, when Julias was right there, big, broad, strong Julias, hand around his dick, his confident smile on display, and his eyes looking right at her. She had to look at him, and Jen, and her mind struggled to focus; if she didn't, she might stab her friend with her claws by accident, trying to unbutton her shirt.

Buttons undone, Jen helped her toss the shirt, and Triss sighed with joy at the sight of her naked torso. No bra despite the large breasts, because the damn woman was a slut. A very, very attractive slut, that had Triss staring at how her large breasts flattened and pulled to the sides of her chest with their natural weight.

Groaning as she felt heat build up between her thighs, she put her weight onto her knees on the bed, and pulled up on Jen's arms, to slide her along the sheets. The woman chuckled, but otherwise did not move, as Triss edged her up further on the bed until her head found a pillow, and Jen was lying next to Julias on her back.

Triss threw off her tank top with no fan fair, and sighed bliss as Jen's hands reached up, and caressed her torso. From neck, to shoulder, down across her breasts and hard, pierced nipples, down her abs, and down her waist. Jeans blocked Jen's fingers from

finding more, and Triss kept it that way, inching down along the bed, and kneeling between Jen's knees.

"You know," Triss said, as she started undoing the button and fly of Jen's suit skirt, "maybe we should find Jacob a girl?"

Julias raised a brow. "He's not over Minerva."

"That was a long time ago. Besides, there ain't nothing good pussy can't fix." Nodding like she had found the secret to infinite wisdom, she yanked off Jen's skirt, and licked her crocodile teeth with her long tongue at the sight of Jen's lingerie. But, off with that too, no time to dawdle. Well, there was time, Triss just didn't want to wait any longer.

"You're sounding more and more like Jessy," Julias said.

"Am I? Think I've said three words to do her my whole second life." Shrugging, Triss tossed Jen's panties away onto the floor, and got onto her knees between Jen's, before scooting down the bed, so she could get onto her elbows and stomach. Jen's delicious thighs, toned, but not as hard as Triss's, smooth skin and lightly tanned. So delicious. Triss offered the soft skin some kisses, as she slowly eased her head down closer toward Jen's equally smooth pussy.

"I think," Jen said, "that Triss is right, and the man could use a woman in his life. Some—" The Ventrue gasped, and let out a long, sultry moan, as Triss set her lips onto her slit. Triss may not have had cheeks, with crocodile teeth there instead, but she still had a normal mouth with normal lips in the front. And, she had a really, really long tongue. "Someone to soothe his aches, and—fuuuuuck..." Jen lifted her head, and stared at her, as Triss forced her tongue a couple inches into the woman's clenching cunt. "Someone to ... do shit like this for him. A blowjob could do the man some good."

Triss nodded, lips still on Jen's slit, and as her long tongue fought against her friend's squeezing insides, she made sure to bury and



suckle on the girl's clit. Jen may not have been the absolute horndog Triss was, but she was still a sensitive creature who aroused easily. A few licks, and the woman's insides began to grow wet, juices joining Triss's lips and tongue.

"I admit, blowjobs can do wonders for a man's disposition." Julias scooted in closer, pressed his body to Jen's, leaned over her, and began to caress her breasts. Head still propped up by his other hand, the man was clear to watch and admire how the woman's huge tits molded to both his hand, but her chest as well, the weight and natural softness of them causing them to flatten slightly.

"I seem to be the center of attention," Jen said.

The bigger Ventrue nodded, and winked at Triss, before he leaned in, and kissed Jen's neck. Oh, those were good kisses, he was good at those. Jen, predictably, melted in moments, and craned her head to the side, exposing more of her neck, as the man placed gentle little kisses up and down its length, from jaw to shoulder. Triss smiled around Jen's slit, watching her man at work, and continued to force her tongue into the woman's pussy. They'd only just started, so it wasn't like Triss was going to push for an orgasm yet; she kept the depth shallow, a couple inches, enough to press up against the woman's g-spot, while her top lip buried and massaged her clit. The tongue was long enough that it came up in waves, and some of it reached high enough to rub against the woman's swollen clit, while penetrating her at the same time.

Once Jen was panting and squirming, getting more into it, warmed and ready, Triss sat up, and smiled down at the sight of Julias working his magic. He knew how to place every kiss with purpose, and his hand caressing Jen's tits knew to explore, to roam, to run along their undersides, before teasing around her areola, until her nipples were swollen as fuck. Only when the nipples were puffed up and begging to be touched, did Superman begin to caress

those as well, fingers offering gentle pinches between deep massages.

Triss grinned at the sight of Jen's cunt clenching, leaking, begging, as Julias's expert touch got her boiling. The bastard did love to do that, get a girl's body just screaming for it, before he got to fucking. And Triss had just done that too, so, poor Jen was boiling twice over. Good.

Triss reached for the box, opened it up, and got digging. "Talk to Aaron or Othello lately, Jen?"

"No, other than them telling me they won't be coming to tonight's ritual." Jen tried to sit up, but Julias didn't let her. The man rode Triss's wavelength without her having to explain a thing, so awesome.

"I wonder if they'll notice how much you two have changed," Julias said.

Triss raised a brow. "Oh?" Aha, lube. She set the bottle by Jen's legs, and went back to digging. Different kinds of lube, different kinds of jewelry, different kinds of toys. She had some giant dildos, the big ones, a bit rough to fit but fun. Not what she was looking for right now though. Right now she wanted something more practical for the position she had in mind.

Voila. She pulled out a purple vibrator, with a sort of loose V shape. One half of the V was the handle, and the other was meant to go inside unsuspecting pussies not aware of how much pressure such a tool could put on a g-spot. The part meant to hit the g-spot was very fat and thick, and the handle had a switch for some vibration power. Muaha.

"Yeah. You're both ... witchy."

Jen laughed, and turned onto her side to face Julias. She nuzzled into his big chest, and kissed it a couple times. “Witchy?”

“Yeah, witchy. Like, witches. Like, scary, dangerous, empowered witches.”

Triss nodded, and tapped on Julias’s leg as she showed him the lube. He rolled onto his back, arm by Jen out so the girl could snuggle into his chest, and snuggle she did, into the nook under his shoulder, squishing her breasts to his side. Of course she did, she was proud of those things, and loved to rub them all over Julias, and Triss.

“It’s true,” Triss said, crawling up to sit between Julias’s legs. Lube in hand, she trickled the liquid over the man’s cock, and smiled at him as she gripped it in her other hand. He shivered, and she licked her extra teeth at the sight of her big guy, and the look of bliss on his face, as she massaged the lube up and down his girth. “We’re the Sisters of the Night, or something. We’re dangerous.” They were getting more in touch with their beasts every night, and would probably be dancing naked in moonlight around their kills, soon. Every night, that fantasy sounded more fun and appealing.

Triss reached over, and picked up Jen. The Ventrue squeaked, and Triss grinned. So much stronger than her, physically, and that was fun to exploit and abuse. She set Jen on Julias’s waist, straddling him, facing him too, so Triss had full access to the slut’s perfect, smooth butt. She gave it a small slap too, earning a tiny gasp from her friend, before Triss grabbed the lube again, and started trickling it down Jen’s ass.

“Sisters of the Night.” Jen looked over her shoulder at her and nodded, as if Triss had found the perfect title for them. It did sound pretty fucking awesome, so she returned the nod, before taking Jen’s lube-soaked butt, and began guiding it down onto Julias’s cock.

Guiding her fellow Sister of the Night's ass onto her lover's shaft? Yeap, that was the sort of stuff she hoped to be doing if she was in a witch's coven. And damn, it really was a nice ass, smooth and firm, not as hard as Triss's but still shapely. Big enough to jiggle when Triss slapped it, too. With a hand on Jen's hip to guide her, and a hand on Julias's cock to guide him, she stared at the beautiful sight of Superman's glans pressing against the soaked hole of Jen's butt. God. Fucking. Damn. The way Jen's ass spread, and resisted his cock, until the flesh enveloped his shaft's head, and swallowed it in, had Triss groaning.

Jen may not have had a bit of an anal addiction like Triss, but she knew Jen still enjoyed it; the sounds she made, and the way she gently ground her ass left and right, as she sank her butt onto Julias's cock, proved it. Once she got her butt all the way down, cheeks pressing against Julias's pelvis, her knees out beside his waist, Triss got up on her knees, and pulled in Julias's legs together. She lifted her knees so she could straddle his legs, Julias's thighs together underneath her, her weight on her knees outside them.

She scooted forward, and pressed her breasts to Jen's back, kneeling slightly higher so she could see over Jen's shoulder. Such a fucking amazing sight, Julias lying there, his hands holding onto Jen's thighs, his muscles looking so god damn delicious. With Jen sitting on him cowgirl, Triss was free to snuggle up against her back, and after she wiped her hands clean of lube, she set her claws onto Jen's breasts, and began to massage them. Damn heavy things, and so fucking soft, they filled her palms, overflowed her fingers, and molded around her fingertips and claws. Triss had to be careful, such softness liable to get hurt from the small-but-sharp claws she had.

"Dark witches," Triss said, "enacting our secret desires." She kissed Jen's neck, earning some more moans from her. She pushed her pelvis forward against Jen's butt, joining the girl in a slow, deep, back and forth rhythm, fucking Julias together. Triss's jeans were

getting soaked in her juices, but there was something empowering about only being half naked, while the two Ventrues were full naked.

“Hey, I was an innocent flower before you corrupted me.” Jen smiled at her, turning her head so she could meet Triss’s lips with her own.

That was a unique perspective that Triss hadn’t really noticed before. Jen corrupted her, got her really vibing on having an extra set of hands and tits in the bed every night with her love. She, on the other hand, did kinda drive Jen to start delving into the more twisted side of the Circle of Crone.

“I feel like I’m about to be sacrificed,” Julias said.

The two girls laughed, and Jen leaned back, grinning a big, evil grin, as she reached down, and spread her slit. Smooth lips soaked in her juices leaked hot wetness onto Julias, earning a groan from the man, as he watched the show the girls put on for him.

“Not sacrificed,” Triss said, “but definitely our slave.”

“Big bad Invictus council member, our sex slave.” Jen nodded, agreeing.

Casually, not wanting Jen to realize what she was up to, Triss scooped up the vibrator from behind her, brought it around, and set it to Jen’s slit. Jen moved her hand out of the way, looking down with a moment of confusion, before she erupted into a groan, as Triss forced the thick thing into her clenching pussy.

Both Jen, and Triss’s white knight groaned. That was one of the best things about the arrangement. Fucking Jen’s slit with the toy, was going to be bliss for the man inside her ass, too. The dildo’s curved shape meant Triss had half of it in her hand for leverage, and

it was really easy to drive the fat head of it forward, toward the woman's g-spot.

Jen moaned openly, and her thighs trembled around Julias, as she leaned back more and against Triss. She stopped moving her hips though, and Triss had to be the one to keep pushing her hips forward, forcing Jen to keep fucking the man.

“God damn,” Julias said, eyes wide, staring. His eyes lowered to the toy Triss was driving back and forth in Jen's tight snatch, and Triss grinned at him as she watched his eyes struggle to stay open. Pleasure had a habit of doing that.

After a minute, Jen, squirming and wriggling, grabbed Triss's wrist, and started to cum. Triss hugged her with her other hand, but the hand on the toy didn't stop, content to continue fucking the woman's wet pussy nice and hard. Gentle was great, but right now Triss felt like making the woman in her arms have one of those really big orgasms, the kind you get from a hard, proper fucking. The kind that always had Triss squirting buckets.

Jen didn't squirt, but that didn't mean Triss couldn't try to make her.

“Triss ... slow ... down.” Sure enough, Jen reached down again, and actively tried to stop Triss from fucking her with the toy. Triss was far, far stronger than her, and it was easy to ignore her weak attempts to stop her hand. Back and forth, back and forth, she moved toy faster, causing the bulbous head within the slam into her girl's g-spot, while Triss pushed her hips back and forth as well, to get a nice fucking rhythm going in tandem. Half to make sure there was some good, lubed friction happening for Julias and his cock inside the girl's ass. Half so Triss could admire her friend's tits bouncing around.

She raised her free hand, and wrapped her grip around Jen's neck. Like lightning to the body. The thrill of power, and control. Having

this woman in her hands, unable to get away, unable to stop what was happening to her, unable to stop cumming, was such a fucking rush. Normally, she'd happily give into Julias doing this to her, but to do it to someone else was awesome too. Really, really fucking awesome.

More awesome, when Jen started squeaking, and some blatant juices began leaking from her. Nothing like Triss might do, but a peek down showed the girl's smooth, clenching lips were coating the toy with more liquid than she normally did. The poor Ventrue was trembling, wriggling, and soaking Triss's love with her cum.

They slowed down after a while, gave Jen a break; fifteen seconds at most, before Triss started fucking her slit again. And, not satisfied, Triss turned on the vibration. Instantly, poor Jen was reduced to a quaking, squirming, wriggling, overstimulated creature, and more juices leaked out of her slit, splashing over the toy, and onto the man beneath them.

Julias reached up, and began massaging Jen's breasts. Probably for the best, with the way they were bouncing around; had to hurt a bit. His big hands took them, caressed them, cupped and fondled them, as his thumbs teased around her nipples. The upper half of her body wasn't rocking around too badly, but the lower half of her body was slamming back and forth, as Triss gripped the woman's neck tight enough to cut off her breathing. Poor Jen came again, juices splashing around Triss's hands, and soaking over Julias's pelvis.

After a few more thrusts, Triss let her go, and eased the vibrating toy out of her cunt. She set it aside, and batted Julias's away from the girl's breasts; she wanted to play with them. Laughing, Superman put his hands back on the girl's hips, and Triss returned his laugh as she cupped the woman's big tits. Soft, and heavy, she massaged them with her palms and fingers, and kissed Jen's neck as the Ventrue woman shivered. Playing with a woman's breasts, as

the woman came down from her orgasm high; best thing in the world.

“I made ... a mess,” she said through her panting. “Nothing like you would.”

“You’re just jealous.” Triss set her lips higher, finding the woman’s jaw. Jen leaned to the side a bit, turned her head, and kissed her properly, hands holding Julias’s on her hips.

Triss was still pushing her hips into Jen’s butt, slowly back and forth, and with the way Jen was trembling, no doubt she was clenching on Julias’s cock with each thrust. A long, quiet sigh from Superman announced his orgasm, and Triss slid her kiss down from Jen’s lips, to her jaw, and back onto her neck, while making sure to massage her tits in a very look-at-these-gorgeous-breasts sort of way, for her man. And, she continued thrusting of course, a nice, slow rhythm, as she held the quivering woman in her arms.

Jen reached down to her slit, and spread herself again. It was enough to get the big bad Ventrue underneath them to groan, and he stared at Jen’s cunt clenching in spurts, as he pumped her ass full of cum. Juices continued to trickle out of her snatch, and Jen added a few exaggerated, delightful moans into the display, as she helped Triss with the gentle, rocking rhythm.

“If we were in a tub or something,” Triss said, “I’d say we should get some kine in here. They could bleed on us, and we could lick the blood off of each other, while we fuck.”

Jen nodded, and blew Superman a kiss, before she started turning around. Oh, yum. “That sounds delightful.” Taking her time, and keeping Julias inside her, she managed to turn herself around, nice and slow so she didn’t break the guy’s dick. Once she was comfortable on her knees again, except now facing Triss, she set her hands on Triss’s hips, and pulled her toward her.



Triss grinned at the woman, and got in close, pressing their bodies together, and setting her lips onto her friend's. The helpless Ventrue managed a swoon and giggle, before she returned the kiss. Her hands drifted up Triss's back, and earned a moan from her; Julias must have told her how much she loved that. Asshole.

Triss looked past Jen, and smiled. Superman looked entranced, staring at Jen's body from head to ass. It was a great ass, and Triss set her fingers on it, squeezed and kneaded it, pressing the cheeks together against Julias's pelvis. Breaking from the kiss, she leaned over Jen's shoulder, looked down, and moaned at the sight of Julias's cum leaking out of her.

"I think, I'd like to drip some blood down my body, while you licked it up." With a long sigh, Jen leaned back, and back, until she was lying on Julias's body. She set her fingers on her breasts, traced down them, down her stomach, down to her cunt, and she spread herself again.

"You ladies are scaring me," Julias said.

Triss laughed. "You're still hard."

"Maybe I find being scared arousing? Scaroused, as Jack would say."

"Well then you're in good company." The Nosferatu gnashed her teeth together a few times, opening her jaw wide, wider than a human jaw could, to show off her chompers. It gave Julias a little shiver, and Jen a much bigger one.

"Think your thralls would be willing?" Jen said.

Superman nodded. "Very much."

"We should definitely do it." Nodding, Triss backed up and up, put her knees between Julias's, and leaned down as she put her hands

on Jen's thighs. The beautiful sight of her pussy, smooth and dripping, with some cum leaking out of where Superman's big dick was spreading her ass.

What would it be like to drip delicious human blood down their bodies, and lick it off each other? Maybe do it outside in the dark, with kine holding candles. Or maybe inside, on a bed with blankets they'd ruin, white silk sheets, and the whole area surrounded in candles. Candle lighting seemed to be the theme her brain latched onto, when it came to the idea of kine dripping blood down their bodies, as she fucked Jen and Julias. Candles and witches went hand in hand, after all. Mood lighting.

She set her lips onto Jen's wet slit again, and pressed her tongue against the clenching entrance. Her friend's slit squeezed down, and Triss had to work a little to get her tongue into her. But, with a little more force, Triss forced in the first inch of her tongue into the hot, trembling tunnel of her fellow witch's body. Then another inch. And this time, she kept going, deeper, and deeper.

"Oh ... gods." Jen spread her legs, pulled out her feet so her legs were straight out, resting along Julias's, and she reached down to slip her fingers into Triss's hair.

Triss had a very long tongue. It couldn't do the hard pounding a big cock or a nice dildo could, but there was something to be said for going gentle; and in the case of a long tongue, gentle, and deep. Jen's body reacted immediately, squirming and wriggling, and Triss's equally squirming, wriggling tongue pushed in further, and further. She opened her mouth, enveloped the whole of Jen's slit, her lips burying her friend's labia, as she pressed her tongue's tip against the depths of Jen's snatch.

"So ... deep..."

Triss chuckled into her friend's slit, and pressed harder, while rolling her tongue upward. The long appendage could bend and

push in ways nothing else could, and she took full advantage, making her tongue roll in waves, applying pressure to the g-spot, the deepspot, and everything in between, while her top lip buried and rubbed against Jen's clit.

She should get paid for cunnilingus, considering how good she was at it. And poor Jen was helpless to do anything but writhe and mewl, as every literal inch of her sex was massaged by tongue. Julias managed to start thrusting again, but he kept it slow, matching the gentleness of Triss's tongue. Triss wasn't really trying to be gentle, but there was only so hard you could wriggle a long tongue, especially when it was being squeezed on by a flesh vise. Jen could probably use the break, anyway.

The trembling Ventrue pushed her hips forward and back, matching Julias's rhythm, and Triss had to hold onto her thighs to keep her mouth against her friend's pussy. But after a few moments to get into sync, Jen and Julias were like two waves, cycling against each other, most of the movement done by Julias so Triss could continue licking.

It wasn't long before Jen was soaking her lips. The Ventrue clenched on Triss's tongue, hard enough Triss had to fight to keep wriggling the appendage. But each wriggle she managed, was a loud groan she pulled out of Jen. Staring up her body, Triss grinned at how Jen's shivering made her breasts jiggle, the two of them pressed together slightly with how Jen was reaching out to hold Triss's head, biceps pushing them together on her chest. She really did know how to show off her body while having sex, and could probably give Antoinette a run for her money in that department.

A minute later, Triss lifted her head, and let her tongue dangle for a moment. Drip drip, juices fell onto the pelvis of the squirming woman. Julias didn't stop fucking her, continuing to sink himself balls deep into her, each gentle thrust making her breasts move back and forth, and her ass ripple around his cock slightly with the

soft impacts. It was hypnotizing to watch, and Triss stared at it, at how Jen's leaking slit continued to clench on nothing as Triss's lover fucked her ass.

Grinning, Triss climbed onto Jen, and into her awaiting embrace. She made sure to drag her nipple piercings along Jen's stomach, before eventually getting over top her, Triss's knees against the blankets between Julias's thighs.

Jen was panting, and smiling. The glow of orgasm aftershocks looked fucking amazing on her, like a runway model giving everyone the o-face, and Triss pressed her body down against hers, hugging her friend, and setting her lips on her neck. Right on time, Julias lifted his hands, and hugged them both.

"You two are getting pretty close," he said, grinning up at Triss.

"We are." She winked back at him, and pushed her body down on Jen's body in the same rhythm Julias was fucking her. Perfect time to put on a strap on, but she didn't want to stop what she was doing. Besides, Jen was enjoying herself as was, considering the little groans and moans she was making.

Julias was cumming again. His o-face was adorable, always was, and she wondered for a moment if he knew how much the hard, cold shell he carried faded away when he came. He looked like a big softy. Triss lifted her head, and watched Jen cum too. Jen, of course, looked like she was a fucking succubus, with a deliberate, small, perfect smile as she shivered in orgasm, putting on a show. What a slut.

Rolling her eyes, Triss pressed her body down against Jen's again, before she resumed suckling on her neck. "Whore."

"I learned it from watching you," she said, with just enough whine to her voice it was obvious she was quoting a meme. Kids these days.

Laughing, Triss sat back down between Superman's knees, and watched the glorious display of Jen's spread legs, her leaking slit, and Julias's cum looking out of her smooth ass. So deliciously carnal. If blood was mixed into it, dripped onto their bodies during this? No wonder some Kindred really got into some self-perpetuating cycles of Kiss addiction; you could mix it with so many things.

Jen and Julias both eventually came to a stop. Now that Triss was off of her friend, Julias's hands slipped up, and took the woman's breasts again, cupping them and caressing them, squeezing them just enough their size spilled over his fingers. He kept fucking her too, in that slow, deep way he liked to when he was cumming. Triss loved that. It always dragged on the orgasm aftershocks, feeling his cock press up against her insides like that as the pleasure sparks ran down on her legs. She could use some of that.

But both Jen and Julias were growing still, in that way people did when satisfied.

"Hey! Hey you fuckers! My turn," she said. They didn't move. "Oh, you dicks."

## Chapter 78

~~Antoinette~~

She combed her hair over chest, and sighed. She was still dressed in the suit she wore, though she had dismissed the jacket, more comfortable in the white shirt and gray skirt. Sitting with one leg resting upon the other at the knee, she leaned back upon the couch in one of the many lounge rooms of her Elysium tower, and looked up at the ceiling. The holes had been drilled into the marble to house LEDs, and the wires that powered them hidden in the black and white stone. A ridiculous expense, and one she was glad to have spent. What use was immortality and fortunes upon fortunes, if one was unwilling to indulge.

Sighing all the more, she refolded her legs, and waited. Not long ago, her thoughts had been on how to share this indulgence with her love for years to come; him being a member of the Invictus made their relationship a touch complicated. Now, her thoughts were on hunters, monsters, werewolves, territory being fought over by short-sighted vampires, and the pain her love was suffering. Such was the ups and downs of ruling a city. There would be times of tranquility, such as after the death of Viktor and Tony, and again after the death of Lucas. And there would be such times again, once these hunters were dealt with, and this looming threat in her city crushed.

It seemed unlikely the Begotten would ever leave, even if Azamel died of her age. And the Uratha, she had to admit, were more equipped to deal with both the strange Azlu entities that had infiltrated her city, but also Black Blood. Oh, how she hoped Avery would end that infernal entity's existence. Could it be done? She did not know, and she dared not ask. Eyes and ears were everywhere,

and she did not wish to let anyone know of her desire, lest they plot to undo them.

Far better for her to do as she always did, and manipulate the individuals and circumstances involved. Black Blood was not invincible, and if Antoinette gently nudged events into confrontation between the werewolves and Jacob's alien friend, perhaps her desire would be satisfied. If not, she could simply try again in the future. Such was the joy of indirect tactics and careful misdirection.

The hunters were the larger threat at the moment, and Avery's aid in hunting them down was paramount. The introduction of this shaman woman Elen had rendered the more passive approach futile, if she was capable of hunting targets with seemingly magical means. The introduction of a Begotten as a member of their group was even more problematic, as the monsters had many ways to both infiltrate, and affect places in ways the others could not. She could not rest until she had dealt with them, or had at least surmised a foolproof plan to deal with them.

And then, of course, was her love Jack. He should be here soon, and she could both inquire about the proposal to the Uratha, and perhaps gently nudge him to expose his secret to her.

She could ask, and the boy would tell her; such was his way, and his honest soul was part of why she loved him so much. But like a creature breaking free from their hatching shell, learning to break free of one's own barriers is important for growth. She would give him more time. For now.

The boy waved to her from the labyrinth hallway, and walked up to join her before sitting on the couch.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello," she said.

“I talked to Avery. She’s down with pairing a pack member with these sweeper teams.”

Smiling, Antoinette raised an arm, and let the boy snuggle into her side. “That is good. Impulsive and aggressive as she is, she is intelligent.”

“She did demand to be the one who picks which Uratha go with which team of Kindred.”

“Naturally.”

“And ... she demanded that the Begotten get involved.”

Antoinette raised a brow. “That, I did not predict. She trusts the Begotten?”

“Eh, more of an enemy-of-my-enemy situation.”

“And you spoke with Azamel?”

“I did. She’s not happy about the idea, but she agreed. Fiona, Mark, and Athalia will help some of the sweeper teams.”

“I see.” She was happy the boy had taken initiative, bringing Avery’s proposal to Azamel. And no doubt the boy had already reported this to Julias and the rest of the Invictus council. But, perhaps, not as content about the prospect of Begotten becoming yet more involved in their affairs.

“I think I got my work cut out for me, making sure everyone gets along.” The boy nudged his nose and cheek into the side of her breast, and nuzzled into her. “I think it’ll be alright, except for maybe a few of our louder Kindred causing a fuss.” Again he nuzzled into her side, and brought in a hand as well, using it to touch her thigh as he pressed his cheek and nose into her closer breast.



The boy was being awfully forward with his desire, compared to usual. Ah, yes, she had enjoyed his touch earlier this evening, while also teasing him of awaiting pleasure in the future. Talk of emotional trauma would salt the very soil she had seeded six hours ago; not a terribly fair thing to do to her poor little Ventrue.

Or perhaps, she was running from the inevitable pain of the conversation, and how she would be forced to look the boy in the eyes, his deep, honest, powerful eyes, as he confessed his rage and agony to her. And that could wait until tomorrow night.

Grinning down at him, she turned on the couch to face him, one leg hooked over the other as she leaned over him, and began to undress him. His face lit up like the fourth of July. “Interspecies romance grows in the city. Perhaps the tension between monster, wolf, and vampire, will not be as large as I fear.” With practiced hands, she slid him out of his jacket, tie, and shirt. The sight of his lean, defined form, his muscles and abs, and the way the Blush of Life brought color to his skin, earned another smile from her. She Blushed Life as well, and grinned down at the boy as she motioned to her chest.

Jack tried to undo her buttons as quickly as she had his, but his fingers fumbled on a few of them. Cute. And when he reached behind her to try and undo the clasp of her bra, he fumbled a few times as well. Adorable. Laughing, she waited and watched, and scratched his head as he at last freed her breasts. His eyes devoured her, and a groan escaped him, as he buried his face in the heavy teardrops.

“Which Kindred do you think most likely to cause problems?” she said, as she reached down and started undoing his pants.

“Jessy, undoubtedly. I know Joe from the Carthians has a big mouth. It wouldn’t surprise me if Hella causes problems, too.” With a big grin on his face, he helped her get him out of his pants and

boxers, sliding them both off at the same time, and exposing his shaved-smooth pelvis, and growing erection. Out in the open, the lounge, with no walls to hide them, and the boy was ready for sex in seconds. She had utterly destroyed the sexual barriers he once had; delightful. She was sure there were more barriers to find, and break if she desired, but now, she could indulge in the sexual openness she craved.

She still wore her skirt, but tonight was about pleasing the boy; and there was a certain joy in remaining half clothed, while her partner was nude.

Smiling her best devil's smile, she slid off of the couch, and got down onto her knees between his. She set her hands underneath her breasts, lifted the heavy pillows up onto his lap, and buried his raised member in the softness. Immediate groans from the boy, each sending a small shiver through her, spurred by the sight of his pleasure-laden face. In the past, he may have been overwhelmed by something so simple, and let his eyes close and head roll back, lost to delirium. Now, he stared down at her and where her breasts pressed snug to his pelvis and thighs, as if looking away for a single moment would rob him of witnessing lightning in a storm.

“The three you listed, if you did not realize, are Gangrel.” She pressed her breasts together harder for a moment, and pulled another groan from her love. “They are quite a handful, I admit.”

“Handful ... lot bigger than a handful.”

She rolled her eyes, and laughed. The look of almost desperate desire in his face was too precious, and that he managed a joke as he gawked at her, was equally wonderful.

To reward him, she leaned down, scooting her butt a little further back so she had the angle to encompass the swollen head of his length in her kiss. She tilted her head to the side, and looked up at the boy, as she both kept her breasts pressed into the groove of his

pelvis and thighs, overflowing much of his body, as she suckled on his cock. Soft, gentle kisses, meant to build the pleasure, slow and tasting the sexual need that radiated from him.

Movement drew her eye, and she almost let the impulse to look spoil the moment. But, no, she kept her eyes on Jack as she lifted her head up, and leaned in forward, to completely engulf his cock with her breasts.

Natasha was watching.

The Mekhet had likely finished her work, and was going back to her room to read. Sunrise was soon, after all. She must have been walking past when the two lovers had drawn her attention, and like any Mekhet was prone to do, she cloaked herself in her Cloak of Night, and sneaked in to see what was happening. Mekhets, forever attracted to secrets.

But Antoinette's habits with her love were no secret. If Natasha wished to watch, she did not need to cloak herself. Still, if that was what the girl needed, in order to find the courage to watch, then that was fine with the Prince. The little creature was a good fifty feet away, and only poking her head out from around the room entrance enough for her to watch. She likely thought she was far enough, and her discipline strong enough, to not be seen by a Daeva, even one as old as Antoinette. Silly girl.

“Do you know what the teams will be for the Invictus?” she said, before she leaned down, and again set her lips onto the boy's cock, keeping it wrapped in her breasts so only the glans was exposed.

“I uh, probably either a Nos or Mekhet in each team, for Obfuscate. They'll probably keep us Right Hands together, and have us exploring the more suspected zones.”

She nodded as she kissed and licked, before she started working her head up and down. Keeping her mouth tight and snug on the

sensitive head of his cock, as she forced her kiss to work back and forth over the base edge of its swollen girth, was enough to have the boy trembling in moments. Precum leaked from the boiling glans, and she kissed it away.

Perhaps it would be fun to put on a show for Natasha? Smiling around his cock, she lifted her head, and used both hands to begin kneading the heavy pillows together. Large as they were, and her so close to Jack's body, kneeling between his knees, each time she pressed her breasts together as a forward wave, they spilled over her hands, and onto his thighs and abs. Each forward press buried his cock completely, causing gentle friction of her silk skin along his glans. In minutes, the boy began to orgasm, and he reached out to hold onto her shoulders as he did. His first gush of cum managed to squirt upward with force, and she licked her lips as she felt the thick warmth coat her neck and under her jaw. The next was lost to her breasts as she squeezed them together with her hands, burying his glans proper, and ensuring each new gush of cum coated them from within. Several more waves followed, each contained and hidden between her breasts, until it began to drip down her stomach.

"I ... I'll try and ... stop Jessy from ... getting into fights with whoever we're working with." Poor boy, panting and squirming with pleasure, completely unaware Natasha was watching.

"Come, stand for a moment, so I may lie down for you," she said as she let go of her bust, leaned back so the cum-soaked, heavy breasts slid off of him and impacted against her with gravity — as intended — and stood.

The boy hopped up, big grin on his face. A prime moment for Antoinette to turn, and glance Natasha's way.

Oh? The girl's head was inching about, easing back and forth a bit. And her shoulder were lifting up and down ever so slightly. Ah, yes, it was a motion Antoinette recognized immediately. The girl was

touching herself, masturbating, using the wall as a barrier to hide what her hand was undoubtedly doing underneath her skirt.

Natasha's eyes went wide when she realized Antoinette saw her, and wide again, when she realized Antoinette knew what the little creature was up to. The power of a little eye contact, and a subtle grin.

As Antoinette sat down, she offered Tash two unspoken words, each single syllable, each easy to read upon silent lips: come watch.

She did not wait to see how the little Mekhet reacted. A little suspense, a little mystery, it all added to the joy and thrill of such open expression. Grinning all the more, she rolled onto her back, set her head upon the arm of the couch, and held out her hands for Jack. His grin was equally large, and he climbed up onto her so he could straddle her waist.

To her lover's delight, she brought her hands up to her collar, setting them over top where her breasts connected at the top of her chest. This way, her elbows were brought in, and each arm forced her breasts up to sit on top of her chest, instead of falling to the sides with gravity. More than enough of a signal for Jack to lean forward, his knees outside her arms on the couch, and slip his length into the crevice underneath and between her breasts. With his own cum as lubricant, the boy let out an obvious groan as he set his hands around the outside of her breasts near her elbows, and held them, pushing them together, as he sank his cock balls deep into the crevice.

"My love," she said, smiling up at him, "how goes your training with Julias?"

"It ... it's um ... going well. Getting better at Resilience. Should be able to use vitae to keep my body together a bit easier." His eyes drifted between her gaze, and where he was easing his cock back and forth between her bosom. With his torso leaning forward

somewhat, he managed to keep the angle of his shaft aligned with her chest, and the pressure of her breasts pressed together by both her arms, and his hands, was enough to keep it secure. It would not slip out, giving the boy the leeway to gently fuck her breasts without anyone having to hold his cock in place.

“That is good. Julias is quite the master of Resilience. It takes much to damage him properly.” She licked her lips as she watched her lover rock his body back and forth, the tip of his length appearing for only a moment, whenever his pelvis pressed against the undersides of her bust. He was moving hard enough to make her breasts ripple with each impact, gentle but not overly so, and she chuckled at the feel of it. The heat of his cum and girth along her skin was pleasant, but it was the look of rapture on the boy’s face as he stared at her body, that had her cravings for more build.

Movement, in the corner of her eye. Oh? Antoinette kept her eyes on the boy in front of her, on his beautiful, naked form, and the joy dripping from his gaze, while peripheral vision allowed her to track the movement of the spying Mekhet. Natasha’s masterful use of Cloak of Night was enough to fool all eyes except for another Mekhet using Auspex, or a Kindred as powerful as Antoinette. She’d have no trouble hiding her presence from Jack as long as she did not get too close.

This was quite a growing moment for Natasha. The girl was standing off to the side, maybe fifteen feet away, and was staring, jaw dropped and unable to close. She was no longer masturbating, but that was undoubtedly too far a leap out of Natasha’s comfort zone for the little Mekhet to handle. Perhaps, in the future, the Prince could change that.

“Coat my nipples, my love, when you cum.”

Groaning again, the boy nodded, and started thrusting faster, both his hands holding her breasts snug around his cock, their size

spilling over and around his hands and wrists. After another minute of consistent, gentle thrusts, he let go of one of her breasts, though it remained where it was, kept snug by her own arms. The free hand took his cock instead, and guided it up onto one of her breasts, to begin rubbing his dripping, engorge glans upon her swollen areola.

Immediate sparks pulsed out from the swollen nipple and into her chest. Antoinette half closed her eyes, and made a deliberate moan, picking the right pitch, the right timbre, the right volume, to have the boy melting. He continued to rub his glans against her nipple, and did not stop as a gush of his thick cum washed over it; less of a squirt, and more of a heavy wave tonight. She watched the ripe head of his shaft let loose another wave of his hot, thick cum, and another, coating her nipple as he circled it with his length's tip, before he slid his cock along the silky skin of her breasts, and onto her other nipple to continue the same treatment. The touch of his wet glans pressing and rubbing against her aching nipples was heavenly, and she sighed joy again as his rubbing earned a few more gentle, warm sparks of bliss that reached into her chest, and inched their way down toward her sex.

“Now, resume as you were before,” she said.

“Yes ma'am.”

Perfect. With her puffy areola thoroughly coated in cum, she eased her elbows down a little, and her hands down her bosom farther, before taking her nipples into her palms. With almost milking motions, she squeezed around them, lightly pinched her nipples, and put pressure around the whole of her areola, before she eased up, tracing her fingers around the aching buttons. With the boy's hot, white fluid coating it all, it made her touch divine, and she offered the boy another calculated moan, to entice his arousal yet again, as she masturbated with her breasts.

He leaned in, took her breasts into his palms on the outside, and again pressed them together as he guided his cock into the crevice they created. As he resumed fucking her bosom, she pleased herself with them, knowing exactly how much pressure, and exactly what motions to use, to make the tingling waves build.

Natasha moved in closer. Her mouth was still open, her whole head blushed beet red, and despite herself, one of her hands stroked one of her nipples through her shirt. Wonderful. Sometimes Antoinette wondered if her student realized her Prince's attempts to spread sexual openness were not empty words. No doubt the child would be terribly embarrassed later, and Antoinette would again have to explain there was nothing to be embarrassed over. Jack would not mind, if she told him; and she eventually would.

“And Dominate, my love? How do you practice?” She shivered as the waves of pleasure built up more, and she eased off of her play for a moment, before she resumed. Squeezing, milking motions around the whole of each areola were delicious when her breasts were wet, and she pulled her hands forward onto the nipple, where she traced and teased, circled, and ever-so-gently pinched.

“I ... I've been ... having mental battles with Julias every so often. I still can't get him.”

“It would be a wonder of the ages if you could dominate your sire at your age, my love. Your skill grows rapidly, but temper your expectations.” Once she resumed caressing her nipples, it did not take long to earn the sparks again, and upon that, the waves that coursed down into her chest, down further to her sex, and then outward. She licked her lips as she met Jack's hypnotized gaze, and a few quivers worked up and down her thighs and arms, as the pleasure tremors spread into her thighs. Despite herself, she closed her eyes for a moment as the unique sensation echoed through her chest and core, before she looked up to Jack and his enraptured gaze.



Natasha's eyes widened, perhaps more than Jack's, and she stared all the more. To orgasm from breast play was perhaps a unique concept to the little Mekhet.

"Y-Yeah, but ... I still wanna." Jack slid his length out from between her breasts, and once again set his glans upon her nipples. Smiling down at her, staring at her, drinking in her gaze, his eyes slid down to watch himself as he masturbated slowly, and took the time to rub his boiling hot glans around her swollen areola. "I ... I think I ... think I could use some practice with you, too. With my Disciplines, I mean."

The sparks hit her immediately, skin sensitive from orgasm, and radiating pleasure all the more as her love pressed down on each nipple, taking the time to half bury the head of his cock into the softness of each breast.

"I will take that challenge, my love." Chuckling, she pressed her soaked breasts together as she buried her nipples with her white-covered hands. "Again. And this time, keep your eyes closed."

"Um, yes ma'am." With a moan, he set his hands outside her breasts again to hold them in snug against his thighs and pelvis as he hid his cock between them. "Three times? Thought you'd want me to try and stop using my vitae so much to fuel sex."

"Three is not so large a number to worry over. And tonight is special."

"It is? Why?"

"I will tell you in the future." Chuckling, she lifted a knee and nudged it against the boy's back. "Eyes closed."

With a nod, he closed them, and began to gently rock his body back and forth, fucking the very well lubricated sleeve of flesh he made of her breasts. Perfect.

She looked Natasha's way, and smiled. The girl was still dumbfounded. Why were so many so shocked by sexual expression? There were cultures in the world that had sex in public as often as they ate their meals. The absurd notion that nudity and sex had to be kept behind closed doors bothered her to no end.

Antoinette could order her student to come closer, but that would be crossing a line. If Natasha wished to explore sexual boundaries, it was something Antoinette could only encourage, not force upon her.

The order to have Jack close his eyes bolstered the girl's courage, though, and the tiny Mekhet took a couple steps closer. Now, she stood only five feet away, in front of the couch, and her eyes were locked onto Jack. He was an attractive man, to be sure, and his defined muscles and lean frame were on quite the display as he worked toward his third orgasm. Slow, controlled thrusts, that had both women admiring how his defined musculature flexed with each motion, and how delicious a sight it was when he took a moment to keep his cock balls deep within the crevice of her breasts.

The Mekhet's eyes drifted down his body, and glanced Antoinette's way a few times with skittish eyes, before they stopped on her breasts. Jack was clutching them snug to his body, and large as they were, his hands had almost disappeared into their softness. Much of his inner thighs were covered in them, and so too was the entirety of his pelvis. It made the ripples his thrusts sent into her bosom quite blatant, and Antoinette made another purposeful moan, as she looked the body's flexing body up and down. As old as Antoinette was, with a long second life that had been filled with sex of every sort, there was something still terribly arousing about the sight of a man's abs, easing back and forth, and burying his cock into her sex; or in this case, her breasts. Arousing became carnal hunger, as she looked up to his face, to find his mouth dropped and head aimed downward, pleasure etched into his closed eyes.

No longer tingling with the blissful remains of climax, she set her hands about her large, cum-soaked nipples once more. As she began to masturbate with the swollen points, gentle milking motions that squeezed from areola toward her nipples' tips, she offered Natasha another smile. The little Mekhet was fucked with aggression, heat, mass, depth, and wild abandon, nigh every night by her boyfriends, no doubt. It was a joy to show the tiny creature that sex could be much different. It could be soft, gentle, slow, and focus on a man enjoying the unique softness of a woman's body, rather than the woman being overwhelmed with pleasure by hard, ravenous men. Instead of burning heat, it could be calm, soothing, and a quiet moment between two lovers — or more — wishing to indulge in nothing more than the tender touch of each other. It was sex that could last hours.

They did not have hours before sunrise, but Jack, perhaps psychic, decided to slow down anyway, and eased his thrusting to tempered speeds. He kept himself balls deep within the crevice of her breasts, and breathed deep as he no doubt focused on the silkiness of her wet skin pressed snug around his cock and its swollen, dripping tip. He inched his knees a little further forward, causing her breasts to rise higher up on his thighs, pelvis, and against the base of his abs, as if the boy were desperate to feel the weight of them upon his body.

His hands drifted over her bosom, and found hers. Ah, he wanted to use his thighs to keep her breasts together. With eyes still closed, he mingled his fingers with her own, found her wet nipples, and offered them small pinches, pinches she had long taught him to master with correct pressure and softness. And as he massaged them, caressed and teased them with his fingertips and his cum, she milked her areola from outside his touch, working her hands around in subtle circles, as she slid her grip in toward her nipple with gentle, squeezing hands. The tingling waves of bliss built once again, and she sighed joy as a tiny quiver worked down her body and into her thighs.

She came. With another perfected, practiced moan, she smiled up at the boy's shut eyes as she felt the sparks work into her chest, and down toward her dripping sex. She kept her eyes open, but only partially, enough so she could both watch the boy continue fucking her breasts with his slow, controlled motions, and so she could watch Natasha. As she teased herself, continued to caress her her nipples, careful to keep her touch light as the sparks of bliss danced along them and into her chest through her climax, she offered a gentle grin for Natasha. A student of hers, of the Ordo Dracul, and perhaps, if the small woman was open to it, a student of sexuality.

Not that she planned to invite Natasha to her bed, but with how the tiny Mekhet was staring, frozen, entranced, it was clear to see the woman was interested in sexuality and sexual expression far more than the old Natasha would have ever admitted. To see her watching, from only five feet away, eyes locked and body almost trembling at the sight of Antoinette masturbating with her breasts, was delightful. She would have to thank Jessy, for opening her new student to new worlds.

When a wave of white began to leak out of the crevice of her breasts, and flowed up onto Antoinette's neck, Natasha quivered, and stepped in a little closer. Her eyes were locked on both Jack's lean body, and down where his glans poked out a sliver with each gentle thrust. Each time it did, a heavy gush of his white cum flooded up onto Antoinette's neck, around her collar, and down around the top curve of her breasts.

She let go of her nipples, and instead used her hands to push her breasts together tighter, earning a groan from her lover as he continued thrusting. The friction of her breasts along his length and glans, wet and tight, was more than enough to have the boy cumming more, and releasing his fluid over her body with each thrust. It pooled underneath her throat, in the dips of her collar bone and shoulders, and between her breasts, before it overflowed and spilled past her shoulders and onto the couch. Natasha leaned

forward, and stared down at the mess of cum that now coated the Prince's neck and shoulders, completing the coating of white, and painting her a heavy necklace. The boy's sex drive was vast, and his ability to use his Kindred body as a conduit for it, divine.

If she was not careful, she would have him addicted, as per the stories she had described.

She nodded toward Natasha; more than enough signal for the Mekhet to run away. The little creature slipped away, Cloak of Night masking her footsteps. Only once she was back out in the hall, did she peek around to look at them again. Smiling like a child who had stolen a cookie, she offered Antoinette a small finger wave, before disappearing. No doubt on a quest to find her boyfriends and indulge. Antoinette had expected the look of embarrassment to be glued to the Mekhet's face, not be replaced with a smile of wonder, awe, and mischievousness. Miss Vola had grown quite a bit, in mere months.

Antoinette sat up. "You may open your eyes, my love."

Jack's gaze looked up to her, and she met his green, deep, overwhelming eyes with her own. "Eyes closed? Was someone spying?"

Oh my. Perhaps she had been a fool to expect he would be oblivious.

"Indeed. Natasha was walking by, and I created the opportunity for her to witness our love making. Does that offend you?"

Laughing, he shrugged. "Nah. I think you've destroyed any shyness or shame I may have had." The boy slid off the couch, and spent a moment looking down at his body and the cum that coated his length, testicles, and pelvis, before he turned to look at her. Even as his length grew flaccid, he licked his lips as his gaze devoured the sight of her torso dripping with his seed.

“My love, only when you and I perform such an act in the center of one of my banquets, for all Kindred, and Begotten and Uratha, to witness, would I consider that true.” And even then, she was sure there were more barriers to destroy, if they ever desired to. Chuckling, she ran a finger down her breast, from neck to nipple, trailing through the layers of cum, before she lifted the digit.

“I uh ... m-maybe ... in ... decades?” The boy was hypnotized, staring at how his fluid connected to her, from fingertip to nipple in a long strand. So precious, her little Ventrue.

This boy, young man, her little Ventrue, had an angry side to him? It was difficult to imagine Jack, as he stood there with his deep, green eyes staring at her topless body with hunger and wonder, could summon such depths of rage.

But she did have to ask. Later.



~~Julias~~

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Awwww!”

Julias and Triss looked over at the other Ventrue in the bed, and both rolled their eyes. The three of them were on his bed in the bunker, and despite Julias and Jen having been thoroughly satisfied, the two Ventrue had just finished making sure Triss was satisfied, too. Probably a good idea. She'd been ready to sink her claws into the two of them, if they didn't.

Now, he was spooning against Triss, holding her close to him, one arm pressing elbow down into the bed so he could hold his head up on his palm. His other arm hugged the scary woman to his chest,

and a finger gently traced lines up and down her stomach, sternum, and around each pierced nipple. He leaned in, planted a kiss on her neck, earning a quiet mewl from her, before he lifted his head, and resumed smiling down at the amazing woman.

The three of them were under the covers, too, though they only had the blanket pulled up to their hips. No need to care about getting cold or uncomfortable, especially when the sun eventually decided to rise and knock them out. You didn't feel anything in torpor, except for the most extreme disturbances. But by the time you realized you were on fire, it'd be too late to do anything about it. Hence, the safety bunker.

Jen was on her side, facing them, big smile on her face, eyes filled with wonder as she watched Julias lean down again, and kiss Triss. He used his hand to guide her chin up to him, and she smiled before their kisses met; though she kept her snake eyes open a bit, so he could see the joy in them. Happy as a clam. And the sight of her being so damn happy, such a huge change from how she was just over a year ago, filled him with joy. Felt like a fluttering in his chest.

His fingers drifted down to her crow skull necklace, and he nudged it a couple times, appreciating the weight of it. "Creepy."

"You mean badass," she said.

Jen nodded. "Very." The Ventrue slipped in a little closer until she was almost touching chest-to-chest with Triss, before she leaned in, and planted a kiss on her friend's chin. "You need the necklace on all the time?"

"Just for the one ritual. Which reminds me." Sitting up with a bounce, Triss gave Jen a slap on the butt, before she hopped off the bed and walked over to the door. Both Ventrue sat up and watched her, though as she started working a knife on her hand to split the skin, Julias turned his attention to the woman beside him.

Jennifer Denver. Four secrets down. He smiled as his eyes drifted up her body, and took a moment to admire her heavy breasts hanging underneath her chest like teardrops, as Jen was sitting while leaning forward, elbows on her knees. Raven hair to her shoulders, like Triss's, and similar height. They could be sisters. Beatrice was the sister who went to beaches and worked out a lot, got a tan, abs, tattoos, and piercings. Jen was the sister that went to balls and banquets, and made friends with the rich and fashionable.

Two sisters. Was that one of his kinks? He didn't think it was, and yet here he was, sitting next to someone who looked quite similar to his love. It was so decadent and indulgent a fantasy, he almost felt guilty.

He slid back a foot, and crawled in behind Jen.

"Oh?" She looked over her shoulder at him, and grinned a succubus grin. Yeah, she'd get along with Antoinette, if the two ever tried.

He put his legs around hers, and wrapped his arm around her torso, while the two of them watched the naked Triss paint his door frame with her blood. She wasn't small, but he was a tall man, broad, and had no trouble putting his chin on top of her head as he squeezed her close.

"You seem to adore romance," he said. Every time he kissed Triss with his 'I love you' kiss, if Jen was nearby, and she often was, she made that 'awwww' sound.

"I do." Nodding, she leaned back, and rested the back of her head against where his shoulder and collar bone met. She offered him dreamy eyes, too, though he could see they weren't for him. They were for something else. Not someone else, but, something else. "Wanna know secret number five?"



“Hit me.” If he had to guess, she was going to tell him about where she picked up her love of romance, and why she found it so intoxicating, despite not wanting it for herself. First woman he’d ever known like that.

“When I was a young woman, I read a lot of romance novels. It was good escapism. But, I always found the characters terribly idiotic.”

“Same,” Triss said, changing from post to post of the door frame. “So I stopped reading them.”

“I didn’t.” Nodding, Jen leaned back as she set her legs straight out on the blankets between his, and nudged her nose into his jawline. “I always found it magical, enchanting, and addicting, to read about two people falling in love. But, I never put myself into the shoes of whoever I was reading about. I don’t know why, honestly, stupidity of the characters aside. I didn’t want to be the princess rescued by the knight, or the college girl who discovers love with the college boy. Didn’t want to be the cold business woman who finds she’d be happier in the arms of the poor guy. Didn’t want to be the queen who seduces a demon, falling in love by accident.”

“Some of those sound specific,” Triss said, finishing up with the door.

“Yeah, I was addicted, and read a lot of those trashy books. Then I discovered erotica, and those quickly replaced most of my romance novels.” With a long sigh, she pushed her back against him a bit more until he was sitting a bit straighter, and then she guided his hands off her arms, and onto her breasts. He should have expected that. “And, there was this one particular story, that turned me on so god damn fucking much.”

He smiled down at the Ventrue in his arms, still with her head in the nook of his shoulder and neck. Triss crawled onto the bed, and lay on her back between Jen’s legs, head resting on Jen’s pelvis so

she could look up at them. The smile on her lips grew to a grin, as Julias started to gently massage the heavy, soft pillows filling his hands. The three of them had spent a long while having sex and satisfying each other, and now was a good time for relaxing; Jen just happened to like having her breasts massaged, and her nipples caressed, when she relaxed. Pampered princess.

“What story?” Triss said, staring up at Jen, green snake eyes wide and waiting.

“It was about a king and queen, and a slave girl. In the story, the king and queen were a loving couple, running a nice kingdom, in a medieval world. They didn’t know a slave market existed under their noses, and when they found out, they dismantled it and saved the slaves. The girl’s parents were dead though, so the king and queen took her into their service. And as the story progressed, the girl, a very young woman by this point, sort of ends up in their bed.” Sighing again, eyes closing as she waltzed through her memories, she reached down for Triss, and started caressing her neck and shoulders. “I was fifteen when I read that book, and it awoke my sexual appetite like an erupting volcano. Something about a loving couple with a healthy sex life, pulling in someone inexperienced into their bed, someone young and impressionable, someone like I was then? I masturbated the whole day away first time I read it.”

Laughing, Triss reached up and poked the girl in one of her breasts with a claw. “Not sure Julias and I really fit that description. Or you, for that matter, slut.”

Jen slapped her hand away, and set both hands flat on Triss’s face, covering it. “Back then, I was an innocent flower.”

“Uh huh,” Triss said from underneath her new finger prison.

Julias smiled down at the woman as he continued caressing her soft skin. This was an aspect of a Kindred-on-Kindred relationship he rarely experienced. Talking about their pasts, coming to terms

with who they used to be, and who they were now? It was a powerful topic for Kindred, comparing who they used to be and who they had become, a topic lost to them as they got older and their memories blurred.

He said nothing. Jen could remember her past in great detail, young as she was, and he wouldn't rob her of the opportunity to talk about it.

“I don't know why I never wanted to be the couple, to be the queen or wife or girlfriend or whatever. But when the story described the young girl, a virgin and terribly uneducated in the ways of sex, getting caressed and fondled by the king and queen, it was like a fire lit inside me.” She leaned a little higher to kiss Julias on the neck, before she slid her hands off of Triss's face, and one idly plucked at some of her crocodile teeth. “I remember a scene in particular. The girl, sitting, leaned back against the queen's stomach, head between her tits. In the story the girl was really tiny, so when the king started to penetrate her, the author took the time to describe in excruciating detail every aspect of the very large man penetrating the tiny woman. And as she's slowly getting penetrated by this enormous cock, her hole stretched to the limit, the king's being super slow and gentle the whole time, while the queen's caressing her body, teasing her nipples and clit, and being very affectionate.” The woman shivered in his arms, kissing his neck and jawline again as she groaned with the memory. “First time I'd ever read a romance story where I wanted to be one of the characters.”

“Surprised you never found ghouls who were a couple,” Triss said. “Lot of couples in Dolareido you could ghoulify, and maybe indulge that fantasy with.”

“I didn't think I was strong enough for ghouls while I was a Carthian; and it took years to develop the courage to make some. And in the Circle, I figured it'd be a bit ... awkward, to indulge that fantasy, with ghouls.”

Indulging any romance with ghouls was often a mistake. The addiction and reliance on Kindred blood wasn't the issue, it was the way it altered the mind. Ghouls loved their masters, obsessively, and that didn't always end with a devoted servant. It often did, but Julias knew of Kindred who tried to turn living romantic interests into ghouls, and it not end well. Obsession never did, and love was dangerous at the best of times, deadly at the worst. Turning two people who loved each other, into devoted ghouls to a Kindred, definitely seemed like playing with fire.

Antoinette likely kept her two ghouls as friends, and made it clear that they would forever be only that. If he had to guess, she'd probably made the mistake when she was younger, romantic attachments to ghouls, and had learned from it.

“But this,” Jen said, gesturing to Triss and to Julias, “is pretty damn close.” Chuckling up at him, she kissed his neck again, a smaller, playful kiss.

“I know, right?” Triss said. “Love the feel of a big dick stretching me open.”

Rolling her eyes, Jen set her hands on Triss's face again. “I meant that you two love each other, and you let me get inside that. Like, letting me in on a precious little secret.”

“Besides, Triss,” Julias said, “you got toys a lot bigger than me.” He was a big guy, well endowed and happy to be, but Triss had an appetite, and the two of them had had fun trying to fit very large things into her very tight holes. And they'd succeeded, too. Joys of being a vampire, no aches to worry about for the next day.

Jen reached up and gave him a gentle pat on the cheek, and then a not-so-gentle pat to follow. Ow. “Yes, the sex was a big part of what made the fantasy addictive when I was a teenager. Then I got older, and realized it wasn't the sex I was craving.”

“You sure?” Triss, peeking through the cracks in Jen’s fingers, reached down for Jen’s feet by her hips, and pulled them up onto her thighs, before she idly stroked and caressed the smooth skin. “You were getting laid more than I was, when I first joined the Circle.”

“Sounds like everyone in the Circle embraces hedonism,” he said.

Jen laughed and shrugged. “Yeah, you could say that. Othello and I in particular.”

“Mmhm.” Triss sat up and turned around, sitting on her butt and pulling her knees up to her chest as she scooted in closer to sit between Jen’s and his legs. “Had a bunch of times where I was trying to talk to Jen, and she was in the middle of a threesome. And Othello, couldn’t find him without his dick up some kine’s ass. At least Aaron keeps it in his pants.”

“Ah, Julias, you should have seen it. Poor Beatrice was struggling like a child in a candy store who made a promise to their mom to not touch. You should be proud of her, resisting us.”

“Power of love,” he said, chuckling. “I have to admit, I’ve been in a lot of sexual situations since I accepted becoming a Kindred, but never in an environment like that.”

Nodding, Jen stuck her feet out, and Triss took them. Foot massage, for the pampered Ventrue. “If the Prince has her way, I’m sure that time will eventually come, and everyone will lock legs no matter where they are. The banquets alone are driving us in that direction.”

That was very true. Even with all the shit befalling the city lately, the Prince seemed intent on pushing her agendas, both her personal ones and her grander ones. Maybe some day the city would actually legalize public sex? Probably not without a major reform of the

country at large, but there were stepping stones he was sure the Prince was working toward, to make it an eventual reality.

“I ... I was in complete control, the whole time,” Triss said, nodding, and staring down at Jen’s feet. Obvious to see she was avoiding eye contact, and she carried guilt on her face like a flag. “Come on! Othello’s new ghoul is fucking gorgeous. The dark skin, the huge tits, and that ass, fucking god. And he was fucking her, in the ass, and with her pussy on display and everything. And he was doing it night after night after night, and ... yeah.”

Shrugging, Julias slid his hands down underneath Jen’s breasts, cupping them and letting them spill over his fingers, before his fingertips drifted around to caress the heavy, silk teardrops.

“Just meant a very horny Triss showed up at my mansion nearly every night, demanding sex. I was pretty happy with the arrangement.” Nodding, his fingers slid a little higher, offering slow, teasing touches along the underside of Jen’s nipples, and she moaned quietly as she pressed her back into his chest. Triss was massaging the woman’s calves too, doing her best with claws anyway, and she grinned at Jen, and at Julias and what he was doing to Jen’s breasts. That was half the fun, playing with his fellow Ventrue’s bust in a visually appealing way, so Triss stared, hypnotized.

“Fuck you, too.” Groaning, Triss switched Jen’s legs, throwing him glares when she managed to pull her eyes away from Jen’s bosom. The girl was such a tomboy; damn, he loved her. “I visited Damien. Apologized for feeding him some of my blood.” Julias and Jen both raised eyebrows, and Triss shook her head. “Don’t worry about it, it’s not important. All’s good. What is important though, is Maria came by, and ... and I don’t think she likes me.”

“She doesn’t like anyone,” he said. “Don’t take it personally.”

“I don’t know. I can understand universal dislike, but this felt personal. Like, she hates me because of ... well, cause I got people like you.” She gestured toward them before resuming her massaging. “A guy who loves me and my Nos freaky shit. A friend who wants to fuck crocodile mouth, too.”

“In terms of your Nosferatu features not being too invasive,” Julias said, “yeah, you have a step up on most Nosferatu. Liliana still hides out in the tunnels with Bob, and their deformities really hit hard.” Bob looked like a classic Nosferatu from fiction, with the pointy ears, pale skin, bald head, fucked up sharp teeth, the works. And Lil had extra eyes covering half her face. “That said, they were both in good shape when they were embraced. I think they overestimate the impact of their features. Liliana could wear a Phantom of the Opera mask without too much trouble. And Bob probably looks fine naked; pale as fuck, but if he finds a girl — or guy — with a kink for the creepy fangs face, he’s set. And he could wear a mask, too.”

“And Maria, how would she deal with her deformities?” Triss said.

“She ... can’t.” Julias shook his head, and let go of Jen’s breasts. Dark, somber mood now, not the time to be fondling. He set his hands on her arms instead, thumbs stroking them as he looked at Triss. “Don’t mention it to her, don’t bring it up with her, don’t even look at her like you might be wanting to talk to her about this. Only two people she’d be willing to talk to about this are Tash and Damien.” If them at all.

The Nosferatu set Jen’s leg down, and sighed. “And Lucas. And, that’s part of why I’m bringing her up.” Leaning in, she looked left and right, as if checking for eavesdroppers. Secure as Julias’s bunker was, especially with Beatrice working her ritual magic, there was always the chance a paranormal was eavesdropping somehow. “There’s more rumors going around about Maria, and that she’s doing something ... something.”

Sighing, both Ventrue nodded, and Julias raised a brow as he glanced down at Jen.

“Yes,” he said, “but I don’t know what it is. People know, a lot of people by now, that she’s up to something, but no one knows what. I know some people are thinking she’s trying to revive Lucas, but I have no evidence. I can’t act on that rumor. And besides that, have either of you known anyone who’s ever been, done, or seen, or knows someone who knows someone who’s done a resurrection?”

Triss lowered her head, like it’d grown heavy on her, weighed down by something. “No, and ... I suppose if it was possible, Jacob would have succeeded by now.”

“Succeeded?” Jen said.

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t have the slightest clue what he’s done with that goal, but I assume it’s a goal of his. Maybe it isn’t? Maybe he’s given up. But if I was a fucking ancient vamp with all sorts of knowledge about the dark arts, and my white knight died? Yeah, I know I’d do whatever I could to bring him back.”

He winced with her words, but nodded. It was a painful thought, being separated from Triss. As Invictus, he’d just assume she was dead and there was no fixing that; and likely would suffer the extreme depressions that came with losing the one you loved. If he was a witch in the Circle of the Crone, if he sacrificed animals and his own blood to some mysterious godly entity, if he flirted with forces beyond his understanding, then yeah, he’d pursue that outcome too.

“Minerva died decades ago,” he said. “I’m going to assume Jacob has given up on that pursuit.”

“Maybe.” Frowning, Triss climbed over the side of Jen’s legs, came around behind Julias, and hugged him from behind, sitting high on her knees so she could put her chin on his shoulder. Feeling



a bit clingy with the subject matter, maybe. He was, too. “Lucas didn’t die decades ago, though. I wonder what sort of shit Maria’s doing, because he died so recently. She’s damn old, too, and I assume she has the patience and drive of any other elder.”

“Except, shit’s different now,” Jen said. “We have nightmare monsters in our tunnels, and a pack of werewolves. Both groups know how to do strange things. And Black Blood...” The woman shivered in his arms, before she turned around, and pushed on Julias.

Like dominoes, Triss fell back and sat on the blankets, while Julias fell onto her body, head resting between her breasts. Triss had to spread her legs wide to fit him. With a sad sigh, Jen climbed onto Julias’s stomach and chest, and lay there, cheek on his chest and face toward him.

“Worried?” Julias said.

Jen nodded, and rubbed her cheek into his chest. “Very. I just want the hunters gone, and everything back to status quo. Even if the monsters and werewolves stick around, fine, we can live with that. But I want things to go back to normal otherwise. Not being able to walk the streets anymore is...”

“It’s what a lot of other cities have to deal with,” he said. “And we’d still be fine to do that, if it wasn’t for Azamel.”

“Still blaming her?” Triss said.

“... I guess I am, a little. But, then again, if I was her, and I knew there was a city that had other paranormals, in a better position than others, I’d probably go to them for help, too.” He groaned and shook his head, shrugging as he looked up at Triss. “Except, I’m not that person. I’m the person that has to clean up her mess, and it’s a giant mess. People are going to get killed.”

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~~Eric~~

“Fuck me! Fuck me fuck me fuck me fuck me fuck me.”

Eric blinked over his shoulder at the woman. In his apartment, she'd stripped, gotten under the covers with him, and was pressing her body against his back. For a second, he'd thought she was angry about something. But, nope, she was literally asking him to fuck her. Again.

“Looks like you're the big spoon here. You fuck me.”

“I don't think you understand how sex works. Unless you were looking to get a strap-on up the ass.” She set her chin on his shoulder, and tilted her head enough to look down at him.

“Not my thing.”

“Yeah, Vincent didn't like it either.”

“Oh Jessy, you didn't.”

“Hey! He is my ghoul, and I can do whatever I want with my ghouls. They're always happy to oblige.” Rolling her eyes, she grabbed his shoulder, and yanked him over onto his back, before sliding her body onto his and pressing her chest down onto his stomach, head hanging off onto the blankets. “I mean, I still managed to make him cum, but I got the impression he'd much prefer cumming a different way.”

“Me too.” He'd never understand the strange relationship between vampires and their ghouls. It was brainwashing, and clearly a form of control. But was it unwanted? Did Kindred turn the unwilling into thralls and ghouls? Probably. Did any in Dolareido? He had no idea, and he was afraid to go down that rabbit hole.

He'd yet to see a ghoul or thrall that was unhappy with their owner, and it certainly seemed like Jessy treated hers well; surprise pegging aside. Did being brainwashed mean all ghouls and thralls were automatically happy? Again, no idea. And again, a little afraid to tug at that thread.

She punched him in the leg, gently. Loved her buddy punches. "Well, if you don't want it up the butt, why you always looking to stick it up a girl's butt? We both have butts."

"You're the one asking for anal," he said.

"Yeah, cause I like it. It's awesome, and my ass is amazing. But, I mean, guys everywhere, always wanting to stick it up the pooper, but the moment you propose sticking something up their pooper, they get all grossed out and shit." She rolled over. He oofed with the less-than-gentle impact of her throwing her self onto her back, draping herself over his body, her back on his stomach and her body perpendicular to him. Like a god damn cat. "A guy can cum buckets from a good prostate massage, especially if you're sucking him off at the same time."

He wrinkled his nose. "I dunno. Just, doesn't seem like something I'd enjoy."

"Well, you're a prude." It took her a few more flops and flomps, before she finally settled on a position on his body, lying on her back on his chest, her head hanging down over his shoulder beside his.

"You think everyone's a prude."

"True." She reached over, picked up Kat from her eternal slumber on bed corner, and held her up in the air. Kat didn't care. She meowed a couple times, and Jess laughed as she dipped the cat from side to side. And as if that wasn't cute enough, Jessy started making

vroom sounds, and dipped Kat further from side to side, like she was an airplane.

“ ... you should buy a cat.” If she’d also used her feet, and put them under Kat’s belly while lifting her into the air, he’d have suggested she adopt a child instead.

“I’m afraid they’ll hate me, like my last cat did after I changed. Kat here is clearly brain damaged, or somehow high on catnip all the time. So this is much better.” She brought Kat back down to her chest, and squeezed her, earning a meow and purr from the lazy freeloader.

“Yeah, I got lucky with her.”

“And you named her Kat.”

“I did.”

“Were you trying to be ironic or funny?”

“I ... just named her the first thing that came to my head.”

“Then you clearly have an empty head.” She set Kat down on the corner of the huge bed by their feet, before she rolled over, and straddled him. Naked girl, straddling his stomach. Half a second was all it took, half a second of looking at the gorgeous woman, before he felt some blood start shifting toward his dick.

Kindred could ‘Blush Life’, or not, and keep their arousal under control. He, on the other hand, had no such defensive mechanism against the manipulations of a beautiful woman, especially not a naked one straddling him.

She Blushed Life, bringing color to her once pale skin, and filling out her body with more of the width caused by blood flow and functioning organs. Grinning at him, heart beating steady and

confident, she reached down to her sex, and started to lightly stroke her clitoris. Yeah, no defense. He was hard in seconds, cock rising and pressing against the back of her ass, fueled by werewolf vitality. It was almost unfair.

“Talk to Azamel or her goons lately?” she said. Her hand on her clit eased down further, and underneath her as she leaned forward to take his cock. But instead of pointing it up at her, she flattened it against his abs, and sat on it. Grinning down at him, she started rocking her body back and forth, rubbing her soft pussy lips against the base of his shaft, while avoiding touching the swelling head of his length.

“Just that quick visit I made with Jack, earlier tonight.” Sunrise was soon, and he’d gone to bed after returning from that trip. Jessy had showed up not long after that.

“Ah yeah, he texted me the result of that.” Laughing, she set both her hands onto his shoulders, and started rocking herself back and forth faster. Wet, warm juices coated in his shaft in no time. “I still think you should play all the fields. No one’s forcing you to pick one group and work only with them.”

“Yet. No one’s forcing me yet.”

“Good point.”

“I’m still—” His jaw dropped as he watched the woman turn around. Straddling him reversed, she guided his cock up toward her slit, and lowered herself down onto him. He quivered for a moment as her clenching insides enveloped him, squeezing him with far more force than was legal, and he stared at the sight of her large, toned ass pressing against his pelvis and hips as she got comfortable. “I uh ... still trying to ... figure out the politics.”

“I mean, I know they’d all prefer you only stick to one group, but they’re not forcing that situation; probably afraid to, in case it

makes an enemy out of you. I say fuck em, do whatever you want. S'long as you're working at Bloodlust and keeping an eye open for hunters, I'm sure I can convince the council you deserve your salary." She looked over her shoulder at him, and grinned an evil grin, when she noticed he was staring at her ass. Slap. She gave her butt a hard enough slap to make it ripple with the impact, and he groaned as he watched.

He was surprised she didn't ask for anal, considering the conversation. But, lubrication would have been required, and awesome as anal was, it didn't make for quick, spontaneous sex.

"Everyone else seems convinced the groups can't get along." He reached out, and set his hands on her ass. Fly to honey. The girl was built like a lean Colosseum gladiator, and that meant the sight of her back, the defined-yet-feminine muscles that highlighted her shoulders, was intoxicating. The slim waist against the large ass and built shoulders and spine made her hourglass figure almost ridiculous, and he gawked at the sight of it.

"Things are different this time. A lot different, with Tony, Viktor, and Lucas dead. And Jack, the little twerp, is a great at keeping everyone happy." She leaned forward toward his legs, grabbed his shins, and started rocking her body back and forth, each dip an opportunity for her to grind her hips down toward his legs, and then grind her ass toward his abs. Holy shit.

"I ... guess I'll try and be friends with everyone. For now."

"Sounds good to me." Nodding some, Jessy lifted her ass up a few inches, and slammed it down onto him, hard enough it landed with an audible, quiet slap, complete with a momentary jiggle. She grinned at him over her shoulder again; damn woman knew exactly what she was doing, and what he was hypnotized by. "Everyone's cooperating with the sweepers idea. What'll you do?" Without

skipping a beat, she clenched on his cock, and started dipping her hips side to side, dancing on him.

“I ... I think I’ll ... take a visit to Avery’s, I guess. Learn a thing or two about Uratha, before I”—she clenched on him, and he winced as the woman started rocking faster—”before I see about helping out. And I would like to help out, before that fucker tries to kidnap me again.”

“I hope he does, so I can tear that fuckers throat out.”

He smiled at the salacious beast riding him. Yeah, he didn’t doubt it.

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The beeping of the heart monitor was slower. Drugs had a habit of doing that, apparently.

Eric looked over the bed, past the curtain, and out to the sunlight. His father’s chest rose and fell, adjusting the blankets ever so slightly with each slow breath. Wake him up? Nah, let the man sleep. Better to let him have his rest when he got it; maybe wake him up before you leave, so as to not waste the visit.

Did he want to waste the visit? It’d make things easier, if the old man was told Eric had visited, after he’d already left. Something like ‘sorry sir, he visited but didn’t want to disturb you.’ Nah, that wouldn’t work either. His father would just get angry at him next visit for not waking him up. Then again, his father would get angry if he did wake him up, for having the nerve to do so. No winning in this situation.

Nothing he could do, but sit there, and wait for his dad to awaken on his own. Even then, he’d probably get a ‘you just watching me sleep? The fuck is the matter with you’ or something.

His new sleep schedule was weird. He thought he had it down, but lately he'd been staying up every hour of the night, instead of getting up before work specifically. Jessy.

She hadn't lied, or exaggerated. She really did want to fuck, a lot. He was happy to oblige, but it was making it difficult to find time to do the stupid shit that he didn't want to do, but had to do. Maybe that was a sign? Stay home and fuck the insatiable fox, and don't hang out with your dying father who has given up on life.

He could do both, he supposed. He didn't have any hobbies anymore, or goals. An hour or two a night for Jessy, a shift at Bloodlust, the occasional visit for his father, and taking care of his cat. Much as he wanted to think he didn't have free time, he did. A decent amount of it, too. Maybe he should get a hobby? He could get back into fighting.

Nah. He wanted to, with his knee feeling good again. But there'd be no sport in it, his new strength and regenerative abilities putting him clear outside the ability of any other human in his weight class. Maybe he could learn a new skill, build a new hobby? Drinking and eating enough crap to give himself diabetes was the only one he learned from his father, after their mother died. That wasn't fair, and he knew it wasn't. But memory was a fickle bitch, picking and choosing what to remind him of at its whim.

But his mom, what did she do? Fuck, that was an old memory.

She liked to sing.

Oh, right. When he was a little kid, he'd been a good singer. Any of that talent still there? No. He didn't even sing in the shower anymore, after she died. That part of him left with her. And with puberty.

Maybe he could pick up writing. Ugh, no. He had nothing to write about, just things to bitch about. Maybe drawing? He was garbage



with a pencil; or whatever the fuck it was people used these days. No one used fucking pencils anymore, it was ... it was ... tablets and stylus pens, was it? Something ridiculous. The fuck was wrong with the old, proper shit, like pencils and paper? Like—

He slapped himself in the face. Groaning, he shifted around in the hospital chair, adjusted his suit and tie, got up, paced around a bit, and sat down again. He was sounded like his father, saying stupid shit like ‘back in my day’ and crap. Like someone had tossed some napalm at him, his skin set on fire, and he had to breathe deep to wipe the rage away. What shitty impulse.

Just breathe.

What did that Jack kid say? Flip the switch? From the context of the conversation, the kid meant being cold and logical about shit. That was important to do in a fight, usually. But emotions were useful tools sometimes; rage, in particular, was a powerful tool, if controlled. He was used to letting it boil up inside him, overflow, splash, and scald. Yeah, the scalding was the problem. Maybe the kid was right, and he should ignore his impulses.

Sound advice, if impulses took you down bad roads, like they did for most people, him especially. Dating Sheryl? Impulse, he supposed, a feeling in his gut that told him she was the one. Nothing but hormones. Getting his knee ruined? He told himself he’d gotten tired in a fight, but truth was, he was getting angry and frustrated, and let that rage drive him into an easily exploited position.

But, an impulse was an impulse for a reason. It hits from out of nowhere, and stopping it in time is borderline impossible. And that really fucking sucked for shit holes like him, who had dozens of shitty, self-destructive impulses piled on top of each other. Good luck changing any of those by his age.

Sighing, he looked at the TV. On, and muted, as per usual. Would his dad wake up if he turned up the volume? Probably. Man would likely sleep through the apocalypse, but god forbid he accidentally hear the fucking TV.

His condition wasn't getting worse, or better. The man was old, had done major damage to his body, and wasn't doing much to fix it. The drugs, the machines, the hospital food, that was preventing him from deteriorating. But the fucker refused to get up off his ass. Christ that pissed him off, got under his skin, really—

“Eric?”

He sat up with a jolt, and turned to the door. “Fiona?”

Radiant and full of life as ever, she grinned at him and slid in. Slid. As if walking might make too much noise, she slid her sneakers over the floor, thankfully not making any squeaks, and she got in close to him.

“Aye. How are ye?”

“I'm good. I...” He looked over at his sleeping father. Still sleeping, good. “Let's go to the cafeteria to talk.”

She nodded, and slid out of the room, hands in the small of her back. She wasn't wearing her usual jacket this time, but some blue jeans and a white t-shirt and bra. Of course he noticed the bra, cause the t-shirt was a bit tight, she had a stacked little body, and he'd seen those breasts naked before. He'd seem them bounce and jiggle, ripple as he fingered her until she came on his fingers, seen the contrast of her pale skin and freckles, and how her breasts had far fewer freckles below the cleavage line.

Three seconds and he was already horny, just remembering it. Yeah, he and Jessy were made for each other, if this was all it took to get him borderline erect. Not just the memory of her either, but

the smell of her, the smell of her juices, the smell of her sweat, the smell of her everything. Like a hound dog, he was never going to forget it, and it'd now be forever distinct in his mind. It'd make talking to her difficult for forever, far as he could tell.

But he was an adult, he could control his hormones. Besides, she was dating someone else: the emo kid.

A tall, slender woman with dark skin waited for them down the hall. He should have known Fiona found him thanks to Athalia. She was in black jeans and a white shirt, buttons done up, and wearing more feminine shoes. He'd prefer sneakers, honestly. He hated the shoes he was wearing, how uncomfortable they were, and he knew for a fact her shoes had to be worse.

"Surprised to see you here," he said. "Feeling better?"

"I am."

"We came by yer apartment, but ye werenae there." Nodding, Fiona stepped between him and Athalia, and bounced with each step as they moved into the cafeteria.

"Yeah. I try to visit my dad every so often."

"Kind of ye to take care of em like this." She found a table for them, and sat down. The silly girl probably didn't even notice she'd decided to take charge and choose where they were sitting, despite her being the youngest in the group. It was fun.

Sitting down by the window, Athalia sighed and looked out to the sunlight. She may have been healed enough to be out, but she still seemed weak. Her human body wasn't injured, but the nightmare creature she was attached to, Eric had no way of knowing how that thing was doing. Or she was just depressed; understandable, given the situation.

“Invictus pay me a lot, more than I really care to spend.” Not that he necessarily wanted to sink money into the broken machine that was American healthcare, but he did anyway, for some stupid reason he still didn’t know.

“We wanted to talk to you about what you said to Azamel,” Athalia said. “And, talk to you about ... where you stand.”

Fiona didn’t look convinced. With a shrug, she got up, got herself a salad, and came back to start munching on it like a rabbit. Nibble nibble.

“I’m still thinking about it.” Just like he was still thinking about what to do about his dad. He’d never thought of himself as indecisive, but that seemed to be the running theme in his life lately. Frustrating.

“Mark and Fiona got the impression you were done thinking about it, and had decided to side with the hand that feeds you.”

“Would you be surprised if I did?” Groaning, he got up, and got some salami. Not exactly the sort of meat his body wanted these days, but close enough he could stomach it.

“It’s not like if you sided with Azamel, be willing to help her out and protect her, it’d mean that you have to give up your job with the Invictus. Just means that when it comes to the real shit”—paranormal scary shit she meant—“that you throw your bid in with us.”

“And you expect the vamps to agree to that?”

“Maybe.” Shrugging, Athalia looked out the window, sun striking her skin and long, smooth black hair. Jessy would be dead in minutes, or seconds, in this room, but the deadly reaper skeleton monster was fine. The sun gave no fucks. “You trust the vamps to just keep paying you? Sooner or later they’ll want you to do more

than just bounce at Bloodlust. And aren't they demanding you see Avery, and learn a thing or two from her?"

All things he didn't want to do. The Avery point though, he was starting to agree with Jack on. Information was power, and the more he learned from Avery, the better off he'd be with whatever decisions he made. But he couldn't shake the feeling he'd be signing on a dotted line with his blood.

"All you can offer me is a safe place to rest my head away from that shit." He leaned in, and frowned at the woman, not Fiona, only Athalia. "And last I checked, your homes aren't exactly foolproof safe. You broke into that gargoyle's home, and I expect he can do the same to yours."

"Azamel, mine, Fiona, and Mark's lairs are connected. He'd be a fool to enter our home, and invite death on himself and his worthless human comrades." She snarled at him, took a piece of his salami, and ate it. Someone else might take that offensively, maybe view it as a display of aggression and dominance. No, she was trying to be nice, and that asshole attitude was how she played nice, like a fucking kid who picks on the boy she likes cause she doesn't know better. If she wanted to be a genuine asshole, she'd be cold and quiet.

Just like he would.

He chuckled despite himself, and shrugged. "If you have to know, I'm not making a decision yet, because I don't have to yet. I will go see Avery, I think, and learn about what I am. And if you guys need my help for something, ask, I'll see what I can do."

"I'd prefer if you made it clear, and make things official. None of this half yes-no bullshit."

"You don't trust easily."

“Neither do you.”

“I trust you well enough,” he said. “You rescued me.”

“I joined a recon mission to learn about our enemy.”

“I expect things will be similar circumstance if I have to rescue you.”

Sighing, she sat back, and nodded to Fiona. “I don’t like Uratha, or Kindred. But Fiona here insists on fucking both of them.”

“Tae fuck!?” Fiona stopped nibbling and glared up at her. “Fuck ye, ya bawbag. I never slept with Eric! Just ... very ... touched things...”

“Uh huh.” Rolling her eyes, Athalia took another slice of his salami, and a piece of Fiona’s spinach. Closest the woman would ever get to being nice and sociable, Eric figured. “Got a dog and leech’s fingers inside you, and now you’re working another leech. Go fuck a human, if you need to get laid so badly.”

Another cat fight. Did he attract these situations? Was it a canine thing?

Blushing — from anger, not from embarrassment, far as Eric could see — Fiona frowned her squirrel frown at Athalia, before returning to her salad. “Yer just jealous.”

The corner of Athalia’s lips twitched. She wanted to smile. She didn’t. Woman was good at keeping distance from emotions that might expose herself.

“If I was captured,” Athalia said, “what reason do I have to believe you’d try and rescue me.”

“Like I said, the circumstance would lend to it, wouldn’t it?  
Enemy of my enemy.”

“And if it’s my daughter?”

He stopped for a moment, and looked at Fiona. She grew quiet, chewing slower, trying to disappear, as Athalia yanked the conversation into the most painful area possible.

“ ... I’d try and take that into consideration. I owe you, and I’d make sure to not kill her.”

Her turn to sigh again, as she looked back out the window. “I suppose that’s the most I can hope for. I’d ... I’d ... prefer to capture her, detain her somehow. Just a stupid fantasy, that I can change her mind.”

“Changing the mind of a relative is never easy.”

“Preaching to the choir.”

Sighing, he sat back, and looked out the window as well. A strange thing to bond over, he supposed. He had a love hate relationship with his dad, she had a love hate relationship with her daughter. To try and compare it was ridiculous, but there it was.

“She came ‘ere for that. I came ‘ere to ask ye a question.” Fiona leaned in, looked left and right like she was checking for spies, and held up a hand to her mouth to block any spectators from seeing it side on. “How do ye ... seduce a man.”

Athalia choked on a noise, a chuckle, before she regained her composure, and kept looking out the window.

“You mean that vamp Damien?” he said.

“Aye! He’s very reserved, and I’m afraid I’ll scare him off if I do something stupid.” The redhead groaned and looked down at her salad. Stirring it randomly with her fork, she bounced a cherry tomato around the plate, frowning at it as if the tomato were her enemy.

“I uh ... think you’d be better off asking a woman, like Athalia here.”

“Ha.” Athalia laughed again, and shook her head. “The fuck do I know about seducing men? Angela is the product of me being a moron, not a sexual conquest.”

He winced, and shrugged. This conversation was so damn awkward. “Ask Jessy. She works with him, and she’s been seducing men for decades.” Just mentioning Jessy brought his mind back to that night with her and Fiona. It did for Fiona too, based on the look she made, a shy grin and blush.

“I dinnae ken if that’s a good idea. Knowing Jessy, she’ll scare the poor lad.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But I mean, I don’t know shit about this guy, except that he seems a bit reserved like you said. And shy, I’m guessing.”

“Aye.”

“I knew a shy guy in high school who never noticed how much a girl liked him, despite him liking her too.” Shrugging again, he leaned in, mirroring Fiona’s sneaky demeanor. Might as well.

“Sounds like he has no confidence,” Athalia said. “Total turn off.”

Groaning, he rolled his eyes and dismissed the other with a wave of his hand. “Ignore her. Just because a guy isn’t confident with talking to a girl or flirting with her, doesn’t mean he lacks



confidence in general. You know who does have an easy time being confident flirting with women straight on? Assholes and morons.” Starting to sound like a fucking dating expert, fucking horrible. “Only thing I can suggest is to just not take it personally if he doesn’t reciprocate you being flirtatious with him; dude probably doesn’t have the slightest fucking clue how to. Be aggressive, just ... not Jessy aggressive.”

“I think I can do that.” Nodding, smile returned, she stabbed the tomato and ate it in a single bite. Voracious. Maybe she was another Jessy, waiting to emerge from her cocoon. “I wonder, how the Prince managed to catch Jack?”

“Ask him. Or her, if you can arrange it. Though, if that kid had a shy side, he’s changed since then.” Shrugging, he reached out for a piece of her lettuce, and took a bite. Fucking. Disgusting. He forced it down, but fuck, lesson learned. His new body didn’t want plants. Not that he didn’t already know that, but didn’t cats and dogs chew on grass sometimes, too?

“He seemed a bit shy at the banquet,” Athalia said.

“Jessy described the banquet to me. Sounds like going there would trigger anyone’s shyness.”

Athalia took another piece of his meal, and bit into the meat with only parting interest as she continued looking out the window. Seemed like she was thinking about things, things that weren’t the current topic. “Bunch of leeches — and dogs — looking to fuck anything on two legs at that party.”

“I was there!” Grumbling, Fiona elbowed her fellow monster in the side. “And I dinnae gae any loving!”

The two adults at the table laughed. God damn it, Fiona was cute.

“I suppose it’s easy for vamps,” he said, “to do shit like that. They own the city.”

“Vamps own most cities,” Athalia said, “but Dolareido definitely dials up the sex content, compared to the other cities I’ve seen. That white-haired bitch really would have everyone fucking on the streets if she could get away with it.”

“Ye could do with a wee bit of fucking yerself!” Leaning in again, Fiona held up her hand, this time blocking off Athalia from seeing her lips. “She’s a cold fish.”

The reaper bone monster slapped Fiona’s hand down. “I didn’t come here to get laid, Fiona. I’m here to lie low.”

“Good job on that,” Eric said. Mistake. She took the rest of his meat, and started eating it. God damn it.

“I am impervious to Slut City’s influence.”

That was sort of admitting to being a cold fish. Or she was asexual.

“Ye told me just last night ye’d have sex with Chadwick Boseman if he ever so much as entered your peripheral vision!”

He got the impression she was the former.

“To be fair,” he said, “Boseman is gorgeous.”

Giggling, Fiona nodded as she munched on more food. “Aye, but —” Athalia slapped the girl upside the head. “Tae fuck! Ya fuckin knob, ah’ll—” Interrupted again as Athalia grabbed her head, and pointed it at the television on the wall. The news, muted, captions on.

A news reporter was speaking. Looked like there'd been an accident. Daughter and mother stabbed. Daughter dead, mother still alive, taken to the South Center Hospital — oh hey where they were — and the mother was in critical condition.

“Pretty bad,” Eric said, sighing as he looked back down at his empty plate. Right, shit, empty. “Don't hear about shit like that too often in Dolareido.” Huge city, but brutal murders were pretty damn rare.

“It said the girl was Mary Terry, and the mom was Samantha Terry.”

“People you know?” he said.

“ ... someone Jack might know.”

He raised a brow, and looked at Fiona. Her jaw slowly dropped as her eyes stared at the reporter.

Oh, right. Jack Terry.

Fuck.

## Chapter 79

~~Julias~~

“Mister Terry, you’ll be working with Madam Leauvion and Madam Jennings.”

The boy raised a brow. “Sire?”

“I know you expected to be working with Mister Burksen and Madam Herrington, but ultimately, they have a lot of experience that would be better served working with younger, less experienced Kindred. In your team, your experience is key, and will compensate for Jennings and Leauvion’s lack thereof, while at the same time, Jennings is Mekhet and old enough to provide a quality use of Obfusate, and Leauvion is more than old enough to be the physical force of your team.”

Jack didn’t seem too convinced. But with a moment to think about it, the kid looked over at Gloria Jennings and Isabella Leauvion, and offered them a nod.

Any Kindred with over twenty years of second life to their name was a part of this meeting, which meant almost a hundred Invictus were in the room; most of the covenant. Jack was the exception, and several Kindred glanced his way as they tried to understand why the boy got such preferential treatment. Perhaps some time with Isabella and Gloria would fix that perception issue.

Julias took a moment to watch everyone’s reaction to the first sweep team. The ancilla Kindred, and Jack, were all sitting at the large, wooden table in the center of the room, high in the Xnomina HQ. The younger stood against the room’s walls, and they were nervous. None of them were old enough to have been through the trials Dolareido had once suffered. The Purge, Azamel’s first visit,

Avery's first visit, all incidents that had resulted in violence, and everyone standing along the large room's walls had missed them. It'd be ridiculous to keep the Right Hands together in the same group, when their vital experience needed to be shared.

For each trio of vampires, he gestured to the map of Dolareido behind him, presented on the enormous touch display, and he highlighted routes, problem areas, areas with little camera surveillance, or areas with plenty, and areas with none. Dolareido was a large, complicated city, with millions of people and thousands of hiding places; by design. Jacob, Antoinette, and Daniel had pushed for complexity and underground networks hundreds of years ago, and when more elders came to join their efforts in building the Kindred utopia, they agreed.

Now, it was all biting them in the ass. The hunters had so many places to hide, and that was compounded by the revelation that they had a Begotten working for them. How many hunters could stay in that nightmare at any given time? How did they get in and out? How did any of that work?

He continued, listing off teams. When he mentioned Jessy's name, she winced, and glanced between both him, and Jack. Strange. Something was on her mind, but it could wait. Once he was done, he stepped back and let Michael MacDonald take the floor.

"As you all know," the Gangrel said, "the hunters have demonstrated both a tenacity and professionalism unexpected of hunters. Leadership has turned what were once ragtag bands, and often solo hunters, into a dangerous, armed force."

Jessy threw up her hands before slamming them on the table. "Because Azamel's pissed off every hunter on the fucking planet, and everyone in a five-hundred-mile radius came here to kill her."

"No one's disagreeing with that." Groaning, Michael leaned back against the wall and ran a finger along his bald head. "Removing

Azamel would lead to violence, and ultimately, this hunter problem is larger than just her, now. So in the meantime, we're going to deal with these hunters. If any of you try and avoid doing your jobs, because you think it's that old monster's problem, not ours, I will personally cut off your limbs and leave you for sunrise. Got it?"

Jessy frowned at her sire, but nodded as she sank into her chair a little. All the younger Kindred along the walls shrank considerably more; Michael wasn't Viktor, but the man was no stranger to violence, or using it to punish Kindred who stepped out of line.

"We have killed several of them," he continued, "but their leaders Jeremiah and Angela remain at large, and they seem to have an inhuman healing ability. We're going to kill them, one way or another. They killed Master Barry Tellern, and that alone is enough reason to deal with them."

Everyone made sure to not look at Isabella or Hella. Barry's death still stung for everyone in Isabella's group, and bringing him up earned a small growl from the young Gangrel Hella. For a group of actors and actresses, Isabella's gang were more respected than Julias had ever expected. He could still remember when she was sired, how quickly she found a home for her in both Dolareido, and the Invictus hierarchy. And he could remember how effectively she defended herself when other Kindred tried to muscle in on her territory.

Hopefully she'd work well with Jack.

"Moving on. Three of the Begotten will be joining our sweeps," MacDonald said. That got everyone's attention, and everyone looked Jack's way. "Yes, Mister Terry has spoken with Azamel, and she has agreed to help with these sweeps. Deal with it. After this meeting is over, Mister Terry will be talking with Avery, and she will be assigning Uratha to various teams; Garry Tones has already talked

to her and recruited some Uratha to join his own. And, as with the Carthians, these teams will defer seniority to the Uratha.”

Some of the vampires grumbled, and some others shifted weight from foot to foot, filling the room with the sound of suit fabric rubbing against itself. No one liked the sound of that, but Julias was smart enough to not wear that frustration on his exterior. Others weren't. MacDonald slammed his palm against the table, and everyone snapped to attention.

“Werewolves are good at two things. Wrecking shit, and hunting. I'm not happy about letting Avery boss us around either, but if we want her help finding and killing these fuckers, we're going to play by her rules. For those teams paired with an Uratha, listen to the wolves in all matters regarding the actual hunt. They will defer to us in matters of the city, and maintaining the Masquerade.” And the look on MacDonald's angry face said it all: so help me god they will or I will kill them myself.

An elder Gangrel versus a werewolf. That would be an interesting battle. Would a werewolf bow to his mastery of Animalism? A scary thought, and a scary memory; Viktor had done similar.

“Dismissed.”

The Kindred walked out, eyes set and determined. A goal to pursue, with steps, procedures, and a clear path toward victory, was something anyone could get behind, especially if revenge was a part of the motivation. But before Jack left, Julias waved him over, and waited for everyone else to leave.

“You going to be alright?”

“With Isabella and Gloria? I think I'll be fine. Gloria's happy to take backseat, and Isabella's happy with me and the damage I've done to Barry's killers.” Sitting down, Jack looked to the door to make sure it was closed before he leaned in toward him, over the

corner of the table. “I’m pretty sure she wants to recruit me into her group. Recruit, and ... well, I don’t think she wants to have sex with me; pretty sure she’s a lesbian. But the looks she gives me, I’m sure she wants to involve me in what I can only assume are orgies with her actors. And I assume she wants to do that to get me under her thumb.”

“She’s bold, I’ll give her that.”

“Hella too, though I think she might be a little less ... bold, I guess, in that department.”

The Gangrel being less bold was peculiar, but he knew Hella well enough to know she was brave. The issue was Isabella was ancilla, seventy-years embraced, and was doing what all ancilla did: started pushing for power and stability in their world. And, old as she was, she had the strength to make it a reality, and the intelligence to do it without exposing her hand. Dance Macabre indeed.

“She’ll do justice in a fight.”

“I can fight too, you know.”

“You’re not even two-years embraced, Jack. You’re strong, very strong for your age, but the last incident should have made it clear that you’re not a front liner. Ventrue never are.”

“It’s not like I’m going to take an army of thralls with me.”

“That’s why you’re taking two other Kindred I trust to handle themselves in a fight. And if I had to guess, Avery will set you up with one of the Uratha, and Azamel will set you up with someone too.” He leaned back in his chair and combed his blond hair back over his head, sighing. “If that’s Athalia ... you see where I’m going with this.”



“If our team runs into Angela, I’ll make sure to follow the lead of whoever Avery pairs us with. If Athalia’s with us, I trust her to at least help us detain her daughter.”

“And stay off the front line.” He almost told him to skip the idea of detaining. Kill the hunters. Wanted dead, not alive. But if Athalia was there, that might not be so easy.

“What’s the point in all the training we’ve done together, if I don’t get to use my abilities?” Jack frowned, and sat back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest.

“Ventrue are meant to rule, lead, and control, not throw punches. And, you’re far too young to be risking your second life. You did impressive work escaping their capture, and you’re a Right Hand not only because you’re politically skilled, but because you’re strong. That doesn’t mean I’m going to let you try and take on hunters first hand.” Because, smart as you are, strong as you are, you’re still a kid, Jack.

“Fine.”

“Jack, I’m serious.”

“I know, and I get it, ok?”

No, he wasn’t getting it. Jack was smart as hell, and stubborn as fuck, when it came to his views of himself. It’d take a hammer to the skull to get his point across to the idiot boy in front of him.

If Jack’s team came upon some hunters, and push came to shove, Jack was going to shove back. This stupid kid was going to put himself on that front line, and get himself killed. Of course, Julius knew from experience, had done the same stupid shit, and had nearly gotten himself killed dealing with Carthians on multiple occasions. But they were never at full-on war with the Carthians in Dolareido, not ever, not like with these hunters. The tenuous truces

between the covenants in the city had spared Julias his life when he was younger, and these hunters weren't going to do the same for Jack.

If Julias pushed too hard, Jack would push back, like any young man would. Question a man his ability to do something himself, something that the person believes they can do, and the man would naturally try and prove it. Jack was not immune to this, and Julias had to be careful of that.

Hopefully, someone else would run into the hunters in their sweeps.

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Julias was not going to enjoy this.

Sighing, he sat down in one of the booths, and looked around. One of the late-evening restaurants, that stayed open until sunrise. Monvaltamor's Evening.

The music was quiet jazz. The lighting was soft and moody, with lots of candles, and LEDs set to gentle light to mimic them. The atmosphere was romantic and poetic, with walls of white that looked like stone; fake stone, but convincing. Plants dangled from above, and decorated the walls, coiling and running along the various pillars and arches. Red drapes dangled for a couple feet from the arches, and each table was a hidden inside a nook made to feel like it was carved into a mountain of ivory. The table was only big enough for four, but the restaurant was meant for loving couples or couples of couples. The red booths matched the drapes of course, for maximum contrast and effect.

Everyone in the restaurant was either fucking the other person across the table from them, or was sitting beside someone they were, and talking to someone across the table who was doing the same; swinging couples. That made it the last place Julias expected to be having this conversation.

Jacob stepped in through the front door, and several people looked his way. Seeing the elder in a casual suit was strange, especially considering the color: dark purple, compared to Julias's gray. You needed a certain level of confidence, charisma, and eclectic flair, to pull off a suit like that. The fact Jacob was wearing a white mask over the top half of his face fit all too well. Anyone looking at him would assume the mask was the reason his eyes were solid black, not the lack of eyeballs.

“Julias, darling!” With a flamboyant fling of his wrist, he walked over to him, and sat down at his booth.

Julias rolled his eyes, and leaned back as he took a sip of his drink. The owner Monvaltamor was an Invictus thrall, and of course, had some blood bags in his fridge to serve. The spoiled life of the First Estate Kindred, and ruling every business to some extent or another.

“You know everyone assumes we're fucking now?” Julias said. “And, from the mask, assume that you're my sugar daddy, and you're some politician or whatnot trying to avoid the press.”

“Well isn't that cute.” Laughing, the elder snapped his fingers, and summoned a waiter. From the way he moved his hand, his shoulder, and the way he looked at Julias as he did, it was obvious Jacob was very comfortable in this setting. Why? The man had spent hundreds of years living inside caves, avoiding the benefits of a city or technology, and overall being antisocial. Even when Minerva was alive, she visited him, not the other way around.

Maybe the man just watched too much TV. Somehow.

Jacob leaned forward, and started tracing circles in the white table cloth, like he was being flirtatious. “I'm sure you know why I asked you here.”

“You want to talk about the favor I owe you.”

“Exactly. I—oh, thank you Jonathan.” Nodding to the waiter, Jacob scooped up the wine glass of blood, and took a sip as he finger waved at the man.

“Jacob, why are you pretending to be flamboyant and gay?” And how the fuck did you know the thrall’s name was Jonathan? He wasn’t wearing a name tag.

“How rude! And homophobic.”

“I—” No, don’t fall for it. The man’s just being random to disarm you. “What’s the favor?”

“Come now, Mister Mire, don’t spoil the fun so quickly.”

“I have work to do, Jacob. You may have noticed?”

The elder smirked beneath his mask, and took another sip. “Yes, I understand your triumvirate, and Garry, are putting together teams to sweep the city.”

“And you?”

“Beatrice, Othello, and Aaron, and maybe Jennifer will be doing their own thing, yes.”

“I suppose you won’t allow Avery to pair any of her pack mates with them.”

“Correct.” Like a knife through the bullshit, Jacob held a snarl for a half second, before his crazy smile returned, and he took another sip. “Besides, she’s down one pack member, and by the time this is all said and done, I’m sure she’ll be down more.” His smile increased, and for a moment, Julias was sure he could see the devil through the eye slits of his mask.

“I won’t help you kill any of her pack, Jacob.”

“Didn’t expect you to.” A borderline admission of intent.

“And if you do kill any of them, you think the Prince or the sheriff will sit by idly?”

Shrugging, and smiling with his unyielding jackass smile, Jacob set his glass down, and netted his fingers together. Power pose, like he was going to start negotiating. Precursor for explaining the deal, maybe?

“How’s your relationship with Beatrice these days?”

“None of your business.”

“Seriously Mire? She’s my student and my subordinate. I care about her, tough as that may be for you to believe. And I want to hear it from the horse’s mouth how your relationship is going, considering your rise to council member of the Invictus.”

Yes, it was a reasonable concern from the leader of a different covenant. Except this was Jacob, and he didn’t deal in reasonable. He dealt in manipulation; they all did, but Jacob was better at it.

“Jack’s my childe, student, and subordinate, and is in just as invested a relationship with a different covenant, and yet I leave that alone. Cut me some slack, Jacob.”

“True, true. Though, you don’t think if you had the authority to ask it, you’d poke and prod at the Prince a bit, to see how she’s affected Jack, and what her plans are with him, in respect to the covenants?”

Yeah, he would.

“You want to talk about Triss? Fine. I love her, and while we do talk about the covenants, I haven’t learned a thing from her that gives me any sort of power over you.”

“That’s good. And Jennifer?”

“She’s become a good friend of mine, and a very good friend of Triss’s.”

Leaning in, Jacob lifted the white mask off his eyes long enough for Julias to see the empty sockets. “Beatrice is my first student in a long time, Julias. I hope you understand what that means to me.”

It meant the elder was not only sharing important secrets with her, it meant Jacob was putting a lot of his value, his faith, and his beliefs, into her. That was not something elder Kindred did without reason.

“ ... do you believe in the Crone, Jacob?”

“That’s a strange question to hear from a suit-loving Invictus.”

“You’re wearing a suit.”

“Yes, but that’s because I pull it off better than you.” Leaning back, he smiled a big, Joker smile as he set the white mask over his eyes again. “Why do you ask about the Crone?”

“Because I can’t tell if you actually give a shit about your religious beliefs.”

“Your mistake is thinking of it as a religion. It is communication with things beyond your limited vision. And it is trading, bargaining, negotiating, and struggling with and against a force you ... Words can’t do it justice, unfortunately. But rest assured, Mire, I am a member of the Circle of the Crone. And that is why your constant involvement with Beatrice, and now Jennifer, is a concern. Can’t you go fuck some Invictus bimbo or Carthian tomboy, instead?”

“I was fucking a Carthian tomboy, remember?”

“Oh, ha, right.” He laughed, in a quiet, almost sinister sort of way. “I almost forgot. Beatrice takes to the dark corners of ritual and occult like she was bathed in it at birth.”

“I ... wouldn’t know.”

“I’m sure she’s shown you some things. I never told her to keep Crúac a secret; a hopeless fool such as yourself, bound to physical objects and material possessions, is but a bumbling infant grasping for—”

“I didn’t come here so you could insult me. I love Beatrice, Jen’s our very good friend that we’re happy to keep with us, and we keep sensitive information about each other’s covenants out of our conversations. Now, what’s the favor you want?”

“Patience, Mire. Patience.” If the man wasn’t five times Julias’s age, he’d probably be hitting him right now. “But if you are so intent on ending the conversation as quickly as possible, I want the shaman.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The shaman that works for the hunters. A dangerous old woman in a wheelchair, I’m to understand. I want her.”

It was Julias’s turn to lean back. He raised a brow, and looked around to make sure no one was listening. At least Jacob had been smart enough to whisper.

“Why?”

“Why wouldn’t I? She’s mastered some very disturbing and enthralling abilities.” Jacob raised his glass and snapped his fingers. The waiter — Jonathan, evidently — showed up in seconds, and poured him another glass of blood. Julias’s glass remained almost full. “Her age would suggest she should be dead, but she isn’t. And

the way she tore the dream apart at the seams was astonishing. It's a wonder Black Blood was able to catch us before we fell into ... whatever it is that lies between."

So Jacob didn't know everything then. Realms between realms. Black emptiness, according to Jack. Sigh. What happened to the world he knew just a year ago? Blood and bullets, suits and cocaine, pushing around uppity Carthians, and building up Xnomina's chokehold on other businesses.

Ignorant of him. People like Jacob lived in this other world with larger-than-life concepts and entities on a regular basis. And now, Beatrice was exposing Julias to that world, to this creepy and dangerous thing that permeated the solid world he was used to. It was important he pay attention, to her, to Jacob, to all of it.

"Giving you Elen completes the favor I owe you?"

"It would."

"And if I say no?"

"You won't."

Julias snarled and folded his arms across his chest. "She's a dangerous person, Jacob. If we find her, we're going to kill her."

"You'd be much better off if you didn't. I'll have to ask a different favor from you, and you won't like my next request."

And of course, the bastard wouldn't tell him what it was. Julias had the option to not satisfy the psycho's requests, but that was a recipe for disaster. Making an enemy of a witch was not good for covenant relations, especially considering Jacob had saved so many of them, including some of Avery's group and Azamel's group. The elder bastard held all the cards, and Julias not paying back what he owed would backfire.



Risk assessment was where Invictus shined. Did giving this psychopath a woman who had displayed strange magical abilities come with risk? Yes, a lot. A large enough risk that it'd be better to piss Jacob off, and kill her? If that meant he'd ask another favor, an even worse one, and Julias denied that one as well, then there was a good chance Jacob would turn violent, in some form or another.

“ ... I'll ... tell the teams to try and capture her alive.”

“Wonderful! And don't worry about Garry, he owes me many favors, and will be trying to do this as well. But don't go telling everyone about this, would you? I'd prefer the Prince and her dog stay out of my affairs.”

Trying to keep anything secret from a Mekhet as old as Daniel was borderline pointless, but then, the fuck did Julias know about the tools Jacob had available to him. Julias always had to assume Jacob and the Prince both had special options the Invictus would never have access to. Those tools had scared Natasha away from the Ordo Dracul and into the arms of the Invictus at one point, but now, perhaps those tools were her tools.

He had to talk to her again, professionally and personally. This world was starting to scare him.

“What're you up to, Jacob?”

“What makes you think I'm up to anything?”

“Don't fuck with me, Jacob. Everyone has their eyes on this hunter issue, but that doesn't change that the council, and the dragons, know you're up to something.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Julias grit his teeth until he felt the fangs fight to emerge. Squeezing a hand into a fist until it hurt, he leaned in and glared at

the masked bastard. “Something is going on. You and that creature are doing something, pursuing something, and you refuse to tell anyone about it.”

“Maybe I told Beatrice about it? How would you know?”

Careful, Julias. Walking on thin ice, over black water, with something lurking underneath.

“Triss and Jen have both expressed concern, over many things, including you. They don’t know what you’re up to, so they’ve said, and I believe them.”

“Careful who you trust, Mire. You sound very concerned about what I’m up to, when you have vipers in your own midst.”

“ ... you mean Maria.”

“Of course. My fellow Nosferatu has quite the agenda of her own. Why don’t you turn your eyes on her?”

“Because, unlike you, I have no evidence suggesting she’s trying to...”

“To what? Hmm? What is it you think I’m up to? You have nothing to accuse me of, no idea what’s going on, and are utterly helpless to stop any of it, if there is anything to stop. So how about you listen to your elders, and take a peek at your own council’s actions before poking your nose in mine?”

“Fine. Point me in a direction, give me a hint, if Maria’s actions concern you so much.”

The asshole adopted a giant grin, and leaned in close. “They don’t concern me. But, you make Beatrice happy, so I suppose I should throw you a bone.” Finishing off his drink, Jacob slid out of the booth, and adjusted his suit jacket. “I’ll let you know this. Avery

knows more, and like all those fucking dogs, is refusing to share some pretty nasty details. In my friend's world, the rules are different, and gods stomp around, fighting over the city in their own, strange ways. But, if you can make friends with the things there, you can pursue ... options."

"Options?"

"The universe is a scary place, Mire. There are walls between us and entities beyond our comprehension. I dip my toe in those waters, and so does Maria. Have fun." With a salute, Jacob walked out.

And Julias stayed where he was. Sighing, he leaned back in his seat, and took a sip of his red drink as he stared down into it.

He knew Maria was up to something. Everyone knew it. Did it involve Lucas? He didn't want to think that Maria was actually trying to do something absurd, like revive Lucas, or just talk to him across the ... the ... whatever it was that separated the living from the dead.

Heh. Guess that was as good as admitting he believed in an afterlife.

His phone vibrated. Sighing again, he took a peek at the message. From Jessy. Two kins had been assaulted during the day. Not thralls or ghouls though, so—

Oh no.

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"Jessy, you fucking idiot. You should have mentioned this earlier!"

"I'm sorry! I didn't know what to do. I thought I should wait until after the meeting to tell Michael. And I bet some other Kindred in

that meeting saw it on the news, too!”

Julias paced left and right in his mansion, occasionally glaring at the stupid woman sitting on his couch. Eric sat next to her, both of them in suits. Eric was probably supposed to be working at the club, and his eyes and ears were valuable there, but this was important.

“I saw it on TV, and—”

“Shut up Eric.” Groaning, Julias folded his arms across his chest as he paced. “Jack’s mother is in the hospital, and his sister is dead.”

“We sure it’s the mother?” Jessy said.

“Yes, Samantha Terry. And Mary Terry is his sister.”

“How long has it been since he’s seen them?”

“Kid sneaks out to watch his family all the time.”

She raised a brow at that. “Really? Figured you’d have nipped that habit in the butt.”

“Jack’s handled his embrace a lot better than most Kindred, and at the same time, has had a lot of shit thrown at him. The occasional peek back at his old life is fine, and something many Kindred his age do.”

Eric said nothing. Good. Last thing Julias needed was to deal with this outsider’s interruptions and ignorance.

“I’m surprised you weren’t contacted, Julias,” Jessy said. “Don’t we got thralls monitoring the news, and hospital reports, and shit?”

“They don’t know who Jack’s old family was, and I wouldn’t want them to. We don’t talk about a Kindred’s old family for many reasons, and this sort of shit is one of those fucking reasons.” Fuck. Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck. The worst possible timing. “It’s not their

responsibility, or anyone's responsibility, to keep tabs on the kines of our first lives. It shouldn't matter. But ... but Jack is what, a year and half embraced? He is way too young to have to deal with this."

"Poor kid." Sighing, she leaned back and against Eric's shoulder. "News said they were stabbed, in fucking daylight. Been years since I've heard about something like that happening in Dolareido."

"... yeah, it has been years. Assault happens in Devil's Corner frequently, and murder occasionally. But the rest of South Side? Rare. A stabbing? Rarer. In daylight? Extremely rare."

"Thinking what I'm thinking?"

Nodding, he sat down across from Jessy and Eric, and leaned forward. Viktor had created many of his living rooms, family rooms, conversation rooms, and other rooms like this, with privacy in mind. No one was going to hear them. Not that it mattered, but the topic was sad enough he felt privacy was warranted.

"Hunters killed his sister." Groaning louder, Julias leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. The dangling chandelier was beautiful. This was the wrong room to have this conversation in. And it was wrong to have this conversation without Jack.

"I have a hard time believing that," Jessy said. "I saw those hunters. So did Eric. They were high on adrenaline, and fear, but it was that Jeremiah fucker and his pet Angela that were the psychopaths. And besides, hunters are fighting for kine, not against them."

"You think one of those two did this on their own?"

"I do. Tell em, Eric."

The man scratched his bald head, and managed a small shrug. "I looked into Jeremiah's eyes. It ... Jessy's right. That man would kill

innocents to reach his goal.” Shrugging, he pat Jessy on the knee. “Not that I know shit about that sort of stuff, but ... but maybe I do. Got a new instinct now, and it’s telling me loud and clear that Jeremiah and Angela could cross that line. They probably did, with the sacrifices for their rituals.”

Julias nodded as he leaned forward again, elbows to his knees. He couldn’t hold still. “Jack’s description of Angela matches. Those two are the problem. If it wasn’t for them, these other hunters would probably leave or lie low.” Hunters had little to no reason to bother with Dolareido, especially now with their three most problematic elders gone.

“So, uh ... what do we do?” Jessy said.

“Jack’s going to see Avery right now. I need to contact him, talk to him about this, but interrupting him is problematic. These sweeper teams are important.”

“More important than his family?”

“They’re not his family!” Julias stood up, and glared down at the Gangrel. Might as well have squashed her under a car, with how she sank into the couch. “I’m his family! Kindred are his family! And if this was anyone else, it’d be years before he had to come to terms with that reality. But no, the kid can’t help but get involved in every possible incident, and attract the ire of the most dangerous beings on the fucking planet!”

Jessy shrank. So did Eric. Julias was yelling at them, and he did not yell often, let alone after only a few words; reasonable words, at that.

Clenching his hands into fists, he started pacing again. The noise of his shoes hitting the hard floor was far closer to stomping. He was angry for a host of reasons, but he didn’t think jealousy was one

of them, jealous of Jack's family and the connection between them. A sire's jealousy. Stupid, stupid Julias.

If only the kid was older, and had moved on from his previous life. If only the kid didn't do Jack things, and become the center of attention. If only, if only.

"... I'll call him and tell him now," he said. "The longer we wait, the worse this will get."

Jessy winced, and nuzzled into Eric a bit harder. "Good luck."

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~~Jack~~

He, Isabella Leauvion, and Gloria Jennings decided to walk. Going way outside of the safe zone near Xnomina meant he had to bring a buddy, and he might as well bring these two so they could start getting along. Walking was a little dangerous, but he was confident that, with Mulder and Scully watching from above, they'd be fine. Besides, any hunter sneaking around with a sniper rifle who decided to take a shot at him would be sacrificing themselves, considering the strength of Isabella, and Gloria's speed. That was true for any hunter who decided to try and take out a vampire at long distance, who had a buddy with them. Hopefully.

He missed not having to have a buddy with him on his walks. He missed doing his own solo hunts; not that he did them often, but the Prince and Julias had pushed for it, and he'd gotten good at it. Approaching someone in a dark alley? Easy. Flirting with a stranger at a bar? Eh, still really damn hard. He doubted he'd ever be comfortable doing that. He preferred making eye contact with them at a distance in an alley, using Dominate, and pulling them into his mental embrace.

But since the buddy system had been put in place, he'd only been feeding on Ashley and Julee. That was great, and fun, since it almost

always included sex. Both girls had been delighting him with sexual romps with Antoinette to join them, or to supervise like it was a wrestling match. But, he kind of missed hunting. There was a thrill to overpowering prey, and he had to assume it was an instinctual desire of Kindred. An animal wasn't happy if it didn't get to satisfy its instinctual desires, and while that may have been a complicated question for humans, for vampires it seemed moderately straightforward: collect, herd, and hunt humans for their blood.

He really wanted to sink his fangs into something. It didn't used to be like that. Before, he wanted blood, sure, and he knew what it felt like to be starving hungry, so there was a desire to get blood to avoid that. There hadn't been an innate urge to hunt though, like, something bubbling up in his veins that stirred, demanding he settle this desire; until recently, that is. Julias had warned him about this, the Beast building up inside him, threatening to overwhelm and take control.

At the moment, it was just a quiet, slightly annoyed house cat. Hopefully it'd stay like that.

Julias had shared him with him stories about Kindred who had succumbed to the Beast, becoming mindless savages that had to be put down. Apparently it was a consequence of siring too often, or creating too many ghouls, though Julias told him the most frequent cause was by giving into the Beast's violent desires with reckless abandon.

Reckless abandon. The Beast was something you should unleash, let it run rampant, let it do its thing and overflow your body with its power and desires. It was a scary thought, especially because he knew it happened to him twice. That first night he was Kindred, and he'd killed Mrs. Pavala. The second time, it was against the hunters, and he'd been in far more control; and yet, not. Would he have been able to stop himself? The rush of it, the thrill, the power, it—



“Jack!”

“W-What? What?”

“You ok?” Gloria said. She’d snapped her fingers in front of his face, apparently, from how she was lowering her hand. He hadn’t heard it.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Jack was standing between the two of them, walking down the sidewalk. Must have drifted off in his thoughts.

“I asked if you were going to be doing all the talking in this meeting,” she said.

“Um, yeah. I mean, if you want to say something, go ahead. It’s not like an Invictus meeting. Ever talk to the Carthians?”

“On occasion,” Isabella said, frowning. Yeah, predictable that she’d hate the way Carthians behaved.

“Very similar.” Nodding, Jack glanced up to see if Mulder and Sculley were visible. Nope. Good. Better if no one could see them. “Just, don’t take it personally if they insult you. They’re either testing you to see how you react, or they’re kidding.”

Her frown faded away, replaced by what he could only guess was stone cold disdain masked with the harsh ruthlessness of a lawyer. Not exactly what he was looking for.

He rotated his shoulders, straightened himself up, shoulders back, and opened the door to the crummy apartment building. Introducing two new Kindred wouldn’t be too hard, he hoped. Discussing the list of sweeper teams, and trying to negotiate who should go where, would not be so easy, especially since Avery had priority. She could — and would — overrule him at whim, and the best he could do was suggest what Kindred would get along with which Uratha. And it wasn’t like he was an expert at that, either.

Sighing, he knocked on the door of the apartment. Hopefully they wouldn't mind him bringing friends.

"Come in," Clara said. Figures she'd be there, Avery's second in charge and all that.

"Hey Clara," he said, opening the door. "This is Isabella, and this is Gloria. How ... how ... what's going on?"

Raising a brow, he looked around at the crowd of Uratha; looked like six of the pack were there. All of them were watching the news.

"You watch the news, Jack?" Avery said from the couch. The news was up, muted, talking about some accident or something.

"Not since ... not since an incident with a woman named Pavala, no. Anything pertinent gets filtered into the Invictus network, though, usually before it ends up on the actual news." Pertinent usually meant something in Dolareido that affected territory, and since Invictus owned most things in the city, police included, they were on top of things that meant anything to the Kindred.

Clara sighed, and winced as she looked down. It was like something with claws had latched onto her face, and was cutting down through her eyes and cheeks, nose and lips, as gravity dragged it down.

His phone buzzed; someone had sent him a message. He didn't check it. "What's going on?"

Everyone except Clara and Avery backed away, putting distance between themselves, the TV, and Jack; what distance was available in a crummy apartment, anyway.

But, with the cold weight falling on everyone, it might as well have been across the Grand Canyon.

Clara stepped forward. “You ... um, I—”

He stepped back. He recognized those faces. Ripped out of the black matter of his brain, out of dead, buried memories, those faces came up and taunted him. He knew those faces from nightmares that had faded into blurry memories, and only now were resurrected.

“What’s going on?” He looked back to Isabella and Gloria, but both of them looked confused, too. They didn’t have those faces.

“Something’s happened,” Clara said, that same face cutting through to his fucking insides. Stop. Stop it. “We were watching the news, and—”

His phone started buzzing. Someone was calling him. He always set the stupid thing to buzz-only while out on a mission. *Zzzt. Zzzt. Zzzt.*

He didn’t answer it. “What’s going on?” Fuck the phone. Fuck those faces. Fuck those eyes, the pity, the weight in their gaze. It was crushing. It was suffocating. Stop it.

He was a kid again, a stupid young boy, standing in his kitchen beside his crying sister as his mom explained to him his dad was dead. It was the same fucking eyes filled with pity that cut into him like someone cutting through his fucking ribs with a chainsaw, trying to get his heart out the hard way.

“Jack,” Clara said, unable to look at him. Just like then, just like fucking then. Stop it. “Is ... is your mom’s name Samantha?”

Please no, not again.

“Y ... Yes...”

She winced again. If his heart still beat, it'd have stopped. He wanted to puke, but there was nothing to puke.

“—cent stabbing on Richmond street has left the district in shock.” The news cut through the thick silence, and Avery sighed as she leaned forward, arms dangling off her knees. “No one knows how this happened, but the police believe it was a mugging gone wrong. Samantha Terry is currently in critical condition, while her daughter Mary, lies dead. Commissioner Landerson has this to say.” Silence again, as Avery re-muted it, emphasizing beautifully the immutable fact of what he'd just heard.

He stared at the TV as someone wearing a police uniform handled a bunch of mics in their face. Dolareido was a big city, and murder happened. But stabbings? In the day? It looked like it was in some alley between buildings, something Dolareido was filled with, but no one got stabbed in the middle of the fucking day.

Wow. He couldn't imagine how horrible it'd be for any family member who had to hear this. Horrible.

He looked around again. Everyone was trying to not stare at him, each making small glances his way before looking at the floor. The only person who was looking at him directly was Clara. She looked sad. Why was she sad?

Oh, right. That was his sister, Mary, and his mother, Samantha, on the news. Stabbed.

It was a distant noise, like someone trying to yell something to him through a blizzard, across a canyon. The wind wouldn't let him hear it. Something inside was trying to talk him, reach out and speak to him, inform him his sister was dead, and his mother was dying. All noise, lost in the snowfall and howling wind in his mind.

He was going numb. He couldn't be angry. Couldn't be angry, or upset, or anything. Numb. Cold. He blinked at Clara, and looked

down at his fingers, before he looked back at the TV again. They were still talking, and shots of the crime scene were spliced into the interview.

He knew what was happening. He knew what he was feeling. This wasn't the proper reaction. Wasn't he upset by their eyes a moment ago? The way everyone had been looking at him, reminding him of the face of everyone else, when he found out his father was dead, where was the wretched fear and agony now? It left him. Gone. Now all he felt, was numb.

"I ... I uh ... should ... probably go check ... on her. Samantha, my mom, I mean." He half turned, before he stopped, and looked to Avery. "Um, the sweep teams, I'll—"

"I'll handle it," Isabella said. She avoided his eyes. Everyone did.

"Thanks." Nodding, he turned to leave, but stopped. "Gloria, you should probably stay with Isabella, so she has a partner when she leaves."

"What about you?" Gloria said.

Clara stepped in. "I'll stick with Jack. I'm going back to my apartment, anyway."

Nodding again, he opened the door and made for the street. No one said anything, no one stopped him, no one interrupted his escape. Whatever had happened in that apartment, it was cold, heavy, and he had to get away from it, like stepping out of a walk-in freezer.

Clara followed behind him, and beside him once they were outside.

"I hope Isabella doesn't cause trouble," he said. "She can be pretty aggressive and cold when she wants to be."

“Jack...”

“And Gloria, she’s quiet and passive. She’ll likely let Isabella say whatever she wants. Isabella’s ancilla, of course, so she has pretty huge seniority and rank.”

“Jack.”

“I’ll call us a car.” He looked at his phone, and—oh right, he’d been messaged. Something from Julias; looked like his sire wanted to talk to him about something. That’s who the call was from, too. It could wait. He dialed up a driver from the Invictus. “Hey, need a pick up at Brent and Farrington Street.”

“Come on, Jack, I’m trying to talk to you.”

“Why?” He looked up at the woman, and managed maybe half a second of eye contact before he looked back to the street, and put his hands in his pockets. “This sort of stuff happens. All Kindred eventually leave their families behind, right? Or should have immediately, like I should have. Like I did, sort of.” He tried to look up at her again. Those eyes. He could see the cemetery in her eyes. He could hear the eulogy. Empty words in the cold, metal shell of his skull.

He looked up for Mulder and Scully. Two crows sat upon a power line some distance away, and he squinted for a moment to make sure it was them. It was. Nodding, he stepped closer to the curb as he waited for the driver.

“Jack, you—”

“Don’t look at me that way.” He managed another glance to her, and found those same eyes. Like a smell that brings back a deeply embedded memory, or hearing a song for the first time in ten years, it brought up imagery he’d long forgotten. Ting ting. The images bounced around in his empty, metal, numb shell.

He was aware what was happening to him. He was well aware he was intellectualizing what should have been an emotional response. He was suppressing a need to mourn.

He could mourn later.

“I don’t—”

“People die all the time,” he said.

“Not family.”

Shaking his head, he managed a weak smile at the werewolf beside him. “They’re not my family anymore, they’re—”

The world stopped, and spun around as he fell. Numb as he was, he felt that. She’d punched him.

He rolled over onto his back, and stared up at the woman. Uh oh. She glowered down at him, hands in fists at her sides, shaking.

“You don’t get to say that shit.”

“I don’t—” Shit! She picked him up, held up him by the collar of his jacket, feet tangling above the sidewalk, and she stared at him eye to eye. She only had an inch or two of height on him, but that felt like plenty when someone was holding you in the air.

“I don’t know what it’s like to be a fucking vampire, to be undead. I don’t know what it’s like to not be allowed to see my family anymore. But I fucking know what it’s like to lose family. Stephanie’s death is just the tip of the iceberg. I’ve lost so many people. I’ve lost pack members, and I’ve lost blood. I lost my brother, and he was no werewolf.” She brought him in close, until he could feel the heat of her breath. “And it hurt. It always fucking hurt. It really god damn fucking hurt, right to the fucking bone. I

woke up in the morning and all I could feel in every inch of my body, was misery.”

He gulped as he stared into her brown eyes. She was breathing, and he was not; a strange juxtaposition, and it made the fury in her gaze almost painful.

“I ... I don’t ... I don’t know what I ... should do.”

Sighing, she set him down, and looked over her shoulder to the oncoming driver. “Do whatever you want, just don’t dismiss how fucking real this is. Get angry, get sad, do something.”

“Easier said than done. I was a just a kid when my dad died. I ... it ... it’s all the same, the fucking same. A giant, random upheaval of everything I knew, out of nowhere, and suddenly my life is ... is...”

“Flipped-turned upside down?”

He choked on a small laugh, and shook his head. “You’re lucky I watch old TV sometimes.”

She smiled at him. Warm. Her eyes had changed. “We didn’t handle it well. Avery shouldn’t have just ... dumped it on you like that, turning on the TV.”

As the car pulled up, Jack took a moment to check his suit for tears or dirt. A bit of dirt. Sighing, he brushed it off his butt, but he knew he was just dodging the issue. Numb. Intellectualizing.

“I ... I—”

“Let’s talk about it when we get to the hospital.”

“Aren’t you going to your apartment?”

“I’m sticking with you.”



No, don't. Leave me alone. I want to be alone.

His eyes found his reflection in the car window. Glass shattered in his mind, audible, ear-splitting, shredding through his thoughts. He grabbed the roof of the car, and glared at the reflection, at his dry eyes, at the empty, dead creature looking back at him. A stupid, lonely creature, that pulled away when it was sad, pulled away from others, and pulled away into its mind. Held people at bay, kept them at arm's length. Just like Jacob had said he did when Jack's dad died.

You're smarter, this time. Learn from your fucking mistakes.

"... thanks." He slid into the back seat, motioned for Clara to join him, and pat the driver's seat on the back. "To South Center Hospital."

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He stood at the door to the hospital. People coming, people going, occasional people with tears in their eyes, or joy as they wheeled someone out in a wheelchair. The hospital had a rear entrance for their doctors and ambulances, so no one at the front had to deal with the far-too-real trauma of bodies on stretchers and the trail of blood that kine left when punctured.

His sister was in there, in a morgue. His mom was in there too, probably hooked up to a respirator, dying, a bunch of holes in her gut. Gulping again, he looked to Clara beside him. She was looking at him, but the pity was gone; thank god. He couldn't take that, couldn't deal with that, couldn't handle it as it drowned him in his memories. It made him want to go numb, do anything to not feel it cut through his fucking ribs with a chainsaw.

"... thank you," he said. "For ... not ... not looking at me like that anymore."

“It was my mistake. I ... yeah. I’ve been in that boat, a lot of us have, and we should know better.” She stepped around calling out what it was, the way a gaze could shred a person.

He was still a little numb. The car ride to the hospital wasn’t long enough to snap him out of it. He could barely tell what he was doing. Walking? Autopilot. Breathing? Didn’t need to. Going to see his mother in the hospital? His mother in critical condition. Words. Empty words. Couldn’t appreciate them, couldn’t feel them, couldn’t picture them. Empty words in an empty skull of cold metal.

He stepped into the hospital.

“Jack,” Julius said. He was standing by the desk, and as people and nurses walked around him, the man looked him in the eyes. No pity, no worry or sadness, nothing like that. Just a solid, hard gaze. Thank you.

“Sire.”

“Your mother is in critical condition. Fifth floor. I’ll take you to her.”

He nodded and fell in beside him. The one person who’d been with him from the very start, and the most stable person in his life. Father figure much? He didn’t really think of Julius in those terms, but it was hard to deny the comparison.

“You ... you can go home if you want to, Clara,” Jack said.

She smiled at him and came up behind him. With a slow step, she fell in line with the two vampires, and looked around as they walked. “Been a long time since I’ve been in a hospital.”

The larger Ventrue growled as he glanced over his shoulder. “It’s not a tour.”

“Didn’t think it was.”

Julias looked upset with Clara’s presence. But Jack needed a buddy if he was going to make the trip from the Carthian half of South Side; and he liked Clara. He liked her for the same reason he liked Julias right now, not giving him those death eyes anymore.

“Does Antoi ... the Prince know about this yet?” he said.

“She doesn’t monitor the news the way the Invictus does. But she’ll probably find out on her own before the night is done, if the past is any indicator.”

Nodding, he looked around at the various rooms they were passing on the way to the elevator. Perfectly normal on this floor for people to be walking around, and once they went to the higher floors where people weren’t supposed to just be walking around, Julias would probably use Dominate to make kine leave them alone. Good.

Hospitals. He hated hospitals. He supposed anyone who had a family member die hated hospitals. Something about the cold lifelessness of them. A place that was supposed to save lives was so sterile — for good reason, of course — that it made everything seem like it was solid metal and plastic, the people inside included. The smells were distinct, and now all he could think of when he smelled them, was the same black and white images he’d tried so hard to forget. Walking through its taupe hallways, and following the lines taped on the floor, was a walk through memory lane, a walk he never thought he’d have to experience again.

The elevator. Getting closer. And after this, he was going to go see his sister’s body. Mary’s body. A dead body.

He clenched his teeth together, hard, and ground them against each other until he felt his fangs emerge. His fists tightened at his sides, and his shoulders started to shake. No one had said it, no one

wanted to say it, or needed to say it, but it was on all their minds. Someone had stabbed his mother, stabbed his sister, and in all likelihood, it was the hunters. In all likelihood, it was Angela.

“Is the building secure?” Jack said.

“Jessy and Eric are outside. Vanna is on a rooftop, along with a few thrall snipers spread out on different rooftops.” Julias checked his phone, and brought up an image of a city blueprint for a moment, likely checking unit positions.

Jack nodded. He could always trust Julias to figure things out before he did, and take the proper precautions.

“I guess everyone knows.”

“In the Invictus, yes. If the hunters are responsible, it might be a trap, so I made sure to inform everyone. The implications are dangerous, especially if the hunters think they can use this situation to force you to lower your guard.”

“Angela and Jeremiah would have to be psychopaths to think they can attack us here,” he said.

His sire nodded, but looked down at him, frown etched into his face, the same frown Jack was building. “Aren’t they?”

“... they are.”

Clara sighed, and nodded, but said nothing. He was happy he accepted her request to join him on this journey, terrifying a prospect as it was. He was going to see his mom, terribly injured, potentially dying, potentially dead, and other people were going to be there with him. Every instinct, every reflex, every fucking inch of him wanted to do that alone. And he was sure he’d get the chance. But this time, maybe this time, maybe, just fucking maybe, he could

not become a reserved asshole like Jacob knew he had become when his dad died.

Christ, Mary. Dead. How much she must have looked for someone to lean on when Dad died, and he'd been too preoccupied with closing himself off to everyone to be there for her. And now she was dead. The last time he saw her, he was wiping her memories of their encounter. All the memories he had to hold onto of her, were things he'd tainted.

Hopefully he didn't have to ruin this last connection.

Ding. With a sigh, he stepped out into the hall, and followed after Julias. The world went silent, and all Jack could hear was the clop clop of their expensive shoes on the hard floor. Some nurses walked by, and some others tried to stop them. Julias made a small hand wave, and said a few words Jack couldn't hear above the ringing inside the metal walls of his mind. The nurses nodded and moved around them, and the three of them kept going. There weren't too many doctors going around at this time of night, near midnight, but for each that inquired about the three intruders, Julias dismissed them all without issue. And knowing Julias's skill, it was likely the doctors and nurses wouldn't remember them when the night was over.

Vampires wiping memories. Was that how ghost stories started?

He stood before the door. Closed. Was that good? If nurses and doctors were pouring in and out of the room, yelling and screaming orders and whatnot, that'd be bad. But maybe she was dead, and had already been removed from the room, or soon to be. Maybe she was better, and conscious, and she'd see them come in? Maybe—

Julias snapped his fingers, and summoned the nearest person. "How's the patient in 534?"

“Still in critical condition, but stable, for now. Unconscious. We’re not sure what level of brain damage she’s suffered, and—” Her voice faded away, lost in the silence that soaked Jack’s shell. She was alive, but stable. Could be dying. Might. Might not. Murdered. Maybe not. But, at least he could visit her.

Paralyzed. He tried to push the door open, but cement blocks were tied to his hands. He wanted to go in, check on her, see how she was doing, but it was all pointless. The fuck was he going to do? She might live, she might not, and all he’d be able to do is stare and mourn, lament, maybe cry if he dared let his walls down; fat chance of that ever happening, not now.

A glance over his shoulder at Clara, and a slow, quiet nod from her reminded him he was here for more than his mother, though. He was here for himself. Selfish as it was, he had to get through this.

He pushed open the door, and walked in.

There was something about the drama involved in someone’s death that TV shows, that movies, that all media failed to ever truly convey. But, as he stood there, looking down at his mom lying in bed, a respirator working her lungs, an IV in her veins, and dozens of wires attached to her in various places, he could understand why. The sheer overwhelming sense of silent weight, of sinking, invisible dread, felt strangely similar to drowning, drowning in nothingness.

Some wires were on her fingers, and others were sneaked under her hospital gown, plugged into the beeping machine beside the bed, though most of her was covered in a blanket of that hospital green. He hated that green. And the sky blue of the hospital gown was offensive. The muted whites of the walls and plastic machines, the metal bed frame, all of it triggered disgust. And fear.

There might as well have been a giant, immovable blanket of black death draped over his mom. He wanted to run away from it,

from his mother, and the memory dragging itself out of the grave like a fucking zombie.

He looked over his shoulder. Julias and Clara had followed in after him, but he could see they were both hesitant to actually close the door behind him.

“It’s ... ok,” he said. “Come in.”

“Jack,” Julias said, “you can—”

“I’m serious. Come in.” No harshness to his voice, but no life either. He could have a moment alone with his mom later. For now, Clara had called him on his bullshit, and while the sting of her voice and fist were fresh in his mind, he was going to let other people, people he trusted and liked, in a little closer, when every part of him wanted to lock itself inside the metal walls of his skull, away from everything else.

“She’s lost weight,” Julias said, “since I last saw her.”

Samantha was average height for a woman, maybe a couple inches shorter, and normally she had long brown hair; it was shorter now.

“You ... right.” Nodding, he came up close, and stared down at his mom’s closed eyes. He’d forgotten that Julias had seen her before, talked to her, on a couple of occasions when Jack was doing his internship with a different company. “Amanda noticed that, too. We think she ... she was trying to get herself back on her feet, maybe start dating again.”

He nodded as he came in closer, and stood beside him. “She looks good.”

Clara came in a little closer as well, winced when she looked at Samantha’s face, and glanced between Jack and her. Yeah, Jack

could see himself in Mom's face. If she opened her eyes, he'd be looking into big, green eyes, like his own. His weren't so big right now; could barely open his eyes half way.

Mom had cut her hair. Nice and short, to the ear, with a bunch of curls put into it. Definitely something Mary had her do. Of course, the curls were ruined and the hair was a mess, wrecked by the hell and rescue she'd gone through. The tube coming out of her throat was large, and looked horrible. She was pale as hell. She looked like a vampire who wasn't Blushing Life.

A vampire.

He gulped on nothing, lifted his head, and stared down at his mom. Samantha Terry. With a heavy sigh, he leaned in close, and put his hand on her forehead. Alive. Warm. Unlike him.

He looked Julias's way, and his sire met his gaze with a small shrug. No need to say it, he was thinking the same thing. Siring her was a choice, if he wanted to save her. But, he wasn't old enough to sire her himself; it was a major drain on a Kindred's mind and body when they sired someone. Julias had sired him well over a year ago, but it'd be way too large a request to make him, to sire again so soon. And it'd be a deeply rude, offensive, inconsiderate thing to ask of another Kindred. He didn't need anyone to tell him that, he just knew it.

Turning her into a ghoul was another option. Would that be so bad? Kindred blood, infused with vitae, might be enough to pull her out of this. Maybe. Very much a maybe. Probably not, considering what the nurse said about brain damage. As much as ghouls were more durable than normal kine, they couldn't get up from injuries like this. One of the doctors said she'd been stabbed thirteen times, like a scene out of the fucking Red Wedding, and that alone meant death to a ghoul usually, let alone fucking brain damage.



And turning her into a ghoul would mean she'd be infatuated with whoever owned her. Antoinette asked her ghouls if they wanted to be ghouls before turning them. Far as he knew, Jessy did the same thing with hers. He also didn't know any ghouls who were connected to their masters, before the change. And in Dolareido, it was proper recourse to always ask them, bring them into the fold gently. He doubted Viktor or Lucas did, but, he wasn't them. He was not them. He was not Viktor.

He started pacing. Couldn't hold still, not for long, not next to this. Clara raised a brow and watched him, but Julias understood. Let the young guy think. He had to think. Feelings could come later.

"She ... she ... she might die." The words bounced around in his empty skull, echoing against the cold metal. "That may ... may happen. I ... will have to accept that. And I ... I won't..." Clenching his fists until his fingers ached, he came up to the foot of his mom's bed, and set his grip on the metal bars. "When my dad died, I really ... really fucked that up. I won't do that again."

Julias nodded, and Clara managed a smile before she opened her mouth. But Julias, thank god for Julias, raised a hand high enough to cut her off. A small finger wave was enough to convince Clara to not speak.

He took a deep breath. Useless. He took another anyway, hoping that maybe some vestigial biological awareness would calm him down with the breath. Nothing. He stared at his mom, his nearly dead mom, stared at the big tube taped into her mouth, at the way her hair was ruined, at the wires sticking out of her, at how still she was. This wasn't the woman he saw in the window a week ago, a mom who was getting over her horrible past; no one could be expected to get over losing both a husband and a son. But, she had been. With the help of her daughter, she was putting her life back together.

And now she was in a fucking hospital, with thirteen fucking stab wounds.

Thirteen. Thirteen! He was going to kill Angela when he found her, rip out her innards, dance in the rain of her blood-spurting cries, and spit on her face when she fell to her knees, dying. He was going to stomp on her skull and smile as it cracked under his heel. No, those deaths were far too quick. He was going to tie her to a chair, summon an army of rats, and invite them to slowly eat her. Nibble, nibble, slowly bite away her flesh. First the fingers. Then the toes. He'd tie belts around her limbs to prevent her from bleeding to death. He'd find drugs to inject into her to make sure she didn't pass out. He'd—

Julias put a hand on his shoulder, and Jack snapped his head up, as if someone had popped a balloon next to his ear. He looked down at the bed railing in his grip, and removed his hands. The metal was bent to fit the shape of his fingers.

Sighing, he came around the bed again, and leaned in over his mom once more. So pale. He forced down the rising terror in his throat, and kissed her on the forehead.

“Let's ... go see my sister.”

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It was easier to be in a room full of dead people, than seeing his mom hooked up to tubes and wires. There were a few metal tables around on wheels, of the proper length and width to hold a body, but they were moved out of the way. All the small doors on the walls were closed. The LEDs above were plain white, and the computer was off. A cold, quiet, dead room.

Clara sniffed a few times, and walked over to one door. “You sure ... you don't want to call the Prince?”

He looked down and away, and clenched his fists at his sides. Antoinette. God, if he saw her, he'd break down. He'd shatter into a million pieces. He'd grab onto her and cry and scream and whisper 'Mom' and 'Mary' into her suit as she held him. She was the only person in the fucking universe he had ever truly let into his mind, into the emotional part of him, and if there was anyone who could demolish the walls he was putting up in his mind, it'd be her.

He couldn't handle that, not yet. He wasn't numb anymore, and that was good enough.

"Maybe tomorrow night. But for now, she probably doesn't know about this, and I'd like to keep it that way. I'll ... I'll tell her, when I go to her tower tonight before sunrise." If he told her just before sunrise, maybe he'd be able to keep that conversation short.

Why was he avoiding it? Why didn't he want her to know? Fucking coward. He knew, he fucking knew, if Antoinette looked at him with eyes of pity, of sadness and empathy, he'd crumble. Others would call that mourning, and dealing with your emotions. And they'd be right. But for now, it wasn't something he could handle, and he didn't think it'd be a good thing to take on when they had bigger fish to fry.

That wasn't everything. A small part of him was terrified he might hate her, for looking at him with pity. He wasn't in a rush to find out.

They were losing night hours, and with hunters ruining their lives, his life, he didn't have hours to lose. He needed to get back out there, join the sweeper teams, work on resolving any arising issues with the Uratha and Kindred teams, go talk to Azamel and see where she wanted to put her three, and above all else, find Jeremiah. They'd already taken time to recuperate after the last run in with him, and now it was time to find the hunters so they could

strike first. Every moment he was in this hospital, was a moment wasted on a personal indulgence.

His dead sister and dying mother were a personal indulgence. Christ, that did sound like something Viktor would say.

Stop. Thinking. About. Viktor.

He stepped up to Clara, and grit his teeth as he read the name on the small metal door. Mary Terry. A small grin forced its way onto his lips, despite his best efforts to keep it suppressed. It was a funny name, Mary Terry, and when he was young, he remembered the other kids used to tease her about it. Course, Mary was an outgoing person, fun, high spirited, and she just laughed it off. She was more like their mother, happy and laughing, never letting other people bring her down.

Then Dad died. Jack had pushed her away, and she got into the nasty sort of shit social people did when they were depressed. It was a miracle she came back at all.

Then Jack died. Only the women in the Terry family were left, and Jack got to watch through a fucking window, the fall and rise of his sister and mother from the pits of what must have been suicidal depression. They kept each other going, supported each other, and from what he could see through glass, became closer than ever.

Then Mary died. If his mom lived, there was no hope for her. She'd kill herself. He didn't want to think that way, and he couldn't be sure it was true, but the human mind could only take that level of pain so many times. To ask a parent to accept the disappearance of one child, and then to accept the death of another, their only remaining offspring, not even two years later? Parents were not meant to bury their children.

He pulled open the door, and slid out the metal bed. A white sheet covered a body. The final frontier was nothing more than a thin

white sheet, cold from being inside a fridge.

“Jack,” Clara said, “you don’t have to.”

Julias shook his head, dismissing her words. “Yes, he does.”

Yes, he did. He pulled the blanket down from her head, and exposed her face.

He was looking at a vampire. An unmoving vampire. If she turned her head to look at him, he would not have been surprised. Pale skin, thin, highlighting the structure of her bones. But it was still her, just a vampire version of her. Dead, like him. Whenever he didn’t Blush Life, this was what he looked like; especially when sleeping during the day. A still, unmoving corpse. Not breathing, deathly pale and sunken cheeks, eyes closed with no movement under her eyelids. It was a face any vampire saw when they looked in the mirror.

He reached out, and touched her forehead. Nothing. No movement, no reaction, nothing. A lifeless, unmoving bag of bones.

He could almost hear the sound of her voice.

“How many times was she stabbed?” he asked.

“Doctor said seven times.” Julias kept his voice cold, curt, to the point, and spared him no sympathy. The man knew him too well.

Jack managed a small chuckle, and slid his knuckles along Mary’s cheek. “And yet Mom’s the one that survived.”

“I ... is that a bad thing?” Clara said.

“Yes,” Julias said, “it is.”

Jack looked over his shoulder at his sire. He knew Julias hadn’t felt this sort of pain, but the man was a century old, and had no

doubt seen it before. Live long enough and you could probably map out the human mind.

Maybe that's why he was so terrified of talking to Antoinette about this? His pain was nothing new to her. She'd have advice, things to offer him, and she'd do everything to try and soothe his wounds. He didn't want that right now. Like a fucking moron, he wanted the pain; better than going completely numb. And he almost had, before Clara snapped him out of it.

He looked at the werewolf for a moment, just enough time to get a snapshot of her face. She adapted quickly. No more pitiful gazes from her. She figured out what he wanted fast, and for the life of him, he couldn't see Antoinette giving him that hard edge. The Prince could be brutal, but with him, about personal things, heavy things? He doubted it.

Stop thinking about it. You can tell her later; or she'll find out herself. No doubt she would. Hell, she might know right now, and was letting you come to her. Maybe she did actually understand he needed a little space right now, and he was being a fucking idiot. He'd find out tonight.

He leaned in, kissed his sister on the forehead, and pulled the blanket up over her head. "Let's go."

"Go?" Clara said.

"Yeah, go. We have a job to do."

"Jack, you can't be serious. You just had a huge loss, and—"

He looked over his shoulder and frowned at her. For a moment, she might have been pitying him with her eyes, but if she had been, it was gone by the time he looked at her. Instead, when she met his eyes, she pulled her head back a bit, and blinked at him, several times, surprised.

He was giving her a death stare.

Sighing, he shook his head for a moment to dislodge the expression. “Sorry, I ... We can’t put the sweeps on hold because of this. If anything, this means we shouldn’t have taken as long as we did to recover from the previous encounter.”

“Assuming the hunters are to blame,” she said.

“Thirteen and seven stab wounds. That’s something Angela would do. Were their belongings taken, Julias?”

“No.”

“Then my mom and sister were hunted down, and assassinated. Angela and Jeremiah are to blame.” With a snarl, he swung the door of the morgue open, and started marching. “I’m going to hook back up with Isabella and Gloria, and go see Azamel.”

“I’m on your sweeper team,” Clara said, “so I might as well join you.”

“Oh. That why you came here with me?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.” He tried to smile at her. It didn’t happen. Best he could manage was to not give her that death stare he was trying to stop doing. She came to provide him support, be there for him, and he let her in. The least he could fucking do was stop looking at her like she was Angela.

“Give me a short report before the night is done, “ Julias said as he joined them. “I’ll see what footage I can find around this incident. Got a team of thralls pouring through available options.”

“Thanks.” He nodded at his sire, and continued along as Julias stayed behind. The man pulled out his phone and started a phone call, and from how it started, Jack figured he was calling the council to report.

They met eyes for a moment, and Julias gave him a solid, stern nod. Jack returned it. No one else would have understood. No one else would have known exactly what Jack wanted, and needed, immediately.

---

He was surround by women.

He looked beside him, at Isabella and Gloria. Isabella was a powerful Daeva, and had learned to Obfuscate, to use the Cloak of Night to a passable degree, despite it being outside a Daeva’s natural talent pool. She was a deadly creature, committed, and focused. Gloria was a quiet, shy ditz, short black hair and an average height and build. She blended perfectly into a crowd; just like a Mekhet wanted. And it was her they were relying on for their sneaky endeavors.

Clara walked ahead of them, each step purposeful and calculated. He might as well have been watching the Discovery channel. Maybe David Attenborough would chime in? ‘Notice, how the deadly female handles her movements with a more specific grace, than her male counterpart. The werewolf breathes deep the air, using her unparalleled sense of smell, to hunt for prey. She is a patient hunter, and practiced. The rest of the pack follow her lead, and by observing the wise alpha female, they will learn what approaches to utilize, and what mistakes, to avoid.’

Not even Attenborough could lighten his mood. Sighing, he looked behind him. Athalia. He was hoping Azamel wouldn’t do this, wouldn’t put any of her troupe with him, but the fucking old woman was too damn smart. Athalia wasn’t going to let him do what he wanted if he ... when he got his hands on Angela.



She looked uncomfortable. Good. Your daughter is the reason my sister is dead and my mom is in a fucking coma.

That wasn't fair, and he knew it. Athalia had tried to defeat Angela, tried to help him and his team when they were rescuing Jessy, and had nearly succeeded. She'd done everything he could have expected of her, and more. The fact she'd begged him to spare Angela at the last moment was hardly something he could blame her for.

But it was still her daughter, and no matter how logical he was, no matter how much he could set aside his emotions, he had just come back from looking his dead sister and dying mother in the face, kissing them goodbye, and went out on a hunting mission. He couldn't help but hate Athalia. And that made him a hypocrite. Flip the switch? Like he'd told others to do? Easier said than done.

At least he wasn't numb anymore. Now, he was boiling. Instead of cold metal walls between him and the people around him, there was fire, lava, and boiling blood scalding his withered veins.

He probably seemed like a colossal asshole right now. If that meant people would leave him alone, or at least be direct with him and not treat him like he was made of porcelain, all the better.

"Where we going?" Gloria said.

Clara nodded forward, into the shadows of the tunnels they walked. "This network of tunnels is stupid complex. Apparently, there are tunnels that no one uses anymore?"

"Correct," Isabella said. "The kine use none, but beyond that, there are tunnels so old they have been abandoned by everyone. The elders thought it would be important for future safety. If there are tunnels that fall out of favor, there are more tunnels that can be used when someone needs to hide."

Jack nodded. “If anyone knows these tunnels, it’s Damien.”

The werewolf agreed, nodding as she rounded one of the curving tunnels. “Text from Avery said she put Matt on his team. He’s got muscle if he finds shit and can’t get out.”

“And Fiona is with them.” Shrugging, Athalia pulled ahead, and started walking beside Clara. Didn’t want to be in the back alone, not with Jack right in front of her, probably. Too uncomfortable. He agreed.

“We need two teams down here then?” he said.

The werewolf nodded again, and glanced back before continuing on. “Too many tunnels for us to cover. Your elders went overboard I think, cause there’s enough underground network in this fucking city to house an entire city’s worth of people.”

“That was their goal, probably. Antoinette thinks far ahead, very far ahead, more than most elders. I wouldn’t put it past her to have a back up plan for if everyone, humans included, needed to go underground to hide from an apocalypse on the surface.” Considering her age, and considering it hadn’t been so long since the Cold War, she’d no doubt felt justified in that preparation. He would have, too.

Sniffing the air deep, Clara sighed and shook her head. “I don’t smell anything but a few vamps, and us.”

“Nosferatu hide in these tunnels,” Isabella said. “Liliana and Robert”—Bob to everyone else but the icy Daeva—“may sleep nearby.”

Jack pulled out his phone and checked the city blueprint. With a few taps, he had the layout of the tunnels highlighted. So many old tunnels, and while the subways were all abandoned, there were tunnels below those that had never been used by the public. Those

tunnels connected to the old subway, the newer-but-still-abandoned subway, and the sewers.

To any creature that loved the dark and didn't need to eat or drink, like a vampire, such a place was a haven. Any vampire not engaging in combat or using their disciplines regularly didn't need to feed often. If they were, or using the Blush of Life frequently, regular feeding was required, but still not nearly as often as a kine needed water. Deep, complex tunnel networks were perfect for vampires, and other monsters. They weren't perfect for humans, far from it. But these hunters had a monster with them, and that changed the game.

There was a very real chance they'd run into the hunters down here, and he was looking forward to it.

"We need to address the elephant in the room," Isabella said. Oh fuck, not now. "The attack against Jack's kine family was likely done by Angela and Jeremiah, based on all reports I've read about their psychological profiles. The hunters in their employ, I can't imagine are that bloodthirsty as to kill innocent kine. Those two psychopaths likely acted on their own, but to what end?"

"Trying to draw me out, I imagine," Jack said. It was easier to think of it like that, to address the situation as if it was a puzzle to solve, like it was a scene on a predictable crime show, than to think this was happening to him. Maybe that was Isabella's goal? If it was, she was a nicer woman than he figured. She did have a bunch of acting students under her wing, so maybe it wasn't so radical an idea, if she was capable of keeping so many people cooperative.

"Then I would have to assume this was an act on Angela's part, and not Jeremiah's," she said.

Athalia coughed, and everyone looked her way. "If you're going to assume Angela's the vengeful one of those two, think again.

Jeremiah's gone to hell and back because he has a grudge against Azamel specifically."

"It's an Ahab situation," Jack said, "far as I can gather. Azamel is Jeremiah's Moby Dick. Unless you know more, Athalia." Keep the venom out of your voice, Jack. Athalia's not to blame. She's not to blame. Repeat it until it fucking sinks in.

"It's close enough. Azamel has a long and varied history, and the destruction she has left in her wake has scarred more than a few souls."

"Explain to me," Clara said, growling as she turned around, bringing the group to a halt, "why we're helping her, then?"

Jack put up a hand. "In the story, Ahab was the psychopath that got his crew killed, with his obsession in killing a whale that bit off his leg. He wasn't a valiant hero or anything, just a powerful madman devoured by rage." He did not like how real that statement was. But, it did give him an idea. "I have to wonder if these hunters are actually with Jeremiah and Angela on this hunt, committed, devoted. In Moby Dick, Ishmael saw the man's descent into madness. It was something he was aware of, could see, and so could members of his crew."

Gloria tilted her head. "You ... you think you can talk reason to the crew."

"Maybe. Unlikely. Like in the story, they all died except for Ishmael. His crew followed him into the maw of death, despite plenty of forewarning about their doom. It's tough to break free of the shackles of a powerful, vocal figure, especially when they're a passionate one."

Everyone let out a small sigh. Yeah, they all knew that was true. Much as everyone liked to think of themselves as valiant, truth was more people followed the words of another as pure instinct.

Jack scrolled through his messages again. Instructions on where to explore, what areas needed an Uratha's nose, what areas could do with surveillance footage checks, and what areas were likely to need a Kindred's eye for separating city kine from hunters. But the last message, he didn't like the sound of.

The council wanted them to capture Elen alive, and not tell the Uratha or Begotten about it. Like Jack's efforts to keep people getting along wasn't hard enough as was.

# Chapter 80

~~Antoinette~~

Oh no.

She sat upon the highest floor of her tower, a tower she had built upon what she designated would be Elysium territory, where Kindred-on-Kindred violence was prohibited, where feeding was prohibited, and where discussion was encouraged. To place her tower within its embrace was a choice she had made, a political stance signifying her devotion to peace and cooperation. And within the highest floor, her main office was her place of control, and where she could personify coolheaded wisdom.

She was boiling. Despite being a creature of death, with no heartbeat of her own, heat filled her body, scalding, raging. She pushed away her laptop along the desk, stood from her grand chair, and walked to the enormous window to stare out over the thousands of lights of her city.

How dare they.

She snarled as she folded her arms across her chest, and stared out the window. How dare they. She would kill them, absolutely, utterly demolish, rend them asunder, and drown her tower in their blood.

She reached behind her and dialed in to the comm system. “Miss Vola, come to my main office immediately.”

Natasha’s tiny voice chipped in over the small speaker. “Um, y-yes Prince. Is there—”

“Now.”

“Yes m-ma’am!”

Sighing, Antoinette turned around and looked out the window once more. It was her city, her labyrinth of tunnels, buildings, alleys, sewers, brothels, casinos, bars, hungry corporations and sprawling districts of factories and neighborhoods. A perfect place for Kindred to herd and control the kine. A perfect place for hunters to hide and reek havoc on her and her kin.

How had she not seen this coming? Poor Jack. To lose his first life’s family, at this age? The gal of these hunters, to murder innocent humans for the sake of their vengeance. It was unheard of. For all the flaws of hunters, for all their murderous intents and all-consuming obsessions, they did not kill innocent humans. To kill a vampire’s previous family, to either draw a vampire out, or to inflict pain upon him, was absurd.

It would not have been hard for the hunters to learn of Jack’s first family. They knew the boy was a young vampire, and they knew his name. To search the city’s obituaries and missing persons reports would have been easy for many hunters, and from there follow the trail back to the Kindred’s first family. But, there was almost never a reason to be concerned over them. Only juvenile Kindred, fledglings with grudges, bothered to harm other Kindred through their first families, and such mindless acts of cruelty were rare. All Kindred knew that first families were things they all had to lose at some point, and to assault a fellow vampire through that tie was only going to free them of that burden sooner. Free them, and turn them into bitter enemies.

But these hunters did not think this way. They did not think in terms of centuries, only in weeks or months. They did this to hurt Jack, and perhaps draw him out, perhaps force him to make a mistake and get himself killed. How that could help them with their goal of killing Azamel, she did not know. Perhaps Angela was simply pursuing payback.

Jack. She sighed as she hugged herself, one hand combing a wave of her hair that cut over her shoulder to her chest. The boy likely knew by now, and had not contacted her. She knew why. The boy had told her of his father's death, and of how much it had hurt him, how badly he had pulled into himself. No doubt he was afraid of doing such a thing to her. Or, perhaps, he was afraid of her, that she would shatter the now fragile state of his mind. She could not deny, that if Jack entered the room at this very moment, she would be overwhelmed with the need to hold him, cradle him, hug him and tend to his wounds.

If the boy, likely holding onto the strength of himself to keep from crumbling, stood before her now, and she could not help but lament for him, he would either retreat into himself, become cold and numb as he did with his father, or he would fall to pieces in emotional turmoil. The latter was necessary at some point, in order for the mind to move on, to mourn, and Jack was intelligent enough to know that. But was he wise enough to internalize that and understand it? Kindred were not kine, and had to come to terms with the end of their first life, and its remains, in unique ways. She had seen it in others; all Kindred her age had. Such was the way of immortal beings.

To make matters worse, the age difference between her and her love was vast, and Kindred did not age as kine did. For all her knowledge, she would forever have the mind of a thirty-year-old woman, and to hold the wisdom of ages in such context could make any conversation about matters strangely painful, and a touch awkward. What could she say to him that would not feel like pandering, or placating? Hollow. Words would fail her.

Perhaps it was best she let the boy come to her, when he was ready. And when he did, she would have to say nothing emotional, and be very careful with how to look at him. Every fiber of her being wanted to scoop him up, hold him in her arms, and embrace him tight enough to wash away his pain. And there would be a time for



that, but not until the boy ... the man, had, on his own, accepted and internalized the reality of his situation. There was no way to help him with that, except to give him space.

And that drove her to rage. Being powerless, was infuriating. It was not a feeling she felt often.

The door opened. She looked over her shoulder, and offered her little student a smile. "Vola, please, come, stand with me."

"Y-Yes Prince. You s-s-sounded ... upset, on the phone." Vola trembled a few times as she came closer. Perhaps Antoinette had been harsher with her voice than she realized.

"I am, though not with you, Natasha. Fret not. Have you seen the news?"

"N-No, I haven't. I've b-been reading mythology, ancient m-monsters, seeing if there was any hint about ... about m-m-monsters like Azamel, or the others." She nodded to herself as she looked down and held her chin in her fingers, digging through her mind. "I d-d-don't watch the news much these days, honestly. When I was in the Invictus, I m-monitored our internal network that our thralls curated."

Antoinette had a similar network, though she had long given instructions to her thralls to curate only the most important information; her decisions were made on a larger scale than the Invictus. But her thralls knew who Jack Terry was, who his first family was, and had sent her the information. Would the Invictus? There was always the possibility the boy did not know what had happened, and perhaps she should—

No. Let him come to you, Antoinette. He is not a boy, he is a man, and a vampire. It is important that he overcome the first stages of his grief on his own. Kindred were solitary creatures by nature, and

she knew, if she violated those instincts, she might drive her love into himself.

She could ask Julias, if Jack knew about his mother. It was tempting, but as much as she wanted to pry, poke, learn and discover more about the situation, it was better to let the boy and his sire handle it on their own. In the relationship between Jack, Julias, and the boy's first family, she was the outsider.

As Natasha stood beside her, as Daniel often did, Antoinette sighed, and nodded out toward the city. "Do any of your first family still live, Natasha?"

"Um, I have an uncle, v-very old now. Lives in Canad-d-da. I have some cousins, and their children, and ... b-but I haven't talked to any of them. I d-d-didn't talk to them even b-before I was embraced."

Nodding, Antoinette refolded her arms, combed her hair, and forced down the urge to run out into the city to find her lover. "When Kindred come to me, and ask if they can be allowed to bring members of their first family into their second life, I acquiesce, but not without warning. Fledglings, and young neonates, are often at the mercy of their attachments."

"I ... I'm n-not sure what this is about, Prince."

"These hunters are far more brutal than any group of hunters I have met before, to the point they are willing to kill innocents to achieve their goals. And despite their goal of killing Azamel, a Begotten, they are well versed in dealing with Kindred. They know our weaknesses, especially those of our young neonates."

"Um, I—oh! Oh no, no n-no, they didn't ... kill Jack's..."

Her student was intelligent, very much so; Daniel had chosen well. With a sigh, Antoinette looked down at the tiny woman beside

her, before looking back out to the city.

“His sister, Mary, is dead. His mother sleeps in South Center Hospital, in critical condition. She may survive. She may not.”

“Oh god, J-J-Jack. Have—”

“I do not know if Jack knows, though if he does not, I imagine he will before the night is over. We have yet to speak.”

“You haven’t t-told him? You ... oh. B-Because, he ... he’s...”

She nodded, but did not explain. Her little assistant was smart enough to piece together the puzzle on her own. Jack needed to deal with this on his own first, before coming to her. It would only be hours, after all, enough time for her love to wrap his mind and feelings around what had occurred, at least a precursor attempt, before he returned to her tower to sleep for the day. And when he did, the challenge would be on her to discover how to handle him.

It was a strange way for the tables to turn. Jack had spent most of his interactions with her trying to figure her out, to know how to react and act around her, no doubt. Now, she was the lost one, unsure of how to act and react around her little Ventrue. It was a not a feeling she enjoyed, after being in control of everyone close to her for so long.

But Jack’s family was not the only reason she had summoned her student.

“Natasha, I have a mission for you.”

“Oh?”

“You are to go to Jacob, and join his sweeper team.”

“Um ... w-what?”

What indeed. She wanted to send Natasha to find Jack, to make sure the boy was ok. But that was not what her city needed at the moment, painful as it was to admit.

Antoinette forced a smile, and looked down at her student. “In this Dance Macabre, we must forever do two things with one action. Give with the right hand, take with the left. You are to present this gift to Jacob, and he will be forced to accept. If he denies me, he knows I will be suspicious of his actions; and I am, we all are. But if he outright refuses to have you accompany his team, then he exposes that such suspicion is warranted. And he knows that. He will have to make a choice about what message he wishes to send, by either accepting you or denying you.”

“B-But, what if he accepts?”

“Then we know that his team did not intend to perform matters he wished to keep secret. And upon that, since I am sure neither Uratha or Begotten will be joining Jacob’s team, you will be a valuable asset. And, upon that again, I would like to know what the witches are up to. No doubt the old Nosferatu is interested in this shaman woman working for the hunters, so do not be surprised if he seeks to learn more about her, or capture her.” She could not deny that she, too, would like to get her hands on this woman. The things she could learn from her, digging into her mind, dissecting her thoughts — or actual brain — would no doubt lead to secrets Antoinette had long sought after.

“That is a lot-t-t of ... of information to learn, from o-one maneuver.”

“Indeed.”

“And, um, I c-could just ask Beatrice.”

Antoinette shook her head before looking back out to the city. “As much as she may be your acquaintance, and perhaps friend, she is a

loyal sort. She will trust Jacob, even as ... even as I hope she can touch the man's soul, before he crumbles under the weight of his own thoughts."

"Thoughts?"

"A personal request I made of her, to help Jacob escape the pit of misery forced on him by Avery." Not that Antoinette could deny Minerva was flirting with lines she had been warned to avoid. "I believe it is working. But, I hope you can discover more. And ... I hope you can find the hunters."

"Yes, I'll d-do my best." Nodding, she turned to look out at the city too. If she was trying to be as still as Antoinette, she was failing horribly, squirming in her own skin. Normally the Prince would find it adorable, but at the moment, she did not.

"What would you do, Miss Vola?"

She squeaked, and looked up at the Prince again. Antoinette did not break her gaze from the city, and after a while, the tiny Mekhet looked out the window again.

"About Jack? I ... I d-d-don't know."

"I will ... discover eventually, what to do about my love's pain. But, it is not him specifically I speak of."

"Not Jack? Then I'm not sure. Um, there's ... there's ... oh. Samantha T-Terry."

"Oui. My network is now monitoring her closely. I do not know if Jack knows she's in there, or if he has already been to see her, but..." With a wince, Antoinette turned around, and walked over to her desk. A click later, the camera feed menu for the hospital room for the critical condition ward appeared, and she selected Samantha's room.

And there she was. A tattered, broken, dying woman, with tubes coming out of her, wires attached to her, needle in her arm, and large machines beside her. The feed did not have audio, but that was probably for the best. The sound of a machine keeping her alive and warning of her vitals was not a sound Antoinette wished to hear.

“Oh no! Oh, oh that’s horrible!” Natasha raised a hand to her mouth as she stared, wide-eyed at the sight. “P-Poor Jack.”

“She was stabbed, many times, as was her daughter.”

“Stabbed? It m-m-must have been Angela. She ... she’s a ... psychopath.”

Nodding, Antoinette sat down at her desk, but did not turn off the camera feed. She stared at the screen, sighing, and combing her hair over her shoulder; it did not help. No matter how she tossed the thoughts in her mind, rearranged and molded them, she could not help but stare at this image in front of her.

“I have no memory of my family,” Antoinette said. “I am ... without personal context, for this attachment.” With an open palm toward the screen, she leaned back in her chair, and began to slowly rock. “I understand loss, and the emotional damage it causes. But there is a unique element to family, to a connection etched into the very foundation of the mind, that I can no longer appreciate.” The curse of a vampire’s immortality.

Natasha sniffed, and shivered a little as she came in closer, standing beside Antoinette and staring at the screen. “My mom and dad, I ... I can ... can still remember what it felt like, t-to be safe in their ... their arms.”

The Prince smiled at the small woman beside her. No wonder her necklace of old had summoned a spirit of safety. It was an emotion instilled deep into her being, something in her core memory, perhaps to never be lost. Alas, unlikely. With centuries, all

memories faded, and the connections Kindred had to what made them human faded with them. To hold onto their humanity was the eternal struggle.

For a young Kindred to lose so many of those ties so quickly was not a good thing. It could send the boy spiraling into a pit of misery, resentment, and then hatred.

Hatred. She had still not talked to him about this supposed hatred Natasha told her of, the anger and fury her little Ventrue was supposedly capable of. If she spoke true, and her love had wells of rage within him, this event could very well push him into that spiral.

Her little Ventrue was very talented for his age. He would grow to become a greater Ventrue than Viktor or Julias, and she would be happy to have him at her side for decades, centuries, or longer. It would almost be a classic scenario of a man and woman from different kingdoms, getting married to create peace. She doubted Jack would ever join the Ordo Dracul, and she knew she would never join the Invictus, but that did not mean they could not work side by side for eternity. And love each other, for eternity.

It was an image of her future she held dear to her heart, and the thought that it might be torn asunder, poisoned, or tainted by horrible, cruel realities befalling her love infuriated her. The idea that Jack might become as twisted, hateful, and paranoid a man as Viktor was a terrifying one. How quickly such a thought left the realm of absurdity, and into to the realm of possibility. Natasha's warning about his rage, and now this?

She had to fix this.

“D ... Do you think ... w-we could make her a ghoul?” Natasha said. Naturally, her student was thinking the same thoughts.

“I do not know if she would survive it. She is a step away from death, with wounds extreme enough to kill a ghoul. There’s potential brain damage, as well, which could have dire consequences if she survives the transformation. And above all, how would Jack feel about his mother now being addicted to vitae, and also under the spell of the Vinculum?” Shaking her head, she reached out, and zoomed the picture in. South Center Hospital embraced technology; the luxury of money. The picture was crystal clear, and showed the paleness of Jack’s mother, and her limp, comatose body. “You know I encourage Kindred in my city to only create ghouls of kine they have both groomed, but also explained the dire consequences of being brought into the fold.” As it was encouraged with creating Kindred, of course. Antoinette’s sympathy for ghouls was well known, to the point it had led to many altercations between her and Lucas.

To become addicted to a vampire’s blood, and to become enslaved to the Vinculum and how it forced the ghoul to become obsessed with the master, were not aspects to dismiss or treat lightly. She had explained to Ashley and Julee, to the best of her ability without risking the Masquerade, what she had been asking of them. They had agreed. No one could ask a woman in a coma such questions.

“B-But ... she ... she could ... become Kindred.”

“... yes, she could.” Sighing all the more, Antoinette continued to comb her hair, seeking the soothing blanket of familiar comfort. None came. “Jack is not old enough to sire. The drain on his mind would be too great.” Not necessarily true, but a risk nonetheless.

“Then ... I ... I d-don’t...”

Her inability to explain the problem was more than enough barrier to give weight to the reality of it. To sire someone was a massive commitment, never to be taken lightly, and always with a sacrifice. It was a sacrifice Antoinette knew well, and one Natasha



was still struggling to come to terms with. Her relationship with her childe was broken, and try as she might fix it, it was unlikely to ever mend.

Better that, than a growing bitterness and resentment that eventually led to a childe like Tony. Then again, perhaps Natasha would be able to repair her damaged relationship with her childe? Rare as it was, it would not be the first time Antoinette had seen a miracle.

“If my love requested it, I would ... be terribly tempted, to sire her.”

“Without ... b-being able to talk to her first?”

“Yes. It would be horribly selfish of me, and my love, to force such an existence on someone who did not ask it. But it is not always such a terrible thing, is it? Julias had the choice to let Jack die, but instead, he forced the embrace upon him. It was for the best, was it not?”

“I ... think so.”

Antoinette frowned at the screen, and squeezed on the ends of her hair. The fact Natasha’s answer was not a resounding ‘yes it was’ pained the Prince. For all Antoinette’s efforts to create a utopia for her kind, for all her faith in her ability to create a world where Kindred could not only live happily, but also pursue new avenues of wisdom and enlightenment available only to immortals, a Kindred’s life was still pain. Her covenant hunted the secrets of that immortality with lifelong devotion, searched for ways to alleviate the damage of torpor, the pain of blood lust, the horribleness of vitae addiction, the chains of the Vinculum, and even for ways to break a Kindred from the corruption of Diablerie. But, in hundreds of years, for all their progress, a Kindred’s second life was still pain. For all her progress in pursuit of peaceful coexistence, hunters were still at her door, killing them.

“Ultimately, she is Jack’s mother. Her fate is in his hands. If he wishes to bring her into a second life, then I will discuss it with him. In the mean time, go, speak with Jacob and his witches, and see if you can prevent their inevitable meddling from ruining our goals. If lucky, you may even find and detain or kill some hunters.”

“Yes, P-Prince.” Natasha took a few more seconds staring at Jack’s half dead mother, before she let out a tiny whimper, and walked toward the door. Stopping halfway, she looked over her shoulder, a small, weighty frown on her gentle face. “I ... I think ... it’d b-b-be better to ... to embrace her, than let her die. At least then, she ... she’d be able t-to choose if she wanted to live or ... die.”

Oh Vola, naive child. What mother would not consider suicide in her situation, even if given immortality? And, what would happen to Jack, if his mother was given a second chance at life, and threw it away?

It was not a decision so easily rationalized.



~~Beatrice~~

“We want to capture her alive?”

Jacob nodded as he walked around the cave, hands behind his back. The eye bandage covered his empty eye sockets, but Triss had gotten pretty good at figuring out where he was looking. Looking at the floor while he paced around, she guessed, like he was being pensive. A pensive Jacob was a strange Jacob.

“We do,” he said.

Triss looked to her fellow Kindred, but the rest of them were all looking at him with confusion, too. Jen and Othello shrugged, and watched their boss pace around. Aaron wasn’t around, but he’d be

back soon with a report, probably to also become confused by the strange request.

“Sounds dangerous as fuck,” Triss said. “We’re talking about this old shaman woman who’s supposedly sacrificing kine, and using some strange magic to hunt people down? The one who gave you the boot out of that Begotten’s nightmare thing?”

“Yeap. Old woman. I didn’t get a good look at her when I was there; she was off in the shadows somewhere, and I only got a peek at her, before she tore the world apart.” Jacob jumped a few times in place, laughing, before he spun around once, and grabbed the sacrifice bowl that stood in the center of their headquarters. “What a rush.”

Triss rolled her eyes, and waited. Jacob did love to have his spurts of silly randomness, and she’d learned to just wait them out. A child. Her boss was a fucking child. A super powerful, intelligent child. Wasn’t there a horror movie about that sort of thing?

“Catching her alive will be difficult,” Jen said. Damn girl was too young to be going on these sweeps, but she’d insisted, and Jacob was a ‘let them learn the hard way’ sort of teacher. “Cause, you know, she has a bunch of hunters defending her, not to mention Jeremiah and Angela, and a monster.”

It was sort of a shame that no one in the Circle had been a part of that mission. Jacob had been there for a whole twenty seconds, according to his story, and that meant a thousand details about the whole situation had been lost.

“The Invictus may help us with that,” Jacob said.

Othello tilted his head to the side. “Oh, was that your request of Julias?”

“Mhmm. Unfortunately, there are many circumstances where that may fall out of his hands. Old woman with a breathing aid, in a wheel chair? If they even look at her wrong, she might implode. If she gets caught in a crossfire, she’s dead.” Groaning, Jacob walked away again, and stared up at the bones arranged into painting-like sculptures on the cave wall. “Think I wasted my favor?”

Triss shrugged, waiting by the bowl. “I’m just glad you didn’t ask him to sacrifice his balls to a ritual or something ... That ... isn’t a thing, is it?”

“You shitting me? There are sacrifice rituals meant to give guys bigger dicks and more sexual endurance in every culture.”

Jen snorted on a laugh, before raising a hand to her mouth in embarrassment. Not very lady like. “Even in the Circle?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. Probably.” Chuckling, Jacob came back to the bowl, and ran his fingers around the stained edges. “That woman has power, a familiar power. There’s something there, something in her ability, something that makes her special. She has knowledge, and I want it.”

“She’s a hunter, Jacob,” Triss said. “She’s trying to kill us, and the monsters and werewolves. And, considering what everyone keeps saying about her, she’s deadly.”

“Mhmm.”

“You think we can catch her?”

“She’s a fossil. If she tries to flee, just grab her wheelchair. If she refuses to cooperate, just grab her breathing tube and squeeze it. A little asphyxiation is great motivation.”

Everyone blinked at him

“Torture an old person?” Othello said.

“Torture is such a strong word. More like, push her around a little. Literally. She’s in a wheelchair. Push her here.”

Triss groaned. If this continued, Jacob was going to start making puns. She wouldn’t be able to handle that without bursting into laughter.

Jen raised a hand. “What about Garry? He’s looking for the hunters, too.”

“Garry owes me more favors than Julias. He’ll try and get me the shaman woman more than the Invictus will.”

What sort of favors had Jacob done for Garry to earn so much from him? Beatrice worked for that Gangrel for almost thirty years, and she was completely unaware of this connection until that incident with Tony. Sneaky fuckers.

They all turned around at the sound of another entering. Aaron. The pale man came up to the bowl, but his eyes were down, and he held his chin in his fingers, lost in thought. A normal pose for Aaron, except for the frown.

“Sup?” Triss said. “You look down. More down than usual, I mean.”

“Any of you check the news?”

She shook her head. “Nah, Jen and I came back not long after sunset.” And it’d only been an hour since then.

Sighing, Aaron stepped aside, and held out his arm to someone coming up behind him. Everyone came around the bowl to watch, arms folding across their chests. They didn’t plan for visitors, so this was a bit weird.

A tiny girl in a suit came in, very tiny. But Triss recognized the aura, and the way her beast stood up to acknowledge the familiar power and hidden smell of the small girl.

“Natasha,” Triss said, smiling and walking up to her. “Why are you here?”

“Hey Triss. I’m here t-t-to ... for two reasons. The first, um, is the Prince would like me to join your t-team.”

Wait, what? Triss raised a brow before looking back at the rest of her crew. Othello and Jen both seemed confused, too, but Jacob adopted a smile. It was his ‘I see what you’re up to’ smile, his Dance Macabre smile, which meant Natasha being here to help them wasn’t just the straightforward gesture.

The Prince didn’t trust them. Understandable, especially considering the conclusion they’d just come to.

“I accept,” Jacob said, grinning. “Be aware that I am trying to capture the shaman woman alive. If you’re going to join my group of witches here, I expect you to help in that regard, or at least, not get in their way.”

Whoa. All his cards out on the table. Either he was one of those poker players that liked to bluff with the truth, or it wasn’t all his cards.

Both. Probably both.

“Y-Yes, well, the Prince expected that.” The little Mekhet walked forward, and looked around as she did. So damn cute, teeny tiny Tash with her teeny tiny frown. There was no denying the girl was terribly strong, in her own weird, sneaky Mekhet way, and that she was so tiny made her so cute and awesome.

Heh, it wasn't too long ago Natasha was in the Invictus, and Triss's enemy, a Carthian. How the times had changed.

"Five vamps should be able to handle anything these hunters throw at us," Triss said.

Tash shook her head, and walked closer, eyes scanning the room with blatant curiosity in her gaze. Bones on the walls could do that to a person, not to mention skulls with candles on them, being kept by thralls. "D-Don't underestimate them. They're ... they c-could kill us all, if they catch us off guard."

"Then it's a good thing we have a very tough Mekhet with us." She stepped forward and offered her hand. Tash looked at her, head hanging heavy, before she took her hand gave it a slow shake. "What's with you? You and Aaron, both look like someone died ... Oh fuck, who died?"

Sighing, Tash shook her head before she slipped her hands into her pockets, eyes down. "Jack's sister was stabbed t-to death. His mom ... is in the hospital, almost d-d ... dead."

"Fuck!" Beatrice backed off, throwing up her hands, as if putting distance between her and the messenger might help take the edge off that bomb. It did not. "You fucking serious?"

"Y-Yes."

Of course she was. Tash didn't have the capacity to joke or be sarcastic about serious things, especially dark humor.

Triss managed only a cursory glance at the rest of the Circle, before she started stomping around. They were all shocked; hard to tell with Jacob, but he wasn't moving, at least.

"His sister's dead? Mom's in the hospital? What the fuck? What ... what the fuck?"

“They were b-both stabbed many times.”

“Stabbed! That ... you ... what? Hunters?”

“W-We think so.”

Triss threw her hands up again, and clutched her head in her claws. Oh fuck, poor Jack. Poor poor Jack. Fucking hell. “How’s the kid?”

“The P-Prince is ... still w-waiting for him to ... to ... we don’t know. He’s out on a sweep.”

“Think he knows?”

“P-Probably.”

“Just ... wow, fucking hell. Poor guy.” She kind of felt like the guy’s aunt, considering she was in a committed relationship with his sire. That was a strange way to think of the friendship. But she couldn’t deny she’d started to care for the kid, quite a bit. Even taught him how to hunt kine in the alleyways that littered Dolareido. She was one of the few people he’d told — accidentally, heh — that he’d killed Viktor and Tony.

Christ, he was Julias’s childe! She had to speak to him, both him and Julias, see if she could do anything. The fuck could she do, though? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Nothing except, catch the people responsible. Catch, kill, maim. Hell, she still owed one of the hunters for shooting her, when she met Eric. That was an afterthought, though, compared to your first family getting murdered.

“I’ve t-texted Jack,” Tash said, “but no response. P-Probably underground.”

“Text Julias yet?”



“ ... no. I ... I should, I j-just...”

Frowning, Triss put a hand on Tash’s shoulder, and started walking her toward the exit. “Let’s get out there and hunt these fuckers down, and I’ll throw Superman a text.” A glance for the rest of the crew, and they all nodded.

Jennifer the Ventrue, Othello the Daeva, Aaron the Gangrel, with Beatrice the Nosferatu and Natasha the Mekhet. Best team? Best team.

The rest of the crew shrugged, and fell in behind her, no questions or anything. Othello was too much of a pushover to fight her for command; not that she was in command, but it did feel like she’d be comfortable barking orders when shit hit the fan. Maybe it’d come to that, maybe it wouldn’t. For now, a trip topside to hunt for hunters, and give Julias a call.

“Beatrice,” Jacob said, bringing everyone to a halt and looking back at him, “be careful. These psychopaths will kill you, or torture you, then kill you.”

“No kidding.”

“And they’re a lot stronger than we give them credit for.”

“At this point, I’m under the assumption they’re fucking deadly as shit and could probably do anything. Is that not enough worry?” she said, turning to face him.

“No. It’s not. But if you’re going out there, find out how Jack’s doing, would you? Julias probably knows, and I’m interested.”

She almost asked why, almost said something stupid. But Jacob’s expression wasn’t his usual Joker smile annoying. Instead, it was serious, as serious as he could get with a bandage covering the eyes. Jacob liked the kid, most people did. Everyone liking you was a good

way to get attention, and getting attention was how Jack found himself in his current predicament, with enemies targeting him, and murdering his family.

Fucking hell, his sister was murdered, and his mother was assaulted, all because he had a nasty habit of getting on Kindreds' good side. That, and he did far more damage to the hunters than any Kindred his age should have been able to.

“Check out Devil’s Corner while you’re there.”

“Will do, boss,” she said, offering a salute, before she crouched down and started crawling out the exit.

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Once they were out of the cave and out of the canyon, Triss pulled up her phone. “You really didn’t contact Julias, Tash?”

“I ... I d-don’t ... I’m not sure what I w-would say to him.”

“Hi, your childe’s first family have been assaulted? Sister’s dead?”

“He knows. He m-must know. Invictus network p-pays more attention to this sort of stuff. If the Prince knows, Julias ... m-must know. And I ... I’m afraid of ... what he’d say. His voice is ... powerful.”

Sighing, Triss nodded and squatted down, eyes on the roadside that circled the city. “I forget sometimes that you know him better than I do, and hung out with him for years.” The others were changing clothes to better streetwear, so she had a moment to talk with the tiny Mekhet.

“I ... never slept with him, though.”

“Heh, why is that? You’re a very cute girl, Natasha. And, knowing that you’re banging two werewolves? Gotta admit, that’s sexy as fuck. You must be a fox in bed.”

“I ... I um.” The tiny creature squirmed a bit, and combed her long black hair with her hand a few times. Triss had seen the Prince do that, on more than one occasion. “He was a f-friend. Always a friend.”

“Yeah, that’s understandable. Julias the white knight.” Rolling her eyes, she dialed him. Ring ring. No answer. She got a text back though. ~In a meeting with the council. Love you.~ Awww. Heh, what a dumbass, taking the time to text that when he was talking with two elders. “K he’s busy. I’ll talk to him about it later.”

Soon Jennifer with was with them, dressed in black jeans, a blouse, and a black bra; blouse undone of course, except for one button at the stomach. Tash raised a brow as she took a moment to look at Jen’s exposed chest, but eventually shrugged. In the past, she’d probably have rolled her eyes, but the girl was getting buried in sex on such a regular basis now, she must have become desensitized. Totally hot.

Othello came out, wearing basically the same thing as Jen, jeans and an open shirt, showing off his abs. At least Aaron bothered to button up.

“What’s the plan?” Othello said.

Triss stood up, rotated her neck and shoulders a few times, and started walking. Everyone fell in line behind her. “Gonna scout Devil’s Corner.”

“The hunters have been abduct-t-ting people,” Tash said, walking beside Triss, “for their rituals. They’re p-probably looking for people that fall b-between the cracks.”

Othello sneered. “Smart of them to go for the sick and weak sheep that have fallen behind.”

Everyone in the group stopped, and looked at the moron Daeva. Ok, that was a lot more than Othello usually said. Normally the idiot just focused on his own pleasure, and stayed out of everything. Probably for the best then, with a personality like that.

Aaron, standing beside him, shrugged and sighed. “Grim as that is, that is accurate. The hunters have instincts, good ones, to know how to take advantage of our own hunting grounds without us noticing.”

Triss groaned a little louder as they started into the streets of North Side. “Yeah, I know, but god damn it. They’re still people.”

“You’ve killed people, when you were hungry and looking to let off some rage,” the Gangrel said, eying her.

“I always made sure they deserved it.” And that was true, she did put in her due diligence to make sure those she killed were the nasty sort. “Some of them ended up on the news ... a lot didn’t, I guess.”

“The hunters are doing the same, more or less. So, if we’re going to hunt them down, let’s take a page from your book.”

“My book? Ha, fine. To Devil’s Corner we go.”

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They took to the rooftops and ran. With Natasha and Beatrice keeping them all wrapped in the Cloak of Night, it was easy to move quick and not worry about getting caught. Course, after learning the hunters had some particularly weird tools at their disposal, they couldn’t discount that maybe the hunters could see through their stealth. Still, hunters would have to be insane to try and attack five vampires in the open.

Fuck, she was underestimating them already. They weren’t only insane enough, they were competent enough. Fucking crazy.

Once they got to the bars deep in Devil's Corner, Triss sat down on one of their roofs, and let her legs dangle a few floors high. Everyone joined her. Like a scene out of a coming-of-age movie. If they had ice cream cones, or a blood sorbet, it'd be perfect.

“Man, Jack must be fucking crushed,” she said.

Everyone nodded, each turning heads in different directions to watch the kine move about below. Lots of jeans all torn up, old and broken shoes and sneakers, dirty shirts, tattoos meant to intimidate instead of just be art, and other crap. People got piercings to look scary in Devil's Corner, not to be cool. She got them to be cool. Bunch of posers.

She reached up, and plucked at the chain dangling from earlobe to nostril. “Look for the ones that are alone. Lot of people sort of drift into their own little pits of misery out here. Much as I'm cool with Dolareido letting people do whatever they want once they're adults ... a lot of adults are really fucking stupid, and throw their lives away on addictions. The really stupid ones, and the nasty ones, end up here, eventually.”

Nodding, Natasha pulled out her pistol, and started examining it, checking the slide and safety. In the past, Triss would have figured Tash was a paranoid bookworm. Nowadays? The little Mekhet was more confident, and each time Triss met her, she started to fear her a little more. Tash was ancilla, and no matter how tiny she looked, she was a deadly creature.

“Can I read a book?” Aaron said.

“No,” everyone else said. Heh, comical.

Sighing, Beatrice put her elbows on her knees, and watched some people coming and going from the more filthy bars. Prostitutes were everywhere, a lot of them with track marks, and plenty of men were getting in on that action, driving by and offering the ladies just

enough money to fuel their addictions. The men weren't any better off, most working shit jobs or getting by on petty theft while squatting in some old, rundown buildings, or shacking up ten to a single apartment.

There was a balance, though. It never got too crazy, too out of control, too insane. The Prince, and other Kindred like the Invictus running some brothels out here, had offered enough support for people to be able to live. Those that were willing to fight their addictions and try and climb out of their hole, had options. Shitty options, but options, and that was more than Triss could say for other cities.

Those that weren't willing to climb, and succumbed to resentment, died. The ones that resented themselves died in their own vomit, usually. The ones that resented others became extreme criminals, and were quickly dealt with by the Kindred. The Invictus liked to keep things orderly. The Carthians liked to protect humans who had shit lives and were trapped in that circumstance; or just let out some of their frustration on those deserving, like Triss had done. The Prince hated anyone that disrupted her Kindred utopia, and murderers, rapists, drug dealers dealing to minors, and pedophiles generally fit into that group.

Those were also the best targets for a fanatical group looking for sacrifices.

It'd been a while since Triss had killed someone. She could still remember what it was like, though, to bring a human's life to an end. It'd been a little sickening, at first, but a part of her had enjoyed exercising its predatory desires. Only now did she realize that part of her was the Beast, and she'd become quite attuned to it, far more than most Carthians had; they rarely killed their prey. She'd been careful to not do it often, and only to do it to those who deserved it, but now she had to wonder if other Kindred in Dolareido could kill people as easily as her.

She sighed, and stared down at the oblivious kine, looking for the low of the low, for the ones most likely to be picked off by hunters looking for an easy sacrifice. And, they would make good sacrifices.

If hunters could learn secrets using sacrifices and strange occult magics and shit, why couldn't she? Seemed right up crúac's alley.

Maybe she could.



~~Damien~~

He did not expect Fiona to come with him. If anything, he expected Azamel to assign him no Begotten. Perhaps the girl had asked the old woman for the choice? He was glad to have her, and not. The last time she'd been in danger, he risked his life to save her, a dangerous impulse decision that nearly got him killed. But, he did save her. Every time she smiled at him, strange tingling sensations danced up his spine, and what he could only surmise were butterflies, filled his stomach.

It was exhilarating, and terrifying. He did not know how to process these feelings, and the very fact he thought of it as 'processing' did not bode well for his chances.

He looked up at Matt's back. The wolf was leading them through the tunnels, though Damien was guiding him; no one knew these tunnels as well as him. Parker White and Vicky Goldman were also with them. Those two had been partners in many affairs, and knew how to work together, supposedly. Both were about forty-five-years embraced, almost through their neonate years, Parker a Daeva while Vicky was a Ventrue. They complimented each other nicely, and Damien was more than confident he could keep them all well hidden. Not that he needed to extend such use of his discipline to Fiona.

She would normally be smiling incessantly, but Jack had sent Damien and Jessy a text explaining the situation with his old, kine family, and Damien had relayed that to the rest of the group. It was pertinent information, to know that the hunters had made such a bold move, and it would spread through the Invictus, and soon all Kindred. Many would dismiss it, showing little pity for a young Kindred experiencing the pain of losing the family from his first life. Many Kindred wouldn't understand at all, those feelings long dead with the age, separation, and inhuman distance that formed between a Kindred and their first life.

Damien was one of the latter. He'd been Kindred for fifty years, and the idea that he was once human was difficult to consider. The Beast, as quiet as a Mekhet's Beast was, was a part of him now, as natural as breathing was to kine. Natasha was different, but, he felt she was the unique one, in this regard. To Jack, to any young neonate, there was still growth to be done, abandoning the old life to embrace the second one. A requiem. Whether the hunters knew killing Jack's sister, and wounding his mother, would affect the boy, Damien didn't know, but he knew it would.

That made every second on this hunt painfully silent.

"I hope Jack will be fine," Fiona said.

He nodded, and looked down at the tiny woman. She was walking close to him, in her brown leather jacket and blue jeans. The vampires were all in suits; not dressed for tunnels, or combat, but ultimately it didn't matter. When bullets and swords, and blood and claws were involved, none of that mattered to Kindred. Only the hunters would have to rely on their clothing for protection.

"Jack is a right hand for a reason," he said. "He's strong and reliable, and oddly intelligent and quick minded. He'll ... he'll..." Sighing, he looked up at the flickering old lights of the tunnels, and reached under his trench coat to be sure his sword was still there.



“He’ll probably pace a circle in his own mind until it becomes a hole he can’t escape.” Everyone stopped, and stared at him. He winced, shrugged, and raised his hands in surrender. “Sorry. But, while I do think Jack’s own mind may be his undoing, his relationship with the Prince is unbreakable. I don’t trust the young man to handle this well, but I trust her to get him through it.” Look someone in the eye when you cut off their limbs, and you get a pretty good sense for what sort of person they were.

Vicky and Parker both started to clap. Not loud, boisterous claps, but quiet claps, the sort a rich, older person might use when applauding at the opera. The fact they both did it at the same time was enough to make Damien frown.

But Fiona laughed when she noticed, and gave him a pat on the shoulder, before everyone resumed walking.

“I think yer right,” she said. “I know if ma or da were killed, I would be right livid. But they’re so far away and not involved in any of this.”

“Kindred are different anyway,” Vicky said. “We’re immortal. Separating from family, and then all kine, is inevitable.”

Yes, that was true, but that process took decades for most Kindred.

Fiona didn’t like that answer, though. She turned around and stuck out her tongue at the two vampires, before she hooked arms with Damien, and pulled him along to resume the hunt.

“I hope to live as long as Azamel. Though, there are better ways for Begotten to age.”

“You don’t all age similarly?” he said.

“Nae. The Horror half of us is unique, and different Begotten will pursue their future differently.” She looked around, as if checking for ghosts. “Some Begotten become immortal, and become true monsters.”

True monsters? That was enough to get a raised brow from everyone, and Damien glanced back to Vicky and Parker to see if they had any idea what she meant. But they shrugged, shaking their heads.

Vicky and Parker were an interesting pair. Both born in Dolareido, they came from rich families, and as far as Damien knew, those families made their money on sex and drugs. Unlike companies like Terra Den, which dealt in drugs in a more insidious fashion, Vicky and Parker’s families were more honest, but without any ties to any corporations. A strange circumstance, and it had bred two children who were very comfortable with the criminal life. Natural fits for the Invictus world. Both were nearing their ancilla years, but it was hard to take them seriously; they belonged in a theater watching an opera or plays, not in abandoned tunnels hunting hunters.

Both were average height, white, lean with decently athletic builds as per any well groomed vampire. Parker enjoyed long blonde hair to the shoulder, worn loose, while Vicky also enjoyed long blonde hair, worn longer, and curled into waves. Fashionable, thin, with manicures and whatnot.

They ran brothels in Devil’s Corner, and probably dealt in the drugs, too. Perhaps they did it better than others? Damien lived in Devil’s Corner, hid underneath it for fifty years, and was very familiar with their illegal businesses. They treated their staff and clients well. Damien spent many years trying to scare their customers back into the arms of God, rarely to success.

Not exactly the company he wanted on this hunt, but they were almost as old as him, trustworthy in a fight. But, he wasn’t so sure

they were trustworthy outside of one.

Fiona skipped up to Matt without him, and poked the giant man in the side. “How’s yer relationship with Natasha?”

Not a single bit of hesitation or shyness in her voice. Did she grow up watching romantic comedies? Perhaps her contagious, unending joyfulness was due to that, or an unending supply of drugs, potentially from the two Kindred behind him.

“Tash is great. Why?”

“Just, there are two of ye. Art and ye.”

“Mhmm.”

“That does nae get weird?”

“Art and I have been best friends for years. We always share things.”

Fiona tapped her chin a few times before glancing back at Damien. Evil grin. Damien raised a brow and looked around, checking to see if she was looking at him or something else. No, she was looking at him.

She laughed at him before she hopped ahead a few feet, and started walking backward. “So do the two of ye ... ye ken ... at the same time, with Tash?”

“Fiona,” Damien said. “If you really want to know, shouldn’t you ask her?”

Giggling, Fiona came back to his side, and nudged against him with her elbow. “Sorry. I never get to talk Matt alone, and I think Tash is shy.”

The blonde giant ahead of them laughed and shrugged as he walked. “Not as shy as you might think, especially not after we spent weeks sleeping at the Prince’s tower, now.”

Fiona giggled again, and jumped up and down a few times as she clapped, before she leaned up to whisper in his ear. “I think he means she enjoys both him and his friend Art, at the same time!” Laughing, she nodded to herself as she walked along, content with her conclusion.

It was not an unappealing thought, he had to admit. Letting his mind consider more sexual, appealing imagery than he had in the past, the image of little Natasha, between two massive bodies of muscle, was tantalizing. But it wasn’t his fellow Mekhet he fantasized about, it was the bouncy redhead beside him.

Everyone else was having sex on a regular basis. Everyone else was indulging in carnal delights, the sort he had never dared think of, and when he had in the past, he had done his best to suppress the thoughts. But now, there was no reason to suppress them.

He wanted to hold the small, curvy creature in his arms. He wanted to feel her naked body against his, feel her breasts against his chest, his arms wrapped around her, his length inside her, his—

He shook his head hard enough to earn a raised eyebrow from Fiona. There was a reason to not think those thoughts: he was on a mission. He could indulge his silly boy fantasies in his mind later. Or, not his mind, if Fiona’s sexual disposition aimed itself at him. A terrifying, and thrilling thought. The thought she might throw herself at him made him smile, but also gulp on a dry throat. He’d be frozen if she did that. Paralyzed. No idea what to do.

Stop thinking about it, Damien. Jack’s kine family was dead and dying, and now you’re on a mission to find the killers. Focus.

And you're also on a mission to capture Elen, according to Julias. Would Fiona mind? Probably not. Would Matt mind? Maybe. Vicky and Parker had received the same message he had, and he could trust them to help.

He looked over his shoulder to watch the two vampires for a while. Yes, they were trustworthy, to a point, but there was some evidence to suggest they weren't entirely. They ran their own brothels in Devil's Corner, and that wasn't an unusual business for Kindred to run. What was unusual was what Jack told him about their strange amulets or artifacts that attracted sexual attention. He'd seen the effects of it himself, with that giant sexual entity in the Shadow Realm. Where had those two acquired that artifact? He doubted Invictus would deal with such things. The Lancea et Sanctum would have destroyed artifacts that represented such sin. The only covenants that'd be interested in artifacts of that nature, were the dragons, and the witches.

"Mister Bursken," Vicky said, walking up closer.

"Call me Damien when we're out on a mission, Vicky."

"Ah, yes, good point."

"First time getting your hands dirty?"

She frowned at him, but when he offered her a steady gaze, it faded. The Invictus were quick to take offense if you accused them of being new at something; he was just trying to get information.

"A mission like this? Yes. We rarely do things so hands on, or with such high stakes. We were sired after the Purge, after all."

He nodded, and smiled after Fiona as the tiny redhead bounced after Matt again. "Yes, there were many changes after the Purge."

"I suppose you would know, since you spied on us for fifty years."

He looked at the woman beside him for a moment, to make sure he read that right. Yeah, there was a bit of annoyance there. Jealous that the outsider was promoted to an Invictus position, probably, especially one as high as Right Hand. It was strange, and there had been considerable resistance from many people in the Invictus, but Maria had pushed it through. Now would be an awkward time for her to conspire against him, though.

Tread lightly, Damien. Hiding in shadows, he could do well. Hiding in plain sight, with slippery words and misleading smiles, was not a skill he had.

“I did. But, much of my time was spent pursuing my covenant’s purpose.”

“Mhmm. What’s that entail, exactly?”

“I’m surprised you don’t know. Maria is quite devout.”

“She keeps her personal life secret, that includes her beliefs.”

“Yes, after the Purge, I imagine she would.” Sighing, Damien pat his chest again to make sure his knife was there. This conversation had a fire to it he didn’t like, like someone had dynamite and was playing with a match, and it set him on edge. “From what I know from Lucas, she was far more open about her beliefs before the Purge.”

“Explain those beliefs to me.”

“If you were curious, why didn’t you visit Lucas’s congregation when he returned last year?”

“Because you two were holed up in an abandoned tunnel that used to belong to one of the biggest pains in our ass. Going there was asking for people to think of me as an enemy. And hey, what do

you know, most of the people who went there ended up dying. Except you.”

“We weren’t aware there was ... something, in that place, something that gave it a strange influence. It gave Lucas’s words power, more power than they should have.” Not that that was the reason Lucas had decided to kamikaze. “But, if you really want to know, I can—”

“Summarize.”

“ ... alright. The Second Estate believes God exists. We believe in a Heaven and Hell. We believe that God created humanity, as per the Christian bible. We believe a man named Longinus stabbed Christ on the cross with a spear, and the event changed him in ways beyond defining. The birth of the Kindred race. Christ gave us, the Damned, a mission: be the wolf that scares the sheep into the arms of the Shepard. Maybe, just maybe, if we do our job and do it well, we don’t have to be damned.”

She raised a brow, and looked back at Parker, before back to him, lips parting into something close to a sneer. “Wow, that’s grim.” Almost as if she didn’t believe him.

“You’re an undead creature that survives off the blood of the living, Vicky Goldman. In front of us, there’s a werewolf that struggles against alien creatures rivaling biblical demons. Beside him, is a monster that embodies literal nightmares as old as the written word ... older.” His words pulled Fiona’s gaze over her shoulder, and she giggled and finger-waved at him, before she started skipping alongside Matthew. Skipping, next to a giant werewolf. The girl was clearly too happy to be real.

“That ... is a good point.”

“Indeed.”

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~~Jack~~

They found nothing. After six hours of exploring the sewers and tunnels, they found nothing. The other teams reported the same thing. No smell, no traces, nothing. Expected. Frustrating. Very, very frustrating. Overwhelmingly frustrating.

He sat on the stairs at the front of the Elysium tower, and looked up to the sky. Mulder and Scully flew down to him, each taking a shoulder, and each pressed their heads into his neck. Soft.

“Yeah, shit is bad,” he said, voice quiet, almost inaudible. “My mom’s dying. My sister is dead. It shouldn’t matter, but it does. Fuck, it does. It fucking does.”

The two crows didn’t understand his words. But, with a little bit of Animalism and some tongue clucks, he shared the meaning. He didn’t bother explaining what a hospital was, or what tubes or wires coming out of a human meant. No need to explain a morgue, or the cold places they kept bodies. No way to get across what nurses and doctors were, what medicine was, what it meant when someone was in critical condition versus stable, or recovering.

They understood injured mother. They understood dead sister. The two birds crooned a few times, before they resumed snuggling into his neck.

“Sorry, I don’t have any oats on me,” he said. They ruffled their feathers, and continued to snuggle into him, apparently unfazed by the lack of food. That made him smile. When you didn’t need to provide food for affection, was a pretty large stepping stone for animals. “Have you two lost family?”

They chirped some more sounds, and his brain managed to put together some images. Other crows, older crows, slower, succumbing to nature. The crows had a very large, almost godly



view of the concept of nature, and he struggled to understand it. He didn't bother explaining hospitals, or the machinations of humans, and to counter, the crows noticed quickly that he struggled to understand the interconnectivity of nature. Trees. Dead crows. Predators. Wind, and leaves, and the seasons, sunrise and sunset, bones and flesh and the moon. They understood it, deep in their hollow, light bones.

The First and Second Estate would say the crow's view on life did not apply to Kindred. The Circle would probably agree with the feathered ones. And besides, humans? They weren't vampires. They fit into the circle of life and the paradigm of nature just fine.

He sighed, and let his head hang, elbows on his knees and arms dangling between them. Go up and see Antoinette? Or not. Nothing stopping him from spending the day at his sire's. Hell, Clara was a few blocks away. If he wanted, he could spend the day at her place, sleeping in her closet or something.

Christ, what would Antoinette do to him if he did that? Heh. Probably tear his head off. But, at least he wouldn't get pity from Clara, no more gazes of sadness, as if he was the one who died. He knew Clara wanted to help him, soothe his pain like everyone else did, but she was a street-rough girl who understood—

Why the fuck wouldn't Antoinette understand? She'd been around for god damn centuries. She was wise and intelligent, and he knew she'd try to help him; that was the problem. A personal struggle, something as quaint as a dead family member, and another one dying? Quaint was the right word, compared to her experience.

Christ, he was fucked in the head. Couldn't see his love because he was afraid of how she'd look at him? Afraid she might pity him, or try and help him get past his misery? Jack, you fucking moron.

He felt like a trapped animal, terrified of the person coming for him. No one was coming for him; not true, the hunters were. He

wasn't afraid of them. He was dying to get his hands on them so he could wring their fucking necks, so he could kill them in the most painful way possible. No, something else felt like it was coming for him, something he couldn't stop, something that made him horrified.

Inevitability. Fuck, what do you know about inevitability? You're just a fool, a kid with a big brain and a bigger ego, sitting around and contemplating the meaning of life and death. Your sister is dead! Your mother is dying, might not survive, and those things are emotion bombs, nuclear ones. Nuclear launch detected, dumbass. You're stuck hiding from the pain because you've tasted it once, and you're afraid to taste it again. That's all there is to it. You're afraid of having to feel the pain of a family member's death again, and the idea it might turn you into an asshole is a distant second, just an excuse you're using to hide from the fact you're a fucking coward. All this drama, all this intellectualizing and rationalizing, nothing but a way to put distance between yourself and that wall of incinerating pain coming your way.

And it's all your fault.

That's the thing that makes you horrified, Jack. No matter how smart you are, no matter how brave, you're still just a kid who panics the moment emotional pain comes your way. Like a toddler, crying because someone destroyed your sand castle. Worse, because you had a chance to prevent it, and you failed. You're not half the—

Jack twitched as Mulder pecked him in the ear. "Ow! Hey, what—" Scully did the same, nipping at his earlobe, before giving a loud caw. "Message received! Jesus, I get it." Don't be so hard on himself. Or, as the crows thought of it: don't give into the black. Their understanding of death, maybe? Don't give into the black.

What a delightful way to think about depression, something akin to how animals thought of death. Push past it.

Sighing again, he reached up, and stroked Scully's head, and Mulder's. "Did you see anything while you were up there?" The two crows shook their head. "Hmm. Ok. From now on, stick around the hospital, that building I went into today with the werewolf. I don't know where they'll show up, so anywhere around the hospital is good." The hunters would show up, sooner or later. If he went to the hospital regularly, they were bound to.

Both crows nodded, and snuggled into his neck a few times. "Heh, yeah, you can stick around till ... till whenever."

"If they keep your mood elevated, they are welcome in the tower."

He jerked his head again, looking behind him. Antoinette.

"Ah ... h-hey." Gulping, he forced his eyes down to her shoes, and with a little time, forced them back up. She was wearing her work shoes, a nice business suit skirt, no jacket, a white shirt, and ... a strange look on her face. Actually, he knew that look. That was her Primogen meeting look, cold and calculating, quiet, receiving, analyzing.

That ... was perfect. He could work with that.

"Hello," she said.

He forced on a smile, but only managed a small one. Better than nothing. "I suppose you know."

"I do."

"Hope ... you don't mind that I didn't contact you."

She offered a small, annoyed sigh, the same she used in her meetings. "I understand. The sweeps could wait no longer. We have wasted enough time on recreation as is."

“Agreed.” He tried the smile again as she came down the steps to stand beside him. No good, gone in seconds. “You came out here?”

“I wanted to speak before sunrise. I thought that you might be hesitant to enter, until the last moment.”

“ ... yeah, probably.”

“But it is imperative that we do.”

“ ... yeah, probably.”

With a nod, Antoinette continued down the steps, and out into the maze garden. “Come.”

Sighing, he followed after her. Mulder and Scully stuck with him, each offering the elder a quiet caw of acknowledgment as Jack started walking. While Ventrue and Gangrels were naturals at Animalism, any Kindred could use it, and it wouldn't surprise Jack if Antoinette had spoken to many crows, coyotes, rats, and other predators.

She sat upon one of the stone benches, between the professionally trimmed hedges. It was the bench they'd sat upon, when their romance was first starting to build. It was when Tony had showed up, and Jack had walked past him. Only later did he learn Antoinette had punched Tony for some insults.

If Jack had been in her position, and had the power, he would have killed the fucker. But the Prince couldn't go making enemies of Kindred so easily; if they ever decided to join forces, they could oust her, or kill her. If she killed a Primogen, over nothing but an insult, the other Primogen would have had an excuse to do just that. And Jack knew, no matter how intelligent he considered himself, he wasn't so intelligent when he was pissed, and that would make him a bad leader.

He looked down at the old, beautiful bench, the weathered stone, and managed another weak smile as he let the memory remind him of a different time. So innocent back then, so naive. So dumb.

“I have eyes on your mother, my love. If her condition changes, I will know immediately. A measure I am sure Julias has already taken.”

“Probably.” He sat down with her, half a foot between them. Normally he’d be pressed to her side, snuggling, or at least keeping a bit of physical contact. If he didn’t, she’d slide over to him instead. Not tonight.

“Based on your words and expression, no one has found traces of the hunters this night.”

“Yeah. But it’s only the first night. And besides, Jeremiah was hurt in our last encounter, as was Angela. Natasha did good, hurting them like she did at the last moment.”

“Alas, had her aim been a foot higher, one of them would be dead.”

“Yeah ... if only. Christ, if I had just killed Angela when I had the chance, none of this would have happened.” Then it wouldn’t be his fault.

Nodding, she leaned back, and looked up to the sky. It was almost impossible to see the stars, with all the lights of Dolareido’s nightlife, but the moon was visible. “If only Athalia and Azamel had helped earlier.”

“ ... yeah.”

“If only Barry Tellern had had the foresight and skill to notice his life was in danger.”

“Yeah.”

“If only they had not acquired the help of this Begotten creature.”

“ ... yeah, I—”

“If only our surveillance was better. If only Damien or the others had been quicker in your last encounter. If only Eric or Clara or Herrington had found the opportunity to return the attack, when they were captured. If only we had predicted that Angela would stoop so low as to attack innocent kine. If only—”

“I get it!” He threw up his hands, and glared at the tall woman. “I get it. Million events that had to converge to create this circumstance. And that’s how life works. Everything’s a unique circumstance created from an infinitely complex chain of causality, and to blame any specific circumstance with an ‘if only’ is a fool’s game. I get it. I’m not an idiot. I’m not ... I’m not blaming ... myself.” Except, of course, he’d basically just admitted to doing that a moment ago. Fuck.

For a moment, she said nothing, letting the volume of his words fade into the night air. “You are,” she said, words quiet and direct. He half expected her words to burn him to cinders, considering he’d just yelled at her.

“I...”

“I will not lecture you on the folly of that thinking. As you said, you are clearly aware of the lack of logic. But, you are a living creature, Jack, not a robot. Your father is dead, and for a young boy, that must have been a pain beyond my imagining. Now your sister is dead, your mother perhaps to follow, and pain turns to agony, to resentment and rage. You will fantasize, from now until eternity, about how things could have been different. Such is the way of anyone with a soul.”

“From now ... until forever, huh?” He groaned and lowered his arms again. “Fuck me.”

“That is, perhaps, untrue. As centuries come and go, and you are forced to take long torpors to settle your ever growing blood lust, the dreams will blur all your memories. For better, and for worse.”

“Fuck me ... again.”

“Many Kindred keep journals, to catalog and attempt to remember both the joys of their pasts, and the pains. I do suggest you begin to do this.”

Journaling? He never liked the idea of keeping a journal. He never needed it. He was more than capable of fully articulating and appreciating his thoughts without having to see them written out. He talked to himself out loud, arranged logic and events, walked through causality chains to see if they made sense, or if they fell apart upon scrutiny. But, those were words, lost after said. Maybe journaling his thoughts would make sense?

He tried to imagine what it'd be like, a hundred years from now, reading old journals about shit like this. Would he think it silly? Meaningful? Painful?

He didn't want to forget his sister, though. He didn't want to forget his father, either. Maybe starting a journal about his first life, and the experiences of his second life, was a good idea.

“Vampires have a strange time of it, don't they?” he said.

“Indeed. We are not human, and yet, much of our knowledge of existence is built upon a human existence we once had.” With another sigh, she looked down at him, and straight into his eyes. Hers had softened. And, that was ok. “I can offer you nothing more than guidance, from a Kindred's perspective, and a soft place to rest

your head, as I always have. But, the pain of losing your first family? I can listen, nothing more.”

“No memory of your first family?” He already knew the answer.

“None at all. I am sure I had a father, and mother, though considering how long ago this was, it would not surprise me if they died to disease, starvation, murder by starving or diseased neighbors, or perhaps they died tragic deaths to cruel occupations? Had I known what would happen with the centuries, I would have at least written their names.”

He leaned back, and stared up at her. Now his eyes were the ones giving pity, shit. “Fuck ... I ... I mean, I know you’ve told me that before, I just ... I can’t imagine forgetting this.”

“And this is why is say, journal it. These memories, even these painful, horrible memories of death, murder, and fear, are precious. Do not let them rob you of your mind, but, do not let them fade away, either. Immortality is a curse, my love. Be careful to not let it rot your soul, as it has done to many others, such as your grandsire.”

Sighing louder, he nodded, and lowered his eyes again. “I ... sorry I didn’t contact you the moment I learned.”

“Do not be. You had work to do, as you said. And I understand that this is a trying time, for more reasons than obvious. You, and I, are Kindred, and that implies our struggles are not so easily defined as a human’s. The five stages of grief? It is not so simple for us.” She slid across the bench, until her thigh was touching his. “Come, speak with me, tell me of the thoughts that haunt you, my love. I am not some all-knowing creature that will laugh at the cliché words you use to describe your pain. If anything, I am a student, hoping to understand what you wish to teach me. And ... and I am your love, hoping to share in your joy, and pain.”



He choked on something between a chuckle and sob. Swallowing it down, he leaned into her side, and pressed his head against her shoulder. So different to Clara. The werewolf knew Jack's pain all too well, while Antoinette had long forgotten what it meant to lose someone as close as father, mother, or sister. He smiled at the thought, at the difference. Clara could be a friend in a way Antoinette couldn't, maybe?

Mulder and Scully hopped off, and took to the bench's back, perching and watching.

"How much do you want to know?"

"Whatever you would hesitate to tell me."

Ouch, straight to the sore spot.

"I ... I do blame myself, I guess. I could have shot that fucking bitch when I had the choice. Now Mary's dead, and Mom's ... almost there." He looked up to her again, to see what she'd say, what she'd do, how she'd look at him.

She didn't. She set her arm around him, and looked up at the moon.

Guess he should continue. "I've ... I've been ... terrified, about ... about this ... rage." He stopped, and waited for the question. None came. She continued to look up, her arm still holding him. "It wasn't there before, before I became Kindred. But now, there's something in me that gets a ... a hunger, I guess. Like, it hungers for ... violence? It's rage, and anger, and it builds up, and ... and it's not rage or anger I'm familiar with, from when I was human." This was good, this was progress. Antoinette had a good point. She was an elder, and that meant her expertise lay in matters of Kindred. Maybe she could help. Maybe he was a fool to think he could get over it, like a human could. "It took hold of me, when I broke out of Angela's torture, and I used it to break the minds of the hunters,

and summon the rats. Ever since then, whenever I think of Angela, I feel it crawling around inside me ... screaming, trying to get out. I thought it was just anger at first, but I can't even think about that fucking bitch, that fucking horrible, disgusting, monster, without wanting to kill her. Not even kill her, but torture her. I want her to suffer. I want her to squirm and writhe in agony. I want to hear her beg for her life." He looked down, and felt his hands squeeze, the way he had just hours ago, at the foot of his mom's hospital bed. "Just ... just fucking rip her open. Get my fingers into her guts, and tear them out. Bite into them. Rip ... tear ... shred..."

Antoinette, with her one arm still around his shoulders, reached across her lap with the other, and found his fists. They were shaking, trembling, his forearms flexed and fists squeezing until his fingers were digging into his palms. He was grinding his teeth. His fangs had emerged. Vitae was rising up into his chest, empowering, preparing, readying him for a Kindred's way of combat.

Dominate.

Make them obey.

You're a Ventrue. They're kine. Weak. Blood bags. Inferior. They've hurt you, attacked you, insulted you. They've hurt those who were close to you in your first life, just to hurt you in your second.

How dare they.

"Your Beast is strong."

He snapped his head up. Fuck, right, he was sitting, and she was with him. Antoinette. He gulped as he looked at her, and she met his eyes, gazing at him with stern eyes. Wait, not stern. Interested? She peered at him, tilted her head to the side a little, and kept eye contact with him as she did, red eyes looking into him.

“I ... I guess.”

“You are a terribly intelligent young man, my love, to the point of fault. I am sure you have run your mind ragged with cycling thoughts of understanding this unusual urge within you.”

“Yeah, no denying that.” Might as well put all his cards on the table. Why would he want to keep this from her, anyway? They were in a loving relationship, and much as he had an ego big enough to get in his way, he wasn’t stupid enough to let it, so he thought.

“Julias has always been unnaturally strong, with a Beast capable of great feats. He is on your council because MacDonald and Turio recognize both his value as wise, and as deadly. You are Right Hand for the same reasons.”

“But, where did this come from? I’m ... barely a neonate.”

“A gift, and a curse, from your sire, and his sire, and his sire, and their sire. No one knows about the past of Viktor Honors, including Viktor, but there was no doubt the man was unusually capable. His bloodline grows strong in Julias, and with time, your sire will become stronger than Viktor ever was. And you, the same, for Julias.” Sighing, she leaned in closer to him, and kissed him on the head. “It rarely manifests so powerfully, so quickly, and that is your curse. You will have the Beast demanding satisfaction, at the doorstep of your mind, while you are still young. Such a burden, for one so young, is rare.”

“Lovely.” He groaned after he said it. Complaining. Whining. He hated that. Hated that in other people, hated it in himself, hated it when he couldn’t stop. Whining when something was your own fault was one of his biggest pet peeves. Whining when it wasn’t, was different, but still a useless, pointless, waste of mental energy. He needed to be stronger than this, he needed—

She bopped him on the head. “I can see your thoughts turning, my love. Enough. Accept that ... that the tragedies that have befallen you are terrible. It is ok to take a moment, and feel the pain it warrants. You need not push yourself so hard; or will you succumb to ego and destroy yourself, as men often do?”

As men often do. Pulling out the guns and poking his gender. Ouch again.

“Come,” she said, and she pulled him tighter to her side. “Your sister is dead, and your mother may soon follow. Enemies tear apart our lives. And you ... have a Beast inside you even your sire did not predict. That I did not predict. Life conspires to bury you with burdens one your age should not be forced to contend with, and it ... it must be terrifying, and overwhelming.”

“It’s ... more than that. It’s hard to explain.”

“Please, share with me.”

He forced down the burning sensation in his chest, and nudged his nose into Antoinette’s side. “I was ... I was terrified of ... of going through what happened when my father died. The pain of it, and ... and pushing people away again.” No matter how much he knew it, no matter how much intelligence and logic he had at his disposal, he couldn’t override the emotions. Couldn’t flip the fucking switch. “I pushed my mom away, my sister away, and now ... now she’s dead ... and Mom’s...”

Terrified of pain. Terrified of repeating mistakes. Terrified of losing the things he had. Terrified of the thing inside him, the Beast, and its clawing and roaring frustration. All wrapped in regret. Poetic, and infuriating.

“You will not push me away, little Ventrue. You may try, but now that I understand, it will not happen. Whatever comes, I will be here for you.”

He sighed into her, and nudged his nose into her a few times. “I really hate this.”

“Why?”

“I’m better than this. I’m smarter than this. I shouldn’t let this ... stupid bullshit fuck with me so much.”

“Ventrue hubris. And, to be torn asunder by these events, is to hold onto your humanity, my love. Without it, you are nothing but a conduit for the Beast inside you.”

“I know, I know. I’m stuck running these thoughts, over and over, and I can’t fucking break out of the loop.”

“I know that feeling all too well, little Ventrue. I have spent hours tonight, wondering, thinking, unsure of what to say to you, or how to approach you.”

“... that ... makes me feel a lot better.” Knowing his five-hundred-year-old lover could get lost in her thoughts, the same way he did? “You don’t just ... know how to respond to every situation automatically? Stay in perfect control at all times?”

“Not at all. In fact, as Kindred enter their elder years, paranoia becomes common. Many of us overreact to the smallest threats, and spend decades plotting against each other despite a complete lack of evidence to justify such actions. To be trapped in our thoughts, running them around in our minds again, and again, and again, paralyzed by them, is a trial all elders deal with nightly.”

“Damn.” He’d been like that ever since he hit puberty. Maybe not paranoid, but then again, maybe it was paranoia.

“Come, to bed with us. We can discuss ... possibilities, tomorrow night, if your mother yet lives.”

Groaning, he got up with her, and nodded. She might be dead tomorrow. She might ... be an option for the embrace, too.

Christ, he was going to have nightmares.

# Chapter 81

~~Jack~~

Waking up beside Antoinette was a good way to start the night, normally. Waking up next to the beautiful seductress should have been the best thing ever, like usual. Not this night.

He sat up, as did she, and the two of them looked at each other for a little while before she nodded, and got dressed. A perfect opportunity to watch the busty demoness move around naked, normally. He didn't watch. Couldn't get into the mood, couldn't find himself wanting to do anything, except check the latest news.

He put on his suit, as did she, and the two of them walked to a neighboring room, smaller, an office environment with a few chairs and a desk where the Prince had a laptop. She probably had a dozen laptops, now that he thought about it. If you had the money to waste, luxuries became the norm.

Come on, don't look for reasons to be upset. Sit down, shut the fuck up, and wait for her to tell you what the latest news is on your mother.

"No change," she said. Straight to the point, thank god. "Do you wish to see?"

"... yeah." It might make it a bit easier to swallow, if he was looking at a computer screen instead of seeing it in the flesh.

Sighing with every step, he walked around the desk of wood, and stood beside the Prince. His mom was on the screen, deathly still, tube still jammed into her throat, needle still jammed into her arm, same as it was when he saw her last night.

“It is a miracle she is alive, my love,” the Prince said.

“Yeah, it is. Stabbed a ... a fucking ridiculous amount of times.”  
Easier to say that, than to say the name of the person responsible. “I ... I think I’ll do another sweep with the team, then visit her again, later tonight.”

“I see.” Antoinette leaned back in her fancy chair, and sighed, combing her hair over her chest in that cute way she did. No matter how dire the situation, he supposed he couldn’t help but notice things like that about her. It made the current situation bearable, if only just.

“I still ... still don’t know if ... if I can ... if I can even ask...”  
Groaning louder, he walked back around the desk and sat in one of the chairs. He wheeled it in close, and put both his palms onto the hard desk. If he could look her in the eye, maybe he could say the words. “I...” Nope, fail. He lowered his head and set his forehead to the cold surface.

“Are you worried about how she would respond, if she discovered her daughter was dead? That, her Requiem would be nothing but pain, and lead to a short second life at her own hand?”

He winced, loudly, as she tore the band-aid off with speed, but it took all his arm hair with it. It was awesome that she knew to be so direct with him, that she didn’t let her desire to coddle him stop her from treating him like an adult, and a fellow Kindred, but damn. “I ... I don’t know. Mary’s dead, and that ... that’s going to kill her. It’s really going to fucking kill her. Far as I could tell from my visits, those two were really becoming a pair.”

“Mother and daughter share a unique bond. I have known many, even some who were both Kindred, mother siring daughter.”

“Really?”



“Oui. The mother could not bear to part with her daughter, and sired her once she had several years of a second life to her name.”

“That sounds sweet ... there’s a but coming, isn’t there.”

“In a manner of speaking. Gloria’s sire stayed with her for a decade, but with time, decided to leave for a different city.”

“Oh, Gloria. Oh ... I had no idea. Must have been a pretty huge fallout between those two, for her mom to risk leaving Dolareido.” Leaving a city was a terrifying prospect.

Nodding, Antoinette closed the laptop, and stood. He followed after her, and when she held out her hand for him, he took it. Holding hands. It used to feel naughty, like a precursor to sex. Tonight, it felt like a lifeline stopping him from drowning in the shit show. So fucking sick and tired of shit shows.

“People change when they are embraced, and become Kindred. You have changed. Your mother would change. And, as you know, each blood clan would affect her in different ways. One of the many reasons Kindred spend time with a potential childe, groom them, learn about them to discover how they would respond to a second life. We have none of that with your mother.”

“I know, I know. And ... fuck, I know. It’s a horrible thing to request, but ... but...”

“Who would you ask?”

“To sire her? I ... fuck, I don’t know.” He wanted to say her, and their conversation had already implied it, but asking that felt so wrong.

“You have made many friends, my love, many who would say they owe you much. Consider who you ask, and consider carefully. Were you ... to ask me, to sire her, I would be terribly tempted. It has been

centuries since I have sired anyone, and I am more than capable. But she would be my childe, and all the things that includes; a dangerous life for anyone.”

Dangerous, and straight up twisted and weird, he was sure. Antoinette was a dragon, a powerful member of an extremely secretive covenant, who researched things that’d make anyone’s skin crawl. Having his mom pulled into that world would be horrible. Julias had been upfront with Jack about what sort of life he was asking of him, even if he didn’t get the chance to explain it. Not a life of sunshine and rainbows, in the Invictus, and he bet being a dragon was harder.

“I ... don’t know what to do, Antoinette.”

“Neither do I, my love.”

Groaning, he walked toward the door. “I’m out to do another sweep.”

“Take care, little Ventrue, but come to a decision quickly. We do not know how long your mother will survive.”

A time limit on everything he did. Lovely.

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~~Julias~~

He held Triss close, and squeezed.

“Ah! Hey, gonna pop, here.”

The three of them were in his bunker, deep underneath his mansion. They hadn’t had much time to talk, the night before. He’d come out of his planning meeting with Maria and Michael pretty damn late, and Triss showed up with Jen not long after. They had a

total of twenty minutes before sunset, and they spent it summarizing the night's events.

But this time, they had thirty minutes before they had to resume their tasks. Enough time to enjoy themselves a little, before they let the weary shit of the world start to ruin their night, as it inevitably would.

He squeezed her closer, spooned her, pressed her tight to his body until he couldn't get any closer, and he nuzzled his head onto hers, against her hair, his cheek to her forehead. Never going to let her go. And with how big his arm was compared to her, he could squeeze a lot of her, pressing against her whole torso until she was wriggling, pinned.

"Looking to fuck?" she said. "Jen, get the lube. I think we got time for a quickie."

"Nope, not looking for sex."

The Nosferatu groaned, and tried to wriggle away. He didn't let her.

"You sure? Feels like you do."

"Nope, just looking to hold the woman I love more than anything, as tight as I can."

Jen sat up, and watched with big, puppy-dog eyes as she got dressed. Not a word, though. Sometimes his fellow Ventrue preferred to stay quiet and listen to their dumb pillow talk. He appreciated it.

"Yeah, I can see that, ya dumbass." But, much as she talked like she didn't like it, she gave up eventually, and pressed her back into him. "You just going to stand there and watch? Help me out, Jen!"

“Nope. Too cute.” Once she had her suit pants on, Jen sat down on the bed, and continued watching, topless. Far be it from her to pass up an opportunity to show off how good she looked wearing pants and nothing but.

He didn't plan on having sex, but, with Jen there, watching, warm smile on her face, and heavy breasts hanging underneath her chest with her forward lean, he might just.

Except, not. Much as he kind of wanted to have sex with his lover, as he often did at the crack of dusk, last night's bullshit was too heavy a wet blanket.

“What're you gonna do?” Triss said, reading his mind. Or, more likely, he wore his moroseness on his face.

“About Jack?”

“Yeah. Kid must be hurting like crazy.”

“Still don't know. It might be best for everyone if she dies.” A fucking horrible way to look at it, but the sooner Jack lost his ties to his first life, the sooner he could obtain safety and distance from it. “He can't sire her, too young to handle the strain; it'd break him. And I'd rather not, not after having sired Jack not so long ago.” Siring wasn't only draining, it was taxing on the soul, or whatever it was inside a Kindred that kept the Beast under control.

“Yeah. Understandable.”

Jen climbed back across the bed, and lay where she'd been a few minutes ago. “I suppose it would all depend on how his mom would react to it. Losing her daughter would be devastating. But, knowing she might be able to get revenge? More of a dad trait than a mom one, but, I wouldn't put it past a mom to want some good old, classic vengeance.” Nodding, she sat cross legged beside Triss, smiling down at her. Putting on pants was probably her way of

saying she wasn't going to have sex, but that didn't mean she wouldn't try and instigate it between him and Triss.

“Don't think most women are capable of revenge?” Triss scoffed, and tried sit up, but he didn't let her, forcing a squeak out of her as he squeezed her tight to his chest. “I would totally fuck someone up if they wronged me.”

“Yes, but you're a tomboy. A proper lady doesn't get her hands dirty.” Laughing, Jen reached out, and flicked Triss in the nose. Julias squeezed with both arms around the Nos preemptively, knowing Triss would try and leap out to tackle Jen. That she did, and almost took him with her, strong as she was. But the odd angle, them on their sides on the bed, prevented the attack.

“Oh you bitch. Get your big tits over here so I can body slam you. I'm gonna ... gonna...” Her voice faded away, as Julias started to kiss her neck. He couldn't risk releasing her from his embrace, but he was clear to lean down over her neck as he spooned her, and kiss her jawline, her neck, under her ear, and pluck at her many earrings a few times with his lips.

They were all feeling a little down, after hearing about Jack's first family, but a little neck kissing and snuggling in bed could cure many wounds; at least for them, the spectators to Jack's misery.

“Talk to Natasha yet?” Jen said as she lay back down on her side by Triss. Head propped up on a palm, elbow to the bed, she took advantage of her friend's incapacitated state, and used her free hand to begin plucking at one of Triss's nipple piercings.

“No, I haven't,” he said. “I know I should, considering what you told me. It's been ... weird, I suppose, between the three of us since the changes. I'm Jessy's boss now, and we rarely talk outside official conversations. I almost never speak with Natasha.”

“You should, ass.” Triss elbowed him in the side, head turning to glare up at him. “Thought she was your friend?”

“She was. Is. It’s been difficult to step away from my position, and...”

The two girls glared at him. Apparently, he’d done something offensive.

Jen slid in closer, and closer, until she was pressing her body to Triss’s. “Natasha is nice. She deserves a good friend, so, be her friend.” She offered him the same nose flick, as well.

“In case you haven’t noticed, most of my free time is spent trying to satisfy two Kindred women who keep sleeping over.”

Jen laughed, and gave Triss’s nipple a hard enough pluck to both make her breast ripple when she let go, and also earn a feminine squeak from the trapped woman. “I’d say invite her over, but I think she’s getting more than she can handle with her two boyfriends.”

“They being too aggressive with her?” Julias said, eyes opening wider. Just like that, like someone pinged a tuning fork, he was ready to get involved if someone was hurting Tash.

Triss shook her head, hands reaching out to shove Jen away. “Nah. If anything, they’re bringing out a more confident side to her. She had no trouble hanging with the four of us.”

“That’s good. I’m happy she’s making progress in her new life.” As he said that, his eyes lowered a bit, and a hint of edge in his voice he didn’t plan to have there came out.

“You’re sad she’s gone, aren’t you?” Triss said.

He nodded, and set his cheek down on her head again. “Yeah. I understand why she left, since Maria betrayed her, but ... yeah.”

“I wonder about Garry sometimes. I left him high and dry.”

Growling, Julias set his lips onto her neck. Not a growl for sex, but a growl for frustration. “Your boss is far too sneaky. The Invictus know a lot about the Carthians, and we know Garry has dealings with Jacob, but ... well, I can’t talk too much about it, except to say, your boss is fucking sneaky as shit. I’m sure Garry only gave you up to pay off some hefty favors.”

“Ooh. I’m worth a lot?”

Nodding, he opened his mouth, and bit down on her neck, gently. No fangs of course, but it was enough to make her squeal, a sound she rarely made.

“A lot,” Jen said. Now that Triss was distracted, Jen slid in closer again, and set her lips onto the other side of Triss’s jaw.

“You talk to any of your old Carthian buds anymore?”

“No.” Triss tried pushing Jen away again, but the other Ventrue refused, sneaking her hands around Triss’s body and holding tight so she could squash herself to her. Nos squished between two Ventrue. “Didn’t have friends, not really. Garry himself was a bit of a friend, but even then, that wasn’t really ... friendship, I guess. I hung out in a fucking catacomb mostly, remember?”

Jen laughed, even as she nuzzled her lips into Triss’s neck, next to Julias’s. “I bet he misses you. If we’re going to nag at Julias to talk to Tash again, maybe you should do the same for Garry?”

“Maybe I should. Maybe I—Jen, the fuck, girl? The fuck did you put pants on for if you want to bone so badly?” Triss gave up on pushing Jen away, but did her best to throw her hands up in an exasperated ‘what the fuck’.

“Sorry. Just, the way you were bossing everyone around last night? Arg, so hot. If we had more time when we got back, I would have demanded sex.” Jen lifted her head enough to put a kiss on Julias’s cheek, winked at him, and set her lips onto Triss’s proper.

“Triss was the boss? I know you said you were looking for easy marks in Devil’s Corner, but I assumed Tash was in charge, or maybe Othello.”

“Mhmm!” Jen had to moan to get through Triss’s lips, before she pulled away. “All Triss. Othello’s just a dog, a lazy one at that, but at least he’s loyal. Aaron’s less lazy, quieter, but I half expect him to push back at some point, like any Gangrel. Tash is Tash. Everyone listened to Triss.”

That was impressive. Triss was strong for her age, thirty-years embraced or not, but to take charge of Tash, a very powerful Mekhet, and Othello, one of the few Kindred in Dolareido to near a hundred years of age? Very impressive.

“Well, I do ... really wanna find those hunters, you know?” Triss said. Much as Jen seemed intent on turning Triss on, the somber weight of present circumstance crushed that kindling fire. “Poor kid must be wrecked.”

Sighing, Julias sat up. Queue for the two of them to sit up as well.

“Yeah, he was. And like Jen said, if she’s sired, she might try and get revenge, maybe try a suicide mission. But assuming she doesn’t, she’s still down a child. Hard as it is to lose a parent, it’s a hundred times worse on a parent to lose a child. She might get Jack back I her life, but she still has to go through the grief of losing her daughter.”

Both women sighed and nodded. The oppressive atmosphere was perfect to get dressed in. Lovely.

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A hundred Invictus Kindred, all in the Xnomina lower levels, all fetching pistols, knives — swords for the Mekhet — and some shotguns. No thralls or ghouls. As much as the Invictus had thralls, trained thralls, capable of managing heavy ordnance like fully automatic assault rifles, sniper rifles, and various handheld explosives, they were needed to guard Xnomina, while also patrolling the streets. And thralls would be a liability, when the bullets started flying.

A Gangrel transformation, or a Ventrue dominating enemy hunters, a Daeva or Nosferatu throwing punches that could puncture buildings, or a Mekhet moving at insane speeds while hidden in shadow, these were the tools needed to fight hunters, when going on the offense. On the defense? Then thralls or ghouls could help.

Some people disagreed with him on that, told him teams should bring thralls, like how he had when he visited Azamel. They didn't understand how different it was, working with a small team of pros, versus a large team of, relative to Kindred, amateurs. Even the most experienced thralls were nothing compared to the Kindred sent on these sweep teams, each a minimum of twenty-years embraced. Even Gloria, assistant and inexperienced, had deadly skills with her use of Obfuscate, and speed.

They could bring the thralls and ghouls if they ever found the hunters, and it turned into a full-on street war. Until then, they had to be tactical, surgical, and use sweep teams. The sweep teams could become strike teams with a single, short order, or could on their own, if circumstances demanded it. They couldn't switch tactics on a dime if they had to carry a bunch of humans with them.

Julias, Maria, and Michael were in an office that overhung the primary equipment room, with a glass wall that overlooked the many metal shelves. There were enough munitions here to launch a war, if they needed. Enough guns to arm a thousand thralls; more

thralls than the Invictus had, but that number was always in flux. Far as Julias knew, they had almost five hundred thralls, and over a hundred ghouls these days. The Carthians didn't have as many, but then again, maybe they were better at hiding it than the Invictus suspected they were.

“Are you sure you want your childe out there, Mister Mire?” Michael said, standing beside him and looking down at the many Kindred walking about, arming themselves.

“No.”

“Then tell him to stay. All other Kindred his age, and those well above, aren't going out there.”

That was true, of course. Jack wasn't even two years embraced, and that meant no one would judge him for staying out of these teams. But, then again. “He's a Right Hand, and that means responsibility. He's joining teams because he knows that, not because I told him to.”

Maria didn't agree, shaking her head. “Or because he's emotionally compromised.”

“If there's anyone I trust to keep their head when things get heated, it's Jack.” Or at least, that's what he'd like to believe, but recent events had put a dent in that theory. Jack wasn't as stable as he used to be, quick to anger, quick to argue, and now with his sister dead and mother not far behind, anyone would doubt him. Or, his willingness to be out there, hunting the hunters, despite his age and his predicament, would instill respect and renewed vigor in the other Kindred. Which way it swung would depend on the results.

Julias stepped closer to the glass, and watched the boy check the available armaments. In the old days, Ventrue never did anything with their own hands, always using slaves, thralls, ghouls, and other Kindred to do their bidding. In the new world, guns were a great

tool, one Ventrue could take advantage of while the other blood clans used their talents. Mekhet always used swords, due to their speed and stealth. Daeva had the same speed, but the strength of Nosferatu, and usually used their fists. Nosferatu did the same, with the stealth of the Mekhet and the strength of the Daeva. Gangrel were as hard to kill as Ventrue, but could transform in a myriad of ways to unleash chaos, and turn that defense into offense.

The other clans were meant for direct confrontation. The Ventrue were not. They used Dominate to turn unsuspecting victims into slaves, bodyguards, sometimes unwitting spies. That all changed with the invention of guns allowing Ventrue to engage at a distance. Anyone could do a lot of damage to a vampire with a shotgun, especially if they got their hands on acidic shells; the wonders of technology. And, of course, flamethrowers turned any Kindred into a harbinger of death.

Michael's phone rang. "Hello? ... you serious? Hold on." He covered the receiver, and looked to Maria and Julias. "Jessy's in the lobby, says some of the dogs want to get a peek at what's going on down here."

Maria, growling like an angry badger, lowered her eyes to her tablet. "Why?"

"Jess says they want to know what sort of weaponry we have. A show of good faith."

Julias groaned, not too far off from Maria's noise. "What could they possibly gain by knowing what weapons we have?"

The big guy shrugged. "Probably want to confirm, make sure we're not bluffing."

It was just an armament room, meant for standard loadouts. Of all the things Kindred were capable of, of all the things the Invictus were capable of, this was hardly the most dangerous stuff. Secrets

capable of toppling massive corporations, experimental weapon designs that incorporated Kindred abilities, potential plans for hostile and non-hostile takeovers of various parts of Dolareido, and many of Xnomina's illegal activities, were found in different places in the building's data centers. Then again, knowing Uratha, they didn't have a hacker, or anyone who understood tech. The damn wolves understood violence, and only violence.

That was better than the Begotten understanding nothing but fear, he supposed.

"Let them in," he said. It was a power play, Avery proving that she could get her way when she wanted, because they needed her. She was right.

Michael nodded. "Jessy, let them in. Keep an eye on them ... What? Why is he here? Fuck. Fine."

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~~Eric~~

The city waited to one side of him, the forest on the other. He sat upon a shore of pebbles of a small river, the same river where a monster had leapt from to attack him. Good enough reason to get away from the river, but instead, he sat there, and waited. It wasn't safe there. The monster might come again. Or not, if Fiona was right, and the strange barriers they burrowed through to reach him were damaged and uncrossable in his area. But, when he was dreaming, was he still in that area, where his body was, in a bed? Was his mind, or soul, actually outside of his body, drifting around and pushing against the boundaries of their world?

He didn't think so, before. In the past, he assumed dreams were just neurological hallucinations. Now, he was half convinced dreams were out-of-body experiences, reaching across ... something, to somewhere, somehow.

He howled at the moon, as any wolf did. If the monster came for him, this time he would be ready for battle. This time he'd summon the gift given to him, and bite into the creature of nightmares, until it was no more. Clara had hurt it, in its nightmare. Maybe he could hurt it here, in his dream.

I need to be able to dream without worry of nightmare invasions, right?

Indeed.

Oh, it's you again. You vanished when a monster infiltrated my mind, my dreams. Left me to die.

I didn't leave you. I will never leave my children. I was blocked by that monstrosity of the human mind.

Children?

Your understanding of the world is so small, Eric Tanverson. If only you knew about the places, the worlds beyond, the things between, the eyes and teeth waiting for anything that dares to step beyond their boundaries. The steps I take to keep it all from collapsing, this Fallen World that struggles to exist ... it is not important, not to you. But know that you are one of the Forsaken, Eric, as are your brothers and sisters. Do your duty, and keep balance between the Shadow and the Material.

You didn't answer my question, and you only add more.  
Forsaken?

Do your duty, Eric, child. Your predecessors broke the world, and you inherit the sins of your ancestors. And when the fury, or pain, or oceans of misery overwhelm you, remember: breathe. Center yourself, and bathe in its strength. I have gifted you power, and you are to use it. Or don't, and be lost to its madness.

He snarled as he started to pace the river, looking down at the reflection of the moon upon its small waves. The moon was talking to him, and he was demanding the moon answer his questions. Pretty fucked up.

And if I want to use that power for whatever the fuck I want?

There will be consequences. But it is up to you, what you do with the power of the spirit I have placed within you. Be warned though, if you continue to resist my orders, if you continue to avoid the duty of the Forsaken, I will strip you of many things. The spirit of the wolf will remain, and so too the hunger for violence and flesh, but there will be no more words from me. Cahalith no more, you will be.

And ... if I want to use that power, to have strange sex with a real hot, fun vampire?

If a moon could laugh, it must have sounded like what filled his ears, and his dream. The wind spun around, the clouds whipped away, the river quivered, and the forest beside him twisted. The birds squawked and chirped, and the city beyond went silent, so the forest could make its sounds.

Be careful, Eric.

Yeah, I know. When I'm in that form, the urge to fight and feast is overwhelming, but channeling that into sex with Jessy is—

Be careful, Eric. This forest of metal and concrete will become a fissure, and things beyond reckoning will crawl up from the depths, clawing at the cracks opened for them. If that comes to pass, no words will be able to describe the hell wrought.

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Yeah, his dreams were weird. He was talking to some sort of alien entity, except it was in his head, and their back and forth wasn't

words so much as intersecting thoughts. Forsaken? Children? The Fallen World? The fuck was any of that?

Groaning, he reached over for Kat, and stroked her around the ears. Purring like a motor in seconds.

“Kat, don’t ever ... get crazy on me, would you? I can only handle so much crazy right now.”

More purrs. If there was one thing he could trust in his life to be consistent, reliable, and loving, it was Kat.

As the sun started to set, he stepped into the shower. Another night at Bloodlust, another night wondering what the fuck he was doing with his life.

That kid, Jack. His mom was in the same hospital as Eric’s dad. Unlike his dad, she’d been put there for legit reasons. It almost made him feel embarrassed to visit his old man, when other people were dying in there because of real problems. Getting stabbed an absurd amount of times? A real problem. Refusing to take care of yourself and giving up on life? Not a real problem.

Christ, he needed to let this go. Course, doing that would be difficult while he put in the money to keep the old man alive.

He turned on the shower, took a breath, and let the hot water wash over him. No matter how many reassurances he was given that thralls were watching this building like a hawk, with snipers and multiple levels of digital surveillance, it was hard to feel completely comfortable. His territory was safe, but only relative to other places in Dolareido. Maybe he should find a hole in the ground to sleep in? Jessie said some Kindred did that, found random places to dig in and bunker down for the day.

Don’t do that. You don’t have any practice in that sort of shit. You’re a city boy, through and through. A forest of metal and

concrete, right? More like a jungle.

Groaning louder, he set both palms to the wall, and let the water flow over his naked body. Jessy didn't fuck him last night. First night in a while he didn't have an orgasm. Honestly, he'd been happy for the break. Learning about the kid's family had yanked the sex mood out of him, anyway.

Knocks at the apartment door. He stood up straight, but rolled his eyes as the door opened, hinges giving away how quickly, and how far; it was Jessy.

"Yo Eric!" she called out. "Ah, shower. Awesome." And in to the massive bathroom she came, no hesitation, no warning.

It made him smile.

"Hey."

"So, I'm heading out to do another sweep of North Side with Hella and Jonah. And I want you to come with."

"Figured you might ask that." Time to see how this relationship was going to work, when her vampire life started to affect his. "Why should I do that?"

"Oh, hardball? I get it." Winking at him, she threw off her blouse, and Blushed Life as she took off her bra with all the grace of a bulldozer.

"Uh, not looking to trade work favors for sex favors." God damn it, she knew his weakness. Not that it was a secret, that men had a second brain, one in their dick, and this brazen woman was going to delight in exploiting how stupid that second brain was. Lemming off a cliff.



“Not trading. This is gamesmanship.” She tossed aside her suit pants and underwear along with her socks, so she was completely naked. The abs, the large breasts, the curvy and muscular legs, tiny waist, the extreme hourglass figure of an athlete meets model, it was too much. And while some guys didn’t like muscle on their girls, to him, she looked fucking amazing.

Winking at him, she got down onto her knees, in front of him. His second brain kicked into overdrive immediately, pulling all blood out of his first brain, and moving it into his penis instead. God damn it.

“Gamesmanship?”

“Yeap. It’s like bribing, except less blatant. Besides, you think I don’t enjoy this?” As the water flattened her beautiful, short blonde hair to her head, she smiled up at him as she set one hand on his thigh, and wrapped his cock in the other. “The look on a man’s face when a girl goes out of her way to give him a blowjob? It’s like I can see Christmas morning in your eyes.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely a gift I can’t imagine a guy ever getting sick of.” He let out a long, slow sigh, as the deadly vampire set her lips onto the swollen head of his length. Ten seconds and he was hard. “You’re ruining your make up.”

“Meh. I’ll touch up before we leave.” She slid her lips further along his glans, and as she started to work her kiss back and forth along the base edge of the bulbous shape, she worked his length with her hand, squeezing and massaging. He wasn’t going to last long, at this rate.

“Still think I’m leaving?”

“Mhmm,” she said, still sucking him off.

“Seriously though, you’re asking me to risk my life hunting down —”

“Hunting down some fuckers who want to kill you, too.” Pulling off of him, she leaned down underneath his cock, and set it along her face so her lips found where his testicles connected to it. Letting the weight of it press on her face, her other hand still holding it, she gave it a long, slow lick, drawing paths with her tongue, before she started to kiss and suckle the underside of his cock’s head. Ok, maybe she did want this to last a little longer than two minutes, if she was going to start teasing him.

“That is true, I suppose.”

“Besides, this is networking. You gotta at least know what that is.”

“How is this going to be networking?” He struggled to keep the groans out of his voice. But, god damn, she was an expert. As she stroked him, grip snug and firm at the base of his length, her lips engulfed the whole of his glans again, and her sucking kiss worked back and forth along the sensitive, swollen skin. The sparks were already starting to build.

“Cause I’m taking you to Xnomina. You’ll meet some of the other Kindred, and get to know them. Make some friends, even.” Nodding with the infinite wisdom of her words, she slid her face under his shaft again, kissing and licking his engorged glans from underneath. With hot water pouring over his body, flowing down over his chest and abs, the splashes hit her and his cock, but the heavy drops of his precum were thick enough he could see them. Thick, almost clear, and heavy, oozing from his ripe glans and down onto her lips.

When she slid her lips back over his cock, spreading his precum around the dark, aching head of his length, the heat began to build between his legs, matching the hot water of the shower.

A moment later, he was cumming into her mouth.

“Ach! Ugh, gross.” Rolling her eyes, she laughed as she leaned back, let his cum fall out of her mouth, and spread across her chest and breasts, before she started sucking on his cock again. This time, she stayed to the side, keeping the tip aimed at her cheek so the streaks of white fluid ran down over her jaw and neck in the hot water, as she suckled on his glans. “Should tell me when you’re going to cum.”

“Sorry. Kind of distracted by the babe who waltzed into my bathroom and decided to give me a random blowjob, at—” His eyes rolled up for a moment, and he struggled to keep down a groan, as a wave of sparkling bliss rolled up and down his length. She was so damn good, milking him with her grip, as she suckled and licked on his swollen tip.

“Well, I can’t swallow werewolf cum, or anyone’s cum for that matter! Can’t digest it. At least with a vamp’s, it fades to dust before it comes an issue.” She didn’t stop pleasuring him as she spoke, and he shivered as she kept his cock snug to her lips so each word was said into the sensitive skin, lip movement included. “K, there, satisfied?” She stood up with a bounce, pushed him back so his back was to the wall, and she stepped under the falling water. With an obvious, manipulative smile on display, she ran her fingers down her neck where water hit her, helping wash his cum off her skin.

“I, uh, could go again.”

“Bet you could. Christ, being a werewolf agrees with you, horny as fuck all time.” Even as she said it, she cupped both of her breasts in her palms, and bounced them, hard nipples pointed at him. “But, you should finish up.”

“I’d like to, but a rather hot woman is in my shower, showing off her huge rack.”

Laughing, she leaned in, and set a quick kiss on his lips, pressing her breasts into his chest until they were squished. Soft, large, with

the firmness of muscle behind them. “All vamps are fucking beautiful and sexy, aren’t we? We only embrace the gorgeous. You must feel spoiled rotten.” She set her lips onto his neck, and let her fangs come out just enough so she could pierce his skin a little. And as she did, she wrapped her hand around his cock again; still hard.

“H-Hey, gonna suck my blood? Thought we were heading out.”

“Just a quick nip. Payment, for the blowjob and the handjob.”

“I—” Nope, couldn’t talk. Hell, he could barely stand, when she sank her fangs into his neck, and started to jack him off with a good, fast, firm rhythm any man with a history of self-loving was familiar with. A perfect rhythm, to work toward a quick orgasm.

“You taste so fucking good.” She groaned onto his neck as she stroked him, pressing her body into him at the same time, making a blatant show of rubbing her breasts into his body. Nipples that could cut glass.

He wanted to say something, but the feel of the Kiss relaxing his muscles, sending pulsing pleasure through his being, and exciting his nerve endings so his member flexed in her hand, was overwhelming. He set his hands on her hips, and did his best to stay standing, as she brought out a record speed second orgasm. And to make things even harder for him, she made sure to press his cock’s tip along her skin, her thigh and hip, and rubbed it against her abs. Painting her own skin with his cum, and making sure his orgasm sent waves of pleasure through him as she rubbed the swollen, dark skin against her own.

“Ok, two down. Should be enough payment for a bit of blood, right?” Panting, smiling, she stepped back, and grinned an evil grin as she lowered her hands to her stomach, and traced her fingers through his cum as the water washed it away.

“Y-Yeah, sure. I ... fuck, I’m gonna need some food before we leave.”

“So you are coming!”

“Fuck, I guess I am.” Shit. Shit shit. He was weak, controlled by sex like a typical man. God damn it. But, he didn’t really disagree with her original proposition either.

He shut off the water, grabbed a towel, and started drying himself. She watched. For a moment, he felt like a slab of meat on a plate, like the one he was about to fix himself; a sexy slab of meat at that. That look in her eye, a hungry look, was almost enough to get him hard again, and he was sure if he walked up to her, and started to touch her, he would be. Two orgasms and a cup of blood gone, and a part of him wanted to pin her down and do things to her. This was insane.

And she knew it. No hiding that his new body came with an appetite, an insatiable one.

He threw the towel at her. “I can see you’re horny too, you know.”

“I know, right? Always been that way. Just a touch, and my skin lights on fire. And after a Kiss? Wet and ready to fuck.” Winking at him, she put on a very blatant pose, sticking one smooth, toned leg out, and ran the towel up and down its curves. “And I look more fucking amazing the hornier I get.”

“Yeap, you definitely do.” He should be walking back to his room to put on some clothes, but there was something too sexy about watching a woman dry herself off, especially when she was blatantly aroused. Her nipples were top hats. “You don’t want ... some help with that?”

“No time. If you’re gonna get me off, I’d want to go for a good while.” She shrugged her shoulders back a few times, and like

magic, stopped Blushing Life. Her nipples flattened to her large breasts, her already small waist sucked in a little more, and her skin, beige with life, turned a few shades whiter. Her cheeks sunk in, just a little, and her nipples and lips turned a few shades darker.

Still fucking gorgeous, but the animal in him could tell she was now, officially, a walking, talking corpse.

“Wish I could turn off my arousal with a finger snap.”

“And I’m glad you can’t. If you could, I couldn’t do this.” She started drying her breasts, and she made sure to bounce each of them, several times, so the softness of them rippled with impact against the towel. Naturally, he stared, blinking, eyes locked to the sight. “Girl’s gotta use what she can to get ahead.”

“... you sound like a city girl trying to sleep her way into Hollywood.”

“Ha! I know, right?” Shrugging, she threw the towel back at him, and slid into her socks and pants. Without skipping a beat, she walked up to his mirror, pulled a kit of makeup out of the drawer, and got to work. “Just fixing up a bit. Hurry up, eat something.”

He laughed. He didn’t know she put her makeup kit in there. Sneak moving into his place.

“Yes ma’am.” He watched her for a little while longer. Beautiful woman, touching up her makeup in his mirror? The fact she was wearing suit pants around her large, curvy butt and thick, powerful legs, while standing there topless with her breasts hanging underneath her while she leaned forward, was perfect. If he had a camera, he’d be tempted to take a picture.

Opening the bathroom door led to an assault of meows. Jessy’s arrival had summoned Kat, but she’d been quiet and patient, waiting outside the bathroom. She offered the vampire a ‘hello’

meow, as per usual, before she started following him as he went to his bedroom.

“What am I wearing?” Might as well ask her.

“Whatever you feel most comfortable fighting in.”

“You assume we’ll be fighting? You went on a sweep last night and found nothing, right?”

“Yeah. But I got a feeling we’ll find something soon. Maybe not the hunters’ main group, but something worth tussling over.” She followed after him, fully dressed again, and squatted down to pet Kat, though without picking her up. Didn’t want hair on her suit, no doubt. Understandable. And Kat seemed to be picking up that suits were a no go for rubbing. Thank god she wasn’t like most cats, who considered things they weren’t supposed to do, a God-given challenge to always do. “You strike me as a regular pants and shirt kinda guy.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Sheryl used to dress me up fancier, but, I never enjoyed it.” He fetched some simple light blue jeans and a white shirt, one with buttons, and some dark hiking boots that fit nicely under the pants. If there was going to be lots of walking on a regular basis from now on, dress shoes didn’t really make much sense. “So, I’m going to help the Invictus out, I guess.”

“For these sweeps, yeah. Anything else can be negotiated.” Laughing, she came up to him, and kissed him. Not the quick sort of kiss she usually did, but something longer, something with some weight to it.

“What was that for?”

“I’m feeling clingy.”

“You? Thought only girls got clingy.”

Laughing, she shoved him hard enough to send him flying a little further than he expected. He tripped backward and fell onto his bed, bounced a few times, and managed to sit up. She was smiling at him.

“I am a girl!”

“You sure?”

“I got the tits and ass to prove it.”

“Pretty sure you put tomboys to shame with your sheer ... tomboyness.”

“Tash said the same thing. Y’all just intimidated by a confident woman.” Queue a confident pose. Except, instead of something feminine, she went full macho bodybuilder pose. A lean and sleek feminine body, with the muscle tone of a warrior queen; and she knew it.

He returned the smile as he stood up, set his hands on her hips, and returned her kiss. Too damn adorable. She held his hips in return, and they kissed for a while. But her Blush of Life was gone, and without renewing saliva, he found he was kissing a dry mouth. She must have realized, cause she laughed as she pushed him away.

“Come on, let’s get some food in you, replenish that blood, and let’s make some friends.”

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He gulped as he stared up at the Xnomina headquarters. A massive corporation, the sort that had surface-level businesses dealing with public-friendly products, and then a shitload of nasty stuff behind curtains. Knowing it was vampires who ran it, it made sense, and made him wonder how many large corporations were actually run by bloodsuckers. Certain movie-making companies, or



smartphone-making companies, did the same, and it only made sense they'd be run by vampires.

According to Jessy, Xnomina and Dolareido were pretty nice on the nice-to-evil scale. He could take a little solace in that, at least.

“You know, I was doing pretty decent work bouncing for Bloodlust, keeping an eye and nostril open for hunters. I could—”

“Come on, you pussy. These are the people that pay you. And there a bunch of Kindred here who are actually going to be pretty afraid of you, cause Uratha are deadly fuckers.” As if to confirm, she gave him a buddy punch on the shoulder and a nod.

“I’m still a baby, in ... what, paranormal years?”

“Ha, yeah some of us call us paranormals.”

“So, paranormal years. Not sure I’m as strong as you think I am.”

“You kidding me? Christ Eric, when you’re in werewolf mode, any Kindred would need to be ancilla just to go toe to toe with you.”

“I ... guess.”

“That’s part of the reason it turns me on so much.” She sneaked in closer, and put a quick kiss on his cheek. “With my ghouls, it was always so one-sided. But with you? Knowing you’re dangerous, and could probably kick my ass if you really went all out?” Shivering, she walked up to the Xnomina door, and she made damn sure to sway her ass with each step. Not finishing the story meant he got to fill in the blanks with his mind, and she knew he’d fill it in with nothing but sex, with how she was shaking her butt.

He felt like a kid again, with all the good and bad that came with.

“I’m still not—” He jerked his head to the side and looked down the street, as a group of people walked up.

Avery. Clara. Arturo. Matthew. Noah. The others he wasn’t too familiar with, but if memory served, one of them was Monica. Two more Uratha besides them, whose names he didn’t know at all, and he knew their pack had a few more besides them that weren’t with them; probably gone to see the Carthians. Seeing them all walk together, wearing typical streetwear he’d expect of Carthians — so Jessy said — was enough to make him stand up straighter, shoulders back, and look like he was intimidating. Animal instinct.

“The fuck you guys doing here?” Jessy said. “We’ll come get you, same as before. And—”

“I want to see what sort of gear you’re bringing to these hunts,” Avery said.

“Bit late, don’t you think? Day two of these sweeps.”

“Been kind of busy. And enough with the banter, vamp. We’re not friends, despite your relationship with the new boy.”

Eric snarled. Didn’t mean to make that noise, didn’t mean to sound like an angry canine, but there it was, a full snarl coming out despite his efforts to keep it down. Worse, his snarl earned return snarls from the pack of dogs looking at him at his mate.

“Way I hear it, you got a boyfriend, too?” Jess said.

Eric pulled his head back at that, and Avery did the same.

“Leave Henry out of this.”

“Henry, eh? Seemed like an attractive man, for a human.”

Leave it to a vampire to come at you sideways. Wincing, Eric wanted to take a small step back. But he didn't need new animal instincts to know that'd be showing a sign of weakness. Stand tall, be imposing, all that shit that came as natural as breathing.

Just breathe, the moon told him. Breathe, if he wanted to stay in control, and not give into the animal hunger telling him he should get into a fist fight with these fuckers. Breathe, right?

The other wolves were breathing. Deep, slow breaths, each with fists at their sides, each with chest and stomach rising and falling together. It was blatant in the way they glared at Jessy, that they were doing the same thing as him, each breath struggling to keep something inside them contained. That's what it meant to be a werewolf he supposed, to always have something on the edge of your insides, fighting to get out, and you had to stay in control to keep it there.

He took a deep breath, and waited. Much as he didn't want to admit it, a part of him was kind of excited at the idea of getting into a tussle with these wolves. Would they fight as well as he did? How many of them did fighting professionally? He was eager to find out. Fuck, how long had it been since he was actually eager to get into a fight, just for the thrill of a fight, the joy of a fight? His new body, and instincts, seemed to agree with him.

"You seriously going to go after Henry?" Clara said.

"Nah." Shrugging, Jessy turned toward the building, and opened the front door. "Come on in. I'll give the boss a call and tell'em what's going on. Just don't touch anything, you fucking losers." If Jessy was looking for a fight, she was doing a good job.

Sighing, Eric followed in after her. He tried to make it look like he was upset with her for picking a fight and drawing the other werewolves into an aggressive mode, cause if he let her know it was

exciting him, he'd only be enabling her. She was crazy enough as was.

Xnomina had, as you'd expect from any rich corporation, a very professional office building, the sort you might suspect of selling prototype nukes, or maybe stolen organs to the rich who wanted to replace kidneys and livers after destroying them with their bad habits. In a word, clean. Too fucking clean. He smelled the air, and got only a small hint of flesh; thralls, probably. In a building where vampires were rampant, all he got was the hint of ash and stagnant air. The black walls struck him odd. Didn't the Prince use black marble? It looked a bit different, but still, was it a vampire thing? The walls might as well have been slabs of black steel, far as his eyes could tell.

"Because," Jessy said into the phone, "we want their help, right?" Rolling her eyes, she covered the receiver, and nodded to the small girl behind the desk at the center of the lobby. She had long black hair, dark skin like Eric's, and was wearing a business suit. "Miss Pol."

"Madam Herrington." She offered a small nod, before she looked over at the rest of them. Compared to the two girls in suits, the rest of them looked like thugs. "Um ... hello. Avery, I presume?"

Before she could speak, Jessy waved a hand. "Yeah, I know we shouldn't let them in!" Again, into the phone. "But, it's just the weapons hold. They just want to see what if—"

"To see what we're dealing with," Avery said.

Jessy snarled into the phone with a glance back to the werewolf. "What she said ... Ok boss." She motioned for them to follow her, and started down. "Eric's coming with me too ... Cause he's a werewolf and has a nose? Besides, give him a chance to prove his worth."

Oh, lovely, arguing with her boss too, about him. Just great.

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~~Damien~~

Damien raised a brow as he watched Isabella get ready. She paid more than a few visits to Hella, a few lockers down the room, and offered her lover a few kisses. Surprisingly, Isabella had on a corset ... shirt ... thing. It was something out of The Matrix, except a bit less action hero, a bit more exotic dancer. It had sleeves though, black sleeves to go with the black body, and at least those were normal. With suit pants, and a suit jacket over top it, it did look pretty badass, but also sexy. No doubt an aesthetic the Daeva had spent many years cultivating and mastering. Kindred didn't need to breathe, after all. No reason to not wear a ridiculous corset if it made you look good.

She slipped a pistol into her jacket, and one of the larger Invictus knives. And, one of the silver knives that Kindred were still under command to carry. Either a silver knife or some silver ammunition was required. Daeva normally did their fighting with their hands though, so a pistol and two knives did seem a bit overkill.

He looked over to Vicky and Parker, his partners for the sweep. Unless otherwise stated, their teams were permanent until these hunters were dealt with; made sense, so people learned smooth cooperation. He didn't like those two, though. They were the classic example of Kindred who did nothing but indulge in their vices. Lust, gluttony, and sloth if he had to wager a guess. They didn't do much to work their way up the Invictus ladder; or maybe they did, and he was just unaware of it. More reason to not trust them. But at least they were both arming themselves as they were supposed to.

Damien had his own sword that he kept with him, and he also kept one of the larger silver knives with him. A pistol as well to join the mix, in case there was need. He smirked at the memory of

shooting Carter in his leg with a silver bullet. Rash, very rash, but Damien had felt a message needed to be sent: the Uratha didn't get to boss the Kindred around. It was a bad time to send that message, considering they were in a different world at the time, at the mercy of spirits and Uratha alike. Still, he was happy to have sent it.

He sighed as he looked Jack's way. The boy was putting on a vest holster, and was considering what weapons to bring. He had a small silver knife tucked in at the rib, and a normal, larger knife at the other side, while above them the two pistol holsters were empty.

"I suggest a fully automatic," Damien said, "and one semi automatic."

"Yeah, I guess. Part of me wonders if I could wield two pistols at once."

"Not if you expect to hit anything smaller than an elephant."

Jack choked on a small laugh, and tried to look Damien in the eye. It didn't last long. "I know. Even with a vampire's hand, shooting a pistol with one hand is tough. Shooting two with two hands would be horrible."

As the boy's eyes drifted down and away before he gazed at the rack of pistols again, Damien forced himself to not stare. Poor Jack. Why was the boy not screaming out in rage? Crying to the sky in pain? Damning the world for its cruelty? Perhaps he was, in his mind, as Damien had predicted; the boy was going to pace circles with his thoughts until he brought himself to ruin. He needed to express his sadness, express his rage, or it would devour him. Fifty years of hiding included fifty years of repressing Damien's own rage, and it was not healthy. More than a few kine had disappeared, victims of Damien's wrath when he was no longer able to control himself. Jack would, no doubt, do the same thing given time.

There was a bubble around the boy, perhaps six feet wide, that everyone refused to enter. The news of his first family was known by everyone, and considering the boy's unheard-of rise to power, it was no wonder everyone was giving him his space. Even Isabella, who wanted to get the boy under her thumb using her feminine wiles, was giving him more space than she would otherwise. Gloria refused to look at Jack for any longer than absolutely necessary.

Every movement the boy made, every action, every word, had a weighted calculation to it, and it set people on edge, like an angry Gangrel. People knew to either give an upset Gangrel their space, or call them out on their aggression. What to do with Jack? No one knew, except to steer clear.

Except, Jack was Damien's friend, and he wanted to help him. How to do that? He hadn't the slightest clue.

The dozen vampires in the room of metal, lockers, racks of weapons and explosives, turned to look to the opening door.

"Jessy." Damien said.

"Sup. I bring guests."

"You ... do?" He raised a brow, and blinked. Confusion was replaced with more confusion, as a bunch of werewolves walked into one of their most secure rooms in the buildings, Eric included. "Explain."

"Just want to see what sort of weaponry you got," Avery said. "Calm down." Groaning and shrugging out her shoulders, she managed a nod to Jack — no one else — and looked up to the glass overhang room where the triumvirate were watching. Maria was in there, out of sight, but Michael and Julias both stood by the glass wall, arms folded across their chests, and scowls on their faces. Uh oh.

“That’s ... understandable, I guess,” Damien said. He looked at the pack for Carter; not there, good. Sighing, Damien checked the slide on his pistol, before he moved to leave. But he didn’t. Better to watch and see how this interaction went.

More vampires came into the room, looking to update their loadouts, or see what other vampires were doing, maybe get some advice from the older Kindred. Instead, they found the room quite full as a group of big, tough, burly types wandered between the large, open lockers, display blades and guns and explosives.

Clara reached into one locker, and took out a silver knife. “Nice to know you guys trust us.”

Jessy yanked it out of her hand and put it back. “We’re letting you in here, aren’t we?”

“You have enough guns here to go to proper war,” Matt said as he walked over to Damien, and leaned against the wall, opposite of the glass overhang. The jolly giant didn’t have his usual smile, and when his eyes found Jack, his frown increased.

Did everyone feel for Jack? The kid had made a lot of friends, that was true, but it was strange to see so many people respond to his plight. Would Azamel behave similarly? That would be a sight to behold.

The static of the intercom chiming in was subtle, but enough to silence everyone.

“The Invictus like to be prepared,” MacDonald said, leaning forward and hand pressing on a button against the glass wall.

“For a city that likes peace,” Avery said as she also grabbed one of the larger silver knives, “you prepare for war like we prepare for the hunt.” She gave Jack a glance, perhaps expecting him to chime in.



He didn't. His eyes were downward, and his expression was blank. Everyone expected him to be volatile, or at least emotional and miserable, but that wasn't Jack. Damien knew him well enough by this point to know the boy was pulling into himself. Hopefully Julias and the Prince would be able to help him. Maybe even Damien would be able to help him. How, he had no idea, but maybe.

Jessy showed off some of their weapons to Eric, too, and while she offered Jack a morose glance, she bounced back to her usual spirited self. How the woman managed to stay so happy and energetic, he did not know. A strange similarity between her and Fiona, to be sure.

Jack grabbed two pistols, semi automatics, and grabbed several magazines, one of which was loaded with silver bullets. The extra pistol was redundant, but after what happened in the nightmare, carrying extra pistols was becoming common among the Invictus. The chances you'd use the second one was minimal, but as their trip into the gargyle's chamber proved, it did occasionally happen where you needed it.

"Ready?" Jack said, looking to Clara, Isabella, and Gloria.

"... yeah." Sighing, Clara followed the small man out of the room, with the other two vampires to follow.

Avery wasn't on any of the Invictus sweeper teams, but she stuck around anyway, watching the various wolves partner up with their appropriate vampires, before leaving the building. It was clear to see the wolves weren't happy about the silver, but that was probably why Avery came, to see what sort of arsenal the Kindred had that would be problematic specifically for Uratha. Now they knew, the Kindred had enough silver to mow down their pack and make sure none of them got back up.

Bold move on the council's part, to let them see that. How desperate were they for their cooperation? Or was it to keep Avery

from siding with Garry come some, hopefully avoidable, conflict between them all? A show of good faith to stay on her good side.

He hated these games. He hated the Danse Macabre. He hated how every move anyone made, was laced with extra layers of intent and information gathering. It was sickening. Seeing it as the background for Jack's suffering, how the boy waded through that cesspit as he struggled against his inner demons, would make anyone frustrated. It was a wonder Jack didn't start screaming at people to get out of his way. But, no, the boy kept his eyes down, and slipped past everyone, Clara, Isabella, and Gloria behind him.

Damien, geared and ready for the hunt, nodded to Vicky and Parker, and then Matthew. For a moment, he almost asked the giant man if he wanted a weapon, but he caught himself. When the violence started, Matt would be the first in the fray, and the last thing he'd need was a sword or gun.

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The tunnels once again. Fiona was waiting for them at the entrance, and she hopped in place several times before running over to them.

"Hi!"

"Hello," he said.

She was so beautiful, and radiant, and blinding. It was still difficult to look her in the eyes; not for his antisocial behavior, but because the girl was smiling and vibrating with such joy, it was almost too much to accept.

She took his hand, and held it as they started down the stairs into the tunnels. He gulped. How could she do that so easily? It was physical contact. It wasn't a glance or a nod or a word, or a laugh or chuckle or smile, it was contact. To her, it was as easy as breathing, something Kindred had long lost.

Did he make that comparison before? He must have.

“How’s Jack?” she said.

Matt chimed in first. “He looked pretty fucked up. Really got that intense brooding thing going, except, with a hefty dose of sadness. Losing his family is tearing him up.”

“Aww!” Fiona let go of Damien’s hand, but only so she could put both hands to her chin and lips, as if she was watching a horror scene in a movie. “From the way ye say that, I wonder ... Matt, do ye —”

“Yeah, I know what it’s like.” He shrugged, sniffed the air of the tunnel a few times, and waited for Damien to suggest a direction. “I was just a kid when my family died. Died trekking over some rough terrain, far up North.”

“Awwwwwww!” And just like that, she took Matt’s hand, and hugged his arm. Which, of course, had Damien questioning everything. Did she touch Damien’s hand because she liked him, or was she like that with everyone? Arg, he hated not knowing.

She pat the big guy’s arm, and returned to Damien’s side. No more touching or hand holding, but she seemed happy to walk only a couple inches from him. Good? Bad?

Damien, you’re an idiot. You went on a date. She’s probably looking for you to ask her on another date. Then why didn’t she ask? Because you’re the man. So? Genders have different proclivities, Damien.

He shook his head and scrunched up his face until the thoughts faded. Now was not the time to have a debate about the roles of genders, in his head.



~~Natasha~~

“Mister Mire?” she said into her phone.

“Come on Natasha, you know I never cared for the formalities.” His voice was his usual calm, deep, confident self.

She stood in the Elysium Tower, and sighed, loud enough she knew Julias could hear her. It was one of the rooms where Antoinette kept various weapons, a small room with many hooks upon metal walls to hold an assortment of deadly tools. It was nothing compared to the Invictus armament room for size, but it offered the same tools: knives, swords, pistols, shotguns, even grenades and assault rifles. Holding the phone to her ear with her shoulder, she reached out, grabbed a pistol, and started examining it to make sure it was clean and operating.

“Sorry, J-Julias. I ... I wanted to talk.”

“About Jack, I assume.”

“Yeah, and ... and um, anything r-really.”

“Well, the Invictus teams are heading out now. I got time to talk.”

“I see.” Nodding, she turned around to look in the mirror, and adjusted her vest holster. A suit with pants, and once she was done equipping herself, she'd put on the suit jacket, and go join the witches. “I'm ... w-working with the witches. We're hunting the hunt-ters.”

“Yeah, Triss told me. How's that going?”

That used to be such an easy question to answer. They used to be partners. Now, they were borderline enemies, different covenants. Every word she could say she had to filter and make sure it was safe

to say. It wasn't that she couldn't do that, but doing that to Julias was painful.

“P-P-Poorly. We're hunting them in D-Devil's Corner, but the chances we'll just stumble ont-to them are ... bad.”

“Tell me about it. But that's why Avery's helping us out; they'll sniff something out. And hell, even the monsters are lending a hand. Who knows, maybe they'll stumble onto ... some ... weird inter-dimensional nightmare stuff.” He chuckled after saying it. She didn't. Inter-dimensional nightmare stuff was stuff she'd gone through, fell through, had been rescued by Black Blood through, and took a stroll through with an injured, giant skeleton monster she'd dragged home through.

“How are ... things, with J-Jack?” After learning about the boy's rage issues, his almost inhuman rage issues, she had to wonder how much Julias knew about that. Of course, the man knew Jack better than she did, and the two of them did training together, and worked together and ... and he had to know.

“Jack is ... walking a knife's edge. I know a lot about being trapped in your head; I imagine most of us do. But that kid is ... he's ... got some demons to work through, and this whole thing with his first family is going to push him off. At some point or another, his Beast is going to sink its teeth in.”

“W-What are you going to do?”

“For now? Nothing. Jack's not other people; kid's a fucking porcupine when shit gets serious. He has to work through this on his own, to some degree. Maybe Antoinette can help him with these first steps, but it'll be a little while before my words can reach him.”

She smiled into the phone as she picked a silver knife off the rack. Mire always was too wise. He had a heart of gold, and a coating of misery to give it all context, like the tragic hero who'd lost

everything in a previous life. No wonder a troubled, unhappy girl like Beatrice found an escape out of Hell with him. But that wasn't fair, chalking it up to only Julias. The tomboy really brightened her old partner's life.

She was happy to be working with Triss. The others? Not so much. Jennifer was manipulative. Othello was lazy, but old and strong enough to pursue his Daeva obsessions when he wanted. Aaron was unusually calm and contemplative for a Gangrel. The problem with that, was how much that made him seem like a stalking predator, quietly waiting for the perfect moment to strike. He reminded her of a komodo dragon, happy to wait, bite when the opportunity presented, and let inevitable death come for the prey slowly. Solid, deep, unwavering eyes.

Her new companions were an interesting, deadly bunch. There were some Kindred in the Invictus and Carthians that were harmless, by vampire standards, but she could imagine all four witches being deadly in the right circumstance.

"I ... I guess I d-don't ... don't relate."

"Course you do, Tash. The way you lost your first family? That—"

"That's ... n-not the same. They weren't m ... m-murdered." Horrible as those memories were, she could not begin to imagine the anger going through Jack right now, and with his admission of his anger issues, he was liable to snap. As rare as it was, draugr did happen, and if Jack became one, Julias would never forgive himself.

"You should come by the mansion before sunrise, Tash. We haven't talked in a while."

"W-Won't Triss be there?"

"I can tell her I want to hang with an old friend."

“B-But Jack, and—”

“Jack is Jack. Jack is going to lay out the details of his circumstance in his head, make a link web, and run around it until he has some sort of understanding. Only when he’s got a grasp on it, is he going to let anyone in. Like I said, maybe Antoinette can help him out in a way only a lover can, but she’d be the only one that can get through to him before he hits that ‘click’ stage.”

“C-Click?”

“It has to click, he has to understand, like finishing a puzzle. Until then, the worst thing you could do is dump emotions on him. Hopefully Antoinette can push through that, cause otherwise, Jack’s going to keep everyone at arm’s length. Porcupine.”

Sighing again, Natasha grabbed a magazine off the rack, took out the clip, and started examining the bullets. Silver. No, she didn’t need this when she already had the silver knife Antoinette got for her.

“Matthew was here,” he said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, Avery paid a visit. Half to see what sort of weaponry we had, but half just to prove that we’d let her, I’m sure. Your relationship with him and Arturo going well?”

She smiled. Nice of him to remember, especially considering everything that was happening. “It is. They ... they’ve had r-rough lives t-t-too, you know? Something t ... to bond over. And they’re n-nice.” Very nice. Maybe a bit crazy once in bed, but for the life of her, she couldn’t help but love that.

She checked a few more magazines, ensuring each worked, and ensuring each had normal bullets, before putting them into her

holster. Fully equipped, pistol, ammunition, silver blade and normal blade at hand, she was ready to join the witches in Devil's Corner. Same perch as last time.

“If I had known you were bold enough to have two boyfriends at once, I'd have ... you know what? I don't think I know any guys who fit that bill. You're lucky.”

She was lucky. Grinning, she started up the stairs to outside. “I'll b-be there. Later tonight, I mean. Should I invite Jessy? M-Maybe, reminisce.”

“Sounds good.”

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Back with the witches. The four of them were sitting on an old apartment building's roof, legs dangling from the edge. Natasha didn't sit, though. She wanted to get up and pace around, not sit and be useless. Triss had insisted they were waiting in the prime place to spot potential hunter maneuvers, but it wasn't like the hunters were committing these rituals regularly, right?

Jennifer and Othello were dressed in very appealing fashion, of course, with lots of skin on display. It was strange, how both Beatrice and Aaron were more comfortable in typical Carthian streetwear, while Jen and Othello wore more expensive fancy clothes, but less of it. Othello didn't even bother with a shirt tonight, wearing thin black pants that were kind of baggy, and she was sure they were meant for the dance floor. A lot of muscle on Othello, and she had to admit, she liked his dreadlocks. Jen was wearing her suit mix again, with the white shirt open and black bra on display. She was very proud of her breasts.

Tash smiled, and looked up as she let her mind wander. Just a few days ago, she'd gotten within touching distance of Jack, fucking Antoinette's breasts. The boy was very attractive, a young man with as much definition to his body as Arturo or Matthew, just in a



smaller size. And of course, the sight of Antoinette's enormous breasts, bouncing against his thighs, covered in cum, had been hypnotizing. Jack looked so happy in that moment, and confident too, enraptured in pleasure and more than comfortable enough to close his eyes.

He probably knew she'd spied on him. The boy wasn't an idiot, and knew she slept in the tower come sunrise, same as him. The Prince asking him to close his eyes was an obvious request for him to let Tash sneak a peek. Despite that, he'd continued to fuck the Prince's breasts, to the point Tash had run off, and the moment she found her boys, had indulged. What was it about cum on the skin, on the nipples, neck, lips, that was so arousing? These were not very feminine thoughts! Jessy was to blame, obviously. When in doubt, blame Jessy.

Stop thinking about sex. You went almost fifty years without sex dominating your thoughts all the time, and now was a good time to get back into that work-only mentality. There was work to be done, lots of it.

She shook her head out, and peeked over the side of the building. A couple of humans were chatting, boasting about a score, and sitting on some milk crates. She drifted to the other side of the building and looked down. More humans, three girls talking about a new building being built toward the city border, an apartment building. Listening a little more, they were looking for new corners to look for clients.

"M-Maybe we should go start investigating, eavesdropping on more kine?" she said.

Triss leaned back onto her palms so she could hang her head upside down behind her, looking at Tash. "That's not a bad idea. It doesn't get much darker than this chunk of Devil's Corner though. But, we could get down into the crowd if you want?"

“W-Will you—”

“Don’t worry, I can cloak myself fine. No one will see the teeth.”

Nodding, she came over to sit down again, and plopped herself down beside Triss on the outside of the group. “B-But, let’s wait for a little bit.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Triss leaned back out over the building edge, and set her elbows to her knees so her head could hang. A buzzing sound announced she’d received a message, and she pulled up her phone. “Oh fuck, this man.”

“Mm?” Jen said.

“Superman sent me an ‘I love you’ text. Randomly, no prompting. Ugh, clingy guys are such a turn off.”

Natasha gasped, and stared at her. “B-B-B-B-B—”

“I’m kidding, Tash.” The Nos reached out, and shoved her at the shoulder, hard enough to make Tash fall on her side. “Not about the text, though. Look.” To prove it, she held up the phone. Yep, an ‘I love you’ text, from the strongest ancilla in the city. Leave it to Julias to say something so direct, with bold-faced confidence. So sweet.

“Aww.”

Laughing, Triss put the phone away, started to bounce her legs on the building wall, and scanned the swarming kine beneath them. “How about you? You’ve been with those two werewolves for a while now. See that going anywhere?”

Uh oh, girl talk. She couldn’t do girl talk to save her life. It was never a problem with Jessy though, and she didn’t expect it to be an

issue with Triss, considering how similar they were. But then, Triss wasn't the same girl she used to be. She'd grown.

"It's ... it's um ... I d-don't know."

"Two guys, one girl," Jen said. "Sounds like a recipe for confrontation to me. Men don't share."

Triss rolled her eyes. "And women do?"

"Better than men. Women are on a different wavelength." With a succubus smile, Jen leaned in to Triss, and set a kiss on her neck. And another, and another. Not Blushing Life meant the kisses were probably a bit dry, but that didn't stop Triss from rolling her eyes again, and smiling. She didn't stop her. She was enjoying it.

"Gender d-d-dynamics ... aside, Matt and Art are v-very comfortable ... sharing..." Thank god she wasn't Blushing Life, or she'd light up the whole roof with her blushing red.

"Well," Triss said, "I was talking more about romance. Lovey dovey stuff. But if you're looking to take the convo into sex territory." Through it all, Jen continued to kiss her neck, her jaw, her ear, while the two men kept eyes on the streets. Either they were very disciplined and determined, or a witch's life had desensitized them to the sexual display.

"W-W-What? I ... I d-didn't ... umm..."

Laughing again, Triss swatted Jen away. "Slut, keep your eyes out for anything suspicious." She looked back to Tash, smiling and gesturing over her shoulder with a nod. "Not to make light of the current situation; Jack's going through shit, and hunters are trying to kill us. But we need to blow off steam, and joking about sex? Good way as any. You know how often I found Jen here with two dicks inside her? Fucking, like, every god damn night, I swear, until she started sleeping with me and Julias."

Tash blinked, several times, and sneaked a peek past her to look at the boys. Again, all they did was watch the people below. It made her feel a little less bad about indulging being a little naughty, then.

“I ... I um ... they’re ... they d-do that with me, too.”

“Now that,” Triss said with a lick of her crocodile teeth, “is hot. There much kissing?”

“There’s ... a lot, of k-kissing.”

“Now I’m jealous.”

Jen laughed, and leaned in over Triss’s lap toward Natasha. “Have you tried controlling the pace, when they’re both inside you? I always found it very enjoyable.”

So glad, so so glad she wasn’t Blushing Life. “I’ve ... I’ve tried, b-but they’re both ... so big, and strong ... and werewolves are aggressive. Sometimes I can t-tame them, for a little while, but they eventually start to ... to move ... on their own.”

Triss groaned, or maybe moaned, and stretched her legs out in front of her as she ran her palms down her pants to the knee. “Choking?”

“... y-yes,” Tash said. Triss made more noises; definitely moans. “And, um, one time, they changed into this ... in b-between mode? Something like, half human, half werewolf. They were a bit bigger, and ... b-b-bigger.” Arg, why was she sharing this information? Well, it wasn’t like she wasn’t used to being bombarded with sexual details from Jessy, and with how much her life had changed, now she was spying on Jack and Antoinette. One could only be surrounded by sex so much before it started to affect how you talked about it.

“Something between human and werewolf mode?” Triss said. “Sounds like ... it’d be hard to fit inside you.”

Jen licked her lips, and leaned in again to put another kiss on Triss’s jawline. “Sounds delicious.”

“Jessy’s the one who’s ... b-been ... getting Eric to fully transform, for sex.”

Both Triss and Jen let out long, low moans. These women were crazy. Maybe it was a witch thing.

“That has to be dangerous,” Triss said.

“V-V-Very, but ... but Jessy is Jessy. If it means g-good sex, I’m sure she’ll risk a lot of things.” Laughing, Natasha looked back down at the crowd below. This was fun. Witches seemed to take serious situations with a slice of casual nihilism, and nonchalance. Now that she thought about it, the few times she’d run into Triss on a mission, years ago, the girl had a certain air of confidence that bordered on apathy, ease, or maybe carelessness. No wonder Jacob was drawn to her.

“Think you’re interested in that?” Jen said.

“N-No! No, um ... Matt and Art are already ... it barely works normally! And, um-um-um ... when they did that ... that halfway transformation thing, they were even harder ... t-to ... you know.” And again, both witches groaned with bliss. So lascivious, these witches. Not that Natasha could complain, considering what her sex life had turned into. “It ... it’s strange, for girls to be t-talking like this, isn’t it? Men d-don’t.”

Triss and Jen both leaned back, and gave Othello a nudge. The beautiful man turned to face them, eyebrow raised, before he looked at Tash.

“She wants to know why men don’t talk about sex with each other,” Jen said, laughing. Yes, it sounded silly, cliché, to ask a question like that. Girls liked to talk, about romance and sex and everything. Guys liked to push heavy things and fix car engines, and stuff. The thought made her smile, silly stereotypes that didn’t really describe Kindred all that well. Except, maybe, in this circumstance.

“Why would we?” he said. Tash giggled, and covered her lips, eyes wide. Woops. But her antics only earned a smile from the man. “Guys like doing, not talking about the doing.”

Triss frowned at the man. “Girls like doing!”

“Yes, but it’s not the same. Men thrive on it, you know?” Shrugging, the man shook his head, causing his dreadlocks to bounce around a little. “Give a man a puzzle and he’ll be content to work on it, alone, without a soul, for days. Women will work on it for days as well, as long as they have someone to talk to.”

Jen and Triss groaned and rolled their eyes. But, Natasha had to agree with him, honestly. Julias was always content to just do something, while Jessy had to talk about it while doing it, or talk about other things while doing it. Or talk, in general; not boasting, just talking. Natasha was always the quiet one, in the Right Hands trio, but online, she was probably the most social of the three. The internet and introverts fit together like a glove.

“I think,” Aaron said, “we should get down there, and start inquiring. Natasha, do you have the names of the two you found dead to the hunter rituals?”

“I d-do.”

Nodding, Triss stood up, and punched her palm. “Time to hunt the hunters.”

## Chapter 82

~~Eric~~

All things considered, that didn't go so badly. Into the belly of the beast, and then right back out. He half expected the Xnomina building to bite him during his escape, but it didn't.

He groaned as he rotated a shoulder, and rubbed his trapezoid with his other hand. Course, that only redirected the pain back to the source, where Jeremiah had stabbed him with that fucking silver knife. It was healed, but tender. Were he still human, it'd be a big enough hint to not exert himself, but he was confident his new body could take the punishment.

Jessy was beside him, but he could tell she was waiting for an opportunity to take lead. She liked leading. Unfortunately for her, it was his nose they were following.

North Side. It wasn't a place he'd ever had to work, unlike his dad. Blue collar work, and a lot of it. A lot of abandoned buildings too, as the ages passed, and both companies and people stopped being interested in working what were dead end careers. The growth of technology into software, fashion, media, the explosion of automation, and all that shit meant less and less people were working in factories. That wasn't a good thing. Automation taking over the world meant people were losing jobs everywhere. How long would it be before cab drivers were all out of the job?

He sighed as he looked at the buildings they passed, the dusty windowsills, broken glass, old machines inside meant for God knows what. Making shoes, maybe? Plenty of North Side was slowly being re-purposed with large buildings meant to host company

employees for stem fields and whatnot, but plenty of it still wasn't. It was like walking through a graveyard of the 1920s.

Jessy looked back at the two other vampires with them. Jonah LeBrun, and Hella Vendram. Nobody to worry about, according to Jessy. Easier said than done. Hella looked simple enough, a tanned woman, fit, slightly tall; a Gangrel according to Jess. Jonah was a different thing all together. He was keeping them wrapped up in some kind of invisible aura, something called the Cloak of Night, that made them almost impossible to see. Impressive shit. A black dude with some nasty hands, fingers extra long, with claws to go with. He didn't have pupils either, just solid black eyes, and his mouth was lined with very sharp teeth. Fucker probably bit down with the same sort of tearing damage of a piranha.

He was a Nosferatu. Jessy said they all got random, weird mutations that made them look — or smell — like freaks. This guy wasn't too bad off, as long as he wore some sunglasses, didn't open his mouth wide, and kept his hands in his pockets. Chicks like that Beatrice were a bit more obvious. What other deformities did Nosferatu get stuck with?

He sniffed the air deeper. He could smell old chemicals, something sewn into the walls, the brick and concrete, the plastic and steel of nearby factories and their interiors. No smell of humans, though, present company included. Vampires barely had an odor to them; made it easy to ignore so he could focus on sniffing out the hunters.

They stopped by the scene. The tire marks were still there, as were bits of glass, mostly cleaned up but some shards remained against the curb. He breathed deep, smelled, dug for the scents, and walked over to where the kid had got caught under the wheels. Nothing.

“You vamps really don't leave behind a trace, do you?” he said.



Hella shook her head, and squatted down where he was standing, looking down at the tire marks. “Nope. Just a bit of ash. Though, if you kill a really young Kindred, they don’t go poof. You get a decomposed corpse. Nasty stuff.”

Sounded nasty. With his new nose, smelling a rotting corpse would probably kill him.

He walked further, onto the parking lot where they’d stopped. Much as he had a powerful nose to help him track people down, it’d been weeks since him and Beatrice had saved the kid. Rain destroyed the odor trail.

“We really expect to find anything out here, boss?” Jonah said.

“Dotting the Is and crossing the Ts and shit.” Shrugging, Jessy nodded toward the prison down the street. “Plenty of other teams are already running South Side, both halves, and Devil’s Corner, and the tunnels. We might as well start out here, where we know the hunters have hidden out once before.”

Hella stood up, shrugging. “That makes me think they’re unlikely to come back.”

“Me too, but we have new information now. We didn’t know they had a Begotten working for them. We also didn’t know that Angela can’t seem to fucking die. We also didn’t know this shaman woman does crazy shit with flesh magic. New perspective.”

The Gangrel raised a brow, tapped her chin a few times, and nodded. “So we keep an eye open for weird, occult shit?”

“Exactly. Invictus cleanup crew weren’t looking for unusual shit. So, let’s do that.”

Everyone shrugged, nodded, and followed. It was as good a plan as any, he supposed. The fuck did he know about any of this

anyhow? All he was was a nose.

Except, that wasn't entirely true. Not long after learning about what he was, some spirits had tried to talk to him, things in the shadows. It was hard to ignore that, hard to forget it. And the fucking moon kept telling him to do his duty or whatever, so it wasn't like he could ignore that either. He was supposed to be guarding the wall between the Hisil — a word he knew without knowing how — and the physical world, and culling problem causers. He wasn't just a werewolf, he was ... whatever was required, a tool of some higher power, to do some higher calling.

Christ, he hated that. But it did mean he should do more than just keep his nose open for strange smells. He should keep all his senses open, new ones included, to see if he could spot anything out of the ordinary. Elen was out of the ordinary, and so was that monster Sándor. He had to think like what a werewolf was, not what his childhood thought a werewolf was.

He kinda preferred the childhood image, a beast of mindless rage and hunger, not this weird border patrol dog on a mystical leash. Then again, childhood image didn't have him fucking a beautiful vampire on the regular. That was a nice perk.

Jessy took them to the prison. Eric curled his nose at the smell of some strange chemical, something the Invictus must have used to get rid of the blood. Not bleach, but something stronger, something they must have tried to wash off with water, but couldn't quite get rid of the scent. Better than leaving traces of blood, he supposed.

Jessy pushed the unlocked gate open, and gestured for them to follow.

“Been a while since I was here,” Jonah said. “Thirty years ago? Still kine, and barely eighteen.”

Eric chuckled, and smiled as he stepped into the prison, struggling to not make a few Dave Chappelle jokes.

“You were arrested?” Hella said.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Had the audacity to look like someone else when I was wearing a hoodie.”

“I don’t—”

“He’s saying racism,” Jessy said, rolling her eyes with a groan. “Progressive as Dolareido is, it wasn’t immune to that sort of shit.”

“Isn’t,” Eric added.

She threw him a smile. “Isn’t.”

Hella nodded as she started walking around the civilian prison lobby, eyes scanning over the old walls. “Guess I really wouldn’t know.”

“Say one thing for Kindred,” Jonah said, squatting down and looking at the scratches in the concrete, “they couldn’t give two shits about the color of your skin.”

“Is it like that everywhere?” Eric said. “Or just here, cause of the Prince?” They all shrugged. “None of you know?”

Jessy walked behind the dusty, worn desk, and started pulling out drawers. “Vamps don’t travel much. Not like I can just take a trip to Los Angeles, and try out the local cuisine. How the fuck would I get there? In a coffin filled with dirt from my homeland, and a bunch of thralls and ghouls guarding me?”

That was true, he supposed. Kindred dying when in sunlight, and passing out come sunrise, were huge disadvantages. They were stuck. Going to another city must have been a massive risk, terrifying really, considering you had a decent chance of being woken up by someone opening the suitcase you were hiding in, in daylight no less. Even if a vamp had a far safer means of transportation, it was still a risk, one you had to leave in the hands of thralls and ghouls to manage in a crisis situation.

“Do the Invictus communicate?” he said.

Jessy nodded as she pulled open the gate to the next lobby, the prisoner lobby. “Yeah. It’s a complicated hierarchy, a large organization with different branches and shit. The council handles all that stuff, though. And to them, it’s all about two things: power, and money. They control so much of the world, but they’re really only concerned with getting local power; cause elders are paranoid fuckers. So they amass wealth and power, and turn the cities they rule into monarchies or dictatorships. Communication with other cities isn’t really in pursuit of any sort of major goal, just, elder assholes, being assholes, occasionally working together to be bigger assholes.”

The other Kindred winced with her words. If this were a monarchy or dictatorship, those sorts of words could get her killed. Brazen Jessy being brazen.

They walked deeper into the prison, everyone keeping their eyes peeled, scanning for any semblance of something unusual, something out of place, something the cleanup teams wouldn’t have bothered with. The first idea that came to his head was an occult ritual circle carved into a wall with a spoon. Some inmates did that, he was sure, but probably as a joke more than anything. Still, considering the weird shit these hunters did, a strange ritual circle was right up their alley.

So many cells. If walls could talk, this prison would have a lot to say, a lot of shit about a lot of horrible shit, probably. Nice a city as Dolareido was, it wasn't perfect, and prisons always had a mix of good and bad people, on both sides of the bars; his dad made sure he knew that.

Old beds were abandoned, mattresses looted with metal frames remaining. The cells were open, and the walls of concrete were filled with cracks. Water damage, and rat damage. Give a rat enough time, and they could chew through anything, supposedly. Considering how many rats and crows Dolareido had, he wouldn't be surprised if they could chew through the whole damn prison.

“Are ... are you here for me?”

Eric froze. He looked to Jessy, then Hella, then Jonah. Nothing. Couldn't have been them.

With a deep breath, Eric entered one of the cells, following the voice. Darkness. Good as his eyes were, seeing in pitch black was impossible. He pulled out his phone, turned on the flashlight, and squatted down as he scanned around.

He gulped, as the shadow moved. A tentacle-like limb pulled away from the light, leaving behind a fading trail of ink. The light struggled to penetrate the shadow around the spirit, and the black mass wriggled, and squirmed, and dragged itself away from him and into the back corner of the cell, underneath the bed's metal frame. Eric came in closer, pushed the light in closer, and the mass of black let out a wheezing sound. It had two eyes, black, blending in with the rest of its amoebous body, catching light and reflecting it. Two round, inky mirrors.

“... what sort of spirit are you?”

“You do not know? You are ... a young Uratha then.” The spirit managed a gurgle, a bubble of something coming out of its—it didn't

have a mouth. Where a mouth should be, a bubble of black fell, splashing onto the floor before fading away.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“P-Please ... d-d-do not ... do not ... consume me.”

“I don’t plan on it. Still eating meat, these days.”

It nodded, head a sphere of jiggling black sticking out of the rest of its slug body. “Young Uratha.”

“Eric, who the fuck are you talking to?”

Eric looked over his shoulder, back at Jessy. With a raised eyebrow, she came in closer, and squatted down beside him, looking around.

“You can’t see it?”

“Um, no.”

Jonah and Hella came as well, and looked at him with the same raised brow.

He knew why they couldn’t see it. More knowledge, more memories, something that dug its way out of the deep matter of his brain. They couldn’t see it because it was in between, in a state, in a place, that was in the physical world, but not really. Shurilam. Twilight?

He snorted, and the bubbly creature recoiled. Shit, he wasn’t angry with it, he was angry because a fucking moon god thing was responsible for knowledge he didn’t ask for. Damn thing probably felt he owed her. Her? Luna?

“Please, no eat.”

“I’m not going to eat you. Why are you here, in an old, abandoned prison?”

“Seriously, Eric, there’s nothing there.” Jessy leaned in closer, reached out, and ran her arm around where he was shining the light. Predictably, her arm moved right through the spirit. With her arm to contrast it against the light, it was easier to see now that the disgusting blob of oozing black, was partly see-through. Yeah, Twilight.

“A spirit’s there,” he said. “Looks like a ... no, it’s not a shadow spirit.”

It gurgled, and its big eyes stared at him all the more. “I am ... hiding.”

“Hiding? Why?” It had to be a shadow spirit, and yet it wasn’t. It was like, someone had mixed shadow with ink, or ... blood?

“Black Blood would devour me if they found me.” More blobs of black ooze splashed outward from its non-existent mouth, landing around its bobbing head, and disappearing into the black. “I ... I only here, to ... to sustain on the ... death, and blood, and black.”

Black Blood. Eric clenched a fist, and forced in a breath. Yeah, this gurgling little spirit did look something like Black Blood. Course, his memories were a blurry mess, having nearly died from his wounds when the strange spirit had come to rescue them. But, he remembered enough. He remembered the inky waves, and the strange, cold-but-not feel of it on his skin, as it pulled him into itself. Swimming, floating, Eric and the others had drifted in what might as well have been a swamp of death and decay, and ... shadow.

“Show yourself to my friends.” He knew it could. Spirits could manifest, become solid, or possess people; more knowledge that seeped into his consciousness.

“B-But, it is very draining, and I—”

“Do it, or I will eat you.” Course, he hadn’t the slightest clue how to make that happen, if he couldn’t touch it. The knowledge he was given, the words of the First Tongue, it was a puzzle missing many pieces. Avery probably had the rest of them.

Blubbering and sputtering, the creature shimmered black, like a TV with a bad signal, before it began to solidify. The vampires stared on, and as the strange spirit manifested, all three of them gasped.

“What the fuuuuck is that?” Jessy said, eyes wide. She slid a step back, still squatted down beside him, but putting a little more distance between her and the tiny thing. Not so tiny, he supposed, since it was about two feet long.

“Some kind of shadow spirit. But, from what it says, it’s got some blood and death mixed in there, too.”

It gargled up another blob of the strange ink, before it wiggled across the floor a little closer. “The ... the city, it ... it overflows, with those things. It is all connected to the Blood Tower, right? Red Tide, and Street-Tail King, they ... they feast on it too. You ... you should go deal with them! Help Flowing Sanctuary.”

That was a lot of random names. Questions for Avery, he supposed.

“Hey, slug thing,” Jessy said, “were you around when a young vampire went on a killing spree in here? Summoned a bunch of rats?”

It gargled another bubble, and dragged itself a little closer. “I was, I was. The carnage ... like a beacon. I came. Hid better.” It had no lips, or at least nothing that could make the sounds it was making. The sound came out of its whole body, instead of a normal mouth.



“Awesome. Tell me—”

“Trade.”

“ ... I’m sorry?”

“Trade. I help you, if you help me.”

Eric suppressed the urge to smile. He knew the spirit would try and trade, would try and work a deal. It’s what spirits did.

“You can’t be fucking serious. Listen here you fucking slug, I’ll rip open your guts and—”

“It has no guts, Jessy,” he said. “It has no blood, or organs, or anything like that. I ... do wonder what this weird abomination is weak to, though.” And it was some sort of abomination. Magath? The word floated around in his mind, but, he couldn’t place it, couldn’t put a meaning to it.

“Will not tell! Can not tell ban or bane, but ... but you want to know about the small one? The one the humans called Jack?”

Jessy, growling, stood back up and began to pace. She was handling the absurdity of what was happening pretty well. Given their encounter with Black Blood, and that Sándor monster, her capacity for insanity must have increased quite a bit; or, his had, and she’d been able to handle this level of fucking nuts for a long time.

“I want to know about the hunters that were torturing Jack. What happened after Jack escaped?”

“I know where hunters went.”

“And,” Eric said, “you want what in return for that knowledge?”

It crawled out a little further again, until it was no longer under the bed frame. Hella and Jonah both had their lights out, and they shined it down at the blubbering mess, their eyes wide and bodies squirming. If it jumped at them, no doubt they'd scream and jump back. The fact that the only source of light was a few phone lights, so the weird blob cast a wavering shadow into the black of the prison cell, was perfect nightmare fuel.

“Let me go? Leave me here. I hurt no one.”

This thing was afraid, of him. It was afraid of Black Blood, but it was also afraid of him. It really didn't need to be; not like Eric knew how the fuck to kill a spirit that could hide in Twilight. But if the creature was afraid of him enough to ask him this, seemed like a perfect opportunity to take advantage.

“Fine,” he said.

It nodded, and began to hover. That was enough to make everyone step back, as its inky, blubberous body rose into the air, and began to drift toward Hella and Jonah. It drifted into the hall, and the rest of them followed after it. Easy to do, since it was leaving a trail of dripping, inky spots.

“You said you knew Black Blood?” Eric said. Jessy winced and looked at him. Yeah, no one enjoyed hearing that name.

“Do not know, no. Avoid. They would devour me.”

Spirits devoured spirits. Devour didn't mean the same thing to humans, though. Absorb was probably the better word. He wish he knew more, but what paltry amount of knowledge was floating around in his skull, it wasn't enough for him to piece together the details. One thing he did notice, though, was how similar this disgusting thing was to Black Blood.

“You got a name?” Eric said.

“No ... not yet.” It looked over its blobby mass of a body at him, and tried to do something close to a shrug. “Maybe soon.”

It was a young spirit, that much was clear. Did spirits get names with age, or were they bestowed them by someone else? He didn't want to care about all this spirit shit, but he did, some part of him drawn to the knowledge and the ancient duty. Fuck, it was frustrating.

Eric looked back at Hella and Jonah, and offered them a small shrug. They tried to return it, but their eyes were wide, and still transfixed on the blob of ink with eyes.

“Where you taking us?” Jessy said.

“Not far, not far.” Hovering a few feet off the dark, dingy floor, it took them out of the prison. Eric expected it to stop at any moment, maybe point out some sort of secret passage, or symbol drawn into the ceiling. Dumb of him, when the Invictus had cleaned the area, and would have spotted anything abnormal.

It took them outside. He should have expected that, he supposed. It wasn't like the hunters would have been able to vanish from within the prison, unless that Begotten monster had done something.

“There,” it said, and an inky limb reached out and pointed to a building in the distance, down the road. “The red place.”

Red wasn't the right word. Bricks. It was an old building, some sort of shop, with brick walls and a sign over a glass door. A convenience store, maybe. Sign said ‘Danner's Stop’ so, he bet convenience store.

“I go now ... no follow? We traded?”

Eric shrugged and nodded. “Yeah, we're good.”

It offered something like a smile, which was creepy as fuck. And it offered a giggle, childlike, and full of black bubbles that fell and popped when they reached the street. Jonah and Hella stepped out of its way, as if the spirit were contagious with the plague, but it didn't seem to care. It floated by them, and went back into the prison.

“Same sort of thing as Black Blood?” Jessy said.

He shrugged again, and started walking, sighing as they passed under a street light. “I guess? It was a weird spirit, and I know fuck all about spirits. So either all spirits are weird and I don't know any better, or it's really a fucking weird thing.”

“Dolareido's a weird city,” she added. “So, I mean, I guess it fits right in.”

He laughed as he shrugged again. Maybe she was right, and what would be a weird spirit elsewhere, was normal for Dolareido.

“I really should pay Avery a visit,” he said. “Just so I can learn a bit more about this sort of shit, what I can or can't do. I—” This late at night, this far in North Side, there shouldn't have been anyone around. But, of course, there was.

His group stopped, and watched as another group stepped around a building on the street corner, jeans and t-shirts and piercings on display. Didn't take a genius to spot a bunch of Carthians, but his nose told him anyway, a draft bringing with it the hint of ash. It was more than the smell, it was in the way they walked, steps confident but quiet, the way their eyes looked around with a little more focus, less blinking, the way they didn't look at each other directly as they walked so they could keep their vision available. Every motion they made was a siren, announcing they were predators.

“Joe,” Jessy said.

“Jessy,” Joe said. From the way the man carried himself, leaning forward a bit with lips raised in a snarl, Eric guessed he was a Gangrel. Behind him were two more vamps, but without any telltale hints about what they were. A woman with tan skin and long black hair, another woman, black, with short black hair, curly.

“Eric, that’s Joe, Debby and Kathy.”

Eric nodded, managing a small I-don’t-really-care-but-I’ll-play-nice shrug. He didn’t want to deal with these vampires right now. Thankfully, they didn’t set off any danger bells in his head, no more than the younger vamps he’d run into had. Dangerous, but not so dangerous he was worried for his life.

It was the other, the fourth, that had Eric’s attention. This man was a werewolf, that much was obvious, and he looked like a young man. A white dude, short red hair, average height, with a fighter’s build, like all the werewolves had. But, he didn’t have the mass of Arturo or Matt, he had slimmer build, something agile.

Jessy growled. “The fuck you guys doing out here, Joe? And who’s this wolf?”

“Doing the same fucking thing you’re doing. And that’s Caleb.” The man shrugged, and nodded his head toward the prison. “Guess you took a peek. See anything?”

“Nothing.”

Joe raised a brow, and looked across the street to the open gate. “Nothing eh?”

Caleb snorted, glared at Eric for a few seconds longer than appreciated, and started toward the prison. “I smell something.”

Eric got between him and the path to the gate. “There was a spirit. It gave us some information, in exchange for being left alone.”

“What kind?”

“Dunno,” he lied. Seemed like the thing to do, based on Jessy’s reaction to their presence.

“No, of course you don’t. Why would you?” The man shoved him aside, and continued on. “Well, you promised. I didn’t. I’ll deal with it. Consider it a favor.”

Eric reached out, and set a hand on the man’s shoulder, stopping him. “Favor? It was harmless.”

“No spirit is harmless.” Caleb shrugged him off, turned around, and glared at him. Lip sneering, some teeth exposed, the man stared at him, growling.

Eric raised a brow, looked back at the others, and found only confused looks. Yeah, ok, no one got why this guy was being aggressive with Eric. Good to know.

“It seemed harmless.”

“So do many spirits, you dumbass. A little water spirit is adorable, splashing around, giggling as it gets papers wet, or fills a glass to enjoy the shape. Give it time, and it becomes a spirit of the Great Storm of the Thousand Waves. It rolls over through the Shadow Realm, unleashing tsunamis and monsoons, crashing and destroying with glee, whatever allows it to bury more things in water. It crosses the Gauntlet and does the same, spreading the only thing it cares about: water. It could create a lake, and it won’t care if has to sink a city to do it.”

Eric gulped. Ok, yeah, that made sense. And if that thing was similar to Black Blood, it certainly made sense to stop it from becoming that. Except, what bad had Black Blood ever done? Fuck if he knew.

“Sounds pretty bad.”

“Yeah, so I’m going to check it out. Now fuck off.” And just like that, he was gone, walking into the prison.

Grimacing, Eric watched the man leave, before turning back to the crew. “Hope he doesn’t hurt it.”

“It was a floating blob of black ooze, Eric,” Jonah said. “Why the concern.”

“We made a deal with it.” Shrugging, Eric resumed his walk toward the building it had originally pointed out. At least, until he realized Jessy wasn’t following. She was eying Joe.

“Ok, you can follow your doggy, and run along now,” she said.

“Fuck you, Jessy.”

“Yeah, fuck you too, Joe.”

Eric took a step back, and looked between the two Gangrels. That didn’t sound like friendly banter, despite how often Jessy would say things like ‘fuck you’ in a playful way. The harshness in their tone was telltale to some real, seeded aggression. Good a time as any to stand beside Jessy, fold his arms across his chest, and glower. Like a bouncer.

“How about you leave?” Joe said.

“We were here first.”

“You know that don’t mean shit.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Course not. Besides, you were going ... here, was it?” Joe nodded toward the building they’d been heading toward. Lucky guess.

“Serious, Joe. Fuck off.”

There was history in their exchange. It wasn't just flat anger, it was implied nuance, and unsaid details. They glared at each other with intensity, far more intensity than people without grudges or a nasty past glared. And nothing got people fighting like a grudge.

Debby and Kathy stood at Joe's sides. Far as Eric could tell, both were too young to be deadly but strong enough to be threats, strong enough to be a cause for concern, to warrant his attention. Joe, more so, but none of them made him want to run.

That was strange, wasn't it? He'd only been part of this paranormal nightlife for a month. He should be afraid of these vampires who had decades on him. He wasn't. Deep down, where the wolf inside growled and howled, it knew if push came to shove, it could tear these fuckers apart. As long as the vamps came at him head on, fought him straight on, he'd rip them to bits.

But vampires didn't do that. Vamps came at you sideways.

Joe came in closer, sneering, and got in Jessy's face. Part of Eric wanted to do the manly thing, step up, get between Jessy and Joe, and push him off. If Jessy was human, he'd do just that. She wasn't.

“Looking for a fight, Joe?”

“Looking to get you out of here.”

“You know we're supposed to be working together on this?”

“Like the Valor bar, or the Martels?”

Jessy returned his sneer, and shoved him away. “Not our fault Carthians don't know how to be smart with money, or businesses, or contracts.”



Eric winced. Invictus being dicks and using lawyer speak to be snakes and fuck over the Carthians sounded about right. But, it wasn't like the Carthians would be so bitter as to—

Joe punched Jessy. The hard thud of a fist colliding with a face, with bone, resonated with Eric. It was an old song, the thud of knuckles on skin, the deep thunk, like punching wood. Movies always got that wrong.

It was a hard enough punch to send Jessy back and onto her ass, rolling a little, and hitting her shoulder.

“Oh fuck! My suit!” She hopped up onto her feet, and snarled at the man. “You really want to take me on, Joe? Think you're strong enough to take on a Right Hand?”

“Just giving you what you deserve. Invictus have fucked us over too many times, and I'm sick of it. I'm not going to forget all the shit you've done to us just because hunters are here.”

Jonah stepped up, but so did Joe's buds Debby and Kathy. Oh shit. Hella growled, and came in closer, but Kathy got in her way, as Debby did with Jonah.

“Guys, come on,” Eric said, stepping in closer to try and get between Jonah and Debby. “We're hunting hunters, not arguing about covenant shit, right? Maybe—”

Debby swung for him. He'd had people take swings at him thousands of times, and he knew how to read the movement. The way the muscle of the shoulder moved, the twist of the hip, the anchoring of the foot, all obvious signs. What wasn't so obvious was the amount of speed that came out of the punch.

He fell the same way Jessy had, but the sound of getting your own face punched was much louder, especially when it made your brain bounce around in your skull.

“Shut up, wolf. You’re a newcomer to all this, and you don’t get to say shit.”

“Oh hell no.” Hella threw a punch back at Debby, but the woman ducked underneath it, and slammed her fist up into Hella’s jaw, hard enough to send her up a foot into the air, and back a few feet to go with.

Recap time. Jessy had given him a basic rundown on the abilities vamps specialized in. Super fast, and strong? Probably a Daeva; or as Jessy put it, the true sluts of the vampire world.

Eric rubbed his jaw where she’d hit him. Blood on his fingers. He breathed in the smell of it, the iron, the life, and he licked it off his lip. Fact of biology was that girls didn’t have the same muscle mass as guys, even when both trained similar routines, and that was especially true for upper body mass. Girls didn’t punch very hard. Apparently, being Kindred changed all that, cause the punch she hit him with didn’t give a shit about muscle mass, testosterone, or other normal factors in calculating force. Something inhuman, something beastly threw that punch.

He got up, and began to change. Not all the way, didn’t need to go insane. Five forms to pick from, and he knew just the one to choose. The strange, alien words in his mind knew what to call it, too. He was currently in Hishu, and if he wanted to put someone in their place, become Dalu. Bigger, stronger. He grew a few inches in height, and grew almost a hundred pounds in muscle. Felt like fucking Mike Tyson. Felt like speed, and power, and aggression, and ... and hunger, for a little payback.

“What the fu—”

He drove his fist into her face, same way she did him. A little part of him told him he shouldn’t hit a girl, not like this, not with all the power and weight of his body. A much larger part reminded him she

wasn't a girl, she was a vampire, and was fair game to have her face broken in.

He looked down at himself. His clothes were filled to bursting, like a good pump at the gym times a hundred. Hell, Jessy laughed and gave him a wink when she looked his way, and licked her lips, too. Of course she'd like it.

Her friend Kathy came for him next, and her speed was also a blur. But, instead of going for a punch, she reached behind her, and pulled out a knife.

“Whoa, whoa!” Jessy said. “The fuck do you—”

Eric stepped in, elbows in, arms up, and unleashed. Kathy wasn't expecting him to go on the offensive, which gave him every advantage. The knife didn't look silver, so he had nothing to worry about as long as she didn't stab him in the brain. Fearlessness, or stupidity, he anchored into a proper punch, and drove his knuckles into her face as well, straight on. Her own forward momentum helped drive her nose into his fist, and combined with the speed and weight of his punch, her head went back while her legs kept going. Clothesline. Her skull crunched against the concrete, bouncing twice, before the vampire unleashed a howl of pain.

Joe snarled, bared his fangs, and took a step toward him. But, the stupid man wasn't so stupid, and thought twice.

“Four on one. Not a fair fight,” Joe said.

Jessy threw her hands up, growling. “It's not supposed to be a fight, Joe. Fuck off. We're looking for these hunters, same as you. Now beat it.”

“Like I'd trust an Invictus to not use this as an opportunity to try and fuck over the Carthians.”

“Of course we will! And you’ll do the same. That’s how it’s always been!”

The two bickered and roared about their covenants, while Eric forced himself to breathe. The Dalu form was empowering, enthralling, and it pumped a myriad of hormones through his blood. He wanted to fight. He wanted to tear into someone. He wanted to sink his teeth into something that wriggled with life. Vampires had no life, but they sure as hell would wriggle if he bit into one. And—

He shook his head. Breathe. Calm down. His heart was pumping, each beat coursing an ocean of blood and desire through him. It wasn’t the same madness that took him the first time he turned full werewolf, Gauru, but it was getting there.

“The fuck is going on out here?”

Everyone turned as Caleb emerged from the prison to join them.

“Find what you were looking for?” Hella said, rubbing her jaw.

“Only the trail. The spirit is gone, and I’m not going to chase it. No point, yet. I’ll tell Avery and see from there.” Caleb marched up to them, and looked down at Debby and Kathy as the two vampires got up, both of them snarling and rubbing their faces. Kathy’s nose was broken, and—crack. She twisted it back into place, and the split skin healed over in moments. No blood. Vamps didn’t bleed like living things did, he knew, but the fact she healed a broken nose that quickly was impressive. Then again, it may have only been surface level, a show, to look tough.

“We’re just settling some old debts, Caleb,” Debby said. “Invictus are a bunch of corporate scumbags, fucking over everyone and everything.”

The other werewolf raised a brow, and looked at each of them in turn. “You serious? We’re kind of busy, aren’t we?”

Joe sighed and shook his head. “The hunter issue is a big deal, and we are working to deal with it, like Garry told you. But, we’re concerned with more than the immediate.” The stupid man shrugged, and stepped in closer. “Side-effect of being a vampire, always looking to the future. And the future? Terra Den is going to put Xnomina in its place.”

This guy liked to talk, that much was obvious. Big mouth, obnoxious, rough sort. Every word out of his stupid mouth had Eric aching to cave it in.

“I don’t give two shits about Xnomina,” Caleb said. “But…” The man reached out, grabbed Eric’s shoulder, and turned him around to face him. And, like Eric, the man adopted the in between form, causing his height to grow, his muscles to grow, and body hair too. A mirror image of testosterone, aggression, and a hint of fangs.

Caleb didn’t go for the sloppy punch. No, this fucker ducked in quick, arms up and elbows in, and sank a right hook into Eric’s face, hard enough he had to take a step back with the momentum.

“You,” the fucker said, “made a deal with a spirit you know nothing about. Fucking with shit you know nothing about, just like Avery said you would.” Again, the man came in quick, the speed of a trained boxer guiding him. The heft of his new body, combined with the pure, insane speed of his punch, forced Eric into the defensive. Arms up as well, he took the punch in the forearm, and the sickening thud preceded the pain, like an explosion and its shock wave.

Eric backed up, out of reach, and growled. Part of him wanted to apologize for stepping out of bounds, making deals with spirits. A much larger part of him wanted to beat this fucker into the ground for being such a colossal asshole.

“The fuck is going on over here?”

Everyone jerked their head again, as another voice added to the cluster fuck of stupid bullshit. Three more vampires came around the corner, out of the darkness and into the glow of a streetlight. A girl's voice, with two dudes beside her. Tattoos, jeans, piercings galore, every one of them had a bit of the poser attitude the grated on Eric. Except, maybe, they weren't posers. If what Jessy told him was true, and it likely was, Carthians really did live on the streets, embodying a punk rocker's dream of fighting the machine. For better, or worse.

They came in closer, smirks on their faces, and each punching a palm in a classic action movie sort of way. Ridiculous, but not so ridiculous, when backed up by strength.

"Carl," Jessy said, "you really want to do this now? I got to put you in the ground again?"

One of the men, a larger guy, white, bald head, enough muscle mass to make everyone step around him, offered Jessy a smile. "Garry's not here, and I'm itching to pay you back."

Ok, if this situation was any indicator, the Carthians really were universally stupid. And, right now, he didn't mind breaking a few stupid people's noses.

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~~Jack~~

People were giving him space. That was good. Part of him wanted to try and be sociable, maybe let a part of him be vulnerable, like other people supposedly did when they were grieving. He did it with Clara, when visiting his sister and mother; a little, anyway. Doing it more would be impossible. Christ, it was so draining just being around other people normally, let alone now that he was a walking, talking, ticking time bomb. Every word had to be carefully

calculated, or he'd snap and piss someone off, burn a bridge, or worse.

So, he kept his eyes on the tunnel floor, and his hands in his pockets as he walked. Isabella and Clara were ahead of him, Athalia and Gloria were behind him. Keep the young one protected from all sides, he supposed. Whatever.

"I really have to wonder," Clara said, "if we're wasting our time in these tunnels. It's not like we've ever found the hunters down here."

"Everyone hides down here," Isabella said. "Azamel as well, their target."

The werewolf shrugged, and stopped, last step ending with weight and preparation for an argument. They all stopped to match it. Oh great, wonderful.

"And yet, they've never launched an attack against her."

Athalia shrugged, and took the opportunity to take a break, leaning against the concrete wall. "Because they know we'd slaughter them if they came at us head on."

"Is that it?" Clara said. "Because, these hunters seem pretty well equipped, more than enough to go head first into any confrontation. In fact, I'd wager they have enough information to launch a direct assault on her, but refuse to."

"What are you saying?" Athalia said.

"I'm saying, something is not what it seems. Jeremiah wants to kill Azamel, but if that was true, he'd have launched a direct attack. Something else is going on between them."

That was true. The hunters weren't being too smart about their maneuvers. Unless—

“Unless,” he said, “they are blind. Could very well be they don’t know where Azamel is. They were trying to get that info from me, right?”

Clara shook her head, frowning as she paced around. “They have a witch that can use some sort of weird occult magic to divine understanding by sacrificing people. And based on what she was going to do to Eric, she was going to do more than just ... get a location. I’m sure they could find Azamel and go for her straight on, if they wanted.”

Isabella sighed, combed her hair back with her fingers, and shrugged. “What ulterior motive could she have? Everything we know about her, Jeremiah, and Angela, suggest they are only interested in Azamel. Azamel, and Jack, now that he has sufficiently infuriated Angela.”

That was true. But, he couldn’t help but throw Isabella a stern glance when she brought it up, and she returned it. Was she looking to start an argument with him? That wasn’t like her. Gloria said nothing, at least, staying in the back and keeping her small sword in her hand, drawn and ready. Jack didn’t expect much from her, when the bullets started flying, but maybe that was a mistake, when it was everyone else getting distracted by the topic at hand.

“Nothing makes sense,” Clara said. “I’m wondering if we should be topside looking for a trail, maybe in Devil’s Corner where those abductions happened.”

“Matt and Art visited one, and couldn’t find a trail,” Jack said.

“Yeah, I guess. But I can’t help but feel coming down here is pointless. The hunters are playing some other game, something indirect, something beyond just trying to kill Azamel. You sure you don’t know more about the relationship between Azamel and Jeremiah, Athalia?”



The monster sighed, and started walking. It took everyone a few seconds to get moving again, but soon they were back on the march, if only to hear what she had to say.

“Azamel and Jeremiah know each other.”

“Know?” Jack said. “How much know is know?”

“I don’t know. She’s been vague about the details. She hurt him, but she doesn’t tell me much about that.”

Jack almost asked if maybe there was a connection between Jeremiah, and the mysterious unknown thing Azamel warned him about. But, no, better to keep that secret until otherwise needed.

Fuck, he’d forgotten all about that. Some great, looming threat going on in the background, and all he could think about was the hunters fucking with his life and his city. The perfect opportunity for a looming threat to take advantage, and instigate their plans. Fucking lovely.

“Then let’s go ask her,” he said.

Athalia stopped, and raised a brow as she looked at him. “You know she won’t tell you.”

“Why not? She’s told me plenty already. Seems to trust me.”

“It’s personal for her.”

“Yeah well, I don’t care.” Shrugging, he motioned for the others to follow, and he started heading in her direction. Clara jogged up to him, getting a foot ahead of him; guard point. But, she smiled as she looked over her shoulder at him. Isabella and Gloria didn’t seem to care either way, and started walking too.

Athalia jogged up to him, and put a hand on his shoulder. For a second, he thought she might have been kind, gentle, maybe try and be nice about disagreeing with him on this. But, no, she squeezed it hard enough to make him have to shrug hard to throw her grip off.

“You’re asking for trouble, Jack.”

“Three vampires and one werewolf, and Fiona and Mark aren’t there. If she’s going to get violent, she—”

“I didn’t say she’d get violent. You don’t understand her at all. I meant, she’s going to remember this, and she’s not going to be so quick to help you out in the future if—”

“If she has any information about Jeremiah, and hasn’t shared it, then every bit of help she’s given so far is not enough. These hunters are—”

“What? The hunters are what? So far they’ve killed one vampire, and that’s it. While we’ve killed several of them, and—”

“That’s it?” He stopped, and looked at her. She noticed the mistake, pulling her head back and wincing, but it was too late. Words poured out of him like someone was firing a machine gun armed with explosive rounds. “My sister is a fucking corpse, sitting on a metal table, surrounded by other corpses! My mother is dying in a fucking hospital as we speak! Because of your fucking daughter!” He reached out, and shoved her. Hard. Little as he was, the importance of size faded away the more vitae played a factor, the more the vampire was willing to use the inhuman part of him to fight. And he was looking for a fight.

She stumbled back, but didn’t fall over, back hitting the curved concrete wall and hands bracing against it.

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I—” He cut himself off, and stared at her. She was glaring right back at him, half snarling, and with her back against the wall of the tunnel, she was half in shadow from the flickering light. Between the flashes of weak illumination, he could see the silhouette of her, the real her, that monster of death incarnate, of bones and fangs.

This Begotten woman was a bitch.

Sighing, he started walking, and Clara matched him. She was looking at him, eyes stern, but concerned, and he shrugged them off as they all started moving again.

Tension in the air, like a tightly wound guitar string. Someone was going to give it a good pluck, snap it, and someone was going to get hurt.

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“Um ... what the fuck?” Clara said. The werewolf moved forward, and looked around, the vampires following behind her only after staring for a few minutes.

This wasn't the tunnel anymore.

“Athalia?” Jack said, looking behind him. Gone. Shit. “I guess we walked into a nightmare.”

“A ni ... nightmare?” Gloria said, teeth chattering. She stepped closer to Jack, and crouched down a little, making herself small. “I, I uh ... um...”

Jack looked beside them, at the white floor they were standing on. White stone? Something white-ish, carved, and small ravines were carved into it. They were filled with blood, spilling into a nearby river. They were outside? Jack looked up, and gulped on a dry throat, as he stared up at a red moon. It was close, very close, and it bled onto a palace in the distance, a white stone palace, smooth, with beautiful curved arches and domes, and many pillars. Indian?

If this nightmare chamber was some sort of twisted abomination inspired by India, then it had to be Azamel's chamber. Maybe. He gulped again, and stepped forward, looking down at the beautiful ravines carved into ornate patterns, converging, and flowing into the river beyond. It was as if the concrete stage the old woman kept her home on, was actually this strange platform of white stone, and beyond it, a forest lost in red shadows.

In the strange courtyard, there were guillotines. In many of the guillotines, were people. Most of them were dead, some waiting to die, all with dozens of lash marks. Heads were piled, flies buzzing around them, and nearby, corpses were mounted on upright, large spears, faces frozen with eyes wide, terrified, and mouths open, screaming silence into the stillness of the palace courtyard. There was a pool of shallow blood in the center of the courtyard, as still as the dead that surrounded it.

The corpses began to scream. The three vampires huddled together, Isabella included, and they stared around at the dead as their cries began to fill the air. The men and women in the guillotines began to scream more obviously, their sounds more acute, and their blood gushed into the ravines. The shallow pool began to bubble, churning softly, and Clara stepped up to it to peer down at it. Fearless.

A dozen trumpets blasting caused the four of them to jerk toward the river of blood beside the palace. Everyone's mouth fell open, as something began to rise out of the blood. One hand, and then another, giant hands, holding colossal swords. Two more hands, each holding a chain, one with a corpse on a hook, the other with a fishing net, filled with bloody skulls. Out came Azamel's head, an elephant head, and the body of a literal giant followed. Dozens of feet tall. So big, Jack had once stood in her hand. Its hand.

The sound had been elephant noises, not an actual trumpet. And, as the fat, four-armed giant walked out of the river, they all stared

on as it eventually exposed human feet at the base of blood-soaked, silk wrap pants. If Azamel wanted to, she could step on them, and they'd pop like grapes.

With a slow glance down at them, the nightmare horror snorted a trumpet sound again, and walked past them, stepping over the shallow pool, and adopted a criss cross sitting position between it, and the palace behind her. Blood continued to ooze from the moon above, dripping onto the domes of the palace, and the golden spears that lined it.

Isabella and Gloria were frozen. The Mekhet had likely gone into shock, and could do nothing but stare with wide eyes and dropped jaw. The Daeva, on the other hand, had a little more courage to her, empowered with her ancilla years. But there was no denying the overwhelming terror of the situation, the absurd nature of seeing a literal nightmare with waking eyes, and Jack could see that daunting reality earn more than a few shudders from the vampire.

“Azamel,” a raspy whisper said. Athalia's voice, her horror voice, from somewhere behind them, whispered in the red darkness. “Jack wishes to speak with you.”

Jack turned around, and found the skeleton creature walking up on its hands to join them. Walking through the dark and into the tunnel, the flickering light and shadows, it must have hid the weird transition that was Azamel opening this chamber. It was weird how these monsters did that, hid that transition, so no one got to see it happening. It just did, just existed, like that time he took stairs down into Athalia's nightmare. The opening had simply been there, when it normally wasn't. And, this tunnel had led into Azamel's nightmare, when it never did before.

It was a strange feeling, to have walked into a nightmare from the physical world. Almost like, as if he'd walked into a trap, the kind that shut the door behind the animal when it goes in.

“What do you want, vampire?” the giant elephant demon god nightmare thing said.

“I...” He looked over at one of the guillotines. The person stuck in there, on their knees with their head locked into the wooden neck binding, was squirming, screaming, and their back was flayed open. None of this blood was real, all a nightmare, all inhuman, but that didn’t mean his nose wasn’t getting hungry smelling it. “Can you make them stop? Trying to talk.”

The monstrosity snorted a trumpet sound again, and nodded. At once, all the screaming stopped, like a well orchestrated choir.

“Speak.”

“Alright. Um, first, I guess, is why is you nightmare open?”

“I sensed Athalia coming, and thought, given circumstances, it might be prudent.”

That did make sense. “And, I wanted to talk to you ... about Jeremiah.”

Another trumpet sound, long, groaning, before Azamel leaned forward toward them. The fact she—it held up its four arms in a pose, never setting them down, was impressive, and unnerving. It was like, she wasn’t a real creature, but a symbol of something, a tainted and corrupted symbol.

“I have told you enough.”

“No, you haven’t.” He folded his arms across his chest, and glared up at the damn elephant. “Every paranormal in this city is looking for this fucker. We’ve nearly died dealing with him and his entourage. Barry did.” A glance back to Isabella, to make sure she knew he wasn’t forgetting her student had been murdered, not just Jack’s sister.

“You have been told enough, Jack Terry. Do not confuse my aid with reliance. This is a cooperative effort.”

After all the shit she'd dumped on him, she had the fucking nerve to stonewall him now? Screw it.

“Tell me more about Jeremiah. And spare the misdirections and half truths.”

“No.”

Oh fuck this. Fuck this, fuck her, fuck everything. He'd been in this conversation for a whole thirty seconds, and he was already at the end of his patience.

“My sister is dead, you stupid, fucking piece of shit!” He raised a hand, pointed it at the elephant god, and glared until he felt the silent growling in his chest. His Beast wanted out. “Murdered! By this bitch's daughter! And my mom could be next. She's in a hospital bed, dying, as we speak, and for all I know, I'll come out of the tunnels tonight to find her dead!” A hand throw gesture for Athalia, too. “Because you, came to our city, and brought your trouble with you. I was tortured. I was cut into, beaten. I had to murder people to escape that, and unlike a fucking monster like you, that doesn't come easily to me.” Didn't. Didn't come easily. “I try. I fucking try to help you, play the game, try and give you a fair deal, but Julias was right. You don't deserve the help I've given you, pushing for you to get better treatment in every Invictus meeting, every Primogen meeting. You're nothing but a hungry monster, and you're not worth helping. Fuck you.”

If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be pissing off a giant nightmare god thing.

He turned, and began to walk in the direction they came from, toward the black and red forest. Hopefully, the dark patch they came

out of, would bring him back into the tunnel going into it the other way.

“Jack,” Azamel said, “come, wait. I ... will speak of Jeremiah.”

He looked back over his shoulder at her. Everyone was frozen, eyes wide, and they were staring at him. Hell, even Athalia looked like her eyes were wide, and she was a giant half skeleton without any facial expressions. He'd probably nearly gotten himself killed right there, but fuck it, he was running on such a short fuse. Calm down, before you make things worse.

“Alright.” He walked back toward the group, and waited.

The nightmare god set down her two giant scimitars, her corpse, and her net of skulls. Reading an elephant's expression was impossible, but as the colossal entity let out a low, rumbling groan sound, Jack could only figure she was sighing. It was humanizing, in a strange way, seeing something that inhuman being bothered by him. Or, was she being bothered by the memory?

“Jeremiah and I were lovers, a long time ago,” she said. Definitely the memory, then.

Everyone gasped, like they were watching a cheesy soap opera. Not so cheesy, when happening to you.

“You're fucking shitting me,” Clara said. “You didn't think that was pertinent information?”

Jack half expected his two vampires to chime in, but Gloria was too busy quivering and staring at the nightmares around her, and Isabella was too smart to open her mouth and draw attention to herself.

The elephant trumpeted a loud blast at the werewolf, forcing Clara to cover her ears.



“Be silent.” Groaning the trumpet sound again, the nightmare god set its four hands on the white stone around it, and leaned in closer, so its trunk reached over the blood pool, and toward Jack. He didn’t step back, much as he wanted to. “I am hundreds of years old, but these last decades of my life have aged me far faster than I could have predicted. When Jeremiah was a young man, I looked a woman in her forties. Naturally, I seduced him. I was mayor of a town at the time, some hundred and fifty years ago.”

“Wait. Jeremiah is almost two hundred-years old?” Jack said.

The elephant monster nodded. “I will explain, but let me get there.” Sighing, the elephant looked to the side, and Jack ducked underneath the tusk. “You do not know the ways of the Begotten, we monsters of nightmares. The Dark Mother whispers, and says you Kindred are merely lost children, but you do not know her as we know her. You do not suffer the hungers we suffer. And, you do not battle that hunger.”

“I’m not sure I get what—”

“To satisfy my hunger was necessary. I controlled that city, and I made sure to crush any and all who opposed me. I ruled with an iron fist. I was just, and fair, and I relished it whenever thieves, relics from the wild West, tried to usurp me or steal from me. I hanged them all. I enjoyed it when others in the city tried to fight me for power, greedy businesses or do-well farmers who thought they could do better than me. I crushed them, ripped the power out of their hands, and kept it as my own. They feared me, the power I had, and I fed on it.”

“Sounds like you were a dictator.” And who didn’t hate dictators?

“That I was, after a fashion. I did not kill those who did not deserve it, or punish those who did not deserve it, but I held power and held it absolutely. Because that is what I feed on, little Ventrue.” She leaned in closer again, and with her head turned, her

giant eye came at him, until he could touch it if he wanted. “I take power, and I ... and I ruined poor Jeremiah.”

Ok, if his eyes weren't deceiving him, that was regret in her one eye he could see. Harder to read her expression considering he could only see half her face, but she drove it home when she let her trunk sort of flop onto the white stone.

“Ruined?”

“He did not know what I was, and while we had a strange relationship, it was good. The man was a deputy, and quite devoted to the city and his sheriff. The sheriff, upon discovering what I was through his insatiable curiosity, attempted to push me out of my position. I forced him out of the city, my city. Jeremiah asked how I could do such a thing, and I explained, exposing my true nature to him. I was an idiot, and perhaps, a bit lovestruck. He left immediately, seeking the sheriff.” With another sad trumpet sound, the colossus sat up, and looked down at them all, four hands now pressing on her knees with how she was sitting criss cross. “With his sheriff and a band of men and women, they tried to kill me. So, I killed them. In this group were some of Jeremiah's friends, and family. But, I could not bring myself to kill Jeremiah.”

Oh. Well, fuck. Jack, wincing, looked around for a place to sit; there was none. Best he could do was look at the floor, and fold his arms across his chest.

“What happened after that?”

“I was no fool. I left, before hunters would fine me. I expected Jeremiah to grieve for his friends and family, and then continue his life. But something happened. I assume when hunters learned of what happened, and came to the city, he joined them.” She reached up, plucked at her tusks, and scratched at her trunk as she looked up to the bloody moon. “I move to a city, feed, and move on, surviving on scraps, compared to what I once had.”

“Sounds like you’ve killed people who didn’t deserve death,” he said.

“In self defense. And do not get confused, vampire. We are monsters, and to suggest that we should abide by human instincts or communal laws is absurd. We are predators, they are prey.”

He didn’t want to agree with that, but he had to, he knew he did. That was a conversation for another time, though.

“So, he extended his life somehow.”

“Indeed,” the nightmare said. “Every few decades, he finds me, and I am forced to flee. But not this time.”

“Because—”

“Because I am old, little vampire. Old, and I will no longer let this mistake, this thorn in my side, haunt my final days. And, if I can, if the Night Mother wills it, I will transcend, and become a true monster of the ages.”

Transcend? True monster of the ages? He looked up to her, eyebrow raised, but didn’t ask what she meant, no point. She’d dodge the question, or stonewall him about it anyway. And it was a lot of information. He couldn’t be angry with her for not sharing with him, at least, not in this conversation. Plenty pissed she didn’t tell him more when this all started, but it wouldn’t have changed things anyway.

“Thanks, for telling me.”

“You are welcome, little Kindred.” And, as if adopting a mask, she reached down, picked up the two swords and the two chains with her four hands, and resumed holding them out at her sides. “I am sure you can understand why I do not speak of him. The reason he hunts me, the past we shared, is irrelevant. He must die.”

Not entirely irrelevant. If Jeremiah was using some sort of magic to extend his life, that was information that could potentially prove useful. Maybe Jacob could figure something out? Life extending magic seemed right up his alley.

“I’m sorry, for what I said.”

“And I am sorry for what they have done to you.”

The pain in his throat and guts settled, and he let his shoulders slump with a long sigh. Either he guessed Azamel wrong, or she was a lot nicer in her horror form versus her human form.

“Anything you can tell us,” Clara said, “about Jeremiah? About, how he might try and strike at you? There’s no sign of him in these tunnels, and we’re wondering if there’s a better place to look.”

“I am sorry, but no. That man is terribly resourceful, and will attack in strange and unpredictable ways. Be careful, little monsters.”



~~Beatrice~~

She did feel kind of badass, walking with four other vampires, and being the one leading them. Lead was a strong word, but it did sort of feel like that. They were taking her cue, and asking her questions. It put a smile on her crocodile mouth.

They moved through the crowds of Devil’s Corner, and stayed close together, giving off the air of a group, a clan or something. It was enough to have people step aside, at least enough so they didn’t go bumping shoulders with everyone. Dolareido was a densely packed city, outside of North Side, which was awesome for hunting for a meal, but it made learning information a pain in the ass. Time to get deep in the shit to see if they could dig some info out of it.

Beatrice kept her Cloak of Night up, enough so that people could see her, but her features would be invisible. Kine's eyes would just glide off of her, unable to pin her down with their vision, and without drawing attention. A Face in the Crowd.

"I wish Damien was with us," she said. "He'd know more about Devil's Corner, about who to ask, about where to look."

Tash nodded, and looked up at the faded night sky. "Maybe. He d-did a lot of w-w-work here, trying to make people religious. But, he d-did spend a lot of time hiding, you know? If ... if the P-Prince ever found him, back then, she'd probably have killed him, or exiled him."

Everyone nodded. The Prince would do something like that, especially considering how sore she'd been after the Purge.

Triss sighed, a long happy sigh, as she looked at the people they walked past. She felt like a Carthian again, walking the streets and looking for kine to beat up if they were being dicks, or kine to help out if they were good for the neighborhood. Not that she did that often, antisocial as she'd been, hanging out in a fucking graveyard and shit for years and years. But Carthians did do the punk street walk bit, and she'd gone with them on occasion, helping curate the lower-middle class half of South Side into a decent place.

"Where we going?" Othello said.

"To visit a few dealers who like to sell the cheap shit to poor addicts." She pointed ahead, before adjusting her hair to make sure it framed her face. Much as she was confident she could hide her features, there was no need to make things harder than necessary. "Some of the dealers will have regulars, and I'm guessing the most fucked of the bunch are the sorts the hunters have been snatching up."

“The sheriff believed the same, b-but no one’s had t-t-time to ... to dig through this place. I was ... gonna come find it myself, b-b-but...”

Triss nodded. Made sense. Daniel was off doing crazy shit probably, with how rarely anyone ever saw the man anymore. It wouldn’t surprise Triss if the man was doing crazy James Bond shit in the spirit world, or something. Poor Natasha was having to pick up that slack, no doubt, and considering how few dragons there were, and the positions those few dragons held, Natasha had a big load on her shoulders to deal with, with big people to please. Not that it wasn’t the same with Triss and Jacob; but, Triss took the crazy shit Jacob threw her like a fly to honey; loved it.

Further and deeper into Devil’s Corner they went, past the prostitutes, past the drunks puking on the street corners, past the alleys filled with junkies trying to get a fix, and past boarded windows where said junkies were enjoying their fix. Past the stinky bars, past the convenience stores with metal bars on the doors, they took a corner, and wandered behind some other bars. Bars everywhere. This one though, Triss knew to be a hangout of some very unsavory types; at least, back when she gave a shit. Hopefully they hadn’t changed location.

Didn’t look like it. Behind a bar’s back door, in an empty section of a concrete alleyway wide enough to hold half a dozen people under a flickering light, there sat a few guys on wood pallets. White guy, black guy, Hispanic dude; well, at least they were diverse.

“You three,” she said. “You work for Mark Dunny, don’t you?”

They got up like someone dropped a grenade at their feet, eyes wide, and hands reaching behind them. Going for their guns, no doubt.

Jen stepped up, and eyed all three of them. “You don’t want to shoot us.”

The three men stared at her, meeting her gaze—well, her breasts firsts, then her gaze. Course, that was what she wanted, eye contact, so she could do what Ventrue did: break some minds.

Within moments, the three men lowered their hands, and stared at Jen. Othello came up, put a hand on her shoulder to pull her back a bit, and smiled at the guys.

“Hey friends,” he said. “You want to help us out?”

Triss snorted on a laugh. The man was using the Majesty discipline, and not on a girl; a strange sight from Othello.

“Oh, yeah, sure!” one of the kine said. “Who are you?” With each ticking second, all three kine’s mouths turned into smiles, and eyes opened wide to look at Othello with awe.

“Othello.”

“Othello!” another guy said. “Awesome. You guys know Mark Dunny?”

“N-No,” Tash said, poking her head out from behind Othello. “But, people who work for Mark Dunny are the sort of p-people we’re working for.”

“Yeah, yeah, we know things. Othello wants to know something? Not a thing we don’t know about in these streets.”

Othello nodded. “That’s good. Help out my friend, and answer her questions.”

They nodded excitedly.

Nodding as well, Tash pulled up her phone, and checked it. “A ... Charlie B-Barker? And, um ... Ashley Groodsman.” No doubt the girl

had memorized the names after calling in for them earlier. But, Tash was Tash, and had to double check everything.

“Just that they’re gone. Disappeared. A shame, too. Hate losing clients.”

Ok, this was good. A lead. “Any idea where they disappeared?” Triss said.

“Yeah! Yeah, Charlie was taken off of Farrington and Goosen. Ashley was taken off Goosen and Third Park.”

Jen raised a brow, looked back at Triss, and shrugged as she looked at the three dealers. “Right off the corners?”

“Yeap, right off the corners. Someone showed up, stranger, said a few words to them, and they hopped in the car with them.”

“A stranger?” Tash said.

“Yeah. Well, four strangers. Two guys, two girls.”

Oh, those four, the four everyone knew about. But knowing they were working in Devil’s Corner was a big deal.

Aaron poked his head around Othello, opposite of Tash. “What were they driving?”

“Honda Civic, blue, from what we’ve heard.”

Damn, good fucking call. It’d been forever since she’d used a car, she kinda forgot kine had a habit of driving everywhere. Fucking Aaron, being too damn smart for his own good.

“Thanks for the help,” Othello said. “We’ll see if we can stop anymore people from disappearing.”



“Oh, thanks man! Hate losing customers. Tough to find consistent customers like those two, you know?”

Consistent? Hmm. “They have a place they go to often to get high?” She’d assumed they’d go home or to their apartment to do that, but considering the circumstance, there was a good chance they were homeless.

“They both squat in an old, abandoned home on the end of Goosen Street. Burned up a long time ago, but it’s still standing, enough for some people to squat there if they really have no place else to go.”

Holy shit, this was turning into a gold mine.

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He wasn’t lying, that was for sure, not about the building at least. At the end of Goosen Street, where Devil’s Corner ended and the desert began, there was a building, burned and all sorts of fucked up. But, structurally sound, which meant squatters.

It wasn’t like Dolareido had a massive homeless problem, but it did have some. Just enough of each problem to create a dirty little corner of the city, Devil’s Corner. Most kine had it pretty decent in Dolareido, but not everyone; by design of the Prince, Triss figured. The homeless were the perfect target for certain types of Kindred, and Dolareido was meant to be a Kindred utopia, not a kine utopia. Carthians really hated that.

The five of them stepped into the building. It was an interesting home, obviously built a long time ago, and someone had taken the time to clean it up. Not repaint, not repair, but clean. The staircase to the second floor had some cinder blocks propped up underneath it, jammed up against the busted wood, visible from the open underside. Fancy. It would have been a nice home, before it got burned and fucked up.

Triss poked her head past a burned wall, an open path, and looked into what must have been a living room. A pot was on the floor, along with some utensils. Well, there weren't any tables left, she supposed. She took a deep breath, smelling the air; food, and humans. There was at least one human in the building, probably on the second floor. They could wait a moment.

The five of them stayed silent, and with the Cloak of Night suppressing them, noises would be quiet, and wandering eyes wouldn't be able to see them. Natasha was far more gifted at the art, and had the ability to take the discipline into true invisibility, where instead of eyes sliding off the person, the person was literally invisible. They were relying on her to keep them all wrapped in that total invisibility, a talent Triss was years away from perfecting. It was impressive, and it let them explore the home without issue, as long as they didn't get too far from Tash.

Living room, empty. Family room — old school — also empty. Kitchen, empty. Basement? She looked down the stairs into the black, and took a deep whiff; nothing, and it was a tiny hole in the ground anyway. Whoever was here was over their heads, and she indicated such to her team with a finger pointing up.

They all nodded, and started up the stairs.

At the top, everyone was taking in the scent of the air, looking for kine. It'd be so fucking nice to have one of the wolves with them on this, but it wasn't an option thanks to Jacob. Ah well, they'd make do. And besides, Aaron was a Gangrel, and Gangrels did love to think they could smell better than the other blood clans.

There was at least one kine in the building, in one of the three bedrooms on the top floor. It'd be pretty bad if someone saw five Kindred literally appear out of thin air, so Triss gave Natasha a nod, and the little Mekhet dropped the Cloak of Night. Triss held up a hand to her ear, and listened, looking for the source of the smell.

Yeap, breathing. Someone was sleeping. With a smile, Triss nodded to the door.

Jennifer walked up to the door, and knocked. No words. And no answer. But, the breathing did stop. Jen knocked again. No answer.

“Hello?” Jennifer said. “We had some questions, about two other people who used to live here? Disappeared?”

The door swung open, and a man in some shitty old jogging pants, and a faded, ripped sweater that didn’t match, swung a knife down at Jen’s neck.

Othello stepped in, a blur of velocity. Fucking Daeva and their speed, fast as Mekhet but as strong as a Nosferatu. Annoying, how the pretty boys were like god damn rockets, when fists started flying. He caught the man by the wrist, and wasted no time pinning him to the floor.

“Holy shit,” Jennifer said, and she stared down at the man, eyes wide. “You could have killed me!”

Triss and the others struggled to hide their smiles. Yeah right. Maybe Jen wanted to be an actor? It wouldn’t surprise Triss if Isabella might let her try out for their club; and try to get into her pants.

“W-Who are you?” the man said, eyes wide, breath coming out in pants, and heartbeat so fast and loud, they could hear it. “I d-don’t know anything! I didn’t do anything! I—”

“Relax,” Othello said, and he stood up, letting the human keep his knife. “We’re not here for you. We’re looking for the people who kidnapped the others who squatted here.”

“Kidnapped?” Groaning, the human sat up, and looked between the five of them. Triss made sure to use the Cloak of Night, just a

little, so she was just a Face in the Crowd. No need for him to see her teeth; hell, if Othello hadn't stopped him from stabbing Jen, they'd probably have to kill him to preserve the Masquerade. It wasn't like Jen could wipe his memory, too young.

“Yeah,” Jen said.

The man's eyes fell. “ ... dead?”

Nodding, Jen adjusted her shirt a little, covering her bra somewhat. Not the time to be showing off her physique, and she knew it.

“That's ... horrible.” He sauntered back into his room, shoulders heavy, and he dropped his knife. No effort to protect the already rundown place, the squatter let the knife land blade first into the wood so it stuck, standing beside a pile of dirty blankets. “P-Poor Charlie, poor Ashley.”

It didn't take a genius to see the man was wrecked, but not just from the emotional turmoil. The way he swayed, the way his jaw kind of stuttered on his words—not the cute way Tash did either, and his sunken cheeks were the story of a man down on his luck and only making it harder on himself.

“Tell you what,” Triss said. “My friend here will give you some money if you share with us some info.”

Jen and Othello both raised a brow, looking to Triss. Yeah, Dominate or Majesty would allow them to get the info, but come on.

Tash reached behind her, pulled out her wallet, and handed Jen some money. The Ventrue took it, made sure the human didn't get to see the amount, and she smiled down at the cash in her hand before she walked into man's bedroom and stood beside him. He'd already sat down on his blankets, the effort of standing too hard. Course, with Jen having her shirt open and showing off her black

bra as some sort of fashion statement, the guy couldn't help but stare.

"I don't know. If ... if Ashley and Charlie are dead, then—"

Jen reached out, and gave the man a couple hundred dollars. "Anything?"

The man licked his hairy chops, took the money, and gulped. "I don't know much."

"See a Honda Civic nearby?" Aaron asked. "Maybe hanging out on the street, a day or three before your friends' disappearances?"

"Y-Yeah! I did."

"Color?"

"Blue. Yeah, it was blue. 2015. Pretty beat up, though."

Ok, lie detector passed. Jen smiled at him, gave the man a rather sexy wink, and slipped him a little more money. Guy wasn't going to spend the cash on fixing his life. He was going to spend it on booze or meth or something nasty. But, maybe he wouldn't. Maybe.

When did Triss become so sympathetic? Hanging out with Julias too much. Damn man was turning her into a 'nice girl'. Bleh!

"Any idea where it came from?" Othello asked. "If you're lying, we'll find out." The big guy left the implication as is, and the poor guy's eyes opened wide and his mouth hung agape for a few moments. He was missing so many teeth.

"Um, I think I saw them coming out of ... out of Barkerton Avenue, one time, when I was around."

Barkerton was a dead end street, with a lot of old homes, maybe a hundred. A hundred homes was a really small number, compared to

the tens of thousands of buildings Dolareido had.

“Thanks,” Jen said as she handed the man the rest of money, totaling probably eight hundred dollars. Then she lifted her bra up over her breasts, winked at the man, bounced her tits a few times with some small jumps, even cupped them a little, before putting her bra back on, and walked out of the room.

The man blinked. Everyone blinked. Then four hands slapped four foreheads. Well, if she was trying to reward the man for being a helpful soul, mission successful, Triss supposed.

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It didn't take all that long to find the guilty house. There was no blue Honda Civic in any driveway, but all it took was a peek in the windows of houses to find the ones with families sleeping in beds. Everyone in Devil's Corner was dirt poor, and those who could afford to live in its shitty housing district were almost as fucked up poor as that poor dude that helped them tonight. Small houses, small beds, with multiple kids per bed, often with some dead-tired father falling asleep on the couch with the TV on, probably so he didn't accidentally wake up his wife going to bed, cause she had to get up at five in the morning for some shitty job.

The Carthian in her was peeking its head out. Carthians didn't just want a better life for Kindred, where everyone was free, anarchy of a sort. They also wanted to make lives better for kine, get them out from under the rule of Kindred. Or at least Garry did. He didn't like that the Invictus or the Prince had millions, billions of dollars, while kine like these poor fucks were surviving on dimes. To the Invictus, the Lancea et Sanctum, and even the fucking Ordo Dracul, money was a way of life to them, while the Carthians were too young a covenant, and too short sighted to have created fortunes. And of course, the Circle of the Crone just didn't give a shit about money.

Maybe that's why she helped that poor fool out. A little money for the old dude, because of a Carthian reflex that asshole Garry had instilled into her. He and Julias would get along more than they knew, if they were on the same side.

The guilty house was the first house that didn't have a soul in it. Just a regular, shitty looking house, the sort that hadn't been painted in years, with a hundred cracks in the driveway. Looked empty, and the doors were locked. They might have to break into every empty home tonight, but she was sure it was this house. There was a strange smell, faint, almost non-existent, but she caught it, and she followed in.

They broke in. Nice and quiet, with some peeks in the windows to make sure no one was watching the door. Not just peeks, but everyone kept an ear and eye open for any breathing or movement. Natasha and her Auspex was perhaps the most useful in seeing if it was safe to open the door, and all she could do was shrug when they looked at her.

In they went, following the subtle, strange smell, into the dark.

## Chapter 83

~~Damien~~

As the night went on, two things were becoming painfully clear. First, that the hunters were either not in the tunnel, or hiding terribly well. Second, that working with Fiona was extremely distracting.

It wasn't that Fiona was too juvenile to focus, or too bubbly to ... not bubble around everywhere, but rather Damien's own mind not being able to concentrate. She was too attractive. Ever since that date, where they'd both enjoyed a meal together, it'd become impossible to ignore how beautiful she was.

He'd heard girls liked it when the man swoops in, sweeps her off her feet. Maybe he should swoop? Course, he didn't know the first thing about swooping, and that made the whole prospect terrifying. But, despite a lack of skill, a girl could only smile at you so many times before it was clear she was looking for you to make a move on her. Fiona smiled at everyone, but whenever she met his eyes, she made sure to smile extra hard. When smiles didn't work, she put her hands behind her, together, and pushed her chest out a bit, while also pushing her arms together, so her biceps pressed her breasts together.

The moment they were topside, he was going to ask for that second date. They'd hunt together, fill their bellies, and maybe, just maybe, he might stop being so scared of her, and do what she seemed to be asking for. Kiss her? Kissing was a good first step.

This must have been how Jack felt, when he met Antoinette in Bloodlust. The kid had shared with him the tense combination of terror and arousal he'd felt, when she drew him into her web. She'd



used her seductive mastery, and her giant breasts, to seduce the poor boy. And Fiona, to Damien's best estimate, was trying to do the same thing, except she didn't have the centuries of experience to go with her efforts. In this weird dance, Damien was the older, more experienced one. Except, he was older, less experienced.

For now, he did his best to return her smile, and at his most bold, looked at her shapely breasts and how her jacket squeezed on them, when he knew she'd notice him doing so. In return, she offered a small blush on her freckled skin, and nudged her shoulder into his side. Flirting successful? Flirting successful.

"How long have we been down here?" Vicky said.

Damien shrugged. "Four hours."

"That is a long time. Perhaps we should take the search elsewhere?"

Matt shook his head. "These tunnels are huge, and I'd prefer we do a proper sweep of them before we move on. If they've been down here within the past few days, I'll smell them."

Powerful nose on that werewolf.

"Assuming," Parker added, "that they don't have some way of covering their scent. And they are hunters after all."

"Hunters don't usually hunt werewolves." Shrugging, Matt stopped at a fork in the tunnel, and took a long whiff. "Vampires spread. Werewolves are chosen by Luna. Our numbers never warrant hunters hunting us, not the way they hunt vampires. And, we don't feed on humans; usually. It's rare for hunters to devote themselves to hunting our kind."

Parker raised a brow. "Your point?"

“My point is that I’d be surprised if these hunters knew tricks for dealing with werewolves, beyond the obvious like silver.”

“What other tricks are there?” Vicky said.

The giant laughed, nodded toward one of the tunnels, and started walking. “Like I’m telling you. I saw how much silver you guys had.”

The three vampires nodded. A little skepticism and distrust was a healthy thing. And, despite Matt being a werewolf, he was plenty kind and sharing with the vampires as was. Asking him to spill over their secrets was a bit much.

“We’ve covered a lot of the tunnels,” Matt said. “A couple more nights, and we can safely say they aren’t down here.”

“Yay!” Fiona said, throwing her hands up and bouncing in place a few times.

The big guy shook his head. “Fighting down here would be a good thing. No humans around to stop us from letting loose, and they can’t surround us. And maybe—” Matt slammed into the air in front of him like a sleepwalker walking into a wall. Crunch. Broken nose, assuredly. He stepped back, groaning loudly, and held his nose in his hands. “What the fuck!”

Matthew didn’t swear often. Damien almost laughed, until he realized the man hadn’t walked into a wall. He had indeed walked into air, and the air had blocked his path. Everyone froze when the realization sank in.

“Um ... w-what?” Fiona said. She bounced over to where Matt was, checked the big guy, before she reached out against where Matt had been hurt. Her hand hit air.

“A barrier?” Damien joined her, and reached out. Indeed, a barrier. It had the texture of still air, which was barely a texture at

all. It confused his brain, touching it, having it press back against his fingers, but it did push back, same as any wall. Soon, everyone was up to the barrier, touching it, pushing against it. Strong as steel.

Matt snorted, and another, quieter crunch sound marked the manual fixing of his nose. He'd heal in no time. With a snort and ka-splat sound of blood leaving his nostrils and hitting the tunnel floor, the werewolf walked up to the barrier as well, and pressed on it.

"If they're behind this," the werewolf said, "then I'd be able to smell them. I don't."

With a quiet snarl, Damien got down onto a knee, and reached down. In the darkness and flickering lights, it was hard to see much, but he managed to spot some strange, black soot, a powder, drawn across the tunnel path from wall to wall.

"What's that?" Fiona said.

"I ... have no idea."

All of them looked down at the soot. And Matt, of course, reached out to touch it. Mistake. He howled pain, and jumped back, clutching his hand and shaking it as if it were on fire. It wasn't, but the noises the man made suggested otherwise.

"Ye awright?" Fiona said, joining him.

"Ouch! Wow, that burns."

Frowning, Damien took in a breath, and blew on the black powder. It didn't move. He tried again, but still it didn't move. Soon, all five of them were doing the same thing, blowing on the strange black soot and trying to move it. No one managed.

This was ridiculous. With a snarl, Damien withdrew his sword, and tried to strike the powder. But the invisible barrier stopped him, blocking the sword from doing anything more than skimming the edge of the powder.

And that was, apparently, another mistake. As Damien put his sword away, a glowing amber started to make its appearance; from underneath them. The five of them stared down as lines started to draw themselves, as if a ghost was painting with glowing amber, encircling them. It didn't take a genius to recognize being inside an amber circle self-drawing onto the floor was a bad thing.

“Go!” He grabbed Fiona, and threw her. She squealed like a squirrel as she flew through the air, and groaned when she face-planted against another invisible barrier. Oh shit.

Whining, she struggled to stand up until Matt helped her. “Tae fuck!? Damien ye wank stain!”

“Sorry, sorry.” Wincing, he walked over to her and offered his best apologetic smile, before he reached out and pressed against the new barrier. This one had a shape, a contour, a curve. It was following the curve of the amber circle that now surrounded the group of them. Shit. “I was too slow.”

“It's awright, ye silly dobber.” Sighing and rubbing her forehead, she pat him on his side, and nudged her shoulder against him. “We ... we uh ... set off a trap?”

“Apparently.” He glanced back to Vicky and Parker. Predictably, they were standing with arms at the ready, but weren't getting involved. Passive, frustratingly so. They were the sort of vampires to sit back, wait for something to happen, and then react. Their reactions would be effective and intelligent, but until that happened, Damien had to assume they were borderline useless.

Matt, growling and groaning, pressed his hands up against the invisible barrier. Wherever he touched, the amber circle that surrounded them glowed brighter underneath the point of contact.

“We’re trapped,” Vicky said.

Parker nodded. “Indubitably.”

Good grief.

They had a decent amount of room to move around in. The circle was almost as wide as the tunnel itself, leaving Damien with more than enough space to start circling the trap. There wasn’t any black powder on the circle or its edges, but with how the amber glowed, he could see some small inconsistencies, as if someone painted it with a paintbrush.

It was a new trap, one the hunters hadn’t used yet. The hunters were far more experienced than any warning tale could have prepared him for, using new tricks at every encounter, and never repeating the same one. Frustrating.

“Anyone have any idea what this is?” Damien said. Everyone shook their heads, as he expected. “It appears to be some kind of ... supernatural trap.”

“It blocked your sword,” Matt said. “And it seemed to block the air from further down the tunnel.”

Damien nodded. “The black soot stuff did. But...” He stuck his sword out. It crossed over the amber circle without issue. “This strange circle appears to be less strict.”

“The first barrier,” a voice called from the tunnel darkness, “is a proper physical barrier, magical, created with that black soot you noticed. The second is a classic entrapment circle for paranormal scum, like yourself.”

Oh no.



~~Natasha~~

They were getting lucky. Very lucky. Too lucky? Maybe. It was perfectly reasonable that the hunters assumed the Kindred wouldn't be able to track this path, considering how convoluted it was. Figure out who was sacrificed, figure out they came from Devil's Corner, have a Kindred in the know about what kine might know something, get lucky that they knew where those who were sacrificed hung out, get lucky with the last kine at that location, and that they saw their vehicle. Convoluted, but not an impossible trail, and there was no doubt the hunters wouldn't leave the trail intact forever. They'd eventually move, or cover their tracks, so the five vampires had to do this quickly, tonight.

It was getting exhausting, keeping her fellow Kindred wrapped in the Cloak of Night along with her. Obfuscate could be used in so many ways, but a full Cloak of Night on herself and four others, to the point the five of them were completely invisible? That was draining. She had to concentrate, and that meant she couldn't devote much attention to looking for hunters or clues. She had to trust the witches.

In normal situations, a less aggressive Cloak of Night, A Face in the Crowd, would be the better choice, saving on vitae while also preventing anyone from noticing the Kindred, as long as other people were around. Not being recognized wasn't good enough for this situation.

It was an abandoned home, as far as she could tell. Everything was worn down, covered in dust, needed repair or painting, and from the smell, no one was living here. A perfect place for hunters to squat. She pulled out her pistol and kept it in her good hand, and held her small sword in her off hand, as she followed the other

Kindred around the home. There was another odor here too; more than just an empty house.

First, they checked upstairs. A small bathroom and three small bedrooms. Nothing. Next they checked the living room and kitchen, but they'd already passed through them, and a second glance found nothing. That left the basement, which they'd all assumed would be the place, but it never hurt to be thorough. And, as they approached the basement, the unidentified odor grew.

Othello pointed down at the floor by the basement door. The dust and dirt was disturbed, tracing an outline of how the door would open, if someone had opened it. Jackpot.

Triss nodded to the large man, and with locked eyes, Othello slid the door open. Darkness awaited, except not as dark as the building's main floors. Light had a habit of doing that, of creating gentle illumination with no source, when it was bouncing around walls. And if there was a gentle, subtle illumination in the basement, that meant someone had a light turned on somewhere down there. Or light was coming in through some basement window, a street light maybe.

No, it wasn't a street light. It had an amber hue, like fire. Maybe someone was having a party? No, there wasn't any noise. And the sliver of light that reached the basement was so small, Tash was sure it was bouncing through other hallways to reach the basement they peered into. Maybe someone was running some sort of drug operation, and had another basement built, connected? Maybe. But there was something about the place, something heavy, and quiet, like liquid shadow you could drown in. She felt it, her partners felt it, and that was enough reason to assume the worst.

Othello went first, with Triss behind him, then Aaron, then Natasha, then Jennifer. The only one who bothered with weapons were Natasha and Jennifer. In the Invictus, everyone used weapons

to some extent or another, but the witches were all comfortable killing with their bare hands; except Jen, who was young, and a Ventrue besides. The only weapon she had was a knife though, hidden on her belt underneath the open shirt. Not a good choice for a Ventrue, but better than nothing.

The basement was predictable, as far as basements went. No windows, concrete walls with no effort to make them pretty, damp cracks caught reflections of the scattered, subtle amber light, and Tash was sure she caught a glimpse of a centipede creeping along. She managed a small grin at that. When she was human, a centipede would have been enough to get her screaming. Now? Kindred and predators had a strange connection, even insect predators. But a centipede wasn't a rat or a crow or a coyote. If Aaron or Jen could use it to see what was ahead, neither of them tried. So, they continued along, into the basement room.

It was empty. Very empty. Too empty. Tash expected maybe some old boxes, or a ruined couch, or some wood palettes or crates, or something, anything. But, no, the basement was completely empty, except for a bookcase. The amber light was coming from behind it, faint against where the wood met the concrete. Beatrice and Aaron wasted no time, each taking an end of it, lifting, and moving it aside.

Another tunnel, and it seemed to go down. That didn't make sense from any blueprint for a building in Dolareido, not in Devil's Corner, but it was the source of the amber light.

The vampires moved closer. Upon closer inspection, it seemed like the hole was manually dug into the wall, as if someone had sliced it open and then got to digging. But that sort of work was loud, and it would have filled the basement up with a mess of dirt. Maybe that's why it was devoid of any objects? Someone may have done just that, and cleaned it up. Well, whatever the methodology they used, it didn't change that there was a hole in the wall tall



enough for them to walk into, and there was a gentle amber glow coming from within.

They followed the same formation, Othello ahead with Triss by him, then Aaron, while Tash and Jen stuck to the rear. And as they followed the curving tunnel, everyone was deadly quiet. No one fake breathed. No one landed on their heel. No one stood straight, crouching instead. Everyone let a bit of their animal instinct to the surface, the part of them that knew how to stick to shadows, move silently, and listen intently.

There was quiet murmuring in the deep, from beyond the twisting, curving tunnel. Tash raised her lip in a hidden sneer, and looked around at the dirt that surrounded them. Someone was down here, in this homemade tunnel? This wasn't a safe tunnel. Without support beams and going deeper, the ceiling of this tunnel was liable to—become soft, and warm, and wet?

Everyone froze as the walls were no longer dirt, but flesh. Flesh. There was no getting around it, no other way for her mind to think of it, no trick of the eye or fancy painting on the walls. It was flesh. She touched it, and sure enough, bits of blood coated her fingertips. Muscle and skin, sinew, tendons, and even some bones lined the walls, curved, unnatural. It was all unnatural, but the bones that lined it weren't from any creature. It was the tunnel's bones, complete with a spinal cord above, and ribs all around.

It was like they were inside a snake, except even a snake's guts didn't look like this, with the bones poking out showing through, with skin taut against them, connecting to their sides, and with slivers of pulsating muscle between bits of torn skin. And it was pulsating, like a heart might. A giant, slow, steady heart.

She'd heard you could walk into a blue whale's heart, that it was big enough to move around in. How fucked up and big a creature would it need to be for this monstrosity?

They continued to creep forward, and Tash poured every ounce of effort she had into keeping them invisible. A very loud thought kept pulsing, that they should turn around and leave, or maybe one of them should. And, maybe, they really should do just that. But they'd discovered a golden opportunity, and might need every one of them there to keep them alive.

Just a little deeper, just enough to get some sort of knowledge about what was going on, and they could turn around and report back. Running away and reporting back a 'flesh tunnel' wasn't really enough information to act on. And, if they left, there was a very real chance the tunnel wouldn't exist the next night. They needed to learn something valuable, anything.

Tash wasn't so stupid as to not have measures in place for something like this. Before entering the tunnel, she ran the 'Unexpected Encounter' app on her phone. It'd ping the Prince, and tell her where Tash was. If worse came to worse, someone would eventually show up and investigate. Maybe they'd be coming to scoop up some vampire ashes, but at least someone would come.

It was like a horror movie script. Anyone with a brain would just turn around, and leave before they traveled any deeper into what was obviously a dangerous situation. But they couldn't. They needed to learn something, and splitting up was too dangerous. It was infuriating, being forced to pick between two stupid decisions, and Tash ground her teeth until her ears hurt. It may have been a witch's tactic, to do everything on the fly, or off the cuff, but the Invictus and Dragon in her very much wanted to pull out a notepad and start creating a proper plan.

Predictably, the witches showed no sign of stopping. They knew the risks, had calculated it no doubt, but, like her, knew the best option was to press on, and learn more.

The murmuring got louder. It wasn't English, and it wasn't being said by one person. It didn't sound like it was being said by people at all. It was deep and rolling, with a resonance and vibration quality that reminded Tash of throat singing monks. Flesh was a good absorber of sound, and shouldn't have echoed or resonated with the odd voices, but it did, and it became terribly obvious as the vampires got closer, that the murmuring was some sort of chant.

Louder, and louder. Everyone crouched low, until eventually people were using their fingertips against the floor to move as silent as possible. The floor was flesh, and ribs, and shallow blood. She was tempted to taste it; what vampire wouldn't be? But, no, better to not taste the blood that dripped from the walls and pooled on the tunnel path of alien muscle and skin. Vampires were immune to disease and poison, but that probably didn't apply to magical or alien things.

Tash bit her lip, and stared on as the tunnel grew larger, widened, and eventually opened up into a room. Room wasn't a strong enough word. Chamber? Whatever it was, it was massive, and it was inhuman. A hundred feet wide, but a hundred feet tall as well. The ribs were gone, and instead, giant pillars of bone lined the walls of the more square room, compared to the round tunnel they'd emerged from. The source of the amber light was clear now. Dangling amber crystals attached to ropes hung from the flesh ceiling, and they glowed.

No, wait, not ropes. Chains. The chains, dangling, swayed gently, occasionally clinking against each other, except the clink sounds were deadened by the sounds of flesh. On the chains, were body parts, attached by meat hooks. Torsos, arms, legs, fresh body parts with skin torn open and bones jammed or tied into the chains, dangled. And as Tash looked closer, she realized the fleshy walls of the chamber had bits of human flesh tied to it, flayed, spread, and hooked to it. Tapestries of skin were stretched taut over metal hooks, latched and secured to the alien flesh of the chamber.

If they hadn't been vampires, the five of them would be vomiting.

The source of the chanting was clear now, too. In the giant chamber, against the back wall, was Elen. She was in her wheelchair, with the respirator machine making sure she had easy access to oxygen. There were a few others standing around, hunters, and they were managing various IV tubes that were ... connected to the wall. And it wasn't the hunters doing the chanting, it was the faces on the wall.

Faces. On the walls. Perfect, smooth, pink fleshy faces, all with eyes closed, all with immaculate teeth, and all chanting the alien language. Not Latin, or any other old language Tash might have recognized, but it was definitely a language. But, the language aspect was less interesting than the fact there were a hundred faces on a wall of flesh, singing. What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck. Was it their blood, in the tubes being fed into Elen's veins? Had to be.

There was someone kneeling at Elen's feet. During all this, Elen wasn't simply sitting there. She was leaning forward, with a scalpel in her hand, and she was making marks on a shirtless man's back. A white guy, dark hair buzzed short, average height, with a lean figure of muscle.

Did they walk into a nightmare? Were they inside some chamber of dreams and fear, where the Begotten lived? It was the only possible explanation for the walls of flesh and bone. But, Begotten didn't just randomly open their chambers, connect them to the physical world, for no reason. And as far as she knew from Fiona, Begotten could open and close their chambers into any place where they'd been, but the place also had to share resonance with the chamber. There was no reason to keep a chamber open, when they could open and close it at will.

Which meant, either a Begotten had opened their chamber preemptively, expecting someone to be coming or going, or this wasn't a Begotten's chamber. She dearly wished it was. Walls of bleeding skin, flexing tendons, tightening and relaxing, and enormous muscle fibers surrounded them. It was the stuff of nightmares. The pieces of corpses used to decorate were almost tacky in comparison.

The faces on the walls, in their perfect symmetry, kept their eyes closed, and continued to chant. What Natasha would do to know what they were saying. Just knowing what language they were speaking would have been a tantalizing drop of honey on her intellectual curiosity. And why, why flesh? Why was everything made of flesh?

Wait. One of the hunters. Tash had seen that hunter get cut open by a werewolf, in the nightmare world. If this shaman could heal the hunters, that made everything so much more problematic.

Elen sighed, leaned back, and spent some time rotating her wrist, in pain from the exertion of carving into a man's back. Frail as thin glass. Capturing this woman alive would be difficult.

"Sándor, if you would stop healing so quickly, I wouldn't need to do this so often," she said.

"My apologies, master," the Begotten said.

All five vampires froze, tension drawn tight until it threatened to snap. Not in a chamber, then, if that was Sándor; he'd be in his gargoyle form otherwise. Unless there was a way for a Begotten to remain in their human form when inside nightmares? Maybe, but from what she'd seen from the others, and what they'd said, it seemed to be expected they be in their horror form when in dreamland.

“No matter. We will do this, again, and again, and again, until Azamel is ruined.”

“Yes, master.”

“And when that day comes, Sándor, you need to pay closer attention. Jeremiah and Angela both nearly died, and if I have to sew them back up again, I’ll take it out of your hide.”

“Yes, master.”

One too many masters. This Begotten was being controlled! Tash managed to poke Triss in the side, and blink several times at her, emphasizing as best she could. The Nos nodded, and mouthed ‘controlled’ slowly. Ok, good, communication. Tash returned the nod, and frowned as she looked out to the room with dangling, amber crystals. If she could see what Elen was doing to Sándor’s back, what she was carving or writing, maybe she’d get some idea about what to do about it.

Or, maybe the five of them should just run in there and kick some ass? There weren’t many hunters, and it wasn’t like hunters could take a vampire at close range. The undead would win this fight, if there weren’t any surprises.

Tash nodded forward, and the five of them pushed out a little more.

They crept forward, everyone low, everyone deathly silent, and moved to a pile of flesh, a mound of it that came out of the red blood like a tumor. It’d be better if they split up, but Tash needed them close if she wanted to make sure they were invisible. And she was getting tired. Vitae, draining more and more with every moment, demanding she replenish it, or at least stop acting like a super hero and keeping a squadron of people invisible.

They were way too deep in this for this to become a problem now. And, with decades of Invictus practice under her belt, she wasn't about to let her discipline break when she needed it most. She grit her teeth, and bore it. They moved in deeper, moving to another pulsating nodule of flesh. Not big enough to hide all of them, Jennifer stayed a bit further back, but still near, finding a big rib bone to stand behind.

This was all so very possibly a trap. Did the vampires find the hunters unawares, or were they hoping to be found? Tash tried to reason through it, but the more she thought about it, the more it seemed like good luck. There was no way Elen would leave herself this exposed on purpose, or have Sándor in such a compromising position.

Compromising position. undefended, and unguarded. She could shoot him. She ... could shoot him! If she got him in the head, he'd die. Maybe it'd make up for not landing the shot, and killing Angela or Jeremiah when she tried. There were a lot of those weird, dangling amber crystals in the way though, and she was already strained trying to keep everyone wrapped in the Cloak of Night. But, if she could get a little closer, and line up a shot, she could kill him, and put a huge dent in the tools available to these hunters.

Except, watching Sándor kneel there, eyes empty, staring at the bloody floor of skin and muscle he knelt on, it was clear that he was being controlled somehow. His face was a blank slate. Tash had seen faces like that before, whenever Julias mind controlled some kine; or Viktor, on the rare occasion Natasha got to see that. And she couldn't shoot a man who was a slave, a mind-controlled slave.

"Here." One of the faces on the wall opened their eyes. Black eyes, completely black eyes.

"Here." Another one of the faces opened their eyes. Oh no.

"Here!"

“Someone’s here.”

“Here.”

“Here.”

Elen started coughing, wheezing, a ragged sound of tearing throat and exhaustion, all caught in the mask she wore. The hunters around her brought up their guns, and started scanning, one of them focusing on removing the tubes and needles from the old woman.

Triss looked back, and groaned, nodding toward the entrance they came from. The pathway closed off, like a constricting ring of muscle. They may as well have been inside a stomach.

Shit.

Sándor got up, leaned his head left and right, earning some loud cracks, and started walking toward them. He may not have been able to transform, but Tash could see the subtle silhouette of the gargantuan gargoyle creature around him.

Double shit.



~~Eric~~

Three vampires, and one fresh werewolf, in a brawl with six vampires, and one experienced werewolf. Shit.

Caleb came for him again, and Eric sidestepped the punch. He returned it with his own, and unlike Caleb, he knew how to skim the line. Whoever this guy was, he wasn’t a professional fighter, and didn’t know how to move by inches. His motions were exaggerated, when they didn’t need to be. His punches would hurt like hell if they got him, but now that Eric was paying attention to him and



only him, it was clear to see the man was not trained. He was, on the other hand, a brawler, a man who'd learned how to fight the hard way. If he managed to land a punch, it was going to hurt, more than Eric's would.

Much as fighters like to say otherwise, there was one undeniable fact about fighting that always made fighters uncomfortable: size mattered. It didn't matter if you were Bruce Lee, you were helpless against a two-hundred and fifty pound brawler. And Caleb did have a few pounds on him, a few inches of reach, and height. He'd be in a higher weight class, if this was a proper fight. Getting hit was to be avoided at all costs.

But, playing by ring rules wasn't required either. And to a professional fighter, there were dozens of dirty tricks they weren't allowed to use, that were suddenly on the menu.

Eric ducked in close, too close to get punched, and with his fists brought in to protect his face, raised his elbow and threw it out in a swing. Crack. The satisfying sensation of elbow bone whacking someone in their head. The dirty play came in when, as Caleb stumbled back, Eric struck out the same arm, grabbed the man's short hair, and yanked downward. Having knocked the man off balance meant a good, quality hair pull drove him into the asphalt. He'd only be on his side for a second, but that was plenty of time for Eric to kick the man in his head, hard enough to half spin him horizontal along the street.

Who knew fighting dirty came so naturally to him. Well, they did come at him with a knife. Fighting fair wasn't in the cards anyway.

The others weren't doing so well. Two of the female vampires had jumped Hella, and they were punching her. Joe and another female vampire were circling Jessy, and Jonah had his back to a wall as the two new male vampires came in closer. The Carthians were all

street punks with outdated fashion sense, and it made the whole situation look like a Michael Jackson music video. Just beat it.

Eric reached down, grabbed Debby off of Hella, and threw her. To throw someone, get them airborne, was exhilarating. As a human, he'd never fought someone much lighter than him, and never with this much strength available. Debby was light, and he was a colossus in this form. She flew twenty feet before she started rolling. While she was airborne, Eric sank his heel into Kathy's head, hard enough to send her rolling as well.

These vampires were idiots. Picked a fight at the worse time, and they fought like idiot punks. Their movements were powerful and fast, but predictable, and when the two vampires harassing Jonah turned around to swing at him, it was easy to duck underneath, and nail them both in the chest, a fist for each.

If there was one god damn thing, one thing in this fucking world he was good at, it was a fist fight. These Carthians didn't know that. All the better for him.

One of the vamps he punched crumbled, clutching their chest, at least one broken rib. The other was far more durable. He stood up, glared at Eric, and sneered.

“Sit.”

Every ounce of Eric's being, every bit of rage, every bit of frustration and carnage in him wanted to punch this fucker in the face hard enough to collapse it. But, he didn't. He couldn't. As his eyes met this stranger's, a wall crashed into Eric's mind. A steel wall. He couldn't get around it, see through it, stop it, nothing. A wall of total, immutable will smashed into him.

This was a Ventrue, ordering him around.

He almost did sit, too, but Jonah punched the man in the back of the head hard enough to send him careening over. Crack, face to the asphalt. As the ability to think, and move his limbs, came back to him in a rush of glorious freedom, he used it. With a snarl and growl, Eric drove the hard toe of his shoe in the fucker's head, hard enough it jerked to the side fast enough to tear ligaments. Potentially lethal, to a human. A vampire would heal, eventually.

Joe and his friend had jumped Jessy, and had started punching her back and forth. That was strange. Jessy was stronger than this Joe, Eric's instincts could see that, and the woman with Joe seemed only as strong as him. Two on one, but Jessy could have fought back, if she went psycho like she did on the monster gargoyle thing. She was holding back.

He came up behind Joe, growling, and kicked the man in the back. Joe went with the motion, falling forward, but tucking into a roll. Maybe the man was more dangerous than he let on.

Jessy turned her attention to Joe's friend, and jumped her, punching, grabbing, slamming. Perfect time for Eric to deal with this Joe fucker, and—

A shoulder smashed into Eric's back. Flashbacks of high school football, except, without the shoulder pad. Eric went down, hands slamming into the street and skin tearing against the asphalt and small rocks. Ow. Groaning, Eric looked at his palms and the trail of blood they'd made a couple feet on the street, before he turned over his shoulder to growl at the man. This fight was pointless, and they were all wasting time while simultaneously exposing themselves to interference. But, fuck it.

Eric tried to turn over completely, but Caleb was on him; except the man obviously didn't know shit about grappling. Getting his arm was easy. Getting a leg around his neck, and the other around his waist, almost as easy. Eric pinned the man's hand to Eric's chest,

and twisted as he locked the man in an arm bar. And unless Caleb wanted his shoulder to dislocate, or elbow to bend ninety degrees in the wrong direction, he had no choice but to move with the grapple. A second later, he was on his back on the street, perpendicular to Eric, his torso underneath Eric's legs, and his arm up along Eric's waist and chest where Eric held it locked.

Of all the martial arts in the world, there were only two he ever worried about. Boxing, and Jiu Jitsu. So of course, those were the two he learned.

“We didn't come here looking for a fight!” Eric yelled, while giving his body enough of an arch to earn a groan of pain from the pinned man. It wouldn't take much to destroy his arm, and sure, the man would heal from it, but that didn't change that getting an elbow bent in the wrong direction was a horrible feeling.

Caleb snarled at him, and tried to sit up. Eric wasn't having it. Didn't the fucker know anything about fighting? Eric locked his grip like steel on the man's forearm and wrist, and arched his back again, forcing his abs up into the man's elbow.

“Fuck you,” Caleb said. “You're just young blood, overstepping your boundaries. A pup like you is going to get people hurt in your ignorance.”

“Because I fucking talked to a spirit?”

“Because you fucking talked to a spirit. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but it'll happen.”

“I'm willing to talk to Avery, you stupid fuck. Been kind of busy lately, and—” The tap tap of a sprinting set of sneakers forced his attention back to the Kindred he'd taken out in his drive-by. Eric let go of Caleb's arm, and rolled away, crunching over his shoulder and the back of his neck as he rolled backward. Minor damage caused by his weight, and it healed almost instantly as he got back to his feet.

Caleb, still on the ground, grabbed his ankle, and threw him.

Getting thrown was an interesting sensation. For the first moment, his stomach hit the wall of his insides, giving him that roller coaster sensation. Once it caught up to him, he found his bearings enough to realize he was actually flying through the air like a Frisbee, far enough that he'd probably go thirty feet before landing. Problem: he was flying toward a building. With the spinning and the speed of it all, the best Eric could do was pull in his limbs, and pray for a minimal amount of cuts, as he slammed into a window.

It shattered around him, and the downward momentum gravity grabbed him with meant a few more points of the sharp glass cut into his skin than he'd like. Worse was the way the inside of the building greeted him with a lovely, hard slap of tile to the ass. And bouncing, especially in his new, heavier body, was not fun either. Also not fun, was how a set of metal stairs stopped him, his back slamming into it, butt to the floor. Each step was a hard edge punching him in his spine, and he yelled pain as white fire danced up and down his back.

Groaning, he got up, one hand reaching for the stairway railing beside him, other against the wall. Where was he? No signs inside, but it was some sort of office building, with short cubicles and computers within, office chairs, desks covered in random crap, and a high ceiling with warehouse metal bars above. Some company had re-purposed an old warehouse into an office building then.

No one else was inside the building, no noises or fresh scents were present. The stairs beside him led up to an overhang room, where a manager probably watched his workers from the window during the day. Ugh.

Debby and Kathy were the first to jump into the room after him, snarling and growling, like small monsters. Kathy still had her

knife, as well. He supposed he should have been happy it wasn't silver.

“What will it take for you to back off?” he said, slowly backing up as they approached.

Kathy returned his snarls, and passed a knife from hand to hand. “You're an Invictus lapdog, literally. So, we'll back off, when we've taught you a lesson. You don't work for them, you stop working for them, and you never work for them.”

Debby nodded, and grinned as she rotated her shoulder. “And of course, since you're fucking that bitch Jessy, we know we're going to have to pound some sense into you.”

He backed up again, back pressing to one of the short cubicle walls. They thought he was retreating. He was setting up his spacing.

Kathy came at him with the knife again, relying on her inhuman speed. Fast. He sidestepped, and her knife grazed along his chest as it slipped by. Her speed was used to cover a few feet, but he only had to move six inches to the side with a twist to keep from getting stabbed, stopping on the outside of her arm. And from there, it was easy to grab her wrist with one hand, and slam his palm into the elbow with the other. Quick, sudden movements, with impact.

He remembered a story once, about training by punching rain drops. Power, speed, direct, instant, stable. These Carthians didn't know how to fight like that, but he did, and he growled at the woman as he destroyed her elbow, bending it ninety degrees the wrong way. Before she could fall, he kicked down at her knee from the side, and with his new strength, it was easy to cave it in, dislocating the knee cap and tearing ligaments in the joint. She fell, howling, screaming, and roaring.

He had to give it to her, she didn't let pain break her. If she was strong enough to heal the damage, she'd be at him again without hesitation. But, if she was a Mekhet like he figured, she wouldn't be healing that—

Debby tackled him. It was laughable how small she was compared to him, especially now, but she anchored herself to the ground, and tackled upward. Vampire legs pushed her up into him like a freight train, and he rose ten feet in the high-ceiling building, before he crashed down on the tile floor. She full mounted him, and started punching, hammering her fists down. But without momentum to give her inertia, she was too light to keep the position, and he landed a single punch in her shoulder at the side to force her sideways off of him.

His turn. As she got up, he threw his weight at her, and drove his shoulder into her chest, while grabbing her thighs so she couldn't touch the floor, picking her up. Anyone else would have had the wind knocked out of them, but the vampire slammed her fists down on his back. The single second was enough for her to hit him thrice, before her back crashed into one of the cubicles. He was bulldozing forward, and with his new weight and hers combined, they broke through it, through the desk, the monitor on it, and through the next cubicle over, before he forced his shoulders down to slam her back against the next desk.

“F ... fuck you,” she said from underneath him. “Invictus dog. Just another tit sucking st—”

He punched her in the face, drove his knuckles down against her mouth hard enough to knock half her teeth out, and earn a shriek of agony. She clutched her jaw and mouth and started rolling from side to side, staring at him for two seconds with total hatred, before her eyes closed as she rolled in pain. Maybe vampires were sensitive to having their fangs punched in? Good to know.

He got up, turned around, and groaned, as Caleb climbed over the windowsill to join them.

“You’re good,” he said. “Haven’t seen anyone fight like that in a long time.”

Eric spit blood to the floor, and faced the man as he brought his fists up, elbows up. “Uratha all fight like you? You’re just untrained thugs.”

Caleb roared at him, and took another step toward him. And began to grow. His steps became heavy, until Eric felt the vibration of weight. His clothes disappeared, fading into his body as fur began to overwhelm him. His shoulders exploded in size, doubling, tripling, quadrupling in mass as Caleb’s head leaned forward, new body haunched, with colossal arms of pure muscle hanging. A red tint came through the fur, hints of it, highlighting the waves of short gray.

His steps were no longer in boots, but enormous claws, and each step forced the claws an inch into the tile. The titan stared up at him, nine feet tall, and rumbled a growl deep in his chest, causing the room to vibrate, and for Eric to shiver in kind. Caleb sniffed, no doubt catching Eric’s scent with a renewed hunger. His mouth was open a little, enough for his breathing to be audible, slow, deep, no thought given to being quiet. The hulking beast took another step forward, and Eric noticed a small tail swish behind him, before his eyes were drawn back to his gigantic size, the barrel chest and python arms, and their huge claws.

“Change,” Caleb said. “I am ... curious.” He struggled to enunciate, big tongue fighting to create syllables against the contours of his long snout and sharp teeth. “If you ... are Ghost Wolf, then I ... will test you.”

Eric gulped, and stepped back again before inching to the side to put a couple cubicles between him and the werewolf. “I—”



A rush of blood flowed up into Eric's chest, and he stumbled back a step as he clutched at his sternum, fingers digging into his shirt. His heart rate skyrocketed, and his breathing became quickened pants. He tried to breathe, to slow it down, but his body wasn't listening. His pulse drummed in his ears, like a quartet pounding on a set of drums in a tribal rhythm. Dum dum. Dum dum. Dum dum.

"You feel, don't you?" Caleb said, stepping in closer. "Feel the call. The madness." Closer the beast came, and Eric fell back onto his ass as he stared up at the werewolf. "It sings. It beckons. The hunt beckons."

Eric gulped and forced himself back onto his feet, only to find himself standing a single foot from the Uratha. Caleb towered over him, buried him underneath his mass, and a drop of drool fell from his chops onto the office building floor. If the man wanted to kill him, he could have done so. He was waiting, and hard as it was to read a wolf's expression, it looked like he was smiling.

"Change."

"I ... I won't. I'm not trying to kill you."

"Need not kill. Blood. No kill. Besides." He leaned down, and brought his teeth within inches of Eric's face. "You fuck vampire, in this sacred form. You can control it. Fight me, and I will test. Come."

It was a drug pumping through his veins. It was a siren's song, beckoning him. It was power and hunger surging up through his body and into his extremities, demanding satisfaction. Something about being near this creature, a fellow werewolf in his most grand form, was calling to Eric. Join in. Change. Transform. Unleash the beast of war within.

Eric lowered his head, but all he found were enormous talons beneath him, Caleb's. He remembered those talons, remembered the feel of them sinking into wood, tile, concrete, and stone under

his weight. He looked higher, to the fellow werewolf's claws, and the enormous hands. They were hands he'd wrapped around Jessy, and had delighted in taking her small body, and pulling her down onto his length, forcing it into a hole far too small for it. He also remembered grabbing hunters, tossing them aside like pebbles. He remembered Pitt, barely, flashes and images of tearing him and his goons apart. He looked higher, and winced as he found Caleb's teeth closer, two inches from Eric's eyes. He remembered biting into people, and how satisfying it'd been to split flesh and crunch bone between his jaws. It was more than satisfaction, it was a requirement, a piece of him that demanded he indulge it. To bite, and tear, and hunt, and kill, were no more different than a spider weaving a web. Pure instinct.

He gave into instinct.

Caleb stepped back and gave him room, a strange, inhuman, knowing smile on his snout, as Eric grew to match his height. Eric's fur was darker, almost night black, but other than that, there were few differences between him and his fellow wolf. Titans of muscle and strength, tall, nine feet high, and with long arms that reached their knees since they were haunched forward. Their enormous necks jutted forward from mountainous shoulders, and they pointed their ears at each other as they both offered acknowledging rumbles.

"You fuck vampire, like this?" Caleb said, and reached out with his two hands to push against Eric's shoulders. He might as well have lit a hidden river of gasoline in Eric's gut, with the way a simple shove ignited a feral drive in him. If he was trying to make a point, about how easy it was to go insane with rage in this form, he'd made it.

No longer was Eric forced to obey mass and inertia without a way to fight back. His talons gripped into the floor, and he shoved back

against Caleb, harder. His fellow wolf had no choice but to step back, or he'd fall over.

Eric focused on his breathing, and made sure every one went deep into his belly. Breathe. Easier said than done. Seeing another werewolf in the Gauru form was wind fueling the fire in his chest, warm, inviting, and intoxicating. It spoke in words that called to him, delicious and almost erotic. Hunt. Find prey. Kill prey. Devour. Land. Territory. Defend. But, it wasn't taking him over, not yet.

He thought of Jessy, of her naked body pressed against his fur. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, enjoying the memory of her, of her voice, of her animal ferocity. This Caleb fucker wanted to see just how comfortable he was in this form, how comfortable he was as an Uratha, he guessed. How comfortable was he? The Uratha thought he was crazy for having sex in this form. He kind of did, too.

"The moon," Eric said, taking a step toward Caleb, offering a snarl, "it says I ... that ... I—"

Caleb roared at him, and began to circle him, as best as he could in the small space available to the titans. "Luna speaks to you?"

"It does." He returned the roar, quick, more of a bark than anything. Debby and Kathy had crawled away, and both vampires were watching now, eyes wide, butts to the floor and weight on their palms behind them. Out of the way enough so they wouldn't get ripped in half accidentally. Hopefully.

"It? She, worm. She ... speaks to Cahalith, in visions." Caleb paced to the other side, and dragged a claw along the cubicle, causing the soft wall to crumble downward under the casual weight and pressure. "Why speak to you?"

"I am Cahalith." He snarled, and came in a little closer. "She warns me."

“You have no right ... to speak to Luna, Ghost Wolf.”

That offended Eric. He didn't know why it offended him, but it did. It burned his skin, and heated it, heated his throat and core, sending blood and adrenaline pulsing. He demanded satisfaction.

“I am me. I am myself.” He crouched, readying his pounce. This was going to be a duel between monsters, and that deserved a little respect, at least. No sucker punches.

Caleb did the same, rumbling in his chest as he did. “We shall see.”

They both roared at each other, and the two vampires watching were forced to cover their ears as the vibrations of animal sounds filled the office building. This bastard used the Invictus and Carthian squabble as an excuse to put Eric to the test. Well, fuck him.

They pounced at each other, and for a moment, Eric thought he pounced an oncoming truck. Eric tried to grab the man's hands, but Caleb slammed both hands downward with his claws out. A bad move for a human to do in a fight, but a great move to do if you're a werewolf with enormous claws. Two seconds into this fight and Eric already made a mistake, one Caleb predicted.

Claws tore through Eric's forearms, causing blood to gush and splatter everywhere, particularly over Caleb. He wasn't a vampire. His blood made no effort to stay inside his body. Instead, it gushed, the claw marks on his arms deep and slicing through veins and muscles alike. Eric's roars turned into howls, and Caleb snapped and barked twice, before lunging in, and sinking his teeth into Eric's neck.

Werewolves heal quickly. Muscles and veins mended, and as the skin sealed, Eric got one hand onto Caleb's shoulder, and tried to push him away. His other grabbed the man's jaw, and pulled down,

forcing pressure off the teeth tearing through his neck. When Caleb pulled away, Eric lifted his leg out to kick. His new body was not made for kicking. It didn't have the correct center of gravity, or the correct ... anything. Another mistake Caleb took advantage of, stepping back clear out of the range of the kick, and then he pounced forward, undoing the space Eric created.

Caleb's weight slammed into him again, and the beast wasted no time, getting into a full mount. But, unlike a human, Caleb didn't straddle and try and rain hammer fists down on him. Instead, the titan started tearing at his chest and shoulders with his claws, and leaned down to once again start biting at Eric. Thankfully, Eric managed to get his forearm in the way, jamming it under Caleb's neck, but the beast was still sitting on him, tearing into him, while Eric couldn't retaliate at all.

Stop letting your trained reflexes guide you. You're not human, you're a beast, a monster. Fight like one.

Eric roared, loud, loud enough it was deafening, and Caleb paused as the unnatural howl smashed into his person. Half a second, more than enough time for Eric to turn his head, and use the reach of his neck and snout, to sink his teeth around Caleb's wrist.

The taste of flesh was haunting and intoxicating. It was delicious. But this was the first time he'd tasted werewolf flesh, and he was not prepared for the overwhelming, overpowering, exquisite taste. If sin and vice had a flavor, it would be this.

Caleb ripped his arm away as he jumped back, leaving behind a chunk of flesh in Eric's mouth. He stared at Eric for a moment, and as Eric got up, Caleb shook his snout from side to side, dislodging bits of Eric's skin and flesh from his own teeth.

“Do not eat flesh. Not of kin, or of man. It will undo you.”

Eric, preparing to swallow down the enticing meal in his mouth, stared at Caleb, and froze. He wanted to swallow it down. God, every part of him wanted to swallow it down, devour, feast on the flesh of someone as powerful as Caleb. But Caleb wasn't tricking him. The man had not swallowed Eric's flesh, and the weight of his voice sounded like a man trying to be calm and serious. Being a werewolf, Eric doubted Caleb would be able to tell convincing lies in the Gauru form. It was a mode of pure, honest aggression and desire, not subtlety and suave words.

He could trust this beast, in this way. A laughable stereotype, that you can always trust the honesty of the fist, but it applied. Eric let the meat flop from his mouth, and it melted into a small pool of blood, with a couple bits of skin. Of course, no werewolf part would stay werewolf once removed. But, for that moment, before it changed back to human, there was a chance Eric could have eaten it.

It tasted divine, ambrosia, but he shook his head until his own saliva washed the bastard's blood away.

"Good," Caleb said, growling an almost pleased sound, before he resumed crouching, ready to pounce at him. He didn't come at him though. Instead, the colossal beast crouched lower, and moved toward a shadow, toward the rest of the remaining cubicles. "We are not mindless. We are in control." His voice blended to the shadow, fading throughout the office building and its high ceilings.

Eric could no longer see him. He was gone.

Growling all the more, Eric started to prowl around, goliath hands resting on cubicles as he began the hunt. Another word drifted through his mind, describing this Caleb, labeling him. Irraka. Sneaky creatures. Assassins in the world of wolves. Irraka would come at him from the side or behind, go for the hamstrings, try and wound him before going in for the kill.

No, he wouldn't go for the kill. For all the aggression and violence the two of them were swimming in, Caleb didn't want to kill him, only test him. That didn't mean the man wouldn't bring him close to it, though. And the man made it clear he was more comfortable fighting in the Gauru form than Eric was.

The instinct was there, but as long as Eric didn't let the rage and hunger inside him overwhelm him, as long as he kept breathing, that instinct was on a leash. That wasn't helping him. Keeping it on a leash meant his human reflexes and training were getting in the way. That's what Caleb was testing, to see how Eric could control himself when shit hit the fan, and someone was trying to tear out his throat.

Rumbling, Eric continued to circle around, slowly walking about and through the office building, between the cubicles, each step slow, no longer sinking his foot claws into the tile. Carefully, slowly, he moved around, and stopped as he came to stand beside the two vampires. They'd both backed up against the wall, and were staring, sitting, jaws dropped, eyes on him.

He crouched down beside them, and rumbled in his throat, like a crocodile. They both squeaked, and their eyes drifted down his body, his mass, before up to his mouth and the massive teeth. They were still injured, and weren't healing anymore. Either they were tapped, and wouldn't be healing without a fresh meal or a day's sleep, or they were too shocked to do anything other than stare. Probably both, by the looks in their eyes.

"Picked a fight," he said, and he rumbled another growl at them. So damn hard to talk with a snout.

Debby managed to find a little resilience, and snarled back at him. A chihuahua barking at the tiger. "Picked a fight with Jessy, because she deserves it."

He was so very tempted to pick up this tiny vampire, and use her as a club against Caleb. No, it wouldn't work. Far too fragile. With another snarl wiping the sneer off the vampire's face, he got up, and resumed his prowl, sniffing at the air. Caleb's scent trail. His scent was everywhere, but focusing on it into exact paths was his only chance of finding the bastard.

He sniffed the air, breathed deep its scent, and let the Beast in him surface; a little. His ears perked up and pointed about in different directions, catching the various sounds. The vampires were quiet, with no breathing or heartbeat. Outside the building, he could hear Jessy, Joe, and the others beat on each other. Hopefully they'd be fine. The Carthians still had four vampires out there, while Jessy only had Jonah and Hella with her. Then again, Jessy was the strongest vampire in the vicinity. She could take care of herself.

He continued along the scent, getting down onto all fours and lifting his nose with his slow steps. Further, through the warehouse building, between the cubicles. Further. He growled as he looked at the cubicles he past, his lower position half hiding his body between their walls. He could smell humans, the scent they left on their chairs and desks, their perfumes, their plants, and their computers; and some alcohol. No Caleb, though.

Wait, there he was, his scent. His nose followed it between the cubicles through the shadow, his mind painting an image of the scent trail before him, like guiding lines in hospital hallways. Vivid, distinct, and blatant in the darkness. He followed it, staying low, though considering his new shoulder span, he had to be careful to not knock over cubicles as he hunted his fellow werewolf.

Movement. Caleb charged at him, dashing from the side, between some of the short, soft walls. Fast! Holy shit. Eric jumped up and away, and the titan blurred into the shadows as he ran past him, biting at the air where Eric's head had been.



And then he was gone, fading into the shadows again. Growling, frustrated, angry, Eric haunched forward but stayed on two legs as he started following the trail Caleb left for him. The bastard was luring him, no doubt, maybe looking for Eric to catch him. Maybe—

Weight crashed into Eric's back. The fucker jumped him, sank claws into his shoulders, and sank teeth into the back of his neck. Roars filled the room, animal and alien, as Eric stood up and unleashed his rage. Caleb hadn't gone for his hamstrings, like he should have. He went for Eric's back, his body, whole mass. Maybe he wanted to pin him, defeat him swiftly, instead of drag the fight on like an Irraka should?

Mistake.

Eric reached up, high and up over his head and Caleb's, and sank his claws into the man's back, through the tough, leathery skin, and into meat. The werewolf screamed and howled into Eric's bloodied neck, but didn't let go, jerking his head left and right, trying to rip chunks of flesh out of him. Eric leaned back, and then brought all of his weight forward, as he pulled on Caleb's flesh, and threw.

Caleb turned upside down, lost his grip, and careened through the air. His back smashed into a wall of concrete between two windows, before he crashed to the floor. Blood was everywhere. It painted them, coated them, splattered the area, and rained down on the cubicles and desks. None of that mattered. All that mattered, was attacking when the opportunity presented itself. Now.

Eric charged forward. Caleb had time to stand up, but that was all he had time for, as Eric crashed into him. Not a pounce, but a full charge, each step gripping into the floor and tearing it to shreds, anchoring him and fueling his momentum. It was more than enough to drive the hundreds and hundreds of pounds of muscle his new body had, into Caleb, through the wall, and into the street.

Shit.

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~~Jack~~

Back to the tunnels.

The visit to Azamel's had been useful, in a way. It was useful to get inside Jeremiah's head and understand him more, but it didn't lend a change in their sweep choice, no chance to their tactics. Jeremiah had a personal vendetta against Azamel, as Jack had suspected, and they now knew the man had used magic to extend his life. Elen's magic? Maybe. Jeremiah seemed like a healthy fifty-year-old, while Elen looked over a hundred. If she had the ability to prevent aging, why not use it on herself from a younger age? Maybe she only learned it in her later years, and had spent hundreds of years a very old woman.

Christ, that'd suck. It was why Kindred groomed a potential child before embracing them; you kept your physical body at the point of the embrace, except for what the Kindred body could heal. His scars on his stomach would never heal, because they were fresh and extreme at the time of his embrace, to the point they were more of a deformity than a simple wound, and the embrace kept physical differences like that. Spending eternity with a nasty problem like being overweight, underweight, or being old, would be horrible.

Old. His mom? No, she wasn't old, not yet. In her mid forties and in great shape, since she'd put her life together. Would the embrace undo the damage of the coma? The brain damage? Would—

He shook his head, and sighed. Stop thinking about it. Stop it. Stop it.

“Want to talk about it?” Clara said.

“What?”

“About whether you’ll embrace your mother.” She managed a small smile, but he could tell it was her trying to hide how much sadness she was feeling for him. It made him angry, for a moment, before he let it go. She was doing a better job of meeting his gaze than other people. Least he could do was not snap at her.

“Me? I can’t. I ... I could try, I guess. But, it’s very draining on a vampire to create a childe, very ... raw, on the soul.”

She frowned with a glance before looking ahead again. The rest of the crew was behind them, but could hear the conversation, no doubt. “I guess that’s why Kindred don’t spread like a virus in the cities where we’ve run into them. Not a fast virus, anyway.”

“Indeed,” Isabella said. “We invest a part of ourselves into our childer. It can take months, or even years to recover from it.”

A part of themselves. A piece of Julias was inside him, and Viktor, and whoever came before. He shivered, and forced down the nasty thoughts.

“I ... I don’t really want to ... to talk about it.” Sighing, he put his hands in his pockets, and lowered his head. He did want to talk about it, but not with them. Maybe with Julias, maybe with Antoinette, but for now, no.

“Just as well you cannot spread quickly,” Athalia said. “The planet doesn’t need a plague like that to deal with.”

Jack twitched, but kept walking. No, don’t escalate that argument. You have a job to do. Focus on that.

Gloria didn’t seem to agree. “Plague? Kindred are not a plague! We are what we choose to be. Unlike you.” Jack looked back to see Gloria glaring at Athalia, and flicking her wrist at her a few times.

Athalia snarled at her, a raspy hiss that earned a squeak from the Mekhet. “Don’t mistake Dolareido for most cities with a vampire presence. The nature of vampires is to spread, slowly but surely, and take over, while turning humans into livestock.”

Isabella stopped, stepped between Gloria and Athalia, and glared at her. “We do not. Kindred are forever balanced upon a knife’s edge, wrestling with our past, our new selves, and our connections. Unlike monsters such as you, we never make decisions carelessly.” Gloria might have been quiet, but Isabella was not.

“Careless?”

“You got pregnant, didn’t you? What business does a monster have getting pregnant?”

Athalia glared at the vampire, and ground her teeth hard enough everyone could hear it. “Don’t assume you understand my life, leech.”

“I’ve lived a lot longer than you, monster, and I have seen and spoken with hundreds, thousands of kine. I know more about life than you ever will. You are the definition of a poor mother.”

Everyone froze, and stared. Ok, that was harsh. That was very harsh. Not that everyone hadn’t been thinking it, but Jack tried to keep an open mind. Athalia gave her kid up to an orphanage when she realized she couldn’t control the circumstances her horror created. That was reasonable, wasn’t it?

Much as that’s how his mind arranged the thoughts, logically speaking, he knew the acid boiling in his guts had a different idea. As far as the venom he wanted to spit was concerned, Athalia was a bitch who deserved to suffer, because of her daughter. Jack hated himself for feeling that, but he did, and he did his best to put the illogical feelings aside.

“Ladies,” Clara said, “we’re not out here to fight each other. We’re supposed to be hunting.”

“Exactly.” Athalia walked past them all, and didn’t bother to dodge hitting Jack with her shoulder on the way past him. “I don’t have to explain my life to any of you.”

Jack glared daggers into the tall, dark-skinned woman’s back. Her long black hair bounced against her back as she marched forward. Images of grabbing her hair, and whipping her into the side of the tunnel danced through his mind. It’d be wrong, it’d be horrible, but just a taste of that revenge against Angela through her bitch of a mother would be great. Great, and disgusting. Sickening. You know it won’t help you, Jack, so let it go.

“I wonder,” Isabella said, “if Jack’s poor mother is indeed embraced, what will she do, when she learns her daughter’s been murdered, by your daughter.”

“Everyone is someone’s son or daughter,” Athalia said, rage only growing. “The fuck do you want from me, vampire?”

“I want some truth and effort on your part, monster.” With a shrug and sinister smile, Isabella slipped ahead of Athalia, stopping her, and began to circle her, her vampire tendencies showing through clear as night. Circling prey. “Mister Terry’s report on what happened in the gargoyle creature’s nightmare was ... forgiving, in how it described your interactions. But I know mothers. What did you say that prevented her death, hmm? What words did you use to save your daughter’s much desired execution?”

Jack was surprised Isabella got her hands on the full report. It was for council and Right Hands only. A good argument to be wary of using technology to record everything, he supposed. And it was true that he hadn’t explained in great detail the final moments of the fight, only that Jeremiah had shown up and saved Angela at the last moment. That Athalia had begged him to spare Angela at the

last moment? He didn't write that down, not in so many words anyway. Isabella was an ancilla vampire, smart, and had both the permission to access high level reports, and the intelligence to read between the lines.

No wonder she resented him for being picked as Right Hand over her.

“I'm trying to stop the hunters, my daughter included.”

“Will you kill your daughter?”

Jack already knew the answer to that question. Isabella wanted to know, though, and she had reason to. But god damn it, now was not the time to have this argument.

“No. I will detain her.”

Isabella scoffed, and folded her arms under her breasts. The corset under her jacket had, of course, made sure both breasts were high and bulging, and she kept the top few buttons of her jacket open so they were on display. When mixed with the ice cold gaze she was giving, it really made her look like a cruel mistress. She'd give Antoinette a run for her money, in presentation.

“You might detain her, but the rest of us will kill her the moment we get a chance.” Laughing, Isabella flicked her wrist, in a far more posh manner than Gloria had managed, and began walking again. “Or, perhaps, a Kindred will embrace her? What delightful revenge against a hunter, making them into the thing they hate.”

Isabella didn't get far before Athalia grabbed her shoulder and turned her around.

“Don't touch my daughter.”

“We’ll cross that bridge,” Clara said, “when we get to it. It’s pretty obvious she’s under Jeremiah’s influence, maybe Elen’s too. There’s no reason to think Angela is—”

“Angela is guilty,” Jack said. They all looked at him, but he kept his eyes on the tracks underneath them. “I’ve looked her in the eye, saw into her ... into her. She knew damn well what she was doing.”

Sighing, Athalia walked ahead of them, and ran a hand along the curving walls of the tunnels. “I can’t apologize for her, but I don’t want to kill her. She’s my daughter. I want to capture her, and show her—”

“Show her what?” Clara said, voice growing louder, far more than Jack expected from her. She’d been rather stable in this argument, and now suddenly not. Why? “Show her her mom’s a monster, but she shouldn’t be trying to kill you?”

“I—”

Clara stomped up to her, loud enough to make Athalia stop and turn to face her. “You’re going to get people killed on a fool’s mission, Athalia. Your daughter’s a hunter, and psychotic, like many of them are. Ever convince a hunter, ever, in your life to not hunt monsters? Werewolves and vampires, maybe. Maybe! Maybe, because there’s a connection to being human there. But monsters? A hunter looks at you and thinks they’ve found a literal incarnation of the thing that goes bump in the night.”

“That ... that is...” She didn’t have to say it, they all knew what she was going to say. ‘I am that incarnation’.

Jack found himself squeezing his hands into fists, until they stared to hurt. Literal monsters, they all were.

He remembered the thoughts he had, when he was trapped in that chair, being tortured. Athalia still had hope that there could be

communication between hunters and monsters; he didn't. There was no talking, no communicating, no bargaining with these people. Vampires, werewolves, and monsters, trying to be the good guys? No. No, fuck that. Fuck that, fuck them, fuck it all.

He turned around, and started walking in the other direction.

"Jack?" Clara said.

"I'm going home. Sweep's over."

"Mister Terry?" Gloria said.

He didn't look back, didn't check to see if anyone was following him. He heard Clara's footsteps for a moment, and he damn well knew if he looked back, she'd be holding a hand out, silently asking him to not go.

He left anyway.

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Mary's body hadn't started to decompose yet. It wouldn't, not for a little while, at least. The morgue was cool, and the metal cupboards they kept people in colder. And, he knew, corpses were cleaned and disinfected. It'd start to decompose eventually though, until someone embalmed it, and prepared it for a funeral.

Of course, there was no one to do that. Grandparents? All dead. Aunts and uncles? None that would make the trip to Dolareido for a funeral, for a sister who never talked to them anymore. Maybe it was a Terry thing, for family to become separated in some fashion or another. That made his mom, and Mary's post-Jack relationship unique, how the two bonded and became best friends—or so it had looked through the windows of their home.

"I remember," he said to Mary, smiling down at her as he pulled up a stool and sat beside her, "when you ran away, after dad died. I



thought you were the most stupid girl on the planet, and a coward. A coward for running away, and stupid for not having planned it out at all.”

She didn't say a word. That was good. He wasn't looking for a conversation, just someone to listen to him.

“And I was right, of course. You were stupid, and a coward. But so was I.” Smiling, he reached out, and touched her shoulder with the back of his knuckle, grazing the bare skin, white sheet pulled down enough to expose her face, shoulders, and collar bone. “I just ran inward, instead of outward. We both abandoned Mom, but you came back. I ... I never really did, did I?” He grazed her shoulder a few more times, half hoping it'd wake her up. “Just, put a wall between me and everyone else. Pathetic, I know. And I kept that wall there, until I grew into it, stunted, misshapen. Miserable.”

What would Mary say to that? She was as much an airhead as Mom, and didn't have an introspective bone in her body. Like Fiona, she was happy because she lived in the moment, with no thoughts to get in the way. He was envious of her.

Maybe he shouldn't be. People who had little introspective ability ran headfirst into dangerous situations. Like, running away from home. That's what he told himself, thinking he was being smart and correct with his approach to life, using his stupid sister as an example. But then, unlike him, she made a mistake, and learned from it, like running away from home and coming back. He didn't make mistakes, and thus, learned nothing.

He was a child, incapable of growing up, because he was too afraid to take risks and get hurt.

“But, hey, I'm trying. You might just be proud of me, Mary. I've stuck my head out, and my balls, and even tried to shut my brain off for a while in some situations. Beautiful woman told me to kiss her, and I did. Best relationship I could hope for.”

Mary said nothing.

“I even did some other stupid shit I’m happy to have done. Nearly got killed, defending her against a psycho with a sword. Psycho with the sword is my friend now. Don’t get me wrong, I still hesitate to let myself out emotionally, all the time. Especially now, especially with this ... this thing, inside me.” Groaning, he stood up, and started to pace around, shoes making quiet clack sounds against the solid floor. With nothing but metal cupboards around, filled with dead people, the sound echoed. “Now, I’m not so sure I should let myself out of the box, you know? Every time I do, this fucking thing inside me starts barking, and roaring, and clawing at me, trying to get out.”

Mary said nothing.

“I told Ann, told her about it, and how it’s triggering some ‘rage’ issues inside me.” He air-quoted rage. It wasn’t a strong enough word. “Feels like I’m possessed by some spirit of wrath every time I so much as think about Angela. And that was before she killed you.” He stopped at his sister’s feet, and set his hands on the metal table. “She killed you. Stabbed you a whole bunch of times. And Mom.” Sighing, he put up his hands. “Mom’s still alive, for now. Life support. But, she was stabbed more times than you. She’ll probably die.”

With a slow step, he started to pace around again, circling the whole room, hands in his pockets. “That fucking woman, Angela. Scars, glass eye, I know she’s been through some shit. And her mom? Nothing like our mom. Athalia is cold, angry, bitter, and if circumstances were different, she’d probably be cruel and nasty. I’ve tried to lend her a hand, help her integrate into the city, but that’s not going well. Thought I made progress, but then her daughter fucked everything up.” Groaning, he threw up his hands, and stared at the ceiling. “Athalia is worth helping, worth trying to help. But,

she doesn't want to kill her daughter. She's stuck between a rock and a hard place, and so am I."

Mary said nothing.

"What do you think? If I kill Angela, and I know I will, Athalia becomes my enemy; assuming she doesn't stop me from killing Angela. But ... but she killed you, Mary. You have to say something to that."

He walked over to her, and leaned down over her, one hand on the table by her shoulder, the other on her chin, her cheek, touching her with a skimming knuckle. "The last thing I ever said to you, did to you, was mind control you, wiped your memory of our encounter. You could have known I was alive. It would have been our little secret." Her eyes stirred. No, they didn't. He was staring at a corpse, expecting it to wake up, and his mind was desperate to see that. There was no stirring. "Can ... can you ... please wake up? I'm getting torn every which way, Mary. All I have are regrets, and ... and it'd ... it'd be great if you could wake up, and wash away one of those for me?" He stared, waiting, watching, but Mary denied him, holding perfectly still. "Please ... I'm begging you. I ... I've made so many mistakes, and not the good kind. I ruined so many ... so many things, from my first life, and now you're gone, and I can't fix them. Please come back."

Mary said nothing.

"I need to fix this! I have to fix it! I have to fix it ... fix it ... It's what I do, right? I fix things, get them working again. I did that for us plenty, when we lived together, right? Fixed your computer so many times. Fixed the stupid washing machine; took a whole god damn week of reading to figure out how, but I did, right? Fixed the DVD player. Remember when you were complaining about taxes, and I had to explain tax brackets to you? Fixed that for you.

“Been fixing things for my new friends and family too! Fixed the Viktor and Tony problem, fixed the Lucas problem, and now I’m some kind of peace maker between all the paranormals. Fixing those problems, making sure everyone gets along. I helped fix a spider problem! Remember how many spiders I killed for you, back at Mom’s? Like that, except a lot bigger.”

Mary said nothing.

He slammed his fist against the table, causing Mary to tremble. “I can’t fix this if you don’t get up! I can’t fix anything if you don’t get up! Please!”

Gulping down on the dry death in his throat, he set both elbows on the metal table, and rested his forehead to the cold material. His palms buried his head, hiding it away, as the gentle tremors started to work up his body. Crying. But without the Blush of Life, there were no tears. Dry heaves in his throat were all he managed, quiet things that forced up the withered, dried guts of a corpse.

Two Terry corpses, and one of them wasn’t ever going to move again.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault, and ... I can’t fix any of it.” He reached out, set his arm across her stomach, and pulled her a little closer, so he could press her shoulder to his head. “Please ... get up.”

Mary said nothing. She was cold, and still. Mary was gone, and all she’d left behind was a body.

He stayed like that for a while. Ten, maybe twenty minutes, crying a vampire’s quiet, pathetic cry. Nothing but dry whimpers. Mary didn’t mind. She lay there, unmoving, quiet, and let him cry on her shoulder. But, once the ache in his gut started to subside, he forced himself to stand, and smiled down at Mary.

“I’ll make sure you get a proper burial. You used to think angels were neat, right? I ... actually, I should take a visit to the house, shouldn’t I? Maybe I’ll find something meaningful to bury with you.” Silence. He nodded, letting the icy quiet sink in as he pulled the blanket back over her head. “Knowing you, it’ll probably be angels, or unicorns, or rainbows.” Everything that a cabinet in a morgue’s wall of corpses wasn’t.

He walked toward the door, and looked over his shoulder as he did. “Goodbye, Sis.”

## Chapter 84

~~Damien~~

One of the hunters came out of the shadows. He recognized this one. A woman, short, thick with muscle, and with a shotgun in her hand.

“... you’re dead,” Damien said. “You were one of the hunters killed in the chaos, in the—”

“In Sándor’s chamber, yeah.” She came closer, tilted her head, and showed them her neck. There was a giant scar where an Uratha had torn into her.

“How!?” Matt asked, growling as he began to pace. The big guy put himself between the group of them, and the hunter, a protective instinct shining through. He probably thought of the four of them as his temporary pack, at least in some capacity. Good for them, they needed a frontliner.

“Oh, sorry, let me just spill all our secrets, and our master plan. Get me in a monologue, right?” Sighing, the hunter began to pace the barrier, going from wall to wall, mirroring Matt’s pacing. Matt was trapped in the circular trap though, while she was blocked by the previous barrier, straight as it cut across the tunnel. So she couldn’t cross the barrier made with black soot, while the amber circle beneath the paranormals trapped them. Or at least, that’s how it looked.

Perhaps they were in a stalemate? Unlikely. The trap had been set with a purpose. Perhaps she intended to undo the wall barrier, and then kill Damien and his group with the shotgun? If she did that, she opened herself up to being shot back, as the amber circle didn’t seem to block things like his sword. Both barriers were magical in

nature, though, and perhaps the hunter had a way to attack through it.

He had to think. Think. Figure a way out of here, before the hunter took advantage somehow, and shot them like fish in a barrel.

“Tell me what I want to know,” the hunter said.

Matt growled, still pacing, while everyone else stood in the center. Damien found himself partly holding an arm out, keeping it between Fiona and the hunter. Vicky and Parker, naturally, stood furthest back, with quiet and unassuming faces. At least they weren't panicking; Damien could appreciate that.

“We're na gonna tell ye nothin!” Fiona said, frowning and sticking her tongue out.

The hunter raised an eyebrow, looking at Fiona with an obvious look of confusion, before she returned the frown. “Don't do that.”

Fiona blinked, and looked to Damien before the hunter again. “Do what?”

“Act like that.”

“... like what?”

“Like a person.”

Everyone looked at everyone else, vampires, monster, and werewolf trading glances with each other, as they digested that comment. The hunter didn't think they were people. How far did that belief go?

“Tae fuck? I'm a person!” Fiona's frown grew, and she stomped her feet.

“You're a soulless monster and a murderer.”

Damien sighed, and pressed his arm against Fiona as she tried to move forward, blocking her. So the hunter's belief extended into such an extreme, believing that paranormals didn't have souls. He knew he did. His faith reminded him of that every night. And, even without faith, vampires, werewolves, and monsters never abandoned their internal struggle with morality and ethics. If that did not prove existence of the soul, then what did?

But trying to prove that to a human was pointless. Once upon a time, Jack would have disagreed, and said that communication was worth it. Now, Damien doubted it.

“Ye dinnae ken! Ye ... dinnae get tae say that!”

Damien blinked, and looked down at the tiny redhead. There were tears in her eyes.

“I don't? How many humans have you killed, monster?”

Sniffing, Fiona wiped her tears away with fists, and stepped behind Damien. Less a shield from potential physical harm, and more a shield to hide her face, he could see.

“I've only killed the mean ones.”

The hunter rolled her eyes and pointed at Matthew. “And you, werewolf. How many humans have you killed? Vamps need blood, monsters need lots of different things, usually got from crushing humans into mulch. But you, werewolf? You don't need to eat humans. I bet you've killed plenty, though.”

This hunter knew a little about them, more than Matthew had predicted. That information alone was valuable, if a bit late.

“I've killed,” Matt said, glaring at the hunter as he squeezed his fists until they cracked. “I killed a crack dealer that had ruined a neighborhood, South of where I lived. I killed a few murderers, once



I managed to get my hands on them. And I've killed one hunter, some dumbass who thought I should die." The aggression rose in the man's voice, and Damien found himself stepping back from the large Uratha, pushing Fiona back along with him. It was hard to tell if Matt was talking about some past killing, or he was implying the inevitable with the hunter in front of him.

"Yeah, uh huh," the hunter said. "And the possessed? Ones with spirits riding inside them? They could be saved, but how many times did you just kill the human helplessly caught in the middle of your hunt?"

That was enough to stun Matt. The hunter knew way, way more than they could have predicted.

"That ... We avoid that as often as possible."

"Uh huh." She didn't sound convinced. "I'm looking for a reason to not kill you all, right now. cursory poking suggests there's no reason to spare any of you."

Damien snarled, and withdrew his pistol, holding it in his right hand while holding his sword in his left. He pointed it at her, and predictably, she smirked at him.

"Because if you lower the barrier to kill us, we'll shoot you. Is that not a good reason?"

Laughing, the hunter pulled something out of her belt. It took them all a second to recognize it, but she flipped the clear top off of some sort of small handheld metal tube, and showed the red button. A detonator.

Everyone looked at each other with raised eyebrow, confused, but Damien figured it out faster. He looked down and around, before he looked up at the ceiling above. Where were the explosives? It wasn't

like the hunters could have simply dug into the concrete of the tunnel. Getting through that material required serious work.

A bluff? Maybe. Damien stared at her, watched her close, and continued to look for any signs of hidden explosives, until the others caught on, and gasped.

“You c-could cause a cave in!” Vicky said.

Yeah, she could, if she wasn't lying. A cave in would kill the hunters, and potentially kill Matthew and Fiona from lack of oxygen. Could Fiona dig them one of her special tunnels into her nightmare world in that circumstance? He didn't know, and he didn't want to find out in that situation.

“Smell any traces of anything, Matt?” he said.

The big man shook his head. “I don't smell traces of anything, somehow. Not ... not even things I should be smelling.”

Their sense of smell was being blocked, or mitigated. Shit.

“Crazy, right?” the hunter said with a laugh. “We have ways. As I'm sure you've noticed, we're not your average hunters. We're organized, and we're—”

“Working with monsters,” Damien said, slowly rotating his wrist with sword in hand.

“Just one.”

“One? I counted four.” Jeremiah, Angela, Elen, and the Begotten.

The hunter woman paused, spent a few seconds longer thinking about his words than Damien expected, before she started pacing again. “Jeremiah is a great man. Been hunting monsters for

decades. Sold a big part of his humanity, to become a tool capable of destroying wicked things like you. Some would call that righteous.”

Matt snarled as he paced, though big as he was, the circle was a little cramped for his pacing. “He’s a psychopath. He’ll throw you to the wolves the moment we find and circle him.”

Damien smiled at Matt and his personal twist on the ‘throw you to the wolves’ line, before looking back to the hunter. “Elen, the shaman woman. How long have you known her?” No answer. “How old is she?” No answer. “How does she perform her strange magic?” No answer. “... how can you accept the murder of innocent people to fuel her—”

“She didn’t kill innocent people.” The hunter laughed and shrugged. “Dealers? Rapists? Scum who’ve not only thrown their lives away, but dragged other people down with them? Not one of us is crying over their deaths. World is better off without them.”

He frowned and raised a brow. That was harsh. These hunters had a steel resolve if they didn’t see a problem with that way of thinking, that was for sure. It was something Kindred and Uratha did, sure, kill humans they felt worth killing, in pursuit of their agendas. But humans killing humans was a different matter.

Damien put up his hands, though he kept pistol in one, sword in the other. “You seem willing to talk, while your comrades are not. Why?”

“I like to know my enemy. And maybe you’ll tell me what I want to know.”

“That’s it?”

“Isn’t that enough?” Shrugging, the short woman approached the barrier, and reached out to press a palm against it in front of her, eye level. She leaned her weight into the palm, too, proving how

secure the flat barrier was. Two barriers seemed overkill to Damien, but then, these hunters were probably sick of failing in their encounters with the Kindred of Dolareido.

Sighing, Damien lowered his hands, and gestured to the rest of the paranormals trapped with him. "I'd appreciate it if you let us go."

She laughed. "Why would I do that? You're all monsters."

"Because if you let us go, we'll let you go. I'll report back to my superiors that not all the hunters are psychopath killers that need to die."

"Ha! Mercy, from a vampire?"

Damien shrugged. "God has mercy for humans, and plenty of it. Not for us, but for you."

That earned two raised brows from the woman. She pushed off the barrier to stand up straight again, and stared at him, tilting her head to the side. "I thought the Lancea et Sanctum were wiped out in this city."

How did these hunters know this much? It had to be Elen's magic, or Jeremiah's unusual skill set; or both.

"They were, except for me. I survived."

"Yeah well, God doesn't seem to give a shit about hunters, so you're not going to sell me on converting."

He sighed, louder this time. Dolareido didn't care for religion, and neither did the hunters. The only people who thought God still existed was him, who spent fifty years hiding underneath streets and in filth, and a dried-up corpse vampire woman, whose lover and loyal servant of God was dead. With the way the world was going, he

couldn't blame people for their lack of faith. But a little faith could go a long way.

“Dolareido rarely had deaths, hunter, of those that didn't deserve it. Even Azamel, for all the ire she's earned, has done little since arriving. The Kindred of Dolareido have changed quite a bit since Tony and Viktor's deaths. Surely we weren't on any hunter radar.” Normally it'd be Jack saying these things, but the boy was in no mindset to be playing ambassador or peace talker; and he wasn't here. If Damien could pull it off, well, the better for everyone.

“You're right, you weren't. But, you gave that elephant freak monster sanctuary. And besides that, you're vampires. You'll eventually cause problems. We might as well kill you along with all the other paranormals. Kind of like a crusade, you know? And hey, if you're a God-fearing vamp, I'm sure you know what those are.”

Damien's sigh turned into a quiet growl. Jack was right. There was no communicating with these people, and that was infuriating because he knew not all the hunters had to be mindless killing machines or genocidal crusaders, with zero consideration for specifics. The Devil is in the details, and that was a painful lesson Damien had learned the hard way, a lesson these hunters had yet to.

He glanced over his shoulder at Fiona. The smile on her face had faded, and her shoulders slumped. She had stayed close to him, and was peeking out from behind him at the hunter. Scared. This was the first time she'd ever faced a hunter, while forced to stay in her vulnerable human body. Worse, this was the first time she'd ever heard the words of a true believer of their cause, someone of complete faith in their views of the world, willing to kill her.

Vicky and Parker were pressing up against the other side of the circle, trying to get out. They were getting a little more panicked, each trying hard enough to escape to force their shoes to slide on the concrete beneath them.

“ ... Matthew,” he said, “transform. See if you can break through this.”

The big guy wasted no time. The juggernaut of strength began to grow, fur pouring out of him as muscle mass appeared from nowhere. Weight, solid, heavy, filled his body, turning the already big man into a Goliath of towering proportions. The hunter stepped back and stared up as Matthew hit seven feet in height, then eight, then nine, and nearly hit ten feet. He would have, if it wasn't for how his head and neck set forward from the shoulders instead of above.

Damien had to step back to give the gargantuan creature his space. His arms were nearly as thick as Damien's whole body, and with the wolf's forward hunched posture, they dangled enough to almost reach the floor beneath him. His tail was big enough Damien had to step back several times to keep out of its way, and doing so drew his eyes to the beast's feet. Not paws, but monstrous feet that looked more at home on a dinosaur than any wolf, with talons there were already starting to puncture the concrete with the Uratha's weight.

The werewolf's breath was slow, but loud and heavy, enormous lungs fueling the giant creature. His snout was thick and long, and his mane of fur around his neck thicker than the short fur on the rest of his body, almost like a lion. His ears were pointed at the hunter, and he rumbled animal aggression deep in his chest loud enough Damien felt the vibration through his shoes.

The hunter gulped, but managed to keep her eyes on Matt as she stared up at the hungry, angry beast. Brave, this woman.

“The reason I'm this close,” she said, “is because this detonator won't punch through concrete from too far.”

However the barrier worked, it didn't seem to block sound. From further down the tunnel, a couple of hunters appeared, each armed

with assault rifles, grenades, knives, the works. Shit.

Matt started clawing at the barrier. He had to get through the ring barrier that circled them first; the second barrier could wait, if they were going to even attempt it. Three hunters were manageable, but not if the one with a detonator started the fight off with an—

Boom. The shock wave was immense, far greater than Damien could have predicted; which was stupid, now that he thought about it. Their attack on the Begotten's nightmare had proven the hunters had access to heavy explosives. Why wouldn't they use some now? Well, they were in a tunnel, and detonating a high-yield explosive could cause it to collapse, especially since it seemed to come from above. They must have dug it in there somehow, or concealed it, for no one to see it or smell it.

The realities flashed through his mind, before other images did. A quick glance to Vicky, Parker, and Matt showed them all slowly turning their heads upward, to the source of the shock wave. The world had gone into slow motion, just like in the films. He brought his eyes to the small woman hiding behind him, and winced as he saw the shock painted on her face as she looked up.

His vampire discipline Celerity kicked into override, a thousand times more effective than any human's adrenaline. Speed at his fingertips, absurd speed, the sort that had let him cut off Antoinette's arm and leg, the sort that helped him save Fiona in the nightmare from the unrelenting gunfire, and now, it'd help him save her again, God willing.

Except, they were trapped inside the circle, and among the blast coming down for their heads, were giant blocks of concrete that would crush them into paste. Matt might live, but the rest of them weren't going to be so lucky. And yet, that reality didn't seem to stop him from trying. Parker was Daeva, another practitioner of Celerity, but the man wasn't ready for this; lazy idiot. As the blocks slowly

fell, Damien sped toward him, slammed a palm into his stomach so he'd start falling down, and then slammed a palm into Vicky's back toward her partner, so she'd fall on top of him. He made sure his punches were downward angled, and strong enough to drive them into the floor fast so Vicky would land on him before the concrete did. She was a Ventrue, resilient, and had the better chance of survival.

He, on the other hand, was going to break like glass. Ah well. He threw a punch upward, hitting one of the falling blocks, the world still a slow motion symphony of falling death, and used the reversed momentum to drive himself down onto Fiona. Her golden brown eyes were wide with shock. He stared into them as he fell on top of her, smiling, and bracing his weight into his elbows as he put his chest over her head. With any luck, she'd live.

He didn't look up as the explosion crashed into them. It wasn't fire, napalm or such, thank the Lord. It was pure kinetic force though, and it crushed them all into the subway tunnel floor like pancakes. Pain wracked his body, a blanket of agony from head to feet, before the individual balls of pain joined in. Thud. Thud. Sickening crunches, sounds he recognized: bones breaking. He could hear them because they were inside his body, punching through the ringing deafness the explosion caused. Each crunch took a moment to echo with pain, but it did, and it wasn't long before the sonata of agony overwhelmed him. The concrete came in two waves. The first fueled by the explosion's punch, turning each giant block into enormous bullets, and with the second wave, larger chunks of concrete fell, slower, fueled by gravity.

One hit his back. Another hit his shoulder, then forearm of the same arm. Then the other arm, the hand. Another hit his lower back, and others hit his legs in various places. One falling block of death crashed into his ankle, and summoned a cacophony of misery through him as he felt the joint shatter. Another hit the floor in



front of his head before toppling down onto his skull; lucky, or it'd have shattered his head like a glass jar.

Worse was the weight of the blocks. Jagged and misshapen, the heavy pieces of rubble crushed him into the ground, pinned him, dug into his broken limbs. He couldn't move, the weight unrelenting, oppressive, and uncaring. And, with time, all was silent.

But, he was alive; as much as a Kindred could be. Groaning, he tried to push against the floor, and couldn't. The very attempt reignited the pain into a concert of agony, and he groaned, unable to muster the energy for a proper cry or sob as his body shrieked in torment. A jagged, sharp piece of concrete was sitting on his head, but another was resting on that, pinning his skull down, and a mess of chaos and weight pinned his limbs. Bones were broken, a hand and wrist, an ankle, a leg, an arm, ribs, and he had the distinct impression one of his hips was, too.

The world was quiet. Underneath rubble, and lots of it, sound was muffled and turned into nothing more than quiet rumbles. Darkness. He groaned again as the pain danced up and down his body, demanding he move but knowing full well he couldn't. A Gangrel or Ventrue would have been able to take the blows better, but not a Mekhet. Vicky was Ventrue, so, maybe she'd pull through?

An explosion ripped outward from the pile that buried him, and his groans turned into shouts as he felt the weight shift, and the darkness split with beams of light. Someone had torn their way out from under the rubble. Matthew.

Half the rubble that covered Damien flew into the air, outside the barrier, including the block that pinned Damien's head to the floor. With it gone, he managed to lift his head enough to look around, and force down his groan as he started taking stock of the situation. His spine was intact, at least, if he could move his head, and send agony into his limbs trying to move them, too.

Vicky and Parker were still buried under the rubble. He looked up higher, ignoring the pain in his spine and muscles, and looked back to the source of the noise. Matthew, on the rampage. The giant beast roared fury as he ripped through the tunnel, barriers destroyed by the explosion; or the titan had succeeded in tearing through them. The beast sprinted down the tunnel, and gunfire erupted, but it was outside Damien's viewing angle.

“D-Damien?”

Oh thank God. He forced his head down to look at the face buried underneath his chest.

“Hey ... F-Fiona,” he said through clenched teeth. “Glad you're ... alive.”

Fiona frowned up at him, and started hitting his chest. “Ye fuckin bawbag! Tae fuck is wrong wit ye! Ye ... didnae have tae ... do that.”

He tried to smile, and managed it for a second or two, before the impacts of her tiny fists against his chest triggered the assortment of broken ribs to revolt against him. He swallowed down the pain as best he could, and let his head collapse against the floor.

“You injured?”

“I'm fine, awright? And ye?”

“... not so fine.” He couldn't find the resolve to dismiss his injuries, and more groans escaped him.

He could faintly remember the sight of Antoinette, filled with holes, a mangled corpse missing an arm and leg besides. She hadn't whimpered, cried, sobbed, or groaned. The steel resolve of the woman in the face of such pain, while he had to bite back his tears as he tried to roll off Fiona, was a testament to the difference in

their abilities and age. It was a degree of resolve he strove for, and right now, it was ten thousand leagues beyond him.

But he bit down his pain and groans, a little, and smiled down at Fiona. "Can you move?"

"Aye!" She slid out from under him, and he coughed up some blood through clenched teeth. Shit, that was not good. Kine bleeding through the mouth was problematic, but if he was, a Kindred, it meant his insides were a broken mess.

Once Fiona was free of his body, he collapsed completely, and a few blocks of concrete rolled down from the pile onto him. That earned a short-lived scream, pain he was not expecting.

"Damien! Damien, ye fucking moron." She reached down, and tried to lift one of the blocks. She was a monster, after all, and spiders were strong for their size. But the blocks were heavy and large, and instead of lifting it straight off of him, she mostly rolled it off, and it crushed some flesh on the way off his body. "Shit fuck shit!" She set her hands on a block, and from a black silhouette of eight legs, started to spin webbing. The white thread, she shot out at the walls and ruined ceiling above, and its absolute stickiness was strong enough to get the weight off of him.

By the time she had the rubble off him, there were a dozen white threads latched onto what remained of the walls. Sighing, looking tired, she moved onto the rest of the pile, and started the same process. Damien lay there, and did his best to watch, but keeping his head up was proving impossible. He let it collapse, and listened.

"Vicky, Parker?" Damien said.

"They're alive." Sweating and grunting, Fiona continued to dig, and reached under some smaller rubble to grab their hands. It looked like his maneuver had been successful, and Vicky had

protected Parker with her body. Ventrue resilience was a powerful tool, and in the moment, he was terribly envious.

More gunfire echoes filled the tunnels, along with animal roars that threatened to deafen anyone within half a mile; more than they already were. He felt the vibration of it through the tunnel floor, overshadowing the thunderous cracks of the rifles. Whatever was happening, it was beyond a bend in the tunnel, out of sight.

Vicky and Parker dragged themselves over to Damien, unable to stand, but in far better condition than him. With grunts and groans of their own, they reached out and took stock of him, lifting his broken hand, dented head, and other limbs. He shouted when they lifted his broken foot.

“If any hunters come back for us,” Parker said, “we’re fucked.”

Vicky sighed, rolling her eyes. “Mekhet and Daeva, you break like porcelain.”

Parker laughed. Damien clenched his jaw, until Parker peered down at him, and winced.

“Fiona,” Damien said, “catch up with Matthew, and see if he needs your help.”

“What? I’m na gonna leave ye, Damien, or the rest of ye. None of ye could fight a bee right now!”

He sighed, and turned his head enough to look up at the ceiling. Somehow, the hunters had managed to get explosives deep into the concrete, powerful ones. They hid the scent too, of themselves and the explosives. On top of all that, they used two different sorts of magical barriers to set up a trap, and get information. Maybe they hadn’t counted on a werewolf springing the trap, especially Matthew, Avery’s juggernaut, hence the hunter and her back up fleeing.

Damien looked over to Fiona as she moved over to sit beside his shoulder, and set a hand down on his neck. She frowned at him and stroked his skin. It felt nice.

“You’re limping,” he said.

“Ye’re more broken than a crushed box. Stop worrying about me.” Fiona shrugged and looked down at her legs in front of her. One leg was torn up, blood dripping from the wound. It wasn’t like Damien’s legs managed to cover hers perfectly, after all. But at least nothing she had was broken. “Ye going to be ... ok, Damien? Ye’re ... ye’re beat up, in a bad way.”

He stared at the blood on her leg, the exposed, pale skin, and sniffed. As his vitae did its best to mend his wounds, at least enough so he’d be able to use his limbs, it drained quickly. In moments, he was starving, and staring at the slow, dripping blood, of Fiona’s leg.

Pain, white fire, almost cold like ice on his withered veins, demanded he heal. And he was healing, thick Kindred blood pulling into his wounds and forcing his bones back into alignment while mending ripped muscles and tendons. It was slow though, very slow compared to the Uratha. Hours, instead of minutes. He wouldn’t be able to completely heal his wounds without going to sleep for the day, and a belly full of blood.

There was no one to feed on, though. He could feed on Vicky or Parker, but the Vinculum was to be avoided at all costs, not to mention addiction to vitae.

There was Fiona. He stared at her wound, glared at her, and he felt his fangs start to emerge. Thoughts melted away, buried in the agony, and gave rise to an animal need inside him. He was vaguely aware it was there, demanding he give in and let it feed. How long had it been since the Beast in him was let out, frenzy driving Damien to feast? Decades. Many decades. It was a forgotten feeling,

the rush and exhilaration of the animal within, caring about one thing and one thing alone. Blood.

He wanted hers.

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~~Julias~~

The three of the Invictus council watched the screen, and sighed. In their primary meeting room where the three did their usual private conversations, the giant touch screen on the wall allowed them to sort large amounts of information and break it down together. Right now it was showing a blueprint of Dolareido, and had various glowing dots. GPS signals from the phones Invictus were carrying.

Unfortunately, it was only the Invictus showing up, and that provided no end of frustration to the council. Garry didn't let them put trackers on his Kindred. Understandable, but still frustrating.

One of the lights lit up. Jonah's light. A second later, the three council members received a message on their phones.

"Looks like Mister LeBrun's run his distress app," Maria said as she moved over to the table to sit. Jonah was a serious sort, so if he was the one pressing it, it was worth considering.

Michael sighed, growling at the phone. "Not the hunters one, though. Seems he's in a fight with Carthians."

"That's Madam Herrington's team." Julias matched Michael's sigh, and sat back, putting his ass to the edge of the table as he watched the screen. The three dots were moving around in the same area, instead of sweeping the area like they should have been. "It wouldn't surprise me if she picked a fight with some Carthians."

“Give my childe a break, Mister Mire. Herrington’s been learning to temper her impulsiveness.”

“I wonder,” Maria said, “if her relationship with the Uratha has helped calm her nerves? Having a strong man to hold her in his arms, instead of a host of weak and helpless ghouls, may be settling her.”

Julias laughed and shook his head. “Maybe, but I doubt it’ll last.”

“The relationship?”

“No, her being less impulsive, if she is. Sorry to say, Mister MacDonald, but I’ve got thousands of solid hours of work with Herrington at my side. Impulsiveness is in her bones.”

The man laughed and shrugged. “What do you propose we do about this situation?”

“We can’t let this go unanswered,” Julias said. “Whoever’s to blame for this scuffle needs to be punished. We’re busy hunting hunters. Covenant squabbles are not allowed.”

The two elders nodded.

“I’ll go deal with it,” Michael said.

Julias blinked at him, and watched as Michael headed for the door. He was a tall guy with a big frame, lot of muscle, with a shaved head and a single chain that connected nostril to ear. He looked like a Carthian, except for the ten-thousand-dollar suit he wore, a shade of blue so dark, it almost shined with stars.

“Garry might drop by,” Maria said. “We can’t escalate the situation.”

“I won’t escalate it. I’ll settle it. If I have to break some arms, I’ll make sure to spread the pain around.”

Julias shook his head. “What if it’s the werewolves? Eric’s with Herrington, and we know Avery has a half dozen of her pack helping the Carthian sweep teams.”

“Then I’ll break them. Put them in their place.”

“We’re trying to be friends with Avery, aren’t we?”

“Not if they violate the Masquerade. Besides, it’s Garry I’m worried about having to deal with. Avery is reasonable. Tones is just a moron.” With that, Michael closed the door, and was gone.

Julias sat down next to Maria, and looked at her. The small corpse lady was looking at her tablet as usual, and scrolled through pictures with scans of ancient texts. Looked like Latin. Julias couldn’t read it, but it also included some pictures, drawn in ink on the parchment, and it didn’t take a genius to guess they were pictures of spirits. A bit of fire, with eyes. A gust of wind, with eyes. A pool of water, with eyes. She scrolled to the next page, and more pictures awaited, animals with strange features, like foxes with multiple tails, or deer with antlers of colossal proportions.

“What’s this?” he said.

“Research. There are spirits in Dolareido, but trying to communicate with them has been frustrating.”

Ok, that was a little surprising. He didn’t expect her to straight up answer him like that. Dodge the question, sure, but direct honesty? The only Kindred he’d expect that from was Jack.

“You’ve been trying?”

“A passing curiosity of late.”



“You know Avery won’t approve.”

Maria shrugged, and scrolled to the next page. No pictures, and a wall of Latin text Julius struggled to understand. Something about a wall between two worlds.

“I am not Minerva. I can fend for myself, should those dogs come to my door. And, I do not know whatever it was that let Minerva perform such successful experiments.”

Successful experiments? “How much do you know about her experiments?”

“Terribly little. Only that she spoke to things on the other side, and reached across the wall. How she did it, is beyond me.”

Julius nodded. Either that was all a misdirect by her, to convince him that she didn’t know how to do whatever it was that Minerva did, or she was telling the truth. From the way she said it, his instincts said truth, but she was much older than him, and had the better poker face.

“I wanted to ask you,” she said, “about Beatrice Damor.”

He leaned back in his seat and raised a brow. “Oh?”

“You two seem to be quite in love.”

“Yeah, we are.” Dangerous territory. Hopefully the Lucas and Maria comparison wasn’t going to be made.

“Do you plan to marry her?”

He chuckled and scanned the corpse’s face, looking for hidden meanings in the cracked flesh. “You think Kindred should marry?”

“I ... do not subscribe to ludicrous notions. We are immortal creatures, and we are not human. The sanctity of marriage and the

roof it provides mean little to our kind. And yet ... I often think of it.”

“Think of marriage?”

“Something akin to marriage, yes. Two Kindred, forever devoted to each other—or at least for centuries. Hundreds of years ago, such pairings in Kindred were not so rare.”

“Hundreds of years ago, Kindred could subjugate entire villages, get a castle for themselves, and become self-made nobles. A different time.”

“Indeed.”

“But, if you’re asking would I spend the next few centuries or more with her, hell, maybe even eternity, at my side? Yeah.”

Maria sighed, but didn’t look his way, eyes still on the tablet. Didn’t look like she was reading though; rather, she stared off into nothing, the tablet in front of her. He couldn’t tell what brought on this topic, but it wasn’t like Kindred didn’t regularly sit and daydream about what ifs.

“You should tell her that, Mister Mire.”

“It’d sound an awful lot like a marriage proposal.”

“It would.”

“I ... I’m not sure how that would go, honestly. Triss is—”

“Tell her, Mister Mire. Ask her.” Maria lifted her eyes from the tablet, glared at him with enough frustration in her gaze to cut into him, before looking back to her studies. This time she did resume reading, and Julias knew better than to interrupt her, especially considering the look on her face.

It was strange to see Maria being emotional like this. Romantic. But it wasn't like he disagreed with what she was saying. Hell, it was the fifth secret he was going to share with Triss and Jen, that he wanted to marry Triss; or at least commit to that in the way Kindred did.

"I think I will."

"Good. Be—"

A phone ring came in, his phone. Sighing, he got up and answered it. "Madam Leauvion, why the call?"

"Mister Mire. I ... I wanted to inform you that we had to end our sweep early."

"What? Why?"

"Mister Terry felt it best to end it prematurely. Tensions were high."

Ok, not good. "Why are you calling me, and not Mister Terry?"

"He ... left, Mister Mire, on his own."

"On his own? Oh for fuck's sake. Thanks for telling me, Madam Leauvion." He hung up, and sighed as he headed for the door.

"We warned you, Mire," Maria said. It was obvious he'd been talking about Jack, of course.

"I know, I know. Guess I just expected ... I'll talk to him."

"Please do. Your childe has been a blessing to the Invictus, and it would pain me to see him perish due to bad decisions. If he left his mission without a companion, he will be easy prey for hunters."

Maybe. He might be easy prey. Or he'd kill them all.

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~~Natasha~~

Chaos erupted. Once the strange faces on the wall spotted her and the others, there was no chance any of this was going to go well. She'd hoped to eavesdrop and then leave, but this place, this giant room of flesh and the dead, was alive. It saw them, through her Cloak of Night, and now the hunters were together, four of them, hiding behind some pulsating mounds of flesh as they readied their guns.

Natasha broke, dropping her Cloak of Night, and grunting little squeaky grunts as she pulled out her own pistol, her back to the flesh. "S-Sorry," she said. "It's ... hard t-to keep it going in here. So many eyes now." Hundreds of eyes from the wall of red meat behind Elen were looking, staring, gaze flitting about randomly.

Triss nodded and shrugged, before peeking over the mound of flesh they hid behind. "Hello there!"

Natasha raised an eyebrow at the Nosferatu, and grimaced as she looked to see what weapons the witches would bring to bear. Oh, right, they had none. She looked Jen's way too, and grimaced twice more. The Ventrue was too young for this, and unarmed except for a knife, the worst of the blood clans to not have a ranged weapon.

She expected the witches to be panicking. They weren't. If anything, they seemed eager for a fight, grinning and licking their fangs as they peeked around the flesh mound to scan the room. It was true that the witches hadn't had a proper confrontation with the hunters like Tash had, and that this would be their first crack at it, but it was the most horrible circumstance possible. No room for error here, and no back up yet. Would Daniel or Antoinette come? She checked her phone, and—no signal anymore. Of course not.

"So that's Elen," Aaron said. "And the Romanian guy is Sándor?"

Tash blinked at the Gangrel. Romanian? She peeked around the mound of flesh to see if she could still see the man. She could. He was standing now, shirtless, and she had to admit, really damn sexy. Sándor had dreamy blue eyes and a defined chin, with some short, dark gruff on his face that matched his buzzed dark hair. He might have been twenty-five years old. But, there was no way she'd be able to guess his nationality at a glance, or from the scant few words he'd said. Aaron could, evidently.

She nodded at him, and switched the safety off on her pistol. "It looks like he's b-being controlled by Elen and her magic." A far better explanation for how a fellow paranormal could have betrayed them, than the thought that maybe a paranormal simply wanted to help hunters out of the kindness of their heart. "I d-d-don't know how, but we should ... we should kill the hunters, capture Elen, and ... m-maybe detain the Begotten."

Jen nodded from her spot behind a giant rib bone jutting from the bloody skin floor. "Agreed, but I don't see how we're going to do that. I—" Shards of bone shattered outward from her position, and she squeaked before flattening herself to the rib as best she could, back to it and arms held in snug. Gunfire.

Tash stuck her head out, and managed to get a peek of Sándor. He was coming closer. Sticking her head out earned the ire of the hunters, and they unloaded at her, bullets slamming into the flesh around her. The alien flesh that encircled them acted like any human flesh would, when hit with a sudden assault of high speed metal shards. It rained blood, bullets tearing into the masses of red, spraying the crimson everywhere, and ripping up chunks of flesh to go with. The faces on the wall groaned and screamed in pain, but the hunters continued firing. They were connected to the chamber, somehow.

"Tash," Triss said, "this Begotten dude. He strong?"

“V-Very!”

“Othello, Aaron, you two take him. Don’t kill him if you can, but if he gives you no choice, rip off his head. Expect to get shot. I’ll be right behind you, and I’ll engage the hunters close range. Tash can shoot them.” She looked over Natasha to Jen, and made a gesture, pointing at her own eyes, then Jen’s, then at one of the hunters, then a fist grab in the air. Probably a gesture for Jen to Dominate one of the hunters once the chaos started.

The boys nodded, and ran in. No fanfare, no waiting for a ‘go’ order or anything. Witches did everything on the fly, and Tash was going to have to get used to that if she was going to survive this insanity. She stared at Othello as he jumped over the flesh they hid behind, and ran toward the awaiting hunters, and the monster.

Daeva were fast. He might not have been as fast as Natasha, but he was still fast. And Daeva were strong. Like Nosferatu, a Daeva could punch through concrete if they had the years and the vitae, and Othello had those things. It was almost unfair. He darted around the hanging chains, and came at the hunters, chuckling softly as he closed the distance in seconds.

A silhouette of an enormous wing snapped out, blocked Othello’s path, and slammed outward toward him. Half wind, half blurry darkness, it crashed into Othello’s body and sent him flying through the air, hitting the dangling chains, body parts, and the metal and hooks.

Aaron should have taken a second to reevaluate. He didn’t. Growling, the man stood up, and charged at Sándor, spikes erupting from his body as he closed the distance. Tash had seen this transformation before, in powerful Gangrel. Jessy did this transformation, a grotesque mess of muscle and bone. It was as if an alien creature had erupted from inside Aaron, and decided it

should have spikes on the shoulders and back and head and elbows and knees and knuckles, and leathery skin to go with.

“Get out!” Elen said. Natasha peeked out again to see the old woman behind one of the tumorous mounds of flesh, in her wheelchair, a scalpel in her hand. It almost glowed with how it caught the amber light.

Othello laughed as he pushed himself up from the bloody floor of flesh. “We can’t. You closed the door!”

“Guess we found you with your pants down,” Beatrice said, poking her head out again. Tash did too, and groaned as two hunters took Sándor’s left side, and another two took his right. A wall between the vampires and their target.

“You are not welcome here!” Her shrieks sounded less human, more banshee-like, as she grew more irritated. It sounded like Beatrice guessed it right; caught with her pants down.

Except, pants down or not, the vampires were now trapped in a room with four hunters, a Begotten, and an old woman with a deceiving amount of power. Maybe they could cut their way out, if they had to; and they might have to. Sándor had been an overpowering presence in the nightmare, and she had no idea if that translated to the physical world.

This chamber of flesh and blood was the physical world. How was that possible? Think think think. The sacrifices, those had been focused on a single thing: the human body. Organs, tendons, sinew, muscle and blood, whatever it was Elen did to do her magic was based around that. What kind of magic was based on that? Not even Crúac was so debased, so disgusting and horrible. Not that she was an expert; she knew almost nothing. But as far as she knew, Crúac was some sort of blood magic for vampires that used vitae, and it was often brutal and grotesque, but not always.

If someone could do magic-y things with vampire blood, and the vitae it contained, could someone do the same with human blood? Why did they sacrifice kine in other locations though? If Daniel found the other locations, maybe whatever it was that they did, was something the sheriff could track.

That made her frown. Kine were for feeding on, not for butchering, especially not for lunacy like this. A strange feeling, one she'd never really felt before, getting possessive over their flock. The Prince would have been proud.

She poked up over the mound, and started shooting. The hunters had been mostly behind cover, staying close to Sándor but keeping some flesh or bone things between her and them. But their heads or hands were poking out, and those were good enough targets to shoot at. She grinned as one of the hunters yelped, when she landed a bullet against his gun. It'd have been better if she shot his finger, but hitting the gun was better than nothing.

She changed targets to the shirtless man, Sándor. He was a Begotten, and Begotten were tough when in the nightmare. But out here, in the physical world? She pointed her gun, and aimed for his knees.

The man knelt down on one knee, and brought his arm around over his chest to place his knuckles to the bloody floor of flesh. A shimmer of blackness covered him, and the wing of the gargoyle appeared for a split second to catch the bullets. Shit. He stood back up, glared at her, and started walking for her.

Aaron ran past him. The monster reached out for him, but Aaron slipped under his arm, and sprinted toward the hunters. More and more spikes covered him, erupting from bones in strange ways, until Aaron didn't look human anymore. He fell to his hands, and jumped up onto the chains. Oh, gross. His claws tore into the body parts that were strewn about the chains on meat hooks, and he



swung from chain to chain as the hunters raised their weapons to him. They unleashed a hailstorm of bullets, and the chains clinked furiously, sparks flying, as well as chunks of meat, as the bullets collided with the hell scene.

Othello got up, and darted in, coming for Sándor. With the Begotten looking up at the monkey Aaron, Othello had a second to get in closer, and pull back a fist. Growling, Sándor jumped back, but Othello was on him in seconds, and he pounced him. Anyone would have fallen over with the impact and weight of Othello, but Sándor remained standing, apparently far heavier than he looked.

The silhouette of the man's wings snapped out once more, and he stepped forward, hands connected with Othello's, the two of them locked in a battle of strength. And Sándor was winning.

Triss vanished. Natasha looked around, and gulped as she watched the foot puddles the invisible Nosferatu made as she ran into the chaos. The hunters caught on quick though, and as Beatrice leapt around, splashes following her, two of the hunters changed their target to her.

Not two, just one hunter. Jen had gotten closer in the chaos, and when she peeked out from behind another rib bone, one of the hunters looked at her.

“Lower your weapon,” Jen said, confident, insidious grin on her face.

The hunter froze. He had an opportunity to shoot Jen, but he didn't. He stared at her, arms trembling, fingers fighting to keep a grip on his gun, head twitching. A mistake, to look her in the eye. But it was dangerous for Jen too, standing there, staring at the man, herself exposed as well.

When the other hunter turned to face Jen, raising his gun, Beatrice reappeared, and swung her claws down at her. The hunter

jumped back, and rolled backward, soaking herself in blood as she came to her knees. Holy shit these hunters were good.

The other two turned to face Beatrice, putting their back to Natasha. Tash stood up, aimed, and sank two bullets into one of the hunter's back. The woman cried out as she stumbled with the impact before falling. And then she got back up, turning onto her back, a blood puddle half covering her body, as she started shooting at Natasha. Kevlar armor under her jacket, probably. A bullet whipped past Tash's head, and she ducked back down behind her flesh mound cover.

This was the weirdest fire fight, in the history of fire fights.

She peeked over again to see Beatrice grappling with two of the hunters. She was super strong, being a Nosferatu, but these hunters were brutally efficient, and they grabbed her and used her light weight against her, lifting her so she couldn't anchor and throw or tear. Aaron jumped down from the chains, and Tash thought for sure he was going to help Triss, but he ran for Othello instead.

In the insanity, Natasha had stopped watching Othello. He was fighting the Begotten one on one, and he was losing. The two were still locked, fingers and palms together, squeezing, but Othello had fallen to his knees, and his head was hanging between his arms. How the hell was Othello losing a fight of strength?

Aaron jumped the Begotten's face, and started slicing. Sándor let go of Othello's hands and jumped away, before he thrust his palm out, and the shadowy silhouette of the colossal creature slammed a wing into the Gangrel. Aaron went flying, knocking into chains and the body parts hooked on them, but he managed to land on his feet.

Everyone was too busy to really care that the wall of faces was chanting again. They'd closed their eyes, and Elen wheeled herself away to put her back into a groove at the base of flesh wall. There, she started to repeat the chant the faces on the wall were saying.

Her wheelchair looked less like a wheelchair, and more like a proper throne, with how it sat underneath and between a host of visages.

Arms, sickly gaunt and pale, oozed out of the fleshy wall between the faces, and began to encircle Elen. A wall of meat and bone. Either this flesh room thing was sentient, or Elen had summoned them. Gross gross gross.

Beatrice continued to wrestle with the hunters, while Natasha shot a few more times at them. But they did a better job staying in cover this time, and when Beatrice jumped toward their cover, they unloaded two dozen shots her way. Bullets ripped into her and pushed her back, enough of them cutting through her flesh to reverse the momentum.

Oh no. This was going badly quickly. It would have been easy to handle, if Sándor wasn't proving ridiculously strong. Beatrice was forced to fight three hunters, while Jennifer kept one of them frozen, occupied. Unfortunately for the Ventrue, she was too young to rip the man's will away completely; hunters had far too much resolve, and Jen wasn't Jack.

Ok, think fast think fast. She poked her head out, and started shooting again, forcing the hunters to stay behind cover as Beatrice dragged herself behind some cover as well. Sándor remained in the open, and as Othello and Aaron both jumped the man again, the beautiful man slapped them both down with the wing silhouette, slamming them into the shallow blood of the fleshy floor, and causing it to splash everywhere. Everyone was coated in it, and with how it was crashing and slathering everything in red, a little got into Natasha's mouth.

It tasted human.

"Release the B-Begotten, Elen!" Natasha said. Might as well delay the chaos a little, until she figured out what she could do.

One of the hunters cursed, loudly, and started shooting at her. “Fuck you! We’re fighting fire with fire, you filthy monster.”

Natasha rolled her eyes as she slapped in another magazine. To Kindred, and probably every other paranormal, that was some terribly cheesy dialogue. She poked her head out again, and squinted as she scanned the room, looking for the three hunters. Still where they were, but Tash could see they were concerned about Beatrice sneaking up on them again, or one of the boys running for them, or Natasha shooting them if they got caught out. If only Sándor wasn’t there, ruining everything, this would have been easy.

Triss got back up, and vanished again. The hunters started firing at the splashes in the blood her feet made, but stopped a few seconds later, as the splashes came in close to Sándor.

“Sand, look out!” one of them yelled. But the Begotten was too busy fending off Othello and Aaron to do anything, as the invisible woman rushed for him.

Her invisibility ceased as she jumped Sándor’s face, her claws on his chest. Gunfire tore Natasha’s eyes away from the mess of vampires digging into the monster, as one of the hunters started firing. She expected to see one of the Kindred getting shot, but instead, the hunter Jennifer had Dominated was shooting at the other hunters. The hunters panicked and spread out, throwing themselves to different points of cover as their friend fired wildly.

The hunter Jen controlled fought to free himself, eyes glaring, jaw clenched, gun hand shaking. But, somehow, she’d managed to get enough control of him to prevent his escape. Impressive.

“Wake up!” Beatrice said. Tash snapped her vision back to the three Kindred, and winced at the sight of them bringing the Begotten to his knees. Triss was tearing at the man’s back, trying to destroy whatever symbol it was Elen had carved there.

“No!” The old shaman in the back shouted, hidden behind her wall of curling arms and layered fingers.

Blood flowed into the grand chamber with all the grace of a typhoon. It came from beneath, from around, from above, surging and crashing against the walls and flesh tumors and chains alike. Geysers bulbed up from the flesh underneath them, and bloodfalls fell upon them. It shot out from torn holes in the walls like gunshots out of a tsunami, and one slammed into Natasha hard enough to send her flying into the back wall.

She kept hold of both her weapons, though. Progress over last time an explosive force had hit her.

Blood flowed over them, crashing, splashing, churning. As if someone had broken a dam, it swirled with chaos as walls of red turned the world into a whirlpool. Any attempt to get her bearings, any attempt to grab onto the giant bone ribs that filled the room, was pointless. She screamed into the torrent of crimson as her body was thrown into the chains. Body parts with hooks sticking out of them caught her, tore into her, ripped a few inches into her, but didn't hook her.

She dared not open her eyes. It wasn't red water, it was blood. It was thick and overpowering, and a part of her wanted to drink it down in the madness, but she had no idea what would happen if she did that. Worse, she could feel it getting into her wounds. As the crashing waves ripped her up and tore up her clothes, she had to wonder if the hunters and Sándor were going through the same thing. It didn't seem like it, from the little she managed to see when her head broke over the waves. The hunters were by Elen, where the blood did not touch.

Sándor, on the other hand, had managed to grab hold of one of the dangling chains, and was weathering the raging waters with all tenacity of a colossal boulder. It crashed against him, but he did not

give into the heavy liquid. Tash stayed curled up as a ball, knowing full well if she stuck her arms or legs out, they'd snap in the liquid insanity.

And then they got sucked out. She choked on a bit of the strange blood as the new momentum pulled her stomach up into her throat. Her back hit something soft, then hard, as she bounced around a smaller area, the tunnel they'd come in from. Like a ball bouncing around in an arcade machine, she ricocheted over and over, body hitting bone and flesh of the snake-like entrance tunnel, until she landed on her back on something much harder than bone.

The concrete of the basement greeted her, and she coughed and sputtered up blood as she lay there, staring at the dark ceiling for a moment. Once reality set in, she sat up quick and looked around; no sword, and no pistol. Damn it, dam—oh! She scooped through the blood, picked them up, and sighed as she put them away.

She groaned as she forced herself up onto her feet, and glared at the tunnel entrance. Blood flowed out of it, and so did Beatrice, Othello, Jennifer, and Aaron. Once they were in the basement with her, a foot of blood around them, the tunnel of flesh closed itself. She stared at the flesh, and walked up to it as it started to turn darker, and darker, until it blocked off the amber light completely. She touched it, and sighed as her fingers found concrete, the same concrete of the rest of the basement wall.

Absolute blackness. She used her Auspex, and her unique quirk to see in darkness, and gasped as a white circle, something drawn with chalk or something, appeared. They'd drawn some sort of summoning circle, and—wait, this was the same circle they found at the ritual sacrifice sights. It wasn't a summoning circle, it was a traveling circle! Traveling to ... some sort of ... weird flesh chamber thing. Gross, so gross.

She looked down at herself, and then the witches. They were all soaked. She'd hoped that, once outside the strange chamber, the blood would go away, but it did no such thing. It was real blood.

“Natasha.”

She squealed and turned around. A light flashed, and she raised a hand to block it before it incinerated her eyes.

“S ... Sire?” She sighed relief as Daniel stepped down the last few stairs, except stopping before the final two. Keeping his shoes above the blood, no doubt.

“I see that you’ve encountered something suspicious.” He gestured to the blood, and the four witches sitting in it.

Beatrice laughed and stood up. “You could say that.” Groaning, she tried to wipe the blood off, but it soaked and coated everything. “You boys ok?” she said to Aaron and Othello.

Othello nodded and stood up. Tash tried not to stare, but, the man did have an obnoxiously sexy look to him with his dreadlocks, and all the blood dripping down his tan skin. Yum. Aaron, on the other hand, was still covered in all the strange mutations and protrusions Gangrel grew when they wanted to fight; or at least, the powerful Gangrels. It was haunting.

Sighing, the boys climbed to their feet, before Aaron reached out to help up Jen. As he did, the spikes disappeared, along with the grotesque leathery skin, and the deformed facial features that had him halfway to some sort of dragon monster thing. It didn't bother Jen though, and she took his hand with a quiet slap of wet palms. She got up, and groaned as she adjusted her now only half-on bra, still shown blatant since she kept her shirt unbuttoned.

“I'd offer a cloth,” Daniel said, “but I feel it'd be pointless.” The five vampires looked at him, and laughed. “Report?”

Natasha nodded as she took off her jacket, and began to wring it out. “W-We found Elen, and Sándor. Elen seems t-to be able to use some kind of ... flesh ... magic? Whatever it was, it w-was alive, in a way. And she could-d-d control it. It was a chamber of flesh, and body parts and ... and—”

“And,” Daniel interrupted, “is connected to the sites where I found the sacrificed.” He nodded toward the wall past them, his light now shining there.

“Yeah!” Learning things was exciting. It sent a jolt of joy and energy through her, to see they were making progress in their goal. Happy worker bee syndrome. “The chamber Elen uses ... it was ... it was gross.”

Her sire raised a brow, before shining the light around at the foot-deep blood pool that filled the basement. “Clearly.”

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~~Eric~~

Eric stomped out of the building, through the hole in the wall he’d made. A part of him was sad about that, something about a Masquerade he should have been paying more attention to, or worrying about more. A larger part of him wanted to beat this bastard into the ground. A massive part of him could barely think as bloodlust poured over him, and demanded he fight, demanded he hunt, demanded he do what animals did. Assert dominance.

Caleb got up quickly, but Eric was already running forward. A run, proper, full, all out run. Every step was a smashing weight into the black earth, and he grinned as he felt each step tear up the hard ground behind him. It felt good. It felt so damn good to be out in the open, and let his warmed up body swing. He’d yet to do this in this Gauru form, and god damn it, it felt amazing.



Eric crashed into the man, and a metal cage on four, round legs on the side of the black path crumpled underneath Caleb's weight as Eric drove his fellow Uratha into it. Glass shattered and went everywhere. Caleb didn't let it stop him. As the two met eyes, Caleb roared up at him, and slashed out at his chest, despite Eric pinning him to the metal cage by his shoulders. Eric didn't think he'd have to dodge claws, but the new Beast in him knew better. He jumped back, and dove back in, trying to pounce after the escape, like Caleb had done to him a minute before.

Caleb jumped. Eric slammed into the bent metal, claws shredding through it like dried leaves in the Fall. As he ripped his claws free, the bastard landed on him, and started clawing at his back. A set of teeth came down for Eric's neck, but he threw his weight back, driving his talons further into the black earth as he used his strength to send Caleb flying back off of him. His rival weighed many hundreds of pounds, but that was nothing for Eric. In fact...

As Caleb landed, Eric grabbed the metal cage, one hand underneath and one on its rear, and he sank his claws into the cold, hard material. With a little leverage and grip, he anchored his talons into man's black earth, and threw the cage at Caleb.

"Eric! Eric, stop!" Jessy said. "Holy shit, you guys can't—"

The heavy, hard object crashed upon his rival, and pinned him. Within seconds, Caleb ripped the metal cage in half, sending shards and bits of its strange guts about the hard black they walked upon. The undead watching gasped, and stood, staring, no longer fighting. Nine undead in total, watching the two Uratha rip the man-made world apart in their Luna-given lust.

Fine by him.

He stomped after Caleb, and his fellow wolf met him between the tall human structures. They crashed against each other, and started to bite and tear. There was a reason for this, some reason they were

fighting, some sort of preparation, or ritual, or test. But it was a blur, background noise in his mind. All that mattered at the moment, was beating his rival, beating him into the hard, black earth of the human den.

Caleb charged at him, and Eric met his charge, roars deafening the watching undead. But his rival was smart, and fast, ducking underneath Eric and dodging to the side to avoid his claws. Caleb was slightly bigger than Eric, but he was Irakka. The sneaky wolf lived and breathed shadows, and that meant he had a weakness in direct confrontation. Eric was Cahalith, seeker of glory. He wanted to face his threat head on, and he reveled in the blood, both of theirs, as it painted the dark, hard earth.

He turned, and roared. Not the same roars as before, the normal sound of beasts trading instinct and aggression, but something else, something from the spirit side of him. He'd done it a minute before, in the human structure, and it had startled Caleb. Doing it again did the same, bringing Caleb to a sudden halt, enough time for Eric to charge him. But Caleb got down onto all fours, and sprinted around Eric, a burst of speed from four sets of claws helping the creature circle around him and go for the hamstrings.

Teeth tore into his calf, and Eric screamed, guttural and alien in his throat. Caleb didn't let go, and with four sets of claws sunk into the black earth, he had the leverage to pull the weight out from under Eric. He was not gentle. Fangs ripped into Eric's leg, ripped out muscle, ripped out skin, and the beast's thrashing forced his leg to bend sharply and way too far. Crack. His shin broke, and Eric shrieked again as he started clawing at his rival. Bleed. Bleed! Die!

"Get off him!" A woman's voice, human voice. Undead voice? Someone ran over to them, spikes jutting out of their shoulders, their knees, their hands. Massive claws, and a face he didn't recognize. They dashed in, and started clawing at his rival, drawing far more blood from Caleb than Eric would have expected.

Someone was interfering in his duel.

Caleb didn't let go of Eric's leg, but he was no longer thrashing. He was trying to see what was going on, who it was that was clawing into him, and that was enough time for Eric to realign his knee over the bone. He roared in a mix of agony and rage as his body mended itself, spirit and flesh sewing muscle and bone together in seconds. It was enough for him to turn, jump down on the beast, and begin tearing. Caleb was caught off guard, and for the moment, stunned.

The intruder continued to interfere, stabbing spikes into Caleb again and again, until his blood coated his side where she'd punctured him. Eric reached out for her, and wrapped her hardened, spiky body in his grip. So light, he was easily able to lift her, and hold her in his one hand, wrapping her waist almost entirely between finger and thumb.

“Eric! Wait, it's me! Jessy!”

He stared at the creature. Spikes, and leathery hard skin. Jessy? His mate? He breathed deep, and the subtle Kindred scent of her hit him harder, enough to jolt his insides. Yes, he knew this person. This was his mate, in her strange battle armor some of these undead could use. He—

Everyone froze as a tenth undead stepped around a distant corner. Caleb let go of Eric, and Eric stopped clawing at him with his other hand. The two of them stood up, and stared past the nine undead watching, to the newcomer.

A man walked forward, white, a bald head, with some metal attached to ear and nostril. The watching undead parted, and gave the man room. They were shivering.

“Boss,” the black man with the teeth and claws, Jonah, said. “We, uh, we got—”

“Shut the fuck up, Mister LeBrun.”

“ ... yes, Mister MacDonald. Apologies.”

The bald man, MacDonald, looked to the other undead, and snarled at one of them in particular. “Joe. You start this?”

Joe backed off, but he kept his chest high; trying to be intimidating. A pointless gesture. Eric could feel the presence of this new undead, and how greater it was compared to the tiny Joe creature.

“Just a scuffle, put Jessy in her place.”

“And this?” MacDonald yelled, gesturing to Eric, and his rival.

“Sire, it’s not ... um, not what it looks like.” Jessy squirmed in his hand, but Eric did not let her go. The presence of this new undead had shocked him, Caleb, and everyone into a moment of peace. Eric could faintly remember the creature’s name, too. Michael. One of the leaders of the Invictus pack. The words meant little to him anymore, but this brute of a human-looking creature was powerful.

“Put her down,” he said.

Growling, Eric and Caleb both gnashed their teeth at Michael. This man with the metal on his face wanted to take away his mate, like a father wolf, unhappy with another for advancing on their pup. But Eric was no juvenile. This spiky creature in his hand was his mate, and he’d earned that right. She wished to mate with him, and he with her. No one was going to stop that.

Eric took a step back, turning around, and set Jessy a ways away on the black earth, far from the inevitable fight.

“Um, Eric?” Jessy said, the spikes and hard skin on her body disappearing. Back into her regular form, he leaned down and

offered her a long, gentle lick along her neck. Soft, compared to him. Small. The smell of her was subtle, but he knew it wouldn't be later, when she pretended to be alive, like these undead creatures did. He'd breathe in her scent then, take her in, and mount her. He couldn't wait to hear her mewls when he'd force himself into her tiny body, and feel her lust soak him.

But not until he dealt with her annoying father.

He turned back again to face Michael, and started a slow march toward the man. Another duel. But this undead creature was no Uratha, and Eric still had plenty of strength left to bite and tear. His rival could wait.

“Holy shit. Eric, you can't—”

Eric snapped his head around and growled at his mate, rumbling deep and loud in his throat. Gulping, she put up her hands, and took a few steps back. He'd defend her from her father wolf, claim her for his own, and if that meant hurting this Michael creature, so be it.

His rival was looking at the undead creature as well, growling, rumbling, and pacing. But he wasn't going to join in. No, Eric was going to have to break the undead, before he could return to his proper duel with Caleb. It wouldn't take long. He took another step toward Michael, and roared with all his rage and hunger, until his voice rolled over the black earth, the hard dens of the humans, and throughout the night. A proper Cahalith roar, one the other auspices could not match. It was enough to make Michael draw back his head, and wipe a finger across his nose.

“Boss!” Eric's mate called out. “Uh, I don't ... this wasn't supposed to happen, you know? And ... I don't think Eric's listening anymore. Caleb?” She looked over to his rival. “Caleb? ... ok, um, we have a problem.”

Caleb had readied himself, biting at the air and growling quietly, pacing, but not interfering. Whatever it was Jessy was asking of him, Caleb did not indulge.

“I’ll knock some sense into them,” Michael said, “and then you’re going to have to explain how the fuck this happened.” The undead gestured to the Uratha, the hole in the hard surface of the human dens, and the torn asunder metal cage.

“... careful Boss, the guys are fucking crazy in this form.”

The undead snarled and marched forward, adjusting the neck of whatever human fabric he was wearing on his chest, and sighing as he did. “Yeah, I know. Got some thralls combing the area to make sure there’s no one around to see any of this.”

The world of came a stop, and everyone froze, as the man’s skin began to churn. Like a bubbling ocean, Michael’s skin opened, revealing flashes of dark, unnatural blood within his carcass that hugged his insides. As more of him twisted and bubbled, he grew in size, adding a head’s height to him. Like his daughter, Michael started to grow spikes and hardened skin; these Gangrel corpses could change their bodies in strange ways. Taller again, the undead grew, and the spikes that emerged from his body were immense, and grotesque. His fingers grew claws, and the claws were hooked. His human fabrics began to disappear, and Eric stared as inhuman mouths appeared on the man’s skin, swallowing the fabric.

Michael took a step forward, and as he did, an arm fell off, fading into ash. A giant arm of monstrous size grew in its place, growing out of him with the speed of wind, and the size of an elephant’s leg. Eric took a step back as the undead creature leaned onto one side, weighed by the giant arm, and it only got worse as more spikes grew from it. Michael now walked on two legs and the one hand, each step causing the gargantuan arm to hit the black earth. Upon his back, wings began to grow, bat wings.

It got worse yet again. As Michael grew closer, his legs thickened, and talons erupted from his ape feet, far larger than Eric's. This lopsided, grotesque monstrosity charged at him, bellowing a cry of gargled rage Eric had never heard before, in his dreams or life. It was not natural.

But, if this was the creature Eric had to fight for the right to be with his mate, possess her, own her, then so be it. He roared in return, and met charge with charge.

Michael's wings grew in size, filling the space between human dens, fifteen wolves wide, and he flapped them a single time to send him up into the air, over Eric. Wind crashed against Eric, blinding him with dirt and dust, before the strange undead fell upon him.

Heavy. The corpse man had been maybe a quarter of Eric's weight, before he started to change. But now, he was far heavier. As if the undead had eaten a mountain of rocks, Eric struggled to deal with the weight of the monster on his back, and he felt, and heard, the crack of his bones. Michael's one giant arm clawed at Eric's back, and ripped into his fur, shredding his skin and flesh, while pinning him under its grotesque, unreal weight.

"The might of the werewolf, defeated so easily." Through the mess of his gnarled mouth, twisted fangs, and crooked jaw, the colossal creature hissed down at him. His one normal-sized arm was covered in spikes, and he used it to stab Eric again, and again, and again, each earning shouts of pain from the pinned werewolf. Each was white fire into Eric's body, earning roars mixed with whimpers and yelps. "Be happy I'm not Jacob, or you'd be dead."

Eric roared into the black earth, and tried to get up, but the corpse used his giant arm and pushed Eric's snout into the hard surface. Crunch. Teeth broke inward, and so did some bone.

"You're not selling yourself very well here, Eric. Jessy insists you're useful. So far all I see is a mindless dog that I can easily

defeat in combat. You should—”

Eric twisted, and drove his elbow up into the monstrosity’s face. He didn’t know why, didn’t know where the idea came from, but he knew to do it. Something inside him told him to, told him to use the elbow, when he couldn’t get the leverage to use his claws. And, it was a delightful sensation, to feel the man’s face crack against the bone.

Michael the abomination rolled off of him from the forced momentum, before coming back to his feet. A disgusting creature. It was something that would have crawled out of the earth, out of the tunnels humans had dug, out of the mounds of dead that humans buried in wooden cages, if a Host from ages past infected the human world, or if a Magath of flesh and destruction and corrupted animal had come for vengeance. It was horrific, and repulsive. It should die.

Eric got up, took a step toward him, and collapsed onto a knee. He clutched at his side, and whined as blood coated his palm. Not just coat, but gush over. He looked around at the hard black earth beneath him, and another quiet whine escaped him as he noticed the amount of blood. It was his blood.

Dizziness hit him, and he planted a hand to the ground as he struggled to keep from collapsing. How many times did this beast stab him in only a few seconds? It must have been dozens. How many bones did he break? Again, dozens. In the haze of pain and midst of blood loss, Eric fought to keep the darkness in his mind from taking over. He would sleep if he gave in. He would die.

All this, for a duel for a female. He looked over to his mate, and froze. She was staring at him, eyes wide, hand up to her mouth, covering it. Shocked. Scared. Worried. He didn’t want her shocked, or scared, or worried.

Michael charged him again, ripping Eric’s attention back to him. The black earth tore up underneath the abomination’s enormous



talons, and his wings tucked in to his misshapen back of spikes and flesh nodules. His massive arm crashed into the ground with each step, shaking the earth. Once the monster was close, he reached out with the giant arm, and wrapped it around Eric's throat.

The trapped mouse bites the cat.

Eric's neck was long enough he could twist his snout downward, and start biting at the creature's wrist; unimaginable pain filled him for using his broken snout, but he had to. The hand and wrist were fat with rippling, leathery skin, and Eric couldn't get the angle needed to get a proper bite, but something was better than nothing. It was enough to earn pause from Michael, and a few seconds pause was enough for Eric to feel a little of his strength return. He started kicking at the monster's chest with his feet, but not the kicks his human half would have used. These were raking, clawing kicks, each dragging his talons down Michael's chest.

The monster tried to stop him with his smaller arm, but it wasn't large or strong enough to block Eric's giant feet. And when Michael tried to let go of Eric's neck, to use his larger, titan arm, Eric held on with both of his, sinking his claws into it.

"Let go!" Michael the abomination raised his disgusting arm of pulsating flesh tumors, spikes, thorns, and overwhelming muscle and mass, and slammed it down against the street. The extra mouths on Michael's body screamed, and the few extra on his grotesque arm shouted frustration, as the monster crushed Eric.

The black earth splintered around him, and the echoes of snapping bones filled his ears. His bones. His insides. Eric coughed up a fountain of blood over his teeth, snout, and neck, precious life flowing onto the black ground, soaking him.

"Wait! Wait, fuck me, wait!" Jessy's voice. The tiny woman ran over to him, and got down on her knees beside him. She set her

hands on his chest, and sighed relief. “Thank god, he’s still breathing. Boss! What the fuck, man. You didn’t need to do that.”

The monster stood over him, flapped his enormous wings, and with his smaller arm, touched the many deep gashes on his chest. Some of them had broken through the extra mouths there, and the undead winced as he touched their split lips and tongues.

“He fought well. I can see why you like him, and—”

Shadow erupted behind Michael. Eric forced his head up enough to see what it was, but he felt it, and heard it first. Caleb appeared from the shadows, and dove at Michael’s spine, all four sets of claws out to catch his weight as he landed upon the monstrosity’s back. Michael roared, as did the extra mouths, some of them shrieking, some of them screaming, as he started to thrash around, but Caleb was behind his wings and not easily reached.

“Shit! Shit shit shit shit.” Jessy jumped up over Eric, got under his head, hooked her arms under his arms, and tried to pull him. His torso was far too large, too wide, for her to get a good grip, but she managed to spread her arms, and get them underneath his armpits enough for a very poor drag away from the renewed action.

Why was his rival helping him? Did he still want his mate for himself? No, wait, did Caleb ever want his mate? There’d been another reason for the fight. A test.

Thoughts ripped their way out of the swirling chaos of his mind, and back into the light of consciousness. Breathe! Fucking breathe, force it in, use it to press it down, ice against the fire hot rage and animal hunger within. Deep breaths, each a splash of cold water on his face.

“... Jessy,” he said, coughing up blood onto his long tongue. It dripped from his many teeth and across his enormous chest. Healing, but not fast enough to get him up on his feet any time

soon. Some animal inside him told him he wasn't going to die from the wounds, but the same animal was screaming at him to worry about the elder vampire that turned into some sort of eldritch nightmare.

He'd seen Jessie do some crazy shit, but apparently, elder Gangrels could take it to a new level. Michael looked like he belonged in a John Carpenter film set in Antarctica.

“Eric, your brain working yet?”

“It ... it is.”

“Fucking christ, you dumbass. You went full feral on me.” She dragged him a few more feet away, before collapsing onto her butt, and his colossal head and neck fell onto her chest and stomach, shoulders pinning her legs. “Can't believe you attacked Michael. Dude's centuries old.”

“ ... I ... stupid.”

“I can see that.” She pat his chest and ran her fingers through his fur where it was thicker around his neck. “He fucked you up bad. Think you'll live?”

“I ... will. Need time.”

“Michael wasn't going to kill you, but he's going to kill Caleb if the fucker doesn't stop.”

Eric getting lost to the animal hunger and overwhelming presence of the Uratha spirit inside him was understandable, he supposed, given his youth and how new this was to him. Even more understandable, considering Caleb had baited him into this, and then Michael showed up to make things worse. An excuse. He needed to be in control in this form, no matter what.

He turned his head, and growled at the watching vampires. Joe and three of his companions, along with Jonah and Hella were watching Caleb tear at Michael's back. Debby and Kathy stood in the hole in the office building Eric had created using Caleb's body. It was a blur in Eric's mind. Punching a giant hole in a warehouse repurposed as an office building was not a good idea.

Michael probably showed up to stop the squabbling, and he found two werewolves fighting out in the open street, destroying property. Big Masquerade violations. Shit.

## Chapter 85

~~Eric~~

He stared, wide-eyed, and frozen. With Jessy behind him, sitting underneath his head, it was propped up enough he could see. His thoughts were clear enough to understand what was happening now, the wolf Beast in his guts beaten and stabbed into submission by the monstrosity now fighting Caleb. How quickly Michael had beaten him, rendered him nothing more than a bleeding welp. Embarrassing.

He wanted to think it was because he'd been fighting vampires and a werewolf before Michael intervened, but he knew better. The man's ungodly weight had crushed him, and whatever he'd been stabbing him with had done more than simply stab a few times. His insides were on fire. His insides were mulch. He'd been defeated in a battle of pure brawn, and quickly at that.

Elder vampires were a breed of their own.

Caleb leaped backward, off of Michael's back, and flipped once before landing on all fours. The abomination turned to face the werewolf, but Caleb vanished into the shadow around one of the buildings. Irraka and their damn sneaky maneuvers.

"How dare you," Michael said. Some of the mouths on his body whispered raspy noises, echoing his deep, rumbling, garbled voice. "Which wolf are you?"

The shadows responded, "Caleb." At least Caleb was still in his right mind. Names had lost all meaning, when the wolf took over Eric.

Christ, he'd nearly attacked Jessy when she tried to defy him by moving away from where he'd set her. Like, an angry animal, frustrated with his mate for defying him. No wonder Caleb wanted to test him and see if he was stable when he left the wolf take him over.

The elder growled. "You think the Invictus are just going to accept this?" It annoyed Eric how the eldritch monstrosity managed to articulate well, while Eric and Caleb struggled to speak English in their transformed state; sentences longer than five words were a nightmare.

"You attacked ... kin ... first." Wherever Caleb was, he wasn't letting his presence be felt or found, voice echoing about randomly. Nice of him to refer to Eric as kin. Either Eric had passed his test, or Caleb was being a nice guy for the hell of it, which seemed unlikely.

The winged freak snarled, and began to stomp over to Eric, each step compounded by how the one massive arm crashed into the street with ridiculous weight. Uratha were heavy enough the claws on their feet often dug into the surface they stood on, when they needed an anchor. Michael was crushing the asphalt with pure weight; he had to be heavier than an elephant. No wonder Eric's body cracked and crumbled when Michael had flown up, and landed on him. Oh god, the man had flown with all that weight? Those wings were insane. This monster's power was immense, and Eric could only stare and watch, lying on the ground, mangled body bleeding everywhere, and head lying in Jessy's lap.

And yet, Caleb was taking him on. The Irraka did a drive by, taking advantage of Michael's approach toward Eric, and bit at the monster's ankle. Uratha teeth ripped through the thickened, armored skin, and blood gushed everywhere, splattering over the black street as Michael roared. He turned around and slammed his enormous arm down, cracking the street and leaving an imprint in the asphalt, but missing the speedy Uratha.

“Your kin was rampaging,” Michael said, again resuming his walk toward Eric. “Lost control.”

“No,” the shadow said, “not completely. Impressive. Respect him.”

Michael laughed, and came in closer, looming over Eric and Jessy. He had a smirk on his fucked up, almost bat-like face; looked really fucked up with the massive teeth poking out, up, and down from his lips.

“He’s young. I can forgive him some stupid decisions considering his circumstance. But know this, Eric Tanverson: I spare your life because you’re useful to the Invictus.”

Eric was very tempted to say ‘fuck you’, but even in his Gauru form, he was still a bleeding, broken mess. He could have been sandwiched in a car crash and be less beaten up than this behemoth had done to him in seconds. And the fucker who just beat his ass signed his checks.

Underestimating the enemy was never a good idea, and Caleb was making sure to not, judging by his guerrilla tactics. Probably learned from Eric’s mistake.

“Boss,” Jessy said, her hand stroking Eric’s furry mane on his neck, “give the guy a break. We were fighting off a bunch of Carthians, and—”

Caleb leaped from shadows. Everyone froze, and Eric’s lungs stopped working, as the werewolf, a blur of dark speed, bolted for Michael’s exposed spine.

The sound of a loud crack forced Eric to start breathing again, and he gasped as Caleb flew in the other direction. Without a moment’s hesitation, Michael turned around, and began walking after the werewolf, as Caleb rolled and crashed into a nearby wall, denting it, bits of concrete raining about. Something twisted and wormed left

and right behind Michael, fast, snake-like. A fucking tail. Not a normal tail though, like you'd find on a reptile or mammal. No, the fucker had a giant scorpion tail sticking out from his tail bone, something he'd grown in the seconds between Caleb's attacks.

How the fuck.

By the time Caleb had regained enough awareness to prepare for any sort of movement, Michael was in front of him. He stabbed his tail over his shoulder at the beast's stomach, much like a scorpion would. Caleb howled, and slid up the wall as Michael lifted him, enormous tail slowly raising the wounded werewolf, poison stinger sunk into the man's stomach. Higher, and higher, until Caleb's long body was dangling, feet hanging a full six feet above the sidewalk, back pinned to the building wall.

"And you," Michael said. "The only reason I don't kill you, is because we strive for good relations with the Uratha. Avery's pack is useful, to a point. But fighting other Uratha in the streets, risking the Masquerade? A single mile closer to South Side and I would consider this a severe Masquerade violation."

Caleb, growling and twitching, tried to lift his arms; no such luck. Maybe Michael's stinger had some sort of poison. It'd have to be a ridiculously strong venom to work on a werewolf, but Eric doubted Caleb was so injured that his limbs weren't working from the impact alone.

"As for the rest of you!" As Michael gestured to the many watching Kindred, he whipped his tail to the side. Caleb went flying once again, landed on the street not far from Eric, and rolled over several times before coming to a halt against Eric's side. "Squabbles between covenants are on hold, until the hunters are found and exterminated. Do not think I do not realize you instigated this, Joe Turner. Tones will hear about this, and you will be punished."



Madam Herrington, Eric Tanverson, and this beast here,” he gestured to Caleb, “are at fault as well. They shall be reprimanded.”

Sighing, the elder vampire shrugged out his arms, his wings, his tail, and everything began to fade away. The extra mouths on his skin began to spit back out the suit he'd been wearing, and it slowly enveloped his skin as he shrank. The giant mutant arm fell off, literally, as did the wings and tail; all turned to ash in seconds. A proper arm regrew where the giant one fell from, and the various bits of spikes, extra mouths, and hardened skin either faded or withdrew back into his body, before his suit pulled over it once again. It was like watching floating fabric drift outward from a body of flesh and blood, poke out over the surface, and cover grotesque, cancerous flesh beneath it.

And then there was only Michael MacDonald, tall, strong man in a suit, shaved head, and a single chain connecting nostril to ear. He growled at the watching Kindred, and they all visibly cowered. The aura of the elder was absurd, disgusting, a blood leech corpse letting his power rise to an overt display Eric had never expected. Jessy had said the man was over two centuries old in Kindred years, and in that amount of time, a vampire could gain and master absurd powers. He believed it now. An elder Gangrel was fucking freaky.

Eric and Caleb both began to return to their human form, threat gone. It was painful, and Eric doubted he'd be walking much, once he was back in human form. He was right. As his clothes reemerged, and his weight returned to normal, he looked up at Jessy, and tried to sit up. Holy shit pain, but not overwhelming. He managed, with a little bit of Jessy's help, and she smiled at him as she helped bring him to standing.

Joe came over to them, eying Michael closely with every step, before he reached down, and provided the same courtesy to Caleb. “Lucky Garry isn't here,” he said under his breath at Jessy.

She rolled her eyes, and started walking, making sure to keep Eric's arm draped over her shoulders. "Fuck you, Joe."

"Herrington," Michael said, staring at her, glaring daggers. "Enough."

"Yes sire." She forced her eyes away from him, and started walking faster, keeping Eric up. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

"... sorry," he said, once they had some distance between them and the group of Kindred. "I kind of fucked things up. Got carried away."

"Nah, you were pushed into it by that Caleb fucker, and Joe. And besides, seeing you run through a fucking wall, and fight another werewolf? Holy fuck, I am soaking my panties."

He laughed, and regretted it immediately. Christ, what the fuck had Michael done to him? It was like he'd been stabbed with silver, not regular spikes. Broken bones were put back together, but tender; they weren't the cause of the extreme pain. It was the unreal, serrated damage of Michael's spikes that had hurt him so much.

"No you're not. I'd smell it."

"Well, later, when I've got the Blush going."

"What about ... that red building, the spirit told us about?"

"Jonah, Hella, and I will drive back, once we drop you off at your place." She laughed, and leaned her head in toward his, pressing the top of it against his neck and chin. "Don't try and fight any elder vampires in the future, ya? I'd be really fucking sad if you died."

He turned his head enough to give her a small kiss on the forehead. "Me too."

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~~Jack~~

His mom wasn't doing much better. Almost as pale as Mary, and face sunken in a bit, and with a big tube coming out of her mouth, she looked like she was in a sci-fi horror movie. If he took out the tube, she'd probably start coughing and sputtering up black ooze, unplugged from her induced coma by the evil corporation that was selling her body to an alien species. The fantasy was preferable to the reality.

Sighing, Jack looked at his mom, and watched her broken, withered body try and breathe. The machine kept her going, life support, and she'd almost certainly die if he took her off of it. The doctors had found brain damage, and didn't know if she'd ever wake up.

He stood at the foot of the bed, and listened to the quiet clop clop of doctors and nurses walking by. He had to Dominate a few of them, to let him in, and to get an update on her condition. No change, of course. A sick, twisted fate, her life paralyzed by this strange moment. God was laughing at him, holding him in limbo at this horrible point. If she woke up, things would be different. If she died, things would be different. Damien would probably say God was testing him. Well, Jack was, at best, agnostic, and didn't give a shit about any deity trying to teach him a lesson.

The bar on the bed frame was still dented with his grip. They'd fix it at some point, he was sure, but for the moment, it was a nice reminder that he had to control his temper. He was a vampire, and the Beast was in his guts, telling him to claw and tear and rip and shred a hundred times more than it ever had before. Looking at his half dead mother, more than looking at his dead sister, was bringing his rage up to the surface, demanding he scream and roar. At least with Mary, there was a sense of finality, but the limbo his mom was

trapped in was triggering anxiety mixed with anger to the point he could feel vitae building up, despite no effort on his part to call it.

The Beast was calling it. Antoinette had said his Beast was unusually strong, and he was letting it get to the surface more than he should have been. Great.

A vampire's strength was directly related to their Beast, he knew that much. It was the piece of them that was inhuman, mixing and mingling with their human body and soul. An animal, a monster, that gave them their strength, their inhuman senses, their strange ability to speak to animals, transform into them, or manipulate the minds of kine. The closer he grew to his, the closer it got to the surface of his mind, and the more he didn't like it. More than that, the louder his inner monster grew, the more it didn't feel like anyone else's Beast, the more it felt strange, and angry. He wanted to ask Viktor about it, and now he couldn't.

Julias kept his Beast well under control, holding it deep inside, far away from the surface. Jack pieced that together on his own, watching his sire work, seeing how the man reacted to negative stimulus; a master of holding his inhuman side at bay, under control, contained. Either his sire was lucky, or had spent dedicated years of effort training himself.

“But me, Mom? I don't know. It could be me, or just the circumstances I keep finding myself in.” He squeezed on the metal bar, and his fingers slid into the dent grooves. “I regret Viktor's death. Julias doesn't seem to have the same bite, the same inner ... fury. Maybe he just saw it in Viktor, and did his best to avoid it. Maybe.” He squeezed the metal a little harder, and closed his eyes as he felt it threaten to bend more. Sighing, he relented his grip, and moved over to sit beside her again.

“Julias is great. Amazing teacher. He even fit the father figure bill for me, to some extent. I learned how to think from him, how to be

smart ... too smart.” He forced down the lump in his throat that threatened to rise, the memories of his conversation with his sister coming up. “You said he looked like a loan shark, remember? That was funny.”

Samantha did not stir. Her eyes didn’t flicker underneath her eyelids. Her fingers remained still, and pale, sitting on the hospital-green bed sheet. Her lungs moved, but only because a machine was making them. Half alive, like him, in a way.

“I said goodbye to Mary. She didn’t have much to say, but I figured it was important. It was weird, doing all the talking while she listened. Big switcharoo, compared to the past.” He reached out, and began to stroke his mom’s hair. Short brown hair, gentle curves and waves, less messed up than they were the first night he saw her in the hospital, but still not as bouncy as they were when he saw her through the window. “Not sure about you though, Mom. I ... I could say goodbye, I suppose. That could mean leaving you here, in a coma, but you’ll probably die eventually. I could take you off life support now, and that’ll kill you. Or, I could ask someone to sire you ... or I could sire you.” He shivered, and shook his head. “No, I can’t. Sorry I mentioned it. I’m barely holding on by a thread here, and if I did something like that, I know ... I know I’ll be as good as dead. Draugr, they call them. Mindless vampires who’ve given into their Beast completely.

“Someone else could sire you, though. Julias probably could, but I don’t want to put that strain on him so soon after siring me. My partners, Jess and Damien, they could. Neither of them have sired, and you’d be their first. What do you think? As a Gangrel, you’d be really in tune with your Beast, and that primal edge would be at your fingertips. And as a Mekhet, you’d be sneaky as hell. Sneaky and fast. And they got that Auspex thing that lets them see into things, into people, items, places, more than other people can. Scary stuff, right? Either of those interest you?”

His mom said nothing, and he sighed as he took her closer hand into both of his. He rubbed her fingers and knuckles, hoping against hope she might squeeze. No such luck, but he kept trying anyway.

“There’s Nosferatu. I ... I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, though. Not everyone gets off as lightly as Jacob or Triss.” He shivered as he pictured his mom looking like Maria. Fuck, that’d be horrific. “You could end up with eyes all over your face, or an extra arm growing out of your butt.

“Then, of course, there’s Antoinette, and the Daeva. You’d be sexy, I can guarantee that. Sexy ... and obsessed.” He leaned in, put his elbows on his knees, and put his chin on the bed next to his mom’s hand. “Daeva obsess over different things. Material things, art, music, romance ... sex.” Laughing, his shoulders shook with his chuckles, and he looked up the blanket toward his still mother. “I really shouldn’t be talking to you about my sex life, huh? Not really a normal topic for a mother-son conversation. But maybe it should be.

“Antoinette is my lover, and the love of my life. She’s smart, wise, confident, super rich, and has a massive sex drive that’s eternal.” He checked her face; no response. “Yeah, I know, don’t freak out. I went from being a loner nerd, to somewhat of a playboy, I suppose. Antoinette has two ghouls, girls, and ... yeah. That sound like something that might interest you? I mean, igniting your love life again, having one, making one. Certainly doable. Hell, you could bang a half dozen strangers every night if you wanted, as a Daeva.” He sat up and slouched forward, with elbows on the blankets again. “I know you were trying to get back into the dating world. That made me happy. The last thing I wanted was for you to linger, and get buried by remorse, you know? Throw me in a box in a ditch; what do I care, I’m dead. The living shouldn’t sit around lamenting the dead, wasting money on them, except for maybe a party to celebrate their life. Just the one party, to help move on.”

Groaning, he shifted the chair closer to her head, and set a hand on her shoulder. “I suppose that’s not the same. You didn’t know I was dead, just missing. I’ve been missing for almost two years. No closure, not really.” He gave her shoulder a little shake. No response, of course. “So, what do you think? Being a Kindred ain’t so bad. You get to start a new life, and it’s damn freeing, you know? Everything from your old life, gone, all the chains and weights removed. Clean slate.

“Except, that’s ... that’s the problem, isn’t it? For someone like me, that wasn’t too hard. For someone like you, it ... it could ... could be tough.” Another shake for her shoulder. No response. “But it’s better than dying, right? The Beast isn’t so bad. It hungers, and you have to feed it regularly, but you don’t have to kill anyone.” That earned a twitch, from him, and he grit his teeth as he leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. “You don’t have to, but it could happen. It happened to me, once, by accident. I handled it well, at the time. Not so well, I suppose, as the months went by. Mrs. Pavala. Her empty stare still haunts me, and ... and knowing you, it’d be worse, if it happened to you. It’d eat you up until you crumbled, killing an innocent person. But I wouldn’t let that happen.

“Julias says it was unusual that I frenzied that first night, especially since he gave me some blood. Cold blood from a fridge, but still, it was something, and should have been enough to stop a fledgling like me from full frenzying like that.” He looked down at his chest, the suit and tie, and clutched a hand to his sternum, fingers digging into bone. “This thing inside me is fucking ravenous, and I haven’t done nearly as good a job as Julias pushing it down. From day one, it was doing its damndest to get out. It’s strong. People have noticed that I’m unusual, for better or worse. Kindred younger than me, and some older, are afraid of me. I ... I don’t understand. Viktor was a monster, but I don’t know how much of it was him, and how much of it was our bloodline. And Julias—”

“Julias got lucky, very early on.”

Jack jerked his head toward the door. His sire stood there, hand in pocket while the other eased the door open silently. With quiet steps, Julias leaned back against the door, closing it, and offered Jack a small smile.

“Julias?”

“Not long after I was embraced, I visited my wife. We started to argue, and I hit her. Not a slap, either. I hit her hard enough to nearly break bone. Had to take her to the hospital. I vanished that night, and never saw her again.”

Jack stared at the man, and gulped. “You?”

“Me.”

“Hit your wife.”

“Yeap.”

“ ... why?”

“All these years, I assumed it was because I was a colossal asshole. And I’m sure that was part of it. But, after seeing what became of Viktor, and seeing ... what’s happening to you, I’m starting to wonder if our bloodline really is cursed.” Julias pulled up a chair, and sat across from him, looking at him over his mother.

“Cursed...”

“Maybe cursed is the wrong word. Viktor was strong, always was. So was I. I thought Viktor returned from his long torpor twisted, but ... I wouldn’t be surprised if the man had been a horrible, twisted soul before, and just did a better job hiding it before his torpor. And me, I felt that anger in me when I hit my wife, how it seared my



soul, and I ... I pushed every bit of that anger deep down into my guts. Hated myself, for a century, until I met a girl like Triss.”

Jack stared at him for a while, but laughed once the cliché reality of his words sank in.

“For the love of a woman, right?”

“Exactly.”

Jack laughed again, and pat his arm on his mom’s shoulder as he smiled at Julias. “I don’t have much context. First relationship of my life is proving to be a keeper.”

“First relationship I’ve had in forever is proving to be a keeper, too.”

“Sometimes I wonder about marriage. A paper contract seems so ... meaningless, compared to ... well, everything about our lives.”

“Yeah, it does. But fuck me, I was going to ask her anyway, Jack.”

That was a bit surprising. “Think Triss’ll say yes?”

He nodded, and offered him a small grin. “Jen and I have been trading secrets, with Triss as a spectator. Personal stuff. I’m going to use the fifth and final secret as a marriage proposal.”

“Sounds disgustingly romantic.”

“Very. Triss will hate it, and love it.”

Jack smiled at the man. To know Julias had struggled with extreme rage was comforting, in a way. If the great and mighty, and sorrowful Julias, could quell his rage, maybe Jack could, too. Then again, Julias hadn’t gone through the same sort of pain Jack had. His Hell had been different.

The two chuckled for a little while, before they both looked back to Samantha.

“I’d sire her, Jack, if you asked.”

“I can’t ask that.”

“I can handle it.”

“Maybe.” Maybe not. If Julias did have a Beast as fucked up, twisted, and angry as Jack’s, siring another childe so soon could bring it to the surface. “I don’t want to put that on you.”

“You could sire her, but ... no, it’d be a bad idea.”

“Agreed.”

Sighing, Julias looked up at the machine showing her vitals. “Natasha wrestled with this.”

“... she did?” He hadn’t thought about that.

“Yeah. Her mother died of illness, brought on by her extreme depression over her daughter’s disappearance. Not long after, her father killed himself.”

“I ... I don’t understand. Why didn’t she embrace them, or ask someone to?”

“Many reasons. She didn’t have the same friends you did, or clout. And at the time, embracing was off limits except by special circumstance.” The man sighed, and leaned in toward Jack, over his mother’s waist. “And, even if she could have, she’d have hesitated.”

“Kindred life can be rough.”

“Yes, it can. Natasha’s life in the Ordo Dracul terrified her. She left, joined the Invictus, and lived inside numbers and books as she

coped with how scary her new life was. I'm not exactly friends with the sheriff, but the few times I saw Daniel during those first few years after her embrace, he looked ... especially stone-like. I didn't know why at the time, since his embracing a child was a secret."

"And getting hit by that fear is a very real possibility with Mom."

"Yes, it is."

"But it's better than her dying."

"Is it?"

Jack glared at his sire, and leaned in as well, only a foot remaining between their faces. "You think it'd be better if she died?"

"That's not what I said. I can't make this decision for you. Personally, being Kindred has been a roller coaster of ups and downs, with greater highs and lows than I could get when alive. But your mom is going to be starting from a very, very low low. It could ruin her. It could save her, give her a new lease on a broken life." The man didn't pull away, staying close, and matching Jack's gaze.

They stared at each other for a little while, in the eyes, without blinking. No malice or frustration. Julias wanted Jack to see what was going on in his mind without saying it, and Jack did his best to see.

Give her a chance, Jack.

"... I ... I think I'll ask someone to sire her."

Julias smiled at him, offered a quick wink, and leaned back in his chair. "Whatever happens, she'll get the best welcome possible. I mean come on, her kid's one of the Right Hands of the Invictus, and a prodigy. She'll be treated with respect."

Prodigy, heh. Julias knew how to inflate his ego, that was for sure.

“Except she won’t be of our bloodline. She’ll be ... someone else’s.”

“Yeah, she will.” Instead of the frown Jack expected, Julias’s smile remained. It was a good thing she wasn’t of their bloodline, if this insidious Beast in their guts was genuine. It’d be years before Jack was in a position to sire, and Julias probably wouldn’t want to for years, or decades. Plenty of time for them to figure out if this problem was fixable, manageable, or ignorable.

“Julias, I ... I just wanted you to know, for all the shit that keeps coming my way, our way, I don’t regret what happened.”

“You don’t think it’d have been better if I could have sired you on your couch, after a conversation and some preparation?”

“Heh, maybe if you got me drunk, first. But I see what you mean. Siring me while I was bleeding to death must have been a tough decision.”

“You’re making the same decision as we speak.”

“I ... I guess I am.” And it was a damn tough one. “And if I knew then what I know now, I would have wanted you to embrace me.” He’d never have met Antoinette if Julias hadn’t.

The two of them nodded and leaned back in their chairs, each folding their arms across their chests and suits. Decision made, then.

“I assume you’re going to ask Antoinette?”

Ok, decision part A made, part B pending.

“I think so. But imagining Mom with a Daeva’s ... quirks, is difficult. She’s an airhead.”

“An airhead, or maybe she just doesn’t overthink everything. She lets the small things roll off, and focuses on the big things. Maybe she lets her emotions guide her a little more than she should, but then, being logical isn’t always a good thing. Humans and vampires alike have this nasty requirement of needing to listen to their emotions in order to be happy, Jack, and a silly airhead has figured that out intuitively. In a way, they’re a genius.”

They both chuckled. It was half true, and they knew it.

“I wonder about Damien,” Jack said. “Fiona reminds me of Mom. I wonder if she’ll help put a dent in Damien’s mind. Dude has a wall the size of Everest between him and the joy literally throwing itself at him.”

“Damien and the sheriff are similar. No one’s cracked Daniel’s shell, except for Natasha, and even then it’s only a little. I have no idea if Fiona will be able to get through Damien’s thick skull, considering he’s had half a century to build it.”

“Half a century. God damn. Really makes all my whining sound so juvenile.”

Julias shook his head, sighing. “No, it doesn’t. The burden you’re carrying is unusual, Jack. I trust you to carry it, but don’t underestimate its weight.”

Nodding, Jack reached out, and stroked his mom’s forehead. “I’m ... excited, to talk to her again. Fucking terrified of telling her Mary’s dead, but excited to show her I’m alive. Hell, I’m even excited to tell her she gets to live for forever now. Excited and so damn terrified.”

“I look forward to speaking to her again, as well. And, Antoinette will get to speak to the mother of her lover.”

Well, shit. Jack hadn't even thought about that. Was that a good thing, or a bad thing? She'd tell Antoinette about how dirty he used to let his room get, or that one time when he was a boy and he had food poisoning and—yeah, bad thing, all bad.

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~~Damien~~

They sat there for a while, and listened to distant echoes of combat. Matthew's roars, and the crack of gunfire, were far enough Damien had to assume they were a near mile off. By the time the sound reached them, it was warped and a shell of its former self, which gave the three vampires and monster enough quiet to sit, recover, and chat. Chatting was, perhaps, the wrong word. Groaning was a better one.

"I am so sore," Vicky said.

Damien grumbled and looked her way. He was sitting, but only because Fiona had managed to drag him over to the tunnel wall, a good fifty feet away from the crumbled ceiling. Above where the trap had been set, was mangled earth, steel bars, and shattered concrete, threatening to fall at the edges of the hole. Fiona had spent some time hooking webbing to the hole, but without supporting arches or pillars, it was a band-aid at best, not safe to stay under.

Vicky was right to complain, he supposed. She wasn't right to keep glaring at him.

"You pushed me on top of Parker."

"I made a tactical decision. You had the best chance of surviving being crushed, compared to Parker." He gestured with his still working arm to the Daeva beside her. "Unless you would have preferred Parker be crushed."

“I, for one, am happy for Mister Burksen’s valiant, and heroic efforts to save my life.” Parker nodded, as if a king bestowing praise to his knight.

“You would be.” Vicky gestured to her ripped suit, and the many places where concrete had torn through her skin. Like all Kindred, her insides were dry and withered, a corpse, but as a seasoned Ventrue with developed Resilience, fatal damage had been resisted. Dark, thick Kindred blood peeked out from her wounds only long enough to seal it over with hardened, dry skin, before it began healing the wound proper from the inside.

He was envious. His ankle still wasn’t functional, but at least he wasn’t in utter agony anymore. Only extreme agony.

He lifted his broken hand, and rotated it. Familiar white fire danced up the ruined limb, and blotted out his mind, until he let the useless limb go limp on the tunnel floor once again. Don’t move, just focus on healing. If the hunters came back, or worse, new hunters attacked them from the other side, Damien wouldn’t be able to do shit.

Vicky and Parker were capable of walking now, but only barely. Parker’s injuries weren’t as bad as Vicky’s, but, like Damien, he simply wasn’t resilient enough to manage thousands of pounds of rubble falling on his body, even if most of it hit the Ventrue on top of him. And Vicky had been extraordinarily lucky, dealing with less debris than Damien had. Apparently, the worst of it had fallen on Damien, as if someone was punishing him for trying to be heroic. Divine comedy.

Fiona was wounded, but nothing more than scrapes and bruises. Her leg was bleeding, and it wasn’t healing with the gusto of an Uratha. And it smelled like blood. Damien, Vicky, and Parker all glanced at the girl’s wound, and Fiona, bless her soul, was oblivious

to everyone's gaze. She sat beside Damien, pat his leg in a place where it wasn't cut open, and smiled at him.

"Damien was fast! Never seen a laddie move so fast," she said.

"He was an assassin," Parker said. "Comes with the job description."

"Assassin? Ah, yer talking about that ... Lucas business."

Damien glared at the man. He'd yet to tell Fiona about the specifics of his time with Lucas, of the darker parts of it, and it was not a conversation to be having in the current circumstance.

Vicky laughed. "Parker is only envious. His strength is considerable, and he uses Majesty to seduce kine regularly. But he is slow, for a Daeva."

Parker rolled his eyes, but didn't deny it. If anything, the man smiled, ran a finger through his shoulder-length blonde hair, and gave Vicky a small shove of the shoulder. Friendship. Damien watched, and sure enough, Vicky didn't snarl or growl or frown like an annoyed person might. Rather, she half grinned, half smirked, and returned it. Perhaps there was more to their relationship than simple partners in business. It was endearing, a little.

"Fiona," Damien said, "what environment do you need, to be able to get back to your lair?"

"A dark tunnel works, to gie to my chamber in the jungle. Some bars and clubs could take us to the blood Dolareido chamber. And—"

Vicky raised a hand. "Blood Dolareido?"

"One of the nightmares." Damien wanted to continue, explain, but he thought better of it. If Fiona wanted to go into more detail, she could, but she'd already shared many details of her life with the



Kindred, and details of how Begotten worked in general. She was too trusting. “If we need a dark tunnel to travel into your jungle lair, we could arrange it, knock out some lights.”

“Ye dinnae need to do that. There’s lots of tunnels down ‘ere that dinnae have light.”

“I’m less concerned about being helpful, Fiona, and more concerned about having another escape avenue, if hunters rush us tonight. We’re in no shape to defend ourselves, especially since our front liner ran off.” And, from the stories he’d heard, a werewolf on the rampage was not something any of them wanted to be near.

“Oh, I gie it.” She tapped a finger to her chin as she looked up, thinking. “I—”

Everyone snapped their heads down the tunnel as footsteps managed to overcome the sound of their hushed voices. The vampires brought up their guns, and Fiona got up, ready to do whatever it is she’d do in a gunfight. But as the footsteps grew louder and closer, Damien sighed and waved a dismissing hand.

“Matthew,” Damien said, loud enough the others knew they were in the clear. “Catch any of them?”

“No.” Groaning, much like the Kindred, Matthew stepped around the distant curve of the tunnel, and came their way. He looked like hell. The four of them each offered their own small gasps or frowns as the big guy came into view, their eyes roaming the trailing streaks of blood that coated him.

Like gasoline on a bonfire, the hunger in Damien’s stomach exploded, and he stared, wide-eyed, at the copious amount of blood on the man’s body. Some of it was still dripping. He didn’t have any holes in his clothes, but the clothes vanished during the transformation, meaning he’d been torn up in his werewolf form then.

Matt managed to reach them, before he groaned louder, and sat down on some rubble a few feet away. Sitting became slouch, and he slid down until his butt was on the dirty floor, with his back to the debris. Exhausted, panting, Matt let his head roll back and dangle.

“Ye awright?” Fiona said.

“I’ll live. Fucking wiped, though. Some silver hit me, and so did a few dozen bullets besides. And some grenades.”

Parker whistled. “Don’t forget getting crushed.”

The Uratha laughed before he nodded toward Damien. “You look like you got the worst of it. Think you’ll heal?”

“I need time, and blood.” He put his pistol away, and used the one good hand to gesture to his ankle. “I can heal enough to move, but that’s it.” And the longer he went, the more he could feel the hunger grow. It wanted out. It wanted to defend itself, repair, get ready for the hunt, and most of all, it wanted to jump Matthew and drink the man’s life essence until he was a dry husk.

“I’d help you out,” he said, “but I’m fucking wiped, dizzy, low on blood and in desperate need of RNR.”

Sighing, he nodded, as did his fellow vampires. They were hungry too, no doubt, but they’d suffered neither the damage nor had they exerted themselves in that moment like Damien had. They were hungry, but he was growing voracious.

He bit down, clenched his jaw, and nodded. “Are we safe?”

“I think so. I chased them to the upper level of the tunnels, and they got out through a manhole. Don’t think they were expecting to run into a Rahu down here.”

“Rahu?” Vicky said.

“One of the Uratha auspices.” Matthew made a vague, weak attempt at flexing, but he barely managed to lift his arms. They dropped, thudding against his legs and the rubble. “Linebackers. Takes a lot to bring me down.”

Parker laughed, and choked on a following cough. “Like a host of bullets, knives, grenades, and silver.”

“Ok, so maybe they were expecting Uratha, but they didn’t bring enough manpower to take me in a straight fight. They probably expected the rubble to take us out.”

“It nearly did!” Fiona said, throwing up her hands.

“Yeah, I guess it nearly did,” Matt said, a small smile sneaking onto his lips as he looked at Damien. “You, are fast as fuck. It was a blur, but I saw you move, man.”

Damien tried to return the smile, but it was hard to find any sense of joy and accomplishment. Pain, hunger, it was spoiling everything.

“Aye, he was.” Fiona leaned in, and nudged her head against Damien’s shoulder, before looking to the rest of the group. “We’re in nae shape to fight. We should go home.”

“Agreed,” they said.

With lots of pained grumbles, all of them got up. As Damien did, Matthew offered him a shoulder, and Damien took it as Fiona got down on a knee beside him. In seconds, she wrapped his ankle in webbing. After a dozen or so circles of her hands around it, it was encased in a brace with the sturdiness of a cast. Thank God, he wouldn’t roll it by accident, and he could put a little weight on it.

The walk back was a slow one. With every minute, Damien could feel his wounds heal, at least to the point they were becoming functional. He dare not put too much weight on his bad ankle, but

he could tell it was repaired enough to function again, if he absolutely had to use it. Same for his wrist. A snap of the fingers would probably shatter the joint, and many other parts of his body in his current state, but at least bones were put back together, and his skin was healed over. Fiona didn't know how close to death he'd become, and he aimed to keep it that way. A younger Kindred would have been nothing but ash under a pile of rubble.

A door took them back to the higher level of tunnels, and Parker locked the door behind them. From there, it was a twenty minute walk to the nearest subway platform, and each step sent throbbing hunger up into Damien's skull. Fiona and Matthew were bleeding, and both were helping him walk. The proximity made smelling their blood easy, and he gulped on a dry throat as he tried to ignore the hunger.

Ever since Lucas's failed coup, Damien's secrecy was over, and he could feed as other Kindred did, without having to hide in stealth and shadow. Before, when every night was spent skulking, and every near encounter meant his potential death, he'd gone many nights starving. He'd barely passed his fledgling year before the Purge, and spent years terrified of suffering the fate of his fellow brothers and sisters of the church. A lot of hungry nights, riding the edge of frenzy, as he huddled in a ball, cold and scared in the tunnels, or abandoned basements.

He wasn't used to that creeping hunger anymore, and present circumstance was rectifying his forgetful memory.

"I'll head back to HQ and update the council," Vicky said. "Unless you feel you have to, Mister Right Hand Burksen."

She was trying to be funny. It wasn't, not at the moment. Her words grated on him, and he glared at her, but didn't let the rising fury lead to anything more. If he'd been Invictus, and not a Right

Hand purely through Maria's recommendation, he might have felt more comfortable giving into his annoyance and yelling at her.

"Probably a good idea," he said. "I'll—"

"I'll take care of Damien," Fiona said. "I'll make sure he gits something to eat."

Damien raised a brow down at the small monster, but Vicky, Parker, and Matthew nodded, and walked up the stairs to the locked door that opened up into the Invictus center of South Side. All Kindred had keys for the tunnels, and Vicky didn't hesitate to lock the door behind her.

Leaving him with Fiona, alone, and starving.

"I can tell yer hungry," she said.

"I ... I said it, earlier."

"Nae what I meant. I mean, yer very hungry. Yer very very, very, very hungry."

He frowned for a moment, but her bright smile punched through it. "You're right. Sorry if I've been staring at your—"

"I can see it, in your Beast."

"You can?"

"Mmhhh. I can see ye, the real ye, or the ye inside ye, ye ken? And ye're hungry."

He couldn't help but smile at her accent, and the balance it held with American city dwellers. "I am. I really ... really am. Been a long time since I've been this hungry."

"Then ask."

“Ask?”

“Ask, to feed, on me. If ye’re this hungry, it cannae wait, right?”

“ ... right.”

Beaming at him, she nudged her forehead into his shoulder, and slipped under his arm so he could lean on her. “I dinnae ken what will happen if ye drink from a ... a monster, but, ye could find out?” Giggling, she set him down on the subway platform edge, legs dangling off at the knee. A hazard, if a subway train came by, but they were long decommissioned, and it was sort of nice to sit there and ignore the faded yellow line on the concrete they were supposed to stand behind. “Here.” She leaned in toward him, and turned her head, exposing her neck.

“You sure?” He stared at her neck. Her beautiful, soft, pale neck. Her shirt was cut a bit low, and her brown leather jacket was opened a couple buttons, so her neck and smattering of freckles around her collar were visible.

“I am. But, ye have to tell me about yer past.”

“My past?”

“Aye! Vicky called ye an assassin.”

“That...” He winced and looked away. “I’m not an assassin, it’s just ... It’s about Lucas, and what ... I essentially was, that last night.”

“Whatever it is, it’s made ye ‘fraid of everything.”

“Everything?”

“Aye.” Sighing, she looked down and kicked her feet out a few times, her boots bouncing against the concrete as they came back down with gravity. “At first, I thought I liked Eric. I’m a silly lass,

and I like my lads all broken and sad.” Her sigh vanished, replaced with giggles. “But, Eric is different. He’s ... older.”

“I’m over twice his age.”

“I dinnae think ye are!” She reached out, and ran her fingers along the shaved smooth half of his head, before running them into the hair on the other side. “Ye act like ye’ve got a terrible secret, something ye’re afraid to share. But ye dinnae act old.”

“I ... I was embraced when I was your age. Kindred don’t really age, in more ways than the obvious. The mind, the personality, are sort of static.” Torpor aside. He’d been a loner and a troubled, problematic boy when Lucas found him, and gave him a chance.

“I see. That explains why some vampires are so silly, like Jessy.” Nodding, she slipped a hand up his back, and onto his neck, to help guide him down to face her. Her fingers felt wonderful. “Ye ignored me, when I was flirting with Eric.”

“I didn’t ignore you, I was—”

“Ignored.” She frowned, blew up her cheeks a bit, and kicked the platform. An adorable temper tantrum, sort of. “I was trying to make ye jealous.”

“ ... mission successful.”

Her chipmunk frown evaporated, replaced with a radiant smile and more giggles. “Eric is definitely a sexy man, but he’s an old man on the inside, in a good way. Ye’re different. Ye’re ... emo.”

Ugh, not this again. “Jessy told me the same thing.”

“It might be the hair.”

“It was the end of the sixties. Everyone was experimenting with their hair.” That earned another laugh from her, and he smiled at her as the fire of his pain faded into background noise. “I can only regrow my hair to how it was when I was embraced, and that’s this.” He pointed to it, how one side of it was shaved smooth, and the other side dangled with dark hair almost reaching his shoulder. It wasn’t perfectly shaved in half, with enough hair to cover the top of his head, but there was no hiding the very unique hairstyle, and how it left most of the skin of the left side of his head exposed.

“I see lasses these days with locks like those. Fashion models and what have ye.”

His turn to frown. “Thanks.”

Giggling like a kid’s toy he’d wound up and let go, she reached out, hooked her hand over his shoulder, and ran her fingers through the hair. “I like it, but it is very emo on a lad like ye, with yer dark hair and pale skin.”

“You have pale skin.”

“I’m a ginger! Nae a fair comparison.” All laughs and giggles, she used her exploring fingers to guide him to face her. “Ye’re hurt and ye need blood ... Taste me. We can talk more, later.”

He wanted to argue. It wasn’t that he was in denial of what he was, like a fledgling vampire. He’d long accepted he was a vampire, and he’d long accepted it was normal and encouraged for vampires to feed. He’d killed, with sword, gun, and fang. But he’d never, ever fed on someone that he held in high regard; or in this case, knew he was attracted to. It was a line he’d yet to cross, one that Lucas would have told him to not, or he’d fall into the bad habits of someone like the Prince.

He could still hear the man’s voice, lecturing him, preaching, explaining the folly. Haunted by the ghosts of his past, like Fiona



said.

If he truly was emo, he must have been wearing it on his face, for both Jessy and Fiona to notice. Others too, likely. It wasn't like he wore mascara, or black lipstick, or covered half his face with his hair, so something more innate must have been giving that impression.

“How ... how are you so happy, all the time?”

“I dinnae spend half a century forced to hide in sewers, for one.” Giggling again, she slipped her hand behind his head, and forced him toward her neck. “Taste me.” She was far too nice to him. Subtly, she'd hinted that he had baggage, but hadn't used the dreaded word. Too kind.

He breathed in the smell of her. There was no getting around that she was alive, and he wasn't. It made the difference between them all too apparent, and appealing. He was an undead, and he had a corpse's desire to fill itself with the living essence of another. Every time he saw her, every time she smiled at him, a piece of him knew he wanted to sink his fangs into her, and sink more than that into her.

And he did. God help him, he did. His good arm was closer, and he used it to hook her further shoulder, pull her to him, and hold her still as he leaned in the final few inches, and sank his fangs into her beautiful, silky, shivering neck. But she grew still, once his fangs pierced her skin, and the pleasure of the Kiss flowed into her.

He almost jerked his head away, as the foreign taste flooded his mouth. What in the Lord's name was that taste? It was ... it was ... he didn't know. Kine blood was warm, and so was this, but kine blood tasted warm, a flavor wholly unique to a vampire's taste buds, the flavor of life, sweet and delicious. If that was in Fiona's blood, it was buried underneath something cold, and a strange mix of sweet

and ... sour? No, not sour, but something he couldn't identify that made him tremble.

Faint memories trickled up through his mind, summoned by the flavor. He'd tasted something similar, when he was kine. An alcoholic drink of some kind, maybe? He groaned into Fiona's neck, and let more of his need surface. The Beast didn't mind this strange new flavor, despite how powerful it was. It latched onto Fiona's neck, and sucked harder, as an afterkick slammed into Damien's mind. A cold, sweet, sour ... hard liquor. They were words he barely understood anymore, with how long it'd been since he could eat normal food. But whatever it was in the horror's body, whatever it was that affected Fiona's blood, whatever it was about the nightmare creature that existed parallel to her human half, he could taste it.

He was drinking a nightmare.

Fiona moaned. Damien forced his eyes open, and pulled away, to the rage and dismay of the hungry thing inside him. He'd only managed a couple gulps of her blood, and he licked his lips as he savored the strange, powerful flavor.

"Wow," Fiona said. She reached up, and touched her neck where his fangs left her bleeding. "I ... I'm bleeding." She blushed, and her pale skin almost glowed red.

"Sorry. Let me..." He leaned back in, and gave the punctures a couple licks. They healed over in seconds.

Moaning, Fiona nudged her neck toward his tongue. "I ... I'm ... sleepy." Giggling again, she turned more to face him. "That didnae last long!"

"I didn't take much." He gulped down saliva. The blood coursing through him ignited the Blush of Life, and he found himself staring

all the harder at the busty redhead. More specifically, he was staring at her breasts, and how her panting made them rise and fall.

“It didnae taste good?”

“It tasted great.” And Longinus himself would have struggled to find a more empowering source of blood. He felt energized, invigorated, and he wanted more. “Very different.”

“It ... it felt good.” She shivered, and raised a hand to wipe her brow. “Oh, I’m feeling a little dizzy. Dizzy and ... um ... tingly.”

“The Kiss can do that. I only took a little, but you should still get some rest, be in bed.” And let me into that bed. He forced down the thoughts, but they sprang right back up. For all his practice at keeping his thoughts under control, the taste of her blood was still fresh on his tongue, and her blood was coursing through his veins, forcing him to feel alive. He wanted more. He needed more.

He was staring at her neck, her cleavage, her flushed skin, everything. When she turned to face him more, he didn’t try and rip away his gaze, like he normally would. He knew he couldn’t even if he tried.

Upon noticing his blatant staring, she smiled up at him, and started undoing the final buttons of her jacket.

“Um, what’re you—”

She slid out of the jacket, and Damien stared as she made sure to emphasize the size of her bust as she did so. Once she set it aside on the old subway platform, she slid further up onto the stage, turned to face him more, and pulled up her shirt so its hem rested above her bra. And, laughing and squeaking, she slid her bra up over her breasts.

Damien gulped thrice, as her heavy, pale breasts fell against her ribs, and rippled with the gentle impact. They were huge, and they were swollen. He knew it was normal for a Kiss, when done slowly and gently, to be arousing for kine; and anyone alive, apparently. But, he'd never partaken of its effects himself, never even took the time to admire its effects. This was the first time he'd really taken a moment to appreciate what the Kiss could do to a willing participant. Her pink nipples were large, swollen to points, and they stood out from her heavy breasts, demanding to be touched.

More giggles. She reached out for him, took his good hand, and set it against her breast. He froze as the softness filled his hand, overwhelmed it, and her hard nipple pressed into his wrist. Heavy, and warm, and mesmerizing.

“Um, Fiona, I—”

“Ye Kissed me! And now, ye should kiss me.” She nodded, blushing, but steeled with resolve, confidence, and the tipsy euphoria of a Kiss cut short. “And ... and massage my tits, at the same time. Gently! I'm aw sensitive and tingly.”

He gulped again, and the sensation of saliva sliding down his throat shocked him. The Blush of Life was not something he normally indulged, but it was coursing through his veins now, and he didn't want it to stop. His dead heart beat faster, and his member pressed against his suit pants, as he cupped the heavy weight of the tiny redhead's large breast. He turned his hand a little, began to slowly run his thumb in circles around her puffy areola, and he let out a quiet groan, as his touch earned a tremble from the beautiful creature.

“See,” she said, and she pulled on his head to guide him back to her, “another thing I like about ye over other lads, is ye're my wounded soldier.”

“Wounded soldier?” he said, gulping yet again as he came in closer, close enough their noses touched.

Grinning, she fluttered her eyelashes at him, drawing his gaze into her golden eyes, before she leaned in, and sneaked a kiss on his lips. He froze, and stared at her as she kissed him. Soft, with a hint moisture, and enough metaphorical heat to melt him.

“Aye. It took a wee while to figure out what I wanted, but what I want ... is someone like ye. Ye stupid dobber. The wounded soldier, with a wee bit of emo mixed in.” Rolling her eyes, she leaned in again, and resumed the kiss. And this time, he had time to return it. He sank into it, closed his eyes, and focused on the feeling of her warmth against him, the weighty softness of her breast in his palm, and the heat of her breath on him.

Wounded soldier? He didn't get it, but, he could ask about it later. All that mattered now was the arousal pumping through him, and how the powerful kick of her blood had been.

He pulled back for a second. “I ... I um...”

“Aye?”

“You didn't have to ... take your breasts out.”

She rolled her eyes again, and leaned back into his lips, making sure they brushed against his as she talked. “Jessy told me I'd need to treat ye like a blind fool.” Her one hand continued to drift behind his head, and her other slid under his fondling hand. Moaning, blatantly at that, she pressed his hand against her breast harder, so it conformed against his fingers and palm, softness filling in between his digits. Wow.

“I ... can't say I blame her.”

“I threw myself at ye and ye didnae respond before. Now, I hope the message is clear.”

“ ... it is.”

“Then, do a lass a favor, and help me out.” Her hand on his took his wrist, and started to slide it down her body. Once it got to her jeans, she undid the button and zipper, and guided his fingers under her underwear.

Smooth, soft flesh awaited him. He groaned as his fingers pressed against her soft mons, and again, when she pushed them further down, and they found her folds. Wet. Warm.

“You want—”

“I want ye to play with me, touch me, until I cum on yer fingers, while ye Kiss me.” She tilted her head, exposed her neck again, and grinned at him through the corner of her eye. “Coz it felt amazing.” Blushing, quivering, the little redhead grinned at him. Slut City had had quite an effect on her, and he most definitely did not mind.

He shivered, and despite himself, growled, a hungry growl. He was still hungry, and he did want more of her strange, powerful, unusual, and enticing blood. And, he wanted to keep touching her, feel her, get inside her. He wanted everything.

He leaned back in, set his fangs to her neck, and sank them into the soft skin. Immediately, the little redhead trembled, and spread her legs. As her monster blood oozed into his mouth, warm and intoxicating, but almost too flavorful to handle, his fingers began to caress the lips of her sex, and the small nub of flesh at the top.

“There!” she said, whimpering. “There, ye found it. So just ... be gentle ... and keep ... rubbing it ... with wet fingers.”

Gulping down her blood, and growling into her neck all the while, he did as she said. He lowered his fingers more, and sank them into her, finding more wetness. Her insides were both soft and tight, and he almost froze at the sensation of her wet sex clenching down on his digits. With his fingers coated in her juices, he resumed massaging her clitoris.

“I thought maybe ... ye wouldnae know ... mmmm.” She almost fell away from him, since they were sitting beside each other, legs still dangling off the platform. But, despite how she was obviously struggling to not give into the euphoric bliss and relaxation of the Kiss and fall over, her arm on the back of his neck managed to get a grip on his further hip. He couldn't see what her other hand was doing, but he could see her elbow over her shoulder, and guessed she was massaging her breast, since he no longer was.

He knew plenty about sex, both from the strange friends of his life before his embrace, but also, it was Dolareido. No matter how much he'd tried to avoid the topic, fifty years of hiding inside Slut City had bestowed him with some basics. And, no matter how much every reflex he'd developed was telling him he might be crossing some sort of line with Fiona, the Beast in him knew better. The girl wanted it. He wanted it.

Just give in.

He test flexed his broken hand. It hurt, but it was working again, and every moment of the Begotten's concoction of life and nightmare energy entering his being, was another piece of his body rebuilt and functional. Drinking her was healing him faster than drinking a kine would have, and that was important to know. More important, was how good it felt, how good she felt, how amazing the mewls and whimpers she made were, and how he wanted more.

He pulled his teeth away, and she whimpered at him, her eyes fluttering, tired and pleasure laden. With his other hand functional

again, he used both to pull her further up onto the platform. The poor creature, trembling and quivering, managed some more giggles as she lay on the dirty concrete. This wasn't exactly a sexy place, or remotely clean place to do be doing something like this, but it didn't matter anymore. He needed more, and he was going to have it.

He stared down at the small redhead, and knelt beside her. She was in that exhausted, sleepy-but-blissful state a good Kiss could put someone into, a pleasure coma, and it made her look amazing. With her jean fly open, her shirt and bra up to expose her breasts, and her arms limp on the floor around her, she looked delicious. A helpless, trembling, dripping wet meal. He needed more. More.

He traced his wet fingers over her breasts, and he growled as he felt the softness fill his palm. Her breathing pressed them into his hand, and she mewled as he offered her nipple a squeeze, before his hand slid down her stomach, and under her white panties. As his fingers found her sex once again, the touch immediately causing her to quiver, he leaned in over her, and resumed the Kiss for the third time. More.

“D-Damien ... I didnae ken ye could be so ... Ye—nnn!” Her hips lifted, and her legs spread, as he slid his fingers into her squeezing slit. Soaking wet, hot, taut around his two fingers, and heavenly. He pressed his fingers up into her, toward her belly, and probed up in a rhythm, in an instinctive, primal beat, as he drove the busty, little creature trapped in his fangs, to orgasm. A new coat of juices soaked his fingers, and her insides clenched down hard enough to force his hand to hold still. He did, for a moment, before he started fingering her again, not waiting for her to recover, and earning panting whines from her as he pumped her insides.

A part of him knew this wasn't him, that he was stepping far outside his comfort zone. Kine used alcohol to help them overcome their fears and inhibitions, liquid courage, and he couldn't help but feel the same was happening to him. Tasting her, having this



beautiful woman's dark, strange blood inside him, lit a curious lust inside him that wasn't settled yet. More.

With his bad hand holding his weight, palm to the subway platform, he was free to keep his teeth deep in the helpless woman's neck, as his fingers filled her. He fingered her harder, hard enough to make her ass bounce lightly, and he growled into her neck as he took more.

“Damien, ye ... ye're ... taking ... too...” The poor creature came over his fingers again, and as her the pleasure coursed through her, her heart sped up. He knew it would. “St ... op...” It was borderline instinct, to bury her in pleasure, use it to make her blood flow, and drink it down. It filled him, sent buzzing pleasure into his fingertips, made him dizzy on the strange high as the alien taste overwhelmed him. Most of all, it felt freeing, natural, to drive this beautiful woman to bliss as he drained her, and—

His phone rang.

He sat up with a jolt, and practically threw himself away from her. Landing on his ass, he stared at the small woman, her beautiful pale skin sweating a little, and her breasts heaving as she struggled to catch her breath. Facing her lying body from side on, he stared at how her long, frizzy red hair sat upon the concrete, and how her heavy breasts pulled to the sides of her ribs with their natural weight. She was panting, and trembling, pleasure and exhaustion blatant on her face.

She turned her head enough to look at him, and he could see she struggled to keep her eyes open. Smiling. The beautiful creature was smiling.

He wasn't. He'd taken a lot of blood from her. A lot lot. He'd fed on plenty of kine, and he knew how much to take to leave them drained but alive; less than what he'd taken from her. She was alive,

thank God, and she'd probably heal considering she was a Begotten. But that didn't change that he'd taken it too far.

He looked down at his body as his phone rang again. His erection pressed against his pants, and he grit his teeth as he glared at it.

"You ... you ok, Fiona?"

"Mmhmhm," she said in a deep haze. "I ... didnae think ye'd ... be..." She shivered again, and tried to lift her hands to press them on her legs. Best she managed was a light touch before they collapsed at her side.

"I'm sorry, Fiona. I ... took way too much, and ... and..." He gulped and looked at his good hand. Her juices had coated his fingers and palm, and he could smell sexual need, hers and his own; though, hers were in far greater supply at that particular point. "I have to answer this."

She blinked at him, and tried to sit up again. Surprisingly, she managed, and she got her weight onto her elbows as she blinked at him. "Ye do?" Sitting up like that, it made her breasts half squash to her ribs, and half weigh down with their size. He stared at them for a second longer than intended, and shook the thoughts out of his head.

"Yeah, it's Maria. She wouldn't call unless it was important." He looked up and around. The signal must have been able to reach them from here, where the subway platform sat directly underneath the streets. "I ... uh ... here." He forced himself in closer to Fiona, did his best to not stare at her breasts and stomach, and leaned in. He hesitated, afraid to get in too close, before he pushed through it and offered her neck a couple licks. The puncture wounds healed over, and he got away from her with a jump and hop.

"Da ... mien?" she said.

“I ... I have to go.” He reached into his pocket, did his best to adjust his erection, and pulled out his phone as he looked around. “Have ... have to go. Can ... c-can you, umm ... do you need me to...”

Fiona groaned, and pulled her bra and shirt back down. For a second, he thought she might have been recovering quickly, but instead she fell back again, and let out some weak giggles. They didn't sound like her usual giggles though, almost as if they were annoyed.

“It's happening again.”

“Again?” he said.

“Nevermind, dinnae worry about it. Go on, talk to yer boss.”

“You'll ... be fine?”

While still lying down, she reached down for her pants and did up her fly. “I can get home from the tunnels no problem. I need a change of pants, though.”

“Um ... I ... y-yeah. I'll ... yeah.” He ran away. There was no other way to think about it. Not even fancy ways of dressing it up, like tactical retreat or strategic withdrawal, could hide how much of an asshole and coward he was in that moment. But, he had to. For reasons.

Once he was topside and on the Dolareido sidewalks, he answered the phone.

“Mister Burksen. You took your sweet time answering.”

“S-Sorry, Madam Turio, I was preoccupied.” He'd almost drained Fiona into a coma, or maybe even killed her. What happened? How had every bit of control he'd mastered in fifty years of his second life evaporated?

“I received a rather poor summary of the situation from Mister White, and I understand you are gravely injured.”

He looked down at his bad hand. Now that the immediate high of Fiona, her blood, and her naked skin, was settling, the pain of broken bones and torn muscle returned. His hip hurt, his ankle was barely holding together in its web cast, and his busted hand was almost paralyzed with dysfunction. But he was in far better shape than he was before he Kissed Fiona.

“I’m ... injured, yes. But Fiona was kind enough to let me feed from her, and I’ve managed to heal enough to function.”

“You fed from a Begotten?”

“ ... yes.” And it was great. It was amazing. It felt like he’d been drinking something naughty and wrong; not in the sinful sense or religious sense, but in some other way he couldn’t put his finger on. Whatever it was about her blood, it was delicious, but overwhelming, and within moments of having it inside him, he’d become blood drunk.

“I understand that feeding from Uratha provides blood of most potent effect. Was the Begotten’s blood similar?”

“I’m ... I am not sure, Madam Turio. I believe it was.” He squirmed, and forced his body to turn off the Blush of Life. It’d only been a minute since he fed, and he’d fed a lot. Turning off the Blush took time, and he used angles to keep his erection from public view.

Thoughts of Fiona’s body didn’t make it any easier. Her heavy breasts had been so soft, and her tiny stature and red hair were terribly appealing. He wanted to go back down into the locked subway platform, and finish what he’d started. The giggles she made, the way her breasts jiggled with her motions, the way she beamed at him, the way she’d invited his touch, it all seared desire

into his soul. God, he wanted to go back down there, get inside her, feel her walls of flesh squeeze on—

“Mister Burksen?”

“Ah, uh ... sorry, Madam Turio, I believe there was interference.”

“I said, come meet me at the Grand Cathedral. I wish to discuss recent developments.”

“About Begotten blood?”

“No, about your partner, Mister Terry.”

“ ... oh.”

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He sighed as he stood at the entrance of the Grand Cathedral. Walking up its stairs, grandiose and imposing, did not strike him with fear; he'd been worried it might have. His sexual act with Fiona still sat in the front of his mind, getting in the way of every thought, every attempt he made to center himself and prepare mind, body, and soul, for the journey into God's building. It wasn't the sinful nature of the act that was bothering him, as God's laws were for kine, not the monsters that preyed upon them. It was how ... debased he'd become in that moment. A mindless savage, concerned only with sex and sustenance. He—

His phone beeped with a message. He'd yet to step into Maria's den, so he'd yet to set it to airplane mode. Sighing, he checked it quick, and groaned as he realized it was Fiona.

~ Damien, you ran away! Big scaredy cat. Come find me when you can, so we can continue. ~

That pulled a smile from him. She was conscious, not comatose from the Kiss, despite that she should have been. He should have trusted that a Begotten would heal quickly, or at least quicker than

kine. Even better was that she wasn't angry with him; at least not overtly so.

His smile turned into shock, as he looked at the picture she sent. With her shirt and bra pulled up, jacket on but open, she held her phone away from her in one hand in classic selfie position, while her other hand blatantly squeezed one of her breasts. The heavy shape of it, and how its teardrop weight was more ample along its underside, meant her nipple stuck outward naturally, as the soft mass filled her palm. Nipple between finger and thumb, she was pinching it lightly, as she smiled at the camera.

He gulped, and put the phone away. Fiona was beautiful, there was no doubt about that. She wasn't thin, but not fat or chubby either, just enough fat on her to give her skin a softness that demanded to be touched. Combined with her enormous breasts and curvy legs, he knew he'd be helpless to resist her the moment she decided to get flirtatious with him. He just, hadn't expected it to ever come, and especially not so aggressively.

This was Jessy's fault. Reminder to self: confront Jessy later. Confront her about what? That the beautiful woman he was drawn to was attempting to seduce him, likely because of Jessy's influence? Or that he was disturbed by his own sudden aggression. Fiona didn't seem to mind, but she didn't realize how close to death she'd come.

If he told Jack, he knew the boy would tell him to not play to a cliché, and not hold Fiona at bay in some self-defeating attempt to protect her from himself. In the moment, he could understand the cliché, but thinking about it, he could also tell it was simply him being afraid of the strange impulse Kissing her had brought.

He'd talk to her about it. Yes, talk to her. Just talk. No more Kissing, only, perhaps, some kissing.

Unless she wanted a Kiss again. And given how adventurous she was, she probably would.

He gulped and shook his head. How easily temptation defeated a hardened mind.

Sighing, he stepped forward, stopped, checked the picture of Fiona's breasts once again, licked his lips, and again put it away before he stepped into the church. Candles were lit, and, to Damien's surprise, Vivienne Maiorie sat in one of the pews, along with Amanda Pol. They were chatting, and as he came closer, he saw they had the Book of Longinus, the summarized version, with them.

"Miss Maiorie, Miss Pol," he said.

"Mister Burksen," they said in unison.

"I ... was unaware you were interested in the teachings of Longinus, Miss Pol."

She shrugged, but nodded as she turned a page. "Just a little. Maiorie is the more interested one."

He offered Vivienne a smile. Vivienne Maiorie was Natasha's childe, and while the two had never managed to reconcile the gap that had grown between them, he could see the ex-Right Hand's influence on her. Vivienne would go far, given time to grow. The short time she'd spent with Lucas and the Lancea et Sanctum agreed.

"Madam Turio mentioned the Cathedral was open for those who wished to speak of the Testament of Longinus, and perhaps pursue an interest in the Lancea et Sanctum," Vivienne said.

He smiled at that. Maria had been making progress with the Prince then; or was doing this in secret. It was innocent enough, to

simply talk about their religion and covenant. Hopefully the Prince would not mind.

“While I can’t excuse the behavior of my sire,” he said, “feel free to ask me questions about Longinus, whenever you wish. Except, perhaps, right now.” Smiling, his old bishop reflexes returning, he nodded toward the dark end of the cathedral where the pipe organ sat, and around behind it, a wooden door. “Madam Turio wishes to speak to me.” He nodded, and each offered a return nod, almost a bow, before they returned to their talk of Longinus. He wanted to join them, but he needed to speak with Maria.

He found the wooden door by the pipe organ, with the crucifix upon its face, and forced it open. It was thick enough that even the explosives the hunters seemed to have in spades would struggle to break it. Past it, a stairway awaited him, and he descended into the darkness.

The first few times he’d been down the stairway, he needed light, but he’d been through it enough times now that he could navigate it with only subtle, almost invisible dashes of ambient light that filled it. When he reached the tunnel though, there was plenty of light by Kindred standards, and he smiled as he admired the gigantic, concrete channel. Braziers hung on the walls of the massive tunnel, covered in spikes, and dangling from chains. They were lit, Maria no doubt having sent her ghouls to light them in preparation of his arrival.

Upon reaching a gate of thick metal bars covered in spikes, a ghoul on the other side opened it to let him in, before resealing the gate with some sort of electronic lock that kept a thick bar of some metal upon the gate’s entrance. The second gate offered the same protection, and so did the third, each with a ghoul, and each ghoul wearing a suit that hid their body armor and guns.



Some Kindred wondered why the elders didn't handle the troubles Dolareido faced on their own, when they were often capable of doing so. The myriad of gates blocking his path explained why rather succinctly. Elders were paranoid, and justly so. Lucas had told him of the games elders played, forever looking for ways to kill each other so they could claim dominion of their chosen city. A single mistake, a single exposed flank, a single moment of complacency, and an elder was liable to perish to another, or to a courageous — or stupid — ancilla. Even in Dolareido, where the covenants, other than the Second Estate, lived in a more-or-less peaceful coexistence, the elders could not let their guard down. For all the Prince's power, Lucas had defeated her with a combination of speed and leverage, and the other elders could be defeated in the same manner.

Plus, they really did spend all night, every night, devouring mountains of information, and making decisions that managed complicated networks of thralls, money, subterfuge, deceit, and everything related. He did not envy them and their mastery of the Danse Macabre.

Once he was past the many gates, the enormous tunnel of concrete opened up into a massive room, a dome, with hanging drapes on the walls. The drapes showed imagery of history, swords and crusades, the Crucifixion, Longinus stabbing Jesus on the cross with a spear, and many other images of such moments. Braziers hung from chains in this room as well, candles within the braziers managed by her primary ghoul Matthias. Hunched back, mangled face, Damien could only assume he'd worked as a bell ringer in a cathedral for a twisted archdeacon in a previous life.

He walked to the back of the room, where a grand piano sat, with a coffin nearby, upright and ready to hold an old-fashioned vampire looking to sleep for the day. Maria sat at the piano, and was playing some classical music. He did not ask what it was. Maria knew how to play every piece of classical music he'd ever heard, and a hundred

score more of pieces he hadn't. At a certain point, asking was pointless.

“Do your lessons go well, Mister Burksen?” she said.

“Lessons? I—oh, the piano. Yes, Madam Turio.”

Nodding, she got up, and motioned for him to sit. He did, and began to play the piece she'd been asking him to play. Beethoven's Fur Elise was, compared to the works of Chopin Maria seemed to love, easy. But it was difficult for him, to command his fingers to dance in such a flowing rhythm, and he could not play it at full speed. Even harder, with his hand only partly repaired. He could play it though, and that earned a smile from his teacher.

“Good.” With a nod, she took the seat back, apparently satisfied. “I wanted to ask of Mister Terry, and I believe you know why.” Without skipping a beat, she started playing as she talked. Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, third movement, a far faster and heftier piece than the more known first movement. She played it as easily as one might walk.

“His attitude, since his sister's death, and mother's assault.”

“Indeed. You of all people know that Mister Terry is unusually strong for a Kindred his age. What does your Auspex see in him?”

That almost earned a twitch from him. If she ever learned it was Jack who killed Lucas, it would not end well for the boy. But, of course, Maria assumed he was using Auspex on his fellow Kindred to see if he could spy potential threats in their Beastly auras. He was, of course, doing just that, regularly.

“Mister Terry himself seems a devoted soul to the Invictus, and to his companions. He himself is also ... painfully honest, with himself and others. I—”

“That is not what I asked, Burksen.” Skipping the honorific meant she wasn’t interested in dancing around the topic.

“If ... when I evaluate him as a vampire, I do notice that there’s an edge to him, something sharp and dangerous. Whatever it is, it is not on the surface, where I can see it.” And, it no doubt played a role in the young man’s ability to dominate Damien’s mind, in that particular incident. He recognized the same edge in Julias, but the man never let it surface, whereas Jack had, multiple times.

Viktor had let that edge surface, but at the time, Damien had only ever looked at the man from a distance, from well behind Lucas, and he hadn’t been old enough recognize the signs, or use Auspex to sense the true, animal deadliness in him.

“Indeed. And today, he did something he’s never done.”

Uh oh. “What was that?”

“He abandoned his mission, and left his sweeper team, in an apparent fit of frustration.”

“He—” Damien stopped himself, and raised a brow. Jack was an analytical, cynical sort, but he didn’t throw temper tantrums, especially not the sort that would interfere with work, and above all, work that affected others. “He is stressed.”

“Do you know what Viktor Honors did when he was stressed, Burksen?” She didn’t bother waiting for his response. “He indulged his baser desires, and killed, or destroyed, or tortured, or...” Sighing, she stopped playing, and frowned at him. “Keep an eye on him, Burksen. Honors never let MacDonald or I close enough to help him, and after his torpor, he kept even his childe Mire at a great distance.”

“I fear Terry may do the same, as these hunters now seem determined to ruin his second life.”

“Indeed. Watch him, Damien, and watch him closely. I trust you to do what is needed if the need ever arises.”

That, was dangerously close to a kill order. Assassin, indeed.

## Chapter 86

~~Antoinette~~

Deep within her tower, she sat at a table with an array of laptops, tablets, and artifacts. The resonance circle sat empty, and she had her chandelier to a normal white light. The necklace that had summoned the odd spirit of secrets sat in front of her, and she stared at it as she folded her arms across her chest.

Should she tell Avery of her concern with Maria? No. Avery would overreact. Besides, there was no tangible proof. But the werewolf was bound to find out sooner or later, as she grew increasingly involved in the affairs of the vampires.

Sighing, she pulled her hair over her shoulder onto her chest, and combed it. There was a missing piece in this madness, in her city, and she was determined to find it. Daniel had spent how many nights now, searching? Drifting through the city with the highest skill Auspex could provide, he was nothing more than a wisp of shadow, a dream, moving through the walls and streets. His hunt had no goal, nothing obvious. He was as likely to discover a random ancient city beneath Dolareido, as he was to determine the secret forces planning something unknown.

Was this unseen force using the hunters as cover? The hunters had become the focus of everyone, and rightly so. If they continued unabated, they would eventually strike gold, and ruin the delicate balance Antoinette had crafted. She did not mind if they killed Azamel, but not if it meant damage to her city.

She did not wish for Fiona to suffer, either. The silly girl was a ray of sunshine, and now that Antoinette had met her on multiple occasions, she was happy the tiny monster had come to her city. She

followed the rules, and had only acted against them in ignorance, originally.

Chuckling at memories of the girl, Antoinette shrugged and looked at her laptop. The video feed had four pictures, one for each corner. One was of Samantha Terry, and the feed showed Julias and Jack sitting by her bed. Good. Those two had a tenuous relationship as of late, the sort all childer and sires eventually felt, as their natures clashed. The curse of Kindred, with their instincts forever pushing for solitude, while their human half demanded socialization to some degree. But, those two were not the typical Kindred, or men for that matter. They did not let ego dictate their decisions, usually.

Perhaps Jack would ask her to sire his mother. The more she thought about it, the more she felt she would, and that it would be a beneficial, and enjoyable change to her own life. To have a childe was an experience she had long forgotten, except that her previous was not only a male, a young male, but also her lover. This one would be a mature woman, and according to Jack, she was not the analytical sort.

What would that be like? Forever her conversations with Tony had been mental battles, each trying to outwit the other. Love faded, replaced with resentment, paranoia, and with time, hatred. With someone like Samantha, where Antoinette was the clear intellectual superior, would she feel superior in more problematic ways to her new childe? She had known Kindred to sometimes sire those they considered easily enslaved; after all, a Kindred did not sire to pass on the generation of their blood, like breeding humans. Kindred sired to increase the strength of their dominion. There were even stories of Kindred who sired, raised their childe, and then devoured them, draining their blood, and their soul.

She shivered. Diablerie was a vile act, and she was glad it had rarely reared its ugly head in her life. No, she was kinder than the

average sire, let alone one capable of Diablerie. She would treat Samantha with respect, and with the wisdom she had gained in the centuries since Tony's embrace. And, it would be nice to have a female companion who was of an age. Ashley and Julee were wonderful, but young, and she was never sure if siring them would be a good choice.

Jack was young. But, was he? The boy had similar attributes to an old man, a strange concoction of intellect, hope, and cynicism. It was terribly appealing.

She sighed as she watched the two men talk over Samantha's body. This potential childe was the mother of her lover. That was a strange situation to be in, but not unheard of for Kindred. Indeed, many Kindred abandoned all pretext of romantic norms, and many engaged in sexual webs more complicated than any soap opera dared dream. It was not unheard of for Kindred to embrace their biological children once of age, leading to parent siring child, who sired their child, who sired their child. There were almost laughably intricate romantic triangles between Kindred that included parent, grandparent, child, and grandchild, fighting for the affections of the same man or woman.

But, while such complications were normal in Antoinette's world, they would novel and shocking in Samantha's. The woman would be Antoinette's childe, while Antoinette made love to her son, took care of him, pampered him, and, in a way, replaced Samantha as the woman in his life. There would be a wall between her and her new childe, and it would take great effort to overcome.

If she decided to sire her at all. Perhaps she should tell the boy to let his mother go? No, that would be cruel. Life was worth fighting for, even a second life. But that did not mean another Kindred could not take Jack's mother for their own, and not her. The issue was that Kindred groomed potential childer before the embrace, and no one knew this woman except for Jack.

Sighing, she looked to the other camera feeds. There were three cameras set up, high on building tops and pointed at the hospital. Some of her thralls sat upon them, perched on roofs, watching the city streets from above; so were Invictus thralls, she was sure. They had to be careful to not step on each other's toes, but at least they all had the same idea: there was a chance hunters would come to the hospital.

And what if they did? What could they possibly hope to achieve from that? Surely they were not willing to risk their lives and the lives of kine in a hospital, in some mindless bid to assassinate a visiting Kindred. That did not mean they did not have some other trick up their sleeve, though.

Her phone buzzed, and she sighed yet again as she picked it up. First she was interrupted from her research by her own thoughts, and now she was to be interrupted by another's. She was tempted to not answer, but if someone was calling her on this number, it was important.

Ah, Natasha. She answered it, and forced down the frustration building in her chest. "Miss Vola, my dear. Are you well?"

"Y-Yes, Prince."

"It was most startling, receiving your message." Only some thirty minutes ago, Natasha had sent the distress message, warning the Prince and the sheriff of her immediate danger. For the GPS on her phone to vanish shortly after had been worrying indeed.

"Sorry, P-Prince. We had to investigate immed-d-diatly, for fear we might miss the opportunity."

Antoinette nodded, phone to her ear. "Do not apologize for your tactical decisions, Natasha."



“B-But I ... w-we could have wasted time, if I made a mistake. And w-w-w—”

“Vola, my dear, you must understand. Even should your decision lead to wasted effort, or disastrous result, if you made it through steps of correct, logical reasoning, then you made the correct decision. It is always possible, that should you make zero mistakes and perform perfectly, you will still fail in your endeavor. Such is life. Do not take on guilt that is not yours to bear.” Natasha had to learn to stop blaming herself for things. She internalized her negativity, and the neurotic behavior was a shackle around her ankle.

“Yes, Prince. I ... I understand.” Antoinette could almost see Natasha squirm on the phone. “W-We found hunters.”

“I see. Then I am doubly glad you sent the message. Was Daniel of use?”

“Um ... n-no, not really. He showed up once we were ... spit out.”

“Spit out?”

“We found Elen, and she w-was ... d-d-doing things, in a hidden chamber, and it was ... was—”

“Come to the tower, Natasha. This is important.” Antoinette reached out, closed her laptop with the video feed, and left the research room. Her attempts to pierce the veil could wait. Hunters were the priority.

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~~Beatrice~~

Mission successful. Sort of? They learned something damn important about the hunters, but that knowledge seemed like such a small thing, compared to how awesome it would have been to kill

some hunters, capture Elen, and maybe free that Begotten from her control; assuming it was mind control. So much potential success, and it'd all been right there in front of them. They followed a hunch, followed their instincts, and tracked down the hunters to what must have been a sort of jumping point they used for their weird ... flesh ... chamber ... thing.

She groaned as she raised her head so the falling hot water fell on her face. Soaked in blood as she was, it had dried out a fair bit by the time she and her fellow witches had broken into a private indoor swimming pool. The pool wasn't close by, but they all desperately needed a shower after the insanity of what just happened, so they made the effort. They'd collected some of the blood into a jar, in case they could use it later, but for now, time to get it the fuck off.

“I wished Natasha joined us,” Jen said.

“Well, I'm sure she's got better gigs to shower in than here.” Triss motioned to the barely lit shower room of the swimming pool. Taupe tiling, large, with mirrors and counters; all around pretty decent, but it probably had nothing on the showers in the Elysium Tower.

The two of them stood naked under the falling water, a showerhead for each, and the two of them let out small groans and moans as they felt the blood wash away. A bit of it had gotten into her mouth, and it tasted very human. That was fucked up. How the fuck could a room of flesh, tortured and cut and spread and split and tied and punctured flesh, with arms and faces growing out of its walls, be human?

“Yeah but, I wouldn't mind getting a peek at her.”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Jen, really?”

“What? She's got this teeny tiny little body, but still has feminine curves, except it's all petite, and ... she's beautiful.” Jen sighed and

turned under the shower, running her fingers through her hair as she did. “And you heard her. She’s got those two boys doing things to her nigh every night, and you just know they’re both fucking her at the same time.”

“You make it sound naughty. You were getting DP’d on the regular before you jumped into my bed, Jen.” Laughing, Triss looked over and watched the blood slide off Jen’s skin, disappearing into the drain. Hot damn, Jennifer had a body.

She must have noticed her gaze, cause Jen smiled at her, and started to make more a show of rubbing her body down. Around and around, she moved her fingers around her large breasts, circled her nipples, and slid them down to her smooth slit to begin rubbing it free of the mess.

“The fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“Trying to arouse you, obviously.” With a few chuckles, she looked up into the falling water, ran her fingers through her hair, and raised her elbows as she did, emphasizing the hourglass figure, tight waist, flat stomach, the big tits, everything. A model pose for an adult photoshoot, no doubt. The brown eyes and almost alabaster skin combined with her shoulder-length black hair always did remind Triss a little of herself, though Triss had darker skin, more muscle definition, and much smaller tits. Still, they looked similar, and seeing herself bathing rather erotically, a bustier version of herself without the crocodile teeth, was hot.

“Well that makes you a bitch. I’m dating Julias, not you.”

“You wound me!” She feigned offense, bringing a hand to her sternum to clutch at her heart. “And besides, I’m not trying to ... you know, damage that. Buuuuut...” Licking her luscious lips, the damn Ventrue walked up to her, and slid under the falling water that Triss had been claiming as her own before. “You know Julias doesn’t mind if we get a little physical. I can kiss you, right?” She leaned in

close, and did just that. Of course she leaned in her body too, so her breasts pressed to Triss's, a bit lower with their size and weight, nipples grazing under hers.

Rolling her eyes again, Triss put her hands on Jen's hips, and returned the kiss. "We're not fucking unless Julias is around."

"I know, sad as that makes me."

"Well I know I'd be pretty pissed if you fucked him when I wasn't there."

"Yes, but he's your boyfriend. The gender dynamic is different."

"That's sexist."

It was Jen's turn to roll her eyes. "Come now, no it isn't. Do you really think Julias would feel jealous, if I licked you all up right now? Because I know I'd make sure, and you'd make sure, to not only explain to him what I did to you in great detail, but to do a repeat performance for him." Jen took Triss's hips in return, and pressed their bodies a bit closer together, hips to hips, breasts to breasts, and she swayed side to side in a dance-like motion. "I won't, of course. But I thought you should know, I very much want to do all sorts of things to you right now."

"I've noticed." It was very hard to not be convinced by her. And Triss had to admit, there was a little logic to it. She knew she'd be right fucking jealous if Jen fucked Julias without her. But, would Julias feel that way if Beatrice and Jennifer fucked?

Her gut said yes, he would. Even if the two of them could bury the man in sexual favors to 'make up' for their wanton sex drives, it didn't feel right. She supposed Jen would be right, and it'd be fine to fuck without him, if she and Julias weren't romantic with each other, but something about the emotional connection made the physical act of sex carry more weight, and meaning. That was

something Jennifer just didn't get. The girl didn't crave romantic connection like other people did. While there wasn't anything wrong with that, it did mean Triss had to keep the girl's sex drive on a leash, which probably only turned Jen on more. Julias had given her the freedom to fuck her ghouls whenever she wanted, but she hadn't been. She'd been saving up all her sexual desires, her salacious and carnal nature, all her sexual hunger, for Triss and Julias.

She trusted Jen. The girl had proven to be a great friend, and trustworthy. But damn, seeing her strut her stuff all the damn time, constantly trying to seduce Triss, was mouth-watering; once she Blushed, at least. Hell, the way she was rubbing their bodies together right now was enough to have Triss struggling to keep her voice under control, and not moan. The moment they got back to Julias's, she was going to fuck his brains out, and Jen's.

“You were like a superhero.”

“I ... what?”

“Tonight, in that flesh room. The boys getting aggressive like that, I expected that. But you ran in there and didn't hesitate. Bullets flying, screams and gunfire, in an alien room of fleshly nightmares, you faced it, fought it, without indecision or delay.”

“What? Fuck yeah I hesitated. Felt like I froze for an eternity.”

Jen shook her head. “Try one second, from behind cover where no one noticed.”

Shrugging, Triss leaned in and set another kiss on Jen, this time on her neck. Ok, maybe a little teasing, to get them all tingly when they saw Julias tonight.

“Well, you were too young to be on that trip, but you stuck your head out anyway,” Triss said.

“I barely managed to get a grip on that hunter’s mind.”

“But you did, and saved our asses.”

Jen smiled at that, and if Triss didn’t know any better, it looked like the girl was feeling shy about it. Surprising, that Jen knew that emotion at all.

“So,” Jen said. “I’m thinking tonight, we fuck Julias in the shower.”

“You ever fuck pussy in the shower?”

“I don’t have a penis, and neither do you.”

Triss shrugged. “I’ve heard horror stories about how nasty it can be, from the positions, to how the water washes away the juices so it’s all ... rubbery.”

“They have water-resistant lubricant these days.”

“Ah, right, yeah. I’ve used them, too.” Triss sighed with the memory. That was a good time. “I was sitting in the tub with Julias, one of those old school tubs. We’d found a couple outside, two kine, man and woman, and he used Dominate to turn them into temporary thralls, right? We used them as our servants for the night, and it was ... was the first time Julias showed me what it was like to be a pampered princess. I sat on his dick, and—”

“Anal, I imagine.”

“Excuse me for enjoying it!” She shoved Jen away, and got back to wiping her body down. Always teasing her about the anal thing. Some women liked anal! Fucking hell. “So I was sitting on him, leaning back in the tub, facing him, and I relaxed there while the two kine massaged me and fingered me. Felt like a god damn queen, being pampered like that.”

Jen didn't stay on her side of the shower for long. Licking her lips, she came back over, slipped behind Triss, smooshed her big tits to her back, and hugged her from behind. Her hands found Triss's breasts, and she cupped them, fingers crossing over her nipples, and she fiddled with the nipple piercings between her knuckles.

“Let's do that then. I'll play the role of servant, and do things to you while you sit on your lover boy.”

“We already do that, all the time.” She squirmed, and Jen held on. Her hands continued to massage Triss's body, fingers tracing around her nipples, before they slid lower to run along the subtle lines of Triss's abs. It made her tingly, very tingly, especially when Jen's fingers slid lower, and started to gently press and tease the softness of her smooth mons. The snake tattoo's tail started there, right over the clitoris, and Jen's fingers stopped there as well, a hair's breadth away from the pierced clit hood. If Triss Blushed Life, her clit would be screaming with need, swollen, and demanding to be touched. But she didn't Blush, and Jen didn't touch. Oh how her friend liked to walk that line.

“How about this time, I—hey!” She snapped her head up to the shower room entrance, and glared as Aaron and Othello walked in. “Assholes. This is the girl's shower room!”

Othello, Triss had seen naked plenty of times; more than. She'd seen him fuck his beautiful ghoul dozens of times by this point, and usually in the ass, so there'd been a hypnotic appeal to it. So she'd watched, more than once. Hell one time she'd given instructions like a porn director. That'd been a fun night. She hadn't expected to see him walk into their shower naked, though.

Othello was a hunk, no two ways about it. The tan skin, big and strong body, dreadlocks, very fashion model. Aaron, on the other hand, she'd never seen naked. With his clothes on, he seemed like a normal dude, average height, average build, pale skin. Nude, was

another story. The fucker was mother fucking ripped, like a god damn Olympian ninja, a lean and athletic build that would have put most accomplished elite to shame. She hadn't noticed it because he lacked bulk, girth, but god damn.

And like Othello, Aaron kept his pubic hair shaved off too, like most in Dolareido. Without the Blush going, both of them looked like they had small dicks, but she knew better than to judge a book by its cover. Kindred without the Blush always looked a bit emaciated, anyway.

Wait. Triss was standing there, naked, with Jen's hands roaming all over her. The boys had never seen her naked. She should probably feel shy about all this.

Eh, not really. She'd been fucking Julias and including thralls semi-regularly in their bedroom, for months now. Put Jen on top of that, and then seeing all the shit that went down at the Circle's den, she'd become thoroughly robbed of all shyness and shame. So she let her eyes linger a bit, and she didn't cover herself up, either.

"Nice tats," Othello said, offering an eye wiggle as his eyes roamed up from her sex to her breasts, where the snake bit into one nipple. "Everything's pierced."

"The fuck you dumbasses doing in here?" she said.

Aaron shrugged, and came in closer. He turned on one of the showerheads, and started washing. It was true the boys still looked bloody, so they hadn't showered yet.

"Honestly?" Aaron said. "We said we wanted to stay close, and this is close. Considering how dangerous shit is, and considering your guard is down right now, we should group up. But, I think we both just wanted to see some tits and ass."

Triss and Jen both laughed. Ok, points for honesty.



“Othello gets ass every night,” Jen said, peeking over Triss’s shoulder at them. “And you both have seen me, and my insides getting filled on the regular.” If Triss had no shame, then by comparison, Jen was some sort of shame black hole, sucking it into a vortex where it was promptly destroyed. “But Aaron, I’ve never seen you fuck anyone. Hell, I don’t know anything about your sex life.”

The man shrugged as he ran his hands up and down his lean muscles. Much as Aaron always had a calm demeanor, mature, wise, cold, Triss noticed him sneak the two women a few glances, especially when Jen started massaging Triss’s breasts again. And Triss let her. Hey, it was just a bit of fun, showing off. The fact none of the Circle gave a shit about her crocodile cheeks, her snake eyes, or her claw-like fingernails, was awesome. The fact they were all comfortable as fuck with nudity, was also awesome.

“You never asked.”

“Are you serious?” Jen let go, and stepped around Triss to lean against the shower wall with her shoulder so she could look at Aaron, arms folded under her breasts. “All I had to do is ask?”

“Yeah.”

“... alright, what’s your favorite kink?”

Right to the good stuff, as expected. The girl could be so suave, verbose, and poetic when she wanted to be, but sometimes she was just a god damn slut. Triss loved her for that. Julias did, too. The dichotomy of her personality was like a really good spice on food; or she assumed it was. Christ, how long had it been since she’d eaten spicy food? Over twenty fucking years, Jesus.

“Kink?”

“You know, kink, like, do you prefer vaginal or anal, do you really get off from blowjobs or face fucking, or maybe you want to fuck some tits?” To emphasize, she jumped in place a few times, small jumps that made her breasts bounce.

Triss couldn't help but laugh. Jacob had told her stories about witches of the Circle that made sacrifices, performed rituals, and otherwise did some pretty nasty stuff, and did it naked, in the middle of the woods; often during an orgy. Nudity meant nothing to witches.

Aaron shrugged, and pressed his hands to the wall, head down, so the water ran down his neck and back. “I like doing whatever she wants. Usually it's pretty gentle. A lot of spooning, some missionary.”

Jennifer groaned in pain and stopped bouncing. “Aaron, you don't understand. Women like a man with desire, with passion, and they like it when he expresses it with aggression.”

The man lifted his head, and slowly raised a brow, just a little, enough to give that classic Aaron look, the ‘I'm not sure if you're right, and even if you are, I'm not sure I care' look. The man lacked passion, that was for sure. But he had the calm and collected thing down, and some women dug that, Triss figured.

“Not every woman wants to be choked and fucked hard, Jennifer.”

Jennifer looked at him, squinted an eye, and gestured to Othello. “Othello, how often do you get your fingers around your ghoul Madison's neck when you fuck her.”

“Almost every time.” The big guy nodded, shrugged, and started washing himself as well, across the room from them under another showerhead. Triss took a little longer than she probably should have watching the guy, but damn he had a body, with an ass of steel. And, like he said, he had a habit of using his hands, big strong hands,

wrapping one around Madison's neck, and holding her down as he fucked her ass. It was powerful imagery that scratched an itch in Triss's mind just the right way.

Triss licked her lips as she let a memory of Julius doing just that to her drift through her mind. The man got pretty aggressive with her sometimes, held her down, pounded her hard, and didn't stop until she was a mess. And she had to admit, those were the times she probably came the hardest. Jennifer had a point.

But Aaron just shrugged, and lowered his head again, letting the water fall down over his face. "Think the Prince is like that with that kid?"

"Touché," Jennifer said. "Based on how we see them interact, I'm guessing she plays the dominatrix a bit. He's probably spent many nights as bottom, watching her dance on him."

Othello laughed. "Maybe. I'm guessing he's spent most nights with his dick between her tits."

They all chuckled. This was classic locker room talk, dirty and ridiculous, with a mix of feminine and masculine vibes stirred in. This was fun. Horribly juvenile and stupid, but fun.

"I think," Triss said, coming up behind Jen, and hugging her in the same way Jen had hugged her before, "we should try that with you and Superman." She leaned in closer, pressing her piercings into Jen's back as she clutched her tight, hands cupping her breasts.

"Which part, the dancing or tit fucking?" Jen turned her head enough to give Triss access to her neck, and Triss responded appropriately, kissing the woman's skin as she massaged her body. She was very tempted to get on her knees, and stick her tongue inside Jen's pussy right here and now; and the idea of having the boys watch her lick Jen to an orgasm or two was exciting, too. But she didn't. Self-control, dumbass, exercise some self-control.

“Both.”

Jen laughed, and pressed her ass back into Triss, earning a lingering gaze from the two boys. “Deal.”

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~~Julias~~

He reached over and set his hand on Samantha’s forehead, sighed, and lowered it back to the sheets. “You going to be alright, Jack?”

“Dunno.”

“Good answer.”

Jack laughed and shrugged. “I mean, what else is there to do?”

“Go talk to Antoinette.”

“Right now?”

“Right now,” Julias said. Jack reached for his pocket, but Julias shook his head. “In person. Go talk to her tonight. Hell, tell you her you want to do it tomorrow night, dusk.”

“Dusk?” His jaw dropped, and it took a few seconds before he realized. Wide eyed, he looked at his mother, before his gaze steeled. The Jack face, the face he made when he was determined to do something and finally realized it. “... yes. I’ll ask her to do it tomorrow, the moment we wake up. That’ll give Mom the night to acclimate. Docs say she’s stable for now. Shouldn’t be an issue to wait one more day.”

Nodding, Julias got up, and Jack joined him. He was tempted to suggest Jack get this done tonight, but rushing an embrace, even in this situation, was a bad idea. It was an important part of a

Kindred's life, both the giver and receiver, and with only an hour of night left, now was not the time.

Thoughts of Tony clawed their way into his head, and he grimaced. Antoinette would be thinking of her old childe, no doubt, when deliberating this, and that could mean she'd change her mind. Tony, he was sure, was her greatest mistake; or at least that's probably how she thought about him. Creating a new childe was not to be taken lightly, and she knew that most of all.

"So, what does it feel like to embrace someone?" Jack said. The two of them began the walk toward the elevator, and dismissed any curious nurses with small mental suggestions, gentle uses of Dominate. The kid had a talent for it, that was for sure.

"Feels like putting a piece of yourself into someone."

"I can't really visualize what that feels like."

Julias shrugged as he hit the elevator button. "It feels like, you're taking a part of you that resonates, and sharing it with someone. Not just sharing, giving, infecting. It feels a little ... wrong, but also, meaningful."

"Resonate?"

"Like when you read a good story or watch a good movie, or listen to a great song, it resonates with you, sticks with you. You feel it in your guts, your heart, everything."

The kid nodded, and stepped onto the elevator. No one else was using it, and he noticed Jack sigh with relaxation. He hated being stuck in an elevator with strangers, probably.

"I know that resonating feeling, yeah."

“So, when I embraced you, a lot of that kind of ... got muffled. More Beastly desires surfaced for a while.” That same night, he’d gotten into a fight with Rebecca, and had nearly beaten her to death. At the time, he’d almost found it fun.

“That sounds horrible.”

“The worst of it passed quickly. You’re my first childe, and I have a lot of ... the part of me, us, that keeps us from giving into the Beast. There are horror stories of younger Kindred, desperate to hold onto who they loved in the first life, embracing a bunch of people. Young Kindred can resist their Beast just fine, usually, maybe even more easily than older Kindred, but a young vamp who doesn’t know better can find themselves ruined by over-draining themselves of that special part of them.”

“Draugr.”

“Correct.”

“Ever had to kill one?” Jack asked.

“Yes.”

“Tell me about one of them.”

Julias raised a brow at the boy as the elevator opened up into the ground floor hall. More people down here, more nurses, less doctors, and some civilians going by. He lowered his voice.

“Different situation. A woman, a fledgling, decided to go homicidal.”

Jack stopped and raised a brow, before leaning in. “What?”

“She killed a whole bunch of people she felt wronged her, in her first life.”

“Wronged her?”

“Some of them deserved it. Most of them didn’t.”

“Fuuuuck. So killing people can do it, too?”

This was a tricky topic. His childe was asking him heavy questions about the Beast, and the soul, about whatever it was that separated humans, and vampires, from other animals; if anything truly did. He brought Jack to the cafeteria, and they sat down by the window so they could look out toward the parking lot.

“It’s not about killing. It’s about you, as an individual, a sentient entity, having things about you that are worth holding onto. They’re the sort of things an expert in torture would try and break, if they wanted to mindfuck you. If you were a courageous leader who cared deeply for his soldiers, an enemy who captured you would try and break that part of you, make you turn on your fellow soldiers, make you turn on your commitments and convictions.”

Jack’s eyebrows raised in understanding, before he lowered them as he looked down at the table. “And you damaged yours, for me?”

“It was just temporary. I feel fine these days, and I could sire your mother if the situation demanded. Hell, I want to. But I know better than to let how I feel be the basis of making the decision.”

Jack nodded again, and rubbed his chin with finger and thumb. If there was anything Julias could trust his childe with, it was being logical and being willing to set his emotions about something aside. Usually. Maybe he shouldn’t trust him with that anymore, considering present circumstances.

“That brings me to a point,” Julias continued. “You left your sweeper team tonight.”

“ ... Yes.”

“And you didn’t bring an escort with you, violating the buddy system.”

“Yes.”

“Want to explain?”

“I—” Rage built in the boy’s face, hardening it, furrowing his brow as he glared down at the table. “Athalia pissed me off.”

Julias didn’t need to explain that that wasn’t a good enough reason to behave as he did. Again, he could trust Jack to understand that there would be ramifications for him letting his emotions force a poor decision out of him. Later, he would punish the boy, and Jack would nod and accept it without argument. For now, energy was better spent trying to get to the root of this problem.

“How?”

“She’s determined to reconcile with her daughter.”

“Isn’t that understandable? It’s her daughter.”

Jack raised his eyes, and glared at Julias. That was a surprise. The kid didn’t break eye contact or look down or anything. He stared Julias straight in the eyes, before finally closing them and shaking his head.

“There’s no communicating with these hunters, Julias. You haven’t looked them in the eye like I have. There’s no truce to be made here, no compromise, nothing. The only way we end this threat is if we force the hunters out, or kill them all.” The boy opened his eyes again, but to look out to the parking lot, and stare at the mostly empty space. The lights shone bright, far away enough from the brighter areas of South Side that the streetlights weren’t washed out by casinos or strip clubs.



“I don’t disagree.”

“But ... hearing her, that fucking ... asshole of a woman, try and argue that maybe there could be? Because it’s her daughter? Selfish.”

Ouch. Julias leaned back, and followed Jack’s gaze out to the parking lot. It was a beautiful night, not a cloud in the sky, so a hint of star managed to show through despite Dolareido’s nightlife filling the sky with its own light. It didn’t fit the atmosphere at all. But then, Dolareido always did its own thing, went its own way.

“Can you blame her?”

“I know what you’re going to say, Julias. She is being selfish, but we all are. This circumstance with Mom is similar, in that I want to save her so she doesn’t die, like Athalia does her daughter. I get it. I fucking get it, but...” His fingers pressed into the table, and Julias felt a little vibration through it. The boy was visibly trembling with rage, if only barely. Deep down in his guts, the kid was boiling. “That daughter killed my sister, nearly killed my mother, has killed and assaulted Kindred, and ... and...”

“Tortured you.”

Jack’s shaking faded away, and he managed a glance at Julias before looking out the window again. The rage subsided, and Julias could see the creeping, cold, uncomfortable ache in the boy’s face. Fear.

“I ... can’t be afraid. I have to deal with these hunters, and—”

“Jack, everyone’s afraid. The only people who aren’t afraid are psychopaths.”

“I know, and I get it. But I’m a key part of the Masquerade now. Like it or not, I can’t let fear stop me from doing my job.”

Sighing, Julias shook his head. This kid was going to tear himself apart in the same way Julias used to. If only he could do this, if only he could do that, if only he had complete control of every facet of his life. If only he was omnipotent, and could fix all the aspects of his world, for himself and everyone he cared about. Hell, even strangers on the street, he'd fix their problems, if he had the power. Jack would do the same.

“You're not even two years embraced, Jack. Cut yourself some slack. You're young. Very young.”

“I know.”

“Do you want me to move the Right Hand title? Isabella would love it.”

“... would she make a good one?”

“Heh, no. She spends all her time with her actors and actresses, helping them learn. Ever see one of their plays? They're quite good, and show a lot of skin.” As per custom in Dolareido, whatever was done in Slut City had to be done with less clothing than the norm.

“If she won't make a good Right Hand, then no, don't give it to her. The council gave it to me for a reason. And I know I fucked up tonight. But, it was that, or...” He grit his teeth and snarled down at the table, quietly. “I don't know why Azamel paired her with me.”

“It was probably Athalia's request.”

“You think?”

Julias nodded. “You're only the second vampire she's ever trusted.”

That hit something in the kid, wiping his snarl away and making his eyes droop. “I don't deserve it, not anymore, not when it comes

to this.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. The only other vampire she’s ever trusted was Daniel, and that was a forced situation. I think this peacekeeper gig you’ve picked up is going to stick, and the Begotten and Uratha are going to continue coming to you, when trying to smooth out issues that involve the others. In this circumstance, Azamel, and even Athalia, may trust you to do what is best, even if that means killing Angela.”

“Imagining keeping up that peacekeeper role, with Athalia at the forefront of the Begotten, after killing her daughter ... is hard.”

Julias nodded once again, and leaned in as he put his elbows on the table. Enough with the depressing crap. The kid needed to think of the future, not brood over the shit in his lap.

“What’re you going to do, when your mom wakes up?”

“Wakes up? Oh, from ... the embrace.” He rubbed his buzzed head, and looked around at the empty cafeteria. Not completely empty, with a few people sitting around on the other side, chatting with each other. “I don’t know. Probably apologize for being so distant with her before I was embraced. And probably apologize for ... you know ... getting Mary killed.”

Oh boy, that idea backfired quick.

“You know it’s not your fault.”

“I know, I know. But something inside my head doesn’t give a shit about the logical explanation, and is content to blame the fuck out of me.”

“Ah, yes, that part. I am all too familiar.” They chuckled. Finally, a little relief from the depression the kid was feeling. “I meant, once the horrible part is over. After explaining to her that Mary’s dead,

and you're alive, comes explaining to her everything about her new life, explaining—”

“I assumed whoever sired her would do a lot of that, honestly.” Aha, finally got the kid thinking about a future that didn't suck, and wasn't filled with pain. A small smile sneaked its way onto his face, and he looked at the table again as his mind wandered. “You don't think?”

“I think whoever does will want to include you. Assuming Antoinette, you'll be there to greet your mother in her new world. You'll make it easier for her to accept, and once the painful parts are over, I'm sure the Prince will encourage you to help your mother integrate.”

“She'd be a dragon, though.”

“The dragons are the most secretive organization on the planet. Samantha isn't working her way up that ladder any time soon. No, Antoinette will ease her in at the most basic level, and won't give her any sensitive information for many years. That means, there'd be no covenant issues including you in helping her new child be comfortable in her new life. Help her hunt. Help her find a new place to live. Help her go shopping.”

Both of them frowned and shook their heads at that, as if tasting something rotten. Shopping trips, hours spent doing nothing but looking in windows, comparing items, no thanks.

“That does sound ... I mean it sounds fun, but like I told you, Mom and I were never that close.” It pained Jack to say that, Julias could see. It ate away at him. Family remorse.

“A strange thing happens to people when they get to your age, Jack. Either they grow even further apart from their families, and commit to being separated, or they get pulled back to them. You saw that with your sister.”

“You think I’ll reconnect with her?” he said. “It could go the other way, and make things worse than they were.” His eyes drifted back to the parking lot, as did Julias’s, and the two of them watched some humans come and go. Watching people move in and out of a hospital had a sobering effect, with how somber many expressions were. Much as people came to a hospital to be healed, the default mood for those that came to one was sadness. It gave the building a heavy atmosphere, not unlike a graveyard.

“I have no idea what’ll happen, but—”

The lights in the parking lot went out. A split second later, the lights in the hospital went out. Ok, now it really felt like a graveyard.

Everything went quiet, and Kindred hearing cut through the silence to hear the panicked gasps of the kine around them. Jack and Julias stared at the window, and watched as power continued to go out from buildings across the street. In this section of South Side, office buildings were everywhere, with lights already off, but there were plenty of apartment buildings as well. Their lights flicked off in the same second that the hospital’s had, like a wave of darkness that crashed over the city as if a monsoon of blackness had suddenly attacked.

A gentle whirr continued in the background, something normally covered by the sound of life in Dolareido, and its consistent activity. The whirr picked up, becoming a hum, and the lights of the hospital turned back on, in low light mode.

The power was out, and the hospital’s generators took over seamlessly.

There was no boom of an explosion, no boom of thunder, no warning of a planned blackout, nothing. The power was out, randomly. And there was no way it was random.

Julias got up, motioned for the Jack to do the same, and started walking toward the cafeteria exit. He had a pistol and knife hidden inside his suit jacket, and he knew Jack had the same. There was an issue with drawing them, though: it was a hospital, and a gunfight would be a problem; hell, even a knife fight would be a problem. Even if no kine were injured, a fight inside a hospital was not something the Invictus or the Prince could hide from the media.

He pulled out his phone. If—

“... my phone ... has no signal,” he said, and he turned to look at Jack as he held it up.

The kid did the same, and groaned before putting it away. “Cell tower down?”

“No, that wouldn’t be it. They’re jamming it somehow.”

“Jamming? Can people even do that?”

The two of them looked at each other, and shrugged. Technology was a bitch, and even youngsters like Jack didn’t know everything about it.

“Excuse me?” One of the humans got up from their chair to join them, a nurse, woman, young and innocent looking. The sort of girl to play an extra in a movie, and get killed off by stray gunfire. “Are your phones working?”

“No signal,” Jack said. “Hospital have Wi-Fi?”

“Yes, but that’s down, too.” She held out her phone, showing how her usual Wi-Fi network signal showed no bars. “But, that’s weird. The hospital’s generator keeps everything running, Wi-Fi included.”

Jack shrugged, and Julias grimaced as he poked his head out of the door. The cafeteria had a door connected to the main hall, and

the main hall went from one end of the front of the hospital to the other end. The lobby sat in front of the hall, and connected to the parking lot that spanned the front of the building, a room large enough to handle dozens of patients. The lobby was out of view from his current position, and as he poked his head out down the hall, he could only see the large doors that lead from the main hall into it.

Crisis mode. Everything had just gone horribly wrong, and they had to act fast. What to do, what to do. If the hunters knocked out the power, that was one thing. Knocking out the power for a whole city block, or more, and putting out some sort of jammer on both cell signals but also Wi-Fi, was extreme to say the least. Plan, assume the worst case scenario, and deescalate when more information was found. He had to assume they were making an attack on the hospital, to come for Jack's mother, and for whoever was here. They would be willing to get violent, even with humans around, and mow down innocents to kill vampires, if their assault on Jack's family was any sort of precedent. If they were willing to brutally murder Jack's sister, they were willing to do anything.

No amount of training, preparation, or equipment, could have prepared the Kindred for hunters willing to use humans as shields, or willing to butcher them. It made no sense. And it wasn't like Kindred considered the humans as hostages or vital targets to be saved; there were millions of them in Dolareido, more than enough to keep all the Kindred well fed. What could the hunters hope to accomplish using humans in this war?

That meant they wouldn't use the humans as hostages, unless they were humans Kindred like Jack considered important, like his mother. The only possible reason they had to come to the hospital then, was to catch Jack and any other Kindred, and potentially use his mother to force the encounter. It wasn't like they knew she'd survive the stabbing, otherwise they'd have probably attacked last night.

Think. It was a stroke of luck Samantha survived; Angela had tried to kill them both, not spare one in hopes this situation would occur. It hadn't even been forty-eight hours since her assault either, so the hunters had to discover she survived, was sent to this hospital, and then plan this attack in that time. How much could they accomplish in that amount of time? Considering what Angela and Jeremiah had proven capable of, probably quite a lot.

“Hey, what are you doing?” a voice called out from the hallway ahead. Julias frowned, and pulled his head back, as the doors of the lobby opened. One of the nurses slammed into the hallway wall, clutching her chest and shoulder, and she slid down onto her ass, as a group of hunters stepped into the hallway.

Julias pulled back, and motioned for Jack to the same. Backs to the wall inside the cafeteria, so no one inside the main hallway could see them, Julias looked around with snapping eyes. Windows. Leave?

“Out the window?” Jack said, eyes wide as he looked up at him, reading his mind. There was fear there, in his gaze, and not because hunters were likely here to kill or capture him. Fear, because his mother was the tool they were going to use to make it happen.

“No. We can't risk it. If they knocked out the power to an entire area, then they've made a move to take advantage of that. There's probably hunters out there, waiting for one of us to go outside.”

“I thought w—” Jack looked at the human in the room. Her eyes were flicking between them like they were crazy, and slow realization was dawning on her.

Julias looked into her eyes, and grabbed her mind. A panicked soul was easy to manipulate, and he took advantage of the rising worry in her. Eye contact.

She broke immediately.



“Hide.”

Nodding, expression flat and cold, the human walked over to the cafeteria counter, climbed over it, and disappeared. The other human in the cafeteria stared at them, and what the nurse did, before he scampered off to join her. The one cafeteria staff on hand managing the night shift, an older man with a hair net, didn't hide. At least, until Julias pulled out his pistol. The man stepped back from behind his counter, and vanished into a room beyond.

The phone landline would be down, no doubt, with how ridiculously thorough these hunters were being. No one was making any communication about the situation in the hospital any time soon. Nearby phone booth? Even if Jack or Julias could go outside without risk of being sniped by awaiting hunters, Dolareido didn't have phone booths anymore.

“I thought we had thralls stationed around the hospital?” Jack said. “And I know Antoinette does.”

“We do, and she does, but only a few. You know protecting your mother wasn't a priority, Jack.”

“I know.” He might know, but the boy's eyes still twitched with rage. “I ... know. Those thralls should be enough, though, right?”

“Maybe. Maybe they're dead. Maybe they couldn't check every face in the area. We still have a thrall in the hospital, and she's trained. She'll make her way to your mother and establish a defense.”

“We have a thrall in the hospital?”

“One of the orderlies. She—”

Both vampires almost jumped out of their skin, as a sharp rapping started on the window not far from them.

“I—Scully! Mulder!” Keeping his voice a whisper, but almost shouting nonetheless, Jack walked over to the window without ever leaving the wall his back was pressed to. He was smart enough to get low once he reached the glass, using the building wall as cover, and the two birds flew in to sit on his shoulders once he crouched and opened the window. “Report!”

The two birds made some click sounds and some quiet caws, and Jack mirrored it. Julias scanned the room again to make sure no one could see, because using Animalism to talk to animals was a Masquerade violation, albeit a small one. Talking to birds was one thing, talking to birds in the middle of this situation, and asking them to report, was enough to draw suspicion.

It was impressive that the kid had managed to tame two crows. Momentarily controlling an animal wasn't too difficult; mental possession of an animal was far harder, and required preparation, but he was sure Jack could pull it off. Taming animals in such a way, on the other hand, took months and months, if not years of diligent practice. He'd managed it in weeks, with a fine mastery of Animalism's subtler techniques.

“They say the people on the roofs can't see anything in the dark.”

“The thralls have night vision goggles.”

Jack shrugged. “Night vision sucks.”

“True enough.” It wasn't like the snipers set about would be able to identify hunters that didn't want to be identified; they didn't have photographs of the hunters to work with, just descriptions. And disguising oneself was easy. “Their phones work?”

After a few more clicks and croons, Jack shook his head. “Based on what Scully and Mulder are saying, probably not. Looks like the thralls are fidgeting with their equipment to try and get it working, but can't.”

“Then whatever it is blocking our phones has some range.” And none of the thralls had access to an easy landline. “We’re in a race against the clock, Jack. Send the crows out for help.”

“Right, right. Good plan. Mulder, get to the Invictus.” He looked to the bird on his right and started making some more clicks and croons. “And Scully, go the Elysium Tower.”

Julias figured the Prince and the Invictus were well aware of the power outage now. But the power was out for the block, and more blocks besides if he guessed right. Figuring out what was going on in that chaos was going to take them a few minutes, and whatever it was the hunters were here to do, they planned to do it quickly. Minutes were precious; which meant sending Jack’s crows to get help was borderline pointless, but maybe it’d help. Hell, maybe the sheriff would show up and save them all.

Fat chance.

The birds left, and Jack closed the window. Sighing and looking down at the floor, he reached into his suit jacket, and pulled out his own pistol.

“I hope they don’t get shot,” he said, glancing back to the window a couple times as the flickering wings vanished into the night.

“Ever try to shoot a black bird in a blackout?”

“Good point.” That perked the kid up, and he lifted his head as he put his back to the wall, next to Julias, beside the exit of the cafeteria. “Plan?”

“There’s lots of ways out of the hospital, but the hunters know what we look like, in detail. They’ll shoot us on sight.” He supposed they could steal someone else’s clothes, but that’d take precious minutes they didn’t have. And he knew they wouldn’t be leaving Jack’s mother behind anyway.

“I don’t suppose you secretly know how to use Cloak of Night discipline, Julias?”

“Not well enough for a situation like this.” Best he could manage was avoiding having people notice him, and even then it only worked on kine not looking for him.

“Isabella knows it well, and she isn’t Mekhet or Nos.”

“Isabella is a talented woman. Maybe I should have made her a Right Hand.”

Jack chuckled. Good to see his spirits were up. Hell, if anything, the kid looked like he was getting excited, now that the first rush of fear had passed. Probably fantasizing about an opportunity to kill Angela. Not so good, if the kid’s head wasn’t on straight, like tonight with his sweeper team.

“We’re ... going to save Mom, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

“K, good. Cause, I know that’s not a priority.”

“She’s deemed a future childe. We’ll give her the same courtesy we’d give any potential.” Which, he supposed, wasn’t all that much. Kindred cared about themselves first, their childe second, covenant third. Other people’s potential childer ranked pretty low on the list. “Well, I will, at any rate.”

“Thanks.”

“But we’re probably surrounded, and sunrise is in an hour. The hunters are going to do everything they can to kill us. That’s their primary objective. Killed or captured, either way you’re dead. We need to remember that your mother is their tool, not their objective.” He checked the slide on his pistol, before inching his

head back out the cafeteria entrance. The hunters were gone, but the hallway had started to fill with nurses, doctors, orderlies, janitors, everyone that kept a hospital running.

“Who was that?”

“I don’t know. Terrorists?”

“Why would terrorists attack a hospital? This hospital?”

“I don’t know. I—”

“There’s a bunch of them! Six I think.”

“Did they say what they wanted?”

“Just to know where the emergency ward was.”

“Someone call the police!”

“The phones are down! Everything is down!”

“But the backup generators are working.”

“The machines are on but there’s some kind of interference blocking the internet and phone reception. I can’t call anyone!”

Eventually, an older doctor showed up, and she barked orders at the gathering in the hall. Get back to work. Person A check the electrical room. Person B double check that the systems were functioning correctly on all floors. Person C drive to the nearby sister hospital and see if their phones were working. Person D and E, drive to the nearest police station. On and on, she addressed each doctor, each nurse by name, each janitor and orderly by name, told them exactly where to go, and what to do.

“And everyone stay out of their way. No one be a hero. Let the police handle this.”

“But—”

“Doctor Thompson, if you so much as look in their direction, I will have you shaving pubic hair for the next year. Shut the hell up, and do what I told you to.”

It really wasn't a meeting to be having in a hallway, but that's where the crowd grew, and the chief physician handled it. Julias was tempted to go up to her and get involved, use her somehow, but it was a losing scenario. They didn't have time to manage the chaos of involving the humans, and until the police arrived, all they'd do is get in the way. Worse, the hunters would kill them.

That thought struck him with anger, and he glowered as he pulled his head back into the cafeteria. What the fuck happened to these bastards to drive them to this point? Killing innocent humans? Twisted.

“What's the plan?” Jack said.

“We get to your mother, and handle the situation.”

“Handle?”

“Kill any hunter we come across. No mercy, no questions.”

Jack nodded, and checked the slide on his pistol as well. “You know Angela is here. She'll turn this place into kindling if things don't go her way.”

“I'm hoping mass murder of innocents is beyond what she's willing to do. Hopefully her anger toward you driving her to homicide was not the norm for her.”

“... me too.” With a long sigh, Jack pushed off the wall. “Ok, we need to get upstairs. Take the stairs?”

“Maybe. They might see that coming. If they find your mother before we get to her, they might sit and wait for you, and cover possible entrances.” Or just kill her and leave, in hopes of driving Jack into a rampage they could take advantage of.

“Then we need to get to her before they do. We can do that by the stairs faster.”

“Assuming they aren’t also taking the stairs,” Julias said.

“How many fire escapes could this hospital have?”

“A lot. It’s a hospital, Jack. It’s a big building with a lot of people. It’ll have fire escapes, and emergency fire escapes.”

They both looked at each other. Emergency fire escape, for patients. That would be the best way to get to her asap.

They nodded, and put their pistols away as they walked out into the hall.

“Um, excuse me sir,” one of the nurses said. “I’m sorry but we’re closing the cafeteria, due to the power outage. Please head on home.”

Julias met the woman’s gaze with his own, and offered a gentle smile. “Where’s the fire escape used for patients, doctors, and emergency staff.” And, like the others, their minds broke with only the slightest nudge. He was good at Dominate, outstanding at it, a testament to his bloodline. Molding her mind like clay came as easy as breathing once did Julias, as it would to Jack when he grew older, far easier than it came to most Ventrue. It kept his vitae reserves in plentiful supply, and he had a feeling he’d need them.

“Um, follow the red line to the back of the hospital. We have a fire escape in the back reserved for staff use, and it has tools to handle emergency evacuations of patients.”

“Thanks. Now forget you ever saw me.”

“Yes sir.” With a nod, she went along her way, and disappeared into one of the rooms.

The two Ventrue nodded at each other, and started for the back of the hospital.

“You know Triss is going to kill you, Julias,” his childe said, “sticking your neck out like this.”

“I can say the same thing about you and Antoinette.” If anything, Antoinette would be even more pissed. Jack was young, and his second life was proving to be a roller coaster. He was also the first person Antoinette had ever loved since Tony, far as he knew. If Jack got hurt, or worse, she was going to tear Julias in half, literally.

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~~Jack~~

He looked at his pistol, as Julias looked at his, and the both of them sighed as they put them away again. If they walked around carrying, in a hospital where everyone could see them, it'd cause havoc. Skilled as they were at Dominate, Julias above all, it wasn't a skill meant for mass manipulation. If they wanted to get dozens of people eating out of their hand, they'd have to be sired Daeva. Not that the raging fans enthralled by Daeva were exactly reliable, with the same love, obsession, and fragility of any diehard fan.

They walked quickly. Jogging and running wouldn't help much when they didn't know exactly where they were going yet, ultimately following some painted lines on a hospital floor, and hoping they stumbled onto the door the nurse told them about. They should have asked her to show them. Julias probably wanted her out of harm's way before she got caught in the crossfire. He was too kind to these kine.



The thought cut through his building rage like a blowtorch. Too kind to the humans? Well, they were in his way. If it weren't for them, he'd pull out his pistol, march up into the emergency ward, and kill any fucker that looked suspicious. Shoot first, ask questions later. If someone died so he could save his mother, so be it.

And that thought stuck out from the others. Julias had a reflex to try and spare the humans, and Jack didn't. When had that happened? He knew when it'd happened: every night since becoming Kindred, small changes to how his mind worked, how he felt about things, how he thought about humans and vampires.

He shook his head, and searched for better thoughts. Yes, you're angry, and being angry can turn you and anyone into a major asshole. People committed some of the most horrible crimes as actions of rage and passion. Give yourself a break, and let it go. You have faith in humanity, humankind, and you don't think they're just sheep to be fed on. You don't. You don't.

They found the fire escape, and started up. It wasn't being used, which was good. The elevators had their own power generators, he supposed, fancy a hospital as this was. Safe to use in a blackout. The best care in the city, and the hospital he'd have moved his mother to, if she hadn't been brought here anyway.

Hospitals had security, supposedly. Where were they? The chief physician had told them to keep people safe, and not interfere with the terrorists. Understandable, he supposed, considering if six hunters had shown up, they'd have made it pretty clear pretty quick, that they weren't to be fucked with. Julias and Jack had hid in the cafeteria while the hunters had moved on, so they didn't know where they were. They could be around the corner, could be in the fire escape stairs above them, or below, or waiting when they opened the door.

Julias pulled out his pistol again, thinking the same thoughts, and Jack mirrored him, no longer having to worry about kine eyes in the empty fire escape. If this were any other situation, the only realistic response would be to hide and wait for support. No kine was worth risking the lives of Kindred over. In fact, the Invictus were likely to punish them for being this stupid, taking on hunters that had proved far more capable than hunters had any right to be. Two Ventrue, formidable, but one of them barely a neonate, and the other far too important to die in a stupid mission like this, were going to face off against half a dozen hunters that had a frustrating habit of nearly killing Jack. They should have found a hiding spot, waited for back up, and secured their own lives.

But, they weren't going to let his mother die. They were going to risk their lives to try and save his mother. Julias hadn't even hesitated. The man was too damn nice. Beatrice was lucky.

The emergency ward wasn't very high up. A couple floors up, and Julias poked his head out the door into the hall. God, it'd be great if they had Natasha with them, or Beatrice, or Damien. Anyone who was good at the Cloak of Night. It wasn't a blood clan unique discipline, it was just that Nosferatu and Mekhet were naturals at it. Jack doubted he'd ever be able to learn it, and Julias had a hundred years under his belt and couldn't use it well.

The lights were soft and gentle. Everything looked subtle, with the ambient light from the weak backup power providing only enough energy to keep things running at minimum. It was good for Kindred, who could see perfectly in low light, and it made Jack feel a little better. Darkness, shadows, his instincts told him to use them, prowl through them, attack from them. But then again, there was light, enough for humans to work by, and more than enough for hunters to shoot at humanoid silhouettes with.

Don't get overconfident. A mistake here meant a world of hurt. His mom could die, or he could die. Worse, he could be captured,

and Angela would make sure to not repeat the same mistakes. She'd cut out his eyes, nail him to the floor with giant spikes, and torture him with fire, acid, and ... and ... He shook out his head, and swallowed down his anger. The anger was caused by his fear, and he'd never forget what Yoda said about fear.

It was chaos in the emergency ward, a strange sort of mayhem. Nurses and doctors and orderlies, but also people in work clothes he didn't recognize. Tradesmen or something, electricians maybe. Everyone was running around, making noise, yelling. Far more panic than an hour ago when he'd been up here.

“Who were they?”

“I don't know!”

“Danna says stay out of their way.”

“What if they hurt the patients?”

“Why would they do that? Who the fuck would attack a hospital?”

“I don't know. Just, stay out of their way.”

“Where'd they go?”

“East Wing.”

“Why?”

“The hell if I know. Danna says someone has already gone to get the police, but with this blackout and all the phones down, we're ... we're at their mercy. Just stay out of their way.”

A lot of hustle and bustle, people trying to manage emergency checks on all the patients, considering the circumstance. It was impressive none of them were running away. He supposed you had to care about your patients, if you wanted to be a doctor; more so

even, if you wanted to be a nurse. The sort of job people got if they cared, and that meant they wouldn't leave the patients to suffer whatever fate awaited them alone.

It meant a lot of bodies, standing around, creating noise, panic, and a lot of eyes looking around for a reason for the insanity. It meant Julias and Jack would have trouble moving around without being mobbed by panicking kine. They could Dominate them, but Dominating hordes of kine would be exhausting. If only they had a Daeva to herd them.

A person in dark blue pants and work shirt, black work boots, and a belt with dangling keys walked by, and Julias reached out to grab him.

“Hey what the fu—”

“Silence,” Julias said, closing the door behind them so they were standing in the fire escape stairway. A little eye contact and the man broke instantly. Damn, Jack's sire was good. Even in the best circumstance, it took Jack a few seconds of eye contact to establish the connection, find the mind behind the person's eyes, and grab it.

The tall man blinked, and stared at him, but said nothing.

“Take us to the East Wing. Can you do that?”

“... yes sir.” With a slow nod, the man reached for the door, but Julias grabbed his wrist.

“First, how many are there.”

“How many, sir?”

“Of the ... terrorists.” They'd heard six, but no harm in being thorough.

“I didn’t see them. It’s chaos up here. Everyone’s running around, trying to check up on the patients, get answers from security or the chief.”

“Where is security?”

“Downstairs. Not equipped to handle something like this. Power going out is bad. Phones and internet out is worse. A bunch of people with guns showing up, on top of that? No one knows what to do, what’s going on, and we’re running around like headless chickens. If shit—”

Julias put up a hand and shook his head. “We get it. Stay out of the way, and hide if things get ugly.”

“Yes sir.” The man nodded, devoted to Julias like the vampire was his lieutenant. Julias probably rewrote one of his memories to make him think something like that. A subtle, hidden suggestion, to turn the man into a committed soul, instead of a mindless automaton.

“You’re taking us because we need you to tell anyone who gets in our way that we’re with the company, doing an emergency check on some equipment since we were in the neighborhood.”

Vague, with a hint of authority and Good Samaritan. Combined with their suits, it’d be enough to get anyone out of their way. The man nodded, and soon the three of them were out in the hall.

People were running around, some literally, barking orders and others listening, or questioning loudly. Others were running away from something, and Jack knew what: the East Wing, where his mother slept. The hunters were there already, and no doubt checking each room looking for her, and for them. If one of the nurses or doctors had told them what room Samantha Terry slept in, they’d be there already.

It'd only been five, maybe six minutes since the power went out and the hunters showed up, but it felt like an eternity. The hunters moved fast, knowing full well Dolareido was a city controlled by vampires, and any attempt they made to do anything had to be done quickly. But, how did they expect to get out? The Prince and the Invictus would put two and two together soon enough, and notify the thralls somehow. He'd sent Scully and Mulder for help, and he wasn't the only vampire in the city using animals for communication and surveillance. This was a doomed effort, liable to get the hunters trapped and killed, all for the sake of punishing him.

No, there had to be something else. The hunters wanted him, or Eric, because they'd seen Azamel, knew about her, her place, her defenses. The two of them held valuable information, and were brand new paranormals, too, what the hunters probably considered weak and easy targets. Their mistake. But even so, they wanted the information, and they weren't going to suicide for it. They had a plan to get out.

The gentleman they'd turned into their comrade for the night guided them down the hall. They'd both been down this hall before, to see his mother, and they knew the way. But with the lower light, and the chaos of people scampering around, everything took on an edge. Every corner, every gurney, every counter, every door, all held the possibility a hunter would pop out and blanket the hallway with gunfire; or worse, actual fire. The hunters knew the vampires died to fire easier than dry paper, and they wouldn't hesitate to use it in a tight hallway, Angela especially.

He shivered as the memory of the prison bubbled up. The hallway of fire, the waves of rats, the smell of burning fur and flesh, the screams of the hunter that'd been eaten alive, the sweltering heat. Kindred had a natural pyrophobia, and his experience with the hunters only made it worse. Thankfully no Kindred would judge him for avoiding fire, when all of them avoided it. The elders in

particular, never touched it, and let their thralls and ghouls manage their love of candles and braziers.

He had to believe the hunters wouldn't be so psychotic as to go on a murdering spree in a hospital with wayward pyrotechnics. They wanted him, his knowledge, his personal experience with Azamel, and this was a maneuver to get it. Maybe Angela had convinced her fellow hunters that attacking his mother and sister was a necessary evil, to get the Kindred to make a move they could exploit. If his mom hadn't lived, he'd probably be raging through the city right now, screaming and crying and looking for hunters in such an overt manner, that they'd capture him easily. A pissed off enemy was an easily manipulated enemy.

The enslaved kine had to explain that they were here to help on several occasions. It wasn't like Jack and Julias hadn't Dominated these doctors before so they could see his mother unhindered, but those suggestions lasted the night; they could last longer, but no reason to waste the vitae doing so. So it was efficient to use this one man to get them past the onslaught of panicked people wondering about the two guys in suits.

They got to the East Wing without issue. The wing, like the other wings, was a loop, two entrance doorways, with rooms on both the inside and outside wall. His mother was in one of the outside rooms toward the end of the wing, which meant it wouldn't be the first room the hunters would check; if they didn't already know which room she was in. Considering the pace Jack and Julias were moving at, the hunters would probably be arriving at it soon, and that made Jack anxious. Go faster, go faster.

The East Wing hallways were empty, and the entrance to them had nurses and others running past, trying to do what nurses were supposed to do, but they were avoiding the hall. They'd seen the strangers enter it no doubt, and the strangers would have made a show of their guns to scare away the people. It was in the hunters'

benefit, he supposed, to scare away everyone. Anyone who stuck around was a possible thrall, and they'd shoot them. Which meant, once Jack and Julias entered the hall, any hunter who spotted them was liable to shoot on sight, without taking the time to recognize them.

For all the hunters knew, no Kindred were even in the hospital, so maybe they weren't expecting anyone to show up. Or did they know Jack had been in here? Did they follow him after he left his sweeper team? Fuck, if they had, and his mom died because of this, he was going to crumble. And then kill them all.

"Who're they?" one of the doctors asked, an older man, standing at the wing's entrance.

"With the company, checking out some equipment to make sure things are working."

"You ... can't go in there. Those people, they had guns, and they weren't playing around. We ... we have to say out of their way."

"Derek, look, these two men here are—"

"I said you're not going in there." The doctor got in front of the wing, glared up at Julias, and glared down at Jack. "They could kill some of the patients. We have to save as many people as possible, even if that means letting these ... terrorists, do what they want."

It must have been a tough pill to swallow. The man wanted to help these people, but by trying to stop the hunters, all he'd accomplish would be getting more people hurt. Being brave, being heroic, it got people killed and usually not much more.

It was common advice for people that were under risk of being captured, that they should do everything they could to not antagonize their capturer, while still holding secret the relevant information. As much as the movies liked to make a thing out of



being badass, and spitting in the face of your torturer, reality was far less kind to such stupidity. It didn't take much to break a man, and anyone who knew a thing or two about the nerve endings in teeth could make the most hardened veteran spill their guts.

Julias put up a hand, and drew the chief's eyes to his. There was a snap of urgency to the movement, and Jack fidgeted in place. No time. They didn't have time. Get out of the way now, before his mom died. And if she died because of this delay, he'd—

No. Stop it. Get a grip, calm down, and understand the situation. This was good. Julias was being logical, and handling the situation in a way that'd have the least fallout. If Jack and Julias started waving their guns around, it might have started a riot or stampede, or worse.

“Mister Bronson,” Julias said, glancing at the doctor's name tag, “keep everyone away from the East Wing, and make sure no one comes to inspect the area when gunfire starts. The patients will not be harmed.”

“I ... I will ... keep everyone away from the East Wing.”

“Right now.”

“Right now. Ok people! Let's get out of here! Come on, everyone into the break room. Equipment's working and no one's coding.” The doctor began waving his hands, and the cluster of people started to move in the guided direction. If it were the middle of the day, there'd be twice as many people, and it'd be hell to manage. But Julias found the right people, and manipulated them in the right way, to get a chaotic situation under control, and he probably could have even if there'd been a riot with twice the people. Decision-making finesse.

That was the regal side of Ventrue. To stand there in the face of a horde, and make decisions that garnered the best outcome, with all

the pressures of the world and a thousand voices screaming at you. Viktor and Julias had that air to them, and both would look perfectly at home on thrones.

“Alright, you get out of here too,” Julias said to the first enslaved man.

The kine nodded, and ran back to the hallway where they’d found him, back into the throngs of chaos. Jack and Julias both readied their pistols, and began the slow crawl into the hall, before his sire turned his head, smirked, and flicked several switches on the wall in the main room where the two hall entrances connected. The hallway went dark, lit only by the small amount of light in each patient’s room, and what came from the staff area behind them.

It was a strange situation. The hospital staff wanted to go into the hallway, but were under orders to stay out of the way of the thugs who showed up with guns. Jack looked over his shoulder, and grimaced as he found the staff watching the two of them enter the darkness. They looked terrified, but not for themselves, for the patients. They sighed, downtrodden, and walked away, disappearing into their staff rooms, looking into the black hallway where the insanity was occurring. He half expected one of them to run up to him and try and stop his intrusion, in some mindless attempt to stop a stranger from entering a secure ward. One of them might try and play hero, run into the inevitable fight between the hunters and him, and they’d get themselves killed, like an idiot.

Put yourself in their shoes, Jack. You haven’t been doing that much lately, with anyone, trying to think what you’d do in their situation. You used to try and do that a lot, but since Angela hurt you, you’ve considered everyone an enemy.

Every reflex he had screamed at him to ignore the quiet little voice in his head, but apparently it had a point to make, and it started knocking on his skull louder.

You haven't tried putting yourself into the shoes of these hunters, either. They have motivations, and they're good ones. Killing monsters? Saving people from enslavement? From the fangs of literal undead? Who wouldn't consider that a good motivation? Maybe, if you could just talk to them, they might—

No. The hunters had lost every right they had to be considered anything more than meat to be butchered. If he got his hands on them, he'd put them on hooks and let them dangle until they bled to death, skin ripping and muscle tearing.

He shook out his head again, and kept walking into the darkness. His mind was grasping at straws, trying to find ways to make him back out of this kill-kill attitude. Something in him was telling him these kine weren't important, just blood bags to be drained. Something in him was telling him his mother was to be protected, because she was a potential child of the night, and the other kine were not important. Something in his guts was telling him the hunters were not only just as worthless as other kine, beneath respect, but that they were revolting, and deserved to be wiped out. Exterminated. The world should be cleansed of them, so he would be allowed to live eternal with his army of thralls, ghouls, and his territory, filled with sheep to feed on.

He shook his head again, harder, enough to draw Julias's eyes. Shrugging, Jack held his pistol up, and motioned for him to go first, which earned an eye roll from the man. But, Julias knew, just as Julias knew Jack knew, that Julias had to be the one to go first. The man could soak a bullet better than him, as long as one didn't blow his brain to smithereens.

The hallway grew silent as the group of hospital workers behind them began to disperse. Hiding themselves in their break rooms and whatnot, their voices, footsteps, and breathing became a quiet hum in the background, allowing Jack to focus his hearing on the darkness before him. The emergency ward, where everyone was in

critical condition and under constant monitoring, was quiet. He didn't know if it had sub sections, if there was something below 'critical emergency' where they'd move his mother if she stabilized, but it hadn't even been forty-eight hours since she'd been stabbed, so here she stayed. Other kine in other rooms with similar problems were sleeping, dying, recovering, and were likely all asleep, coma or drug induced. The ward was silent as fuck, the distant background noise fading into nothingness as he focused on the hallway.

What was that line? Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death? A dark hallway, with rooms on its sides, many with dying patients, fit that description better than he'd like.

## Chapter 87

~~Damien~~

He looked at the picture again, then put the phone away. Gulping, he pulled the phone out again, and looked at the picture. She was so beautiful, and fun, and joyful, and overwhelmingly sexual. The frizzy red hair, bouncy and big, her soft face and pale skin, her golden eyes, it was all gorgeous. Of course, she knew she had large breasts, and in classic Dolareido fashion, had no issue using them to get what she wanted; in this case, him. Lucky him.

He was damn glad she left her cozy little town, and came to Slut City. Apparently she was a city girl to the bone, despite where she grew up, and came to Dolareido to both feed her horror, but also indulge her more human desires. The internet had corrupted her. He was glad it did. He shouldn't have been, but he was.

He stared at how she cupped one of her breasts, grip gently milking, and how its heavier bottom half filled and overflowed her hand. The pink, large nipple, milky white skin, and—

“Mister Burksen?”

He snapped his head up, and Maria raised a brow as she met his gaze. He must have had a strange look on his face, with the way she showed confusion on hers.

“Uh, yes, Madam Turio?” Putting the phone away, he looked down at the table, the computer it held, and the books beside it. Old books, written by various people throughout history. They were in English, but old English was difficult to read, with dead words, a lack of words, strange symbols, and a host of nuance that he didn't get. But it was his job to try and digitize the old world into the new world.

Lucas would have balked at that. Recording the words of Sanctified Kindred on a computer? Madness. A true sin against the Lord himself. If they continued, the wrath of God would rain upon them, and the ten plagues of Egypt would destroy them. Locusts would scour the land, and people's skin would blister with boils.

The man's words had enraptured Damien, at the time. His impressive control of voice was moving, enthralling, and the man moved Damien to action in his name, and His name, like guiding a fish with a shiny, shimmering hook.

The memory was bitter, now.

“You look distracted.”

“Ah, I am sorry, Madam Turio. My personal life has thrown some twists my way.” Nodding, grimacing, he tried to focus on the task at hand. The Invictus lived in the new world more than the other covenants, at least in Dolareido. They digitized things, recorded them, as long as specific words weren't used. ‘Kindred’ and ‘Masquerade’ were no-go words, or any obvious use of ‘vampire’ that would implicate their kind. Talk of paranormal content was to be adjusted, and works that could not be adjusted were to be marked for storage. The journal of a powerful Ventrue discussing how his long age had allowed him to chronicle the growth of a society, could be adjusted and digitized. The almost prophetic words of a vampire infected with Malkavia, that the vampire had been sane — or insane — enough to write down, were too dangerous and problematic to alter. Such words were invaluable though, and were to be stored, left as paper books only, and placed inside a vault.

“Personal life?” She smiled, and Damien froze. Maria never smiled. “Do tell.”

Do tell. She cut through the ‘personal life’ barrier with as much tact as a nuke, and now he was left helpless to deny her, unless he

upset her. More so, he couldn't lie, lest she eventually find out and punish him.

He hoped he hadn't traded Lucas for Maria. The two were similar in a way, and of the faith. There was a definite possibility that both of them had similar dispositions, and Lucas's hidden totalitarian motivations could exist within her as well. Lucas also considered the personal lives of his flock to be his business, as the Lancea et Sanctum and the Sanctified devoted every part of themselves to the faith. Was Maria pursuing more knowledge about him in pursuit of that, or was she simply being curious ... forcefully?

In either regard, she was an elder, his boss, and was the building block he'd use to rebirth the Lancea et Sanctum in Dolareido. He had to appease her.

"I ... seem to have entered a ... relationship, I think, with Fiona."

"Oh." A hint of anger crossed her face, before vanishing. She was reading her tablet, and was delving into some old, forgotten words of languages few could read. Secret scriptures from the Lancea et Sanctum's storage, stories of dead worlds, letters long beyond mosts ability to decipher. "Tell me more."

"Are ... are you sure?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Because probably the only man to ever love you is dead, and it no doubt weighed on you like no pain anyone could ever understand?

"We're just younglings, going through ... juvenile feelings. I didn't think that'd interest you."

"It does."

“... very well.” Ok, how to talk about this. “Fiona is ... a silly girl, and—”

“Woman, Damien. She’s a woman. She may be a young woman, but a woman nonetheless.”

“Woman. She seems to be attracted to ... tormented types.” Far as Damien could tell, Eric was a bitter man, though for far different reasons.

Maria chuckled, and turned the page. “Ah yes, that sort. Many young women are. Such a motif has been known for many for centuries. Bram Stoker’s Dracula painted the vampire as a tormented soul, broken by his pain, and overwhelmed with passion for his obsession. Or Erik in the Phantom of the Opera. A man with drive, with grit and determination, moved to commit heinous acts in the name of his obsession.”

“And ... women are attracted to this?”

“Women are attracted to powerful men, Damien. Many mistake this for simple things like money, or status, and while there is truth to that, it is also proxy to the personality trait that is so alluring. The ability to play an instrument is an example. Yes, there is attraction to the status that comes with someone being a musician. But, a man proving he has the grit and determination to master — or at least learn — a skill that most cannot, is alluring. A man in uniform garners similar reactions for similar reasons; not only is his life in order, but he has shown he can pursue something to completion, and bear fruit. A man who is not passive, but active, determined to acquire what he wants, and has the mental fortitude to push through barriers to acquire it, is beguiling to any woman.”

He stroked his chin as he looked at Maria. She didn’t lift her head, eyes still on her tablet, but he doubted she was reading it. Doubtless her mind was on her relationship with Lucas now, and that made every word he said now dangerous.



“I hadn’t thought of it like that. I just assumed women ... uh...”

“Desire money, and drama?”

“Well, yes, that.”

The corpse woman chuckled, and scrolled to another page. “There is that, as well,” she said. His turn to chuckle. Maria, making a joke. This was progress in their strange relationship. “It is the combination of that grit in personality, and the darkness that comes with tormented characters, the drama, that is enthralling to young women like Fiona. In older women, they find the dark, tormented characters juvenile. Erik compared to Raoul, in Phantom of the Opera, for example. The tormented soul versus the stable man? With maturity comes understanding that the drama of a dark, brooding man, is not healthy, and a relationship with such a soul is doomed to failure.”

He sighed at that, and sat up straight, looking at Maria with more obvious body language. “Then what hope is there for any Kindred?” Vampires, overwhelmingly so, were tormented to some degree or another, ripped in two by the struggle of their human side, and their new Beastly side.

“Touché.” That got her. She nodded, and set the tablet down on her table as she turned her chair to look at him. “But we have an advantage. We live for centuries, and while our minds may be trapped, unchanging, wisdom can still be learned. Perhaps a dark, tormented soul can also be stable and reliable? Julias is an example of such a man. He has grown considerably in the century I’ve known him, but still, he is a tormented man.”

“He seems a lot happier now that he has Beatrice. But, also weighed down with his new responsibilities.”

“And yet, he not only bears his burdens, but engages Miss Damor in both emotional and sexual gratification. He is a rare breed.”

Damien nodded. If there was a Kindred in Dolareido people could consider a success story, it was Julias Mire. The great Viktor Honors, replaced by his rising childe and prodigy Julias Mire, who had sired a childe fit to someday replace him, the star Jack Terry. And like Honors, Mire had a dark side, something that used to torment him from his past.

“What about Mister Terry?” His relationship with Antoinette didn’t fit Maria’s descriptions, as far as he could tell.

“I did not think of Mister Terry as a tormented soul, young as he is, with as boring a first life he had.”

If only she knew how untrue that was. The kid was plenty tormented, by Viktor’s ghost, by Angela’s face, by his kills, by his first life’s mistakes, by many things. Like sire like childe, Jack would go through pains similar to Julias, and his torment had only just begun, if it took Julias a century to overcome his pain.

Better to not tarnish the boy’s image for Maria, though. Damien smiled and nodded. “I meant, in regards to the dynamic between him and the Prince.” If Maria was willing to educate him on more aspects of romance and whatnot, he’d take her up on her offer. Zero personal experience was a terrifying problem to have; fear of the unknown was universal.

Not that the corpse woman was going to have an unbiased view on romance, women, men, or anything in that realm, but her wisdom was valuable nonetheless.

“The Prince is unique, but there are women who prefer their men to be less ... rigid, in their pursuits. If the man is happy to let the woman drive, so to speak, and the woman has the desire to be the one driving, then there is no issue. Jack does not feel the need to press his desires on others, unlike most men, and Antoinette does not feel a need to try and minimize conflict, unlike most women.

She is content to be the..." The elder set the tablet down, raised her hands, and air quoted. "The 'man' in the relationship."

Damien choked, doing his best to suppress the laughter that struggled to free itself. Seeing the small corpse woman, her cracked pale skin, her ancient white dress, her long black hair that forever had some knots and twists to it, seeing her air quote was too much. And it earned a small smile from her in return.

"But," she continued, "make no mistake. If Mister Terry did not possess a drive, a will, to pursue the things he considered important to him, he would hold no attraction to the Prince. Such weak, flaccid men, with no drive of their own, are nothing more than children, to be spoon fed and protected, not be drawn to sexually."

That made sense, he supposed. While Jack and Antoinette's relationship was a bit unique, and the elder vampire was the 'man' in that relationship, dare he use the word, Jack did not lack drive. He was simply comfortable, and perhaps happier, to let Antoinette be the dominant one. But, what did dominant entail? The term seemed antiquated, in a modern context. Perhaps it wasn't though, and he, spending fifty years living under rocks, simply didn't understand how the gender dynamics applied in the new world.

"I—" He jerked in place as Maria's phone began to ring. Someone had to be daring to call Maria an hour before sunrise, when she had already retired to her chamber for the oncoming day.

She answered it, offering a quiet snarl as she did. "This better be important. It ... I see. Are—oh. Then ... yes, we must take care of this immediately. Send every thrall in the area to either the hospital, or to investigate the possible causes of the power loss. We do not have long." She put down the phone, stood up, and turned to him. "Damien, a messenger crow has arrived at the Invictus headquarters. Eight minutes before that, a massive blackout struck

South Side, and three city blocks are without power. The South Center Hospital is within the center.”

“The hunters are attacking the hospital.”

“Yes, in all likelihood. The crow was sent by Mister Terry. We have attempted to contact our thralls in the area, but none of them are responding. And since Mister Terry has not called us himself, I can only assume the hunters have somehow blocked cell reception, and other digital communication methods as well.”

Oh no. Oh shit. After what the hunters accomplished in the tunnels tonight, he could only assume they’d managed to use similar methods to disrupt power and communications on such a large scale. He’d told Maria about the barriers the hunters had used already, but none of that information had been circulated yet, having only told her half an hour ago. There was only an hour until sunrise, and they hadn’t expected anything to happen in the single hour he’d been at the Cathedral. Mistake.

“What do Mister MacDonald and Mister Mire say?”

“MacDonald is currently in North Side, punishing some Uratha and Kindred for being uppity. Mire is with Terry, at the hospital, most likely.”

“That ... is a problem.” The night had gone from bad to worse in a very small amount of time. The high of his time with Fiona, the thrill of her body, the joy in the picture she’d sent him, all gone in a flash as he realized hunters were attacking the hospital, likely in a bid to either kill Jack’s mother, or capture the boy who sat with her. If they went during the night, now, it had to be because of Jack’s presence, and Mire being there made it all the more problematic. If one of the Invictus council was captured, the fallout would be catastrophic.

“I am calling MacDonald now, and we will see what can be done, but with so short a time before sunrise, I am hesitant to send Kindred.” Maria stood up and began pacing, phone to her ear. “But...” Her eyes fell for a second before looking to him.

Damien nodded, got up, tested his busted, wrapped ankle, tested his aching hand, and found them functional. He grabbed his sword, one of the pistols Maria kept in her personal chamber, and started for the gate.

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~~Julias~~

The dark hall awaited them. The patient’s rooms leaked light from under their doors and small, vertical windows, but most of them provided only the small light of the low-light mode, or the small amount of light from the machinery within. It meant the hallway was pretty damn dark from end to end and around the turn. The switches he flicked where the hallway looped and connected to, the main room where elevator opened up to and where the staff rooms were, had turned all the hallway’s lights off in the East Wing. Perfect for vampires.

Lights in the distance flickered, moving with the telltale snap speed of flashlights. There they were. Julias moved forward slowly, staying half crouched, gun down and held in both hands. The moment one of the hunters poked their head out, he’d shoot. No, wait, it might not be a hunter. He had to at least put half a second into identifying the target first. If they had a gun, that put the chances it was one of the hunters up to ninety-nine percent. If they didn’t have a gun, who the fuck were they and what were they doing in the East Wing? Maybe a nurse or orderly hadn’t heard about the raid, found an emergency flashlight after the lights in the hallway went out, and were walking around inspecting the patients.

He kept his shoulder to the wall, and whenever he came to a door, he used the indent it provided to create some cover. Maybe three inches deep into the wall wasn't exactly enough cover for a gunfight, but it was something. And if it did turn into a gunfight, he could open the door and step into the room. With a patient room opposite of him, Jack did the same thing, and small as he was, he could fit a lot better into the three inch groove. But would the kid know to not shoot until they at least confirmed it was the hunters? It might have been Miss Jez Tummer, the thrall orderly.

They moved quickly. Into a doorway slot, then the next one, then the next one, always prepared to swing it open if they needed to dive in. Samantha was at the end of the hall, and based on how the flashlight was moving, the hunters were coming toward it, having entered the U-shaped hallway from the other entrance. They would run into each other, face to face eventually, and when that happened the bullets were going to fly.

“How long?” a voice said, a woman. A glance Jack's way showed the boy tense horribly, and his gun hand trembled for a few seconds before it steeled itself. Angela's voice, then.

“Two minutes,” another said.

“You have one.”

“Why ask if you already know the limit. The fuck is this, Star Trek?” The man's voice sparked some rage from Jack as well, but nothing nearly as visceral. It wasn't Jeremiah, then.

“Just get to it. They're coming.”

“We don't know who's coming. Could just be—”

“Someone turned off the lights. Who the fuck else would do that except for them? They're coming.”

Sounded like Angela knew Jack and Julias were in the building, then. They must have decided to raid the hospital at night, knowing that, and because of that. Cocky mother fuckers.

“Think the woman will get through the portal alive?”

“Machine’s working her lungs. We can do that ourselves with a manual ventilator.”

“Ever rip a ventilator out of a person before?”

“No. Worst case scenario, she dies, and we continue with the original plan. Now shut up and get this done.” The click of someone checking the slide on their pistol echoed through the quiet hall. Angela was just around the corner, and from the sounds of it, she’d already found Samantha. Shit.

He had to act, and act quickly. Jack no doubt heard the woman’s words, and if Julias guessed right, the kid was going to respond in the next five seconds. The hunters were doing something, something involving a portal and Jack’s mother. That wasn’t enough information to act on, but they had to act anyway.

So, Julias nodded to Jack, and the boy nodded in return. Now or never.

Jack slid up to the end of hall, back to the wall, and he didn’t poke his head out or expose himself. He waited, and Julias moved forward along with him, still on the outside wall of the hall. If Jack stuck his head out first, Julias would be in a weird position where he’d have to use the inside wall, the corner Jack was using, for cover, while he was still on the outside wall. It’d be better to use the door at the end of the hall, where the hall turned on the end of the U shape.

He nodded to Jack, pointed to himself, the door at the end, and waited for kid’s return nod. Jack confirmed, and readied himself,

gun up, waiting, and Julias readied a dash. He was going to be both a distraction, and the following fire when the hunters left themselves open to Jack's attack.

What a fun way to spend a night with his childe, murdering people.

Time came to a near standstill, everything slowing down, as Kindred reflexes kicked into overdrive. Human adrenaline had nothing on the power of vitae, and while Julias was no Mekhet or Daeva, he could use Celerity enough to manage some speed and inhuman reflexes. He drove his weight forward, and came down on the side of his leg and hip, a sliding kick aimed for the door. Facing the hunters, he scanned the group of them as best he could in the fraction of a second it took him to reach the door, foot smashing into it, momentum driving his torso back upward, and hand slamming the handle down and open so the door swung open with the momentum.

Six hunters, in the hallway, and the door to Samantha's room was open. One of them had an assault rifle, one of them had a shotgun, the rest had pistols, and while one of them was down on their knees by the floor, Angela stood over him, pistol in right hand, and her fake eye glinting with reflections of the flashlights.

The thrall Jez was on her knees, hair held by Angela's free hand, and she looked battered, beaten. One of her arms was broken, and she looked almost unconscious, dazed and listing. Fucking assholes.

The hunters managed to look his way as he slammed open the door, only for Jack to poke his head around the corner, crouched, and begin to unload his weapon. If there was ever any hope for this to not escalate, Jack crushed it. But the kid saw the opening, six hunters standing around, and Julias had already told Jack they were going to kill them. It was how he expected this to go, but, seeing his childe not hesitate, not flinch, not even say a word, just unload



bullets at the humans, with every intent of killing them then and there, was a painful thing to see.

The bullets crashed into the air with a loud crunch, and fell to the floor. Jack reloaded his next magazine and sank every bullet he could at the standing hunters, taking less than a second to reload, and only two more to empty the gun once again. And again, each bullet slammed into the air in front of the kneeling hunter. The hunter's eyes were wide, blatant shock painted there, and he breathed deep a sigh of relief as he put away a small, black bag.

A trail of black soot ran across the floor from wall to wall, a line that separated the two Kindred and the seven humans. The bullets fell on that line, beside it, on the side closer to the vampires.

“Holy shit,” the man said, standing up. A small man, for a hunter, with a shag of red hair, and a scar across his cheek. “A second sooner and we’d be splattered.”

Laughing, Angela came over to the black line, dragging the thrall behind her. Jez didn't struggle, and if she wasn't unconscious before, she was drifting into it now.

“Jack,” she said, “how nice to see you again.”

Growling, Jack kept his back to the corner, and stuck his head out for longer than was safe. The hunters didn't take the opportunity to shoot at him; the barrier was likely blocking them as well. Julius stuck his head out from the room he hid within, and stood up as he realized his hunch was correct. But he wasn't willing to bet his life on it yet, and he kept most of his body inside the room he'd opened. The room was empty thankfully, sparing him having to worry about a patient, unconscious or otherwise.

“Angela,” Jack said, the venom in his voice palpable.

“And you are Julias Mire, childe of Viktor Honors the murderer.” And, like Jack, the venom in her voice could fill a swimming pool. “I’ve met a few hunters that have tried to take a shot at him, you know.”

Ah yes, the history of his sire coming to light, bringing all the pain expected with it. Wonderful.

“Considering the things I’ve heard, you’re the monster in the room, Angela.” He nodded past her, toward the woman she was dragging.

“I’m not going to waste my sympathy on a thrall, vampire.”

Why? The Vinculum wasn’t permanent, and neither was vitae addiction. If they threw a thrall into a cell for a few months, or a year at most, both could likely be broken. He almost told her that, but giving the hunters new tools they could use to kill Kindred was not a good idea, even if it could possibly endear them to the hunters a bit more.

“You killed my sister,” Jack said through clenched teeth.

“What? I didn’t touch your sister, or your mother.” She nodded toward the door. “I heard about it on the news, same as you did, I imagine. I’m taking advantage of an opportunity someone else created.”

Julias ground his teeth, as did Jack. She was lying. He’d been playing poker for too many decades to not recognize a bluff, a confident one, but a bluff nonetheless.

Did she know they wouldn’t believe her? Probably, which meant she wasn’t lying for them, she was lying for her troupe, to keep them in the dark about her activities. A possible opportunity, a way to show these hunters their leader wasn’t the beacon of trust they

probably thought of her as, if they were willing to go to war, and fight for her.

Take advantage of it later, handle the immediate situation now. There was black soot on the floor, and it was probably erecting some sort of magical barrier, invisible but hard as stone. If any sweeper team ran into something like this, he didn't get to hear about it, having left to go find Jack before the reports were circulated. And knowing his luck, or rather, Jack's luck as of late, that probably did happen.

"Assuming," Julias said, "that you didn't kill Mary or hurt Samantha"—an evil glare from Jack forced a pause from him—"what are you doing here, and with Samantha?"

"I thought that would be obvious. We're taking her, and either she'll tell us a way to force Jack to tell us what we want to know, ooohrrrr..." She laughed, and reached out to press her gun hand against the invisible barrier. A lot of trust for an invisible wall. "Jack comes with us now, and tells us what we want to know about Azamel."

"All this for a Begotten," Julias said, sighing as he stuck his head out a little more. At this point it was pretty clear that the invisible barrier wasn't going to burst any time soon. "Azamel hasn't hurt a soul since she's been here."

"She's brought villages, towns, and cities to ruin, vampire. She'll do it to this one, too, given time. Millions of innocent people here, and they'll die because you continue to house a monster."

This time, she wasn't lying. Julias blinked, and managed a quick glance at Jack to see what his reaction was, but the boy was too busy oozing rage from every pore to notice Julias anymore.

"Has my mom told you yet?" Angela said, grinning at Jack like a hungry hyena. "She tell you what her boss did to mine?"

“ ... Azamel told me.”

“From the mouth of the bitch herself. That’s just the tip of the iceberg, fuckwit. She’s ruined many lives, destroyed so many homes. And I bet you’ve seen her, the real her, the fucking monstrosity she is. You have the god damn nerve to defend her? A fucking twisted, evil re-imagining of a god? You’re all monsters.”

“Angela,” the hunter with the red hair said, “it’s time.”

“Finally. Let’s get this over with.” Angela put her pistol into the holster on her hip, pulled out a knife, and with all the grace of a butcher, slit Jez’s throat.

Julias stood up straight, stepped out of the patient room, and walked up to the barrier. Pistol in hand, he reached out with his other, and pressed fingers against the odd surface. He glared at Angela, met her one good eye with his, and then looked down at the corpse of Jez lying on the cold surface floor of the hospital hall. Angela had cut deep, two inches into the poor woman’s throat. In her dazed state, Jez probably hadn’t even felt it, just faded away in five seconds as all the blood of her body poured out of her.

The other hunters winced. Angela didn’t. She put the knife in her other hand, and redrew her pistol into her right. She didn’t back away from Julias; if anything, she came in closer, and glared up at him.

“We’re going to kill all of you if we have to,” she said. “Or, help us kill Azamel, and you vamps get to live. Viktor’s dead, so Tony’s, so the worst of your kind are off the list. We didn’t come here for vamps from Slut City, we came here to kill a true horror, a monster you can’t possibly understand. We can compromise. Tell us what we want to know about Azamel, help us kill her, and we’ll move on.”

A lie. She smiled when she lied. Subtle, a fidget of the corner of her mouth where she tried to suppress the desire to smile, but it

was there. People often had issues suppressing those muscles when they bluffed, especially if they got a thrill out of it. This psychopath of a woman was that sort. She got off on lying, and on being a menace. One look in her eyes, glass one included, was enough to tell him plenty about her, about how she felt about vampires, and how she would get off on seeing them all burn.

She wasn't a hunter. Hunters often married their job, and many even took it into the pleasure realm, enjoying killing monsters, but there was something else in this woman's eyes, something insane, something inhuman.

"You killed her." He nodded down at Jez's body.

"I did. A thrall's a thrall, another of your devoted servants. And we need blood." She nodded toward the redhead. "Get to it, Bill."

Bill sighed, nodded, and pulled out a small paintbrush. Squatting down by the wall opposite of Samantha's open door, he dabbed the paintbrush into the blood around his feet, and started painting on the wall.

"Angela, you should get away from them," Bill said, as he began to paint a circle on the wall. "Ventrue, right? You—"

"I'll be fine, Bill." The woman glared at Julias, stared him straight in the eyes, and licked her lips, the hunger for violence blatant on her face. "No Ventrue is dominating my mind. No Daeva or Nos or whateverthefuck who tries is going to get anywhere. Not me." Like a striking snake, she brought up her blade and stabbed it at his face. His eyes went wide, and every reflex he had demanded he move out of the way. He almost did, before the blade crashed against the barrier, tip slamming into it as if she'd just stabbed rock. "Made you flinch."

"... my childe is right. You are a deranged, sad woman, with a mountain of woes." And she was right, that he couldn't dominate

her, not with a simple glance at least. Something in her was blocking him, a wall between him and her, and it wasn't the physical barrier.

He looked to the other kine, but they were smart enough to avoid eye contact with him. If they saw his eyes, the path was open to him, the eyes a window to the soul. He didn't need to be able to see their eyes, as the Beast reached out from his own; as long as they could see his eyes, he could find their minds, and break them. They kept their eyes away, trusting in the barrier to keep them alive, so they didn't have to keep their attention on him. A lot of faith in a bit of black dust.

“I am what my mother made me.”

“Way my childe tells it, your mother left you in an orphanage.”

“Not before she let a little of her monster side feed on me.” She dragged the knife through the air, grinding it against the barrier, and snarled at him like an angry tiger. “You know what that's like? To have your own blood use you for food?”

Julias looked to Jack, without hiding the glance. Let them see he was curious about this, it invited more conversation. The more they talked, the more time he had to figure out a way through this barrier. But the boy looked confused. The details of Angela and Athalia's relationship when they were still a family was not known to him.

“You knew my sire, or stories of him at least,” Julias said. “Viktor was a violent, deranged man, toward the end.”

“Heh, Viktor ever torture you?”

“Nothing so direct. Has Athalia ever tortured you?”

“Not directly. But, she’s a twisted creature, as any Begotten is. She feeds on destruction and ruin, and the fear that comes with it. One time, when she was so hungry she couldn’t control herself, she destroyed my doll house. Cried afterwards, both of us. Pretty stupid, sad little story, right?”

That painted a full image. A young girl, impressionable, still open to ideas like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, exposed to the horrific nature of her young, unstable, monster parent. Begotten had insatiable hungers, and he could only imagine the trauma it’d cause someone so young. She’d never be able to sleep comfortably, never able to feel at home, never able to feel truly loved, if her mother was a monster forever fighting her hungers.

“It is a sad tale, Angela, and I sympathize, I truly do.”

“What? Fuck you, vampire, you don’t—”

“But it’s nothing I haven’t heard. I’m sure most hunters have suffered equally horribly pasts, and so too have us paranormals. The Uratha, the Kindred, and the Begotten, go through worse, and many of them are not only less violent than a psychopath like you, but many strive to save as many lives as they can. You don’t get to use your mother’s treatment of you as an excuse for your actions.”

She sneered, and looked over her shoulder to Bill. The man’s painting was complex, but it was clear that it was some sort of occult circle he was drawing on the wall. If it had to be done in blood, then it couldn’t be good; reason enough to stop them, let alone saving Samantha, and taking the opportunity to stop the hunters permanently.

“Your childe killed several hunters. Your wolf friends killed several hunters as well, or nearly; Elen managed to save them.”

He raised a brow. She was willing to talk about Elen. Maybe some information could be gathered? Jack said she had a habit of talking,

and hadn't learned the important skill of saying less than she knew. Children had that habit.

The more he looked this twisted woman in the eye, the more it was becoming clear she was exactly that, a child. Athalia had abandoned her, with good cause, and the whole situation had created this revolting example of a human. The guilt Athalia must have felt, every day, especially now that Angela had killed Jack's sister, was immense. It explained her anger, classic redirection.

And Jack probably knew it, too, though he probably wasn't admitting it to himself. Easier for him to think of Athalia as a burden, and Angela as nothing more than an enemy at the moment. He couldn't blame him. Killing her would have been easier if he didn't know this much about her. No one minded killing a faceless enemy. It was always harder to kill a person, someone with a family, with a past, with a voice of their own.

"Elen can resurrect people?"

"Elen can do some pretty amazing things. But I'm not going to tell you." She shrugged, not realizing she just told him that no, she couldn't resurrect people, but she could do some magical stuff otherwise. The woman would be a horrible poker player. "I look forward to what she tells me about Jack, when she starts digging through Samantha's brain."

He snarled, while Jack outright growled, and the boy approached the barrier. His eyes were wide, and glaring, animal fury blatant and overwhelming his gaze. His free hand reached out to press on the barrier, with his gun hand clenched at his side, still pointed at the hunters.

"You're not touching my mother."

"Sorry, kid. You got information we need. Come with us, and we'll spare your mother. But you're not going to do that, are you? Too



selfish to—”

Jack slammed his hand against the barrier, hard, hard enough to make his arm bounce off it, and for his body to push back five feet across the floor, shoes literally sliding with him. If he'd punched a person, he'd have broken their bones. The crack of the impact was enough to make the hunters jerk, and for Angela to flinch; Julias suppressed the urge to make the obvious retort.

“You can lie to your hunters, about what you're doing, and why. But I know what you're doing, you fucking, disgusting bitch.” He walked back up to the barrier again, and again pressed his free hand against it, fingers spread at eye level. His voice dropped, a whisper, only he, Julias, and Angela could hear. “If you touch my mother, I'm going to rip off your fingers, one at a time, and your toes, and let you bleed out as I slowly cut your stomach open with a thousand small cuts.”

Angela glared at the kid, and Jack returned it. There was more here than simple hate, there was something greater. Something inhuman was in them, both of them, aching to dance in the blood of the other. Julias held his gaze on his childe for a little longer than he needed to, but it was hard to look away from Jack, once the honest introvert, with a smart mind and analytical nature, being filled with so much bloodlust.

That said, seeing this vile woman standing there, lying to them, lying to her hunters, cutting open Jez's throat like she was a sheep, and ready to sacrifice Samantha to Elen for whatever strange ritual she had planned, was infuriating. He couldn't deny the rage was building inside him as well, and he glared at the woman, keeping his vision on her real eye, as he let the anger boil over. This woman had ruined his childe, poisoned him, driven him to insane depths of hate and wrath, and was going out of her way to ruin his life. What could she possibly get from Samantha's mind that would be of use to her, except leverage over Jack?

Everything about this screamed vendetta. She wanted to hurt Jack. Using him to get information about Azamel seemed ridiculous at this point, with all the other targets she could be going after. With the resources she was spending on this hospital attack, and the lives she was risking, this had clearly become a sunken cost, and there was no way she was unaware of that. Were the others? Was Jeremiah? Something was off. The hunters didn't know what sort of woman Angela was.

“Almost done here,” Bill said.

“Good. Zak, get the woman.”

“Get her? I don't know how to remove a ventilator.”

“I know how, sort of,” Bill said. With a groan, he reached up, and finished the occult circle he was drawing. A star, an inverted pentagram, some symbols Julias didn't recognize, all arranged in a specific pattern. “I'll help Zak. Olivia, you can open the gate now.”

“Finally.” Another hunter walked up to the circle, and placed a hand against its center. Bill disappeared into Samantha's room, and Zak went with him. Four hunters in the hall, one preoccupied with the circle, while Angela continued to stand at the barrier, glaring at Jack like she was trying to fillet his soul.

Julias had to stop this. Samantha was going to die, either by what was bound to be a haphazard removal of her ventilator and insertion of a manual, portable one, or by what was going to come next. Jessy's report had described what Elen was going to do to Eric, cut into him, and learn things from him whether he wanted to tell her or not. She had some way of getting information with her magic, and could probably do more things besides, considering what Angela said. Either way, he had to stop her, for Jack's sake.

He set his free hand on the barrier, open fingers like Jack, and stared into Angela's eye.

“What’re you gonna do, Mister Mire? You can’t cross this barrier, and you can’t break my mind. Throw your weapons away, lie down on your stomachs, put your hands behind your head, and we’ll take Jack, instead of her. Otherwise, Samantha comes with us, and we’ll get some tasty info about Jack from her.” Lies on top of lies. She’d take Jack alright, after she executed Julias.

“Fuck you,” Jack said. “You’re just doing this to hurt me.”

“I’m doing this to force your hand. Surrender, and we don’t harm her.”

“She’s innocent.”

“Yes, she is. But she’s half dead, unlikely to recover, and I won’t let that life go to waste. You—” Her voice stopped, and her body went rigid, before her arms started to go limp at her sides. Gulping, she stared at Julias, and her head tilted slightly to one side.

Julias grinned.

“Boss?” one of the hunters said. The hunter had to be careful to not look at Julias, or he’d catch the hunter’s mind and break it in seconds. They couldn’t see what was happening then, not clearly, not with their eyes facing in other directions, as Julias and Jack did nothing but stand there, not drawing any attention to themselves.

Angela did nothing either. She stood there, eyes wide, stuck on Julias’s, and he managed a small smile as he reached out with everything he had, every ounce of vitae, every bit of blood, every bit of will he could muster. He slammed his mind into hers, and made her tremble. He slammed it into her again, hard enough to make her head sway back slightly. He crashed against it, against this strange barrier in her mind, the wall of hate and anger and inhuman determination.

For a moment, he remembered the heroes in ancient tales. Many heroes from mythology were psychopaths, capable of great feats, while obsessed with themselves or their goals. How many of them were twisted, convinced of their immortality, or gladly committed war crimes in pursuit of glory? Legends upon legends of the greatest the human race had to offer, and many of those stories described what could only be called a lunatic, someone driven in ways no sane mind could understand.

That's what it felt like, crashing his will against this woman. This maniac was barely human, but she was human still. That meant, for all her boasting, all her will, all her determination, she was limited by what she was. He took that part of her, the human part, and squeezed on it, found the foundation of the wall she'd built, and hammered his will on it. It was like trying to break through rock with his teeth, but he did it again, and again, until he felt his insides begin to vibrate.

"Break ... upon ... me," he said through clenched teeth. No one could hear him except him, and the woman trapped in his mental grip. His voice echoed in her mind like a cannon; he could hear her thoughts, except that they were buried underneath the thunderous echo of his own, crashing upon her will. She would break, he gave her no choice. The howling winds and roaring explosions of his resolve, his thoughts, his words, slammed into the pillars of her psyche again, and again, and soon her trembling shakes were in sync with his hammering Domination.

And he broke down her gates with all the subtlety of a battering ram. This was how Viktor broke minds, and how the man had originally taught him to. Human minds were ants to be crushed, nothing more, according to his sire. They had no Beast, nothing in them that protected them from the overwhelming, alien power of the monster inside Kindred, or Uratha, or Begotten, or whatever else crept around in the dark. Humans had nothing like that. And

this Angela, despite her strange mental state, despite the oddity of her, her personality, her everything, was human.

He crushed her, and grabbed her mind.

“Break the line.”

“Yes...” With a slow nod, Angela set her foot against the black line of soot, and nudged it open.

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~~Antoinette~~

“Flesh magic?” she said.

“Y-Yeah. I ... I can’t think of any other w-w-way to p-put it. It was flesh. The walls, the floor, the ... the b-b-bones, it was all flesh, and other ... things you find inside a person.”

Antoinette frowned and leaned back in her seat. Natasha was down with her in their primary experimentation room, chandelier above, empty summoning and resonance circle behind them. The details of her encounter could wait for tomorrow night, but tomorrow night was likely to be filled with talk of Samantha Terry. It was better to learn of this now, and she could ruminate upon the information while handling her new childe.

A small piece of her bubbled with excitement over the prospect of a new childe. How many years had it been since she tired Tony? She could not recall the date, but it must have been over two centuries. To have a new childe, a woman of maturity nonetheless, someone she could both teach, but also indulge in conversations her ghouls could not appreciate, was exciting indeed. And above all, it would make her love happy.

Tiny smiles sneaked their way onto her face mid conversation. She would consider siring Ashley and Julee in the future, but the

two were still content to simply enjoy the freedom she gave them: immortality, sex, money, education, fashion, and anything their whimsical hearts desired. And she was content to enjoy their glee by proxy. With Samantha it would be different. Everything would be different.

She forced her mind back to the topic at hand, as unsavory as it was. “What you describe can only be the creation of magic.”

“M-M-Magic is ... I’d ... I w-wish there was a more scientific explanation.”

“As do I.” That was one of the goals of the Ordo Dracul, to discover, document, and understand the mysterious workings of the universe. To lump the unexplainable under the title ‘magic’ was doing a disservice to her order, and the universe at large. But, that did not change that some acts were so alien and obtuse, that they defied any explanation she had available, her or her order. A room made of flesh, a living, breathing, pulsating room with ribs, and dangling chains with bodies hooked upon them, was magical, and abhorrent.

“For now,” she continued, “we will call it magic, flesh magic if you will, until we discover how the witch Elen is performing these acts. Is she communicating with an entity from another realm? Perhaps there is a wavelength of energy she has learned to sense that we have not, and she manipulates it. There are humans that can see colors that others cannot.”

“That ... that um, d-doesn’t sound ... comparable.” Natasha squirmed in her seat, and fidgeted with one of the tablets Antoinette had provided, scrolling through texts relevant to the topic. There were not many, but there were some, talks of strange magics that revolved around the manipulation of living flesh. Living was the key to it, as far as the texts suggested. It was not magic that could be performed on the dead or undead, but only those with living,

breathing bodies, and souls within; or bodies who had died within the past few minutes. If Elen was performing this magic, and that was indeed what seemed to be happening, that was her limitation.

The report the Invictus had shared with her said that, while Elen was going to perform her magic upon Eric, she was not going to do so to Jack; they had resorted to torture with her beloved. Eric was alive, while Jack was undead. A pattern, perhaps, proving that Elen was bound by that rule.

“No, I suppose it does not.” With a long sigh, Antoinette leaned back in her chair and looked up at the dangling chandelier. It produced a white light, but she could change its color to allow her tablets, and the complicated software and delicate lenses they used, to view the usually invisible substance ephemera. Such discoveries were a step toward understanding the madness others called magic, and that she too, was forced to call magic in the meantime. Frustrating.

She could still remember when Lucas had summoned a literal bolt of lightning, and struck her with it. But it had not burned her. It had suppressed her powers, locked her vitae to her insides, blocked her from using it to extend her will outside of her. It had nearly spelled her doom.

“What interests me more than this flesh chamber,” Antoinette said, “is what you have discovered about the Begotten. If Elen was indeed controlling him through something she was carving on his back, which Daniel’s discoveries of her sacrifice rituals suggests is quite within the realm of possibilities, then that is an opportunity.”

“We could free him!” Tash sat upright a little straighter, a hint of resolve crossing her young face as she nodded.

“Oui, perhaps we could. That would be invaluable, and likely turn this strange war we have found ourselves in, deep in our favor.”

“That would b-be so great. And ... and...”

“Mmm?”

“He was ... very p-pretty.”

Antoinette laughed, and shook her head. “Little Vola, you already have two strapping men in your bed every night.”

“N-No! Not for me. Just, he was v-very pretty. I bet he’d ... you know, f-fit in Dolareido.”

“Ah, he had that look, did he?”

“Well, he was shirtless!” She threw up her hands, as if that justified her apparent inability to not think of the man through a sexual lens. “He, umm, Aaron said-d that he looked and sound Romanian. He had blue eyes, and short b-black hair, buzzed, like Jack’s. Normal height, and ... athletic.”

Ah, athletic. Perhaps it was her long friendship with Jessy Herrington that had sparked the girl’s interest in masculine physiques. Or Antoinette had simply underestimated the size of the small woman’s sex drive before she got to know her, underestimating her and her almost cliché — but terribly cute — desire to be small in the arms of her large, powerful, deadly lovers.

Except they were not lovers, not yet. Plenty of sex to be had, but as far as Natasha had mentioned, it had not entered the territory of love yet. Would it? Antoinette feared for her, as a woman being shared by two men was a difficult thing to manage, when love entered the equation. But if she could make it work, all the power to her.

“Perhaps he can be rescued. Perhaps not. If this shaman has managed to ensnare a Begotten, true monsters, beings of literal nightmares, understand that saving him may not be possible. And,



sad as it is, if the circumstance arises, we must prioritize the lives of our Kindred over his.”

“B-But we’ll try, right?”

Smiling, Antoinette nodded again. “We will try.” The tactical advantage alone warranted the attempt, let alone freeing a fellow paranormal from the hunter psychopaths.

“Any idea ab-b-bout this?” Tash said, with a gesture to the small jar of blood on the counter.

Antoinette scooped it up. Tilting it from side to side revealed no abnormalities; it looked like normal human blood. Kindred blood was darker, thicker, and it acted with a will of its own, determined to keep the host healthy and in one piece. This was not that. This was a jar of thick, red water that moved with gravity and the laws of liquids, nothing more.

“I presume, once this is analyzed, we will find the blood of many humans. I also presume it will also show signs of rot, now that it has been removed from its body.”

“That chamber w-was a ... b-b-body?”

“Based on what you described, I can only assume it was some sort of body. It had skin and flesh of its own, and a sentience, displayed in the reaction of those faces on the wall. I can only surmise that Elen has either created or discovered this entity. I ... would not be surprised, if this old woman has created it, through decades of effort, and the murder of others.” If murder was the correct word. Perhaps she had merged them, combined them, like some sort of alien entity found in a science fiction fantasy. “Based on the drawings Daniel has collected, and now our understanding of her powers, at least in relation to flesh, and what she tried to do to Eric, we must assume that she works powers in regards to flesh. She not

only treats it as a mechanic treats a vehicle, but she treats it like she were a whisperer, someone who can speak to what others cannot.”

“B-Because she ... she said ... things about...”

“Assuming the reports of your friend Herrington, Eric, and Clara are decently accurate, then this Elen shaman has discovered something truly mysterious about the power of flesh. I wish to know more, as will Jacob.”

“W ... Will you tell him stuff y-you learn, if we capture her first?”

“That is a good question, Miss Vola. Will I tell Jacob.” The question deserved pondering, and she sat there for a minute, looking down at the table as she tapped her finger upon it. “I imagine not, honestly. The man cannot be trusted.”

“B-B-But ... he’s your old friend.” As much as she was arguing in the man’s favor, Vola’s face betrayed her views of him. She did not like the old Nosferatu.

“Jacob has not been a true friend in ... I suppose that is not correct, or fair of me.” She tapped a finger against her chin, and smiled at Vola. “He aided me, in creating the wild goose chase that Tony and Viktor pursued, which led to their demise.”

Natasha’s jaw dropped as she pieced together the implications of that. Antoinette had arranged for Tony and Viktor to clash, and Jacob had joined her in that pursuit. Two elders had conspired to kill two other elders in the city, and had done so without ever giving up their identities. The Danse Macabre could be deadly, and she could play it like no other.

“You’re ... a d-d-dangerous woman, Prince.”

“Oui, c’est vrai.” She nodded, acknowledging the fact. No harm in letting the small Mekhet offer her ego some gentle strokes. “I—”

Her phone rang. Sighing, Antoinette picked it up. Daniel's ring. He would not call without good reason, same as his childe. "Yes Daniel, what is it?"

"Ann, one of Jack's crows showed up."

"That is peculiar."

"And there's a massive blackout in the city. A few blocks are without power, and that includes South Center Hospital."

Antoinette growled into the phone, and clenched on it. It took will to not shatter it to pieces. "Then we go."

"There's only an hour till sunrise, Annie."

"That is more than enough time to dismember whoever is responsible." She got up and started marching out the door. "I assume communications are down?"

Natasha hopped up, and looked around in a panic, grabbing her sword and pistol quickly before jogging to catch up to the Prince.

"Yes," Daniel said.

"Then you will find and fix this issue, and slaughter any hunters you find. I will go to the hospital."

"We should send some thralls to—"

"I am going, Daniel. I have been hands-off in this affair long enough. These vermin think they can exploit my love and his youth by attacking his mother. I am going to tear them apart, limb by limb."

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~~Jack~~

Jack could feel his sire smashing his will against Angela's, and it was awe inspiring. Dominate was normally a subtle skill, and not a Masquerade violation due to how impossible it was to see. Unless a Mekhet was using Auspex to spy on the paranormal activity, Dominate was a hidden talent that seemed like nothing more than a man speaking convincing words.

This wasn't subtle. Jack could feel this. Jack could almost hear this. There was the thud thud of Angela's heartbeat, and in the dead silence, he was sure he could hear something crashing in rhythm with it. Julias's mind was slamming into her, battering against her, smashing through her mental gates, and from this close, Jack could feel the waves of the Kindred energy pour out of him. This was a side of Julias he'd never seen. Always his sire was about subtle decisions, spending energy where it was best served, never ridiculous expenditures. This was not that. This was like that time Viktor had summoned an army of rats, to allow the three of them to storm Tony's position, a surreal display of insanity.

"Break the line," his sire said.

Angela twitched, the eyelid over her glass eye fidgeting. Even now, as the century-old Kindred destroyed her defenses and grabbed her mind, she resisted. The will this woman could muster was nuts, something no human should have been able to do. Werewolves, vampires, monsters, and probably other things Jack had yet to see, they could stand up in a fight like this, be a part of it, instead of a simple sack of meat as kine always were. Angela had no right to be able to resist them like she was. But, despite whatever it was that blocked Jack, Julias broke through it, and Angela moved her foot just enough, to push a small gap into the black powder at her feet.

The barrier Jack had his hand against fell away. From this close, he had the warning about what was happening, and he let a smile sneak onto his lips, as his hand fell to his side. His pistol hand brought up the gun, pointed it at Angela's face, and fired. No

hesitation this time, no mistakes. Execute her, be done with it, and dance in the river of her blood once his mom was safe.

Except, the bullet didn't land. Angela's body fell like a sack of rocks, hitting the ground hard as a blur of movement tackled her legs from behind, bullet cutting through her forehead but not penetrating. Julias, Angela, and one of the hunters rolled over each other in a mess of limbs and grunts. Jack was soon included in the mess, as the diving hunter half spun with their tackle, legs out to the side, and slamming into Jack's legs.

He wouldn't let this happen, not again. As he fell, he caught his weight onto open hand, the rest of his weight rolling onto his elbow and side. He pointed the gun at the mess of bodies, and started firing.

Some bullets hit Julias. He knew it'd happen, and he fired anyway. He saw where his sire's head was, though, and as long as he didn't turn the man's skull into splatter art, Julias would be fine. Other bullets slammed into the mess of limbs, most hitting the hunter that had tackled them, and hitting what Jack guessed was kevlar underneath his jacket. Damn it.

The whole situation lasted three seconds. By then, the other hunters had responded. Jack was forced to turn around, and roll to the side, putting the original wall corner he'd used as cover between him and the hunters. A good thing, because Bill and Zak both came out of his mother's room, guns blazing, unloading a flurry of bullets into the wall corner Jack was hiding behind. At least Olivia stayed at the circle Bill had painted. Her hand was pressed to its center, and there was a gentle, amber glow on her fingers. He'd love to shoot her and stop whatever it was she was doing, but bullets smashed into the wall corner, shredding it, and forcing Jack back into hiding.

The hunter on the other side of the hall, standing by his own line of black powder, ran their way, and started unloading his shotgun.

This one came closer, and closer, unloading shell after shell at Jack, until he came around the corner to join him. Pure aggression. This hunter had balls, using the suppressing spray of his shotgun — sawed off, evidently — to pin Jack back until he had to retreat to one of the doors behind him. Jack threw the door open, and ducked in around the door frame, before poking his head out enough to start firing at the incoming asshole.

A quick glance past the shotgun wielder, showed Julias in the corner of the hall, wrestling with Angela. It didn't last long. Even a Ventrue was a lot stronger than a human physically, especially if they were ancilla, and especially if the human had been shot. The bastards were wearing bulletproof vests, but there was still blood, some of Jack's bullets having hit their limbs. Angela was bleeding from the head, but now also from the arm, and the hunter who tackled them was bleeding from the leg. Julias stood up, and despite the hole in his stomach and leg that Jack put there, the man held both kine by the throat, one for each hand; must have dropped his pistol in the mess. Their legs dangled, and Angela slammed her foot up to kick him in the crotch.

He was a Ventrue though. Only the Gangrel matched their Resilience, and Angela's reflex probably didn't take that account. Julias barely reacted, and glared at the two humans in his grip.

"You. Kill them." Julias nodded toward the man in his hand, and dropped him.

The kine collapsed, his leg almost gushing blood from the impact. But once he was down, he pulled out his pistol, and started firing. First, at the kine with the shotgun approaching Jack. In the chaos, the hunter put every bullet into the hunter's back; headshots would have been better, but he was probably aiming for center of mass, or resisting Julias's snappy mind control as best he could. It was enough to send the man with the shotgun onto his face, though.

And that was enough for Jack to shoot the man in the skull when he landed.

There was a flash moment, a single instance of time, and it stood out with a white background, scarring Jack's eyes. The moment the bullet slammed into the man's skull, and the splatter of blood and brain matter rained over the hospital floor around him, the world froze. It was for a moment, a single moment, but it was long enough for Jack to notice it, and long enough to hear the growling chuckle that came with it.

His growl. His chuckle. It didn't sound like him.

Julias still held Angela, and she was his shield between him and the three hunters still outside his mother's room. But, even as he held her, an animal snarl escaping him, he squeezed the woman's throat harder, eyes glancing between her and the other hunters. The hunter at his feet and under his control broke the momentary standoff, turning to face the other hunters, and he started firing. Jack couldn't see the other hunters from his new position, himself halfway in a patient's room and down the hall toward where he'd originally come from, but he could hear them. They must have been hiding in his mom's room, out of the dominated hunter's line of sight.

"Put her down!"

"No," Julias said, looking over the struggling, squirming woman's shoulder, as he squeezed on her neck. Yes, break it, crush it. Angela held his wrist with both her hands, her gun on the floor, and her arm bleeding more as she fought against him. His Dominate hadn't lasted long on her, but it didn't need to. Jack could see her neck begin to buckle, and he licked his lips as the woman's frantic struggles grew more panicked, her face turning red in the darkness.

And then everything started to glow amber. As if a portal to hell had suddenly opened up, the orange light filled the hall, and Jack

had to raise an arm to cover his eyes for a moment. Julias stared ahead into the hall, and Jack stepped over the corpse of the hunter he'd executed to put his shoulder to the corner he'd been using as cover again. Bullet casings were everywhere, and the white of the wall had been torn apart by metal shrapnel, exposing the building steel underneath. The amber glow grew, and Jack stuck his head out, ready to pull it back to avoid getting shot.

The wall, opposite of his mother's room, the one the hunter had painted on, had opened.

Jack blinked, staring at where the hunter had drawn the blood circle. He'd recognized the circle from the ritual sites Daniel had showed him, but he didn't know their significance. Significance now explained. The circle was open, and an orange light flowed out of it, pouring over the hall, and the room his mother was in. And suddenly, everything smelled thick of blood, far more than it had. What the fuck was going on?

A man stepped out, someone of average height, dark hair buzzed short like Jack's, shirtless, wearing jeans and combat boots. He smelled of blood, too. For a second, Jack could see the man's muscular back as he stepped out of the portal from Hell, and he squinted to see the strange circle drawn between his shoulder blades. It was a similar circle to the one that'd been painted on the wall, and it looked like it was carved into his flesh.

The man turned to face Julias and Jack, and raised the corner of his lip in a snarl. He leaned forward slightly, put a foot behind him, and readied a sprint. As he did, a subtle, black silhouette filled the air around him, and Jack felt every muscle in his body clench, as he recognized four giant arms, and four colossal wings.

Oh shit.

The beast charged forward, and as he did, his boots tore the floor apart. Jack had seen the werewolves do that, using their talons to



anchor their weight, so they could propel themselves. This man was doing the same thing, except it was the strange silhouette of the colossal, four-armed gargoyle tearing the floor apart. And as he came in close to Julias, he threw his weight to the side, one of the wing silhouettes, a shadowy mist lit by the amber of the portal, flapped to force the Begotten toward a wall.

Julias tried to compensate, turn to face the monster, but Angela fought him, bringing up both her feet and driving them into his chest. Julias still didn't let go of her, but it threw off his balance, and he couldn't keep his hostage between him and the monster. With a quiet, cold ruthlessness, Sándor jumped, bounced a foot off the wall, got around Angela, and smashed his weight into Julias.

The hospital wall didn't appreciate it. It cracked, bits of white falling away like brick, and where the Begotten drove his hands into Julias's shoulders and into the wall, it was dented. Angela fell, and scampered to take away the gun of the hunter Julias had dominated. The two of them started to roll, trailing blood and firing the gun wildly.

Angela was strong, even with only one uninjured arm. While her gun, and Julias's gun had scattered around on the floor in the earlier mayhem, she managed to grab onto the wild, flailing gun hand of the dominated hunter, and she pointed it at Jack.

The sensation of metal tearing through his flesh was not a pleasant one. He thought he'd get used to it, with how often it was becoming a part of his life. But, as much as he thought maybe he could handle pain, the way a bullet tears through the flesh with such unbridled enthusiasm, was not a pain he could ever prepare himself for. One bullet hit his leg, another hit his guts, and another hit his chest. His body hit the wall, back planted to it, and two more bullets slammed into his ribs. When another hit his gun arm, crashing into the bone, he dropped the pistol, and his body fell back, back sliding down the wall as his feet gave out. He tried to get up,

but another bullet crashed into him, ripping up his legs, and putting that idea on hold with a silent wave of agony.

How? How did this happen? One moment, Jack and Julias were kicking ass, ready to put these six hunters in their place. Hell, one of them lay beside Jack, a big hole in his skull where Jack had executed him. There'd been a sick satisfaction in that, in the cold and brutally efficient act of putting a bullet in his head when he was down, taking advantage of the opportunity Julias's Dominated hunter had created. But now, Jack looked down at the many holes that peppered his body, made by bullets that had ripped through his muscle and bone, scattered some ashes to the hospital floor, and left him broken. Angela didn't stop firing at him, until the pistol clicked, empty.

Angela drove her elbow into the side of the Dominated man's skull, and the hunter went unconscious. With the Dominated hunter down, and Jack momentarily incapacitated, Angela got up, and joined Sándor, kicking at the man while the Begotten rammed his fists into Julias's sides.

“Zak! Bill! Get Raymond back through the gateway now! Elen might be able to do something for him.”

Two of the hunters ran around the corner Jack was sitting against, and grabbed the man Jack executed. Do something for him? Unless Elen could sew the bits of his brain back together, she shouldn't be able to do a thing for him. Could she?

He managed a glare up at the hunters as they ran past, but they were very, very good at avoiding his eyes. They'd learned from their mistakes in the past, and had training in this exact, specific niche of combat with vampires: avoiding looking them in the eyes. Just a glance, just a peek his way, and he'd reach out and break them, but of course he wasn't that lucky.

He tried to move his gun arm. Grab the pistol, grab it, grab the pistol. He growled as the pain tore through him, and vitae flowed over the bones, forcing them back into place. Move, move your hand, grab the pistol. You have to do something or you're dead. If you don't do something, don't fix this, you're dead, your sire's dead, and your mother's dead. Move!

He managed to look to his sire, but Julias was busy. Angela was in there with the Begotten, and the two of them were fighting him hand to hand. Angela didn't manage much with her bleeding arm and head, and upon second look, Jack could see his bullet had hit her in the bone of bicep; partly out of commission then, at least until it was fixed up, probably by Elen. But that didn't stop her from trying, kicking at Julias's side and forcing Jack's sire to block with his arm, while the Begotten pounded on him.

Sándor was strong. Sándor was ridiculously strong. Jack hadn't seen such a display of sheer, brute strength since the werewolves had fought against that spider monster in tunnels, or maybe when Antoinette had torn apart over a dozen Kindred with her bare hands. The stomach-turning crunch of bones breaking, the thud of flesh rippling under explosive impact, the way the body moved off the floor half an inch with each upward punch — or in this case, several inches — was nauseating. Jack stared as the smaller man, probably fifty pounds lighter than Julias, beat him into a pulp.

Julias took it, a small grin on his lips as he blocked as many punches as he could. He glanced Angela's way, and the woman froze.

“Kill the Begotten.”

Whatever wall she had in her mind to keep vampires from getting their fingers into her brain, it must have been damaged, because she turned on the shirtless man beside her instantly, and tackled him. Sándor fell over, caught off guard and a slave to physics; he wasn't

as big a guy as Julias. And Julias sealed the deal by driving his fist down at the man's face when Angela caught his side, forcing him onto his knees. Angela pulled a knife out from behind her with her good hand, and threw herself onto the Begotten's back, stabbing wildly, sending blood everywhere. The Begotten only grunted as his blood painted the walls, and rolled underneath her, bringing her down with him.

As Sándor and Angela rolled around on the floor, Jack stared at the pistol beside him. Forcing down the bubbling scream that threatened to make his head explode as pain flooded him, he twisted over, and reached for it with his offhand. Get it, get the pistol, and shoot everyone, riddle them with holes. Time was running out, and if things kept going the way they were, either the hunters would kill him, or sunrise would.

Julias looked down the hall, where the circle had been drawn, where the amber light was bathing the area in the colors of a crimson sunrise, where Jack's mother's room was, and he froze. His eyes went wide for a moment, before the room erupted with an unending sea of thunder and metal. The flashing white of a thousand small explosions lit the hallway like the fourth of July, if someone had been unlucky enough to accidentally light all the fireworks at once, at their feet.

Jack did his best to ignore the hail of gunfire, half his focus on getting his gun arm working again, other half trying its best to twist itself so he could grab the pistol with his bad hand. He got his fingers on it, and pointed at the rolling Begotten and Angela, but the rain of gunfire rattled his brain, and he snapped his head to the side as a chunk of the wall corner he was sitting against exploded. His back was to the corner, wall blocking him from being caught in the gunfire, and with Angela and Sándor on the floor, there was no reason that the few hunters still on their feet, and whoever came out of the hole in the wall, couldn't unleash hell at anything higher than three feet.

Julias, already with dents in his body and some twisted, mangled bends to one of his wrists, didn't try and dodge. He just stared at whatever Hell awaited him, and managed a small grin, as the bullets started to rip him apart.

Jack froze, and stared at his sire. Sándor threw his head down and covered his ears with his hands, and Angela, perhaps brought out of her enslavement by the Begotten's punch, or maybe the explosion of metal death, did the same. She broke her enslavement in seconds before, and had done so again. She was insane.

Julias was insane, too. As dozens of bullets ripped into him, Jack stared on, paralyzed, unable to look away as the small shards of metal opened him up. And yet, the man remained standing. Kindred blood filled the wounds, pulled withered skin and muscle over them, and hid the damage as best it could.

For a moment, Jack was reminded of when Viktor lost a chunk of his skull to a sniper bullet. It'd taken some of his brain with him, but the man had managed to regrow it in minutes; a staggering, impressive regenerative display he now only expected from transformed Uratha, but not Kindred, not even elders. And yet as the metal ripped into Julias, Jack found the same thing happening.

It was more than that. The bullets hit his skin, and many didn't penetrate. Some flattened against his hardening body, falling to the side. Others cut through his suit and skin, but were pushed aside by the writhing mass of dark Kindred blood within. Others went through him, slamming into the wall behind him, and the holes in his flesh filled in within seconds.

It was worse when some hit his face. The sight of teeth getting ripped from his mouth, a cheek tearing open, and a chunk of his upper skull getting exposed, made Jack's stomach turn. His sire's combed-back blonde hair was ripped into a mess of torn bits, with his scalp getting hammered with at least a dozen bullets, one

penetrating his sire's skull, above the eye, and causing him to stagger. He didn't fall.

Jack managed to stick his head around the corner enough to see what was going on. The four other hunters in Angela's troupe were there, and so were four more. While the four that joined them had pistols, three of them were unloading their bullets at Julias, the fourth stood behind a wheelchair. Elen, the old sack of bones, ready to succumb to extreme age and frailty, watched the fireworks from a safe ways back. The other black line of powder was behind her, keeping her back safe while she watched the onslaught, six hunters unleashing Armageddon on Julias, one small piece at a time.

Jack ducked his head back in, and brought up his gun. Still not the good hand, and that arm was struggling to work as well, considering a fair amount of metal was now lodged inside him. But if Julias could stand there, and take a couple hundred bullets in five seconds, and not fall, the least Jack could do was shoot at the fucking bitch at his feet.

Angela managed to crawl Jack's way, and throw herself at him, tripping over herself as she did. It didn't need to be a graceful tackle. A stumbling mess of shoulders and limbs was more than enough to crash into Jack before he could get the pistol straight. He held onto the gun this time, squeezing the grip as hard as he could, and he struggled underneath the shoulder of the woman. Work, body, work, mend. Fix the bones, reattach the tendons, get the muscles to bare functioning minimum. Let him kill this woman before she ruined everything.

She turned so she was facing him, on top of him, and the sheer manic rage he found in her one good eye was almost enough to shock him. Being controlled by Julias, twice, must have triggered something in her. This was the Angela he saw when she was on him last time, in the street, when Eric and Beatrice had run them over. If

both her arms worked, he wouldn't have been surprised if she'd tried to strangle him, pointless as it was.

But her arm didn't work, and neither did his. The best she could manage was hammer punches down on his face with her good hand, and a weak grab on his throat with her bad one. He blocked them with his forearm, before swinging the gun hand against the side of her head, sending her falling over. The two of them were out of the way of the gunfire, and with Julias pinned to the wall under a constant incoming rain of death, Jack was on his own.

At least, that's what he hoped for. In all the chaos, the darkness, the pyrotechnics of muzzle flashes and bullet ricochets, Jack rolled onto Angela, and started beating his gun down on her. Break her face in. Use the grip, smash her teeth in, break her nose, break her eye, smash her skull in until it's pulp. And when she's almost dead, when she's struggling to breathe, when she's gargling on her blood, Kiss her, and drink her until she's a withered corpse.

Each blow he rained down, she managed to block, same as he had her. The difference was, he was a vampire, and she was just a stupid human. He was stronger than her. Break her. Rip her in half. Ruin her. Tear—

Two hands found him, lifted him off the floor, and smashed him into the wall. His skull cracked against it, and for a brief moment, he knew Sándor had crawled out from under the gunfire, and got him when his guard was down. Stupid, stupid Jack.

Jack fell onto his back, dazed, hot misery exploding outward from his dented skull. His eyes barely worked, but he looked up at the bleeding, shirtless man, and met his gaze. The monster had blue eyes, and they looked a little sad. He'd seen similar eyes, in Angela actually, when he was about to shoot her in the beast's nightmare.

The silhouette of the monster gargoyle filled the hallway, and Sándor raised his boot. He was going to die, skull crushed under the

boot of a man he turned his back to, a monster at that. And of all the ways to die, this seemed to be the most empty, most pointless, most unsatisfying of them all.

The gunfire stopped, and Sándor turned around. Julias walked his way, and Jack's jaw dropped as he stared at his sire.

The man was missing half his flesh. The suit had torn to shreds, exposing an arm, half of his torso, and his pants were no better off, one leg half exposed below the knee, the other half exposed above it. Some of his sire's bones were visible. Jack winced, staring, eyes locked onto how he could see a lot of the bone of one leg, and one arm. And as Julias took another step toward Sándor, Jack was reminded of a scene from Terminator, where his skin was being shot off, but it didn't stop the machine.

Blood coursed over Julias's body, thick Kindred blood, and it filled in the gaps where muscle was gone, and filled in for tendons and ligaments, keeping his kneecap where it should be, and allowing his wrist to work.

His sire held up his hand, pulled it back, and drove it into Sándor's face, enough heft and vitae behind it to send the man half spinning through the air before he landed.

“Get the fuck off my childe.”



# Chapter 88

~~Julias~~

Everything had fallen apart in a matter of seconds. When it was just the six hunters, he and his childe could have handled the situation easily. Even Angela, for all her absurd might and endurance, was only human. Six humans? He could have handled this himself.

Having to work quickly, break through Angela's defenses, deal with a magical barrier, and save Samantha, threw a wrench into what would have otherwise been simple. Unless the hunters managed to nail him with a shotgun or Molotov, he could shrug off the bullets easily enough. It wasn't like they'd use a grenade or a high caliber sniper rifle inside a hospital. Hell, even the guy with the assault rifle wasn't too bad to deal with; a bullet going through him instead of tearing him up was less damaging to a vampire.

But, he hadn't predicted running into the Begotten, Sándor. A colossal mistake. He knew the nightmare horrors couldn't use their full ability outside of the nightmare realm, so he'd been confident that, even if he came across the monster, he could handle him with Jack's help. Another mistake. Whoever this man was, whatever cosmic entity of fear and terror had merged with him, it had given the beast incredible vigor. Julias was as likely to win a battle of strength against this brute, as he was against Maria or Michael.

Using Angela against the Begotten had been the best he could manage, but once the two of them were down and fighting each other, there'd been nothing to stop the remaining hunters, and the four new ones, from unleashing Hell upon him. Shit.

Julias froze, staring, glaring, as the wall of bullets smashed into him, tore into him, ripped his suit apart, hacked through skin and muscle, and cracked bone. Most of the hunters didn't use armor piercing rounds; they wanted maximum torn flesh, and used hollow-point rounds instead. He growled as he felt the metal shred him, until he could do nothing but stand there, pinned to the wall by the momentum of dozens of bullets hitting him.

He knew bone had become exposed. Bone, muscle, some old organs, random parts of his body giving way under the sudden onslaught. His left arm screamed in agony, as did his left leg, as bullets ripped them open. He tried to look down, but couldn't, as a bullet crashed against his skull, his Kindred bone and its hollow-point nature the only thing keeping it from sinking into his brain and knocking him unconscious.

Going into torpor wasn't an option. He had to save Jack. A quick glance at the kid showed that, in the chaos, blood, bullets, and spraying bits of wall, Jack had managed to win his struggle against Angela, despite the dozen bullets he'd taken. His success was rewarded by a Begotten grabbing him from behind, ready to break him in half.

No. Julias would not allow that. Whatever it took, whatever happened, he would not let them capture, or kill, his childe.

He looked back to the six hunters shooting at him, and held up a hand. First, defense. He summoned the vitae in his core, summoned the Beast with it, and brought it to the surface. The monster within, dormant, contained, he let rise like a dragon disturbed from slumber. The growling monster rushed up to his skin, and it howled through the bullet holes in his body, through the clenched teeth of the ancilla Ventrue, and flooded his frame with Kindred blood. Literally. The running, living liquid washed over Julias's body, and where skin, tendon, and muscle had been ripped apart by the hail of metal, his blood pulled double duty, protecting, and forcing it to

move. He was a Kindred, and a Ventrue. He didn't need muscles to move, only his will.

As the bullets crashed into the crimson liquid, they broke upon it like sand thrown against a wall. What bits of metal managed to pierce the flowing waves of blood coursing over him, did not reach the Kindred underneath. He was impervious to their weapons, while his vitae lasted. He had to be done with this quickly, before the inevitable.

The hunters had done a good job of avoiding his eyes before, but once they'd turned him into a target for their shooting gallery, they had no choice but to look at him. With all the muzzle flashes, and three hunters holding a flashlight directly at him, the darkness did not hide his gaze; they had no choice but to be able to see his eyes.

He grinned through the flowing waves of crimson, and reached out with his mind.

“Kill your comrades.”

To ask anyone to do something wholly against their nature was difficult. To ask a hunter to do so was extremely difficult. To do it to three of them at once, almost impossible. To do it, while they were shooting him, while he summoned up the blood barrier? Viktor would have been proud of him.

The three closer hunters immediately turned on their partners, and Hell broke loose. The other three were quick on the draw, and immediately grappled with their friends, grabbing their guns and taking them out of the equation. They'd had training for this sort of thing, then. But, three on three, meant that no more hunters were free to shoot at him. And Elen could do nothing but watch from her chair, glaring and angry, as the six hunters became a free-for-all mess of punches and kicks.

He looked beside him, and winced as the Begotten slammed Jack's head into the wall. A splatter of Kindred blood soaked the surface, before burning away with tiny flames, as the boy fell down, rolling onto his back. Jack had managed to knock Angela around a little, hurt her, leaving her bruised and probably concussed, but the Begotten was mostly fine. Angela, only moments before, had stabbed him several times under Julias's Dominate, cutting through the skin and muscle around the man's shoulders, and for all Sándor's power, it didn't seem like extreme regeneration was one of them.

With a small grin on his lips that he just couldn't seem to get rid of, Julias walked up behind the Begotten, and when the monster turned around, likely tipped off by the ceasing gunfire, Julias drove his fist into the man's face. It wasn't like a Ventrue couldn't tap into strength and Kindred Vigor with extreme effect, it was just far harder for them than Nos or Daeva. And, letting his Beast come to the surface like a tidal wave, was hitting him with power he hadn't felt in decades. With the extra vitae sunk into it, he summoned enough strength to punch a hole through a brick wall, and he put that force into Sándor's face.

“Get the fuck off my childe.”

Earlier, a glance at Sándor's eyes had made it obvious breaking his mind would be difficult, and take time. So he resorted to brute strength, like Triss would. He didn't have the vitae to waste doing that, inefficient as hell for a Ventrue, but he had to put the Begotten out of commission, now. The coursing blood flowed over him, drained him to near starving, but got his body working, kept it working, and would protect him; it was now or never. Jack was staring at him, and considering the amount of bone and withered muscle Julias was showing, he no doubt looked like a fucking monstrosity. He'd yet to enter one of the nightmares to see what the nightmare monsters looked like, but he'd read the reports, and Julias probably didn't look too far off right now.

The hunters he'd broken wouldn't stay under his control for long. Sharp blows to the head, or a few minutes of freedom, would eventually release them from the very weak control he'd put them under. But a few minutes was enough time to beat this fucking asshole into oblivion.

He reached down, one of his arms showing the bones of his forearm, knuckles, and some fingers. It was enough to make Sándor open his eyes in what Julias could only guess was fear. Making a literal nightmare horror afraid of him? Yes, that stroked a Ventrue's ego just fine. He rewarded the man by grabbing his shoulders, picking him up, and throwing him into the other wall, hard. Before the man could fall, the Ventrue shoulder checked him, driving his weight into the smaller man's chest hard enough to earn a spray of blood from his mouth.

The only thing that kept this from being a horrible Masquerade violation, was that the hallway was unlit, and they were fighting at the end of it, so its length managed to blanket some of the insanity in darkness. A quick glance showed none of the nurses or anyone had left their staff rooms, but the fight had only been going on for a minute. Someone was bound to show up sooner or later, take a picture, or try and get involved. The list of reasons to deal with this in the next thirty seconds was growing.

As Sándor started to fall, back flat to the wall, Julias drove his knee upward, catching the man's head as it drifted forward, and smashed the man's mouth and nose. The crunch of broken cartilage and breaking teeth was satisfying. The thud of his skull hitting the wall from the hit, and the crack it left in the hard white surface, was even more satisfying. Blood flowed over Julias's knee, and Sándor went limp, body falling forward until it hit the hospital floor with a wet crunch from his face.

Julias smirked as he walked over to Jack, reached down, winked at him, and picked up Angela. Break her neck this time, quickly now.

A memory tickled him, one of Rebecca, smashing his head in with a hammer, and leaving him for dead in a burning building. She'd caught him off guard then, hadn't given him the time to build up to something like this. And, at the time, his child hadn't been in danger. Jack was in danger now, and there was no way in hell Julias was going to—

He fell to a knee, and let go of the one-eyed woman before he'd even had a chance to squeeze. She stumbled back, landing on her ass beside Jack, and she froze as she stared up at him as well. The blood that coated him, protected him, started to fade, and he growled as he felt his insides run dry. Doing so much, so quickly, brought the world into a blurry haze, and ripped the strength out of him. The Beast in him, the creature he normally kept deep down in its cave, roared in frustration, as it ran hungry.

He looked beside him at the Begotten. Groaning and growling as well, Sándor pushed himself up onto his hands, and then struggled to get up, blood flowing out of his mouth and nose as one of his hands pressed to the wall. And get up, he did. Angela's face bled in a similar mess, beaten in by Jack, and while she may have been mentally ready to get back up and fight him, her body disagreed with her. Her attempts to get up failed, and she vomited onto the floor, the concussion and blood loss mixing into a powerful concoction of misery for her. She was out of the fight, for a few minutes, at least. Sándor was another matter entirely.

Julias tried to stand up. His body didn't listen. The Beast in him raged and shrieked, but for all its fury, Julias's body was broken and empty. No more vitae to draw upon, no more blood, no more strength, no more anything. The flowing dark crimson that covered his bones and forced his body to work, despite missing a myriad of muscle and tendons, ceased. Only the withered ligaments kept his bony arm and leg from falling apart entirely

Jack was struggling to get back up. After a blow like that, anyone his age would have been in torpor, and out of the fight until a day's sleep. Not Jack. The kid's dented head was healing over right before Julias's eyes, same as it would for him, and Viktor; not as fast, but far faster than a vampire his age should have been able to.

But then, that was Jack being Jack. He'd make it through this, somehow, even if Julias didn't. The kid always did.

Julias tried to stand up again, and he bit back the desire to scream as pain flooded him. Exposed insides, bones, withered organs, and worse, drops of Kindred blood fell to the floor around him, lifeless, useless to him. Get up. Get the fuck up. He grit his teeth, and bit down another scream, as he forced himself up to his feet.

As blood flowed down Sándor's face, he looked down at Angela and Jack, the two of them a mess of blood and wounds. Another, short-lived hint of sadness crossed his face, and he bit his lip, before he looked over to Julias. There it was again, something that crossed his eyes, something heavy, something Julias recognized from his own mirror. A moment later it was gone, and the monster walked toward him.

"Sand," Angela said, gargling, coughing up more blood and puke, before she managed to get herself onto a palm and elbow. "Kill ... Mire ... Capture Jack."

The monster nodded, and walked up to Julias. Apology was written into his eyes, but he said nothing. The short man grabbed Julias by the shirt, and drew back his other fist. The silhouette of the gargoyle monster filled the hallway, and the array of claws it sported on one of its hands aimed themselves at Julias's face.

Julias managed to catch Jack's panicked eyes, and he offered his childe a small smile. You'll get out of this, kid. One way or another, you'll get out of this. I'll make sure of it.

Julias found the last bit of him, the final ounces of whatever strength he had left, scraping the bottom of the barrel for whatever remained in his corpse body, the tiny shred that kept him out of torpor. It was enough, just barely, to twist his body, and let the monster's momentum roll with him, as Julias grabbed his shoulder with a hand. Hard to bodyslam a man who wasn't wearing a shirt, but he managed, grabbing the wrist of the punching arm with his other hand, and throwing the Begotten over him into the floor.

He dropped his weight straight down with his knee, down onto Sándor's chest, and made sure to put some momentum into it, jumping a few inches so he could put all of his weight into the knee. Crunch. Sándor coughed up blood again, a lot of it, before rolling onto his side, clutching his chest as he went fetal.

Julias, unable to get back up after that, managed to turn and face Jack while on his knees, his back to the hallway corner where the hunters were fighting each other.

"Jack," he said. "Get out of here."

"What?" Good, the kid was capable of talking. If he could talk, he could think, and could act. The world was nothing but a blur to Julias at this point, and the aching hunger in his gut was loud enough to tell him he was empty, and drifting into torpor. That was fine.

"Get out of here. Run."

"Fuck that! I'm not leaving you, or Mom."

"If my guess is right, someone from the Invictus will be here soon, or the dragons. They'll get you out of here." The Beast within Julias roared at the top of its lungs, demanding he get up and fight. Sorry Mr. Beast, would if I could.

"I'm not—"



“Jack.” He sighed, and offered his childe a gentle smile. “You can’t save her if you’re dead.”

“I—”

“Jack.” Julias shook his head, before he glanced Angela’s way. The woman was drifting in and out of consciousness, struggling against her blood loss and her damaged head. “The hunters I’ve Dominated, might be another minute. We don’t have time to debate. They want you alive. Use that, and get out of here.” He could hear them struggling in the back, fists hitting flesh, and an old woman’s sharp barks of orders.

“We’re not doing this,” the kid said. “We’re not doing this last stand bullshit. You’re—” Angela’s groans drew his gaze as well, and Jack reached out for the gun beside him, likely with a desire to shoot her. But his skull was still a half-ruined mess, and his attempts to grab the pistol forced him to roll onto his side, screaming in pain.

Sándor groaned as well, and Julias looked over his shoulder to make sure the man was still down. He was; not that Julias could do anything if he wasn’t. Julias couldn’t move. His body was paralyzed. Every inch of him refused to move as he knelt there, arms limp at his sides. Torpor was moments away. He doubted its heavy embrace would find him before the hunters managed to either escape his Dominate, or knocked out the ones who had been brainwashed.

“Jack.” Julias tried to lift his arms again, purely out of habit. They weren’t budging. Using his body in a fist fight, driving it to such an extreme, had damaged it greatly. Pile on the hundreds of bullets, and his empty vitae reserves, it was like trying to move a mountain. He was done, no matter how much his Beast might roar and fight to say otherwise.

“Julias, please ... don’t...”

“Sorry Jack. I ... I pushed myself a bit hard, here.” He got cocky; Ventrue do that from time to time, and it was a harsh way to teach his childe this lesson. Julias found his head collapsing forward, the weight of it too much to bear. His back slumped, and he fought against gravity to stay kneeling. “Tell her, for me.”

“Tell ... tell Mom what?”

Julias managed something like a laugh, though it was more of a whispered chuckle as his lungs refused to cooperate. “Tell ... Triss ... everything...”

Jack got his head up, his weight on his side, but he managed to get a palm underneath him so he could force himself into a half sit, half lay. When he finally looked Julias’s way, his eyes were wide, and a mix of anger and terror was in them; anger because of the hunters, and terror, because his sire was going to die. Poor kid.

“Please Julias! Don’t ... do—”

Footsteps silenced his childe. Julias tried to turn his head around to look at them, but he couldn’t. Everything was going dark, and torpor crept up his spine, demanding he sleep. Only a mouthful of fresh human blood would stave off torpor now, and unless one of the hunters was feeling generous, they wouldn’t give it to him.

“K ... Kill him,” Angela said, coughing up another wad of blood, her bruising neck straining. “Kill Mire.”

Julias managed a smile. It’d be in the hunter’s favor to capture him, but Angela wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. Good, this was better.

As his eyelids grew too heavy to keep from falling, he managed one more smile for Jack, before his eyes closed. As he heard the boots of a hunter come up behind him, he let his mind drift to Triss.

God, she was going to be mad, him being a reckless idiot like this. Hopefully Jennifer could comfort her. He pitied whoever the messenger was; it'd probably be Jack, too. Poor kid again.

Triss. Her smile, beautiful, and the way it sat between two sets of crocodile teeth always gave him a thrill. Her snake eyes, even more beautiful. Her touch, her embrace, the feel of her body, the way she laughed when she thought she was winning, and the way she got obstinate and juvenile when she didn't. The way she was super playful when she was happy and comfortable, like a cat. The sound of her purrs. Th—

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~~Jack~~

Bang. Bang. Bang.

“Julias!”

The hunter sank a bullet into the back of his sire's skull, and a mess of gore exploded outward, scattering and turning into sparks and embers, before becoming dust. The first bullet sent Julias onto his stomach, and the next two were done as the man became nothing more than a still corpse. Executed, like Jack had done to a hunter only moments before.

Jack stared on, mouth open, jaw hanging, as his sire faded. The man, half skeleton at that point, had held a smile, and gave Jack what could only be described as a loving look, before the telltale flames of a dead Kindred took him. His suit, his skin, his muscles, organs, bones, all of it, turned into ash as it vanished into an almost gentle puff of smoke and flame. In the darkness of the hallway, it was a soft light, something that lit the faces of everyone watching, enough for Jack to see them.

The hunters did not look happy. Some of them looked a bit sad, if he was reading them right. Did they not want this? Sándor was out

of commission, the brutal, ridiculously strong monster beaten by a Ventrue. Angela lay on the floor not far from Jack, trying to sit up, trying to see what had happened, but managing only the dry heaves of extreme nausea and pain.

As the small mound of ash that was once Julias spread over the dark hallway floor, Jack looked passed it, to Elen and her hunters, and found something different on her. She looked happy. Satisfied.

All Jack felt, was fury. Blinding, white fury. It coursed up through him, made pain disappear, and sent vitae pouring through his limbs. Thick Kindred blood engulfed his wounds, filled them, rendered them moot, as his vampire body demanded he moved, as the Beast demanded he moved. He needed to be able to move to kill them all, and he was going to kill them all.

Julias had been smiling. His sire had spent his last moments trying to save Jack's life, and died doing so. He'd spent his last moments smiling at him, in that typical 'this is alright, don't worry about it' sort of way. His last god damn fucking moments, and he did his usual 'you got this' smile.

Jack's insides wrenched, vitae mixing and coursing, while his muscles wanted him to vomit again, and again, and again. It wouldn't happen. All he could feel was every muscle in his body flexing, the memory of his sire's eyes, his smile, his ashes, hitting every nerve in his frame like fire.

Don't be dead, please don't be dead. God, please, please don't ... don't be...

The pile of ashes before him mocked him, a testament to yet another thing that was Jack's fault. Another thing he couldn't fix.

He squeezed his fists until his arms shook, and forced himself up, even as the world swayed before him. Kill them. Kill them. Kill them all.

“Stay down,” Elen said, her stupid old granny voice weak and pathetic.

He ignored her. Get up. Get the fuck up. Get up, kill them all. Ignore the pain, ignore the spinning world, ignore the wounds. Let it flow, let the blood flow, theirs and yours.

Stand up, he did. He demanded it, forced it, didn't care if his body was willing to do it or not. Vitae surged through him, Kindred blood fueling his will. Stand up. Stand up, and kill them. Kill—

White. Complete, total, all consuming, all encompassing white.

He froze and looked around at the white that surrounded him. It was the same white that had flashed in his vision when he executed that hunter. Endless white, as if God had decided to hit the reset button on the universe, but forgotten to turn off the light. There was no feeling or weight to it; might as well have been walking on floating clouds with the color depth of white plastic.

Without the hunters around him, without the smell of blood, without the pain of his wounds, his fury diminished, and his mind started working again. Where were the hunters, the blood, pain, and wounds?

“Oh ... kay...” What the fuck. He reached down and pressed on the floor, but his brain registered no feeling to it. Looking down did show that he was naked though. Naked, and without the wounds that Angela had dealt to him tonight.

Angela. He squeezed his knuckles as he remembered how many times she'd shot him tonight alone. A dozen? And those bullets really fucked him up, tore him apart. A bullet that went straight through was barely a wound to a Kindred, but a hollow-point round that tore up flesh and got lodged in the body, was a lot deadlier. Sándor smashing his head into a wall hard enough to crack the

bone, had scrambled his circuits so bad, he hadn't been able to move. All those wounds had ceased to exist.

He sighed. Was he dead? He supposed it didn't matter, since Beatrice was going to kill him anyway. He was tempted to let her. She was going to blame him for Julias's death, in a moment of rage and grief, and she was going to cut into him. He'd let her. She'd say that he died trying to save a fucking kine, a human, someone Jack should have left behind long ago. He'd agree.

Maria and Michael? They'd punish him. Leaving his sweeper team early had no doubt earned some sort of punishment, but that spiraling into this, into his sire dying, was beyond horrible. They might execute him, as a warning tale to all other Kindred to always obey orders. Jessy and Damien would protest, but it's not like they could stop the two elders.

The white world he found himself in gave him a moment of peace, at least. The fury that bubbled through him, threatening to blister and boil his skin and insides, lessened, now that he was out of the scene. Without Angela's face to stare at, the heat in his guts lowered enough that he found himself fending off the rising need to cry.

Mary was dead, and now Julias was dead. Sighing, Jack clutched at his naked chest, and fell down, ass hitting the strange white surface, hard enough to elicit pain but finding none. He sat there, staring down between his knees at the white oblivion, and let the misery rise. His emotions were raw, and no matter how much he looked for his trusty logic switch, he couldn't find it. His earlier run-in with Mary had left his guts exposed, soul shredded, and nothing he could do now could hide its bleeding surface. Sadness, agony, regret, guilt, it all washed over him, digging at him with a knife in his guts.

Jack rolled up into a ball, and lay on his side. Julias was dead. Dead. His sire was dead. His friend was dead. Oh god. Oh fucking god.

After a minute of paralyzing agony, movement forced his eyes open, and he sat up with a jolt. He stared, eyes analyzing the strange, floating shadow that stood before him, and he gulped down on nothing.

If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be to a shadow monster on the plains of oblivion.

The monster creature stood over him, a flowing wave of mist, shadow, darkness, and wings. Onyx poured over itself, and from within the churning waves of its black smoke, he could see other things, too: claws, feathers, some red eyes that belonged on a snake, a beak ... with teeth, many things. It was like he was staring at an amalgamation of beasts, of the sort of creatures Kindred identified with. Crow, snake, fox, wolf, rat, pieces of those things were all there, inside this flowing mass of darkness that stood six feet tall.

It was a Beast. He knew it, somehow. Some part of him knew.

He was looking at his Beast.

The chains, though, he didn't understand those. Chains wrapped the shadowy creature, with enormous locks of rusted iron dangling from around its body. How could chains remain hooked around something that looked like it was made of smoke and shadow? Metaphor. It was a metaphor for being bound.

"... are you ... my Beast?" Might as well ask.

The monstrosity said nothing. It probably wasn't capable of it. But, despite the communication barrier, several of the flowing heads blinked their red eyes at him before disappearing into the murk of its body. One of them nodded.

“Am I ... dead?”

The monster shook its heads.

“Then, I don’t understand. What’s going on? Where am I? I—this is in my head, isn’t it? This is one of those ‘life flashes before your eyes’ sort of things, right?”

The monster nodded.

“And ... you summoned me, for this heart to heart? I suppose you’d want to have one, if I got us both killed.” With a sigh and groan, Jack forced himself back up onto his feet. “I really hate you, you know that? First person I ever killed was an innocent woman, and that’s on you.”

A blurry, shadowy image of her face appeared in the air, covered in blood, like some sort of holographic projection his mind decided to torture him with. His mind, or the Beast. Not the face of her on the news, either, but the face Jack was most intimate with, the dead Mrs. Pavala, the one he’d found when he’d awoken from his frenzy, with puncture marks in her neck.

“Yeah, her. Fuck you, you fucking ... monster.” Insulting it for its bloodlust made as much sense as insulting any animal for chasing a meal.

The image changed, to Julias, his final moments as a juggernaut of unstoppable ... protection. There was no rage on his face, just a cocky smile, and a concern for Jack written in his eyes, in a way only Jack would recognize.

Before Jack could say anything to this fucking abomination tormenting him, the image changed again. This time, he didn’t recognize it, and he stared, curious, at the two people. Julias, and Viktor. The clothes suggested sometime around World War I, and



based on the positions of the two men, it looked like Viktor was draining Julias of his blood; and not by Julias's choice.

The image was more than the two men. Somehow, the Beast extended the scene, filling it, showing Jack the environment, the lighting, the smell, the sounds, despite it being a frozen moment. The beast also took the courtesy of giving Jack back his clothes and shoes whilst setting the scene, how nice of it.

Julias's mansion, or rather, Viktor's mansion, at the time, now surrounded them ... There was more though. Within Viktor, on him, around him, the shadowy waves of a Beast floated, normally invisible. And as the elder vampire killed Julias, preparing him for the embrace, the darkness of Viktor's Beast moved into the corpse, infecting, duplicating.

When Viktor set his bloodied wrist to Julias's mouth in the next frozen moment, and forced a heavy drop of the thick, dark liquid into Julias's mouth, the shadowy creature inside Jack's sire awoke.

There were chains. Jack walked around the two figures, frozen in time, and listened to the classical music playing in the background, as he watched a Beast be born within Julias. The shadowy creature inside Viktor had chains, just like the Beast floating next to Jack. And the new one, awakening inside the corpse that was Julias, had them as well. Dark, rusty things, that circled around and around the black cloud, sealed with massive stained locks, and a few dangling giant balls of metal.

"The ... the chains, they don't seem ... right. Do other Kindred have chains around them?"

The Beast shook its heads, somehow. Images of Kindred Jack knew appeared, Damien and Jessy and Natasha, Antoinette and others. Their Beasts were blurry, and lacked detail. Made sense, Jack supposed. If this Beast was showing him his family tree, it might have more detail to draw on, like a genetic memory. It was

the only way it could show him something he'd never seen, Julias being sired. However it was doing what it was doing, his Beast knew the utmost detail of what came before it, but didn't seem to be able to show him much about other people.

There were only the swirling masses of shadow in the other Kindred, claws and talons, wings and beaks, and tails. No chains or locks or rope. The Beast was showing him what was hidden, secret. Jack knew. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew.

The Beasts in the others were contained within the Kindred, but they weren't chained, bound, limited. The prison that wrapped Jack's Beast, and Viktor's, and Julias's, wasn't normal.

Before Jack could inquire about how his inner monster was able to see other Beasts, the myriad of Kindred shown to him vanished, as did Julias, Viktor, and the mansion. The white world grew hazy for a moment, before shapes grew solid, and the familiar comfort of streets, walls, and windows surrounded him. He didn't recognize the place though, except that it was night, and it was outside. He was on a thin street, and a glance down showed the road was cobblestone, not asphalt or anything like that.

There weren't any people outside, and the street lamps weren't lit. Lit being the operative word. Wherever he was, it was a period of time before electric street lamps, but street lamps nonetheless.

Beside him, between two buildings of warped wood and bent stone, was Viktor. He didn't look anything like the Viktor Jack remembered. His long hair was disheveled, a mess around his torn and dirty clothes. Very old, very dirty clothes. This must have been over three hundred years ago. A tall woman was hugging him too tight for a normal hug, and Jack stared as the curvaceous woman sank her fangs into his grandsire's neck.

This was the moment Viktor was embraced.

Jack stepped in closer, and blinked as he realized the woman, a blonde with pale skin, and legs almost as long as Antoinette's, had her thighs spread. Viktor was having sex with her. Man, if people knew this was the circumstance Viktor was in when he was sired, poor and fucking a whore, it'd have damaged his image greatly. The woman was beautiful though, and Jack stared a little harder than he should have at how her white rags around her legs were spread, and chest pulled down, exposing one of her large breasts.

This woman was a vampire, though, and from the feel Jack was getting from her, she was no fledgling. She had some decades on her. Centuries. This elder, this woman, who seemed perfectly content to play the role of nothing more than a 1600s prostitute, was killing Viktor, mid sex, so she could embrace him.

“Who ... is she?”

The Beast did not respond. Of course it didn't. It didn't seem to be able to use words, and everything it showed Jack was a combination of the five senses, scents and sounds, taste and touch, and things to see. Jack could feel the air of the night, wherever they were, and he could hear the clop clop of shoes and hooves against the cobblestone, despite how everything was a single frozen moment of time. He could hear Viktor's quiet moans, and her moans matching his, despite how tightly her lips were sealed on his neck. She was enjoying herself.

“Did they know each other before this? I find it hard to believe she'd sire him if she just ran into him, randomly, and offered a quick fuck in a dark alley.”

Sure enough, the image changed. It cut to an earlier time, maybe a few years earlier; he could only tell because Viktor looked younger. Younger, and far better off. He wore a pretty fancy suit fitting the time period, and was sitting at a table with other people and fancy utensils. The woman was there again, but judging from

where she was sitting and where her eyes were glancing, she was with another man. Not a vampire though. A ghoul, maybe? The only Beast at the table was her, and like the Beast taking Jack on this ridiculous journey through the past, the chains still wrapped her.

So Viktor had been well off in life, and the vampire woman, likely having some games with her nightlife, was involved somehow. At this point in history, it wasn't like she had to worry about technology. She could probably dress up as a prostitute whenever she wanted, or pretend to be a luxurious, rich woman whenever she wanted. Whatever this stranger was doing, she was drawing the eyes of multiple men, and one woman, at the table. She wasn't a Daeva, she was a Ventrue, and it was through sheer confidence and allure, that she'd captured everyone's attention.

The Beast inside her struggled, fighting against its chains, but the woman only smiled.

The image of the inside of the large establishment vanished, and so did the characters within. Wiped away like sand, the white oblivion that surrounded him appeared for a second, before it disappeared again as another image overlaid it.

Jack gulped, and stared at the sight of three naked women, writhing on a bed. A man sat in a chair beside them, but whoever he was, he looked thoroughly drained. He was dead, naked, body completely still on a very hard looking wooden chair. The signs of a Kiss victim were blatant, along with what looked like the liquid remains of a very, very good time on his crotch.

There was a man behind him, too, standing behind the chair, blending into the shadows. A Mekhet or Nosferatu using Cloak of Night, maybe? Whoever he was, he had a Beast, though no chains bound its form. He wore black robes that hid him from head to toe, and Jack could only just barely make out an expression on his face

from within the hood: disappointment. His eyes were cast upon the bed, on the three women writhing on it.

Jack looked back to the women on the ancient-looking bed. He guessed it was a feather mattress, and some fur blankets, all on a bed frame that looked like it was made of the same sort of carved, curvy wood the chair was made of. He looked up and around, and frowned as he analyzed the walls of logs, and a nearby stove made of stones. Was that safe? Didn't stones crack and break when hot enough?

Knowledge of antiquated technology aside, he could only guess he was maybe a couple centuries before the moment Viktor had been sired. Not long after the Medieval Ages then, if he was guessing right. That alone made what he was looking at pretty unique. Three women, naked, rubbing each other all over.

The woman in the middle was human, and she was being Kissed, the long deep Kiss that'd eventually kill her. It was the woman who had sired Viktor. Her legs were spread, and Jack could see the sexual juices between her thighs, a mix of a man's, and her own, as the two women fingered her. Both women were draining her, and it was obvious the woman in the center, his great grandsire, was having the time of her life as she was brought closer and closer to death.

Then, one of the women beside her, a pale, short woman with long black hair, set her wrist to the woman's mouth. A Beast awoke inside the woman between the vampires, like someone tossing fire onto a dry parchment. The black, twisting abomination awoke within her, and grew within moments. Only the chains that surrounded it kept it from overwhelming her.

Jack stood beside the bed, and stared down at the naked women responsible for the siring. While her friend was a tall, curvy woman, red hair with freckles, it was the brunette that was Jack's great,

great grandsire. She looked young, too young to be in a threesome. Looks were deceiving though, and upon inspection, he had to admit she looked older than Natasha; which wasn't a fair comparison he supposed, since Natasha looked far younger than she was. And of course, Jack looked younger than his age, too.

Age aside, he took a moment to analyze her. A bit over five feet, with some curve to her for a small woman, more muscle and health than he expected anyone from this time period to have. She'd been groomed for her embrace, then, as the dead and soon-to-be undead woman between her and her vampire friend must have been.

And the brunette's Beast struggled against its chains as well. Whatever these chains were that other Kindred didn't seem to have, they went back a long, long way into Jack's family history.

"I don't understand. Why are you showing me all of this? ... and how? Last I checked, I'm currently about to get captured by Angela and a bunch of hunters. I don't have time for this soap opera! None of this helps me." Or did he have time? Speed of the mind. Speed of thought. Speed of the subconscious. It was the only possible explanation.

The image changed again, and suddenly they were in the streets of what he could only guess was some old city in Europe. Jack's history sucked, and his geography sucked too, but considering how old it all looked, and how horrible it smelled, it had to be the medieval ages now. The darkness hid many details, and damn it was quiet. This was an age when people actually slept during the night, when they hid in their homes from wolves and crusaders alike.

"Holy fuck. How far back can you remember?" he said to the hovering, smoky mass beside him. "How far back can ... I remember? Fuck, will I even remember any of this, when I snap back to reality?" No, he imagined he wouldn't. Maybe a haze, like a dream. Whatever was happening to him wasn't normal, and it

wasn't something any other Kindred had ever spoken of. Torpor dreams could be strange and vivid, but this was something else.

The Beast said nothing, but it showed him everything. It looked up with some of its heads, and Jack followed its gaze up to see the moon, half hidden in clouds. There weren't any street lamps anymore, nothing lit. There were a couple people moving around with lanterns held in hand, always in pairs, and they had rags held up to their face. Yeah, it smelled horrible, nasty horrible, and the rats were everywhere.

Jack froze, and slowly turned around in a circle. Rats. The rats were everywhere. Crows sat upon the sloped roofs of the old buildings, stone and wood, and they cawed into the night air, as the rats scurried along the walls. It wasn't them that smelled, it was the shit, and the bodies.

A body sat in the street beside him, on his side and clutching his stomach. Dead. Dead for days actually, considering how sunken the skin was, and how some rats were gnawing on his toes through worn shoes. Another body was beside him, a woman, and they were thrown over each other like they knew each other. Family, maybe. There was no way any city would leave corpses in the streets like this. They stank horribly, and since the smell was mixed with shit from an ancient and horrible plumbing system, Jack didn't have to work very hard to figure out what time period he was in.

This was during the Black Plague. What in the actual fuck.

“Ok, I'm guessing you're showing me our bloodline. And so far, it seems like our bloodline is Julias, to Viktor, to another elder vampire, to another elder vampire.” A short chain of people, very powerful people, forged over centuries. He turned to face the hovering Beast beside him, and glared at it. It simply hovered there, chains dangling and clinking, before it moved to a window.

And then Jack was inside the building. A house from this era wasn't exactly clean or luxurious living. The houses were decently large, two floors, with glass windows that were difficult to see through. The Beast took him upstairs, and he followed, expecting creaks and groans from the wood, but finding none. It wasn't real, just a moment in time, and nothing Jack did would affect it. He couldn't change the past; assuming this was the past, and not some sort of pre-death hallucination.

The woman, the small one with the black hair, his great, great grandsire, was kneeling in front of another vampire, a man, someone dressed in the garb of the church. *Lancea et Sanctum*? Whatever was happening, it wasn't good for her. She was on her knees, a drawn circle surrounding her, and various objects peppered the floor. A crucifix, complete with Jesus, and other things sat around the circle: a spear, a necklace with a cross, and other objects Jack didn't recognize. The vampire standing in front of her was chanting something in Latin, and reading from a book that was definitely not the Bible. Testament of Longinus, maybe?

The chains, the invisible, circling, encompassing, stifling chains on the woman's Beast, weren't present. No, wait, yes they were, just half invisible. They were coming out of the circle, out of the floor, out of the objects the priest had laid around. Not priest, bishop, a member of the Sanctified probably. Only in the moment of this freeze frame, was her Beast bound by the chains. Jack's ancestor screamed and shrieked, pounded her hands against the air, but could not escape whatever sort of binding circle the bishop had created. It was like that barrier Jack dealt with tonight, the ones the hunters made with some black powder. Magic? Theban Sorcery, like what Lucas had used against the Prince?

The bishop was doing something to Jack's ancient predecessor, binding her Beast, limiting it. Why? Why not just kill her, if he wanted to stop her.



Wait. This was the man who was watching the threesome, the one with disappointment on his face, the guy standing behind the dead dude on the chair. What sort of insanity was going on? Who were these people? This ... this must have been like the madness in Dolareido, the strange relationships between ancient Kindred, manipulating each other. The Danse Macabre. There was no way his Beast would be able to explain to him the complicated relationships he was seeing unfold before him.

With a swipe of one of its shadowy limbs, the Beast wiped away the image, and replaced it with something new. Same city, same stench of dead, same scurrying of rats in the dark, and fluttering of crow wings against the cloudy moonlight. Dozens of shadows, dozens of moving bodies, dozens of tiny eyes in the obsidian death of the night.

No, not the same. There were far more rats, and far more crows. The two animals, denizens of cities as much as any kine or Kindred, overflowed the streets, poured down alleys, and scurried up the warped, aging wooden walls of homes. No living walked the street, not this late, and what should have been silence, was a constant white noise of rat claws on rock, and rat squeaks. The hundreds of crows that sat upon building roofs made no noise, except for some occasional wing flutters and caws. White noise, a lot of it, to the point it was overwhelming.

Jack stared at the mountain before him, something very out of place in the road. Ten feet high, the mound covered the street completely, and spread out onto all the streets that connected to what Jack guessed was some sort of town center. The mountain didn't belong there. Neither did the woman sitting atop it. But there she sat on a simple three-leg wooden stool, a big grin on her face, and her manic eyes staring down at the havoc she'd wrought.

The mountain, was made out of bodies. At least a hundred bodies, piled onto each other, bleeding, rotting, and providing a feast for the

rats. The little creatures gnawed and chewed at the flesh of the dead, and the woman upon them smiled down at her flock. Blood soaked her face, moonlight catching it enough for Jack to see her. She was wearing loose rags and trousers, and a hat, something a farmer would have worn. Dressed like that, she looked like nothing more than a simple tradesman, her curves hidden by the rags.

She held a sickle in one hand, bloody, dripping, and she held the severed head of a corpse in her other.

Jack gulped as he stared up at her. While the scene was frozen, he could hear her chuckling, and feel the bloodlust flow from her, down over the corpses, and onto the rats and crows. Her army. They scurried around her, moving yet not moving within the frozen memory. A crow perched on her shoulder, and another perched on her hat, a human finger in its beak.

This was the brunette from before, the small woman, his great great grandsire. A serial killer.

No chains bound her Beast, and the more Jack stared, the more she didn't feel like a Kindred. Her Beast was huge, an enormous creature that mixed into the shadows of the streets, the windows, the sky, everything. So titanic and colossal, a gate to Hell must have opened up, to let such a creature out onto the plains of human existence. Free. The Beast within this monster was free to rampage and roam, slaughter and bathe in blood, and indulge every base desire it had. The Black Plague itself couldn't have been its doing, but that didn't mean the woman and her Beast half didn't take advantage.

She was a monster, a bloodthirsty monster upon her throne of corpses, and the rats and crows obeyed her.

"I ... I don't understand. She's ... she's a Ventrue, right?" He looked to his Beast, and frowned at the chains that bound it. Bound as it was, his Beast was the same size, shape, and moved in the same

way the other Beasts it'd shown him had, of other Kindred not in Jack's bloodline. Another glance to the short woman sitting atop the bodies showed that hers was different. It was more than just its size, it was how it moved, lifting into the air and burying the area in its invisible shadow.

This was a massive Masquerade violation. No Kindred who saw this would let her live. There was no way out of it, no way to explain the situation that didn't involve 'dark creature of the night' in the response. She must have been a menace, and any Kindred who found her would kill her to keep their kind secret. Did the Masquerade even exist in this age? It had to, in some form or another. Maybe it didn't go by that name, but no vampire wants to get caught, or have their food source be enlightened on how to deal with their hunters.

He looked down at the bodies, and the rats that poured over them. The little creatures came out of holes between the limbs, and some holes in the bodies themselves. They were getting fat on the carcasses. Chittering, scampering, they moved with the same one-minded swarming motion that the rats he'd once summoned had. This use of Animalism was awe inspiring, and Jack couldn't help but take a step onto a corpse, and then another, as he stared at his great, great grandsire. Closer he came, closer, ignoring the way the rotting flesh felt under his feet. It didn't respond to him, not really, being a memory and all that, but his Beast was content to make sure he felt it against his shoes. The texture of flesh, some old, some new, coagulating blood, bones, he felt it all through his soles.

At the top of the small mountain, he squatted down beside the stool and the woman who sat on it, and he stared at her eyes. No remorse there, no regret, nothing to suggest compassion for the damage she'd done, or for the damage she was helping magnify. The Black Plague had killed tens of millions, maybe even over a hundred million people in its time. Any vampire with an agenda would have

found it easy to take advantage of the carnage, and thrive, immune to disease as they were.

But this woman didn't look like she had an agenda. She looked like she was enjoying herself, with her army of rats and crows. A queen on her throne, a queen of mayhem and destruction. In a city, rats and crows were everywhere, and would come as a natural choice to any Kindred looking to use Animalism. But to use it on this scale, and to pile up bodies like this? No Kindred would do that, and an elder would have struggled to create this mess. This woman looked like she'd been enjoying her midnight stroll, and had randomly decided to summon an army of animals while she slaughtered a hundred people, for fun.

Fuck, she looked like a psychopath.

“So this is what ... what she was like, before someone chained her other half down?” He looked down the bodies to his Beast, and it stood at the base of the corpse pile, a pale shade of the enormous silhouette of wings, claws, beaks, fangs, snouts, eyes, and feathers his great, great grandsire's Beast displayed. “But, she's not like other Kindred. What happened? What—”

It all vanished. In a blur of black and red, shadow and blood, the images turned into mist, and the textures, the sounds, the horrible smell, it all went away. Jack was left standing on the endless white oblivion, same as before, and his Beast, still wrapped in its chains, was now level with him, hovering beside him.

By this point, Jack knew to just wait, but his mind drifted to where he was a minute before this insanity occurred. He was in a hallway, with Angela, Elen, Sándor, a bunch of hunters, and the ashes of his sire, and friend. He was going to die, the moment this alien entity stopped this journey through his ancestral past. It all felt so pointless, and yet, he wanted to know.

The white oblivion vanished, and darkness replaced it. Jack spun around, looking for his guide on this horrible 'A Christmas Carol' rip-off. It was there, hovering beside him, chains still occasionally making their clink clink sounds, and it did not waver, as the world around them descended into the depths. Down, and down, the world sank, and the familiar darkness of earth and its swallowing mouths enveloped them. Tunnels.

Deeper, and deeper, and deeper, down slopes of rock, down landslides of bat shit, down fungus and moss, down wet bones, down a spiral chasm of blanketing weight and cold humidity. Down, and down, into the awaiting arms of the center of the Earth. Each foot down was like a step into a graveyard plot. He could feel the dead above him, thousands, millions, billions. Ages upon ages of dead inside rock and dirt, inside petrified bones and trees, inside amber, inside the darkness that surrounded him.

A tiny fire was the only thing that separated the endless darkness, from the small woman. She wore some rags, dirty trousers and a ripped up shirt; must have not been too far removed from the time period Jack was just in then, by the looks of them. A decade, a century, or two? Hard to tell this far back in time. And upon closer inspection, he realized this woman, crouched and alone at the bottom of this pit, was his great, great grandsire again. She looked battered, but like any Kindred, she didn't bruise.

She was Kindred, and surprisingly, her Beast looked normal. No longer was it the giant, swirling mass of death and shadow, but something far more subdued, and sneaky. That was the normal essence of Kindred, to be subtle, manipulative, to hide in darkness and strike from it. The colossal Beast he'd seen in this woman when its chains were off was not that. But now, it had no chains, and it wasn't the titan he saw on the mountain of bodies and rats. It was normal; for a ghostly, inhuman presence.

There were circles on the ground, etched in with stone, the humidity and wet rock of the earth reflecting the small fire. In the center of the circle was his ancestor, and beside her was another vampire, someone who looked an awful lot like her. Way too much like her. Jack blinked down at the vampire, a stake through her shirt, straight into her heart, keeping her paralyzed.

His ancestor held up her hands, as if awaiting rain to fall onto her palms. Why? There was nothing down here. It had to be some sort of cave, the end of one, at the end of some sort of spiraling network of natural tunnels. No living thing existed down here except for insects and whatnot, so it wasn't like a Kindred could do much down here. Hide, sure, but without a regular source of human blood, living down here wasn't an option.

But he looked up to where his ancestor was looking, and froze. The flicker of her small fire was enough for Kindred eyes to see in the dark, but as he looked the crucified mayhem up and down, he wished it wasn't. Total, blinding darkness, would have been better than seeing this.

Only now did he notice the tree of black, and the bodies tied to it, hooked to it, split apart and spread along it. Once his brain registered what he was looking at, the rest of his senses kicked in. It was almost complete silence this deep in the Earth, and the only sound was the crackling of the small fire. It was cold, so far down, and wet. It was the smell that hit him, similar to the smell of the streets of the city he'd been in, but different. There weren't as many bodies, but there was no breeze down here, no fresh air of any kind to cycle out the smell of rot, blood, and shit.

Why was there a tree down here? How the fuck did a tree grow down here? It was dead, but it was big, no leaves but solid branches that had no trouble holding up the remains of what must have been thirteen bodies. Jack stepped closer to it, and eyed the symbols carved into the black bark. He didn't recognize any of them. None

looked like the symbols Elen seemed to use, or the symbols the bishop had used, further in the future when he bound this woman's Beast.

Jack turned back to look at his ancestor. The image changed, jumping forward in time, and his ancestor now Kissed the paralyzed vampire. Sister, mother, daughter, he couldn't tell except that the resemblance was obvious. And that made the sight all the more horrific, as his ancestor sucked down the blood of another Kindred. Vitae addiction, and the Vinculum, were two of the three fears that stopped a vampire from feeding on another, but neither meant anything to someone who performed Diablerie.

And it was Diablerie. Jack stared, hands locked at his sides, as the image shifted forward again, and his ancestor was left holding not her relative, but a pile of ash in each palm. She had drained the relative of every shred of their blood and vitae, to the point it killed them. And if legend and myth were to be believed, his ancestor had absorbed more than her blood, but a piece of her soul. No one who performed Diablerie had to worry about suffering the Vinculum for their victim.

It sounded ridiculous, the idea of absorbing, devouring, destroying a soul, but he was looking right at it. His ancestor glowed with a new energy, almost like a new life, and it made Jack's insides freeze. It only grew worse as the woman got up, carried the ashes of her kill to the tree, and rubbed the ashes into the bark.

And when she did, the tree woke up. Flowing waves of black mist, lit only by the flickering flame, poured out of the tree, and fell upon the woman. The living shadow leaked out of the eyes, mouths, and nostrils of the corpses on the branches and trunk, some of them new, some of them old, some of them nothing but skeletons. It oozed from them, heavy, and fell upon the vampire, flowing over her, and coating her.

The air grew colder, and stiller than death, as his ancestor fell to her knees, and screamed. The sound was an explosion against the silent walls of the cave, and Jack almost jumped back as the image shifted forward again. The scream echoed for an eternity, crashing against the walls with nothing to deaden it. As the sound smashed into him again and again, Jack couldn't tear his eyes away from the small, pale woman with dark hair, and how the Beast inside her began to grow, and grow, and grow.

The little fire she'd built, a tiny thing of twigs surrounded by small rocks, struggled against the rising tide of obsidian mist. The lack of wind was the only thing keeping it alive, as the heavy fog descended from the tree, onto the woman, and the ashes of her kill. It swirled around her, crashed into her, and tore through her with far more inertia than mist had any right to use. It threw her to the ground, and bore into her, entering her without creating wounds, but as the flash-freeze images moved forward, each a second apart, he could tell she felt like it was shredding her apart. And when the mist started to pour into her through her eyes, she fell to her knees, and screamed up at the darkness above her, the tree, and the things on its branches.

As the Beast within her morphed and grew into a colossal titan of morphing shapes and shadows, something new appeared. Jack stared from her, to the tree of the dead, and he blinked at the silhouettes that appeared there. There'd only been dead bodies before, but now, there were flickers of black caught by the fire. Feathers? He peered harder, squinting, trying to make out what it was that now perched on the branches. Not crows.

Whatever it was, there was more than one. Their eyes opened, and began to reflect the fire light, glowing amber in the darkness; the eye glow was brighter than the tiny fire warranted. There were feathers, and wings, hugged tight to oval bodies, that sat upon claws, bird claws. Owls? What the fuck. Why were a bunch of black owls down here in this Hell pit, far below any source of life?



The owls, bodies as much misty shadow as the fog that penetrated and mutated his ancestor, looked down at her, and if owls were capable of showing a satisfied expression, it'd look like that.

The image and memory shattered as Jack's other half quaked, body of rippling shadows and evolving animal parts practically falling over; if such a hovering mass of darkness and limbs could technically fall. The darkness of the cave vanished, along with the dead tree, the corpses tied to it, the owls that sat upon it, and the ancestor. All that was left was the endless, white oblivion, the staging area for this fucked up conversation between Jack and his other half.

“So ... so that's it? Like, almost a thousand fucking years ago, my great great grandsire committed Diablerie, and ... and made the sacrifice to ... to ... a bunch of owls, and that gave her Beast great power? And then some Sanctified person chained it up?”

His Beast hovered back up to its full height, standing maybe six feet tall, chains clinking against each other as it came back to its full strength. Except, full strength wasn't really full, because it was bound.

“The reason you've been fucking with me, been ruining my life, is because of some ancient fucking ritual? Something that happened almost a thousand years ago, is haunting me?” He stomped toward the abomination, and tried to look it in the eye, but it had too many eyes, and they disappeared and reappeared in a constant, unending sea of shadow.

He was getting sick of shadows.

“That isn't fair! I didn't do this? This isn't my fault? This thing is ... is...” He fell back on his ass, and sat there, staring down at the white below him. Naked as he was, he felt exposed. Well, considering this was all happening in his head, it was tough to get more exposed than that. He was sick of the metaphors, too.

Another image appeared, and the Beast floated aside to make room for it. It was his ancestor again, his great great grandsire, the psychopath, and she was out in the woods. Her Beast was bound in chains, size shrunk to that of a normal Kindred; this was happening after that bishop had done his ritual on her. She was wearing old rags, and definitely looked worse off than she did than when she was sitting on a mountain of bodies. Hell, she looked like she was mid frenzy, a crazed look in her eyes.

Suspicions confirmed. The next freeze frame, his ancestor fell out of a tree on an unsuspecting woman walking by, and she drank her to death. Good god, what happened in the decades between these moments Jack got to see? How could this woman go from the horrible crimes of Diablerie, to the almost royal position of sitting atop the carnage of the Black Death, to this? By the looks of her, he had to assume this happened before she sired the blonde woman, if this was some sort of ancestral memory his Beast was taking him through.

Images overlapped, and Jack squinted as he tried to understand what he was seeing. It was her, on top of her, transposed, as if he was seeing her inner self. This new image was of her naked, and she had a big hammer in her hand. With the hammer, she smashed the locks and chains of her Beast. Slam. Crack. Slam. None of them broke.

The images started coming faster, and faster. Jack stood up, and braced himself against the onslaught of information. Her again, his ancestor, when she sired the blonde woman. Again, her, naked like he was now, and smashing a hammer against the chains containing her Beast. Then again, this time a new image, showing the blonde woman, his great grandsire, summoning a pack of wolves. Jack forced down the urge to vomit, as the next image showed the wolves flooding over a small village, killing the denizens within. All of them. And with her as well, he could see her inner self, hammering against the chains that bound her Beast. The next image, was of her

siring Viktor. Again, he could see her hammering against her chains, to no avail.

The next image was of Viktor, engaging in some sort of torture of someone bound to a chair. The man was wearing a nice Victorian suit, and there was a candle nearby, giving Jack some idea of the time period, as he watched his grandsire murder a kine. Again, Jack could see the man's inner self, hammering against the chains of his Beast, getting nowhere. The image changed again, to when Viktor sired Julias, and the hammering of his chains continued.

The next image froze Jack to the guts. Julias, punching a woman. Based on the suit and her dress, it had to be sometime around World War I, so Julias was a fresh vampire. This was his wife, then. This was when he'd hit her, and spent the next century feeling guilty about it. And it showed in the man's inner self, a naked Julias, who took a single swing at his chains with a hammer, before he looked at the hammer, and threw it away.

The next, Jack saw coming. He didn't want to see this, but there was no way he couldn't look. Knowledge was bitter sweet, and no matter what it was, he was drawn to it, had to have it, even if it meant being sick. The sight of himself, dying in Julias's arms on a rooftop, bleeding out from stab wounds and the Kiss, was more than enough to accomplish that.

Jack took a step back, and held his guts, as he watched himself die. He watched the chained Beast inside Julias deposit a piece of itself into Jack, and sure enough, the alien creature grew inside him as well. Julias's inner self took a swing at the chains of his Beast too, trying to free it from the chains that bound it, but at least he swung with less enthusiasm than his ancestors. He was more than happy to keep the infernal creature inside him bound and limited.

Wait. Julias had said siring another robbed a Kindred of a piece of their humanity. That was the clue, the key. That was what was

happening in each of the scenes, these memories that had been stored from Beast to Beast to Beast. Each time, it was when a Kindred was doing something that cost them a piece of themselves, struggling against their Beastly urges.

He knew what was going to come next, then. He wished he didn't.

The Beast beside him snarled, and drew forth the image of Mrs. Pavala. Him, killing her, draining her when he was in a frenzy. And there Jack was, hammering away at his chain, oblivious, not realizing what he was doing. Then there was when Viktor had cut him in half, down the face to the crotch, getting his blade an inch deep through his whole body. Holy fuck, Jack may as well have been a zombie after a wound like that, and the only reason he wasn't dead, was because he ignored the pain, pushed it down, and found a way to make himself move.

Slam. Within the frozen image, memory-Jack slammed the hammer down on the locks and chains of his Beast. Tapping into that animal will, was a part of how he'd dragged his ruined body across that floor, to kill Viktor and Tony.

Another image came. When Jack had reached out, grabbed Damien's mind, the mind of a far more powerful — if troubled — Kindred, and Dominated it. Slam.

It was when Angela made her appearance, that the images came at him rapid fire. When she stabbed him, cut into him, and when Jeremiah had as well. Slam. Slam. Slam. When Jack had broken through the spell of the handcuffs, Dominated those hunters, and had them cut off his hands so he could escape. Slam. Slam. Slam. But the locks refused to break.

It was when the image showed him summoning the rats at the prison, that Jack took a step back, and almost screamed. Memory-Jack wasn't using a big hammer anymore, it was using a fucking sledgehammer, a massive one, meant to be used by two hundred-

plus pound men, breaking rocks. And memory-Jack smashed it against the locks of his Beast with as much strength as a Kindred could provide. Boom. Boom.

Then, when Jack fought Angela inside the nightmare, tried to kill her, failed to kill her. Boom. Boom. More strikes. Heavier. Faster. When Jack found out his mother was in the hospital, dying, and his sister was dead. Boom. Then, when Jack fought Angela in the hospital. Boom. Boom.

Then, when he watched his sire die. The sledgehammer grew bigger, darker, to the point it was the size of Jack's body. And somehow, seeing Julias die, had been enough to make memory-Jack lift that fucking thing, and bring it down. Kaboom. Kaboom.

And now, the enormous sledgehammer was in Jack's hands. He looked down at it, at its sudden appearance, and he gasped. So heavy he could barely move it, left alone lift it.

The images disappeared, morphing into nothing but black sand that faded away. Dust in the wind. But the Beast wasn't done with him yet. As the sand flowed off into eternity, a few scattering remnants swirled together, and formed Julias at his last moments. A man, on his knees, half skeleton at this point, and a warm smile on his face as he looked at his incapacitated child.

The small smile meant a million things.

*I'm proud of you, Jack. You'll get through this. These hunters won't stop you. You kidding me, Jack? After the shit you've done, you'll take care of these punks.*

*Tell her for me, Jack. Tell her I love her, and she should move on; after an appropriate amount of grieving time, of course. Don't push her, Jack. She'll close in to herself, hide in her catacomb again, hate the world, and you should let her do that, for a little while. Give her some time to mourn, and then, give her a push, would you?*

Tears filled Jack's eyes. His inner self was content to hit him with all the agony and misery that came with watching Julias die. He clutched his gut with one free hand, and leaned forward, letting the weight of the sledgehammer in the other prevent him from falling on his face. Tears fell onto the white endlessness, and they were red.

“Oh fuck you. Crying blood tears? Give me a break.” He raised a hand to wipe them away, and laughed at the streak of red across his arm. Funny, they weren't actually blurring his vision red, but red they were. The Kindred metaphor was nauseating. “Is there even any time for ... for anything? We've been in here for a while.”

A window appeared before him, two, in the shape of eyes. Yeap, that made sense, if this was all happening in his head. And, predictably, through the windows and their onyx borders, he could see the hallway of the hospital. Blood was everywhere, Angela's, Sándor's, Jez's flowing from around the corner, and now ashes coated a large portion of the hallway floor. It was dark, hallway lights off, and only the flashlights of some hunters, some light from the patient rooms, and the light from the primary room where the hall connected, provided any illumination. Considering the hospital was in low light mode, the flashlights were the primary source of light, and that wasn't exactly a lot.

Elen sat in the back, a hunter holding her wheelchair's push handles. She had a grin on her face, and her fingers were netted together, indexes tapping each other. If she'd started mumbling 'excellent', it would have been fitting.

Angela sat against one wall, and Sándor lay on the floor, thoroughly beaten and destroyed. If Angela had been a normal human, she'd have gone fetal, too. But somehow, the fucking demon woman had mustered up enough strength and will to get her hands under her, and start pushing herself up.

Angela. Her words had sealed Julias's fate. Things could have gone differently, maybe, but she'd decided to order his death, instead of capturing him. Stupid. She did it to hurt Jack. Reasons piled on reasons, to do whatever he could, to get revenge.

"I guess we're just frozen in this moment, so I can sit on the precipice of this god awful decision, until the end of time." Sighing, he looked to the bound Beast beside him. "I don't want to die. And I'm not going to give some courageous speech about needing to save the people I love. Honestly? I really don't want to die. I want to keep living, spend a century or two or three in Antoinette's arms. I want to save my mom, too, and give her another chance at life.

"And I want revenge. I want to kill that bitch, Angela. I want to kill that bastard Jeremiah. I want to kill that fucking traitor Begotten. I want to kill the old woman Elen. I want to kill the hunters, at least the ones that knew what their bosses were up to." He tried to lift the hammer. Holy fuck it was heavy. "But, I won't become a Draugr to do it. I won't just become a mindless host for a stupid Beast with nothing but an impulse to feed."

The Beast pulsed for a few seconds, before it brought up the image of the mountain of corpses again. His great, great grandsire sat upon it, on her stool, and she looked happy. Psychopath happy, but happy. She also looked immensely powerful, and not at all mindless. Draugr were supposed to be nothing more than animals, and this woman looked like a queen, bathing in her power.

What would that mean for him? The fuck did any of it mean? He didn't know what the symbols meant, when his ancestor had performed Diablerie; hell he barely knew a thing about Diablerie, secret and taboo as it was. He didn't know anything about the black, dead tree. He didn't know a thing about the dark, shadowy owls on its branches either. Trying to wrap his mind around the hundreds of years of history, of the Danse Macabre, of political machinations,

deceptions, and apparently, the curses and magic that led to his present circumstance, was impossible.

All he knew was, the only chance he had at surviving the present circumstance, was with the help of this fucker, wrapped in chains.

“We save Mom, right? Much as I want to kill Angela and the others, the priority here is saving Mom.”

The Beast nodded, as much as it could, a few heads — rat, wolf, crow, owl — emerging from its billowing mass to oblige him.

Sighing, Jack looked down at the sledgehammer. It took two hands to lift it, and more than that. It took will. It took effort. It took hate. He summoned up his rage, his fury, grimaced as he glared at the dark, wooden handle, and took a deep breath as he forced his determination into his grip.

He wouldn't die here. He refused to die here. Come what may, he'd survive this, and he'd make sure the hunters wouldn't. He'd make his own mountain of bodies, and summon the crows and rats to feast on their corpses. He'd drink their blood, and dance in a river of flowing crimson.

He'd kill them all.

With a heavy grunt, he lifted the sledgehammer, glared at the Beast, its chains, and slammed the enormous weight down against the rusty metal. Kaboom, the endless white oblivion around him trembled, rippling under the impact. One of the locks, already withered and damaged by memory-Jack's previous attempts, shattered. The next lock did the same. Kaboom. With each lock, the Beast before him grew, and grew, and grew, as the white wasteland shuddered in an earthquake. A swirling wind of black fog fell upon them both, circling them, enveloping them in a tornado Jack could not see past.



It felt hungry. It felt angry. It felt frustrated that its territory had been violated. It felt disturbed that the kine before it weren't bowing, begging for their lives. The swirling black closed in on him tighter, and the Beast before him grew larger, and larger, until its mass overshadowed Jack completely.

In the future, there would be a struggle between him and this creature, a fight over his body and mind. It happened before, and to all Kindred, and it'd be a hundred times harder for him now.

That didn't matter. Saving his mom, and revenge, saving his own life, they were all that mattered. Jack frowned up at his other half, and brought the hammer down. Kaboom.

Sorry, Antoinette.



~~Damien~~

He shouldn't have been doing this, and Maria knew it. The sun would be up in less than an hour, and Damien was injured. The only reason he'd agreed to Maria's request was because Fiona's blood had managed to heal him considerably, and her spider webbing cast on his leg functioned surprisingly well. And, of course, he agreed because it was Maria, and he couldn't say no to her. If he did, he'd risk the Lancea et Sanctum, or his life.

It was a beautiful night, though. Without a cloud in the sky, the blackout allowed the stars and moon to shine through over the district. It didn't fit the dread he felt in his guts, but there was no denying the beauty of the night sky when the city's lights were off. He'd lived in Dolareido for over seventy years, fifty of them as a vampire, and had watched the city embrace almost every vise. With each one, the amount of lights the city kept on during the night grew, until the stars were practically a faded memory.

He jumped up onto a roof overlooking the hospital, and walked up to the thrall standing there.

“Report,” he said, and the thrall jumped, almost squeaking with surprise.

“Um, sir Burksen, sir! All communications are down, and—”

“What’s going on in the hospital.”

“Sir.” The man, dressed in a black trench coat not unlike Damien’s, pulled out some very large binoculars, night vision equipped most likely, and resumed scanning the hospital. “Mister Terry entered the hospital some time ago, and Mister Mire entered not long after. Not long after the black out, six people wearing coats entered the hospital together. They got out of their car after the blackout, making a report impossible. And even if we could have, six people exiting a car is common at a hospital. Lot of families visiting.”

“Then how do you know these were the hunters?”

“Timing, and the way they walked. Most people walk toward a hospital slowly, like they’re afraid of it. These six walked toward it with a purpose.”

Sighing, Damien walked up to the roof edge, and held out his hand. The thrall gave him the binoculars without question.

“See anyone else suspicious out here?” Damien scanned the hospital. The night-vision annoyed his eyes, and he flicked it off. Kindred vision was almost as good anyway.

“No sir. We suspect snipers, but there’s just no way to be sure.”

It’d have taken a large team, and weeks of planning, to make a surrounded location like a hospital in the center of a key district in a

large city, even remotely safe against snipers. But, sniping was difficult, very difficult, and that was their only saving grace in this communication darkness.

“Hear anything?”

“There’s been some gunfire in the hospital, a lot of it, but it’s died down.”

Frowning, Damien looked down at the thrall’s equipment. A sniper rifle for the trained marksmen, and some other standard provisions: food, communications equipment, and such. He didn’t have any sort of directional microphone that would let him hear specifics, if one of those things even existed. Perhaps Damien should inquire with the Invictus?

“Gunfire. See any muzzle flashes in the windows?”

“No sir. But I only have the West and Front wall covered from here. And most of the windows are patients’ rooms.”

“I—” Damien froze as the familiar sound of gunfire sounded off from the hospital. “East Wing.” Kindred hearing to the rescue. “Stay here. If you see those six hunters, any of them, come out of the hospital, and they’re not being held captive by a Kindred, shoot them.”

“Yes sir.”

Ah, the joys of a thrall. Nigh mindless obedience. No need to argue with the person, or try and assert dominance like with a Kindred.

Nodding, Damien stepped up onto the edge of the roof, and looked below. From his perch, he was facing the front of the hospital, and scanned one more time with the binoculars for anything out of the ordinary.

A quiet hum started, a white noise that rose above the unnoticeable threshold, and grabbed his attention. He handed the man back his binoculars, and raised a brow as he looked at him. Was the thrall humming? No.

He looked up, and felt his body turn to stone, as the stars started to flicker out of existence. First one, then another, then back into existence, then gone again. Then dozens, then hundreds. And as the stars hid away into the black, the growing noise grew louder, and sharper.

The flap of wings, and the telltale caw of crows, became a choir. A flock so vast it blocked out the sky, and so loud, it would have shook the heavens.

Death had come on wings.

## Chapter 89

~~Jack~~

He started to get up.

“Stop!” one of the hunters said. “Stop, or we’ll keep shooting until you can’t get up.”

He continued to get up, a small grin on his lips. This was going to be fun. This was going to be so much damn fun.

“Shoot him,” Elen said, voice cold and hard. “Don’t kill him if you can help it.” Well, nice to know they still wanted him alive. It’d make this slaughterfest all the easier.

The bullets began. Just like with Julias, it was like staring into fireworks, all going off at once in the dark hallway, complete with the ear-splitting cracks.

The bullets crashed against his suit, tore through it, and slammed into his skin; but they didn’t penetrate. Hollow-point rounds were great at tearing flesh, but the Beast laughed as it hardened Jack’s body. Useless, weak, pathetic metal. The fools didn’t understand the only threat to him now, was fire, and they didn’t bring fire. Perhaps they feared damaging the hospital? Their loss.

As the bullets crashed into him, and fell to the hospital floor, he smiled more, exposing his teeth and fangs. Tilting his head, he glared at Angela, stared, and her eyes widened as she realized he was mobile. Somewhere in all the chaos, the barely conscious woman managed to find one of the dropped pistols. She brought up the gun, and fired it at him, but the telltale sound of click click announced the empty clip. Her jaw dropped. Wonderful. Perfect. Let

her soak in her fear. Let her roast in it for that moment, before he ripped her asunder.

As the bullets continued to slam into him, his body began to regenerate. The metal lodged into him from earlier fell out of him, joining the mess of metal of other bullets falling to the floor. The flesh within mended. Bones reformed and sealed. Muscle sewed itself back together. Skin knitted over the holes. Easy.

The conversation he'd had with his Beast was a blurry, fading thing, like a dream. He vaguely recalled that he knew it'd be like that, that whatever he'd done, whatever had happened, he wouldn't remember the details. He remembered her, though. He remembered the short brunette woman, sitting on her mountain of bodies. He remembered the smile on her lips, the sickle in her hand, the farmer's hat on her head. He remembered the crows that sat on her shoulders and hat, and on the rooftops. He remembered the thousands of rats that scurried around her, between her feet and the feet of her stool, and through the bodies they gnawed on. He remembered the Beast that existed within her, and its titanic, overwhelming size.

That was him now.

His smile faded for a moment, as once the gunfire settled, Jack looked down at the ashes of his sire. Julias. Dead. His sire was dead. He'd died with a smile on his face, but that didn't change that they'd murdered him, killed him, destroyed his life and silenced his voice.

How dare they. How. Fucking. Dare they.

He raised his eyes again, and found the hunters staring, jaws dropped, confusion and dismay carved into their faces; they hadn't expected a vampire to suddenly be immune to bullets. The fear on their faces, the sweet, delicious sight of their terror, almost made selling his soul worth it.

Jack raised a wrist to his mouth, bit into it, and tore a chunk of his flesh out. The hunters gasped and backed away; maybe they'd seen something like this before. He doubted it.

Two hunters approached quickly, grabbed Angela and Sándor, and dragged them into the darkness with the other hunters. Their companions reloaded their guns, and pointed them at Jack, but didn't fire. They would soon, once they realized what he was doing, but he knew, and they knew, it wouldn't help them.

Jack swung his arm down at the floor, and splattered it with Kindred blood. A drop of will imbued into the flowing crimson kept it from burning into ash, and would keep it around for several minutes. And as the vitae set into the hospital floor, near the ashes of his dead sire, Jack could feel the pulsing wave of its power, his power. God, so much power, sweet, delicious, intoxicating power.

These kine couldn't see it, smell it, or hear it. They couldn't feel it. Jack felt it, and any Kindred in the area would. Any Kindred within a mile would. Each pulse a wave, each a thundering explosion, silent, unfelt, but blatant to any paranormal, he was sure. Others would know. That was fine, let them know. Let them witness his resurrection.

Five seconds after he spilled his blood, and created his summoning beacon, he smiled as he felt the call reach his flock. The room Julias had first used as cover had its door open, and as the fluttering noise in the background grew louder, one of the hunters turned to look in its direction. The noise grew louder, and louder, more fluttering, the sound of movement of small things in such number, it became a white noise; far too loud for white noise. Louder, and louder, and from all directions.

The cawing began. At first, just one, but one was the trigger that announced the flood. As if a host of angels — real angels, the ones in the bible, the freaky ones with extra mouths and eyes — had

descended from the heavens to speak the word of God himself, a shrieking sound crashed against the hospital walls. The hunters jumped, spinning around and pointing their guns at patient rooms, and the two hallways, seeking the cause.

The banging began. Birds slammed into the windows, hard, hard enough to break beak and bone, hard enough to die. That was fine. His army would die for him; that's what armies were for, dying, in heaps and droves for their lord. Him.

The banging grew louder in only a few seconds, until it sounded like gunfire itself. Sturdy windows.

The hunter with the assault rifle moved forward, pointed at Jack, and started firing. Apparently this one had decided to spare their ammunition, likely having put some of it into Julias earlier, but not wasting any others until now. These bullets were not hollow-point. These bullets were meant to pierce. The only reason holes didn't punch through the hospital wall or floor, where the hunter had shot Julias, was because the hospital was built to survive a hurricane.

Jack smirked, and raised an arm, the injured limb already healed over from earlier wounds. The pieces of metal slammed into him, each hitting him with far more force than could ever be explained as anything but 'getting shot by a rifle'. The punch a proper assault rifle could give, combined with the pointed tip of the bullet, meant each bullet hit him with enough force to pierce through metal.

But they didn't pierce him. The vitae in him hardened his body, a mix of malleability and durability preventing the bullets from penetrating his skin. Metal slammed into him, and broke upon him, water against the shore. The hunter with the rifle stopped shooting, and Jack could see his jaw drop. Yes. Cower. Let the fear roll through you. Delicious.

Jack took a step forward, chuckling as he did. He felt good. He felt amazing. He felt hungry.



“You,” Jack said to the man with the rifle. “Come here, and kneel.”

Without hesitation, he came forward. Fool should have looked away before Jack could make eye contact, but fear had paralyzed him. His mind broke like tissue paper under water. One of the hunters reached out to stop him, but after a moment, she thought better of it. She turned around, grabbed Elen’s chair, and started wheeling the woman away.

She didn’t get far. The windows of the open patient rooms erupted, including Jack’s mother’s. An explosive force complete with an ear-splitting bang. Jack almost started to dance to the tune as more windows shattered under the impact of his servants. As the glass smashed inward, all the hunters turned to face the two open doors behind them, except the hunter under Jack’s Dominate. The man with the rifle continued forward, came up to Jack, and fell onto his knees.

As if to announce the man’s imminent demise, the hallway flooded with darkness. Loud, squawking, flapping darkness. The hunters threw their hands up over their heads, and tried to protect themselves from the onslaught, but the crows were unending. More of them poured in through the windows, and soon, patient rooms began to open. Crows were smart, very smart, and the only thing that stopped them from opening door levers was their absurdly small mass. That wasn’t a problem when there were hundreds of them working together.

“Stop their escape. Kill them all,” he said to his flock, “except for the Begotten. Capture the Begotten.” Traitors didn’t deserve death. Traitors deserved an eternity in the ninth circle of hell, in the frozen grip of Lucifer himself, or his maw, depending. Jack would recreate that Hell for this Begotten, while he still breathed. Heh, poor Judas.

Hundreds of crows became thousands. The swirling mass of endless black poured over anything and everything, like locusts,

blanketing the walls, the floor, the doors, everything in fluttering obsidian.

Jack laughed as he held his hands out, and two familiar crows joined him. “Scully. Mulder. Is help coming?” The screams of the hunters buried his voice, but his voice was ancillary. Animalism was how he communicated with these friends of his, and now, it was easier than ever. As easy as being.

They both cawed a couple times, and clicked several more.

“Good. Unnecessary, but good.” They’d contacted the Invictus and the Ordo Dracul. Antoinette would send someone, probably Daniel, and the Invictus would send someone, probably his fellow Right Hands. What would they say? What would they do? Undoubtedly, there’d be some arguments over the Masquerade, and Jack would have to justify his actions.

No, he wouldn’t have to justify. What could they do to him? Nothing. They could do nothing.

He smiled down at his meal, who knelt patiently, waiting for him. With the crows swirling around him, a wall of flesh and feathers, it meant he was protected from outside interference, and free to begin drinking.

And drink he did. He motioned for his prey to come closer, and the man stood up, crouching enough for Jack to be able to reach his neck. Once he did, Jack grabbed him, hands on his shoulders, and he squeezed hard enough to break bone. This worthless maggot didn’t deserve a pleasurable Kiss. No, this was going to be agony.

The hunter screamed, and Jack laughed, as he sank his fangs into the man’s neck. The murder of crows flowed around him, swarming, swirling, a tornado of beaks and claws that spread out and flowed through the hall. Kill the hunters, kill them all.

The swarm of crows communicated with him using their caws, explaining to him what was happening as they did his bidding. Two of the female hunters went down, swiping and slicing at the birds with their knives, but there were too many. Jack could hear them, but seeing them was difficult; only small flickers of their bodies were visible through the walls of crows. Their screams were a siren's song, and he groaned in joy as he drank down his meal. The birds were pecking their eyes out, ripping their scalps apart, and their clothes could do nothing to stop the hundreds of claws and beaks.

Blood was going to fill the hospital, overflow it, pour through the halls and down its elevators and stairs. Blood was going to drown the patients and staff. Blood was going to paint its walls, counters, doors, everything. Blood would cover the building, by the time he was done warming up.

As Jack refilled his stomach on the blood of the shrieking hunter in his grip, the old thrill of murder tingled along his bones. Fuck, how long had it been since he'd done this, just crushed someone as he drank them? Must have been over six hundred years. God damn it felt good. So good, he pushed his hands together harder, and smiled into the screaming man's neck, as the hunter's shoulders collapsed inward, collar bone breaking, then his ribcage. Like popping a grape.

Blood splashed over Jack's body, as the hunter in his hands broke. Strong as Jack was, he couldn't get his hands to push all the way through, but he was content to get them within a few inches of each other. Flesh, bone, all became mush between his squeezing grip, the hunter's clothes an inadequate shield to keep the blood off of Jack's hands; and it was the only thing that kept the hunter from splitting in literal half.

Grape popped, blood drained, the broken, dry husk of a man was now useless to him. Jack threw him aside, and licked his lips. Yes,

god yes, it felt good. It felt so damn good.

Scully and Mulder cawed a few times, and Jack shrugged at them. “I am different.” They clucked a few times more. Apparently, they weren’t entirely sure what to think of him. “Don’t worry. You’re still my favorites.” And they were, of course. That’s how it was supposed to be. Two crows to be his eyes and ears, and he wouldn’t throw those things away without just cause.

He stepped forward over the body, and toward the other two. Ah, two women. Screaming, crying, they died swinging, but it had done nothing. It was a pity he didn’t get to see it, with the amount of his servants he’d summoned, but the aftermath was plenty appealing nonetheless. Bodies torn open, crows biting at their brains through their now empty eye sockets, and much of their skin exposed as his servants pulled and tore it off. Stomachs torn open, intestines pulled out, organs pecked to bits in moments. If he’d had time, he’d have made some necklaces.

The liver was a nutrient powerhouse, and essential food. Had to have that. Brains, eyeballs, heart, kidney, all good, but the liver was the prime meal for his army. Of course, when dealing with thousands, nothing went to waste. He watched with a smile as his army ripped off their skin with their beaks, finishing the job they’d started while the hunters had still been alive moments before. While it’d been shame he didn’t get to see it, see the terror in their eyes as crow beaks punctured them, hearing their screams over the swarm had been delightful.

The swarming mass cawed their frustration, and Jack listened, Animalism the bridge that turned their chaotic squawks into noises he could understand, could interpret into sights and sounds. Several of the hunters had escaped back through the hole in the wall, and they not only took the woman in the wheelchair, but also the damaged one with the glass eye. And, according to the crows, the hole had closed up, and vanished.

“Fuck!” He turned, and punched the wall, hard. Vitae pumped through him, and the Beast within flowed outward freely, pouring into the limb, and causing his fist to sink into the wall. The hospital wall was some sort of concrete painted white, and it cracked and crumbled around his fist. The fucking bitch escaped him again. Again!

After a few moments, his smile returned. No matter, he’d find them again eventually. However it was the hunters were traveling around, it was magical, and it was limited. If it required a sacrifice to paint such a circle and create the portal, that was a limitation he could use to track them. And for all its power to jump from location to location, it seemed like the hunters couldn’t make the portal opening wherever they wanted. They had to manually go to a place first. Which meant the hunters were still somewhere in the city, coming out of a portal, and departing from such a location to head out, and paint more circles.

He blinked at the wall and his fist. The sight of the damaged wall stirred a strange dissonance in his mind. Jack could never punch concrete hard enough to nigh shatter it. Jack could, now, easily. Hell, he felt almost as strong as a proper elder Nos or Daeva now, in pure physical strength.

He squinted at the wall, and drew his hand back to admire the damage he’d done to his skin and bone. It was minor, and healed over quickly, far quicker than Jack normally could. Yes, he was different now, very different, and something about it tickled somewhere in his brain. The conversation he’d had with his Beast was such a blurry thing in his memory, and it was hard to pull out the specific words that’d been said.

It didn’t matter. What mattered was revenge, saving his mom, and everything in between.

More caws in the vortex announced the capture of the Begotten. They'd stopped one of the hunters from dragging him through the portal, pecking and stabbing, until the hunter was forced to abandon the monster.

“Yes, finally. How many fucking times have these bastards sneaked away? Not this time.” Capturing their enforcer wasn't as good as capturing Elen or Angela, or the MIA Jeremiah, but it was still a great step toward that goal. Now, time to collect the prize.

Jack stopped, and tilted his head to the side. In one of the patient rooms ahead of him, were two people, and the caws of his army announced both their arrival, and who they were. Antoinette, and Damien.

Jack held out his hands, and opened them, palms out. The crows went silent, and many of them flowed out the windows of the nearby half dozen patient rooms with open doors. Outside, he could feel their presence, feel their claws perch atop roof edges and power lines, feel their beady eyes scanning the darkness for any suspicious movement. A few caws from outdoors announced that the hospital exterior was clear.

Time to collect the prize, and talk to the Misses, then.

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~~Antoinette~~

Blackout. It was a true blackout. Such power outages were rare in her city, where electricity was the lifeblood of its pulsing heart, and for power to cease was enough to elicit panic from many.

Such panic was a problem. The fire department was out in full swing, driving the streets, looking for the problem as best they could; no doubt their equipment was hampered by whatever spell the hunters had cast, forcing them to do things manually. Hospitals had backup generators to keep their patients alive and maintained,

but for many night organizations, no electricity was paralyzing, and it left customers out on the streets, flooding the large sidewalks, and bringing traffic to a standstill.

The South Center Hospital, on the other hand, looked deserted. It was stupid of her to approach the hospital directly from the front, but it was also the fastest method. Time was of the essence, and she was not about to risk the Masquerade by jumping onto the building's side and charging in through a window. Admittedly, there were better routes she could have taken into the hospital, but she did not have the mind to plan that out. It had been a literal eight minutes since Jack's crow had arrived at her tower, and she had jumped rooftops to get to the hospital as quickly as she had.

Gunfire. She looked up at the building, and toward the East Wing. Too difficult to isolate the noise to the exact floor or room, but there was no doubt it was happening near Samantha Terry. There was no time. Go. Now.

She did not enter. She was about to, but a growing noise drew her eyes and ears, until she was forced to look upward. The stars were quite visible in the district, with all the lights out, and nothing protected Dolareido from the heavenly gaze of the stars above. It made her feel exposed. She had spent so long building this city, and with each decade that went by, the amount of light the city produced increased. For the roofs, the walls, and the windows, to be dark or only lit with gentle light, elicited a strange feeling, as if she were afraid of the dark.

No. This darkness, as alien as it was to her these days, was not what sent chills up her spine. The silence it brought with it did not upset her either. These were where Kindred were their most comfortable, between walls and shadows. And, as much as she originally thought so, it was not a fear for Jack that had her body trembling. She was not human, and she did not have adrenaline to

trigger such a response. Vitae did surge through her, though, and it was in fear, but she did not know why.

Her mouth parted, and she stared up at the sky, as crows descended upon the hospital. Their wings hid the sky, and their growing noise became unimaginable. Not so loud as to damage her ears, but overwhelming nonetheless, heightened by the eerie silence of the district moments before. Cawing, the squawking bird noise that crows made, distinct, unique, wholly recognized as a sound of death and impending doom. It was all she could hear, as the sky became a moving tapestry of shadow and feathers.

It was as if a demonic entity had sliced open the sky, spilled its obsidian, endless blood over the stars, and from it, an army of black birds came to reap the souls of her city.

She was stunned. She tried to move, tried to tell herself to ignore the birds, and enter the hospital, but the sight was horrific and beautiful. The squawking birds numbered in the thousands, and the volume of their calls only grew as they came closer, and closer. As they began to lower themselves onto the hospital, Antoinette gasped, staring, as dozens of the birds matched speeds, and smashed their beaks into the windows.

Many of the birds died, and each that did hit the glass with such force, that even staring up from the parking lot, many feet away, it sounded like a gunshot to her ears. She flinched, something she rarely did anymore, as more birds destroyed themselves upon the glass, harder, sometimes in pairs, in trios, quartets, and quintets at the same time. They hit the glass hard enough, that the loud crack of their beaks against the windows echoed against the walls of nearby buildings.

It took them maybe twenty seconds, before the windows exploded inward, such was the force of their determination. As a hundred crows fell to their deaths, bodies of fragile bones smashed into pulp



against their targets, the glass broke, and thousands of crows flew inward into the patient rooms. Oh no.

Footsteps behind her grabbed her attention; Kindred ears captured the sound as pure reflex, rather than conscious effort, so loud was the army of crows and their kamikaze mission. From the sound and the pace, it was a Kindred.

“Prince,” Damien said.

“Mister Burksen. I assume my love’s other pet found you?”

“Found the Invictus, yes. Madam Turio sent me.”

Antoinette frowned. This boy, a member of the Sanctified by Lucas’s choice, had become Jack’s friend. A frustrating position for Antoinette, who wished for nothing more than for the boy and his accursed religion to disappear. But, the man had proved his worth and reliability. If things continued as they were with Damien and Maria, Antoinette would have no choice but to eventually let them reopen the Lancea et Sanctum in Dolareido in an official capacity. She dreaded the thought, but she could not deny them for forever, lest the covenants feel her rule totalitarian. And that would lead to other troubles.

Even now she danced the Danse Macabre, as the sky parted to unleash its army upon the hospital. Sighing, she turned back to the building.

“Come,” she said.

“ ... uh ... you’re coming, yourself? Are—”

“My sheriff and my student are both hunting down the cause of this power outage, Burksen. I assume Turio sent you because the other Invictus are indisposed. Logic dictates that we work together,

and rescue Mister Terry and Mister Mire.” She marched forward for the hospital front door.

“ ... alright. Then, I suggest we scale the building wall, and go in through one of the windows the crows are using.”

She stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. “The sky devours us with endless wings, and you wish to perform yet another violation of the Masquerade? Do you not think kine are awake, and aiming their phones about at this very moment, filming this?”

“I’ll Cloak us.”

“I can tell from the way you move that you are injured.”

“I...” Damien looked down at one of his hands, and the leg she noticed he was keeping his weight off. “I’ve fed enough to Cloak us. My injuries are irrelevant. I’m not going to let them hurt Jack.”

She blinked at the man, and tilted her head to the side slightly. Those were powerful words, and not words she ever expected to hear from Lucas’s child.

Looking at the man could not help but spark memories within her. This young man, just old enough to be ancilla, had cut off one of her arms and legs. He had stormed her home with weapons and zealots, and the two of them had shared barbed words. He had played his hand, exposed what he thought of her, what Lucas thought of her, and had sent his companions to their demise in order to defeat her.

And he had failed, because of Jack. To see them become friends in the months that followed would forever be the rarest of social interactions and changes of personality she had ever seen in another. That did not change that the sight of the man sparked anger in her, and she was not comfortable with letting a man who had taken a sword to her, help her. For all her power, even she was

vulnerable to a swift hand with intent to betray, and stab her in the back if she lowered her guard. Though, considering his injuries, she was the one helping him.

It was not that she could not use the Cloak of Night herself, but it was certainly not a discipline with which she had had much practice. Daniel offered to spend the time and teach her, but instead, she focused on the abilities that came naturally to Daeva, and her pursuits in the Coils of the Ordo Dracul. To her utmost annoyance, Damien's suggestion was the better approach.

“Very well.” It took effort to keep the venom out of her voice. But now was not the time for such juvenile frustration; healthy paranoia, perhaps, but not childish antics.

The boy nodded, and summoned up his Cloak of Night. It was a subtle, hidden thing, for a Kindred to tap into their vitae, and encapsulate themselves, or others, in the aura of the Cloak. Humans watching would first have found their eyes sliding off the two Kindred, in such a way that did not garner attention. And then, as the full effect of a true Cloak of Night arrived, total invisibility followed.

The boy was powerful, to be able to encapsulate both her and himself in his Cloak, to the degree of total invisibility. Natasha could as well, but then, Natasha was a talented woman, and the Prince trusted her to handle herself with Daniel, despite how exhausted little Vola was after her return tonight. A talented Mekhet was a dangerous thing.

The two of them ran over to the hospital East Wing, from the outside, and looked up at the windows the crows were pouring in through. Such recklessness. Such insanity. Did Jack do this, or Julias? Their bloodline was impossible to predict, forever causing mayhem in her city with their surprising bursts of strength and talent. Viktor had ruled the Invictus under such strength, bullying

his two fellow councilmen into submission. But Viktor was dead. Who was summoning the crows, and how were they managing such a massive number?

She sighed as she looked down at the dozens of dead crows at her feet. Neither Jack or Julias would be so cruel as to use Animalism, and send so many creatures to their death. But then, when Jack had escaped the hunters' torture, the reports indicated that many rats had died in his escape. Jack would never kill animals like that, never let himself become so drunk on violence and death, that he would kill hundreds of creatures to enact his will. Would he?

“It’ll take me a few seconds to climb up,” Damien said. “If—”

“Come.” She grabbed him, and threw him. The man’s eyes went wide, and he almost let out a yelp, before he managed to close his mouth at the last second. Fool boy was weightless in her grip, and she had no trouble launching him at one of the windows where fewer crows entered. If his Cloak failed, she would have to leave, and enter through the hospital front door instead.

It did not fail. Impressive. She leaped after him, keeping the distance between them small, so he would not have to extend his Cloak too far. Two vampires, dangling off a windowsill, outside a hospital. Très drôle.

How long had it been since she had left her tower, in pursuit of a mission? For decades now, over a century perhaps, she sent her thralls, or Daniel, to enact her will, to force the covenants into line, or to deal with kine who overstepped their limits. Not since the Purge had she truly used her own hands in such a way. She had forgotten the thrill of engaging things with her own fingers, to leave the safety of her tower, and seek out an objective, with purpose. She could not deny there was excitement to it, but any potential joy to be found was lost under the growing fear within her core. What had happened here?

She forced up the window -- better than risking damage on the broken glass -- and rolled into the room. Damien followed, silent and slick. His movements were terribly similar to Daniel, and she struggled to suppress both a smile and frown at the value and threat that represented. For now, she could trust him to watch her back, if only because she was standing and at full strength, while he was not.

The two of them stared down at one of the patients. The machines beside the man continued to beep, and the crows that filled the room avoided him. The ventilator continued, and the sensitive equipment such as the IV feeding into the man's body was untouched. The birds swarmed around the room though, and both vampires were forced to crouch to prevent them from hitting their heads.

The noise was immense. The birds were not trying to be stealthy, despite their seeming attempt to not accidentally kill or contaminate the patient in the room. They had somehow managed to open the door as well. She knew crows were intelligent, but—

As she stepped out of the door, she froze, and Damien froze behind and beside her. The two of them stared out of the hall, at the swirling maelstrom of feathers, and blood. The screaming of kine mixed into the chorus of caws, and Antoinette had to force herself to keep her hands off her ears in an attempt to block out the noise. The blood was everywhere, splattering and scattering across the whirlwind of flapping black shadows.

The hospital lights of patient rooms were low, with the hospital in low light mode on its generators. The lights of the hallway itself were off, and from the room they were entering it from, the two Kindred were looking down the hall toward the center of the hospital. And from there, their eyes were buried in the carnage and mayhem.

A body lay on the floor, and blood was splattered across the floor and walls, painting the white surface endless red. The clothes this person — a hunter, she surmised — wore, were torn to shreds, most of it removed and spread about, but enough of it remained for her to identify them. Birds, hundreds of birds, were tearing into the corpse, ripping flesh through the holes in their clothes with their beaks and reckless abandon. As if piranha had been given wings, the creatures devoured the body with enough mouths, and with such speed, that she could see bits of bone emerge before her eyes. The hunter was a woman, though the defining curves soon disappeared under beak and gore.

If anyone was alive in the madness, she could hear them no longer. The scream she heard a moment before was gone, and another scream, a woman's, rose to a banshee shriek, before it died off as well.

She wanted to move forward, to leave the doorway and enter the madness, find Jack, find Julias, but she could not. If she entered the pandemonium before her, surely the crows, an ocean of violence unhinged, would devour her; or at least, harm her to a degree she refused to underestimate. A whirlwind of claws and beaks was not to be dismissed lightly.

She peered at the flapping darkness, and after a few more seconds, she called out. "Jack? My love?" To get through the noise of the murder, both the act and the group of crows, she had to call loud. It would give away her position to any hunters, but it was worth the risk.

And, as if parting the Red Sea, the crows split apart. While many stayed on the floor, dotting it to the point they were wing to wing, eyes glistening in the flickering shadows, others continued to fly, soaring over along the ceiling, and along the wall. Many birds flew past her and out the window, clearing space, and in the mouths of the birds, was flesh. As the thickness of the sea of feathers lessened,

the sight of more corpses drew her eyes. Disgusting, how the birds had shredded the clothes of these hunters, pecked out their flesh, destroyed their faces, tore off skin and chunks of muscle.

Antoinette had seen many forms of torture in her second life, and only a few were able to match the sheer animal brutality this senseless mayhem had brought forth.

Jack, her little Ventrue, stood only fifteen feet away. A crow sat on each shoulder, his pets, and the boy wore a smile. His suit was coated in blood, as was his skin, human blood that drenched him, dripped from his fingers, and flowed down his body. But the mess of gore was not what struck her cold, it was the strange smile on his face. She had never seen him wear such an expression.

“Annie!” the boy said, hands out as if to embrace her arrival, but not her physically. “Good news! Well, good and bad.” Annie? Not once, in the nigh two years she had known this boy, had he ever called her that. “Damien too, sweet.”

“... Jack,” she said. “Where is ... where is Mister Mire?”

“Dead.” Nodding, sighing, he crouched down, and the birds that covered the floor hopped aside, pushing wing to wing so they could reveal a patch of dust and dirt, soaked in blood. “Hunters got him.”

Antoinette could not move, every muscle and tendon in her body frozen. Who was this boy? It was not Jack Terry, her love. The inflection in his voice, the confident and almost sinister gaze, the odd smile, none of it belonged. In the corner of her eye, she could see that Damien felt the same, as the man stepped forward slightly to stand beside her, and he kept his weight on the balls of one foot, ready to sprint forward in an attack.

“I ... I am ... sorry.” Mire was dead? Oh no. If, that was truly what happened. This snake speaking to her could not possibly have been

Jack, and now, as she stared at him, every word she heard from him became suspect.

“Yeah, I was pretty bummed. But! Good news. Crows say Mom is fine, they killed two hunters, which makes four total, if Elen can’t revive the one I shot in the head, and I drained and popped one a minute before.” Popped? “And the best news we’ve had in god damn forever, I caught Sándor.”

She squinted for a moment, before she stepped forward. The crows moved aside for her, barely, while they gave her lover plenty of room; slaves, making way for their master.

Sure enough, Sándor the Begotten was there. The man was a mess, bleeding and broken, and she could tell many of his wounds had not been caused by the birds. He was on his back, but she could tell he was bleeding quite profusely from wounds underneath him, as blood leaked onto the floor around him. Someone had broken many of his ribs, if not all of them, and his face was a ruined mess, nose smashed and teeth lost. Every breath the man took was a gargled mess, blood oozing from his parted mouth and broken lips. Someone had thoroughly crushed this man.

Jack, or whoever this snake was, walked up beside her, grinned up at her, and then down at the shirtless man on the floor. “Julias really fucked him up. Never seen a Ventrue punch that hard. But it drained my sire pretty bad, left him defenseless.” Crows sat upon the Begotten’s arms and legs, and a few of them had left scratch marks there, some peck marks as well, but Sándor did not respond. He was close to death, but she doubted the horror inside the man would let him simply bleed out.

If Natasha’s report about this Begotten’s strength was to be believed, and it was, then Julias defeating him in a fist fight would have been horribly costly indeed. Impossible, even, for other Ventrue his age, but Julias was Julias. Was ... Julias. She sighed,



looked over Jack's head to the ashes upon the floor, and frowned at the crows stomping over it. Jack, her Jack, would have made sure his summoned crows would have not touched them. Her Jack would not have done any of the things he was doing now.

The crows upon Sándor's body cawed a few times, announcing their presence, and Jack chuckled as he squatted down over his prize.

"Hey, Sand." He looked up at her, and Antoinette struggled to not look away in disgust at the alien creature meeting her gaze. "Angela called him Sand, heh. Sand!" Leaning over the Begotten, he slapped the man's broken face, but found no response. "Damn, unconscious. Well, he ain't going anywhere. Let's check Mom." He pat the man on the chest, used the ruined ribcage to push himself up, and walked toward his mother's room.

And Antoinette followed, closely, as did Damien. She glanced back to him, and found the same fear in his eyes. He did not recognize this boy either. After a quick grimace, she nodded to Damien, acknowledging his fear with her own; and perhaps, warning him that she would soon act.

Jack stepped into his mother's room. She almost stopped him. Did the hunters have some sort of doppelgänger in their employ, or could somehow possess Jack and turn him into this snake before her? That made no sense. It was clear that Jack had done great damage to the hunters this night, thus, it was unlikely the hunters that were responsible for this change in Jack. Jack had always had an unusual, unknown element that people noticed, but this? This was beyond the pale.

The crows perched upon the bed, the chairs, the equipment, everything within his mother's room, but none touched the woman's body. Sensitive equipment was also left alone; crow claws and fragile equipment did not mix.

“They were going to take her,” Jack said as he stepped in closer. “Take her, and Elen was going to do things to her. Probably cut her up, do some shit to her mind or guts, voodoo magic, or whatnot.”

Antoinette sighed, but nodded. “To force your cooperation.”

“Yep. Fuckers. Whatever, she’s fine, and I’ll get them. Kill them, rip them apart, shred them, throw their guts to the birds, my birds.” Nodding to himself, he reached up and stroked the bellies of his two crows upon his shoulders. “The hunters are in the city, and they’re not leaving; Jeremiah won’t, at least, not until he’s killed Azamel. So we have plenty of time to find them and skull-fuck their corpses. I —” As the devil creature leaned over the unconscious body of his mother, his voice came to a sudden stop, and he froze.

“ ... Jack?” Damien said, stepping around to the other side of the bed. “You ok?”

Antoinette, keeping a couple feet between her and the alien entity, looked down at his eyes. They were locked onto the face of his mother. His hands trembled at his sides, and his shoulders matched, quivering, as if the boy were carrying great weights in his empty palms.

She said nothing. Something was happening to Jack, something sinister, something horrible, and in the moment, something told her to watch. Let this unfold.

“I—” Again, his voice cut short, and the boy’s right hand took the bed’s edge with far more strength than required. “I ... I...”

As Jack struggled, Damien slid a hand into his coat. The Mekhet was as suspicious of Jack as she was, and, at least in this, she could trust him to do something to help the boy, even if that meant cutting off his legs to incapacitate him. But Antoinette had no clue what was happening to her love, and if watching him struggle now

provided some answers, then she was left with no choice but to observe.

She looked to Samantha. The poor woman looked horrible, but at least she had not been harmed by the influx of crows. Antoinette looked around at the many birds sitting about, and frowned at how some of them gobbled down bits of flesh, while others preened, rubbing at the blood that soaked their feathers. Some of that blood dripped onto floor, and Antoinette glared at the birds. Disease was a true risk for Samantha, and the current situation was a large problem.

Jack put his other hand on the bed, and he stared down at his mother harder, as if trying to penetrate her mind with his. If he did something violent, Antoinette was ready to pounce and stop him. But, he did not. He stood there, a trembling statue, hands locked to the bed while his torso leaned forward enough that he could stare down at his mother.

“Mom?” Jack said at last. “Mom, I ... I ... what...”

And then the boy turned around. For a moment, Antoinette thought he would march out of his mother’s room, but he froze at the doorway, again like a shivering statue. His hands found the door frame, and squeezed. Bits of the metal frame bent under his trembling grip. Jack, even at his strongest and most desperate, could not have dented a metal door frame by squeezing it with his fingertips.

Back again, he turned and walked toward the bed. His face was pained, as if someone was dragging a hot poker through his insides.

“I ... I...”

“Jack, my love, what is happening to you?” She hesitated to ask, fearing his response.

“I won’t ... let it ... Mom, I won’t ... I won’t let it...” He collapsed. As if someone had staked the boy with a proper wooden stake, he collapsed, and slipped into unconsciousness. The two birds upon his shoulders flapped their wings in panic, and flew toward the window.

“Jack!” She caught him before his head hit the floor. The smell of blood was on his lips. If he had fed on one of the hunters, then the boy did not need to enter torpor, especially as he apparently had no visible wounds; bullet holes in his clothes, but no wounds. And only moments before, he had looked healthy, energized, and ready for war. There was no reason for this collapse.

As her love went into torpor, the army crows cawed once, and left. Leaving was not so easy for thousands of birds trapped inside a hallway and several small rooms, and Antoinette stayed low as the birds rose. Their black wings became a whirlwind above her head, and she stared up, teeth clenched as the creatures, as if of one mind, flowed together out through the destroyed window. Damien ducked as well, hands covering his head, until it became clear the birds had no intention of doing anything, except leaving.

The caw noise filled the hall, blocking out the sound of anything else. A glance out the door showed the birds leaving, including the ones perched upon Sándor. With no more guidance from their unconscious master, the birds flowed out of the hospital in a matter of seconds, and what was nothing but endless black feathers, became a hospital hallway. Blood was everywhere. Four corpses decorated the floor, and one of them wore scrubs, or the remains of them. The crows, under her love’s command, had eaten the bodies to the point of nigh skeletons.

“Jack’s ... different,” Damien said, walking out of the room, and grabbing the Begotten once the crows had gone. He dragged him into the room with the three of them, and drew a pistol. Better to keep the prisoner at gun point, even if he was incapacitated.

“Clearly he is different. I—”

“I ... sorry to interrupt, Prince, but ... he’s different. Auspex shows he’s ... he’s uh...” The Mekhet squirmed, looking blatantly uneasy, as he looked back over his shoulder to her, and Jack. “He’s dangerous.” Was the pistol for Jack, and not the Begotten? No, Damien would not do such a thing.

She sighed, and looked down at the boy in her arms. He was different, that much was obvious, and to summon an army of crows in such a manner was a feat elders as old as Antoinette would struggle to accomplish, were Animalism one of her talents. He had not only done so, but it seemed easy for him, with no strain to him at all. That was, until he saw his mother’s face.

A glance toward Samantha showed two crows remained, perched upon the windowsill. His pets, Scully and Mulder, no doubt. They stepped side to side a few times, and bobbed their heads a few times more, likely anxious to investigate their master’s sudden fall.

Antoinette stood up, boy in her arms horizontal, and she leaned down to set a kiss upon his forehead. “Something has happened to him, something I ... I do not know.”

“Jack’s been acting more and more strangely,” Damien said, “since his first run in with Angela. And he’s always been unusually skilled; I just assumed that was his bloodline showing through.”

“Perhaps it was. Perhaps it is...” She set the boy down in one of the chairs, and slid a finger across his forehead. Who was this man who had summoned an army to his aid? This boy in the chair was not Jack. Or perhaps it was, and Jack was the one that, upon seeing the face of his mother, stopped whoever was controlling him. His words had suggested some form of inner struggle.

“What ... what are we going to do?”

“You are going to help me, Mister Burksen.” She got up, stepped over to Samantha, and looked down at the monster on the floor. “My tower has facilities that can contain the Begotten.”

“The Invictus—”

“Are not equipped to secure foes of a paranormal nature. You do not have...” Sighing, she shook her head, glanced over her shoulder back to Jack, and then back to his mother. “Be silent, Damien, and do what I tell you. You will guard the Begotten, and you will guard me, as I do what must be done.” Desperate times called for desperate measures, if she was forced to ask this Sanctified to be her guard.

“... very well.” He did not look happy, and no doubt the Prince’s orders would pose a dilemma for the boy, since he was to report to the Invictus, not help her. Maria could burn, for all Antoinette cared at the moment. “What must be done?”

“If I had known that the hunters would be this aggressive, that Angela would be so petty, as to launch such a grandiose assault on the hospital, I would have done this earlier. But I ... had to deliberate.”

“Siring Jack’s mother?”

“... oui. It is not a decision to be made lightly.”

Damien nodded, eyes drifting between the three unconscious people in the room. “I’ll guard you. I haven’t seen any staff, so I imagine they’re all hiding. And police aren’t going to arrive for some time at that. You’re clear.”

The Mekhet was a touch wordier than Daniel, but he cut to the point in a similar manner. She appreciated the candor. Unlike Daniel, she did not feel comfortable dropping her guard and exposing herself to his sword. But if she tried to remove the

ventilator from Samantha to transport her, she could die before Antoinette could get her back to the Elysium tower for a safer embrace.

“You...” Sighing as well, Damien shook his head, eyes lowering. “You don’t need to worry. Things are different now, Prince. You can trust me. I’ll cover Jack and Sándor, and you.”

She stood up straight, and looked at the man. He did the same, meeting her gaze, and unlike her, he lowered his guard. Not the guard of his body, weapon still at hand, but the guard of his gaze. No frown, no smile, no grimace or smirk, no grin or sneer, nothing but an exposed face, that let her peer into his soul. She had peered into countless souls in her long life, and had grown skilled at reading the intentions of any who let their guard down.

The gaze of the Mekhet was a powerful one, and said much. Damien was a troubled young man, torn asunder by his past, by the ghost of Lucas, and by his new life. He was worried for his friend Jack. He was also deathly afraid of her. And, like many Kindred, the man’s life was now defined by regret. She was too harsh, to judge him as she did.

Nodding, she leaned down over Samantha, and stared at her face.

Two days in a coma had not been kind to her; though, she probably looked better than she did the night of the stabbing. She had pale, sunken skin, just like a vampire. Her short hair was cut to the ear, and was supposed curl with waves, but the trauma, the pillow, everything had ruined it.

But she was in good shape, preparing herself for potential mates, perhaps. Bouncing back from the horrible luck that had befallen her, she was a single mother striking back at life.

How would this woman respond to her new awakening, and her new life? No doubt there would be misery, due to the death of her

daughter. There would be elation, that her son was alive. There would be shock, that she was now a vampire. To survive the mental damage such mayhem would cause, would be a trial greater than the trial she had only just begun to recover from.

But she deserved a chance.

Antoinette leaned in, moved the tube coming out of the woman's mouth aside slightly, and set her fangs to Samantha's neck.

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~~Natasha~~

Power came back to the city, twenty minutes before sunrise.

“Oh thank g-god,” she said.

“Yes. This was futile.” Daniel nodded, and the two of them stepped out of a local hydro building before climbing up onto the rooftops. “Quickly, back to the tower.”

Their search for the source of the power outage had proved fruitless. The local power facility had emergency staff, but they had been royally confused. Spying on them was the plan, to let them locate the source of the power failure, and Daniel and Natasha would race to the designated location and quickly handle it. But the technicians were dumbfounded, saying the power failure had no source. More dumbfounded, when the power came back on, on its own.

“Um ... w-what is that?” She pointed to the sky. The light from the city lit a blurry, black movement, something vast and flowing across the sky.

Daniel frowned. “A murder.”

“Murder? Oh, c-crows. That ... that is a lot of crows.”



“Yes, yes it is.” Daniel frowning was an unusual sight, but his frown continued as he watched the flock of black birds fly away. Some remained, perching upon roofs and power lines, but that was normal for Dolareido. Rats, crows, cockroaches, and kine. All four were everywhere in the city, but a giant flock like that flying away was not normal.

“I felt something,” she said. “Earlier, I m-mean. I d-d-don’t know what it was, but...”

“Now we know. Someone summoned them.” The sheriff adjusted his glasses, and leapt, before she could ask how on Earth someone could summon an army of crows that big. Even Viktor would have struggled with that, and that man had been a master of Animalism.

On the rooftops, the two Mekhet ran back for the tower. They’d arrive at the tower with maybe fifteen minutes to spare; Mekhet were fast, and sprinting across rooftops wasn’t hard. Still, fifteen minutes before imminent death was enough to get her anxious, and then some.

“Are we going to call the P-Prince?”

“No. The ring or vibration could give her away, if she’s being stealthy, assuming she has not disabled notifications.”

“R-Right, makes sense.” Better to meet back at the tower. Maybe there she’d get some answers about the crows.

She chewed on her lip. A blackout that had knocked out power for several blocks, and blocked out all communication, wired and wireless, in that area? She’d assumed magical from the get go, but hadn’t said anything when the Prince told her to investigate. Maybe she should have.

The two of them walked in through the front doors literal seconds after the Prince.

“P-Prince?” Natasha said.

“Miss Vola, Daniel, I am glad to see you are safe.” The tall woman turned to face them, and Tash froze as she realized another woman was draped across her arms. She froze twice over, when she realized that not only did Damien stand next to her, but Jack was hooked over one shoulder, and Sándor, beaten to a pulp and bleeding profusely, was hooked over the other. Both were soaked in blood, and with Jack, she knew it was not his.

“I ... I um...”

Daniel stepped forward. “Is she embraced?”

“She is. She will likely not awaken until tomorrow night. Daniel, take Sándor, and lock him within Cell 5. Use extreme measures.”

“Extreme ... yes, my Prince.” With a nod, Daniel walked over to Damien, scooped up the bleeding Begotten, and walked toward the back of the lobby where the stairs led down.

“Natasha, join Damien, and help him ... help him...” After grinding her teeth together for a moment, she looked away. “Set Jack within Cell 4 ... and stake him.”

Natasha froze thrice. “W-What? I—”

“Do it! Do not question it.” The bite in the Prince’s words could have broken steel. “And see to it that Damien has a place to sleep. Mister Burksen should not risk his life racing the sun returning home.”

“Y-Yes m-m-ma’am!” Nodding, she stepped up beside Damien, and gestured toward the path Daniel already walked. “Do ... d-do you not need help with ... your ... childe?” Childe. Oh god the Prince had a childe now. So exciting! Super exciting! But Antoinette wasn’t smiling. If anything, she looked angry.

“No, Miss Vola. For today, she will rest next to me, and I will make sure to greet her come sunset. Now, tend to her s—”  
Antoinette bit down, as if the word was difficult to articulate. “Tend to her son. Quickly.”

Nodding five times faster than she should have, she took Damien’s free wrist, and pulled him toward the back.

Antoinette followed, but slower. They had ten minutes before sunset, and the Prince probably wanted a few minutes to process what had happened to her, how her life was going to change, and how everything was going to change. Ten minutes was also enough time for her to ask Damien some questions.

Once they were down the stairs, several floors, and had taken a right in the halls of black marble, she felt comfortable enough to open her mouth. Hopefully her sire and boss couldn’t hear her this far away.

“W-What happened?”

“Not sure. We showed up to see the aftermath.”

“Can you ... t-tell me what you think happened?”

“ ... Julias is dead.”

She froze again. This was too many freezings in a single ten minute window. “W-W-What?”

“He died helping Jack defend his mother, most likely.” Damien nodded toward the kid lying across his shoulder. “When we showed up, Jack had ... had somehow summoned at least a few thousand crows. He blocked out the sky. Every rooftop was covered, and they poured into the hospital, breaking in through the windows. He killed three hunters with their help, and captured the Begotten.”

Processing. Processing. Ok, her brain wasn't willing to make sense of everything Damien just told her. Needed more. "Jack ... Jack did ... what?" At least he'd decided to capture Sándor instead of killing him. Lucky. He didn't know Sándor was being controlled by Elen. If Jack was killing hunters, he had no reason to not kill the Begotten as well, except maybe to torture him for information.

"It wasn't Jack."

"I—"

"Jack wasn't Jack." Damien sighed, following her, steps brisk. "Whoever this kid was, it wasn't Jack. He was ... he was ... cruel."

Flashbacks hit Natasha. The alley, when Jack had told her he was struggling with rage issues that defied normal explanation. Oh no.

"M ... multiple p-personalities?"

"He summoned an army of crows, Natasha. More crows than any vampire should be able to summon, not without preparation. And he used them like soldiers, slaughtered three hunters, and when we finally got to them, we found the birds ripping muscle off the bones. He walked over Julias's ashes, let the birds walk over them, and he ... he..." Damien sighed, shook his head, and nodded toward the hall. "Let's hurry."

"O-Ok." Hurry, hurry. Yeap, do that. Get down to Cell 4, and stake the young man so he'd be stuck in torpor until it was removed. "We saw the crows, but I ... I d-didn't know what to think."

The hallway had a few cells, each large and filled with many tools for securing kine. Some of them had people in them, horrible people, violent criminals and the like, people Antoinette considered harmful to her city. Such kine could be kept unconscious using drugs, or not, if she was feeling particularly ... wrathful, toward a rather heinous criminal, left to rot in a cell. They were emergency

food. The quality was poor, but come dire situations, even poor quality was ambrosia.

As they entered the hallway, there was a solid metal cabinet on the wall. She dialed in the number on its digital door lock, and opened it. There were a few wooden stakes — if it wasn't wood, it was unreliable at best — along with some other weaponry that would work well against paranormals. A mini flamethrower, a shotgun, some knives and swords, and silver knives too. She grabbed a stake.

The cells with doors along the hall were numbered 1, 2, and 3. The cell at the end of the hall, numbered 4, was different. The door looked thicker, and the number itself was larger. Natasha had never seen its interior, and it did not have a sliding view window to let her do such, unlike the other cells. A digital lock, and a manual lock, were ready and open on cell 4, made of metal she was sure no one was getting through, including Uratha.

She dialed in the code, unhooked the enormous padlock, and pulled open the gigantic metal door. Or rather, tried. Frowning, she set a foot against the wall, and pulled with all her might. It slid open with all the grace of pushing a parked car with the emergency brake on. But, with a little Kindred strength put into it, she managed to get the thing open, and she gawked at the thickness of the door. Godzilla wasn't getting through this thing.

The room was empty. That made sense, she supposed, if it was meant to be some sort of multipurpose room they could store particularly dangerous people in. If there'd been a chair, a monster would have little trouble turning it into a weapon.

Cell 5 was on the next floor, beneath her. It was Antoinette's cell for securing the most dangerous and magical entities; and she'd never used it before, according to the Prince. Sándor deserved it. How could she keep a Begotten under control? Antoinette probably

had more tricks up her sleeve than Natasha knew about, if she was willing to share the resonance circle with her so early into her new life as a young dragon. There may have been rooms deep in the tower, filled with dark secrets that Natasha was happier not knowing about.

But for now, a big, empty room of metal to hold a big baddie would do fine. Hopefully. She lay Jack on the ground with Damien's help, and stared at the young man for movement as she did. None. For whatever reason, he was out cold, but better to paralyze him than risk his awakening. Damien held out a hand, and she gave him the stake.

Stab. Damien didn't bother to open the man's suit; it was a blood-soaked, hole-ridden mess anyway. Jack's body flopped once, limbs flailing out a little from the impact, as Damien sank the wooden object into his heart. Puncturing the organ wasn't as easy as it sounded, considering you had to get through the ribs and muscle protecting it. She was glad Damien did it.

"Julias ... is dead? And A-Angela—"

"Escaped. Again."

Natasha, sighing loudly, got up, and motioned for Damien to follow. Once he was outside in the hall with her, the two of them closed the enormous door, and she locked it, both locks. No one was getting in or out. It'd be terrifying to wake up in a room like that, but Jack was staked, and no vampire, even an elder, was going to wake up from that situation.

"She k-k-keeps getting away!"

"Some sort of circle had been painted on the wall. Maybe—"

"Oh ... oh no. I ran into that w-with the witches, tonight. It ... the hunters, they use some sort of..." She threw up her hands. "Long

story! I'll t-t-tell you at dusk."

Mirroring her sigh, Damien nodded, and looked around with wary eyes. "I really wish I could get back to my place before sunrise."

"And I w-wish I could see my b-b-boyfriends before sunrise too, but I can't. So we have to deal." She guided the surly Mekhet down the hall, and into the main room where the stairway connected and descended, massive walls of marble showing dragon statues, and where hallways showed peeks of far more enjoyable rooms. Not everything in the tower was a cell; she hoped Damien realized that.

"I can still remember the first time I met you," he said. "A tiny little thing, fast, shot me when my guard was down."

She raised a brow as she looked over her shoulder at him. That was a strange direction to take the conversation.

"I ... I—"

"Now, you're a dragon, going on missions with the sheriff of the city. And you have two boyfriends." With a tiny smile that almost didn't exist, he held up two fingers and showed them to her. "Two. Werewolves at that."

She blinked at him. "I ... I g-guess I changed. Why are you—"

"I've changed too, haven't I?" Smile destroyed. He looked around at the walls, and despite how the rooms they passed were far more appealing than cells, with living rooms with couches, fancy lighting, paintings and the like, he still looked nervous. More than once, he glanced over his shoulder, checking the stairs and hallway behind him.

"Y-Yes, of course."

“The Prince doesn’t seem to think so. Half the time I was with her tonight, I expected her to rip off my head, literally.”

“She...” Tash looked down, and juggled the thoughts for a while as she guided Damien to a guest room. It was a small room, a bed and nothing more. A great bed though, and the room locked from the inside, with a normal door lever lock, and an actual barricade bar. A guest room meant for vampires. “She’s old, D-Damien, very old. Give her time.”

“We’re old, too.”

She laughed at that as she stood in the doorway. It died away, as the night’s events weighed on her. “You know it’s n-not the same.”

“No, I suppose it isn’t.” Damien looked around at the room, before he turned to face her, hands reaching for the door. “Julias is dead, Natasha, killed by hunters. Jack has gone The Shining on us, and yet the Prince is still looking at me like I’m the threat.”

“I’ll ... I’ll t-talk to her.”

His small smile returned, partly. “Thanks.”

She left, and he closed the door behind her. Only once she heard the sound of metal clicking, did she let her head drop, and her hands find her shoulders, hugging herself.

Julias was dead. Mister Mire. Her friend, companion, a man she could always rely on to be fair, straight, honorable, and dependable. A man who’d helped her so many times when she was in the Invictus, lent her a hand countless times. He was dead.

She found her bed, curled up on it, and buried her face in her hands. Sobs crept up through her body, up her spine, into her lungs, and into her core. Before she knew it, they were in her neck, and up



into her head where she could no longer stop them. She cried, dry sobs she hid in her palms. No, not Julias. No. No no no.

Oh god, what would she tell Jessy? Oh god oh god, what would ... what would Triss do? And Maria and Michael, they'd be beyond upset. And ... and ... oh god.

She pulled her knees up to her chest, and shook with the trembling clenches of crying, until sunrise came.

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~~Antoinette~~

The last thing Antoinette did, before setting Samantha on the bed next to her, was send Beatrice a message. 'Come to the tower, the moment the sun sets. Immediately.' That was not a conversation she looked forward to having.

But, it would be some time before Beatrice arrived tomorrow night. In the mean time, she had other problems to deal with. Problems, but also, a great delight.

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As sunset arrived, announcing the next night, she slowly sat up from her bed. She had long learned how to manage the surge of the nightly awakening with grace, and she used the wave to propel herself to action. Within seconds, she was out of bed, and adjusting her clothes. She had changed into a clean suit, before settling for the day, as Kindred did not move during their daily torpor. Her suit was immaculate. She, on the other hand, was nervous. It was not a feeling she was accustomed to.

She smiled down at Samantha, and waited. Put aside the grief and misery, bury it, and focus on the moment. Julias did not die. Jack is not waiting in a cell for you, with a stake in his heart. He had not performed a massive Masquerade violation. A monster is not in

your deepest, darkest prison, waiting to be interrogated. None of that existed. All that existed, was this moment.

Samantha opened her eyes.

“Bonjour,” Antoinette said, voice as soft as she could manage.

The woman was still dressed in the hospital gown; it was better this way, so Antoinette could add some evidence to the testimony she was doubtless going to give in this conversation.

“I ... I ... w-where...” The woman was only an inch shorter than Jack, but Jack was a small fellow, so his mother was perhaps an inch or two shorter than the average woman. She was thin and lean, like her son, but with the hips and legs that came with age and motherhood. Her hair was brown, with some curves and waves weaved into it, damaged by the trauma of the past two days.

She looked to Antoinette, and the vampire froze. Those eyes. Those green eyes. Jack’s eyes, on a soft face. They went wide as she stared at her, and looked her up and down a few times. Antoinette’s great height, red eyes, and long white hair caught her off guard, as expected. So Antoinette waited, giving the woman several seconds more, before continuing.

“Samantha Terry. What is the last thing you remember?”

“I ... god, I ... I ... oh god.” She brought her knees up to her chest, hugged them, and set her chin upon them. “My little ... my little girl ... oh god.”

Then Angela killed Mary first. A disgusting, cruel, heartless woman, to make a mother watch her daughter die. No parent should ever have to see their child die. Ever.

Poor Athalia.

Sighing, Antoinette walked over to her cabinet and desk against the black marble wall, took the chair, and pulled it over to the bed to sit. “I am sorry, Miss Terry, but your daughter is gone.”

The woman trembled, and continued to hide her forehead against her arm, the rest of her face hidden behind her knees. It was several minutes before the quivering woman found her voice.

“Everyone’s gone,” she said, voice breaking with the rise of sorrow. “All gone. I ... I can’t ... I...”

Antoinette reached out, and set a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “You are not alone, Miss Terry. I—”

“My family is dead!” she screamed, lifting her face and glaring up at her. The softness of her visage was stricken, destroyed. “I don’t even know you. Don’t give me that shit. I—”

“Samantha.” With a slow, gentle sigh, Antoinette pulled her hand back, and offered her grieving child a small smile. “I was not referring to myself.”

“W-What? I ... I don’t understand.”

To guide this woman’s fragile mind would be difficult. Antoinette considered carefully, before speaking. “You and your daughter were assaulted two days ago.”

“Two days? But ... but I remember ... I remember being stabbed, again and again and—” She lowered her legs, and pulled up her hospital gown, with no concern that Antoinette could see her bare genitals for the act. Unlike Jack, who’d been stabbed literal moments before Julius sired him, Samantha’s stomach wounds had healed as part of her embrace. “God, I’m so pale. And ... and ... oh god, I—”

“Your world has been changed, Samantha Terry. I changed it. And I changed it without your consent. For that, I must apologize and ask for your forgiveness. But, explanations can wait. For now, I need your help.”

The small woman stared at her, confused and paralyzed. There was anger there, wanting to lash out, but it took only a moment to see that this Samantha creature was too gentle to explode with rage or fury. No, this woman would curl into a ball, pull her sorrow inward, and wither away, if given the chance. A soft, delicate woman, hardened by her life but still a tender, loving creature. She did not have the drive that Antoinette would have looked for in a potential childe, but then, perhaps that was for the best.

“M-My help? Y ... You mean, to help catch the ... the woman that ... k-killed...” Her whole body started trembling again, and she started to curl up once more.

Antoinette could not have that. She reached out, and grabbed the woman’s wrist.

“No. We know very well who killed your daughter, and have been hunting her and her group for some time. You and your daughter are unfortunate victims of her war.”

The small woman stared at Antoinette, obviously wanting to pull her arm back, but refusing to. Timid. Docile. It would take time to help this woman overcome her natural, accommodating attitude.

“Then I ... I don’t understand what I can do.”

“Come with me. All your questions will be answered, and you will be fed, once you have done for me this one task.”

Samantha’s eyes widened at the mention of ‘fed’. A new Kindred, a fresh fledgling, would no doubt be starving, in need of blood, and soon. But some stored blood would suffice, and the woman would

not need it immediately. She was not Jack, and not of his bloodline. Her Beast would not send her into a frenzy on her first night so swiftly.

Antoinette felt her eye twitch as the thought ran across her mind. Jack's Beast. The boy had gone into a frenzy on his first night, despite Julias sharing with him his stored blood. It should not have happened. The boy's inner monster was strong, and fought to free itself with far more enthusiasm than a young vampire's Beast should have. Was it related to the madness of last night? When a Beast took over the mind of a Kindred, completely took over, the result was a Draugr, a mindless animal concerned only with its hunger. What had taken over Jack, or replaced Jack, or manipulated Jack, was not mindless. It was cruel, filled with malice, and disturbing joviality.

She brought a hand up to her chest, and clutched at it through her blouse. Her Jack, infected, changed, altered. No, do not think about it. Think about your childe for now. Help her first. And maybe, just maybe, she can help you.

Gulping, and coughing on her dry throat, Samantha turned to face the side of the bed.

"I feel ... f-feel ... strange, and..."

"You will feel many strange things, Samantha. Your life has been altered, in more ways than you can imagine."

"B ... Because of ... this ... Angela woman?"

"In a manner of speaking." Antoinette walked over to her wardrobe, retrieved a robe of solid white, and offered it to her new childe. "I know ... I know that misery and anguish overwhelm you, Miss Terry. Your world has been destroyed, for a third time. As if the Fates themselves conspired against you, happenstance and atrocious luck have ruined your life and killed those you cared for

most. But, if you will set your misery aside for a moment, and listen to me, I promise you not all is lost.”

Samantha slowly slid her legs off the bed, remained seated, and looked between the robe and Antoinette. If she knew how to Blush Life, she probably would have, purely to let tears flow as waterfalls. In Antoinette’s many years of unlife, she had seen true grief countless times, soul crushing torment, and Samantha dripped of it.

“My ... m-my...” Her head dropped, and her shoulders shook. “You ... you’ll ... you’ll get her?”

“We will capture Angela and her group, and we will crucify her. Literally.” With a nod, Antoinette took initiative, and threw the robe around Samantha’s shoulders. The poor woman would go comatose, or slip into shock, if Antoinette let her. “Come. Not all is lost for you, Samantha.” With that, she reached out, and set a hand on her childe’s.

“Not all...” Clearly lost to her confusion, helpless and disoriented, she took her hand. Progress.

Slowly, gently, Antoinette pulled the woman up to standing. Petite as she was, the robe dragged on the black marble floor, and Antoinette smiled at that. There was some Jack in her, in her quiet mannerisms, her shy glances, her careful steps. She reminded her of the first time she had met Jack, a small boy at a ball full of vampires. There had been a strength in him at the time, and in his mother now, it only needed to be drawn forth.

“I am Antoinette, and for now, I am your host.”

“An ... toinette.” Clutching the robe around her at the neck with one hand, the other still in Antoinette’s grip, she followed along as best she could. Antoinette did not pull her too hard, but hard enough to force her to take steps. If she dallied, the poor woman was bound to collapse with depression.

Once she arrived at the main stairway, that connected to the center room and various halls, she went up a couple floors, and made sure to both give Samantha a moment to admire the dragon statues and carvings, but also hurry her along. The marvels of her tower were many, and she looked forward to sharing them with her new child. The extravagances of fortune and time were hers to have, and while they could not cure the agony she undoubtedly felt, they could alleviate the pain a little.

Jack, on the other hand, she could aid quite a bit.

She guided the woman down the hall, past the metal doors that were obviously cell doors, and when Samantha stopped to stare at the closed window slits, Antoinette pulled her along.

“I ... are—”

“These prisons are not for you. Do not fret, little Terry.” She could not help but smile at herself for the phrase. “But, there is someone within one of these cells, that you need to see.”

“ ... it’s ... you ... you said you’re still looking for her.”

“And we are. This is someone you will wish to see.”

“You can’t bring back my daughter, Miss ... Antoinette. You can’t bring back my family. There’s no one I—” She went silent as she stared at the enormous metal door. Shaking, she stood there, watching, eyes wide as Antoinette set the number for the digital padlock, and used her key to unlock the manual one. Each lock was made of metal thick enough to give a blowtorch pause, were they made of normal metals, and she did not use normal metals. Security was paramount.

The door was thick, two feet thick, and made of reinforced material similar to the locks. It was also as heavy as a vehicle. No one was getting into, or out of this room, if she put them in there.

Samantha gasped as Antoinette pulled it open, without too much trouble at that. She gasped again, as the hallway light entered the metal square room, and lit a body.

“Someone’s d-d-dead ... in there!”

Antoinette looked over her shoulder, offered the oblivious woman another smile, and stepped into the room. “Be calm, Samantha. And come with me. Not everything is as it seems.”

“I ... but, I ... I—” Her body went rigid, frozen to ice, once Antoinette sat on her knees on the floor, and lifted the boy half onto her lap. “Jack!” The world exploded upon her face. Her eyes lit up with wonder, and fell with the weight of turmoil, as she saw the stake sticking out of the boy’s chest. “Oh god! Oh god, oh god oh god oh god oh go—”

“Samantha Terry,” Antoinette said, putting some bite into her voice to cut through the woman’s oncoming shock. “Come here, kneel beside your son, and observe.”

It must have been Hell for the poor mother. To wake up from a coma with new sensations in her undead body was confusing; sensations lost, as well. Her memories were a bundled mess, and the loudest, most pronounced, were of her daughter’s death, the final member of her family. She had awoken in a stranger’s home, and was at the mercy of their whim, a whim she knew nothing about. Dressed in a hospital gown and a robe, she had walked down a hall of obvious cells, and now, in a dark room undoubtedly meant to contain and imprison anything imaginable, she found the body of her son with a stake through his heart.

“Wh—”

“Now.” She did not wish to be cruel, or to destroy her new childe. But this had to be done. She could not simply sit by and let her childe come to terms with the changes of her life, when Antoinette



needed her help. Seeing Jack rise from the dead would demonstrate the life of a Kindred to her, and perhaps fill her with joy that one of her children was alive. And maybe, if everything aligned perfectly, Samantha's face would do what it did for Jack last night, and settle his demons.

She did not have the time to let her new childe collapse upon herself.

Gulping, panicking, trembling, Samantha came over to her, and knelt beside her son, across from Antoinette. "He's ... he's ... You found him? He ... he disappeared, two years ago, and ... did this Angela woman have something to do with it? Oh god ... oh god oh god."

Antoinette shook her head, and yanked the stake from her lover's chest. Samantha let out a cry, short, weak, and she reached out to set her hands onto the chest of her son. As whimpers built within her, and spilled from her in tired sobs, she managed to frown up at Antoinette.

"How could you? He—"

Antoinette nodded down toward Jack. "Watch the wound."

"What? You—"

"Watch the wound, Samantha." Again, she raised her voice, and cut through the small woman's rising panic. She could not let her succumb, not yet, not until after this moment.

It would all be for naught, if Jack did not awaken. It would all be for naught, if the insidious monster she met last night was what waited for her. Please, Jack. So much had been lost already. She could not lose you, too.

Samantha gasped, a noise no louder than a mouse, as the wound on Jack's chest began to close; and it closed quickly. "Oh my god. What's happening? What's happening? I don't—"

Antoinette raised a hand, offered her childe a warm smile, and nodded down at Jack. Sure enough, it healed over, the currents of Kindred blood within showing themselves for a moment before the pale skin of the boy's chest hid them. He healed fast, faster than a Ventrue his age should have been able to. She had grown to expect much of Jack's abilities, but purely in his conscious efforts. How quickly he healed during torpor, on the other hand, was purely a function of his natural Kindred strength, and it was quite impressive.

What dark Beast lurked within her little Ventrue, that had grown to such heights under her very nose?

The stars aligned. She had not known if Jack would awaken, considering his unexpected torpor at the hospital. That would have only added to Samantha's confusion and misery. But sure enough, once the hole healed over, Jack's eyes opened. The hallway light exposed his beautiful, green eyes.

He was not used to waking up on a metal floor, and he blinked several times as he stared up at the Prince. "... Antoinette?"

The tension in Antoinette's chest vanished. She had not realized it was there, a slow creeping that had sneaked into her core, tightened all the muscles there, and constricted her depths. But the sight of her lover's eyes, his eyes, Jack's eyes, and the blatant honesty he carried within them, genuine sincerity without the layers of lies and deception most carried, washed away her anxiety.

Purely through her gaze, she could tell Samantha was similar in a way, a genuine, sincere sort, if perhaps without Jack's eye for analysis, or his delightful old-man cynicism.

And once Jack shifted his eyes to Samantha, it was fireworks. Antoinette leaned back a little, giving enough space for the two to react to each other without her interference, even as Jack's back lay along her thighs. The two stared at each other, blinking, confusion on both their faces. Jack's broke first, understanding coming through, and he offered his mother a small smile.

“ ... hi ... Mom.”

“Jack! Oh god, Jack!” The world vanished for Samantha Terry. In the moment, there was only her, and her son, her long lost son. She grabbed him, yanked him off Antoinette's lap, and crushed him in her embrace.

Antoinette smiled as she watched them, and let the joy pour. Her childe, a sweet, innocent woman, did not hold back. She wailed, and her motherly — if small — voice echoed in the metal chamber. Poor Jack was going to break in half with how hard she clutched him, and while the boy let his arms go limp at first, with a few moments to collect himself, he returned her hug. The two merged into each other, clutching, trembling, until Antoinette felt an urge to cry flutter up her chest.

How long had it been since she had felt such a feeling? An eternity. She clutched the scene with her eyes almost as hard Samantha clutched her son with her arms. No words could describe the expression on her face, except for, perhaps, painful rapture.

## Chapter 90

~~Jack~~

Thank god. Thank. Fucking. God.

He breathed in the smell of her, and chuckled between his sobs. She was undead, like him, but he could still smell a bit of her, the old her, the living her, the person he grew up with, the person who raised him. Memories crashed into him, him sitting on the couch with her watching movies, waiting at the table while she cooked, reading a book on the couch while she decorated the Christmas tree with Mary. Her. It was her.

“Mom,” he said, his eyes buried in her neck. When was the last time he did this, hugged her while he cried? When Dad died, just once. After that, he’d drawn into himself, and hugging became a thing of the past. So many years, so many fucking years, he’d built up those walls, kept himself safe from feeling anything, especially where family was concerned.

Waking up to see her eyes blinking down at him, shattered those walls.

“Jack! Oh god, Jack.”

They hugged each other for a good couple minutes. It wasn’t until Antoinette shifted her legs a bit that Jack remembered she was there.

“M-Mom ... I ... how much—”

“She knows nothing, my little Ventrue.” The Prince reached out, and pat his shoulder, drawing his head out of the neck of his

mother. “And, while I loath to end this moment, we should explain to Samantha the realities of the situation.”

The situation. Oh fucking god, the situation. Jack pushed away, slowly, gently, and had to fight against his mother’s squeezing arms a bit to do so. But after he tapped her on the shoulder a few times, she released him, and he smiled at her as he forced himself to stand.

“You were dead!” His mother jumped up with him, and set a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it as if he was a ghost.

“Sort of? I know I disappeared two years ago, and—”

“No, Jack, just now. You were dead! There was a ... a stick in your chest.”

Jack raised a brow, and looked down at the floor, then to Antoinette. A wooden stake was in her hand.

The realities of the situation, she’d said. In that moment, he thought she meant purely about telling his mom about her new life as a vampire; and she probably did also mean that. But she also meant a private conversation had to happen, about what he did.

The soft, heavenly, simple memories of his first life, when he was young, living with his mother, disappeared under murky waters. The hard, cruel, complex memories of his second life sucker punched him, and he grimaced as he looked at Antoinette. Julias, dead. Angela and Elen escaped, once again, for the last fucking time. Sándor was captured, and Antoinette probably had him locked up.

All of that faded into background noise, as he dug through the chaos of the event, and found the horrendous truth buried within. Something inside him had summoned an army of crows, and had slaughtered several hunters. Something inside him, something twisted and fucked up, had practically danced upon the blood and corpses. Something inside him, lurking beneath the surface, had

lost its grip on Jack when he saw his mom in bed, and disappeared into him. It was still there.

And Antoinette knew it hadn't been him. She knew it, Damien knew it, and to be careful, they staked him. Ouch.

"I..." He looked at Antoinette, and waited. This whole situation was paralyzing, and he didn't know where to begin.

"Samantha, you have been brought into our world at a rather chaotic time. I can only offer my deepest apologies for how expedient we must be, but I cannot ease you into this." The Prince met their gazes, steady, strong, a pillar for Samantha to rely on. "Two years ago, Jack was stabbed and killed by an enemy of his friend Julias Mire. Julias resurrected him, in the same way ... that I have resurrected you."

"Res ... surrected?" Mom said.

Nodding, Jack winced as he looked down, and noticed his mom was still wearing her hospital gown under the robe. "Yeah. Look at me, Mom. Look at her. Pale as fuck, and ... well, check yourself for a pulse." It was how it sank in for him, seeing himself in the mirror, and then checking for a pulse. Something about seeing the difference of yourself, and the lack of a heartbeat, shattered any willful ignorance.

His mom did just that. She blinked at him as she felt her wrist, then her other wrist, then her neck, and then her chest. "I ... I don't ... have a pulse."

"None of us do," Jack said. "I—" He stopped, and looked to his love. "Sorry, I'm sort of just taking over the conversation."

"It is understandable. I am a stranger to her, while Julias was ... was not a stranger to you." The weight of her voice hit him, and his head lowered again.

His mom, fighting through her dry sobs, set a hand on his shoulder, and squeezed. “Julias is dead? I remember him, and ... he ... he was a business man, wasn’t he?”

“He was a vampire, Mom. We ... we all are.”

The grip she had on his shoulder loosened, and she started to sway. He caught her, kept her standing, and offered a weak smile as he pat her on the shoulder. Ok, that was a bit much for her, but like Antoinette said, no time to ease her into this.

“Vampires? You mean ... like ... T-Twilight?”

He groaned, so did Antoinette, until he couldn’t help but laugh. “No, not like Twilight. More like Dracula.”

“That movie with Gary Oldman and Keanu Reeves?”

“Yep.” Close enough. Nodding, he helped guide his mom toward the door, following after Antoinette once she started to leave. Keep talking, explain things to her, it was better than thinking about Julias, or letting her think about Mary. “Well, I meant the book, but, yeah. We’re vampires. That’s what happened to me. Another vampire who hated Julias tried to kill me, and Julias had to turn me, so that I didn’t permanently die. It all happened so fast, that ... that I had to disappear.”

“So you’ve been ... like this, for two years? Alive, or ... or ... whatever you are now?”

“Yep.”

“But ... but ... you could have told me! You could have come back, told your mother you were still alive!” She wasn’t getting it. He was just saying words to her, and they weren’t sinking in. Vampire was a little too fantasy for her to accept, while seeing her son still alive was something her mind could latch onto.

“He could not,” Antoinette said. “It is a secret society, Samantha Terry. Your son was pulled into a hidden world, with no say in the matter.”

Samantha’s head fell, and she dragged a little behind, trying to process everything happening to her. It was a lot to wake up to.

Worse, was that Antoinette kept glancing Jack’s way, and he could see grains of suspicion there. Warranted. He could remember what he did in the hallway, could remember referring to her as ‘Annie’, and remember how callous he’d been at the time about Julias’s death, and Sándor, and the bodies. He could remember how different he’d been, how good it felt to be free, how natural it felt to be that cruel.

He’d been a different person, but not. He’d had his memories, knew who he was, but he’d been someone else at the same time. God. Fucking god. Fucking shit fucking god shit fuck, oh god.

No, focus. Multiple personalities can wait. First, he had to help his mom adjust to her new life; and be happy that she was alive! Or rather, undead. Be happy! Be happy that ... that Julias’s sacrifice wasn’t in vain.

“We’re vampires, Mom. Julias was my sire, and ... and he died, saving you, just last night. Saving you from that woman who stabbed Mary. Or, I mean, I’ve been assuming it was Angela.”

“Glass eye?” she said.

“Yeah, that’s her.” So she had been lying to her fellow hunters, then. They didn’t know Angela was doing the shit she was doing. She was manipulating them. “She went to the hospital where you were in a coma. She was going to kidnap you, so she could get to me, force me to tell her information. We stopped her. Antoinette here turned you, embraced you, same as Julias did for me.”



His poor mom. She didn't know how to process a wave of information like this. Hell, she thought *The Matrix* was confusing. He loved her, but she wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, and she showed that as her eyes drifted down, with a small frown of mental exertion. He had to dumb it down for her.

"Vampires have a secret society, and that society is at war, Mom. You and Mary got caught in the middle. And I ... I ... couldn't let you die."

That got through to her. She lifted her eyes, and she looked like she was about to burst into tears, caught somewhere between a big smile and sobs.

"And ... M-Mary?"

"... dead."

"B-But—"

"Dead, Mom. No one could ... could ... save her." He reached back behind him, and held his hand open.

Slowly, with a shaking palm, his mom reached out, and took it, as they started up the stairs. "I can't cry! I ... I can't cry. Why—"

"You're a vampire now. Things are different. And don't worry, we'll explain everything. For now, you—"

"You should feed." Antoinette looked over her shoulder down at them, before they finally finished with the stairs and entered the lobby. Into the elevator they went. "I have stored blood that will tide you over."

Jack frowned at that. It certainly didn't tide him over on his first night. But then, last night pretty much proved that his inner

monster was a whole different Beast than anyone expected. Fucking lovely.

“Blood?” Mom said. “I ... what?”

Jack couldn't help but chuckle again, and once his mom was settled in the elevator with them, he pointed at her hand. The rest of her was covered in Antoinette's robe, but he could see her hands at least.

“You have no pulse.”

“I know, but—”

“You're pale, mom. You can't cry. And I bet you're hungry.”

“I know! I know, but ... but ... it's all so...”

Jack opened his mouth, pulled back his cheek with a finger, and with a little will, caused his canines to grow into fangs. Samantha gasped and stepped back, before coming closer and looking intently, until he closed his mouth.

“It all sounds like a fantasy, I know. But...” He pulled up his shirt, and showed where the stab scars were, earning another gasp from her. “I'm not lying. I was stabbed, was dying, and Julias”—he couldn't keep the flinch off his face that time—“sired me, turned me, moments later, to save my life. I ... I asked Antoinette to do the same for you.”

The lights were turning on in her head, each causing his mom's eyes to grow wider. She lifted her head after a time, up to the white-haired Prince, and gulped—and coughed in result. Dry gulps were hard to get used to.

“Th ... thank ... you.”

“You are welcome, my childe.”

“Child?”

“Childe, with an E at the end,” Jack said. “She’s your sire. You’re her childe. It ... it’s not a normal relationship, and it’s very unusual to be made this way. Julias got to know me for years, right? Groomed me, prepared me, though he didn’t tell me why. I asked Antoinette to embrace a stranger. It’s ... yeah, unusual circumstances”

His mom continued to look up at Antoinette, and after a while, drew up a smile. “I’m sorry, I ... it’s all so ... I’m so...”

“Give it time, Samantha Terry. We have asked you to accept more in fifteen minutes, than most must accept in a lifetime.” After a nod, the elevator dinged, and Antoinette stepped out. She opened the first, large office double door, and Samantha gasped in awe as she was introduced to just one of Antoinette’s offices. There, Daniel was waiting, and he had a bottle of red at the table, along with glasses. In the back of the room, the curtain was pulled aside, showing the giant glass window, and the city skyline lit up with lights.

The man looked at Jack, adjusted his glasses, and watched him, like a sniper watches a potential target. Antoinette must have told him. Shit.

“My love and I have fed recently, Samantha. Please, help yourself to as much as you wish.”

“Um ... thanks.” Samantha walked around the glass table in the center of the room, and sat down. Her hands were shaking as she took a glass. They didn’t stop as Daniel filled it with red, and her eyes stared at the thick liquid. “Um ... uh ... s-so, this is your, uh, boyfriend?” she said, nodding to Daniel. “Hello, Mister... ?”

Antoinette raised a brow, looking to Daniel, then to Jack, then to Samantha. After a moment, she groaned, and set a couple fingers against her forehead. “Merde.”

“You’re going to make her head explode, with too many revelations at once, my Prince,” Jack said, unable to stop a smile sneaking through. Of all the shit, of all the horrible shit that was burying him, and the Prince by relation, there was something delightfully funny about her accidentally revealing that he was Antoinette’s lover.

His mom looked at Jack, caught the smile, and her eyes went wider than any time before. She looked to Antoinette, then back to him, and completed the circuit twenty times, before she downed the glass of blood without attempting to taste it.

“I need ... alcohol...”

“Sorry,” Jack said, sitting down next to his mom, and patting her on the shoulder. “Sorry for ... for a lot of things. Sorry I couldn’t tell you about any of this. Sorry that ... that our night war spilled over, and got ... Mary killed. Sorry that I couldn’t tell you I’ve been dating the Prince of Dolareido for over a year.” He nodded to Antoinette, eyes still on his mom. “Sorry, but you can’t drink alcohol either. Only blood.”

His mom stared down at the empty glass in her hand. “Are ... are you sure? I think now would be the perfect time to become an alcoholic.”

“Agreed. But, yeah, no alcohol, unless you want to vomit it up.”

Sighing, she took the bottle Daniel had set on the massive glass table, and poured herself more. Apparently, she liked it, or at least, liked the way it felt in her stomach. “S-So, um ... uh ... the Prince?”

Antoinette sat down at the head of the table, and leaned back in her luxurious chair as she combed her white hair over her chest with her fingers. “A gender neutral title, specific to Kindred. Vampires. This is my city, Samantha Terry, and I must apologize yet again. I have failed to keep the peace, to deal with invaders, to expunge the filth, and that has led to this situation. Ideally, you would have lived your life, blissfully unaware—”

“Blissful?” Mom set her glass down, and glared at Antoinette, sparing only a second for Daniel. “My son disappeared. Both of the most important men in my life were dead. I was ... I ... was...”

Silence fell on the room, and Jack, without realizing, put his hand on his mom’s wrist. With a squeeze for her shaking limb, he scooted his chair in a little closer.

“It’s the way it is, Mom. The way it has to be. Lot of vamps go through this problem, abandoning their families. We have to keep it secret, this night life. We’re undead.” Ok, his mom was his mom, and trying to explain to her things like the machinations of ancient elders, the harsh intentions of hunters, and the possible extinction of their race if they became known worldwide, was too much for now. Keep it simple, keep it succinct.”If ... if we became public, the sort of people who killed Mary, would be here in droves with pitchforks and torches. Worse, shotguns and flamethrowers. They’d hunt us down.”

“But ... b-but I thought vampires were the bad guys? I mean, I know it’s not that simple in Twilight, but ... but that’s just a story...”

Jack winced and looked to Antoinette, only to find her gesturing to him. This was a prime opportunity for her to learn about his mother through observation, while at the same time, let him handle tough questions. Smart. Evil of her, but smart.

“We can be. We’re usually somewhere in the gray, Mom. Yeah, we drink blood, but we don’t have to kill anyone. And Antoinette has

pushed hard for Dolareido to be a peaceful city, compared to others.”

“Vampires ... are in other cities?”

He nodded, and poured his mom another glass of blood. She was going through it quickly, which was a good sign. “Basically every city. There’s hundreds of Kindred in Dolareido. It’s a society, with its own rules, its own history, its own ... political parties, and its own enemies.”

“And ... and ... I’m ... in that society now?”

“Sort of. You’re a fledgling, brand new. Just do what Antoinette tells you, and everything will be fine. You’ve got the most powerful Kindred in the city as your sire.”

“ ... and ... apparently, she’s your girlfriend?”

He winced, and scratched his buzzed hair. “She is. We love each other, quite a bit.”

His mom squinted at him, trying to read him in that way she always used to, making no effort to hide her attempts to decipher his face. Her gaze turned to Antoinette again after a while, and she spent a little more time looking at her, at how she looked, at the seat she was in, the office she owned, the window she owned, and the man in the trench coat.

“Who ... who’s he?”

“This is Daniel, my sheriff,” Antoinette said.

“Sheriff?”

“Yes, my childe. As my little Vent—as Jack has explained, this is my city. When matters must be handled with force, Daniel is my

right hand.”

Mom shrank, and took another gulp of her drink. At least she was getting lost in other things, and not getting stuck on the whole ‘drinking blood’ hurdle a lot of vampires struggled to get over. She might hit it later, especially when she had to feed on an actual person, but for now, this was good.

“I ... I don’t have any say in this, do I?”

Sighing, Jack sat up straight, and withdrew his hand. “Not really, no. I asked Antoinette to sire you, to save your life. You were dying in that bed.” The unspoken choice was obvious of course. Kill herself. He dared not say it. His mom had to be volatile at the moment; a stiff breeze would shatter her. She wasn’t grieving over Mary, because she didn’t have time. Hell, he wasn’t grieving over Julias, because he didn’t have time.

Samantha reached out, and took his hand. She put it back on the table, held it, and managed to smile at him as she, again, gulped down some more blood with her shaking hand. “I’m sorry Jack. I’m just ... struggling to wrap my mind around all this.”

“You have all the time in the world now. You’re immortal.”

“Immortal?”

“One the perks. Antoinette and Daniel are both centuries old.”

Samantha raised her eyes at that; then again, she’d been raising her eyes at everything, and he could tell it was starting to lose meaning for her. “I ... I need to ... to stop ... and think...”

Antoinette smiled at her new childe, nodding, and motioned to Daniel. “Daniel, please go with Jack, and check the prisoner. Keep an eye on him.” A small glance Jack’s way added the double meaning. ‘Him’ meant both Sándor, and Jack. Yeah, that was

understandable. “Jack my dear, I know you must report to the Invictus as soon as possible, but please spare a moment for Beatrice. I have invited her to the tower, and I imagine she will arrive within the next thirty minutes.”

Oh fuck. Oh fucking god. He lowered his head, and with heavy shoulders, forced himself to stand.

Beatrice. Her name crashed into him, broke him open, spilled his guts, and left him defenseless. Julias was dead, and he had to tell her. Julias was dead, and he had to tell the Invictus. Julias was dead, and the closest thing he had to a father, was gone.

When the rage rose up within him, this time, it didn't come as a faceless wave. It came up, and it was obvious something else came with it, was pushing it, driving it, forcing it to bubble up through him. His Beast was out of the box, off its leash, and for some fucking reason, it came with its own personality.

*Let's go hunting, Jack. Let me drive, and I'll rip the hunters apart. I can find them them. I can find them, and we can rip them into pieces. You don't know how good it feels, to feast until you overflow. We can find that Angela bitch, rape her until she cries, stab her, rip her open, fuck her while we drain her and—*

He shook his head, hard, hard enough to hurt his neck. What in the ever living fuck?

When he opened his eyes, Daniel had unfolded his arms from his chest, and one looked ready to reach over his shoulder. He kept a sword back there, a very long sword, hidden inside the trench coat, and he was prepared to use it on him.

They didn't trust him. No, that wasn't true. They trusted him a lot, actually. They trusted him more than they should have, considering his behavior when Antoinette and Damien had found him. Seeing his mom had shattered its hold on him, like ice water to the face



and spine. That was why Antoinette had brought her when waking him up, so he'd wake to her face. It was a good idea. It wasn't a good idea to trust Jack with talking to Sándor; but then, Daniel could kill him instantly if he started acting out, or at least stab him with a stake. Maybe.

If Jack was Antoinette, and a Kindred he knew had done what he did, summoned an army of crows, and had a personality shift, he'd have them locked up, hung them up, blindfolded them, and staked them, until he knew what was happening. Christ, the crows. That was a massive Masquerade violation, and it'd take a lot of media manipulation to pass that off as something natural or explainable. The Invictus were going to have his head for that.

He really hoped Scully and Mulder were fine. Would they even still trust him, after seeing what he did?

Daniel came forward, and walked past him before motioning for him to follow. He did, unable to look the man in the eyes. A flicker of the man's gaze said it all: Daniel was more than ready to kill him, and if anything, the man looked offended that Jack had put him in this position. Daniel cared about Antoinette above all, with the only exception being his childe. Jack was now an unknown factor, who spent every night in her bed. If he did anything to make Daniel think he was dangerous, the best he could hope for was a stake to the heart.

“Damien and Natasha are waiting for us, Jack.”

“They are? I—oh, Mom?” He looked over his shoulder back at the two women. A moment of worry was on Antoinette's face, and he caught it; an arrow to the fucking heart, and not a nice, pink one in the shape of a heart. Antoinette was worried about him, very worried, and she was putting that conversation on hold so she could handle her new childe, and everything else. “Stay with Antoinette. She's your sire, and she'll be taking care of you.”

“You’re going?” She almost jumped out of her chair, until Jack motioned for her to sit.

“I sleep here basically every day, and spend a lot of my time here. I’ll see you all the time, ok? I might leave the tower sometime tonight, but I’ll explain the situation to my bosses, and I’ll be back.”

“Oh ... ok ... p-please, come back?”

And his heart shattered. The Beast inside him, demanding he be angry, growling and roaring and looking to unleash its hate toward Angela, went quiet. That strange voice in his head vanished. The sight of his mom’s face, half panicked with the thought of losing the son she’d just got back, when the rest of her life was in ruin, buried the Beast and the rage it rode. Remember that face, Jack.

“I will. Don’t worry.” With a nod, he stepped out of the office, and joined Daniel in the elevator.

“Something happened to you,” the sheriff said. Oh boy, a conversation with the sheriff, when no one else was around. This was bound to end well.

“Yeah. Something ... did.”

“You know what?”

“Kind of? It’s ... it’s a blur. Trying to remember a dream.” Sighing, he put both his hands against the elevator door, and felt the vibrations of its descent. “Something’s inside me, and it isn’t supposed to be there. It’s ... it’s something, from the past, something that’s been in my bloodline for centuries, I guess. Some ... something ... something fucked up.” Something with a voice of its own.

Daniel stared at him, face as still and expressionless as stone, before he adjusted his glasses. “Does it mean us harm?”

“No. It means the hunters harm.”

“I see.” That seemed to alleviate Daniel’s concern a bit. “Is this something you can control, or should we stake you?” Thank god Daniel didn’t give two shits about being gentle with Jack. Antoinette might have wanted to avoid the hard questions, but the sheriff didn’t hesitate.

“I can feel it, something underneath my skin, lurking, hungry.”

“Sounds like the Beast all Kindred deal with.”

“Yeah, except ... except, now, it doesn’t feel like some mindless animal, you know? Now it feels ... feels like ... like something else.” Like something intelligent. Being hunted by an animal was a scary thing. Being hunted by an intelligent entity, on the other hand, was fucking terrifying. Made him feel like he was a helpless kine, in the middle of the woods, in the dark, being hunted by a monster that knew his name.

The elevator opened, and Damien and Natasha stood there, waiting. Damien took one glance at him, and sighed relief. Natasha, on the other hand, ran up to him, and hugged him.

“Jack!” She buried her face in his chest, and squeezed him. “Jack, oh god, I’m so sorry. I ... I...”

He blinked down at the tiny woman. This was new, and he wasn’t sure—

Jack, you’re doing it again. A horrible death haunts you, and you close yourself off. Don’t do that. Don’t go backward.

Sighing, he closed his eyes, and hugged her back, before opening them again and looking to Damien. “Thanks, for helping the Prince.”

“We ran into each other,” he said, shrugging. “And you ... you didn’t need our help.”

“Yes, I did.” He shook his head, and pat Natasha’s back a couple times. She was content to keep hugging him, which seemed very uncharacteristic of her, considering she was just as antisocial as he was. Then again, she’d changed, too. “If you guys hadn’t shown up, I don’t know if ... if I’d ... have snapped back.”

Natasha lifted her head and blinked up at him. “What?”

Sighing again, Jack explained what he could to the three Mekhets. He left out the detail that he’d chosen to let this Beast out, that he decided to do it, and decided to let it off the leash. He also left out the detail that, apparently, it could whisper to him now. Everything else, he explained in as much detail as he could. The attack on the hospital, Julias’s last stand, Jack’s blurry dream, his cursed ancestor, and how Jack defeated the hunters.

“It’s g-good you didn’t kill Sándor,” Natasha said, nodding and smiling as she stepped away from him, though he could see the weight behind it. Better to focus on their prisoner, than Julias’s death, she probably thought. “We think he’s b-b-being controlled, by Elen.” She squirmed a bit when she looked at him, and her eyes fell. She knew about his rage issues, and when he returned her gaze, the glance was enough for her to realize the two issues were connected; likely connected.

Jack drew his head back. “Really? Controlled?”

“Mhmm. There’s s-s-something carved into his back, b-by Elen. And ... he’s ... he’s like a zombie, when t-talking to her.”

That definitely sounded like brainwash behavior. Daniel nodded, and began the walk down the stairs to the lower depths of the tower, where Antoinette kept her prisoners.

“Damien,” Jack said. “Did—”

“I’ve already sent a message to Maria and Jessy. They know about the hunter attack, and ... your sire’s death.” His eyes fell as he said it, but only for a moment. He knew better than to stew in the pain of it, or rather, to let Jack stew in it. “They also know you killed three hunters, and that you captured their Begotten enforcer. They ... also know about the crows.”

Jack winced. Masquerade violation, and a massive one. The fact he’d dealt the hunters a massive blow, and that he was the only Kindred who’d managed to do so ever, let alone thrice, meant he was valuable to the Invictus. That was probably the only thing that kept them from tying him to a rooftop and leaving him there for sunrise, for that degree of violation. It was the sort of violation that’d hit the media, and there’d be no other way to spin it than ‘swarm of crows attack hospital’. It was the sort of media that went viral, and in this day and age, that meant within twenty-four hours of its occurrence, hunters around the world would read about it. Fuck, they’d get to see it on camera footage.

Damien told them, because it was bound to come out eventually anyway. Hell, the thralls probably reported it during the daily reports they prepped for dusk. Still, it was painful knowing his friend had told them, and not let him do it, no matter how justifiable it was.

“Mom’s upstairs with Antoinette now. It’s ... it’s pretty rough. She looks like she’s ready to break down.”

“B-But she was happy to see you, right?” Tash said.

“Yeah, overjoyed. But then I had to tell her about Mary, and that she’s a vampire, and ... it’s a lot. I want to get back up there, be with her, help walk her through this.”

“Trust in the Prince.” Daniel guided the three of them down the hall, not bothering to look back as he spoke. “She can handle your mother’s situation.”

The hallway had a cell at the end of it, but unlike the cell they’d kept Jack in, no other cells lined the hallway. It was also a deeper level of the tower, one Jack had been discouraged from exploring. What sort of secrets did the dragons keep down here? What sort of strange experiments did they perform behind closed doors. Antoinette had made it clear in the past that, while she considered Dolareido her city, and enforced her policies, her role in the Ordo Dracul had nothing to do with it.

Other elders, Jack had learned from her, spent their wealth and power fighting to maintain power. They fought the other covenants, and they fought invaders, like hunters. Antoinette had created a different sort of city, a peaceful one, where she could pursue her dragon interests without having to devote her effort to wars or dictatorship. In retrospect, that was backfiring. No vamp in the city was prepared for this hunter threat, and even if they had been, these hunters were absurdly organized, skilled, and informed.

But the vampires would win. After what happened last night, Jack would make sure they’d win, even if he had to let out his inner monster. No way was he letting Angela, or Elen, or even Jeremiah get out of this city alive.

*Yeah, that’s what I like to hear. Find them, kill them. Have fun while you’re doing it, too. Angela’s a pretty thing, and I bet she’d scream and scream as we slowly rip out her entrails.*

Jack grit his teeth, and ignored the voice; or tried to. He knew it wasn’t him, and it was fucking sick and twisted. Ignore it.

Daniel pulled open the door. Like Jack’s cell door, it was absurdly thick, capable of withstanding a nuke, or at least the punches of any paranormal. But once inside, the similarities ended.

Natasha and Jack gasped, Damien frowned, and Daniel stood as the statue he always was. The room, lit only by the hallway light, took a second to reveal its secrets, but Kindred eyes adjusted eventually. The walls were metal, the same sort of metal the door was made of, ceiling and floor included. Upon the floor was some sort of painting, or carving, or ... engraving. Carved into the metal, was a circle, and a circle around that, and a circle around that. A seven-pointed star cut across the circle, and stars sat within their points, then symbols he didn't recognize, except that they looked mathematical. Patterns upon patterns.

The symbols and signs Elen used were less mathematical, and more blatant in their occult nature. Hearts, skulls, bones, things like that. Whatever the Prince had set up here, was very different. If there'd been a Fibonacci sequence on the floor, it'd have fit in perfectly.

Sándor knelt in the middle. Both his arms were out to his side, pulled out and raised higher than his shoulders. Metal cuffs wrapped his wrists, and chains connected the cuffs to high points on the walls, refusing to let his hands fall. His head hung forward, and a small pool of blood sat around his knees. A black bandage circled his head and covered his eyes. He was breathing, but it was easy to see each breath was labored.

Rage stirred inside Jack, and the voice came with it again, a whispering, dark voice in the back of his brain.

*Rip his arm off, Jack. That'll make him talk. Better yet, you remember that book, 1984? Summon some rats, and have some fun. All sorts of interesting ways you can torture people with rats.*

Jack shook his head again, and forced the voice down and out of his thoughts as best he could. He couldn't embrace it, couldn't let the rage well up anymore, couldn't feed the furnace. Not now, not yet. But later, when Angela was in his sights.

Daniel stepped around behind the man, and gestured to his back. “This symbol has been carved into his back, as Natasha described in her report.”

“Report?” Jack said.

“I r-ran into Sándor, and Elen, and some hunters ... not even an hour b-before ... you...”

Wincing, Jack walked around behind the Begotten, and looked at his back. Sure enough, there was a symbol carved there, a circle with an upside-down pentagram, and various things cut into the corners, predictable things, like a realistic heart, and a skull. “Did they use some sort of portal?”

“Yeah! And, it ... it took us int-to some sort of ... flesh chamber.”

A flesh chamber. Ok, that needed a little more explanation, but it could wait. Throw it in the ‘Elen’s crazy magic’ category for now.

“That’s what Angela did then. She opened a portal, using a sacrifice; killed one of our thralls to use her blood for the symbols. Sándor and Elen came out, and ... that’s what turned the tide,” Jack said. Natasha’s eyes went wide, but before she could say anything, Jack shook his head and raised a hand. “You know it’s not your fault, Tash. No one knew how they were getting around.”

She sighed but nodded. “We ... we d-do, now. I have a report f-for ... for the Invictus, to give you, or D-Damien, before you go.”

Damien nodded, but his eyes were locked on the Begotten. “Is he awake?”

Daniel reached around the Begotten’s face, and flicked him in the nose. As the man groaned, Tash squirmed, shifting her weight back and forth on her heels and toes. Yeah, flicking a man in his broken



nose was a painful way to test if they were awake. A groan was all that it pulled from him though.

“He can’t do some trick,” Jack said, “and slip into a nightmare chamber from here?”

“No. This symbol creates a barrier between our world and the Shadow realm.” Daniel came around, and squatted down in front of the Begotten. If he was awake, he was either refusing to talk, or Julias’s last moments had been damaging enough to leave the monster borderline comatose; probably both. “We’ve discovered it causes interference for things that ... attempt to cross realms, not just the Shadow realm. It should work on him.”

That didn’t sound terribly reliable, but since Sándor was still here, either it was good enough, or the Begotten couldn’t escape in his current situation anyway. Fiona had said they couldn’t simply go ‘poof’ and arrive in their nightmare chambers, certain prerequisites were required.

Jack squatted down beside the sheriff. A bit presumptuous of him, acting like he was going to be a part of this on even ground, like two detectives interrogating a suspect. But, Daniel had brought him. In fact, Daniel nodded to Jack, and waited. Considering the last thing Sándor got to experience was a swarm of crows killing his comrades, maybe Jack could strike a little fear into the fear monster.

“Sándor,” Jack said. “We know you’re awake. We know you can hear us.”

The man continued to dangle, body wanting to fall but unable to with how his hands were out and strung up by the chains. If he was being controlled, and Tash seemed adamant that he was, then he wasn’t a traitor. Hell, he was a victim, someone they should try and save.

“Damien, try cutting through the symbol on his back.”

Without protest or hesitation, Damien walked behind the prisoner, drew his small sword, and deftly cut across Sándor’s back. It earned another groan from the man, and a few shudders, but otherwise did nothing. Yeah, it figured. It’d have been great if that was all it took to break the spell holding the man, but then, it’d probably have broken easily in the past. However the symbol worked, it was more than skin deep.

Tash came around to stand beside Damien. Frowning, she leaned down and looked at the symbol carved between the prisoner’s shoulder blades. “Elen said that she ... she had to carve this m-m-multiple times. Said he healed from it t-too quickly.”

Jack leaned in close, and gently pushed the man’s head up by his forehead. His hair was buzzed short, like Jack’s, and he had a build of lean, solid muscle, also like Jack. A lot of physical similarities, though Sándor was of average height, and probably had forty pounds of bone and solid muscle on Jack. It was hard to tell anything else about him without eye contact.

“Can I take off the bandage?”

Daniel adjusted his glasses, looked at him, then at the man in chains. “If I think the monster is going to escape somehow, I will cut off his head.”

“How strong are the chains?”

“Neither Antoinette or Jacob would be able to break them.”

Jack, Damien, and Natasha all whistled at the same time. Those were strong chains.

With a wince, Jack reached out, and undid the man’s bandage, exposing his eyes. They were closed, and remained closed. Sighing,

Jack pushed his head up by his forehead with one hand, and slid open one of his eyes with a thumb.

This fucker was the reason Julias was dead. If he hadn't had shown up randomly through a fucking Hell portal in a god damn wall, Julias would still be alive. It took every ounce of will Jack had, to not picture his sire on his knees, not picture the warm smile he had before a hunter shot him in the back of the fucking head at Angela's command. He frowned, squeezed his eyes shut, pushed the images down, and looked into the Begotten's eye.

"He's conscious," Jack said. "His horror won't let him die from these wounds. Though, from what I know, he won't be able to heal from them, not easily, until he gets back into his lair. I'm guessing he's not talking because of Tash's theory."

"What's the plan, then?" Damien said.

With a deep, useless breath, Jack put both hands on the man's face, holding his head up while also holding his eyelids up using his thumbs. A quiet growl rumbled in Jack's throat, as he forced the Begotten to look him in the eye, and he smashed his will into the man's mind.

Cold. Something ice cold stood between Jack and the creature's thoughts, like a gate of frozen metal. Touching it with his will sent pain back into Jack, the sort of shock pain jumping into ice cold water caused. And normally, that'd be enough to make Jack back off; who didn't scamper out of water when it was so cold, it made every nerve in your body feel like it was on fire? Tonight, it might as well have been a cool shower. He threw his will against it again, and again, and again, each slam hitting Jack in his guts, and sending more of that cold fire up his spine, but he didn't stop.

Something inside the Begotten growled from within his thoughts. In Jack's mind, in the connection he made with the nightmare incarnate, he could feel something stir beyond the icy gate, and it

rumbled its frustration. It didn't like that Jack was trying to break through. Jack didn't care. He slammed his will against the gate again, and the monster beyond, hidden in the endless depths of mental chaos and undefinable darkness, snarled. But, through the bars, he could see — or feel — the horror awaiting him. A nightmare, a beast, a titanic gargoyle lurked beyond the gate, and it was ready to defend itself against anyone who managed to break through the strange barrier. Beating it, defeating this man's will, his very essence, would be difficult.

It didn't matter, ultimately. A strange, red circle flashed in Jack's eyes, and he stopped. The symbols on the circle, inside and around it, were familiar. One of Elen's circles. He let go of the Begotten's head, and fell back, body shaking, muscles clenching.

“You o-ok?” Tash said.

“Yeah, yeah I'm fine.” Jack stood up, and stared down at the limp man. “He's guarded, by more than just his own nightmare horror thing. Elen's circle is blocking me. I can't get at his mind, let alone break it. Maybe ... maybe Julias could have.”

*Come on, Jack. Let me out. Let me do it. You think I can't smash through a fucking ward? I'll rip his mind to bits.*

Jack gulped, and blinked several times, as he digested that. Ok ... maybe he could talk to ... it.

You'll destroy him. He doesn't deserve to be turned into an invalid.

*Yes he does. He's been captured and turned into a fucking robot, serving his masters, hunters. Any paranormal who fucks up that bad deserves to die.*

Jack growled and shook his head hard, earning some glances from the others. Talking to himself was natural, and he'd been doing it

since long before he was a vampire. But when himself starting talking back, especially when not prompted, that was unacceptable. A back and forth between his inner self? Christ, it was so cliché. Doctor Jekyll, meet Mister Hyde.

He didn't tell the others his Beast came with a voice now, and he wasn't going to. He'd told them enough. This was his burden, and he could manage it. And, much as he hated to admit it, he needed this monster lurking underneath his skin. Once Angela, Jeremiah, and Elen were dead, he could tell the others, and let them lock him away; or dissect his brain, or whatever they'd do.

“What do we do then?” Damien said.

Jack shrugged as he looked down at the prisoner. “The Prince would have a better chance of breaking him than any Ventrue currently ... alive, in the city.” There were never that many Ventrue in Dolareido, and they lost the greatest of them last night. “Her Majesty discipline might do it. Even if it can't, she's gotta have a plan, right?”

“If she doesn't,” Daniel said, “she will have one soon. We didn't expect to capture the Begotten alive.”

Nodding, Jack circled the Begotten a couple times, looking for details he may have missed. “Last night's encounter set them back a lot.”

“Us too,” Damien said.

Jack winced, but nodded. “Yeah ... us too.” Stop it. Don't think about it. Think about it later. “We have to lick our wounds, and so do they. Gives us some time to see if maybe we can get through to the Begotten, or figure out a plan.”

“Agreed.” Damien turned for the door, but glanced back to look at the prisoner. “We should probably get him drink and food. He's not

a vampire. His body will starve.”

“Agreed.” Jack retied the bandage around the monster’s eyes, and looked to Daniel for confirmation. The elder nodded, and the four of them left the room.

What a waste of time. If they couldn’t get through to Sándor, either with Disciplines or words, he wouldn’t be of use. Torture was unlikely to work, considering who and what he was, and from how the man was basically a zombie.

“Elen said she had t-to redraw the symbol, after he healed it,” Tash said. “M-Maybe if we wait, he’ll ... he’ll b-b-break free on his own?”

Jack nodded, and once Daniel began leading them again, the four of them started up the stairs back to the lobby. Maybe Sándor would heal and eventually be free of his magical binding, if that was the case. It was hard to believe any sort of curse could be permanent, when used on something as powerful as a Begotten; Jack’s certainly wasn’t permanent. And this Sándor, he was brutally strong. If Jack and Julias had faced him in the nightmare, it wouldn’t have been a fight at all. And—shit.

The Fates hated Jack. They despised him. As if discovering his new life with Antoinette had pissed them off, and now he was doomed to suffer eternally, everything conspiring against him. Maybe they’d summoned Angela, to destroy him, break him, ruin him. Whatever happened, his life was becoming one unending string of bullshit, perfectly timed to bring the worst possible pain. His torture, his mother’s assault, Mary’s death, Julias’s death, it was a string of Hell. And it never stopped.

As he stepped out of the stairway, and up into the fancy, massive lobby of the Elysium Tower, someone came up from around the front desk. Jack knew who it was, even before his eyes recognized her. Half because Antoinette said she was coming, half because he

knew the Fates wanted to make sure he suffered until the end of time.

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~~Antoinette~~

Standing by her window, hands behind her, she watched Beatrice approach her tower. The woman knew what floor to come to, and Antoinette suspected the Nosferatu would be suspicious of the meeting. She had not talked to her lover, Julias, and would be looking for him, or awaiting his response to her messages to him. Antoinette would have to explain the reality, and she did not look forward to hurting her so. She still trusted the woman, all fire and energy, to reach Jacob, and pull her old friend back from his dark agendas. But after tonight, that would, perhaps, be a lost hope.

Hopefully, with a touch of luck, Jack would be able to handle the situation better than her. She did not want to bury the boy in yet more pain, but Beatrice deserved to hear this from him. And, she needed to know, how this new Jack would respond.

Samantha stood beside the Prince, the small creature sipping from her glass, robe still wrapped around her. She gasped once or twice as she stared over the city landscape, its colorful horizon of lights and lit signs, and the desert that lay beyond.

“I still can’t really believe it.”

“You saw the condition of your son’s suit, Samantha.”

“I ... I didn’t ... I didn’t really, honestly.”

Antoinette chuckled at that, and looked down at her new childe. “It was filled with gunshot wounds, Samantha. Last night, your son, and his sire, fought perhaps eight hunters, to save your life.”

“Hunters?”

“I ... I suppose Jack will be better equipped to explain the circumstances in terms you can understand. Media, television and video, I have not remained enlightened as to modern storytelling.”

“Modern ... storytelling?”

“I am very old, Samantha Terry. I moved to a quaint little village hundreds of years ago, and I grew it into the Dolareido you see today. As your son explained, we are immortal.”

The glass in her hands began to tremble, and Antoinette reached out to set her hand underneath it. Touching its bottom was enough to awaken her childe from her shock, and regain her grip on the glass.

“It really is your city?”

“Indeed.”

“And ... and I’m ... your childe?”

“Indeed.” Antoinette waved a dismissing hand. “For now, you need only concern yourself with becoming comfortable with your new existence. Your old life is gone, and ... and while nothing can undo the horrible pains inflicted upon you, or return to you that which has been stolen, you must understand that you have been reborn. You are now a creature of the night, Samantha Terry, and now you are to begin your second life.”

“Second life...” The small woman took a sip, before stepping closer to the glass, and looking down at the garden maze far below. “My old life ended only an hour ago, for me, miss ... I’m sorry, you never told me your last name.”

“A thing lost to the annals of time.”

“You lost your last name?”



“If I contacted my order, or if I searched through decrepit journals from my past, I am sure I could recover it, but it is not necessary, or desired.” She turned, and walked back to the glass table. Sitting down upon her large chair, she motioned for Samantha to join her once again. “My second life began many centuries ago, Samantha. My last name is an artifact from ancient days that no longer have meaning to me.”

“B-But, your family, I—”

Antoinette shook her head, and leaned back in her chair again, pulling her hair over her shoulder to begin combing it. “Unfortunately, one of the negatives of our long lives, is that our memory fades, and is suspect. That which occurred over a hundred years ago has faded somewhat. Two hundred years, is quite blurry. Three hundred years, I have only the faintest, drifting images. Before that, it is ... gone.”

Samantha stared at her, eyes wide and wider still. The poor woman’s eyes were going to slip free of her skull if she continued.

“And ... s-someone like you ... is Jack’s ... love?”

Of course, the mother could not help but wonder about the woman dating her son.

“Your son is an amazing man, Samantha Terry. He has affected this city, influenced it and its denizens of the night, and made great strides in many facets, including his political power, financial security, and abilities as a vampire.”

Jack’s mother frowned, and looked down at the drink in her hand. “And that’s why you love him?”

Ah, she was concerned about the sort of woman Antoinette was underneath the skin, concerned for her son. It was terribly cute, and the Prince smiled at her new childe.

“No. I love your son because I have met few, in my many years of unlife, that have his conviction, his commitment to honesty with himself and others, and yet, he somehow remains sensitive and sincere. I can always trust your son to be genuine, Samantha. We Kindred, we have an instinct to deceive and to manipulate, and yet your son resists this urge.” She sighed, and let her head lean back onto the spine of her chair, as she smiled. “He is a diamond in the rough, Samantha. You raised a wonderful man.”

“Diamond ... I...” The fledgling found a smile, a real smile buried underneath her misery, and it sneaked its way onto her lips as she took another sip of her drink. “I always told him, growing up, that he needed to be honest, with himself and everyone else. His dad, he ... he taught him how to think, before he died. Challenged him, you know? When Jack would ask ‘Why’s the sky blue?’, he’d say ‘Dunno, why is the sky blue? See if you can find out.’ And Jack would stay up late on the computer, rotting his eyes and brain, but sure enough, the next day, he’d give James a big explanation about something scientific, and ... and ... and Mary would roll her eyes. Call him a nerd.” Her shoulders began to shake, and she set the glass down on the table before she dropped it. “I can’t believe she’s gone.”

Antoinette reached out, poured herself a glass of blood, and took a sip as she leaned back in her chair once more. “There is no misery greater, than a parent losing their child.”

“I ... I didn’t think ... I didn’t think I’d have to face it again. At least this time, there’s closure. M-Mary is ... is gone.”

“And your son Jack, is alive.” After another sip, Antoinette offered her child her gaze. Let her peer into her soul, and she her in return. For Antoinette, it was as if looking upon an icy desert of pain. For Samantha, hopefully, there was stability and honesty found in Antoinette’s eyes. “There will be plenty of time to grieve, Samantha,

but for now, I must explain to you the role you play in your new life.”

“D ... do I get a say in this?” She looked down at her drink, a hint of fear in her eyes.

“No. Well ... I suppose that is not true. You will always have the choice to end your own life, if you so desire.”

She snapped her head up and blinked at her, as if it were the most absurd suggestion she had ever heard. Bien.

“I wouldn’t ... I ... I couldn’t ... now that Jack...” Now that Jack was alive, she would not consider it.

“Then you are my childe, and for now, I am responsible for you.”

“How long does that last for?”

“For the first year or two of your life, you are considered a fledgling, and your sire is held accountable for your actions. After, once you have proven capable of survival and respecting the Masquerade, you are a neonate, until you are about fifty years old, in Kindred years. Your covenant will be your guide in those years. Generally, from fifty to about one hundred and fifty years old, you are ancilla, and you will be a key figure within your covenant, trusted with difficult tasks, and important decisions. After, you are what we consider an elder, and you will be a key figure within whatever city you reside, respected and feared by all.” She chuckled as she watched Samantha reel with the massive numbers. “Though, by the time you reach such an age, I suspect many of us will be within spaceships, and will have to discover new ways to approach our nightlife.”

She downed her drink, and poured herself another. “Good god ... Masquerade?”

“The veil of secrecy we Kindred hold dear. If you announce the existence of vampires publicly to humans, which we call kine, you will be killed. If you perform an act that would draw the suspicion of the kine, you will be punished.” Before her childe could begin inevitable panic, Antoinette smiled and shook her head. “Do not fret. I will guide you.”

“H ... how many vampires are in Dolareido?”

“Less than three hundred, at the moment. I have allowed siring to recommence, to repopulate.”

“Three hundred, and you run the city? You, alone? But there are millions of people in Dolareido.”

Antoinette leaned toward her childe, and grinned. “You are a creature of the night now, little Terry. You will grow into powers you can not even begin to comprehend.” She held up a hand, open palm, four fingers and thumb spread outward. “There are primarily five types of Kindred, childe, and since you are my childe, you share in my bloodclan. We are Daeva.”

“Daeva?”

“Mmm, oui.” She increased the sensuality of her words, her expressions, and took another sip of her drink. “Of two of the many shared disciplines, we are naturals: strength, and speed.”

“Like ... those superhero movies?”

“Quite. All Kindred share in common disciplines, and all bloodclans find they are naturals at two of them. Speed, strength, resilience, the ability to cloak ourselves from sight, and the ability to talk to, summon, and control animals.”

“ ... I ... I can't even...”

This was delightful. As much as the poor woman had to manage the greatest moment of chaos in her life, misery and joy mixing, it was pleasing to see the wonder and surprise on her face. Antoinette had not taken the time to explain to a fresh vampire the enchanting aspects of their Kindred species, in many, many years.

“Bloodclans also have unique abilities. We, the Daeva, can bend the minds of others, into adoration.”

“Adoration?”

“The Nosferatu can haunt the minds of others with nightmares, and make them feel fear. Gangrel can transform into hideous beasts, and alter their bodies in many ways. Mekhet can see into the truth of people, events, and objects, even so far as seeing glimpses of the past. Ventrue, like your son, can break the minds of others, and turn them into obedient servants. Particularly skilled Ventrue can wipe memories, change them, manipulate them. While you and I, Samantha Terry, can drown ourselves in sin and pleasure with but a flick of our wrist and wink of the eye. I could, within a single month, teach you to turn any kine you wish into an adoring fan for the night, someone who would do whatever you wished of them. Anything.”

“You m-mean ... s-s-s-s—”

“You are a vampire, Samantha. You feed on humans, and while that may sound horrible, I assure you it need not be. We call it the Kiss, and it is exquisite. It is more pleasurable than sex, and there is nothing to stop you from indulging in both, at the same time. For Daeva, this is particularly effortless, as we can use the discipline Majesty to turn any kine into a dotting, enraptured admirer.” With a playful wink, she took another sip of her drink. “And, if you take your time, build the moment, and let your hunger emerge as a creature of lust, rather than aggression, the Kiss becomes overwhelmingly blissful for the kine. Many, if not most of the

Kindred in my city enjoy feeding during sex, and indulge in total freedom in their pursuits of pleasure.”

“Oh ... god ... W-Wait, I’m not blushing! I should be blushing.” The woman pat her cheeks, likely seeking the heat that did not come.

Antoinette chuckled again, and nodded. “You will learn how to, as we call it, Blush Life, and with a smattering of will and energy, force your body to behave as it once did, before you were turned.”

She continued, and took delicate moments to explain to her childe the nuances of a Kindred’s life. The Blush of Life, feeding, torpor, and avoiding fire and sunlight. Required knowledge, before she dared let Samantha out of her sight.

Beatrice did not come to meet her, doubtless having run into Jack, or the three Mekhet. Sorrow gripped Antoinette, pulling at her, demanding she give it her attention. She refused. Julias’s death, and Beatrice’s inevitable misery, were not as important as preparing her new childe for her second life, her requiem.

And once the Nosferatu learned of her lover’s death, God have mercy on the fool who stumbled onto her path tonight.

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~~Beatrice~~

She did not like this.

Walking up to the Elysium Tower never felt good, but that was normal for any Nosferatu. The tower represented peace, and younger Kindred hung around in the gardens, free from any covenant disputes. A no-violence zone. If Kindred wanted to show up, talk, get to know each other, this was where they’d do it. Nosferatu didn’t show up, because they were ugly as fuck, and that startled other young Kindred. So they hung out by themselves for

the first few years of their embrace, and longer, hiding in sewers and whatnot until they were strong enough to Cloak themselves easily.

Times were different. She was different. She was a witch now, Jacob's student, and that put her on Antoinette's radar in a way she didn't necessarily like. She'd helped Jack when dealing with that strange spider monster in the sewers, so she had that to put her in Antoinette's favor, at least. Antoinette had also asked her to actually do her a favor, for Jacob, so there was that, too. And now she was dating one of the Invictus council, putting her on everyone's radar, which was probably what this call was about. The fuck did Julias do now?

She'd sent him a message before going to sleep yesterday, since he wasn't at the mansion. Still no reply. Strange. Ugh, did the man piss off the Prince somehow? Or lose his phone. Julias wasn't the type to forget his phone, or lose it, but who knew.

"Let me know how it goes," Jen said. She moved over to a bench, and sat nearby some other Kindred. The chance of hunters coming to Elysium was none, but still, the buddy system wasn't going away until the hunters were gone. Vamps had to stick together.

Nodding, Triss walked up the stairs. Once through the front door, she frowned at the thrall behind the front desk. A fat guy, bald, and he offered her a small wave.

"Miss Damar? Hey, come on in. You're expected."

"... thanks." She didn't bother Cloaking to hide herself from him, but it'd never be easy, revealing her mutations to a kine. The fat man did a double take once he noticed her cheeks, or lack there of, and the crocodile teeth that sat where cheeks were supposed to be, but quickly went back to his computer — and donuts — once he saw that she saw.

God damn, the tower was a fancy thing. The Invictus tower was all black marble, but the Elysium Tower was black marble with white veins, fucking everywhere. It was gorgeous, and imposing. And—oh, Jack and crew. Four Kindred came up from the stairs in the back of the big lobby, and turned to face her, Jack at the forefront. Tash, Damien, and Daniel followed him, probably the three most powerful Mekhet in the city. Scary.

She met Jack's eyes, and froze.

The boy stood there, and while she could see he struggled with it, he was forcing himself to look at her. The other three couldn't, avoiding her gaze, as if catching her snake eyes would set them on fire. Even Daniel, the fucking statue, had picked something else to look at, rather than meet her eyes.

“Natasha, come with me,” Daniel said. “Thralls have been at the hospital all day, Invictus and ours, and we should join them. The Invictus council have sent Vicky Goldman and Bruce Vanna, and we should oversee the results.”

Vicky and Bruce were Ventrue, and if they were going somewhere, with the sheriff too, then they were handling a cleanup. Ventrue would use their Dominate to control the situation, rewrite some kine memories, and deal with fallout. But, like with Eric's first transformation, if it was a serious situation, Julias was the Ventrue they'd send.

She was paralyzed. She couldn't move. Her feet were stuck to the floor, and her arms hung at her sides, limp, chains tying them to the Earth. As the two Mekhets walked past her, they continued to avoid her eyes, and Tash looked like she carried a weight on her back.

“I'm heading to the Invictus HQ,” Damien said. As he walked past Jack, he looked over his shoulder, and Beatrice could see the grimace in the muscles of his jaw. “Michael and Maria will need a



more thorough report.” He didn’t wait for Jack’s response, leaving, gaze on the floor.

The kid nodded, but didn’t take his eyes off hers, even as Damien walked past her, leaving the two of them alone. They both stood there, looking at each other, and listened to the footsteps on the hard floor. A minute went by, and then another. Jack swallowed hard, several times, a habit he couldn’t seem to break, and it made his discomfort obvious. More than discomfort. The kid was oozing agony from every pore, to the point he might as well have bled black.

Oh fuck. Please god, please, don’t let it be that. Anything, fucking anything other than what she could see in the kid’s eyes.

“ ... Triss,” the kid said, and the waver in his voice broke through her ribs and ripped out her heart with a splatter of gore and and anguish. “I—”

“How?”

“What?”

“How did it happen?” No dancing around it, avoiding it, going into denial about it. Get it out of the way. Rip the bandaid off, even if it took all her skin with it.

“I...” Finally, the kid broke, and his eyes fell. His shoulders trembled for a moment, and she could see he was fighting off the urge to cry. “I was at the hospital, visiting Mary and Mom. He came to see me, and then hunters showed up, with Angela. Then Elen and Sándor showed up using some sort of portal, and it ruined ... ruined everything. They were ... going to take Mom, and ... and use her to ... get to me.” His fingers squeezed, tightening into fists as the kid forced down the shaking until it was gone. “We stopped them. Killed three hunters, maybe four, and even captured Sándor. But ... but Julias ... he...”

“Died doing a valiant last stand, right?”

“Yeah ... yeah.”

“And your mom?”

Jack lifted his eyes, and dug through the cesspit of misery he was swimming through, to find a small smile for her. “He saved her. She’s upstairs, with Antoinette, sire and childe.”

She nodded, and let her eyes drop. Yeah, that sounded like Julias, sacrificing himself to save someone else. His childe’s mom? Definitely a Julias move.

Julias was dead.

She felt her long tongue press against the top of her mouth, and her throat constrict. Julias was dead. The words meant nothing at first, even as she ran them through her head several times. Julias was dead. Just three words that bounced off of her, as if spoken in an unknown language. Julias. Was. Dead.

As seconds slowly trickled by, meaning came to the words, context creeping in, no matter how much she didn’t want it to. Julias was dead, which meant, the man who first showed her her disfigurement wasn’t the problem she thought it was, was gone. The man who held her tight, hugged her, made her feel safe, was gone. The man who made her laugh, took her out to feed on kine, danced with her, was gone. The man who didn’t mind her kinks, enjoyed and embraced them, inviting her friend into their bed, was gone. The man who pampered her, made her feel like a princess, and laughed when she acted like a spoiled one, was gone. The man who loved her, was gone.

Her white knight, her Superman, was dead.

Jack gasped as she threw herself at him. Her claws found his shoulders, and she sank them into flesh as she grabbed him, crashing his back to elevator door behind him. She picked him up, pinning him to the door, and glared at him, as the cold tremors started to work through her. Rage. She'd managed to skip right over denial then, like she wanted to. Yeap, sounded like her, sprinting out of the gate and then tripping a moment later.

“You!” She bashed the man against the elevator door, slamming him into it several times. “He died helping you!” She squeezed harder, and stared into the man’s eyes as pain hit him. “He died because of you!” She knew she lost control. Deep down, past the icy pain that now coursed through her, she knew this wasn’t fair. Didn’t care, didn’t matter. Pain. Rage. She had to get it out, had to before she exploded.

Footsteps forced her head to look over her shoulder, and the fat guard came closer, a pistol in his hands.

“Ma’am, put down Mister Terry, before I—”

“It’s ok, Chunk,” Jack said, shaking his head at the thrall. “Go back to your desk, and pretend you didn’t see anything.”

“Um, are you sure Mister Terry? She—”

“Go, Chunk. Now.”

The thrall frowned, but put his pistol away, and walked back to his desk. Good. If he’d fired, Triss knew she’d have ripped the tubby fucker into bits.

She glared back up at Jack as her tremors grew. Her whole body was shaking, and her fingers tightened around his shoulders, claws getting through his suit. And—

His suit. Holy shit, his suit. He was covered in holes, and dried blood. He must have been shot a couple dozen times, and from the amount of blood on him, he must have been swimming in death.

This kid. This fucking, god damn kid. Ruin followed him wherever he went. Julias almost died that night when Rebecca fought him helping Tony, and Triss saved him. Twice! Viktor and Tony died around Jack in that confrontation. Then Lucas, and a host of other young Kindred. A hunt for a spider monster turned into two, randomly, and it'd gone ballistic trying to kill Jack. Then Angela and the hunters, not even in the city for him, were now suddenly trying to destroy his life.

The kid was cursed.

She lowered him, and stopped squeezing, letting her claws slip free of his flesh. But looking into his eyes soon proved too much, the honest green opening his soul to her. Pain. Christ, the kid was in pain, and she was blaming him, hurting him. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Blame someone! She had to blame someone, anyone.

This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening.

Her head fell, dangling in front of her, and her clutching hands shook Jack lightly. Strength vanished. An icy cold blanket, heavy, painful, covered her from head to toe, and pulled her down toward the floor. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find strength anymore, and her palms slid down Jack's arms. Soon, her knees met the floor, and her hands continued to slide down Jack's legs, until they fell to the floor as well. She tried to lift her head again, and she managed a few inches, enough to look up at Jack. Mistake. The kid, helpless to his own god damn honesty, met her eyes, and she crumbled.

He was broken. He was destroyed. But he was carrying on, despite it. She couldn't.

“He ... he can't be dead,” she said, voice choking against rising sobs. “He can't be! I ... I need him ... I ... I can't ... please, I can't ... I can't!” Back to denial, then.

“He's dead.” The wasteland of death and ice that surrounded them both, broke apart under the crashing weight of his words. And beneath it, all that awaited her, was a freezing cold, dark, endless abyss.

“Don't say that!”

“He's ... he's gone, Triss.”

“He's not gone! I need him! He can't be gone. No! He's not! He's not! He's—”

“Gone ... he ... he's gone.” Jack's back pressed to the elevator door, and he started to slide down it. Soon he was sitting on the floor, legs apart, her between them. “He's dead.”

“He's not dead! No! He'll ... he ... he had a plan, right? He'll—”

“He's gone! He's ... he's gone, Triss. He's dead, and ... and I couldn't save him...”

Her whole body trembled, no matter how much she tried to stop it. “He's not! He's not ... not...” She reached out, grabbed his ruined suit, and tried to shake him. She might as well have been trying to shake a mountain. “I can't ... I can't...”

His hands found hers, and his gentle grip wrapped her wrists. “He's gone ... he's dead, Triss. He's dead, and ... and ... it's my fault.”

Again, his words cut through her body like he wielded a sword. The hurt ran deep, into her guts, into her fucking bones, until it buried every inch of her. There was no escaping it. Even if she

curled up and covered herself, protected herself, it wouldn't help. It was coming at her from the inside.

She forced herself to look at the small man sitting on the floor with her, and managed to find enough strength to glare. His fault. He said it. He took responsibility. It was his fault! His fault Superman was dead. His fault. His fault. His fault. She tried to shake him, tried to use her claws, tried to do something, but nothing worked. Her body was broken, strength gone. She was broken.

The rage began to fade.

“It's not,” she managed to say, after a few weeping minutes of quiet. “You know it's not. You damn well know it's not, Jack. That fucking idiot just couldn't help himself. And ... and I knew it'd happen, too. I knew it'd happen. I fucking knew it'd happen eventually.” And she hated herself for it, for letting her walls down, for letting him get close, closer than anyone ever. Stupid. How could she be so stupid, to fall in love with someone like that?

Jack let go of her wrists, and the two of them sat quiet, until they stopped trembling.

“Triss ... Julias, he ... he wanted me to tell you—”

“He was going to make some sort of grand, sweeping, romantic gesture, wasn't he?”

He blinked at her. “Yeah...”

“I knew it. Fucker was ... was smiling way too much, when he looked at me.”

“He wanted to marry you. Said he was ... going to use the last secret, some sort of bet, to tell you?”

She choked as a sob and laugh fought to come out at the same time. “Of course he fucking did. The stupid bastard. I—” She almost made a joke about her wearing a white dress or something, but the thought came with an image, of her and Julias, cuddling in bed, wedding dress hanging on the wall. They’d be together, forever.

And now that was gone. Everything she loved about him, everything she loved, was gone.

She got up, and walked away. She half expected Jack to say something, but a quick glance over her shoulder showed he was forcing himself back up onto his feet, and watching her leave. He looked broken and ruined, and she knew she looked the same. But he got up, and was ready to push forward. Something came out of all this misery for him: capturing a key enemy figure, and saving his mom. No way the kid was going to let this break him totally, when his mother probably balanced on the edge of a psychological knife as was. There was a good side to Julias’s death for him, something that made his sacrifice worth it.

There was nothing for her.

Once she was outside, Jennifer caught her eyes, and ran over to her.

“Triss?”

Beatrice managed to look her friend in the eyes, before her head fell, and she almost started wailing, screaming, crying, and destroying. But a quick glance around showed there were watching Kindred, young neonates, eyes wide and taking in both her disturbed expression, and Jennifer’s rather revealing, mostly open suit jacket.

“He ... he’s ... Julias, he’s...”

“Oh ... oh god ... I—”

“Not here. Not ... not here.” She started walking, and wrapped the two of them in a Cloak of Night. No interruptions, from anyone, would be tolerated. She needed to get out, away, needed to go where she could cry, and rage.

Jennifer managed a small squeak, before following after her.

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The catacombs beneath South Hill Cemetery. Three Kings Cemetery got all the attention, but South Hill was still a great place for any vampire who was looking to be sneaky. She'd spent many years in it, scaring off punks who wanted to fuck with it, break in and do graffiti and whatnot. The Prince built the city, and had made sure to slip in some classic cemeteries when she did, because hey, old vampires be old.

Triss managed a small smile as she stepped down into her old hideout. Coffins on the walls in shelves cut out of the stone, everything covered in dust and dirt, and a few skulls and other bones sat out in artistic-yet-totally-not-manually-placed spots. For any Kindred who wanted to be alone, and reflect on their second life, their requiem, this was the perfect place.

“Triss,” Jen said, following her down into the darkness, “you ... you're sure?”

“Jack was sure. Saw it in his eyes. Kid was rocked, absolutely fucking wrecked. Julias is ... is...” As she tried to get the word out, she collapsed. Weight slammed down against her, drove her knees into the stone floor of the catacomb, and her claws raked against it. “Oh god ... no ... I ... I can't...”

Jen came over to her and reached out, but Triss slapped her hand away. “Triss, please, you—”

“He's dead, Jennifer! He's dead! The ... the ... the man ... the only man I ... He's fucking ... fucking ... d ... d...” In the depths of the



Earth in the catacomb, in the darkness and stone, in the presence of dozens of corpses, she let go of what small shred of composure she'd managed to hold onto. Her wails came out, and she slammed her hands against the stone floor again, and again, and again.

Jennifer said nothing. Good. Much as Triss loved her, and even wanted her here, she didn't want to be soothed, didn't want to be placated, didn't want to have someone tell her it was going to be ok. It was not going to be ok. It was all ruined, all destroyed, gone, fucking gone.

Triss got up, and walked up to one of the coffins. She grabbed it, ripped out the massive hunk of wood, and shattered it against a nearby wall. The corpse within was nothing but bone and a very old suit, and they shattered along with the shards of wood. Jen raised an arm to stop the flying splinters from hitting her, doing her best to block them in the dark, as Triss walked up to another coffin. Needed to do something, needed to destroy, to break, needed to let out some rage before she killed every kine within a mile.

Jen's eyes were wide, and her mouth parted. It was almost enough to give Triss pause, but she didn't. She marched over to another coffin, sank her claws into it, and whipped it out. A few hundred pounds of heavy, thick, solid wood, plus corpse, and she threw it across the stone room hard enough that it exploded as it collided with a wall. A sob worked up through her, forced her throat to clench tight, and made each heave her lungs forced get stuck. All she managed were growling sobs, grunts and grumbles mixing into her crying, as she let out another scream. She walked over to another coffin, and started to tear into it, claws slicing against the stone around it, scratching, but her claws couldn't break stone. The wood, on the other hand, was helpless, and she ripped the thick, heavy thing into bits in seconds.

Dead. He was dead. He'd never hold her again, never smile at her again, never fuck her, never kiss her, never pamper her, never tease

her, never play with her, never beat her at poker, never cuddle with her, never—

“This is where you first met Julias, right?” Jen said, ready to duck if she needed to.

Triss stopped her rampage long enough to look Jen’s away. With a long, weary sigh, she set her hands down on the shelf edge, and her head dangled in front of her, between her shoulders.

“Not ... not exactly, but it’s where we first talked. He’d ... he almost died in a fire, knocked into torpor by Rebecca. I saved him, brought him here, and fed him some criminal fuckwad.” Chuckles managed to break through her quieting sobs. “He ... he showed ... interest, in me. It was the first time I’d ever felt ... wanted by someone, since my embrace.”

“You know—”

“Yeah, I know, I really overestimated how badly Kindred reacted to Nosferatu. But he was still ... he ... it wasn’t just about attraction. He ... he ... made me feel ... different, and...” She slowly turned around, and sat down, back to the wall behind her, knees up to her chest. “He was so stupid. I called him a tragedy freak, someone who got off on the drama. He ... called me out on my own bullshit, later, and ... and...”

Jen came over, and sat down next to her, an inch between them. She emulated her sitting position too, wrapping her arms around her legs. “I can’t believe he’s gone.”

Triss draped an arm across her knees, and let her forehead rest on it, as her sobs became wails once again. It wasn’t a sound she was familiar with. Crying, sure, what girl didn’t cry every now and then? But this wailing sound, this banshee cry, she’d never made it before in her whole life. It filled the catacomb, echoed through it, and

anyone in the cemetery was going to think some fucking ghost was haunting it.

“ ... Angela,” she said, forcing some words out between her cries. If she’d been Blushing Life, tears and snot would have been dripping off her chin. “Jack says she ... attacked the hospital to get to his mom, so they ... could manipulate him.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Elen showed up ... with Sándor, using that portal we went through. Or another one like it, I guess.”

“Oh ... oh god. If we had—”

“We didn’t know, and we ... we didn’t...” Every part of her wanted to blame herself, and Jen, and Aaron and Othello and Natasha and Antoinette and Jacob and Garry and Daniel and Maria and Michael and who the fuck else, for her Superman’s death. Above all, she wanted to blame Jack. But that was a road down stupidity lane, and she couldn’t let herself go there, no matter how much she wanted to. “Jack captured Sándor.”

“Jack did?”

“Yeah, he ... he did ... somehow.” Her crying sobs started to settle, and with a few more minutes, she got herself under control. Quiet whimpers refused to die, but for now, that was fine. “I—”

“Now, why on Earth, would a pretty lady like yourself, be makin’ such a fuss?” the darkness said in a Southern drawl.

# Chapter 91

~~Beatrice~~

The two vampires jumped up and spun around, looking around in the dark. That voice. She recognized that voice. What the fuck, why was it here? Both of them pulled out their phones and started shining them around, but the catacomb was empty.

“You ... you can’t be here,” she said. “No one’s ... no one’s been sacrificed.” Jen stepped in closer to her, and pressed her shoulder to hers, enough for Triss to feel her friend trembling. While Triss was still shaking because her world had been destroyed, Jen was shaking because she was scared. Black Blood, without Jacob nearby? Shit. Fucking shit.

Black mist began to drip from the stones above, and out of the coffin Triss had destroyed. It fell over the stones, the bones she’d scattered everywhere, and the rocks and dirt. Oh fuck, oh fucking fuck. She backed away, and tried to move toward the exit, spine to the stone shelves behind her, and free hand taking Jen’s, but the dripping black began to fall over the exit and its stairs. More of it came down, and more, until it dripped down over the stairs like heavy mist on a cold lake come morning.

The bones started to move.

“The sacrifice is useful for summoning me, little missy. But, you think I can’t come and go as I please, where I please, talk with who I please?” With quiet little clacks, the bones rolled, hitting the stone floor with soft bounces that echoed, now that Triss and Jen had gone silent. Shattered bones came back together, bits of white dust, and splintered shards found each other to reform. An arm with its hand and fingers still attached started to drag itself across the floor,

and she almost laughed at how ridiculous it looked, before she remembered why it was doing that.

Jen shook her head, eyes wide as she watched the skeletons put themselves back together. “W-What do you want?”

“Why, to talk, like I said.” He — err, it — was using that damn Southern accent again, complete with a drawl, but she couldn’t focus on it, as if it was coming from around them.

“Jacob isn’t here. Go talk to him.” Triss took a step toward the exit again, but stepped back, as two skeletons began to form from the hundreds of bones. They sat on the stairs, and they moved like people moved, complete with shrugs, and giving each other some buddy pats on the back. One of them took off its jaw bone, looked at it, and traded it with the other, who nodded in agreement.

Did Jacob get his stupid sense of humor from Black Blood, or the other way around?

“And I will, young lady, I will. But I want to talk to you first, before Malachi does.” One of the skeletons took off its head, and set it on its lap. The voice continued to come from all around the two Kindred, despite how the spirit was obviously drawing their attention the two puppets. “I could hear your screams, you know, on the other side.”

“What? How?”

“This is my city, young lady. I have ears everywhere, and eyes, too. Besides, the little vampire boy did something truly wondrous, and every spirit on my side of the curtain noticed.”

She blinked, and did her best to not stare too hard at the skull sitting on the skeleton’s leg; it wasn’t doing the talking. The voice came from the black mist that dripped around them, that filled the small cracks and dents in the stone floor, that leaked out of the

coffins around them. Any second now, every skeleton was going to climb out of their coffins, and do a fucking dance from some bad old Western, sexy burlesque movie scene.

“B-Black Blood,” Jen said, “I ... I mean, we really don’t have permission to be talking with you, without Ja—Malachi around.”

“We’re just talkin’, sweet pea,” the alien god said. It must have had a library in its head of annoying pet names for women. “Besides, ain’t nothing I’m gonna say, you can’t say to him later.” While one skeleton pat the skull still perched upon its leg, the other slapped its own knee, as if excited. Triss wouldn’t have been surprised if the skeleton thought it was at a shindig.

“... fine,” Triss said. She forced down the rising vitae in her body, readying her for fight or flight, and lowered her phone. The light stayed on though, in case the fucker decided to get uppity. “What do you know?”

“That your world has been destroyed.”

The words cut her down, and she almost fell with them. The fucker, the god damn fucking alien creature, knew what words to use to sucker punch her. It knew exactly what it was talking about.

“You know...”

“Julias Mire, is dead, yes. Though I only saw the aftermath, as his childe called an unholy reckoning upon his attackers. A beautiful sight, seeing the boy get revenge. Well, not quite, seeing as how the bitch and her old shaman vamoosed. Still, he caught the nightmare creature, killed at least three other hunters, and he awakened a creature the likes of which I’ve never seen.”

She raised an eyebrow, and looked around more in a futile attempt to find the source of the voice. “Awakened?”

“You’ll have to ask him yourself, little lady. But, what he did, hoo-wee, felt that storm brewing throughout the whole damn city.” One skeleton slapped his knee again. “I’m fixin’ to learn what he did, but that’s not why I’m here. I came here, to talk to you, Beatrice.”

“Why?”

“I reckon now you and Malachi share something in common. And I’ll tell you, same thing I told him.” Silence followed, as if the thing was pondering. Maybe it was. What sort of things did a fucking god ponder? “That fancy blood magic, Crúac, that you witches like to use, it can do more than you think. Jacob’s only let you touch the surface, because he knows how deep the rabbit hole goes.” Naturally, it was going to make an Alice in Wonderland reference. Or the Matrix.

She stood up straighter, and stared at the two skeletons on the stairs, her snakes eyes growing wider. “How deep does it go?”

“Deep.” The voice rolled with bass, causing some pebbles around Triss’s feet to vibrate and move. “Very deep. Deep until all you can find, is shadow. Cold, unending shadow. Ain’t nothin’ down there for living folk, but an undead creature like a vampire? Just maybe you can make some use of the oblivion beneath us all.” It laughed. “You want to find the person responsible for your lover’s death? Fixin’ to kill em, get revenge?”

“Of course.” No point in beating around that bush. Of course she fucking wanted revenge.

“Triss,” Jen said, “you ... you shouldn’t...”

No, she shouldn’t. This reeked of ‘sell your soul for a chance to see Wanda again’. And for the first time in her whole damn fucking life, and second life, she understood why Al took that bargain.

“I’m not making any deals with—”

The darkness chuckled, the deep voice taking on multiple layers, filled with rumbling bass that caused some of the unused bones to rattle on the stone. “Bless your heart, girl. I don’t mean to trick you. Putting all the cards on the table. Anything I say, will be straight. You want to get revenge? You want to find this woman what killed your man?”

“ ... fuck, yes, I do. Christ, I want to, I really ... I ... I have to. I have to find her, them, all of them. I have to ... I...” The pain came for her again. She hugged herself, clutched her arms in her palms, forearms across her chest, and she started to shake. Her back pressed to the stone behind her, and she struggled to not collapse again. She’d collapsed twice tonight, and she’d hate herself if she went for a third.

“Then let this idea percolate in your mind for a week or two, vampire. Think about how much pain you can endure. Then, think about how much blood you’re willing to spill, yours, and your sacrifices’. If you’re willing to drown the streets in red, well then, I think you might just have what it takes.” A pretty blatant hint that, whatever rabbit hole she’d be going down, murder would be involved, lots of it.

“I’ve killed before.” Scumbags that deserved it, but still.

Again, the darkness laughed, and a mix of its alien voice and Southern accent filled the small catacomb.

“That you have, little missy. I can see it on you, dripping off you, the color of murder, of a killer.” Another chuckle, but it was the words he used that sent a painful shiver up her spine. “That’s good. Takes a real predator to be a witch, Beatrice. And, if you really want to do the things ancient witches could do, the things Jacob can do, you gotta be willing to swim in blood, and death.”

“I—”



“I said think about it, kid. You’re in no shape to make any decisions now. In a couple weeks, when you’re not as mad as a wet hen, talk to Malachi about it. Tell him I said I’m on board.”

“This...” She looked over at Jen, and frowned. Her friend looked worried, very worried, but considering the direction the conversation was going, that made sense. Sighing, Triss pat her friend’s fingers where they sat on her shoulder. “This is about Minerva, isn’t it?”

“Poor Minerva, cut down by dogs, just cause she wanted to punch a hole through the Gauntlet.”

“She ... she what?” Holy shit.

“Now don’t go telling anyone I told you,” the ancient colossal god entity said, “but Minerva was trying to build a bridge in the barrier that separates us spirits from you physical types. Avery didn’t much appreciate that, seeing as her whole reason for existing is to stop spirits and flesh from intermingling, right?”

Ok, whoa, key information. She set aside her life destroying, overwhelming misery for a few seconds — it’d still be there when she came back to it — and focused on the insanity Black Blood just dumped on her.

“Sounds like she didn’t succeed.” The only spirit she’d ever really dealt with was Black Blood, but from what she knew, the other side was filled with all sorts of random crap personified. Letting people come and go, and letting spirits come and go between the wall that separated the physical reality she knew, and an entirely new reality she knew fuck all about, sounded unsafe. Much as Triss was curious about the other side, Jack had seen it, and had mentioned how fucking scary and dangerous it was. Hell, her only experience with it was some oozing black god thing of death and power, and a giant spider monster that’d killed a fucking werewolf.

“No, our poor Minerva did not succeed. She thought there was ... I’ve said too much, honestly. Crossed a line. This is Malachi’s story to tell, not mine.” Unless Triss was hallucinating, that sounded like regret in Black Blood’s voice. Was it even capable of that feeling? “I digress. The point of this tale, this conversation, is simple little vampire. You’ve a talent, and if you’re willing to swim in death and blood, revenge is within your reach. Maybe more.”

More? The fuck did more mean? She stared at the floor for a moment, before leaning her head toward Jen, who leaned in as well, letting her head touch hers.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good answer.” The black mist began to fade, and the two skeletons at the stairway collapsed into broken shards and white dust.

“Hey, wait! Did ... did Jacob ever ... try and ... revive Minerva? Use Crúac to resurrect her, or something?”

The Black Mist let out a long sigh, and continued to fade. “He did, little missy, that he did.”

“So he failed.” A tiny, shining little spot of hope, in the endless obsidian, destroyed.

“He did. But that don’t mean it can’t be done, vampire. Or that we don’t know how.”

She stood up straight and pushed away from the wall. “Wait! What the fuck does that mean!? ... Black Blood?” Silence. The black mist was gone, and the heavy weight she felt like she was drowning in left with it.

Jen gasped, and stepped over to the pile of bones. A nudge of her foot suggested they were no longer possessed, but it wasn’t exactly

enough to settle Triss's nerves, or Jen's. "I never really wanted to know, if Jacob had ever tried something like ... resurrection." She used her foot, and started scooping bones away from the stairs like she had a broom. "You know, you just know, something like that would be horrible, Triss. I mean, considering how horrible Crúac is normally, can you imagine what you'd have to do to actually revive someone?"

Beatrice stared down at the floor, and then her claws, her sharp, Nosferatu claws. "Yeah ... yeah."

"Triss, please. Don't—"

"Black Blood said give it some time, right? That's what I'll do. But I want to know, Jen. I want to know if it's possible, and what I'd have to do."

"Jacob hasn't done it! And I doubt that man has any barriers left he won't cross."

"Maybe ... maybe..." Then again, maybe not.

---

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~~Jack~~

He went back into the elevator, and hit one of the higher numbers. With no one else in the elevator this time, he was free to step back, and let his back press to the wall. He could get through this. Julias's death wouldn't break him. He had a job to do, and until it was done, he couldn't let the man's death bring him down.

*Let me take control, and you won't have to worry about that.*

Jack scowled. You don't get a say. Since when could you talk?

*You released me.*

I ... broke your chains, so you could help me kill these hunters and save my mother.

*And revenge, don't forget revenge.*

So, are you a voice inside my head? Did I awake a new personality? Or did I summon some ancient entity into me? Or, was that—

*Ha, no. The curse gives me a voice, Jack, but I'm you.*

You're me?

*You're no more separate from your Beast than the Begotten are separate from their horrors. I'm inside you, a part of you. Like you thought earlier, Jekyll meet Hyde.*

You're ... my Beast?

*Not entirely accurate, but good enough for conversation. I'm inside you, a part of you, and together, we're going to have some fun.*

Fun. Like the woman in my dream, sitting on top of a mountain of dead? The fun of a psychotic murderer?

*I recalled the sounds, sights, smells, taste, and touch for you. Was it not a thrilling display? The First, sitting atop a pile of corpses, all her kills, while her army both defended, and sought out new prey for her? Glorious days.*

Jack groaned, and rubbed his hands on his face. If he had to pick between becoming a mindless god of destruction like he originally thought might happen, or having some jackass whispering in his head, he'd have picked the former.

*Don't worry Jack. We're in this together, you and me. I gain nothing by fucking you over.*

But you are going to try and recreate the carnage of those memories, of the ... First.

*I won't have to try. When the time comes, you'll ask me to.*

Fucking wonderful.

*Isn't it? And don't worry, I already see where your thoughts are headed. I'm just going to shut up now, and let you do your thing. Won't interfere with your life.*

How nice of you, if I can even trust a word you're saying.

*Heh. When the blood starts to fly, I'll be there, Jack, and I won't idly sit by.*

And then he, or it, was gone. Jack could feel it, could feel the dark predator leave, feel it curl up and go to sleep in its den. He could feel the massive presence, the overwhelming power of it, the giant creature of shadow and claws, of fangs and beaks and talons and feathers, go to sleep. With it, it took the anger, the bubbling rage, the overflowing, scalding heat and fury that had been tearing Jack from the inside out, and silenced them.

For the first time in months, Jack didn't feel rage boiling up through his guts. Thank god.

The voice didn't sound like it was some sort of angry psychopath, but there was no denying that's what it felt like. It spoke with a smooth copy of Jack's inner voice, confident, insidious, and didn't sound angry at all. But fuck, it felt angry. Or maybe angry wasn't the word? It felt ... it felt like an animal, a hungry animal that expressed itself the way some animals do: violence, aggression, killing and hunting and slaughtering anything that violated its territory.

Maybe that's what it meant, by saying it wasn't accurate to call it his Beast. Whatever this thing was, its voice didn't match the staggering ferocity and intensity that came with it.

He managed a small, weak smile. It was a bit of a relief, knowing that the mind-altering rage he'd been feeling for months now wasn't his. Or at least, not entirely his.

As the elevator doors opened, he rubbed his hands on his face again, and tried to get his bearings. Everything had changed, everything. And, as much as it was horrible that his sister was dead, and Julias was dead, and now there was a fucking voice inside his head, it wasn't all bad. One of those not-bad things was waiting for him in the office room he was approaching. It was up to him to make sure that not-bad thing, continued to be a not-bad thing. He had to be someone his mom could lean on, could rely on, could connect with, could come to when she wanted to talk about Mary, and someone she could hold when she wanted to cry.

He could be those things, right? Yes, he could. He was getting a second chance to fix this, and he was going to take it.

He knocked on the door.

"Come in," his lover called.

He opened the door, looking down a bit as he did. Wow, holy shit his suit. Triss had been staring at it, but Jack didn't realize how fucked up he looked until now. He was a fucking mess, suit riddled with holes and dried blood.

"Did you only realize now, my love?" Antoinette said, smiling at him as she sipped a glass of blood. His mom sat beside her, and her face lit up when she saw him, smile cutting through the misery etched into her face.

“Yeah. Haven’t had two seconds to think.” He came over, sat down, and smiled at his mom. “How you doing?”

“I’m ... I’m better than I was when I woke up.” The woman looked so meek, timid, scared, and he slid his chair in closer so he could sit within inches of her. He was fine sitting further, but he knew she wouldn’t be. Reason enough.

“I was explaining to your mother the basics of her new life, little Ventrue. She now knows of the bloodclans, of the Masquerade, of the threat of fire and sun, and of the Kiss.”

The Kiss. Jack managed a glance at his mom, and she managed a glance at him, before things got awkward quick. Yep, their conversation had gone to sex, because it often did when the Kiss was involved, especially in Dolareido.

He’d prefer an awkward conversation with his mom about sex, than the conversation he just had downstairs with Triss.

“I met Beatrice a moment ago,” he said. “It ... it went about as well as can be expected.” With a wince and groan, he showed his shoulders, leaning each forward in turn so both woman saw the new puncture marks. His mom didn’t get it, but the Prince did.

Antoinette nodded, but she held his gaze, something close to a smile on her face as she looked at him. She looked relieved. It couldn’t have been about the conversation with Triss, not from the expression he saw on her face. No, she was relieved that he, him, the Jack she knew, the guy that couldn’t help but throw himself onto pain and suffering like a grenade, was still there. He was glad, too. Really, really, really fucking glad.

Maybe letting his Beast out from whatever chains had been placed upon it, would be nothing but a good thing? Ha, yeah right.

“Beatrice,” Antoinette said to his mom, “was Julias’s lover, and is your son’s friend.”

“Oh. That’s ... horrible for her. I know what that’s like.” That she did. “So ... w-what now?”

“You are my priority for tonight, Samantha, and for several nights. I am fortuitous, in that my sheriff and his childe can handle many of my immediate priorities. Though I will have to take time to deal with our prisoner, it will not affect our time together.” She raised a hand, cutting off Samantha before she could say something. “You will have plenty of time to spend with your son, but I imagine Madam Turio, or Mister MacDonald, will be calling him soon.”

“Yeah. Damien went to talk to them, but there’s no chance they won’t want my follow up, tonight at that.” He leaned back in his chair and groaned, holding his forehead up with a few fingers. “They’re not going to be happy with me.”

“B-But you’ll ... you’re...” His poor mom. She was worried about him, wanted him to stay, and couldn’t wrap her mind around that he’d somehow become so involved in some sort of secret society. That he’d become a major figure in said society, must have seemed impossible to her.

He wasn’t about to tell his mother what he’d told the others, that he’d awoken some sort of empowered entity inside him. He only told the others because there was no way to keep it secret, what with the army of crows, and that Damien and Antoinette had seen him. He’d have told Julias in good faith, and even Antoinette; they’d have kept it to themselves, for a while at least. But with no way to avoid having Maria and Michael interrogating him, it was simply not possible for him to keep his change a secret. But the fact it could talk to him, he could keep to himself. For now.

“I’m pretty high up in the Invictus ranks, Mom. Invictus being my covenant, my ... political group, sort of. Lot of responsibilities. But



hey, I make a six figure salary now.” That got an eyebrow raise, and even a hint of a smile. Of course she’d be happy he was doing well. She’d throw herself under a bus if she thought it’d get him a raise at a fast food joint. “And Antoinette is beyond rich.” That earned more eyebrow raises, bigger ones. His mom’s first thought was probably that it was great Jack was potentially marrying into money, not that she’d suddenly have access to fortunes as well. It was going to blow her mind, once she realized she’d be able to buy anything she wanted.

Antoinette laughed, a deeper, heartier sound Jack hadn’t expected. “True. And that brings us to the first barrier to your new life, Samantha.”

“Barrier?”

“Oui. You are a vampire now, Samantha, and now bound by the Masquerade. Abandoning the life once you had, is your first barrier. Your home, your job, friends, family, these are to be left behind.”

“Oh...” Sighing, she shrugged and looked down at her glass. “That’s not so bad. I ... I never made many friends, after James died. My job hasn’t felt very important or satisfying anymore. And after Jack disappeared, the ... the highlight of my day ... the only reason I had to stay in that life ... was Mary.”

The breaking point. No matter how many new things they threw at her, eventually the painful reality of last night was going to crash into her psyche again.

She set her glass down on the table, and started to cry. The sound of her sobs ripped through Jack like a chainsaw, and he set his arm around her, over both her shoulders. His mom couldn’t look up, but he knew what sort of face she’d be wearing, the face he’d seen through the window when spying on her, after his disappearance. Wrecked. Mortified. Devastated.

For now, he did nothing but sit with her, hug her, and wait. The Invictus could wait, too.

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~~Damien~~

He gave his more, in-depth, detailed report as best he could, to Michael and Maria. They weren't satisfied. If anything, they looked like he didn't believe him. He didn't blame them. Julias dying, and Jack having unleashed some sort of ancient curse, in the same night, was a lot to take in.

While they waited for Jessy and Jack to arrive, they confirmed what Damien said about the crows, and the lack of Julias Mire's presence confirmed his death as well. The two council members looked confused, unsure, and that was a look Damien had never seen on their faces.

A couple hours later, all three Right Hands stood before the two remaining council members, within their main meeting room.

Jessy's jaw dropped. "Julias is..."

"Mister Mire ... perished, last night." Maria, standing beside the table, had her side to the three Right Hands who stood in a row at the table's end. She was looking down, arms folded across her chest, while the big screen along the wall showed footage of the hospital. The corner showed live footage, while the main feed showed a recording she'd grabbed off the internet. Crows, thousands of crows, were swirling around the hospital, above it too, like some sort of concentrated hurricane.

"I don't understand. How? And, what's that? Who ... the fuck did that?" The Gangrel pointed at the screen. A hint of envy, perhaps, over the insane display of Animalism that she wouldn't be able to manage for centuries.

The two elders looked to Jack, and waited. With a quiet sigh, Jack scratched his buzzed head, and looked to Jessy.

“I was visiting my mother in the hospital, after leaving my sweeper team ... early.” He looked to the two elders, probably awaiting warning of punishment. They said nothing, yet. “Julias came, to warn me about that sort of behavior, but also, to just ... help me, help with my situation. Then a massive blackout happened, wiped out power for several blocks, and blocked all communications. The hunters must have been using some sort of spell; no way to do all that, in a specific area, with tech, far as I know.”

“Holy shit.” Jessy shook her head, several times, jaw dropping once again.

Jack nodded. “Angela showed up, with a small group of hunters. She wanted to capture my m—Samantha Terry, to try and force my hand. I ... I don’t think she’s telling her hunters the truth. I think she’s motivated by revenge at this point, and she used my mom as a lie to get hunters to help her.”

Damien had only one short interaction with Angela, from a distance, and it’d been enough for him to see the woman was not quite sane. If the woman was actually deceiving her fellow hunters, that was a possible avenue of action. It also meant the woman was a maniac, and predicting or manipulating a psychopath wasn’t exactly easy.

“My sire and I went to stop them. We were succeeding, but, using one of our thrall’s blood, they drew a symbol on a wall, and created some sort of portal. Natasha Vola has explained to me that it’s some sort of tunnel to a ... flesh chamber? Something like a Begotten’s nightmare chamber, something used by their shaman Elen. The hunters are using it to move around, we think.”

The two elders nodded. Damien had explained this to them already, but Jack offered details he and they didn't know. It was painting a more detailed image, and not one anyone was glad to hear about.

“Elen, Sándor, and several more hunters came out of the portal, and ... and we lost the fight.” The kid couldn't help it anymore, and his eyes fell. His hands clenched, struggling to keep his sorrow suppressed, but everyone could see it.

“Council,” Damien said, “I saw Mister Terry moments after the fight. The evidence upon his person, his attire, was clear. He tried his hardest to—”

Michael raised a hand. While Maria was a little further away, Michael stood at the end of the table with the Right Hands, sitting back against its edge, arms folded across his chest. He did not look happy.

“He looks fine now, Mister Burksen.” It was true. Jack had no wounds, and a Ventrue his age shouldn't have been able to heal from the gunshot wounds he'd suffered in a single night, not that many. He'd also changed into a clean suit.

“That ... leads me to my second point,” Jack continued. “In the fight, something ... happened to me.”

Maria looked his way, expression blank. “Something the hunters did?”

The small Ventrue shook his head. “No, this was ... something ... something in my bloodline.” That got some raised eyebrows from the two elders. “I saw glimpses of it, something connected to me, Mister Mire, Mister Honors ... and ... Kindred before. Something infected my great great grandsire, a long time ago, something I don't understand. Owls. Shadowy owls.” Again, the two elders looked

surprised, and Damien did as well. Jack had mentioned the dream and the curse, but he hadn't said owls specifically.

“... the Strix have touched you,” Maria said. “Or rather, your ancestor.”

“Strix?” the three Right Hands said together.

Groaning, Michael pushed away from the table, and stepped past the Right Hands. They didn't turn around, standing at attention. Michael paced left and right behind them, slow steps, along with some occasional, quiet grunts, as he contemplated. All in all, it was making Damien very nervous, seeing the two elders react this way. They'd been surprised when Damien had explained Jack was to blame for the crows, before this meeting, but now they looked hesitant, almost afraid.

“No one knows for sure what they are. They are dangerous, and they will haunt you, and ruin you, if you become the focus of their attentions,” Michael said at last. “If you see these owls of shadow, any of you, run. Do not interact with them. Do not speak to them. Escape, and report.”

Damien gulped, and saw his fellow Right Hands do the same.

“So, you have awakened this curse, Mister Terry?” Maria said.

“I ... the circumstance did. Whatever it was the ... Strix ... did, was sealed away by a Sanctified centuries ago. And, I guess, over the centuries and across multiple childer, the seal weakened.” Sighing, Jack forced his head up, and looked to the Nosferatu ghost woman with as much calm composure as he could muster. “I'm confident it's why — at least partly why — my sire and Mister Honors were unusually skilled Ventrue, and why I've managed the things I have; the curse was able to exude its power, despite being sealed. It ... it awoke, fully, during the raid on the hospital. It violated the Masquerade.”

A Sanctified, like Damien, had done something to seal away the monster inside Jack. It sounded like a fantasy, but after all the things that'd happened in the past couple years, fantasy was quickly become the normal. If Lucas could summon a bolt of magic lightning, then sealing away a strange curse seemed plenty possible.

"It?" Michael said, still pacing behind them.

"It ... it can influence me. I suppose it's more accurate to say, I violated the Masquerade while under its influence."

Damien grit his teeth. He wanted to counter that, say that it wasn't entirely true, and defend Jack. The kid hadn't been under its influence, he'd been an entirely different person, possessed even. Damien hadn't explained it like that though to the council, keeping it vague, hoping Jack would fill in the details. That detail wasn't exactly what he expected to hear, but he said nothing. If Jack felt comfortable misdirecting the Invictus council, he must have had a good reason.

"This is an extreme circumstance," Maria said, turning her gaze back to the screen. The video was obviously taken by someone's phone, and while it didn't do a good job of capturing the insanity in the darkness, lacking detail, it was still obvious that there were crows everywhere, swarming in Biblical proportions.

"I agree, Madam Turio, and I expect to be punished for this transgression."

The Nosferatu stood up, marched over to Jack, and stared at him, her small stature meeting him an inch or two below his. Jack winced when she leaned in, literal inches from his face, and his eyes looked down.

"Look at me, Jack."

Everyone in the room went rigid. First name. Uh oh.

Jack sighed, heavy, weary, and raised his gaze to hers. The corpse woman, dressed in her usual white, frowned at him for the first few moments, but the frown faded after a while. She set a hand on his shoulder, and copied his sigh as she pat it a couple times.

“How stupid do you think we are, Jack?”

“ ... I ... what?”

“Michael and I, we are not Viktor. We are not so stupid as to think all situations are solved through fear or domination.” Shaking her head, she stepped back, and set her butt to the table behind her, resting her hands against it as well. “Would you prefer we adopt a ridiculous stereotype, and rule as ruthless tyrants? You’re a smart man, Jack. You should know how self defeating it is to dole punishment without concern for the details, the specifics, or to expect the absurd from our members. Your situation was extreme, by any measure. The death of Julias alone would have, at least to some extent, justified your measures of self defense, despite the Masquerade violation; a minor reprimand at most.

“But, the fact you know of the Strix, have seen Striges in this dream of yours, and suspect them of tampering with your lineage? Foolish would not begin to describe us, if we simply punished you.” She managed a weak smile, and Damien found his eyes falling to the floor as well. Maria showing any weakness, even in a smile, was odd. It hurt to see it on her. “How did he die?”

“My ... my sire died, single-handedly defeating Angela and a half dozen hunters with his mind, and Sándor in a fist fight. I didn’t capture the Begotten, Julias did. I was just there to claim credit when ... when my ... curse, had had enough.” Jack took a deep, useless breath, and Damien flinched as he recognized the wavering sound. His friend was fighting back the desire to cry. “Angela had the opportunity to attempt capture, but she ordered hunters to execute him instead.”

“Harsh as that was,” Michael said, coming around them to lean against the table beside Maria, “it may have been in our favor. If Mire had been captured, it could have been disastrous. Angela is proving to be an unpredictable, but unstable enemy. It will be her downfall.”

Jessy threw up her hands. “I can’t believe he’s fucking dead. I got Damien’s message, and I ... I thought maybe...”

The small Ventrue looked to the woman at his side, managed a slow nod, and his head fell again. Groaning, Michael reached out and hit his childe upside the head with his palm, but it didn’t have any of the force he would normally put into it.

“In the past two years,” the elder Gangrel said, “our city has been upturned. I think we have all realized, for some time, that this little Ventrue before us is largely responsible.” Damien and Jessy both leaned forward a bit to look at the small man between them. Naturally, Jack squirmed. Michael did not realize how correct he was.

With a small smile, Maria shook her head. “We are not blaming you, Jack. Change is inevitable, but we did not expect it to happen so abruptly. Not since the Purge has anything this extreme happened within the city.”

“Viktor Honors was the most skilled Ventrue we have ever worked with,” Michael said, “but he was falling deeper into madness, paranoia, and cruel lusts with each decade. Mire was ... Julias was a surprise for us. We expected him to fall in his sire’s footsteps, but he proved to be exactly what the city needed. He was reliable, trustworthy, and not heartless like his sire. We promoted him to the council, eager to see him replace the man we were glad to see perish.”

Maria looked to her partner, shared a nod, and looked back to the three Right Hands. “We saw unusual skill in Julias, and Jack has



managed to surpass even that, relative to his age. If this is entirely due to this strange curse that haunts your bloodline, we do not know. What we do know, is Julias is gone. The damage to the Invictus is immense. The damage to the city, and to us, for his passing, is also immense.”

Michael returned her nod. “As such, Mister Terry will keep his position as Right Hand. Madam Turio and I will handle Julias’s responsibilities, until such time a third can be appointed to the council; though that will be decades from now.”

Damien almost thought they were going to promote Jack to the council. It’d fit right in with the lunacy that happened nonstop in Dolareido these days. Thankfully there was a limit to the insanity Dolareido was willing to accept.

“In the mean time,” Maria said, “you three have only the one objective. Defeat the hunters. Use Madam Vola’s report of their means of transportation, and hunt them down. Everything else is secondary, and meaningless by comparison. This talk of Azamel, and her ulterior motives, is to be set aside. Talk of Avery, and whatever she’s doing in the Shadow realm, is to be set aside. Talk of Garry, and his attempts to push into our half of South Side with his manipulation of Terra Den, is to be set aside.

“We will be in contact with the Prince about the capture of the Begotten. And, Mister Terry?” She looked at the kid again, face softening into something that didn’t match her cracked corpse face. “I expect you to be at the forefront of that matter. Your capture of the monster is perhaps, our first real step toward defeating the hunters. And considering your relationship with the Prince, and your role as intermediary with the other paranormals, you are best suited to be intermediary in this matter as well.”

Jack nodded, and straightened up his shoulders a bit. “Will do, Madam Turio.”

“And Mister Terry,” Michael said, offering a gentle smile that Damien was sure the man probably hadn’t made in decades, “we understand that the Prince has embraced your mother?”

“My ... my mother, yes. I—”

Maria put up a hand. “Take a week off, and recover, Mister Terry. Learn about this curse, learn how it will affect you, and report to us anything else you can learn about it. But also, take this time to deal with the death of your sire, and help your mother come to terms with her new existence, and the death of her daughter. We are not so cruel as to expect you to trudge through this world of pain and misery, without time to recuperate, and the aid of others.

“And be careful upon your return, Mister Terry. For the time being, we expect you to focus on understanding your current situation, more than dealing with the hunters. You are useless to us if we cannot trust you, and if you feel the need to take more time to handle your unique situation, do so. While we will not punish you for the Masquerade violation, that only applies to this circumstance,” the elder Nosferatu said. “It cannot happen again. Do we make ourselves understood?”

“Yes Madam Turio.” Jack shifted in place a little, and struggled to keep eye contact with the corpse woman. Damien couldn’t blame him. Her eyes carried a hint of something more than the kindness she’d shown seconds before. They were threatening, but also sad.

Her poker face was unbeatable. Damien was practically staring at her, running the conversation he’d had with her last night through his head, and she hadn’t even glanced at him. Watch him closely Damien, she’d told him, just the night before. She’d put it on his shoulders to kill Jack if the kid ever crossed a line, and considering what happened last night, it might as well have been prophetic. If he turned into another Viktor, especially with this absurd power, Damien would have no choice.

Lord help him if it came to that. The Prince would tear the city apart on a man hunt if she discovered it was Damien who killed her lover. And if she learned it was Maria's order, she'd tear the Invictus to shreds with her bare hands. And, Damien did not want to kill his friend. Worst case scenario, on top of another worst case scenario. Could things get any worse? He dared not say such a tempting question out loud.

"And don't think I've forgotten about Eric," Michael said, looking straight at Jessy.

"Sire, we were goaded into that fight by the Carthians."

"You say that as if it matters."

"Sire! It was two on one, and that Caleb werewolf felt like he had to ... to put Eric through a test, I guess, to make sure Eric could be trusted to stay under control."

"With good reason, based on what happened after I arrived."

Damien and Jack both raised eyebrows, and looked at Jessy. It was her turn to squirm.

"He ... it ... he was under control, until Caleb pushed it really far."

"A hole in the Golden Arch Industries office complex wall! Damage to several nearby vehicles, and to the street and sidewalks. Only a fool wouldn't notice the claw shapes everywhere. The damage I created, that I was required to create, is not identifiable, at least."

Jessy sighed, and looked down. Seeing her feel guilty about something was a strange sight, and Damien flicked his gaze between her and her sire.

"What ... do you wish to do, sire?"

Sighing, Michael shook his head, like a parent disappointed in an actual child. “You are partly responsible for Eric’s behavior, as his self-appointed liaison. You will be pulling patrol duty around South Side until Mister Terry returns to us, and Eric will join you. You will both do this in addition to your current duties. Mister Terry, I do expect you to speak with Avery about this, sooner rather than later.”

“Yes Mister MacDonald,” Jack said. “I imagine Avery is already cooking up a punishment for Caleb, if it’s true he’s partly responsible for this.”

“Very well. Dismissed.” Michael nodded, and walked over to the screen to begin his observations, tablet in hand likely filled with thrall reports.

The three Right Hands stepped out of the room, and took the elevator back down to the lobby of the Invictus HQ. They were silent in the elevator, and Damien struggled to find something to say.

“Holy shit, Julias is gone,” Jessy said. Apparently, getting punished by Michael didn’t faze her much. It’d probably happened semi routinely, considering Jessy, and Gangrels in general.

“Yeah...” Jack sighed, and his head slumped a little again. “Not even twenty-four hours later, and everyone’s just ... pushing past it.”

She pat the kid’s shoulder a couple times before leaning against the elevator wall. “Never seen Maria or Michael get that soft with someone before. Julias’s death must have really fucked them up, emotionally.”

Damien nodded. “It’s true. I’ve never seen either of them express any emotion freely, except for maybe frustration.” Not entirely true. Maria had been willing to let a little of herself come through her shell, when in her private quarters with Damien. But he wasn’t

about to tarnish her image, and spread word that she was softer than she let on.

“Y-Yeah.” Jack lifted his head, but he might as well have had an anchor tied around his neck.

Jessy touched his shoulder again, but this time she squeezed it, gently, and turned him slightly to look to her. “You going to be ok? You’ve been through fucking hell, Jack. Like .. like ... fucking god damn.”

“I’ll be ... not fine, but I’ll make it.”

“We should call Tash,” she said, “get together, have a night out, trade memories.” Nodding, she gave him a tiny shake, before letting him go. Thankfully, the Gangrel knew when to stop before she crossed a line. “I’d say we should ask Beatrice if she wants to come, but...”

Jack shook his head. “She won’t come. She might attack you for even suggesting it. I told her earlier tonight, and it ... it didn’t go well.”

“Damn, you had to tell her? Jesus christ, Jack.”

Damien winced at that. The three Mekhets had abandoned Jack to that responsibility, but it would have been worse for Beatrice if they’d stuck around.

“Let’s wait a few days, Jessy,” Damien said, “before we try dragging Jack anywhere.”

“Yeah, I getcha.” She nodded, and stepped out of the elevator as the doors opened. “Anyone else get hurt at the hospital?”

“I don’t think so,” Jack said.

“Good. Eric’s dad is there, and those two have a typical love hate relationship going on.” Groaning, she stopped halfway through the lobby, and hooked her hands behind her head as she looked up. “Still can’t believe he’s gone. God damn fucker was ... was...”

“We can talk about it later, when we get together.” Jack managed to offer her a small smile as he passed her, and he pat her on the shoulder. Returning the favor, Damien supposed.

“Yeah, then.” She snapped her fingers, gave herself a slap in the head, and started toward the exit. “Until then, I’m going to bury myself in blood and sex.”

Damien rolled his eyes. “Seriously?”

“Hey, fuck you. We all grieve in our own way.”

That didn’t sound like grieving. That sounded like avoiding grieving. Damien barely knew Julias, and felt little need to grieve for his passing, but even he felt a bit cold for something like sex. Not that he was one to have any opinion on it.

Except, maybe he was? He resisted the urge to look at the picture Fiona sent him, but he’d text her later, and see if, or rather, when she wanted to go on their next date. Be aggressive, or at least confident, Maria said.

Still, it’d only been a day since Jessy’s old friend had died. He didn’t understand her, and he’d never understand her.

Jack and Damien followed Jessy out of the building. A few caws drew Damien’s eyes up, and he moved his hand closer to his suit jacket where he kept a small sword hidden. No swarm descended upon him, and as only two pairs of wings flew down, Damien lowered his hand back to his hip. But the moment earned a glance from Jack, and the hurt on his face was obvious. No hiding now that Damien was a little scared of Jack and his crows.

“Mulder, Scully, I am damn glad to see you two.” Jack wiped the hurt away with a smile, and nudged cheeks into each bird once they perched on his shoulders. “What happened after I passed out?” This close to the Invictus HQ, still under the shadow of its front doors, no kine were close enough to hear them, though a couple did stop to notice the guy with crows on his shoulders. Expected, considering what happened last night was now circulating the internet; and a guy with crows on his shoulders was an unusual sight, regardless. If anyone took a picture of Jack now, they wouldn’t get a good shot of his face, thanks to the Beast.

Jack nodded as the two birds cawed, clicked, and crooned. “Thanks, for sticking around. And if ... if I do something like that again, you have my permission to hide, and ignore my summons, ok? I ... I don’t think I can be trusted, when I’m like that. Lot of crows died. I’d hate for you two to be a part of that.” They cawed a few more times. “ ... ok, if you really think so.” With a nod, the two birds flew off, but didn’t go far, landing on rooftop edges above.

“Still having trouble understanding this,” Jessy said, standing at the top of the stairs that led to the street sidewalk. “I mean, I know you’re a skilled mother fucker, Jack, like Julias ... was. But what you’re describing is ... it’s pretty nuts, you know?”

“You’re telling me.” Shoulders heavy, movements sluggish, he started walking down the stairs, and the other Right Hands joined him after a second. “I’m just trying to roll with it as best I can for now. It explains a lot of things, and lets me put them aside while I focus on other things.”

“Like your mom?” she said.

“Yeah. And Triss.”

“Triss?”

“I need to talk to her. Not now, like I said, but sooner rather than later. She ... she...” Shrugging, he looked up at the sky, and slipped past the kine on the sidewalk without so much as a glance at them. “I feel responsible.”

Damien shook his head. “You know—”

“No, I know. I know, logically, that my sire’s death is not my fault. Emotionally is a different matter, and Beatrice is probably feeling the same thing. She knows it’s not my fault, but she won’t feel that way. The only way to get over that hurdle and help her, is to talk to her.”

“She’s got Jen,” Jessy said, “and the other witches. You don’t need to ... to do a Julias, and bear the burden yourself, you know.”

Try as he might, Damien couldn’t help but smile at that. That was an elegant way to frame the dilemma for Jack, that he hadn’t expected to come from Jessy. He really didn’t understand her, especially when she proved she wasn’t as dumb or callous as he figured she was.

“You’re right. I know you’re right. I ... I’ll wait, and see what happens.”

Hiding inside holes in the city, curled up in misery, Damien was familiar with these sensations. He was not familiar with the overwhelming emotional destruction of your intimate lover dying. For him, it’d been about hiding, about avoiding. It wasn’t the same, not by a mile, and he could only feel distant empathy for Beatrice and her situation.

He shook his head a little, trying to dislodge the thought. Part of him wanted to go to her, talk to her, soothe her, and it wasn’t a natural feeling. He barely knew Beatrice. No, the desire to go to her was just the residual effects of the Vinculum. They weren’t friends.



They'd had maybe two conversations in the year since Damien's return.

Making connections with his fellow Kindred was difficult, and so far the only connection he'd made was with Jack. Maria seemed to be following suit, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"I'm off," Jessy said, waving. "Cell's on. Call me if shit goes insane."

"Seeing Eric?" Jack said.

"Yeah. Michael beat his ass hard, cause we got into this big scuffle with the Carthians, and Caleb, one of the wolves, and ... I'll explain it later. Cya." She offered them a flick of her fingers over her head as she turned her back to them, and walked off.

Damien and Jack stood there, watched her leave, and sighed.

"She's got life figured out," Jack said, "in a way I don't think we ever will."

"Probably." With a shrug, Damien started down the sidewalk, and Jack followed, occasionally glancing up to check on his two crows watching them from overhead. "I ... I had a rather ... intense moment with Fiona, last night."

Jack quick-stepped up to his side, and walked in tandem with him. "Oh?"

"Sorry, if it seems selfish or badly timed, but—"

"Damien, my sire is dead, my sister is dead, and my mom's at the Elysium tower right now, probably crying her eyes out over the shit storm that's happened to her. I've awakened some sort of curse, and I can ... feel it ... lurking, hunting, except now instead of it being the Beast we know, it's something massive and hungry, and angry and

fucking twisted.” With a groan, he ran his fingers over his buzzed head, scratching. “The last thing I want to do, for the next ten minutes as I head back, is think about that stuff. You’re getting somewhere with Fiona? Hit me.”

As usual, Jack managed to hit his personal struggles with a degree of clarity of brutal honesty Damien never found in others. It was impressive, but if the kid never gave himself a break, it’d be his undoing eventually.

“Very well. I ... was injured last night, badly, in an ambush by hunters. Fiona offered me her blood, and I ... tasted it.”

Jack raised a brow. “How’d that taste?”

“Like ... as if someone had created an alcohol for Kindred. It was a powerful flavor, and the effect was equally as powerful. Before I knew it, I was ... on her, touching her, as I Kissed her. It was ... frightening.”

“Frightening?”

“I became aggressive. I pinned her, and ... did some things to her...”

That earned both of his eyebrows raising. “How’d she react?”

“She ... she uh...” Damien scratched the top of his head, in hopes it’d soothe him as it apparently did for Jack. No such luck. “She enjoyed it ... a lot...”

Jack laughed and shook his head. “Well, I don’t know about the whole Begotten blood thing, maybe making you into an aggressive drunk. You seem fine now? And it seems like Fiona wants to be manhandled a bit.” He raised his fingers, air-quoting ‘man’.

“Manhandled. I ... am not sure how to do that.”

“Antoinette is usually the one manhandling me, so I’m not the best person to get advice from. But with Ashley and Julee, they really enjoy it when someone else takes charge. Hell, Julee likes being choked, like, a lot.”

It was sometimes easy to forget that the small Ventrue regularly engaged in sex with not only the Prince of Dolareido, but her duo of lithe, beautiful ghouls.

“And you think Fiona will be ... into that?” It was hard to imagine cute, tiny Fiona, wanting to be handled roughly.

“I think you should ask her. Or, you know, do whatever you did last time, and see what she tells you?” Shrugging, he ducked left and right around kine, flowing easily through the masses of suits. “It’s a good problem to have.”

“Oh?”

“When you know the girl wants you, but you don’t know what to do. There’s electricity, and it burns, but it draws you in anyway. Before you know it, you’re in each other’s arms, drowning in a delightful heat you didn’t know you needed.”

Damien looked back to the sidewalk, the kine they walked past, and digested that. It was a poetic way to put Damien’s inexperience with women.

“Jessy confuses me,” Damien said.

“Oh?”

“She ... seems to enjoy such aggression, but Fiona is nothing like her.”

“Yeah, no denying that. I think Jessy treats sex like a sport, more than something to get intimate about.” He laughed, shrugging again.

“She knows what she likes, and she’s not afraid to go after it. Eric’s a lucky guy. I wonder if he gets to see an intimate side I’ve never seen of her before.”

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~~Eric~~

“Holy shit,” he said. “And ... and everyone else at the hospital?”

Jessy shrugged and sat down on his couch before putting her elbows up on its back. “Your dad’s fine, I’m sure. Hunters only killed one person working there, an orderly named Jez.”

“And the crows?”

“Shit load of crows died. Jack’s probably feeling guilty as shit for that.”

Eric frowned. “I meant the people at the hospital. Lot of sick people, compromised immune systems, like my father.”

“No crows came near your father, and the clean up crew know what they’re doing. So do the doctors.” Sighing, she slid her arms off the couch back, put her elbows on her knees, and slouched. From confident to not, in seconds. “But the news is out there, about the crow attack. My bosses were understanding of Jack’s position, but that doesn’t change that we have to deal with the fallout.”

“The crow attack on the hospital?”

“Guaranteed that headline is already circulating the internet. No chance in hell it isn’t going to attract attention.”

Nodding, he joined her on the couch. Once he turned a little to face her, she pushed herself into him, shoulder and head pressing to his chest. A meow announced Kat’s interest, and she jumped up

onto Jessy's lap, only to mirror the vampire's motion, except into her and not him. Might as well have been two cats on his couch.

"What's that mean for you?" He slipped his arm behind her, half hugging, half rubbing her back. Seemed like the boyfriend thing to do, and she seemed to appreciate it as she nuzzled half her face into his chest against his white t-shirt.

"Means more hunters, probably. Probably nothing like the hunters we got, cause they're fucking insane. But, it means nights of only worrying about tussling with Carthians like last night will be a thing of the past."

"I'm surprised that, considering shit like this happens, shit like the stuff I did, and now Jack, and whoever's done whatever in the decades since the invention of the internet, that the world doesn't already know about vampires."

She chuckled, didn't lift her head, and pushed into him a little harder. He fell onto his back on the couch, his head on its arm, and pulled up a leg onto the couch, the other dangling off, so Jessy could lie on his stomach. Kat had no trouble adapting, climbing up Jessy's chest and settling on her back once Jessy was settled on him.

"You'd be surprised how easy it is to keep this sort of shit under wraps, Eric."

"Say what?"

"Most kine are adamant that paranormal shit doesn't exist. I mean hell, how long were you pestered by your new, inhuman urges, before you genuinely considered you weren't human?"

"That's ... not really the same, I think. It was happening to me, randomly." One of his arms dangled off the couch along with his leg, but his arm closer to the couch's back slid down Jessy's side, and

found the small of her back. He traced lines into it, slipping his fingers underneath her suit blouse so he could caress her skin.

“True, but still, paranormal shit happens everywhere, all the time. We’re good at hiding it, but with the invention of cameras and the digital world, there’s fuckloads of decent sightings online. Everyone calls bullshit. There are hunters out there working day and night to try and prove we exist, but the world just refuses to listen. Then Kindred do some cleanup, directly or indirectly, call shenanigans somehow, manipulate someone, and entire websites are marked as nutjob conspiracy theories.”

He nodded and sighed, looking up at the ceiling of his new, fancy place. “I see your point. The last thing the world wants is to deal with a whole new kind of horror. It’s a scary enough place without things like us.”

“Yeah, true that.”

“ ... so...”

“So?” She lifted her head and frowned at him. “That sounds like inbound heavy talk.”

“Well, I mean—”

“No. No heavy talk. My friend is dead, my other friend’s all kinds of fucked up, and more shit is going to end up on our doorstep. I don’t want heavy. I want to curl up on my boyfriend’s chest, listen to his heart beat — because it does unlike mine — and forget about heavy shit.” She slammed her forehead down on his sternum, hard enough to earn a groan from him, before she set her cheek down on his chest again. “Maybe ... maybe later. Much later.”

Nodding, he raised his other arm, set his fingers along her neck, and gently combed them through the back of her hair. Instant, quiet moans from the undead vampire.

“How’s your dad?” she said.

“Thought you didn’t want to do heavy talk?”

“My heavy. Not your heavy.”

He chuckled. Well, his heavy wasn’t nearly as heavy as her heavy, right now. “I tried to pay him a visit yesterday, after the whole crow thing, but a bunch of officials had the hospital blocked off.”

“Yeah, load of Invictus thralls with different groups and shit, managing cleanup. Then tonight, I know my bosses sent some vamps more equipped to do damage control, Ventrue and whatnot.”

“Hope I can see my dad again soon.”

She chuckled again, and drew some lines in his side with a fingertip. “You will, I’m sure. Maybe this will scare him into taking better care of his fat ass.”

Wow. He almost wanted to get angry at her for being so callous about his dad’s stupidity. Almost. Jessy was Jessy, and she was just saying what she’d be thinking otherwise; and what he was thinking, too.

“What do you think I should do?” he said.

“About your dad?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck, I dunno.” She turned her head so she could rest her chin on his sternum, with no mercy for how uncomfortable it was to have hard bone pressing on his chest. “You make enough money you can just leave him in there, can’t you?”

“Maybe? I’m not sure. He’s taking up a hospital spot, and I think they can argue that at this point, he should just be moved to a

retirement home with the facilities to take care of him.” Which, admittedly, would be cheaper.

“Sounds like a good idea to me. That’s what’s happening, right? He’s too old and stubborn to change his mind about things, and too unhealthy to be anything but retired. You have more than enough money to put him into some expensive home, and we can make sure he’s well taken care of.” She waggled her eyebrows. “Sponge baths from sexy topless nurses and all.”

He shuddered. “Why would you put that image in my head?”

“Because I am evil.” She put her cheek back to his chest, and resumed nuzzling, both her hands pressing into his sides and chest in random, massaging motions, like a kneading cat. “Ok, no more heavy talk about your dad. That’s officially crossed the line into too heavy territory, for now.”

“Ok. What do you want to talk about? How about ... that building, that spirit I found pointed you to?”

“We took a peek after I got you home. Big symbol drawn on the wall, but it was all black and burned up and shit. Leftovers, I guess. Turns out the hunters are using some portals to get around.”

“Portals?” He raised a brow. “You say that like it’s normal.”

“After what you saw Michael do last night, I figured you’d be past the ‘oh god is this really reality’ crap.”

“Good point.”

“I have a better topic,” she said. “Caleb.” Eric grumbled, and Jessy laughed as she pat his chest. “Aww, getting all manly and grumbly just because I mentioned his name?”



“He tried to prove I couldn’t control myself.” For entirely good reasons, but still.

“Well, you did go a bit psycho, you know. Got all possessive of me and shit, and tried to fight Michael.”

He lifted his head so he could frown at the girl on his lap, but she was grinning at him. Teasing. He rolled his eyes and set his head back down.

“I guess I did.”

“And hey, don’t get me wrong, I’m into it. But you and Caleb really fucked shit up.”

“ ... you’re trying to build up to a hammer drop, aren’t you?”

She sighed, nodded, and groaned. “We have to pull patrol duty for a week or two. On top of our normal shit.”

“Fuck, that does suck. No free time.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m injured. Can’t I pull some sort of injury card?”

She laughed and pat his chest again. “You seem healed to me. You damn wolves heal so fast.”

“True, but your boss doesn’t know that. And not completely healed I’ll have you know. Something about Caleb’s claws and teeth really fucked me up. And ... and that thing your boss changed into, fucked me up pretty bad too.”

“Michael’s transformations are fucking nuts. Dude’s so fucking old, he transforms into shit that I’m pretty sure is the source of a lot of scary folklore. He uses it once every thirty years or so. You should feel proud.”

“Heh, maybe. Proud, and bruised.”

Laughing, she stroked her cheek against his shirt, and tucked her hands in between his arms and chest in a half hug. “We’ll be together for it, so, that’s good, right?”

“Very good.”

“Good.” She lifted her head long enough to smile at him, and stayed there for a moment. Weight crept into her gaze, and she sighed as she continued to look at him. He met her gaze, tilting his head to the side slightly so it rolled along the couch arm.

He almost said something, asked her why she was looking at him like that. But he didn’t. He’d learned from his mistakes in the past, learned to not ruin something, not put his foot in it, or in his mouth. Just shut up, and let her come out of her shell on her own.

He’d known women like her in the past, tough women, women who were very outgoing, lively, loud, and acted like they wore their emotions on their sleeve. They didn’t. There was something soft inside, something they guarded closely, something hidden behind the wall of extroversion, of energy, of exaggerated action. Best thing he could do, if she was finally not being that person for a second? Shut up, and listen.

Another sigh escaped her, and she put her cheek back on his sternum.

“You ... you’re not going anywhere, right?”

Multiple ways to take that question. Leaving the city. Leaving her. Dying. It didn’t really matter which she meant, and she probably meant all of them.

“Didn’t plan on it.”

“Good. Good.” She nodded as she kept her cheek to his chest, and her hands against his sides tightened a little. “Jack mentioned Beatrice, and how she’s taking Julias’s death. I can .. I can’t imagine the pain she’s in.”

“Me neither.” He knew she wanted to talk about it, but he wasn’t going to say that. No, just, sit and listen.

“I saw those two, Julias and Beatrice at a ball, and they ... they fit together so well, like puzzle pieces. And now he’s gone, and ... fuck, she must feel like her whole world’s ended.” Jessy slid in toward the back of the couch, and snuggled into his side. Kat, bless her soul, hopped up onto the couch back, giving Jessy the freedom to press her body into Eric’s as she slid higher, into the nook of his arm.

His arm around her found a nice groove, a half hug, elbow bent so his hand could rest on her shoulder. This was the girl who’d seduced him at a night club, and had sex with him while simultaneously seducing Fiona. She’d had orgies nearly every night before he came along, far as he knew. The night scene, fucking in a crowd under pulsing lights to the beat, was her life. Lying on a couch, snuggling, talking, those were things she wasn’t familiar with. New territory for the deadly vampire.

So he said nothing, and stroked her shoulder as she worked up the courage to keep talking. This felt nice. Being someone else’s shoulder? New territory for him, too. His wife had never really opened up to him on that emotional level, and in hindsight, he had to wonder if she even had the emotional depth to do so. Had he? He’d had the emotional maturity of a self-involved kid then, convinced a relationship should be nothing but sex and laughter and booze and good times. He’d avoided ‘heavy’ conversations, and so had his wife.

Not this time. And, much as Jessy said she didn’t want to talk about heavy, he knew she did.

“Tash is probably crying right now,” she said, “to Art and Matt. I can just picture it, little Tash, sniffing, trying to explain what happened. She might get through five words, before bursting into tears—well, not tears, not without the Blush. But she’ll be crying, and hugging them, and she’ll be inconsolable. They’ll pet her, pat her head and stuff, and ... yeah.”

Eric lifted his hand from the arm she was snuggled into, and set it on her head. Instant murr of satisfaction, and she rubbed her cheek against his chest a little harder.

“She was really attached to Julias, you know? She first came to us, all spooked up and scared and shit, and we didn’t really know the details about her sire at the time. Apparently she’d gotten super spooked by her time with the Ordo Dracul, but yeah, we didn’t know that. Lot of us thought she was just this tiny wimp. Like, so tiny, right? And even more timid than your typical Mekhet. But Julias, he...” Jessy shuddered a little, and squeezed on him a little harder. “He didn’t care, didn’t feel a need to condescend or manipulate in typical Invictus fashion. In meetings and gatherings, she was Miss Vola, and no one gave her the time of day. But Julias took her off to the side, and explained things, since she had no sire that we knew of. To him, she was Tash, not a title with a fucking respect quota to meet.”

Her shudders returned, and didn’t stop, tiny things that rippled through her, earning some quiet sobs. He kept his touch soft, lightly stroking her scalp and combing her hair with his fingers.

“Sounds like he was a nice guy.”

“He ... he was my friend. I could always trust Julias, you know? Even when he replaced his fucking lunatic sire, I could always trust him. I used to go to Bloodlust with him, and sometimes we’d find some kine to hook up with, play wingman for each other. When we had to get into tussles with the Carthians, he always had my back,

even when he disagreed with me when I was ... a little more aggressive than I should have been.” Her squeezing arms only grew tighter, and her sobs continued, mixed with whimpers. “And ... and ... and now he’s ... he’s...”

Eric said nothing. He held Jessy, held her close, and let her cry. First time in his life he’d ever held someone like this. And, self-involved as it was, he had to admit, it was a peculiar feeling for him. The raw emotion, the thoughts laid bare, the utter vulnerability. She was so defenseless. A single word, a good jab, an insult, a passive-aggressive remark would be all he’d need to break her and leave her a ruin of tears and betrayal.

All he wanted to do was hold her, and see if maybe, just maybe, he could ease her pain a little by hugging her. It seemed like such a small thing, such a little thing, but he couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

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~~Natasha~~

“Julias is ... he’s ... he ... d-d ... died...”

She threw herself at the closest one: Matt. She grabbed his waist, buried her face in his chest, and started crying. No, not crying. Crying wasn’t a strong enough word for the pain tearing through her, making her shake and her muscles clench uncontrollably. Bawling. Maybe bawling was better.

Matt froze. Good. Don’t move. Let her squeak into his chest for a bit.

“What?” Art said, stepping around Matt, and squatting down beside her. She wasn’t so short that he had to squat, putting his head lower than hers, but she appreciated it anyway. Whimpering like a pathetic little girl, she threw her arms around his neck, and buried her face there as well.

The three of them were standing in the garden outside the Elysium Tower. Apparently they'd come to talk to her, and were too old fashioned to send a text. Or maybe they'd just wanted to surprise her.

"Sheriff?" Matt said. "What happened? We knew something happened at the hospital, but no one's filled Avery in on the details yet."

She managed to lift her face from Art's neck long enough to look behind her, to see Daniel standing by the stairs.

"Jack will fill Avery in ... but perhaps not immediately," Daniel said. "I will explain some, in the mean time."

Natasha didn't listen, but some of her sire's words managed to penetrate her sobs. He mentioned the hunter attack on the hospital, and that Jack and Julias were caught in it. He mentioned Julias's death. He mentioned the clean up the thralls were handling, and the Ventrues Vicky and Bruce, too.

By the time Tash and Daniel had gotten to the hospital, it was already the next night, and the thralls had cleaned up the major issues; namely, all the dead crows, and the human corpses. A quarantine was put in place, and every patient in that wing was declared potentially contaminated by the birds. Hospital staff would have to wear protective gear when treating them.

He also mentioned they'd captured the Begotten Sándor. That got some affirming grunts from the two werewolves.

Tash tried to keep her voice down, she really did. She didn't want to be making so much noise, especially outside the tower where some other vamps were nearby. The younger Kindred hid in the shadows, afraid to come out in the presence of the sheriff, werewolves, and an ex-Right Hand. But they were there, she could

sense them, see some of them, and it was royally embarrassing considering the noises she was making.

She forced down her sobs, grit her teeth, and let go of Art's neck. The heartbreak in his eyes almost shattered her, but she gulped down the need to weep, and took a step back. Weeping could come when they were in private.

"I'll ... I'll explain more details to them, sire," she said. "Were you t-two coming to ... visit for the night?"

"Yeah," Matt said, offering Daniel a salute before coming over to join her and Art. "And ... yeah, I guess we should talk inside?"

Nodding, she started the walk into the lobby, with Matthew and Arturo close behind. She felt silly and dumb, for breaking down the moment she saw them, especially out in the open where everyone could see her. How did Isabella and her group feel when Barry died? And others, who'd been a part of Lucas's uprising, their deaths must have affected some Kindred they'd known. How many of them burst into tears in the open? Probably none.

But Julias was ... Julias.

Matt and Art said nothing as she guided them down to her room. Jack was probably back from his visit to the Invictus; no way he'd stay gone for long, with his mom here and Sándor as well. She—oh, right, Jessy! She pulled out her phone, and sent Jessy a text.

~You ok?~

~I guess. Just lying here with Eric, being a bitch and crying.~

Jessy crying. Jessy didn't cry. If she was crying, that meant a lot, and Tash struggled to not burst into more sobs as she read the message. Thank god Jessy had no problems being honest, once the truth smacked her in the face.

~I just got back from checking in with the cleanup crew with Daniel. It ... it was pretty insane, how much damage the hunters did. And how much damage Jack did.~

~He told us about the weird curse thing. Fucking nuts.~

Ah, that was good. If Jack was being open and honest about this strange change that'd happened to him, Tash could talk about it; with one of his fellow Right Hands at least.

~I ... I still can't believe he's gone.~

~We're going to have to go out, maybe in a few days, have a send-off party or something.~

~I ... think I can do that.~

~K, I'm going to go back to sobbing.~

~Me too. Bye.~

She put her phone away, and forced down the rising urge to sob again. Not now, not yet.

Once she was downstairs, deep in the underground floors of the tower, and in her temporary bedroom, she motioned for the two boys to enter. So many times she'd done this, always with either the intent or knowledge it'd end in sex. It'd become a ritual almost, her two werewolves joining her, following her into this room, and it sparked a couple memories of her with her legs spread out, her tiny body vanishing between theirs.

The happy thought lasted two seconds, before the thought of Julias dying slammed into her. His tall body and broad shoulders, similar to her boyfriends', his combed-back short blonde hair, his confident smile, the way he filled out a suit, it'd all made him seem so imposing the first time she ever saw him. He—



“He was ... he w-w-was ... the first Invictus to ... t-to be nice to me.” She sat down on the edge of her bed, and looked down. She didn’t need to ask, as Matt and Art came to join her, each sitting on either side of her. “He t-taught me about life in the Invictus, and ... and ... he helped me so much...”

Matt set a hand on her back, and rubbed, while Art leaned forward to put his elbows on his knees. With a sigh, he looked at her, offered her a weak smile, a knowing smile, and waited.

“I ... I hadn’t t-talked to him much, since coming back to the Ordo Dracul. I ... w-we were supposed to talk again, and ... I wanted to! I ... I wanted to, b-but it just ... never happened.” She buried her face in her hands. “And now I can’t!”

The sobs started again. She didn’t bother trying to suppress them anymore, now that she had walls around her, and she trusted the Prince’s construction to be basically sound proof. The only people who’d get to hear her be a big baby, were Matt and Art, and she didn’t mind that at all. Jessy later too, doubtlessly, but for now, just her boyfriends and the black marble walls.

Matt continued to rub her back, and Art pat her knee a couple times, offering her some more sad smiles, before he looked to the wall.

“Is ... this your first friend, to die?” Art said.

“Y ... Yes.” She turned a bit in toward Matt, and nuzzled her cheek into his chest. He returned the favor, sliding in a bit closer so their legs were pressed to each other, and she could disappear into the nook of his hugging arm. “D-Dolareido, it ... it’s been so peaceful here, you know? Ever since the Purge, w-we haven’t had ... things like this happen. And I was embraced around then. M-My ... fifty years have been quiet, for the m-most part. Viktor, Tony, G-Garry, they got into fights all the time, and a Kindred d-died every now and then, but it was rare. Now ... so many people have died, and ... and

Julias, he ... he was invincible. N-No one was surprised he got to be in the council so young.”

Viktor Honors, Julias Mire, and Jack Terry. All three had been unusually strong relative to their age, and now there was an explanation. She didn't like the explanation, because now Jack was possibly in danger, threatened by something none of them understood. The Prince was probably digging through ancient texts none of them had ever seen or heard of, looking for possible explanations.

“It's been different for us,” Art said. “Tijuana was ... it was rough. We lost people.” He groaned and ran a hand over his head, before scratching the back of his neck. “Sorry, I made that sound like Julias's death was ... yeah, my bad. What I meant was, we know how you feel. Stephanie wasn't the only family we've lost.”

Stephanie. Tash frowned and looked down. She'd completely forgotten about her. The poor woman had died to a monster in the Dolareido sewers, cut down, while Natasha and her boyfriends had been stuck behind a wall of debris and collapsed tunnel.

“Um, how's Mason d-d-doing?” Her sobs quieted down a bit, and she pushed herself off of Matt's chest. Two seconds later, she put her cheek back to his chest again, and stayed there. After last night, crying on her bed, alone, she wasn't doing that again.

“Stephanie's death still tears him up, I say,” Art said. “You know guys, bottling up their emotions, being all stoic and shit, never really getting over problems. Mason's like that. But, at least this Tilly girl and him are getting along.”

Matt nodded, hugging Tash a little closer, and rubbing her further arm with his hugging hand. “Trying to survive emotional pain like that, without someone to lean on, is rough. Art and I have our pack, our family. When John died eight years ago, it was hard on all of us, and we...” He leaned in over Tash, and set his chin on her head as he

squeezed her. “I’m sorry you have to go through something like that.”

Art got up, and started to walk around her room in a slow pace. “Julias died saving his childe, right?”

She nodded. “Y-Yeah, he did. He ... he um, he ... he’s the r-reason Jack’s alive, and that we c-captured Sándor. He ... he went down ... fighting.”

“It was a good death,” Art said. He came up to her, squatted down, and pat her knee. “I know that isn’t any consolation, not now, but it will be.”

She couldn’t see how. But, much as she was older than Matthew or Arturo, they’d been living rough lives for decades, while she’d spent the past fifty years more or less cozy, in comparison. Tussles with the Carthians, and trying to keep her ruthless bosses happy, was the worst she’d had to deal with. Art and Matt were used to this sort of horribleness.

She managed a smile for Art, a weak one, but it was something. She let go of Matt, reached out, and hugged Art, putting a kiss on his lips and cheek as she did.

“I feel so bad for B-Beatrice, too. Julias was her ... her...”

“They had something special,” Art said, smiling at her.

It wasn’t the usual smile Art gave her, playful and teasing. And it wasn’t the smile he’d given to her just moments before, sad and knowing. It was a strange smile, almost shy, but inviting. Like, a literal invite, an invitation. She blinked at him, and looked up at the big man holding her. Matt gave the same smile.

Something special.

She burst into sobs again, but despite herself, a small smile managed to sneak through, as she hugged the two men. The three of them curled up on her bed, her in the middle, and she cried onto their shoulders as they lay there with her. She tried to tell a few stories about Julias, but each attempt ended quickly, with more sobs, and she gave up after a while. Better to just lie there, and enjoy Matt and Art's company, as dawn approached.

## Chapter 92

~~Jack~~

Once Jack got back, his mom seemed to have gotten past what was probably a couple solid hours of crying. She'd be miserable, for months, but time healed all wounds and all that crap, so he knew to be patient. Antoinette would know, too.

His mom threw her arms around him when he walked back in, and he had to calm her down. A few pats on her back and some encouraging words did the trick. When he got her back into her seat, he and Antoinette sat down, and spent the rest of the night calmly explaining to her what life would be like as a vampire. They explained the five common blood clans, the five covenants, and the current state of the covenants in Dolareido. They explained some rules, like how Elysium was a no-feeding, no-violence zone, and how the Carthians and Invictus split South Side evenly for feeding.

They explained the Masquerade, and did their best to explain the Danse Macabre, but Jack could see his mom struggled with the idea that vampires were all paranoid, deceitful, manipulative bastards, looking to gain as much power as they could in their immortal lives. He knew Antoinette had already explained some of the physiology basics, but Jack knew they should again. He explained feeding, blood, vitae, avoiding fire and sunlight, torpor and the daily sleep, and the Blush of Life.

And they'd have to explain it again, no doubt. And that was fine. She had all the time in the world now, now that she was safe. In the Elysium Tower, she could learn in safety, and she could grieve in privacy.

Antoinette and Jack ended their lesson with an hour to spare, took her to one of the big, fancy bedrooms Antoinette kept free — for no reason Jack could understand — and helped her settle down.

“You’ll ... be here when I wake up?” she said.

“Well I’ll be on the floor below you, but yeah, in the building.” He smiled down at her, sat on the bed with her, and pat her on the leg. “There’s hundreds of feet of marble, earth, and metal between us and anyone who wants to get into the tower. You...” He looked over his shoulder to Antoinette.

“C’est vrai. Rest, Samantha, and take all the time you need. As your son has said, he has been given time away from his duties, and I am sure he will spend them aiding you with your new life.” The tall Daeva nodded at her childe from over his head, smiling, and Jack mirrored it as he looked back at his mom.

“Oh ... ok ... ok...” She gulped, coughed, and looked around. “All this for me?” A big bed, white silk sheets, big open space, a desk with a mirror and an assortment of makeup kits and whatnot, and a wardrobe filled with robes that would never fit his mom.

Antoinette laughed, before letting the somber weight the night held settle her voice. “All this and far more, Samantha. Now please, rest, and mourn if you feel the need. Tomorrow night, you will have time to spend with your son, and time to grieve. Perhaps, given a few days time, we can go shopping for you?”

“Shopping?”

“For clothes, my dear.”

“Oh ... b-but, I have clothes, at home, and—” She stopped, frowned down at the blankets underneath her, and sighed. “Right, new clothes, new me. That ... that sounds doable, maybe.”

“Alright,” Jack said, “we’re off.”

“You two ... sleep in the same bed?”

Jack winced, but nodded. “Yeah. We love each other, Mom. A lot.”

Nodding, she sighed as she looked down again, and twisted the blankets with her hands. “Can ... can you tell me about that, too? Your relationship? N-Not now, but later? I ... I can’t believe you found a woman, you know? And—”

Jack put up his hands, surrendering. “I’ll tell you everything.”

“G ... Good.” She nodded, but once Jack got up, she snapped her hand out and grabbed his wrist. No words, but she looked at him with the saddest doe eyes he had ever seen on her.

He sat back down, wrapped his arms around her, and stayed there for a minute. “I’m right here, ok? I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere.”

She squeezed him tight, tighter than she probably realized she was doing. Vampire strength was a thing, and it came naturally to Daeva; any harder and she was going to hurt him. But he pat her back, stroked it, and squeezed her in return until she started to settle. Years, so many years, since he’d hugged her like this. When his dad died, it’d never occurred to him that she was looking for someone to lean on, that she needed some support. He was a kid, and she was the parent. Parents were supposed to be self-sufficient, bastions of stability.

Holy fuck, how stupid he’d been.

“Promise?” she said.

“Promise.” He leaned back from her, found her pinky finger, and hooked it with his own. Like old times.

She nodded, let him go, and slowly scooted further back on the bed. She was still in the robe and hospital gown, and Jack doubted she even realized. That'd change, as the insanity of her new life resolved, and she began to process.

“You will sleep all day,” Antoinette said. “Torpor will keep you deep in slumber. Once dusk arrives and you awaken, Jack and I will come for you.” With a bow, the Prince turned and left, and Jack followed after her, offering his mom a small wave as he did. She returned it, smiling at him, and watching him go until he stepped outside her room, and closed her door.

And then he opened it again and stuck his head through. “Oh, this locks. See this big metal bar here? It'd take a freight train collision to break it. Lock it once we're gone.”

“W-Why?”

“Because shit happens. Kindred lesson 101, be paranoid. This way, you'll be secure, and you can sleep knowing no one's going to interfere with your daily rest.”

“Oh. Ok.” Nodding, she got up and came to the door. Before he closed it, he gave her the small wave again, and she returned it, just like he used to when going to bed when he was a kid.

He fell in beside Antoinette, and followed her back to their room. The enormous vault door, and walls easily ten feet thick, meant it was the most difficult room to break into; by conventional means anyway. Could someone like Sándor bust in here? He doubted it, based on what Fiona told him, but the monsters were difficult to predict, or understand. Maybe Sándor would pull a movie monster move, and break out of the cell with some bullshit ability? The sheriff was confident he was trapped, but still.

He closed the vault door behind him, and watched Antoinette as she slipped out of her suit. No sexual display, no flirting or



flaunting, no tossing of her hair, no exaggerated swaying of the hips, nothing. She set her clothes aside by the wardrobe at her desk against the wall, reached in, and plucked out a robe. Wrapped in white, she sat down on the bed, upon its foot edge, and watched him.

Sighing, he stripped down to his boxers, and sat beside her. “ ... hey.”

“My love.” She slipped her arm around him, and he reciprocated, sliding in closer until their legs touched, and he could hook his arm around her waist.

They had a bit of time before sunrise, time to sit there, and talk about things. Except he didn't want to talk about things. He didn't want to talk about Julias, or the curse. He wanted to bottle it all up, sit on it, and brood. So, by this point, he knew he should talk about them. You can only make the same mistake so many times before you have to learn from it.

“Julias is dead,” he said. “I ... Beatrice and I, we both sort of ... it got pretty heavy for a bit there. We both cried.”

“That ... is saddening, my love, but healthy.”

“Let it out, mourn, grieve, all that?”

“As cliché as it must sound, it is quite true, mon amour.” She rubbed his back a little, and leaned down to put a kiss on his head.

He sighed, nodded, and leaned into her, putting his cheek against the nook of her shoulder and chest. “After that conversation with Triss, I ... I feel so drained, tired. Wrecked.” He looked up at his lover, before hiding his eyes against her robe. “Julias is dead, and I ... I ... just want to forget.”

“You cannot forget.”

“I know, I know. But, fuck, I looked into his eyes when he died, Antoinette. I saw them, and ... and...”

“I have ... had known Julias Mire for far longer than you, my love. If I knew him as well as I believe, then I can only imagine he felt joy, that he could not only spend his last moments with you, but saving your second life.”

“Yeap. That’s exactly what happened. He had that cocky, happy smile on, and ... and ... he died with it on.” Slow, Jack, take it slow. Work through it. “He had a few last words, encouragement for me, and ... things he wanted said to Triss, things I managed to say before she left, earlier tonight. The whole scene at the hospital was ... it was ... fuck, if it’d been anyone else, they’d have either raged or cried at the end. Not Julias. He accepted it, and ... and I knew he was thinking about Triss, right till the end, and...”

Fuck it. He held her tighter, and let some sobs come up. He didn’t want to cry anymore; honestly, he was getting sick of it. Cried over Mary, then the next night, cried over Julias with Beatrice. Now, same night, crying again. He was emotionally exhausted.

A minute later, the sobs passed, and he pulled his head away from Antoinette’s robe.

“Sorry,” he said, “for ... not wanting to spend the rest of the night sputtering sobs, I guess? I’m just too tired.”

She nodded, and pet his head a few times before she scooted back further onto the bed. “Come, lie with me. I wish to hold you.”

And there was that. In all the chaos and insanity, he’d almost forgotten about this part, about how, while Julias died and left Triss alone, he’d also almost died, and almost left Antoinette alone. Selfish of him, to forget that. And, kind of selfish of Julias, to leave Beatrice like he did. Selfish and selfless.

Jack slid into bed with her, and curled up, facing away, knowing she'd definitely want to be the big spoon tonight. She was a foot taller than him, so the big spoon came naturally to her, but they didn't always go that way. This time, he knew she'd want to, because he fucked up, almost died, and ... and put her through what Beatrice was going through.

Sure enough, she pulled the blanket up to their shoulders, turned to face him, and pulled him into her. She pressed her body to his back, held him close, and set her cheek against the back of his head.

“Sorry,” he said.

“For?”

“Almost dying. Almost ... yeah.”

“It ... would have been devastating, I cannot lie.” She sighed, a knowing sigh. “There are many things we should speak of.” She was too smart. All the thoughts he'd taken a day to process, to realize, she'd probably thought of immediately. Julius's death, Jack's curse, his Masquerade violation, Sándor's capture, his mom's embrace, and the fallout of everything related to those five things, she'd probably made a list of in her head and gone through them and the hundreds of connected variables already. Him, he was still struggling with accepting the five things as reality, let alone calculating possible outcomes from the fallout.

“I think I can talk now,” he said.

“Bien. What did the Invictus bestow upon you as punishment for violating the Masquerade?”

He managed a small chuckle. “Nothing. They're ... they're pretty broken up about Julius, too. And they understood the extenuating circumstances. I have to take time trying to figure out this curse, before I'm allowed to return to work.”

“Then Maria and Michael have grown wiser, since they arrived in my city so many decades ago.” She squeezed him a little harder for a moment, and kissed his ear once. “The circumstances were extreme, and the loss, far worse. They know better than to damage a valuable asset, or harm a dear ally, such as yourself.”

“A tactical decision, then.”

“No.” She squeezed yet again, and nudged her cheek against his head. “Well, perhaps. They are Invictus, after all. But I believe they are not the soulless manipulators they pass themselves off to be. They care about the Invictus, and its Kindred.”

“It’s hard to imagine Maria being emotional about things. And Michael, I expect would sooner throw a punch.” His turn to sigh. “But that’s not really what you want to talk about, is it?”

“No, I suppose it is not.”

His sigh turned into a groan, but he knew it was coming. “The curse, the thing, I assume Daniel filled you in on what I told him?”

“Oui, but ... I must hear it from you.”

Yeah, that was understandable. He really, fucking really didn’t want to, but it was the least he could do.

“Maria and Michael said it was the Strix, when I described the dream.” That earned a hard freeze from her, and her grip on him tightened. “Striges, or whatever. They ... infected me, or my ancestor, a woman, my great great grandsire. A Sanctified sealed it away, locked the curse behind some sort of spell. And over the centuries, it wore away, and I managed to break it. I ... I guess I’d been trying to break it ever since Angela first hurt me.” He turned around, and faced her. Her eyes were wider, staring at him as if he might turn into ash in her hands. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“I ... I am sorry, my love, but—”

“I’m still me, Antoinette. The thing, it’s there, but it’s ... it’s no different than the Beast we all deal with.” Not true. Now it could speak to him. Now, it had desires that extended beyond the typical hunger and animal aggression of a mindless beast. Now, it wanted revenge, with the sick joy of a psychotic killer. “Ok, it’s not the same. It’s different, but it’s not different in that it’s not me, but a separate thing, same as your Beast. It’s hungry, and angry, and it’s...” He closed his eyes and pushed in closer, setting his forehead to her sternum. “It’s fucking terrifying, but it also helped me, saved my life, captured Sándor, killed three hunters, and...”

The elder Daeva shivered for a moment, and clutched him tighter still, almost hurting him as she squeezed.

“I ... am frightened, my love. Of all the possibilities, I had not thought something as grandiose, or horrible, could be lurking within you.”

He wrapped his arm around her, the other underneath him on the bed, and he held her close as well.

“It seems ... unreal, doesn’t it? People dying, that feels real, like a hard punch to the gut. But this ... thing ... it doesn’t feel real. Feels more like a fairy tale, something out of a book.”

“It was quite real, my love. The crows, the blood and carnage, the ... personality ... that emerged.” More shivers worked through her, and she loosened her grip on him enough so she could lean back and look down at him. “The weight of death, murder, family, bullets and knives, money and blood, we contend with these every day. They are easy for us to understand, to grasp, and combat. But we are also creatures of the night, of fantasy and nightmares. The fantastical, and the horrific, we must also concern ourselves with. As easy as it may be to dismiss this curse as ... less real, than the death of your sister or sire, I urge you to reconsider. I have dealt

with entities beyond our understanding before, and ... and the wake of destruction they can leave, is far too real.”

He nodded, and she leaned back in to hold him tight against her. She was right, of course. Julias and Mary’s death felt like serrated blades in his gut. Memories of Angela, and the way she and Jeremiah had tortured him, felt like hot pokers being dragged down his spine. This curse, lurking in his heart, waiting to pounce, was almost too insane to believe.

But it was real, and it wasn’t going away.



~~Damien~~

“Hey Damien!”

Damien got up from his seat on the roof, and walked over to the fire escape on the side of the building. He held out his hand, and Fiona took it, pulling herself up and joining him.

“Hey.”

“What’re we doing up ‘ere?”

“Wanted to update you, in private.”

She raised a brow, and wandered around the rooftop, hands behind the small of her back against her brown, leather jacket. “Update? So ... not a date?”

He couldn’t help but laugh. How had he not seen that coming? He really was a dumbass, as Jessy said.

“Update tonight, date another night?” he said. There was maybe ninety minutes before sunrise, and he wouldn’t waste them on a date, even if he really, really wanted to.

“Ugh, fine!” She bounced over to him and beamed up at him. “What happened? No one’s told us anything, but we ken something’s going on.”

Sighing, he nodded toward the building edge. He sat down, legs dangling off, and she joined him, sitting beside him. It was a twenty-story building, and beside them was a giant, bright neon sign that read ‘Dips and Curves’. A hotel, and brothel. Men — and some women — came to stay the night, usually with a partner they brought, but sometimes they acquired a partner at the hotel itself. It had a strip club, a bar, a supposedly reputable buffet, and many other amenities that made Damien laugh thinking about them.

Lucas would have hated it, how the building encouraged a casual view of sins. Compared with the shit getting shoveled Damien’s way these past few months, it seemed too petty a concern.

“Julias is dead.”

“Julias, Jack’s sire?”

“Yeah.”

“I ... how?”

“Angela and her group attacked the hospital last night, to try and capture Jack’s mother. Jack was there, with Julias. They saved her, fought off the hunters, killed a few of them, and even captured Sándor, but Julias died in the fight.” Three sentences to summarize what must have been an utterly horrific experience for his friend. Three sentences didn’t do it justice.

“The crows!” Fiona pat him on the leg, several times, each basically a slap, an exclamation point for her waves of surprise. “I saw on the news! And it’s aw over the internet.”

Wincing, he nodded, and looked down at the tiny woman beside him. "That was Jack."

"... really? Wee Jack?"

"Yeah, really. He awoke some sort of curse inside him, far as he can tell, something ancient and a part of his bloodline. It ... snapped, when Julius died, broke free, and Jack summoned an army of crows." Damien shivered as he remembered the sky, the thousands upon thousands of crows that descended from above, and the hundred or more that had killed themselves in order to break a few windows. "It was terrifying, and awe-inspiring. I thought, for a moment, that perhaps I was witnessing a biblical event, something out of the Old Testament."

"I was in my lair, sleeping, recovering from yer Kiss." She managed a smile for him when she said Kiss, but it faded quickly. "Jack, he ... he must be feeling horrible. What happened to his maw?"

"The Prince turned her, and brought her back to the tower."

"Yay!" Fiona bounced in place a few times, butt hitting the rooftop edge. "Oh, oh, so she's Daeva now! I bet she'll be fun ... once ... she gets over her wee one dying."

"I think it'll be a little while before we can see Samantha. A little while longer, before she feels comfortable enough to ... socialize, with other paranormals. I suggest being a little more ... um..."

"What?" Her smile returned, and quickly became a mischievous grin, with a hint of 'I dare you to insult me'.

"Less aggressive with her, than you are with others."

Her grin only grew wider. Wham. She threw herself at him, a full on tackle; impressive, considering she was sitting down. But she



managed to get some weight into it, and it was enough to send him onto his back.

“I am nah aggressive!” she said, even as she crawled onto him, and straddled his waist. His legs were still dangling off the building edge, and it was a far enough drop to give any Kindred pause. If Fiona fell, would she survive, die instantly, or swing away like Spider-Man?

Of course that’s where his mind went, not to the fact the beautiful woman was straddling him, and grinning down at him. An ingrained reflex, to always look for the negatives, when a positive was set on his lap.

“I ... I uh ... um ... I—”

Groaning, she rolled her eyes, leaned down, and kissed him. “I’m glad yer fine,” she said without ever lifting her lips, half burying the words.

“I—” Ok, talking wasn’t going to work. In fact, she seemed quite insistent on not letting him talk. The gorgeous little woman pressed herself down on him, squashed her jacket and breasts to his suit jacket and chest, and her hands found his. She guided them, set them on her hips, and smiled into her kiss as she continued.

She knew how to kiss. He didn’t. He felt wholly inadequate to be a part of this exchange. But, God, it felt nice. Her lips were so warm, and soft, and—

“Ye were injured!” she said, pulling her head off of him at last. “In the tunnel, ye were injured, but ye still went to help Jack?”

“Maria wanted me to. And ... I mean, yeah. He’s my friend.”

Fiona squealed, and started kissing him again. “So brave!” Giggling unendingly, she rubbed her nose on his a few times, and

made sure to push her chest down on his, so there was no question about the feminine softness hidden in her jacket. “Did ye like my picture?”

“I ... haven’t been able to stop looking at it.”

He almost gasped as the fiery redhead blushed, deeply at that.

“Sorry if I’m being aw ... ye know ... slutty.” With more giggles, she stood up, and helped pull him to standing. “I can’t help it! I get aw ... tingly, when things gie scary.”

“Fear junkie,” he said, managing to put a touch of sarcasm on his inflection. It wasn’t easy, bantering like this, but she definitely made it easier. She made everything feel easier, even as he felt a hundred walls throw themselves up in his brain, trying to stop him from just giving into the joy, the giggles, the fun.

“Well I am a creature of nightmares!”

“Does Vrall get tingles from being scared?”

“No. She’s different.” Shaking her head, Fiona took his hand, and walked him toward the fire escape. “Come on, let’s go have fun!” Fun came with some very blatant eyebrow wiggling.

And, as much as it would have been so easy to simply follow her, let her pull him along into a journey of what was bound to be endless sexual fun, he resisted. He planted his feet, and she came to a stop, despite her continuous attempts to pull. He didn’t invite her up here for sex, or a date, or any of that. He invited her up here because he was worried about her, and he wanted to make sure she knew what was happening.

There was no greater killjoy in his life, than himself.

“Fiona.”

“What? Come on.”

“Fiona, I ... want to talk.”

She frowned at him. “Why?”

“Why?” He gave a small tug, and she had to come back onto the middle of the roof to not fall over. “Because you don’t seem to want to.”

“I dinnae understand.”

“We nearly died in that tunnel, Fiona. Julias died that same night. Jack’s got some sort of curse doing only Lord knows what. Hunters are everywhere. And ... and I nearly killed you.” Much as he knew his words carried weight, they didn’t seem to land. They bounced off the tiny redhead, as if she were impervious to all the worries in the world. Considering how quickly she recovered from getting drained of half her blood, maybe she was.

“And?”

“ ... and? Come on Fiona, I’m worried you’re not—”

“Nae taking things seriously? Dinnae ken what’s going on?” Her smile faded, replaced with a far more serious frown than he’d ever seen on her. Uh oh.

“I—”

“Damien! Ye dinnae ... ye’re the one that doesnae understand. Ye vampires are so concerned with tomorrow, ye never enjoy today.”

Well, that was true. That was very true, he supposed, and he was one of the worst offenders. Fifty years hiding in sewers could do that to a man. It was paranoia well deserved, though, even if it

meant interrupting what obviously could have been a very enjoyable night.

“But I—”

“No! Shut up!” She stomped her foot, and Damien took a step back. “Ye’re dumb!”

“I ... I’m afraid I have to agree. I am pretty dumb, and—”

“No! No no no no no!” She stomped around a few more times, before she marched up to him, and punched him in the shoulder. “Ye’re supposed to protect me!”

“I ... what?”

“I’m the princess! Ye’re supposed to protect me, and be both sexy and caring, but also dark and scary and mysterious. Ye’re supposed to scoop me up, guard me from this horrible world, and fuck me as you do!”

Wow. Ok, confused did not begin to describe his state of mind. “I don’t know if I’m the guy to—”

She grabbed his hands, and started pulling again, but this time she started pulling him toward the rooftop entrance, a locked door. “I’ll have ye know, I think about those things, about the hunters, and Jeremiah, and how Angela is hurting my friends, and how the Prince and the others dinnae really want us here, and all sorts of stuff!” A spidery silhouette erupted from around her back, and Damien flinched as the eight limbs of shadow slammed into the door, piercing the metal. A moment later, she yanked it open, and it banged against the rooftop entrance protrusion.

“I ... I don’t think it was locked.”

“Shh!” She glared at him, but didn’t let go of his hand, as she dragged him down into the hotel. The roof entrance showed a stairway, one that led down to another door. A passage used by staff only, probably. A light flickered, not doing the best job lighting the rarely used stairway. “This will work.”

“Fiona, I—”

She snapped her hand out, and again the silhouette of the spider woman appeared around her. How their monster abilities worked outside the nightmare realm, he didn’t understand. It wasn’t like she was carrying around her horror half in a physical sense; otherwise Sándor would have weighed several tons, at least, and carrying him out of the hospital would have been impossible for him. But, they were able to summon up their physical forms in a limited, specific sense, like Fiona stabbing with her spider legs momentarily. What other strange things could they do? Sándor had penetrated Eric’s dreams once, attacked him there, turned it into a nightmare. If the gargyle horror could do it there, could the man tied up in the Prince’s cell do it as well?

Fiona’s snap shattered the light bulb overhead, and drowned them in darkness. “Close the door behind ye.”

He did, and regretted it. Complete, total, one-hundred percent darkness. Kindred eyes were good, but not that good.

“Damien,” she said, “ye Kindred are all stupid dobbers! Do ye nae ever consider the moment? Ye’re all so concerned with the future, ye never enjoy the present.”

“It’s hard to enjoy the present when you know the future is going to get you killed, Fiona.”

“Pfft.” She snorted, and pulled him down the stairs. Without light to go by, she went slow, but still faster than he’d like, and he almost

stumbled down the hard stairs multiple times. “Why dinnae ye do it for me?”

“What?” he said to the darkness.

“Do it for me? Ye’re so focused on the future, but ye never see the things in front of ye. It’s like ye’re afraid of ... of being happy for once, ye ken?”

“I—” He froze as he felt his boot land on something soft. The air turned humid, hot, and it blanketed him in sweltering heat; no concern or real discomfort to a vampire, but it was startling nonetheless. Still pitch black, but now he could feel mud start to overwhelm his boots, branches hit his suit, and moisture soak through into his clothes. He knew where they were.

“You’re always so worried about the future,” she said, except her voice had changed. No longer was she the cute little redhead, but something else instead. “And it’s more than that. You always observe, never participate. You’re always on the outside, Damien, watching. It’s as if, you never consider that maybe, you could have a piece of what others are having, as if the pleasures others find in each other, is not something you’re ... allowed to have.”

“I ... guess I got used to that. Fifty years of hiding is a long time. And ... and when I was finally done, it all sort of fell apart.”

“But it’s not like that anymore. You don’t have to be so paranoid that everything you touch is going to fall apart. Especially me.”

“You say that so easily, but—” And then he was upside down.

Only now, as he dangled upside down and was lifted higher, did some light manage to pierce through the canopy above them. What light found him confirmed his suspicions, and he gasped as he watched the branches, leaves, vines, and moisture droplets of the jungle pass by. There were creatures as well, the sort you’d expect to

find in a jungle, though attempts to see them proved borderline futile. And considering it was a jungle of darkness, he doubted he wanted to. Centipedes were probably the least frightening thing this jungle held within its endless shadows.

Higher, and higher they went, until the floor was gone, and only branches remained, giant and layered with dark vines. The moonlight punctured the canopy better up here, but the trees were tall and taller still, burying him in shadow, with only several beams of moonlight able to reach him. Enough to see by, enough to look around, and realize he wasn't moving up anymore.

He was stuck, not upside down anymore, but still stuck. In a spider web. Stuck in a spiderweb. The human reflex in him demanded he panic and struggle. The Kindred reflex in him told him to vanish, disappear, find a shadow to hide in. Neither were of much use in this situation, and he grit down on his teeth as he told both sets of instincts to shut up.

“Damien Damien Damien,” the spider monster said, hidden in the shadows that blanketed the forest. “So concerned with everything, all the time, and refusing to embrace the comforts given to you. I’ve known people like you Damien, hundreds and hundreds of years ago. A wounded soldier, wounded in the mind, unable to accept that, perhaps, they could be happy, if they just lowered their guard for a moment.” She chuckled, the alien voice rippling along the enormous trees. “I can fix that.”

Squirming accomplished nothing. The webbing was thick, strong, and he didn't have the easy strength of a Nosferatu or Daeva to fuel his efforts.

“Fiona, you—”

The spider woman descended from the trees, and he froze as he stared up at her. Up this high, the canopy was open enough to expose the two moons, providing just enough light for him to see a

few feet into the dark night. He was glad he could. As much as Fiona in her human form was terribly attractive, in her horror form, the true form of her monster half, she was beautiful, exotic, and terrifying.

The long, thin spider legs that emerged from her back were smooth, and the texture of them looked almost like metal, matching their dark tint. She pressed their sharp tips against the thread, and climbed down it with more delicate, precise skill than any real spider could manage. Her humanoid body hovered before him, held up by the eight legs, and she smiled down at him as she descended upon him.

She had no eyes; a stark difference to the many eyes real spiders had. Instead of eyes, smooth, dark horns curled up and back from where eyes would have been, and they joined the myriad of enormous horns that decorated her head like a grand crown. No hair. Beneath the almost-black horns, her skin was of similar color, dark steel, and her small nose, pointed chin, and tiny lips gave both figurative and literal sharpness to her gorgeous face. Her slender neck joined to a very human torso, a long white dress of spider silk hiding her huge breasts, but there were plenty of holes in it, and it was tight enough that he could see the inhumanly tiny waist sitting above her wide hips, and curvy butt.

Her legs were human shaped, but instead of ankles or feet, her shins were twice as long as a human's, and came to sharp points, like her eight spider legs. She had hands, but instead of four fingers and a thumb, she had two fingers and thumb, each a large claw that matched the rest of her blades.

Vrallar'trakla of the Eight Blade Arach. He didn't know what that title was about, except that it was appropriate.

“ ... Fiona,” he said, and he tried to pull his head back a little. No such luck. He was thoroughly trapped. “What are you—”



“I’m not letting you run away this time. You are trapped, vampire, and I will make you feel pleasure, and joy, no matter how much you wish to hide from it.” Her eight spider legs took to different corners of the enormous web, keeping her humanoid center stable as she hovered, and came in closer to him, and closer, until she was only inches from his face. “I’ve seen your looks, your eyes, when I’ve been in this body around you. You like it.”

Her voice was far more smooth and natural than it had been the first time he met the monster, but he could still hear the hisses and rasps. He gulped, and tried to keep his eyes on hers. Not having her own eyes made eye contact difficult. It grew especially difficult when she leaned in closer, until she pressed her breasts into his chest, and set her lips on his neck.

Any concern her spider body had hard skin vanished, as her massive, soft breasts squished against his suit jacket. Good God.

“It’s ... it’s very attractive, in a unique way.”

“Isn’t it?” Laughing, her deeper, huskier voice showing through, she kissed his neck, and set her clawed hands onto his shoulders as she came in closer still. Her pelvis pressed to his, and he squirmed as he felt her lovely thighs against his pants.

“Fiona, I—”

One of her hand’s claws pressed to his lips, and she shook her head as she smiled at him. “Damien, listen. Fiona wants you to Kiss her again, drink more of her blood; except next time, she wants you to be inside her when you do.”

“Fiona does...” Right, Fiona was Vrall and Vrall was Fiona. It was a strange way to think, but it wasn’t like they were two different people. Just, two different bodies, with different personalities to go with. “I almost killed you.”

“No you didn’t.” Laughing, the beautiful monster put a kiss on his jaw, and nudged her cheek into his. “You drained her, quite a bit, but she was fine. It was strange, seeing you being so aggressive, giving into your Beast like that. Fiona ... loved it. Fiona wants that desperately, to feel your hands hold her down as you drink her. She wants to squeeze on your cock and soak you in her cum as you devour her. She wants her dark, dangerous man, delirious with hunger, to pin her down and take her.”

He blinked, a dozen times. This was starting to sound very similar to Jack’s advice. “She ... does?”

“Yes, she does. She wants to sit down with you, talk about your past that you refuse to talk about, and she wants to tell you about her life. She wants to order in pizza, and watch a romcom with you.” It almost made Damien laugh, hearing the ancient spider monster say ‘romcom’ in her scary, hissing voice. “She then wants you to take her hand, kiss her, and then pin her down and Kiss her, as you fuck her into a coma.” The monster laughed, and offered him a small shrug as she leaned away. “Not a literal coma, but there is no doubt that the Beast you unleashed in that moment was ... stronger than expected. Perhaps it was the blood?”

“Maybe. It was unusual, the taste of her blood.”

“But pleasant?”

“ ... very.”

She nodded, smiling, and leaned in again. He couldn’t move, but that was fine, he was ok with letting the spider monster kiss him; mostly ok. Eyes closed, moment frozen, he managed a small smile as her small lips opened, and he felt the hint of her long fangs within. She probably had a venomous bite. Scary. Exhilarating. Maybe he had a fear kink, same as Fiona?

“But, you ran away.”

“I didn’t run away!” he yelled. “I thought I ... thought I might have really hurt you.”

She giggled, and set a kiss on his chin. “You do not raise your voice often.”

“I have learned to be ... reserved, and quiet.” It was the only way to survive all those years.

“Mmmm, that was then. Things are different now.” Shrugging, she hovered away a couple feet, and raised her claws to her shoulders. With slow movements, and a subtle, evil grin, she began to cut through the shoulder straps of the tiny, flimsy dress. “Fiona finds your behavior confusing. I recognize it, though. You are a man that is not used to pleasure, and does not know how to accept it. You flee from it, terrified it might make you happy, and that, eventually, you might lose that happiness.”

“I ... I don’t think...” Was that it? He’d legitimately thought he’d crossed a line with Fiona, thought maybe his Kiss had bordered on an attack, maybe a deadly one. He hadn’t considered that maybe he was just lying to himself, and that he was afraid of being happy. “I —”

His jaw dropped, as the spider lady’s dress fell. Good Lord, her breasts were enormous, and her nipples were black against the dark steel skin, like her lips. The humanoid part of Vrall was of average size for a woman, a little shorter than him, but her waist cut into a size that belonged on a Barbie doll more than a real person. Her thighs were toned and smooth, and her sex was smooth as well, with the same black color of her nipples.

“Fiona does not understand why someone would behave that way. She just chases the things that make her happy without a second thought. I, on the other hand, have existed for thousands of years, and am all too familiar with the self-destructive nature of man.”

“Umm...” Words failed him, eyes too busy staring at the gorgeous body of the monster.

“That is why I have trapped you in my web. There will be no fleeing from me. And”—she leaned in, and pressed her breasts into his suit hard enough he could feel her nipples harden against it —“unlike Fiona, I am at my most content, when my prey is bound and helpless.”

“Prey?” That earned a small squirm from him.

She laughed again, and started to undo the buttons of his suit jacket. “Blush Life for me, vampire.”

“Fio ... Vrall, I—” He shivered as her claws slipped into his pants, and began undoing the fly. “I don’t—”

“Shh.” The busty creature undid the buttons of his shirt with swift precision, and once she exposed his chest to the humid, warm jungle air, she pressed her huge breasts into him. Their softness molded to the hardness of his chest and abs, and Vrall let out a long, quiet moan. “I would ask you to drink me, as you did with Fiona, but I do not think a Kindred’s body can gain sustenance from a true horror.”

“P ... Probably not.” He froze, paralyzed, and tried to keep his eyes open as the monster gently eased her body up and down using her eight spider legs. Soft, warm, silky, he gulped as he looked down, and stared at the huge pillows squashed to his chest.

“Blush.”

“I feel like you’ll drink me if I do.” Irony, for a Kindred to be the one worried about being sucked dry into a withered husk.

“ ... I might, but I guarantee you will enjoy it.” She leaned in to him, and began to kiss his neck, opening her mouth enough for him

to feel her fangs. “Blush for me, and I will tell you all the ways Fiona wants you to touch her.”

“But, I thought you were Fiona.”

“I am. But I am Vrall, and right now, Vrall is me, and Fiona is her.”

Give up trying to understand how the Begotten work, Damien, and go with it.

He Blushed Life, and immediately, his shaft began to press on his pants, hard, hard enough it hurt. The spider woman moaned into his neck, and slid her hands down his body. He couldn't see what she was doing, but he could feel her immense finger claws ease his pants down, and his boxers.

“Ooh.” She giggled. Not Fiona's giggle, but Vrall's, a foreign, subtle, scary, from-the-depths-of-forgotten-jungle laugh. Her grip surrounded his length, and squeezed.

“Ah ... h-hey.” Her long claws couldn't curl around his length due to the shape of them, so instead, she used her soft palm to cup his shaft, and grip it with enough strength to make him stir. Someone else's hands were on his penis, and the strangeness of it, and exhilaration, got his heart beating fast enough he could feel it hit his chest and her breasts pressed to them.

“You are more well endowed than your passive nature suggests, vampire. You hope to fit this into Fiona? She is a tiny thing.”

Damien managed a small chuckle, but it was weak. He was too overwhelmed to be chuckling. A spider monster had trapped him in her web and was currently stroking his cock, gently bringing her soft skin back and forth along its underside. Circumcised, he shivered as her palm eased up along the swollen head, before slipping down to

the base again. Sensitive as all Hell, the touch made him gulp again, and this time he gulped saliva, fueled by the Blush and craving.

So he was, perhaps, a little more well endowed than statistically common. Her words stroked his ego almost as much as her hand stroked his length, and he blushed red.

“I ... yeah, I do.”

“Then I shall tell you in what ways you could treat Fiona in bed, because Fiona is, and is not Vrall. We have different tastes.” Nodding, Vrall pulled back, and hovered a foot away from him, giving him more than a perfect angle for him to admire her inhuman curves. She reached out, and began to slice his clothes open.

“Wha—hey.”

“The Invictus will buy you new clothes, surely.” Laughing, she sliced apart the shoulders and sleeves, and threw the fabric away, before doing the same to his pants, all with exact precision, and all within mere moments. She’d be an amazing surgeon.

“I know, it’s just ... how am I going to get back home now?”

“We will cross that bridge later.” Nodding again, she grinned as she looked him up and down. “Fiona will love this. She will very much want it.” He almost said something, but she came back in again, and lowered herself down, and down, until her face was eye-level with his shaft. “Vrall wants to ensnare you, Damien. Vrall wants you as you are, bound, helpless, free for me to take my time and enjoy my meal.”

Calling him meal, and prey, was definitely making him nervous. It was also pumping his body full of fake adrenaline fueled by the Blush, and he found himself panting. Tiny bits of fear danced up and down his skin, as he realized he was in a nightmare, and a

monster had him trapped in a literal web. When he first met her, he'd stumbled through this jungle, and was taken aback by how much it was a real jungle, smells, humidity, heat, noises, all included. She had corpses dangling about, some from Dolareido, many others far, far older, and Vrall had made it known she was an old creature. Killing a vampire like him, who was tied up and helpless? He knew Fiona liked him, but Vrall was another story. It certainly seemed like the monster liked him, but he wasn't completely convinced yet.

"But Fiona?" Laughing softly, she came in closer, and set her face against the underside of his shaft. She smiled up at him as he felt the angles of her oddly beautiful face nudge along the veins of his girth. "Fiona is a young woman, with the fantasies of many young women who are as nice as her. She wants a strong man, a dangerous man, to take her, and have his way with her."

"I ... I'm not—"

"You are a dangerous creature, Damien. You have the body of an agile warrior, a history worthy of story, the skills of an assassin, and the determination of someone with resolve. Combined with your young face, and your ... movie vampire aesthetics, a modern young woman is bound to fall for you."

"Movie vampire?" Arg, not the emo thing again. "I—"

The eyeless monster giggled once again, quiet, with a few small hisses, and she offered his shaft a slow kiss along its underside. God in Heaven. The beautiful creature looked almost regal with the array of horns on her head, how they curved backward and then out and in like a crown. The fact she didn't have eyes, but more horns coming up and out to join the crown, didn't rob her of her beauty; made her as scary as Lucifer, but didn't rob her.

"She wants you to pin her down, Damien. She wants you to take her, hold her down, and enter her. She wants you to wrap your grip

around her throat, and make her squirm as she climaxes on your length. She wants you to bind her, and finger her until she squeals, as you drain her of blood.” With a slow, gentle touch, Vrall brought her face up to the tip of his cock, and offered the swollen head a loving kiss. Immediate sparks ran down his length as he felt the warm, succulent, massaging touch of her lips on his glans. “Hug her, hold her, drain her, and force her to cum until she has almost passed out. And when she is defenseless, exhausted, soaking wet and shaking, she wants you to fuck her, hard. Or soft, depending. As long as she is weak and unable to stop you. A limp woman in your arms, insides trembling, juices flowing, that is what she wants to be.”

“That ... is...” A lot to process. Honestly, he’d almost done all those things, that time in the subway. If things had gone any further, he’d been liable to either Kiss her until death was a real possibility, or he would have spent every bit of energy he drained out of her, fucking her.

“Is this not to your liking?”

“I’m not sure. I ... I...” It wasn’t a part of him he normally ever indulged, the desire to be aggressive, overpower, and penetrate. But, that time in the subway changed that. The sight of her, panting, exhausted, helpless, soaking his fingers in her cum, it’d sent an overpowering desire into his guts to have her, take her, and do things to her.

“Imagine it.” Again, the spider woman kissed the head of his cock, and he groaned louder, above a whisper now, as the pleasure ripples continued to build. “Fiona, sitting in your lap, her hands tied behind her back. She is exhausted, whimpering and mewling, her legs hooked around your waist, and your length buried inside her. She is too tired to do anything, so you grab her hips and force her back and forth, all the while your teeth are sunk into her neck, and letting her



blood flow into you. She trembles, squeezing on you, and her juices flow down your cock again, and again, until yours join them.”

As her intoxicating story finished painting a vivid picture he couldn't deny he wanted to taste, she began to suckle on the whole of his length's head. His breath caught in his throat, and he gazed down at the spider monster as she slid his length between her spread lips, back and forth, slow and tight. He could feel her spider fangs, four fangs that curled back in her mouth, so only the flat side of the front of them nudged against his glans. It was her lips that shocked him to stillness. Her kisses had been gentle, but once she'd slipped them over the whole of the sensitive skin, he struggled to manage the sensation.

It had been a long, long time since he'd had an orgasm. Decades. And never, ever, had he experienced the touch of another. The overwhelming sensation shook him to the core, literally, abs squeezing and cock flexing upward in her mouth as he struggled to handle the onslaught of bliss. Wet, warm, soft, and tight. Smaller groans and pants managed to escape him, and his eyes closed as he felt the building heat between his legs.

And then she stopped. He forced in a useless breath, and gazed down at the beautiful woman and her royal crown of horns.

“I ... uh ... wow.”

Vrall chuckled, and gave his cock's head a quick kiss, before she hovered up a little higher. Once her breasts were level with his length, she took his girth into a palm, and guided it onto her right breast. She held it, aimed it forward and pressed it into her soft, dark nipple. Gently, slowly, she massaged her breast with his cock, and he shivered as she acquainted his glans with the texture of her skin, her swollen areola, and the engorged tip.

“Vrall, on the other hand, prefers her men in the opposite situation.”

“S ... Sounds like ... you’re her other half.”

“It does, does it not?” Nodding, enormous crown moving with her, she slid his length down, and pressed it up against the soft, heavy underside of her breast, so the silky weight overflowed it. She rubbed it from side to side, sending more pulses of growing bliss along his length, but not strong enough to bring him to orgasm. The edge of bliss, a pleasure he hadn’t felt in so long, he was almost afraid to experience it again, afraid it wouldn’t live up to the paltry memory.

“I um ... I don’t know if—” Another shudder, and his eyes went wide as he looked down, and he found the spider woman suckling on his glans again.

“You will do as I say for Fiona. She craves it, and you crave it.”

“I do?”

“Oh yes.” Her lips slipped down further, and she set a kiss along the underside of his cock, and another, and another, peppering its whole length with them. “You want to. I remember the animal that awoke in you when you tasted her. I saw it in your eyes. A hint of the Beast rose to the surface, and you embraced it.”

“I—” His eyes closed again as she started to suckle his length’s head again, all of it. It was the sensation of her lips sliding back and forth along the base edge of his glans, at where the bulbous shape connected to his length, that filled him with rising waves of bliss and sensitivity. The monster knew what she was doing, and he was helpless to control the waves of warmth flowing up from underneath his shaft.

His jaw dropped, and he forced himself to keep his eyes open — half successful — so he could watch the beautiful creature suckle, as he came into her mouth. Her suckling grew softer, slower, and he sighed relief as she kept the pleasure from crossing into painful.

Each flex of his insides sent a wave bliss up through his cock, and a gush of warm fluid came with it, landing on the tongue teasing his girth.

The pleasure was staggering. Small grunts escaped him as his insides flexed, lungs crushed by muscles as he struggled to handle the waves of pleasure. She continued to suckle, easing her lips back and forth again and again, slow, tight, milking him of his cum, and gulping it down with quiet moans. The vibrations of her voice on the sensitive skin was euphoric, and his eyes eventually closed as he melted into her suckling kiss.

Eventually, she relented. He managed to open his eyes again, and he stared at the spider woman as she grinned up at him.

“Your first?” she said.

“Y ... Yeah.”

“The first time you have cum at the hands of another, and it is a monster’s lips.” Laughing, Vrall hovered higher, enough so her breasts nudged against his thighs. With a lick of her lips, she pushed her body into him closer, enough so his cock rested between her breasts, and she stayed there, grinning up at him. “Still aroused?”

“I ... I...” He blinked, gulping, panting, and continued to stare at the sight of his length sitting along her sternum. His testicles pressed to her tiny stomach, and when she pushed her shoulders and biceps forward, it pushed her breasts forward, squashing the mounds to his inner thighs and pelvis, and burying much of his length between them. The softness of them molding around his shaft felt heavenly, and relaxing, compared to the extreme stimulus of lips on his glans, and he managed a small, exhausted smile, as he gazed down at the sight.

Her shoulders were moving slightly, and had been before, he only just realized. And looking at her now, he could see why. She was

masturbating, one of her claw hands underneath her doing something he couldn't see, but it was obvious now that he was looking. Of course, he was bound to a web, and could only look down, not actually give into his cravings and maybe help her out. Despite himself, despite trying to hold still, he inched his hips forward, and sighed bliss as he felt her breasts fight to keep his body and cock where they were.

“I will take that as a yes.” Her shoulder moved faster, and her breasts began to jiggle lightly, ripples working through them and into his pelvis. Her mouth parted, exposing her spider fangs, and quiet, girlish moans mixed into the sounds of the jungle, as she played with herself. He did not know how long she'd been masturbating before, but it must have been a little while, as her body started to move faster rather quickly. She was already on the edge.

Over the edge. She shuddered, made a few hiss-filled groans, and pressed her breasts harder into him, smiling up at him as she trembled. He felt it, felt her quivers through her body, and how they caused her squashed breasts to jiggle and bounce where they were pinned to him.

After a few moments, she let out her own long sigh, and hovered upward again until she was eye level with him. One of her claw hands reached down, took his cock, and guided it toward her own sex, a smooth, hairless pelvis that looked basically human, except for the dark metal color. Her sex's lips sat beneath, and she smiled at him as she slid herself in closer, and pressed his glans against the folds.

Soaked. Wet warmth enveloped his cock's tip once again, except this time it wasn't from her mouth. It was soft along her folds, between her thighs, and she eased herself back and forth a couple inches, enough for his cock to slip along the almost dripping lips.

Her cum coated him in moments, and he shivered as he struggled to keep from thrusting his hips forward.

“Fiona wants to be taken, and protected. Beauty and the Beast.” Nodding her head of horns, Vrall angled her hips back a little to aim her sex more toward him, and began to push toward him. His engorged glans pressed to her hot, clenching slit, and Damien froze again as the soft, hot skin of her insides began to spread around his cock. Soft, but tight. Very, very tight.

With a hearty chuckle, the creature lowered herself down onto him, inch by inch, and she leaned back as she did. Her hands took his shoulders, and she licked her fangs as slowly but surely, she devoured him, sheathing every inch he had into her depths, until she was pressed snug and firm to his pelvis. She leaned back far enough she was almost horizontal, and he could feel the upward angle of his cock press toward her belly button. And, with how she leaned back, her breasts flattened and spread against her chest.

Tight. Extremely tight. He clenched on his jaw and flexed his core as he felt her insides squeeze, and he let out a quick pant or two as she squeezed harder still. He had not expected it to feel like this, not at all. No wonder every man in Dolareido did everything they could, to have sex as often as humanly or inhumanly possible.

“But I am the Beast this night, and you are bound, helpless.” She let go of his shoulders, but her many spider legs emerging from her back remained attached to the spider web. They moved with precision, subtle and silent, and he stared at how they adjusted on the web, some reaching out far, others staying close, to keep her snug to his body as she held herself horizontal as if lying on a table, and then down a little further. Leaning back and down as she was, it drove his cock upward toward her belly harder, and he shivered as she clenched again. Hot juices dripped down onto his testicles, mixing with the humidity of the jungle, and he gulped as he looked down to see her tiny slit spread wide and taut around his girth.

The head of his length was pressing against her depths, and Fi—Vrall moaned as she pushed herself in toward him harder, causing his length to fill her, and for his glans to rub against the furthest reaches within her. Good Lord. The sparks of bliss that her insides sent down the sensitive skin were enough to make him gulp.

“How does it feel?” the spider said. Before he could answer, eyes locked onto her spread sex and her extreme hourglass figure, she lifted her two human legs, and set them on his shoulders, the blade-like points coming up past his head and his ears.

“I ... it...” No words could describe the combination of stimulus. The tightness of her depths, the heat and wetness that combined into a massaging grip that worked every inch of his length, it reignited the sensitivity and bliss her mouth had minutes before.

She used her spider legs to ease herself away a few inches, and pull her back in with a soft impact, making the webbing shake, all while keeping her two human-ish legs up and on his shoulders. Back and forth, each stroke a slow motion, and she timed her squeezing muscles with them. Rolling waves of pleasure flowed down through his length, and he found his whole body flexing in surprise at the overwhelming sensation of the friction of her insides on his cock’s tip.

The fact he got to watch her body as she slid back and forth in the air, heavy breasts jiggling up and down on her chest with each thrust, was making it excruciatingly difficult to keep his pleasure under control. And as the almost painful, delicious minutes went by, the spider made it a thousand times harder, as she started to squeeze all the more. Her movements came to a halt, and she kept herself balls deep, as her hands roamed her body. She raised herself a little so she was horizontal again, and she smiled up at him as she squeezed her breasts, causing them to spill over her long, sharp blade-like fingers, as she quivered. Her insides gripped him in random spasms, milking, massaging, leaking her juices onto him

until a couple drips fell from his testicles, onto the awaiting dark jungle beneath.

“It has been so long,” she said, sighing with long, heavy breaths, each causing her breasts to rise and fall, “since I have felt another inside me.” With a quiet chuckle that almost disappeared into the sounds of the jungle, she sat up further and further as she hooked her legs around his hips. Her hands took his shoulders again, and she came in close, doing her best to keep him fully sheathed inside her as she brought her face in to his, and pressed her breasts to his chest. “These may be firsts for you, Damien, but for Vrall, these are ancient pleasures I once bathed in.”

“B ... Bathed ... in?” He struggled to breathe. He was on the edge of orgasm, and he could still feel hers, her insides trembling around him, clenching in spurts, and her panting body pressing her breasts tight to his hard chest. Air was unnecessary for a Kindred, but the Blush of Life looked for it anyway, and the few panting sounds he didn’t manage to suppress earned smiles from the regal creature sitting on his cock.

“Memories, faded, buried in time from centuries of sleeping in the nightmare. I was once worshiped by the people of the jungle. They feared the spider, and sacrificed to me. Some did more than worship.” Sighing, she set her lips to his, but only just, skin grazing along his chin and cheek. So close, his eyes were left looking at the enormous horns that came straight up from her face before curling back; it was almost like a mask, hiding where eyes should have been. “I enjoyed those nights. I hope you have enjoyed this one.”

Even as she said it, she nudged her lips into his, and ground her hips forward, rubbing her clitoris into his pelvis as she clenched on him. She’d become so much more eloquent since he first met the monster, as if she was becoming more and more used to Dolareido. Still a bit of that Portuguese-ish accent coming through, making

him wonder how much Vrall adapted to her other half's environment.

His wandering mind came back to the moment as he felt his cum start to build up once again. Trying to think about anything — and normally he never stopped thinking — was impossible, as the spider creature clenched her depths on his cock, and began to milk him. The sweet, blissful friction of her slit, dripping around him as its depths massaged his length and glans, was euphoric. No words, no thoughts, only pleasure, as the spider woman started to work herself faster.

He was helpless to do anything but stand there, arms and legs out, held by the web. It was sort of freeing, not being able to do anything, but he did try to thrust a bit. The webbing was flexible enough that he could drive his hips forward, and the small whimpers he earned from Vrall were intoxicating. It was a sound he'd heard women make before, in his nightly hunts, but never one he'd ever heard from so close, or one he'd helped a girl make. And it felt so very different, when he could hear it from so close, be part of her, indulge in her moans as he thrust into her a little harder.

He came, and slowed down his thrusts. She didn't. As he felt his fluids pour into her, each clench of his muscles spurting thick warmth up through his length, Vrall continued to grind herself against him, squeezing hard enough to make him wince. Orgasm turned his glans sensitive, and her thrusts were almost painful, as she milked every last drop of him into her awaiting body.

She stopped once she started shivering, and hugged him. Her face disappeared into the nook of his neck, forcing his head to lean over to make room for her horns. The moans and pants the spider monster made were amazing, and he closed his eyes as he relished the feel of her insides squeezing, shivering, and the feel of her heart beating against his chest. The feel of her breasts, massive and



overflowing, and the feel of her thighs, squeezing around his hips, was a euphoric mix of softness, and power.

“Now,” the spider monster said, turning her head, and then kissing his earlobe, “I want you, Damien, to understand. I have seen many men who refused to embrace comforts when they came their way, for many reasons. Take it from someone much older and wiser than you, that that is foolhardy. Enjoy what pleasures you can find in this world, vampire. They are few.”

“R-Right. I ... I think I ... can see your point.”

“Good.” With another pleasing sigh, she floated away from him, and hovered about three feet out from his body while her eight spider legs remained attached to the web. She reached down, scooped up between her legs, and traced a line of white up her tiny waist, and then up onto one of her heavy breasts. “While I do expect you to take Fiona to bed, and fuck her regularly, Damien, I also expect to find you back here in my web frequently as well. Understood?”

“Um, understood.” He was dating two women. How had that thought never occurred to him?

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~~Beatrice~~

Everyone was waiting for her.

Sighing, groaning, she got up from crawling through the tiny cave entrance, and stood before the witches of the Circle of the Crone. Jen came up behind her and stood with her. She'd stayed with her, when Triss had decided to not return to the cave after learning about Julias. But this was the next night, and she had to report back. The cave was also the only truly safe place she had anymore, now that she couldn't stay in Julias's bunker. Last night, she'd risked

sleeping in a dark little corner in the tomb, and Jen had stuck with her.

Stupid girl. Triss was lucky to have her.

Othello and Aaron both approached, but Triss held up a hand, halting them from fifty feet away.

“Not looking to talk, guys. Besides, you’d suck at it.”

That managed to lighten the heavy weight blanketing them all, at least a bit, and the two men smiled a little, nodded, and backed off. Jacob stood by the sacrifice bowl further back, between it and the hundreds of bones that decorated the wall of stone behind him. Dressed in his black robes and white eye bandage, he looked like his usual, imposing self.

Except, he wasn’t smiling his usual jackass smile. He wasn’t shifting around like a restless child annoyed with the world for being too slow, like usual. He wasn’t in his weird half imposing, half inviting postures, and he wasn’t chuckling, or making any sound. All her boss did, was stand there, and look at her. His expression wasn’t cold, but it wasn’t playful or teasing like usual either. It wasn’t anything. It was just there.

She walked up to him, put her hands on the disgusting sacrificial bowl’s edges, and looked at him. Four feet separated them, and the fucker didn’t flinch once. Hell, he could have been a statue; not like vampires needed to breathe.

“You heard?” she said.

“I did,” he said.

“You know what I’m going to ask for.”

“I do.”

“ ... I don't plan to ask, not yet.”

A small smile broke through on his lips, but it faded just as quickly. “Smart.”

“Black Blood paid me a visit.”

“Did he now?” Not a break in his tone or a flinch in his expression. Either he knew, or expected.

“It, Jacob. It's an it.”

“It identifies as a he, Triss. Don't judge.”

Rolling her eyes, she couldn't stop herself from chuckling at that. God damn it, she didn't want to laugh right now. “It ... he...” She looked down at the bowl. Empty. Her fingers squeezed on the metal, avoiding the bone of the skulls and whatnot that were part of its shape. Don't break the bowl, the bowl did nothing to you. “He thinks I should ... think ... about things.”

“Sound advice.”

“ ... can we talk? In private?” She looked over her shoulder to Jen. “You ok with that?”

“Yeah, it's fine. I'll catch the boys up.” Jen nodded her head toward Aaron and Othello, and the three of them disappeared into one of the alcoves carved in the cave wall. Some of the ghouls drifting around came with her, following the Ventrue with intent to obey her orders. They were trustworthy, according to Jacob, and Triss had grown used to their presence in the many months she'd spent in the cave.

But she didn't want them around when talking with Jacob, not about this.

Jacob nodded, and the two of them took a side tunnel into a winding path. Eventually they came to his room, though Triss knew he slept elsewhere. She couldn't blame him. Elders had earned their paranoia, surviving for centuries by trusting no one, not even their closest servants. After last night, she thought about asking him for tips. If nightmares were going to haunt her daily torpor for the rest of her life, the least she could do for herself was ensure she did it someplace safe.

Jacob pulled the hanging fur aside, and the two of them sat down on the floor on his many furs. She didn't visit his room very much, not since the hunters had made an appearance. If she had to stay someplace for the day, someplace safe, her and Jen could just stay at Julius's. But that was the past, and she had to adapt. Don't think about Julius, think about the future. Think about revenge.

She looked around the walls of Jacob's alcove. There were bones on the walls, hanging masks, and furs from animals she didn't know. She'd described one of the masks to Jack once, and he assured her it was from a video game. Apparently, a playful imp stole it from a merchant who had a bunch of masks, and put it on. Unknown to the imp, the mask was possessed with some sort of evil god or entity thing, and it took over the imp to use him as a conduit for destruction.

She told him no fucking way it was from a video game. The fuck would Jacob be doing with a fucking cosplay prop? Surely everything in the room was authentic. The bones, the voodoo bags, the carvings, it made the room look like some sort of occult shop, and there was no way the five-hundred-year-old vampire would stand for anything less than authentic. She hoped. It was Jacob, and he was a joker, a trickster, and an all-around maniac. Maybe it was all silly fake shit?

"Black Blood visited you?" he said.

“Yeah. He ... he wanted to present ... options.”

Jacob reached up, grabbed one of the masks, and put it on. Holding it by the chin, he kept it against his face, and started talking in a Southern accent.

“You sure you want to make deals with the devil, pretty lady?” The mask was solid black, covered in bark or something, and she had to admit, if Black Blood ever needed to wear a mask, it’d be a pretty good option.

She slapped the mask off his face and out of his hand. “Not in the mood for laughing, Jacob.”

“Then it’s the perfect time for laughter, isn’t it?” He put the mask back, sighed, and looked at her. With his knees apart, legs crossed, he almost looked like he was meditating, considering he was wearing a robe. “Black Blood is free to do what he wants, and if he came to you, he sees an opportunity. Plus, he’s going to be drawn to you.”

“Drawn?”

“Black Blood is old, older than me. He’s absorbed the disgusting waves of murder and death in Dolareido, since long before the Prince and I showed up.”

“So ... he’s a murder spirit?”

The Nosferatu shook his head. “Spirits are everywhere, and they’ve been fucking with shit for as long as Earth has existed, Beatrice. They’ve shaped our side of the curtain, and we’ve shaped theirs. If they live long enough, they get big, and complicated, and weird. Black Blood may have been a murder spirit at some point, but he’s absorbed things, merged with things, eaten things, and ... he is Dolareido.”

She frowned. Ok, either Jacob didn't really understand the nature of his friend, or he did, and Triss was struggling to grasp the sheer scope of Jacob's explanation.

"Ok, assuming Black Blood, this grotesque monstrosity that's been helping you help me learn Crúac, really is the spirit incarnation of our city, that means our city is based on murder?"

Jacob laughed as he nodded, and he reached over to grab one of his books, one of the creepy ones she was half sure was bound in human skin. "Probably crawled up out of the ground as a spirit of death, not murder, and the area was ripe with death. Maybe some sort of clan war? Maybe the natives fought off invaders. Something happened here, before the Colonial period." After flipping through a few pages, he motioned for her to come sit next to him. She did, putting her back to the wall and knees up to her chest, with only a couple inches between them so she could look at the book.

Someone had drawn stones, a big circle of stones. And they'd drawn bones, lots, and lots, and lots of bones. The stones weren't natural, but carved, big and square and sticking out of the ground. Skeletons were tied to them. Remnants of clothes were drawn, but the artist wasn't the best; shitty parchment and a drawing that must have been six hundred years old didn't make for accurate depictions. But she could feel the death coming off the page just by looking at it.

"Where'd you get this?"

"Early colonials traded for information about this place. A flood must have come through or something, destroyed the site, but the natives remembered it; probably told ghost stories about it. The natives tried to warn the colonials off. They didn't listen." Triss hadn't signed up for story time, but she knew better than to interrupt Jacob. And besides, it was relevant, if she was going to do business with the devil. "So the colonials started up a tiny village.

Lot of convicts sent from across the drink. Far as I can find out, once they got the homes built, people started getting underhanded. Murdering each other for resources, for pussy, for whatever. Must have been at each other's throats for two or three hundred years, lying, stealing, killing. Black Blood was there for that, so he tells me, when he was nothing more than a tiny, creeping ink stain, looking to hide from hungry spirits on the other side. He seeped into the cracks in the Earth, into the walls of their homes, and he watched, and ... partook.

“That’s when the Prince and I showed up with the Sheriff, and Viktor. We took over, and turned that shitty little village into the utopia you live in today. Black Blood was there, watching, absorbing, learning.”

“Spirits can do that?”

“When they get as old and intricate as him, yeah, apparently they can. He’s part death, part shadow, part environment, part ... so many things.”

She frowned at Jacob, and shook her head. “How can Dolareido and this thing be so intertwined, if Black Blood is a death ... shadow ... spirit thing?”

“He’s not. The fuck did I just say? He’s grown well beyond that. All the dark, twisted, weird, sexual, loving, deadly parts of Dolareido, Black Blood has absorbed in some way. Simon called him a Magath, whatever that is.”

“Simon, right, the Uratha Avery used to go with.”

“Fuck those dogs.” Jacob ground his teeth, and flipped to the next page. It was written in some language she didn’t recognize, so no reading. The pictures were good enough, and this page had a picture of some woods, with some skeletons tied to them as well. Christ, Dolareido might as well have been built on unholy ground or

something. If she went digging outside in the canyon, she'd probably find legions of dead.

"I wanted to talk about Black Blood, and Crúac, and ... and..."

"My attempts to resurrect Minerva."

She froze, and slowly moved her eyes from the page of the old book, to the Nosferatu elder sitting next to her. As if he hadn't said anything, he flipped the book to the next page. A cliff, overlooking the ocean. Nowhere near Dolareido then. Whoever this traveler was, they must have been important, for Jacob to want their book. Maybe they'd been a vampire.

"So you did try."

"I did. Even learned how." He flipped the page. Woods, and some tipis sitting about, with people sleeping around them. No, wait, not sleeping, dead. Fucking horrible. "I expect you'll want to jump for joy, knowing that."

"Minerva's still dead, so ... whatever it is, I can't believe I could do it if you couldn't." She wanted to believe, fuck did she want to believe, but she wasn't stupid. "Black Blood says I should wait a couple weeks, so I can calm down before I do anything stupid."

"Good advice." The next page. Some very spooky trees, with a few owls perched on the branches. Dark, shadowy owls. "And if you're looking for me to tell you how to resurrect Mire, I—"

"Don't ... please don't say no. Please?" She collapsed back against the wall, head falling forward to dangle. "I'll wait. Two weeks or something, before I ask. Ok? Please." She couldn't keep the begging sound out of her voice. It made her sound pathetic, and she didn't care. If Jacob decided to tease her, rub her misery in her face, that was fine, she didn't care. All that mattered was—



“Beatrice, look at me.”

She froze, again, before slowly lifting her head enough. As she did, Jacob raised a hand, and pulled his bandage down around his neck. Eye contact. The man’s empty eye sockets stared straight at her, and she did her best to meet them. She had snake eyes, but Jacob’s lack of eyes was a thousand times scarier, especially considering his eyelids looked like they’d been removed by a serrated spoon.

He looked sad. The ancient, deadly vampire, looked sad. It hit her in the stomach, and a harsh sob worked up through her before she could stop it. The following sobs were quieter, and she managed to keep them from exploding out of her; doubtless they’d have summoned Jen if she let them out at full volume. No, enough crying. But meeting the old man’s face, and how his fucked up deformity didn’t stop him from showing some real, genuine emotion, was just too fucking hard to deal with. Her gaze fell back to the floor.

“I hate this,” she said. “This ... this wasn’t ... wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Jacob turned back to the book, closed it, and kept his scary gaze on its dark, stained cover. “It never is. And unlike those fuckers out there, or everyone else, none of those assholes know what it’s like, to have love taken from you like that. I know. I know what it’s like to find someone who connects with you, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. I know what it’s like as a Nos, to ... fuck, I’m just wasting my breath, aren’t I?” He laughed, quiet and heavy, and shook his head. “My words can’t—”

“No ... no, tell me. I want to know.” She sniffed, and pulled her knees up to her chest tighter so she could hug them. “You’re right. How many of them know what it’s like, to be a Nos, find love, and then have their love fucking killed? Murdered? It ... it...” She squeezed her legs harder. “It’s burning me up. It’s in my bones. It’s

in my fucking chest, and I want to reach inside and tear it out, and I can't. I can feel myself ready to frenzy, even though I've fed. I ca ... ca ... can't handle this, Jacob. I can't! I can't I—”

Touch stopped her cold. Jacob set his hand on her shoulder, but still looking down. Maybe he caught on that she couldn't handle looking him in the eyes right now, not when he looked sad as well.

“Minerva was ... something like Julias. She looked for the best in people, without being naive. And, she wasn't afraid of me. Well, maybe a little afraid, but she didn't let it stop her. We grew to know each other because of her courage and insistence. She was ... intelligent, far more intelligent than she had any right to be. The Prince and I both included her in our more specific experiments, as we both tested the waters of the spirit world.”

Oh, wow, real knowledge about Minerva. Holy shit.

“You and the Prince?”

“You think Annie and I are enemies?”

“It ... does seem that way, a little.”

Jacob laughed. “I guess it does. But, we both have an ... academic interest, in the Shadow Realm. So did Minerva. I let her in on a few secrets, so did Antoinette, and before we knew it, she was performing her own experiments. She learned about Black Blood, and other spirits. She became convinced that ... that things could change.”

“Things?”

“This.” He gestured around him, to the wall covered in bones and masks, to the shelves carved into the stone that held dolls and small bags filled with only god knew what, and several books as old as dirt. “Other things, too. Vampires, sucking on veins, fighting each

other over sheep. Werewolves, slaughtering spirits or the possessed. Monsters, bound to their hungers no vampire could hope to understand. She thought she could change the world, find missing pieces of the puzzle, fix things. Spirits, ghosts, dreams, death, life, the afterlife? She dug deep into learning all she could about those things, and tried hard to find ways to bridge the gaps between them.”

Beatrice gulped. “I never thought of it like that, that it’s all ... separate. She wanted to bring it together? How?” It sounded too crazy to be real, but at the moment, crazy was better than reality.

With a dark chuckle, Jacob nodded, and licked his teeth. “I’ll show you.”

## Chapter 93

~~Natasha~~

She stood there in front of Sándor, frowning, arms folded across her chest, and chewed on the inside of her cheek. Antoinette stood beside her. A thrall was busy cleaning of the prisoner's body; it was a human body after all, and it did things human bodies did. Pooping, peeing, all the nasty realities of trying to keep a dangerous person prisoner. The horror stories prisoners of war shared were never fun reads.

“Still unresponsive,” Antoinette said, sighing. “The mark on his back also remains. Whatever Elen meant when she said it healed too quickly, little Vola, it does not appear to be on a time scale useful to us.”

Jack stepped around and looked at the mark, while Daniel stood further back in the room. Natasha's sire was responsible for Sándor, for making sure the man was kept alive, and that each day a thrall cleaned the man's waste while under the sheriff's protection. They were using intravenous nutrition for Sándor as well, since he didn't seem to respond to attempts to feed him. The man was basically a comatose patient, a dangerous comatose patient.

“I might be able to break through into his mind,” Jack said, “if I use you-know-what. I'm pretty sure it would tear Sándor's mind apart though. We could get a little info, maybe a lot of info, but we ... I'd be turning this man into an invalid in the process.”

“I d-d-don't ... like that idea,” Natasha said. “And, t-tactically, it might not be worth it. He m-might not know much, and ... and if we can break him out of whatever's happened t-to him, he'd b-be a valuable ally.”

Antoinette smiled down at her, nodding. Natasha beamed. Thinking in terms of strategy, cold and logical, was a skill Natasha excelled at, when she could separate herself from the reality of her circumstance. Easy to do when playing chess, not so easy to do when making choices that affected people's lives. But it was a skill, learning to think like a strategist in the middle of real chaos. With time, she'd master it, like her boss and sire had.

She doubted she'd ever arrive at a point where she could capture a prisoner, hold them hostage in such painful restraints, and interrogate them, possibly with torture. But there was no doubt in her mind that the Prince and the sheriff had likely done exactly that in their very, very long lifetimes. Maybe in a few centuries, she'd be capable of that too? Scary.

"I agree, my student. Jack, unless circumstances become dire, I would not ask you to take such a risk." Antoinette stepped aside to let her thrall walk past with the soiled cleaning cloths. Far as Tash knew, this particular thrall was basically not leaving the tower until the hunters were gone, for safety reasons. And for all they knew, Sándor might have found a way to affect the thrall's mind without them knowing. "But you missed another reason, Vola."

"Oh?"

The Prince nodded toward the little Ventrue. "We do not understand the curse Jack Terry suffers. It brings power to bear, but I will not risk his life, or threaten my city with its insane aggression and volatility."

"R-Right." It was easy to forget that Jack was carrying some sort of curse inside him, and that it wasn't him that was so strong; or at least not just him. The boy was formidable without the curse, she was sure, but there was no denying his insane spurts of rage and power must have been caused by the curse. If he called upon it, what would happen? Would it devour him? Maybe Jack would fade

away over the years, and become someone none of them knew, or wanted to know?

Poor Antoinette. Those fears must be eating away at her all hours of the night.

“Daniel will learn more from the Begotten with time,” the Prince said. “Silence will only bring so much protection, from the eyes of a Mekhet.” With that, she left, and the three of them followed after her, leaving Sándor in the darkness, still bound in chains, still with his eyes covered. It must have been agonizing to be stuck like that, but they couldn’t take any risks.

Once the door was closed behind them, they stopped and faced each other.

“I understand you and old friends are heading off?” Antoinette said to her.

“Yep. W-We’re going to ... spend a little time, remembering Julias.” It was due. She didn’t want to do it, because it was going to be painful, and she was bound to cry her eyes out, but it was due.

“I suspect I will need to take Samantha hunting in a few days. Her Beast will be content with stored blood for only so long.”

“Should I come with?” Jack said.

“Non. Leave this to her sire, my love. There is an art to feeding that is ... specific, to women, and Daeva especially.”

Natasha smiled at that. If there was anyone that could teach Samantha how to hunt for a mark with the seductive tools of a Kindred, and a woman, it was Antoinette. She was in good hands. Not that Tash had gotten to spend much time with Samantha in the few days since her arrival, meeting her only a few times. She seemed nice though, maybe too nice.

It was hard to think of Samantha as anything other than a broken woman, a mourning mother, a widow, and a terrified fledgling. Antoinette could see more, no doubt, and Tash trusted her judgment. If Tash guessed right, Samantha would soon find herself buried in male kine. It wasn't a topic Tash could broach with Jack right there, but Samantha was a very attractive woman, cute, and carried some of that older woman sexiness.

"Specific to women?" Jack said, before cringing and throwing his hands up around his head. "Oh god, you just put images in my head. Why? Why would you do that?"

Antoinette laughed, walked over to the small man, and kissed him on the forehead. "My love, surely you knew this would happen. Samantha is Daeva, and you know my views on sexuality. I fully intend to help your mother embrace her ... inner goddess, as the fledglings say these modern days."

Tash choked on a laugh. Inner goddess, oh god.

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Natasha, Jessy, and Jack all walked into Jack's apartment together. It looked like Julias's old apartment, fancy and sleek, cold colors, steel and black and stuff. Jack called it his American Psycho apartment. It'd changed since her last visit too. He had paintings on the walls, more of them, and new ones too. He definitely had a thing for Gothic motifs, and also some macabre stuff like skulls and bones, but he also had some rather sexy looking ... ghosts? Pale women in corsets who were partly see-through. A few sexy witches. A few sexy ... reaper things, too.

"Dude. Hot." Jessy walked up to one of the paintings, where a woman with a skull for a head wore an open black robe, showing off a body of similar proportions to Antoinette; absurdly massive breasts that would have spelled eternal back pain for any breathing entity. "Antoinette see you put this stuff up? I mean, I like, but I'm getting some cheesy sexist nerd vibes."

Laughing, Jack sat down on his couch and shrugged. “She’s the one that gave me the idea.”

“I suppose she’d encourage you to put sexy things up, considering who she is.”

“And,” Jack added, “she’s big into fashion, including costumes. I’ve seen her wear some stuff that makes these pictures look tame.”

“Daaamn.” With a chuckle, Jessy sat down next to him, while Tash sat across from them on the other couch, a glass table between them.

“The Prince does wear ... uh ... extremely r-revealing things. And d-d-does ... extremely revealing ... things.” Natasha nodded, doing her best to say those things without changing her tone, or letting Jack notice her fidgeting gaze. Fail. He noticed her glance, she noticed his, and she shrank into the couch.

“Dude, you banging the Prince out in the open where Tash can see?” Jessy bounced on the couch a few times, before holding up her hand. “High five.”

With a groan, Jack acknowledged and acquiesced her request, hard enough for a slap sound too.

“The Prince is one of the most romantic people I know,” he said, “but her views on sex are less romantic. She thinks of it more like performance art, an expression of beauty and grace, and skill. I’m sure Tash has seen me naked, doing things to her, and her me, on several occasions by now.”

Jessy blinked, before slowly sliding her gaze to Tash with a big, evil grin. “So Tash has seen you naked.”

“Probably. Probably more.”



“You seen her naked?”

“What? No.” He raised a brow as he looked Tash’s way, managing a isn’t-Jessy-a-bitch eyeroll, before smiling. “She keeps her sexual exploits private.”

“I d-do!” she said, glaring at Jessy.

Of course, her friend didn’t get the hint, or more likely, chose to ignore it.

“You should have seen the things Tash did to my ghouls when—”

“N-No! No no, no no no, no t-talking about that.” Tash buried her hands in her face for a few seconds, did her best to regain some composure, and set them back down again. “Aren’t we here to ... to t-talk about Julias?”

“Honestly?” Jack said. “Julias would prefer we talk about each other, and goof around, and laugh, and ... and be happy, you know? Last thing he’d want is for us to cry over him.”

“Well I d-did cry!” she said.

Jessy held up her hand. “Me too.”

“Yeah, me too.” Sighing, Jack got up, walked around a counter-top, and stepped into his kitchen. A moment later he returned with some glasses and a bottle of blood. “I felt it when he died. Like, not just emotionally, but physically. Felt an ache I couldn’t explain.”

“Sire childe connection,” Jessy said, “supposedly. I ... my sire’s still alive. So’s Tash’s, so I guess we wouldn’t know. But you hear it from other vamps, that you can tell if your sire is still alive, or at least when they die. And vice versa.”

Nodding, Tash took a glass, and Jack filled it. “I can’t imagine w-what you’re going through, Jack. It ... it makes me feel like I should try and ... t-talk to Vivi more.”

Jack shook his head. “You won’t be able to rebuild that bridge forcefully, Tash. I’d tell her you want to talk more, and let her come to you. It might take years, or decades; hell it might never happen. But Vivienne isn’t much older than me, and my gut would tell me to back off if Mom had suddenly started trying to be buddy buddy with me. It ... it took a crisis to mend that connection.”

“Is it mended?” Jessy said.

“I think so. Mom’s spent most of her nights crying, and I’ve sat with her a few times, held her, just ... been there for her. We’ve talked about memories, cried over Mary, and I let her lean on me when she broke down several more times. Poor woman has been through fucking hell, and—”

The Gangrel shook her head. “Jack, you’ve been through hell too. Who you leaning on?”

“Antoinette’s been there for me, don’t worry. I’ve leaned and cried on her shoulder a bit too. Though I can tell she’s a little ... nervous, I guess? She saw me, when I was ... not me, at the hospital.”

“Can ... can you t-tell us m-m-more, about it?” Natasha said.

“Rumors are spreading like wildfire.” Jessy scooped up her glass, downed the contents, and poured herself another. So much for letting the host handle that. Her rudeness was a welcomed familiarity at the moment, though. “Everyone’s heard about the cursed Ventrue. I hear whispers and shit from the fledglings, neonates, hell even the ancilla, about Jack the cursed Ventrue who summoned an army of crows, an army of rats, survived the hunters thrice, and even survived Tony, Viktor, and Lucas.”

Tash flinched, and looked to Jack. Jack's eyes were downcast, staring into his drink as he sipped at it.

"I killed Lucas, Jessy," he said. Holy shit. Tash froze, eyes flicking between the two of them. "I killed Viktor and Tony, too. Though, that was mostly luck. Managed to set the building on fire, and caught them in it. Lucas though? I possessed Damien, Dominated him, and I cut his sire's head off."

Wow. Wow. Um. Wow. Silence fell, and Natasha and Jessy looked between each other and the small man. How had such a young Kindred been involved in so much? Lucas's death was already a massive deal, but to know two other elders died at his hands, was insane.

"You fucking with me?" Jessy said, putting her glass down and staring at him.

"No."

"Jesus fucking christ, Jack. Why you telling me now?"

"Because I ... I don't trust myself, not completely, not anymore. I need you two to know what happened. People are right to whisper about me. I'm dangerous, and ... fuck, that sounds dumb, doesn't it?" He chuckled, a heavy, dark sound, and took a sip of his drink. "You know what I'm going to ask for."

Snarling, Jessy downed her glass again, got up, and started pacing. "You want Tash and me to keep an eye on you, maybe take you down if shit goes horrible."

"... yeah." He shook his head again, but didn't look at the Gangrel, or Natasha. "Damien was with the Prince when they found me at the hospital, and I can remember it clearly, how he was ready to pull his blade on me. I want you two to be ready to do the same."

“We ... w-w-we’re not going t-to kill you, Jack,” Tash said.

“And I’m not so depressed as to hope you do, Tash. Capture if you can, you know? I know there’s a ritual out there that can reveal this curse, and if it takes a hundred years for someone to find it, that’s fine. Just stake me until someone’s got it ready. But I need someone to be ready to do that.”

“Stake you?” Jessy said. “Easy. Dealing with Maria if she finds out about Lucas? Not so easy.”

The boy nodded some more, and walked over to the window. He pulled open the curtain, and stared out over the city heights, the colorful lights striking the glass in his hand. From the back, in his suit, Tash could practically see Julias’s silhouette over the boy. How many times had Julias stared out his huge window at the city, glass of blood in his hand? She’d seen him do it hundreds of times, and who knows how many times he’d done it in private, contemplating, worrying.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Groaning, Jessy joined him, and put her jeans and ass against the window. “Course you shouldn’t have. Ugh, I hate knowing things I don’t want to know. How am I supposed to talk to Maria now?”

“Maria ... m-might ... might forgive you, Jack.” Maybe. Based on Tash’s conversation with her, it was clear the woman was trying to get over some emotional issues involving Lucas. “Have you t-talked to Damien about it?”

“Yes and no. I’ve mostly been hoping the secret would fade and die with the years. Long time ago, Jacob insisted Maria and Michael would kill me, if they knew Viktor and Tony died at my hands. But, after the last meeting I had with them ... I don’t think they would. They trust me now, as much as an elder can trust any subordinate. Except now this curse thing changes everything, and ... ugh.” He

rubbed his buzzed head in that way that he did, walked back over to the table in front of Tash, and poured himself another glass. “I’m sorry, I’ve ruined this night. We were supposed to talk about Julias, and—”

“Nah, you ain’t ruined shit.” Jessy came back over, flopped on the couch, and smiled out at the window, curtain still pulled aside so they could admire the city lights. “Kinda put a damper on things, with all this curse worrying, but I’ll bring it back. Tash has seen you naked, and I’ve seen Tash naked, but—”

Jack put a hand on Jessy’s mouth. “No. Bad Gangrel.”

Snorting on a surprise laugh, Natasha started coughing as she struggled to not spill her drink. “How about ... w-when did you meet Julias?”

“That is a very boring story, actually. I met Julias when I was doing an internship with a law firm.” That made sense, she supposed. Jack was a logical person, like her. Unlike her, he was surprisingly good at talking, when he needed to be. “I called out some people older than me about some holes in their contracts. Julias was there. Must have been doing something for Xnomina. He overheard, and I guess he was impressed that I was willing to argue with people fifteen years my senior.” The boy smiled to himself, nodded, and leaned back on the couch. “He involved me in negotiating some contracts, for some random business deals between subsidiaries. I didn’t realize it at the time, but he was analyzing me.”

“Well,” Jessy said, “kid your age working smart shit like law work, arguing with people much older than you? Sounds like Ventrue material.” She poured herself another glass, half of the bottle gone already and mostly to her, before she raised a hand. A story was coming to her, no doubt. “I was in the Invictus from day one, cause

of Michael. But I was just a brawler, with no direction or anything. Fighting and fucking was all I knew.”

“Julias help you?” Jack said.

“You mean, help me come into the fold? Nah, I handled that shit on my own. Once we got to know each other, we started going to bars together, playing wingman for each other.” She leaned back on the couch, and let her head hang over the back. “I tried to get into his pants a few times, but it never went anywhere. He made it clear he didn’t want to ruin our friendship. Which pissed me off, but it was the right call, in the end.”

Laughing quietly, Tash sipped and leaned back as well. “Julias really ... b-brought out the b-best in people. Helped p-p-people grow.”

“That he did,” Jack said. “Beatrice would agree, more than anyone. I almost invited her, but ... yeah, that wouldn’t go well.”

“Yeah,” Jessy said. “Fuck, I feel so bad for her. Real good thing they had going, and it’s gone, and—” Tash sniffed, and sobbed. “Aw Tash, I’m sorry.”

“No, n-no, it’s ok. It’s ... fine. It’s hard to imagine my second life without him, but B-Beatrice, she...”

Jack leaned forward, and set his elbows on his knees. “She’ll probably do everything she can to get revenge. I’ve been aching to kill Angela, and while it’s a relief to know the strange rage issues I was having were because of this curse ... hopefully, Beatrice is probably aching to kill Angela even more than I ever did. She’s ... she’ll ... she’ll be sinking deep into that Crúac shit, talking to Jacob and stuff.”

“When Minerva died,” Jessy said, “everyone assumed Jacob was doing everything in his power to revive her. He disappeared for

months at a time. We had a string of kine disappearances. There was creepy weather and other crap. Rumors about some weird ghost things — probably Black Blood — were going around, too.”

Tash remembered those. There was a night where a bunch of rats flowed up from the sewers. Another night, it snowed, in late Spring. Dolareido rarely even had snow in the dead of winter. Another night, for a whole month, it was super super windy, and the city swore there were voices on the wind. People eventually figured it was just the unusual wind speed hitting the buildings at just the right way to howl.

“P-Poor Jacob,” she said. “Minerva is still d-dead though.”

“Jacob once asked me to see if Avery would tell me why she killed Minerva, like, get specifics. She won’t give them. It must be eating Jacob up. And I’m sure my sire’s death is eating Beatrice up, too. She ... she’s going to do something.”

Everyone nodded. Yeah, she was. Beatrice probably felt like she had nothing left to lose anymore, after losing Julias, and to someone like a witch, that was an invitation to go down a dark path.

Memories of a ripped-open body dangling on a hook over a giant, sacrificial bowl flitted through Tash’s mind.

“D ... d-do you think she’ll ... I don’t know. I found her, with Jacob and Jennifer once,” Natasha said. “Matt, Art, and I, w-we found them ... d-doing things, in one of Jacob’s lairs. Scary things. I ... I wouldn’t be surprised if Beatrice crossed some lines, t-to ... to try and get Julias back.”

Jack shook his head. “If Minerva’s dead, then what hope does Beatrice have?”

“No fucking idea,” Jessy said, “but yeah, I agree, Triss is the sort of girl who would do some dangerous shit, to get him back.”

“Then, keep an eye on her,” Jack said. “Keep an eye on her, and me, and Jacob, and ... Maria, I guess.”

“Her too?” Grumbling, Jessy folded her arms on her chest and squirmed on the couch. “Because she might find out you killed Lucas?”

“N-No,” Tash said. “Because there’s ... a p-possibility she’s trying to revive him.”

The Gangrel threw her hands up. “No one’s been revived! Any of you know anyone, or know anyone who knows anyone, who’s ever even heard of a successful resurrection? Why’re we suddenly concerned about this?”

“A feeling in my guts,” Jack said. “Something’s going to happen. I ... I can’t say more. I don’t want to involve you two in things you don’t need to be involved in. But something’s going on in the city, something bigger than the hunters. It might have something to do with Jacob, or Maria, I don’t know, but ... keep an eye open, ok?”

Something else? Natasha looked at the small man, and he met her gaze. There wasn’t only confidence in his gaze, but an awareness, knowledge, a look of wisdom and intelligence that no man his age should have carried. It was frightening.

“ ... ok.”



~~Antoinette~~

The first seven nights since her embrace, Samantha spent alone, other than visits from her child. Jack and Antoinette both knew to give her her space, and while she enjoyed and embraced her son’s company, there were many moments where she wanted to be alone. Through the laptop Antoinette gave her, the woman was able to watch the news, monitor the changing of life now that hers was



gone, and indulge her misery. A part of the grieving process, to be sure. Antoinette had a thrall monitor the laptop, to make sure her new childe did not attempt to contact anyone; a gross violation of privacy, but a necessary one for now.

Samantha did not attempt to contact anyone. As Antoinette predicted, she found videos of her two children, school events and such, and spent several days weeping over the imagery. Some of that time she spent with Jack, and while she attempted to spend time with Antoinette as well, the elder kept interactions with her childe moderately short. It was better to let Samantha grieve on her own for now, and with Jack's shoulder to lean on, not her own.

But after seven nights, Samantha was ready to take her first steps in her new life. Or rather, Antoinette recognized the signs of her Beast's hunger, no longer satisfied with bottled, cooled blood. It wanted to hunt, and to sink its teeth into living flesh. Antoinette had no choice but to oblige it, lest Samantha suffer a frenzy, and that was the last thing the poor woman needed to suffer at the moment.

"You ... know my measurements?" she said, eyes wide as she gazed upon the clothes before her.

"Oui."

"But I never gave them to you."

"I have indulged in fashion since before you grandmother was born, Samantha. I could accurately guess your weight, if you wish for me to prove my skill."

"Um ... n-no thanks." She smiled as she said it though, the first smile the woman had made over a humorous comment.

The two of them stood in her primary fashion room, where rows upon rows upon rows of clothing were to be found. Antoinette

stored much here, fashions from ages past, fashions from ages only to recently meet the runway, and fashions that stood the test of time. Clothes were held for Natasha as well, though Antoinette had yet to truly indulge her fashion vice with the little Mekhet.

“Come, explore. I have purchased eighty-seven different ensembles you may try. Skilled as I am, doubtless only a third of them will fit properly, but we can have them tailored to adjust.” Nodding, she held out a hand to her little Daeva on her stool.

Samantha gulped, reached out, and took her hand. Slowly, with delicate precision, Antoinette pulled her along into the sea of coat racks, wardrobes, and vanity sets. Hundreds of thousands of American dollars, spent on something as meaningless as fabric; a true indulgent sin for any Daeva.

At the moment, Antoinette was dressed in one of her robes, black, with plenty of skin showing. She often wore such clothes for the enjoyment of it, or to drive her little lover wild, but tonight it served a different purpose: sparking Samantha’s interest in fashion. It was an enjoyable tool, fashion, to prepare oneself for the hunt.

Samantha wore a white robe, with no skin showing. It was thick, fluffy, and comfortable, perfect for someone tending to a wounded soul.

The small woman looked Antoinette up and down several times as she sat on a stool. She had yet to see this side of her sire, and was no doubt surprised at Antoinette’s rather tall physique being on display. Combined with her white hair and red eyes, it made the elder’s unusual body all the more blatant.

“You’re so beautiful,” she said.

Antoinette smiled at the small woman. “Why thank you my childe. Though I hope you realize, you are quite the attractive little creature yourself.”

“I don’t ... I don’t know. Really?”

“You were preparing yourself for the hunt before the madness occurred, were you not? For a man? Your son noticed that you had lost weight, and were taking better care of yourself.”

She sat up straight, eyes widening, trapped in disbelief. “He noticed?”

“I would have hesitated to sire you, Samantha, if you had not done so. An eternity is a terribly long time to spend with a body you do not like. Trust me, you have done well, and any man — or woman — will be delighted to slip between your thighs.”

“A-Antoinette! I ... I haven’t thought about things like that in a long time. At least, not so brazenly!”

Antoinette chuckled, and motioned for the woman to one of the racks of clothes, filled with outfits for her new child. “One of the few joys of your second life, Samantha, is your ability to indulge and enjoy sex in ways you could not before. Pregnancy and diseases are things of the past. So too are societal judgments. If you wish to fornicate only rarely, that is your choice, but you and I both know sex is most entertaining, and addicting. And in our night society, many Kindred, of whatever sex or gender best describes them, indulge in sexual delights beyond imagining.” Maybe a little more context, something a little more tactile? “I have two ghouls, young women, that I both feed from, and share with your son, both for food, and for when we are in the mood to indulge our sexual cravings.”

She brought her hands up to her cheeks, as if trying to hide the blush that did not come, eyes widening to the extreme. This woman was quite sincere, genuine, and delightful, to the point of almost being drôle. It did earn a chuckle, and a giggle, from the Prince.

“My son ... I...”

“I am sorry if that was too much, my childe. But, I felt it necessary to paint the reality thick with color for you. If you wished to bring three men back to a nest for the night, strangers, lonely widows, virgin youths, or dangerous wanderers, no Kindred would think less of you for it.” Antoinette fished through the clothes, and withdrew a dress meant for a night club. A black skirt of latex, only barely long enough to cover the buttocks, and a top that was nothing more than a glorified bikini top with a few extra straps, but triangle fronts that would barely cover the nipples.

“I can’t wear that! It ... it doesn’t even have underwear!”

“You could wear a thong with it, if you desired, but many of the garments here are meant to be worn without. Sex is much easier to have, if all you need to do is lift your skirt, or slip it aside.” She withdrew another outfit, a long skirt black dress, a classic that any woman should own. The skirt was split up past the thigh and hip, and the dress’s front had small, loose traps that would do a poor job of hiding the breasts.

“Prince! Maybe we should ... look for something a little ... more tame, for my first night out?”

Antoinette sighed, drawing out the sound in a very deliberate way, emphasizing her disappointment. A game, of course, only meant to tease her new childe. While her heart broke for the pain Samantha was dealing with, setting that misery aside and focusing on the pleasures her new life offered her was proving all sorts of fun for her sire.

“You are Daeva, Samantha Terry, free to indulge and feed your ego and your vices. You are beautiful, and can bend mine to your whim with only a few words.” Nodding, she set the black dress upon the childe’s shoulder. “Did you shave as I recommended?”

“Yes.” She squirmed a little, reached down, and rubbed at her ankle under the hem of the robe. “I mean, I know ‘shaved’ is in-

fashion these days,” she said, air quoting ‘shaved’ with the same mannerism as her son, “but it looks a little strange on me. I’m old and—”

“Do not be ridiculous. I sired you at a ripe age, Samantha. Men everywhere will refer to you ... as a ... milf, dare I use such a ridiculous term. A woman such as yourself, dressed in clothes obviously meant to lure hungry eyes, only to reveal smooth skin to wandering fingers? You will not need to use a Kindred discipline to seduce your target. They will throw themselves at you eagerly.”

The poor woman squirmed with every word, and Antoinette chuckled once again. Oh what fun her new childe was.

“Do all Kindred use sex, when hunting for food?”

“At one time or another. While all Kindred, save for the Nosferatu, can openly use sex when hunting, we are the only bloodclan that can persuade kine with such an obvious bias. The Ventrue can use Dominate, to bend and break the minds of kine, and the more skilled, subtle Ventrue could use it to invite kine into their bed.” Julias was such a man, but she dared not utter his name. Mentioning him could send Samantha spiraling, perhaps reminding her of Julias’s sacrifice to save her, or of her daughter’s death. Tonight was to be a night of joy, not pain. “But Daeva can use Majesty, and twist kine around our fingers.”

“I’m not sure I feel comfortable doing that.”

Antoinette nodded, and began fishing for other clothing options for her childe. “You are a Kindred, but a fledgling, and not far separated from your first life. You will struggle with that separation for the rest of your second life. It is our curse, to struggle between our Humanity, and the Beast that now lurks within you.” Nodding, she tossed her childe a couple more ensembles, some more conservative, some less so. “But make no mistake, you are a

vampire now, Samantha. Humans are beneath you, on the food chain.”

“I ... I’ll ... try and remember that.”

“See that you do. It would be horrible if you perished, because you refused to feed.” Sighing, Antoinette sat down beside her childe upon another cushioned stool, and set a hand on her shoulder. “Especially considering how much work I have put into my city, turning it into a haven for our kind.”

“You mean, so that we can feed so openly?”

“Oui.”

“I ... I’m afraid, sire. Feeding, the Kiss? It sounds so ... overwhelming. Last week I was going to go shopping for toilet paper!”

Antoinette laughed, got up, and started looking for apparel for herself for tonight. “Once your fangs pierce their skin, it will come naturally to you, childe. Your target will melt into pleasure and relaxation. Their muscles will release, their body will go limp, and pleasure will course through both of your forms.” Antoinette grinned as she moved aside some clothes along the rail. Ah, a dress with terribly flimsy straps and front, meant to be worn with tape to hold it in place on the breasts. A bit much to wear in front of her childe on her first hunt. “If done during sex, it will guarantee an orgasm for the both of you.”

“I d-don’t think I’ll be ... sleeping with anyone.” The small woman held out the first dress Antoinette had passed her, and she looked it up and down with a curious gaze.

“And that is perfectly alright, Samantha. Do whatever you wish. Whichever kine you feast upon will be rendered catatonic in bliss,

and then with exhaustion, as you drain them. And as long as you do not drink until the blood runs dry, they will survive.”

Samantha continued to examine the dress, and spent more than a minute gawking at how little its top was meant to cover. “You’re not worried about getting into ... I don’t know, dangerous situations? I hear horror stories about women, getting ... you know ... if they put themselves in bad positions...”

“You overestimate such dangers. The majority of men are courteous and civil, if perhaps a bit persistent, once intrigued.” She plucked a dress from the rack. Perhaps this one? “And you are a Kindred now, Samantha. Any Kindred is far stronger than kine. As a Daeva, you are especially strong, and will have little trouble breaking even the strongest kine with one hand.”

“You say that, but I can’t imagine—”

Antoinette reached over to one of the cushioned stools beside her, set a hand atop it, and broke off one of its thick, wooden legs, with all the effort of breaking a toothpick. As her childe’s eyes went wide, she handed the wooden leg to her. It was several inches thick, and well beyond the ability of a woman her size to break.

“Take this, and break it in half.”

“ ... really?”

“Oui. It will be easy, little Daeva. The strength of the Kindred, vitae, you will feel it coursing through you as you set your mind and heart to a task. Try.”

Her childe, with eyes wide in disbelief, took the hard stick in her hand. She frowned at it, and Antoinette struggled to not giggle at how terribly adorable it was. Samantha was as cute as a button, and her timid nature only increased how positively joyful it made their

interactions. Better yet, was the surprised squeak that Samantha made, when the wooden leg broke in half with a loud crack.

“Oh my god!”

“Your body is durable, your strength great, and you have tools to hunt, either with seduction, or through force. You are a predator, Samantha. And tonight, you will be able to have any man or woman of your choosing.”

She gulped, coughed on her dry throat, and took a peek at the more revealing dress Antoinette gave her. “Oh god, if Jack saw me wearing this.”

Antoinette giggled, stood up, and resumed digging through her endless clothes in pursuit of something appropriate. “Jack has seen hundreds of women wear far less, at this point.”

“My boy, sleeping around?”

“No, but as I said, sleeping around is not a concern in our society, Samantha. Do not judge others, and they will not judge you. Besides, what I meant was, in our night life, clothes are often risqué, as are the acts Kindred perform when feeding. No doubt you will see many kine at Bloodlust tonight, wearing less than either of us, and likely engaged in sexual acts.”

Samantha looked at the broken wood in her hands, took a long sigh, set it aside, and got up. “I ... I need to change, don't I? I mean, my mind, how I think about things.”

“Yes, but much of what I ask will come naturally to you, Samantha.”

“I don't know if I can change that much. I ... I haven't been with anyone since James. That's a long time! And ... and I was working up to ... getting back into sex. Trying to build my confidence.” She



walked over to one of the vanity mirrors, and held the first dress Antoinette had given her in front of her. “And now you’re telling me I can use it as a tool for hunting, that I can indulge in it whenever I want, as much as I want, with whomever I want, and that I’ll ... I’ll be ... fine?”

“You are a deadly predator now, my childe. Be confident. Rest assured, dealing with kine will be easy, once you are familiar.” Antoinette nodded, came up behind Samantha, and set her hands on her shoulders. A tiny woman, several inches shorter than Ashley or Julee, but with a larger derrière, thicker thighs, and larger breasts. Motherhood, and then a year returning to health and fitness, had crafted her a beautiful little physique, thin but curvy, a small waist accented by the developed bust and buttocks. Hourglass. It was a build Antoinette knew many men and women craved to have in their bed, and one she knew some women were paradoxically self-conscious about. Samantha would grow confidence with Antoinette’s help, and learn to use her body as a tool for hunting; and a tool for pleasure, if she desired.

“Are you sure we should go out ... tonight? D-Don’t you have, um, a prisoner to deal with?”

“Your son, my student, and my sheriff are handling the interrogation of the monster, Samantha. For now, you are my priority, and teaching a childe to feed is a task all sires must perform.” She pat the woman on the shoulder, before she turned and stepped over to her own vanity mirror. Without hesitation, she slid out of her robe, and held one of the dresses against her naked body. A peek over her shoulder showed that Samantha had looked to her, and a little eye contact earned a squeak from the small woman.

“You’re so ... so beautiful! And tall!”

“Merci, little Daeva. Though, I assume my great height, unusual curves, and white hair, are a product of experimentations I must have performed upon myself, centuries ago.” A part of her thought she should have, perhaps, felt shame over that. A much larger part of her knew to accept that past, and move on.

“Assume?”

Nodding, Antoinette took another dress into her hands. Yes, this one would do. A silver dress, open back, with plunging cleavage to the navel, and front straps that would only barely cover her breasts. A necklace would be required, to offset the extreme cleavage. The skirt was split up each thigh, reaching far above the hip, with a small string upon each split to keep it tight about the waist. The skirt would reach low on her calf, so extravagant shoes would have to go with, of course.

The flimsy, loose, dangling front would mean she would have to be careful with each step, to prevent her breasts from becoming exposed. That was part of the fun, after all, teasing wandering eyes with the fair chance she would display her bust. She would not; centuries of wearing different forms of clothing of varying degrees of comfort had long molded her into an expert of flaunting, without fault.

“I explained it upon your first night with us. After centuries, Kindred as old as I struggle with memories of ages past. I can faintly remember beginning experiments with my order long ago.”

“The Ordo Dracul? I ... I’m still not sure what your covenant does.”

“Experimenting with what makes us Kindred, seeking to discover the secrets of our species, and other hidden gems of knowledge within the endless dark.” Antoinette slid the dress over her head, and let it fall upon her body. After tying the little strings upon its left and right to her waist, ensuring it was snug to her flat stomach,

she adjusted the front over her breasts, before turning and joining her childe. “My unusual body has been an ... interesting dilemma, for me. Most men find me far too imposing to engage of their own volition. Your son, I engaged on my own.”

“Really? Why?”

“Simple curiosity at first. He was obviously out of his element, attempting to hunt in Bloodlust on his own. But when I invited him to conversation, I found myself surprised at his courage, and the depth of his mind.”

Samantha smiled at the mirror. It was obvious that complimenting her son was the best way to brighten her mood, and Antoinette would use the tactic freely.

“I’m so proud of Jack. I mean, I’m furious that he didn’t tell me he was alive, but what he’s managed to become in just two years? Wow.”

Antoinette’s smile did not falter, but there was no denying the cold stab Samantha’s words wrought. Her beloved Jack had indeed accomplished much in those two years, and the burdens he now bore were unjust, and horrific.

But now was not the time to share such details with his mother. Tonight, she, her childe, and several other women, were going to enjoy themselves.

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“Oh ... my ... god.” Samantha’s jaw dropped, and she looked around and around, eyes wide as she took in the sights.

A host of people at the bar, and another thirty on the dance floor, swaying, grinding, to the slow, deep, drumming beat. The red light and flickering white strobes made Bloodlust feel as if it were the inside of an actual heart, and everyone within it could not ignore the

urge to move to its pulse. As if by instinct, kine succumbed to the beat, entranced, drawn into its allure, and their bodies demanded they act to its desires with dance, touch, and lust.

Antoinette smiled down at her childe. Samantha looked delicious in the black dress, and to her sire's delight, she chose to wear the first one Antoinette had picked for her. It highlighted her round buttocks nicely, and left her beautiful, curvy legs fully exposed. She had chosen to wear a thong underneath, but it looked marvelous where it hooked near her exposed hips. The criss-crossing black straps that ran over her stomach, sides, back, and breasts, left nothing to the imagination. They had also taken the time to play with her hair, emphasizing its brown waves as they reached her mostly bare shoulders.

Ashley and Julee had come as well, wearing simple but colorful short skirts and black tank tops with open backs. The ghouls did not wish to pull eyes away from their master, or their master's new childe tonight. Would there be jealousy between them and Samantha? Antoinette did not know. Perhaps.

Natasha stood beside them as well, and to Antoinette's great joy, was wearing something as equally as revealing as the Prince. Antoinette's long, silver dress was barely more than a few dangling slips of fabric, and it drew many eyes, but it was Natasha that drew more eyes this night. The tiny woman wore a petite black skirt, similar to Samantha's, and small enough that everyone could see the hips of the thong underneath. Better yet, she wore a tube top, a wonderfully tiny tube top that did a poor job of covering her small breasts. The fabric was also slightly see-through in the strobing light, barely, only enough to provide a slim hint of her nipples for onlookers.

The point of the attire was obvious: to announce to onlookers that, despite her tiny stature, she had the curves of a woman, sexual and seductive. Antoinette had picked the attire for her, knowing it

would make her terribly uncomfortable, but also knowing it would stroke her ego, once the eyes started to find her. Eyes did, many, and Natasha squirmed as she failed to suppress a smile.

“Come,” Antoinette said to her childe. “I prefer to sit upstairs.”

Samantha, gulping, eyes wide as she looked around at the sights, followed after her. Antoinette walked slow, inviting eyes to stare, and indulging her Daeva ego as many men and women looked at her body. Samantha looked down, but she was smiling as she realized many people were looking at her as well. Good. Five women, all terribly beautiful, sexual, arousing to any viewer, and walking as a group. It was strangely fun, silly and juvenile, but fun.

Samantha stopped as her eyes fell upon a couple in one of the booths, still on the bottom floor. A woman was sitting between two men, a hand rubbing the crotch of one, while she leaned into and kissed the lips of the other. Others were drinking, and exchanging saliva in vast quantities as they kissed each other between gulps. Others were sitting alone, but shivering in obvious bliss, and Samantha gasped as she realized the person, a woman, was being eaten from underneath the booth table.

“I’m in way over my head,” her childe said.

Natasha giggled, and gave the woman a small touch on her arm. “It’s n-not so crazy, once you’ve been around it f-f-for a while. The kine here are happy.”

“B-But, they’re ... they all look so young! And they’re not really preparing for their future, you know? They’re being so juvenile! I mean, how much money does—”

Antoinette looked over her shoulder at her childe, and met her gaze. A small exchange of a soft look was enough to remind Samantha of their earlier conversations. She was no longer a kine, she was Kindred, and she had to learn to think in such terms. To

completely separate her mind from her previous modes of thought would be foolhardy, leaving herself open to the Beast and its animal desires. But to chain herself in the impulses she developed as a human, was equally as foolhardy, and that included her motherly tendencies. Many Kindred lost themselves to depression if they refused to embrace at least some of the Beast, and Samantha was at extreme risk to such desolation.

“Right, right. I shouldn’t worry about what they’re doing.” Nodding several times, as if drilling the information past her own mind’s defenses, she started up the stairs after her sire. “It’s hard. I ... I’m too old for—”

“You’re t-too young, if anything,” Natasha said, giggling all the more. To hear the little woman make such a sound lifted a great weight from Antoinette’s shoulders. Natasha took Julias’s death hard, but she also seemed quite overjoyed to have a new companion in the Ordo Dracul. “Given a little t-t-time, I’m sure you’ll be ... d-doing whatever you want, with whoever you want, really.”

Samantha managed a small frown as she kept walking up the stairs. “I don’t even know what that is. It’s been so long since I’ve ... done anything, with anyone.”

“I suggest,” Antoinette said, “that you keep any sexual exploration rather shallow, tonight. It will be your first Kiss, and could be quite overwhelming.”

“So you’re saying, I shouldn’t sleep with ... whoever I ... hunt?”

Antoinette laughed, and motioned to her favorite booth upon the second floor of Bloodlust. It sat further back, in the center of the balcony, and the lighting up above was not as powerful or direct as that below. Darkness reigned on the second floor.

“My childe, if you decided to bask in the touch of a dozen men and women tonight, at once, I would say to enjoy yourself. I only

suggest keeping your explorations light, because it will be your first time enjoying the Kiss, and you may find yourself a touch surprised at its impact.” And you are not yet prepared mentally, with such a vast wound still healing. Antoinette slipped into the booth, and Samantha slid in beside her, Natasha taking Samantha’s other side. Julee and Ashley stood behind the booth, to be extra eyes and ears for Antoinette as she relaxed. “There is nothing to fear, no matter what happens, as long as you remember what I told you. Do not kill whoever you Kiss, and lick the wound once you are done to seal it shut.”

“Don’t kill, lick it shut, right right.” Samantha put her hands on the booth table, and looked down at herself. “Wearing something like this, I’m surprised a guy hasn’t tried to jump me yet.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, and motioned to Natasha.

“D-D-Don’t be so hard on men. If a man g-gets aggressive with you, it’s almost always n-not because he ... he’s going to do something horrible. It’s because m-most women like a confident man.” Natasha gestured to the railing. They couldn’t see the first floor from their booth, but the memory of its sights would no doubt be vivid in Samantha’s memory. “A lot of w-w-women like it when a man gets aggressive, m-make her feel ... helpless. B-B-But not when she isn’t into the guy. It’s ... it’s...”

“It is a difficult balance for men to find, my childe,” Antoinette said. “Timidity is not attractive, but society looks down upon men who are too aggressive.” For the conversation to head into this direction, the social and cultural establishments of gender norms and sexual attraction, was not what Antoinette had expected. But, she was happy to indulge the topic, and happier still, that Natasha was learning from her lessons. “What Natasha and I mean to say, is if a man is being aggressive with you, do not fret. If you have sternly told him to leave you be, and he does not, then you are encouraged to exercise your abilities as a Kindred.”

“My abilities? Oh, you mean hurt him.”

Natasha punched the air, once, with a lightning jab. “Kapow! Or something. Break an arm, or leg, or w-w-what have you. As long as you don’t kill them, then d-do what you want.”

Samantha gulped again and looked to Antoinette. “Really?”

“Oui, as I demonstrated to you earlier, with the stool leg. But, such a measure is rarely required. If a man is being aggressive with you, in all likelihood, it is because he believes you have flirted with him, and he is approaching you in a way he thinks you will enjoy; as dozens of women in this very establishment have proven. In such a circumstance, simply being upfront with him and saying ‘no thank you, I am not interested’ will end his chase. Usually.” Antoinette had long lost interest in being chased. Chasing, she found, was far more appealing. Perhaps it was simply a question of time and Kindred blood that led to such a change in Antoinette. But then, Natasha was not the sort to enjoy chasing, and she was both old and Kindred. No, the little woman definitely enjoyed being chased, and considering her boyfriends were literal incarnations of beasts of the hunt, such a thing was likely a near nightly occurrence for her. Lucky her. Antoinette had not slept with Jack since Julias’s death, and she was not sure when they would again.

She was not sure if she could let her sexuality fully emerge in Jack’s presence anymore, after seeing the alien entity within him emerge. An abhorrent, disgusting thing. The look in its eyes had not been Jack’s, and the idea of such a nasty beast touching her body was not a pleasant one. Worse, the idea of letting her guard down around the monster that had summoned an army of crows, and had slaughtered hunters in such a brutal way, such a ... Viktor way, sent a cold shiver down her spine. Not a shiver of fear, but of revulsion.

She shook her head, and refocused her thoughts. Jack had shown no signs of letting his curse emerge a second time, and she should



trust his word that it would not affect him, especially where his relationship with her was concerned. And she did trust him, mostly.

“And,” Antoinette continued, “if you truly wished to, you are allowed to kill kine, Samantha. There is little reason to, and almost always only negatives to gain. But know that, no matter what happens tonight, you are more than capable of managing any kine that comes your way, in any way you see fit. You came with me, and you will leave with me.”

“Guess I won’t be going back to some random stud’s place then?”

Too drôle, and cute. Antoinette could not help but chuckle. “Not until the hunters have been dealt with. While this section of South Side is quite safe, quite is not completely. I—” The Prince cast her glances to the stairs, and smiled as she recognized the vampire coming to join them. “Samantha Terry, meet Jessy Herrington, and Eric Tanverson.” Samantha’s eyes went wide, a reflex that Antoinette found herself drawn to. It was an expression of sincerity, showing Samantha’s soul with blatant honesty, much like her son did. It was precious.

Her childe’s eyes had gone wide from having at least two of her senses overwhelmed. The first was the unmistakable aura Eric gave off. Samantha did not yet know how to understand the strange way the Beast communicated with her, altered her senses, told her things and made her aware of things she had not been before, such as subtle smells, or body language. It was undoubtedly warning her now that Eric was an extremely dangerous animal, and perhaps not a simple kine.

The second reason was Jessy’s clothing. The Gangrel wore a tiny skirt, same as Samantha, but it was her top that had Samantha staring. Jessy’s top could barely be considered more than an elaborate necklace, with many loops of black fabric perhaps an inch thick circling around her neck and over her shoulders, and dangling

against her chest. A dozen loops, hanging loosely, and doing an abysmal job of covering her skin. Her breasts hung free, with some black tape drawn in an X across each nipple, hiding them but for a subtle hint of pink at the inner edges.

Jessy and her brazen attitude were such a delight. Her short blonde hair, her muscular physique, and surprisingly large bust, were such a pleasing visual combination of strength and femininity, that Antoinette could not help but be interested in the woman's pursuits. And her pursuits had most definitely become interesting, as knowledge of her rather extreme sexual adventures with her werewolf partner became known.

"You're Samantha? Hot damn, you are gorgeous." Jessy slipped into the booth next to Natasha, before she froze and looked at Antoinette. "Uh, sorry, Prince. Can I—"

"I am here only as observer, Miss Herrington, and aid to my childe on her first hunt. Behave as if I were not here ... to a reasonable point, of course."

Jessy nodded, and Antoinette half expected her to salute. It made Antoinette smile.

"So you're Jack's mom? Yeah, gorgeous! Who convinced you to wear that?"

Samantha shrank in her seat. "Um ... m-my sire."

Lights flashed in Jessy's eyes, and she leaned over the counter, across Natasha's lap toward Samantha. "First hunt? If you're shy, I can lend you one of my boys."

"Boys?" Samantha said, eyes drifting up from the table toward Eric. "I, uh—"

“No no, that’s Eric, my boyfriend. I got four ghouls, dudes, and—yeah, two of them over there.” The Gangrel nodded toward a booth. “And ... that’s Vincent, over there. Looks like he’s getting a blowjob right now, but that just means he’d enjoy a Kiss even more.” Another nod for another nearby booth.

Samantha leaned out enough to follow Jessy’s directions and spot the male ghouls. Her gasps were audible despite the music, earning a laugh from Jessy.

“D-Don’t rush her!” Natasha said. “Samantha, my friend J-Jessy is an asshole.”

“I happen to like that asshole,” Eric said, stepping up with a smile. Jessy burst into laughter, and Eric took a moment, before realizing his double entendre. “You know what I mean.”

“Fuck, we are wiped,” Jessy said. “Boss has me and Eric running the whole damn city up and down, patrolling. And Eric still has to do his shifts, too. Tonight’s the first night we get any free time, once his shift’s done tonight.”

“Um, Eric,” Samantha said, “I ... I um, you seem ... uh...”

“Werewolf,” Eric said, smiling at the woman. He did not sit down. He was wearing the suit the other bouncers wore, a nice balance of classy and fun, no tie, and suit jacket undone. Combined with his dark skin and shaved head, he looked terribly attractive, and Samantha looked him up and down at least twice. Perhaps her Daeva blood was showing through, drawing her gaze into the delicious symmetry of his body.

“Werewolf?” Samantha shivered, and rubbed her arms for a moment before setting them on her lap. “Wow.”

Antoinette struggled to not giggle at the expense of her childe. Jack had warned the Prince of the woman’s infatuation with

juvenile romance dramas, including the infamous Twilight series. Talk of vampires and werewolves would fill her mind with fantastical images that were wholly inaccurate. But, for the moment, it was a pleasing delight to let the woman's own imagination fill her thoughts with wonder.

Eric looked at the small woman for a few moments, before he adopted a strange smile. It was not a smile Antoinette was used to seeing on paranormals, but she did recognize it. It was the smile of someone who was going to talk with an older person, a mix of respect, but also understanding that the minds of the older were never quite as quick as the minds of the younger. The man had plenty of practice from dealing with his father, no doubt. Antoinette appreciated it.

“Jessy is right though, you look great. Certainly don't look old enough to be Jack's mom.”

She smiled, and to Antoinette's utter delight, giggled. The woman was helpless to the obviously manipulative words of Eric, kind as they were. Jack's analysis of his mother was correct, that she was a simple-minded woman, with a heart of gold. Antoinette almost felt bad, bringing such a pure woman into a place of decadence, sexuality, and wanton exploration of boundaries. Perhaps she was being too hard on her little childe, throwing her into the deep end and expecting her to swim?

As much as it was true that Samantha was a fresh Kindred, a fledgling only a week old, it was also true that she was the Prince's childe. Much was expected of her, and Antoinette had faith she could fulfill those expectations. While Jack may think much of his success and abilities were due to his curse expressing its power, Antoinette knew better, as did Julias. Jack had a mind capable of great feats, with or without his curse, and the Prince expected to see various aspects of Jack's determination and skill emerge in her new childe.

But for now, she was a naive woman, vulnerable to words. Eric's words had been kind, but Antoinette could foresee others attempting to manipulate her. Jessy would no doubt push the woman into a sexual affair, but that was not necessarily a bad thing. Sex and the Kiss, especially when combined, were wonderfully capable of easing the sorrow of a pained soul, if at least only momentarily.

"You all know Jack?" Samantha said. "It's ... hard to imagine, Jack making so many friends. After James died, he always kept to himself. All his teenage years, he did his own thing, alone."

"Jack's been making waves ever since Julias brought him in," Jessy said. "I mean yeah, he was pretty closed off then, and still is a bit, but he's a force, you know? When shit hits the fan, we can all rely on that little punk." Nodding, Jessy pulled Eric down to sit next to her, before she slid onto his lap sideways, and hooked an arm around his neck. Her free arm played with his suit, tugging at the shirt underneath, and fingers slipping in between buttons to find skin. "Kid even ran a rescue mission. Saved me, Eric, and another wolf named Clara."

"Jack running ... rescue ... missions?" Samantha shivered and set a hand to her neck. "It's ... I suppose it's easier to see him doing that, than being social and making friends. But harder to accept. He must be in danger ... all the time."

The Gangrel nodded, and spoke up before anyone else could. "Our second life isn't without risks, Sam. Your kid has saved a lot of lives." And again, before anyone could say anything, or before poor Samantha could even react to the contentious Gangrel, Jessy slammed both palms down on the table. It made everyone flinch save for Antoinette. How poor Eric could handle such a bundle of unbridled aggression, Antoinette would never know. "But from where I'm sitting"—she laughed at her joke, and punched Eric in the chest—"this night is about you, right? Don't worry about Jack."

Samantha gulped, and looked up at Antoinette.

The Prince smiled down at her childe once more. “As much as the boisterous Gangrel has invited herself into our affairs, she is not wrong. Your son has made unprecedented advancement in skill and position, Samantha. He can take care of himself, better than most. You, on the other hand, are a brand new fledgling, and must learn to do the same.” Complimenting her would work well, but complimenting her son would turn the woman into malleable clay, fully willing to believe and follow whoever it was that applauded her offspring. Antoinette would have to work hard to teach the woman some awareness, and to be wary of forked tongues.

Antoinette did take a moment to offer Jessy a small glare. It said many things, in a fraction of a second of eye contact. Do not push my childe too hard, stupid woman, or I will break you, and your sire will be helpless to do anything but watch.

Jessy gulped in a similar manner to Samantha, and Antoinette smiled. Message sent and received.

“I’m not sure what to do,” Samantha said.

Antoinette tapped her chin a few times. “I think, perhaps, you should take Jessy up on her offer.”

“Say what?” Jessy said, eyebrow raised.

“The first time Jack fed on kine, it was on Ashley. Was it not, my dear?”

“Yeah!” Ashley leaned over the booth from behind, and nodded emphatically. “He was super nervous. But mistress let him Kiss me, right here in this booth actually.” A frown slowly crept onto her face. “Just that, though.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, and shooed her silly ghoul away. No need to scar the mother's mind with talk of Jack sharing his bed with three women; or rather, no more than Antoinette already had.

Natasha smiled up at the ghoul, before turning her petite smile to Samantha. "If you're n-not comfortable with hunting, with m-meeting a stranger and Kissing them, then Jessy's idea isn't t-t-too bad. I ... d-don't suggest Vincent though." Indeed, Vincent was in the midst of fellatio, and Kindred eyes revealed enough in the dark that Samantha could no doubt see the man was struggling on the edge of bliss.

"So you ... know these men?" Samantha said. "Of course you do, if they're your ghouls. I ... I um ... I can trust them."

Jessy laughed. "As much as any man. They're horny and dumb. Flash a smile and some skin and you can make them do whatever you want. And if they get too uppity, break their arm. My ghouls won't do anything you won't like, though."

That earned a chuckle from Samantha. Two separate Kindred, vastly different, recommending the same course of action separate from each other, was a convincing argument.

"I think ... I mean, I guess I can do that."

"You kidding me?" Jessy said. "You're a Daeva. You could literally break any man in this room in half, even at your age. And you're Kindred, so as long as you don't ... I don't know, tackle someone through a wall, or rip out someone's skull, you're free to do what you want to the kine. You're worrying too much! You can hunt and fuck all you want. You can't get pregnant, you can't get any diseases, and anal is on the menu twenty-four-seven. And especially as a Daeva, a little touch of Majesty, and kine are eating out of your palm, and between your legs." Shrugging, she got up and out from the booth, and motioned for Eric and Natasha to follow.

They did, leaving Samantha's flank and path completely open.

"Just ... walk up to the two of them?"

Jessy nodded. "Sure. Bang them if you want, you got my permission." A sharp glance from Antoinette earned a flinch from the brazen woman. "Or, you know, probably just want to offer one of them a Kiss. All the power is in your hands."

"Power. Right. Power." Nodding, several more times than necessary, Samantha scooted out of the booth seat, stood up, and adjusted her dress. "How do I look?"

"Like the sexy milf young men fantasize about getting seduced by," Jessy said, and she held up her thumb.

"Right. Yeah. Ok." She did not believe Jessy's words, but she would, Antoinette knew it. Samantha was a beautiful woman, and the Prince had made sure to put that beauty on exaggerated display tonight. Jessy's ghouls stood no chance.

Samantha shook out her shoulders a little, and walked over to the booth the two men sat in. They were bordering on intoxicated, from what Antoinette could see, glasses in their hands, and jovial laughs cutting through the music between pulses. Their height and muscularity were impressive, and Antoinette found herself a little surprised Jessy had traded her four men of brawn in, for the bitter ex-husband who was, by all accounts, an average-sized man. The Prince knew Eric was quite muscular underneath his suit, given his history, but with it on, he seemed of normal stature.

But then, he would be anything but average sized, once transformed into his war beast form. Antoinette had almost decided to speak to Jessy on her own, and discourage this reckless indulgence in such a dangerous kink. The other Uratha did not indulge their lust when transformed, as far as she knew, and she did know that they struggled to control themselves when in the Gauru



form. As long as Eric did not draw attention to himself, as he did with his first transformation, she did not mind, but it was a risky business.

“Sorry if I’m spoiling shit,” Jessy said to them all. “Kinda just walked in and told your childe what to do, didn’t I?”

Antoinette nodded, and licked a canine. “You did. But your intentions were well placed. Samantha is a .. troubled woman, as you know. She does not realize it, but she is the sort who best thrives on a social environment.” And apparently, that was half destroyed when she lost her husband, and the other half was destroyed when she lost Jack. It was time to heal. “Kind words from a group of friends will help her, more than she knows, more than the words of a mentor can.”

“Social butterfly sort, right?” Nodding, Jessy adjusted her top, made sure to do so in such a way as to draw Eric’s eyes, before she smiled at Antoinette. “Or at least, she probably was.”

“Indeed, but her life has been pain, and misery, long before her embrace. Given time, she will heal, and I believe a large social circle will help her do so.” She tapped a finger on the table, and watched her childe sit with the two men in a distant booth. Samantha looked terribly nervous, sitting with plenty of space between her and the nearest of Jessy’s ghouls. But, there was no denying the lust in the men’s eyes as they looked the small woman up and down, and the hunger in hers as she did the same to them. Instinct would take over eventually.

“Large s-social circle?” Natasha said as she sat back down in the booth. “I c-can’t imagine that healing anyone.”

Jessy and Antoinette both chuckled, and the small woman frowned.

“We could help her?” Julee said, leaning over the booth’s back. “I mean, I know we’re a bit young, but...”

“In the future, perhaps, my pet.” Antoinette nodded, and combed her hair over her shoulder and chest. “Samantha may require a social life Kindred like Natasha do not, but not until she has recovered from her circumstance. If she did not need to hunt, I would have kept her in the tower for several more weeks, to heal.”

Julee nodded, put her elbows on the booth’s back, and set her chin in her palms. “Shame we never got to meet Mary.”

“Careful, pet. Should Samantha hear you, you may send her spiraling into sorrow.”

“Right, right! Sorry.” The ballerina stood at attention again, but it broke quickly as she started talking with Ashley.

“Prince,” Jessy said, “can I speak frankly? About, you know, normal stuff.”

“At Bloodlust, I expect only a fraction of the respect I demand in the rest of the city.”

“How ... much is that fraction?”

Antoinette grinned. “Test the waters, and find out, Herrington.” A challenge for the Gangrel was Antoinette at play, toying with her prey. If Jessy had the mindfulness to gauge and control herself, she would learn how to speak with Antoinette without issue. If she did not, then Antoinette would slap her down with a harsh remark, or a literal slap, if needed. Verbal jousting was a true sport, and one Antoinette enjoyed.

These were strange waters for Antoinette as well, speaking with the neonates and ancilla of the city on such informal ground. Normally they avoided her, until Jack, sweet, curious, honest Jack,

had not. She found herself almost excited that, perhaps, she could make new friends; or at least acquaintances to speak with. It had grown lonely in her tower, after Tony's departure, even for an elder such as her.

“Well, I was talking with Tash and Jack a few days ago, and it seems you and Jack are pretty open about expressing your sexual interests with each other.” With a juvenile grin, Jessy slid back into the booth next to Natasha.

“You have been to my balls, young Gangrel. You should know it is my wish to discard the taboo of sex, and uproot the cultural stigma.” She shrugged, and gestured to Jessy's attire. “Though not everyone embraces it as readily as you.”

“Heh, thanks.” She shook her shoulders a few times, causing her delightful breasts to sway and ripple with nipples locked behind the black tape, and for the dress top of black straps to bounce. “I wanted to know about you and Jack. Like ... how does it work in bed? You know, considering—”

“Jack is content to let me lead, usually. Sometimes he is more aggressive and dominant, though such bursts are most often spent on Ashley and Julee,” she said. The two ballerinas giggled, and wiggled their fingers at the grinning Jessy. “Most nights, I guide him, indulge him, and pamper him, usually with my breasts. They are quite sensitive, and I enjoy his touch upon them greatly.”

Her words managed to punctured Jessy's shell, and the Gangrel choked on a small chuckle. Eric, on the other hand, did his best to not look at the Prince, though the man managed to sneak a few glances at her breasts. The dress was quite revealing, after all.

“And Tash gets to see all that?”

“H-Hey! I ... I mean...” Sighing, Tash punched her friend in the shoulder. “Only once or ... t-twice.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, and looked out to the railing ahead of them, between them and the floor below. “Perhaps, some day, people will make love upon a stage for all to see, and it will be watched by eyes filled with wonder. I wish for such a future.”

“Sounds avant-garde,” Eric said. “I mean ... Dolareido’s halfway there.”

“I d-dunno.” Natasha shook her head, and tapped her index fingers together. “Love is ... b-better when it’s private, isn’t it?”

“Pffft.” Jessy reached out, and plucked on Natasha’s tube top, causing the fabric to fall.

“J-Jessy!” Natasha, squeaking and frowning, pulled her top back up, and again punched the Gangrel in the shoulder. Having her breasts revealed seemed inconsequential to the Prince; Natasha’s clothes were formfitting enough that nothing was left to the imagination anyway. Poor Eric did his best to not look, but Natasha was a terribly cute little creature, and her revealing attire meant the werewolf could see all of her delightful, small body.

“I, for one,” Jessy said, “am feeling terribly left out. You guys just fucking all over the place in that fancy tower?”

“I keep it p-p-private!”

“You do not need to, if you so desired, my student.” Antoinette smiled down at the tiny Mekhet, and Natasha looked back up at her with widening eyes. “I for one, would love to see your small frame trapped between your two wolves.”

Natasha shrank into the booth, frowning all the more. “You’re all p-p-perverts.”

Antoinette blinked, and let her eyes drift away back to the balcony railing. Natasha had just insulted her. How long had it been since

someone had insulted her in such a manner? Jacob insulted her on occasion, but the man's words were never sincere, always manipulative, always layered with extra meaning. For her student to insult her with such a genuine, if juvenile, insult was ... wonderful.

Antoinette laughed, a touch louder than she meant to, and it earned looks and raised eyebrows from everyone nearby.

“Perhaps we are.”



~~Eric~~

Understanding women was impossible. Cliché, and a cliché he hadn't really believed, until he met these vampires. One minute his girlfriend was rash and brazen, the next, she was borderline flirting with her old friend; a damn cute old friend, this Natasha woman. Natasha herself seemed shy, but she had two boyfriends that she slept with, at the same time, according to Jessy. And of course, there was Antoinette, who carried a 'mommy dominatrix' sign over her head, and yet, had an edge to her that was hard to place. She was damn smart, and scary.

The confusing part was how they talked about sex. Only Natasha avoided the topic, but even then, it was obvious that the very thought of sex seemed to please her. Maybe it was a Kindred thing, or an age thing? All these women were quite old, older than Samantha, and he could tell they all enjoyed sex quite a bit. He was the youngster, in this group. Even the two young ladies behind the Prince were older than they looked, he knew, having been ghouls for her for some years.

All in all, it made him a little uncomfortable. Not in a bad way, but there was no denying that three sexy-as-hell vampires were sitting in the booth with him, and all of them were quite aware of their sexuality. Even Natasha, in stark contrast to how she acted, had a bit

of that ‘mature and sexual self-awareness’ in her eyes. Then there was the fact they were all dressed to kill. Natasha was in a tiny tube top with an itty bitty skirt, and a thong. Antoinette was wearing a silver dress that a stiff breeze could have knocked off of her; any small movement would have slid the front straps off her breasts. He had no idea how she managed to keep them where they were. And his girlfriend was wearing what might have been the remains of a black top, after a lawn mower was done chewing it up. The only thing that kept nipples out of the picture, was the black nipple tape she was using to cover them up.

He was used to seeing a lot of skin. He’d been rich, or at least well off once upon a time, and even a little famous. He went to clubs a lot rowdier than Bloodlust, and had seen some huge sexual displays, but that was rarely from mature women who knew themselves. No, those nights, it’d been young women who liked pretty lights and the drugs that came with them. Young, experimenting, not sure what they wanted, not confident in themselves, and faking that they were. It was a whole different ballgame when dealing with older women, who knew exactly what they wanted.

Eric, sitting on the outside edge of the booth, looked over his shoulder to peek at Samantha. She’d moved in closer on her booth seat, close enough she was almost touching one of Jessy’s ghouls. After a few seconds, she was chuckling, a shy and quiet chuckle, but a chuckle. The ghouls were tipsy, and both were obviously trying to impress Samantha with smooth lines, jokes, and the size of their muscles. And it was working.

“Jack’s mother,” he said, looking back to the rest of them, “is ... really sweet, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is.” The Prince nodded as she combed her hair down over her chest. “I find myself pleasantly surprised with her. She has been through the greatest Hell, and survives through sheer resilience. Despite that, she remains a soft, delicate woman.”

“Ah, one of those types.” Nodding, he looked back again. Yeap, Samantha was eating up whatever compliments the two ghouls were throwing at her. One of them slid in closer, and she didn’t slide away. Her eyes kept looking to their exposed necks. A young vampire, being driven by hunger, and the need to hunt.

She kind of reminded Eric of Fiona, actually, though Fiona had an aggressive quality to her. Samantha, if she ever recovered from the trauma she’d suffered, would likely have the same smiles and laughs the Scot did.

Samantha could recover, but his dad couldn’t? Fuck, that was frustrating. Maybe—

“You should make a sex tape.”

Everyone turned to look at Jessy.

“Um, what?” Eric said.

“Tash! Sex tape. It’s all the rage these days. We can make one, and she can make one, and we can trade.” She nodded, as if it were the greatest idea ever.

Eric facepalmed, while Natasha grumbled. The Prince just watched and listened, apparently quite content to observe the idiots make fools of themselves.

“I w-won’t!”

“Aw, come on. Really? After all I did for you, this is how you repay me?” Seeing Jessy pout like a kid wanting candy was too hilarious to not laugh at, but the glare Tash gave him shut him up quick; mostly. Some chuckles still managed to sneak through.

“You d-d-didn’t ... do ... me any favors! You just wanted to see me n-naked.”

“I did, and so did the boys. It was fun, wasn’t it? I bet Matt and Arturo are loving the new you.”

“I—”

“Pleeeaaasse? Pretty pretty please? I’ll—ow!” A sharp elbow in the side from Eric cut her off. “Asshole!” She elbowed him back, and she wasn’t so kind about it.

The Prince laughed, and caught his eyes. She knew what he was aiming for, to break Jessy out of her insistent personality loop, without bringing down the mood, and she winked at him. Woman was too damn smart.

“Herrington, while Natasha is far more comfortable with her sexuality than she used to be, in part due to your friendship, I believe you will catch more flies with honey.” Antoinette leaned forward over the table, and smiled at Natasha before eyeing Jessy with an unusual grin. “If you continue to insist, she will not acquiesce, if only to spite you.”

Jessy groaned, stomped her feet a few times, and looked back at Eric. Like a kid whining for candy in a store, to now sullen with defeat, in a matter of seconds. It was too damn cute.

“Let’s dance.”

“What?”

“Dance!” Jessy pushed on him, got him out of the booth, and followed after him. “Come on. I’m gonna show you off for a bit, before we go back to your place for some good fucking. We haven’t had time to fuck in days, and I am so god damn horny, it is killing me.”

“Show me off, or show yourself off?” He gestured to her chest, and how her flimsy top left her rock hard stomach and large breasts



on display.

“Mostly the latter, bit of the former?” Shrugging, she took his hand, and started toward the stairs. “Tash! I expect to see some juicy stuff from you later.”

Tash’s frown wavered, a smile fighting to break through, but she persevered. Folding her arms across her chest, she waved at Jessy, and turned to start a conversation with the Prince.

As Jessy guided Eric to the stairway, she made sure to take the other stairway down; it cut closer to Samantha. “Isaac, Chris, Samantha treating you two alright?”

“Yes ma’am,” they said together, like soldiers.

“Me, treating them?” Samantha frowned, until she realized it was a joke, and she smiled as a giggle erupted out of her. “I’ll ... be nice.”

Jessy winked at her. “Don’t be too nice. Chris and Isaac are yours for the night.”

“M ... Mine?”

“Yeap, and they’ll do anything you ask them to.” Eyebrow wiggles followed. “Anything.”

Samantha gulped, but before she could say something, Jessy grabbed Eric’s hand and took her down the stairs.

It was louder on the first floor, and the flashing white light was more obnoxious. But none of that really mattered with Jessy’s hand around his. Everyone around them, the loud music, the lighting, it was all secondary to the joy in something as simple as following the person he was hoping to spend his time with.

They got into the middle of the crowd, and began to sway and bounce to the beat. Jessy instantly melted into it, merging with the music and its sexual rhythm. She put her back to his chest, and moved her shoulders left and right, arms raised and mixing with the crowd around them, the dozens of kine that all flowed with sexual hunger and physical exertion.

She was sad. She was doing a good job of hiding it, but he'd been hanging with her enough to see how quick she was to put on a big smile whenever he caught her eyes. She was sad, and being outgoing and hyper aggressive and sexual was how she kept the sadness from getting to her. Except, he'd held her when she cried. He knew what it felt like to hold the crazy, brash woman to his chest, when she whimpered, and sobbed. He knew what it felt like, to be someone she could lean on when she needed to cry. He wouldn't give that feeling up for the world.

If she wanted to dance, to try and forget her woes, he could be her dance partner too.

## Chapter 94

~~Eric~~

“Were you trying to make me jealous the whole night?” he said.

Jessy laughed as she closed his door behind them. Back in his apartment, she reached down, threw off her high heels, literally, and jumped onto the couch. Kat sat upon the couch’s back, and meowed in greeting. Jessy meowed back.

“I am a walking, talking embodiment of hotness, Eric. Last thing I’d ever feel the need to do, is make you jealous. I am God’s gift to you, to make up for your shitty life from before.”

As much as Kat was dumb beyond all reason, she got along better with Jessy than Eric expected; especially if Jessy’s cat from her time as a human no longer liked her after her change, like she said. Maybe after her embrace, Jessy became more cat-like than human, and her pet saw her as a rival? Introducing adult cats and getting them to live together was often a painful, slow process.

With Kat, Eric could get a pet badger, and she’d still try and make friends.

“Can’t disagree.” He walked up to her, and gestured to the ridiculous-but-sexy top she still wore. “But, just because you don’t have to, doesn’t mean you wouldn’t, if you found it fun.”

“True, true.” She gestured for him to sit. Once he did, she turned around and lay on her back, her head on his lap. Groaning, she tilted her head from side to side, stretching. Did vampires need to stretch? They often breathed, and they didn’t need to do that. Probably just old habits, because, at the moment, he could tell she wasn’t alive. Pale skin, thinned, and no heartbeat or natural scents. It’d been a bit

of a shocker, being around her when she wasn't Blushing Life, and after his new senses had awakened. His animal instincts told him she was a corpse, but corpses didn't walk and talk and fuck.

"Samantha seems nice," he said.

"Yeah, really nice. And speaking of." She pulled out her phone, and texted someone. A second later, she got a text back, and she smirked at the phone. "She took a small kiss of Isaac. Apparently it was a little surprising for her, and she ended it quickly. Now Chris is trying to convince her to Kiss him too, and now that she's all hot and bothered from the first Kiss, he's pushing for a little touching."

"Aw come on. The woman's been through hell. He shouldn't—"

"Samantha's an adult, dumbass. She can take care of herself. And besides, my boys know to not push it too far." She shrugged, and scrolled on the phone. Holding it up with it pointed down at her, head still on his lap, he couldn't see what she was scrolling through, but whatever it was, was making her smile. "Want to see some more pictures?"

"More pictures? Of—" She turned the phone around and showed him. Clara again, with a weird expression; likely drunk, and maybe high. She was standing in a shower, and two of Jessy's ghouls were eating her out, one from behind, one from the front. Must have been a picture from earlier, since most of those guys were just at Bloodlust.

Jesus, how much pot would it take for an Uratha to get high? What used to get him drunk, didn't, and he'd probably have to drink ten times what he used to to get wasted. An expensive vice to keep.

"God damn Clara is beautiful. I'm happy she's enjoying my boys, with Jack out of the picture. I hope Samantha enjoys them too."

“You know she’s going to kill you, if you keep letting your ghouls take pictures of her. And—” Eric stared at the picture of the naked werewolf. Clara was average height for a woman, maybe a couple inches taller, and she had a lean muscularity similar to Jessy; no wonder the Gangrel found her attractive. Smaller breasts, long black box-braids, and dark tan skin, she was the definition of ‘sporty’, and Eric licked his lips at the sight of her, mouth open in obvious bliss.

“Hey! I’m right here,” Jessy said, and she thumped her head against his leg.

“What, I can’t make you jealous?”

“No. I can dish it out, but I am far too sensitive to take being teased like that.” Nodding, she put the phone away, and smiled up at him. “I am a sensitive snowflake.”

“Uh huh.” Laughing, he set a hand on her head, and started working his fingers through her hair. Instant murrms of joy from the vampire. “So what now?”

“Well I don’t know about you, but I plan on getting laid before sunrise.”

He rolled his eyes. “I mean, with the hunters, and the covenants now that Julias is gone.”

She winced, and lowered her gaze to look at nothing. It wasn’t the nicest thing to talk about, but they hadn’t really, and it was about time they did.

“Jack’s dealt them a huge wound, killing three, maybe four more of them, and capturing their enforcer. Gives us the leeway — we hope — to get more aggressive. Everyone has kill orders if they see a hunter. Sweeps continue, more of them, more often.” Groaning, she sat up, thought better of it, and lay back down. “God I’m tired. This week has been brutal.”

“Heh, yeah.” The two of them had been doing their patrols together, and then he had to either work, or sleep then work. He wasn’t sure what she did for work, secret Invictus stuff probably, and she had to do that when she wasn’t patrolling. Right Hand of the Invictus and whatnot.

“Hey,” she said, looking up at him, eyes pensive. “Make sure you don’t ... you know...”

“Mm?”

“You’re getting dragged into this hunter beef, and ... and after what happened to Jack, I can’t stop thinking about Beatrice and shit. I hate it. Fuck I hate it.”

Oh, right. She was worried he’d die. Not worried about herself, but worried about him.

“I—”

“Like, your dad’s in the hospital, just like Jack’s mom was.”

“I’m not su—”

“Think those hunters won’t use that against you, if they find out? These ones are psychopaths. They’ll burn down a school if they think it’ll kill a vamp, I bet.”

“That’s a bit—”

“This fucking Angela woman, and Jeremiah, they aren’t playing by the rules.” She reached up and hooked a hand on his shoulder, while still lying on the couch and his lap. “They know your face, right? Four of them have seen your human face, and know you go to Bloodlust. No hunter with a brain would show up there, or come this deep into South Side, but these hunters don’t have brains! They’re insane, or at least their boss is.”

He stopped trying to say anything. Better to just smile down at her, and wait for her to get to wherever her train of thought was taking her.

“So ... be careful, you know? Really, really careful. Cause I’m getting attached to you, and I’m ... I’m sad enough, with Julias gone. If you died, I’d ... I’d...”

“Be sad.”

“Yes! Sad. I don’t like feeling sad. Fucking hate it.” She slipped off of him, stood up, and threw off her top. The thing ceased being clothes, and became a bundle of black straps tangled together as it flew through the air, and landed on his kitchen table. Kat chased after it, continuing its evolution from a pile of straps, into cat toy. “So, I ... I want you to make me feel safe, tonight.”

“Don’t transform, then?” He smiled, leaning back on his couch, and watching the ridiculously gorgeous woman stand there in a short skirt, thong, and nipple pasties. Like a skill, she’d gone from sad to horny in seconds.

“What? Fuck that, definitely transform. I want to disappear from the world for a while, beneath my boyfriend’s giant body. Just, hide away inside your shadow.”

He choked on a chuckle. “Sometimes I think you’re only dating me because I can get really big.”

She frowned at him. Uh oh. “Hey, fuck you. I’ll have you know that I happen to like you, you bitter asshole.”

That was unexpected. Unexpected because he was an idiot. She’d just compared them to Julias and Beatrice, and far as he knew, those two had been madly in love. A dangerous step for Jessy, thinking like that. A dangerous step for him, being intrigued by her, and the L word.

Memories of his ex-wife ran through his mind, and he pushed them away. Jessy was not Sheryl. Jessy was basically the antithesis to Sheryl, and that meant something. The last thing this woman was thinking, was a ploy to hook him into a relationship to take his money. That wasn't fair to Sheryl, but then, that's all their relationship had been towards the end.

He tilted his head to the side, and let out a gentle sigh as he smiled. "I like you too. A lot."

"A lot?"

"A lot lot."

She squirmed in place, a smile growing bigger and brighter on her face. "You just want me for my body." As she said it, she hooked her fingers into her skirt, and slid the tiny bit of black fabric off. Wearing nothing but a g-string, she posed for him, weight on one leg and hand on its hip. The fact he'd just said similar to her about her only wanting his body, seemed lost on her; or more likely, she was ignoring the hypocrisy like a playful kid.

"Not true. I'm also into you for the money."

"That's more understandable; I'm rich as fuck. But I'm not a moron. If we get married, we're signing a prenup." She slid out of the thong, revealing her smooth, pale skin, and her shaved sex. A moment later she was Blushing Life, and her skin darkened, becoming tan, and bringing some pink color to the lips between her thighs; the ones on her mouth had lipstick.

"Smart. Wish I'd have done that."

"Yeah well, when you're young and stupid and in love, it's impossible to think someone's only into you because you're rich." She grabbed his hand, pulled him off the couch, and started dragging him toward his bedroom. "And hey, I ain't blaming a girl



for being attracted to money. It's such a turn on when a guy can buy a yacht."

"What if I bought one, kidnapped you, and held you captive it on you until you inevitably fell in love with me?"

"Fuck that is so stupid, and dumb, and hot."

They both laughed. He wasn't sure if she was kidding or being serious, but it was true that, given a few more years, he'd be able to buy a very small yacht, or at least a small boat of some kind. On the other hand, Jessy could probably afford a proper one right now, if what he knew about the Invictus, and older Kindred was true.

She jumped onto the bed, spread her legs as she turned to face him, and idly began to gently stroke her clitoris, one leg up on the bed. Licking her lips, she motioned to him with her other hand, and waved her fingers up a bit.

"Transform, and then prove to me you can be sweet, and gentle, and all protective and possessive and stuff."

"Thinking Caleb was right?" That couldn't have been true, if she was willing to do this again. He started taking off his suit, and watched her casually masturbate as he did. Her touch was slow, soft, only enough to start to warm her up. He'd have happily did it for her, but she seemed to have something else in mind.

"Mostly not, but maybe a little. Sometimes, you do get a little scary and weird and animal-like, when transformed." She shivered with the memory, massaging her clitoris faster as she smiled at him. "So, we can consider this training, to help you get better at controlling yourself, at not giving into that animal side. Though ... if you did, and you turned into some hungry animal, aching with a savage need to mate with me, mount and claim me, and fill me? Can't say that doesn't have its appeal either. A beastly, deadly protector, who will guard me and keep me safe, even as he rocks me

until I'm bowlegged." Swooning, she started to fan her face with one hand, eyes rolling up with her silly fantasy, even as she continued to tease her clit with her other hand.

In retrospect, it wasn't a silly fantasy. When he did lose control of himself, he seemed to think of her as his mate, someone to protect, and dominate. The idea was very appealing.

He laughed as he slipped out of his pants and boxers, and tossed them aside. Watching the naked woman masturbate on his bed, legs spread and smooth slit on display, with an X in thick black tape still drawn across each nipple, was an invitation for him to pounce her and pound her into the mattress. He'd try and control himself, but she seemed determined to test his limits.

He stood at the edge of the bed, two feet from her, one of her legs dangling off its edge and nearly touching his. This close, he could smile down at her, feel his arousal grow into an erection, and draw her wandering eyes. This close, he could smell her own arousal, spurred by her Blush of Life. This close, he could see her lips part and her tongue lick a canine, as he began to transform.

Embracing the wolf inside him had become far easier than it used to be. Practice, and acceptance, he supposed. Whatever the reason, letting the creature, the Beast as the vampires put it, emerge from the depths of his core, had become a simple, smooth process, relatively speaking. It didn't hurt as much anymore, and he managed to keep a smile as he felt the mass overwhelm him, the muscles explode in size, the fur grow from his skin, and his mouth elongate.

The weight was the biggest difference. He felt heavy, and strong, and massive. He was heavy, strong, and massive. He could run through a wall, could tear through metal, bite through a block of hard wood, or shred the floor with his claws and mass. Power coursed into him, a mixture of flesh and blood and life, and

something else, something that he didn't understand, but knew what it was. Spirit. Not the metaphorical kind, but the real kind, the sort on the other side of the Gauntlet.

It filled him with power, and hunger. Filled him with desire. A part of him wanted to rip and tear, break, shred, destroy, hunt and control his territory. But as his eyes looked down, down, way down at the tiny, naked creature on his bed, with her legs spread, another desire replaced the others.

“F-Fuck...” She stared up at him, eyes wide, as he leaned down over her and planted his claws against the bed sheets. “It’s ... it’s um, hard to know if ... if you’re still Eric, when you’re like this, you know?”

He breathed, deep, his chest rising and falling. As long as he breathed deep like Luna taught him, as long as he didn't let the rage in his chest build, he would remain calm. However, the power and desire it brought with it was amazing, and addicting; to Jessy's delight, from the way she was looking him up and down. And when he squatted down a little, so the heavy slab of pink flesh dangling from between his legs rested on her stomach, she groaned openly. It was massive compared to her small waist, and reached past her navel along her abs.

He wanted it inside her, now. Every part of him demanded it.

“W-Wait,” she said. “Let me, uh ... get some lube.”

He growled, low, deep, a rumbling purr in his chest that he could feel through his body and into his claws. She felt it too, and she licked her lips as she shivered. For all her desire, it was clear to see she was afraid; and she liked it.

He stepped back, and his cock fell off of her, heavy and just soft enough it could bend with gravity, but only just. Groaning openly, Jessy slid off the bed, and with quick steps, bounced off to the

bathroom. She returned in seconds, and threw herself onto the bed, with a towel. Sitting on the towel, she dangled her legs off the bed, and wasted no time pouring a globe of the liquid onto her palm, before she began rubbing it between her thighs, further down than her slit.

As she did, he stepped in closer once again, burying her in his shadow. He licked his long teeth as he watched the vampire work the lubricant into her ass, while at the same time rubbing her sex and clitoris. An expert at pleasuring herself. Her moans grew, and as he crouched down over her, again planting his claws on the blankets around her, and setting his long shaft along her stomach and wrist, her moans became blatant panting.

As she masturbated, using her palm to rub her sex as her fingers massaged the lube into her ass, her other hand reached up, and slipped her fingers into his mouth. Into was the wrong word, more like, holding onto the jaw, and hooking her fingers between the giant canines along one side.

“You really are, like, fucking ... terrifying.” Her hand slid down his jaw, down his colossal chest, and down onto his abs. Everything had a coating of fur, thicker on his neck, arms, and legs, but thin enough on his chest and abs for the muscle definition to be blatant. She traced them, hypnotized, as she continued to masturbate.

He lowered his head closer, until his titan snout was only inches from her face. “You ... are ... beau ... tiful.” It was a struggle to say words, keep them controlled, and enunciating ‘beautiful’ was borderline impossible.

She stared at him, gulping. When he brought his head in closer again, so his enormous jaw was beside head, over her shoulder, and his large eye was next to hers, she gulped again. Being near her was enough to send her heart racing with its fake heartbeat.

He needed her. Now.

“I ... I am, yeah.” She turned her head to lean in toward his jaw, and she set a kiss on the upper half of his snout, beside his nose. Her head could fit into his mouth if he wanted it to, literally. She smiled at him, making eye contact as her other soaked hand raised from her ass, and slid onto the massive phallus resting on her stomach. Rubbing it, coating it in lubricant and sending tiny waves of bliss down its length, earned a pleased rumble from him, more deep bass filling him, and her.

“I want you,” he said, voice deep, guttural, but quiet, half whisper.

“Course you do.” She grinned at him, but she still shivered, even trembled. And as she squirmed underneath him, she squeezed on his cock, sending a spark of pleasure down its fat, pink flesh, and between his legs. A drop of his precum leaked from the tip, and fell onto her flat stomach, above her navel.

With a gleeful giggle, a very un-Jessy-like sound, she grabbed a pillow, lay back, and put the pillow under her ass. Even with his mind clouded with a mix of animalistic hungers, he knew this human sex position: missionary. Maybe he'd mount her later, pin her down underneath him, do what his body demanded. For now, he'd delight in this strange balance of control and desire, and indulge a more human approach.

He pulled his hips back, and as he crouched down over the tiny creature, he took his cock into one hand, and pressed it against the small, squeezing rose of her ass.

“Fuuuuck that thing is huge,” she said. “Haha, fuck, I sound like a stupid young girl who's watched too much porn, and thinks she knows how to talk to turn guys on.” Laughing, she reached down with both hands, and clutched her thighs from the inside pressing out, holding her legs apart while pressing her breasts together with her biceps. “Who am I kidding. I could talk about physics, and it'd turn a guy on when I'm in this position.”

He managed a chuckle, a breathy and heavy sound, as he licked his chops. The tiny female was practiced with anal sex, and knew how to relax the tight ring of flesh, to let him sink the first couple inches of his slab of pink meat into her. It was tight beyond imagining, and forcing the tip of his length into her, was euphoric. Moaning, she let go of her thighs, but kept her legs spread as far as they could, as she reached up, and pressed her hands against his chest. With him leaning over her, she was hidden underneath him, buried, and his head hung above hers by a couple feet. A small drop of drool fell onto her neck. He was a beast. There was no getting around a little drool.

It didn't bother Jessy. She just laughed, but he could see her eyes stare at his mouth, at the gargantuan snout filled with enormous teeth, and the tongue between them.

“Christ, you are a scary fucker.”

“I ... won't hurt ... you.”

“I—fuuuuuuuuck.” She pressed against his chest a little harder, to no avail, as he began to sink more of his cock into her. Her squeezing ring of lubricated flesh was heavenly, and he rumbled as more pleasure sparks danced along the swollen, sensitive pink skin of his cock. The thick girth stretched her ass apart, and while she tried to relax the muscle, she groaned, leaned her head back, and pressed her hands on his chest a little harder. He continued, sinking in another inch, and another. Slow, Eric, nice and slow. For now.

Eight inches in, her clenching ass found the bulbous shape of the knot of his cock. She groaned louder as she forced herself up onto her elbows, and stared down at her body, her spread ass, and the tiny distension his thick girth was causing along her abs.

“Slow! Holy crap, slow ... slowly,” she said.

“Too much?” he said. With most of him inside her, he let go of his cock, and set the hand down against the blanket beside her. He was free to lean over her more, and truly bury her underneath him so his chest was only a foot above her head, his head past her and now over the blankets instead.

“Fuck no. Just ... go slow, you know? Ready to burst, here.”

He felt it. Her insides were taugth around his girth, fighting him, and he rumbled bliss at the sparks of pleasure it sent down his length until it reached between his legs and heavy, hanging testicles. How Avery and her pack did not indulge this desire, he could not understand. They had enough control to do so, and the hunger for gratification coursing through him was more than for simple hunt and prey. In this form, he wanted to mount and dominate his mate, to the point it was almost overwhelming. The scent of her clenching, leaking slit, dripping juices down her folds and onto his cock where it penetrated the hole beneath, was intoxicating.

He set one hand around her waist, encircling nearly every inch in his colossal grip, while his other hand pressed to the blanket, bed struggling to handle his weight. He leaned in closer, head pointed down at her, and he licked her neck long and slow, as he eased his hips back a few inches, and pressed them back toward her. The thick base of his cock was most definitely not human anatomy, and an animal part of him demanded he force the knot of his thick member between her firm buttocks, past the lubricated, heavenly rings of flesh squeezing on him, and deep into her; but not yet. It'd be another few inches of length, but Jessy seemed to enjoy such deep penetration into her comparatively small body. And so did he.

As he found a gentle pace, each thrust causing the knot of him to reach her opening, but not push into her, causing her large ass to ripple around it, Jessy moaned openly. She pressed one hand down against her abs where each thrust created a small bump, marking how much he was stretching her taut insides and filling her lean

waist. Her other hand reached between her thighs, and began to masturbate again, stroking her clitoris and smooth folds. Without a single hair on her legs or sex, his eyes were treated to the open display of trembling muscles and glistening skin, as Jessy groaned.

She slid the hand pressing on her abs upward, up to her chest, played with one of her lightly jiggling breasts for a few moments and the black X that marked it, before she set it behind her head. A makeshift pillow. Smiling up at him, she blew him a kiss, and started to rock her hips in rhythm with him.

“I figured, after how primal and aggressive you were with Caleb, you might let out some of that aggression on me.”

“You want ... faster?” he said.

“Nah. Like this, I can just lay here, enjoy myself, and let the heat build until it boils and I just cream everything.” She took a long, deep breath, purposefully showing off how it caused her heavy breasts to rise, and she began to scoop into her cunt with her masturbating hand. Curling fingers pressed up against various bits inside her, with far more expertise than Eric would ever have, he knew. She was much older than him, after all, and knew her body well.

He kept his thrusts slow, each pressing the knot of his shaft against her clenching, massaging ring of flesh without going past it, while her masturbating hand only grew faster. By the time she was ready to orgasm, she was fingering herself with fervor, almost slapping her fingers up against her insides, and causing her breasts to ripple against her chest. Her scooping fingers didn't slow, and she purred, even growled, as she began to tremble. A copious wave of her juices began to drip down over his cock, soaking his length where it spread her ass apart.

Rumbling, he set both hands onto her hips, and stood up.



“H-Hey!” she said, voice almost a squeak. While her shoulders and upper back remained on the bed, his heightened position caused her ass to raise two feet into the air, his hands keeping her ass snug to his cock. Her breasts hung toward her shoulders and neck, and her eyes opened wide, as he began to force her hips toward him. “Oh fuck.”

He almost laughed at her words. She enjoyed the ridiculous dialogue. He enjoyed how playful she was. But the laughter faded quickly, as he rumbled bliss at the sensation of her drenched ring of flesh squeezing on his cock in spurts, and he began to force the far thicker base of his length into the girl’s ass. With another groan, she managed to relax the clenching muscles, and her once masturbating hand now held onto his wrist, as she began to spread open.

“Fuuuuuuck.” She let out a long whimper, and bit her bottom lip as she stared up at him. The distension along her abs moved higher, and grew thicker, as the angle forced his cock toward her belly, pressing against her insides and sensitive parts. As she grew more comfortable, she hooked both hands behind her head, and relaxed into the bed and his grip, as he stretched her ass taut, until it began to slide over the sensitive flesh of his girth’s knot.

She squeaked as the final few inches of his cock eased into her, and her eyes closed as she melted into the blankets. He, on the other hand, looked down his body to see where her large, firm ass cheeks now pressed to his furry thighs, and the entirety of his cock was inside her. Her insides wrapped every inch of his cock in a tight sleeve of soaked, hot, squeezing flesh, and he struggled to not unleash his need to pound her into the mattress, as waves of bliss rippled down his fat girth.

He pulled away a little, and growled as the pleasure filled him, her squeezing rings of flesh preventing his escape. Her smooth slit, sitting above where he skewered her, clenched on itself, and several droplets of her juices leaked out to flow down onto their connection.

“Going to tear rip my insides open,” she said. He pulled his head back. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her, but she laughed, reached out a hand to pat his stomach where it sat above and between her thighs, and she wrapped her legs around his goliath waist as she put her hand behind her head again. “We used a bunch of lube for a reason. Just don’t pile drive me and I’ll be fine.”

He rumbled as he smiled, and he looked down at the subtle, larger distension along her tight waist under her defined abs; rumble turned into happy growl as he began to thrust back and forth again, and the distension moved with him. She enjoyed being filled to near bursting, a lot, and she mewled again as he pushed back into her, balls deep. The gripping ring of muscle wouldn’t let him leave her now, trapping him inside her, as he gently pumped her depths a couple inches.

It wasn’t long before he began to fill her with his cum. The rolling waves of hot pleasure filled him, rippling outward from his cock and from between his legs, as inner flexes of his muscles caused a hot gush of thick, white fluid to pour into the woman’s body. A small thrust, for another gush. And another, and another. He shivered with the pleasure of it, and gently lowered himself down as satisfied animal instinct let him relax. Lower, and lower, until her ass was on the pillow again. Lower, until he set both hands down against the blankets around his mate, and put his chest a half foot above her own. With his head next to hers, he licked her neck several times, rumbling bliss, and filling her and the bed with the crocodile-like vibrations. Still a few more thrusts, gentle, tender, each earning a few more spurts of his heavy cum, and earning some mewls from his mate.

Jessy reached out, hugged his neck, and kissed the side of his snout. She was shivering. Somewhere along the line, she’d cum again, a small orgasm mixed into his own, dripping her juices down from her slit onto her ass and his cock. And knowing that, set his body on fire.

He turned her over.

“Hey! Thought we were gonna cuddle?”

He laughed again, a heavy, animal sound. With one hand still holding her waist, he turned her over so she was facing down, and he pulled her off the bed, holding her chest in his other hand. He brought her down onto the floor, and got to his knees, all the while keeping his hard cock inside her cum-filled ass; warm, and lubricating, tingling along the swollen girth, and massaged into his skin by her taut depths.

“Doggy? Fucking animal.” She laughed at him, but she pressed her weight onto her palms, and arched her back downward, highlighting the curve of her body and extreme hourglass figure of her wide shoulders and hips compared to her slender waist.

With her on her knees on the floor, he had to spread his own to level with hers, massive and tall as he was. He pressed one hand to the floor beside her, still looming well above her, while his other wrapped the tiny waist she was showing off, and pulled her toward him.

“Fuuck ... fuuuuuuck.” Her clenching ass jiggled as it hit his lower abdomen, and his testicles were soon soaked as they gently slapped against her pussy. He stared down at her arching body, unable to look away from her ass, how the large mounds rippled when they lightly hit his pelvis, and how her ring of muscle clenched tight enough around the base of his cock to prevent the massive knot from leaving. Unless she relaxed her muscle, he was trapped inside her, and she showed no sign of relenting.

He pulled away from her, and he could see some of the pink flesh of his cock fight against the soaked, clenching ring of her ass. It quickly disappeared back into her insides, burying almost a foot of meat in her, and a thick dripping wave of his cum oozed out of her, soaking the connection. It flowed down her slit, thighs, and his

testicles, coating it all in his own white cum. And when he thrust forward, her own juices joined the mix along his balls, less thick, clearer, almost washing his heavy, oozing cum away. It was a messy business, having sex in his form, filled with scents, fluids, and pleasure.

He started to pump faster. Still slow, but fast enough that he knew he'd eventually reach orgasm. It'd take a while, but he'd get there. And it was fast enough to earn some groans from the Gangrel beneath him. Each thrust slapped his balls to her slit, and each thrust made the tiny creature tremble. More of her juices coated his testicles, and more, earning a purr from him over the pleasing sensation from its warmth.

While one hand held her waist and hips, the other reached out for her chest, and he pulled her up to him.

“W ... what?” Gasping, groaning, she looked up at him as he pressed her shoulders to his chest, and wrapped his hand around her throat. His fingers were long enough to completely encircle her neck almost twice over, and thick enough that he could only fit two fingers between her jaw and shoulders. He growled down at her as she clutched his wrist with both her hands. Watching her heavy, X-marked breasts jiggle with his thrusts was invigorating, and seeing how his cock pressed against her abs, filling her to bursting, was intoxicating. She reached down with one hand to press against the bulge, the other still holding his wrist, as she gazed up at him, eyes wide as he gently squeezed her throat.

A few harder thrusts earned a few more squeaks, and she reached down to start caressing her folds with her fingers as he fucked her ass. Her eyes closed, and she started to shake as she came again. He didn't stop. Each thrust, gentle and slow, but deep, had her shaking, and he stared down to see drops of her cum land on the floor of his bedroom.

He gently set her back down, and she didn't bother catching her weight with her hands. She set her shoulders and cheek to the floor, and let her arms go limp, as he continued to fuck her. Lying down like she was, her ass was high in the air, her weight on her knees. A perfect position for him to admire how her large ass jiggled with each thrust, rippling as it gently hit his pelvis, before he leaned down over her, and set both hands onto the floor around her.

He fully mounted her, burying her underneath him, hiding the entirety of her beneath his size, as he started to fuck her a little faster. She managed to smile up at him, and even pressed herself up onto her hands again. So small compared to him, he had to spread his knees and lower his chest further, putting his weight onto his hands and elbows both, for her to be able to press her back to his chest. But she did, and she groaned up at him as she pressed her ass toward him, while rubbing her head into the fur of his neck and chest.

The two of them fell into a gentle, consistent rhythm. Each forward thrust was heaven, softly slapping his heavy, soaked testicles against her dripping slit and soaked thighs, before he eventually, slowly pulled back. Delicious friction of her soaked depths on his sensitive skin made each thrust spark pleasure down his length and into his core and thighs. Her clenching ass prevented anything more than the base inch of his cock from escaping, the knot staying snug inside her gripping flesh, but each thrust did let a little of his own cum drip out of her, down her slit, his testicles, and her thighs.

With time, and a few more soaked trembles from Jessy, his second orgasm arrived. Mounting his mate, he rumbled down at her, lowering his head and looking underneath her where the girl, on her hands and knees, was panting. Her jaw hung open, and her tongue almost dangled from her mouth, as she tried to look up at him.

“Fucking ... filling me up...” She shivered blatantly, arms struggling to keep her from collapsing, as she started to cum halfway through his own. As he flooded her depths, heavy, hot, thick cum gushing into her in larger amounts than before, a small thrust earned a deep groan from her. Her arms gave out again, and she lay her chest to the floor as she squirted, a small gush of her cum splashing against his testicles where they rested against her pussy. Another thrust earned the same, and the quiet squelch of very, very wet sex filled the air, as he fucked her. He continued looking underneath him, unable to break his ravenous eyes away from the sight of her spread ass, high in the air and pressed to his pelvis, jiggling and bouncing toward her lower back each time he thrust into her. Gentle slaps, again, and again, and again, as he pumped his cum into her, and enjoyed how each soft impact of his heavy balls against her cunt meant he could feel her slit’s heat, quivering, before a small squirt of her cum coated them again.

“Fu ... ck ... are you ... done yet?” Her words were lost between exhausted moans, and her attempts to get her weight onto her hands failed yet again.

But he wasn’t done. He reached down for her, and scooped her up, holding her waist in one hand, neck in the other. A little force to keep her pinned on his length, and he stood up, taking her with him.

“Eric! Jesus Christ dude. Can ... can you ... give a girl a break?”

He put her over the bed, and squatted down so her torso rested upon it chest down, her legs dangling off the mattress at the hip. Growling down at his mate, he slowly pulled out, earning some girlish squeals from her as her clenching muscles struggled to let go of the knot of his cock. But with a little force, he managed to pull it out, and Jessy’s legs quivered between his own, thighs shaking as the copious amount of cum he’d filled her with flowed back over his cock despite most of the thick, flesh-colored length still inside her.

He forced it back in, slowly, enjoying how his own cum flowed over his length as he sank the thick girth into her awaiting ass. His mate groaned loudly, legs kicking at the floor between his feet, as he eased the knot back into her taut muscles, and pressed forward until the large mounds of her butt were again pressed snug to his pelvis. With her torso lying on the bed, he spread his legs, squatted down low over her, and put his chest down against her back, pinning her into the blankets with his size.

She completely disappeared underneath him.

“W ... Wait ... Eric. I ... need ... a break...”

He ignored his mate’s desperate, quiet pleas, and began to thrust into her. The ring of muscles of her ass ensured the whole of his cock remained inside her, unable to escape, plugging her. If she wanted him to stop, her body disagreed, as her legs kicked at the floor and her squeals returned, higher pitched than he was used to hearing from her. He kept the pace consistent, hard enough to earn grunts from her, gentle enough to keep from hurting her. Each thrust filled her ass completely, his massive length reaching deep into her as the angle forced his cock toward her belly.

A third orgasm would take time to reach, but he wanted it. Demanded it. She was his mate to fuck as he pleased, and she could do nothing but lie there, head and torso pinned to the soft fabric of the human bed, as he took what was his. He thrust into her again, and purred pleasure as he felt her large ass ripple underneath him. He thrust again, and set his hands wide against the blankets, letting his weight simply press down upon her, his chest and stomach holding her down as he felt his testicles slap against her leaking pussy, where it hovered over the edge of the bed. She squirted harder, drenching them, and he sank himself to the hilt and stayed there for a moment to enjoy the gush of her warm juices over the sensitive orbs. She’d never squirted this much before, and the heat of her cum soaking him sent hungry fire through his core.

He could feel her hands press against the bed, desperate to escape him, but he did not relent. Slowly, continuously, he continued to fuck her, each thrust pressing the whole of his weight down on her and onto the softness beneath them. Another gush of her juices flowed over his testicles, and her thighs shook with her clenching muscles. Her squeals and moans quietened, and her arms gave up trying to push her weight anywhere. Her feet no longer kicked at the floor, and she let her legs spread as they went limp; all the better for him to let his testicles slap against her slit as he fucked her.

She came again. And again. And again. Her voice had become nothing but little, weak whimpers, and her body remained limp underneath him. While each orgasm that hit her caused her pussy to drench him, the volume of her squeals decreased as she succumbed to exhaustion. Her muscles continued to clench and spasm around his cock, but without the same enthusiasm of before. She was spent, exhausted. If she'd been human, she wouldn't have been able to cum half as often, or squirt half as much, but his mate was a vampire creature, a beast with far more sexual endurance than any human. There was no need to stop any time soon.

Eventually, maybe ten minutes later, he rumbled a quiet announcement, and filled his chest with the vibrations of his pleased purr as he came again. Her insides were filled with his seed, and her body had long stopped struggling. She'd long gone limp, lying there, pinned under his chest and weight, managing only the occasional squeak as he filled her with another wave of his seed, and another. Keeping her balls deep upon his cock, he worked his thrusts a little harder, enough to feel her large ass bounce against his pelvis, and feel her exhausted muscles clench. Taut insides massaged his length, milking him of his seed, until he knew he'd filled her.

He brought himself up onto his palms again before he knelt upright, and he wrapped a hand around her waist to begin easing himself off of her. She wasn't clenching on his girth anymore, and



he was beginning to grow soft. Once he managed to slip the sensitive skin of his cock past her wet ring of muscle, cum flowed out of her, initial gush landing on the floor with a large splash, before the rest oozed down her thighs, thick and white.

He breathed deep, and let the oxygen, and the satisfied sexual need, calm his nerves, until he felt the beast within him settle down. And with it, his transformation faded away.

“You ... you alright?” he said, as he soon as he felt he had lips again.

She lay there, unmoving for several moments, before she started to shiver. With a shaking arm and a trembling hand, Jessy managed to make a fist, before sticking up a thumb.

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~~Jack~~

~Dear diary.~

Jack groaned, and stared at the screen of his laptop. “Dear diary is all I got? Christ, this is harder than I thought.” Minutes crawled by like hours, and he blinked several times as he felt his eyes strain, staring at the words. It passed in moments. Things like a simple muscle strain healed instantly, in his vampire body. Hell, he doubted they happened at all, and it was just his mind making him think he’d strained his eyes.

Those were the sort of thoughts he had often, a couple years ago, when he was just a fresh fledgling. Understanding his new body, his new instincts, trying to wrap his mind around the fact he didn’t have a pulse anymore, all that stuff. Life, or rather, his second life, had been simple back then in comparison to now. Now, he was trying to understand ancient curses, complicated politics of old beasts and monsters, and the thoughts of psychopaths.

*Susanna hated the machinations of vampires. When she wanted something, she took it.*

Jack froze, and looked left and right in a panic. No one else in the apartment with him. So, just him, going crazy.

*You're not going crazy and you know it.*

“Don't speak to me.”

*You're trying to write down your inner thoughts. You're practically asking for me to speak up.*

“You're a curse, a ... thing, from those shadow owls. When we figure out how, we'll seal you back up, and this will end.”

*Good luck with that. The Sanctified have forgotten much in the centuries since Susanna's Beast was sealed.*

“I won't let you do to Dolareido what Susanna did.” Might as well use her name, since the curse apparently knew it.

*Susanna reveled in destruction, Jack, but it was always guided. She didn't mindlessly slaughter villages. She did it mindfully. She killed thousands, and in her mind, they deserved it.*

“Did they?”

*A complicated question. Susanna had a difficult life, and she blamed many. Most probably didn't deserve to die horrible deaths, but that didn't change that their apathy to her misery left her a cold, broken woman.*

Groaning, Jack walked into the kitchen and got himself a glass of blood. “I don't understand. You're a magical curse thing, or whatever. How do you remember things like a name from a completely different person?”

*Vague, floating things, memories. The best I can manage is some names, maybe some motivations, times, places. I don't know how I know them, but I know them.*

“Naturally.” Rolling his eyes, he stood at his window, laptop behind him on the kitchen counter, and he stared out over the vast city. From here, he could see apartments, most with lights on, and lit from outside as well by the many lit signs. So many people just going about their lives, oblivious to shit like vampires, werewolves, monsters, and whatever else was out there.

*You could, too.*

“Revel in destruction? No thanks. Not interested.”

*Don't be so sure. You think all those pent up feelings, all that rage, that desire to get revenge, think that's all me? I'm not a person, Jack. No soul here. I'm just a tool, giving power, and a voice.*

“So ... the desire to skull fuck Angela's corpse?”

*A part of you wants to do that. Something deep down inside you, underneath your Humanity, underneath your memories and personality and psyche, underneath your consciousness. A part of you, tiny and lost, wants to swim in her blood.*

Ugh, a philosopher. Why did this curse have to be a philosopher?

“I can't deny that. I'm a living creature ... sort of.” He took a sip, and set his free hand against the glass. It left smudges that'd turn to dust soon, but he didn't care anymore. “But I think it's the Beast that really wants to indulge. And you're making it ... bigger. Its cravings, its desires, its nature, you're making it fight to override me.”

*I can't deny that. I'm a curse.*

Snarky mother fucker.

*I'm you. You're snarky.*

“Stop reading my mind!”

*I'm in your mind. I am you. What don't you get about that? I'm a voice, a tool, a piece grafted onto you and the vampire part of you that you repress. Stop repressing. Let me out. I'll find Angela, and Jeremiah, and kill every hunter we come across.*

“I—”

Knock knock.

Oh thank god. If this kept going, he was going to snap and break something. He walked up to his door, and peeked through the peephole. Oh god no, Beatrice.

He opened the door, and met the woman's gaze. Her snake eyes were always a little startling at first, and then the enormous crocodile teeth where her cheeks were, were a lot more startling, but always noticed second. This time, it was the emotion he noticed first, the weight, the sadness, the ruination.

He stepped back, giving her room, and put a few feet between them in case she lunged for him. “Beatrice, hey.”

“Jack.” She didn't hold his gaze for long. After a few uncomfortable seconds, she came in, and sat down on one of his couches. “How you doing?”

How was he doing? Ugh, the question was so forced, he almost wanted to yell at her for it.

“Pretty horrible. You?” He sat down across from her, glass table between them. Hopefully the glass table would survive this

encounter; it didn't always.

“Pretty horrible. How's your mother?”

“She's ... she's good. Went hunting tonight, with the Prince.” Grinding his teeth, he looked to the window. Easier to look at the city than look at Triss. “She's still struggling with becoming a vampire, and Mary's death. I don't talk about Julias with her.”

Beatrice flinched with the name. “Why not?”

“Because she'd shatter. Mom is ... strong, in some ways. Not so strong in others. She'd happily suffer decades of pain if it meant helping others, especially me or ... Mary. But knowing that ... that someone died for her? It's eating at her, badly, and I don't think she realizes it.”

“Simple-minded woman?”

“Very.” And there was power, in that simple mindedness. His mom would become something great, he was sure, if she could get past the pit of spikes she currently dangled over. “If you see her ... try and, and um ... be gentle with her, please?”

Her gaze looked to the window as well. Eye contact was going to be a difficult thing from now on, and he didn't look forward to learning if it'd ever be possible again. Fallout from deaths broke a lot of people up. Kid dies, the parents often split. Friend dies, friends thereof often stop hanging out. His sire's death was going to be a wall between him and her for the rest of their existence, and they were immortal. Their existence was going to be a damn long time. Assuming they didn't end up like Julias.

*You won't end up like Julias, Jack. You think I'll let us die? Once we find those hunters, I'll spread their entrails on every power line and every rooftop. No need to stop there. The mysterious threat that wrinkly old monster warned us about? We can find it, and—*

Shut up shut up. Not now.

“Yeah, of course, I’ll be gentle with her.” The Nos trembled slightly, struggling to not let her sorrow show. She was failing. “But I’m not here to talk about that. Not here to talk about Julias, or any of that shit.”

He raised a brow, but sighed and nodded as realization dawned on him. “You heard about the curse.”

“Yeap. Rumors spread fast in Dolareido.”

Shit. He’d kind of hoped he’d have more time to figure this out, before this conversation had to happen. Too late.

“Alright,” he said. “What do you want to know?”

“Young vamps are saying you’ve been cursed; which I guess you just confirmed.”

“Yeah.”

“They say you summoned an army of crows to the hospital, something only an elder vamp can do.”

“ ... yeah.” On a good night, maybe.

“And, considering what you did at the prison, something is definitely going on with you.” Still she kept her eyes on the window, voice steady, despite the fidgeting, trembling fingers. It was taking a lot out of her, to be here. She looked weak, drained, distracted, and broken. What sort of things had she been doing in the dark, since Julias died? Mourning for sure, but what else?

He almost suggested an exchange of questions and answers. That’d be cruel, though, and Beatrice had never done anything to make him think he couldn’t trust her. Jacob, sure, but not her.

“I’ll tell you what I can.” He got up, and fetched another glass from the fridge. A new bottle, too. They were going to need it. “For a while now, I’ve known there was something wrong with me.”

“What? Wrong?”

“At first, I thought I was just a natural, talented, better than average Kindred for my age, you know? That whole situation with Tony, and Viktor, and then Lucas and Damien. But...” Groaning, he sat down slowly, as if he weighed a thousand pounds and had a bad back. “When Angela captured me, tortured me, something snapped. I let out all this ... aggression, the sort you’d expect a slasher horror movie villain to have, you know? I wanted to kill them, the hunters, Angela, Jeremiah, kill them and dance on their fucking corpses.” Beatrice looked away from the window, back to him, and her eyes were wide. It was the reaction he was expecting, and one he wasn’t looking forward to seeing on more faces, as this topic inevitably came up again in the future. “And I found ... I could. I tapped into something massive, overwhelming, and it ... it made it so easy, to do ... Kindred things.”

“Kindred things?”

“Dominate, Animalism, Resilience, Vigor, it was overpowering how easy it was to just ... unleash them. I summoned hundreds of rats like it was nothing, Dominated hunters like it was nothing, suffered gunshot wounds and walked them off, and ... it was a slaughter.” He poured her some of the cooled blood, and slid her the glass. She took it, but her hands were still a little shaky; not because of Julias anymore, but because of him.

“It gets worse,” he said. “After that, I started feeling ... rage.”

“Rage is normal, Jack, considering—”

“No, I mean, not normal rage, not anger. It was twisted, fucked up, aggression and rage that wasn’t ... it wasn’t right. It was cruel,

and filled with malice. It kept ... getting into my thoughts, and ... and ... demanding I give into it.”

She sat up straight, sipped the drink, and stared at him. “So you are cursed.”

“When Julias died, saving me, saving Mom, it snapped something inside me, a hundred times worse than when Angela tortured me. I was ... inside my mind, I guess. White, endless white, and—”

“And you saw something in there, something shadowy, like a black fog. It had claws and teeth and shit inside it, right?”

His jaw dropped, and he leaned in closer. “You’ve been there?”

“A couple times, when learning Crúac rituals.” She downed the glass, and poured herself another. Another similarity between her and Jessy, and it managed to make him smile. “According to Jacob, it happens when you really get in touch with your Beast, sort of ... remove consciousness from the equation. Just you, and the thing that’s been added to you by the embrace.”

“Fucking hell. How did you achieve that? Like, meditation and shit?”

“I fucking wish. No, we have to get tortured, feel pain, zen out by letting pain wash away all thoughts. So, I mean, I guess it’s like meditation, but you go into it with a purpose, to learn something.” She pat her stomach, wincing. “Jacob has ripped into me in ways that’d kill a kine a dozen times over. He teaches me the ritual, then shows me how to ... communicate, I guess, with some sort of ... energy? I don’t know. It’s something the Beast can manipulate, or speak to, I guess? The ritual let’s me tap into whatever it is that makes us Kindred, whatever it is that makes us ... monsters.”

“Monsters...” The information about Crúac was invaluable, and he doubted Jacob would appreciate her sharing it. But she was. She



trusted him. And he trusted her.

“It’s easy to forget that sometimes, isn’t it?” she said. “We see these Begotten creatures, and it’s like ‘hey, I know you, from that monster story by Stephen King’ or some such. But we’re just like them, I guess, except...” The sadness dripped off of her, and she didn’t try to hide it anymore. “Julias disliked them, said they were driven by their hungers to a ... yeah, to the point of being a movie monster, the sickening kind.”

“If Julias, or the others saw what we’ve seen—”

“They’d know that we’re just as fucking twisted and revolting on the inside.” She buried her face in her hands, before she started rubbing her shoulders. “So, your Beast, your monster, was in there?”

“Yeah. It showed me the past, too.”

“How the fuck did it do that?”

“No idea. Guess it was like a genetic memory, since it never showed me anything that happened after someone in my bloodline embraced someone. It showed me things from Viktor’s past, but only up till he embraced Julias.” Saying his name over and over was important. They had to get it out of the way, had to accept his death and use his name in conversation. They had to move on, and they had to strategize, make plans, deal with the hunters. Saying his name a lot was inevitable. But god damn it, it hurt every time. “It showed me Viktor’s sire, and her sire, too.”

“Fuck, I can barely remember what I did in my visions. It’s all dreamy, faded, blurry.”

“It’s blurry for me too, but I guess because of this curse, it’s a bit closer to the surface.” He leaned back and stared up at the cold

ceiling. “My Beast had chains wrapped around it, tied to it, with heavy blocks and shit holding it down.”

“Mine ... did not. The fuck?”

“It was the curse, being bound by a seal or something.”

She frowned. “A seal? Like...”

“Like a ritual, like magic. A member of the Lancea et Sanctum performed it on my great great grandsire.” Digging up the memory was easier than he’d like.

*I’m making it easier for you. It’s a glorious history of violence, carnage, and indulgence.*

Shut up shut up.

“Jack?”

“Sorry, stuck in a thought.” He took another sip, trying to pass off the internal conflict. “My great great grandsire, she ... killed another vampire, someone who looked an awful lot like her. Drained her until she turned into ash.”

“Diablerie? Holy shit.”

“And then she ... I mean, I guess it was a sacrifice to ... my bosses called it the Strix?” he said. She raised an eyebrow, confused, and he held up his hands, mirroring her confusion. “Shadowy owl things. That’s all I know, and that seems to be all that they know. Either way, it was the medieval ages, long fucking time ago. But whatever she did, whatever the sacrifice was meant to do, the Strix imbued her with ... with the curse, this thing that’s ... that’s...”

“That wants to rip off Angela’s head.”

“I wish that’s all it wanted to do with her head.” Sighing, he nodded as he met her eyes again. “It’s strong, and it’s violent.”

“Well that’s good, because that’s why I’m here.”

He snarled, earning a blink from her as he stood up, and walked into the kitchen. “You want my help, killing Angela.”

“Yes.” She stood up as well, leaving the glasses and bottle behind as she sat at his counter top. “It’s not like you weren’t going to.”

“I ... I was...” He snapped his head to the side a couple times.

*Just point me in their direction, and I’ll paint the streets with their blood.*

The twitch put the conversation on a harsh pause, and Triss eyed him closely until he spoke again. “I have to be careful, Triss. This curse thing is real, and it’s ... it’s angry, and hungry.”

“So, what? You’re going to push it on a leash? Take a backseat until the hunters are dead?”

“No!” He slammed both palms on the counter. The Nos didn’t blink, or flinch. She’d expected the outburst. “No, I’m not going to sit back. I need to be careful, but I won’t ... won’t let Angela or Jeremiah get away with this, Triss.”

“Good. Then, when I come to you, I want you to come with me.”

“What?”

“When I come,” she said slower, “I want you to come with me.” Her claws found his hands, and he felt the trembling still working through them. “I’m going to find where these hunters are, Jack, no matter what it takes. When I do, I’m not going to play by whatever rules the covenants have in place. Fuck the Masquerade. Fuck the

covenants. We go in, guns blazing. They won't expect a frontal assault like that."

She was right about that. The hunters undoubtedly expected the vampires to be slow, cautious, and calculating. Vampires didn't rush in head first. Vampires didn't stick their necks out when they didn't have to. Hell, what Jack and Julias had done at the hospital, a slow and calculated approach, was fast and reckless by Kindred standards.

"And no rules will stop you?"

"None. If I have to blow up a building, I will."

"And how are you going to find them? With Black Blood's help?"

"I..." She jerked her hands away, wincing as her eyes fell. "I'll do what I have to do."

"Think Julias would want you to—"

"Don't!" Her turn to slam her palms against the counter. "Don't fucking ... don't do that. Julias is dead, and nothing else matters."

Nothing else matters. He smiled as his eyes fell, and he motioned for her to calm down as he set his elbows to the counter.

"Good song."

She blinked at him a few times, but a second later, she laughed, and nodded, leaning down on the counter as well so only a few inches separated their faces. "It is."

"I'll help you, Triss."

"You will?"

“Yeah, I will. Show up, tell me it’s time, and I’ll follow.” God help me. “We have to be careful, Triss. I don’t know what you’re doing with Black Blood, Jacob, or that crazy Crúac shit, but it ... it could all backfire. This curse could do things I don’t want it to do. And you sound like you’re joining the dark side, you know?”

Nodding, she squeezed his hands, and the trembling started to fade. “I don’t plan to sacrifice my soul, Jack. I’m not stupid. Like ... like you were going to say, Julias wouldn’t want that. But I’m not going to sit by when I could do something.”

“If the elders can’t do something, what makes you think we can?”

“They can do something!” She threw up her hands, hopped off the stool, and started pacing around. “I bet Jacob or the Prince or your bosses, or even Garry, could kick their asses in a straight fight.”

“You know that isn’t how it works. If Garry stuck his head out, got himself killed or captured, you know the Invictus would take advantage. And vice versa.”

“Garry wouldn’t—”

“Yes, he would, Triss. If Maria and Michael were killed, Garry would be knocking on Invictus doors within the week. He moved on Terra Den for a reason.”

“You think any of them could get killed or caught?”

“After the shit I saw at the hospital, magical barriers and whatnot? Yes, I do. And Damien told us what they did in the tunnels, capturing him and Matt, with a different kind of circle trap thing. If Matt hadn’t been there, they’d have all been dead.”

They both grumbled. This was the problem with their situation. Elder vampires were strong enough that they could take the hunters in a fight, but even the smallest mistake meant death. As strong as

they were, elders had a nasty habit of being particularly weak to fire and sunlight.

“Antoinette came to the hospital, didn’t she?” Triss said, sitting back down as she calmed down.

“Yes, she did. I don’t think she was thinking straight, at the time.”

“Probably not, if you were in danger. If ... if I had known...” Her eyes fell to the counter again, and she gulped as she shook her head. “No, no, I won’t do this. I won’t cry. I won’t—”

“I’m in, Triss. I’m in. And I think I know some other people who will help us.”

Nodding, she raised her head, and forced herself to stop trembling again. “You do? We could piss some people off, our bosses included, doing this, Jack. I mean it.”

He grinned, and sat down beside her at the counter. “I don’t think they’ll mind pissing off our bosses. Tell me how I can help, finding the hunters.

“It ... it could mean sacrificing kine, Jack. I’ll keep it to scum, but —”

“Sounds fine to me.” Shrugging, and ignoring her shocked expression, he glanced at his laptop, and stepped over to it. “Gimme a sec.”

~Dear diary, my best friend died a week ago. Friend isn’t the right word for him. Julias was a second father, and a mentor. Angela killed him. I’m going to kill her, no matter what it takes. The end.~

He closed the laptop, and smiled.



~~Antoinette~~

She was not looking forward to this call.

It was not a question of disliking the caller. All things considered, she was very much looking forward to speaking with Elaine. It was the inevitable topics the conversation would summon that would infuriate her, that she wished to avoid.

With a sigh, she sat upon her throne in her primary meeting room, high within her Elysium Tower, and ran the program upon her laptop. It took much convincing that such a program could be utilized, but only once she had confirmed that the program used every secure measure in existence, did her fellow dragons consider using digital communication. Many of them would have preferred they send mail. Mail, parchment, paper! She rolled her eyes, and waited as the program created a secure connection to Elaine's own computer.

Many elders in the order were old fashioned, despite the goals of Ordo Dracul. While few were as old as her, those in the upper echelons of her order with centuries to their name were simply unwilling to adapt to technology. Antoinette was a black sheep, in that regard. Technology was the future, and if the old fools did not come to terms with that reality, they would be left behind. What would they do in a hundred years, when metal carriages, no longer drawn by horses, pierced the sky? No Kindred had yet to visit space, and none of them knew what would happen in such a circumstance.

At least her order were not as trapped by their old expectations as the Circle of the Crone. If Jacob had his way, technology would be cast aside, and kine and Kindred alike would be living in the woods once more. Metal, concrete, electricity, all would be lost, traded for vine rope, cottages built with wood and mud brick, and scattered villages instead of massive cities. Kine would crouch around fires, worshipping spirits, some real, some not, while Kindred like Jacob

preyed upon them, used them in his rituals, and summoned spirits from across the Gauntlet in his mad pursuits.

She sighed, tapping her finger on her desk as she waited for the program to secure the connection. The Ordo Dracul was dedicated to uncovering the secrets of existence, but also to the understanding of change. The fact many of her peers, convinced they studied the world and its changing state of existence, were in fact, unwilling to accept technological advancements, was a point of contention within her covenant. Frustrating.

“Once you cease learning, death is inevitable,” she said with a sigh. Her peers preached of understanding change, but how many of them could see that, within the next two hundred years, space travel would be a very real possibility? Technological advancement grew both in power, and its speed of growth. To say that, in twenty years, the entire world and its Kindred would suddenly be illuminated under a hunting light of technological advancement, was a very real possibility as well. Could they not—

Beep. “Ann, thinking?”

Antoinette looked to the laptop screen, and smiled at the familiar image. “Always.”

Elaine laughed, shaking her head as she leaned in toward her own screen. “Do not think yourself into an early death.”

“If I do not think, who will? Forever I am forced to break molds, and redefine the world for its own betterment, against its own wishes.”

“The other Kogaions think you are mad, if you did not realize. Traditions exist for a reason.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes. “They preach of the pursuit of knowledge, and understanding change, but they treat technology as



if it were a fad. Fools.”

Her old friend shrugged, and leaned in closer, so her own computer’s camera focused on her face. For all the Beast’s natural ability to avoid the lens of a camera, it could not avoid it if the vampire leaned in for a closeup.

Elaine was a beautiful woman. Pale skin not unlike Antoinette’s, and tall, with flowing long blonde hair. Thin, busty, beautiful, Elaine would have made a perfect Daeva, one who could use her looks to enslave men and women with but a glance. Unfortunately, she was Ventrue. Were she Daeva, Antoinette would likely have included her in far more of her games, when she was younger. Perhaps she would have included her in whatever experiment it was that Antoinette had performed to give herself her hair and eye color, and her proportions. And perhaps, unlike Antoinette, Elaine would have been intelligent enough to journal the experiment.

“How fairs your city, Sworn of the Dying Light, Architect of Carnal Void, Voivode of Dolareido?”

Antoinette rolled her eyes. Dragon titles were a touch absurd, but she could not deny she valued them; she had earned them, after all. Her order thought it unusual for a Kogaion such as her to pursue her goals not only without the support of other Kindred save for her sheriff, but also in such a peculiar position. She was an oddity, in many respects.

“I am surrounded by imbeciles, old friend. Every night, I argue and push for understanding, cooperation, and awareness. Every night, I struggle to teach these fools that, only through critical thinking, and a pursuit of truth, will we survive the flood of change soon to drown us all.” Sighing, she shook her head as she pulled her hair over her shoulder, onto her chest, and began to comb it with her fingers. “They are far too obsessed with their own squabbles,

their own troubles, and their own desires, to face toward the inevitable danger.”

“Give it time, Ann. You’ve made great progress. Most cities with a Kogaion such as yourself still struggle with battles between covenants. The peace you’ve created remains, does it not?”

“It does, if only barely.” She got up, pushed her chair aside so Elaine could see, and she stepped over to her window to gaze out over her city. “Decades upon decades building trust, Elaine. Decades! And still these infants seek reasons to fight each other. Hunters have crawled their way into the cracks of my city, and if I could trust the others, I would organize a full scale search involving each covenant.” The idea sounded wonderful, and practical. In reality, it was naive. “Garry Tones and his infuriating ruffians will jump on the opportunity to attack the Invictus if they overextend their efforts, and Turio and MacDonald will gladly cut off Garry’s head if he sticks it out too far.”

“You could reenact the Purge.”

Antoinette threw Elaine a cold stare, but it lasted for only a moment before she sighed and shook her head. “No. Perhaps if Honors were still alive, I might deem it necessary, and recruit the Carthians to my aid once more. But he is dead.”

Elaine flinched at the mention of Viktor Honors. “I’m sorry, about Tony I mean. I heard he died with Viktor.”

Antoinette and Elaine occasionally went years without speaking to each other, but when they spoke with each other again, it were as if they had spoken only days before. Such was the way with Kindred of their age; kine as well, she supposed.

“I am freed by his death, and he deserved a worse fate.” Nodding, she moved her eyes over the city that sat before her. Hotels, casinos, and buildings of similar entertainment sat a little further away from

her tower than buildings of business. They were still close enough that traces of their light cut through her window, and she managed a small smile as their light filled her eyes. It truly was a beautiful city that she had grown, nurtured, molded, and she would be damned before she let hunters, or power hungry Kindred destroy it.

“News of a giant swarm of crows circulates,” Elaine said.

“Yes, that is a problem, a grand one that is half my focus of late.” Should she tell her old friend, an Architect of Terror, about Jack? Surely Elaine’s vast knowledge could help him. She was a powerful dragon, wise, with a bloodied history she had cut her teeth upon, grew from, and overcame. Antoinette trusted Elaine with all but her life, and that was far more than most Kindred were willing to trust others. “The Masquerade has been damaged by something no one could have foreseen.”

“Oh?”

“A ... a curse, has befallen one of the Kindred here. A relic of the ancient past has resurfaced, and has emerged to explosive effect. It has poisoned, contaminated my ... my lover.”

“Your lover?” Elaine leaned in close to her camera, eyes wide with curiosity. Sadness drifted across her, once she walked back through Antoinette’s words in her mind. “Your lover is cursed.”

“He is. But it is under his control ... perhaps.”

“Tell me about him.”

Antoinette laughed, and shrugged. “My city struggles and you wish to talk romance?”

“Naturally.”

The Prince rolled her eyes once more, but her smile only grew. “He is a small man, and quite young. About twenty, when he was embraced, and embraced only two years ago.” Embraced by one of the best men in her city, a dead man. She pushed through the sorrow, and did not let it damage her budding warmth as she thought of Jack.

“That is young, but not unheard of.”

“Jack Terry is his name, and while he may be young physically, he possesses critical thinking, awareness, a hunger for truth, and the soul of a cynical old man.” She laughed, out loud at that, and looked back to her city to let its lights dance across her eyes. “He is sincere, genuine to a fault, and I cannot help myself when I am near him.”

“Typical Daeva.”

“Oui, I cannot deny that. When I near him, I want to hold him, pin him down, bury him, and pamper him. And he bathes in my loving touch, content to let me guide his actions under our sheets.”

Elaine swooned. “I can only imagine what you’re doing to this poor boy. Is he timid?”

“He can be surprisingly aggressive, in matters of the city or his covenant. Come romance, he was once terribly timid, and frightened. But I helped him grow past his shyness, and now I have acquired someone who loves me for who I am.” Put like that, it sounded wonderfully drôle, and cliché. But that was what it was, that her relationship with Jack was delightful and fulfilling, because he enjoyed the way she did things, much as she did with him. Attempting to convey such a deep feeling through words seemed a wholly impossible affair, and she sighed wistfully as she smiled at Elaine over her shoulder.

“I am saddened to hear this curse affects him, then. I ... I had assumed, considering the degree of the incident, that he’d be older.”

“It is the curse. A seal once contained it, and across sires, through the years, it weakened. We can only assume that the death of his sire triggered its destruction.”

“Seal?”

“Yes. My love believes a Sanctified, many centuries ago, sealed the curse away with Theban sorcery. Time, it seems, destroys everything.” Hundreds of years, and spreading across Kindred like a disease. Did Viktor have other childer she did not know of? It was possible. He had come to Dolareido when entering his elder years, and had undoubtedly spent decades before creating empires; or destroying them.

“I am doubly troubled to hear your love’s sire is dead, then.”

“Viktor’s childe was a wonderful man. Of all the Kindred in my city, I felt he understood my goals better than anyone else; except for maybe his childe. Julias Mire died saving my lover’s mother, who is now my childe.”

Elaine’s jaw dropped halfway through Antoinette’s words, and almost hit her desk upon mention of a new childe. “That is a lot to take in, Ann.”

Yes, it was a lot to take in. But there was something else in Elaine’s eyes, a hint of curiosity, of surprise. Something Antoinette had said had surprised Elaine, something more than mention of a new childe, and the woman was not going to say what. At least, not yet. Such was Elaine’s way, sitting on questions to ask them later.

“It has been a busy time, these couple of years.”

“Ok, the hunters and things can wait. You have a new childe?”

“Yes. A small, sweet woman, in her mid forties. She is resilient, and yet soft-hearted. I am intrigued by her, how she remains

delicate, and yet has the strength to endure the trials of her past.”

“Trials?”

“Her husband died a decade ago, and her son disappeared two years ago, vanishing from his old life when he became Kindred. And hunters killed her daughter less than two weeks ago.” Nodding toward the city, Antoinette growled and grit her teeth. “Two of the hunters are psychotic, passionate, and vicious. They kill innocents in their pursuits.”

“That ... is unusual.” A creaking noise drew Antoinette’s eyes. Elaine had leaned back in her chair, in much the same way Antoinette did when pondering. “Your childe is a spirited woman, then.”

“Spirited, and naive. I am delighted by her, and terrified for her. I will need to harden her shell, if she is to survive the city. And now that her son has become a vessel for a raging curse, wishing to unleash its malice upon all it deems worthy of its disdain, I do not know what will become of her.”

“You’re in a terribly complicated situation.”

“Indeed.”

“And only you and your delicious sheriff fight to keep the utopia of Dolareido from collapsing?”

Antoinette chuckled and gestured to the window. “Daniel is still single, if you are interested.” With a long sigh, she began to pace, moving from end to end of the massive window as she looked down, arms folded across her chest. “The problem grows worse, Elaine. Azamel has returned. The hunters I spoke of, came in pursuit of her.”

“It sounds like the solution is simple then. Expel Azamel.”

“I would, but not only is the old monster capable of great destruction, I would be doing nothing but foisting problems we all face onto her shoulders alone. These hunters need to be stopped.” Laughing, Antoinette buried her face in one hand. “My troubles do not stop there. Werewolves have come, Avery specifically.”

“Oh no. Simon—”

“Apparently Simon is dead, or at least Avery is no longer in his pack. She has created her own, and they have come to deal with invading spirits.”

“It does sound like you are buried in a maelstrom of troubles.” Elaine tapped her own desk several times, thinking. Antoinette stopped pacing to watch her, and found the woman twirling the end of her hair with a finger, as she always did when trapped in thought. “I wish to visit.”

“Oh? The city has become a turbulent place, Elaine. I cannot promise your safety.”

“The great Antoinette, White-Haired Demon of our order, holding a city alone, cannot promise my safety?”

The teasing was pleasant, and it reminded Antoinette of Natasha’s barb at Bloodlust. Playful and innocent, but with a hint of truth that Antoinette was forced to consider.

“It is true, that my situation is problematic. And—”

“I’m your friend, Ann. Besides, we can catch up on your experiments. I’d love to see how far you’ve come in crossing the Gauntlet. And…” The blonde woman sighed as she leaned back in closer to her camera. “And I wish to speak more of Viktor.”

Antoinette raised a brow, and returned to sit upon her grand chair at her desk. “He is dead, Elaine, destroyed by fire along with my

childe Tony. His childe is also dead, and I am lovers with his grandchilde. There is little else to say of him.” Strange for Elaine to be concerned with Viktor. In the past, she showed little interest in him. As far as Antoinette had noticed, her old friend and the brutal Viktor Honors avoided each other whenever they crossed paths.

“Consider it an intellectual curiosity.”

“You will have trouble studying the remains of a dead vampire, Elaine.”

“Perhaps. But as you say, his grandchilde lives, and is your lover.”

Antoinette frowned. That did not sound like an innocent request, despite Elaine’s innocent smile. “Help is welcome, but my lover is not to be experimented on, Architect of Terror.” Her old friend’s willingness to dig deep into matters of the Beast was well known, and was a driving force of their friendship. But, Elaine had also crossed lines in her younger years, to Antoinette’s knowledge. So had she, and the pursuit of forbidden knowledge and lost secrets had been a binding goal between the two of them.

They had both done things they regretted. But that was then, events from centuries before, now only blurry memories and vague descriptions written in tomes, locked away within the libraries of her order.

“I will not experiment on him, Ann. Don’t worry. But I can’t deny this curse is of interest.”

Of greater interest than her friend was letting on, it appeared. A twinkle in her eye, a small lick of her lips, Elaine let the intrigue show, knowing full well Antoinette would see.

“What game are you playing, Elaine?”



“I will be in Dolareido within a month, Ann. Perhaps we can have one of your famous balls, in celebration?”

Antoinette could not help but grin as she rolled her eyes once more. Her old friend was playing with her, teasing her, drawing her in, like a kitten and string.

Naturally, she had to give chase.

# Part 7

## Chapter 95

~~Jack~~

It'd been two weeks since the incident. Two weeks since the news broadcasted Jack's fuck up with the crows. Two weeks since Julias's death, his mother's embrace, and the capture of Sándor. Two weeks of futile attempts to understand what had happened to him.

He'd stuck with journaling, organizing his thoughts and putting them to words, but it wasn't working out very well. All he could manage to write were succinct paragraphs that were obviously bitter, cynical, and angry. Sometimes he wasn't sure they were his thoughts; considering his borderline multiple personality disorder at the moment, it was reasonable that maybe they weren't. But this was important. If he died, someone was going to be reading these, and knowledge of the curse could save someone's life, or maybe fuel the evolution of a covenant, or ritual, or anything. If leaving behind a few words now and then could help others, or his future self, it was worth doing.

When he got back to his apartment later, he'd give it another shot. He couldn't write down anything that specifically called out vampires or the like, unless he was willing to write it down on paper, in a real journal, so it could be locked away in a vault for safekeeping. Maybe that was the problem? Maybe he was going about this all wrong, using a computer and typing his thoughts, when he could be using a pen? There definitely was something more real about ink and paper.

Heh, maybe he could start using a quill?

It'd been almost a week since Beatrice had come to him, asking for his help. What that help implied, he didn't know yet. He also had

no idea how she'd find the hunters; assuming that was her plan, to find them and then ask for his help in killing them. It probably involved Crúac, and some nasty deeds he was happier not knowing the details of yet. Better that he didn't know more, until he needed to.

He looked at Antoinette across the table, and sighed. The noise buried in the pulsing music of Bloodlust, but she noticed it anyway. When her eyes found his, she looked away.

It'd been two weeks since they had sex, as well. It wasn't that he needed sex, at least not constantly, but it was a good indicator that something was wrong, considering Antoinette's sex drive. They had sex almost every night, normally, and it'd been like that since they'd started dating. Before he came along, Antoinette had sex with Ashley and Julee, near every night he assumed. Before them, she had other ghouls. Long before, she had Tony. Before Tony, and probably with Tony, she had orgies with dozens of kine, and probably other vampires here or there. Her history was filled with sexual exploration and delight.

If she didn't want to have sex, it was a flag something was wrong, and it was obvious what that was. Him. The curse.

But the curse didn't seem to care about Antoinette or sex. It wasn't going to do anything to sabotage his relationship, according to what it said. So far it'd been true to its words, or rather, true to its instinct. It wanted to destroy its enemies, control its territory, and feast upon the sheep, all in wanton excess. Love, romance, intimacy, the Beast didn't care for any of that.

Convincing Antoinette of that wasn't going to be so easy. She saw him at the hospital, saw him when he'd changed, and that was going to be a horrible memory for her, haunting her and every interaction they had from here on out. He'd have to fix that. It's what he did, fix things. Supposedly. He wasn't so sure anymore.

“Jessy isn’t here tonight,” his mom said. She was avoiding his eyes too, but for a different reason. The dress she was wearing was worthy of a Dolareido club scene: slutty as hell.

His mom was an attractive woman, no doubt about it, but she didn’t have any of Antoinette’s confidence or flair. Sitting there in a black dress — black was always a safe choice — with her hands on her legs, and shoulders slouching, she looked terribly attractive, but meek. Antoinette had made sure his mom’s brown hair was done, curly and wavy and bouncy, and that she was wearing more make up than she usually did. Black mascara and eyeliner, more than Jack had ever seen her wear, made her eyes pop as it contrasted the pale skin of a vampire. Green eyes, like his, almost glowed when the white light pulsed.

“No, she is not,” Antoinette said. “I am afraid you will have to hunt for prey yourself, this night.”

“Aww.” Pouting, his mom put her hands on the table, and forced herself to look out at the other booths.

Jack smiled as he watched her. He knew all the feelings she felt, the lack of confidence, the uncertainty, and the animal hunger that demanded she overcome those weaknesses. For all the problems the Beast caused, it was a powerful companion that helped Kindred get over the limitations of their kine lives. In a couple years, Jack had developed the mental fortitude of a veteran navy seal; or at least, he suspected. He didn’t want to put that to the test, but there was no denying he could put himself through hell and come out swinging. He’d done it twice now.

And, much as he was struggling with his own Beast, he was happy his mother’s was forcing her to act. It meant she couldn’t brood about Mary all the time. Like it or not, she had to get out and feed, and when a vampire was hungry, they grew bold.

“Mom, don’t hold back cause I’m here.” Jack shrugged as he leaned forward, and smiled at her. “You’re Daeva. Some things are going to come naturally to you, and you should run with them.”

“But ... but in Tw—”

“Less Twilight, more Dracula.”

“Which one?”

He laughed. “You know the one. Gary Oldman. Remember the scene with Drac and Lucy, having sex outside?” She gasped. “Or Harker and Dracula’s three wives?” More gasps. “It’s a part of who you are, now. I won’t judge, and no other vamp will either.”

“That movie didn’t end well for Dracula,” she said.

“True, and it’s a good warning to be careful. Don’t get involved with your prey, unless you’re willing to make a ghoul or thrall, and you won’t be doing that any time soon,” he said. Antoinette nodded, and gestured over her shoulder. Ashley and Julee weren’t there this time, but they often were, and Jack nodded toward his love before looking back at his mom. “All you should do, is find a mark, convince them to lower their guard, and drink. It went well with Jessy’s ghouls, didn’t it?”

“They um ... they...”

“My childe enjoyed their blood immensely,” the Prince said as she leaned forward, mirroring Jack’s sneaky posture. “Their blood and their touch.”

Jack almost winced. Much as he was trying to convince his mom to embrace her vampire nature, she was still his mom. No one likes imagining their mom in the middle of sex; or at least, most don’t.

“Jack, I swear I—”

“Mom, seriously, what about me not judging are you not getting?” Classic Mom. His words just bounced off her, and convincing her of anything would be borderline impossible. It’d always been that way. She liked to say she was too old to learn new tricks, but mid-forties wasn’t that old. It wasn’t old at all to anyone who took care of their health. And she was just a baby in vampire years.

“I ... I guess I’m just—”

“No, you’re not too old to learn a new trick.” Jesus, how quickly the two of them fell into old, predictable patterns. “You’re a brand new Kindred. Throw away everything you used to know, and embrace what we’re telling you. We’ve said it, what, twenty times now? And we’re saying it again, because it’s true. Do what you want, give in, and enjoy your new Kindred body and desires.” He leaned back and smiled, his old cocky smile he used with her when he knew he was correct in an argument. “It’s one of the best things about this new life. Go on, let loose.”

“Letting loose means ordering in some pizza and watching my Friends DVDs.”

He choked on a laugh. Yes, watching a comedy she’d seen a bunch of times, oblivious to the poor resolution, with some pizza, and maybe some soda, was her definition of giving into her more base, carnal desires. She had a lot of work to readjust her expectations.

“Well, you can still enjoy pizza, if you Blush Life and eat some. You’ll be vomiting it up later though, whether you want to or not.”

“Bleh.”

“Yeah. But now you can come to a place like this, and—”

“You like this place? You?” she said, smirking at him. She knew him well, though it wouldn’t take a genius to know he wouldn’t like night clubs and lounges.

“I like the company.” With a grin, he nodded to his lover again. “And, much as I don’t like this sort of atmosphere to hang out, it feels ... feels natural, doesn’t it? The shadows, the crowd, the heat and sweat and blood of prey. If you listen to your instincts Mom, you can walk into that crowd downstairs, dancing and grinding, and you’d know exactly what to do. Exactly who to look at with fluttering eyelashes. Exactly how to move your body to manipulate kine into doing whatever you wanted, wherever you wanted. You’d know exactly how to get them alone, with their guard down, so you can feed.”

And it was true. As his instincts grew, and as he grew more comfortable listening to them, the impulses, desires, and skills of the shadow Beast hiding inside him and all Kindred, it became obvious how to use them. To be a predator, to stalk, hunt, surround, trap, it felt natural. A young woman out of her element in a place like this would be easy to guide into a corner, make her feel trapped, helpless, and a smoldering gaze would have her melting, scared but intrigued. Or a man, drunk and horny, drawn into said dark corner by the helpless woman, who was actually the vampire, hunting with the proven techniques of the angler fish. Not that male and female Kindred always fell into those two roles, but there was no denying they were tried and true approaches.

Hunting would come natural to his mom, too, once she got used to it. And, unfortunately for her, the best way to get used to it, was to experience it.

“I’d know exactly what to do?”

“Indeed,” Antoinette said. “But, as your sire, I will guide you in that general direction, and present the circumstance from which you can learn without threat.”

“Threat?”



The Prince nodded. “Many Kindred are forced to learn in far less controlled circumstances. In other cities, you might find yourself hunting city streets, while gang wars between infantile kine raged around you. Or, in quieter towns, a witch of the Circle might cast you into the woods, and demand you survive on the blood of animals, while forced to build your own shelter against the sun. You would be given no instruction, no aid, and would only be allowed to return after a week.”

Holy shit. Witches did that? Jack knew Jacob would probably do some hardcore shit with a new childe, but he hadn’t expected something like that; assuming she was talking about Jacob.

“That ... um ... I d-don’t think I’d be able to survive that.”

“Few would,” Antoinette said. “Though, such practices are from a time when kine hunted with bow and axe. In the modern day, I suspect a Kindred who wished to put their new childe through a hazing of deadly proportions, would throw them into the sewers, and hunt them with a pistol.”

Samantha’s eyes went wide. “That’s horrible!”

The Prince nodded as her eyes drifted around, looking at nearby booths and the kine they held. “I agree, my childe. Be glad this is my city, and I do not respect barbarism. There will be time to teach you in forms of self defense, rather than hope you can summon such skills in moments of random despair. And until such a time that your life could be in danger, I will not ask you to learn such skills; at least not so quickly. No, I will protect you and guard you, keep you safe, and let you learn the most essential skills of the Kindred first: how to hunt.”

Jack’s mom looked at Antoinette, and so did Jack. This was a side of the Prince he hadn’t expected to see. It was true that Antoinette could be motherly, especially when she wanted to pamper and tease Jack, but this role of teacher, guardian, and nurturer, wasn’t a look

he'd ever seen on her. Maybe Tash got to see it, but it was a new look for Jack. Antoinette was looking around like a mother hen, checking for threats and scoping for potential targets for Samantha, and she was doing it in such a subtle way, his mom hadn't noticed it before. She was noticing it now.

The relationship between those two was something Jack didn't think he'd ever be able to fully understand. His mom was a teddy bear, capable of soft love and nothing else. Growing up, the most she'd ever managed to do as a form of punishment, was a hard slap on the back of Jack's hand, followed by a whole ten seconds of yelling. Antoinette on the other hand, was capable of some extreme ruthlessness, to a degree he doubted his mom had yet to even realize, let alone considered the implications of. How did the two of them talk when he wasn't around? What did they talk about? If his mom was an animal, she'd be a panda, and Antoinette would be a tiger; or a dragon. Tigers would hunt pandas if given the chance, while this one was trying to raise a panda cub.

It was adorable, and strange, and wonderful.

"Mom, listen." He rubbed his head a few times before leaning in even closer. "Just go downstairs, sit at a booth or the bar, and wait. And while you wait, flaunt a little." Do everything in your power to ignore the fact that this is your mom, Jack. She's not your mom tonight. She's a Kindred who needs to hunt but doesn't have the confidence. "Flaunt, and if you see someone looking at you, go sit with them. Smile, flirt, be yourself, you know? Just like you were with Jessy's ghouls."

"I ... I didn't really feel like myself with those boys." Squirming and wriggling, Samantha looked down, occasionally glancing her sire's way to see if she had anything to say, or maybe would disagree with Jack. He knew Antoinette wouldn't. He'd learned this from her. "I was being so forward!"

“That’s your Daeva side showing through, and your Kindred confidence. They’re prey, you’re the predator, and you knew it, the moment you sat with them, right?” He ducked his head down a bit so he could get a better look at her down-turned eyes. “Antoinette told me. And Jessy told me, too. You had fun with them, getting all touchy with them when feeding.”

His mom squirmed all the more. “We didn’t ... I mean, I didn’t ... you know...”

Jack rolled his eyes. Getting through to her was going to be tough. To let go, just go with the flow, just let instinct and hunger pilot for a little while, was not something his mom could do; not easily, at least. Jack had never really noticed it when he was younger. And he stopped looking at his family much at all, when his dad died. But now, it was so obvious, it made him want to slap himself for not knowing. His mom had all the classic signs of a young woman with no self confidence, and the typical inward-driven neurotic, negative views of herself. She was the sort of woman who’d stand in front of a mirror, pinch her belly fat, frown because she didn’t fit the idealistic body image view she held, and then eat a box of cookies while watching romcoms.

She had managed to stop eating the cookies, in an effort to get herself back on the market though. There was will there, determination, and if she could bring it to the surface and mix it with her new Kindred instincts, she’d be able to find a little slice of happiness for herself.

“Look at me, Mom. I look good, don’t I?” He sat up straight and gestured to himself, his casual suit, his subtle but solid smile. The Julius smile.

“Of course, dear. You look handsome.”

Oh god. It took some serious effort to not laugh at the classic mom appraisal.

“No, I mean I look good. Confident. Well kept. Fit. Financially secure. I look like someone a woman — or man — would want to talk to.” He tapped a finger on the table, then pointed it at her. “And so do you. You look like a woman, a confident, thin, sexy woman who has her life in order. You look like someone guys will want to talk to.”

That hit home. His mom had probably wanted to rebuild her life, and had framed a lot of her romantic goals around that. That life was gone, but that didn't mean he couldn't frame her new life in the same terms, at least a little. She wasn't a broken widow with nothing going for her. She was a sexy, confident woman who had everything going for her.

Antoinette chuckled as she watched. This was a lesson for her too, on how to deal with his mother. Not that the Prince needed the lesson, but Jack could see she was delighted to see what sort of words worked best on Samantha.

“People will want to talk to me. People ... will want to talk to me.” Nodding, gulping, she pushed down her apprehension, and pushed herself up from the booth. “So I go downstairs, and—”

“Take in your surroundings,” Antoinette said, “look for prey that interests you, and catch their eye. It will be easy.” The Prince touched a lip, exposing a fang as she smiled. “And with a touch of Majesty, my childe, all of this will be rendered simple and effortless, but for the effort to use a Kindred discipline.”

“Um, I don't know if ... if I can use that, like we talked about.”

Antoinette shrugged, and nodded toward the stairs. “You are welcome to not use it. But I do expect to see you at least attempt to Kiss someone tonight, my childe.” This time, the Prince put a little ice in her words, and Jack winced.

Samantha squeaked, and walked down the stairs.

Jack laughed, sat up, and looked at his lover. She met his gaze, and they smiled for a time, before their eyes drifted away. And when they did, icy pain filled his guts. This had to end. He wasn't going to let the relationship die because of this curse.

Nothing else in his life was going to die anymore. Nothing.

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“Ok, I thought that'd be more awkward. That was actually fun, and funny,” he said as they stepped into the vault bedroom.

“Oui, vraiment. I think my new childe will prove to be a delightful, fun creature, once she moves past her grieving, as she has begun.”

His mom had managed to find someone to Kiss. It hadn't taken her long at all, actually, and when Jack and Antoinette went down to check on her progress, they'd found her trying to help the man she'd put into a temporary coma. A good thing she remembered to lick the wound clean, because she hadn't remembered what gravity did to someone when they went comatose. The poor guy had nearly fallen out of the booth, and she'd had to struggle to keep him from doing so.

The look on her face, of joy from a successful hunt, and panic from having to keep a body from literally falling out onto the floor, had been hilarious.

Laughing with her usual, quiet, sultry little chuckles, Antoinette walked to her side closet, where a hidden palace of clothes awaited her. Jack didn't really bother with a closet; unless he spilled something on his suit, he had no need to change. A trip back to his apartment every few days was perfectly fine for clothes-changing, for a vampire.

But, he did like to watch her prepare for bed. For the past two weeks, he hadn't watched, he'd simply gone to bed, lay down, and

waited for dawn, when daily torpor would bring them under. They talked a little, sure, but heavy conversations were handled during the night, and come time for sleep, they simply let sleep come.

They'd arrived at her tower with an hour before dawn though, and that meant Antoinette was likely to read a book while waiting for sunrise. She'd disrobe, put on a nightgown, and lie in bed next to him. Like an old married couple, complete with the lack of sex. Fifteen nights now, including the one where he'd been staked, they hadn't touched each other. To go two nights in a row without sex was unusual for them, let alone fifteen.

He hated this. He was feeling depressed about Mary, and especially about Julias, but that wasn't the whole reason. She was feeling uneasy about the curse, and much as he tried to deny it, so was he.

Sighing, he put his shoulder to the frame of the door to her closet room, and watched her slip off her shoes, still in her dress.

“Do you trust me?”

She stood up straight, now barefoot, and looked up with a slightly raised eyebrow. As she met his gaze, her eyebrow lowered, and her eyes grew heavy with realization.

“I ... I find it difficult to ignore, little Ventrue, that you are not entirely you, anymore.”

“You're telling me.” He tilted his head so it rested against the door opening as well. Door wasn't really the right word, considering it was a hole carved into the fancy black marble. “I can feel it lurking. I mean, every Kindred's Beast lurks, right? And Begotten have their nightmare horror thing, and Uratha have their ... wolfish spirit thing, I guess. But this curse, it's different.”

Antoinette nodded, and turned her back to him as she reached up to slip off the neck of her dress up over her head, to let it fall forward from her.

He came up behind her, and set his hands on her hips, hands stopping her dress from falling down her legs. She must have heard him coming, but she still shivered a little when his fingers found her, and not the good kind of shivers.

“This thing inside me, it’s ... it’s not trying to take me over, or trick me, or trick you. It’s deep down, and under control. You ... you don’t have to worry. It’s not going to attack you, or the city.” It’d attack the hunters, or maybe get a little overzealous in abusing its power, but it didn’t seem to have any desire to harm Kindred.

“It is not me or my city I worry for, my love. It is you. This entity affects you.”

“It ... yeah, it does. But it’s different now. It’s ... its own thing, its own entity. The rage I felt before, the weird, disturbing thoughts, I can feel them, but they’re not mine.” He leaned forward, and pressed his forehead against her naked back, right underneath her neck. So tall. “I’m ... I’m still me.”

She nodded. Standing there, unmoving, she set her hands on his where they sat on her hips, and she caressed his knuckles lightly.

“I am sorry, my love, for keeping you at a distance. That night, where another person’s eyes looked back at me through yours, was ... painful. For a brief moment, I felt as Beatrice does now.”

He flinched. Ouch.

“It’s not going to change me, or take me over, or anything like that. The worst that’ll happen is it makes an appearance when it’s time to fight the hunters. Otherwise, it’s just me.”

“ ... Promise?”

“Promise.” You hear that, monster? You’re just a passenger in this car.

The monster said nothing. He knew it could hear him, his thoughts, but it seemed content to lurk, its desires and urges dormant. And Jack was thankful. Not so much thankful that his Beast seemed to have obtained sentience, or fake it somehow, but thankful that, in the end, all the horrible thoughts he’d been having before weren’t entirely his. It wasn’t him that was going mad with bloodlust and wanton rage every time he thought of Angela, it was the curse creeping around inside him.

Well, maybe some of it was him. Who wouldn’t get overwhelming, royally pissed at the sight of someone who’d basically become their mortal enemy? That, he could accept was him. The desire to rip off her head and dance in the blood squirting from her neck? Thank god, thank fucking god, that wasn’t him.

And he was eager to show his lover that it wasn’t.

“Do you trust me?” he said.

“Of course, mon chéri.”

He smiled, and lifted his head up a bit so he could kiss between her shoulder blades. Instant reaction. She shivered, and this time it was the good kind. Much as Antoinette liked to act like the suave, seductive succubus, she craved sex as much as any young man did; or older woman, heh.

“Want to prove it for me?” He stepped away, hands slipping out from under hers, and off her hips.

She turned around, and exposing her devilish smile, as she stood before him. She was wearing only a thong, a black thong, and it



hugged her wide hips hard enough he could see the light pinch it made in her soft skin. Leaning on one leg and hip, she looked him up and down, smile showing through all the more once she met his eyes. It was tough pulling his eyes away from that thong for a moment so he could meet her gaze in return, but it was worth it.

She knew his eyes, and he knew hers. Intimacy, familiarity, comfortable and divine at the same time. The fact she visibly relaxed when looking into his eyes also undid a knot in his stomach that'd been tightening for days. She believed him.

“Very well, my little Ventrue. What would you have of me?”

A devil smile of his own sneaked onto his face, despite his attempts to hide it. He was so bad at poker.

“Sit on the bed with me, and let me do whatever I want to you.”

“Ah, this game. We have played it before, have we not?” She walked past him toward the bed, and as she did, she Blushed Life. So well timed, it sent a fire into him in seconds, and he groaned as he Blushed Life as well. “I submit to your will, oh mighty, regal Ventrue.”

There's nothing in the world like watching a woman walk away; or in this case, walk away and toward the enormous bed in the back center of the room. She knew how to emphasize each step, making her large, shapely ass sway. And the black thong, worn to match the revealing dress she no longer wore, looked perfect against her alabaster skin. As she walked, she raised her hands, elbows up, and ran her fingers back through her hair, showing off her figure. Her breasts were more than large enough that he could see the sides of them from behind, overwhelming her chest and lightly jiggling with her catwalk.

It took a lot of willpower to not sprint after her. Forcing himself to walk, he stared after her, drinking in the sight of large, shapely

things, rippling with gravity and her exaggerated, fashion model runway walk. Once she reached the bed, she climbed up and crawled along the black silk sheets, prowling, arching her back down so her breasts swayed underneath her with each forward motion. Once she reached the center of the massive bed, she rolled onto her hip and sat there, legs out to her side, one hand to the sheets to keep her torso up straight, other hand resting on her legs.

He slid out of his suit, and threw his clothes onto the floor, literally. No way he was going to hang them up like she usually insisted; she did hate wrinkles. But he had to have her, now.

“Most unbecoming a Ventrue of the Invictus.”

“Sorry.” But not sorry. He climbed up onto the bed after her, and knelt in front of her, eyes looking her up and down. Fifteen days of no sex might as well have been an eternity. “Sit against some pillows for me?”

Smiling all the more, she grabbed some of the many, large pillows, and set them atop each other, against the headboard. Once done, it'd made a slope of pillows, and she was free to lean back against it, sitting comfortably on her butt, her legs out in front of her on the bed. It made it easy for him to crawl over her legs, reach down for her hips, and begin the hypnotizing journey of sliding the tiny piece of black fabric down her milky skin. She leaned side to side, helping him get the fabric past her large buttocks, and then raised her legs a bit so he could finish the job.

“You said you trust me, right?”

“Oui, mon amour.”

“Alright. Get comfortable for me. Lean back, relax, spread your legs, and play with your nipples.” His words earned a raised brow, but a smile a moment later as she did as he said.

With a relaxed sigh, she snuggled back into the pillows holding her naked body half sitting up. Slowly, she opened her legs, alabaster skin spreading to reveal the pink of her labia, the mound of her mons, and its complete smoothness. As she exposed herself, she set both her hands on her flat stomach, one higher and placed up onto her breasts, so she could begin circling one of her large, pink nipples with her fingertips. It swelled, slowly, but Jack was more than willing to wait a minute or two simply watching her touch herself.

As the busty goddess fell into a hypnotizing rhythm, her pussy clenched a few times; he was kneeling between her thighs, and could see it in close detail between her lips. He scooted his ass and legs back, lay on his stomach, and got up between her thighs. A kiss for the left one. A kiss for the right one. He offered a few suckles, sliding his lips down closer and closer to her sex, as he enjoyed the way her smooth inner thighs felt against his lips and nose. And, taking his sweet time to actually reach her awaiting lips, meant she was getting more and more turned on as she masturbated with her nipples.

This long without sex? Last thing he was going to do was rush it.

Once his kisses tickled along her vulva, only grazing along her lips, she moaned. A quiet, little thing, but her noises were always quiet and controlled. Earning one was a big deal, an indication of her arousal, and a kiss on her pussy proved it. Wet.

He slowly encased the whole of her pussy in his maw, burying it, covering it with his lips and making sure to encompass the top of it deep into his mouth. Like this, it was easy to bury her clitoris with his tongue, and provide it slow, long, massaging licks, without ever having to stop kissing her body.

Antoinette let out a long, pleased sigh, and reached down with her free hand to tease his buzzed hair. "Jack, if you were concerned I did

not trust your lips to remember what I like, then you are silly indeed.”

He grinned up at her. “No. I was worried that you ... might not trust me when you’re so vulnerable.”

Before the weight of his words had a chance to damage the sexual heat, he set his lips back onto her body, and resumed massaging her clit, a little harder now. He offered a small groan onto her flesh, causing her to shudder a little, and for her heavy breasts to ripple against her chest.

She closed her eyes, melted into the pillows, and continued to play with herself, fingertips teasing and rubbing her puffy areola, with both hands this time. That’s what he wanted, to see if she’d close her eyes, give into the moment completely, and not let worries get in the way of sex. Fear of damaged intimacy melted away, and he grew a little more forceful, burying her clit with his tongue as he could feel her pussy’s juices begin to leak out of her.

He suckled on the small nub, and pulled a quiet purr from his lover, as one of his hands began to press at her entrance. Fingers slipped between her smooth lips, caressing along them and finding her juices mixing with his saliva, before he pushed a finger against her clenching slit. Her wet, pink flesh spread around the digit, squeezing in spurts as he sank in a knuckle, and another, palm turned upward so he could curl the finger toward him, and toward her belly.

Pressing against her g-spot, while he suckled in and bathed her clitoris with his tongue, was one of Antoinette’s favorite ways to cum. Knowing what pleased her, knowing how to set her body on fire, was a wonderful form of intimacy. Knowing, that when he sank in his second finger, and started probing up against her g-spot in a fucking rhythm as he kissed her clit, she wouldn’t take long to cum, was delightful.

He watched her with hungry eyes, drank in the sight of her teasing and masturbating with her enormous breasts, and smiled against her clit as her breathing quickened, causing her breasts to rise and fall blatantly. It only grew more enchanting when her depths started to clench and squeeze, and he had to fight against her to keep fingering her. She hadn't cum yet, but she would soon. It was the signal to start fingering her faster, and begin pumping his fingers upward harder, while burying her clitoris with his mouth.

She closed her eyes, let her head sink back onto her pillows, and wrapped her hands around the undersides of each breast to keep them snug to her ribs, as she started to orgasm. Her voice disappeared, and her body arched, jutting out her breasts — that still rippled despite her attempts to keep them contained — while her insides squeezed. Muscles clenched like a vise, and juices leaked onto his palm as he forced his fingers up against her g-spot harder.

He lifted his head, and watched her cum. She didn't like having her clit touched when cumming, but her insides were fair game. He continued to pump his hand up and down, hard but not too hard, a decent rhythm that made her body ripple and her pussy leak a few more drops of her hot juices. Only after a few more moments of fingering her through her orgasm, prolonging it, did he stop, keeping his fingers inside her to enjoy the aftershocks, and how each spurred random spasms of her warm, tight insides.

“That was delicious, my love,” she said. Letting go of her breasts, she raised her head, and looked down the valley of her body.

He grinned at her from between her legs, and set his lips back onto her clitoris. Instant clenches, and a surprised gasp. He kept the touch light, and only for a second, knowing she'd be sensitive, but he did keep it there, keeping her on edge. Her eyes widened a little, and she raised her eyebrows as she looked at him and the grin he wasn't able to remove.

He sank his two fingers deeper into her, deeper, into the final knuckle and then some. He pressed them up toward her belly, up against her deepspot, and started pushing.

“Jack, I—”

He pressed harder, and her voice cut off as she clenched. She liked this spot, a lot, a spot way in the back of her depths that he could hit if he curled his fingers up toward her stomach. She'd taught him well, but normally she didn't sit back and let him do things to her. This was a rare opportunity, and he wasn't going to waste it.

He eased his fingers out of her, earning a quiet groan, before he forced in three.

“Jack!” she said, blinking down at him. Another kiss on her clit turned her surprise into a small mewl, and she fell back onto her throne of pillows as he fought to sink in the three fingers against her clenching muscles. Her insides really were like a vise, and he had to fight to get the three of them in to the final knuckles so only his thumb and pinky finger weren't inside her.

After few more gentle kisses on her swollen clitoris, he started pressing up against her insides with the three fingers, stretching her pussy upward in the sweet spot she'd taught him. The result was powerful, and almost painful, with how tight she clenched on his fingers and hand. Once the shock of it had passed, she managed a smile at him despite her trembling, and she hugged her breasts to her body, crossing at the wrist so her hands could tease her swollen nipples of the opposite breast.

He started to pump faster, making her thighs shake around him, and her large ass jiggle against the bed near him. He started to lick her clitoris harder too, never quite going as hard as before, but instead using his tongue to gently massage, while his fingers got rougher, and rougher.

A few minutes later, and his lover was cumming again, and harder. She clamped down, and both her hands grabbed the sheets around her as her body arched, causing her breasts to jiggle and sway against her torso like water as she quivered. Going deadly silent, her eyes closed, and her pussy began to squeeze in random spurts again as pleasure worked up and down her legs; he could see them tremble, and a glance back showed her toes curling.

Before she started to calm from the obvious bliss coursing through her, he crawled in closer between her legs while sitting up without removing his fingers, and putting his knees between her thighs. Now sitting between her legs, he had a much easier time seeing the busty goddess quivering with his fingering, and he gazed at her breasts and how they flowed back and forth along her ribs, dipping to her sides and bouncing about. Hypnotizing.

It only grew more hypnotic when he set his free hand against her lower abdomen, pressed the palm down toward the fingers inside her, and started to finger her again. Hard, like a piston.

“Jack you ... d ... devil...” She managed a short look to him before her head pressed back against her pillows, and her eyes closed.

As her insides squeezed unendingly, fighting to get him to stop, her body arched all the more, pressing her hips toward him as he fingered her hard enough to make her ass bounce against the sheets. Her hands squeezed on the blankets, and her head turned to bury half her face in the pillows as she came again, hips rising to try and match the speed of his fingering. The hand pinning her kept her down, and let him drive his fingers up against her depths with each upward slap of his hand.

The sounds, already a carnal mixture of wet flesh, became utterly salacious as Antoinette started to squirt. A small gush of her fluids splashed over his palm, quickly sent outward in all directions by his pumping hand. The small splashes hit his wrist, arm, his stomach,

and both their thighs. Antoinette's cum, coating him, instead of him coating her like usual.

God, that was hot.

He started pumping her harder, and immediately another gush of her cum landed over his palm. And then another. He grinned down at the sight of her tight slit spread taut around three of his fingers, alabaster skin smooth, and pink lips opened wide around his hand. It was all soaked. And he wanted more.

“J ... Jack ... nng!”

He knew she wanted to say something; probably to ask him to stop. Losing control during sex wasn't her usual bag. But she had lost control, and she was cumming so hard she was drenching him. Her body was on fire, and as long as he continued assaulting her, she could do little but cum again as her increased sensitivity left her defenseless. She might be angry—well, not angry, but she'd undoubtedly get revenge on him later for being so rough with her. Until then, he was going to indulge.

He stopped fingering her for a moment, only to start up again when it looked like her orgasm was calming down. Her legs spread, her insides clenched, and her juices flowed out onto his palm as she squirmed, eyes still closed and head against her pillows. Her breasts swayed freely, flowing around and around her chest in circles. Her hips tried to push toward him again, or away from him, and he didn't let her, keeping his other hand pressed hard down against her pelvis. It was too good, to hold and trap the great dragon, the deadly elder Antoinette, in the middle of a forced orgasm. A long, long, very long orgasm.

Only when her hands let go of the sheets around her, going limp, did he stop finger fucking her hard enough to make the bed shake. He eased up, and eventually stopped altogether, smiling down at the sight of her body as it shivered in orgasm, and the way her control



had shattered. Her legs continued to quiver, and her torso relaxed with exhaustion against the pillows. She was spent.

He, on the other hand, was dying for release. With a small, animal growl, he eased his body in closer, sneaking his knees under her thighs. Soon he was close enough, and his growl grew as he took his cock in his soaked hand, and set his glans against her trembling folds. Precum was already leaking from the swollen tip, making it easy to peel back the skin and expose the engorged, red head, big enough he felt like it was going to burst.

Easing his shaft into her leaking, quivering pussy, as the exhausted elder vampire continued to tremble, was oddly exhilarating. For sure the ancient, deadly creature was going to do something to him later as punishment for this, but good god, it was too inviting. Seeing her lying there, shaking, breasts rippling gently on her chest, pulled to her sides with their enormous mass and weight, was beautiful. It was a glorious sight, and he drank it in as he pushed his cock into the vise-grip of her slit, fighting against her clenching spasms. Tight enough, if she'd wanted to, she could have squeezed hard enough to prevent entry entirely; or break off his dick. But she was exhausted, and her insides were absolutely soaked. It was almost like she was defenseless to stop him.

He felt like a kid sneaking a cookie from the cookie jar.

He took her hips into his hands, put his weight on his knees, and pulled on her. She managed a tired moan, and opened her eyes long enough to look at him, but they closed again as he pulled her across the blankets and pillows a few inches. As her bountiful ass molded to his thighs, and her pussy swallowed every inch of him, she shivered again, and let her head turn to the side to rest on the pillows as her insides squeezed on him.

He knelt up straight, putting his weight onto both knees and getting his ass in the air, while keeping both hands on his lover's

hips. Her butt lifted with him, and her long, flat stomach stuck out as her back arched to keep her shoulders flat to the pillows. If she'd been more aware of what was going on, she'd probably have hooked her thighs around his hips, but her legs dangled limply around him, spread and trembling as the woman clenched on his cock. Each motion was like fireworks of bliss along his aching length.

He held onto her hips nice and tight, pulled his own back, and thrust into her hard enough to make her whole body shake. It managed to pull a short, quiet mewl from the deadly predator, and Jack licked his lips at the sound; it was intoxicating. He thrust into her again, hitting her hard enough, and deep enough, he could feel her large ass jiggle against his thighs. The thrust also made her breasts flow back and forth along her chest even more than before, not unlike hitting a waterbed.

But the best part, was the sizzling heat of her cum coating his length. Another hard thrust, and her juices renewed, a small squirt of her cum enough to drench his cock, and leak down onto his testicles. When she squirted, her insides clenched hard, and he winced as he felt her depths grip his shaft tight enough it was difficult to move. But he managed another thrust, and another, until the heaven of her hot slit massaging and milking his length and ripe glans, had sparks of pleasure dancing down his cock and between his legs.

Part of him told him he should probably slow down. If Antoinette were human, she'd be so exhausted that she probably wouldn't be able to cum anymore, after the piston fingering he'd given her. But she was a vampire, and that meant she could take a lot more. And, seeing her like this, giving into pleasure and trusting him completely? He wanted this, needed this, and didn't want it to stop. He thrust into her again, hard, and again, until he felt the warmth of his cum gush up through his length.

With each wave of his cum, he thrust into her, slamming into her and causing her whole body to shake. Her mewls turned into moans, still quiet and tired, and each was met with a clench of her insides. It was a struggle to manage his own pleasure, to stay on his knees and upright, as each thrust meant her cunt squeezed on the now hypersensitive skin of his cock's head. It also meant each thrust was euphoric, almost painfully so, causing a gush of his warm cum to send sparks down his length as it poured into his lover

Soon both of their fluids were trickling down her ass and thighs, and his testicles. The mostly clear color of hers, mixing with the thick white of his, coated, mixed, and flowed out of Antoinette, and he licked his lips as he watched. He pulled out most of his length, groaned as her dripping slit milked on his length, and groaned again as he slowly slid it back into her, eyes locked on how her soaked pussy squeezed in spurts around his girth.

It almost felt like cheating, with how easy it was to make his lover feel pleasure. Antoinette had spent centuries developing her sexuality, and now that she'd let her guard down, it took little to make the deadly predator cum and cum hard. No wonder she didn't do it often, if she turned into this when she did, a bundle of sensitive nerves he could probably make cum by breathing on her neck. Like this, she was defenseless against him, and could do nothing but lie there on her throne of pillows, on her massive bed, and quiver in pleasure.

And, he needed more.

He used one hand to keep her body pressed to him, ass still in the air with how he was kneeling. His other took her leg, her long, curvy, smooth, delicious, creamy leg, and hooked it over his shoulder, before grabbing her hips again, and using the inside of his arm to keep the leg where it was. He repeated the process with his other hand, and smiled down at the Prince once both her legs were hooked on his shoulders. Her insides grew tighter with the position,

and he shivered as her clenching pussy sent more waves of pleasure down his still sensitive glans.

He started thrusting again, hard. Antoinette's eyes opened, and she managed to blink at him as her lips parted. She moaned, a deep, husky sound, and her eyes closed once again as she melted onto her pillows. Her breasts bounced against her chest, mostly rolling toward her shoulders with gravity, and how her back arched upward, her hips in his hands. It created the most beautiful sight he could imagine, demanding he keep thrusting, harder, causing her ass to ripple against his thighs and her whole body to shake with each impact, so he could keep watching her breasts flow back and forth along her chest.

She came again. Instead of writhing or moaning, or thrusting her hips to meet him, or arching her back harder, she simply lay there, and shivered. Her juices trickled down, mixing with his own and soaking the blankets beneath them; it'd turn to the faintest trace of dust eventually, but for now, it was a mess of sex and heat. Something about her being so exhausted that she couldn't even squirm anymore, sent Jack over the edge, and he started pounding into her, causing the enormous bed to shake as he drove his cock into her cum-filled insides. More wet warmth soaked his cock, almost splashing his abdomen as it trickled out over his length, only to get lost in the mess as he thrust into her again, and again, earning more of her fluids.

Seeing her lie there, exhausted and open, quiet moans sneaking out through her parted lips, was too much. He stopped thrusting, and slowly let Antoinette's ass back down onto the blankets. White cum dripped from her clenching slit, almost washed away by her trickling juices and squeezing muscles. But it was her breasts that drew his eyes, and he licked his lips as he crawled over her pelvis and legs, and sat on her stomach.

With her torso still propped up on the pillows, gravity pulled her breasts down toward her stomach, and out along her ribs. He reached down onto both sides of her, scooped her breasts inward, and as he leaned forward so his cock rested along her upper stomach, he buried his cum-soaked length in the softness of her bosom. As much as her insides were a sinful combination of tight muscle and dripping heat, the softness of her breasts enveloping his girth was a guilty pleasure he'd never grow tired of. Her breasts were more than big enough to completely hide his cock, and it wasn't like he had a small one; in fact, he had a normal sized one, which looked pretty large on his small body. It made it all the better, when her massive breasts overflowed his thighs and pelvis, as he began to fuck the valley of alabaster softness.

Antoinette managed to open her eyes again, though she was still blatantly exhausted, and trapped in orgasm aftershocks. A light brush of his thumbs along her hard nipples was enough to make her shiver, and she closed her eyes again as she sank onto the pillows. It was heaven, feeling the supple, heavy mass of her breasts mold snug to his legs and pelvis. A gentle thrust was enough to cause them to ripple against him, jiggling as he pinned them around his length, and overflowed his fingers.

He leaned down, bending his back so he could keep his cock snug between her breasts, and found her lips with his. A crack of her red gaze showed through before she closed her eyes again. It was surprising, that she'd given in this hard. It filled his stomach with butterflies, knowing she was willing to do that, after what had happened. Knowing he could make her cum so hard she practically went into a coma, was also a huge stroke to his ego, one he would look to create again if he could find the opportunity. But for now, take advantage while you can, Jack. Antoinette had gone totally submissive, and he'd be damned if he was going to waste the chance it provided.

He kissed her again, and again. With anyone else, bending his back down this way while doing this would have been impossible, but Antoinette was tall, and her breasts were large enough they reached his pelvis without him having to sit up high on her stomach. He was free to kiss her, and touch her forehead with his, as he started to cum into the softness of her bosom. Instead of the vise grip of hot, milking muscle, the silky texture of her breasts caressed his aching glans tenderly, and invited him to coat her chest in his cum, rather than demanding it. He was more than happy to give into it, and he raised his head so he could look down and admire the sight of his cum flowing up along her sternum, as he fucked her breasts.

He scooted up a little higher, so her breasts outright buried his thighs, and overflowed his pelvis and up onto his abdomen. Cum oozed down her sternum, coating her breasts, even as it poured over their contours underneath her collar, to start dripping down her ribs. The moment the tingling waves settled, his glans stopped being hypersensitive, and his clenching inner muscles calmed down, he started thrusting again. He needed more.

“My love,” Antoinette said, eyes slowly opening to full, “you are ... ravenous, tonight.”

“I can’t help it. Two weeks is way too long.” It wasn’t a biological need; he was a corpse after all, and didn’t experience those urges innately. It was very much a psychological need however, both to enjoy sex, but also to spend more time with skin-on-skin contact with Antoinette. There was something magical about that, skin on skin, touch on touch, something overwhelming and soothing at the same time, about feeling their bodies against each other. He needed more.

The elder vampire, with a quiet, pleasant moan, stopped quivering, and slowly slid her arms up to touch his wrists. Her fingers teased, inching up his arms until they reached his biceps,

and she held his arms there, helping press her breasts together for him with her own biceps as she smiled up at him.

“I must apologize for that.”

“No ... apology necessary. It happened. We move on, right?” He tried his best to smile down at her, but he was trapped in carnal need. Autopilot. His hips moved forward in a consistent fucking rhythm, and he stared down at how her breasts, squished between his hands and her arms, kept his cock hidden despite him kneeling straight up. It made everything tighter, and her silky skin squeezed on him, his own cum keeping everything sliding back and forth in heavenly bliss.

“Perhaps. Or, perhaps I was a fool, for not ... for fearing that I could not feel safe with you, like this.” Her legs raised, putting her knees and thighs to his back and butt.

“I’ll never let anything come between us, Antoinette. Ever.” And he meant it. No matter what he did with Beatrice, no matter what crazy shit he’d do to get revenge, no matter how loud or strong his curse grew to be, he’d never let anything get between him and the Prince.

He leaned down again, and set his lips to hers. She returned his kiss, eagerly, and offered him some controlled moans as his thrusting got faster. The Prince moved her chest with him, matching his rhythm, and helping him reach another orgasm in record time.

He lifted his head, and stared down at how her breasts, squashed to his body, were soon painted white in another layer of his cum. Kneeling up gave him more leverage too, and he squeezed her breasts together a little harder, fingers sinking into their softness, until the gentle pressured forced out waves of his white fluid. More joined the mess, until it was overflowing the upper arches of each breast and trickling down along their sides. Each thrust meant the soaked, wet, silky skin of her breasts massaged his length, but also

that her breasts jiggled hypnotically, despite the both of them holding them. The sensation of cum-soaked breasts hitting his thighs and abdomen, as he poured his cum into their crevice, was euphoric.

But eventually he was done, and he let go of her breasts, exposing the soaked valley between them. Antoinette spread her arms, letting the two pillows pull to the sides of her chest, before she brought her hands to each of them, and began to massage his cum into her alabaster skin. Good god in heaven.

“I am glad to hear that, my love,” she said, growing still and relaxing onto her pillows once more as she grinned at him. “I would hate to learn Elaine stole you away from me.”

“Who?”



~~Damien~~

He couldn't stop looking at her. She couldn't stop looking at him. It was a good thing he was a corpse, because he knew his hormones would be raging, and he'd be walking around with an erection.

Damien, Fiona, Matthew, Vicky, and Parker, were together once again. The sweeps didn't get to stop just because of the incident with Jack at the hospital; if anything, Julias's death did the opposite. The Invictus were in overdrive now, with every sweeper team running almost every night, and the age bracket having increased to include younger Kindred. It was a bad idea, including younger Kindred who'd only get themselves killed in a confrontation with hunters, especially these hunters. Angela, Jeremiah, and her crew were anything but the usual hunters Damien had been warned of by Lucas, so long ago. These were trained soldiers, professional killers, who lived and breathed



teamwork, not a band of disgruntled humans who wanted revenge for a dead family member.

Keeping his mind on the hunters was proving difficult. It didn't matter to Fiona that their lives were in danger, and that, out here in North Side, hunters could be hiding around any corner. Or maybe it did matter, and that was why she kept glancing at him and smiling, and grinning. She was a danger junkie, and being in danger always put her in a bouncy mood.

The two of them slowly drifted further back from the rest of the group, putting maybe fifty feet between them and the team, before Damien fully turned to face Fiona. An alleyway, high walls of two office buildings, and corners cutting off light sources, meant the two of them were in darkness. He liked darkness. So did she. She was darkness, in ways he could never be, and he had to admit, there was an appeal in that dangerous side of her.

There was also an appeal in the less dangerous side of her, the cute little redhead in the jeans and brown leather jacket, with frizzy red hair and freckles. There was appeal in the way she looked up at him with beaming golden brown eyes. There was extreme appeal in how she bit her bottom lip when she did.

And then, there was the appeal in how, when he reached out to touch her, she didn't hesitate to lean into it. He had no idea, no idea at all, how amazing a thing it'd be, to have someone lean into his touch when he wanted to touch them. Power in touch, in skin on skin contact, in the movement toward each other, in eye contact. It was overpowering, mesmerizing, and good Lord, how had he denied himself this for so long?

He set a hand on her neck, another on her hip, and came in closer, pulling her in as he did. She let out a small mewl, pushed up onto the toes of her black boots, and kissed him. Heat, warmth, subtle

wetness, he melted into the feel of it as he pressed his lips to hers, and—

“Tck!” she said, pushing both hands against his chest, turning her head to the side, and coughing.

“What? What, what did I—”

She laughed and put a finger on his lips. “Sorry! But yer lips are all dry and dusty, cause ye’re nae Blushing Life.”

“Oh. Um, I could—”

“Nae, we cannae stop our jobs, just cause ... we want ... to touch.” Her hands began to roam his body, squeezing and pressing on his arms, before drifting around and slipping around his waist. She was quite literally saying no, while her body was literally saying yes with its body language.

In the past, that’d have been way too confusing a signal. Now, it was only mildly confusing. Progress.

He was wearing a trench coat, thick, black, and heavy. Some called it a duster. Fiona called it sexy. He figured it’d be a reasonable change in fashion, considering it was the same sort of clothes the sheriff wore, and the two of them were similar in more ways than one. Either way, Fiona agreed with the wardrobe adjustment, though she didn’t know it was Maria’s idea. The small woman smiled up at him as her hands drifted around his waist, squeezed and pressed on his abs and back, and kneaded the fabric of his suit underneath.

He returned the favor, unable to stop himself as he gazed down at the fiery creature. His fingers found her back and waist, and while one drifted up to sneak into her hair, earning some more mewls from her, the other slid down, and gently squeezed on the mass of her ass. It was a large ass, curvy, and it filled her jeans to the point

of tightness. Fiona had some muscle on her, but not as much as his coworkers. She was soft, thin, but with just enough plumpness to her to make her features supple and inviting.

She also had enormous breasts, matching her hourglass figure perfectly, and he growled down at her as one of his roaming hands found them. Even through her jacket, shirt, and bra, he could feel the softness of them and how they molded to his fingers. Better, was when he placed both hands behind her, one on her ass, and pressed her to his body so he could feel her breasts squash to his chest.

No wonder kine everywhere were addicted to touch, craved it, dreamed of it, wrote about it day and night. Every part of him wanted to hold her, feel her heartbeat, listen to her breathe, and kiss her. Every part of him wanted to grab her, press her to him, and bury his member inside her so he could feel her clenching muscles soak him as he drank her blood until she was limp, exhausted, trembling, and helpless.

They hadn't had sex yet, and it was killing the both of them. The problem was a lack of time. When he was awake, he was working double time, dealing with the hunter threat, and when he wasn't working he was asleep. He had, on average, twelve hours a day, while she had more to work with. And the devil woman had made sure to use that free time to take more pictures of herself, and send them to him to taunt him. At this point, he was intimately familiar with the heavy teardrop shape her breasts made when she was nude, and how delicious her milky white skin looked when squeezed. Lots, and lots of selfies to torment him when he woke up each dusk.

He'd had sex with Vrall, and he looked forward to doing that again as well. Except, now he knew how good sex felt, and it was on his mind all the time. He needed more. God, he needed more. And Fiona was taunting him, teasing him, playing with him, bringing

him closer to a bursting point every time he went out on a sweep with her. So evil. Why did evil have to be so delicious?

He leaned down closer, and breathed in the smell of her neck, her flesh, her life and her perfume. “You’re killing me.”

“Ye’re the one killing me! I have Vral’s experience with ye, but nae my own! Vral, she ... she was right, ye ken? About ... the things ... I like...”

He growled into her ear. Never did he picture himself as an aggressive sort, someone who had to act on impulse, masculine instincts, or wanton need. But Fiona flashed her doe eyes at him, bit her bottom lip again, and he shivered as the Kindred inside him demanded he take her. His hands found hers, and slowly tightened his fingers around them, locking them into his grip as he pressed the backs of them against the wall behind her.

She melted. It was like throwing a lit match onto gasoline. The poor woman squirmed for a second, but within moments, she sank against the wall, and blinked her sweet, pure, please-don’t-take-me-I’m-just-an-innocent-girl eyes at him; a total lie but his awakened sex drive didn’t seem to care. Vral had been right. More than right, she’d been dead on. Damien leaned down over her, growled again, and he felt Fiona’s weight struggle against his hands as her legs started to quiver.

“We ... we shouldnae ... nae now ... we have a job to do,” she said, but her voice had fallen into whispers. Her breathing was short, shallow, pants that drew his eyes to her chest and neck.

She was right of course. They had a job to do, hunters to find, and a city to make safe. All of that was background noise to the roaring in his chest, telling him to give into his desires, and drain this woman. Sink his fangs into her, and sink his cock into her, too. She wanted it. He could smell it. He—

“You two, good god.”

Damien snapped his head up, and glared at Vicky. But her voice had been joyful, full of chuckling, and it prevented a barking retort from him. The Ventrue stood down the alleyway where it opened to the street, maybe fifteen feet away, and close enough Damien should have sensed her. He didn't. With every sense pointed at Fiona, tunnel vision was real. Even now, trying to pull back from his need to take the small redhead and sink his fangs into her neck, it was hard to notice other things. Street. Wall. Windows. Shadows. Two other vampires, and a werewolf nearby. Pay attention to your surroundings at all times, like a Mekhet should, instead of the horny teenager you're acting like.

“Hey, ye're ruining a moment!” Fiona said, barking at Vicky but smiling as she did. When Damien pulled away, Fiona pushed away from the wall, straightened her clothes, and stuck her tongue out at the Ventrue.

“You two can fuck later, when the hunters are dead,” Vicky said. “Come on, we still have a lot of work to do tonight.”

Fiona, grumbling, bounced on her feet a few times before stomping down the alley to join Vicky, and Damien followed after. In the past, he'd have walked ahead of her, in some sort of protective instinct he supposed. Now, any opportunity to see her from behind was an opportunity worth taking.

He almost laughed. Back when he was human, he'd had a sex drive, one that demanded he gawk at every woman who passed by. But then he'd also had a limited view of the world, a hyper conservative view colored by his beliefs; naturally, being attracted to everything with two legs and boobs had led to a lot of guilt. No guilt anymore. No, now things were different, he was different, and as far as he could tell, his beliefs more reasonable.

How much of that was Antoinette and her hyper progressive city affecting him, versus simple logical reasoning, he didn't know. It was hard to know, when working in the dark, and until God decided to pay a visit, he had to try and be reasonable about things.

Even more uncertain, how much of that was actually reasonable thinking, versus him being out-of-his-mind horny twenty-four seven, since he'd had a taste of Fiona? People didn't think straight when they were aroused. He assumed that Kindred were different, since without the Blush of Life, arousal was purely mental. Except maybe it wasn't. The Beast didn't operate on the biological, it was a monster, something above and beyond biology, and it certainly seemed like it was making him horny even when he wasn't Blushing Life. Which meant, he wasn't thinking straight, and never would be again as long as Fiona was in his life.

He was okay with that.

He fell in beside Fiona, but this time Vicky and Parker got behind them, while Matt led on. No way for the two of them to lose track and fall back, and conveniently start touching each other again.

Sighing, he looked back at the other two vampires. He was tired, and they were tired. Patrols, every night, all night, were starting to get to them, them more than him. He was used to being on edge all the time, being wound up, being ready for violence. They weren't. A lifetime, a second lifetime, a third lifetime for some of them, spent swaddled in Dolareido's gentle embrace had made them soft. The Carthians fighting the Invictus, Viktor and Tony being menaces, none of them compared to the violence of the Purge, and ultimately, that affair had been done and sealed within months. The Kindred of Dolareido were woefully unprepared for constant threat.

So, he was tired, but he wasn't letting it get to him like they were. What was getting to him was his desperate need to pounce the small

redhead beside him and do things to her, and not having time to do so.

Speaking of sex...

“Vicky, Parker, how goes your brothels in Devil’s Corner?” No time wasted on last times, this was important, and first names cut to that truth like cracking ice with a hammer.

That earned a pause from them, until Parker stepped up and started walking beside him. “Why?”

“Jack told me about a trip he and Avery made, to one of your brothels. Found some special, small statues there.”

“Right,” Matt said, still walking ahead of them, hands in his jeans pockets. “Avery said there’s some low scale loci there, resonating on sex and pleasure.”

Vicky and Parker looked between each other like guilty school children. It wasn’t Damien’s job or interest to ask about this, it was something Jack wanted to follow up on, but the kid had enough on his shoulders right now. Least Damien could do for his friend was find out more, since he was out with these two pampered royal babies every night.

“Why didn’t Avery investigate further?” Damien said to the big man.

“Low priority. And despite how dangerous it is, Dolareido seems to deal with the sexual energy well. It dissipates throughout the city without overwhelming it.”

Damien frowned at Parker as he spoke. “What happens if it becomes too much, too concentrated?”

Matt shrugged. “Same thing that happens when any particular energy, aspect, emotion, concept, or entity grows too big for its area. A large spirit comes along, devours, and upsets the balance. A shadow spirit feeding on an area thick with the essence of darkness could grow strong enough to turn off all lights in a city, and eventually strong enough to block out all light. You’ve probably read about myths and legends with things like eclipses happening when they shouldn’t, and things of that nature. Lot of that was probably when some shadow spirits got out of hand.”

That was not a comforting thought. If spirits could feed on a locus, and grow to the point of godly power, that was a legitimate concern. It also made Parker and Vicky’s unchecked actions far more concerning than Damien had originally thought warranted. Learning that the two had been dealing with things that were possibly more dangerous than known had been of little concern to him at first, but as a Right Hand for the Invictus, and now intimately invested in Dolareido’s future, it now did.

“You fucking serious?” Vicky said.

The werewolf nodded again as he stepped around a street corner. “If we saw it happening with those brothels, we’d have taken the locus you own. If you had tried to stop us, we would have killed you.”

Vicky and Parker both stopped, looked at each other, and gulped before running to catch up.

“We didn’t know,” Parker said. “We knew those statue things were special, magical in some way. But ... but, it seems perfectly innocent, doesn’t it? It attracts kine, makes them docile, want to fuck and chill, and otherwise be all-around pleasant. Can’t imagine it getting out of hand.”

Sighing, Matt stopped and looked over his shoulder at the group of them. “Avery once visited Nevada, and found a den filled with sex



spirits. Many of them had possessed people, to the point their lives were destroyed. They'd made innocent people abandon friends, family, and spend every dime they had on creating brothels and what have you. Drug abuse was rampant. People with infected track marks were jamming needles into wounds, so they could do anything in their power to increase the pleasure. Orgies filled with STDs and heroin. Women getting pregnant without a thought for the consequences. Men were dragging people into the den and tossing them in. Women were luring people into the den as well, though I believe a few used gunpoint to force the issue. Anyone in the den succumbed to the power of the spirits that infested the area. People were dying." The big man stopped, sniffed deep, looked up at a building, and continued on. "Avery interfered, and we had to kill more people, and spirits, to undo the damage."

Fiona whistled. "Aye, that sounds like trouble."

"But Avery says the spirits here are cooperating, keeping things moderate," Matt said.

"Is that normal?" Damien said.

"No, it isn't. Spirits do everything they can to get stronger, and they do that by expanding their influence, devouring other spirits if it fits their nature, merging or consuming, and they play politics. Sometimes, if they grow big enough, strong and smart enough, they play games you can't even begin to wrap your mind around."

That was a lot of information, and Matt was sharing it freely. Either he was beginning to trust him and the other vampires, or Natasha was convincing him to. In any case, information was power, and Damien picked up each bit like it was gold. He'd share it with Jack, and possibly Maria.

"Any idea why they're playing nice?"

"That," the enormous werewolf said with a grin, "I can't tell you."

Hm, Matt seemed like a big dumb guy, but he wasn't. Jolly giant, perhaps, but not stupid.

"Where did ye get them?" Fiona said, looking to Vicky and Parker.

"Get what?" Parker said.

"The statues! Damien said ye had a statue at the brothel?"

The two vampires squirmed a little. It was a question Damien had planned to get to, but Fiona beat him to the punch. He'd also planned to be a bit more manipulative about it, find a way to ask the question without leaving them an avenue to back out of it, and hopefully minimize the possibility they'd lie.

"I'd rather not say," Vicky said with a nod.

Naturally. With a sigh, Damien turned and faced the two vampires, right hand reaching behind his neck to rest his palm against the back collar of his trench coat. The hilt of his sword was there hidden inside the coat, his new sword, his much longer sword. They knew what it meant.

Parker glared at him, but he took a step back, too. "Damien, we don't have to tell if we—"

"Madam Vicky Goldman, Mister Parker White, I want to know, where you got those statues." He kept his hand where it was, and his other hand remained at his side, unmoving but ready to snatch up his hidden pistol if he had to. "So does my fellow Right Hand, Mister Terry. Don't upset me."

He didn't like being aggressive like this, but he knew he was good at it. Lucas had a hard, aggressive side most Mekhet didn't, and Damien knew it; and he'd learned it was a powerful tool. He'd used it many times when dealing with kine, and it almost always ended in the desired result: intimidation to the point his target acquiesced.

With Kindred, he wasn't sure. Now was as good a time as any to test it, he supposed.

Vicky stood beside Parker, glaring at him, some teeth exposed as she growled. "The fuck is this? Thought we were out here looking for hunters, and now you're grilling us about what we do in our own time?"

He kept his hand where it was. "It is, but two of the Right Hands would like to know. It's important, more than you realize."

And that was true. Things were happening in Dolareido, and he, Jack, and Fiona now that she knew about the unknown threat, needed to know about random things that could turn into leads. Why two Invictus had powerful objects in their possession, magical in some way or another, was a question worth learning the answer to. The reason he had his hand on his sword, was because the two vampires were being unusually resistant to answering that question.

No, it wasn't just that he wanted to know the answer. Vicky and Parker, and other Kindred in the Invictus, didn't respect him as a Right Hand, didn't view him as a member of the Invictus. That was true, he wasn't Invictus. But if members of the covenant weren't willing to respect him as a Right Hand, it was going to be a problem. They didn't know him, what he was capable of, and it was about time he showed them.

Parker looked to Matthew. "Gonna let him just threaten us like this?"

The werewolf put his hands up and backed away. "I'd love to ask him to stop, but I have clear orders from Avery. Let vamps do what vamps do, as long as it doesn't interfere with our original job."

And for Uratha, that job was dealing with spirits. Kindred on Kindred violence was not Avery's concern, it was his concern. It was tempting, to try and convince Matthew that, since the statues in

their possession were capable of summoning spirits, that it did concern him, and he should help Damien get information. But Matt made it clear that the statues weren't causing issues. And Fiona was neither Kindred nor Uratha; better she stay out of this.

“Just tell me where you got the statues,” Damien said.

“No,” the two vampires said at once.

Well, at least they were honest enough to not lie to him.

How quickly things grew violent between Kindred. For all Dolareido boasted of its peaceful interactions between vampires, it was only skin deep. Kindred were monsters, predators, hungry, with a set of instincts that demanded they distrust each other. The moment it stopped being a pleasant, cooperative effort between them, vampires turned on each other like angry cats. Tensions tightened even further, until they snapped like guitar strings, or bridge support lines. It was like that in many cities. Vampires could be working alongside each other one moment, and at each other's throats the next, when they felt threatened or got in each other's way.

The First Estate and Second Estate, the Invictus and Lancea et Sanctum respectively, often held some sort of truce in other cities, but not always. Tonight was a perfect example of how such a truce could go wrong.

When things grew too violent for the Prince's liking, she had exterminated the Lancea et Sanctum. The only thing that stopped the Carthians and Invictus from going at each other with intent to kill, was Antoinette and her iron fist. If anyone stepped out of line, she'd kill them, naturally. Unfortunately for Vicky and Parker, that line was pretty easy to not cross if you kept your head. Antoinette had grown quite forgiving and soft since Lucas's death, and more so since Jack came into her life. Unless someone came up and slapped her, she'd likely forgive transgressions. She'd be livid, undoubtedly,

if Damien killed these two, but he doubted she'd care too much if he cut off their arms. They'd grow back, after all, in a week, or two, or twenty.

“Final warning,” he said, “tell me where you got the statues.” No longer a question of simple knowledge, now it was a question of respect. He'd prefer it wasn't, but the Invictus operated on respect, on power, and superiority and position and image. If he wanted to function among them, he had to play by their rules. If he really wanted to get pompous, he could challenge them to a duel, but that might not work, considering two on one.

He glared between the two of them, and licked a canine.

“No,” they said together.

And the next moment, Parker had his sword stabbing through his chest, into his heart, and out through his back.

His eyes widened, looked down at the enormous sword piercing his torso, before his eyes closed and he collapsed into torpor. The sword would keep him paralyzed for a little while, more than enough time for him to deal with Vicky. Daeva were fast and strong, and in a frontal confrontation, that could make for a problem. Damien was sure he was faster, but if he had to deal with a Daeva and a Ventrue at the same time, it wouldn't be efficient.

Hesitation is defeat. He understood that. These two didn't.

He turned his eyes to Vicky, and found fear there. That was ... thrilling. He was used to kine being afraid, when he took the time to strike fear into their hearts, and scare them back into the awaiting arms of the Lord. That'd been strangely thrilling as well, stroking an animal instinct that satisfied a need to be intimidating. But to see fear in a fellow predator's eyes was a special treat, and he licked a canine again as he approached her, leaving his sword behind, and pulling a large knife from inside his coat.

“Do not mistake my quiet nature for weakness, Vicky. I am a Right Hand for a reason. Do you know of the more powerful of Auspex’s abilities? Its capacity to learn secrets from its target?” he said. She glared at him, eyes wide, mixing fear and rage, trapping her with indecision. She knew. “Answer my question, before I—”

“Jacob, ok? Christ, we traded with Jacob to get them.”

## Chapter 96

~~Beatrice~~

She curled up under her pile of blankets, and clutched Jennifer tight.

It was quiet in the cave. Jacob and the boys were out, doing things, looking for hunters or something. She didn't really care right now. Every part of her ached, felt drained, and demanded sleep. Deep diving into Crúac was exhausting, demanding, and beyond difficult. But that wasn't the whole reason she felt like shit, and she knew it. Every part of her couldn't imagine doing anything but staying in bed, and letting the world crumble around her.

Of course, Jennifer wouldn't let her do that. Like that annoying friend that refuses to let you die, Jennifer hounded her and demanded she not succumb to the blatant depression she was suffering. Like, right now, Triss had planned to just lie in her alcove, and mope, but Jennifer had slipped under the covers with her, wearing nothing at all. Triss was only wearing a tank top and some boy shorts, and they did little to block the feel of Jen's skin.

Triss held her close, the big spoon, and she set her cheek against the back of Jen's head.

"Hey," Triss said.

"Hey. How did your visit to Jack's go?"

Right, she hadn't talked to Jen about that yet. Too busy being sad, and crying in dark corners.

"It was ... it went well. He agreed, but I ... I could tell that ... that this curse thing is real." She'd felt it, when in the kid's presence. He

was stronger. He was deadlier. He'd gone from sweet, innocent little Jack, naive and untainted, to a predator. A seemingly corrupted predator, given the nature of the curse.

She didn't understand it, and didn't need to understand it. Jack was willing to help her, and he seemed confident he could handle anything she threw at him. More to the point, he was willing to kill Angela, no matter what. They both saw eye to eye on that.

That was where things got blurry, ethically. She never considered herself to be a particularly horrible person, even at her worst when she killed kine; they'd deserved it, and she didn't lose any sleep over them. Hunting down asshole humans and drinking them dead had been a good way to burn off steam, and it wasn't a problem as long as she kept killings rare, and cleaned up evidence. Dolareido's crime rate remained moderately low, despite it being the perfect nesting ground for the lowlifes of the world, because of Kindred like her. Low crime rate, casinos, theater, strip clubs, and everything in between, meant a lot of kine were always visiting or moving in, and food was always at a surplus for Kindred. Everybody won, a symbiotic relationship.

Slaughtering kine because she needed blood for rituals, was a grayer area. How many had she killed in the past week? Six. Drug dealers and abusers, people that didn't necessarily deserve death, but it didn't matter. She had a goal, and it required blood. People would keep dying until she met that goal, until she found Angela, until she killed every hunter in the fucking city.

Even if she had to burn the whole thing to the ground.

Tonight was her first break from practicing Crúac with Jacob since Julias's death. Her mind needed a break. They'd been trying to do something unusual, and something even Jacob himself warned her might not be possible: invent a ritual that could track down hunters. The problem was that, not only were they struggling to



figure out a way to get the ritual to hunt hunters specifically, but Crúac rituals were as mysterious and obscure as trying to talk to God. God had a habit of not responding, so learning whether the Crone, or whatever strange alien entities or forces that existed in the universe, were even listening to them, was difficult.

That's where Black Blood came in. It—

Jen's hands, hidden underneath the many blankets, slid around until they found Triss's, and guided them along her body. One hand slid down to set Triss's fingers along Jen's thighs, while the other slipped Triss's fingers around one of Jen's breasts. The woman's body was smooth and curvy, and Triss traced her fingers along her friend's skin, sighing as she did. Soft, and delightful. The big tits and large ass were model material, and Jen did ever enjoy rubbing them against her.

It was obvious her friend was trying to get her mind off Julias, and onto something less depressing. Jen's body and sex drive were definitely less depressing, and Triss managed a weak chuckle as she gently squeezed the woman's large tit until it overflowed her fingers.

It was more than just sex. Jen knew that Triss had begun associating sex and Julias, with having Jen around as well. Rubbing her big ass against her, making her grope her breasts, it did feel like being in Julias's company again, if only a little. If a big guy had climbed under the blankets with them, wrapped his arms around her from behind, while Triss felt Jen up, it'd have been the same world she'd lost over two weeks ago.

She stopped, and put her hands back where they were. Still holding and squeezing the naked, beautiful woman to her, but no fondling, no groping, no fingering. Jen got the point pretty quick, and relaxed into the blankets while Triss held her.

“You don’t need me to have sex, Jen,” she said. “You have two ghouls, who I am sure are itching to fuck you. How long has it been since you’ve slept with them?”

“A long time ago.” Groaning, she turned around and faced her, keeping the mountain of blankets pulled up to her shoulders. “Since ... you know.” Since Julias first invited her into his bed with Triss. For all Jen’s talk about not being interested in romance, she’d displayed a lot of the signs of someone who’d been romantically interested.

Sighing, Triss squeezed her friend tighter, and buried her face in her neck. “I miss him. So damn much.”

“I know. I was just—”

“I know. It’s ... it’s ok.” She kissed Jen’s neck a couple times, before settling her head back down against her pillow. The past two weeks had been nothing but crying. Crying, and experimenting with Crúac when Jacob said to, that’d been her life for now and probably would be for some time.

The Beast in her disagreed. It was sad its mate was gone, but the Beasts were loners by nature. Relationships were not something it understood, especially long-term ones. The Beast told her to get out there, kill her enemies, reestablish her territory, defend her food supply, blah blah blah. Annoying as it was, she appreciated its candor, she supposed. It was the only part of her that wasn’t screaming in rage and agony every second of the night.

Two years. Two fucking years she’d spent in that man’s arms, and now, she didn’t know what to do with herself.

Not true. She knew what to do next. Revenge. It was her only guiding light, the only thing she could trust. Once it was done, what next? The idea of going on with her second life without Julias felt pointless and hollow. All she wanted to do was climb onto his body,

get between his arms, and disappear. Nothing else existed, nothing else mattered when she was there, just the way she felt safe, and loved, and happy, and complete, and...

God fucking damn it. She sobbed a couple times, and hid her face in Jen's neck. Her friend held her, squeezed her in return, and said nothing. The cave was empty tonight save for them. No one to hear her cry.

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~~Jack~~

Dusk arrived, and with it, new goals. He was going to talk to Beatrice today, and show his mom his apartment, and see Azamel. Or at least, that was the plan. Right now, his brain was having trouble picturing anything past the immediate moment, and what Antoinette was doing to him.

He gulped, melted into the bed, and watched Antoinette as she settled on the bed perpendicular to him, her torso draped across his thighs. She set her weight onto an elbow on the other side of his legs, got comfortable with her side pressing down on his upper thighs, and set her breasts around his shaft so it was sticking up between the two pillows. It was absolute bliss, feeling the weight of her breasts around his cock, how the soft skin and supple mounds molded to its shape, and how she smiled at him like a satisfied cat, as she watched him merge with the blankets and mattress.

“An old friend of mine will be visiting soon, my love,” she said. “Do be careful with her.”

“I, uh ... wait, what?” He blinked down at the Prince, but she only grinned at him as she got comfortable. “Oh, right, Elaine. You haven't told me anything about her yet. Figured I'd wait before asking.”

His shaft, still between her breasts, and getting squashed by the sideways angle she was lying on him with, fought to escape the tight confines. With a guiding finger, she pushed it back toward her sternum, trapping it between the two mountains. She set her temple against the hand of the arm with the elbow to the mattress on the other side of his hips, while her other casually teased over her nipples, circling and stroking their swelling, pink areolas. Her touching herself meant no stimulus for him, just a heavenly blanket of breasts around his length while they talked. That was fine. Hell, it was perfect. It gave him a little more self control, more mental capacity to simply watch the amazing sight, instead of immediately giving into sexual need.

It'd been weeks since they had a conversation like this, exchanging information about their day and whatnot, during the middle of sex. Apparently, she wanted to make it known that these sorts of talks would be happening regularly again. Awesome.

“Elaine is a fellow dragon and upstanding member of the Ordo Dracul. She will be visiting my city soon, and she means to speak with you.”

“With me?”

“Oui.” Still with her head resting lazily against the fist of one arm, keeping it propped up, her other hand reached down her own body, down her flat stomach and pale skin, to disappear between her thighs. Her body started to move, slow and subtle motions, a gentle rhythm that drew his eyes. She was masturbating, while she talked, instead of pleasuring him. All he could do was lie there, and watch the goddess play with herself, with his cock sticking up from between her two breasts sitting on his abdomen.

A teasing game. Probably punishment for him taking control a couple nights ago. As far as punishments went, he was entirely ok

with this one. She wasn't against binding him with shackles and chains, complete with a leash, if the past was any indication.

“What does she want with me?”

“You are an intellectual curiosity to her. She will likely seek to learn all she can of your curse.”

“Ah.” That made sense. If the Ordo Dracul were dedicated to uncovering the secrets of the world, particularly those that directly involved Kindred, then he should have seen this coming. Antoinette was supposedly one of the highest ranked in her order supposedly, and no doubt other members of her order would be interested in something like a childe-jumping curse.

“Though,” Antoinette said as she lifted her higher leg, exposing her smooth skin and sex's lips, “I suspect once she sees you, she will try for more.”

“More?”

“Mmmm, oui.” Her fingers between her thighs, now visible, played with her clitoris in massaging waves. He recognized the motion; she wanted to cum quickly. She probably had plans as well, and didn't have time to spend all day fucking. He wanted to. God, every part of him wanted to forget about the world, forget about all the horrible shit, and spend his time in his lover's bed every night instead. So much better to do that, than to deal with hunters and Azamel and only God knew what else.

“You mean, secret stuff about the Invictus, or—”

“Nothing of that sort. But, I am sure she will attempt to seduce you.”

He raised a brow at that. “She's ... your friend, though?”

Antoinette laughed, a husky chuckle. “I have known Elaine for centuries, my love, and she is quite an attractive woman. There has been occasion where we have shared a bed.” Her red eyes stayed on him, smiling as she sank a finger in between her slit’s lips. “Though, it has never been romantic, purely sexual. She shares my interest in the skill of sex, the art of it, and has joined me in exploring its pleasures on several occasions. I suspect she will attempt to do so again, once she sees you.”

“I ... I uh, I see.” Ok, this was dangerous territory. Antoinette made it clear that sex was almost like performance art for her, but she also made it clear that she did not want them sleeping with other people; except for inviting her ghouls into their bed. And he was more than happy with that relationship, elated even. Sex between them was special, and sleeping around would taint that. But, from the mischievous smile she was giving him, as she masturbated, while his cock lightly moved around between her shifting breasts, it was obvious she was purposefully planting thoughts in his head. “What sort of exploring have you two done?”

Her smile widened for a moment, and she made a long sigh as she sank two fingers into her slit, leg still raised at the hip so he could see. Masturbating for her was a skill she’d mastered well beyond what any horny teenage boy could.

“I told you of my ghouls, so long ago, in a castle I once owned?”

“Y-Yeah.” The story of the orgies, and Antoinette getting drenched in cum while women licked it off her, stuck in his mind a little more than the individual ghouls herself, but yeah he remembered.

“Elaine has joined me on such adventures. Some, she initiated herself.”

“I ... I see.” His cock twitched between her breasts, and she laughed, openly. He didn’t need to say that the image of Antoinette with another woman was appealing, his dick said it for him.

“She has shown great interest in Daniel, and has tried to seduce the man on many occasions. But he forever ignores her; which, naturally, both infuriates and entices her.”

The idea of the sheriff hooking up with anyone was honestly strange to imagine. Jack figured he was one of those Kindred that was content to get all their pleasure from the Kiss, hunting and feeding, as some Kindred did. No need for sex or other artifacts of their first lives. But then, what did he know? It was often the quietest people who had the biggest kinks, and sex drives to go with.

“So, this woman, you think she’ll try and seduce me?”

“Oui.” Even as she nodded, she took her hand from her pussy, and set its fingertips down between her breasts where the glans of his cock was sticking out. Wet warmth coated the head of his cock, as she teased the tip with her juices that practically dripped from her fingers. Instant sparks of pleasure.

“W-What does she look like?”

“A tall woman, though not quite as tall as me. Thin and strong, with a touch of softness to her, like your Prince. And, her bust is très large.” She grinned at him, and slowly eased her chest forward an inch, causing her breasts to roll and press against his abdomen as she buried his member. When his jaw dropped and a groan escaped him, she chuckled again, leaned back, and slid her fingers back down between her own legs. “Large, and quite soft, my love.”

He groaned again, and let his eyes roll up as he pictured Antoinette, massaging, kneading, rubbing, and fondling someone else’s large breasts. A small part of him nagged at him, poked him in the back of his brain, and complained he was being a typical man. A much larger part announced its desires clearly: breasts, yes breasts, more breasts, all the breasts. Another set of legs in the bed? Perfect, as long as it meant more breasts.

He'd feel guilty, if Antoinette didn't seem to also delight in indulging him such fantasies. She was a sex goddess that had harnessed the power of everything sexual, and she loved to tease him with it.

Maybe she was doing this to make him feel better about Julias? Maybe—stop, stop thinking about Julias. You can deal with that mountain of pain and misery later. For now, just enjoy the fact that your lover is as amazing, and horny, as she is.

“I will do my best to resist her charms.”

She chuckled, but cut herself off short. After a few shudders, and a single deep breath, she withdrew her fingers from her sex once again, and set them back onto the tip of his cock where it poked out from between the two alabaster pillows. Wetter, hotter. God damn.

“To invite another Kindred into our bed is not something I had expected to consider,” she said. “You are mine, little Ventrue, and while to share you with my pets is a pleasant indulgence, sharing you with another Kindred felt ... as if, it may perhaps damage our intimacy.”

“A legitimate concern.” And one Julias and Triss probably ha—stop, stop it.

“But, Elaine is Elaine. I have known her for longer than Dolareido has existed. I trust her, and...” She leaned down, and planted a kiss on the head of his cock. Pleasure poured down through his length, and he flexed it, causing it to pull toward his stomach from between her breasts. Her wet fingers kept it where it was, a few of them teasing up and down one side of his glans, while her lips set kisses on the other. “And, I do believe, she will find your charms quite irresistible.”

“My charms?” he managed to say, but as she started kissing and suckling on the swollen head of his length, the pleasure waves



began to build. A drop of precum announced his pleasure, and she stopped kissing, using only her fingers to tease and tickle his cock as she smiled at him.

“Oh yes, my love. I have no doubt she will be interested in you, and I believe, you would enjoy setting your length between both sets of our breasts, at the same time. Non?” She kept her head down so her kisses could resume. The only way she managed the position while keeping his shaft between her breasts, was because of how absurdly large they were, flopped forward and almost pancaked against his pelvis and abs.

“I ... I um...” God she was a cruel woman. A cruel, evil, horrible, awesome woman.

“I do not know for certain if she will attempt to join our bed, but there is a strong possibility. I felt I should warn you, and give permission to invite her to join us, if the conversation went in such a direction. And, of course, only if you are interested.”

Before he could respond, she encased the whole of his cock’s tip in her mouth, and began to milk him, squeezing her suckling lips tight and drawing them up, from the base of the bulbous head to the tip. The sparks of pleasure were immediate and massive, flowing down his length in between his legs, and telling his insides to let out the growing pool of heat building there. A hard flex of his inner muscles caused a gush of his cum to splash onto her tongue, and Antoinette smiled up at him while keeping his shaft in her mouth, suckling the engorged tip almost painfully, and licking the underside with a loving tongue, as he flooded her mouth with his cum.

“I ... will ... m-make sure to ... to say something if she ... suggests it.” It was almost enough to white his mind, the extreme sensation of being suckled and licked during orgasm. She knew just how hard to go, how tight, how fast, keeping everything bordering on too

much without ever crossing over. It left him destroyed, helpless but to lie there and squirm as the pleasure waves coursed through his length and out from between his legs.

Evidently satisfied, she lifted her head, swallowed, licked her lips, and grinned at him. “That said, do be careful with her, my love. She is a calculating, dangerous woman, and she has her own agendas.”

“I see.” Typical elder then. No surprise there. And if she was Antoinette’s friend, than she was probably smart and deadly to a degree words didn’t do justice.

As Antoinette pulled away and started getting dressed, he forced himself to sit up. He didn’t want to. He wanted to lie back down and spend more time with Antoinette. Fuck going back to work. Fuck going out there and dealing with Angela, and getting revenge. Fuck that noise, as Jessy would say. Just let him stay in bed, chat with Antoinette about stories, music, history, politics, maybe invite her ghouls over for some foursomes, and ultimately do nothing productive.

He couldn’t let himself do that. Just like when he was first changed, first became a vampire, it was important he didn’t let himself stop doing things. To sit idle and contemplate was a recipe for depression, and a downward spiral into mourning sadness that’d rip him in half, like it was probably doing to Triss over, and over, and over.

That was probably half the reason Antoinette had put the idea of him in bed with her and Elaine, to keep his mind on something far more appealing. And it was definitely appealing. The idea of him, lying down, while two women with huge breasts buried his dick in four pillows of erotic, heavy softness? It was hard to think of a more juvenile male fantasy, and damn, it was an awesome one.

Groaning at himself for being too damn smart for his own good, he jumped out of bed and started getting dressed. Watching

Antoinette get dressed was always a joy, and he made sure to do plenty of that. Black bra that struggled to handle her breasts, black panties that were borderline a thong, gray business skirt, blouse, and suit jacket. Black shoes too, of course. Antoinette did love to wear black.

“So, she’s an elder, like you?” Obviously, from her earlier comment about how long they’d known each other.

“Indeed. She has served the Ordo for many centuries. Unfortunately, as many of us realized far too late, we did not journal our lives with the detail we now wish we did.” Ugh, journaling. “But she had written enough that we know she has, indeed, served our order as long as I have.”

The idea of forgetting their previous lives due to age and torpor, was a scary idea. It gave him a reason to journal things, sure, but it was still damn hard to wrap his mind around that wall. If he hit four or five hundred years of age, would he forget how he felt now, staring at Antoinette and struggling to not jump her, because of how amazing her ass looked as she slid her skirt on over it? Would he forget what it felt like the first time he talked to her, the dangerous dragon sitting in Bloodlust?

Those were things worth writing about, and worth writing about on actual paper. Digital revolutions could mean files might get lost or deleted, but paper was forever, if it got laminated or something, and locked inside a vault. Mental note: when you get back to your apartment, look into a better way to journal things.

“My pets,” she said, “have never seen Elaine. But they know of her, and will undoubtedly wish to partake, lost in the stories of my past that I have shared with them.”

He couldn’t blame them. Just one story about her past, and Jack had a newfound respect for his lover’s immeasurable sex drive and sexual interest.

“Wait, four women, one man? Are you telling me that’s a possibility?”

“Oui.”

He winced as he looked down, buttoning his shirt. “I mean, uh, I’m only one guy. And—”

“I am sure that you will be more than capable of handling it, little Ventrue. Especially if you feed and feed deeply, non?” Laughing, she sat down at her nearby desk, and started making adjustments to her make up. “You are taking your mother to see your apartment today, are you not?”

“Yeah. I think she still has trouble believing that I’m financially well off. I could almost hear her writing desperate cheques in some sort of attempt to help me with money, because she hasn’t heard from me for two years. Gotta help her son, right?” They both chuckled. His mom was adorable. “After that, I thought maybe we’d talk about ... about visiting Mary’s grave, once she’s buried. And her own grave.”

“Ah yes, the sight of one’s own grave will forever be a powerful, final seal, on one’s past.”

He raised a brow. “You’ve seen your grave?”

“If I have, I ... I cannot remember. And it is likely that no such grave exists.”

He frowned as he came up behind her, grabbed a brush, and started going through her hair. “If you’re as old as you think you are, then ... yeah, I guess. Who knows.” The feel of her hair was always pleasant, and he leaned in to smell it a little as he brushed it. It was silly, but hey, if she continued to use shampoo that smelled nice, he could not be blamed for smelling it.

“Be careful, Jack. Your mother may react strongly to such a situation.”

“Do ... you want to come?” He leaned in over her shoulder, set his chin on it, and kissed her ear, watching her reflection in the mirror. “It won’t happen for weeks yet, but when Mom and I do go to see Mary’s grave, and her grave, her sire should be with her, right?”

“That ... is true, my love. I admit, I had thought you would have preferred to perform such a powerful ceremony in private with your mother.”

“It will be in private, with you.” He set the brush aside, kissed her again, whispered, “I love you,” and headed for the door.

“I love you,” she said, smiling at him, before turning to the mirror.

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He breathed deep as he looked around his apartment. The breathing habit would never die, no matter how useless it was. Within a moment, his body always realized the breath did little, provided no soothing oxygen, no comfort, no energy, no nothing. But, at least scratching his head still provided some of that soothing sensation; permanently even, because it’d be forever buzzed until the end of time.

“You’ll rub your head raw,” his mom said.

He laughed, and stepped aside so she could follow him in. “You know that isn’t true, at least not anymore.”

“I ... I guess that’s true, isn’t it?” As she stepped in and slid out of her new, fluffy white coat Antoinette got her, she dropped her jaw. “This place is so ... expensive!” She still didn’t understand that she too could afford a place like this, being the childe of Antoinette. Hell, she was wearing a very nice suit, charcoal with pants.

“I can afford it. Easily.”

“B-Because of the Prince?” She slipped off her shoes and started walking around, running her fingers along the white walls, black couches, glass table, the steel kitchen appliances, and she looked up the small stairs that led to the small second floor that held the master bedroom. The second floor only took up half the apartment, so the living room had a high ceiling, and an enormous window.

“Nope.” He followed after, waiting for her to stick her nose somewhere he didn’t want her to; which wasn’t really anywhere, he supposed. As long as she didn’t go through his laptop, she was free to poke her nose wherever she wanted. A big change from the past, hiding in his bedroom and considering everything within to be his private property.

The enormous TV sat against the wall over one couch, and his mom laughed as she finally sat down, and motioned to it. “Didn’t you used to say that proper viewing height was blah blah blah lower than this?”

He sat down beside her, on the couch in the center of the living room, and grabbed the remote off the glass table. With a press of a button, the TV began to lower, until it was, indeed, at a proper viewing height, the upper hemisphere of the screen level with the eyes. How anyone could watch a TV not at the correct viewing height, he could never understand.

“Other couch is in the way,” he said, “but I can just slide it out of the way when I need to.” The huge living room had more than enough space.

“Wow.” She blinked at the technological display, before turning her eyes to the blackout curtains that blocked the window. “And, still using those thick curtains? You ... you probably shouldn’t let the sun in, should you?”

He laughed again. This was too cute. He got up and pulled the curtain aside, exposing the lights and tops of the buildings of Dolareido. They were pretty damn high up, and it was the most expensive district in the whole city. People went all out like it was Vegas here. There were glass pools connected to the sides of apartments. Some apartments took up the entire floor of the building they were in. Many of them kept the windows open, as if hoping other people would notice how much money they had. A few others kept them open because they had some blatant exhibitionist kinks. More than a few women enjoyed standing around on their balconies wearing bikinis, or night gowns that were partly open. A few of them, straight up enjoyed fucking on their balconies, or masturbating for what was probably a webcam they had setup nearby. Thankfully none of that was on display tonight. Lucky.

“You—” His phone rang. “Ugh, hold on. Might be my bosses.”

“Ok dear.” With a nod, his mom got up and walked over to the window. Much as she was used to being surrounded by fancy living arrangements and technology, thanks to the Prince, she didn’t spend much time high up in the tower. There was no substitute for seeing a city at night like Dolareido, from up high, regularly.

He pulled out his phone, and grimaced. A message from Damien.

~Jack, I followed up on the statue issue with Vicky and Parker. They insist that they traded with Jacob for them.~

Oh for fuck’s sake. Why, why was it always Jacob?

~What’d they trade with?~ No point in asking why or how Jacob had acquired special artifacts like that; he wouldn’t have told the two entrepreneurs. Fucker probably had millions of dollars stashed away in various bank accounts, that he likely never felt the need to spend. The Circle didn’t care for possessions.

~That Jacob was allowed to move freely through the area, unreported, and use the brothels to keep an eye open for potential targets.~

Targets? What sort of targets did Jacob need? Jack shuddered as he considered, frowning and pacing. Jacob was a sneaky man, who had doubtlessly set up multiple gimmicks and tools in the city for him to acquire the things he'd need, when he wanted them. Crúac was blood magic, and he knew Kindred could use their blood to use it, but apparently, you could get really nasty if you used human sacrifices. And the easiest people to take for sacrifices, were the lowlifes who lived in Devil's Corner.

That was what Beatrice meant, when she came to him, talked to him about being ready to do shit. Sacrificing kine like sheep was something he was sure she'd do, for revenge. And Jacob made it easy for her to acquire shit like that, with how many fingers he had everywhere.

~How'd you get them to tell you?~

~Stabbed Parker, and threatened to use Auspex on Vicky's mind.~

~Auspex can do that?~

~It can. If needed, it can be used to gleam hidden information people are hiding, by emulating their thoughts.~

That ... was a terrifying prospect, especially the word 'emulate'. No wonder elders were so scared of other elder Mekhet; no secret was safe.

~Can you do that?~

~No idea. Maybe.~



Jack laughed, and buried his face in his free hand. Good god, the man had bluffed. It was hard to imagine cold, efficient, reserved Damien bluffing, but if it worked, it worked.

~Thanks for the update. Hope you didn't make an enemy.~

~Vicky and Parker are upset, but I'm confident I can handle them.~

Smirking, Jack put the phone away, and stepped back to join his mother.

"It's a nice place!" she said. "But..." The frown was unmistakable, her annoyed-with-something-silly frown, and she gestured to some of the paintings. The borderline erotic Gothic paintings.

"Hey, I'm just riding the vibe, as the kids say. And I'll have you know, it was your sire's idea that I indulge in a little nude art."

"Nude art ... with skulls?" Sighing, she walked over to one of the paintings, of a woman in a black cloak. The cloak was silk, thin enough that it left nothing to the imagination, and billowing in the wind while also hiding the woman's face. The woman was holding a scythe, and while the hood hid her face, there was a sliver of it showing through, hinting at a skull, rather than skin and flesh.

He laughed. Trying to justify his aesthetic choices to his mother was just one of those conversations every man had to have eventually.

"Yeap. I like them, and so does Antoinette. Your sire is a fashion fanatic, so you know, like, academically. She knows fashion from different ages, different cultures, and different sources." He wasn't about to detail his sexual encounters with Antoinette when she'd dressed up as an evil sorceress, but he was sure the Prince would eventually teach her childe the ways of fashion mastery. She'd probably stick to modern fashion, but Jack wouldn't be surprised if,

in a few years, he'd catch his mom wearing a black swan getup at a ball. "Come on, I'll get you a drink and—"

Knock knock.

Oh god damn it. Sighing, he motioned to his cupboards and the fridge for his mom, before checking the peephole on his door. Before he reached the wood, he ground his teeth and prepared for a fight, tightening hands into fists. Someone dangerous was on the other side of that door, someone strong. And it was obvious who that'd be.

Jacob stood there, wearing an immaculate gray suit that looked like it belonged on an Invictus member, expensive and fancy. You needed confidence to pull off a suit like that, and Jacob had it in spades, his big cocky grin on full display. He was wearing a bandage over his eyes, gray and pristine like his suit, and he had a cane in his hand. The fucker probably pretended to be blind on the way here. He had no eyes! He should have been blind. How he managed to see, Jack still had no idea.

Of course the bastard knew Jack was at the door, and he leaned in close to the peephole so Jack could only see his nose, and a hint of his smile.

"Mom, uh ... the leader of the Circle of the Crone is here."

"W-What!?" She threw her hands up and started running them through her hair, in some desperate attempt to fix it; it'd already been done up before she left, and looked great.

Antoinette and him had already warned her about Jacob, and the Circle of the Crone. She was familiar with all the basics of Kindred life, and Dolareido's covenant situation. It was probably a good thing Antoinette had spared her the details of what happened to the Lancea et Sanctum, but that'd probably come up later. For now, her

knowledge of the covenants was good enough Jack could trust her to not slip up royally. Hopefully.

“Just ... let me do the talking.” With a groan, he swung open the door, stood up straight, and glared at the man. “Jacob.”

“Clarice! I haven’t seen you in ages.” His jackass smile remained, but when he noticed his mother, he toned it down a little

“I imagine there’s a lot of Kindred you haven’t seen in ages. You spend all your time by yourself.” A frown made the hidden meaning a little more obvious: I know you’re up to something.

“Not true. Beatrice has been learning much from me lately ... May I come in?”

Before Jack could snap a retort, his mother came up behind him, and hit him in the back of the shoulder with a slap.

“I am so sorry, Mister Jacob! I—” She froze for a moment as she looked at the man’s bandaged eyes. “I uh, I thought I raised a more polite boy than this.”

Jack ground his teeth into powder, but after considering slamming the door for a second or two, he stepped back and let the man in.

The bastard walked in, smiled at him, and looked at his mother. “You must be Jack’s mother, Samantha Terry. I’ve heard so much about you!”

“You ... you have?” She raised a brow, blinking, and looking between Jack and the elder.

“Of course! We Kindred all do our best to leave our past behind, but I have heard your name spoken before the terrible incident, Samantha Terry.” Either he was lying, or the man knew more than

he should have. Probably the latter. Jacob looked his mom up and down for a moment, a quick glance that Jack only noticed by the slight tilt of his head. Ok, the old man was just taking in his mom, memorizing the look of her. He was most definitely not admiring her physique, nope.

“You know my son? But, you called him Clarice.”

“A joke between old friends.” Grinning like a jackass, Jacob threw his arm around Jack’s shoulders, and give him a half hug that reeked of familiarity the two most definitely did not have. “Your son’s made a lot of waves,” Jacob said as he lowered his arm, “and we’ve run into each other several times. If it weren’t for him, a lot of troubles thrown our way these past couple years would have been far worse.”

Jack’s mom’s face brightened. God damn it. It would have been so much better if she listened to her instincts, and not let herself get too close to Jacob, physically and mentally. The elder was too good at manipulating people, and his mom too oblivious. After this conversation, Jack would have a hell of a time convincing her that she couldn’t trust him. ‘Oh he seemed perfectly fine, Jack! Don’t be so cynical.’ Ugh.

“I’ve ... heard good things about my son, about the work he’s done, since he disappeared two years ago.”

“All true! I assure you. And, I am quite sorry about your daughter, Miss Terry. And you, your sire, Jack. Terrible times. I will do everything I can to help find the perpetrators.” From elated and borderline flirtatious, to sincere and sympathetic in seconds. Not overacting, but not downplaying either, he dripped of genuine honesty as he lamented with them. It was bullshit. Jack did his best to suppress his frown, but there was no stopping him from glaring at the man.

His mother, on the other hand, sighed and nodded, eyes pointing down as she struggled with the words. “It ... it’s...”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.” Nodding, Jacob held out a hand for Samantha’s. Blinking, she took it, and the mother fucker lifted it, and put a kiss on it. Not a big one, but the gentle sort, a brush of lips on knuckles. Smooth, too smooth. “And I shouldn’t have shown up unannounced.”

Jack’s mom, obviously trying to keep her cool like a fan girl in front of her idol, smiled a big smile at having her knuckles kissed. “It’s ... it’s alright.”

It wasn’t alright. This was his apartment, and his mom was speaking for him. Ugh. Bringing his mom back into his life wasn’t going to be all sunshine and rainbows, he supposed. There’d be some old shit getting in the way, routines they’d both fall into when dealing with each other. Those habits made it difficult to think or act instead of react, and that went double for someone like his mother.

He looked at his mother and studied her for a moment. She was nervous. Who wouldn’t be? Jacob had to be one of the most powerful vampires in the world. Being near him felt like being in the wake of a hurricane, including the difficulty breathing. The Beast in her was trembling in fear, made obvious by the way her fingers fidgeted, and the way her eyes couldn’t look at the Nosferatu for longer than a second.

“If you don’t mind, Miss Terry, I’d like to speak to your son for a moment. Covenant business and what have you.” Naturally, the bastard smiled at Jack’s mother, a big, warm, pleasant smile that looked absolutely perfect. It made Jack want to punch him. Stop flirting with my mother, you asshole.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I’ll, um—”

“Don’t worry,” Jacob said, “we’ll just step outside. I’ll cover us in a discipline, and no one will hear us or see us.” With a nod, Jacob opened the front door again, and waited for him, his cooperation assumed.

Part of him wanted to not cooperate. Part of him knew that, if he really wanted to, fucking really wanted to, he could take Jacob in a fight. Probably. The curse whispered to him in more than words, but sensations and instincts as well. The Beast, with its newly inflated ego and arsenal, no longer looked at Jacob as some ancient, godly entity to be feared. It look at him as a threat, sure, but a competitor, someone it could fight to secure resources.

No, don’t fall to hubris, stupid Ventrue. It’s not you that can take Jacob in a fight, if you even can. It’s the curse, doing its thing to you and your Beast. Remember, the ancient sacrifice your great great grandsire did, to a bunch of shadowy owl things? It’s fucked up, twisted, evil, and horrible and—since when did you believe in the concept of evil? Last I checked, you were a believer of moral relativism, Jack. Good and evil don’t exist, and right and wrong are defined by the times, cultures, socially agreed upon rules, and what have you.

That wasn’t entirely true. He believed in the concepts of caring and resentment, polar opposites that lead to non-zero sums of outcome. If more people cared, the world would be a better, happier place. If more people were resentful, it devolved into destruction with no goal but to cause strife. But those concepts were far cries from larger-than-life, borderline metaphysical concepts like good and evil.

He was a scientist at heart. Everything was about data, facts, logical reasoning, pragmatic conclusions, with no room for bias or fallacies. But, try as he might, the idea of sacrificing a family member for power grated on him in a way he could only describe as evil. Worse, was doing it with Diablerie, something his Beast looked

upon with as much fear, and intrigue, as Eve likely did when she ate of the apple in the Garden of Eden.

Heh, if Damien were here, he'd probably be proud of him for the reference.

He nodded, and followed Jacob out. His apartment had a pre-room area where the elevator connected to, since his apartment took up half the floor. It provided a little privacy, but not nearly as much as the blanket of Obfuscation Jacob dropped on them. It tingled, and Jack's dead, pale skin erupted in weird, momentary goosebumps.

"What do you want, Jacob?"

"You have been thrust upon strange circumstances, Jack," the old bastard said, smirking as he looked out one of the small windows in the pre-room. "I can feel it, you know, this curse thing everyone's talking about, now that you've let it out."

"It's not out! It's ... contained. And I knew I couldn't hide it. That's why I didn't try." Jack folded his arms across his chest and glared at him. "Is that why you're here? To talk about the curse?"

"Well honestly, I wanted to see your mother."

That stunned him, and he blinked a few times. "Um, why?"

"The mother of Jack Terry, the kid who's destroyed everything? Of course I'd want to see her."

"I haven't destroyed everything." It came out a growl between clenched teeth, but Jacob just laughed.

"Sure you haven't." Mid laugh, Jacob walked up to his door and put a hand against it. "Whether directly or indirectly, you've upset

the balance of everything, more than anyone ever has, in my city. And it all started, with killing Tony and Viktor.”

Jack snarled at the man, and clenched his hands into fists at his side until he felt his fingers stabbing into his palms. “You—”

“And your mother seems sweet. Very sweet. How could someone like you, come from someone like her?”

“Don’t assume you know everything about me, Jacob, and maybe you’ll realize there’s a reason I came from someone like her.”

“Ah, touché. I would be a fool to assume I know everything.” The elder leaned against the wall as he peered out the window in the pre-room, shoulder to the window frame. “What do you know of your curse?”

“Now? You want to talk about this now?”

“Tomorrow night, Beatrice and I will be taking you to my favorite ritual site. She’s told me some, about the curse’s nature, but I need to know more before I let you in.”

Let him in? It really was like some sort of twisted cult.

“You want to know about the Strix.”

It was Jacob’s turn to snarl. “Striges are a menace. They have visited this city once before, and they were ... difficult to remove, at best.”

“What do they want? What do they do?”

The Nosferatu shrugged and gestured to the city before them. “We thought the city, but we were wrong. Their attack was ... strange, and insidious. They instigated violence for its own sake, as far as I can tell. But!” He clapped his hands together. “My concern is



not with them, but with you. If this curse is some vestigial remnant of the Strix, I need to know what dangers it poses to me and mine.”

“It’s just an ... amplification, of the Beast, Jacob. All instinct and hunger and rage.”

“Hmm. That lends a hint to the goal of the Strix, when they created the curse, I suppose. Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

“You said that awfully fast.”

Damn it, that was true. The quick denial was often the mark of a liar.

Jack snarled at the man a little louder, and stepped in a little closer. “It’s fine, Jacob. You want to find the hunters, I want to find the hunters, and so does this curse. It wants to do everything it can to find them, and kill them. So just point me in the right direction, and I’ll get them.”

Jacob raised a brow, high enough it was blatant over his eye bandage. “Confident.”

“Yes, I am.”

The old man laughed and pat him on the shoulder. “Very well. Tomorrow, dusk, go to Three Kings Cemetery. And make sure you’re fed.” With that, the bastard nodded, and headed for the elevator. But not before he stuck his head back into the apartment, and waved to his mom. “I’m off, Miss Terry. I do hope to see more of you in the future.”

“Oh!” Samantha said, sitting up with a jolt on Jack’s couch. “Um, yes, I’d like that. Goodbye, Mister Jacob.”

Jack frowned around Jacob's shoulder. There should have been fear and some nervousness on his mom's face, not intrigue. But that was definitely her intrigued face.

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~~Natasha~~

“W-We're going to ... what?”

Matt chuckled, and grinned at her over his shoulder. “Take you into the Hisil.”

She stared at his large back, and Art's too, processing the words the werewolf had just said. Visiting the Hisil, what the Uratha called the Shadow Realm, had been one of her secondary goals for a while now. Dealing with the hunters was still her primary goal, but no one had found any signs of them since the night Jack had captured Sándor. The Invictus and the Carthians were sweeping the city almost constantly now, and had expanded the groups to include any Kindred over five years old.

It was one of the great things about Dolareido, now that the Lancea et Sanctum had been removed. The Invictus and Carthians got along well enough that they could trust each other to work together in removing the hunter threat. Mostly. Maria and Michael would never expose their backs to Garry, and vice versa, but exposing all their underlings' backs was a step in the right direction, a display of trust. As long as no one took advantage and stabbed an exposed back, everything would go smoother.

She walked along the sidewalk with her two boyfriends, slightly behind but mostly between. They were a nice wall between her and the oncoming traffic of bodies; not that she needed a shield, easy as it was to step around the tide of limbs, but it was a fun change to have a couple of bodyguards keeping everyone out of her path. And this deep in South Side, in the center toward the business district,

there was no danger of hunters. She was free to relax, and think about what they just said.

“You mean ... n-now? I thought maybe you were t-t-taking me to see Avery, so we could ... p-plan for the future? B-B-But, we’re going ... now?”

“Yeap,” Art said. “Avery’s preparing a crossing tonight, and we’re taking Eric with us.”

“Oh! I w-wonder how he’ll respond.”

“So do we.”

Blinking, she looked down at herself. Jeans and a white sweater, along with some sneakers. It was most definitely not Ordo Dracul clothes, or Invictus clothes. She looked like a Carthian. Considering where Avery and her pack slept, it was potentially a dangerous thing for her to dress up like one of the Carthians; could stir a fight. But, she had to admit, if she was going into a new, dangerous realm, something as casual as jeans and a shirt was decent attire. It didn’t make it easy to hide her silver sword or her pistol though, and she had to strap them to the small of her back so the sweater hid them.

Her boys knew she carried silver. All the werewolves knew at this point, that all Kindred carried some degree of silver with them. The bane of werewolves. Spirits had banes too, and if she was going to run into them, figuring out what those banes were would be an essential skill. But then, the Uratha would probably be doing some sort of tour guide situation, and not letting her or Eric get into any real trouble.

Or maybe, they’d get into a lot of trouble? It was hard to tell with someone like Avery. Her — and Garry — were just as likely to throw someone into the deep end to see if they could swim, as they were to slowly ease someone in. Hard to judge.

“I ... I think I ... w-would have brought more guns, if I had known,” she said. “I thought m-maybe, at the worst, you were j-just going t-t-to show me some ... dangerous spirits or something.”

“We are,” they said in unison.

“B-But I thought you were going t-to ... summon them, into a protected circle ... or...” Like she did with Antoinette. A controlled experiment, with clear and obvious barriers to keep her safe from whatever crazy things existed on the other side of the wall.

“Summoning spirits?” Matt said, blinking over his shoulder at her. “It’s not exactly a common thing to do, summoning spirits. Not like you hear about humans getting summoned to their side of the Gauntlet.”

The other man laughed. “Well...” Shrugging, Art took a corner, guiding them further out from the center of the city, and towards the Carthian half of South Side. “I mean, there are disturbing stories out there, about people disappearing into portals and shit. Lovecraft wrote books about shit like that.”

She froze, and blinked at their backs as they walked on. Lovecraft’s stories about alien creatures that existed on planes above human understanding, were just stories, right? No, of course they weren’t just stories! After seeing things like Black Blood, she had to assume that god monsters as old as time itself existed. Warring alien creatures that lived in higher dimensions probably existed too. Scary things that lived on human souls or something, and beckoned them through portals and whatnot, also probably existed.

Suddenly, she wasn’t feeling so excited about this opportunity to see the other side.

She jogged to catch up to the boys, and fell in between them. “Is Avery really okay w-with this?” It wasn’t exactly unknown that

Avery wasn't keen on letting other people in on the secrets of the Uratha. Everything involving spirits, their pack leader wanted to keep out of the vampires' hands. But some months of working together and learning to trust each other must have opened Avery's heart to a little cooperation. A little. A tiny itty bitty little.

"I'd be lying," Art said, "if I said it was her idea. Matt and I pushed for this. We know you well, and in the spirit of getting along, we want to show you the sort of stuff we deal with. You're the only vamp who gets to."

She beamed. The boys knew her too well at this point, how to manipulate her. Make her feel like the special kid in class, and she could be molded like wet clay; and she was fine with that!

"Is it okay if I t-tell the Prince things? I w-work for her, and you know she's ... interested, in these s-sorts of things."

Matt laughed and nodded. "We wouldn't bring you if you couldn't tell your boss about what you see. Not that you'll be able to learn anything dangerous from us, like, how to do anything. We're Uratha, you know? It's all a part of us, not something we do with symbols and rituals."

That did pose a problem for her and the Prince. The werewolves were strange creatures, half flesh, and half spirit, according to Matt and Art. Dealing with spirits, hunting them, or hunting other things that involved themselves in affairs that affected what the Uratha called 'balance', was innate to them. It wasn't written in a book, or drawn on a mural. It was the instinct of a living creature in tune with the environment it lived in.

Kindred didn't work like that. Kindred were the shadows of kine. The werewolves might know how to find North without seeing the stars, or know if an area had a predator nearby by sniffing the rocks, but they didn't know the ebb and flow of humanity. They didn't have an instinct for the human race, for reading kine and guessing

their motivations, their weaknesses, or their habits. They didn't know how to walk into a crowd, and know what the humans were doing. They knew what the prey would do, where the weaklings were and the strong were, and they knew how they could herd them or chase them. But they didn't know about the smartphones and which humans were most hypnotized. They didn't know, at a glance, which humans were looking to fuck in a dark corner, or which humans were blazed out of their minds. They didn't know which humans were lovesick, or which were flaunting cleavage in a desperate need to get laid.

Werewolves knew how to hunt, wolves stalking sheep. Vampires knew how to become sheep, like wolves in sheep's clothing.

All of that skill, that innate and natural ability of a vampire to exist among humans, the ability to manipulate and control them, none of that helped at all when presented with unknown circumstances like this. The wolves knew how to hunt among the spirits, and she did not. The best she could do was follow them and stay out of the way; and mentally record everything she could. The more knowledge, the better.

“How's Jessy?” Art said.

“Huh? Um, she's f-fine. Why?”

“Avery wanted to know. Word is she's still fucking Eric when he's transformed, and that puts us all on edge.”

“R-Right.” She shivered at the thought. Uratha when transformed into their war form, were utterly massive, and titans of muscle. Assuming their ... penises, were proportional, it meant Jessy was penetrated by something far too large, regularly. The thought was appealing, though, Jessy underneath a giant beast's body, wriggling and squirming as he mounted and had sex with her. And it was what Eric was doing, from the stories Jessy absolutely insisted on telling her.

Of course, Avery wasn't worried about the proportional mismatch. She was worried about a Gauru, a killing machine riding the edge of a berserk rage, going nuts in the city and drawing the attention of kine, media, and more hunters. Much as the werewolves didn't have a Danse Macabre law, that didn't mean they didn't try and keep their existence a secret.

Natasha shook her head as she considered. "She, um, insists Eric is in control w-w-when they, you know. And, um, if she's r-right, that's s-s-sort of like, training, isn't it?"

"Dangerous training," Art said. "One fuck up and people will die. But Caleb seems to think Eric's fine. Only lost his cool when shit really hit the fan."

Matt shook his head. "Still worried. It's a recipe for a problem."

Her gentle giant, Matthew, was not so gentle when transformed. The man became a raging beast concerned only with violence and destruction when he let out the war form; it probably bothered him. He was always so ice, and tender, but when the wolf came out, the two-legged dangerous one, he seemed to be the most violent of his clan. It must have had something to do with his past, from losing his family when he was young.

And Art, sneaky, witty Art, was always at his side, keeping him from snapping. It must have been quite the story, when they met in Tijuana, and Art joined their pack. What sort of crazy, wacky adventures had these two gone on together over the years, to become as close as they did now? If she got closer to the rest of the pack, maybe she could ask them.

It was a pleasing image, Art and Matt, side by side, covered in cuts and bruises as they fought against the vampires of Tijuana, and deadly spirits. It sent butterflies into her belly as she looked between them. They were so connected, two best friends who'd been

with each other day and night for many years. And they were all hers.

Her wandering thoughts had slowed her down. She stepped up to join the two of them again, between them, and smiled up at them. This was her chance to get to know her boyfriends on a personal level, more personal than the stories they told. It was like meeting the parents.

It ... it was like meeting the parents! Oh god, oh god oh god. She hadn't thought of it like that before! Oh no. She squirmed in her shoes as she walked, and her eyes fell to the sidewalk as she tried to wrap her mind around the implications. Soon, she'd be meeting the parents, the family, the brothers and sisters and cousins, in their own home. It was practically like she was visiting for dinner. Maybe that was why they suggested jeans? The Uratha didn't care for suits.

They took her into the apartment she knew Avery and the pack were staying at, save for Clara and Carter, who were staying in Eric's building. Would they be coming?

They guided her into one of the old, dirty apartments, and Natasha blinked as she stepped through the door. Clara was there, and so was Carter, and Avery. And Caleb, and Noah. David, Mason, and a bunch of other wolves she wasn't sure she could remember the name of. Brianna, Erica, and Monica, she thought, and a couple more. All of them.

"Heya," Clara said.

Natasha slowly raised a hand, and offered a small wave. "H-Hi."

"See Eric?" Avery said.

Art and Matt shook their heads.



The pack leader groaned, and started pacing around. “I’m giving that asshole fifteen minutes.”

Now that Tash thought about it, pack leader might not have been the correct way to look at it. As far as she knew, recent studies into wolf behavior suggested they didn’t follow a leader, so much as they were a family, and while a member of the family often took charge, they weren’t a leader in any absolute or military sense. So Avery was more like, the mother of the pack, sort of, maybe. She dared not ask.

So, they waited. Waiting was uncomfortable. The wolves started chatting, and Art and Matt tried to draw her into conversations with the other wolves as they talked about Dolareido, but try as she might, she couldn’t find words. Talking with strangers was difficult enough. Talking with strangers, when surrounded by them, in a small apartment, was Hell. She could feel her skin crawl as she looked around. Every wall, every seat, every corner had a werewolf standing against or sitting on it, and her brain screamed at her to get out to where there were less people.

Before she could find the courage to move from her spot by the door — either deeper in or out of the apartment, she wasn’t sure — a knock at the door ten minutes later announced Eric’s arrival, and Art opened the door for him with a smirk. Like Natasha, he was dressed in casual clothes, jeans and a t-shirt, and Tash could tell he didn’t have any weapons hidden on his body; wearing a tight t-shirt could do that.

“You shave that head every morning?” Avery said, snorting as she stood up from the couch.

Eric raised a brow as he looked to her, and the rest of the crew. “Something against hygiene among wolves?”

Art laughed. He didn’t do much for his hair, but he shaved clean. A lot of the other wolves had gruff on their face, long hair like Art and Matt, and otherwise looked like they’d feel perfectly at home

living in the woods with only a knife and a mirror for any sort of grooming.

“Avery’s not a fan of city folk,” Clara said, shrugging. “Makes for soft people.”

Natasha kept her mouth shut. City people were definitely different than people who lived in the country or woods, but soft wasn’t the right word. And when it came to Kindred, living in a city was often more difficult. Fellow predators fought you for resources, and there were far more ways to be sneaky, to manipulate, and back stab. In a city, you had to be intelligent and ruthless to deal with your competition, in a way no other environment could mirror. It was an environment Kindred loved, hard as it was, with all the dark alleys and ways to control kine. The Danse Macabre thrived on cities.

But werewolves? Something told her they’d prefer to live in rural environments, where they could let their woflish instincts go wild. Maybe, seeing Eric survive just fine in a city, even going so far as to have sex while transformed, bothered Avery? Envy? Probably not. Irritation that her previous conclusions may have been incorrect? Probably so.

Eric shrugged and ran a finger along his head and dark skin. “Ladies seem to like it.”

Tash nodded, and froze when Avery snapped her a glare. Well, it was true, she thought. Black men looked nice with shaved heads, especially when they wore suits. Eric wasn’t in his usual work suit, but still.

“Here are the rules of this trip,” Avery said, glaring at the two of them more. “Stay quiet, and stay out of the way, Vola. I’ve agreed to this because you vamps have played nice with us, and I know you dragons are obsessed with getting your hands on any information you can.”

Yeap, that was true. Even before she was a dragon, information was sweet candy, to be savored with the utmost bias. The chance to see the spirit world, the Shadow Realm, and see with her own eyes the crazy things Jack had spoken of? Even better, it was an opportunity to see the world where the creatures Antoinette had summoned came from, creatures like Safe, or that weird eyeball squid thing that liked secrets.

The squid spirit. It'd said Maria was up to something. Maybe she could learn something about that while in the spirit world too, as long as she didn't earn Avery's ire in the process.

"I w-will."

"Good. Eric, we're hunting for an Azlu."

Tash petrified in place, and blinked at the woman several times, before looking to her boyfriends. A moment's wisdom told her to keep her mouth shut, and she did.

"Azlu?" Eric said. He said it like a question, but there was a glint in his eye. Information was rolling around in his head, and Tash raised a brow as she watched him.

"One of the Hosts. These monsters wreak havoc on the balance, and Azlu in particular, sew threads, weaving their webs in the Gauntlet until there's no flow between the two sides at all. That causes problems."

He raised a brow. "We're going into the Hisil to do that?"

Avery nodded. "We're looking for the signs they leave behind. They'll probably be hiding in Gurihal, but we can find areas where there's ... emptiness, you could say. We can find it better in the Hisil, and it'll give us a clue."

Natasha tapped a finger on her chin. If the Hisil world was a sort of reflection of the material world Gurihal, and some sort of barrier came up between them, then it did stand to reason that the Hisil would be affected. She assumed it'd lead to death, like a river suddenly drying up would for the area, but spirits didn't work like biological entities. Emptiness made more sense.

What would happen to the material world in that area? Would it dry up like her original idea, or would people and animals simply leave the area? Would it become still? That was hard to imagine. Graveyards had a certain energy to them even kine were aware of, and so did majestic geography like the Grand Canyon. They were still, but not 'still' still. What would a place devoid of a connection to the spirit world be like, then?

She wanted to ask about all of it, so badly. What was ephemera and how did it work? What was essence? How did Antoinette's strange machinery manage to create, or at least emulate it? How were the physical and spirit world connected, and why? Why was there a wall between them? But the questions could wait until she was alone with Art and Matt, and even then, she got the impression they wouldn't tell her. They hadn't before.

She squeaked as half a dozen of the werewolves began to change. They fell onto their hands, and fur emerged from their bodies, pouring out through their pores and overtaking their clothes, until the fabric vanished beneath their leathery hide. Wolves, enormous and terrifying replaced them, each nearly twice as long as a normal wolf, and thus nearly twice as wide and tall. No one would mistake them for regular wolves. More like, Gmork from *The Neverending Story*.

She knew the Uratha had five forms: wolf, big wolf, big scary werewolf, beastly man, and man. She'd had sex with Art and Matt once, when they transformed into their beast-man bodies, and that'd been quite a treat. They'd been almost too much to take, but

the night had been very satisfying. And Jessy was having sex with one in their full werewolf form. Did they ever have sex in their wolf forms? She knew Jessy could become one, and all the Uratha could, and—that is a strange line of thinking you should probably not go down, Tash.

Avery remained in her human form, as did Clara, Art, and Matt.

“W-Why, um—”

Rolling her eyes, Avery cut her off with a wave of her hand. “Faster, and better noses.”

“Oh, right.” Nodding, she looked up at Art and Matt and—and she squeaked! A white light cut through the air in front of them, as if someone had sliced through it with a sword that could pierce reality. Strange that her mind went to ‘magical sword’ first, but there was no denying the comparison. It really did look as if someone had cut through the air in the center of the shitty apartment’s living room, and had left a tear in the air and whatever else permeated space.

Art took her left hand, Matt took her right, and they walked her toward the light. And she almost screamed. Half because she was about to enter another dimension, again, and that was scary. Half because she wanted to ask a bazillion questions before she did. No one had done anything to create the portal, as far as she could tell. No one waved a wand or slashed a sword, or did anything that drew her eyes. Avery was touching a necklace she had, rubbing it with her thumb, but that hardly seemed like enough to open a portal to another dimension! Antoinette had been working on this for years, decades, maybe centuries, and these werewolves did it as easily as a breathing.

No wonder the Prince and Jacob were so frustrated with them. Both elders had answers they wanted, and both figured they could gain some of them by piercing the Gauntlet on their own terms, and enter the spirit world. Jacob had Black Blood to aid him, and

Antoinette had her tools. Both were a pale comparison to what these Uratha could do.

She couldn't feel Art and Matt's hands anymore. When she tried to squeeze her hand, they wouldn't close, indicating the two men's hands were still held between her fingers, at least. The Gauntlet didn't want her to feel, or do anything, apparently; or maybe that was how the Uratha passed through it. She could kind of feel something underneath her, as if she could walk on it, and she was sort of walking, but it was like walking on cloud. Her eyes showed her some depth in the endless white, hinting that it was more than a white sheet burned into her retinas. It was a place, a thing, somewhere she could walk and move around in, even if she couldn't hear or feel or see well.

How many old stories were there, about people walking dangerous paths, and always told the same: don't stray from the path? In newer stories, straying from the path was how you found adventures, and how you grew as a person. In the old tales, Brothers Grimm and before, straying from the path was how you got eaten. She was no fool, and not ignorant of survivor bias. Now was the perfect time to hold onto her boyfriends' hands, and just move the way they moved.

And then, they were back in Dolareido. She blinked and looked around, trying to understand what had just happened. Dolareido? Dolareido. They were in an apartment too. In fact, they were in the apartment Avery considered home, or her den or whatever, and as far as Natasha could tell, it was perfectly normal Dolareido.

She looked around. There was Matt and Art, and Avery and Clara, and the others, many of them still in their giant wolf bodies, all in the apartment with her. This didn't make any sense. If they were in the Hisil now, shouldn't it have been different?

As the silence filled the room, she wiggled her ears a couple times, and looked around. It was quieter, though, in the Hisil. She could hear the breathing of the werewolves, but other than that, it was basically dead silent. That couldn't be right. They were in South Side, and even this far from central, there should still be noise. It was a densely populated city, and while the Carthian half of South Side didn't have the bustling traffic or streetlight of the Invictus half, it still had hundreds of thousands of people. There should have been some noise, like a group of people walking down the street, or a car alarm going off.

Nothing.

“Stay close,” Avery said. “And don't touch anything unless you're ok with it biting your hand off.”

It? Biting? Tash raised a brow, and looked around at the things around her. They did look different, if only slightly. The couch lacked some of the texture detail. The floor and its dirty carpet didn't have stains anymore, but were slightly warped and dirty all over, like a gradient. And the windows showed water dripping down the glass. Except, it wasn't raining.

Avery went out first, opening the door and motioning for everyone to follow. That gave Tash pause for a moment, before she followed after the boys. She almost screamed again as, from across the hall, one of the doors opened an eye. The door itself didn't open, but the cheap white paint was hiding an eye, and the big eye opened to look at the wolves and her. Jack mentioned things like this, but she'd had a hard time believing him, assuming he must have been exaggerating when he said the doors literally looked at him.

It only got weirder when she got outside. The sky didn't look like Dolareido's sky. Weird colors streaked across it, the same sort of colors you might find on the signs above bars and casinos. Black shadows, subtle blobby things moved along the base of buildings.

The streetlights were bent in strange ways. The moon faded in and out like a slow heartbeat. A few of those strange squid things Antoinette had summoned floated by. The windows weren't see-through, not from this side, as if they were one-way, and solid black.

Once the strange details became obvious, it was almost overwhelming. She might as well have been on an alien planet!

Every fiber of her being wanted to pull out her phone and start recording, but she knew Avery wouldn't let her. If she ever wanted to come back here again, she had to play by her rules, and focus on being a quiet bystander who only watched.

She looked over at Eric. While Natasha was doing her best to be invisible, Eric's eyes were wide with wonder as he looked and walked around. The man breathed deep, taking in the sights and smells of the spirit world like it was a magical place; which it was, of course, but for Eric, it was almost as if seeing his hometown again, after being away for decades.

Natasha outright squealed, when a giant wave of water splashed around a distant street corner, and started to come their way. She dug in the balls of her feet, ready to run, but no one else moved, and she forced herself to calm down. Ok, incoming tidal wave in the middle of the street was apparently a common occurrence for the Uratha.

"Calm down," Clara said, chuckling. "If you need to react, we'll let you know."

"Easier f-for you t-t-to say!" It was hard enough to not run away from an oncoming tidal wave in the middle of a street; a street she only just now noticed was completely void of any kine. It was even harder to hold still, as the wave not only grew closer, but grew higher.



The water was pristine, and it shimmered in the light of the stars and moon above, when it really shouldn't have, considering the stars were usually invisible in Dolareido, washed out by the city light. The waves were beautiful, and scary as it was to see a giant wave coming at her, Tash had to admit it was a dazzling sight.

It grew doubly beautiful, when a feminine figure emerged from the water. It had no arms, and instead of legs, the flowing waves beneath it connected at the hip. White wings emerged from the waves, jutting from the spirit's back, like an angel. Mist flowed out from where arms should have been, gorgeous and glittering.

Natasha put her hands to her mouth, and gasped, staring, trying to wrap her mind around the beauty before her. "She's ... it's..."

"This is our pack's totem. Flowing Sanctuary," Avery said, joining the spirit on the sidewalk.

Totem? She'd heard the boys talk about that, but she hadn't really mentally pictured what a totem would be like. There were a lot of similarities between the Uratha, and the beliefs of the Native Americans that lived on the land long before the Colonials came. Flowing Sanctuary could have easily been one of the spirits such people paid respect to. A spirit of the river, maybe? It had something to do with water. But its name suggested more. A spirit of protection?

"H-Hi!" she said at last.

Everyone looked at her, raising eyebrows, before they laughed. Laughing was better than anger, considering she was supposed to stay quiet. And besides, there was no way she could not at least greet something that looked like a literal goddess.

"Hello Kindred," the spirit said. The voice was powerful, with none of the softness Natasha expected of something so sparkly and beautiful. It didn't have a mouth either, face lacking details, with

only the subtle shapes of nose and jaw and eyes carved into the flowing water. “And this new Uratha is Eric, I assume?”

“Yes,” Eric said, looking the water waves up and down. Flowing Sanctuary was tall, and most of her mass of water swirled underneath her. But it wasn’t the same amount of water she used to get to where they were. Maybe she should create more water as she moved around, or something? Of course, that made no sense from a physics standpoint, but she doubted anything here did.

“Come on,” Avery said. “This is half about looking for any spots we think the Azlu could be fucking up. Half, to get Eric used to the Hisil. If we’re going to stay in Dolareido, least we can do is help our city expert with hunting in the city’s shadow.”

Eric raised a brow. “Expert?”

“You know the city better than any of us. For a lot of us, Tijuana is the closest comparison, and it’s not a good one.”

“... oh.” He blinked at Avery several times, and the spirit several times more, before nodding.

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~~Eric~~

Light bulb moment. He eyed Avery closely, and looked to Natasha for a moment before back to the pack leader. That was dangerously close to an admission of ignorance, and that she’d need him to help her with hunting in Dolareido. He knew she’d suck at dealing with Dolareido, from her attitude, and how the Kindred were so wary of them. But to actually hear the arrogant woman say that he knew more than her, was a surprise.

Avery didn’t like asking for help, that was obvious. She was used to being in charge. It wasn’t like she hadn’t earned the role, from what he’d seen from her. The pack respected her, trusted her. So

maybe it was a respect thing, a face thing, a culture thing. Or maybe it was just like how guys didn't like asking for directions, she didn't like asking for aid.

Avery came up to him and gestured down the street. "We think the Azlu is somewhere in the sewers, same as last time. We have to be careful, exploring, hunting, because the Azlu weave their webs thick in the Gauntlet. If shit hits the fan, we can't jump back to the material world; not that we can do that easily in a fight, anyway." With a snort, she nodded her head toward Art. "At least, most of us can't."

Art smiled, and winked down at Tash. "Irakka got skills," he said, in that silly rapper show-off accent. It was corny as hell, but in typical girlfriend fashion, Natasha squeaked a chuckle.

It surprised him, that she was not only maintaining a relationship with two guys at once, but she seemed happy and delighted with it. Matt and Art must have jived on a friendship level Eric had never seen, for the two of them to be happy with one girl between them. Then again, they both had her at the same time, according to Jessy, so it wasn't like they had her on a timeshare setup.

Those two huge guys with tiny her. No wonder Jessy wanted video evidence.

"So ... what's the plan?" Eric said, shrugging. "Cause, I got no clue on how to fight a spider monster."

"We're not fighting it, not tonight," Clara said. "We need fire to kill it. Avery can use some fire gifts, but it's not really enough to stop an Azlu, especially once it splits apart and scurries."

"Splits apart ... and scurries." Something in his brain told him this was, indeed, what Azlu did. He couldn't wrap his mind around a creature just splitting itself into smaller parts, but hey, he was in a spirit world. Crazy was the name of the game.

Clara nodded, and started walking down the street. “If we have to fight it, we will. We got the pack, and you, and even a vampire. Should be enough to fight it, if we’re forced into the situation. But we’re not hunting to kill, tonight. We’re hunting for information.”

Sighing, he followed after her, grabbed one of his shoulders, and started rotating it, like he was preparing for a fight. A lot of ‘ifs’ in her statements, which, in his experience, meant shit was going to go down. In the past, that meant arguments with the fuck heads that set up fights in the ring. Here, it probably meant people getting sucked into life threatening situations.

But, honestly, he was itching for an opportunity to let the wolf out, and rip something apart. Much as letting out his sexual hunger through the wolf with Jessy was satisfying and fulfilling, he could feel the need in him for the hunt, for violence, for the feel of flesh — animal or spirit — giving way to his fangs. And maybe tonight, he could let a little of that out. Maybe.

## Chapter 97

~~Damien~~

A night off, finally. Maria had demanded he take it, after learning of his rather brash encounter with Parker and Vicky. Matt had said his pack were going on a trip and wanted their enforcer along, as well. He didn't like being put off the hunt for a night, when hunters were out there, hiding, sneaking, and planning to kill them all. But he couldn't deny that working nearly every hour of the night, every night, for several weeks, had been taxing.

Best of all, he could spend some time with Fiona.

“Mah apartment!” She swung the door open, and bounced several times as she hopped in, before turning around and grinning at him.

He followed her in, looking around and taking in the sights. It was, to his surprise, utterly normal. Fiona was anything but a normal girl, from her bouncy, cheerful attitude that could not be smothered, no matter how dire things got, to the fact she was also a literal monster. The apartment reflected none of that. No, that wasn't true. As his brain analyzed, it became clear the apartment was, in fact, very cheerful.

It was a studio apartment, so it didn't take long to take in everything. It was a cheap apartment, cheap building, on the edge of South Side near the Carthian district, and Damien found himself smiling as he looked at it. He was so used to the extravagances of the Invictus, and the eccentricities of old vampires like Maria, that he'd almost forgotten most people lived in simple, small apartments, in buildings that barely remained standing. He could almost hear the cockroaches he assumed hid in the walls.

She was messy. Well, maybe messy wasn't the right word; a splattering of random objects on the floor, slippers, a plush toy, a pair of jeans and some socks, wasn't exactly a mess. But her tastes were quirky and eclectic, that was for sure. On the windowsill, she had a couple potted cacti. On the walls, she had several posters of what he could only imagine were K-pop bands; supposedly considered music by the uneducated, to Maria's chagrin. She had a desk in the corner, a small thing of wood, slightly warped with age, and a laptop sat upon it, with pink and blue stickers decorating its white casing. Her bed was a double, with pink sheets and bright blue pillows that reminded him of cotton candy. Several stuffed animals sat on the bed, most of them rabbits with big, child-like black eyes, and long floppy ears.

Maybe that's why she liked bouncing around everywhere? Rabbit envy.

He took off his shoes, set them aside, and couldn't help but laugh when he met her eyes. Sometime, during his analysis, her smile had become a frown, but it was too adorable to not chuckle at.

"Hey! I'm just a young woman trying to survive in a town, living off the wee bits of money I get from my meals. Dinnae make fun of my apartment! Ye wanker!"

He held up his hands in surrender. "I lived in literal holes for fifty years, Fiona. This place looks great to me. Looks like a home."

"It does!" She threw herself onto the bed, and tossed her leather jacket onto the floor. Naturally, he picked it up and hung in the closet by the front door. There was a winter coat inside, along with a rain coat, and different shoes. A lot of different shoes, maybe nine. He was very tempted to tease her about that.

She was in jeans and a white t-shirt, one that hugged her large breasts in a way he couldn't help but notice. Maybe she was wearing one a little smaller than she should have, so he'd notice she was

wearing a white bra, one that made everything look so ... bouncy. She was also wearing white socks with little rabbits drawn on them.

“If you wanted, I could set you up with a more expensive place.”

“Ye can?”

“Yeah. Invictus pay well.” He was making six figures, and it was money he didn’t need. Maria considered it a standard pay for someone who put their lives on the line for the Invictus, while also being at the forefront of assaults as a Right Hand, and attempting to revive the Lancea et Sanctum. Perhaps he could put the money toward reviving the Second Estate, but how to do that was the bigger question in that regard.

“Maybe when I’m older. But, living in a nook like this is part of growing up, ye ken?”

Laughing again, he walked over to her and sat on the edge of her bed. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Besides, I like it.”

“I do too.”

She giggled, reached out, and started pulling his trench coat off his shoulders. “Are ye nae hot?”

He helped her, doing his best to ignore the butterflies in his withered stomach at the feel of a woman removing his jacket. Such a simple touch that elicited such a strong response.

“Vampire. Body heat not really a thing.”

“Like a lizard?”

“Sort of. More like, being cold or hot doesn’t really mean anything to me.” Sweltering heat, freezing cold, as long as it wasn’t literally

hot or cold enough to damage tissue, it didn't affect vampires.

“Oh. Azamel says ye Kindred are a distant cousin to us Begotten. The same, but different. The Horrors inside ye, ye call them Beasts, affect ye in a different way than us. Ye ken?”

That was an interesting theory. “A better question for the Ordo Dracul, I suppose.”

“But, I thought ye were religious? Like, religious for vampires? Do ye nae have an idea of where ya came from?”

“We do, but for vampires and humans. The Testament of Longinus says little about other paranormals.”

“Are ye nae curious?”

He nodded, took his coat from her, and hung it up in her closet. A sideways glance showed her bathroom door was open, and he could see the curtain of her shower; it was clear, with bright yellow flowers on it.

“I guess. Maybe a little. I try and let faith guide me, when I can, when it comes to questions larger than life.”

“Oh?”

“Mhmm. There are questions out there we can't answer, and while I'll try and keep an open mind to potential explanations”—against Lucas's judgment—“I cannot deny there exists something beyond science.” He gestured to her, and him. Paranormals, magic, spirits and other dimensions, much of it existed outside the purview of science as far as he could tell. “God, or something equivalent, seems a possibility, and a decent one, does he not?”

She thought about that for a moment, tapping a finger on her chin. “As long as God isnae an old man sitting in a chair, judging



people for wankin' all the time.”

He choked on a laugh. Oh dear Lord.

“I suppose many Christians believe God is male, with a penis and a white beard, casting judgment for ultimately inconsequential actions and intentions. Lucas was such a vampire.” He came to the bed and sat down, undoing the buttons of his suit jacket as he did. Fiona was quick to shift over to him, take the jacket, and set it on the back of her desk chair. “I’m trying to be a little more open minded than he was.”

“Probably a smart idea.” Giggling, she crawled up behind him, hugged him snug and tight, and set her chin on his shoulder. “Mah parents dragged me to church every now and again, but I dinnae think they really believed it. Think they just wanted to teach me some morals.”

“They failed.”

The beautiful monster erupted into more giggles, and hugged him harder. “I’m a bad lass.”

“No denying that.”

“I should be punished.” She kissed his neck, hugging him tighter, and giggled yet again. She was excited.

“I ... I have trouble believing this is real.”

“Wha?”

“All the Kindred I know, get into relationships in bizarre ways, dramatic ways. They don’t start dating because they just happen to like each other, get along and are attracted to each other.”

“Oh! Drama! I see what ye need, now.” She got up and stomped around a few times, feet hitting her carpet with enough weight to go thud thud. “The world is going to end tomorrow, Damien! We ... we only have tonight. And I cannae die knowing that—”

He reached out, took her hand, and yanked her back onto the bed. With a squeal, she threw her arms around him, and the two of them landed on their sides, facing each other.

“Point made. Drama is dumb.”

“Oh I dinnae know about that. It’s fun, especially for a young lass like me.” Lying there, opposite from him and facing him, she leaned in closer and set a kiss on his chin. “And besides, I think there’s some drama.”

He raised a brow. “Is there?”

“Mhmm. I am just a wee lass, drawn in by the emo vampire.”

Ok, that made him laugh. “Two weeks ago, you tied me up in a giant spider’s web.”

“That was nae me! That was Vrall.”

“You are Vrall.”

Her smile broke for a moment, and she nodded. “Aye.” Sighing, she sat up, and he did along with her, only for her to sneak in behind him again, and start hugging him from behind once more.

“You ... don’t like being Vrall?”

“It’s nae about liking. She and I are the same, but ... like with yer Beast, do ye not sometimes wish yer own feelings were nae so ... fucked with?”

Oh. That. The call of the Beast and its hungers were instinct, a part of him, and after having dealt with them for so long, he barely noticed them anymore. “I suppose it’s a little easier for me to ignore it. It can’t talk to me. Assuming Vrall talks to you?”

“Well, Vrall cannae really talk to me. She is me. I have her memories, and her personality emerges when I’m in mah nightmare.” She hugged him tighter, pressing her body to his back as she squeezed. “I think that’s drama enough. Anymore and it’d be like one of my shows.”

Ah yes, the eternal sin of women everywhere: bad television. He looked over at her laptop, and smiled at the cute animals that danced across it as her screensaver. Undoubtedly, she watched Netflix and whatnot on it, and indulged other wastes of time on the internet. He envied her.

That wasn’t true. Her hungers were far worse than this own, and the dark side of her was a far greater presence than his Beast. And that, put her silly, terribly cute but juvenile home into perspective. He looked around, tilting his head at the pictures on the walls, at the obvious obsession with cute animals and cute musicians she had, and contrasted it against the nightmare horror that lurked inside her. She’d said that, when she was younger, she was haunted by nightmares every night, and that they were always about her being pursued by a creature in the dark, a creature with eight legs.

He turned his head and studied her bubbly smile. For so long, she must have been a fun, simple young girl, who did everything in her power to not let her strange nightmares ruin her. Tragic, he supposed. It must have been horrifying, to be stalked by a creature in her dreams, especially when her life gave no reason for it.

He slid out of her hug, and stepped up to one of the posters.

“Damien?”

“Sorry, just...” It was another cute creature, a ferret, pouncing on a cat, who was delighted to be play fighting. Not a photograph, but something drawn in a cutesy, silly cartoon style.

They’d both had rough lives, and she’d embraced everything fun, silly, bright, and cute she could get her hands on, to keep it from tainting who she was. Considering how powerful a force her horror was, it was a wonder she managed to do that. Most people, him included, would have let it destroy who they were, until they devolved into self-loathing. Moping, brooding, the things he’d done for so many decades.

“Do ye like that one?” she said, eyebrow raised.

He laughed as he smiled at her. “Not for me, no. I like that you like it.” He liked that, unlike him, she had a tenacity to her, a desire to hold onto who she was and what she liked. He’d been a malleable fool when he was her age. She’d stood against something horrible, something she likely hadn’t been able to understand, and didn’t let it break her. She was, by night, a scary as all Hell monster who devoured people and their fears. By day, she was a bouncy, silly girl, that liked rabbits, cats, ferrets, dogs, and likely anything she could hug, pet, feed, and take care of.

He supposed a more cynical view would be that she refused to accept reality. And that was a view he probably would have defaulted to, once upon a time. But, after having spent a couple weeks hunting for hunters with her, he couldn’t deny her optimism and joviality were affecting him. It was contagious.

She blinked at him, obviously confused. That was fine. If she didn’t understand why she did the things she did, all the better. They didn’t need two over-analytical people in the relationship.

“Aye, I do like it!”

“I don’t smell any animals.” With his new insight, it was a surprise he didn’t see at least a cat running around. Any minute now, he expected a small dog to hop out of the bathroom, or maybe for a chinchilla or something equally fluffy to land on the windowsill. Nothing.

“Oh? Oh! A pet, ye mean. I ... I’ve always wanted one, but ... I dinnae know. It might not like me, because of Vrall, ye ken?”

He shook his head as he came back to the bed, and crawled across it to join her. “That is a real possibility, but I think any pet you get and raise from a young age will be fine. That Eric fellow has a cat, and he’s a werewolf.”

She blushed a little at the mention of him. “Right.”

“I ... suppose you saw the cat I’m talking about.” Eric’s cat, a creature Jessie insisted was the most amazing pet in the world.

“I did.”

“Still surprised you’re dating me, not him.”

“Well, like I said, yer both stupid, but a different kind of stupid. I thought I liked him, but I know better now. I like ye a lot more.” She reached down, grabbed the hem of her t-shirt, and pulled it up over her head. Her hair bounced a little, but like her, the frizzy thing was surprisingly resilient.

Damien tried to keep his eyes on her, but when a woman is only a foot away from you, wearing only jeans and a bra, it’s hard to not stare at the chest area. It wasn’t a sexy bra, with special lace or anything. It was a perfectly normal white bra, and she looked amazing in it.

“I, um—”

“Strip!” Giggling, she undid the buckle of her jeans, and wiggled out of them. That warranted some staring as well. “We’re gonna do a lot of firsts today.”

He kept his eyes on her—more like, unable to look away, as he started undoing the buttons of his shirt. “We are?”

“Aye! After all this, I’m still a virgin I’ll have ye know!”

He raised a brow at that. Well, it was true he’d had sex with her horror’s body, not her human body. And apparently, despite her sexual adventures with Eric, they hadn’t ever had sex. It didn’t really matter to him whether they did or not, but it was surprising that someone as assured of herself, and extroverted and outgoing as herself, hadn’t had sex before. Funny that she was the virgin, while the scary monster inside her, had a history of orgies with cultures that worshiped her, centuries ago.

Wearing nothing but her plain white bra and underwear, and her cute socks, she reached out and slid his shirt off his shoulders. He almost didn’t realize she was touching him, as his eyes locked onto the sight of her body. Curvy legs, wide hips, massive breasts, and her thin-but-not-too-thin physique gave her such a soft looking body. Every part of him wanted to pin it beneath him.

He licked a fang, and Blushed Life. He thought about asking first, but stopped himself. It had become clear from their interactions that she wanted him to take charge, to be aggressive with her, to be the beast that hunts the doe. She liked being treated as a cute, innocent little creature, helpless to stop a beast from having its way with her. And, to his surprise, he enjoyed giving into the aggressive desires he normally kept locked deep in his chest.

Once he was out of the shirt, he took her hand, and set it against the fly of his suit pants. He also took her other, and set them against his abdomen, and the many abs carved there. Instant delight in her eyes, and she squealed between giggles as she traced them, while

struggling to undo the zipper of his fly. He was being far more playful than he usually was, he knew it, she knew it, and it was fun.

She made him fun.

He helped her get the pants off him, and he made sure the boxers came off with, and his socks, leaving him naked. She licked her lips as she looked him up and down, staying close on her knees, and now using both hands to touch his arms, chest, and abdomen.

“It’s such a shame,” she said.

“Mmm?”

“Ye permanently have such a nice body, all lean and defined and ... mmm.” She almost purred as she came in closer, and set a kiss on his shoulder. “Ye cannae get fat! That’d make any lass die with envy, but, ye cannae eat food. Nae cake or pizza, nothing.”

“Lucas demanded I get into the best shape possible, before ... you know.” He struggled to keep his growl quiet as he looked down at the woman’s body. He was naked, but she still had her underwear and bra on. Not fair. He was blatantly aroused too, cock standing out from the smooth skin of his pelvis, announcing his obvious hunger.

“Oh, ye shaved it,” she said, sliding in closer so his right knee was between both of hers. So close, she set one hand on the small of his back, while the other traced down his abs, then down further to the smooth skin, and to the base of his member.

He shivered as she slowly encased it in her hand. The feel of a hand, fingers, palm, circling his girth in experimental squeezes, drew a quiet growl from him, and Fiona looked up at him with her big doe eyes all the more. She put on that please-don’t-hurt-me-I’m-so-innocent-and-pure face, bit her bottom lip, and continued to idly stroke the base inch of his length in slow pulses.

“I ... thought maybe, since it’s the ‘in thing’ to do in Dolareido, I should?” he said.

She giggled, but her eyes slid down his body with anything but silly laughter. They were hungry. “It looks ... really good ... here.” She let go of his shaft, and slid a finger down from his navel, down the abs beneath, and to where the muscles sat just above his pubic bone.

Listening to his own building hunger, he leaned down over her, reached behind her, and worked the clasp of her bra. It took several seconds longer than he’d have liked, and she giggled into his neck as he struggled. But she let him work, and soon the large piece of white fabric fell off her breasts, and with a little wiggling from her, down her arms.

She blushed a little, and it made her pale skin glow red. “Did ye like the pictures I sent ye?” As she said it, she sat up straight, and hugged her bust, forearms underneath while her biceps pressed them together. They were very bottom heavy, and they weighed down on her forearms as they spilled over them, while her pink nipples poked outward from her swelling areolas.

He stared at them, and gulped. He hadn’t been able to touch Vrrall, being trapped in a web and all. But Fiona was right there, topless, inviting his touch. The last time he’d touched her like this, he’d pounced her, drained her, fingered her, and almost took it a lot further. This time, he could take it much further, all the way, if Vrrall was to be believed; and she was.

He reached out with a hand, and she lowered her arms as he set his palm underneath one of her breasts. Instant tingles coursed through him, and he felt growing heat between his legs, as he marveled at the sensation of her pale breast sitting on his palm. It overflowed his grip completely, and he stared in awe as a small wiggle of his fingers caused it to ripple. He pushed up a little harder,



just enough to make it bounce, and Fiona burst into a fit of giggles as she watched him experiment.

“Aye, I think ye did.”

He crawled toward her, but being already so close left her with no choice but to fall back. Her squeak of surprise was intoxicating. She blinked at him, but her surprise faded as he brought his head down over her chest, and set his lips to her breast.

Her squeaks and giggles turned into mewls, and he smiled into her breast as he slowly brought her nipple into his mouth. It was swollen, and instinct told him there was only thing you can do with a swollen nipple: suckle on it. So he did, and he groaned into her body, intoxicated by the sensation of her massive breast’s softness and how it molded to his face.

They could talk later. For now, he was going to do what she kept asking him for, what he wanted to do, and listen to his body’s hungers. Just give in, take her, have her, and drink her.

With him lying on top of her, half his weight on her and half on the bed next to her hip, his arm closer to her was free to find her legs. Smooth, curvy, delicious legs. As he slid his fingers up their contours, he could feel her start to shiver, quivering, but her legs spread without prompting.

He set his hand against her stomach, slid his fingers underneath her underwear, down smooth shaved skin, and down to her sex. Last time he did this, he’d had his fangs in her neck. This time, he wanted to try tenderly licking and suckling on her nipple first, before fangs came into the picture. It sent fire through his body, when he felt some subtle wetness on his fingers as they traced along her sex’s lips. She liked this, a lot. And knowing that she liked it, liked having his body on her, his lips on her breast, and his fingers tickling along her lower lips, was a loud siren in his head demanding for more.

“Damien! Mah tits are sensitive, ye ken? Be ... gentle...”

He lifted his head, but in that moment, found a split second's disappointment on her face. Right, she liked being sweet, docile, but she didn't want him to be like that. She wanted him to ignore her pleas, and have his way with her. He immediately set his lips back onto her breasts, and suckled harder, lifting his head so her breast lifted from her chest with him. She squealed again, and both her hands found his head.

They fell to the blankets, and squeezed her sheets into bundles around her fingers, as his wet fingers began to massage her clitoris.

“Nnn ... mmm.” She wriggled and squirmed a little, pushing her hips toward his hand, even as he devoured her breast. Her nipple swelled more, filling his mouth as he licked it, while his lips suckled, drawing it to his face again as he lifted his head, before his lips let it go. The way it jiggled as it settled against her ribs pulled another growl from him, and he licked his lips as he felt his hunger grow.

He backed up along her bed, slid his hand out from her underwear, and crawled between her legs. With her wanting him to be more and more aggressive, he let his natural desires out a little more; and they wanted to rip her underwear off. He took the fabric apart like it was tissue, leaving her completely naked save for her socks, and earning a squeak from her. He'd shocked her. Good.

He got down onto his stomach, hooked his arms under her thighs, and gazed upon her wet, tiny, glistening slit, before burying it in his mouth. Immediate gasps from her, filling the quiet room, and sending pulsing need through his body. Vrall had made interesting sounds, lovely and hypnotizing sounds, but the way tiny Fiona mewled and whimpered as he buried her clitoris with his tongue, was intoxicating in a way he hadn't expected.

“D-Damien! Please, slow down!” She reached out with both hands and pressed them to his forehead, gently pushing him away. With his arms hooked under her delicious thighs, he had the leeway to reach over her waist, grab her wrists, and pin them to the blankets around her. More squeaks, increasing in volume as she realized she was trapped, unable to stop him, as he devoured her pussy.

Not being able to stop him set her off. Her squirming and wriggling intensified for a second or two, but as it became obvious she couldn't get her hands off the blankets to stop him, it was like gasoline thrown on a fire. Her breathing quickened, her mewls turned into moans, and her legs quivered on his arms and shoulders, as more juices flowed out of her.

When he tightened his grip on her wrists, the reaction was almost visceral. She squealed and arched her back, and he had to fight a little harder to keep her down as she came. He hadn't expected her to cum so quickly; she'd been on the edge of need for days then, like he was.

While he didn't have any sexual history to draw on, he knew how to read, and had done his research. Instead of licking and suckling on her clitoris as she came, he eased up, letting her enjoy the bliss without spoiling it with too much stimulus.

It was his first time, and more importantly, his first time with her. Analysis skills kicked in, and he made mental notes of each and every reaction she made to his touch. First thing he noticed, was how easily she came; sort of made everything feel like cheating. Fiona was hyper into her sexuality, and he got the impression anything he did to her would make her feel good, as long as he held her down when he did it. Second thing, was how she gasped. A lick of his tongue drew a sharp inhale from her, that turned into a long groan as he rested his tongue against her clit, no longer moving it as she continued to climax. She liked being pushed a little further than his reading suggested.

It was like solving a puzzle, a beautiful, writhing puzzle.

He lifted his head and smiled down at her, her panting body, her closed eyes, her smile of pleasure, and her trembling legs. She was coming down from her pleasure high, and she giggled as she stopped trembling.

“Mmmm,” she said, voice a whisper. Once he released her wrists, her hands drifted up and down her body, fingertips teasing along her skin, before they reached out for his waist.

He slid in closer while sitting on his ass. And before Fiona could realize what he was doing, he took her legs, pulled them toward him so they hooked around his hips, and then he took her waist. He pulled her up toward him, and she giggled as she set her hands on his shoulders, sitting between his thighs.

“So romantic!” she said, smile only growing.

He gulped as he looked her body up and down. With her hands on his shoulders, and her sitting between his legs, her legs hooked over his and around behind him, he could feel her body heat. His cock pointed up, aimed at her stomach, only several inches from her and her shivering body. Her heavy breasts, jutting out from her ribs with their bottom-heavy, teardrop shapes, made each breath she took blatant and hypnotic. And the feel of her quivering legs resting on his and his hips, filled him with hunger for more.

He slid his hands under her ass, squeezed the soft meat of her body, and lifted her.

“Oh!” With more squeaking giggles, she helped him align everything, one hand reaching down and grabbing his length. “Be ... be slow, ok? Yer, um, pretty large, ye ken? And I’m ... nae.”

Nodding, he slowly lowered her down, and licked a canine as he felt the wet lips of her slit graze along his glans. He wanted to slam

her small body down, feel her tiny walls spread taut around him, and watch her beautiful breasts bounce as he thrust into her. And, considering Fiona's personality, that sort of rough sex was inevitable. But it was a good idea to start slow, like she asked. It gave him time to analyze her more, figure out what she liked from how she responded, and the longer he got to enjoy this, the better.

He lowered her more, and a quiet growl rolled through him as he felt her clenching, wet muscles spread over the sensitive skin of his cock's head. Immediate sparks of pleasure danced down his length, and Fiona giggled and mewled simultaneously as she caught his eyes. He lowered her a little further, and she closed her eyes as she let go of his member, set her hand back on his shoulder, and groaned.

The slow journey of penetrating the feisty redhead, was exquisite torture. She was dripping wet, and boiling hot; combined with how tight and small her insides were, it made each inch he managed to slip into her euphoric. She squeezed in spurts as he went deeper, and gasped every so often, eyes staring down at him as her mouth parted. He tried to look up and meet her gaze, but his eyes couldn't stay away from her body, her breasts rippling with her shudders, and her small pussy spread wide around his girth.

She winced when he started to press against her depths, but wince turned into another groan as she sank another inch onto him, stretching her insides inward as she snuggled her thighs around his waist. As her lips found the base of his cock, and her lovely ass grew snug with his thighs, sitting on them, her hands slid under his arms to hug him. She set her forehead to his, and smiled as she squirmed, getting comfortable.

"No ... longer ... a virgin!" She kissed him, winked, and hugged tighter, pressing her breasts to his chest and setting her chin on his shoulder. "Well, I mean, I used a lot of toys and stuff, but they dinnae count."

He chuckled, but it came out constrained, mixing with a growl as his hunger continued to rise. “Con ... congratulations.”

“I can tell yer hungry,” she said, whispering into his ear, and nudging her body against him. “Ye can drink me, ye ken. Any time ye want.” He shivered as he felt her fingers trace up and down the muscles of his back and spine. “Maybe right now? Cause, yer ... inside me, and we’re all ... snuggly, and ... and I’m all tingly and ... I’d probably cum right easy, aye.”

Drinking her was still a scary thought. He hadn’t done it since the first time, and the strange taste of her blood had been intoxicating, in a bizarre, overpowering way. The heat of it had been powerful, delicious with a kick, and he wanted more.

“Are you sure? I—”

“I trust ye. And ... it ... it was really good.” She squirmed, wriggling her hips left and right. He didn’t know if she knew how good that felt, but good Lord, the way her gripping, dripping insides milked his length as she adjusted her weight, was heaven.

He growled into her ear, breath flowing over her neck, and she whimpered all the more. He couldn’t help it. The Beast wanted to growl, and every time he gave into it, the results it earned were amazing. Muscles squeezed around his girth, hot juices soaked him, and she hugged him tighter, making sure her hard nipples were buried against his chest.

He opened his mouth, kissed her neck until she started whimpering again, and slowly sank his fangs into her.

“Nnn! Nn ... Oh ... dinnae hurt me, ye evil ... horrible ... brute...” She squirmed again, and to his surprise, actually tried to escape. He couldn’t have that.

He put a stop to her escape attempts quickly. His hands reached behind him, grabbed hers by the wrists, and pinned them to her own back instead. With her hands pressed to the small of her back, by his own, she was trapped in his embrace, unable to squirm away, as he was basically free to press on her body, and keep her snug to his. Trapped. Helpless. Defenseless.

“Noo! Please ... please dinnae...” Her legs kicked at the bed, heels digging into the blankets as she tried to find leverage to escape him. Every wriggling motion, every writhing twist of her body, made her insides clench like a vise, squeezing in milking spurts around his length. They were also making her pant and mewl, the friction of her tight depths on his cock pulling intoxicating noises from her.

But all of that became background noise, as he Kissed her. Blood, warm, thick, flowed over his tongue and into his body, filling him with tingling heat that spread throughout his limbs. Electricity coursed through him, and he groaned around her skin as the strange kick of her blood hit him. The Beast in his guts roared pleasure, demanding more, and he gave it, keeping his teeth deep in his prey’s neck as he swallowed down her life essence.

Her struggles continued, legs kicking at the bed, and body wriggling in useless attempts to escape his embrace. Futile. His hands were pressed to the small of her back, pinning her hands there, and keeping her body balls deep on his length. Each of her squirms and wriggles bathed his cock in bliss, and he started to press down on her lower back in a rhythm, a heartbeat pace, forcing her back and forth an inch on his length, as he continued to drain her. He needed more.

She came again. Part of him, a small part buried by everything else at the moment, told him he should be proud of that, delighted that he’d made his sexual partner enjoy herself so much. But right now, a much louder part told him to hold her down, keep her pinned on his cock, and Kiss her more. Hold her, embrace and trap her,

drain her, and continue absorbing her exquisite, delicious, precious life blood. And it was delicious, with a flavor far more overwhelming, and an effect far more powerful, than any kine's blood. It had his whole body buzzing in seconds, and soon after, cumming.

“Please! Let ... let me go ... ye ... monster...” Her trembles came and went in waves, and renewed more wet warmth as they returned, until he rolled his eyes up in bliss as he felt her insides spasm in quivering need.

He growled around her neck, and pressed on her hands harder, pushing her body snug to his own as he flooded her insides. His prey squealed, but it was a tired sound, weak, and her kicking legs and wriggling body began to slow. Her insides continued to squeeze, random spurts of muscle clenches working through her pussy, and milking him sporadically. Every moment inside her was bliss, the heat of his cum filling her and demanding he flex his inner muscles, only for her milking grip to coax more of his seed from him.

Soon, Fiona went limp. No longer struggling, the quivering woman leaned against his body, exhausted and spent. It was a signal that he should stop Kissing her; a signal that he desperately wanted to ignore. Despite the annoyed protests of the hungry creature in his soul, Damien forced his lips away from her neck, and licked the puncture marks closed. He let her wrists go, and kissed her jaw as he felt her hands dangle at her sides, fingers grazing the blankets.

He slid her off of him, set her butt against the blankets, and smiled down at her as she fell onto the bed like a bag of sand. Breathing hard, sweating, and quivering, she managed to keep her eyes half open as she looked up at him, but any attempt to move was defeated by her drained state. The blissful release of a post-Kiss coma. And with her legs spread wide around him, Damien was treated to the delicious site of her smooth, pink lips leaking white cum down her lovely thighs and buttocks.



And that was enough to trigger a need for more.

He reached down, and flipped her over. A vampire didn't need to be a Daeva or Nos to summon strength; Daeva and Nos would forever be naturals at summoning insane strength, but a Mekhet was quite capable of tapping into inhuman strength as well. Lifting and turning a small girl like Fiona onto her stomach was easy, and better yet, was the way she lay on the bed on her stomach, breasts squashed and visible along the outside of her ribs.

He reached over for her biggest pillow, and slid it under her hips, so her beautiful, bountiful ass was in the air, and legs together, so he could kneel around them. And, without being nearly as gentle as before, he guided his wet cock to her lips, and sank his length into her.

“Nnn!” The poor creature managed a squeal, but not much else. She was exhausted, trembling, and he could feel her legs struggle to move, but unable. The Kiss coma had rendered her helpless, defenseless, and sensitive.

He shivered as he enjoyed the bliss her quivering depths sent along his length, and he lowered himself onto her. He sank his weight onto his elbows around her torso, and most of his weight onto his hips and pelvis so they pressed snug to her ass. With her ass up on the pillow and legs together, trapped between his own, nothing stopped him from sinking himself down on her with all his weight, and the beautiful monster whimpered into the pillow as he started to thrust.

She managed to turn her head enough so she could rest her cheek to the blankets. Her eyes gleamed, despite still being half closed and struggling to stay that way. Even when he started to thrust harder, hard enough he knew he was hitting her to the base, and hitting places inside her that he probably should have treated more gently, she continued to whimper. Either getting that deep inside her didn't

hurt her, or it did, and she loved it anyway. The message was clear: fuck her hard.

He grabbed her wrists again, and pinned them to the blankets around her head. Immediately, as if he'd pressed a magic button, her whimpers turned into moans again, and her clenching depths squeezed until it was hard to keep thrusting. He did though, because, no way could he stop now, with the gorgeous woman trembling underneath him, and leaking more juices onto his length.

And then, he tried something he never thought he'd try, in a million years, ever. He pushed his weight back up onto his knees so he was kneeling straight, looked down, and gave her a slap on the ass.

“Nnnnn!” She clenched on him hard enough to make him wince, before she went limp again, body trembling but unable to move. Her eyes closed, and her panting mewls grew a little louder, as he felt more of her juices trickle down his testicles.

Wow.

He spanked her twice more, each deliberate, each hard enough to make a bit of a sound, and spark a small sting on his palm. Each caused her ass to ripple with the impact, and for her pussy to grip down like her life depended on it, practically crushing his length. He thrust through her vise grip, and shivered at the bliss of her soaked, hot insides milking his glans, sending sparks of pleasure through him. His fingers sank into the curved softness of her ass, and he thrust again, and again, until he felt the pleasure building into heat between his legs.

He pressed his chest down on her back again, lay on her body, pinned her wrists to the blankets again, and started to fuck her hard, driving his hips down upon her. Her bed shook, creaking with each impact, and her mewls mixed with her panting as she struggled to get breath. He didn't let her. He pounded down into her, robbing her

of any air she tried to get, as he worked himself up to another orgasm.

He growled into her ear, and came inside her once again. His thrusts slowed, but each was a hard slam into her, causing the bed to bounce a little more violently than was strictly necessary. Neighbors would probably hear, and he didn't care. He smashed her down into the bed with each thrust, until he felt her hot cum renewing. He felt her try and lift her legs, maybe to kick at the bed, but she managed only a small bend of her knee before she collapsed again, closing her eyes as she soaked his cock.

He knelt up straight again, slowing down his thrusts as he focused on the pleasure. Her insides were insanely tight, and he made sure to stay balls deep inside her, as he adjusted his weight on his knees. His hands found her ass again, and he smiled down at her quivering body as he kneaded the large mounds. He slapped one again, and groaned as her insides responded with a hard squeeze, milking him with enough force that it was almost painful. But, to feel her boiling insides massaging every inch of his length with a death grip, was too pleasurable to not do again. Another spank made her shudder, and he groaned as he watched the heavenly mound ripple, and felt her muscles spasm around his cock until she'd managed to milk another few drops of his cum.

He blinked down at himself, and her, as the hunger for blood faded, and the hunger for sex along with it. He inched his legs back, and his cock slid out of her, letting cum spill from her slit and down onto her blankets and pillow. He stared, licking his lips as he took in the sight of her shivering pussy, and how her legs trembled. Good Lord.

Good Lord! He'd ... he'd pinned her down, had rough sex, and spanked her! Spanking. Him?

“Fiona? You, uh ... you alright?”

The redhead managed to a few, quiet whimpering noises, but didn't manage much movement. He touched her leg, shook it a few times, but still only managed a few murrms and meows from her. Even a shake hard enough to make her ass jiggle — damn that was hypnotizing — wasn't enough to stir her from the bed.

So, he pulled the pillow out from under her, let her flatten on the bed, and climbed over to lie beside her. "Fiiiiona." No response, eyes still closed, but breathing. "Fiiiiiona." He reached out for her, pushed her closer shoulder up, and rolled her onto her side, facing him.

Which, of course, put her breasts on display, one half flattening to the bed sheets with its size and weight, the other pressing down on its sister. For a split moment, it made him want cover her up, hide her nudity so that he couldn't see. And then he remembered that, not only did they just have sex, they'd been dating for a little while now, and had had sex a couple weeks ago, sort of. Plus, she'd sent him plenty of pictures of her topless, with full intent on showing off her bust. That meant, he could be more forward, especially since that seemed to be the thing she liked.

And, his stomach was full, flooding his body with energy. The womans' strange blood was empowering, intoxicating, and he could feel it clouding his thoughts. Not drunk, not high, but the waves of tingling energy blood sent through a Kindred's body, didn't normally hit like this. The Kiss was extremely pleasurable, and satisfying hunger was always enjoyable, but Fiona's blood made him want to explode with energy and desire. It made him want to grab her, hold her down, slide his cock into her wet, tight, dripping insides, and keep going.

Fiona was still awake, and sensitive, still trembling with orgasm aftershocks. If he fucked her again, now, she'd cum easier than paper took fire. And his growing erection loved that idea. So, he scooted down a little, got closer, and as he hugged her waist with

one arm, he set his lips to one of her breasts. Some more mewls followed, and he smiled into the softness as—

As his phone rang.

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~~Jack~~

Damien had a bounce in his step, and that was weird. Damien didn't bounce. Damien stalked, sneaked, walked with quiet steps, and basically never bounced. Apparently Fiona was rubbing off on him. Or maybe...

“You slept with Fiona, didn't you? I can smell blood on you.”

Damien froze, reached up with a gloved hand for his mouth, and ran a finger along his lips for a moment. Well, that reaction was telling.

“I did. Was it obvious?”

“You're radiating joy.” And it was kind of irritating. Course, Jack didn't say that, but seeing his friend being so damn happy, when everyone else in Jack's world, including Jack, was miserable, was grating. He was happy for his friend, but circumstance made it difficult to not also be annoyed, and envious.

The two of them were underground, walking the tunnels to Azamel's path. Jack would have gone alone, now that he had the power of the curse at his disposal, but it would have annoyed his bosses to break the rules. And, much as he could feel the power coursing through him, the strange and wicked curse ready to unleash its visceral desires on whoever it felt deserved it, he wasn't a god. He almost felt like one, knowing what he could do if the situation demanded, but the elders of Dolareido never stuck their heads out for a good reason: even elders died quick, if you caught them off guard. He was no exception.

It annoyed him, that the elders refused to do things themselves. All that power, and they did nothing but hide in their towers or whatever, telling other Kindred what to do. It also annoyed him that, whenever he broke it down tactically, he couldn't disagree with them. Elders wanted to stay alive, and he couldn't blame them for that. Elders wanted to control their environment, and he couldn't blame them for that. The role of general was the best way to accomplish both those tasks, out of the fight while also controlling it.

One mistake was all it took for any vampire to die, no matter how old. Tony and Viktor were perfect examples of that, dying to something as innocent as a dry fire in an old factory.

That meant that, while he may have gained access to strength that rivaled an elder Kindred, he still had to be careful. And it wasn't like he didn't want to bring Damien, it was just that, a part of him wanted to brood, be angry, and mope. It was hard to do that with his friend vibrating on the happy frequency.

"I ... I've been ... dating her, for a while, I suppose you could say. We just didn't have time to get physical, except for that time with Vrall."

Ah yes, the oddly beautiful spider monster, Fiona's horror. Damien hadn't given him many details, but had given him enough hints for Jack to piece together what happened. Fucking a gorgeous-but-terrifying spider monster in her web, would have been not unlike the times Antoinette had sex with him, when she tied him up so he couldn't move. Except, Jack got to do those things in a nice, quiet, luxurious basement, with lots of soft things to lie on, usually. Sex in a spider web, in a sweltering jungle, in the black of the canopy, with corpses hanging from nearby trees? Eesh.

"Judging by what I'm seeing, I'm guessing your first night with normal redhead Fiona went well."

“Very.” Damien nodded, smile beaming; at least, beaming by Damien standards.

Jack laughed, reached up, and stroked the breast feathers of Mulder. A caw from Scully drew his hand, and he scratched the back of her head a few times, as he continued walking.

“Jacob visited my apartment.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, and he met my mother. Hell, part of me thinks that was half the reason he went there.”

“And the other half?”

Jack groaned and looked down at the old tracks beneath his feet. “He wants me there, when Triss and him do ... do something, I guess.”

Damien mirrored his groan, shaking his head as he slipped his hands into his trench coat pockets. “That sounds like it could be messy. There’s already been an unusual amount of disappearances in Devil’s Corner. The police are likely going to get involved soon.”

“Not like they’ll catch Jacob in the act.” And, now that Jack and Damien knew the weird sex statues in Devil’s Corner were there because of Jacob, it was easy to put two and two together. “I wonder what other sort of hooks that man has in the city.”

“Plenty, I’m sure, of all sorts,” Damien said. “He’s been here since the beginning. Getting leverage on Vicky and Parker is probably an afterthought to him.”

That was the problem with dealing with elders. They played the long game. Jack, and even Damien, could unfortunately only appreciate actions that had consequences within the year, or decade

at most. Jacob had undoubtedly made decisions like sewing seeds, or better, planting trees. Trees took forever to grow, and took centuries to truly grow into towering behemoths, but an elder like Jacob could plant dozens of them, knowing they'd eventually be useful to him.

Sighing, Jack shrugged, and winced as both Mulder and Scully cawed in annoyance at the sudden movement. "He is on our side, I guess," he said.

"Is he? I assumed Jacob was on his own side. No one else's."

"I don't know. There's more to Jacob than that. And besides, these disappearances are to fuel his efforts to find the hunters. I can't fault him for that."

Damien shook his head. "You mean, to fuel Beatrice's efforts. She's not a fledgling. If something goes wrong, she gets blamed. Or, considering the nature of her pursuits, if something goes wrong, she'll probably be the one to die in some Crúac ritual gone bad."

"Then I better do a good job helping her. I'm not letting her die, or get herself killed." It was the least he could do, considering his sire died helping him, leaving her alone and miserable. He felt responsible. Hell, he partly was.

That feeling of guilt was going to haunt him for the rest of his eternal life. Fucking lovely.

"Hey," Jack said. "Sorry for calling you in on this meeting, since you were—"

His friend waved a hand through the air, dismissing him. "This is important. Besides, Fiona's asleep now. It was a good ... great night."

Jack smiled. Ashley and Julee always went to sleep after Jack or Antoinette had had their fun with them, draining them. And



occasionally, they continued to do things to the two girls, while they were trapped in that post-Kiss bliss. Fiona likely had a great night.

It was more than just Jack needing a partner for this meeting, though. Damien came because a chat with Azamel and the other Begotten meant the conversation could swing to include the mysterious threat Azamel had warned them about. Damien was in on that, so was Fiona, and Jack wouldn't be surprised if the other nightmare monsters knew too.

The goal of the trip was simple. He had to get an update from Azamel, to see if she had anything to contribute about any of the ongoings. The Invictus and Azamel didn't get along, and it was in everyone's best interest that Jack try and head off any disagreements before they escalated. He also wanted to know if she had any updates about the mysterious threat, because Jack didn't, Damien didn't, and that was nerve wracking.

But, most importantly, he wanted to talk to them about the thing inside him, the thing whispering to him, asking him to kill and slaughter, with far more verbosity than his Beast had ever shown before.

It was always quiet, this deep in the tunnels. Vibrations from the city above, and the sounds they created, were well below what a human could hear, and his Kindred ears struggled to pick up on it. Lights flickered, forever unable to ever be fully maintained by repair crews. At this point, he assumed the nightmare monsters liked it that way, and were thwarting any Kindred attempts to repair the lights. It certainly made things creepier, deep down in the cold, dark depths of the Earth.

Damien looked around, and reached above his head behind the neck.

"You almost look like you could be the sheriff's childe, dressed like that," Jack said. And hey, it was true.

“I ... noticed, that many people consider me in the same light as the sheriff. Perhaps, not with the same fear, but many consider me an assassin nonetheless.” Damien shrugged, tapped the spot behind his neck, inside the large neck of his trench coat, and offered Jack a smaller smile. “I’d be a fool to not at least consider his approach to combat.”

“He keeps the whole city under his thumb, I guess.”

“That he does.”

“I ... I never did ask, about it.”

“It? I—oh, the Purge. Right, because the sheriff ... yeah.”

Wincing, Jack looked ahead, one hand idly stroking the back of each crow’s neck, while he did his best to keep a neutral expression. “People refer to it, talk about it, mention it, but I don’t know much about it.”

“It ... it’s a painful memory.”

“Don’t talk about it if you don’t want to. But, you are one of the few who’s seen the sheriff in action.” And if there was one thing his second life had taught Jack, it was the value of information.

With a long sigh, Damien nodded as he put both his hands back into his coat pockets. “You saw him in action, didn’t you? After ... you know.”

Right, after Jack forced Damien to kill his sire. What a lovely bonding experience for the two of them.

“Using Dominate like that left me completely drained. I barely remember a thing.”

“I see. Daniel is ... able to combine speed with the Cloak of Night, to degrees other Kindred can't. Fighting him is like fighting a ghost.” The Mekhet shuddered, and rubbed his forearms through his coat. “The Prince rarely fought, when she enacted the Purge. Most of the damage was done by Garry, the Carthians at large, and ... Daniel. The sheriff handled the bishops, most of them, and they could do little. Too fast, too difficult to catch, or even see.”

Mekhet didn't have the brute strength of Nos or Daeva; that's why they liked swords. Speed and swords worked well together, and Jack did have a faint memory of the damage Daniel did to the remaining Kindred under Lucas's control, after Damien had cut off Lucas's head. The sheriff had slaughtered Lucas's crew like a scene from a fucking anime, dashing around, a blur of speed and Cloak of Night hiding him from even Kindred eyes, until he was too close to be stopped.

If that was the sort of person Damien wanted to emulate, at least in combat effectiveness, it was a tough goal to reach.

“And,” Damien continued, “I was ... thinking about asking the sheriff for training.”

Pieces snapped into place, and Jack nodded as the image became clear. “Because, if Antoinette's sheriff is deeply involved with you, it'll make your rebirth of the Lancea et Sanctum go smoother.”

“Two birds with one stone.”

“Maria's idea?”

“Yes.”

“She's too damn smart.”

Damien chuckled. “She's ... she's smart, but not the bastion of cold reason and burning wrath people think she is. She wants to

cooperate with the Prince to get the Lancea et Sanctum up and running again, because she's a believer."

Maria was Jack's boss too, but Jack never got personal with her, or Michael. Right Hands in the Dolareido Invictus were the only ones to get personal with the council, and usually one on one, Right Hand to their designated council member. Jessy had her sire, Michael. Damien had Maria, two believers of Longinus. And Jack, had no one.

Jack grit his teeth, forced down the rising bile in his guts, and sighed. "Then I hope she's not the one Azamel warned us about."

"As do I. I'd ... I'd hate to kill her."

That, was not the response Jack expected.

"Do you think you can?"

"If I catch her off guard. But again, I do not wish to harm her. She's taught me much, about music, economy, psychology. I have a hard time thinking she's willing to harm the city to revive Lucas, or for any other reason." The Mekhet slowed for a moment, eyes wandering down as his mind dug through his thoughts. "She's well aware Lucas was a menace, and his ... aggressiveness had only grown worse after his torpor."

"I'm still worried. Love makes people do stupid things."

Sighing, Damien started walking again, but his eyes were elsewhere, probably drifting through memories of Maria. "Agreed."

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Stepping into the lair of monsters was always a frightening affair. It wasn't as scary anymore, now that Jack had the curse, but that didn't change the memories he had of Athalia and Azamel.

Perhaps more frightening, was the inevitable conversation he was going to have with Athalia. It was Jack's job to keep the peace between the groups in Dolareido, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to do that when he saw her. Losing his sister because of her daughter was bad enough, but losing his sire because of her as well, was absurd.

Would Athalia be afraid? Would she care? The only vampire she gave a shit about was the sheriff, and him, supposedly. Did she feel bad about what her daughter did?

He wasn't sure, but he knew how he'd respond if she treated his situation callously. He'd get angry, and he didn't know how that'd go. Maybe anger would trigger the curse, like it had in the past? Maybe he was like, the Hulk now, and he should have been in a monastery or something, somewhere where he could meditate and learn to control his anger.

He sighed, rubbed his head a few times, and stepped around the corner. Stop thinking about the curse. It only ever came out when his life was threatened. There was no reason to think the curse would jump out in a different circumstance. Right?

Athalia sat in a chair on the stage of concrete, not far from Azamel, who sat in her rocking chair as usual. Mark wasn't on the stage, but he was in the room, sitting in a corner by himself with a book in his hand. The room was quiet. They'd heard him coming.

The three monsters looked at Damien, then him, and their eyes went wide. Mark and Athalia both shot up to their feet, and their hands tightened into fists at their sides as they stared at him. Azamel, for all her usual calm demeanor and imposing presence, froze. She put her cigarette down, staring at him, eyes locked and looking at him from head to toe several times.

Damien raised a brow as he looked at him too. From what Jack had seen from other Kindred, since his curse thing awakened, they

were able to tell he was different. They could tell his strength had grown, that his Beast and its presence had grown, but he'd never garnered a reaction like he was getting from the Begotten. The monsters were able to see other paranormals in a way Kindred couldn't understand. Whatever it was that made paranormals paranormal, there was no hiding it from the monsters of nightmares.

And the monsters of nightmares were looking at him like he'd just dropped a bomb at their front door.

"Jack," Azamel said, clearing her throat as best she could without breaking into a smoker's cough. "You ... you are different."

*These nightmare monsters see far too much. Don't trust them.*

Jack winced, and snapped his head to the side.

I trust them more than I trust you.

*Because you're an idiot. What I want is obvious. These monsters have desires so much bigger and disgusting.*

Don't give me that shit. I remember what my Beast showed me, the memories of Susanna and the carnage she caused with you.

*Because she wanted to. These monsters? They do similar because they have to. It's who they are. You remember what Azamel said, about the villages she controlled. You don't think she spun that story to make her sound a bit less horrible? You don't think she slaughtered innocents, hundreds of them, to feed the nightmare inside her?*

Jack sighed, and looked to Damien. His friend was dating one of those monsters, and having the time of his second life. It wasn't like the whisper in Jack's ear was entirely wrong, but just as Azamel had probably twisted her story of her past to make her sound less

horrible than she was, the curse in Jack's ear was probably doing the same thing. But, it wasn't like the Begotten were horrible. Fiona certainly wasn't. Was she? She'd been killing people as a part of how she hunted before she was told to control herself, and Damien said she had corpses hanging from trees in her jungle nightmare.

Don't throw stones in glass houses.

"I am different," he said. "I assume you've seen the news."

"I did," Athalia said. "I ... I didn't know what to think. What happened to you, Jack?"

Jack stepped forward, and Athalia stepped back. The sight of fear in her eyes sent a thrill up his spine, but he didn't let it make him smile. He wanted to, though. A dark, evil, sinister smile would have gone a long way toward putting her on the defensive. It would have felt good to make her be afraid, to make her fear for her life from the Kindred who'd suffered such atrocities at her daughter's whim. But he wouldn't. That wouldn't help anyone.

Grinding his teeth into powder, Jack stopped walking, and glared. "I wanted to ask you."

"Me? Why? I don't—"

"Did you see anything ... strange, about me, or Julias, or Viktor? I know you Begotten can see things we can't."

A glance to Mark showed the man didn't want to get involved in the conversation. Jack met his eyes, and the man recoiled a little, lowering his gaze back to his book. Another glance to Athalia showed the same thing. They didn't want to meet his eyes.

After a few seconds of silence, Athalia spoke up. "I'm not sure. I didn't see much of Viktor, but you and ... Julias, you both seemed normal."

“Are you sure?”

Azamel started coughing, and everyone looked her way as they waited for her to rip her lungs to shreds.

“There has always been a subtle difference, young Kindred, in your bloodline,” the old woman said. “I saw it as ... chains, bits of metal lost in the shadows of your Beast.”

Jack stepped toward the stage, and Athalia took another step back. But after a moment, she came up to stand beside Azamel, setting a hand on the monster’s chair. She was shaking.

“You saw that my bloodline’s Beast was different than others?” Jack said.

“I did.”

“And you said nothing?”

“You Kindred and your Horrors are wisps of shadow and mist, with many limbs of many forms. What is one more oddity among small Horrors, with such liquid features?”

She was describing the Beast, and she knew what it looked like. So, the strange creature Jack and Beatrice had seen in their minds was what the Begotten could see in them, then. The monsters lived in a plane of dreams. Did the Beast live in such a place as well? Or, was connected to it, somehow?

The idea that Crúac could reach into some other realm, communicate with potentially godly entities like the Crone, and perform magical acts, didn’t seem so absurd anymore.

“Liquid features?” he said.



The old monster nodded as she took another puff of smoke into her lungs. It came out as she spoke, as natural as anything to the ancient creature. “Us Begotten are a little more ... defined. With you vampires, you are small, and adaptable. Like chameleons, you change colors to become one with your environment. Like evolution on fast forward, you grow to fit your surroundings. Adapting, with liquid features that mold to your whim and habitat.” She breathed smoke at him, but he could see the hesitation in her eyes. “Chameleons are minuscule, and usually, beneath our notice.”

“And ... now? What do you see in me now?”

The Begotten looked between each other, as if playing hot potato on who would speak. But Azamel, coughing a couple more times, put out her cigarette, and leaned forward toward him.

“A long time ago, I once met a Begotten, little Kindred, and he reminded me of you. This monster fed on ... I am not sure. To this day, I haven’t been able to discern what this brute craved. All I know is bodies followed in his wake.” Sighing, she shook her head as she fumbled for another cigarette. Athalia helped her, and where Azamel would have probably been annoyed at the assistance in the past, now, she accepted it without issue. “Within the heart of his lair, I found endless corpses, some fresh, some old. Mountains of them, piled high, until they reached the black sky above. The only light was glints of white against the flowing rivers of red.

“And this Horror, little Kindred, was massive, as massive as I. A creature of shadow, with tendrils of obsidian mist that ripped into the endless bodies it rested upon. It had no single face, and no set of limbs I could identify. It was a ... a thing.” She leaned back, and breathed smoke into the air before meeting his eyes again. “I see such a monster, in you, little vampire.”

That was a pretty horrible image, and Jack winced as he met the old woman’s gaze. She wasn’t lying, or exaggerating. Hell, if

anything, she was looking at him with pity.

“What happened to him?”

“Slain. The beast was a glutton, and for the Begotten, mindlessly indulging our hungers can leave us ... vulnerable.”

Indulging his Beast its desire to feed and destroy wouldn't make it vulnerable, as far as Jack could tell. Except, indulgence was often the weakness that destroyed many people, and monsters. He didn't think that that was what Azamel meant, but still.

“You heard about what happened?” he said, looking to Athalia.

“ ... we did.”

“You know Angela killed one of our thralls, and my sire?”

Azamel frowned, apparently not happy he'd switched his attention. And in the past, she would have wrestled it back with a sharp remark. Not this time.

“We ... we heard of Julias's death, yes,” Athalia said. “Jack, I—”

“You heard about the crows, that attacked the hospital?”

Athalia lowered her head, turning away from him. “We heard. I thought maybe that was Julias, until Fiona told us what she learned from Damien.”

Jack glanced at Damien. There wasn't anything wrong with Damien sharing with his girlfriend information that was basically public, but Jack did sort of wish the Begotten hadn't gotten to know about his curse until he told them.

Whether they knew or not, their reaction was blatant, and seemed honest. The three monsters were looking at him like he was a threat, like he was dangerous, like he might attack them at any

point. Mark had moved to join his companions, and was standing with fists at his side. Athalia had some of her weight braced on the balls of her feet. Azamel had her eyes on him, staring, ready, as if Damien didn't exist.

It made him feel powerful. Ventrue ego swelled, and Jack struggled to keep the growing smile down. Feeling powerful was addicting, he knew that, everyone knew that, and he wasn't going to let it influence his decisions. Besides, it wasn't him, it was the curse, something that he hadn't earned or developed on his own. It was a gift, and a curse, a tool dumped into his lap by a psychopath from hundreds of years ago. He'd be a fool to rely on it.

But god damn it, it was tempting.

"Before I go," he said, "does anyone have an update on the unknown threat?"

They visibly relaxed. Maybe they thought, upon seeing him, that he was going to push for violence because of what happened to his sire. They didn't know him, didn't understand he wouldn't do something so stupid just because he wanted to. And, much as a part of him really wanted to, a larger part of him knew it wasn't their fault, or Athalia's fault.

"No, unfortunately," Azamel said. "With everything that's happening, it's hard to tell what's what, in the mess."

Jack frowned, and idly scratched the neck of Mulder and Scully, along the back, as he pondered. There was someone out there, doing something. The strange portal Fiona had found, that she'd opened and taken him and Damien through into the Shadow Realm, proved it.

"At this rate, I really only have one course of action," he said.

Damien raised a brow. "Which is?"

“Talk to Black Blood, or his rivals.” He was playing diplomat with werewolves and nightmare monsters, why not godly spirits too?

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~~Eric~~

He didn't stay in human form. Urshul was the better form for exploring, a massive wolf that was so absurdly muscular and gigantic, using the form in Dolareido was a recipe for a Masquerade violation. The Prince was as likely to string him up by his guts, as hunters would be to snipe him from a distance, if he ever used this form where anyone could see him. But in a mostly empty city with not a single human presence, the giant wolf body was the way to go.

Most of the pack felt the same way. Everyone shifted into the Urshul form as they got moving, except for Clara. Avery's second in command stayed human, probably for better communication purposes. The Uratha could communicate in wolf form, but it wasn't exactly elegant or precise as far as he could tell. Grunts, howls, yelps, body language, he could understand them more than a human, but it was a far call from a refined language. And the vampire wouldn't be able to understand half as much.

Natasha bounced a few times, made some tiny squeals, and hugged her two wolves by the manes. It was adorable, seeing the tiny girl hug the gigantic beasts, and lose half herself in the depths of their fur. It almost made Eric vomit from cuteness overload, when Natasha climbed onto Matt's back. It wasn't like Matt couldn't handle her size, considering he was utterly massive, even when compared to the rest of the pack. It was just that, he was a wolf, not a horse. No saddle on that back. But Natasha was light enough, and Matt fluffy enough, that she had no trouble holding on.

He'd decided they should head to the center of South Side and start there, since the Azlu had an agenda of blocking the Gauntlet, and essence flowed mostly freely there. Made sense, hopefully.

Avery warned him it'd be dangerous, but she'd agreed with his reasoning. So, off they went, to hopefully not die.

Flowing Sanctuary continued behind them. The best comparison he could think of for her was an angel, except made of water. How did Avery acquire the help of a spirit like that? More than just help, a contractual obligation. That's how spirits worked, as far as Eric knew, and his instincts told him he was right. Spirits were creatures of contract, with rules to follow. They didn't do charity work. If Avery had this deadly entity working for her, she had to have earned it, or maybe forced it.

Flow didn't seem like a pushover. Hell, as they walked along the Dolareido street, spirits gave way, scurrying into shadows or jumping around buildings to hide. They were easy to spot, now that he was in this form; and they were easy to smell. Was it smell? The wolf half of his brain recognized it as smell, but the spirit half recognized it as something different. If there was a word for it, in English or in the language of spirits, he didn't know it, but his body knew how to sense it.

There was a giant crow in the sky, following them. That was fine, no aggression there. There were lots of shadowy blob creatures moving along the shadows provided by buildings and benches, and his nose followed them far more easily than his eyes. A flock of what he could only guess were spirits of vehicles and asphalt came by, each rolling along as a single tire, with wings of asphalt they used to keep balance. Fucking weird.

It only got weirder as they walked along. The rest of the pack took in the insanity like it was normal, but Eric paused, frequently, as he took in the sights. The sky erupted with a lightning crack and storm every so often, something in the distance, something unnatural, but the pack didn't pay it any mind. There weren't any crows except for the huge one following them, which made the city feel just as empty as the lack of humans, but as his senses tuned in to the Hisil, it felt

progressively less empty. Where there should have been crows, he noticed little dark wisps flowing around, scattering as the wolves grew closer. Some of them flew, and seemed like they had wings. Some crawled, joined the blobby shadows at the base of buildings, and flowed into the sewers.

The buildings themselves were all crazy reflections of their physical counterparts. A casino, Tesauffer, looked basically the same, but as they grew closer, he could see the front doors waver like liquid, and the sign itself pulsed like a heartbeat. A nearby strip joint did the same. The street lights were twisted and coiling upward, heading toward the casino signs like a vine chasing sunlight in a maze. The lack of cars felt strange, but tides of motion flowing in and around the buildings filled in for the missing vehicles.

A lot of the spirits were pink, or aqua, or bright lime, and a bunch of colors that announced their nature. Sex, entertainment, fun, bliss, joy, the spirits here were the blatant reflection of the mood in Dolareido's South Side central district. They weren't the people themselves, but manifestations of the things that defined the area. Some looked humanoid, many others didn't, with strange shapes, extra eyes, tails, glowing body parts, and flowing lines. If they went into those buildings, he doubted the spirits were sitting around at booths, chatting, eating and drinking, and ogling girls. They'd be doing ... spirit things, which meant feeding off of the resonating essence in the area, while also trying to get a one-up on competition.

Spirits behaved like wild animals in a way, as far as he knew, and as far as the dark matter of his brain was telling him. But, instead of fighting for resources or mates, they fought to grow and spread themselves. If any of the spirits could grow stronger than the others, they might devour them, and grow into something large and multifaceted. A spirit of sex, and gambling, and other vices, could come out of this arrangement, dominating everything else, devouring them, and taking over South Side, then the city.

That was the sort of thing Avery fought to keep under control, that all Uratha fought to prevent. It was the sort of thing they'd want his help with, a supposed expert on city living.

And there was no denying his instincts wanted to do exactly that. Hunt and kill and keep his territory in a healthy state. Another part of him wanted to bring Jessy here, and indulge in the atmosphere he was feeling, the resonance that filled the walls, the street, the signs and streetlights, and the air. It was a place one could easily get lost in a tide of self-destructive fun.

Funny thing was, as strange as it all looked, and smelled, it still felt familiar. This was his world, in a way, he'd just been living on one side of it, the Gurihal side. Here in the Hisil, the emotions, the concepts and ideas, the geography and how it meshed with the humans it guided, it all created literal things in the Shadow Realm. The spirits embodied everything and manifested in as many ways as his mind could consider.

One of the buildings had a red carpet leading up to the door of glass and lights, and he could see the carpet moved and twisted, creating waves on its length that softly rolled toward the building's door that ushered spirits in. One spirit swam through the air past them, slithering left and right. It looked kind of like an eel, but it had large scales that looked like gold coins. Several more of the asphalt spirits drove by again, following after the eels. One spirit, pink and curvy with nothing but flowing lines, emphasizing feminine features to an absurd degree, hovered past them and drifted into one of the buildings, a strip club.

"Spirits don't get along like this," Clara said as she walked up to his side. "Not normally, anyway. There's so many different kinds here, mixing and interacting."

"Is it l-like, a zoo?" Natasha said. "Lots of d-d-different animals, all near each other, m-most in cages."

Avery shifted back into her human form, as smooth as putting on pants, and gestured to one of the casinos. “More like, everything is on a leash. They come here, feed on the essence that seeps in from the other side, and none of them dare step out of line.”

Flow drifted further forward, and the pack spread apart to let the angel of water move between them. Slowly, she drifted toward one of the casinos, but came to a stop as a metal gate began to move.

No, not a metal gate. Something vaguely humanoid made of metal bars approached, each limb a myriad of straight, hard-edge metal pipes. It was seven feet tall, no head, but it did have two legs and arms. Instead of eyes, glowing sparkles dotted various parts of its metal frame. His instinct said they were eyes, but his instinct also told him to not trust what he saw. Spirits could be crafty.

“Uratha not allowed,” it said. “That includes you.” Well, this spirit had guts.

It was a giant thing of metal bars, in a bustling entertainment district where people spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on vices. This was probably some sort of incarnation of the kind of shit Eric did, bouncing for Bloodlust. And many of these places locked up when they were closed, or blocked off paths from customers, using metal gates.

It was a spirit manifestation of a barrier, specific to the environment: casinos and whatnot. Their ban was, naturally, to not let anyone pass who didn't have permission. There was no option in a spirit's will to resist their ban, it was what they were. But what sort of bane would these creatures have? They'd probably take damage from things known for breaking through barriers, especially in this sort of environment. Keycards? Maybe the tools of a professional thief who knew how to pick locks? Blowtorches?

Uratha didn't need to use banes to deal with unruly spirits, but it certainly helped. Against this tin can, any of them could have simply



gone Gauru, and ripped it in half. And if Eric's instincts were right, Flow could have done worse to it.

Flow said nothing, not a scoff or chuckle or groan, and floated there in front of the barrier spirit for several moments. She—it was testing the waters probably, no pun intended.

“Scary,” Natasha said, her eyes locked onto the barrier spirit. “Are ... things like that th-the thing ... holding the leash?”

Avery shook her head, and dismissed the barrier spirit with a wrist flick. “Strong, but unable to step outside its narrow purview. It's not why the spirits here are getting along. The war between Black Blood, Street-Tail King, and Red Tide is why.”

Eric's ears twitched, and he turned his head, looking between the various spirits before watching Avery closely.

Natasha blinked, confused, and let her eyes drift back to Avery. “I d-don't understand.”

“The politics of spirits are a giant mess you don't want to get stuck in, vampire,” Avery said. “I—”

The lights went out.

Avery snapped her fingers, pointed at Tash, and stepped toward the center of the street. Tash hopped off of Matt, and moved to the center of the street as well, as all the werewolves collapsed into what Eric could only assume were battle stations. There was no light except for the pulsing moonlight above, but that was plenty for a werewolf.

The spirits around them panicked, and vanished. The sneaking shadows slipped into manholes or alleyways. The barrier spirit stepped back and into the building it was guarding, and the liquid doors of the casino opened for it like oil around water. The spirits

driving by on wheels sped off, and the flying eels flew into casinos, bars, strip clubs, and anything that had walls to protect them. In seconds, the place went quiet.

The familiar weight of something alien, something massive, something dark and cold and twisted fell over him, and he snarled through clenched teeth as he backed up closer to the pack. A glance back at Natasha showed she'd pulled a pistol out of her pants, and had a knife in her hand. Silver. She was smart enough to not say anything at least, and draw attention to herself. He grit his teeth and looked away, back to the streets and sky, looking for what could possibly be affecting the area so directly.

“I ain't ever see such a thing,” the darkness said in a Southern drawl. “Bunch of dogs come through my home, with a vampire to boot, and didn't have the sense to ask for permission first?”

Oh shit. Yeah, he really should have listened to Avery and avoided South Side central.

## Chapter 98

~~Antoinette~~

“Does he speak?”

“No.”

Antoinette sighed as she glared at the bound man. Two thralls were seeing to his body, cleaning and maintaining Sándor so he did not drown in his bodily fluids, or die of starvation. An unfortunate consequence of keeping a prisoner alive was handling the frustrating elements of biology.

It was not a process she was unfamiliar with. She kept several prisoners in her tower, after all, emergency sources of blood should she or an ally need them. Dealing with biological functions was a necessity. But, with her prisoners, normally they were of no threat, and could be handled easily. The Begotten, on the other hand, was a dangerous foe, and it paid to be wary with such creatures.

She waited until her thralls were done, before she closed the door of the cell, leaving her and Daniel in the dark with the monster. With a sigh, she turned on the light of her phone, and set it in her breast pocket. Its light was plenty for Kindred to see by, despite the fabric covering it.

Sándor’s back, and the symbol carved there, remained unchanged. Frustration coursed through her, and she clenched her fists tight as she glared at the symbol. Natasha was convinced it would heal with time, but without a time frame, the wait was proving infuriating. They needed the knowledge this man could provide to track down and deal with the hunters, and in his current state, he was useless.

“You are still convinced your Auspex cannot unmask the secrets of his mind?”

Daniel nodded, walking around the kneeling creature as he kept his chin between his gloved fingers. “Jack was correct. The seal protects his mind. Only brute force can get through it, and Jack was probably correct about the consequences.”

Not only was Jack likely correct about the consequences, he was the only Ventrue in the city strong enough to attempt such a feat. Viktor could have performed such a task, and so could poor Julias, she was sure. In both circumstances, it seemed like Sándor would have been damaged for the experience, and perhaps rendered useless. If Jack attempted to enter the man’s mind, he was convinced his curse would rip and tear Sándor’s psyche until he was beyond saving.

To know her little Ventrue had been given such power, cursed with it and its baser desires, gnawed at her endlessly. She wanted to help him, save him, free him from his burden. But there was no denying that it was a valuable tool that could spell the end for the hunters, if they could find them. Knowing her love, he would carry his burden, and march into the hunters, wading through fire and bullets until they were defeated.

Defeated, and dead. There was no doubt in her mind that her love would succumb to rage, upon finding the hunters, and that he would destroy everything in his path to exact his revenge. While she could not fault him for that, displays such as his crow summoning at the hospital could not be tolerated. If he brought the eye of the media upon her city a second time with such a reckless display of power, she would be forced to act.

It was difficult to tell, if Jack Terry was someone should could control, if it came to such a circumstance. She was confident that, if she was forced to use might, she could deal with Garry, Maria, and

Michael. Jack Terry, on the other hand, was an enigma, now that the curse permeated his being. She could still sense and feel the young Kindred she had first met, but now she could also feel the inflated power his curse provided. Every moment in his presence had her confused, and not sure how to manage the strange presence and its two halves.

Groaning, she shook her head and gestured to the Begotten. “The longer I let this man remain here, the longer he is useless to me. I cannot let this advantage be wasted.”

“Agreed, but I don’t see any other options. And besides, with him trapped here, he can’t help Jeremiah.”

That was true. For all the annoyance it brought her that she could not rip information from the prisoner’s mind, he also could not help his masters while trapped within her tower. That would have to do for now.

She motioned for her sheriff to follow, and stepped out in the long hallway, deep within her labyrinth of black marble. “Are you excited to see Elaine, old friend?”

That earned a pause from the Mekhet, and she struggled to not chuckle at her friend’s discomfort. Earning any reaction from the stone was always something to be cherished.

“Is she here yet?”

“Non. I assume she will arrive within the next few days.”

“I ... see.”

It was too delightful, and she could no longer hold back her chuckles as she started up the stairs. “Daniel, she is a beautiful woman, intelligent, and as devoted to the order as either of us. And

she is fun, as devoted to finding joy in our second lives as I ever was. Why do you resist her so?"

The man frowned, but the almost cataclysmic shift of the stars that would lead to a genuine expression on his face, faded away, taking the frown with it, and leaving her with the usual stone face of her friend. As much as she loved Daniel, she could not understand how Elaine could find his concrete-wall personality so enticing. Antoinette trusted him, valued his opinions and wisdom, and enjoyed his company. But she did not wish to smother him with her sexuality, unlike Elaine, who had expressed her desire for Daniel to her on several occasions.

Perhaps she should not have warned Jack of her potential advances? Elaine was difficult to predict. The woman had joined Antoinette on many of her more absurd sexual adventures, while at the same time, had engaged in the occasional, far more reserved relationship.

Thinking of her brought up more than a few wonderful memories, that quickly became bitter. Elaine had joined her several times, when Antoinette dated her childe Tony, and Elaine had long warned her that the man was devolving into a self-involved, destructive twit. Antoinette should have heeded her advice.

"I resist her," he said at last, "because I do not like her. She's ... volatile."

Antoinette sighed and shrugged. "It may surprise you to learn that all women are, perhaps, a touch volatile, old friend." Though that was hardly unique to women, it simply manifested differently compared to men. She knew what Daniel meant though, that he preferred predictable interaction, while Elaine had drifted through England hundreds of years ago, whoring herself for coins, purely for the entertainment of it rather than any need to hunt in such a

manner. She had a long history of eccentric pursuits and experiences.

Daniel did not care about the woman's sexual exploits, but he did care about calm waters. Antoinette had long been of the mind that the man could do with a few stones tossed into his waters, to stir and add a ripple here or there, but the man was ancient at this point, and would not budge.

“And Athalia?” she said.

Daniel sighed, adjusted his glasses, and waited for the elevator. “What of her?”

“You pursued her once, did you not?”

“That was—”

“Come, Daniel, do not take me for a fool. She trusted you, and only you, before she met Jack Terry. I saw the look on your face, when you escorted her to my ball. You are interested in her.”

“I...” He was surprised. Good. It served an elder well to be reminded that they did not know everything, and Daniel had not realized how obvious his interest in unstable Athalia was.

“She is far more volatile than Elaine,” she said.

“She's young, and ... and her volatility is not a simple state of her personality. It's a result of her circumstance.”

“You believe that, were her circumstances more stable, she would be as well?”

“I had hoped, but I guess we'll never know.”

She sighed with that, and lowered her head to look at the floor as the two of them stepped onto the elevator. “Indeed.”

There was no denying the inevitable reality. The hunters were going to perish eventually, now that they had both lost their enforcer, and their numbers had dwindled to Jack's assaults. It was simply a matter of time before Angela was dead, and Athalia would become more unstable. Would she strive for revenge, or accept her daughter's necessary death? Antoinette struggled to imagine any parent accepting their child's death, no matter if it were deserved.

"I ... had planned for another ball," Antoinette said, "but I believe it will be best to wait until the hunter threat is eliminated."

"Athalia will not be invited, I presume."

"I do not believe so, no. My childe knows her by name, and what her daughter has done. Were they to meet, I do not believe it would end well, for either of them." Young as Samantha was, a Daeva was a dangerous creature when strength was the deciding factor. Doubly so, for a mother wronged and robbed of her child.

"Your childe, she ... she seems a lot nicer than Tony ever was."

Antoinette smiled at that, and nodded as she touched her lips with a couple fingers. "Not so nice that she would not throw herself at Athalia in a fit of rage, should they ever meet. But yes, Samantha is a breath of fresh air, I must admit. I can now appreciate where my love earned his honest soul."

The doors opened up, and she stepped into her primary meeting room, high in her tower, with Daniel following.

"You think he's being honest?"

Stopping, she turned and looked at Daniel with a raised brow. "You do not think Jack has been honest with me, about the curse?"

"I think he's more concerned with keeping you happy, and safe. What he's shared about his curse, is probably only what he felt



necessary.”

With a long groan, she stepped passed the meeting table, and instead took a stand by the grand window overlooking her city. “I suspect you are correct. But do not underestimate my little Ventrue. He will either bear his burden, or expose his need when it is required.” Ventrue hubris would not destroy him, as it had Viktor.

However, she was no fool. For all her lover’s intelligence and tenacity, she could not assume he could predict the future. It was in his, and her best interest, to plan for many outcomes, including the worst.

For now, her primary goal was finding the hunters, and eliminating them. She sat down at the table, and began preparations for the next Primogen meeting. Terra Den continued to push on Invictus corporations, irritating the Invictus and doubtless soon to instigate confrontations in some form or another. And while the two covenants were free to poke and prod each other, jousting as they fought for territory, she had to manage their petty squabbles before they erupted into war.

Insufferable children, honestly.



~~Natasha~~

She slid off of Matt’s back, pulled out her weapons, and started spinning around in a borderline panic. She knew that voice. She didn’t like that voice. And this time, she was in its realm.

Her jaw dropped as her eyes flicked around, spotting movement in the darkness. The only source of light was the moon above, and that was enough to illuminate the pustules of black ooze that started to trickle over the buildings. It seeped down the walls, thick like sludge, and built on itself in heavier, and bigger waves. Soon it

fell onto the sidewalks, and filled the cracks and crevices before it started to flow onto the streets.

Natasha looked at the pack, but none of them were moving. Clara and Avery were in human form, and they certainly looked like they were ready for a fight, but they weren't running. Running would have been good. Running would have been smart. If Black Blood had come for them, they didn't have the protection of its limitations in the physical world. They were in the spirit world, and the entity would have no trouble unleashing its full power here, as far as she understood.

But the pack remained. Eric, she could see, was looking quite jumpy, and he backed up into the pack as he snapped his ears around. Well, it was his idea to start here first. He was probably feeling guilty for leading them here. Avery had to know Black Blood's locations though, or at least what it was capable of, and no way would she just blindly follow Eric here if it was too dangerous.

It was hard to imagine Avery being ok with Black Blood's unplanned arrival, but she and Clara folded their arms across their chests, and waited, eyes locked onto the oncoming blobs of black puss that flowed. More of the gross liquid leaked onto the street, the cracks and crevices of the buildings and streets no longer capable of handling its total mass. The air grew cold, and smelled of death; not rotting flesh, but death itself, something she didn't realize was a smell on its own. It was. The city had gone quiet, the chirps, barks, and talking of spirits vanishing into the growing blackness.

"We don't need permission to be here, Black Blood," Avery said, glaring around at the growing pile of obsidian water. "And we're not here for you. Let us pass."

Please don't be mean to the scary alien creature thing, please please.

"I have lain claim to these streets and walls, dog."

Natasha squealed as an arm shot out of the black ooze on the street before them. A huge arm. A huge, absurdly skinny arm. Bones! Natasha gulped as she stared at the arm, and how it managed to reach from the street to the top of one of the casinos, four floors up. It was a skeleton arm, colored black, and dripping with the gross liquid.

Flowing Sanctuary drifted over the asphalt, and set herself between the wolves and the entity crawling out of the pits of Hell. Another arm reached up through the ooze, big enough to crush a bus, and soon the entity's skull emerged as well. Skeleton was right. Natasha froze, unable to gulp or shiver or anything, as her eyes took in the sight of the gigantic thing pulling itself out of the street.

It stopped once it got its ribcage out of the Earth, but that was enough to have the black skeleton towering over them. It placed its elbows on the street, like someone resting at the edge of a pool, skull pointed down at them. Unlike Athalia and the creepy white dots that sat in the center of her skull eye sockets, the giant skeleton was only a skeleton; as much as any human skeleton bigger than any dinosaur could be 'only', with no glowing eye dots. Black ooze dripped from its eye sockets, and trickled down over the colossal bones, into the pool the monster came out of.

The black waves inched closer, but Flowing Sanctuary pushed them away with her body. For a moment, Natasha thought it might have been a sort of attack, but Flow didn't react with anything more than gentle, lapping waves of crystalline clear blue. Black Blood wasn't attacking them. Black Blood was just being itself, a titanic entity of ... she didn't know. But she felt it, felt something horrible, and cold, and heavy pressing down on her, as the skeleton creature's skull blocked out the pulsing moon above.

"You do not own this city," Flow said. Such a beautiful, strong voice. It reminded Natasha of an angel, the sort that could boom their voice in the movies, so entire areas could hear them.

Black Blood laughed, and lowered his head toward the water spirit. “I am this city, Flowing Sanctuary.”

Avery shook her shoulders out a bit, and stepped up to stand beside the water spirit. Flow’s base, the wide splashing waves of clear blue, parted to give Avery a place to walk.

“Not only are you fighting Street-Tail King, and Red Tide for this place, Black Blood, meaning you’re rather busy, but you are, as you said, the city.” She snorted, and rubbed her thumb across her nose once. “Dolareido welcomes all who come searching for cures to what ails them, doesn’t it?”

Black Blood laughed. Southern accents and laughter normally mixed to create a lovely sound; not so with Black Blood. Its big, terrible voice, with strange rasps hidden underneath, made every sound grate on Natasha’s soul, until she could feel ice building in her dry veins.

This thing could kill her. This thing could kill all of them. She’d seen the werewolf pack hunt and fight, and while their strength and endurance were massive, Black Blood could swing an arm and decimate a building. Fighting it made as much sense as a mouse trying to kill an elephant.

Natasha put her knife and pistol away, doing her best to keep her fingers steady as she did.

“You navigate dangerous waters, dog,” Black Blood said.

“Yeah well, we know you as much as you know us.”

The spirit snorted, and leaned in closer, head only a few feet from Flow and Avery. Good god it could have opened its mouth and swallowed them both.

“The protection I provide breaks the moment you cross the line, dog. So you see here. If you or your pack violate any of my rules, be assured I will deal with you personally.”

Natasha blinked. Black Blood apparently considered itself to be the city. Spirits had banes that hurt them, and bans that determined their behavior. If Black Blood, a colossal entity that may as well have been the Devil itself, as far as Natasha could tell, considered itself to be the city, then that had to affect its behavior. So, as long as Avery obeyed the rules of the city, Black Blood couldn't touch her?

She doubted it was that simple, or that limiting to the creature. But she didn't understand how any of this worked, and until she was back in the safety of her boss's tower, she'd keep her assumptions to a minimum. Avery may have been comfortable playing by the spirit's rules, but she wasn't.

“We've violated none of your laws, Black Blood,” Clara said. “Step aside.”

The god of death laughed, quiet and controlled, as it lifted itself up a bit, and leaned over Avery, Clara, and Flow, toward her. Little, itty-bitty her, who was doing her best to disappear into the fur of Matt beside her. Shit.

“I have right over this dominion, dog. And I reckon I have a right to asks questions. Such as to this tiny creature here.” One of those gigantic hands let go of a nearby rooftop, and it came down onto the street to support the god's weight as it leaned in closer. Natasha, or any of the Uratha, could have fit into that hand completely.

“M-Me?” she managed to say, voice cracking and barely getting above a whisper.

“You, little lady.”

Avery growled, walked past the giant arm of black, oozing bone like it didn't matter, and came to stand beside her. "Natasha, be careful with your words. Don't agree to anything. Make no deals. Accept no gifts."

She stared at Avery for a second, before her eyes locked onto the giant onyx skull again. It didn't breathe, but it moved, shifting about with the idle motions of most living entities. Creepy. Very creepy.

But this was Black Blood, an entity that helped Jacob. It'd saved her and the others from Sándor's nightmare. It'd probably been in Dolareido for a long time. Despite how scary it looked, and how hilarious strong it must have been, it wasn't some thug looking to squash her and unleash violence randomly. It was smart. Which, made it scarier.

"W-What do you want t ... t-to know?"

"You're Natasha Vola, right? Yes, I remember you now. I pulled you out of that monster boy's nightmare chamber. Heck of a feat, if I do say so myself."

"R-Right! Um ... thank you, for that." No dealing, no gifts, nothing. Questioning every word she came up with was tiring. She never was any good at the Danse Macabre.

"I understand the kid, Jack Terry, he's unleashed something pretty nasty, hasn't he?"

She froze, and glanced to Clara and Avery. They were looking at her with raised eyebrows. She hadn't told Matt or Art, or any of the pack, not her place. Now was most definitely not the place, but it wasn't like she could just ignore the alien god's request. Could she?

"W-Why do you ... want to know about J-J-Jack?" Ok, answering a question with a question was a recipe for problems, but Avery and Clara seemed alright with it.

“I’ll answer your question if you answer mine, little lady.”

Shit. She looked to Clara and Avery again, but the two werewolves looked pensive. She expected for them to immediately shake their head or something, but apparently a trade of information like this didn’t bother them. Or maybe, they were curious about Jack as well.

“I ... sorry, I c-can’t tell you. Jacob, uh ... he’ll p-probably ... probably tell you. But I w-w-won’t speak ... for my friend.”

Black Blood chuckled, and Natasha did her best to not visibly wince. Something about its voice was terrifying, like she was listening to Death itself; if Death lived in Texas. And the fact she’d just told Death that she wasn’t willing to give it information herself, in an effort to protect her friend, was asking for Death to slap her upside the head.

But it didn’t. It looked at her, as far as she could tell based on where its skull was pointed, and chuckled some more.

“Tough little thing, ain’t ya?”

“I ... I try.”

“This is pointless,” Avery said. She stepped in closer to Tash, stood in front of her, and glared at the enormous creature. “We’re not here for you, Black Blood, or your rivals. We’re here looking for —”

“The Azlu, I reckon.”

Clara stepped up and joined her leader, between Tash and the creature. “You know where it is?”

Having two Uratha between her and Black Blood was enough to let Tash relax, but only a little. Glances around in the dark showed movement, subtle things hiding around the buildings. Some things

poked their heads out of manholes, while others peeked over rooftop edges. Spirits were watching, hiding in the dark, hiding behind benches and streetlights, hiding in alleys and behind barriers.

They were afraid of Black Blood, but they respected it. Thin line between fear and respect, she supposed.

“Damn spider is hard to find. It’s hiding, like you figured, but not here. Essence flows here, as you can see, with no trouble. So git, and look elsewhere.”

Matt didn’t like that. The enormous wolf bared his fangs and snarled, body going rigid with tense muscles. Art did the same, coming in closer and standing beside Avery as he matched Matt’s growls. But before any more of the gigantic wolves could start growling and lead to some sort of fight, Avery waved a hand back at the pack.

“Back off guys. You know the deal, he can’t touch us if we obey the rules.”

Another of the wolves began to stand upright. The rest of them looked, and Tash chewed on a lip as she watched Eric reform, his fur disappearing into his clothes as his skeleton adopted the two-legged shape.

Black Blood turned its head down to gaze on the man. “Right, you. I remember you. Another fool that tried to kill that hunter, Jeremiah.”

Eric scratched the back of his neck, and glanced around at the other members of the pack. Other than Avery and Clara, the rest of them remained in their giant wolf forms, still ready to fight based on the muscle tension Natasha could see, and the bared fangs.



“Thanks for that,” Eric said. “But, yeah, I don’t care what beef you have with Avery and her friends. I’m just trying to do a job. Where’s the Azlu?”

Clara and Avery both winced. Apparently, they didn’t like the way Eric was talking to Black Blood. Hell, Natasha didn’t like the way he was talking to Black Blood. If they all kept disrespecting it, would it retaliate? Did its nature allow it to?

The god creature chuckled again, and pushed itself back up to standing straight, lower half of its body still hidden in the pool of black covering the street. “I can respect that, little dog. And I admit, it’s the job of dogs to run off vermin.” The skeleton lowered its mass, until its colossal head was only several feet from Eric. To Eric’s credit, he didn’t step back, but there was no way for anyone to not tremble a little when so close to something like that, even someone as obstinate as Eric. “I wager that pest is hiding in Devil’s Corner.”

Devil’s Corner. Natasha shivered, and looked to Avery to see her reaction. The pack leader groaned, and sighed. Ok, so the pack leader of the deadly Uratha was not happy about her quarry being in Devil’s Corner, which meant Devil’s Corner was probably not a fun place to be in the Hisil.

“ ... thanks,” Eric said.

“Don’t thank me, boy. I hope y’all find yourself at the end of its blades. And better sooner than later.” And with that, the giant skeleton began to ease itself into the ocean of black that coated the street. “Not you though, vampire. No beef with you. Happy trails.”

“W-Wait!” Natasha ran past the wolves, past Clara and Avery and their confused gazes, and past Eric. She stopped in front of Black Blood, hands held in fists at her side, and she glared up at the creature as best as she could manage. It wasn’t a good glare, but it was enough to stop the enormous spirit from its descent.

“Yes, little lady?”

“I ... I ... w-want to know. You’ve b-been working with Jacob for a long t-t-time, haven’t you?”

“Gutsy of you to ask, after shooting me down.” Chuckling, the skeleton lowered its head over her, until she was literally two feet away from its teeth and jaw bone. This close, she could feel the strange cold pouring off its body. Calling it cold wasn’t right, but it was the only way her body could interpret the feeling. Cold and death. If Natasha had been frozen in a block of ice and tossed into a ravine in the Arctic, to wither away to her Beast’s hunger until she fell into torpor, it probably would have felt like this.

“S-Sorry, just, I ... Dolareido’s been going through hard t-times, lately. Everything’s turned upside down in the past couple y-years, and everyone’s looking for someone t-t-to ... blame.” She didn’t want to say that Antoinette suspected Jacob, and Black Blood especially, of doing bad things and perhaps threatening the city. But it was the truth. “Jacob, he ... he trusts you. And I d-d-don’t believe Jacob is ... is...”

“Give it up, Tash,” Avery said, growling as she joined her. “Black Blood couldn’t begin to give a shit about our troubles. All that matters to it is its city, and its ruling of it. Only reason it’s giving us a tip about the Azlu is it wants it gone, not because—”

“You think you know me, dog. You’re just an ant, biting off more than they can chew.” The skeleton god shook its head as it sank deeper into the pool of black at Natasha’s feet. “And if you’re looking to stay alive in the coming tide, little lady, I suggest you trust Jacob a bit more than you have been, and maybe you keep your head down. More than one elder vampire out there, fucking with shit they should know to leave well alone.”

Maria. It was talking about Maria.

She opened her mouth, and closed it. Instead of putting her foot in her mouth and tipping off everyone that she suspected Maria was doing something dangerous, she stayed quiet, and watched the alien disappear into the black Earth. As it left, the tide of oozing black faded away, no longer combating Flow's waves. The giant blobs of onyx drooling down the walls of the buildings around them faded, or sank into the hole with Black Blood. The weight of the cold death went with it, letting its grip on her shoulders go as it sank into the ocean of obsidian.

Once the haze of black that sat on them all was completely gone, all the wolves started breathing again. It was almost a shock, hearing a bunch of lungs kick in like that; she was used to the silence of meeting rooms filled with vampires. But once Black Blood was gone, the wolves all visibly relaxed, or at least stopped looking like they were ready to fight. Considering the size of Black Blood, she had a hard time imagining the Uratha lasting twenty seconds in a tussle. Then again, she doubted the Uratha could only use brute strength. Then again ... again, she doubted Black Blood was really just a giant black skeleton.

“Natasha,” Avery said, “the fuck did I tell you, before we left?”

Uh oh. Natasha shrank, taking a step back from the angry woman. Art and Matt, both still in their Urshul forms, came up behind her, and she set a hand against Matt's shoulder as she put her back to his side.

“T-To ... stay out of the way.”

“Yeah, I did. So the fuck do you think you're doing, talking with—”

Clara threw up a hand and joined them. “Avery, come on, you saw Black Blood engage her first.”

“No reason for her to follow up.” Glaring daggers, Avery pointed a finger at Natasha. “You vampires keep sticking your fingers into shit

you shouldn't."

Natasha blinked at her, and struggled to hide the realization that clicked. Avery didn't want her talking to Black Blood, and it wasn't just because she was worried about the old spirit. This was about Minerva.

Tempted, so very tempted, to ask her why she killed Jacob's lover. How could a vampire do something so horrible in their research, that werewolves felt the need to kill her? And it wasn't like Minerva was just someone they could kill without consequence. She'd been Antoinette's friend, and Jacob's love. The only reason Avery was alive was because of her old leader Simon, as far as Natasha knew, and Simon wasn't a factor anymore.

"S-Sorry," she said.

Clara shook her head, and put a hand on Avery's shoulder to drag her back. "Don't be sorry, Tash. We know shit's been crazy in the city since we showed up. Since a year before that, from what we've heard. I'd bet money Black Blood's involved."

Shrugging her shoulder free of Clara, Avery walked toward Eric, and tilted her neck far enough to earn a loud crack everyone could hear. "Let's go."

"Go?" he said.

"To Devil's Corner."

Eric frowned for a moment, and glanced around at the various spirits. The oddities began poking their noses — if they had them — out of their hiding holes, and resumed their hustling and bustling. Natasha had expected spirits to look colorful, and perhaps see-through, but Safe hadn't looked that way, or the spirit of secrets they'd caught. They looked like strange creatures out of fairy tales

and childish whimsy, or freakish nightmares. The spirits around her continued the trend of bizarreness.

Good thing those weird wraith things hadn't shown up. She'd never seen one, but Jack had described it to her in one of their little meetings, Matt and Art had mentioned them as well, and it was a scary thing to imagine. She'd almost hoped to see one though, because that spirit of secrets the Prince had captured said Black Blood's wraiths had spoken with Maria. Much as it was in Natasha's best interest to not stick her nose where it didn't belong, she wouldn't be much of a dragon of the Ordo Dracul, if she didn't seek out answers to mysteries whenever she could.

Besides, as much as the thought of Maria still irritated her, the elder had tried to reconcile with Natasha, a little. And Natasha never could hold a grudge.

Shaking his head, Eric nodded in the direction of Devil's Corner. "We've been here for a couple hours already."

"Hunts can last a long time," Avery said. "Let's go. Besides, we're not going to engage."

Natasha sighed, and rubbed her neck into Matt's neck, and Art's. Fluffy, warm, and soft. They both gave her a quick lick, and she giggled as she felt their tongues on her skin. Big, dumb, floppy dog kisses. Art at least tried to be a little artful with his, getting her cheek once, but Matt licked her like an excited Bernese Mountain Dog might. Slobber was inevitable. She giggled again, and climbed up onto the big guy's back.

The whole pack changed into their giant wolf forms, and began the walk to Devil's Corner.

~~Eric~~

He hadn't expected that. Black Blood showing up and causing trouble, he'd partly expected. He hadn't expected the godly entity to leave without causing any real problems, so that was nice. He also hadn't expected Natasha to have the guts to talk to it, which had been impressive from the very tiny woman.

Don't underestimate the tiny vampire, Eric. She went with Jack on that rescue mission for a reason. According to Jessy, she was over fifty years embraced, and was both smart, and deadly quick. He was glad to have her with him on this — hopefully — dry run of hunting an Azlu. Except, now they were going to Devil's Corner, and it wasn't because of her input, but Black Blood's.

He didn't trust it. The pack didn't trust it. Doing anything Black Blood suggested was a bad idea, but at the same time, Black Blood did save his life, Nathasha's too, and Clara's, and Matthew and Arturo's. And Jessy's.

He frowned, and shook his head a few times, causing his ears to flap against his head slightly; he'd changed back once they started moving. The Urshul form was empowering, and it was also clouding his thoughts. Difficult to think about complicated webs of manipulation and deceit, when his wolf brain was focused on tracking down his prey. Focus on that, figure out whether you can trust Black Blood later.

He breathed deep the smell of Dolareido, the spirit half of it anyway, and looked over his shoulder. Everyone was behind him, while Avery walked alongside him, her nose up and taking in the smells, same as him. She was following his lead, but she knew the way to Devil's Corner, same as him.

He didn't like being at the front like this. It'd have been better to have him follow, but she seemed intent on having him drive, and that was weird as fuck. It was almost like a test, to see if he was good enough to join their pack, which he had no intention of doing.

Besides, he hated tests. Always did horrible in high school; test anxiety was a bitch, and cramming the day before certainly didn't help.

So, of course, he was nervous. He had a dozen Uratha behind him, watching his every move, following him and waiting to see what he'd do. No doubt Caleb told them about his fuck up, and how he lost control in their tussle. Well, it was the bastard's fault, pushing him so far. Eric thought he handled himself pretty well when transformed, all things considered.

Naturally, while thinking about being in his true werewolf form, where the aggression exploded and the hunger for action boiled over, he couldn't help but think about Jessy. And in his monster-sized wolf form, that aggression and instinct may have been muffled compared to the Gauru form, but it was still there, and in larger supply than it would be in normal wolf or human form. Thinking about Jessy was a bad idea right now, but god damn, the sight of her ass spreading around his dick as he pinned her to the bed underneath his weight, was burned into his memory. Separating the thrill of his inhuman forms, especially Gauru, with sex, was going to be impossible, thanks to her.

He growled, shaking his head, trying to focus on the task at hand. It earned a look from the wolf next to him, and he kept walking as if nothing had happened, signaling its meaninglessness. Focus, pay attention, look around you.

Dolareido, in the Hisil, was a scary place, largely because he didn't recognize it, but did. Kind of like when you put a scary smile on a teddy bear, it became creepy, sitting somewhere between normal and terrifying. The shadow of Dolareido was like that. He recognized the places, the buildings, but it all felt off and weird.

There were no cars, but there were plenty of those tire asphalt creatures rolling by. Some were chased by creatures that looked like

they too were made of asphalt, with bodies that looked more serpent like. The closer they got to Devil's Corner, the less he saw of those flying coin eels; probably spirits of money and spare change, or disposable income. The streetlights, twisted like corkscrews, pointed back the way he came, toward the center of South Side. All roads lead to Rome, he supposed, or in this case, to the money.

The sky pulsed with a moonlight heart beat, mixed with strange colors from chaotic streaks that cut across its black surface. Instinct told him the colors above were spirits of a sort, but it was hard to wrap his mind around what they could be. The buildings around him were tilted and dilapidated, far more than Devil's Corner actually looked; yeah, reflecting how beat up and downtrodden a place Devil's Corner was. Closer to North Side, the people of the Carthian district were hardy and honorable. Devil's Corner, on the other hand, was filled with crime and problems. And the deeper he moved into Devil's Corner, the more he could see that being reflected.

Eyes watched them, from the dark, and there was plenty of dark. The twisting streetlights flickered, and many didn't shine as bright as they should have. Alleyways had shadows that slithered up into the air, and adopted forms like wavy strips of black, with arms, and two, tiny glowing white dots for eyes.

A blurry wisp of blue ran by, and only once it got a little closer could Eric see through its subtle glow, and to the tentacles underneath. It had several eyes, each wide and blinking, and terrified. It sped past them, half hovering half running. Behind the fleeing creature, a hulking, humanoid mass followed, tall and heavy. It had no glow, but instead marched upon two legs that looked like they belonged on Goliath. Its enormous torso held four arms, and the shoulders connected with no head between them. Upon its chest, two small eyes and a giant, shark teeth-filled mouth sat where a stomach should have been. It stood at least ten feet tall, and its skin looked like dirty brown fur.



It would have looked comical, in a cartoon. But standing there only fifty feet away, the creature looked like something out of a nightmare; and he had the experience to make that claim, he supposed, after having met a couple nightmares. It leaned forward, walked like a gorilla, and the mouth on its gross stomach-face drooled as it sauntered. The air around it reeked of rage and strength, and Eric could picture what this monster would do to him if it got a good grip on his body with its four hands: tear him into literal pieces.

The fuck kind of spirit was it? It was chasing something that looked terrified, so, was the thing running away a fear spirit? Or rather, a spirit of being afraid? So maybe the brute chasing it was something that fed on fear then. A bully, maybe, or something more sinister. Devil's Corner had bullies, thugs, and assholes that fed on people's situations.

It turned to look at him, and Eric bared his fangs. Kill? He turned to face the rest of the pack, but Avery shook her head. No kill then. Probably for the best. It looked like it could put up a hell of a fight, and it wasn't like it was screwing over the ecosystem of Devil's Corner. Maybe tilting it in its favor more than Eric would have liked, but Devil's Corner's balance of poverty and crime had remained largely unchanged for a century or more.

Still, it sucked seeing something like that gross monster walk around. If they brought it down, what would happen? Instinct told him its 'influence' would lessen, but he didn't really know how that'd manifest. That's why he was on this trip, to learn about how this shit worked beyond what his new half-spirit-wolf-brain-thing was telling him.

More things he didn't like the look of made an appearance. A gangly, tall, ghost-white humanoid creature sat in one of the alleys, a leg hanging out onto the sidewalk. It had a gray cloak filled with holes, and the creature's face was hidden in a black mask. A plague

doctor's mask, with two large, black eyes. More grotesque, was the creature's hands. They would have looked human, barring the size and lanky nature, except the fingers were needles.

Didn't take a genius to figure out what kind of spirit it was.

Growling, Eric began to stand up. His clothes reemerged, muscles shrank, and he growled through the pain as his snout was sucked back into his skull. Transforming didn't hurt as much anymore, but it was still a pain, especially when he rushed it.

He turned to the pack, and Natasha, and gestured to the spirit of drugs and whatnot. "We seriously just going to leave this thing here?"

Clara and Avery transformed once again, far smoother than he could, and stepped up to join him.

"The ecosystem here is stable," Avery said. "I don't see any reason to fuck with it, when we don't know what'll happen."

Clara didn't look too convinced. "I think we could make this city a better place, getting rid of shit like that." Once she pointed a finger at the tall, lanky creature, it got up and bolted into the darkness. Of course it'd be a natural at disappearing, once it was in the spotlight, just like back in the physical world.

Avery sighed, shaking her head as she turned to face her pack mate. "You know it's not that simple. One thing affects another, in ways you might not expect."

"That doesn't mean we can't work at it, and get this shit hole corner of the city up to a better quality of life."

"Antoinette's doing better than most cities. You think you can just fix a complex system like people, by temporarily removing spirits like that?" Avery growled, and jammed a finger against Clara's

shoulder. “And you think the Prince would even appreciate us busting our ass for it? Hell, shit could escalate. She might not like our help.”

“That’s never stopped you before.”

“I learned a thing or two since then!”

The argument went on, and on. The pack backed away a little, and Art had the presence of mind to nudge Natasha further away; apparently, these arguments were common. Eric, on the other hand, never had much presence of mind when it came to arguing.

He stepped up to them, and opened his mouth, preparing for a swift death. “I think—”

“I think,” a voice from the darkness said, “that you should leave well enough alone.”

Eric, Clara, and Avery all turned to face the alleyway. The voice was raspy, a loud whisper, and it sent chills up Eric’s body, as if spiders were crawling up his legs. He couldn’t see the source, but his ears told him it wasn’t too far, from the same direction that spirit with the needle fingers ran off to.

Avery and Clara came closer to the alley, and the pack followed, creating a wall of muscle and fangs, a fortress the two women could fall back to.

“Street-Tail King,” Avery said, teeth clenched together. “Christ, everyone’s trying to get in our way tonight. What do you want?”

“To bargain,” the darkness said. “You seek the Azlu. I will give you knowledge, for a price.”

Ok, there was no way this was a coincidence. Street-Tail King, here, now? Eric knew about the three warring spirits of Dolareido,

Black Blood, Red Tide, and Street-Tail King, but all he had were names. Were werewolves celebrities, in the Hisil? Judging by the way other spirits reacted to them, avoided them, and glared, the Uratha were at least infamous. But, that probably didn't warrant being visited by both Black Blood and Street-Tail King. Something was going on.

Eric kept his mouth shut, for now. A glance Natasha's way showed her sneaking past her two boyfriends before they could stop her, and she crept closer, eyes wide and scanning. Desperate to see the spirit, probably.

"What makes you think we're here for the Azlu?" Clara said.

"Overheard. I've been following you." A shape moved in the darkness, something wide, and tall. "You are all far too loud for your own good." The darkness that hid the spirit wasn't natural. It was something the creature brought with it then, something heavy and powerful, something that blanketed the alley to the point Eric wouldn't have been able to see into it even if he transformed.

But he could feel the creature, smell it, and his nose was telling him to stay the fuck away from this raspy, hissing voice in the dark. It was a different sensation than Black Blood, who might as well have been the Devil, as far as Eric's instincts could tell. This creature, on the other hand, felt like something weaker, but dirtier. A dirty rat, like in a mob movie, was the closest his brain could associate. The name Street-Tail King didn't exactly counter the assumption.

"You want it gone too," Avery said. "So don't give me this shit."

"Do I?" It came closer, and a silhouette appeared, hinting at fur along a broad shape that reached from wall to wall of the alley. The creature had to be at least ten feet tall, and now that it was closer, the glow of its eyes, catching the streetlights and pulsing moonlight, gave shape to its face.

That was a rat face. A giant rat face. A lot of the details were lost to the darkness, but he saw ears, a bit of the nose, and the beady eyes — massive on its huge body — shining in the darkness. Eric’s gaze snapped downward at the sight of more movement, and he frowned as the tip of the creature’s tail flicked left and right on the edge of the alleyway shadow. It didn’t look like a rat tail, but asphalt instead. A clump of asphalt, as if someone had torn up a piece of the street, and made it long and rope shaped.

The name Street-Tail made a lot more sense. It was almost a laughable idea, a creature having a tail that looked like asphalt, but the spirits were all strange, and dangerous. Now was not the time to underestimate.

“Of course you want it gone,” Clara said. “And besides, now you’re willing to talk to us? The fuck happened?”

The silhouette shook with its cackling laughter. “I am no fool. I will not expose myself to chaos without reason.”

Avery snorted, cracked her knuckles, and came up to the alleyway. She was a tiny woman, and the silhouette was huge. Looking up was inevitable, but she may as well have been looking down, with the condescending glare she had on. Unlike Black Blood, he got the impression she was comfortable with the idea of taking this creature in a fight.

“Talk, then. What do you want?”

More chuckles from the darkness. “I want many things, Uratha, many you could help with.”

“You know there’s certain things we can’t help you with, spirit.”

“Can’t you?” The creature came a little closer, and Eric took a step back. Yeap, that was a giant rat, standing on its legs, but its arms were longer than a rat’s should have been, and muscular as well.

It wasn't the giant rat that made Eric step back though. Sure, it was huge and scary, but something in Eric's mind told him he and the pack could take down this powerful entity in a fight. A baker's dozen Uratha in their war farms, could rip it into chunks without too much trouble. It wasn't the creature that made him nervous, it was the scurrying movement around its feet.

The various blobby creatures that snuck around Dolareido's buildings, along the cracks where sidewalk met street, where streetlights stood on concrete foundations, where benches were old and broken, they all moved closer to Street-Tail King. They swarmed around its feet, still hidden in the shadow, movement flowing and piling over each other like black oil oozing over anything in its path. They made noises, squeaks, and chirps. Some of the blobs were developed enough to have claws, and some had tails.

"Look, Street," said Clara, "we're trying to hunt down this Azlu. We think it's been active, recovered from what we did to it. We know you want it gone, so can't you just tell us where you think it is?"

"There's no trade in that, no bargain." Its voice filled with chitters, and Eric took a step back as he winced. Not a pleasant sound, high pitched and far louder than any normal rat. "I think—"

"I think," Flow said from behind the pack, "that we shall make no bargain, accept no deal, with Street-Tail King. We violate no laws, and you will not stop us." The angel of water passed the alley, and parts of her water body that glowed with light cut through the darkness.

Street-Tail hissed and squeaked, and backed further away into the black, but not before Eric got an eyeful of the enormous creature. Rat was not good enough to describe its shape, now that Eric could see there was more to it than asphalt and a rat body. Bits of what he could only guess were parts of the city were in the rat's fur, shards

of concrete and slabs of metal that must have come from benches, and barbed wire that must have come from the rougher parts of North Side.

The enormous rat was carrying the city on its back, or rather, the city was a part of its back. And more than just the inanimate parts. Things scurried across its spine, more of the rat-like blobs that flowed around its feet, but also smaller things that could only have been cockroaches. Almost like a mother spider and her offspring. No wonder it had an unusually muscular form, if it was carrying all that around with it.

Flow moved on by, and darkness once again hid the enormous creature.

“And,” the rat said, “if I said, I could not only tell you where the Azlu is likely hiding, but why it is here?”

Avery raised a brow. “We know why it’s here, why Azlu and the other hosts do what they do.”

Another one of the wolves began to change. David, a big fellow, white, short blonde hair, came up to the alley.

“Y ... You don’t think...”

“Aaah.” Chuckling, the giant rat slapped its tail against the earth beneath its feet. “The Ithaeur knows of what I speak.”

Everyone in the pack turned to look at David, including Flow.

“David?” Clara and Avery said.

“It’s ... the spirits, they ... they say...” The guy didn’t like eye contact, that was obvious. He kept looking at the floor, and fidgeting as he did. A bit like Natasha, except the little vampire was getting over the fidgeting habits Eric recognized on her. This David fellow

looked like a bundle of fireworks that might go off if someone poked him the wrong way.

“What, David?” Avery came up and pat him on the back. Apparently, she knew where to not poke.

“Been hearing ... w-whispers. The choirs, they don’t know h-how, but the Azlu, the two ... they came ... not came. They came because ... something ... unnatural.”

Unnatural? It was hard to think of hosts doing anything natural; not that Eric knew how any of that worked, but the hidden knowledge in his brain had trouble considering the hosts as natural in any sense of the word.

“Wait, the Azlu didn’t come here because it was hunting?” Clara said. “Then ... what the fuck? Why did it come here?”

Sighing, Avery shook her head, groaning. “Not it, they. Two fully formed Azlu came. I knew that was weird, but ... Fuck me. David, why you only bringing this up now?”

“C-Chaos,” David said. “So much noise ... The spirits don’t know what happened. But the Azlu didn’t just ... show up. We ... we should find out what we can.”

“Yesss,” the rat said with a serpent-like hiss. “Most unnatural, the appearance of these monsters, the hosts. I will tell you where the second one hides, where I think it hides, and I will tell you about their arrival. If...” The rat went quiet, waiting for someone to ask the obvious question. But apparently the pack weren’t game to be prompted, and said nothing, waiting. Eventually Street-Tail continued with a humph. “If you will pursue that mystery to its end. Dangerous answers await at the end of this road, ones that I would have you deal with, not myself.”



Clara, David, and Avery looked at each other like a bomb had been laid at their feet.

“You ... can’t expect me,” Avery said, “to agree to such an open-ended deal like that.”

“We have to,” David said with a snap. Both women blinked at him, and the split moment of courage — or fear — that drove him to speak up so plainly vanished. “We ... we have to find out.”

Eric looked between the group, and waited. If this were him, he’d have made an impulse decision, when he was younger. Now, he’d have hesitated; the joys of wisdom forged by experience. Make enough mistakes, and you eventually learn something. What would Avery do?

“ ... we’ll talk later, Street-Tail.” Sighing and running her fingers through her hair, the short blonde motioned to the rest of the pack. “Let’s get out of here, and back home.”

Well, anticlimactic. Smart, but anticlimactic. And honestly he was happy for a little anticlimax. A dangerous decision made in the middle of a dangerous place, with no time to consider? Fuck that.

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They went back to Avery’s apartment, the Hisil version, and jumped back to the physical world from there. Jumping back into the material realm was dangerous business, supposedly. Crossing the Gauntlet was inherently dangerous, though Avery assured them she’d never run into trouble crossing it. The larger issue was arriving in a place where humans could see. A bunch of people stepping out of thin air would be a problem.

According to Clara, people who saw Uratha doing werewolfy things suffered a sort of temporary insanity, lunacy. Eric had to wonder if it was the work of the strange voice, Luna, that spoke to him sometimes in his dreams. If it was some sort of godly entity,

and it certainly seemed like one, doing something like inflicting lunacy on people who saw werewolves at large seemed reasonable. Scary thought.

“We didn’t have to leave,” Matthew said, frowning as he sat down on the couch. The hunger for the hunt was on him no doubt, and Eric couldn’t deny he still felt it. But, Avery was smart to stop it when she did.

“Yes, we did.” Noah shook his head, and took a moment to run his fingers along his shaved scalp. Why hadn’t Avery taken a jab at him for the head, like she had Eric? “Spirits are crafty. No deal comes cheap, and spirits are very good at making sure deals land in their favor, whether you realize it or not — saying this for your sake, Eric. Street-Tail Motherfucker threw us a deal that could end horribly for us.”

“Besides,” Caleb said, with a nod to Eric, “the Azlu probably is in Devil’s Corner, like Black Blood said. We don’t need Street-Tail’s help. And I don’t know about you, but meeting two of the three powers fighting for the city, is enough close encounters with trouble for one night.”

Arturo didn’t look convinced. “We want to stay in this city, right? Hunters in Darkness aren’t meant for fucking travel. We got a good thing here, and I’m not just talking about Matt and me.” He grinned down at the vampire beside him, and she smiled brightly, despite her obvious attempts to hide it. “Avery, you’ve been getting closer to Henry, haven’t you?”

The small woman marched up to the big guy, and jabbed him in the chest with a finger, hard enough to make Art stumble back a foot. “Don’t bring Henry into this. Just cause the rest of you let sex cloud your judgment doesn’t mean I will.”

“So there is sex,” Art said. His words got him another harsh jab, in the stomach, and he coughed on his chuckles as he took another

step back.

Clara mirrored Avery's groan, but at least she didn't join in the finger stabbing. "I think what these two idiots are trying to say, is that, Dolareido's as good a place as any to stay, even after we've killed those Azlu."

That was an oddly specific sentence. Eric raised a brow and stepped toward the second-in-command. "Is that the only reason you came to Dolareido, for those two Azlu monsters?"

Avery and Clara both looked to David, and the rest of the pack ceased their mumbling as they looked to the fidgeting guy. It probably wasn't the best idea to do that to the poor man, since it was obvious he struggled with crowds, and doubly so with being the center of attention. But after a few seconds, David gulped down whatever was in his throat, and looked to Eric.

"I ... I brought the family here. Whispers guided me, told me that ... that the hosts would do great harm."

"Whispers?" Eric said. "Like ... Cahalith dreams?"

He shook his head. "No. Something else. There ... there were spirits, and they spoke of the spider hosts and the damage they were inflicting. We ... we had no home, and I thought maybe..."

"David gave us an idea," Avery said as she sat on the back edge of her couch, "and I went with it. I'm here, to deal with the Azlu threat, maybe mend some bridges with that eyeless fucker and Prince big-tits, and, just maybe, find a home for the pack. We've been wandering a long time."

"Dolareido's a nice place," Clara said, her eyes drifting for a moment in thought. "But it's a bomb waiting to explode, with all sorts of craziness from the other side. Now that we're here, we're

sure we can help, even after the Azlu are dead. David's idea was a good one."

David winced, scratched his neck, and shook his head again. "But Street-Tail King says the Azlu didn't come here normally. The Azlu, they ... they scurry, and bite, and scratch and tear, and weave ... and devour. They're monsters, and they behave in ... monster ways. If Street-Tail King thinks they behaved unusually, then ... then..."

"Then there's a mystery," Avery said. "I didn't want to tell that fucking rat spirit asshole, but it's an intriguing mystery. Stephanie died for this hunt, and if there's more going on, we owe it to her to find out more." That got some murmurs from the pack, nods and affirmations. "But I'll be damned if I make a deal with a fucking spirit, especially one as sneaky as Street-Tail King, without thinking about every single mother fucking detail first. In the mean time, we can pick up the hunt without you Eric."

"With ... without me?"

Avery smirked at him, with that 'I knew it' look. "Got a taste for the hunt already? All we did was a little scouting."

"I guess ... maybe I did. But, fuck me, I have a job bouncing at Bloodlust." And thus, the first real conflict between being a werewolf and working for vampires.

"Strange thing about being a werewolf and not a vampire, Eric. You can hunt during the day."

Goodbye sleep.

"Maybe I can work out a deal with Jessy instead."

"M-Maybe..." Natasha stepped up, and joined Eric, nodding to him before looking to Avery. "Maybe Jessy can come on the next hunt? I know she'd like th-that."

Clara grinned, rolling her eyes, while Avery frowned and growled.

“ ... I suppose the Invictus would want a piece of this pie sooner or later. Fucking money grubbing assholes.”

The little vampire nodded, but her smile only grew. “Y-Yes, they are. But they’re smart, and they’ll s-s-see this as ... building a bridge. M-M-Maybe you should talk to Jack about it?”



~~Jack~~

The journey back home was a slow one. Jack had little to do but ponder, and Damien pondered beside him. Scully had, at some point, decided to hop onto his shoulder, and Damien barely noticed in the darkness of the tunnels.

So Jack said nothing, but offered a small smile when he glanced at his friend.

“I—whoa!” Damien almost jumped, when he returned the glance, but once he understood the situation, he managed a little chuckle, and continued walking along. “Your doing?”

“No. I think Scully likes you. You have a dark, mysterious vampire appeal.” He clucked and chirped at Scully a few times, and his pet returned a few caws. A connection of Animalism turned the innocent sounds into meaning, far more than could be conveyed with just noise or body language.

Images flashed in Jack’s mind. A movie theater. Scully flew inside one at some point. Pictures, flat screen, popcorn on the floors. Sparkling vampires.

Jack choked on laughter, and waved off the connection with several wrist flicks before he broke a rib. “Oh god, she thinks you’re a sparkling movie vampire.”

Damien frowned at him, and then at Scully. “So, is she attracted to me, or shiny things, and she expects me to sparkle like that abomination?”

“Bit of both, I think.”

Damien rolled his eyes, glared at the bird for a second, but sighed and resumed looking ahead. “I’m surprised you brought them down here. We’re underground, after all. I expect most birds would hate this.”

“They weren’t thrilled, but they insisted on coming anyway. After the hospital scene, I think they’re worried about me.” Jack brought up some oats from his pocket for them, and Mulder happily nibbled and pecked. Scully looked torn between her new love interest, and food, so Jack held his palm out toward her so she didn’t have to leave Damien’s shoulder.

“Crows are intelligent animals, and I’m sure they’re quite capable of feeling worried for you.”

“Makes me wonder how many crows, or rats, or other animals are being controlled by Kindred.”

Damien considered that with a nod, smiling as he watched Scully peck at Jack’s palm. “Auspex has allowed me to notice a few crows and rats, every now and then, under the influence of another Kindred, but it’s rare. In today’s world, with digital cameras, satellite surveillance, and what have you, animal companions almost seem obsolete.” Jack grinned, clucked a few times, and Scully fluffed up her breast feathers before biting at Damien’s earlobe. “Ow! Hey!”

“Can’t ask a camera to do that.”

“Then you’re not familiar with the concept of automated turrets.”

“Science fiction. Besides, a crow can go anywhere in this city, and can act independently.” And Jack had spent at least a few minutes each night with Scully and Mulder, teaching them some of the basics of reconnaissance.

And, he'd spent more than a few minutes with them each night, just hanging out. Crows were so damn smart, and like many birds, enjoyed being a part of a flock. He'd sit around with his two pets, and they'd just enjoy each other's company, with a few caws here and there to fill the silence. It was a good time to enjoy his privacy, and contemplate the curse in his guts he assured everyone he could control, when he wasn't entirely sure about that. And it was a good time to cry. His pets didn't mind. Hell, they understood sorrow, and kept telling him in as many ways a crow could, to 'not give into the black'.

He leaned over, kissed Mulder's neck, and the bird responded by rubbing his head into Jack's cheek, before adjusting his wings.

“So,” Damien said, “you're going to try and talk to Black Blood?”

“Yep. I'll probably be seeing him ... it, tomorrow night.”

“But Beatrice and Jacob will be there. Jennifer too, I imagine.”

“Yeah, that'll complicate things.”

“And besides, are you sure you want to? We're supposed to be dealing with the hunters. This threat Azamel warned us about—”

“Is undoubtedly taking advantage of all of us being distracted. Can't have that. We have to juggle the two problems.”

Damien laughed, and scratched Scully on the back of her neck with a gentle finger, like Jack taught him to. “Heh, just two? Tensions are still building with Garry and the Invictus. That move

he pulled with Terra Den couldn't be anymore obvious. He's going to make a push against the First Estate."

"Yeah well, he can only push so hard. If he crosses a line, Antoinette will put him down."

"Easier said than done. Garry knows how to fight, has a small army, and we know he has connections to Jacob."

That earned a groan from Jack. If Jacob went to bat for Garry, that'd be a problem. Antoinette ruled because she was strong, absurdly so, and so was Daniel, but that was really the only reason, on the military might front. She didn't have an army of vampires to control, while Garry basically did. If Jacob and Garry fought Antoinette, it wouldn't be so easy for her to deal with. Hell, it might have been impossible, and that was assuming Black Blood didn't get involved, if it somehow could.

Well, tomorrow would be a good opportunity for Jack to learn some things about Jacob, and maybe Black Blood.

"She..." Sighing, Damien scratched the back of his neck, before offering Scully the same pleasure. "She likes pets."

"She? Sh—oh, Fiona. She does? I can imagine a pet tarantula or something. Maybe a—"

"No, not spiders, or anything like that. She ... likes cute things."

Jack raised a brow at that. "Spider monster lady likes cute things? I mean, Fiona's a bundle of sunlight, to the point it's blinding. So I suppose that makes sense. But, it's hard to imagine a Begotten with a pet, especially a cute one."

"Agreed, and she agrees with you. She had no pets of her own. But I saw her apartment, and—" Jack held out his fist, with a small grin to join. His friend rolled his eyes, returned the fist bump, and



continued. “And she’s really into cute things. A cat, a dog, maybe a rabbit or two, a business, they’d—”

“Business?”

“What?”

“Business?” Jack said.

“Term for a group of ferrets.”

“W-What? How do you know that?”

Damien pulled out his phone. “Looked up ferrets on the way over.”

Oh god, that was adorable. Jack laughed, and laughed, and laughed. He only got it under control once Scully and Mulder joined him, and the noise became a bit too piercing to keep up.

“I don’t suggest getting her a surprise pet. One of the big ways pets end up abandoned.”

“I see. I suggested she get a pet on her own, but like you said, she’s concerned it won’t take to her.”

“A legitimate concern. But, I bet she’s the kind of girl that could bond with an animal, despite her horror half. I can practically feel myself become a nicer, more social person just by being around her.” Fiona was beautiful and desirable, and she knew it, too. But, it didn’t inflate her ego. She was an honest person, with others and herself.

Jack saw a bit of himself in her, honestly, if someone put sunshine into a needle and injected it straight into his veins. Of course, that’d turn him into a pile of ash, but still. If Jack had grown

up less cynical, maybe he'd have ended up like Fiona. Honest to a fault, except, happy to be so.

Now, Jack was getting better, and better at controlling his tongue, controlling his impulse to speak honestly. Lying was getting easier. It didn't grate on his soul the way it used to, and that, he couldn't blame on the curse.

"Damien, this curse. I ... it..." You can tell him, Jack. You can trust him, right? "I was wondering if you'd made any progress finding out about it. I'd love to get it sealed up again." Coward.

"Unfortunately no. I have no contacts outside the city, and within, much of our records were destroyed by Garry, as you know." The man held his chin in his fingers, eyes down, thinking. "I'd hoped to find something in what Maria has secured, but I haven't managed to. Maybe ... maybe I could reach outside the city for help?"

"You mean contact Sanctified from elsewhere?"

"Surely Maria must know someone."

"I mean, maybe. After the purge, would anyone outside want to talk to us? Maybe ... maybe Elaine, actually."

"Elaine?"

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~~Beatrice~~

Jacob returned after a time, and the boys did as well, all separately. Othello came back with his gorgeous ghoul, no doubt intent on finishing the night with sex, and a lot of it. The man had a habit of fucking her until they were both satisfied, then he'd Kiss her, and fuck her some more. Triss usually made sure to not be here when he did that anymore. Painful memories.

Aaron never joined him, which had surprised Triss until that time they all showered together. It turned out, the guy was totally vanilla. Probably considered the doggy position to be kinky; so cute. Jen had joined Othello on several occasions in the past, but always with a ghoul or three between them, never to fuck each other. And since Julias came into the picture, she'd been unusually faithful. Even now, she refused to get involved with anyone else.

That wasn't fair to her. Vampires had sex drives, but Jennifer was horny down to her soul, from before she was a vampire. Her lust was now eternal, captured in the freeze-frame of the embrace, and Triss felt bad that the girl now felt too attached to Triss and her misery to indulge herself. If the girl had never gotten into bed with her, Jen would probably be fucking up a storm right now, probably right next to Othello. Ghouls, thralls, and two vampires, buried in legs and boobs and juices.

Aaron disappeared into his alcove with his books, Othello disappeared into his with his girl, and Jacob disappeared into the tunnels in the back of the huge cave.

"Jen, I'm going to talk to the boss."

"Don't want me to join?" Jen said, standing up.

"It ... it's private. I'll tell you about it later. For now, you can ... watch Othello fuck, I guess? You used to do that a lot."

"I suppose." There wasn't any heart or enthusiasm in her words though, and she only feigned interest until Triss had taken a few steps. A look over her shoulder showed her friend was, in fact, heading toward Aaron's alcove.

"Gonna read a book?"

"I just might."

“Can ... can you read?”

Jen rolled her eyes, but laughed all the same, and climbed into Aaron's cave in a cave. Which almost felt like turning her back on her sex drive, considering Aaron's seemed awfully low, in comparison.

Maybe she'd get back to who she used to be, maybe she wouldn't. Time healed all wounds, and stupid shit like that. The joy of being a vampire was eternal life as long as Triss was cautious with it. Maybe she'd eventually get over losing Superman, maybe not, but she knew Jen would get over it eventually.

Triss stepped into the tunnel that led into Jacob's alcove, and pulled aside the hanging furs. No point in asking if she could come in; Jacob liked it when she was an asshole. And besides, even if she put on her strongest Cloak of Night, she wouldn't be able to sneak up on Jacob.

The man was sitting on another fur, with some strange book in his hand. No pictures in this one, but she recognized the letters at least: Mandarin or something. She knew fuck all about Asian languages, and she expected the same of Jacob; stupid of her to do that. The man was too damn smart.

“Jacob.”

“Beatrice. Come, sit.” He nodded toward the fur and the empty space beside him.

She sat with a heavy thump, and leaned against the stone. The fear she used to feel from being so close to an elder as insane as Jacob had faded to a background sensation. It wasn't good to let her guard down, but it wasn't like Jacob didn't already have every key to every lock she had, physically and mentally. If he wanted to, he could destroy her in so many ways, and he'd done nothing but treat her like the spunky Carthian he saw potential in.

And at this point, she didn't care if she was in danger of getting too close to this man. Whatever, as long Angela got what was coming to her.

She smiled for a moment, before it faded. The Prince had asked her to help her with Jacob, connect with the man, see if she could stop him from going down a bad road. Well, fuck that, bad road was the only road.

"I assume the sacrifices are ready?" she said.

"Yep, seven fuckers just dangling there. And before you ask, yes, I made sure to collect fuckers who deserved it."

She leaned in toward him, squinting, and he leaned in toward her, gray bandage covering his eyes. His eyebrows suggested squinting, but who the fuck knew with this bastard. Trying to read his expression was impossible.

"Seven's a lot."

"Lot of disappearances and deaths happen in Devil's Corner all the time. I should know."

After a heavy sigh, she collapsed back again against the wall, head aimed up at the stone above. "You've been setting up hooks in this fucking city for centuries, plans and schemes, so you can do shit like this, haven't you?"

The Joker smiled a big, scary smile, before looking back down at his book. "If that Fiona girl knew who to target better when she first arrived, she wouldn't have appeared on anyone's radar."

"I suppose she should have asked you."

"Yep. I could have set her up with a better, streamlined supply of sacrifices. Though, I understand her appetite is specific? Probably

can't be just anyone.”

“Yeah.”

“And besides, even with millions of people in Dolareido, we can only kill so many before it becomes a problem.”

She raised a brow at that. “How ... how many people have you considered killing at once?” From the way he'd said what he said, it sounded like he'd run into a sort of barrier, a limit that stopped him from doing what he wanted.

“There are whispers of rituals that require inordinate amounts of blood, and vitae. Some, could only be done by bleeding several Kindred dry. Others, could be done with kine, if they were sacrificed by the dozens.”

“Dozens?” Jesus fucking christ. She tried to imagine twenty, thirty, forty kine, dangling from hooks in Jacob's ritual chamber, guts ripped open. The smell alone would have been horrific, let alone the display.

“I try to play nice, to keep Annie happy. Don't need her or that asshole Daniel bleeding down my throat.”

Triss winced at that. She knew the old man had ancient relationships with those two, but to hear him describe the sheriff as ‘asshole’ was a little jarring. A recipe for getting stabbed by the fucker's giant sword, if anyone else said it.

“I ... I wanted to talk about ... you know.”

The man's smile vanished, the electricity of chaos and surprise he always carried with him dissipated, and his shoulders slumped as he closed the book and set it aside. “About Crúac and resurrection.”

“Yes. Black Blood said you guys figured out how, but ... but ... we’ve spent these two weeks trying to track down Elen instead. It’s ... fucking killing me, Jacob. We’re not talking about it, and—”

“We wanted to give you time, to calm down, before we put this at your feet, Triss.” Jacob reached over for one of his books, a large one, black leather bound, and kind of fancy looking.

“I’m calm, I’m fucking calm! I’m ... not calm. I know I’m not calm, but I’m not the wreck I was, ok? I can ... I can think, use my brain, not be impulsive. Trust me.”

Triss had a long history of being impulsive; came with the territory of being a Carthian. She knew it, Jacob knew it, and as far as she knew, Jacob signed on for that impulsiveness when he invited her into his circle. The bastard knew her better than he should have, considering they’d only started hanging out the past year and a bit.

Honestly, if he said she wasn’t ready to talk about this, she’d believe him. For all her impulsiveness, and for all her wariness of Jacob’s motives, the man had that old-man wisdom, times a thousand. He’d seen too much of the world, too much of everything, for her to just ignore his words. And the fact he’d not yet revived Minerva already crushed the idea that she could do what he did, to revive her lost lover.

But Black Blood said they knew how.

“Crúac isn’t simply an act fueled by your blood, Beatrice. It’s a display, a call, a summoning, a hand reaching into the oblivion that separates us and things beyond.” Jacob opened the book, and flipped to a page depicting orbiting spheres. She didn’t recognize the language. “The crazier the shit you’re trying to do, the further you’re reaching outside of our world, and into others.” He set a finger onto one of the spheres toward the center. Earth then, given the context of the conversation.

“These other spheres? That—” She leaned in closer. One of the spheres was pressed up against the sphere Jacob was touching. “Shadow realm, with the spirits and shit?”

“Supposedly.”

“Hmm.” She tilted her head as she looked at the other spheres. They weren’t just sitting around like marbles, but some circled others. Others overlapped, like the one she’d just pointed out. One circle covered it all. “Makes me feel ... small.”

“This world of blood, bones, cocaine, guns, sex and shit and streets and politics, it’s just one small piece of the puzzle. And it’s a piece you should be satisfied with. When you go out hunting in Dolareido’s world, our world, you get lost in the moment. You feel the breeze on your skin, the darkness covering you as you stalk alleyways, and listen to the hunger in your core. You catch some prey, indulge, and slink back into your hole to hide from the sun. It’s a simple life, Triss, and a good one.”

“But...”

“But, people like me, like other witches, and dragons like Annie, we know there’s more out there. There are entire universes, places that are separated from us, but not unreachable. You can see them sometimes, when you dream; though, most can’t dream so deep they can reach such places.”

Her dreams during torpor had been of nothing but Julias lately. That didn’t feel otherworldly. It felt right at home, stabbing her in the fucking stomach over and over.

“You’re saying, if we start doing rituals with Crúac that really reach far...”

“You’ll touch on places your primitive brain can’t even comprehend. Entities that exist beyond life and death, like the



Crone herself, or perhaps Luna, that the Uratha believe in. But, more importantly, the idea that a soul exists, that something real and special is out there, in us and humans and even the fucking dogs and monsters, is truth. And ... and hunting for this soul, has been a goal of mine since Minerva's death."

She shivered, and felt her body grow heavy. "An afterlife? One of these realms is an afterlife?"

"Maybe. Neither me or Black Blood have managed to cross that gap. But we're trying."

"Trying? Not ... tried?"

He grinned at her, and flipped to another page. Another picture, obviously of a ritual bowl, the type Jacob was so drawn to, with skulls and whatnot around it. Several corpses lay around it, and a witch figure stood over the bowl, shaking a skull.

"Death creates a hole in the barrier that separates realms. I believe the soul goes through it, going back to wherever souls come from, but the hole is ... tiny, in a sense. I haven't been able to reach through it, but I've peeked, and ... and it was like ... taking a sneak peek at God, Beatrice. It was like seeing into something that should never be seen."

"B-But, you said you knew how to revive Minerva!"

"There are Crúac rituals, and other strange magics, that can recreate bodies, reforge them. But they'd just be a hollow shell, something out of a horror film. There are Crúac rituals that can seek a person's essence, Triss, and it can—"

"Can pull them out, through the hole ... and place it in the forged body."

The eyeless man sighed, nodding. “There are two problems. The first, is to reach into this world beyond worlds, this greater being, to extract the essence of the dead we’re looking for, would require us to enter it, to some degree at least. I can guarantee that that would be instant death, or fracturing for the mind. And...” He looked to her, waiting.

“And ... to ... make the hole big enough, a lot of people would need to die.” The man’s nod confirmed. “How many?”

“I wish I knew. The one time I managed to peek through the temporary hole, I’d killed at least fifty at once.”

“That’s a lot of murder for just a peek at the other side!”

He closed the book slowly, and kept his bandaged gaze upon its cover. “Yes. Yes it is.”

## Chapter 99

~~Natasha~~

It was the day after the trip into the Hisil, and Natasha couldn't stop smiling.

“Oh my god oh my god oh my g-god!” She vibrated as she bounced around, almost hitting Matt and Art with each step. “That was so d-d-dangerous!”

Art and Matt both nodded as they stepped up the stairs. They were in front of her apartment building, a place she rarely visited anymore. All those nights at the Prince's, it was easy to forget she had her own apartment, a nice one at that. It wasn't as fancy as Jack's, but it was still a nice, decorative place. They didn't hang in at it often enough.

Plus, she could be herself more in her own apartment, where the walls were hers, and she knew every creak, every inch and corner, every thing. No home like home.

First thing she did was throw open her laptop and send Jessy a quick message. The two of them were still doing their frequent check-ins with each other, and considering yesterday she'd just been in a literal different dimension, this check in would be interesting.

~Back from the Shadow Realm!~

~Eric was telling me about it, and you, you brave little girl.~

~Brave?~

~Talking to Black Blood? Yeah, sounded pretty fucking brave of you. You at home?~

~Yeah.~

Naturally, Tash's laptop started ringing, and she rolled her eyes as she accepted the call. "Hey J-Jessy!"

"Tash, I—oh, is that Matthew and Arturo?" Jessy leaned down toward her laptop and smiled at the camera. Eric was beside her on her couch, dressed in his Bloodlust suit, shirt undone and tie nowhere to be seen. Jessy was in a white tube top masquerading as a tank top with tiny straps, and her leaning forward was purposeful: showing off the cleavage. Not that she needed to, considering the tank top was almost see-through.

"Yeap!" Tash motioned to the boys, and they came to join her at her kitchen counter where she kept the laptop.

The two boys sat around her, and waved. "Hello there," they said together, in unison, with eyes on Jessy's display. So Natasha elbowed each of them in their ribs, because.

Eric caught on, slipped a hand around Jessy's face, and pushed her back into the couch with enough force to make her bounce.

"This line secure?" he said.

Natasha nodded. "Y-Yes. Why? D-D ... Did you want to talk about the trip?"

"I did, yes, assuming Art and Matt don't mind."

Art and Matt shrugged, got up, and started walking around Natasha's kitchen. There was meat and stuff to be found, bought by them and deposited in her fridge and freezer. It was almost like a girl sneak-moving into her boyfriend's apartment, except instead of makeup kits, toothbrushes, and feminine hygiene products, they'd brought food. She couldn't help but giggle at that as she watched

them start to cook up a bunch of steaks, with liver and hearts to go with.

“They d-don’t.”

“Right. So, Jessy wants to come on the next trip.”

“She d-does?”

“I do!” Jessy fought to get out from behind Eric’s hand, eventually being forced to push the man off the couch altogether. “Eric was telling me about the things he saw, Black Blood and shit. That sounds fucking freaky, dangerous, and a lot more important to Dolareido than I figured it was.”

“Important?”

Art raised a hand, and reached around to wave it in front of the camera from behind the laptop. “I’m guessing she’s talking about how one world affects the other.”

The Gangrel nodded vigorously. “Yeah! Like, Eric was telling me about the drug spirit he saw. If the wolves killed it, would drug activity drop in Devil’s Corner?”

“Probably,” Matt said, “assuming you could get away with it. Spirits have their own society, you know.” He had some raw steak in his mouth, and he swallowed it down mid sentence. Ugh, like a mom snacking while cooking, except with the stomach of a carnivore, capable of handling nasty bacteria.

“It’s not our j-job,” Tash said, “to police the kine. We’re supposed t-t-to let them d-do what they want, within reason.”

Eric leaned into the camera, and frowned at her. The man usually frowned, but never at people directly. He was the sort of man that frowned at circumstances, situations, never at someone, and never a

vampire, from what she knew of him. The hard look on his face was unsettling.

“Not everyone lives the good life in Dolareido, Natasha. Just because it’s a good city on average, doesn’t mean it couldn’t be better.”

That was aggressive. She looked to Matt and Art, and she could see the two men were ready to get between her and the angry man on the other side of the laptop screen, but she gulped and shook her head at them.

“I know it’s n-not perfect, Eric. If you want t-t-to help the less fortunate, maybe ... talk to Garry?”

“Garry? Right, the Carthians. I mean yeah, I guess I could do that, but I’d prefer to put my unique skills to use. If I have to be Uratha, then I should try and do what I can.”

She tilted her head to the side. “I’m n-not—”

“I suppose I’m talking to Matthew and Arturo here. I ... want to try and clean up some the shittier parts of the city.”

“Why?” Art said, without leaving the kitchen so Eric couldn’t see him.

“Because some of us dealt with those streets growing up, grew up on them. I’d like to help the people still dealing with those streets.”

Matt stuck his head over the laptop from behind, so Eric and Jessy would have to look at an upside down face hanging in front of them. “Avery would like to do that too. That’s half the reason we’re hunting this Azlu monster you know. But, the Prince and Jacob both stick their fingers into spirit business, Eric. If you start fucking with things on the other side of the Gauntlet, they’ll find out.”

“Fuck em!” Jessy said. “If Eric wants to be Batman and clean up the streets, I say let him.”

Natasha couldn't help but laugh at that, and her boyfriends did as well.

“We've been there, and we've done that sort of thing in our youth,” Art said, coming around to sit with Natasha. “Now we're part of a family, and if any of us do something that annoys the Prince, we risk getting the boot. Which is why we're helping you guys find the hunters.”

“Buuuut.” Matt set a couple steaks on the burner, hot enough Triss could hear the sizzle. “Eric isn't part of the pack. If he wants to go vigilante, I say go for it. Like Art said, we've all been there. Getting his feet wet could be a good thing.”

Art nodded for the camera. “Next day off we get, Matt and I can show you how to cross the Gauntlet at a locus, and you'll be free to do whatever you want. Just don't come crying to us if you get killed.”

Jessy snorted. Her facial expressions said it all, but Tash couldn't stop her from saying something dumb. “And you two won't tell your mom?”

“Nope.” Art winked for the camera, before he came up behind Natasha, hugged her, and set his chin on her head. Oh dear, PDA! Natasha squirmed and struggled, but Art's grip was absolute. After a few seconds of wriggling, she relented, and set her head back against his chest, while avoiding eye contact with the laptop screen.

“Oh, oh!” Jessy said. “You guys are so fucking cute, it hurts. I'm in literal pain. Did you do that thing that—”

Natasha closed the laptop.

Caught mid-flip of his steak, Matt raised a brow as he looked at her. “Thing?”

“A thing ... it’s a thing. A thing ... she w-wants me t-t-to do.”

Laughing, Arturo leaned down and kissed her head. “If it’s Jessy, I’m assuming this is a sex thing.”

“It’s always a sex thing w-w-with her.” And it was. If Jessy had her way, there’d be two vampires and three werewolves locking legs at that very moment, with a camera set up to stream it for every Kindred and ghoul to watch.

“Well,” Art said, “I’ll have you know, that if it’s with you, I’m down to do whatever you want.” His roaming hands slid down over her suit shirt. Her jacket was put away, and her shirt wasn’t exactly good protection against roaming fingers. She wore no bra underneath, and Art’s fingers didn’t hesitate to massage her chest. “As long as it’s with you and only you.”

The dreamy sigh she tried to suppress escaped her anyway. She slapped at his hands, but all that did was send them down lower. They teased at her stomach, and she rolled her eyes as she relented, leaning her head back against his chest again.

“Yeah,” Matt said while throwing his steaks onto a plate. He was a big man, and once he sat beside her, didn’t waste much time chewing it as he started to ingest. At least he used a knife and fork this time.

She still felt the tingle and zing of new information from yesterday, of expanding her horizons, of going on a dangerous mission and learning lots of tasty details. It may have been a day ago, but she didn’t get to visit an alternate dimension often. It was making her feel bold, and she knew it. Maybe now was the perfect time to exercise that boldness.



“Well, um ... J-Jessy, she suggested an idea. Um...”

Art slid his head down beside hers, chin on her shoulder, and his hands ceased fondling. Instead, he adopted a hug, and buried her in it, holding her to his chest as he swallowed her in his arms. Big, strong arms, that made her feel protected and safe, and warm. And more bold, too. She wasn't meek little Natasha anymore. She was adventurous, daring Natasha! Smart, and fast, and sexy Natasha. Sexy had snuck in there at some point, because of Jessy, and Matthew and Arturo were determined to keep it that way.

“J-Jessy,” she said, “thinks we should ... umm ... uh ... have sex ... w-where someone can see.”

Matt, already finishing his meal, looked at her, surprised. His fork went clink, in the silence. “Really?”

“I know! I kn-kn-know, it's really rude of her! And ... I d-d-d ... d-don't know. It's—”

Art, with his head next to hers still, nodded a few times. Thank goodness he shaved, or sandpaper stubble would have destroyed her face. “Definitely a step outside most people's comfort zone.”

“I ... I know.” Now she was afraid to ask. She wasn't going to ask to have sex in front of Jessy or anything, but there were things and options she had investigated.

“Course,” Matt said as he swallowed the last of his food, “this is Dolareido, city of experimentation. If Tash wants to, I'm down. As long as it's just us under the sheets, I don't mind.”

“Same,” Art said, setting kisses on her neck. Oh no, not the neck. She melted back against his chest, and a soft mewl escaped her as she put her hands on the countertop to keep from falling.

They were ok with it, actually ok with it. They wouldn't mind it if someone else saw them naked, and her naked, and with them inside her. She doubted they'd have troubles with performance anxiety, considering they were Uratha, and bursting with life and hunger. She, on the other hand, knew very well she'd be anxious performing live, terribly so. That was no good. But, if Matt and Art were ok with sharing how intimate and amazing their sexy times together were, she had ideas.

“Ok, um ... uh ... c-come with me.” She slid out of Art's arms, and started toward her bedroom.

The two boys blinked at each other before following after her. “Now?” they said.

“M-Maybe? Get m-m-my laptop.”

Nodding, Matt scooped it up and followed after her. “Wow, brave!”

She giggled as she stepped into her bedroom, motioned Matt to her nightstand, and started digging through her closet. He set the laptop down where she'd pointed, and watched as she began removing things.

Both boys were dumbfounded, looking left and right as Natasha brought out a couple lights on stands, and a light modifier, a big white umbrella shape to guide the light down at her bed. She brought out a camera too, very expensive, and plugged it into her laptop. A few moments and some clicks later, the camera was recording, she could see the video feed, and she started adjusting the lighting.

Art was the first to speak up. “Umm, you've given this some thought.”

“Jessy ... she gave me an idea. I thought, m-maybe, since I d-d-don’t want to do this in person, I could ... make a video? And I n-never half-ass anything!” Nodding, because her perfectionist nature was obvious and everyone should know it, she started adjusting the cameras. Project mode. The world disappeared, time vanished, and all that mattered was her project. It just so happened that this particular project was a sexy project, and one that Jessy, and Antoinette, would no doubt approve of.

Once everything looked perfect, she looked between the boys and the bed, and squirmed. “Are you sure ... you d-don’t ... mind ... if someone ... sees us?” She was almost hoping they’d say no, so she wouldn’t have to go through with this. It was exciting, and terrifying, like skydiving.

The boys shrugged. “Nope,” they said together.

Tash squirmed and wriggled, and eventually nodded as she turned around and set her hands on her wardrobe. “Ok, ok ... I...” This was scary! But it wasn’t as scary as her trip into the Shadow Realm. And besides, she’d get to edit it later, or delete it, if she didn’t like it. That didn’t change that she was shivering at the idea of being filmed while having sex.

Little her, and her two big boyfriends, on camera. Someone was going to get to see her naked, and in all likelihood, having an orgasm, and being doubly penetrated. It was a thrilling idea, she had to admit to herself. Jessy enjoyed being seen, and the Prince enjoyed being seen. And Jennifer certainly enjoyed it, that was for sure.

Live sex was not on the menu, though! It was fun and addictive, doing it with Jessy’s ghouls with her around, but that wasn’t the same. Jessy was her friend, and the ghouls were only there for sex. With Matthew and Arturo, there was a growing emotional connection, and she wasn’t sure she was comfortable with the idea

of anyone else being there when she touched them, felt them, and came on them.

But a video was different. She could do a video. She could edit it and make it pretty and artistic and sexy. And she could remove unflattering scenes and stuff. Yes. Perfect plan. If it went well, she could even do it again, and use her growing knowledge of cameras to set up more, for multiple angles and things.

She gulped, nodded, and walked to her laptop on the nightstand. The software was expansive, but she'd swallowed down its details with her nerd obsessiveness, when she'd decided on the project. She could pilot its knobs and dials, and with time, she found good settings for the software.

The boys chuckled as they looked around the room, and touched the various lights and stuff mounted on stands.

“Sure you don't just want to hold a handheld camera?” Arturo said. “Or Matt could, or me, and we can just pass it around, get juicy shots.”

Juicy shots. If she'd been blushing life, her whole body would have lit the room red.

“No! N-No no. If ... if we're going t-to do this, then I ... I w-want to make it ... pretty.”

Matt nodded, but Art laughed and shrugged.

“So Matt and I are porn stars now? In some new age, modern, artistic, femme-friendly porn?”

She frowned at him, but he smiled at her with that charming, infuriating smile as he walked up to her, slid behind her, and set his hands on her hips. It wasn't fair that a touch as innocent as that made her anger melt.

“No, not porn stars. B-But my friends, they ... they w-want me to continue ... growing. D-Dolareido is ... The P-P-Prince has encouraged this city and culture of ... sexual openness. I want t-to try it.” She reached into the wardrobe and started rooting through some things. Something pretty, or dignified, or sexy, or cute, or—

“I think,” Art said over her, hands still on her hips, “you should wear those pink thigh highs you wore that one time.”

“With the n-nightie?”

“But without the nightie. Seeing you and those smooth legs wrapped tight in pink, and they make just a little pinch around your upper thighs? The nightie is super cute, but when you’re naked except for the thigh highs, it’s perfect.” The man groaned, and pulled on her hips a little tighter to squash her butt to his thighs; so tall. “It’s a great balance of girlish innocence, and womanly charms.”

“Girlish innocence ... that shouldn’t b-be erotic!”

“Eh, I dunno.” Matt, sitting on her bed, shrugged as he tilted his head from side to side while looking up at one of the two directional lights. “There’s something really arousing about a young woman, just turned eighteen, who sleeps with stuffed animals and has kittens on her pajamas, having a man in her bed. I guess it’s the contrast.”

She frowned all the more. “P-Perverts.” Ok, so she had both of those things, the thigh highs, stuffed animals, and kitten pajamas. And ok, she did really find the idea appealing, of a man in her bed, surrounded by her stuffed animals, holding her close and gently fucking her. But they weren’t allowed to like it, too!

Sighing, she reached into a drawer, and pulled out the now infamous pink thigh highs, before turning around and glaring up at Art. He smiled. Jackass.

“Ok, so, t-tonight, I’m in charge. You ... d-do what I say, ok? No ... getting out of hand.” At first, no getting out of hand at first. At this point in their relationship, she’d more or less accepted that the boys couldn’t help themselves once they’d been at it for a while.

They nodded, and feigned innocent smiles. Jerks.

Nodding, she walked over to the camera, and adjusted it for the twelfth time. “Ok, um ... get n-naked, and sit on the side of the bed.” She looked at the display on the camera, and lined it up with the bed. Video footage wouldn’t show her face normally; the Beast would find ways to hide it, either by subtly turning her head at just the right angle, or by ensuring scenes with her face had just enough blur to prevent identification. Hopefully, she could keep that Beast reflex suppressed when she wanted the camera to see her.

The boys did as she asked. Wow. A thrill danced up her spine as she watched through the camera display, and adjusted for height and depth. She remembered that time Damien had shown her his telescope, and she’d seen Jessy through her window, getting opened up by four sets of hands. There was a thrill to it, something naughty, something fun, about seeing a sexual act through a window or camera lens.

And of course, her boyfriends were gorgeous. Arturo with his tan skin and dark, sexy, mischievous eyes. Matthew, with his blonde hair and gruff, and heavenly blue eyes. The fact they had the bodies of Olympian strength athletes was undeniably appealing, no matter how much she tried to think she didn’t need a man to have muscles to be attractive. Abs were attractive, the V shape of their wide shoulders and backs connecting to their hips was attractive, and the girth of their arms was attractive. They had the bodies of buff porn stars.

She laughed at that, and the boys raised a brow each, before she dismissed it with a hand wave. “Keep going.”

Shrugging, the two boys got naked, and she licked her lips as they slid out of their jeans. They'd trimmed their pubic hair down to almost nothing at her request, and it exposed more of the hard lower abdomen of the pelvis, the Adonis belt. It also made their members look bigger, and they were already big.

Looking at it through a camera display and doing inventory on their bodies, it really seemed like she was spoiled. Utterly, completely spoiled.

“Ok, that’s good. Y-Yeah, I’ll ... yeah.” Ok, time for the hard part: getting herself on the screen.

With a deep, useless breath, she started to undress. The boys watched, smiling, grinning, and a familiar fire lit in their eyes as she took off her shirt and suit pants. Ever since she'd started dating them, she'd grown more comfortable wearing fancier underwear, and instead of wearing what Jessy referred to as 'granny panties', Tash was wearing some black underwear, panties that bordered on a thong.

The boys whistled. She rolled her eyes and tossed her shirt aside. Bra-less. There was no need with small breasts usually, and unless she Blushed Life, her nipples would remain soft no matter how cold it was. And, considering how many times the three of them had impromptu sex in various places, one less garment between her and their fingers was a good thing.

She smiled at that thought. If Jessy could read her mind, she'd be teasing her incessantly.

As she slid out of the underwear, both men, each facing her, sitting on the bed with a few feet between them, began to masturbate. Their eyes were locked onto her smooth slit, and how its tiny lips were hidden. They used slow, gentle strokes, that soon had the large phalluses standing upright. Were they kine, she'd tell

them to stop or they'd ruin things, cumming too soon. But they were Uratha.

Utterly spoiled.

She slid on the pink high thighs, and peeked a glance at her boyfriends as she did. They continued to masturbate, slow but steady, eyes staring at her, her small, thin body, and shaved smooth sex. Every so often, they rumbled, a bass-filled purring sound unique to these wolfish men, and it only grew as she finished putting on the high socks. Both stared at how it pinched slightly halfway up her thigh.

She reached into one of the socks, and snapped it against her skin lightly. Both men groaned.

“That is fucking amazing,” Arturo said, looking her up and down like she was a steak he was about to devour, complete with licking his lips.

“Agreed.” Matthew showed the same behavior, eyes locked onto her legs, her butt, and his stroking hand grew a little faster.

She Blushed Life, and they both rumbled. Instant heat flooded her, hardening her small nipples, and igniting little tingles along the skin between her thighs. The way they looked at her, like they were ready to pounce her, pin her, ravage her, and that her request was the only thing holding them back like a leash, set her skin on fire. If she pushed them too far too fast, they'd give into their instincts again, grab her, hold her, trap her in their embrace, penetrate her, and fuck her until she couldn't feel her legs anymore.

The goal was to see if she could keep them under control for the camera. She fetched some lubricant from the shelf, set it on the bed, and climbed up onto the blankets between the two large men. And, without realizing it until she'd done it, she made sure to move in a more exaggerated way. Instead of just hopping onto the bed, she



arched her back, stuck her butt out a bit, and crawled with a little prowl.

Having a camera on her was sending electricity through her body, leaving her surprised. She'd never done anything like this, and that thrill was palpable. Like that first night with Jessy, testing new waters had been an overwhelming experience mixed with so much jittery nervousness, it bordered on fear. And she still felt that, but instead of it burying her in anxiety, she found herself excited.

She wasn't the same woman anymore. A lifetime of keeping her sexual adventures to a couple of very vanilla relationships, and otherwise a bunch of sexual exploration behind closed doors by herself, were days gone. Now, she'd been involved in what could only be called an orgy, on several occasions, with her good friend Jessy. Now, she'd been having threesomes almost every day, for months. Now, she'd given double blowjobs in dark alleys, been fucked on rooftops, spied on her boss giving her lover a tit fuck, and had, despite her best efforts to deny it, enjoyed a multitude of purely anal orgasms.

And now she was creating a sex tape for Jessy — and probably Eric — to watch. Good god what had happened to her?

Dolareido happened to her. Jessy, the Prince, and others who liked to wear their sexuality openly, like Jennifer and Isabella, they happened to her. Confident women who knew what they liked and had no issues pursuing it, women Natasha had never thought to compare herself to, once upon a time.

But now a camera was pointed at her, pointed at the bed at a slight downward angle, and she blushed profusely as she smiled at the lens while telling her Beast to let it get a peek at her. She got comfortable on the edge of the bed, motioned for Art and Matt to sit in closer, and slid a hand down her chest and stomach as they did. Both boys rumbled in their chests once their legs were snug against

hers, and she reached out, set her hands onto the base of their lengths, and smiled a tiny, shy smile up at each of them, as she started to stroke them.

Heavy, hard girths filled her small hands, and she shivered as she squeezed lightly. The heat of their flesh sent the butterflies in her stomach into a frenzy, and the way their members, firm and huge, molded slightly to the pressure of her fingers, had her breathing heavy. The boys smelled of sex, and it wasn't long before some drops of precum rose to the tips of their lengths. The camera was having a strong effect on them too, or they were getting into it so quickly because she was. Both, probably both.

Matt's closer hand slid down her body, her breasts and chest, and down between her legs. Without thinking about it, she slowly looked from him to the camera, and smiled again as she inched her thighs apart. His fingers slid down underneath her, found the beginnings of growing wetness, and traced her juices up higher to find her clitoris. It was embarrassing, how quickly she got wet these nights, but embarrassment turned into a satisfied moan, as Matt began to lovingly caress her clitoris.

Art's fingers traced down her back, and a quiet pop told her ears that he'd opened a bottle of lubricant; she always kept some in her bedroom, these days. A few seconds later, he set his fingers back onto the small of her back, and then down further between her butt cheeks, and up, against the small rose of her ass. Lubricant pressed to the skin, and Art massaged it against her entrance until she found herself pushing her ass toward his hand.

She squeezed on their cocks harder, stroking with a little more firmness after spreading their growing precum around their glans. As much as she was already feeling the tingles begin to grow through her body, the boys had been masturbating for a little while already, before she got to touch them. With anyone else, she'd stop,

to keep their arousal available. But the werewolves were a bundle of hunger and desire, and a single orgasm was never enough for them.

She was so spoiled.

Matt started to cum first. She let go of Art, and leaned in toward Matt, sneaking in underneath his arm so she could snuggle into his side, as her hand continued to stroke his length. The giant of a man shuddered for a moment, and grinned down at her, no longer stroking her clitoris so he could make room for her under the arm. He hugged her close to him, and she kissed his ribs and the enormous muscles that covered them, as she peeked a glance at the camera, before looking down.

His cum gushed up, announced by the flexing of his girth, and she set her hand over the head of his cock to keep the waves contained. The heat was immense, and she shivered, a small mewl escaping her, as she watched the waves of white fluid fill the crevices between her fingers. So much, always so much. She licked her lips and moaned as she moved her hand down, massaging the thick girth a lot harder with the newfound lubricant, and another wave of cum flowed out of him, slow and thick. With his girth aimed upward, it flowed down and onto her fingers, and she made sure to make a show of it for the camera.

Through all this, Art seemed quite happy to continue fingering her. He sank his large digit deep, to the final knuckle, and wiggled it around, adding more and more lubricant as he needed. It felt wonderful. It wasn't something she could cum with, not this early, and not the right angle, but it still felt great, how he massaged the inside of her ass, probing and prodding, and she couldn't help but wiggle. He earned a few mewls from her too, and she blushed again as she managed another peek at the camera, while still stroking Matthew through his messy orgasm.

“K, Matthew, um ... lie d-down, on your stomach. I w-want ... to sit on you. And Art can ... you know.”

“Yes ma’am.” With a curt nod, Matt slid back onto the bed, and lay down. He was so huge and heavy, he sank the bed considerably, and she giggled as she struggled to not roll with the sudden indent in the mattress.

Art slid back as well, removing his finger from her body. With a little more cat prowl movement than strictly required, she got between Matthew’s knees, her weight on her own knees, and her hands pressed to his lower abdomen. She set her cum-coated fingers around his girth, and her clean fingers too, and started to massage the long shaft again, as she lowered her lips to the tip.

The giant’s reaction was immediate. He growled. She smiled down at the lying beast, and worked her lips back and forth along his glans, as she moved her hair out of her eyes and over her ear with a hand. A small peek to the camera again, before she started to slide more of the enormous girth into her mouth.

She lifted her head with a jolt, and looked over her shoulder, as Art began to sink his cock into her ass. And despite herself, she arched her back downward, pushed her ass upward toward him, and wiggled her butt a little as she peeked back at the camera. Her eyes rolled upward, and she set her head down onto Matt’s thigh, strength leaving her as she felt the length of Art’s member filling her. Deep, deep, and deeper, until she felt the man’s length pressing toward her stomach.

Art reached down, took her shoulders, and pulled her up so she was kneeling upright, back pressed to his chest, and he clutched her body as he began to thrust into her. And that spot, oh god that spot, deep and aching. Delirious with arousal meant that spot, that deep spot, made her body shake when he hit it through the walls of her ass.

“W ... wai...” Her breath was gone, and she struggled to find it. But as Art slid his fingers into her pussy and started to finger her, the tiny amount of air she needed to make sounds fled, and she melted. With his cock hitting that spot deep inside her again and again, while his fingers curled up to press against her g-spot, she could do nothing but tremble.

Matt slid in closer, until his shaft was underneath her and ready to penetrate her wet slit. His right hand took his soaked length, and stroked it as he watched her. She was still on her knees, kneeling upright, so if Art would only lower her down, she would soon be doubly penetrated by her boyfriends; god, she wanted that. But Art didn't lower her. Instead, he continued to finger her, harder, and hit his pelvis against her ass hard enough to make her squeak.

She peeked at the camera again, knowing full well what was about to happen, and being horribly embarrassed about it. Heat flooded her skin head to toe, announcing the blushing she couldn't avoid, and she managed a small smile through the pleasure, as she started to cum. Art removed his fingers from her, but his thrusting didn't stop. Again and again, she felt his hard length hit that aching spot deep inside her, until her muscles clenched down hard. The pleasure coursed through her, rippling out down her legs into her toes, and up through her belly, causing her insides to tighten.

A look down revealed she was dripping. Several drops of her cum leaked out of her, onto the awaiting cock of Matthew. And then more, and more, as Art continued to thrust into her, the copious amount of lube allowing him to fuck her ass with enthusiasm. Only after his thrusts started to slow down, did she realize he'd been cumming inside her as she came.

Matthew groaned, masturbating a little faster as her fluids coated his length. But, he began to slow, eventually only using his hand to keep his length pointed upward, as Arturo started to adjust his position. The man behind her spread his legs, and helped lower her

down, and down. She couldn't help him much, trembling as she was and trying to recover from her orgasm, but he kept lowering her anyway. Down, down, and down, onto the awaiting shaft ready to enter her.

As Matt's cock pressed against her tiny, soaked folds, she moaned openly, and forced herself to look at the camera again, as her body began to devour the man's length. A small tap of her fingers against Art's wrists caused him to let go of her, and she leaned forward, pressing her hands down against the giant's abs as she continued to sink downward. His girth spread her taut, and a peek down at her slit showed how wide he was pushing her little labia apart. And as his girth dragged along her g-spot, getting deeper and deeper, she felt his glans press against her depths. The spot was already aching for more, after Arturo's treatment of it, and feeling Matthew's glans press to it as he stretched her deep, was euphoric. Tenderly and gently like this allowed her body to adapt, preventing any pain, and flooding her with sparks of pleasure in her core. She squeezed hard on his girth, earning another groan from the enormous man, as she slowly, very slowly, devoured him to the hilt.

With both men now fully inside her, she took some time holding still, fingers kneading on Matt's abs — too tall for her to easily reach his chest while sitting up — and her ass snug to their pelvises. Arturo's position couldn't have been comfortable, squatting around her, but he seemed ok with it, and he held onto her waist for balance. Both of them, balls deep inside her, stretching her deep and apart, but not moving. Good god.

She looked at the camera, licked her lips, and smiled down at Matthew, as she began to grind her hips back and forth. "Hold still for me, a little longer."

What would Jessy do in this situation? Or Jennifer? What would they do for a camera, with two men inside them? They'd probably get rough, bounce, get things full of tumbling thrusts that had them

struggling to stay on the bed. Much as the boys liked to get rough with her sometimes, they never got that rough; she was too small, and stretched to the limit already. And honestly, she wasn't interested in getting tossed around like a ragdoll.

But, she loved the way the two men wanted her, desired her, craved her. She loved it when they lost control, and gave into their animal side; a little, anyway. The way they sometimes stared at her, and she knew they were imagining little her with legs spread wide around them, filled her with tingles.

What would Antoinette do, in this situation? Were it Jack underneath her, she'd probably show off for him, play with her breasts and stuff. Natasha had basically no breasts to speak of, but that didn't deter Matthew or Arturo's obsession with them. They'd covered her chest in their cum a dozen times. What else would Antoinette do? She'd probably...

Natasha sat up straight, reached up with both hands, and combed her long black hair back behind her with her fingers. She spread her elbows out as she did, emphasizing the shape of her torso, of her small, feminine, dainty frame, her tiny pale breasts and swollen, pink nipples. And she offered the camera a seconds worth of bedroom eyes, before she tilted her head up, and kissed the underside of Arturo's jaw.

Both boys groaned. Arturo's hands squeezed her waist with an almost desperate need, and Matthew rubbed her legs where her thighs were spread around him. As their voices faded, she leaned forward again, put her hands back on Matt's stomach, and started to slowly, gently, grind her body back and forth.

"Fucking hell," Art said. "I'm dying here, Tash."

She chuckled, but it came out as squeaks. "You? I ... I'm b-bursting." One of her hands found her stomach, and she pressed down underneath her navel, where the two men were fighting for

room inside her. Leaning forward like this meant the bump along her flat, small stomach, that showed just how much she was bursting, was subtle. But she could feel it, the overwhelming pressure and tightness causing each and every inch she moved to fill her with the sensation of flesh rubbing against flesh. Her little clitoris was practically standing up, but it was her insides that were aching beyond reason, more of her juices trickling out of her as her body demanded more heavenly friction and pressure on her depths. The sensation of pressure on her g-spot through the sheer volume of girth filling her had her struggling to keep her eyes open, and the way the both pressed against her depths, stretching her inward, was making her quiver, and whimper.

And the camera was making it worse! Knowing that a lens was on her, that she was being taped, and soon someone else would be seeing her naked, on display between two beautiful men, was overwhelming her with heat. She moved a little faster, posing as she did; she didn't try to, it just happened. Her small frame, lost between all this muscle and testosterone, must have looked good on camera, right? If it didn't, she could edit it, or delete the video. If it did, she could show it to people, show that she was — despite her tiny size — a woman, with curves and a sexual appetite. She was gorgeous!

Antoinette had, apparently, gotten into her head at some point tonight, and started driving.

She reached behind her, took Arturo's left hand, and guided it up to her neck. The instant he squeezed, a solid and firm grip, every part of her wanted to turn into warm goo and melt all over him. She guided his right hand to hook around her waist in a hug; she was small enough, and him large enough, that he almost could hug her waist with nothing but his fingers. With Matt, she took his hands and guided them up onto her hips, so she was covered in palms and fingers, arms, and muscle mass.



She offered the camera another peek, before she whispered to the men around her. “Ok ... f-f-fuck me.”

Like well oiled pistons, or perfectly aligned cogs, or ... experienced porn stars, the two men started to thrust into her body in rhythm with each other. Instant pleasure started to flow through her, more than she could get by moving on her own. Giving into it, especially after having teased them so, was euphoric, and she erupted into tiny squeaks and mewls as the friction of flesh on soaking hot flesh filled her.

She wasn't Natasha anymore. She was someone naughty, and salacious, and comfortable with themselves and showing off. She was someone who could do something as insane as make a sex tape, with two boyfriends, and let people see her when she climaxed. It was like wearing beautiful armor, being like this, confident and happy. It made it so easy to get into it, to let the growing heat spread out from her center and into her limbs, until she couldn't help but move with the two men thrusting into her.

She managed another peek at the camera, before her eyes closed. Clenching muscles and a shortening of her breath announced her orgasm, and the two men slowed down as she started to cum. They slowed, but did not stop. The thrust slower, but deeper, making sure to sink both themselves to the hilt, at the same time, insuring she could barely get a breath, as her juices trickled down onto the beast beneath her.

They rolled over, or rather rolled backward. Soon she was on her back on Art's chest, and Matt was leaning over her, fucking her. He brought his chest down over her, squashed her between him and Art, and he took her thighs, bringing them up to her shoulders. Only then did she remember she was wearing pink thigh highs, and she managed a small giggle between her squeaks.

The only thing the camera would be able to see now, were her pink legs bouncing around, sticking out from between two massive bodies, and two enormous shafts, plunging into her again, and again, and again.

Utterly. Carnal. She could edit it out later. Or, more likely, leave it in.

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~~Jack~~

Three Kings Cemetery. It was a beautiful place, and Jack instantly felt comfortable once he stepped through its gates. The Beast in his guts purred, happy to be surrounded by monuments that respected the dead, especially on a cloudy night with a cool breeze like tonight. It felt normal, felt right, to be walking among enormous tombstones with amazing sculptures upon them, angels and knights, horses and coat of arms, and some reaper-like figures. Some vampires probably lived in cemeteries like this, sleeping in locked mausoleums, and drinking of visitors. He understood.

It was the sort of cemetery that belonged in Paris or London, hundreds of years ago, and it didn't really fit into the modern-rich atmosphere of Dolareido, with its clubs and casinos. But Antoinette and the others had made sure a chunk of South Side was separate from all the money and vices, and Lucas and Maria had made sure to preserve the tradition. It led to things like the Grand Cathedral where Maria slept, and Three Kings Cemetery, where the dead got to indulge in dramatic presentation, and Gothic atmosphere.

The dead, the truly dead, didn't give a shit of course, but the fake dead like Jack couldn't help but be drawn to it. He stood in front of one headstone, with an angel sculpture standing behind it, raised upon a platform, and he smiled as he noticed it was worn with time. The features of the eyes and wings were smoothed out, but the magnificence of it wasn't. Another tombstone had a smaller angel, a

baby or cherub or something, floating upon a basket. A child's tombstone.

Graveyards struck the perfect note of sadness and serenity, to soothe any soul, but if he had to guess, vampires probably enjoyed the atmosphere more than anyone else. The only reason Three Kings didn't have Kindred hiding in it right now, was probably because of Maria's nearby presence, or because of the strange shit Jacob did here. Rumor had it the cemetery was haunted, and he was sure that was entirely Jacob. And this far out from South Side central, it was quiet enough that the breeze rustled the leaves of nearby trees, planted in the graveyard. It did feel haunted.

Someone was watching him.

His new strength, powers, abilities, all joined to heighten his senses. It'd be hard for anyone to sneak up on him now. Elders must have walked around like this, like rocket launchers at the ready and held by itchy trigger fingers, knowing full well they could, and should, shoot anything that looked remotely suspicious. It was scary, being this strong now, knowing he could tap into the curse without issue anymore. It was scary, having his Beast whisper to him things he didn't notice before, like the presence of distant kine, the flapping of bird wings, or the fact someone was hidden in their Cloak of Night, and was watching him.

Jack wore his coal suit tonight, with a slick coal business coat. For some reason, he wanted to remind himself that his life didn't have to be about colossal alien entities, ancient curses, and otherworldly realms. He was a vampire first and foremost, and that meant skin, bones, blood, and the hunger for it. He was a walking corpse that looked great in a suit.

He looked over beside him, and the darkness hid his small smile. There was someone over there, a kine, standing at a grave; she wasn't the person who was watching him. Whoever that was

remained hidden. The woman, in her forties, was texting on her phone. Attractive, and dressed to please the eye with a coat covered in fluffy white fur, and black high heels visible below.

Jack started toward her, and used a hint of vitae to keep his motions quiet and suppressed. Instinct had kicked in, told him this was a hunt, and he let his instincts guide his actions in a way he never did before. He was over two years embraced now, and hunting prey came easily to him, even without his newly inflated Beast steering him. Walking up to a stranger and initiating conversation would have been a daunting prospect in the past, and it still wasn't a fun time for him, but he could get over that hurdle without too much trouble now.

The woman only noticed him once he was beside her, and she jumped away from him with a startle. Her phone fell, and Jack snatched it out of the air before it landed.

“Oh! Oh Jesus Christ, fuck me, I ... hello,” she said. This close, the darkness peeled away to reveal her long, flowing dark hair, and her dark skin. She reminded him of Athalia, though without the height. “You saved my phone!”

“I shouldn't have startled you,” he said softly as he handed it back to her. No need to talk in hushed tones, but it added to the atmosphere of the moment. It was a graveyard, after all. If he'd been doing this in a library, he'd have done the same thing. No reason to disturb the ghosts.

“No no, it's fine. Surprised to see anyone else out at this hour, in a graveyard.”

He struggled to not grin at that. “Me too.” A glance down at the tombstone showed a man's name, Harry, someone who died a few years ago. “May I ask who this is?”

“My husband.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Much as he hated this small talk, it was a skill, and a valuable one. Chewing-the-cud dialogue was as painful as taking a cheese grater to his testicles, which was a big reason he avoided chitchatting with strangers. But in a graveyard, the talk was likely to have a little more depth, or at least, not hop subjects every fifteen seconds.

“It’s fine. He was an asshole. Cheated on me.” Well, that was blunt of her. Her eyes hardened as she looked at the tombstone, and she sent another quick text off. “He doesn’t deserve to be buried here, honestly. Three Kings is too good for him.”

“Why is he?”

“His parents are rich.”

“Yep, that’ll do it in Dolareido.” Where the money runs like blood.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m Felicia. And I really shouldn’t be telling this stuff to a stranger.”

“Talking to a stranger can be freeing. And I’m John.” John Smith, naturally. “Hit me.”

“Hit you?”

“With more about”—he glanced down at the tombstone again—“Harry. Or rather, why you’re here visiting him.”

“Heh.” She shrugged and shook her head. “I’m here because I’m dumb. We were in the middle of a divorce when he died. I guess it’s just left me ... left the situation unresolved.”

“I’m guessing there were good times, along with the bad, if you still visit his grave.”

“Of course. I married the fucker, after all.”

“It’s good to have some good memories of the people we lose. They have a habit of sticking around for a long time.”

*Why all this small talk? Just take her, drain her, and leave the corpse on her husband’s grave. Perfectly poetic.*

Fuck you, I’m not killing her. Kindred in Dolareido don’t kill without reason.

*Kindred kill. Kindred are predators. And you even have the Prince’s permission to kill, as long as you don’t violate the Masquerade. Go nuts. Kill her.*

No! Fuck off and shut up.

“You ok?”

“What?” He raised his head. He must have lowered it at some point without noticing, probably to hide the expressions on his face; they couldn’t have been pleasant ones. “Y-Yeah, fine. Just thinking about ... an ex-girlfriend. She’s not dead, but we were together a long time, and I don’t know if I’d be doing what you’re doing, if she died.” God damn, lying was easy once you gave yourself over to it. “Needless to say, it did not end well.”

“Ouch. I’m sure you’d feel differently if it happened, though. I mean, at the time I wanted to kill Harry, but now ... seems ... like a waste.” She took a peek at him a few times as she sent off another text, noticing his nice coat and suit. Confidence plus suit plus politeness equals easy hunt.

*Maybe turn her, then? You have no thralls or ghouls. A lovely lady like her would be a valuable set of eyes and ears.*

I have Scully and Mulder for that.

*Then fuck her. Turn her into a ghoul, and make her your personal hole to fuck.*

The fuck do you care for sex? If you're ... a voice for the Kindred half of me, or whatever, the fuck does sex mean to you?

*Drink her during sex, Kiss her. Make her your own.*

I have a lover, the love of my life. Idiot.

*She has ghouls, so can you. Grow your army. Start with her. You can drink her and fuck her, and invite that so called Prince.*

Jack shook out his head again, but when Felicia caught it, he made sure to catch her eyes. She was intrigued by him, the small guy who showed up out of nowhere, in a graveyard, to talk with her. It wouldn't be hard to turn her into a thrall or ghoul really; a single command and she'd drink his blood. A taste or three, and she'd be a thrall, devoted to him. If he put his will and vitae into it, she'd become a ghoul, devoted to him all the same, and immortal, as long as he kept feeding her the will-infused blood every month.

And she was attractive. Age treated her well; or botox, he wasn't sure. Cosmetic surgery was the norm in Dolareido, with fake breasts and fake butts, worn by fake personalities. That didn't mean Felicia was like that, but considering her fancy coat and heels, in a graveyard no less, she lived the high life. He wouldn't have been surprised if she was one of the couples he noticed fucking on their balconies, doing lines and showing off jewelry naked.

No. Making a thrall was something to be calculated, with an eye for the effects, short and longterm. Would she be valuable? How many secrets could he trust her with? Hell, just telling her he was a vampire was a huge danger, to him and his kin. A ghoul was more reliable, someone that could heal from grave injuries, exercise great strength, and supposedly, even perform some Kindred feats, if they

were old and strong enough. To create a ghoul was a major investment, and he wasn't about to do that to a random woman.

The only reason he was even thinking the thoughts, was because he could feel his Kindred instincts kick in in self defense. His sire was dead, and that truth weighed on him until it fucking hurt, until it was breaking his back and pinning him to the ground. He had to be more paranoid, more careful, not let the curse make him do anything stupid, but also plan for the future better than he had been. Kindred caution was telling him that, if he wanted to outlive his sire and grandsire, he had to be better, and build an army.

Julias didn't die because he made a mistake, Jack. He died because you did. The only mistake he made was helping you.

Jack pushed the thoughts away, smiled at Felicia, and reached across the empty space between their eyes with his thoughts. Vitae, the energy in his blood, let him bridge that gap. It was magic, an ancient, disturbing, twisted, dark magic. Blood magic, he supposed. He hadn't thought of it that way before, when he'd first become a vampire. It wasn't magic to him, just an extension of his abilities, same as he had when he was kine. Now, after seeing werewolves, monsters from a literal nightmare realm, rats summoned en masse by Viktor's hand, after seeing Lucas summon a bolt of lightning, and so many other things, magic was the only word he could think to use.

Fucked up, horrible, powerful magic.

Felicia's mouth parted slightly, and her arms hung limp at her sides. The resistance she provided him was beyond small, so small it was like stepping on an ant. Is this what it felt like to be an elder? Using Dominate felt ten times easier now, and apparently, he'd been a natural at it from the start. He could break this woman's mind and turn her into a vegetable, with the smallest modicum of effort. The giant creature in his guts, inflated by the curse he never wanted, was



giving him the power to use fully automatic rifles, when he'd only just got comfortable with BB guns.

With great power comes great responsibility, so he'd heard. All he wanted to do with it was get revenge, and then seal it away. Not exactly a superhero, was he?

"Come here," he said, barely more than a whisper. She complied without hesitation, her face blank, and her mind as well. "Come closer. I will drink of you, Felicia." He almost added what would have inevitably been a horrible attempt at the classic Dracula accent.

She succumbed. He breathed in the smell of his meal, her perfume, her flesh, and he gently sank his fangs into her neck as he did. His hands took her in an embrace, and he growled quietly against her skin as he let the thick, warm, divine liquid pour over his tongue. Delicious. It didn't taste like metal, not really, not like a kine would have tasted. To him, it tasted amazing in a way he couldn't put to words. Fulfilling, warm, sweet. Maybe like hot chocolate, but thicker, and the more he drank down, the better he felt, like an energy drink. No, food descriptions didn't work. Kine blood was too amazing, too addicting. He gave up thinking about defining it, and just reveled in the moment of a successful hunt.

Felicia moaned, but he didn't drag the Kiss on. He drank quickly, sucking the blood out of her instead of letting it flow into his mouth slowly. If he was going to turn this into a sexual affair, slow was better, but he'd never do that; not without Antoinette present to enjoy it with him, at least. Done quickly, the Kiss was plenty enjoyable, but Felicia was borderline comatose before she could truly enjoy it. She went limp in his arms, and he gently lowered her down onto the tombstone as her energy vanished. A couple of licks onto the puncture marks in her neck, and they sealed, hiding the evidence of his hunt.

No gods, no alien creatures, no nightmare monsters, no spirits or ghosts or goblins. Just a vampire, having a meal in a cemetery. Long ago, he was terrified of this. Now, it was a moment's reprieve before he was thrust into the insanity awaiting him.

"I can remember," a woman's voice said from the dark, "when you had trouble doing this sort of shit."

He wiped a thumb along his lips, put his hands in his pockets, and looked to the source of the sound. Beatrice was standing beside a sculpture, a huge one, an angel with sword in hand, and she managed a small wave for him as she caught his eyes. She must have been the one hiding with the Cloak of Night, and revealed herself when he was done. The presence of a hiding vampire, one as old and strong as a vampire like her, was something the old him would not have been able to detect. Not true anymore.

"I had people like you to help me," he said. He walked up to her, and managed a small smile once they were a couple feet apart. "Taught me how to hunt, right?"

"How to hunt in alleys and shit, yeah. I didn't teach you how to flirt with strangers."

"That wasn't flirting!"

"Any woman her age who gets approached by a young guy in a great suit, who's making flawless chit chat, is going to assume you're flirting, at least a little. But hey, she looked interested."

He frowned at that, looking down as he held his chin between his fingers. "You're right, I guess. Antoinette has taught me a lot about talking, how to be suave and stuff. And ... Julias did too."

If she was going to flinch, she hid it well. "I'm sure he did. Fucker was a smooth talker." Her smile grew, and Jack matched it. It was a fun memory, thinking of Julias and how frustratingly smooth he

could be, when he wanted to. The good memories always last. “You really want to wear that?”

“I ... Shit, is it going to get messy?” He looked down at his nice clothes, frowning all the more.

“Probably.”

“Well, I mean I’d prefer to keep it from a blood soaking, but if it gets ruined, I guess I’ll just replace them.”

“You Invictus fuckers just love to waste money.”

He shrugged, and adjusted the shoulders of the jacket in a very ‘look at me I’m gorgeous’ fashion. “True dat.” Distant noises called his attention, stone shifting on stone, and he looked to the mausoleums in the back of the graveyard. “Jennifer?”

“Good ears.”

“Yeah. This curse comes with benefits.”

She nodded, snake eyes looking down as she ran the toe of a boot back and forth along the path beneath them. “Good. And ... how’s your stomach?”

“My stomach?”

“Going to ask you to do something pretty ... fucking horrible, honestly.”

He closed his eyes, took a deep, useless breath, and nodded. “What is it?”

“We have seven sacrifices waiting downstairs, alive but unconscious.”

“Jesus...”

“Jacob’s down there, preparing, but he doesn’t think it’ll be enough.”

“Enough for what? How’s this going to work? I don’t even know what we’re doing.” And if seven sacrifices wasn’t enough to fuel this ritual, holy fucking shit, how deep did this rabbit hole go?

“Crúac is ... weird. It’s fickle, and it can be random. We’re trying to track down the hunters, right? Jacob knows rituals that can track people down, so do I, but we’re trying to catch a target hiding inside a weird flesh chamber. It’s ... it’s difficult. It’s like we’re digging for items in the sand, except there’s other items in the sand, and some of them are sharp.”

He raised a brow. “That sounds difficult. But, I’m not sure what I can do.”

“We need a new ritual.”

“Sounds tough to do.”

“More than tough, impossible, without a ... a ... sign, I guess.”

“Sign?” He glanced back at the unconscious woman he left, hopefully fine until she recovered in four or eight hours. It was damn unlikely for thieves or whatnot to come visiting Three Kings Cemetery, not after the last time, when a few of them disappeared. Probably sacrifices for Jacob’s disturbing hobbies.

“What we’re doing tonight isn’t a Crúac ritual, not really. It’s an ... offering, to the Crone. For guidance.”

“Guidance...” He winced, and when he met her eyes, she winced. She knew what it sounded like, then. “You believe there’s a Crone ... thing, out there, listening to your prayers?”

“I didn’t, when I first joined the Circle. But after all the shit we’ve seen, Jack, how can you not think there’s something out there, things, listening to us? Big things, godly things, things that look at human existence like flies buzzing around a rotting corpse, and vampires are the cockroaches.”

He couldn’t help but smile at that, and her nasty but effective metaphor. “At least you have a humble view of yourself. Does Jacob share the same view?”

“He does. Hell, much as he likes to act big and tough, I’ve seen him pay more respect to this mythical entity he’s never seen more than I have.”

That was a plus in Jacob’s favor. If he didn’t consider himself to be an important figure in the grand plan — or whatever — of his Crone’s existence and intentions, then it was less likely Jacob was just manipulating Beatrice in a pyramid scheme.

“... I miss the old days,” he said, “when all I had to worry about was working up the courage to talk to strangers.” With a gesture to the unconscious kine behind him, he started pacing, hands in his pockets and head looking down. “Now we’re worrying about hidden gods and scheming devils. Now we’re worrying about alternate fucking dimensions, monsters from literal nightmares, and psychopaths with flesh magic.”

“You’re telling me. Fuck, what I’d give to just curl back up in J ... Julias’s bed, and ... yeah.”

Her eyes fell, avoiding his gaze. If he’d looked at her with sympathy, with any empathy, she’d probably have burst into tears, and left. It was something they had in common, that they didn’t want sympathy, even if it would have been good for them. Nope, fuck that, just power through their misery, even if they broke their nose and bones on every wall in the way.

“So, I’m here. What do you need me to do?”

“Right, right.” She took a breath, licked her crocodile teeth with her long tongue, and looked up at the cloudy sky. “Jacob’s been talking with Black Blood, and they both think we need more ... sacrifices.”

“More?”

“More. We’re trying to summon something’s attention. We think last time, we managed to get somewhere, and this time we have seven sacrifices like I said. But it’s not like we can just linearly scale up how many we sacrifice until the Crone, or whatever’s out there, responds. We’ll run out of people eventually, or the Prince will interfere, or—”

“So you want to sacrifice a lot more people, to make sure this is the one time you need to do it. Prudent, if you were running a business. Psychotic, if you’re, oh I don’t know, killing people.”

Her snake eyes cut into him hard, and she came closer to him as she ground her teeth together. It made her crocodile teeth click as they shifted grooves along each other.

“Dolareido has plenty of people the world won’t mind disappearing.”

“Not so many that you can just wipe out dozens of people. And besides, they’re still people. You’re really ok with slaughtering humans like this?”

In the past, he’d have been afraid. Beatrice was a strong Nosferatu, strong for her age too, a Kindred who’d exercised her powers far more regularly than her fellow Carthians. Jacob recruited her for a reason. Once she was old enough, the whole city would fear her as one of the most powerful elders to ever emerge from its streets. She was strong, good with the Cloak of Night, and

he knew she could bestow nightmares if forced, the unique ability of Nosferatu.

But now it was different. He wasn't afraid of her, she was afraid of him, and she was acting aggressive because of it. He didn't want to fight her, and the only thing he was afraid of was accidentally hurting her if it came to that.

"It has to be done!" she said.

He winced, looked down, and gulped. Lot of wincing tonight, and he doubted it'd stop any time soon. "You've killed people, Triss, on hunts and stuff. I've never killed anyone outside of a battle, you know?" When he raised his eyes back to her, she'd taken a step back, and she looked shocked. "I still think about Mrs. Pavala sometimes, and the interviews I saw on TV with her family."

"That ... that's different! She was an innocent, and it wasn't your fault. We're only sacrificing scumbags."

That earned a frown from him. "We're flirting with a line, Triss. I'm terrified of crossing it."

"The fuck? I thought you were willing to do anything to kill Angela."

"Anything except sell my soul down the river."

"... are you going to help or not?"

He sighed, dug up a small smile from somewhere, and nodded. "Yes, I'll help."

Kindred only kill kine when they need to. This was one of those times.

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Predictably, they went to Devil's Corner, not too far off from the brothels Vicky and Parker ran. Jacob had his fingers in this district, and probably had thralls and ghouls no one knew about, running side businesses and keeping their eyes open. The more he dealt with shit like this, the more he didn't blame the elders for rarely sticking their necks out. One wrong move and an elder could find themselves in the middle of an explosion a rival set up in a random building years before. Boom, gone, no more rival.

He struggled to think Jacob would actually kill Antoinette, but he had to swallow the painful truth that Jacob might, if he could without risk of retaliation. And he definitely would kill any of the other elders if given the chance. They'd probably kill him, too. What about Garry though? He had some sort of relationship with Jacob, but he didn't know the details of it, if it extended to friendship or purely business.

He laughed and rolled his eyes. Kindred instincts were kicking in, warning him of the Danse Macabre, and that he should start playing it. He should be creating thralls no one knew about, setting up spies, surveillance, maybe connecting with some animals. He'd never given Scully or Mulder his blood, but it was a thing he could do, to turn them into devoted servants. The idea irked him, but another part of him said it was just the way the game was played. Animals, kine, they were like money and property, tools to be used to extend his life as long as possible, so the Kindred believed. Ugh.

A glance upward spotted Scully and Mulder, flying from rooftop to rooftop, power line to streetlight. He didn't know if Triss noticed them, but he wouldn't have been surprised if she had. She wasn't a Mekhet, but she was still surprisingly talented for her age, more than she probably realized.

"I'm surprised Jacob isn't doing this himself," he said to Triss as they walked the sidewalk. She had them wrapped in her Cloak of Night, or rather its gentler cousin Face in the Crowd, which let kine



see them without actually noticing them. It meant they could walk through the street crowds of Devil's Corner without issue, no one noticing her face, or his suit.

"I guess he'd have a harder time doing this than you. And it's probably a test of your commitment."

"Mmm, love all this cult talk."

"Jack, it's not a cult. You know what's going on."

He shook his head and frowned at her. "I don't know what's going on, and neither do you. You can't honestly believe Jacob or Black Blood are telling you everything."

"They're ... telling me more than I bargained for."

That caused him to raise a brow, especially as she avoided eye contact. He almost followed up with more questions, but her eyes had grown cold, glaring, staring ahead, and he pulled back. No need to be aggressive with her, it wasn't like he was in a position to judge.

"Any ideas where we can pick up people we don't mind killing?"

"Jacob says there's a new fucker pushing in on Devil's Corner, some human with delusions of grandeur, setting up trafficking rings. Innocent people are getting hurt. You know the deal."

"I guess, yeah." He didn't always know the deal. Once upon a time, the idea that humans were capable of killing each other over drugs, or territory, or prostitutes, was alien to him. And his parents thought the city was a safe place to live, according to the statistics. It was, but not nearly as safe as he thought, when he was still alive. Disappearances happened all the time in Dolareido, and the Invictus or the Prince covered it up when it suited their purposes.

"Think you can handle Dominating that many?"

“How many is that many?”

“Probably four of five.”

He shrugged and nodded. “Easily.”

That earned a raised brow from her. “Really?”

“Even without the curse, I’m sure I could convince a few kine to follow us without issue. Maybe not to their deaths, but we could just lie until we knocked them out. Now though? No problem.”

Again, she looked surprised, and her eyes flicked from him to the sidewalk and people ahead of her. “That’s damn impressive for someone your age.”

“I ... had a great teacher.” He didn’t stop to catch her reaction. Better to talk about Julias and move on, not let it weigh them down. “And it was a natural talent, same as my sire and his sire, and I presume his sire and her sire.”

“Still can’t believe you actually got to see a vision of Viktor’s sire, and her sire. What’d they look like?”

“Beautiful women, honestly. Susanna, the ... source of the curse, she was short, slim, long dark hair. Beautiful, in a petite, and maybe a little psycho kinda way. And she sired her childe in the middle of a threesome. Her childe was taller, blonde, very curvy and busty with a slim waist. Definitely got some Jessica Rabbit vibes from her. I ... I saw her siring Viktor, and she was having sex with him against a wall in what I can only assume was a street in 1600s, England.”

That made her laugh, and Jack blinked at her as he waited for her to regain her composure.

“Sex is in your veins.”

“I guess it is.”

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Finding the people was easy enough. Four tough guys and one punk girl, wearing clothes that were stereotypical. He hated that it was a stereotype, how it gave perfectly nice people a bad image, but there was no denying the baggy clothes and tattoos were common among the worst Devil’s Corner had to offer.

But, that wasn’t a fair analysis. In his world, the biggest scum, the dirtiest fucks, the most horrible people that deserved slow, painful deaths, were often the most well dressed. They enunciated and spoke eloquently. They hosted wine tastings, art showings, and hedged stocks. They wore suits and dresses worth the same as a car, and they were very, very good at hiding how fucking horrible they were.

He was usually surrounded by suits. Being down in the dirt, behind buildings, in dark alleys, and under the homes of pimps, was a change of pace for him. Carthians dealt with this particular half of humans usually, and would be better at recognizing the signs, at knowing which kine were dangerous and which were up to no good. All he had to go on was whatever Beatrice told him.

“I’m looking for Clarence,” Triss said.

“You found him.” One of the kine stood up, and the rest of the group followed, each reaching behind their back, but leaving their hands hooked behind and out of sight. Hands on their pistols, no doubt.

Jack took a step forward, made eye contact with each of them, and sighed. “Leave your weapons behind, don’t say a word, and come with me.”

The more complicated the instruction, the more difficult it was to get across. Three commands was tough, but doable. Doing it to five

kine at once was very tough for any neonate Ventrue, especially one as young as him. His natural talent, and his powerful bloodline helped, but it was the curse that made it easy. Their minds broke like twigs. Not a hint of resistance. He had to pull back, yank on the reins of the force that flowed out of him and crashed into their minds, or he'd have damaged them. They were open to him, and he could turn them into his puppets with ease. He could rewrite their memories until they were empty pawns.

They set their pistols down, and walked up to him, eyes void of anything.

“You ... you hit them hard,” Beatrice said.

“Yeah, too hard. I'm still trying to get used to this.”

“I didn't realize you could just use this curse thing on command, so easily.”

“I couldn't before, and I wish I couldn't now. But, it's like someone took my toy gun and gave me a rocket launcher, and didn't bother to teach me how to use it.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“Yeap. I'm a menace to everyone around me.”

They both laughed. It was good to laugh, like laughing at death. Helped alleviate the cruel, cold truth of reality that he was walking out from behind a building with a bunch of kine that were going to be dead before the night was over.

“Before you say it,” Triss said, “yes, I do wonder what Julias would say right now. I'm guessing he'd be pretty upset we're doing this.”

Ouch. Jack looked back at the criminals, and checked for a reaction. Normally he'd have to be careful to not let them know what he was doing, if he was going to make them do something they didn't want to do. If a kine realized the orders they were following were dangerous, or suicidal, they'd try and fight to escape his control. This wasn't that. This was full on hypnosis with layers of memory wiping. He had damaged these kine. If they managed to get free somehow, he doubted they'd get full function of their minds back for days.

Christ, in the past using Dominate was like trying to smash through drywall. Sure it was tough, but certainly not impossible. Breaking these kine had been like trying to smash through a glass wall, with a tank. It'd been a struggle to stop his forward momentum, and not accidentally topple the whole house.

He waited a minute before nodding. "Yeah, he would be upset. Julias loved the kine."

"Yeah, fucker did, just like Superman." Her voice choked for a second, and she looked away as she took a deep breath. "He was envious of them, of how they enjoyed life in the moment, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

"And here we are, performing rituals to dark gods so we can win a war for our survival, and revenge. And after that, we'll be continuing our stupid games with the covenants, and other shit. It's comical."

"Yeah, it is." He looked back at the group following him again. Triss had extended her Cloak of Night enough to hit all of them, since its weaker form Face in the Crowd was easy to use. Anyone watching would have seen them and their strange group, but no one would care.

"How's Sándor?" she said.

“Still a vegetable. I think I could break into his mind, but it’d be like building up pressure on a dam to break it.”

“It’d ... break everything behind it once the dam went down.”

“Yeap,” he said. “No one has any ideas of how to get the seal off him. Best I can figure is we kill Elen.”

Triss shook her head. “We want to capture her. If we kill her, it might not break the seal. If we capture her, maybe we can force her to remove it.”

“Or better yet, maybe if we capture the flesh mage, we can have her do all sorts of crazy shit for us.” He made sure the sarcasm was dripping.

“You know everyone wants her. Jacob isn’t alone in that. Your bosses want her, and so does your girlfriend.”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ve already fucked up twice with these hunters. I’m not going to make a mistake and let them escape again, because our bosses are elders and obsessed with getting their hands on every angle of power they can.” He glared at her, squinting until she was forced to look away. “We’ll capture her if we can, Triss, but if you had to pick between that, or killing Angela, which would you take?”

“Not even a fucking question ... unless...”

“Unless?”

Triss rubbed the back of her neck. Something was bothering her, for sure. It squirmed out of her, making her fidget until she broke.

“Jacob and I have been talking ... about ... resurrection.”

Full stop. Jack blinked at her, several times, before looking back to the group following him. “Forget this conversation ever happened.” They nodded in unison, his faithful zombies, and Jack looked back to his friend with wide eyes. “You can’t be serious.”

“We don’t need Elen, but I’ve seen the sort of shit she can do, in that weird flesh chamber. It ... it’s ... possible, that maybe she could do something. Maybe she could help us revive people? Julias, Mary, and I’m sure the others would—”

“Don’t.”

“What?”

“Don’t. Just don’t. There’s no reviving the dead, Beatrice. We can’t get them back. Christ, how many movies, how many stories, how many fucking comic books do we have now showing how bad an idea that is?” He turned and pointed at his zombies. “Any of you got a car?”

“Yeah,” the woman said.

“Take us to it.”

She nodded, stepped up, and guided them down a different street.

“The fuck we need a car for?” Triss said. “Let’s just carry them and run to Three Kings.”

“Easy for you to say. Even with this curse, I’m still short and light. Physics are a thing. And don’t change the subject! You can’t honestly expect this resurrection idea is possible. We have some of the oldest, strongest vampires in this city, and two of them have been fucking with shit well beyond our understanding for centuries. If it could be done—”

“It can be done! It can, it fucking can. It can it can it...” She came in closer to him, shoulder to shoulder. If she’d wanted to, she was close enough to hit him, and she sounded like she wanted to, but she sighed and just shook her head. “It is possible, but doing it is insanely hard. It’s just not feasible unless you’re ready to cause a biblical catastrophe.”

Wait, what? He put every shred of control he had into his poker face, and kept his eyes ahead of him as he walked. “Biblical catastrophe?”

“I’m trusting you with a huge secret, Jack. Swear you’ll keep the ... the little I tell you, to yourself.”

Good fucking god. This was not good, not good at all, but he needed to know. He ground his teeth until he felt his jaw bone threaten to crack.

“I swear.” Fuck. Fuck fuck. He meant it when he made an oath, and she knew it too. Fuck.

“Jacob knows a way to at least attempt resurrection, but he hasn’t tried it, because it’d pile the bodies to the sky. Fucked up as he is, he won’t try that.”

Jack looked to Triss, and he knew he wore shock on his face. She’d think he was shocked that Jacob had actually learned of a way to resurrect someone. He was shocked because holy fucking shit that fit so damn well into Azamel’s warning that it made him want to scream. No. No no no, oh fucking god no.

“You’re ... sure he wouldn’t try it?”

“Pretty damn sure, Jack. Jacob’s a twisted bastard but he loves this city. There’s a reason he calls it his, instead of Antoinette’s.”



That was true. Jacob did love the city, in his own strange way, in an Erik and Christine sort of way; Dolareido being Christine in that fucked up relationship. And Minerva died a long time ago. If Jacob was willing to destroy the city in order to revive Minerva, he'd have done so already. Right? On top of that, Dolareido was his source of food and shelter. Kindred spent centuries setting up their nests to be safe and sustainable. It made no sense for Jacob to ruin that.

But, what about Maria? Her lover had only recently died, and more than few things pointed to her being up to something. If Jacob knew how to resurrect someone, and wasn't willing to do it, was Maria?

*Kine are sheep, Jack. Any elder will gladly sacrifice tens of thousands of them to bring back a loved one.*

There are millions of people in Dolareido!

*The number is meaningless. Susanna piled the bodies high, because kine are nothing more than bags of blood that inconveniently move around.*

Jack squeezed his eyes tight, and forced the voice away. "You trust Jacob?"

"I ... I do, more than I should, but I do."

"Alright then. When it comes to Jacob, I'll trust you, Triss. If you tell me I don't have to worry that he's going to do something insane, I'll take your word for it. But promise you'll tell me if that ever changes."

"Promise."

# Chapter 100

~~Beatrice~~

They walked through the cemetery gates, and stepped among the tombstones, a bunch of brainwashed kine behind them. She tried to not show it, but she was a little scared. Not of Jacob and the madness he pursued; that ship had sailed. No, she was afraid of Jack.

He'd accidentally hurt these kine, their brains, with how easily he'd dominated. Accidentally performed an act most ancilla Ventrue would have struggled to perform, let alone a neonate, no less. And he wasn't lying about it, either. The kine behind them were thoroughly brain fucked. She could have turned around, slit the throat of one of them, and the others would have barely reacted. Normally, a kine brainwashed by a Ventrue's Dominate, could break free if the stimulus they were exposed to was too extreme, or if they thought their orders went against their beliefs, or self preservation.

These five might as well have been wearing blindfolds and drugged to hell, with how little they were thinking. A blessing in disguise, she supposed. Killing an animal was easier when it didn't display signs of intelligence.

The woman Jack had left unconscious was still there, on the ground and sleeping against a tombstone, untouched. She'd be fine. No kine came to the cemetery with ill intent, not with people like Jacob and Black Blood haunting it. In the past, the kid would have felt horrible about leaving a kine unconscious and unguarded like this, but Jack walked past her, sparing only a quick glance and frown. He probably still felt bad, but didn't let it stop him. Sad. Every night was turning the kid more and more into a typical Kindred.

What would Julias say about that? He was the one Kindred in the whole city who tried to keep his humanity, keep thinking about kine as more than food, and tried to keep the peace between Kindred. Superman, a real white knight, who would tell Jack he should find a better place to let the kine woman sleep off the Kiss coma. He was dead, and Beatrice was about to kill a dozen kine in a prayer offering to the Crone, in hopes of learning a Crúac ritual to hunt down the hunters.

Depressing.

She guided Jack to the mausoleum in the back of the cemetery. They said nothing. This wasn't a fun time, and it wasn't a chatty time. It was a shit time, and she was about to expose Jack to a side of it she'd prefer to not.

The journey through the tunnel was gloomy as all hell. The warning sign above remained, Jacob's sign, and Jack took note of it, but he'd seen this tunnel before, from that time Black Blood rescued him. Black Blood, and Jacob. The kine behind followed. Some managed a glance up at the sign, but where there should have been fear, she saw only numb faces. And when it got too dark for human eyes, they started feeling along the stone walls to guide them. Sheep to the slaughter.

"Clarice! How nice of you to join us. And five more? The Crone will be pleased."

The sight was horrific. The seven kine Jacob had prepared dangled from hooks over the bowl, alive, and unconscious. Triss didn't know if the Crone cared about pain, beyond what the Kindred had to suffer to learn Crúac, or if Jacob had ever indulged in torturing his sacrifices, but she was thankful he'd never done that with her around.

The elder stood by the giant bowl, dressed in his black robes and black eye bandage. Jennifer was there, wrapped in a black cloak as

well, and her eyes were wide, locked onto Jack and the offerings he brought.

“You did this?” she said.

Jack nodded to her, frown deepening, before he turned to the people following. “Do whatever they tell you to.” And the five kine nodded, like ants obeying the word of their queen, off to die without a thought.

“Excellent,” Jacob said. “Nice to see you putting that gift to use.”

“Gift?” Jack walked up to Jacob, glared up at his bandaged eyes, and grit his teeth. “Don’t. Just don’t. I’m here so we can find the hunters. I’m not helping you beyond that, and it’s not a gift. It’s a curse, treat it as such.”

Jacob’s smile grew, but the ice behind it was growing, too. Gulping, Triss and Jen both took a step back as they looked between the two men; so much for Jack being a kid. Two men fighting, two rather strong Kindred evidently, was not something she wanted to be near when it started.

“Curses can be gifts, Jack. Problems can be opportunities. You think so small! Give it a few hundred years, and you’ll learn to see the bigger picture.” Jacob stepped around the bowl, put it between him and Jack, and gestured to the enormous metal sacrificial altar. “Now, since your sacrifices seem to be thoroughly under your control, I won’t bother with drugs.”

Beatrice raised a hand. “We could—”

“Nonsense! Come, you, you, you, you, and you, stand over the bowl, and lean forward.” If Triss could have seen Jacob’s eyes, they’d no doubt be wide with madness. Jennifer was in awe over Jack’s abilities, impressed by his ridiculous power of Dominate, and Jacob was getting giggly over the power of it.

“How is this going to play out?” Jack said.

With a menacing grin, Jacob shrugged, and walked up to the first kine, the woman. “I have prepared the altar, and Black Blood has assisted. All that’s left now, is to prove our commitment, before I make the prayer.”

The slaughter commenced.

Beatrice forced herself to watch, but Jennifer had to look away. Triss didn’t blame her, honestly. If it were any other circumstance, Triss wouldn’t watch either, but the murder happening in front of her was her fault, her choice. Jacob may have been the one pulling the trigger, but she pushed for it, asked for it, and now she was neck deep in death because of it. Thankfully, Jacob wasn’t asking her to do the killing. Maybe he was protecting her, or maybe he liked killing kine and wanted to do it himself. Either way, she was more than fine with letting the old man do it for her.

Except, she would have killed them in a less messy method. A knife in the skull was instant death in almost all cases, and she knew Jacob had knives. The elder, on the other hand, never killed cleanly, as if the act of spilling blood needed to be as gory as possible. Maybe it had to be, for Black Blood to do whatever it was that Black Blood did. The spirit wasn’t in the room with them, far as Triss could tell, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t.

Jacob ripped the girl’s throat out, literally. The shower of blood into the empty, rusty bowl, and the struggles of the dying woman, were enough to stir reactions from the other sacrifices. If given time, they’d have probably broken free from Jack’s brainwashing, with the threat of imminent death weighing on them. But Jacob worked fast, spending no more than two seconds per sacrifice. The first one was still alive, by the time he’d ripped the throat out of the last one.

With each disgusting mess of murder and blood, he tossed the bits of throat into the bowl; blood and flesh were a part of the sacrifice, too. He let the writhing, silent sacrifices fall to the floor, where they bled out onto the Earth and stone, but not after having lost a gallon of blood into the bowl.

“Not exactly kosher, are they?” he said as he looked down at their bodies. His smile was gone, replaced by something else, something strange and twisted. Not a grin, or a grimace, but something Triss didn’t recognize, something between intrigue and resolution. Her boss was making jokes, but he didn’t mean them.

Jack turned his back to the slaughter, and stepped clear. For a second, Triss figured he was going to walk out, but he didn’t. Like her, he probably felt committed to being present for the results of his actions. Unlike her, he couldn’t stomach seeing such a horrible death.

Once upon a time, she couldn’t have either. Even at her worst, when she hated life and killed scum to vent, she didn’t delight in gore. This was disgusting. This was the road she was going down, if she wanted revenge. And it was the road she’d continue going down, if she ever wanted to see Julias again. Hell, this was a small taste of the Hell that she’d be treading on, a road paved in blood and murder, if she ever wanted to see him again.

Stop thinking about that, Triss. For now, just focus on catching the hunters. Killing some fucking shithead kine that were bad for the city, in pursuit of catching the hunters, was a perfectly reasonable action to take. Vampire lives came first.

Julias wouldn’t agree. Julias, was dead.

The blood poured, and only got worse when Jacob hopped up onto the edge of the bowl, reached out for a person hanging over it, and continued with the same process. These sacrifices didn’t squirm, and only swung mildly, giant hooks snug under the bindings on

their wrists. Unconscious, they went to death with all the fight of a stone. Blood gushed from their ripped open throats, down into the bowl, and onto the bits of throat from the other sacrifices.

The longer she watched, the more it felt like she was watching chickens, cows, or pigs being slaughtered. Now she knew why some people became vegetarians after visiting slaughterhouses. She grit her teeth, forced herself to keep her eyes on the murder, and waited until Jacob was done.

It only got worse. Jacob slipped each dangling kine off their hooks, and set them in the bowl, piling them on each other. Then he reached down and tossed the five dead into the bowl as well. A pile of death, limbs, flesh and blood, that was their offering to the Crone.

Jack turned around eventually, and winced as he stared at the pile of empty vessels. “And what if this doesn’t work?”

“Then we’ll try something else,” Jacob said.

“Until you’ve gone through all your ideas, like checking things off a list?”

“We’re dealing with gods and demons, aliens and angels, really fucked up shit, Jack. It isn’t about business, or checking things off a list, it’s about commitment, and intent.”

“Intent? I—”

Jacob walked over to him, and this time Jack backed up. The Nosferatu was soaked in blood, mostly at the hands, but every motion the elder made splattered blood around him. It got onto Jack’s suit coat, and his face, but it was a pale comparison to the rivers of red that coated Jacob’s sleeves.

“You Invictus are all the same. You live inside numbers, and you treat respect like a currency. You’re so blind to the greater

mysteries, God could come up to you and kiss your forehead and you wouldn't even notice. He could take off your sandals, wash your feet, and you'd try and quantify, identify, qualify, and turn it into a footnote for your books." The chuckling vanished. Jacob snapped his hands out, and grabbed Jack by the collar, splattering more blood everywhere. "You're swimming in the blood of a bleeding universe, walking on the ashes of dead deities, and you're too scared to even consider what could possibly exist beyond your insignificant, immortal lifespan."

For a second, Beatrice was almost impressed with the metaphor. But as she looked at Jacob, watched him clutch Jack as if desperate to get his point across to a boy who was desperately trying to stay grounded in the real world, she knew he'd been literal. Where had Jacob been in his life, what places had he visited, what entities had he talked to, to think like that? He was good friends with what might as well have been a deity, and he spent his time reading ancient manuscripts and sacrificing kine — and his own vitae — to a hidden god.

She came up to him, set an arm on his cloaked, dripping wrist, and nudged it off of Jack. Jacob turned his head to her, sighed, and stepped back, joining her at the bowl. When she looked back at Jack, she found the man looking down at the ground, caught between a frown and seeming genuinely hurt.

"I..." Jack stirred, still looking down and staring at the mess of blood the witches walked through. It was everywhere, flooding the cracks of the cave, until it sparkled like rivers in the candlelight. "I ... I'm terrified, Jacob."

The three witches froze, and stared at him.

"What?" Jacob said. And for the first time, Triss heard the sound of complete, total, genuine shock from her boss.



“I’m scared shitless. I’ve lost my sister. I’ve lost my sire. Now I’m carrying around something inside me straight from a horror movie, something that belongs in a fucking tome of dark rituals, not in my chest. And now we’re slaughtering people while we make prayers to dark gods. You might think this is all just another day, or maybe you’re excited to see things get shaken up, get fucked up and twisted, but every fucking day all I can do is hope and push for a time when things are back to the way they were. The sooner we can stop all this, the better. I’m hanging on by a thread here, and everywhere I look, all I see is shit that makes immortal bloodsucking vampires look blasé. So yeah, excuse me if I resist the idea of killing twelve people for a fucking prayer.”

All eyes fell to Jacob. Beatrice had never expected Jack to pour his heart out like that, especially not to Jacob. Maybe he felt like he could trust Jacob because Triss said he could. Or maybe he just couldn’t hold it in anymore. Whatever it was, Jacob didn’t look at him, keeping his head turned toward the bowl in front of him instead.

“Down here in the dark,” Jacob said, voice calm and almost soothing, “it gets pretty frightening. We’re buried in corpses and struggling to keep from drowning. Sometimes, you can hear the voices, and feel their fingers trying to drag you down.” Sighing, he shook his head, and motioned for Triss and Jennifer to step in toward the bowl with him. “Don’t worry, you’ll do better than most.”

“Better than most...” Jack lifted his eyes back up to the bowl, sighed, and stepped in closer. “So how does this prayer work?”

Jacob smiled, and pulled out a knife. “The sacrifice has been prepared. The three of us are going to imbue the sacrifice with our vitae. And then, we shall burn the corpses, a signal, to whoever’s watching.”

“Burn? There’s limited oxygen down here. The fire will die out.”

Chuckling, Jacob shook his head again, even as he slit his wrist. A thick, heavy glob of Kindred blood pooled at the wound, before eventually falling onto the corpses. Normally they'd use a single drop in their rituals, but Jacob forced out another, and another, each large and landing with enough impact they could hear it in the silence. Once he'd lost enough blood to make a kine lightheaded, the knife was passed around. Triss took it and did the same. Jack met her eyes, and she held a smile for him, a warm one, hoping it'd lessen his worry, as she bled into the bowl. Jennifer did the same, without the smile, and grimaced as she forced out her blood; poor girl was too soft for this insanity.

Jacob walked to the back wall, and disappeared into the heavy, unnatural shadow that covered it. Triss knew what was back there, the body parts and tools of torture, the symbols drawn on the walls, and the overwhelming dread, but it was better to not let Jack see it.

“Is Black Blood here tonight?” Jack said. The silence was absolute, and his soft voice echoed.

Some things went clank and clunk in the black. “He’s watching,” Jacob said, “from the other side. His followers help him perform their own rituals.”

“Followers?” Jack began to pace side to side, chin in his fingers. The look on his face was obvious: should he play his hand and let Jacob know more information. Triss would have probably said no, but she was curious. “You mean his red wraiths.”

Jacob came back out of the darkness holding a torch, unlit, and a strange smile on his face. “Your visit to the Hisil was informative. Black Blood wasn’t too happy that you left before he got to chat with you.”

“I imagine it wanted to know how I got there.”

Triss and Jen both looked between the two men, and Triss felt horribly lost. What the fuck were these two talking about, and what had they been up to?

“Yes, he, did.” With a head motion that suggested eye rolling, Jacob stepped up to the bowl, plucked a lighter out of his robes, and lit the torch. Fire, Kindred’s bane, lit the room a hundred times more than the couple candles they had, and everyone but Jacob covered their eyes until they adjusted.

Jacob tilted his head upward, as if in prayer, raised his slit wrist over the fire, and forced another large drop of his dark vampire blood from the wound. It splashed over the flame, and for a moment, nothing happened. But with time, and an unending smile from the Nosferatu, the flame changed color. He’d done this last time, with their first attempt at a sacrifice and prayer. Black flame.

It was a Crúac ritual, to create the flame, one Beatrice had no idea how to perform. Whatever the flame did, Jacob insisted it was a helpful step in bridging the communication gap between their pitiful little physical world, and the great beyond. Smoke signals, was the analogy he used. But like all things Crúac, it wasn’t as simple as a drop of blood on a torch.

Jacob tossed the torch into the bowl of blood and death, and without so much as a flicker, the massive bowl, sat upon dozens of carved skeletons below, erupted in flame.

The fire was huge, far bigger than last time, and Triss and Jen both jumped back, jaws hanging. Jack wasn’t near the bowl, but he stepped back too, eyes wide and hand raised to block the light that did not come. The flame was black. Like as if she was staring into a void, Triss gazed into the black flame that devoured light, and found herself lost in it.

It danced, swaying left and right, and as seconds rolled by like eternities, faces appeared in the flame. Eyes, mouths, wisps of

definition that came and went as the obsidian fire moved about in its deadly waltz, she stared at them all with wonder. They never held still, but she recognized them in the split moments they made themselves visible; the faces of the bodies in the bowl.

Then the howls began. As the fire swayed and flowed, devouring the bodies and disintegrating them, noises echoed within the metal walls of the sacrificial altar. Wails, like banshees crying out for their lost loved ones as they roamed graveyards, filled the cave the four vampires stood in. The sound had nowhere to go, so it echoed against the stone and metal, until it sank into the walls, and into the graves above. Three Kings Cemetery was a haunted graveyard, after all.

Beatrice raised her hand to her mouth, covering it, feigning surprise, but hiding an annoyed smile; annoyed with herself. Hanging out with Jacob had made her thoughts oddly macabre and poetic lately, and she couldn't help but indulge the drama of it all in her mind. No wonder vampires indulged in Gothic aesthetics and poetry, she was doing it and she wasn't even trying. Must have been a natural side effect everyone suffered, when they lost the things most precious to them in the world.

The fire rose higher, and higher, until it licked at the ceiling. It melded into the shadows, creating them and hiding more of the candlelight. The banshee cries and ghostly wails were persistent, but not loud enough to bother the ears. Background noise, the sort a psychopath killer might play as a lullaby before bed.

Jacob waved a hand through the flame before looking at Jack, and nodding to the boy. No damage came to the elder vampire, or his robe, despite how quickly the black flame was eating the bodies. Before Jack could respond, Jacob looked back to the flame, and began to speak.

“Oh Crone, it is I, Malachi, your acolyte, oh Crone. I and my fellow witches offer you this sacrifice. No blood was taken from them. Every drop has been saved, and spilled for you. Three witches have spilled their own blood for this sacrifice, so that we may hear from you, oh Crone. Send us a sign, teach us a way for us to hunt down our adversary, and bathe in their blood.”

He was hamming it up. He was really hamming it up, the bastard. Beatrice smiled at the man, if only because he'd adopted the voice of a preacher, saying a prayer to God in front of his congregation. The Crone, according to Jacob, didn't care about words; if anything, platitudes would offend her. What the Crone cared about, was intent, desire, and action. She cared about death and sacrifice. She cared about blood.

Hopefully, she'd care about them enough to answer their call.

The flames danced and swayed, howls and wails quiet but piercing, and the gentle roar of the fire the choir to their song. The bodies in the bowl were cooking, and the sound of crackling fat and blood grew louder. It smelled horrific. She stepped in closer, and ran her hands through the flame. It did not harm her.

This needed to work. Please, work. She had to find the hunters. She had to kill them. The thirst for revenge was coursing through her, devouring her, demanding she pursue it until the end, whatever end that may be. It was consuming her, down to her soul.

No wonder some vampires became obsessed with revenge, or obsessed with anything, really. She had eternity ahead of her. If she wanted to spend the next thirty years plotting the perfect revenge against someone who wronged her, it was perfectly reasonable for a vampire to do just that. If she wanted to spend the next two hundred years preparing the perfect ritual to resurrect someone, she could do just that. She had all the time in the world. And she'd do anything to make that happen, to—

“Come closer, child.”

Everyone froze, before they started looking around. Jacob? Jen? Jack? No, none of them. And it wasn't Black Blood either. That was not a familiar voice. It was quiet, a whisper, hidden in the muted banshee cries, and the gentle roar of the flame. And it sounded feminine.

After a small gasp, Jacob stepped away from the fire, and bowed his head. He said nothing, and he was trembling. Not a big tremble, not shaking in his boots or anything, but even a small tremble from her boss was enough to make her take notice. Jack was frozen like a statue, eyes on the fire, and Jennifer had taken several steps back, taking her cue from Jacob and bowing her head as well. She was trembling too, and a lot more than Jacob was.

“I said,” the whisper continued, “come closer, child.”

The fire, the faces in the flame, they turned and looked at her. Not Jacob or the others, but her, Beatrice.

“I...” It was talking to her. The things in the flame, the flames themselves, were talking to her. Oh fuck. “Me? Not Jac—Malachi? I mean, I—”

“Now, child of the night. Come to me.”

She did as instructed. In for a penny, in for a soul. If she was willing to go this far, kill this many people and dedicate her existence to the purpose of revenge, talking to an ancient god entity seemed par for the course. Was this how Jacob felt, the first time he talked to Black Blood? No, Jacob was already an elder when he came to Dolareido, and a devoted servant to the Crone. He must have been used to sticking his toes into dark water. She, on the other hand, was not.

“Closer...”

With a deep gulp, Beatrice set her hands on the bowl, and leaned in. The black flames and the faces within accepted her without pain, as before and as with Jacob, but this time, they responded to her. They bent around her, looked at her, enveloped her, and their banshee wails quieted. A second later, the room was deadly silent, and all Triss could see was the black flames flowing over her eyes.

“Yesss ... my child...”

“I—”

“Silence,” the fire whispered. “Let me ... see ... you...”

Oh fucking god, it was examining her. She was being examined by something, something in the flames. Was it the Crone? Who the fuck else could it be? She forced herself to look down, into the burning corpses and the ashes piling up, and she regretted it instantly. The corpses were moving, writhing, slowly twisting. If it was from the force of chemical reactions from the fat sizzling and blood boiling, she had no idea, but several of the dozen bodies tilted their heads to face her.

“I know your pain, child.” The corpses were talking. Oh fucking shit the corpses were the source of the whispering voice, and the now silent wailing.

“You do?”

“I ... know this ... pain. Let him go, child.” The bodies continued to twist, as if in agony, but the voice was calm and eerie. Death was whispering to her, sharing its secrets with her. “He ... is beyond ... your reach.”

She ground her teeth, and glared down at the talking corpses in the black flames. “But not your reach.”

“Let him go, child.” The voice started to grow quiet, and the bodies began to grow still. “Let him go.”

“But, that’s not what ... not what we made this sacrifice for!” She clenched hard on the bowl until she felt her claws fight to penetrate the metal. “We need to find the hunters, to kill them.”

The corpses renewed their writhing with all the hurried pace of the typical zombie. The only noise she could hear anymore was the roar of the fire, and the cooking of human meat.

“You ... desire ... a tool for revenge.”

“Yes.”

“Were ... it not for Luna, and her meddling, I ... would leave you to your battle, child. I have no use ... for children who are weak.”

“Luna? As ... as in...”

“The moon aids one of the Uratha, more than ... she should. This human city ... sits on a border ... and Luna ... takes advantage, to voice her ... concerns ... Ask the child of the moon, if you wish to know more.”

Ok, so one of the Uratha was being spoken to by the fucking moon. The. Fucking. Moon. Yeah, nothing crazy about that. But then, she had her head in black fire, was watching burning corpses squirm and whisper, and was apparently speaking to the Crone herself. Who the fuck was she to judge insanity, at this point?

“I ... I need your help. Please, I ... I have to ... I have to get them. If I can’t have him back, the least I can do is make them suffer. They might run, or try to escape, or—”

“How much ... are you willing to suffer ... child, to see your revenge ... a reality?”



She snarled into the fire, and glared. “Anything.”

One of the corpses snapped out their arm, grabbed her face, and the room filled with screams of agony. Her screams.

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~~Jack~~

“Holy shit!” Jack ran forward and reached for Beatrice, but Jacob jumped between them. “Get the fuck out of my way!”

“No.”

“What? Move, fucker!” Jack pushed forward, but Jacob remained in front of him. Tempted, so very tempted, to try and Dominate him, or maybe even just punch him, but Jack wasn’t that stupid, even in a panic. Now wasn’t the time to test his curse against Jacob’s years.

He glared up at the eyeless fucker, and tried to get around him, but Jacob, grinning a wicked bastard grin, stepped side to side to keep him from getting to Beatrice.

“Jack,” Jennifer said from the other side of the bowl. She had to yell to get over Beatrice’s screams. “This is ... the way.” His fellow Ventrue’s eyes were wide, staring at the horrific display. If it was the way, she certainly didn’t seem comfortable with it.

A corpse had literally reached out from the pile, grabbed Triss’s face, and was squeezing. Whatever it was doing, was making his friend scream like she was being burned alive. Her arms were locked, flexing, hands gripping the giant bowl’s edge. Her mouth was open wider than a human’s could, showing her enormous crocodile teeth, and her long tongue was bouncing around in there like she was being electrocuted. Her eyes were wide, and staring straight ahead into the black flames.

Jack stepped back again, glaring harder at Jacob with each step. “If she dies, you die next, Jacob.”

“Oh ho, big threats from the little Ventrue.” Sighing, but never losing his big grin, Jacob shook his head and gestured to the dancing flames. “Look, Clarice. Look at her. She’s communing with the Crone herself.”

“She’s getting her brain felt up by a fucking flaming zombie!” He wasn’t trying to be funny, but Jacob laughed at him anyway, a deep hearty laugh anyone would make when they heard a great joke. “How can you be so calm? She’s your student! She could—”

“I’ve been on this Earth for longer than you could ever appreciate, Jack. I’ve tasted black waters and I’ve swam in the blood of the dead. I’ve spoken to many creatures, many entities, and I have spoken to the Crone in this manner once before; if she is truly the Crone.”

“If?”

He shrugged, and gestured to the display behind him, at the burning bodies and the dancing flames. The quiet shrieks of ghosts and the damned resumed, but they were nothing compared to the cries of pain from Jack’s friend.

“There are many entities out there, floating around in realms beyond our understanding. How they operate is knowledge I cannot begin to fathom. I have spoken to these flames once before, and I can only guess that they were indeed the Crone. But perhaps they are someone else. Or perhaps they are a part of her. Perhaps all Beatrice is speaking to is the Crone’s pinky finger.” Jacob came in closer to him, smiling all the way, until he was only a foot from him. “We’re talking about gods, Jack. Gods. For all I know, the Crone, or Luna, or whoever else out there listening, is an entity with a thousand parts, a thousand voices, a thousand imitations, a thousand versions.” Shrugging, he slowly reached out, and set a

hand on Jack's shoulder. "Whoever this entity is that we have summoned, that has graced us with their presence, she did not steer me wrong last time."

"Last time..." Jack glared at the man, but gave up after a while. You can only glare for so long before it becomes meaningless. "Is this how you—"

Beatrice's screams and cries stopped, and the poor woman collapsed onto the floor of the cave. Jen ran over to her, and Jacob, after giving a small grin and nod to Jack, went to join her.

"Triss, you ok?" Jennifer said. "You—"

"I ... have honored ... your sacrifice," the fire said, deadly, soft voice cutting Jack to his guts. "Go ... and bathe the world in ecstasy ... and blood."

Boom. The fire exploded outward, engulfing everyone in flowing wind that swarmed around the cave, trapped. The black flame hit all of them, but did nothing. Whatever Jacob did to the flame, it didn't care about Jack, the other Kindred, or their clothes. Not true for the people in the sacrificial altar bowl. The exploding fire took the ashes with it, mixed it into the air, and littered cave with the black soot of the murdered.

Jack thought he was tainted before this ritual started. Now, he was covered in the blood and ashes of the people he'd helped sacrifice to some sort of god creature. Fucking hell.

"I'm fine," Triss said after a few minutes. "I'm ... fine..."

Jacob nodded, standing up and helping Triss do the same. "What did you learn?"

"She ... it ... showed me a way to ... to ... open those doors. Elen's doors, the flesh doors."

“Shit, really?” Jack came in as well, dusting the ash off himself as best he could. Considering how much blood Jacob got on him, he’d have an easier time removing tar. “You mean the weird ritual Angela did to create a new one?”

“N-No.” Shaky, Triss reached out for support. Jack went to help, but Jacob got there first. The eyeless bastard’s snarky smile vanished, for a second anyway, as he helped Triss keep her footing. “It showed me ... how to open ... an active one. The Crone, it ... she ... showed me, what Elen is doing, the strange blood magic she’s doing. She’s burrowing around in some sort of ... I don’t know, pocket dimension? The flesh room I fought Sándor in isn’t in the real world, I guess, or at least not completely. It moves around, and it has multiple doors in the city. It’s only connected to one of them at a time.”

Jennifer came up behind Triss, replacing Jacob, and slipping underneath her friend’s arm. “And you think you can open one of these doors?”

“If we can find one that’s active. Last time, we found one that was open, but there’s no way Elen will make that mistake again.”

“I’m surprised she made that mistake at all,” Jack said.

Triss shrugged, but almost fell for the effort. Poor girl was wiped. “Must take a lot of ... I dunno, magical energy or some bullshit, to open and close the active door. Last time, she flooded the whole place with thousands of gallons of blood, to get us out, before closing the door.”

Jack shook his head. “I know what it takes to open one of those doors. It takes a sacrifice. That’s why Angela killed the thrall we had in the hospital. That was a fresh door, but ... I wouldn’t be surprised if they had to do that every time they opened a door.”

After a long sigh, Triss nodded, but smiled at Jack once she managed to lift her head again. “We won’t need one this time.”

That was good. That was very good. All the killing was starting to make him sick.

*Learn to enjoy it, vampire. It’s a part of who you are, no matter how much you deny it.*

Jack grit his teeth, clenched his eyes tight, and forced the voice down into the recesses of his mind. “So, what now?”

“Recon,” Jacob said. “Maria and Michael and Garry are all still working together, like sweet little doggies, trying to catch the hunters. Someone needs to find one of the gateways the hunters use, one that’s active. They’ll close it, and Beatrice will force it open.”

Beatrice managed a thumbs up, before her arm fell limp at her side. “Jen, let’s get back. I need to rest.”

Jennifer nodded, adjusted her spot under Triss’s arm, and started the walk back out of the cave.

“Jacob, I want to talk to you, in private,” Jack said. Triss and Jen looked over their shoulders at him, but he smiled and shooed them off. “Don’t worry.”

They both frowned, but after a few seconds, continued on. Once they were a ways away, and Jack could no longer hear their shuffling, he let out a long sigh, and started walking around the now empty bowl. Good fucking god, that strange black fire had completely devoured the bodies. Fire didn’t do that; there’d be no need for crematories otherwise. There weren’t even any bones.

“Clarice Clarice, forever the investigator. Searching for clues?” Chuckling, Jacob walked around the bowl, staying opposite of Jack.

“Just marveling at how fucked up this all is. I heard what the flame said about Luna, and I’ve heard the Begotten talk about someone they call the Dark Mother.”

“All women!” Laughing, Jacob slapped the bowl’s edge a few times, like playing a drum. “Women are pretty amazing, aren’t they?”

The way Jacob had looked — or probably looked — at his mother reignited in Jack’s mind, and he glared at the eyeless bastard hard enough to light him on fire. Or not, since he didn’t, but he tried.

“And this weird thing you did with your vitae, to make the fire black. You used that to first speak with Black Blood?”

“Oh, smart, aren’t ya?” They circled each other, keeping the bowl between them. “Like I said, it sends smoke signals. Humans might be blind to this stuff, but the spirits are not.”

“And you’ve been sacrificing people since—”

“Since before I came to Dolareido, Clarice. It’s one of the reasons Black Blood and I get along. Black Blood is a kindred spirit to this Kindred.”

“Uh huh.” Jack stopped circling, and thus Jacob stopped circling, like a twisted mirror. The elder Nosferatu enjoyed doing things that put people off guard, got under their skin, and annoyed them. He was doing it as a reflex probably, not even thinking about it. How anyone could stand Jacob for more than five minutes, he couldn’t fathom. Minerva must have been an interesting woman.

“And you—”

“I want to talk to Black Blood.”

“Do you? Then make a sacrifice. It will beckon him.”

Of course it would, because the only way anyone was doing any of this dark ritual shit was on the backs of corpses, floating in an ocean of blood.

“Yeah, I’m not going to do that.”

“Ha, you think your Prince doesn’t? She’s talked to Black Blood on her own, on several occasions.”

Muscles in Jack’s body tightened as he glared at the man. “I ... won’t judge her, for that. I can’t.”

“And you judge me?”

“I’m trying not to, Jacob. But throw me a bone here. I just watched you kill twelve people, and I helped. I’m willing to help you with the twisted fucking shit you do in the dark, ok? So just ... let me talk to Black Blood. Your its friend. You don’t need to sacrifice anyone to talk to it.”

Jacob’s smile softened, and he stepped away from the bowl. “Him. I can summon him.”

“Him, fine.” Spirits didn’t have genders or sexes or whatever, but if Black Blood insisted on being considered male, fine.

“I can summon him because he’s my friend. He’ll need a corpse to work with, if we’re to physically interact, but if you’re only looking to chat, then—”

“Then I reckon I better make an appearance.”

Jack spun around, looking left and right and scanning the floor and ceiling. That was the spirit’s voice all right, heavy and filled with bass, and rasp, layered and inhuman. The Southern accent on top of it almost made it comical, but the cold weight that fell onto Jack’s shoulders for the second time that night wasn’t comical at all.

The walls began to bleed.

“You ... you were eavesdropping,” Jack said.

As the thick, black ooze dripped from the cracks on the cave walls, and the symbols drawn upon them, it began to pool around their feet. The onyx color dripped from the ceiling, and from the eyes of the skeletons holding up the giant bowl. One god left, another one arrived, and both were dressed in black. No more black flame, but now it was black blood, a thick liquid that flowed over everything until Jack could have swam; if the liquid had any consistency. For all its thickness, it didn't have weight or texture to it. But as it slowly overwhelmed Jack's body, as patient as Death, Jack could feel the cold inevitably of the monster's presence.

This god that sat on Jacob's shoulder was as sick and twisted as the Crone. No wonder it got along so well with Jacob.

“Indeed I was, little vampire. Why, I ain't ever seen a creature like this Crone, reach across the stars and air, earth and black fire, to make an appearance. Truly a blessed night.” The creature's voice was far too smooth for how terrifying a noise it was.

“You ... look up to the Crone.”

“When I was nothing more than a tiny black ball of decay and murder, before Malachi and his friends ever came to this place, people worshiped creatures of the dark, little vampire.” The ooze flowed up and around, engulfing everything and everyone. Jack knew to let it do its thing; it was how Black Blood filled an area with its—his presence. If the spirit wanted to kill Jack, it'd be easier to now, but it wasn't like he didn't have the opportunity to kill Jack multiple times before.

And besides, apparently the spirits knew about him. Maybe they liked him? Or found him interesting enough to keep alive.



“Other witches?” Jack said.

“Yes, but not Kindred. Oh, the murder that happened on the soil beneath your feet would make your skin crawl. Sins my simple existence did not know could exist at the time. The pain and death dripped down into the world, and into me.” Black Blood laughed, and the black water rippled around them all. Jack couldn’t feel it, but he could see how the waves distorted his vision, bending it.

Jack ran a hand over his buzzed head. “Trying to understand you is difficult. The other spirits I’ve seen—”

“Are defined,” the flowing onyx said. A glance toward Jacob showed the Nosferatu nod, holding a small grin for Jack, but the old man seemed content to listen to the conversation.

“I ... had a question for you.”

“Bless your heart, little vampire, thinking you can just ask me a question.”

Growls filled the room. It took Jack a moment to realize they were his own. Growling at an entity that might as well have been a god, was not a smart thing to do. But the curse inside him disagreed. It growled, and Jack had to bite down to suppress it.

“You want to make a deal.”

“Now don’t you fret none. I’m a fair spirit. You ask a question, and then I’ll ask one.”

“And if I lie?”

“Well, certainly possible, little vampire. But break a deal with a spirit at your own risk. If I find you’ve been steering me wrong, I will gut you and your precious mother, and spread your ashes across my city as warning. Can’t let nobody think they can get away with

breaking a deal with me, even if they are carrying some ancient curse.”

“No lying then.” And information was the most valuable commodity, to Kindred and to anyone who knew a thing or two about the seedy underbelly of Dolareido. Answering a question could be his undoing, for all he knew. But he needed to know. “When I was in the Hisil, we were attacked by these ... red wraith things, that I’m pretty sure work for you. They wanted flesh. Why?”

“Ah yes, my friends on the other side.” The black mist lifted, swirled upon itself within the sacrificial altar, and something resembling a human stood within, with only the most vague features, like a cloud of obsidian. “As you have seen tonight, there is more to flesh than simple meat and bones. That Elen witch knows this. My old friend Malachi knows this. Flesh is a machine with power, meant to carry a soul. Learn to bend it, work it, shape it, and a host of options come up.”

Of course the ancient entity of death and murder and dark magic and only God knew what else would want to develop an understanding of flesh magic. If spirits embodied their intentions, then Black Blood likely had parts to him that existed in a weird, ‘I am witchcraft and flesh ritual’ sort of way. No wonder he was so strange compared to other spirits.

“This flesh magic,” Jack said, “is pretty fucked up shit, you two. Even worse than sacrificing people to perform rituals.”

Jacob set his hip against the side of the bowl, head pointed at him and arms folded across his chest. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I saw the shit Elen did to track me and Eric down. She figured out how to use flesh like ... like ... fuck me, I don’t know. It was sickening, the things she’d drawn, analyzing skin and muscle and ... and ... tapping into something that let her learn about me, and Eric. And now you’re telling me you two have been trying to do

the same thing? You must have been pursuing this for a while, if there are literal incarnations of this fucked up desire wandering the Shadow half of Dolareido, ready to attack my friend, for a chance to see her guts!” Again, the curse took a joyride on Jack’s behalf, and announced his words as a shout. Jack didn’t mind this time.

Jacob looked to the mist, and the mist looked — probably — at Jacob; hard to tell where mist was looking.

“Don’t go walking where you ain’t welcome, boy,” Black Blood said. “There’s alligators in them waters. Don’t come visiting my realm unless I’m there to oversee it. Something might bite you.”

This conversation was quickly making it apparent, that Jack had a lot of growing up to do. He wanted to argue, spit bile, throw a fit, and maybe even challenge them. This curse made him feel like he could do it, too. To set aside the impulse, ignore it, let the emotion pass and then default to a logical decision, was a skill he prided himself on, but no one could do that easily when frustrated. His poker face was shattered, and he fucking knew it. Regain control, pause, let the bubbling rage settle, and then speak.

“You live in the Shadow Realm, Black Blood, but it’s not yours. Besides, we used a door that someone else put there. Your doing, I assume?” No point in keeping the Begotten’s ability to open inter-dimensional doors a secret, not after Black Blood had rescued them, and watched the Begotten leave the strange in-between realm on their own. He no doubt knew Fiona had been the one to open the portal to take Jack and Damien into the Shadow Realm. Maybe Jack could learn about the portal Fiona had found, and—

“That’s a second question,” Black Blood said, chuckling.

Jack bit down again. “Shit.”

“My turn for a question,” Black Blood continued, “about this curse of yours.”

“Of course you’d want to talk about the curse.”

The black mist leaned forward toward him. Dark fog flowed from its body, and dripped off of it like dye dispersing in liquid. “Don’t be getting too big for your britches, boy.”

“Sorry,” he said through clenched teeth. Like fucking hell he was sorry, but he had to play nice. God, he sucked at the Danse Macabre.

“Right you are. Now, the curse, explain to me the ritual that your ancient sire performed. Every detail now.”

Fuck. If they learned about the details, they could perform it. But it wasn’t like there were any Strix in Dolareido; that he knew of, anyway. And that tree at the bottom of some ancient cave seemed to be important, too. He had no idea where it was, and he had no idea if Black Blood could leave Dolareido. He seemed awfully attached to it, connected even.

“I guess Triss told you.”

“Yes,” Jacob said, “but what you told her was vague. Give us details.”

Frowning at Jacob the whole time, Jack recounted the tale. He did his best, and extrapolated where he thought it was safe. Susanna and Diablerie, how she performed it on someone who was likely a family member, and how she’d rubbed the ashes into the old, dead tree. How the Strix, the whole flock of striges, descended upon her, and filled her with the curse.

It was not a fun memory to go dancing through.

Jacob laughed, holding his face in his hand as his cackles filled the cave. “The amount of sins that woman committed in a single night, is astronomical. Your great great grandsire makes me seem

tame by comparison, Jack, even when compared to my most wild nights.”

Well, that was a good thing, if Jacob was telling the truth.

“I have another question,” Jack said.

“Shoot,” the darkness replied.

Ok, time to be smart about this. He couldn't just outright ask if Black Blood knew about some mysterious force conspiring to destroy the city. If Jacob or Black Blood were actually that force, perhaps pursuing resurrection or something, him tipping off his hand could get him killed. Back to the portal question then. Hopefully it wouldn't give him away.

“When we visited the Shadow Realm, we came through a portal, some sort of cut that went from one world to the other. Your doing?”

“I reckon it was. Few of them are my projects, and I'd appreciate it kindly, if you let em be.”

Finally, progress. If that one was Black Blood's doing, the others Fiona said were found in Dolareido probably were, too. Someone was cutting, or tearing, holes in the fabric of reality, and that someone was Black Blood; or at least, was Black Blood in several instances.

Fabric of reality. He almost laughed. It was like out of a fucking comic book. No, it wasn't the general fabric of reality being cut up. Be specific Jack. Black Blood was somehow creating holes from his world to theirs, and was probably doing other things, too.

“And you, boy, answer me this. What have you learned about that tart Maria?”

Jack blinked at the misty ghost, and glanced between him and Jacob. “Uh ... Madam Turio? Why do you want to know—”

“Them’s ain’t the rules, little vampire. Answer the question. What have you learned about Maria? And you know damn well what I’m referring to.”

Shit. Fucking shit fuck.

“Maria ... There’s evidence and rumors, that she’s been ... trying to ... Well, we don’t know. She might be trying to resurrect Lucas, but it might be something else. Maybe she just wants to talk to him?” He managed a shrug, but it wasn’t a very convincing follow up. “From what I’d heard, she was seen talking to spirits at some point.” A little prodding had garnered that information from Natasha, and now he regretted it. It was information he had to share, to uphold the deal.

Both Jacob and Black Blood made some weird grumbling sounds. Either they didn’t know that, or they did, and weren’t happy Jack knew about it.

Why though? Why would Maria be talking to the spirits? If they were Black Blood’s wraiths, and had become weird flesh-obsessed creatures because that’s what Black Blood was into, what did that mean? He wanted to ask. Christ, he wanted to ask. But if he gave Black Blood another question, he’d have a chance to ask Jack about anything. He might ask Jack a leading question, and Jack would unintentionally expose his motives about looking for the reason for Azamel’s warning.

“I ... think I’m done,” Jack said.

“Very well,” Black Blood said.

Jacob nodded, and so did the mist. But as Jack walked away, Jacob held up a hand.

“Do try and keep Elen alive, Jack. You owe me and Black Blood a favor.”

“Favor...”

The eyeless bastard grinned at him. “For saving your lives, lest you forget.”

Fuck.



~~Damien~~

Damien sat within Maria’s abode, deep underneath the Grand Cathedral of Dolareido. Nearby, Maria Turio sat at her piano, and played music with the delicate exactness of a virtuoso. Near her, her large, hunched ghoul swept the floor, tended the candles, and wiped the shelves. Damien sat at a desk with two laptops, and perused some ancient texts, looking to cross reference with the book that sat between the two screens.

Curses and Rituals, a Summary, by Sir Isaac Landers. There were many such texts in the world, of people attempting to decipher magical concepts, and many more that were tomfoolery — as Maria would put it — or just fiction. It was all worthless, except for a few texts that the Lancea et Sanctum held.

Whoever Sir Landers was, Damien didn’t know. A vampire probably, based on the way the man approached concepts like blood and sunlight, without ever actually saying the word vampire or Kindred. Learning to read old English was a pain in his ass, but slowly, Damien was discovering how to understand Landers’s words.

“I assume,” Maria said, without ceasing her quiet playing, “that you research such old knowledge, to help your friend.”

“Indeed.” The internet, for all its infinite wisdom, was full of shit. It was taking ages to find credible researchers, and those he did manage to find, had their careers silenced, delayed, or unfulfilled. Research into the dark arts of Crúac, he could understand being stonewalled. But Theban sorcery, he hadn’t expected to be so closed off and buried. It was damn secretive.

A mention of a concept here, an altar there, a long lost manuscript in a foreign tongue with a shoddy sketch, it was all so difficult to dig through.

“Though...” He groaned, ran his palms over his face and fingers through his hair, before he turned to Maria. “I’m hitting a wall. Trying to make sense of all this chaos is difficult.”

“Lucas spent centuries researching this material, Mister Burksen. And we have only a fraction of what he originally once had, due to Garry’s sabotage.”

“Do you have any insight to offer, Madam Turio? Jack says that his curse was originally sealed away by a Sanctified. I can only assume it was a spell of some sort, meant to seal away whatever sorcery the striges cast upon his great great grandsire.”

“I am afraid I do not.” She stopped playing, set down the cover on the grand piano’s keys, and walked over to his desk. Her white dress flowed on the mist that seeped from her skin, and Damien did his best to pretend he didn’t notice that. It wasn’t real, just an illusion, something her *Kindred vitae* perpetuated through her *Nosferatu* curse. Real or not, it, along with her cracked and destroyed skin, made her look like a ghost. No, a ghost would have been envious of how terrifying she looked.

He was getting used to it though, being around her as often as he was. Behind the cracked skin and cold mist, Maria was a woman, a heartbroken woman who refused to let her woes prevent her from doing her job. Admirable. She scooped the book off his desk, and



began to examine its texts. She could read the old language far more easily than he, no doubt.

“Maybe the Prince’s friend Elaine will know something,” he said.

“Elaine? Elaine is visiting?” Maria leaned her hip on his desk as she flipped through the pages of the ancient text.

“So says Mister Terry. You know her?”

Rolling her eyes, Maria continued flipping through the pages. “The woman is strange, even by Kindred standards. She is like fire; a breeze may settle her or have her blazing.”

“Volatile then?”

“In a way. And no doubt she will indulge the Prince’s sexual appetite. I expect the white-haired one to host a ball soon, similar to last, with flesh on display and blood to be shared.”

Damien offered his mentor a knowing smile. He didn’t mind the sexual displays anymore, uncomfortable as they made him, but he knew Maria did. She wasn’t Lucas, but she still hated such blatant, sinful indulgences.

“Do you trust her?”

Maria shook her head. “Never trust a dragon, Mister Burksen. They hold their pursuit of knowledge above all else. They’re the sort to read an ancient tome bound in human skin, in a room filled with dangling hooks and skeletons, and smile with delight as they accidentally summon Death herself. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Such types would destroy a world, if only to learn whether it was possible.”

An oddly powerful, and frightening description of Antoinette and her order. Damien looked down, the images of such ideas stirring up

his imagination. He could understand Jacob pursuing deadly rituals in his desire to expand the reach of his power, but for someone to perform dark arts to learn if they could, seemed even worse.

“In ... one of the rooms,” he said, “in the Elysium tower, I saw some strange symbols drawn upon the floor and walls.”

“When was this?”

“When I assaulted the building.”

“Ah.” She nodded again, and stopped walking in front of one of her hanging drapes along the cave wall. A beautiful tapestry of blood red and gold embroidery. She pushed it aside, exposing one of her paintings. Jesus Christ, being stabbed by a spear, wielded by a soldier.

She normally left it covered. Perhaps the image bothered her. But then, why keep it and expose it occasionally, if it did? He'd found her staring at it on several occasions, when she was in thought. Something was on her mind, something about the Second Estate.

Maybe she was prompting him, to inquire specifically about the Lancea et Sanctum? He hadn't done a good job pursuing anything in that region of his job; far too busy dealing with hunters and searching for a cure to Jack's curse. But, the least he could do was inquire.

“Have you spoken with the Prince about our desires?” he said.

“The next Primogen meeting is soon. I will speak with her then, as unfortunately, reviving the Second Estate will require the ears of all Primogen. Antoinette will have the last word, but the others must have their say as well.” With a tired groan, she gave him back the book, and began to pace about, hugging her chest and chin in hand.

“You believe the Prince will resist.”

“Undoubtedly. But, time has settled her rage. With Lucas ... gone, and with you being a valuable asset to the city, I feel I can convince her that a small revival of the Second Estate is warranted, and earned.”

“Me, a valuable asset?” He blinked at that.

“You are her lover’s friend, and have helped him in multiple situations. You have also helped in general, Mister Burksen. Do not sell yourself short.”

That was true, in a sense. Damien had become an active member of Dolareido in the months since his return, and since Lucas’s death. He aided the Invictus, fought monsters in the sewers, helped Jack on a rescue mission, and aided the Prince when Jack summoned the crows at the hospital. Go him.

“Thank you, Madam Turio. But I worry not only for the Prince’s resistance, but Garry Tones’s as well. He despised the Lancea et Sanctum as much as she did, when my sire was Archbishop.”

“Indeed.” The corpse woman walked about, chin in her fingers, eyes up. Her pondering stance. “We will need to convince him that things will be different this time. I trust Mister Terry and yourself to handle such a discussion.”

“Oh? Not at the Primogen meeting...”

“No. Speak to the man on his property. I trust Mister Terry to handle the conversation with delicacy, and I trust you to explain the desires of the Lancea et Sanctum, Mister Burksen.”

Wonderful. Sweeps for hunters already devoured much of his time, and now he had to prepare for a personal meeting with the strongest Carthian in the city.

“Should I—”

“Wait until our Primogen meeting is done. I will report the ... temperature, of the idea. Act accordingly.” She nodded, and he nodded. Silence fell, a comfortable silence, filled only with the swish swish of the ghouls’ broom, and—”How goes your relationship with the Begotten?” Whoa, what?

“My—oh, Fiona. It goes well, it does. She’s a delightful person, and I can’t help but be happier in her presence.”

Maria smiled, but continued to walk around, likely juggling two thoughts: the Primogen meeting, and for some reason, Damien’s relationship. But, if she wanted to talk about his romantic situation, he could oblige her. She knew more about romance than he did, and honestly, he felt happy knowing he was making her happy.

How much had the elder changed, since she betrayed Natasha?



~~Natasha~~

If the sex went on much longer, she’d have run out of space on her SSD. Apparently, the boys and their libidos agreed with being filmed, far more than she could have anticipated.

She stepped out of the shower, wrapped her hair in a towel, and started on the rest of her. The shower wasn’t big enough for three people, so they took turns; naturally she went first. Soon she was out and walking around her room wearing a towel on her head and a towel wrapped around her.

She looked at herself in the mirror hanging on the back of her bedroom door; without any makeup on, and the blush of life turned off, she was as white as a sheet. No makeup meant her lips were a pale, dull pink, and her eyes had no pop. Human women would have to deal with all the skin blemishes and discoloration caused by

frequently putting on and taking off makeup, but at least vampire skin didn't do that. It was just pale, smoothly pale.

Matt stepped behind her, and hugged her from behind, her head pressing to his chest.

"You look like a queen," he said.

She laughed and rolled her eyes. She could have covered herself in dirty rags and mud, and they'd say she was beautiful. They meant it, too. As for a queen, she had her long black hair all done up in the towel, so it did kind of look like a tall crown.

Matt was in his jeans and nothing but. His hair was still a bit wet, and it fell heavy around his head, long blonde dirty air that matched the gruff on his face. A big, handsome lumberjack of a man. She doubted he'd ever used a computer in his life except to browse YouTube and send e-mails. How did she end up with someone like him, and Arturo?

"I c-can't ... b-b-believe you told Eric to ... to do whatever he wanted. If he were Kindred, w-we'd have him ... under scrutiny, you know? We c-can't let Kindred j-j-just do whatever they want. It could violate the M-Masquerade."

"I guess we play a little fast and loose with the rules. Not all Uratha packs do that. The Iminir — Storm Lords — are practically a military cult. They'd put Eric in chains if they had to."

"And ... y-you? You call yourselves, um, Hunters in D-Darkness."

"Mhmm. The Meninna."

"W-What are you known for?"

His grip around her body tightened, and he squashed her to his chest harder. The giant, solid wall of muscle was steel, and she

froze, like a deer in headlights. His head came down lower, and lower, until she could feel the warmth of his breath on her ear, and feel his heartbeat against her back.

“Meninna pay respect to the Black Wolf, who gives the Meninna his favor. We Meninna guard our territory with total commitment, and protect what is ours.” His grip tightened a little more again, and she found her legs wavering, as Matthew, gentle giant Matthew, smiled at her in the mirror. It was Matthew’s smile, but it had more edge to it, more animal hunger, more aggression.

And it was not good that she liked it! This was obviously a case of Stockholm Syndrome, because a massive man had his hands around her, trapping her, and was implying that she was his and he’d protect her like property, and she liked it. Nope, not good. Definitely bad thing. Bad bad. Toxic relationship!

Matt kissed her on the head, picked her up, and set her on her bed. “A lot of us have been setting up roots here. Whether or not David learns about what happened that led to the Azlu situation, or if that has any effect on why we came, a lot of us will want to stay. I know Art and I will want to stay for you.”

Awww. She squirmed on her bed, thankful she wasn’t Blushing Life, cause every time Matt or Art talked romantic talk, she could feel herself getting ready to blush blood red.

“W-Would you ... really stay for me?” She almost stopped herself when she heard the shower turn off. Art would be coming out any minute, and she wasn’t sure if she could say this to both of them at the same time.

“You don’t ... want us to?” Matt backed up against a wall, hands in the small of his back. He tried to look at her, but his eyes fell away after a second. From aggressive and possessive one minute, to uncertain the next.

When it came to wolfy things, guarding territory and protecting pack mates, Matt was comfortable. Not only comfortable, he was skilled and confident. She could throw dangerous hunters or deadly monsters at him, and Matt wouldn't blink. But, if she said something romantic to him, how would he react? If his averting gaze was any indication, he might be sheepish, or even shy. Hard to picture Matthew as shy, but she was picking up those vibes now.

“Of c-course ... I want you to. Y-You and Arturo. I ... have b-been ... getting rather ... attached, t-to you two, you know?” She held out her palms toward him, and made grabby hands, like a toddler. With a growing smile, Matthew walked over to her, and got down on his knees in front of her. Sitting on the bed meant she was in a perfect position to hug him, and kiss him, and nudge her nose into his.

He met her kiss, hands roaming down her body and squeezing her waist through her towel. It was a good thing she'd just drained them — sexually speaking — minutes before, or Matt would have pinned her down and started fucking her again, no doubt.

“Hey,” Art said from her bedroom door, “I'm getting jealous watching this.”

“S-Sorry!” She said, gently pushing Matthew away by the shoulders. “W-We were ... getting a little ... um ... I d-don't want you to leave Dolareido.” And now the cat was officially out of the bag.

“Oh?” And of course, unlike Matthew who didn't have a deceiving bone in his body, Arturo was a deceitful, manipulative bastard. His smile said it all. He knew she had feelings for him, and Matthew, and he was going to dangle—“I don't want to leave Dolareido, and I don't want to leave you. I like you, a lot.” Grinning the whole time like Loki would, Arturo, also only dressed in his jeans, sat down beside her on the bed, leaned down over her, and started kissing her.

She frowned into his kisses, and punched him in the chest a few times. Pointless. The man may not have been as big as Matthew, but he was still huge. Might as well have been punching her door frame. One of his arms slipped behind her, half hugging her, and he continued to kiss her, until she relented. Ok, much as she wanted to punch him, Arturo was a really good kisser.

Like peeling a delicate gift, Matthew pulled the towel on her body apart, and groaned at the sight of her naked body, one of those happy groans Natasha made when drinking. “It’s not just us, either,” Matthew said. “Avery is getting in comfy with some human dude. Clara and Carter are sitting pretty in that tower. Mason and that Carthian chick are together all the time. And there’s a rumor Clara’s been having some fun with a bunch of guys.”

Natasha laughed, before sucking in her breath quick, as Matthew started to kiss her neck, under the jaw and opposite of Arturo. She tried to push him away, but it didn’t last long, and Matthew’s hands roamed up to caress her breasts as he kissed her. He gently pressed his thumbs into them, and she could feel him smile against her neck, as his fingers tenderly massaged their softness. Small as her breasts were, the big man seemed perfectly content to obsess over them.

“I ... w-wonder, about Clara,” she said, little mewls slipping into her words and between Arturo’s lips.

Arturo kissed her again, sighing into her kiss as he closed his eyes. “Why?”

“I still think she likes ... J-J-Jack. She—” She squeaked, reached out, and pressed both hands on Matt’s face. “If you d-don’t stop, I’ll drain you until y-you can’t get up!”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.”



She rolled her eyes, and wiggled away from the two men. If that went on any longer, it'd have led to more sex, and it'd barely been more than an hour since they finished up. Kindred healed quick, and she probably could go again if she really wanted, but it wasn't good to get addicted. It was a wonder the Uratha didn't spend literally every waking moment fucking each other, if they could all recover this quickly. It wasn't like they could simply not Blush Life, to prevent arousal.

Maybe she should drain them both of blood? She'd Kissed them just yesterday! But if she drained them both to the point they went comatose, or at least close to it, maybe it'd get their sex drives under control for a little while. Not that she minded. She wouldn't be able to make a sex tape if they weren't such bundles of testosterone and desire.

Thinking of sex tapes, she walked over to the laptop. She'd stopped the recording, but she hadn't had an opportunity to actually examine the footage yet. Unable to suppress her grin, she scanned through the video quickly, to make sure they never fell out of frame. And she muted the video ahead of time, because she knew she got all squeaky during sex. Didn't want to trigger her boyfriends' hunger right now. Maybe later.

Oh god! That was her! Little her, on her back on Art's chest. Her pink-clad legs were sticking out from between the two titans, and the camera was pointed three quarters at her ass, showing what the two men were doing to her. How did all that fit inside her?

Shock over, she shifted herself a bit, to keep the camera screen out of sight of the boyfriends. Couldn't have them see it! Not until she edited it and got it all pretty. It was her project, and it had to be perfect before anyone could see it. Only then, she'd show them, and as long as they said it was good, she'd show Jessie too. And maybe Antoinette?

“You think Clara still likes Jack?” Matthew said. He’d joined Arturo on the bed, and both of them were staring at her. Oh, right, the towel. She closed the laptop, yanked on the towel, and pulled it out from underneath Matt’s ass.

“I d-do. She, she um ... she’s getting d-distracted, right now. B-But that’s just sex. So unless s-someone else comes along, I ... d-don’t see her just giving up on Jack.”

The two men nodded, each lifting a hand to hold their chin, in unison, like a choreographed maneuver.

“Know any vampires who’d like a strong-headed woman like her?” Art said. “Clara’s fun on the outside, but once you get to know her, she’s damn stubborn.”

“Um ... I d-don’t, no. I mean, there are lots of single K-Kindred in Dolareido. Does ... does it n-n-need to be Kindred? You said Avery is d-dating a man named Henry.” And there was no vampire named Henry, unless the Prince’s opening of siring had led to a new Kindred with such a name.

“True,” Art said, “but Avery’s Avery. Sometimes I think she’d prefer to just walk away from all this, and live a quiet life with a baker named Henry, Henry McBoring”

Giggling, she tied the towel tight around her, and came over to sit on Matthew’s lap. She snuggled back into his chest, turned so she could press her cheek against it, and set her legs on Art’s lap.

“She ... d-doesn’t want to be Uratha?”

Art shook his head. “More like, she’s paid her dues, and she wants to live a quieter life. Still be Uratha, still hunt, but not at the front of the pack, and not into life-threatening danger.” His hands found her legs, and traced fingers up and down her skin. “Sometimes I think

that's half the reason she came to Dolareido, to settle an old score so she could relax for the first time in her life."

"First t-time?"

"I think Art's right," Matt said, kissing the top of her towel crown. "Avery found us after she left Dolareido, but we can tell she's been carrying scars. She's been fighting and hunting for a very long time."

"W-What kind of scars?"

"Well," Matt continued, "as far as we can tell, she and her pack got pretty upset about what happened in Dolareido, about killing Minerva. They must have done something reckless since then, because her old leader Simon is dead, and her old totem is dead. Flowing Sanctuary was a spirit she befriended not long before she met me."

Art nodded, and started to massage her calves. "She's been through hell, but she doesn't talk about it, with anyone. We just know about Minerva, and Jacob, and the shit that went down here in Dolareido. When David said the spirits were pointing to this city, she was ... excited, in a way. Or terrified maybe. We could tell she wanted to come here, but..."

"But," said Matt, "she seems to be happier, now that she's here. She's dating, and we think she's going to try and reconcile with Jacob again."

Natasha looked down at her lap, frowning. The idea of Jacob ever forgiving someone a major transgression was difficult to imagine, but the death of his love Minerva, she couldn't see him forgiving anyone for that, ever. Avery had a long battle ahead of her.



~~Antoinette~~

Come dusk, she sat upon her throne in the primary meeting room of her headquarters, her Elysium Tower, and waited. With Daniel at her side, standing and still, an eternal gargoyle guarding over her, she feared no vampire. As Maria, Michael, Garry, and Jacob stepped into her room, she offered each a small nod, a knowing nod, a ‘this is my city, obey me’ nod. Only Jacob, and his eyeless gaze, offered anything resembling defiance, subtle motions hidden in his body language.

Would her old friend ever calm himself? Would he ever be her friend again? Doubtful, and tragic.

“Report,” she said. It was a formality of course, to ask for redundant information. And yet, there was always the possibility for misunderstandings to be cleared, or for the Primogen to announce newly developed issues they’d yet to share with her. Hopefully they would not, but it was better to brave such waters immediately.

“The sweeper teams have found nothing,” Garry said. “Couple of the Uratha say they get close to finding something, but however this Elen woman is getting around is throwing them for a loop.”

Michael nodded, and tossed a few pictures onto the glass table. “We’ve found more remnants of those burned symbols, the ones we think Elen uses as a portal. The hunters are clever, but they seem to be on the run. Or at least licking their wounds.”

“Mister Terry,” Maria said with a small smile, “has done them far more harm than any of us could have predicted. Were it not for him, I fear more than Berry Tellern and Julias Mire would have died. The hunters are indeed hurting, and we must take advantage of this as soon as possible.”

Jacob chuckled, but nodded, saying nothing. Garry, on the other hand, leaned back in his chair and donned the expression he always wore when ready to speak, like an aggressive, barking dog. Forever a child, this man.

“But he and no one else has managed to find the hunters, since he captured the monster,” Garry said. “We’re running out of time. Sooner or later the hunters are going to strike again.”

“Indeed,” Jacob said. “Jeremiah and his hunters will do anything to obtain revenge against Azamel, and the longer we wait, the longer we allow him to recover. Let’s not forget, their shaman can hunt down individuals, using some form of haruspex.”

Haruspex. To know that such magics could actually be done, using flesh and sacrifice, was an unsettling truth to discover. Valuable information, but the sort that haunted her dreams. What madness could this Elen witch unleash with her mastery of flesh? What dark gods did she pray to?

“Agreed,” Antoinette said. “But until we learn of a way to defeat Elen and her magic, they will continue to be cockroaches.”

Jacob leaned forward over the table, smiling his deadly smile. Dressed in his usual black robes that he insisted on wearing to these meetings, he looked less a modern vampire, and more an ancient relic of magic and mystery. He found it fun, no doubt, while she considered it nothing more than quaint.

“I may be able to help with that. My fellow witches and I have been doing all we can, to find a way to beat Elen at her own game. We might be onto something.”

Antoinette frowned at her old friend, and tapped a finger against the glass table. “You are the cause for the disappearances in Devil’s Corner as of late.”

“I am.”

“You kill too many, Jacob. If this continues, you will summon yet more of these infernal cockroaches to my city.”

Her words earned nothing more than an annoyed smirk from the man.

“And what progress have you made, in catching Jeremiah and Angela, hmm? Got that Begotten locked up downstairs, but has he told you anything?”

The game, once again, began. Jacob would take a jab at her, a verbal lunge, and subtly imply she was not suitable to lead the city. She would defend herself, assert dominance, and Jacob would retreat with all the regret of a mischievous child. Why did he insist on these stupid games, this pointless jousting?

“No, he has not. He will eventually break free of Elen’s spell, but I imagine it will be too late by then.”

Michael lifted a finger from the table. “But, without Sándor, she can’t escape into the nightmare, correct?”

Jacob shook his head. “Jeremiah broke into the dream realm on his own before, the same night he kidnapped Jack. We don’t know if he used Sándor to do that or not, but considering the magical handcuffs, and the strange glowing knives we’ve seen, I wouldn’t put it past him to have done it without the gargoyle monster.”

Far too many unknowns. The hunt for the hunters grated on her, irritated her beyond belief, a grain of sand that refused to be banished.

“Jacob,” she said with a sigh, “Elen and her strange magics are beyond the reach of the Invictus and the Carthians. And though I loathe to say it, such ... an obsession with flesh, is not my forte. In matters of Elen and this strange chamber of flesh that she hides her hunters with, I will defer to you.”

The eyeless man winked at her, only noticeable through the small flex of his eyebrow. “Like I said, already on it.”

“If I may,” Maria Turio said, “I would like to speak of the Lancea et Sanctum.”

Of course she would, because each grain of sand these children slid into her shoes was a victory for them.

Antoinette did her best to not roll her eyes. “I have already allowed Burksen to preach to any who wish to learn of Longinus.”

“Yes, but you limited our freedom to speak of this. And, I am ... seeking, to reestablish the Second Estate, in its entirety.”

She glared at Maria, but said nothing, slowly tapping a finger against her table, while Garry began to boil.

“So we can kill all of you again?” the Gangrel said. “Learn from the past, for fuck’s sake.”

“It will not be as last time!” Maria slammed both hands on the table. It survived. For all her obvious frustration with the Carthian, Maria was not the sort to let her emotions get the best of her. She could control herself. But, could she control herself in matters connected to Lucas?

Garry, unlike Antoinette, did roll his eyes. “You say that, but all I see is Lucas’s woman wanting to take up the mantle.”

It was tempting, to interrupt this squabble and prevent escalation. But it was better to see how the Nosferatu would respond to this verbal torture.

“In fact, I wish to do exactly that, except without the man’s eyes for conquest.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“It means, Mister Tones, that I wish ... to leave my position as council member for the First Estate. Should I be given permission to do so, I will create the Second Estate as a child branch of the First Estate, until such time that we can be considered a separate covenant unto ourselves.”

That was not what Antoinette had expected to hear. “Are you serious, Madam Turio?”

“She is,” Michael said. “I will rule the Invictus, and Turio and I will be partners. We expect the Second Estate to rely on the first for all resources, until such a time they can stand on their own.”

Maria raised a hand before Garry could speak up. “And before you seek battle, Mister Tones, allow Mister Terry and Mister Burksen to prove to you that this is not a bid to grow our influence.”

The Carthian ground his teeth until everyone present could hear, but after a time, leaned back in his chair, and sighed. “As long as it’s just the Church fuckers existing within the Invictus, I guess it doesn’t matter much.”

Antoinette smiled, a subtle smile, but one that earned a frozen look from the corpse woman. “Very well, Maria Turio. For now, you may act as leader of the Lancea et Sanctum, provided you remain within the confines of the Invictus. We will see, with time, if you remain true to your intentions.”

Unless Antoinette’s ears were deceiving her, tonight’s meeting sounded like progress.



# Chapter 101

~~Jack~~

The sweeps continued. Until someone managed to find a hint of the hunters, they had no choice but to continue them. But as time went on, Jack's mom started asking about their old home, about visiting it, and getting things they might want. He had a free night tonight, so, time to take a trip through memory lane, knowing full well the hell it'd be.

"You ready for this?" he said.

"I ... I don't know." His mom looked at the door, the front door, the threshold, the gate, the barrier between her new life and her old life, and trembled. "I don't know what I'll find."

"A lot of pain, Mom." Not the nicest way to start, but he had to be honest. "I ... I've only looked through the windows of this place, and it's always been painful."

"You never snuck in?"

"Hell no." Laughing, he shook his head, and rested his back against the front door of his old house. It was raining, pouring even, as if someone decided this night was the perfect night to dial up the drama. Visiting his old home in the rain was such a perfect balance of sad atmosphere that he couldn't help but be moved. Though, if someone started playing some depressing music, he'd probably kill them.

And, he probably should have brought a partner on this trip. It was the rule, to always travel in pairs when not in the dead center of South Side. His mom didn't exactly count as a partner, considering

she'd only been Embraced for a month. But he was strong enough to make up for that weakness.

Ventruue hubris.

“B-But, I thought you had a friend, that Damien fellow, and he could hide things in plain sight?” His mom was dressed in a business suit, the same sort he was, and wearing a long trench coat meant to protect it from the rain. Her umbrella protected her wavy hair. He was in a coat too, but no umbrella of his own. They'd shared. He knew they would.

“Cloak of Night? Yeah, Damien can do that. So can Natasha, and Beatrice. But, the issue was never being stealthy. It ... it hurt, you know? Seeing you, and Mary. I never got to say goodbye, and I...” He grit his teeth, turned around, and unlocked the door. Getting the key had been easy enough. After the incident at the hospital, the Invictus had confiscated Mary's stuff, and his mother's. If he wanted to, the Invictus could confiscate the house too. But, no, better to let it go up for sale at some point.

“What, Jack?”

“Nothing.”

Samantha sighed, the usual sigh she made when she knew he was just ending a conversation he didn't want to have. They'd had this dance a thousand times, after his dad died. And, stepping into the kitchen of his old home, the muscle memory, patterns, and habits of his old life kicked in as if he'd never left. No doubt, they'd have more conversations where they fell into bad habits, the sort that had led to their distancing. But, he'd try to catch them when he could.

He didn't want to enter the house. It was his old house, but he felt something different about it, something off, something bleak and mean. It was an empty house, scarred by the loss of its family, all four of them. There was a shadow, something dark and heavy about

it now, something that had never been there before, as if it was angry at him for coming back dead instead of alive.

He set his hand down against the counter next to the door, the first thing he always noticed when he came home, back when he was alive. It's where he'd throw his keys, and set his headphones. It felt cold, colder than the ambient temperature would have suggested. But, worse than that, was how quiet it was. He was surprised to hear the hum of the fridge; guess no one had bothered to empty it and turn off non-essential circuits or something, since the Invictus had closed the house off. But other than that, it was deathly quiet.

It was a decent house, middle class, with a family room, living room, a few bedrooms, and a couple bathrooms. A four-level split, with a basement split in half for storage and a movie room. The side door they took went into the kitchen, where they were surrounded by cupboards and drawers. Without hesitation, Jack rubbed his shoes back and forth on the old brown mat, and started to undo his shoelaces

He blinked down at his fingers, laughed, stood back up, and walked into the kitchen, shoes still on. No point. No point at all.

“Jack! Take off your ... your ... oh.” His mom laughed as well, quieter, sadder, before she followed him.

He smiled at the tile, white, with little black flowers. He smiled at the cupboards, brown wood, and the slot where a microwave sat above a counter. He smiled at the counters too, and their muted white marble coloring.

The house really was colder than he was used to. He wasn't Blushing Life, so the temperature difference didn't bother his skin so much, but he could tell it was off. Colder in the house than it was outside. Strange. Darker too. It must have been his imagination, or a trick of the light his Kindred eyes were picking up.

No, it was probably the depressing thoughts running through his mind by entering his old home that was doing the trick. It was the home he'd left behind, the home where he left two women shattered and depressed. Fuck him, he could practically feel the misery permeating the walls, made worse by his memories, when he spied on his mom and sister through the windows. Dad dead, him missing, his mom and sister had only each other to recover from that mess.

Jack, give yourself a break. None of it, absolutely none of it, is your fault. You were involved, but none of it happened because of you.

Easy to think the logical thoughts. Harder to internalize them and turn them into a feeling. Deep down, he knew damn well he blamed himself for Mary's death, and nearly losing his mother. It was beyond frustrating, knowing a truth, but not being able to accept it.

He took a deep breath, and let his memories guide him. Before he knew what he was doing, he opened the fridge. It was a nice fridge, big, with a bottom freezer drawer. A little digging exposed some ice cream, and he laughed as he showed it to his mom.

"The super low cal high protein ice cream?"

"Hey! It tastes good."

"And costs five times as much as regular ice cream."

Frowning and scrunching up her nose, she took the ice cream and put it back in the freezer. "I look good, don't I? I had to give up the delicacies to lose the weight."

"You do look good."

She beamed with the compliment, and he rolled his eyes. She was too damn sweet.

“I ... I don’t know if there’s anything I ... I should take. Antoinette says I should be careful. If I take memories with me, it’ll ... it’ll be hard, to move on.”

Yeah, that was true. He nodded, affirming as he moved past the counter and into the kitchen. There was a wood table, one of those you could pull apart and slip some wood planks into the center to make bigger. The patio doors beside him showed the pouring rain falling onto the wood, and the bench on the patio. On the wall was a painting he did, from his high school days. Apples on a plate, of course.

“But if you take nothing, it might make it harder to hold onto what keeps you human,” he said.

“Antoinette said that too. And she ... she um ... told me about what happened to Mrs. Pavala.”

Jack froze, eyes locked onto the painting. What a lovely juxtaposition, a painting he did when he was barely more than a kid, against the words his mom just said.

“That is a good example, of why you don’t want to let the Beast inside you get too strong. You go hungry, and it gets a hold of you. You get too ... horrible, and bloodthirsty, and it can come out that way, too. So, it might be a good idea to ... grab something that reminds you of being human. Maybe not something as hurtful as a picture of Mary, but maybe something with some—”

“Jack.”

“What?” He turned and faced her, but it was a bad idea. She had that look, the ‘I know you’re hurting please talk to me’ look, and he almost recoiled at the sight of it.

Grinding his teeth, his looked down and away, before he stepped under a small arch of drywall, and into the living room. The front

door connected to this room, and hardwood floors greeted him. She'd changed the carpet out, sometime after he disappeared. The couches were changed too, no longer boring, pale colors, but slick and inviting blues. Went nice with the floor.

"I was going to renovate the kitchen," she said. "New ... new beginnings, right?"

"Right, right." He looked at the corner of the room by the fake fireplace, and smiled as the warm memories drifted through him. Decorating the Christmas tree, watching the fake fireplace fake burn fake wood, making real emotions and memories, opening presents, the smell of cookies. He completely blamed his mother for his candy obsession, that she also shared.

"Come on Jack, talk to me."

"Talk about what?"

"About anything? Every time I look at you, you look so much older than you used to. I can see the weight of the world on your shoulders." She shook out the umbrella and set it on the counter, before following him into the living room. "Antoinette hasn't told me much. She insists you should tell me yourself."

That earned a smile from him. He could trust Antoinette with his personal information, and she was smart enough to realize the more painful conversations between him and his mother, should be between them alone.

"I'm surprised she didn't come," he said.

"She ... she told me, I should talk to you, privately, about things. She'll come another time."

"You already know about Mrs. Pavala. It was horrible. I had to clean up a corpse on my first night of being Kindred. It was rough. I

got over it.” He shrugged, and looked up the stairs. The bedrooms were up there. They could wait. He started down the stairs into the family room, and looked around at the couches and TV.

He wasn’t sure what he was looking for. A lost memory, perhaps. It felt important to visit, and that’s why he was doing it, but he couldn’t exactly figure out the real why, other than it was important to help his mother move on.

His mom followed after him. “You always do that.”

“Do what?”

“Act like you have to bear these burdens. Like no one can help.”

“I ... I do act like that, don’t I?” For a second, he almost fell into the old habit, dismissing her with some quip like ‘everyone has to bear their burdens’. Not tonight.

He continued down into the basement, flipped on the light, and melted into a pot of nostalgia. The boxes and shelves, the old toys collecting dust, a wall his dad built to cut the basement in half, so they had another room where they could watch movies. But his dad wasn’t exactly a carpenter, and the door never closed right; they had to slam it.

The room was cold. The basement was always cold, but this felt weird. Painful tingles danced up his spine, and he found himself looking over his shoulders, checking the area for anything unusual.

“Yes, you do act like that,” his mom said. “And I can’t imagine how big a burden it is! With all these things that’s happened to you, it must be ... be horrible...”

He stopped in the door frame of the built wall, and put his hands out to grab onto it. His head fell forward, facing away from her, and he squeezed the frame.

“I have friends, and Antoinette. I have people I do rely on.”

“But not your mother?”

“It’s only been a month since you were sired, Mom. I’m not going to dump a world of hurt on you already.”

She set a hand on his shoulder, standing behind him. “Jack, it’s not about that. It’s about ... It’s about me, having a son, ok? Call it selfish, but I want my son back.”

That, he should have guessed. It wasn’t about her wanting to help him; though, that had to be part of it. But she’d lost her children, and he wasn’t doing a good job of letting her be a mom to him. He wanted to protect her from the shit raining down on him, and she was probably spending every moment of the night wishing she had a way to help him with his pain. She was driven to do so, because she was his mother. He could throw her that bone, at least.

“It’s been rough,” he said. “A lot more has happened than Mrs. Pavala. I’ve killed a ... a lot of people, now. Hunters, mostly.”

“Mostly? I—oh ... M-More people like Pavala?”

“No, thank god. But, it’s been tough, you know? And I didn’t want to put that on you. You’ve got your hands full, getting used to your new life. No need for me to add onto—”

She embraced him, tightly, and buried her face against the back of his head. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Being a vampire is—”

“Not that. I mean, that is pretty hard to believe, but I mean ... all of this, happening to you. Antoinette’s told me you’ve become sort of a celebrity, but because horrible things keep happening to you.”



“It ... it’s ... it’s been ... rough.” It was hard to not cry. He was kind of sick of crying, after Julias died. But being in his old home, seeing all the things he’d abandoned, and being hugged by his mom, who only wanted to help him like the old days, was digging up those emotions again. He took a deep, useless breath, and pushed them back down.

“How rough?”

Time to open up. Hopefully it wouldn’t scar her.

“I’ve been ... tortured. I’ve had to kill hunters in horrific ways.” I’ve sacrificed thieves to a dark, ancient god. “And I ... I learned that something is inside me, something that affects my Beast. It’s like an amplifier on all my Beast’s urges, and strengths. We call it the curse. It’s inside me, eating away at me all the time, demanding I kill without justification.” He turned around as her arms fell away, and he managed a weak smile for her. Her jaw was hanging open. “But all that is background noise, to how horrible I feel, that my sire, my best friend, the closest thing I’ve had to a dad in a long time, is dead. It wasn’t just Mary who died because I hurt the hunters, and left an opening for them to hurt me. My friend is dead, too. He died because I wasn’t going to let the hunters get you. He died helping me, knowing damn well it was a fool mission. The only reason he died, is because I was too emotional to just let you die.”

Every word he said, was a knife to his mom’s gut. He could almost see the blades skewering her, and the life draining from her eyes with every wound.

“And ... that’s why,” he said, “I haven’t been telling you these things. I hurt you, by letting Mary down and getting her killed. I hurt you, by letting Angela nearly kill you. And now I’ve hurt you again, because hey, now you know a man you barely knew died to save you. He had a girlfriend who loved him dearly. He was one of

the best Kindred in the city, who strived for peace, and wanted Kindred to treat kine with respect.”

“B-But ... those things ... aren’t your fault.”

“I know, I know.” He slipped around her, and started up the stairs out of the basement. “I keep telling myself that, too. Doesn’t seem to help.”

He could almost feel her frown, drilling into his back. He could hear her sniffles.

“I had ... no idea. So many things...”

“It’s not everything, either, but more stuff in the same vein. It’s been ... rough, like I said. Not gonna lie.”

“You said ... there’s a curse, inside you?”

He nodded as he worked his way up to the family room, then the living room, and then up to the bedrooms. Except, he didn’t get very far. There was a wall between him and the hallway, something he couldn’t see, but he could feel it. A wall he’d put up in his mind and his past, the part of him that knew better than to include his old life in his new life. The wall was still there, even with Mary gone, and his mother behind him, a vampire too.

He tried to walk past it, to reach the bedrooms, but his legs didn’t want to move. Someone had tied weights to them, vast, cold weights, that demanded he turn around and run away. So, coward that he was, he walked into the bathroom instead, which wasn’t so far down the hall. The upstairs bathroom had the tub, while the downstairs one had a small shower. Over time, he’d stuck to using the downstairs bathroom, while Mary and his mom used the upstairs bathroom usually.

Two toothbrushes.

He leaned onto the counter, set his fingers on it by the sink, and stared down at the subtle stains building on the otherwise clean, beige bowl. “Yeah, something in my bloodline. Apparently I’m the first to break the seal someone put on it hundreds of years ago; or at least, Viktor and Julias never did. So now, it’s awake, inside me, and it’s hungry for ... for all the things the Beast hungers for. It’s strong, and it gives me strength, but it’s got its own desires, fighting to get out.” A side glance showed his mother was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, eyes locked onto him like he was a baby bird with a broken wing. “Sorry. I dumped a lot of stuff on you there.”

“N-No, it’s ok. I ... asked for it.” She came up beside him, and looked at the big mirror on the wall, before looking down at the toothbrushes too. Guilt was gnawing at her, about Julias probably. “Vampires show up in mirrors,” she said, obviously trying to find some words to fill the silence. “I guess we don’t need to brush our teeth anymore.”

“Don’t need to brush your teeth, or wash any part of you, really, unless you spill stuff on you.” Yes, this was easier, talking about vampire things. Teaching his mom what sort of things Kindred dealt with from day to day, was better than handling the avalanche of things he’d just dumped on her. “You can get a tattoo if you want. A little mental effort every night, and it’ll be permanent. Cut your hair, same thing.”

“Y-Yes. Antoinette told me.” Nodding, she came in closer, until her shoulder was touching his, before she turned and hugged him again. It wasn’t a motherly hug this time either, but something tight and desperate. “It’s killing me, that you have to deal with all this.”

“Well, you’re a vampire now, like me. It’s not all bad. We get to live forever, if we’re smart about it. All this shit, it’ll pass.” He returned her hug, but when she didn’t let go, he had to wriggle free. A gentle push on her shoulders managed to get the message across. “And I have a lot of help, the best and brightest minds in the city.”

Not to mention, Antoinette and I really do love each other, and she's the Prince of the city. I'm not alone in this."

"Good! Good, good." Nodding, but obviously not entirely convinced, she stepped back out of the bathroom and waited for him to follow. "Antoinette is ... smart, and beautiful."

"Very." He followed after her, but hesitated at the door frame. If he followed her any further, they'd be going toward the bedrooms, and the cold weight that idea pushed onto him was blatant.

And more than that, there was a darkness in the house, something he couldn't quite see, but it was pushing against him. They turned on a couple of the lights as they moved through the house, but the darkness never seemed to go away. It felt wrong, as if the house were offended that he had the audacity to come back to it at all.

"She's so tall! And, um, curvy."

Oh god. Jack laughed, and buried his face in a palm as he shook his head. "Aha, yeah. She has white hair and red eyes too, in case you didn't notice."

"I did! I assumed they were fake, at first."

"They're not. Antoinette isn't sure why she's built the way she's built. She thinks, maybe, hundreds of years ago, she did experiments on herself. The Ordo Dracul have a habit of doing that."

"Experiment on herself? Why?"

"A guess? To make herself more beautiful than humanly possible."

"That ... that sounds..."

“Vain, doesn’t it?” He stepped back into the hallway, looked toward the bedroom doors, and sighed. Just do it. Just do it. Ok, he could check Mary’s room last. First room, Mom’s. “We’re young and stupid, Mom, you and I. And Antoinette was too, once upon a time, I’m sure. A young Daeva with the ability to make herself inhumanly beautiful for eternity? Hell, I might have risked it, too.” Maybe Elaine might know more about it?

“And she really can’t remember her past?”

“From hundreds of years ago? Just blurry images, according to her.” He pushed on his mom’s door. It wasn’t closed, like usual. The double bed within was made, and a nightstand stood beside the head of the bed in the unassuming room. A lamp, and a book sat upon it. His mom got the double bed after his dad died, replacing the old queen bed. There was a desk dresser with a mirror, with random things on it. A cute toy. A jewelry box. A snow globe. A picture of all four of them together when they were alive, James, Samantha, Mary, and Jack. God damn, they were so young.

“I don’t know what to take.” His mom ran a finger over the picture, smiled down at it, and moved onto her jewelry box. It made a tiny creak when she opened it. “Maybe the earrings your dad bought for me? Or a necklace, from your sister.”

“Take whatever you want. The whole box, the clothes, the blankets. Hell, take the bed if you really want it.”

With a weak laugh, she started digging through the jewelry, looking at old things she’d stopped wearing by the time Jack knew what jewelry was. “All of this seems so cheap, compared to what Antoinette has.”

“You’re her childe now, Miss Daeva. I’m sure she’ll lend you whatever you want, or buy you everything she doesn’t have to lend.”

Laughing louder, his Mom turned around, and showed him a necklace around her neck. Fake pearls probably, something very nineties, meant to go with church clothes or something.

“She probably has real pearls, doesn’t she?”

“Pearls, diamonds, rubies, uranium, whatever rock is worth a lot, I’m sure she has it in abundance.”

“Uranium?”

“Heh, nevermind.” He walked over to the window, and slid aside the curtain. It was a nice neighborhood. Not expensive, not cheap, with nearby schools and parks. Apartment buildings were on the other side of the neighborhood, and malls and grocery stores were shared by both, closer to the main road. He could still remember making trips to the nearest store, to buy candy.

“Hey,” she said, “what do you know about that ... Jacob fellow?”

Oh no, not this conversation. “He has no eyes under that bandage, Mom.”

“That’s fine! Antoinette told me about Nosferatu and their deformities. That one doesn’t sound so bad.”

“They look like they were removed with a serrated spoon.”

“That’s ... less fine, but still fine! He seemed charming.”

Jack leaned forward until his forehead was pressed to the glass. And then he started dragging it left and right, so it bounced numerous times against the glass with the friction. “He’s an elder Nosferatu, Mom.”

“So? Your girlfriend is an elder Daeva.”

Touché.

“He’s dangerous.”

“So’s your girlfriend.”

“He’s in charge of a cult.”

“So’s your girlfriend”

God damn it.

“The Ordo Dracul are more of a secret organization than a cult. Like, secret organization inside a secret organization. But, my point is, Jacob’s a weird, twisted man, Mom. He’s—”

“Antoinette says he’s saved you once, from the hunters.”

“That’s ... true.” Trying to drive home his point was getting harder and harder. “He’s into dark, occult stuff, Mom! Like, the witchy witch kind of stuff, and it gets pretty dark.”

“You don’t think he’s a good man?”

“I think ... he’s ... chaotic neutral.”

She tilted her head to the side, and blinked at him. “What?”

“He’s ... he’s ... really hard to predict. He cares for the city, and he cares for his fellow witches, but he’s done nasty stuff, Mom. He’s older than dirt. He’s killed kine by the hundreds, thousands.”

“For fun?”

“I ... don’t think he’s killed kine for fun. He’s killed them because he’s a witch, and is trying to expand the reaches of his power. He ... does stick to only killing those most Kindred would say deserve it. Killers, rapists, dealers, and stuff.” But Jack had no idea if he’d always done that.

She tapped her chin a few times, but he knew his mom. She wasn't a thinker. The chin tap thing was a feint, a thing she picked up when she knew he wanted her to think about something, demanded it, and she tapped her chin to appease him. What a sneaky woman.

"Let's go check your room. Maybe there's something you want to bring, too?"

"Y-Yeah, maybe." This was not going to be fun. He took yet another deep, useless breath, and followed his mom into his room. When he had moved out and started his own life, she hadn't touched it. He wished she had. It'd have been so much easier to forget his family and move on, if they hadn't been so insistent that he always had a place back at home.

He stood by his bed, and sighed. Blue blankets on a double bed, with a big fluffy pillow and side mattress, because he liked to sleep on his side. At least, he used to. Now he slept in whatever way was comfortable with Antoinette, often holding her; easy to do, when sunrise guaranteed he fell asleep instantly.

In the corner of the room was a corner desk meant for computers; no computer though. He'd brought it when he moved out. The walls were blank as well, and the nightstand by his bed was nothing more than a box of wood he could put his phone on for his alarm when he went to bed.

"Jeeze, I never cared for decorating, did I?"

"Nope. I always thought this room needed some flair. I thought maybe you were depressed. But, when you were on your computer, listening to music and stuff, you seemed happy, so I let it be." She slid open the closet, and laughed as she started digging through his clothes. "This all looks so ... so..."

"Juvenile?" He plucked out a t-shirt from the closet. "Cheap?"



“Now that’s not very nice. I was going to say more homely, or normal. All I ever see you wear is expensive suits now, and the Prince is always wearing a suit or dress of some kind.”

“Speaking of suits and the Prince, do you plan to invite her to your funeral?”

Her laughing regrew, until she couldn’t stand anymore. She sat on his bed, shaking, laughing, and wiping away laughter tears that never came. “How many people get to do that? Invite people to their own funeral?”

He laughed with her. Yeah, it was funny, in that strange sort of ‘rock bottom’ way. Like, if a man loses everything, and all he has left is his house, and then aliens come and blow up his house, guaranteed the man would laugh.

“It’s Mary’s funeral, too,” he said. “Antoinette was worried you might not want her there.”

“No no, I want her there. She’s been nothing but nice to me, and she’s taken great care of you. And she’s your wife, right?”

Jack raised a brow, and looked at his fingers. “Invisible ring?”

She punched him in the shoulder. “Why haven’t you proposed to her?”

“Because she’s Kindred! We’re Kindred. Marriage is ... a tricky proposition, you know. We live forever, and a lot of what makes marriage work — when it does — for humans, isn’t as strong a force for vampires.”

Poor Mom. She frowned at him a while longer, before looking down, kicking her feet back and forth. “I’m not sure I like that.”

“If it’s any consolation, Antoinette and I plan to stay together. We love each other, a lot, but we don’t belong to the same covenant, and Kindred are solitary creatures by nature. I fully expect her and I to be an item for centuries, Mom. But marriage, I—”

“What about ... this Vinculum thing? I hear that—”

He turned to face her, and grabbed her shoulder with his closer hand. “Don’t.”

“But—”

“Don’t. Drinking another vampire’s blood doesn’t make you love them, Mom, it makes you infatuated. Don’t drink another vampire’s blood.”

“Is it that bad?”

“It’s...” How to word this, how to word this. “It can be horrible, or it can be a bittersweet thing. Antoinette’s ghouls knew what they were getting into before they took her blood. They knew they’d have their minds altered for drinking of her, but they also knew of the perks. But then, plenty of thralls were turned into thralls without them even knowing what was happening. They’re dedicated to their masters.” Some thralls were created using the Vinculum, and others were created using Dominate or Majesty; many were created using both. But no sense getting her more confused.

“Sounds like we treat humans as less than us.”

“We do. We’re vampires, not humans.”

“But...”

Laughing weakly again, he pat her on the same shoulder, stood up, and started back for the hall. “But why did I and Antoinette tell you to not forget the human part of you? Because that’s what it

means to be Kindred, Mom. Balancing on a knife's edge between the human part of you, and the Beast." With a shrug, he headed toward Mary's room, and waited for his mom to join him. "You'll get used to it. You have a great teacher."

He set his hand on the doorknob, and froze. Tingles, the painful kind, the ones you get from sticking your hand into ice water, ran up his limb and into his shoulder. He stepped back, and blinked at the white paint of the door.

It was the same feeling again, that feeling that coursed through him when he first entered the house. The strange sensation crept up his spine, prickled, needles in his skin, until it stirred a headache, throbbing in his skull. Kindred didn't get headaches.

"Do you ... feel that?" he said.

"It's cold. B-But, I ... it's ... it's not normal cold, right? What is it?"

He didn't like this, didn't like it at all. If his mom could feel it, then something was definitely up. He ran a finger down the closed door, and again felt the cold surge cut through him, until it hurt. Wincing and sucking in his breath through his teeth, he tried again.

This wasn't a new sensation. He'd felt it before, when Black Blood was around, when the Crone came, and when he was in that room where Elen had performed her haruspex. Cold, but not cold, a heavy weight, oppressive and suffocating, as if he was drowning. But Black Blood wasn't here, was it? There wasn't any black fog or liquid around.

"I ... I'm not sure ... we should..." His arm ached, touching the door, but he kept it there, determined to let the sensation either pass or build until he could bear it no more. The cold ache continued, but didn't rise above a pain he couldn't handle. He wasn't sure it even was pain. Something cold, and cruel, and sad, pulsed through the door and into his limb.

If it'd been the old him, he'd have fled. The old him had never felt this sensation before. The old him was a young vampire that didn't have his strength and abilities now. The old him would have been terrified by anything like this, that felt like the depressive arms of Black Blood, or the creeping bleakness he knew permeated cemeteries. The old him was smarter.

“Mom, stay behind me.”

“B-But, maybe we should—”

“It's our home, Mom, and something's happened to it. I'm sure you noticed, when we first came in.”

His mom took a small step back, before coming in closer and getting behind his right arm. “I thought maybe someone had shut off the heat.”

No one had shut off the heat. The Invictus had kept their home untouched, until Jack and Samantha were ready to deal with it. Even if they had, this cold was painful, and Kindred didn't mind the cold unless it was literally freezing.

Someone had done something to his home. Someone, had entered his home.

“Black Blood,” Jack said, loud enough to penetrate the door, “if this is you, show yourself.”

Silence.

“Black Blood?” his mom said.

“A spirit.”

“Spirit!?”

He shook his head. Black Blood would probably respond to being called out, unable to avoid taunting Jack in return. And, much as he wanted to blame this strange aura on Black Blood, this did feel colder, and harsher.

Gritting his teeth through the strange pain, he turned the doorknob, and pushed the door open.

Both him and his mother stiffened, chilled to the bone, as the cold atmosphere overwhelmed them. Like hitting a nerve on something hard, the penetrating sensation dug into him, up through his limbs, and into his guts. There was fog on the floor, and it seeped out of the room, inching over their shoes and into the hallway. Jack stared down at it, sure it'd be the black fog he was used to seeing now, whenever Black Blood was making an appearance. It wasn't black. It was the same, gray color of fog that anyone would see on a cold, humid day.

Was it Maria? No, the corpse woman was nowhere to be seen, and he trusted his new Kindred strength to be able to at least partly sense the disguised presence of a hiding vampire, no matter their age. And while her Nosferatu mutation made her sort of leak mist everywhere, this was different.

“Oh my god,” his mother said, looking down at the mist that seeped out into the hall, and then out further, into the other rooms, and down the stairs. It were as if they'd opened the cage, let something out, and now it had free rein to explore.

He waited for something to happen. Maybe something would jump out of the closet, or his Kindred senses would tell him something or someone was hiding. Nothing happened. He took a step into Mary's room, and the mist parted around his legs, swirling and mixing before settling once again. The cold numbness did not abate.

Mary's room was different than his, in a predictable manner. Jack kept his thoughts and emotions in his head, and that expressed itself in the most common way: by living on a computer. Mary was far more extroverted. She had posters up from various movies she enjoyed, some romance, some action, and she had fancy pillows. One stuffed animal, a white fluffy bear, and a bunch of pillows and blankets. There was a dresser with a mirror, smaller than his mom's, and there was a small desk for her laptop. It was plugged in, closed, and probably in sleep mode; no matter how much he complained, his sister refused to ever properly shut off any electronic.

Jack and his mom stood in the middle of her room, slowly turning around, and she kept her back to his. Something or someone was in the room with them, but neither of them could see it. The silence was deafening. Mist filled the room unendingly, replenishing even as it flowed out into the hall. Mary's window, with its white blinds pulled up, was covered in frost. The tiny cactus on the windowsill was dead.

"I don't understand," his mom said. "What's ... going on? I—"

Jack held up a hand slowly, and brought a finger to his lips. Thankfully his mom caught on quick, and glued to him a little harder as Jack roamed his dead sister's bedroom. The closet? He slid it open, but nothing waited inside.

"... hello?" he said.

"What?"

God damn it, Mom. Jack shook his head at his mom again. Not so quick. Shhh.

The silence continued for a time. Jack stepped out of the bedroom after a while, and his mom let out a small squeak as she dashed after him to catch up. She grabbed his right arm with both her

hands, and followed after him, peeking around him as he walked through the hallway.

It was, just a few minutes ago, his old home, a house he recognized. But it wasn't his home anymore, or hers. He still recognized it, but the atmosphere, the nostalgia, the old memories and comforting presence, they were all gone.

It was when the lights they'd turned on, all turned off, that Jack and his mom both gasped. He flicked the hallway light switch, but nothing happened.

If he'd still been alive, and if he'd let out a breath, it'd have come out fog. The windows were frosted, and the mist permeated everything. It'd grown so thick, each step he took caused it to swirl around his ankles. And the weight of the cold, more than temperature, continued to press down on him.

Standing in the living room, he looked out the window. The streetlights beyond were muted, as if the windows themselves were fighting to keep any light out. Considering the lights in the house weren't working anymore, everything was dark. If he wasn't a vampire, it'd have been hard to walk around.

"... I know someone's there," he said. The slight tremble of his voice betrayed him, and he clenched his jaw for a moment until it settled. "Show yourself."

"J-Jack, maybe we should ... should..." His mom's voice trailed off, as a new noise finally penetrated the silence.

Wails. Cries. Screams. The noise wasn't loud, but it was everywhere, filling the air until it was almost palpable, and every step felt like pushing through a choir of dead. He slowly turned around and around, and his mom followed, staying behind him and clutching his arm as he scanned for any movement.

He knew this sound better than he wanted to. It was like being in Jacob's cave again. It was the sound the dead made, when they got to make some. How they could do that, he had no idea, and if he'd known he'd find this at his old home, he'd probably have asked Jacob or Black Blood about it. Hindsight was twenty twenty. But at least at Jacob's underground sacrifice pit, there was a reason for the sound, for the whimpering, crying, shrieking voices to echo for all time. Why here though?

His old home had become a graveyard. Every step made it more apparent that the dead were here, or something similar was. Maybe that was it, a spirit from the Shadow had come. But there wasn't any reason for that, and how they would even know where he lived? He gulped as he felt his mother's grip shake, but forced himself to stay calm.

They moved to the kitchen, slowly, each step a labor, each filled with the gnawing cold and growing fear. A vampire, afraid of the dark? Yep, that's what was happening. He was growing more and more afraid, and that meant his mother was probably terrified. She never could handle a horror film.

It only got worse when he tried to push open the side door, and couldn't. He tried harder, and still it refused to open. He kicked the damn thing, and it refused to open. He kicked it again, putting all his weight into it, his Kindred strength, and the strength of his curse. Physics being physics, the act sent him sprawling to the floor. The door swung open, door frame tearing apart at the lock, but before he could move through it, the door slammed closed with more force than Jack kicked it open with. Bang. His mom, after squealing several times, tried to open it again. It did not budge.

“Jack! Jack, oh god, are you ok?”

“Fine, fine.” Growling, Jack forced himself back to his feet, and held his hand out for his mother. She took it, getting behind him



once again, as the two began to creep around the dark house. The wailing continued, louder, but as Jack listened to the piercing cries, something became apparent. Unlike the choir of voices in Jacob's cave, there was only one voice in the old home, a woman's voice.

He knew that voice.

“ ... Mary?”

The cupboards flew open, all of them, at the same time. The wood slammed against itself, multiple times, until Jack and Samantha both covered their ears with their palms. Noise ripped through the cold air, followed by plates, glasses, and bowls. Jack ducked as one of the dishes flew at him, shattering against the fridge. A plate drifted out of the cupboard, floated in the air a moment, began to vibrate violently, and launched itself at Jack. Again, he had to move, diving to the side and barely escaping the oncoming dish.

“What's going on?” his mom said. “I don't understand!”

Jack looked up from the floor to his mother, expecting her to have to dive out of the way. She stood there, eyes wide, jaw dropped, hands at her chest. Terrified.

But she didn't have to. The cupboards swung open and slammed closed. The drawers slid open and slammed closed. The door flew open, and slammed closed. The house shook, rumbling, noise rising to a crescendo as the kitchen decided it didn't like them anymore. But, nothing flew at Jack's mom.

Oh fucking god, this couldn't be happening. It had to be a prank or something. Something or someone was in his house, and was acting like a fucking ghost, and the more he tried to figure out who it could be, the more his mind came up blank. It couldn't be Mary! It couldn't. It fucking couldn't.

His mom turned around in place, frozen, horrified, hands up to her lips. The utensils and plates and glasses didn't come for her, though. Metal and glass flew up in the air, and headed toward Jack with straight force, like someone firing a bullet. He rolled to the side as plates smashed into a million pieces, white porcelain raining in the floor. Glass exploded, tearing his suit and cutting his skin. Metal forks and knives stabbed into the floor and walls, penetrated drywall and tile flooring alike.

Whatever it was, it was focused on him. It didn't care about his mom. Good, he could focus on just keeping himself alive for the next few minutes, but if a lucky knife came at him and cut off his head, no curse was going to save him from that. And more were coming. He grabbed the frame of the archway that led to the living room, and threw himself into through it, as more utensils peppered the floor and nearest wall.

The cold pressure only grew, until every motion felt like slogging through a swamp. It pulled on him, tried to drag him down, demanded he give in and lie down in the oppressive weight of the invisible blizzard. The mist swirled, scattering around him and his panicked motions, and reformed within moments. Any second now, rotting fingers or bones would reach up, and yank him under the rising mist.

Luckily no fingers rose from the fog, but the sound of utensils stabbing the walls, each intended for him, continued as he ran into the living room.

“You,” the fog said, “you ... stole ... my ... my...”

“Please, stop!” His mother ran into the living room to join him, but something heavy, large, and invisible, blew through the room. The cold mist swirled again, making way for the incoming force that slammed into his mother, and threw her into a couch. She tried to

get up, but it held her down, rendering her struggles, even the strong struggles of a Daeva, futile.

“Jack ... Jaaack...”

More whispers in the dark, from the grave, in the shadow and the endless obsidian that seemed to haunt him wherever he fucking went. And he knew that voice, better than he knew the screams. The banshee wails continued, rolling over the fog around him, but a woman’s voice rose above it all, thundering through the house. The closet door nearby vibrated, and Jack could hear the hangers inside hitting each other furiously. A louder vibration sound drew his eyes, and he realized the couches were shifting along the floor with the power of the voice, wooden legs hidden in the mist.

“Tell me,” he said, grabbing the staircase railing, “who you are? You ... you sound like Mary!”

“I am Mary!”

Stupid question to ask. The couch his mom wasn’t sitting on vibrated like it was angry, and then launched at him. He managed to twist out of the way of the railing and the stairs that led up, but the couch hit him anyway, and he flew through the air as he was sent downstairs instead. The family room had carpet, but it was thin, and didn’t do much to soften the impact of his skull as he slammed against it.

He grabbed a nearby couch — not the one thrown at him — and forced himself back to his feet. The mist leaked down over the stairs, a slow and endless tide of cold and death, come to hurt him. A nameless wave of—no, not nameless. It was Mary. The voice, the anger, the presence. It was Mary.

But Mary was dead.

“I don’t ... understand,” he said to the mist. “I never stole anything from Mary!”

The fog parted as something descended the stairs. He stared at what could only have been invisible legs, steps of a walking gait, someone coming down the stairs to join him.

“You stole my memory!”

A hint of silhouette formed in the mist, a woman, a little taller than him. She was wearing normal clothes, but it was hard to tell, the details lost to the fog and to the shimmering illusion. It couldn’t have been Mary. No, it was a trick. This was Black Blood’s doing, or the hunters’ somehow.

“Memory? I—”

The couch flew at him again, and he wasn’t prepared, mind digging through the past for what the voice could possibly mean. Distracted meant easy target, and he screamed as the couch smashed his legs into the TV stand behind him. His scream ended when a second couch, one of the couches already down in the family room, smashed into his chest, and drove his back and skull into the TV. Glass showered over him, tore through his scalp, and shredded his suit until shards of plastic lodged themselves in his shoulders.

“Stole it! You were alive. Alive. And you stole that memory!” The banshee, or ghost, or what the fuck ever it was, floated off the last stair, and hovered over the mist, two feet above the floor. He could see through her, directly through her, like she was nothing more than a thin silk curtain. Shoulder-length dark hair, and a soft face, details he recognized, but were lost to the harsh cold of her new form. She was so pale, and all color from her clothes gone, except for hints of cold blue, and deadly white.

He pushed the couches away. No blood followed his wounds, and the pain was minor, compared to the hell he’d been through the past

couple years. But no matter how minor the lacerations were to his Kindred body, it was Mary that had hurt him, and wanted to hurt him. An ache bubbled in his withered guts, and he grit his teeth as he did his best to ignore it. He knew what she was talking about.

“Mary, please, stop.” It wasn’t her. It wasn’t her! It was some after image, some scar left behind, not the real Mary. Mary was dead, and this ghost creature wasn’t her.

No, Jack, you idiot. It’s her.

He should have known this would happen. But how the fuck was he supposed to know about ghosts? They were nothing but a whispered rumor, something Kindred said existed, but never spoke of, never recounted meeting one, never discussed. He should have known, the moment he set foot into his old home, and felt the frigid bite of death in the air, that something was going on.

If there was one way he was going to die, it’d be to the sister he got killed.

“And now Mom! Mom’s like you! What have you done!?” The shrieks rose higher, piercing Jack’s skull until he felt vitae throb through his brain to heal the wound. His eardrums threatened to pop, until vitae protected them.

“Mary, stop! Stop, it’s—”

The lights flickered on again, but off a second later, only to be followed by darkness beyond what was possible. Black fell upon him, buried him and the large room, blocking out the small windows at the top of the walls in the semi basement. The blinds trembled, and the mist began to rise, flowing along the walls, until he might as well have been in the eye of a tornado.

But the mist was still visible. It almost looked like a lava lamp in the dark, except instead of wax, it was mist. The gray fog glowed

until it was white, but did not illuminate the walls. Mary's ghost moved over top it, a black outline he could see through, against the white death around her. Her eyes were empty, completely empty, like a skull, and she stared at him as she screamed. The darkness hid everything. The couches, the carpet, the windows, the ceiling, it all disappeared into endless oblivion, except for the glowing white fog, and the eyeless gaze of the shrieking creature hovering toward him.

Her face was twisted and warped, cheeks sunken in, and her hair was frayed and wet. Her mouth was wide open, exposing teeth, and a black hole that he couldn't see through, same as her eyes. She came closer, and closer, screaming endlessly. Every foot she gained, he could feel the chilling ache pulse through him, tear at him, and it made him feel heavier, heavier, and heavier.

The curse didn't have anything to contribute; ghosts were outside its purview, apparently. Fucking useless.

“You were alive! Stole my memory! And now I'm ... I'm...”

He knew what this was about. This was about the time he ran into her, not long after his Embrace. He'd run into her randomly, and had to wipe her memory of the encounter to keep the Masquerade safe. He'd violated her mind, tore something from her, and now she knew about it. Then, it had to be Mary. Oh fuck.

“I'm sorry, Mary, I had to!”

“If I knew, maybe I'd still be alive!”

He sucked in his breath, and stared at the ghost as she came closer, frozen. Mary wouldn't talk like that. But, this Mary, was different.

“Mary, please listen. I didn't have a choice. I—”

The world turned into a blur. Something grabbed him, something enormous, heavy, and invisible. The mist exploded outward as if in a panic, desperate to get away from the maelstrom of effort as something squeezed him, and threw him toward the stairs again. The couches and the TV went with him. The ghost wanted him low, deep down in the Earth, and threw him toward the doorway that held the final stairway down into the final basement; the door frame was the only thing that saved him from the incoming TV and couches.

The lowest floor again, and it greeted him far more harshly this time than last. He cracked against the metal support beam in the center of the first room, the storage half, and slumped to the floor as a shower of glass followed him from the TV that couldn't fit through the door. More of that thin carpet that might as well have been concrete caught his weight, and he groaned as he pressed his palms against it. Broken ribs, lovely.

The mist was already down in the basement, thick and smothering. The room almost looked like a different place, with white fog up to his knees, and he clutched the support beam as he looked around desperately. He had to stop this, before the spirit brought the house down.

Mary followed him down, slow and wavering, body dipping left and right over the fog. She never blinked, just glared at him, and her mouth hung open between shrieks, like a zombie that didn't know how to close its mouth after groaning. Down and down she came, until she was only a few feet from him. He had no where to run. All he could do was look up at the ghostly face of his sister, and sigh.

“Mary, what do you want from me? I regret that you ... died, but I don't regret doing what I had to do to preserve my secrecy. I had to wipe your memory, or—”

She pointed a palm out at him. This close, he could see her clothes, the casual clothes she wore when she was out shopping, jeans and a jacket; guess she didn't like hoodies anymore. There were holes in the jacket, a lot of them, slits that had the same darkness to them that her mouth and eyes did. Stab wounds.

The world turned upside down, and gained warp speed. No, that was him. Reality caught up a second too late, when he felt his body crash into some shelves. Cans of food went flying, some split open from the impact, and the crunch of the chest freezer denting against the impact of his head was the climax of the new hurricane of pain. He liked that freezer. His mom used to hide treats in there, ice cream and stuff, buried underneath frozen fish and liver, where no child would look; smart woman, his mom.

The mix of nostalgia and pain was not a pleasant one. A desire to scream coursed through him, but the world wouldn't stop spinning, putting a halt to any immediate attempt to make noise. The floor, basement, cans and shelves, and fog were covered in the endless, overwhelming, cold, white fog, glowing in the darkness but providing no light. It was all he could see until he pushed himself up onto his palms again, and peeked his head over the mist.

“Mary ... don't...”

“A stranger on the street stabbed me to death! And now Mom's like you!” Wails and shrieks mixed into her words, layering over each other. It wasn't an echo, it was extra voices, all hers, pouring over and overwhelming the basement, and the whole house. Her voice had the cans vibrating along the floor, and the shelves, and whatever else was hidden beneath the fog.

He'd already be dead if he wasn't a vampire. She'd have killed him already. Good fucking god, his sister would have killed him. Revenge, a dish best served cold, right? He managed a small chuckle, clearly delusional as he struggled to understand the



situation, and the absurdity of it all. What a way to learn ghosts were real.

“A stranger! I saw what happened. I watched! I watched!” Again she pointed her palm at him, and again the world stopped making sense. Gravity reversed, and he fell into the air, crashing into the exposed wood beams underneath what would have been the kitchen floor. He hit the ceiling hard enough that half of him lodged between the wood beams, and he gasped, a reflex that mixed with the crunch of bone. Pain followed a second later, and it only grew worse as the upward force driving him into the ceiling continued. Finally, he could start screaming.

“I watched! Mom fell, and some people came, and took us to the hospital. I was dead! Dead! I watched them put my body on a gurney!” Again an invisible force found him, and decided he was better off a painting on the wall. She threw him toward the wall his dad built, and he went through it, drywall and then the studs. More bones broke, but he was too busy trying to figure out up from down to notice; plus he was already screaming in pain.

“I ran home! It ... it was dark ... everywhere. But I could see home! Home ... home ... It’s not dark here. I can see, and I can ... I can feel things, touch things.” Her mouth opened wide, wider than it should have been able to, and her empty black eyes stared through him with all the tenderness of a bullet. “And then I remembered! I found my missing brother! But you stole that memory! Took it from me! Took it! Took it! Took it!”

He managed to lift his head, and gaze back through the hole in the wall she’d made with his body. Pieces of his suit lined the broken wooden studs, and so did pieces of his skin and Kindred blood. They burned away to ash in moments, lighting the room with small red cinders, before the only thing visible was the glowing fog once again.

Mary came through the doorway, glaring at him like he was the one who destroyed her life, and all she could think about was revenge. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing how he felt about himself. The more those eyes tore into his soul, the more he found himself agreeing with her. Angela came for her because of him, because he fucked up and failed to kill her when he had the chance. His war spilled over into the kine world, and he was stupid to think that psychopath woman wouldn't go for his weak spot. And it was a weak spot, as it must have been for any Kindred his age; a neonate, barely older than a fledgling, still fresh from the Embrace, and still struggling to let his old life go.

But just because he felt like it was his fault, didn't mean it was. He knew that, and he wasn't going to let a stupid thing like crippling depression and self doubt change that reality.

"It wasn't my fault!" he screamed back at the shrieking banshee. "Blame Angela, and the other hunters. You could have lived your life free of all this if it wasn't for her."

"And who says I wanted to live that life, with Dad dead, and my little brother missing? Mom and me didn't know what happened! We cried almost every night for a year!"

Up again he went, lifted by the invisible hand of the dead, and thrown. There was another couch and TV down here, a smaller room meant for watching movies and stuff. The shattering of glass was the first sensory input Jack received, to let him know he'd been thrown into it. Like an old friend who refused to let go, pain flooded him, renewed, and came at him from new places. He'd have bled out a dozen times over if he was alive.

"P-Please, Mary, I couldn't let you know." His voice came out broken, between groans and sobs. Sobs? Right, of course, he was crying. Only a little, and not about the pain. Somewhere inside him, he knew he was talking to his dead sister. Every word she said

ripped at him until it felt like his fucking insides were bleeding. “There’s rules! A secret society. I wasn’t allowed to bring you into it, and even if I could, I wouldn’t have!”

Slowly, he managed to get a sense for his surroundings. Glass was sawing into his stomach, fighting against his suit and penetrating his abdomen. He couldn’t see anything, not even the fog. So, his head was in the wall behind the flatscreen TV, and his torso was in, or through, the TV. It’d have been comical, if it was a cartoon. Turns out, getting rammed through a TV screen so hard you go through it and into the wall behind it, is blindingly painful.

He pushed himself out, or tried, but a second later he didn’t need to. The invisible grip of his sister’s rage grabbed him, and threw him back and away into the opposite wall. Again he felt parts of his body crumple to the impact, but since they were in the lower basement, the outer wall was thick and reinforced; more than strong enough to stop him, his body just broke against the studs of the wall instead.

He pushed himself out of the wall, and fell onto the couch beneath him. His Kindred body repaired itself quickly, far quicker than it would have in the past. Much as he’d prefer to keep the curse out of his life, it was terrifyingly useful, and it pulsed vitae through him at an unprecedented speed. Bones snapped back into place. Joints slid back into their sockets. Skin closed on itself, and began to mend, preventing any more of his stubborn Kindred blood from leaking out.

Ventrue were hard to kill, and with the curse, he was probably as hard to kill as Viktor; maybe he could regrow half his head if someone blew it off, too. But he couldn’t use his abilities against a ghost, that much he could tell every time he made eye contact with the black voids of Mary’s eyes. Summoning animals to his aid would require some time as well, and Mary wasn’t going to give him that; not like an army of rats would be useful right now anyway. The only

thing he had was his Ventrue resilience, and all that did was let Mary indulge in breaking him.

So, he sat on the couch, ready to let his dead sister beat on him some more.

“I’m sorry ... for everything,” he said. “I didn’t want any of this to happen.”

“Sorry? You’re sorry!?! I died, Jack! I died because—”

“Mary Julia Terry, stop that this instant!”

The fog, high and swirling around Mary, settled down instantly. Mary herself froze, before slowly lowering her outstretched hand, as she turned to face their mom. Samantha stood in the doorway, hands in fists at her side, and eyes wide as she glared at the floating ghost.

“M ... Mom?” Realization dawned on the dead woman’s face. Her massive, empty eyes shrank to something resembling normal size, and her mouth closed into a grimace. “Mom, I ... I...”

“Mary! Look at what you’ve done to my house! You’ve put holes in the walls. You’ve destroyed shelves, the freezer, windows, both televisions, and the couches. You’ve ruined the kitchen and all the utensils. You destroyed all the plates and bowls!”

“But ... but I...”

Jack stared at the hovering ghost, and his lips parted. Every moment their mom yelled at her, Mary looked less and less like the hovering maelstrom of rage and death, and more like Mary. The heavy darkness that buried everything faded away, and the mist became nothing more than a quiet gray around his ankles.

He looked at his mom. Her eyes were hard, glaring, and doing her angry mom face. Sadness danced in her gaze as well, but she wiped it away on her sleeve, before she pointed at Jack, still glaring at Mary.

“Your brother doesn’t deserve this! None of this is his fault. He did what he had to!”

“But he—”

“But nothing! After we were attacked, your brother put himself in danger to save me! His best friend died to save me! And if you had been alive too, I’m sure they would have done the same.” She looked down, ground her teeth, and started to tremble. Crying, as a vampire, was always a strange sight, with the lack of tears. But she was crying, sobbing, and half screaming, as sorrow and frustration poured through. “A man died to save me! Jack’s friend! If anything could have been done, if they had any idea what would happen, people would have been there to save us!” His mom marched toward the ghost, and glared up at her hovering body, straight in the eyes. The fact she was crying didn’t seem to affect her ability to talk. Maybe she was more used to it than he was.

“He ... he stole my ... memory...”

“He did it to protect you! He’s a vampire, and he has to protect that world, and protect you from it!”

“But—”

“And it’s not his fault a horrible, horrible woman brought us into it! This is her fault, and not Jack’s! Now apologize, right now!”

The silence that followed, was horrifying. Mary’s image continued to fall lower and lower, until she was standing on the mist-covered floor. She lowered her gaze to the carpet, and hugged herself, before she started to tremble, too.

“Jack, I ... I’m...” She fell to her knees. The mist spread out from her, exposing the hard carpet and how she knelt upon it. Still hovering, but only a single inch above the floor. “It’s ... it’s ... not ... me...”

He tried to sit up. Mistake. Much as his new regenerative powers were putting in work, he could feel dozens of bones still broken. Aligned, but broken. He could move if needed, but he’d need a day’s sleep before he felt normal again. But it didn’t matter. He had to fix this, fix the mess, fix the whole god damn fucking horrible situation.

“It’s ok,” he said, choking on a small sob. With another shove, he managed to get off the couch, and onto his knees, down in the mist with the ghost.

“No, it’s not!” The ghost’s shriek pierced the air, and both vampires reeled back a bit at the explosion of sound. When she screamed, her mouth and eyes opened inhumanly wide, exposing the endless void of black within. It was like the Scream painting by Edvard Munch, without any of the color. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m—”

Jack tried to reach out to her, but there was still a few feet between him and her, and his body didn’t want to listen. Bones ground on each other, and limbs threatened to bend in places where they shouldn’t. His mom, on the other hand, fell to her knees beside the ghost, and tried to hug her. Her arms passed through her, just like the mist that inched around their hands and feet.

So, the three of them knelt in the mist, and cried. Jack recovered quickly; weeks of misery had basically maxed him out on how much he could cry. His mom, on the other hand, had sorrow in limitless supply. She tried to touch Mary again, and failed, finding only a hazy image that bent and dispersed around her fingers.

“Oh my baby! I’m so sorry this happened. I’m so sorry!”

Accepting that ghosts exist came faster to Jack than he thought it would, if ever confronted with a ghost. It made sense in hindsight, with all the other things he'd seen. Vampires and werewolves were normal. Spirits and nightmare monsters were still weird, but not so weird. Ghosts fit well into that spectrum. But his sister?

“Why, Mary?” he said. “Why ... why are you here? Is it even you?”

“I don't know!” An explosion of anger swept out from the ghost, pushing the mist back, and the two vampires. A cold wave, something that shocked Jack to his guts, and ripped out any heat he had. If he'd been alive, it would have felt like someone, or something, was sucking the life out of him. The lights were off, and down in a basement it was pretty damn hard to see, even as a Kindred. But when Mary screamed, the darkness grew until Jack could barely see his nose, before some small light returned.

Their mom shook their head, and wiped away at her eyes at tears that never came. “What do you mean, is it her? Jack, it's—”

“Sorry,” he said, “just trying to be sure. I don't know anything about ... ghosts...”

“Ghost.” Mary looked at him, glaring, as if someone had just ripped out her soul. “Ghost. I'm ... a ghost ... Dead people are ghosts.”

He stared at her, unable to look away from the black void in her eyes. “Yes. You're ... a ghost.”

She looked down, and started to cry, louder than before. Black tears ran down her cheeks, and Jack gulped as he watched them drip onto the floor, before vanishing into the shallow mist. It was the same sort of liquid Black Blood frequently made with its presence.

Black Blood wasn't a ghost. Black Blood was a spirit from the Shadow Realm ... wasn't it—he? The spirit was strange, even

compared to other spirits, in how he seemed to embody Dolareido, and Dolareido's fucked up past from before the vampires came: flesh, witchcraft, and death. He also identified with a gender, though based on his accent and the time line, it was one he adopted. Was Black Blood a ghost, and not a spirit? Fuck, they were questions for the Uratha, because he sure as fuck had no idea. Would the Begotten know, maybe?

Focus, Jack. Your dead sister is sitting in front of you, a ghost, and crying her guts out.

"Mary," he said. He had to raise his voice a bit, to get over the sounds of both women still crying; it also helped to keep himself from crying anymore. "Mary, please, try to remember what happened. Not ... Not about before your death. Do you remember what happened after? You said you ... you ran home?"

"Home!" She continued to stare at him, without blinking. Her face looked like it was caught between Mary's face, and a skull. "I couldn't touch anything! No one could hear me!" Jack winced and pulled back from her shrieks, but she did not relent. "I ... I could feel myself ... fading. B-But, I could feel ... home. Mom would come back! She survived, and she would come back!" Her sobs grew, until they were again the banshee wails that penetrated wall and bone. "We could be a family again."

Jack looked at his mom. She was still crying, and Mary's words were only making it worse. There was no helping it though. His mom, their mom, had been on the edge and ready to break down the moment any conversation turned to Mary, and this situation was acid in the wound.

"And then," Mary continued, "I remembered ... w-what Jack did to me. The memory, it came back. I didn't understand! I didn't know! But ... you came ... home. You're different, Jack! You, and Mom, and ... and I'm ... I'm..." She couldn't finish. Screams flowed out of her,



causing the fog around her to rise and ripple, before settling down again as her high-pitched shrieks died away.

“We’re vampires,” he said.

The ghost looked at him. “Vampires?” Her eyebrows suggested a blink, but her empty eyes didn’t seem to have eyelids. “You mean like ... like in Twi—”

“Don’t say it,” he said, smiling as he put up a hand. “No, not like that. Mostly. But we are undead. We drink blood, we hide from sunlight, we have powers. It’s how I was able to ... to wipe your memory, of our encounter. I have to keep our existence secret.”

“Vampires ... and a ghost...” Mary clutched her legs to her chest, and started rocking back and forth, sobbing but no longer shrieking. “Real. It’s real. Dark things, bad things, all real.”

Trying to find something to say to soothe her was pointless. She was a ghost, dead, and there was no fixing that.

Or was there? Everyone seemed to be talking about resurrection these days, with pointed fingers and deadly rumors. And Beatrice straight up admitted that it was something she and Jacob had talked about.

No. No no. The road to Hell was paved with good intentions, and a lot of corpses.

“I still don’t understand,” he said. “You ... you died, Mary. I ... visited you, in the morgue.”

“You did?”

Smiling at the ghost, he raised a hand and showed two fingers. “Twice. I don’t understand why you’re still here, among the living.”

“After I ... got my memory back, I couldn’t leave! I was so angry, I ... couldn’t ... leave...”

The three of them sat in the cold, dark basement, and waited. Mary’s sobs and wails quieted until they were gone, and their mom’s quieted soon after.

“And now?” his mom said.

“Now I ... I’m still angry! But I understand. I understand.” Understand she may, but she kept rocking back and forth, head turning about in quick snaps and random directions. She was upset, and unstable. Hell, she was a ghost, haunting the home she grew up in. Ghosts weren’t known for being calm, or logical.

How much of the ghost lore he knew about applied to real life? Holy artifacts, sunlight, silver, did any of that affect ghosts? And ghosts, as far as he knew, stuck around for unfinished business. As far as the conversation suggested, he was that unfinished business.

“Mary,” he said, “you ... can’t stay, you know.”

“This is home! My home!” The mist began to rise once again, and Mary forced herself up onto her feet, before she began hovering higher. “I’m not leaving! I will not leave!”

“Jack,” their mom said, standing up, and helping him up. “If Mary wants to stay, she can stay.”

“No, no you don’t understand, Mom. Mary, you ... you can’t ... be happy like this, can you?” He had to stop this before it got worse. Mary was dead, and he could already see the desperation in his mom’s eyes as she looked between him and her. This wasn’t fair to their mom, dragging out hope like this, when they all knew how this had to end. “If you’re ... a ghost, it means something went wrong. This isn’t good Mom, and Mary, you need to understand that.”

This was sick, cruel punishment. This was ripping his mom apart, letting her think she could have something of her old life back. And to make matters worse, it was making him think that. The fuck did he know about ghosts? Maybe Mary could just ... haunt the old house, and exist as a ghost for as long as she wanted? Maybe she could be the next Casper, and spend her days and nights hanging out here. Maybe he could find a way to move her, so she could haunt a more lively place, and be a part of their lives?

Or, in the most likely case, she was going to be trapped in this state of anger and misery, until she let go, and moved on. Every moment she was here was pain for her, for him, and a thousand fold worse for their mother, who was probably thinking far better thoughts than him. She was probably thinking she had her daughter back, and that she'd regained the most precious thing she'd ever lost.

"It's not fair!" Mary flew around the room, literally. The ends of her jeans broke away, her feet disappeared, and Jack stared up at her circling form. Now she looked like a classic ghost, the sort that soar around in only tattered clothes and mist at their base, instead of feet.

"I know it's not fair," he said.

"No!" Their mom stomped her feet once, wiped her non-existent tears away again, and glared at him. "No, you leave her alone, Jack. If she wants to be—"

"Mom, stop it. She's a ghost! She's dead. You think we wouldn't know of a way to make a good thing out of this, if there wasn't a way? Christ, I'm close to two"—unfortunately that included Jacob—"of the oldest vampires around, and neither of them have ever suggested anything good could come of this."

"I'm here!" Mary screamed down at him, and her eyes opened wide once again, beyond what a human should be able to. "I'm here!"

In my home! I'm not dead if I'm here! I won't go away into the beyond!"

"Jack, please, just ... just..." His mom reached out and grabbed his shoulders, shook him, and stared into him until he felt his heart break. "Just leave her be for now, ok? If something needs to happen, if she has to move on, it can come later. For now, just let me talk to my daughter, ok?"

"Mom, I ... you know I love her, ok? I love her, almost as much as you do, but—"

"You..." Mary, who had begun screaming and shrieking again, stopped. The mist settled again, and her eyes and mouth returned to a normal shape. Even her feet returned, as she lowered herself down from the ceiling, and stood before him. "You love me?"

"What? Mary, of course I love you. You're my sister. How ... how could you ask me that?"

"You never talked to me!"

"I never talked to anyone! I'm sorry, I ... I was an asshole of a brother." Even if this wasn't Mary, even if it was a remnant, a faded image of a soul that already left, it was good to say this, and have his mother hear it. And if it was Mary, if a ghost was actually a person's soul, well, this was an opportunity to fix the things he never got to fix.

"I'm so sorry," he continued. "Christ I'm so sorry. When Dad died, I just kinda ... turned inward, you know? I stopped letting anyone get in, and ... Fuck me, I never stopped loving you, Mary. When I wiped your memory of me, that hurt, a lot. A real fucking lot, ok? I didn't want to do it."

Mary sniffed, wiped some of the strange, black tears from her empty eyes, and nodded. "I know ... about, I mean, after Dad died,

how you closed up. I thought maybe, maybe you didn't want us anymore."

He slapped himself in the forehead. "It was never like that. I was just being an asshole, focused on myself and no one else. I've grown up a bit since then, I think. Not a night goes by I don't regret leaving you two behind, and not making amends. And since ... you died, not a night goes by that it doesn't fucking kill me, Mary, that I couldn't fix that."

The ghost of Mary smiled at him. "I ... I'm glad ... that you ... told me that. You always did like to fix things."

The coldness and darkness that permeated the house, began to lift more. Some lights turned on, and Samantha flicked on the one in the movie room they were in; it didn't flicker. The dread in his guts abated, and he sighed as the growling pain subsided. Whether that was guilt washing away, his wounds healing, or a tangible effect from Mary no longer being mad with rage, who could tell. But god damn, it felt good to get to say that to her.

"So what now?" his mom said. "Mary's ... I can't believe she's here. She's here, and she's ... she's a ghost. Oh my baby, I'm so sorry this happened. I should have—"

Mary shook her head, hard, but it didn't make her hair bounce like it should have. "No, don't. When ... when I think about it, I get ... angry. Everything becomes a blur, and I ... I ... need to lash out!" Her hands tightened into fists, and she almost started screaming again, but she caught herself. "I don't want to think about it anymore. I've been thinking about it for ... for ... how long have I been ... dead?"

"A month," he said.

"A month? Feels like ... it was ... yesterday." She drifted down and over to their mom, and stayed close to her, soft smile fighting the

rage he could see bubbling inside her. “A month. I ... I...”

She started to fade. Jack stared, eyes wide, and their mom almost screamed when she noticed it too.

“Baby, are you—”

“I’ll ... be here, Mom, Jack.” Her voice grew quieter as well. “I’ll be here. I’m not going to leave ... just ... yet. Come visit me, ok? Please. It’s lonely here ... in the dark...”

“We will! Of course we will, baby.” Samantha got in close enough to touch her, and whimpered as her hand passed through her daughter.

“I’m ... tired ... B-But, I’ll be here! I love you Mom! Jack. Just need ... to ... rest...”

And like morning mist fading in the rising sun, she disappeared. The cold weight of the room went with her, mostly, and the oppressive darkness vanished entirely.

Jack and his mom hugged each other, and despite his hardest efforts, Jack couldn’t help but smile a little. This whole ghost situation was bound to end in more tears, more pain, but at least for the moment, it was good to get to say the things he’d wanted to say.

“Let’s go talk to Antoinette. She deals with this sort of stuff. She might have an idea. But—”

“I know,” she said, “I know. I ... I won’t get my hopes up. B-But, it was good to talk to her again, right?”

“Yes, it was.”

## Chapter 102

~~Antoinette~~

High within her tower, Antoinette perused the latest information she had acquired through her network of spies. Pictures of Terra Den and its enforcers were cropping up, far more than she wished, as were pictures of the various Xnomina thralls and ghouls, moving against them during daylight. Forever a frustration, that a Kindred's movements and actions were limited to the night, while their far less capable thralls and ghouls could move about freely whenever they desired. Every night come dusk, she had to examine the latest reports, and see what silly maneuvers the enthralled humans performed while she slept.

Garry, was likely the reason Terra Den continued to be aggressive toward Invictus and Xnomina. If this aggressiveness continued unabated, soon thralls would be shooting each other. Once that occurred, the insulted covenant would argue it was damaged property, and demand recompense. The other would not agree, and make a similar argument. Kindred would argue with each other in dark alleys and behind closed doors about the loss, and these disagreements would escalate into violence. The moment a Kindred died, it would escalate further, to skirmishes; nothing more than an appetizer to outright war.

As she acquainted herself with the details of the previous twenty-four hours, thralls had appointments to visit her. Each night, several of her thralls stepped into her office, eyes down in reverence, and she performed the routine of maintaining them as a resource. Those she had bound with the Vinculum were given a taste of her blood, to ensure the addiction and affection continued. Some were bound with only Majesty, though these thralls could not be trusted with vital information, or more impressive weaponry. Some were bound

with both, those she trusted with handling the most deadly weaponry and deadlier information.

None of them were told anything about her experiments. Let them live in ignorance of it, lest an unruly thrall divulged information they should not. For all the squabbles of the covenants, and her need to manage them, they were secondary to her true goals of mastering the rules of ephemera, spirits, and what else may lay beyond.

Sometimes she still wondered if it would be better to leave Dolareido, continue her experiments where no one knew her, and no one knew what sort of science she pursued. Jack would be with her of course, and her new childe.

Samantha Terry. Antoinette smiled as she brought up yet another report about covenant activity; Samantha was not in the report, and yet Antoinette's mind drifted to her nonetheless. Her childe had departed to visit her old home, and say her farewells. Jack had gone with her. She had been tempted to join them, but no, it was far too personal. Let the two of them bond, reforge their relationship, and move on from the death of daughter and sibling. Antoinette would be there when it was time for Samantha's funeral. A month was quite a length of time to wait for such an event, but Samantha's new life took precedence.

Bless her heart, Samantha was simply too adorable. While mother and child shared much in common, such as their penchant for honesty, Samantha was soft, resilient in that she would bend when forced, but far too passive to strike back at whatever bent her. The sort of woman who would stay with her husband, even if the man proved abusive and aggressive. Delightfully fortuitous of the woman, to have wed a loving husband and bear two loving children. Or perhaps, not fortuitous, but diligent, to have raised her children as she did, to have raised Jack into the man he had become.



Daniel stepped into the office, and she gestured to him with a gentle hand as she leaned back upon her throne. “I assume you know of Terra Den’s new aggression. They continue to poke at Xnomina.”

“Did it come up at the Primogen meeting?”

“It did, but Garry did not admit to the severity of his actions, and the Invictus refused to admit how damaging those actions are. Strange, is it not? It is usually Garry who refuses to show weakness, while the Invictus claw at his domain.”

“It is strange. The power balance has been upset, and Garry continues to take advantage.”

Sighing, Antoinette caressed her jaw with a single finger, and scrolled through the various pictures her thralls had taken. Garry’s thralls were never subtle. While the Invictus knew to operate quietly, in secret, establishing many plots with a dozen avenues each, the Carthians were content to operate openly, burning down whatever they felt was an obstacle. In the past, Garry would force himself to hold back on his more reckless Carthian urges, due to the dual power of the First and Second Estate. His rise to greater power continued after the purge, and had only continued to grow in more earnest after the death of Viktor and Tony. Naturally, now that Maria had decided to focus her efforts on the revival of the blasted Lancia et Sanctum, leaving much of the Invictus duties in Michael’s lap, Garry would continue to push to expand his territory, in retribution for the Mirrden district, but also with an inevitable desire to rule the city for himself.

Perhaps, instead of fleeing Dolareido for a more private life, she should simply kill all the Carthians and Invictus in her beloved city? A tempting thought, but ultimately it would undermine her goals. If she wanted Kindred to cooperate in preparation for the future,

Dolareido and the truce it maintained between covenants were her greatest chance.

“The Uratha,” she said, “are a factor in this. Garry feels comfortable being aggressive, because the infuriating Gangrel is friends with Avery. How far have the Invictus come in ... seducing, the werewolves into their arms?”

“Not very.” Shrugging, Daniel walked behind her to stand at the enormous window looking over her city. “Clara and Carter continue to sleep in the Invictus hotel, and while the First Estate has offered other incentives to the Uratha, Avery has been slow to take the bait.”

“She is intelligent. I ... have to respect that.”

“She killed Minerva,” he said.

“She killed Minerva at Simon’s order, and because my ... old friend, had crossed a line.” A line of which she had yet to be informed of. “You do not trust her.” She could practically see the frown through the back of Daniel’s head. Which was quite surprising, considering how rarely the man frowned.

“I think ... you have been unusually forgiving, as of late.”

This again. Antoinette sighed, got up from her chair, and joined her old friend at the window.

“Did you enjoy the purge, sheriff? Did you enjoy walking in the ashes of dozens of Kindred?”

“We have a responsibility to the Ordo Dracul, Ann. Being Voivode of this city has provided you with the resources to pursue your experiments.”

“You know very well my goal is not only my experiments with ephemera, Daniel.”

She expected a sigh, but that was her mistake; Daniel rarely made such noises. He stared out the window, adjusted his glasses, and shook his head.

“You expect too much. The Carthians will stir violence with the Invictus, sooner or later, and Jacob will throw gasoline onto that fire. The werewolves will get involved. And, because tragedy is an avalanche that does not stop until it has destroyed everything, the Begotten will become involved. Do you not remember the damage Azamel caused the last time she was here?”

“I ... cling to the peace we have. It is the only hope our kind has, Daniel.”

As if God had decided to make a statement, Daniel did indeed, sigh. “Then you have more hope for these Kindred than I. It will come to violence, Ann.”

“You believe we will be forced to choose between the Carthians and the Invictus?”

“No. I believe, when the time comes, everyone will be at each other’s throats. We will be forced to leave, or...”

Or kill them all, and purge her city of all meddling forces. The issue with that approach, was that, for all the strength she possessed, her and Daniel, it would not be possible for them two of them to defeat two hundred Kindred in battle, when the enemy would have the support of several ancilla, Maria, Michael, Garry, and now perhaps the Uratha. In the worst case scenario, Jacob would become an issue, and that was not a battle she was sure she could win.

She was more confident that she could defeat the Uratha, than she could Jacob. But then she remembered Simon, and the others of his pack, and the powers they possessed. While all Uratha could transform into fierce beasts of legend, it was the Uratha that wielded special abilities upon that, that were truly frightening. Some could disappear, in a similar manner to Kindred. Some could summon flames to their claws, which would be especially problematic for her kind. And some, she knew, could unleash roars that could render even a Kindred catatonic.

Daniel was right, of course. With time, the habits of Kindred would lead to violence, and Avery would find herself involved; Azamel as well, considering Dolareido's luck of late. All of this, and they still had the hunters to deal with.

"No," she said at last. "If it comes to it, we will act with violence, but not only do I believe these Kindred can learn to coexist, but that you and I can deal with the troubles that arise in pursuit of coexistence."

Large words. She had become more passive, accepting, and forgiving of the transgressions of her fellow paranormals as of late. The sheriff and her had had this conversation before, and at the time, she had felt that perhaps her relationship with Jack had softened her; Daniel felt the same way. With time, she was not so sure it was simply her being in a loving, healthy relationship that had softened her heart, but hope. Hope that, perhaps, the covenants could grow to cooperate, and the Lancea et Sanctum, with the reforged Burksen within, could become something healthy for her city, instead of the ludicrous traditionalism and totalitarianism of Lucas's approach.

Alas, perhaps she was being naive. Perhaps, given time, Daniel would prove to be correct, and the two of them would be forced to deal with the covenants, the Uratha, and the Begotten. She had

measures in place, should such a battle happen upon the horizon, but she would not engage such tools unless absolutely necessary.

Her phone began to ring. Only her two ghouls, Jack, the sheriff, Natasha, and Samantha, could pull a ring from her phone, and she smiled as she reached for it upon her desk. She had chosen a gentle song to play, when Samantha called; it fit her.

“Yes, my childe?”

“Antoinette, I ... um ... something’s happened.”

Antoinette froze, and felt her fingers tighten on the phone. How long had it been since she felt the fear of a guardian, that perhaps something horrible had happened to someone she cherished? Not since the death of her previous ghouls, at Lucas’s hand. Tony’s death had been a sad night, but not for the same reasons.

“What has happened, Samantha?”

“Um ... it’s personal. Can we talk, in person? It ... might involve some of the things we ... we do.”

Without Antoinette saying a word, Daniel nodded to her, and left, leaving the Prince smiling at his back. Her old friend was far too wise.

“Oui. Come, see me in my main office.”

---

Samantha came to her tower, alone. Jack had dropped her off, and had sent her a text explaining that he had to meet with the other Right Hands to pursue covenant business. She acknowledged, and watched through her window as her love walked off. How she wished she could help him with the weight on his shoulders. Her poor little Ventrue.

She trusted him to manage the stress being laid at his feet. And at the moment, she had her own situations to manage.

“Samantha, my dear childe, come sit.” She gestured to one of the chairs near her desk. There was no glass table in this office room. Instead, there were several large, cushioned chairs, black leather.

With trembling hands, Samantha sat down, and slid in closer to Antoinette’s desk. She had a wooden box in her hand, a foot wide and a few inches thick, with a split down the center. A jewelry box?

“Something ... happened, at the house.” The look of fear on her face was blatant. If Jack wore his emotions on his sleeve, something he struggled to manage, Samantha put them up in lights.

“Are you alright, my childe?”

“I think so. I didn’t know what to take, so I grabbed my old jewelry box; lots of gifts from my family in here. Some things from James and Mary, and Jack. Other people too. Some of them are ... important to me, in memory, you know?”

Antoinette smiled. “I know indeed. But, I do not understand. You look as if you have seen a ghost.”

Her childe blinked at her, several times, and clutched the box tight on her lap. “That’s ... that’s what happened.”

“Excusez-moi?”

“Jack and I, we were walking around the house. It was cold, strangely cold, and it got dark, and it felt strange, and ... heavy.”

“That does sound unusual.”

“And ... and then...” Samantha looked down, and her shoulders started to shake. “She attacked Jack.”

“Someone attacked Jack? But, I witnessed the boy’s departure moments ago. He looked unharmed.” But then, as she examined the memory, she did notice he looked heavy. She had thought it was the stress her poor little Ventrue must bear, but perhaps it was more?

“He says it’s the curse. It heals him pretty quick. He’s still hurt, but he’s up and moving around.”

So Jack had confessed to his mother of the curse. Smart of the boy to break the news to her himself, before a ruthless rumor did it for him.

“I do not understand. Who would attack Jack in such a location? Was it the hunters?”

“No! No no, it was ... it was ... Mary.”

Antoinette peered at Samantha closely, squinting for a moment as she sifted through the emotions pouring out of her childe. “Your daughter.”

“My daughter. She ... she’s a ghost ... and she’s haunting our home.”

So, she had seen a ghost, then. Were the situation not so terrible, she would have laughed at her previous deduction. “I ... I do not know what to say, Samantha. That is an extreme situation to be caught in, and one I have not seen in many decades. I cannot imagine the horror of seeing your daughter return in such a fashion.”

“It was ... it was hard. She attacked Jack, because Jack wiped her memory of an encounter they once had. To preserve the Masquerade, you know?”

“Indeed.”

“And, and ... Mary remembered it, as a ghost, I guess.”

That was a disturbing portion of knowledge to discover, that a ghost could recall memories they had lost in life, those wiped away by a Ventrue. It stirred questions about memories, about the soul, and whether the two were connected. Her experiments suggested events left lasting impacts on ephemera, that could manifest given the correct stimuli, but memories were a different creature, than events themselves.

“I calmed her down, and she apologized,” Samantha continued, voice wavering. “It was really her, Prince! My daughter, a ... a ... ghost. Oh, it was terrifying. She was so angry, and not ... not herself.” Slowly, Samantha opened the box, exposing some of her old jewelry. It was delightfully juvenile, old fashioned and inexpensive, necklaces with broaches and pictures, bulky gold rings, and loop earrings.

“I can only imagine, if she felt the need to attack her brother.”

“She threw him around! It was like that movie Carrie, you know? She threw Jack around, and plates, knives, and the couches. Two couches were ruined, and both televisions.”

“That ... is a powerful ghost, my childe.” For a ghost to lash out with destruction force of such magnitude was rare. Normally they haunted an area, but their influence was subtle, distorting paintings or knocking over glasses. Their occurrence was so rare that sometimes she wondered if her few encounters with spectral entities in the past couple centuries had actually been, indeed, ghosts at all.

Nodding, Samantha set the box on Antoinette’s desk, and withdrew one of the necklaces. A thin gold chain, one of the more elegant pieces, and timelessly fashionable.



“Mary got me this.” Ah, yes, it made sense that it was the daughter that acquired the jewelry that a mother would wear. Bless the men and their failed attempts at purchasing jewelry; twice bless her silly childe, for keeping the gifts, and not trading them for store credit. Juvenile, and ultimately emotions misplaced. But then, she was not Samantha. Do not judge, Antoinette.

“It is lovely.”

“Thank you!” Samantha, still shaking with what must have been the aftereffects of overwhelming fear, elation, and heartbreak, beamed. Forever weak to compliments, her childe, a weakness Antoinette was hesitant to train out of her. “I ... I ... I don’t know what to do! My baby girl is back, Antoinette. She’s back. She called me Mom.” The word ‘Mom’ had her shaking all the more, and she had to clutch the necklace on her lap before she could settle. “Jack insisted this is bad, that she shouldn’t be a ghost, that ... that...”

“Your son is wise, Samantha.”

“I ... know.”

Antoinette took a deep breath, and sighed. “I had not foreseen this, but perhaps I should have.”

“You said you hadn’t seen something like this in decades. You’ve dealt with ... ghosts, before?”

Nodding, Antoinette got up, and walked over to her window, before gesturing for Samantha to follow. She did a moment later, necklace still in her hands. The two Daeva stared out over the city, and Antoinette held her hands behind her, in the small of her back, as she considered her words.

“I have had the good fortune of never having to deal with a specter from someone I knew, my childe. But, a couple times, ghosts have likely haunted places in my city. They hide well, and

only expose themselves when they feel the need. Normally they hide in Twilight, and only emerge either to pursue resolution, or to let their emotions boil over into the real world.”

Samantha looked from the city to her, eyes widening, and lips parting. “You know a lot about this sort of stuff.”

“That I do, my childe. Studying aspects of Twilight, and the peculiar entities that lurk within, and beyond, is what I do for the Ordo Dracul.” And for herself, naturally.

Samantha gasped. It was so joyfully typical, it were almost if Samantha did stock sounds for old television.

“You’ve never told me about what you do, for the Ordo. Not in depth, I mean. You mentioned spirits before, but I ... didn’t really know what that meant.”

“With this unexpected situation, perhaps it is time that changed.”

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She guided Samantha down into the depths of her tower. Her childe had her own room within the maze and luxuries of her tower’s underside, but Samantha did not have the courage to explore without Antoinette to guide her. Perhaps that would change, if the woman began to feel a connection to her new role.

It was Antoinette’s duty as sire to teach her childe the basics of her covenant. An easy task for the Carthians or the Invictus, whose purposes were clear, and who dealt with tiers of information as many normal societies did: with rank, or respect. An even easier task for the Lancea et Sanctum, who felt content to strip away skepticism and critical thinking from their recruits, and only give them enough information to pull them deeper into the pyramid scheme.

She frowned at herself as she walked. Her opinion of the Second Estate did not need to be so harsh, but it was difficult to release. Not all who were devoted to religion were needlessly traditional, and blind to scientific reason, or weighing evidence, or pragmatic conclusions. Perhaps Damien could be such a soul, or Maria could learn to be.

To learn the basics of the Circle of the Crone, to enter its dark embrace, would not be as easy as the first three. They did not have the mindless worship mentality of religion, but that did not change that they were a dark cult that encouraged treating each other as a family. They openly pushed for their members to go out, explore, dive deep into dark arts, and to test the limits of pleasure and pain. It was not a group you could test the waters with first. You must dive in deep, and learn to swim.

The Ordo Dracul, on the other hand, were different. Everything was about a Kindred's ability to learn, decipher, and adapt. The Ordo used mentors to prepare students for the many phases of rising through the ranks of the secret organization. It was not dissimilar to a secret university, with ranks of knowledge and mastery, with students pursuing doctorates in specific topics. The topics ranged from learning how to read society at large and how it responded to various zeitgeists, to more arcane or deadly interests, such as her own.

Some of the more brutal Kogaion demanded studying dragons performed heinous acts, in order to observe the change, and master the art of study. Kill one of the kine, and document the results, analyze the fallout, and report. She felt no need for such a barbaric tactic to teach Kindred how to analyze.

Tonight, she would test some waters with her childe, and see if the ripples piqued Samantha's interest. Perhaps she would be interested, or perhaps she would not be. Natasha had been terrified of the secrets Antoinette offered, once upon a time. Lesson learned

then, to go slow with Samantha. Not everyone devoured this knowledge with the voracity of Minerva.

Deep within the tunnels of her tower, surrounded by black marble and metal, she opened the door to her primary experiments room. She motioned for her childe to follow her, and smiled back over her shoulder, as she watched Samantha's jaw drop.

"Wow." Samantha stepped over to the table with the tablets, the laptops, and the various artifacts sitting about. Above her hung the chandelier, though it cast no light at the moment, room lit with the usual white LEDs within the ceiling. They did not rob from the majesty of the chandelier, the priceless artifacts, or the many symbols drawn into the floor, the walls, and ceiling.

Unlike Jacob and his archaic ritual symbols, Antoinette had found patterns that allowed her to peer into Twilight. Trial and error, hundreds of years of experimentation, and reading through every ancient text she could find. Information had to be assembled painfully, pieces of a million-piece puzzle, of which she did not have a final image for reference. It would have been easier to complete a puzzle of featureless glass.

The discovery of Twilight was not the highlight of her career. The concept of ghosts and other creatures that hid in a realm between, but were part of the physical world in sense, was an idea as old as time. But that she could touch its hidden depths, test them, and fish for interaction through a combination of mathematical patterns, symbols, resonance, and light spectrums, was her contribution to the Ordo. Since she first proposed the idea, and demonstrated repeatable results in the past century, visiting members of the Ordo took to her idea, and had begun to explore it as well. Perhaps Elaine would ask for an update on her progress?

"I have mentioned that I explore the existence of other realms before, have I not?" Antoinette, smiling at her childe, stepped out

onto the giant, spiraling circle within the center of the floor.

“Y-Yes, but I didn’t really ... know what that meant.”

“As a Kogaion for the Ordo Dracul in Dolareido, all dragons in this city must report to me. But I also pursue my own interests, as a Sworn of the Dying Light. Perhaps, in the future, these titles will mean something to you, but for now simply listen and absorb what you can.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Delightful.

“The Ordo Dracul pursue mastery of many facets of existence, as I have explained before. I have dedicated much of my second life to experimenting with Coils focused on exploring the soul, as well as that of the flesh, particularly vampire flesh.”

“Right, yeah. I don’t really know what Coils are, though.”

“Coils are techniques you may learn, that draw upon your abilities as a vampire to summon forth. With willpower, you may perform acts outside the realm of standard Disciplines, and the Coils are unique from Disciplines in that they do not drain your vitae to enact. Some may resist the damage of sunlight. Others resist the nightmares of torpor. And others may allow your blood to be more addictive, so you may bind others to your will far more quickly than normal.” How and why coils behaved the way they did, when performed by Kindred, was a great riddle that the Ordo explored with utmost conviction. An answer to the question ‘what are the Coils’ still remained a mystery, however.

“Wow.” Such an interesting student, her childe. Whereas Natasha would absorb information, and then question what she did not understand, Samantha listened and absorbed what she could, which,

did not seem like all that much. Bless her heart, teaching her to master the Coils would be difficult.

“But tonight, it is not the Coils I wish to explore with you. Due to your encounter with your daughter, I believe it will be of ... value to you. Ultimately, you do not need to join the Ordo Dracul, my childe, or become one of the Sworn, but perhaps tonight will intrigue you.” She held out her palm, smiled at Samantha, and nodded to the necklace in her hand.

Samantha raised a brow, blinked at her several times, and handed her the small chain. “Why wouldn’t I join?”

“The Ordo explores the mysteries of existence, my childe. Many of these mysteries are terrifying. I do not blame others for preferring to keep their feet firmly upon the Earth. But for those who acquire a taste for secrets, they often become quite addicted.” She set the necklace upon the center of her summoning circle, and rejoined Samantha at the table. Nodding to her childe, she grabbed the primary control tablet, and used it to turn off the lights, turn on the chandelier and its unusual blue light, and turn on the resonance machine and its gentle hum.

Such objects normally only left an imprint on Twilight ephemera, if the emotions suffered by those near it were extreme. Samantha was the sort to overflow with emotion though, and perhaps something as simple as a gift from her daughter would affect it.

She gave the tablet to her childe, and pointed at the summoning circle within the center of the room. “Using the resonance tool, select the filter, and observe the circle through the device.”

“Ok.” Obviously confused, Samantha managed a small shrug, and did as instructed. Soon she was looking through the orange filter of the tablet, aiming the large device toward the center of the room, and her necklace, sitting under the chandelier.

Samantha gasped, as if the woman had seen far too many soap operas. She opened her eyes as wide as they could go, lowered the device, peered at the necklace and blue light, and raised the device again.

“Oh my god! That’s ... that’s ... that’s me, and Mary!”

Antoinette suppressed her grin. It was true then, that Samantha overflowed with such emotion, that something as simple as receiving a necklace from her daughter would leave an imprint. Stepping around the desk and looking through the screen did indeed show a woman, hugging another woman. The hazy images were blurry, without as much definition as she found on artifacts oriented around murders of passion, or the collapse of civilizations, but that did not detract from the power of the scene.

“This necklace must be important to you.”

“It ... it’s ... a gift Mary got me, not long after she came back from running away. See? She looks shorter than ... than ... she is now. Was ... now.” Samantha pointed at the tablet, and beamed up at Antoinette with a precious smile. “Is this real?”

Antoinette returned the smile as she analyzed the two women on the screen. “In a sense. It is what we call ephemera.”

“Ephemera...” Samantha tapped her nose several times, before smiling at the repeating image of her past self hugging her daughter.

“A material, no different than solids, liquids, or gasses. It exists in many manifestations, but most importantly, it hides among us and the physical, in a place, or state, that some call Twilight.”

“Right, you mentioned Twilight. Is it like that—”

“No, silly childe, not as per the books or movies.” Forever she would be tormented by such media. “It is a place that surrounds is,

permeates us, but we cannot touch. Spirits from other realms hide within its shadows; the werewolves hunt them. Ghosts rest within, and emerge when disturbed. Understanding the nature of ephemera is one of my goals.”

Nodding to her child, Antoinette walked over to the circle, and stepped next to the necklace. Samantha blinked at her, but looked down at the tablet, and gasped once again.

“W-What? They ... they see you! But I don’t understand. I thought we were looking at a memory.”

“The nature of ephemera is strange. It feeds on essence, an invisible energy that I also study to understand. Ephemera seems capable of evolving into entities, or perhaps essence itself is what births ephemera into an entity, I do not know. Such are the mysteries I explore. A property of ephemera that I have researched to a grand degree, is what you see, that it seems capable of both retaining the details of powerful events, but also capable of interacting with the physical present.”

“Wow. I thought ... the Ordo Dracul would be focused more on things like, vampire stuff.”

“Many are, and many explore the boundaries of our existence. There are realms beyond our borders, Samantha Terry, entire realms, filled with alien entities upon the edge of reason. I spend much of my time exploring how our physical realm interacts with our sister realm, that we call the Shadow Realm. The werewolves, Uratha, call it the Hisil.” She left the circle, and by the time she returned to Samantha and peered upon the tablet, the ghostly images were repeating their everlasting moment of joy as if Antoinette had not disturbed them.

“Ephemera can act like ... like it’s alive, but it’s really just replaying memories?”



“Indeed.” She sat with her childe, and watched the painful realization dawn upon Samantha’s face.

“So, the ghost at my home ... might just be a memory of Mary, and not actually Mary.”

“It is a grand, difficult question, my childe, and one other dragons have attempted to answer. Attempted, and failed. For all our knowledge, centuries upon centuries of research and experiments, no one has ever managed to define a soul. We have evidence the soul exists, but what a soul entails, is beyond our current sum of knowledge. Whether this ghost is your daughter’s soul, or a rather powerful memory of her, I do not know.”

“That’s ... painful to hear.” Her childe forced down an oncoming sob, but soon a bittersweet smile sat upon her lips once again, as she watched the precious past through the tablet. “I should have listened to Jack.”

Antoinette shook her head. “My love is doing his best to protect you from the unusual circumstances that surround him. From what you have said, this ghost has demonstrated far more emotion and awareness than any ephemera I have exposed with objects such as your necklace.”

That earned a larger smile from her childe. “I think it’s her. But ... but, she’s still a ghost. She’s still dead.”

“That she is, my childe. And the unfortunate reality, is that no one has ever managed to achieve resurrection. Or if they have, it has been kept secret.” She loathed to mention the word ‘resurrection’ to her childe, for fear of implanting the idea at all, but it was better to crush any hope she had, before hope shattered into destructive remorse. If only Maria, and the witches could understand that.

“What do we do?”

“Ghosts are a conundrum, my childe. Dealing with them can often simply be a case of ignoring them, and letting them fade. I suspect such is how most are dealt with. But the few I have been forced to deal with, their ends did not come lightly. In the circumstances I can remember, one of the specters had to achieve revenge on who murdered him; I was but a distant witness to this event. The other two, I was forced to destroy the building they haunted.”

“Destroy!?”

“Indeed. Though, I suspect it was not destroying the building itself that dispersed the specter, but the fire destroying an object the ghost was connected to.” She shrugged, and held out a hand. With a sigh of disappointment, Samantha handed the tablet to her, and Antoinette turned off the resonance machine before setting the lights back to normal.

“What happens to ghosts destroyed like that?”

“I do not know, little Daeva. If they are ephemeral remnants, memories left behind by powerful moments, then I assume they were destroyed completely. If they are, instead, the souls of those who have died, I believe they are forced to move onto wherever it is that souls normally arrive upon death.”

Samantha nodded, looking down, lost in thought. “That does sound like a mystery I’d like to know the answer to.”

“Oh?” Smiling wider, Antoinette leaned in closer to the small woman. “Such secrets do not frighten you?”

“They do. But, it’s better to know, right?”

“You do not consider it blasphemy?”

“Blasphemy? No. It’s just knowledge, right? What’s wrong with learning about things?”

There were many things wrong with knowledge, in the grand scheme of things. Samantha's naivety was quite cute though, and Antoinette could not help but chuckle at how adorable it was.

"Indeed, knowledge is knowledge, a tool. Sometimes it is a deadly tool, but only a fool blames the tool for the intent of those who wield them. And yet, sometimes a tool is an accident waiting to happen, my sweet childe. Kingdoms have been lost in calamity, to the wandering fingers of curious souls."

Samantha nodded, smiling some more. Antoinette's words were going in through one ear and out the other, mostly, but perhaps traces of them would be left behind, grains of sand Samantha could ponder upon until they became pearls. She truly was Natasha's opposite.

"Prince."

"Samantha?"

"Jack, he um ... told me about a lot of things at the house, before Mary attacked him. He told me about ... Julias."

"That is a sad story, my childe, and I am saddened that you had to learn the details of it. But please, do not feel guilty. Julias Mire made his own choice."

"And ... he also told me about something people call the curse?"

"Yes, as you mentioned. Of that, I am quite surprised he shared with you."

She frowned at Antoinette. "I'm his mother."

As expected, the fledgling was more than capable of summoning some fierceness to her, if her children were in danger. A useful trait, but not well managed.

“You are his mother, but that was a previous life, Samantha Terry. You must accept that your role has changed.”

“I ... don't think I can do that.”

Again, Antoinette laughed, and offered her childe a more gentle smile. “You would not be you if you could, my childe. As for Jack and his curse, it is a strange circumstance your son has found himself in. We do not know what will happen to him, but I trust him and his friend Damien to monitor the situation closely.”

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~~Damien~~

The sheriff left the Elysium tower, and Damien followed. He tapped deep into his vitae, summoned excessive amounts of it, of willpower, of determination, and hid himself with the Cloak of Night. While Daniel walked the sidewalk of South Side, surrounded by people, Damien kept to the rooftops. Following him in the crowd would be both easier, due to all the bodies, and harder, due to the needed proximity for visual contact. Up here, he could follow the man from a distance. Even if Daniel managed to sense him, Damien was nothing but a black silhouette at the edge of rooftops.

He wasn't sure why he was doing this. Perhaps if he managed to sneak up on the sheriff, he could prove worthy of training? It was an absurd notion, that he could convince the sheriff to train him, but Maria saw the value in it. It was a way to maintain peace between the reborn Lancea et Sanctum, and the Prince. It was also a way for Damien to acquire skills no other Mekhet in the city was old enough to teach. Those reasons didn't resonate with him though.

Daniel was the sheriff, a man who'd killed dozens of Kindred and many bishops during the purge. He defeated Lucas's rebellion, but only after Natasha was safe from Lucas's clutches, a place Damien

had put her. In the end, Daniel had spared him when he had every reason to kill him.

Perhaps all Damien wanted to do was apologize? He'd seen the error of his ways, and was turning over a new leaf. But the thought felt shallow. Words, were shallow. Actions spoke loud, and Damien thought he had acted in the best interest of the covenants since Lucas's death. Twice now, he had fought alongside Jack, once against a strange monster, and another time against hunters. He had rushed to Jack's aid when the man had summoned an army of crows to the hospital.

Perhaps all Damien wanted, was simply a mentor, a fellow Mekhet and someone he could talk to about the trials and tribulations of their blood clan. There were Mekhet older than Damien in the Invictus and Carthian covenants, one each he believed, but neither had acquired the experience Damien had. The Kindred of Dolareido were soft.

Daniel wasn't soft. Daniel was a brutal, efficient killer. An assassin, a perfect example of a Mekhet at the height of their power. And Damien looked up to him. Perhaps that was the reason then, simple idolism.

Damien froze, and stared through his binoculars at the sheriff. Keeping track of someone among hundreds of shifting bodies was difficult, but Daniel had stopped moving, making trapping him much easier. Any moment now, the elder was going to look Damien's way, and catch him in the act.

Except, no. Daniel was looking at something ahead of him, or someone. He recognized the someone. Athalia.

Right, Daniel knew Athalia. Apparently, the two knew each other from before Angela's arrival at the city. Romance? Judging from the way Athalia was glaring at him, probably not. If only he could read

her lips. It was a skill he should have developed, considering his many decades of observation, but he hadn't.

The two were exchanging words, and Athalia seemed heated. She was always heated. There was an appeal to her, dark skin, long, smooth black hair, tall and thin. Unfortunately, he'd never seen Athalia not look upset, and if he had to pick between the fieriness of someone like Athalia, or the joviality of someone like Fiona, there was no question which he found more appealing.

His phone buzzed. Cursing under his breath, he pulled out his phone and turned off the ring and buzz. Who had messaged him? Ah, Fiona, speak of the devil. And she'd sent him a picture.

Look at the picture, or focus on the mission. A terrible, difficult, horrible choice to make.

He looked at the picture.

Fiona, on her bed, wearing some purple boy shorts, and nothing but. She was facing the camera, kneeling on the bed, and cupping each breast as she smiled for the picture; a picture taken by her laptop, apparently. There were multiple pictures, and each had Fiona exploring her body with increasing indecency. She knew she had large breasts, and she enjoyed showing them off. She knew she had a large butt, and she enjoyed showing that off as well.

He forced down the rising urge to indulge, and quickly texted her. ~Please stop, you're killing me. I'm on a mission.~

A moment later, he received another picture. Fiona stood in front of her laptop, leaning forward, frowning. The angle caused her breasts to hang heavy underneath her, and in her hand, she held a vibrator. Good Lord, give him strength.

He put the phone away, and looked back to the street. Naturally, Daniel had vanished. He could see Athalia, walking off, and he could

see her frown steering nearby pedestrians clear of her path, but Daniel was nowhere to be seen.

“Why are you following me?” The sheriff’s voice came from behind him, quiet, and cold, maybe slightly irritated.

Damien turned his head enough to see that a long sword was being held an inch from his throat. He had half expected this excursion to end like this, with Daniel sneaking up on him, turning the tables; it did nothing to ease the shock of being ambushed. He hadn’t expected Daniel’s sneak attack to succeed because he was distracted by his sex life. And damn, he was happy to have a sex life, but not happy to have a sword at his neck.

“Sheriff. I was ... limit testing.”

“Limit testing?”

“I wanted to know if I could follow you without being spotted.”

Daniel stared at him through his glasses, a stone, without emotion or surprise. His right hand still held the sword, and he used his left to adjust his glasses, pushing on the bridge to get them closer to his eyes.

“I’m almost half a millennium old, Mister Burksen. You’re what, fifty-one-years embraced?”

“And that’s ... part of the reason I’m following you.” Damien stood up, and Daniel kept the sword where it was. The blade was steady, and Damien frowned for a moment as he checked the metal. Zero adornments of any kind, a blade meant for killing and nothing else. “Maria tells me she’s announced the revival of the Lancea et Sanctum officially, and that she’s going to be running it. I’m going to be her right hand, her sword, and ... I wanted your help.”

“My help?” With brow raised, a moment of emotion Damien had not expected from the statue, Daniel slipped his sword into his jacket into a hidden sheath starting behind his neck. His face returned to its stone solidity in seconds, and he stared at Damien with all the interest and urgency of a wall.

“Yes, your help. There aren’t any Mekhet I can come to for training.”

“Training.” Daniel stared at him, a blank expression Damien could only assume was the man’s surprised face, before he started walking away. “Are you serious?”

Damien followed after him. When they got to the edge of the rooftop, Daniel dropped off it, as casual as walking down the stairs. He landed like a feather. Daniel was a tall man, a bit lanky, but big enough to hit with impact, except he didn’t. He didn’t make a noise, didn’t roll with the impact, he simply landed, and started walking. And it was a five-floor drop.

Damien tried to mimic him. It was stupid, juvenile, and very much not like him to do something like this, but he tried. His Kindred body could handle the impact without too much issue, but he heard the sound of his boots hitting the concrete of the dark alley, plenty loud. And it hurt, falling that far. It took a few moments for the shinsplints pain to pass, before he limped, and then walked after the sheriff.

“Yes, I’m serious.”

“Why should I do that?”

“Why did you spare me?”

The two Mekhet merged into the crowd. Daniel moved through it like water, turning his shoulders only just enough to graze by the



dozens, hundreds of people walking past. If Daniel collided with a single shoulder, Damien didn't notice it.

“Natasha wanted to spare you.”

“And you agreed.”

“I ... did not see Lucas, in you.”

“Exactly.” Damien forced himself in close so the two of them could talk, getting in behind the man until his nose was almost touching the back of Daniel's neck. “You trusted me enough to leave me alive, even after everything that happened, everything I did.”

“If you need training, ask Mister Templeman.”

“Ryan is ... ancilla, but he hasn't developed the skills I'm looking for, the skills everyone knows you possess.”

“And?”

“And I'm asking, help me. I am a valuable asset to the city, and to the Prince's efforts.” Maybe some cold reasoning would be the way to sway this man of stone.

The sheriff looked over his shoulder at him. The expression was unreadable, as it almost always was with the man.

“How are you a valuable asset?”

“Because I'm doing all I can to catch these hunters. And because I don't want the Second Estate to be what Lucas wanted it to be. I ... I am against the idea, in its entirety. And if Maria ever pushes it toward Lucas's end goals, I'll steer her back, or refuse to help her.”

And it was true. As much as he believed Maria's views on the Lancea et Sanctum were far less conservative and vile than Lucas's, that did not mean she wasn't capable of pushing the Second Estate

toward a totalitarian regime with aspirations of domination. He didn't want that. He was happy with the way things were going, with his role as Maria's Right Hand, but also with the truce the city was experiencing. Dolareido was a good place for a Kindred to live, he'd come to realize, and he was willing to fight to keep it that way.

"Natasha was right about you."

"She was." Maybe a little confidence would also help convince Daniel. Or it would backfire horribly. "And, honestly, things are going to get bad. You know they are, and I know they are. Something's going to happen, and I want to be prepared. I'll be a lot more help than most Kindred in this city." He was tempted to ask about Athalia as well, but there wasn't any need to pull at that thread.

Daniel pulled into another alley, Damien followed, and the two of them came to a stop once they were in the darkness, away from the street light, the vibrant lights of casinos, and the bustling noise of the crowds.

"If it weren't for the Prince," Daniel said, "and her goals for this city, I would say no. As far as I'm concerned, we dragons have our own goals, and this city provides us with the resources to pursue them, nothing more." He adjusted his glasses again, and looked to the crowd walking past as he set his back against the brick wall. "But my friend is convinced we can keep the peace, and make something of this. Alright Damien, I will train you."

Progress. Damien did his best to suppress his smile, but a small one came through. Maybe in a few hundred years, he'd be as cold as the sheriff, but even Damien, who he knew some considered a cold person, experienced emotions in abundance. Maybe Daniel did as well, and was simply better at hiding them.

"Thank you."

“I have a few hours to spare every Tuesday, at dusk.”

“I’ll be there. Can I tell anyone about this?”

“Maria only, and Jack.”

“I see. Very well.”

Daniel sighed, a small thing, terribly out of place on him, and he even shrugged a little. “This is highly unusual, Mister Burksen. If I suspect that you are abusing my kindness in any form, I will not hesitate to scatter your ashes to the wind. Understood?”

“Understood.” Damien suppressed his smile. This was going to be like boot camp. Daniel was going to be harsh with him, cruel, intense, and try to break him. Damien would survive, as he always did, and would come out of their exchanges stronger for it.

Or he was going to die.



~~Beatrice~~

Slowly but surely, she could feel her sex drive returning. That sucked, because she didn’t plan to sleep with anyone for a long time. Othello felt differently of course, and he and his ghouls were fucking up a storm almost every night. He pulled the hanging furs closed though, in respect for her. But tonight, she didn’t feel like being so lonely, so she pulled the fur aside.

Maybe if Jen was around, Triss might have slept with her, enjoyed a quick orgasm, and gotten back to working on her ritual. But Jen was out on a hunt or something, making connections, getting to know some kine probably. Doubtful that she was sleeping with any of them. The girl seemed honest about her reluctance to return to her old sex life, and any time the conversation turned to Julias, she

seemed genuinely bothered. Not as sad as Beatrice, but sad nonetheless.

“Triss,” Othello said. It was just him and his ghoul in his alcove, carved into the cave wall. As usual, they were having anal sex, with his dark-skinned, beautiful ghoul sitting on his lap, facing away from him. She had her legs spread, and was masturbating, while Othello choked her. Madison was a gorgeous woman, with her super short curly hair, and her tremble breasts on display.

“Othello. Madison. Don’t mind me, just ... yeah, keep going.”

Madison may have, once upon a time, been shy about the whole situation with Othello, but that had long passed. She was a regular in their dark cave of occult wonders, knew about vampires, and Othello made sure she enjoyed herself any night she was around. Such a beautiful woman, and Othello had probably seduced her using his Discipline Majesty the first time he met her. Or maybe he didn’t, and had seduced her with his natural, I’m-a-lazy-fun-loving-idiot charm.

That presented an interesting question. What sort of man was Othello? She never really hung out with him; hell, she hung out with him even less than Aaron. He was a handsome man, handsome as fuck, tan skin, average height or maybe a little taller, shredded and covered in muscle. With his long dark hair, she wouldn’t have been surprised to see him surfing on a beach closer to the equator, drawing onlookers over his beauty. His brown eyes looked like they held depth, but what little she knew of him suggested otherwise. He was a pretty boy, a pretty dumb boy.

He had a huge dick though, and Madison was enjoying it thoroughly.

“Othello,” Triss asked, “who sired you?”

The man raised a brow, but didn't stop fucking his ghoul. Sex was in the man's genes, probably. "Why do you want to know?"

"No reason, really."

"I was sired by a woman, a hundred years ago, not far from Puerto Rico."

"Tropical weather? You must miss it."

He shrugged, let go of Madison's neck, and slid his grip down her body to her breasts. Cupping them, he tweaked her nipples, hard enough to earn a squeak from the woman, before softening his touch. The bastard knew what he was doing. Madison didn't stand a chance, and she leaned back against Othello's big chest as she writhed in orgasm. Her slit dripped a couple drops of juices onto the furs, and Triss breathed the smell of sex and life. It was making her hungry, for blood and sex.

"Sometimes."

"Why'd you come up here?"

"My sire did. I followed, and joined the Carthians. She left after a few decades, annoyed with the Invictus and the Lancea et Sanctum. I stayed."

Ah, things were starting to fall into place. She was surprised he was telling her all this so freely. Then again, the Circle really was a family, in a twisted sort of way, why wouldn't they share information like this readily?

"Jacob picked you up, then?"

"Yeah."

"Hard to imagine a lover boy like you, getting into witchcraft."

Othello laughed, and gently pushed Madison forward until she fell to her hands and knees, facing Triss. A moment later she collapsed, shoulders and cheek to the furs, ass in the air. Othello sank his grip into her hips, and continued to fuck her, thrusting in hard, but pulling out slow. Each thrust made the trembling ghoul squeak or groan, and her toes curled as she kicked the furs a few times, before succumbing. Well, Othello had been fucking her for quite a while. Poor girl was lit like a match. Gotta love that vampire stamina.

“Sometimes,” Othello said, “I think I’m just here, in the Circle, because no one tells me what to do.”

“Understandable. Much as Garry was my friend, it was a pain having a boss.”

“Exactly.” Grinning, Othello smacked Madison’s ass. It jiggled, in a very pleasing way. Madison wasn’t shredded like Triss or Othello. She had a touch of softness to her, just a bit, just enough to make a toned ass particularly large, and hypnotizing. It rippled with each impact, and Triss licked her lips as she watched.

“Though, I’m surprised Jacob let you stick around, if you all do is lounge about.”

Othello shrugged, reached down, and grabbed Madison’s wrists. God, the sight of Madison being pulled up, torso suspended by the tension of Othello holding her arms back, was candy for the eyes. The girl was in a daze, mouth open, eyes glazed, and head bouncing up and down as Othello fucked her. Watching her breasts bounce around underneath her was amazing, and Triss squatted down so she could get a better look.

If she’d been blushing life, she’d have been soaked. But she didn’t. Without Julias, she wasn’t going to be enjoying sex any time soon, no matter how much her hunger demanded it. Maybe with

Jen, but even then it'd have been something short lived, to take the edge off her desires.

“I’ll have you know,” the Daeva said, “that I’ve been Jacob’s eyes and ears for decades. The witchcraft stuff was never important to me, but the freedom of the Circle is. I believe in its views on ... governance...”

Triss raised a brow, and felt herself smile as Othello’s gaze became focused on the whimpering ghoul. He let go of her hands, let her flop down on the furs, and he sank his fingers into her waist as he pulled his cock out of her. Dripping with lube, he set his huge shaft on the girl’s ass crack, and slid his grip down to knead her ass cheeks with his hands, pressing the huge mounds against his cock. Cum gushed down the woman’s back, white fluid along her dark skin, that soon trickled down her spine, between her gorgeous shoulders, and down her ribs to trickle onto her breasts.

Poor Madison. She wasn’t getting rest any time soon. Othello sank his cock back into her ass, pulled her back up to him, and sank his fangs into her neck. The result was instant. Madison shuddered and squirmed, and the juices trickling down her thighs doubled in volume. Triss and Julias used to have fun with the thralls sometimes, but never like this. Seeing the woman cum from the Kiss, from having her blood drained and fangs sunk into her neck, was quite the sight, especially from only five feet away.

Othello, being the sex-obsessed animal that he was, started to fuck his ghoul, as he Kissed her. There’d been times where Triss had Kissed one of Julias’s thralls while Julias fucked her, and good god that’d always been amazing, the combination of sexual bliss with the pleasure of life blood trickling down her throat. But most of all, she missed just being in another person’s arms during sex.

She lightly flicked at the necklace sitting against her sternum, and the crow skull it held. “Thanks.”

“For what?” he said, smiling at her from over Madison’s neck.

“For telling me stuff without me having to pry it out of you like most Kindred. And for letting me watch.”

The man winked at her, and set Madison back down. She collapsed once again, chest down and ass in the air, and her squeaks and groans turned into weak whimpers and mewls as Othello continued to fuck her. Best thing, the absolute best thing about the Kiss, was how it left the target exhausted and sensitive if the vampire didn’t drain them to comatose. Which meant that poor Madison was going to cum until it hurt, as Othello did not stop. Lucky.

Beatrice left, pulling the fur curtain closed as she headed back toward her cave. Except, Aaron crawled in from the tiny entrance of the cave, and made a small wave at her as he headed toward his alcove. She returned it, and followed.

“How goes it?” he said.

Shrugging, she stepped into his alcove, and flopped down onto her back on the furs. “The ritual I was shown is hard to wrap my mind around. Still struggling with how to execute it, without royally fucking myself up.

“I’ll help however I can.” Aaron sat down next to her, back against the cave wall, and a book in his lap. He didn’t pop it open yet though, ready to talk. “But, you and Jacob are the only two witches who have figured out how to use Crúac, in Dolareido at least. Not sure if I can help.”

“I’m surprised you guys stick around if it doesn’t interest you.”

“Who says it doesn’t interest me?” Aaron reached over the small room, under a rug, and pulled out another book.



“Heh, what’s this?” She scooped it up and checked the cover.  
“Dark Mysteries?”

“Jacob says it’s one of the more accurate journals, written by a human who discovered some pretty dark stuff back in the 1800s.”

Triss wasn’t a reader, she was a doer. To read about dark magic didn’t hit her with anything, didn’t teach her anything, and she doubted she’d ever be able to get value out of a book like Aaron or Jacob could. And this one didn’t even have pictures, bleh.

“You’re interested, then?”

“In reading about it, sure. Academic interest. But I’ve seen you and Jacob perform some rituals, and I can safely say that it’s not for me. That doesn’t mean I won’t help however I can though. Need anything?”

She shook her head. “No. The ritual to force open the door is all me.” And she wished it wasn’t. It was going to be painful, and she’d lose a lot of blood doing it. So it was a good thing Jack would be there when it happened, to keep her going. No way in hell she was going to stay back after the ritual was complete. “You really don’t think you could do a ritual?”

The Gangrel shook his head as well. “No. It seems to require a mindset, the ability to ... feel, as much as think, about something.”

“And what, you’re all thinking, no feeling?”

“I suppose. There’s a reason witchcraft has typically been a female occupation.”

Laughing, she gave him back the book, and scooted in closer to him so she could sit beside him, back to the wall as well.

“No, I’m pretty sure that was just sexism from the medieval ages. Oh no, this woman seduced me! Clearly she used evil powers to do so. She must be a witch, burn her! Oh hey the priest gets to absorb all her possessions. How convenient.”

Aaron nodded, a very scientific nod, the sort of nod one made when discussing the latest medical journals, or philosophy papers. “That’s true, but I think there might be a hint of truth to it. Not the seduction part, but that women have a capacity for witchcraft men don’t.”

“Totally explaining our boss.”

Aaron smiled, a rare occurrence, and shrugged. “Jacob the warlock. Do you think our boss is a typical man?”

“No, I suppose not.” No one could figure out Jacob, except for Minerva, a dead woman. “Did Othello ever talk to Minerva?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Damn. It’d be nice to learn something about her. Learn about her, and we might learn about him.”

Predictably, Aaron disagreed. “Let sleeping dogs lie, Triss.”

“Not sure I can do that.” Not only was it a favor the Prince had asked for, but Beatrice was genuinely curious about her boss and his past. What had driven him to become the man he was? Given his age and how torpor affected the mind, especially when elders took to it for decades to let their bloodlust settle, she doubted he remembered his neonate years with any clarity. But damn, it’d have been amazing to get to learn about the psychopath that was Jacob, and how he got so involved with the Circle, with Crúac, and the Crone.

“You don’t think maybe it can wait? This talk of Jacob and Minerva,” Aaron said.

“Wait? Until what?”

The Gangrel sighed, looked down, and ran a finger along the spine of his book. “Until your own wounds have healed?”

She winced at that. Fuck him for bringing it up, and fuck him for being worried about her. She didn’t want worry or pity or sympathy, she wanted revenge. And in the meantime, she could learn about the man making it possible.

“What makes you think it’ll ever heal? I doubt Jacob’s wound has.”

“He knew Minerva for decades. And—”

“And what, because I only knew Julias for a couple years, I’ll heal faster?” Don’t cheapen her love of the man, you fucking asshole. Grinding her teeth, she looked down, and tapped her claws together in her lap, feeling guilty for the thought. “It’s still raw. Fuck me, it’s still so damn raw.”

“It hasn’t even been five weeks, Triss. Give it time.”

“I am! I am...” She didn’t spend her nights crying anymore. A sob might slip out of her in the few minutes before dawn, but the nightmares weren’t so vivid the past few sleeps. She still dreamed of his face, his warm kisses and gentle touch, and she still dreamed of him disintegrating into a pile of ash. She didn’t hear his screams anymore though, or dream of ghostly images taunting her for not being there.

One night at a time, the pain would fade. She knew that, and she wasn’t sure she liked that. She needed that pain, a fire under her feet to make sure she got revenge. And once she had it, the screams

of her dreams would pale compared to what she'd pull from that bitch Angela.

“If you ever need my help, just ask, ok?”

“Don't make a promise you can't keep.”

“What makes you think I won't keep it?”

“Because, of the two of us, I think you're a little less likely to do something insanely stupid, and throw yourself into the fray on a whim.”

A small chuckle later, Aaron shrugged. “I'm smart, Triss, all the time. Maybe I'd like to do something stupid every once in a while.”

She returned his chuckle, louder, until she was outright laughing. God damn it, Aaron was smart and wise. Lucky fucker.

“I'll make sure to remember that, Aaron. But don't complain when you're buried neck deep in bullshit.”

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~~Jack~~

Tonight would be his first night working with the Uratha again, doing sweeps. A visit to see Avery was a good idea, to keep up to date on how they were doing, and to do his job of preventing conflicts. Much as he wanted to forget about his responsibilities, and spend another year or two resting in Antoinette's bed, he had responsibilities. Maybe doing them would keep his mind off of Julias. And maybe he could learn something about ghosts.

Jacob probably knew a lot about ghosts, considering the nature of the Circle of the Crone. They dealt with death as often as undeath, and ghosts fit right between those two concepts. He wasn't sure he wanted Jacob to know about Mary, but Jacob had probably dealt

with specters many times in his fucked up life. Maybe if he talked to Beatrice about it, she could learn something about it for him.

“Can’t believe you met your sister!” Jessy threw her hands up in shock; there was way too much television in her life. “Fuck me, that must have been weird, and painful.”

“It was definitely painful.” He shook his shoulders out. The fact he was used to the sensation of breaking bones and popping joints was not a good thing, and he closed his eyes as he tried to let the memories go. Not easy to let those memories fade away, at least not without Antoinette at his side, stroking his head and helping his mental wounds heal.

Jessy and Jack sat in one of the Invictus cars, driven by a thrall. You could always trust a thrall, at least more than a Kindred, considering their vitae addiction and the Vinculum. This one’s name was Matthew Kensworth, a thrall of Michael’s, and the man would know better than to repeat anything he heard in the black vehicle.

“What’re you gonna do?”

“Not sure. She’s dead, Jessy. There’s not much I can do for her, except help her pass on. And I don’t have the faintest idea how to do that.”

Jessy, dressed in an Invictus suit same as him, looked at him with complete empathy. With every word he said, he could see she was envisioning his words, and suffering them as he had suffered. So he didn’t go too deep into the worst parts, the physical damage or the emotional trauma. No need to bring her down, too.

“Did you get to talk to her, at least? Maybe say things you wished you could have said?”

Jack smiled. “I did.”

“Good! Nice to know there’s some silver lining to such a shitty situation. But, god damn, I can’t imagine the pain your mother is in.” Leave it to Jessy to cut through the bullshit and get straight to the heart of a situation. His mother was all too happy to have Mary back in her life, and that was not a good thing.

“Yes, she is. Maybe Antoinette can help.”

“Or Jacob.”

Of course Jessy would think of him, same as Jack had. “I’d prefer to keep him out of this.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He blinked at her, several times. “Because it’s Jacob.”

“So? Dude’s only ever helped you. He’s taken a liking to you.”

That, Jack wasn’t so sure about. ‘Taken a liking to’ implied something a little different than ‘being intrigued by’. Maybe Jacob foresaw all the shit that’d fall on Jack’s lap, and just thought he was interesting for it, the unpredictable factor that Jacob once applied to both him and Damien.

“I’m surprised you’re wearing a suit,” he said.

“Yeah well, this is official business. Michael doesn’t like it when I dress casual on business, even with the werewolves. Besides, it’s Eric I’m friends with, not Avery.”

“Just friends?”

She laughed, but avoided his eyes. There was something there, something in her gaze, a spark of joy, and a hint of a smile that betrayed her. She liked Eric, a lot.

“Speaking of Eric,” he said. “Ask him about Luna.”

“Luna?”

“Yes, Luna. I ... heard the name mentioned recently, so I’m pursuing a lead.”

“Hmm. Is it ok if I tell him it’s you asking?”

He nodded. “Yeah, sure.” Because he might not mind if Jack was asking, but he probably would if it was a witch, one who heard the name from a mythical entity. Avoiding telling the whole truth like this was a key skill of a good manipulator. Look at him, learning.

“So what’re you gonna talk to Avery about?” she said.

“I’ll mention Mary. The werewolves know about spirits, so maybe they know about ghosts. But mostly I just want to know how the sweeps have been. And, if I can, see if they’ll let slip some indirect information about how their relationship with Garry is going.”

“Good.” Nodding, Jessy leaned back in the car seat and stared up at the ceiling as she hooked her fingers behind her head, into her short blonde hair. “I hope we catch these hunters soon.”

“We all do.”

“Yeah but I mean, really soon. If we take too long, you know what’s going to happen.”

“What?”

She snapped her head back up and blinked at him. “We’ll get used to it, and the covenants will stop working together. They’ll stop setting aside their squabbles, our squabbles, and just accept the hunters as a way of life. And they’ll do this because I’m sure the elders would prefer to be protecting their asses from each other, than dealing with the hunters. It’ll be us out on the streets, risking our necks, while our bosses hide behind walls, giving orders.”

Each word earned a wince from him, and he did a triple take at the driver to make sure he wasn't listening too hard. No doubt the thrall heard every word, but Jack didn't notice any sparks of surprise from him.

“So we're under a time limit before this bullshit becomes normal, and our bosses go back to focusing on the wrong things?”

“Exactly. When shit goes from a surprise to a common thing, we stop treating it with the respect it deserves.”

Damn, Jessy was smarter than she let on. When a problem went from acute to chronic, people did stop treating it like the crisis it was, despite how it being a chronic problem was actually worse. She saw it, when others didn't.

It was hard to know how much to trust Jessy. She was becoming a good friend, and she had a head on her shoulders, despite all evidence to the contrary. But she wasn't exactly quiet, and he didn't know how good she was at lying, or at least not telling Michael what she knew about things. He'd involved her in a lot of stuff, and told her about how he killed Viktor, Lucas, and Tony already. But letting her know about the mysterious threat Azamel insisted remained, was still a concern, and probably a step too far, at least until he knew the cause.

How would she take that, when he finally did tell her? Probably angry, understanding but angry that he kept it secret. And maybe he actually could tell her that something was up, since she hadn't told Michael about what Jack did to Viktor. Then again, maybe she had? The better he got to know Maria and Michael, the more it became apparent they were happy Viktor and Tony were dead. Lucas, on the other hand, Maria still mourned.

He should trust her more, he should. He really should, just, not right now.

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Avery and Clara were the only ones in the apartment this time. Both of them frowned, looking at him and Jessy, and he could see it was because of the suits. But after looking at him for a few seconds, their frowns deepened, and it wasn't because of the suits.

“Jack,” Clara said, blinking at him, “you smell ... different.”

Both wolves, who were sitting on the couch, stood up. The muscles in their bodies tensed, and both of them sniffed the air a few times as they stared at him. He doubted the curse actually made an odor, but it made sense that werewolf senses could pick up on more than biological stuff, if they could hunt spirits.

“I know you two know about the curse,” he said. “Natasha knows, so Matt and Art know, so you know. And everyone knows.”

“We do,” Avery said, still frowning as she looked him up and down. “We didn't know what to think. Sweeps started, and we figured we'd learn that way, but you've been avoiding working with us.”

“I have. Just ... been trying to get a grip on things. Didn't want to ... expose myself, I suppose.” Uratha weren't Begotten, they couldn't see the truth behind the meat of his body, but they could still see more than he wanted.

Or maybe he just didn't want Clara to see him like this. He managed to meet her gaze, but when he did, her frown vanished, replaced with the sympathy he didn't want to see. Letting the others know that he was fucked up with some sort of ancient curse didn't bother him so much, now that he thought about it. Letting Clara see him like this did.

Pride, or something else? He didn't know.

“Don't worry about my bud Jack,” Jessy said, hooking an arm over his shoulders. “We'll get his situation fixed up eventually, and get

back things to the way they were.”

“How?” Clara said.

Grinding his teeth for a second, Jack shrugged, and slipped out of Jessy’s embrace. “The curse was sealed away once before, we’ll figure out how to do so again. In the mean time, it’s not a problem. It gives me power, and for now, that’s all that matters.” Hollow words. Clara’s face said it all, that she knew he was lying, and that he was in pain. True as that was, it really didn’t matter. They had a job to do, and revenge to be had.

“Works for me,” Avery said. “Just avoid Black Blood, would you? He’s taken an interest in you.”

Jessy flinched, and looked down at him for a second. No words needed to be said. Jacob and Black Blood were both interested in him, and this curse, probably as something they could manipulate and use. Wonderful.

“I have no interest in dealing with Black Blood anymore than I have to.”

Avery’s frown darkened. “That wasn’t what I wanted to hear.”

“What do you want from me? He’s close with Jacob, and Jacob is hunting the hunters as much as the rest of us.”

“It,” Avery said with emphasis, “is a nasty fucker that will do everything it can to spread its influence, Jack.”

“Which is?” He stepped in closer, and glared at the short, sturdy woman. “What is it about Black Blood that has you wolves so upset with it, and confused by it?”

“It...” Avery met his gaze, but she was struggling to find a retort. “Black Blood’s an unusual spirit, very fucked up. It’s up to

something, and it can't be good. You've seen it, right? Or at least the pieces of it it brings over in Jacob's fucked up rituals. You can't honestly believe it's trustworthy." An admittance of ignorance, wow. He didn't expect that of Avery. Maybe she was starting to trust him, or she was desperate about the situation.

"He, it, whatever, rescued Clara from Sándor's nightmare, didn't he? Cut him a break." Even as he said it, he poked holes in the logic. If Black Blood wanted them to trust him, the way to do that would be to do things like save one of the werewolves Jacob so despised. But to what end?

"Jack," Clara said, leaning her butt against the back edge of the dingy old couch, and folding her arms across her chest. A pondering stance. "Something's happening in the city. We don't know what, but something's happening. And now you have this curse thing, and —"

"The curse has nothing to do with Black Blood."

"But that won't stop it from trying to take advantage of you somehow." Clara shook her head, sighing as she looked down, idly kicking at the back of the couch. "How ... how strong is this curse?"

"Just find the hunters, and I'll take care of them. All of them." Before they could respond, he put up his hands in surrender. "I won't go in alone, I'm not stupid. But at the hospital, I took down a bunch of hunters alone, and I could have taken a dozen more. The curse is ... reliable, ok?"

The two werewolves looked between each other, and the doubt was blatant. God, how frustrating a conversation this would have been in front of the whole pack. Maybe that's why the others weren't here, so he could talk to the leader and second-in-command without that problem.

“Alright,” Avery said. “You haven’t steered is wrong, and we trust you; as much as you can trust a vampire.”

He grinned at that. “Thanks. And, I wanted to ask you about something. Who’s Luna?”

The two women raised a brow, glanced at each other, and nodded.

“Luna is mate to Father Wolf,” Clara said. “We call her Amahan Iduth. Most know her as the moon. When Father Wolf, Urfatah, was murdered by his children, it was Luna who cursed them. Ever since then, the Uratha try to fulfill the duty Father Wolf performed, hunting between worlds and keeping the balance. But, she’s not exactly happy with us. Sometimes Uratha are called the Forsaken, because of what our ancestors did.”

Avery sat down on the couch Clara was leaning against, and looked at the muted TV and the news it was playing. “By serving Luna, we have gained her favor.”

“Favor?” Jessy said.

“Yeah, but I think we’ve spilled enough of our secrets for one night,” Avery said. “Besides, it’s all mythology. We don’t know if any of it is true. Clara and I, and even that asshole Eric, are Cahalith, and sometimes we get dreams that ... that suggest Luna is quite real.”

So Cahalith had dreams, special dreams. It fit what he knew about them, honestly. Werewolves were hunters of spirits, part spirit themselves, and if that included talking to the moon, or bear spirits or tree spirits, then he shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Suggest? Have any of you talked to her?”

Avery and Clara shook their heads.

“It’s been heard of,” Clara said, “but an actual conversation? No.”

Then the weird message Beatrice got about Luna was probably about Eric then. If he looked at Jessy now, to make some eye contact and let her know he was thinking about Eric, then Avery and Clara would know he was talking about Eric. Then again, he asked about Luna, and they were the ones that brought up Eric. Maybe they knew about it?

“Where’d you learn the name?” Avery said.

“Conversation with Jacob. Drifted to the Uratha.” Which, wasn’t completely a lie. Except a half truth is worse than a lie, and he knew that. A guilty conscious is a bitch. “I had another question, something unrelated, and ... I’m really hoping you can help.” He could ask about Garry at the end of the meeting.

Avery frowned, eyes drilling into him, and probably trying to figure out why Jacob would be wondering about Luna.

“What’s up?” Clara asked.

He stepped in a little closer, and his eyes fell. “What do you guys know about ghosts?”

“Ghosts?” Clara looked to Avery, who shrugged and looked back to the news. The subtitles were on. What was it about older people and watching the news muted with subtitles on? “You ran into a ghost?”

“I did.”

“Holy shit. Whose?”

“My ... sister’s.”

Clara blinked at him, several times, and Avery turned around to look over the couch back at him. Silence flattened the room, as he predicted it would, and everyone's eyes fell away as the uncomfortable reality set in. Yeah, his dead sister was alive, in a fashion, a very poor, horrible fashion, making the misery of her death a terrible mess of resurrected pain.

So, to fill the silence, he explained. He explained about the trip to the house, and that his mother was with him. He explained about the strange cold, and weight that permeated his old home. And he explained about the mist, and the ghost that followed it, his sister.

Clara and Avery stared at him like he was telling a fictional but compelling ghost story, and not a literal recounting. The spark of pride over telling an interesting story vanished in seconds in the sorrow of the memory of his sister's screams. It wasn't a fun memory.

"We've dealt with a few ghosts," Avery said, "every now and then. It's never ended pretty, Jack. Ghosts don't age well. They get more and more twisted with time, and mean."

"But you can deal with them?"

The pack leader nodded, turned the TV off, and hooked her arm over the back of the couch so she could look at him more easily. "Yes, we can deal with them. Ghosts are made of similar stuff as spirits. But I've never ... It's never gone well. You sure you can't convince her to leave on her own? To crossover?"

Easier said than done. How the fuck was he supposed to do that, when it was clear she didn't want to die or crossover or whatever, and his mom didn't want her to either. Being in the house with her was like being in the shadow of something that wasn't supposed to be up, out of the dirt, walking around, smelling of death. Maybe it would have been easier if she was a zombie, out of one of those really shit TV shows, and the emotional dilemma would have been

resolved by forcing himself to shoot her in the head. There, problem solved. No conversation needed.

Who the fuck could convince someone that they needed to die? How the fuck was he supposed to do that? And it wasn't like he had a leg to stand on, being an undead creature. His heart wasn't beating, and his lungs didn't do shit with the air he breathed. Every word out of his mouth to his sister, about letting go and moving on, would have been borderline hypocritical.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "Mary doesn't want to leave, and my mom doesn't want her to, either."

"She's going to get nasty, Jack," Avery insisted, "they always do. She's not a spirit, like the spirits from the Hisil. Your sister is a human, with the body of a spirit. It's not right, and it's going to drive her insane."

He looked down again, avoiding yet another reason for the pitying gazes of others, and clenched his teeth. "If it comes to it, can I ask one of you to help me?"

Clara came up to him, and nudged a hand on his shoulder. "Of course, Jack. Of course. If you need anything, just ask."

He smiled up at the werewolf, and nodded.

## Chapter 103

~~Jack~~

Telling Antoinette about Mary had been easier than he thought. Well truthfully, Antoinette talked to him about it, after his mom had filled her in. Jack had promised he wouldn't be visiting Mary for a little while, and Antoinette agreed it was a good idea for both he and his mom to avoid her for a short period of time. His lover also said she might have some ideas, but in the meantime, she'd talk to Samantha about it in depth.

When he'd inquired about 'in depth', she'd dodged the question, saying it was a private business of the Ordo Dracul. He was cool with that. With all the secrets he was learning about the Circle of the Crone, secrets he'd prefer to not know, he was perfectly cool with not learning about the secrets of the Ordo Dracul. Ignorance was bliss.

The hunts continued, but there was still no sign of the hunters, which had everyone on edge. Somehow, the hunters were being healed of the wounds Jack and the others had dealt them, far faster than humanly possible, which had them all anxious to find them as soon as possible. The only explanation was Elen, or maybe some other weird magic the hunters had access to. Either way, it meant the Kindred had to go on the offensive to secure any real advantage, but they couldn't if they couldn't find a target; the hunters were using guerrilla warfare and using it well. It was infuriating.

He joined his proper sweep team with Gloria, Isabella, Clara, and Athalia, and started exploring North Side. It was quiet, out in North Side. It was an hour after sunset, and most people were no longer working. Gloria, their group's Mekhet, was keeping them wrapped in her Face in the Crowd aura, so anyone who spotted them simply



wouldn't care. It wasn't past midnight yet, so there was the occasional person walking by, working late hours. As long as no one in their group did something loud or strange, no one would care they existed.

Athalia may as well have put a bell on his neck, with how fixated her eyes were on him. Untrusting. Suspicious. Scared. Gloria and Isabella could tell he changed, and Clara could sense it more than his fellow Kindred, but Athalia could see the reality. The curse, its size and mass, its presence, it was all plainly visible to her. Could she see that it talked? Could she hear its whispering voice in his head, the dark voice telling him to indulge his Kindred desires with all the control of a child entertaining their id? God, he fucking hoped not.

It was good that the curse had manifested itself properly now, instead of being bound to him so tightly by the seal. He could feel its influence more obviously now, instead of a mysterious urge that drove him to violence with subtlety. With its revelation, it was easier to keep it at a distance, and to recognize its desires as something separate from his own. On the other hand, those desires were stronger now, and he knew that at some point, the curse was going to come at him like a typhoon. It was going to overwhelm him, and take control, even if only temporarily.

The memories of the scene at the hospital were still there, maybe a little blurrier than his own memories, but still there. Summoning the crows and unleashing them upon the hunters, the sounds of their screams of agony as hundreds of beaks ripped them open, and the smell of blood and feathers, were permanent memories, cut into his brain with a rusty knife. He could summon that power easily now, and he knew if he did, he would be letting the curse have free reign to run around in his brain. Every time he called upon it, it'd have an easier time getting its claws into him. And he didn't want to give it that opening unless he had to.

Every time he glanced Clara's way, he caught her looking at him. Unlike Athalia, who watched him like he was a bomb ready to go off any moment, Clara could not help but hide her sympathy. She tried, he could see that, but learning that his dead sister was back as a ghost was apparently her breaking point.

"I still can't believe she's back," Clara said.

Isabella, who was ahead of them with Gloria, looked over her shoulder. "Who is back?"

Clara froze, and blinked at him. "Shit, sorry."

Yeah, he hadn't told everyone. It was personal, and not exactly information he wanted floating around. But it wasn't a secret, and maybe it'd be better if people knew.

"My sister is haunting my mother's old home," he said. "And yes, I mean literally haunting."

Everyone stopped walking, and stared at him. Even Athalia, who was following from behind, looked surprised when he glanced her way.

"A ghost?" Gloria said, visibly shaking. "B-But ... that means—"

"Yes, ghosts are real," he said. "Our bosses have dealt with them before, I'm sure. No one talks about them, I guess, because they're ... problems..." What a lovely way to view the situation, thinking of his dead sister like a problem, like an infestation that wouldn't die easy.

"I have known of only one ghost in my lifetime," Isabella said, the tall Daeva tapping a finger on her chin. "We don't speak of it because ... it can be tough to discern what actually happened. Was it a trick of our imagination, a hallucination, some strange repeating

dream localized to an area? The one ghost I know of, I passed by the building it haunted. It was ... unsettling, to say the least.”

“Yeah, that’s a good way of describing it. It was unsettling, if unsettling was what you found at the edge of Hell. Now imagine you walked past that edge, down the stairs through each circle of Hell, and then decided to camp out in the center.” He ground his teeth, stared at the sidewalk, and started walking. The group started moving again too, but he could tell they were hesitant. Another glance back showed Athalia was still keeping her distance, but not as far as before, as if the story about Mary had softened her a little. Maybe it had. She was a mother.

“That sounds horrible,” Gloria said. “Why ... why do these horrible things keep happening to you?”

“It’s not me, it’s my sister.” This time, this horrible thing was happening by proxy. That was a step in a better direction, he supposed. Except, not really. If shitty things happened to the people he loved instead of him, that still sucked. “And I don’t know. But, we’re not out here to talk about my sister.”

“Sorry,” Clara said again, “I didn’t realize people didn’t know.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, really.”

“How is she?” Gloria said, earning a raised brow from everyone. “Er, well, you know what I mean.”

“She’s about as well as you can expect, Gloria. She’s furious about her murder.” And utterly furious with Jack for having harmed her, in a way. But he wasn’t about to bring that up. “Ultimately, the issue with my sister is untimely, and horrible, but there’s a bit of good in it. I got to talk to my sister again.”

Every woman awwed, even Athalia, though when he whipped his head around, he saw only the hard face of a woman who would

never dare utter such a sound. Christ he wished there were some men in this team.

“My point being,” he continued, “don’t worry about it. Let’s just focus on our jobs, ok?”

And they did. Isabella and Gloria were both curious, but they let it go, only offering him the occasional glance as they tried to read him. Clara was a little better at focusing, but every so often he met her gaze, and found that hint of sympathy. Or maybe it was understanding. She’d told him once that she’d lost her brother, a kine, and maybe she was envisioning what she’d do if she’d been in Jack’s circumstance. The opportunity to talk to a dead loved one sounded like a good thing on the surface, but the reality was a two-edged sword.

As the hunt went on, Athalia stayed in the back, and kept her eyes on Jack, never quite losing that nervousness she displayed the first time she saw him since the curse awakened. There was more there, though, in her gaze. Maybe she was thinking about Mary, about what it was like for Jack’s mother to speak to the ghost of her daughter. When Angela was dead, how would Athalia take any of it?

Fuck him, if they had to deal with Angela’s ghost too, he wasn’t sure what they’d do. But it wasn’t like ghosts were just wandering around, appearing in the wake of everyone dying. There was no Julias ghost, or Barry ghost, or Viktor or Tony or Lucas ghost. A lot of kine and Kindred had died, and one Uratha too, in the past couple years. No ghosts.

But then, most of those people had died in circumstances that made sense, in a strange way. Stephanie the Uratha had died on a hunt. The vampires died as a part of conflicts that arose from being a vampire, from being hunter and hunted, and from the Danse Macabre. Kine died because Kindred preyed upon them, or because of the various, normal reasons kine died. Mary’s death, on the other

hand, had been a freak of circumstance done by a psychopath, and combined with Jack's memory-wiping her before she died, it was probably that anger that kept her from crossing over.

Now that he'd apologized to her, and she'd apologized to him, she was free to crossover, wasn't she? But she hadn't, not yet, and that was a worry that terrified him.

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A couple days later, it was time to pay Garry a visit.

"I had my first session with the sheriff last night," Damien said. "It was ... painful."

"Painful?" He and his friend rode in an Invictus car, the same one that took him and Jessy to see Avery only a couple days ago. "When Julias and I trained, we did a little physical stuff, him teaching me about using Resilience for defense. You should have seen him Damien, in ... in the hospital. He took a couple hundred bullets from half a dozen firearms, and kept on coming. He was practically a walking skeleton by the end, and still going. Kicked Sándor's ass, Dominated some hunters, and ... yeah."

"Julias was an impressive Ventrue for his age, Jack."

"I wonder how much of that is from the curse. Though, in the memory the curse showed me, Julias's subconscious was ... less enthusiastic about trying to break the seal." Not that the seal needed to be broken to let out its power, but whereas Jack had embraced its power when he could, well before the seal was broken, he doubted Julias had.

"Then I can only guess that it was his own talent, same as your own."

Jack laughed, elbow on the door arm, chin on his palm. "I've relied on the curse plenty."

Damien looked at him, for a long time, until Jack turned his head to make eye contact. “I felt nothing of any curse, that time ... you know when. Only you, a stubborn Ventrue.”

A stubborn Ventrue. Laughing again, Jack nodded, and looked back out the window to watch the slow traffic of South Side.

“Thanks. I didn’t feel it then either, pushing to get out; at least, not as hard. So, maybe it was all me, back then, and maybe it was all Julias, in the hospital. Either way, he was only a century old. I can’t imagine how strong the sheriff is.”

Damien’s eyes fell, and he groaned, the groan of a man who’d finished a grueling workout, and was afraid to do it again in the future. “He’s teaching me how to use a sword, and forcing me to use Celerity and Cloak of Night together, while we fence. I ended my first session utterly starving.”

“Paid a visit to Fiona, I imagine?”

Damien grinned at him. It wasn’t common for Damien to grin. The Mekhet normally kept his facial expressions subtle, like a mini-Daniel, but now he grinned a big grin, and nodded.

“If I had known how ... enjoyable, a relationship can be, I think I would have pursued one even while I was hiding from the Prince.”

“They’re pretty damn amazing. Can Fiona handle giving blood often?”

“She can, she says. Her Begotten body may not be as sturdy or regenerative as the Urathas’, but it still heals quickly, and a quick trip to her nightmare chamber accelerates the process.”

Right, the nightmare chamber, the jungle. It was so easy to forget that Fiona was a Begotten, with a nightmare creature inside her. If he wrote it out on paper, he’d think Fiona was bad for Damien, and

that the boy's troubled past would only be worsened by Fiona's borderline evil presence. Maybe an evil girlfriend would turn the man into an evil assassin? But the girl was the biggest ray of sunshine he'd ever known, and was probably the best thing for Damien.

“Julias also trained me in Dominate and Animalism. I assume Daniel is helping you develop Auspex?”

“He is. There are levels of that Discipline that I don't know if I'll ever obtain, but perhaps, someday. I assume you've managed to skip over some steps in your training, because of the curse.”

Groaning, Jack squirmed in the car seat, and threw Damien an annoyed glance. “Yes, but that's not a good thing. Not at all.”

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“Hello Joe,” Jack said. Him and Damien stood outside one of the rundown apartment buildings in the Carthian half of South Side, where Garry hung out during the night. Jack doubted he slept there, considering how easy it'd be to infiltrate or destroy a building like this during the day, even for thralls. Maybe he had a secret bunker beneath it, or a bomb shelter nearby?

Joe the Carthian stood at the entrance to the apartment building, dressed in some torn jeans and a hoodie. A white guy with a shaved bald head and a bodybuilder physique, he was like a weak version of Michael; a weak version of a deadly-as-hell man wasn't exactly no threat. Joe was a neonate, nothing special, but he'd earned a position working close to Garry, and that meant he had more power to him than was obvious. Hard to imagine, considering the man reeked of stupid henchman syndrome.

There were a few ancilla in the Carthians, tough men and women that could pose a serious threat to any Kindred. Why didn't Garry have them guarding him? Maybe they were, and Jack couldn't see them. Either way, having to deal with Joe was annoying enough.

Maybe Garry knew Joe annoyed the Invictus, and that's why he had Joe as his door man? That would actually be pretty smart, if Garry's goal was to be a jackass. And it was, to some degree or another.

"Jack, Damien." Rolling his eyes and sighing, Joe stepped back and let them enter. "Garry's been expecting you."

Jack nodded, a very proper nod, with a hint of Invictus superiority to it. Despite himself, knowing full well such an action would do nothing but annoy a Carthian, he did it anyway. At this point, he assumed it was typical faction brainwashing. He had no real reason to hate the Carthians, but because they were generally considered an enemy of the Invictus, aggressive or hateful thoughts seeped into the brain with time.

Not exactly being a good peacemaker with thoughts like that. So he took a deep, useless breath, and tried to purge them. How would Antoinette treat the situation? She'd be annoyed with Garry, and everyone else who didn't have the foresight to make decisions with 10,000 possible futures, for a thousand years beyond, in mind. But, she would do her best to eliminate bias, and enter every conversation with a clear head, and an eye for pragmatic conclusions. He could do that.

Garry was on the top floor, in an office; not an office really, but a re-purposed apartment. No wonder the werewolves got along with him.

"Jack," he said from behind a large, beat up, old wooden desk.

Oh, this is where the ancilla were. Two men and one woman, the strongest of the Carthians, and as far as he knew, half of the total ancilla in the covenant. And they were here, when they could be out looking for hunters. Garry didn't trust Jack or Damien, and he wanted backup in case he needed it.



“Garry,” he said. “You uh, looking for a fight?” He gestured to the three Kindred sitting on a nearby couch. The two guys were playing a fighting game, and the woman was reading a book. If there’d been chips and beer on the wooden table between the TV and two couches they were using, Jack would have recognized the scene from his college days. Not a scene he’d ever partaken in, but one he saw plenty in the various break rooms.

“Course not. But I’m not stupid. Lucas’s childe, right here, in my office? God damn, how easy it’d be to put a rest to this whole project of Maria’s, if you were dead.” He leaned forward, set his elbows on his desk, and pointed at Damien. “I could tolerate your existence when you were just an Invictus dog, but now you’re a church slave again?”

Ok, so, this was going well. An aggressive Gangrel, and an elder at that, was looking at Damien like he wanted to kill him, and it was Damien and Jack’s job to convince Garry to calm down about the return of the Lancea et Sanctum. Wonderful.

Damien frowned for a moment, but kept his hands in his coat pockets. The man would have at least one, if not two pistols hidden inside the coat, and he had that long sword hidden in the back of it as well; sitting down wasn’t an option for him. Sighing, the Mekhet simply stood there, withdrew his hands, and folded them across his chest.

“I remember you,” Damien said, “during the purge. I remember the smile on your face as you stormed the church I was in.”

Garry returned the frown, leaned back in his chair, and put his feet up on the desk. “And?”

“You have a lot of nerve,” the Mekhet continued, “acting like a leader for a covenant of anarchists, raging against the machine, when really you just like fighting and killing.”

Jack winced. Yeah, there was some truth to that. Garry looked like he ate knuckle fights and breathed bullets since he was a just a kid, and the man's history lent to that deduction. The Gangrel loved to fight, a rebel without a cause, until another Carthian gave him one. Now he was the thorn in the Invictus's side, and once the Lancea et Sanctum's before their demise in Dolareido.

Maybe Maria made a mistake, sending Damien here.

“Fuck you,” Garry said, without lowering his feet. “It’s not a crime to like your job. I was taking out the trash that night, for weeks before, and for weeks after. I guess I missed my calling as a garbage man.”

Fucking god, how did Viktor ever put up with this man enough to actually invite him to gatherings? The Carthian was looking for a reason to argue, a reason to fight, a reason to say Jack and Damien fucked up, and no way in hell was Garry letting the Lancea et Sanctum come back.

Remember what Antoinette would do, what you'd do, before you were given the power to kick this fucker in the teeth. Be calm, be calculating, and be intelligent.

It was surprising how much easier it was to give into frustration, when he knew he had the power to make change in a physical way. Every piece of him wanted to use it, to just force the issue, and bypass having to deal with the idiots in his way. Maybe that's how totalitarians were born?

“Garry Tones,” Jack said, “you know by now that my colleague Mister Burksen has aided the Kindred of Dolareido in multiple capacities since the death of his sire. He has, of his own volition, expressed remorse over Lucas's actions, and dismay when he learned of his sire's rather tyrannical plans. Madam Turio herself has shown sorrow over Lucas's actions. The Lancea et Sanctum you are familiar with is not the Second Estate that Burksen or Turio

wish to revive. You are judging them based on the actions of a singular, disturbed individual.”

Garry snorted, and poked himself in the temple with two fingers. Garry was average height for a male, with a shaved head not unlike Joe, but while Joe was much larger, Garry’s lean physique and myriad of scars spoke of a far more eventful first life. He was a scary man. The fact the three ancilla did not lift their heads from what they were doing also gave him a crass ‘I do shit myself’ atmosphere.

“You know, Jack,” Garry said, “I can’t help but wonder if you were sent here to pressure me.”

“Pressure? Me?”

“Yes, you. Everyone knows about this curse business, Jack. Story going around is you summoned a million crows, and—”

“It was more like, ten thousand, but—”

“And that you defeated a couple dozen hunters in that hospital.”

“It was, like, six, and—”

“The point is, Jack, that everyone thinks you’re here as an enforcer, that the wonder kid with the big bad curse is here to bully me.” Sighing, Garry leaned back in his chair and hooked his hands behind his head. “That’s not good for business.”

Jack ground his teeth until his jaws hurt. Good for business was a nice way of putting ‘not good for his image’, a very Invictus way of putting it. Calling Garry out on it would have guaranteed an argument, but that wasn’t his reason for being here. He had a job, to keep the peace between the paranormals, and at least attempt to do so with the covenants in a capacity Primogen meetings couldn’t.

“I’m not here to push you into anything, Tones. This is a mission of peace.”

Apparently, he’d said something funny. The two guys playing video games stopped, paused the game, and looked at him with a raised brow. The woman stopped reading her book. Garry himself raised a brow, like he didn’t believe a word he was hearing. God damn it.

“It’s a good thing I trust Antoinette, at least a little,” Garry said, “or I’d call bullshit on this curse thing.”

Jack saw where this was going, and he didn’t like it. “I’m not going to prove to you the curse is real. I’m sure you can feel it.”

“I’m not sure what I feel, kid, but I don’t make grand decisions without knowing exactly what’s going on.”

“Nothing’s going on.” Tempted, so damn tempted to start yelling. “This thing with me, the curse, it has nothing to do with why we’re here. I’m here because it’s my job to play liaison. Damien’s here because he wanted to meet you face to face, and show that he’s sincere.”

“And I am sincere,” Damien said. “I’m not your enemy, Garry. All I want to do is teach the word of Longinus to those who wish to learn.”

“Pfft.” Garry got out of the chair, stepped around his desk, and sat against its front edge as he folded his arms across his chest. Defensive stance. “You stormed the Prince’s precious tower, and tried to kill her. You expect me to believe you’re just going to sit around and play preacher, boy?”

“It was mistake, and one I’m glad to have survived.”

Jack glared at Garry, but kept his mouth shut. The underground tunnel, the fortress Tony had built, had had a strange power to it supposedly, sucking people in and bending their minds to the will of the group and leader. He wasn't sure if he believed that, but it wasn't like it was impossible. Tony had swayed a lot of Kindred to his weird, pointless cause, and after his death, his Kindred had dispersed, left Dolareido, or joined the other covenants. Lucas had taken over the underground fortress, and history repeated itself, with Kindred flocking to him.

Now that Jack knew a thing or two about spirits, he had to wonder if they had a hand in that. Maybe the fortress had been affected by spirits, and that was why it had a strange power. It made sense, considering the brothels in Devil's Corner worked the same way. Either way, it was rubble now, destroyed, and no longer exerting its influence on anyone.

“That doesn't mean jack shit, Damien. My concern is that you're a dangerous asshole who's willing to kill to spread his religious bullshit. Don't forget, you entitled little fucker, that I dealt with Lucas for years before you were embraced. I watched that fucker twist words, bend rules, break minds, and spread his cancerous garbage through the city. It was decades in the works, with me bitching and whining about it every Primogen meeting. I was ignored, until it got so bad that Lucas outright started fighting. Finally, the Prince and I went to war against him, and your fucking sire killed without discretion. He fucking killed the Prince's ghouls, a couple of young, innocent girls. And this psychopath, this deranged lunatic, picked you as a childe. So how about you give me one fucking reason I should ever, ever, trust a damn thing you have to say.”

Before Damien could say a thing, Jack stepped up to Garry, and got close. Very close. In a second, only two feet separated him from the dangerous asshole, close enough Garry slid off the desk and brought his arms up, ready to fight. The three ancilla in the room

got up, and Damien reached behind his neck, ready to draw his longsword.

“Did you like Viktor, Garry?” Jack said.

“What? Don’t fuck with me, kid. I’ll—”

“Did you like Viktor? Did you like that asshole basically running the Invictus?”

“Course I didn’t like that mother fucker. He—”

“Viktor sired Julias, my sire. And Julias was the best of us. My sire did more for covenant relations than anyone, and you know he was a good man. Don’t judge a childe by the sire.” In the corner of his eyes, Jack could see the three ancilla, dressed in jeans and t-shirts, ready to jump him. Two Gangrels and a Mekhet. They probably had knives hidden in their pants, and other weapons hidden in the room.

It didn’t matter. If it came to it, he was confident he could handle them, or that Damien could. They may have been a bit older than Damien, but his friend was a skilled Kindred, very skilled, and Jack trusted him to watch his back.

Unfortunately, even if Jack was strong enough to take on Garry, and Damien could hold off three ancilla, that didn’t change that they were in the heart of Carthian territory, surrounded by Carthians, and any fight that broke out was bound to summon more people.

Garry glared at him, but lowered his hands after a few painful moments of silence. “Fine. You make a good point.” Once Jack backed off, Garry turned his sights to Damien. “I’ll be watching you. Get me? Do anything even remotely out of line, and I’ll put your ashes on Maria’s doorstep. The Prince won’t interfere over me killing a fucking bishop, and you know it.”

Sighing, Jack stepped away, and looked at Damien. The Mekhet visibly relaxed, arms lowering, but his eyes stabbed at Garry like he was trying to kill him.

“Understood,” Damien said.

And they left. Jack nodded, Damien nodded, and the two of them left the room. Jack didn’t want to entertain Garry’s threat with a response; doing so with anything less than violence would be an admittance of weakness. So they left, glancing at the ready-to-fight Carthians, who were staring at them like Jack and Damien were going to attack them first. Wow, they were wound up tight.

All things considered, that went worse than Jack figured it would. He’d underestimated how aggressive the Carthians had become in the past couple years, and how comfortable Garry was becoming making his desires known. With the death of Viktor and Tony, there was little reason for Garry to not become more aggressive, if he had plans to expand the Carthians and their control.

The moment the hunters were dealt with, the Carthians were going to become a problem. Fucking lovely.

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~~Eric~~

A knock at his door summoned him from his nap. Where was he? Couch. Time? 8:00PM. The sun had just set. He was still having some trouble getting used to working at night, and now that he was involved with the vampires, sleeping during any hour of the night was a thing of the past.

The rattling of keys announced who it was. Jessy walked in, dressed in her Invictus suit, complete with a tie, a hard contrast to him wearing only his boxers.

“Jessy, glad to see you’re making yourself comf—”

“You know, I think I’m in the mood for some normal sex. Don’t feel like getting stuffed like a turkey right now.” Without ceremony, she threw off her suit, as if she’d had a long day at the office, gave Kat a kiss on the head, and dragged him off to the washroom. With each step, she kicked off more clothes, tossing pants and socks, then underwear and bra, all over the hallway floor. Far be it from him to stop her, considering how her large, toned ass bounced a bit as she half walked, half hopped toward the washroom.

Eric choked on his laugh as he turned on the water of his shower. “It must hurt, doesn’t it?”

“What, having sex when you’re transformed?” Jessy shrugged, stepped under the hot water, and sighed bliss. “Dude, we talked about this. Those parts can stretch, a lot.”

“Still, it—”

“It’s fucking awesome when I’m struggling to handle it. Fuck me, I love the god damn feeling of ... like ... I’m about to burst, from how much I’m filled up.” Shrugging, she reached for the lube hooked on the wall of his bathroom, and Blushed Life. It was easy to see, with how her pale skin darkened slightly, and suddenly he could smell the odors of a living person, not ash. “I know not every girl does, but let me tell you, a lot of us want to feel overwhelmed with how much is fitting inside.”

“But not right now?”

“Not right now. Right now, I want my boyfriend to come into the shower with me, hug me, kiss me, and have tender sex with me under the hot water.” As she said it, she faced him, smiled a flirty, silly smile he wasn’t used to seeing on her, and started masturbating. She used full hand strokes, burying her clitoris and her folds in exploring fingers, far rougher than most woman would want straight off the bat.



As confusing as her proposition was to him, it was more than enough to get his blood running. Plus, watching the fit, curvy woman start to masturbate under the hot water of his shower, would be enough to get anyone's blood pumping down between the legs.

“So you come over, and at the drop of a hat, you want romantic sex?”

She frowned at that, and tapped her chin several times. “What if I make it anal?”

Rolling his eyes, he kicked off his boxers, and joined her in the no-wall shower. With two of them under the spray, the hot water went everywhere, splashing over the expensive tile floor of his enormous bathroom before draining away.

“I think we can just keep it vanilla, if you want romantic.”

“Aw, vanilla.” Laughing at her own ‘that’s so cute’ noise, she squirted a load of the water-resistant lubricant into her palm, and started to masturbate with it, rubbing it into her clitoris and insides alike. “Ok, vanilla it is. So, we go into typical missionary position, we’re not allowed to touch my clit, the angle sucks for hitting anything good, and I don’t get to cum?”

“Pretty much.”

More laughter. “Deal, but after, I get a drink of you.”

“Deal, but only if you don’t take too much. I was planning to visit my father later. Late visiting hours today.”

“Oh? Sounds interesting. I’ll be there.” Nodding, as if joining him on the trip was obvious, she reached down and started to rub the lubricant along his hard length with one hand, while still masturbating with the other. She did this for a while, mostly

touching herself, with him as an afterthought, as she warmed up her body.

Of course, an attempt at vanilla sex lasted maybe ten seconds before Jessy got bored, and demanded standing doggy, complete with hands on shoulders, and a rather rough pounding. Maybe some night they'd have tender vanilla sex, but it wasn't tonight.

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Being Kissed was always an exhilarating experience, and he couldn't blame kine for flocking to Bloodlust and wherever else, to enjoy its secret pleasures. He'd cum once, before Jessy kissed him, and that had immediately led to a second orgasm for him, the sort that make men see stars. Following that, a nap, because even a small drink of him had left him tired.

Jessy may not have wanted to cuddle during sex, but she enjoyed it after. She climbed into bed with him, got in close as the big spoon, and woke him up thirty minutes later. A good power nap followed by a quality meal, and his energy started to return. The joys of his Uratha body, near limitless endurance.

Then it was off to the hospital.

“So, they pretend like that event with the crows didn't happen?” he said.

Jessy shrugged as the two of them walked through the hospital parking lot. “The crow incident is still in the news, but the Invictus and the Prince did a decent job of spinning it as an unusual phenomenon. Bird flocking, sorta? There's some crazy shit out there in the world, animals doing weird things like flocking together in strange ways. I guess they did a spin on that.”

“Scared the shit outta Dad. He won't say it, but he was trapped in his room, when all that was going down, scared stiff. And you know how old people get when they're scared.”

“Angry, loud, and stupid? I don’t think old people have a monopoly on that behavior.”

“True enough. But I’d bet good money they take it to an extreme others don’t, and the only reason they don’t start a stupid revolution or civil war, is because they’re too old to do so.”

Jessy laughed, but it didn’t have the same bounce it usually did. “You don’t like your father, do you?”

“I ... love him. He’s my dad.”

“You don’t have to like the people you love, you know, at least not when it’s family. If your dad’s an asshat, then he’s an asshat.”

He stopped outside the sliding glass doors of the front of the hospital. It wasn’t the sort of conversation to have in the lobby, where people could hear the rather depressing topic. The conversation would probably mirror the thoughts of a lot of people in the building, though. The hospital was a stressful place, stressful as fuck, and people who loved each other could tear each other’s head off, when one of them grew resentful that they were dying, while the other lived.

“Yeah, he’s an asshat, but I think he did a decent job raising me. Didn’t he?”

“I think so, yeah.” Nodding, she hooked her arm with his, and together, they walked into the hospital, and followed the colored line on the floor.

A couple minutes later, they knocked on his dad’s door, and after rather annoyed ‘what?’ from inside, they came in.

“Hey Dad. This is my girlfriend, Jessy Herrington.” Eric knew his dad had seen Jessy before, but no reason to not repeat the name, reintroduce with Jessy’s new title as girlfriend, and see where the

conversation went. He wasn't exactly sure he wanted to let his father know about his romance life, but Jessy seemed to think it was a good idea.

"Uh huh." His father eyed him closely, and then looked at Jessy. "... how do ya know my son?" Oh thank god, for a second Eric thought he was going to ask her why she wasn't black.

"I work for Xnomina, and Bloodlust is just one of the clubs we own in this city." Jessy sat down in a chair, folded her legs, and smiled at the old man in the hospital bed. "One of my agents recognized your son from his career, and gave him the job you're familiar with."

"That knee not troubling you no more?" his dad said, looking to Eric. Eric was already sitting down, wearing his casual suit he normally wore at Bloodlust. Jessy was dressed in a similar suit, no tie anymore, and pants. If she'd been wearing a skirt, his father probably would have liked it more.

"It still hurts," he lied. "But I don't need to do any running at my new job, just stand around, and sit if my knee starts bothering me."

"That's good. Don't screw up this job now, or let this lady go; if she's your boss, you know the position that puts you in."

Jessy laughed, despite the implication, and leaned forward, putting her elbows to her knees. "Don't be an asshole, Mister Tanverson, I've been handling businesses and moving around millions in personnel and equity, for a decade. I'm not stupid enough to fire someone just because they stop sleeping with me."

Eric grinned. She'd been doing it for a hell of a lot longer than a decade.

"Alright lady, alright." His dad also grinned at her. "I like a woman who knows a thing or two."

“I know more than that.” Jessy leaned back in her chair again, and pat Eric on the shoulder. “Your son’s a dumbass, Mister Tanverson. He told me about Sheryl, and any moron could have seen the signs. But don’t worry, I like this dumbass, and I’ll keep him from being too dumb for his own good.”

“Ha! That he is.” And for the first time Eric could remember since the man had entered the hospital, his dad turned off the muted television with a smile, not a frown. “Thank you Jessy. I can’t do shit for my idiot son trapped in this bed.”

“Trapped?” Jessy leaned forward, and slapped his dad on the leg, hard enough to make the man do his ow-this-hurts laugh. “You’ll be feeling fine eventually, I’m sure. And I ain’t gonna preach, but I can tell by looking at you that if you got your dumb old ass into shape, you’d look sexy as fuck, like your son here.”

Eric blinked, several times, as he slowly turned his gaze from his dad to Jessy. She was treading some dangerously thin ice, ice Eric had fallen through before. One wrong word and she’d send the man into a one of his angry fits, which for his dad, was always expressed as closing himself off after a nasty argument. It was the problem with his dad, that Eric couldn’t have a hard conversation with him, since he’d just block Eric out.

But he didn’t block Jessy out. His dad chuckled again, and smiled at the woman.

“You think so, do ya?”

“I do. Hell, get healthy enough to get out of this bed, and I’ll show you my tits.”

Before Eric could say anything, and he definitely wanted to say something, his dad burst out laughing.

“Alright pretty lady, deal.”

---

“So you’re ... gonna show my dad your tits.”

“Yeap.” She winked at him as they walked down the hospital hallway.

“And you think that’ll work?”

“Probably. Different people get motivated by different things. Your dad seemed like the sort you can melt with booze or sex. No booze in a hospital, so, a little nudity should do the trick.”

“Uh huh...” Well, if it worked, and his dad started taking care of himself, he would be adding another ten or twenty years onto his lifespan. That, as much as Eric tried to deny it, was something he wanted to happen. He’d be sad once the old man was dead.

“So, were you gonna do it tonight?” she said

“Do what?”

Laughing, she slipped a hand around him, hugging his waist as they walked out of the hospital. “Visit the Shadow place.”

“Oh, right. Um, I don’t know. I kinda feel like I should, right? Use this gift I’ve got to give something back to the places I grew up.” He was almost tempted to ask her to just waste more Xnomina money on those goals, but that was crossing a line. At a certain point, it was time to stop asking for handouts, and do something himself.

Look at him, pulling out of a pit of depression like he had a rocket on his back. No longer did he want to spend his time alone, miserable, bitching about life. He had a girlfriend who was awesome, and money, and a place to live, and a future. The werewolf thing was a mixed bag, but it gave him tools, tools he could use to give something back to the streets he grew up from.

Heh, like a crap movie, kid from the street comes back to save his shitty neighborhood. No, it wouldn't be like that. No inspirational music would play when he walked into an old school of his, with the recipe to save it from going under, nothing like that. That didn't mean he couldn't at least get some fucked up shit out of the picture, take them out in the Hisil, and have the influence die in Dolareido and Devil's Corner.

"That's hard for a Kindred to wrap their mind around," she said. "Everything a vamp does, we do to save ourselves first, and our own kin second. You really want to help a bunch of strangers?"

"Yeap. Because, fuck me, I like Dolareido. Born here, grew up here, plan to stick around, and I'd like to make it a better city."

"Bleeeeeeh." She rested her temple on his shoulder as they walked, heading back toward the center of South Side where he lived. "Don't start getting virtuous on me."

"Turn off?"

"A bit, yeah."

He kissed the top of her head, and laughed. "I'll be doing it against the wishes of my supposed Uratha superiors. Does that help?"

"You know what? It kinda does. The diligent protector dog look is a turn off, but a vigilante wolf is a sexy beast. When do you want to go, if not tonight?"

"To the Hisil?" He peeked around at the people walking around. This deep in South Side, it was loud and full of people, talking about meaningless things, and half drunk while they did it. Safe to talk in, he supposed.

“Let’s go tonight! You got the night off, right? I’ll call Natasha, and see if she can get Matt and Art to come over. They can show you how to ... uh, do whatever it is to get over there.”

“You really want to come with me?”

“Fuck yeah!” Laughing again, she broke her hug, and punched him in the shoulder, making sure both her and him hit the shoulders of people walking by. “Fuck.” She pushed off some of the people, and they pushed her, creating a little zone of chaos for them to swim through before she got beside him again. “Course I want to come.”

“Um, you sure? You’ve never been there, and it’s pretty fucked up. And dangerous. And fuck me, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Matt and Art will be there. I’ll be fine! And—” The ring of her phone stopped her, and she blinked down at it as she checked the message. “Ooooh. Natasha sent me something. She says to only watch this in private.”

“Then we should watch it in priv—” She grabbed his arm, and yanked him into a small alley, barely wide enough for the two of them to stand side by side. It was well lit, this deep in South Side where there were lights absolutely everywhere, but there didn’t seem to be anybody in this particular alley.

“Let’s see let’s see. Oh ... oh!” She got in cozy against the wall beside Eric, shoulder to shoulder, and held up the phone so they could both watch. “Oh my god.”

Eric stared at the screen and gulped, doing his best to keep his heart rate from jumping. But, there was Natasha, tiny, pale, skinny, dainty little Natasha, nude, sitting between two huge naked guys on the edge of a bed, and touching them.

“Jessy, um, you—”



“No one else can see, you big baby. And”—she jumped ahead in the video—“oh my god.”

It was hard to not stare, hard to the point he gave up. Jessy was holding the phone in front of him, and he was being shown cute Natasha riding Matthew while Arturo fucked her from behind. And, it was hard to not stare at how, since Natasha was so utterly tiny compared to the two men, that she basically disappeared between them. Even more obvious, was how her tiny body struggled to handle that much meat filling her.

He pushed the phone down and frowned at his girlfriend. “Ok, I get it, you convinced her to make a sex tape.”

“I did! I did. So proud.”

“And she’s ok with me seeing this?”

“Natasha may look meek and skittish on the outside, but inside, there’s a sexual animal who dreams of being pinned down and taken by a group of rough men.” Laughing, Jessy put the phone away, and grinned at Eric. Uh oh. “I’m sad she never let me touch her. Maybe —”

“No no, no. No swinging.”

“Bah, fine.” But when she rolled her eyes, he could see she’d never intended to suggest it. The vampire loved to yank his chain, apparently. “You gotta admit though, seeing little Tash plugged up like that was pretty damn arousing.” She pulled up the video, and scanned ahead a little. Oh fuck, she was on her back now, and the two dudes were filling her up. All he could see of her was her ass, and her two legs sticking out from between their bodies.

He breathed deep, pushed her phone down again, and did his best to calm his body down. Breathe deep, right?

“You know, in most circumstances, most girls get jealous in this sort of situation, if their boyfriend gets aroused looking at another woman.”

“Pffft, dude I am the best thing that will ever happen to you. The fuck do I have to be jealous about?” She elbowed him in the side, and kissed his cheek. “Maybe a little envious though. She’s so god damn tiny, and those two dudes are so huge! She looked like she was going to burst.” One of her hands started to roam his body, caressing his stomach through his shirt, as her lips worked on his jawline. “Love that feeling, of getting split in half.”

“Yes, I’ve come to realize that.” Oh no, he knew where this was going.

“And I know you like it, when you’ve pinned me down and you’re stretching my insides until I’m ready to pop.”

“I uh ... yeah, can’t lie.”

“Maybe next time, we can see if you can sit back and relax when transformed; I’ll give you a blowjob if you can. Sounds like a challenge, you know? See if you can resist pouncing me, while I pleasure you.” Her roaming hand pressed against his crotch through his pants, or they did, until she stopped and looked up, digging up a memory. “Hey, Jack wanted to know, you know anything about something called Luna?”

God damn it. She may have been able to ignore her sex drive, since she wasn’t Blushing Life, but he had no such barrier between him and the hunger she’d awakened. Rushing blood began to flow between his legs, and he had to breathe deep to calm it down.

“Luna? The moon?”

“I guess, yeah.”

“She ... she’s been in my dreams a few times. I never really know if she’s talking to me, or it’s just a vision, or ... I dunno. It’s a Cahalith thing.”

Jessy eyed him, squinting one eye. “I’m not so sure, based on the conversation Jack and I had with Avery a bit ago. You should ask him about it sometime.” And, randomly, she clapped her hands together once. “Let’s go see Natasha and her boy toys. But first, gimme a quickie.”

“Again? We fucked just over an hour ago.”

“Again!”

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~~Natasha~~

“W-Wait! Stop!”

They didn’t stop. Grinning down at her, Matthew and Arturo held her down against their bodies, and fucked her. She was exhausted, utterly exhausted, and she wasn’t sure she could cum anymore, but that didn’t seem to bother the two beasts. Sweat dripped off her skin, rolled down her body, and onto the man lying underneath her, Arturo, who had one hand tight around her throat while the other pinned her hand to the bed.

Matthew, kneeling upright between her legs, held onto her waist, and thrust into her. In any other circumstance, him thrusting hard like this, and to the hilt, would be painful, but her whole body was on fire and didn’t seem to care. When her insides were boiling, when pleasure-ripples worked through her thighs, when her legs stuck out and her toes curled until it hurt, the werewolves knew they had liberty to get rough with her. It got to the point all she could do was lie there, and try and hold on, as she came until she saw stars.

It really wasn't fair, that they could make her body do this. Ah well.

She reached up with her only free hand, and punched Matthew's chest, trying to get him off her. Might as well have been punching a tank. Her attempts to push Matthew away earned the opposite effect: he pinned the hand to his chest at the wrist. His hand was big enough, his fingers almost circled her wrist twice. His other hand continued to hold her waist, and worked her body back and forth with his thrusts. She was barely more than a toy for him to fuck, at this point.

The giant growled down at her, his usually warm smile darkened, and he leaned over her. His kiss was savage, searing, and it made her eyes go wide as his closed. Even as he kissed her, he didn't stop fucking her, each thrust sinking his ridiculously massive length into her small body until her insides were stretching inward, and it felt like he was hitting her stomach. He wasn't, but that didn't change the sensation, the feeling of being skewered, of being split in half, and no matter how much she struggled, the sensation was overwhelmingly addictive. She tried to mewl, but Matt's lips were locked onto her lips; and if Matt's lips didn't block her voice, Art's tightening grip around her throat would have.

She came again. Every muscle she had clenched and clenched hard, but Matthew and Arturo continued to thrust through her trembling, squeezing spurts of pleasure, until her eyes rolled upward. They kept going, and going, and going, until she started to feel herself going numb.

Faintly, she could tell she was being moved around, to a different position. The mattress sank under the weight of their bodies, and several soft things were put under Natasha's head and back. Pillows. She forced her eyes open, but it was hard, orgasm aftershocks coursing through her and demanding she do nothing but lie there and quiver. But she managed to get them open a crack, and she

looked left and right up at the two boys, who were kneeling around her.

Oh, she'd been propped up by the pillows. Her two boyfriends were masturbating, each on a different side of her, and each close enough that they'd surrounded her back and sides with their knees. All around her, she was surrounded by walls of muscle, sweat, and hunger, as the two wolves masturbated. They rubbed their cocks on her body, on her breasts, on her stomach, and took turns rubbing their glans on her lips. With a little encouragement from Matthew, her mouth opened wider, and soon she had the enormous, drenched cock filling her mouth and pressing into the inside of one of her cheeks. Lubricant didn't taste good, so she was happy Arturo was happier rubbing his cock along her nipples. The wet heat of his length's tip, coating her nipple and areola in juices, sent sparks into her chest and down through her body, mixing with the bliss already filling her.

It was kind of nice, she had to admit, to just submit, and enjoy being the center of attention. When she cracked her eyes open a little further, and saw the hunger in the eyes of Matt and Art, she managed a small smile, and shivered as the two beasts growled louder. She recognized that growl. It was the sound of orgasm. She'd heard it already tonight, and she could feel the remains leaking out of her. The smell of sex was powerful, and in the moment, when the tingling waves continued to course through her, it was a wonderful smell.

The men began to coat her body in more of their cum. Matthew soaked her lips, slid his glans down onto her chin, neck, and down onto her chest, leaving a trail of the warm fluid. Arturo was cumming a moment later, and he masturbated onto her other breast, rubbing his boiling glans up and down along her nipple and drowning it in white. Soon, both beasts had coated her pale skin to the point it was trickling down her body, along the underside of her small breasts, down her ribs, and down her tiny stomach.

Never, never ever ever, did she think she'd be into this sort of stuff, once upon a time. But being taken like this, filled with cum, and then coated in it, sent a tingle through her body she couldn't deny. There was something to it, something about being helpless and dominated like this, until she was literally covered in cum, that had her fake heartbeat skyrocketing. And now that a camera was on her, recording her getting covered until she looked like a Jackson Pollock, the thrill was doubled.

Matthew slid off the bed, walked over to the laptop, and stopped the recording. "Well, if you were worried about looking too shy in the last video, I don't think you have anything to worry about in this one."

Arturo, grinning down at her like the evil bastard he was, helped her sit up. "If you showed anyone this video without context, they'd think this wasn't entirely consensual, you know?"

She smiled at that. Ok, so, that particular fantasy was creeping up in her imagination a lot lately, of her two boyfriends getting even more aggressive with her, pinning her down and taking her, without her consent. It was a harmless fantasy! And it was fun to act it out. Besides, it wasn't like Arturo and Matthew didn't often go further than she planned, and did basically ignore her when she begged for them to stop. She was glad they didn't.

She slid off the bed, looked down at herself, and shivered. The last tingles of pleasure gave the sight and feeling of cum trickling down her skin an electric sizzle, hot and very arousing. A Kindred body meant she could keep going if she wanted, especially if she took a drink of either Art or Matt. But at a certain point she had to stop having sex, and get back to being a Kindred, doing vampire things. She let the rippling pleasure of her previous orgasms fade away until her thighs no longer shivered, and as she did, the thrilling sensation of being covered in cum, and having it drip out of her

insides, turned into a strong need to bathe. She was filthy! Shower time.

“No one’s g-going to see it ... who d-d-doesn’t already know you’re my b-boyfriends.” And she knew Jessie would eat up the rape fantasy like an addict. Sending sex tapes to her friend was a bit weird, and being excited to do so even more weird, or at least it’d have been weird anywhere else. In Dolareido, she supposed it was a part of how some people explored the fun of sexuality. Fucking on balconies where people could see, in clubs, in pools at expensive hotels, Dolareido really brought out the sexual side in people.

Antoinette had succeeded in creating a city where even quiet nerds like Tash could let loose. And maybe the world needed more of that, like, a revival of the seventies again. Except with condoms this time, for the kine.

She got a towel, did her best to deal with the mess, locked the laptop — no way was she going to risk someone seeing those files — and scooted off to the shower. Matt and Art followed, and they hopped in once she was done. Maybe she could move the camera equipment to the Elysium Tower? Antoinette had many showers in her tower’s underground labyrinth, and they were much bigger than her apartment’s, so it wasn’t like she couldn’t do shoots there. And, Antoinette probably had better camera equipment, and all Natasha would have to do to have access to it, was ask.

“Is this going to be a regular thing?” Art said, sitting on the toilet, but not using it, while waiting for his turn as Matt hopped into the shower. “I mean, I got no issue. This is fun. But if we’re gonna be putting out these videos regularly, maybe we should set up an account with some reputable online porn services? We could make good money.”

“That...” For a second, just a tiny, dirty second, she looked at herself in the mirror wearing her towel, and considered the idea.

Then she grabbed a facecloth and chucked it at the man. “P-Pervert.”

Rolling his eyes, Arturo set the cloth aside. “I think that ship has sailed, on calling us the perverted ones.”

She gasped, brought a hand up to her sternum in feigned shock, and turned to face the man. “ ... really?”

“Really. You’ve crossed most of the lines that can be crossed.”

“I d-dunno. I mean...” Jessy fucked her ghouls in front of her window, a full wall window, where everyone in the city could see her. And of course, she was fucking a werewolf when he was fully transformed into an enormous beast, can’t forget that part. “I’m rich already. N-No need. This is ... it’s fun. It’s just for fun.”

“Definitely fun,” Matthew said as he stepped out of the shower. “So we’re gonna film us again? Cause we could try some more fantasies.”

As Arturo stepped into the shower, Matthew came up behind her while she turned around to look in the mirror again. The enormous man stood directly behind her, so close his body touched hers, and he leaned down. With a dark, evil grin, he watched her in the mirror as he lowered himself until his head was over her shoulders. One of his hands sneaked around her neck again, and she froze as she felt the power of his grip circling her throat. His other plucked at the towel wrapped around her, sending it to the floor, and soon his enormous fingers were cupping one of her small breasts until it disappeared in his grip. All the while, he kept his dangerous, hungry, and animal gaze on her eyes in the mirror.

It was a good thing she wasn’t Blushing Life anymore, or he’d have lit a match under her until she was boiling.

“Arturo and I will be villains. You’ll be locked up in our mansion, where we have our way with you every night. We’ll tie you up so you



can't get away, and we'll take you again and again. And again." The gruff man, normally all gentle smiles and gentler touch, squeezed on her throat. She would have mewled, or whimpered, or moaned, but she couldn't with the firmness of his grip blocking her windpipe.

Choking kine was different. If you wanted to choke someone so they could enjoy it during sex, you didn't squeeze on the throat to block breathing, not normally. As far as her now unneeded porn habit suggested, choking was done to put pressure on the throat's contours and restricting some blood flow, but not outright block breathing. That wouldn't work with Kindred, and the werewolves knew it.

So, as the enormous man squeezed her throat, until she could feel the sheer power of his arm, and see the muscle flex and veins bulge in the mirror, she trembled, and did her best to not let her eyes roll up. Why did it feel so good? Why did the sight of this man's giant body burying her in his shadow, and how his arm flexed as he gripped her tiny throat in his huge grip, make her shake?

"We got pretty rough with you tonight," the evil, bizarro Matthew whispered, "but if you wanted to really indulge a fantasy, Art and I will happily tie you up, and—"

"Matt!" Art stuck his head around the shower curtain, frowning, shampoo foam spiraling around his dark hair. "Dude, you read too many shitty romance books, written by eighteen-year-old girls."

As if someone had doused him with ice water, Matt let go of her throat and breast, and stood up straight. The dark hunger she saw in his eyes vanished instantly, and the kind Matthew remained. Chuckling softly, he reached down, handed her back her towel, and smirked at the man in the shower.

"You read romance?" she said.

Matt shrugged, but she could see a hint of blush as he put his hands on her shoulders, still looking at her through the mirror. “I uh ... I mean, occasionally? You see those movies making waves, and sometimes you try the books, and then you kinda get sucked into a rabbit hole.”

She knew of the movies he spoke of, the ones that did a bad job of exploring BDSM, or the ones that glorified kidnapping. But hey, as long as it was done by a billionaire, all that was perfectly fine, right? Laughing, she walked out the bathroom as she adjusted her towel again. It wasn't fair to judge kinks, and that's all those movies and stories were, exploring kinks.

Matthew followed after her, and she threw his boxers at him as she sat down on the edge of her bed.

“I know w-what you mean. I read a lot of b-b-bad romance novels too. They're ... bad, so b-bad, but how else is someone like myself supposed to ... explore sexual things, right?” She held out her arms for him, and he got down on his knees in front of her. Kissing his forehead, she squeezed the giant muscles bulging out of his shoulders. “It's cute!” She leaned in, and rubbed her nose on his. “And, um ... if you really want to ... you know, b-b-be ... mean, and ... pin me d-down, and tie me up, and ... stuff ... we can do that.”

A twinkle sparkled in his eyes, and he kissed her, a quick peck on the lips, before he stepped back and started dressing. Arturo came out, and he also had a twinkle in his eyes, along with an evil grin. Yeah, he heard them. Vampires had good ears, but werewolves were something else entirely.

“Did you hear back from Jessy about the first video yet?” he said.

“N-Not yet, but I'm sure she'll—”

Knock knock.

That was unusual. The only people who knew she was in her apartment were paranormals, and they wouldn't just drop by randomly without a text. Well, the werewolves probably would, but she doubted any of them would drop by randomly, unless they needed Matt or Art. Then—

Bzz bzz. Natasha scooped her phone off the nearby nightstand.  
~Hey Tash, it's me.~

“Oh, it's J-Jessy.” Natasha scooped up her underwear, threw on some jeans and a t-shirt, and opened the door to her apartment.  
“Hi!”

“I smell boys.” Nodding, eyes stern like a detective on a trail, Jessy walked into the apartment, and sat at the kitchen counter like she always used to. “I hear boys.”

“M-Matt and Art are here, and—hi Eric!”

“Hey Tash.” Eric Tanverson, beautiful in his casual suit, smiled at her and joined Jessy at the counter. “You said Matt and Art here?”

“Mhmm.” As Natasha stepped around the counter, she noticed Jessy was grinning at her. Not only that, but once she made eye contact with Eric, he avoided eye contact with her. “You ... saw the t-t-t-ta ... movie.”

“We did! Good fucking god, that is some epic porn, Tash. Eric and I fucked within seconds, in the street.”

“You w-watched it in the street!?” She gasped, stepping back and staring at her friend, her very very dumb friend.

But Jessy laughed and waved a hand. “We were in an alley. No one else saw.”

Good god, she would be radiating red if she was Blushing Life. “As long as no one else saw. It’s p-p-private! Wait, in an alley? D-Did you ... have sex in an alley?”

“We did.” Jessy grinned, like a happy cat. “That’s how good your video was.”

“Um, good! Good.” Good, because she was very attached to the project now, and she was excited to see what sort of movies she could make. And Matthew seemed to be super into it, too. Arturo was, but in a different way, in a ‘I’m so handsome and I’m fucking the pretty lady’ sorta way, while Matthew genuinely seemed to want to create movies. She was happy to have both.

“Eric, Jessy,” the boys said as they came down the hall.

Eric managed a small nod for them, but Jessy’s grin grew enormous as she looked over her shoulder at them.

“Hey boooys,” she said. “Maybe you can—” Eric pinched her arm, hard enough to make the Gangrel squeak. “Hey!” She pinched him back, going for the thigh. Eric yelped, and returned the pinch once again.

This went back and forth for a while, and Natasha did her best to not giggle. They were a strange couple, but she was hardly one to judge.

“We were wondering,” Eric said, after a few more painful pinch exchanges, “if you could teach me how to cross the Gauntlet tonight.”

“Tonight?” Arturo shrugged, and hopped onto the couch nearby. Natasha’s kitchen was connected to her living room, giving plenty of space for everyone to sit down and talk as long as they spread out. “Sure, if you want. Did everyone get tonight off?”

The two vampires nodded, and Eric too.

“Alright then,” Matthew said. “Uratha need to cross over to the Gauntlet at a locus, a place where essence gathers. Arturo can cross without one, cause he’s Irakka, but the rest of us will need a locus.”

Arturo nodded. “Avery has something that basically creates a locus wherever she is, but that’s not really an option for us.”

“How do we find one?” Eric asked.

Matt raised a hand. “We already know where some are.”

---

~~Damien~~

Fiona stared around at the sensual sights of Bloodlust, squeezed Damien’s hand tight, and giggled up a storm as they walked.

“Ya cannae come here and nae think, sex is in the air.” She pressed her cheek to his shoulder, and followed him as he stayed as far away as he could from the dance floor. Thankfully she got the hint, but he could see she was thinking about suggesting it.

“No denying it. Everyone here is looking for intercourse.”

That sent her into a fit of giggles loud enough people could hear it over the music. “Nae intercourse! Ye dobber.” After a moment, she started pulling him, instead of him guiding her, and she took him up the stairs. “Sex, nae intercourse.”

“Right, right.” His somewhat stilted way of speaking never bothered Fiona; it did make her laugh, however. “Are you sure you want to be here, and not back in your apartment?”

“Aye, I’m sure. Ye need to be around folk from time to time, Damien. It’s healthy for ye, ye ken?” Soon they were on the second floor, with the balcony that overlooked the dance floor. A bit darker,

a bit quieter, it was where Kindred almost always came when they visited the club. But tonight there weren't any. They were out on sweeps, like he would be again come tomorrow night.

He slid into the booth of her choosing, and relaxed as he felt the shadows and walls of the booth surround him. "I'm not so sure. I'm Kindred, not kine. Kindred are solitary creatures."

"I dinnae believe ye."

"We're like ... snow leopards. We meet every once in a while, but really prefer to be alone."

Again, she burst into giggles. "And yet ye vamps are fucking each other, and yer humans, all the time!"

"Dolareido's got a good thing going here. I—"

"So ye do think it's good that vamps are meeting each other!"

He paused, lowered a raised hand, and set it on his lap. "I guess I do. But it's not easy. Do Begotten not crave solitude?"

"Aye, we do. From dragons — real dragons — to monsters like me and Athalia, monsters of shadows ye ken? Our horrors all like being alone. But there's also me, and not Vrall. I like being around folk. Athalia ... does nae."

"I suppose that's a big difference between us. The Beast's desires are subtle. There's no monster walking around in my head, demanding certain behaviors. It stays quiet, its influence gentle, unless I'm starving." Damien had frenzied several times in his younger years, when he had to do all that he could to avoid detection. Thankfully the Beast wasn't smart enough to do anything but hunt. He'd been lucky to be far away from anything that would create an incident, unlike Jack and his first night.

To frenzy was an interesting sensation. It was power, hunger, desire, coursing through withered veins until the Kindred lost all control. It was overwhelming. It was exhilarating. He could not remember the details of his frenzy, only blurry images of the walls he'd shredded with his nails. After a time, the Beast spent itself, unable to maintain its chaotic greed and yearning for blood, and only Damien remained, shivering on the floor of the storage room he'd hidden himself in, deep in the tunnels. After that, finding a kine he could feed upon had been difficult, and every second was agony trying to resist the monstrous urges of the Beast.

Fiona snuggled in close to him, rubbed her cheek against his shoulder some more, and hugged his arm. She was in a dress tonight, a very revealing dress, dark green, with cleavage that plunged to her navel. It didn't do a good job of covering her breasts either, and it reminded Damien of the dress he saw Antoinette wear at the ball. His girlfriend didn't have any of Antoinette's regalness, but that made it all the more appealing, that it was the fun bouncy girl wearing the dress and not the royal Daeva.

"Ye're staring," she said, grinning up at him.

"I am not." Shit, he was. He forced his eyes up from her breasts, and to her golden gaze.

"Ye are!" All giggles and fun, she leaned up from her seat beside him, kissed his jawline, and got cozy against his side again.

She leaned forward over the booth table a bit, peeked around to see if anyone could see her, they couldn't, and she snuggled back into his side as her mischievous grin grew. One of her hands slipped up to her shoulder, slid off the shoulder strap of her green dress, and she used the same hand to pull out one of her breasts.

"Ye can touch, whenever ye want. Ya dinnae need to ask, just ... grab me, and take me, like a hungry beast." She cupped her one exposed breast, like how she did in her pictures, and she squeezed it

gently, causing it to spill over her fingers with its mass and softness. Her large nipple, pink and lovely against her pale skin, poked out from over her palm between finger and thumb. Without losing a beat, the giggling redhead next to him massaged her breast, and made sure to bounce it several times in her hand, to make sure he could see how it rippled with each impact.

“Whenever I want?”

“Aye! Um, well, ye know ... nae when it’s nae a good idea. This body is alive, unlike ye vampires. But aye, please ... jump me and ... do things to me.” She leaned her head down, lifted her breast, and gave her areola a slow kiss.

Good Lord. Why did this woman delight in tempting him so? No doubt she saw the conflicted look on his face that he was sure was blatant, and it ignited her giggling again as she pulled the dress back up to hide her breast. If he’d been Blushing Life, he’d have been aroused, and would have probably pounced her, sank his fangs into her, and fucked her right there in the booth.

Maybe that’s what she wanted? It was her idea to come to Bloodlust. Everyone knew that people had sex in this night club, and every Kindred knew they could come and get an easy meal. Maybe she wanted to be that easy meal? He’d never considered having sex in public, but it did seem like she was tempting him to do just that.

He smiled at her, and tried to make it look dark, a touch evil, and a bit mischievous. Yeah, ok, he could do that. He could climb on top of her, pin her down, slide her dress up, get inside her, and sink his fangs into her. Maybe? Yes, he could. But not yet. There was fun in waiting, in the build up, in anticipation, and in the mystery of what sort of things he’d do to her in the future. He could see it in her eyes, in how a small grin from him was enough to elicit a shiver from her and a sparkle in her gaze.



She gulped, licked her lips, and fluttered her eyelashes at him. So damn cute.

“I think you should get a pet, by the way.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I mentioned it to Jack, and he believes if you got a pet, a young one, it'd be perfectly happy with you as an owner.”

She tapped her chin at that. “I had thought about it, aye. I'm still afraid though.”

“Maybe visit a pet store?”

“Nae! Nae a pet store, ye wanker! It's gotta be a breeder. Pet stores dinnae take care of their animals, and they buy from backyard breeders and mills and ... and...” Wow, sexy mood ruined. Fiona folded her arms across her chest, and harrumphed, like he'd offended her and her ancestors.

“Is that right? Sorry, I had no idea.” He nudged her with his shoulder, leaned down, and kissed her ear. “You just tell me what sort of pet you want, I'll see if I can help.”

“Ye sure? A good breeder can make a pet cost a lot of money.”

“Unless it's tens of thousands of dollars, I'm sure I can afford it.”

Nodding, she turned her head to kiss his chin. “Maybe a few thousand for a dog, but ... I think maybe I want something cheaper. Like a bunny!”

“Bunnies are pretty cute. But I don't think they'll cuddle as readily as a dog, or Eric's cat.”

“Eric's cat, but nae other cats?”

He shrugged. “Eric’s cat sounds pretty unique, from what I’ve heard. We can look into a cat like that, or affectionate rodents and mustelids, or a cuddly dog?”

“Ye seem awfully invested in this idea.”

“Do I?” He looked out to the railing ahead of them as his mind wandered. “I guess I am. It definitely seemed like something you really wanted.”

“And ye want it because I want it?”

“I guess I really want you to have it. I never got to have anything, not really, not when I was kine, and not after my embrace.”

“Awww.” She pat his leg, sighing dramatically. “Well, I do want a pet. And it definitely has to be cuddly!”

“Then I suggest dog, if you’re willing to watch over something for ten to twenty years.”

“Ten to twenty years.” She blinked, stared down at her legs, and then set her head down on the table, on her cheek. “That is a long time, I cannae lie.”

Right, Fiona was a young woman. Asking her to take care of something for as long as she’d been alive, was quite a request from any animal.

“Think about it,” he said. “I’ll help, anyway I can.” He rubbed her back, unable to stop from smiling as poor Fiona finally understood the gravity of what it meant to take care of a dog. At least with a thrall or ghou, they could take care of themselves. Even Jack’s crows took care of themselves, despite their growing affection for the Ventrue.

Speak of the devil. Jack came up the stairs, and waved.

“Hey guys.”

“Jack,” Damien said with a nod. Like Damien, Jack was dressed in his Invictus suit, but unlike Damien, no curvy woman was found on his arm. “Where’s the Prince?”

“Antoinette is doing dragon things with my mom. She’s got information that might help with this ghost issue, and—”

“Ghost?” Fiona said, sitting up.

“Yeah.” Sighing, like someone had thrown a heavy iron chain around his neck, Jack sat down on Damien’s side of the booth. “My sister’s ghost, currently haunting my old home.”

“Oh my god!” Well, if Damien’s comment about the lifespan of dogs didn’t kill Fiona’s sex drive for the moment, Jack’s comment about his dead sister sure did. “Did ye get to talk to her?”

“I did. I ... did.”

“Did ye—”

“Yes, I got to say the things I wish I’d said before she died, more or less.” Groaning, Jack put his elbows on the table, and buried his face in his hands. “But she’s a ghost. The Uratha are convinced this is not going to end well, and fuck me, I knew that before I even asked them.”

“I ... I suppose I cannae believe it, but Vrall can.” Nodding, Fiona quickly checked her chest and shoulder straps, probably to make sure she didn’t have anything still on display, and reached to pat Jack’s closer elbow. “Sorry, Vrall does nae have anything good to say about it either.”

“I figured.”

“Why’re ye here anyhow? I’m on a date with my boyfriend!” She hooked her arm with Damien’s, and smiled at Jack. It was half a ‘I’m glad to see you’ smile, and half ‘go away I want to be alone with my boyfriend’ smile.

“Sorry to interrupt your date. Normally I’d be with Antoinette, but she’s busy, and our sweep ended early tonight. Wait, did Athalia not tell you about the Mary? I was talking to her on the sweep.”

“Athalia keeps to herself. She’d tell us, eventually. And it’s ok if ye wanna stay for a wee bit. Damien and I are just enjoying a little time outside, before we go back.”

Jack lifted his head out of his palms, blinked at Fiona, and then blinked at Damien. “Damien, enjoying outside? Sounds like madness.”

It was madness. “I don’t really enjoy it, but I like that Fiona likes it. And I like Fiona, so, here I am.”

Jack laughed, grinning at Damien between chuckles. “Understandable. I’ll be gone a minute, once I’ve...”

Damien and Jack both stared at the stairs, off to the side of the balcony, and watched a man step up onto their floor. Each step was slow, careful, calculating, and the man looked left and right as if waiting for a bullet to say hello to his spine. No strange aura emanated from him, no presence that would signal a paranormal to an observing Kindred, but it was obvious the man wasn’t supposed to be here in Bloodlust.

He was a tall man, black, with short curly hair and a bit of stubble. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, which stuck out quite a bit in Bloodlust; Damien had no idea how he managed to get in wearing that. Maybe he sneaked in? He had large arms, and there were various tattoos covering them. Not tattoo sleeves, but strange markings that looked more like they had a purpose, instead of

artwork. Circles, patterns, symbols. There were scars as well, several of them, and a few more on his fingers, the signs of a man who spent his life doing something dangerous with his hands.

“Hello,” the man said, glancing around nervously as he did, “I’m Brace Harcourt. I ... uh ... came here to talk to you, Jack. Or, well, any of you, really. Guess I’m lucky that you’re here in person.”

---

~~Jack~~

This man knew his name. Jack didn’t know his, until he just said it. He didn’t recognize him, or his voice, or—no, he did recognize him. As the memories came swarming back, Jack’s eyes widened, and he froze solid, staring at the man.

This was one of the hunters he saw in the hospital, after Angela opened the portal. This was one of the guys who had shot Julias up.

The man slid into the booth. Damien, who must have noticed Jack’s gaze, got ready to stand up and jump the man, but Jack held up a hand. Fiona didn’t have a clue what was going on, and that was fine. She just stared, eyebrow raised, confused.

“I’m here to help,” Harcourt said. “I want that bitch Angela dead and gone, and if you can take that psycho Jeremiah with her, I’d appreciate it.”

## Chapter 104

~~Eric~~

They took a trip to a club. Eric was kind of sick of the club scene, working at Bloodlust all the time; not that Bloodlust really counted as a club, more of a night lounge thing. Bloodlust had the music, the low light, and the people, just less of them. To go to a proper nightclub was not how he wanted to spend the night, but Matthew and Arturo assured him it was temporary.

They didn't need to convince the bouncer to let them in. Natasha wrapped them in her Kindred powers, and somehow, they just strolled in. It was almost enviable. Werewolves could go unseen in the shadows, perhaps to degrees that vampires couldn't, but vampires could blend into a crowd in ways the wolves never could. For werewolves, they were wolves deep down to the soul, but vampires were something else, something that still coexisted and thrived with humans, around humans, and on humans. According to Jessy, they held kinship with crows, rats, cockroaches, and other animals that thrived among humans. Werewolves did not.

Eric doubted he'd ever feel comfortable around a group of humans again. Ah well, he was happier being around vampires like Jessy, and even the other werewolves.

Inside the club Fallen Angels — good god that name — Eric found the same scene he found at Bloodlust, just dialed up to eleven, as he suspected. The dance floor was crowded, with bodies pressed together, dancing and sweating and rubbing against each other. The smell of alcohol was blatant, and other drugs the two hundred people were enjoying.

“Nothing like the smell of people having a good time, to get me hungry!” Jessy shouted. The swirling lights of different colors did a strange job of illuminating anything, psychedelic like the fucking eighties, but Jessy made sure to hold onto Eric’s hand as she followed after Matthew’s back. “Fuck, I haven’t been here in years! Look at this!” She gestured to several of the people they were pushing past. Two girls, not women, girls, maybe nineteen, had pulled their tube tops up and were rubbing their breasts together. They were surrounded by other bodies, men and women, grinding and bouncing, and the two girls were obviously enjoying being the center of attention.

“Places like this make me feel old as fuck,” he shouted back. Christ, the music was loud.

“Ha, with age comes wisdom! Half these dudes probably don’t know what a fucking g-spot is! Let alone where it is.” Shrugging at him, she continued to pull on him through the crowd. He also noticed she was not pulling him in a straight line. With every weaving sweep she did through the crowd toward the back, she laughed louder, and looked over her shoulder to smile at him. She really did enjoy these clusters of flesh and sex and drugs, in a particular way only a Kindred could, a predator mingling with prey.

They lost the large back they were following. Or more likely, Jessy purposefully lost it. Natasha and her boyfriends were somewhere ahead, and Eric was pretty sure Natasha pushed through the crowd as quickly as possible. She wasn’t wrapping them up in her Discipline anymore, so the crowd could see Eric and Jessy, but at this point it didn’t matter. Everyone was loud and dancing wildly; no bouncer could manage this, or spot some people wearing casual suits among all the skimpy skirts, tank tops, and latex.

“Hey Eric! Come on, get in here!” Jessy came up beside a woman who was having a grand time, and took her by the waist. The stranger, a black woman with curly black hair a few inches long, was

short and thin, very thin, a little too thin. Not anorexic, but definitely a girl of the modern era who thought runway models were a good look, and not the unhealthy sticks Eric knew they were. Excessive skinniness aside, she was cute, young, and must have set off Jessy's vampire instincts, because Jessy slid around behind the bouncing, grinding girl, and set her hands on the girl's chest. The girl was wearing some tiny top, white and partly see-through, showing her naked, small breasts underneath.

And Jessy sank her teeth into her, without a moment's hesitation or foreplay. The stranger didn't even resist. Either she'd done this before, had seen it done to other people, or most likely, was too drunk or high to think a stranger kissing their neck was anything other than awesome.

Jessy looked at Eric as she drank, a twinkle in her eye. Insatiable, this woman, for blood and sex, and she let her hands roam over the young girl's body as she grinned at him.

"Jessy! Come on, we're supposed to be following Matt and Art." He came in close, very close, leaning in and putting his lips up to Jessy's ear.

Groaning, half annoyed and half delighted, Jessy lifted her head and wiped a drop of blood from her mouth. "Why the rush? Come on, get in here. Hey, girl! This is my boyfriend." She slipped an arm around the girl's shoulders, and pointed her at Eric. "Mind if we take you off to the side for a quickie?"

"Not ... at ... all." The girl, high or drunk, was now high on the Kiss. She swayed half with the beat, half with the exhaustion the Kiss brought on, along with its pleasure. But, high as she was, she still managed to step a few inches closer to Eric, and press hard nipples against his suit jacket. "Or, right here? We can dance, Mister Handsome, fuck and dance to the beat."



Eric blinked down at the skinny girl. Ok, yeah, she was attractive, and Jessy knew how to spark his hunger like she had a fucking switch for it; several orgasms already tonight, and he was ready to go again, because of her. Well, not only her, but also because of his Uratha endurance demanding he satisfy his hungers, and her having a switch to his libido, was a dangerous combination. And surrounded by all this flesh, sweat, moving bodies, and pulsating music, he was two steps away from listening to Jessy, grabbing this girl, and fucking her here and now. He could imagine it, taste the thought, hear and smell it, the feeling of this tiny girl's slit spread taught around his cock, as Jessy, his mate, played with her body from behind, fondling her small breasts and Kissing her—

Eric shook his head to dislodge the thought, and then again to deny the stranger's approach. Breathe, Eric, like the moon told you. Breathe.

“Tempted, very tempted, but my girlfriend and I have an engagement.”

The stranger sighed, as did Jessy. The vampire let the girl go, and enjoying her new high and undoubtedly tingling, aroused skin, the girl drifted back into the crowd. No doubt someone was going to lift up her tiny skirt, and fuck her until she was melting, with how the Kiss prepared her. That could have been Eric fucking her, too. But too young, and they really did have an engagement to get to.

And, deep down beneath the surface thoughts, he knew he didn't want to fuck her. Much as Jessy was pushing to bathe him in more pussy than he knew what to do with, he found himself pulling back from the idea. He liked the one-on-one approach. Too old fashioned for Dolareido, maybe.

“You're no fun,” Jessy said.

“You'd really get a random girl involved?”

“What? Not involved.” She kept close to him, lips to his ear so she didn’t have to scream too loud. “But Kindred do what Kindred do, you know? We get in the crowds, we mingle, we drink, and we fuck. I just thought you’d want to be part of that, share in the fun.”

Eric smiled. There was something touching in that, in Jessy trying to find ways to make him happy. It was almost like an alien race, trying to make another alien race happy, and hosting a cultural event the former loved, while the latter could not appreciate it at all. Course, he loved sex, so he was sure he’d break eventually, if she kept trying. A random stranger, a young girl at that, was too big a step though. But he could tell Jessy was aching for some of her old habits to be satisfied, and he had to accept that, while Jessy seemed committed to their relationship, she also used to indulge in orgies as a regular thing. Her sleeping with him and only him was almost abstinence for her, werewolf transformations excluded.

“And if I got her pregnant?”

“I—fuck, I forgot.” Laughing, she slapped herself in the forehead. “Sorry, not really a concern for vamps.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“But, hey, if I get a sweet girl as a ghoul, you wouldn’t fuck her with me? I mean, I wouldn’t fuck her without you of course. Just, I hear about the shit Tash is up to, and Jack, and even ... Julias, and I get all envious, you know?”

He rolled his eyes, put a hand on her shoulder, and started pushing her through the crowd in the direction he saw Matt and Art go earlier. “I’ll think about it.”

She threw up her hands as they moved, laughing and enjoying her exaggerated motion, like a sitcom. “I’ll make sure she’s hot. We could find one who’s tiny, like that girl. Or someone busty. Or both. You were into Fiona right? Short and stacked? She’s half boob.”

He put Jessy in a headlock, and started dragging her through the crowd. “You have no focus.”

“Oh you mother fucker, I am going to kill you in a second here.” She squirmed and wriggled, but with so many people around, bodies bumping into each other, and him never stopping, she couldn’t get her footing to break free.

Eventually they were on the other side of the dance floor. Matt and Art had followed along the wall, while Jessy had taken the scenic route, straight onto the middle of the crowd and borderline orgy. Once they got to the other side, Matt and Art were waiting for them, Natasha too, and all of them had an eyebrow raised at the sight of Jessy in a headlock.

“I had to,” he said, releasing his girlfriend at last. “She was being a menace.”

Jessy came out of the headlock slapping, fingers hitting his shoulders and chest several times before she stepped to the wall and adjusted her suit. “I was just grabbing a bite to eat.”

“Again.”

“Hey, I got a big appetite.”

“For a lot of things.”

“You don’t like that?” She gave him doe eyes, and pressed her biceps close together along her chest, hands down at her thighs. A very dainty, sweet, innocent posture, that didn’t fit her in the slightest.

“Course I like that. But—”

“I think,” Art said, raising a hand, “maybe you can talk about it later?”

Eric and Jessy shared a glance. It was a weird conversation, and it never really got to argument stage; hard to get to that stage when it was your girlfriend pushing to have more boobs in the bed. So they shrugged and nodded.

Once again, Natasha wrapped them up in her Discipline, and the group of them continued on their journey. Eric had no idea where that was, though, and Matt and Art were reluctant to say; reluctant, or they enjoyed being teased. And once Art started climbing a pillar along the back wall, Eric figured they just enjoyed being teased, cause they were smiling like jackasses.

“Up there?” Natasha said.

Matthew nodded. “Yeah, up in the catwalk.”

Catwalk? Eric looked up and scanned, raising a hand over his eyes to try and block some of the pulsing, colored lights. There was a catwalk, not unlike the ones you’d find in a theater. The pillar Arturo started climbing was a ladder, four ladders together in a square, and Eric had thought it was shaped like that for aesthetic. Apparently not, with similar structures hanging from the ceiling with lights attached to them.

“Anyone afraid of heights?” Matthew said, chuckling as he started climbing after Arturo.

So this was why they needed to come inside the building. Wherever they were going, it was up. Thankfully, the pillars were sturdy, so sturdy that even the combined weight of Arturo and Matthew didn’t make the one they were climbing tremble in the slightest. Once Natasha and Jessy were climbing, Eric waited a bit, and followed after. Again, the pillars held strong, not vibrating at all. A good thing Natasha was keeping him hidden with her Discipline though, because holy fuck it would have looked weird as hell to anyone who noticed them, five people climbing up from a dance floor.

Up, and up, and up they went. The ceiling was easily forty feet up, and Eric sucked in his breath when he glanced down. Would he survive that if he fell? With his new body, he probably would, and he was sure he'd recover in days, instead of years. Didn't mean he wanted to experience that though, or the nausea that came with looking down from such a height.

Once they were at the top of the pillar, it was a hassle to climb up onto it. No railings, and no solid floor, just more ladder steps, except beneath them. One slip and they'd be falling. Ok, so not a catwalk then, but some sort of contraption meant to hang heavy lights and heavier speakers from. No one was supposed to be on climbing on it, and definitely not walking on it, without a harness.

“Over there,” Matthew said, no longer needing to yell quite as loud since the speakers were a fair ways below them, hanging from wire, and pointed downward at the dance floor. His finger pointed at a section where the not-catwalk crossed over the center of swarming masses.

Everyone got moving. It hit Eric, like a ton of bricks, that he was a child compared to these four people. Matthew, Arturo, Natasha, and Jessy all walked across the thin beams without issue, without looking down, without losing their balance, without a care for the possibility they'd fall. The bars weren't far apart, one every foot, and as long as he didn't try and balance on a single one, walking along them was easy enough, but his brain kept telling him 'look down you might fall what the fuck are you doing'. It was a mental game, one he hadn't developed, while the other four had.

They'd been doing death-defying acts for decades, the vampires especially, and Eric had only been in this madness for about a year. Something like this, like walking really high up over what could easily be a major injury-inducing fall, was not something his mind was prepared for. In the past, he'd have backed off, climbed back down, said nope, fuck that, hurt my knee once already. But his knee

was fine now, and he had the soul of a wolf. He could push on. Hell, part of him wanted to, just to not let Jessy see he was, evidently, afraid of heights.

Once the five of them were standing precariously over the center of the stage, and holding onto some of the enormous metal pipes sticking up from the structure, Arturo gestured around them.

“This place has collected a lot of essence over the decades,” Art said, “more than is natural. I don’t know why, or exactly where it’s collecting. I think it’s the lights.”

Eric looked down at the enormous lights at their feet. “Lights collect essence?”

“We think something triggered it,” Matt said. “People come here for the light show, and we think it escalated from there over the decades. The essence accumulating here is, as typical of Dolareido, a form of pleasure. Any essence will do. It accumulates, creates a locus, and here we can cross the Gauntlet.”

“How?” the two vampires said.

Art shrugged. “Same way you vampires do anything you do. It’s a part of you, right? Same as moving a limb.”

“N-Not exactly the same,” Natasha said. “Using a D-Discipline is like ... we have to reach for our blood to fuel it.”

“Well, you know what I mean. It may be a new muscle, but it’s still a part of you, something you feel. Werewolves have a spiritual half, and to cross the Gauntlet, you have to tap into that, and use it, tell it to cross over. Explaining it is hard, because it’s like trying to explain how to bend your finger. You just do it, you know?”

“Oh, oh! Mind muscle c-connection.” Natasha almost jumped, obviously excited about getting to include some science in the

conversation.

“Sure,” Art said, shrugging again. “You can tap into your blood as a reflex, right? It’s not something you conjure, or use a tool to access, it’s a part of you. Eric here doesn’t know shit about those muscles, and learning to use them can be disorienting.”

“Avery wants to teach you,” Matt said, “before you find yourself totally confused. You can extend your senses into the Hisil you know, and look at what’s going on there, instead of here. Imagine if you did that without realizing. How would you react?”

“I’d probably be pretty fucking confused.”

“Exactly.”

“So,” Art said, “if you’re willing to listen to us at least, this should be educational. You’re going to cross the Gauntlet first, breach it, and we’ll follow in your wake.”

“I’m going first?”

“Yeap,” the two men said.

“And I should just be able to ... do this, like flexing a muscle?”

Art nodded. “Kind of, yeah. A better way to think of it, is that you’re in bed right now, and to climb out of bed, you need to be at a locus like here. Think of the physical world as if your bed’s blankets are too tight, and here at a locus, your blankets are loose enough that now you can pull them off and get up.”

That, was a strange way of putting it, half because of the ridiculous comparison, but also because it felt true. He did feel the aura of the essence, the strange elevation that came with being in its presence. Course, he had no fucking idea what that meant or how to use it.

“Ok, so, if I go first, you’ll be right behind me?”

“Yeap,” Matt said, “like dolphins following a boat.”

Eric looked down, and — mistake, seeing the massive drop below — got ready to try what Art described. The physical world was a blanket, holding him down in his bed. Here, surrounded by this invisible energy only the Uratha could sense, the tethers holding him down were loose. He could slip free of them here. Somewhere deep in the gray matter of his brain, he knew he could do that, could cross over to a place where his bonds were gone.

So, he did. In the same way he knew he could transform into a wolf or a giant beast of destruction, in the same way he knew how to breathe or how to flex a muscle, he knew he could breach the Gauntlet here. He took a deep breath, and another, reached out, and pulled off the blanket.

Noise bled away. The sensation of flesh faded. Gravity and weight, clothes and skin, it all became background noise, as white and gold filled his eyes. He looked around, and watched as the club disappeared from sight. His girlfriend was behind him, and a little ways behind her, was Matt, Art, and Natasha, but it was hard to see them. Hearing them was difficult. Smelling them was impossible.

He moved forward. He knew to do that. They were crossing a wall that separated the physical from the spiritual, that separated his old life and his new, and instinct told him to push forward. Don’t stop in the Gauntlet, you won’t like what’s hiding in there, Eric.

Doing this on his own sent a surge of joy through him, as if finding a freedom he didn’t realize existed before. What were those old instructions? Second star to the right, and straight on till morning.



~~Jack~~



The three of them stared at the man, and Jack knew his jaw had dropped.

“You’re ... serious.”

“I am.” The tall man rotated his shoulder a few times as if it were injured, but Jack could see he was using it as a feint so he could look over his shoulder and around, checking for spying eyes.

“Angela is going to get me and my friends killed. Jeremiah and his crusade needs to stop. You vamps don’t do half the shit vamps do in other cities, so we have no reason to keep this up. I ... I’m here to bring this shit to an end.”

“Should have thought of that,” Jack said, leaning in closer to the man, “before you killed my sire. Yeah, I recognize you, from the hospital.”

Harcourt winced and looked away. His fingers tapped on the table with the music, a poor attempt to mask how nervous the man was.

“Look, I’m here, aren’t I? I know what that means. I’m pretty much putting my life in your hands here, so you can put a stop to Jeremiah and Angela.”

“Now you want to stop them?” Jack said. “Why not before?”

“I didn’t realize before, how fucked up a person Angela was! We didn’t know about those two women she stabbed, until it was mentioned at the hospital, when that shit went down, you know, where you killed a bunch of my friends? I looked into what you said about Angela, about the woman in the hospital and her daughter. And yeah, it lines up.”

“And...”

“And it’s more than just that. We’ve all seen how unstable she is, and Jeremiah doesn’t seem interested in calming her down or

helping her out. Hell, he pushes her to get more psychotic about shit.”

Jack looked to his friends. Damien was in analyze mode, as per any Mekhet. Fiona, on the other hand, looked like she was trapped between fear and excitement, her eyes locked on Harcourt. Damien had mentioned she seemed to be a bit of a fear and excitement junkie; this situation would feed right into that.

“If you’re lying,” Jack said, “you know what I’ll do to you.”

“I do. I’m here because I’m serious about wanting to take Angela down. Jeremiah too. His crusade against Azamel is ... fuck me, I feel like I’m working for a literal crusader, complete with burning people at the stake.” Harcourt took a deep breath, clapped his hands together, and turned in his seat to face Jack more head on. “But you’ll want proof. I know you’re a Ventrue, so, make me tell you the truth.”

Jack snapped his hand out, and grabbed the man by the neck. Even without the curse, Jack was still a vampire, over two years old, and had enough strength in his grip to kill this man. But with the curse, he could flay this man into strips with a fingernail. Harcourt’s hands took him by the wrist, but as the man struggled, Jack let just a little of the curse flow out of him, flow through him, and into his fingers. The hunter froze as he felt the power of Jack’s vise grip, and how his struggles did nothing to dislodge it.

“You saw what I did to your hunter friend with my bare hands?”

The man shook his head. He must have missed it, then, in the chaos of crows.

“I popped him like a grape, Harcourt. I squashed him until he split down the middle, with my hands. You fuckers awoke something inside me. That’s how I summoned my army, and it’s how I’ll do it again if I find out you’re lying. I’ll feed you to the

crows, alive, and I'll make sure they start with the fingers first, then toes, then your face, then your guts. It'll take days to die. Understand?" The man nodded desperately. Either he was overwhelmed with the immediate need to avoid having his throat crushed, knowing full well Jack would crush it a minute later once he'd discovered the truth, or he was telling the truth.

But Jack wasn't about to risk accepting a man's word. The hunter expected him to use Dominate, to dig up the truth, and that's what he was going to do. Jack leaned in closer to the man, pulled him toward him, and met his eyes.

The hunter's tattoos, or maybe it was the necklace, or the strange bracelet made of old string, but something the hunter had on created a barrier for Jack's mind. It reminded Jack of that time he was captured in handcuffs that had a magical property. He'd broken through them then, the magical, invisible barrier, and breaking through whatever protection this hunter had was going to be easier, now that Jack had the full might of the curse to back him. The issue now, was not accidentally destroying the hunter's mind in the process of getting through the barrier.

"Look ... into my eyes..." Jack stared hard into the man, reached out with his vitae, and tried to find the balance. Was it like this for other Ventrue? It couldn't have been. They didn't have some extra force pushing and pulling inside them. He supposed most vampires had to learn to use their abilities like driving a car. Jack had to learn to ride a horse, or a better comparison: learn to ride a dragon. It wasn't just an extension of him, like a vehicle was, or any tool. It had a mind of its own, and unlike most Kindred's Beasts, this one had its own awareness that it was willing to throw at him.

If he fucked up this strange balance, he'd break this fool's mind, and then he'd be useless. Their one opportunity to get the hunters, to find a way to catch them, and if Jack screwed up, they could be set back months, years, or fucking decades.

Jack sighed relief as he felt the vitae connect mind to mind, an invisible tether that reached through the air. He could feel the man's mind now, something in the distance that he could touch, mold, and break.

“Are you being honest, about why you're here?” The man again nodded desperately. Jack's grip had loosened enough to let the man breathe, but only just. “You've told us no lies?” More nods. “And you aren't planning to betray us?” More nods.

Satisfied, Jack released the man's throat, and his grip on the man's mind. The connection snapped like a giant elastic band, and Jack had to take a second to not recoil from the power of it. His natural talent for Dominate paled in comparison to the power the curse brought to the table.

As his mind came back to him, Jack looked to Fiona and Damien. His friend was looking at him with obvious worry, but Fiona looked almost inspired by Jack's power, excited, and awestruck. She could see things Damien couldn't, things Jack couldn't see either. Maybe she could see what Jack felt, black tendrils reaching out from his core and into the man's mind.

The hunter, gasping for breath, managed to not give into his obvious fear and run away. This man had the scars of someone who'd dealt with fear the hard way, face on, and it hadn't broken him so far. He was a reliable man for his fellow hunters, then, or at least he had more courage than fear.

“Can I speak now?” he said. Jack nodded, eyes locked onto the hunter's face. “Right. So, you know that Jeremiah and Angela came here to kill Azamel, right?” Damien and Fiona slowly nodded this time. Jack kept his gaze on the hunter, eyes stabbing the man as he waited without patience. “I don't know where he met this Elen witch, and I don't know how she got that fucking monster Sándor

under her spell, but I guess you know how Elen has been moving us around the city now, where you can't find us."

"A flesh chamber," Jack said, a small snarl escaping him. "Fucking sick."

"You're telling me." The man visibly shivered, with an exaggerated motion. He had a loud personality, this man, and if it wasn't for the dire circumstances, he'd probably be joking, laughing, and having a drink. "You have to understand, none of us wanted this. Jeremiah picked us up from a bunch of different cities, told us stories about this monster Azamel, showed us evidence, and recruited us. A few years later, we're neck deep in this shit, and now he's got this witch hag helping us, giving us tattoos, healing our wounds like a regular Frankenstein, while we get butchered trying to find a way to get access to this monster's lair.

"But like I said, you have to understand. We didn't want this, me and my friends. Hunters avoid Dolareido because you seem to be pretty good about keeping humans alive and happy. Don't get me wrong, a bunch of us would love to smoke you out and burn you down, but fuck me, you are so low on the list of things to give a shit about, no one comes here. We're drowning now, clinging to each other trying to float in this river Jeremiah's thrown us into."

"You're ... asking me to spare you hunters," Jack said.

"Yeah."

"You have no leverage. I can force from you every detail you have to offer."

"Well, that's the kicker. If I fight, I mean really fight, I figure I can last an hour or two before you break me, right? Got these tattoos for a reason. Thing is, this tip I'm about to give you is only good for the night. After that, I'm borderline useless to you. You might be able to

use me to bait some hunters to come out and meet me for a meeting or something, but you won't be able to catch the boss that way."

Harcourt was wrong. He didn't know about the curse, not truly, and how easy it'd be for Jack to smash through his supernatural defenses again, go deeper, and extract the information forcefully. Then again, the same problem presented itself, and Jack might destroy the man's mind in the process, rendering the hunter useless to him. If Harcourt fought Jack's Dominate this time, and Jack had to push harder to break past it and his supernatural defenses, it was a very real possibility.

"Perhaps," Jack said. "So, what exactly are you proposing?"

"I tell you how to get Angela, Jeremiah, and the witch, tonight, if you promise to let everyone else go."

Frowning, Jack looked to Fiona and Damien. The Begotten put up her hands, refusing to comment, but Damien leaned in over the table.

"The hunter is here on good faith, if your Dominate was successful. And if this tip is only good for the night, well ... it's true, isn't it, that those three are our only true targets?"

Fuck, Damien was right. And Jack didn't want to take a gamble on getting the information with Dominate, especially if the information was only good for the night.

"I could have over a hundred vampires marching an assault on Jeremiah if I had time to prepare, Mister Harcourt," Jack said, glaring at the terrified man beside him. "And ... you're putting me in a position where I can't use them."

"Exactly. I'm trying to save as many lives as I can."

“Sounds to me like you’re trying to save your own life, while getting me and my kin to take Jeremiah off the map.”

The hunter shook his head vehemently. “I got to sneak out here because we hunters don’t spend time watching each other. If I wanted to, I could have run, just left the city. But I’m trying to save my friends.”

Sighing, Jack leaned back in his seat, and rubbed his skull with his fingertips. Think, think. How to handle this. He could Dominate the man completely, control him like a puppet, and maybe—no, the same problem came up. If he fucked up, if the curse decided to go too far, too hard, this man’s value would be lost. Jack hadn’t spent nearly enough time learning to use the curse to risk it.

“Alright,” Jack said. “You’ve put me in a difficult position. Tell us what you know, and me and my friends will take down Jeremiah, Angela, and Elen.”

“How many vamps?”

Jack ran the numbers fast. “About ten friends, give or take.” And not all vamps, but he didn’t need to know that.

Harcourt sighed, looked down, and let several minutes go by in silence. Jack almost started yelling, but stopped himself. If the man was risking the lives of his friends on this, the least Jack could do was give him a second to think.

“Promise you’ll do what you can to spare their lives.”

It took everything Jack had, to not start screaming, break the man’s wrist, several ribs, and rip into his mind. But that was redirected rage. As much as Angela didn’t pull the trigger, she made the order, she killed Julias. The hunter who did pull the trigger was just a tool, and in the first place, this guy wasn’t that hunter anyway.

God, it was hard to make that distinction. The anger boiling inside him, being fed by the curse like gasoline on fire, was blurring the faces of his enemies. Kill them all. Kill them all.

No, he wouldn't kill them all. He refused. He wouldn't give into this curse.

"My promise is worth something to you?" Jack said.

"Better than nothing. Vamps in Dolareido seem to conduct themselves halfway decently, and after what I saw in the hospital, I'll take your word over Angela's."

Jack looked to his friends again. They shrugged. This was the perfect opportunity, an amazing opportunity, if the hunter was telling the truth. And he was. Jack would have been a fool to not take advantage, but there was no way, no way in Hell, that this was going to go down without a problem.

"I'm killing Angela and Jeremiah," Jack said. "If your friends don't get out of my way, I'll kill them, too."

"And if they do move out of the way?"

"Then yes, I'll spare them, and I'll make sure anyone I bring with me knows to do the same. Promise." And he meant it. As much as the curse wanted to bathe the city in the blood of all the hunters, it was Angela and Jeremiah that Jack wanted. Hopefully he could steer the curse in that direction, when it came to it.

"Good. Great. We have a deal then." Harcourt looked left and right, groaned, and tapped his fingers on the table again and again. "Fuck, wish I had a drink. But can't get drunk. Need to stay frosty."

"Frosty?" Jack rolled his eyes. "Do you hunters seriously talk like that?"



“They don’t. I do.” Shrugging again, Harcourt looked around yet again, utterly convinced someone was spying on him. Maybe they were. Jack felt nothing though, and neither did his friends. “So Elen’s portals, the active one moves around a lot, right? I know where it is tonight. Tomorrow it’ll be somewhere else.”

Jack clenched his hands until he felt fingers threaten to pierce skin. “Where is it?”

“I don’t suppose you’ll just, let me take you there, as insurance?”

“I’m already taking a huge risk by listening to this advice at all, Harcourt. Tell me where the fuck the portal is, and then I can decide on a course of action.”

“Decide? This is a one-time thing! I don’t know if I’ll be able to just, walk back in after this. Angela and Jeremiah have ... ways, of knowing things. Elen and her fucking sacrifices know things. She has ways of knowing if hunters have been affected by ... monsters. I can’t risk going back, now. I—”

Jack held up a hand, and again stared into the man and his fidgeting eyes. “I could make you go back, but I won’t. I suspect you’re right about Elen, and ultimately, that you’re correct about a lot of things. This has to happen, tonight, but I’ll only make that call if you tell me where this portal is.”

Groaning all the more, rather loudly at that, Harcourt slumped back in his seat. “For tonight, the portal is active under the Dampheer Bridge.”

Dampheer Bridge was a small bridge over an even smaller gap in the earth, one of the hundreds of roads that connected North and South Side. There was nothing there, just road, some brush, a few trees, and rocks. It was on the outskirts, before the Mojave-like desert that surrounded the city. It was such a boring place, that Jack

had to laugh as he thought about hunters sneaking out of a witch's portal underneath the tiny bridge.

Jack looked down, and planned. They had six hours before sunlight. No way in hell would Maria and Michael, or Antoinette for that matter, let him launch an attack on the hunters in this circumstance, on such a lead. If he went to the Invictus, they'd stop him. If he went to the Prince, she'd stop him. And he couldn't blame them. This had reckless and dangerous written all over it.

"But," Harcourt said, throwing his hands up before slumping in his seat again, "the kicker is, I don't know how to get the portal open. Elen always does it from the inside. I wouldn't be surprised if we had to sacrifice someone, and that ... yeah, I'd prefer to not do that."

"You came here," Jack said, "knowing full well that the portal you're telling us about, is closed, and you don't know how to open it?"

"I'm sure I could figure it out! I just ... don't want to have to sacrifice someone to do it." He shuddered visibly, and Jack swore he could see the man reach for a drink that wasn't there. A lifelong habit, then. "In my mental plan, Elen opens the portal while you guys are hiding. Maybe you do a stakeout until Elen opens it for someone to come out. And then you do what needs to be done."

"And if she doesn't open the portal?"

"Then ... you let me go?"

Good god, this man, was an idiot. Jack supposed that you had to be at least a bit stupid to become a hunter, but this man was a colossal fool; he had a strange sense of honor to go with it, though.

"Lucky for you, we have options. Time to assemble the team." Jack rubbed his hands together, and smiled as he felt the hunger

growing inside him. Not a hunger for blood, since he'd already eaten, but a hunger for violence. He wasn't sure if it was the curse craving violence, or him, craving revenge, but it was a feeling he was glad to have.

He pulled out his phone, and called the most important person to bring on this mission.

"Yeah?"

"Beatrice, it's Jack. Meet me near the Dampheer Bridge in an hour. Say ... on the roof of Robina's."

"Shit, really? You found them?"

"We just might have, but we have a time limit. We get this done tonight, or our lead goes cold. Are you ready with the ritual?"

"I am. I ... am. I'll be there."

"Anyone else coming?"

"Jacob, as usual, is nowhere to be found, but the rest of us are here."

"Excellent. Round em up. We're going in swinging."

"Jennifer too?"

Right, Jennifer. A talented Ventrue and ten years embraced, but ten years old wasn't exactly old enough to be marching headlong into a bunch of hunters. She got lucky last time, very lucky.

"Yeah, Jennifer too. We'll need some people on the outside, where it's safer." He couldn't avoid putting some weight in those words. He knew what Beatrice was thinking, about the idea of risking Jennifer. She'd lost enough.

“Yeah, ok, I can agree with that. I’ll be there.”

Jack hung up, and started dialing another number, before Damien reached out and pushed down on the phone.

“Jack, are you sure you want to do this?”

Putting his phone down, Jack looked between the Begotten and his friend. Did he want to do this? Of course not. He was going to kill people tonight, and he was going to let the curse out, let it do its thing, let it run rampant and slaughter. Kindred might die, too.

But revenge could happen. Revenge was going to happen. Angela, Jeremiah, and even Elen, he’d have them all. Things could go back to normal, or at least more normal. And he could save lives if he pulled this off, prevent more paranormals from being killed. All they had to do was get over this hill. And the window was closing rapidly.

“We don’t have time to think about this, Damien, at least not for long. Unless you see a better opportunity coming in the near future, we need to do this and do it now. You in?”

“Of course.”

Tension that’d been building since he realized he needed to act tonight, melted away, as he met Damien’s gaze. His friend was coming with him. He hadn’t been sure he would.

For a moment, Jack had to force down a sob. It came out of nowhere, a harsh reminder that his best friend had died, and Damien was now his best friend. And damn it, he was a good friend.

“Thanks.”

“Me too me too!” Fiona bounced in her seat, several times. Instantly, every man in the booth had to lift their eyes. Wow, what a dress. “Uh, I mean ... I need to talk to Azamel first.”

“That’s why I told Triss we need an hour. We need to talk to Azamel, in person. But first, more troops.” Jack lifted his phone, and dialed Jessy’s number. No answer. He dialed Natasha’s number. No answer. What the fuck? “Ok, so, no Natasha or Jessy.” He wasn’t sure he could convince Natasha to come, not with knowing the Prince would have both their hides for this absurd plan. But Jessy, he was sure would come to bat for him.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they were doing something with the Uratha,” Damien said. Yeah, that made more sense than Jack’s worst nightmare coming true, that two of his friends were dead and he didn’t even know about it.

But if the Uratha were out on a hunt without their phones, or in the Hisil, that made this final call a desperate hope of a hope, then. He dialed Clara’s number.

“Hello?”

“Clara, hey, it’s Jack. Where you at?”

“In the fancy hotel you’re paying for. I’m currently soaking in a giant tub, and I have to say, I look exceptionally amazing naked in it.” Her words were a bit slurred, and emphasized in strange places. Uh oh.

Jack blinked at the three people looking at him, before putting his hand over the receiver. “Uh, Damien, can you and Fiona take our hunter friend here outside? I’ll be with you in a second. And Fiona, can you transport us t—”

“Nae a problem! Come on then.” The redhead bounced out of the booth, bouncing far more than Jack knew was strictly necessary, and took Damien’s hand. Then, she pointed a finger at Harcourt like it was a gun, and pointed it toward the stairs. “Come on then, ya wankstain! Walk ahead, and if ye try anything, I’ll string up and leave ye to rot in my nightmare!”

Jack watched the three walk off, and smiled. Friends. God damn it felt good to have friends, people he could rely on, people who he could not only trust with secrets, but people who could actually get things accomplished. It was such a change from his younger years in his first life. He never had many friends, and whenever there was a group project in school, he was the one that got shit done.

And now apparently, one of his friends, was drunk as fuck.

“Clara, have you been drinking?”

“I have! You have any idea how much booze it takes to get really drunk as an Uratha? I’m finishing my second bottle here.”

Bottle? Right, wine. He pictured Clara for the sort of girl to chug beers, like Jessy. Then again, there was more to Clara than the surface suggested, he knew that.

“Did you say finishing?”

“Yeap! I have to keep drinking, to stay drunk. This’ll fade in an hour.”

Oh thank god.

“Can y—”

“Is it the tits, Jack?”

“What?”

“Antoinette’s tits. Is it the tits you love? That why you like her so much?”

Jack froze, and blinked at the red darkness around him, and how white light pulsed like a heart. She probably wanted to ask ‘is that why you pick her over me?’ or something like that, and that was a painful conversation. It was also a conversation he never expected

to have, ever. Jack never considered himself an attractive guy, short as he was, and while Julias helped get him into amazing shape, he was still a tiny dude. The idea of two women being interested in him? Never in a million years did he ever consider this a possibility, which meant he never practiced it in his head, like he did his other conversations.

What the fuck could he say to her? She was drunk, not thinking straight, and it wouldn't be entirely fair of him to treat her like she was herself. He had to handle this delicately, and he was as good at that as he was at flirting: not at all. Well, he had gotten better at it, he supposed. Maybe he could be delicate.

“Clara, I like you a lot. You're smart and strong, and you are fucking gorgeous and beautiful. I can still remember, in vivid detail, what your breasts looked like when that kine pulled up your shirt.” Ok, that was not delicate, at all, but at least it was a step in the right direction. Hopefully. “Trust me Clara, it's nothing to do with that.”

Silence, and then, giggling. Clara could giggle. Surprising. “I guess I knew that. It's just nice to hear you say it. A girl can get sensitive about these things when she gets turned down.”

“Clara, we ... we can talk about it later, ok? I need you to stop drinking and get dressed.”

“What? Why?” Ok, if she was aware enough to ask those questions, she wasn't too far gone.

“I need help. I've got a huge tip on where the hunters are gonna be, and I need to hit them, tonight. If we don't, the lead goes cold, and we might not be able to find them again.”

“Wow. Um, ok. Who's going?”

“Damien, and Beatrice's gang are. Maybe some of the Begotten. I can't get hold of Natasha or Jessy though.”

“You can’t? They’re probably ... doing something dumb. Probably going into the Hisil.” Her groan was comical and loud. “Eric wants to be Batman, and the dumb boys probably want to be Robin. Insert gay joke here.”

“Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.” Why now? Why fucking now? There was no way that was a coincidence, that the same night Eric decided to go into the Hisil, was the night a hunter showed up with the answer to their dilemma. Or maybe it was coincidence, and Jack just had to fucking roll with it.

“Jack, am I a slut?”

Oh sweet mother fucking god, what?

“What?”

“You’ve probably heard by now I’ve been sleeping with Jessy’s ghouls. All of them. At the same time.” She stopped for a moment, and Jack heard the distinct breathing and sipping of someone taking a drink. God damn it. “I only did it because I was a bit sad and lonely at first, and drunk as hell, but ... well, it was really fun, you know? And after a while, I figured—”

“You figured it was Dolareido,” he said rapidly, “and you might as well indulge, blend in, give into its atmosphere and aura.” There could not be a worst time for this conversation. “Yes, I agree, indulge. Just, not right now. I need you at Robina’s in an hour, near the Dampheer Bridge. Can you do that?”

“Yeah yeah sure.” Another sipping sound. “I always thought of myself as a one-guy kinda girl. I wanted romance, flowers and movies, cuddling in bed, not throwing myself into an orgy. But the scary thing is, I kinda like it. There’s something about doing something so ... taboo, I guess, it’s freeing. But you know, if Natasha gets to do it, and you do, and Jessy was doing it, and everyone’s doing it, why don’t I get to? And why the fuck is it even taboo if



everyone's doing it?" And she continued, hopping from one thought to another.

It faintly occurred to Jack, that he'd never dealt with this problem. Friends getting drunk and getting into stupid shit, or saying stupid shit, was never an issue he'd learned to deal with, never having run into it; same problem with the two girls fighting over him, no experience in damage control. How did one help a drunk friend, convince them to not sleep with that girl or that guy, or avoid any other poor decisions? It was especially hard, cause he had no idea how to talk to a girl he'd turned down, since she was the only one.

"Clara, this is important. Stop drinking, get dressed, and be at Robina's in an hour. Got it?"

"Yeah yeah, got it."

"People could die, Clara. People will die. I need you there."

"Did you call Avery?"

"You know damn well she wouldn't do this on a last minute whim like this, and she'd stop you if she found out."

Clara laughed, then there was a crash, cursing, and scuffling noises. "Shit, dropped the phone. Fell onto the floor, thank god. Um, yeah sure, I'm getting up."

"And you're sure you'll be sober by the time you get to the meet up?"

"Yeah, mostly."

"I really need your help on this Clara, and ... and I know I'm asking a huge favor." Saying that he was asking for a huge favor, was

vampire talk for ‘I’m super in your debt’, like any self respecting mobster.

But Clara just laughed again. “Don’t sweat it. These hunters gotta go, and that Angela bitch needs to bleed. I’ll be there.”

He smiled into the phone. Even Antoinette wouldn’t blindly agree to a request like this. She’d argue, or make counter points, or break down the situation and explain how futile it was, in a very matter-of-fact way that wouldn’t allow for argument or debate. And she’d probably be right, too. It was in the elder’s nature to control everything she touched, being her age and all. Clara, on the other hand, was willing to go with the flow, just because she was his friend. She was so different from Antoinette, in so many ways, in appealing ways.

“No, Clara, I really will owe you, ok? Like, really. This is a life or death situation. You could die. My friends could die. I could die. Anything you want after this, just ask.”

“ ... ok.”

---

Damien, Fiona, and the hunter Brace Harcourt, walked through the humid jungle of Fiona’s nightmare, on the way to see Azamel. Fiona moved along ahead of them, sharp feet-point things hovering a foot above the mud and roots, while her eight spider legs sticking out of her back walked along the jungle floor, trees, and stone. Her awareness of her surroundings was complete. Even if he’d blind folded her, he was sure she’d still be able to move through the foliage without noise, like a cat using their whiskers to sense what was around their head.

“Are we really bringing him?” Damien said, gesturing to the hunter marching slightly ahead of them.

“He knows where the portal is. And if he can, he’ll stop a bunch of hunters from getting in our way.”

“He already told us where it is. And you checked, didn’t you? Dominated, forced him to speak the truth.”

Jack shrugged. “He may have been tricked, too. I wouldn’t put it past those two psychopaths to lie to this man, knowing this would happen. And shit might happen. Scratch that, shit will happen. I want him around in case it does.” And with another shrug, he nodded toward the hunter’s way. “If worst comes to worst, I’ll turn him into a wall for us to hide behind.”

Harcourt looked back at them, eyes wide, before he squinted and frowned. “I’m trying to help.”

The poor hunter squeaked, jumped around, and brought up his hands, ready to karate chop the source of the howl in the night. Just a monkey, Jack was sure, but even Jack felt unnerved by the environment they were walking in. They’d only been in the realm for five minutes, and Fiona assured them it would be a ten minute walk through her chamber to exit into the tunnels with Azamel, but it felt a lot longer. It was a nightmare, after all, not exactly limited to the pure reality of the physical world. A giant jaguar, or insect, or snake, could attack them at any moment, something beyond the power of the normal animal kingdom. Fiona also assured them they were safe, but didn’t deny that the jungle held strange terrors.

“You’ll forgive me,” Jack said with a snarl, “if I don’t consider your word terribly reliable. You don’t seem to be lying, but that doesn’t mean you’re trustworthy, that you won’t change your mind when it suits you.”

The kine rolled his eyes, but kept walking, and his feet went squelch squelch in the shallow mud. “What do I need to do to prove I’m genuinely interested in helping you? Or that I’m good to my word.”

“More information, for a start,” Jack said. “I’ve seen the hunters use some knives that kinda glow. What’s up with that?”

“Blessed knives. They harm monsters and shit more than regular knives.”

“Blessed? Damien here basically lives in a church. Why the fuck would a blessed anything affect us more?”

The hunter could only shrug. “No idea. I’ve seen monsters ignore crosses, but Jeremiah’s shit does work.”

Jack stepped in closer to Harcourt, and looked at his neck. “And the tattoos? I’ve seen tattoos on all of you.”

The man winced and stepped away from him, failing to hide a tremble. “Yeah, some of those are Jeremiah’s work, and some are Elen’s. They help fight off some vampire shit, and a lot of them stop monsters from finding us in our dreams.”

Right, right. Jeremiah and his cause were actually centered around killing monsters, not vampires. Vampires were a mild annoyance to him, cockroaches. Monsters were legends to be fought and defeated.

“Ok, better question. How did you become a hunter?”

That got him. Harcourt winced, visibly, through his whole body, and had to take a second with dramatic pause before continuing on. “Vampire did some shit to my family. Ok?”

“Jack,” Vrall said, looking over her shoulder at him. Rather, he assumed she was looking at him, since she had no eyes, only the enormous, regal horns that curled backward from her eye sockets and forehead. “I do not sense a ... meal, in this man, if that is any help to you.”

Vrall fed on people who deserved punishment for being abusive, for being bullies, and being all-around aggressive shits. Far as he could figure, her hunger was something that fed on the psychological aspects of the chosen target. If Harcourt was actually a pretty fucked up, nasty person who liked to use power to abuse people, then Fiona would be able to pick up on it.

What other hungers did monsters have? What other twisted cravings did some of the more fucked up monsters indulge in? Which ones had desires that fit right in a Stephen King book, complete with otherworldly awareness? It made him glad Fiona's was, relatively speaking, nice, because he could still remember the look in Angela's face and her one good eye, when she explained the trauma Athalia had inflicted on her when she was a young girl.

"Vampires did shit to your family? Be specific, Harcourt." Time to push some buttons. He didn't want to, but if he could knock Harcourt off balance, maybe he could get a better look at the man underneath.

"I didn't come to you to pour out my personal bullshit, Jack. I came—"

"Tell me what vampires did to you, Harcourt." And when Harcourt looked over his shoulder at him, Jack stared into the man's eyes. He didn't make the connection, didn't reach into the man's mind and break him. It was a gamble doing that, with the curse fueling his efforts, and he didn't want to violate what little trust the two had between them anyway.

"The fuck do you care?"

"I need to know something about the man I'm working with. Beyond that, you don't need to know. Tell me."

It took a few seconds, but Jack could see the man's will fold. He was trapped in his circumstance, out of his element, and at the

mercy of monsters who could do anything to him, physically and mentally. He was afraid. Jack could almost smell the fear, and he could definitely feel it, something the Beast in him recognized and delighted in.

Maybe that's what it felt like to be a Begotten monster, with that feeling dialed up to eleven.

"A vampire killed my parents, ok? Dad saw something he shouldn't, got involved, Mom was there, and the vamp took them out. And ... my sisters are vampires now."

"I ... damn, that's hard. And your sisters are vampires, not were vampires?"

"Yes, are. I have no idea where they are. If I manage to find them, I'll kill them," the hunter said. Jack couldn't help but wince. Ok, yeah, that was a powerful motivation, having your parents killed and your siblings turned. "Until then, I'm a hunter, hunting all the nasties I can find."

"... except here?"

"Yes, except here. Dolareido's low on the priority list, you know?"

"No, I don't know." He'd assumed, but this was the first time a hunter had ever confirmed.

Harcourt shrugged, and followed after the spider monster half floating ahead of them. "Hunters talk. Words spread. We have groups, organizations, some even say cults, and news spreads along the grapevine. When word comes up about Dolareido, it's usually to leave it alone, like I said. Didn't used to be that way, when some nasty fucker named Lucas was up and about, but word is he's dead."

"That makes sense, I guess." It was a far cry from the advanced communication network of the Invictus, but he supposed the

Carthians communicated in a similar way. A lot of word of mouth, and a lot of unorganized information drifting, unfiltered and unconfirmed. Hunches. “And about your sisters. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why kill your sisters?”

“Because they’re vampires. I—”

“That makes no sense. You’re willing to give Dolareido a pass because we’re not all that bad, but we’re vampires, too.”

Harcourt shook his head harder, as if the exaggerated movement would lend weight to his words. “I don’t know how you do it. That thing inside your guts, that thing that makes you a monster, it does some pretty nasty shit to most vampires. You start treating people like livestock, things to farm and kill at will. Been in a lot of cities where the homicide rate is high, and most of them are vampires killing without remorse. Fuck that, and fuck them.”

“How many vampires have you talked to?”

“A couple, before I dusted them. Fucking blood-hungry psychopaths.”

Rage crept up Jack’s skin, until the telltale sign of his Beast tingled in his fingers, a burning anger that demanded he hurt this man. Of course, that’d be proving the man right, that vampires were just blood-hungry psychopaths, slaves to their Beasts, and unable to stay above its brutal desires.

Jack was so focused on the curse and the things it was doing to him, it was sometimes easy to forget the Beast was, on its own, a problem for all vampires. Dolareido was, by the standard of other cities with a vampire presence, moderately peaceful for both vampires and humans. Killing kine was discouraged. Killing Kindred

was basically not allowed, because it'd trigger a war. Hell, there were probably cities with vampires that went unknown, without ever killing a soul, Jack figured. Hard to prove that, though.

How was it, really, in the more violent cities? Did Kindred just ignore their half human, and let their bloodlust run rampant? Viktor certainly had no issue butchering kine like cattle, but Jack had assumed the curse had something to do with it. It must have. But then, Lucas was bloodthirsty, as was Tony. The stories about them included plenty of murder of kine. If Harcourt was telling the truth, and it seemed like he was, assholes like Tony and Lucas, who had no issue killing humans, were common. Or at least, more common than in Dolareido.

Oh god, Mom. How was she handling the Beast, handling its cravings and desires, its need for blood, and compulsion to establish territory. He hadn't talk to her in a little bit, since she was hanging with the Prince and doing dragon things. He should, he really should. If his mom ended up like Harcourt's sisters, a bloodthirsty psychopath who indulged in killing, he wasn't sure how he'd handle that. He knew Damien and Beatrice had killed kine, kine they didn't need to kill, but kine they felt deserved death anyhow. Antoinette supposedly had a dungeon filled with kine she kept locked up or permanently unconscious.

Kindred, acting like judge, jury, and executioner. What was worse was, Jack didn't blame them.

"Yeah," Jack said. "We can be blood-hungry psychopaths. But we don't have to be. It's a struggle, but we don't have to be."

The human snorted, shrugged with more exaggerated movements that looked like they belonged in a cartoon, and kept walking. "Whatever you say."

The picture was coming into focus, the more this silly man talked. It wasn't like it was a picture Jack hadn't already guessed, that



hunters were dangerous humans driven by personal reasons into a rough life of tracking and killing monsters. But seeing this man, who by all accounts seemed like he'd be more comfortable on a stage acting or singing drunk in a bar, ache with what amounted to a cliché story that belonged in a monster movie, put details on what was originally a blurry picture. It wasn't just a cliché story. There were actual humans out there who dedicated their lives to hunting down people like him, for the nasty shit they did, because vampires were no longer human and felt they were in a position to kill humans if they wanted to.

Somewhere, deep down where he didn't like looking, a part of him felt proud of that. Vampires were creatures of the night, literally, and they fed on the humans. They were predators. Humans were prey. Why wouldn't he feel proud that humans feared him?

He sighed and marched on after Fiona. He could wrestle with these issues later.

"Harcourt," Jack said, "this change of heart you had. It seems pretty random."

"Yeah well, kinda had to see a lot of shit to put the picture together. And I made a move tonight because it looked like there were less of your patrols on the street."

That might explain why he came out the same night Tash and Jessy were gone, then.

"Did you ... have any sort of indicator beyond what happened at the hospital? Like, maybe something else ... random, happened?"

"Ha, if you call a fucked up dream random, sure. I mean, who the fuck wouldn't have nightmares after seeing the fucked up shit you did at the hospital, only to learn your boss is a murdering, raving lunatic?"

Jack smiled. This man really shouldn't be a hunter. Far too outgoing and honest. Hunters were supposed to be surly, stoic, angry, and disturbed. He certainly had the back story to be that sort of man, but he wasn't. There was a personality in there, something with more flair than a mossy rock like Jack expected most hunters to have. How many of the hunters he killed were like this Harcourt?

“What kind of dream?”

“Something fucking creepy, with an old, gross woman in a robe.”

An ugly old woman in a robe. Like, a crone.

---

Inside the nightmare, they stepped into a dark cave. With no light to see by, they had to feel along the wet stone to move forward, even with Kindred eyes. As they moved long, the shape of the stone began to change, ridges and humidity fading away, along with the heat of the jungle. Soon they were greeted with stagnant, cooler air, and the familiar sensation of concrete on fingertips. Light emerged around a bend, and Jack sighed relief as he recognized the tunnels of Dolareido.

Right, this was the large chamber Azamel liked, where she set up her strange fake home with her couch, chair, and bed. It was a special place for her. Was this why? The ability to just come and go to it through their nightmares was pretty powerful, a way for them to get into the real world together, in a predictable location. The Invictus surrounding it in explosives must have really bothered Azamel.

“Good day!” Fiona say. “I bring food for ye!” When Harcourt yelped and stepped back, she laughed and shook her head. “I'm just fucking wit ye.”

Athalia and Mark all got up, staring at the group of them and the hunter they brought, frowns blatant. Azamel, on the other hand,

barely turned her head enough to see them, before sighing once she took a drag of her cigarette. The very sight of her froze Harcourt to a standstill, and Damien had to give him a small shove to get him moving.

“What’s this about?” Azamel said.

“I’m launching an attack on the hunters in moments,” Jack said. “I wouldn’t have to visit like this if you got some phones and lived somewhere with reception, you know.”

Azamel shrugged, as if she’d heard the argument before a hundred times, and simply didn’t care. Probably true. “You know where the hunters are?”

“Aye, we do! Thanks to this lad.” Fiona walked them up to the stage to stand in front of Azamel, and she gave Harcourt a hard pat on the back, enough to make the man nearly jump. Poor dude was surrounded by vampires and monsters, and they could all sense the fear on him, smell it, and practically hear his heart beat; if there were any werewolves with them, they could have.

Before the dumb man could start blabbering, Jack waved a hand to him and shooed him back from the stage a foot.

“Yes, this man is a hunter. I’ve tested his mind and can confirm he’s telling the truth about who he is and his intentions.” His words would have a lot more weight than Harcourt’s, and if the man started talking, the hunter would probably piss the old monster off. Dead, he was useless to Jack. Alive, he might get something out of this. “He wants to help us deal with Angela and Jeremiah, specifically.”

“Does he now?” Athalia hopped off the stage, marched up to Harcourt, glared at him, threw Jack a hard glance in the corner of her eye, and glared at Harcourt some more. If a look could kill, Harcourt would have exploded. “You want to kill my daughter?”

“Oh god it’s you.” Harcourt stepped further back, but he didn’t get far before his shoulder hit Damien’s. Damien didn’t move, except to put a hand on Harcourt’s shoulder, and force him to hold still.

“Yeah, it’s me, the bitch from Hell. What shit has my daughter been telling you?”

“Nothing! Nothing. I mean, she’s brought up some things about nightmares, and the weird things you did to her, destroying things and stuff. I don’t have anything to say about that! No ma’am. All I want is those two taken off the board. Lot of good people are dying helping them, not realizing what’s going on, and—”

Jack stepped up, and pulled Athalia way by the shoulder. If that went on any longer, the monster was bound to hurt him. “He’s just a guy who realizes his hunter friends have been tricked by Jeremiah.”

Then she turned on him. Athalia poked her finger into Jack’s chest, though he could see a moment’s regret in her gaze. She was afraid of him now, and had jabbed him out of reflex, not remembering he’d become a different monster. It was tempting, to pounce on the opportunity and scare her, terrify her, make it known that he wasn’t to be pushed around anymore.

But that was the Beast talking. Jack, on the other hand, took a small step back, and held up his hands. “I’m trying to help you, and us.”

“I’m supposed to trust you?” she said.

“Yeah, you are. Have I ever lied to you? Steered you wrong?” He folded his arms across his chest, and waited.

“No...”

“I tested this man’s mind myself. He’s telling the truth, and is genuinely trying to help. And if he’s been tricked, well, he’s coming along in case something goes wrong.”

“He’s coming with you?” Azamel said.

“Yes, he is. For all I know, he’s been tricked by Elen and her magic, into triggering this ploy.” Though, from what Harcourt said, it was more likely that the Crone was involved. “I could lock him up, for interrogation, but we wouldn’t get anything useful out of him. Jeremiah is too smart to let his hunters know too much. The man knows the location of Elen’s portal tonight, and he might be able to provide some value to me in the shitstorm to follow. He might be able to convince his friends to stop fighting us, and give up Jeremiah and your daughter. He might be able to recognize a tactical maneuver they commit to, and tell me how to best respond.”

The old woman blew some more smoke, before setting the cigarette aside. She leaned forward in her rocking chair, a motion that forced a groan and creak from her old body. “This is a major gamble, vampire.”

“It is, but the more we sit around waiting, the more time we give Jeremiah to compensate and adapt to the situation. Guerrilla warfare is a hunter’s game. We have to do this and do it now.” Before Angela figures out another way to hurt the Kindred, and Jack specifically. Julias was already dead, his sister too, and if someone else he cared about died, he was going to crack.

“True,” the old woman said. “If this hunter is telling the truth and has not been tricked, and if you can pull this maneuver of yours off, it will be the deciding factor in this confrontation. I assume you’re here to request my help?”

“Yes, I am. Come help me. I’m not going to have the backing of my covenant for this; this is way too risky for any Invictus to agree to. Hell, Michael’s going to have my ass in a sling for doing this.”

“As he should, vampire.” The old monster shook her head, like an angry grandmother annoyed with her grandchild. “This approach is dangerous, radical, and vampires are used to weathering storms, for decades if need be.”

“Maybe the older ones are. I’m young and impulsive. The Invictus, the Prince, even the Carthians would probably like to play this safe and let the storm pass, because you’re the primary target, not them. But I want to help. And .. I’ve become a target, too.” He turned back to Athalia, and her eyes fell. Weight dragged her down, bringing her shoulders and posture down with it. Her daughter was to blame for Jack’s pain. She knew it, he knew it, and it made every interaction they had hard as fuck. “I assume Athalia wants to come. This is the best opportunity she has of saving her daughter’s life.”

*Save her? We’re not saving Angela! Kill her. Rip open her throat, and drink the blood as it squirts out. Watch the life drain from that sheep’s eye, and indulge in the kill. You’re a predator, Jack. She’s prey, prey that had the nerve to bite you. Make her suffer, and then make her die.*

Jack kept his best stone face while the voice ranted. Yes, he wanted to kill Angela. He wanted revenge. He wanted to hurt her for the crimes she’d committed against him, his family, and his friends. He wanted to crush her skull for killing Julias.

But, seeing Athalia looking miserable tugged at something inside him, and for the fucking life of him, he couldn’t ignore it. She wanted to save her daughter, or at least capture her and try to rehabilitate; a lost cause, but what else could a mother do for her daughter. If the opportunity presented itself, Jack would capture her, but only if the opportunity was blatant, and safe. Broken legs, broken arms, no hunters nearby, and with Jeremiah dead and Elen too, was the only chance for Angela’s life to be spared, and only if it happened by accident.

The chances of that happening were slim to none. In all likelihood, the moment the opportunity presented itself, Jack was going to kill her, and smile doing it. Feeling bad for Athalia could come later.

“I ... would like to come,” Athalia said. “I have to come. If I can do something, about Angela, I ... I should.”

Azamel snorted, only to erupt in a nasty cough. Everyone went silent as they waited for the old monster to recover, a form of respect that had Harcourt’s eyebrows raising as he looked around.

“You may go, Athalia, but Mark and I will stay here. Fiona, you’re not going anywhere.”

“What!? But I—”

“You may intervene if the hunters enter the nightmare realm, Fiona, but you are too young for this madness. Need I remind you, you nearly died once already?”

Pouting and shaking her little fists, Fiona looked down and stomped a foot once. It was easy to forget that, while Vrall was an ancient monster with plenty of experience, Fiona was a young woman. It was Vrall who’d been shot up last time, but this time they wouldn’t be in the nightmare, and Fiona would be in a much greater danger.

Fiona marched up to Damien, but before she could say anything, the man put up his hands.

“I agree with Azamel, Fiona. If we’re in the nightmare world, sure, we’d love Vrall’s help. But out here, it’s ... it’s going to be brutal. I can survive a bullet to the head. Vrall can take a dozen bullet wounds, and survive. Can you?”

“ ... nae, I cannae.”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “I wasn’t sure how to say it, but yeah. What about Mark? Is he—”

“Mark stays with me,” Azamel said. “I would not be surprised if Jeremiah tries something desperate, in response to this ludicrous plan of yours, vampire. He’s been hunting for a way to assault me without losing his life in the process, but if that’s no longer an option for him, I expect to find him at my door.”

Jack frowned at her, and found his gaze slowly turning into a glare; he could feel the strain in his eyes. It was enough to draw Azamel’s glare, returned and hard, battling against him. She knew what she was saying, that of the four powerful monsters living in Dolareido, who the hunters were here to kill, Azamel was only letting one of them come with him. Half of this effort was to save her life and the lives of her young Begotten kin, and yet she was denying him aid.

Mark shrugged, sat back down on the couch upon the concrete stage, and pulled out a laptop.

Fucking great, lovely, what a perfect night for launching a crazy attack. Jessy and Natasha were missing, and so were the three werewolves he may have been able to recruit. Of the four monsters he could take, only Athalia was coming, and Vrall was on the maybe list if the fight somehow moved into the nightmare world. If it weren’t for Clara agreeing to come, he’d call this off.

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe he shouldn’t do this. Didn’t he learn from the last time he launched a surprise attack on the hunters? They used explosives and nearly killed him and his friends. And at the hospital, he thought his sire and him could handle them there, but they couldn’t. This whole night seemed like he was repeating the mistake.

No. No it wasn’t the same. This time, they had inside help. This time, he had the curse. This time, he’d handle things himself, and



everyone else could stand back and watch. This time, the blood was going to pour. This time, he'd—

“Jack,” Azamel said, “do not spare Elen’s life. The magic she knows is a twisted, horrible thing. It will seduce you with promises of impossibilities becoming impossible. End her life.”

“Impossibilities?”

“Yes. She knows how to manipulate flesh, and I am sure such a skill has been extended to ... otherworldly ends. I assume Jacob and Antoinette will want her, and I am telling you to kill her if given the chance. It may be the key to freeing the Begotten in the Prince’s cage from the spell that binds him.”

“I thought that seal thing would fade?”

“It will, I am sure, but I would not have a fellow Begotten trapped so. Of course, for all I know, it will take years for that seal to fade. And besides, what if Jeremiah escapes? You will need the Begotten’s help.”

If he killed Elen, Antoinette would be upset, and Jacob would be livid with him.

“I’ll ... yeah, I probably will. I can’t imagine letting her live.”

“Good.”



~~Beatrice~

Finally. Fucking finally.

She smiled down at her phone, slipped it into her jeans’ pocket, and prepared for war.

“We really doing this?” Jennifer asked.

“Me and the boys are. You’re staying outside.”

“I am most certainly not. I helped last time.”

“Last time there were only a few of them, and distracted, and—”

“And this time there’ll be many of us distracting many of them. I can—”

Beatrice threw up a hand and shook her head. “No! No. Just no, ok? You’re a young vampire, and—fuck me, I’m a young vampire, ok? I’m too young to be doing this, but I have to. I know the ritual. So you stay back, watch the entrance I make, and cover our backs.”

That didn’t settle well with Jennifer, but too fucking bad. Beatrice had lost enough. She had no intentions of losing her best friend.

“You expect me to sit back and watch you go in, after you perform this ritual? You told me what it’d do to you!”

“I’ll recover, well enough to be useful. And there’s no fucking way I’m missing the fight.” No fucking way she’d miss the chance to kill Angela, or at least see the light leave her eyes. She had to die. She had to fucking die. Even if Athalia, weeping a storm, held the bleeding, also weeping body of her daughter, Beatrice would laugh and kill the hunter bitch.

Jennifer, Beatrice, Othello, and Aaron all stood within the cave they lived in, gathered in the center and mentally preparing. Or at least, she was mentally preparing. She wasn’t sure if Othello had enough brain to do something like that, and Aaron was always mentally prepared.

They were all dressed in jeans and t-shirts, nothing impressive or distinct, nothing that would give them an edge in battle. Shit like

bulletproof vests were more hassle than they were worth, when you were trying to jump around and dodge with the speed and strength of a Kindred. Maybe if the hunters started using fire, a fire-repellent suit of some kind could be useful? Heh, probably not. She laughed, imagining a vampire in a big full body suit, like a space suit, walking through fire.

Jacob was off doing whatever it was that he did when he disappeared for weeks at a time. Probably plotting how to take over Dolareido. Nah, more like, plotting how to summon an ancient demon to be his new buddy, so he could rule the world. Something along those lines. But that was a big part of the joy of being in the Circle, that they didn't need Jacob's permission to do shit. Hell, he encouraged them to do whatever the fuck they wanted, and right now she wanted to kill Angela and Jeremiah. Kill them dead.

“We got your back,” Othello said. “Is the ritual going to be hard?”

“It'll leave me pretty fucked up, not gonna lie. But I'll still be mobile enough for the fight. No way am I missing this.”

Aaron raised a hand. “Who's Jack bringing?”

“Not sure. Everyone he can get his hands on, probably. Which ... probably doesn't include any Invictus. I doubt Mary or Michael would allow this blitzkrieg ambush tactic of his. Way too risky. And Antoinette's going to skin Jack alive when he gets back, so I'm not sure he could convince Natasha to go against her wishes.” Jack would get back, though, no doubt about it. The least Beatrice could do for the kid was keep him alive after all he'd done. “But Jessy and Damien will probably come, even knowing their bosses will break their legs for it. Eric might come too.”

Part of her was still angry at him, for Julias dying. It was hard to ignore that it was Jack and his mother's fault that Julias stuck his neck out, but over the weeks it grew easier to accept that it was neither of their faults. Superman had been one of the kindest men

she'd ever known, and that kindness got him killed; more like, asshole hunters taking advantage of that kindness got him killed. Those assholes needed to die.

“Hope we get some werewolves with us,” Othello said. “They can frontline better than we can.”

“Well I doubt Avery will let any of her pups come on this insanity either.”

“Clara will,” Jennifer said.

Triss raised a brow. “She will?”

“She will. From what you've told me about her, and from what I remember at the ball, I think she likes Jack quite a bit. More than a bit. And these Uratha behave like Carthians, completely uncontrolled without a sensible thought in their head. Plus, Jack knows her, and he knows we'll need the wolves to help us if we want this to succeed.”

Beatrice nodded, tapping a claw against one of her crocodile teeth. “In the end, it doesn't matter. Jack and his curse are going to be doing the heavy lifting, and he says we have to do this tonight, or it's not happening. We're going balls to the walls here, and we're going to make this work. Jeremiah and Angela are dead after tonight, and Elen...” Shrugging, she started for the cave exit. “Jacob wants her. If we capture her, fine. If we end up killing her, I ... No, I'd prefer to capture her alive if we can.”

Elen could manipulate flesh with magic, and that was one more piece of a puzzle Triss was slowly pursuing. If she could make it work, why not?

## Chapter 105

~~Beatrice~~

“It this ... everyone?”

Sighing, Jack nodded, crouched low on the roof of Robina's. “Clara's not here yet, but yea, h this is everyone. If any of the hunters escape into a nightmare, Azamel will send Fiona to help us on that end. You know, assuming she can find us.”

Beatrice started counting. Six vampires, one werewolf, and one monster; potentially two monsters, if they had to fight in the nightmare. That was not nearly as many people as Triss was hoping for. And, for some reason, a human was there, too.

“The fuck? Isn't this Azamel's problem? Why isn't she coming?”

The kid shrugged as he stared over the edge of the building, and to the small, distant bridge beneath them. No movement. “Azamel's old as dirt. So unless the fight comes to her, and in the nightmare, she can't do much. Mark is her bodyguard, more or less. And Fiona's just a young girl.”

“You're just a young vampire.”

Jack chuckled quietly, smiling. It sounded forced. “Damien said it best. Fiona can't survive a bullet, but her Horror can. Better if we don't throw her life away if we don't have to, right? And Athalia's here because ... well, obvious reasons.”

Every witch looked at Athalia, and frowned, a quartet of annoyance with the woman. They all knew who she was, and that this was partly her fault.

“I don’t give a fuck if you all hate me,” she said. “It’s my daughter.”

Growling, Triss slowly crouched down next to Jack. The cool night air and the clouds above held little noise, and Triss did her best to listen for any potential danger. All she could hear was the distant sound of traffic, and Athalia’s breathing.

“What about Jessy?” she said. “Figured she’d help, and maybe her boy toy Eric too.”

“Can’t reach them. I tried to get Natasha too, but she’s MIA.”

If Natasha was missing, along with Jessy and Eric, there was a decent chance they were off doing something werewolfy. Natasha and Jessy wouldn’t just shut off their phones; disable the ring and buzz, sure, but not turn off. They were indisposed somehow, unreachable, probably by either doing something super sneaky, or being in the Shadow realm. Three werewolves and one very curious little vampire meant research opportunities, Triss figured.

“Ok, I can wrap my mind around that,” she said, “but who the fuck is this guy?” Some kine, a black dude with short curly hair, was staring at her and her teeth like he’d never seen a Nosferatu before. Well, he wasn’t freaking out and screaming or anything, so he must have seen similar at some point.

“A hunter,” Jack said.

“I’m sorry, I think I misheard you. Say that again?”

Rolling his eyes, Jack motioned for them to get low. Apparently they’d all started standing up as the conversation took a definite turn toward argument. Damien and Triss were keeping everyone wrapped in the Cloak of Night, but it still paid to be cautious.

“Um, hey, yeah, I’m Harcourt. I came to see the vampires here in Dolareido, because honestly, we need help getting rid of Angela and Jeremiah. I want my friends to survive, and you know, Angela and Jeremiah are going to get them all killed. It’s pretty crazy. I was hoping—”

Athalia backhanded the still-standing man in the stomach, sending him down onto his knees, gasping. “Shut up.”

Beatrice stared at the man, and flexed her fingers tight, until the joints hurt. “This is a hunter? One of the fuckers working for the psychopaths?”

“He is,” Jack said. “I tested his mind myself. He’s legit. Wants to help, and knows where Elen’s set up the portal tonight. The issue now, is we need to get it open.”

Oh sweet mother of fucking god, they were all going to die.

“Ok,” she said, “so, setting aside the insanity that our entire plan relies on the word — even checked — of a hunter, why can’t this fucker just walk up to the portal and open it?”

“Few reasons,” Harcourt said. “Only Elen can open the portal, and Elen has ways to tell if someone’s mind has been tampered with. I dunno if she’d open it for me. And we don’t just come and go randomly anyway. We leave, set up meetings and rendezvous by phone later, and—”

Beatrice threw up her hands. “Then how about, we sit on this fucker, and make him arrange a rendezvous with his buddies? Instead of jumping into the mouth of Hell, we’d have time to set up a proper ambush. You could easily turn him into a puppet, and—”

Jack shook his head, and started rubbing his buzzed hair as he stared down at the building roof. “I thought about that. There’s nothing I could make this guy say or do, that would trick the

hunters into making the opening he's provided for us tonight. I could use him to capture a few more hunters maybe once, and then the jig would be up. It's not like Jeremiah and Angela would come to rescue this guy, and you know it."

"I ... yeah, you're right. Fuck me, we have to do this now, don't we? Ugh. Ugh!" This was not a good way to do this, and Jack definitely noticed the similarity with this and his previous attacks on the hunters: done last minute and without planning. But he was right that, if they wanted to kill Jeremiah and Angela, this was probably their best chance.

And she wanted to kill them. Fuck, it was an itch inside her that she couldn't get rid of, an itch that turned into a boiling heat that scalded her every time she thought about it. She had to get it out, get it to stop burning her insides, and the only way to do that would be over their dead bodies.

"Hey, don't forget your promise!" Harcourt said, loud enough that Athalia, again, hit him, this time with a smack to the back of his head. She was no human, and a hard slap was enough to send the man to the roof on his stomach. Any harder and she'd have injured him.

"Promise?" Aaron said.

Groaning, Jack nodded, but kept his eyes on the distant bridge that showed no signs of movement or life. "Yeah, I promised him we'd spare any hunters that didn't get in our way."

Beatrice pointed a claw at the human, currently coughing and rubbing the back of his head. "You're shitting me. These fuckers—"

"Are being tricked by Jeremiah and Angela. They didn't know about what Angela did to my family."

"And? They still killed Julias."



“Trust me,” Harcourt managed to say, whispering this time, “no one came here to fight the vampires. Our eyes are on Azamel. You heard about the crazy shit she’s done? She enslaved whole towns!”

“You only heard one side of the story,” Jack said to the hunter, “and from a couple of nutjobs at that; the king of nutjobs, given what I’ve seen of Jeremiah. Not that I’m excusing Azamel’s behavior, but lots of Begotten do their best to not be the monster you think they are.” When he said it, he glanced to Beatrice, and the inner conflict in his eyes was obvious. Yeah, they’d been up to some pretty monstrous shit lately, sacrificing kine and speaking to otherworldly gods that were most certainly not benevolent.

She shrugged at him. She was willing to do a lot more than that to make sure she got to feel Angela’s blood on her hands.

“And ... I know I can’t ask this,” Athalia said, “but I’m asking anyway. If we can capture my daughter, instead of killing her, I’d appreciate it.”

Beatrice laughed, and gave the woman the finger. “Fuck that.”

The stupid bitch got in Beatrice’s face, but of course Beatrice didn’t flinch. If Athalia wanted to fight, here and now, over whether her psychopath, murdering daughter deserved to live, Triss was perfectly willing to rip the woman’s throat out to prove her point. Or maybe bite it out.

“She’s my daughter.”

“She’s a corpse, she just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Ladies,” Jack said, and motioned for them to crouch. They did, glaring and frowning at each other all the way. “If the opportunity presents itself, sure, we can capture Angela.”

“What!?”

“The chances of that happening are unlikely, Triss. Unless she’s down and out with broken legs and broken fingers, consider her a kill target.” Shaking his head, Jack made a vague gesture back toward South Side. “And if we capture her, we keep her locked up with a chain around her neck for the rest of her life. We’re not just going to hand her over to Athalia.”

“Fuck. Fine.” Beatrice crawled over to the edge of the roof, and looked out to the small bridge. Just a tiny thing, some wood and concrete, maybe thirty feet long with a small valley or crevice underneath it, with some rocks, dirt, and no water. It’d totally be filled with kids hanging out if it was closer to the Carthian half of South Side, or even Devil’s corner. The hunters chose a place no one would give a shit about.

As the silence dragged on, everyone looked to Jack.

“We’re waiting for—”

“For me.”

They all turned as a woman hopped up onto the roof to join them. Clara Moreno, average height with an athlete’s build, tan skin, with box-braids in her hair. Beatrice had had almost zero interaction with the woman, but even she knew the werewolf had a strange relationship with Jessy, and news spread about the werewolf’s involvement with the vampire’s ghouls. And everyone knew she liked Jack, so, there was a whole mess of drama there Triss had no intent of touching with a ten-foot pole.

Like the witches, she was wearing some jeans and a shirt, nothing special, no weapons. She would transform once the fight started, and Triss was looking forward to seeing that chaos again. Rip and tear. Queue heavy metal music.

“Not much of a group,” Clara said. “I’d ask some of the pack to join, but Avery would have their hides.”

“But not yours?” Othello said, smiling as he stepped in closer. Right, it was the man’s first time really interacting with Clara, and it was obvious the dude liked what he saw.

Jennifer grinned too, probably enjoying the idea of watching Othello fuck Clara in a place where she could watch. So Triss smacked her in the shoulder, gently, but hard enough to remind her now was not the time. Besides, it didn’t look like Clara was taking the bait, offering Othello only an eye-roll and a quiet grunt.

“I’m second in command for my pack. Avery will get into an argument with me, sure, but after the results of tonight, she’ll let it go.”

“Right,” Triss said, “because we’ll either succeed, or we’ll be dead and it won’t matter.” Everyone but Damien and Aaron groaned as they looked at her, and she returned their groans with a shrug. “Don’t give me that shit. You’re all thinking it.”

Maybe she shouldn’t have said that. While she was willing to put her life on the line to make this happen, the others — besides Jack — weren’t so committed. They had no reason to be. Hell, Athalia probably wanted them to fail, so her daughter would have a chance to live. Then again, tonight might be the woman’s only chance to save her daughter’s life.

“Alright,” Aaron said, “I’m guessing Jack is leading this?”

They all looked to the kid, again.

“... I guess I am.” Jack sighed, rubbed his head several times, and stared out at the small bridge. Poor guy, having to come up with plans in such fucked up circumstances. Plus, you know, the whole being a kid thing. Everyone there was much older than him, and yet they were looking to him to make the decisions.

Well, he was a Ventrue. This was the stuff Ventrue did, give orders and shit. Triss could see Jennifer was itching to say something, provide her take on the situation as any Ventrue would, or maybe complain about her position, but she defaulted to the stronger Ventrue.

Nah, it wasn't the Ventrue thing for the kid. Jack was taking charge because he was good at it. He was taking charge because this plan was his. And he was taking charge because they all knew the kid had been fucked up with some curse, and that it was going to do something insane once the blood started flying. Triss was banking on it.

“Alright, plan. Damien, go scout the bridge now. I don't want any trouble hitting us while Triss does her thing. Triss is going to open the portal. I'm going in first, along with my reinforcements. Jennifer stays outside, in case shit happens out here; it'll be up to her on what to do if something happens, coming in to get us or handling it herself. The rest of you, follow behind me.” Jack took a deep breath, checked his pockets and chest for what Triss guessed were weapons, and gestured to Damien. “Go.”

And Damien was gone. Christ, he was a fast fucker. The idiot hunter on his knees let out a small squeak as Damien bolted, Celerity and Cloak of Night turning him into a blur. Being that close would have startled anyone who wasn't ready for it.

“And that's why we like to stay at a distance,” Harcourt said. “Or, you know, hide behind a lot of fire. And—wait, you said reinforcements, Jack? Then you told the rest of these dudes to follow behind you. Um, aren't they your reinforcements?”

Beatrice expected Jack to smile, smirk, grin, anything to tease the incoming carnage the kid would summon. But a glance showed the kid's face was pained, conflicted, and frustrated. He didn't want to summon the curse.

Well, it was a curse. It was a bad thing, and it was probably doing all sorts of nasty shit to Jack's mind. If he summoned it, let it loose, would it be as simple as returning to normal once all this was done? Or would it change him, and turn him into another Viktor. You didn't need some ancient curse for a vampire to become a fucking sack of shit like Viktor, but that didn't mean it wasn't involved. Poor kid probably spent every night worried about that.

He was going to do it though. He needed to, and she needed him to. Both of them had to do this, and the consequences be fucking damned.

Damien came back a moment later, silent as a shadow. "No one."

"Right," the hunter said. "If we had a lookout, we might give away the position of the portal the night we're using it."

"Risky," Aaron said.

The human shrugged. "Everything we do is risky. Gotta take risks to win."

That earned a small snort from Jack. Vampires didn't think that way, normally. To a vampire, a risk was how you ended what would otherwise be an endless life of indulgence. If smart planning and paranoia allowed a vampire to live in decadence for centuries, why wouldn't a vampire do it?

Because of shit like this. Because of revenge and vengeance. Because some people deserved to die.

"Like I said earlier," the hunter said, "you're expecting probably a dozen of my friends. There's another dozen out in the city, doing shit. Far as I know, Jeremiah, Angela, and Elen are in the chamber tonight, still helping with Angela's injuries. You guys fucked her up pretty bad last time."

Aaron raised a hand. “And Elen. She’s been putting the hunters back together?”

“Yeah, sorta. She can do some impressive shit for my friends, but for Jeremiah and Angela, it’s like she’s rebuilding them from scratch. Something to do with the special tattoos they got; lot more on them than on any of us.”

“She manage to revive that hunter I shot in the head?” Jack said.

“No ... almost, but no.” The hunter shuddered. Must have seen a real life Frankenstein moment, from the look on his face, and it wasn’t sitting well with him.

This hunter was far too nice to be a hunter. He was cute though, fit like all the hunters, a bit tall, nicely built, and she was digging the short, almost-afro he was sporting. The smile was contagious too, or it would have been, if the sight of him didn’t make her want to rip him in half for being part of the reason her lover was dead. Shame.

Jack pushed himself up to his feet, and took one of those long, slow breaths he seemed rather attached to. “Alright, let’s do this. Stay behind me, and ... don’t freak out. I’ll be doing this as Triss opens the portal, so I need people to stay calm. Just stay out of my way, and try and remain ... yeah, calm. Don’t, uh, be surprised, if I’m different, ok?”

“Different?” Harcourt looked around, eyebrow raised, confusion blatant. “Uhh ... don’t forget about our promise, right?”

“And my daughter, Jack,” Athalia said. “You said you’d spare her life, if the opportunity presented itself.”

“I will.” He twitched when he said it, and ground his teeth. “Yes, I will, if I can.”

That twitch was strange. Triss glanced to Damien, but the Mekhet's face was stone; which said a lot. The twitch wasn't all that subtle, and more than Triss noticed it. If Damien refused to react to it, then it was something he'd seen before, and either knew what it was, or didn't and was ignoring it anyway.

"Alright, so, we doing this?" Triss said.

"Yeah, we're doing this." With another heavy sigh, Jack pulled out his phone, and sent a text.

Oh, right. He was sending a text to his mother, and his lover. If he died tonight, those two would be broken. The guilt that must have been eating at him, with how much he loved those two. Fuck. The only people Triss had were right here with her. If things went sour, they'd all be dead; except Jennifer hopefully. But the kid, he was doing this knowing full well if he died doing it, he'd be leaving an amazing woman alone, and an already heartbroken mother probably suicidal.

She was tempted to tell him to not do this. They didn't need to do this. Revenge could wait, vampires were good at that. They'd bide their time, look for a better opportunity, play safe and keep everyone on their toes. That's what every elder would say, to not gamble lives on a risky play. Take advantage of immortality, plan, manipulate, deceive, and concoct the perfect scheme to get these fuckers.

And in the meantime, other Kindred would die, Kindred who didn't have the resources to build themselves underground fortresses. Hell, more than them, the monsters would die too, and more kine that didn't deserve it. Much as Beatrice had bathed herself in murder, she still kept those kills to the worst Dolareido had to offer. Jeremiah and Angela didn't.

All of that almost felt like background noise though, or a poor excuse. Deep down, she wanted to do this now with every fucking

fiber of her being, because if she didn't get this burning ache out of her chest soon, it was going to kill her. And the only thing that'd do it was Angela's head on a stick.

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Damien wrapped them in the Cloak of Night, and the group of them approached. What a fucked up looking bunch. One human, six vampires, a werewolf, and a bona fide monster. Eight paranormals and one pile of baggage to drag around. Well, if Harcourt proved useful, then he proved useful. If he turned on them at the last moment, the fucker would quickly realize how easily and happily Triss would turn him into a corpse, or a meal.

The group of them stood underneath the small bridge, and everyone scanned the surroundings, convinced someone was watching them. It was dark, and it was quiet, the only noise coming from a cool night breeze that cut down into the tiny ravine. The sounds of cars and taxis blaring their horns were a mile off, nothing more than whispers all the way out here. It was the sort of place a traveler might sleep, where no thugs would rob her or disturb her.

Underneath the bridge, where it connected to the earth, was a concrete wall, each side. A small drain was at its base, a place that collected rain could flow. The expanse of wood above was only wide enough for two lanes, so it wasn't exactly a well hidden fortress, to hide here. But that was what made it such a good place for one of these portals, that no one would think to look here, in a giant city with millions of people.

But there it was, the symbol, etched onto the wall in black. Jack had said these were created with blood. Maybe this one had been, and the blood burned away? It did smell burned.

She looked behind her, and checked the faces of people waiting for her to do her thing. The witches looked confident. Damien didn't, and neither did Athalia. Clara was in wait mode. Harcourt



just looked confused as all hell. Well, they were about to see a thing or two.

“Ok, you begin, Triss,” Jack said, “and ... so will I. Just ... yeah ... stay out of my way, everybody.”

Poor kid. Poor fucking kid. She'd asked him to do this, to be ready to jump into this insanity in order to get revenge, and he'd agreed. She'd asked him to be ready to use his curse for this, and he'd agreed. He'd helped her butcher kine, and speak with ancient, evil gods. And now he was going to make good on his word.

Christ, if this broke him, if something happened to him, Julias would ... Julias was dead. His childe was on his own now, and more than smart enough to make his own choices. Don't feel guilty for this, Triss. You want this, and he wants it. He—

“The fuck!?” Harcourt jumped back as Jack took a bite out of his wrist. Clara and Athalia both did as well, without noise. The vampires didn't budge. They all knew Ventrue could do this, use blood to summon animals to their aid; Gangrels could do it, too. When Gangrels did it, it was like watching a monster summoning his brood. When Ventrue did it, it was like watching a lord summon their army.

While Jack did his thing, Beatrice got to work. She touched the crow skull on her chest, and traced a claw along the drawn lines of the ritual symbol Elen or one of her flunkies had made. It was almost invisible, in the dark, charcoal-colored lines on concrete at night. During the day, it'd have looked like silly graffiti to anyone who noticed, and in the shadows underneath the bridge, out here between North and South Side, no one was going to notice.

So close though, she could feel the power emanating from it, subtle, but distinct. It felt like the flesh chamber Natasha and her had found the night Julias died, so she was sure Harcourt was telling the truth. Whatever madness Elen performed to create

things from flesh, and to divine information from haruspex, Triss had no idea, but she couldn't deny that it felt familiar. Maybe it was the blood and murder, maybe it was how it was founded on death and darkness, but there was something similar between Crúac and whatever it was Elen was doing. Crúac reached across the ether, tapped into something hellish and twisted, and used vitae to fuel that effort. Elen, on the other hand, found a way to do it with the flesh and blood of the living. Vitae was what the vampire curse created when given the blood of the living.

Might as well have been neighbors, 665 and 667 getting buddy buddy with the handsome dude next door.

Electricity danced along her fingertips, and she shivered as the power of it practically burned her fingers. Yes, this was the power the Crone had exposed her to, introduced her to, and scarred into her mind. She'd never forget this pain now, this sensation, the way this portal worked, the way it opened and closed. It'd take her months, maybe years, to figure out how to open it with a sacrifice, but she was a vampire, she had vitae to fuel her efforts, unlike Elen.

Skittering sounds drew her gaze, tiny movements that ran along the corners of her eyes. Everyone else in the group started looking around as well, even Harcourt, once the noise grew noticeable to human ears. When he noticed, he started spinning around and around, breath quickening as it became obvious the noises were coming from all directions.

Triss was supposed to be focusing on opening the portal, but for a moment, she let herself stare in awe at the sight unfolding around her. Rat eyes. There were rats eyes everywhere. Tiny orbs that caught glimmers of nearby streetlights, and what little moonlight slipped through the clouds. They glinted and moved, dozens of them at first, each flowing along the pavement, and then down to join them in the dark and rocks. Dozens more, and then hundreds, flowed along the bridge above them, tails and claws rubbing against

wood and concrete in such number, it sounded almost like churning water.

The shadow may as well have been a flowing, black creek around them, with how it moved, and rose. It started to trickle down over the edges of the small ravine, and then flowed, and then poured like rapids, a bubbling mass of black fur, claws and tails and eyes, that filled every crevice. And as the rats came to join them, the skies above darkened.

“The longer we take,” Jack said, eyes on Triss, “the more likely they’ll be prepared. There’s no way they don’t have some method to peek outside of their portals, or they’d never use them. So open it up, and let’s get to killing.”

Time had come to a standstill, and Beatrice found herself unable to move. That was Jack? His voice had changed. There was a bounce to it, almost a chuckle, a sound she was used to on Jacob, but not on the kid. And the grin, the Joker grin, looked freaky as fuck on him.

It was more than rats; there were plenty of those, but Jack seemed intent on bringing Armageddon. Two crows, without a caw or croon, glided down under the bridge and perched upon the boy’s shoulders. He reached up, stroked the back of each bird’s head, and grinned up at each, a knowing grin. It was then that the dark clouds above began to descend.

The shadows around them, churning over each other, were the rats of Jack’s army. The black sky falling upon them, was his crows.

“Oh god oh god oh god.” Harcourt had backed up to the other side of the pit, and he was quickly becoming a panting mess. Wide eyes snapped left and right, up and down, each trying to take in the madness collapsing on him. “Sweet fuck, oh mother fucking god. Merciful Christ protect me, mother fucking g—”

Athalia smacked him, again. That caused Clara to chuckle, but it didn't sound natural; of course it didn't, considering the fear Triss could see on her face. They were all frightened by the display, and Triss had to force herself to hold still as she felt rats begin to climb over her combat boots. Jennifer and Aaron were in awe, jaws dropped in what must have been envy over the display of Animalism even Michael McDonald couldn't have done. Othello had a new grin on his face, one Triss wasn't used to seeing, something that mixed excitement, surprise, and fear. Athalia had backed away from Jack, and it looked like the monster was struggling to hide her trembling, rubbing her fingers together and lowering her gaze down from the boy. She didn't want to look at him. And Damien looked like he was watching his best friend march into the valley of death.

Another glance at Clara showed she truly was scared, but not of the animals, or even scared of Jack. She looked scared for Jack, and that drove a knife into Triss's gut she didn't need right then.

Triss recollected herself, and looked back to the portal. Ignore the scurrying, the tiny squeaks, ignore the thousands of moving bodies swarming around you. Ignore the strange look in Jack's eyes. Jack was the trump card, the big move no one was expecting. Ignore anything strange, ignore that voice in your head telling you to stop this before the kid loses something, and commit to the fucking goal.

The choir of rats and crows, fur and feathers, claws and talons and beaks, were the music to her ritual. The beady eyes were the lighting. The flapping wings and chattering chirps were the rustling of her audience. They all grew silent, and almost completely still, as they stared at Triss, waiting.

Time to get this show on the road.

She lifted her t-shirt with her left hand hand, up to the neck, and set the claw of her right hand high up against her sternum. The portal was a concoction of flesh, woven together using some

intangible energy that permeated the world, and she could feel it. As she sank the claw into her skin, she closed her eyes, set the hand that lifted the shirt against the concrete, felt the symbol beneath it, and searched for the connection. She had to find it, the same way she could find another's mind if she wanted to bestow a nightmare upon them, as all Nosferatu could. Instead of another person's mind, she was connecting to something magical, something mysterious, something royally fucked up and twisted. She was connecting to unnatural flesh that could split apart and close itself, guarding another world.

Her chest cavity would serve as the conduit, the connection, the way for her vitae to cross the space between her and the portal, and rip it open.

She kept down the growing scream as she forced her claw into the bone of her sternum. Jacob had introduced her to many forms of pain, in his growing efforts to teach her Crúac rituals. The physical pain was almost blazé. Several times now, when buried to the neck in agony, she'd quieted her mind and found a way to commune with her Beast. When she came to, waking from the coma, the details of the encounter were lost to a haze and fog. But she could remember the shadow creature, and she could remember the feeling it shared with her, of there being something, or someone else out there it could touch.

She summoned that feeling as her Beast had taught her, as the entity Jacob called the Crone taught her, and ripped apart Elen's magic as she ripped apart her own body. Thankfully, she didn't need to literally rip her ribcage open, but that didn't change that she had use Kindred strength to drive her claw down through the bones of her chest, and into her stomach. With each inch her claw cut open, the wall before her began to bleed from its own forming vertical cut, deeper, and longer.

“Oh ... god...” Clara, of all people, was the first to gasp. Triss didn’t dare look her way; breaking concentration now would really suck. But it was obvious Clara’s words triggered a chain reaction, and everyone started gasping as they realized what Beatrice was doing.

“What? What’s going on? I—oh sweet fuck!” Harcourt apparently stepped close enough to take a peek, and almost screamed before someone grabbed him and covered his mouth. Muffled cries lasted for a few seconds before the man calmed down.

Triss kept her eyes on the portal before her, and ignored the scalding pain coursing through her chest. Vitae, thick, heavy blood that refused to drip, dripped. A wound this large was too much for her Kindred body, and several of the viscous droplets splattered on the swarming rats around her feet. They didn’t seem to mind. Hell, Jack used his own blood to summon them, so they probably thought this was just part of their master’s shtick, and it’d turn to ash in a bit anyway.

She pressed both her hands against the enormous, vertical slice down through her chest, soaked them in her vampire blood, and pressed them against the concrete. Like stabbing into flesh, she pressed her claws into the concrete, and began to pull it apart, this time as if she really were ripping open a ribcage. The ritual had turned the concrete into skin, into muscle, meat, bone, something she could rip apart and shred. Something that bled.

“Fuck me,” Othello said. “It’s like ... watching Jacob at work.”

She grinned at that, but didn’t let him see it; too busy with her chest nearly pressed to the portal, and her elbows out as she ripped it apart. It didn’t take long, maybe fifteen seconds, but it was fifteen seconds of concrete becoming flesh, and fifteen seconds of her groaning as she tore it open, hoping to god her chest cavity didn’t explode from flexing muscles.

When the folds of flesh were finally spread apart, the hole was maybe five feet high, and three feet wide. More than big enough for people to enter.

“Triss!” Jennifer came up to her side, and winced as she felt the wound of Triss’s torso. “This is horrible.”

“I’ll live.”

“You can’t fight like this!”

“Watch me.”

“Good job, Trissy,” Jack said. Trissy? She looked over her shoulder again, and stifled a scream, nearly brought by the agony boiling in her chest, and the look on Jack’s face.

That wasn’t Jack.

“Th ... thanks.”

“Now step aside. Follow in when you can. Harcourt, stay behind me, we’re going in first. The rest of you, follow behind Harcourt. We’re not leaving until Jeremiah’s head is decorating my fist, or until we’re ashes.” Chuckling, Jack nudged Triss aside with enough force to nearly make her trip. And then, the stranger stepped into the hole.



~~Jack~~

Letting the curse out was surprisingly easily. He didn’t need to do anything, not really. He just, opened the door, and the curse hopped on out to party, summoned by the promise of blood and carnage. It wanted to play.

It wasn't as overwhelming as the first time. It was there, in his mind, and he could tell it was there, altering him, overriding parts of him, taking over. Jack could still feel, could still control, but the curse was in there with him, in his fingers, in his toes and limbs, and in his blood.

And then, Jack was in the passenger seat. He was still in the car, and still looking around, seeing, hearing, but it wasn't his hands on the wheel anymore, or his foot on the pedal. It was the curse.

The curse was a much better driver.

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He reached into himself, and unleashed Armageddon. He bit his wrist open, and spilled his sacred blood. He smiled in the darkness, and reached out for the city around him. The shadows were his to control, and the animals were his to lead, order, and rule. There were many animals that lived with the sheep, animals that held kinship with Kindred. In some places, coyotes and owls held closer kinship to Kindred. But in a city, overflowing with flesh and sin, the crow and the rat were his brothers and sisters, and they would be the stepping stones to claiming his throne.

Yes, it was his city. Antoinette owned it in name, and Jacob owned the darkness beneath its shadows, but in the end, there was always a single force that rose to the top of any squabble: the mightiest. They could serve him; Jack would be ok with that, right? He could let them live, and they could serve him. He had no true need for sex, take it or leave it, but it'd be a shame to let a piece like Antoinette go. And Jacob, the old bastard deserved respect.

He could think about those two later. For now, his city had to be cleansed of vermin, and he was going to enjoy every moment of it.

With eyes closed, he reached out for his servants, and felt their presence. Claws, scurrying through the dark. Wings, flowing through the air. Noses sniffing french fries and used condoms.



Talons clutching to glowing neon signs and rain-worn rooftop edges. So many. There were so many of them. He knew, deep down in the recesses of memories that were not his, that Susanna would have creamed herself at being so spoiled for choice. So many, there were so many. Thousands upon thousands of crows covering his city in their beautiful feathers, and millions of rats, living beneath the hooves of its sheep.

And they came. He knew Mulder and Scully would be with him soon, since they were following him already. They'd feel the call, and come. The others though, they would come in a number he could not quite perfectly control. They would obey his call and command, true, and there would be a swarming mass of them, but exactly how big that mass would be, was to be seen. It got him excited. He'd be hard as fuck, if he was Blushing Life.

Scully and Mulder perched on his shoulders, and he gave each of them a deserved scratch on the back of their heads. They would bear witness to his triumph, to the slaughter, and spread the tale to all other birds not present to witness it. Let them know of him, and be in awe.

As the rats began to pour into the small ravine, Jack felt his vitae flow with a renewed hunger, desperate for violence, aching to dance in blood. His wound closed in moments, and he chuckled as he looked around at the waves of fur and claw. He didn't bother glancing at his fellow vampires, weaklings that they were, but he could hear their muffled surprise. The human wasn't nearly as muffled, and he proved his pathetic weakness with every squeak and squawk. A glance at Clara, on the other hand, showed the cute werewolf was looking at him like he'd sold his soul to the devil, and all she could do was watch. Heh.

A glance at Athalia showed something different. She managed eye contact with him for a single moment, before she looked down and backed away. Fear. True terror. That annoying creature inside her,

the nightmare creature, it could see him, all of him, and it horrified her. Pretty fucking dumb for a horror monster to be horrified of another monster. Well, fucking psycho skeleton bitch, you ain't seen nothing yet.

Beatrice, in true witch fashion, began to do something super twisted and awesome. She began slicing her chest open. Fucking sick. It was almost predictable that, to open a door made of flesh, a witch would have to cut open their own flesh. When Beatrice started opening the flesh with her hands, pulling it apart, Jack had to fight to keep down an orgasmic groan. It was a perfect way to begin the festivities, pulling open alien flesh like tearing open a present.

Jennifer and Beatrice argued for a moment, but Jack stepped up and nudged the witch aside.

“Good job, Trissy.”

“Thanks,” she said, eyebrow raised. Christ, trying to be nice and she still looked at him like he was the devil. Fuck her.

“Now step aside. Follow in when you can. Harcourt, stay behind me, we're going in first. The rest of you, follow behind Harcourt. We're not leaving until Jeremiah's head is decorating my fist, or until we're ashes.”

He pointed both hands forward, and grinned into the darkness that awaited them. The hunters doubtlessly knew their portal had been opened by now, and probably had some idea about who was out here, ready to come in. He laughed. Yeah, they had no fucking idea what was about to hit them.

It was this moment that made it all worth it. He was seconds away from unleashing Hell upon these poor fools, and they had no idea, no fucking idea at all. He was going to slaughter them like fish in a barrel, delight in seeing the surprise and horror on their faces,

and dance in their blood. Relish it, savor it, the edge of the moment before the climax.

“Um, shouldn’t we cloak up?” Damien said.

Jack shook his head. “Last time, Trissy snuck in because the door was open and unlocked. Here, we basically just kicked down the door. They know we’re here. So we do this SWAT style.”

“Which is?”

“Expedient, overwhelming force.”

With a great roar, the tide of flesh and fur flowed forward. It wasn’t subtle, or quiet. It was like watching a ship-breaker wave, the sort that could snap one in half from hull pressure, and it slammed into a hole far too small to accept the rushing tide. The flesh of the portal rent apart under the scratching weight of the rats, and the weird blood splattered around him as his army tore through it. Thousands of rats pushed through in seconds, and thousands more followed, swirling about Jack a foot high off the ground, in a foot-wide radius around him. The rats would not dare accidentally get in his way, and they moved with almost one mind.

Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. The ocean of blackness scurried forward, and Jack followed. No need to run, he moved along at a slow pace, chuckling as he did. He skipped a little too, because how could he not. Finally, fucking finally, he was going to get to crush Jeremiah’s skill, and rip Angela’s innards out.

“Better warn them, Brace,” he said to the hunter behind him. “Any hunters who even look like they’re going to attack us, my army will devour alive.” There, good enough, Jack? A fair warning to all within, that their lives could be spared. All they had to do was lay down their weapons, and pray that Satan was feeling merciful tonight.

“Shit! Shit shit shit!” The idiot human ran up to join him in the tunnel, and held up his hands to his mouth. “Guys! It’s Harcourt! Put down your weapons, and stay out of the vampire’s way! You won’t be harmed!”

There were a thousand better ways Jack could have done this. He could have established communication himself, under a banner of a parlay, or provided some sort of warning of what was about to happen. He could have sent in Harcourt first, and let the man try and convince them what was happening. This was chaos. This was a giant mess of a situation, horribly handled, that would doubtlessly lead to many deaths.

Good. Better than good. Fucking perfect.

The chamber smelled like flesh, that much was obvious, but it was also pitch black. Trissy had said the chamber was supposed to have an amber glow, so the hunters must have turned out the lights, in the entrance at least. It wasn’t until Aaron pulled out his phone and started shining a light that he could see, and Harcourt and Othello did the same. A tunnel made of flesh, with rib bones along the walls, and blood around their feet. Each step was soft, and would have made a subtle splash in the shallow blood, if it hadn’t been teeming with thousands of rats.

He would have loved to take the time to really enjoy the moment, and the strange fetish environment he’d found himself in. It was like being inside a snake, a gutted one, surrounded by its skin, muscle, and bones. There were bits of metal sticking out of the flesh too, a spike here or there, and some chains hanging from the flesh. Beatrice had said to expect shit like this, and that it only got worse the deeper you went into the tunnel. He couldn’t wait.

Jack smirked into the darkness ahead of him, and the rolling waves of fur and death. He should throw these hunters a bone, if only to keep Jack happy.

How to do this, how to do this. He could go for the snarky introduction, that always worked well. Or he could try the glorious villain introduction, a classic. Or he could stay silent, and let the hunters stew in the unknown.

“He means it, fuckers,” he called into the flesh tunnel. Snarky it was. “I am going to kill every single one of you who even so much as holds a weapon in hand. I’m here for Jeremiah, Angela, and Elen. The rest of you are free to run away.” He could have said ‘free to go’, but then that would have likely meant some of them probably would. An escape offered as an insult to pride would hopefully keep a few more of them around, pitting their egos against themselves. More bodies for the pile. Blood for the blood god.

Movement in the distance, quiet splashes, and then faster splashes. Yeah, someone was running down the tunnel. The splashes stopped suddenly, as if someone had winding up and releasing a throw, and Jack grinned into endless flesh before him. Predictable.

He pointed his hands forward again, and his army obeyed. As flame began to pour down the tunnel toward Jack and his crew, a tidal wave of black fur gushed up and over, claws upon backs upon claws upon backs, until the rushing mound of flesh filled the tunnel to the ceiling. It crashed forward, a plague of delightful, furry little bodies, uncountable and unstoppable, silencing all beyond it. The flame became nothing, lost to the monsoon of rats that filled the tunnel as they barreled forward.

What was that movie? Where the water pours down the tunnel, flooding it in seconds? Probably a bunch of movies, always eliciting terror from the people within as the unstoppable wave of cruel water came for them with all the subtlety of a volcanic eruption. Interesting to be on the other side of the wave.

“Holy shit,” Harcourt said. The man’s eyes were wide, bugging out of his head.

“Come on,” Jack said. He followed after the rolling wave of flesh and fur, smiling with every step. It was a barrier that only an armor-penetrating bullet fired from a high-powered sniper rifle was likely to get through, and while he didn’t put it past the hunters to have that, they weren’t going to have that set up to fire in their current circumstance.

The hunters were trapped. Trapped trapped trapped. Fish in a barrel, unless they had a way to get out of the chamber beyond. Ooh ooh, like opening a present, Jack could not wait to get to the end of the tunnel, and see what gift awaited him.

“Jack,” Clara said, jogging up to him. “Jack, this is—” She stopped, looked down, and sucked in a breath.

Dead rats. Walking through a hallway made of flesh and dripping of blood was pretty awesome, but the way the rolling wave of rats left behind those that died to the hunters attacking from the other side, was artistic. The wave was so huge it plugged the tunnel to the ceiling, and now all sounds of attacks by the hunters were muffled and buried under the roaring sound of tens of thousands of rodents pouring over each other. Chuckling, Jack stepped over the corpses with only a moment’s glance. Some were burned, while others had been shot. Ah well, sacrifices in the name of his pleasure were sacrifices well made. Had to break a few eggs, and whatnot.

Everyone started to follow, once they realized it was safe. They were scared of what they were seeing, but that made it all the better. Susanna had never done this, if the vague images swimming around in recesses of his blood were correct. She’d never taken a crew with her into one of her forays. They’d probably be more pain than they were worth, but it’d be kind of cool to have some witnesses. Normally, no one survived.

Old Jack would have tried to be tactical or something, like back in the nightmare chamber of the gargoyle monster. New Jack, heh, new Jack knew better. Tactics were stupid, and never worked once shit started flying. No plan survived first contact with the enemy. It was so much easier to simply overwhelm, overpower, and be the first person to get that shit flying. Humans, hunters included, did not have the instincts to respond to chaos; and he was going to fucking drown them in chaos.

Mulder and Scully fluttered their wings a couple times, and Jack offered each a quick head scratch, again.

“Don’t worry my pets. Once we’re inside, Trissy says there’s plenty of ceiling space, and dangling things for you to perch on.” They both cawed, loud enough to be heard over the rapids of rats. “I will summon your kin once I am sure they will be of use.” For icing on the cake, of course. Let the hunters drown in biting teeth and scratching claws. His legion of crows could follow, and rip the skin from their screaming faces. And, if some hunters managed to escape through the tunnel Jack had come through, plenty of crows waited outside to tear them to pieces.

“Fuck me,” Beatrice said. “You’re ... fucking sick.”

Jack raised a brow as he looked over his shoulder. Beatrice was following, Othello and Aaron in front of her, with Athalia behind. Her shirt was down again, but it was clear she was struggling with the wound. Yeah, vampire as young as her wouldn’t be healing from a nasty wound like that too easily. But if she wanted to come along and maybe get shot, her choice.

For the life of him, he couldn’t help but give her a big grin. “You wanted this too, right? Don’t get squeamish now.”

While the vampires and the werewolf all looked quite perturbed by the display he’d unleashed, Athalia was carrying a lovely combination of terror and worry. Poor mother was worried for her

daughter. Well, Angela was going to die, so the worry was justified, even if it was stupid of her. Her daughter hated monsters, and actively hunted to kill them. What kind of self-respecting monster would let someone like that live? Who the fuck cares if it's family.

Angela was going to die. Hell, Jack was sure he wouldn't have to break his promise to spare the psycho's life in the unlikely circumstance it was possible. No way was someone like that going to go down without a fight. And he remembered the look on Angela's face, when he almost shot her that time in the gargoyle's nightmare. She'd looked relieved. The girl wanted to die, and he was happy to deliver peace.

"My pets, stay back with Beatrice for now. Fly, when the opportunity presents itself. Be my eyes." Mulder and Scully nodded, and hopped back with a single wing flap. The Nos flinched for a moment, but his pets were good enough to not hurt her as their claws met her skin. "We're almost there."

"How do you know?" Damien said. His friend looked at him like Jack was someone else, like he was possessed, like there was some sort of curse running rampant inside Jack, liable to get them all killed.

Nah, they'd all live. He'd make them see he was better than the old Jack.

"My army has found the exit." He grinned at his friend, and set a finger to his own temple. Communication with tens of thousands of rats was a glorious thing, little chirps and squeaks that all meant small images, scents, and textures. It painted an image like a Van Gogh, expressive lines and streaks of color that told so much more than a simple picture.

They were close to the exit now, his army told him, and beyond was a grand chamber of flesh, bone, chains, and glowing amber crystals. Light.



He didn't need his army to explain to him that the hunters were shooting at the oncoming death tide, and in greater numbers. The sound, once nothing more than quiet pop pops in the background, had grown to louder cracking sounds, like someone stepping on bubble wrap. And the corpses of his rats were growing in number, to the point he could not walk without feeling their tiny, broken bodies squash under his step, into the flesh floor. More of the corpses were burned as well, some in huge clumps, others more spread out. Molotovs and flamethrowers.

"Ten more feet," he said. "Everybody duck."

"Duck?" they all said together.

Laughing, he pointed his hands toward the rats, then upward. Moses, parting the Red Sea. No God here though, freeing slaves from an oppressive pharaoh. Just a vampire doing what vampires were supposed to do: kill.

The tide of fur and death erupted forward, exploding outward as rats jumped off rats jumping off other rats. Amber light flooded over them, hints of fire scattering about along the army of fur, but most of the strange light came from the interior of the enormous flesh chamber. Such a beautiful room, with flesh nodules sticking out of the floor like divine cancer, and chains hanging from the ceiling with bones and chunks of corpses hooked onto their spikes. Never in his wildest dreams, could he have envisioned such a beautiful room.

A perfect room to bathe in death.

There was a total of two seconds of beautiful chaos. As thousands of rats poured out of the tunnel and into the chamber, many leaping far through the air, many on fire, Jack analyzed what he could. A dozen hunters, armed with assault rifles and pistols. No Molotovs; must have used them all on the rats. There were two hunters with flamethrowers, but they weren't the crazy military grade kind, so

their range wasn't absurd. They were maybe thirty feet away, more than close enough for the explosion of rats leaping forward to send them backward, recoiling.

Jeremiah and Angela were there, in the middle of barking some sort of order, each with pistol in hand and firing at the tunnel. The hunters looked panicked, terrified, and two of them opened their hands to let their guns drop, once they saw Jack and Harcourt. Damn, two lives to spare. Ah well, he'd keep his word, for now.

He grinned the best grin he could summon, and pointed the palms of his raised hands at the stunned group before him.

Only when the choir of shrieks from the portal entrance pierced the chaos unfolding before him, did the unholy chorus of screaming caws fill the air. Everyone behind him finally ducked.

“Surprise, motherfuckers!”



~~Damien~~

Noises so loud they managed to cut through the insanity, erupted from the tunnel behind them. It was hard to notice anything other than the giant flood of rats erupting forward, into the huge chamber of flesh, and pouring out toward the hunters. It was Athalia though, who shoved on their backs and sent them onto their hands and knees. For a moment, he was tempted to yell at her. The feel of alien flesh and blood was not pleasant, and the feel of hundreds of rat corpses mixed among them was even worse.

When a black cloud ripped past their heads, shrieking and cawing, he understood. Like bullets, black bullets with wings, crows flew overhead with zero grace or zero interest in subtlety. Like that night at the hospital, the birds flew straight and hard, zipping past Damien with enough force they could penetrate glass with their beaks. He'd seen it. He did not want to be in the way of it.

“Holy fuck,” Clara said, down in the blood and death next to him.

“Holy fuck,” the three witches said.

Athalia said nothing. But, once Damien managed a glance back toward her, he could see the horror in her eyes as she stared at Jack’s back.

The kid had his hands out in front of him, like he was a puppeteer controlling his puppets. His back looked massive, a small body carrying something none of them could understand. Whoever this man was, it wasn’t Jack. As pandemonium fell upon the hunters, and cries of terror and pain joined the mixture of panic yells, Damien swore he could hear a quiet laughter.

He could. He could see it, too. Jack’s shoulders were trembling lightly, shaking up and down with the motions of someone enjoying a good, deep laugh, noise buried in the discord.

Sometime during all this, Scully and Mulder had left Triss and joined the flock. Damien tried to look up and see where they went, but all he could see was flapping wings, a black cloud that tore through the air with far more speed than the rats could ever accomplish.

After a few seconds passed, and he realized his life was in danger of being riddled with bullets and fire, he got up and got ready to dash forward into the large chamber. Othello, Aaron, and Clara all did the same, up and crouched, ready to sprint toward cover. They didn’t. Despite the obvious danger, Jack stayed in front of them, standing, chuckling, and waving his hand around as he guided his flock. The chaos was a barrier between the vampires and the hunters ahead.

“Remember my pretties, if they don’t drop their weapons, eat them alive.”

“You heard him!” Harcourt yelled. The man had managed to get up at some point, and had his shoulder to the side of the tunnel where it met the chamber. His hands were pressed to his cheeks, cupping around his mouth to try and amplify the sound. “Please, drop your weapons! We’re here for Jeremiah and Angela, not you guys!”

God take pity on this man. There was no chance in all Hell that Harcourt was going to save many of his comrades. Upon opening his mouth, half of the hunters, caught between trying to fight off the impending swarm in melee, and firing bullets at its endless tide, turned to look at him.

“Traitor! Traitor!” they said, screaming, vitriol dripping from their mouths.

“Team! Plan Vermont!” Jeremiah pulled out one of those strange, glowing knives, and stabbed the wall behind him. “Form up!”

And just like that, the ten hunters who kept their weapons, pressed their backs to the wall near Jeremiah, with maybe a hundred feet between them and the intruders, and began their line of defense. The two with flamethrowers formed the outer edges, and each unleashed seemingly unending waves of fire upon the encroaching rats and birds. It was enough to bring the insane, inhuman blitzkrieg assault to a stop. For a moment.

Jack stepped forward, giving his team room to follow. Damien and the others remained crouched as they ran into the room, and slipped along the skin and blood to find giant bone and flesh to hide behind. Gross. It was thick and hard though, more than enough to stop the bullets that were flying around. The other vampires ran to different places, while Clara ran over to join Damien, still untransformed. He was tempted to tell her to do it, but she knew herself better than he did. Surely there was a reason she wasn't.

Maybe she didn't feel the need to, considering none of them had done a thing yet. All of them were just watching Jack do his thing, as the curse turned their absurd, practically suicidal plan, into a brutally efficient frontal assault.

Damien looked up, and gulped. The chains dangling, with bones and body parts hooked onto them, were now covered in crows. Some of the birds took a few nibbles of the plentiful flesh, but most perched for only a moment, before soaring around, either adding to the death cloud that circled above, or dive bombing the hunters doing their best to fend off the rats biting at their ankles. A maelstrom of turmoil for any human caught in its wake, the creatures descended upon the hunters with zero hesitation or fear. They were after blood.

It felt like an eternity. It'd only been ten seconds. In ten seconds, the two hunters who'd dropped their weapons had dove behind some giant bones, and were curled up, clutching their knees as rats splashed past them along the blood. In ten seconds, the rest had formed up and were waiting for Jeremiah to do something called Plan Vermont. In ten seconds, the vampires, werewolf, and monster had taken up positions behind cover, while Harcourt started running toward the two hunters who'd given up. He knew them, apparently, judging from the look on his face. Maybe he'd expressed concerns about their bosses before.

"I'll kill you!" Angela screamed. "Kill you! I'll—" Her voice disappeared under a hail of her own gunfire. A pistol wasn't enough for her, and she grabbed an assault rifle from one of the hunters. Jeremiah was behind her, cutting through the flesh of the wall and carving symbols into it, but Damien could see the man's face carried some panic. And Angela, she looked like she'd been tossed into Hell without warning, and was going to blast her way out.

This was going better than any of them could have hoped for. The hunters were caught with their pants down, caught off guard by the

shock of Harcourt's betrayal, by the vampires' ability to break through their closed portal, but most importantly, by Jack's sheer power. Much as Damien wanted to look at the hunters, and maybe launch an attack of his own, he was awestruck, eyes locked onto Jack and the way the kid was slowly waving his hands around. Conducting an orchestra.

This was going to be a slaughter.

Angela's directed fire wasn't aimed for the oncoming swarms of rats or birds, it was aimed for Jack. Rats burned away and crows fell from the air by the dozens, but they were endless, with more pouring in from the tunnel to Jack's call. Each of Angela's bullets were met with a wall of rats that flowed in front of Jack in waves, spreading onto the floor moments later, only to rise up again once Angela loaded a new magazine.

It was sad. Even an elder vampire would struggle to do this; Michael certainly couldn't. The hunters were totally outmatched, and the crew Jack brought with him were practically pointless. Hell, if Damien so much as stood up, a crow was liable to sink its beak into the back of his head, purely by accident. No, every moment of this madness was like a nightmare, someone else's nightmare that Damien was just a powerless witness in. Jack was the Bogey Man.

There would be no grand stand here for the hunters, a last, final battle. They weren't Spartans in the Battle of Thermopylae, or the Alamo. They were cockroaches that'd invaded someone's home, and they'd awakened something dark and twisted in the black, something that was going to destroy them with all the empathy of an exterminator.

"Surrender!" Jack yelled, laughing the whole time. "I'll kill you quick. Hell, Angela, I'll even let you live, so you can spend the rest of your days locked up in a dungeon, alone, with only your mom to visit you. Isn't that right, Athalia?"

Again, Angela paused, eyes snapping around through the chaos until Athalia poked her head out from behind one of the enormous rib bones jutting out from the fleshy floor. It was strange, seeing Athalia in her human form, in an environment that was so obviously a nightmare.

“Angela, stop this!” Athalia said. “Stop! It doesn’t need to end this way.”

“Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuc—”

Jeremiah grabbed her shoulder, and yanked her in through the slit he’d cut in the flesh. The man didn’t have the time to open it wide like Triss had to the other opening, and he moved through it like a splinter pushing through flesh, with blood squirting out from the pressure in the wound.

The other hunters tried to follow, but with two less people unloading lead and flame on the endless swarms, the encroaching animals grew closer, and closer. They tried, they really tried, but as hunter after hunter slipped through the bloody hole, the crows and rats had an easier time reaching the target. When three were left, one with a flamethrower and two with rifles, that was the tipping point, when the end was inevitable.

Rats overflowed the three hunters, and screams filled the room, loud enough they cut through the squawks and chirps of the creatures devouring them. Gargling mixed with their screams in moments, and as Damien finally stood up from behind his cover, he watched flailing arms and legs, sticking out from a literal mound of churning fur and claws, eventually go still.

Damien felt sick, and he thanked the Lord Fiona wasn’t here. Vrall may have been comfortable murdering people, but Fiona? He doubted the joyful woman would be able to stomach seeing these men eaten alive, men and women who didn’t deserve it.

“They got away!” Triss said, forcing herself back to her feet. Clutching her chest with one hand, she walked over to Jack, and pointed at the hole in the wall. “Again!”

“They’ve entered the nightmare,” Athalia said, joining them. “I can feel it. Jeremiah must have opened one of our burrows and entered the nightmare, one of Sándor’s nightmare chambers. I can’t tell which one without entering it first, though.”

Nodding and sporting the biggest, strangest grin Damien had ever seen, Jack pat Triss on the shoulder, and started for the hole.

“Come on then. They’re not getting away. Clara! Transform, rip that hole bigger, and run through it first. I want you to punch a hole through whatever defense they’re setting up. They know what I’m doing now, and I want to make sure we catch them off guard a second time. Rip any hunter in the way to bits.”

“O ... kay...” Clara looked to the roiling mound of rats, still pouring over the three hunter corpses, and the crows that flew by and snatched a piece of flesh, before flying off. She looked just as disgusted as Damien felt, and when she looked Jack’s way, she looked concerned, in a blatant ‘please be ok’ sort of way. Jack either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“Aaron,” he continued, “get Jennifer, get her in here. She’ll be playing watch duty for these two. And help her tie them up before you follow us in. Athalia, you’re following me. I want information the moment you can give it to us. If this is in the nightmare realm, then will Fiona be able to help us?”

“She’ll be able to sense you’ve entered the nightmare, but finding you is another matter entirely. Sándor’s lair is not open to ours. She’ll have to push her way in.”

Jack groaned and rolled his eyes. “Of course. Can you navigate to her lair from Sandor’s?”



“Yes. It might take a little time, but yes, getting to my lair or Fiona’s from Sándor’s is doable. I assume you want Fiona’s help?”

Jack shrugged. “The more people on my side to stop Jeremiah, the better the chance I don’t feed your daughter’s guts to my pets.” For a moment, it looked like Athalia was going to hit him, but one glance from the little Ventrue was enough to make her freeze, fists clenched at her sides. “Can Jeremiah escape from inside this nightmare chamber? Escape into the city elsewhere?”

“If Jeremiah had to use this flesh stuff to get into the nightmare realm, I’d be surprised if he has a way out the nightmare that doesn’t come right back here; not like Elen would have multiple of these flesh chambers just sitting around for use, hopefully. And he won’t come back here, not now, when for all he knows, we could have a hundred vampires marching in after us to secure this area. Elen has to be in the nightmare with him. Maybe she can create another way out of the nightmare, but I can’t imagine it’s easy.” The Begotten gestured to the flesh chamber around them. “I can’t imagine her doing any of this is easy. And—”

“That’s enough guessing,” Jack said. “Sick of it. Sick of all this guessing, planning. Ugh, doing it makes me want to puke. Enough. Humans are the ones that need to plan, that need to waste their short, useless lives on plans that accomplish nothing. We go in, and we thrive on the free-for-all!” Shrugging, he pointed to the giant, bleeding hole the hunters had squeezed through, and the three corpses that now lay around it, barely more than skeletons anymore. “Damien, Othello, follow in after us. Do your thing; I expect to see some speed and hear some death. Trissy, behind them. Stay out of the way until you’re useful. Bring Harcourt along too, we might need him. Let’s go.”

Clara started to walk over to the hole, before looking over her shoulder. “But—”

“Now!”

Jack’s voice boomed through the room, thunder that silenced every sound. No one moved, no one breathed, and each and every rodent and bird stopped moving as the weight of the entity’s words settled on them. Clara was dumbfounded, eyes wide and locked on the small man. But, after a second, she swallowed down the growing fear Damien saw on her, and she began to transform.

Seeing the beautiful woman turn into a monstrous wolf beast, standing on two legs and eight feet tall, seemed almost mundane in comparison to everything around her. No one batted an eyelash, not even the three hunters crouched in a corner of the flesh chamber. And, with the strength he expected of a werewolf, Clara the Uratha sank her claws into the fleshy walls, and ripped them apart. Blood squirted, gushing from the fresh wounds, and soaking the enormous beast in fresh crimson; it fit the decor.

After a moment to recover, Clara unleashed an enormous roar, and charged through the hole into the blackness beyond. As she did, Jack followed, chuckling yet again as his army of rats poured around his legs until they reached his knees. Big as Clara was, she managed to make the hole big enough for Jack, hundreds of rats, and dozens of crows to follow in after him without issue.

Athalia walked in after him, and Damien could see the dread filling her. As Othello followed, Damien looked back to the others, and found Triss carrying the same look as Clara.

“What ... have I done,” Triss said. In the noise of rats and crows, Damien had to combine the buried sound with some attempted lip reading to piece together her words; a skill he was now trying to learn.

“What do you mean?”

“I did this to him, begged him for his help, asked him to ... to go all out, like this. Oh fucking god Damien, look at him. He’s—”

“Let’s save the guilt for after we get Jeremiah, Angela, and Elen, ok? Besides, I saw him pull out of this once before, at the hospital. Trust him.”

Damien turned, and followed after the others, Othello beside him. He didn’t let Beatrice see his face, and the worry he knew was carved there. This was the second time he’d seen this personality manifest in Jack, yes, but last time the kid pulled out of it by seeing the comatose, dying body of his mother. There was no one like that this time, and if anything, the presence of all the sources of pain and agony in Jack’s life being in one place, would drive him and the curse to new depths of carnage.

“Ok. Ok, yeah.”

“Sure you’re up for this?” He gestured to her chest.

“No, but I’m not missing this. That bitch has to die, Damien. She killed Julias, and ... and she has to ... has to...”

Damien pat her shoulder once, and offered his best confident nod and smile, which weren’t very good, before he followed after Othello.

It was obvious on contact that this wasn’t the same sort of entrance as the one they came in from. The first portal had definitely been meant to be opened; maybe not the way Triss opened it, but it had been designed to be opened, to serve as a doorway. But whatever Jeremiah had done had been some sort of hack job, using Elen’s magic symbols to force an opening through the wall of flesh. It was a mess, leaking blood and showing ruined flesh, like skin being torn apart by claws. Not like, was.

It pressed on parts of his body as he pushed through it, and he had to close his eyes to keep the blood out of them. The wound was closing, like a healing wound, and Damien took some time to push the hanging flaps of flesh apart. Once he created more room, more birds flew in, many hopping off his shoulders as they flapped past. It took effort to not flinch or drop at the feel of their bodies jumping off his.

“Beatrice! Before you come in, tell Aaron he should stay out here with Jennifer, and try and keep this doorway from closing!” Damien said. With the city at his beck and call, Jack’s army was limitless. There were more crows and rats in Dolareido than any human could individually count, and to have them at his service made Jack unstoppable. If they were blocked off, it’d be a problem.

Triss nodded, and Damien pushed through, more rats and birds following him as he fought against the heavy flesh. The wall was thick, thicker than Damien could have guessed. Three feet, four feet, five feet. Six feet. Longinus, give him strength, he was walking into the valley of the shadow of death.

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~~Antoinette~~

She stared at the text in her phone, and slowly squeezed the device. It shattered unceremoniously, bending on itself until the glass screen littered the floor of her office. She dropped it, letting it land with a loud clunk, before she started to tremble with growing anger.

“That ... infuriating ... stupid ... boy!” If Daniel were with her, no doubt her old friend would have asked what was bothering her. But he was not, and she was forced to share her fury with the air. “That idiot boy is risking his life on a yet another excursion, another foolhardy mission to fight the hunters. He has not prepared!” Why did the boy insist on letting impulse dictate his choices, when the

hunters were involved? Did he not understand that such a rash action was bound to lead to failure and pain?

She paced left and right in front of her window overlooking her city, and glared down at the Elysium garden beneath her. Once he returned, she was going to tie him to the wall in her bedroom, and leave him there. She would explain, in great detail, the folly of his reasonings and actions, and invite his mother to join in berating him. Samantha may not agree with literally chaining her son to a wall, until Antoinette detailed the actions of her son. Then, no doubt, she would agree with Antoinette. The boy needed to be locked up for his own protection.

She kicked the phone across the floor. A touch of Kindred strength was enough that, upon colliding with the toe of her shoe, the phone exploded, showering her office in its innards.

There was some sense in what the fool was doing, based on what little his text told her. If a hunter had indeed offered him a single night to launch an assault on Jeremiah, and Jack had used his skills as a Ventrue to prove the hunter spoke true, then she could not entirely blame him for choosing to take advantage of the opening. But the boy did not understand. He did not appreciate that eternity lay before him, and if he were to act with wisdom, he would understand that a gamble on revenge was not worth risking eternity. The vampires could weather this storm, and deal with the hunters as they always did, with patience and decades.

Sighing, she took a moment to regain her composure. Such unbridled rage did not become her, and only with a clear mind could she respond to this situation intelligently. As her love described it, it was flipping a switch in the mind, and setting all emotions aside; evidently, he did not employ the skill in this particular matter.

She reached into her desk, acquired another phone, and called her sheriff.

“Yes, Prince?”

“Daniel, where is Jacob?”

“Jacob? I ... I’m not sure. He’s difficult to track, but I assume he’s in one of his sacrifice chambers. He’s not in his Circle’s cave.”

“I see. Well, his Circle has launched an assault on the hunters, with Jack leading them. That foolish boy has taken the witches, his friend Damien, and even one of the Uratha with him into what is undoubtedly a suicidal battle!” Do not crush this phone, Antoinette. It is your spare, and you will need to format a new one should you destroy this one. You do not have time for that.

“I ... see. Natasha?”

“His message said nothing of Vola. Where is your childe?”

“I do not know. I assume she is with Matthew and Arturo, and perhaps her friend Herrington, if ... if Herrington is not with Terry? The message said nothing of her?”

“It did not.” With a loud sigh, Antoinette sent a message to Natasha. Normally the diligent Mekhet would respond within seconds, but nothing came. “I assume you are correct, then,” she said to Daniel. Whether that was because Jack dare not ask Natasha to join him on this mission, knowing full well it would pit Vola against her Prince and teacher, or because he had asked and she said no, Antoinette did not know. But Natasha would crack about such a request from Jack, if Antoinette pressed her for information. Interrogations could come later.

“You think ... Jack will be able to defeat the hunters?”

“With this curse as a tool for his use, like the Devil on his shoulder, I fear he will be able to do far more than defeat them, Daniel. It will be a slaughter, and it will affect my love in ways

neither of us can predict.” That did not mean his life was not in danger, but after witnessing its power herself, it was his soul she was concerned for, not his life.

“I see. But, why do you wish to speak to Jacob?”

“Because Jack and the Circle may assume that they were doing this on a whim, without the knowledge of their superiors, but I know Jacob. He and that infernal creature Black Blood watch the shadows of my city, and with such chaos occurring, that man must know something.”

“Then I will find him, immediately.”

“See that you do.” She ended the conversation, got up, and headed for the door. Before she could open it, someone knocked.

There were only three vampires she considered talented and powerful enough to sneak into her tower, without at least one of her defense measures noticing: Daniel, Jacob, and Maria. Talented as the Uratha were, she doubted they had the tools to penetrate her tower; they were beasts, wolves, meant for dirt and hunts, not walls of metal and electronics. Her Beast did not recognize the aura of a fellow Kindred, however.

Upon opening the door, she could not help but be surprised at the presence before her. Elder Nosferatu and Mekhet could hide their presence to the point she would have difficulty sensing them, but this, she had not expected. Mark, the Begotten, stood there with Azamel, in a wheel chair.

A curious moment, and one Antoinette was forced to take pause within. In another circumstance, it would not be Elen Antoinette and her Kindred would be hunting, it would be this woman, yet another old, frail creature in a wheelchair, with far too much power under her control.

Mark was an interesting looking man, dark skin, muscled, and overweight. It would not have surprised Antoinette to see the man playing American Football. But the power of his Horror, the creature that lurked within, did not radiate might. It radiated disgust. It radiated shadow and stealth, subterfuge, and the quiet inching of insects and rot. He was the reason Azamel now sat before her, bypassing Antoinette's defenses.

Begotten were utterly aggravating. Slippery, frustrating creatures. They had tools to tunnel through the world in ways Antoinette struggled to fathom, let alone mimic. If the Uratha were a reminder that Antoinette struggled to master the mysteries of otherworldly connections, the Begotten were reminders that the Uratha were merely children by comparison, in that regard. They lived and breathed other realms in the way Antoinette lived and breathed blood, money, and concrete.

"Azamel," Antoinette said, barely suppressing a snarl, "I assume you have business with me?"

"I do. I ... assume Jack has sent word that he's attacking the hunters?"

"He has."

"Did he mention that Athalia is with him?"

"He did not."

"Hmm. I assume he wants to protect her from the fallout. Your boy toy puts others before himself as a habit, without even realizing it, doesn't he?"

"He ... does." Sighing, she folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot. "What do you seek, old monster?"

"I would like to see Sándor."



“Out of the question. He is locked away, and I will not risk the presence of one of your kind.”

The old monster chuckled, which turned into a choking cough within moments. “You think I’ll attempt to free him.”

“I think I am not so senseless as to let such a security risk arise with no reasonable benefit for myself.”

The old woman tapped her fingers together. She reeked of cigarettes, tar, poison, and age, but at least she was not smoking; such an insult would be too much.

“Your lover visited me, Prince. I know where’s he’s gone.”

Antoinette clenched her teeth until she felt her fangs emerge, hidden within her lips but ready to sink into this creature and end her pitiful existence as a dried husk.

“And you wish to see Sándor, in exchange for such information?”

“That, and because ... there’s a chance he may be freed.”

## Chapter 106

~~Natasha~~

She was going on an adventure!

There was a time, not too long ago, where such a thought would have been absurd. Adventure was not smart. Adventure was how you met an early second death. Survivor bias was a killer, and she would not let the whims of baseless positive thinking get her killed. She made only smart decisions, ones that earned her plenty of money, and status in the Invictus.

And then everything turned upside down. She met a cute boy named Damien, shot him in the head, and got involved in so many things. As a dragon, she'd gained a lot of responsibilities, many that pushed her to step outside her comfort zone. And then she had an orgy while her best friend watched. She met a couple of cute werewolves that she now had sex with regularly, at the same time. She'd seen spirits and ghostly after images, living nightmares, and spoken with what might as well have been some ancient god of death. At this point, she was starting to feel comfortable with being uncomfortable. Mostly. Somewhat. A bit.

Still, as she walked through the Gauntlet behind Matthew and in front of Arturo, she reminded herself that this was dangerous. Adventures like this were how people got killed. So, despite the fact she was going on an adventure with her boyfriends, her best friend, and her best friend's boyfriend, she refused to let her excitement get the best of her. Fear was a better emotion, far more useful, and good at keeping her alive.

She wiped the smile off her face, and tried her best to adopt a frown instead. But after her last trip into the Shadow realm, she

didn't feel so scared anymore. Spirits were scary, sure, but not so scary they paralyzed her. They seemed alien, in a real alien way, like from another galaxy sort of way. Their mannerisms weren't human. It was obvious at a glance that spirits did not think like humans or paranormals, and according to the Uratha, they didn't really think at all. They were manifestations of aspects of the physical realm, and everything they did was a reaction to their environment and situations, even if it was an intelligent reaction that considered the past or future.

Which, she supposed, was an argument someone could make about sentient beings. Deterministic universe, no free will, everything is just a chain of causality and chemical reactions and neural pathways, etc. It was a train of thought she didn't waste energy on anymore.

As they stepped out of the Gauntlet, she almost squeaked. Right, right, they were high up, and walking on support beams. Except, that's not what they looked like in the Hisil. Here, she was walking on smoothed metal that glowed, metal that curved under her feet, and metal that felt warm through her shoes. She reached down and touched the flat, filled surface, to make sure it wasn't hot enough to melt her feet.

It was the same building, except no longer were there any hanging lights; the glowing metal served that purpose. As far as she could tell, there weren't any speakers, either. But there was music. It thrummed, fast and frantic, like the heartbeat of a kine on PCP. It almost sounded like drums, but the bass was so thick, she felt it in her skull.

The walls were different, too, with lots of curves that made her want to touch them, and slide along them. Beneath her, she could see spirits floating around, pink and blue with vague human shapes, rubbing along each other and the walls. She didn't need the boys to explain to her what they were, these spirits were aspects of pleasure,

sexuality, and joy. The human-shaped ones were obviously created by the humans who came to the club and had sex without end, but there were other spirits down there, too. Some of the creatures that hovered around looked like giant bees, and she had no idea what those were. Others were more obvious, like some sort of giant dragonfly-looking creature, purple, that buzzed around from table to table, leaving behind a white powder from its wings that disappeared after a few seconds. Drugs? Certainly not the pleasure of drugs, but perhaps, the distribution of it. But that made no sense. The spirits wouldn't care about the white powder, and as she watched them from above, she was correct. They didn't care. So why was it doing what it did?

It was a complex ecosystem, where spirits did things. She had no chance of understanding its finer points without intense study, study she was eager to pursue. And that thought made her smile. She had a boss that appreciated such dedication to examination. If Tash wanted, she could get completely lost in studying the spirits, putting together what essentially amounted to a dissertation on them, and Antoinette would both appreciate it, but also read it.

Maybe, just maybe, if she could convince her boyfriends to have a chat with her about the ecosystem of spirits, specifically those in Dolareido, it'd make Antoinette happy? It'd also piss off Avery, though. Making Antoinette happy was one of her primary goals, but she didn't want to make the lives of her boyfriends any harder than she had to.

"They know we're here," Art said, "no need to hide. Just, obey the rules of the city, and Black Blood's dominion over it will keep the spirits from getting in our way."

"W-What are those rules?" Tash said.

Matthew shrugged, and started back along the catwalk the way they came. Much easier, now that the catwalk didn't have holes to

fall through. “Hard to say, really. Seems to be a strange balance of the official human law, and the laws the Prince has set up.” He started climbing down the support beam, and Tash sucked in a breath. The support structure didn’t have the individual rungs anymore, as if such a detail was meaningless in the spirit world; they kind of were, really. The metal was warped and bendy, and it glowed a strange rainbow of colors all the way down to the base. The group slid down them without issue, though she could see Eric struggled with the height, and how with the new support beams, they literally had to slide down them, gripping their sides as tight as they could.

Climbing back up was going to be a pain, but perhaps the Uratha had a different locus for getting back to the physical world.

On the dance floor, things were as chaotic and overflowing with life as they were back in normal Dolareido. The spirits swirled around each other, though it was plain to see some were utterly gigantic compared to others. One spirit in particular, another pink creature with decidedly feminine curves, was slithering around the dance floor, while other spirits came up to rub against her—it. Other strange creatures kept out of the way, some more dragonfly-looking things, and a few more of the odd, large bees, that looked too cartoony and simple to be actual bees. And now that she was underneath the pillars, she could see there was something actually flying around underneath the catwalk, a butterfly creature with a long, snake body, and many pairs of wings. It was glowing different colors, each pulsing with the weird, heartbeat music that wasn’t music.

The spirits didn’t seem to really care about Natasha or Jessy. Sure, they stopped and looked at them, if ‘look’ was the right word, considering many of them didn’t have eyes, or had many that looked in many directions at once. Maybe they cared a little, but it wasn’t enough to stop them from doing whatever it was they were doing.

The Uratha, on the other hand, were enough to force every nearby spirit to take notice. The strange creatures moved aside, some going so far as to flatten their serpent bodies to the curved walls to stay out of the way. She didn't understand how a spirit of pleasure, or joy, or drugs, or pretty lights, or all the various possibilities Dolareido had to offer, could express fear, but it seemed like they were. Fear and discontent. They didn't enjoy the presence of the Uratha.

"They really don't like you," Jessy said, eyes wide as she looked around. Right, this was her first step into the Hisil, and she looked at each spirit like a child's first visit to a zoo. It made Tash giggle, seeing her badass, sporty friend regress to a young girl.

Jessy had owned a cat, before she was turned. It was easy to forget sometimes, that Jessy had a soft side.

Art shrugged, with the exact same mannerism as Matthew. Two peas in a pod, those two. "We're the police. Yeah, they don't like us."

"Self-appointed police at that," Matthew said. "If we let them do whatever they wanted, it'd lead to some ridiculous chaos."

"But not in Dolareido," Eric said.

Art nodded, though Tash could see the hesitance on his face. "But ... not here, no. At least, whatever strange balance Black Blood maintains here, it's lasted. So it doesn't want us here, naturally. But Dolareido has reached a critical mass of essence and spirits, David says. Shit's going to pop if we don't help."

They stepped out of the club, and into the streets of Dolareido, in the center of South Side's entertainment district. Jessy gasped as she looked at the buildings and their lights, how they curved in strange ways, and glowed in places where there weren't actually any lights to glow. In the Hisil, half the buildings in South Side were glowing in strange places. Spirits flowed along, some driving along

on their weird tire-asphalt hybrid bodies, others flying along on crow wings. The only ones that looked human were the obvious sex spirits, and even then, they didn't look very human. No legs, with bodies like Casper the friendly ghost, except far too friendly, and their faces lacked much in the way of facial features. While the blue ones had broader shoulders, and the pink ones had hips and breasts, it wasn't static. Some of them changed color, or changed shape, or both, as they came and went from the various glowing, twisted buildings. They were manifestations of sexual pleasure, after all, not of people themselves.

But there were direct manifestations of animals, she noticed. On the buildings she could see crows, though they were exaggerated in strange ways; particularly, their eyes had a habit of glowing in the dark, mostly white, but sometimes she could see a crow with red eyes peering down at her from the edges of rooftops. And the rats were practically amorphous blobs, moving along the base edge of buildings, and disappearing into the million holes Dolareido had to offer. Some were larger, had more definition, and pushed the other rats around.

“Holy shit,” Jessy said. “It’s a whole god damn new dimension.”

“You’ve been in a nightmare dimension before,” Eric said.

“Yeah but, this is, like ... there’s an entire city here! That gargoyle dude’s nightmare chamber was just a big, empty castle. I mean, my god!” She pointed up at the night sky, and the chaos of colors it held.

Natasha nodded. “True. Here it’s ... s-so alive. There’s a lot g-going on.”

Art started walking first, in the direction of Devil’s Corner, and the rest followed. “That’s just here. In most places in the city, it can be pretty sparse, and that’s true of most cities in the world. Humans and paranormals don’t have a direct reflection in the spirit world,

you've probably noticed by now, so all the spirits are reflections of other things. It can mean some cities look sparse. Dolareido is ... not so much, not here in South Side. It's pretty empty elsewhere though, especially North Side."

"Why don't they have reflections?" Eric and Jessy said in tandem.

"Hard to say. Something to do with a soul, I suppose."

That alone was a question worth a million questions. What was special about humans and paranormals, that set them apart from other animals? A scientist would say nothing, but she was looking at evidence that suggested otherwise.

"S-Speaking of," Tash said, "did you hear about Jack's sister?" Everyone present nodded. "Horrible, so horrib-ble. Jack and Samantha think it's the real her, and n-n-not a ... left b-behind image. So, her ... soul..."

Everyone shivered as they walked down the sidewalk. Talk of souls was always going to be heavy talk, especially with all the rumors of resurrection lately. With Julias dead, Tash could only imagine the sorts of things Triss was up to, especially with an ancient witch as her boss.

"Spirits don't leave behind ghosts," Matthew said, "ever. They can be killed, and they dissipate, become essence, merge into the environment of the Hisil, but nothing like a ghost is left behind."

Jessy raised a hand. "How many spirits have you killed?"

Art winced and looked around. Spirits were listening, giving them space, but still listening. They didn't like the Uratha being in their city, and admitting to killing them was probably not a good idea. "Not sure. Dozens?" he whispered. "A lot more if you include the hunts for food."



“Food?” Tash looked around at the spirits. Some of them were talking with each other in a language she didn’t know, and she cringed at the thought of her boyfriends eating something like Safe. “H-How does that work?”

The boys looked about, motioned people in, and everyone got in close. They were still walking, but huddled up, shoulder to shoulder and with Matthew and Arturo directly behind them so they could whisper, and people could listen.

“Uratha are half spirit,” Matthew said. “We can eat spirits the same way a predator spirit can eat spirits of prey. Eric here could come hunting with us, bring down a beast of the tunnels, or maybe one of the larger rat spirits, and feast.”

Jessy raised her hand again. “Eat spirits?”

Matthew nodded. “Yeah, just like a steak.” When Tash, Jessy, and Eric all looked over their shoulders to raise brows at him, the jolly giant laughed. “You’d have to be Uratha to understand. And Eric might just not realize it, until he’s tasted it. But, maybe this hunt will awaken it in him.”

“I doubt I’ll be eating that drug spirit I saw,” he said over his shoulder.

“Maybe,” Art said. “Spirits do it to each other all the time, devour or absorb each other. A predator spirit may devour a prey spirit, with teeth and claw. Or, a predator spirit might absorb another, contesting territory or fighting for dominance over each other. Either way, you get a stronger, usually larger spirit. They get smarter, more self aware, and more capable of pursuing whatever it is they are. So, don’t feel guilty about eating them, Eric. It’s part of the ecosystem.”

Predators absorbing predators. A wolf with hawk wings? A giant scorpion in a desert, with a dozen tails? The possibilities were

endless!

Tash absorbed every bit of information she could, and did her best to hide how interesting the conversation was. With Matthew and Arturo behind her, she feigned keeping her eyes on the sidewalk ahead of her, and looking around at the crazy environment of the spirit half of Dolareido, but she really wasn't. Every detail her boyfriends dropped, she wrote down in her mind. Her boys knew by now that anything they said, she was eventually going to tell Antoinette. If they were willing to talk about it, they were willing to have Antoinette hear about it. Hopefully.

“But,” Matthew said, “most of us don't, or don't often. Carter does, Avery, and so does David. Some of us are closer to our spirit side than others, and some aren't so much. I like meat, personally.”

“How do you like it cooked,” Eric said.

“Either raw or blue seared. The closer you are to your spirit side, the harder you're going to find it to eat normal human food; most Uratha can't touch shit like chips or french fries without getting major digestion issues.”

Natasha and Jessy laughed, and the boys blinked at them several times, before they chuckled as well. Yeah, vampires couldn't eat anything but blood; Tash had long forgotten what a burger tasted like. For the boys to lose their ability to eat fast food, or rather, not be able to digest it easily, was cute by comparison.

“In some cities,” Jessy said, “vampires have parties where they will use the Blush of Life, and indulge in human food. They puke it up later, but I do admit, sometimes I wonder if it'd be worth it, to taste pizza again.”

Ah, yes, pizza, the ultimate food. Probably half the kine Tash had drank from her in second life had eaten pizza within at least a

couple days. She couldn't taste that of course, but statistically speaking, it was likely.

Pizza sent her down memory lane, and she smiled to herself as she thought about home. Not her current home, the apartment or the Elysium tower. She thought about her home before she died and became a vampire, before her second life began. She thought about the necklace.

“Hey ... c-can we take a d-d-detour?”

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Since they didn't have to hide their presence from watching eyes, they got to traverse Dolareido the fun way.

Matthew, Arturo, and Eric all transformed into their wolf forms. Not their regular wolf forms, but the giant wolves, bigger than lions and much thicker. This immediately earned some awwws and ooohs from her, and she hugged Matthew and Arturo as tightly as she could around their giant manes. Terrifying as they would have looked if they were snarling or growling, they were instead sitting like well-trained house dogs, and that was absolutely adorable. She squeezed on them nice and tight, buried her face deep in the fur of their necks, and giggled.

“Kat is going to wonder what the fuck is that smell,” Jessy said, but she copied Tash, and gave Eric a giant hug. Eric wasn't sitting though. Maybe he felt self conscious about acting like a dog? It didn't bother Jessy, but Tash couldn't help but turn into a silly, stupid child when her boys were transformed.

She climbed onto Matthew's back as the wolf beast stood up, and she beamed at her fellow vampire. Jessy looked at her, froze, and practically exploded.

“Oh my fucking god, that is so cute!” Jessy made a very un-Jessy squeal, and started digging into her pockets. “I need a picture! I

need a ... a ... It won't work if I take a picture, will it?"

Tash shook her head. "P-Probably not. Uratha have that lunacy thing. It w-w-won't let cameras work right, when they're d-doing werewolfy stuff." She gestured down to the enormous, fluffy creature underneath her. "N-No one would confuse this for a regular wolf."

"God fucking damn it. You're so tiny, and he's so big, it's like ... arg, fuck it." Without ceremony, she hopped onto Eric's back. Mistake. Eric wavered for a moment as someone over twice Natasha's weight was suddenly jumping on him, and he let out a small, deep woof noise. Frowning like a child throwing a tantrum, Jessy slid off and stomped her feet a couple times. "No fair."

"You could transform t-too, you know."

"I don't have something like this," Jessy said. Tash had seen her use various Gangrel forms that warped and twisted her human body, but actual animal transformation was something different.

"B-But you can transform into a normal wolf."

"True." With smile returning, Jessy began to transform into the wolf Tash had seen her use before. A normal wolf, not one of the giant beasts the boys had become.

Eric, without any indication that he was going to, transformed as well. He shrank, mass disappearing into himself, and fur thinning. A wolf was still an enormous creature, but paled in comparison to the giant mass of their bigger, Urshul form. Now, he was basically the same size as the Jessy-wolf beside him, maybe just a little bigger.

It was Natasha's turn to make a squeal, and she struggled to keep the noise from erupting too loudly. It was so romantic, how Eric changed to match her, and now they were two beautiful wolves beside each other. Naturally, Jessy-wolf nudged into Eric-wolf, and

started playing, pressing her snout into his neck, and hitting her shoulder against him. And Tash could see Eric wanted to do the same, play, wrestle, but after a couple seconds, he started walking forward.

“Yes, focus! Let’s f-focus on ... this little detour.”

Off they went, to visit the suburbs. It was a couple miles away, and if they had to walk, it would have taken a while. It didn’t seem like there were any cars to drive, though she did see several spirits that could only have been car spirits driving by; no passengers, though. Getting to the suburbs as running wolves, on the other hand, was pretty fast. Natasha was Mekhet, and could utilize Celerity to a great degree with ease, but it wasn’t really meant for running miles. The run of a wolf, on the other hand, made covering miles take only minutes.

The suburbs of Dolareido were divided into several sections that ran in an arch across where it met North Side. There was Rich Side, where Viktor and ... Julias, used to live. Then there was the normal suburbs, with one half sporting nice houses, and the other sporting still-nice-but-not-ridiculously-overpriced houses. Natasha’s mom and dad used to live in the latter, like Jack’s mom did. Maybe she’d run into Samantha and Jack’s old home while they were out looking for what she hoped to discover.

She wasn’t sure what she expected to find, but as her wolf mount slowed down and started to stroll through the streets of Dolareido’s suburbs, she knew she’d find it eventually. Unlike the city center of Dolareido’s spirit half, the suburbs were calm and quiet. Few spirits roamed the large streets, and the ones that did didn’t carry half the imposing nature of the others. The hills of grass and the small sidewalks along the front yards of houses, the small park with a swing set and sandbox, the few trees, the complete lack of convenience stores and neon signs, it was all definitely a very not-Dolareido place.

But that wasn't fair. Dolareido had another side to it, a quiet side, a side where she'd grown up when she was human. It wasn't a vampire friendly part of the city, from the lack of population density or gathering hubs, so vampires rarely came to the suburbs. But as she looked around at the buildings, she smiled as the memories surfaced, of growing up in the quiet world of a home instead of an apartment.

The area reflected that, she could see. Instead of bright, glowing signs that were twisted and pulsing with the Hisil's oddness, the houses in the suburbs were visually dull. In fact, they looked too dull. The houses were there, but they lacked the features she expected to see on a house. The roofs didn't have shingles, but were a solid black surface instead, void of texture. No siding, just a flat surface of color. The lawns were solid flat green surfaces, grass comically simple, and the sidewalks lacked the grooves she expected. So, maybe the Hisil was reflecting how dull the suburbs were? But there was more to it than that. There was an honesty to the display, of the homes showing what they were in such simple terms.

The park near her old home, on the other hand, was far more vibrant. It was night in Shadow Dolareido, but the park had a glow to it that defied her eyes. There was one electric light in the old park in the physical version, a lamp post in the center, and in the Shadow version of the park, it glowed a gentle yellow, but in a much larger area. Soothing, and warm. The swings, slide, monkey bars, sand box, they all had exaggerated features, with simple but bright colors that the single lamppost illuminated to the point they themselves glowed with its light. The grass and dirt were almost invisible, while the playground equipment drew the eye and invited interest, as if asking her to come play.

Within the park, small lights drifted around, and the three werewolves and two vampires paused to stare.

“Oh my g-god,” she said. “That’s beautiful.”

Fireflies. They couldn’t have been actual fireflies, being that they were in the Shadow Realm; maybe they were spirit manifestations of fireflies? But they were huge, and didn’t have a body. They moved around slowly through the park, and Natasha could hear what sounded like giggling, high pitched and joyful. The spirits of children? No, there were no spirits that were reflections of humans themselves, in the Hisil, but that didn’t change that the glowing orbs moved around the park, giggling like children would. They hovered about a foot above the ground, each a foot in width of pure, glowing yellow light, and while they didn’t use the swing set, or sit in the sandbox, or go down the slide, they moved around the objects that children doubtlessly used every day, to have fun.

Spirits of fun, then? Or joy? Or juvenile purity? She didn’t know, and the werewolves couldn’t talk with dog mouths to tell her. Maybe she could ask them later, but then, there was some magic to the mystery. Whatever these spirits were, they were beautiful, like fairies — the good kind — mingling among children and the joy they exuded. The sight of them dug up memories she’d thought she’d lost, memories of her as a small girl, playing with other children. Nothing in the world held the same sense of wonder or amazement, as the memories she had from when she was just a child, learning to ride the swings or go down a slide for the first time.

But, what would happen if the spirits here grew out of control? There were stories in many cultures, about mythical entities that wanted humans to come play with them for all eternity, fairies and such. The stories were not happy ones. It wouldn’t surprise her if those stories had been inspired by real spirits, who grew too large and powerful, invaded the physical world, and started to spread their influence. All of a sudden, the old fairy tales she knew about, the ones with strange and obtuse creatures, seemed like very real possibilities.

She and the wolves moved on. She guided them along the streets, and she kept her eyes along the houses they moved past. Surely one of the houses had to have it. Maybe—

“Oh, there! There!” She pointed to a nearby house, and the bedroom window that overlooked the street. The houses in this area were a bit small, and crammed together, with little in the way of lawns. This district belonged to the Carthians, more or less, as it was right next to the urban areas with the apartments and convenience stores. On a normal shopping day, people in this neighborhood would drive out to the urban area if they wanted clothes, or technology. But the neighborhood was still far away enough that it was quiet, and the only noise she could remember through the day had been from kids playing outside, or a school bus driving by.

The wolves trotted up the driveway of the house. In the Hisil, the driveway had no cracks or dents, but was a smooth black color and shape, as if it was made of plastic. No car in the driveway; none of the driveways had cars, now that she thought about it. A lack of cars was a consistent thing in Shadow Dolareido, though the occasional wheel thing drove by, a concoction of asphalt and tires, with eyes that looked like headlights. She saw many of those in the center of South Side, but out in the suburbs, they were rare.

“Hello!” she called to the window.

The glowing orb hovered over to the window, and flapped one of its angel wings at her. It opened the window with what Tash guessed were tiny arms hidden in the glow of its spherical body, and it flew down to her.

“Hello!” it said, in a high pitched voice. “Uratha? And Kindred. Are ... are you here for me?”

“N-No! No. Um, not really. I uh ... I’m s-sorry, I ... uh ... did we meet? M-My boss, she ... she summoned a spirit like you before, and—”



“Oh! Oh oh. I know you. Friend spoke of you, spoke of visit to Gurihal. Do you want to speak to Safe of Grey Street?”

“Grey Street?” She clapped a couple times, before she forced down her rising giggles. “That’s where my home is.”

“Safe of Grey Street has spoken of their visit. And they spoke of you. They’ve visited you before, hiding in Twilight while you were young. I will take you to them.”

Safe had visited her before? Spirits could sneak into the physical world, she knew that, and hide in Twilight; Twilight was what she and the Prince spent a lot of time investigating. And if it was her necklace that summoned Safe to the Prince’s tower, it didn’t surprise her that Safe must have visited her when she was human, her, and other kids who felt safe in their homes.

Without questioning it, the Uratha and Kindred began to follow the hovering, spherical angel creature. Natasha was still on Matthew’s back, so she got to spend her time looking around and taking in as many details as she could. It was true the city looked empty at first glance, as the suburbs usually did at night, but the more she kept her eyes open, the more she spotted movement. A slithering serpent creature went into a drain along the street curb. Several crows flew by, each of varying sizes that were comically different; one might as well have been the size of an albatross. There was a raccoon, but as usual with the animal spirits, it had didn’t look quite like a normal raccoon. Its tail was bigger, fluffier, its body leaner and more sly, and unless her eyes were deceiving her, its hands looked more like human hands wearing black gloves than a raccoon’s hands.

There were other things too. Dolareido’s Hisil sky was a bizarre display of colors, especially in the center of South Side, but out here it looked a bit less crazy, a bit more natural. But there was no denying that one could tell the direction to the entertainment

district of South Side by looking at the sky, and seeing where the warped lighting patterns were bleeding into the clouds.

There were other firefly-like creatures, glowing tiny orbs, and they drifted around streetlamps, or moved along windowsills of nearby houses. They had different colors, too, especially compared to the darker or stranger colors of center South Side: slime green or pulsing neon. Out here, they were soft blues and gentle greens, warm amber, and inviting yellows.

Soon they were on Grey Street, and she smiled at how the Hisil reflected its existence. Yeah, not much happened on Grey Street, and the Hisil agreed. It was quiet, and it was empty. But there was movement in some of the windows of the oddly smooth, simplified houses. Other spirits, maybe like the one in front of her, who looked very similar to the Safe Natasha met. Were they the same spirit, a spirit of safety, or the feeling of safety children felt in their homes?

A large set of angel wings appeared between two homes, hovering forward toward the street. The other spirit, the one with Natasha was maybe a foot wide, with a six-foot wing span. She thought it had arms, but it was hard to see in the glow of its body. On the other hand, the larger creature that hovered out from between two homes had double the wingspan, and while it still had a spherical body, like a glowing glass ball, Natasha was sure she could see some features, like arms or legs within the sphere. It looked almost angelic, in a way, or like a fairy that was evolving inside a safe container.

“Hello!” the larger Safe spirit said. “I remember you, from the Gurihal!”

“Safe!” Natasha hopped off Matthew’s back, and ran over to the large angel creature. And, as if she’d opened the front door to her home after a long day at school, she opened her arms to hug the creature, and felt the weight on her shoulders vanish. She didn’t

know why, didn't really understand how, but her body just moved on its own, and wanted to hug this old, beautiful feeling.

The spirit hugged her back, angel wings circling her. "Hello!"

"I ... I never told you my name, did I? I'm Natasha."

"Hello Natasha! I'm glad you're ok. You've been safe?"

"I have, I have!" Giggling like she was a child, she stepped back a little as the huge angel wings spread for her. Yes, she could see through the glass body of Safe now, and see that there was indeed a tiny person inside the sphere, without features, and glowing so bright it filled the orb with pure light. "You've grown."

"I have, I have! I am Safe of Grey Street. The choir has spoken."

Choir? She was tempted to ask, but no, not the time.

"Um, they"—Natasha gestured toward the other Safe spirit—"said you'd visited me before, when I was human? M-Must have been a long time ago."

"It was!" Despite that she was bigger than the other spirit, Safe's voice had the same, high-pitched, joyful squeal. It was contagious, loving, warm, and Natasha couldn't stop smiling at the sound of it. "I was small then, very small, with no name. Now I am Safe of Grey Street. Are you safe, Natasha?"

"I'm, uh, v-very safe. These two Uratha are my protectors. The Kindred is my friend, and the Uratha with her is t-t-too." Friend by proxy. Maybe she should have asked Eric if he felt that way before saying it, but he seemed like the sort of guy to be shy about that sort of stuff, and maybe squirm before reluctantly agreeing. So, it'd probably be best to spare him the pain of that conversation, and just tell him he was a friend.

“Protectors!” Safe spread its wings and offered a bow; a strange look, considering it was just a floating, glowing glass sphere with huge wings. “It’s good that you are safe.” And, as if satisfied that they were indeed safe, the smaller spirit flew away.

Queue for everyone to start transforming. It looked strange to her, the sight of them transforming, but the spirits didn’t seem to care that four wolves, two of which were monstrously massive and scary, transformed into humans; or humanoids, rather. Uratha and Kindred weren’t human, even when in human form.

“And,” Art said, mouth emerging as his enormous snout vanished into a human face, “you’ve been keeping a balance, right, Safe of Grey Street?”

“I have! We have.” The angel creature motioned to her departing, smaller kin with a wing. “Though, our choir is small, as Avery knows.”

“Small?” Natasha said. “D-Do people not feel ... safe, in Dolareido?”

With a warm smile, without a hint of the condescending smirk she’d expect from any lecturing Kindred, Matt gestured to the buildings. “Just because a choir is small, doesn’t mean they don’t have a large effect, or that Dolareido doesn’t have a large reservoir for them to feed on. But some spirits have an easier time growing than others, and some spirits have an easier time gorging on essence compared to others. It all depends on the environment, and how thick the Gauntlet is. The thicker the Gauntlet, the less spirits have to eat, and the less they hang around.”

Complexity on top of complexity. It was a big puzzle, one she was delighted to try and solve; as long as Avery didn’t kill her for it. She didn’t want to be another Minerva.

“Safety,” she said, “w-we came to the Hisil, because Eric wants to ... to...”

“If I’m going to be stuck doing this werewolf gig,” the man said, “I figure I should give it a shot, doing things in a way I can get behind. So, point me in a direction toward something that deserves killing.”

“Deserves?” Safety said.

“Yeah, something that’s causing a lot of harm to Dolareido’s citizens, in Gurihal. I already had a target, but if Tash thinks you know better, then hit me.”

“Oh. You mean, ones that damage their safety?” The safety spirit brought its wings on itself, and pondered. Or at least, it certainly looked like it was pondering.

“Ones that damage safety,” Eric said, “or otherwise inflict harm. Anything that leads to pain, and—”

“Ooh, pain. Yes, pain.” One of its wings unfolded, and pointed back toward the city. “An agony spirit has been growing underneath what you humans call Devil’s Corner. They nest under some place called Mike’s Ring.”

“An ... agony spirit?” Eric said, scratching the back of his neck. “I thought maybe there’d be something more specific, like, a spirit of ... theft, or drug abuse, or murder, or...”

“Oh! One of the named! Those are dangerous, Uratha Eric! Very dangerous. But ... but, if you want to harm those, one spirit called Needle Swords has been growing quite menacing. It drifts near the Blood Tower, and hides under the Turning Lights.”

Needle Swords. That was probably the spirit Tash had seen last time, the ugly, nasty thing with needles for fingers.

“Turning Lights?” Eric said.

“It means,” Matthew said, “Doc Omala’s. Needle Swords is definitely a part of the reason Dolareido’s drug problem exists, and some other nasty shit that happens in the shadows of the city. But we haven’t touched it because—”

Art threw up his hands. “Because Avery says don’t. Black Blood doesn’t want us messing with the balance of its city, especially in the center of South Side, and your Prince doesn’t want us to either. We’re trying to figure out the mystery with this Azlu, and until we do, we’re walking around on eggshells. If we kill Needle Swords, people are going to find out.”

“I couldn’t give two shits,” Eric said, “about Black Blood or Avery or the Prince. Dolareido’s my city. Born here, raised here. If I’m gonna do this Uratha thing, well, fuck Avery, I’m doing it my way.” And with that, the man transformed back into a wolf, and started back toward the city.

Natasha blinked after him, before looking to Jessy. Wow. Tash recognized that look. It was the sort of look a young girl might have, if they saw their favorite musician or actor in person. Awe, or infatuation, or something in between. Whatever it was, seeing Eric turn into a vigilante was doing it for Jessy in a way Tash had never seen.

Poor guy was probably going to be fucked senseless, once they got back.

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~~Jack~~

What fun, what fun! Pushing through a wall of alien flesh, and following in the wake of a berserking werewolf, into a nightmare realm. What Susanna would have given to be a part of something

like this, of the chaos and madness, buried in magic and blood that had to have come from the depths of Hell itself. Glorious.

He stepped out of the flesh and into a massive room, dark and delightfully imposing. Stone walls and stone floors, wooden ceilings, with spiky braziers on the walls holding fire. Right, they'd been here before, Sándor's castle nightmare. Begotten had lairs, and their lairs had multiple chambers, but this seemed to be the one Jeremiah and his crew defaulted to. Maybe they couldn't access the other chambers, or maybe they didn't serve as defensible positions. Well, the stone walls wouldn't protect Jeremiah or Angela. He'd tear them down with his bare hands if he had to.

In front of him, it was pandemonium. The hunters were trying to set up some sort of defensive position, and it was obvious it was a plan they'd practiced in the past. The hallway had wooden doors along its sides, and a large door at the end, like the one the hunters had blown up when Jack had first arrived. Oh wow, he was going to get to do this again! It was going to go better this time.

The hunters fell back, but always with two stopping and turning around to fire behind them. He'd seen this tactic before, where modern soldiers would retreat back as a chain, with the person closest to the enemy pulling back while the others took up positions and unleashed defensive fire. And then once that person was clear, they'd take up a position, start firing, and the new person closest to the enemy would retreat under the protection of their comrades' covering fire. The hunters were trying to do that, but it wasn't working out too well for them. It was just a big, long hallway, and they were doing their best to get to the big, wooden door. The retreating tactic didn't help much. Screams of panic abound as their bullets tore into the tide of rats, but did little to stop the army of rodents. Music for the soul.

But the hunters did have a head start, since it took Clara a bit to get the second portal open wide enough for Jack and his army.

Soon, most of the kine had gotten past the two enormous doors, and were pushing them closed as a couple hunters poured bullets into the oncoming werewolf.

“Come on Denver! Get in here! Get—”

Too late. One final hunter tried to slip past the closing doors, but Clara, snarling and roaring as she charged forward, slammed into her. Her massive weight crashed into the hunter’s body hard enough, Jack could hear bones snap as her head hit the wood. But she didn’t die; that came after, as Clara sank her claws into the hunter’s chest, and ripped her in half, literally. Body parts went flying, blood followed, and Jack laughed as the two parts of the woman’s torso splattered against the stone walls.

Clara had been shot, but she shrugged it off. Ah yes, the amazing regenerative abilities of the Uratha. Maybe there was value in the Uratha after all? He considered it, and balanced the pros and cons of Dominating one, and turning them into a thrall. Maybe Clara? An intriguing thought, but he set it aside for later.

The enormous doors closed with a thud, which was soon followed by more thuds, hammering sounds, and hollers muted by the wood. The humans were creating a barrier, probably throwing nearby things against the door to try and block it off. Cute.

Jack took a second to look behind him, and at the swarming army of rats and crows. Damien and Othello followed, and soon, so did Beatrice and Athalia. Of course, once Athalia made her appearance, it wasn’t the tall, beautiful, angry black woman he’d come to know and love, it was a strange, enormous skeleton creature with no pelvis or legs, that walked around on its hands, and had bone wings. Seeing that push through the fleshy mess on the back end of the hallway, slipping out from what was otherwise a wall of stone, was wicked awesome.



“I will get Fiona,” the skeleton creature said, raspy, loud voice cutting scratches on the walls. “Jack, do not—”

“Yeah yeah. Shut up and do your job.” Fuck, what an annoying woman. Head buried so deep up her ass, she was still convinced she could have it both ways, with the whole being a monster and having a hunter for a daughter thing. Dumbass.

Athalia snorted, opened one of the side doors, and disappeared into the darkness.

“Jack,” Damien said, blood dripping down his trench coat. “I told Aaron to stay behind and try and keep this portal open, so you can ... you know.”

“Yes, good call.” It was true that Jack’s connection to Dolareido was growing thin, so deep in this realm. The vitae he’d spilled to summon his army was a beacon to him, and to the portal where the blood had fallen nearby, but the creatures had to come to him through two portals now, two magical portals at that. Reinforcements were going to come slower, and at a rate that couldn’t be matched by the amount he lost to bullets and fire.

He didn’t need his army to unleash Armageddon on these fools, but it was good to let people think he did.

He walked up to the giant door, frowned, and looked down at the blood splatter the two halves of the hunter’s corpse left behind. The problem with having strength and a small body, was physics. He could tear this door down, but he was too small to get leverage with weight and friction. The stone floor was smooth, too smooth for him to line up a good punch. And he couldn’t fit his fingers between the two doors, either. Unless he managed to get his hands around something, he was just too light to punch it without sending himself flying backward, instead of damaging something as heavy and solid as a giant wooden door at least a foot thick.

“Harcourt,” Jack said.

“Y-Yeah?” The man was just coming through the flesh portal, groaning with every step. His eyes were down, and he was doing his best to keep from stepping on the blood-soaked rats that swarmed past him. Some crows were latched onto his shoulders as well, and took to the air once he was in the hallway.

“Plan Vermont, what is it?”

“Um, it’s us taking up defensive positions in Sándor’s nightmare chambers. We got a lot of shit stored in there, shit we can use to defend in the off chance we needed to. But, I mean, I figured you’d have figured that.”

“I did.” After the last time the paranormals managed to break in and attack the hunters in the nightmare, it made sense they’d prepare for the potential it happened again. Since the Begotten weren’t following in Sándor’s wake to pierce into his lair this time, the Begotten couldn’t just walk into the monster’s lair, either. “Did you know they could break into the nightmare from Elen’s flesh room?”

“Uh, yeah. We do most of our business in the flesh room, though. I don’t think Elen can go in and out of the nightmare easily”

Jack slowly turned and glared at the man. He didn’t like this. They were losing momentum, and there was nothing quite as annoying as losing momentum when on a blood high.

“Clara, tear it down.”

Clara went to work. He may have been a hundred and thirty pounds soaking wet, but Clara had to easily break seven hundred pounds in her enormous werewolf form. She didn’t have quite the burly mass of the male werewolves, but that didn’t change that she was enormous, and an Uratha. She sank the claws of her feet into

the stone, set the claws of her hands into the wood of the door, and began ripping it apart.

Glorious. Absolutely, utterly glorious. He could almost see her muscles bulge underneath the fur of her body, and he groaned as her huge claws ripped through the wood like it was paper.

“God damn that’s hot,” he said.

She paused, looked at him with her wolf eyes, confused, before returning to her destruction.

It only took her twenty seconds. If the door had been made of metal, she’d still have probably been able to get through it. Werewolf claws were something special, something supernatural, and Jack almost moaned at the sight of her ripping through the wood and sending the splinters everywhere. They were bloodied with the crimson life of the dead hunter at their feet.

Once she had a hole big enough, about a foot wide, he sent the swarm. They had to keep the blitzkrieg moving, keep pushing forward, keeping ripping into the hunters before they had time to recover and defend. Clara’s short work of the door caught the hunters by surprise, and they took a second before they started unloading lead at the door. The lead was met with furry bodies, and immediately, Clara was splattered with the corpses of hundreds of rats; a living shield, summoned by Jack.

She kept tearing. If the hunters had explosives on the other side of the door they could use, they’d take longer than a few moments to set them up and use them, he hoped. It’d really suck to have Clara die; watching her go full feral freakout berserk rage, and tear open a goliath of a door in seconds, was really arousing for his undead bones.

“Um,” Harcourt said, “Jeremiah does have a habit of putting plans inside plans, and only sharing those details with a few people. So, I

mean, Plant Vandermont was about defending Sándor's nightmare chambers from invasion, but I wouldn't be surprised if it included other things."

"Then we'll deal with it when it comes up." Jack threw a final glance back at his crew. Othello and Damien were ready, with Beatrice staggering along behind them. Fucked up as she looked, her eyes were nothing but solid anger and determination, ready to walk through fire to make sure that bitch Angela died. Awesome. "Get ready to rush in, Damien, Othello. I expect a lot of gunfire once Clara's opened the door up, and they still have one flamethrower. Find the fucker with fire, and take them out."

"Sure thing boss," Othello said.

"Alright," Damien added.

At last, with a mighty roar that shook the walls, Clara gave a final outward tear of her hands, and ripped a giant chunk of the door open. Within sixty seconds of entering the hallway, Jack and his crew had rushed through it, killed a hunter, forced the hunters to flee into the main chamber beyond, and had already torn a path into the hunter's defenses. Yes, good, fast, brutal. Don't let the hunters breathe, don't let them get their bearings, just run them down like the worthless animals they were, and kill them. To the paranormals, sixty seconds was plenty of time to get things done. To the worthless blood bags, sixty seconds wasn't enough time to get anything done.

As Clara burst through the door and into the darkness beyond, Jack pointed his hands forward once again, and guided his army of sacrifices and servants. Scully and Mulder flew above, keeping tabs and offering caws of information to him. Yes, he could see what they saw, or at least have a vague idea.

In the room beyond, the hunters fled. There were a few heavy logs thrown haphazardly against the door, but nothing that could create

a realistic barrier. And in the next room, Jack had expected to find the enormous columns from last time, each topped with a statue that mirrored the Horror of Sándor. But there were no columns in the large room. Hell, there wasn't a roof. He looked up, and he could see sky, stars, clouds, the full moon, and he could feel a breeze on his face.

It was a village.

Maybe village was the wrong word. It was definitely a group of houses one would expect to see in the medieval ages, but it was also a nightmare, and no fucking way would something like this function as a real village. First thing he noticed was how the castle, with a fresh hole torn through its front door, didn't have a courtyard. No, the door with the hole was connected to a road, and the road was a mile high in the fucking sky. The road, nothing but dirt and rock, was maybe twenty feet wide, and off either side was a giant fall that would kill anyone, paranormal or otherwise. Terminal velocity, even for someone as light and strong as him, would turn him into a splat on the ground if he landed on rock.

They were on a winding, thin road that was literally the top of a mountain, high enough it practically pierced the clouds.

Clara had stopped not far ahead, probably struck dumb by the sudden change in scenery, same as he was.

"Harcourt," Jack said, "the fuck is this?"

"Oh, right! Yeah that Sándor dude has multiple nightmares, right? I thought we were in the castle, but this is a different nightmare."

"But the castle is behind us."

"Yeah, sorta. You can go into the castle from here, but it kinda warps you around. I'm pretty sure when you're inside, it doesn't

really match up with that.” He gestured back behind them, to the castle sitting on the cliff edge.

He was right. The castle looked more like a very large, Gothic mansion, which certainly fit the decor, especially considering it had a bunch of gargoyles on columns and stone walls. But the mansion, despite its grandeur, wasn’t big enough to hold the colossal chamber Jack and the others had fought Angela, and Jeremiah in before. That would have taken a grand stadium to contain, something a fair bit bigger than the Dracula-esque castle he was looking at.

But the gargoyles upon its walls and stone outcroppings did indeed look like Sándor, the giant gargoyle with four arms and four wings. Such a magnificent beast of power, the captured Begotten. Maybe Jack could turn him into a thrall, as well.

“Are any of the hunters in the nightmare?” Jack said.

“Back in the castle? Probably no. The Sándor’s Horror is fucking stomping around in there. We stay away. There might be some of us out here though, and Elen’s probably here. She hangs out here.” The hunter gestured to the village at the end of the thin, winding road.

“His Horror is ... stomping around?” Damien said.

“Yeah. I guess wherever Sándor’s locked up, he can’t get in touch with it. So it’s just rampaging around like nightmare things do.”

So a Horror and the Begotten connected to it weren’t completely merged. A Begotten not in the nightmare was separated from its Horror. That made for some weird implications, and Jack didn’t have time to sort them out now. He had some hunters to butcher.

They started down the winding path, going at a steady jog, while Clara burst forward with Uratha strength driving her to inhuman speed. Each step caused her claws to rip up the earth beneath her

with far more brutishness than the stone castle provided, and Jack grinned at each running step she took. Fucking hot.

But the rest of them were going too slow. Lucky for them, Jack had been wrong about expecting the hunters to set up a defense outside the door. If they had, he would have lost more rats, and potentially some of his crew to the flames. He didn't mind walking over the ashes of his crew to reach his goal, but they were more valuable alive.

“Othello. Grab Harcourt, carry him.”

“Roger that.”

“W-Wait, I—shit!”

Othello had no problems picking the guy up and slinging him onto his back. And then the group of them were free to move at a proper running pace, even Beatrice, who was grimacing with each step. She may not like who he'd become, but the witch had spirit, and he had to respect that. With her guts almost hanging out, she was willing to run after her vengeance, vengeance he was going to make sure happened.

The hunters had managed to get a little further away, both from the door having blocked Jack's path, but also because Jack and crew were a little shocked by the sight before them. Being this high up was absurd, far higher than any cliff could reasonably be and hold a village. But more than that, it was the geography, the shape of the cliff. At no point did it spread out into a flat land for the houses ahead of them to be placed. Instead, the houses were attached to the sides of the thin, winding cliff, attached by enormous tree roots and sitting upon jutting boulders and rock face edges.

Withered trees sat between the houses, titanic and towering, dark and sharp with a myriad of leafless branches. As Jack ran down the road's length, jumping left and right as the strange road curved to

ridiculous degrees, he scanned ahead for where the hunters were. The hunter group had managed to put maybe a thousand feet between them and the paranormals; fast mother fuckers.

What was that quote, from Max Payne? 'I don't know about angels, but it's fear that gives men wings.' Too true. The hunters were terrified, completely surprised by Jack's full-frontal blitzkrieg, and they weren't prepared for it. Four of them were dead, two of them had dropped their weapons and surrendered, and one of them was a traitor. The rest were probably convinced they were all going to die, after seeing that. They were on the run, desperate, panicked, adrenaline pumping and fear coursing through their veins. Their world had fallen apart in a matter of minutes, and the only thing they could do was follow Jeremiah and Angela.

They'd only be able to flee from Jack so far. They were in the nightmare world, and as long as Jack stayed on their heels, they'd falter. If they had another way out of the nightmare, it'd take them time to use it. Athalia was convinced they probably didn't, but she didn't know Jeremiah like he did. She'd never stared the man in the eyes as he tortured her, like he had. The fucker was crafty, devoted, and doubtlessly had backup plans for when shit didn't go his way; that probably included the unlikelihood of Elen's flesh chamber being penetrated.

Plus, as Jack looked out past the village, it became obvious that the strange nightmare town, with its dark windows and empty, winding street, had no exiting road. While the entire village existed on the single road, the road itself looked like it ended by colliding with a forest in the distance. In typical nightmare fantasy fashion, the forest was tall, dark, and obtrusively thick. No one was getting through that forest unless it was on foot, and even then, it'd take ten times as long go through it than open land. Anyone inside would be easy meals for paranormals, especially a werewolf.



If this was where they were going to make their last stand, it was suicide. The houses were made of wood, long slabs of timber, like shitty cheap cottages, and decrepit at that, judging by how horrible they looked; any paranormal could tear through them. With the dark clouds above, the night sky, the full moon, and the creepy wind drifting around the houses, rustling the dead trees and their branches, the village screamed haunted. Nightmare fuel. Well, it was a nightmare, a chamber created in the dream world by some event or entity, according to Fiona. Naturally it'd be fucking creepy. Naturally, he felt right at home.

There was one problem, though. As Jack's rats poured out onto the road, and his crows dotted the sky, no new animals joined him. There was a giant forest ahead, undoubtedly filled with small creatures like rats and crows, but none rose from their hiding places. Jack reached out with his mind, and grit his teeth as he found nothing. The vitae he'd spilled to summon his legions sat upon the dirt and earth of the physical realm, and it summoned the creatures of the physical realm. Here, in a world of nightmare fabrications, a dream realm forged and molded by dreamers and strange creatures, his Kindred powers did not reach the rodents, scavengers, and predators. They weren't real. Fiona was real, and so was Athalia, but whatever things with tiny claws and tiny beaks rested within the nightmare, they were only as real as the road Jack walked on: not.

He was at a disadvantage here, and that pissed him off. Whatever. Once he got his hands on the hunters, or was close enough to force eye contact, he wouldn't need his legions.

“Damien, get ahead of us. I don't want anyone with a molotov hitting us from a window.”

“Done.” The Mekhet jumped ahead, clearing over Clara, and landing on the rooftops. The hunters were still in view, and a few more of them had joined the others, increasing their numbers to

maybe ten. What were hunters doing in the nightmare village? Probably helping Elen do something; she'd yet to make her appearance. Maybe she was doing more of her strange witchcraft, and if she was doing it in the nightmare chamber, instead of her strange flesh chamber, maybe whatever she was doing was meant to affect the nightmare realm.

Or maybe she was just taking a nap and preferred to nap here, instead of on a cancerous pile of flesh and blood.

They ran through the village, scanning for possible ambushes, but Damien landed beside them and shook his head.

“The hunters are fleeing into the forest. All of them.”

“The forest?” Othello said. “That forest? Are they serious? We’re going to eat them alive.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Clara said. The booming, guttural growls of her voice silenced everyone. Talking must have been difficult, with a big snout and without lips to articulate. “If Jeremiah retreat into forest, he has ways to defeat us there.” Her sentences were choppy, and missing a few words. It was kinda adorable, in a ‘big bad wolf can’t talk’ sort of way.

“Yeah,” Harcourt said from Othello’s back. “But, fuck me, I don’t remember setting up any defenses here, just in the castle. Jeremiah and Elen didn’t let any hunter stay here in the village for long. They were protective of this place.”

Protective of the village, hmm. It wasn’t a real village, no more than its fake forest, or the fake castle were. The creatures he could see scurrying along the darkness of the mountain, the building edges, the crows and other scavenger birds perched on the dead trees, and the howls he could hear coming from the forest, none of them had true lives of their own. They were just echoes of someone

else's nightmares. It made little sense for Jeremiah to be protective of this place.

Unless, Jeremiah and his two bitches were up to things the hunters were unaware of. And they probably were. What other nasty shit was the human witch up to, and capable of doing. And if she was up to something, why here, and not her flesh chamber? Perhaps this place provided her more privacy, if Harcourt was right, and the hunters weren't allowed to stay for long. That meant she could do the darkest, dirtiest stuff. And if she was in those woods, where the hunters were fleeing to, maybe she had some particularly nasty stuff waiting for them.

He couldn't wait.

The village provided no response to Jack's assault. As his flowing army continued to pour out of the destroyed castle door behind him, and his rats swarmed over the tiny, winding road thousands of feet high on a thin, jutting cliff point, no one stopped them. There were eyes in the windows, but a glance and moment's reach of his senses told him there were no living creatures within the buildings, or unliving. More shadows and illusions, more fake images caused by the nightmare. No human could stay here long without feeling like they were going to be eaten.

The hunters reached the forest, turned around, and started stepping backward into the shadows. As they did, they all unloaded their guns toward the oncoming paranormals, who had closed to the distance to only fifty feet; they were much faster than clumsy, slow kine. Othello and Damien could have caught up to them earlier if Jack had ordered it, but he didn't want those two going in first. Clara could front line, and so could Jack and his army; the others would flank.

And that's exactly what they did. As bullets rained on them by the hunters retreating into the forest, Jack ran forward with his rats

scurrying along with him. They were propelled by his will, his need, and their swarming mass worked together to turn themselves into a tide that rose up. Bullets disappeared into the waves of fur, sending blood splattering. The bullets did not last long, as the hunters vanished into the forest, and the trees blocked line of sight.

He managed a glance to Clara. Several bullet wounds decorated her fur, and while most of them healed before his eyes, one upon her shoulder was reluctant to do so. Silver. She didn't let the pain bother her. Good, he'd hate to leave a useful piece like her behind, and a hot piece at that.

"We go slow here," he said as they came to a stop at the forest edge, "one of them still has a flamethrower. Beatrice, you're wounded so you keep an eye on Harcourt for now. If he tries to run, kill him."

"Y-Yeah." She stared at him for a second longer than normal, before she motioned for Othello to set the man down. With the hunter at her side, she waited for everyone else to push into the forest first.

If there ever was a haunted forest, this was it. And, unlike the typical haunted forest with a road to walk down, or a path, this had neither. It was trees pressed to trees, warped trunks giving rise to jagged and sharp bodies and branches, with faces hidden in the bark. Not a leaf in sight. To see movement through the trees was impossible, as ten feet was enough for the thick trees to block off all view with their tight constriction. There was maybe two feet on the ground to move about, two feet of space mixed with roots and dead twigs that provided a choir of noise as the hidden hunters moved through the forest's twisted innards.

It wasn't only the hunters making noise. There were animals in the forest, animals that weren't his. They were as much a part of the nightmare as the trees, and they'd listen to his commandants with

the same level of respect. Maybe they'd listen to Sándor, if the beast could be tamed to their cause, instead of the hunter's cause. Maybe not. Either way, they weren't his to command, and many started to disperse deeper into the enormous, endless forest that coated the mountain they stood upon.

His army poured into the woodland, and what was once an impenetrable, unknowable barrier of wood and darkness, became penetrated, and known. Kine would find this mess of forest to be unassailable, and suicidal to enter. To paranormals, this was prime hunting grounds. To him, it was as open as a book, now that his rats and crows flowed between the trees. They chirped, squeaked, cawed, and crowed about the contents, about the trees upon trees upon rocks upon dirt upon trees. They spoke of the hunters, and how they fled as fast as they could, glancing over their shoulders in manic fear as they moved in the same direction. They spoke of Jeremiah, and Angela, heading forward together. They spoke of the limp Angela carried, and how Jeremiah was forced to help her.

Limp. She really wasn't fully healed from their last encounter. Good. Fleeing would be harder for her.

This was how things should be! Kindred, hunting through the dark for their prey, with humans fleeing in terror. None of that ludicrous garbage the Prince pushed for, no. This was how Jacob would have done it, and how the new Jack was going to do it, hunting prey as they went screaming into the night. Fucking orgasmic. The hunters didn't deserve a last stand, a grand battle, anything that would lend satisfaction or gratification to their final moments. They were just vermin to be exterminated, vermin that had infested his world. Hunt them down and kill them off. No epic moments, and no stories to tell. They weren't heroes, they were idiots that wandered into the lion's den. No tales, but maybe a parable, a warning to future generations to not mess with dangers you could not appreciate, dangers in the dark.

Maybe they could pile the bodies high, or skewer their corpses on the trees, as decorations and homecoming gifts for when they inevitably freed Sándor's mind. Surely a nightmare monster would appreciate the gift.

A shame Sándor couldn't join them. He'd bet good money the monster would love to dance in the blood of his captors. Ah well, Jack would have to do it for him. He'd kill the hunters, and if he could catch one, he would Dominate them and make them kill each other, and themselves. Make them drink misery, and look each other in the eye as they ripped each other's guts out.

The vampires snuck through the trees without issue, for the most part. But they were all city vampires, after all, and couldn't help but step on twig. It didn't matter. As thousands of rats swarmed over the roots and earth, any noise the vampires made became irrelevant. Like a hundred horses galloping and creating thunder, the legion of rats filled the air with a sound not unlike raining glass shards, as if someone had shattered a million windows at once, and all anyone could hear was the sound of the bits hitting streets for miles in all directions. The crows were quiet by comparison, and their caws didn't reach the same level of sheer, imposing grandiose allure; that'd change, as more of his flock arrived, and their wings blocked out the moon.

Scully and Mulder cawed from perches above. They knew better than to get into the thick of his army, where their lives were in danger. His two closest pets were not to be wasted.

"Clara," he said to the darkness around him, "we don't have time to be sneaky. Rip it down."

The beautiful choir of rat chirps and the constant rain of their claws on bark and rock, disappeared under the shattering roar of the titan. Clara pushed forward and began to rip the forest apart, literally. Her claws sank into wood and went through it like a knife

through flesh, and the forest began to collapse around her as she doubled the speed she moved forward. She'd have gotten stuck eventually anyway, considering how big she was.

And, now that Jack had leverage, he was free to use his own strength. Back in the castle hallway that led to this nightmare, he couldn't really get a grip on anything. But here, surrounded by trees, physics were on his side. He reached forward, put his hands between two trees, pointed outward, and spread his arms. He didn't have the sheer weight and velocity to his movements Clara did, or claws for that matter, but there was one simple, undeniable fact, that he was delighted to show off.

He was stronger than the huge beast currently ripping the forest down.

Othello, the oldest of his crew, and a Daeva to boot, with natural strength coursing through him by the power of his blood clan, wouldn't stand five seconds against Jack. Clara, who was probably stronger than Othello in her transformed state, wouldn't last ten. If he could get his hands on them, get a good grip, get his fingers wrapped around something vital, it'd be all over. He'd crush them like a grape, like he did that hunter in the hospital. For now, tearing the forest down would have to do.

He heard a gasp from behind him, Harcourt's, and Jack glanced over his shoulder to laugh at the man, as Jack spread his arms out completely, causing the weaker of the trees to crack, break, and begin to fall. The dark trees were two feet thick, tough as nails, and they fought to stay standing, but that was the fun part. If they just broke like twigs, it wouldn't make any difference. The fact that he and Clara were tearing the whole damn forest down as they chased after the hunters, a strong, sturdy forest, turned the hunt into a theatrical affair of booms and screams.

Screams? Ah, yes, one of the hunters, the closest one, was pinned under one of the trees. Yeap, that was a broken leg, and probably broken hip or something too. The man was trapped under one of Clara's trees, and she pushed past the victim, stepping onto the tree as she continued forward, ignoring a free kill.

That wouldn't do, not at all.

"Harcourt! You gotta do something! Please!" The man held his hand out for his fellow hunter.

"Jack," Harcourt said, desperation in his eyes, "that's Larry! Let him—"

Jack laughed, pointed a palm at the man, and unleashed Hell. Rats poured over the downed hunter like piranha, and the screams turned into shrieks of agony as hundreds of teeth bit down into his clothes and flesh. Shrieks turned into gargled noise that no human mouth or throat could create, and seconds after, silence.

"They had their chance, Harcourt." It didn't make any sense to spare the ones that surrendered now. What kind of message would that be sending? That Jack was soft. Couldn't have that.

He stepped over the corpse, still teeming with rats, and continued on. The squeaks of his army were a mix of satisfaction over the meal, and information about the forest they moved through. The hunters had given up trying to shoot behind them, and were doing their best to move toward somewhere in the forest as fast they could. But the forest was so tight, even his crows had trouble navigating it from above.

Scully and Mulder did their best to provide him with more detailed information. All they could see of the strange nightmare forest was its size, and how it went on endlessly, consuming the mountain as it descended into fog, miles down. No doubt the nightmare was localized to the village and the forest on its edge, and



the hunters wouldn't be able to keep going without running into some sort of impassible barrier.

So where were they going? He couldn't wait to find out.

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~~Beatrice~~

She was following a demon.

She'd seen Viktor get angry before, and do some pretty nasty shit. She'd seen Tony and him get into scuffles before. She'd seen Tony and Garry throw down on occasion, and really tear up a place. When elder vampires decided to get physical, shit got crazy. They wielded insane power, to the point it could be hard to really appreciate.

What Jack was doing was at least on that level, if not a level past. This was some Jacob-level shit, and she'd seen Jacob throw a punch when he beat Art and Matt into the ground like children. Hell, this display of Jack's was something Jacob would have struggled to do, probably. The little guy was marching through the woods, and tearing down enormous trees, while commanding an army of literal thousands. When he managed to get between a couple trees so he could get his footing, he pushed them down and broke them even faster than the giant werewolf ripping the forest open did.

Ventrue did not have the natural strength of Nosferatu or Daeva. They could develop it, sure, but they never came to it with the same ease like Beatrice or Othello, or Jacob or the Prince would. What Jack was doing was the territory of Jacob's strength, and the Prince's. The summoning he was doing was something only Viktor could have rivaled, and she doubted he could match it. Good fucking god, she pitied whatever fucker had to suffer Jack's Dominate.

Fuck her, she should have stayed back with Jennifer, guarding the two hunters who'd given up. She could be keeping the second portal open, like Aaron was.

No. No, no no no, she had to come. She had to see this through. She had to kill Angela. And, she had to make sure Jack came back from this, and more than just alive. No way in fucking hell, could she let this fucking abomination go walking around in Jack's skin.

God, Julias, what have I done to your childe?

“Stay out of his way and shut up,” she said to Harcourt. The two of them were relegated to following the crew now, and she was kind of happy she was. She didn't want to be upfront with the kid, not anymore. Clara was beside him, ripping down trees and charging forward, but she wasn't making quite the same impact Jack was, as the kid pushed trees down like a child marching his toy dinosaur through a Lego city he'd made expressly for the purpose of smashing. Othello and Damien had stopped trying at some point, and had taken up defensive positions right behind the leading two, ready to leap out and attack any hunters who got caught.

The first hunter who did get caught, Larry apparently, was nothing more than bone and strips of shredded clothes, as they stepped over him. Harcourt put a hand to his mouth, gagged, vomited, cried, and pushed on, all in six seconds. Well, she had to give it to him, he had resolve to be able to experience all that and keep going.

“You have no idea where your buddies are going?” she said.

“No. Jeremiah and Elen had lots of secrets, you know? We ... we never got to see everything. They were always protective of their secrets, and they only let us know about the ... sacrifices, after we'd been with the group for some time.”

“Pretty fucking stupid, to work for a boss who sacrifices people as part of their magic.”

“Fight fire with fire, was their plan.”

Snarling, she pushed her shirt up a little and ran a claw along her stomach. The cut was still there, but at least it had closed, Kindred blood pulling the threads of her skin together to keep her guts from falling out. But it was only skin deep. Her insides were not happy with her, and if she dared do something stupid like run or jump, she might lose a spleen. She was an undead creature, and a withered, useless spleen falling out of her wasn't exactly a big deal, but fuck, it would have hurt. And even an undead creature like her would die a second death with enough structural damage.

“So, because some psychopath told you they were fighting fire with fire, you thought it was cool to start sacrificing people you stole off the street, so you could divine information from their guts, and use their blood to open portals into a literal flesh chamber, some sort of pocket dimension thing, crafted by a witch?”

“Fuck you, I'm here, aren't I?” He wiped his mouth off, and hopped from one fallen tree to the next. “Marge and Dennis are going to live, and that makes this worth it.” Marge and Dennis were the names of the two hunters with brains, then.

“Yeah, well, if things—”

Jack and Clara, and the army of rats and birds came to a stop. A clearing sat before them, fully exposed now that Clara and Jack had pushed all the trees in the path down. Most of the trees. Some trees in the path still stood, but as Clara and Jack tried to reach the few remaining, they couldn't. And those trees had corpses nailed to them.

Everyone other than Jack and Clara found trees to hide behind, and there were plenty with the forest still surrounding them. But pushing further ahead seemed to have come to a stop. Clara slammed her hands against the air, and Triss could hear the impact, as if the werewolf were hitting some sort of super hard, perfectly clear plastic.

Damien spun around, eyes on the ground. “Look for an amber light, or circle!”

Everyone did, but no amber light made an appearance, for the first few seconds. But an amber glow eventually did start to arise from between the fallen bark and branches, a line that stretched wide, until it circled the hunters and the clearing they were standing in.

No gunfire came, despite Jack and Clara being out in the open, with only the few trees beyond the protecting line between them and the hunters. A few trees, with bodies nailed to them, were paltry defensive against assault rifles, but the hunters didn’t take a shot. The group of kine were huddled together in the center of the clearing, surrounded by trees with, what Triss had to guess, were sacrifices crucified upon them. In the clearing, a dozen hunters had their guns pointed at Jack and the werewolf, but Jeremiah and Angela were rooting through some bags sitting on the dirt.

Elen, in her wheelchair, was holding a small knife. Triss couldn’t see the handle, but from how the blade gleamed and showed a few decorations along its length, she imagined a host of nasty witchcraft had been done with that blade. A glance at the corpses on the trees proved it; they all had symbols carved into their skin.

In the center of the clearing, a large stone stood, flat, rectangular, and pointing toward the sky at an angle. Elen and the others were ignoring it; apparently it wasn’t the reason they’d come to the clearing. But Beatrice couldn’t look away from it.

On the slab of stone, a giant sheet of skin was plastered, human skin that’d been cut free from a body. And on that, was another one of Elen’s fancy emblems, large, complicated, circular and filled with dozens of symbols.

“I recognize that symbol,” Jack said over his shoulder to the crew. “That’s the symbol on Sándor’s back.”

## Chapter 107

~~Eric~~

It was probably a dumb idea. Hell, he knew it was a dumb idea. But he was going to do it anyway.

Maybe he was doing this because he wanted to get some control of his life; it hadn't been under his control in god damn forever. Maybe he was doing this to prove to Avery that he could be Uratha without her guidance. Maybe he was doing this because Jessy was obviously into it, and he could practically feel the hunger in her gaze when he announced his intentions. Going against the 'man' apparently did it for her. He bet, if he met her twenty years ago, she'd be listening to RATM every night during her orgies. Fucking to 'Killing in the Name' would have hit Eric weird for sex, especially the lyrics, but Jessy was the sort of girl to ignore lyrics when dancing, or fucking, and move to the beat.

It surprised him sometimes that she was an Invictus, and not a Carthian. Her rebellious attitude jived with what he knew about the Carthians far more than the money-loving Invictus. Then again, she liked expensive things, expensive places, expensive hobbies, and everything in between. Gift idea? Buy her a fancy suit?

Well, she had money, far more than he did. Hard to buy something expensive for her, when she could just get anything expensive that she wanted. What else did she like? Sex, she liked that. And tonight made it obvious that she was anxious to get some more bodies in the bed. She'd been having orgies for decades, and had gone solo because of him. Orgies didn't interest him, but maybe he should try and meet her halfway. Threesomes were pretty standard, as far as Dolareido was concerned, and vampires as old as Jessy had been doing far more than threesome for years.

He'd like to get her a gift of some kind, though. They'd been dating for a while, half a year, at least, and a gift seemed like a good idea. Except, the only gifts he knew how to give girls were shit like jewelry; that's all Sheryl ever wanted. Jewelry wouldn't work on a woman who could buy anything that ever crossed her path. And jewelry did seem kind of shallow, in the context of their fucked up paranormal lives.

He looked at the wolf beside him. While Matthew, Arturo, and the tiny vampire who rode them were content to stay behind and follow, Jessy stayed at his side. It probably didn't even occur to her to walk behind, despite this whole trip being his idea. For her, it was a reflex to go shoulder to shoulder with him or whoever was leading. He liked that. Last thing he wanted to be was a leader, and it was nice to have someone who'd go side-by-side with him into whatever shit show he inevitably triggered.

Needle Swords was their target. According to the two Uratha helping him tonight, Needle Swords was a spirit that'd grown in Devil's Corner, originally a spirit of misery, that fed on some spirits of drugs. Drug spirits were not negative, and if anything, many of them shared space with spirits of pleasure or adventure, according to Matt and Art. The problem was when a spirit of agony, or misery, or depression, devoured them, or vice versa. Spirits grew either by absorbing similar spirits, or by devouring spirits that fit into the framework. A hawk spirit could devour rodent or fish spirits to become bigger and stronger. It could absorb other bird spirits to become stronger as well, and absorb their natures along with them.

So a misery spirit had devoured or absorbed some drug spirits, and had its nature altered in the process. Now, it was a pretty fucked up spirit with a specific agenda, while also being quite strong. It was becoming a menace. A perfect target for Uratha looking to keep a city healthy.

Spirits had bans and banes. A ban defined the spirit's behavior, what actions it could and couldn't take. Spirits generally operated on a barter system, trading favors for favors, or objects for objects, and were bound by their agreements; usually bound, Art insisted. More specific bans included things like, a fire spirit not being able to cross water, or a spirit of surveillance being bound to give up their secrets if you knew the password.

Banes were actual ways to hurt spirits, to a far greater degree than normal physical violence could. Light could hurt spirits of darkness. Water could hurt fire spirits. It got more complicated, the more complicated and stronger the spirit. A spirit of the darkness of caves where insects made their home, to whom a village had routinely sacrificed goats to, would be a very strange spirit that would require research to figure out. Maybe it could be harmed by purified river water specifically from a nearby stream, blessed by the village who did the sacrificing. Maybe it could be harmed by gathering some of the insects that nested in the cave in the physical world, burning them, and creating a refined powder. Or maybe it could be hurt fire, too.

Figuring shit out was a part of an Uratha's job, according to the others. But it wasn't always necessary. Werewolves were half spirit by nature, and their teeth and claws did damage to spirits like fire did to vampires, and silver did to werewolves. Unfortunately for the werewolves, claws and teeth didn't do the trick on particularly powerful spirits, not very well, at least. Art insisted that, if looking to take something down that was very strong, finding its bane was a requirement.

Needle Swords was not strong, but not weak. They could take him down with their claws and teeth, according to his guides. If they couldn't, they could always go ask around and figure out what was the creature's bane, asking spirits for information, and having to do favors to get it. The original water rapids of economics: trading favors. What sort of thing could be the bane of a spirit of pain and

drugs? AA? How the fuck could you distill AA into a bottle so you could—maybe get one of those badges or coins people in rehab programs got? That wasn't a bad idea, actually.

He was excited. He tried to hide it, but Jessy saw, and she bumped wolf shoulder to wolf shoulder with him. Yeah, this was kind of fun. And, it was kind of fulfilling. It felt good to be out, doing this, hunting down something he wanted to kill. There was an itch inside him he'd been struggling to scratch, and this hunt was doing a damn good job scratching it. Hopefully a successful hunt would wipe the itch away, and he could breathe easy again until the next itch arrived.

Natasha wrapped them in the Cloak of Night as they entered the busy half of South Side. They hopped up onto the roof of Doc Omala's, a fat building several stories high, and they looked around at the skyline of Dolareido. The sky in the Hisil, especially in the entertainment center of South Side, was a beautiful concoction of colors that almost looked sinful, as if someone had found the colors to represent sex and alcohol, and painted the night clouds with them. Or, it just had the Las Vegas color palette, he supposed.

The Blood Tower stood not too far away, and everyone took a moment to stare at it. The Prince's tower, a place Eric had been to only once, and it was a place he was glad to avoid. Antoinette was a scary lady, the sort of woman who'd rip your throat out and not even flinch, if she felt it was an optimal strategy in whatever game she was playing. The Hisil version of the tower did a decent job of representing how fucked up a place it was, as the tower leaked blood down its sides in such volume, the tower looked red. A far cry from the Elysium the Prince supposedly said her tower, and the grounds around it, were. No violence allowed. Yeah right.

Shock and awe over, the group looked down through the skylight as they transformed back into their human forms.



“I don’t know much about this place, in the normal world,” Eric said.

The skylight, what would have been nothing more than an outward curved piece of glass in the real world, was larger, wider, and stuck out of the building rooftop like a dome, in the Hisil. Yeah, it was a feature that attracted the eye, and the Hisil’s reflection of it emphasized that.

Inside, Doc Omala’s was a strip club, through and through. There was a stage with several stripper poles, and the Hisil had the poles larger, and glowing. Eric tried to not laugh as he dug up a memory, his first trip to a strip club. It’d blown his mind when he realized it was the pole that rotated.

Eric sniffed deep as he leaned in over the glass to peer. A couple of large pleasure spirits were flowing around on the floor, and some other spirits were as well, more of those dragonfly-looking spirits. But, the spirit that defined the room, was definitely the spirit on the stage. It wasn’t Needle Swords, but some sort of spirit that obviously demanded to be the center of attention, something that thrived on being in the spotlight.

And it was beautiful. Nothing about it looked feminine or masculine, but it was humanoid, tall, and a long flowing cape glittering with all the colors of the rainbow hung from its shoulders. It drifted from one pole to the other, and showed long, beautiful legs, far longer than a human’s, and colored reflective silver. Its face was smooth, lacked any features, and Eric found himself staring at it and its silvery color. It was like, some sort of tall alien creature, that somehow had managed to find a way to look beautiful with its smooth body, despite looking nothing like a human except for a basic humanoid shape.

It was putting on a show for the watching spirits, and it was doing a good job, dancing, swaying, and sliding around the polls. Everyone

watched, entranced, and that included the five people on the rooftop.

“That’s Dancing Light,” Matthew said. “It’s pretty old, been around for a few decades at least. Thrives on being—”

“The center of attention, obviously,” Jessy said. “Strangely beautiful, isn’t it?”

Everyone nodded, Eric included.

Art gestured to the scene below them. “It’s been making deals with Needle Swords. See it, in the corner?”

Eric strained his senses, but it was difficult to ignore all the lights and movement in the strip club. Bright colors and flashing lights, spurts of utter darkness, and glittering that would have put any glitter crafts to shame, meant the dark corners were hard to peer into. But he squinted, and forced his senses to focus on the corner Art gestured to.

Right, this spirit, he remembered this spirit, from the last time he was in the Hisil. Natasha recognized it too, and she made a tiny growl that was half intimidating, half adorable.

The spirit was tall, not unlike the dancing spirit on the stage. Unlike the hypnotically beautiful, silver and rainbow creature dancing, Needle Swords was an ugly fucker. A gray cloak filled with holes covered most of its gangly limbs. It wore a plague doctor mask, the kind with a beak, and looked like a crow or raven’s face. And its fingers weren’t fingers at all. They were needles.

“Plan?” Jessy said.

Art shrugged. “Well, we can walk in and take him out, nice and quick. Black Blood will have our hides for that, though.”

“Black Blood,” Jessy said, shivering. “What a spooky motherfucker.” Right, she’d seen Black Blood, when it rescued them from Sándor’s nightmare. What a way to first meet the fucked up creature.

Spooky didn’t really describe what he felt when that giant black skeleton crawled out of oblivion, the last time Eric saw it. A bit of awe, sure, but mostly abject terror. Black Blood didn’t feel or smell like any of the spirits he’d seen in the Hisil. There was something else to it, something that felt very not-spirit like. Even that weird, black blob creature Eric had found at the prison, while emanating the strange aura that did qualify as ‘spooky’, didn’t have the odd aura Black Blood carried with it.

Better to just avoid it if it made an appearance, and do their best to meet its demands, if they somehow violated the rules of the city. The ‘rules of the city’ were vague at best, and he wasn’t looking forward to figuring them out the hard way. It was likely the spirit’s ban, and it’d follow its ban without hesitation; it had to.

“So, assuming that if we storm the strip joint,” Eric said, “and we piss off Black Blood, or break its rules or whatever, we ... probably shouldn’t do that.”

They all nodded.

“Then, m-maybe we bait it out?” Natasha said.

Matthew scratched the scruff of his short beard as he considered. “Needle Swords will want to make a deal. More than most spirits, making deals will be a part of its nature.”

“Course,” Jessy said, “it’s a fucking drug dealer. Might as well be pimping with its off hand.”

Eric almost corrected her, but decided to keep his mouth shut. The spirit wasn’t a dealer, but someone who thrived on the pain that

drug addiction could cause. Plenty of people in Dolareido enjoyed drugs, and sometimes even the hard stuff, without letting it build into a destructive habit. Plenty of people, on the other hand, did, and Needle Swords was probably there to enhance their pain and devour the essence it created. It wanted to spread sadness and torment, not prostitutes.

Eric grit his teeth and clenched his fists as he felt anger course through him. Yeah, he wanted this fucker out of his city.

His city? When did he start thinking of Dolareido as his city? He grew up here, sure, but he never thought of it in those terms. That was a new development, something that came with being a wolf he supposed. Territory, home, a den, with food to eat and kin to protect.

“If Natasha is comfortable with it,” Art said, “we could let her make contact.”

“M-Me?”

“You or Jessy. Needle will be suspicious of us, but Kindred in Dolareido get their fingers mixed up in the same sort of shit Needle’s into. It knows that Kindred have started getting into the Hisil I bet, so it might believe you if you said you had a deal to make. And spirits love to trade, make deals, and make contracts they think they can twist to be a profit for them.” How delightfully similar to humans.

The two women looked at each other, frowning.

“We try and keep Dolareido from becoming too slimy a place, you know,” Jessy said.

“Y-Yeah. It’s not like w-we just ... it’s not like Tijuana.”

It was Art's turn to frown, his and Matt's. Eric, on the other hand, was confused. The Tijuana remark seemed almost random.

"I can't go two feet without smelling how fucked up this city can be, Tash," Art said. Oh, Tash had picked up a previous conversation she'd had with Art.

"B-But it's not nearly as bad as other cities."

"So? It could be better."

Eric nodded with Art's words. Mistake. Jessy glared at him, and he managed a small shrug, earlier anger over Needle Swords vanishing. Uh oh.

His girlfriend turned her frustration toward Arturo, thank god. "Dude, Dolareido's crime scene is minor, and that includes the drug scene. Be happy we don't encourage rampant drug abuse; people lost on a high or sleeping dead drunk, are easy meals for vamps."

"Yeah, I know. Kinda grew up in that scene."

Oh, that's what this was about. Arturo grew up in a city where vampires exploited the drug scene, and Dolareido had some symptoms of that. Eric wasn't ready to blame the vampires for that; people were people, and people were stupid. But Arturo was.

Tash opened her mouth, but Jessy jumped in again.

"We let the kine be, Art. Much as we use them for blood, we also let them do what they want to do. The fuck do you want? For us to hold their hands and tell them they should make decisions with the future in mind? Want us to make the city squeaky clean, top to bottom? Looking to be Big Brother?"

"Maybe I am. Maybe I think that we should be doing more for them than just taking from them."

“Taking?” She got in close, and practically bared her fangs at him. “Dolareido’s a great city, and we made it that way. The humans here are enjoying the fruits of our labors.”

“So it’s a gilded cage. Doesn’t change the fact that the humans here are at your mercy, and you’re letting them get into some deep shit.” Art pointed down through the skylight at Needle Swords. “If Eric wasn’t here, you’d be content to let this fucker keep doing what it’s doing, spreading its misery. Easy meals, right?”

“Is the spirit possessing anyone?”

“No.”

“Then the people getting into this shit were making their own choices. Just because they’re being influenced doesn’t mean it’s not their responsibility. The fuck? Come on. You let a drunk man off for punching someone, just because he was drunk? Or not break up with your girlfriend, if she was fucking behind your back, just because she was horny and you weren’t around?” This time she did bare her fangs, and hissed a little, enough to make everyone shut up. “Humans aren’t children. They might seem like it, compared to us, but they aren’t. Let them make their own fucking mistakes. It’s not our job to hold their hand, never was.”

This was an argument Eric did not expect. He knew Art came from Tijuana, and the vamps there didn’t run the city with as gentle a hand as Antoinette. Now, he was getting a clearer picture. Kindred, in powerful positions, abusing entire groups of poor people, downtrodden and desperate, and setting them up for lifelong, life-destroying addictions. Kindred turning kine into slaves, and using them in turf wars, until the bodies piled high. Kindred killing kine, and if the horror stories were true, maybe harvesting their organs, too.

Eric’s childhood, pretty cliché for a poor black kid growing up in a big city, paled in comparison to the horrors Art must have

witnessed.

Art didn't look convinced by Jessy, or shocked to silence for very long. "Like I said, if it wasn't for Eric, you'd let this spirit continue doing what it's doing, and ignore that it's helping ruin lives. Wouldn't you? Where's your compassion?"

Anyone else would have been caught off guard by a comment like that, but Jessy didn't flinch or blink.

"Eric wants to try and make this city a better place, I say all the power to him. Hell, I'll help, cause I happen to like the man. But I haven't heard him blame us Kindred for the state of the city." She leaned in closer to Art again, and while she may not have flinched, Eric did. That was her fight face. Eric had seen it, when they were brawling with the Carthians not long ago. "You, on the other hand, seem quick to blame us. Don't drag your hate of vamps into this. We already show kine more compassion than most Kindred do, here in Dolareido."

Matthew looked like a child, trapped between his two arguing parents. Natasha looked like she wanted to join in, and maybe defend someone, but couldn't figure out who. Side with the friend or the boyfriend. And it wasn't like they didn't both have decent points to make. The Kindred could have been doing a better job, and turn Dolareido from an already pretty great city, into a borderline utopia. But that wasn't their responsibility. Hell, vampires fed on people, and it was obvious a lot of aspects of Dolareido were there specifically to make that easier, even if it did mean a potentially harder life for some of the humans. Vampires were higher up on the food chain, after all. It wasn't like Eric could completely argue against that; farms worked under the same premise.

Except, he didn't used to be a chicken or a cow. He used to be human. Same with vampires.

“Um, m-m-maybe we should ... t-talk about this later?” Natasha said. Matthew nodded vehemently.

With a grunt, Jessy and Art nodded. Maybe it was because she was a Gangrel, but it was obvious to Eric Jessy looked for arguments, at least when Uratha were involved. He didn't really mind. It was nice, having a girlfriend who voiced her opinions honestly, even if she did get a bit overly aggressive about it. Better that than passive aggressive.

“I think,” Eric said, “Jessy should make an offer to it. Draw it out to ... Devil's Corner, I suppose. What should Jessy offer it? And, once we get it alone in Devil's Corner, should we just jump it? Or—”

“You will do no such thing.”

Ah shit. The group of them looked to the roof edge, and Jessy almost jumped back, as a crystal blue wave flowed up and over, onto the roof. And angel wings came with it.

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~~Natasha~~

“Flowing Sanctuary,” Tash whispered.

“Indeed.” The tall goddess of flowing water and angel wings — two types of spirits with angel wings! — flowed over to them, and hit them with water. For a moment, Tash wasn't sure how to respond to that, or if it'd be actual water that hit her. It was. That begged a billion questions about what it was that a spirit's body was made of, because there was no question that all five of the paranormals on the roof were now knocked onto their ass, and soaked.

Uh oh. Uh oh uh oh. She looked between the group, the skylight that was now covered in water, and the enormous water spirit that had risen to join them on the rooftop. Her Cloak of Night was



shattered, and it wouldn't have been strong enough to keep something as huge and majestic as Flow hidden anyway.

Flowing Sanctuary really was a beautiful creature, the very definition of a water goddess, a human-shaped torso of water so pristine, it was crystal. Its angel wings started blue, and turned into white mist at the tips of their feathers. No arms, but small waterfalls for arms that turned into the same sort of mist her feathers did. No legs, but instead a slow-swirling vortex of water, like a reverse whirlpool that supported Flow's body. She had no facial features, but at certain angles, and when the water flowed just right, Tash was sure she could see two glowing white slits for eyes.

The fact Flow and Safe both had angel wings was a pattern she'd noticed before, and now that she thought about it, both spirits had similar motifs. Flowing Sanctuary provided a form of protection for her Uratha clan; assuming her name was indicative of her nature. Safe of Grey Street and her fellow, younger spirit, were literal spirits of safety that hung around suburbs where kids grew up. It wasn't like kids couldn't feel safe in an apartment, but there was something unique and powerful about owning your own home, and the spirits must have picked up on that. Why they both manifested with angel wings, she wasn't quite sure.

"The fuck?" Jessy said, getting up from her butt and back onto her feet. "Whoa, what's this?"

"This," Arturo said, grumbling as he also stood up, and spent a little time wringing out his t-shirt, "is Flowing Sanctuary, our pack's totem."

Jessy held up a hand, not dissimilar to how Tash would have. Maybe Jessy was picking up the habit; more likely, just mirroring Tash's mannerisms to get answers.

"Totem?"

“She’s part of the pack,” Matt said. “She helps us, and we help her.”

Help a spirit, a spirit named Flowing Sanctuary. If spirits always tried to spread their influence, and create more of what they were reflections of, then Flowing Sanctuary would probably try and create a sanctuary of some kind. Or maybe, being that it was some hybrid of water and protection, it was too complicated for Natasha to figure out with such simple labels.

Jessy raised her hand again. “Help her with...?”

“None of your concern,” Flow said, powerful voice almost booming. “But I will not let my pack mates destroy the tenuous truce we hold with Black Blood, on some flight of fancy. And I assume this ridiculous plan is yours, Eric Tanverson?” The water goddess pointed one of her—its mist arms at Eric.

“It is.” Eric wiped some of the water off his clothes, before he walked up to the enormous water spirit, and looked it in the face. “And I’m not part of your pack. You can’t tell me what to do.”

“Can’t I?”

Natasha didn’t have to say it. The look on Eric’s face may as well have blared it out with a loud horn, and comedic sound effect. Mistake.

A crashing wave smashed into the roof. Flowing Sanctuary did not pull punches, and Tash couldn’t help but think about real water, as a colossal, heavy wave of liquid smashed into her and her friends, sending them off the building like leaves to the wind. Real water was impartial, and some might say, even cruel. As much as Flowing Sanctuary looked like something that would protect those that it cared for, it also attacked them with the same callousness and total indifference of a monsoon. Or, maybe the better comparison was angel. Much as its angel wings reminded her of Safe and how joyful

it'd been, Flow was quickly reminding her of angels from the Old Testament.

Thankfully the spirit didn't throw them out onto the main street. Instead, it tossed them onto the back alley that separated Doc Omala's from the other entertainment buildings. Except, there wasn't much room in the alley, only six feet wide, and to Flow, that wasn't much room at all. As the group of them plummeted toward the asphalt below, water poured over them, crashing downward faster than gravity allowed, and encompassed the five paranormals.

With zero concern for avoiding damaging its passengers, Flow threw them out from the alley onto a distant street, dumping them into an intersection. Nearby car and street spirits swerved out of the way, and left tire tracks behind as they sped off as fast as they could. Crow spirits fled to higher perches. Nearby rat spirits unleashed a choir of shrieks before scampering into the sewers. Random spirits that were drifting between the warped, half glowing, half lit up buildings, scattered and disappeared into the buildings they'd been leaving.

The water drained away, as quickly as it'd arrived, and Flow stood before them, tall, and immutable.

"Avery expected this," it said. "I said she did not trust her Uratha, if she thought them capable of this. Silly me, for not believing her."

The group of them slowly got up, grumbling and groaning with each step. From wet to dripping soaked in seconds.

"Shit, really?" Matt said.

"Fuckin' boss." Grumbling louder than necessary, Arturo rung out the base of his shirt, again. "We weren't going to violate any truce, Flow."

"You know very well Black Blood would not accept this action."

Art threw his arms up. “You know damn well that’s not how it works. We weren’t going to disturb the peace, and that’d keep Black Blood happy.”

The water angel shook its head. “You underestimate the connections of this city, Uratha. As usual, you do not appreciate the politics of the Hisil. I can forgive Eric for his ignorance, but I will not forgive you.”

“I don’t—”

And up Arturo went. Natasha stepped back and gulped hard, as water poured out from Flow’s base, crashed into Arturo, and literally threw him into the air. Thirty feet into the air and then down again. Flow didn’t brace his fall this time, but Art was ready for it, and he landed on his hands and feet. Big as he was, it was still a rough landing, and he collapsed onto his side with the impact. Thud.

With a squeak, Tash ran over to him and helped get him onto his knees. “I thought you said F-F-Flow was part of the pack?”

“It is. That doesn’t mean it gets along with us all the time.”

“Avery and I get along beautifully.” With a sigh, Flow began to circle them. A fairly theatrical feat, considering they were in the center of an intersection, and spirits were watching them from a safe distance. “You two troublemakers, on the other hand, are a problem. You disturb the sanctuary I seek to create.”

Matthew, still on his feet, got between Flow and Art. “Alright, we get it, you don’t like us. Can we calm down?”

“I do not think so. You two need to be taught a lesson.”

Jessy stepped up, earning some raised eyebrows from everyone. Well, Natasha knew her friend would throw herself into harm’s way,

but the boy's were surprised. Even Eric blinked at her several times.

“So, uh,” Jessy said, “we’re making quite a bit of ruckus out here. Isn’t Black Blood going to come around and, I dunno, smack us?”

Everyone went silent, and looked around. Considering the power of the spirit, Tash did expect it—him to arrive the moment he felt a disturbance in ‘his’ city.

Where was Black Blood?

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~~Damien~~

Never, in a million years, did Damien expect to find the horrors he did. But the dark forest proved to be the thorny barrier that tried to keep prying eyes from witnessing its secrets. A forest worthy of the Brothers Grimm. Now that the werewolf and the demon ripped that barrier apart, the secrets of the forest were laid open before them.

Jacob would have been envious of the secrets they found.

At Jack and Clara’s feet, Damien could see black soot; the dust Angela used as a barrier in the hospital. Just inside that, was a glowing amber line, and it circled the small forest clearing all the way around, same as the black soot. It was a barrier Damien was all too familiar with. Just within the circle, there were twelve trees, fat, twisted, black, withered, and barbed. Each tree carried a body, a naked corpse, crucified, nails hammered in through the ankles and wrists. Their stomachs were cut open, and contents spilled at the base of each tree. It reeked, and the nightmare was content to have flies buzz around the corpses.

“Your work?” Jack said with a cackle. The demon kid gestured to the tree near him, and then to the hunters beyond the barrier.

“Like this even compares to the shit you’ve done!” one of the hunters said.

Angela lifted her head from the bag she was digging through with Jeremiah. “Fuck you, vampire. You’d never understand.”

Damien wasn’t so sure about that. Jack and Beatrice had been up to something, and he didn’t know what, but it was safe to assume that nastiness had been involved. A glance to the Nosferatu confirmed his suspicion, as she looked up at the corpses on the trees, caught his look, and looked down for a second. A single second was plenty, for him to recognize a touch of guilt on her face.

“How far the righteous have fallen!” Cackling, actually cackling, Jack began to make his way around the circle. If he was scanning for a hole in the defense, Damien knew he wouldn’t find it. Just like the trap that had caught Damien in the tunnel, the amber circle would block paranormals from crossing, and the black soot seemed to stop anything from passing it at all.

This was probably what Jeremiah had meant by plan Vandermont. If the word had any meaning, Damien couldn’t surmise it, and Harcourt mentioned nothing of the sort; probably just a meaningless name, or something that only meant something to Jeremiah. But the plan had obviously been about retreating to a new position. Harcourt said Jeremiah had a habit of not explaining everything involved in his plans, so the hunters had probably retreated to this location on blind faith, following Jeremiah and Angela to a place they’d never been to before.

No, not quite true. Four of the hunters, two men and two women, were likely privy to some inside knowledge. Those were the four that the Kindred had descriptions of, that’d been scouted out by Jack when he was hunting for Barry’s killers, and by Eric the night Jack had been kidnapped. These four hunters were the four that had already been in the village when Clara had broken through the door.

Two men, white and Hispanic, and two women, black and Hispanic, wearing various mixtures of jeans, leather, and straps holding lots of pistols, magazines, and a couple grenades. They had plenty of tattoos on what skin was visible, more than Harcourt, and almost as many as Angela and Jeremiah.

It made sense that Jeremiah would have some hunters he'd trust a little more than the others. A rank system, or maybe he just relied on them more, and didn't tell the other hunters what he told these four. Either way, those four pulled assault rifles out of the bags sitting in the center of the clearing. One of the four, the white man, took the flamethrower from one of the other hunters, and rejoined Jeremiah in the circle center. None of them looked directly at the vampires.

"Sacrifices must be made," Jeremiah said as he stood up, "to defeat vile creatures such as yourself." A book sat in his hands, and Damien glared at it, squinting, making out every detail he could. The book looked like a movie prop, cover thick and enveloped in the sort of bumps and grooves you might find on dried flesh.

"Oh yes, sacrifices," Jack continued. "Let's put this into perspective, for your hunter buddies here that you've been keeping in the dark." The little man braced one hand against the invisible wall, set another against a tree, and pushed it down, opening up the path before him to continue walking around the perimeter. Crash, boom, a thunderous applause of destroyed wood, before he resumed his walk. "You and your group show up in my city, hunting an old monster named Azamel. Fine, I can understand that. She's your Moby Dick. But then you kill Barry to cover your tracks. That was dumb. The Dolareido vamps would have been much slower to jump on your ass, if you'd left him alone."

That was true. Much as Damien didn't want to admit it, Dolareido vampires were attached to the peace they had. They'd have been far more reluctant to get involved with hunters, if the hunters had let

them be. Earning Isabella's ire, on the other hand, expedited how soon there would be inevitable conflict with the hunters, ten fold.

“And then, because you know I know Azamel, you kidnap me and torture me. Heh, if only you fucking morons knew about me and Susanna, you'd have run.” His words earned nothing but confused, raised eyebrows, and glances shared between the hunters. “So, you've been kidnapping humans off Dolareido's streets, and using them in some pretty fucked up rituals, rituals so twisted they'd make any witch of the Circle envious. You used this fucked up magic of blood and flesh, to literally divine useful information for you. You used haruspex to figure out I know about Azamel and her lair. You used it to learn about Eric, and that he also could be an 'in' to Azamel's lair. You used this fucked up magic to enslave a Begotten, and use him against us! And you know what, you fucking know what? I don't take any of that personally. They're tactical decisions that are questionable, but I can understand coming to those conclusions, in your situation.

“But, there is no way, no fucking way, no possible fucking way, that you can justify killing my living family. My mother and my sister were completely uninvolved in any of this, just a couple of innocent humans.” Jack pushed down another tree, a big one, and the forest went silent in the wake of the following explosion and thunder.

“Wait, what?” one of the hunters said.

“It's true, guys!” Harcourt said. Everyone, except Jack, looked back at the man, who was moving among the trees to stick with the group as best he could in the thick forest. “Angela's crazy. She's been on this vengeance kick against Jack. I saw it, in the hospital, and Jack mentioned his mom and sister there. It—”

“Shut up!” Angela screamed. “Traitor.”



“I’m not a traitor! You tricked us! You and Jeremiah and that old bitch, you tricked us!”

“Brace, you’ve been brainwashed,” one of the hunters said, daring to take a step toward the invisible barrier. “You’ve got to realize that. You—”

“Oh, I could have brainwashed him, easily” Jack said. “I could have broken this poor fool and turned him into my doting slave. But he wouldn’t have this spark in his eyes, would he? Wouldn’t have the same panic and mannerisms you probably recognize. But, it doesn’t matter if you believe me or not. Harcourt gave you the opportunity to surrender. Two of you did. They get to live. The rest of you? Too late now.” Down went another tree, and the group of paranormals winced as they watched the kid destroy with as much concern for his surroundings as a child.

Jeremiah and Angela offered Jack some quick glares, too quick for proper eye contact, but it was enough for the other hunters to notice. And when they noticed each other noticing, they started looking between each other, confused. The four hunters that seemed to be the more trusted of the group, on the other hand, mirrored the glares of their bosses, and stayed close to the old woman in the wheelchair.

“Jack,” Harcourt said, “please, come on. If they—”

“They had their chance!” Jack spun and slammed his hand into a nearby tree. With his other hand braced against the invisible barrier, the demon’s true strength went into the punch, and wood shattered around his fist. Bark flew, splinters showered around them, and Othello and Harcourt both ducked to keep the exploding wood from stabbing them.

“So,” Jack continued, “is this where Elen’s been doing the truly wicked stuff? Have you hunters even noticed these corpses on the trees? They’re not from the nightmare. They’re real.” He reached

out for one of the trees, but it stood just within the circle, beyond his reach. “She uses these sacrifices for more of her magic. How many citizens have you fuckers killed, since you arrived? You open portals with blood, you divine information with guts, and you control Sándor through sacrifices. And these corpses on the trees? What do they do?”

As he walked, slowly circling the clearing, Jack continued to create his path, leaving a trail of destruction behind. Rats followed, hundreds of them, and they pushed against the invisible barrier. Some dug at the earth, and tried to get under the black soot, but they didn’t get far. The soot either went deep, or its magical properties extended deep. How deep? Damien looked up, and his frown deepened. The crows above were circling, trying to find a way in, but they couldn’t.

“The whole lot of you,” Jack said, gesturing to the hunters, “have sold your souls down the river. None of you are heroes. None of you are valiant defenders, fighting the good fight. You’re all cockroaches who infested my home. Jeremiah, Angela, and the old witch, are horrible fucks with delusions of valor. Your masters, dear hunters, are psychopaths who don’t give a damn about saving lives. And worst of the lot is Angela. She stabbed my mother and sister in broad daylight. My mother nearly died, and my sire sacrificed himself to save her from the bitch. My sister is dead! Her ghost haunts my home. And you know what? I bet telling her that—fuck that, I bet bringing her Angela’s head will help her move on.”

The more he talked, the more Damien felt an ice cold pit growing in his stomach. This wasn’t Jack. This was the demon he’d met at the hospital, the one that had unleashed his army of crows on the building, and the one that had literally popped a hunter, as Jack said, like a grape. But, unlike that hospital encounter, this Jack was piloting for an extended period of time. He was dancing around in Jack’s body, and toying with his voice, using inflections and sinister tones that just didn’t fit Jack. Cackling was just the tip of the iceberg

of the mannerisms this new Jack was using. Everything from how he walked, stood, twitched his head faster when looking around, and flicked his eyes like a schizophrenic, was unnerving. And much as he was disturbing Damien, the Mekhet could see Jack's attitude was disturbing the hunters as well. His words were getting to them, making them sweat, tremble, breath faster, and step back from the barrier.

Several of them had interacted with Jack before, in the prison, in the nightmare castle, and at the hospital. This was not the Jack they were familiar with, either. Or, it was the Jack some of them had seen emerge, when Julias had died. No doubt, the kid had become a horror story they told each other. No doubt, Jack was the vampire they'd told each other to now avoid at all costs.

Jack the Ripper. He dare not say it.

“Well, come on!” Jack said. “Let's have it. Let's have whatever final move you're going to do, Jeremiah. What last trick do you have?” As he said it, he motioned for Clara to start digging at the ground. Growling quietly, she obeyed, and started ripping and tearing at the earth and the lines that blocked them. “We'll break these lines eventually. And then what?” A tall mountain of rats splashed against the invisible barrier in front of Jack, pouring against it before collapsing, like a tidal wave crashing against a glass wall. “I'm going to butcher every one of you. I'm going to rip out your insides, and make you watch. I'm going to Dominate your friends, and make you kill each other, slowly. I'm going to make you look each other in the eyes, and strangle each other to death. Ever read *The Sandman, 24 Hours*? I'll make that seem tame.” The kid tapped his chin thoughtfully, juggling fantasies. “Maybe a little Russian roulette. Maybe a little fun with razor blades, or barbed wire? I'm going to strip the skin off your limbs and—”

At a certain point, Damien threw everything the demon said into a 'horrific' pile, and ignored it. His threats were working though.

Every so often, Jack punched the invisible barrier, and the resounding thud was enough to make the hunters jump; they were afraid of him. Each time, Jack found leverage, putting his feet down against fallen trees or large rocks. And each time, the punch was hard enough that whatever leverage Jack used, was sent backward, ripping up the earth or crashing through other trees violently. Damien and the others stayed well and clear.

Angela looked worried. She tried to hide it, Damien could see that, but there was doubt in her eyes. None of them had predicted the vampires would find a way to penetrate their defenses, and have a traitor give up its temporary location. On top of that, none of them had anticipated the power they awoke within Jack. The kid was coming at them with the power of an ancient elder, like Jacob or the Prince or the sheriff. Elders didn't risk their necks like this, unless they were absolutely sure they were in complete control of the situation. For an elder to run into the unknown on a blitzkrieg assault, was unheard of. Jack was doing just that, and foiling their plans singlehandedly.

The kid was right. There was no last grand stand for the hunters, no moment of tested virtue, no epic finality of martyrdom. All the hunters were going to get, was a tortured end at the hands of a beast whose ire they'd stirred.

Or were they? The four hunters that stood by Elen didn't look as distraught as the others. Jeremiah was turning through the pages of some book, and Angela was pulling out strange objects from the bag. An ornamental stone knife. A shrunken head. A ... spinal cord. The overlap between Elen's magic, and the twisted things Damien expected of the Circle of the Crone, was growing.

"Come on, Angela," Jack said. "How many times have I nearly killed you. Three times, now? I'm standing right here, and you're ignoring me. I'm hurt."

“Fuck you!”

“Haha! Is that it, Angela, all you have to say? You’re the reason I’ve awoken, and now you get to reap the rewards.” Jack took another punch at the barrier, to the same result. But twenty feet to his right, Clara was making progress, causing the earth in front of the black soot to become softer and softer as she got deeper and deeper. Right, like with the explosives in the tunnel, Jack and crew might not be able to affect the barrier, but the material it was drawn on could be affected, if something happened to it. Clara had to dig straight down, not able to cross the barrier in any sense, but eventually the earth would collapse. Probably.

“She’s going to do something,” Beatrice said, nodding toward Elen. Triss was still a ways back from the chaos, next to Damien and Othello. Harcourt had approached the barrier, and was obviously wrestling with the dilemma of trying to convince Jack to spare his friends. Poor man would make no headway with the curse possessing Jack.

Damien nodded, squeezing his sword in his right hand. “What do you think?”

“Well, we know their primary goal is Azamel. And we know Jeremiah knows her intimately. Everything he’s been doing in Dolareido is about him trying to find a way to attack Azamel.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, and ... well ... we know Elen can penetrate nightmare chambers.”

“Yeah.”

“So, what’s stopping her from just opening a portal straight to Azamel’s lair?”

At that, Damien could only shrug. “I assume Azamel has a way to lock hers up, or maybe Elen can only enter Sándor’s nightmare.”

The nature of Begotten, their lairs, and nightmares in general, were still a mystery to all of them. Fiona had told him much, and it still wasn’t enough to piece together any sort of framework his mind could grasp. There existed a dream realm, affected or created by human consciousness, and a chunk of it was devoted to nightmares. Nightmare chambers were actual locations in the dream realm, created or affected by humans who had suffered traumatic experiences. They were scars on the dream realm, or maybe the better metaphor was, edifices that had been built in an endless dreamscape. Begotten had a chamber that seemed to birth them, or was integral to their existence, and they could connect other chambers, claim them, and attach them. A lair.

Navigating a maze across a realm of dreams, and figuring out how to penetrate chambers, or prevent them from being penetrated, was well beyond his ability to understand. It probably had less to do with understanding, and more to do with feeling. Mekhet struggled with feeling as is, let alone when taken to as ridiculous a situation as navigating literal dream realms.

Beatrice shook her head. “This is their last chance. What would a psychopath like Jeremiah do, if he realized his back was to a wall, and the only chance he had at completing a mission he’s been pursuing for decades, was slipping through his fingers?”

“He’d ... he’d...” No, he wouldn’t run. A sane person would run. A rational person would run. Live to fight another day and all that. But this was an opportunity that Jeremiah never had before. He was so close to his target, and Jack had, on multiple occasions, made comparisons between Azamel and Moby Dick, and Jeremiah and Captain Ahab.

In Melville's Moby-Dick, Ahab ignored the warning signs and dangers, and proceeded forward on his vengeance quest, until it led to the death of him and his crew, save one. So consumed by complete hatred for the beast that had injured him, he didn't care who died, and that included himself. 'Thus, I give up the spear!' Only for Ahab to be dragged under the water to the depths below, entangled by the rope of his own harpoon stuck in the whale's hide. A sickening, and resonating metaphor for the self-destructive nature of hatred and fanaticism.

If Jack's understanding of Jeremiah was accurate, and Damien believed it was, then Jeremiah was going to put killing Azamel as more important than his own life, or the lives of his hunters.

"We have to get in there," Damien said. "Now."

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~~Antoinette~~

"I fear," Azamel said, between several coughs, "that I won't be receiving my inheritance, as I once intended."

The Prince looked down at the frail woman beside her, confused. Azamel was in her wheelchair still, with Mark behind her, as the elevator descended into the depths of Antoinette's tower. Naturally, the old woman did not elaborate, likely prompting Antoinette to ask her to. A child's power games, but Antoinette was not in a position to deny her.

"Inheritance?"

"A goal for many of my kind, and rare beyond measure." The old woman shook her head, sighed, and let her eyes drift down. "But, it is not all for naught. Athalia, Mark, and Fiona will continue to grow. I have high hopes for them. And perhaps, we can save this poor soul in your basement as well." The woman's voice was heavy, sorrowful,

and each word stirred Antoinette in a way she could not have predicted.

Azamel was a surly, frustrating old woman, the sort who despised everything new, including others. She was the sort who would cover her furniture in plastic, to preserve it through the years as she festered in front of the television. She was the sort who would smoke herself to death, and never once even consider the idea of quitting; smoking was as much a part of her as breathing. Considering her unnatural age, and for how many decades she had been smoking, only her Begotten body kept the tobacco from killing her.

She was the sort of woman who had nothing left in her to share with the world, except for resentment and frustration. To hear her speak of her fellow monsters with such emotion, care, and empathy, was a side of Azamel she had never seen, not in her first visit to her city, or the second. It was unexpected to hear such words from her, and Antoinette felt, perhaps, a little humbled. She was old enough to know death was coming, to be bitter and hateful at the world, and yet, Azamel cared for her kin. Admirable.

“Plenty of women live past where I see your—”

“It’s not old age that comes for me, vampire, at least, not tonight. Jeremiah is being pinned in a corner by your lover and the strange curse, as I knew he would be when Jack came to speak with me tonight. Never has Jeremiah been so close to me and collecting my head, and never has he earned the wrath of something as ... twisted.”

“You can see the curse?” she said.

“Indeed. Begotten can see the truth behind the skin of all creatures.” She shrugged, and reached for her breast pocket for a cigarette. But, when her fingers found an empty pocket, she sighed



and set her hands down upon the arms of her chair, more defeated by that than anything Antoinette had ever said to her.

“I was aware you could see more than others could, but I did not realize it was such a powerful tool. Could ... you please tell me more, about what you saw in Jack?”

She coughed a single time, before the elevator doors opened. Antoinette guided them down toward the stairs that led deeper into her labyrinth, and she froze. The Elysium Tower’s labyrinths did not have ramps, for people who used wheelchairs. But thankfully, Mark had little issue leaning forward, securing a grip on the arms of the chair, and helping Azamel move down the stairs with minimal bumps.

“A great and terrible beast, vampire. In all Kindred, we see a creature of shadow, something that twists upon itself, and shows hint of claw, beak, feather, talon, and fang. You and all your fellow vampires are malleable creatures, adapting to your environment as any cockroach, rat, or crow does. But ... but Jack, the shadow creature within him, the vampire part of his body and soul, has grown. It’s enormous, overwhelming, and overpowering.” She was trembling, and rubbing her hands as if to soothe arthritis. For a moment, Antoinette thought it was perhaps Mark letting some of her wheels bounce against the stairs, but once he reached the floor where Antoinette waited, the old woman’s shivering continued.

The image the old monster’s words painted was not a pleasant one. It sounded as if, the dreaded Strix placed a curse upon her lover’s bloodline, that twisted the desires of the natural, normal Kindred condition. Those infernal creatures attempted to draw out the most horrible side of Kindred whenever they made an appearance, and she knew not why. No one did. But wherever Striges were found, Kindred being tormented, and pushed into extreme scenarios, were also found.

The mystery of the curse, its origin, and its connection to those who cast it, were questions she doubted would ever be answered. What she knew for certain, was that her beloved now carried the curse, and judging by Azamel's description, the curse had affected the Beast within her love. It would drive him to violence, to slaughter, and to mayhem.

"I spoke to the curse, for a moment, at the hospital," Antoinette said. "It was a rude creature, wholly confident, narcissistic, and concerned only with its own pleasure, pleasure at the expense of others."

"That must have been horrible for you," Azamel said, though she did not attempt to hide how little she cared for Antoinette's feelings. What reservoir of empathy Azamel carried, she saved it for other Begotten only.

"And—"

"No," Azamel said, "I don't know if he can be cured."

It was Antoinette's turn to sigh, but after a moment to suppress her despair, she began down the hallway. "What do you believe Jeremiah will do, if you are correct?"

"Athalia has already reported back to me, about Jack's assault. She has left my lair with Fiona, and returns to Sándor's to aid your little boyfriend. Jack has ... scared her, Athalia I mean. He's scared her, he's scared his comrades, and he's terrified every hunter." The old monster shook her head, and let it lean to the side, as if it were too heavy to lift. But she kept her eyes open, and breathed with the slow, steady struggle of someone too stubborn to give into pain. "I had not foreseen this."

"Foreseen?"

“What was supposed to happen, was I ... came here, to Dolareido, to hide from Jeremiah. Here, I would lure Jeremiah into lowering his guard, and I would claim his life, with no room for argument from his pack of hunters. The tragedy of Jeremiah, and ... and my own mistakes, would be shared for all to hear. The surviving hunters would be forced to watch, and I would let them live. They would spread my tale, and I would ... receive my inheritance.

“But, that is no longer an option. My health fails me, and I fear I cannot defeat Jeremiah in battle. This battle between us ... has gone on too long.”

“Your health?” So, Azamel’s body was dying. Not tonight or tomorrow night, but Antoinette could see how time had ravaged the monster. “Surely it is not—”

“It’s not the cigarettes. Don’t be ridiculous.” She waved a hand, though even that motion was crippled. If she had flicked her wrist with any enthusiasm, it would have broke. “But, like I said to you, during your first visit following my return, I am old, centuries old. My time will come, sooner than I’d like, and sooner than I’d planned. The battle I wished to have with Jeremiah will not go as I predicted.” And, as if the crone were releasing a lungful of smoke, she let out another long sigh. “Not that it matters any longer. Jack is going to slaughter all of them. Nothing will be left.”

“You said, it was not old age that comes for you tonight?”

“No. Jeremiah will come for me tonight.”

“How? He has done much in his time here specifically in an attempt to find a way to attack you.”

The walk through the hallway was a slow one, as if Mark were afraid a proper walking speed would affect Azamel. Considering how tonight’s conversation had gone, perhaps he was correct. All the

doors in the hall were closed, and the large door at the end of the hall waited for them with unyielding patience.

“He has done much in an attempt to find ways to poke holes in my defenses, to find me where I’m human, and to expose my vulnerabilities. But I believe that ... I believe that Jeremiah has been able to penetrate my lair all this time, Prince.” Again, she shivered, and again reached for a cigarette that did not exist, before sighing. “Creatures like Jeremiah find ways of puncturing the nightmare realm, and forcing their way into our lairs. As if God hated us, those damn creatures always find a way.”

“Creatures like Jeremiah?”

“Men and women with conviction, absurd determination, and ... I suppose you could call them psychopaths. History would remember them as heroes, if any remained to tell their tale. And ... and that’s a part of what I needed, vampire. I needed those heroes, and I needed to defeat them. I needed them to come to me and be defeated by me, so wholly and completely, that my Inheritance would be within my grasp.” She shook her head yet again, weighed down by a thousand decisions Antoinette could not begin to understand. “A dream beyond my grasp, now. Instead, I will do what I can to save what I can of my kin.”

Antoinette got in front of the wheelchair, and glared down at the old woman. “You came to my city, not to escape Jeremiah’s pursuit, but to purposefully trigger a battle with him?”

Azamel met her glare, unflinching and resolute. “I did.”

“All for something called Inheritance?”

“As I said, a goal for my existence, vampire. It’s something you cannot appreciate. Don’t try. But for Begotten, there are states of being greater than we are, and when we are old enough, and mature enough to understand them, we pursue them. To become a legend,

to become a monster of myth, to have humans everywhere know the name Azamel, as they might Goliath, or the Kraken, or the Hydra, or Abaddon, there is no reward greater for Begotten.”

Somehow, Antoinette doubted that. Not all Begotten embraced their existence so completely and wholly, just as many Kindred hated their existence, and some Uratha likely did as well. Though, it was reasonable to assume that Azamel enjoyed being Begotten, and she was willing to risk the lives of Kindred in pursuit of this unknown goal. It was enough to have Antoinette squeezing her fists at her sides, until they trembled.

“I should kill you now,” she said.

Azamel still did not flinch; carved from stone. As if she’d met death before, and laughed, Azamel met her gaze without fear, though the cough that eventually ripped through her was enough to break it.

“Yes, I’m sure you think so. But, unless Jack proves exceptionally lucky, and manages to kill Jeremiah before he has a chance to act, I expect to be meeting my end before the night is done. I have spent these many years running from Jeremiah, from my past, as Jeremiah knows my weakness.” Past? Weakness. A million questions ran through Antoinette’s mind, begging to be answered, but if Azamel spoke truth that she would likely die soon, it served to let the woman speak. “If Jack backs him into a corner, and I believe he will, considering the power of this curse he’s unleashed, Jeremiah will resort to a kamikaze attack on me.”

“Then why are you not defending yourself?”

“I am, in a way. This kin you’ve locked up, I want to be here, if Jack and his friends free the man from this spell that binds him.”

“The man appears to be comatose.”

“Then when his mind returns to him, we will know the spell is broken.”

“Or, it will be a ploy of his, to be freed so he can return to Jeremiah as dutiful servant once more.”

The old woman shook her head. “You think this man can pretend to be comatose for weeks upon weeks, only to enact a ploy now? I’m sure the spell the shaman has cast on him keeps him comatose when he is captured. Better to have a tool become useless, when captured by the enemy.”

Yes, that was in all likelihood what was happening. But it was not guaranteed, and she did not take chances she did not need to.

“Should every word you have said be true,” Antoinette said, “then I have no reason to help you, Azamel. In fact, you have given me reason to dispose of you. You abused the hospitality I offered, little that it was, and you have risked the lives of my Kindred with your absurd plan.”

Azamel let out another long, slow breath, and shrugged. “If you help me, I’ll take you with me, when I head back into my lair. If things go as I expect, no doubt we’ll run into Jack ... or, the thing inside Jack.”

It took the centuries of practice and patience Antoinette had, to not hiss. “ ... very well.”

Every reflex she had wanted to punish herself, for agreeing to such a ridiculous proposal. She was an elder Kindred, and her responsibilities lay with her city. It was not on her shoulders to venture out, and enact enforcement with her bare hands. Such was the responsibility of her thralls, and her trusted Kindred servants, her sheriff and her student Vola. To handle conflict by her own hand was foolhardy. There came a point in all Kindred’s lives, should they live long enough, that they realized that dealing with conflict, battle,

and confrontation directly rather than indirectly, was how one met an early second death. Typically during their later ancilla years, smart Kindred learned to avoid direct confrontation, and to defeat problems with subterfuge, manipulation, or grace. Those that did not learn, died.

When it came to Jack, she found herself reduced to the mentality of a young ancilla, prepared to use her great strength and do things with her own hands. Wisdom vanished, memories and the lessons learned faded, and all that was left was an overwhelming desire to put herself into harm's way to save her love.

Other Kindred had died for such stupidity. And tonight, for the first time in her long life, she considered that, perhaps, dying for such a reason was a worthy cause to perish for.

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~~Beatrice~~

“Yeah,” she said to Damien, “we do.” The more she watched the hunters in the circle work, the more it became obvious Jeremiah and Angela were planning some final maneuver. The other hunters didn't come here in some last ditch effort to save their skins. They were just following Jeremiah and Angela blindly. She could see the terror in their eyes, panic driving each of them into animal hysteria. Every hunter, except for the leading trio and their four bodyguards, were fidgeting with their guns, checking the safeties, checking their belts for what ammunition they had left, and staring at the growing damage Clara was creating.

The barrier would break eventually. Either the dirt would collapse where Clara dug, and the line would be broken, or there'd be enough open dirt dug up that Clara would literally be able to throw her weight into the wall of earth, and cause it to crumble. One, maybe two minutes at most. But two minutes was an eternity in the middle of extreme chaos, with a few thousand rats and crows fighting to get in, and everyone sitting on the edge of death.

“Form a defensive line!” Jeremiah yelled. “We won’t let these beasts have us.”

While Clara continued to dig, Jack started to circle the hunters once again. If it weren’t for the forest, a brisk walk would take a person around the clearing in a single minute. A large enough clearing for a dozen hunters, a dozen trees with sacrifices crucified on them, and a giant stone with a slab of human skin draped over it. But it was a clearing, a circle, and there was nothing stopping the paranormals from circling it. Once they got in, there’d be nothing stopping the paranormals from circling the hunters, and ripping them to shreds.

As Jack moved left again, his army of rats following him while the crows above hopped along branches or flew overhead, everyone else moved right. It was becoming obvious there was no need to cover the kid’s back. If anything, once the shooting started, the kid would have to come save their asses, not the other way around. Beatrice, Damien, Othello, and the idiot hunter stayed mostly together as they moved around the circle in the other direction. Othello and Beatrice did their best to push down trees when they got in the way, but for the most part they stepped around them. It was a waste of vitae to summon the inhuman strength needed to push over giant trees, for her and Othello, at least. And Damien couldn’t do it at all.

While the hunters were panicked as all fuck, and kept their eyes on Clara and the circling Jack, they didn’t care too much about Triss. Two of them kept their eyes on her, and looked directly at her. An easy bridge for her to reach out, and—and nothing.

“Trying to hit them with a nightmare?” Damien whispered.

“Yeah. Can’t get through.”

“The amber line seems to block things of a paranormal nature. The black line blocks the physical.”



“Y-Yeah,” Harcourt said. They threw glances at him, until the man lowered his voice to nothing more than a quiet whisper. “We draw the amber line with one of Elen’s tools, though it doesn’t last long. And leave Jeremiah’s special black powder as a line, but he doesn’t have much of it.”

“Those two,” Beatrice said, clicking her crocodile teeth along each other as she glared at Jeremiah and Elen, “are a match made in heaven.”

“You’re telling me.” Shivering, Harcourt started to lag behind, at least until Othello gave him a shove of the shoulder. “Yeah yeah.”

Everyone’s eyes went to Elen, as the woman had one of her hunter friends push her wheelchair along the grass toward the big stone slab. She took the stone knife, and started writing in the skin.

“Sandor’s locked up in the Elysium Tower,” Jack said, grinning. “Cast what magics you want. I’ve seen where the Prince has him. Nothing supernatural is getting in there, spell or curse.”

The hunters ignored him, for the most part. Elen continued her work, humming to herself in that sweet way old grandmas sometimes did. Angela dug through the bag and dug out a few more strange items, though at a certain point a pattern became clear. Everything that came out of the bag was some sort of preserved body part, with something done to it to make it unique; the shrunken head was the obvious example. At one point she pulled out a dried hand, and Triss snarled. The hand of a hanged man was a powerful artifact, according to some of the books Jacob had shown her. A Hand of Glory.

“Come on!” Jack said, laughing all the while as he knocked over another tree, making slow but sure progress around the clearing. “There’s no getting out of there. You’re dead, all of you, dead! Sure you don’t have any final words?”

“Fuck you!” Angela, for all her obvious fury, kept her mind on the task; not even an attempt at banter. In fact, she looked disturbed. She pulled out another artifact, and another, and she treated each like a scientist might handling a petri dish of a deadly bacterium. Every one, she set down carefully, shivered a few times, and looked to Jeremiah with worry in her eyes.

“Fee-fi-fo-fum.” Jack’s laughter continued, growing louder as he pushed down another tree. This one he pointed at the barrier, and high above them the tree crashed into the invisible wall. Branches shattered, twigs rained down, and the forest thundered with the sound of thousands of bits of wood cracking under their own weight as the tall tree rolled sideways along the barrier, before falling to the side, shredding branches off of other trees on the way down. “I smell the blood of a stupid bitch.”

Angela got up, and limped toward the hunters further out in the clearing. To run here despite having a limp was impressive, and Triss found herself smirking as she watched the woman move. This was the bitch who killed Julias, a psychopath caught up in her own drama. A hunter with her head jammed so far up her ass, she felt justified in slaughtering kine, innocent kine, so she’d have the tools she needed to fight monsters. Jack was right. How far the righteous had fallen.

Triss took time to analyze the woman’s features. If she was going to enjoy ripping the girl’s eyes out, now was a good time to get familiar with the woman before harm was done to her. Damn, she looked so much like Athalia, a tall, thin black woman, and even beautiful. The tattoos, the glass eye, the scar, it was obvious she’d been through Hell in her life, while her mother was basically unscarred, with no tattoos that Triss could notice. The human girl looked battered and beaten, and was obviously pushing herself forward to the detriment of every aspect of her life, in order to reach her goal. How much of that goal had been about killing her mother, and was now about killing Jack?

Well, fuck her. If her goal had just been to kill Azamel or Athalia, fine, but now it included killing Jack, her friend, and her lover's childe.

Dead lover's childe. In the end, that's all that really mattered. Angela killed Julias, and Triss was going to make her pay. Who Angela was, what trials she'd been through growing up with a monster for a mother, and then a psychopath hunter for a foster father, were irrelevant.

Jeremiah and Angela began walking around the circle, Jeremiah with book in hand, and Angela with the delicate objects held in her arms. He was reading from the book, eyes locked onto its text, and every word he uttered — some language she didn't know or recognize — had him grunting with the effort. It was tiring him.

"W-What's this?" the hunter closest to Triss said, as their two bosses came up to them.

"This will protect you," Angela said. She looked down immediately after saying it. Lying? The woman handed the confused hunter the shrunken head, gave Triss a single, hard glare, and moved on.

Triss was tempted to yell at her, scream, curse her name, make a boast, or maybe throw an insult about that time she literally ran Angela over. Anything, fucking anything to get a hook into Angela's mind, and get her angrier, make her suffer. But no, better to wait, and make the grand reveal about who Triss was and why she was hunting down Angela, when Angela was in no position to do anything about it. Maybe whisper 'you killed the love of my life' before tearing her throat out. Yes, that was the way to do it, a way Jacob would be proud of. Vengeance was a dish best served cold.

"Hey," Triss said to the hunter, once Angela and Jeremiah had moved on. "We've got you guys. You know that, right?" With all the commotion going on, it was difficult finding a good volume, something that'd let her talk to the hunter without Jeremiah and

Angela noticing. But she found it, and the hunter, a short man with short blonde hair, managed only a quick flick of his eyes before looking back down at the shrunken head in his left hand, pistol in his right.

“Fuck you, vampire.”

Triss looked to the others, and motioned with her head toward the path they’d been walking. They kept moving, Othello dragging along Harcourt before the man could protest. A few moments later, it was just her and the unknown hunter.

“You guys really fucked up, when you killed Jack’s family and sire, you know.”

“We didn’t—”

“Shut up,” she said, grinding her teeth. Jeremiah continued his chanting in the background as he moved onto the next hunter, Elen was humming to herself, and Jack and Clara were both making a racket. As long as no one started shooting and making even more noise, she could talk to this guy quietly, and he’d hear her. “Your bosses are psychos. Just look around you. How many humans have you sacrificed on this crusade to kill Azamel? Azamel, and now Jack, if Angela gets a say in the matter.”

The hunter met her eyes, apparently trusting the amber line enough to keep Triss from tearing into his mind and planting a nightmare.

“You’re a vampire, and you host a monster like Azamel. You can’t possibly expect me to trust anything you say.”

“I don’t give two shits about Azamel.”

“But—”

“Your boss Jeremiah is a fucking maniac willing to do anything to kill her. Angela follows him like a faithful dog, and just like Jeremiah and Azamel, she wants to kill Jack.” Triss pointed at the grotesque head in the man’s hands. “You even have any idea what that’s going to do?”

“No ... but—”

“And your friend Harcourt, no one broke his mind. He came to us. Well, he came to Jack. Normally Jack’s the first person willing to talk and negotiate, but now you’ve woken up this thing inside him, and...” She gestured vaguely toward the kid, still stomping around, cackling, and destroying the forest. “And now, what about now? The fuck are your bosses going to do now? Far as Harcourt knows, Plan Vandermont is nothing but you guys setting up defensive positions and fighting us off. You really think you can fight us off now? You’re in a big open clearing, for fuck’s sake. Killing you all will be easy as shit, once we get inside.”

“Jeremiah and Elen can do amazing things, vampire. They’ll figure something out.”

“Or maybe, your bosses are insane, and they’re going to do whatever it takes to achieve their goal, even if that means dying in the process.” She leaned in closer, set a hand against the invisible wall, and stared into the hunter’s eyes with her snake eyes. “Think about it. How the fuck did we randomly catch Harcourt? He came to Jack.”

“That Jack?” the hunter said, nodding over his shoulder toward the kid, on the other side of the clearing. The little guy threw a few more grotesque, gory threats, and pushed down yet another enormous tree as a swarm of rats followed along behind him like a second shadow.

“Not that Jack. Like I said, you guys woke up something nasty in that kid, something the rest of us don’t have. Now, he’s going to kill

every single fucking one of you.”

That managed to get a reaction from the small man, and he winced as he looked down. “Then why are you talking to me?”

“Because I know Jeremiah’s tricked you all. Angela has, too. Put down the fucking head”—she gestured to the shrunken head in his hand—”down, and break the line. You can join Harcourt, and I’ll make sure Jack doesn’t kill you.” She didn’t think that was an empty promise. Jack would probably spare the life of a hunter if said hunter actively helped them defeat Jeremiah. But, then again, Jack with the curse controlling him was a fucking asshole, and she wouldn’t put it past him ... it ... to be a backstabbing, lying shitface.

“Carver,” Harcourt said, poking his head out from behind a tree, “come on, man. You heard about those stabbings, right? That was Angela! She—”

Jeremiah slammed his book closed, and came over to stand beside Elen. Angela and Jeremiah stood at the woman’s shoulders, and the old woman continued to work the skin, an oxygen mask on her face. And, unless Triss’s eyes were deceiving her, that book was fucking gleaming red now. It had an eerie glow, dark amber, almost like blood, like the flesh room Elen used to hide and repair her hunters.

Elen set one of her long, gross hands on the closed book, on its cover, and traced lines onto it slowly, while her right hand started to carve into the skin on the rock with the knife. The red glow from the book seeped up her white skin, along her veins, and disappeared underneath her loose gray dress. It wasn’t long before the strange, stone knife began to glow as well. All the while, the old woman had a strange smile Triss could only barely see through her mask.

The head in Carver’s hand began to glow.

“Carver,” Triss said, eyes wide. “Drop it. I have no idea what that thing does, but Jeremiah’s going to use you, just like these corpses on the trees. Drop it now, before—”

Too late. Carver stared at the occult object in his hand, and his gaze locked onto it. He squeezed it gently, but his mind was gone, like a child staring into a Christmas tree bulb.

Seeing the life drain from someone’s eyes was not something she was used to. For all the murder she’d committed in her life, most of that was with her fangs on the target’s neck, or when sacrificing kine for Crúac rituals, in which case they were usually unconscious. Looking someone in the eye, and witnessing their death, seeing their soul leave, watching their body and vessel turn into a fucking corpse, was not an experience she craved. The few times it’d happened, like when Jacob killed those kine Jack had brought, it’d left her with chills that never went away.

When Carver looked up from the object, and met her gaze, she saw it again. He fell to his knees slowly, but the effect was anything but slow. The color from his skin drained away. The thickness of his body, showing through his jacket and jeans, disappeared. His eyes emptied, like some motherfucker ripped his soul out through them. He became nothing more than a skin sack, filled with meaningless organs and unmoving blood.

“Carver! Carver!” Harcourt shook free of Othello, ran back over to Triss, and started pounding his fists against the invisible wall. “What the fuck!? What the fuck!?”

It didn’t take a genius to figure out what was happening. The objects the hunters were handed, the glowing book, Elen touching said book and cutting new symbols into the skin on the stone. They’d cast a spell. Triss winced as she looked around the clearing at the hunters, and how each one of them were falling onto their knees, or straight onto their backs. All at once, without noise,

without fanfare, without a final word to mark their passing, the other nine hunters that'd surrounded the outer edges of the clearing, died.

Triss stepped back from the body, but Harcourt didn't. He fell to his knees and started pounding his hands against the air harder, blocked and incapable of helping. Guttural noises left his mouth, grunts and yells, and Triss had to force her eyes off him to look at what was happening in the circle. She hated those noises, the mix of despair and frustration, of helplessness. She'd made them.

"What in the ever living fuck?" Jack said, looking down at the new bodies that decorated the clearing. "Sacrifices on top of sacrifices. You guys are going to burn in Hell, you know that?"

"Fuck you, fucking monster," Angela said. "There's a place in Hell for monsters like you, fucks who embrace their nature. Burning right at the fucking bottom."

The kid cackled again, and tilted his head as he looked at the remaining hunters. Jeremiah, Elen, Angela, and the four hunters they apparently trusted more.

Leaning forward, Jack set his hand against the barrier and chuckled. "Last I checked, Judas was freezing in the last circle of Hell, and being gnawed on by Satan himself, for being a traitor. Look forward to it." He used his other hand to gesture at the corpses of the hunters. "Let me guess. By betraying these people who believed in you, who had faith in you, the spell you're casting will be quite powerful. Makes sense. That's how Susanna gained her curse."

As if, finally satisfied, Jeremiah stepped away from the big stone, and toward Jack. Angela followed, and the four hunters covered their flanks.

"If I'd known there was something twisted in you," Jeremiah said, "I would have just killed you, instead of capturing you. There was



nothing special about you. The divination showed that you knew about Azamel, had visited, and could be used to trick her into letting her guard down. You were to be a pawn, like Sándor, nothing more.”

“Used? How would you use me?”

“The same way we used Sándor, and continue to use him.” The rugged old man gestured to Elen’s work behind him.

Before Jack could retort, a horrible noise, alien, thunderous, and layered with rasp and shriek over its bass undertones, filled the forest. Everyone raised their heads, as the booming roar ripped through the air until Triss felt it in her bones. She’d never heard that roar before, but it didn’t take a genius to know that something that loud, that deep, that overpowering and overwhelming, had to come from something gigantic. And it came from the castle.

## Chapter 108

~~Jack~~

“Sándor’s locked up, and isn’t going into any nightmare,” Jack said. Much as he knew that that was true, that didn’t change that the roaring coming from the castle, was a roar he was all too familiar with.

When him and his crew had been fighting Angela and the hunters, when they were trying to rescue Jessy, it’d gone horribly wrong. Still, with the help of Athalia’s crazy darkness attack, and the sheer endurance of the werewolves, they’d managed to turn things around. It was only when Jeremiah and the four-armed gargoyle showed up that they lost control again.

The four-armed, four-winged creature had defeated Eric, and Clara, and Jessy. And judging by size of it, and the aura Jack had felt in its presence, it would have been able to do a lot more than that. It, he, whatever, was a force to be reckoned with, something stronger than Athalia or Fiona, and definitely that fat fucker Mark. Sándor, or at least his Horror, was on a scale of power Jack didn’t feel often. It’d been like being around Jacob or Antoinette, or Azamel. And that force was being summoned by whatever the fuck Elen was doing.

“You understand so little of the beasts, the monsters,” Jeremiah said, grin growing. “Vampires, werewolves, you’re all just leftovers from an era long past, when true monsters roamed the world, feeding on people and seeding their minds. Nightmares, the real, terrifying kind, the ones that scare you to the point your blood runs cold and your heart stops, the ones that give you glimpses of what’s waiting in the dark, in the brush, in the cave, in the forest and in the depths of the ocean, are a product of monsters. Or, perhaps, the

nightmares create those monsters, and carve them into ethereal existence, the ultimate threat to mankind.” The man was smart. Despite his obvious, cocky attitude, he didn’t ever meet Jack’s gaze; knew too well that Jack could probably reach through this barrier of his, if Jack was given a fair chance of it. Smash through the amber line, and grab the fucker’s mind. The black powder line, on the other hand, was being a major cock block.

“Ha, you trying to demean me?” Jack said, but his eyes kept flicking past Jeremiah, and to the two women. Elen’s knife was still glowing, and it continued to glow with the red aura as she carved what must have been dozens of tiny symbols into the skin. It was like, watching an old woman who used to be a virtuoso pianist, moving her fingers with extraordinary speed and precision that persevered despite her aging, decaying body.

“Monsters like Azamel, and Sándor, have no souls, Jack. They lost their soul, gave up it, or had it stolen. All that’s left is a beast, a Horror, a literal incarnation of fear and evil, that’s taken up residence where a human’s soul should be.” With a shrug, Jeremiah started walking the circle’s inner edge, and picked up one of the assault rifles one of the dead hunters had wielded. Jack stayed with him, glaring at him with every step as he removed the magazine, grabbed another magazine from the corpse, and continued on. It was dark in the forest clearing, and what little light the hunters carried on their guns or attached to breast pockets, didn’t help all that much. The man had good eyes.

Jack laughed. “That’s rich, coming from you.” Shaking his head, Jack reached out and ran a finger along the invisible wall as he walked. “You’re the one who sacrificed people who put their lives in your hands, were willing to die for you. You betrayed them.”

“They knew the risks.”

“Did they know it’d be you, killing them?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters.” Jack laughed louder, and gave Jeremiah a big grin, showing his fangs. “You’re a monster, Jeremiah, the human kind. Don’t need to be a werewolf, or vampire, or have a Horror for a soul, when a human is perfectly capable of being an abomination that needs to be put down.”

That managed to make Jeremiah pause, and for just a second, Jack saw a touch of pain in his eyes. Fucking delicious. These philosophical conversations were always fun, especially when the other person didn’t realize the universal truth: everyone’s a fucking monster. The only thing that matters, is what monster rises to the top of the food chain.

“Controlling the human mind is doable,” Jeremiah continued, “even when it’s become tainted, or infected by the vampire, the werewolf, or the monster. Elen knows spells to do that, and as you have obviously guessed, that’s what we did to Sándor. Unfortunately, when we lost Sándor, wherever you have put him has separated him from his Horror. The spell’s influence over it is weak, and the most we could manage was to prevent it from attacking us while we rested here.” The psycho gestured to the trees around him, the ones with corpses attached. “Elen’s magic is costly, but it’s all worth it to guarantee Azamel dies, Jack. And, you’ll have to forgive me, but looking at you now, I see the darkness Angela told me she saw in your eyes. I will be Azamel’s death, but Angela will be yours.”

“Aww, that’s touching.” Jack touched his chest with his fingertips, feigning joyful surprise. “Angela, you going to be my nemesis?”

The word hit her like a ton of bricks, and she met his eyes. Oh yeah, she’d been thinking about the word too, and he could see it resonate in her like a tuning fork. But, awareness hit her before he could try and breach the barrier, and she looked down again. She

was trembling. Rage coursed up through her limbs, and every part of her probably wanted to unload a hail of bullets on him. Only by cutting open his guts, filling it with cinders, and watching him turn to burning ash from the inside out, would she be satisfied. He knew it, because it was a feeling he shared. And as much as nemesis was too good a word for her, there was no denying she was the target of his hate.

She was his nemesis the way the roadrunner was Wile E. Coyote's nemesis, just a meal who kept getting away. Not this time.

“Come on, Jeremiah,” she said. “We have to do this now. You know what that Horror will do after.”

“Good luck, Jack. You'll need it.” Jeremiah offered him a small bow of his head, and walked back to Elen.

The old woman made one last, small gesture, with the familiarity of someone writing their signature, and another thunderous, screeching, alien roar announced the completion of whatever it was she was doing. Her knife was still glowing, too. He doubted she used artifacts for all her works, probably making this particular spell unusually potent. Or maybe she did? Maybe she had every person she killed hold an object she'd cursed, and that was how she absorbed their lives into the knife. Like, collecting ink for a quill. And she still had ink left.

The four hunters guided Elen away from the stone and flesh she'd been carving on, and pushed her toward the center of the clearing again, eying Clara closely as they did. They were afraid she'd get through the barrier then. Queue for Jack to start heading back to her, and get ready to run in—

The roar sounded again, and it was louder this time. A lot louder. Once his ears readjusted to the following silence, it became painfully clear that it wasn't silent at all. His rats, his crows, his legion had stopped making noise, holding deathly still. Clara ceased

her digging. Harcourt ceased his stupid whining. Beatrice, Othello, and Damien all came back to stand with him by Clara, and look up at the branches above, at the incoming noise.

“What’s that sound?” Damien said.

Woomp. Woomp. Woomp. A heartbeat that grew louder and louder, closer, and for the fucking life of him, Jack couldn’t place the sound. It was familiar, but it wasn’t. And it wasn’t the impact of the gargoyle’s feet; that had a distinct sound, and sensation. This was—

“Down!” Damien said.

Jack realized just a bit too late what the sound was. Wings. Beating wings.

The snapping of trees was an explosion of chaos and speed. The dark canopy above, needles and thorns of onyx against a cloudy night sky, shattered. And the thing that came down for them moved faster than the falling twigs did. How could something that huge move so quickly? It descended upon them, its giant body tearing through the tall trees with greater ease than Jack had. It was like watching a train derail and smash through the woods that surrounded it, its mass rendering the blockade of trees irrelevant. Crash, snap, boom. Wood held little sway against thousands of pounds of meat.

Everyone threw themselves down against the ground, everyone except Jack. As the titan plummeted toward them, destroying the forest with far more explosive impact than Jack and Clara had managed, Jack grinned. He hadn’t expected this, but it was a good opportunity. Crush Sándor, and crush the final hope Jeremiah and Angela had. It’d be fucking beautiful.

The monster landed maybe twenty feet in front of him, and the impact alone was enough to send vibrations into the hundreds of

nearby of trees, big and small. The beast's arrival sent an explosion of momentum and inertia outward, until the thousands of crows above took to the sky as their perches shook violently. His legion of rats trembled on the dark forest floor like rippling sand. Branches, rocks, and tree trunks flew everywhere, soaring over the heads of his crew who'd taken to the dirt. But not him. He kept his back to the barrier, and lifted his arms in front of him, swatting down or blocking oncoming debris, using the barrier to keep him from getting knocked back.

"Clara," he said, "how's that hole coming?"

"The line ... not break!" she said, werewolf voice half words, half roaring barks.

Jack managed a second to glance back at the hole Clara had made. She had no choice but to dig straight down right beside the line, since she couldn't cross it, but the dirt the line was drawn on refused to crumble. Considering she'd gotten a good three feet deep and wide beside the line of soot already, and the whole damn forest was shaking with the mess Sándor was making, the fact it still didn't break meant there was a good chance they wouldn't be able to break the line at all.

But then, a colossal gargoyle that easily weighed eight times what the werewolf did was running at them. If Clara couldn't cause the disturbance needed to break the line, maybe this thing could. Maybe

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The titan bull rushed forward, and Jack's eyes opened wide. Just like Clara, the enormous beast sank its huge talons into the earth to create the grip it needed to tear forward. Unlike Clara, the gargoyle was so massive, it hit every single obstacle between it and Jack. And, unlike Clara, the trees it crashed into didn't slow it down in the slightest. It fell upon Jack within two literal seconds, showering the area in more debris as it came for him.

Jack grinned from behind his hands, and met the beast's charge.

Sándor—no, not Sándor. Sándor was locked up in the Prince's tower. This was Sándor's Horror, a literal manifestation of his other half, just like how Kindred had a Beast, and Uratha had a ... wolf spirit thing. Vampires and werewolves were never separate from their other half, but a nightmare beast apparently could be; he was looking at it. And, it was grabbing him with its four arms.

Holy shit those were strong arms. He knew Sándor's Horror was unusually strong, but god fucking damn. Its hands were big enough to cover most of the length of his arms, and half the length of his legs, one hand for each.

There was a moment, a single moment, where Jack could see the Horror was confused. Jack hadn't dodged, hadn't tried to jump out of the way, and that would have confused any giant beast running down prey. Jack also knew there wasn't a single shred of fear on his face, and when facing down a literal nightmare, a creature that existed on humanity's fear as the basis of its existence, of course it'd be confused. It'd find no terror here.

And it wouldn't find easy prey. Jack met the gargoyle's eyes, and smiled. As predicted, there was no mind to bend there, no human mind at least. When he reached out and attempted to Dominate the Horror, all he found was a tapestry of desires, without any of the rhyme or reason a human mind had. The Horror had less mental awareness than any wolf or rat. All it was was a bundle of hunger, and it spoke in a single language: terror, the terror it inflicted on others. Jack would not be able to Dominate, or use Animalism, on such a strange, simple, ethereal, and insubstantial mind.

But, that didn't mean Jack couldn't beat it into the ground, break it, and rip it apart.

Rats poured over the beast, and the Horror roared as a swarm of claws climbed up its dark skin. Jack had continued summoning rats



throughout all this, through his rants and taunting at Angela, and through his circling of the clearing. They came from the castle by only dozens, so far from his original sacrifice of vitae, but they came. They had scurried down the road. Damien had made a good call, telling Aaron to stay behind to keep the second gateway opened.

The gargoyle threw Jack to the ground before it had a chance to hurt him, and started backing off and to the side around the clearing. It scraped at the rats, dislodging them by the hundreds with its four giant hands, and with enough speed and force that Jack's legion died by the hundreds as well.

It? Now that he thought about it, Sándor's Horror had masculine features, and its face wasn't all that too far off from being human, just big, and dark blue, with some horns. Fiona's Horror Vrall was obviously feminine, to the point it—she'd had sex with Damien. Athalia and Azamel, on the other hand, their horrors seemed genderless. But none of them were natural, organic creatures that reproduced sexually or a-sexually. They were things, dream creations, or maybe parasites that existed in the dream landscape. Without their human half, they were powerful creatures, but mindless, drifting phantasms, less than real. Hell, less than mindless, just a shadow of the physical world. And anyone with more IQ than a grapefruit could outsmart a mindless beast.

Groaning, Jack pushed himself up off the ground, and managed a quick look back at the hunters. Angela spared him only a moment's glance, before turning back to help whatever it was Elen was doing. If she was willing to miss this, then whatever she was doing was important; either running away, or helping Jeremiah go for Azamel.

“Damien, annoy him. Clara, go for the legs. Othello, go for the face. Beatrice, you and Harcourt stay the fuck out of the way.”

And they listened. Good. Much as he didn't really care if they died, he needed them to live, if he was to prove he was the better Jack. And Clara, transformed and unleashed, was growing on him.

Damien came at Sándor, sword in right hand, pistol in left. Crows descended upon the colossal creature, and they swarmed it like locusts, cawing and scratching and pecking. But his legion of claws, teeth, and beaks, drew no blood and made no headway. The damn gargoyle's skin was as tough as leather, tougher, and thick. Clara charged at its legs straight on, momentarily getting on all fours before throwing all of her weight into the distracted creature's leg. Othello jumped high, very high, above the creature, and plummeted down at its face. Fucking Daeva were a bunch of pretty boys, but they had speed and strength.

Except, the speed and strength didn't matter much. Sándor's Horror threw one arm up, and smashed Othello out of the sky like it was smacking a beach ball. Crunch. That was a broken leg at least, and more besides as Othello flew threw the air before colliding with another tree, then slumping down onto the ground.

Damien had better luck. His bullets bounced off the Horror's skin as he approached, but he got behind the gargoyle, and managed to sink his sword into its right side, a foot deep. Red blood seeped from the wound, and the Horror threw out one of its other hands. It was fast, and strong, and while Damien managed to duck underneath one gigantic arm, the monster had four. The third backhand attempt at Damien sent him flying, with even more velocity than Othello, and the Mekhet crashed into the invisible barrier with a thud.

While Othello and Damien were flies to be swatted, the thousands upon thousands of rats crawling and biting at the Horror's skin could not be dislodged so easily. Again, Sándor's Horror stepped to the side, off balance, roaring its alien sounds as it scraped them off. Their claws and teeth couldn't penetrate the fucker's thick hide, and even the crows that dive bombed it, many

dying as they slammed their beaks into its wings at full speed, couldn't so much as draw a drop of blood; thousands of scratches, but no blood. Scratches were painful though, and if you were getting hundreds of them chiseled into your skin every second, even a giant monster like this Horror evidently couldn't ignore the pain.

Clara had better luck than Othello or Damien. With the monster distracted, she crashed into its leg hard enough that the giant brute began to topple. Jack almost yelled 'timber', but the moment was cut short, as the Horror fell to its knees, stopped itself from falling over with three of its arms, while the fourth reached out and grabbed Clara. The two creatures roared at each other, but Clara didn't take nearly as long before she started ripping and tearing. While the monster's hand was big enough to get a grip on her waist and chest, it wasn't a good grip, and Clara ripped herself free with her own sets of claws, while at the same time sinking her teeth into the gargoyle's arm.

Did Jeremiah and Angela really trust this monster to fight them? Sure, the Horror was unusually strong, but—

The gargoyle spread its four wings, hard and fast, sending wind outward in a powerful pulse that caught Jack's crows in its wake. The wings were massive, utterly massive; they had to be, to carry something as absurdly huge as a fifteen-foot-tall gargoyle with four arms and a tail. Trees fractured and were demolished as the wings hit them, turning the large path of destruction they were fighting in, into a clearing all its own, wood exploding and shattering as it went everywhere from the impact of thick skin membrane, and the thick bat-like arms along each wing. Wings were supposed to be fragile. This beast could break down a brick wall with its wings.

Jack covered his face with his arms again, but otherwise stood his ground as the wood and wind ripped through him. What crows who survived took to the sky, and stayed there, circling high above as they looked for an opening. Mulder and Scully were already up

there, cawing and giving him information about the hunters. They didn't think the Horror could be beaten. Run, run, stay away from the black, live to hunt another day.

Jack smiled up at the night sky, winked at his pets, and started marching toward the giant creature. They had nothing to fear.

“You know, you're the reason I didn't get to kill Angela,” Jack said. “Hell, you're the reason twice over. Once in your nightmare, and once in mine. If it weren't for you, I'd have killed Angela, and my sister wouldn't be dead. If it weren't for you, my sire would be alive. Course, you can blame any link in a chain for where the chain goes. The joys of causality, right?”

The Horror made no attempt to understand or retort. It probably didn't know how. All it knew how to do was let out more screams and roars as it turned its attention to the werewolf biting and clawing at its arm.

“Uh, Jack,” Beatrice said from behind a fallen tree, a good fifty feet away. “They're ... I think they're opening another portal.”

Yeah, Scully and Mulder confirmed strangeness was happening. Elen was drawing markings on the trees, and he recognized the symbols as the ones Beatrice had cut through to get them into Elen's flesh chamber, the ones Angela's friends had painted, when they sacrificed a thrall in the hospital. And if they were drawing it on multiple trees, it wasn't going to be just any portal, like the other ones Elen had created.

“They're not getting away this time,” he whispered to himself. He'd burn the whole fucking city down looking for them if they escaped. And he didn't want to do that. Dolareido was his city.

The Horror lined up a punch on the wolf, rather than using its claws and risking its arm. Clara was fast, and she let go of the arm she was tearing into, got onto all fours on the dirt, and slipped

under the giant's crotch. No longer snarling or roaring, focused entirely on the hunt and the fight, the wolf creature ran her claws along the inside of the beast's thighs, earning deep gashes that sent some blood squirting onto her.

Jack licked his lips at the sight of it. God damn, that was hot. And those claws, werewolf claws. Normal claws couldn't do that, even on a creature that brutally strong, and even if the claws were indestructible. The teeth, too, like the claws, had something supernatural to them. Werewolves had the tools to put out raw destruction from the moment they became what they were, unlike vampires, who took a good fifty years to become truly dangerous.

But, despite the nasty wounds, the colossal creature responded with deft speed, lifting its right leg, half turning, and slamming down with its two lower fists. Clara was forced to jump to the side, abandoning her attempt to rip open the Horror's tail. But she didn't jump far enough. The creature was strong, and far too fast for something its size. The crunch of knuckles hitting Clara's body was obvious.

It'd turned around though, to deal with Clara, and that left its back exposed to Jack. Oh boy oh boy, time to have some fun. Jack ran up to the Horror's tail, knowing damn well he was too light to make much noise as he leapt from cracked trunk to cracked trunk. The joys of being tiny.

Crew check. Othello was picking himself up a good ways away, and so was Damien, albeit slower, but the Horror's utter destruction of the area had buried them in fallen timber. They had to both heal from their wounds enough to fight, and had to climb out from underneath the debris; easy enough for Othello, not so easy for Damien. And Clara was now on her back, using both her hands and wolf feet to claw and slice at the Horror's attempts to punch down at her. It tried once, and got its knuckles cut up for it. Anyone who

owned a cat knew better than to go for the stomach, which gave the cat four sets of claws and a set of teeth to use on the attacking hand.

Jack grinned at the gleam he spotted on the monster's side, and leapt for it. Yeah, he was light, and small as fuck compared to a fifteen-foot behemoth, but there was no way the monster wouldn't notice a kid jumping onto its back. But, for that brief second, Jack managed to land on the creature's spine, underneath where its four wings jutted out from between four shoulder blades. It hurt, landing on his crotch and ass, but it gave him a bit of control with his legs half wrapped around the titan's waist. And as the monster twisted around in surprise, Jack grabbed the sword sticking out of the Horror's side, and yanked.

Blood poured out of the titan, and the monster's roars turned into a deliciously higher pitched, alien scream. The Horror's voice had layers to it, so it sounded like a bunch of monsters all screaming bloody murder. And this close, it was painful, loud and hard enough Jack felt his eardrums struggle, threatening to take damage. Ah well, he'd heal them in moments anyway.

He let gravity take him off the creature. Thump, he fell like a bag of sand to the ground. When the monster turned around, shrieking and roaring unendingly, Jack waited until the monster was looking away from the direction it'd sent Damien. Jack threw the sword that way, and bolted in the other. The creature gave chase to Jack, as planned.

The creature's skin was too thick for his legion to harm, and much of his legion had died to fire and bullets already. And since the human half of the Horror was nowhere to be found, leaving behind nothing more than a rather large, angry dream shadow thing, Jack couldn't Dominate it. It was like trying to Dominate an aspect of the environment, like a tree or bush, and those things lacked the parts needed for his brain to catch and control. If Sándor

were piloting, he'd be able to Dominate him, and make short work of this whole excursion.

More problematic was, for all his strength, Jack was ultimately trapped by his size and weight. He wouldn't be able to win a game of strength against this colossal brute, not easily anyway, simply because he wouldn't be able to anchor and engage it. The gargoyle could literally punt him like a football, if he got the chance, and it wouldn't matter how strong Jack was.

It was frustrating. But it did mean he could move quick; maybe not as quick as a vamp fueled by Celerity, but pure brawn still created speed in physics. With all the destroyed trees lying around, he had no trouble finding things to push off of as he bounded his way back to where Clara had been digging in the hole.

The Horror tore after him. Queue Jurassic Park music. Sándor's nightmare might not have been as big as a tyrannosaurus rex, but it wasn't far off. The Horror was gargantuan, a tall and hulking mass, that sped up after Jack far faster than physics — damn physics — would allow. He remembered a similar thing with Azamel, when he met her elephant man form, how it could move faster than something that big should be able to. So, instead of a giant creature taking its sweet time pushing itself up to full speed, like a movie dinosaur might, the Horror bolted after him like a fucking tiger, complete with a mighty roar and extended claws.

The monster was quick, but Damien and Othello were quicker. Celerity fed their movements until they were practically blurs, and the two vampires launched themselves at the running monster's back. They may as well have been trying to ride a dragon, but they got onto the monster's back, and started hitting. Damien went for a killing blow, but as his sword sank into the gargoyle's head, it came to a dead stop.

“Its bone is like metal!” Damien said. This time, he managed to jump off without getting hit, but he had to leave his sword behind again. Unfortunately, the handle and a chunk of the blade went with Damien, while the majority of the blade remained with the creature. The long thing was literally sticking out of the Horror’s head, between two enormous horns. Fucking. Hilarious.

While Damien got off the ride, Othello didn’t. He wrapped one arm around the beast’s neck, and started punching with the other. Othello wasn’t very smart. The monster had plenty of flexibility, and it reached up with one hand to grab onto the big man pounding dents into its neck.

Only for Clara to collide with it again. The werewolf threw her weight at the Horror’s back, and she weighed a lot more than Othello. A full pounce, one that utilized her extreme strength, so that her weight came down onto the gargoyle’s back with a massive amount of inertia powering it. It was enough to make the monster drop Othello, and start turning around at high speed in an attempt to dislodge Clara. She held on, her teeth biting the base of one of its giant wings, but her legs stuck out from the monster’s body with the force of its spinning.

It would have been hilarious, if not for the crunch of bone as Clara’s body collided with trees. Jack and Clara had knocked down trees, Jack far more, and the fight with the Horror had knocked down hundreds, but the forest was enormous, and every few feet meant another thick tree. As the fight drifted around, the monster continued to clear out the woods with all the grace of a wrecking ball run by a drunk asshole. Each step the monster took was enough to break and crunch through most of the trees it stepped on, and its claws latched onto the larger ones without issue. It wasn’t going to fall over easily.

“Harcourt,” Jack yelled, “I don’t suppose you know what this thing is weak to?”



“Uh, would you believe sunlight?” The hunter was nowhere to be found, until he poked his head out from behind a particularly massive tree.

Of course it'd be weak to sunlight. It was a gargoyle. Maybe it'd turn to stone or something. Either way, a useless weakness for a vampire to take advantage of, at least in this situation.

Othello came back in, or tried to, but the monster didn't stop spinning around. Eventually, it threw itself backward against the trees, crashing through them and smashing through trunks two or three feet thick without issue. A wolf's howl cut through the explosion of wood.

“Othello, Damien, get him over here,” Jack said. This was getting ridiculous. This giant thing was just a dumb bull, a stupid bull that needed to be put down. If this monster was the other half of Sándor, killing it would probably kill Sándor. Ah well, if it came to that, so be it, but he wanted to try his other idea first.

“How are we supposed to do that!?” Othello yelled. The vampire ran underneath the gargoyle's tail, and landed a solid punch against the creature's leg. Thunk. Othello was strong, a hundred-year-old Daeva with plenty of strength to summon, plus plenty of muscle and heft to put to use. But in a fist fight against a giant nightmare that was practically living stone, they needed an anti-tank rifle, or maybe a nuke. The fact Damien's sword had managed to survive as long as it did, was sheer dumb luck.

The wound Jack had dealt with the sword had already closed, still there, but no longer bleeding. The shallow cuts Clara had left on its body were closed as well. The thousands of bites and scratches his rats had inflicted were meaningless. The damn thing was just too large a juggernaut.

Grinning, Jack hopped across the downed trees, and stood not too far from the hole that Clara had dug. He turned to look back at the

gargoyle, pointed his hands at it, and tapped into his core, his vitae, and reached deep. No matter how much he reached out for nearby wildlife, the nightmare landscape provided no link for his mind, no animals for him to Dominate. It was a dream realm, and he was a creature of flesh and blood, both literally and in intent. Everything about a vampire was about blood, and the flesh that contained it. Begotten existed parallel with dreams. Uratha existed parallel with spirits. Vampires existed in the world of blood, and unfortunately for him that meant the things in nightmares, including a Horror, were something his mind could not reach out and Dominate.

But he could still control his own body, and his own flesh and blood.

“Draw him here as best you can,” Jack said. “I’ll deal with him.”

Licking his fangs, Jack kicked away nearby rocks and trees. Now that there was space, mostly created by the idiot creature’s clumsiness, drawing it to him should be easy enough.

Much as he loved destruction, loved breaking things, loved to feel an explosion course through his body, and loved to hear the screams of the ruined, this creature’s idiotic, wanton destruction was juvenile. It had no sense of purpose, or desire guided by context, memories and experiences, thoughts and goals. It was a mindless vortex of chaos and carnage. Cool in theory, but now that he got to see the colossal creature ripping and tearing, all it made him think of was an angry bull. Not even a bull! More like, a volcano, just doing what it did naturally. Where was the context? Where was the emotion that dripped from real carnage. Where was the drama?

Susanna would have been annoyed by this thing as well. She bathed in the blood of hundreds, because they deserved it, because she loathed them, or was disgusted by the actions they’d done. Hate, anger, molded by years of interaction. This nightmare creature had none of that. Exploiting it would be no harder than manipulating an

amoeba, or guiding a river; a large river, admittedly, but a river nonetheless.

Clara let go of the titan. No, not let go, was thrown. At some point in the chaos, as the giant Horror thrashed around and slammed her into trees while it tried to catch Othello, she couldn't hold on anymore. Her body went through a tree sideways, and into the next before coming to a stop. The lump of fur and muscle that landed still moved, but barely, twitching limbs twisted, turned, and broken. Her head lifted for a second, looked at Jack, and slumped against a destroyed tree trunk beside her, jaw hanging open and wolf tongue dangling out.

Triss, not far from the downed Clara and hiding behind a large tree, put a hand to her lips as she stared at the broken werewolf. But she got over her shock quickly, and looked to Jack, then the hunters, then the dragon they still had to deal with.

Othello got out from around its legs, and sprinted over to Jack, bouncing off fallen trees as he crossed over the growing clearing of destroyed forest. But the Horror was fast, and it charged forward after Othello, ripping the earth up underneath it as it tore through the ruin to snatch him out of the air. It was like watching a house cat grab a toy ball flying by, an insane display of reflexes and timing that no human could hope to match. Except, the Horror was fucking titanic, and had no business being that fast.

It wrapped its four hands around Othello, one on each limb, and lifted the man up to its mouth. Welp, there went Othello. Ah well. The man's death would give Jack the time to tap into the reservoirs of vitae he'd need, to become a juggernaut himself.

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~~Beatrice~~

Sándor, or Sándor's Horror, was fucking insane. From what she knew about Fiona and Athalia, they were strong individuals, deadly

strong, like the Uratha were. Strong without having to sink in decades to earn it like Kindred did. In the land of nightmares, Begotten became even stronger, becoming, or merging with the Horror, or whatever. She could still remember what it felt like, when Athalia had taken her into the nightmare, and Triss got to see the woman's Horror up close and personal. Triss's Beast had recoiled in fear of the alien power of such a creature.

But, apparently, the human half was separate from the Horror half, when the human was out in the real world. So, what, the Horror half was just a mindless thing? Just something that, what, drifted around and caused nightmares? Or, maybe it fed on people's nightmares? She didn't have a fucking clue about Begotten or how they worked, but for the moment, she didn't need to. It was obvious that Sándor's Horror was a fucking titan, far stronger than any of them could have predicted, far stronger than Fiona or Athalia, or that insect pile Mark that Jacob had spooked. This beast running for Jack was a god damn fucking myth of legend.

Triss hid behind a tree, a big one, one of the fat fuckers at least five feet wide. Hopefully it'd survive a hit. Clara had destroyed a bunch of trees earlier, and Jack had knocked down dozens for the fun of it. Sándor's Horror was knocking down hundreds. The rats were scattered and dying by the thousands, mostly to falling trees. The earth was starting to run red with blood, and not long after, it began to turn black with feathers. Above her, the birds were doing their best to be a part of the fight, dive bombing the gargoyle, but for each that managed to close in on the creature, another died to the chaos, from falling trees crashing into each other, or from the gargoyle's many flailing limbs. A flying twig might not have been a big deal, but the giant branches shattering and sending enormous splinters everywhere were. The trees had no give. They didn't bend. They were hard, old, dark, bitter trees, that snapped violently, as if making sure to part the world with a fun-filled farewell.

She looked back to the clearing the hunters were in. The four bodyguards stared at the chaos of Sándor's Horror fighting a werewolf and three vampires, but Jeremiah, Elen, and Angela remained focused on their task. Every so often, Angela twitched, spooked by the impact of the monster smashing through more trees, ripping the night endless forest to bits around it. Jeremiah only bothered with a few glances, and Elen didn't even notice. The old woman, now being wheeled by Jeremiah, started drawing on another tree with her glowing red knife, before moving onto the next. Those portal symbols again. They were going to go somewhere, and they sacrificed a fuckload of bodies, trained and useful bodies, to go wherever somewhere was.

"Brace," she said, "sure you don't know what your bosses are up to?" The hunter was lying down on the ground behind a fallen tree on his stomach. Smart. If the nightmare monster came there way, there was a decent chance it'd run right past him. Or step on him and kill him instantly.

"No," he whispered, "not a fucking clue. Andrew and the others probably know. They're with Jeremiah and Elen all the time." He gestured to the four hunters, shook his head several times, dropped his forehead into the dirt, and shook it again. Guy really wore his emotions on his sleeve.

Considering what they knew about Jeremiah, he was probably pulling out some last ditch effort to achieve his goals, which meant Azamel's life was in danger. No one fucking cared about Azamel, though. The problem was it might mean they get away, again, and that could not happen.

What a delightful circle of hate. Azamel ruined Jeremiah's life, so the fucker spent an eternity hunting her down. Angela ruined Beatrice's life, so she'd spend an eternity hunting her down Angela probably didn't know who she was, the fucking bitch. But, no, she wasn't going to escape again. This was going to end tonight.

Triss poked her head around the giant tree. Fucking god, that monster was huge. When it stood up straight, it must have been fifteen feet tall, muscular, with dark blue skin, like the depths of the ocean. The four arms, one pair set under the other, were each almost as big as her. Its horns were massive, its wings gigantic, and its tail slithered left and right behind it with serpent grace. Clara clung to its back, biting and clawing at where its four wings jutted. The arms of each wing, not as big as its more normal four arms, were still big, long, and muscular. The werewolf didn't make much headway in damaging them.

It was obviously male, and its face wasn't too far off from a human face, if perhaps a little demon-ish, with a broad hard chin and heavy brow. He, it, whatever, might have even looked attractive, in a 'I am a demon incarnate, bow before my might' sort of way. And watching it rampage, ripping and tearing the forest around it like paper, sealed the image pretty thoroughly. It was a nightmare alright, the sort of nightmare someone might have had five hundred years ago, imagining a gargoyle on a cathedral being possessed by a demon and unleashing its hate and fury on the city. It would have been kind of awesome, if the damn thing wasn't trying to kill them.

It threw Clara off, hard enough that she smashed through a tree like a rock through a window, before she slammed against the tree Triss was behind. The thud of her body against the trunk was sickening. Crunch, tearing bark and breaking bones. The werewolf slumped to the earth, and Triss slowly crouched down, and peeked around the tree at her.

Poor woman. Her body was twisted almost one-eighty at the waist, her torso pointed up, head leaning against the nearby tree trunk of a destroyed tree, and her mouth hung open, with tongue hanging out. Her eyes were open, but she wasn't there. Unconscious, or dazed. A good thing, too, or she'd be shrieking in agony. One of her legs was bent at the knee, in the wrong direction, and the other leg had a bone sticking out of it. Her arms weren't in

as bad condition, except one being bent horribly out of place around and behind her back; dislocated. Much of her fur was soaked in blood, and giant gashes ran down her side. They must have been caused by the trees and branches she'd hit. Triss could see the gashes closing themselves, that ridiculous werewolf endurance putting itself to use, but it had its work cut out for it, trying to rebuild someone as beat up as Clara was now.

Stupid woman, putting herself through this, knowing full well her boss was going to rip her a new one when she found out. And for what? Because she had a crush on Jack, or because she genuinely agreed with this ridiculous plan? God, she hoped it was the latter.

“Go back to having fun orgies with ghouls, Clara,” Triss whispered, hoping Clara couldn't hear her. “Don't get attached to the kid. Don't ... don't get attached to anyone.” Fuck, was she that bitter now? Screw love, screw romance, screw the idea of ever connecting with another person? A lot of Kindred did that, gave up on romance when looking down the road of immortality. She could see it, see herself telling others that love wasn't worth it, especially if you were an undying creature of the night, and had to carry the heartache for who fucking knew how long. But, no, she wasn't that fucked up, hopefully. She'd bounce back. Angela's corpse would be her trampoline.

As she started dragging Clara's body around the tree and to a safer location, Othello sprinted ahead of the gargoyle. Her fellow witch rarely ever used his physical abilities. He was a slut, through and through, and was only concerned with using Majesty to seduce people. Seeing him exercise his Daeva muscles, and dash away from the Horror with some inhuman speed, was pretty wicked. Except, the monster tore after him far faster than it should have been able to. It wasn't a creature of muscle and bone. It was a nightmare. It didn't have to obey normal rules anymore than Kindred did.

It caught Othello, and it got a hand around each of his limbs.

Oh fuck. No. No no. She would not allow this. She'd lost too much already. She wasn't going to lose anyone else.

She ran out into the clearing of destroyed forest, and jumped out for the giant gargoyle. There should have been a moment's hesitation, but there wasn't. It might kill her, it might not. Maybe Jack would do something, cause he was just standing there by the barrier, waiting. Maybe Damien was would show up and save Othello? She couldn't wait.

Faintly, for a moment, she wondered if maybe the whole night had been a bad idea. As she flew through the air, and did her best to ignore the tearing sensations in her chest, she wondered if any of this had been a good idea at all. How blinded by rage and a need for revenge could she be?

Pretty god damn fucking blinded.

She latched onto the gargoyle's shoulder. Christ, it was huge, over twice as tall as her. This close, it was easy to see that, yes, one of its arms literally was nearly the size of her. Its skin was hard, but not rough. It was tough, quality leather, and as she sank her claws into it to get a grip, she could feel the steel muscle underneath it. Most of Damien's blade was still stuck in its head, and the gargoyle just didn't care. Well, it'd care about this.

She lunged for the side of its face, and sank her teeth into its neck. All her teeth. She opened her mouth wide, as wide as it could go, like a motherfucking python, and sank all her extra teeth onto the gargoyle's muscle.

Back in the real world, grunts and groans, gasps, and even the occasional human scream, were noises she was familiar with, when she sank her fangs into someone. She'd never, ever sunk her crocodile teeth into someone, and she'd never sunk any teeth into something like this. Her eardrums didn't know how to register the sound. It was like someone running a guitar pick along the strings



of an electric guitar, with the gain cranked to max, and having ten guitarists do it at the same time with fifty speakers, all pointed at her ears. And, underneath that, it was like someone had attached an earthquake to her head, thousands of square miles of land, literally attached to her skull, and vibrating wildly, bass filling her until she thought her teeth might shatter.

Nosferatu strength poured through her, vitae pumping through her limbs and through her jaw. She ignored the sound of the creature's shrieking roar, ignore how it felt to hear that with her teeth lodged into its neck, and bit harder. Its blood squirted into her mouth, and she ignored that, too. A second of taste was all it took for her to realize its blood would provide no nourishment to her. Like the forest, the castle, the village around her, it was all fake, a dream, a nightmare. The thing she was biting into was a phantasm, not flesh with blood to be devoured. But that didn't mean she couldn't bite it, and hurt it, a lot.

The monster started thrashing around instantly, roaring and screaming with an animal's panic. It let go of Othello, save for one hand around one of the man's legs, and reached for her with the other three. It got two of its hands on her legs, and tugged, but the moment it felt her teeth threaten to rip its throat out if it pulled her off, it hesitated. That's right, motherfucker, I'm a god damn bear trap, and I'm on your fucking jugular.

A few extra seconds in the chaos was all she was going to manage. Her guts were threatening to pop out of her, since she was flexing every muscle in her body, and the cut she'd given to herself wasn't healed. Maybe, just maybe, if she was at full strength, she might be able to tear this fucker's throat a hole, but she doubted that'd kill it. Still, a nasty wound was a step in the right direction.

A strange thunk went through the beast's body, followed by more deafening roars.

“Triss, let go!”

Damien’s voice. She let go, and threw herself to the side, away from the creature. In the blur of movement, she spotted Damien bouncing off the creature’s head. Oh, he’d kicked the sword still lodged in its skull. It was still there, and a fresh squirt of blood came out of the gargoyle’s head, only to cease a moment later; it healed as fast as the werewolves. As Damien flew through the air, he unloaded his pistol at the creature’s face, a dozen shots in a single second, before the Mekhet landed on a branch of a nearby tree. Fucking bullets did nothing.

It was surrounded, and every attempt the Horror made to home in on someone and kill them meant it got attacked by someone else. But the gargoyle was learning. It turned to face Damien, ignoring the bullets that bounced from the skin of its skull and face, but as it did, it snapped its tail back behind it, straight at Beatrice.

A giant tail, a snake’s tail, a dragon’s tail, was not a weapon she expected to ever have to worry about. It wasn’t like anything with a tail was up and about, walking around in Dolareido. But the gargoyle had one, and it was long, ten feet probably. And it slammed into her like a fucking truck. Her ribs shattered instantly, she knew that. The strange part was the complete cessation of feeling all together as she flew through the air. All she could do was go limp, and wait for gravity to put her down, an angry child sick of its toy. Spinning fast enough that the world swirled into a blur, she twisted and turned, orientation completely out of her control, until she hit something.

What did she hit? She couldn’t see it, whatever it was. Oh, right, the invisible barrier. Like a stone, she fell to the ground, and landed on her head upside down. The ground greeted her like an old, spiteful friend, content to spew bitter words over past misgivings. Dirt, rock, twigs and sharp bark cut into her skin. Only when she slumped over onto her side, did the real pain start kicking in. Ribs,

back, and a leg, were broken; attempts to move told her that pretty quick. Agony, searing lava, ran up her limbs and into her skull, explaining to her about her broken body with waves of pain, each screaming 'I'm from your leg' and 'I'm from your back' and 'I'm from your chest'. If she hadn't been Kindred, the broken back would have probably saved her a lot of that pain, but a vampire's corpse body didn't play by biological rules.

It took a few seconds, but eventually the pain subsided into utter misery, instead of paralyzing torment. A level of pain she could manage, after all the training Jacob had put her through. The problem now, was moving. She turned her head and looked at her body, broken and twisted, just like Clara's had been. Miraculously, both her arms were still working, nothing dislocated or broken, and she stabbed her claws into the dirt to begin dragging herself away from the carnage.

She looked over her shoulder, at Jack. He wasn't too far from her. The pit Clara had dug sat between them, so maybe thirty feet was between her and the kid. The monster hadn't been to this side of the growing destruction zone, so, she managed to pull herself between some of the trees. Clara was fifty feet away, behind the giant tree, and out of the way; a big enough tree that even the gargoyle wouldn't be able to break it. Harcourt was nowhere to be found, but the man wasn't stupid enough to try and escape. He had nowhere to go. Fucker was just hiding, as if he finally managed to grow a brain.

Othello had not escaped the gargoyle unharmed, like she'd hoped. What had—oh, right, it had four hands, and one of them had held onto Othello when she bit into it. And, when Damien showed up and kicked the blade lodged in its skull, the gargoyle had whipped around, throwing its arms about. Her fellow witch would have been thrown like a doll, a cheap, small doll that would break if thrown too hard.

Yep, the man was skewered, body dangling from a tree, twenty feet in the air, with a giant branch rammed through his chest. He was in torpor, eyes closed and head hanging forward. A wooden stake through the heart, or anything similar, would do that.

Damien and Jack were the only ones left standing, and Jack seemed content to just stand there by the barrier, grinning at the gargoyle. His legion of rats had been beaten, smashed in by a few thousand hunter bullets, who fucking knew how much flamethrower fire, and now the chaos of a fight against a colossus, in the middle of a forest where the rats were getting squashed left right and center. And black feathers were everywhere. Many of the crows still lived, and had taken to the sky, hundreds of them, maybe even thousands, but they just couldn't do a damn fucking thing against the fucking Horror.

Damien hopped away from the monster, only for it to charge through trees in pursuit, body crashing through them like the fucking Kool-Aid man. The vampire was fast, very fast, but the speed didn't mean shit if he couldn't turn it into an offense. Queue epic music, as the poor fucker just ran from the Horror, unable to do anything. If the monster got his hands on him, he was fucked. Maybe an elder Gangrel would be tough enough to take a beating from it, or maybe a Ventrue, but not a Mekhet.

It couldn't match his speed enough to catch him though, and Damien managed to put distance between him and the titan, a lot of it. He disappeared into the woods again, undoubtedly to hide with his Cloak of Night, and look for another attack strategy. Well, fuck, she knew he had none. And the Horror was realizing that, too. Damien was a fly, pestering it, but unable to hurt it with a useless pistol, and without his sword.

The giant creature turned its dark, steel gaze to Jack, and started to march toward him.

“Jack!” Damien yelled from the woods. “Got a plan?” His usually smooth, subdued voice was filled with panicked yells, but the thick forest suppressed the sound, unholy trees muffling all the noise so it was directionless.

The kid didn't respond. He stood there, looking at the gargoyle, and tilted his head from side to side as if to crack his neck. Kindred bodies couldn't pop their knuckles or crack their backs, no nitrogen bubbles or shit in the joints. But it was obvious he was getting ready for something.

Searing pain scorched up through her body again, and Triss bit down as she tried to ignore it. The taste of that monster's blood was on her tongue, and it tasted weird. It tasted wrong. It tasted good. The fuck would Sándor's blood taste like? She shook her head, throwing away the thought, and replacing it with a mountain of pain from the stupid fucking act of shaking her fucking head. But vitae coursed through her, started fixing her spine and fixing her leg, and she screamed through clenched teeth as more pain flowed through her. Things were sliding into grooves and slots with almost audible grinding of bone on bone, the Beast within putting her back together with all the care and delicacy of an overworked masseuse turned serial killer.

She looked to the clearing. Not the one the Horror had made, a ruin of destroyed trees, rat and bird corpses, and blood. She looked to the other one, with the hunters standing safely behind their bullshit magic. The clearing with the sacrifices on trees now looked like a saintly display, compared to the zone of death she was dragging her broken ass through. Loads of the rats and birds weren't completely dead, and some of them squeaked or squawked in misery as she dragged herself past them. Fuck, it was horrible. It fit the nightmare environment of the old, dead forest, and the haunted village perfectly.

She managed to get her body around a tree, between her and the rampaging gargoyle. Clara was nearby, and Triss sighed relief as she noticed the werewolf moving her jaw slowly, inching out of her coma. Movement in the other direction drew her eye in a snap, and she hissed to herself as she glared at Angela and Jeremiah. Whatever they were doing, it was taking longer than she'd figured it would. Well, if this was some sort of last ditch effort at something, and they were willing to kill almost all the hunters they had to do it, it made sense that it was going to take them more than a minute to set it up.

They were drawing lines in the grass now, carving them with their belt knives and heels. Elen followed them as they dug, pushed by her bodyguards. No way was that old bitch leaning down to write on the ground without accidentally snapping every bone in her body, but she didn't need to. As she was pushed along, she let her right hand dangle off the side of her chair, so the tip of her glowing knife was only inches from the ground. Drops of red fell from it, gentle glows of crimson that pulsed like candlelight in the night air.

"Harcourt," she said, biting down as another pulse of pain went through her. Crack, crunch, a femur bone slid into place, bone rubbing and grinding sliver by sliver. "Harcourt."

"W-What? I—holy shit." The man poked his head up from behind his fallen tree, and stared at her. "Your—"

"I'll be fine, fucking moron." The look of concern on his face dug at her like a thorn. The man was a hunter. Killing things like her was his reason for getting up in the morning, or night. Where the fuck did he get off looking concerned. "You sure you don't know what your bosses are doing?"

"Creating a portal of some kind. That's all I know."

"Yeah, I gathered that much. Fuck me, you are useless."

“Well sorry! I’ll just take back the info that enabled this stupid suicide mission!”

She rolled her eyes as she looked back to the hunters, and then back to Jack. The Horror was charging at him now, full speed, and it’d get to him in a couple of seconds.

“Come on, I want you to do it, I want you to do it,” Jack said, grinning and staring at the gargoyle. The kid had moved closer to the pit Clara dug, now only a few feet from the ditch, and stood his ground. “Come on, hit me. Hit me!”

Oh my fucking god, he was quoting The Dark Knight.

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~~Damien~~

He felt useless.

Sándor’s nightmare was a juggernaut. Bullets couldn’t pierce its skin, and his sword was lodged in its skull so hard, he wasn’t getting it out. The sword’s handle, and a few inches of the metal, were lost, and useless besides. He still had a silver knife, but the soft metal wouldn’t stand a chance against this thing’s body; it wasn’t long enough to do serious damage anyway.

As he sped away from the chasing gargoyle, he tapped into his core, found the vitae stirring and coursing through him, and blanketed himself in the Cloak of Night. Doing it while running, especially while running in this environment, bouncing off trees and in the dead of night, wasn’t easy. He had to slow down to do it, but at least that gave him some time to look over his shoulder, and check on Othello.

The man had been thrown aside when Damien kicked the blade lodged in its skull. Following that, the gargoyle had spread its wings in a powerful explosion of force, and Damien had lost track of the

Daeva. Those four enormous sails of leather, each draped under arms longer and thinner than its main four arms, were far tougher than wings should have been. Instead of thin membranes, they were full-on leather, sturdy enough that, when it spread its wings, it not only sent wind outward with explosive force, sending branches and rodents alike outward in a blast, it kicked up air and twisted it into a momentary tornado. The poor Daeva was skewered on a branch, dangling like a rag doll, defenseless.

He had to do something. If he could get inside the circle the hunters had created, he could destroy the altar Elen had prepared. It must have been controlling Sándor and his Horror, and if he destroyed it, Lord willing, the spell on the man, and the new one cast on his Horror, would be broken. But Clara hadn't managed to make even the tiniest hole through the black soot. The ground was tougher than Jack had predicted.

If they had time, they could have done something. All they needed to do was cause the earth to vibrate at the hole Clara dug. Vibration would make the earth crumble, and the line would be broken. A quick trip to the Invictus HQ, and they could get some grenades, assuming Michael and Maria didn't lock them up immediately. Or, they could maybe grab some of the fallen trees, and smash them into the hole Clara dug. Surely with a cooperative effort, they could lift some truly heavy objects.

Damien dashed up a tree and got fifty feet into the air, before he started returning toward the chaos. Kindred eyes helped with navigating the insane, deadly maze of sharp branches and twisted, fat, warped, withered trees, but rolling clouds above kept the moon and starlight from helping much. He had to go slower, slower than he wanted. Each branch he had to take carefully. The bloody forest was brittle in some places, and deadly sharp in others. Running through it would lead any human to die a slow death to a thousand cuts, or to trip and be skewered by an errant branch through the neck. Nightmare realm indeed.



He got as close as he could before he ran out of trees. From up high, everything was different. It were as if a giant explosion had gone off, creating a crater of mayhem and death below, several hundred feet wide. Dead rats coated the forest floor like a carpet.

Up in the trees, high up where everything was black, and hopefully beyond the notice of the gargoyle, there were crows everywhere, far more crows than Damien had thought. Had Jack told them to hide? Plenty of crows had died, but it was the rats that'd taken the brunt force of both the hunters' weapons fire, and the Horror's chaotic destruction. Up in the high branches of the angry forest of black bark and petrified wood, thousands and thousands of wings waited in absolute silence.

Damien scanned the ground below him. Clara was there, but Triss had managed to pull her behind a tree earlier, so all Damien could see was a bit of her tail, and one of her feet. Paws? It was twitching. Clara had been crushed into a broken mess of bone and meat, and Damien was confident she'd be on her feet in another ten minutes, given her werewolf regeneration and tenacity. Ten minutes was an eternity, in their current situation.

Triss had been hit as well, and unlike Clara, she'd had no one to pull her out of harm's way. He could see her, dragging herself behind some of the fallen trees, not too far from where Clara had gone down. Harcourt was there. For a moment, Damien wondered if the man would take advantage of the situation, and kill Clara, Triss, and maybe Othello, but the fear passed quickly. Jack had proved the man was trustworthy before they went on this suicidal mission, and even if he hadn't, Harcourt was trapped by circumstance. Maybe he'd help. Or, most likely, he'd hide.

Only Damien and Jack remained then, and in a battle of brute strength, a Mekhet was borderline useless, especially without his sword. The gargoyle's skin had been difficult enough to penetrate, which led it to getting stuck in the creature's side when Damien had

first stabbed it. Jack had taken advantage of it, but that had likely damaged the sword's integrity. Of course it would break, after stabbing it into bone that may as well have been metal.

Jack. The demon stepped closer to the hole Clara had dug, closer, and closer still. All the while, he stared at the gargoyle, a grin on his face and his arms at his sides, palms pointed forward as if ready to catch someone's charge. Pointless. The gargoyle was big enough, strong enough, and heavy enough, that it'd turn the boy into paste if it charged him into the invisible barrier at Jack's back.

Damien went rigid. His hands clasped tight the ugly, hostile tree beside him. His fingers scraped against the harsh bark. He forced himself to crouch low to the branch as a black poison crept up his body, up his feet and into his spine, up his fingers and into his neck. What was that? Good Lord, what was that?

His eyes fell on Jack, and froze. Something was happening to him. Something was twisting and churning inside Jack, something invisible, something that felt black and ... and ... angry? Was angry the word? It felt aggressive, and hateful, but not in a vindictive way. Then maybe angry wasn't the word. Explosive, hostile, ready to burn everything around it in a display of fury and ... and ... intense violence and ferocity.

He reached for his vitae, and enabled Auspex. The world changed for him, for his eyes, shadows peeling away slightly, and subtle glows circling everything that lived. Natasha could see in true dark with her Auspex, a freak mutation, or possible gift, of her bloodline. But for most Mekhet, Auspex was used to see the truth in other creatures or objects. At its most basic level, it could be used to spot a Kindred hiding with Obfuscate such as Cloak of Night, and it could be used to sense the power and disposition of nearby Kindred.

Whatever was inside Jack, whatever was piloting his body like a puppet, was doing something, something horrible. He shivered,

remembering how Azamel described it, and gulped down the growing fear in his gut as Auspex showed the strange, pulsing aura around Jack. It burned Damien's eyes, but he kept them open, locked onto the boy as Sándor's Horror grew faster, and faster, until it was running at him with a gait only a charging dinosaur could have mimicked, leaning forward with its tail swaying behind it. Its wings were tucked tight to its back, and each step it made send vibrations pulsing through the earth.

“Hit me. Come on, hit me! Hit me!” The kid stomped a foot once, and laughed.

Damien almost said something, almost yelled, almost told Jack to run, almost ruined his hidden position. But he didn't. Not because he was afraid for Jack's life; he was, but that didn't sew his lips. The aura emanating from the boy, the strange, burning sensation that pulsed outward, that burned his eyes and his core, terrified him. There was no other way to think of the cold pain coursing through him, juxtaposed against the searing heat that poured from the boy. It wasn't heat, it was rage, fury, a need for violence that his senses could only interpret as a scalding heat that threatened to kill him if he came too close.

His jaw dropped, and he almost gasped, as the gargoyle smashed into Jack. The titan was enormous, too enormous. In the madness of collision, Jack disappeared beneath the mass of the Horror, and the world erupted into vibration as the creature struck the invisible barrier. It was like watching a transport truck crash into a mountain. The crows that filled the trees, the ones closest to the circle of destruction, erupted upward, joining the clouds above as they blocked out what little starlight and moonlight was visible. Damien held tight to the tree as the following wave of vibration soaked up through his shoes and hands, and into his teeth.

The gargoyle spread its wings, stabilizing itself after the impact. It took a single step back from where its body collided with the

invisible wall, and three of its arms pressed hands against the barrier. It had hit the barrier hard, obviously not aware of its presence. Any other creature would have smashed a dozen bones from the sudden stop, but the gargoyle looked perfectly intact.

Jack, was crushed underneath one of its fists.

“Oh ... no.” Damien looked around quickly, eyes snapping, panic gripping him. Shit. Shit shit shit. If Jack died, everything was over. Escape? He could run away. Yes, he could run and hide. He was good at that. Did it for fifty years. Maria would understand. There—

No, don't be ridiculous. Calm down, and think. Jack had stood there, and invited the creature to charge him. You've seen what the curse can do, the power it could summon. Jack isn't dead.

He knew it was true. Jack wasn't dead, because he could still feel that black, searing, inhuman, invampire rage pouring out of him.

Sure enough, as the chaos settled, Damien focused his vision on the gargoyle, and noticed movement underneath the fist it had planted against the barrier. Jack. The gargoyle's fist was nearly the size of Jack's torso, and it was planted firmly into the boy's chest, pinning him to the wall. It'd punched him. The gargoyle, charging like a bull with the weight of a truck, had punched Jack, poured his mass and strength into it, and flattened the kid into the barrier.

Except, Jack was still alive. He wasn't ash. He was there, behind this fist, and with a growing smile, the kid raised his arms around the fist, and set his hands upon it.

Blood began to pour out of the boy, dark red, and angry. It leaked from him, from his mouth, from his nostrils, from his ears, and from his eyes. It leaked out from where the Horror had crushed his chest into the barrier, spilling over the monster's fingers and into its fist. It leaked from the boy's undoubtedly crushed waist, and down his legs.

But not a drop hit the ground. It seeped, flowed, and began to fly. It sought its master, bound to his skin, and covered him, coating him until pale flesh was hidden behind a crimson wall. It binded to him, showing pockets of skin as it began to run along his body, coursing unendingly.

The gargoyle roared in pain, after Jack lifted his right hand, and brought it down on the fist. It backed off, but Jack held on; big as the gargoyle was, it wasn't so big that Jack couldn't hold onto its wrist with his left hand. Cackling madly, Jack brought his right hand down again, held in a fist and swung like a hammer. This time, Damien could see the gargoyle's finger break, earning another deathly roar from the creature.

The Horror stepped back again, and brought all three free hands down toward Jack, palms open. It was going to remove Jack, like a pesky bug that'd gotten stuck between its fingers. But as they descended upon the boy, Jack reached up and grabbed some of the incoming fingers from two of its hands. Crack, crunch, followed by more roars of pain. He didn't have enough hands to stop them all, though, and the third hand managed to grab Jack's body, and sank claws into him. It didn't matter. The red blood flowing over the boy's skin gushed into the holes the Horror made, and forced the claws out of his body.

Damien knew what this was. He'd never seen anyone perform the ability, though from what Jack told him, his sire had managed it for a few moments before death. To tap into his vitae, summon it, and infuse blood with it so the crimson liquid coated and protected him, was not a feat done easily, or for long.

Two crows next to Damien poked at his jacket.

"Ow!" he whispered. "What—oh." Mulder and Scully. They poked and pecked several more times, before they flew to another tree, this one across the clearing of destroyed forest, and much closer to

the hole Clara had been digging. It wasn't like Damien could break through the barrier, and without a proper explosive, it'd be difficult to create the explosion of force needed to—

The explosion had been created. The Horror's charge into the barrier had shook the entire, cursed nightmare. Now all he had to do, was see what damage had been done. Was that Jack's idea, or the curse's?

He closed his eyes for a moment, tapped deep into his body, dug up his vitae, and infused it into his limbs. Speed. He needed speed. As he felt the tingling sensation of glorious, overwhelming speed demand action, he spun more vitae out of him, around him, and buried himself with his Obfuscate. He was getting tired. He'd launched several attacks on this creature tonight, and had barely done anything to it. But it didn't matter. This needed to happen, or everything would be for naught.

He set a foot against the tree behind him, and forced as much vitae and strength into his leg as he could, and jumped. Air greeted him, the familiar sensation of jumping through the sky. Roof hopping was a common mode of transportation for Mekhet and Nosferatu, but landing on a rooftop was a hundred times easier than landing in the high branches of sharp, twisted, brittle trees.

His boots slid against a fat branch, his target. His hands caught the trunk, but inertia made sure the rest of him hit it anyway. He thudded against it quietly, quiet enough only a keen beast would notice, and the gargoyle was far too distracted by its battle with Jack to notice something like a Mekhet sneaking through the trees above it.

Jack continued to hold onto the gargoyle's wrist, and as it swung its arm around in an attempt to dislodge the small boy, Jack held on. The Horror gave up moments later, and again slammed Jack into the invisible barrier, open palm, like crushing an egg. Blood

splattered outward from the impact, and Damien swore he could see Jack's body momentarily implode. A second later, it filled itself out, and the blood that erupted from the boy's body forced itself back into him.

The kid brought up both hands above his head, created a single fist, and slammed them down against the gargoyle's wrist. Crack. The snap of its enormous bones was audible, as if Jack had cracked a steel beam in half. The gargoyle backed away yet again, leaving Jack to fall to the ground as it grabbed its hand, roaring in pain and surprise. And fear.

A sharp pain in Damien's ear earned a wince, and he snapped his eyes around. A crow sat upon a small, nearby branch, and flapped its wings several times before pointing down at the hole not far from where Jack was fighting the monster. It wasn't a deep hole. Clara hadn't been able to make much progress in the single minute she'd had to dig at it, at least not relative to her size. She was a huge creature, and she needed room to be able to throw her weight against the wall of dirt in hopes of breaking the barrier, a plan she never got the chance to enact.

If Jack's plan had failed, they were screwed. Lord why, why didn't you give him a sign to bring a blasted grenade? Maybe he should go back to the hunter Clara killed at the door. She might have had a grenade. Or the hunter crushed in the forest, they ... they were buried under half a dozen trees now.

Groaning and rolling his eyes, he hopped down from branch to branch, and poured every ounce of vitae he had into his Cloak. He couldn't allow himself to be spotted. If Jack's plan had been successful, this was their only chance to stop Jeremiah.

On the way down, he spotted Triss and Harcourt. The human was hiding well, like a soldier in a trench, far from home. Triss was recovering, but it was obvious to see she was out of commission.

She wouldn't be fighting anymore tonight. Considering the very young Nosferatu had managed to do far more damage to the gargoyle than he, or even the far older Daeva had, she'd done more than enough. And if Harcourt so much as earned a stern look from the gargoyle, he'd likely explode violently. He wouldn't be fighting, either.

Damien crawled past them, inching carefully over bark and twigs and dead rats. Better to not let them see him, lest they give his position away. Then again, it might not have mattered, considering what Jack was doing. The plan Jack was communicating to his crows, somehow, in the middle of battle, with a Horror, was to investigate the place Clara had been attempting to break the infuriating barrier the hunters had created. Checking the barrier in a stealthy manner was to his advantage, to avoid drawing the Horror's attention, but then again, Jack was currently in the process of bashing the creature's arm in. Attention drawn.

The gargoyle stumbled back again, and Jack, now dropped to the ground, jumped after it. His skin, his suit, all of it swirled and flowed with the dark liquid, and the holes the gargoyle had put into the boy filled in. For a moment, Damien could see bone, but it disappeared under the red, only for a layer of skin to appear a second later. His body had been crushed to utter oblivion, but now the boy was walking around as if nothing had happened. His suit told another story, with a few dozen breaks from where the gargoyle's attack had punctured and tore it.

Julias would not have survived that. Viktor would have struggled to survive that. Jack walked it off.

The demon landed between the beast's legs, and now protected by his shield of blood and death, the creature within him unleashing its violent need, he went on the offensive. He dove for the monster's right leg, and punched at the knee. He hit the knee on the inside, and sent the monster down onto its hip as it collapsed, weight giving



way. The impact launched Jack backward hard, and his back bounced against the Horror's other leg. But, as the gargoyle fell, landing on its palms, Jack dashed around its legs to get underneath its torn neck, and he punched upward.

The result was absurd. Little Jack. Tiny, skinny little Jack in his torn up suit, gave the goliath monstrosity an uppercut, and because the upward force drove Jack's weight into the ground, he was anchored. The full might of the demon child's punch connected to the gargoyle's jaw, and the colossal creature went upright with the force of it, before falling backward over its own legs. It crumbled onto its back and right side, and tore at the ground with its arms as it struggled to get back up.

But Jack didn't let it. The kid ran around, got underneath its chest, and punched upward again. And again, the explosive force sent the creature up and back, half rolling over itself. The creature weighed thousands and thousands of pounds, and Jack was punching it hard enough to almost send it in the air. The second punch earned another audible crack, followed by a shrieking roar that threatened to burst ear drums.

"Don't get me wrong!" Jack said, laughing between his movements as he jumped after the creature. "I don't want to hurt you, nightmare. I respect the Begotten, to a degree. And you are a certifiably badass, deadly creature. I don't want to kill you. But I will if I have to." The demon boy jumped around to its head again, and came from above this time, slamming both hands down on it. The impact was enough to send the gargoyle down onto its chest, and head into the ground hard enough Damien felt the impact. It also sent Jack into the air, high into the air, propelled upward by his own strength.

The curse controlling Jack, and infusing him with absurd vigor, may have had the power to Dominate anyone, control an entire legion of creatures, and perform true feats of strength Damien

doubted Jacob or the Prince could match, but balance and dexterity were skills of finesse, timing, and practice. Jack spun around in the air, a dozen times, before gravity eventually took hold of him and brought him down. Damien would have landed on his feet. Jack landed on his ass.

That didn't matter to the new Jack. He laughed, a joyful, arrogant, ruthless sound, and hopped up once again. Crimson continued to coat him, protected him, repaired him, and fueled him. But it did nothing for his reflexes. The gargoyle got to one knee, and swept its tail with a twist of its body. Crack, a whip snap, like the one that had hit Triss and broke her.

Jack took it straight on, and Damien could see his body fold in half before the tail launched him into a distant tree. It was like seeing a baseball bat hit a ball hard enough to drive it through the stadium itself. Sure enough, Jack hit the so hard, he went through it. More than go through it, the trunk shattered around him like a brick through glass, and Jack disappeared into the dark wood beyond.

Damien froze and stared, forcing his body to hold still as he crept toward the pit Clara had dug. The silence that followed the explosion was deafening, but it wasn't the hit that Jack took that shook him to his core. It was the laughter that followed, a creepy, insidious laugh, that felt right at home surrounded by the horrible trees, the corpses, and the destruction. It wasn't the gargoyle laughing. That would have sounded louder, and more animal. This laugh came from the shadows beyond, from within the forest, from where Jack had landed.

Several enormous trees, lying on their sides, rolled over each other, as the small Kindred pushed the insane weight off of him. Body a broken mess, suit half ripped off, exposing his chest and right arm, Jack stepped over the ruins of wood, and walked back toward the gargoyle. Damien could see bone through holes left on

his body, holes that quickly filled with the crimson liquid. He could see gashes seal, and he only realized it once it was healed, but Jack's right foot had been twisted almost completely around. It snapped back into place as if someone had grabbed it, and literally screwed it back into the correct position, like twisting a cork.

A chunk of the boy's face had lost its skin, and Damien stared at the demon child as blood flowed up and down Jack's cheek, hiding the eye socket, cheek bone, jaw, and teeth that'd been exposed a moment before. Soon, skin once again covered the wound. And, judging by the sadistic smile the boy now sported, his face was completely healed.

Jack licked his lips, threw off the tattered remains of his suit jacket, and marched toward the gargoyle. "That the best you got? Fucking pathetic."

# Chapter 109

~~Author's Note~~

Sorry this action scene is taking so long. It's really been dragging! But it's building up to something pretty big, and a lot of details needed to be explored; they'll be relevant later. Give it a couple more chapters and we'll be back to the world of Dolareido.

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~~Damien~~

He didn't have to say anything. The moment he curled his finger against the small hole in the soot, and opened the barrier, the crows above began to squawk, caw, and attack. Damien worked quickly, spreading the soot apart until one, two, three feet of open earth awaited him. Thankfully, the amber circle was rendered completely useless by being broken, but the soot apparently still worked as a barrier from either direction, as his fingers attested; it blocked all matter from both sides, but when his fingers touched the powder itself from the inside of the invisible wall, it gave way. He had to make sure the break was wide.

The crows, who had hidden in the forest, hiding their numbers in the shadow and sinister wood, unleashed the swarm. The legion descended upon Damien, and flew through the break in the barrier over his head. Made sense; they wouldn't be able to see the black powder way high up in the sky, with branches and darkness hiding it. But it did mean he had to plant himself flat to the ground and ledge of the ditch, covering his head with his hands, as the birds flew through the hole, shrieking and squawking.

The four hunters lifted their heads, eyes wide, surprised, and maybe a little afraid. But the fear disappeared under reflexes, training, and Lord only knew how many years of hate and loathing.

The one with the flamethrower unleashed Hell, and Damien had to throw himself back and away into the forest again, disappearing behind trees as fire lit up the hole in the barrier he'd made. Feathers went up in flames, and the smell of burned flesh filled Damien's nostrils. Bullets ripped up the ground, shredding the hole Damien had made, and again the Mekhet found himself hiding as the hail of gunfire continued until dozens, hundreds of bullets were crashing against the bark around him.

He peeked his head out, and watched. Wrapped in his Cloak of Night, the hunters wouldn't be able to see him. Except, Jeremiah, Angela, and Elen had proven they were quite capable of handling paranormal threats. Perhaps they could see him, if he got too close, thanks to their tattoo symbols, or maybe the necklaces and bracelets they wore. The four hunters were as likely a threat, but they were distracted, all four sets of eyes locked onto the ditch Clara had dug, and burying it in metal and fire.

Angela, Elen, and Jeremiah, on the other hand, did not break from their task. Now they stood within a new circle, one Angela was finishing drawing with what looked like chalk. Amber. That blasted amber line again. But it seemed like they didn't have anymore of the black soot anymore; powerful stuff, absurdly powerful, and thank the Lord he didn't have to deal with anymore of it. The amber line wouldn't block a bullet.

He looked to Jack, and shivered at the sight of the kid. Auspex showed the same thing as before, that the boy's aura had exploded into something massive, angry, violent, and bloodthirsty. It was a rage Damien could not begin to understand, could not put into context, and could not appreciate. It was the rage of a psychopath, of a broken mind that didn't think like a normal person.

No, it was the rage of the Beast, the sheer animal aggression and desire for violence that existed within him, and all Kindred. Except, only a draugr was so consumed with a need to destroy, and even

then, draugr were mindless, stupid animals. Jack was unleashing the worst his Beast had to offer, and one of the most powerful creatures Damien had ever seen, the gargoyle Horror, was getting destroyed by it.

It was a strange sight, to see the small boy physically punch something with enough force to break steel. He didn't have the mass to anchor the force into the ground, and it launched him back, or in this case, down. Down gave the kid a better anchor, and the driving upward force the blood-coated man sank into the gargoyle's chest was so strong, it fell backward again, landing with a resounding crash. There was a dent in its chest.

And Jack, wearing his crimson armor, laughed the entire time.

Damien forced his eyes back to the hunters. Jack was busy with the gargoyle, Triss was wrecked, Clara was beyond wrecked, and Othello was out of commission. If the branch that skewered him had been any bigger, Damien would have feared for his second life. A small stroke of luck that it wasn't. A huge stroke of misfortune, that Damien was now on his own, and without his sword.

Elen drew symbols in the air with her knife, and the symbols stuck. As if she was cutting into the fabric of reality itself and making it bleed, her glowing red knife left burning blood-red lines in the night air. They burned, but not with fire. They burned the way flesh did, when it was sick and inflamed, when it was infected, or when it'd had time to fight against the damage of a wound. A dull, pulsing red that had no business glowing in the dark, but it did.

Angela came in close to Jeremiah, and hugged an arm around the man's waist. She kissed the man's cheek, like a daughter might a father, and looked down at the book in the old man's hands as he opened it once again. Pain. Sadness. Worry. The host of emotions the old man carried, and shared with the woman next to him, were immense and uncountable. The trials those two must have faced to

look at each other that way, was almost enough for Damien to sympathize for them. They were friends, together until the end.

Damien did not like humanizing them, but there it was. Next to Jack, or the thing currently controlling Jack, Jeremiah and Angela looked like reasonable people, driven and determined. Only Elen continued to seem the monster.

The crows died by the hundreds. When one hunter stopped to reload, another started shooting, a seamless and unending stream of destruction. They had the magazines of their fallen hunters, and a small hole to cover. There was no getting in there.

The black powder seemed to block incoming matter high and low, which meant that now that the line was broken, he could get in from above where he'd broken it, from high above if necessary. The crows were figuring that out as well, and slowly expanding the height of their incoming swarm as they learned where the hole was. Some still hit the invisible barrier, and when a bird flies into essentially unbreakable glass at high speeds, it's a death sentence. But the crows couldn't be slow either, not with the four hunters unloading bullet after bullet, and waves of flame.

Damien looked up and down the invisible hole through the barrier, and anchored his weight onto the balls of his feet and his fingertips. The crows were showing him the path, all he had to do was jump with them, or over them. He could jump pretty damn high, ten, twenty, maybe thirty feet high if he had the time to prepare his vitae. And he did have that time, the crows were providing it, them and the demon curse who was simultaneously controlling them, while fighting a titan.

A quick glance down, a check of his pistol, the magazine, the safety, and he was off. He put every bit of strength into the jump, poured vitae into his legs until he felt his hunger rise, and he did the same for his Cloak, masking himself as best he could. This was what

Daniel had been trying to teach him, multitasking, how to use Obfuscate while going on the offensive in combination with Celerity. A juggling act, and a demanding one, like juggling cement blocks.

He flew through the air, pulled his legs and arms in, and sailed between the walls of the invisible barrier. Impressively, he'd managed to get above the crows, too. Not so impressively, was how his high jump meant he had a hell of a drop to make. And, most unfortunately, it became obvious as he went through the barrier and into clearing, that the hunters had set up a trap.

He fell not too far from where the four hunters stood within the newer, smaller amber circle. It was wide enough for the seven of them to stand and move comfortably around some big stones, each a couple feet high, but not so large that it included the sacrificial trees of the clearing, or the stone altar that stood halfway between the trees and the clearing's center. Elen continued to write strange symbols into the air, and Jeremiah continued to read from his book. Engrossed as they were, Damien could have probably run up to them and started shooting, and they wouldn't have stopped what they were doing. Angela, on the other hand, lifted her head, and looked toward him. Not directly at him, but toward him and where he landed. It seemed his Cloak had not been perfect.

Strange movement drew his eyes, and Damien, crouched low in the shallow grass, looked to the nearest tree, one of the trees with a sacrifice crucified upon its thick, twisted trunk of black bark. The body, naked and eviscerated, with three nails jammed through its limbs, looked at him. Cold, empty eyes looked at him, directly at him, and with slow, twitching movements, the corpse opened its mouth.

"There," one of the corpses said.

Another raised its head, her head, and looked at him. "There."



“There.”

“There.”

“There!”

The voices of the dead. The voices of cracked, dry throats, and withered tongues. The voices of bags of skin, with nothing inside them but drying organs. Raspy, harsh, and louder than they should have been. Like, screaming banshees.

Angela wasn't looking at him, but near him, and through him. She was looking at where the faces were looking, and doing some quick and poor triangulation. Poor triangulation was enough, when she pulled out a shotgun, a sawed-off shotgun, and started firing in his general direction.

He dove to the side and around one of the trees, but not before one of the hunters near Angela unloaded a couple dozen bullets in his direction as well. While Angela missed, the other hunter managed to clip his leg, and he spun as he fell down. Pain, a mountain of screaming pain brought his Cloak to a quick end, and Damien yelled between clenched teeth as he slid behind the tree. Two bullets had caught his shin and calf, and he could see bits of bone through his pant leg.

Concentrate. Fucking concentrate! You need to move. Be faster. Ignore the wound. Think!

He scanned the area around him, and ducked close to the tree as a swarm of bullets started to rip into it. Worse was the shotgun. Click, click, boom. It didn't damage the tree as much as a penetrating bullet, but it damaged a square foot of area, instead of a single spot. If Damien made one misstep, he'd take dozens of pellets to the body, and that was infinitely worse than a few bullets from a rifle cutting clean through him. He edged his head out from behind cover, only to have bullets tear through wood and bark near his eye.

Three hunters remained to cover the hole in the barrier, and they tore through the hundreds of crows, until the birds' corpses decorated the black and bloodied earth like a garden of death. One hunter plus one Angela kept their guns pointed at him, and they were more than enough to keep him stuck behind the tree.

Except, if he was behind the tree, and the group of hunters were inside their small circle in the center of the clearing, that meant he could approach the outer line of black soot without exposing himself too much. It was a fat tree, the one he was hiding behind, big enough for a corpse to be crucified to it; damn corpse wouldn't shut up, yelling 'here here' over and over. But, if he backed away from it, and kept its thick trunk between him and the hunters, he could break the magic black line yet again. To what purpose, though. To get back outside the circle and render his efforts pointless?

Movement rustled some bushes, and he snapped his head back to look into the darkness, beyond the black line, and out into the forest. Jack? No, Jack was still creating a ruckus, butting heads with the juggernaut. Clara, Triss, Othello? He doubted one minute was enough for any of them to recover. Aaron or Jennifer? Jennifer was guarding her hunter prisoners, and wouldn't disobey the cursed Jack. Maybe Aaron, but Damien doubted it. The man was logical, and didn't let whims of emotion dictate actions. Aaron had made a tactical decision and would stick to it. Fiona? Athalia? They were supposed to help, and he desperately needed it, but—

Harcourt stuck his head out from behind a tree. He must have snuck away from the destruction, and now stood behind and between the many standing trees near the invisible barrier. Maybe ninety degrees of the huge barrier was now between Harcourt and Jack. He must have been sneaking along through the dark and chaos for some time, and he was better at it than Damien would have assumed, for him to not notice the hunter.

The hunter met Damien's eyes, and showed his pistol. The pistol drew Damien's attention for only a moment. It was the hunter's eyes that struck Damien still with surprise. He recognized those eyes, he'd seen them in others, others who'd been wronged, who knew people who'd been wronged, and wanted a chance at revenge.

Elen had killed his friends. The people he'd trusted had killed his friends. Fellow humans, who'd fought beside him to kill the monsters of the night, had killed his friends, and left him alone in a den of monsters. The man was probably angry now, angry down to his soul, and hurting for a chance at payback.

Damien dragged himself toward the man, doing his best to keep the tree between him and the hunters in their circle. They could step out of it anytime they wanted, and pour bullets into him, if they realized what he was doing. Considering things could leave the circle without issue, a spray of bullets could get Harcourt killed as well if he came into the clearing through the original break Damien had made. Right now, Damien needed an ally, and that meant he needed to make a new hole in the wall.

He cloaked himself as best he could, ignored the pain in his leg, and approached Harcourt. Once he was close, Harcourt could see him; a downward flick of the hunter's eyes, spotting Damien along the grass well before he should have proved that. Whether the man was trained to notice disturbances in the ground, or his tattoos and bracelets and whatnot allowed him to see Damien earlier than he should have been able to, Damien didn't know. Maybe he could ask him when this was all over, assuming they lived.

Damien kicked out the black soot, and Harcourt came into the circle, quiet and slow. Where Damien had seen a goofy expression before, now he found only hardness. He'd be able to use this man, rely on him, and make an attempt for Jeremiah. Or Elen. Or Angela. Any of them. Better to not be picky at this rate. They were on their last legs.

“This is for Carver, you fucking assholes!” Angry as the man was, and skilled as he was, he was not professional; professionally trained, but not professionally behaved. He stuck his head out from behind the tree Damien had been using, and began to unleash rage as bullets aimed for his fellow hunters.

A gunfight in the darkness was difficult. No one had night vision, save for what the paranormals managed naturally, but the hunters had flashlights. All Damien had was a phone he could use for light, and he'd turned that off not long after entering the nightmare. Harcourt had a light under his pistol though, and he used it, getting down onto a knee and aiming it at the hunters as he fired at them. He had better form than Damien did.

But he didn't have a vampire's reflexes. Damien grabbed his shoulder, and yanked him back behind the tree after he shot thrice. Bullets shredded the side of the tree Harcourt was behind, and the man cursed as he pressed his back to the wood. Lights shined along the grass on either side of them, like prison spotlights.

“Thanks. Fuck me, can't line up a shot in the dark. When I try and aim at them, I get light in the eyes.”

Damien nodded. “Yes, but the hunters are exposed, and occupied with the crows.”

“Not completely exposed. They've got a couple rocks to duck behind.”

True, they did, but not the rock with the slab of skin on it, the largest in the clearing.

The altar. If assaulting the hunters would be too difficult now that Damien was injured, without his sword, and running low on bullets, then maybe he should change his target. Adjust tactics, change the goal, adapt to the situation.

“Brace, what do you know about that slab of skin on the altar.”

“Fuck me, I don’t know shit.”

“It has to do with Sándor.”

“The monster? Then I guess it’s probably how Elen’s got him under her spell. She had to carve symbols into his back regularly, you know? Like every few months.”

“Any idea where the skin came from? Whose it is?”

The man shrugged. The motion must have brushed outside the cover of the tree, as a few bullets shredded past the bark and skimmed along the skin of his arm. “Fuck. Uh, if I had to guess, it’s probably ... his?”

Sándor’s skin. The Begotten merged with their Horrors in the nightmare, so how would one get his skin into the nightmare? Considering Elen seemed to be a master of flesh, she likely removed it from Sándor outside the nightmare, in her flesh chamber, and brought it into the nightmare, all as part of her ritual to control the man and his connection to the Horror. Twisted and sick. And impressive. Damien doubted there were many witches or shamans in the world who knew such a spell, let alone had managed to perform it.

“If I were in good condition, I’d assault the hunters directly,” Damien said. “But—”

“They’re not hunters.”

“I—alright, the ... the...”

“Traitors.”

Damien smiled. “Alright. The traitors have those ... corpses, on the trees, to guide their fire to me. I need a distraction, and a powerful one, if I’m to reach the altar.” He gestured down to his damaged leg. “And I’m afraid I won’t be as fast as I’d like to be.” The blasted leg was refusing to heal, and he knew why. Such constant use of his Obfuscate and Celerity left him drained, and running on fumes. He didn’t have time for this.

Part of him was tempted to drain the hunter in front of him. He didn’t need to kill Harcourt, but a stomach full of the man’s blood would go a long way to helping Damien out. But, no, the Kiss took a few moments, and it didn’t heal instantly. The man was more useful to him conscious and armed.

“So, I need to keep them occupied.”

“Yes, and—” A noise had Damien turning around, ready to shoot or tear open whatever was trying to sneak up behind him. Relief washed over him, as he looked down, and smiled at the two crows hopping along the grass. “Mulder. Scully. You two are far too smart for your own good.”

“The fuck?”

“Jack’s pet crows.”

“He’s got a million pet crows!”

“These two are special.” Damien nodded toward the hole in the barrier they came through, the second hole Damien had made, and gestured to it with his free hand. “If you can summon what remains of your army to distract the hunters, I’d—”

And they left. They didn’t fly, probably putting two and two together that flying in this environment was a great way to invite a hailstorm of bullets. They hopped out of the break in the line Damien had made, cawed a few times, and ... and came back. They

stayed low to the ground until their breast feathers pressed to the grass, and lower, like nesting chickens. And they started to walk outward, each bird taking one half of the line, and dusting it apart as the waddled.

In the darkness, clouds above combined by a canopy of horrible branches, the birds were surrounded in nigh perfect shadow. And they were crows. They were black from beak to tail feathers, and from eye to claw. They were twenty feet away and Damien struggled to see them.

“Smart birds,” Harcourt whispered.

“Indeed.” They didn’t have long to wait, but it didn’t take long. The two crows went slowly, but slowly was quick enough to open the hole from two feet, to four, to six, to eight, to ten feet wide in short order. And once the hole in the barrier was spread wide, movement in the branches above signaled the invasion.

He’d underestimated Jack. As if the scene in the hospital, a display straight out of Hell, hadn’t been enough to convince Damien that the curse possessing the boy was something absurd. As if seeing it summon a legion to lead their assault on the hunters’ strange room of flesh hadn’t been enough. As if watching the boy fight the gargoyle, a monster proving to be a titan of durability and strength, straight on hadn’t been enough. As if learning that the boy was simultaneously guiding his swarm of crows, while fighting the giant monster hadn’t been enough, now he could see that Jack had continued to summon yet even more crows than Damien had known about.

It’d gone past absurd, and into the surreal, that the curse could do this much. These hunters, or at least Jeremiah and his two female companions, had enough tools and skills at their disposal, that they could have defeated any nest of vampires in a city with enough time and patience. Elders would have perished to this ridiculous

assortment of enchantments, rituals, and strange magics they had acquired and mastered. The professional military training of the hunters, the weapons, and the sheer drive of Jeremiah, would have bested all but perhaps the Prince or Jacob. The hunters deserved to win this fight, and to succeed on this hunt for Azamel. The only reason they wouldn't, was Jack, and the curse.

Jack had said there'd been a memory, something carried over from his curse, that showed a man of the cloth, a Kindred of the Lancea et Sanctum, sealing the curse inside the original carrier Susanna. That was something he'd have to look into harder, because the cruel reality that the curse was strong enough to do whatever the fuck it wanted to anyone, including the Prince, or the sheriff, or Jacob, was quickly sinking in. For now, it was helping them. Who knew what it'd want to do tomorrow night.

Damien checked the slide on his pistol, and nodded to Harcourt. "More crows will be joining us."

"More!?" the man said.

Damien nodded again, and ran.

"Fuuuuuuuck!" Harcourt stuck out from behind the tree, this time from the other side, and started shooting. When he did, he unleashed the swarm.

Damien didn't look back. He couldn't. Every ounce of effort, energy, vitae, and concentration was in this sprint. He could feel his punctured leg damage itself further with the harsh impact of his shoes against the dirt. He could feel his Cloak of Night envelop him. He could hear the voices of the corpses as they shouted in his direction, despite the Cloak. He could hear the crows erupt, a cawing horde that launched from their branches in such numbers, it drowned out the sound of Jack and his brawl with the gargoyles.



He felt vitae course through his limbs as his Kindred half used Celerity, breaching through normal physics and using the almost magical properties of Kindred blood to push him past speeds he shouldn't have been able to hit. But even so, the hunters began to shoot at him, two of them. The one with the flamethrower turned their attention, but not to him, thank Longinus. Fire poured toward Harcourt, and higher, up into the sky to rain down the liquid flame upon the black, feathered locusts that entered the clearing.

Scully and Mulder must have continued clearing away the magical black powder, because the width of the swarm grew, until Damien could not resist peeking over his shoulder. It was a black cloud, blurring with the darkness of the night.

Damien forced his eyes back onto the ground ahead of him. Without his own light source, the darkness was enough for Kindred eyes to struggle to find footing, and he could not stop. Only the wild lights of the hunters scanning for him, and the wilder flames filling the air, provided light for him to use, and they tricked his eyes with fast shadows, as much as illuminated his path. As hunters unleashed bullets toward Harcourt, and bullets toward the two streams of crows flowing into their clearing, two continued to shoot at Damien. Celerity would not have been enough to avoid their gunfire, slowed as he was by his injury. And, the hunters, at least these four and Angela, were good shots. They kept their lights toward him, and every time one foot landed on the grass, they unleashed a spray of bullets. Only the chaos of the crows made his plan work.

If he ran at them, he'd be riddled with bullets. If he paused to try and shoot back at them, he'd likely be shot as well. All these actions that required him to ground his weight and change momentum weren't viable, with his leg threatening to cease functioning. But they weren't his goal. As long as he ran the perimeter of the clearing, staying far away from the hunters within its center, they

wouldn't be able to get a good shot at him, and he'd be able to approach his true target.

The largest rock in the clearing was the fat one, easily five feet wide, and slanted, providing an inward-facing slope where Elen had placed the large flap of skin. The new circle they'd drawn in amber, to protect themselves from supernatural forces and bodies, hadn't been large enough to include it. While the hunters had a decent enough circle to move around in, maybe twenty feet across, with several large rocks within to use as cover, the enormous one that had to be an altar, was left beyond its embrace. Perhaps it was because it didn't sit directly between all the trees with corpses attached to them. It became obvious now, as he circled them as fast as he could, that the seven remaining hunters had drawn their circle where they did, because it was directly between all the trees used as crucifixes. Whatever they were doing, they were going to be in the center of it.

It was beyond frustrating. The hunters were mostly out in the open, and if given a moment, Damien would have been able to find a vantage point, and simply shoot them from a distance. But the barrier, the gargoyle, the rushed circumstance, the corpses announcing his position, it made everything a panicked mess of unknowns. All he could do with what he had left, was this.

He ran the perimeter harder, hard enough he felt the torn flesh of his leg rip under the flexing muscles. For all their tools, for all their skill, the humans were human. His body was damaged, his vitae was running out, but he was still faster than they were, and he still managed to pull up at least some degree of a Cloak. He was a blur for them, nothing more than a flickering shadow in the darkness that they were trying to catch with their flashlights. Trying, and failing.

He slid hard, good leg out in front of him, body twisted to face the hunters, and left hand down to catch his weight as he came to a

hard stop. It gave his position away, and invited a hail of bullets, but they turned into sparks of collision as he put the grand altar rock between him and them.

He didn't stop for long. The crows above had managed to fully enter the clearing, so a tornado of feathers circled everything within, but they did not cross the amber line. Could they not? They were influenced by supernatural means, so, maybe they couldn't, or maybe they couldn't easily. They were trying, but as they swam down upon the hunters, they were forced to pull away, or pushed away, by invisible waves.

The fire raged. The hunter with the flamethrower didn't care that wood and grass burned, and they unleashed the stream into the air without limit. Birds caught on fire, and soon their swirling mass became a mix of black feathers and red flames. The smell of burning flesh and cooking meat filled the air, and Damien grimaced as he ducked down, avoiding bullets that skimmed along his protecting rock altar, while burning wings flew overhead. The grass, the forest, it resisted the flame, as if it didn't belong. It didn't. Would the nightmare chamber heal, once the chaos was done? Maybe it would, but for the moment, the fire was winning that battle, and the birds were only making it worse.

A loud crash summoned his gaze. Behind him, Jack continued his fight with the nightmare's owner. It looked silly when only glanced at for a second, a tiny boy fighting a colossus, but Damien spared an extra second to watch longer, and the cruel, absurd, and visceral reality sank it, of Jack's disturbing display of power. The gargoyle had slammed Jack into the invisible barrier again, and was punching him over and over, one hand braced against the barrier, another against the ground, while it used two of its enormous fists to punch the boy like a furious bread maker.

Jack shrugged the blows off after taking five of them, and met one of the punches with his own. Small as he was, his punches were to

the gargoyle as a framing hammer would be to human flesh, and again Damien could hear an audible snap as something inside the titan cracked. The following roar was deafening, but quieter than Damien had predicted. His hearing was starting to suffer.

The cursed boy looked over his shoulder to the clearing, and noticed Damien's position. "Damien! Do it!"

"Fucking touch that," one of the hunters said as they reloaded their magazine, "and I'll fill you with so much lead, you'll—" And down they went, the woman letting out a screech as she fell onto her stomach.

"Fuck you, bitch!" Harcourt's voice, followed by more gunfire, his own, and the return fire of the hunters.

Damien crouched low, and peeked around the altar. The woman was getting back up, but she was groaning and fighting against pain. No doubt she had a bulletproof vest under her clothes, otherwise she'd be screaming in pain, or dead. But she struggled to her hands and knees, still alive, and still with one hand on her rifle.

But it was a few seconds of less bullets firing at Damien, and that was enough for him to jump up onto the altar. It was a large stone, very large, and the slope the skin tapestry was laid upon was on the other side, pointed toward the center of the clearing. It was too wide, too tall, too fat for him to simply reach around and grab the ritual item. Perhaps, if he hadn't been injured, he could dash around it, or if he had the vitae, or if the hunters didn't have their strange tools, or if the corpses upon the trees weren't twisting their heads to stare directly at him, he could have snuck around it. Unfortunately, all those things were happening, and screwing this up wasn't an option.

The skin flap was large, and this close, it was much easier to tell what skin it was. It was the skin of someone's back, a person's back. From the neck to the tail bone, with some of the waist, and a bit of

where the arm and shoulder met, all of the skin had been surgically removed from someone, and tied down. Human skin was far easier to tear than most animal skin, and yet Elen had managed to remove it all from Sándor, he presumed, and spread it with tiny pegs, like she was tanning leather or making a drum. It was tight to the rock, to the point Damien could see the bumps and grooves of the mineral underneath the skin.

The symbols carved into the skin had a subtle glow to them, the color of blood, same as Elen's knife. He recognized them, or at least the style they were written in, the blatant occult symbols that he'd seen used by Elen at the sacrifice sites. Why she didn't do those sacrifices here, or in her flesh chamber, he didn't know. Perhaps the haruspex had to be done in the location where the information needed to be divined. Or maybe—maybe he didn't have time to be wondering.

Upon the altar, he reached down, set his fingers into the spread skin, and ripped it apart.

The sensation of his fingers digging into the skin was met with the sensation of bullets hitting his chest. Whichever hunter it was, he didn't know. The one on the ground was still getting up, and the one with the flamethrower was doing their best to kill the crows; more than that, he now realized as metal tore through his chest. They were spreading the fire preemptively, creating walls of it in an attempt to stop Damien from getting in close, and any future Kindred attempts.

It was also sealing them in a ring of flame. Humans could run through fire, far more easily than a vampire, but it wouldn't be easy. They'd get burned. Unless, they were bunkering down even harder?

He couldn't finish the thought. The thunk and thud of bullets hitting things inside him announced he'd been caught, and as he fell back, he stared up at the swarming birds, many burning and

dropping black, flaming feathers around him. There was a peaceful moment, a single second as he fell through the few feet of air before hitting the grass waiting for him, where he glimpsed the night sky above. There was no canopy in the clearing, and through the swirling mass of black feathers and red flame, through the clouds above, he could see the stars.

The silence that followed, as he landed in the grass, was beautiful. The gargoyle stopped roaring and shrieking its alien sounds. Jack stopped his battle cries and taunts. The hunters stopped firing their weapons, Harcourt included. Even the crows, many dying horrible deaths, were shocked to silence, as a great, invisible wave of release poured out through them all.

Damien had broken something. Tearing the skin apart had broken something, or undone something, or ended, or freed something. They couldn't see it, or hear it, but they all felt it, like a vibration in the universe that had exploded outward, without making any vibrations at all. Whatever ritual had been done upon the disgusting object, had been undone.

Damien tilted his head back, and looked out toward the invisible barrier. On his back with his head tilted, everything was upside down, but it was clear to see that Jack was standing by the invisible barrier, looking his way. So too was the enormous monster, the titan, the Horror. There were obvious dents in the gargoyle's body, places where Jack had broken bones; not that that seemed to matter to the creature. Wherever Jack had damaged it, its body had put itself back together well enough to keep fighting. Except, now it no longer fought. It simply stood there, staring at Damien, and the altar he lay by, its great width between him and the hunters.

The creature was the first to break the silence. It started, by slamming the whole of its weight into the invisible barrier, shoulder first. Again, and again, and again, until the entirety of the nightmare was trembling under the power of its unknowable rage.

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~~Antoinette~~

“You’ve ... taken care of him, at least,” Azamel said, frowning as Mark pushed her near the open doorway of the cell, but no further.

Sándor knelt as he had for some time now, arms held out to the sides by chains. His head dangled, but his naked body showed no signs of deterioration; she had made sure the thralls who cleaned him checked to see if he started to suffer biologically. He did not. Begotten, or at least this particular Begotten, were a resilient breed, compared to most living creatures.

The IV in his arm had been changed recently, as had the bucket kept between his legs. The air vents in this particular part of the tower were extremely limited in size, but well powered, enough to keep the air from growing stale or grotesque with the smell of bodily waste. The man’s dark hair had begun to grow, as did his beard, hiding what had once been the pleasing face of an attractive man in his twenties or thirties, fit and lean, and perhaps Russian, or Eastern European.

“You may examine him, if you wish,” she said.

The two monsters looked to each other, to her, and then the many symbols that had been etched into the floor of her prison.

“I can feel from here,” the old woman said, “that this room is ... cut off. How did you manage that?”

“You know very well I will divulge no such information, Azamel.” Antoinette almost rolled her eyes, but did not. It would not serve her to make an enemy of the frustrating woman, though she would not part with her secrets. Her experiments into penetrating the Gauntlet had taught her methods of countering her own efforts; lessons learned from failures. It had taken many decades to learn that she could seal a room so that those within would not be able to

reach out from the physical realm, and into whatever realms awaited beyond. Or rather, she had concluded that she could seal a room off from the Shadow realm, and the Begotten had been a test to see if it would also seal creatures off from other realms.

Sándor was the second creature she had placed into the room's confines, to learn if its walls and symbols could prevent a prisoner from 'reaching' out from the physical world. The first had been a necklace, obsessively haunted by a spirit. The experiment had worked, cutting the spirit off from the Shadow realm, leaving them without a way home. In the end, she had let the spirit go free.

"Well, either way, I am not stepping foot into that room." She shook her head slowly, frowning as she glared at the chains holding the man. "Were the chains necessary?"

"I do not take unnecessary risks."

"Uh huh." The old monster rolled her eyes, and motioned toward the prisoner. "He's separated from his Horror."

"Separated?"

"The other half of ourselves exists within the dream, vampire. And it's still there."

"It's not with you?"

"My other half is with me, and within the dream."

Understanding such a paradoxical statement was difficult. If Azamel's Horror, the monster of the nightmare, was in the dream realm, and yet with her at the same time, how did they interact? Did they overlap each other? Often, she thought of the Shadow realm as the second side of a coin, but even that comparison invited the mental separation of the two realms. It was more accurate to consider them as existing within the same space, and under the



same frequency, but offset. And if the physical and spirit world existed in the same place, with frequencies offset from each other, there was no reason other realms could not do the same.

“I have summoned Daniel,” Antoinette said. “He will accompany us into your ... nightmare realm.”

“Of course.”

“And I would ... request,” —the word tasted bitter—“that we leave as soon as possible.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do.”

Antoinette could not hold back a small snarl. “My love’s life is in danger.”

“Yes, it is. Though, considering the strength of the curse, I doubt the danger is great.”

“And this hope you have, that Jack or his companions will free Sándor of the spell that binds him, is a random hope. A whim.”

The old woman shrugged, and so too did Mark, as if to mirror his boss’s demeanor. A yes-man, Antoinette was sure.

“Yes, it is.”

Antoinette stepped in front of Azamel, putting herself inches from the open door of her cell, and blocking Azamel’s view of the incapacitated Begotten.

“Jack fights a man you brought to my city, that hunts your head, and here you stand ... sit, defying me.”

Mark frowned but stepped back a little, taking Azamel back a foot with him. Whatever bravery the man had, she had seen none of it. Every pore in her undead body told her Mark was a disgusting

creature, not to be trusted; not for any traitorous intent, but rather, something about him told her Beast that the monster before her was inherently vile. Never trust a scorpion, who wishes to cross the river.

“Threaten me all you like, vampire, my offer stands. We wait here to see if Sándor is freed by your boy toy Jack.”

Grinding her teeth, Antoinette looked past Azamel as she heard the quiet clop clop of a man’s shoes on her marble floors. Daniel stepped into the hallway, stone expression locked onto Mark and the monster in the wheelchair.

“Why do you believe Sándor will be freed by Jack tonight? Much of this madness revolves around that assumption.”

Azamel looked over her shoulder as Daniel joined them, and annoyance crept into her cracked, hanging skin. “Jeremiah will go to ground. Jack has attempted on an assault on him once before, and the attack took Jack into my kin’s nightmare. I know Jeremiah has been consorting with this shaman, Elen, and I ... know more, about Jeremiah’s defenses, than he realizes.” The old woman looked up over her shoulder again, this time at her escort Mark.

“You have managed to penetrate the man’s defenses?” Rage once again ran through Antoinette’s limbs, until her fists trembled at her sides. “How long have you been playing this game with Jeremiah, Azamel? How long have you been able to attack him on his ground, and yet, you invite his pursuit, in hopes of obtaining this ‘inheritance’ you so desperately want?”

The old woman scoffed, coughed, and shrugged again. “Jeremiah and I have jostled with each other for a long, long time. We’ve been able to attack each other and go for the kill for a long, long time as well. Jeremiah has been trying to find a way to do so without getting himself killed in the process. I’ve been trying to find a way to kill him in such a way that the battle will be legendary, in the literal

sense, made into legend, never to be forgotten.” She clenched and unclenched her hands on the arms of her wheelchair, and Antoinette almost winced at the cracking sounds the frail creature’s hands made. “But as I said, time has caught up with me, and now I ... do what I can, for my fellow Begotten.”

Antoinette stepped away and began to pace, slipping her hands into the small of her back as she looked down, frowning. With Daniel at her side, she was more than confident that if the old woman presented her with an opportunity to attack Jeremiah, now that the hunter was distracted with Jack, she could deal with him. She and Daniel could kill him, Angela, and every human the man kept at his side. No matter the tools he had available, there was little the hunter could do if she caught him unawares.

“Why do you devote yourself to a stranger?” Antoinette said. “You do not know this man.”

“I know he’s a slave, and that he’s kin.”

“Is that all?”

“Do I need another reason?”

Antoinette paused. Yes, she needed another reason. People did not simply risk their lives for strangers, even those of the same kind. Vampires certainly did not. Then again, Azamel had said that she did not consider Kindred to be the same sort of monster as her fellow creatures of nightmares. Vampires often avoided each other, as if driven by instinct to be solitary, and to fight each other for territory and food. Were nightmare monsters creatures that actively sought others of their kind? Werewolves generally found themselves in packs, after all.

“A leech would never understand,” the old hag said with a small, dismissing wave, confirming Antoinette’s suspicions to some extent. “You might be satisfied, hiding in the millions of humans walking

around, a wolf among sheep, but we Begotten are ... primordial, Kindred. We are ancient, and what defines us, separates us from the world.” Leaning toward her, Azamel licked her teeth loudly, twice, before squinting a single eye at Antoinette. “How much do you know about Athalia?”

Athalia. Antoinette knew little of the woman, honestly, except that she had once lived in Dolareido, left, and returned with Azamel a year ago. Though perhaps, the trouble the woman suffered, the curse of her existence, were problems Daniel knew of. She looked to her sheriff, and waited.

“I know she’s ... what you monsters apparently call Eshmaki, a monster of darkness. I also know that she hungers for ... ruin,” he said.

Antoinette raised a brow as she looked at her old friend. Ruin? He had never gone into depth about his conversations with the woman, leaving Antoinette to assume the woman was benign. This was the first hint that, perhaps, her sheriff had reason to consider Athalia a threat to Dolareido.

“Elaborate,” Antoinette said. It was not a request.

Daniel adjusted his glasses, and his face set in stone all the more, as if preparing to hold his tongue. She knew the man had a strange affection for Athalia, but never to such an extent that he might defy her. Would he? There was a moment’s hesitation, several seconds of deathly silence, as the sheriff met her eyes, and considered.

“What he means,” Azamel said, sparing the man, “is that Athalia needs to destroy the safety others feel, in order to feed. We Begotten feed on fear, as we are creatures of the nightmare, as you know. How we create that fear, and in what form we seek that fear, is different for each hunger a Begotten may be bestowed, for all time. Fiona, bless her young heart and old soul, feeds on the fear people feel when they are being pursued or punished for their

transgressions. Her Horror, a strange, ancient Horror, lost to the realm of nightmares, unfettered and wandering the land of our Mother, emerged from the darkness to enter such a lovely girl. It hungers for the fear of the guilty. An easy craving to satisfy, as long as she isn't too gluttonous.

“Athalia hungers for the fear people feel when their sense of safety is ruined, obliterated, ravaged. When the walls you cherish and barricades you defend no longer provide you with a feeling of security, as they become destroyed, compromised, or left in shambles by her, she feeds upon the fear that follows.” Glaring, Azamel gestured for Mark to turn her chair, and he did, pointing the old woman directly at Antoinette. “Imagine, vampire, how difficult it is for a woman such as her, to have a life. Every moment of her existence, she struggles with a need to destroy the safety of others, to leave them feeling vulnerable. While a leech such as yourself must feed on the blood of the living, it is an enjoyable act, and sluts like yourself have built an entire city on its pleasures. You're a leech which people line up to let bite them. But no one enjoys feeling the security of their job, their home, or their lives, being shattered.”

Antoinette folded her arms, and tapped fingers along her bicep. It was a sad tale, true, and if Athalia had come to her seeking her help, Antoinette would have listened to her plight.

Alas, be truthful with yourself, Annie. You would have listened to her, but you would not have helped her, beyond insuring the Kindred of the city knew to give her a wide berth. Dolareido is your concern, as are the Kindred within it. Begotten, Uratha, and other strange creatures, are unknowns, and not a part of your plan for a utopia.

“You vampires,” Azamel continued, “can frenzy, correct? You can lose control, and give into the Beast.” Antoinette nodded, and glanced to her sheriff. His gaze remained steady, while hers did not, balancing annoyance with Azamel, and annoyance with Daniel for

his hesitation seconds earlier. “Your Beast is contained. It’s inside you, a part of you. It is something that has latched onto your soul, and dragged it down into the muck. If it wants to act out, it has to go through you.” Chuckling, the old woman lifted a hand and flicked it back at Mark, hitting the man’s stomach playfully. “There’s a reason vampires are considered damned, Prince. If ever a creature was close to Hell, it’s the vampire. You should give more credit to the *Lancea et Sanctum*.”

The Voivode would not grind her teeth, or bare her fangs, or clench her fists, or give any indication this infuriating woman was, indeed, infuriating. For all Azamel’s arrogance and cliché need to tell stories, the old woman was both sharing information Antoinette ached to know, and also held the key to rescuing Jack tonight.

“The Beast is a taint upon our souls, you say.”

“Hah, yes.” Again the old woman reached for a cigarette from her breast pocket, and sighed as she found none. “I can see it, but I cannot reach it easily, locked away as it is where souls reside. For us Begotten, our Horrors are not so ... limited. Our Horrors are creatures of the Dream. Just as a human’s soul resides within a chamber within the person, a place we cannot physically enter, a place that exists within a different realm and state of being, a Begotten’s Horror resides within a chamber as well, a place sealed off from intrusion. It has devoured our human soul, vampire, replaced it, and elevated us to myth, and legend.”

“And yet,” Antoinette said, “intrusion into these nightmare chambers seems to be a common act, this past year.” She let the statement about a soul slide by, ignoring the overwhelming urge she had to pounce the old woman, and demand answers. A soul. The old woman knew much about the soul, that such a thing existed, and apparently, of a chamber it resided in. Antoinette’s own studies, and the studies of the *Ordo Dracul*, had mostly confirmed the existence

of a soul, but to define and understand it, were beyond their abilities.

The old woman coughed, and made no attempt to hide how much Antoinette's statement infuriated her. "Consider the many, many, many stories that exist in all cultures, of entering someone's mind, and finding the person's soul, or spirit, or true self. Such tales often describe the journey, or the interaction, and share of the environment. That environment, that realm, is not of the Dream, but it is where the soul resides. Sometimes the soul can leave. A human who sleeps deep, very deep, who experiences life-altering dreams, has a soul — if it is truly their soul that does this, or a projection — with a tendency to drift from the walls of its realm, and into the Dream, where it may stumble onto many things ... including us.

"And, in a similar way, our Horrors may leave their chambers while we sleep. Unlike a human, our Horrors hunger, vampire. They hunger for fear. They swim through the seas of humanity's consciousness, swim deep, and find the chambers of human souls. They leave nightmares, grand and terrifying nightmares. And like any predator, they return to places where food has been found."

"I do not—"

"The more a Begotten denies the hungers of their Horror," Azamel interrupted, "the stronger the Horror becomes, and desperate. And Athalia denied her Horror for many years, feeding it only enough to keep herself sane. She gave birth to a girl, a human girl, vampire, something you will never be able to appreciate. And for years, Athalia fought to keep her Horror under control, to keep it out of her life, only for it to feed upon her daughter once her tiny eyes closed for sleep. Nightmares, vampire, horrible nightmares, visited upon a small girl, again and again and again. Imagine the guilt, leech, imagine the pain Athalia felt, wanting nothing more than to take care of her little girl, and yet every moment she spent

with her, she was the greatest source of pain in the girl's life. Imagine the sorrow, at being forced to leave a daughter you love at an orphanage. Imagine the agony, at knowing your daughter's mind has been left in ruins, ruins no amount of years can repair.

“What comparison is there between vampire and monster, Prince? In what possible world, could your pathetic need to drink blood and hide from a giant ball of fire in the sky, compare to that struggle?”

The single second of chuckling Azamel had shared with Mark was long gone, and now, there sat only an old woman, a creature who had seen troubles and suffered troubles well beyond the scope of Antoinette's experience. Antoinette was, as the monster said, a vampire. Her struggles were internal, forever battling the desires of her Beast, and the weakness of her Humanity; cliché, but true. Despite the very real battle of resisting her Beast, and maintaining a balance of her human and beastly desires, it was always a battle she was able to win, and easily at that. How long had it been since she had suffered famine? Not since the early years of her arrival in the village that became Dolareido, had she been concerned with unleashing an unwanted frenzy. For a Begotten to both forever battle their hungers and their unusual needs, but to also have their soul — or rather, Horror — hunt through the minds of nearby kine, and to bestow nightmares upon them in order to feed upon their fear, she could indeed not imagine.

“I do not deny that some Begotten suffer a burden greater than ours,” Antoinette said. “And, yes, I can understand that a shared burden of such magnitude, can create powerful companions.”

“Family, vampire. We're a family. Me, Athalia, Fiona, Mark here, and even this man Sándor. Hell, even you vampires, and the wolves, are distant cousins. We don't really want you around, or at least I don't, but I'll invite you to join us for Thanksgiving, if you agree to civility.” Sighing, Azamel shook her head again, and gestured to the



man chained up. “This cell blocks a person off from other realms. Why hasn’t it blocked him from the spell?”

Knowledge the old woman did not have. Finally, a dent in her relentless ego. But what little joy such an admittance brought Antoinette was short lived. She did not have the answers either.

“This room, as you said, prevents a person from reaching across realms. If Elen’s magic does no such thing, then I can only assume that the symbols I have placed upon this Wyrms’ Nest do not affect magical energies.” Magical energies did not do justice the mystery that was magic. Mages existed, of that she knew, as did several elders, but their nature, their motives, such things were as secret to her as the Ordo was to the other covenants; they and it existed, but whatever happened behind closed doors was entirely unknown.

“If he begins to speak, will you release him?”

The reality of what Antoinette had done to Sándor wormed its way into her mind. Azamel insisted that, while a vampire’s soul was tainted by the Kindred infection, becoming ‘damned’ as it were, it remained within a chamber quite connected to the human. She also insisted that the Horror, an entity that had apparently replaced, or devoured and replaced her own soul, was a creature that existed parallel with her in another realm as well. Similar to a normal soul, and yet different, as it came from a different realm, a realm her cell rendered inaccessible.

She had cut the man off from his soul. The ramifications of such an action, she could not begin to consider. Perhaps that was the true reason Azamel was desperate to have him released; though, she did not exclaim such. The mystery of the soul was ultimately a puzzle for another time.

“I will, if you take me to where you believe Jack is,” she said. Azamel nodded. A deal struck. Now, to wait, the most difficult task in the universe.

Daniel frowned at her. Frown was, perhaps, too strong a word for the look he gave her, but nonetheless, she recognized the disappointment and annoyance on his stone face. Well, she was disappointed in him, and her frown was a touch less subtle, enough that the man was the first to look away.

They did not have to wait long. How Azamel could have predicted this, Antoinette would demand to know later; there was no way, in any statistical sense, Azamel could have simply guessed correctly. But sure enough, after fifteen minutes of waiting, they felt something. She did not know what she felt, what the strange sensation was, but a fleeting breeze flowed over her. The air did not move, but it was a breeze nonetheless, or at least the feeling a breeze would give. It washed over her, and the others judging by their reactions, the feeling of something being released, tension being loosed, a wire snapping, or a window being opened. It was a tension she had not noticed before, and only now that it was gone, did she notice its absence.

The four of them looked to each other, standing in the marble hallway, before they looked to the cell and its open door. The man stirred.

Daniel drew his sword, and Mark turned around in an instant, facing Daniel, hands at his sides, ready to do something. But Azamel reached behind her, thumped the man on the hip, and rolled her wheelchair closer to the door again. She did not enter the cell.

“Sándor,” she said. “Are you awake?”

Antoinette stepped into the cell, her sheriff behind her, sword still drawn, and she peeked around at the man’s back. The large symbol was, indeed, gone. The chances it had healed in this particular moment were astronomically low. She had no choice but to accept that Azamel and Mark had spied Jeremiah’s defenses, and knew

where he would go when chased by Jack, his friends, and the Strix curse.

“I ... I...” Slowly, with the obvious discomfort of someone fighting against stiff joints and borderline atrophy, the man lifted his head, and looked to Azamel. “Y-You ... you’re...”

“You know me?” Azamel frowned slightly, before Mark came up behind her and again set his hands upon the handles of her wheelchair. “I suppose you would, what with Jeremiah capturing you, and ... Yes, I am Azamel.”

Groaning quietly, Sándor twisted his head around more, taking in the sights and digesting his environment. For a moment, Antoinette expected the man to begin to panic. But no panic came. Instead, the man looked up to her over his right shoulder, Daniel from over his left, and then back to Azamel.

“I remember,” he said. “I ... remember ... everything.”

“Bien. That saves us much time.” Antoinette came around and looked down at the man. Blue eyes, with a hint of gentleness, buried under exhaustion and turmoil. She felt for the man, she did, but she cared far more for her city, and she would not take unnecessary risks. “You understand that you were captured by Jeremiah, and have been used by him and his shaman woman, as a tool?”

“Yes. Yes, I ... remember what Elen did to me.” He shivered, quite visibly, enough to rattle the chains. He had a deep voice, once he added some volume to it, enough for quiet conversation. “I remember that ... that kid, Jack. Angela, she ... she was obsessed with revenge, and ... and...” His head shot up, and he yanked on the chains around him. The sudden motion was enough for Daniel to swing his sword with a snap and place it against the monster’s throat, forcing his cessation. “They’re in my lair! I can feel them ... see them ... I”—again, his head snapped around at the room that

held him—"I can see them, but I can't ... burrow ... from here. There's a ... wall. I'm blocked."

Antoinette felt a kernel of relief within. Her cell did not separate the man from his other essential half then, only limited his ability to enact his will from within her prison. Useful information. If she locked away creatures of a strange nature in the cell, she now knew there was a likely chance they would still be able to feel, sense, and perhaps communicate with supernatural means, but not leave the cell, or use abilities from the other realms within it. She could not wait to share this knowledge with Elaine.

Spare your academic obsessions for later, Antoinette. Deal with the current situation, immediately.

"You can see what your Horror is doing?" Daniel said.

"Y-Yes. That's ... we ... it's normal, for us ... monsters." After a quiet groan, the man lowered his head, and started fighting for air. He was far more exhausted than he should have been.

"We merge when we are in the Dream," Azamel said. "The relationship we have with our Horror is far more complicated than you, and your soul. Sorry, tainted soul." A grin from the old woman sealed the insult, and Antoinette struggled to keep from showing an angry fang.

"What do you see?" Antoinette said, and she reached down, took the man's chin, and pointed his face up at her. There was no time for softness. Action needed to be done, now, and if she had to be stern with this broken man in order for such action to occur, then so be it.

"I ... I'm att—It's attacking ... Jeremiah. Jack's there. So is ... a werewolf woman, and some other vampires, one with ... some crazy teeth." The man shivered again, but made no effort to look away from Antoinette's eyes. He looked defeated, weary, and guilty.

“Daniel,” she said, “release him.”

“Are you sure?”

Again she met her sheriff’s gaze, and again, a momentary, quiet battle raged between them.

“Do it.” She tried to keep the ice from her words, she truly did, but the situation demanded expedience, and her growing frustration with her sheriff had stripped away the single grain of patience she had left.

After half a second of hesitation, Daniel sheathed his blade, and began undoing the shackles that bound the helpless Begotten. Antoinette removed the IV herself.

“Thank you,” Azamel said. For a moment, Antoinette thought the woman may have looked to slip some defiance or insult in her words, but she did not. Sincerity was not a tone she expected to hear from the monster, but there it was.

Once Sándor was free of his shackles, Daniel set his right hand upon the hilt of his sword behind his neck, but did not draw it a second time. His left hand slipped under the tired man’s arm, lifted him up with grace and strength, and helped him out of the room.

It was clear to Antoinette that her sheriff would respond, if Sándor acted peculiarly, once he stepped from the cell. If he attempted to run, swing a fist, or even so much as cough too loudly, the man would lose his head before he noticed Daniel was moving. And he did do something strange, enough for Daniel to draw his sword an inch from his sheath: the man gasped, and his eyes opened wide, like a man seeing daylight for the first time in years. He was no longer under the protection and limitation of her cell.

“I have to ... to get back ... to my lair.” He leaned forward, coughing, struggling to regain his sense of balance. If not for the

man ready to cut off his head, he would have fallen to his knees. “Oh god, they’re ... they’re ... doing something. I don’t know what. I have to get back ... get back and stop him. Stop him, kill him. Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.”

Antoinette eased her weight onto the balls of her feet, as strength returned to the man before her. As if stepping from the cell had reattached the thread of life to him, his sense of balance returned. His eyes opened wide for another moment, before setting hard, glaring into nothing. His hands tightened into fists at his naked sides. Muscles flexed along his lean-but-muscular figure, and she could hear the clench of his jaw threatening to break his teeth.

“Sándor,” Azamel said, “are you—”

“The vampire in the coat, with a sword, he broke the ritual.”

Vampire, coat, sword. Damien, no doubt.

“You can see the contents of your lair? All of it?” Antoinette said.

“No. I can see what I can see. I can see what it can see. I can feel what it can feel. I have to get back, merge, and guide it. It’s ... it’s lost, without me. It’s just a ... just a gargoyle. I have to ... get back.” The man raised his head, as if to yell at the ceiling, but something stopped him. “I ... can’t control it. Jeremiah has driven it beyond ... my reigns. It’s starving. It’s furious. It’s...”

Every word, Antoinette wrote within her mind, each letter accompanied by a picture of the moment. Sándor’s face had looked up and into nothing again, as if he truly was somewhere else. A telepathic connection to his Horror, perhaps? Not telepathy she supposed, now that she considered the implications of that. A different connection, a special connection, if Azamel were to be believed, something as deep and mythic as the connection between a human and their soul.

“Then let’s go,” Azamel said, nodding, and gesturing to Mark with a small raise of her wrinkled hand. “All of us. I will meet Jeremiah face to face tonight. Who knows, I may well live through the experience.”

Antoinette shared another look with her sheriff. Neither of them were anxious to do something as reckless as enter another realm. Both of them, ancient and set in their ways, had both feet firmly set on the physical Earth, despite their devotion to studying the very matter of other realms. To literally enter another realm, to feel the territory of creatures outside of flesh and blood, was a dream she had long held, but had never experienced. Neither had her most trusted companion.

Was she ready, to test her second life so wholly? To fight monsters and other vampires in the streets and walls of her city was one thing. To fight trained professionals — kine, but still professionals — in a realm of dreams, a place she had never set foot, was another thing entirely. Daniel did not want to go, she could see that. It was not that he was unwilling to risk his life for her. Far from it, she knew very well the man would die for her, for duty and for friendship. But the man did not agree with who Antoinette had become as of late, someone willing to put her emotions before her logic. To enter a dream realm, a nightmare realm at that, was not a logical choice.

She had spent centuries being logical. She had long earned the right to set cold numbers aside for a night, and let her heart lead her for once. If she had to tear the entire nightmare realm apart with her bare hands to save her little Ventrue, she would.

“Very well,” Antoinette said. Rotating her shoulders for a moment, she kicked off her heels, tested the floor with her toes, and centered herself. Vitae, through her limbs. Sensations, air on the tiny hairs of her body, scents in her nostrils, tastes on her tongue, the breathing sound of the three nearby Begotten, and the quiet

light of her hallway. Her senses awakened, heightened, increased in sensitivity and precision, as the Beast also awoke from its slumber.

She was ready for battle. Not since Lucas had come to her door with several dozen Kindred, armed with weapons of all sorts, and Theban sorcery besides, had she prepared herself in such a way. Tonight, she would rip the bodies of hunters apart, and see her lover returned safely; if her lover left any alive. The curse was a deadly thing, and she feared the sight she would discover, once she found him.

“How do we ... enter your lair?” Daniel said to the man.

Sándor reached out, and set his left hand to the marble wall beside him. For all his returned desire, his body was weak, quivering, and as he looked around the hallway, Antoinette could see how it was fury that kept the man on his feet. She did not blame him. To be enslaved to a spell must have been a horrible fate.

“This place, these walls ... of marble ... I can bring my lair here.”

“Can you?” Azamel said. “I would struggle to do a thing like that, Ugallu. This tower is built on a place of power.”

The two vampires did not flinch at the mention of the unknown word, Ugallu; hundreds of years of experience had long taught her the value of pretending to not realize, notice, or know something. A place of power, on the other hand, Antoinette knew well. She had chosen this location for her tower for a reason. Something deep in the Earth, somewhere buried, something that scarred the land had left its mark before her arrival to Dolareido. It created, as she found out later, a locus of a sort, a gathering of essence that spirits were drawn to. She had harnessed it, and used the way it thinned the veil between realms for her experiments. A Wyrms' Nest.

Sándor stood up straight, offered Azamel a small, perhaps unnerving, angry grin as he cracked his knuckles, and tilted his head



to the side until his neck cracked as well. It echoed through her hall of stone.

“Watch me.”

Antoinette stared at the naked man’s back, waiting for a sign that this creature, this so called gargoyle, would betray them, or maybe that his words would spark a moment’s concern on Azamel’s face. But Antoinette found only surprise on the old woman’s visage. Azamel was impressed by the gargoyle, if he spoke true. That, was startling. How strong was this man?

Sándor stuck his hands out to the side, and squeezed fingers upon open palms. Without so much as a second’s buildup, the world around her began to change. She blinked several times as she slowly turned around, instinct guiding her to put her back to Daniel’s. With her to guard his back, and he hers, they were safe, or safer, from the inevitable violence to follow. Violence, and insanity.

She tried to blink away the oddness before her, the impossibility of it, but no matter how she tried, the illusion remained. Her beautiful black marble that had cost several fortunes to acquire, and use as the building blocks for her tower, were changing. In place of them, stones, old, dirty stones began to fade into existence. The subdued, consistent, unnatural yet professional quiet illumination of her LED lighting flickered in and out, while the telltale shifting movement of flame light replaced it. The walls of her hallway changed in the same manner as her floor, though they spread out further, warping, bending, struggling to fit into the new shape the monster six feet from her was bringing into her world.

“Explain,” she said, gesturing around herself.

Azamel managed a small smile, but whatever wicked, insulting intent she carried, faded away, as if she were too tired to use what vitriol she had left. “He’s opening a doorway between his lair in the Dream, and the physical world. They will overlap, or at least, a small

part of each will overlap. This hallway, and ... what appears to be a hallway, of a rather old building.”

Antoinette looked to the floor, then back to Azamel, and gasped, a sound she so rarely made, she had almost forgotten what it sounded like.

Azamel was no longer Azamel. The old woman, frail, angry, bound to a wheelchair and hopelessly addicted to nicotine, no longer existed. Something had taken her place, something strange, something from fiction, something that she could not have begun to imagine actually existing.

If someone had taken Ganesha, and twisted it, tainted it, corrupted it, and given it weapons of murder, slaughter, and torture, it would look like this. An elephant head, upon the body of an overweight man with four arms, skin leathery gray to match its animal head and ivory tusks. It stood before her upon elephant feet, and from two of its human hands, one on each side, hung chains, black and sinister. One chain held a net, bloody, dripping, and the other chain, short and also dripping red, ended with a cruel hook Antoinette could only imagine being used to rip open the innards of a victim. The other two hands held scimitars, also dark, and also dripping of blood.

The net was filled with human skulls, and upon the dangling hook, a corpse was run through. Except, such things could not fit, not in this hallway that overtook her fortress and now surrounded them. As the foreign stones and strange flames upon distant walls nudged aside her marble, edging it out of existence like how vines pull old houses into the earth, Azamel’s form began to grow. No, not grow, not truly. She, he, it, had never been small at all. The titanic creature could not fit into the hallway of stone, and the hallway of stone knew that. Or perhaps, Azamel’s body knew that, and refused to grow to a size that would damage it.

But the bones in her net of death, and the hook with its corpse, gave Antoinette an idea of how big the monster would have grown, and would likely grow once given the freedom. She would tower over many of the buildings of Dolareido.

Mark, if it truly was Mark, had become something she could not have predicted, and yet predicted perfectly. Worms. Insects. A skeleton that teemed with all that crept and crawled along and within the rotting earth. The skeleton wore clothes, a cloak of sorts, obviously made of skin. There was an odor as well, the disgusting smell of rot and decay, but more. If dishonor, wretched deception, and the horrible and terrible aspects of killing and death could be giving odor, it would smell as this nightmare before her smelled. It did more than make her nose curl. It made her insides recoil in complete disgust.

Sándor became, as she knew he would, the famed gargoyle. Jack had spoken of its size, and while his words had painted Azamel as a towering behemoth, and rightly so, she was not prepared for the size of the four-winged beast. Unlike Mark, who would have fit well in a pit of the plagued dead, the gargoyle creature before her, filling the huge hallway with its size and might, looked almost majestic. It belonged on a tower, a cathedral, a castle, guarding its entrance and the souls held within. In fact, it would have looked perfectly at home in Three Kings Cemetery, or perhaps above the door of the Grand Cathedral of Dolareido.

The lights above her disappeared, leaving old, solid boards of wood. Braziers of metal, beautiful things that would have fit in her art room, teemed with the life of the flame. Her hallway of black marble was gone completely, and she and Daniel had entered the realm of nightmares. And—

Azamel screamed. The sound of blasting trumpets filled the hallway, and the two vampires jumped away from the noise. The elephant creature, still growing but blocked by the hallway's

dimensions, threw out its hands and dropped its colossal weapons. They disappeared instantly, vanishing in clouds of black, as the elephant creature was buried in an amber glow. Glow turned into searing light, and the elephant screamed again, the noise so powerful, Antoinette could only assume a thousand elephants were announcing their pain and anger.

Mark threw up his ... its skeleton hands, and though it had no eyes or facial muscles to speak of, she could see shock and dismay there. This was not supposed to happen.

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~~Jack~~

Jack smiled at his friend, and his prostrated body. Shit load of bullets just went through Damien, turning him into swiss cheese, but he was safe behind the rock. More important than safe, was he'd succeeded. The weird flap of skin was destroyed, and the effect was immediate. The big, dumb, pile of dream-essence gargoyle thing hitting him, stopped hitting him. More than that, Jack could feel the strange release of invisible tension that went out from the clearing where Damien lay. The spell was broken, fuck yeah.

It was like someone had flipped a switch in the monster's brain, and suddenly, it was capable of thinking again. Or maybe thinking was too strong a word, now that Jack watched it unload its anger upon the invisible barrier. This monster was clearly as dumb as a brick. Would Azamel's monster, a giant thing and obviously fucked up interpretation of Ganesha, be dumb like this, too, if Azamel wasn't merged with it? No idea, no idea at all, but it definitely made for an entertaining sight, watching the gargoyle realize it was free of a chain that had bound it for who knew how long. And it obviously knew who used to hold that chain.

Jack shrugged, and focused his vitae through his limbs. He still had plenty, and was confident he'd win in a fist fight against the gargoyle if it had to drag on. But now that the big threat was over, he

could tone it down, and save his vitae for showing off when he killed Angela. Maybe make her rip her own guts out. That'd be cool, and satisfying as fuck to watch.

The gargoyle began to fade.

“Hey, what the fuck?” Jack turned to look at the giant creature. Yeap, it was fading away, literally at that. It stopped beating on the barrier, turned around, and took to the sky in the direction of the wicked awesome castle. Jack expected it to kick up dirt, stir up the wind, and make a lot of noise; fucker was huge and heavy, after all. But it didn't. It just took to the sky from the way it came, and vanished, fading out like a dream.

If he had to guess, that meant Sándor had come. Wow, he was sure the man would be trapped in Antoinette's cell. So, either her cell didn't work, or she'd let the man go, randomly. Someone on the outside was interfering. Azamel? Maybe. Or Athalia and Fiona? Where the fuck were those two anyhow?

Jack looked around and took stock. Clara was whole again, no more bones showing, and she wasn't twisted like a rotini noodle anymore; still down, though. Beatrice was dragging herself up to her feet, claws in a tree. Far as Jack could guess, she was just as fucked up as Clara, but unlike the werewolf, Beatrice had a mountain of hate to help fuel her. That was good. Hate was a great motivator.

Damien was down, and considering the amount of bullets he'd taken, he was probably down for the count. He'd live, but torpor would take him soon. Othello was still skewered on a branch, in the background of the whole fiasco. Jack should have gotten him a red shirt to go with his level of uselessness. And Harcourt was behind a tree, out of sight from Jack, but also out of sight from the hunters. Fucker had been useful apparently, according to Scully. Well, who woulda thought.

Now, his crows, they were the real stars of the show. Scully and Mulder were, at this very moment, clearing out the rest of the black soot. They'd taken down a quarter of the circle already, and in five more minutes, the whole damn thing would be gone.

He looked past Damien, past the altar, and into the clearing where seven hunters remained. Elen was still carving symbols into the air, and Jeremiah still had that fucking book. But, now that Sándor was gone, Angela and her four bodyguards all looked straight at Jack, and boy oh boy, the fucking joy of seeing genuine fear in their eyes. Even Angela, who was usually one hundred percent hate and anger, showed a sliver of terror, when she saw him.

Jack licked a fang, and waved.

# Chapter 110

~~Beatrice~~

Heal, damn it, heal! She didn't have time for this. The climax was happening, the end point, the big, inevitable moment where shit was going to be decided. No way, no god damn motherfucking way was she going to miss it. More than not miss it, she was going to be a part of it. She was perfectly fine not being the one to defeat Angela, as long as she got to be a part of killing her.

Vitae poured through her legs, until the bones were in place, and the muscles connected enough that she could stand on them. She sank her claws into the nearest tree, and dragged herself to standing, eyes on the clearing and the apocalyptic chaos within. Holy fucking shit. Fire was everywhere, and while she could see the nightmare was fighting the flame, like wet wood might, the unending flame the hunter had spread eventually got the upper hand. The clearing was catching fire, and she couldn't tell if it'd spread beyond. If it did, well, fuck her.

The crows were on fire, too. How Jack had managed to summon so many, she was sure she'd never know, other than that the curse was something fucking nasty strong. He'd summoned more during this whole fiasco, and now those crows were circling around the hunters, like a fucking tornado. Now that Damien was down, and the gargoyle was gone, the hunters were free to focus on the birds. The rifles didn't do much, but every shot of Angela's shotgun took down half a dozen or more. It was raining feathers and bird corpses.

And Jack just watched. The kid wasn't too far from Triss, standing by a chunk of the invisible wall with arms folded across his chest, and a big grin on his face. His shirt was gone at this point, and his pants were full of tears, but still on. It was kind of badass, seeing

how ripped the little twerp was in a setting and situation like this. And scary. He was enjoying this. He was enjoying watching the hunters fight off panic and a thousand crows at the same time. The fact his army was dying by the droves didn't bother him at all.

“Now what?” Jack said, loud enough they could all hear it over the dying birds and gunfire. “Your enforcer is gone, free of your spell. Most of your barrier is gone and—” the boy glanced down, laughed, and stepped forward. The barrier, or at least where it was in front of him, no longer was. Movement skittered along his feet, black shadows in the darkness. Mulder and Scully, if Triss had to guess. Smart birds, to not perch on his shoulders like usual, with all the bullets flying around. “And your barrier is gone. You think your protection circle is going to stop me?”

“Fire will,” the hunter with the flamethrower said, and predictably, unleashed a wave of flame toward Jack. Flamethrowers could shoot far, very far; Kindred were right to fear them.

The mighty Jack jumped back, and disappeared into the dark forest. Despite the sheer destruction the kid and the gargoyle had created, there was still plenty of forest. Hell, unless her eyes were deceiving her, Triss was sure some of the forest was reforming around them. The dark, twisted, fucking horrible trees were everywhere, and Jack didn't have to go far to vanish into the black.

The birds were fading away, the tornado of wings and squawks of pain dying down as Jack's army died off. But as the birds bled away, the hunter with the flamethrower let out a shrieking curse, as the fuel nozzle went dry. She turned off the ignition flame, threw the gun and pack to the ground, took one of the rifles, and readied her shot. But Jack didn't reemerge from the wood.

“Knew that was going to happen eventually.” Laughing, Jack moved through the forest. Triss couldn't see him, but his voice moved, a vague direction she could only guess was now the other



side of the clearing, across from her. “So now what? This fire won’t last forever, and then I’m going to get you. Gonna getcha. Gonna fuckin getcha.”

Christ, he was a creepy bastard. It wouldn’t have been so bad if the curse had simply been vindictive, angry, vengeful, and full of wrath. This curse thing was a twisted fuck, worse than Jacob.

Triss stared through the flames at Damien. From where he’d fallen, he was mostly safe from the hunters, with that giant altar rock between him and them. He was on his back, flat to the ground, and he wasn’t moving. The fire wasn’t spreading as fast as it could have, so if the Mekhet got a little lucky, he was safe from the flames for a minute or two. And if the hunters didn’t step out of their circle to try and finish him off, he might recover enough to wake up from his torpor, and drag himself to safety. Most likely, he’d be stuck in torpor, and someone else was going to have to drag him to safety.

Fiona would. Fiona would get him to safety, take him back to the real world, and give him a drink. Where the fuck was she? Where the fuck was Athalia, too?

Triss snarled and dragged her claws down the bark of the tree. Athalia. That bitch had probably tied up Fiona somehow, and left her somewhere where she couldn’t help. Then she’d come back, and watch and wait, until she had an opportunity to save her daughter. And it wasn’t like Triss would be able to stop her, fucked up as she was. Her insides were on fire, rib bones stabbing into shit, and the cut she’d given to herself earlier was threatening to burst open. All that was background noise to how her legs were one bad step from cracking in half.

It didn’t matter. If she had to kill Athalia to reach her goal, then she would.

“Clara,” Triss said, getting down onto her knees. Ok, yeah, crawling was easier. Getting down wasn’t so easy, but once she had

her weight on her knees, she breathed a sigh of relief as the pressure eased off her bones and insides. “Clara.”

The werewolf was conscious. Better than conscious, Clara looked at her as she too got onto her knees. The two of them were behind a fallen tree, so most of their bodies were hidden from the eyes of the hunters, but not hidden from the fire. The invisible wall was dying off, and as it did, the fire the hunter with the flamethrower had been spreading, spread further. Shit, maybe she was wrong about Damien, and someone had to get him, now.

“Clara, get up.”

“I ... getting...” Her snout struggled to make human sounds, eventually gave up, and forced herself to lift her head. “Fire.”

“Yeah, fire. A lot of fucking fire. Damien’s in the middle of it, and I need you to get him out. Othello too, before the fire gets them.”

“Othello?”

Triss motioned to the giant circle of destruction the kid and the gargoyle had made. On one of the branches, pretty damn high up, dangled the vampire in torpor.

“I can barely move,” Triss said, “let alone get through the fire. Get Damien and Othello to safety.”

Snarling, the werewolf shook her head and looked around. “Gargoyle. Hunters.”

“Most of the hunters are dead, remember? The gargoyle’s free of the control spell and it’s gone. And Jack ... Jack will handle the rest of them.” Much as she tried to act calm, a glance in the direction Jack had vanished was enough to get her shaking. She didn’t need Auspex to feel the fucking animal rage and hunger coming from the curse. It’d only grown worse as the night had gone on, and the aura

exploded when Jack had gone full blood-armor mode. She could feel it, and she knew Clara could feel it.

“I ... should help Jack.” As if she hadn’t been injured at all, Clara hunched low behind the fallen tree, like she was prowling, and looked into the clearing. The fire raged, a strange back-and-forth between the nightmare’s desire to return to its original shape, and the sheer amount of flame. If it weren’t for the nightmare’s ... nightmarish self, the whole forest would have become a raging inferno already.

“Jack will be fine. Damien and Othello might fucking die! Help them.” She tried, oh she fucking tried, to not snarl at the damn wolf. Pissing off a giant werewolf creature was not a good idea, especially when Triss wouldn’t be able to defend herself.

She was tempted to make a comment about the werewolf’s attraction to Jack, and how it was probably clouding her vision, especially now that she was transformed and likely a hormone and rage-fueled unstoppable juggernaut. Well, not unstoppable. The fucking gargoyle saw to that, but the gargoyle was gone, and without that fucker, the hunters were outmatched, outgunned, and already defeated.

Except, they weren’t. They were obviously up to something. Jack saw it, and would pounce the moment the opportunity presented itself. But the curse didn’t give a shit about Othello, and probably didn’t give a shit about Damien either. Christ, how fucking horrible would Jack feel, if Damien died when he could have done something to help, but the curse just didn’t give a shit. Yeah, Clara had to help them.

“Fine.” With animal grace, the werewolf crouched low, got on all fours, and started to prowl along. For a moment, Triss thought she might transform into something else, like one of her more wolfy forms, but then she wouldn’t have hands. Needed hands for a rescue

mission. Maybe Harcourt could help? The man was still hiding behind a tree in the clearing, and had obviously helped Damien. If—

The sky exploded in fire. Triss threw up her hands to block the light from her eyes, snarling and hissing as if she'd been hit by sunlight. Kindred eyes adapted quickly, but for a split second, she couldn't see a fucking thing around her except searing amber light. After the screaming pain in her retinas passed, she managed to lower her hand.

“What ... the fuck...”

There was Azamel! In the fucking sky, with all six of her limbs spread out. Azamel, the giant fucking elephant creature. Her, all of her, was in the mother fucking sky, and directly overhead the hunters. She was horizontal, as if lying on a surface, except hanging, and pointed down at the ground; her elephant trunk was dangling with gravity, down toward the hunters. Good fucking god, she must have been fifty feet in the air. The strange things she'd held in her four hands, last time Triss had gotten a glimpse of her, were gone.

Symbols were drawn around her, into the air by her limbs as if drawn on whatever surface she was attached to. Elen's symbols. Amber, glowing cuffs were shackled to the giant elephant creature's wrists, securing her to the night sky. If they gave, the enormous monster would have fallen and flattened the humans underneath her. The mighty Horror ... no, not Horror. That was Azamel. Triss could feel it. This wasn't the shadow or whatever of the Begotten, this was her, genuinely her. And she trumpeted in pain, a blasting sound that filled the whole nightmare with its alien noise. Not if a hundred trombones had been blown at full volume, would it sound like the horrible noise that came out of the elephant monster, or as loud.

Jeremiah raised the book in his hand, and closed it with a grand thump. Fucking dramatic asshole.

“And so it comes to this!” he yelled, holding up both hands, book in his left, as he looked up at the giant creature overhead. “I did not want to do this, Azamel. This soul ritual will be the death of us, you and I!”

Soul ritual? Death? Fuck. Fuck fuck. They’d guessed right, then. Jeremiah was going to do something that’d get him killed, in order to kill Azamel. What a predictable fucking cunt. In his mind, he was a hero, sacrificing his life and the lives of his soldiers, in order to wipe a great evil from the world. Sack of shit.

Azamel trumpeted again, and Triss covered her ears, trying to block out the sound as best she could. It didn’t help much. The Begotten thrashed, pulled against the bindings, trumpeted again, and Triss fell to her stomach as the sound ripped through her. Ow, ow ow ow.

Jeremiah pointed a finger up at the monster above. “Struggle all you want. You will pay for the things you’ve done!” The fire raged around the man and his hunters, but did nothing to drown out the sound of his voice. It was as if he was standing at the nose of a ship, and his voice bellowed out to everyone around him, a ship floating in a sea of fire, beneath a burning, cursed sun.

“Soul ritual?” the elephant monster asked, booming voice matching Jeremiah’s.

“Do you think I chained and bound a Begotten to my cause, and have spent years working with Elen, to play this idiotic game of cat and mouse in this city? My daughter convinced me that maybe we could kill you the old fashioned way, monster. But...” Sighing, a noise they could all hear despite the fire and the squawking of dying crows, Jeremiah reached for the knife Elen held out for him, before he gave Angela a parting nod. “We are bound, old monster. And I will see you dead before the end.”

The psycho gave the big book to Elen, held the knife in one hand, and fished something out of a pocket with his other. A lock of hair. A lock of hair?

“I gave that to you, long ago.” Again the elephant’s voice boomed over the fire, the clearing, and the dark forest beneath her. “You’ve kept it all this time?” The anger in her voice vanished. It was still an elephant talking, though its mouth did not move, and the voice was anything but an old woman’s. But, the anger was gone, replaced with something sad, and even a little tender.

Harcourt poked his head out from behind his tree, only to have a dozen bullets slam into the bark beside it. Poor guy ducked behind cover again, ass to the grass and half surrounded by fire. It didn’t scare him all that much, hot as it must have been. For Kindred, being around all this fire was terrifying, and Triss had to fight against her Beast’s urge to flee every second she was here. Just touching the red flame would burn through skin and turn it into ash in half a second. The true fear, was if she actually caught fire. One mistake and she’d be up in flames like kindling, and that’d kill any Kindred, including an unprepared Elder, in literal seconds.

“I’ve kept it. And now, with the sacrifices made, I can use this nightmare to ensnare you, old friend. So many lives sacrificed, to be the bedrock, the foundation of this ritual. But you forced me, forced my hand.” Sighing yet again, a long and exhausted sound that carried far more years than any human should have been carrying, Jeremiah lifted the knife, and tuft of hair.

Triss started to move toward the clearing, crawling along her belly. The asshole was acting as if everyone else had ceased to exist, as if two vampires, a werewolf, and a rather angry hunter, weren’t still out to kill him and his crew. Jack especially, if he still had his weapons, would have had an easy shot available to him, now that their precious barrier was gone, and he was hiding in the darkness of the woods. The rocks they were using for cover weren’t perfect.

Maybe she could sneak around, find a pistol, and—and Jeremiah stabbed his hand, through the hair.

The world went dark.

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~~Antoinette~~

Azamel vanished, fading from existence like a ghost might, becoming see-through for several moments, before ceasing to be.

“What the fuck,” Mark said. Antoinette blinked at the man, almost surprised that he was not mute. The skeleton creature flowing with insects and oozing annelids had a quiet, raspy voice, as one would expect from something that belonged in a pit of corpses. It was not a sound she appreciated, and she stepped away from the gross creature as it began to walk, or flow, toward the large, damaged wooden door ahead of them.

The similarities between Mark, a vile Begotten of rot, decay, and death, and Black Blood, a spirit that identified with her city, according to it, were not lost on her. Mere coincidence, she hoped.

Despite the urgency the situation demanded, Antoinette spared a moment to analyze her surroundings. Oh how Miss Vola would have squealed with delight, over the sights around Antoinette, of a castle hallway from an age long dead. The braziers along the walls were small gargoyles, almost identical to the creature before her, and were made of black metal that held a flame. The stones on the floor were smooth, and arranged in specific, symmetrical patterns, but worn and dusty with age and grime. The ceiling above, lumber and slightly warped, was in similar condition.

It reminded her of her castle, so long ago in Europe, if no one had cared for it. For a moment, she considered analyzing it, to determine the most likely age of its birth, and when perhaps it had last been

renovated. But cruel reality required she respond to her immediate situation.

“Where did Azamel go?” her sheriff said.

Mark shook his ... its head. “I don’t know. I don’t know!”

The enormous gargoyle shook his head as well, and began to walk, then run for the door. “I feel them. Come.” That voice, a deep and powerful voice, sent a chill through her spine. She almost thanked the monster for the sensation. It had been ages since she had felt such a feeling, a mixture of fear and excitement, and of awe. She could literally feel the bass of the gargoyle’s voice through the stones of the floor and into her bare feet. There was a touch of rasp underneath the voice, layers that fit well into a nightmare, layers that added a hint of a snake-like hiss.

Her Beast struggled to understand the threat of the monsters before her. With other vampires, the Beast engaged in a play for dominance through an aura of monstrous destruction, competitive play for the alpha position, or lustful need. An unspoken back and forth always occurred when Kindred met each other, and the Beasts within knew how to examine the other, as wild animals did others of their own kind. When she had first met Uratha, it did not take long for her Beast to understand the aura the spirit wolves exuded. Begotten, on the other hand, were difficult to read, and now that she was literally within the nightmare realm, where Begotten merged with their Horrors, and became true creatures of terror and dream, that difficulty did not wane.

Mark clearly exuded something that felt weak, and yet deadly, dangerous, an assassin in the most ancient sense: rot, and the diseases that came with it. The enormous, and perhaps in a strange way, sovereign and handsome gargoyle, on the other hand, her Beast read as a blatant threat, a direct one. She did not know what abilities the strange creatures had, other than they could bestow



nightmares in a similar way the Nosferatu could, and when in the physical realm, summon their Horror's physical abilities to their person.

The one time Azamel had truly, without limit or restraint, summoned her Horror to her and attacked the environment around her, decades ago, it had destroyed a building. A large building, through sheer blunt force. Antoinette did not sense such raw strength from the gargoyle, but she did sense strength, and other forms of prowess. What abilities the four-winged, regal creature had, she could not tell, and she doubted her sheriff and his Auspex would be able to infer them, either.

She looked to Daniel, and he to her. Five seconds into this affair, and already things had not gone as planned. Azamel had predicted Jeremiah would attempt something tonight, some final effort to achieve his goal, and so far, her predictions had proven far too accurate. Was such foresight a question of Mark and Azamel having glimpsed into Jeremiah's defenses, or did Azamel know the old hunter better than any of them could have imagined?

Antoinette followed after the running gargoyle, and after sharing a stern glance with her sheriff, Daniel followed as well. Sándor did not run like a lumbering beast. He, it, ran with the grace of a sprinting tiger, except he carried his weight on two feet of talons rather than four. Leaning forward, the beast's tail slithered left and right behind him, matching its great strides as it poured power into its sprint. The inevitable comparison to a dinosaur ran through her mind, and she dismissed the juvenile simile quickly. The beast had wings, four of them, and his face looked mostly human, though with kingly, giant horns curling backward. Sándor looked more a demon than an artist's unscientific portrayal of the ancient dinosaur.

When they reached the wooden door with a large hole carved into it, a work obviously done by claws, Sándor thrust out his hands, and the doors swung open for him. Antoinette had anticipated resistance

from the door, but it parted to more than simply the gargoyle's strength. It opened the way a door does when touched by its owner, with total familiarity and servitude. Beyond, Antoinette expected the enormous castle interior Jack had described to her, but she found something else entirely.

She stood upon a cliff edge, a narrow road that raised to a point. The point grew in width enough to hold, with impossible strength, a castle. She once had her own property on the face of a cliff, and she knew all too well the realities of an enormous structure of stone on the edge of a mountain. What she was looking at here, here in the nightmare, was not physically possible.

A lightning strike, distant and well behind the old castle, shook the nightmare whole with the following thunder. The flash of white against the cloudy night sky illuminated the castle, its glorious stone Gothic architecture, and a nigh endless drop that awaited beneath its precarious perch upon the cliff edge. The nightmare cared nothing for the reality and impossibility of such elevation. It cared only to terrify those within, and for all her strength and ability, Antoinette could not ignore the overpowering presentation of its aesthetic. Were she human, such a castle, at least a mile high, would have had her quivering.

So too, would the village that awaited her. She gazed out over the old, wooden buildings, the long winding road they surrounded, and the tall, twisted trees of black bark between them. Not unlike the castle behind her, the buildings weren't set flat upon stone earth, but instead hung off the sides of the skinny cliff, and she could see the enormous roots of trees about them curling, twisting, and holding the buildings into the rock. A single earthquake would have left the village decimated, perhaps nonexistent, but it was a nightmare, and she had to start thinking in such terms.

Before the four of them could proceed down the road, and into the clearly haunted village, the sky was set aflame. Antoinette

covered her eyes for a moment, lowered her hands, and gasped as she made sense of the insanity in the dark air above the woods ahead of them.

Over the distant forest, over the horrible trees and wicked branches, was Azamel, the enormous elephant creature, now in her full size and monstrous glory. Shackled to the sky, the monster trumpeted her agony and rage, and struggled against the amber, glowing symbols that bound her. But she could not move.

“In the forest,” the gargoyle said, and took off. The creature’s great weight tore into the ground, shredding rock and earth alike as he sprinted forward, spread his wings, and caught the air. With wings spread, Sándor looked far more enormous, his wings titanic and long enough to lift his colossal weight against the air currents beneath him.

Before she could pursue, the world went dark. Beyond dark. The world ceased to exist. She froze, and vitae pumped through her limbs like a flood as she prepared for an attack. None came. She listened for the sound of the wind, of the distant gunfire in the forest, of Sándor’s absurd wingspan, or of Azamel’s trumpets of pain. Nothing. As if the world had decided it simply no longer existed, and had blinked out of reality, all around her she found nothing. No wind touched her skin through her business suit, and no ground greeted her bare feet. The smell of rock, wood, and mountain air vanished. It had all faded away.

All except Azamel. The elephant above came closer, and closer, until Antoinette was not far from the hanging giant. Or, had Antoinette come closer to her? With nothing else in existence, literally, to form context, movement had no meaning. She may as well have been floating through space, though she could tell she was not, somehow.

“Daniel?” she said. No, she did not say it. She tried, and she was certain her mouth moved and lungs compressed to create the noise. And yet, no noise came. She was speaking into oblivion, and oblivion was all she could hear.

“Azamel,” the darkness said. “Azamel. I loved you.”

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~~Jack~~

Jack reached down, picked up a rock, and grinned as he stepped out from the forest. He didn't need his pistol, or any of his weapons, to kill these fuckers from a distance. A well thrown rock with Kindred strength behind it would kill just as well as a bullet.

This wasn't how he wanted things to go. The hunters were supposed to be buried under his legion, and he'd torture them to death in a beautiful, gory display of dominance. He'd march toward them, unstoppable, a fucking Terminator, and he'd spend the whole night picking them off one by one. He'd break their legs, and drag them screaming to a room, where he'd gather them and bathe in their wails. He'd Kiss one or two of them to death, but the others wouldn't get to die so quickly, or pleasurably. It'd be a great night of slaughter!

But noooo, Jeremiah had to be a fucking asshole, and sacrifice his pawns for some sort of gambit. Now there was fire everywhere, blocking him. Worse, the hunters were all dead! He'd get, at best, seven hunters to kill, and that was a pale comparison to the nigh two dozen he'd had not long ago. Even doubly worse, was how they'd ruined his groove. It was cool, beating up the gargoyle enforcer, but his night of unleashing unimaginable horrors on the hunters was wrecked. Now, he was in the fucking forest, ready to throw a rock, because they had fire and protection circles, and—

No. Fuck a rock. This was his follow up performance! His debut at the hospital was awesome, and he had to top that. Nothing less than

a grand display of strength, complete with explosions and loud noises, would do.

He put the rock down, reached out for the base of a tree trunk, and reached into himself. Jack, old Jack, was such a weak Ventrue. He, on the other hand, was the mother fucking best. A drop of vitae was all he needed. For him, a single drop was enough to break minds. A single drop was enough to heal wounds. A single drop was enough to summon a wall of blood around his body. A single drop was enough to command legions of animals. And, and this was where old Jack sucked, a single drop was enough for him to unleash strength. Real strength. Kindred strength. Ventrue didn't come to Kindred strength as easily as the Nos or the Daeva, but Susanna had spent the time to build it, develop it, master it, and the new Jack could feel Vigor as easily as Dominate, Animalism, and Resilience.

There was something about the power of raw strength, that fucking rocked.

Jack sank his fingers into the trunk of the tree, the one tree that stood between him and the hunters, and started to lift. He was going to crush them, all of them, right now. The barrier was mostly gone now, said the chirps of his two best agents, so there wasn't anything stopping him from attacking the humans from a distance. A tree thousands of pounds heavy, thrown sideways, directly at the hunters? It'd be great. They'd shoot him, and he'd shrug off the bullets as he threw the tree. They'd get crushed, damaged, but probably live, and he'd walk up to them once the fire died, and have some fun.

Which would give first, the roots of tree and their grip on the ground, or the wood itself, snapping the trunk? He—

He let go of tree, and stared up at the sky. Amber fire scorched the black clouds, and he glared into the burning light, letting it sear his retinas for a single moment before his irises adjusted. Azamel, in

the sky, bound to it, with Elen's ritual symbols burning in the air around her.

Jack stepped out from behind the tree, and glared at Jeremiah. The fucker was doing something, yelling and babbling, and he had a knife in his hand. The fuck was he doing? The fuck was Azamel doing here? Christ, she was making a racket, trumpeting her strange Horror's pain, and practically making the forest shake with its piercing, layered noise. What the fuck was—

Darkness. Everywhere, was darkness. The tree he was leaning against, gone. The feeling of its bark under his hands, gone. The feeling of ground under his shoes, gone. The sound of fire, the breeze on his naked chest, all gone. All that was left was him, standing in endless darkness, underneath Azamel's hanging, enormous elephant body.

“Azamel,” someone said. “Azamel. I loved you.” Jeremiah's voice.

Jack frowned, and swung his hand out for the tree he knew was beside him. Nothing. His hand moved through the air, unimpeded, not by tree or even air.

The elephant above remained where she was, and while he could see her, it, whatever, she wasn't making any noise, despite her attempts to. The flapping, dangling, gigantic elephant trunk was obviously trumpeting, but not making a single sound anymore, when before the darkness came, she'd been driving a railroad spike into his brain.

Ok, so, what was happening?

“It took decades to learn this ritual, Azamel, to get the ingredients I needed. Elen, a shaman from the old world, before we Americans ran this land over, and killed everyone. A nightmare realm, to trap you, the whole you, the real you. People who trusted me with their lives, to be sacrificed.” The man's voice broke, wavering, a hitch in

his throat. “It’s a cursed ritual, Azamel, and it was my last option. I never wanted to do it, but my hand has been forced. If you’d just ... let me kill you, none of this would have had to happen.”

“If you loved me, then why are you doing this?” A woman’s voice, and one Jack struggled to identify. Azamel? It sounded kind of like her, the human her, but softer, without the cracks and grit of decades of smoking and age.

“You killed my friends and family.”

“They came for my head, Jeremiah.”

The man grunted. “Can you blame them? You’re a monster, Azamel. They knew what needed to be done.”

Azamel stopped struggling against her bindings, and went limp. Her eyes were still open, but she looked drained, empty, as if someone had ripped something out of her.

Jack stared ahead into the darkness, and frowned as Jeremiah faded into being, younger, and without any of the tattoos or scars. He stood there in clothes Jack guessed came from post the American civil war. A woman stood next to him, a bit older, attractive, handsome, someone in her forties. Azamel, back when she was strong, tough, and judging by how she carried herself, ready to boss people around. She wasn’t wearing the sort of shitty dress women wore back then either, giant dresses with huge asses. She was wearing the same sort of clothes Jeremiah wore, and both of them looked a bit dirty, like they’d been working fields. They probably had.

“I defended myself.”

“You ruined their lives,” Jeremiah said. His voice had its youthfulness revived as well.

“How? I built this town, and gave them a life.”

Was this the past? Azamel had said she'd known Jeremiah, a hundred and fifty years ago, fucked up, lived with him in a town she'd been mayor of; dictator of a town, really. Jeremiah had been a deputy, and when his sheriff had learned who Azamel was, Azamel had basically exiled him from her town. Jeremiah asked why, Azamel explained about her monster side, Jeremiah left town, got the sheriff, and they tried to take the town back. Azamel killed them all, save for Jeremiah. All in all, it sounded like Jeremiah had been a fucking moron, to throw away a babe with money and power, for some misplaced sense of justice.

But this conversation he was witnessing didn't sound like it fitted into that time line. Then, it was happening now? Right, Jeremiah had said something about soul ritual.

Oh fucking god, were they having a soul battle? Is that what was happening? He was watching these two fossils butting heads, except instead of heads, it was their souls? Someone come kill him quick, and spare him the drama.

“You were a tyrant, Azamel,” Jeremiah said. “You killed people.”

“Just the criminals.”

If Azamel was in the sky during this, and her soul, or projection of her soul, or whatthefuckever, was standing in front of Jack, next to Jeremiah's soul, then where was the real Jeremiah? Probably invisible like everyone else was. They could probably all see Azamel, her, prostrated in the black emptiness above, while her and her pursuer had a friendly conversation. Dramatic. Stupid. The moment Jack figured out how to find the real Jeremiah, or any of his hunters, this sham would be over.

“You ruled with an iron fist,” young Jeremiah said.



“And gave people a good life, a life worth living. They had money. They had homes. They were not abused.”

“They had no freedom!”

“They had the freedom I gave them, and it was enough! You ruined it for them, Jeremiah, not me!”

Jack walked around, but it made no difference. Like walking on a frictionless surface, he couldn't get anywhere, and the reference points he had, Jeremiah and Azamel, remained fixed where they were relative to him. Growling between clenched teeth, he reached into himself, and grabbed vitae, far more of it than he needed. It poured through him, into his fingers and toes, into his nostrils and eyes, and he stared around with every sense he had on overdrive. He couldn't smell them, hear them, or see them; the hunters simply weren't nearby. He couldn't smell the forest, his burning, dying legion, or blood anymore, and there'd been plenty of blood.

He froze, and looked around with bewilderment as new things flickered into existence, new places, new areas, and more than one. A building, wood, dirty windows. Sunlight. He winced as he prepared for the burning, but none came. Instead, the illusion spread out before him of a town, obviously a village from a hundred and fifty years ago. People were walking around, townsfolk, guys in boots, and women in stupid dresses.

The illusion didn't hold still. It faded in and out, and each time it showed something different, but also of the town. Kids running through the streets. Horses trotting along with carriages. A sheriff, walking around with a gun in its holster on his hip, a revolver. They were coming up on the end of the 'Wild West' era, the American Frontier, and people weren't as utterly filthy as Jack expected they would be. The illusion provided no noise and no smells, as if to spare Jack the authentic experience of horse shit.

The sun burned bright in the sky, and Jack spared a peek at it, several times. It was fake, but damn, it'd been a while since he'd seen the sun literally above him, shining, and being annoying. He didn't miss it.

“You fed on the fear they had of you!”

The illusion jumped to the inside of another building, a fancy one for the era, big, and imposing. Azamel's home, no doubt. She had hunting trophies on the walls, deer and bear heads, and a large fireplace built into the wall. Bear fur rugs, with the bear's head and hands still attached. A stone house, well built, sturdy, meant to last the ages. A few more decades and she'd probably have some electricity set up for lighting.

Young Jeremiah and young Azamel stood by the fireplace, yelling, in the familiar way lovers did. Either the illusion had fully pulled them into its lie, or just the sight of her old home was enough to regress them.

“All people should fear the might of a predator, and the wrath of a ruler. I did not abuse that power!” young Azamel said, throwing up her hands, before they tightened into fists at her sides.

Ok, they may not have been literally butting heads, but the anger in their voices may as well have been shotguns jammed up to each other's throats, and triggers pulled. The two of them screamed with enough vitriol, it made Jack smile. God damn, old people knew how to hate, really really how to hate, in a way young people just couldn't appreciate it. Old people hated down to the fucking essence of their being; case in point, a soul ritual, demonstrating just that.

Jeremiah took a deep breath, calming himself. “Angela convinced me to avoid using this ritual, when we captured Sándor. She thought, maybe with Elen's magic, the way she can manipulate flesh, we could catch you without having to use it. But ... my hand's been forced.” Lowering his head, Jeremiah began to pace around the

room with the familiarity of someone who'd done it a hundred times. He didn't glance at the taxidermy around him, or even the fireplace.

Jack's smile grew. Yeah, you fucker, I forced your hand. Using Elen and the fucked up shit she could do, to try and catch Azamel when she was vulnerable, just an old woman in a wheelchair, was a good idea. Pissing off Jack until new Jack could come out to play, was not a good idea.

"You speak as if this ritual will kill you," the oddly beautiful, or rather handsome woman said.

"Because ... it probably will." Sighing again, the man stepped closer to the woman, and set a hand on her shoulder. "I've done more than hunt you all these years, Azamel. I've researched, as well. I've dug, and dug, and dug. Not long after you destroyed my home, I tracked down where you'd been before. From there, I went down a hole, searching for anyone who knew anything about the elephant monster. Nightmares, Azamel, the nightmares you spun and the memories they'd left in others were my trail.

"It took years to find people who knew of you. They were old by then, a hundred years ago, and were only children when they'd seen you. All the way to the Middle East, Azamel, where I learned about a woman, a foreigner, journeying across the land. Apparently, she'd been haunted by a nightmare, and ranted and raved about it." Slowly, Jeremiah used his other hand to reach into his suit shirt, and pulled out a knife from within. The blade was white.

Azamel's eyes went wide, and she stepped away. Jeremiah's other hand held her shoulder firm, stopping her from taking a second step.

"It took years," Jeremiah continued, "to figure out that you, your Horror, have nothing to do with Ganesha. It took decades to learn about the story of the cursed elephant, an old horror story told

around campfires. It was just a tale, a stupid tale, Azamel, that people in the East told each other, to spook each other about the folly of mistreating or underestimating the anger of elephants.

“It was when I heard about a man who’d died, long ago, that I pieced it together. This man was supposedly a big believer of the tale, and due to unfortunate circumstances, found himself trampled to death under the feet of an enraged elephant. Worse than trampled, he’d been skewered first, by a tusk.”

Oh. That made a lot more sense. Jack had been racking his brain, trying to figure out why Azamel’s horror was some sort of twisted, corrupt version of Ganesha. He’d even looked it up. Ganesha was a god of intellect, wisdom, and a ‘remover of obstacles’. Nothing about that, at all, was scary.

Now, a spooky campfire story about some sort of evil elephant that looked like Ganesha, maybe a story meant to dissuade people from aggravating elephants, or a warning to avoid the dangers of an elephant, that idea made much more sense. He could imagine it easily, a person trekking through the jungle or savanna, forced to move at night, being terrified of running into a lion or tiger or something. Then, they stumble onto a fucking elephant, sleeping. Elephant wakes up and panics, or maybe hates humans for hunting their kind, or goes on a rampage for any number of reasons. All Jack knew, was a raging elephant was a fucking terrifying idea; it’d give most Kindred pause, let alone kine.

Running into that, in the night, and having it attack you, skewer you with its tusks, and trample you to death? Yeah, that must have qualified for creating a nightmare chamber, according to what Fiona told him. Maybe the tale created the Horror, and that experience created the chamber it needed to exist? Fuck him, he had no idea. But it definitely painted Azamel in a new light. She wasn’t a Ganesha knock off. She was an embodiment of the terror people felt, before the might of an enraged creature, a symbol known

throughout dozens of cultures, suddenly going on a rampage. A majestic creature, corrupted by fury, murder, and bloodlust. Badass.

Except, badass was not what he was seeing. As Jeremiah approached Azamel, the woman stepped away from him, and her eyes were wide. From what Jeremiah had said, the knife must have been ivory, specifically the ivory of an elephant tusk.

Jeremiah lunged. Azamel yelled, and threw her hands up as she stepped back. All of this happened maybe ten feet from Jack, but no matter how hard he tried to close the distance and help Azamel, he couldn't get closer. The ritual, the soul ritual, didn't allow for interference apparently. All he could do was watch, as a man lunged at a woman, with a knife.

It didn't play out like Jack expected. Azamel should have landed a punch on Jeremiah, and the man would have fucking exploded in a gory mess; she was that strong. But instead, Azamel tried to push him away, and all she got for her efforts was Jeremiah slicing down at her, and cutting into her skin with the knife. She had no strength here, not in this place, where her Horror's strength was bound.

The scene quickly went from the one-sided tussle Jack expected, obviously favoring the monster, to something out of a horror flick. The blade left a gash along Azamel's arm, and she screamed as she fell back. Blood flowed from her skin, and splashed over the floor, sliding into the cracks between slabs of stone.

"I'm sorry," Jeremiah said. "I never wanted to do this!" He came at her again, and now that the reality had sunk in, Azamel reacted more realistically. She was just a person, in this strange ritual Jeremiah had pulled her into, without the strength of her Horror to call upon. And while young Azamel looked like a sturdy and tough woman, she didn't have a knife. There were things around that she could have used to defend herself maybe, like the metal poker beside the fireplace, but Jack knew why she couldn't use it. Illusion.

Young Jeremiah was real. Young Azamel was real. The knife Jeremiah had was real, somehow. Everything else wasn't.

Azamel fell onto her back, and Jeremiah got on top of her. He brought the knife down again, holding it dagger style this time, underhanded, and Azamel shrieked as it pierced through her blocking hand.

"I'm sorry!" Jeremiah yelled. Tears were in his eyes, but they didn't stop him. He brought the knife down again, and again it cut into Azamel, this time her other blocking hand, but this block was nothing more than a panicked throw of her arm.

Jack ground his teeth until he felt his fangs emerge from their sheaths. Get up, Azamel. Get up! Punch him, kick him, do something, you god damn woman. So your Horror was bound, and all you had left was the human part of you to fight off Jeremiah. Jeremiah was human, too. Kick him in the balls. Headbutt him, and break his nose. Use your fucking feet, and get him off of you. Just fucking hit him!

It was no good. Jeremiah was in a full mount, and Azamel had nothing to defend herself. Jack doubted muscle mass played any part in this confrontation; they were illusions, projections of something inside them. Jeremiah was winning the fight, because he came armed, somehow able to take his special tool into the ritual with him, while Azamel had nothing. All the damn woman could do, was scream, as Jeremiah's knife cut deep into her right hand.

The next stab got passed her bleeding, ruined hands, and sank into the shoulder of her right arm. Jack heard the thunk of the ivory blade hitting bone, and winced as Azamel's screams rose an octave. She tried to beat the man off of her with her bleeding hands, one of them with a hole carved clean through it by Jeremiah's earlier stab, but the arm with the stabbed shoulder was out of commission. The best she could manage, was some weak slaps with her other hand.

Jeremiah did not budge, as her red fingers painted his face and chest with blood.

*Save her!*

I can't save her, dumbass. This ritual is showing me what's happening, but it's all in their minds.

*How?*

Fuck me, I don't know. He said he commandeered the nightmare to do it, so, I guess we're still in Sándor's nightmare.

*We have to save her.*

What? Why? The fuck has she ever done for you, Jack?

It wasn't like he wouldn't try and save her if he could, but only because it'd help him achieve his goal. He didn't care if Azamel died.

*She doesn't need to have done something for me, for me to want to save her from a death she doesn't deserve.*

She doesn't deserve this? You heard what Jeremiah said, and the man's definitely got that 'so psycho he can't help but speak true' thing going for him. She's done some nasty shit.

*You're worse, curse.*

I didn't say I wasn't. And when someone comes to take my head, I'll fight them. But I won't stand there and say I haven't rightly earned their ire.

Jack shook his head. Old Jack could complain about present circumstance all he wanted, it didn't change that, for all new Jack's power, for all the destruction he could unleash, he was currently unable to do shit. He was a vampire. His world was flesh and bone, blood and smoke. The fuck could he do about dreams, nightmares,

and the creatures that lurked inside them? The fuck could he do about a ritual that, evidently, commandeered them?

Staring at Jeremiah, Jack clicked his teeth. The man had spent fucking decades setting this up. He'd journeyed the fucking world, extended his life with witchcraft, enlisted the help of dozens of hunters, and a witch, and had captured another Begotten, all with the express purpose of killing Azamel. It made for a great villain, and Jack found himself torn between respecting the man's devotion, and being sickened by his obviously emotional state. He was crying, as he stabbed Azamel to death. In the end, he was a blubbering fool, driven by emotions as pathetic as lost love.

Jeremiah raised his knife, ready to plunge it into the woman's body yet again; she'd already been stabbed in the hands, forearms, and shoulder. No longer able to defend herself from her old lover's blade, this stab would kill her. It was plain to see that, with every stab, Jeremiah was getting weaker, too. The ritual was a last resort for him, and if Jack had to guess, that wasn't just because it required sacrificing a bunch of people to fuel it. The ritual was probably, literally killing him. Would killing Azamel fast spare him? Did it matter?

Before Jeremiah plunged the blade, the world shook, and a loud, echoing crash ran through Jack. He stumbled, didn't fall, and looked up at the elephant above, still bound to the sky in a haze of black endlessness around the illusions of the old town. The world shook again, and the elephant above vibrated with the impact. It wasn't her.

"No! You will not be saved, monster. This has to end, here and now!" Jeremiah, stunned, quickly reestablished his grip on the knife, and brought it down toward Azamel. But the third time the illusion and the darkness around them shook, it was like God had decided to smash Jeremiah's silly bullshit with a fucking sledgehammer.



Jack, Jeremiah, and Azamel, all flew back, landing on their asses and rolling over the black nothingness beneath them, as the illusion exploded. The town, the sun, the roads, the people and horses and buildings, even the taxidermy, fur rugs, and hunting trophies, all shattered like glass. The shards glinted, catching the sparks of a destroyed universe, before they faded away into the oblivion around them.

Existence reemerged from its slumber. Jack was back on the ground, grass, and dirt, exactly where he'd been before Jeremiah had enacted the ritual. Azamel, the giant elephant Azamel, lay on the ground, beside the clearing, half slumped over against trees. Her giant eyes were closed, and her four hands were limp at her sides. Her enormous weight was enough that many of the trees broke trying to keep her from falling over, but some of the fatter ones managed to stop the giant from crumbling back into the forest.

Jeremiah lay in the center of his circle, and his four bodyguards, and adopted daughter, stood over him. Their mouths were hanging open, staring at the intruder above them. Jack looked up, and for a single moment, he grinned, as the shape came into focus.

Sándor, the gargoyle, flew above them, hovering, the flap of his wings sending waves of air down against them. In his four hands, black strands of nothingness were dripping away, falling like drops of water, and disappearing into the fire-lit night air. As if the beast had grabbed onto oblivion itself and ripped it asunder, the flaps of blackness draped over its palms and fingers hung like flayed skin, bleeding onyx onto the clearing beneath the gargoyle. In the bleeding droplets, Jack could see hints of the illusions he'd seen, of the village, the sun, the people, the houses. The black drops splattered and vanished against the grass, as if the ritual had never existed.

“You killed my family!” Sándor fell from the sky, and landed with a great, resounding thud. He wasn't nearly as big as Azamel, but

unlike the giant elephant, a lumbering oaf of a creature, the gargoyle moved like a fucking tiger. It sprinted through the fires of the clearing, and fell upon the hunters, just like a fucking tiger would. Only the amber circle that circled the hunters gave it pause.

“Run!” Jeremiah said. The four hunters did just that, though Angela showed a second’s hesitation, before she turned and ran into the woods, out of the amber circle, through the fire, and past Azamel. One of the hunters had literally grabbed Elen, and thrown the old woman onto his shoulder, leaving her breather and wheelchair behind. Considering who she was, Jack imagined the woman was actually immortal, and wouldn’t die from not being able to breathe

Jack grinned after them, and got ready to chase. Oh yes, this was going to be fun. But, he could spare a moment, a single moment, to see what Sándor was going to do to Jeremiah.

“You killed my Ashley! You killed my Sam!” the beast bellowed again. That sexy voice of his, so deep and booming, with just a hint of snake rasp underneath it, echoed throughout the forest like it owned the trees, the grass, the dirt, the rocks, and the fucking air. And he did; not ‘it’ anymore, ‘he’. The difference between the Horror Jack had fought, and the proper, merged and whole creature he was looking at now, was colossal.

Jeremiah brought himself to standing, glaring defiance through teary eyes up at the gargoyle. All he got for his stubbornness, was Sándor flapping four titanic wings down toward Jeremiah, again, and again, and again. Jeremiah faced into the wind, but fell to his knees a moment later as the air hit him without mercy. The ground around him suffered the same fate, and bits of dirt and grass succumbed to the insane pressure of the wind, until a small tear ripped through the circle. A small tear was all that was needed, for the amber circle to die, and when it did, the gargoyle stopped beating his wings.

His prey was defenseless. The following silence sealed that reality in beautiful inevitability, and it would have made Jack's mouth water, if he'd been Blushing.

"I did what I ha—" Jeremiah's voice was cut short as the gargoyle reached down, and scooped the man up with all the gentle care of an angry rugby player.

"Did you really think I'd let you use my home for this ritual, once I was free?" The gargoyle squeezed, and Jack licked his lips as he saw Jeremiah's face change color several times in Sándor's huge, clawed grip. "You killed my son! You killed my wife! No more. You don't get to hurt anyone else. You don't get to use me, or my home. No more!"

Sándor was more than strong enough to crush Jeremiah into pulp, and probably instantly at that, but he didn't. There was a moment, a fleeting, perfect, beautiful moment before a kill, and Jack could see that Sándor, for all his rage and indignation, was craving that moment. He found it, when Jeremiah tried to scream, and couldn't. The gargoyle had thoroughly compressed on the man's body, like a constricting snake, and likely broke most of his ribs besides.

When Jeremiah failed to scream, the glint of beastly satisfaction was blatant on the gargoyle's face. He'd achieved nirvana, in the throes of fury. And now that he was satisfied, Jack knew Jeremiah was a dead man.

Sándor lifted the still squirming, still trembling and kicking and fighting man up to his mouth, and bit off his head.

Glorious. As much as Jack, the new Jack, was a creature of power and animal fury, the strength of the Beast unleashed in all its glory, there was something he simply wouldn't do: eat his prey. Vampires drank of their prey, sure, and while to Kiss prey to death was the ultimate expression of a vampire's predator status, there was

something so delightfully carnal about the enormous gargoyle literally crunching down on Jeremiah's neck, and tearing off his head. Crunch. Crunch.

Sándor didn't stop there. He tore the man apart, and devoured him piece by piece, quickly at that. Maybe he didn't want to savor it? Jack would have savored it. Rip, tear, arms and legs, guts, they all went into the gargoyle's mouth, disappearing between his sharp teeth and fangs. It was strange, seeing a mostly human face, Sándor's, eating human flesh. But within his dark, steel-colored skin, those teeth were big and sharp, and they destroyed Jeremiah's bones like they'd been made for it.

As much as Jack wanted to savor the death of that fucking asshole, time was a wastin'.

"Sándor!" Jack yelled.

"... Jack." The gargoyle turned to face him. He was still standing in the center of the clearing, surrounded by fire and the corpses of thousands of rats and crows. Standing, standing, aaaaand falling. With a heavy thud, the gargoyle fell to his knees, and his wings flopped weak to the ground around him. They touched fire, and Jack winced instinctively, but as far as he could see, the gargoyle didn't react to the flame.

The monster was exhausted. Well, he did spend weeks locked up in a cell, unable to move. And he did just literally rip a ritual apart with his hands. Damien freeing Sándor during the ritual was something Jeremiah had not expected, and was probably trying to beat, like a race. Fucker lost.

"Alright, you look exhausted. Do—Clara!" He motioned to the rising werewolf on the other side of the circle. "You and Clara, help Damien and Othello ... and Azamel, I guess." The giant elephant creature looked unconscious, not moving, but seemed to be breathing.

“... alright.” As if someone had ripped all energy, or reason to keep on living, straight out of the monster, the gargoyle let his head droop for a moment. After a second, he looked around, first to the werewolf that he’d fought twice now, then to Damien currently unconscious by the altar. The colossal monster reached down, scooped Damien up, and set him directly on the altar, safe from the fire that continued to eat at the grass. With four hands, Sándor began to squash fires with his palms with all the hurry and hustle of a drunk turtle. Fucker really was out of it.

“Sándor, where can Angela get to from here?” Jack said.

“Nowhere. The forest is endless. It—” Sándor raised his head with a snap, and looked in the direction Angela and her friends had run off. “Another Begotten comes.”

“Another Be—Athalia! Now!?” Jack threw up his hands, and ran off after Angela. If Athalia helped Angela escape, he’d kill her. He’d rip her head off and drink the god damn blood. If he had to kill her while she was merged with her Horror, he’d break every stupid bone in her big skeleton body, one at a fucking time.

He glanced in Beatrice’s direction, back to Sándor, back to Clara, then to Beatrice again, who stepped out from behind her tree, and was jogging around the fires toward him. She was beat to all fuck, and limping like crazy. Anyone else would have been lying down and doing their best to recuperate, but not her. She had hate behind her, pushing her, driving her toward a very clear goal. And Jack could not help but fucking love that.

He hopped over to her, and before she could say anything, he slipped under her arm, and helped her give chase to the fleeing hunters. She deserved to be a part of this.

“Jack,” the gargoyle said over his shoulder. “Your Prince is here ... at the castle. She’ll be here in seconds.”

Antoinette was in the nightmare? Now things made more sense. Azamel had gone to her, after Jack had recruited Athalia, knowing that there was a chance that, in all this chaos, Sándor might be freed. It was the only possible way Sándor could have escaped the cell. She'd known about Elen's control of Sándor, sure, but how the fuck did she guess it would come to this? Well, for all her omniscients, she didn't predict that by entering the nightmare, Sándor's nightmare, she'd be giving Jeremiah the opportunity he needed to kill her.

Jack glanced back, past the forest, the fires, and to the haunted village. Yeap, he could see her, other Jack's lover. If she'd been foolhardy, she could have rushed into the forest in seconds, once the ritual was broken. But she was too smart for that, and she was approaching at a more reasonable pace, her sheriff beside her, both scanning for threats.

Wait for her? Nah. She'd probably try and stop him or something. And besides, the longer he waited, the bigger chance Angela had of getting away. Getting Beatrice had slowed him down enough, but damn, the way she was riding her hate to the point it was the only thing keeping her on her feet, was admirable. He couldn't leave her behind. She was the only one who understood, and who'd appreciate what he was going to do.

He took off through the forest, in the direction the hunters had gone. They wouldn't be able to move fast, not in this forest, with all its evil, sharp branches, twisted trunks, and roots sticking out of the ground. He could smell them, too, sweating. And as he took off after them, it wasn't long before he could hear them, their boots snapping twigs, their limbs breaking branches, and the grunts of their exertion. A few seconds later, he could see the light of their flashlights.

“Still with me?” Jack said to the woman hooked over his shoulders.

“Why ... are you ... helping me? I thought—”

“Ha, thought what? I’d kill Angela and leave you out of it? She killed Julias.”

“You’re not Jack. The fuck do you care about—”

He looked to her, and leaned in close; easy enough, considering she was draped over his shoulder. Her snake eyes met his, and she froze, staring.

“I’m not a demon, Beatrice. I’m Jack. Not the same Jack, but Jack all the same. Got his memories, and got my thoughts, his and my thoughts, going through my head. I want Angela dead as much as you, so does old Jack, and unlike old Jack, I can make it happen.” There was a moment of realization in her eyes, and he chuckled. She hadn’t thought of him as a person before this, as someone who could think, as someone who could use their fucking brain. Well now she knew. Now she knew the kid carrying her wasn’t some mindless force with a stick up its ass. Now she knew, he was Jack, and he was going to bathe in some blood tonight.

“ ... really?”

He winked at her, and took both her arms, pulled her onto his back, and started running proper.

It didn’t take long to reach the hunters, slow as they were. Hell, the one with Elen on his shoulders was starting to fall behind. Elen probably weighed ninety pounds, but the dense forest didn’t treat the hunter kindly. Jack could smell fresh blood, and spotted the telltale shine of bits of the liquid when the moonlight peeked through. They were getting cut on the branches.

How to kill the old woman? She was a witch, and obviously had great power, though it seemed like she needed time to set up whatever it was she did with her occult shit; not unlike a Crúac

ritual, he supposed. She could be valuable. Well, once he caught up to her, it'd be easy enough to Dominate her, and tell her to sit down and shut the fuck up, while he dealt with the others.

And there they were. Five hunters, plus one witch. Angela was leading them, limp and all, while the dude with the old woman on his shoulders was in the middle of the pack.

He didn't bother to tell the Nos to hold on. She would or she wouldn't. If she wanted to be part of this bad enough, she'd hold on, and close as she was, it wasn't like she wouldn't be able to tell he was about to unleash a bit of his power. And it'd only take a little bit.

“He's here! He's here! Stop him! Stop—”

The woman, the one who'd been using the flamethrower, was taking up the rear. She had a rifle now, and she pointed it straight at him, its muzzle light shining into his eyes and blinding him. He didn't care. When the gunfire started, and the explosion of bark and wood began, he didn't mind. When some of the bullets crashed into his body, he didn't flinch or wince. The pain was minor, and a little will was enough to summon his Kindred blood, and begin filling and healing the wounds.

He ran up to her, and she screamed a mix of rage and fear as she emptied her magazine into his chest. Maybe if there'd been more room, more light, and less roots tripping her up as she walked backward, she'd have been able to aim for his head. That'd have at least have slowed him down. But as her bullets went thunk thunk in his chest, blocked by his building wall of blood, he didn't slow down at all.

“Hi,” he said as he got in close, reached out, grabbed her shoulders with both his hands, and squeezed.



Things were a bit awkward with Beatrice on his back, her legs hooked on his hips. But he was strong enough to carry dozens of Beatrices, and she was doing a good job keeping her arms out of the way of his, and her head behind his. It meant he was clear to go nuts, and nuts did he go. The hunter shrieked bloody murder, and started twisting and turning as he squeezed on her shoulders harder, and harder, and harder, until his fingers sank through skin, muscle, and bone.

Her arms didn't come off completely. Clothes got in the way, and probably a few bits of skin hidden inside, but they were basically both completely off, popped off like squeezing a stick of butter until it separates. Her screams rose to a climax, and she foamed at the mouth before the pain became too much, and she passed out. Damn.

“Jack,” Beatrice said. “You ... don't need to be so—”

“These fuckers hunted us, killed us. These worthless, pathetic humans had the audacity to kill us!” He snapped the idiot Nos a harsh glare over his shoulder, and she recoiled. Good. “They're fucking sheep, and they killed Julias. You want me to spare them?”

“No...”

“Then shut up, and let me get revenge for the both of us. And hey, I'll even let you have a shot at Angela.”

“Fine! Fine, just ... fine.”

He caught up to them again pretty quick. A man this time, the one without Elen. He had a shotgun, and that was substantially more dangerous than the rifle. Unfortunately for the hunter, the forest was the perfect guard against it. A rifle might penetrate through trees, but a shotgun wouldn't.

Jack slipped between the trees, ducked low underneath nearby branches, and closed the distance over the seconds, as the hunter roared his fury. Boom, boom, shotgun shells unloaded their pellets, sending bark everywhere, but only managed to clip Jack every so often. He'd summoned his blood to protect him fully by this point, as he had with Sándor. The pellets hit him, and then fell to the forest floor, as Jack got in close.

Very close, close enough for eye contact. Perfect. The hunter met his eyes, and only too late realized he'd done it. Maybe he thought his tattoos, his bracelets and necklaces, his bullshit, would keep Jack out of his mind. Jack reached out with his thoughts, and smashed through all that crap instantly.

“Cut out your stomach open, and pull your guts out.”

The man's eyes went wide. There was a kernel of awareness in there, a part of him that knew what Jack was demanding he do. Perfect. What was the point of a torturous death if the person being tortured wasn't aware of it?

Jack sped past his victim, and didn't look back. He didn't need to. The sounds were telling. A knife being drawn. A quiet cutting sound. Screams of agony. It was a shame Jack couldn't really indulge and watch, but they were appetizers anyway. He couldn't let the main course escape.

The next hunter, the other guy, had Elen on his shoulder, and was running, not even bothering to turn around and shoot. Jack made no effort to be gentle. He hopped in close, jumped at the man's back, pushed down on the man's head with his left hand, and grabbed Elen with his right. He was right, the old woman weighed basically nothing, and her shitty old gown didn't tear when he yanked her off the man's falling body, then dumped her on the forest floor. And the hunter, his real target, fell with a satisfying crunch against the cruel forest floor.

With Beatrice on his back, Jack actually had a bit of weight to him. He stood beside the downed hunter, waited a second for the man to look up, winked at him, and brought his foot down on the side of the man's neck. Crunch.

Breaking someone's neck wasn't a good way to kill someone, if the goal was efficiency. People survived a broken neck all the time, or took a long time to die. The man's scream ended quickly, but he was still twitching, squirming, dying. Perfect. The night was starting to look bright again.

"What do we do with her?" Beatrice said, nodding toward the old woman lying on the ground. A quick glance showed she was on her back, looking up, and not moving. Breathing, but not moving. In the tussle, her dress had come up a bit, enough for them to see her calves. Skin and bones, to the point that the woman should have been dead. A walking corpse.

Not walking. A living, breathing mummy, sure, and probably immortal. But not walking. She wasn't walking anywhere anymore, hence why the hunters had her in a wheelchair. The breather was probably so she had enough oxygen to think straight when performing her rituals. Aging, and aging, and aging, but never dying.

"She's not going anywhere, and I have questions for her." And even if she did somehow manage to escape, despite the Prince being on Jack's heels, it wasn't really Elen his hate was pointed at. She was a tool. His hate was saved for the wielders of the tool. One was dead, and another was going to die a horrible, horrible death soon enough.

Noise up ahead, besides the screams of panic and grunts of exertion, announced the location of the two remaining women. Jack took off after them, chuckling with every thud his boots made against the wood and grass. The dark chuckle, the kind villains

practiced in front of the mirror. He knew Angela and her remaining hunter could hear him, and that made it all the better.

This was how the night was supposed to go! Fuck Jeremiah and his stand-off bullshit. This was how things were meant to be, a vampire running after humans, in the dark, and bathing in the slaughter. It felt good, god it felt good. He was closer to his Beast than old Jack would ever be, and his Beast was howling with joy at getting to unleash its instincts tonight. Catch them, kill them, maybe save one, and drink them until they were nothing but a dry husk.

“Here,” the darkness whispered. Not Jack, not Trissy, and not the two hunters. “Here!” He recognized that voice. He’d recognize Athalia’s monster voice anywhere.

There they were. He slipped around a fat tree, and found the two women running, huffing and puffing. And falling. Just as Jack reached out to grab onto the Angela, she stumbled down into the earth, and disappeared beneath grass and twigs, with her hunter friend beside her. He got a glimpse of her eyes for only a split moment, and found a mix of pain, likely from her running with a limp, and utter despair. But not fear, like her friend.

He’d have to fix that.

He stopped before the pit, and looked down into the blackness below. A hole, but not a natural one. Around its edges were finger bones, sticking up from the around the roots and dirt. They held open the hole, unmoving, and certainly not inviting, but Angela and the other hunter had gone down the hole like Alice.

“Athalia?” Beatrice said.

“Athalia. Fucking bitch. Probably has Fiona tied up somewhere, and was waiting for an opportunity to save her daughter.”

“She ... opened a door to one of her nightmare chambers, then?”

“Yeah. Ready?”

“You’re going inside?”

“Yep.”

“For all you know, Athalia’s opened the chamber to—”

“To somewhere her daughter could survive.” They wouldn’t land inside a volcano or something.

“Maybe Begotten can give guests immunity to their lairs?”

“Maybe. I’ll deal with anything she throws my way. And then I’m going to kill her, too.”

“But—ah!” Beatrice squeaked, as Jack jumped into the hole.

The transition from one nightmare chamber into another was seamless. Just like when he’d went to visit Azamel in the tunnels, found nothing, and then took a magical stairway down into a room covered in sewed-up faces. How their lairs managed to blend into each other, and the physical world, he had no idea, but it meant things could get difficult. Lairs were evidently big, and complicated. Linking them together meant he might have to navigate a maze if he took too long chasing after Angela. Better to throw caution to the wind, and stay on her heels. Momentum! It was all about momentum.

He was not, not not not going to let this become a long, drawn out chase. He was ending this in the next five god damn minutes. Killing Angela might take longer, but in the next three hundred seconds, he was going to get his hands on her, break her legs, and make her watch as he drank her one remaining hunter to death.

While they'd jumped down a hole, the hole didn't go down. It went up. Physics, gravity specifically, decided to go on a bender, and before Jack could reorient himself, he was being thrown out of a hole by his own bodyweight. Up and up, and then down and down, onto more grass and dirt.

He got up quick. Beatrice had let go of him in the strange gravity reversal, and was lying next to him in the grass. Clean, green grass, a bit damp, and almost glowing under the moonlight. Where the fuck were they? It was cold, and it was windy. Some nearby trees bent and blew with the wind. Tombstones stood defiantly against it. And the moon above was enormous, without a cloud in the sky. The moon, hilariously, had a subtle skull face drawn by its craters.

A cemetery. Jack and Beatrice had tumbled out of an open grave, literally. And moments before, so had Angela and her friend. Said friend now had Angela's left arm over her shoulders, and the two were currently stumbling away toward what looked like an old church. Like, 1600s church, like a bunch of Amish had built a big barn in a day, put a cross over the front door, and some pews inside, church. He assumed there'd be pews, anyway, with no cushion, and probably all aimed at a pulpit.

"Angela!" Jack yelled. "Stop running already! Christ, I've had a long night, and I'm getting sick of having to chase you guys down."

"Fuck you! Fuck—" The words were lost under the explosion of a gun. Angela pointed her sawed-off shotgun at him, and boom.

He'd been ready for a fight though, and as the pellets slammed into him, his skin, his jaw and neck, his chest, and his right eye, the blood wall coated his skin and protected him. It was enough to make both hunters pause, before they pressed their backs against the large doors of the church, and disappeared inside.

For just a second, when the door was open, Jack could see into the dark church, and noticed movement. Large arms of bone shifted

around in the darkness, and so did the two white dots he recognized as Athalia's eyes, inside the huge skull of her monster body. He was going to have to kill her, to get to Angela.

"Trissy, you good to walk on your own?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Not fine to fight, though."

"Just stay behind me. I'll deal with them." He marched up the small wooden stairs up to the church door, and opened it.

Immediately, he was hit with bullets. Shotgun shells were unloaded upon him in quick succession, only for Angela to reload in record time, and do it again. The female hunter with her held down the trigger on her rifle, and the much larger bullets slammed into Jack's flesh.

Two hunters wouldn't be enough to stop him. He laughed as he walked through the storm of bullets, through the dark church lit only by their flashlights, and headed toward the muzzle flashes. He had to pour vitae into his blood shield to protect him, but it was enough to stop the assault of both hunters cold. A waste, but scaring them to death was half the fun.

"What is this?" he said, throwing up his arms. "Now? Now you finally accept your mother's help? Now, at the end, when it doesn't matter, now you accept the help of a creature you've been hunting for years?"

Angela glared at him, trembling. The two of them had their backs against the back wall of the small stage, and while they were trying their best to shoot him down, they made no headway. The reality of the inevitable was sinking in for them, and Jack relished the terror building in their eyes.

Jack glanced back, to see where Beatrice was. But, Beatrice was Obfuscating herself with her Cloak, and doing a pretty good job of it,

too. He could see her, mostly, but she was a natural at the Cloak, and as long as she moved slowly in the darkness of the old church, he doubted anyone else would be able to notice her. Except for, of course, a nightmare monster of shadows.

Looking behind him had been a mistake. He knew it the moment he did it. Angela and the hunter were now out of bullets, and Jack didn't see any grenades or anything on them. He also didn't see Athalia anymore either, and he should have fucking realized she'd attack him the moment he turned his head, and the hunters had stopped shooting.

Athalia came down, and Jack snapped around, jumping back and away. She'd been hiding up in the darkness of the high ceiling, and had a good opportunity to attack him. Hell, she might have even hurt him. She was no Sándor or Azamel, but that didn't mean she wasn't dangerous. Maybe she knew it'd be pointless in the end, or maybe she was afraid of him after seeing the things he could do, but she didn't take the opportunity to attack him. She stood there, in the isle of the church, enormous hands crushing pews as she placed herself between Angela and Jack.

“Curse,” the black skeleton creature hissed, “remember our deal. Angela is beaten. Leave her be.”

“I'm not beaten!” the bitch in the back screamed, and she drew her knife, the shiny one. Heh, out of ammo. She tried to run at Jack as well, but her friend pulled her back.

“Fuck you, Athalia. Your daughter looks plenty threatening to me. I'm afraid I'm gonna have to put her in the ground.”

“You will not touch my daughter.”

Jack snorted, and started to pace the width of the small isle. He didn't glance toward Beatrice, or acknowledge her presence in any way. The others knew she had to be nearby, but they knew she was



injured, and probably thought she was still outside. Then again, if this was Athalia's lair, there was a good chance Athalia knew more about her surroundings than was obvious. Besides, she was a creature of darkness, a monster of shadows. Maybe she'd be able to spot Beatrice no matter what.

She didn't seem to, though. Maybe she was too distracted with him, or she was baiting him. Maybe maybe maybe. The hunters also had a nasty habit of being able to spot Kindred protected by the Cloak, but it was so damn dark in the church, that as long as Trissy crouched low and kept pews between her and the targets, she might just make it.

"This wasn't part of the deal," he said. "Sparing your daughter was only if it was guaranteed she was incapacitated."

"She's beaten, Jack! She has nothing to defend herself with."

Rolling his eyes, Jack took a step forward. It was enough to make Athalia flinch, but not step aside. Making her flinch with a single step sent a shiver of pleasure up his spine; not as much as if she'd jumped back, but fear was fear, and it felt fucking good to use it.

"Get out of my way, Athalia. Your daughter doesn't even want your help." He looked past the skeleton, to the two women on the stage. They both had knives now, and looked ready to die swinging. But, even with that resolution to die in combat, there was fear there, plenty of fear, and he licked his lips as he smiled at them. Not enough on Angela though. There was time to correct that.

"She is my daughter!" The black skeleton creature, a beast with bone wings, a massive size with no legs to speak of, slammed her claws against the church floor. The wood splintered, and the church rumbled with the impact. "You will not touch her!"

Jack rolled his eyes, licked a fang, and stepped in closer. "Yeah, well, we'll see about that."

# Chapter 111

~~Antoinette~~

Jack had seen her. She knew he must have. And yet, he gave chase into the forest, with Beatrice over his shoulders. So committed was he to his plan, to his need for revenge, that he would ignore her approach, the Prince of Dolareido, and his lover, to pursue it.

It was not Jack she saw. It was the curse, a relic from ages past, from those infuriating striges and their obsessive need to disrupt the lives of Kindred. The curse. The damned, bloody curse, that crawled into her thoughts all minutes of the night. Of course her love would use its power to achieve his goal, for vengeance, to settle the ghost of Julias over his shoulder, and the very real ghost of his sister. She knew it would happen, and yet, she was still surprised.

The carnage the curse had wrought was extreme, and she stared in nigh disbelief as she came closer to the forest. One hundred, two hundred, perhaps three hundred feet wide, a clearing of destroyed trees and shredded earth. And corpses. The corpses of crows and rats, but corpses nonetheless, thousands of them. Only Jack could have summoned such an army to his side, and only a battle between him, hunters, and Sándor especially, could have created a field of mayhem such as the one she walked through.

She checked back over her shoulder for Mark, or perhaps someone else. There had been someone else nearby, a young Kindred, but she did not see them, eyes locked onto Sándor as they had been. Mark, on the other hand, she knew was to follow behind her. And he was, though he stayed away, far away, a lowly creeping skeleton covered in grime, insects, and gore. One could barely see his shifting shadow in the darkness of the night.

A werewolf leapt down from a tree, Othello in her arms. She looked at Antoinette as she set the man against a large rock, near the center of a rather disturbing clearing connected to the zone of destruction. Fire awaited her, but the gargoyle made quick work of the flames, flattening them with his palms, one after another. And, unless her eyes deceived her, the nightmare itself began to fight back against the flames, trees regrowing when she was not looking, and grass rising from the ashes. In the clearing with the gargoyle, corpses were crucified to trees, and perhaps a dozen hunters lay dead in the burning grass.

“Prince,” Sándor said, “Jack has...” Sighing, the beast pointed to the forest with one hand, while his other three continued to squash the fires as if flame had no power over him. Perhaps it did not. Blood coated his mouth, and Antoinette did not need to guess whose it was. Jeremiah’s clothes, or what remained of them, were on the ground about his feet.

Azamel lay beside Sándor. Breathing, alive. Good. Antoinette would have questions, once she had a moment to process what was happening.

“I will be back, and I will deal with this insanity,” she said.

She took off into the woods, and Daniel followed. Once again, she had arrived too late to help in the battle, and found nothing but the remains. But, perhaps if she caught up to Jack, she could influence the outcome of the curse’s actions. Without a doubt, it was the curse enacting its will to create such chaos, and while Jack may have been willing to let it unleash its will, in order to achieve victory, he would not be able to stomach the carnage it might force upon him.

Past the clearing, she noticed a man sitting behind a tree. The others must have known of his presence, but did not react to him.

Harcourt then, the hunter Jack had mentioned in his message to her. She decided to leave him be, and kept after Jack's trail.

She and Daniel came to a dead stop, as a black wave of thick water oozed and boiled between some trees. An aura of dread, of fear, of death and of power flowed out from where it bubbled on the ground, and Antoinette steeled herself as she dashed toward it. Mark? It was similar, and yet Mark was but an ant compared to the aura that buried her. She knew that presence. Here? How? Why?

She expected a confrontation, of wills or of fists, but as she slipped past the twisting trees and found the spot where the ooze bubbled up from the dirt and grass, she found the ooze vacating. It slipped back into the earth, and it took something with it. Someone? An old woman with sickly thin limbs, and a tattered dress, disappeared into a black void.

And then, Black Blood was gone. It was Black Blood, it had to be. The cold air, the sense of decay and death, as if someone had distilled a cemetery, its tombstones and mausoleums, into perfume. It could only be that blasted spirit. But it was gone, and had taken someone with it.

Elen. The shaman. The flesh witch.

She bit down her teeth, and followed after the curse currently controlling her little Ventrue. Black Blood and Jacob could be dealt with later. For now, her love mattered more.

---

~~Beatrice~~

Sneaking in the shadows with her injuries was difficult. She was injured, in pain, and ravenous. No more blood flowed through her, and she was forced to run on fumes to power her Cloak. No choice. If she let Athalia stop her, this opportunity might slip away. She had

to, even if she had to drain herself until she fell into torpor, she had to do it. At this moment, nothing else mattered.

Jack shook his head, snarling. “Athalia, you know damn well she has to die. She’s a hunter, and—”

“Beatrice!” the skeleton shrieked, and lifted her giant skeleton head to look around. Beatrice froze solid. She knows you’re here. Not like you could hide from a monster of darkness, in darkness. Do it now, before she stops you. “I know you’re in here. The shadows will not hide you from me. I will—”

Bang.

The hunter beside Angela went down, and her blood splattered against the wood behind her. Beatrice had aimed well, and the bullet went straight. The hunter went down like a bag of sand, a hole in her head, and chunks of her brains everywhere. It was a church in a nightmare, so, it felt kinda proper to fill it up with murder. Angela yelped and jumped back, like a frightened animal.

Athalia, the giant, black, alien skeleton thing with no legs, turned to face her, shock somehow chiseled into her bone face. Triss looked at her from halfway along the wall of the church, outside the pews, pistol hanging at her side.

“Thought I might need this,” she said, “cause my legs are all fucked up. In all the chaos, especially when Sándor showed up, the real Sándor, and broke Jeremiah’s ritual, it was easy to take a moment to find a gun.” And she knew how to use a pistol like this. You checked the slide and flipped the safety. Easy.

“Beatrice, do not—”

Jack stepped up to the woman, the huge monster creature, and glared. “Athalia, the only reason I haven’t broken you in two, or Dominated you and made you move, is because you’re a creature,

like me, like Trissy, like all of us. But if you don't get out of my way, I'll do more than break you. I'll make you watch."

Triss winced, and looked away from the skeleton monster. Jack, this curse Jack, may have had more going on in his head than Triss realized, but that didn't change that he was so fucking twisted, it made her sick. Twisted, cruel, and sick. Jacob paled in comparison to how fucking mean the kid was, and the shit he was willing to do to make his desires a reality.

Asking him to Dominate some kine, and bring them to Jacob for the execution and ritual to the Crone, may have hurt Jack, but this Jack must have enjoyed it.

Triss looked to Angela, who clutched her knife in front of her, eyes wide, and panic ripping through her. This was the fucking cunt who killed Jack's sister, and nearly killed his mother. This was the psycho who stood with Jeremiah, shoulder to shoulder, when the man threw away the lives of his hunters, for a shot at killing Azamel. This was the bitch who killed her Superman. Triss was going to enjoy killing her.

"You're a fucking monster!" Angela said. "All of you! Fucking monsters, every last one of you. You kill humans, you eat them, you hunt them and you infect them! Monsters! Monsters! Monsters!" Tears were in her eyes now, and she almost tripped over her fellow hunter's leg as she stepped further back. "You killed Jeremiah! My father!" She knew she was trapped. She knew the only reason Beatrice hadn't shot her too, was because getting shot to death was too quick a death for her. She knew the only thing standing between her and a painful, torturous end, was the monster in front of her, her mom, the monster she'd been looking to kill for years.

The struggle was blatant on her face, and Beatrice couldn't help but smile as she took a step closer.

“Angela, please!” Athalia turned more, until she was looking at Angela on the stage. “Please, I’m trying to help you! I know I couldn’t help you before. I know I ... that I ruined your life, daughter. Please, let me help you now, before these—”

“Fuck you, monster! You’re not—”

“I am your mother, Angie!”

“Don’t call me that!” The hunter’s voice rose so high, it silenced them all. They all stood frozen, stunned, as Angela took a step closer to the stage edge, undoing her retreat seconds before. “Jeremiah is the only family I ever had. And now he’s dead! Killed, by monsters. All of you, you’re nothing but monsters.” Tears flowed from her eyes until they dripped from her chin. “We would have done anything to make sure you all died. If I had to kill hundreds, thousands of innocents, to make sure your kind were wiped out, I would! It’d save more lives, in the end. And you!” She pointed to Jack, eyes wide, hand shaking. “You. You’re the worst thing I’ve ever run into, ever dealt with. You—”

Beatrice shot her in the stomach. The shock on Angela’s crying face was delicious, for a second. As the weeping girl fell onto her ass next to her dead friend, Athalia turned and lunged for Beatrice. She didn’t get far. Jack grabbed a pew, a long, heavy slab of wood, and slammed it down on the skeleton monster. Wood shattered, splinters and shards going everywhere. He hadn’t been gentle, and Athalia crashed down into the floor of her nightmare church. She didn’t get back up.

Beatrice looked down at the skeleton monster, who had one of her huge arms outstretched, reaching for her. Triss was on the outside edge of the church, though, and as long as she stayed that way as she walked toward Angela, the monster couldn’t reach her. It was hard, damn hard, to not look down at Athalia, as she marched

toward her daughter, but she managed. Angela was the target. Ignore Athalia. Nothing else mattered.

Before Athalia could recover and get back up, Jack came around to her face, and met her eyes, her strange, skull eyes with small glowing white dots in them, and snarled.

“Do not move from this spot, and do not interfere.” His voice was resonant, filling the church with far more bass than the little guy should have been able to summon. But, he did, and Triss felt his voice roll through her as the curse stared down into Athalia’s soul.

The monster did not move.

“Please ... Jack ... she’s my daughter.”

“Your daughter killed my sister, and my sire. Your daughter stabbed my mother. Your daughter has slaughtered ... I’m wasting my breath, aren’t I? I could describe a thousand atrocities your daughter’s committed, and it just wouldn’t matter, would it?” He squatted down in front of Athalia’s huge, strange, alien skull, and shook his head like an annoyed dog trainer. “Where’s Fiona? What’d you do to her?”

“Nothing. She’s ... in Azamel’s lair, waiting. I told her Jeremiah was likely to go there.”

“You really wanted to save Azamel, didn’t you?” Triss said. Fiona, spider monster Fiona at least, was supposed to help with the assault on the hunters if things went into the dream. They did, and instead of getting her help, Athalia told Fiona to stay out of the way, essentially. At least if Fiona was in Azamel’s lair, she might have been able to help the old woman if Jeremiah had gone there.

Christ, Athalia had risked their lives on that gambit. If any paranormals had died on this assault, Triss probably would have shot Athalia in the head, because she kinda deserved it. But maybe



Athalia knew Jack, the cursed Jack, would be able to handle whatever Jeremiah threw at him. The whole time, she'd been looking for an opportunity to save her daughter, even if it meant they all died. It was hard to hate her for that, even if she did deserve the hate, and worse. She was a mom, doing mom things.

“... yes, I did. Azamel's been our caregiver, and we owe her much.” The skeleton monster shook her head as her massive claws dug at the church floor. Did she have a way out of this nightmare chamber? Cause it certainly seemed like a dead end. Maybe she expected Angela to accept her help faster. Maybe she had another escape route, from this chamber into another, and into another, and into another, and Jack had simply caught up faster than she'd hoped.

As Athalia began to sob, the joy Triss felt drained away, until all that was left were the sounds of the weeping monster. It was a fucking sad night, for everyone. Try as she might to be elated over this, to find the joy she had moments before, Triss couldn't wipe away the cold feeling in her gut that only grew with every moment.

“She's a monster!” Angela said, spitting blood over her lips as she did. “You ... you all are ... monsters ... every last one of you. Fucking monsters. You killed Dad. You ... you...”

“Please don't kill my daughter, Jack.”

Jack stepped over Athalia like stepping over roadkill, and made his way toward the stage, and Angela. “She's got to die,” he said, speaking to Athalia, eyes on Angela, “and you know it.”

Athalia may have been bound by Jack's Dominate to not move from her spot, but that didn't mean she couldn't turn around and watch the two vampires closing in on her daughter. She was crying. In her monster form, it didn't sound like sobs, but a strange, grinding rasp, quiet, and unnerving.

Jack and Beatrice stood on the stage, and looked down at Angela. She still had her knife, and she held it in front of her with one hand, like she'd be able to use it in a fight. But, she was sitting on her ass, back to the wall behind her, and her blood was pooling down the fingers of her other hand, pressed to her gut.

“Do you know who I am?” Beatrice said.

Angela hocked up a nasty, bloody bit of snot and saliva onto Beatrice's pants. Triss could have dodged it, even with her busted legs barely held together by what little vitae she had. But, something about the moment, the scene before her, of a defeated, crying human expending their last ounce of effort to spite her, demanded she let the hunter have her final act of defiance.

“I'll take that as a no.” Beatrice squatted down in front of Angela, ignored the corpse next to her, and glared. She had a good glare, when she stared hard with her snake eyes. It was enough to unnerve other Kindred, let alone a bleeding kine. “Beatrice. In the hospital, when you were going to kill Jack's mom, you killed a vampire named Julias. Julias was Jack's sire. He was also my lover.”

Maybe Angela realized what Beatrice had realized, that in this final moment, some rules weren't to be broken. Angela got to have her last moment of heroic defiance, and Beatrice got to have her evil villain monologue speech.

“Vampires don't have lovers. You have—”

Beatrice snarled, loudly, until she felt her guts threaten to spill from how tight her abs clenched. She jammed the barrel of the pistol against Angela's forehead, hard enough to pin Angela's head to the wall. The bitch dropped her knife with the impact, and once her brains probably stopped rattling around in her head, her eyes opened wide, meeting Beatrice's.

“He was the love of my life, you fucking bitch! He was my everything. My ... everything.” Like a tidal wave, everything she’d been keeping down slammed into her. The sound of his voice, the touch of his fingers, the way he held her from behind and set his chin on her head, the way he told jokes, bad ones, the way he could be loving and soft one moment, then imposing and powerful the next.

If she’d been blushing life, she’d have cried tears, as she held the gun to Angela’s head. This person was the reason the greatest thing she’d ever had in her life was gone, this fucked up psychopath, this broken woman, this idiot. All Angela was, was a disturbed kine who’d met up with a fucker named Jeremiah. He’d slipped into her life, filled the parent role, and channeled her fucked up brain into being a hunter.

With a gun to her head, Angela froze, but the defiance in her eyes didn’t leave. Beatrice thought that, just maybe, Angela would break, and become a sobbing baby who’d whine and beg for her life. She didn’t. As the cruel, harsh reality of a gun against her head sank in, Angela’s face changed into something Beatrice never expected.

She looked relieved.

“Don’t shoot her,” Jack said, grin growing as he stared down at the woman. “At least not yet. Come on, she killed Julias. I was there. She ordered another hunter to shoot him dead, when the man had given everything he could to save my life, Jack’s life, and my mother’s. She executed him, Beatrice. The man was on his knees, spent and ruined.” He squatted down next to her, mad smile growing wider as he looked the woman in the eyes. “We should have some fun with her at least. I can make her pull her intestines out, one foot at a time. I can make her do worse. I still owe her for torturing me.”

Beatrice slowly turned her head from Angela, to the demon next to her. Tony, Viktor, they'd been fucking assholes, but even they didn't talk like that. What the fuck.

And now that she was here, with a gun pressed to the head of the woman who ruined her life, the idea of torturing her was fading away. Dancing in her blood, delighting in her pain, none of that appealed to her anymore. Maybe it was because Jack was next to her, providing a very clear image of what it'd be like to completely give into her Beast's dark urges. Or maybe it was because Athalia was forty feet away in the center of a creepy church, crying as inevitability finally came crashing down. Or maybe it was because Angela was nothing more than a rabid animal, deranged and violent, and needed to die.

There had been satisfaction, for a little while. Beatrice loved watching the fuckers get destroyed by Jack, but that part was over. Now it was just slaughter. She thought she wanted that. She thought she wanted to string Angela upside down, and slit her throat, after thoroughly beating her within an inch of her life. She'd plant Nightmares in the girl's head, if she could get past the warding on the woman's body. Jack could get past them easily, and he'd happily make her torture herself to death in ways Beatrice probably couldn't even imagine. And she thought she'd love that. Now, in the end, she knew she wouldn't.

"Do it," Angela whispered. Her voice was a wavering mess, on the verge of sobs again, but never breaking. Even as tears continued to stream down her face, she kept her eyes open, glaring at the two vampires. "Do it."

"Alright ... Angela." Triss lowered her head, stood up, and pointed the gun at Angela once again.

The world froze, as it had a habit of doing the past couple years. Often, something big would happen, something dangerous,

something epic, something deadly, and everything would freeze as her brain tried to understand and process the sensory overload. But, this wasn't like those times. This was like that one other time the world froze for her, when she saw Jack's face, seconds before he told her Julias was dead. This was the world freezing because it'd grown so cold, it had to. This was the god damn universe telling her, forcing her to feel with agonizing cruelty, the reality of what was happening.

A final tear dripped off of Angela's chin, and Triss pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit Angela's head, and came out the back end, with all the horrific detail Triss didn't want to see anymore. She forced herself to watch, forced herself to meet Angela's dying gaze, and watch the light leave her eyes as her brains splattered the wall behind her. The pistol fell from her hand. The world ceased to be for a few seconds, an empty void of nothingness left in the wake of the gunshot. Vengeance had. Mission successful.

All she felt, was cold.

The pistol hit the wood of the stage, and Athalia shrieked. Her alien voice, fucking freaky as it was, sounded a hundred times worse as the Begotten erupted into horrible cries of rage and sadness. So much for victory. So much for feeling satisfied. All she could feel, was the cries of agony of Athalia, and not because of empathy. She didn't care about Athalia, not a lot, at least, but the mother's desperate screams captured the empty feeling overwhelming Triss's insides. This sucked.

"Trissy, really?" Snorting, Jack kicked Angela's leg, hard enough that it snapped up over her other leg, and hip. Crack. "We could have had fun with her. I was looking forward to making her rip her fingernails off."

“You said you wouldn’t kill her, if she was defeated!” Athalia screamed.

“And you said you’d come help us catch her.” Jack turned on his heel, like he was dancing, and marched over to Athalia. “We could have died, because of you. Give me one reason I shouldn’t—”

The church doors opened. Beatrice knew who it was before the two became visible. The presence of the two vampires approaching the church had been massive, and obvious.

The Prince and the sheriff stepped into the church, Daniel first, with his ridiculously long sword held ready. Antoinette was only a foot behind him, and Triss smiled as she realized the Prince wasn’t wearing any shoes or socks. Well, it did kind of make sense. Shoes, even combat boots, paled in comparison to the grip and feedback actual feet provided. And it wasn’t like stepping on broken glass or a nail would stop an elder.

“Annie! Dan. Didn’t expect you guys to come with Azamel. Didn’t expect Azamel to get involved at all, really.” Jack offered the two of them a small wave, before he unleashed a heavy kick into the enormous skeleton monster’s skull. If he’d been heavier, he could have put more power into it, and likely pierced the bone. But he only used enough strength to send the huge skull away from him several feet, and earn a grunt from the still weeping mother—woman.

Triss stayed on the stage, and watched the train wreck unfold before her. Daniel looked ready to fight, eyes locked solidly on Jack. Antoinette looked like she was ready to deliver a hard speech in a board meeting. Both looked ready to kill.

“Where’s Elen?” Jack said. “I left her on the ground, when I knew you two were following me. Tempted to kill her, but, you know, she could be useful.”

The two elders looked between each other, each offering only the tiniest sliver of shock through their expressions, before they both solidified to stone again.

“Jack,” Antoinette said, taking several steps forward. “The battle is over. Jeremiah is dead, and ... so is Angela.” Her guard was up, weight on the balls of her feet, and vitae coursing through her. Didn’t need Auspex to feel the power flowing from her. She’d come ready for a fight, and for a moment, Triss couldn’t figure out why. Did she expect to fight Athalia, or the two final hunters? No...

She’d come ready to fight Jack.

“Yeap. Mission successful. Though I’m wondering about this bitch right here.” Again, Jack kicked Athalia, this time one of her enormous arms. Same result. Her arm flung away from the impact, crashing into some pews and knocking them over. If there was any wiggle room in Jack’s Dominate for her to try and resist, or at least not flop around like a dying fish, she didn’t use it. She lay there, sobbing, and turned her head toward the stage.

This whole fucking night sucked, and it was only getting worse.

“This is ... Athalia, I imagine,” Antoinette said. “What has she done?”

“Tried to save her daughter. Bailed out on helping us. I’m thinking, I’ll break every finger in this monster body of hers. Teach her to—”

“Jack.” Antoinette came closer, and stared down at the boy as she came within arm’s reach of him. “She was a mother who wanted to spare her daughter. And you should spare her.”

“What? Why the fuck would I do that? She—”

“Jack.” She came in closer again, until only a foot separated her from the tiny, shirtless Ventrue. “You would not harm Athalia.”

Jack stepped back. Triss couldn't see his face from where she was on the stage, but the body language was clear: startled, and then annoyed.

“Are you shitting me, Prince? She nearly got my crew killed. I could have died. Me. Me! I could have died because of her selfishness.” The hypocrisy of the statement was probably lost on the curse.

“Jack ... she is just a mother, who wanted to save her daughter. Surely you must be able to understand that.”

The kid swung his arm out in front of him, dismissing her words as if they were utter insanity. “She's a fucking ... traitor ... and...”

It didn't come quickly, like Triss thought it might. Slowly, as if waking up from a dream, Jack looked around at the mess around him, the destroyed pews, the weeping monster, and the two bodies on the church stage. It was a sickening scene, and Triss found herself taking a step away from the two dead kine, as if she'd committed a crime. She hadn't, she knew that, but that didn't change that the scene of the two dead hunters was a sobering sight.

Sobering for more than just her. Jack looked up to her where she was, still on the stage, then to the bodies, then to Antoinette and Daniel, then back down to Athalia.

“I ... I uh...” He teetered for a moment, before reaching to grab his side, as if he'd been stabbed. “I ... I'm not ... I won't...” His other hand found his head, and he rubbed his hair in that way he always did, as he stared down at Athalia. “I ... won't ... won't...”

After taking a deep, pointless breath, Beatrice walked through the pews, down to Athalia, around her, and then to Jack. “It's over, man.



It's ... it's over.”

Jack looked up to her, eyes wide with panic. He blinked a hundred million times, before looking to the stage again, and the two corpses there. It was a long moment of silence, except for Athalia's sobs, before Jack, trembling, took a few steps closer to Athalia's giant skull.

“You're ... released.”

The skeleton creature sat up, stared at the small boy standing beside her, and the world froze again. The tension was there, Triss could feel it, a string ready to snap. If it did, Athalia would attack, maybe try and slice Jack open. Maybe try and slice her open? Unless someone jumped in the way, Triss would get cut to ribbons if the giant, half-body skeleton creature nailed her with one set of those claws.

As the monster got up onto her hands, and her strange bone wings spread out behind her, she stared at Beatrice. And, Beatrice met her gaze, for a few seconds at least. There wasn't much to say. 'I'm sorry I killed your daughter'. 'Be happy I didn't torture her'. 'Be especially happy I didn't let Jack torture her'. 'I hate you for defending your psychopath offspring'. 'I can't imagine the pain you're going through'. It'd have all been empty words. There was no way anything Triss said could have come across as anything other than insulting, pandering, bullshit.

The best she could manage, was a few seconds of eye contact with the strange monster, and her two white dots for eyes inside her large, shadowy eye sockets. Then, she lowered her gaze, and lowered her guard as well. Yeap, she was done. Take your shot, Athalia, if you really want it.

The skeleton stared at her for many long, painful seconds, before she walked past her. She had no legs, so her huge hands were her

legs, and her palms didn't make a sound as she walked across the church floor toward her daughter's corpse.

"We ... we should ... go," Jack said. Jack, the real Jack, the original, and not the curse that made Beatrice want to run in the opposite direction every time they met eyes, said that. Thank god. Thank fucking god.

It was over. Fucking finally, it was over. Are you happy now, Julias? Probably not.

---

~~Jack~~

Are you happy now, Julias? Did I do good? Was it worth it?

Whether Athalia left the gateway open, or had reopened it, he didn't know, but the hole in the grave was still there. Daniel went in first, then him, then Antoinette and Beatrice. As they jumped in, he could hear Athalia screaming in the church, weeping, and shrieking. It sounded like his sister did, his ghost sister, the wailing screams of a banshee.

He was going to be sick. He was a vampire, a corpse, and unless he Blushed Life, he wasn't going to be vomiting. But even without the Blush, he felt sick, to his bones, to his soul.

"I was ... awake," he said, once the four of them were back in the forest of Sándor's nightmare. "Aware, I mean. I ... I saw everything. I remember everything. I—where's Elen?"

"We can discuss the shaman later," Antoinette said. "But know that she is detained."

Jack looked up at the white-haired vampire, and caught her glance for a moment. There was something there, in her gaze, that

told him she wasn't saying everything, and hiding even more than was obvious.

"Triss, you good to walk?" he said, looking back over his shoulder.

He almost wished he didn't. Of course she'd seen all the shit he'd done, the destruction he'd created, and the pain he'd inflicted. Hell, she'd probably been hoping he'd have been as nasty as he was, at first. As the mission went on, he could see her resolve waning, the more people died, the more horrible things got. And at the end there, when he'd tried to goad her into having a torture-fest, that conversation stuck out in his memories and made him sick. Really, really fucking sick.

Angela was dead, though. Beatrice killed her; even got to have some final words, too. He felt happy about that. Athalia was devastated, and he felt horrible about that. Jeremiah was dead, killed by Sándor, who apparently had more reasons than they realized to want the man dead. He felt good about that. But, Azamel had been seriously injured by Jeremiah and his crazy ritual. He felt sad about that. Much as Azamel was a bitch, she wasn't nearly as bad as Jeremiah thought she was.

"Yeah, I'm good," Triss said. She tried to meet his eyes, but it didn't last. Thinking the same thoughts he was, probably. Mission successful, but it didn't feel as good as they'd hoped.

It took a few minutes to get back to the clearing where all the shit had gone down. The fire was out, and the smell of cinders was in the air. As they broke through the walls of trees and into the open space, the damage the fire had done, and the much greater damage Jack and Sándor's Horror had done, looked like a scar on the land. If it'd been real, people would have assumed a bomb had gone off, a big one, the kind used to blow up large buildings. But it wasn't real, and even as Jack walked toward the clearing where Sándor stood, he noticed some of the damage was repairing itself. It was subtle,

hidden, but in the corner of his eyes, he could see the trees regrowing, reforming, along with the grass.

Mulder and Scully came to him, as he knew they would. When they perched on his bare shoulders, they weren't as gentle as they should have been, and he winced as their claws scratched his skin. But it was understandable. They both crooned and crowed, and rubbed their heads against his neck and ears.

"I'm fine, guys, I'm fine." They didn't seem convinced. Or maybe, they were happy he was back, and not the other Jack. "You guys were great tonight, really great. That ... that other ... Jack, he ... he didn't..." With a heavy hand, Jack gestured to the dead rats and crows that littered the forest floor. "Don't listen to other Jack, if it puts your lives on the line, ok?" They both nodded, as if they knew who other Jack was, and what kind of villain he was. "Do me a favor, if you're up to it? Get Aaron, Jen, and her prisoners, ok?"

The two crows nodded, and took off. Mulder remained for a few seconds though, and Jack could see he was hesitant to leave him; worried, about him. Jack leaned his head toward the bird, and nudged his nose into his friend's neck until the bird eventually took off.

With both birds gone, he scanned the clearing for his crew. Harcourt was hiding behind a tree, but in reality, everyone was just ignoring him for now. Clara, in her human form, stood by the altar, and she was looking over Othello, who sat against the side of the big rock. He was still in torpor, but at least he was out of the tree, and the hole in his chest seemed smaller than the branch he'd been skewered on would have left. Maybe Clara gave him some of her blood.

More surprising was Damien, and Fiona. Judging by how Fiona scooped Damien off the altar rock and clutched him close, borderline panic blatant on her spider legs and clutching arms, she'd

just arrived. She wasn't crying, but she was close, and she trembled a little as she clutched the vampire tight to her body.

"Jack!" she said, turning her head to stare at him; he thought. She had no eyes, so knowing if she was staring was hard to do. "Jack, you ... you're..." Vrrall's voice was so different to Fiona's, it took a second for him to adjust.

"Angela's dead," he said, and he couldn't keep a sigh out of the proclamation. "All the hunters are dead." Barring those still in the city, or captured. No need to bring them up and ruin the victory.

Fiona's smile brightened, and she nodded before tightening her grip on the vampire. "And Athalia?"

"Alive, and unharmed. And..." His head dropped again. Neck pain was in his future, if tonight continued as it did. "She tried to save her daughter, but ... but..." She could have attacked him, in the church. She didn't. Much as she loved her daughter, she wasn't willing to attack Jack. At first he thought it was because she was afraid of the curse, but in retrospect, Athalia would have fought a volcano if it meant saving her daughter, under normal circumstances. No, she didn't hit him, because he wasn't her enemy.

And they'd killed her daughter anyway. He winced and glanced back at Triss. She had the same look in her eyes he knew he probably did. Guilt. They shouldn't feel guilty. They'd saved other Kindred from these hunters, and got revenge on a woman who was a psychopath and needed to be put down anyway. Guilt was the last thing they should have been feeling. But the sounds Athalia had made, and the destroyed look in her alien eyes, had been horrible.

The whole fucking night was horrible.

The gargoyle turned to face them, but once he saw them, and the blood covering them, he looked satisfied. He got to his knees beside Azamel, and set one of his many hands on her side.

Azamel. Jack gulped as he stepped around her titanic leg, and moved in front of her. She was on her side, breathing, but it didn't sound good. Who the fuck knew what a monster like this would sound like when breathing normally, but she sounded exhausted, and beaten. Her eyes were open, and Jack shivered as he came in close to her face, and those huge eyes. Her tusks were big enough that he had to step around them, as well.

“How you doing, Azamel?” he said.

The elephant creature tried to laugh, a quiet — relative to her usual noises — trumpeting noise, before her trunk went still again. “I live.”

“You sure?” He offered his best, goofy smile, anything to ease the tension and sorrow grating at his insides. “You look like hell.”

A quiet chuckle from the monster announced his success. “Yes, but I do live ... for now.” She tried to sit up, but even with four hands pressing on the grass, she couldn't get her body upright.

“Are you—”

“I will heal, little vampire. But it will take time, and I ... I...”

He winced as his head dropped, again. She didn't need to say it. The soul ritual or whatever the fuck it was may not have been completed, but that didn't change that Jeremiah did some damage to her, and not just to her, but her her, the stuff underneath the skin. She was wounded down to the soul, or her Horror, or whatever. They weren't wounds that healed like flesh, and she didn't know if she'd recover.

“Sándor,” he said, “how are you feeling? I ... should apologize. The curse, it—”

“I am free,” the gargoyle said, bass-filled voice almost enough to make Jack’s teeth rattle. “Thank you.” As if Azamel’s exhaustion was contagious, the gargoyle fell onto a knee, before slumping onto his side against a tree, beside the giant elephant monster.

“I would have killed you, if that continued much longer,” Jack said. “Er, I assume if I kill your Horror, you—”

“Yes. That would kill me.” He shook his head, and his mighty horns grazed against the tree behind him. It was quickly becoming obvious the gargoyle didn’t enjoy chatting. A stoic dude. “Azamel explained the curse to me. I ... You have my sympathies, Jack.”

The big gargoyle had sympathies, for him? The creature whose family had been killed by Jeremiah, and had been a slave to the man for who knew how long, was pitying him? The words struck Jack cold, and he took a deep breath as he tried to ignore the Beast in his guts.

“Thanks...” He tried to look at Antoinette, who seemed content to follow and listen, but a quick glance was scarring. Despite the obvious anger he could feel, her frustration that he’d done something this stupid, it wasn’t the most powerful emotion he could sense from her. She wore her mask, her Prince mask, as she always did, but he’d been around her for two years now, and could recognize the more subtle things that told how she truly felt. She could have probably hid those ticks, if she wanted to, but she didn’t.

The truer emotion she was feeling, was more pity, redoubled by Sándor’s comment. She was pitying him, the same as the Begotten was. Every time she seamlessly avoided stepping on any of the bird, rat, or hunter corpses around, she looked to him through the corner of her eye, and bit her bottom lip slightly. Not in the sexy way, but in the ‘oh god my poor love, how will he ever survive this?’ sort of way.

In the past, it'd have pissed him off. Now, he was starting to think, he could accept a little pity. Just a little. After all, he was going to be pitying Athalia until she was likely to kill him.

“Clara,” he said, and he walked over to where she sat, next to the unconscious Othello, against the altar rock. “You ok?”

“Yep.” She saluted him, and even met his gaze. He wished she hadn't. There was something there, something new in her eyes, something that replaced the borderline flirtation she usually held when looking at him. For a second, he thought it was concern, and it was, but that was mostly buried under something else. Fear. Not a lot, not enough to overpower her expression, but he recognized fear.

God damn it.

“Um ... hello.”

They all turned around, and looked at the tree they all knew Harcourt had been hiding behind. He hadn't moved from there, since helping Damien. A frightened animal knew better than to move, when escape wasn't an option. They played dead, or bit anything that came close. Playing nice, on the other hand, wasn't the usual, but it was Harcourt's only choice if he wanted to live.

Once everyone slowly settled their monstrous gazes on the hunter, he froze solid, and for the life of him, Jack couldn't help but smile a little. Three monsters, four conscious vampires, and one werewolf, any of which could have taken on multiple hunters at once. And all of them were looking at Harcourt like he might be an enemy. Poor guy.

“Harcourt's the reason we were able to pull this off,” Jack said, looking to Antoinette. “We made a deal. There's two other hunters spared, and—and there they are.” Jennifer and Aaron came down along the village road, and while Aaron kept his cool, Jennifer did not. Her eyes were wide with fascination and fright as she looked



the surroundings up and down. They kept the two hunters in front of them, and the two hunters looked more terrified than anyone else, by far. They were no threat.

Two crows flew overhead, and Jack smiled up at Mulder and Scully as they found a perch on a tree nearby. Too many unknown faces around for them to feel comfortable on his shoulder.

“Marge! Dennis!” Harcourt ran out to meet them as they bordered on the forest edge. Daniel reached for his sword, but Jack threw the man a quick glance. He wasn’t in a position to boss a sheriff around, and—maybe he was? Maybe he was strong enough to beat Daniel in a fight? No, he refused let the curse twist his thoughts. Logic, civility, they were his tools, his best tools.

Christ, how easy it was to let power corrupt. Make a decision you think is the right one, and instead of dealing with others and red tape, simply brute force your decision onto everyone else with that power. It was fine as long as it was done with good intentions, right? The birthing thoughts of a tyrant.

Daniel met his gaze, and held it for a couple seconds longer than Jack thought he would. For a moment, the possibility that Daniel would act and kill the three hunters was very real. But, Antoinette said nothing. She folded her arms across her chest, and watched the three hunters, ready to kill at a moment’s notice, same as Daniel. To them, the hunters were the only threats in the room.

“You promised them amnesty?” Antoinette said.

“I ... yeah, basically. For Harcourt, and at his request, any hunters that laid down their arms.” And now the tricky part, following through on promises he hadn’t been in a position to make.

Jennifer ran to Beatrice, wrapped her arms around her, and squeezed. Aaron ran to Othello, and shook the man a few times by the shoulder before sitting beside him. Fiona guarded over Damien,

clutching him tightly to her dark, beautiful spider body. Sándor sat by Azamel, exhausted and, unless Jack was reading him wrong, ready to pass out. He might have even been ready to cry, if he'd been alone. Considering what he'd just done, and what Jeremiah had done to him, Jack wasn't surprised. Harcourt, and Marge and Dennis hugged each other in the chaos, and they were crying, Marge loudly, and the two guys doing their best to keep their tears silent. Christ, what a mess.

And Antoinette could see it, too. It was a mess, a huge fucking mess. Decisions could be made later.

"I will take the three hunters into custody," she said. "I will talk with them, and we will see what I allow."

"Fuck, really?" Harcourt said. The reality of his situation was finally sinking in, the adrenaline of the action fading away. "I thought, since I helped Jack that ... um ... I guess we don't have a choice, do we?" He wiped away a tear, recovering quickly from his emotional reunion, but it was obvious he was terrified of what Antoinette might do to him.

"No. You do not. Understand that Dolareido is my city, hunter, and you three are prisoners of war. It is only by my good graces, and Jack's impulsive actions, that you survive our encounter at all." She came a step closer to the hunter, glared ice daggers into his eyes, and the man visibly shrank. "Daniel, take them to the tower, and imprison th ... constrain them, in the first floor cells." Well, at least she took a stab at some measure of civility.

Harcourt looked to Jack, but Jack nodded back to him, confident. As long as the hunters didn't know some sort of weakness about Dolareido they could exploit, Antoinette would be lenient. Daniel probably less so, but he wasn't the one making the decisions.

Daniel stepped up to the three hunters, and they quivered. They'd surrendered to a powerful and terrible enemy, as far as Marge and

Dennis were concerned; it was painted on their faces. One wrong move, and they'd get sliced up, Kissed to death, or embraced against their will. A bunch of bullshit that wasn't accurate, at least not in Dolareido, but Dolareido was unique. According to Harcourt, vampires could get pretty nasty in other cities.

Yeah, as if the curse hadn't just unleashed a whole bunch of nasty for all of them to see. And now, when he looked to the hunters, he could see fear. A mountain of fear. A fucking galaxy of fear. As much as Marge and Dennis looked at everyone, especially Antoinette and Daniel, with considerable fear, they looked at Jack with abject terror. In the past, it'd have made him happy to know the hunters feared him so. Now, it only added to the nausea eating at him.

Elen's whereabouts itched at him. She couldn't have gotten up and walked away, not with a body like that. Someone had to have come and taken her, and the only people capable of that, Jack was looking at. No one else was in the nightmare. Right?

Antoinette had dismissed worrying about her. Had she taken Elen somewhere before coming into Athalia's nightmare? No way, no time. Did someone else come? The portals were still open, and—

“Oh shit! Are the doors still open?” Jack said.

“The door I opened still is,” Beatrice said. “I can close it by ending the ritual. And it'll probably close with sunrise, anyway.”

Aaron shook his head. “The one Jeremiah cut open isn't. It closed the moment I stopped holding it open.”

“Don't worry,” Fiona said. “I can take us out. Or ... or Sándor can.” The spider woman looked — again, Jack could only guess she was looking — at Azamel, and sighed. “Azamel will want to stay in the nightmare, for now, until she ... heals.”

“Yes, she will,” the elephant said with the labor of someone breathing on one lung.

If there was any doubt that Azamel wasn't deeply injured, Fiona wiped it away. Azamel was hurt, badly. And fuck him, after all this, it was a sour note that really jived with the sour mess he'd left in Athalia's chamber, minutes ago.

What was that old line? Gotta take the bitter with the sweet? For once, it'd be great if it was just sweet, and not bitter.

God, he missed candy. Heh, random thought.

“Surprised you didn't see me, Prince, when you showed up,” Aaron said. “I was in the ... I guess I was literally in the wall, behind you. More in the flesh chamber, than in the nightmare. Could barely see through the hole.” The nightmare did keep trying to go back to its original state, so that made sense.

The Prince considered that for a moment, tapped her chin as she looked at Aaron, before finally turning to Jack. “Jack, come with me. The rest of you”—Antoinette turned and faced the unusual group—“should go home. Sándor, I freed you from my cell, but if you remain in Dolareido, you will still be under my rule. If you decide to stay, visit my tower as soon as possible.” Slowly, she turned to look back at Beatrice, who was sharing a weak hug with Jen. It looked like she wanted to hug harder, but the poor girl was beat to fuck. “All Kindred present will visit my tower tomorrow night, understood?”

If Othello were conscious, Jack got the impression he might say something stupid, like ‘you're not our boss’. And then Antoinette would promptly break his arm, given the ice Jack could see in her eyes. It was true that, while none of them were members of the Ordo Dracul, the Prince was still the Prince, and they all had to answer to her. Normally she'd go through their bosses, but she was

here, in person, and it was perfectly within her rights to dole out some orders, and punishment, if she felt like it.

“Sándor,” she continued, “can you open a doorway to ... somewhere convenient?”

The gargoyle nodded, before gesturing to the rest of them with one of his many hands. “You all can ... stay, if needed. It’s ... been a long time, since others have...” His voice trailed off, and he held still as he looked down. Completely still, like a statue.

The gargoyle, despite the booming bass and almost hidden rasp underneath his voice, talked casually, if rather unemotionally. It was strange. When something that big and ancient-looking spoke, you expected to hear something regal. And he did, a little, in how calmly he spoke, and how clearly he roared when killing Jeremiah. But now that the battle was over, he’d grown quiet, stern, and curt.

Poor guy. He’d lost his son and wife to the fucker, and was turned into a tool. Killing Jeremiah, literally eating Jeremiah, was the ultimate revenge, and yet he still looked broken, and defeated. His wife and son weren’t coming back. Mary wasn’t coming back either, and neither was Julias. Revenge soothed the aching rage Jack felt in his guts when he thought of Angela, thought of her corpse with a bullet through the skull, thought of the cold body that couldn’t hurt him or his loved ones anymore. Soothed, but didn’t heal. He felt drained, and tired, just like how he knew Beatrice felt, and Sándor too.

And while Angela’s corpse couldn’t hurt him anymore, it could still hurt Athalia, hurt her like a dagger through the soul.

Before they left, Daniel walked around and collected the various artifacts, the strange occult items that’d been handed out to the hunters, and the big book that looked like someone with a chainsaw for a hand had read from it. Groovy. Well, it made sense they’d want

the items, and better they take it, he supposed, than them just sitting around. And, better them than Jacob.

Jack looked to Beatrice one last time, before he followed Antoinette in the direction Sándor pointed.

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Up the road, into the castle, and into the hallway they'd all come from. This time, leaving the hallway was as simple as opening one of the doors within, and stepping into a dark room. From the dark room, they opened another door, and voila, they were in Antoinette's Elysium Tower, in the hallway outside of the cell he recognized as Sándor's.

Jack and Antoinette went first. Daniel and the three hunters followed behind. The sounds of their gasps was enough to make Jack smile a little, but the smile vanished when he caught a glimpse of Antoinette's icy stare. She was angry in that special way only a lover could be, but also combined with the anger mastered only by bosses, and queens.

Maria and Michael were going to be livid with him, but also happy. He'd produced results. He'd done what everyone else had been failing to do. He'd defeated the hunters, and had gotten revenge. The first would earn him great esteem with the Invictus, and the second would seal his reputation with the First Estate as a Ventrue to not be trifled with. The issue was smoothing over his rashness with Michael; Maria, not so much, since she was officially no longer a true member of the Invictus. Michael held the reputation of the Invictus in great importance, almost the most important thing, and Jack was sure he could appeal to that side of him.

"You're ... not going to kill us, are you?" Harcourt said.

"I am a woman of my word," Antoinette said. "You hunters believe us vampires soulless brutes, who indulge in murder for the

joy of it.” Sighing, she shook her head, and motioned down the hall of black marble. “Do not think so highly of yourselves. We have souls, hunters, and that is how some of us are capable of enjoying murder. It is also how some of us refuse to give into such blood lust. Be happy we do have souls, hunters, else little would stop me from simply killing you to protect what is mine.”

And with that, Daniel took the hunters. They looked a bit stunned, on top of all the stunning they’d been getting all night, but said nothing as the vampire in the trench coat with the big sword guided them along.

Soon, Jack was alone, with Antoinette, in a long hall of marble. The stone felt especially cold, and Jack struggled to keep from looking down. He failed, and looked at his filthy shoes. Filthy, but not filthy. The dirt was fading, dissipating, in a not dissimilar manner to Kindred blood, just without the tiny bits of flame and ash. It was material from the dream world. Made sense it’d fade away.

Unfortunately, the damage to his clothes did not. He was shirtless, didn’t have his weapons, and his pants had large tears cut into them. And now that everyone was gone, he did notice, for a tiny fraction of a second, an intrigued look from Antoinette. She liked what she saw. The look was replaced with frustration and annoyance instantly.

“Your phone?” she said.

“My phone? I—shit. It’s still in the nightmare.” Along with all my other gear. “Guaranteed it’s shattered.”

Sighing, Antoinette withdrew her own, and began texting. It was funny, watching her use a smartphone. He almost expected her to give orders to a servant to do it for her, or for her to use speech-to-text, since that’d be more in line with giving orders.

“Your mother is now aware you live.”

“My mom. Right ... right.”

“You are to meet with her in thirty minutes, in the recreation room on floor B5.”

“Yes sir!” He stood up straight, rigid, military posture, and saluted. But attempts at humor failed, unable to melt the ice wall standing before him.

“Let us go to my room, to speak privately. When we are done, you will speak to your mother. And then, you may contact the Invictus however you wish.”

“Right, right.” Sighing, he followed after her, down the many stairs into the deepest parts of her tower. The safe door was open, and once he stepped in, she pulled the enormous door closed, sealing them in her master bedroom.

He knew Antoinette wouldn't hurt him, but for a moment, he felt like a boy trapped in a cage with a tiger.

“Sit,” she said, and she gestured to her bed. Gulping, he did just that, and waited for the inevitable verbal lashing. “The hunters are defeated?”

“Yes.”

“I saw many corpses, some crucified upon trees.”

“The ones on the trees were already there. And all the dead hunters on the ground in that clearing, Elen killed with her magic. I killed a few before that, on the way to that clearing.”

“Ah, oui. I found one corpse at the door to the village, from Sándor's castle.”



“That one was Clara. I killed some others. You know I killed the hunters helping Angela. I killed some in the flesh chamber, too. But the majority were killed by Elen to fuel her rituals.” Antoinette had Elen’s knife now, since the old woman had dropped it when fleeing, but he doubted it was special. The book, on the other hand, must have been, and deadly powerful, if Antoinette could read it. And all the other artifacts, maybe they had special powers. “I’m pretty sure Elen can do everything she does without any of those artifacts though, or she can create more.”

“I see. Then ... I find it terribly frustrating that Jacob has her.”

Jack blinked at her, stood up, sat back down, and winced. “Elen disappeared, didn’t she?”

“In a way. I noticed the presence of Black Blood, and her disappearing body. I can only assume Jacob, or perhaps Black Blood alone, came to the dream, and stole away the shaman when the chance presented itself.” With a sigh to mimic his own, she came to sit next to him, took his hand, and set it on her lap.

“Fuck. I knew Black Blood could penetrate dreams, I just ... I didn’t think—”

“You did not think at all, my love.” She stared down at his hand, but her expression softened considerably. Soon, she was stroking his knuckles with her left hand, while her right held his hand against her leg. With her head aimed down, her hair flowed down over her shoulder on the opposite side of her head from him, a white curtain reaching down to her other leg. “So obsessed with defeating the hunters, you forget that other threats could take advantage. Forever the Carthians seek to hit the Invictus when they are weak. Forever, Jacob stirs chaos, and invites struggle to my city, in his barbaric need to weed out the weak. And ... and, I know that you know, my love, about the unseen presence that lurks within my city, something powerful and deadly, with unknown intent.”

He winced again, and looked down at her hands, same as she was for his. Damn it, she did know. He knew she knew, and he knew she knew he knew, but they'd never really said it, talked about it, and laid it out in the open. It wasn't the vampire way. Better to keep secrets, than to spread them and lose a valuable tool. Worse, better to keep the mouth closed, than have a loosed secret get someone killed.

“And ... and because I went full ham attacking these hunters, I—”

“You created chaos, and these factions could have taken advantage in any number of ways. What if Garry had discovered what you were doing, my love, and arranged for troubles to befall you? Your curse may be strong enough to protect you, but what of your friends, Damien, Beatrice, Fiona, and Clara.” The word Clara came out of her mouth with the tiniest hint of venom. “This unknown thing that hides within my walls may have struck out in this madness. Or, Jacob may have ... as he did.”

A slow, cold chill worked up through Jack's body. Jacob would have happily waited, while Jeremiah killed more vampires and monsters, until an opportunity presented itself for him to benefit. And to Jacob, anything to shake up the peace of Dolareido was a good thing.

“It's Jacob though. We can trust him, a little, right? I've seen him ... seen him at his worst, I think, and I don't think he'd actively harm Dolareido. He loves this city, in a strange way.”

“Do not underestimate the man's ability to deceive. And, do not underestimate an elder's desire to control and dominate.” Her right hand slipped away from his, and slid over his shoulders. “I can understand your actions, my love. For all my anger and annoyance with your brashness, I can both understand, and appreciate what you have done tonight. A great thorn has been removed from my

side, and only time will tell if Jacob's actions will be a detriment to my city."

"But, uh, you seem pretty angry. Like, I'm half expecting to get staked and thrown in a dungeon, Antoinette."

That managed to pull a smile from her. Good. He was really getting worried.

"I am beyond livid ... but not with you, not truly."

"Say what?"

Her right arm hugged him in close, tight to the side of her chest. "Were you in your elder years, it would be easier to explain. My kind naturally incline toward decisions that pit time against our enemies. Rashness and bravado is how most young Kindred die, Jack. Of all the fates that can befall neonates, it is hastiness that has destroyed the most."

"But, I knew with the curse that I'd be able to—"

"And perhaps, that is what has angered me, Jack. To know that you willingly embraced its power, this mark of the Strix, terrifies me. Striges are our enemies, Jack. They exist to create chaos, and suffering. They exist to spread their destructive view that Kindred must be predators, and kine can only be prey; at least, so one Ordo hypothesis proclaims." She got up, and started to pace, one arm hooked under her breasts while her other, elbow held by the other hand, moved about in the air as she talked. A professor, giving a lecture, pacing around in front of a white board. "It angers me to no end, that these trials fall upon you, a neonate barely out of his fledgling years. You should be deferring to your sire, who would then defer to the leader of your covenant. I can guarantee you, little Ventrue, that Michael would have voted against this attack, in favor of something safer."

“But more people would have died! I didn’t have time to debate it, or get a second opinion. We only had hours, and—”

“I am not finished.” Again she glared at him, and he froze. Gulp. “People die. We accept that. It is in our best interest to make decisions that have the greatest chance of success, with a calculated loss. Surely you understand that. From the many conversations you and I have had, my love, I have come to know your mind, and I appreciate your ability to think logically. For all the words of poets and the courageous, life rarely rewards *carpe diem*. Those who take the path less traveled, those who pounce upon opportunity without looking where they leap, those who believe strong will and determination will lead them to success against their obstacles, fail. They, in overwhelming droves, fail, and often die. Life is cruel, my love. Do you understand that?”

He nodded as he looked down. Christ, she was reading his mind.

“Yeah, I understand. And ... and for once, I felt it was worth the risk. With the curse, I knew I could do it, and ... and...” His face disappeared in his hands, and he leaned forward until his elbows rested on his knees. “I had to do it. I had to stop them. I had to ... to get her, Antoinette. I had to get her.”

The great elder, done with her lecture, reached down, took his hands, and nudged them aside. He looked up, and she smiled down at him, a mix of pity and knowing on her face.

“You did, my love. Revenge has been had. Are you satisfied?”

“No! No, I’m ... I’m not satisfied. I feel horrible. I feel sick. I ... fuck, the things I did.”

“The things it did, Jack.”

“I let it. And for a bit, a part of me liked what it did. Fuck, I told a guy to cut his own guts out.” He shivered as he looked away. To

Dominate someone to the point they'd not only commit suicide at order, but do it in torturous manner, was a level of Dominate he doubted many Ventrue ever managed. "And, fuck me, it's not even that that's bothering me. Killing those hunters, even in the brutal way I did, that's not what's eating at me."

"What is?" She sat beside him again, and resumed her previous position, hooking her right arm over his shoulders and pulling him to her chest.

"Killing Angela. Or rather, letting Beatrice kill her. You showed up, and the things you said, about Athalia..." It was enough to shatter the curse's grip on him, just like last time when he saw his mother in the hospital. "It wasn't supposed to be like that, you know? It wasn't supposed to be this ... execution scene. It was supposed to be a battle! We were supposed to take her down in a big fight, and it'd be ... I don't know, epic I guess." At least, that's what he'd been expecting. The curse, on the other hand, had been expecting to put Angela through some twisted shit, like a regular Jigsaw, but worse. "But we didn't do that. We executed her like a wild dog, while her mom watched, screaming and crying.

"Fuck," he continued, "I sound pathetic, don't I? You're centuries old, and must have been through a lot of horrible shit, right? This must sound like ... it must sound trite." That borderline sounded like an insult about her age. Shit. He winced, but managed a small shrug as he smiled up at her. "You know what I mean?"

"I do, my love. I do. Another harsh reality, is that revenge is never a glorious battle, where the party seeking vengeance wins through grit and effort. And it is never the delicious dessert many others think it will be. Revenge is a messy affair at best, a colossal nexus of ruin at worst. Perhaps most surprising, is how revenge will always involve others, whether you wish it to or not."

“Athalia.” He gulped down the rising bile in his throat he knew wasn’t there. “I’ve ... really fucked up, haven’t I? I let Jacob capture Elen, and I’ve strained our relationship with the Begotten and Uratha.”

“Perhaps.” Her voice had a hint of anger, but also a touch of contemplation. She was looking for something from him. He knew what.

“And I’ve strained our relationship. I made you worry. Hell, I made Mom worry.”

Bingo. With a subtle smile, she nodded.

“I will not punish you, my love. And I do not imagine Michael will either. For all your rashness tonight, you defeated the hunters without a single casualty. While it frustrates me to no end that you gambled, the reality is that your gamble paid off. We will worry about Elen another night; Jeremiah and Angela were the threats, while she was but a tool.” A very scary tool. “And, while that blasted spirit has taken the shaman, I acquired many artifacts tonight to add to my collection.”

He blinked at her, and the smile she gave him made him shiver again, for a completely different reason. It was easy to forget sometimes, that the Prince was a dragon, a member of the Ordo Dracul, and she was devoted to her covenant, a covenant that did secret things in the dark. Now she had Elen’s book, and her artifacts. Just because she wasn’t as nasty as Jacob, didn’t mean Antoinette didn’t do her own dangerous, maybe even nefarious things in secret.

“Can we ... not talk about unusual, spooky, magical things for a while?” he said. “No talk about the curse, or Crúac rituals, or flesh magic, or magic of any kind? Kinda just want to do the vampire thing for a while. Normal vampire stuff.”

“Normal ... vampire stuff?” she asked, an eyebrow raised. “I received word from Elaine not long ago. She will arrive in three days. With the hunters defeated, I believe I will host a ball, both in her honor, and to celebrate your victory.”

“A ball? Like, last time?”

Antoinette laughed and stroked his buzzed hair. “Yes, though with, perhaps, less sex. I do not wish to scare my new childe with such displays, yet.” A thought danced along her eyes, he could see it, and she looked up before tapping her chin with her left hand. “I would not be surprised if Jennifer tries to escalate that situation, in an attempt to push Beatrice past her sorrow, now that vengeance has been had.”

“I doubt it’ll work. When Beatrice killed Angela, she was ... she was pretty...” Broken.

But, sad as that was, sad as he felt he felt about Athalia, and about how Angela died, and the thousands of animals he sacrificed, he smiled. Yeah, tonight sucked. It really sucked. Clara, Triss, Othello, and Damien all nearly died. The slaughter had been a hectic mess that didn’t go the way any of them thought it would. Azamel was injured, and might die. And Athalia lost her daughter, something Jack doubted she’d ever forgive them for. But for all that shit, he had so much to be happy about. Stop being a dumbass, stop focusing on the negative, and look at the positive.

He smiled because Damien saved Sándor. He smiled because the hunters were all dead, every one of them except three, who were now prisoners, and some leftover drifters. He smiled because none of his friends or crew died. He smiled because Julias’s murder had been avenged. He smiled because, now, he could begin to heal, and so could Beatrice. Maybe his mom could, too.

And, maybe his sister could, too.

“And, I would not be surprised if Elaine attempts to escalate the situation in a similar manner. She will delight in teasing you, knowing that you are my lover.” She chuckled, a hearty sound rich with joy and memory, and she shook her head to dislodge it. But her smile remained. “I feel that, perhaps, I corrupted her when we were younger.”

“Wait, you corrupted her?”

Antoinette nodded. “Indeed. We visited each other dozens of times in our most promiscuous years. I taught her much of the joys of sex, and how to relish each orgasm with precision and delight.”

Jack stared at her, and gulped. “So, um, you’ve ... slept with her.”

“Indeed, hundreds of times.”

Antoinette’s story about the orgies she’d had with kine, when she’d owned her own castle, now suddenly included another vampire, another dominant figure doing things in the middle of all that flesh. Good god.

“With kine around?”

“Oui, though there were many times no kine graced our bed, and we had only each other for company. She is quite talented in the erotic arts.” She said it like it was the most casual thing, that her ex-girlfriend from centuries past, was someone she’d fucked a fucking fuckload. When she saw his expression of shock, she laughed again, and rubbed his buzzed hair. “You have nothing to fear, my love. We were never romantic with each other. Friends with benefits, as it is said. But I know Elaine, and she will tease you for the game of it. Be careful with her.”

Friends with benefits. Uh oh. The phrase hit a note in his head, and he couldn’t help but sit up straight. And naturally, Antoinette noticed, and the evil grin she donned struck him still. He knew that



grin. That was her ‘I’ve thought of a new personal barrier of yours to shatter, my love’ grin. Double uh oh?

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~~Damien~~

He woke up with a jolt, sat up straight, and regretted it instantly. Through the pain, he reached for his sword. Gone. He reached for his pistol. Gone. He reached for his silver knife; still there.

“Calm yourself, Damien,” a familiar voice said. Half of him shivered a bit at the sound, and another half relaxed as he attached a person to the familiar voice. Vrall, Fiona’s monster half. Fiona was here.

Damien eased back, and felt his spine press to a rock. A turn of his head showed it was the altar he’d been shot on. Beside the altar and beyond it, was a gigantic creature, looming, two massive horns donning its ... his head. Sándor. If the gargoyle was just standing there, not trying to rip him in half, then Damien had been successful in freeing him.

A smile sneaked onto his face as he looked around some more. Yes, there was Vrall in her spider silk dress. She was hovering over him, her eight spider legs pressed to the grass, and her two human arms reaching down and stroking through his hair. Beside him was Othello, and Clara in her human form. She had a knife in her hand, and was leaking blood from her wrist into Othello’s mouth.

Oh. Clara had given him blood. The last time he’d awoken from torpor, he’d had to fight a mild vitae addiction, and partial Vinculum with Beatrice. A werewolf’s blood would elicit no such reaction, and from what he could gather, it was potent blood. The hole in Othello’s chest began to close almost immediately; not completely, as it was a large wound, but a day’s sleep with some wolf blood in his gut would heal that, Damien was sure.

“Thank you,” he said to Clara, licking his teeth the moment the words were out. He could still taste her. It was different from both kine and Begotten, richer, and so full of life it was almost overpowering.

“Don’t sweat it. You did good, real fucking good.” Clara put the knife away, and gestured to Sándor. “Tall, dark, and handsome over there owes you his life. Well, he would have, but he saved our asses. So, kinda even, I guess.”

Damien grinned slightly, and looked to the gargoyle. “Is that so?”

“It is,” Beatrice said. She was sitting on a nearby rock, one of the stones in the center of the clearing. Jennifer and Aaron stood beside her. “He interrupted Jeremiah’s ritual, which you missed. Fucker nearly killed Azamel.”

“Is Azamel—”

“She lives,” the gargoyle said. And then said nothing. The creature’s voice boomed, and Damien found himself staring at him for more than a few seconds, before he looked around yet again.

Clara chimed in. “She’s been hurt badly. Mark says she’s going to stay in her lair for a while. He helped her get back.”

“What of the hunters? Jeremiah, and Angela?”

“All dead,” Beatrice said. There was no joy in her voice, and that confused Damien. Why wasn’t she happy?

“Mission successful then?”

The Nosferatu nodded. While she was sitting on the rock, she had her left arm out and draped over Jennifer’s shoulders, as if she’d fall over any minute. She looked like she might.

“Yeah, mission successful. The Prince showed up with the sheriff, and took Jack out of here, along with Harcourt and the two hunters who surrendered. She took Jeremiah and Elen’s shit, too.”

“What of Elen?”

She shook her head. “Don’t know. She didn’t have her, and Jack didn’t kill her.”

He tried to sit up again, and again regretted it. Looking down revealed many holes in his chest, mostly closed but not completely. The rifles had pushed their bullets straight through him, so healing wouldn’t be as bad as it could have been, but it was still a painful task, and he looked forward to sleeping come sunrise.

“She escaped?” he said.

Beatrice shook her head. “From the look I saw on Antoinette’s face, I ... I don’t think she did. I don’t know where she is, though. Maybe the sheriff took her when we weren’t looking.”

He shivered again, thinking of the magics the strange shaman had done. The symbols carved into the flap of flesh he’d ripped apart would never fade from his mind. The sight of the corpses on the trees calling out his location, and the sound, wouldn’t either. The corpses were silent now, but still there, and he grimaced as he looked at them, before back to the spider woman stroking his head.

“The hunters are defeated,” he said. “I ... I think that means we won?”

“Yep,” the werewolf said, getting to her feet. Her wrist wound didn’t close as quickly as it would have if she were in her werewolf form, and Damien glanced to it for probably a little longer than he should have. A lick of his fangs earned a subtle, but very real jerk of his hair from Fiona, hidden so the others wouldn’t notice. Ok, yeah, don’t go staring at other girls, even if it’s just because you’re hungry.

“Sándor,” Aaron said, walking over to the colossal creature as if he was walking over to just another vampire. “The others said you ate Jeremiah.”

“I ... did.”

“Do you eat the flesh of humans to sustain yourself?”

The titan shook his head, and began to walk around the clearing circle. He had no trouble scooping up corpses, one per hand, and setting them in a lone spot by the clearing edge. He wasn't so big that a human body fit into his palm like a fork, but he was fifteen feet tall, and was big enough he could scoop each up and hold them, like a human holding oddly large dolls. If the humans were alive, it would have been terribly uncomfortable, their own weight causing them to folding like pretzels around his fingers and palms.

“I ... feed, upon those I hunt. They must know that I hunt them, and it is that fear I feed on. I ... often eat the flesh. I often must.” With time, he collected all the bodies, including the ones crucified to trees, and sighed as he looked down at the pile of dead.

It seemed obvious that the man didn't like who he was, or at least didn't like how his Horror operated. Fiona had to feed on the fear of the guilty, and it only worked if they deserved to be punished. A more specific taste, but she didn't have to literally eat and kill her prey. She only did that if she wanted to gorge herself. If Sándor literally had to hunt and kill — or eat — his prey to sustain himself, that was a far harsher hunger to satisfy.

“Jack,” Damien said, “or the Prince, should be the one to welcome you to the city in an official capacity. Has he, or did the Prince when she was here?”

The titan nodded, a lazy and tired motion, before he started digging up the ground with his claws. The earth gave way to his fingers easier than it should have. His nightmare, his rules.

“Yeah, Antoinette told him he had to drop by for a sermon,” Beatrice said. “But, he doesn’t need a fucking lecture. He’s here. He —”

It was Damien’s turn to shake his head. “You know the Prince is going to want to speak to him, explain the rules to him.” Blinking, Damien looked to the gargoyle. “That is, of course, if you plan to remain in the city. It’s not your home, is it?”

“It isn’t. And for now I ... I will ... remain within my lair.”

“It is nice in Dolareido,” Vrall said. “Now that the hunters are dead, there is only peace in Dolareido ... of a sort.” She smiled down at Damien, leaned down, and kissed his forehead. He tried to lift his head so he could properly kiss her, but craning his head back didn’t agree with him, and he stopped the motion short before he could ruin the moment.

Only when Fiona pulled away, did he notice Beatrice looking at him. There was venom in her eyes, and sadness on her face, and when she noticed him noticing her, her eyes fell away. Or maybe, it was when he noticed her noticing both him and Fiona, that she looked away. Right, Julias.

Something had happened. Something, while he was deep in his forced torpor, had destroyed the joy he would have otherwise expected to see upon learning the hunters were defeated. No one looked happy except for Fiona, and even she seemed worried. Did everyone care for Azamel this much, or was it something else? Jeremiah was dead, dead at Sándor’s hand, and yet the gargoyle seemed morose. Angela was dead, surely at Beatrice or Jack’s hand, and yet Beatrice seemed quite defeated.

Was this how he’d have felt, if he’d managed to kill Antoinette and Daniel, when he assaulted the Elysium Tower? If the revenge he’d wanted for so long had been obtained, would he have felt

defeated for acquiring it? Perhaps, especially once Lucas's madness became obvious.

"Can you help me up?" he asked.

"Of course." Vrall held him up, and he hooked his arm over her shoulders. Her feet, or rather, pointy blade things, never touched the ground. If she did try to walk on them and them alone, she'd likely sink a foot into the earth, considering how sharp they looked. But with her eight spider legs, enormous and smooth, jutting out of her back and tapping along the ground around her, her foot points stayed an inch above the ground, hovering.

"I'd love to get a drink," he said, "but I need to speak to Michael and Maria."

The werewolf, of all people, was the first to get up and agree, nodding. "Makes sense. Burning resources hunting for hunters that aren't a problem anymore—"

"No, wait," Damien said. "That isn't true. Harcourt said there were hunters still in the city, maybe a dozen."

Beatrice shrugged, as if the effort to lift her shoulders was colossal. "Harcourt will deal with them. And the ones that don't listen to him won't be a big threat without Elen to let them cheat shit."

True. The shaman's magics allowed the hunters avenues of attack and retreat that bordered on cheating.

He laughed, and leaned the side of his head toward Vrall. His temple met one of her gorgeous horns, rather than meeting her actual head, but it was the side of the horn, and he set the weight of his head against it.

“It’s hard to relax, isn’t it?” he said. “I’m trying to relax, about our success, but a part of me is telling me I shouldn’t relax, that I should keep my guard up.”

He shouldn’t have said that. Everyone looked at each other, and where he should have found shock or confusion, he found only knowing eyes. They all felt the same way, and while he’d only thought Fiona and Jack were in the know about the mysterious threat lurking within Dolareido, their expressions suggested otherwise. Everyone knew about it, or knew about something.

Lovely.

# Chapter 112

~~Beatrice~~

Everyone left. Sándor was apparently a really, really strong Begotten, to the point he surprised Fiona when he opened a pathway back to the real world without issue. A wave of the gargoyle's hand, and the darkness in the forest flickered. Fiona, or Vrall or whatever, went through it with her man, and they disappeared, supposedly to arrive near Damien's apartment so he could take a moment to recoup. Two crows sat on Damien's shoulders, and several more plus a few rats scurried along with them. Mulder, Scully, and the few that survived Jack's assault. A second later, Sándor did it again for Clara, opening to somewhere in the Carthian district. And then again, for Aaron, who was dragging the now barely conscious Othello. Sándor opened a portal to the outskirts of town, guided by Aaron's suggestions. Mark had already left with Azamel, so, that left Beatrice, Jennifer, and the gargoyle.

"Why did you not leave with your friends?" the beast asked.

Triss shrugged, and dragged herself over to the altar she knew had been Sándor's imprisonment. This was where Elen had done her ritual, with knife and skin. Triss could almost feel the residue of a strange power emanating from it. Not so strange, really. It felt similar to Crúac.

"I thought Athalia might come through. I wanted to talk to her," she said.

"The door between our lairs has closed. I am, once again, closed off from the other Begotten."

"Closed off?" she said.



“Yes. Athalia, Fiona, Azamel, and Mark have linked their lairs. They may travel between their many realms freely. I ... have not linked my lair with anyone in many years.”

“Sounds lonely,” Jennifer said. She came up behind Beatrice, and hugged her, arms looping around her stomach. She either wanted to keep close in case Triss started to fall, or she just wanted to be close in general. It was good, either way. Triss was too exhausted to be surly and dismissive. And it felt good to let Jennifer in close again. She leaned back into Jennifer’s body, and sighed.

Triss turned her head enough to give her friend a small kiss on the cheek. “How long were you under Elen’s control?”

“Four years.”

“Jesus Christ.” She shivered, and set her hands on the altar. It was sloped upward, but at the lowest point where it pointed toward the center of the clearing, it was low enough that her arms came down in order for her palms to reach it, with a bit of a slouch, too. “He murdered your family, to capture you?”

“... yes.” Slowly, with delicate hands completely at odds with the Horror she’d seen earlier, the gargoyle lowered some of the many bodies into the hole he dug. They didn’t deserve a burial, especially if they helped Jeremiah capture Sándor, and yet the monster was burying them. From how careful he was being, she suspected he’d give them a proper burial, if it’d been viable.

“Horrible,” Jennifer said. “Absolutely horrible.”

Triss winced. Yeah, it was horrible. But how long ago did Triss and Jen brutally butcher a bunch of kine, sacrificing them into a big rusty bowl, so Triss could communicate with some otherworldly entity of blood and pain? Those people had been brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, maybe even mothers and fathers too. Tough to think of the hunters as being so low, when—no. No, don’t think that

shit. The people you killed were just scumbags and worthless cockroaches. What you did is not the same as killing the family members of the people you were hunting. Jeremiah and Angela were the lowest of the low. Don't compare your journey into the world of blood sacrifice, to their pathetic, cowardly, shitty tactics.

“Well,” Triss said, “fuck him. He taught Angela to fight dirty like that, and it got them killed.”

“Yes ... yes, it did.” The gargoyle put on the smallest smile, before he came over to them, and squatted like he was perching on a jutting stone of a church wall. God damn he was huge, muscular as all fuck, and she stared at the beast for a few seconds as he pulled his huge wings in snug to his back.

His face was expressive in a way she hadn't been prepared for. It was a demon face, yes, but a human demon face, with dark steel-colored skin, deep set eyes, pronounced eyebrow ridges, and of course, giant horns. Like, big, curly, scary, giant horns. And with his very hard, broad chin, he would have looked perfectly at home sitting on a throne, looking stoic, and giving orders to his army of demons. When he talked, she could see hints of his teeth behind his lips, all of them sharp, with some very nasty, pronounced fangs. Those teeth had chomped Jeremiah into bite sized chunks.

Speaking of teeth, and biting.

“Your neck ok?” she said, gesturing to it.

That, of all things, brought a real, if momentary smile to the squatting monster's face. “Yes, mostly.” He raised one of his hands to his neck, and rubbed at the wound. The skin was mostly closed, but she'd managed to fuck his neck up pretty good. Damn proud of that.

“I guess Athalia didn't come back,” Jen said.

Triss nodded. "I'm not surprised. It ... it..." Fuck it. She turned around, and hugged Jennifer, full on hug. She set her face in her friend's neck, and just held on. No crying, no sobbing. She'd cried enough for a decade, at least. But, she wanted a hug. "Killing Angela wasn't fun."

Jennifer chuckled, a tiny laugh, only audible cause Triss was close enough to feel it. "You thought it would be?"

"Yes. I thought I'd kill her, laughing and dancing the whole time, you know? It'd be great. I'd feel great." Sighing, she ran her hands up and down Jen's back a little, continuing the hug. "Instead, all I did was ... execute a defeated, broken, stupid girl. And I did it in front of her crying mom." After making sure the hug was good and long, she backed off and set her hands on Jen's shoulders. "Felt more like ... like a scene from Old Yeller, or something, you know? I was putting down a rabid dog. I wanted to be screaming with joy! Not ... not..."

"Jeremiah's last words," Sándor said, his quiet voice rumbling with so much bass, he sounded more like a subwoofer, "were to tell Angela to run. His last words ... were an attempt to save her, while he died." The gargoyle, still squatting with his two lower arms resting on his knees, raised his two higher arms out in front of him, and slowly grabbed the air, as if grabbing Jeremiah again. "I did not kill a monster. I killed a person. It had to be done, but that does not alleviate the weight such death places on our ... souls."

Ugh, she hated that that sounded right. Killing people brought with it something she couldn't quite put her finger on, until Sándor just said it: weight. She'd been killing a lot of people lately, and that weight was starting to pull her down, like shackles tied around her throat. Killing Angela was more weight on her soul, and good god, that fucking sucked. Killing the bitch should have freed her, not added to a growing mountain of bones tied to her.

“You sound ... wise, I guess,” she said, smiling up at the gargoyle. Jen slipped behind her, and started hugging her again, this time putting a kiss on her ear as she did. Triss didn’t pull her head away this time. It felt nice, to have Jen’s hands on her, and after tonight, after the misery of Athalia’s sobs faded, maybe she’d let her do more. Not tonight, but later.

“I’ve been around for many centuries,” the beast said. “I guess ... wisdom snuck up on me.”

“Centuries?” Jen said from over Triss’s shoulder. “We thought Begotten aged. Slowly, but they did.”

“It depends on whichever Horror has cursed us. The ... gargoyle, ages very slowly, like the stones of a castle wall. I will live for centuries yet, I imagine.” With a great, heavy sigh, the beast slid his long tail along the earth, until it was curled around the front of his ankles, and then behind him again. “I ... I have to apologize, Beatrice.”

“Apologize? For—oh ... right.” Right. Sándor was a big part of the reason Julias was dead. “You were under a fucking spell, dude. And after learning about what Jeremiah did to you, the fuck am I going to do, yell at you because you were forced to help kill my boyfriend? Christ man, you lost your wife, and your son! I...” She’d started yelling, and only after her volume rose, did it slap her in her stupid face that she was yelling at herself. “H ... How was he, at the end? Julias, I mean.”

“Ridiculously strong. I knew of the ancilla, and what was to be expected of a Ventrue his age, and yet he surprised me. Defeated me. He demonstrated resilience, and strength that I had not expected. I could tell he was fighting for something, for someone.”

God damn it. She smiled, and took a breath, forcing down the sudden urge to cry again. “Tch, yeah, he was. Me, and for Jack, too.”

“Jack...” The gargoyle shivered, and that included his wings, all four of them reaching out with their long arms to shake, as if dislodging snow. “The curse is a horrifying taint. I ... I would have lost that fight, if he’d really tried to kill me.”

Jen and Triss both shivered as well. Yeah, she could believe that.

“So, Mr. Sándor, you’re going to stay here in your lair?” Jennifer stepped around Triss, and walked up to the squatting titan. Without a bit of fear in her step, but definitely a bit of sway in her hips, she came up under the monster’s head, and grinned up at him.

“I ... yes. I will heal faster here. And ... I have nowhere else to go, for now. Sándor’s life, my old life, is gone.”

The damn Ventrue put a hand on the gargoyle’s knee, and chuckled. Or, giggled, if Triss was hearing right. “So, you could stay in Dolareido?” Oh good god she was flirting with the gargoyle.

The gargoyle tilted his head to the side, as if perplexed by her blatant flirting. Maybe he was. Well, he’d helped them a fuckload, least Triss could do was save him from Jen’s legs.

“Jen, stop flirting with the giant gargoyle. It—he’s a gargoyle.” She was tempted to make a comment about his obvious lack of a penis, but then, she knew Jessy had sex with Eric when he was transformed, and werewolves didn’t walk around with dicks and balls. Maybe it formed when the desire was present? Werewolves were spirit things, not biological, and Sándor was a dream thing, not biological.

Hell, did vampires really count as biological? They may have lived in a world of blood, but blood and flesh were proving capable of more than she’d ever thought, considering what Elen had done, and what she’d done with Crúac. Maybe it was time she stopped thinking of vampires as simple bodies of flesh and blood, and more like how she thought of dream monsters, spirits, and ghosts.

“Athalia’s not coming,” Triss said. “Let’s go.” It was probably a good thing she didn’t. Triss wanted to talk to her, but she still hadn’t resolved her feelings about the whole situation, and she knew it. It made her feel guilty, not knowing how to feel. She’d killed a woman’s daughter, and that woman was a fellow monster, too. The least she could do was understand how she felt about it, so she could feel justified, or something. It was the least she could fucking do, so she could talk to Athalia, and know where they both stood.

“Fine, fine.” Jen rejoined her, and the two of them started toward the village road. At least, until Jen stopped, and leaned in close to Triss’s ear. “We should ask him to come home with us.”

“Jen, Angela’s been dead thirty minutes. Can’t you—”

“Not to sleep with, dumbass.” She looked over her shoulder back at the gargoyle, and draped her left arm over Triss’s shoulders. Ow, legs, not healed, ow. “Though, I mean, we’ve both seen him in his human form, without his shirt. He’s a sexy man. Hell, he’s sexy right now. But, not what I meant. I meant, he’s has no home, and he’s lost everything. Perhaps we should extend him a hand?”

Triss rolled her eyes. Jen wasn’t fooling her. It was true they’d both seen him without his shirt, that night they fought him and a few other hunters in Elen’s flesh chamber, and he’d been a gorgeous man. A little tall, quite lean, muscular but not overly thick. He actually kinda looked like Jack, just scaled up; even had the short dark hair. Only difference besides the overall size, was the Begotten had had some gruff on his face.

She tried to think about how hot he’d looked when they’d been fighting him, with his abs and shit on a sweaty display, but the image was ruined. That was the night Julias died. But, hey, if Jen wanted to fuck him, she was free to fuck him. Poor girl hadn’t fucked anyone since Superman died.

“Go ahead,” she said, and immediately regretted it. No, she didn’t want a stranger around. She wanted to be alone, or maybe talk to Jacob about all this shit, about revenge, about this hole in her fucking gut that wouldn’t go away. He’d understand; ancient fucker understood everything.

“Sándor,” Jen said, turning around, and hooking her other arm around Triss’s throat gently, so her wrist dangled over Triss’s further shoulder. “Did you ever find out where the Circle of the Crone sleeps during the day?” Except for Jacob, of course. Elders didn’t expose their backs when sleeping, even to their comrades.

“No.”

“We sleep on the outskirts of town, in a cave hidden in a ravine. It’s not far from the path you made for Aaron, East of there. You’ll know you’ve found it when you see three giant rocks propped up next to each other.”

The gargoyle stared at her, his steely expression so damn hard to read. Fucker was stoic, so stoic it was almost comical. It was so hilariously different from the raging bull that’d been trying to kill them before, she wasn’t even sure it was really him. If he got angry, would he become that raging death machine, like his Horror had been? It’d been scary strong.

And a scary strong Begotten would be a powerful ally.

Triss raised a brow as she looked at the Ventrue still hooking her neck and shoulders, and Jen spared her a quick, knowing smile. That crafty slut. Well, she said her sire had sired her because she was both attractive, and conniving.

“I will ... visit, sometime.”

“Wonderful!” Jen let go of Triss, and clapped her hands together once, before rising onto the balls of her feet for a moment, then

landing on her heels. Just enough of a tiny, 'girly' flirtatious jump, to make her tits jiggle a bit inside her suit top. If it'd been someone like Fiona, Triss would have chalked it up to just natural flirtiness; the redhead flirted like breathing. With Jen, on the other hand, it was calculated, always calculated.

Calculated boob jiggle. The thought made Triss laugh, and she struggled to get it under control. Pain ripped through her, but she laughed anyway. When Jen turned to face her, Triss hooked an arm over her shoulders, and leaned on her, desperate to get some weight off her legs and ribs. But she still laughed. The pain didn't matter. It felt good to laugh.

"Before ... you go," the gargoyle said, "I..."

"Yeah?" Triss asked.

"I ... do not know who to tell of this. But, the presence that ... attacked me in my lair, months ago, the one that rescued Jack and the others..."

Oh shit. Triss's laughter came to a quick stop, and she turned her and Jen around so she could look at the gargoyle again while keeping her arm on Jen's shoulders. They hadn't gotten very far, just to the edge of the clearing, and she wasn't looking forward to limping over all the destroyed trees back to the creepy village road anyway.

"You're talking about Black Blood," she said. "A spirit."

The titan nodded, and slowly looked down. "It came."

"He came? Like ... like, tonight, he came?"

"Yes."



Of course he did. Of fucking course he did. The damn thing had probably been watching from outside the nightmare somehow, looking for an opportunity to take advantage of the situation.

“What’d he do?” she said. “If he showed up, he was up to something.”

“I do not know. Except ... it ... he helped me break the ritual.”

“Say what?” She stared at the gargoyle, but the beast simply remained where he was, squatting over the grass and death around him. Stoic bastard. “Black Blood helped you?”

“Jeremiah’s ritual took the nightmare from me, and blinded me. The ... the spirit, removed the veil from my eyes.” He snorted, just like a big, heavy animal that didn’t like its situation might. A damn powerful sound, and Triss shivered as she felt the heavy bass of it flow past her. “The spirit was ... cold.”

Triss and Jen looked to each other, and sighed. Yeah, that was Black Blood. His presence was cold, but not in temperature. It was cold, the way death felt cold.

“Thanks for telling us,” she said. “I’d avoid telling anyone else except for us witches. Black Blood isn’t exactly well liked in Dolareido.”

The monster nodded, and turned his head back to look down at the ground in front of him. He didn’t move. Literally. He didn’t breath, didn’t shift, didn’t adjust, he just squatted there like a statue. Like an actual gargoyle.

“Hungry?” Jen said.

“Oh god, very. Fucking starving.” She gave her friend a smile, and started to limp toward Dracula’s knock-off castle.

Angela was dead. Jeremiah was dead. The hunters were defeated except for some still hiding out in the city, and they weren't nearly the threat they'd been with their leader. Triss and the gang had won. Yeah, Athalia probably hated them, but they saved Azamel's life too, so that was a point in their corner for keeping the Begotten on their side. Jack managed to become Jack again, normal Jack. And they'd made an ally in Sándor. Everything was looking up.

She could go home now, maybe go visit Julias's mansion, and do something to seek finality. Burn it down, maybe? The Invictus would probably have her head for that. Maybe walk around the mansion for a while, and just absorb the sad memories. Maybe cry until it hurt, like she'd done so many times already? No matter how bad she felt about killing Angela, about how horribly the night had gone and had been, there was a piece of her that was genuinely happy. Vengeance was had. Time to move on.

But, why was Black Blood here? How did he know what was going on? What the fuck was Jacob up to?

---

~~Natasha~~

Flowing Sanctuary kicked them out of the Hisil, under threat of reporting them to Avery, and beating them to a pulp. And it had the power to make it a reality. It became clear, as the strange entity guided them to the nearest locus, and then sent them packing, that Flow was a very powerful spirit.

The boys told Tash a story, a third hand account of how Avery, who'd lost her pack and her previous totem spirit, met Flow when she was dying. They didn't know what, but something happened to Simon and his pack, between now and the last time Avery had come to the city. Flow had been tiny then, apparently a water spirit who'd obtained a desire to protect others somehow. It wasn't far fetched. Water could be a very protective force in certain circumstances. A river could be a wall between predator and prey. The surface of a

lake could be the barrier between predator and prey. She'd have to ask to find out, and after tonight, she was afraid to ask Flow anything.

Together, Flow and Avery had helped each other survive, and forged a friendship. That friendship was how Flow became her totem spirit, instead of a deal struck or forced enslavement. Flow was too powerful to be forced to do anything, probably.

So, Tash and friends had been forced out, back to the physical world. Eric looked upset. The man was finally reaching out to affect the paranormal world, instead of being pulled into it, and got shut down for his efforts.

Natasha frowned down at the sidewalk as she turned the thoughts in her head. "I wonder..."

"Mm?" the boys said, looking over their shoulders at her. She'd fallen behind the group, trapped in her thoughts.

"I w-wonder how Flow found us. Dolareido is a b-b-big city."

"It probably tracked Matt and me down," Art said. "We've been working together for years. I'm sure it can find us if we're in the Hisil."

That made sense, she supposed. She wasn't sure how spirits sensed, but if Flow was acutely familiar with the 'scent' of its pack, then—"Um, then m-maybe Eric should do what he wants ... without you?"

Eric glanced over his shoulder at them, shrugged, and continued on. He was cranky, but she was confident he'd get over it. And the streets of Dolareido weren't the best place for this sort of conversation anyway.

“She’s right,” Matt said. “Sorry Eric. I mean, we knew Flow would disagree, but we didn’t think it’d actively block us.”

Art sighed as he shrugged. “Avery must have warned it, tipped it off that we might do something like this. Damn woman knew what you were going to do, Eric, and of course whatever Avery thinks is right, she does.”

Avery was strong willed, to the point it’d be a problem if she ever disagreed with Antoinette about something important. She’d willingly fight the elder, if she thought it was the right thing to do. And, while the werewolf must have been extremely dangerous, Antoinette was half a millennium old. Eric, on the other hand, was a fresh pup, and Avery would have no trouble smacking him around.

She pulled out her phone, and checked her messages. She’d gotten into the habit of turning off the vibration, for fear it might get her in trouble someday in a precarious situation. And—oh, oh god. One from Jack, one from Antoinette, each a couple hours old, and a new one from Antoinette. Uh oh.

“Um, I have t-to get back to the Elysium, immediately.”

“Business?” the boys said together.

“Yes. Um, Jessy, you’ll w-want to talk to McDonald, too. Something happened. Something ... b-big.”

“Big?”

“Y-Yes. Um ... we ... we d-d-don’t need to worry about the hunters anymore. M-Most are ... dead, including Jeremiah, and Angela.”

Everyone stopped, and stared at her. She’d had to whisper it, so quiet they wouldn’t have been able to hear it if they hadn’t been paranormals. The text said some hunters were still in the city, and

she couldn't risk them hearing. Even letting normal kine hear such a profound statement was risky.

“Wow,” Matt said, “um ... ok? I guess we'll head back, and see what Avery knows.”

Natasha stared at the text again for a moment, took a second to nod to each person in the group, including a knowing one for Jessy, before she vanished.

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As she descended the stairs of the Elysium tower, she froze. People were talking, voices she recognized.

Jack, and Samantha. The two were sitting in one of the recreation rooms, the one with couches and an enormous TV, meant for digesting news in luxury. Jack was talking about his fight with the hunters, from the little Natasha picked up, and mentioned Angela was dead.

So, Natasha did what any self respecting Mekhet would do. She Cloaked herself, and pressed her back to the archway of the room's entrance. Spying! No, not spying, but she just couldn't help herself.

“Angela's dead?” Samantha said.

“Yeah, she's dead.”

“I ... I ... I don't know what to say.”

That earned a chuckle from the kid. “Neither do I, Mom. I don't know how to feel about it. It ... it...” Natasha couldn't see him, from how she kept her back to the frame of the arch entrance, and Jack might be able to spot her if she peeked, with his new power. If he could sense her right now, he wasn't letting it affect his conversation. Maybe he was too tired to.

“It must have been horrible.”

“Yeah, it was. We won, really won. We took them down and didn’t lose a single person. But ... yeah, it was bad.” After a long sigh, one Natasha knew Jack often made while rubbing his buzzed hair, he continued. “But, we’re safe. Or at least, a lot safer. There’s still some hunters in the city, but—”

“What about Athalia?”

“Athalia? She ... she was there, yeah.”

“Oh no. She helped kill her daughter.”

“No. It was the plan that she’d help kill her, or possibly capture her. In the end, she ... she tried to save Angela, and we had to kill her anyway. I ... I don’t think ... Athalia’s ever going to forgive me, for that.”

“Oh Jack. I can’t imagine. I ... I can’t imagine.”

“I have to go talk to my bosses in a minute, Mom. But later, we can—”

Some shuffling fabric sounds signaled that they were hugging, and Natasha felt her heart break. She’d been super happy to learn the hunters were defeated, so happy she’d forgotten about Athalia. Antoinette would tell her to not concern herself with Athalia’s pain, but it was easier said than done. Maybe with a hundred years under her belt, Natasha could close off her heart like that, but for now, it all hit her no matter how hard she tried to keep it out. It was one of the reasons she didn’t hang with people as much as someone like Jessie. She absorbed the emotions of people around her, whether she wanted to or not.

She didn’t stick around anymore, and instead moved on to the primary experimentation room, where she knew Antoinette awaited her. It wouldn’t be good to come to Antoinette feeling emotional about poor Samantha and poor Athalia, and poor Mary, and poor ...

whoever else was hurt. Undoubtedly, other people had been hurt. But Antoinette would want her calm, smart, and logical.

She walked into the grand room where Antoinette stood by the massive table off to the side, covered in laptops. In the center of the huge room, was the dangling chandelier of blue, though it was off, and some regular white LEDs were on instead. All the laptops were on, and around the laptops, were a host of strange items Natasha had never seen.

“Prince, I—oh, w-what are these?” Immediately, the shrunken head grabbed her attention. It’d have creeped her out in the past, and while it was still definitely creepy, it didn’t bother her anymore. After months of dealing with Antoinette’s strange research, a shrunken head was pretty normal.

Except, it wasn’t just a shrunken head. There were a whole bunch of things! A knife that must have been carved out of a bone. A necklace that had bits of bone hooked on it. It was a smörgåsbord of occult objects, and they all had a very obvious motif: the key aspects of each were made of human body parts. And, in the center of it all, was a very creepy book, a big, fat, thick book that demanded she read it. Except, the cover was obviously made of skin, probably human skin, and if she opened it, she was likely to summon the Apocalypse.

The book put everything else into context. This was the hunters’ stuff, the shaman’s stuff, and Antoinette had taken it from the dream.

“Oh m-m-my god...”

“Indeed.” Antoinette looked to her, grinned a knowing grin, and sat down at the table as she gestured for her to do the same. “The hunters are defeated, and I have gained many new items for my collection. We will have much to study, I think.” And, without fear, she opened the book. Natasha froze, expecting it to scream, to burst

into flame, to unleash a black demon arm, or at least do something more than be a book. But it just sat there, doing book things, waiting to be read; deciphered, actually, as she didn't recognize the letters.

"I can't b-b-believe it. The hunters are gone?"

"Yes, except for, as I warned you, perhaps a dozen that remain in the city, leaderless. Though tomorrow night, you, I, Daniel, and Jack will talk with Harcourt." She frowned at the mention of the hunter's name, the one she'd mentioned in her text. "These hunters must come to my tower, and only after I have personally inspected them, will I allow them to leave. I expect that there will yet be more deaths, hunter deaths, before this problem is completely resolved."

"The p-part of war no one talks about. It never stops instantly, d-d-does it? It always ... trickles to a stop."

"Quite true, Miss Vola." Antoinette smiled at her, proud, and Natasha buzzed with joy. Teacher's pet. "The realities of war are never as final or definitive as in literature. But, for all my frustration with Jack for the reckless assault he led tonight, the hunters are defeated. Only one true problem has been created in the aftermath."

Uh oh. "Problem?"

"Elen lived through the encounter. And, while I admit that I had hoped she would, so I could capture her, and learn what she knew, it is not I who possesses her."

"She lived, b-b-but she's not here? Then, who ha—Jacob. J-Jacob has her."

Again, Antoinette smiled. "Your deduction skills improve, my student. Oui, that infernal Nosferatu has taken her, with Black Blood's aid. And now, my strongest ally, and perhaps strongest enemy, is potentially armed with the skills of a terribly skilled



shaman of flesh.” Sighing, smile gone, she gestured to the assortment of occult goods. “And while both Jacob and I gained from the fallout of my beloved’s assault, I fear he has stolen the better of the spoils.”

“B-But, we have her book, and—”

“I doubt she needs this scripture, Miss Vola. For a creature that absorbed in her craft, it is likely that she can wield the art as easily as a musician plays their instrument.”

“B-But, even a musician needs their sheet music for really long and complicated songs!”

That pleased the Prince, and she nodded as she sat back, tapping her chin with a finger. “Correct again, little one. Yes, it may be true that Elen will need the book, or her tools, for some of her more grand efforts. Jacob may come to bargain for said tools, or, he may attempt to take them by force.”

“What!? W-Why would he do that?”

“Because, Miss Vola, Jacob is forever obsessed with his rituals. He toys with barriers, as you and I do, and I fear that Jacob will ... No. I judge the man too harshly. But remain vigilant of the possibility, Vola.”

“I will.” The idea of Jacob going from his usual, strange, unpredictable but still-a-friend self, to a genuine enemy, was terrifying, far more terrifying than the hunters, or the werewolves, or Azamel.

Antoinette leaned in then, and offered Natasha a rather predatory grin. “And do not think I do not know, that you know I sent you a text earlier today, Vola, one that you ignored. Knowing you, you either had your phone off to help hide your presence and not annoy

others, or more likely, you were out with your boyfriends, on an ... adventure. Perhaps you were out, learning of the Hisil?”

Natasha froze, gulped, and nodded. Better to not say anything, and put her foot in her mouth.

The Prince chuckled. “You are free to be adventurous with your desire to learn of spirits and of Uratha. As long as you are careful, as I trust you to be, and to share with your teacher valuable information.” Natasha nodded vigorously. “Good. I summoned you here to familiarize yourself with these items before sunrise, as you can imagine. But also, your priorities have changed with the defeat of the hunters.”

“Oh, r-right. If Jack’s taken them down, then I d-don’t need to be hunting for them anymore.” If she hadn’t been in the Hisil tonight, she would have gotten Jack’s call, or following text. She would have come. Maybe it was a good thing she didn’t?

“I wished for you to explore ways to defeat Begotten. For now, consider such an activity as your lowest priority. Azamel and Sándor can be ... trusted, to an extent. I wish for you to continue learning of spirits and the werewolves, though that is to be your second priority. Your primary task, young Mekhet, will be to discover whatever it is that haunts my city.”

“Haunts?”

Antoinette leaned back, and adopted her serious face, like steel. “Surely you have noticed it. Something lurks within the shadows. It watches. It affects in ways I have yet to determine.”

“Black Blood? Or ... Maria?” The thought of her old boss being up to something so nasty that Antoinette considered it to be a ‘thing’ haunting her city, was not a comforting thought. At least with Black Blood, it was practically expected.

“I do not know, Miss Vola.” She shrugged. That was scary, Antoinette shrugged. To see the elder straight up admit to not knowing something was always startling. “Perhaps. The Begotten have noticed the presence of something, and Jack is aware of it. I imagine several of his interactions with the Begotten brought this strange presence to light. It creeps and crawls, just at the edge of my awareness, Vola. I have learned more of its presence through things not seen, rather than seen. The spirits we summon have mentioned something that scars the land, and cuts holes through the Gauntlet, but know not what. I cannot help but—”

“Um ... I m-may have an idea.”

The Prince raised an eyebrow, her steel expression shattering for one of intrigue. “Oh?”

“Y-Yes. I d-d-don’t know if it’s connected, but ... when I was in the Hisil, with Avery, a little while ago, one of the spirits, and David, they ... they umm ... said that the strange spider monster, the Azlu, it didn’t come naturally. Something ... d-drew it here.”

The Prince froze for a moment, and her eyes slowly, slightly squinted at Natasha, like she was lining her up as a target. “And you wait until now to share this with me?”

Natasha felt her whole body suddenly encapsulate in ice. Antoinette almost never looked at her that way, that angry way, with cold fury flowing out of her. Fix it fix it fix it!

“I-I’m sorry! I had planned to, in a more ... d-d-detailed report.” It hadn’t been long since that first trip into the Hisil, and she’d been a little more concerned with the hunters. Yeah, the hunters! “The hunters were t-taking p-p-priority! And ... I ... didn’t think it was important.”

Antoinette’s fury always came in two forms: fire, and ice. Fire came and went predictably, and Antoinette was better at controlling

it than most. Ice, on the other hand, made Natasha feel like she was staring into the eyes of an alien intelligence, something with a mind greater than hers, something that looked at her with disdain like how a human might look at an ant that'd had the nerve to get on their food. It was the sort of anger only someone who'd had decades of experience being a leader could truly wield.

But, Antoinette sighed, and the ice melted away. "I apologize, my student. I have not truly involved you in this hunt for the mysterious force. I should not expect you to make connections regarding it."

"I should have m-mentioned it, though."

"Perhaps, but I am sure you would have eventually, as you did." Leaning back, Antoinette looked up at the ceiling far above them, and combed her hair over her right shoulder down onto her chest. "So the Uratha have also had their attention drawn to something unusual within the city."

"Y-Yes. One of the spirits ... um, Street-Tail King, it said it would give them information about the Azlu, if they promised to ... p-pursue the mystery, to its end, and deal with it for Street-Tail. It was ... afraid."

"Pursue the mystery to its end. That does sound undoubtedly linked, does it not?"

"It d-does."

Antoinette shook her head as she looked at the table, and Natasha could only guess at the million thoughts running through her head.

"There is a connection we are not seeing, my student. The hunters have been a distraction, and I fear the Carthians and Terra Den will continue this trend of distractions. You will be my eyes and ears, Natasha, in a way my sheriff cannot. Continue to learn of the Uratha

and the spirits. And make more of an effort to befriend the Begotten. And, if possible, learn more of Black Blood.”

“B-B-B-Black...” Oh god.

“Tread lightly, my student. Black Blood does not care for my presence, and undoubtedly knows you serve the Ordo as well. Should an interaction occur, it should only be because an Uratha acted as catalyst. You are not to broach the spirit on your own. Understood?”

“Yes ma’am!” Her boss didn’t need to tell her twice. Black Blood was legitimately the scariest thing she’d ever seen. Scarier than a psycho Lucas. Scarier than a spider monster. Scarier than any of the Begotten, and she’d seen three of their Horrors by now.

“On a far more enjoyable note, I am hosting a ball in several days, Miss Vola, in celebration of the defeat of the hunters. Everyone is invited.”

Ooh, a ball, another opportunity for Tash to feel awkward and out of place. Yaay.

“Everyone?”

“Indeed. Tensions run high between the Invictus and Carthians. With the hunters defeated, it will be far safer to host a gathering, and it presents me an opportunity. I would like to announce victory officially, and to insure those who achieved it are known, the witches in particular. All four were there.”

“Oh, r-right. Aaron, Othello, Jennifer, and Beatrice. If ... if you m-make it known that they helped defeat the hunters...”

“Then the city will appreciate their presence, and it will help sooth tensions with them. I will do the same for Clara, if she agrees. It would help with soothing tensions with the Carthians; they like the

werewolves.” Sighing, a painful and weary sigh, she looked at the waves of hair she combed with her fingers. “I am not sure whether to invite the Begotten though, or at least, I am not sure what to do of Athalia. She acted against Jack, indirectly, but against him nonetheless, in a futile effort to save her daughter.”

That was a dilemma. If Antoinette was trying to host a ‘all paranormals invited’ ball, not inviting one would a pretty big statement. Bad politics. It’d put a red flag over Athalia’s head, and would insult the Begotten as a whole, probably.

“M-Maybe ... ask Samantha?”

“Ah, that is an interesting proposal, my student. Of all that would disagree with Athalia’s presence, Samantha is the most truly damaged by the Begotten’s daughter, even more so than Beatrice.” With a satisfied nod, she smiled. “And, I would like to warn you of Elaine. She will be there.”

“You’re old friend, right. B-But, warn me?”

“Oui. Elaine is a Ventrue of the Ordo Dracul, as you know, and as old as I. She is ... dangerous, Natasha, and while she is a close friend of mine, I am not so oblivious as to think this visit of hers is purely coincidental. She is up to something, my student. Keep your eyes open.”

---

~~Damien~~

“What?!” Maria and Michael said, together. There was a considerable amount of venom in their words, and plenty of surprise, enough that Damien wasn’t sure how to continue. He looked to Jessy beside him, but she was staring at him in a similar manner.

They were in the Xnomina headquarters, in the top floor for an impromptu meeting at Jack's request, with very little time left before sunrise. Considering the circumstances, the two elders had known it'd be a serious meeting before they arrived, but Jack shocked them both.

"The hunters are defeated," Damien said again. Maybe it wasn't a good idea that he opened this conversation, Longinus help him. Damien had decided to, but it was clear that as Damien tried to direct their focus to him, they were quickly catching on that this night was Jack's, good and bad.

Part of him felt relieved. He was tired, hungry, and sore. He needed sleep, and the sun would be up soon. Let Jack deal with the two elders.

Jack looked down, rubbed his head a couple times, and took a deep breath. And so began the tale of how a rather outgoing and dull-witted hunter named Brace Harcourt came to them with a proposal. Jack told them of the help the Circle of the Crone provided, that Fiona and Athalia helped, and how he used the power of the curse to blitzkrieg the hunters. Conveniently, he left out how the curse had its own personality, and relished in the chaos it'd created. He told them about the nightmare, about Sándor, and how Damien freed him. He told them about Azamel, and how Jeremiah nearly killed her. He told them about how Antoinette now had the three hunters as prisoners, how Elen was still alive, and that Jacob likely had her.

That sent a shiver up Damien's spine. Elen was still alive. And it wasn't Antoinette who'd got her, Jacob had. Knowing that psychopath had a flesh witch to torture secrets out of, was not a pleasing thought.

Jack didn't mention Clara. And he didn't mention how Athalia hadn't helped them like she was supposed to. Damien noted these.

Last thing they needed right now was holes in their story. Jack wanted to protect Clara, and he wanted to protect Athalia. If Athalia had truly betrayed them in an effort to save her daughter, Damien was surprised he felt that way. But, he didn't know the details of what happened at the end, and judging by the somber look on Jack's face, and everyone else when he'd woken up in the nightmare for that matter, it hadn't been good.

"Let me get this straight," Michael said, sitting back against the office table edge as he folded his arms across his chest. "You did not contact either me or Madam Turio. You did not even contact the Prince, someone you have sway with, Mister Terry. You did not contact the Invictus at large for aid either. Instead, you decided to trust witches, and this curse that you still do not fully understand." His voice rose until it was booming. He didn't yell, but he came close, and Damien found it growing more and more difficult to hold still.

"Yes, Mister McDonald," Jack said. "I had no time. Harcourt's offer was legitimate, and the time frame small." Sighing, Jack looked to his boss, and met the man's gaze in a way Damien never would. "And I knew this curse was strong enough to deal with them."

Damien winced, and finally looked down. Yeah, it was strong enough to deal with the hunters, and Sándor, and maybe both at the same time. If, instead of fighting inside alien and unusual places, the fight had been in Dolareido itself, he bet Jack would have had an even easier time beating them. A vampire, in a city, with walls and shadows and nigh infinite creatures to summon, was a far more dangerous creature than one in a strange place, like a fish out of water.

"And where were you during all this," Michael said to his child.



Jessy stood up straight, ripped out of her shocked expression that'd been locked on Jack for some time. "Uh, I was out with some of the werewolves, and Natasha ... sire."

And if Jessy didn't join them, that meant whatever it was she was up to with the werewolves, had prevented her involvement. Considering how important dealing with the hunters was, that put a sign over her head saying she was doing some shit with the werewolves that was either a big deal, or involved the Shadow realm. Either way, it was clear Jessy hadn't told Michael about it, and her sire growled as he glared at her.

Throughout all this, Maria watched, and glared as well. Michael was content to wear his rage on his surface, but Maria kept it buried, only leaking out through her eyes.

"The hunters are defeated," Maria said at last, standing up from her seat at the huge table. "I am sure you realized as you launched this assault, that Mister McDonald would not approve, Mister Terry."

The boy nodded. "I did, Madam Turio. But there was no way I could convince you that this curse was strong enough to succeed, except victory." His voice rose as well, a little louder than Damien thought smart. "I had to make a decision, where only I could be fully aware of the elements involved. I knew I could do that, that the curse could do it, and we did."

The two elders aimed their stabbing eyes at the boy, but Jack did not back down. Jessy and Damien both inched themselves away from him, just a little, afraid he might spontaneously combust under the power of their glares.

But, after a few moments of painful silence, the two elders looked to each other, and sighed.

“You speak truly, Mister Terry,” Maria said. Damien sighed as he felt the tension melt out of him. “While your actions were extreme, it is true that these are unusual circumstances. The Circle and the Ordo acquiring new toys to fuel their experiments does not bring me joy, but knowing that the majority of the hunters have been defeated, does.”

Michael nodded. “This is a great thorn out of our side. As much as I’d like to be angry with you, Mister Terry, you’ve beaten an enemy, and secured your own revenge. Now, we can focus on the Carthians, and their infuriating need to disturb the balance.”

Michael went on, talking about the politics of Dolareido, how the Carthians were pushing against the Invictus, using Terra Den to fight Xnomina, and how Garry Tones was a loose cannon. Maria, on the other hand, was happy to let the man rant as she looked at Damien. The knowing glance traded between them was plenty. She did not like what she’d heard about the curse, and was reminding Damien that it was his responsibility to deal with Jack, if it came to that.

After tonight, it didn’t seem like a such a ridiculous notion, that he might have to kill Jack. He prayed he wouldn’t have to, but unless he found a way to reseal the curse, the possibility of Damien having to do something was very real, and sickening.

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“Can’t believe it,” Jessy said as she stepped onto the elevator. “You fucking killed them all?”

Sighing, Jack shook his head. “No. Like I said, Elen killed most of them.”

“But, you would have killed most of them, if she hadn’t done it for you, right? Hell, you had them on the run.”

“I did ... it did.” The boy shuddered and shook his head again. “It was nasty, Jessy. Not like, a great war story I want to share, ok?”

“But, you won! Julias is—”

“Yeah, I know. And I get it. But later, ok?”

She put her hands up in surrender. “Sure, sure. But, I mean, you must be a little happy, right? Angela’s dead! Jeremiah’s dead. Christ, you got em!” Laughing, she clapped the man on the shoulder.

“Julias avenged! No more sweeps every fucking night. No more worrying about that fucker blowing us up during the day. Parties are back on the menu?”

As much as Damien was trying to appreciate Jack’s rather sober and serious attitude, Jessy got Damien smiling. Him, and a moment later, Jack as well. Perhaps the man wasn’t as depressed as he seemed. Jessy was right, after all. They’d won.

“Yes, parties are back on the menu, you fucking dumbass,” Jack said, throwing his hands up not unlike Jessy had moments ago. “The Prince is going to be hosting a party soon. Or, you know, ball.”

“Ooh, like the last one? I got this new dress that—”

“Not like the last one. Well, maybe a bit? My mom’s going to be there, and this will be the first, real social thing she’s gone to since her embrace, except for a couple trips to Bloodlust for drink. So, you know, lay off fingering and blowing the kine that come?”

“Agreed,” Damien said. Social gatherings, parties, balls, they weren’t things he enjoyed, and seeing kine being stripped, Kissed, and sexually pleased, only made said things more difficult for him. Now that he had a girlfriend, maybe it’d be different? Fiona would be there, and being that she wasn’t a vampire, she couldn’t simply turn off her body’s desires. It’d be a night of her trying to get

into his pants, because everything around her would be lighting her blood on fire.

In retrospect, maybe it wouldn't be so bad?

“Well, I won't be enjoying myself that way, anyway. Eric doesn't seem interested in getting more legs in the bed.”

Damien shrugged. “Perhaps he's happy with your relationship, sexually speaking? Not all relationships need to include wanton sex orgies.”

“Of course he's happy, I'm fucking awesome. And I'm damn happy with Eric, too. But I keep thinking, man it'd be hot to have some more legs in this bed. Like, I'm thinking he'll really love it, too. He's a guy, right? What guy doesn't want two, or three, or five sets of lips sucking on his cock?”

Rolling his eyes, Damien gestured to Jack. “Does having more legs in your bed make your nights with the Prince more enjoyable?”

The kid shook his head, without hesitation either. “Honestly? No. I mean, I enjoy Ashley and Julee's company, and I enjoy that Antoinette enjoys their company. The sex isn't better with them there, but it certainly is different.” He tapped his chin then, and Damien and Jessy waited for his growing thought. “It can actually kinda ruin the romance sometimes, you know? Antoinette loves her ghouls, but it's not romantic love, and when she and I want to be romantic, it can be a little hard to do that with them around.”

That got Jessy thinking. “Romance, right. I ... I guess I don't do the romance thing very well. Never been in a real relationship, you know? Not good at this whole ‘hey I like you, we should be friends and fuck, but also emotionally support each other’ thing.”

Jack laughed. “Eric's divorced, right? He's probably got a bunch of triggers you're setting off, warning him that you're not taking the

relationship seriously when you propose having more people in bed.”

“I am taking it seriously!” Like a child throwing a tantrum, she stomped around the elevator as it continued its descent. “Like, really seriously; by my standards at least. I don’t normally let myself get all ... mushy, you know? But I do with Eric.”

Nodding, Jack leaned back against the wall of the elevator. It was a long way down, and they had a little bit to talk. “I’m sure if you keep trying, you’ll have more legs in your bed eventually. But in the meantime, I’d suggest dialing down on the orgy pushing a bit, and dial up the romantic lovey dovey stuff.”

“Bleh. Bleh!”

Jack and Damien laughed, and Damien leaned back against the elevator wall next to his friend. He said nothing though, this particular topic well outside his expertise. Better to let his friend talk, and he could absorb and learn. Jack didn’t seem like the sort of guy to be well versed in social romance constructs, but then again, he was very smart, and had Antoinette for a lover.

“You were out with him tonight?” Jack said.

“Yeah, with Tash, visiting the Shadow realm. Scary shit! Those spirit things are fucking weird. Some of them look like they came out of a Dr. Seuss story. Some of them look like they came out of a nightmare. And now that we’ve all literally been inside nightmares, I can say that with authority.”

“Learn anything useful?” Damien said.

“Nah, just that the werewolves have a spirit, Flowing Sanctuary, and she won’t let us stir up trouble. Black Blood wasn’t around either, but if Jacob has Elen, then I’m guessing that’s why.”

Before Damien could ask what sort of trouble the damn Gangrel was attempting to cause, the elevator door opened. Fiona jumped in place at the door, several times, wearing her usual leather jacket and jeans, and helped Damien out of the elevator. Much as he'd been holding up well for the last minute meeting, truth was he desperately needed to lie down and sleep. His insides ached, and Clara hadn't given him enough blood to fully recover; even if she had, he still needed sleep to use it.

"Fiona," Jessy said, "ball happening in a few days. Gonna celebrate! The boys here are suggesting we vamps tone it down, you know, sexually speaking, compared to last time."

"Well fuck that! Ye want to celebrate, right? I say, more sex than last time!"

Damien, who'd just finished hooking his right arm over Fiona's shoulders, facepalmed with his left. Of course Fiona would agree with Jessy. She'd have agreed to skydiving without a parachute, if someone suggested it, especially Jessy. Those two were not good for each other.

"Please don't," Jack said. "My mom's gonna be there, and she's not exactly, uh ... a slut, like the two of you?"

Damien winced, expecting a backlash. But Fiona and Jessy laughed, shrugged, and stuck their tongues out at him. At the same time. Had they been hanging out together?

"Only one man in my life, ye wankstain." Rolling her eyes, she leaned in and put a kiss on Damien's cheek. "Now, I'm gonna take that man home, and take care of him."

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They went to his apartment. The sun would be up very soon, maybe twenty minutes, and there wasn't time for a visit to her place to drop her off. His apartment was a typical expensive apartment,

except that he hadn't decorated it, at all. Nothing but cold steel colors, with plenty of blacks, including blackout curtains. While he'd slept here before, he'd mostly slept in Maria's den, with the rising threat of the hunters.

Now, with the hunters shattered, no leaders, no special flesh chamber to hide within, the chances of them attacking was minuscule; attacking his apartment building specifically, beyond minuscule. And with the reinforced walls, extra locks on the door, blackout curtains, and bedroom with no windows, the chances of someone or some sunlight managing to reach him while he slept was extremely low.

Dolareido had been built from the ground up to house vampires after all. Only the elders slept in places more secure, and perhaps the witches and their cave.

"Victory!" Fiona said, and she giggled openly as she set him on his bed. Black sheets, black pillow cases, white walls. His girlfriend couldn't help but laugh when she looked around, shrugged, and sat on the bed with him. "The hunters are gone!"

"Not completely gone."

"Na, but close!" Nodding like she understood the world and its secrets, she started to undress him.

"You don't have to—"

"I want to. I was so worried! Ye coulda died, and I wouldnae 'ave been there! Athalia, she ... she tricked me, and—"

He shook his head, and set a hand on her shoulder. "I don't know what happened exactly. Do you know the details? Of what happened between Jack and Athalia, at the end, with Angela."

“Na.” Sighing with a big, heavy sound, she turned to face him, and flomped on him. Flomped, like a big dog not aware of its own size. He was flattened to his bed, and he groaned as the impact of her body awakened his wounds. “Fuck! Sorry. I’m such a dobber.”

He smiled, and hugged her as she cuddled into his chest. Sunrise was coming, and they didn’t have much time for anything. He doubted either of them would really be in the mood for sex anyway, not after tonight. Even monsters could only look so much death in the eye before it made them sick.

“Athalia...”

“What?” he said.

“Athalia, she’ll be ... sad. She talked about her daughter, ye ken? Blethered on about her, about how ... how much it was her fault, that Angela turned out like she did.”

“Everyone’s responsible for their own actions.”

“Aye, but it’s nae the same! Athalia’s Horror couldnae help it, and it ... it really hurt Angela, ye ken? She grew up with nightmares, all the time. And Athalia, she was so ... so...” Sniffling, Fiona nuzzled her face into Damien’s neck, and sighed louder, straight into the side of his throat. The warmth of her breath was pleasant. “I’ll talk to her, but I know she’ll be so sad!”

“Sad enough ... that she’ll want revenge?”

Fiona shrugged into his body, and kissed his neck once before growing still again. “I dinnae think so, but ... I dinnae know. She’ll be...” Sad. Fiona couldn’t find a better word for it. It was a sadness Damien knew he’d never be able to appreciate it, but he didn’t need to. For the moment, his concern was whether Athalia would be a problem, and if it was a good idea to leave her alive.



He could kill her, he knew he could. He wasn't Daniel, but that didn't mean he couldn't sneak up on Athalia and end her, or snipe her from a distance. All these events had been driving him to be better, faster, sneakier, and with Daniel to train him, he knew he'd be good enough to kill the monster if he caught her in the physical world.

Good Lord. It was frustrating that he kept framing his problems with 'could I kill this person?' First Jack, now Athalia. Who next?

He kissed Fiona's hair, wrinkled his nose as the frizzy mane tickled his face, and hugged her. "Can you get home from here? Or should I—"

"Aye, I can, easy. Ye rest. I'll burrow home from under yer bed, once ye're down."

He laughed at that. It was a sound he didn't make often, but a lot more when she was around. He was dating a monster that came from under the bed, literally.

"Can you get into places the same way?"

"Kinda. Getting back to my lair is nae the same as opening a door. If I've been there before, I can burrow there, if there's some darkness around. But I cannae take others that way. I need to open a door for that, and that would need a lot of similarities between a place in my lair, and where I'm opening up to." She kissed his neck again, and nuzzled in close, as if she was going to sleep. Maybe she was?

He was lowering his guard down quite a bit, having someone else in his bedroom while he let sunrise come. Vampire instinct told him he should go find somewhere safer to sleep, somewhere where people didn't know his location, or at least do it alone. But, he trusted Fiona, far more than he figured he'd ever trust another. She was too damn sweet to do anything to betray him.

And, there was a painful reality he and the other Kindred had trouble accepting: Begotten could get almost anywhere, go almost anywhere, as long as they'd been there once before. They were the Houdinis of the paranormal world, evidently, and if you were unlucky enough to get pulled into their lair, they were insanely powerful.

One of those inescapable monsters, someone that could get you from under your own damn bed, now hated Jack and Beatrice. Jack with his curse could take her in a straight fight, sure, but Athalia didn't have to play nice. She could strike out from the shadows in a way that'd make any Nos or Mekhet jealous. No wonder Antoinette wasn't happy they were in her city.

Well, Damien was happy they were, or at least, happy Fiona had come. As sunrise came, and he let Kindred instinct pull him down into the deep slumber of his daily coma, he indulged in the sensation of Fiona's body on him.

They'd won. No more hunters, mostly. They could take a moment to relax, and worry about other problems now, problems that seemed less liable to blow up buildings in a reckless attack. But, for the second life of him, he could not completely relax. Something or someone was out there, creeping around in Dolareido, sneaking, cutting holes and creating portals, according to Fiona. As much as Damien knew he'd have to deal with the Carthians, and potentially Jack, and maybe even Maria or Jacob, as least they were known quantities. Knowing something else was out there, maybe harmless, maybe not, was itching at the Mekhet half of him.

He had to learn more.

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~~Antoinette~~

The next night, she awoke, and without a word, began to fuck her little Ventrue. First for his pleasure, and then for hers.

Antoinette relaxed into the mountain of pillows against her back, bed beneath her, and grinned at the boy between her legs. With her ass on her blankets, her knees were raised, and thighs hooked over Jack's shoulders. His mouth was wrapped around her sex, completely, and his tongue lapped and massaged her clitoris. His weight was on his elbows, left hand hooked around her leg to rest on her stomach, while his right hand stretched her open with several fingers, and pressed up against her g-spot.

Oh, how she had taught her little Ventrue well. After burying her clitoris in rough, almost frantic licking for several seconds, and nearly bringing her toward her second orgasm, he slowed down. He switched to a gentle suckle, drawing her lips with his own, before doing the same for her clitoris. No longer did her lover dedicate his efforts simply to making her orgasm. As his skills had developed, he had long learned how to insure each orgasm was teased out of her, so each was powerful once it finally arrived. He had learned to trust his skills, trust in her arousal, and build the pleasure.

She smiled down at the buzzed head between her milky white thighs, and offered him a small moan. She did not need to moan of course, despite the coursing bliss she felt sparking outward from her swollen clitoris and aching depths, but the sound not only elicited joy from her lover, it also added to the art of the experience. Her moans were, after all, honed, and masterful.

With a slow, teasing motion of her own, she ran her right hand down from her shoulder to her right breast, and trailed through the cum that coated her. Once her fingers reached her nipple, she teased her middle finger around and around her swollen, pink areola, where it jutted out from her large bosom. Instant sparks, tiny jolts of electric pleasure that danced from her large nipple, into her chest, and down to her core.

It was the combination of the gentle, playful friction of fingertips along the engorged skin, combined with the pleasing heat and

wetness of her lover's cum, that sparked the greatest pleasure from touching her breasts. In truth, she craved it. Massaging her lover's seed into her skin, and drawing pleasure from her breasts and swollen nipples as she did, had become a regular aspect of their love making. All the better to masturbate with her breasts, as her man licked her sex and fingered her insides.

As she watched the boy between her thighs, she smiled. Jack had proven capable of suppressing the curse twice now, and that settled many of her concerns. It was still a great threat, but after last night, she no longer let it scratch at her thoughts all hours of the night. Jack not only had some degree of control over it, but the curse proved that it desired as other Kindred desired. Perhaps it would become another Viktor, or Tony, or Lucas, and she would be forced to deal with it and its rising ambitions. For now, it had climbed down her list of concerns considerably.

"Jack, my love," she said, talking smoothly, despite the rising pleasure dancing along her thighs, down into her toes. "I have been thinking of Elaine, as of late." Her climax was fast approaching, and she licked her lips slowly, putting on a display for her watching Ventrue. When her words stirred his eyes to open wide, she gently squeezed the whole of her right breast with her right hand, causing his cum to trickle out from between her fingers as she eased her cupping grip down her breasts, before her hand slipped underneath the heavy weight.

"Ou hav?" he said, words muffled.

She laughed. He knew better than to stop kissing her, unless she requested it, and she had not. But, just to remind him, she squeezed his head and neck with her large, curvy, hard thighs, and the boy's eyes went wide again for a single moment, before he resumed his suckling and licking with emphasis. Laughing once again, she released his skull from the death trap of her thick legs, and resumed teasing her breast.

“I have indeed. I cannot help but wonder what she will do, to attempt to draw you from my embrace. I trust her to not perform Disciplines upon you, especially now, considering your condition. And even if you did not carry the curse, she would not resort to such tactics, as you are mine. No, I expect Elaine to attempt to—” Jack started to finger her faster, and her breathing stopped for a moment. Perhaps he was annoyed with her, for teasing him so? His hand hooked about her hip pressed on her pelvis, a couple inches past her sex, and his other hand drove three fingers up toward it in a rapid pulse. Her engorged g-spot lay between the two hands, and the assault sent pleasure washing over her like a tidal wave.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and released a single, precisely arranged moan, with a beautiful pitch and perfect volume, as her insides clenched. The boy ceased licking and suckling, and kept his tongue flat to her clitoris, holding still and letting the bliss spread as he continued to finger her slit. She arched her back slightly, jutting her breasts outward, and while she was making an obvious effort to show off for him, to put her body on display and let her lover drink in the sight of her beauty, it was also true that orgasm was coursing up and down through her. The delightful sparks erupted outward from her sex, earning drops of her juices onto the boy’s face and fingers, as the bliss flowed down to her toes, and back up to her chest. She drew the pleasure further, massaging her breasts and teasing her soaked, swollen nipples. With his fingers pressing up against her depths again and again, as she teased her aching areola, massaging his cum into them, she had little trouble milking the pleasure to its fullest.

“I expect her to attempt to seduce more directly,” she said, voice a touch softer, and a touch higher. Her climax was only just beginning to fade, after all, and even one as skilled as her could not keep her voice perfectly level, as orgasm aftershocks rippled outward from her between her legs. “She is Ventrue, after all, and does not do subtlety well.” Better than a Gangrel, of course, but that meant little.

She relaxed her thighs, releasing them from Jack's head, and the boy lifted it. He kept his fingers inside her though, gently pushing up on her depths, in a similar rhythm to her milking grip on her breasts. Oh yes, she had taught him well. To milk the final sparks of climax was vital, after all.

“And, um, you're just going to let her?”

“Oui.” With a small grin she knew her lover recognized, she leaned down for him, kissed him on the forehead, and slipped off the bed. Her legs and breast still tingled with orgasm aftershocks, but alas, she had several emergency meetings to arrange, after all, and could not wait much longer. “I look forward to seeing her fail. And, truthfully, I look forward to watching you squirm as Elaine makes Jennifer seem quaint.” Both were terribly attractive Ventrue, and in typical Daeva fashion, perfectly content using their beauty to persuade and manipulate. Unlike Daeva, they did not care to guard themselves with pretense, or disguise their manipulations in any way.

“You really like watching me squirm, don't you?”

“Oui. Call it a guilty pleasure, my love, and punishment, for your rashness last night.”

“A guilty pleasure.” Her lover frowned at her, but it was a weak frown, melting within moments as she grinned at him through the corner of her eye. “I'm never going to be as comfortable with all this sex stuff as you, am I?”

“Nonsense. With another century or two under your belt, I am sure you will be freed of all sexual ... hangups, as people refer to them in present times.” As she started touching up her makeup, Jack stepped behind her, and started combing her hair. The both of them were nude, and yet the boy no longer stared at her in unending awe; one of his barriers already shattered. Jack probably

did not realize that, were he still human, he would now be comfortable on a nude beach. Mostly.

“I dunno. I don’t think it’s fair to really call it a hangup that some people just kinda prefer to be private about their sex lives.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. For a lot of people, privacy kinda increases the intimacy, you know?”

“Perhaps.” It did not take long to finish; she had been perfecting her beauty for centuries. She smiled at her lover through the mirror, analyzing his expression. “I do not believe it is the literal act of sex where such intimacy is found, my love. I believe proximity is merely the bridge that allows two to connect their emotions, and that that bridge can be built in many ways.” Chuckling, she turned around again, and set her hands on the boy’s shoulders. Now, he was no longer able to hold his composure, and his gaze fell to her breasts several times before finally stabilizing on her eyes. “I could love you with all my soul, you damned fool, even with ten pairs of legs wrapped around you, and a thousand eyes watching. As long as your hunger, lust, and emotions were centered on me, and mine upon you, that bridge would form without issue.”

Jack returned her smile, nodding. “I guess if I get as old as you, I’ll be more comfortable with intimacy, or, I mean ... well, you know.”

“Oui. You will learn to not attach simple, physical touch, as the guiding force of romance.” She tapped her chin at that, before she walked over to her wardrobe, and began to dress. “I would be remiss to not mention gender differences. Men, even elder male Kindred, are perhaps a little more limited to opening themselves so.”

“Ha, maybe. But then, what about Natasha? Her relationship is pretty unique. I keep expecting to hear that Matt and Art have

started fighting over her, and she has to choose. Typical girly paranormal romance trash, right? Instead, all I hear is that they both seem to like her a lot, and are good friends.”

“Indeed. I did not expect her relationship to survive as long as it has, before devolving into something juvenile. I underestimated the emotional maturity of Matthew and Arturo.” As she slipped on her bra, a black and uplifting thing, she turned to face Jack, so he could watch. He enjoyed watching her, and she enjoyed having his eyes on her. “Our relationship is simpler. We love each other, my love, and others who wish to partake of the sexual energy we create are welcome to do so.”

“Are they?” he said, eyes locked firmly onto her body. “I believe you once said you didn’t want other Kindred in our bed.”

“That I did. Kindred are selfish creatures, that wish to acquire and control all they can. I said I would share our sexual energy, not release to another.” She paused in front of the mirror for a moment, considering. “The relationship that has developed between Beatrice and Jennifer has also surprised me, though that is mostly a question of Jennifer, and her bizarre tastes.” Grinning, Antoinette slipped into her business skirt, and made sure to display her curvy derriere in its full glory for her lover. “The only Kindred I would trust to respect our relationship, if they joined us, is Elaine.” The boy sat up straight again, and she slowly licked a fang as she drank in his reaction. Shock, surprise, wonder. “Does that idea interest you, my love?”

“I uh, I mean, the last thing I want is to do something you don’t want to do, Antoinette. And, I mean, I’m already having sex with three women on a regular basis because of you. I’m the luckiest guy on the planet! Last thing I need is even more ... you know, women in bed.”



“But?” She sensed a but, and she again smiled at the man as she slipped on her white shirt.

“But, um ... I gotta admit, I am a guy. There’s something alluring about, you know, having more women in bed. Kinda appeals to some lizard brain part of me, I guess? Gotta build my harem.” He shrugged at that, as if admitting to tomfoolery. All she could do was laugh at his delicious self awareness.”I do kinda like all these experiences you keep putting me through, too. Most of them kinda shock me at the time, and my reflex is to say no, but you put me through them anyway, and I end up kinda loving it.”

One of the many reasons she loved her little Ventrue. Not only did he agree to do the things she borderline forced upon him, he was always happier for the experience.

“I am glad to have expanded your tastes, Jack.”

“But, I don’t know anything about this woman.”

“Ah, of course.” She came over, sat beside her still naked Ventrue, and set an arm behind him so she could rub his buzzed hair in that way he enjoyed. “Elaine, a tall and curvy woman, not dissimilar to myself. Wavy blonde hair, and exquisitely large breasts, almost as large as mine.” Naturally, a comment about breasts was enough to grab Jack’s attention, and she laughed as she stroked his buzzed head a little harder. It was a delightful sensation, the feel of such short hair fighting against her fingers, almost prickly.

“I uh, I meant personality, and history. Like, what sort of ... things, have you done with her?”

Nodding, she leaned in close, and set her lips to her lover’s ear. With slow, husky breaths, she slid her hand down from his head to his back, while her other reached out, slid down his stomach, and reached for his flaccid length. Her touch was signal enough for her surprised Jack to reignite his Blush, and she made one of her

perfected, calculated moans for him. She Blushed as well, and licked her tongue along her teeth, preparing.

“Elaine has joined my bed enough times, that we have touched every inch of each other’s body, my love. We have locked our legs together, and rubbed our slits against each other’s until juices were literally dripping.” The boy went rigid once again, as did his shaft in her grip. “I have had a dozen kine paint our breasts in white, and we have rubbed our bodies against each other until the seed was spread and massaged into our skin. I have kissed away the cum of men, and the juices of women, from her breasts, as she has mine. I have held her close and delighted in the sensations of her climaxes, as she was fucked by several men, and women, at once.”

“Good ... god...”

Laughing, Antoinette pulled Jack up onto the center of the huge bed, light as a feather. She spread his legs, and the boy’s body went limp as he submitted; his shaft did anything but.

“I would never invite another Kindred into our bed without your express permission, my love. It is a threshold, a border I would not cross lightly.” She lowered herself down onto him, and set her lips to the already wetting head of his cock. Her story had elicited a strong reaction in him, as she knew it would. No doubt he was imagining himself now, painting her breasts with his seed, and watching her rub her body into another curvy woman’s bosom. “But, as I said, I trust Elaine, and we know each other well. Something tells me you would enjoy having me sit on your girth, while my friend caresses my body until I climax upon you?”

“I really do wonder why”—his own moan interrupted him, as she slipped her lips around his glans, and began to lick and suckle —“why you enjoy having sex with me so much, with a history like that.”

Without removing his cock from her mouth, she rolled her eyes, grinned her succubus grin, and sank her head down onto the naked man's length. Once every inch of his shaft was buried inside, with her leaning down over him between his legs, and Jack lying on his back, she reached out, pressed her hands down against his hard stomach, and bathed his length in bliss. She had done this hundred of times with her lover, and as the boy said, she had quite the history. It took four minutes to bring him the orgasm.

Jack, panting and shaking for the moment with the sheer brute force of the bliss she had forced upon him, managed to push his weight up onto his elbows, and gazed down at where her lips were still locked around the base of him. She knew how to milk him, how to best draw out the final sparks of pleasure, before she at last lifted her head. Swallowing was not necessary. He had cum down her throat, and within five or ten minutes, his seed would fade into nothing more than the faintest trace of dust.

Once she lifted her head, she offered him her succubus smile again as she pat him on the chest lightly. "We have discussed this before."

"I know, I just—"

"Jack, as one becomes well versed in any particular thing, skill, hobby, they go through phases. Excess and indulgence is one of those phases, but with time, it passes, and instead, the practitioner learns to enjoy quality over quantity." She stepped off the bed, found her work shoes, and slipped them off. "The way your eyes sparkle as I bring pleasures to your door, entices me to no end, little Ventrue, in ways no orgy ever could."

The boy sat up, and scratched his head in that wonderful way, as he watched after her. "I'm uh, glad you like them. I grew them myself."

She rolled her eyes at the hilariously poor attempt at humor, but chuckled nonetheless. “And, I admit, your body delights me as well.” Standing at the edge of the bed, she leaned over him. Her hands found his abs, and she traced the chiseled lines, the subtle indents at the bottom that hinted at the famous ‘eight pack’ she knew men — and women — craved. His pectorals were equally as defined, with small indentations that ran outside them, and his shoulders, and along his legs. He was a short man, small, but that simply made it easier for her to fit him in her embrace when she wished to.

“I grew that t—”

She slapped his chest, hard, enough to earn a loud slap sound, and send the boy into groans of pain. Exaggerated groans, but groans nonetheless. He enjoyed playing her games. She loved that he did.

“As for Elaine, she has grown to appreciate more refined and specific tastes as well. No more does she bathe in the seed of two dozen men as a weekend treat.” Nodding as she dug through her hazy memories, she cleaned the dust from several, and marveled at the sheer excess she and Elaine had once enjoyed. “She once played the proverbial Jezebel, and danced the streets of England centuries ago, pretending to be a whore, and luring men into sexual situations that ... damaged their lives, in a way. Once, she had a banker and the owner of an esteemed company fighting each other for her affection. First, with currency, then with fists.” Antoinette could not help but laugh at the memory, and the joy of which Elaine told her of her manipulations. A Daeva would have delighted in the obsession of her adoring doters, but Elaine delighted in the skill of which she used to control them. “Another reason to be careful with her, Jack. She does oh so enjoy to manipulate, as most Ventrue do.”

“Whoring in England? Like, a prostitute?” Jack sat up, and looked up with thought. Something had sparked a memory in him, and he dug through it, not unlike her. “She, uh, does sound kind of dangerous.”

“Indeed. Dangerous, but my oldest friend, save for Daniel. And she is a member of my order. We may trust her, mostly,” she said. Again, the boy’s eyes looked up, hunting for something in his own mind, but unable to find it. What was he searching for?

# Chapter 113

~~Beatrice~~

Jacob hadn't been in the cave when she came back with everyone. She was kinda thankful for that. Stressful conversations could wait until another time.

Waking up was a strange feeling, and the memories hit her hard. Angela, Jeremiah, Athalia, the fucking twisted curse Jack, the huge gargoyle Sándor, it all came back to her a little faster than she'd have liked. Joy, over knowing Angela was dead, and Jeremiah too. Sadness, about Athalia; not a lot, but enough to make things bittersweet. She felt real good that every one of her witches lived, and hell, she even felt good about Azamel living, too.

Sándor was a bit of an anomaly. While Jack's attack had gone freakishly well, to the point it hadn't really been a fight, but a slaughter, she did completely forget they weren't just killing some hunters. They were also freeing a slave. Christ, she'd completely forgotten that Jeremiah had a fucking monster as his slave, during that attack last night. All she knew, was she had a way to get past Elen's magic, and with Jack's curse, they could get revenge.

Revenge had. Now what? She wouldn't be surprised if they had to hunt down a few of the remaining hunters, but compared to the shit they'd been through for months now, it'd be a cakewalk. Maybe Athalia would try and kill her. Certainly possible. If Athalia wanted to kill her, well, let her come. But something told her that it wouldn't come to that, at least not yet, and not without at least one more conversation between them.

That meant she didn't have a good reason to get up tonight. If she wanted, she could just lie down, and sink into a hole of depression.

Fuck, who'da thought achieving revenge would leave her so empty? At least when Angela was alive, she had something to distract herself, something to pour her efforts into. Now, she had nothing.

Not completely nothing. The damn Ventrue slut next to her was a reason. Stupid girl wouldn't let her drown in her pit of despair and self-loathing, and Triss knew that must have been hell for her. Triss was very much a 'let people who can't swim, drown' sort of person, or at least she was, in the past. If she'd known a woman who was drowning in sadness because her lover died, Triss wouldn't have helped her. You can't get stronger when other people save you from your struggles. Few things terrified her as much as the idea of a clingy person dragging her down, until she drowned with them.

She hadn't become clingy since Julias died, but she'd certainly been drowning. Jen helped her stay above water. Damn idiot.

Triss looked over at the stupid woman, who was sitting up with the vitae jolt that came with every completed sunset. Both were still clothed. Jen's clothes were in good condition, but Beatrice's looked like hell, and she smirked as she compared them.

"So, what now?" Jen said.

"Dunno. I suppose we talk to Jacob, next time that asshole shows his face." She had a sneaking suspicion the man had been involved last night, and she didn't know how. "And the Prince wanted to talk to us tonight. We should probably call Jack and see when she wants to do that."

With a heavy sigh, Jen nodded, and lay back on the furs in their alcove. "I'm ... happy, that you got her."

"I am, too."

"You sure? You look torn about the whole thing."

Course Jen would be able to read her, considering how long they'd been friends. And Beatrice was dogshit at hiding her feelings about anything, anyway.

“Yeah, I am,” she said. She whispered it, she realized, after she'd said it. Aaron and Othello were in the cave, and she didn't want them hearing. Her voice grew quieter again, and she scooted in closer to Jen. “You know what her last words were? ‘Do it’. Christ, she was fucked up, Jen. Like, majorly fucked in the head, fucked up. She was happy to die.”

“Yes, you told me last night, but it still sounds terrible. She must have had a horrible life.”

“Athalia fucked her up pretty bad, judging from the ... the last words they had. In the end, she just wanted to save her daughter, but her daughter wouldn't accept her help. It was ... it was so fucked up.” Triss pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged her legs close to her body. “I didn't get to kill an evil woman who ruined my life. I didn't get to beat some horrible bitch. I was just putting down some sort of injured, rabid animal.” She was on repeat, saying the things she'd already told Jen, but her mind was stuck on it and couldn't work past it. Her vision of revenge had been ruined by the reality, and it fucking sucked.

Jen slipped in closer, hooked an arm around her, and hugged her tight. “Then, instead of being happy about revenge, be happy you did something good? You stopped her from killing more people, and it sounds like she was happy it was over. That's a lot of pain you helped stop. Maybe even Athalia will be able to move on now?”

Triss managed a small smile for her friend. There was truth in what she said, and hell, maybe Triss could even start thinking of it that way. “Yeah, but I don't know about Athalia. She ... really wanted to protect her daughter.”



“A wound can’t heal when the knife’s still jammed in there, Triss. Now that Angela’s gone, I think Athalia will ... probably get worse, first, and then she’ll recover. It might take weeks, months, or years, but she’ll recover. No more false hope dragging her down.”

No more false hope. Painful truth. Triss didn’t like it, but truth was better than bullshit. This whole thing didn’t have the ending she’d been hoping for, but it was over. Time for people to heal, and move on.

“So,” Jen said, “that Sándor. Wow.”

Oh good god. “Jen, the dude was getting revenge for a dead wife and son. I think you can safely say he’s off the table.”

“For the moment.” She grinned, and tapped her fingertips together, classic evil villain style. “It was four years ago.”

“And if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were giving his monster form bedroom eyes.”

Jen giggled, a sultry and very feminine thing; undoubtedly a sound she’d practiced. “Well, you have to admit, it was gorgeous. He was utterly massive. Can you imagine, disappearing between those arms? Yum.”

Triss rolled her eyes, and looked around for some clothes. If she was going to the Elysium Tower, the least she could do was not wear clothes with giant tears cutting through it. The others would probably wear suits or something, but the witches would go casual. Casual didn’t mean with half her skin exposed.

She threw off her tank top, reached for another one, and before she could slip it on, Jen was on her. Hugging her from behind, she cupped Triss’s breasts, and pressed her chest into Triss’s back with a very obvious intent to squash her big tits into her. And to make

matters worse, she hooked her chin over Triss's shoulder, and set a small kiss on her temple.

“Jen. Seriously?”

“I know I know. Still too soon. But I think it's good to remind you that, I'm perfectly willing to help you alleviate some of your stress.” And to make her point clear, her hands cupping Triss's breasts found her nipple piercings, and lightly teased, circling around her areola with her fingertips. God damn it. Even without the Blush of Life, it still felt damn good.

So, for a little while, Triss just sat there, before leaning back a little, and letting herself melt into Jen's body. Jen remained snug to her back, keeping her upright, and continued to gently massage her breasts. With slow, tender fingers, she circled Triss's nipples, and set slow kisses on her neck, more relaxing than anything. And of course, Jen knew just how to touch her, just how to gently caress her moderate breasts, and how to place delicious, tender squeezes on them that were half massage, half tease. God damn. If Triss blushed, her body would have lit up like the Fourth of July.

“Thanks, for putting up with this stick in the mud,” she said.

“Ha, you are welcome.” Jen got up, held out her hand, and Triss took it once she got the cleaner shirt. “Call me a strong believer in sexual healing.”

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Standing in the office room of the top floor of the Elysium Tower was a strange feeling. Everything was so clean, pristine, and expensive. The black marble with white lightning lines, the lights built into the walls, the fucking chairs, it was all so god damn richy rich. It made her cringe. All that money, and this was how Antoinette spent it? Then again, this probably didn't scratch the surface of the money Antoinette had, and it was definitely a powerful symbol of her control.

Jennifer, Othello, and Aaron were all there with her, though each of them stood a little bit behind Beatrice, just enough so she would be the first others looked at. Kinda dumb, considering Jen was the one in a suit. She liked suits. Fucking Ventrue.

Clara was there too, dressed just like Triss, blue jeans and a tank top, white versus Triss's black. Damn she was an attractive woman, and she screamed confident. Except, some of that confidence looked damaged.

It was Jack. Jack was standing in front of the group of them, and Clara was a couple feet behind. Whenever her eyes went to the little guy, they fell after a few seconds, and it took a few seconds after that before she lifted her eyes again.

Yeah, understandable. They were all having trouble looking at Jack. Even Jennifer and Aaron, who'd missed half the party, weren't able to look at the kid's back for very long. It was massive, on such a small body. The aura of his Beast was absurd, and dark, and being this close to him made her Beast reel in disgust and fear. Having a very real mental image and memory to attach to its horrid nature made it a thousand times worse.

Only Damien seemed to be ok with it. He stood beside Jack, in his suit and trench coat. No sword. Heh, maybe the broken thing was still in the dream? He didn't waver, didn't shake or quiver, didn't do anything but stand there beside the demon. Solid.

Fiona was there. Sándor was there as well. Both were giving Jack plenty of room, hanging out in the back of the office. Fiona was in her usual leather jacket, but Sándor was dressed a little more formally, some dark jeans with brown boots, black belt, and a blue, button shirt, undone a few buttons so the top half of his chest was visible. Where'd he get the clothes? Probably stole them just for this night, considering they didn't fit him very well, a bit tight on his frame.

Beatrice couldn't blame Jen for getting so flirtatious with him, attractive as he was. The buzz-length black hair, short dark gruff on his hard chin and lean face, along with his strangely dreamy blue eyes, made for a pleasing image. Deep-seated eyes, that held enough buried pain that the man just oozed tormented soul.

She hated that he reminded her of Julias. He helped kill Julias, against his will, but still, it made looking at him difficult. The fact that she recognized that morose look from Julias, back before she helped fix his life, made looking at Sándor beyond difficult. He was a sad soul, racked with pain, and guilt, all the things that screamed emo. Justifiably emo. And he was old enough that he didn't grow hair over one eye, put on mascara, and wear a black t-shirt with some vague anarchist expression on it. Emo on a guy like him was a darker thing, subtler, and a hell of a lot more serious.

If he'd started fake smiling, and suddenly being flirtatious and suave to cover his depression, it'd have been so Julias, she would have had no choice but to rip his fucking throat out. But he didn't. He just stood there, face solid stone like the gargoyle monster, once he'd merged with it. A cold face.

Maybe he'd start to heal. Maybe not.

"Everyone involved in your suicidal assault on the hunters is here, save for Athalia," Antoinette said. She was sitting behind a big desk, and leaning back in a black leather chair that may as well have been a throne. "I am sure you can understand why she is not."

No one said anything. Antoinette was giving some sort of speech, and the atmosphere was clear: let the boss woman talk.

"What you did was foolhardy," she continued, "but ultimately, details of the circumstance were simply beyond my, or the Invictus's, or Avery's, or Jacob's, or ... the Sanctum's ability to quantify or qualify. Jack and the curse that plagues him have proven a powerful tool, and he made a decision to use it, one that he knew

the Primogen would not have agreed to.” She smiled at that, and Beatrice raised an eyebrow. Ok, not expecting the smile. “Better to ask for forgiveness than permission, Mister Terry?”

“Uh ... in a sense, Prince,” the kid said.

She nodded, smile remaining. The whole tone of the conversation changed from the military whooping Triss expected, to something a lot more lighthearted. Was the Prince happy with them? It kinda seemed like she was. “The hunters are defeated. Jeremiah and Angela are dead. Three hunters have surrendered. Harcourt has already sent a message to his fellow hunters explaining what has happened, a message I helped craft. Jack, I ask that you Dominate the man later, to insure that he is truthful about his intentions.”

“Will do, Prince. It’s ... difficult, to get past his barriers though, and with the curse, I could end up hurting him.”

“A risk worth taking.” She brushed a hand aside, dismissing the concern easily. Well, he was a hunter. No use crying over spilled milk in that regard, Triss supposed. “The remaining hunters in the city are considered a deadly threat, and are to be killed on sight unless they surrender first. I imagine they will flee, once receiving Harcourt’s message.”

“And ... Harcourt, and his friends?” Jack asked. “I made them a promise.”

“We will see. You overstepped your power, Mister Terry. I do not need to honor your promise to them. Be thankful your promise was to kine, and not another Kindred, or they would have had claim to a dispute.”

Beatrice grinned a little at that. Well, at least Antoinette wasn’t playing favorites with her boy toy.

“Yes, yes you’re right. I apologize,” he said.

“Lying to the enemy is a part of warfare, Jack Terry. Do not apologize.” She shrugged, again dismissing Harcourt’s life value with a small gesture. “My point was that, were such a promise made to Kindred, and it became a part of the Danse Macabre, you would be ... up shit creek, without a paddle, as it were. Be careful with such promises in the future.”

“Lesson learned, Prince.”

“I will be hosting a ball in several days. All Kindred are to attend. Defy me at your peril.” She offered each witch a harsh glare, before looking to the others. “Uratha and Begotten, you are invited, but your presence is optional. I would appreciate your attendance. I—” She stopped, and raised her hand to her ear for a moment. Oh, she was wearing an ear piece, a tiny thing Triss almost hadn’t noticed. And she was too good to poker player to do something as stupid as call attention to it by lifting a hand to her ear. So, if she was willing to let them know she was hearing something, then—

Everyone snapped to awareness, weight going onto the balls of their feet, as Daniel stepped out of the corner of the room, from behind them. Holy fucking shit, he’d been in the room all along, Cloaked, hidden, invisible. Everyone was caught by surprise, everyone except Jack.

A grunt came from Daniel’s direction, and that did draw Jack’s attention, as if he’d known about Daniel, but not who was going to make that noise. Everyone turned to watch the deadly fucker walk toward the center of the room, and they made way for him, and his prisoner.

“Mark?” Jack said. “You...”

The dude said nothing. In jeans and a hoodie, the man frowned up a storm as Daniel, with a sword drawn and pressed to the Begotten’s throat, escorted him to the big desk Antoinette sat behind.

“Mark.” Antoinette said. “You never gave me your last name.” The dude said nothing, but it was clear he hadn’t expected to be found doing whatever it was he was doing. “I suspected, based on my last conversation with Azamel, that she knew far too much, about a great many things. She hinted that you had helped her learn of Jeremiah’s defenses, and to extrapolate from that was not difficult.” She leaned forward, and glared ice into the monster. “I wondered why Azamel kept you close, Mark. You do not seem to possess combat prowess. What value would you have as bodyguard? It took time before I realized that you are not a sword, but eyes and ears. A rather devious set of eyes and ears.

“Unfortunately for you, your underestimated my sheriff’s ability.” She netted her fingers in front of her, elbows still on the desk, and she smiled a deadly smile. My god, she was enjoying this, indulging in catching the fucker who’d been spying on her. Dude had balls, Triss had to give him that, to spy on the fucking Prince.

Triss found her eyes drifting to Jack more than anyone. He hadn’t reacted to Daniel’s sudden appearance, while the rest of them had. But, he’d been surprised by Mark’s presence. Did he sense Daniel? Did he just assume the sheriff was always around, Cloaked? Either way, Mark had managed to surprise him. Hell, even Antoinette looked pleased that the fucker had been caught, as if she hadn’t been able to sense him either. Giant balls and insane sneaking skills.

“Release me,” he said eventually.

“Fiona.” Antoinette turned to look at the redhead, and the tiny girl stood up straight. Poor girl probably thought she’d be nothing but a sideler through all this, but Mark’s presence changed that. “Did you know of your colleague’s ambitious attempts at spying?”

“N-No! I didnae ... know...” She couldn’t hold Antoinette’s gaze for long. After a few awkward moments, where Antoinette was

obviously waiting for Fiona to fill in some blanks, the redhead lowered her eyes and glanced Mark's way. "I only knew that he works close with Azamel, and he spies for her, and stuff."

The Prince glared at Fiona for a few more seconds, and the room waited for something to happen. Fiona was innocent. No way that dumbass ditz was up to anything sinister; other than her usual Begotten stuff, hunting kine and feeding off their fear.

"Needless to say, this damages my trust of Azamel." Sighing, Antoinette got up, stepped around her desk, and looked down at Mark. Damn tall woman. "The only reason I do not kill you, is because—"

"Because you're afraid of Azamel. I—"

Everyone took another quick step back from Mark and Daniel, when Antoinette snapped out her right hand, and wrapped her fingers around Mark's throat. Her arm moved fast enough, Beatrice fucking heard it moving the air, long after the Prince'd already gotten her hand around the monster's throat.

Like a queen of ice, the white-haired woman squeezed on Mark's neck, silencing his grunts as she lifted him a foot into the air. With her arm outstretched and solid, she glared at the man, and Triss swore she could see literal blades of ice shooting out of her red eyes, and into the man's body.

"I have been far too passive in this ridiculous game, but my patience has been stretched to its limit. You think I spare you for fear of your master? I could kill Azamel myself, worm, and I was capable of such a feat before her injury. She is injured now, weakened, and I could have her head on a platter if I so choose." A quiet growl rumbled in her throat, and Triss gulped as she felt her Beast do its best to disappear into the environment. Mark, clutching her wrists, squirmed and wriggled, obviously unable to breathe, and



the only reason he wasn't kicking Antoinette, was probably because she'd literally squeeze until his head popped off if he did.

"The only reason you live," she continued, "is because it brings me no pleasure to make enemies of fellow paranormals. The only reason you live, is because Azamel has never directly attempted to harm me. The only reason you live, is because she proved true to her word last night. The only reason you live, is because I can understand the measures of an old, dying woman, doing her best to control her world." She still wasn't letting up her grip, and it was clear the man was beginning to feel the effects of asphyxiation. As fucked up weird the Begotten were, with strange powers, and Mark himself probably being immune to something like being choked to death when he was in his rot form, here in the real world, he was vulnerable.

"Hear me, filth," Antoinette said, and she brought the man in close to her face. "You are not invited to my ball, and for this transgression, neither is Azamel. One more misstep from her, and I will have the Invictus detonate the explosives placed in the precious tunnels. Go back to the old crone, and give the shadow creature Athalia a message. If she behaves, she is invited, and will be safe under the protection I give all those who enter my walls." After a quiet growl, Antoinette threw the man back, and everyone spread apart to let him crash into the office floor.

Mark got up, looked around, eyed the sheriff with what Triss could only guess was professional rivalry, before glaring at Antoinette again. But, he said nothing. He turned, and walked out of the room.

"Uh ... you invited Athalia?" Triss said.

Antoinette snapped her a look, and she froze. Ok, yeah, talking without being asked to talk was not a good idea right now.

Once Antoinette calmed down in a second, she nodded. “Indeed. Samantha wishes to speak with her, or at least see her once for herself.”

Triss winced and looked to Jack. His mom wanted to see the mother of Angela. Fuck, what was that interaction going to be like? Hell, what would any interaction with Athalia be like, after the death of her daughter?

“Can Mo—Samantha be trusted with such a decision?” Jack said.

“Yes, she can.” Antoinette gave the small Ventrue a harsh glare not unlike the one she gave Triss, before she stepped around her desk to sit in her chair again. “We may discuss your mother later, Mister Terry. For now, understand that all are invited to my ball. All, except for that ... thing”—she gestured to the door—”and his master. If last night had not gone as it did, if Azamel had lied to me, or deceived me, Mark would be dead, and I would personally see to killing Azamel myself.” As she said it, she looked to Fiona, as if daring the woman to challenge her.

Fiona did not. She put up her hands, an exaggerated surrender, before putting them down and doing her best to disappear by holding perfectly still.

“Miss Moreno,” Antoinette continued, looking to Clara, “I understand that Avery may disagree with your actions last night. Should I not mention you at the ball?”

“Um, the boss already knows, the sneaky bitch. So I guess it doesn’t matter. But, mention?”

“Oui. I will be making an announcement at the ball, of who defeated the hunters.” Her eyes fell to Sándor, and she looked at the quiet man for a little while, probably trying to gauge how the gargoyle would react. The problem was, the man barely reacted at all. His eyes were locked onto her, and the room as a whole,

obviously paying attention, but Mark and Daniel's sudden appearance, and Antoinette's aggression toward his fellow Begotten had barely made him move. He just, stood there, like a gargoyle.

Which the Prince took as a silent yes, apparently.

“Excellent. Dolareido has come unto strange times, and I expect that, by explaining the different forces involved in this act, I can nurture an atmosphere of cooperation. The assault was a joint effort of many groups, after all.”

Ah, politics, the worst reason to do anything. But Antoinette was smart, and good at the Danse Macabre, better than Triss would ever be. Better to just do what she said. Not like Triss had a choice anyway, since only the Uratha and Begotten were optionals. Everyone else was just expected to do what Antoinette wanted them to, and they would, too, unless they wanted to get on her bad side. No one wanted that.

“Dress well. Suits, dresses, and do not be afraid to show some skin. Some, mind you.” Nodding, Antoinette waved a hand, a tiny gesture, motioning for them to go. “Jack, please explain the rules of my city to Sándor.”

“Me?”

“Oui. I trust you, and I am pressed for time.”

Jack nodded, and everyone left.

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“So, your mother is coming to the ball?” Jennifer said to Jack, in the elevator. In it were Triss, Jen, Jack, Clara, and Sándor. Othello, Aaron, Fiona, and Damien took another one, not wanting to crowd.

“Yes, she is,” Jack said, and he glared at Jen with a hard squint. “Please don't wear what you wore last time.”

“Jack! A woman never wears the same dress twice. Not to a ball, at least.”

“You know what I mean. Can you cover up a bit? Mom’s been single since my dad died years ago, and now she’s getting hammered in all directions by”—Triss snorted on a laugh, and Jack glared at her as well—”by changes.”

“She’s Daeva!” Jen said. “Daeva love new experiences.”

Jack jammed a finger in the girl’s shoulder. “New experiences does not necessarily include an orgy buffet.”

Orgy buffet. Well, Daeva did have a habit of becoming addicted to sex, and lining up kine like a buffet to drink, and then fuck. Or fuck, then drink. Or drink fuck. Triss could understand Jack having trouble imagining his mom doing that, but then again, the kid basically got to do just that, frequently.

So, she elbowed him in the side a bit. Half of her said don’t do that, don’t touch the demon, but the other half won over. This wasn’t Jack the psycho. This was Jack, kid Jack, growing up far too fast but still her friend Jack. She could feel the curse, but it felt like it was asleep or something, or lurking under the surface. Strangely, she managed to relax around him, a little.

“Jack, come on, your mom’s an adult. If you can survive a foursome on the reg, I think your mom can, too.”

The kid cringed, and she laughed. Yeah, that was Jack, young Jack who could still get caught off guard by aspects of Kindred life he never predicted. Orgies and whatnot was one hurdle most Kindred dealt with; not her, considering she was Nosferatu and had a stick up her ass, but still. The hurdle of a family member also becoming Kindred, and then getting involved in their own orgies? It happened to a lot of Kindred, she supposed, those who got their family pulled into the Masquerade.

“Seriously Jack,” Jennifer added, “you let go of your issues with sex, didn’t you? That should extend to your mother, and I’m sure she’ll let go of hers, with a little incentive.” Smiling, Jen combed back her shoulder-length black hair over one ear, and took a step toward Sándor. “Mister Sándor, I ... what is your last name, if I may ask?”

The man, who’d been watching them with an unreadable, muted expression, softened his stone gaze. Or at least, softened a little, as if he was making an effort.

“Pavel.”

“Mister Pavel! I know your life has been quite hectic as of late. You’ve only been a free man for a single night, and the ball is in several days. Would you like some help finding clothes?”

That sneaky, crafty bitch. She was roping him in, giving him reasons to want to lean on her, and trust her considering she’d given him the location of their base. Not that it was a secret base, but there were plenty of Kindred who didn’t know where it was; not exactly widely circulated info.

“I didn’t plan to go.” Again, deadpan face.

“You must come!” She came in closer again, until she was only a foot from him, fluttering her eyelashes up at the man. “Everyone will be there, and it will be the perfect opportunity for people to meet the Begotten who killed Jeremiah.”

Mentioning Jeremiah managed to get a reaction from the statue, but it passed quickly.

“I’m only here because I know Dolareido is a safe enough place for me to rest this body. Once I ... feel well enough to move on, I probably will.”

Jennifer stood up straight, and frowned. “Move on? Why?”

“Because ... this place is not my...” He didn’t need to say it, he’d said it before. His wife and son were dead, and they were his home. His human half had been a slave for four years, too, so if he went back to his old life, the result would be obvious. He’d be accused of killing his wife and son. Christ, that’d suck.

“Well,” Jennifer said, “I think Dolareido could be your new home. It’s a huge city, with endless indulgences and interesting distractions.”

“I don’t have—”

“If you need money, I’m sure Jack will help you. Invictus are all rich. And they can create a new identify for you.”

That earned a raised brow from the man, some of the largest expression Triss had seen from him yet. He looked to Jack, and the little guy nodded.

“Yeah, that’d be easy. There are Invictus in every branch of government, keeping information under control. It’s the least I could do. And money, too.”

Triss grinned at the Begotten, not having to say a word as the two Ventrue, predictably, handled the negotiations.

“Something tells me the Prince—”

“Nonsense,” Jen said. “The Prince will be glad to have you in the city. She ... may not be happy about the Uratha and other Begotten, but you seem a good deal more civil. And it is civility that the Prince seeks in others.” She came in even closer, and held out a hand, just as the elevator door opened. Planned, no doubt. “Come, let us help build you a wardrobe.”

Stoic as all fuck, the monster looked down at her hand, back to her, all without moving his head, and stood there. But even as Jack, Clara, and Triss walked out of the elevator, Jen remained where she was, waiting, smile unwavering. Damn, she was relentless.

The man sighed, and nodded. “Very well.” He took her hand, and Triss watched him suppress a groan as Jennifer beamed.

“Excellent. Triss, coming?”

“Yeah sure.”

“But I don’t—”

Jennifer waved a hand, letting go of Sándor’s but obviously implying for him to keep following. “You’re in the company of vampires now, Mister Pavel. The city is our banquet to take from as we see fit. You won’t need any money tonight.”

Triss glanced to Jack. Yeah, he saw it too, that Jen was obviously manipulating the man because he’d be a powerful ally. But, she knew he knew, Jen was also earning the man’s trust because she was trying to get Triss to open up more, since Julias’s death, and she was going to use Sándor as catalyst. And Jen knew Triss knew, too, but she did it anyway, because she was a Ventrue, and that’s just how Ventrue rolled.

“I’ll walk with you,” Jack said. “Gotta explain to Sándor about the rules, and ... well, he probably knows most of them, and—” The other elevator opened, and Fiona came out, arm hooked with Damien’s. God damn it, she was so cute. And the way she clung to Emo Boy like he was her everything, was sickeningly adorable. “Damien, Fiona, wanna walk with me for a bit?”

Before Damien could say anything, Fiona threw up a hand, jumped once, and dragged Damien over to him. For a moment, Triss

thought Jack might ask Clara to follow, but Clara had already started walking away.

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Fifteen minutes later, Sándor, Jen, and Triss were in a men's wear store. It was open, which was insane considering it was 3:00 AM, but hey, it was Dolareido, with a bustling nightlife that any smart company would take advantage of. Rich morons with cocaine in the blood did love to waste money on expensive suits, especially when they had a half naked gold digger to admire it, or mimbo dumbass on their arm to wear it.

Triss was getting better at Obfuscate, particularly Face in the Crowd. It no longer took as much effort to blend in, be unnoticed by the kine, and basically be a fly on the wall. She knew Sándor could tell what she was doing, so she didn't need to explain it to him. The man was a lot older than he looked, based on what he said, so he probably knew plenty about vampires anyway.

"May I help you?" the man behind the desk said.

"Yes you may," Jennifer said. "My friend here"—she gestured to Sándor—"needs a suit in two days."

"Two days?" The man, a tall, skinny fellow with a mouse face, squinted through his glasses at Sándor. "It cannot be done, Miss. Even minor alterations will require several days to move through our queue."

"Two days," she said, and she leaned over the glass counter at the man, over the various mens' jewelry. Her eyes met the man's, and his breathing stopped for a moment as Jennifer grabbed his mind. "We will try several suits tonight, black tie, and the alterations will be ready two days hence. Understood?" No theatrics, no explosive battle of wills, just a Ventrue dominating a simple, unsuspecting kine.



Deadpan, obviously brainwashed, the man slowly nodded. “Yes Miss. Come this way then, and I’ll show you our selection.” Not once did he glance Triss’s way. Perfect.

Jennifer picked out three suits, each of them ‘black tie’ or whatever, lavish, practically tuxedos, with enough modern flair that they looked more like really nice lawyer suits. Sexy, the sort of suits Julias wore when he was feeling fancy. Triss frowned at Jen until she noticed, but Jen rolled her eyes, took the suits, handed them to Sándor, and took him to the changing room.

“Why are you doing this?” Sándor asked, eyes solid as he looked at the dotting Ventrue.

“Beatrice told me what happened in the dream, about how you saved everyone.”

“I didn’t save everyone. I saved myself. Everyone else just happened to be there.”

Jennifer grinned at the man as she leaned in toward his face. He didn’t move. Hell, Jen probably could have kissed him and he wouldn’t have moved, or blinked, or showed any expression.

“I don’t believe you,” she said. The Begotten raised a brow slightly before lowering it again. “And I heard about what happened to your family. Horrible. The least I can do is help you get adjusted to Dolareido.” And, without asking, she started undoing his shirt buttons. So damn forward, but Sándor still didn’t react.

“It’s a city, like any other.”

Triss snorted from her corner of the changing room. “Yeah, uh, no it ain’t.”

“Indeed,” Jen said, smile growing wider. “The Prince and Jacob built this city to be a haven for vampires. I don’t know how much

you learned from Jeremiah, but paranormal beings are quite safe here, usually. The only problems we get are the ones we give each other.” She slid him out of the blue shirt, and reached for one of the white ones she’d picked out for him.

“Yeah, Jack gave me the rundown on the way here,” he said. A snarkier person would have said ‘remember?’ since Jen had been beside him the whole time while Jack explained. But Sándor didn’t say it. He just stood there, and let the woman cross every personal boundary the man had. Yeesh. Either he just didn’t mind, or was too broken to care. Maybe both.

God damn, that body. Yeah, those were muscles, lots of muscles on his slightly pale skin. He wasn’t as big and bulky as some other guys, but shirtless, it was more obvious that half the reason for his leaner shape was he didn’t have any fat on his body. Like, shredded, good lord. The fuck did this dude do in his human life to warrant a body like that? Or was it an effect from his Horror?

Heh, look at her, objectifying him based on his looks. Maybe Jen was right, and she was healing, sexually speaking.

Of course, Jen took his stoic attitude as a challenge. She started undoing his belt, while Sándor put on the white shirt.

“Jen, for the love of god, ease up.”

“I’m just helping him undress. Calm down.”

Triss wanted to say something, like ‘good fucking god he just avenged his dead wife and son, leave him alone’ but it’d have sounded dumb as fuck, especially coming from her. Besides, Sándor was an adult, and older than either of them. Dude must have had the balls to tell a pretty girl to back off if he wanted to.

He didn’t say a thing, though he made sure to keep his eyes on Jen as she did her thing while he buttoned up his new shirt. “I’m

not used to being ... doted on.”

“Well, get used to it,” Jen said. “I did nothing last night but babysit a couple hunters, who’d surrendered already. You saved my girl’s life breaking that ritual, and many of our friends’ lives. I feel indebted, and a bit guilty for not participating.” Nodding, she handed the man the black—charcoal, Jen had insisted—pants, and stepped back, watching.

“Be careful using words like doted,” Triss said. “You’re going to be famous after the ball, and I can guarantee a lot of girls, and a few guys, are going to want to fuck you. Hell, if you want to, just ask someone and they’ll lend you their ghouls, or enthrall a few kine for the night for you.”

Of all the reactions she expected from the man, she didn’t expect him to look at her with the most quiet, smidgen of a frown ever.

“No thanks.” He finished with the pants, and reached for the jacket as Jen handed it to him.

“No?” the Ventrue said.

“No.”

Jen persisted. “Not interested in sex?”

Triss almost jumped in. Yeah, Jen was crossing some lines. The man had had a wife and a son. The chances of him not being interested in sex were pretty small. Combined with the subtle odor of masculinity Triss could smell with her vampire nose, she doubted he had any biological issue, especially considering Begotten could heal from quite a bit. Maybe not as much as Uratha or Kindred, but far as she knew, their human bodies did heal better than kine.

Sándor’s gaze hardened, but only for a moment. Triss recognized that face. She’d seen it in the mirror. Something had triggered a

memory in the man, but he let it go, realizing it wasn't fair to hold onto it.

“I am. But not with strangers.”

The Ventrue laughed, came up behind Sándor, and turned him to face the mirror. With roaming hands, she adjusted his suit for him, tugging on his shoulders and reaching around to help slide his shirt into the pants. He let her, face emotionless and looking into the mirror. The fact he was being so standoff-ish to Jen, instead of straight up telling her to back off, was probably triggering every instinct Jen had to try and break him. Poor guy, playing hard to get and not realizing it.

“Shoulders are a bit tight,” she said, “and you can't trust a tailor to fix that, in my experience. Let's find a size larger, and we'll trim down on the waist. And the sleeves, of course.” Nodding, she grinned at Triss over her shoulder, before leaving to find the suit jacket in a larger size.

“Your friend is ... indecent,” Sándor said, voice a touch quieter.

Triss snorted on a laugh, and shrugged. “She is, but she's great. Her heart's in the right place.”

“Is it?”

“You don't think so?”

“I ... no, that's not what I meant. I'm just ... not used to someone being so familiar with me.”

Triss nodded, walked over to the man, and stood beside him to look at them both in the mirror. “She's the only reason I'm not in a cave somewhere, crying over Julias.”

“I see.”

“Plus, you said it’s been four years since your life was fucked? That’s a long time. Jen’s probably thinking you’re ready to move on, and get you some pussy. Because, well, Jen thinks that’s how you heal any man’s wounds. Good pussy.”

The word pussy earned the smallest twitch of one of his eyebrows, and she snorted on a laugh again. Ok, yeah, he was a perfect straight man, and it was just too damn fun to try and crack his shell. She owed Jen an apology.

“I don’t think I’ll be comfortable in this city,” he said. “I ... I lived in a smaller city, miles from here, when Jeremiah came. A normal city.”

“You’re safer here. And your human half needs a place to go to eventually, right?”

“Yes.”

Shrugging, she sat down in one of the fancy chairs, because everything had to be extravagant in the overpriced store, and she gestured to the man in the mirror. “Stick around for a while, at least a few weeks. The vamps will take care of you, as thanks for what you did. Kick back, relax ... grieve, you know?” Four years of being brainwashed probably meant he’d never had a proper opportunity to do that. “And, once you have, move on. It’s been four years. Have a little of Dolareido’s primary export.”

She knew she was really talking to herself, not him. Jen, you crafty slut.

His expression softened just a bit, and he looked at her through the mirror as well. “Which is?”

“Carnal indulgence.”

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~~Eric~~

“Man, looks like so much shit happened while we were getting shut down by Flow. Can’t believe we missed it.”

Eric raised a brow as he blinked at the woman. The two of them were in his apartment again, and Kat slept in the living room while they were in his bedroom. She was lying down on her stomach on his bed, and she had her laptop open and in front of him. It was clear she was working some slick software, typing in messages to various people, and speaking in code words Eric didn’t know. Well, that made sense. A secret organization of high tech vamps probably did all the crazy shit he’d seen in spy movies.

“Um, yeah. Think you can focus on—”

“Eric, I’m a little busy. Just keep doing what you’re doing. I’ll be with you in a minute, or ten.”

He frowned down at the naked woman underneath him, and gave her ass a rather harsh slap. The huge, firm mounds jiggled hypnotically, but she didn’t flinch or react otherwise. She laughed, grinned at him from over her shoulder, and got back to typing.

Rolling his eyes, he eased his hips back, sliding his shaft out of her several inches, before he slowly sank himself balls deep into her ass once again. She had several pillows under her hips, putting her ass up in the air for him, and she’d insisted he fuck her while she did some work. And, well, he was horny. Can’t blame a guy for fucking his girlfriend when she shakes her booty at him, right?

Somehow, despite the wholly unsexy situation, and despite having immediately jumped into anal sex with absolutely zero foreplay, he could feel some subtle wetness forming along the lips of her sex, as he ground himself into her ass until his hanging testicles nudged them. And that was strangely hot. She wasn’t paying him any mind, and was looking through what looked like

financial reports from Xnomina, and updates from other Kindred about secret things. Despite that, with each gentle thrust of his length into her well-lubed butt, he could feel her body responding. A wet spot was growing on the pillow underneath her slit, where her pelvis rested.

She had her legs almost completely together, and his were outside them, weight on his knees, so she was lying, and he was basically sitting on his knees and her thighs. A very casual, leisurely way to fuck. It was especially nice for him, cause with her ass in the air from the pillows, and him sitting around her legs, he barely had to do anything. With his hands on her hips, all it took was a little thrust, and he was treated to the most amazing sight in the world: a fit woman's large ass wrapping his length, jiggling with the soft impact, and pressing toward her back as he pushed his pelvis forward. Hell, several times he simply buried himself inside her, and ground into her, just to watch her ass and how its mounds pushed toward her lower back.

He sank his fingers into the meat of her ass, and massaged, working the muscles in with his thumbs, and earning a small groan from Jessy. Bingo. She squeezed her ass together, and he shivered as the ring of muscle around the base of his length gripped tight, before she released her grip on him.

“Jeeze, these reports are so dull. Jack and friends got to have all the fun. Everyone else in the city was quiet, except for a scuffle between Joe and Hella. Fucking Gangrels.”

Eric laughed. This woman, good god. “You’re a Gangrel.”

“No shit! And I make my boss’s life hell all the time. Now my Gangrel subordinates are making my life hell.”

“She’s your subordinate?”

“Eh, not exactly. I’m a Right Hand, so I have access to all the data the rest of the Invictus puts out. When someone does something super dumb, I might have to clean up the mess. So, subordinate, no, but I’ll break her god damn skull if she stirs up more trouble with Joe.”

He leaned down over her, and set a kiss on the back of her neck. Instant shivers. “We were causing trouble with Joe not long ago.” More than trouble. Eric had transformed, Caleb had transformed, and the two of them had practically destroyed a building, until her sire interfered.

She swatted at him, wearing a comedic and exaggerated frown before she looked back to her laptop. “They started it, that time.”

“But not this time?”

“No. Hella wanted some revenge, apparently.”

“I see.” Right, revenge. He was tempted to bring up Julias, about how Jack had killed Angela and had gotten his revenge, and see how Jessy reacted to it. Then again, maybe it was time he start putting his boyfriend knowledge to use, and see if he could read her.

What did Jessy do when she was feeling sad? The sadder she felt, the more outgoing she was, the harder she tried to be sexual, to be social, to distract herself. The last thing Jessy liked doing was thinking about things, and when Julias died, she’d tried extra hard to get Eric to come to the club with her, dance with her, and after the initial shock, fuck her. She was smarter than she let on, wiser, but she hated contemplating things. If she was contemplating, she probably had some unconscious tick telling her she was wasting her energy, when she could be having fun.

Now, she’d literally just lain on his bed naked, and told him to fuck her, cause she was busy and had to take care of some work stuff. Of course he’d suggested they have sex later, but she told him



that, after getting shutdown by Flowing Sanctuary, the least she could do to make it up to him was let him fuck her ass while she did some work. She'd even said don't worry about making her orgasm, cause she had to get her work done asap. Well, he'd make sure to surprise her.

So, boyfriend detective work completed, he came to a conclusion: she was happier. Not completely happy, and probably still grieving, but happier than she'd been, after learning that Jack had gotten revenge and killed Julias's killer. And that made him happy. God, that was a nice feeling, just feeling better because she was feeling better. It'd been forever since he felt that way.

“So there's a party, in a few days I think. A ball. You weren't at the last one, right? Should be a lot of fun. Wanna be my date?”

“A ball?”

“Mhmm. Shit load of vamps will be there, probably a bunch of the werewolves, and maybe even some of the monsters. I doubt Athalia will be there, but Fiona probably will be.” She grinned over her shoulder at him again, and bounced her ass up and down for him a few times. The way it rippled was beyond hypnotizing. “Remember her? God damn, she was hot. Huge tits that shook like jelly.”

“She has a boyfriend.” Though, Jessy was right, Fiona had been terribly attractive, in that cute and curvy sorta way. Twice he'd almost had sex with her, and he was glad he didn't. Too young, emotionally speaking.

“Yeah, I know. She got her hands on Emo Boy.” Laughing, she shrugged and got back to work. “Though Damien is pretty hot, I admit. That half buzzed head look, long black hair on the other side? Plus, I've seen him changing gear at the HQ, and he's built like a fucking ninja. Skinnier than you, but damn, those abs.”

Eric rolled his eyes, and looked down at his own body. His muscles had grown a little since his awakening, and his body fat percentage had dropped a little as well, turning his abs into a rather chiseled washboard. No wonder everyone in Avery's pack were so fit. They were all on natural steroids, and now he was too. He'd always been a fairly lean fighter, but he'd gone up a weight class in the past year, despite having apparently lost a few pounds of fat. All muscle. He kinda liked it, and he could tell Jessy liked it as well; considering the size of her ghouls, it made sense.

"So it's a ball for paranormals?" A quiet groan escaped him, and he stopped his gentle thrusting as he felt the first tingles of a rising orgasm. Warmth grew between his legs underneath his testicles, and he breathed deep to calm his body. Eventually, the heat settled, and his glans no longer sent tingling sparks down his length. A couple moments after that, he was able to start thrusting again, nice and slow, each to the base so he could see the glorious sight of her ass pushing toward her lower back each time.

"Dude, just cum. You're a fucking werewolf, you can go like twice more."

"Doesn't mean I don't want to make each one last."

Chuckling, she tapped on her keys a few times, and used the track pad to bring up a picture of a building. "The Black Hall. The Prince's favorite building for hosting balls. No one outside can see inside, so it's a great place for Kindred to really indulge in what we do, you know? Last time, there must have been a hundred thralls or ghouls, probably more, being shared around. And at least half of them were naked and thoroughly drained by the end of the party. Drained in both ways, you know?" She sighed happily, and pushed her ass back into him as she recalled a memory. "So many tits out, and pussies being licked and fingered. So many kine dicks getting stroked and sucked. Orgasm makes the blood taste a little different, you know."

Wow. That definitely painted an image. “Really?”

“Yeap. Most of the young vamps aren’t comfortable enough yet, but the ones with a couple decades under their belt were all over it. No Kindred actually did any fucking, but some of the girls had their tits out, to give the guy kine plenty of encouragement when they started stroking them off, or sucking them off. And while that was happening, Kindred took turns Kissing them, slowly draining them. Same for the girl kine. Never seen girls cum as hard as some of those ghouls, when they got surrounded by Kindred, usually dudes, and were fingered, choked, and Kissed.” Jessy started pushing her ass back into him harder, some small moans of her own slipping into her words as she recounted the tale. “God, I love this city.”

“Clearly.” He laughed, but it faded quick as he started to thrust faster, and tightened his grip on her hips as he did. Each thrust was enough to have her ass shaking back and forth, a wave that met his rhythm with each lap. She squeezed on him in spurts as well, tight ring of muscle locking firm along his length as he worked himself in and out of her.

When his cum started to flood her insides, Jessy grinned at him again, rolled her eyes, and got back to work. “Finally.”

“Hey,” he managed to say, “I’m ... just...” His words faded as he continued work his hips in motion, using the strength of his arms to make sure she didn’t go anywhere, as he sank each thrust balls deep into her. He could feel his own cum coating his length inside her ass along with all the lubricant, and he shivered as each stroke sent powerful waves of bliss down his length, and into his core and testicles. And, of course, he could not take his eyes off the sight of her ass as he filled her.

“K, you keep going. I gotta finish a quick report here.” And back to typing.

Luna bless Uratha longevity, he supposed. He could keep going. Paranormals may have had hard lives, but they were utterly spoiled for sex.

He started fucking her again, nice and slow, and he smiled as he noticed the wet spot where her mons sat on the pillows had grown quite a bit. What a sneak, pretending to be more into her work than she was. Or, maybe she really was focused on her work, and just knew how to do that while aroused anyway. Probably the latter, now that he thought about it. Well, he wasn't in any rush. The night was young, and he was perfectly content to keep fucking her while she finished up her work. He'd make sure she was satisfied after she was done, but until then, back to slow, deep thrusts.

Ten minutes later, she flicked her hand toward her laptop screen. "Oh my fucking god. Terra Den is going full hostile takeover on Xnomina. Fucking assholes. I'm going to have to pay them a visit."

"I could come, if you need back up. I still have bone to pick with them."

"Heh, I guess you do." That sparked her interest, and she looked over her shoulder at him, contemplating. "Yeah, actually, I think I will bring you. Jack or Damien will probably come, too. It'll be a proper conversation for the Right Hands. And—oh, speaking of, I need to call Natasha, and I see she's online. You mind?"

"Now?"

"Sure. I mean come on, we've both seen her naked, getting DP'd by her boyfriends. I seriously doubt it'll be a problem if she hears my cheeks clapping a bit."

He laughed again. God damn it, she was too funny, and utterly spoiling the mood. "Fine." In the past, he'd have been concerned something like that would destroy his erection; awkwardness had a habit of doing that to any man. But since the wolf spirit took up

residence in his guts, it was the last thing he was worried about. The creature inside constantly begged for an outlet for his energy, his hungers and needs, and Jessy was content to take advantage, or in this case, placate. And, with all the things that'd happened to him since he'd met Jessy, phone call sex probably wouldn't affect him at all.

Nodding, she set the laptop out a little further from her, maybe two feet from her head on the sheets, and dialed Natasha on some app he didn't recognize. Probably something specific to the Invictus or Xnomina.

When Natasha's picture came up on the screen, and then started moving, Eric quickly realized it wasn't a phone call, it was a video call.

"Hey Jessy, I-oh my g-g-god! Eric, I ... um..." Natasha threw her hands up to her eyes, covering them and most of her face with both palms. "Jessy, you d-d-dumbass!"

"Hey Tash. Wanted to ask about the ball. I assume you know more than me, what with it being your boss's party." Laughing, Jessy shook her head, and looked back at Eric so she could grin at him before looking back at her friend. "Oh come on, lower your hands. We've both seen that video you sent, and you know it. I think we're past the shy phase, right?"

Frowning, Natasha shook her head, refusing to lower her hands; except one, and just enough so Tash could get a peek. Eric squinted at the corner picture, which showed the video feed that Natasha could see. Yeap, there was Eric, and Jessy. Most of the picture was Jessy, weight on her elbows, breasts hanging underneath her, but the laptop was angled and off to the side just enough so Tash could see the way Jessy's back was arched down toward the bed, with her ass up in the air propped up by pillows. Eric, with his knees out and

around Jessy's body, was on full display in the background of the video, though the actual penetration was hidden by Jessy's ass.

"That was a video! This is ... l-live."

"Don't worry about it. Seriously, about the ball. Got any details for me? It's pretty sudden. A few days isn't exactly a long time to plan."

Sighing, Natasha spread the fingers of one hand enough so a single eye peeked out. "Um. Uh ... Antoinette says she d-doesn't expect there to be as much ... you know, kine b-being molested, this time. Maybe some? Jack's m-mom is going to be there, and—"

"Oh come on, really? That's the opposite of what she should do! The hunters are dead, and we should celebrate! Balls to the walls celebration. And Samantha's a Daeva. She's been to Bloodlust before, and I can just tell she's itching to fuck someone."

"N-No no no. Jessy, not every D-Daeva is like that."

"Bullshit." Shrugging, Jessy slid the laptop further to the side, and then more toward her profile. Now, while Jessy was still the main focus of the video, her large breasts were hidden by her left arm, where her elbows were propping up her chest and shoulders. It wasn't her breasts Jessy wanted her friend to see, it was the arching body of the athletic woman, and how Eric's thrusts were making her ass jiggle back and forth.

If he'd told her to turn it off, Jessy would have turned it off. She may have shocked him by making it a video call without telling him, but she wasn't so mean that she'd keep making him do something he didn't want to do. He really liked that about her, the fun balance she had, being aggressive with her ideas and her wants, but also leaving room for him to say no. Natasha would certainly understand if he did.

The only thing stopping him from closing the laptop was, he was kinda enjoying this. It was obvious Natasha wanted to watch, and was trying to not. Both hands were still on her face, but both had also spread her fingers enough that she was watching anyway. Damn it, Jessy had corrupted the both of them.

“Daeva,” Jessy continued, “are hornier than anyone, all the time.”

Her friend shook her head. “That’s, um ... racism?”

“Ha, it’s not racism. Daeva — at least the ones in Dolareido — obsess over sex, and you know it. Samantha will give into the Prince’s ‘sex for everyone, anywhere, anytime’ philosophy sooner or later. I mean come on, look at who her sire is.”

With an exaggerated and obviously not truly serious groan of annoyance, Natasha lowered her hands and glared at Jessy. “She’s depressed! Bad things have happened, Jessy. And now, thanks to J-Jack, maybe she can start to ... heal...” Her eyes ran down Jessy’s body, and landed on Eric’s.

Eric moved his left arm off Jessy’s hip, and set it on his own hip. It let the tiny vampire see his body. He didn’t even think to do it, he just did it, showing off for the crowd a bit like he did back in the old days when he was a fighter. The last thing he expected to do tonight was put on a porn show for someone, but considering how much he’d seen of Natasha, and how close Jessy and Natasha were, he probably should have. And, despite himself, the old thrill came back to him, the joy of having an audience, of having the people in their seats focused on him.

MMA fighting was a spectator sport, after all, and he’d been drawn to it because ... because of a lot of reasons, really. He liked being in shape, he liked the skill of fighting, and he liked money. But damn, he’d forgotten how awesome it felt to have people watching you, their attention focused on you, as you did what you did. Back then, the thing he did was kicking ass. Now, because Jessy

was an evil woman content to corrupt everyone around her, it was fucking her ass.

“You know what heals? Sex! Sex heals. Sex, with the Kiss, is a concoction that will soothe her soul.” Jessy turned her torso over, propped her head up on her right fist with elbow to the sheets, and reached out with her left hand to start working her laptop again. Surprising that she didn’t start doing something a lot more blatant, like playing with her breasts and putting on an even lewder show. But, she was serious about having work to do, and she pulled up another app on the screen with her left hand, and scrolled through blocks of information. More stuff about Xnomina. Looked like receipts for purchases of things Eric couldn’t understand, ID codes likes XEMR233 and FRTE421.

“M-Maybe, but—”

“Jesus Christ, have you seen these reports, Tash? Terra Den is royally screwing with us.”

“What? N-No, I haven’t seen them. I’m not an Invictus anymore, remember?”

“Ah, right. Figured you might have been spying on Xnomina’s purchase history or something, you know? Guess you wouldn’t be allowed to tell me if you were.”

“And are you ... w-working?”

“Yeah.”

Natasha’s frown returned all the meaner. “You’re having sex, right n-n-now! P-Poor Eric.”

“Poor Eric? Dude’s getting treated to the best ass this side of the planet.” She reached behind her with that left hand, and gave her ass a good slap. It rippled with the impact, a large ripple that faded



quickly. Large as Jessy's ass was, it was mostly muscle, and damn firm.

And of course, Natasha's eyes went to Jessy's ass. They stayed there for a while, and Eric could see from the mirror video in the corner of the screen, that the tiny vampire could see a bit of Eric's cock as he eased out of Jessy, before sinking back into her. It wasn't long before the vampire was looking at him again, his abs, his ass, and frequently looking back to where he was penetrating his lover. The angle made it obvious which hole he was fucking.

"I ... sup-p-ppose," she said.

Jessy grinned at her friend. "Gonna make a new movie?"

"Movie? Oh, I ... I um, d-don't know." She squirmed. If she'd been Blushing Life, Eric bet she'd have turned solid red. "The boys enjoyed it."

"And, from what we saw in the movie, yooooou enjoyed it. How many times you cum making that vid? Five? Six?" With a hearty chuckle, Jessy shook her head, and resumed scrolling through the Terra Den receipts. "And I know you. When something's got your attention, you analyze and nerd out over it. So, what's your next movie gonna be like?"

"Um, it ... it's already filmed. I'm editing it."

"Knew it. Pervert."

Natasha's frown kept returning, only to flee in a second. She, like Eric, could just not stay mad at the Gangrel for very long.

"It's uh ... a b-bit of a ... you know, um, reluctance fantasy."

"Oh fuck yeah." That got Jessy's attention. She stopped scrolling, and set her hand on the blankets as she smiled at her friend. "Can't

wait to see it.”

“Well now you w-won’t! Surprising me like this, and Eric. I assume Eric d-d-didn’t even know you were calling me.”

“I knew,” Eric said. “Not that it was a video call, though.”

“See! Horrible.”

The Gangrel laughed again, a hearty laugh Eric hadn’t heard her do often since Julias died. Maybe that’s why he was willing to do this? Much as he felt the old thrill stirring of being the center of attention for an audience, it was nothing compared to the sound of Jessy laughing.

He eased his cock out of her, and laid it upon the crack of her ass. It was hard, long, thick, and as he slid it back and forth along his girlfriend’s butt, spreading some of his earlier cum, he watched Natasha through the corner of his eye. She was staring hard now, with zero effort to hide it, eyes locked on his body, his muscles, and his wet shaft easing back and forth along her friend’s firm ass. Much as it was obvious Natasha thought Jessy was attractive, it didn’t take much to see that Natasha was more into men than women. Jessy had to have known that, too. She was showing him off for her friend.

“Seriously though, the ball. What’re you wearing? I won’t be touching any kine, since Eric’s my date, but that doesn’t mean I won’t put some goods on display. Gotta show those Carthian fucks that I’m hotter than them.”

Natasha stared at her friend for a moment, before she erupted into laughter. “You w-want everyone to think you’re hotter than them.”

“Damn straight.”

“How ab-bout ... the black dress, the one you wore to Bloodlust a few w-weeks ago?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

As the two ladies started talking dresses, Natasha half caught between trying to watch him, and trying to bounce ideas with her friend, Eric eased his knees back a bit, set his left hand on Jessy’s thigh for support, and sank two of his right hand’s fingers into Jessy’s pussy.

The Gangrel groaned immediately, but he knew what would happen. It was part of the game. He got to do what he wanted to her, and she had to try and ignore him and keep talking with Natasha. So after a quick glance from Jessy, a tiniest hint of worry in her eyes, she refocused and looked back to Tash.

“How about you, Tash? Hoping you’ll wear something really revealing.” Her voice wavered a little. “You can do the fashion runway model thing, you know? You got the frame for it. Lots of dresses go better for a girl with your proportions, like, scarf tops that dangle over your tits.”

“Um, maybe? I d-don’t know. I mean, I suppose ... b-but, if I bend over, then everyone could see.”

“Ha, so? L—nnng!” Jessy moaned, loudly, as Eric started to finger her g-spot, hard and fast. With a rigid hand, he drove his index and middle finger straight down into her g-spot like a jackhammer, until her whole body was shaking.

The sounds of her pleasure filled the room, and the bed trembled, as the Gangrel quickly came to orgasm. She’d be on edge for forever now, he figured, since he’d been fucking her ass for so long. But the angle, the pace, none of it had been good for getting her off. If he’d lain on top of her, and started thrusting down a lot harder, then maybe. Or if he’d transformed, and relied on the sheer size of his

girth, that'd have pushed her over the edge as well. But, much as she enjoyed anal sex, he knew she came easier this way.

As her insides clamped down in a desperate attempt to stop him, he kept fingering her. Tiny splashes of her juices landed on the pillow and her thighs, and he kept fingering her. She clenched like a vise, and the liquids grew until they were more than splashing, they were soaking. He kept fingering her, a consistent, fast rhythm that drove her g-spot down toward the pillows underneath her, and forced another tiny squirt from her, and another, and another, little things that went no more than an inch before soaking the pillow.

Jessy had given up keeping her torso twisted to face Natasha. She went onto both elbows again, and her head dangled between her shoulders, groans escaping her that soon turned into weak pants as she struggled to get more air; she didn't need the air, but damn she liked to make noise. Her legs were quivering, and a quick peek behind him showed her toes were curled hard.

After he was satisfied, having earned a dozen small squirts from her over maybe thirty seconds, he eased up, and pulled his fingers out of her soaking hot depths.

“M ... M ... Maybe s-s-s-something like ... Jennifer wore at the last ball,” Tash said, her eyes wide and locked onto Jessy. “That top, um, d-dangled.” Poor girl was doing her best to keep playing the game she'd noticed the two of them were playing, but Eric had already won. Everything from here on out was a victory lap.

After a few groans, Jessy lifted her head, and turned to the laptop. “Y-Yeah, something like that. I was thinking, less inner boob, and more underboob. Something that—” A moan cut her short, as Eric got comfortable back where he'd been before, set his cock against her drenched, trembling slit, and sank himself balls deep into her pussy in one, hard thrust. “Fuck!” She took a second to recover. “Uh,

maybe something that ... really ... lets people see how tiny your waist is, and how flat your stomach is, you know?”

“I b-bet I can ask Antoinette, and she’ll—” This time it was Natasha who went quiet, as Eric reached out, took each of Jessy’s hands in his, and pinned them to the small of her back. She fell onto her chest, head turned to face the laptop, and Eric couldn’t help smile as he saw the wicked grin on his girlfriend’s face. Jessy was looking at Natasha, still trying to play the game, as if Eric wasn’t affecting her, but the spasms of her insides around his cock told a different story. She was just coming down from her orgasm, and it wouldn’t take much to make her cum again.

The sight of pinning Jessy’s hands to her back stirred something in Natasha, as well. Her eyes locked onto him, his arms, his side, where his pelvis was snug to Jessy’s ass, and most often, where his hands were wrapped tight around Jessy’s wrists. What did she say, that the second movie she made was a reluctance fantasy? Getting pinned like this was probably a big kink for Natasha then.

Eric didn’t want to make her feel too uncomfortable though, so he never looked at Natasha, not directly, only through the corner of his eye. Most of the time, he made sure to keep his eyes on Jessy; not like that was hard. And as he started to thrust into her, going slow for now, he watched her expression with joy as her eyes rolled up in pleasure. Every inch was met with a hard clench of her soaked insides, and he shivered as her boiling depths sent pleasure sparks down his length.

“Antoinette, right,” Jessy said, voice barely more than a whisper. “I bet she’ll have lots of options for you. She’ll—nng ... she’ll have better ideas than me, but I still think you should wear a top that—nnng! ... that really shows off your waist, with a bit of boob.”

“I’ll ... m-make sure to t-tell her that, and ask, um, what she thinks.” Natasha fell silent, and stared, eyes fixated on Eric and

growing wider and wider by the second. He was getting faster, and now each thrust was enough to make the bed shake; must have looked like an earthquake to Tash, considering the laptop was on the bed. Each thrust also caused the fit woman's thighs and ass to ripple, in that special way that demanded Eric stare.

The laptop started to drift. Before Jessy could say anything, Eric reached out, and adjusted it, setting it between some blanket folds so it'd stop shifting. He also moved it closer to him, and pointed it directly at where he was penetrating Natasha's friend. The small, whimpering gasp from Natasha signaled he'd lined up the shot perfectly. The small vampire could now see everything, could see Eric and his body thrusting back and forth at the hip, see his cock plunging into Jessy's soaked slit, and see Jessy's ass jiggle with each impact.

Vaguely, he was aware that this was very much outside his comfort zone. He felt mostly comfortable with Natasha's presence now, and considering she'd sent a sex tape of her to her friend, a friend she knew would show it to him, it was clear that Natasha was willing to let him see her naked. Naked, and with two huge dudes pumping her full of cum, both holes. Compared to that, letting her watch him fuck her friend, a friend that very much loved this sort of stuff, seemed tame. And hell, he'd been used to putting on a show, just not this kind of show.

Damn, Jessy really was corrupting him.

By the time his second orgasm came around, Jessy had already cum twice more, groans blatant. He'd have lasted a lot longer, but she kept wriggling, squirming, trying to fight him but unable, not with pleasure running up and down her body. Each motion meant muscles clenching and milking his length, along with the random spasms her climaxes forced on her insides, and all that gripping and squeezing on his cock built up the heat underneath his testicles quickly.

He slammed his hips forward, and Jessy groaned openly. Her eyes were half open, head still turned to face the laptop, and she had a strange, almost dopey smile on her face as she came again. She was loving this. Tightening his grip on her wrists, he slowly eased out most of his length, and slammed into her again, a drastically slower rhythm, but each thrust was much harder, earning separate and defined moans from the Gangrel, and a gush of cum from him. It was leaking out of her by the third thrust.

He slipped back again, and withdrew his length, all of it, from his girlfriend. A heavy strand of the white fluid connected them, and another small gasp from Natasha announced that she could see it. He looked at her, again through the corner of his eye, and smiled as he watched the tiny woman stare at his dripping cock.

When he wrapped his hand around his girth, and started to slowly stroke it, working his and Jessy's cum back and forth along his veined skin, Natasha sat up straight with a jolt. Her eyes lit up with fire.

"I ... I ... g-g-g-gotta go!" And with a small, panicked motion of her arm, the call ended.

"You ... scared her off. Heh, probably running to ... find her boy toys and ... fuck them silly." With a heavy groan, Jessy tried to push herself back up onto her elbows. "Dude, I ... didn't think you'd get so into it. I mean, I've been offering threesomes and foursomes on a plate, and you kept shooting them down. I figured—" Her voice cut short as he set the head of his cock back onto her asshole, and he again sank into her. "Again? Oh ... fff ... uuuuck."

This time, he lay atop her, and used his greater weight to gently pin her underneath him as he began to fuck her ass again. Like this, with his cock driving toward her abs, and her body hypersensitive, he knew she'd be cumming in no time.

“Didn’t think I would,” he said, and he thrust, hard. She didn’t just groan, she squeaked. “I used to like being in the limelight, you know? I never admitted it to myself, but I guess I did. Kinda reminded me of that.” His hands found hers again, and he pinned them into the blankets, a foot over and past her head. “But, honestly, it was just seeing how much you enjoyed it, that really got me into it.”

“Of course,” she whispered between pants. “I’m ... awesome.”

“Uh huh.” He slammed down into her, hard enough to make her ass jiggle despite his pelvis being pressed firm against it. It drove his glans deep into her, stretching her, and down against her pussy through the walls of her insides. Instant groans from the exhausted vampire.

“She ... was really into watching ... you fuck me. She likes guys.”

“You don’t like guys?”

“Heh, I do, but—nnng!” She turned her head to bury her face in the blankets for a second, before turning it to the side again so she could look up at him. “I’m like, sixty percent down for fucking guys, forty for fucking girls. She’s more like an eighty twenty mix.”

“Bisexuality on a spectrum?”

“Exactly.” Nodding, she sucked in a breath as he withdrew his length, and let out another moan as he slammed down into her. He didn’t thrust as hard as he would if penetrating her pussy, but she was thoroughly lubricated with lube and cum. He was in the clear to get rough.

“I did kinda like it though,” he said, and he set his lips to Jessy’s ear for a kiss. “Wouldn’t mind doing it again, especially since we know she’s making another movie. Wouldn’t mind watching it with you, either.”



“Awesome.” Nodding, Jessy melted into the blankets, and stopped squirming or wriggling. Instead, she went limp, tiny shivers working up and down her spine, as he continued to fuck her ass with a heavy rhythm. “Think ... you could transform, and let her watch ... that?”

“I think transforming would fuck up any cameras watching.”

“Damn.”

He rolled his eyes, chuckled, and kissed her neck between thrusts. “I’d never agree to swinging. I’m way to into you for that. But, if Tash ever caught us having sex and I was transformed, I seriously doubt I’d stop fucking you. Especially when transformed.”

Jessy managed her own chuckle, but a moan ripped it away. “I’ll make sure to ... to plant the idea in her head.” Her body started to tremble again, mostly in her legs, and he made his own groan as he felt her ass clench hungrily, as her legs kicked at the bed a couple times, weak little kicks made only below the knee. “You’re ... into me?”

Oh good god. He chuckled again, and did not let up his pace, even as she came. The feel of her rings of muscle trying to stop his cock from sinking into her deep enough until he felt her stretching to fit him, but too wet to provide any resistance other than a milking massage, was heaven.

“Very into you.”

She moaned, and unless his ears were lying to him, it almost sounded like a swoon. “Girl could ... get used to ... talk like that.”

“Get used to it.” He started to thrust a little faster, instinct demanding he satisfy the building pleasure running up and down his length. Each thrust made his glans more sensitive, more swollen, until each sent a shock of pleasure down his length, into his testicles, and into his body. Muscles clenched within, and then

released, allowing the first wave of warm cum to flood up his cock, before the muscle clenched again, causing it to squirt into his lover.

“I ... I think I will.”

He smiled down at her trembling body as his rhythm slowed but his thrusts grew harder, the almost desperate sensation of needing to milk every wave of his cum a natural instinct taking hold of him. He sank himself into her again and again, until Jessy managed to get some breaths, and matched each thrust with a grunt and moan. And, the occasional, girlish mewl.

When he was done, he rolled over, lay next to her, and before he could say anything, she inched over to him to put the top half of her on top of him, breasts to his chest, and didn't move. Cuddle time, evidently. She'd liked what he said.

He'd liked saying it.

# Chapter 114

~~Jack~~

He'd been tempted to ask Clara to join him. She was scared of him now, he knew that, and it hurt to all fuck every time he glanced at her. The curse was done with its rampage, but it'd been an asshole in that time, and had left an impression on everyone who'd gone on the mission with him. Damien, he knew wouldn't let it stop him from being his friend. They'd been through too much together. The others, on the other hand, he wasn't so sure about.

So hanging out with Fiona and Damien was a good way to test the waters. Fiona no doubt knew about what he'd done, had the details, and he could judge how she felt about him as the night went on.

“Let's go talk to yer sister!”

He froze on the sidewalk, and blinked at her. “Uh, what?”

“Yer sis, Mary. Ye said she's a ghost now? I'd love tae meet the lass.”

Jack blinked at the redhead several times, before looking at Damien. Yeah, Damien was wincing a bit, knowing full well Mary's death wasn't exactly an easy topic for Jack to broach.

But, hey, maybe it was a good idea? He hadn't done it yet, just that one time, and telling Mary about Angela might help her pass on. And if Fiona was suggesting it, the horror stories she'd undoubtedly heard about the curse and the assault on the hunters hadn't scared her too much.

But, maybe it wasn't a good idea. He didn't really think he was that close with Fiona, not yet anyway, and Mary might straight up

attack her or Damien. His sister was strong as fuck, in the house. Straight out of a horror movie, complete with throwing furniture.

But, maybe it was a good idea. Telling Mary about Angela had to be done, for him and for his mom, so they could both move on. And it'd be good to show Mary that he'd made some friends, that he didn't need her watching over him or Mom.

He settled on the good idea gamble.

“You know what? Let's do it.”

“Really?” Damien said. “Seems like ... something pretty personal. Sure you want us there?”

“It is personal, but we've been in a shit load of life and death situations together, Damien. And Fiona's been in at least one with me. Just ... don't make any sudden movements, or say anything without being asked to, once we're inside. Ok?”

Damien and Fiona looked at each other, the Mekhet obviously uncertain, and Fiona brimming with excitement over the possibility of seeing a ghost.

“And yer mum?”

“You want Mom to come?”

“Aye!”

---

He stood in the driveway of his old home, with Fiona, Damien, and his mom. Fiona had done her usual bit when she saw Samantha, saying hi and bouncing up to her to hug. And his mom rode that wavelength easily, hugging back and smiling; Fiona probably reminded her of Mary. Damien did his usual silent introduction thing, until Jack had introduced them himself.

Damien and Fiona were strong, especially Damien. If shit went sideways, he could trust them to get out if they had to. As for himself, well, the curse would protect him. It wanted to live, and Jack dying would put a dent in that plan. And no matter what happened, Mary wouldn't hurt his mom, not directly anyway.

"I can't believe you invited Athalia to the ball," Jack said.

His mom raised a brow as she looked at him, dressed in a blue business suit with a knee-length skirt. She looked nice, far better than she did weeks ago when Antoinette had sired her. It felt good, seeing his mom recovering, another piece of his guilt melting away. Still plenty of guilty pieces stacked up, but with some time, he was confident he'd be done with them.

"I need to see her," his mom said.

"She's not going to come."

"I think she will."

"It'll only have been four nights since her daughter died. I imagine she'll be—"

"You said she's been separated from Angela for years, right? And in that time, Angela started hunting her?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"I think she'll come. And I want to see her. I want to ... see her eyes."

Jack frowned at his mom, and she returned his gaze. Memories slammed into both of them, so many conversations had, so many times they'd gotten into arguments but never let it escalate to yelling, in the past. There wasn't any reason to start yelling, yet, and

he didn't want the conversation to get heated, not with Damien and Fiona right there. And not with Mary's ghost so close.

"She's a Begotten, Mom, a nightmare monster. She'll ... she's dangerous."

"It'll be a ball, right? And Antoinette will be there, and that sheriff fellow. I trust them to keep me safe. Besides, Antoinette was the one who asked me if she should invite Athalia."

He still didn't know how he felt about that. Sure, his mom had been a vampire for a little while now. She'd fed many times, mostly with Antoinette to supervise, but still. She didn't spend every night mourning Mary anymore, especially not since learning that Mary was haunting their home. Not healthy. The last thing he wanted was for his mom to become a recluse, living in the basement of her old home, with her dead daughter.

"Everyone will be there," he said.

"Aye! I'll be there, with my jimmy 'ere." Fiona hugged Damien's arm and rested her temple on his shoulder. In the past, such an obvious display of affection and crossing a personal boundary would've unnerved Damien, made him uncomfortable, but now it didn't. It would have with anyone else, he was sure, but not with Fiona. Those two were getting very close.

"I think what Jack means," Damien said, "is a lot of people are going to be there, who will care about what happens. People know Athalia was Angela's mother, and some people know about what happened at the end. How Athalia presents herself at the ball will be a big statement about the Begotten, especially now that Azamel has pissed the Prince off, having Mark spy on her."

Mark, right. It surprised the fuck out of Jack that the curse hadn't been able to sense his presence. Sneaky fucker. He'd felt Daniel around, lurking, though the sheriff was so good at his art that Jack

hadn't the vaguest idea where he was, just that he was nearby. Mark, on the other hand, had felt like a literal fly on the wall, an insect and no more. His presence hadn't been hidden, so much as altered to feel like a nearby insect. A bit annoying, sure, but entirely ignorable.

He should have realized that feeling meant Mark was nearby. Not like Antoinette didn't keep her tower in pristine, clean condition. Christ, the man's spying had made Jack's job so much harder now, keeping peace between the different races. He had to visit Azamel soon, but, he didn't want to, not so soon after killing Angela. He wanted to avoid Athalia. Wanted, and didn't want to.

If she came to the party, he'd talk to her. It'd probably end badly, but he'd have no choice.

"I was hoping," Jack said, "that after Azamel helped Antoinette come to the dream that night, that things would be better between vamps and monsters. And then Azamel had to ruin it."

"Can ye blame her?" Fiona shook her head, and took a few steps up the driveway, leaving the rest of them behind as she turned around and walked backward. "She's ... she's hurt, ye ken? I dinnae think she has long left, and she ... she just wants to know what's going on. She wants to know we'll be safe, when she's gone."

"She takes care of you?" his mom said.

"Aye, she does. I think, maybe she's trying tae ... be who she was, ye ken? Before Jeremiah ruined everything for her."

Jack nodded. "A leader." Maybe that was another reason she came to Dolareido? Considering the city was practically a utopia for vampires, mostly safe from hunters, and with peace between the paranormals, it'd be a good place for any monster with delusions of grandeur to set up camp. Maybe Azamel would have joined the

Primogen at some point, if she stayed long enough. Now, he doubted she'd live long enough.

“Trust me,” his mom said. “It'll be fine.”

God he hated that. Really, down to his bones, hated that, how his mom would dismiss the realities of situations and cover them with useless words like ‘it'll be fine’. She never attempted to reason through her conclusions, to create any sort of logical framework for her beliefs. She just went with whatever she felt made sense, or thought was a good idea because it felt good.

His disappearance and Mary's death hadn't broken that, apparently. Hopefully Antoinette would teach her better, before her naivete got her killed.

Once the four of them reached the side door which led to the kitchen, Fiona knocked. Everyone raised a brow as they looked at her, and she giggled, shrugged, and stepped back. Jack motioned to his mom, she unlocked the door, and they followed her inside.

The coldness was back, like when he'd opened his sister's bedroom door, that first time revisiting the house. It wasn't as bad as last time, but it was there. Mary was there, somewhere in the dark, invisible, watching. She could see him, see his mom and his friends. She could attack, if she wanted to like last time, and turn utensils and plates into missiles. She could probably do whatever she wanted, since this was her domain, and she was a ghost.

Half wincing, Jack turned on the kitchen light. Nothing happened. He breathed relief, and reached down to take off his shoes before stopping himself. Old habits died hard.

Damien and Fiona both looked around the quaint kitchen, Damien with inquisitiveness, and Fiona with obvious familiarity. She'd come from a home, with a family. It must have looked similar to her old house.



He wanted to invite Antoinette, to show her the simple little world he came from, and for her to see his sister. He wanted to invite Clara, for the same reasons, and because he knew she'd be able to understand in ways Antoinette couldn't. It was a painful truth that Antoinette was too old, and came from too different a world, to understand why something as simple as seeing his old kitchen, and the silly tablecloth his mom kept, would be such a powerful experience for him and his mom. Clara would be able to understand it.

Except, Clara was afraid of him now. Hell, he knew Fiona and Damien were too, but they were doing a good job of keeping it from affecting them. Fiona could see the curse, and Damien was his best friend. That was probably the only thing keeping them calm around him. Clara, on the other hand, had kept a healthy distance from him during the meeting in the Elysium tower, and kept glancing his way. Maybe if he talked to her, he could convince her the curse wasn't something to worry about?

He'd have to convince himself of that, first.

"Mary?" he said. Silence. "Mary, it's me, Jack. Mom's here, and I brought a couple friends." Nothing.

"I can ... feel her," Fiona said. "Mary? Mary, ye there, lass?"

Jack winced, but said nothing. He didn't expect Fiona to try talking to a ghost, especially since he'd given instruction to not, but in retrospect, he was an idiot. Of course she'd do that. Damien'd warned him weeks ago that, as he got to know her, it'd become obvious the girl was sort of a fear junkie. She loved taking risks, being exposed to life-threatening situations, and overall being dumb. If she lived long enough, she'd learn.

God, listen to him, sounding like an elder vampire, judging young people for being rash. Antoinette was right, he was growing up too fast.

“Mary. It’s Mom. Can you come out please?”

That did it. The dark, empty house grew darker and emptier. The still air started to turn, and a thin mist began to cover the floor, more and more until it covered their feet, ankles, and touched their knees. The air grew colder, a harsh cold that skipped the skin and went straight for the bones. And silence settled on them like a heavy, wet blanket, drowning the outside world until all that existed was the house they were in.

If they’d tried the doors, Jack bet they would have been locked.

Jack spun his head as movement blipped in the corner of his vision. A face stuck out from around the wall between the kitchen and the upward stairway of the living room, Mary’s face. It was too high though, as if Mary had grown a foot, and was peeking around the edge of the white surface. Her face was white and see-through, and she only stuck her head out enough for him to see her forehead and eyes.

“Mary,” their mom said, and she looked to the living room archway. “Mary, you doing ok, baby girl?” Taking a cue from Jack, she didn’t approach the ghost, not yet, but it was obvious she wanted to. It was obvious to everyone that she’d have thrown herself at Mary to bury her in hugs if she could. But, she couldn’t, and she knew it.

Mary didn’t say anything, but she did manage a small nod.

Damien and Fiona both turned, and froze. Seeing Damien freeze felt almost natural, because the man always froze when he was taking in his surroundings. It meant he was hyper focused on absorbing as much data as he could, as quickly as possible, so he could be ready to react the moment he had to. Mekhet did that, especially the good ones like Tash, and the sheriff. Fiona, on the other hand, froze because she was deer-in-headlights surprised by the sight of a real ghost. Jack could sympathize.

“Mary,” Jack said, smiling and offering his sister a small wave, but otherwise not moving. “Hey. These are my friends, Fiona and Damien. Damien’s a vampire, too. Fiona is ... uh.” Wow. How to explain a nightmare monster succinctly?

“I’m a monster, from nightmares! Rar.” Fiona pawed the air once, like a cat, and she smiled.

Very slowly, like a frightened animal exploring new boundaries, Mary came down the stairs. She had legs down to her knees, and then they faded into a cloudy fog, mixing into the mist covering the floor. Her shoulder-length hair, once dark like his mom’s, was a ghostly white, the same as the rest of her. Her simple shirt, her jeans, her skin, all of it was a sad white, like fading chalk. It made looking at her painful.

“You ... have friends,” Mary said. Her voice was inhuman, but quiet, a whisper; a far cry from the banshee shrieks of last time.

“I do.” He took a step toward her. She didn’t back away. Ok, progress, he could move around and not expect his sis to smash him through a wall again. “Something happened last night, a ... good thing, I guess. Mom and I wanted to talk to you about it.” And Fiona wanted to see a real, actual ghost. He left that point out.

Getting closer to her increased the sensation of cold cutting to his insides. It was coming from her, no doubt about that.

“Something good?” Mary swayed left and right slightly, as if she wasn’t entirely solid. A stiff breeze might have knocked her over, if she had been.

“Yes Mary.” His mom came up beside him, and she hugged his arm, patting his side as she nodded to her daughter. “He ... he got her, Mary. He got Angela. K ... Killed her.”

The room went quiet, again. Only now, after his mom said it, did he truly appreciate just how much he'd changed, compared to his old life. Hearing his mom say the word 'killed' struck him hard, and he winced openly, looking down and letting the harshness of it pass.

Momma, I just killed a woman. Put a gun against her head, pulled my trigger, now she's dead?

"She's dead?" the ghost said.

"Aye! Dead as ye!" Fiona said. She would have continued, but Damien gave her a small elbow jab in the side.

Everyone slowly turned, and stared at her. Damien visibly winced, and made the tiniest step away from Fiona, as if afraid she'd be getting tossed across the room by a ghostly force in a moment, and he didn't want to join her. Not exactly the most chivalrous move, but hey, Fiona made the bed, let her be the one to get ghost-swatted in it.

But Mary didn't throw her around, or stab her with a dozen forks, or do anything. The hovering specter stared at her for a few seconds, before she laughed. Mary's laugh. Man, how long had it been since Jack had heard his sister's laugh? Except now it was a twisted, distorted thing, like nails on chalkboard mixed into a normal, human laugh.

"So much ... so much has changed," the ghost said. "She's really dead?"

"She is." Jack walked around the ghost, and did his best to act like it was Mary. He still didn't know anything about the ghost, whether it was some ghostly afterimage, or actually Mary, or her soul, or anything. Looking at her hurt. He'd said his goodbyes to her corpse, and while his mom didn't get to do that, she'd gotten to say similar to Mary last time they were here.

Similar, but not close enough to a proper goodbye. And he knew he was going to have to force his mom to have that final goodbye eventually. It was going to suck.

He sat down on the stairs, the ones leading from the upstairs bedrooms hallway into the living room, the one Mary had just floated down from. Mary was a ghost, but whether she was the real Mary or a ghostly afterimage didn't matter, she was still Mary in a sense. The least he could do was stop treating her like some monster hiding in his old house, and be more at ease around her, if not for her sake, then for his mom's. She definitely thought of the ghost as the bona fide Mary.

"I killed her," he continued. "Er, well, Beatrice killed her, actually. I was with her, and helped make it happen."

Mary floated over to him, and before Jack could say anything, the ghostly creature sat down beside him.

Memories hit him, powerful, painful. They used to do this, before their dad died, sit on the stairs and talk; not that he'd been very good at it, but they did anyway, usually while their parents sat on the couches ten feet away. After their dad died, they didn't talk all that often, but it still happened from time to time.

"Who's Beatrice?" Mary asked.

"Another vampire, and a friend. Angela killed her boyfriend, Julias. Remember Julias?"

"Angela ... killed Julias..." The ghost shivered, and her image shuddered along with the motion. Her empty eyes looked down, and her hands rested on her knees over the fog that swallowed the floor. "She hurt a lot of people."

"She's gone now, baby," their mom said. "She's gone now, and she's not going to hurt anyone anymore." She came over to them,

stood in front of them and leaned on the railing. Old positions, the way they used to talk while things were cooking in the kitchen beside them. Did they fall into old habits like this because it was the house they grew up in and nostalgia was a powerful force, or because they were trying to keep each other at ease?

“There’s still hunters in the city,” Damien said, “but none of them compare to Jeremiah and Angela.”

“Jeremiah?” the ghost said.

Jack nodded. “Angela’s boss. And adopted father, I suppose. Another person they’d hurt, someone whose wife and son they’d killed, he uh ... ate him. Literally.”

Mary’s eyes went wide. Chilling, seeing those empty sockets. If eyes were windows to the soul, and Mary’s eyes were gone, did that have any significance? So many unanswered questions. He knew Antoinette delved into this sort of stuff, and Samantha was her student, but he also knew Antoinette wouldn’t have shared much information with her new child yet. All in all, it was quickly becoming apparent that Jack really should have invited Antoinette on this trip.

He was happy to bring Damien because Damien was his best friend. He was ok with Fiona coming because he trusted her, and he knew Fiona and Mary were similar. But neither of them would be able to help with the real problem here: what to do about Mary.

“Monsters,” Mary said, ghostly voice wavering. “We’re ... all monsters.”

“Aye, we are,” Fiona said. She slid over to them, literally sliding her shoes over the floor, and smiled at the group of them. “But that’s awright. I know for ye, it must be strange, being dead and aw, and learning yer family is a bunch of vampires now.”

The idea that Mary might not be the actual Mary apparently did not once cross Fiona's mind. Or maybe it did, and she just didn't care. Nice to a fault.

"You could say that." Mary smiled, a disturbing image, empty gaze pointed at Fiona.

Fiona didn't even blink. Despite it being Fiona's, and hell, everyone's first ghost encounter, ghosts probably ranked pretty low on the strange things Fiona had seen, considering her origins. Or rather, Vrall's origins. Maybe Fiona knew more than Jack figured?

"What about her mother?" Mary said. "The other ... monster. Athalia."

Jack frowned. He didn't remember mentioning anything about Angela's mother to Mary. Which probably meant his mom had been visiting Mary without telling him, and without telling Antoinette either. God damn it.

"She lives," Jack said, after giving his mom a harsh glare. "She wasn't the enemy. But, she's ... she's ... pretty broken. I'm not sure what she's going to do."

His mom put up a hand, just a few inches, enough to get their attention. "I'm going to talk with her."

Jack shook his head. "I still don't think that's a good, Mom. I don't even think she's going to come to the ball."

"Then I'll talk with her somewhere else."

"Mom, you can't—"

"I'm going to talk to her, Jack. I have to ... have to talk to her."

"She could kill you!"

“She won’t kill me. You don’t understand.”

“Damn right I don’t understand. She’s a broken woman, Mom, and she hates me. She’ll blame me for what happened to Angela, and—”

“And I blame Angela for what happened to Mary! My daughter is dead because of her, and her mother is a part of that!”

Jack lifted his head, and stared at his mom, eyes going wide. The ghost beside him shimmered, broke into pieces, and melted into the fog. It’d already been cold, sitting beside her, but the temperature dropped a few more degrees, and the mist around their feet rose a foot. Everyone held still and looked around slowly as the lights flickered, darkness creeping up around them. Darker, and darker, until the lights went out entirely.

The mist moved, rolling over the floor, the stairs, and around people’s legs as it began to swirl. The curtains flapped against the rising breeze, and Jack stood up as it increased to a full wind. He grabbed the railing as the cold seeped into his bones, and he gulped down the rising panic. It was stupid to bring Damien and Fiona. Now they were caught up in family drama that was quickly going to turn into a horror story if he didn’t do something.

“Mary,” Jack said, “I ... I came to tell you about Angela, because—”

“I know!” the ghost screamed. Her voice was short, harsh, and a bit of the banshee wail he’d heard from her before joined in. It was not a pleasant noise, and Jack pulled his head back a bit when she spoke. “I ... I’m dead. I’m dead. I’m dead I’m dead I’m dead.”

“I’m sorry baby!” his mom said to the darkness around them. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to ... to say it like that.”

Jack shut his mouth and ground his teeth into powder. Much as he loved his sister, his mom was much closer to her. The best Jack



was likely to do right now was put Damien and Fiona through what he went through, the first time he met Mary the ghost. Damien could survive that, Fiona might not.

“It’s ... it’s ok...” Slowly, with far greater control than Jack figured an angry banshee creature would be able to summon, Mary calmed down. It took time, a painful eternity of listening to the ghost cry, shriek, wail, and sob. It was crazy how she went from calm and talking one moment, to psychotic the next, but despite that, she started to settle.

“What now?” His mom said. “What ... what do we do now?”

The fog lowered until it covered only their feet again, and Mary’s ghastly noises stopped. With a couple more minutes, Mary’s form reappeared, in the living room a few feet from them, drifting around in a circle close to the ceiling. She looked so sad, even when she smiled.

“I don’t know. I ... I’m happy, happy that Angela’s gone, and Mom and Jack are safe. But I don’t ... don’t know what to do. I don’t want to leave.”

“Oh, Mary.” Their mom moved from the railing to the living room, and stood in its center, looking up at her daughter. If Mary had been solid, Jack knew his mom would have been doing everything in her power to hug her as much as she could. “You don’t have to leave! You can stay, as long as you want, and—”

“Mom, you can’t say that.” Jack joined her, and gave Damien a glance over his shoulder as he did. The message was clear: sorry I let you two see this, mistake, please leave. Damien nodded, took the staring Fiona with him, and left.

“I can say what I want. This is my house, and she’s my daughter.”

“Mom, she’s dead! This ... Mary isn’t alive, you said it yourself. This isn’t good for anyone. We have to let her go.”

“We don’t have to do anything!” His mom marched up to him and glared at him, a classic glare he’d grown to hate in the past, her ‘this is how I feel and my feelings are valid no matter what your logic says’ glare. He’d have any easier time breaking a wall with his face, than getting through to her when she was like this.

“Mom,” Mary said, “I—”

“No! No, I don’t want to let you go! I ... I ... don’t want to lose my daughter, like Athalia did hers!”

Silence fell on them again. Even Mary, still hovering around in the air above them, didn’t make a peep, no moan or banshee wail or anything. Everyone stood still, and let the reality sink in.

“Mom,” the ghost said, “it’s ok.” It was eerie, how deathly calm Mary had grown, after listening to her mom lament.

“It’s not ok!”

“Mom.” Mary hovered down to float in front of her. Jack had a hard time looking his dead sister in the face, but his mom didn’t flinch. The fact her daughter had empty eye sockets and gaunt cheeks didn’t bother her at all. “I’ve been ... thinking, a lot. It’s hard to think. Every thought feels real, and I get so lost in them, in the memories, in things that aren’t real.”

“Honey, please, you can—”

“I need to speak, Mom! I need to say this. I need to ... before it slips away.” She shook her head hard, enough for her hair to bounce around in a motion far too jagged to be natural. “It was there, and now it’s gone. Angela, I mean. She ... she killed me, and now it’s gone, the chain around my feet. And that’s ok. It’s all ok. Please,

don't ... don't make things harder than they have to be. I don't want to go, but I know I should."

"But ... baby, that ... that doesn't mean you have to go."

"It does, Mom. It does! It ... does!" Mary screamed the last word, and Samantha flinched back. Flinch turned into squeak as Mary's arms reached out and tried to grab her. Not try, did. Their mom's squeak turned into a gasp and short-lived scream as Mary's grip sank into her shoulders, and the moment Mary realized she'd hurt her, she let out her own scream. A proper scream. A banshee's scream.

Mary flew back, and threw herself into the corner of the room, the corner where they used to keep the Christmas tree. Her body hit the wall hard, and Jack froze for a moment, watching his sister twist and squirm in the corner, as he ran to his mom and set his hands on her shoulders.

"Mom!"

"I'm ok, I'm ok. I..." Her suit jacket was torn in both shoulders, and Jack could see through it to the torn shirt underneath, and torn skin underneath that. If she'd been alive, she'd have been bleeding from ten nasty gashes.

"Sorry! I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry." Mary, now curled up in the corner with her hands wrapping her head, peeked up from behind her forearms at them. "Please don't be mad. Please, I—"

"Mary Terry, you know I could never be mad at you." As if a ghost hadn't just nearly ripped her arms off, their mom walked over to the corner with Mary, and knelt down into the mist Mary was half merged with. "I'll be fine. Vampire, see?" She showed her arms to her daughter's ghost, smiling the whole time. "It's ok. You just focus

on telling us what you wanted to say.” The pain must have been great, but his mom acted like she wasn’t in pain at all.

Jack frowned from behind his mother, but watching Mary shudder in her corner like a frightened dog, frightened by her own temper, ripped the frown off his face. Ow. The sight of her, trembling, struggling, was cold ice over his body, and all attempts to be impartial about the ghost haunting his old home faded away. He wanted to help her, same as his mom did.

No, you fucking idiot. It’s a ghost. It’s not your sister. You have to help her move on, to pass over into the afterlife, or to disperse into the ethereal or ether, or do whatever it was that ghosts did!

“Sorry, sorry! I ... I have to tell you though, have to, have to.” She forced her arms down, and Jack gulped as he met her face again. The empty eye sockets, the gaunt features, it’d all grown worse, as if she’d begun to rot before their eyes. But, after a few more seconds, she managed to return to her earlier self, doing her best to look good for her mom and brother. “Thank you Jack, for getting ... for killing Angela. I can feel it, a tether, a noose, it’s gone.”

“Then—”

“I can’t! I can’t. Something’s ... something’s out there, Mom. Something’s going on, and I can see it.”

“See it?” Jack said.

“See it! There’s lines. Someone drew lines. They’re ... they’re in the city.”

“In the city?” He came closer and knelt by her. This was starting to sound dangerously like information about the lurking presence in the city.

“Yes, in the city. Something’s out there, Jack. Something’s ... drawing lines, and they’re ... tearing. I can see through them sometimes, see to places where things are ... are moving, shapes in the darkness. I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to go there.”

---

~~Antoinette~~

Antoinette leaned back in her office chair, and looked up at the ceiling.

“Problems?” Elaine said, her voice coming through Antoinette’s laptop speakers.

“Of a sort.”

“Do tell.”

“Jacob.” Antoinette looked back to the laptop, and offered her old friend a small smile.

Based on the background she could see, Elaine was in a different room compared to last time. Her exact location, Ann did not know, but it was better that elders did not trade exact locations when on the move. Crossing territory was when an elder, or indeed any Kindred, was at their most vulnerable. Should a hunter catch wind of where Elaine was at this exact moment, it was not unthinkable for them to organize a strike against her while she slept. Her current location would no doubt not be as defensible as her home fortress.

“What is the old bastard up to?”

“He conspires with spiritual forces of ill intent, or rather, unknown and likely ill intent.”

Elaine laughed and shrugged. “That does not sound unusual for Jacob.”

“No. No it does not.” But something else crept within the walls of her city, and as the months went on, the more she was convinced Jacob and Black Blood knew of it. More than simply knew, but were likely involved somehow.

Something had upset the spirits. Several more creatures that she had summoned were hesitant to speak, but one had been bold enough to speak of ‘tears’ in the world. She had suspected the spirit was referring to the infamous Gauntlet, the wall between the physical world and its mirror, the Shadow world. Now, she was not so sure. Perhaps it had something to do with Natasha’s information, about how one of the most powerful spirits that lurked within her domain, the Street-Tail King, thought the arrival of the Azlu was not natural. The ecosystem of spirits was difficult for her to discover and catalogue, and she knew utterly nothing about monsters related to that ecosystem. To extrapolate from what little information she could glean from the other realm, was beyond difficult.

But there was something out there, something hiding within her city. The monsters knew of it. Catching Mark in the act of spying on her, and then threatening him, was perhaps not the wisest course of action, with an unknown threat looming over her. Not entirely unknown, since more than she knew of its presence. Azamel had known of it, according to Jack. Perhaps the Uratha knew of it? Perhaps it was time to speak to Avery directly of this.

“Large problems, then,” Elaine said.

Antoinette forced her eyes back onto Elaine. “My apologies.” She had been drifting, trapped in her thoughts, and forcing poor Elaine to watch her in silence. “My studies of ephemera suggest danger lurks, Elaine. A ritual, perhaps? An entity? It...” She sighed, and leaned in toward the laptop. “I do not know. I am inclined to point my eyes to Jacob and that infernal Black Blood, but there are other possibilities.” Telling Elaine this information was dangerous; mostly due to professional rivalry from her fellow dragon, more than

anything. But she trusted her old friend, and perhaps Elaine could help, once she was within Dolareido. Except, maybe not with all information over potentially hackable means of conversation. “I will tell you more once you have arrived.”

“I look forward to it. And I look forward to making my grand entrance at your ball. What should I wear?”

Antoinette chuckled, combed her hair over her shoulder, and ran her hands through it as she considered. “I told my childe, and my lover, that this ball would not be as sexually explicit as my last.”

“I assume you were lying?”

“I was not!” Laughing, Antoinette flicked her right hand while her left continued to comb her hair. “Though, I suspect people will be quite joyful over the news of the defeat of the hunters. The moment someone — likely Jennifer Denver, or Jessy Herrington, or Othello Manu — shows skin, I am sure many kine will be stripped, and buried in fang and pleasure. Poor Samantha.”

“Your childe? Ha, let her sink or swim. I am sure she will adapt.”

“So you say. My childe is a sweet creature, Elaine, and her son will be at the ball as well.”

“He is her son biologically. They are Kindred now, Ann, dead creatures, same as you or I. The hold our biological ties placed on us with birth are quite weak to us undead, and you know it.”

Antoinette nodded as she looked up again, considering. It was true that Jack and Samantha would slowly stop considering each other mother and son, at least with the insistence of living beings, but it would never fade completely. Ultimately, the bond between sire and childe was stronger. Jack had only been two years embraced when Angela killed his sister and attempted to kill his

mother. In another ten or twenty years, his reaction to the murder and assault would have been much different.

She did not tell her little Ventrue this. His refusal to let go of his humanity, despite his capacity for cold logic, was a trait she would cherish for as long as he held it.

“You believe the presence of her son will not prevent her from ... enjoying the delights presented to her?” Antoinette said.

Elaine nodded. “I doubt she will engage in an orgy in clear view of her son, but I think she will indulge more than you think she will. She is your childe, after all.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, licked her lips, and grinned at her old friend. “I hope you do not mind, but I have planted several images into my lover’s thoughts, images related to you.”

Elaine leaned back in her chair as well, a black leather office chair behind a desk of glass. No windows. Behind her was a white wall, plain and without a single marking. A bunker of a sort, if Antoinette had to guess.

“Images? Do tell.”

“I regaled my love with tales of our past.”

Elaine laughed and shook her head. “Your lover is but a boy! A young man, with two Kindred years to his name. Why would you torture him so?”

“I do oh so delight in watching him squirm.”

“Sadist.”

“Aha, perhaps. But I love my little Ventrue, and”—she pointed a finger at the laptop screen—“I know full well you will tease, taunt,



and torment my Jack.”

“Will I?”

“Oh yes. He is quite ... tease-able.”

That earned a sparkle from her eye, and she leaned in closer to the camera. “Then I think I will wear something up to that task.”

“I do not wish to see any blatant nudity, Elaine. Although...”

“Mmm?”

“During my last ball, a Ventrue that shares many similarities with you wore what was, essentially, a cross sash across her breasts, that exposed her chest completely whenever she leaned forward.” Jennifer Denver, someone Antoinette would have been interested in as a potential dragon, if Jacob and the ethos of his Circle had not seduced her first. Aaron as well. Othello, not so much. “She turned many heads that night.”

“I shall have to do better, then, mm? Something that would give your little Ventrue many fantasies?”

Distant memories danced in Antoinette’s mind, and she shared a sly grin with her friend. The thousands of dresses they had worn, the hundreds of different styles and aesthetics, the sheer eroticism of many of the encounters such dresses led to, it all made Jennifer and her silly attempts at being the center of attention, seem quaint.

“Do not try too hard, old friend,” Antoinette said. “He is my lover, and my love. You will not be able to seduce him from me.”

“But I can try.”

“Ha. You may try.”

Elaine's grin widened. "And I have your permission to make him squirm?"

"By all means. His squirms are an utter delight." Perhaps she was a tad sadistic. The way her little Ventrue squirmed when she bathed him in new experiences always sent a thrill up her spine. She loved to care for him, pamper him, but she also delighted in making him uncomfortable. She did not think of herself as a dominatrix, but between her phases of caring for and spoiling her Ventrue, she did love to force him into situations she knew would make him nervous.

"And ... if I wanted to do more?"

Antoinette glared at Elaine, but only with half seriousness. "As I said, he and I are in love, and—"

"I would never violate that, Antoinette. But it has been many years since I have touched you." After a slow lick of her lips, her old friend leaned back again. "And from what you have told me of your Jack, I cannot help but remember a certain hunter we once captured. Sir Eric Franzalod, if you recall?"

Ah, yes, the hunter Eric Franzalod. Unfortunate that their encounter had ultimately ended in his death, but a week prior, she had seduced the man. In her attempt to enthrall him, she had used her sexuality, along with Elaine's, and the week had been filled with enough sex to kill a lesser man. He had been quite nervous, and they had bathed him with their bodies and breasts, squashing him between their bosoms and satisfying every fantasy the silly fool had ever dreamt.

It had been an enjoyable week, Elaine and Antoinette doing their best to pleasure the man, to sway him, to seduce him. His hunter charms had prevented his mind from being broken by her Majesty, or Elaine's Dominate, so they attempted to use sex instead. Oh, such a joy, to milk the man onto Elaine's skin, and watch the

hunter's jaw drop as Antoinette massaged and licked her friend's body until it was clean, and ready for more. A true shame that their efforts had been in vain.

"I can see your thoughts," Elaine said. "A small smile, when your eyes look up in memory."

Antoinette refocused her gaze on her old friend, smile remaining. "While I would normally delight in entrapping my little Ventrue, and forcing delights upon him, to allow another Kindred into my bed with him is a different matter entirely. It is a border I will not cross lightly." She combed her hair, considered, and nodded toward Elaine. "If you proposition him, about joining our bed, I will let him decide."

"Ah, so it is on me to seduce your little Jack Terry, until he relents, and lets me join your bed? You must take me for quite the slut, Ann."

"That I do."

More gentle, ridiculous chuckles between them. It felt wonderful to be silly, to be foolish like this. It had been ages since she had truly entertained silly.

"Very well. I will seduce your little Ventrue, and dare I say, half of your city with him, with what I will be wearing at the ball."

"Oh, does that include Daniel?"

That shattered Elaine's smile, and she fell back in her seat hard enough for her blond, wavy hair to bounce. "It would! But your infuriating sheriff has abandoned all sexuality."

"He is Mekhet, not Daeva."

“I am Ventrue, not Daeva, and I can still enjoy the bliss of skin touching skin. Why your blasted sheriff refuses to let me touch him remains beyond my reasoning.” She reached out for her desk and began to tap index and middle finger against it, almost violently. “And you tell me he shares a bed with no one?”

“Not that I am aware of. He feeds privately, and when he is not embarking on the tasks I give him, he is studying what knowledge I have gathered on ephemera.” A part of her wanted to share knowledge of Mary, a ghost, and invite Elaine to perform experiments. Anyone in the Ordo would be excited to learn of a ghost they could actively engage with. So many specters were obscure, difficult to lock down, or otherwise impossible to interact with. Mary was a tantalizing treat that Antoinette had to resist, lest she offend her lover and her childe. Frustrating.

Speaking of her childe. Antoinette’s phone began to ring, and the ring tone announced it was Samantha Terry.

“I must take this, Elaine. I look forward to your arrival, and ... and, I acquiesce. If you wish to wear something far too revealing, you have my permission, as I know other Kindred will wear similar.” Antoinette would too, no doubt. The thought of making her lover stare in awe was forever too great a guilty pleasure. Perhaps she could convince her childe to wear something revealing as well? She knew, with a little nudging, that the precious Natasha could also be convinced to wear something très risqué, considering the odd turns her sexual life had taken. Convincing Samantha to do the same would be a little trickier.

“I will speak to you when I arrive tomorrow night then. Au revoir.” And the conversation ended with a silent blip.

Antoinette answered her childe’s call. “Yes, my dear Samantha, how may I help you?”

“Hi sire. I wanted to tell you that Jack and I went to visit Mary.”

Antoinette blinked several times, before finally saying, “Oh. I see.”

“I ... I wasn’t sure you’d want to come, Antoinette. He wasn’t sure, either.”

“And why would I not?”

“Because it’s ... it’s just an old, small house, you know? It’s so, I don’t know the word ... plebeian? And Mary and Jack I, it was—”

“Please, childe, the next time you speak to your daughter, I would like to be there. She is a part of your past, a powerful part, and as your sire, I feel I will know you better, if I meet a part of that past.” And while that was true, Antoinette also ached to speak directly with something she only managed short encounters with in the past, a true specter.

“Oh, that’s a good point. I’m sorry.”

“It is alright, dear Samantha. I had honestly not considered that, perhaps, you would feel this way about your past life. I admit, I know Jack through Julias and the Invictus, a world of suits and money. But please, do not fret. Such homely beginnings are far from unusual, and nothing to be judged over.”

She could almost hear Samantha smile over the phone. While Antoinette thought her words sounded patronizing, she knew Samantha well enough by now to know the woman loved direct, honest, heartfelt communication. She was Jack’s mother, after all, and while Jack was a far more intelligent and scrutinizing, analytic sort, much of what made Jack tick, made Samantha tick. Namely, direct honesty.

“Thank you. I’ll make sure to invite you next time.”

“Please do.” A gentle touch of insistence, to remind Samantha of who she was. She was the Prince of Dolareido, and the woman’s sire. Samantha had a responsibility to acknowledge that, and treat her with the respect she deserved. At the same time, teaching Samantha was a delicate affair, after the trauma she had suffered, combined with her personality. Antoinette had to be careful how she worded things.

Some Kindred could be taught with pure information, like Jack, Natasha, and likely Damien. Others needed to be dominated, pushed around, perhaps sometimes bullied, like Jessy and many Gangrels. Some needed to be outwitted, and shown that they were not as intelligent as they thought themselves to be, such as Jennifer or Isabella. Others responded best to emotional support. Samantha was such a person.

“How is your daughter?” Antoinette continued. “Has learning of Angela’s death helped her move on?”

“No ... no it hasn’t. That’s part of the reason I called. Mary, she says ... she says she can’t go yet.”

“Cannot?”

“Can’t, or won’t, she doesn’t even know! But, but she says there’s something going on, something in ... in the afterlife, I guess? I don’t know, she doesn’t know. And she won’t go until whatever this thing is, something that’s ... in Dolareido, something that she can feel, is gone.”

That, was intriguing. Mary was a creature of ephemera, and while it was unknown whether she was a ghostly afterimage, or the literal soul of Samantha’s daughter, it was still true that she was no longer among the living. Mary, someone who had been blissfully unaware of the world of the paranormal in life, was now aware of something that fit Antoinette’s vague and hidden threat.

It was settled then. She would have to visit Mary, and perhaps do so on her own.

“Merci ma petite, for sharing this with me. This information helps me more than you know.”

“Um, you’re welcome!”

“And, as the ball will soon be upon us, I would have you return to the tower. We must find both you and I something to wear.”

---

~~Natasha~~

The room was huge, as big as a basketball court, with high walls of black marble. Within one wall was a closet almost as big as the actual room, filled with wardrobes and clothes racks on wheels that Antoinette pulled out to be sifted through. Leather stools sat about, with enormous mirrors against walls lined with light bulbs, for sitting at and adjusting make up and whatnot. A very ‘showgirl backroom’ sorta room, if the showgirls had all been millionaires.

How the times had changed. She’d only just been getting used to Antoinette, and her sire Daniel again, when the Prince had held the last ball. And the ball before that, Lucas had crashed. Back then, she’d thought of Antoinette as this immovable force that could not be stopped or denied. Lucas and his assault on the tower had shown her otherwise.

Antoinette wasn’t some unstoppable force, some immutable or invincible deity. She wasn’t a god, or demon, or volcano or tornado. Antoinette was a woman, a woman who knew what she liked and what she wanted. Rare, but then, she’d had centuries to figure out what she wanted from her second life. Maybe it was that sense of direction, combined with her power, that made Antoinette such an intimidating figure. But, intimidating or not, it’d been some time

now that Natasha no longer thought of Antoinette as an unapproachable god.

That didn't mean she didn't still think of her as a very intimidating woman, someone who was too smart and wise for Natasha to ever truly outwit or outsmart. Natasha prided herself on her intelligence, and she used it to run circles around most people; quiet circles that she kept to herself. With Antoinette, she ran no circles. Every word, every motion, every eye glance Antoinette made was a calculated action, and Natasha quickly realized it was better to just do whatever it was Antoinette wanted her to do.

Tonight, that was try on dresses.

“J-Jessy says I should try a loose hanging scarf ... that's also the t-top.” If there was a name for the absurd fashion item, she didn't know it.

Samantha giggled. Antoinette chuckled. Natasha, despite herself, smiled as she squirmed a little on the leather stool seat. All three of them wore suits, though only Natasha's had pants. They were in Antoinette primary dressing room, where she kept literally hundreds upon hundreds of dresses, and had apparently taken it upon herself to fill her rows upon rows of hangers with clothes for her two students as well. Well, student and childe. Samantha had yet to join them in matters of the Ordo.

“I would have to agree with your friend,” the Prince said. “Your small bust allows you to wear clothes that expose much of your torso, without it becoming blatantly erotic so quickly.”

Tash frowned at that. “I need b-bigger boobs.”

Jack's mom snorted on a laugh, and pat her shoulder, also sitting on the large stool. “Me too?”



Tash's frown grew. Now Samantha was making fun of her. The woman had perfectly normal breasts. Tash basically had none, tiny mounds that were only noticeable in skintight clothes. Which didn't seem to bother her boyfriends, because all she had to do was show the slightest bit of skin, and they were all over her.

Last night, after seeing Jessy and Eric enjoying themselves, she'd pretty much thrown herself at them. Damn that woman, corrupter of all good and pure.

"Nonsense," Antoinette said, and she pulled aside one of the coat racks that was utterly crammed with dresses and things preserved in clothes bags.

"Easy for you to say!" Her loud tone earned a raised brow from the Prince, but when Tash shrank, Antoinette just laughed and shrugged.

"I admit, being well endowed has provided me with many advantages, when it comes to controlling the sexuality of others. But that does not mean it is always a blessing, Vola. And besides, a small, dainty figure allows a woman to stir all sorts of sexual hungers. Many men fantasize about holding a small creature such as yourself in their grasp, someone très petite, someone that they can bury inside their arms and legs, and hold, pinned on their lengths as they squeeze you to their chests."

Natasha's frown slowly faded, and try as she might to stop it, she knew she was smiling. Yeah, that was exactly what Matt and Art liked to do. They liked to make her disappear against their bodies, manhandle her a bit, pick her up and move her around cause she was so small, and squash her into the bed. They did it last night.

She smiled with the memory, and the memory of what triggered it. Eric was getting bigger. It wasn't that she found him necessarily more attractive because he'd grown bigger since she first met him, but after spending so many nights with two very large guys, her

tastes were changing. Once upon a time, she'd figured she'd have preferred guys like Damien, thin, without any bulging muscles. It made more sense for someone like Fiona to be into big guys with big muscles. And yet, it was the super extroverted redhead with the giant boobs going for Damien, and little Natasha getting, as Jessy would put it, 'DP'd on the reg by two huge dudes'.

So of course, Jessy thought it'd be a good idea to show her everything Eric was doing to her. And what shocked Tash more, was how quickly Eric got into it! Those two were meant for each other, assholes. She smiled to herself as she remembered the sight of Eric, his length in his hand, all covered in cum and juices.

It really was Jessy's fault. It had to be. Only—

A sharp pain made her sit up, and she blinked at the vampire beside her.

"Your mind's running away without you, honey," Samantha said, lowering her hand after flicking Tash's shoulder. The grin on her face showed she knew where Tash's mind went, and Tash looked down at her knees.

"And you, Samantha," Antoinette said. "I hope to see you engage with others at the ball."

"Engage?"

"Oui. Talk to Kindred, learn who they are, introduce yourself to them. You are my childe, and that will lend you weight; others will respond to you whether they wish to or not."

"People won't want to talk to me?" Samantha put a hand to her cheek, genuinely surprised. Natasha had to suppress the need to giggle.

“The Danse Macabre, my childe. While this ball is meant for all to relax, feed, and mingle, most Kindred will find it difficult to speak with you without considering your position. They will worry that, if they offend you, they may offend me. Or different but similar worries will bother them.”

“Oh. I’m the daughter of the mayor. I’ve seen this movie.”

Tash laughed. Would the Prince even get the reference? Apparently she did, because she chuckled, nodded, and continued to comb through the various dresses she had hanging.

“Oui. I suggest you use the others as a catalyst. While Natasha or Damien could help you, I know Jessy or Jennifer will happily bury you in socialization.”

“But ... not Jack?”

Natasha winced, and looked to Samantha for only a second before looking down again. Say something? No, Antoinette would handle this.

“I fear Jack will be the most feared character at the ball, Samantha.”

Samantha gasped, a sound so classic, Tash could have sworn she’d taken it straight from a soundboard.

“They’ll be afraid of Jack?”

“Jack has gained a strange infamy, my sweet childe. His defeat of the hunters, combined with the spreading rumors of his curse, has painted a dangerous image of my love. This ball is also to show others that Jack is perfectly in control, and calm the fears of the city.”

“In control, b-b-but ... still ridiculously strong,” Tash said. “Garry will p-probably poke and prod, to see how much of a threat Jack is.”

The young Daeva sighed, got up, and looked at the many hanging dresses. “It hurts, to think of Jack being the target of so many horrible things.”

“As it pains me,” Antoinette said. “With his sire gone, I fear that your son will continue to put himself in harm’s way, taking up tasks that would normally fall to Julias.”

Natasha sighed, and the two Daeva looked to her. “I miss Julias.” Sighing again, she kicked the bottom of the stool with her heel gently. “He was r-really ... kind.” Damn it. It’d been many weeks since Julias died, but it still stung, remembering that her friend, second only to Jessy, was dead. And Julias, of all Kindred! The last man who deserved it.

“Come now, my sweet.” The Prince came over to her, and pet her shoulder as she smiled down at her. “I knew Julias as well. Not as personally as you, but better than you may suspect. He would not want you to feel such sorrow.”

“I know. I know. I just...” She shook her head with a quick shudder, dislodging the sadness as best she could. Antoinette nodded, and Natasha stood up to join her and Samantha. “M-Maybe some girly stuff will make me feel better.”

That earned a proper laugh from Antoinette, and she withdrew several dresses from her many, and set them over the rack. “Referring to the art of embellishing the body as ‘girly’ does not do justice this ancient game, little Vola. Men groom beards, wear suits with accented shoulders, build muscle unnecessary in the modern world, and in addition, attempt to display their financial security through fashion, vehicle, and other tools, knowing full well women find such things attractive. This game is played by both genders, and those between.”

“I dunno,” Samantha said as she pulled out a dress, and held it in front of her along her body for the other two to see. A pretty, classic, long black dress with sleeves and modest cleavage. “I mean, I know what you’re saying, sire. But, you don’t think women have a bit of ... uh, a bit of a bias, in this department? I mean, Jack never put on make up when he was living with me, and I think that’s still true.”

Natasha smiled at the young Daeva, nodding. “I agree with Samantha. P-People are going to be looking at us more than the men, at the b-b-ball.”

“There was once a time,” Antoinette said, “where it was the other way around. But, yes, I admit that in this modern age, the pendulum has swung in our direction. Perhaps it has been in our direction for many centuries.” She took Samantha’s dress, put it back on the rack, and pulled out another. It looked similar to the one Samantha had picked, but the cleavage was much deeper, and a diamond was cut out of the stomach to expose the navel.

Samantha looked at the dress, gulped, took it, and stepped around the clothes rack. Out of sight, she began to change, and Antoinette rolled her eyes at her childe.

“I still think,” Samantha said, “that women have been judged by how they look more than men, since forever.”

“Perhaps, but men have been judged by a larger group of factors, and many of those factors are indicated visually. And while those factors may not draw the eye with such hypnotic attention as a woman’s bust or derrière, that does not change that men are judged by how well concerning factors appear visually, and they are judged with great harshness.”

Natasha smiled to herself. Her boss was a student of the human condition, which was kind of strange, considering she hadn’t been human for a bunch of centuries. At first, she’d thought maybe Antoinette was a ‘woman for woman-kind’ sorta person, but the

more they talked, the more it became clear Antoinette considered men with her assessments with as much rigor as she did women.

Samantha made a sound, almost like a disbelieving scoff, but she was too sweet to double down on an aggressive sound like that. “Example?”

“A man in uniform.”

Oh. Right. Natasha nodded to her boss, before peeking to the side a bit to get a glimpse of Samantha’s expression over the shoulders of the clothes bags. Antoinette’s example had frozen Samantha solid for a moment, before she started squirming again, getting the dress up over her shoulders. The ancient Daeva was too damn smart.

A uniform was sexy, no doubt about that. Could be anything from a tool belt to a proper military outfit, something about a man wearing clothes that said ‘I am self sufficient, skilled, and dedicated to a craft. I affect the world’ crossed a line from simply being attractive, to straight-up arousing.

“But,” Antoinette continued, “dare I say such a thing, I believe women do enjoy... ‘showing off’ more than men, at least in the realm of fashion. I know that personally, it will forever be a guilty pleasure of mine.” With that, she withdrew another dress, and held it across her front as she looked at Natasha.

“Um ... you could go t-to the ball naked, instead?” She stared at the flimsy thing, nothing more than hanging silver flaps that connected in loops to what couldn’t have been anything more than a string around the neck, and another around the waist. It was like someone turned a sling bikini into a dress. Well, Antoinette would have looked amazing in it for sure, but it’d look better in a strip club, not a ball.

Shrugging, the tall woman put the dress back, and removed something a little more appropriate for a ball. A single piece, white,

with a single loose strap that hooked around the neck, before dangling in front of her to connect at the waist. The skirt was similar, a loose flap for the front and another for the back. Naturally, you couldn't wear underwear with a dress like that.

“Very p-pretty, and, um ... arousing for everyone at the ball, I'm sure.”

“Merci. I do wish to indulge in a little flaunting, but I am not sure to what extent. Elaine will undoubtedly flaunt her body, brazenly, in a manner similar to Jennifer, and she will be both my guest and companion. I would prefer to wear something similar to what she wears.”

“You d-don't know exactly what she'll wear?”

“Non. Elaine hopes to surprise me.”

“How long have you known her?”

“Centuries.”

“So, she says surprise, b-but you already know what she's going to wear, right? At least, can b-ballpark it.”

Antoinette grinned at her. “Indeed. I know what she will do, and she knows what I will do in response. An ancient game we have played, but we are both too old to change our ways now.” With a nod, Antoinette set the dress on a stool beside Natasha, and started digging through her infinite clothes for another. “She will wear something terribly seductive, brazen, and proceed to flaunt her beauty as she learns of what new Kindred have come to my city.”

“Sounds like a D-Daeva,” Natasha said, unable to hold back her smile.

“Ha, in a way, my student. But Daeva are far more subtle, and we play games of misdirection and controlling pretense. To be Daeva in the Danse Macabre, is to insure an opponent can never call you out on exactly what you mean by your words. Every sentence must drip with subtext.” She held another dress in front of, similar to the previous one, but shining silver instead of white. Natasha nodded, and Antoinette set the dress down with the other. “Ventrue, on the other hand, love to state things plainly, and back their words with power, monetary or political. Elaine has learned much from me, and I her, but she is Ventrue, and she will be quite bold and direct.”

This Elaine woman was starting to sound dangerous. Tash would have to keep an eye on her.

Samantha stepped out from behind the wall of clothes, and Natasha smiled in awe at the Daeva. She was so pretty! A little short, with shoulder-length brown wavy hair, and big, soft, green eyes she recognized from Jack. The black dress also made sure that her flat stomach and plentiful breasts were on display, in a tasteful but blatantly erotic way. It was a ‘come fuck me’ dress, and everyone at the ball would come to that conclusion instantly.

“It’s so revealing,” Samantha said, looking down at her cleavage. “I’m going to—”

“Blend with the crowd, my childe. Come, we have discussed this. Do you not trust me? You look beautiful.”

“I trust you sire, it’s just ... still hard for me to picture myself wearing this kinda stuff.”

Antoinette sighed, a long and playful sound, and stepped over to another hanging rack of clothes. She fished out several more dresses, all meant for Samantha, and all of varying degrees of tightness and raciness. The one Samantha had was the tamest by comparison. With a far less playful sigh, the young Daeva scooped up the dresses, and stepped around the rack again to try them on.



Natasha's turn. Antoinette pulled another rack of hanging clothes from the wall of black marble, out into the white LED light, and dug through the layers and layers of fabrics.

"Your son has removed a great thorn from my side, childe," Antoinette said, voice raised so Samantha could hear while she hunted through more clothes, "and my city's side. It is time to celebrate. I expect you to feed on someone at the ball, Samantha."

"Feed? I ... um, I don't know..."

"Come now. Did you not enjoy yourself with Jessy's ghouls?"

Natasha couldn't see Samantha through the clothes, but she could hear her squirm and struggle against her dress, and her old personality.

"I did. It was nice, being the ... center of attention like that. And, you know, the blood was ... delicious." A hint of wonder filled her voice, and Natasha grinned up at Antoinette. They both knew what was happening to Samantha.

"Think of how much more enjoyable it could have been, my childe, if you had let them do what they wished to do to you in that booth."

"What they wished?"

Antoinette chuckled, and found a dress for Natasha. It was just like Jessy had suggested, something with a super short, tight skirt, and a top that wasn't anything more than a hanging scarf. Tash had expected black, but the dress the Prince pulled out was a dark, rich burgundy. Natasha had never worn any clothes in this color, let alone a revealing dress.

Natasha had pale skin and long black hair. The dress would compliment that, she supposed, in a strange way. Sort of like how

Antoinette had eyes so red they were almost crimson, and they matched her white hair.

“Yes, my childe, what they wished for.” Nodding, Antoinette handed Natasha the dress, and began digging for more. “They wanted to have sex with you, dear Samantha. It would have brought them great joy to have pulled up your skirt, and sat you on their laps, taking turns enjoying your insides, as you enjoyed their blood.”

More gasps from Samantha. Again Antoinette looked down at Tash, and rolled her eyes. The Prince had probably had this conversation with her childe a bunch of times now, and was having it again.

“Sex, in a club?”

“Oui, in a club. You were the predator, Samantha, the vampire. They were prey. If you wanted to, you could have hurt them to your desire.”

“Hurt them!?”

“I am only making a point, sweet childe, be calm. You were in a dark booth where few could see, and you had two gorgeous men, experts in the art of sex, enthralled by you. A small nudge would have been enough to push you over the edge, and into a rather enjoyable ménage à trois, non?”

“I ... I don't know.”

“The point I make, is that you were in control of the situation. You could have enjoyed every carnal desire you have, and not only would no one have judged you, I am sure Jessy's ghouls would have been delighted to partake in your fantasies.”

Samantha stepped around the rack again, and stood in her new dress, frowning at her sire. The dress was very racy, with only a thin,

silver metal ring connecting a blue tube-top to her breasts, with some itty-bitty shoulder straps, and some straps tight to her waist that crisscrossed down to her hips, to attach to a short skirt with a split thigh.

“I uh ... I don’t know, you know?”

“Hmm.” Antoinette turned to face her childe, and looked the dress up and down. “Perhaps it is the wrong color. I could—”

“No, not about the dress. I mean, uh, I don’t ... don’t really want to be the predator, I guess? I mean sure, I could have went further with those boys. And maybe I would, now that I’m a little older, a little more comfortable with who I am. And this ... this Beast thing inside me, I can tell it ... it wants to be aggressive. I don’t know. But, I mean ... This is just between us girls, right?”

“Of course, ma petite,” Antoinette said.

Natasha nodded, and did her best to not laugh at Samantha’s word choice. This girly locker room talk was so silly to her, but she had to admit, it was kind of fun. With Jessy, it wasn’t girl talk, it was boy talk from a dude with boobs who happened to like dresses. And much as she enjoyed talking with Matt and Art, they didn’t really talk about this sort of stuff. Antoinette and her childe were the only real ‘girly’ types Natasha ever talked to, and she was quickly growing to like it more and more, especially Samantha.

Much as Natasha loved her friend Jack, she was pleasantly surprised by how different he was to Samantha in so many ways. Samantha was a fluffy pillow, content to receive everything thrown at her, and provide nothing but softness in return. Definitely a trait someone could take advantage of, but Antoinette was confident in her childe’s future. For Natasha, it was nice to have someone she could talk to, who was happy to listen, smile, and be tender with her replies. Sort of like a much calmer, gentler Fiona, now that she thought about it.

“I don’t really want to be aggressive with guys. I ... kinda like the idea of them being aggressive with me.” Samantha squirmed some more, doing her best to look comfortable in a dress she was clearly uncomfortable in, and admitting to a secret she was clearly uncomfortable admitting.

“How aggressive?” Antoinette said. “Miss Vola enjoys a rather aggressive pair of werewolves most nights.”

Natasha tried to frown, but it didn’t last. There wasn’t any point in denying it or being shy about it anymore. Everyone knew she was having sex with two huge, aggressive guys regularly, and considering how long the relationship had been going on, everyone knew it wasn’t a fling. And besides, while everyone else was probably only picturing little her getting fucked by two huge guys, she knew them for the cuddling, the laughs, the stories they told, and the confidence they gave her. The frequent sex was a bonus. A huge bonus.

Samantha met Tash’s eyes for a second before looking down, and squirming some more. “Uh, maybe not that aggressive. I’m too old for—”

“Natasha is older than you, childe.”

“Oh, right. Um, I mean ... I don’t know. I guess what interests me is a man who will ... hold me down a little during sex, and then cuddle with me afterwards.”

Tash aww’d, a little louder than she meant to, and Antoinette gave her a gentle flick in the temple, before handing her another dress. This one was black, and had a similar shape to the first.

“I am sure,” Antoinette said, “that we could find you a man willing to perform the former, and with great skill. The latter, on the other hand, is a difficult quest.”

“How about that Jacob fellow? He visited Jack once, when I was there. He seems interesting, and handsome.”

Natasha blinked at Samantha, several times, trying to see if she was making a joke. She wasn't. Any moment now, Antoinette was going to give Samantha a harsh warning about Jacob, which Tash was sure she'd given her before, but probably always about the Danse Macabre. Dealing with Jacob on a personal level was an entirely different minefield.

So, Natasha backed off a little, stepped around the other rack, the one Antoinette had pulled out full of dresses for her, and started changing. Changing, and eavesdropping. It's not like the two Daeva didn't know she was listening!

“Jacob is a dangerous man, my childe.”

“I know. I mean, I could tell that from when he visited Jack. And I remember your lessons, sire.”

“Then you should know that Maria, Michael, Garry, and above all, Jacob, are dangerous Kindred to be given their space.”

“I know, but Jacob seemed ... interesting.”

“He is interesting, my childe. Very interesting. Behind the bandage that covers his empty eyes, there is a deep soul filled with emotion and wisdom. He is a reservoir of knowledge, of experience, and of living poetry.”

Natasha gulped as she set aside her suit jacket, shirt, and slipped out of her pants. Never, never ever, had Antoinette described Jacob with those words. She didn't just respect Jacob, it almost sounded like she liked him, or maybe liked the man Jacob used to be.

“I sense a but coming,” Samantha said.

“But the man has lost much. The woman he cared for more than anything, died decades ago. I ... I do not know if Jacob has the capacity to be romantic with another anymore, sweet Samantha.” Antoinette sighed, and shifted some of the hangers. “And even if he were, I would caution you to avoid him nonetheless. He is a witch, or warlock if you prefer, and that vocation includes some of the most disturbing, brutal rituals you can imagine.”

The more Antoinette described Jacob, the more Natasha was getting Phantom vibes. It was obvious the Prince was trying to scare Samantha away from the deadly Nosferatu, but she was also painting the man in a powerful light. He was an imposing man, Jacob, but intelligent and wise. He had depth, emotions, and he'd been scarred by a horrible loss. He was deadly powerful, but also a leader, and teacher. What woman wouldn't be interested in a man like that?

A woman who'd seen the sick sort of shit those witches did in their rituals, that's who.

Natasha threw on the burgundy top over her neck, and reached for the straps to tie behind her back. There were no straps. At a glance, she'd suspected halter top, but no, it really was just a heavy scarf, the heaviest part meant to hang to the sternum, with the thinnest and lightest part around the back of her neck. With a ridiculous dress like this, every motion she made would have to be calculated, or everyone would see her breasts; it already showed off her stomach, all of her sides, and all of her back.

She already knew what Antoinette would say, what Jessy would say, and hell, what Jennifer would say about nudity concerns. ‘So?’ Laughing quietly, she pulled on the skirt, and stepped around the rack to rejoin the Daevas.

Antoinette looked to her, tapped a chin, and shook her head. “I thought perhaps the burgundy would work, but I think the color

demands a more grandiose ensemble. And with your très petite physique, I think slim is your best option, without the rolling folds or ruffles that I think believe work with burgundy better.”

Natasha nodded, and stepped around the rack again. Ok, burgundy not good for tight little clothes according to the boss. Black though, black worked with everything, especially with clothes that were basically nothing but fancy lingerie. And, as she slid out of the burgundy dress and got into the black one, it was obvious the black dress really was nothing but lingerie. Unlike the previous dress, this one’s dangling chest was a bit tighter, and hugged her torso, using a single tiny strap around the mid back to keep it snug. Sort of like a halter top, if the intent was to slowly peel it off during in a strip tease. The skirt did a better job covering her legs, reaching to the knee, but each thigh had a split, with zigzag straps that exposed every inch up to the waist.

She came out, and showed the two women. Samantha looked at her like she was crazy for wearing something so revealing, since the top was super tiny, and hugged to her chest tight enough that the shapes of her breasts were defined. Well, at least it wasn’t the loose scarf top Jessy wanted her to wear!

“Delicious, Natasha,” Antoinette said, smiling and nodding. “Though, if you wear this, understand that it is meant to be worn without undergarments.”

“Oh.” She looked down at the thighs of the dress, and where it showed her outer thighs all the way up to the hip, completely exposing where hip met waist met stomach. She could go commando, right? A lot of the women Kindred would. Jessy and Jennifer, and Antoinette and her friend probably would.

The more she thought about it, the easier it became to see Jessy’s side of things. It wouldn’t be long before everyone just went to these parties naked, dispensing with pretense and just fucking the

kine on the ballroom floor. Antoinette may have even preferred that, too.

Antoinette handed her another dress, and turned back to her childe. “Jacob will be at the ball, I imagine. If you truly wish to learn more of him, then you may talk with him. If the conversation turns to the covenants, or his Crone, or Crúac rituals, you are not to entertain such subjects. Understood?”

“Yes sire. What do I do if he brings them up?”

“Tell him your sire forbids such topics. He will understand.”

Natasha shivered as she slipped on the third dress. The idea of Samantha telling Jacob no was hard to imagine. Partly because Samantha wasn't the sort of person to say no, because she wanted to make everyone happy. And partly because Jacob was Jacob. Just being around the man was oppressive, the weight of his Beast crushing anyone nearby.

“The P-Prince is right,” Natasha said from behind the rack. “I've seen Jacob d ... d-d-do some very horrible things.”

“Horrible?” Samantha said.

“Yes. Those rituals he d-does, and the experiments with occult stuff. It's all very ... scary.”

Natasha came around the rack again, and did a small spin to show the third dress. A one piece that connected a black halter top to a very short black skirt. It screamed ‘night club dress’ that was meant to dance in, and fuck in, but the material was some sort of strong silk instead of leather, and it had subtle embroidery on its edges, silver thread almost impossible to notice unless you got close. Slightly fancier than a typical nightclub dress.



And of course, since it was silk and tight to her chest, it meant the shape of her nipples could be seen. Combined with how small the front of the halter top was, exposing a lot of her chest, all of her stomach, and all her sides and back, she felt very much naked.

“Perfect,” Antoinette said, nodding.

Tash frowned at her. “I thought you w-wanted less skin than the last ball?”

Her defiance must have hit Antoinette’s funny bone, cause the elder laughed heartily, and pulled out another rack of hanging dresses from the deep cavern of endless clothes.

“I am a creature of habit, I suppose,” she said. “Tell me, little Natasha, what do you think of, perhaps, Harcourt attending the ball?”

“Harcourt? The hunter who helped J-Jack?”

“Oui.” Without a care for the two women watching her, Antoinette started undressing where she was. “He and his two companions still remain within my tower, and a part of me feels that, it could very well be an interesting experience to invite them to this ball. Harcourt betrayed Jeremiah, and that alone will protect him at the ball. His two friends will be protected under that umbrella as well.”

Natasha looked down as she imagined the scene. Harcourt and two hunters, in a ballroom full of vampires and other monsters. Horny vampires, and likely horny werewolves and monsters. Well, it was true that Harcourt would be seen as something of an anomaly, considering what he did.

“Um, I think ... honestly, I think s-some vampire will probably try to f-f-f-fuck him, before the night is over.”

Antoinette laughed again, nodding. “You are likely correct. I am unsure whether to bring him, in some sort of likely doomed effort to convince him not all paranormal creatures are as based and predatory as his ilk believe. It could very well backfire, and lead to his death and the death of his comrades.” As she slipped out of her shirt, revealing a ridiculously huge black bra that made Tash almost roll her eyes, Antoinette nodded to herself. “But, I admit, to see a trio of hunters, disarmed and dressed for the occasion, surrounded by hungry, aroused Kindred, is an experiment I think I would very much like witnessing.”

# Chapter 115

~~Jack~~

“Oh my god,” Jack said.

“Oh ... dear Lord,” Damien said.

“Now arriving, Mister Jack Terry, of the Invictus, and champion this evening. With him, Mister Damien Burksen, of the ... Lancea et Sanctum, and champion’s guard,” the ghoul in the tuxedo beside them called out. The crowd turned to them, clapped for a few moments, nodded their heads, and resumed socializing.

Somewhere along the line, Antoinette’s invite to the ball, which had included a ‘some skin but not too much’ message, had gotten mixed up. Or people read something from it that Jack didn’t really think was there, because he’d honestly thought everyone was going to dial down the sexiness factor for this ball. It was his mom’s first ball after all, and everyone knew that. And hell, there were some other new faces in the crowd too, freshly embraced Kindred from before the hunters had made their presence known. They’d yet to see a ball either, and he didn’t think they’d want their first experience to be ... this!

There was even more skin than last time.

Jack looked down at his handsome, gray suit, fancy and expensive as all hell, but far less sexual. Antoinette probably knew what he’d decide to wear would be woefully overdressing, and would delight in stripping him once she arrived. For the sake of saving time, he sighed, unbuttoned the jacket, and undid a few buttons of the shirt.

“Blending in?” Damien said.

“I guess. We stick out enough as is.”

“You’re right, I guess.” With a quiet groan, Damien also undid his jacket, and a few buttons. His suit was black, and decidedly sleeker, with thinner legs and sleeves meant to highlight his lean physique. A perfect suit for a Mekhet.

The two of them walked down the front stairs of the Black Hall, and onto the main floor where everyone was chatting. The grand stairs in the back led up to a balcony that circled the main floor from above, but no one was up there, not yet at least. There was a band up there though, or what looked like a small orchestra? A bunch of cellos and basses and whatnot, playing some relaxing classical music Jack didn’t recognize. The music would have fit proper ballroom dresses and tuxedos better, but something about everyone being Kindred added a certain atmosphere that demanded the ‘upper-class’ music. Quite the stereotype, that vampires loved pretending to be nobility. It was true.

Jessy wore what amounted to a bunch of horizontal leather straps, tied tight together around her body, with a lot of gaps between them. Each strap left a gap in the front, and a strap zigzagged through the ends where they stopped in the front, exposing enough of her body that nothing was left to the imagination. She had a fit figure, muscular without losing the hourglass physique, with surprisingly large breasts for someone so lean. She knew it too, and loved to show off; her breasts only had one strap across them, and it barely reached far enough across her bosom to cover the nipples. Their undersides were completely exposed.

Eric was on her arm, and the man was wearing black suit pants, and a black shirt that was slightly see-through. The first three buttons were undone, showing some of his chest, a silver necklace Jack was sure Jessy got for him, and he had a fancy silver watch on. Both of them looked like they should have been in a club, but he

could see the clothes weren't cheap; not that club clothes were cheap, but ballroom clothes were a step above, price-wise. Fine silks, embroidery on the hems, luxurious jewelry, they looked like they were wearing a million bucks, a particularly horny million bucks.

"Really?" Jack said, frowning at her.

"What?" She shrugged at him, turned a bit to aim her hip at him, and pointed at it. "I'm wearing a thong, see? Could have gone without."

"I ... don't think that dress is meant to be worn without underwear," Damien said, eyebrow raised. It was true. Much as a lot of the dresses Jack expected to see tonight were probably worn without underwear, Jessy's naked front would have meant her sex would have been completely exposed. Considering how small the thong was, it almost was.

"That's what I did, last time I wore it. Though, I wore a pussy pastie with it then, so I guess—"

Eric elbowed her in the side. She elbowed him back. Jack choked on a laugh. God, those two.

Sighing, Jack looked around, and scoped for familiar faces. There was Maria again, wearing a proper, normal, ridiculously expensive, old fashioned white dress. No chance the disfigured Nos would show off her physique, not when she looked like a cracked, broken, wet corpse. Few Nosferatu came to the ball for that very reason. Michael, on the other hand, wore a white suit with shirt completely open, showing off huge muscles that almost bulged out of his chest and stomach. He may as well have had a tattoo saying 'Kingpin' written across his pectorals. He wasn't wearing sunglasses, but it would have fit if he did.

The witches hadn't arrived yet, but he knew it'd be a sight when they did, considering Jennifer and Othello were bound to show off. A bunch of the werewolves had already arrived though, and Jack smiled as he noticed they were wearing fancier clothes than he'd ever seen them in. Well, the Invictus were doing their best to seduce the Uratha into their employ. Money for expensive suits and dresses wasn't exactly the best way to spend a fortune, but then again, this way the werewolves were getting more involved with the city and its vampires. Even Avery was there, wearing a tight one-piece white dress that reached halfway down her thigh, long sleeves with shoulders, and the classic boob window. Very mature, and it fit her mature visage well.

Jack did a double take when his eyes landed on Natasha. Holy shit. It was already hard to look at her without thinking sexual thoughts, with everything he'd learned and seen. But now, she was wearing a dress with a tiny black halter top connected to a tiny skirt. If she'd been wearing a small towel, it'd have covered more. Yep, those were the sides of her small breasts, and the entirety of her back, and her ridiculously small waist and stomach, and thin, lean legs.

She was talking with Caleb and Noah, while her boyfriends were talking with Avery. Probably trying to, again, explain themselves and their foolhardy trip into the Hisil with Eric that Tash told him about. Jack wasn't in a position to judge, but Avery was, and Jack smiled as he watched the tiny woman glare and frown up at the two huge men. Neither of them were wearing suit jackets, but they had the pants, and their partly open shirts had some colors streaking across them in slick patterns, a cross between classy suit shirt, and something you'd find at a night club. Undoubtedly picked out by Antoinette, or Jessy.

"She looks so fuckable, doesn't she?" Jessy said, following his gaze. "God damn, just imagine that tiny thing on your dick. Bet you can barely fit a finger in there."

Eric grabbed his girlfriend by both shoulders and pulled her away from Jack. “Jessy, I swear.”

“Sorry! Sorry. I’m just so excited!” She bounced in place, one arm hooked behind Eric’s back. “It feels so fucking good to get back to this shit, you know? Even the fucking Carthians are here, and not being assholes for once.”

Right, the Carthians. Jack looked around and spotted a bunch of them. Joe, Mike, Tilly with her wolf boyfriend Mason, Marcus, Kathy, Jody, Debby, those he recognized, but there were many more he didn’t know by name. And of course, the man himself, Garry. They’d definitely dressed up for the occasion, though a trained eye could see the difference between an expensive, tailored suit, and an expensive, stolen one. Still, they looked good, and it was obvious they were making an attempt to play nice. Considering how much trouble they’d been causing the Invictus lately, border skirmishes, and Terra Den getting in Xnomina’s way, their playing nice here felt insincere. The Danse Macabre was a persistent pain in the ass.

“Where’s Fiona?” Eric said.

“She...” Damien scratched the back of his neck as he looked to the werewolf. “I don’t know if she’s coming. She wanted to, but after Mark was caught spying on the Prince, Azamel might not want her here.”

“Then again,” Jack said, “Fiona is Fiona. She might just sneak out.” The girl did have that ‘sneak out for the party’ sort of vibe to her. “Mom here yet?”

Jessy shook her head. “Nope. Natasha says she’s going to show up with Antoinette. And you know the host has to be fashionably late.” Her following eye roll made Jack laugh. Yeah, Jack didn’t really get things like that either, the social back and forth of impression, something outside the Danse Macabre that kind engaged in as well. If he got an invitation for a late night party, and it said it started at

eight, he'd show up at eight. He knew he'd be the only one to do that, but being clear with the instructions on invitations was important, damn it.

“Jack.”

Jack winced, looking away from the source of sound so hopefully she wouldn't see it. But when he turned around and looked Clara in the eyes, he knew she had. Meeting her gaze got a similar reaction from her, a borderline wince, but she forced herself to keep looking at him, only a single moment spared to admire his suit.

He spared more than a single moment admiring her and her dress, though. The Uratha and Carthians loved to wear clothes that were closer to casual, and hints of that still came through in their evening wear. Clara, on the other hand, was wearing something far closer to what an Invictus would wear: a fancy dress that screamed money, and sex. It took every ounce of effort he could muster to not let his jaw drop, but he knew it had anyway, if only a little.

The dress was black, like most of the dresses tonight. Strapless, the one-piece sat very, very, very low on her chest, no shoulders or sleeves, and wrapped super tight to her body. Any lower and the nipples of her handful breasts would have peeked out. The bottom of the dress was only just low enough to cover her sex, and it hugged her fit physique tight enough that he could see every curve and indentation of her muscular ass. Her box-braids were tied together in something like a ponytail, and she had it pulled over her shoulder.

It would have been a simple, tight, black dress wrapped around her like a towel, except for all the cuts along it that exposed so much more of her skin. Her dress had cuts arranged in V shapes along her front, very specific and precise cuts that had to have been made for her, a strange combination of erotic and sleek professional. Most of



her breasts were left completely exposed saved for her nipples, and her flat stomach was on display as well, showing off her subtle abs.

And she was wearing jewelry. Large diamond earrings? Whatever they were, they weren't subtle. And a necklace! He never, in a million years, figured someone like Clara would wear a necklace like this, large, glittering, and what looked like more diamonds. For the life of him, he couldn't help but stare at it, and how the large thing sat between her breasts against her amazing tan skin. He'd seen those breasts bare before, and damn it, his mind forced him to picture them adorned with the jewelery.

He didn't say anything. She didn't say anything. They looked at each other for a while, and only when Damien, Jessy, and Eric left, did Jack realize they were just staring at each other. Jack spared a glance for Damien, only for the man to give him a small grin as he disappeared into the crowd. Traitor.

He tried to speak first. "Did ... did you, uh..."

Clara chuckled, but it was quiet, and awkward. "No, I didn't buy the dress, or steal it. Marcus set me up." Marcus, a Ventrue of the Carthians. 'Set me up' meant he'd used Dominate to insure she was well dressed. Carthians could make money if they had to, but their covenant wasn't set up to take advantage of it. "I thought he was crazy, but he insisted people were going to be ... uh, under dressed, I guess?"

"You mean half naked." He did his best to not stare at her breasts again as he said it. But, damn, just saying the word naked demanded he look down at her body for a second time.

Which was her plan, of course. He looked down, and she smiled. He forced his eyes back up to her, and she smiled again, this time with a grin smirk. Yeah, she knew she looked amazing, and she was enjoying making him squirm.

Why did women love making him squirm?

“Ha, yeah. And I guess I am pretty much half naked.”

“Seems to be the theme for the party,” he said, gesturing to his own shirt and the buttons he’d undone. His chest was exposed, and while he was a small guy, there was a fair amount of chiseled definition there.

“I wanted to talk to you,” she said.

“Did you? I got the impression you’d want to avoid me.”

“What? Why—”

Now wasn’t the time for this topic, but he was just stupid enough to bring it up anyway. “I saw the look on your face, Clara, after the incident. And I remember everything that happened during it, too.”

She looked down, then around, before motioning for him to walk with her. He did, stepping out of the center of the ballroom floor, and heading over toward the wall close to the grand stairs that led up to the second floor.

“The look on my face?” she said, once they had a few feet between them and everyone else, with the music band closer to block out their voices.

“The look I saw on everyone’s face, really. The curse scared everyone, and disgusted them, including you.”

“Yes ... yes it did.” Sighing, she leaned back against the white marble, a dragon carved into its surface, and she let her shoulders sag. “I guess I wanted to see if you were ok.”

And that’s why you dressed to kill? To ask me if I was alright?

“I’m f—”

“You’re not fine, Jack. You saw the look on my face, but I saw the look on yours.” She leaned in closer to him, half squinting, half dripping with sympathy. “It’s lurking around in there, isn’t it? Inside you.”

He froze for a moment. Shit, he shouldn’t have, but that was enough for her to nod and lean back a bit. He’d confirmed her suspicion without saying a word.

“I can manage it, Clara.”

“Can you? That thing was twisted and cruel, Jack.”

“It just wanted to kill the hunters.”

“Did it? It gave the impression it would have happily, and literally skull fucked one of them if given the chance.”

The grotesque image of him doing something like that to someone’s head made his throat clench up, and he shook his head as he looked to the crowd. “Yeah, it’s twisted. But it wants what I want ... wanted, to defeat the hunters.”

She turned as well, looking to the crowd mingling as she stepped in a little closer, until her shoulder touched his. “For now.”

“For now,” he said. “And when it doesn’t, I’ll shut it down.”

“Jack, this thing is strong enough to singlehandedly mow down a dozen hunters, and fight a monster that kicked my ass, twice. You’re barely over two-years embraced. Do you actually think you could shut this thing down if it really wanted to get out?”

*She makes a good point, Jack.*

Shut up. You’re just a tag along. I’m the real Jack, and you’re a shadow. If you could take me over permanently, you would have.

*Perhaps. Or perhaps I don't want Miss Tits and that witch Jacob getting in my way.*

Getting in the way of what? There a secret you're not sharing with me?

*Ha, nothing so stupid. I'm you, Jack. I'm what a Kindred can be when they give into their Beastly nature. This city will be mine eventually, and we're going to make some changes! None of this pacifist bullshit your boobs-with-legs girlfriend is so attached to.*

You said you wouldn't ruin things.

*I won't. I'll make them better! I'll show you a better way to live, Jack. Jacob's figured it out, but he isn't pushing hard enough for it. The only way to live is on the backs of kine, on their corpses. Seriously, when's the last time you Kissed a kine until they were dead? Remember how fucking good it felt, to drain the life out of them until they died in your embrace?*

I didn't enjoy that, you sick fuck. I—

"I can see it right now," Clara said. Jack snapped his head up to her, and she pulled back an inch, meeting his gaze. There it was again, that expression on her face, fear. "You're fighting with it right now."

"I'll be fine."

"You're not fine, Jack. Christ, does Damien know about this, or the Prince? Do they know this thing's inside you, fighting to get out?"

He clenched his fists at his side, and kept his glare on the crowd. People walking past were soon avoiding him, and anyone who did glance at him was quick to look away. God damn it.

“No, they don’t know.” They probably suspected, but until he straight up told them the curse was actively talking in his head, he doubted they’d come to that conclusion. Clara had managed to though, so maybe they would, too.

“You don’t think you’re being overconfident, Jack? Thinking that you can handle this problem on your own?”

He looked down as her words brought up a nagging feeling from his gut. Ventrue hubris, sneaking his way into his life again, and again, and again.

“I ... I’ll tell them. Damien’s already looking for a way to shut this curse down, like someone else in the Second Estate did for Susanna, centuries ago. And Antoinette, I’ll ... I’ll...”

Clara frowned at him, and gave his shoulder a nudge. “You really hate the idea of appearing weak in front of her, don’t you?”

“It’s not that. I appear weak in front of her all the time.”

“Do you? Because I get the impression you probably just lower your manly-man wall, be emotional with her, and think of that as being weak.”

He ground his teeth together. “That’s ... not what I meant.”

“Uh huh, sure it isn’t. What I meant, Jack, is are you willing to look her in the eye, and say ‘I can’t handle this and I need help’?”

“She knows about the curse, and—”

“Dodging the question.”

He frowned at her, but it didn’t last. He knew what she was getting at, that he had a hard time lowering his guard about some things. His life as a Kindred had been unusually brutal, and he’d

shared that with Antoinette readily. Now, he had something he thought he could handle, and he wasn't sharing it with his love. Antoinette was smart enough to guess he was holding something back, and she was trusting him to bring it up when he felt comfortable speaking about it. Clara, on the other hand, was content to approach him directly, and call him out.

Maybe he could use a little bit of that directness?

"I'll hold on," he said. "I'll keep it under control, until Damien and I can figure out a way to deal with it. I'll tell her about it, too, but I'll deal with it."

"Whatever you say." She folded her arms across her chest, and nodded out toward the crowd. "Well, you did save the day. Now everyone gets to party and fuck, all thanks to you."

He winced again, this time a lot more obviously. "No no, no fucking. I don't see any naked kine being Kissed and fucked."

"Yet. You don't see kine being Kissed and fucked, yet. I remember the last party."

"My mom's coming to this party!"

"Well, she's going to get an eyeful, I'm sure."

He shuddered at the idea. Yeah, it was dumb that he'd embraced the sexuality of Kindred life, but couldn't imagine his mom doing it. And not fair of him. He wanted his mom to move on, and he wasn't helping.

"So ... how is your sister?"

Jack stepped over to the white marble wall by the stairs again, and leaned against it. Clara joined him a moment later.

“Better, now that I’ve told her about Angela. But she’s still a ghost. She’s so unstable, talking to her is dangerous.”

“Must be rough. I can’t imagine how I’d have handled it if I ever ran into my brother.”

“You were close?”

“Pretty damn close, yeah.” The life left her eyes as she looked down, but it came back to her as she recovered. Not only recovered, but scooped up a glass of wine from a passing waiter heading toward her pack, and downed it. She downed a second, gave the waiter the two empty glasses, and took a third.

“You’re going to get sick,” he said.

“I’ll be fine. Just ... you kinda stirred up some bad memories. My fault, I know, bringing up your sister. But unlike you, I can use some nice alcohol to—”

“Now arriving, the Circle of the Crone, and elder Jacob. With him, Beatrice Damor, Jennifer Denver, Aaron Jones, and Othello Manu, champion’s guards during the assault on the hunters.”

The crowd looked to watch the witches enter the ball. Or, two witches, three warlocks? He still wasn’t clear on that.

Jacob was wearing a gray suit, something with the modern flair Invictus fashion demanded, but at the same time, it had enough old school flair that it reminded Jack of something worn by maybe a Roman soldier? Or even older, like, Greek? The suit jacket had something like a toga flap to it, and a sash. It would have looked ridiculous, if not for how seamlessly it was blended together.

Did the elder have a tailor? The idea of the eyeless bastard with his own tailor made Jack laugh.

Othello and Aaron wore tuxedos, though Jennifer obviously had a hand in picking them, because they left a fair amount of the chest exposed, no tie or bow tie, with jacket unbuttoned and under shirt unbuttoned to the pants. Clothes you could only get away with if you had the body for it.

Jennifer and Beatrice wore similar dresses, both in black. They were long enough to go past the knee, but each skirt was barely anything more than strips of black fabric, circling and connecting like rope. The ropes connected in the back, and crisscrossed in the front along the sternum, with thin slices of fabric just enough to cup the inner edges of their breasts and hide their nipples, barely, before tying around the neck, with a black choker. The only difference between the two women were the patterns in the dresses, the way the rope-like construction left slits of flesh exposed. Beatrice went for gaps that looked a lot more visceral and fleshy, harsh, uneven diagonal slashes. The message was clear: sexy witch. Jennifer's dress, which must have been made from the same starting point, had her straps all arranged in even patterns that crisscrossed along her whole body. The message was very clear: two sexy witches, different but similar. Considering they had similar hair and height, it was definitely an image. Anyone with a twins fantasy would be looking their way a lot tonight.

Zigzag, crisscross, Jack noticed that pattern in a lot of women's dresses. He didn't know shit about fashion, but it did seem to be a recurring theme. The kindred were dressed more formally, with tuxedos and classy suits, or beautiful — if dark — gowns. They looked good, and tasty. The Kindred on the other hand, were dressed to kill. Apparently, only Damien and Jack hadn't managed to put that together, but it was easy enough to undo a few buttons. Not so easy for a woman to put a dozen strategic gaps in her dress to show skin without actually going naked.

Then again, as Jack looked around, he noticed a few of the Kindred took his cue, and undid some buttons. Not their own



buttons, they'd already been undone. They were undoing some of the buttons of the kine they'd brought with them, exposing the chests of their male kine they'd undoubtedly spent months grooming into fit, lean, strong sources of food.

Yeap. There was going to be a Kissing buffet tonight. Damn it.

“Oh. And arriving with the Circle, is ... Sándor Pavel, Begotten,” the announcer said.

That surprised Jack. It shouldn't have, considering how obvious it was Jen was manipulating Sándor into being her friend. But for her to bring the man, literally on her arm, was a pretty huge a statement to the other covenants. She had dibs. Of course, in the Danse Macabre, dibs meant shit all, and everyone was undoubtedly going to try and manipulate the man into their good graces. She was smart to get there first.

As the witches walked down the white stairs and onto the main floor, people gave them plenty of space. Much as everyone was giving Jack room out of fear of his rumored curse, they knew Jack, knew Julias, and knew the Prince. He'd become an anomaly for them, someone they used to be able to predict and trust, but not anymore, not quite. The witches, on the other hand, were entirely the latter. No one trusted them, especially Jacob. Now they had a Begotten with them, a nightmare monster, and one everyone knew was a deadly beast who'd been a slave to the hunters. To say that people gave them their space as they stepped onto the ballroom floor was an understatement.

But, much as they were giving them their room, they were all looking, and more than a few people were looking with hungry eyes. Yeah, the witches cleaned up good. And Sándor, now that Jack got to see him in a proper, fitted suit, was definitely a handsome man. A bit tall, with a lean, muscular figure, and enough width to his shoulders to give him an imposing mass; highlighted by the suit, of

course. Jennifer knew what she was doing. A lot of the women in the crowd, who'd backed up to give the newcomers room, set their eyes on him, taking in the sight and presence of the monster, and how good he looked.

People probably knew by now that Damien occasionally fed on Fiona, and that it was a powerful experience. Sándor was a taunting fruit dangling from a forbidden tree, for the Kindred eying him hungrily. And, kine or Kindred, women wanted what they couldn't have, as if forbidden was tantalizing icing on a cake, and not a deadly decree.

Time to get to work. It kinda was his job to have everyone getting along. That job wasn't meant to focus on the covenants, but with Sándor in their group, it was a good idea he get involved anyway. He walked up to them, and Clara followed.

"Sándor," he said. "I'm glad you came."

"Are you?" he said coldly. It would have been offensive if he'd been looking at Jack, but he was looking around, doing his best to absorb the sight of almost two hundred Kindred and nearly a hundred kine all looking at him. He was distracted, and uncomfortable.

"Yeah, I am. There's a lot of people here who need to know Begotten aren't terrifying nightmare monsters ... er, well, you know what I mean." As Jack talked, Othello and Aaron walked off. Aaron found a Mekhet Jack knew, and began a conversation. Maybe about a book, given what Jack knew of the man. Othello, on the other hand, walked over to Isabella, of all people, and started talking. The beauty was wearing a corset and a gown, surprisingly making her one of the more clothed vampires in the Black Hall, though the corset had pushed her breasts together and up to the point they looked like balloons ready to pop.

Isabella was a lesbian, as far as Jack knew. Othello really wasn't the smartest man. Except, maybe he was? He wasn't alone. He'd brought a woman with him, not a vampire, a ghoul maybe, a black woman with very short curly hair. And she was wrapped in a black sheet, a fancy sheet that someone probably lied about and sold as a dress. One tug and the dress would come right off her, probably as planned. Whoever the ghoul was, Isabella and Hella both looked at her with the same eyes Jack saw on a lot of the women looking at Sándor.

“Jack, my dear,” Jennifer said, coming straight up to him. Her eyes slid away, fell on Clara, and looked her up and down a couple times. “Oh my, Clara. Dare I say, damn.”

Jack rolled his eyes, but he did look to Clara to see how she responded to the compliment. The werewolf grinned, a small and sly thing. Probably trying to figure out if Jennifer was manipulating her, or being sincere. Jack could see the sincerity in his fellow Ventrue's eyes, but to Clara, it probably seemed a little too forward. But that was Jennifer being Jennifer, Ventrue being Ventrue.

“Thank you. I figured, after the last ball, I'd be better off dressing ... uh, less?”

Jennifer nodded, smile growing bright. “Exactly! I had to convince Sándor here, and the tailor, that the party would require some skin.”

The begotten frowned slightly. “The invitation—”

Jennifer cut him off with a small wave. “You're new to Dolareido, and don't know the subtext of things, or people's proclivities. You'll learn.”

“You're looking great too,” Clara said. “Tits not hanging out this time.”

“Yes, well, I don’t plan to get frisky with the kine tonight.” And with that, she leaned in close to Triss, and nudged her cheek against her friend’s for a moment. Cheek against crocodile teeth.

Jack expected Triss to pull away in friendly annoyance. She didn’t. She didn’t exactly reciprocate with her own cheek rub, but that was just Triss being Triss. There was a twinkle in her eye, a touch of happiness Jack hadn’t expected to see. Angela’s death had fucked with Triss, Jack knew that much. Half of him had expected her to suffer another session of depression, like she’d suffered after Julias died, but based on what Jack was seeing, Jen hadn’t let her.

On the surface, Jen seemed like nothing more than a typical Ventrue manipulator, content to use her intelligence and beauty to control conversations and get her way. But, if that’d been all there was to her, Julias and Triss wouldn’t have let her get so close. Even knowing that, he still hadn’t expect her to be able to help Triss. Dumb of him to think like that.

He looked past the two girls for a moment, to Jacob. The man had walked past them with only a second’s glance for Jack, complete with a knowing grin, before joining Garry. While everyone made sure to give the old bastard his room, the Carthians didn’t seem as scared of him. Still scared, sure, but not as scared, since their boss was talking to the man regularly.

“How you doing, Triss?” Jack said.

“Better than expected, honestly. Was kinda tempted to stay home, but I thought Athalia might show up.” Her shoulders slumped, and she looked down for a few seconds, before recovering. “And because I’m an idiot, I thought I should be here if she does.”

“Right, Athalia.” Jack shuddered and looked around some more. “Hard for me to sense Begotten when they’re hiding. I couldn’t sense Mark, and I bet I won’t be able to sense Athalia either.”

“You think? Mark seemed to specialize in being a sneaky fuck. Athalia, I don’t know.”

“Good point, but I’m still not going to let my guard down.”

“Guard? Your mom invited her, Jack.”

“My mom isn’t the smartest woman,” he said. Everyone looked at him like he’d just insulted a kitten, and he rolled his eyes. “What? I love my mom, but I’m not delusional.”

“How’s your sister?” Triss said.

“She’s ... It’s complicated, I guess. She wants to leave, but something’s happening that’s making her stay. Or at least, not want to leave yet.” He almost didn’t say it. There was a good chance whatever Mary sensed had something to do with the unknown force sneaking around in Dolareido’s shadow, and he didn’t want everyone knowing about that. But after everything present company had gone through, he felt he could trust them, at least more than a week ago.

“Doesn’t want to leave?” Triss raised a brow, before looking past Jack to Jacob. “I’ll ask the boss about it. We haven’t had a chance to talk to him at all since the incident, but I ... I think we all know he’s up to something.”

They all chuckled, nervous, small chuckles. Except for Sándor, of course.

“So,” Jack said to the gargoyle, “I guess I should probably show you who’s who?”

“I’ll educate him.” With a grin and a small wink, Jen took Sándor’s arm, hooked elbows, and started guiding the man through the crowd.

People didn't avoid them as much anymore, finally picking up on the atmosphere that the witches and Begotten weren't a threat. Well, they were, but not a threat at the moment. Everyone was here to relax, and as the music played and people mingled, the crowd stopped staring at Jack and his friends like they were going to snap and kill them all. That was Antoinette's intention, to get everyone to settle and be calm around each other, something Kindred didn't exactly do naturally without some coaxing.

"You really do look great," Triss said, smiling at Clara. "Thinking of partaking?"

"Partaking? Oh, right, the inevitable buffet. You know I'm not a vampire, right?"

Triss shrugged. "Doesn't mean you can't get involved. Hell, you're a werewolf. Put your neck out there and you could have vamps lined up to have a taste of you."

"I ... I really should just say no to that, but Matt and Art, and Mason have gone on and on about how good the Kiss is."

"Any girls in your pack get Kissed yet? One of them you can ask?"

"No."

Triss grinned. "From the occasional girl kine Jen and I had in bed ... from before, I can attest that the effect is pretty damn strong, sexually speaking. Maybe give it a shot?"

Rolling her eyes, Clara couldn't help but laugh. "I'm gonna go hang with the pack. Jack, think about what I said, ok?"

"I will. I am."

Her following sigh said a thousand words. She didn't believe him. Well, she was wrong.

She walked away, and Jack and Triss stared after her. No need to glance at Triss to see where she was looking, both were staring at her ass and how the black dress hugged it so tight, nothing was left to the imagination.

Once she was a ways away, in the crowd and mingling with her fellow werewolves, Triss leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“Dude, you can’t make room for her in your bed?”

“I’m pretty sure she wants more than just a fling with me and Antoinette, Triss. She wants a relationship.”

“And you’re still dead set on that being a no? I think you two have a lot more in common than you and the Prince.”

“I love Antoinette. Like, a lot, you know? And Antoinette would never share me in a romantic sense.”

“I guess I’m just suggesting it, because it ... it’s really helped me, you know? Julias died, and I thought everything was over. And that damn slut over there,” she pointed at Jennifer, who was showing off Sándor to some Carthians, “has helped me more than I can ever repay her.”

“I guess I just don’t see it happening. Antoinette’s very possessive of me, and I kinda like that.”

“She shares you with her ghouls.”

“Eh, it’s not the same. She’ll share me in a purely sexual context, you know? She’s so ancient, sex and romance are two completely separate things for her. But, I know she’ll never do that with a woman who’s interested in me.” Never, never ever ever, would he get used to the idea that two women were into him. For all his Ventrue hubris, that seemed to apply only to his willpower and

strength. The idea that maybe his looks and personality intrigued multiple women? Madness.

“Sucks to be her, then.”

“I hear she’s been getting it on with Jessy’s ghouls.”

“Yeah, but like you said, she’s looking for romance.”

Sighing, he nodded. Guilt sucked, and the more he thought about Clara being romantically into him, and him having to say no, the more guilty he felt. It really was a shitty feeling. Infinitely less painful than how guilty he’d felt over Mary and Julias’s death, but now that the hunters were dead, those aches were starting to fade. More subtle aches, like this strange feeling he had with Clara, were reappearing and growing.

“So, Jen and Sándor?” he said.

“Ha, well, he is really sexy. And he pulls off that whole dark and brooding thing super well.”

“But?”

The Nosferatu sighed, set an elbow on his shoulder, and leaned against him a bit. “Jen sees some similarities between him and me, after what the hunters did to the both of us. She’s planning to use him to help me get over Julias.”

“She’s too smart.”

“Ch’yeah. Not so smart I can’t tell what she’s up to, though.”

“Is her plan working? She making progress with you?”

“Eh, well ... I mean, not sure about her plan, but yeah I guess she’s making progress.” Sighing, she lowered her elbow from his shoulder, and stepped in close enough to nudge half her body into



his, a sort of armless hug. “It hasn’t been very long since your sire died, you know? Not ... not long enough, anyway. Jen’s doing everything she can to help me move on, and she’s convinced sex is the way to do that.”

Jack laughed. Yeah, that fit what he knew of Jen.

“I’m gonna talk to Garry,” he said. Jacob had just moved on from a conversation with the man, leaving him open. “I figure now’s a good time. Less chance he’ll start a fight.”

“Need back up? He is my old boss.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine. Go have fun. Or, you know, keep Jen out of trouble?” Laughing, he looked toward the girl and the man she was dragging around on her arm. “She’s going to get him into trouble.”

“Yeap, she definitely will.” Triss nodded, and walked after her twin.

Jack smiled after her. It felt great, seeing how much better she was doing. Yeah, Julius’s death really wasn’t that long ago, not even a couple months yet, but she was recovering. He was, too. Beating the hunters was like removing a ball and chain from around their ankles, like Mary said.

God, what was Mary talking about? Lines that tore? Things in the darkness? Much as he wanted his sister’s ghost to pass on, before the situation killed his mom, or him, he was damn glad she hadn’t. He needed more information from her. Maybe he could find a way to bring her with him, out of the house?

He walked over to Garry, and immediately, the nearby Carthians backed off, keeping their eyes on him but otherwise giving him his space. Annoying that everywhere he went, he became the center of attention, but it was kind of nice having that leverage. This was how

Viktor must have felt when walking around in his parties and balls, the feel of power and thrill of authority. An addicting feeling.

“Jack,” the Gangrel said.

He nodded to the man. “Garry.” How to play this, how to play this. “Gonna stop shitting down Xnomina’s throat any time soon?” Smooth.

Smooth enough to make Garry laugh. “It’s not personal, Jack. Xnomina’s been a pain in the Carthians’ asses for decades.”

“Yeah, I get that. Is it the money?” Garry liked cutting through bullshit, and Jack could do that. Garry also liked it when people came at him with a little aggression, and Jack could do that too. Not in the past, but now? Easy, with or without the curse.

“Money’s a part of it. Just because I got Terra Den working for me doesn’t mean I’m swimming in money.”

“You could be, if you—”

“Ha, what, conspired to take over a bank? All the banks in Dolareido work for the Invictus, in some way or another.”

“True. I guess we got a rubber band around your balls.”

“You did. I’ll punch a hole in your bullshit with Terra Den.”

Jack nodded, and as a waiter walked by, Jack scooped a wine glass from the tray, filled with red. A sip confirmed it was blood, and Jack smiled down at the drink as he leaned his back against the white marble wall.

“I don’t mind.”

“Say what?” Garry said, eyebrow raised.

“This economic stuff? Fighting over territory and money? After everything that’s happened, some scuffles in the streets, the occasional brawl, a broken arm here or there, and maybe some blackmail, sounds like a vacation.”

Laughing, the Gangrel leaned back against the wall with him. “Your boss disagrees.”

“Michael? Well, he’s old, and smarter than me. He probably thinks all this shit between you and him will turn sour, and Kindred will start dying.” Jack offered Garry a single, harsh glare, but only kept it up for a second before he took another sip of the blood. “I’d prefer it if Kindred didn’t start dying, Garry.”

“You and me both.”

“Then why are you pushing so hard?”

“Because your boss has been pushing on us for long enough. Before you were even born, let alone embraced, that asshole’s been in our grill, fucking shit up, ruining lives and causing problems.”

“Thought you said it wasn’t personal.”

The Gangrel snorted, shrugged, and nodded in Michael’s direction. On the other side of the ballroom stood Michael and Maria, now talking with Damien and Jessy. A business conversation, based on the expressions on their faces.

“It’s not personal ... mostly. Doesn’t mean I won’t take any chance I get to break Michael’s nose in.”

Sighing, Jack shrugged slightly, took another sip, and gestured to his boss with the glass. “Go ahead, if you want. All I care about is keeping people alive.”

“You’re still a Right Hand of the Invictus, Jack. If Michael tells you he wants me dead, what do you do? With that curse juicing you up, that’s a problem.”

“He won’t do that.”

“If he does?”

If he does, Jack could just say no. Much as Michael was still his boss, and had a thousand ways he could ruin Jack’s second life, Jack was confident he—that the curse was stronger than him. But he had to be careful. If he pissed Michael off, it could lead to any number of problems, from having his account frozen, to having an Invictus sniper blow his brains out, then set his body on fire before he woke up. Strong as Jack was now, Michael was still a deadly man to deal with.

“Then ... I’ll fix that problem, too. Been doing that a lot, lately.” More than he could tell the man.

“It’s pretty fucked up that you’ve got this curse thing in you, kid. I already knew there was something to Viktor and Julias, but—”

“Don’t,” Jack said. “Don’t ... just don’t.”

Garry looked at him, and said nothing for a few moments, before he also grabbed a glass of blood from a passing waiter. “Either way, thanks for dealing with the hunters. They really were a huge problem. And for what it’s worth, I’m glad you got Julias’s killers. He didn’t deserve to die.”

“Thanks.” Don’t make me do to you what I did to them, Garry, please.

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~~Beatrice~~

She watched Jen's ass for a little while. Not like she stuck out doing that, when everyone else was doing it. Everyone was looking at Triss's ass, too. Well, Triss did have the bigger ass, and the dress, chosen by Jen, highlighted it nicely. It felt nice, having eyes on her, admiring her, getting horny for her. Some people noticed her freaky extra teeth where her cheeks should be, and the hunger in their eyes evaporated, the younger Kindred in particular. But, plenty of the Kindred — and some kine — didn't mind her extra teeth, or the snake eyes or short claws, and they watched her with brazen interest.

It felt good, to think about sex again. She knew she wouldn't be sleeping with anyone anytime soon, except maybe Jen, but it still felt nice. Lots of hunks standing around in really nice suits, many with chests showing or muscles highlighted in some way or another. Natasha's boys looked fucking great, with sleek shirts that really showed off their size. Lucky girl.

Garry looked good, too. Nice to see the old bastard playing nice, talking with Jack and not throwing any punches. Yet. She was tempted to go talk to him, but it'd probably feel kinda weird. He wasn't her boss anymore. She'd dumped him for a crazier boss, Jacob.

And Jacob, wow. The old bastard cleaned up good. He actually looked genuinely handsome, gorgeous even, with his salt and pepper hair combed back a bit so it had some body. He wasn't a muscular man, but he'd been in decent shape when embraced, and he filled out his suit well enough. And that suit, holy shit, she never expected her boss to have his own tailor. Dumb of her, now that she thought about it. Of course Jacob had a tailor. Much as he acted like he lived in the woods, the man had a bunch of connections in the city, thralls and ghouls she didn't know about, and probably a shit load of money in a bunch of different accounts.

Still, she didn't expect to see him wearing a suit that looked like it'd been made for a fashion runway last year. The odd, streamlined shape of the sash and skirt that screamed Greek or Roman, while still looking kinda like a suit, was great, and she smiled at the man's back as she admired it.

Admiration turned to nervousness, and she gulped down the lump in her throat as she made her way toward him. She had to ask about what Sándor meant, about Black Blood showing up. What happened? Why did he show up? Where the fuck was Elen?

People gave him his room, as expected, so catching him alone to talk ... would be damn difficult, evidently. Avery walked over to the man, Noah at her side, and she stared coldly at the old Nos.

Beatrice came to Jacob's side, and met Noah's gaze. He met hers. The message was clear. Avery wanted to have a quick chat with Jacob, and Noah was there to make sure no one got in her way, someone like Beatrice. At least she didn't sense any direct hostility.

"Jacob," Avery said.

The old man glared at the old woman, and looked her up and down a few times. While Avery wasn't dressed to kill like everyone else, the white one-piece dress with the boob window looked great on her. If Jacob was going to insult her based on her looks, he gave up after a few seconds.

"What do you want, Avery?"

"To talk." Her eyes drifted to Beatrice, and she offered her a small nod. Yeah, the woman wanted a peaceful talk, but she knew Jacob didn't want to give it to her. At least at the ball, she had a chance of making it happen. Heh, good luck with that.

"Nothing to say to you."

“So you say. But I want to talk anyway.”

Growling, the elder looked between everyone present, eyes hidden behind the bandage, and shrugged. “Yap yap, dog.”

“Not going to work, Jacob. Not going to let you bait me. I want to settle the animosity between us.”

“Us? You killed my lover, dog. And you still won’t tell me why.”

“You know she was fucking with the Gauntlet, Jacob.”

“And? That tells me nothing. Still don’t know why that’s a bad thing, and I still don’t know what exactly she was doing that warranted the assault you launched.” Jacob stepped in closer, and glared down at the small woman. Didn’t need visible eyes to see the glare, with how his neck muscles constricted and jaw clenched. “Was it a ritual? Did she figure out a way to bring it all down? Or maybe she was summoning something?”

“You know I can’t tell you. The more people who know, the harder it makes my job, Jacob. Can’t you just—”

“Just what? Take your word for it that it was a good thing, that you killed the most amazing person I’ve ever known? That you stripped away the best thing that’d ever happened to me?” His voice rose just enough that the Kindred nearby turned to look to them. Triss put a hand on her boss’s shoulder, a soft touch, hopefully enough to warn him to lower his voice. It was. “Consider it from my point of view.”

“You don’t think I have? Come on, Jacob, I’m trying to work with you here. I didn’t want to kill her, and Simon caused a shit load of grief for so many people. But he made the right call with her.”

“Simon—”

“Is dead, Jacob. He died pissing off some fucking spirits he thought he could take on. I lost everyone because of that asshole. Christ, he’s dead and gone, so can’t you ease up a little here?”

Jacob stepped in even closer, and Noah and Triss both stepped up, in case they had to jump in. Not exactly a viable option, considering Jacob could kick Avery’s ass, and Noah’s, and Triss’s, all at the same time.

“Tell me exactly what she was doing that warranted her death, and I’ll consider easing off. But we know you wont, so I suggest you leave me be, mutt.” And he was off. With a quiet scoff, the man stepped around Avery and Noah, and moved to the stairs that led to the second floor. No one was socializing on the balcony that circled the ballroom floor from above, and that’d make it a good place to calm down, Triss supposed.

“Beatrice,” Avery said, looking to her, “can you help me out? The pack wants to stay in Dolareido, but we can’t if Jacob’s going to flip out and try and kill us randomly.”

Triss snorted on a small laugh. “Try?”

Avery’s eyes settled into a hard squint. “Yes, try. Don’t underestimate the pack, Triss. Jacob may be one of the oldest vampires around, but he’s a vampire. He’ll always have that weakness, that solitude and inability to trust others working against him. If I send the pack at him, all of us, we’ll win.”

That was a terrifying image. Clara had been a serious threat to Sándor in the dream, alone, and even scarier, was how deadly the pack had been in the tunnels, fighting that spider monster months ago. Yeah, she had to give it to Avery there. Jacob might have an easy time kicking the ass of a couple werewolves, but if they all threw themselves at it him, especially the queen bitch herself Avery, it’d be a different story.



“Just, give him his space,” Triss said, and before Avery could respond, she walked after Jacob.

She'd planned to jog after him, but the moment she put some real impact into the balls of her feet, she slowed it down to a walk instantly. High heels suck. High heels suuuuuuck. Catching up to Jacob took a little while, but thankfully the man came to a stop once he moved into the East balcony. He put his back to the wall, away from the balcony railing, and pointed his head down as he brooded. Even with his eyes covered, the brooding expression was obvious, frown chiseled into his lean face.

“Boss,” she said. “How you doing? Haven't seen you for almost a week.”

“I've been busy.”

“Yeah, I can imagine.” She stood next to him, back to the wall, far back enough that no one in the ballroom below could see them. “Lot of shit's happened, and you haven't been around. I've been wanting to talk to you.”

“You want to know if I have Elen. You want to know if Black Blood helped me get her. He did.”

Sighing, she nodded. “Did you really let me walk into fire, just so you could have a chance of getting her?”

“Yes.”

Well, fuck. Nice of him to be honest about it, at least. “You couldn't have helped us?”

“I don't stick my neck out for stupid shit, Triss.”

“The great and mighty Jacob, afraid he might get hurt?”

“The great and mighty Jacob, afraid he might miss his chance to get something that’s got his attention.”

“Elen. The flesh witch. Of course she has your attention. Sick bastard.”

The man looked at her, and slowly formed a smile. “When I’m ready, I’ll take you to her, Triss.”

“Thanks, I guess. But I don’t know what the fuck’s going on. Why did you capture her?”

“Because she’s a practitioner of arts similar to our own. And I know damn well you’ve been wondering what I’ve been wondering.”

What she’s been wondering? “Wondering ... wondering if Elen could ... help us perform resurrection.”

“Exactly.”

She shivered with the word. Resurrection. A fantasy. A dream. It was stupid to think about it, to consider it a possibility, but she’d be lying if she said it wasn’t on her mind all the damn fucking time.

“You said ... that you had to kill a lot of people, just to get a small peek through to the other side.”

“Yep.”

“And even if you could get a peek, how the fuck can you turn peek, into reaching into the ... the beyond or whatever, to grab someone’s ... soul?”

“With a lot of experimentation and practice.”

“ ... Black Blood. You’re talking about Black Blood.”

The old bastard winked at her. No eyes, but she could see the muscle of his brow and cheek flex.

“The Prince isn’t the only one doing experiments with the crazy realms that lurk among our own, Beatrice. We’ve both been poking and prodding at the walls between realms for decades, centuries. This Elen woman is a unique opportunity.”

“Because she manipulates flesh. You think she could ... could...” Oh good fucking god. “You think she could be a regular Doctor Frankenstein.”

“Exactly. You told me about her flesh lair, Triss. Imagine the flesh vessels she could carve. She could make any body you could think of, and then we, you and I, could reach out, pluck a soul from the beyond, and place it within.”

This was a horrible place for Jacob to confirm all the things Triss had been suspecting. She couldn’t freak out here, get excited or angry or anything. And there was a good chance someone might hear them. Course, if Jacob was willing to say it, it was because he didn’t care if people knew, or he figured they’d have pieced it together already. Antoinette probably had.

“You think this will work?” she said.

“No.”

“No?” Well, fuck.

“No. People older than me have tried this kind of stuff, Triss. Cults as ancient as mankind have tried to reach across the barrier, to grab souls, and put them back into bodies. And every mythos, when you dig deep, exposes the folly of this idea.”

“Then...” She came around to look at him straight on. “Then why are you doing this?”

He grinned at her, reached out, and pat her shoulder. “Because, I want you to give it a shot.”

“Me? You want me to try something that you’re sure won’t work?”

“Not completely sure, just mostly sure. I’m hoping you’ll prove me wrong.” He pushed away from the wall, and started to walk back toward the stairs. “It’ll be a teaching opportunity. The best teacher is experience, after all.”

She grabbed his arm. “Wait! Jacob, please, for fuck’s sake, tell me what you’re doing!”

“Don’t worry about it for now. When it’s time, I’ll come for you, and you can start your experiments.”

“My experiments? The fuck makes you think I’ll be doing any experiments?”

Jacob turned around, and stepped in close to her. Too close. She tried to take a step back, but he stopped her, grabbing her arm and yanking her in close until they were almost kissing.

“Because I did. When Minerva died, it was all I could think about. Every fucking night, it consumed my thoughts, that maybe I could find a way to bring her back, that maybe the Crone would reward me. Every day, it’s all I dreamed about. I know it haunts your thoughts too, the idea that maybe you can bring Julias back.”

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

“But, I ... I spoke to her, remember? The Crone. She said it herself, to let him go.” And that horrible, painful conversation was carved into her mind with a rusty knife. It’d be with her until she died, in every excruciating detail.

“And you’ll let that stop you?”

Ah, fuck, the trigger word. ‘Stop’. Someone ‘stopping’ her, getting in her way, blocking, preventing. It immediately made her want to fight, to be obstinate, to be a fucking child and bitch and whine until she managed to break through whatever it was stopping her. Stubborn, but not so stupid she couldn’t recognize it.

Still too stupid to not let it control her, though.

“No, I guess I won’t.”

The old bastard grinned at her. “I’ll come get you when I’m ready. I’m thinking a week or two. Depends on how long it takes to break her. Be ready.”

Before she could ask what the fuck that meant, the old Nos walked away, and back down the stairs to rejoin the crowd. She didn’t get to ask him about Mary. She hadn’t even got to ask him about Avery, and if he was really going to let the werewolf get him so angry. It did sound like Avery was genuine, that she wanted to fix things between her and Jacob. But, until the old wolf told Jacob what Minerva was doing that warranted her death, Triss couldn’t blame him for holding the grudge. Triss had been so consumed by revenge when Julias died, it dominated literally every moment of her waking life. And Jacob had known Minerva a lot longer than Triss did Julias.

Sighing, she walked over to the railing, and looked down at the crowd below. Christ, up here, it was just tits, tits everywhere. Big ones, small ones, tits tits tits. Most of the dresses the women wore had exposed necks and plunging cleavage, so, tits. And it was obviously affecting the kine they’d brought. Anyone with a heartbeat was doing their best to keep themselves under control, but as the night went on, and people got more comfortable, and drunk, it was easy to see they were getting aroused. Hell, she could smell it.

The female kine were looking at the female Kindred of course, but if Triss had to guess, they were looking at the men just as much. The male kine were mostly looking at the women, and some were looking at the men. She laughed and shrugged. Natasha would have found that interesting, the distribution of sexual preference. Triss, on the other hand, found herself licking her lips as she watched the kine grow more and more horny. It'd been so long since she'd fed and got off at the same time.

There was Vivienne, hanging out with some of the young female Invictus. With them was Carter, the older wolf dude who was staying at the same building Clara and Eric stayed in. Carter was a handsome, rugged, old man kinda dude, big and gruff. Damn handsome, in a 'I live in the woods, chop wood, built my house from wood, and can break wood with my bare hands' kinda way. There was exotic appeal in that, definitely, especially to a bunch of city girls like Invictus Kindred.

The female Uratha were getting a lot of attention too. Rumor was that Avery had a boyfriend, so they stayed clear of her, but the other girls were getting more attention than they expected. Triss knew some of their names. Erica and Brianna looked to be in their forties, but like all the werewolves, were pinnacles of fitness and athleticism. Monica, on the other hand, looked to be in her early twenties, and one male vampire was obviously hitting on her. The poor girl looked to be in a daze, and not from any Discipline. The air smelled of sex. Not gross sex, like a couple's bedsheets that hadn't been washed in weeks. It smelled of sex like a great cologne or perfume might. It was affecting the Kindred, and that meant it was probably affecting the werewolves ten times more, considering how stronger their noses were, and how they couldn't turn off their biology like vampires did.

She looked around her, and gulped down the rising sadness. She'd talked to Julias on this balcony. At the time, she'd worn a veil over her face to hide her mouth, because she'd thought her crocodile

teeth were ugly. And, well, they kinda were, but most Kindred didn't mind. Julias had helped her see past her own infatuation with misery, and consider that maybe her second life didn't need to suck so much.

And then he died.

She growled to herself, grit her teeth, and shook her head hard. Stop it. Stop it, just let him go. The fucking Crone herself, or whatever that thing was, told you to let him go. Don't let yourself go down this road.

She looked around again, and the memories sucker punched her. It was this spot that brought it all back, the feel of his arms around her, the way he smiled, the god damn mother fucking sound of his voice.

If Jacob really was offering even the possibility that she could bring him back, then she had to try.

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~~Eric~~

Good fucking god.

“Good fucking god,” Jessy said. “Look at these sluts.”

Eric choked on a laugh, but nodded as he looked around. “Um, yeah, I guess people did get a little crazy. Like, you know, you did.”

“I'm over fifty years embraced. I'm allowed to do whatever I want. But I see a bunch of neonates just putting their tits out like rotisserie chickens. And look at all these dudes, showing off their abs. No class.”

Eric looked at Jessy's dress, which was just a bunch of horizontal black straps connected at the front by a zigzagging string, and a

thong that hid her sex. Then he looked down at his own, slightly see-through black shirt that was unbuttoned down to his navel.

“Uh—”

“You’re my date. If I wanted to, I could fuck you right there in the middle of floor, and no one except for five people could say shit. I have the power, so I get to flaunt! Them’s the rules.”

Five people? Antoinette, the sheriff, her sire Michael, and probably Maria. And? Oh, probably Jacob. Well, he was a scary bastard, and commanded as much respect as the Prince in his own, strange way. Eric was perfectly content staying on his good side.

“So the people at the top get to flaunt. People at the bottom should be more conservative?”

“Exactly.”

“I get the impression Antoinette would disagree. I think she’d prefer everyone feel comfortable doing whatever they wanted, sexually speaking.”

His girlfriend rolled her eyes, hooked her arm with his, and started pulling him around the ballroom again. “Yeah, but she’d still push for some kind of hierarchy.”

“All the older vamps are tops, all the young vamps are bottoms?”

“Ah!” She beamed at him, eyes wide with genuine surprise and wonder at his suggestion. “I like that idea!”

He elbowed her in the side, again. “You have a boyfriend.”

“And you have a girlfriend. Don’t think I haven’t noticed all the tits you’ve been staring at.”



He laughed. Well, it was true, but it was also true Jessy was staring at them as well, and more than he was. Though, as the night went on, he could tell that was slowly changing. Try as he might to ignore the smell of flesh and desire, his Uratha nose picked up on it all. His eyes certainly didn't miss all the breasts barely contained, or asses, or thighs, or stomachs; Jessy kept pointing them out to him. No matter how hard he tried to keep his blood cool, it was getting hotter and hotter.

“Eric,” a voice said, one he barely recognized.

He turned and looked at the woman, and then up for a moment as he dug through his memory. “Brianna, right?”

“Yeah.” Brianna was a bit tall, a black woman with short black hair straightened, and brown eyes. Quite muscular too, like Jessy, though her breasts were smaller. He kinda hated that he couldn't help but make that comparison, but Brianna was wearing a revealing dress, lacy, with shoulders and sleeves and a long skirt, but the lace made sure most of her body was visible through it. Only the convenient curls of solid black through the black lace over her sex and nipples kept it from being indecent.

She was damn attractive, and Jessy looked her up and down a couple times before smiling. Eric got ready to elbow her before she said anything, but she waited, grin barely contained.

“I wanted to talk to the both of you,” Brianna continued. “I ... uh ... wanted to talk about sex.”

Jessy's grin exploded into a large smile. “You can totally jo—”

Eric elbowed her. She elbowed him. This was quickly turning into an abusive relationship. If this kept up, he was going to have to use ju-jitsu on her ass. She'd probably like it, too.

Brianna blinked at them, several times. “I uh, meant about you two. Word is Eric has sex while in Gauru form?”

“He does,” Jessy said, grin growing again.

“I ... wanted to know, how?”

“How?” Eric said. “Not sure what you mean.”

“Well, it’s just that ... for the rest of us, Gauru form is damn hard to control. I know you’re Cahalith, and not Rahu like me or Matthew, but still.”

Well, he figured this conversation would happen eventually. Caleb had poked him about it, but they hadn’t actually had the conversation. Considering all the skin visible everywhere tonight, now was as good a time as any.

“Well, I guess a part of it is because I’m a city boy. Born and bred here in Dolareido.”

“No, I don’t think that’s it,” Brianna said. “A few of us in the pack grew up in cities, too.”

“Hmm. Maybe it’s because I used to fight professionally? You get used to keeping a cool head, despite being in a fight.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. A lot of us are good at keeping cool heads when fighting, just, not when in Gauru form.”

He shrugged. “Not sure what to tell you then.”

“Can you ... describe it for me?”

“Oh fuck yes,” Jessy said, stepping in close and dragging Eric in with her. “The dude gets so huge, and then he kinda grows a di—”

Brianna held up a hand. “Uh, I meant from Eric, and I meant mentally.”

Fun time ruined, Jessy frowned, but hooked her arm with Eric again and leaned in close to him.

“It’s ... a powerful rush, I admit,” Eric said. “There’s been a few times I’ve lost control, but never with Jessy. With her, when I’m transformed, I can still hear my human thoughts. And they’re ... aligned, I guess, with the wolf’s thoughts? Same for the desires.” Well, this conversation was about to get pretty damn personal, but he was going to say it anyway. “When I’m in that form, every part of me thinks of Jessy as my ... mate. All those urges you get for the hunt in that form, they get sidelined for a while, replaced with this need to be ... to...”

“To pin me down and make me his bitch, literally,” Jessy whispered, leaning in close so only Brianna and Eric could hear. She had the most evil smile on as she said it. “It really is like fucking some sort of horny wolf, a giant one. Like, half of him is ready to fight for his territory or go on a hunt, but the other half is looking to fuck and make puppies.”

For all her jokes, Jessy grinned up at him, and a hint of something more was there. She’d caught on to the word ‘mate’, and after their conversation a couple nights ago, the word had a lot more meaning than it used to, for both of them.

Brianna raised a brow as she looked at Jessy. It was probably her first conversation with the woman, and considering the topic, was bound to be a shocker for her. Jessy was brash, brazen, and a lot wiser than she let on. He really did love that about her.

He really did love her.

“Why?” Jessy said. “You find a man interested? Cause, I mean, I’m not sure how that’d work physically. You girls get pretty big.”

Brianna frowned. “Not that big. I’m ... sure it could still work.”

As if Eric no longer existed, Jessy let go of his arm, stepped around Brianna to get on her other side, and leaned in to her, shoulder to shoulder. “Who?”

“Who what?”

“Who’s the dude looking to bang a big werewolf girl?” Jessy said. Eric facepalmed, but before he could say anything, Jessy shushed him.

Eric took a couple steps back, and let Jessy corrupt another soul. There was no stopping her.

But before she could get very far into spreading her evil tendrils into Brianna’s brain, the front doors of the Black Hall opened.

“Now arriving, Prince of Dolareido, and Voivode, Antoinette of the Ordo Dracul. Introducing her childe Samantha Terry. Accompanying, ghouls Ashley Ronald and Julee Hemmertin.”

Everyone looked. Guys, girls, vamps, wolves, humans, everyone. Antoinette was the tallest woman in the whole damn city, with white hair and red eyes. Even without the absurdly massive rack, there was no way people couldn’t take a moment to look at the woman. You had to look at her, if even only for a second, to know what she dressed like for the night, like witnessing a celebrity out in the real world.

Straight up obvious was the corset. Eric glanced over across the ballroom to another tall woman wearing a corset. Isabella, according to Jessy. For just a second, Eric spotted a little envy, and maybe a little venom to join it, as the Invictus Daeva looked at the Prince.

Antoinette’s black corset covered her bust, but only barely, and it really had both her breasts pressed up and together to the point

someone could have jumped on them and enjoyed a waterbed. From the corset hung a skirt, except as she moved, her legs broke through many hanging black strips of fabric. So, less a skirt, more a bunch of thin, dangling slices of black that did a very, very poor job of covering her legs when she moved. Each step exposed her black — low — heels, and he gulped as he noticed from certain angles that, of course, she was wearing a micro thong. When she held still, she looked like she was wearing a black skirt. When she walked, staring eyes could get a glimpse of her smooth mons and large ass. And there were a lot of staring eyes.

It was a simple dress, one that screamed ‘I own this building, this city, and everyone in it’. It was working. Her two ghouls were dressed in tight black dresses, strapless, with long skirts. They were meant to accent the Prince, like living jewelry that proved who she was, and the power she wielded.

Her childe, wide-eyed and scared, followed after her, glancing left and right with each step. It was obvious she was doing her best to keep her arms at her side, and not cover herself up. As was apparently in fashion, according to the dresses currently surrounding Eric, her black dress was a lot of straps, connecting horizontally to a long front and rear piece for a skirt. They connected behind her back, around her breasts for a sort of tube top shape, before hooking around the neck.

The straps along the thigh that connected the front and back of the skirt, went all the way up past the hip where they connected behind her. Yeap, no underwear. Poor woman look so frazzled and awkward, and with every step she took, it was obvious she was getting overloaded on the sheer amount of skin everyone was showing off.

She was beautiful, though. Must have been in her forties, but had put in the work to get in shape. Jessy would—

“Total milf,” Jessy said. “And embraced at that age? She’s one kiss on the neck away from getting wet.” She’d snuck back over to him, and he’d been too distracted to notice. As a great man once said: a penis and a brain, and only enough blood to run one at a time.

Eric chuckled as he looked back to her. Brianna had followed, but her eyes were locked on the newcomers. Yeah, everyone was staring, half because it was the Prince and that demanded respect, but half because four beautiful women had just walked in.

Five? Everyone looked up to the stairs that Antoinette stood at the base of. There stood the sheriff in a tuxedo, and on his arm was a woman Eric had never seen before.

“Now arriving, the sheriff of Dolareido, Daniel.” The name hung in the air, as if the announcer was waiting for a last name. Daniel didn’t give him one. None of the super old elders seemed to have them. “Accompanying him, esteemed guest Elaine, of the Ordo Dracul, Architect of Terror, companion of the Prince.”

Eric literally heard the shifting fabric of every suit and dress in the place, as everyone looked to the front entrance of the Black Hall. She was gorgeous, this Elaine person. His inner wolf told him vampire; made sense, considering she was the Prince’s friend, and a member of her covenant. He couldn’t tell what bloodclan she belonged to, but whoever she was, she had certainly dressed for the occasion.

Her black dress came with gloves that reached past her elbows. She wore black high heels, and the long split along the skirt made sure every inch of a long, pale, curvy leg was visible. It was a classic black dress, the sort you’d expect a lounge singer to wear in the fifties, except with a shit load more cleavage than a dress of that era could get away with. Open back, and a single strap that hooked the neck so the loose, dangling front straps barely covered her enormous breasts. A black strap wrapped around her waist was the

only thing keeping the dress snug to her stomach and bosom as she walked down the stairs.

Long blonde wavy hair, red lipstick, and grinning brown eyes. If she'd had a long, black cigarette holder with a lit cigarette in between her fingers, she could have walked straight out of a film noir flick. Except for one very specific detail.

The dress was slightly see-through.

Eric gulped again, and did his best to not stare at Elaine's huge breasts, and the barely visible large nipples that fought against the loose front straps. Every step she took made them jiggle and threaten to escape, and despite the fact his girlfriend was literally touching his side, he couldn't help but want them to do just that. Well, Jessy was probably hoping for the same thing.

The fact they could both see through the skirt enough to tell that she was not only not wearing underwear, but that she shaved her sex smooth, only added to the ensemble. Yeap, this was Antoinette's friend, another bombshell sex goddess that didn't mind people seeing her parts. And here he was worrying that Jessy was going to corrupt everyone, when the real threats had just arrived.

"She," Jessy said, "is dangerous."

"You're telling me," Brianna said.

The Gangrel shook her head. "No. I mean, that's Elaine. She hasn't been to Dolareido in decades. I think I saw her maybe once, when I was just a fledgling. Maria and Michael avoided her. Viktor did more than avoid her, he outright dodged her company. I think he was afraid of her."

"Really?" Brianna said. "Viktor, afraid of someone?"

“Yeah, crazy, right? That motherfucker could take on anyone, but her, he put in time to keep his distance from.”

Eric frowned, but said nothing. He barely knew who Viktor was, just that he was dead. But it didn't take a genius to pick up on the cues he was seeing from Jessy and others, older vamps giving Elaine plenty of room as she came down the stairs to join Antoinette. With the two women standing beside each other, it was hard to not stare.

“Just imagine,” Jessy whispered as she leaned in close to his ear, eyes still on Elaine, “those two women in bed with you.”

“Uh...”

“You'd drown in tits. Death by boob smothering.”

“That, um, is a kink for some people, apparently.”

“I think I may be coming down with said kink. A shame vampires don't need to breathe.”

He laughed, and slipped his arm behind Jessy and around her waist. “Picking up kinks like kids pick up the flu?”

“Exactly. Probably the best part of these balls, getting introduced to all these new fashion statements, and seeing which stroke a new kink, like sparks starting a fire.” Nodding, as if stating a most obvious truth, she turned the two of them to look at Brianna again. “So yeah, I say go for it. Just find someplace with thick walls, first. Much as Eric is in control when we fuck, I can tell he's walking a line, you know? But your dude's a vamp, so I'm sure he can handle it.”

Brianna nodded, lifted her fingers to her chin, and held it as she walked off, deep in contemplation.



“Did you really convince her to have sex with someone while in werewolf form?” he said.

“Yeap.”

Well, he had to admit, the female werewolves certainly didn't lack for curves. But they were eight feet tall, and all the best bits were covered in fur. Maybe her form would adapt to the sexual stimulus, like his did?

“Can I ask who?”

Jessy touched her nose. “Nope. Just a horny dude who's into strong girls who can kick his ass.”

“Is he a dumb dude?”

“Ha, yes. Very dumb. A charming, dumb dolt, I guess. Kinda like a big kid.”

That did narrow it down a little. Kindred generally weren't stupid. A dumb, big kid in an adult body? Maybe Joe. Then again, for Jessy to talk about him without scowling meant it probably wasn't Joe. Maybe Othello? From what he'd heard from Jessy, Othello was an old, strong, lazy and dumb Daeva. So maybe him, but the man had brought a pretty woman with him. Heh, like that mattered to Kindred.

The crowd's murmurs resumed, only to die off again as Antoinette raised a hand, silencing the music. Everyone looked to the Prince, who stood by the front stairs, with her childe, her ghouls, her sheriff, and her friend. Time for a speech, apparently. Anyone else probably would have needed a mic. In Dolareido, people shut the fuck up when the Prince wanted to talk.

“My dear Kindred, Uratha, and Begotten,” the Prince said. Only one Begotten at the ball, but maybe that'd change as the night went

on. “I host this ball to celebrate the removal of a great thorn in our sides. My love Mister Terry, with the help of the witches of the Circle of the Crone, and Miss Moreno of Avery’s pack, have defeated the hunters.” She nodded to Jack, to the witches, to Clara, waited, and everyone took the cue to applaud. “And, lest I forgot, we cannot ignore that the hunters were defeated in large part due to the aid of one of their own. Brace Harcourt unveiled the hidden location of the hunters, and his two companions Marge LeBlanc and Dennis Hemmer allowed the assault to proceed. They knew their masters were villains, and we should acknowledge and appreciate our human guests’ contribution to their defeat.”

Well, holy shit. Some more murmurs went through the crowd as three people walked in through the front door. The two guys were wearing some normal tuxedos, and the girl was wearing a white dress with big shoulder straps and a skirt that went down to the knee, zero cleavage or anything like that. To the watching Kindred, the three probably looked like very well wrapped snacks.

“Um, hi!” the black dude in front of his two friends said. Probably Harcourt.

Antoinette threw him a harsh glare, enough to make the human shrink, before she looked back to the crowd. “I have given them sanctuary. Until I decide otherwise, they remain within the city, and under my protection. Treat them as you would any thrall or ghoul.”

Any thrall or ghoul? That was a dangerous statement. Far as Eric knew, the Kindred had license to get pretty hands-on with thralls and ghouls. So, as long as the three hunters weren’t killed, embraced, or harmed in some nasty way, Antoinette basically just gave every vamp license to have some fun with them. And, the ball was filled with hungry vampires, who’d be very horny the moment they got a drink of someone. Unless the hunters defended themselves, chances were they’d be getting Kissed, and probably fucked, before the night was over.

Eric glanced to his side. Jack was nearby, standing with Damien, and while Damien was looking over the newly arrived Kindred and hunters, analyzing, Jack's eyes locked onto Elaine. For a moment, Eric figured the kid was admiring how fucking gorgeous the woman was. He wasn't. The kid's eyes were wide, as if someone had shocked him to the core.

Whoever this Elaine was, Jack knew her.

# Chapter 116

~~Jack~~

Her. It was her. No doubt about it. As if someone popped a balloon in his face, snapping out of his memory to the present was loud and painful.

That was Susanna's childe, and Jack's great grandsire.

"In the name of peace," Antoinette continued, "these three hunters were invited to the ball to be shown that Dolareido, my city, is not as devolved as other cities with a Kindred presence. We are better than our baser desires." She adopted an evil smile, and looked back to the hunters. "Mingle with my Kindred, dear hunters. Be at ease, and enjoy the pleasures we provide, for they are many." It sounded less like an offering, and more of a command.

Jack's eyes flicked over to the hunters. Harcourt, Marge, and Dennis, three humans who were very out of place, but Antoinette was manipulating them into being merged into Dolareido, or at least not hostile toward it. Considering what she said, no one would be stupid enough to dose them with blood and bind them with the Vinculum, or kill them, and especially not embrace them. But that didn't mean they wouldn't get manipulated into a night of amazing sex and Kisses. And the hunters knew it, too.

But the surprise of seeing them at the ball was nothing compared to the surprise of seeing his great grandsire. Elaine. An elder, and a member of the Ordo Dracul. Antoinette's friend. He rubbed his head, seeking the feel of buzzed hair against his fingers and scalp, desperate for the soothing sensation. His great grandsire, alive, in the Ordo, and his lover's friend. Think think think.

There were no way this was coincidence. Elaine must have known who Viktor was, she sired him after all. She must have known about Julias then, since Elaine had visited Dolareido several times before, according to the Prince. And, if Antoinette and Elaine were friends, that meant Elaine likely knew about Jack. She knew he was Julias's childe. She knew he was Viktor's grandchilde, and her great grandchilde.

Why did she come now? There had to be—the crows! At the hospital. When he'd first let the curse out, and it'd summoned a legion of crows, that shit had hit the news. The Invictus had done an excellent job suppressing the fallout of that, but that didn't mean people hadn't learned about it. Or maybe Antoinette had just told Elaine about Jack's curse directly, considering researching shit like that was probably something the Ordo did.

She had to know about him, and she had to know about the curse. Did she know it spoke to him? Did she know it had contaminated his mind, had him half convinced he'd devolved into a killer, before he broke the seal. The curse's desires had morphed and solidified into a separate personality now, no longer tampering with his mind covertly, but overtly. Did it do that to her, too?

Jack snapped his head around. Where was he, where was he? There, Jen, and Sándor. He slid over to them, taking advantage of how Maria, Michael, Garry, and Jacob all came up to shake Elaine's hand. They were a nice distraction for Antoinette. She'd want him to come up to her in a moment, but he needed to know something, and know it now.

"Sándor," he whispered, once was close to the man.

"Jack," the monster said. He almost slid away, once Jack got close. Right, the man was a Begotten, and while other Kindred could sense the curse, and how it inflated Jack's Beast, Sándor could see it in all its twisted, disturbing glory. Perfect.

“Jack?” Jen said. Jack leaned in closer. Hint, be quiet. She raised a brow, but stopped talking.

“Sándor, that newcomer, Elaine. What does her Beast look like?”

“Her Beast?” Sándor, one brow slightly raised, looked at Jack, then around at the Kindred around him, then to Elaine, who was shaking hands with Maria. “Normal. The only one here with an unusual creature beneath the skin, is you, Jack.”

“Really? Uh, how about ... chains? Anything like chains, or something that could be tying her Beast down? Like, a binding?”

“No, Jack. The creature of shadow and fog, claws and beaks, fangs and talons and feathers, the strange malleable cloud that is the Beast, is the same in her as I see in everyone. Only the ... titanic monstrosity in you, is different.” Quite verbose for the gargoyle.

Frowning at him, Sándor took a small step away from him, toward Jen. And Jen didn't miss a beat, hooking her arm with his again, and smiling up at him before throwing Jack a 'sorry about this' look.

Jack managed a smile for her. It was obvious she was manipulating Sándor, so obvious that Sándor must have known, and Jen knew that he knew. It was kind of cute, honestly, how the Begotten was just too closed off and stoic to stop her from dragging him around like an arm candy himbo. And it was obvious she was using him as a tool to help Triss. The girl had a kind heart, despite her demeanor.

Sighing, Jack nodded to Sándor. “Thanks.”

He didn't wait for the Begotten's response. The elders were done greeting Elaine, and were dispersing back into the crowd, after giving the hunters some distrustful glares. Right on time, Antoinette looked around for him, and Jack met her eyes as he walked toward her.

Elaine's curse was ... gone? No chains? Jack could still remember the Beast from the vision, and how it'd been covered in chains until he'd destroyed them. The other Begotten had seen them on him, but hadn't called them out; a classic 'nobody asked' sorta situation. And now that the curse was loose in Jack, the Begotten were afraid to even get close to him. Except Fiona of course, but Fiona was Fiona. If Sándor said Elaine's Beast didn't look mutated or bound, he believed him.

As he approached his great grandsire, Antoinette, his mom, Daniel, and the two ghouls, Jack reached into his core, and did his best to sense what he could. His Kindred senses, his Beast, found nothing out of the ordinary. It did its usual song and dance with Antoinette, though now that his Beast was a twisted, cursed thing, what used to be a purely submissive gesture, wasn't nearly as passive. It bowed to Antoinette, but because it wanted to, not because it had to.

He could feel his mother's Beast, shrinking into itself at being surrounded by so many elders. His approach didn't help, and he winced as he watched his mom turn to him, freeze for a moment as her Beast shuddered at the sight of him, before her conscious mind pushed past it. The older his mom got, the better she'd get at listening to her Beast and Kindred instincts, and that was going to be painful for him, if he didn't get rid of this curse.

And maybe, just maybe, considering Elaine's condition, he could do just that.

"Mom," he said, "you look amazing." And he did his best to avoid looking at how much of his mom's skin the dress showed. Hard to do. He'd never seen her look so amazing, and as much as he could see his mom had hit probably ninety percent maximum embarrassment load, there was a bit of pride and joy in there too. She liked looking good, and having so many eyes on her. Once she got past the embarrassment phase, her Daeva blood would kick in,

and she'd enjoy being in the limelight like Antoinette, Isabella, and Othello did.

Much as he felt he should be kinda freaked out by the idea of his mom likely having orgies in her future, he was too damn distracted by the tall blonde who'd jumped out of his memories.

"You do too! But, I look like a harlot." His mom frowned as she looked down at herself.

"Please," Elaine said, grinning and waving a hand with a small flick, the barest touch of a English accent coming through. "If you are a harlot, then your sire and I may as well dance naked in the streets."

"As if you have never done so." Chuckling, Antoinette walked past Elaine, up to Jack, bent down, and leaned in for a kiss. He gave it to her, drawing on every bit of teaching Julias had ever given him on how to manage a poker face. It was enough to fool his mom and the ghouls, but the three elders? No chance. At least he could mostly trust Daniel to remain indifferent.

Antoinette's brows furrowed, and she blinked at him twice, searching for whatever it was that was bothering him. He smiled for her, letting her know he realized she knew, and silently mouthed 'later'. She nodded, but a speck of uncertainty remained on her face.

"My love," she said, "this is Elaine." No last name, like her, like Daniel, like Jacob. "A Ventrue, and valued dragon in the Ordo Dracul. Elaine, this is my little Ventrue, Jack Terry of the Invictus."

Jack glanced around quickly before looking back to Elaine. If people watched too closely, they might notice Jack's behavior, and he knew he didn't have the skill to not give something away if everyone was watching.



The crowd had begun to mingle again, and the hunters were promptly surrounded by some very hungry looking vampires. But before things got crazy, the witches of all people, save Jacob, went over to join the hunters. Well, Harcourt knew them, so they were a decent familiar face in the crowd for him. More and more Kindred drifted toward the hunters, even the younger ones, all pretty excited that some hunters had actually helped defeat the threat. No one at the party had expected to actually get the opportunity to talk to them, and potentially, maybe even feed on them.

No one even looked at Jack or Elaine anymore. Perfect.

Jack offered his fellow Ventrue a small bow and nod. “You look lovely, Elaine.”

“Don’t I?” Laughing, Elaine tossed her hair back over her shoulder. “I was told that this ball would be less scandalous than what I would normally expect from my good friend. A lie, obviously.”

“Not a lie,” Antoinette said with a touch of laughter, “but I did suspect the joyous occasion would have my Kindred happy to show skin.” After motioning to the crowd around her, she laughed again, and stepped in close enough to Elaine that they were almost touching shoulders as they looked at Jack. Damn, they were tall. “Have the Begotten not arrived? I see the gargoyle Sándor, but neither Fiona or Athalia.”

His mom nodded with her sire’s question.

“They haven’t.” Sighing, Jack looked around the crowd again, then gave his mom a quick ‘I don’t know’ glance, before looking to the two elders again. “They might. Night’s still young.”

“I hope they do,” his mom said. A moment of silence followed, and everyone pursed their lips for a moment. The chance they’d

show up was small, especially if Fiona wasn't here yet; Azamel probably keeping them home.

“Samantha.” Antoinette leaned down over her childe, and set a hand on her shoulder. “Go, mingle. Bring Ashley and Julee with you, and introduce yourself to some Kindred.”

Samantha gulped as her eyes went wide. She looked at her sire for a second, then looked around again. Judging by how she squirmed, she couldn't help but be intimidated by all the skin on display. Combined with her young Kindred age, it'd be hella intimidating for her to approach strangers.

“Um, you ... don't want to introduce me, sire?”

Laughing, Antoinette shook her head. “I introduced you to the Primogen. Beyond that, you need to make an effort yourself. But, I suppose this is your first ball. Find Natasha, and ask for her help.”

“Oh right. Natasha.” Nodding, Jack's mom started walking past, but not before stopping beside him and smiling at him. “Um, have fun?”

He choked on a surprise laugh. Good god, his mom. “I've done this before, a few times actually. And my date is hosting the ball, remember? I'll be fine. You, on the other hand, need a shove in the general direction of fun. You're not my mom here. You're a new vampire with powerful connections.”

“Powerful connections,” Antoinette said, nodding.

“Powerful connections!” the two ghouls said, and they pulled Samantha off, practically against her will judging by how she dragged her heels.

Antoinette leaned toward her sheriff, and whispered something. Jack couldn't hear over the music, but it probably amounted to

'keep an eye on her'. Daniel nodded, and stepped away from them until he was near a wall where he could watch the crowd.

That left Jack standing alone with the two elders. Ok, so, tell them? There was no way he could keep his awareness of Elaine secret for very long. They might not figure out what was going in his head, but they'd realize something was up in no time.

He looked at them, and tried to focus his thoughts. Hard, so very damn hard, when both women were utterly gorgeous. Antoinette's dangling hip straps masquerading as a skirt had let the entire city see her micro thong, and how little it covered. The corset, which had cinched her waist so tight it was basically a torture device, was ornate and beautiful. And while it raised high enough to cover her breasts, the cups that held them sat very well, and were barely existent. A hint of both her areola were visible along the top of the corset, and both breasts were pushed up to create the most arousing pair of enormous pillows he'd ever seen.

Elaine and her see-through dress cut through the pretense of wearing revealing clothes, and instead opted to literally reveal everything to anyone who looked long enough. The simple dress with its two dangling black straps over her breasts, and the long skirt with an equally long split, did look gorgeous, but the fact he could see through it added an air of command that he recognized as very Ventrue. And she was almost as tall as Antoinette, with huge breasts, a tight waist, and wide hips. If she'd bleached her hair and put on red contacts, she'd have looked pretty damn close to the Prince.

Both sumptuous women were looking at him, Antoinette with a hint of confusion, and Elaine with some obvious intrigue. She looked him up and down, and slowly licked her lips as her eyes lingered on his stomach.

“Your little Ventrue,” Elaine said, voice dark and husky, “is a delicious thing.”

“Is he not?” After giving Jack a wicked grin, Antoinette motioned for a nearby waitress to join them. Soon, the three of them had glasses in their hands, and were sipping blood, nonchalant and relaxed. They weren’t relaxed. The three of them were trying to figure out what was going on, without saying it. Fucking Danse Macabre.

“Thank you,” he said to his great grandsire. “I ... understand that you’ve been friends with the Prince for a long time?”

“Centuries.” She took a step closer to him, then another, and once she was almost close enough to touch him with her shoulders, she started to slowly walk around him. She may not have had a foot of height on him like the Prince did, but she still had good eight inches; more, with the heels. “She speaks highly of you.”

He tracked her with his eyes, but didn’t turn his head to follow her. Couldn’t show weakness to a fellow Ventrue, or he’d be asking for trouble.

“She’s the best thing to ever happen to me,” he said.

Elaine crooned as she came back around to the front of him, and stood shoulder to shoulder with the Prince. “You two are utterly adorable together. I hope to get to see more of you. A lot more.”

And there it was, what Antoinette warned him about. The sly grin. The direct eye contact, with another lick of her lips. A slide of her fingers over her ear to adjust her hair. She’d stuck her hip out more than she needed to, and as she folded her arms under her bosom to relax, one arm out at the elbow holding her glass, she made sure to hug her breasts as she did it. The body language was blatant: look at me, I am beautiful, and you want me.

Well, she certainly was beautiful, but he wouldn't touch her with a ten foot pole if Antoinette didn't want him to. Kinda the whole deal with a trusting relationship. But the fact Antoinette had basically given him permission to invite Elaine into their bed, and had shared stories with him of the naughty things she'd done with her old friend, put a wholly different spin on the situation. A beautiful, half-naked curvy woman was hitting on him, and his girlfriend liked the idea of having her in their bed. Antoinette, naked, breasts pressed to Elaine's, both of them wriggling on him, writhing, and—

God damn it, it sucked being a man, sometimes. Even without the Blush of Life, his dick was trying to lead the show, and it demanded more boobs. Good fucking god, focus! Do not listen to the dick. The dick is not your friend. The dick wants immediate satisfaction, and the consequences be damned.

"I ... can't say I'd mind that," he said. Ok, yes, that was dangerously close to asking her to join him and the Prince. Not quite, but almost. Christ, asking a vampire, half a millennium old, to join him for a threesome? Or ... fivesome? She's your great grandsire for fuck's sake. Susanna's childe! Be more concerned with how she got rid of the curse, of her possible motivations for coming here, not how to get that dress off her.

"Neither would I," Antoinette said. She stepped up behind him, and while she held her glass of blood with one hand, the other reached down, traced along his buzzed hair, down his neck, down his chest, and down to his exposed abs where his shirt was open.

Oh god, he was squirming. Squirming squirming, like the first night he spoke to Antoinette in Bloodlust. It didn't matter that the curse had given him the strength of an elder, and that in a contest of pure strength, he felt he could probably win against most of the elders in the room, if not all. But Elaine was a woman, an older one at that, with centuries of all sorts of experience. He was a child

compared to her, and to be the target of her flirting, and Antoinette's as well, was making him wriggle like a worm on a hook.

Jack gulped down another sip of his drink, did his best to not stare at Elaine's breasts through her dress, and looked up at Antoinette beside him. Did she know who Elaine really was? It didn't look like it. Should he say it? No, not here in the middle of the ballroom floor.

"Um..." Shit. Get control of your words. "I wanted to ask, what brings you to Dolareido, Elaine? Experiments for the Ordo?"

She grinned at him as she watched him. Almost like an evil scientist, complete with evil smile, she kept her eyes on him, taking mental notes of him. If she'd had a pad in her hand and a white lab coat, it'd have fit perfectly.

"The Prince's delving into the world of ephemera is of great interest to many in my order. I would love to see what she has learned lately."

"That's ... not it." Ugh, he shouldn't have said it. He should have just nodded and smiled, pretending to believe her. But it would have been written on his face that he didn't believe her, anyway. Better to at least admit that he knew something.

Elaine's smile changed. It didn't disappear, but it did change, no longer the playfully evil PhD scientist, and now something far more serious. It was the sort of smile Michael put on when he was negotiating.

"Oh?"

"You're here for something else." He quickly glanced to Antoinette, still behind him, but she looked intrigued more than anything.

“Am I?” The sparkle in Elaine’s eye announced her excitement that he had the balls to confront her like this. “Then do tell, Jack Terry. What am I here for?”

So much for not bringing this topic up in the middle of the ballroom floor. Ugh, being surrounded by beautiful women did a number on his thinking ability.

“I—” No. Wait. Be smart about this. For once, stop being direct and honest about things, and try playing the game a bit. “Let’s talk after the ball?”

“Oh. Dangling a carrot in front of me?” Elaine laughed, reached out, and touched his shoulder. “Very well. I await with bated breath. Ann, I shall rejoin you in a moment or three? I wish to speak with that blasted sheriff of yours.”

“Please do, Elaine.”

With a small nod, Elaine grinned at Jack again, gave Antoinette a proper smile, and walked off in search of the sheriff.

“Why does she want to talk to Daniel?” Jack said.

“She has been interested in my sheriff for many decades.”

“He doesn’t reciprocate?”

“He does not reciprocate with anyone.” Shrugging, Antoinette stepped around him again, and smiled down at him. “You believe Elaine wishes to learn more of your curse.”

“I assume you told her about it. Or that she’s here to look into whatever summoned those crows that showed up on the news.”

“I did tell her, weeks ago. I trust her with much, my love. Though, I would trust her with my life, before I trusted her with all my

secrets; professional rivalry, you see. Many in the Ordo have dealt with strange phenomena, such as this curse that plagues you.”

“Yeah, I would have told her too, if I were you.” Sighing, he looked down, and stared at his shoes. How to handle this? What to do?

“Something bothers you, my love, something to do with Elaine. What is it? If she is being too direct about her desire to partake of you sexually, that—”

“No no, that’s not it. Er, well, I mean ... I got the impression she enjoyed making me squirm.” He couldn’t help but smile as he looked up at his love. “Easy to see how you two get along.”

“Ah oui. Birds of a feather.” She leaned down, and kissed him proper, lips to lips. And of course, she didn’t close her eyes when she did, keeping them open a crack, until he eventually closed his. “If it is not her sexuality that has frazzled you, what has? It seemed as if you knew something, something I do not.”

He could keep it a secret. Antoinette wouldn’t even hold it against him if he did, not really. The Danse Macabre was played by everyone, and that meant he should always make decisions with that in mind. But now that Julias was gone, he didn’t have anyone to come to with this. Everyone else was a friend, but Antoinette was a genuine force, a powerful figure in the Danse, and most of all, someone whose motivations he trusted.

“It can wait. Tell you later tonight? She can come, too.” Might as well tell them both, since Antoinette trusted Elaine so much.

“I suppose I must acquiesce.” Laughing again, she kissed his ear, and started to walk. He was expected to follow, and he did. After all the shit that’d happened to him the past few months, he was damn happy to shut off his brain for a while, and do whatever Antoinette wanted.



Except, he couldn't stop thinking about Elaine. And sure, some of that was because she'd basically offered herself up to him and Antoinette, sexually speaking. But his thoughts kept pulling to the elephant in the room: she was his great grandsire, and her curse was gone. Great grandsire! Curse, gone!

He settled his mind for a moment, and waited for the twisted thing in his guts to speak up. Nothing. He was sure the curse would start talking, but it said nothing. Afraid, maybe, of Elaine? She was a walking, talking example of someone from his bloodline who no longer had the curse; assuming it was the woman from his vision, and not some identical twin. It damn well better be afraid. Now that the hunters were gone, he didn't need the curse.

He looked to Elaine again, who had found Daniel, and was proceeding to get up in his face until she was almost nose to nose with him. Daniel wouldn't back down, but it was clear he wasn't interested, or his poker face was amazing. Considering how gorgeous Elaine was, Jack bet on the former.

Antoinette did her rounds. She always made sure to check up on every single Kindred she could whenever she hosted, or came to a ball. Maybe it was to personally insure every vampire in her city was afraid of her; a little fear was healthy. Maybe it was so she would always be able to identify people by their faces if the need ever arose. Maybe it was because she genuinely enjoyed getting to personally meet every single Kindred in her city. He couldn't imagine it being that, but the fuck did he know, antisocial as he was.

They found his mom after a while, Ashley and Julee sticking with her like cute bodyguards. Natasha, Arturo, and Matthew were introducing her to the rest of the Uratha. And the Uratha, were getting quite drunk.

"Jack!" his mom said, joining him in what seemed like an effort to escape some heavy gazes. While the Kindred at the ball weren't

Blushing Life, so they could keep their hormones out of the picture, the Uratha had no such option. When a woman in a revealing dress starts talking to you, he couldn't blame any dude — or gal — from kinda staring.

“Mom. I see you met Avery, Matthew, Arturo, Monica, Brianna, Caleb, Noah, Clara, Erica, Carter, and Mason — and Tilly.” Tilly, dressed in a red dress that hugged her body so tight, every curve was visible, stood with Mason, a grin on her face. At least, until she saw him. The grin vanished, replaced with a mix of trepidation and concern. Another vampire who was afraid of him.

There were a few more in the pack, but they weren't there, out mingling with the rest of the crowd.

Avery smirked at him. “Think you can charm me by memorizing our names?”

“It's a start, isn't it?” He returned the woman's smirk, before looking to Antoinette.

“Avery,” the Prince said, “I hope you and your family are enjoying the ball.”

“We are,” she said. “Jacob's still being an asshole though. I'm trying, Prince, really trying to make nice and play nice, but that fucker's going to throw a punch eventually.”

Frowning, Jack looked around until he spotted Jacob. He was speaking with Beatrice again, and the rest of his witches, who'd left the hunters now. Sándor wasn't far off, but Jen had let him go, probably so she could speak with her fellow witches and her boss. That might have been a mistake, considering several women had taken the opportunity to approach the Begotten now. Jack would have been tempted to save him, but it was clear that the women were getting nowhere, unable to break the man's cold exterior.

He looked around until he found Damien. He was with Jessy and Eric, and he looked a bit sad. No Fiona yet. Maybe no Fiona at all. Much as that'd suck, he was glad Athalia wasn't—

“Now arriving, Begotten Fiona Young, and Begotten Athalia Gardner.”

Antoinette threw up a hand, and somehow, someone somewhere saw the cue, and stopped the band. Everyone froze and turned. Just like when Antoinette arrived, the silence was deafening, the only sound the rubbing of fabrics as everyone looked at the front door. Athalia, and Fiona.

Damn it.

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~~Damien~~

He raised his head, looked to the door, and smiled.

Fiona came down the stairs a little faster than was probably expected. No slow, sexy walk for her. She bounced the whole way down, which of course, was damn sexy in its own way. In the tight red dress, it meant lots and lots of jiggling. Red? Darker. Burgundy? It contrasted her pale skin and freckles beautifully, and her big mountain of frizzy red hair matched it nicely as her curls sat on her bare shoulders. The dress had ruffled off-shoulder straps, and the chest hugged her breasts tight with cups of the thin fabric that showed the shape of her nipples. The skirt was long, but the split nearly reached her hip. She had burgundy shoes, too.

No way did she have clothes like that lying around. Someone had to help her get those. Maybe Athalia? Fiona had worn a purple dress to the last party, something classy but with plenty of cleavage, and an open back. That dress had hung loosely, but the burgundy thing she was wearing was a lot tighter, and was actively pressing her breasts up and together. As she practically hopped down the stairs,

her breasts bounced up and down on top of their cups, to they point they almost leapt out of them. Lord, give him strength.

“Damien!” she called out, fully ignoring the fact the ball had gone quiet. She jogged over to him, nearly tripped in her heels, recovered, and continued. Once she got to him, she threw her arms around him and pulled him down for a kiss. Not a small peck on the cheek, but a big kiss, long, dramatic, and one that demanded he hug her in return, half just to keep from falling over. His hands found her naked back, and he groaned quietly into her lips.

“Fiona,” he said once she released him. “I’m glad you came. Did Azamel get in the way?”

“Nae! She was angry, sure, but nae angry enough to stop me. We’re late cause I had to convince Athalia to come.”

Damien slowly lifted his gaze from her, to Athalia, and did his best to keep a frown off his face. He succeeded, but he knew Fiona could see the coldness set in his eyes. He felt it, too.

Athalia wore a black dress, and while Damien would have expected a black dress on Athalia, something meant for mourning, this one was not. It was gorgeous, a strapless, tight thing with some ruffles along its front and cleavage. The skirt reached her ankles, no split, and the cleavage wasn’t ridiculous like everyone else’s tonight. Modest, by Dolareido standards. Her long black hair was tied into a braid behind her head, and her eyes were just as cold as Damien’s felt.

She didn’t want to be here.

With a slow breath, Athalia took a step down the stairs. The clack of her heels echoed in the silence. With each step, she glared around at the crowd, as if daring them to say something, daring them to confront her, daring them to make something of her arrival. No one said a word. No one moved. The only movement was Daniel, who

stepped away from Elaine, and joined Athalia at the bottom of the stairs. For a moment, Damien thought his fellow Mekhet might attack her, cut her to bits, or kick her out. But, a small glimpse of his eyes past his glasses showed something Damien had never seen on the man, ever, except when Lucas had held Tash hostage. Compassion.

Daniel held out a hand for her. With a heavy sigh, she took it.

Just when everyone started to relax, someone else stepped out from the crowd. Samantha. Oh no. Damien stared at the young Daeva as she made her way across the ballroom floor, dripping of anxiety and fear. Jack came up behind her, but she turned and glared at him. For all her obvious fear, she wanted to do this alone, that much was clear. Poor Jack. The kid backed off, and stood with Antoinette again.

Antoinette. Damien had almost forgotten about her in the moment, but when he looked at her, he could see a small smile on her lips, her eyes locked on her childe. Pride, in her childe and the courage she'd mustered. All Samantha's courage did was make Damien expect the worst, but he was Mekhet, that was his nature. But, that awareness didn't mean he was about to lower his guard, as the fledgling Daeva approached the shadow monster.

"Athalia," she said, once she was close enough. She had to look up to meet the monster's gaze. "I'm Samantha Terry." The ballroom was completely silent, no movement, no music, and everyone could hear their words clearly.

"... I see." Athalia's gaze lowered for a few, long, painful seconds, before meeting the vampire's again. She opened her mouth, ready to say something, but the words died in her throat. Eye contact died seconds later, and her eyes fell again as her shoulders slumped.

Ten seconds went by. Ten long, horrible seconds, the only sounds the breathing of those with working lungs in the ball. Ten seconds

of Athalia, frozen, staring at the floor, while Samantha looked at her.

Samantha spread her arms, reached out, and hugged the woman.

The tension in the room melted away. A lot of held breaths released, and people began to stir around, quiet whispers turning into murmured conversations, as people watched the strange scene. Samantha whispered to Athalia, and combined with the returned noise, Damien couldn't make it out. But the look of palpable relief on Athalia's face said more than words ever could.

Samantha was too nice, way too nice, nicer than even Fiona, and that was saying a lot. But, maybe that's what the city needed, because after what happened less than a week ago, it was amazing to see Samantha crack Athalia's rage and sorrow with nothing more than a hug. After a few seconds, Athalia returned the hug, and blinked away some rising tears.

"I thought so," Fiona whispered up to Damien.

"You thought so?"

"Aye. After what we saw at her home, with Mary and Jack, I knew Samantha was a kind lass. Took a while to convince Athalia it'd be awright to come."

Damien smiled down at Fiona, and pulled her into a half hug beside him. If it'd been him, he'd have told Athalia to stay away. There was no reason to risk something like this. Except, there was. It never crossed his mind that maybe, by having the two women interact, that closure could be found for both of them, or that he should even be concerned about that. But seeing the two meet and speak with each other, seeing something meaningful happen, seeing — practically feeling — untold tensions he would never be able to appreciate, dissipate before his eyes, was moving.

He looked to Jack again, and smiled. The kid looked back to him, rolled his eyes, but smiled too. No need to say it, Damien could tell what he was thinking. His mom's niceness worked, this time. It might not work the next time.

The crowd resumed their conversations. The heaviness that had hung in the air was gone, and Damien could feel how lighter everything grew, how free. Like a bunch of children with no cares or concerns for tomorrow, people started talking louder, laughing, and smiling. The band started playing again, and picked a happier classical piece.

“La finta giardiniera overture,” he said.

“What?” Fiona said.

“Uh, a piece by Mozart.”

The redhead beamed up at him. “Ye listen to classical music?”

“Maria makes me. There's a lot more depth to classical music than modern, and she insists I develop my ear.”

Fiona swooned, an exaggerated and playful, half sarcastic sound. “Yer so deep.”

He rolled his eyes, took Fiona's hand, and made his way toward Jack. A glance to Samantha and Athalia showed they were still talking, and with Daniel next to them, Damien figured he could relax. If something happened, the sheriff would deal with it, and judging from the expression on Athalia's face, nothing would. Her rage was broken, defeated by Samantha's kindness and compassion. For now at least.

“My Prince,” Damien said as they arrived. “Mister Terry.”

“Mister Burksen,” Antoinette said, eyes settling on him with a balance of disdain and appreciation. Yeah, she didn’t like the Lancea et Sanctum, and him by extension, but she appreciated his existence. Better than nothing. “Miss Young, I am glad you could come. I see that you brought Athalia under better circumstances than I could have imagined.”

“Aye! I convinced her to come, but ‘twas Athalia who calmed down on her own.” Sighing, the young girl shook her head and shuddered a little. “She was so sad, ye ken? When I told her ‘twas Samantha who invited her, she didnae know what tae do! But,” Fiona scooped a glass of red wine, did a quick sniff test to make sure it wasn’t blood, and took a deep sip, “but she came. I’m glad. Maybe the two of them can become friends?”

Antoinette looked doubtful, but she looked to her childe and the shadow monster on the ballroom floor with consideration, before looking down at the tiny redhead. “Perhaps. My childe could become friends with a stone, if the stone was willing to share a word with her. The question is, will Athalia be capable of doing so.”

Jack laughed, nodded, and took a sip of his own drink. “I’m glad I was wrong. I’m glad I ... I’m glad.”

“Should ye talk to her?” Fiona said. “Athalia, I mean. She might—”

“No no, no, bad idea.” Shaking his head, Jack downed his drink, and grabbed another one as a waitress came by. To Damien’s surprise, someone had undone a few buttons of the server’s shirt, exposing a black bra underneath the white fabric. Good Lord, it was happening already. “I ... I think we should give Athalia her space. The fact she came is a miracle, and after ... after what happened, I’m sure it’ll be weeks before me or Triss can say a word to her, without it escalating.”

Damien nodded. “Makes sense. Let’s leave her be, and—”



“Who tae fuck is that lass?” Fiona downed her drink, and stared off into the crowd. “The tall one, with the tits!”

While Antoinette laughed and rolled her eyes, Damien saw the wince on Jack’s face. Damien had noticed before, when Elaine first stepped into the Black Hall, that Jack had reacted to her presence differently than Damien figured he’d would. Considering the woman was Antoinette’s close, personal friend, it probably meant Jack would get to see Elaine naked in short time, and likely more. Something to be excited about, considering the sexual Olympics Antoinette enjoyed. But Jack hadn’t looked excited. He’d looked shocked, and worried.

“That is my friend, Elaine of the Ordo Dracul,” the Prince said. “Elder, and Ventrue.”

“Does she know we can see through her dress?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Awright then.” Fiona grabbed another glass from a waiter, did a double take at the waiter’s exposed chest, and downed half her new glass of red. “I see we’re having one of thooooose parties.”

“Do pace yourself, little Begotten.” Antoinette made a small gesture to the glass in Fiona’s hand. “I will throw you to the street if you vomit on my floors.”

Fiona scoffed, but didn’t down the other half of her drink. “Awright awright.”

Damien laughed. Too cute. Poor girl looked heartbroken.

Jack looked past them to Elaine again, and Damien followed his gaze to the Ventrue. She really was utterly gorgeous, a tall blonde with large curves despite her thin waist. If it wasn’t for the rumors about her, about how dangerous of a dragon she was, Isabella

probably would have been over there already to recruit her for her show.

“Antoinette,” Jack said, “do you mind if I speak with Jacob?”

“Hmm. Be careful, my love. The old snake has been missing quite a bit, since the incident. I am sure he is up to something.”

“Yeah, agreed. Damien, back me up?”

Damien nodded. “Fiona, can you—”

“I’ll take her,” Jessy said. The Gangrel came up to join them, slipped an arm over his girlfriend’s shoulders, and grinned down at her. “Fiona and I haven’t talked in ages.”

“I saw ye at Bloodlust a week ago!”

“Ages.” Nodding, Jessy took Fiona with one arm, Eric with another, and guided them in the direction of Isabella. If Damien had to guess, Jessy was going to show Fiona off for her fellow Invictus. And based on the looks Isabella gave Fiona as they approached, it was working.

“Your girlfriend is gorgeous,” Jack said, smiling at him as the two of them made their way toward Jacob.

“She is. I’m very lucky.” He was tempted to compliment Antoinette as well, but it seemed pointless. They’d talked about her absurd beauty before, and considering how Antoinette was dressed, any compliment seemed almost like an insult. The Prince was beautiful, unnaturally so. The white hair, red eyes, and unusual ... proportions, weren’t natural. Bringing up her beauty always felt strange to him, as if broaching a subject the Prince might find offensive.

She certainly was beautiful, no doubt about that, like some mythical entity from a bygone era. But Damien preferred the very real, lovely Fiona, to the almost monolithic presence of the white-haired dragon.

“Think Isabella will recruit Fiona?” Jack said.

“Potentially? I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Isabella’s plays can get pretty sexual. And I’m sure she’d love to have a tiny, curvy redhead in her crew.”

A hint of something Damien had rarely felt, but instantly recognized, shot up his spine, hot and unwanted. Jealousy. It was not a sensation he was used to. Thoughts of Eric and Fiona being together before Damien was with her did spark the feeling, a little. Thinking of Isabella doing things to Fiona also sparked the feeling, and the feeling increased as he thought about the crafty Daeva manipulating his girlfriend.

“I trust Fiona,” he said.

Jack laughed and shrugged. “I didn’t think it was a matter of trust, at least not Fiona’s. Isabella, on the other hand ... well, she is a Daeva, and I wouldn’t put it past her to try a little Majesty on Fiona.”

That, Damien did not like the sound of. “Do you think she’d be so horrible as to ... slip Fiona some of her blood?”

His friend winced at that. The power of the Vinculum was extreme, and they had no idea if the Begotten were immune to its effects. Since it could affect both kine and Kindred, Damien guessed it could affect anyone.

“Hard to say. I’d guess no, if only as a favor to us for killing the hunters who killed her student Barry.”

That was true. Damien, Jack, and the witches were heroes in a sense. As much as the city's Kindred looked at them as if they were dangerous, they also looked at them with a mix of pride and wonder, too. Pride, because it was Kindred who defeated the enemy. Wonder, because it was Kindred they knew, who'd managed to defeat a deadly threat, deadly enough to enslave a Begotten and kill Julias Mire. No one in the city would have expected them to succeed in what looked like a suicide mission on the outside.

They were champions, according to the announcer. Or at least, Jack was, and the rest of them were the champion's guard. An accurate enough assessment, and enough of a title boast that Damien noticed several women were looking at him, women that had ignored him in the past. Which made him wonder if Fiona would feel jealousy like he did. Considering the amount of wine she was inhaling, if she did feel any jealousy, she might throw a punch before the night was done.

The image of little Fiona throwing a tiny fist at some Kindred's face, was strangely hilarious.

The two of them arrived at Jacob, who'd been rejoined by Aaron and Beatrice in the meantime. Jennifer was still taking Sándor around the room, introducing him to Kindred without missing a single name as far as Damien could tell, save for the recently embraced. Impressive of her, to memorize so many names and titles.

Jack and Damien nodded to Triss and Aaron, they nodded in return, and Jack stepped up to Jacob.

"Jacob," Jack said, "been looking to talk to you." Not the most respectful greeting Damien had ever heard, but it seemed fitting. Jacob didn't like pleasantries, or formalities.

The Nos smiled, an evil looking expression, and he ran his fingers back through his hair. "Me? You're the hero of the night, Jack, you

and the crew you took with you on your ... excursion. Should be me looking to talk to you.”

“You’re the one who has Elen. You know damn well I’d be coming to talk about that.”

“Touché.” Jacob raised his glass, didn’t bother to wait for Jack to reciprocate, and took a sip. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about it, Clarice.”

Jack stepped in a little closer, until only a single foot separated the two men. “I worry, Jacob.”

Damien looked between them, and found his hand reaching for his sword. His sword wasn’t there. No one was allowed to carry arms in the Black Hall, and that was particularly problematic for Mekhet. Nosferatu and Daeva were quite strong, and Gangrel and Ventrue were tough as hell. Mekhet were neither. They used their speed and stuck to the shadows. Out in the open like this, he’d rely on a sword and gun, and without them, he felt naked.

If Jacob and Jack started fighting, it’d be chaos in seconds. Jacob could summon insane strength, maybe even greater than Jack’s curse, and he could bestow literal nightmares on the Ventrue. Jack’s curse could summon a legion of creatures to his aid, and could likely manifest endurance to match Jacob’s strength. Jack could also attempt to Dominate the man. If he succeeded, that would be terrifying.

So Damien stood there, feeling terribly useless, but smart enough to keep watching and look for any detail that might be useful. Beatrice and Aaron had backed off, giving Jacob enough space to have his conversation, but close enough that they could jump in if something happened. Damien nodded to them, and they nodded to him, a bit of camaraderie forming. They’d all survived the same mission together. That had to be worth something, as far as trust was concerned.

“Elen is under my ... protection,” Jacob said, grinning into his drink as he sipped. “Her flesh chamber has collapsed, since she hasn’t been able to manage it, bound as I have her. And no hunters have even attempted to find her.”

Jack frowned, and stayed where he was. It’d have been too close for comfort for Damien, to have someone standing this close to him, but Jacob didn’t seem to notice, or care. “She’s ancient, Jacob. How is she even still alive?”

“Her magic keeps her alive. She’s done some interesting things to herself. She doesn’t eat, doesn’t sleep.” He chuckled, and dipped his glass left and right until the blood swirled inside it. “Pretty fucking disturbing shit, if I do say so myself.”

Damien smirked at that, for a second. Jacob calling anything disturbing, was disturbing.

“What do you plan to do with her?” Jack asked.

“I plan the to enact the great ritual of Nunya.”

Damien blinked. “Nunya?”

Before Jacob could respond, Jack put up a hand and looked to Damien. “Nunya business.” Oh, a joke. Forever the trickster, and juvenile, deranged lunatic, was Jacob. Damien and Jack both rolled their eyes, before Jack continued. “I felt something, when Sándor broke the ritual. Something that felt familiar.” Jacob smiled, but said nothing. “You nearly let Triss die, so you could have a shot of stealing Elen? What, was that a plan? Something you’ve been cooking up since we learned about her? Pretty damn cold.”

Beatrice took a step toward them, but Jacob held up a hand, and she stepped back, frown growing.

“Cold, is it?” The man shrugged as his smile went through twenty phases. Was he angry, sad, happy, furious, manic? It was impossible to tell. Damien tried, analyzed Jacob every chance he could, but the man was such a question mark, that Lucas had warned him about the Nosferatu on several occasions before his extended torpor, and several times again thereafter.

“Yes, it’s cold. She could have died, Jacob.”

“All my witches were there. One of those fucking dogs was there. This assassin-in-training,” he gestured to Damien, “was there. And let’s not forget, the Strix curse was there.” His grin grew until Damien thought his lips would split at the cheek. “You know, that horrible abomination you willingly used? A dark, twisted thing that you’ve embraced? A very witchy-witch thing to do.”

Jack snarled, and Damien found himself taking a step back. In the past, Jack snarling would have meant little. These days, it meant quite a bit.

“I haven’t embraced it.”

“Ha, sure you haven’t.” He took another sip, before he nodded in Elaine’s direction. “You know her?”

That made Jack freeze. Damien raised a brow as he looked between the two men, and it was clear the Nos had said something to disturb Jack. The old man always knew what to say to get under a person’s skin. Damien could only be content that Jacob never seemed interested in harassing him. Once, Jack had told Damien that Jacob had been interested in him, when he worked for Lucas. That interest had died when Lucas died. All the better.

“I don’t know her.”

“Sure you don’t. You looked like you saw a ghost when she came in.”

“I ... don’t know her.”

Laughing, Jacob sipped again, shrugged, and looked to Elaine. She’d rejoined Antoinette, apparently done with her conversation with Daniel, and the two of them chatted with the werewolf pack.

“I’ll find out eventually, Jack. You know I will.”

“I’d prefer if you just stayed out of it.”

With that, Jacob stepped close, until only six inches separated him from the small Ventrue. It was enough to stir Beatrice and Aaron a step closer, but they calmed when Jack didn’t move.

“Then let’s make a deal.”

Jack frowned, but remained where he was. “What deal?”

“Don’t interfere with me and mine, and I won’t interfere with you and yours.”

“Interfere with me? What could—”

Jacob leaned in until he was almost kissing Jack, and he chuckled. “Think about it.”

That time, Jack did back away a little, and he looked to Damien through the corner of his eye. Which was a mistake, because it let Jacob know they had an inkling of what he meant, but it was a mistake anyone would have made.

“Jacob ... we’re all on the same team, right?” Jack said.

The elder grinned his usual, crazy grin, shrugged, and stepped back. “I think we are. Sometimes, I don’t know. Maybe that’s a problem that needs fixing.”

“That you don’t know?”



“That we might be on the same team.”

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~~Antoinette~~

“I cannot tell if I like her or not,” Elaine said, rejoining Antoinette. She gestured to the wolf woman the two of them had finished speaking with, moments before.

“Avery? She is ... difficult to deal with, I admit. Less so than Simon, though.”

Elaine nodded as she stood shoulder to shoulder with her, sipped her blood, and looked out at the crowd. The two of them stood in the center of the ballroom floor, and while the crowd gave them their space, people had begun to enjoy themselves to the point they no longer avoided them due to their Beasts’ fear. By the end of the ball, perhaps her Kindred would no longer avoid her at all, drunk on blood and desire.

She grinned subtly at the thought. No, her city would never fully be comfortable with her, both due to her altered body, but also due to her position. She was the Prince. This was her city. Such was the way of things.

“Daniel,” Elaine continued, “seems to be ... interested, in Athalia.”

Antoinette looked past her friend to her sheriff, who stood in a corner with the Begotten, and her childe Samantha.

“Yes, I fear he is, old friend.”

“A shame. I would very much like to crack that cold exterior of his.”

“You have known my sheriff for centuries, and have made no progress. Why pursue him so?”

She tapped a finger against her chin, looked over her shoulder, and let out a quiet sigh as she looked at the man. “I am not sure, honestly. I cannot help but sense much sadness in him, and I would very much like to warm him.”

Antoinette doubted that was all there was to it. Elaine, like many women, craved what they could not have.

“There has been much sadness in his life, but with the return of his childe, a grain of joy has been found. That joy is perhaps the only reason he speaks to Athalia.” Antoinette sipped her own blood, and lightly traced a finger along her old friend’s beautiful shoulder. “Could you not have worn something less brazen?”

“I am more covered than you.”

“You cannot see through my clothes.”

She shrugged. “And you cannot see through mine, unless you stare.”

Antoinette laughed at her friend’s knowing grin, and looked around. People were staring. Many had never seen Elaine before, and were obviously enraptured with her beauty. Antoinette could not blame them.

“You knew very well my love would gawk, from what I told you. Poor Jack has not been able to stop looking at you.”

“That is your own fault, for planting images in his head.” She sipped her drink, and looked to the boy as she did, currently conversing with Jacob. “I admit, he is very handsome. And the way he squirms is ... very ... appealing.” She licked her lips, sipped again, and kept her eyes on Jack as she swayed gently with the music. “I did not expect the intensity in his eyes, the sheer openness of them. But after seeing his mother, I can see where his eyes came from.”

Antoinette nodded, but her eyes lingered on Jack and Jacob. While it brought her limitless discomfort to see the old snake talking with her lover, she trusted Jack. He had proven capable of managing the curse, at least to some extent, and he was proving intelligent enough to handle scenarios she would never have trusted a neonate to handle. Speaking with Jacob, an elder, someone no neonate would willingly speak with, was something Jack was equipped to handle, intellectually, and now thanks to the curse, in power.

“He knows something,” Elaine said.

“Oui, that he does. But I do not know what. My love said he would tell us though, and I trust him.” It did have her mind running in circles trying to predict what that knowledge would be, however. He had looked upon Elaine with the awe and lust Antoinette had expected to see, that she had helped create with her stories, but he had also looked at her with the shock of someone surprised. For the second life of her, she could not figure out why.

“He leaves us in suspense.”

“That he does.”

Elaine giggled, and looked back to her as she sipped her drink. “A man after my own heart.”

“Then I regret to inform you, that he is taken.”

They laughed. It was a strange, silly discussion, talking over a man like young girls. To the Ordo, little meant more than the mastery of their coils, and talk of romance was largely discarded once they reached their ancilla years, let alone into their elder years. She had not spoken with Elaine like this since she had sired Tony, so long ago, blurry memories she could not recall beyond vague notions. It sent a joyful chuckle through her, to once again be

talking of something as simple, juvenile, and yet as all powerful, as love.

She guided Elaine toward one cluster of Kindred she looked forward to speaking to.

“Miss Leauvion,” Antoinette said with a nod to Isabella. “Attempting to recruit Miss Young into your troupe?”

The Daeva smiled at her, a fake and pompous thing, but well crafted and seamless. Such a gorgeous creature, Isabella, with her long dark blonde hair, sharp features, above average height, and piercing blue gaze. She did not look dissimilar to Elaine, though Elaine, a touch taller, wore her hair free instead of in ponytails, and had brown eyes.

A tiny flicker in Isabella’s eyes betrayed her, a glance at Antoinette’s bust and corset that clearly dwarfed her own. A petty thing, for Antoinette to enjoy a grain of pride and ego in that moment, but she did. The men about clearly looked at each other in a similar manner, and not-so-subtly analyzed physiques to see who had the broader shoulders and flatter stomach. Such was life, and unlife, an unending game of comparing the self to others.

If Isabella devoted herself more to the future of the Invictus, instead of her own pursuits and obsessions, as many Daeva did, she would no doubt have risen in the ranks of her covenant. But no, she spent her days mastering the art of acting, teaching her troupe to act, and by large, she had succeeded. Her plays were held in high regard, but were ultimately of zero use to the Invictus. The arts would never earn the income of a corporation brought to its knees by blackmail, or insider trading, tools the Invictus often used.

“She is beautiful,” Isabella said, smiling at Fiona and earning a loud giggle from the intoxicated redhead. “But I do not believe she holds the ... discipline, to be an actress.”

Jessy snorted on a laugh. “You mean she probably can’t memorize lines.”

Little Fiona’s eyes set into a hard glare, and she took a weak swing at Jessy. The vampire let her, and Fiona’s fist bounced harmlessly off Jessy’s arm, while Fiona simultaneously spilled some of her wine from her other glass.

“I can memorize lines!”

“You couldn’t memorize a menu.”

“I ... I...” Suddenly, the tiny girl started to weep. Not a loud sob, but tiny sniffles. “Yer right! I couldnae! I tried, but they had to let me go. Fired!”

Jessy blinked at her, before leaning in and hooking her arm over the woman’s shoulders. “Ok, guess I was a bit on the nose there. Don’t worry about it. You don’t want to work for this bitch anyway.”

“I beg your pardon?” Isabella scoffed, and looked to her lover Hella beside her. “Can you believe this?”

Hella offered her lover some silent condolences, and Antoinette turned her attention to the nearby hunters. They were surrounded by Isabella’s troupe, a group of beautiful young Invictus Kindred, and things were quickly growing sexual. They had stepped quite close to the hunters, and the female Kindred were not only touching them with roaming hands, they were exposing their legs and breasts in subtle, flirting displays. Predictable, considering Isabella and her proclivities, but Antoinette did not mind. In truth, she had hoped for this, that the Kindred would approach the hunters with aim to seduce.

If hunters could come to Dolareido, leave Dolareido, and spread word that the city was to be ignored by their ilk, it could save her

great trials in the future, especially after so many died under Jack's hand.

The small group of Kindred surrounding the hunters stepped aside when Antoinette and Elaine approached. The hunters had seen her dress already, but not Elaine's, and the three of them looked to the elder Ventrue for several moments, jaw's dropping, before looking to the Prince. The two men did their best to hide their growing erections.

"Harcourt, LeBlanc, Hemmer, I trust you are enjoying yourselves?"

"Um, y-yes Prince," Harcourt said. The man may have been a strange, overt, and silly individual, but he had courage.

Elaine grinned at them as she sipped from her glass. "But you have not tasted the wine." Before Harcourt could respond, she flicked her hand upward in dismissal. "We can smell the lack of alcohol on your breaths."

"Um ... well, we thought ... maybe it wasn't a good idea to get drunk in a room filled with vampires and werewolves and monsters?"

"Nonsense." Antoinette snapped her fingers, and several servants joined them immediately. One of them had wine, and she dismissed the other two, before motioning the final servant, a waitress, toward the hunters. "Your lives are in no danger, and you are to be rewarded for your aid in defeating Jeremiah and Angela."

The woman, Marge, stepped up beside her friend. With a slow, trembling hand, she took a glass of the wine.

"Thank you. B-But, you can understand why we're so ... scared, right? We're still your prisoners." With a trembling hand, she raised the glass, and took a cautious sip. "The three of us, we're vampire

hunters. We're all very aware of the things you can do to us with a glance, or a drop of blood."

Marge was a beautiful woman, a touch short with a lean, almost skinny physique. Her curly brown hair reached her shoulders, and her brown eyes stared at Antoinette as she sipped her wine. A black woman, with light skin and pink lips. To think of her as a vampire hunter was difficult. She looked more an innocent doe than a hunter. Perhaps that was part of her hunting tactics, to feign weakness, before striking.

Dennis, a white man with short blonde hair and green eyes, took a glass as well, and sniffed it several times. The fool must have known sniffing wine would never discover tampering, but he did anyway. He was taller than Harcourt, bigger, and while Harcourt was an attractive man, it was clear some of the women nearby with similar tastes to Jessy, were looking to Dennis. Though, a glance Jessy's way showed the Gangrel was looking at Marge, more than the men.

"You have my promise that no harm will come to you," Antoinette said, and she spoke a touch louder so those nearby could hear over the music. "Any who attempt to place you under the Vinculum will quickly find themselves witnessing a sunrise."

That earned at least a small bit of trust from the hunters, and the three of them took another sip of their new drinks, though none of them looked down when they did, eyes up, scanning.

"Still can't believe you're really letting us be here," Harcourt said.

"Forever a visionary, the Prince," Elaine said. "Be happy your bosses met their end in Dolareido. I have lived in cities where your corpses would be left for the crows. But here in Dolareido, my lovely friend insists on peace where she can find it."

Antoinette rolled her eyes, but her smile remained. Elaine did love to joust with her, and she enjoyed the game.

“If and when I decide to let our three hunters leave the city, their opinions of Dolareido will have changed.”

“I don’t think we’ll give up our jobs,” Harcourt said. Fear was in his face. It terrified him to admit that truth, but he knew very well she had discerned it on her own.

“I do not expect you to,” she said. “But, in the future, perhaps you will consider the reality that not all Kindred so blindly give into their hungers? Not all paranormal creatures willfully listen to the call of their inner monsters.”

Isabella, her troupe, Jessy, Fiona, and Eric all stood nearby, all looking at her, all listening. She had not meant to give a speech per say, but there it was.

“I ... think we can agree to that,” Marge said. “We’ve all had dealings with friendly vamps before. Just, usually, while surrounded by not-so-friendly vamps.”

“Ha.” Jessy laughed, and took a step closer, taking Fiona and Eric in with her. “We’re all friendly in Dolareido. Well, except for eyeless over there.” She pointed over her shoulder with a thumb toward Jacob, who still spoke with Jack and Damien. “And maybe her.” Again, she made the gesture, this time for Maria. “But, yeah, considering the situation your bosses had you in, we’re all pretty damn happy with the three of you. You especially, Harcourt.”

“I got a lot of people killed,” the man said, voice heavy.

“Yea but, from what I hear, it was a shitty situation that would have ended a lot worse if you didn’t do something.” Shrugging, she nodded in Isabella’s direction, then in the direction of the Carthians, the witches, the werewolves, then in the direction of the rest of the Invictus. “You guys are welcome at the party, so get partying! Get drunk, get laid, get Kissed. These whores here will make sure you’re



all well taken care of.” She gestured to Isabella’s actors, who only smiled at the playful insult.

Antoinette suppressed her urge to groan at Jessy’s brazen words, but it was not as if the woman was incorrect. A glance around showed that the ball was going, quite predictably, in a sexual direction. While she had originally doubted the paranormals would actively engage in sex in her ball, she had not put a ban on such an activity. That tantalizing possibility drew many Kindred toward the thralls and ghouls, with obvious intent to render them catatonic in sexual bliss, only to be taken back to their lair to be thoroughly ravaged. Tonight, it would not have surprised the Prince if the kine were ravaged here instead.

She grinned as she noticed Harcourt gulp. Yes, his eyes had begun to look past the Kindred that currently surrounded him, and out to the rest of the ball, where the creatures of the night were beginning to give into their more appealing natures.

Many of the female kine’s dresses no longer covered their breasts. Dresses had been pulled down, revealing bosoms of all sizes, bare and beautiful. Skirts had been pulled aside, and panties removed, giving free access to their smooth, wet slits. Not far from Antoinette and the group around her, one woman had a set of fangs in her neck as a man hugged her from behind, and fingered her, earning tiny squeaks of desperation and pleasure. Not far from her, was another female kine, and this one had been stripped bare, not a shred of clothes left on her save for her cute heels. Two men and two women surrounded her, Kindred, and all four of them had their hands on her, massaging, kneading, prying, opening, fingering.

On the other side of the ballroom, where some tables were adorned with trays and glasses, a male lay on his back. His shirt was open to reveal his chest, and one Kindred leaned over it to both kiss and Kiss his muscles. Another Kindred, a woman, stood between the man’s legs, and had the kine’s shaft in her hand, through the man’s

boxers. Judging by the small trail of blood on the corner of her mouth, she had already fed, and was eager to see the kine orgasm as her friend also partook.

Not far from them, another male kine was in the same position, lain upon a table. Two women were Kissing him, each draining the man slowly, with obvious intent to milk his pleasure, and their own. Another Kindred stood between his legs, and was letting her impressive bust devour the man's length. She had pulled the black straps of her dress apart to reveal her breasts, though Antoinette could see she had yet to feed. She was waiting for her turn, and would likely have her chest coated in cum before it was. Naturally, after having been dismissed by Isabella earlier, Othello was enjoying his ghoul's touch, and sharing her with one of the female Kindred as well.

For all this blatant sexuality, it was witnessing the Uratha involve themselves that earned a smile from Antoinette. Avery's attempt to communicate with Jacob had been doomed to failure, but that did not stop her pack from integrating themselves with the rest of the Kindred. Mason and Tilly were enjoying themselves, chatting and laughing, and from the body language, Antoinette expected the man to be inside his girlfriend within the next fifteen minutes, likely pinning her to a wall while she Kissed him. Natasha, sweet Natasha, stood with her boyfriends, and while she was trying to talk, the two men were touching her. The balance of frustration and enjoyment on her face was delightful.

The werewolf Brianna stood with a man, and—no, two men, both Kindred. Surprising. Antoinette knew them, Invictus neonates about to enter their ancilla years, a Ventrue and a Gangrel. Both of them were close to her, quite close, enough for chests to be touching her shoulders, and for the two of them to have their lips to her neck. The Ventrue had a hand pressing against the front of her long skirt, fondling and caressing through it against her panties, and the Gangrel was hugged from behind with one hand, while his other

hand fondled one of her breasts through the lacy dress. The only reason they had not removed the dress from the drunk, and clearly excited werewolf, was that her dress covered her shoulder to ankle. Mostly see-through, with only a few coiling bits of solid black to hide her nipples and underwear, the dress was ultimately too thin a fabric to prevent thirsting Kindred from indulging themselves with her body.

Once they sank their fangs into her, they would have to hold her up to keep her from falling in orgasm.

More of the Uratha mingled with the Kindred. Carter spoke with several female Kindred, young things that were clearly intrigued by the man's older looks. One of them was quite content to press her breasts into his arm, and the other looked to be quietly begging for the man to lower his neck, so she could Kiss him. Her hand massaged the erection Antoinette could see pressing against his pants. Caleb was in a kissing match with a very fiery woman Kindred, and his hands were kneading her ass with abandon. Noah was doing his best to fend off the advances of literally five women, though as their attentions grew more and more blatant and erotic, Antoinette could see the rising hunger in the werewolf's face. Erica and a Carthian were also engaged in a rather passionate kiss, and grinding their bodies against each other against the side of the stairway. Judging from where their hands were going, they would be the first to charge past foreplay and into actual sex.

Antoinette gestured to Harcourt, and then to the scene around them. The hunters, finally noticing the extreme eroticism that surrounded them, each downed their drinks, and reached for seconds. Fiona giggled and reached for a drink to do the same, eyes scanning the sexual wonders around her, but a small slap on the hand from her Gangrel friend stopped her.

“Ha, I know, right?” Jessy said to the hunters, while simultaneously holding off Fiona's advancing, fist-throwing body

with a hand to the small woman's forehead, arm stretched out. "I—Samantha!" Jessy abandoned Eric and Fiona, and slid over to grab Samantha's hand as the woman approached. "Girl, can't believe you did that."

Ashley and Julee, no longer needed as guard for Samantha, rejoined Antoinette.

"Did what?" Samantha said, though as she said it, her eyes looked around in shock at the sexual displays. Her gaze lingered on Brianna especially, as the woman, still being fondled and stroked through her dress, quickly approached orgasm, judging from the embarrassed expression on her face, and the hanging jaw.

"Forgave Athalia."

"Well, I ... um..."

"Miss Herrington," Antoinette said, with a hint of ice in her voice, "do not broach such personal subjects with my childe so freely."

Jessy winced as she realized her mistake. "Ah, right. Sorry."

With an annoyed sigh, Antoinette looked over her shoulder to Athalia. She remained with Daniel, and likely would continue to do so until she left; he was the only one at the party she knew, that she did not despise. It was too much to hope that the woman would socialize and enjoy herself tonight, not after losing her daughter a mere four nights past. But, she was speaking with Daniel, and he with her. That alone was a surprising step.

Jack approached, Damien behind him, their conversation with Jacob done. Aaron joined the old Nosferatu, while Beatrice rejoined Jennifer as she continued to walk Sándor around the ball. They talked with the Carthians, Garry mostly, and they spoke with some Invictus; it was more accurate to say that Jen spoke. Beatrice seemed largely disinterested with speaking with others, except for

perhaps a few short exchanges with her old covenant leader. Sándor seemed largely disinterested with speaking with anyone at all. Watching the young Ventrue try and break the Begotten made Antoinette smile, as she made the inevitable comparison to Elaine and Daniel. Elaine's efforts with Daniel had proved fruitless over the decades, but perhaps Jennifer's efforts would find better results.

"Prince," Jack said, returned. He nodded to everyone, and his smile grew as he stepped up to his mother. "Mom. Glad things worked out."

"I told you they would."

The boy's smile faltered for a moment. Undoubtedly, he was struggling to suppress his natural desire to argue, analyze, and bombard his mother with irrefutable facts that proved his point. But the boy had grown wisdom, and decided to not pursue his overwhelming urge to debate. Later, Antoinette would entertain his need to do so, and let the boy vent.

"I'm glad you were right."

With a happy smile, Samantha hugged her son, gasped, and looked past Jack to some of the sexual sights beyond.

"Jack, cover your eyes!"

He raised a brow, looked behind him, and before he could say anything, Jessy roared with laughter. Poor, sweet Samantha, attempting to hide her son from the sexual feast around her.

"Lass," Fiona said, accent far thicker than before, "yer wee lad fucks three lassies almost every night, ye ken?"

Jack, Eric, Damien, and Jessy laughed more, some others groaned, and before Fiona could continue, Damien took her hand, and pulled her away from the group. From the look on his face, he

was not upset with her, but a sympathetic look from him for Jack made it clear he was doing his friend a favor.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” Samantha said with a nod.

Elaine laughed, a hearty sound that had everyone smiling. “Come now, young Daeva. Embrace the pleasures around you. Your enemy is defeated, and food is in excess. What possible reason could you not have to indulge yourself?”

“I ... I’m not sure I’m ready to indulge myself, like that.”

“And,” Jack said, “I’m not entirely sure I’m ready to see my mom indulge like that. We can at least wait until the party’s over?”

Antoinette smiled down at her lover, leaned in, and set a kiss on his forehead. “A reasonable request.”

“And ... um.” Samantha scratched her arm several times as she cast her gaze past them, to the eyeless Nosferatu standing with Aaron. “Can Natasha show me around again, sire?” Yes, Natasha had not shown many to Samantha, before Athalia arrived and interrupted.

It took effort to keep the frown off her face. “Yes, I am sure she will. Go speak with her, before she vanishes into the night to be with her lovers.” A momentary trade of eyes between her and her childe made it clear what she thought of Samantha’s intent. Speaking with Jacob was not an intelligent idea, but the current venue was one of the better ones, if the foolish girl insisted on such a dangerous game.

Samantha nodded her head to her, pat Jack on the arm once, and walked toward the pack of wolves, where Natasha stood near Avery, Clara, Matthew, and Arturo.

Jack watched after her, sighed, rolled his eyes, and looked to the hunters. “I hope you three can enjoy the party, after the shit that’s happened.”

“Ch’yeah,” Harcourt said. “I mean, before, I definitely would have said no. But, after getting to meet a bunch of you, and ... well, getting to meet her,” he gestured toward Samantha, “I can ... relax a little more.” As if to seal his point, he downed his second drink.

Jack smiled at them, and Antoinette watched the tension in his shoulders fade. Forever her Jack concerned himself with the reactions of others now. No doubt her assault on Mark in her tower likely weighed on his mind, and the possible ramifications it would have with Azamel. And, as much as the night was meant for celebration, to relax, enjoy, and bask in the feast, the boy looked left and right constantly to take stock of the situation. But, as the night went on, and not only did the Kindred succumb to their sexual hungers, but the Uratha did as well, she could see the stress on her lover ease. He was slowly abandoning his role as peace maker, for the night at least.

The stress returned, when he looked to Elaine.

“Jack,” Antoinette said, “the ball goes well. I believe that, perhaps now would be a good moment to speak to Elaine and I, of what you wished to speak of?” And, it would be good to distract him before he interfered with his mother’s intent. Antoinette did not agree with Samantha’s actions, but would not stop her, either.

He looked up at her, met her gaze for several moments, searching, before nodding. “Sure. Is ... there somewhere private we can talk?” There was hesitation in his words. He would have preferred to have this conversation later, but she ached to know what secret her lover hid from her. One did not need to be a Mekhet to be lured by the promise of knowledge.

“I believe the roof will suffice. Coming, Elaine?”

“Of course.” Elaine smiled, her usual, confident, but analyzing smile. A Ventrue smile.

Antoinette guided the two Ventrue through the crowd, though truthfully, the crowd parted for them. Those in the throes of passion were far too lost to acknowledge her presence though, and did not move from their perches; she did not mind. She smiled at them as she walked past, and let her eyes rest on Brianna for a moment longer than the others. The two men had finally begun to truly Kiss her, each taking one side of her dark neck, while rubbing her clitoris through her skirt. The effect was pronounced. The werewolf’s moan was quiet, and almost lost to the music, but her quivering legs were far more obvious, and the two Kindred held her close to keep her from falling.

The Gangrel lifted her long skirt. She did not stop him. Soon, the fabric was pulled up to her hip, exposing her long, dark legs, and the tiny black panties she wore underneath the mostly see-through dress. The man slipped his fingers underneath the underwear, and began to finger the woman in earnest, earning some rumbling groans from the Uratha that sounded far more wolfish than human. Such a delectable display. Were it not for the kine being treated to similar pleasure around her, Antoinette doubted the werewolf would have let the two vampires feast upon her, let alone feast while fondling, caressing, and fingering. Brianna was blending in.

Better still, was how the other Uratha did not seem disturbed by this. They had expected it. Their integration with Dolareido was complete, more or less, and while Antoinette did not appreciate them sticking their long noses into her business or her city’s business, she had to admit, they had their value.

Up the stairs, and past the band, she guided the two Ventrue to a third stairway, something far less luxurious and lavish. Up and up it went, until a door opened onto the roof of the Black Hall.



The Black Hall was not a terribly tall build. Quite wide, its ballroom its single purpose. And she had insured no towering skyscrapers stood too near, allowing for the building to stand beautiful in its surroundings. It certainly did not carry the power and imposing demeanor of her grand Elysium Tower, but it was beautiful.

Jack walked to the railing, nearly waist high, thick and ornate marble with curving surfaces. He looked out to the city streets for a moment before turning his back to it as he folded his arms across his chest. Where Antoinette had expected to find a smile on Jack's face, as the looming possibility of seeing Elaine naked drew near, she instead found neutrality, and perhaps a touch of concern. Even anger.

“Jack,” Antoinette said, standing next to her friend, “what is it?”

The boy looked at her for only moments, before his eyes settled on Elaine. Again, where Antoinette had expected to have thoroughly corrupted her lover's thoughts, so that he could think of nothing else except for her and her friend nude, she instead found something else entirely in his gaze. His eyes were locked onto his old friend's eyes, as if battling her.

“How much do you know about Elaine?” Jack said, asking her, but gaze locked onto the elder Ventrue.

“I ... have known Elaine for centuries. She is a fellow dragon, and we have shared in our experiments, our secrets, and more.”

With a slow, heavy sigh, Elaine's unending, confident smile faded, and she looked down. “How did you find out?”

What? Antoinette snapped her head back to look to her love, then to Elaine, but said nothing. It appeared she was the ignorant one in this exchange.

“Before I broke the curse free of its seal, it showed me things. It showed me ... shadows of memories, of things my sires experienced, before they embraced their childe. I saw things Julias did before embracing me. I saw things Viktor did, before embracing Julias. And I saw things Viktor’s sire did, before she embraced him. A whore in the streets of England, playing her games, until she found someone she...” He shrugged, and rubbed his head as he looked down. Much as he was trying to sound confident, it was apparent the conversation was painful for him. “And, I can remember Susanna, my great, great grandsire, embracing—”

“Elaine,” Antoinette finished for him. She took a small step back from her old friend, and squinted her eyes at the woman.

Elaine let out a long, sad sigh, looked up, and offered her a small smile. “I guess my secret is out, Ann.” Slowly, she looked to Jack, and the small smile remained. “Hello, my dear great grandchilde. I am ... glad, that the curse has not undone you, as it nearly did me.”

## Chapter 117

~~Natasha~~

“Sire,” she said.

“Natasha.” Daniel looked down at her, then to Athalia. “Athalia, do you—”

“Speak with your childe.”

The sheriff adjusted his glasses, a single finger against the bridge, same as always. “I’d prefer you stayed for a while.”

Athalia rolled her eyes. “I ... will, ok? Jesus, I’m not going to explode or anything.”

Natasha tried to meet Athalia’s eyes, but the moment the tall, dark-skinned woman looked at her, Natasha looked down. Those weren’t eyes she wanted to look into, not now, not yet. Just the thought of what Athalia must have been feeling was enough to have Natasha on the verge of tears; not that she could cry while not Blushing, but still. The poor woman.

Athalia didn’t go far, just a few steps back. Other than Daniel, Fiona was the only person at the ball Athalia would want to be near, and Fiona was with Damien. It’d been an adorable sight, Fiona trying to walk while drunk, in high heels, dragging Damien around the ball. The twinkle in the drunk girl’s eyes said everything: she wanted to have sex with her dark, mysterious, well-dressed vampire. That meant she couldn’t be a social anchor for Athalia, while Daniel could be.

Natasha peeked past her sire at the woman again, before nodding to him, and then nodding toward Jacob in the distance. “Um ... is

that ok?”

“You tell me. You took her over there.”

Samantha had asked Tash to introduce her to Jacob. She had, stuttering up a mess, but she had. Then she'd backed off, and did her best to casually join Daniel, to get his take, or at least get his eyes on Jacob.

“I d-don't know. I ... have a hard time trusting Jacob. I can't t-t-tell what he wants.”

“Wants from what?”

“From ... life? Or unlife?”

Daniel sighed, nodded, and watched Jacob with cold eyes. “He's up to something, Natasha. Keep an eye on him.”

Keep an eye on Jacob, right, like she wasn't already doing that with extreme prejudice. The man was terrifying, and it blew her mind that Samantha didn't seem to care. Despite her warnings, and Antoinette's warnings, Samantha was content to talk to the man, like she had with Athalia. Even more surprising, was how Jacob looked happy to talk to her. Samantha's body language grew calmer, as did Jacob's, and the two laughed as Jacob told some sort of joke.

Samantha adjusted her hair and shifted her weight from foot to foot a little, in a subtle but not too subtle flirt. Natasha frowned. Jack was not going to like this.

Natasha looked across the ball to her boyfriends, who were hanging with Avery and Clara. Sex surrounded them. Not actual sex, since no one had penetrated anyone yet, but the room was filling with soft moans, as arousal began to soar. The poor werewolves, surrounded by hormones, and unable to control their own.

The music changed to something a little less classical, and a little more ... jazz? Slow, but pleasing, and almost naughty sounding. Something Antoinette had picked out probably, and told the musicians to play when things began to heat up.

She looked to her right, and sighed as she watched a male kine, now completely naked and lying on a table, begin to cum onto his stomach and onto a woman's breasts. Two women were around him, Kissing him, and a third one strolled up like everything was perfectly normal, and sank her fangs into his wrist. A female kine was in a similar boat, lying on a table as well, and being devoured from all directions, including between her legs.

Several of the waiters and waitresses had been robbed of their clothing, left to walk around in their underwear and bras. Those would be gone soon, once a hungry Kindred decided to partake of them, instead of the unfulfilling glasses of old blood. And from the looks on the waiters' and waitresses' eyes, and from their erections and hard nipples, they were eagerly anticipating that moment.

Natasha squirmed as she spotted Mason through the crowd. It was hard to see him past all the shoulders, but between moving bodies, she managed to spot him with his girlfriend Tilly pressed to a wall. He wasn't just kissing and fondling her. He was fucking her.

Things quickly devolved from there, as people noticed the hungry werewolf had actually penetrated his girlfriend. While these balls had a habit of being very sexual, with thralls and ghouls being caressed and massaged first, then kissed and fondled, then Kissed and treated to fellatio, cunnilingus, and everything up to, just not including, actual sex. The Kindred didn't indulge themselves to orgasm at these parties, usually. That came when they took the kine home after the party, or they rushed out to find unsuspecting kine to hunt, Kiss, and fuck into comas.

That wasn't what was happening tonight. Maybe it was because of the Uratha, and Mason's actual willingness to fuck. Maybe it was larger than that, tensions having finally given way since the hunters were no longer a threat. Or maybe it was the spice of having some of those very hunters in the ball, who Tash could see were slowly getting more drunk, and more aroused. Something had snapped in the crowd, and Kindred began to indulge more than Natasha had ever seen.

Brianna suddenly had her two vampire friends pressing their bodies against hers, from front and behind, and the one in front of her pulled his pants down, took out his cock, and sank it into her. Not exactly the best position for her to enjoy, except, from the expression on her face, she looked like she came instantly the moment the man entered her. He pressed his body tight to hers, as did the man behind her, hiding the fact they were having sex, though her skirt was still pulled up over her hips, and her panties were gone. She hugged the man in front of her, ground her pelvis against his, and shuddered as the two men continued to slowly drown her in pleasure with the Kiss.

Natasha gulped and looked around some more. According to her boss, balls used to be like this, before Lucas, and before Garry rose to be a covenant leader. When Dolareido was still young and a lot smaller, and light bulbs hadn't become a thing yet, Kindred would gather in a big room in a mansion, filled with thralls and ghouls, and everything would descend into a feast orgy. In the darkness, lit only by gentle candlelight, kine would be Kissed and fucked until utterly exhausted. And when they were, Kindred would fuck each other.

No candles this night, and a lot more people. She doubted it'd turn into a full orgy, with everyone fucking everyone, but that didn't mean it wouldn't get very, very close.

She licked her fangs, and looked around a little more. The hunters were defeated, unable to resist the approaching vampires, or the tingle of alcohol in their veins. Isabella's troupe had likely used some Majesty on them, but it'd be temporary, and as much as Natasha didn't necessarily like being that forceful with kine, she could see the three hunters were enjoying themselves immensely.

Both Dennis and Harcourt each had two women on them, kissing and kissing. One of them pulled up her skirt, lifted a leg, and leaned into Harcourt, encouraging the man to hook her leg with his arm, while she looked him in the eyes, and talked to him, a casual conversation Natasha couldn't hear. Poor guy was way too nice, and drunk, to say no, and the moment he gave in, Dennis found himself in the same situation.

Marge had three men on her. Natasha was tempted to interfere, since Marge looked like such a small and innocent thing, but after looking at her for a few seconds, Natasha quivered. It was like looking into a mirror. Much as Marge was clearly being forced into a super embarrassing and overwhelming situation she didn't seem to want to be in, Natasha recognized the sweet hunger in her eyes, those 'oh please don't ravage me, I'm too sweet and innocent' eyes. She wanted to be ravaged. It may not have been what she expected to happen tonight, but that didn't mean Natasha couldn't see the obvious desire on her face.

One of the vampires leaned in and sank his teeth into her neck, and she melted instantly, mouth opening and eyes rolling upward. She struggled, tried to get away, but it was a weak attempt, and not because of the Kiss, but because she didn't really want to escape. Natasha squirmed as she watched the small woman disappear between the three men, but between two of their bodies, she could see a sliver of the woman, and the trembling of her body, as one of the men slid his hand under her skirt. Her tiny squeaks were audible, and as she started to quiver in bliss, a few more of Isabella's troupe turned to watch the hunter orgasm.

Humans were slaves to their hormones, and it wouldn't take much from any Daeva to break them. Well, maybe it would, since the hunters had tattoos and stuff that supposedly fought off vampire Disciplines. If those tattoos were working, then either they weren't working very well, or the hunters found themselves giving into the erotic atmosphere naturally, same as the thralls and ghouls.

It took a moment for Tash to realize she'd lost track of time, and had spent the past ten minutes watching people have sex. She snapped her head back to Samantha, except, there was no Samantha. She blinked several times, leaned forward, and tried to see past as many shoulders as she could.

“Um, sire, where is—”

“Samantha's outside, with Jacob.”

“What?”

“He hid them both in his Cloak, and now they're outside.”

“What!?” She stepped in close to her sire, and elbowed him in the side. Not the smartest move on her part, irritating her sire, but this was an emergency. “G-Go after them!”

Daniel let out a quiet sigh, set a finger to his ear, and touched the earpiece there. “Report on the warlock? ... alright.” He looked at Natasha, adjusted his glasses, and smiled slightly. “They're sitting on a bench and talking, not far from the ball. Samantha probably felt uncomfortable with...” He gestured to the growing eroticism.

“I ... can't b-believe she's talking to him.”

“She doesn't know Jacob, like we do. To her, the man is an intriguing figure.”



Well, Jacob was intriguing, Tash had to agree with that. But he was also terrifying. She'd dealt with elders for a couple decades, when her skills had launched her career in the Invictus, and soon earned her a position as a Right Hand. Of the three elders she'd dealt with dozens of times, Viktor had been the most intimidating, sometimes outright horrifying to speak to, but even he didn't scare her like Jacob did.

Which, now that she thought about it, wasn't really fair. Jacob was terrifying because she knew he was powerful, possibly the most powerful vampire in the city, and he was very unpredictable, but his actions weren't all that horrible. As far as she knew, he'd never actually done anything to directly harm the Prince, the city, or even actively fought to acquire territory. Jacob was content to do his own thing, and barely involve himself in the Danse Macabre. And, even more strangely, the Prince considered him to be something of a friend.

Natasha was more concerned with Samantha talking with Jacob, than the Prince would be, or than Daniel apparently was. If Jacob wanted to get his hands on Samantha, it wasn't like the elder couldn't just sneak-sneak and kidnap her. He might even protect her, if a circumstance arose that meant Samantha was in danger.

Or, he could slip her some of his blood, addict her to vitae, addict her to him, and turn her into a bound thrall, a vampire trapped in the Vinculum. Well, true as that might be, it wasn't like Samantha had the acting skills to hide such a condition.

The more Natasha thought about it, the more she couldn't find a circumstance where letting Samantha talk to Jacob was a real problem. If Jacob was doing nasty things, things that the Prince would want to stop, Samantha talking to him would hardly change that. And she wouldn't be able to stop Jacob from kidnapping, enslaving, or killing her anyway, if that was his goal. Better yet, if Jacob wasn't actually an enemy, the two becoming friends would be

good for relations. Minerva had been friends with both Antoinette and Jacob, after all.

So, the best course of action, was to trust Jacob ... a little. And that was a very hard thing to do.

“So you’re going t-to let her go?”

“She has a phone, my childe. I am sure she will contact the Prince to let her know what’s happening.”

Tash frowned. “Do you ... w-want to let her go?”

“No. I trust Jacob less than the Prince does. But you know as well as I, that if Jacob wished to strike us through Samantha, we could hardly stop him ... only retaliate.” And, retaliation would mean Jacob’s death, judging from the stone cold glare her sire gave her.

Tash doubted her sire trusted anyone except for the Prince. The two had worked together for centuries, and were huge figures in the Ordo Dracul. An unbreakable pair. A shame Jacob had no one like that for support.

Sighing, she nodded. “I’m going to t-talk to Beatrice. Maybe ... maybe.”

Daniel nodded. “Maybe.”

Maybe Triss could give her a hint about Jacob’s intentions. A long shot, especially since Jacob told his witches less than Antoinette told Tash, and Tash only knew a little about the Ordo Dracul.

She found the witches, and walked over to them. The quiet one, Aaron, was gone, or maybe hanging out where she couldn’t see him. Maybe he went outside, like she wanted to, cause parties were overwhelming. Moving through the crowd was horrible, and she shuddered as she brushed shoulders with people. Way, way too

many people for her to be comfortable. Once she talked with Triss, she'd go get her boyfriends, and they'd leave.

All around her, the sex continued. This was crazy! Never ever had these parties gotten so out of hand before. It wasn't just the kine getting treated to Kisses and orgasms, it was Kindred as well. While plenty of Kindred were now actually having sex with kine, some Kindred were having sex with each other. More than a few of the Carthians had taken advantage of each other, when one was busy Kissing a meal. A feeding vampire was a momentarily helpless, very horny creature, and a horny friend could easily turn that into a sexual situation. And they were.

Beatrice, Jennifer, and Sándor were near the stairway, where they could stand beside it so they had at least one flank not surrounded by sex.

"Hi Triss. J-Jen. Sándor," she said once she got close.

"Tash," Triss said at her, smiling. It was always a little disturbing, Triss's smile. Such a beautiful face, but the crocodile teeth where cheeks should have been always threw her off, until she adjusted. But, it was great to see the young Nos smile again. "Surprised you're still here. Your boys are, uh, yeah." She gestured toward Matthew and Arturo.

A few women had approached the two werewolves, and were blatantly flirting with them. The three vampires had fed, judging from the smiles on their faces and warm tints in their skin, and all three were likely looking for someone to satisfy their Blush-awakened urges. Jealousy crept up Tash's spine, but she dismissed it with a shrug. She trusted her boyfriends, and it was only natural that the werewolves would be feeling the impact of the bubbling sexuality in the room, more than the other races.

Once she left the party with them, she knew what was going to happen. They were going to take her, pin her down, and do naughty

things to her, even if she said ‘no, please, stop’, just like Marge. Which sounded horrible! Horrible, bad, mean, and ... tantalizing.

“They’ll b-be fine. I wanted to ... um, I d-don’t know. Check up on you? I missed the fight, and I feel guilty.”

Triss laughed and shrugged. “It wouldn’t have mattered. Everything was finished by Jack, in the end. And Sándor, I suppose.” She gestured to the man beside her, his arm still locked with Jen’s.

Sándor’s expression wasn’t too different than Tash’s. He didn’t want to be at the party either. But, unlike Tash, it looked like he was uncomfortable with all the sex. Not that Tash was comfortable with it, but considering the twists and turns her life had taken lately, being in a ball that was evolving into an orgy, was not all that overwhelming. Being almost shoulder-to-shoulder with them was overwhelming, but the fact many were half naked, and fucking either thralls, ghouls, or each other, only hit a six or seven on her embarrassment scale; it would have hit a nine, just a few years ago.

Sándor was a gorgeous man. A little tall, and thinner than her boyfriends, but since his shirt was open, she could see he was nothing but muscle. His buzzed dark hair, dreamy blue eyes, and hard chin, combined with the dark gruff on his face, were very attractive, and she smiled at him as they made eye contact. He looked away a second later, eyes yanked by the sounds of moans and groans. The Kindred did a good job of being quiet as they Kissed and fucked. The humans and the werewolves, not so much.

Tash watched the Begotten for a few seconds, analyzing. He seemed very closed off, stoic even, and it only added to his attraction. No wonder Jennifer seemed so intent on cracking his shell. And there was the gargoyle monster too, Natasha remembered that well. It’d been enormous, imposing, terrifying, and strangely majestic, even handsome, in a ‘oh god it’s going to eat me’ kinda way.

“Look at this, look at this,” Jennifer said, looking to the hunters. Isabella’s troupe had surrounded them, to the point it looked like a bunch of lions circling prey. Dennis and Harcourt each had hands down their pants, the hands of female Kindred, and several of them at that. Marge still had three men with their hands inside her dress, fondling, massaging, fingering.

“Think we should ... d-d-do something?” Tash said

Jennifer shook her head. “Oh come now. They’re perfectly safe, and the least they can do to repay Antoinette and Jack for sparing their lives, is share their blood. Though, I suspect by the time the ball is over, the three of them will be catatonic.”

Tash rolled her eyes, but watched a little longer. The way the three men pushed themselves onto Marge despite her weak struggles, and the obvious pleasure in her eyes, was just too damn erotic, and familiar. It was giving her ideas for her next movie.

“How are you, Sándor?” Tash said. “Uncomfortable? Me t-too.”

“This is...” The man looked around at the evolving sexual display, and carried a tiny frown for a second, before he turned into stone again. “I’m not used to so much open sex.”

“You said you were a lot older than you look,” Beatrice said. “I’m sure you’ve been around vampires before.”

“Yes, but ... never this close.” Sándor nodded his head slowly, but his eyes flicked around to some more sexual displays. Brianna was still being fucked, and she wasn’t too far from them, around the corner of the staircase where it met the wall. She had her hands on the Ventrue’s shoulders, still standing, still penetrated from the front, still with her breasts pressed to his chest. The Gangrel ground against her ass, not penetrating, but Tash could see his pants were open, and his cock was wedged along the crack of her ass.

“No wonder Samantha left,” Triss said, laughing. “Holy shit, this place just exploded, didn’t it?”

“She left ... to speak with J-Jacob.”

“Ah, right.” The Nosferatu nodded, and stepped in a little closer to Natasha. “I suppose you wanted to ask what that’s about?”

“Y-Yes. I worry about her.” Samantha was far too nice and naive to be in the Ordo. Considering who her sire was, Samantha would have plenty of time to grow up into tougher, smarter Kindred under Antoinette’s protection. But she did have to grow up. In the mean time, Natasha had to worry about her fellow, young dragon. “Has Jacob spoken t-to you about her?”

“He mentioned her once. Said he thought she was cute, and interesting, cause of her eyes.”

“Her eyes?”

Triss nodded. “She has Jack’s eyes.”

Tash smiled at that. It was true. Samantha had Jack’s eyes, and their capacity to say a million words with a single look. Intense eyes.

“Jacob’s outside, t-talking with her right now. Should ... should I be worried?”

Laughing, Triss shrugged. “Uh, I’m not sure how to answer that. Jacob won’t do anything to hurt her, if that’s what you mean.”

A tricky situation. Tash couldn’t outright say she didn’t trust Jacob to not do something to Samantha, but then again, it wasn’t like Beatrice wouldn’t already suspect Tash of suspecting that. How to play this, then? Antoinette could dance the Danse as easily as kine breathed. What would she do? She’d say something that committed to nothing, but held powerful subtext.

“Jacob ... is a d-dangerous man,” she said. “He makes p-p-people nervous.”

Jennifer and Beatrice looked at her, and their eyes widened slightly. Her words were a hint, just a tiny hint, that maybe some people didn't like that Jacob was talking to Samantha. Antoinette didn't. Daniel very much didn't. And Jack most certainly wouldn't. The Prince and the sheriff were scary foes to have, but it was Jack that the witches had seen in action. It was Jack, that the whole city was now a little scared of. It was Jack, that Natasha was warning them about.

“He is dangerous, I'll give you that,” Triss said, nodding. “But I'm keeping an eye on him. I can't imagine he's talking with Samantha for any other reason than because he thinks she's interesting. Cross my heart.”

Natasha smiled, nodded, and looked around some more. Othello was nearby, and was sharing his ghoul with a woman, a vampire of the Carthians. The poor ghoul was completely naked, dark skin visible for all to see. But, instead of being fucked from the front for a very intimate Kiss, it seemed like she'd already been Kissed, at least a little. He was fucking her from behind, hands wrapped around her hips, her breasts bouncing and her large ass rippling as it collided with his pelvis. The Carthian stood in front of Madison, pressing her chest into the woman's bare breasts, and Kissing her neck, as Othello fucked her into what must have been a fifth or sixth orgasm.

“I don't understand,” Sándor said, eyes squinting slightly as he glared around at the ever growing eroticism. “How can everyone be so comfortable with sex?”

Jennifer laughed and pat the man on the arm. “It's what happens when Kindred are at peace, and we have no need to fight for food. When we can enjoy the hunt and the pleasure the Kiss brings and

gives, things get sexual very quickly. Combined with the Prince's natural Daeva tendencies, and her view that sexuality should be embraced as an art form, displays such as these are inevitable." After a moment, she tapped her chin with a finger. "Though, they don't usually get so ... blatantly sexual. Kindred would normally indulge the kine, but not have sex with them. At least not here."

"I think it's the wolves' fault," Triss said, gesturing to them. "Just the smell of their horniness is bound to draw people in, flies to honey." The pack had spread out quite a bit, and at least half of the pack were sharing their blood with horny vampires. Well, the Uratha had spent many months in Dolareido now, and had made friends with various Kindred. It was only a matter of time before more vampires than Tash or Tilly got to sink their teeth into them.

"You can smell them specifically?" Sándor said.

The three women raised brows as they looked at him.

"You can't?" Jen said.

"No. I hunt by sight."

Ah, like an eagle or something. Well, he was a gargoyle. If it was his Horror's nature to stand on top of super tall buildings, and look down below for tasty targets, quality eyesight over smell made sense.

"We c-can smell it," Tash said. "And, if we can, the Uratha are p-p-probably—"

"Boiling in their clothes," Jennifer said, her evil grin now pointed at Natasha. She knew what Matthew and Arturo were going to do to her, the moment they were out of the party. Or possibly before they were out of the party. If Tash wasn't careful, they might grab her here and now, and fuck her where everyone could see.



Would that be so bad? It wasn't like she was as uncomfortable with sex and her body as she used to be. She'd had sex in front of Jessy and with her ghouls, before she even met Matt and Art! And now she was making sex films, because it was fun and satisfying. It was a project she could nerd-out on, obsess over, master, while also being super enjoyable, sexually speaking. And showing it to Jessy, and Eric, had been nerve racking, but also exciting. The result, knowing that it had been a very arousing watch for them, had been exhilarating, and validating. It felt good, knowing that people found her attractive, and it felt good to show off a little. Antoinette would have loved to hear her say those words.

Of course, there was a difference between the very controlled environment of a film shoot, and knowing only select people would get to see said film, than having sex in the middle of a Kindred ball, where the majority of Kindred would get to see her naked, and penetrated. Too much, way way way too much. Maybe in a hundred years, but for now, too much.

Tash spotted many of the Uratha, but Avery and Clara were gone. Avery probably left to find and have sex with her kine boyfriend, some random man she'd apparently become close with. Clara, she didn't know. Maybe she was still having sex with Jessy's ghouls? If Jessy was attempting to convert Clara into being as sexually open minded as her, it didn't seem to be working. Clara probably felt guilty, for giving into her hormones and having sex with four attractive men, rather than satisfied.

Maybe Tash should talk to Jessy about that.

Shaking out her shoulders a little, Tash adjusted her hair, and looked for her friend. "I'm going t-to talk to Jessy again. I'll speak to you guys later?" Sándor didn't say anything, and continued to look around him, bewildered by the growing orgy. Jen and Triss nodded, though. "And, uh ... Sándor, um. I know it's ... w-weird, in D-D-Dolareido. But, this is the happiest Kindred have been in ... d-

decades. This is how a lot of Kindred express that. Sex, and similar things. D-Dolareido is like that.” She almost said ‘you can enjoy it too’, but didn’t. It wouldn’t be fair to push him too hard, considering what he’d lost. Hopefully Jen realized that.

It took a little while to find Jessy, but she found her at last. She expected to find her having sex with Eric, or at least groping him, but she stood with a glass of blood in her hand, still completely clothed, and not Blushing Life. The wicked grin on her face said a million words. While she was capable of ignoring her arousal, poor Eric looked around with flicking glances, not unlike an animal scanning for prey. The smell of sex, of lust, hunger, sweat, and blood, was driving him closer and closer to an animal frenzy.

“Tash,” Jessy said, “those witches looking to fuck Sándor?”

“Um, I ... don’t think so. Jen’s d-definitely trying to make him an ally, but I don’t know if she’s actively trying to have s-sex with him.” Jen was young, and Natasha still didn’t understand her very well, except that she carried the same confidence and directness most Ventrue did. At the last ball, she’d gotten her hands and breasts quite messy, pleasuring multiple kine for the feast. To see her take her time with Sándor was confusing. Then again, Sándor seemed to have more than enough self control to dismiss her if she pushed him too hard.

Beatrice was the reason. Jennifer liked Beatrice, a lot. Her behavior had changed because of her, and if Jennifer was trying to seduce Sándor, she was doing it because she thought it was a way to help Triss. The thought made Tash smile. Well, good luck to her, because Sándor looked like as hard a nut to crack as Daniel.

“Well, I hope they succeed,” Jessy said. “Dude’s fucking crazy strong.”

Eric nodded. “Yeah, he is.”

“And hot,” Jessy amended.

Eric rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I guess he is.”

Jessy laughed and thumped her boyfriend in the shoulder with her free hand. “Ha, gay.” Politically correct, Jessy was not.

Tash smiled at Eric. “Um, how are you d-doing? Things are getting ... p-pretty crazy.”

The man shook his head, a hard shake meant to dislodge rising thoughts. “Even at the craziest parties I went to at the height of my fighting career, with people getting wasted and high in every corner of the room, snorting lines off tits and silver trays, people didn’t start fucking like this.” He frowned, scratched his neck, and looked beside him at how one of the waitresses, now completely naked, was still taking her tray of blood-filled glasses around. From the look on her face, and hardness of her nipples, she was just waiting for someone to pounce her and Kiss her. “Granted, they were a lot louder, and sometimes rowdier.”

The beautiful waitress came close to Jessy, Eric, and Tash, obviously hoping for something to happen, but Jessy shooed her along, and the poor girl walked away. Natasha had no doubt someone would satisfy her before the night was done, though; Kindred only grew hornier the more they fed, not the other way around.

“I can see it,” Jessy said, “a bunch of rich fucks, hanging out at a celebrity party, cutting loose after a fight? I wonder how many of them were just kids, barely eighteen, living the highlife on their parents’ money.”

“A lot of them. Way too damn young and stupid.” No wonder Eric had a thing about wanting to clean up some of the drug abuse in Dolareido, if it’d been a part of his environment as a poor child, and then again as a rich adult. The werewolf shrugged, and took a sip of

his wine. Probably not a good idea, considering that being intoxicated was why so many Uratha were giving themselves over to their arousal.

“I’m surprised you’re ... not ... I d-don’t know, groping Eric, or that waitress,” Tash said, gesturing at the naked woman walking away with the tray.

Jessy laughed. “Eric thinks I’m a hornball with no control. I’m proving him wrong.”

Poor, poor Eric. As long as Jessy didn’t Blush Life, or feast on someone, her body would remain a lifeless husk, incapable of being physically aroused. Mentally was a different matter, and Tash could see Jessy’s eyes jumping to the various sexual displays. She watched the naked waitress walk away, and then looked down at Eric’s crotch. He wasn’t erect, but he was getting there.

As if cursed by some sort of sex god, determined to make her life awkward, Matthew and Arturo joined Natasha. The two men stood behind her, leaned down, and each planted a kiss on her cheeks at the same time. So close, she could smell the hunger on them.

“This party,” Matthew said, “uh ... took off, didn’t it?”

“Yes, it did!” Jessy said, raising a glass. “Finally. I’d heard stories about how sexy these parties used to get, back before my time. Glad to see people getting Kissed and fucked in the open like this.”

“Because you want to corrupt everyone,” Eric said.

“Yes, corrupt them with the awesomeness that is sex. The Prince knows what she’s talking about. Everyone should get over their shit, and fuck in the streets.”

Arturo laughed, smiling. “I don’t think even the Prince and Invictus could suppress the news bomb of people fucking in the

streets.”

Fantasy ruined, Jessy sighed and lowered her drink. “Yeah. That sucks.” Before anyone else could say anything, she smiled an evil smile and looked at Tash and her two boyfriends. “I look forward to more movies, by the way.”

Natasha frowned, squirmed, and glanced up at the two men. They blushed, but barely. They weren’t embarrassed, or at least not very much. They probably just didn’t know how to take a compliment.

Eric coughed, and did his best to not look the two men in the eyes. “It won’t be long before the Prince, or Jessy, has us all—”

“No no!” Tash said, waving her hands. “No no, no. T-Too much.”

Everyone laughed, and then stopped, as Fiona dragged Damien past them.

“Up ‘ere!”

“There’s a way up to the roof from here, yeah.”

“Then let’s go! Ah want to see the roof!”

Tash coughed, and stared at Fiona as she guided the vampire up the stairs the way the Prince had gone. She was a very horny drunk, and apparently, very intent on fucking Damien. Poor Damien. If there was anyone in Dolareido who understood Tash’s pain in balls like this, it was Damien, and now his girlfriend was dragging him off somewhere to likely have sex.

That said, Damien had a dark side. He was calm, collected, cool and quiet on the outside, like Daniel, but Tash knew better. There was an aggressive aspect to him, hidden underneath that cold exterior. If Damien could be coaxed out of his shell, he would probably be quite the sexual animal, same as Tash knew she was.

What kind of man was Damien, when he gave into arousal?

---

~~Jack~~

Mulder and Scully flew down, and perched on a nearby power line. They didn't know who Elaine was, and until they did, they were probably happier staying out of immediate reach of potential attackers. He smiled up at them, but snapped his head back to Elaine a moment later.

“All this time, and you never told me Viktor was your childe?” Antoinette said. “And ... and ... contaminated by the Strix curse?”

“I did not want that stain to be a ... a wedge between us.”

“And yet you let him come with me to Dolareido, to help forge this city.”

Elaine frowned at her, stepped up to her, and touched her arm. “I knew you could protect yourself. Daniel was with you, as was Jacob. And I did not expect Viktor to become an enemy.”

The Prince sighed, but didn't step away from her friend. “And the curse?”

“I asked Sándor,” Jack said, “if he could see the things I know give the curse away. He said she looks perfectly normal. She's not cursed.”

Antoinette raised a brow at that, but Elaine cut in before she could say anything.

“I rarely ever deal with Begotten. I had no idea they could see the curse.”

Jack nodded. “They can see the monster in everyone. They say it's difficult to pin down exactly what a Kindred's Beast looks like,

except that they saw chains on mine and Julias's, and ... and that mine has ditched the chains, and is now grown, and twisted. Infected."

The two women looked at him then, and the difference in their expressions was startling. Antoinette was stuck somewhere between pity and surprise, concerned about him, and shocked about the whole situation. Elaine's was stuck somewhere between intrigue and dismay, probably unhappy that he knew her secret and that she was forced to share it. Her intrigue, on the other hand, sent a little chill through him. It wasn't sexual, but her eyes were pointed at him. Intrigue in the curse?

"You should have told me, Elaine."

"Yes, well, surely you can understand why I wanted to avoid speaking of Viktor. The man quickly became a ... cruel creature."

"Yes, I remember you introducing me to him, when he was still a neonate. A ... hazy memory, but I remember his cold, subtle rancor." Sighing, Antoinette pushed her friend's hand away. Gently, softly, but still away. "Yes, I can understand. Tony became a menace, as I have told you."

"After embracing Viktor, and enjoying the pleasures that path in life took me, I realized how ... problematic he was quickly becoming." Sighing, she shrugged, and started to slowly pace in a circle. But before she could continue, Jack jumped in.

"You got rid of the curse. I assume that's why? Because you saw the sort of person Viktor was becoming?"

"There were many reasons. And many were greatly personal, reasons I do not wish to divulge. Some of them are lost to time, and the haze that curses all elders."

He frowned. He needed details. Her avoiding giving them was a big red flag waving in the night sky. She should have been bombarding him with details, offering help, doing something to solve his dilemma, if she really was Antoinette's friend. Why wasn't she?

"I want this curse gone, Elaine," he said.

She raised a brow at that. "Do you?"

"Yes."

A small frown flickered across her face, before she strutted up to him. He did him damnedest to not stare at her breasts through the see-through dress.

"Why?"

"Why?" His frown only grew, even as hers disappeared. "Because —" He stopped, and looked to Antoinette. This was a conversation they should have been having in private, just him and his lover. He didn't like exposing this part of himself, especially to a stranger. But Elaine was his great grandsire. He had to say something to her, if only to try and get on her good side. She wasn't infected anymore, and maybe she could help him accomplish the same. "Because the curse is a sick and twisted thing. It crawls into my thoughts and ... christ, it's fucked up, Elaine."

The flicker of pain on Antoinette's face cut into his insides. Elaine didn't show pain, just more of that intrigue.

"I can only assume," Antoinette said, "that the reason you have come to Dolareido this time, is a desire to interact with Jack, now that his curse has been unleashed."

Elaine slid behind him, and he struggled to keep looking ahead to Antoinette. If Antoinette was comfortable with Elaine stepping



behind him, then she didn't think her old friend would suddenly attack him. Still, it made him nervous, and he glanced to the side to see how Mulder and Scully were reacting. They watched, like hawks.

It made him especially nervous, when Elaine set her hands on his shoulders, still behind him.

“Yes, I admit it. I have come to ... bear witness, to this moment. I have come to document, study, and learn. I have come to understand this thing that my sire had sealed away from her, that I abandoned, and—”

“Susanna,” Jack winced with the name. “Your sire Susanna.”

“Susanna. I have ... forgotten nearly everything about her, memories worn by the sands of time.”

“Know what happened to her?”

“No. I imagine she is dead.” Elaine stepped out from behind him, and leaned her ass against the railing beside him. “With her lust for carnage, I imagine someone has killed her. There is no way she could have survived all these centuries with no one knowing about her.”

Antoinette watched, silent, analyzing. This whole thing had come as quite a shock to her, too, and Jack could see the frustration and pain hidden in her stone gaze. She felt betrayed by Elaine's secrets.

“How did you get rid of the curse?” he said.

“I do not know.”

He turned to face her directly. “Um, what?” Well, that would explain why she wasn't bombarding him with details on what to do to fix his problem.

“It was centuries ago. I have ... blurry memories to offer you, but I fear they will not aid you.”

Sighing, he shrugged, and leaned his ass against the railing a few feet from her, eyes pointed down at the roof underneath them. “I guess it was pretty dumb of me to expect a ... convenient solution to my problem.”

“Indeed,” Elaine said. “I am not here to solve your problems. I am here because I am a dragon, an Architect of Terror, with a need to know and learn of the Beast. That does not mean I will not aid you if I can. And...” With a quiet chuckle, she gestured to Antoinette, hand outstretched, and waited with open palm. “I wanted to visit my old friend, and this new lover she speaks of, this young man who has filled a hole left by that loathsome Tony. Knowing that it was my great grandchilde that has helped her, was a secret I was dying to share with her. But I did not know how, until you forced my hand.”

With a heavy sigh, Antoinette walked over, took Elaine’s hand, and pulled her into a hug. Seeing Antoinette hug someone almost as tall, and almost as busty as her, was a strange mix of emotional, and comical. Antoinette didn’t normally let her guard down like that, but with Elaine, she did. The only people Jack had ever seen Antoinette be even half this open with, was himself and her ghouls. And it was funny how the two of them were too busty to actually get in a proper hug without things getting in the way. Funny, and erotic.

Apparently he was staring, because Antoinette, looking at him over Elaine’s shoulder, smiled. Slowly, she turned her friend around, and resumed looking at him over Elaine’s shoulder, though now with Elaine facing him, her back to Antoinette’s stomach.

“Jack has become a grand force in my life,” she said, and her hands set on Elaine’s hips. “And I in his.”

He nodded, the wariness and distrust he felt for his ancient sire slowly fading. If Antoinette still trusted her, even after all that, he

could trust her too. A little.

“Yeap. She’s the love of my life.”

“Aww,” Elaine crooned.

“And,” Antoinette continued, “as I have told you, old friend, nothing delights me, or arouses me, quite like seeing his eyes go wide as I bathe him in new, delicious wonders.”

Uh oh. He froze, eyes going wide, just like Antoinette said they would, as she started to trace one hand up Elaine’s bare stomach and sternum.

Elaine didn’t flinch. Hell, she looked perfectly comfortable with what Antoinette was doing, like it was a dance they’d done a million times. “I see what you mean. Those eyes of his are ... enticing. I am filled with a desire to ... I do not know, draw something from them?” Her hands found Antoinette’s, rested on her wrists, and her gaze stayed on him as her smile grew.

“I know how you feel, my dear. His gaze stirs hungers in me, and I feel a need to extract his eyes and feast upon them.” His eyes opened wider, and she laughed. “Metaphorically, of course.” Her second hand joined the first, teasing fingers running up and down the bare chest between the straps of Elaine’s dress.

Until she pulled them apart, so the straps sat outside her breasts. Jack froze, eyes locked onto the blonde woman’s enormous bosom, and he gulped. Elaine still didn’t flinch, but even with his eyes locked onto her chest, he could see her mischievous smile grow, along with Antoinette’s.

Oh god, they really were similar. Two powerful women who liked making people squirm, were looking at him like he was a tasty dessert they were preparing to devour. Every moment he stood

there, he was a statue with jaw dropped and hands stuck on the railing. Two of them. Two of them! He couldn't handle one!

Antoinette's hands cupped Elaine's bust, and her fingers and palms sank into the overflowing softness of her friend's breasts. And, because she knew damn well it'd hypnotize him until he'd be drooling if he'd been Blushing, she gently bounced Elaine's breasts in her palms. The rippling waves of softness stirred a groan from him he didn't even realize he'd made until the two women were chuckling.

"Oh yes," Elaine said, "I can definitely see why you are so enraptured with him now. The way he gazes upon us, it is ... intense."

"My love wears his emotions openly with me."

"Indeed. I have not had a man lust after me so ... honestly, and wholly, in decades."

Finally, Jack managed to find some measure of control, and gulped. Still had his eyes locked onto Elaine's huge breasts, especially because Antoinette refused to stop playing with them, but his mouth did start working again.

"It's, uh, a bad habit for a Kindred. I need a better poker face." He should have been hiding all his emotions behind a mask, but it just wasn't a skill he'd ever master, at least not when it came to sex.

It was surprising, how quickly Antoinette had gotten over the secrets Elaine had shared. Was it because they'd been friends for centuries? Was this just how elders behaved, dismissing monumental issues as minor hiccups compared to multiple lifetimes of friendship? It was strangely endearing, but he was still suspicious as all hell of Elaine, suspicious and utterly hypnotized by what the Prince was doing to her tits. Jiggle. Jiggle.

“Perhaps,” Elaine said, “but it is ... deliriously ... beguiling.” Her hands entwined with Antoinette’s, but didn’t stop her. The white-haired, taller vampire continued to play with Elaine’s breasts, bouncing, massaging, gently squeezing and softly kneading, and Elaine did nothing but watch him.

“Just wait my dear, until you see his eyes gazing upon you, when his length sits between your breasts, gushing white onto your skin.” Antoinette, devil smile unwavering, set a kiss on Elaine’s earlobe, and then lower, lips trailing kisses down Elaine’s neck until her friend moaned. And all the while, she never broke eye contact with him, drinking in his shock and arousal like it was some kind of drug.

Oh fuck. Seeing Antoinette kiss Elaine’s neck was like a fireworks explosion in Jack’s mind, and all the images Antoinette had planted in his head of the orgies she’d shared with Elaine, were suddenly replaying with a thousand times the resolution.

“I think I would very much love to see those eyes, in exactly that situation.” She reached out for him, and before he knew what he was doing, he took the single step needed to be within touching distance. He didn’t fully trust Elaine, and was pretty sure she was still hiding something, but for some dumb reason, he went to her anyway. Her right hand touched his sternum, and her index danced down his skin to find his abs, where she traced the shapes she found.

These two were a dangerous pair. This wasn’t like with Ashley and Julee, where Antoinette directed them in everything. He could see the same confidence, and reservoir of experience in Elaine’s eyes as Antoinette’s, and the same brutal intelligence. Scarier, was how Antoinette didn’t seem to mind Elaine making physical contact with him at her own choosing, something she’d never let anyone else do. Even now, Antoinette was watching him, drinking in his gaze, and very purposefully making a show of her friend’s body while kissing her neck, all for the sake of making him hornier, and hornier, and

hornier. Judging from the soft sighs of Elaine, it was a kiss she was both familiar with, and one being done in just the way she liked it.

“You...” He forced down the rising panic. It was an old sensation, the sudden shock and uncertainty of being in front of a beautiful woman who’d shown interest in him. Most women, in romantic situations, could be scary as fuck for any man to deal with. These two, tall, busty, half-naked women with mountains of power and money, were utterly horrifying in their sheer confidence.

“Yesssss?” Elaine said as her hand slid down and down, until her fingers started to slide into his pants. If he’d been Blushing Life, he’d have been hard as a rock, eyes still unable to peel away from what Antoinette was doing with her friend’s breasts.

“You, uh ... you’re—”

The roof door swung open with a bang, and Jack jumped up with a half spin. Mulder and Scully cawed and flapped their wings in surprise. Elaine and Antoinette barely moved, though when they saw Fiona and Damien come up, Antoinette gracefully slid her friend’s dress back on over her bust.

“Ah’ve never been up ‘ere!” Fiona’s voice, cheerful and fun. And drunk. “Bet ah could piss on someone below!”

Damien, pulled by a bouncing Fiona, stepped up onto the roof. He looked at Jack, Jack looked at him, and then the Mekhet looked at the two women standing around.

“Per ... haps we should go back downstairs, Fiona?”

“No!” Jack said. Everyone blinked at him. “Um, no, uh ... we’re done up here. Right, Antoinette?” He knew his expression must have said something like ‘please save me from this extremely squirmy situation’. Part of him screamed at him, telling him to bathe in the divine land of unending, enormous boobs. Another part

wanted him to back off, until he could get a better sense of who Elaine was; much as he trusted Antoinette, she hadn't known Elaine as well as she thought she had. Another part of him found the idea of two elders, two obscenely strong vampires with centuries of sexual expertise, turning him into a boy toy for an evening, terrifying and thrilling. It was making him hesitate, like everyone does the first time they go skydiving.

He knew that look in Elaine's eyes, though. Sure, she probably had all sorts of secrets, but the look in her eyes was one he saw on Antoinette all the time: desire. He'd expected the desire to be pointed at Antoinette, but Elaine looked at him like she wanted to do ... well, the things Antoinette liked to do. And it wasn't like he didn't want to, it was just a bit scary, looking at the two five-hundred-year-old women who'd seen more sex than anyone, ever.

Plus, he needed to stay on Elaine's good side, if he wanted to learn how she got rid of her curse. She said she didn't know, but he doubted that was true. Even if it happened three hundred years ago, or longer, he could not believe a memory like that wouldn't be chiseled into her brain.

Ok, so, plan, stay on Elaine's good side. Recover!

"I would like to get together later though," he said, looking at Elaine and Antoinette.

That was enough to make the two women smile. Antoinette's mischievous, devil smile was always enough to send a thrill through his body. Elaine's smile was almost identical, and that made it terrifying.

"Yes, I would enjoy that," Elaine said. "Ann?"

"Oui. I do believe I would." She gave Elaine another small kiss on the neck, let her go, and the two women walked toward the door Fiona had just opened. Fiona stepped aside, eyes wide at what she'd

just witnessed. The two vampires left the roof, leaving Jack alone with Fiona and Damien.

“That ... is a dangerous woman,” Damien said to him, once a few seconds had past.

“Aye. Ye know ‘er, Jack?”

“I don’t, not really. But ... eh, I’ll tell you later.” He took a slow, useless breath, and stood at the top of the doorway.

Elaine, was gorgeous. Utterly fucking gorgeous. And from remembering how casually Antoinette had pulled the girl’s dress apart, exposing her breasts, and then played with them, it was clear what Antoinette, and Elaine, had in mind. It really was like that first night with Antoinette, the nervousness and shyness all coming back to him. Maybe it was because Elaine was his great grandsire, and he’d been given a glimpse of her past. He knew what Elaine looked like three hundred years or more ago, what she did, what the city looked like, what the kine around her looked like, and how she fed on them. It made it so much more real, how crazy old those two vampires were, how much experience they had, and how little he had.

Like Garry said, he’d been given a nuke, but he was still just a child, a young boy compared to the elders. And two ancient, beautiful, ridiculously sexy women, were eying him like he’d look good tied to a bed, naked, with hot candle wax being dripped onto his stomach.

Gulp.

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~~Antoinette~~

She looked back to her love, and smiled. To her utmost delight, Jack had been completely enraptured by her teasing using Elaine’s



body. She had been concerned the man might be uncomfortable with her touching another vampire, but the sheer wonder in his eyes when she had touched her friend's breasts, had said everything. As long as she drew a clear boundary for Elaine that she was not to cross, as she had with Ashley and Julee, Antoinette was free to use her friend to test the limits of her love's sex drive.

She laughed quietly to herself. Faded memories reminded her she had indulged in sexual fantasies with Elaine, long ago when the two only recently entered their elder years. For centuries thereafter, they expressed their sexuality whenever they met, and Antoinette had invited the woman to join her in many erotic forays. At that time, such dances were exciting, with her still new to the power of an elder vampire capable of enthralling entire groups of kine. To explore such extreme eroticism, often with Elaine at her side, had been some of the most enjoyable nights of her life, ages past.

Jack made her feel as if she were experiencing those nights once more. Jack made her feel young again.

But, Elaine had kept a secret from her. Viktor, a capable Ventrue that had quickly risen in power in the Invictus in Europe, was her childe. The man had decided to join Antoinette, when she left Europe for greener pastures, and only now did she realize it was likely a decision influenced by their secret. Viktor, ancilla at the time, had promised to help her build a new city, where Kindred could live in a utopia, and he likely only agreed because he knew of her relationship with his sire.

Elaine had been ashamed of Viktor, in much the same way Antoinette had grown ashamed of Tony. Perhaps Elaine thought the curse responsible for Viktor's cruelty, and had performed whatever ritual she had to be rid of it in response to that. Perhaps something else had triggered her seeking of the ritual. Or, perhaps the ritual had been performed upon her against her will, by a third party.

The curse of torpor, and being an elder. How many memories had she lost to time, and the erosion torpor and its chaotic dreams buried the mind in? It had been ages since her last deep torpor, to let the rising blood lust all Kindred suffer settle. How many memories had it stripped from her? Even now, as she thought back to the wonderful times she had shared with her good friend, there were gaps. Had Elaine already sired Viktor when she met her, or did that come later? Had Antoinette sensed anything strange with Elaine when she first met her, perhaps indications of the curse? Entire decades, lost to a frustrating mist, and twisted images that lied to her, memories altered by the vivid dreams of torpor.

She stopped at the top of the stairs that led to the second floor, and looked down at the paranormals of her city.

“Well then,” Elaine said beside her. “It seems things have ... escalated, while we spoke.”

Antoinette laughed. “Indeed.” Sex was everywhere. It did not hold a crown to the younger years, when Dolareido was small, and before electricity, but that did not change that the ball had succumbed to the sexual frenzy she had partly hoped it would. The Kiss was wonderful, and Kindred could spread neither disease nor pregnancy. Why not encourage her city to indulge, and share in that pleasure?

“Holy shit,” Jack said, looking around from the stop of the stairs. “Uh, ok, things kinda exploded. Um...” The look in his eyes was obvious. His mind already wandered with thoughts of Antoinette and Elaine, thoughts planted and nurtured by her, and now he was treated to the sight of dozens of Kindred Kissing, kissing, and sexually engaging with dozens of thralls, ghouls, and surprisingly, Uratha.

“How delicious.” Antoinette licked her lips, held out her hand for her lover, and started down the stairs. He fell in beside her, holding her hand and looking left and right in bewilderment.

People were beginning to leave, either satisfied, or eager to pursue sexual endeavors in privacy. Jessy and Eric left, with Natasha, Matthew, and Arturo immediately behind them. Maria was gone, but she did not feast during the balls, and always left early. Michael and Garry shared a few final words with Kindred of their covenant, and were soon to be off. The witches remained, poor Sándor trapped by circumstance, and Jennifer's arm. Jacob—

“Uh, where's Mom?” Jack said.

Frowning, Antoinette looked across to the room to Daniel. A quick glance and nod toward the door from him, was all that was needed for a conclusion to be drawn. Samantha was outside, with Jacob. Oh dear.

Surprisingly, Athalia remained, standing with her sheriff, and looking out at the crowd with a strange mix of annoyance, moroseness, and arousal. Samantha had done more to crack Athalia's shell, than anything Antoinette had ever seen. Perhaps now the woman could let herself feel joy for once in her life. Perhaps Daniel could be the one to show her some.

“I believe my childe is outside,” Antoinette said. “And, I believe I would like to depart for the evening. Perhaps we should say goodbye to her, as we leave?” With a small wave of her hand, Ashley and Julee emerged from the crowd, untouched and fully clothed, though perhaps a bit drunk, and quite aroused from how their nipples pressed through their thin dresses.

“We're going to leave her here?” Jack said.

“Do you believe her in danger?”

“I...” He frowned as he looked around again. Sex, sex, and more sex, but the room and those within were all allies, or at least, neutral parties. “I guess I don't. Just ... it's been so damn long since we could walk around without worrying about a hunter sniping us

or something. I can't picture Mom out there, just ... being a vampire, doing her own thing, living her own life."

Antoinette ran a finger over her lover's head, kissed him on his forehead, and guided him through the crowd. Ashley and Julee fell in step beside her, though the two aroused little creatures kept their hungry eyes on Elaine.

"Look," Antoinette said, gesturing to the hunters as she walked past. The three of them were lost to the bliss of the Kiss, enraptured in pleasure, and from the looks on their faces, orgasm. They were kine, after all, drunk and helpless to fend off the many Kindred that wished a taste. Whatever hesitance they might have had was but a paltry defense, against the seductive powers of Kindred, especially Isabella and her Majesty. But, the hunters were safe from physical harm, and would be sent back to Antoinette's tower before the night was done.

"I hope they don't mind, come the morning," Jack said.

She shrugged. "They were our enemies. Every moment they are alive, is a moment I have given them. I am sure they would happily share their blood, and their bodies, with Kindred, rather than die." Not that she planned to kill them, but it was within her power to do so, and the hunters knew it. And, despite the frightening situation the hunters found themselves in, she could see relief in their eyes, that they were not to be killed, only Kissed. Relief turned to surprise, when the kine found themselves succumbing to pleasures they had never experienced before.

They walked past Daniel and Athalia on the way out. It surprised Antoinette to no end that Athalia remained, both for the growing sexual display, but also the obvious disdain Athalia must have felt for Jack and the others. She held polite, quiet, somber conversation with the sheriff, and as Antoinette walked past with her lover, Athalia grew silent, and looked at them.

Elaine, Ashley, and Julee all gave the woman space, and waited at the doors of the Black Hall, as Jack made eye contact with Athalia. Antoinette remained beside her lover, though she did not stare at Athalia, keeping her gaze on Daniel instead. So long had she known her sheriff, that it took little more than subtle twitches of their mouths and eyes to convey simple messages. Yes, Athalia was dangerous and unstable. No, she would not attack Jack. Yes, there was hope for her.

“Athalia,” Jack said at last, “I—”

“Don’t,” she said in return. “Just don’t. It’s over, and ... I was wrong ... to do what I did.”

The words hurt her. Pain dripped from Athalia so thick, Antoinette could almost see the black ooze of it splash on the floor. The mother’s eyes fell, and she shuddered as she struggled to contain her misery. Mother no longer.

“I’m ... sorry,” Jack said, wincing. Before the situation could turn worse, he walked out of the Black Hall.

“For all the solace useless words can provide,” Antoinette said to the Begotten, “understand that I am glad you came, Athalia. Paranormal creatures should not war with each other.” And there were other reasons she was content. Athalia’s presence pleased Daniel, for one. And it had brought new strength to Samantha, for another.

“No, I suppose they shouldn’t.”

“Indeed. Good night, Athalia.” Antoinette offered the grieving woman a small nod, before she followed the little Ventrue out of the Black Hall.

The night could not have gone better.

Outside, with Elaine, Jack, and her pets in tow, Antoinette walked toward the wide driveway where a driver waited for her. Tiny squeaks of pleasure filled the air, and she looked up. Fiona dangled over the ornate, marble railing of the roof of the Black Hall. Her dress had been pulled down to expose her large, freckled breasts, and they rippled underneath her as someone thrust into her from out of sight. Not out of sight for long, as Damien pulled Fiona up to stand, came in close to her to press his chest to her back, and held her to him, hands clutching at her body, one hand sinking into her breast while another wrapped her stomach. The Begotten looked drained, and from the look in Damien's eyes, he had Kissed her, taken of her deeply, and was now unleashing his arousal upon the defenseless woman. He sank his teeth into her for what must have been a second, or perhaps third Kiss, and began to drain the helpless creature as she squirmed, trapped on her man's length, unable to escape, as the Kiss forced a climax upon her.

Such a beautiful sight, Antoinette found herself watching. Jack coughed, and the ghouls giggled as they looked up to watch for a little while too. If Damien was aware, he did not show it. The man was lost to his hunger, his desire, hands groping and squeezing Fiona's naked chest roughly, with hard thrusts that had her whole body quivering, each earning a little squeak from her.

Antoinette had not imagined Damien could let himself go so completely. In her experience, creatures like him were wrapped in complexes so deep, no joy could be found within their fortress of solitude, bitterness, delusion, and hypocrisy. Claude Frollo, Damien was not. Upon her Black Hall, the man devoured his girlfriend, fucked her with reckless abandon, and gave into his desires.

The more she learned of the man, the less she disliked him.

“Mom?” Jack's voice.

On a concrete bench, near some of the sculpted bushes that decorated the grass around the Black Hall, sat Samantha and Jacob. They had been chatting, and laughing, until Jack spoke up.

Before Antoinette could say anything, Jack marched over to them, the impact of his feet a touch harsher than necessary. While it brought Antoinette much joy whenever Jack exercised some of his more masculine traits, there was a time and place for it. Now was not such a time or place, and she almost stopped him from interfering.

But she did follow him, as did Elaine.

“Jacob,” Jack said. “Talking to my mom?”

“I was talking to him,” Samantha said, frowning at her son. “Can’t I do that?”

Jack frowned at the grinning elder, though he spoke to his mother. “You can. I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

For all Jack’s obvious annoyance with the situation, Antoinette could not help but continue to smile. It was pointless to tell Jacob to stay away from her childe, strong and talented as the man was. Unless Antoinette locked her childe up in her tower, never to leave, it was impossible to keep Jacob from interacting with her, or whomever he wished, for that matter. The young Ventrue had to know that.

“I’m starting to feel judged!” Jacob said brightly, and he placed the tips of his right hand’s fingers against his chest. “Can’t I have a nice, evening chat with a beautiful woman?”

Antoinette’s smile hardened. What game was Jacob playing?

“Oh, stop!” Samantha dismissed his compliment with a tiny flick of her hand, and she radiated joy from every pore. Jacob had

thoroughly demolished whatever defensive measures Samantha had, with a simple word of admiration. Teaching her childe to defend herself against the words of others would take time, but Jacob was a master at manipulating people. Samantha would never be able to defend herself against him.

But, Jacob had no reason to come after her, unless he genuinely found her attractive or interesting, or both. Surely Antoinette's old friend would not attempt to use her childe to manipulate her? He was smarter than that. If push came to shove, Antoinette would destroy him in retaliation, and he knew that. For all the man's grand plans and hidden motives, he knew that she could kill him, if the situation was forced. But he had no reason to force her hand, and she had no desire to kill him.

In the end, she trusted him with her childe, to an extent. And if her request of Beatrice, to help the man out of his pit of depression over Minerva's death proved fruitful, who knew how he would evolve?

But regardless, she was not stupid enough to not keep a close eye on the old Nosferatu.

"I was talking to your lovely mother about history," Jacob said, head pointed at Jack. "Imagine my surprise when I learned she's never left Dolareido."

Jack folded his arms across his chest, frown unending. "You haven't left Dolareido in hundreds of years."

"Says you!" Chuckling, Jacob gestured to the streets beyond. "I've taken a few trips to various places, over the past few centuries. I was in France during World War II, for a few months. I was in South America a century ago."

"Oh, what was South America like?" Samantha asked.



“Hot. Very hot.”

“You were close to the equator then?”

“Yeap. I was looking for some ancient, lost text about different rituals the indigenous people used to perform, many hundreds of years ago.” Jacob gave Jack one last, quick smile, before turning his head to Samantha. “I was borderline naked, crawling on my stomach through the pitch black of the jungle. The foliage was so thick, I had to ditch the clothes. Centipedes crawled over my skin. Monkeys howled. An encounter with a jaguar taught the jungle I wasn’t to be bothered, but I didn’t expect the lesson to last. And worse, sunrise was in a couple hours.”

Jacob proceeded to regale Samantha with a tale of adventure, with the discovery of ancient ruins, and the horrors that awaited within. And she was enraptured. Jacob was a masterful storyteller, and edges of his rather obtuse personality shone through as delightful accents to the pacing. Samantha only grew more enamored, and she watched the man with hypnotized eyes, drinking in every gesture the old Nosferatu made as he told his story.

“Mom,” Jack said. “I ... I’ll ... see you later, ok?” The hesitation in his voice painted a clear picture for Antoinette, and likely for Jacob and Elaine as well. He wanted to get angry, and act the protective father for his daughter. But for all his greater wisdom and intelligence in matters of their second lives, he was the son, Samantha the mother. “Jacob, don’t do anything—”

“I’m half a millennium old, Jack. I know how to be responsible. I’ll make sure your mom’s home before sunrise.”

“I’ll be fine, Jack, really. Jacob’s not so bad.” And as she said ‘bad’, she smiled.

Antoinette could barely contain her own, resurfaced smile. Not due to her child’s strange interest in Jacob; she also wished the

woman would leave the old man be. No, it was the inflection she used in the phrase ‘Jacob’s not so bad’. It was flirtatious, obvious without being too obvious, a compliment handled with a social mastery Antoinette expected of older Daeva. Delightful.

“Come, my love. Your mother will be fine.” She set her hand on Jack’s shoulder, drew him toward her, and offered Jacob a final glance. A flicker of knowing bounced between them.

Jacob was difficult to read. He always was. Even if he had eyes, and did not wear a bandage to hide them, he would have been as predictable as a chaotic wind. But she could see the hint of understanding in the muscles of his face, when he looked her way.

*I know you are up to something, Jacob. Harm my childe, and I will kill you.*

And of course, the man returned a wordless reply.

*You’ll never know what I’m up to. I’m too good at this. But relax, your childe’s safe.*

She frowned, but wiped it away before her childe could notice. “Samantha, I expect you to return to the tower before the night is over.”

“Yes, sire.”

A final glance for Jacob, before she left with Elaine, Jack, and her precious ghouls.

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“Jack,” she said, once they stepped onto the stairs, leading down into the maze beneath her Elysium Tower, “do you mind if I speak to Elaine alone?”

“Um, sure.” He seemed hesitant. No doubt, he wished to speak to his great grandsire in private as well. “I’ll wait for you in the rec

room, B4?”

“Very well. Ashley, Julee, go with him.”

The two ghouls nodded, and joined Jack down the stairs to disappear around a corner. Leaving Elaine and Antoinette alone.

Elaine knew her way around the tower. As much as Antoinette updated it routinely with technological advancements, the purpose of individual rooms remained largely unchanged, and Elaine headed toward one of her smaller rooms, one meant for updating journals and recording personal developments. Sound proof, perfect for speaking, and in the modern era, for recording data privately.

They stepped into the small room, and Antoinette turned on the light, before sitting down at the large, beautiful, wooden table in the center of the black marble floor.

“You have been keeping secrets,” she said.

Elaine laughed, sat down opposite from her, and snuggled into the luxurious leather chair. “As have you, and Jacob, and Daniel, and the others.”

“Yes, but this is not a secret of the Danse. This is personal, Elaine. I...” Sighing, Antoinette pulled her hair over a shoulder, and combed it as she looked down at the table while she folded her legs. “Why did you not tell me?”

“About Viktor?”

“About Jack, and the curse.”

Elaine matched her sigh, and managed a weak shrug. “I am free of its reins, Ann.”

“But I am not.” A frown sneaked its way onto Antoinette’s face, and it took concentration to dismiss it. “The curse now infects my love, and my city. If it only affected him internally, that would be a different matter, but it does not. It expresses its power and desires outwardly, and has summoned the media to my city, ravenous for answers for the unusual.”

“That, is part of the reason I am here, as I am sure you have deduced.” Elaine traced a finger along the wood, eyes on Antoinette. “I wish to learn what I can of the curse, and if possible, to help your little Ventrue be free of it.”

“Did you expect to do this without me learning of the connection?”

“Maybe?”

Laughing, Antoinette shook her head. “What I cannot understand, is why you did not tell me about Viktor, and the curse? Surely you must have realized the curse was dangerous.”

“It was centuries ago, Ann. I cannot remember Susanna, and I can barely remember embracing Viktor.”

“But you did remember. And you remembered the curse.”

Elaine shook her head. “A lingering shadow in endless mist, at best.”

“Do not hide behind your age, Elaine. When you embraced Viktor, your memory would have been intact. When you let Viktor join me in my plans to create a new city, riding the colonial wave, you must have known, then.”

“I ... hoped, perhaps, the curse would fade away. I can remember, and I know I have it written, that I was forever unable to free the curse from its binds, and use its true power.”

Antoinette squinted her eyes at her friend. “You attempted to?”

“I ... did. I can barely remember, and I did not catalog my efforts well. I have written some remarks about Susanna, small things, hinting at her great power.” The poor woman shuddered as she dug through her memories. A painful process for any elder, to dig through memories destroyed by the centuries and torpor. “I scratched the surface, I believe, but in the end I failed.”

“All that, and you never thought to warn your friend that Viktor carried this infection?”

“I should have, but it was a shadow of my past I wanted to forget. And, after my failed attempts to unleash the curse’s power, I did all I could to be rid of the nightmarish presence.” Again, more shudders from her old friend. “I found some way to remove it, and I broke all contact with Viktor.”

“You did not offer Viktor a way to remove the curse?”

“I ... never told him of the curse.”

Antoinette sighed heavily, and buried her forehead in one hand, while the other continued to comb her hair. “Why?”

“I was unable to summon it. I assumed Viktor would not be able to either. And the idea that maybe he would manage to accomplish what I could not, and unleash its power, was terrifying. After my own failed attempts to summon it...” The poor woman. It hurt, to watch her suffer as she dug through her faded memories. Antoinette almost asked her to stop, but this conversation was too important. Their friendship depended on it.

“Why go on a quest to remove the curse?”

“I am not sure. My journals mention that the curse ... clawed at me.” She laughed as she looked down. “I wiped it from my past, and

cast Viktor aside.”

“Is that why the two of you avoided each other, during your visits?”

“I imagine yes. And, he had come into his own, without my help. I suspect he resented me, ignorant of my reasoning. Or ... that, perhaps, the curse wore away at him, and devolved him.” Elaine leaned in closer, and a hint of vulnerability passed her face. “It had crossed my mind, to perhaps speak to the man, after your stories of how much he had become ... twisted, and cruel, crueler than I could have imagined. But then you told me of Julias, and how great a man he was.”

“Julias was a great man, and ... and gone.”

“And gone. I cannot imagine the pain your little Ventrue is going through.”

The two shared a sigh, and Antoinette reached out to pat her friend on the hand. “You thought, if Julias could be such a good man, surely the curse was something that faded between sires?”

“Yes. And now, to learn that my great grandchilde is not only plagued by it, but has unleashed it? And that he is your beloved? I had to come.” She withdrew her hand from Antoinette’s, and looked up. Misery draped her shoulders. “Why must our past haunt us so?”

Elaine was not telling her the whole truth. Something else was on her mind, and if Antoinette had to guess, it was something to do with the curse, and the Coils Elaine pursued. She was a master of Coils that dealt with the Beast, and Jack was likely of great interest to her, professionally. And perhaps personally, since the boy had managed to do something Elaine admitted to not being able to do: free the curse from its chains.

Antoinette trusted her friend with much, but she was no fool. She would have to keep an eye on her friend, as one dragon competing with another. But, in matters personal, she felt far more comfortable sharing her secrets and feelings with Elaine.

“Such is our curse. And ... I must apologize, for plotting Viktor’s demise.”

Elaine chuckled and shrugged. “I bear you no ill will for that. Tony died as well, did he not? You plotted to kill both of them.”

“Yes, and...” Sighing again, Antoinette leaned back in her chair, and looked down at the table. “Jack killed them.”

“Jack?” Elaine’s eyes went wide. “Your little Ventrue?”

“Oui, my little Ventrue. He killed my childe, and your childe,” she said. Elaine’s stare was powerful. Rare, for an elder to let their shock show on their face. “Self defense. He was caught between them as they fought over the fabrication I had sent them after. He set the building on fire, a cotton mill, in order to prevent Viktor from killing him.”

“Oh ... god. I had no idea.”

“Of course you did not. I did not speak of it. I have no desire to involve you in the Danse here in Dolareido, Elaine. Surely you must struggle with your own games in England.”

“Yes, but ... but if I had known—”

“Nonsense. Viktor has been his own man for over two hundred years, Elaine. His actions are not of your make. If Julias could suppress the urges of the curse, then Viktor had no excuse.”

A smile slowly returned to Elaine’s lips. “You are correct, of course. And ... I must say, I am surprised. Jack did this?”

“Oui. Forever the boy is thrust into circumstances no neonate should face.”

“And yet he thrives.”

“Thrive is not the word. He has nearly died several times, and the death of his sire, and sister, hit him hard. Considering the stress that befalls my love, I fear for his sanity.”

Elaine laughed. “Knowing you, you have likely pampered and spoiled the boy rotten, in order to soothe him of his pains.”

“Ben oui. That is why I have let you get so close to him, after all.”

“Oh, is that how it is, old friend? I am nothing but a tool for you to use, to overindulge and mollycoddle your lover?”  
Lightheartedness had returned to her friend’s voice, and Antoinette laughed with the joy of it.

“Naturally.”

A twinkle shone in the woman’s eye. “Naturally. And I admit, I look forward to it. He is a scrumptious morsel, is he not? But, I am worried that this ... unveiling of my past has damaged that possibility.”

Laughing again, Antoinette shook her head. “Jack trusts me. And I trust you.”

“Trust is dangerous.”

“Quite, but I do nonetheless.”

Elaine’s smile brightened. “Thank you.”

“And despite the surprises this evening, we both saw the look in my love’s eyes.”



The old Ventrue licked her lips with a hunger Antoinette recognized. “Yes, indeed. I am surprised a man who has seen so much violence, and has grown into such a powerful individual in many ways, can be rendered so paralyzed by the sight of breasts.”

“As strong as Jack is, in will and mind, something about him cannot seem to fathom the existence of women, of breasts and legs, and sex.”

They both laughed. Surely there was a time in her life when such stubborn innocence in a man would have been thoroughly unappealing. Now, with endless years of experience to draw upon and sculpt her outlook and tastes, Antoinette found it extremely enticing. And so would Elaine, before the night was done.

“But, he has been your lover for two years now? Surely he is comfortable with sex, considering you ... are you.” A sly grin announced her true meaning.

Antoinette rolled her eyes. “As if you are any different to me.”

“I did not arrange orgies of over fifty kine, Ann.”

“No, but you did join them. Excitedly, if my blurry memories do not lie to me.”

With a playful sigh, Elaine shook her head. “They do not.”

Nodding, Antoinette stood up, and motioned for Elaine to do as well. “Jack defies my attempts to acclimatize him to the sexual possibilities of sharing his bed with an elder Daeva. Every night, his eyes fill with wonder as I take him into my arms. And every time I treat him to a new experience, he paralyzes, as if struck dumb by the sheer idea that multiple women find him attractive.” Nodding, she pulled out her phone, and prepared a message. “No matter how many times I have bathed him in not only my sexuality, but also that of my ghouls, he is still shocked by such pleasures.”

“He lacks confidence?”

“I considered that, at first. Now, I believe the boy simply cannot ever be bored with erotica.”

“Lucky you.”

Antoinette grinned her playful, devil grin. “Indeed.”

For all the insanity the evening had wrought, secrets upon secrets shattered and innards exposed, everything turned out well. Her invitation for Elaine to visit her in Dolareido had not backfired with the new knowledge, and if anything, she understood her old friend better now. Telling her who killed her childe, and Elaine’s childe, had been a strange moment, balancing on a knife’s edge. But Elaine did not care for Viktor anymore than Antoinette did Tony. The threat of ill will passed, and Antoinette found her tension fading away. Tonight, was a wonderful night.

“Who are you texting?”

“Ashley and Julee. My pets will join us. We will feed, and then I will show you how wonderful my little Ventrue can be.”

# Chapter 118

~~Beatrice~~

The night went so much fucking better than she thought it would have. After her heavy conversation with Jacob, she thought maybe things would get intense, in a bad way. Nope. Dude hung out, chatted with Aaron a bit, and Jack, and now Samantha. More surprising, was how the dragons let him.

Peace was the name of the game tonight. Carthians and Invictus were getting along, at least for now, and everyone else was more than getting along. They were getting fucked, in the good way. Othello was sharing his beautiful ghoul with a Carthian. The hunters were getting gang-Kissed by Isabella and her troupe. The werewolves were getting involved with plenty of people, Carthians and Invictus, and were literally fucking where people could see them. Damn, werewolves were all jacked and ripped.

Some people found it a little too uncomfortable. Avery, Clara, Aaron, Maria, Michael, they all left eventually. Jacob was outside with Samantha. Fiona and Damien were—well, they were probably having sex, on the roof. A few others had left too, but for the most part, the ball still had plenty of people. Over a hundred Kindred, a bunch of werewolves, a bunch of thralls and ghouls, and two Begotten, all remained within.

Sándor, she could understand sticking around, since Jen still held his arm, and the man seemed reluctant to forcibly remove her. He kinda looked like he wanted to, but unless he manually got rid of her, Jennifer just took his defiance as a challenge. It was cute.

Athalia, on the other hand, remained, and Beatrice did not understand why. Jack, Big Tits and Bigger Tits, along with two

ballerina ghouls, walked past her, and after a few seconds talk with Jack, Athalia looked better. Legitimately better, like, maybe she didn't want to kill everyone and everything in the universe anymore. It was clear that she didn't want to talk to Jack, and the conversation had been very short, but she looked better for it.

But Jack hadn't been the one to kill Angela, Beatrice had. Sure, Jack did everything to get her there, including drag her broken ass, but he didn't pull the trigger, she did. No way in hell was Triss going to push, and try and talk to the dead woman's mother.

Daniel, on the other hand, chatted with her, and she listened. Hell, she even chatted back, and unless Triss was seeing things, she smiled a few times too. Daniel ignored all the sex around him like he was used to it, and he probably was, considering his closest friend thought sex was a literal art form, and had likely indulged in it like a kid in a candy store, for hundreds of years. The sheriff barely acknowledged it. Instead, his focus remained on Athalia, and a sliver of a smile sneaked onto his lips.

The sheriff. Smiling? Triss knew Daniel was one of the first people Athalia had met in Dolareido, when she'd first become a monster. And judging from the looks the two of them shared, she liked him. She might not have liked that she liked him, but she did like him. And Daniel, so closed off he made Sándor look chatty, apparently liked her, too.

Everyone was getting along, every single person. It felt way too weird, and too good to be true. Probably was. In a week or two or ten, something would happen, and shit would get problematic again. The Carthians and Invictus would step on each other's toes, or maybe the werewolves would pick a fight with someone they thought was fucking with the 'balance' or whatever. But for now, it was nice, how everyone was enjoying the peace, peace she'd helped bring.

She looked down, and let a memory up from the grave for a bit. Julias, hugging her, holding her, stroking her hair, kissing her. Just a little, just for a moment, just to remind her why she did what she did.

Except, the memory didn't go away. She'd gotten good at suppressing them, but after what Jacob said, she couldn't, not right now. Could he revive Julias? Could she use Crúac, and that bitch Elen, to somehow revive him? God, she shouldn't, she really shouldn't. Even Jacob thought it wouldn't work.

But, god, to hear his voice again, and ... to hold him again, and—

“Triss, you alright?” Jen said.

“I ... I think I want to go now.”

Jennifer let go of Sándor, and set her hands on Triss's arm. “You —” Her mouth shut when they made eye contact. “Right, right. Let's go.”

God damn it, it was great having a friend. Didn't have to explain herself, didn't need to justify anything, didn't even need to say a damn thing. Jen recognized the look on her face, knew she was suffering with memories of Julias, and knew she had to get her out of the party asap.

“Sándor,” Triss said, “you could stay or—”

“I'll leave too.” And without a further word, the man started for the door.

Jen managed some small chuckles, and followed after him. Triss tried to chuckle too, cause Sándor was funny, a perfect straight man. But, she couldn't chuckle. It choked in her throat, and turned into a quiet sob that forced her to look down and hide her face in the frame of her hair.

On the way out, she spotted Garry. He was chatting with someone, someone Triss didn't recognize. A vampire, and probably a Gangrel by the way he carried himself. Jeremy Long, Garry's new childe? Had to be. The Asian-looking fellow had dangerous written right on his forehead, but he managed to stay out of the limelight like an expert Mekhet might. Well, whatever, he was the Invictus's problem, not hers.

Once Triss, Jen, and Sándor were outside, a quick glance showed Samantha chatting with Jacob on a nearby bench, surrounded by grass and bushes. The Nos looked Triss's way, offered her a small, knowing nod, and returned to his conversation. She knew Jacob could flirt. Hell, Jacob was a smoother fucker when he wanted to be. But, the look she saw on his face was a little different, a little softer, a little kinder, almost like he was just having a genuinely pleasant conversation. Crazy, to think of Jacob doing something normal, like talking to someone, for the sake of talking to someone. No way he was just talking to her for fun. Jacob, like every elder, always had a bunch of things lined up, so every action benefited him in multiple ways. But, he did really look like he was enjoying himself.

Before she could stop herself, she pictured herself where Samantha was, and Julias where Jacob was. She never did the girly-girly flirts with Julias, and Julias didn't try and spin fairytale adventures for her. But, that didn't change that seeing them together reminded her of times with Julias, and—

Jennifer touched her arm. "Don't do that."

"I ... I'm not trying to." Sighing, she shuddered, crossed her arms and rubbed her biceps. "Can we just go?"

"Back to the catacombs?"

Right, the catacombs. If she went back to the cave with the other witches, they'd hear her crying.

“Anywhere private, I suppose. I—”

Sándor looked at her, and she met his eyes for a second. He knew. He knew exactly what she was feeling. And after a quiet moment, the man let out a short sigh, and nodded toward the shadows around the building.

“You want privacy, quickly? Come with me.”

Jen and Triss looked at each other, brows quirked, but after they realized what Sándor was doing, Jen smiled. She took Triss’s hand, and pulled her after the Begotten, as he disappeared into the shadows that sat behind the Black Hall.

It wasn’t the first time Triss had gone through one of the strange holes Begotten dug through reality, or the second. It came with a strange feeling, like walking at night when a thunderstorm was brewing. Electricity in the air. But with Begotten, and the strange ways they opened doors to their nightmare realms, the tingle in the air was less electric, and more like goosebumps. It was a nightmare realm, nightmare, with every intent to be scary, so goosebumps made sense. She wouldn’t get goosebumps without Blushing Life, but that didn’t stop a chill of fear from sneaking up her spine.

She stepped out of the shadows, onto a solid, dark platform. Concrete? Stone? With a few moments to think, she managed to piece together what she was looking at, and she sucked in a quick, useless breath.

There was a stone throne, enormous, and imposing. Around her were titanic pillars, dozens, maybe even hundreds in the gigantic room. Braziers lit the walls, gargoyle-shaped braziers, and they lit the pillars as well, showing frozen statues at the top of each. Gargoyles, each the same size and shape as Sándor’s Horror, giant beasts that could have squashed her like a grape.

Movement in the shadows drew her eyes, and she froze as one of those titanic gargoyles crept around one of the pillars, and onto the huge throne of stone at the end of the room. Sándor didn't sit in the throne; he couldn't have, with four wings and a tail. Instead, the monster perched on it, squatting and holding onto the edge of its back with two of his hands, while his two others held his knees.

Triss looked behind her, at a large wooden door, opened, and it led into a hallway she recognized. This wasn't the place that opened up into the haunted village on the cliff edge. This was the place where Jack and his crew had rescued Eric, Jessy, and Clara. A nightmare chamber, linked to the other one, but not exactly the same place.

Triss and Jen both stared on as the giant got comfortable on his perch, his wings stretching out wide enough to hide a bus. Christ, he was huge, so god damn mother fucking huge.

"Take that door," the beast rumbled, and he pointed to one of the massive wooden doors that lined the walls of the colossal room, identical to the she'd stepped out of, "to emerge near the South Hill Cemetery." Right, right, Jen had told him that Triss and she often hung out in the catacombs in the South Hill Cemetery. Nice of him, and impressive, to open a portal straight there. Fiona, er, Vrall, had said his ability to control his lair was crazy strong.

He was a scary strong creature, Sándor. And terrifying. The gargoyle body he morphed into wasn't gross or anything; hell, it was pretty hot. The issue was her Beast recognized a stronger predator in its blatant superiority. She was a mouse before a tiger.

"Thanks," she said, and she took a step toward the door.

Before Jen could follow, she stopped.

"Triss?" Jen asked.



“I ... I’m so sick of being sad, you know?” She reached out, set a hand against one of the nearby pillars, maybe thirty feet away from the huge throne. “Christ, it was going well! The party was going well. Everything’s better, right? And ... and then it hits me, out of nowhere.” After a heavy sigh, she turned, pressed her back to the pillar, and slid down until she was on her ass. The dress did not like that, and she didn’t care.

Jen sat down beside her. She did a bit better with her dress, keeping it from getting too bundled up or torn, but the dress was not made for anything but standing or sexily sitting on expensive chairs. The two of them looked ridiculous.

“Come on, we can go to your favorite spot, and—”

“Oh I don’t fucking care if Sándor sees. Dude knows exactly what I’m going through.” She pulled her knees up to her chest, hugged them tight to her body, and let her forehead fall onto them. If she’d been Blushing Life, tears would have been streaming down her cheeks, and Jennifer knew it too. Her friend wrapped an arm over her shoulders, hugged her, and didn’t say a thing.

Triss really should have gotten up and left. It was pretty pathetic, hanging out in Sándor’s nightmare, struggling to not cry. Struggling, and failing. Sobs broke through, and she leaned into Jennifer as she felt the misery course through her. At this point, she recognized the pains, and could anticipate the phases she’d go through, the way the ache would change over the minutes, until it either exhausted her, or turned to rage. She did her best to stay quiet, to let the agony do its thing, torment her, rip her stomach open and her organs apart, and then be on its merry way. Sometimes it went quickly, sometimes, not so much.

“You might not care,” Jen said eventually, voice soft and delicate, “but ... he might. He—”

“I don’t mind,” the enormous creature rumbled, his own voice quiet, despite the thick bass. “Take as long as you want.”

Triss lifted her head and looked to the creature on the throne. He didn’t move. No tail slithering, no wing shaking, no breathing, nothing. The only movement she’d noticed after he took his perch, was when he bothered to say something. Outside of his few words, nothing, a statue.

“You’re being awfully nice,” Triss said between quiet sobs. At least she wasn’t gushing tears everywhere. “I figured we were being a pain in your ass.” We, including Jen, for obvious reasons.

The gargoyle made a small grunt, and Jennifer chuckled softly in response.

“Two gorgeous women were on his arm all night,” Jen said, “at a luxurious ball. Hardly being a pain in the ass.”

Sándor scoffed, except, in his giant dragon gargoyle body, it sounded more like a heavy rush of air, mixed with a bassy rumble. “You weren’t.”

“Ha, see? It won’t be much longer before he’s asking for our numbers.”

Triss choked on a laugh that forced its way up through her sobs, and she leaned her head into Jen’s side as her friend hugged her.

“Sorry, about Jen. She’s ... she’s...”

Jen sighed, a happy, heavy sound, and kissed her ear. Triss turned, and set a quick kiss on her lips. Not a deep kiss, but long enough to let Jen know she loved her stupid ass, in the strange ‘very close friends’ love they’d developed.

After a long, quiet rumble, the gargoyle spoke. “Not a day goes by ... where I don’t wish I was stronger.”

Triss choked down another rising sob, and looked through the dark to the colossal creature on his giant perch. “Say what? You’re already ridiculously strong.”

“If I was stronger, faster, smarter, I could have saved my family.” His wings, limbs, and tail still didn’t move, even as his mouth did. Creepy. Maybe the little bit of wine he’d drank was getting to him, to actually talk like that, to open up a little. “And Julias Mire would still be alive.”

Beatrice choked again, this time laughing, and she forced herself up to her feet. After stumbling, she growled down at her feet, kicked off her stupid heels, and walked over to the huge throne. Jen followed, though she kept her heels on, and scooped up Triss’s. Strange for a witch to love heels, or be so comfortable in them, but that was Jen.

“You were held in a fucking curse, Sándor. I can’t blame for you what happened to Julias.” She wanted to. Fuck, she wanted to blame him, blame Jack, blame everyone and everything. Blame the whole god damn fucking world. But, she didn’t, and she wouldn’t. She couldn’t let herself sink any deeper into that pit than she’d already had.

“I wasn’t held in the curse, when that monster first came for me.”

The monster, calling Jeremiah a monster. It was so poetic, she’d have vomited if she’d eaten at the ball feast. That’d be a sight, a vampire puking up blood like a fucking geyser.

“Did they just show up in your city or something?” She regretted saying it the moment the words came out of her mouth. “You don’t have to answer that.” God, how fucking nasty a memory was it for the huge fucker, to lose his wife and child to Jeremiah? She hadn’t

even seen Julias die, and the memory of learning about it from Jack ate at her every night.

The gargoyle shook his head, slow, lumbering motions, as if he was moving hundreds of pounds with the small movement. He probably was, considering those horns.

“When Begotten grow hungry, and we’re in the physical world, our Horror can become ... unruly. While I sleep, or when I am distracted, it may go out hunting dreams, spreading nightmares. Those nightmares can summon ... people like Jeremiah. Hunters who specialize in hunting monsters.”

“Summon?” Triss said. “How?”

The creature rustled his wings, and dragged his claws along the arm of the stone throne. “I don’t know. But they followed the signs, like dogs on a blood trail.”

“Scary,” Jennifer said.

Triss nodded. “You’re telling me. Christ, we’re really spoiled in Dolareido.” Sighing, she climbed up onto the huge throne, and sat in it. “We weren’t prepared for anything like this.” The colossal gargoyle above her looked down at her, confused, but she didn’t care. Sándor was basically a stranger, and one of the few people who’d understand what she was going through. Maybe talking to him as an outlet was a good idea.

Damn Jennifer, she’d planned this from day one. She was too damn smart.

“Neither was I,” the gargoyle said, his heavy, rumbling voice cold and sad.

Jennifer came over to the throne, stood by one of the huge arms, and looked up at the creature. “You said you weren’t hunting?”

Why?”

“It ... is difficult, for me to hunt.”

“How so?”

Triss almost jumped in, to tell Jen to leave the guy alone. He'd lost his wife, his kid, and it was indirectly because he was a Begotten. Fucker probably spent every moment of every day racked with guilt, hating himself, wishing he could have protected them, wishing he wasn't a monster, so psychopath would-be 'heroes' would leave him the fuck alone. Poor bastard.

But, after a quiet rumble, Sándor continued.

“I hunger for the chase. I must hunt, and my prey must know it is being hunted. My Horror, it...” The gargoyle sighed, shook his head again, and let it droop. “It is difficult to satisfy. Sometimes, its hunger is too strong, and I devour my prey.”

“Sounds kinda like a vampire problem,” Triss said, “times a thousand.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. Satisfying my hunger is difficult, so I either suppress it, or find a target I do not mind dying, if I fail to control it.” He sighed, and shifted around on the throne for a moment, gargantuan size causing the stones to rub and creak, before he went completely still once again, except for his mouth.

Jennifer raised her hand slightly. “Is there no way to feed more safely?”

“The gargoyle,” Sándor said, voice rumbling with something that sounded almost like anger, deep, rumbling, and raspy, “and any Begotten with predatory hungers, must hunt. I feed on the fear of those that know they are being hunted. The fear can only be consumed, when I chase prey, and then catch them.”

“The fear, not the flesh?” Triss said. “That means, you could spare them?”

“Yes,” he said. “I used to be a detective. I’d hunt criminals. It satisfied the hunger, for a while. But the gargoyle, it ... it is not easily satisfied. I grew hungrier, and killed my prey sometimes.”

A detective. She smiled as she looked down, imagining the man dressed as a detective in the fifties, complete with fedora and trench coat. The smile faded, as she imagined him running down a criminal, catching them, then struggling to keep from ripping the person into literal bits, failing, and eating them while still in his human form.

Part of her kinda wanted to ask about his wife and child. If Jennifer was willing to put so much effort into turning Sándor into an ally, and someone for Triss to talk to, or to fuck, then maybe she should ask about the wife and kid? Or, maybe, she should just shut the fuck up. She didn’t want to talk about Julias, and the man undoubtedly didn’t want to talk about his dead family.

Triss had no intentions of fucking the man, but she had to admit, it was kind of nice, being around someone who knew what she was going through. Hell, he had it worse.

“That’s tough,” she said. “I ... don’t know how to deal with that sort of hunger. Maybe Azamel can help? She’s helped Fiona deal with her hunger.” Azamel was old, but so was Sándor. The two were very powerful, ancient creatures, and if Azamel knew something, Sándor probably would too. Or, maybe not? Sándor didn’t seem to like being a Begotten, while Azamel seemed quite happy being what she was.

The gargoyle sighed again, and nodded. “Perhaps I will.” He was thinking the same thing, from the sound of his voice.

“We can help,” Jennifer said, “with your hunger, I mean.”

Sándor let out a heavy snort. Only heavy because the monster was so damn huge. “How?”

“Dolareido,” Jennifer continued as she began to pace around in front of the throne, “is a huge city. Millions of people live here. There are thousands of criminals and assholes in Devil’s Corner that you can hunt down and beat up. The city was built to be a utopia for vampires, and that includes some places where Kindred can feed ... more violently, when needed.”

Another heavy snort from the giant. “This city is cruel.”

“Now now, it’s not cruel. Dolareido is better off than most cities of this size. But yes, the Prince insured some typical economic and cultural distribution kine habits emerged. That led to poor people, to criminals, and sometimes, poor criminals.” Jennifer shrugged, but her face was hard. “We don’t kill if we can help it, but it is allowed, for a reason. We’re not kine.”

Triss raised a brow at Jennifer, then looked up at the giant gargoyle over her. Sándor did not look happy. Something about Jennifer’s suggestion irritated him. He didn’t like the idea of a city being built, specifically to treat kine like cows or fattened pigs.

Oh god, he was a nice guy. A fucking nice guy. She could understand not wanting to hurt humans; hell, they’d all been human once. But, a nice guy? Christ. He’d looked sad, after she came back from killing Angela. Not ecstatic for killing Jeremiah, like Triss figured he would have been. Nope, he’d been sad, very sad. He didn’t want to hurt people, and it bothered him to hear about people being kept in situations where they could be hurt. He was a nice guy.

The last nice guy she knew was dead.

“I still don’t understand why you’re so intent on helping me,” he said.

“She’s trying to—”

“I,” Jennifer interrupted, “am just doing what Kindred do. You’re a powerful ally. Any self respecting vampire has no choice but to buy you into service. Money, support, sex, whatever works.”

The gargoyle grunted, and the deep sound vibrated the huge throne, straight into Triss’s ass. “At least you’re honest.”

Triss laughed, and buried her face in a hand. That bitch interrupted her, to keep her real motivation a secret. Well, at least Triss wasn’t on the verge of crying anymore. God, it felt nice to laugh.

---

~~Jack~~

He had no idea what to think, no idea at all.

Trust her? Don’t trust her? Antoinette trusted her, and that trust hadn’t faltered for very long, despite the massive truth bomb. Well, they had known each other for literal centuries. Jack hadn’t even been alive, including his first life years, for a quarter of a single century. The two of them probably had gaps between speaking, due to the nature of their careers in the Ordo, that were literally as long as Jack’s entire lifespan. And then they’d probably picked up talking to each other again, chatting about the latest fashion trends that’d come and gone, as if they hadn’t ever stopped talking.

He should trust the Prince. She was smart, really damn smart. If she trusted Elaine despite everything that happened, he probably should too, at least when it came to personal things. When it came to the curse, he’d have to make that decision on his own.

Another memory hit him, and he struggled to force it down. His mom, talking with Jacob. It bothered him so damn much! It couldn’t have been, like, a misplaced issue over his mom finally



moving onto another man. His dad died years ago. He'd have loved for his mom to find romance, just, not with Jacob. The man was too sneaky, too crafty, and too hard to predict. He was up to something, him and Black Blood.

Stop thinking about Jacob and your mom! Think about something else.

He looked down at the hot water coursing around him, and rubbed his head. Ok, reality check. He was in a jacuzzi, in his swimming trunks, because Antoinette told him to sit and wait for a surprise. Naturally, his penis assumed surprise meant lots of boobs wrapped in far-too-small swimsuits. But maybe that was just because he'd been surrounded by so much sex tonight. Sure, Antoinette had made it obvious that she was looking forward to bringing Elaine into their bed, but then she went to have a private chat with her old friend. For all he knew, that private chat might have gone badly.

Heavy, heavy topic, that Elaine had kept secrets. Heavier, that Elaine had once been infected with the curse. He wasn't sure—

The sound of feet drew his eyes, and his jaw dropped. Antoinette, and Elaine. The two women walked together side by side, and they made sure each step was a calculated, prowling motion, meant to draw his eyes and lock them onto the swaying S shapes of their bodies. They wore bikinis, tiny tiny, tiny, tiny black, string bikinis. Only tiny triangles covered their nipples and sex, and each step they made insured lots of jiggling.

His penis's assumption had been, evidently, correct.

"H ... Hello," he said. He'd been thinking about something stressful seconds before, but he hadn't the slightest idea what it was anymore.

“Hello,” Elaine said, smile only growing as she approached the tub. “I hope you do not mind me joining, Jack?”

“Joining? I ... uh...”

The Prince chuckled softly as she stood beside her friend. “If that is alright? I understand a great many secrets were unveiled tonight, but my friendship with Elaine will hardly be broken by a few secrets. Her connection to you, on the other hand...”

“Um, no! No, I’m ... fine ... with whatever you want to do.”

“Wonderful,” they said together, in unison. They even had the same, evil smiles on.

He stared up at the two women at the edge of the jacuzzi, and offered his smile. It was weak, shaken, confidence destroyed by the sight of two utterly beautiful women. Didn’t matter how strong he was, a confident, beautiful woman put strong Jack away, and brought shy, nervous Jack to the surface. Doubly so, when it was two women.

“W-Where are Julee and Ashley,” he said to them.

Antoinette laughed. “Unconscious.”

Elaine nodded, and ran a finger along the right corner of her mouth. “And delicious.” More than just a taunting gesture, it was a statement. Jack could smell blood, and hints of the two ghouls on their bodies. Antoinette didn’t sleep with her ghouls without Jack since they’d become lovers, but that didn’t mean Elaine wouldn’t get a little frisky when Kissing them.

Ok, so, both elders were coming into the pool with full bellies. He could see they were Blushing Life, because their skin had a touch more color than usual, and more importantly, their nipples were pushing out against the tiny triangles of their string bikinis. He’d

fed earlier tonight before the party, but he wasn't Blushing Life. They were Blushing Life with the natural reflex of a Kindred who'd just gorged themselves, an involuntary reflex, and erotic as all hell.

"Matching bikinis?" Jack said.

Elaine laughed and shrugged. "Your lover knows my measurements. She knew I was coming, and she knew you could not resist my charms." She stepped down into the hot water, sat across from Jack, crossed her legs, and smiled at him as she set her hands on her lap. Every motion she made was sensual, obviously made to flaunt her body for him, and it was working.

"I ... could resist." He frowned at that, but he knew it was a damn weak protest.

It was Antoinette's turn to laugh, and she settled into the water next to Elaine. She hooked her left arm up onto the wall of the jacuzzi, and slid in close so Elaine was snug to her left side, the Prince's left arm now behind her. Jack gulped as he watched the side of her left breast press into Elaine's right. Skin-on-skin contact, boob to boob. Good god in heaven.

"Oh my," Elaine said, eyes locked onto him. "You are most definitely correct, Ann. His eyes are delicious when he squirms."

"Are they not?"

"I can see how one could become addicted to making them light up like that."

"Indeed. It sends a tingling buzz through my body every time." With a long, pleasant sigh, Antoinette also folded her legs, left arm still up so her body remained snug to Elaine's side, while her right arm rested on her lap. "Jack, Blush for me."

He Blushed, but kept his hands firmly locked onto the jacuzzi seat beneath him as he felt every drop of blood in his body rush into his dick. Damn painful, having a raging boner pressing against the inside of his swimming trunks, but he refused to give into wanton need. It was the game Antoinette wanted to play, to tease him until he was ready to explode. It was simultaneously fun, and torturous.

Elaine's right hand slid down her bare, smooth leg, walked on fingertips to Antoinette's leg, and started to stroke the inside of the Prince's thigh. Antoinette unfolded her legs, giving Elaine more access, and Elaine didn't hesitate to slide her roaming hand higher up Antoinette's leg, all while never looking away from Jack. Antoinette didn't either, eyes locked onto him, occasionally glancing down at his erection trapped in his swimsuit, and licked her lips.

Good god it was happening. What was that thing Damien said? Lord, or Longinus, give him strength? He'd need it, with the way these two evil women were looking at him.

"He has patience," Elaine said.

"He does, oui. I have enjoyed many nights with my lover, where I have spent an hour or more, teasing him to his first orgasm of many."

"Poor man. You are a wicked thing, Ann."

"So you say, Elaine, but, I will show you why I cannot resist." Antoinette pointed her right hand at him. "Jack, undress, and come stand before us."

Jack took a useless breath, glanced down at his trunks, back at the two women, sighed, and did as commanded, sliding the trunks off. Who the fuck was he kidding, he loved this game. It always ended in some ridiculously powerful orgasms, almost painfully powerful. And Antoinette loved the game. He loved doing anything she loved doing, and as the years had proven, vice versa.

He stood two feet in front of them, water cutting halfway across his pelvis and raised penis. There was always a moment of embarrassment and worry, showing his dick to a new face. Big enough? Not gross? But the worry passed quickly as he saw Elaine's smile grow as her eyes slid down his chest, his abs, and down onto his shaved smooth pelvis and penis.

"You are surprisingly muscular for such a small creature," his great grandsire said.

Antoinette nodded, and licked her lips again as she looked him up and down. Apparently, Elaine's admiration of him was doing something for Antoinette, sexually speaking. He could see fire light up in her eyes.

"Is he not? He is so utterly ... delectable." She sighed with a growing hunger, and looked up to him. "Closer, Jack." He took a step forward. "Closer." He blinked, and came closer again, until Elaine had to unfold her legs like Antoinette had, and he was literally standing up against the edge of their seat, his left knee between Antoinette's knees, his right between Elaine's.

Since they were both sitting, their breasts were at the same height as his dick, and now that he was so close, a single foot of water was all that was between his length, and the front triangles of their tiny bikinis. The bikinis really were doing a horrible job containing their breasts, and considering breasts floated in water, he could not be more thankful.

"I suppose he spends every night with his shaft between your bosoms," Elaine said with a playful eye roll.

"Perhaps half. The other half, he spends inside me, with his lips upon my body."

"I admit, that is a heavenly way to spend an evening."

He almost said something, but no, that wasn't the game. Shut up, and let the two gorgeous devils torture him, that was the game. It was the greatest test of self control he could possibly imagine.

“Jack, my love, come, lean closer. Masturbate onto my breasts, and let my old friend indulge her eyes.”

He blinked at the white-haired goddess, then his great grandsire, before he slowly wrapped his right hand around his cock. Immediate shifts of anticipation from Elaine, and she set her eyes his shaft as he leaned in closer to Antoinette. He set his left hand to the jacuzzi edge just outside Antoinette's right shoulder, and guided his swollen, aching glans toward her breasts.

“Come now, this is no good.” With a teasing chuckle, Elaine reached behind Antoinette's back, and pulled on something. The bikini loosened. She did it again behind Antoinette's neck as the Daeva leaned forward to let her, and the bikini top fell away entirely. Antoinette was now topless, and her pink, swollen areola demanded to be touched.

And then, Elaine did the most erotic, absurd, ridiculous, amazing thing he could have possibly imagined. She half twisted to face Antoinette, and with her closer hand, she reached underneath Antoinette's left breast, and cupped it. Jack stared down at his great grandsire, and how the blonde Ventrue grinned first at Antoinette, and then at him, as she gently bounced the enormous breast in her palm.

“Cum, on this breast,” she said.

“By all means,” Antoinette said, and she relaxed back against the jacuzzi wall, eyes half closing, as if preparing for a massage.

After a few seconds to make sure he wasn't hallucinating, Jack leaned in again, set his cock's engorged head against her swollen nipple, and began to nudge the sensitive, pink skin of his glans

against it, as he slowly masturbated. Antoinette moaned, a quiet and controlled noise, one of those calculated sounds she loved to make to purposefully send him into a frenzy of erotic hunger. Of course, she loved doing that when the rules of the game were about him trying to control his arousal. And now, watching Elaine gently bounce the huge tit in her hand, making it softly stir the flowing, hot water of the jacuzzi, and causing the hard nipple to rub against his cock's head, his arousal was already maxed.

Elaine was a lot, lot lot lot more comfortable with the situation than Julee and Ashley ever were. Even Ashley, a ball of joy and energy, was always hesitant to do anything off the cuff. She was Antoinette's pet, through and through. Elaine, on the other hand, was Antoinette's equal. That, sent a surge of hunger and need through Jack he hadn't expected. That someone else, not someone influenced by the Vinculum or Antoinette's presence in any way, someone as old and experienced as Antoinette, would happily join her in a threesome with him, was a huge stroke to his sexual ego. It was also kind of frightening, because she wouldn't just take Antoinette's cues for what to enjoy, and what to do. She had her own tastes, her own desires, and who the fuck knew what would happen.

He already felt a drop of precum tingle down through his length, and leak out onto Antoinette's areola, before disappearing into the hot water. Damn. He slowed his hand down until it was almost still, and Elaine chuckled as she smiled up at him.

"Ann's nipples have always been terribly sensitive. I hope you have been using that to your advantage."

"I ... I have," he managed to say, voice wavering and quiet as he struggled to keep his orgasm from arriving. Three minutes in, and ready to cum already, Jesus Christ. He knew he'd be able to go again, being Kindred and all, but still, embarrassing.

Antoinette's right hand found her right breast, and teased it, fingers running along and around its edges before tracing circles into her areola, while Jack teased her left breast. Several times, she lifted the enormous pillow to her mouth, and gave her own nipple a tender kiss, all while grinning at Jack with her eyes. But she said nothing, happy to watch and smile, and see where things went.

"That is good," Elaine said, "I would hate to know my friend has not been enjoying her sexual endeavors."

"I—"

"Ha. Do not worry, Jack Terry. Your lover speaks highly of your attentiveness." While her right hand continued to cup Antoinette's closer breast, her left hand slid her blonde hair past her ear before she leaned in toward the breast, and set a kiss on Antoinette's bosom. The kiss started high, closer to her friend's shoulder, before inching down closer and closer toward the areola.

Jack pulled back, but Elaine reached out with her left hand, and pulled him back in.

"But I—"

"Do not stop," the Ventrue said. The Ventrue ordered. It would have been audacious of her, if Antoinette hadn't looked like she'd been ready to say the same thing.

He gulped, and resumed, very, very slowly stroking his length as he rubbed his aching glans along Antoinette's nipple. Elaine's kisses get kept getting closer, and closer, and he continued to masturbate, eyes locked onto the gorgeous woman's lips planting kisses on his lover's breast. Finally, her lips found Antoinette's nipple, and set a heavy kiss against it, and the head of his cock.

Antoinette groaned, another masterful sound Jack recognized, one of her 'I am most pleased, continue' sounds. He did, staring,



eyes locked on the sight of Elaine kissing and suckling on the head of his cock, just above the surface of the water. Christ, it felt good. It felt really, really good. Elaine wasn't afraid to be forceful with her lips, to put pressure into her kisses, and bathe his cock's tip while also making sure to draw Antoinette's nipple in with her kisses.

Jack gulped as he looked down through the water, and saw Elaine slide her left hand down from his leg, across Antoinette's, and up her thigh to find her bikini bottom. Her fingers slid along his lover's smooth mons, disappeared under the fabric, and started moving. Another quiet moan from Antoinette announced her pleasure, and her left arm lowered to settle along Elaine's back and shoulders. She smiled down at the woman kissing her breast, before looking up at Jack with a much more mischievous grin.

"I hope you do not mind, if Elaine helps in pleasuring me, my love. To make it up to you, I am sure Elaine will not mind if we bathe her in your seed, later." She licked a fang as she continued masturbating with her other breast, massaging her nipple more forcefully, matching the increasing desperation of Elaine's kisses.

It wasn't like he hadn't seen someone else make Antoinette cum before. Ashley and Julee often made her cum while Jack enjoyed playing with her breasts or something. And, he'd made Ashley and Julee cum, while Antoinette masturbated or some such. Seeing an equal, a fellow Kindred with all the implied privileges and earned power of Antoinette, start fingering the Prince without so much as asking, let alone be guided to do so, was a completely different experience.

It was fucking arousing as all god damn hell.

"I ... I don't mind," he said, even as his eyes locked onto the sight of Elaine's lips suckling the side of his glans. She hadn't asked if she could pleasure him, either. It just happened, because the woman was riding the exact same sexual wavelength and rhythm as

Antoinette. Well, Antoinette had said they were old friends, and they had not only fucked hundreds of kine together, and probably some other vampires too, but also fucked each other occasionally purely for the erotic joy of it. They had a much larger sexual history together, than he and Antoinette did.

He thought maybe he should have been kind of jealous about that, considering the situation. But, as Elaine continued to kiss his cock, until he felt the rising heat flow up his length, and powerful sparks of pleasure down from his glans, he couldn't find any jealousy for the life of him. Just a white blanket snuffing out his thoughts, as he started to cum onto his lover's breast, and Elaine's lips.

She eased the power of her kisses, adopting a far gentler suckling pressure. Her left arm pumped up and down in the water, earning some quiet moans from Antoinette, all while she continued kiss and lick his glans and her friend's nipple. Multitasking expert. Antoinette looked down at her breasts, and let out a long, happy sigh, as she started to cum, the intimately familiar, if subtle expression on her face announcing her pleasure. She didn't stop them, content to watch Jack cum onto her body and onto Elaine's lips, as Elaine fingered her.

Jack squeezed on the base of his length, and pushed out the final drops of his cum, milking the last sparks of bliss. Elaine didn't miss a beat. She pulled her head back a bit, and Jack pressed his glans against Antoinette's breast, sinking it into the mountain of softness as he forced out the final drops of his white fluid. When he pulled back, Elaine wrapped her lips around his glans completely, and smiled up at him as she did. He almost gasped as she suckled on him, ran her tongue around his cock's tip in circles, sent electric pleasure down his length, and milked him until there wasn't a drop left. And then, she turned back to Antoinette, and began to devour his lover's breast all the more.

Jack stared, eyes wide, as he watched this gorgeous woman, hair wet with water now, arm trembling as she continued to finger Antoinette's insides, suckle, kiss, lick, and utterly spoil his lover's breast. His cum slid down the heavy teardrop shape of Antoinette's breast, but Elaine lowered her lips, caught the descending trails, and licked them clean before setting her mouth back to the Prince's areola.

Antoinette looked up to him again, and for a moment, he could see a hint of worry there. Would he be jealous that he was watching another vampire bring her to orgasm like this, was probably going through her mind. Well, judging from how she relaxed a second later, the expression on his face must have eased her worries. He probably looked like a starstruck child, utterly hypnotized by the sight of the elder vampire licking cum, his cum, off his lover's tit, while fingering her to a second orgasm. Yeap, that was hot. That was very, very hot.

"Jack," Antoinette said, mid orgasm, eyes still half closed, "I assume you would like to do the same to Elaine now, oui?" Even as she talked, looking up at him, the blonde woman continued to kiss and lick her breast, and fingered her underneath her bikini bottom hard enough to churn flowing water. Antoinette's left hand slid up Elaine's back, into her hair, and cradled her head, massaging her scalp and pushing her toward Antoinette's breast until the woman's face half disappeared into the mountain of softness.

It didn't stop Elaine. The blonde woman grinned into Antoinette's breast, and kept going, left hand pumping up and down inside Antoinette's, while her right settle on Antoinette's hip for balance. The Prince's breasts jiggled hypnotically in the water, enormous pale pillows that floated in the hot waves, though her left one remained firmly pinned to her chest where Elaine smothered it in kisses. Antoinette's smile never broke or faltered, but her lips did part slightly as her orgasm continued, or was renewed by a third. Good god, Elaine knew what she was doing.

“Yes, yes I would,” he managed to get out, eyes still locked onto Antoinette, and Elaine.

Elaine finally stopped. She sat up, leaned back into her seat, and grinned up at Jack as she licked her lips. “I suppose it is only fair. Though, why you would prefer to fuck my breasts, when your lover and I could bathe your cock in kisses, is beyond me.”

“Jack loves breasts,” Antoinette said with a shrug, “and I am glad that he does. But, perhaps the next time you join us, we could test our lips and tongues against his length, together.” And, because she knew he was picturing it now, she grinned up at him, and licked her lips.

Her left arm, behind Elaine and hooked on the edge of the jacuzzi again, reached out and grabbed a bottle of lubricant, one they kept nearby pretty much all the time after a few incidents in the past. If you were aiming for some serious, sexual friction in a tub, you needed lubricant. Water washed away the natural stuff, but a really, really thick silicone lubricant mitigated that. So, as he'd seen Ashley and Julee do to Antoinette's breasts many times, Antoinette reached over Elaine's breasts with her right hand, squeezed, and buried the woman's breasts in the gel.

Elaine's long, pleased sigh, was intoxicating. She half closed her eyes, but kept them open as she reached up, undid the knot of her bikini top, peeled it down, and did the same for the bottom knot. After setting the cloth on the jacuzzi wall, she cupped her huge breasts in her hands, caught the waves of lubricant trickling down them, and began to massage it into her skin. Jack was hypnotized, instantly. Elaine may not have had the utterly absurd bosom of Antoinette, but she still had enormous breasts that filled her hands and overflowed her fingers with their softness and size. Her large nipples were a shade darker than his lover's, a little smaller, and sat a little higher, so that the undersides of each breast were huge. She saw that he was staring at the underside contours of her bosom, and

she used it, chuckling as she ran her fingers through the water to spread the lubricant along and beneath each breast.

“I think,” Elaine said, voice huskier than before, “that I would like to relax for a bit. Be a dear Ann, and pleasure me, while your lover fucks my breasts? I want to watch.”

“Forever lazy and spoiled,” Antoinette said as she rolled her eyes. Left arm still hooked behind Elaine, she reached out with her right, and temporarily hugged her as she used the leverage to coat her right hand in lubricant. “I suppose you still do this regularly, sit there and do nothing while your thralls and ghouls do all the work.”

“And why would I not? They are my servants, after all.” Her grin turned toward mischievous, a grin Jack recognized from Antoinette, and she spread her legs. Antoinette, now pressed to her side, reached down her right hand, slid it underneath the black, tiny bikini bottom, and began to fondle and caress what she found underneath.

Elaine moaned, and Jack melted. Antoinette was snug to her side with how her left arm was behind Elaine, so her left breast was squashed to Elaine’s right. Her right hand was between Elaine’s thighs, obviously working an already very horny Elaine toward what would be a quick orgasm. Judging from the fire in Elaine’s eyes as she grinned up at him, he knew he was right. They’d both just fed, and Jack was fairly certain Elaine had probably fingered, or licked the two ghouls into submission when she did. Both elders had been super aroused when they’d joined him in the pool, before he’d even touched them.

“Come, Jack. Use your hands, take my breasts, and enjoy yourself.”

He gulped, stepped around their legs a bit so both of his were between Elaine’s knees, and reached down to scoop up both of

Elaine's breasts into his hands. They spilled over his palms, fingers, and wrists.

Antoinette looked up to him just long enough for a wink, before she leaned in, and started to kiss Elaine's neck. So close, Antoinette's left breast squashed Jack's hand where it held Elaine's right breast, and he stared down at the valley of softness before him. Elaine's mouth parted in another moan, and she relaxed her back against the jacuzzi. Neck was her sweet spot, then. It wasn't like Antoinette's kiss had shattered Elaine's control; Antoinette didn't lose control, even mid orgasm, and he doubted Elaine would either. But seeing the Ventrue melt, and hearing a genuine moan of bliss come from her devious smile, a moan earned by his lover's kiss and fingers, was too damn much.

He leaned in, set his cock between her breasts, and pressed them together around his girth.

Elaine's eyes slid down his body to his chest, to his abs, to his length now surrounded by her breasts so only his glans poked out from between them, and then back to his stomach. He gently thrust forward, and shuddered as he felt the friction of breasts along his shaft and on his aching glans. Elaine sighed happily, reached up, and ran both her hands along his abs, until she was tracing the lines of them with her fingertips.

"You must do this often," Elaine said, head tilted slightly toward the woman currently giving her a hickey, "let this gorgeous little man fuck your breasts like this, while your two precious pets pleasure you?"

"Of course," Antoinette said into her neck. "Can you blame me? Look at that boy's body, how his stomach flexes with each thrust, how his cock boils against the skin, how his eyes beg for more." Her right arm shook slightly, her hand doing something inside Elaine

that looked a lot closer to an up-and-down pumping motion, rather than a clitoris massage.

The Ventrue nodded, eyes half closing again as she looked back up to his face. “I admit, the way he shows his hunger so clearly in his eyes and his body language ... is ... captivating.” Her voice wavered, only slightly, and her body quivered in the water as Antoinette pumped her insides faster. Orgasm danced in the woman’s eyes, and she made sure he saw it, eye contact making it clear how much she was enjoying this. She wanted him to see that she was in bliss, or, she wanted to see his eyes when he did see.

Her hands slipped around, grabbed his ass, and gently sank her fingers into the muscle of his buttocks. He gulped as he thrust, and she laughed as she eased her grip, but kept her hands where they were. It made it so he was thrusting between her arms, and into the valley his hands created with her breasts. He couldn’t see what Antoinette’s hand was doing to her, but he could see Antoinette’s arm slowing down at the shoulder, only to pick up pace again, and slow down again. Elaine’s expressions matched the speed, eyes settling and calming when the Prince slowed, and half closing with lust when she sped up. When she did, Elaine’s breasts jiggled within Jack’s grip, and he shuddered as he felt the vibration flow into his cock.

Elaine’s following sigh was higher pitched than he anticipated, and he stared down at her as her eyes finally closed completely. She leaned her head back onto Antoinette’s arm, and came again. Her hands lowered, let go of Jack, and fell aimlessly beneath her in the water.

“As you can see, my love,” Antoinette said, “a belly full of blood, and Elaine here takes but only moments to climax. Quite the hungry vixen, is she not?”

The Ventrue giggled, a tiny, pleasing sound mixed into her soft groans. She lifted her head again, and leaned in toward Antoinette to rest her cheek against the woman's head. "I admit, it is true. And your two pets were so wholly delicious. But..." Her wandering eyes found Jack's again, and she licked her lips as she slowly lowered her gaze to his body, down and down, until she was looking at how his hands squashed her breasts together around his cock. "Your lover here, is ... strangely ... arousing, how he stares at me as if I were one of Michaelangelo's statues. And yet, he does not leer."

Chuckling, Antoinette nudged her head into Elaine's cheek, and resumed kissing her neck and shoulder. "Wait until he coats you with his cum," she said between kisses. "The sheer pleasure in his face, is addictive. You will crave it."

He knew his expressions were always blatant and obvious, at least more than other Kindred. He'd been learning to hide his emotions, but something about erotic scenarios destroyed any possibility of that. Worse, or better as far as Antoinette was concerned, he regressed to a shy and nervous young man whenever she buried him in some new sexual scenario. This was very much like that, and he knew the look on his face must have made him look like a hypnotized, paralyzed, drunk fool, with jaw hanging open and cheeks blushing. Apparently, that seemed to turn the two women on quite a bit.

Elaine closed her eyes for a moment, a long, quiet groan escaping her as Antoinette fingered her faster. The vibration of her body filled Jack's palms where he held her breasts, and he thrust up into the valley between them faster as he watched her tremble. His pelvis hit her breasts hard enough to make them ripple with the impact, and deep enough he could see his engorged glans poke out from between them, beneath her collar. Each thrust buried his cock, every inch, in the glorious friction of her lubricated, huge breasts snug and tight around his length. And, staring down at the beautiful



woman as she came for what must have been the fourth time, it was too much.

He slowed his thrusts down, and came. A small groan announced his pleasure, and Antoinette stopped fingering her friend long enough for Elaine to open her eyes. She looked down, and watched with a hungry gaze, as the first gush of his cum splashed up onto her chest. But, before she could say anything, Antoinette started to finger her again, and leaned in close to set her perfect kisses deep along her neck. The elder Ventrue quickly fell back into waves of pleasure, but she forced herself to keep her eyes open, and watch Jack cum on her body.

Seeing the ancient woman, gorgeous and moaning in bliss, was icing on each and every gush of pleasure that ran through him. Antoinette was good, really really, really good. She wasn't just a master of eroticism, she knew Elaine's body better than she knew even his. She knew where to kiss, where to finger, and how hard to finger, to have Elaine shivering in obvious orgasm in mere moments, so that the Ventrue had to work to keep her eyes open. But she did, and she stared down at the mess he was making over her body as he came. Another gush, and another, each sending sparks of pleasure down from his engorged cock into his pelvis and underneath his testicles. More, until the heavy strands of white leaked down, over, and around each of her breasts, to fall into the splashing water.

When he was done, Antoinette stopped. The two Ventrue looked at each other for a few seconds, taking in the sight of each other recovering from orgasmic pleasure, before they looked down at her breasts. Coated in white, and still snug to his pelvis. His hands stayed on them, and he gently eased his cock back and forth an inch while staying balls deep in the valley of her bust, as he milked out the final drops of his climax. Even when he was done, he stayed there, between Elaine's legs, her enormous breasts still in his hands

so he could enjoy the intoxicating sensation of their softness squashed around his girth.

“Oh my,” Elaine said at last, her eyes sliding up from his cock, to his pelvis, abs, chest, then to his face. “So much.” She reached out, ran a finger down his abs, tracing the lines between them down onto his pelvis, before she continued down his arm, onto her breast, up to her collar, and then up to her lips where she kissed her finger free of his cum. “Perhaps you would ... like to go again? I must admit, that was ... terribly appealing to watch.”

Antoinette chuckled into her friend’s ear, gave it a small kiss, and sat up straight. “I thought perhaps, we could both pleasure my love, at the same time?”

“Oh?” Elaine said, raising a brow and looking to her friend. She was still trembling, and Jack found himself gently fucking her breasts again, just to enjoy the feel of her shivers.

With a pleased, husky chuckle, Antoinette reached out, and pushed Jack away from Elaine until he stood a foot back. Damn.

“Oui. I thought ... perhaps...” She leaned into Elaine’s ear, whispered a few words, and set a taunting kiss on her earlobe.

Elaine giggled, nodded, and stood up. Antoinette did as well, and the two tall women smiled down at Jack. Uh oh? They turned to face each other, and while still looking at Jack, they stepped into each other, and pressed their breasts together. Uh oh.

He gulped as he watched the wet pillows mold to each other and fight for space, as the two women made an obvious show for him. Elaine still trembled a little, but she didn’t let that stop her as she nudged her body into her friend’s. She leaned in closer, set a kiss on Antoinette’s neck, and grinned at him as she did. Then Antoinette did the same, leaning down to kiss her slightly shorter friend’s neck, while pulling her in close at the hip. They didn’t just hug, they

moved their torsos up and down a few inches opposite of each other, so their huge breasts slid against the other's, conforming to each other in round shapes as they fought for space. His cum, and the lubricant, spread readily, and he stared all the while as it did.

“Are you two trying to kill me?” he said.

Antoinette chuckled, and Elaine outright laughed.

“He is a treasure,” his great grandsire said.

“That he is.” Antoinette reached over to the jacuzzi edge, grabbed the lube, and poured a generous amount onto their breasts. And then, they resumed, rubbing their bodies against each other, spreading the lube and his cum around, and around, until he could see the mixed liquids trickle down their stomachs.

They got on their knees, pressed their breasts together again, and motioned for him to come closer.

Ok, this was happening. This was actually happening. Antoinette knew he was basically obsessed with her breasts, and while she indulged that kink to his heart's content, what she was offering now was completely outside the realm of anything he'd ever expected. Hell, he would have been surprised if Antoinette had found a female kine with a huge rack, to let him try this with. But, a fellow vampire, one as old as her? Two deadly creatures, that were looking at him like he was a snack, and happily inviting him to slide his cock between their breasts, was taking the fantasy to a whole new level.

He gulped as he stepped closer, and stared down at the two women. He could see how his cum coated all four breasts, spread thin and mixed with the lubricant. And when he got a little closer, the two women reached out with their closer arms, Antoinette her right, Elaine her left, and they guided him toward them. He took a slow, deep breath, eyes locked onto the hypnotic sight of four

breasts squashed together, and he slowly, determined to enjoy every single inch, very slowly sank his cock between them.

He put his left hand on Antoinette's further shoulder, right hand on Elaine's, and shivered as he watched his cock disappear into the supple mounds of their bosoms. They turned to face him just slightly, enough to that their breasts squished into his pelvis, while also staying together. And as they snuggled in toward his hips, he shivered as the head of his glans poked up from between four breasts.

Yeap, it was happening. He was fucking two enormous sets of tits at the same time. One belonged to his lover, the other to her friend.

If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be from sex fantasy overload.

Antoinette grinned her devil grin at him, and looked to Elaine. "I assume we will continue this the next night we are all free, oui?"

"Of course. I look forward to reliving some of our best nights."

Were they ... ignoring him? Ignore wasn't the right word, but they weren't looking at him anymore. They were having a chat, while simultaneously squashing their breasts together, and into him. Their torsos were still partly turned to face him at a mild angle, but their faces were looking to each other, each with devious smiles on.

"Oh? What nights did you wish to relive?"

Elaine looked up at Jack, licked her lips, and then looked back to Antoinette, all the while ignoring that Jack was gently thrusting his cock back and forth against the tight bed of wet softness they'd created for him.

"He is Kindred. He can last much longer than the kine we have taken."

“Oui. Perhaps we should not have rendered my pets unconscious? The four of us could have taken turns with him.”

Oh good god, they really were going to kill him.

“True. Or perhaps, you could sit on your lover’s length, and let me enjoy you while he holds on as long as possible.”

“That is a fun game, one we have played many times with my pets, Jack and I.”

Elaine grinned. “But I am not some small ghoul, Ann.” She leaned in, and set a kiss on the left side of Antoinette’s neck, opposite of Jack. It let Jack see how her body arched to reach her, how her breasts squashed harder against him and Antoinette’s breasts, and how Antoinette’s eyes fluttered for just a moment before looking up to Jack again. Elaine’s threat was very clear. She could make Antoinette cum and cum hard, while riding Jack.

He struggled to keep his thrusts slow, but the images they were painting were driving him insane.

“Or,” Antoinette added, “I have many toys, some that would allow us to join and fuck each other, legs entwined.”

Scissoring? Gulp.

“But then what will your precious boy toy here be left with?”

Antoinette leaned in this time, and mirrored what Elaine did moments before, kissing the side of her neck opposite of Jack, so he could see how their breasts squashed all the harder around his cock when she did. And of course, see the pleasure in Elaine’s eyes as the Prince set a hungry kiss on her skin.

“He will be forced to content himself with our breasts, and our mouths.”

The conversation, obviously meant to tease him into a frenzy, would have sounded utterly silly and dumb, if it wasn't for the situation. Not only were they perfectly willing to do the things they were saying, they said them while he was fucking their breasts. It turned the cheesy dialogue into a very real stimulus, mixed with enough heat and hormones — fake, but still effective — running through his body to make anything resembling a flirt sound intoxicatingly erotic. The fluttering of their eyelashes, the subtle up-and-down shifting of their chests, the husky, quiet moans, it was all a perfectly choreographed dance the two women had mastered centuries ago, to make people like him completely lose their minds.

It was working.

“Perhaps tomorrow night,” Elaine said, “instead of you, you will let me wrap my legs around him?”

Antoinette's chuckle was gentle, husky, and obviously meant to sound sexy. God damn it, she was too good. “I have struggled to not let sexual addiction run our second lives, Elaine. I fear you will be my undoing.”

Chuckling in the same way Antoinette did, husky, with pleasant moans thrown in, Elaine leaned backed in, and started to kiss along the Prince's neck. The kisses went higher, and higher, teasing along her neck and under her jawline.

“We have both known Kindred who literally had ghouls eating their cunts and devouring their cocks during Primogen meetings, Ann.”

“Even we do not do that in Dolareido.”

Jack suppressed his smile. Yeah, they didn't do that, but if the covenants got along better, they probably would.

“Then why the concern?” Elaine said between her kisses, each placed with delicate precision leading back down onto Antoinette’s shoulder further from Jack.

“Because my poor little Ventrue here is soon to have his third orgasm, and knowing you, you will push it to six, or seven ... or twenty.” Antoinette nudged her cheek down against Elaine’s, encouraging her friend to continue kissing. “You may damage his sanity, or turn him into a mindless addict.”

“I can assure you, Delavon enjoyed his stay with us.”

“I am sure he did, what he can remember of it.”

“Twenty times?” Jack said, eyes shifting between where his glans poked up between the four breasts at the apex of each thrust, and Antoinette’s teasing gaze.

“Oui, vingt. Elaine tied the poor man up, and being a young Mekhet, he could not escape.” She laughed again, and pushed herself harder against her friend’s breasts, trapping his cock in more slippery heaven. “Naturally, my cruel friend tortured every climax from him. It took the entire night.”

“You enjoyed it,” Elaine said. She matched Antoinette’s pressure, and Jack did his best to keep up his rhythmic thrusting, as the two women squashed their bodies against each other, with him between them. “I expect to be in the city for some time. We elders do not travel often, Jack, as you can imagine.” She grinned up at him, licking her lips. “I do hope we can do this regularly? These old stories stir such wonderful memories, and awaken urges I have not indulged in decades.” Her eyes told a thousand stories with just a glance. They weren’t eyes like Ashley and Julee, where each night was an explosive experience full of delightful flavors that threatened to overwhelm them. They were experienced eyes like Antoinette’s, eyes that had seen tens of thousands of sexual scenarios, and had

refined her taste over the centuries like an immortal wine connoisseur.

Two women, who'd had sex with each other hundreds of times, and sex with probably tens of thousands of other people, and now complete and total experts in the art, were bathing his cock in their breasts. It was enough to make his eyes roll up as the pleasure waves started down his swollen glans, into his pelvis and underneath, until he shuddered. He forced his eyes open and down, refusing to miss this, as he started to cum.

“I do believe,” Antoinette said, grinning up at him for a moment before looking down at where his hard, desperate thrusts caused his cock's head to poke up between their jiggling breasts, “that my love and I would enjoy that.”

A gush of cum rose over the splashing water, the heavy strand coating one of Antoinette's breasts, until Elaine raised her torso a few inches, causing her bosom to slide up along Antoinette's until the next gush of fluid landed on her breasts instead. Their up-and-down rhythm was subtle, just enough to occasionally alter whose breasts was coated in cum in between Jack's thrusts. Each thrust was hard enough to make the whole bed of supple skin ripple in the hot water, and bathe his length in the massaging pressure of their tits.

“I would indeed,” Elaine said, also looking down, and smiling at the sight of his cum squirting up from the bed of cleavage. “Would you, Jack?” She pressed her body in as snug as she could, making sure each thrust was so, damn, fucking, good. Just the sight of their breasts, struggling to fit into the tight space they were making, was enough to have him melting. But the heavenly friction of their lubed, cum-soaked pillows surrounding his cock as he fucked the bed of cleavage, was almost painfully blissful.



Much as a Kindred's Blush of Life allowed vampires to manipulate their bodies, and push them to some pretty absurd extremes, sexually speaking, he couldn't cum forever. But he did his best, and focused on keeping the part of the Blush that allowed, and triggered sexual desire, to keep going. When his orgasm finally started to fade, he gulped down at the sight of both women's breasts coated in cum, and finally stopped thrusting. Four breasts, each with several heavy strands of white cum, eased their pressure, and started to float in the hot water. But they didn't back away completely, content to keep his cock half buried inside the hot, heavy heaven.

"I ... I think I would," he managed to say between pants.

"Wonderful," his lover said, and she stood up. Elaine did as well. The two of them looked at him over their shoulder, and without saying a word, or even looking at each other to confirm what they were about to do, they both raised their hands, and started to slowly massage his cum into their skin. Close enough so their breasts touched, they rubbed, caressed, and teased each other, their fingers overflowing with his cum, and soon his white fluid trickled down their stomachs, and along the undersides of their heavy breasts.

These two women really were going to kill him with sex. Ah well, it was a good way to die.

Chuckling, the Prince ran her fingers through the water to wash them, took his hand, and pulled him toward her as she stepped out of the tub. Elaine walked beside her, and the two of them laughed between themselves as Jack followed along, staring at the two women's asses, and the back contours of their jiggling, swaying breasts. They knew he was, and when they glanced back, they laughed again.

Antoinette was enjoying this, and that surprised him a bit. He knew she'd enjoy spoiling the ever loving shit out of him, because

she really got off on watching him struggle to manage new, or massive amounts pleasure. But, she was really, really enjoying this. There was a bounce in her step, and he smiled as he noticed her glances occasionally jump to Elaine. Much as Antoinette was attracted to Elaine, those weren't the sort of glances she made when she was thinking sexual thoughts. Her glances to her friend were the sort of glances Jack and Damien made when they were having fun, or sharing a hidden joke.

The two elders were having fun. And, well, that was such a nice change over the past few months, he smiled. Yeah, the whole night had been a ridiculous indulgence of every fantasy a guy like him could have, and he knew Antoinette was doing it half just to treat him because of how rough his life had been lately. But, she was also half doing it because she found it fun.

Fun was good.

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He gawked as he watched Antoinette and Elaine. Either the two women were psychic, or they just understood each other on a strange, succubus wavelength that allowed them remain in sync, without saying a word. Antoinette took Elaine to her favorite shower, the large one of black marble — always with the fancy black marble with the white veins — and with a huge slanted split overhead that poured hot water like a waterfall. They slipped out of their thongs, exposing their smooth slits, and as Antoinette turned on the water, Elaine reached for the soap.

Jack stood outside the shower, naked, and watched the two women begin to lather each other. Not themselves, each other. Vampires didn't need to bathe unless they got something on them; in this case, very thick silicone-based lube. Jack, paralyzed, stood there and watched the two women soap up their bodies, specifically their coated breasts. Chuckling, they half looked at him, half looked at what their hands were doing, and began to wash away the soap under the falling water.

Part of Jack could tell he was standing there, five feet away, frozen and hard again. A much larger part was hypnotized, turning off all thought, and bound by the spell of the two women washing each other.

“I trust my quarters are prepared?” Elaine said. “As are the accommodations for my servants?”

“Of course.” Nodding, Antoinette stopped washing Elaine’s now clean breasts, and took Jack by the shoulder. Soon, he was standing with his back against Antoinette’s stomach, and she, looking down over him from behind him, reached down, and covered his hard length in soap. “How long did you imagine you would be staying, dear friend?”

“Six months at minimum, but I am not sure. I would love to see your latest research.” Without hesitation, Elaine stepped forward, her breasts nudging against Jack’s chin and neck, as she reached down, and netted her fingers with Antoinette’s. “Perhaps a year or two. Perhaps more.”

“Year?” Jack said, gulping, and looking up. With a giant set of tits pressed against the back of his shoulders, and another nudging against the front of them, and the top of his chest, chin, and neck, it was very hard to think straight. He was literally being squashed between boobs. On top of that, both women were using both their hands to lather his cock, and he couldn’t help but groan quietly as he felt expert hands massage and caress him.

“Elders rarely travel,” Antoinette said. “It is dangerous. Elaine will not leave until she has made the trip worth it.”

“Oh, right. That—” He sucked in a breath as the two women turned slightly, aligned the falling water, and washed his length free of lubricant and soap. The tingle of hot water on his swollen glans, along with four hands squeezing along and around his girth, was fucking heaven.

“And, as you have no doubt surmised, my great grandchilde, I wish to learn more of you and this curse. I am an Architect of Terror, a leading name in researching all that pertains to the Beast.” Elaine stepped in a little closer again, until her breasts squished against his chin, neck, and shoulders. Her grip on his cock tightened. “I am not above trading pleasure, for information.”

Before Jack could say anything, Antoinette laughed and shook her head, her long, wet, white hair nudging against his back. “Above? You enjoy it.”

“That I do. And I openly admit that you were correct, Ann. Your love’s eyes are ... utterly ... entrancing.” Slowly, Elaine lowered herself down, and down, dragging her breasts against his chest, his stomach, his hips, down his pelvis and cock, and down until she knelt in front of him.

“You’re, um, being awfully honest about your intentions,” Jack said. He squirmed a little, but froze again as his great grandsire set a succulent kiss on his cock’s tip. She looked up at him as she did, her blonde hair flattened to her head like a swimsuit commercial.

“Yes, well, I had planned to tell Ann about our lineage someday, and after learning about you and how you awakened the curse, I knew now was the time. Better late than never, I can only hope.” She set another kiss on his glans, and another, before she leaned forward, and set the whole of his cock’s engorged head in her mouth. She smiled up at him, watching his gaze as she slowly ran her tongue around and around, while her lips inched back and forth along the base edge of his glans.

She was too damn good. Just like with Antoinette, he really had no chance of lasting any longer than two minutes, if she wanted to make him cum quickly. Apparently, she did. Worse, was that while Elaine set her hands on his legs for balance, Antoinette continued to

squeeze and gently stroke his cock at the base, while Elaine gave him a blowjob.

He was so spoiled, it was painful.

“I would not let her do this if I thought her intentions ill, my love,” the Prince said. “I trust her, and I trust she will aid you in removing your curse.”

“She—” He sucked in another breath as he felt the pleasure waves start to build underneath his testicles, and his glans grow sensitive with the sparks of pleasure her lips and tongue milked from him. “She, uh, says she doesn’t remember what she did to get rid of it.”

“Elaine is a dragon, like myself. I am sure she has records she can search through. Do you not, my friend?”

Elaine nodded, and lifted her head from his cock, just before the pleasure jolts would have tipped him over the edge. God damn it, she’d never even seen him before tonight, and she could already read him well enough to know when he was about to cum.

“Poor records, but I did record a few things, and I have retained a few, hazy memories that may be of use. I wish to learn about the curse, now that it is unleashed, and I am sure that there will be hints within my records that could be useful to you.”

Again, before he could say anything, Elaine put her lips back onto his shaft, and bathed the aching head of his cock in slow, sensuous licks of her tongue, while her lips slid back and forth in a tight suckle along the base of his glans. As much as he was utterly obsessed with breasts, breasts couldn’t provide the delicious, wet, tight friction of lips and tongue. Combined with Antoinette gripping the base of his length, and jerking him off into her friend’s mouth, he couldn’t hold it any longer.

His lover's grip slowed, but remained firm as she started to milk him. Elaine's mouth did the same, and her eyes gazed up at him with delight as he filled her mouth with cum. Each gush was a hard jolt of pleasure from his engorged cock's head, down through his length, and into his pelvis and thighs. He did his best to hold still, hands at his side, but holy fuck, with one woman stroking and squeezing, and the other licking and sucking, he couldn't help but gently ease his hips forward toward Elaine, and sink another inch of his cock into her as he came. A subtle rhythm allowed him to softly fuck her mouth, as the two women drained him.

"Now," Antoinette continued, "do not tell Elaine everything. Dolareido secrets should remain with Kindred of Dolareido." Before Elaine could pull back and say something, Antoinette reached out with both her hands, cupped the back of her friend's head, and at the same time, pushed her own hips forward. Elaine arched her spine backward, leaned her head forward, and created a straight line of her neck, as she was forced to deepthroat Jack.

He stared down at Elaine, who didn't break her smiling gaze, as he squirted the final drops of his cum straight down her throat.

"But," Antoinette said, hands still on Elaine's head, and keeping her buried balls deep on his cock, "the mystery of your curse is one I want solved. It is dangerous. As Prince of Dolareido, consider it an order, my love, that you and Elaine should work together to be rid of it. In return for her aid, answer whatever questions Elaine may have for you, regarding the curse."

Jack gulped, nodded, and stared down at his great grandsire as she gently nudged her head around, while her tongue bathed the underside of his cock. The two women had no issues discussing business, and making business decisions, while having sex. Antoinette had told him in the past that she tried to avoid letting sex dominate her life to the point it seeped into her work, but Elaine

seemed to bring out some naughtiness in her. And the idea that someone else could make Antoinette even more naughty, was scary.

Finally done, Elaine stood up, and smiled down at him. The way she looked at him now was not the same as when she'd look at him on the roof of the Black Hall. Whether she'd been faking it or not, he couldn't really tell, but now, there was something else in her eyes, something he'd only seen hints of before.

She was plotting something.

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~~Author's Note~~

Sorry about this chapter, but sometimes, I just wanna write about boobs for 10k words. I'm weak, forgive me!

# Part 8



# Chapter 119

~~Jack~~

“It’s been a long time,” Michael said, and he pushed open the door.

Jack, Jessy, and Damien followed. The leader of the Invictus, and the three Right Hands, together, in the home of Viktor Honors, and then later, Julias Mire. A beautiful mansion, very Victorian, with its grand entrance room and big wooden stairway with fancy railings. Hell, there was a chandelier.

It was very Viktor. It was very not Jack.

Michael stepped over to the stairs, but didn’t go up. Instead, he leaned back against a railing as he folded his arms across his chest, and looked at Jack.

“As you’ve probably already guessed, Mister Terry, your victory against the hunters has earned you enough status to own Mister Honors’s home.”

“Julias’s home,” Jessy said. She shut up pretty quick though, when her sire glared at her.

Michael was an imposing man, big, tall, strong, with a shaved head, a nose piercing, and hints of tattoos here and there hidden under his suit. Piercings and tattoos on someone like Beatrice made them look punk and new age; not on Michael. On him, they seemed more like battle scars. He looked like a strange mix of a street fighter, and mafia boss, especially in his expensive suit.

In the past, Jack was terrified of him. He could still remember the night he met him, the same night he met Viktor and Maria, the

same night he'd died, and was reborn as a vampire. Well over two years ago, holy fuck. Felt like yesterday, or an eternity ago. Which made the contrast in strength he felt between himself and Michael now, all the more powerful. Back then, his Beast had cowered in the presence of the elders. Now, he knew, if he had to fight Michael, he could.

He could destroy his boss, if he had to.

But that wasn't how the game was played. It wouldn't help Jack in any way to kill Michael, and not only that, Michael had a million connections. The man was smart, and probably had several contingency plans for dealing with Jack, including plans that'd be set off if Jack killed him. It was a smart idea to still fear the man. Plus, it'd only hurt Jack in the long run to kill his boss. He was an ally.

Ugh, he hated thinking thoughts like this. Power corrupts. At least the ravenous, insane rage and malevolence of the curse no longer infected his personality subtly. Nope, now it rode around in his head as a second personality. Lovely.

"Thank you, Mister McDonald," he said. "I ... I believe I know why you've been hesitant to give me this mansion."

"Oh?" A small smile graced the man's lips. "Do tell."

"I have no thralls or ghouls." The closest he had were Scully and Mulder. They waited on the mansion's rooftop as the vampires spoke, and were utterly useless in keeping a mansion in good condition.

His boss's smile grew. "That is the primary reason, yes. Do you plan to change that?"

"I don't know if I should. I've never given my blood to another." He glanced back to Damien and Jessy, who waited quietly. Damien

didn't have any thralls or ghouls either, but Mekhet often didn't. They usually flew solo. Jessy, on the other hand, had four ghouls, and probably some thralls Jack didn't even know about. But she didn't have a curse to worry about.

Ventrue lent to thralls and ghouls more than the other bloodclans. Even the Daeva didn't rely on having an army like the Ventrue did. Until Jack started building up a host of thralls, and maybe even ghouls, he wouldn't really be a Ventrue.

"Your sire, and grandsire," Damien said to him, "had ghouls and thralls. Were any of them a problem?"

Jessy shook her head. "Nope. Regular dudes and dudettes."

Sighing, Jack took a single step, and stopped. "It's not the same. The curse was sealed inside them. It's not in me, not anymore."

The room went quiet, and they all stood there for a few moments. Yeah, much as they were all damn happy the hunters were no longer a threat, the curse still was. It made every conversation where it came up get kinda awkward.

"The mansion is yours, Mister Terry," Michael continued. "As much as Madam Turio and I don't think it's a good idea to give it to you, you've earned it. Now, see to it that you do not insult your station. Acquire some thralls or ghouls to maintain it."

Jack nodded, and did his best to keep the sour expression off his face. He could Dominate some people and turn them into thralls, but using Dominate, especially on an innocent kine, would be like using a wrecking ball to open a screen door. The curse was liable to really hurt someone.

But there was another way to create a thrall. A serving of blood bent the mind of anyone, kine or Kindred, to liking the owner of said blood. A second serving, and they adored the owner. A third

servicing, and they became bound in the Vinculum, completely devoted or obsessed with their new master.

To create a ghoul was a similar process, except he'd have to infuse his vitae into his blood, to give the ghoul their special properties. Immortality, great regenerative abilities, and supposedly, even some minor Kindred ability if they lived long enough.

Julias gently used Dominate to create his thralls. Viktor likely enjoyed breaking kine with the Vinculum. The stark contrast between them was a painful reminder of Jack's circumstance, and he sighed as he looked down at one of his hands. He wouldn't be able to do things the way Julias did, not until he got rid of the curse, and he had no idea if that was even possible. And doing things the way Viktor did might be dangerous. Who knew what his blood would do if he fed it to someone.

If he wanted to keep the mansion, Michael was right, he needed thralls. It would be very unbecoming an Invictus to own a mansion, and let it fall into disrepair. Image was everything to the Invictus.

"I will figure something out, Mister McDonald."

"See that you do." And with that, the big guy nodded, and left.

After a heavy sigh, Jack sat down on the stairs, a few from the bottom. Damien and Jessy joined him, sitting on either side of him, and before Damien could say anything, Jessy pat him on the shoulder.

"New digs! Sweet."

Jack frowned at her. "Your sire's right. I can't keep a big fucking mansion unless I'm willing to ... you know." So much easier to keep a nice, big apartment in good condition, than a fucking mansion. He hired a cleaner to take a trip through his place once a week, and even that was unnecessary. A mansion was a completely different

beast, and this one had some dark secrets that demanded it be tended by thralls and ghouls, not hired help.

The Gangrel shrugged as she looked around. “Is this an ethics thing? You know there’s plenty of humans in the city you can convince to accept the Vinculum before they’ve even had a taste, right? Just dangle the carrot of immortality in front of them, and bam, you have a thrall. If they’re good at their job, upgrade them to ghoul. If they’re good at that, someday, sire them.”

Groaning, Jack got up, and started down the right hall. Damien and Jessy followed, and he opened a door that led further into the house. He knew his way around the mansion, a little at least, enough to know how to find things like the kitchen, some of the reading rooms, guest rooms, recreation rooms. They were all absurdly fancy. Made him think of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, the interior of the castle in the cartoon movie.

“I can’t say I really like the idea of doing that,” he said, drifting from room to room. “I mean, yeah, I get it, I’m not human anymore and I need to stop thinking of myself as one. But even then, I don’t know what’ll happen if I give a kine my blood.”

Jessy shrugged as she followed behind him. “You can just give it back, you know; the mansion, I mean. No one expects a vampire your age to manage a place like this. You’re what, three years embraced?”

“Not even.”

“Well there ya go. If anything, Michael gave you this mansion so you’d try and own it, fuck up somehow, and then he’d get to knock you down a peg on the social ladder.”

Ah, right, the *Danse Macabre*. Michael wasn’t his friend, not really, and Jack would be stupid to just blindly accept anything the man did for him.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll ... think of something.” He picked a random room, one with fancy couches and fancy tables and fancy curtains, and threw himself onto a couch, on his stomach, face down in the cushions.

“How did last night go?” Damien said.

“Yeah!” Jessy jumped onto the couch with him, and didn’t bother to control her landing. Her ass drove straight down into his back, and he yelped as he flopped like a fish.

“It ... it went well, I guess,” he said, frowning up over his shoulder at her. She didn’t move, and grinned down at him.

“Better than well, yeah? That Elaine chick was totally into you.”

Damien smiled slightly, but shook his head. “I’m not sure it’s simple attraction, Jessy. I got the impression she knew Jack, or maybe, knew something about him.” Subtle smile unwavering, Damien crouched down by Jack’s head. Pinned as Jack was, it almost felt like he was a captive, being interrogated. “And it looked like you knew her too, Jack.”

Jack rolled his eyes, and let his cheek collapse against the arm of the chair. “Yeah, kinda. I recognized her from the memories the curse showed me.” No point in lying to these two, not about this. “She’s my great grandsire. Viktor’s sire.”

The other two Right Hands looked at each other, eyes wide, then stared down at him.

“Seriously?” Jessy said. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Then, the curse?” Damien asked.

“She’s not cursed. I don’t know how she got rid of it, and she’s not sure either. It was hundreds of years ago, and the best she has is some journals from way back when that might help us figure it out.”

Jessy got up, and eyed him, like he’d said something stupid. “And you believe she wants to help you? Out of the goodness of her heart?” Ok, yeah, maybe he had said something stupid. If Michael gave him a mansion as a way of manipulating him into a bad position, Elaine helping him might fit the same bill. But, why would she try and sabotage him? Made no sense.

Jack sat up and shrugged. “She’s Antoinette’s closest friend, save for maybe Daniel. The Prince trusts her. But I’m not stupid enough to think she’s come to Dolareido just to help me out. She’s up to something. I don’t think she’s trying to ruin me or anything, but she’s definitely up to something.”

Now that there was room on the couch, Jessy sat down next to him, and her grin widened. “And?”

“And what?”

“And, how was last night? She looked like she wanted to fuck you.”

“I—”

“Maybe fuck’s not the right word. She looked like she wanted to tie you up and do sexy things to you, in that motherly way Antoinette does. Strict, but tender, I guess?”

“Hey! Antoinette does not mother me.” He looked to Damien for support.

Damien offered no support.

“No no! It’s cool, Jack,” Jessy said. “Everyone’s got their kinks. You know how many girls got a daddy kink? Hint: fuckloads. No one’s judging you for having a mommy thing.”

He facepalmed. This wasn’t happening. “I don’t have a mommy kink!”

“Come on, you can’t lie to me. I bet Antoinette just loves to pamper the shit out of you, right? Smiles at you sweetly and strokes your hair while you fuck her tits? Or says you’ve been a bad boy, ties you up, and fucks you in a I’m-in-charge-but-I’m-gentle kinda way?”

He raised a hand, finger pointed. And, lowered the hand. “Let the record show, that at no point have I ever called her mom, or mommy, and she’s never called me son.”

Damien choked on a laugh, and Jessy didn’t bother trying to hide her laughter.

“Ok ok,” she said. “I believe ya. So, Antoinette’s friend, Elaine. She join ya?” He rolled his eyes, but nodded. “Dude, that is epic. Two elders in the bed? The two of them combined have probably seen more sex than God. Or, you know, Satan.”

Damien coughed, bothered by the ‘God’ comment, but watched and listened, evidently interested.

Jack offered him a knowing glare. If he wanted to, he could call out how at least a few dozen people had seen him fucking Fiona last night. The glare was enough though, and Damien coughed again as he looked away.

“Ok, yes, I admit it, Antoinette loves to pamper me. And she and Elaine are very similar, and ... enjoy doing a lot of things together.” A lot lot lot of things.



“Knew it,” Jessy said. “Bet you spent the whole evening being smothered in giant boobs. Christ that Elaine is stacked. Makes a girl envious.” She frowned down at her own boobs hidden inside her suit, and Jack rolled his eyes. Jessy had large breasts, especially for a woman as fit and muscular as her. Just, not as large as Elaine’s.

He stuck his tongue out at her. “And you? Still failing to get more legs in your bed?” Welp, if Jessy was going to steer the conversation into sex, like she so often did, he was going to tease her about her own, failed attempts to corrupt Eric.

“... yes. The dude is just thoroughly uninterested in indulging those fantasies I know damn well every man has.”

Jack shrugged at that. “I mean, yeah, not gonna lie, multiple girls with one guy is pretty awesome, but like I’ve said before, some of my best nights with Antoinette are the best specifically because we enjoy each other without Ashley or Julee ... or Elaine now, I suppose. We can be romantic. Not that we’re not romantic when they’re with us, but it’s much easier to be very romantic and intimate when alone.”

“Ugh, I suck at this romance thing.” She threw up her hands before letting her arms collapse on her knees with a slap. “Like, how the fuck do you ... do the romance thing? I mean, I hang out with Eric all the time, but I don’t really do lovey dovey.”

Jack smiled. That wasn’t true. Much as Jessy was a very outgoing hornball who struggled with the quieter aspects of socializing, and had a somewhat masculine personality, that didn’t mean softer parts of her didn’t come out. When Julias died, Jack had seen her express them in her own, strange ways. And Eric was a smart guy. He probably picked up on them, in ways Jessy didn’t even know about.

“How ... how do you know if you love someone?” she added. Both guys froze, and she threw her hands up again. “I’ve been seeing Eric

for a while, right? A long while, longer than I have any other guy. I mean ... fuck, I don't know. I don't do dating! I just know that I want to keep him. Hell, I'm even trying to help his dad get out of the hospital."

"How?" Damien asked.

"Gonna show him my tits if he manages to get his lazy, fat ass together."

Damien and Jack facepalmed, in unison.

Jessy frowned at them. "And Eric and I have said ... like, almost said the words, you know? It's just hard! I don't know what the fuck to do."

Damien held up his hands and took a step back. "I'm the last person to ask. My relationship with Fiona is still new, and I know less about romance than you."

That left Jack as the only one with any experience in this area. Except his relationship was anything but normal, even relative to Jessy and Damien's, and for him to describe how love felt was like trying to describe a color someone had never seen.

"When I said the words to Antoinette, it was after I killed Lucas." He glanced to Damien, and caught the man's eyes looking down at the mention of his sire. "It was when I realized that I couldn't live without her. Antoinette and I have a pretty strange relationship. She's so much older than me, and we connect over odd things. No way we talk about the same things you two talk about with your lovers. But, that night, I realized that if she died, I'd be devastated. I couldn't let it happen."

"I nearly killed you," Damien said.

Jack shrugged. “Yeah, you did.” That was then, an era past. “Bygones.”

The Mekhet smiled, but before he could reply, Jessy jumped in again.

“I ... haven’t thought about what it’d be like if Eric died. I mean, I have, but I haven’t, you know? When Julias died, I felt so bad for Beatrice, but I never really thought about it happening to me.”

“It won’t happen to anyone anymore,” he said before he could stop himself. “The hunters are gone. And—”

Jessy got up, and headed for the door. “I’m going to see Eric. Dumbass is visiting his dad tonight. I should do a surprise visit, see how his pop is doing.”

Damien and Jack smiled at each other, and followed after her. Jessy probably didn’t realize what she was doing right now was romantic. To her, she was just being her usual, impulsive self. It was obvious Eric liked that impulsive, aggressive woman, and also liked it when she was being impulsive and aggressive.

Back at the front door, Jessy threw up her hands again, this time in a cheer as she opened it. “Hey! No more sweeps, right? I’m going to run to the hospital, alone, for the fucking fun of it.” And before Damien or Jack could say anything, she slammed the door behind her. Thud. It resonated, shaking the whole house, and Jessy popped her head back in a moment later. “Holy shit, this thing really goes boom. Sorry!” She closed the door again, and was gone.

Damien and Jack laughed, and sat down on the stairs again. Jack could continue on the tour of the mansion, but he knew Damien didn’t care. He didn’t care, either. Just a bunch of empty rooms now, empty and meaningless. Part of him thought maybe he should have felt more attached to this place, but Julias hadn’t owned it very long.

All it was to Jack, was a big house that'd be a huge pain in the ass to take care of.

“Elaine is your great grandsire,” Damien said, eyes on the door Jessy had just closed, and his elbows on his knees.

“Yeap.”

“And she shares in Antoinette’s ... sexual preferences, and activities?”

Jack snorted on a laugh. “Yeah. The two of them are quite a pair. If I were human, I’d be dead.”

“It makes me wonder how your relationship with Antoinette functions.”

“What do you mean?”

The Mekhet shrugged, eyes still on the door. “Jessy and Eric have similar interests, and are at least somewhat of a similar age. Fiona and I don’t, but that’s mostly a case of me having done so little for half a century. She’s exposing me to new things all the time. She enjoys doing it, and, I admit, I enjoy that. She has so much joy to share, and...”

And Damien had a reservoir of misery to shed. Jack smiled at the man, before he let his gaze drift to the door as well. It was easy to forget sometimes that Damien spent fifty years hiding and sneaking around in Dolareido, waiting for the day he could get revenge. When the opportunity had come, he’d become a lot wiser over half a century, and had seen past Lucas’s madness. But, too late. The only reason he still walked the night, was Daniel and Natasha.

The man was racked with guilt, and plenty of self loathing. Fiona didn’t know the meaning of those words, and was happy to pull the man up into a happier place.

“I getcha,” Jack said. “With Antoinette, it’s ... it’s strange. There’s a lot of things you find in normal relationships you don’t find in ours. She’s not interested in having fun conversations where we could trade silly stories about our pasts. She’s not interested in chilling on a couch and watching a movie, unless it’s profound.”

“Those are things Fiona and I do quite a bit. Jessy and Eric too, I imagine, trading silly stories and watching movies on a couch.”

“Yeah, exactly. But, with the Prince, I can sit down and have a conversation about ... storytelling techniques, and she’s instantly engaged. We’ll have a back and forth about it, comparing points, and she’ll counter me with examples from history. Or maybe I’ll get stuck on an existential thought, you know? And when I bring it to her, she doesn’t just try and humor me or stare blankly. She engages, and challenges my mind. When I bring up music, she doesn’t throw up her hands with enthusiasm and squeal about her favorite band. Instead, she talks about different musicians, different instruments, different playstyles, and we compare the things that strike a chord with us.” He didn’t stop to draw attention to the pun. And Damien didn’t draw attention to it either. No friend in the world is as good a friend, as one who ignores puns.

“She sounds very intelligent.”

“Extremely. But, I still manage to surprise her. Sometimes I find a way to phrase a hypothesis she hadn’t considered, and her eyes light up, intrigued. When I can find a silver lining in dire assessments about things like the future, humanity, etcetera, it makes her so damn happy. Sometimes, I can poke a hole in a philosophy she’s proposed, and she’ll almost bounce with joy.”

“The Prince? Bounce?”

“Ha, I know, right? But she will, or you know, almost, when she’s with me.” Bounce was probably the wrong word. More like, purr. “She likes talking to me, because when we talk about things, it’s

both an intellectual exercise, and we both genuinely enjoy analyzing and dissecting things. Our egos don't get in the way. It's fun."

Damien nodded. "I think if I asked Fiona to analyze why she likes a movie, she'd ... give up, in seconds. She just likes things."

"I'm surprised you don't want to debate with her."

"I ... don't enjoy debating, analyzing, obsessing."

Jack raised a brow. "Really? You're a natural at it, and you're a Mekhet. I just assumed—"

"I'm good at it, but honestly I wish I could just ... enjoy things mindlessly, like Fiona does."

Ah, yeah, Jack could understand that. He could never do it, but he could understand why someone would want to.

"And when we're not debating or analyzing things, Antoinette and I, we can just ... lie down and hug each other, you know? We can cuddle," he dared not say that Antoinette was usually the big spoon, "and talk about emotional things. I confide in her about all the shit that's been happening to me all the time. She confides in me about her struggles with Dolareido, about how frustrating it is for her, to try and get everyone cooperating. She..." He laughed as he rubbed his head. "She likes to talk about her day, and I like to listen. And vice versa. Our days, er, nights, are pretty strange compared to kines', but still, we genuinely enjoy talking about them with each other."

"That does sound a lot like love, when combined with everything else. Not that I would know from personal experience."

"You haven't been dating Fiona very long. Give it time. And it's not like you have to love her."

Damien sighed and nodded. “I guess. But ... I don’t know how I’d feel if I lost her. Never, in my whole damn worthless life, did I feel happy to wake up, until now. Is that too dramatic?”

Laughing, Jack buddy punched his friend in the shoulder. “A little. But I can tell Fiona likes that dramatic stuff.”

The Mekhet smiled, but it faded after a while. “Speaking of drama ... you were talking to Clara at the ball yesterday.”

“Yeah ... I was. I didn’t think it was a very dramatic moment though.”

“To everyone observing, there was drama. Your eyes—”

“Fuck! Ugh, fuck. I should start wearing a bandage over my eyes, like Jacob. They got see-through bandages and shit, right?”

Damien shrugged. “Yeah, maybe.”

Sighing, Jack got up, and started pacing. Damien had gone quiet, obviously waiting for Jack to speak on his own. Nice of him, but now that the man had brought up that painful conversation with Clara, it quickly dominated Jack’s thoughts.

“So, what do people think, after seeing me talk with Clara?”

“They think you’re caught between a rock and a hard place.”

“Well, fuck, I mean, yeah, I am.”

“Why? Just tell Clara to back off.”

Jack walked over to the door of the mansion, and set his back against it as he looked down at the beautiful floor, and then up at the more beautiful chandelier. “I don’t want to hurt her feelings anymore than I already have. She’s great.”

“She’s insistent. You’d think she’d have backed off on her own by now.”

Jack shook his head. “She thinks my relationship with Antoinette is doomed.”

That earned a startled expression from Damien, and then, a nod of understanding. “I can see why she thinks that, considering what we just talked about.”

“The age difference?” The heart of the differences between Antoinette and Jack. Sure, Damien was a fair bit older than Fiona, as was Jessy and Eric. But that didn’t hold a candle to the difference between Jack and Antoinette.

“The age difference. You’re so much younger than her. I get that you and the Prince connect and love each other, but ... Clara’s concern is warranted, don’t you think? Antoinette is absurdly old. She has watched the rise and fall of nations. She’s so old, Dolareido is a petri dish she’s been working on for over two centuries.” Damien shrugged and stood up. “What happens in five years from now? Will she grow bored of you? Or will you start to crave a more ... even relationship?”

“Even?”

“Well, Clara isn’t that much older than you, compared to Antoinette. The Prince has experienced so much, that nothing is new to her. If a couple is meant to grow together, then I’m not sure how you can do that with Antoinette.”

Leave it to his friend to say what he was thinking.

“You think I could have a healthier, more normal relationship with Clara.”



Damien put up his hands in surrender. “I don’t think anything. Like I said, I’m the last person to ask about this sort of stuff. But Clara’s probably thinking: Jack’s dating a succubus, and even if Antoinette means well, she’s so old that she’s just reliving her youth, and hurting you in the long run.”

“Reliving her youth...” It was a line of thought he’d gone down several times, and each time, it always scared him. Was Antoinette actually in love with him, or was she just reliving her youth through him, and was addicted to that feeling? “I don’t think so.”

“No?”

“No. Well, I mean, she probably is, but it’s no different than how I enjoy her intelligence, wisdom, and maturity. She knows a billion more things than me, about everything.” He shrugged, opened the door, and waited for Damien to follow. “I don’t think it’s the basis of our relationship or anything, though. But, I see what you mean. It’s a very strange relationship.”

Damien followed him out of the mansion, and they stood at the top of the small stairway that led down to the huge driveway. In Rich Side, places like the mansion had long driveways that twisted left and right over small hills, before eventually connecting back to South Side. It was quiet. Behind the mansion was the edge of the city, and the rocks and sand of the desert. Secluded. The perfect place to be a scary Ventrue with a host of ghouls and thralls guarding his home twenty-four seven.

But he wasn’t an elder. Creating and maintaining thralls was draining. Creating and maintaining ghouls was even more draining, supposedly. If he created them, it wouldn’t be from his own power, it’d be from the curse. Sounded like a recipe for disaster.

Back out in the night air, and without Michael to scare them, Mulder and Scully rejoined him. Each found a shoulder to perch on, and each gave Damien some inquisitive looks before taking a turn

nuzzling their heads into Jack's temples. Without thinking, Jack reached into his pockets, into a hidden bag, and pulled out a little bit of oat mix for each of them.

"You owe Clara a favor," Damien said, smiling at the two crows, but speaking to him.

"Yeap."

"Know what she'll ask for?"

"Not a clue. You ... you don't think she'd ask for something like a date, do you?"

His friend shrugged, and joined him as the two started to walk down the driveway. No need to explain, or ask, Damien just followed him as Jack wordlessly decided to go for a walk. Or had Jack decided to follow him, when Damien decided to go for a walk?

Two friends, talking about girls, and not having to say a word about where they were going. They just went. God damn, it felt nice. Even with Julias, he hadn't ever really been in sync with him to that point. Julias was a good mentor, and a great friend, a father figure, but he'd been a very different person than Jack. Damien and Jack weren't nearly as different. Hell, they were similar in a lot of ways.

Which made Damien's opinion on what to do about Clara very important to him.

"I think she might," Damien said. "Maybe if there was something more perilous going on, she'd ask for a favor about that. But since things have calmed down a bit, she might ask for a date."

"Seems kind of dirty."

"Maybe. To her, she's rescuing you from a relationship with an ancient succubus, someone she assumes is just using you for her

enjoyment.”

“I really don’t think that’s fair.”

“Neither do I. I trust you Jack, when you say your relationship with Antoinette has depth. But, playing devil’s advocate, I can see where Clara’s coming from.” Damien stroked his chin for a second as he considered. “Maybe spend some time with her to tell her that?”

Spending time with Clara wasn’t high on his todo list. Hell, he was avoiding her. He didn’t want to have a beautiful, fun woman trying to convince him he shouldn’t be with Antoinette. There were too many valid points she could make, and he liked Clara lot.

A week ago, Antoinette would have shot Jack down, and prevented him from going on that mission to kill Jeremiah and Angela. Clara hadn’t. She’d joined him without hesitation.

He liked her more than he liked to think about.

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Damien and Jack stood side by side, deep underneath Dolareido in the abandoned tunnels. The trip wasn’t nearly as stressful as it’d have been in the past, what with hunters laying traps around back when Jeremiah was still a threat.

Well, there was still a little stress. This deep underground, he couldn’t call the Begotten and tell them he was coming, and attempts to contact Fiona before going underground proved unsuccessful. Either she was in her lair, or she was with Azamel. Considering Damien had drained her last night, probably in her lair, sleeping a monster’s sleep, or maybe passed out on her real bed. That meant Jack was about to commit a great sin: the surprise visit, assuming Azamel was in her chair. He kinda hoped she wasn’t. If she wasn’t around, he could just leave and forget about his

responsibility of keeping peace between the paranormals. He could leave, and not worry about having a conversation with Athalia.

But, she was there. So was Mark. Athalia, on the other hand, was not. Thank god.

“Azamel,” Jack said as he sauntered up to stand in front of the raised concrete platform her strange living room was built on. “How are you?”

The old woman looked horrible. The cigarette between her fingers had a long tail of ash on it, ready to be tapped onto her ashtray, and her sunken eyes stared ahead, only occasionally glancing at Jack. Her breathing was labored, and her skin sagged more than usual. She looked like she’d aged a decade in a single week.

“What do you think? Idiot child.” She raised a shaking hand, and blew smoke. Normally, she’d have blown the smoke straight at him. Not tonight. Blowing smoke six feet was probably too much effort, based on how she looked.

“I think ... you look like you’re dying, Azamel.”

His brutal honesty managed to get a smile from the old woman.

“I am. Jeremiah’s ritual was partly successful, as you saw.”

“Yeah.” Sighing, Jack pulled himself up onto the stage. Mark got up immediately from lying on a nearby couch, but Azamel waved him down with a tiny, trembling gesture.

A living room on a concrete stage. Such a horrible way to live, but then, Azamel and the other Begotten used it because it was easy to portal in and out of their lairs to here. No need for a bathroom, he guessed, if they just went into their lairs to do ... that.

“I suppose you want to know how much longer I have left,” Azamel said.

Damien tilted his head to the side, eyebrow raised, and looked to Jack. Jack shook his head. Trying to be friends with Azamel would be harder than ever, after what Antoinette did, and especially now that the old woman was dying.

“No, Azamel. I wanted to thank you.”

The old woman coughed, coughed, coughed some more, and looked over her shoulder at him, eyes a little bloodshot. “Thank me?”

“Thank you.” He grabbed a simple kitchen chair, one they kept near their old, dingy couch, and sat down on it reversed. “You’ve been a royal pain in my ass, Azamel, but in retrospect, you’ve been a greater help to me than my bosses Maria, Michael, or Viktor ever were. And everything that happened because of Jeremiah and Angela is ... understandable, I guess.”

“Understandable?” She choked on a laugh. “Did the Prince tell you what I was up to?”

“That you were trying to kill Jeremiah here, in some sort of grand battle, to make your name a legend? Yeah, she told me.” Shrugging, Jack slid the chair in closer, and eyed the woman while wearing a small smile. She didn’t scare him half as much as she used to. “But you didn’t actively try and get us killed. You didn’t go out of your way to hurt anyone. And, you even offered advice and information every so often.”

“Pfft. You fucking vampires and your incessant need to fight each other over every scrap. I simply don’t attempt to usurp you, and you think I deserve thanks.”

“Yeap.”

Again, she scoffed, and took a drag of her cigarette. “What else did you want?”

“I thought, maybe ... you’d want to talk?” If there was one thing, one thing in the whole world he new about old people, it was their love of telling stories to anyone who’d listen. “Some crazy shit happened, you know? Jeremiah got his hands on, what I guess was a knife made of elephant tusks? Ivory?”

Much as old people loved to talk and tell stories, they also weren’t stupid. One glance from her told Jack she knew what he was doing, getting on her good side by luring her into telling a story. But, it also told him she didn’t really mind.

“You heard the story, from Jeremiah’s own mouth. And the knife, he ... had on his person, hidden. It was a part of the ritual, I suppose, that it would join him, and he would use it on me while I was vulnerable.”

“That ritual. That was ... insane. So many people died.”

Azamel breathed smoke into the air after another puff. “Heroes like Jeremiah have always found ways to do strange things, tools to allow them assaults of such. Elen was a tool.”

“Is a tool.”

“Ha, yes, I suppose. That snake Jacob has her, doesn’t he?”

Jack sighed and let his head droop. “Yeah, but, I’ll deal with Jacob. And—”

“Jack.” Azamel set her cigarette down, and stared at him with heavy eyes. “Don’t underestimate this thing that’s wrapped itself around your insides. Don’t underestimate it or rely on it. It’s merged with your Beast, Jack, the very thing that makes you a

vampire. It's strong, and it is not to be trifled with, by others, or by you."

That was painful to hear. He'd heard it before, from her specifically, but with the dead look in her eyes, it hit particularly hard.

"Thanks, again, for the warning. But, I'm not here to talk about Jacob, or even Elen. I wanted to talk about you, and what happened. Like, what happened to that knife? If Jeremiah had it hidden on him, on his physical body, then—"

"Then Sándor ate it. And I doubt it could survive in the gargoyle's gullet."

"Heh, I guess that's one way to get rid of a deadly weapon."

Laughing, Azamel managed another puff, and tapped out her cigarette again. "It was deadly to me, because of my past. I was ... well, you heard Jeremiah. I was just a roaming fool, little vampire. Just a roaming fool, caught up in nightmares I could not understand." She shuddered as she looked down again. "Do you have any idea, Jack, what it's like to roam fields of tall grass, of jungle, or savanna, in total blackness? Do you have any idea what it's like, to hear the rumble of the earth as something colossal crushes rock and tree underneath its feet?"

"No, I don't."

"Neither did I. But the nightmares came nonetheless. And this ... this creature, it drove me insane for years. Always I ran, and I ran, and I ran, until I went to the Middle East in search of answers." Another laugh quickly turned into a coughing fit, and she set the used cigarette down once the coughing past. "I listened to the locals as they told tales about elephants, and then finally, the horrific tales of warning. I always thought elephants were cute, large creatures. I had no idea, no idea at all, how terrifying they were, before the

nightmares came. And deep in the jungle, I learned ... the nightmares weren't an exaggeration."

Jack put up his hands for a moment. "Don't need to convince me, Azamel. I grew up watching nature documentaries. Elephants are terrifying." Lots of videos out there of elephants going on rampages, flipping cars like they were nothing. "I suppose Jeremiah got that knife made, when he realized the origin of your Horror wasn't based on Ganesha, but real elephants. Or, rather, a horror story spun because of real elephants."

"Yes. But the knife was useless on its own. He needed a way to trap me and expose me. The ritual."

"I'm ... sorry, that I couldn't stop it in time."

"Yes, well, all things must come to an end eventually, I suppose." She reached for her breast pocket of her old sweater, took out the pack of cigarettes, and fought to open it.

Jack snatched it from her hand. Before the stubborn woman could say anything, he snatched the lighter from her other hand as well.

"You know, you really pissed the Prince off, spying on her." He slipped out a cigarette, gave it to her, and flicked the lighter on. Fire, even a tiny fire like this, was vampire bane. It was to him what that strange ivory knife had been to her, what silver was to werewolves, something the universe deemed meant to kill them. The universe was a strange place with strange rules.

Azamel eyed him, obviously annoyed. But after a few seconds, the annoyance faded, and she set the cigarette between her lips. He lit it.

"Sorry, if I don't like surprises," she said. "Mark is good though, isn't he? Hard to detect."



“Yes, he is.” Jack eyed the man, and the man eyed him back, the barest hint of a smile on his face. “He’s also very lucky to be alive. Any other city, and he wouldn’t be.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps? Antoinette is the nicest elder vampire on this damn planet, and you know it.” He grinned at the old woman and rolled his eyes. “What’s your opinion on Sándor? And where is he?”

“Why should I tell you?” She took another puff, and this time, did blow the smoke at him. He was a lot closer, so she didn’t have to try hard. But he also didn’t have to breathe, and the smoke past him without getting into his mouth or nostrils.

“Because I’m not your enemy. I’m your friend, Azamel. And I think you know that. Otherwise, why would you have told me about ... whatever it is, sneaking around in Dolareido?”

The old monster let out a long sigh, and a long puff of smoke with it. “Sándor is powerful, very powerful. And broken.”

“Broken? Right, because of his family.”

“Yes. Outside of that, I know little of Sándor. He has not spoken to me more than once, since the incident, and his lair remains sealed off from mine.”

“Sealed?”

“We could break in, but that requires effort, and is hardly courteous to a neighbor.” Another puff. “He prefers to be alone.”

“Heh, I think Jennifer is trying to change that.”

“Whore.”

Damien laughed. He'd been still and quiet the whole time, but as the conversation went on, Jack could see his friend slowly become more comfortable with Azamel.

“And the thing,” Jack said, “the thing that’s sneaking around in Dolareido. Other people know about it, but no one knows what it is. Is—”

“It’s still here. I stumble onto the scars it’s left in the dream, every so often.”

“Jesus. The dream, too?”

“Yes. It’s torn at the ... the ... fabric of reality.”

“Now you sound like a comic book character.”

That earned a laugh from her, and she continued to laugh, even as she coughed and smoke came out of her nose. “I struggle to describe it any other way. Fiona has shown you the scars it’s left in the Shadow realm.”

“Yeah, but they, uh, didn’t give me ‘breaking the fabric of reality like a shitty comic book writer with their head jammed up their ass’ kinda vibe.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Whatever it is that hides in the city, it tears holes in the realms. I don’t know what it is, or why it does what it does, but it doesn’t take a genius to understand that it does what it does, knowing full well it could lead to problems.”

“Problems?”

She shrugged, sucked in a hard breath between her teeth, and Jack struggled to hide a wince. Even shrugging was difficult for her.

“If you have a room, and half the room is a giant aquarium, what would happen if you started damaging the glass that separated them?”

“That...” He frowned as he looked down and rubbed his head. “That ... might have something to do with the azlu.”

“Oh?”

“Those spider monsters that showed up. Natasha tells me the Uratha mentioned that azlu like to spin web, to strengthen the Gauntlet separating the physical world and the spirit one. Apparently it’s some kinda instinct thing for them.”

The old monster nodded as she tapped ashes into her ashtray. “Perhaps they sensed what I found. I do not know, vampire, but I do know that these tears continue.”

The tears. He frowned as he looked down and scratched his head. Ok, hunters were gone. Next mission, figure out this mystery, which probably meant getting Fiona’s help, and maybe stepping on the Uratha’s toes by going into the Shadow realm.

“Thanks, for telling me. Not now, I mean, but before, when you didn’t have to.” He was tempted to offer her an olive branch, like removing the explosives the Invictus put up around the tunnels the Begotten loved. But, much as Azamel was proving helpful, she was still a threat. The Jack in him wanted to be nice, and remove that stress for her. The growing vampire in him knew better.

“You’re welcome. Any other freebies you wanted, vampire?”

Laughing, Jack shook his head, but slowly, another question came to him and one he didn’t want to ask. Two, actually.

“Where’s Athalia?”

“She is with that blasted man, the sheriff.”

Jack blinked. Damien blinked. The two of them looked at each other, trying to find some explanation in each other’s faces, but they were both confused as hell.

“Uh ... is ... he still with her?” Jack asked.

“I believe so.” A small, knowing grin said a lot more than her words. Sex implied. The monster and the sheriff were fucking, if Azamel was right.

That was a surprise. He knew Athalia and Daniel knew each other, and had gone through some shit long before Jack came around, but he had no idea it might be like that; assuming Azamel was correct. Athalia being romantic with Daniel was actually pretty awesome, if it meant the woman could find a little peace and happiness.

It was a strange image, the cold, hard Daniel, holding a likely weeping Athalia. She was such an aggressive, angry, bitter woman. But, thinking about it, Daniel might be the tide breaker she could rage against. When her rage settled, he’d still be there, unmoved, unchanged, and he’d get to see what no one else got to see: Athalia, with her guard down, vulnerable, and alone. Cue romance?

“And ... and the last thing,” Jack said, “is...” He waited, knowing damn well she’d interrupt him, like she interrupted him a dozen times before, and did to everyone.

Except she didn’t. She stared out, not looking at anything, and took a long, slow drag of her cigarette.

“Is what I thought you’d ask before,” she said at last, “how much longer do I have left.”

“Sorry, but, yeah. Horrible thing to ask, I know, but it’s important. I need to know what’s going to happen to Fiona, Athalia, and that

jackass over there, too.” He pointed over his shoulder with a thumb to Mark. No point in checking the man’s reaction. “They all work for you.”

“They don’t work for me. They’re family.”

“Like the mafia.”

“No, young fool. A family. Surely you remember family?” With a heavy sigh, she shook her head.

Well, it was kinda hard to see things from her point of view, being a vampire and all. Human instinct was to socialize, to form tribes, to find safety in numbers and create groups that could protect each other, coexist, and share resources. Kindred instinct was a lot closer to that of a tiger. Territory was sacred, and not to be shared. Even now as he listened to her, he knew his human half wanted to agree with her, but the Beast in him balked at the idea.

“I remember family,” he borderline lied, “it’s just...”

“Yes, I know. There’s a reason paranormals struggle to trust vampires, Jack. But, if you must know, I ... don’t know. Weeks. Maybe months. Every day, I can feel my life drain from me, a wound I can’t heal from.”

“That’s awful.”

“Yes, it is. But I have lived a long life, and I have helped many Begotten understand their place.”

Many Begotten? She was old, very old. She’d probably lived in a lot of places over the past couple hundred years, and if she treated other places like she treated Dolareido, she’d helped Begotten learn how take care of themselves. It was who she was, a leader, in a strange way. Jeremiah’s ritual, and the past it’d put on display for everyone to see, had confirmed it.

“Thanks, Azamel. I mean it, you old bitch.”

She laughed and blew some smoke at him. “You’re welcome, leech.”

He smiled at her, and jumped off the stage to land beside Damien.

“Let’s—”

“Before you go, Jack, please speak with Sándor.”

“Sándor? Why?”

“I’ll be dead soon, and I ... would not have my kin be without someone strong to protect them. The gargoyle is old, and strong. He can do that.”

Jack and Damien traded glances. She was right, Sándor was strong, very strong. But he was also a quiet guy who didn’t seem interested in merging with the paranormal community. Jennifer, a gorgeous woman, had latched onto him, probably in an attempt to use him to help Beatrice get over her own trauma, but the man remained steadfast.

“Reluctant leader?” Damien said, reading Jack’s mind.

Jack shrugged. “Maybe. He does owe us a favor, considering all we’ve done for him.” It was as good a plan as any. And besides, it didn’t really make sense to let the witches get their claws in him so quickly. “Goodbye, Azamel. I ... I really am sorry, you know? That things went the way they did. I wanted to stop Jeremiah and Angela, and—”

The old woman waved a hand, dismissing him. “What’s done is done. Now, begone, leave an old woman to her solitude.”

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“She’s afraid,” Damien said, once they were a ways down the tunnel.

“Yeah. She’s dying, so, I mean, I can’t blame her. Death is terrifying.”

“I could preach of Longinus, if you wished? He’s found a path for us undead, a way to save our damned souls, and a way for us to find purpose in our second lives.”

Jack stopped, and looked at his friend. Slowly, Damien’s mouth broke into a grin, and the two of them burst into laughter. Jack was, at best, agnostic, and Damien knew it.

“Speaking of. How goes the revival of the Second Estate?”

Damien furrowed his brows as he looked down and started walking again. “It goes well enough. A few Kindred visit the cathedral regularly, and Maria has been allowed to speak to the Invictus as a whole of the Lancea et Sanctum.”

“Sounds like you’re up and running, then?”

“In a manner of speaking. There’s still ... issues, from the Carthians.”

“The fuck is Garry up to now?”

“He’s blocked me, from speaking to his covenant.”

Jack grit his teeth. Damn that man. Every time Jack felt like things were going better in Dolareido, that things were looking up, that he could relax, someone mentioned Garry. Terra Den and Jeremy Long, Garry’s beef with the Second Estate, it was all going to be a pain in Jack’s ass. The Invictus and Lancea et Sanctum were often called the First and Second Estate for a reason. They usually ran cities together, one subservient but still cooperative with the

other. According to the Prince, it was perfectly normal for the Carthians to be picking fights with both Estates in most cities, and the only reason the two Estates didn't crush them completely, was because of typical Kindred bullshit. The Invictus and Lancea et Sanctum schemed against each other as with all covenants, and secretly fought for control of the city, despite the outward appearance of cooperation. If one pushed themselves too hard defeating the Carthians, they weakened themselves and left their backs exposed to their supposed ally.

But they worked together when it came to blocking the Carthians, to a point. So, for Garry, now was the best chance he'd get at dealing with the Invictus, with the Lancea et Sanctum down and not able to block him. The only reason shit hadn't escalated to a full on war, was Dolareido's peaceful disposition, and how Antoinette forced it. In any other city, the Prince would either be an Invictus or Sanctified, and be personally invested in defeating the Carthians, while manipulating their allies, be they First or Second Estate. Sometimes the Prince was a Carthian, and those cities were supposedly quite crazy, borderline anarchy.

Dolareido having a dragon for a Prince was, apparently, very odd. Dragons were hands off, doing their own things and being regular Doctor Frankensteins with their secret research. In Antoinette's case, Dolareido was her experiment, or one of them at least, and she was content to let the Invictus, Sanctified, and Carthians beat on each other as long as the peace wasn't broken. Garry knew that, so, what did he hope to accomplish with Terra Den, and now getting in Maria's way with the Lancea et Sanctum?

A chilling thought ran up Jack's spine. What would Dolareido be like if Jacob was the Prince? Probably like The Purge, every day of the year. Only the strong would survive.

"Has Maria brought it up at the Primogen meetings yet?" Jack said.



“She’s been hesitant. You know what the Prince thinks of the Sanctified.”

“Yeah, I guess. But, you were a big part in helping take down Jeremiah, dude. You freed Sándor! That’s gotta have weight.”

Damien sighed and nodded. “I’ll mention it to Maria later tonight. It would be nice, if Garry got off my back.”

Jack nodded, and they continued on in silence for a while. Comfortable silence. Neither Jack nor Damien were chatty types, and it was great how they could both shut up, and just enjoy silence.

Once they got back up onto the streets, Damien turned to head off in the direction of the cathedral, but stopped. He looked at Jack, struggling with something.

“Jack,” he said quietly, and he stepped in close so the kine nearby wouldn’t hear, “I’m worried about Elaine.”

“Yeah, me too. I know she’s up to something, and it probably has something to do with the curse.”

Tension eased from Damien’s shoulders. “I’m glad you’re not letting your guard down with her. Does she know about your sister?”

“My sister? I ... oh, you mean ... the ghost.” Cold weight pulled Jack’s eyes down, and he frowned as the memory of the specter haunting his old home haunted his damn head. “No.”

“Still don’t think she’s really her?”

“I think it doesn’t matter. She has to go.”

Damien grimaced. “That’s cold, Jack. Your mother—”

“My mother is the one I’m trying to save. If Mary sticks around, it’s going to hurt her more and more.” It was a sad story, and frustrating because it seemed like he was the only person with enough sense to realize it. It didn’t take a genius to see how badly the situation with Mary’s ghost was going to end.

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~~Eric~~

His dad was getting better.

Eric tried to hide his knowing grin, but he couldn’t, not as he watched his dad sit his fat ass up out of bed, and actually start walking around. And under his own damn power, he managed to walk around the hospital with him. The old bastard was tough. The host of health problems, caused mostly by his weight gain, and exasperated by shit like age, stress, and atrophy, were destroying his health. But apparently the promise of getting to see Jessy’s tits was enough to get him moving again.

“How’s the job?” his dad said, limping alongside him, a cane in hand. The cane had four legs, the type Eric had seen before, except there weren’t four tennis balls wrapped around the feet of this one.

“Pretty good. Pay is ridiculously good.” And it better be, considering how expensive a stay like this was at South Center Hospital.

“That Jessy lady treating you right?”

Eric rolled his eyes, and continued along the hall with his old man. The evening was still young, the sun having set only an hour ago. Not exactly normal visiting hours, but the Invictus had pulled some strings to let him visit his pops whenever he wanted.

“You’re just thinking about that promise she made.”

His dad grinned at him. “Maybe.”

Eric rolled his eyes, again. “Get well enough and I’ll take you to Bloodlust. I’m sure I can find some drunk girl to throw herself at you.”

“Eugh! A club? Son, you can’t be serious.”

“No, I’m not. It is pretty horrible.”

“Hate working there?”

“Nah, not really. I’d hate to go there as a customer, but working there is pretty chill.”

His dad raised a brow as he looked at him. “Chill? You look like you’ve been beefin’ up.”

Heh, leave it to his dad to notice if he’d been putting on muscle. “I am a bouncer. I should be pretty strong to do my job well.” Course, he hadn’t done much exercise since he’d changed. It seemed like the wolf in him knew the best form for his body, and was building it for him. He doubted he could sit on his ass and eat 10,000 calories every day and not get fat, but it did seem like it took very little effort these days to push his body toward new fitness heights.

“Looks like your knee is doing better.”

“It is. The pain is minor,” he lied. No pain at all.

“Get into any fights at the club?”

“Eh, not really. It’s pretty quiet there ... except for the music.”  
That damn music.

“Must be kinda dull. You ever miss being in front of the camera? Being in the ring?”

“A little.” Though, considering his recent reintroduction to being on camera, he was missing it more. It was fun, having an audience. He didn’t expect to be doing porn like Natasha suddenly found herself doing, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t been fun.

“That Jessy gal looks like she could kick your ass. She ever fight?”

He snorted on a laugh. “She’s fought plenty, but never professionally.”

“Tough girl.”

“Very.”

“Think she’ll treat you better than Sheryl?”

Eric raised a brow as he looked down at his old man. His dad had never been under any illusion about the divorce; both Eric and Sheryl were to blame. They didn’t communicate, didn’t share interests, didn’t get along unless the money was flowing, and by the end of it, didn’t want to be in the same room. Of course Eric felt it was mostly Sheryl being a bitch, and liking him only for his money and fame, all lost when he’d hurt his knee. But time was a good teacher, and slowly but surely, he started to realize how much his own bitterness had contributed to that divorce.

But now he made an amazing salary, lived in an amazing apartment, and dated an amazing woman. It was a lot easier to look back on the past and see the error of his ways, when not currently out of his mind miserable, driving a taxi, piss poor, and dealing with a bum knee.

“Honestly? ... yeah, I think she will. Jessy’s an awesome woman, and I...” And I love her. “And I think I’ve learned a thing or two, from my first marriage.”

“Ha!”

“Think I’m kidding myself?”

His dad shrugged as they eventually came back to his room. He waddled over to his bed, pulled himself up onto it, and rubbed his legs. Walking wasn’t easy for a man as broken and unhealthy as him, but with how much better he was treating himself, it wouldn’t be long before he’d be walking out of the hospital.

“I think it’s dangerous to go thinking you’ve got women figured out. Ain’t nobody got women figured out, boy, women included. You want things to work with this woman, talk to her, figure things out.”

Eric sat in a chair against the wall, and smiled at his old man. For the first time in a long time, his dad didn’t turn on the TV.

“The old ‘communication solves everything’ idea?”

“Fuck that. Communication just helps you spot the problems before they explode and ruin your day. Only thing that solves those problems, is hard work! Relationships ain’t easy. Your mother and I had lots problems, and it took work to iron them out.”

His dad went on and on, hitting Eric with various speeches about how lovely Eric’s mom had been, and how stubborn she could be. On and on, about the work they had to do to raise him, poor as they were, and how rough their neighborhood was. On and on, about how much he loved her, and it was such a damn shame she was gone.

In the past, Eric would have rolled his eyes and dismissed his dad’s ranting. Just an old man, a bitter widower, sharing his woes with whoever would listen. Except now, it didn’t sound like bitter ranting. The tone was the same, the inflections, the words. The difference, was Eric.

“Am I interrupting?”

Eric and his dad looked to the door as Jessy stuck her head in. He'd heard her coming, even over his dad's ranting, but he was getting better at not letting his new, enhanced senses show outwardly.

"Hell nah," his dad said. "How you doing, girl? My son treating you well?"

"He is." She reached out, and when Eric took her hand, she pulled him up. A big kiss soon followed, but Jessy kept it short. "And you, you old fart, you look like you're doing better."

"Yeah well, if the boy's getting his life together, I should too. Got a few more years in me yet."

Eric blinked. Was that the real reason his old man was finally taking care of himself? When Eric hurt his knee, and his whole life had fallen into a spiral, his dad's health had done the same. And now that Eric's life was looking better, especially romantically, his old man's health was on the up. Fuck, did his dad care about him that much?

Of course his dad cared that much. Jesus, the fuck is wrong with you, Eric? Took you this damn long to realize your dad, a single man, is attached to you? You're his son.

"The deal is still on," Jessy said, grinning at his dad. "Get to it."

"Yes ma'am."

"I'm going to steal your son now." And she did, pulling him out of the room.

Eric managed to poke his head back into the room for a second before Jessy got him too far. "See you Monday?"

"Yeah yeah, now get outta here."

Eric nodded, and disappeared around the door frame with his girlfriend. Nurses walked past, along with a doctor here or orderly there, and none of them looked happy to see Eric and Jessy. The two of them were a couple hours past visiting hours, and the staff knew it. But the staff also knew Jessy worked for Xnomina, and that Xnomina owned the hospital. They couldn't do a damn thing.

“Hard to believe that this hospital got swarmed by crows,” he whispered.

“Ugh, the damage was insane. Dead birds everywhere.”

He leaned in a little closer. “And the staff just go along with it?”

“We got a few thralls working on the staff, and high up in the chain. Shit's managed. Same with most of the big companies in the city.”

“Invictus really control the city, don't they?”

“I'd like to think so, but Terra Den has their fingers in a lot of stuff.” Frowning, she took him to the cafeteria. It was well after supper, and not many people were around. Jessy found them a secluded booth by the window. “Garry's finally figured out that money's the way to control shit in Dolareido.”

“Think that'll be a problem?” He slid into the plastic booth across from her, and watched her for a moment. She was in a casual suit, jacket open and shirt undone a few buttons, enough so a bit of her bra was visible. Fucking gorgeous. Honestly, given her personality, he usually expected her to wear jeans and regular shirts more often. But despite her tomboy personality, she seemed to prefer the Invictus look.

Nowadays, if given a choice, he'd take a good suit too. A well tailored suit was comfortable, and looked good. He was wearing a casual suit right now, without the jacket, and he could admit to

himself it felt good to look good. And that's probably what the Invictus wanted, for him to get attached to the money. Well, he was thoroughly attached at this point, and had basically forgotten about Azamel's offer.

“Yeah, it'll be a problem. First, Viktor died. Then some Invictus Kindred died, when the fucking idiots joined Lucas, got brainwashed in that weird place — because apparently brainwashing was a thing — and attacked the Prince. It hurt our numbers. That put the power in Garry's hands. He took advantage of that opportunity, and sired Jeremy Long.”

“Right, right. Was Long at the ball last night?”

“Yes, but he's been doing a good job of avoiding attention. I can't get him alone, and I just know if I talk to him when he's with Garry, I'm going to start a fight.”

Garry's new childe, Jeremy Long. Eric didn't know the man, but he did owe one of his thugs, Montoya, a lot of money once upon a time. Killing Montoya's goon Mr. Pitt, and literally eating him and his henchmen, had been Eric's introduction to the power and berserk rage of the Gauru form. Nauseating as it'd been, he could still remember the taste, and he could still remember liking it.

“How much you know about Mr. Long?”

Jessy shrugged and peeked out the window. A mostly empty parking lot, with street lights shining on pavement.

“I know a lot more about Terra Den, the only real threat to Dolareido in a lot of financial districts. Long himself is pretty secretive. All I know, is that he's a ruthless businessman, practically a predator.”

A predator. Eric smirked at that as he looked down at the cafeteria table. Well, it made more sense now for Garry to sire someone like



that, if the man had the instincts of a predator. Gangrels were drawn to people like that.

“Considering how things went last night, I figured everyone was getting along,” he said.

Jessy snorted and shook her head. “Vampires are fucking horrible. Lowering our guard long enough to fuck, isn’t fully lowering our guard. You didn’t notice? A bunch of them vamps, mid-fuck, were looking around and scanning for what other Kindred were doing, recon and assessment shit.”

“The fuck can you learn from watching how someone fucks?”

“A lot! You can get a sense for who’s really letting their guard down, who’s too stupid to watch their ass, who’s smart enough to keep their eyes open.”

“You plot devious plans in the middle of sex, don’t you?”

She laughed and winked at him. “Only when you’re going slow.” After a few, silly laughs, she leaned in close to him, elbow on the table. “Looking to take another stab at being Batman?”

“Say what?”

“You know, sneak into the Shadow realm, and clean some scum off the streets?”

Eric raised a brow. “Thought you didn’t really agree with my idea?”

“What? I—oh, you mean about what Matt and Art said.” Sighing, she slid out of the booth, but slid back into it on his side. After a few moments to get comfortable against his shoulder, she traced a finger along the table. “I dunno. It’s not like Kindred hate kine or anything. But we’re not kine, and neither are you, not anymore. It

doesn't make sense to put yourself out there for no other reason than to be a good Samaritan."

"I ... I guess. But my dad's human."

"Yeah, but..." Sighing, she rubbed her cheek into his shoulder. "I don't know how you werewolves deal with it. Vampires, we spend the first ten, twenty, even fifty years of our second lives, struggling with this issue. Eventually, we accept that we're not human anymore, and we stop feeling much sympathy for them. They're food."

Ouch.

"I ... don't know if I can ever do that." How the fuck could he even think in those terms? Another fifty years? He'd gathered that Uratha lived a long time, maybe a couple centuries from what he'd seen of Avery, but that was nothing compared to immortality.

"I get that. And besides, I'm not against what you want to do. Sounds like fun. And I like the idea of pissing Avery off."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Bitch is arrogant."

Eric smiled at his girlfriend, leaned down, and kissed her forehead. No need to say what he was thinking, especially since she promptly punched him in the leg for the silent insult.

"Ow."

"I'm different than Avery. I'm awesome."

"Of course."

"And she's probably a prude."

“Probably.”

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~~Antoinette~~

Elaine took one of the guest rooms meant for vampires, with a sealable door capable of withstanding an explosion. It did not have the strength of Antoinette’s personal vault door, but it was more than enough for an elder to feel secure come the dawn. And besides, both Elaine and Antoinette had thralls within the tower, armed and ready to defend their masters.

It had been decades since Elaine’s last visit, but her old friend fell into her routine smoothly. There were rooms that, while not dedicated to the woman’s research, were easily converted to such. Secure connections to various networks the Ordo had established could be made, allowing Elaine to pursue her research, or at least access it.

And no doubt, Elaine would attempt to continue her research, with Jack as her new focus. Antoinette knew of her friend’s intentions, and Elaine knew that she knew. The issue was, whether such pursuits would be harmful to Dolareido, or to Jack. If they were harmless, then Antoinette had no reason to block her old friend’s efforts. If they were potentially harmful, well, then Antoinette would put an end to her friend’s experiments. It was not unheard of for one dragon to interfere with another.

It was unheard of for two elder dragons as old as them, to interfere with each other directly, though.

“Did you enjoy yourself last night?” she asked of Elaine.

“You know I did.” They laughed. It was true. “I did not expect the boy’s presence to be so ... alluring.”

“He pulls you into him, does he not? I get lost in his joy.”

The two of them walked her halls, both dressed in suits and ready to work. Natasha awaited them, and Samantha would join them soon.

“And he enjoys my company, or my body, at least.” Elaine frowned as she looked down at the floor. “Unlike your sheriff.”

“Daniel did seem preoccupied with Athalia last night.”

“Very.”

“I cannot judge the man for his tastes. I do not agree with his tastes, but I cannot judge him for them.”

Elaine chuckled and nodded. “I suppose. It is not fair of me to judge this Athalia creature. I cannot understand why Daniel would be interested in a woman so volatile and broken, but I shall do my best to leave him be.”

“There is no accounting for taste.”

“Indeed.” Nodding, Elaine pulled out her tablet and checked her messages. “Your lover, Jack. I am surprised you have become so attached to one so young.”

Oh this again. Antoinette sighed and nodded as well. “You do not approve of my tastes, then.”

“Now that I have seen him, I am less surprised. There is an old soul inside that young body. The contrast of his youth with his attitude is beguiling, and I cannot blame you for your attraction to him.” After a sigh, she lowered the tablet, and looked at her closely. “But, I am still concerned over your shared love.”

“Yes, I imagined you would be.”

“Can you blame me, old friend? You loved Tony with all the zeal of a Daeva.”

“That was centuries ago. And ... and he was a loving man, back then, Elaine.” It almost felt condescending, to be reminded she was Daeva, that the curse of her bloodclan would forever stir her to obsess over that which stirred the soul. Love was no exception.

“He was an artist that wooed you with his skill and passion.”

“And Viktor? What did he seduce you with?”

A hint of a frown crossed her old friend’s face. “I was never in love with Viktor, Ann. You are quite in love with this young man, this boy, and I am concerned that you share too little in common for such a powerful relationship.” Elaine leaned in closer, and her face softened. “Sex and friendship are one thing, but love? You love him, I believe that. But it is such a dangerous thing, Ann.”

“Yes, it is dangerous. But it is worth the risk.” Antoinette set a hand against one of the doors in her maze of halls, and looked at Elaine with a somber gaze. “I have not felt such joy in centuries, old friend. Surely you can understand why I would hold onto that?”

“I understand, but do you not worry that, perhaps, Jack is too young to know whether this relationship is healthy for him?”

Antoinette paused for a single second, before smiling at her friend. “That is one of the many reasons I love my little Ventrue. He has the awareness to have undoubtedly asked himself that question, and have looked for an answer on his own.”

Elaine smiled, satisfied for the moment, and followed Antoinette into her primary experimentation room.

“Ah, Natasha Vola,” Elaine said as she entered the room. “Hard at work, I see.”

“Um, yes, um ... w-what title should I call you?”

Elaine smiled as she sat at the table, covered in artifacts, laptops, and tablets. “Officially, you may address me as Elaine, Architect of Terror, just as you are Natasha Vola, Slave. Unofficially, Elaine is fine.” Upon the table, was the book, cover made of skin, and contents a strange, forgotten language. One of the many artifacts she planned to show her old friend.

“Slave?” little Vola said.

Nodding, Antoinette sat next to Elaine, and smiled at her growing student. “You have yet to learn any Coils, and some in the Ordo use the title Slave to refer to ones such as yourself. I prefer Attendant.”

“I think I d-do too.”

“Naturally. But, understand that if you are to remain within the Ordo, you will eventually have to learn Coils of the Dragon.”

The little Mekhet nodded as she looked down, summoned some courage, and looked back to the Prince. “I understand.”

“Good,” Antoinette said. “Is that Samantha I hear running down the hall?”

“Um, Samantha’s—”

“Here! I’m here!” Samantha said as she swung open the door. She sat down at the table, and straightened her shoulders. “Sorry! Not used to putting on suits.”

Antoinette smiled at her silly childe. “It took many months before your son became familiar with them. Months more, before he was comfortable. But with time, he grew to love them, as all Ventrue do.”

“Ventrue love presentation,” Elaine said with a shrug. “As do Daeva.”

“We certainly do, but we enjoy the art of presentation. You, like a thug, enjoy the power and intimidation of it.”

“That is hardly fair!” Giggling and rolling her eyes, Elaine picked up one of the tablets, and grinned at the screen as she examined the footage available to her. “Samantha, you and I have had little time to speak. A true crime. You are my friend’s childe, and I would be remiss to not learn more of you.”

“Of me? I’m nobody. Just a widow, who got pulled into a crazy world by ... horrible circumstances.” Samantha furrowed a brow slightly before looking to Antoinette. “I thought ... we were doing experiments today.”

Antoinette shrugged and nodded toward Elaine. “Forgive my friend, dear childe. But she is the great grandsire of your son, and is thus interested to learn of the boy’s mother.”

Natasha and Samantha both sat up straighter. “W-What?” They said together, stutter included.

Poor Elaine. Perhaps her old friend had meant to sneak it into a conversation, or use the secret to toy over Antoinette’s students, but Antoinette spoiled her fun.

“Your Prince speaks truly. I came to Dolareido only partly to visit my old friend, and see the latest developments in her research in ephemera. The larger part is, your son, Samantha Terry.”

“My son? And ... and the curse.” Oh, dear childe. The woman shivered, rubbed her arms, and looked down at the table as Elaine’s words ripped the joy from her. “Does that mean you’re—”

“Hundreds of years ago, I had the curse removed,” Elaine said. “The ... details of the event, are lost to time. I have some records that may help, and I will use them to the best of my ability to help your son.”

Samantha’s joyful energy returned instantly, and she beamed a big smile at Elaine. “Thank you! Jack’s ... ugh, that boy just doesn’t know how to share the load, does he? Always has to do things himself.”

“A valuable trait, in many ways,” Antoinette added. “Stubbornness and strength of mind often go hand in hand.”

“So does self-destructive bullheadedness.” Laughing, Elaine shrugged, and scrolled along her tablet. “As any Ventrue can attest to.”

“Then it is good I can temper that stubbornness. My love is not the child he appears. He has grown in leaps and bounds, forced by circumstance.”

“He’s growing up a little too fast,” Samantha said. “At least, I think he is. He’s—”

“He is Kindred now, my childe. As much as it pains me, there is great value in a vampire growing as quickly as possible. Many of us are devious creatures, more than willing to manipulate each other for personal gains.” Antoinette leaned in over the table, and smiled at her childe. “Speaking of devious Kindred, how did your evening with Jacob proceed?”

“Jacob? He...” Samantha squirmed in her seat, and squirmed all the more when she realized three sets of eyes were on her. “He’s so interesting! Scary, but interesting.”

“Scary,” Natasha confirmed.



“I know little of Jacob,” Elaine said. “He and I have rarely interacted. His circle was a small thing, when he nested in Europe near Ann and I. It remains small, here in Dolareido.”

With a heavy sigh, Antoinette leaned back in her chair, and combed her hair over her shoulder. “Jacob believed as I did, that if several elder Kindred cultivated a growing city in a new land, we could create a utopia of sorts. Of course, our views of the nuances of that utopia differ. Jacob is a strong believer in Darwinism, Samantha.”

“Darwinism?” her childe said. “Like, evolution?”

“In a sense. Jacob, and all members of the Circle of the Crone, believe that individuals and groups must struggle, as a natural part of our second lives. I push for cooperation, and fight for it. But that man refuses to understand that his views on our second lives, his and his covenant’s, are antiquated.”

“And this,” Elaine said, “is where Ann and I often disagree. She assumes our old way of life, of predator and prey, of letting the weak die and fostering the strong, will not survive the oncoming tide of technology.”

“Technology?” Samantha said.

Elaine nodded. “Indeed. In a couple hundred years, humans will be spacefaring. Will our way of unlife survive such a change? Many Kindred fear technology, and the potential ramifications of billions upon billions of kine learning of Kindred.”

“Would that be so bad?” Samantha said. “We can’t all get along?” The room went silent as, again, three sets of eyes stared at her, though this time with a gentle air of disbelief, and maybe a touch of annoyance. “I ... suppose not.”

“Non,” Antoinette said, “I suppose not. Kindred must cooperate to survive the oncoming genesis. If we work together, we can find ways to keep our society a secret, even in the advent of extreme social upheavals, and total, global alteration at the hands of technology.”

“And Jacob ... doesn’t?” Samantha’s eyes fell, and she tapped her chin several times. Cute as a squirrel.

“Jacob,” Antoinette continued, “is difficult to understand. I imagine he would happily cast the world thousands of years into the past, stripped of technology. He, like all witches and warlocks, encourages Kindred to listen to their instincts, and in extreme scenarios, perhaps even listen to dark voices that whisper to us from shadows.”

This time, it was Vola who raised her head and stared at her.  
“Dark voices?”

This conversation had quickly grown far heavier than Antoinette had intended. But, if it would give Samantha the necessary perspective to understand Jacob, all the better. She did not want her childe getting close to the man, but to simply forbid her was not fair, to her or Jacob. And, perhaps, Samantha could succeed where Beatrice would now likely fail, lost to sadness as she was.

“One of the reasons I study ephemera, this material that exists beyond our eyes, that permeates reality in strange ways, is to understand the entities that exist beyond our eyes as well.”

“Entities!?” Samantha squeaked.

“Entities. Beyond the walls of existence you are familiar with, my childe, creatures exist beyond description. Natasha has ventured across the Gauntlet and into a realm of spirits. Nightmare creatures, monsters of literal fear, roam a realm of dreams, and my city. Beyond them, above and below, exists realms so grand and alien, I have struggled for centuries to scratch their surface. Creatures, or

gods if you prefer, exist within these realms. And the Circle of the Crone often worship, or seek to communicate with these gods.” Enough verbosity. “Jacob has communed with such entities before, as many in the Circle often struggle, and fail, to do.”

Samantha stared at her for several moments, before speaking at last. “That ... is scary.”

“So be warned, my childe. While I strongly encourage you to avoid Jacob, I will not prevent it. Jacob is a wise man, but while you understand my goals, to understand his is an entirely different matter. Be careful with him.”

The look on Natasha’s face spoke volumes. She did not understand why Antoinette allowed her childe to talk with Jacob at all. Never mind that Jacob could simply force the situation if he wanted, why did the Prince not simply forbid her childe from speaking with the dangerous man?

Because, if cooperation was to be had with her old friend, she needed to extend the olive branch.

No, that was not the only reason. While Samantha, on the surface, seemed a naive and sweet woman, she was Jack’s mother. Beneath her surface, there was an anvil of strength that could survive where others would perish. Perhaps it was cruel, to let her childe enter such dangerous circumstances in hopes that she could accomplish what Jack accomplished.

Perhaps, Antoinette could be a little cruel, when she needed to be.

## Chapter 120

~~Jack~~

“Consider a glass cage, my love, and within, a glowing sphere bounces up and down. The cage holds the sphere perfectly still on the horizontal plane, forcing the sphere to remain locked on its vertical path. It bounces at the speed of light, which, as you know, is the limit matter may travel. No faster. 299,792,458 meters per second.”

Jack nodded, eyes wide and engaged as he watched Antoinette. Understanding the world in terms of special relativity was always a troubling mental exercise, but it was one he'd taken a few shots at when he was younger, and he knew Antoinette likely had as well. Course, her 'younger' would have been when Einstein suggested the theory, and Antoinette, forever looking to the future, would have added the hypothesis to her list of key scientific theories to understand.

He smiled as he listened to her, half absorbing the knowledge and trying to wrap his mind around it, half admiring the way her lips moved, and how damn good she looked in that business suit.

“This cage begins to orbit you at a great distance, and in this hypothetical, you are able to see and monitor it instantly; do not worry for the nuances that light must reach your own eyes in reality, as we ignore that in this hypothetical. As you watch, the cage orbits you faster and faster.”

“But ... if the speed of light is the fastest something can move, then ... isn't this example violating that?”

Her own smile grew. “How so?”

“Because, if the ball is going up and down at the speed of light, and it’s rotating around me, then ... Pythagorean theorem, you know? The ball would have angled paths that would be a combination of its bouncing speed, and the orbiting speed. It’d be moving faster than the speed of light on an angle.”

A twinkle danced in Antoinette’s eye, and she leaned forward, elbows on the glass table of her office. “Exactly. But the law cannot be violated. The bouncing sphere will have to slow the speed of its bouncing, so its angled velocity will always have a total velocity of the speed of light.”

“I could literally watch time slow down and the bouncing ball slow down too, the faster the glass cage moved around me?”

She nodded again. “The infamous time dilation. This example is crude, filled with hypotheticals and caveats, but functional.”

He leaned back in his chair and buried his chin in his palm. He was next to her, at the table in her big office at the top of the tower, and also dressed in a business suit. They were having a Primogen meeting later, and he was invited, both to speak of details of what happened during his attack on the hunters, but also to speak for Azamel and Avery.

The meeting wasn’t for another hour though, and he was free until then.

“But, now I’m all confused. What if two people were zooming past each other at high speeds? Do they both see each other as aging slower? Sounds like a paradox.”

“And that is where the hypotheticals and caveats betray us. With them, we are discussing scenarios that simply cannot be measured. If two individuals flew past each other at great enough speeds to notice such a thing, they could not see any paradox, due to perspective, and the vary nature of the speed of light being the

limiting factor in how we perceive each other. There is simply no way for both parties to be able to compare their experiences instantaneously. Any and all forms of communication would suffer the very same time dilation you are attempting to measure.” She sighed and shook her head. “It is forever mentally taxing, is it not? Down this rabbit hole, and suddenly, you realize your very experience of existence itself is subject to the whims of the materials of the universe.”

“I have heard some mathematicians go mad.”

She laughed and shrug. “Understandable.”

“Wait, so, if I left Earth at a super high speed, I’d see the Earth as aging slower, and an observer would see me on the ship, aging slower?”

“Yes, but again, that measurement cannot be made.”

“But, if I turned around, and came back at a high speed until I was face-to-face with whatever observer was on Earth, then ... I’d have created a paradox, where both me and the observer expect to find each other aged slower? Because I’m flying away super fast, the observer sees me age slowly, but to me, they’re the one flying super fast away from me, and they’re aging slowly. I fly back, same effect occurs. Me and observer both see each other as having aged slower than the other?”

“No, because your journey had two elements to it. Flying away, and flying home. Two different measurements, that create a different skew of the flow of time, not unlike two sides of a triangle being compared to another, single side, the side of the observer whose initial frame of reference did not change, while yours did.”

Jack dropped his forehead onto the table, and started gently sliding it back and forth so it bumped along. “Ugh, ok, so ... if ... I’m flying away, and the observer sees me taking a trip that takes a year

to reach my destination. Observer knows that, while he saw it take a year, from my perspective in the spaceship, it took less. In my perspective, a year hasn't gone by yet ... let's say a three quarters of a year went by, for me to arrive at a distant planet. Then I fly back, and ... but ... in my perspective, I'm thinking the observer is aging slower than me, and—”

“Except, in this problem, your frame of reference remains the Earth. You must adjust your coordinate system in two separate circumstances if you are to measure and consider this problem from the point of you, the person in the space ship, but normally your reference point should remain unchanged through this hypothetical dilemma. You accelerate away from the earth, and then accelerate toward it to return home. Even if you changed the point of reference to be your space ship, and it was the Earth moving away from you for the first half of your journey, you would then be the one that has to catch up to the earth, speeding away from the reference point you original chose. Your point of reference would be your original vector, a vector you leave behind on the return trip. It would not simply follow you, because while velocity is relative, acceleration is not. We can objectively assume that you have left your frame of reference halfway through the journey, or arrived at it, depending on how you measure it, because we can measure the acceleration you used to create that change.”

Jack just stared at her. “ ... you are so hot right now.”

Laughter filled the room, sweet, delicious, and a touch husky. After a time, she smiled at him and rolled her eyes. “I could wear glasses, if you would like? It has been some time since I have dressed as a sex-starved librarian for my pets.”

Jack choked on another laugh. “Ashley and Julee are into that?”

“Are not we all? A quiet, intelligent woman, with a grand reservoir of knowledge, who desperately hungers for a frequent outlet for her

large, endless sexual desires?”

He had to admit, that was a very sexy image. Lots of masturbation sessions to porn in that general category.

“Hey, Antoinette, I ... I wanted to talk to you about something.”

More chuckles. “Are we not talking of something at this very moment?”

“Ha, I meant something ... something less fun.”

Her laughter stopped, her smile faded, and she settled back in her chair. “Oh?”

“Um, yeah. It’s...” Oh god, how to word this. Maybe he shouldn’t have said anything? Why question a good thing? “Sometimes, I wonder ... about us.” Her eyebrows shot up, and he cut her off before the world exploded. “Not what you think! Not, not really. Just, sometimes I wonder about us, because ... well.” He slid his chair in a bit closer. “I love these kinds of conversations. I love being able to talk to you about shit like physics, and you take it seriously, and give amazing insight. I like that I can talk to you about music, and you take it seriously, and give amazing insight.”

“Are you saying you only appreciate me for my mind?” The shock on her face faded, partly replaced with a playful grin.

“Ha, no. I’m saying ... our relationship is unique. Very unique. And honestly, sometimes I wonder what ... what I can give you,” he said. She tilted her head to the side, grin vanishing again, but said nothing. “You know so much, and have been through so much. Growing up, I was always under the impression committed relationships were about two people growing together, but I ... don’t really see that happening with us. I’m certainly growing, every moment I’m with you, but I don’t know what I’m providing you, how I could be helping you grow.”



She leaned back, and tapped her fingers on the glass table with one hand, while the other pulled her hair over her shoulder to begin combing it. Instead of the confident, powerful woman he almost always found, Antoinette looked nervous. That, was a very strange look to see on her, and he gulped as he watched the woman of his dreams deliberate.

“You wish you were with someone closer to your age, someone who could ... evolve with you, as you aged.”

“I’m not saying that.” Ugh, why did he bring this up? Why why why did he listen to Damien? Bleh, he knew why. Because they were thoughts he’d already had, about this strange, amazing relationship he found himself in. “But, I ... I am saying, that it’s something I’ve thought about. Not in the sense that, I think it’s something I should have, or that what we have is worse or better or...” He rubbed his buzzed hair and sighed. “I love you, Antoinette, and I have no intention of ending this relationship. But I do wonder about this kinda stuff sometimes, about how different we are, about whether I’m able to provide anything in this relationship.”

She met his eyes, her crimson gaze reaching past his face and into his soul. They’d stared longingly into each other’s eyes before, many times, and he was quite comfortable meeting her stare now. Usually. Right now, she looked at him with something more than loving eyes. She was analyzing him. On anyone else, the analytical expression wouldn’t merit notice, but Antoinette didn’t let people read her expression unless she wanted them to, or was comfortable enough to lower her poker face. And her analyzing eyes were like the eyes of some grand, calculating machine. Made him think of the sphinx gates in *The Neverending Story*.

They made him feel very small. And that was the worry, the one concern he had about their relationship. Most relationships were built on two people being equals, but Jack was her inferior in so many ways, even if she denied it.

“Jack,” she said after a cold eternity, “it is true that I am much older than you. It is true that I have experienced far more than you, and despite how our undead minds resist change, half a millennium of second life has molded me. It will be many hundreds of years, before you will be able to appreciate events and circumstances with the same perspective as I.”

“Yeah.” That made him wince.

“And, it is true that I have a wealth of knowledge above yours, that which surpasses typical metrics. Hundreds of years of experience has taught me much.”

“Yeah...” This conversation was starting to hurt.

“Jack.” She reached out and grabbed his hand. “If I asked you, to consider whether you had a personal bias clouding your judgment, in any matter at all, not just this one, how would you respond?”

He raised a brow. “I would ... agree, undoubtedly. I’d do my best to see past my biases. I’d try and be as objective as possible, and I’d ask for some outside opinions, cause I’m only human — er, vampire — and I know I could never be a hundred percent objective about anything. I try my best to always accept that I could be wrong about anything, I think.”

“You are self aware.”

“I guess. Kind of a hard thing to define, right? I don’t know if—”

She laughed and smiled at him. “Your very admittance of an imperfect understanding is exactly what I am talking about, my love.” As her mischievous smile returned, she pulled on his hand, harder, until he had to stand up. And before he knew it, he sat on her lap, sideways, and blinked at her. “Do you have any idea, my love, any idea, how rare a quality that is? Can you fathom how rare it is for the average kine, or indeed, average Kindred, to think to

themselves ‘perhaps I do not know everything’? Do you have the slightest inkling, on how rare a trait it is for someone as young as you, to have the self awareness to understand that what you see is not a perfect recreation of reality, and that your biases color your perspectives to the extreme?”

“I mean, I get that not everyone’s a thinker, but—”

“It goes further than that, my love. I am not speaking of intelligence. I am speaking of wisdom, a wisdom that most only learn through decades upon decades of suffering, and only when they are so lucky as to survive their own stupidity. To look around you and think ‘I do not understand this world, and my journey to do so will be a never ending struggle, a struggle worth pursuing’ is a perspective on the universe that so few ever achieve.” Sighing, she hugged him, and pulled his head to hers until their foreheads touched. With him sitting on her lap, and her being as tall as she was, they were eye to eye. “The greatest philosophers of history started with such a viewpoint.”

That managed to pull a smile out of him. Any stroke to the ego was candy for a Ventrue, or anyone for that matter.

“Greatest philosophers, mmm?”

She laughed again. “Oui. The ability to simply look at yourself, and consider not only that your own understanding is imperfect or limited, but others may provide a superior, more detailed, more nuanced, and more logical perspective, is wise beyond all measure. And the awareness to apply this reasoning to every aspect of your life, is...” Grin growing, she leaned in and kissed him. “I have told you before, you are an old soul. There is much about us where we are equals.”

He’d be blushing horribly if he’d been Blushing Life right then. “Yeah?”

“And, that is not all.”

“Oh?”

“There is something, something important ... where it is I who falls short.”

He tilted his head to the side, and eyed her closely. Her poker face was gone, ripped away by her own words, and he found himself lost as he stared into her eyes again. Now, as if from nowhere, he found sadness. Not the sadness he was familiar with, sadness caused by pain, visceral pain, family pain, loss and mourning. That wasn't what he saw on her face. The sadness he found there was like looking into an abyss of coldness. It was the sort of sadness he figured you might find on a reluctant king or queen, someone forced into their position, someone who lost everything that they used to know.

“What?”

After a long sigh, she closed her eyes, and kept her forehead against his. “For many my age, it is impossible for us to connect, emotionally. We have left that part of us behind. The older Kindred become, the more difficult it is for us to find, or accept, true intimacy with another.”

“Jaded?” He tried to not think of Jacob and Minerva, or even worse, Maria, and the only man who'd probably ever love the corpse woman, Lucas.

“Perhaps. Much of what brings joy to a soul, loses flavor over the centuries. Many Kindred, as they enter their elder years, become obsessed with their work, their covenants, their goals, and the very idea of finding contentment becomes alien. We become slaves to our ambitions and our Beastly instincts. It ... it takes much, to stir genuine emotion within us.” Her arms slipped around him and held him by his waist. “I have told you this before.”

He nodded, forehead still against hers. “Yeah, but ... I ... I guess it’s hard to understand.”

“Of course. And you will not understand it for centuries yet. It is the curse of immortality.”

Wait. He lifted his head, looking up as he scanned memories. “This reminds me of a Conan story.”

“Conan?” The Prince raised a brow, and Jack couldn’t help but laugh.

“Conan the Barbarian. The story had a bunch of these immortal beings in it, and when they grew tired of life, they would kill themselves in a ritual suicide. It...” He chewed on the thought for a moment, before leaning in and setting his head against Antoinette’s shoulder. “They were villains in the story, but it was sad. They lost the will to live, for no other reason than they’d been alive for too long.”

“Then the author displayed startling wisdom. Life is precious because it is short. Our second lives are different, and it is the struggle of all Kindred to find joy in immortality.” Her left arm raised, found the back of his head, and her fingers stroked his hair and scratched his scalp. Ah, heaven. “You fear that you bring little to our relationship, and are perhaps a leech, drawing from my experience and life knowledge. And yet, here I sit, fearing that I am the leech, attached to you and offering nothing in the way of emotional satisfaction, while I siphon empathy and passion from you.”

She was afraid she was leeching from him, and damaging him. Wow.

He melted into her touch, turned his head, and kissed her neck. “It’s a strange relationship.”

“Indeed. I did not ... open myself to you lightly, Jack. At first, I found your open soul and lack of experience to be a delight to tease. It was a fun game for me. I hope it was fun for you, as well.”

“I mean, kinda? It was definitely scary, having the queen take an interest in a random, new squire.”

She laughed. “And, with every encounter, I realized how much more there was to you, little Ventrue. I realized that you were precious, quickly becoming precious to me, and that ... that I had fun with you. Genuine fun, different from the master and servant relationship I have with my ghouls. With you, there is ... an indescribable feeling, more than a simple desire to tease and spoil, or to rear. You are ... a missing piece. I feel complete when you are with me. And I worry that I am using you.” Her laughter vanished, and the somber coldness in her eyes returned.

But before she could say anything else, Jack kissed her. Not one of their quick, fluttery kisses, but a long one, a deep one, one that he'd normally let her trigger, not the other way around. As the conversation went on, it'd become painfully clear that Antoinette was just as insecure about their relationship as he was. Her concerns were vastly different than his, but she still had them.

And that made him feel a lot better, in a strange way. Antoinette always seemed so secure, so confident, like everything she did was a perfectly calculated plan. Considering how many experiences she'd had, every action she did probably was something she'd calculated as a reflex, cause she'd done it dozens of times before. Except, not this, not romance like this, not with someone as young and different as him.

Mutual uncertainty. Something to bond over. Something to overcome together.

“I've never felt like you've taken anything from me,” he said.

Her smile brightened. “And I—”

Knock knock. Before Jack could get off Antoinette’s lap, the door to her office opened, and Elaine walked in.

“Ann, I—oh. Hello Jack.” The blonde woman’s lips cracked into a big grin, and she walked over to them, hips swaying with deliberate, exaggerated motions. She wore a business suit like the Prince, and the skirt highlighted the shape of her wide hips and curvy thighs. Nothing like a woman in a suit and skirt.

“Elaine. You are early.” Antoinette didn’t react to Elaine’s approach; probably heard her coming, while Jack had been a little too distracted. Another one of those age difference things, presence of mind, a skill Jack seriously hoped he’d eventually learn.

“Yes. I thought we should talk again before the meeting, about how much of the Ordo you are willing to share with your Primogen. But, it appears I interrupted something?” Her evil smile continued as she casually walked up to the chair Jack had abandoned, and sat in it. She leaned back in it, set her hands together on her lap as she crossed her legs, and watched him and the Prince with expecting eyes.

“Oui, that you did.” Antoinette chuckled, a playful, husky sound, and held Jack’s hand as he stood beside her while she remained seated.

“You two are utterly adorable.”

“Are we not?”

“I could write romance novels about such a beautiful couple.”

The Prince scoffed, grinning. “You do not have the artistic skill or creative mind to be a fiction author.”

Elaine rolled her eyes and laughed. “Pretentious Daeva.”

“Jack,” Antoinette said, “would you mind if I asked you to leave until the Primogen meeting? I would speak with Elaine.”

“Yeah, of course.” He stood up straight, nodded to Antoinette in a very ‘yes my Prince’ kinda way, and looked at Elaine.

He still didn’t trust her, not completely, and he knew Antoinette didn’t trust her completely either. The difference was, the two of them were such old friends, they could become enemies and it wouldn’t ruin their friendship. The fact they’d remained cooperative for hundreds of years seemed more like the exception, not the rule, as far as elders were concerned.

Antoinette trusted her enough to have sex with her, with Jack, and the ghouls. That may have sounded like a lot of trust for some people, but for someone like Antoinette, it wasn’t. Hell, Antoinette and Elaine probably kept a bit of guard up, ready to strike out and fight each other, even in the middle of orgasm, despite their friendship. Elders were just paranoid like—

“On second thought,” Antoinette said, smiling at Elaine, but speaking to him, “come, and masturbate for me.”

He froze, blinking at the grinning Elaine, before slowly turning and looking down at the Prince. “Now?”

“Oui. I feel horrible for sending you away.” Oh no she didn’t. Her devil smile was in full bloom. “Come, masturbate, here.” With her eyes on him, she undid the button of her black suit jacket, and then several of the top buttons of her white shirt, exposing the black bra underneath.

“Um ... are you sure? The meeting—”



“Is not for some time. Now, come, enjoy yourself.” Smile unending, she curled a finger at him and toward herself.

“What about Elaine?”

“I,” Elaine said as she gestured toward herself with a loose wrist, “will watch, of course.”

And, Antoinette knew Elaine would say that, judging from the wicked grins the two carried. These two women were so in sync, it was scary.

Maybe he should try something different, instead of just mindlessly following along? He certainly loved following along, cause Antoinette spoiled the shit out of him. But, maybe it was time he tried doing something he never did before.

He folded his arms across his chest, put on a surly expression, and looked away. “No.”

“Non?” Antoinette said.

“No?” Elaine said.

“No,” he said again, and he put a hint of whine into his tone. “I don’t want to.” A lie, of course. Just seeing Antoinette expose her bra was enough to have him craving her.

The two elders looked between each other, apparently shocked by his behavior. But, after the shock passed, they chuckled, and Antoinette stood up. Uh oh. She stepped over to him, devil smile growing, and set her hands on his shoulders. Before he could say or do anything, the powerful Daeva slowly turned him to face Elaine, while she slipped behind him, and pressed her breasts and bra into the back of his shoulders as she hugged him.

“I believe you do,” she whispered.

“I don’t.” Resist. Resist, damn it.

“You cannot lie to me, my love.” Her hands drifted down over his body, and she pressed her fingers against his abs through his shirt. “Or, perhaps, you would prefer to cum on Elaine’s breasts?”

“Um, I—” He froze and stared, as Elaine instantly picked up on what Antoinette was saying, and started to undo her suit jacket buttons as well. “You don’t have to—” He gulped as Elaine met his eyes, and started undoing the buttons of her shirt. Within seconds, the shirt was undone save for the bottom button, and she grinned up at him as she set her hands on the arms of her chair.

Like Antoinette, she was wearing a black bra, something obviously meant to be sexy rather than comfortable. Evidently, the two women had become immune to uncomfortable clothes, and wore whatever they felt looked best.

“My love, you would do me a great disservice, if you denied me.” Antoinette hugged him tighter, making sure her huge breasts squashed against the back of his shoulders. “And, it would be in your best interest to listen to the Prince of Dolareido.”

Ooh, a gentle threat. And fuck him, it triggered instant arousal. Something about a powerful woman threatening him was hot, and by this point in his life, he’d accepted it. He definitely had a kink for the intimidating, female villain trope.

Before he could reply, Antoinette guided him around the table, and up to Elaine. The blonde spread her legs, and Antoinette pushed him closer until he was standing between his great grandsire’s knees.

“I know your desires, lover,” the succubus whispered down over him. “Give into me. Do as I say, and I will make every night Elaine is with us a veritable feast of silk skin and wet heat.” As she said it, her right hand began to undo his shirt buttons, eventually undoing

them all, before slipping down onto his crotch to rub it through his pants. He wasn't blushing life yet, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to tease him until he did. Her left hand slid up, and he found her fingers wrapping his throat. "Deny me at your own peril."

Welp, he should have known better than to try and play the unwilling participant. Antoinette knew him so damn well, she could press every kink button he had like playing the piano. She'd trapped him between two powerful, deadly women, threatened him like an evil villain might, had her enormous breasts pressed against him, and was offering to pleasure him using another woman's set of huge breasts.

The fact they were all still in their business suits, just made it all the hotter.

He sighed as he gave in, and Blushed Life. Both women audibly purred as his erection immediately pressed against the insides of his boxers and pants. Elaine sat up straight, set her hands on his pants, undid his fly, and pulled down his boxers just enough to free his length from his clothes. But then she stopped. Still sitting up straight, so her propped-up breasts held up by her bra were only inches away from his pelvis, she set her hands down on the arms of her chair, grinned up at him, and waited.

Her grin melted into a happy sigh, as Antoinette inched him closer to Elaine, took his cock into her right hand, squeezed on the base of its length, and guided it down until it pointed straight toward her friend. His glans dragged along Elaine's bare sternum, before Antoinette guided the swollen head of his cock to the right, and into the side of Elaine's left breast.

"Give into me," the succubus whispered again. "I can make every fantasy you have ever dreamed of come true." Apparently, his moment of resistance earlier had sparked something in Antoinette

as well. Without him asking, she'd taken up the mantle of villain, and was trying to corrupt him, as if he were the righteous hero.

Welp, if he was the hero, meant to resist the temptations of a succubus, he was fucked.

Her squeezing grip worked back and forth, and Jack shivered as heat began to build up underneath his testicles. Moments later, drops of his precum leaked out from the tip of his length, wetting Elaine's breast and his foreskin. Antoinette peeled the skin back, exposing the swollen, aching, tingling head of his cock, and gently rubbed it up and down along the inside of each of Elaine's breasts where the bra didn't cover them. Her grip tightened, and she worked her hand faster, knowing exactly what to do to bring him closer and closer to orgasm in record time.

“You could paint my old friend in your seed, my love, every inch of her, inside and out. You could fuck her, while my ghouls and I clean her with our lips, and tongues.” Her grip on his cock tightened again, and stroked him faster. “Or perhaps you would rather fuck me, while Elaine massages your body with her breasts, her thighs, her everything. Or perhaps, you would simply prefer to sit down and watch my old friend and I drive each other to climax again, and again, and again, while my ghouls suckle on your length, and—”

The heat in his glans grew electric, and he moaned quietly as each stroke of his cock caused the sensitive skin to rub and sink into the supple skin of Elaine's left breast. Warmth gushed up from between his legs, up his length, and into the spot where Antoinette was burying his cock's head in her friend's body. White fluid squirted from him, splashing up and over the breast, some of the liquid slipping down between Elaine's bosom, some overflowing and running down along the outside of the breast Antoinette was rubbing with his cock. Elaine said nothing, but she moaned openly as she looked down, and watched his cum flood over her chest, and soak her bra.

“Delicious,” Antoinette whispered.

“Indeed,” Elaine also whispered.

“I uh ... um...” He stared down at the sight of Elaine’s bra and chest soaked in his cum. If he’d been human, his teeth would have fallen out from him being spoiled rotten.

Elaine leaned back, and idly ran a finger back and forth through the trails of his cum, as Antoinette pulled him back, and gave him a gentle slap on the ass.

“Now, off with you. Elaine and I have secret matters to discuss before the Primogen join us. Wait for them, and join them.”

“Yes, Prince.” He nodded, turned off the Blush, got dressed, and headed for the door. Of course, he took a peek at Elaine, who still had her shirt and jacket open, and was grinning at him as she continued to run the tip of her middle finger through the white liquid coating her skin.

So spoiled.

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~~Antoinette~~

Antoinette smiled at her old friend as her lover left, and settled in her chair as Elaine wiped Jack’s cum off her breasts with a napkin. Unnecessary. It would fade into the faintest hint of dust in minutes, but, it was easier to have a conversation without the distraction.

“You overindulge him,” Elaine said, her weak reprimand joined by a smile.

Antoinette buttoned up her shirt and jacket, and chuckled. “I do. For over two years now, I have spoiled him almost nightly, and it never grows old.”

“I hope I will get to join you, frequently.”

“Judging by how my love has reacted so far, I am sure that can be arranged. Perhaps not every night we make love; we do enjoy our private intimacy from time to time.”

“Of course, but...”

“But, since you have only just arrived, I am sure we can convince Jack to invite you to bed with us tonight. And tomorrow night.”

Elaine smiled and nodded. “Wonderful. But onto the business at hand. As I asked before, what am I allowed to share with your Primogen?”

“Nothing, I am afraid.”

“So your quest to bring the city into cooperation continues to fail?”

Antoinette frowned slightly. “Perhaps. The peace I obtained since the Purge has continued, but as we speak, the Carthians and Invictus prepare themselves for inevitable confrontation. This is of course compounded by the chaos of the arrival of the Uratha and the Begotten.”

“Much has happened to your city, these past two years, since Jack was embraced.”

“Indeed. And what’s worse, Maria both pushes to revive the Lancea et Sanctum, but also...”

“Also?” Elaine asked, tilting her head to the side.

“After my love killed Lucas, I found several hints to suggest that someone is ... up to something.”

“Up to something? Awfully vague, Ann.”

“Indeed. But I have spoken with spirits from across the Gauntlet, and they insist that Maria has been in communication with other spirits who are related to Black Blood in some way.”

The name Black Blood drew a shiver from the old Ventrue. Antoinette did not share all her secrets with Elaine, but she did share many. Black Blood had been a thorn in her side for over a century, and she had spoken with her old friend about the blasted spirit before; if it truly was a spirit.

“Why would she do such a thing? And, how does she even know about the creature?”

“I do not know. Perhaps Jacob spoke with her. Perhaps ... perhaps it decided to speak with her on its own. I do not know. But I do know that both Black Blood and Jacob have tested their abilities in pursuit of resurrection. They have failed, but, that does not mean they would not point another onto the path.”

“Why would Jacob help Maria?”

“I do not know. Perhaps she made a deal with him.” Sighing, Antoinette shook her head. “I will find out eventually. For now, pay attention to those two, and listen for potential clues as to their motives.” No easy feat. All Primogen were masters at saying less than they knew, while simultaneously misdirecting; well, except for perhaps Garry, but only a fool would underestimate the young elder.

“Alright, so, assume the two Nosferatu are up to no good.” She laughed, shrugging. “Nothing new.”

“And the two Gangrel bark at each other,” Antoinette added. “A precursor to inevitable confrontation.”

“Gangrels being Gangrels.”

“And, the details of my experiments continue to be secret.”

“To me as well. You have not told me of most of your experiments or intentions there in, Ann.”

The Prince smiled at her old friend. “I have told you more than anyone except my sheriff. Even my new student, and especially my new childe, remain ignorant to the scope of my goals.”

They shared chuckles. It was such an old game, elders sharing only parts of their secret agendas with even their closest friends. They shared perhaps a third of their secrets, implied another third, and left the other third completely unknown to all. And so the game would continue, with only Daniel as a truly trusted confidant.

No doubt, that was part of Elaine’s attraction to Daniel, to learn more about Antoinette’s experiments. She could not blame her friend for it, either. At their age, the hunt for knowledge was as reflexive and enticing as any Beastly instinct.

“And what do they know of Jack?”

“That a Strix curse has awakened in him, and that, while it is dangerous, Jack seems to be in control.” Something the boy had proven, and yet, Antoinette was not convinced.

“And his lineage?”

“Jacob knows, undoubtedly.”

“Oh? Viktor and I never met him while the two of us were a pair, or in a context where he could deduce such a thing.”

Antoinette shook her head. “Jacob is Jacob. If he did not manage to piece together the puzzle on his own, his blood rituals will have.”

With a heavy sigh, Elaine leaned back in her chair and frowned. “You should have killed him by now.”



“I will not kill him, Elaine. Jacob is an old friend, and for all our disagreements, he has value. And besides, I ... made a promise to Minerva. I will not kill the man without just cause.”

Elaine rolled her eyes. Yes, it was a conversation they had had before. But there were reasons to spare Jacob’s life, more than simply her promise to Minerva that she would give the dead woman’s lover the benefit of a doubt. As Elaine said earlier tonight, she agreed with some of Jacob’s views on their second lives. There was wisdom to be found in the old bastard’s brutal, animalistic view of the world, and she refused to ignore or dismiss him simply because she did not agree with, or enjoy those views.

“Very well. Be aware I will not let the old snake try and control me with knowledge of my lineage. And besides, since Jack is aware, I expect the information to spread.”

“It is hardly harmful information.” There was little anyone could do with the secret that Elaine was Jack’s great grandsire. If anything, people would fear her, now that Jack himself had become infamous.

“I suppose not. And the Begotten, and Uratha?”

“Jack has spoken with them, and will relay information. But they know little of my experiments. Avery assumes I am seeking to harness ephemera as means of power, the deluded fool.”

Elaine smiled at her. “I thought that too, once upon a time.”

Antoinette returned the smile. “I know. It was to my advantage to continue such a facade, even with you, old friend.”

“Ah, I see. I cannot be trusted.”

“Naturally.”

They smiled at each other again, each turning a little more devious than before, before Elaine put her hands up in surrender. “If I did not know better, I would think you trusted me less than before.”

Until Antoinette knew more, she could not tell Elaine of the unknown entity, roaming within her city. There were simply too many possibilities, too many ways for such a revelation to backfire. She shared much with her friend, and even trusted her to touch her little Ventrue, but when it came to such a strange, volatile, and potentially dangerous secret, she would not share it without reason. Hopefully Jack knew to do the same.

So, for now, she would let the old Ventrue believe Maria was to be suspected, as many did. Antoinette, however, was not convinced of the Nosferatu’s potential ill intent.

“I trust you, dear friend, with much. But we both know—”

Elaine flicked a hand to the side, dismissing Antoinette’s explanation. “Do not fret. I am just ... annoyed, I suppose. Annoyed with myself, for not having told you of Viktor, or the curse.” Before Antoinette could console her, Elaine laughed and shrugged. “I can still remember being utterly confused, when he agreed to join you on this ridiculous quest to build a new city in a new land, specifically for vampires and such.”

“Yes. I was a touch surprised myself. But, despite what Viktor evolved ... or devolved into over the years, as Tony did, they provided value as I built this city. Do not think that he was a thorn in my side from day one. And if the curse affected him, it did so differently than it did Julias, which I find unlikely. Viktor is to blame for his attitude, his actions, same as my childe Tony.”

A touch of relief crossed Elaine’s face, and she nodded again, before the two of them turned to face the door of her office. The Primogen walked in, followed by Jack and her sheriff.

Time for yet another hour or two of needless barking, and daggers in the dark.

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~~Damien~~

Damien raised his sword, and did his best to follow the sheriff's movements. Borderline pointless, but not completely. He managed to get in a block as the larger man brought his own sword down toward Damien's head, and then another block as Daniel brought his massive sword around to swing for Damien's side. Like the sheriff, Damien had adopted a longer sword some time ago, but unlike the sheriff, he didn't have the skill to use it. Or the sheer strength. Mekhet didn't take naturally to bursts of pure physical power, but given enough centuries, even they could summon strength enough to punch holes through concrete. They may not be able to throw a bus like an elder Daeva or Nosferatu, but still.

The third strike hit Damien hard. Daniel was just too damn fast, and brought his sword around to hit Damien's exposed side. Crack. Ribs broke, and Damien fell to the marble floor, grunting in pain.

"There is a reason," Daniel said as he stepped back, "that people don't use swords this long." With gloved hand, he gestured to the long sword in his right hand's grip, and the similar sword in Damien's.

Both swords were dull, and not their actual swords. Approximations, meant for training.

"Slower," Damien said.

"Not that much slower. The blades are light, after all. The issue, is control, like a dog trying to carry a very long stick."

Natasha giggled at the simile, despite the worry in her eyes over his injury, and Damien offered the little woman a small frown.

“For example,” the sheriff continued, “do this.” Daniel put his weight back on his right foot, pointed his left palm at Damien, and with his right elbow drawn back, pointed his sword at Damien so it nearly touched his left hand’s palm. “Look.”

Damien forced himself up from the hard marble floor of the Elysium Tower, and bit down the pain. Daniel was as cold as ice to ignore the fact he’d just broken several of Damien’s ribs. But, that was a part of the reason Damien had come to him for training. Cold, efficient, and fast. That’s what Damien wanted to become.

And he wasn’t worried about becoming too cold, not with Fiona there to warm him.

Damien squinted at the sword’s tip, and licked a fang. Still, completely, utterly, still. Daniel’s grip was as still as the dead, and Damien slowly rotated his head around the sword tip, looking for any signs of movement. There were none. Considering the length of a blade amplified any hand trembling, the fact the very long sword’s tip was dead still, was kind of freakish. And impressive.

“You’re saying I need more control.”

“Yes, among other things. You need to learn how to control the length of the blade. Using a smaller sword is like swinging a hammer, and requires little finesse in most situations. But if you want the superior range of a weapon like this, you’ll need to learn to counter balance for the motion.”

Natasha, sitting on a bench nearby, shook her head. “It seems unnecessary. There’s a reason w-we usually wield our weapons like this.” The tiny woman raised her own dull sword in her right hand, a short thing similar to the sword she usually used. She pointed her left hand’s index finger at Damien, like aiming a pistol, and smiled. “A gun has a m-much longer range than a sword.”

“A silver bullet is useful against a werewolf,” the sheriff said. “Against a fellow Kindred, not so much.”

Natasha mimed shooting a much larger gun, with both hands. “Shotgun!” Her smile was vibrant.

Unless Damien was seeing things, Daniel smiled, if only for a moment. Natasha, being happy and even joyful around the cold sheriff, was really cute.

“A shotgun may work quite well against a Kindred, but it will do little to an Uratha. Or a Ventrue or Gangrel that are being defensive with their Disciplines.” Daniel relaxed his stance, and gestured with his left hand to his sword. “The only way a Kindred can survive a sword, is a Gangrel exploiting transformations to become a swarm of bats, or a cloud of smoke, or river of blood.”

“I’ve never seen M-Michael do anything like that,” she said.

“The man prefers his big, loud, boisterous, strong transformations.” Daniel managed a tiny shrug, and adjusted his glasses. “Garry, on the other hand, has been known to become smoke, or Miasma, during the Purge.”

Damien and Natasha both shuddered. It was easy to forget sometimes that Garry, despite only just barely hitting elder vampire years, had earned his position. He was very, very strong, and smarter than your typical thug Carthian. He might not have been able to beat his closest comparison, Michael, in a straight fight, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t beat him in other ways.

“A sword, combined with speed, can handle almost any situation, be it against Kindred, Uratha, or Begotten.” Nodding, Daniel lifted his sword and looked back to Damien. “Defend yourself.”

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Beaten and hurting, Damien picked himself off the floor, and dragged himself to sit beside Natasha on the bench. Damien had attempted to hit Daniel in three matches, and had failed all three. Natasha had also attempted three, and had actually nearly managed to hit him, but didn't. The little girl was fast.

Of course, it might have had something to do with how Daniel didn't hit her as hard as he hit Damien. Not because she was a girl, but because she was his child. The sheriff had a soft spot for Natasha, even if he rarely showed it.

"Sire," she said, grimacing as she rubbed her shoulder where Daniel had cracked her one. "Um, how d-did your night with Athalia go?"

Daniel opened a wardrobe on the side of the gym, exposing the various training weapons within, and put away his training sword. "Why do you wish to know?"

"T-To ... be nice?"

Her sire looked at her with a raised brow, adjusted his glasses, and grabbed his trench coat from the bench beside them. "It's personal."

"Yeah! B-B-But, that's part of why it's nice to talk about it. You don't talk to anyone ever, Sire. But, Damien and I, we ... we're..."

"Similar," Damien finished. "... sort of."

The sheriff eyed them with as much emotion as a rock, before he finally sighed and folded his arms across his chest. Defensive posture. Talking about something like social interaction was definitely something the three of them sucked at, but Natasha and Damien had both been pulled into a lot of socializing the past couple years, Tash especially. They weren't the same people anymore. They'd evolved; a difficult thing for Kindred to do. In this

matter, they'd gotten an upper hand on Daniel, who seemed to be the most antisocial man alive. Or, un-alive.

“What do you want to know?”

Natasha shrugged, and rubbed her arm where Daniel had nearly broken it. “I d-don't know! Did you, um ... kiss her?”

The sheriff frowned and grunted; barely of course, but he did. “Yes.”

Natasha's smile brightened. “D-Did you, um, do more? I mean, I know something horrible j-just happened to her, but, maybe if you, um ... you know...”

“Comforted her,” Damien added, “she might not be such a risk.”

“She is...” Daniel paused, looked down, and stared at the marble floor. “She is sad. But, much of the anger she once felt is gone.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Damien said. “She must have hated every moment of life, knowing what she'd been doing to her daughter when raising her, and then again, hated life, when Angela became a hunter. And then, how angry she must have felt, and guilty, knowing what Angela had done to Jack.”

The little Mekhet next to him hmmm'd and nodded. “N-Now it's over. It's sad, but ... she's free.”

“I am helping her,” Daniel continued. “How I do that, is private.” With that, Daniel walked out.

Private? Damien raised a brow as he watched the sheriff collect himself and leave. No ceremony, no goodbyes, he simply left, leaving Damien and Natasha alone.

“Your sire is ... efficient.” Damien got up, took a step, and regretted it immediately. The tall bastard had thoroughly cracked Damien’s legs with his dull sword, several times. He fell, on his ass, and groaned as he pushed himself up to his feet again.

“He is that.” Natasha had an easier time getting up, and she limped over to him before looking him up and down. “Think you’ll b-be fine?”

“I will. But a little shocked to learn that Daniel is capable of sex.”

Natasha giggled and shrugged. A groan announced her own pain, and regret. Daniel may have gone easier on her, but that didn’t mean he didn’t beat her bones to their limit as well.

“He didn’t say he was having s-sex with her.”

“But...”

“B-But, I ... suppose he would call that private, if he was having it.” She grinned up at him. “I’m happy for him. It’s nice that Athalia won’t b-be trying to kill Jack, and it’s ... it’s very romantic. Sire is such a c-cold man, and Athalia is...”

“Also cold, but cold like an arctic blizzard.” In comparison, Daniel was far more stable. Perhaps his stability would be the foundation Athalia could use to become stable herself.

More giggles from the little lady. “Y-Yeah. And, if they can make each other happy, that’s wonderful.”

“Don’t forget, Athalia was supposed to help us in that raid, and she didn’t.” Limping as well, Damien dragged himself over to the cabinet of practice weapons, put away the sword, and once she handed it to him, put hers away as well. “The only reason we’re not hunting her down and killing her, is because we feel bad for her.”



“And b-because she’s a Begotten. Hunting her down might not be so easy.”

“You think Daniel would have trouble killing her?”

“Emotionally?”

He shook his head. “Physically.”

“No, of course n-not. Daniel is ... is crazy. He can actually use Auspex to leave his body!”

The two of them left the tower, and started down the street. The weather was turning cold, and less people were outside. Those that were wore trench coats and furry jackets, all with the obvious need to look gorgeous even when the weather didn’t permit exposed skin.

“I’ve heard of Mekhet entering Twilight like that. Out of body experiences, done at will. Lucas told me it was possible, but it was beyond him.” Keeping secrets from Mekhet was tricky business. They had lots of ways to learn things, and some of them weren’t just about being sneaky.

“Sire says, he wants t-to teach us more about reading objects using Auspex.”

The Spirit’s Touch. Reading an object to learn about its past was definitely a useful skill, if a bit disorienting. He could still remember touching the sword Lucas had destroyed to fuel his sorcery against the Prince. The scene it’d showed him, of a man, two thousand years ago, getting his ear cut off, would stick with him for all eternity.

“It is useful. I can only barely do it, but it is useful. I should try it more often, and see what I can learn about the—” The thing he wasn’t supposed to talk about with anyone except Jack and the Begotten.

Natasha stared up at him, looked around worriedly, and started walking again. “Y-Yes, to learn about ... the thing.” Nothing slipped past her. She caught the expression on his face, and from that single glance, deduced he knew about the mysterious presence. Impressive.

“The thing.” Well, that answered that. The little Mekhet knew about it, too. It made sense. The Prince undoubtedly did, considering Daniel’s abilities. “Does ... does Samantha know?”

“N-No! Of course not. Um, do a lot of people know?”

He shook his head. “Jack and myself. And the Begotten.” Maybe the Begotten simply told the Prince, as they had Jack?

“If Jack knows, and my b-boss knows, then...”

Damien shook his head again. “We must keep this a secret, no matter how many important people know.”

“But, why? We d-don’t even know what’s going on. Why is everyone so scared b-by this?”

“Azamel made it clear. Whatever this thing is, it’s risking everyone’s lives. It’s damaging things like the Gauntlet, and other barriers between realms.” He tried to shrug, to pass it off as yet another threat, like the ones they’d faced before, like the spider monster or the hunters, but the shrug died halfway. “It’s making me nervous, like there’s a ticking time bomb underneath our feet.”

That earned a shiver from the small woman.

“Yeah. It’s ... it’s scary. This rumor has b-been going around for a while, but nothing’s come of it.”

“There’s also a rumor going around that Maria might be trying to perform resurrection.” He glanced Natasha’s way to see if she’d

heard it. From the way her eyes flicked to him and then down, she had.

“Yeah.”

“Know anything of it? She was your old boss.”

She raised a brow at him. “She’s your current b-boss.”

“Touché. So, I guess neither of us know anything.”

“I think ... think m-maybe I should see if the Uratha can help learn anything. Spirits might be involved.”

He nodded. “Ok. I’ll try and get closer to Maria, see if I can get something out of her. But...”

“But?”

“But, I’ve already been getting closer to Maria as the months have gone on, and have seen no suggestion that she’s reaching into other realms.” He raised his fingers to air quote ‘other realms’. It was such an absurd concept, and yet, it’d become a regular part of his life the past couple years.

What if Heaven and Hell truly existed? If realms of spirits and dreams existed, then maybe Heaven and Hell did. He’d always thought they did, but there was a difference between a realm existing as some sort of unknowable thing, a background idea, a belief based on faith, versus something that existed as an actual thing to be touched. It almost sullied the idea.

The more he learned about the world, the more he believed God must exist, but that his existence couldn’t be accurately defined by the Bible or the Testament of Longinus. Perhaps God was as the new age philosophers and spiritual sorts believed, a being that was the universe, literally, and that everyone was literally a part of God.

Or, maybe, God was some sort of machine, and the physical realm, the spirit realm, the dream realm, and whatever else existed out there, were part of some kind of resource harvester and simulation, like the Matrix.

Scary.

“I ... I know she loved Lucas,” Tash said. “B-But, she accepts that he was horrible. I have a hard time imagining she would just ... try and d-do something like that.”

“Me too.” Cause, as much of a cold hard ass Maria was, she also had a soft side to her, and a wise one. She may have been sad and alone, but he doubted the woman would be so shortsighted as to pursue something as dangerous as communing with deadly, perhaps evil spirits, for something as selfish as resurrection. He hoped.

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~~Jack~~

It wasn't easy, finding Sándor. It took a whole week, actually. Jack had to visit Azamel twice, and call Damien four times to get him to ask Fiona about it, before anyone managed to provide a hint on where Sándor was. No one knew. The man kept to himself.

But Fiona being Fiona, rambunctious and filled with wanderlust, apparently managed to track Sándor based on his movements, and intercept him to deliver Jack's message.

Jack waited for him outside his mansion, sitting on the stairs in front of the huge front door. Eventually, the Begotten walked up the driveway, alone, an unreadable expression on his face. Stern, cold. It wasn't exactly resting bitch face, so much as the man seemed void of emotion. Someone who didn't know his circumstance would probably assume he was angry, or indeed had resting bitch face. To Jack, it was clear he was a scarred, broken man, doing his best to

keep the rage inside where it wouldn't destroy everything around him.

That was the problem with revenge. It might start allowing someone to heal from trauma, but it wouldn't heal damage itself. Only time would do that, and a couple weeks was nothing.

Jack stood up and gave a small wave. "Hey."

"Hey." The taller man stopped in front of the stairs, and looked up at the huge building. "You vampires and your need for ... boastful habitation."

Jack laughed, and pushed open the door. "Yeah, it is pretty ridiculous. Ventrue are the worst for it."

Sándor followed him in, looking left and right at the mansion and its beautiful, royal, over-the-top Victorian decor. "I suppose it's no different than kings and queens living in castles."

"You old enough to have seen that? Like, medieval ages?"

"No. I am ... about two hundred years old, I think. I was born in Romania, and left quite young."

A gargoyle from Romania. Heh.

"Judging from what Azamel told me, you must have started having nightmares at some point, about a gargoyle? Trying to ... eat you?"

With a heavy sigh, Sándor nodded as he followed Jack, eyes up and taking in the sights of the huge, master staircase, and the chandelier. "Yes. It's one of the reasons I fled my home. I thought I was cursed, and that the monster would devour me. But, the nightmares followed me across the ocean."

“Across the ocean? So you did what Antoinette did, came to North America during the colonization period.”

“Not long after that period was done, yes. I believe your Prince came here a hundred years before I did.” Sándor was talking a lot more than Jack figured he would. Either he wasn’t as wholly miserable as he used to be anymore, or Jennifer had started to open him up.

Jack sat at the top of the stairs. Sándor raised a brow at him, slightly of course, and eventually sat down beside him. There were couches and shit, fancy rooms and whatnot Jack could have taken the man to, but, none of them felt natural or right. It was better like this.

“Still, that’s really old. You must be pretty damn strong, in more ways than obvious.”

“I ... suppose.”

Jack shrugged and gestured to the man. “We had a fist fight, but that’s it. Begotten can do more than that, can’t they? I’ve seen Athalia bury an entire area in darkness, and start slicing things at random like a ... well, a nightmare. I’ve seen Fiona spin web. We’ve both seen that Mark asshole sneak around. What can you do?”

Sándor thought about it for a moment, eyes pointed down at the stairs he sat on. “I’d rather not say.”

“Heh, good.” Jack smiled at the man when Sándor looked at him, confused. “I didn’t have Azamel in that list, cause I don’t know what she can do. I’m sure she can do a lot, but her abilities are a mystery. I’m sure that’s intentional. She’s smart.”

“She is.”

“And she’s dying.”

“Yes ... she is.”

“And the three Begotten she’s been taking care of, they’ll be leaderless without her. Or, I should say, without protection.”

“They’re Begotten, capable of defending themselves.” His tone grew dark. “Why?”

Welp, time to make the pitch. “Azamel wants you to meet the others, and become ... well, their new protector, when she’s gone.”

Sándor grunted, eyes still pointed down. But, Jack could see he was thinking about it.

“Azamel overestimates me.”

“Does she? You said yourself you’re super old. And, I’m sure if you’d been in control while I was fighting your Horror, the fight would have gone differently.” Who knew what sort of crazy things the ancient creature could do. Apparently he’d invaded Eric’s dreams before, so it wasn’t like Sándor didn’t have tricks up his sleeve. The Begotten could do more than just physical things.

“I am strong, and capable. But despite that, I still lost my family.”

Ah, right. There was more going on than a broken man struggling to recover from his pain. His confidence had been shot, too. How much did he blame himself for their deaths, for not being strong enough to save them? Probably completely. Probably to the point he would have killed himself, if he’d been given a few moments of peace after killing Jeremiah.

But, he hadn’t gotten it. Jennifer had latched onto him immediately, and started to insert herself and Beatrice into the man’s life. Maybe she’d come to the same conclusion Jack had.

That woman was too damn smart.

“Sándor ... Jeremiah, with that witch Elen, managed to outsmart and dodge some of the oldest vampires in the world. The Prince and the sheriff were both looking for them, and couldn't find them. Isabella lost one of her men to them. I lost my sire to them. I lost my sister. I nearly lost my mother. And the only reason things didn't get worse, is because of this fucking curse inside me they woke up.” Worse, relatively speaking. It still sucked being cursed, but its power allowed him the opportunity to bring the hunters down.

“Silver lining,” the gargoyle said.

“Yeap. Otherwise, more Kindred would be dead, and probably all the Begotten.”

“Your point?”

“My point is, you can't blame yourself for this insanity. And hey, I'm all for self blaming, when it's warranted. If some shmuck walked up to your door and took you out, then killed your family, sure, blame yourself. But this was an extreme circumstance, Sándor. Cut yourself a break. You're a powerful man, and the other Begotten need that. More than that, you've been around, and you've learned a lot more than they have. I have no idea about Mark, but Fiona's just a kid, and Athalia's ... more broken than you are.”

Sándor slowly turned his head, looked at Jack for a long while, completely still, before looking at the stairs between his feet again. “You're asking me to take up a new burden, knowing that I owe you.”

“Yep.”

“I ... suppose I should speak with Azamel again. I have been meaning to ask her, about how to better control hunger.”

Jack smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”



The gargoyle nodded as he stood up, but only got up halfway before he sat down again. "I have spoken with her once already though, about a different topic."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. The strange tears I have seen."

Oh shit. "You've seen them?"

"I have. I don't know who's made them or why they're there. But they're there, around where Dolareido exists."

"And you've never seen them elsewhere?"

Sándor shook his head. "No. Whatever they are, they are unique to Dolareido."

"Can ... can you take me to one of them?"

"Yes, but so could the other Begotten."

Jack nodded. "They could, but sunrise is in a few hours, and it could take time to get Damien and Fiona, or Azamel involved. Besides, we're just gonna take a look, not go through it or anything. Let's go."

Sándor nodded. No arguing, no convincing, he just did. Awesome. The two of them got up, and Jack followed him to the front door.

Except, opening the door revealed someone about to knock.

"Clara?" Oh shit shit.

"Jack." She smiled at him, then at Sándor, then at the mansion as she looked past. "Jesus. This place is right out of a romance novel."

"It's very over the top, isn't it?"

“Yeah. Uh ... can I come in?” She tilted her head to the side as she realized what was happening. “Oh, you were leaving. Figured you just got the door for me.”

“No, uh, I didn’t. Sándor and I were going to check something out.”

“Check something out?”

“Yeah, um, something important.” Jack looked to Sándor, but the Begotten kept his mouth shut, arms folded across his chest. Right, great, now was a great time for him to stop talking, instead of being useful and saying something that might get Clara to leave. The Uratha didn’t know about the weird presence in Dolareido, and he wanted to keep it that way. For all he knew, one of them was the culprit. Uratha could cross the Gauntlet using their natural abilities, so maybe one of them was doing the damage.

“You’re ... going to look into the strangeness happening, aren’t you?”

“Strangeness?” Fuck.

“Don’t even bother trying to pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. You’re not that good a liar, not yet.”

Fuck fuck.

“It’s nothing personal, Clara. But, you know, vampires and the whole Danse and shit, right? I don’t know what’s going on, and I need more information. At the same time, the less people who know, the better.”

“Well that’s too bad, because I’m calling in my favor.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Totally,” she said, the language announcing her age. A bit older than she looked. “Something’s going on in this city, and I want to know what. Spirits are talking about resurrection, and more than a few have mentioned the ‘ghost lady’, Maria.” She air quoted ghost lady. “So yeah, the pack’s getting pretty nervous about that, cause we don’t know why the fuck spirits would be involved in that. And more than a few of the pack have seen some strange tears in the Hisil, like, big cuts in the ground and in walls and shit.”

Jack winced with every sentence. Not because he didn’t already know these things, but because Clara was being so honest about it. No effort to twist her words, to say less than she knew, or to imply things rather than say them. No subtext, no manipulation, she just said them.

And he owed her. Anything she wanted.

“You ... you want in,” he said.

“Yeap.”

“Can you promise me you won’t tell anyone?”

She frowned and folded her arms across her chest. “Not even my pack?”

“Yeah.”

“Why the fuck wouldn’t I tell them?”

“Because we don’t know what’s happening, or who’s causing it. This is tricky business, Clara. For all I know, one of your pack is possessed and is up to something.”

She didn’t look convinced, but after a while, she sighed and nodded. “I can’t promise I won’t tell them for forever, but I’ll keep my mouth shut for now.”

“Good enough.” He opened his mouth, but looked left and right first, before shutting it. “Actually, let’s walk and talk. The house could be bugged.”

“Bugged?”

Nodding, he stepped out onto the huge driveway. Scully and Mulder flew overhead, quiet, and blending into the night sky perfectly. With how many crows they had in Dolareido, those two could hide in plain sight, even up in Rich Side.

“Like I said, no one knows what’s going on, except that it’s a big deal. So until I have some kinda clue, I need to be smart about this.” Once the three of them had some distance behind them, he felt comfortable enough to continue. “Something’s been tearing at the realms. Like, not just the spirit realm, but the dream one, too.”

“The dream one too?”

“Yes,” Sándor said.

Jack gestured to the Begotten as he walked. “The Begotten were the first to find out about it. Azamel told me, not long after she arrived in the city. So whatever this thing is, it’s been at it since then, at least.”

“Who else knows?”

“Natasha and Damien. The Prince and the sheriff. And the Begotten.” He was taking a huge risk trusting Clara, but, he couldn’t help himself. She was that sort of person, someone he could trust, and someone he wanted to trust.

She raised a brow. “That’s it? Five vampires and five monsters? If this is so dangerous, then—”

“We don’t know who’s doing it.”

“So?”

“So, if we spread the word about what’s happening, whoever they are might change tactics.” He shrugged. “Don’t let the enemy know you know.”

“Ah, like Churchill and Coventry.”

Jack shook his head. “That’s a myth.”

“Really?”

“Really. But, the idea still applies. If we’re going to catch this thing or person, and take advantage when they make a mistake, we have a better chance if they don’t know we know.” But after a second, he shrugged and sighed. “Of course, they might know we know. The evidence hasn’t exactly been hidden.”

“So, you think ... what? That Maria is—”

“We don’t know it’s Maria.”

Clara took his shoulder and forced him to look at her. “David says the spirits are talking to Maria, the same spirits we’ve seen hanging around some of these strange tears. Red wraiths.”

Jack shivered. Red wraiths. The one encounter he’d had with them had not been fun, with him, Damien, and Fiona running for their lives until Clara and Flowing Sanctuary showed up and saved them.

“Those red spirits,” Jack said. “They were obsessed with flesh.”

“Yes, they are, kinda like how someone attempting to, oh I don’t know, create a flesh body might be? We’re pretty sure they work for Black Blood, and ... and if there’s anyone capable of something as crazy as resurrection, it’s Black Blood.” It was her turn to shiver.

“Black Blood’s nothing like anything the pack has seen before. Avery warned us, but ... fuck.”

“I don’t want to blame Maria just yet. Not enough evidence. And she’s not some psycho crazy woman who’d risk destroying the city and everyone in it, for something as selfish as resurrecting a dead lover.” He hoped. “And besides, if she was working with Black Blood, then Jacob must have tried something like this before, considering how close he is with the spirit. Minerva’s still dead.”

“Maybe Jacob’s using her? Using her for a trial run? Vamps like him play the long game.”

Sighing, Jack stopped walking as the driveway joined the streets of Dolareido. They were still in Rich Side, and no one walked the streets in the middle of the night in Rich Side. Safe to keep talking, mostly.

“Maybe. But—” He blinked, looked down, and rubbed his head. “Mary said she could see tears, too.”

“Mary? Your ... the ghost. She’s seen tears too?”

“Yes. So something’s happening in, uh, whatever place it is that ghosts go to when invisible, I guess.”

Sándor finally spoke up. “It sounds like, whatever it is that’s causing these tears, is doing so across many realms.”

“Sándor and I were going to go check out one of the tears, one he found in the dream world.”

“Just you two? I ... I suppose considering it’s you two, you could probably handle anything thrown at you.”

Jack grinned at her. Much as it was the curse, not Jack, that had so much power to throw around, he couldn’t help but feel good

about what she said. Typical Ventrue.

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Sándor found them a place similar to one of his lairs, and opened a door. It didn't matter how powerful Jack became, he doubted any Kindred would ever feel comfortable leaving the world of flesh and blood. In Dreamland, his powers were far less useful.

For the Begotten, it was the other way around. Sándor's human body faded in the shadows, and the enormous gargoyle emerged, like Pennywise stepping into its lair and exposing its spider-like monstrous form. And damn, Sándor was tall. At the sight of the monster stepping out of the black and into the halls of his strange dream castle, Clara whistled.

Jack eyed her, eyebrow raised.

“What?” She said, shrugging. “Dude's tall, dark, and handsome.”

“He also has four arms, and horns and wings and stuff.”

“Heh, tell that to Jessy. Fur and a snout don't seem to bother her.”

Jack half expected Sándor to jump in and say something, considering they were basically talking about how several women seemed to find his transformed body attractive. But the huge beast said nothing. His human body had a habit of being quiet and still. His enormous gargoyle body frequently went dead silent and completely still, like a statue.

“And,” she continued, “you saw one of the pack at the party last week, right? Practically getting DP'd on the floor? I know one of those vamps has a werewolf kink, and has asked her about transforming for sex.”

“Into the full werewolf form, right? Not, like ... the wolf form?”

Clara choked on a laugh. “No you sick bastard, the full Gauru form. Dangerous as fuck, but some of you vampires are kinky fuckers,” she said, still laughing. Jack laughed too. Clara had a great laugh, and he couldn’t help himself. “Sándor,” she continued, “you uh ... I mean, feel free to not answer, but I’m pretty sure that Fiona girl can have sex while in her spider body, especially with how she drapes herself all over Damien while in it. Is that something your Horror’s body can do? Cause if no, there’s a few women I could probably update.”

Sándor snorted, a loud, heavy sound, but in the following silence, he sighed. “I can.”

Clara laughed harder, and poor Sándor stared at the two of them with his typical cold, stone face. It wasn’t a pure, silly laugh though. Something else came with it, a sort of sad sound, and Jack’s laugh slowly died off as he watched her. She was trying to make Sándor laugh, to spread her laughter to him. Maybe it was a canine thing, a desire to share joy, or uplift others. It wasn’t working very well on Sándor, but it made Jack smile.

“It figures,” she said, after her laughter died down. “Come to Slut City, and everyone gets laid, in every way possible.”

Sándor snorted again, shook out his wings, and started down the path outside. “Follow.”

Jack and Clara watched the enormous creature push open the giant wooden doors, and lead them outside, to the narrow cliff path they’d seen before. But before they stepped out after him, Jack leaned in to Clara.

“I don’t think we should touch that subject with him.”

“What, sex?”



“Sex, romance, anything like that. He’s still really beat up about his family.”

“Ugh, my bad. Figured Jen would have gotten into his pants already, considering, you know, it’s Dolareido.”

“He’s not from Dolareido.” And probably didn’t frame everything in a sexual context, like basically everyone in Dolareido did.

Nodding, Clara stepped out onto the cliff, and sucked in a breath. It was windy, it was night time, and the cliff road wasn’t exactly wide. Ten feet across sounded like plenty of space, until a misstep meant careening off a mountain and into fucking clouds, that likely hid an astronomical drop beneath. Then ten feet was nothing at all, and the each gust of wind felt like an attempt from God to murder them.

“Where is the tear?” Jack called out over the wind.

“Ahead, past the woods.”

“Past?” Jack raised a brow, and stared out past the haunted village, and into the woods he and the gargoyle had torn up a couple weeks ago. “I thought those woods were endless.”

“They are, in this chamber. You can reach another chamber from within.”

Shivering, Jack rubbed his arms as he nodded and followed after. He didn’t like this place. It wasn’t because it was a haunted village; that was kinda awesome, and something any vampire would love to take advantage of, or at least visit. It was his memories of the village that bothered him. The first memories of the village, before he’d recovered from the curse’s possession, were his most prominent ones, and they felt tainted. Dirty.

It only got worse as he followed the titan through the woods. A lot of the damage the two of them had inflicted was repaired, but not all of it.

“Jesus,” he said. “I didn’t really get how much ... destruction we’d caused.”

Destroyed trees, smashed tree trunks, and lots and lots of blood. The corpses were gone, and he could vaguely remember Sándor collecting them to bury them or something, but the blood was still there. Blood, guts, and a lot of dead rats and crows. He was happy he didn’t bring Scully and Mulder into the dream this time. This couldn’t have been an easy sight for them, either. At least the bodies weren’t rotting. Maybe bacteria and such couldn’t survive in the nightmare. If nightmare chambers were created by scarring, powerful incidents in the real world, then it made sense that the nightmare would only handle things that fit whatever defined the nightmare.

If the legion he’d summoned had died in Fiona’s jungle, he bet they’d have started to rot, rotted thoroughly, and be devoured by carrion eaters by now. But in this nightmare, the focus had apparently been a scary, haunted village, with a scary, haunted castle, on a scary cliff edge, with scary, haunted woods between the village, and any hope of escape.

Sándor snorted, but kept walking. Despite his size, he knew where to step to avoid trees, zigzagging and slithering around the thick trunks and sharp branches. Clara and Jack followed in his wake, since it seemed like the best path. Any misstep could mean stepping on sharp branch, or getting one in the face, especially with how dark it was.

They came to a tree. A big, nasty, fat, ugly tree.

“I’ve seen this tree before,” Clara said. Her night vision was much better than his. “Some idiots with an enormous tree harvester were

sawing down trees, and they cut it down, and this huge evil black ooze creature came out.”

Jack choked on a snort. “Was it voiced by Tim Curry?”

She grinned at him. “It was. You are way too young to have seen that movie.”

“Ha. Well, Mom liked the old Disney movies, collected them, and insisted Mary and I watch them.”

“Most definitely not a Disney movie.”

He shrugged. “That’s Mom for ya. She couldn’t tell the difference.”

Before they could start laughing, Sándor motioned toward the enormous, black mouth of the tree. On closer inspection, it wasn’t a hollowed trunk, like Jack figured it was. It was an endless cave, black and more black, a tunnel into nowhere. Considering the size of the tree, even the giant gargoyle could fit, and as Clara and Jack stared, the titan folded his wings snug to his back, leaned forward, and walked into the tree on all fours, tail slithering in the air behind him.

“Maybe he’s taking us to a Christmas wonderland,” Clara said. “Or a Halloween one.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Shrugging, he followed after Sándor, happy to get out of the nasty forest and the memories it stirred.

Once they were through the tree, it was obvious where they had come out. A closet. And, upon further inspection, a hospital supply closet. And a very old hospital, at that.

“Ugh, I don’t even want to know how this nightmare got created,” Clara said.

Sándor rumbled as he pushed his way through the large doorway of the closet. Too big. His shoulders and horns tore the door frame apart, and Jack and Clara winced and sucked air between their teeth, as the titanic creature ripped the wall half apart on his way out.

“This doesn’t seem like a very practical entrance for you, Sándor,” Jack said.

“It’s not. I found this chamber recently, hovering in the dream near the Terrence Hospital. I still need to rearrange my lair to fit them together, if I decide to keep it.”

Right, Begotten doing Begotten things, manipulating the very dimension of their existence.

Jack looked around at the hospital hallway, and sighed. Yeah, this was a hospital from probably sixty or eighty years ago, which meant treatments were brutal and inefficient compared to today. People were also a lot more superstitious, and believed in things like ghosts. He rolled his eyes. Ok, maybe not superstitious if they were actually correct, but he was pretty sure almost all those people who said they’d seen ghosts, were lying or had overactive imaginations.

“We’re in the basement, right?” Clara said. She looked up at the old bulbs in some very tacky glass shells, and down at the hard, dirty floor, and white walls.

“Yes,” the gargoyle said. “I sensed a disturbance, when I touched this chamber. It led me here.” He motioned for them to follow, and they did.

The old hospital was creepy as fuck. The shitty old lights flickered, and didn’t provide nearly as much light as they should have. The nearby doors, all closed, showed darkness underneath them, and a lot of the shadows moved, as if someone on the other side of the door was casting a shadow, and walking around. They moved with heavy footsteps, deep, resounding, and alien. Whispers drifted

through the air, tiny things Jack barely noticed, but when he did, he could hear words hidden in the rasps.

‘You’re going to die here. There’s no saving you.’

He pushed the voices away. If he’d been human, they’d have been terrifying. As a vampire, they were still terrifying, but not as much. Plus, the knowledge that he was friends with the nightmare’s owner definitely lightened the fear factor.

Following the giant creature through the hallway was kind of funny, once he managed to ignore the obviously haunted hospital’s attempts to scare him. Sándor was so damn huge, he had to walk on all fours, and keep his ludicrously massive wings snug to his back.

He stopped eventually, and sat down not unlike a dog would, and gestured down the hall ahead of him. Jack and Clara looked at each other, shrugged, and stepped around the beast. Both of them gasped at the sight of the tear.

“I’ve seen one other tear,” Sándor said, “but this one is deep.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Jack whispered, eyes wide and locked onto what he was seeing.

Tear didn’t do the scene justice. It was like someone had taken a claw the size of a car, and dragged it across the air, somehow cutting through it and into the world and reality behind it. It floated in the air a foot above the ground, and reached from one side of the wide hallway to the other. The edges of the tear were frayed, and the gap of the wound was big enough that Jack could have jumped through it if he wanted to.

He could see things, glowing green things on the other side. They were moving.

## Chapter 121

~~Jack~~

It was like staring through a window into another universe. Not like, was.

“Um ... what’s on the other side?” he said.

“The Realm of the Dead.”

Jack froze. Clara froze. The two slowly turned to look at each other, before they both stared at the giant creature squashed inside the hallway.

“Uh, what?” Clara said.

Sándor looked at them, and waited, quiet and stoic despite the massive bomb he’d just dropped on them.

“Sándor,” Jack said, “you’re going to have to fill us in, because you just sorta shattered a lot of preconceptions a lot of us probably have about death. Realm of the Dead?”

After a long, quiet moment in the spooky basement of an old, haunted hospital, Sándor gestured to the huge tear in the air in front of them again.

“I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t know anything about it.”

“Then how do you know it’s the Realm of the Dead?”

“I have come across it before, as I’m sure the other Begotten have. But no living creature would want to stay within. It is a cold, heavy place. Ghosts wander within.”

Clara shook her head, obviously not happy about the gargoyle's impulsiveness. "You went in?"

"I have before, and only for a moment now."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's dangerous as fuck?" Jack frowned at the gargoyle, but stopped himself from saying something stupid. If the man didn't feel his life was worth being careful with, the reason why was obvious, and drawing attention to it was a bad idea. It sucked that the poor guy was still depressed, but understandable.

Jack still felt depressed sometimes, when memories of Julias or Mary came at him. Hell, sometimes he felt depressed about the hunters he'd killed, or worse, Mrs. Pavala, his first kill. But he had Antoinette to help him get past that. Sándor had no one.

"Ok ok," Jack said, "let's just ... let's just approach this calmly. Sándor, you've been through this tear?"

"Yes. Again, only for a moment."

"And you saw ... ghosts?"

"Yes."

Jack stepped closer to the tear, and stared into it. "... ghost lights."

"What?" Clara said. She stepped closer, and from the gasp, it was obvious she knew exactly what Jack meant.

Through the shadow, through the black and strange fog that filled the tear, there were lights. Green lights. They were subtle things, blurry, but they were there, and they were moving, far in the

distance. Each gave off enough light that Jack could see some details in the environment, and he squinted as he tried to make out what he was looking at through the mist.

Rock? A cave? Whatever it was the lights were moving along, it looked like stone. Dark, oddly bending, curving stone. The harder he stared, the more he could see the drifting lights actually had shapes, shapes he recognized, human shapes. He shivered as he stared into another world, a dark, cold place, and he looked to Clara beside him.

“Have you ever seen *Galaxy Quest*?” he said, eyes still on the tear.

“Yeah. I—oh, the joke about whether there’s air.” Clara was just as shocked as Jack, and he could see her quivering as much as him.

“Yeah.” He looked back through the large tear, and tried to accept the reality of what he was looking at. No doubt about it, those were ghosts. They had that same, semi-transparent look Mary did, and they were missing their feet; not really missing, just, lost to the fog their own bodies seemed to generate. They hovered as they moved, with the same lack of nuanced movement he saw in Mary, corpses drifting around with no care for breathing, or flexing muscles, or anything.

Through the fog, they looked like drifting lights, like seeing distant street light through rain.

“We’re not going in there,” Jack said finally.

Clara sighed. “Why not? The air’s breathable, if Sándor’s been in there before.” But from the tone of her voice, she knew why not.

“Even if the air is breathable, we’re not going because it’s dangerous.” Air didn’t mean anything to him anyway. “Because we don’t know what’s in there.”

“Sándor was fine.”



The gargoyle finally interjected. “I did not stay for long, whenever I entered this realm. Just enough to understand what I was looking at.”

Jack took a deep, useless breath. “Ok, it’s another realm, that much seems obvious. So we got a dream realm, a spirit realm, the physical realm, and now a realm of ... of ghosts.” It was tantalizing beyond belief, the desire to go through the tear and find out more. It wasn’t like Sándor couldn’t be wrong. He found a place filled with ghosts, and had made an assumption. Maybe it was just a place in the physical realm, where ghosts had a habit of collecting? Maybe some kind of deep cave, hidden in the Earth.

From the what he was looking at, and from how it felt, the cold death seeping out of the tear and into his undead body, he knew that wasn’t true. This was another place, a whole other world, and they were peeking into it. It felt wrong, as if the realm wasn’t meant for living, or even undead eyes.

“Is this where my sister will go, when she finally lets go of Mom, and the house?”

“Is this where my brother went?” Clara said. “Hell, is this where everyone goes when they die?”

They both looked at the gargoyle, but he shrugged and shook his head.

“I don’t know. Why would I know?”

“Because you’re centuries old and you’re a dream monster?” Clara said.

The titan sighed and shook his head again. “I have kept to myself ... for obvious reasons. I know little of ghosts, or spirits.” He grumbled and flicked his tail. “You’re the werewolf. You deal with spirits. Why don’t know you?”

“Uh, because I deal with spirits, not ghosts?”

“They are similar.”

“That’s like saying a tiger is similar to a tree, because they’re both carbon-based.”

“And yet, most people know how a tiger and tree function, largely because of their similarities.”

“Similarities?” She snorted, like a wolf would. “The fuck?”

“Relative to things like dreams, and spirits. A tiger and a tree can be touched. A tiger eats matter, so does a tree. They’re both biological.”

Jack smiled. This was progress. Sándor barely ever said more than three words at a time when Jack met him, and now he was borderline bickering with Clara. Well, she was awesome like that, no ridiculous games like Jennifer, or aggressiveness like Jessy.

“Either way,” he said, “I’m not stepping through this. I know Sándor did, but he shouldn’t have. We need to figure out more. Or, you know, ideally stop these tears from happening at all. There’s nothing to be gained from us going in there, and fucking with things. At best, we’d be risking our lives on a bad gamble that we might learn something.”

“Yeah, that makes sense and all,” she said, “except I don’t have a single other lead, and I don’t think you do either, as far as these tears go. This seems to be the only one that’s cut a hole so clearly through ... uh ... the ‘fabric of reality’.” She air quoted, and Jack struggled to suppress a laugh. “If more of these tears are going to be made, and if they cut through to this place, we should probably know how. Bad gamble or not, we need to make it if we don’t want this lead to go cold.”

Sighing, Jack paced back and forth. Clara had a point, except the first tear Jack had ever seen, had been between the physical world and the spirit one, and it'd failed to cut through the Gauntlet. Fiona had had to pry it open.

So, without a better idea, he shared the story with Clara and Sándor about how Fiona showed him and Damien a tear. He explained how Fiona took them to an old factory, found what seemed like nothing on the physical side, opened the pathway, took them through the Gauntlet, and then when they plopped out on the other side, saw a massive amount of damage.

“It was ... a lot sloppier than this,” he said, and he gestured to the tear in front of them.

“Well, that one had hit the Gauntlet,” she said. “Punching a hole through that ain't easy. And ... and...” She stepped closer to the tear, and stuck her head in.

“For fuck's sake!” Jack snapped his hand out for her, but she backed up before he could reach her.

“It's here.”

He blinked at her before staring at the tear. “What's here?”

“The Gauntlet. The barrier between the physical and the spiritual. It's here. I can smell it.” With a heavy sigh, she reached out a hand for the tear, and through it. Jack didn't stop her this time, eyes locked onto her hand. “It's so thin.”

“Thin?”

“Thin.” She stuck her head through the tear again, looked around, and took a deep sniff. “Normally, your eyes can see a kind of gold or yellow air, right? And it's here, but it's so thin that I can barely see

it, like a ... morning mist that's pretty much evaporated. I can smell it, though."

He couldn't smell it. Probably a werewolf thing.

"Did the tear make it thin?" he said.

"Maybe. I ... I need to talk to Avery about this. She probably knows something about whatever we're looking at, and—"

"You think Avery knows about this ... underworld?"

"She knows a lot of stuff she doesn't like to share, cause she thinks the knowledge is dangerous." Wincing, Clara looked down and put her hands in her pockets. "You may have noticed, talking with Jacob and all."

Jack winced as well. Yeah, Avery was just one of those types of people.

"So, if the Gauntlet is here, then that means this place is, uh, part of the spirit world?" he said.

She shrugged. "Maybe. I mean, you don't have to go through the Gauntlet to get to the dream world, right?" Sándor shook his head. "So, I mean, I guess? The Gauntlet keeps the Hisil and the Gurihal from merging, or overlapping or whatever. When it's thin, spirits have an easy time jumping over, and even average Joe humans could find themselves walking through a hole and ending up in the spirit world. This is ... this is really fucking dangerous."

"What can do this?" Sándor asked.

"Hmm. Only thing I can think of is the Hosts, beshilu. You've met azlu, Jack, but beshilu are rats, and they gnaw at the Gauntlet. And ... and ... and a spirit told us that the azlu didn't come to Dolareido naturally." She gestured to the tear. "Which makes me think

something strange caused this, and the azlu showed up. They're driven by instinct to weave web and strengthen the Gauntlet."

Jack shivered. The azlu, monster spiders, straight out of a horror movie. Ugh.

"Azlu?"

She nodded to Sándor. "Ancient creatures from my side of the tracks. Spirit, but not quite spirit. Look like spiders. They like to break into the physical world, turn a human into a host, and grow into a—"

A giant claw snapped out from the tear, and slammed down into the air in front of Clara. She threw herself back, landing in a prowling crouch. Jack threw himself back too, almost screaming in surprise, and ended rolling along the hospital floor. Sándor jumped back as well, and the effect was far more disastrous, as his giant body smashed into the walls, tore into the drywall, and his claws left slashes through the tile floor. Worse, Jack managed to lift his head up in time to see the gargoyle's tail slam into Clara, and send her rolling onto the floor next to Jack.

No way. No fucking way. Jack forced himself up onto his knees, and stared at the sight of the huge creature as it started to crawl its way through the tear. Before it got half its huge body through the opening, it slammed one of its bone scythe arms down at Clara again. It was massive, and way too fast for something that size. Clara was still recovering from getting a giant tail smashed into her, and couldn't get out of the way in time before the huge scythe claw cut into her leg above the knee. Meat on a hook. She screamed.

"Clara!" Jack jumped up to his feet, but he was too slow. The creature pulled back into the tear, and dragged Clara with it, leaving a messy streak of blood as it jerked Clara left and right.

Sándor, not quite knocked over, recovered far faster than Jack did, and the titan threw himself at the azlu monster like a tiger pouncing prey. He roared, and the hospital shook with the bellowing rumble, as the giant nightmare monster fell upon the equally massive spirit monster. Onto it, and then through the tear, dragging Clara with them.

“Jack!” she screamed, before she disappeared through the hole.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.” Jack ran over to the tear, and peered through it. The mist flowed up and over his fingers, and he yanked his hand back as the unnatural cold seeped into his bones. After taking a second, he stepped back toward the tear, but he couldn’t see past the fog. Having three people suddenly fall through it must have stirred it.

He couldn’t smell anything through the tear, or taste. But he could hear quiet moans, past the battle screams of Clara and Sándor, and he could feel the strange cold.

“Jack! Do something!” Sándor’s voice. It cut through the strange, deadly silence, but it was quiet and distant.

Ok, ok, do something! Like some kind of bad joke, an azlu monster attacked just when they were talking about it. Well, they were hanging out by a tear through the Gauntlet, and considering what Clara said, it made sense that one of those weird spider monsters would be around. Except, it didn’t look like the Shadow Realm on the other side of the tear. Looked like Hades or something. The fuck was an azlu doing in there?

Go in? Sándor could—no, Sándor couldn’t. Sándor had just leapt through the tear, and into a different realm. Far as Jack knew, he was only merged with his Horror in the Dream Realm; it was a dream monster, after all. Outside of it, he’d probably go back to his human form. Still strong as all hell, but not like he was in the dream. And considering Jack’s previous experience with the azlu, he

doubted Clara and Sándor could take it down if the Begotten was in his human form.

He shook his head hard, and jumped in. He still remembered what happened to Stephanie, and he wouldn't let that happen to Clara. No fucking chance in Hell.

Passing through the tear, he caught a glimpse of the yellow and gold, the streaks of white, and endless mist he knew as the Gauntlet. Apparently, the werewolves saw it differently, or maybe they smelled or sensed more. For him, the Gauntlet was a numbing thing, but his eyes still worked, and he stared, eyes wide, as he quickly moved through the strange, golden realm he couldn't even see from outside the tear. And then a second later, he was in a completely new realm, a new place, a new dimension he knew absolutely nothing about.

Except that gravity worked.

He sucked in a hard breath as he fell. The strange mist of the realm surrounded him, dark and gray, and he spun around in the air as he struggled to prepare for a landing. Through the mist, he could see the hints of drifting green, the strange rock pathways the ghosts hovered along, and the walls of the cavern. An enormous cavern. An enormous, colossal, holy fucking shit gigantic cavern.

He put out his hands and oriented himself until he felt the mist and air hitting him in the face and stomach. No longer spinning, he peered down and tried to see where the ground was. Still falling. Oh god, if he hit the ground at this speed, it was going to crumple him like a car careening off a bridge and landing nose first into the ravine below. He might survive it, being a corpse and all. The other two, he doubted.

There was howling, a quiet sound that drifted around him. Wherever it was coming from, it was around him, hitting him from all directions, but almost inaudible. The sound changed pitch,

slowly going up and down, almost like a choir. Maybe it was a choir? There were lots of myths and legends about ghosts singing. And in the odd quiet of the endless fall, it did sound almost musical, haunting, and sad. It reminded him of Mary; not the Mary he knew, but Mary the ghost, haunting his old home, and carrying with her enough sadness that she hadn't gone where she was supposed to go when she died.

That's what this place felt like. Sadness, and regret.

The ground finally came up to meet him, and it was not fun. He was light, and he'd summoned vitae into his limbs to prepare for the impact. But it still hurt, and despite his best efforts, he felt something crunch. Bone. He screamed as something snapped in one of his legs, and the opposite arm.

A quick glance up showed the tear maybe a hundred feet over them, and out maybe five feet away from a colossal wall of rock. Dark, smooth rock, like the rock he'd landed on. A moment later, he could hear the screech of the monster, and the impact of its eight sharp feet hitting the rock as it fled.

Heal, now!

Immediately, the curse got to work, and shot vitae through his limbs and into his bones. It hurt, having his flesh force chunks of bone back into place. He could hear the crunching, grinding sounds of his body mending, and of muscle and skin sewing back together. Viktor would have been proud of how quickly he healed, and seconds later, his Beast told him he was repaired enough to at least get up and get moving.

He jumped and spun around. Now that he was on the ground and no longer falling through endless mist, vertigo hit him, and he stumbled as the shift in his weight threw him for a loop. He'd have vomited if he was human.



“Clara!?! Sándor!?” Shit, fucking shit fuck. The fog was thick, but not so thick he couldn’t see for a hundred feet. At the edges of the fog, he could see movement, more ghost lights drifting along. If they noticed him, they didn’t care.

“Jack.” Sándor jogged up to him through the mist, panting quietly. Not injured. How? “That spider thing was half human.”

“Yeah, azlu do that. They possess a person, eat part of their brain like a parasite, literally turn them into a giant spider monster, and then they start eating people.”

The Begotten snorted. “And—”

A few falling pebbles forced the two of them to look up. It was hard to see through the mist, but Jack recognized the shapes of huge spiders crawling along the cave wall near the floating tear. Some dangled from web, and others stuck to the wall, sticking their butts out and shooting web at the tear.

“Us showing up must of scared them off,” Jack said, “until their enforcer came and ... and took Clara.” He didn’t know shit about azlu, or these Host monsters, except that the werewolves were super surprised to find two fully mutated azlu working together. “When I killed one, it split into hundreds of spiders like those.” He pointed up.

“Disgusting.”

“Where’s Clara?”

“I don’t know. When I jumped through and realized I was falling, I tried to fly, but losing my Horror in the air was disorienting.”

Jack raised a brow at the man. “You can fly without your Horror?”

“Yes. We can get back the way we came, but...” Frowning, Sándor looked down at the ground, and some blood that ran along the floor. A streak of it made it clear what happened: it’d dragged Clara off. “I saw the two of them struggling in the air, falling. The spider had meant to crawl down the wall, but my tackle ruined that. She hit her head at some point. She’s probably unconscious, or dead.”

“Shit. Shit shit shit shit.” He knew Uratha could heal from almost anything when transformed into their war form, but he doubted they were nearly as difficult to kill while still human; similar situation to the nightmare monster. Growling, he took off at a near sprint along the blood trail. Stupid, so fucking stupid of him to go with Sándor to check out the tear, without at least getting Damien. Of course it turned out to be dangerous. Shit always got dangerous, randomly, for no damn reason.

The rock floor of the ludicrously massive cavern was smooth, and while it did have rolling hills, they were shallow and short. But the mist was a problem. The smart side of him told him to slow down before he ran off a cliff or into a nest of the spider monsters. The desperate part of him told him he fucked up, and now Clara was going to die, like Stephanie, butchered.

He ran faster. Mekhet and Daeva could use Celerity easily, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t use it, too. Not as well, but he could. He reached into his core, found his vitae, and told it to do one very specific thing: run faster.

The sound of his shoes slapping the rock died in the heavy mist, and he looked down to make sure he was actually moving faster. He was. Each stride took him further and further, until it was more like a fast, hard leap with each step. Sándor couldn’t keep up, until he leaned forward, and his feet started to slam into the rock hard enough to spread vibrations. Jack glanced back enough to see a silhouette of the gargoyle, the enormous Horror, surrounding

Sándor and going full Tyrannosaurus rex sprint, like a scene from Jurassic Park. Thud thud thud thud.

Twenty seconds later, they found the spider, not a long chase at all. It was big, heavy, and Jack and Sándor were light. The giant creature ran along the rock, eight hairy black legs covered in patchwork human skin. Clara dangled from its right, giant claw, limp, arms hanging underneath it, and small drops of blood falling as she bounced. A claw still skewered her leg, and each bounce was tearing the wound open more and more.

“Let go of her!” Jack threw himself at the strange spider monster’s body, and landed on the beast’s back. Like a centaur or drider, the human half jutted out from where the spider’s neck would be, connecting at the human’s waist. It twisted easily, and stared at Jack with black spider eyes that dotted the now bald human skull. Fucking. Gross.

Grosser was the mandibles, and how they opened spreading the torn cheeks of the human head the spider had basically grown out of. Grosser again, was the white shit it spat at Jack. His mind screamed acid, but it was probably spider silk. Either way, he was glad he jumped to the side.

Sándor charged in, and slammed himself into the giant spider monster’s ass. To see a man, a normal sized dude, slam into the spider with the weight of what was obviously his Horror, was a strange sight. The spider’s giant, hairy, gross ass bent inward at the point of impact, like one of those slow motion videos of a ball hitting a wall.

The spider went flying. Well, maybe not flying. It weighed thousands of pounds, but the fact it rolled over several times after Sándor’s impact was damn impressive. A glance back at the gargoyle showed the man had fallen to his hands and knees, and was struggling to get back up. Again, the silhouette of the gargoyle

surrounded him, and Sándor flapped his four shadow wings hard as he came back up to his feet.

But, he wasn't the gargoyle, not outside of the Dream. Everything he did to summon the Horror's power was demanding on him, and Jack could see the exertion on his face as he ran at the spider while it was down, and sank his fingers through the exoskeleton along the spider's ass, as if they were the claws of the gargoyle instead.

The monster got up quickly, and spun around to face Sándor, except the man was still attached to it. The spider slashed down behind him, and Sándor used the spider's body as a wall, hiding behind and underneath it.

"Where's Clara!?" Sándor shouted.

Jack lifted himself up from the ground and snapped his head around. Clara wasn't on the thing's claw anymore.

"I don't know! I—"

A monstrous howl erupted, and relief washed over Jack as the enormous werewolf dove out of the fog, and leapt at the distracted monster. She flew high, going over twenty feet up before she fell down onto the azlu's shoulder. Roaring with a primal need, she sank her claws into the monster, tearing and shredding, and doing more damage to the monster's flesh in seconds, than Sándor had yet managed.

Jack looked around in a panic. There were no animals for him to summon here, no legion he could unleash on the monster. But just because he'd been stupid enough to check out the tear without his usual back up, didn't mean he was so stupid he didn't bring guns.

He pulled out his pistol, and started sinking bullets into the spider monster's gut. It shrieked in agony, and spun around, trying to dislodge Sándor and Clara at the same time. No luck. They were

both thoroughly stuck to the monster's body, and while it could spin super fast with eight gigantic, sharp spider legs stabbing into the strange rock underneath them, it couldn't get them off. Jack had to time his shots, to make sure he didn't hit either of them, as the spider turned into a spin top.

Bleeding everywhere but not slowing down, it came to a sudden stop, and kicked at Sándor using its hind legs. Sándor couldn't get out of the way fast enough, and the spider's back legs were perfectly capable of stabbing underneath its giant ass. The man screamed as one of them pierced his shoulder, and fell away from the spider as he let go.

Without Sándor distracting it, the monster looked to the huge wolf humanoid ripping at its arm and shoulder. Clara had managed to remove a chunk of its right shoulder, causing the arm she once dangled from to hang limp at the spider's front side, but the other arm still worked. It raised its left claw scythe, and—

And it met eyes with Jack, as he stepped toward its front. The gun wasn't doing shit, and with no time to summon the juggernaut within with the curse's power, to turn this into a physical brawl, he had to do something and do it quick. He'd assumed he wouldn't be able to use Dominate or Animalism on the monster, since it wasn't a creature of flesh and blood. Except, it was partly human, in a strange, sick way.

When it met Jack's eyes, and Jack met its strange, spider eyes, he reached out with Dominate, and the world came to a standstill. For a brief moment, the world froze, while Jack and the creature met minds.

The human part of the monster was alive, sort of. The brain was gone except for some minor remnants, and the spider had hijacked those remnants. Instead of being able to enter the creature's mind, like Jack easily could with kine or animal, he stared at the spider

creature from across a chasm. Walls surrounded them all, a giant dome of warped walls that oozed black and shifting colors. They were inside the mind of the host body, who should have been dead, but wasn't.

Across the chasm between them in the strange dome, was the azlu, with a dozen of its brethren behind it, no longer in its human mutation shape. It was a spider, and it wasn't a spider. It was something else, something old, something ancient, something covered in the dust and ashes of dead civilizations and dead monstrosities. It stood there on its eight legs, a large spider with large eyes, and it stared at him like he was nothing. Its strange, alien thoughts reached across the chasm like someone hollering with palms cupped around their mouths, except the thoughts were disgusting, vile, strangely loud, and driven by instinct.

To it, he was nothing more than an undead creature, a corpse that didn't have the nerve to become dust and ashes like the things that came before. It would kill him as it and its other parts had done to many undone creatures. Parts?

Jack gulped as he looked past the spider and its kin, and glimpsed on the memories of the ancient creature behind it. Images, warped against the dome's wall, started to form where the bleeding colors had been. An ancient land, with ancient creatures, ancient foliage, and ancient skies. A totally alien landscape, prowled by things his mind could not imagine. Giant wolves, rats, and spiders, but none of them looked right, as if each were some sort of spirit interpretation. Or, godly interpretation.

The spider in his mind hissed. It needed to protect the Gauntlet, to strengthen it. To understand why would be to ask how a normal spider learned to spin web. Instinct, an instinct so old and from a different realm, it defied flesh and blood. He was a corpse, standing in its path, and it'd kill him, the moment it'd killed the Forsaken Uratha and the Primordial Begotten.

The spider shut up real quick, as the Beast within and around Jack rose to bury them all in its shadow. The chasm suddenly seemed quite small, and no longer the insurmountable leap it'd been moments before. The spiders on the other side backed away, and fear overwhelmed their hairy bodies and eight legs, as their many eyes stared up at the swirling mass.

“This ... thing,” the curse whispered in that sleazy, demony voice that sounded eerily like Jack's, “is just an animal. An animal from before even the Strix, but just an animal.”

“And how would you know?” Jack looked up over his shoulder at the Beast, frowning. “You have memories from my previous sires, but not—”

The giant black cloud of fangs, beaks, fur and feathers, pointed out toward the large spiders on the other side of the black chasm. It used a foggy limb to point, and the Beast showed a mix of claws and rat tails in its black mist.

“I can smell it, smell the age on it, and I know you can, too. It's beyond old, and despite all that time, it remains nothing more than a useless bug. Look at it, Jack.” The Beast lowered itself, loomed over him, and set two titanic hands that looked like crow feet on his shoulders. “I wonder how many thousands and thousands of years this strange thing has existed, and despite all the time, it's still just a bug to be squashed.”

“A big bug, back in the real world.” Jack gestured to the chasm. “We can't cross this?”

“No, dumbass. It's a metaphor for the distance between our worlds. The only reason we can speak to it at all, is the human body the Host has taken over; as you guessed.”

“And we're communicating at the speed of thought.”

“Of course, or we’d be dead from standing still and stupid in this thing’s path, otherwise.”

After shrugging off the damn Beasts’ grimy claws, Jack paced left and right in front of the chasm, glaring at the spider.

“But it is an animal. A strange, ancient animal, and according to the wolves, not a normal flesh and blood animal. Not something I can use Animalism on.” The fact Jack could attempt to enter its mind at all was only because of the poor kine it’d taken over. “But, still an animal.”

“Yes, it is,” the Beast said, tone growing more sinister as it laughed, “one of the most stupid animals I’ve ever met minds with. A crow has a hundred times the intelligence of this arachnid.” The giant cloud of black smoke followed after Jack, looking at him with a bunch of different kinds of eyes in the upper half of its body. “What’re you thinking, Jack?”

“As if you have to ask.” It could read his mind, after all, and they were in his mind, and the monster’s.

“Heh. You want to scare it, like waving fire in front of a tiger.”

Jack looked at the absurd monstrosity infecting his soul. “Can you do it?”

The Beast laughed, a dark and twisted sound, inhuman and filled with layers. Crow caws, rat squeaks, coyote howls, owl shrieks, and other things. As it laughed, the noise far more maniacal than Jack would have liked, the big cloud of smoke grew in size. Bigger, and bigger, until the metaphorical chasm would not have been big enough to stop it from crossing simply by stepping over it.

The spiders clicked their mandibles together. Well, that was a fucking gross sound, especially combined with the spiders tilting their heads to look up at the Beast. Did they understand what was



happening? Did they understand this whole conversation was a near-instantaneous moment in its host's head? They must have understood it wasn't a normal situation, given that they hadn't done anything but stand on the other side of the shadowy ravine, and stare at him.

But, as the curse displayed its power, expanded and engulfed the strange metaphorical cavern they were in, it was clear that the spiders were scared. They backed away, chittering and stabbing their feet against the rocky ground as they retreated. Spiders didn't have facial expressions, and these odd, ancient creatures were no different, but the body language was obvious. Scared turned into terrified, as the curse exploded in a flurry of dark claws and black feathers. Whatever space was left in the strange dome vanished, and hundreds of glowing red eyes covered the ceiling. The Beast's eyes, a host of all the different creatures the Beast identified with, could become, could control. Carrion eaters and predators all.

The spiders shrieked, a high pitched, shrill sound that grated on Jack's ears like nails on chalkboard. They turned, and fled.

Jack's grasp on the host's mind fell away, ripped free by the azlu's panic. It had never encountered anything like the curse. Other vampires sure, based on how it originally reacted, and maybe other vampires had even tried to Dominate it or use Animalism on it. But from how it fled, Jack had to guess it was the first time the creature had seen something that genuinely scared it.

That was a terrifying thought, and a thrilling, exciting one.

Maybe one or two seconds had gone by, back in the world of the physical, or wherever it was they currently were. It was enough time for Clara to have moved out of the way of the claw arm that'd been meant for her, but the claw arm didn't come down. Now, with the huge werewolf no longer attached to its shoulder, the spider monster let out a horrific scream, and fled. Its huge spider legs

scratched against the rock underneath it as it sped away, moving fast enough to cause the strange mist of the new realm to swirl around and behind it in the following vacuum.

Clara bounded after it.

“Wait! Clara, don’t!”

She stopped, panting, growling, her body a silhouette against the gentle, unending mist. After a few moments, she turned around and stomped over to him.

“Why!?! This is a hunt! It is wounded!” Her voice was a harsh bark, and Jack winced as bits of the creature’s blood splattered onto his suit and face.

“Because we don’t know what’s out there, and”—he gestured to Sándor—”our one way out of here is currently bleeding to death!”

“One way out?” The way she stood there, panting, each breath a quiet growl, long arms at her sides with blood still dripping from her claws and fangs, was startling. Hunger filled her eyes, and the weight of her tall, muscular-but-feminine werewolf body remained forward in a hunched position, like she was ready to pounce. Scary. Made him feel like a bomb disposal expert. One wrong decision and boom.

Sure, the curse made him absurdly strong, but unless he had time to summon his defenses, or summon a legion, or summon his will so he could Dominate or use Animalism on her, she’d be on him before he could stop her. Being super strong didn’t mean shit if you weren’t fast enough to use it, and he didn’t want to preemptively prepare his abilities. Might set her off.

“Yes!” He gestured to the ground. “Unless you think you can sink your claws into this strange rock, there’s no way getting up that wall. We need someone who can fly, or create a portal to get us out

of here. Sándor can do both, but he's bleeding out!" He didn't like raising his voice at a werewolf, but if he could get through the obvious bloodlust in her eyes, he was confident Clara would calm down.

She did, taking a deep breath before standing up straighter. After looking back over her shoulder for a moment, she stalked over to Sándor and crouched down beside him. Jack joined her, and the two looked the poor guy up and down.

"That's a lot of blood loss," Jack said.

"I'll live." Sándor said, grunting as he forced himself to sit up.

Jack shook his head, got down, took off his suit jacket, then his shirt, and started ripping the white fabric to shreds. "Don't fucking give me that shit. Begotten don't heal nearly as well as vamps or werewolves outside of the Dream Realm."

Clara snorted, and shook her head as she looked around, still wary of the monster. "Hard to smell."

"The mist?" Jack said.

"Yes." She sniffed the air like a hound, and stalked around back and forth, between Jack and where the monster had run off. "The air. Thick. Smells of strange spirits. Dead spirits." Each word was almost a bark. Considering she had a snout, it was a wonder she could talk at all.

Sándor grit his teeth as Jack wrapped a strip of his shirt around the man's shoulder. "I'm an idiot. I should have realized—"

"Realized what?" Jack said. "That an ancient spider creature that follows instincts older than any of us can appreciate, would be on the other side of the tear, in what is apparently very much not the Shadow Realm?" Another question for Azamel.

“Yes.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “You are an idiot, for a very different reason. Hold still.” Bandage press, bandage wrapped around the shoulder, bandage wrapped across and around the opposite shoulder, and some wrapped around the top of his chest. Sándor groaned, but Jack could tell the man wanted to scream, as Jack pressed on the wound while wrapping it. It was a shoulder wound but it went dangerously close to the chest, and covering it wasn’t easy. A human would bleed out without an ambulance. A Begotten would live, hopefully, as long as Jack’s shirt managed to help a little.

Clara let out a heavy sigh, and transformed back into her human shape. Jack watched, a little mesmerized. It was pretty awesome how the wolves could transform in a matter of seconds, and it looked ... painful, honestly. But within moments, Clara stood there, panting and sweating, back in her clothes, covered in blood. Her leg was a horrible mess of red, and her jeans had a giant hole where the creature had stabbed her, but she was healed. The Gauru form and its ability to heal were pretty insane.

“Ok, plan?” Jack said.

Clara stared at him, and when he didn’t say anything, it was her turn to roll her eyes. “Hey, you’re the Ventrue, and the dude everyone apparently looks to for this sorta shit. What do you think we should do?”

“Ugh, you’re foisting the role of leader on me?”

“Yes,” the two of them said together, Sándor more so with a grunt.

Sighing, Jack smiled. God, he’d be terrified of something like that in the past. He’d have still done it, and maybe even done it well, but he would have been scared as fuck. Not so much anymore. Except...

“Uh, as far as I can tell, we’re in some kinda ghost realm, like Sándor thought. So, uh, let’s not touch anything, draw any attention to us, and get the fuck out of here as quietly as we can. I have no idea if the sun can rise here, and it looks like we’re in a cave so I should be safe. But eventually, I’m going to pass out, and you’re going to have one injured monster and one comatose vampire to protect, Clara.”

Nodding, she looked down, found the blood trail she’d originally created, scooped up Sándor from under his good arm, and started walking.

“Then let’s get out of here before that happens.”

---

~~Natasha~~

She left Damien behind, and went to find her boyfriends. She half expected them to take her to Bloodlust, but nope, they suggested no such thing. Instead, they invited her to walk around the Carthian district.

She agreed, reluctantly. It wasn’t like she couldn’t do it, or wasn’t allowed. Even when she’d been in the Invictus, she was technically allowed to walk around with the Carthians. It just wasn’t done. It was tempting fate for no reason. As long as no one else but a Carthian fed in the Carthian district, they were allowed to go into it, except, an Invictus going into it was asking for trouble.

She wasn’t Invictus anymore! She didn’t need to worry, because the Carthians and the Ordo Dracul got along in Dolareido. During the Purge, they’d worked together, which was a pretty huge accomplishment for any two covenants in any city. There was no reason for the Carthians to look at her with suspicion, especially since she was close with the Uratha, who were close with the Carthians.

But she wasn't an idiot. She brought a pistol underneath her suit jacket, a short sword, and a large silver knife that was almost a short sword itself. If things got crazy, she could defend herself. Better yet, she could hide behind her boyfriends; not because she couldn't fight, she could, but the Carthians were less likely to shoot at them. Plus, they were big, and easy to use as cover.

"So it's finally over," Art said. "No more sweeps. No more worrying about getting shot in the back or blown up." He'd said those words before, but it was as good a conversation starter as any.

She nodded. "Mhmm. As long as Garry d-doesn't start a war, everything is peaceful."

"Way he tells it," Matthew said, "he's just taking back territory he used to own, and has no plans to throw the first punch."

"He's already thrown a p-punch!" she said. "He just hasn't taken it further than that. Yet."

The two boys looked at each other, not entirely convinced by what she said. But it wasn't like she was wrong. Garry may have thought what he was doing was justified, and it probably was, but he was fooling himself if he thought starting street fights and pushing Invictus out of areas they'd claimed, by using Terra Den's influence, was anything but throwing a punch.

Taking territory was a big deal. Kindred were paranoid, selfish creatures. They fought for territory because territory equaled more kine. As per the Prince's orders, the Carthians and Invictus were not to feed in each other's territory; the witches and dragons were free to feed anywhere, because they didn't really have territory or anything. After the purge, and then Tony's death, the amount of territory available had grown substantially, and the Invictus and Carthians both got greedy. And still, despite that, they continued to fight over food.

“Either way,” Art said, “things have calmed down for now.” He looked around slowly, scanning the occasional kine that walked by. Not many kine out this late in the Carthian district, except for the rowdier sorts.

Vampires did occasionally walk by, and at least one watched them from the rooftops. Well, watched her.

“I hope Avery c-can help keep it that way,” she said. “She’s friends with Garry, right?”

Matthew shrugged. “Friend is a strong word. But they’re on the same wavelength ... kinda?”

“Kinda?”

“Similar people, different ideas,” Art said. “Garry has an aggressive side, and an aggressive streak ready to launch. He wants to fix this city. Avery, she ... she’s tired, you know? She’s getting old, and was already tired before this shit starting going down. Stephanie died, then the rest of us started getting comfy here in the aftermath. Last thing she wants is to spoil what she’s got here.”

Right, right. Natasha and the others knew Avery was now looking to treat Dolareido as home, and had already been in the city for almost two years.

“I want you t ... t-to stay,” she said, nodding. Of course she wanted them to stay. She’d said it to them before, and they’d said they wanted to, too.

She expected them to say something romantic, based on the looks they gave her. Content smiles and warm eyes. But instead, Matthew reached down for her, and she outright squealed as the man put her on his shoulders. Her struggles were rendered pointless as the big guy pinned her legs to his chest where they dangled.

After an annoyed groan, she adjusted her suit pants a bit, and leaned forward to rest her elbows on the moron's head. Her lovable giant. Art laughed of course, when he saw the expression on her face, and she frowned at him before sticking her tongue out at him.

It was hardly becoming behavior for a vampire as old as her, or for these two men who were werewolves, and older than they appeared. But, it was fun, doing something stupid and silly like this.

"I'm ... n-not against the pack d-doing things, to make Dolareido better, I mean."

"Your boss probably is," Art said.

"Maybe. She ... she has p-plans for Dolareido, and a lot of that involves getting p-people to cooperate. She wants peace."

"Sure, but she sets the rules. If she learns that Eric's been doing shit that might really affect her city, in a pretty drastic way, she'll be pissed. If anyone in the pack does, she'll be more than pissed."

Natasha sighed and slouched over Matt's head. "I guess. B-But, you're a part of the city. And the Prince hasn't said you're not allowed to do things in the Hisil. If you think you can make a b-better city for kine by taking down some nasty spirits, I c-can't say you shouldn't."

Art gave her a suspicious glance from below. "But, you don't feel compelled to do so yourself."

"I ... I uh..." It was such a complicated topic! It was hard to really summarize all the nuances involved, about the natural habits of kine, about controlling the Beast inside every Kindred, about keeping everyone peaceful while allowing for natural instincts to be satisfied. "I d-don't like seeing the kine get hurt either, but—"

"They're people," Art said.



“... they’re food,” she whispered, only loud enough for the two of them to hear. Art winced, and Matt’s dramatic gasp was louder than her own whisper. “We try t-to be fair! But, we’re not kine anymore. And ... and I know for the Uratha, it’s different, but for Kindred, we ... we have to drink their blood to survive. Do that for a d-decade or two, then a century for two, and ... and it’s normal t-to become detached.”

The two men looked at each other for a moment, sighed, and kept walking. A heavy silence settled on them.

She spoke up first. “Um, w-why do you two, do what you do?”

“Whatcha mean?” Matt said. Art looked up at her with similar confusion.

“Why do you guys try and help the kine? I mean, the p-people? For Kindred, we would do things like ... hunt spirits and spider monsters like you do, to protect our food, or maybe to eat them if they were food. B-But, why do you do it?”

“For a lot of us,” Art said, “it’s a matter of our history, the Uratha’s history. Some call us the Forsaken, because of what our ancestors did to Father Wolf. So now we try and fill in the old man’s paws, and Luna gifts us for doing so.”

“Inherited the sins of your parents?” Natasha shook her head. “I can’t believe you’d d-do so much, for something that isn’t your fault.” Adam and Eve passing their sins onto humanity was just as idiotic an idea. Maybe Damien would understand their motivations better.

Matthew tilted his head up to peek at her, and she had to hold on to keep from falling off his shoulders. “It’s not easy to explain. If you had the wolf inside you like us, it’d make a lot more sense.”

She frowned down at him. Pack mentality? Kindred were obsessively individualistic, while the Uratha really treated their family, even their dead family, as very important to them. Even more important than their own lives. It was hard for her to think that way, when every instinct she had was to put herself first. She'd certainly fight to protect her friends, but, if Daniel died, she wouldn't suddenly feel compelled to do what he did and be the Prince's new Right Hand or sheriff or something.

"And," Art added, "we try to help people because, why wouldn't we? How couldn't we? We're a part of this world, this environment. Least we can do is protect it and get rid of the filth."

Matthew nodded. "Filth being assholes and nasty spirits alike."

"I ... I'm not against you guys doing that," Natasha said. "I guess I won't be able to understand. My ... B-Beast isn't ... it doesn't understand." She gestured to a group of kine hanging under a nearby street light. "When I was younger, yes, it felt horrible, being ... you know, a vampire, and having to drink from, and sometimes hurt kine. After a few decades, I kinda grew n-numb to it."

"I suppose if I had to survive on their blood, I might become numb to it too," Art said. "We've eaten animals, and spirits, but eating a human is forbidden. And ... I guess we kinda think of ourselves as their protector. If the Gauntlet came down, it'd wreck everything humans have, you know? I guess it's ... it's a hard difference between vampires and werewolves. Not that all werewolves are as nice as us, but—"

"B-But no vampire ever goes as far t-to help kine, as you do." Natasha rested against Matt's head as she absorbed that. Her boyfriends were the good guys, she was sort of a bad guy, relatively speaking. In Dolareido, the Prince considered it perfectly reasonable for vampires to kill humans, as long as it was handled well, with no

media attention. Killing the prey was discouraged, but still allowed, and occasionally a vampire did so.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “But, at the same time, you vamps here in Dolareido are a shit load nicer than the vamps we’ve dealt with before. Like we said, we’ve had a rough time of it in other cities. And Arturo’s had it worst than most.”

Natasha smiled down at Arturo. It was true. The man had come from Tijuana, where the vampires did not play around, killing kine without hesitation, and killing each other in regular turf wars. The werewolves had come and rescued him from that past. Rough stuff. It made sense he’d be looking for someone nicer than the vamps he had to deal with growing up.

She was nice, right? Most of the Kindred in Dolareido were nice, relatively speaking, and she was nicer than them, despite Maria’s attempts to harden her. The boys liked her because she was nice. She liked them because they were nice! And, not nice, in a fun and sexy kinda way. But she was worried the differences between them would become a problem, and this conversation wasn’t doing anything to settle her fears.

Back onto the other topic.

“B-But, Avery doesn’t want you to interfere with the city.”

“Yeah,” Art said, “and it’s irritating as fuck. She’s trying to find a balance, to find a way we can do our thing, without stepping on the Prince’s toes. Garry—”

“Garry d-doesn’t care about the kine anymore than the Invictus,” she said, a little more bite in her words than she planned. “Or if he does, it’s only by a little.”

“Either way, Avery wants to fit in. She’s tired, and she’s apparently found herself a man. But even she wants to help, try and

clean up some of the shit in this city. If she does, she might piss off the Prince, and that'd fuck us over. Especially me and Matt.”

“You t-two? Why?”

Matt laughed, and Art smiled up at her. “Come on, why do you think?”

“B ... Because if you make the Prince angry, and she makes you leave, then we ... w-w-we won't be together anymore.”

“Yep,” they said together.

Natasha grumbled, and clutched Matt's head tight as she slouched forward, and rested her chest on him. Her relationship was causing another to make a decision they might not otherwise. She hated that feeling.

“Not just us,” Matthew said, voice bright, obviously trying to lift her spirits. “Mason and that Tilly girl are still an item. Brianna is ... uh...”

“She's throwing herself into the deep end,” Art said, laughing. “I guess she saw what Clara had, and wanted a piece too, except not with ghouls.”

Natasha giggled, and started combing Matt's beautiful, long blonde hair as they walked. “She enjoyed herself at the b-ball,” she said. The two men nodded. “But, um, Clara's still into Jack.”

The boys looked at each other.

“Is she?” they said together.

Ugh, boys. Blind to everything.

“You saw her t-talk to Jack at the ball.”

Matt shrugged, and Natasha bounced on his shoulders with the motion. “Yeah, but—”

“We just figured she was talking to him, friend to friend sorta thing, and were pushing past that unrequited love stage. They did go through hell, attacking the hunters like that.” Art looked behind him, probably checking to see if anyone of note had taken an interest in their conversation. No one had.

“You didn’t see the look in her eyes?” Natasha said.

“No,” the boys said.

“She still likes him. And now, after ... after what I heard, about what Jack d-did with the curse, she ... she still likes him.” If anything, she’d want to help him even more now. “D-Do you know if, um, she’s still getting visits from Jessy’s ghouls?”

Art raised a brow as he looked up at her. “You mean you don’t know?”

“Jessy doesn’t t-talk about Clara as much as she used to. Now it’s always about Eric.” Because the girl was obviously in love. “Eric Eric Eric.”

“Eric is an interesting guy,” Matt said. “There’s something strange about him. Avery thinks Luna might have spoken to him, which is pretty damn amazing. Cahalith get visions from Luna, but to actually be spoken to by her is huge. Plus, his relationship with Jessy is pretty strange, too.”

“Strange? Oh, r-right, the sex.”

Art nodded. “You’ve seen how crazy we can get when we transform into the Gauru form. To be in that form for sex?” Rubbing his neck, he looked left and right again, the anxiety at the

idea obvious. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s from a new wave of modern werewolves, who can handle that sort of stuff better.”

“M-Maybe? His first time transforming, he killed, and ate some men.”

“Yeah,” Matt said, “which also makes us nervous. But, he seems to be fine with it. Probably didn’t get addicted. Lucky. Mason had to deal with cravings for months, after his first transformation.”

Uratha could become addicted to human flesh? Well, that was a little scary. Suddenly, a lot of werewolf folklore made a lot more sense. How many werewolves went nuts the first time they transformed, and were from then on addicted to flesh? Hungry, powerful monsters, stalking villages at night and satisfying their hungers on the villagers, even if they hated themselves every moment of it. Not a far cry from what vampires had to deal with all the time.

A strange thought re-emerged in her mind.

“Is ... is there any way for your, um ... lunacy thing, to n-not affect cameras?”

They both looked up at her, and she squeaked as she clutched Matt’s forehead to keep from falling off again.

“Not that we’re aware of,” Art said. “Why? You want us to transform for the next movie?”

“No! No no...” Not that she didn’t like the idea of two giant beasts ravaging her, thanks to Jessy forever planting the idea in her head, but there was a limit! “But, J-Jessy was interested.”

The two men nodded at each other, coming to some sort of conclusion.

But Art shook his head after thinking about it for a moment. “Pretty sure there isn’t a way. It’s not really us doing it.”

“Oh. Jessy will be sad.”

Art laughed. “Oh, I get it. You’ve been watching her and Eric having sex, right?”

“I ... um, n-not on purpose! She called me, and it was happening, and ... yeah,” she said. The two men laughed, and she knew she’d be blushing furiously if she’d been Blushing Life. “You t-two, why don’t you ever get jealous?”

“Because we’re gorgeous,” Art said, laughing some more, and fist bumping Matt. “And we trust you. No harm in looking, right? I mean, sure, it’s a little strange for us, but it is Dolareido.”

She reached down, and punched Art in the shoulder. He didn’t budge.

“Strange? You’re t-two guys, who ... you know...” Have a history of double teaming women. Natasha wasn’t their first. “And you’re not even from D-Dolareido!”

They shrugged again, and Matt spoke up this time.

“Yeah, it’s a bit strange, we know. But Art and I have been through Hell, and...”

“And,” Art continued, “we kinda just get along, you know?”

“I guess ... W-What was your first time like? I mean, uh, when you two both ... you know,” she said. The two guys looked at each other, obviously not sure what to say. “Come on, I won’t be jealous.” Hopefully.

After some careful deliberation, they nodded.

“Sure,” Matt said. “But, let’s go somewhere private?”

“Is it ... emotional?” she said.

Art laughed and shook his head. “No. Embarrassing.”

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~~Beatrice~~

Jacob came for her, and she went with him. He didn’t want to bring Jennifer, but Triss insisted. Jennifer had stuck her neck out for Triss on several occasions now, and deserved to be a part of this. More than that, Jennifer had been Julias’s friend. She may not have loved him, or maybe she did in her strange sort of way, either way, she deserved to be a part of this.

Jacob took them out into the desert, and the two girls blinked at each other as they wandered the rocks and sand, draped in Jacob’s Cloak of Night.

“Uh, where we going?” Triss said.

“One of my lairs is out here. It’s where I’ve been keeping Elen,” the old Nosferatu said with a grin over his shoulder. “Hard for Daniel to find anything out here.”

Jennifer nodded. “I suppose if the sheriff is working by area instead of leads and clues, then yes. I doubt Daniel is so blind to your movements that—”

“The sheriff cannot find me when I truly do not wish to be found, Jen.” Jacob laughed, a soft and sinister thing, and motioned for them to join him down in a small, rocky ravine. “He knows where my primary lair is because it serves me to let him. Come on, you know that.”

“I do.” Jen frowned at the man and his teasing. “But you underestimate the sheriff.”



Jacob shrugged, and started down the ravine. “He underestimates me, I underestimate him, ‘round and around it goes.”

It was a long walk, and apparently, Jacob was in no hurry. If anything, he had a bounce in his step, and he skipped around a little as he guided them through the desert night. Well, it was kinda nice heading a few miles out from the city, and enjoying the quiet. And nerve racking. This far away from quality shelter was enough to make any vampire nervous.

“So,” Jennifer said, “did you see Samantha again?”

The small misstep Jacob made would have been unnoticeable to anyone who didn’t know the man. Triss did, and so did Jen. They smiled at each other before smiling at their boss.

“You were having fun with her, after the party last week,” Triss said. “And, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you were actually kinda enjoying yourself, talking with her. But we both know you were really just manipulating her to like you, so you’d have a way of manipulating Jack and the Prince, right?” She didn’t need to be that harsh, but she wasn’t down with Jacob being an asshole to Samantha. Jack didn’t deserve that. Plus, Jacob liked it when she was harsh.

The look he gave her when he looked back at her, on the other hand, said something she didn’t expect. Even with the bandage on his eyes, she could see a bit of hesitation in him, a bit of internal struggle. He was thinking about what to say, and Jacob never had to think about what to say. The fucker was so in tune with his thoughts, they flowed out of him in all their psychotic, genius glory, usually.

“Maybe,” he said, with zero conviction. There was more to this than he wanted them to know.

Jen raised a brow, and picked up her pace to catch up to him. “Have you seen her again?” she asked again.

“Maybe.”

Triss laughed, and jogged up to Jacob’s side, opposite of Jen. “Ok, seriously, did you see her again? A lot of people were talking about it, you know. What the fuck was the leader of the Circle of the Crone doing hanging out with the Prince’s new childe, they said.” Not that she hung out with any of the other vampires, but she did creep around, go hunting and stuff. Vamps talk.

“You two whores just want to gossip. Sluts.”

“Yes!” Jennifer said with a little cheer. “Gossip with us, boss. Samantha’s cute, and close to your age.” Triss and Jacob looked at her, eyebrow raised. “You know what I mean. She was in her forties when embraced. I bet you two get along.”

Right, Jen was talking about how vampires generally didn’t change much once they were embraced; except, when caused by long torpors, which Jacob had undoubtedly been through at least several of. But, the fact that Jacob had been embraced in his older years was obvious by the color of his hair: salt and pepper, and a couple inches long, a bit wavy, a bit full. He was certainly a handsome guy, Triss figured, for any woman in her forties, since he had that mature and successful look to him. And the eye bandage made him look mysterious. It made him seem dangerous and psychotic to anyone who knew better, but to a young Kindred like Samantha, he undoubtedly looked mysterious and sexy. A regular phantom of the opera.

“For all you two know, I was twenty when embraced,” the old bastard said with a hint of a smile. “I could pass for twenty, right? Be honest.”

Jen and Triss looked at each other, and laughed again. No chance.

“Seriously,” Triss continued, “what’s up with you and her? She’s ... well, not the sharpest tool in the shed, you know? Figured you’d be interested in someone with a brain.” Too harsh? Too harsh. “Er, well, I’m sure she has a brain, but you know what I mean.”

“Yes,” Jennifer said. “Samantha seems like a lovely woman, and kind. But—”

Jacob shook his head. “But she’ll never be good at the Danse Macabre, at complex plans, at feats of logic, at constructing and acquiring resources. Vampire stuff.”

“Yes,” the two women said.

The boss laughed again, shrugging. “You kids, you think you got the whole world figured out.”

Triss scratched the back of her neck. “Maybe a little more than—”

Jacob swung his left arm out and hit Triss in the shoulder. Not hard, more of a buddy backhand than anything, but it was enough to give her pause.

“There are many types of intelligences, Triss. Sure, some are better at the Danse than others, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t worth talking to. You saw how she treated Athalia at the ball, and the effect it had? She soothed pain and turned a tense situation into a peaceful one, by herself. There’s talent inside her, one she doesn’t even realize she has.”

Triss raised a brow again, eying the man. When the conversation drifted to Samantha, she expected Jacob to do his usual thing where he got quirky, random, strange, and dangerous. But he didn’t. If anything, he was talking like a normal person, and that was strange in and of itself.

“I get that. Just kinda ... surprised you’re talking to her. Seems a bit random, if you’re not doing it for typical Danse reasons.”

He stopped walking, and set his chin between some fingers as he considered. “The first time I met her, I was visiting Jack. She seemed interesting. A bit of Jack in her eyes.”

Triss shivered. It was hard to think of Jack anymore without thinking of the curse, and the crazy look she saw in his eyes when he’d given it the reins. But with a little effort, she could remember Jack before, Jack when he was just a kid struggling to not drown in his new world. There was definitely something to Jack, something in his damn brain that naturally steered him into the shittiest situations possible.

Julias had seen it before anyone else. Jack, just some random, smart kid who worked for an accounting firm or law firm or something, some entry intern position. Julias noticed him, taught him, became friends with him, and saved him from that bitch Rebecca. In retrospect, Rebecca wouldn’t have touched Jack if Julias hadn’t made it obvious he was going to sire him, or maybe turn him into a ghoul.

Rebecca was the reason Julias had to embrace him. She was the reason so much crazy shit happened. Damn, it made Triss happy knowing she’d killed her.

“I have to wonder,” Jennifer said, “if Samantha will have the same impact on Dolareido as Jack did.” Saying what everyone was thinking. “And if Jack is so compelling that he interests the Prince, then I can only imagine there’s something compelling about Samantha as well.”

“Either way,” Jacob said, “it’s my business, not yours. We’re not here to gossip and do each other’s makeup, sluts. We’re here to discuss Elen.” He reached over to a large rock, and after grounding his feet, rolled it aside.

The smell was strange. Flesh, but not rotting flesh. No shit or piss either, so either Jacob was doing a good job taking care of his prisoner, or Elen just didn't do those things. Other smells too, some Triss recognized from the other sacrifice site, a strange, cold smell that reminded her of metal, and of Black Blood.

The entrance was a tiny hole, same as their headquarters, and they had to crouch down and literally crawl through it. The tunnel was long, and Triss quickly found herself becoming claustrophobic as they moved through the darkness. Not even Kindred eyes could see in total blackness, and considering how long the tunnel was, and filled with dirt and other surfaces that didn't bounce any light, it really was utter, pure darkness. If the tunnel collapsed, Jen and Triss wouldn't be getting out without help, not strong enough. No worry about dying, but she'd still eventually starve until she fell into torpor. Not a fun thing to do, she imagined.

After a silent eternity, they crawled out of the tunnel, deep in the Earth, and stood up. A few candles were lit, and after so much time in absolute darkness, a few candles was plenty of light.

She expected the occult witchcraft stuff. The thousands of symbols drawn on the walls, carved into them. The dangling chains and ropes with strange occult objects, like large bones and skulls dangling from them. The big, gross metal bowl in the center, ready to give anyone unlucky enough to touch it a bout of tetanus. But she wasn't prepared for the sight of Elen, an old, emaciated woman, dangling from a chain with a big hook skewering her wrists. She dangled over the bowl, naked, loose skin hanging, and an occasional drop of blood dripping from her feet and into the bowl. A knife stuck out from her leg.

Beatrice stared up at the dangling woman, and swallowed down on her dry throat, before looking around some more. Unlike the bigger cavern Jacob normally used, this one didn't have a back wall that was unnaturally dark, or smell of death and decay. Elen didn't

smell good, sure, but she wasn't dead, and apparently hadn't pissed or shit unless Jacob was washing her.

There were a couple bloody daggers in the bowl, and some bloody barbed wire. A few bloody hooks, one bloody hammer, and one bloody scalpel. And yet, despite how gross with age Elen looked, she didn't have a cut on her. No scar or anything.

"The curse of immortality," Jacob said, gesturing to the old woman with a laugh.

"Immortality? Uh ... what?"

Jacob jumped up onto the bowl edge, with Elen between him and Triss, and reached up so he could set a hand on the hook. Surprisingly, the bowl was stable. It sat on what looked like some skulls, and a few dark skeletal hands held its base. Maybe they were actually full bodies, sticking up from the ground where they'd been buried to the neck.

Elen didn't react to Jacob's antics, though Jennifer groaned in disgust and dismay over the whole situation.

"Immortality," the old bastard repeated. "This fellow witch has somehow managed to make herself basically immortal. Her flesh mends itself. I haven't tried ripping her head off or destroying her brain, but so far, she seems quite impervious. A regular Tithonus."

"Who?" Triss asked.

Jacob laughed, and gave the old woman a slap on the back. No response. She drifted back and forth, head hanging slightly, eyes open and looking around. A bit of drool fell from her lip.

"Greek myth. A man who was cursed with immortality, but not eternal youth. He aged, and became a withered, pathetic thing." Jacob turned the dangling woman until they were facing each other,

and while his left hand still held onto the dangling hook above for balance, he used his right to clutch the woman's chin and make her look at him. "She's done something to her flesh, using her magic. But whatever it is she did, wasn't perfect. She forgot to ask for eternal youth." Laughing like a maniac, Jacob hopped off the bowl, and without looking, snapped his hand out, grabbed the knife lodged in her thigh, and yanked it out the old woman's leg.

"Nasty," Triss said.

"It took time, to understand what she can do," he continued, and he held out the knife to Beatrice. "She's harmless. Her magic only works on the living, and only if she can spend the time to draw her symbols on them."

Beatrice looked at the knife, and growled as her eyes raised to look at the hanging woman. "Then, the hunters that died when we attacked ... the ones holding the weird objects."

"I'm sure Elen had worked tattoos and other things into all the hunters. But for that particular ritual, she needed to channel something a great deal more powerful than she could manage. Hence, the objects. Without them, all she can do, is manipulate flesh."

"What about the haruspex?" Jennifer said. "She was predicting things, by reading entrails."

Which was one of the most fucked up, kinda cool, but still fucked up things Beatrice had ever imagined.

Jacob shrugged, and gave the woman another push so she swayed a few feet over the bowl. "Haruspex is divination. The magic let her speak to something, nothing more."

"Nothing more?" Jennifer shuddered and rubbed her arms. "There's something out there willing to talk with her, and make

predictions about things?”

“Yeah, there is,” Triss said. “I’ve spoken with something like that, remember? In a pretty similar way.” They’d piled the bodies high, that night.

Jennifer bit her lip, and took a step back from Elen. Much as Jen had stood by Triss through a lot of shit, the girl was still too scared to really throw herself into the deep end. Good. If they both got in over their heads, there’d be no one to pull them out.

“What now?” Jennifer said.

Jacob flashed her a big green. “That’s up to Beatrice. I set this up so she could do whatever she wanted.”

Triss laughed, but it had no heart in it. “Don’t act like you weren’t curious about her, and what she can do.”

“True, true.” He rubbed his hands together a few times, indicating he’d already learned a few things, things he wasn’t telling them. Fuck. “But, it’s pretty obvious her mind’s going. She doesn’t feel pain, or hunger or thirst. She’s not some sort of genius who’s survived all this time on her intelligence, wisdom, and wits. She’s a shell. If it wasn’t for Jeremiah, she’d be in a hospital somewhere, wasting away, and never dying.”

“Has she spoken?” Jennifer said. “I know she can speak.”

“She hasn’t said a word.” Jacob gestured to the knife in Triss’s hands. “Maybe you’ll have better results.”

Triss frowned down at the knife. “And the Nightmare discipline didn’t work?”

“I managed to stir some strange noises out of her. But for the most part, she’s less a person, more a tool. Like, she’s running on



great grandma software, to the point I don't think there's a thought going on in that pretty head."

Pretty, like a hundred-and-fifty-year-old who smoked and slept on her face and didn't eat nearly as much as she should have pretty.

"Let me," Jen said, stepping back in. "I'll take a stab." Triss held up the knife to her, and Jen grimaced, before chuckling as she realized the pun.

"If you're sure. Who knows what kinda crazy shit is in that mind," Triss said.

"I won't push too hard. I'll be fine." After a heavy sigh, Jen reached out, and stopped the old naked woman's gentle swinging.

Jacob and Triss stepped back, and let Jennifer have her room. Beatrice couldn't use Dominate, and she was pretty sure Jacob couldn't either. Acquiring the unique disciplines of other bloodclans required doing some pretty nasty things, like drinking their blood, risking the Vinculum or vitae addiction, and it just wasn't worth it. Unless of course, a vampire performed diablerie, sucked another vampire dry, and rendered themselves immune to the Vinculum; because they were now a nasty, twisted freak, and they'd just killed the vamp they may have been bound to.

It was the silence. The lack of noise, the lack of distraction, it was letting Triss's mind run away with her, so it could dig up nasty thoughts. Bleh.

Jennifer met eyes with the old woman, frowned, and sighed. "I can ... can ... ugh. Jacob's right. Something's happened to her, and I can't get a good grip on her mind."

"Barrier?" Triss asked.

“No. Most minds put up a defense when I attack them with Dominate. With her, it’s like ... I’m trying to grab fog or rain.”

“Because she’s so old?”

Jennifer shook her head. “Maybe, but I don’t think so. I think parts of her are just ... gone, like she gave up something. Whoever this old woman is dangling in front of us, she’s not much different than a corpse. Like, a zombie, still thinking she’s a great grandma like Jacob said. That, and still very aware of how to be a witch.”

She really was just a tool then. Elen was dead, and this old thing in front of them was the remains.

“She did this to herself, so she could become immortal?” Triss said.

Jacob chuckled and shrugged. “Maybe. I bet a lot of what’s affecting her mind is because of the magic she uses, the places her mind has been, and the things it’s communicated with. Her brain, or her soul, or both, have been eaten away. After my tests, I figured she was basically brain dead, and Jennifer’s confirmed. Just a zombie.”

“Dears,” Elen said, voice quiet, dry, and full of weak rasp. Jen and Triss froze as they looked up to her, and even Jacob stopped drifting around as much as he looked at her too. “Dears, be kind and leave an old woman be. I need a nap.”

Triss stared up at her, and shivered as a harsh chill ran down her spine. Vampires had crazy, magic-like abilities that were given to them by their condition. Witches of the Circle of the Crone managed to tap into some sort of mysterious force in the universe, and guided it using Crúac rituals. If a human being, someone made of normal flesh and blood, who didn’t have the naturally immortal and resilient — and static — bodies of a vampire, tried to use strange magical forces, did they all turn out like this?

Nah. Elen must have done something specific and weird, to get herself this fucked up. Being genuinely immortal was a pretty big deal for any human, even something as fucked up as this. It had to come at a huge cost, and she probably paid that cost more than once, with the insane magics she pulled.

“Elen,” Triss said. No response. “Elen, have you ever resurrected someone?”

The R word managed to make her raise her eyes, but after a moment, Elen lowered them. “Be a dear and let me go. I really would like to get my book back. I like to feed some birds by the park in the morning.”

It was super fucking creepy, how she sounded like a sweet grandma, despite her circumstance. A talking zombie, alive, and even functioning, sort of.

“She wore an oxygen mask before,” Triss said.

Jacob shrugged. “Probably helps her move her body better. Takes oxygen to move muscles. If she had to lift her arms and cut into things, with a body this fucked up, she’d need oxygen to do it.”

Jennifer didn’t look convinced. “But not food or water?”

“She’s withering away without them,” Jacob said, “but she won’t die. Makes you wonder, right? Where’s the line between this immortality curse keeping her alive, and how far her biology will go before she eventually falls apart like ash.”

Like ash, like a Kindred did, when killed, assuming they were old enough.

“I wonder why she did this to herself,” Jennifer said.

“A human witch playing with powers they shouldn’t have.” After another shrug, Jacob paced around the bowl slowly, arms folded across his chest. “Why does anyone do anything? Selfishness. Either she wanted immortality for the hell of it, or she wanted it so she could do something else. Maybe save a loved one. Maybe get revenge.”

Much as the words sounded like they should have been insulting or condescending, Jacob’s tone was not. He was intrigued, amused, and maybe even a little fascinated. Elen was definitely unusual, especially if she could intrigue a fossil like Jacob.

Ok, so, Disciplines wouldn’t work on her mind. She simply didn’t have the mind left to scare or control, or seduce, if they had a Daeva.

“What about ... Auspex?” she said. Jacob raised a brow as he looked at her, but waited. “Mekhet can learn secrets from people hiding them, right? I hear they can get information out of people, using Auspex.”

“It might work, but, know any that’d be willing to help you?”

Triss glared at him. The bastard knew exactly who she knew, and exactly who she was thinking of. Natasha, and Damien. Natasha wouldn’t help, not with something this disturbing. Damien did sort of owe her, for when she’d given him some of her blood to save his ass. And maybe a little residual effect was left, so he’d be easier to convince? Nah. That was too long ago, and Damien wouldn’t help her without telling Jack. Ideally, she’d like to keep outside interference to a minimum.

Ugh, why didn’t the Circle have any Mekhet?

“Maybe ... maybe...” She looked down, her hair falling around her face as she let the sickening thought build before she found the will to say it. “Maybe ... Black Blood could do something?”

Jennifer stared at her, and gulped. Jacob, on the other hand, grinned at her like he'd been waiting for her to say it.

“What a wonderful idea.”

## Chapter 122

~~Natasha~~

They went back to her apartment. With the hunters defeated, and the few remaining still in the Prince's custody, there wasn't any reason she couldn't sleep in her apartment anymore. Maybe Samantha would get her own place too? Daniel slept in the Elysium Tower, somewhere secret, but that didn't mean Samantha had to as well.

She sat on the couch between her boyfriends, and looked between them as they obviously prepared a tale.

"It was ten years ago," Art said, smiling down at her, half turned to face her. "Matthew and I had become great friends by this point. We hung out all the time, and we went on patrols together. Eventually, we did our hunting together, when we realized how much we complimented each other."

"We were hunting a spirit," Matthew continued. "It'd possessed someone."

"H-How do you free someone from a possession?" she said.

"You have to learn about the spirit," Art said, "and figure out how to manipulate it with a bane or ban. If a fire spirit, desperate to turn the possessed into an arsonist, got soaked in water for example, some fire spirits would have to vacate the body."

"Oooh. A puzzle." She did oh so enjoy puzzles.

"This one," Matt said, "was a spirit of ... a sort of revenge, I guess. It was kinda hard to pin down. It'd possessed a girl who'd just found out her boyfriend cheated on her."

Art laughed and looked down. “And, well, when we got rid of the spirit, it left an impression on the girl. She somehow got it into her head that she could hurt her ex by sleeping with the two of us.”

Matt shook his head. “She didn’t say that though. Instead, she invited Art and me to a thank you party sorta thing. She got drunk, and got us drunk.”

“No easy feat,” Art said, “but she really wanted a party.”

“And she, uh, kinda jumped us. Situationally speaking, I mean.”

“She was a tall woman, and apparently pretty, uh, comfortable with her sexuality. She went to take a shower, and was in there for a pretty long time. It was especially weird when we heard the shower running, and ten minutes later, still nothing. Matthew and I were thinking maybe we should leave, when she told us to come in.”

“Into the bathroom?” Natasha said.

Matthew nodded, scratching the scruff of his cheeks. “Yeah. Like, the both of us.”

“W-What’d you do?”

Art laughed and shrugged. “Details are a little fuzzy. We were pretty drunk, woozy, and not really thinking straight, or thinking at all. So Matt and I kinda just ... went with it.”

“Yeah, we did. I blame the alcohol.”

Tash scrunched up her nose and looked up at the big guy on her left. “I’m sure there was m-more than alcohol in your veins.”

He scratched the scruff of his neck a little, looking away, embarrassed. “Er, I mean ... well, we are werewolves. We’re kinda always—”

“Ready to fight,” Art said, grinning down at her as he did. Yeah, right. Fight, in this case, being anything strenuous involving biological functions. Should be changed to fight or flight or fuck response.

“W-What happened next?”

“She was naked, grinning at us, and waving a small bottle of lubricant side to side.”

The exact opposite situation Natasha had been in. They’d had to bully her, to get her to accept. A risky move, cause she could have reacted badly, and the situation would have ended horribly. But they’d been tipped off by Jessy. The stranger in their story, on the other hand, was the aggressive one, and guys were, well, guys.

“And you j-just went with it?”

Matthew shrugged, with more hand waving this time. “We were drunk! And a naked girl was beckoning! She wanted to repay us for helping her.”

“So,” Art continued, “we got naked. Apparently she’d done this kinda thing before, cause she took lead, and, yeah, that was Matt and I’s first experience with that sorta thing.”

“N-No, um ... problems?” She held out her hands in front of her, and mimed smooshing orbs together. “Cause, you know, things can touch, and it can get awkward.”

The two men laughed, hearty sounds that made her smile.

“We were pretty drunk,” Matt repeated. “A lot of that sorta stuff didn’t really register. The next time this kinda situation came up, we weren’t drunk, but we’d talked about it already, admitted we’d had a lot of fun being with a girl like that, and wouldn’t mind doing it again.”



Natasha laughed. "I'd say it's strange for t-two guys to agree to something like that. But, it's pretty normal in Dolareido."

They grinned at her. Tinglies went through her belly, and she quivered at the rising tension in the air. If she pushed them just a little more, they'd pounce, pin her down, and do things to her. She kinda wanted to do that.

"You're the first," Art added, "that we've ever dated like this though. Like, really ... committed to a relationship with."

She suppressed the need to gasp, and managed a peek up at the man beside her. "Y-Yeah?"

"Yeah," Matt said, and he set a hand on her legs. Usually that'd be a precursor to much touching, no matter how much she squirmed to get away. The look in his face didn't scream sex though. They were being serious.

Art sighed and shook his head. "Actually, we wanted to talk to you about something else, tonight."

"Oh?"

He nodded. "Yeah. The pack has found more clues pointing to Maria. Red wraiths have been sneaky across the Gauntlet, and we're sure they've been talking to her. Far as we can tell, they work for Black Blood, or it's got a firm grip on them and they have no choice. Either way, Avery's convinced she's up to something."

This again. Frustrating beyond belief, that the werewolves were the only ones capable of acquiring this sort of evidence. Except, that wasn't true. The Prince got glimpses of things on the other side of the Gauntlet, and that necklace the Prince had acquired some time ago had drawn a spirit that also pointed toward Maria. Combined, it was hard to ignore.

“I could t-talk to her about it,” she said.

Art shook his head again. “Before we were sure, I’d say do it. But now we know she’s in deep. No idea if it’s linked to the tears we’ve been finding, but she’s into something dark if she has to go through those wraiths. If you ask her now, she might wise up, change her tactics or something.”

“I suppose it m-makes sense. If Maria suspected anyone the Uratha might send, to ask questions about what she’s doing, it’d be m-me.” Since she was so close to the Uratha, compared to anyone else. “I’ll ask D-Damien. He’s already keeping an eye on her, and says he hasn’t seen anything suspicious. B-But, I can ask him to look harder.” He was Mekhet, after all. It wouldn’t take much prodding to get him interested in searching for more. The curse of all Mekhet, to hunger for secrets to learn.

The problem was, Damien seemed to care for Maria, to some extent. Maybe he felt guilty for Lucas, and was doing his best to help Maria in his absence? Not very Kindred of him, to behave like that.

“I’ll be taking a trip into the Hisil tomorrow,” Art said. “I want you to tag along.”

“M-Me? Why?”

“Because you’re sneaky. And you provide some objectivity; the pack sucks at that. And because I’d like to hang out with my girlfriend for a while.”

She beamed, but washed the expression away quickly. “Ok, b-but, if I see an opportunity to learn something, I’ll take it.”

He grinned. “Avery won’t like that.”

She returned the grin. No way it had that smoldering look Art’s did, but damn it, she could do a smart aleck grin.

“That’s the p-p-price! I mean, if you want my help sneaking around, then I’m going t-to take the opportunity to learn about things. I w-want to see some of the tears.”

Art winced, but nodded. “Sure.”

“W-What about Matt?”

“I can’t sneak for shit.” Laughing, he shrugged. “If you two can cover for me, sure. I—”

The phone started to ring. Natasha’s, and the ring announced it was the Prince calling. She pulled it out, and held up a finger for her boyfriends.

“Yes, my Prince?” she answered.

“Natasha. Have you seen Jack?” First names and no additions meant she was serious.

“Jack? N-No, Prince. Is he missing?”

The quiet growl through the phone was like a knife’s edge against her skin.

“Yes, he is. Again.”

Oh damn it.

“Um, d-dawn is nearly here. And tomorrow I was going t-to see about going into the Hisil with Avery’s pack, to learn about ... possible ... things.” The word ‘things’ was enough to have the Prince thinking about it for a moment.

Another phone rang, and Art pulled it out to check a message. His eyes went wide.

“Then,” the Prince continued, “I have no choice but to ask for that man’s help.”

“D-Damien?”

“Damien.”

---

~~Jack~~

Sándor’s bleeding slowed, and stopped. Jack did his best to ignore the smell of blood, and so did Clara. For her, it must have been pulling at an instinct, some animal anxiety or need to get aggressive. For him, it was just making him hungry. Over two years ago, when he was just a freshly embraced fledgling, being hungry was terrifying. Feeding on people was terrifying, especially after his Beast had flipped out that first night and killed someone.

These days, he fed regularly, both on Antoinette’s ghouls, but also random people he found on the street, in dark alleys, or occasional trips to Bloodlust and other night lounges and clubs. The last thing he wanted was to get hungry, to give his Beast any excuse to run rampant. That meant feeding, often, keeping it sated and quiet.

He’d come into confidence quickly, to be able to feed so readily; except with women, of course. Something about talking to a woman always threw him off, made him hesitate, doubt himself, all those things women generally found unappealing. The Prince found it endearing. He’d gotten a lot better at it, especially when it came to hunting, but still.

He licked his lips as the smell of blood hit his nose again. Sándor’s, and Clara’s, where it soaked her jeans. The smell was different. Each smelled inhuman in their own way, Clara’s like some kind of rich meal, while Sándor’s smelled almost like alcohol. Subtle smells a human nose wouldn’t pick up on, but to a Kindred, blood was life. Given another few hundred years, maybe he’d be able to

smell the difference between human blood with different diets. Maybe he'd be one of those elders who insisted on feeding on kine of specific age groups, sexes, blood types, or ethnicities.

"He's healing," Clara said.

Jack nodded as he looked over at the man still hanging off Clara's shoulders. "Yeah, but he's lost a lot of blood. And he pushed himself tackling the azlu." Sándor's head drooped, the man trapped somewhere between falling asleep and groaning in pain. "I ... don't think he's going to be able to help us for a little while."

"Then I'll climb the wall."

"I mean, sure, if you can." He looked up at the huge, smooth rock wall, wincing. "I saw how much the azlu hit the ground with its claws and feet. They didn't leave much impact. No grooves anywhere."

She snorted, set Sándor down against the sloping wall, and let out a quiet growl in her throat. Quiet turned into a heavy, bassy rumble as she transformed, becoming an eight-foot beast of muscle. Leaner than the male werewolves, he couldn't help but notice how her furry form didn't hide her feminine physique. Short fur meant he could still see the shape of hips, waist, legs, and even the hint of bust, and more impressive, the place where legs and back met. Very, uh, shapely, even with a wolf tail stick out over it.

Clara noticed him looking, and she managed the wolf equivalent of a quiet chuckle.

"Brianna has fucked, like this." She gestured to herself. "Says body changes, for sex. Says it was fun, but ... hard, to control herself." Clara's words came out harsh, half bark, but he could hear the playfulness in them.

Jack nodded, gulping. “Uh, very dangerous, I imagine.” He was not a furry. He was not a furry. He was not a furry. He was not a furry.

She grinned, as much as a snout can grin, turned to the wall of rock, and slammed both of her hands against it at the same time, claws out, palms forward. They pierced the rock, a whole quarter inch, and the moment she tried to pull her weight upward, her claws came right back out. She tried again, harder, and for a split second, Jack was sure he could see a small, red glow on her claws.

Avery had done something with her claws, when she’d fought the azlu. She’d set them on fire somehow, but not really on fire. Maybe she could pierce the rock they needed to climb to reach the tear above, or maybe those fire claws were better for killing azlu, but either way, Clara didn’t seem capable of it, or any other trick that might let her climb the rock.

Apparently, the Gauru side of her didn’t like that. She roared, loudly, and Jack flinched back as the unnatural power of it crashed into him. She slammed her claws into the wall again, but got no further, despite the hard crack sound. Movement drew their eyes, and they both looked up to see through the fog, way way way up, several scurrying sets of spider legs run off into the darkness. The azlu spiders were still around, hiding in the mist, and staying out of reach. They hated Clara, but they were also afraid of her. And now, they were afraid of him.

But he couldn’t take advantage of that fear if he couldn’t force an engagement. And besides, better to not, and just escape.

Clara slammed her claws again and again into the rock, but she got nowhere. “Fuck!” she half screamed, half barked.

Sándor coughed a few times, before he looked up at the two of them. “Get me up. I’ll fly us up there.”

“You can’t even stand,” Jack said.

“Then I’ll burrow a tunnel home, and you can follow.”

“I get the impression you’d have done that already if you could.” Sighing, Jack came over to the man and squatted in front of him. “Opening portals, tunneling, opening your lair so it overlaps with other worlds, all of that must take effort. Right now, you’re useless. Which means we got two options. We wait until you’re feeling well enough to get us out of here, or wait until someone figures out what happened, and comes looking for us.” The first option looked rough, cause it could take Sándor days to recover, or more, depending on how well his human body could heal. The second option was rougher. Sándor hadn’t opened his lair to the other Begotten, and hadn’t really been in contact with them. They had no way of knowing where he was.

“So ... what’s the plan?” Clara said. She’d already transformed back into her human form.

“Fuck me, I don’t know.” He sat down against the wall edge beside Sándor, and leaned his head back against the stone. “I can feel sunrise; it’ll be here any minute. I’ll try and stay awake as long as I can, but...”

“But if we all fall asleep, we’ll be killed in our sleep.” Sighing, she sat down next to him, taking a breather while still scanning left and right. “Guess I’ll be pulling an all ... dayer.”

They laughed, and let the sound die away as the dangers of the situation sank in. A glance to the Begotten showed he was already asleep, and not in good shape at all. Sándor had seemed confident he would heal, but guys like him had a habit of lying about that sort of shit, right into a grave. But, him being asleep did give Jack and Clara a moment to talk.

“Clara,” he said at last, “I ... I’m thankful, you know.”

“Thankful?”

“For how you don’t seem to let the curse bother you, after everything you’ve seen.”

She watched him for a while, before she looked down, pulled up her knees, and hooked her elbows on them. “It bothers me.”

He winced. “Oh.”

“It bothers everyone, Jack.”

“Yeah, I ... I know. I meant, you don’t seem to let it bother you enough to keep you away.”

She looked at him, hesitating, a hint of pain in her eyes. “Yeah, well, someone needs to be there for you. Not like any elder ever risks their own neck on missions like this.”

He couldn’t hold her gaze for long. Her eyes were sad. It was the sort of look he’d seen in movies, when someone watched a friend go off to war. Why did she care about him so much?

“It’s not like my friends aren’t concerned too, Clara. Damien, Antoinette, they’re all looking for ways to remove the curse. Elaine might be able to help with that, too.” Assuming whatever devious scheme was she was up to allowed for that.

“And Beatrice?”

“Triss? She ... she...” He shivered as he looked down. “She needed my help, and I was glad to give it.”

“And when Damien needs your help, and only the curse can provide it, what happens? Or the Prince? Or the others?”

“I don’t know. It’s a bridge I’ll cross when I get to it.”



“Come on, you know what’s going to happen, Jack.”

He couldn’t keep a bit of venom out of his voice. “Educate me.”

“Things will happen that the power of the curse can help with, and you’ll help the people who need it. You’ll help because that’s you. But...”

“But?”

“But, you’ve got a self destructive impulse, Jack.”

He kept his eyes down. Easier that way, to have this painful conversation without any eye contact.

“I’m not self destructive.”

“Come on, that’s exactly what you are.”

“I—”

“You wouldn’t hesitate to put yourself in front of a train if it meant you could do something you felt needed doing. Problem is, you jump to that conclusion pretty damn fast, you know?”

He tightened his hands into his fists, but still kept his eyes down. “I make quick decisions because it’s the only way things can happen. He who hesitates is lost.”

“Against the first azlu, you threw yourself down at it, a monster clearly stronger than you.”

“If I didn’t, it would have killed you, and escaped.”

“Maybe. How about when you escaped Jeremiah and Angela, that first night when they captured you? You cut off your own hands.”

“If I didn’t, I would have been trapped.”

“Maybe. What about that rescue attempt you made for me, Jessy, and Eric? You came in guns blazing. And then there was our assault on their home turf. You went in first, on intel you got that very night, and took them all on yourself.”

“I—”

“Jack.” Her voice was heavy and sad, not loud, but the impact was enough to shut him up. “The point I’m trying to make, is ... I’ve dealt with vampires before. They take advantage of other people, without even thinking about it. That’s just what vampires do. It’s who they are. But you’re different. You put yourself in positions where you’ll take the brunt of the pain, and ... and I know vampires are going to take advantage of that.”

He licked his fangs slowly, before he ground his teeth until his jaw threatened to break. The anger hit him like a ton of bricks, and it wasn’t the anger the curse used to slip into him, before he’d freed it. It was the anger of an indignant child, not liking what it was being told. It was an anger he was familiar with from his whole life, from someone saying something he disagreed with, while he internally realized they were right, and he was wrong.

Being wrong sucked.

“But ... you won’t do that,” he said.

“Do what?”

“Take advantage of me, of the curse.”

She smiled at him in the corner of his eye. “I don’t know. I don’t think so?”

“You wouldn’t.” It wasn’t in her, that much was obvious. The werewolves didn’t think like that, think in terms of the self first. They were so far from the Kindred mindset, it seemed alien to him.

“You said the Prince and her friend are looking for ways to remove the curse?”

“Yes. Elaine is, in particular. She’s my great grandsire.”

Clara’s eyes shot open. “Oh...” He gave her a minute to process that.

“She had the curse, but never unleashed it, like I did. At some point, centuries ago, she removed it. Now she’s willing to help me.”

“Does she know how she did it?”

“She has some notes, and some hazy memories.” He shrugged, tension fading from his shoulders. “But, I’m not an idiot. Like you said, Kindred take advantage of anything they can, including each other. She’s up to something, and...”

Clara laughed. “But you slept with her anyway?”

He sat up straight and winced. Awkward. “Uh, yeah. But, it’s not what you think. With Antoinette, the sex isn’t the intimate part. And even mid ... you know, she never truly lets her guard down.”

Laughing, Clara looked up and stared off into nothing. “I suppose I can understand that, considering what I was doing.”

“You mean with Jessy’s ghouls?”

Her turn to wince. “Yeah. You ... you didn’t see the pictures, did you?”

He raised a brow. “Pictures?”

“Oh thank god. Those ghouls took some pictures, probably because that slut Jessy wanted to see. I was drunk, and I ... guess I didn’t really care. When in Rome, right?”

“Ha, yeah, when in Rome.” He gave her a small punch in the knee. “So, I’ve slept with four women at once, and you’ve slept with four dudes at once?”

She blushed, horribly at that, face going bright through her tan skin. “Apparently.”

“Sounds hot.”

She choked on a laugh. “I mean, yeah, it was. Jessy, uh, definitely trained her ghouls.”

“Sex is a sport, in Dolareido. But intimacy, romance, that stuff? It’s so damn rare.”

“And you have that with Antoinette.”

After a long, heavy sigh, he looked at her and forced himself to make eye contact with her. “Yes, I do. It’s a strange relationship, no doubt about that. We’ve talked about it, and ... it’s something we’re both aware of, and we’ll both work on it.”

“The sex?”

He choked on a laugh. “The relationship.”

“I suppose she’s mastered basically every aspect of sex, right?”

“Yeap.” No way around admitting that.

“Lot of women in Dolareido really seem to take the lead, sexually speaking.”

“I guess? I mean, the guys do too.” Julias did, definitely, but he didn’t say it. “It’s just, people kinda notice it more when women do, cause it’s not something that female kine normally do, you know? But, Kindred aren’t kine. For vampires, it’s a pretty even split on most behaviors, sexual aggression included.” Far as he could tell,

the Beast did not have gender proclivities. It didn't have a gender. It was a mass of shadow, claws, talons, beaks, fangs, fur, and feathers. How much of the human remained, when one became a vampire? A question for the Ordo, or the Circle, he supposed.

“Yeah, I guess. It was the same thing, in Tijuana. The vamps, girls included, were pretty damn aggressive about what they wanted. The sex was ... everywhere, and it was pretty intense, from the sounds.”

“But, that's not what binds me and Antoinette, if that's what you were thinking. Yeah, we have sex, and we enjoy it, but there's a lot more to us than that.” He didn't want to have this conversation, but maybe it was good to have it. Painful, sure, but Clara was interested in him, and thought his current relationship wasn't a healthy one. Much as it sucked, it was probably a good idea to try and fix her impression.

“Do you joke around with her?” she said.

He shook his head. “Not really, not the way you're thinking, anyway.” She was undoubtedly referencing how the two of them had joked around tonight, as seamlessly as two old friends who knew each other well. Hell, he could joke around with Clara more easily than Damien, or even Julias. Something about her was so damn enjoyable and fun.

She raised a brow at that. “You don't?”

“No, but that's not what makes us happy, you know? I mean sure, I enjoy laughing, and joking around, but to me, it's ... it's not what I crave.”

That confused her, and she tilted her head to the side as she watched him. “Eh?”

He laughed and shrugged. “I'd sound pretty pretentious if I explained. But, uh ... ever seen Frasier?”

She laughed, and before he knew it, his laugh grew to match hers. No need to say it, they were both bringing up funny memories from the sitcom. Clara was old enough to have watched the show when it aired, and Jack found modern television mind numbing, stupid, and written specifically with ADD in mind. Naturally, he deferred to older shows.

“Well,” he continued, “you know how a lot of the humor was poking fun at those two for their elitist mindsets? Fancy wine, fancy decor, nitpicking details about opera, etcetera?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, those are the kinds of conversations Antoinette and I have. Not about wine or decor, but that is how we approach topics, things like science, music, movies. We obsess and nitpick over specifics and minutiae, and ... it’s fun for us. We can talk for hours about it, argue, debate, or indulge each other. It’s really satisfying, and fulfilling. I ... I know it’s not what most people think of, when they think of a relationship, but it makes me happy.”

“So, you’re Niles?”

“Aha, I mean, I guess?” Niles’s greatest weakness was women. Jack could relate.

“You know Niles ended up with Daphne, right?”

Oh, right. Well, that example backfired pretty quick, and the look in her eyes said it all. Niles had been with a wretched, elitist woman before he fell for Daphne, and once he’d finally started a relationship with Daphne, he’d found his happiness.

It was painful, holding Clara’s gaze, and they both looked down at the same time. Reality wasn’t like a sitcom, and he was stupid for bringing it up.

“Jack,” she said at last. “I—”

“Hello.”

Jack and Clara jumped up, and Jack wasted no time drawing a dagger from within his suit. But, the new figure did not attack them. It just stood there, looking at them, occasionally tilting its head from side to side.

A woman, and a ghost. Like Mary, she had hollow eyes, with a see-through body, and mist trickling out of her legs to mix into the gray fog that surrounded them. Her face was soft and her hair was long, going past her shoulders. Gray. From her clothing, Jack guessed she wasn't some crazy ancient ghost or anything; probably someone from the 90s, considering the t-shirt and jeans. But the jeans and t-shirt were faded, gray things, just like her hazy skin.

Only the strange, green light in her chest stuck out from the oppressively dreary grayness of it all. How the fuck had a glowing green light managed to sneak up on them? The ghost must have been able to turn that off or something.

“Hello,” Jack said eventually. “Um, I'm Jack. This is Clara, and Sándor.” Might as well be nice to the ghost, and do his best to not make enemies. He put his dagger away, and brushed his thumb against the silver knife hidden underneath his jacket. He doubted silver would work against a ghost, but he could be wrong.

“I'm Sabrina.” The ghost hovered closer, and Jack and Clara both took a step back, only for the huge rock wall to greet them. If the ghost noticed their retreat, she didn't care. “Why are you in the Great Below?”

“Great Below?” Clara said. “Is that where we are?”

“Yes, the Great Below.” The ghost nodded, and gestured to the fog behind her, and distant, drifting green lights. “You're alive. You

shouldn't be here. You could get hurt."

Jack frowned. "Hurt, by who?"

"Us," Sabrina said, and again gestured behind her. No other ghosts were nearby, and the gray mist was thick, but that didn't stop Jack from seeing the hundreds, maybe even thousands of distant, drifting green lights move about. The green glow pierced the fog somehow, almost like a lighthouse, or maybe an angler fish "Why are you here? Are ... are you here because of the spiders?"

Clara nodded. "Yeah. They're called azlu. I—" She stopped herself, and leaned over to Jack. "How much should we tell her?" she said, hand up to cover her mouth and his ear.

Jack turned, repeating the gesture. "We're up shit creek without a paddle, and can't afford to piss anyone off. Tell her ... most things."

Clara nodded again before looking back to the ghost. "Sabrina, have you seen a giant spider ... monster thing, running around?"

The ghost woman shivered and hugged her chest. "Yes! Very scary." Hints of a perfectly normal, human voice were underneath the raspy, harsh ghost voice, the remains of whoever this girl had been, someone named Sabrina. "And it hurts us. We left it alone after that."

"We'll try and kill it if we can," Jack said. "But ... but..." He blinked down at the ground, and then at the ghost Sabrina, then Clara, and then fell onto his ass. "Oh shit. Shit shit. Not now. Not now..."

"Jack! What the—"

"It's alright! It's alright, just ... it may not be sunrise here, but it is back on the ... surface, I guess." It certainly felt like they were underground, in the three dimensional sense, and the alternate dimensions sense. Great Below sounded right. Normally, dawn



knocked vampires out within seconds, but Jack tapped into his vitae, and forced it up through his body and into extremities. Keep him moving, keep him talking, just for a few moments. “Clara, you —”

“I’ll play guard dog until you’re awake, Jack. Don’t worry, no one’s getting close.” She wriggled her fingers, like a cat unfurling their claws experimentally. “Ghosts are made of ephemera. If I have to, I can defend you and Sándor.”

“Try ... try and play nice, ok? Better to make friends than enemies, you know?”

She laughed as she squatted down beside him. “Jesus. Even after everything that’s happened, you’re still trying to play diplomat?”

“Call it a habit, by this point.” He looked at the Begotten beside him, then to Clara, then to the ghost. “Sorry, suppose this is a strange way to learn I’m a vampire.”

He watched the ghost, scanning for any unusual behavior as torpor dragged him down. No hostility, no movement, only a confused expression on her face. Well, hopefully she wouldn’t kill him while he slept.

---

~~Antoinette~~

The first thing she did once the sun disappeared beneath the horizon, and she awoke to a new night, was inform her sheriff of the situation. The second thing, was ask for an update from her student. Natasha confirmed Jack was not answering his phone. Apparently, neither was Clara, according to her lovers Matthew and Arturo.

Clara, missing. Jack, missing. A hint of worry ran through Antoinette’s spine. Considering the conversation she had with Jack not long ago, about the nature of her relationship, the idea that her

love and that woman were both together somewhere was a painful notion. But the fear passed quickly. Jack was an honest soul, and even if he struggled with some internal conflict, it would not drive him to commit a dishonest or treacherous act. He was simply incapable of crossing that line.

Her phone rang, the sound announcing it was her sheriff. She answered.

“Jack?”

“Not at his mansion. Auspex found a few hints that Clara was here, along with Sándor.”

Jack, with the werewolf and the monster. It was the boy’s job to work with the Begotten and the Uratha, but such things were done through Avery and Azamel, not Clara and Sándor.

“Can you follow their trail?”

“No.”

Groaning, she got up from her chair and looked down at her city from her tower. A message came through on her phone. She checked it, and sighed. “Michael has not seen him either. He does not need to report every day to the Invictus leader, but nevertheless.”

“Talked to Damien yet?”

Despite her best attempts, she scowled. “I suppose if it must be done, it must be done. How do you feel about the man, now that you have been training him?” Yet another favor she did not entirely agree with. But, in the future, if she demanded a favor of Damien Burksen, he would hardly be in a position to say no. Silver lining.

“He’s a lot more mentally stable than he has any right to be, considering what happened to him and Lucas. I see a lot of Jack in him. The calm, calculating part of Jack. The boy has probably helped Damien overcome a lot of his past.”

“Yes, I imagine Jack has. He cannot help himself.”

“And the nightmare monster seems to have sparked something else in Damien.”

Antoinette chuckled. Yes, Fiona’s unending optimism and joviality would likely melt any heart, and Antoinette knew Damien’s heart well, from when he had cut off one of her arms, and legs. There was much to be melted.

“If Sándor and Clara are with him, then I am sure Jack is alive. But he is indisposed, and that is startling.” The hunters were dead, after all. What could have captured or harmed Jack, the monster, and the werewolf? There were many possibilities, but they were all unlikely. And without an idea as to where the boy could be, what she needed to find him, was a hound. “Return to your previous task, Daniel. I will speak with Lucas’s childe.”

---

~~Damien~~

Within several minutes of waking, Maria and Damien got to work. The joys of being Kindred, waking and sleeping came instantly, and this night, he’d stayed at Maria’s. She’d wanted to get started early, and he didn’t mind. Fiona had said she was busy with Athalia anyway.

“Good, good,” Maria said. “You are learning to relax your hands.”

He nodded, and let his fingers drift along the keys, moving rapidly but never flexing his wrists or tightening his hands. It was

important to allow the hands to move with the keys, to dance along them, or they'd trip and stumble.

Months of constant practice had allowed him to move onto some fairly interesting classical pieces, and he impressed himself with both his ability to learn them, but also his joy in playing such music. Classical music held a depth in both technical and emotional dimensions he had never considered in the past, but now, it was water he was happy to swim. This piece, *Petite Suite* by Claude Debussy, was charming and soothing, with a bounce in its step. A simple song, compared to the stuff Maria played, but a good stepping stone for Damien.

It was also played by two people. The ghost lady sat beside him in one of her typical, old fashioned white dresses, and she watched his fingers while playing on her half of the piano. Deep under the Grand Cathedral of Dolareido, the music filled her large den, as her deformed-but-pleasant ghoul drifted about, cleaning, lighting candles, and humming expertly to the melody.

Damien smiled at her. The sight of her broken skin, and the hints of mist that dripped from her, didn't bother him anymore. And his presence didn't seem to bother her anymore, either. It was obvious that the introduction of him into her personal life as a student and bishop of Longinus had interfered with her routines; he spent a lot of time in her underground den. But after a time, she'd adapted, as had he.

He didn't try and teach her about the things that interested him; not that he had many, considering how limited his life had been. But the greater reason, was he knew better. Maria was ancient, and set in her ways. Their relationship worked far better if he simply let her teach him what she was willing to teach, and maybe occasionally ask her to teach him a bit more, but never the other way around. Maybe some day in the future, he'd have something to teach her, but for now, their relationship was of teacher and

student. And, because they were the only two in their covenant in Dolareido, leader and follower.

A phone ring interrupted their song.

“Go, answer it,” she said.

He nodded, fetched the phone, and froze. “Uh ... it’s, the Prince.” Everyone knew the Prince’s number, the one she used when making an official call. The fact this was coming to him, and not to Maria, was very, very weird.

Maria turned on the piano bench, and raised a brow as she watched him. “You best answer it then.”

He gulped, and did. “Hello, my Prince.”

“Damien. Have you heard from Jack?”

Damien? She called him Damien?

“Jack? No, I haven’t. Last I knew, he was going to talk with Sándor, about the situation with Azamel. That was yesterday.”

“I see. Well, the boy is missing, as is Clara, and likely Sándor.”

He was very tempted to say ‘Jack’s missing, again?’ in an annoyed drawl. He did not.

“Clara as well?”

“Yes. You are to make contact with Avery, and request her assistance.”

He froze. “The Uratha?”

“Yes. Normally, Jack would go, as you can imagine. But tonight, it would appear I am requesting that you go in his stead.” From the

tone of her voice, the request was very much an order. “Natasha is otherwise preoccupied.”

“I see.” He put his hand over the receiver. “Jack’s missing. The Prince wants me to look for him, and to ask Avery to help.” The ghost lady frowned at his explanation, but after half a second’s consideration, nodded. “I will leave at once.”

“No need. Jack informs me the Uratha have finally, thank the stars, acquired smartphones. I have her number, for emergency purposes only mind you, such as now.” She gave him the number.

He was going to smack Jack once he found him. The city had seen enough damn excitement, since the last time Jack had randomly disappeared.

---

~~Eric~~

Multiple layers of blackout curtains and closed windows prevented any light from getting into his apartment, including the red of a setting sun, but he could still sense dusk approaching. Despite that, the jolt of Jessy’s body, sitting up with a startle, had Eric sitting up with a jolt as well.

“Ah, fuck, sorry,” she said. “Still happens sometimes.”

Shrugging, he leaned in toward her and set a kiss on her bare shoulder. “You never wake up gently anymore?”

“Nah. Kindred wake up like someone nearby has shot a gun. Sometimes we handle the jolt well, sometimes we don’t, but it’s never slow or gentle.” Nodding with her explanation, she turned to face him, grinned, and threw herself at him. “Gimme!”

He let her flatten him to his big, hilariously nice bed, and Kat let out a meow in greeting. Apparently Kat’s meow was more inviting

than Eric, because Jessy reached out, scooped up the cat, and cuddled her over her shoulder. The purring was audible.

“Your cat is totally brain damaged.”

“Yeap.”

“I love her.”

“Everyone does.”

“Ha, she’s such a cuddle slut.” Jessy laughed and rolled onto her back. She held Kat up and out at arm’s length, smiled up at the adorable dumbass, and lowered the cat back down onto her bare chest. Kat didn’t care about boobs. Kat just wanted cuddles.

Eric rolled over to her, pressed his chest into her right shoulder, and pet Kat the cat, gently scratching under her chin. With Jessy’s right arm holding the cat, they both had free access to pet the hell out of the pampered queen. She purred like a lawn mower.

“I feel bad, about Azamel,” he said.

“What? Why?”

“She wanted my help, remember? Before things went crazy, she was hoping to hire me. Said I couldn’t trust the vamps—”

“Which you can’t.”

“Which, I can’t. Said I could trust her, sorta, because I was an odd one out, not a part of the werewolf pack, and not a vampire.”

“All very true things.” Jessy flashed him a hint of a grin before she buried her head into Kat’s neck, hiding half her face in the dumb cat’s fur.

“And now she’s fucked, dying.”

“Yeah well, from what Jack told us, it was her past catching up with her. She’s a nightmare monster, you know? Literally survives on scaring people.”

He shrugged. “Not like she asked to be that.”

“No, but, it’s still reality. I can’t blame a predator for being a predator, but that doesn’t mean me, or anyone else, is just going to lie down and let them eat me. And they shouldn’t feel bad if a predator gets fucked by the prey, either. Circle of life.”

That was an oddly wise view of it, and he raised a brow as he watched her snuggle and spoil his already spoiled and slightly fat cat. “And vampire hunters?”

“Same thing. There are vampires, so there are going to be vampire hunters. It sucks, but no way should someone feel guilty for not helping me deal with that problem. It’s my problem.” After hugging Kat with both her arms for a few moments, she lifted the cat again up over her head, and set her on the head corner of the bed, before turning to look at Eric. “So we try to not kill anyone, to minimize that problem. Azamel’s done the same. Considering how old she is, she’s done a good job. Nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But still, I can’t help but think about what-ifs.” Athalia and Fiona did come and join the rescue effort, when Eric had been attacked by Sándor. He owed them, in a strange way.

“Add it to your list of good guy things to do.”

“Good guy?”

“Good guy.” Nodding, she leaned in to him, kissed him, and pushed his shoulder until he was on his back again. “I’m hungry. Gimme.” Like a cat, a far more aggressive and prowly cat than Kat would ever be, Jessy slid the blankets down to their knees, then climbed up onto his pelvis, and sat down in all her naked glory.



He tilted his head up at her, one eyebrow raised. “You ‘ate’ yesterday.” He airquoted ate; seemed to be the ‘in thing’ to do these days.

“Yeah but, I’m feeling peckish. And having you around all the time is like, any woman hanging around chocolate. Can’t help ourselves.”

He nodded. Even Sheryl had been unable to resist chocolate if they had any in the place.

“I am pretty delicious.”

Laughing, she nodded, and slid down his legs. Soon she was on her belly, elbows between his thighs, and she grinned up at him as she placed a kiss against the underside of his soft shaft. Not soft for long. The mischievous glee in her eyes was enough to have him hard in seconds as the wolf inside reacted.

“I’ll trade. Blowjob for blood.”

“Sounds an awful lot like I’m your sugar daddy, if I’m paying you for sexual services with blood.” He forced himself up onto his elbows, and watched the blonde woman set another kiss on his length, and another, lips working up toward the engorging tip.

“But, I give you real money for your services. I’m your sugar momma.”

“Sounds like a paradox.”

She laughed, shrugged, grabbed his cock with one of her hands, and started to stroke its base as she set its body along her cheek and up to her forehead, measuring her face against its length and girth. “Almost like we’re a couple, who just like giving each other stuff.”

“Crazy.”

Nodding, she wrapped her lips around the head of his cock, and started to bathe it in suckling kisses and massaging licks. She'd started Blushing Life, so the sensitive skin of his glans was treated to the wet warmth of her mouth. And it was clear she was in one of her moods, her playful moods, her almost cat-like moods. For the moment, he was her toy. He was perfectly okay with that.

She wasted no time, and god damn, she was skilled. Within minutes, he reached down, and ran his fingers through her hair as he felt the warm gush of his cum flood his length. Jessy's playful gaze melted into something soft and beautiful, as his fingers slid along her scalp and through her hair. She smiled at him and hummed happily, as his cum poured into her mouth, each wave sending sparks of bliss down his cock and down between his legs.

"Three minutes, bitch," she said, doing her best to not spill the mouthful she had. She jumped off the bed, disappeared into the bathroom, spat, and returned with a hop in her step. Still Blushing Life meant the fit woman's nipples stood out on her large breasts, and he stared, hypnotized by how her tits bounced with her skipping. And, of course, by how her large ass rippled. God damn. "I've known college students that last longer than you."

Rolling his eyes, he sat up, and motioned for her to come closer. She did. They hugged. She sank her fangs into his neck, and he shivered as the unnatural power of the Kiss sent jolts of relaxing pleasure through his body. It was almost like an orgasm, just the reverse, with flowing waves of exhaustion happening before the pleasure did. But the wolf spirit in him was strong, and it didn't let the Kiss knock him out. And Jessy only took a little blood, this time.

"Ah fuck, now I'm horny too."

"Wh—hey!"

She pushed him back onto the bed again, straddled him, and before he knew it, they were having sex.

“Come on, you’re good for it, right?” She pointed down at where he was still hard, and was indeed penetrating her. She was wet, hot, and so very damn tight.

“Just, a little shocked by the drive-by fucking.”

“Well, I—” The phone on the nearby nightstand rang. Kat, half asleep and still on the head corner of the bed, hadn’t reacted to their movements at all. The ringing, however, managed to pull her head up enough to look at the smartphone nearby, and earn an annoyed meow from her, before the spoiled queen went back to her slumber.

Jessy grabbed the phone and handed it to him. “Answer it.”

“Uh, we’re—”

“How often are your phone calls social calls?”

“ ... basically never.”

“Exactly. It’s probably important, so answer it.” Nodding, she leaned down into him, spread her knees, and ground her pelvis down toward his to swallow his length to the base. With her knees spread out and on the blankets, she had the leverage to really grind her body left and right, and she did. Her hands slid around his back, and she pressed her breasts into his chest as she hugged him. Her lips found his neck again, but she didn’t Kiss, only kissed.

He gulped, and answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Eric, it’s Damien.”

“Damien? I—” He forced down the rising need to groan, as Jessy clenched on him tight. “Um, hey, what’re you—”

Jessy snatched the phone out of his hand. “Damien? Dude, what’s up?” She leaned back from him, hooked the back of his neck with

her free hand, and ground back and forth at higher speeds. He stared, awestruck by the way her body rolled like a wave, how her abs flexed and unflexed, and how her huge breasts jiggled with each motion.

Something was in her hand. Phone? Phone! Right, she was on the phone. Damn easy to forget, looking at what he was looking at.

“He’s missing again, are you fucking serious? Clara too? Ugh, fucking typical. City’s finally not trying to kill us, and those two somehow go missing.” Despite being in the middle of sex, and fast, almost rough sex at that, her voice didn’t change. Vamps didn’t need to breathe, so it wasn’t like physical exertion would affect her air. But that didn’t mean she could just ignore pleasure easily. And she was feeling pleasure, considering the warm wetness soaking him.

“Not sure what that has to do with Eric ... Oh, I getcha. Like, they’ll be here soon? ... because I am literally fucking him right now, and we’re not stopping until I get off at least once.”

Eric suppressed a groan of pleasure, only for a groan of awkwardness to seep out. Jessy did not give the slightest shit if someone knew she was having sex, and that brazenness was very attractive, usually. Right now, it made Eric freeze as he realized the man on the phone could now turn every noise into a likely accurate image of what was happening.

But after realizing what he was doing, Jessy gave his face a gentle pat with her free hand, tightened her grip on his shoulder with it, and ground her body faster while squeezing her insides harder, reaching rough sex territory. The pleasure started to build again, and Eric set his hands on her hips to hold on.

“Right, I getcha. Why not Natasha and her boys? I—oh, busy. Fine, I—” She started to cum. Her voice broke for a moment, and she let out a long, pleased sigh as her rocking motion slowed. Warm insides clenched hard, and she quivered, her breasts jiggling as the

random spasms of her muscles earned a few shudders of her chest. It was more than enough to tip him over the edge.

Jessy laughed as she got control of herself, and she ground herself back and forth again on his cock. Her insides dripped wet heat down his length, and soon dripped with his cum, as the vise grip of her depths milked him to almost painful levels of pleasure.

“Sorry,” she said into the phone. “Just had to work that one out. Ca—no you can’t talk to Eric! Talk to me, asshole. Jeeze, don’t act all awkward and shit. You’re worse than Eric. It’s not like we didn’t see you fucking Fiona on the roof in front of, you know, all the Kindred in the city.” She laughed again. Teasing her workmate. But damn that laugh was warm, and she pat Eric’s chest as she worked her hips back and forth a few more times, squeezing hard and wringing his cock until she squeezed every drop out of him, all while laughing on the phone.

“So, they’ll be here any minute? Yeah yeah, sure, we’ll go. But if the Prince thinks Sándor was involved, they could be in the Dream. We’ll need a Begotten ... You can’t be fucking serious. Um, alright ... Yeah yeah, I’m sure he’ll agree.”

He sat up, took his phone back, and put it to his ear. Nothing, conversation over.

“How rude,” he said to her, though he couldn’t keep the smile off his face.

“Yeah, I’m rude. But you love that about me.” Winking at him, she slid off him, walked down the hall, huge ass swaying left and right, and returned with a couple wet rags. She tossed him one, while wiping herself down with the other.

“Yeah, I do.” He said it slowly, with a little more weight than he consciously intended. Subconsciously, he wasn’t so sure.

They froze and looked at each other for a while. Yeap, that was the L word, except, not really said in the way that'd carry the emotional weight to earn the freezing. But they froze anyway, and stared at each other, eyes locked.

A dilemma worthy of a romantic comedy, he supposed. He'd been burned by the L word before, while she didn't have the wiring to recognize the emotion or embrace it. Easily worth a few seasons of romantic tension, with the two of them circling each other, trying to find ways to say it, or hoping for it to be said to them by the other. It'd all come together in the end in a big confession, made by one of them screaming out from the street, in the rain; no one would hear that shit in Dolareido, but still.

“Eric,” she whispered, eyes falling. “I—”

Knock knock. Right on time, comedic timing and all.

“Rain check?” he said, and he gave her a smile to let her know it would, hopefully, be a good conversation.

Apparently he had a good smile, because once she saw it, she beamed. “Yeah.”

They put on their underwear and suit pants, and Jessy grabbed her bra as she walked down the hall of the massive apartment, and opened the door, without bothering to put the bra on.

“Caleb, Noah,” she said, frowning at them, hand on a hip and holding the black bra. “Hope you realize you nearly ruined a quickie. But we're both pretty damn quick, so, all's well.”

“I, uh ... what?” Caleb said.

She shrugged and motioned for them to come in as Eric walked down the hall, buttoning up his shirt. She walked past him, slipping on her bra and fetching her suit shirt, too. So brazen.

Caleb and Noah came in, and stayed by the door on the mat. Good. Their shoes were filthy, and honestly, Eric was starting to become attached to a clean apartment. It was easy to get attached to neat and orderly, when he had the money to keep everything streamlined and professionally cleaned.

Noah was an interesting looking man, and it was hard to guess his age. Average height, or maybe a bit taller, but it was hard to tell considering he was bald, with scalp and other pale skin covered in tattoos. Clean shaven made him look younger than he probably was, and his dark blue eyes matched his cold personality.

Caleb had a similar build, same as Noah, same as Eric, about average height with some definite muscle on their lean frames. But unlike Noah, it was easy to tell he was probably in his mid twenties, short red hair, also clean shaven, and a smattering of freckles. He smiled more than his partner, and he was smiling a lot more, eyes snapping between Eric and the hallway Jessy had just disappeared down.

Eric smiled too, a small but pleasant one. “Yeah, she’s shameless as fuck.”

“All vamps like that?” Caleb said. “I mean, whenever Tilly’s around, everyone in the building gets to hear it. Whole damn block knows what her moans sound like now.”

“You were at the ball,” Eric said, “you tell me.”

Caleb laughed. Noah nodded. Yeah, the vamps in Dolareido really let loose, sexually speaking, and it was rubbing off on everyone else. Case in point, the two guys in front of him had just seen his girlfriend’s tits, and everyone brushed off the encounter within seconds.

“We were supposed to speak with you,” Noah said, “about your progress as Uratha, your visions of Luna, and ... how it is you’re

capable of having sex while transformed, something others in the pack have expressed ... interest in.”

Eric raised a brow, but Noah’s expression was solid. The man definitely had a cold, calculating personality. Sorta reminded Eric of the sheriff, except Noah seemed like he could be suave and smooth if he wanted to be.

“But?”

“But,” Caleb said, “Avery called us on the way here with an update from Damien. Clara’s missing, she figured that out last night. But apparently so is Jack. We know they were at the mansion, so we’re going there now to pick up the trail.”

Pick up the trail, like hunting dogs. Or any predator, he supposed.

Jessy returned, fully clothed in her suit, opened his closet, pulled out his suit jacket, and tossed it to him. “Let’s go. I want this situation solved ASAP. Kid is probably just ... fuck, I dunno, stuck in a hole somewhere.”

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“I don’t know what to tell you guys. Yeah, sure, when I’m transformed, it’s a pretty overwhelming rush. There’s definitely an urge to hunt and destroy. But, it gets kinda buried by the need to ... fuck.” God, this conversation was awkward. Jessy may have been slowly — or not so slowly — corrupting him, to the point he’d be able to fuck her in the middle of the street without a second’s hesitation, but he wasn’t there yet. And talking with two guys about how they fucked was especially weird. He’d never been into locker talk, and locker talk never got super personal anyway.

The four of them hopped along the rooftops of Dolareido, making their way through the thicker entertainment districts quickly as they headed for Rich Side. The three werewolves adopted their Dalu forms, the hybrid between human form and the titan Gauru form.



They each grew a few inches, got surprisingly hairy, and put on a good fifty pounds of muscle out of nowhere. It put the wolf spirit right under the skin where it was easy to tap into, particularly its strength, and allowed them to jump from rooftop to rooftop without effort. Despite the massive increase in bodyweight, they landed smoothly; not as smooth as Jessy, but smooth enough to keep up without hurting their ankles.

“It might have something to do with why you transform,” Noah said between jumps. “I suspect the wolf in us all is capable of more than just hunting and destruction. If it’s summoned to express itself sexually, then the result would be different.”

“Kinda makes sense, sure,” Caleb said. “I suppose it’d take a werewolf born and raised in a place like Dolareido to even consider trying it. Didn’t you kill a bunch of people the first time you changed, Eric?”

Eric frowned over at the young guy. “I was literally being murdered at the time. Christ, I still have a bone to pick with Terra Den over that shit.” He’d mostly let it go because the fucker with the knife was dead, but Montoya and his boss Jeremy Long were still alive.

“We’ll get them eventually,” Jessy said from up ahead. “Just gotta figure out a way to do it without Garry being able to pin it on us.”

Caleb and Noah looked at each other, before Noah called out. “Being kinda open with that information, don’t you think?”

“Ha. Garry knows we’ll try and find a way to bring his new buddies down. Nothing surprising there.”

The two wolves looked at Eric, and he shrugged. Jessy was right, but it was a little weird how openly she talked about it. She didn’t say anything that could backfire, but she still said more than the other vampires did.

“You two boys looking to fuck some people while transformed?” she continued. “Definitely make sure your girl — or boy — toy knows what she or he’s in for. Eric don’t stop until he’s satisfied, and he’s big enough it’s like fucking a record-setting cucumber, home grown in some old lady’s garden, attached to a piston on a car motor.”

All three men coughed, but it wasn’t long before Caleb was laughing, then Eric, and eventually even Noah managed a chuckle.

“When we were fighting,” Caleb said, “I wanted to test you, Eric. A lot of Uratha go psycho when they transform. You didn’t. You lost control faster than I would have liked, but at least you didn’t go crazy and start attacking everything that moved. Hell, you even seemed protective of the vampire.” He gestured to Jessy ahead of them. “Some Uratha go into Gauru form more easily than others. Some have trouble with it, and some have trouble controlling themselves when in it.”

“Rahu like Matthew, in particular,” Noah said.

Jessy shrugged, mid leap over a large gap. “I think Natasha’s safe,” she said once she landed. “She’s too scared to fuck a couple of giant werewolves. Maybe I can change her mind, but I’d need someway to show her what it’s like. Her boys say it can’t really be filmed?”

Caleb nodded. “Luna, or her proxy or something, affects people and technology alike. Otherwise, people would have us on film, or people would be telling some pretty detailed stories about a giant wolf on two legs, you know?”

“I think,” Eric said, “maybe we should let the tiny woman and her two huge boyfriends be? Who knows what those two would be like with her if they transformed.” Last thing Eric wanted was to trigger some sort of sexual social movement with the Uratha, and then

learn that they'd killed someone mid sex. Jesus, that'd be scarring to hear.

“Matthew can be hard to control,” Noah agreed. “But, as long as Arturo is there to calm him, he's never lost control. Those two are as thick as thieves.”

Thick as thieves. That partly explained their ability to both be in a romantic relationship with one woman.

Jessy slowed her running until she was between Eric and Caleb. “You just let me handle Natasha. I've known her for decades. All she needs is a push, and before she knows it, she's blissfully swimming in the new experiences I've thrown her into.”

Eric shook his head. “Something tells me you haven't had a hundred percent success rate with this.”

She rolled her eyes. “Nobody's perfect.”

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Once they got past the main district of South Side, the jog to Rich Side didn't take very long. They were all damn fast. More importantly, once they were out of sight of all the lights, and could start skirting the edge of the city where it met the desert, they were free to use their wolf forms, Urhan. Urshal, the near-wolf form, was a massive beast of power and strength, but the smaller, full wolf form was ideal for stealth. Eric didn't spend much time in it, but that was out of habit. According to the Uratha, some of them spent just as much time, if not more time in their wolf form. They weren't human after all, they were werewolves, half human, half wolf, with freedom to be in either form as much as they wanted. Which meant, as much as he felt more normal in his human form, being in wolf form felt perfectly natural, too.

Jessy said it was different for her. Her wolf form was an extension of her Beast, a malleable creature, filled with blood lust no matter

its form. Different instincts, then.

Wolves were fast. Wolves were very, very fast. They'd jumped along the rooftops in human shapes because, if anyone spotted them, they would have looked like parkour-obsessed risk takers. Unusual, but not call-the-cops unusual, and definitely not supernaturally unusual. Wolves, on the other hand, were definitely worthy of media attention. So they saved the wolf forms until they were out of the city. And once they did that, it was only a matter of minutes to cover miles.

They shifted into human form, and walked up the last few feet of the mansion's driveway. A glance Jessy's way showed a hint of something she rarely showed on her face: sadness. Right, this used to be Julias's mansion, after his sire Viktor died, in a cotton mill explosion or something. Eric could still remember hearing about it on the radio in his taxi. It hadn't been very long since Julias died, and she was still sad about it, and probably would be for years. Considering the lifespan vampires operated on, and how they were naturally territorial and didn't make friends easily, losing a close friend must have affected them in a way he would never really be able to understand.

Damien, Fiona, and oh good god, Athalia waited for them on the stairs.

"Athalia." Jessy said, bite in her voice. "Still not sure why you're coming along."

"I am here to help find Sándor. Azamel desires to speak with him."

Eric frowned slightly as he looked between the two women. Athalia had apparently not done what she was supposed to do, when Jack attacked the hunters, and that put her on a maybe-enemy list for the vampires. But, considering how well the ball had gone, maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

“Dinnae worry yer pretty head, lass! Ye can trust her.” Fiona folded her arms across her chest and leather jacket, nodding sagely.

Everyone looked to Damien, who stood beside Fiona, his girlfriend between him and Athalia, and he shrugged, offering little more than a cold and calculating gaze. Just like Noah, and just like the sheriff, he didn’t let his expression show much, except that he was prepared to handle things with a cool, albeit sneaky approach, if it came to it. They were scary fellas.

“None of you can follow the trail without us?” Noah said.

Damien shook his head. “Vampires have a good sense of smell, but not that good.”

The bald man gestured to the two women beside the vampire. “And them?”

“Different, for each Begotten,” Athalia said. “Fiona and I can see in total darkness, but our sense of smell is nothing special. And Mark isn’t leaving Azamel’s side.”

That made sense. If Begotten were each a nightmare monster, and each unique, then each would come with different abilities or handicaps.

“Alright, let’s go,” Caleb said. Everyone except Noah raised a brow as they looked at the man, but he shrugged and waved it off. “I’ve been hunting with Clara for years. Easy to pick up her scent. Come on.”

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~~Beatrice~~

Once dusk arrived, she and Jennifer left, and went out into the desert where Jacob had set up the ... interrogation room. Beatrice wrapped them in her best Cloak, and both did their best to spot any

followers. If the sheriff wanted to find them, he could, unless Jacob was there to help. But Jacob was off, doing his own thing, apparently uninterested in helping them anymore.

Resurrection was not feasible, according to him. He'd captured Elen for no other purpose than to let Beatrice attempt it, and inevitably come to the same conclusion. Jacob, like all the elders, played the long game, and seemed intent on teaching Beatrice quite a bit about being a witch. And, in classic evil witch or warlock fashion, enjoyed teaching lessons the hard way, for maximum impact. Sick bastard.

She smiled to herself as she thought about her boss. The man was an enigma, even to her, and despite the Prince's request that she try and help Jacob out of his pit of depression, the closer she got to Jacob, the more she found herself thinking like him. He'd lost the love of his life, and so had she. He was neck deep in occult shit, seemed to enjoy it, and she found herself kinda liking it too. Using pain to empty the mind so she could speak with her Beast wasn't fun, but the rewards for tapping into the creature, and then using it to learn rituals from the great beyond, was a rush.

Jacob was preparing her. She knew that, she wasn't stupid. Like a moth to flame, she was getting sucked into his world of butchery, sacrifice, and darkness, spurred by the train wreck that was her second life, and the misery that her friends suffered. Misery, and death. She wasn't stupid. She saw all that and saw how Jacob was using it to shape and mold her.

Jennifer saw it too, and was invested in making sure Beatrice didn't drown. God, it felt great to have a friend like her. It was the only damn thing keeping Triss from going full psycho and tearing Elen's guts open in some pointless attempt to torture answers out of her. She didn't want to do that, to go so far she'd lose all connection to the human half of her.

“I think,” Jennifer said, walking alongside her on the sand and rocks, “that the sheriff knows exactly what’s going on out here.”

“Then he’d have stolen Elen away already. We know they have her book and tools. If they had her, they’d have the whole set. Pretty sure the dragons would want her, just to experiment on her and shit.” If the Circle was filled with witches and warlocks, the Ordo was filled with Doctor Franksteins. They’d cut off Elen’s head and stick her on a younger body or something.

“Maybe. He might think the cave is booby trapped.”

“True,” Triss said. Surprising that Jen didn’t jump at her own mention of booby, but she didn’t. Probably picking up the vibe that now was not the time. It wasn’t. “I know Mekhet like the sheriff can do some pretty insane feats with Auspex. But, I suppose if that’s true, Jacob may have accomplished equally insane feats using Crúac rituals. Maybe he’s put a spell on the cave, to hide it from Daniel, or to strike at the man if he gets too close?”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t put it past him. Or maybe the sheriff just stays away because he respects Jacob.”

“That respect didn’t stop him that one time.” Daniel had walked into the main sacrificial chamber Jacob maintained, and had basically interrogated them, on Jacob’s home turf. Gently, but still, terrifying, to have the fucking sheriff asking questions. “He was looking for something. I don’t think it had to do with Jacob.”

Jennifer nodded, and they continued along in silence for another minute before she spoke up. “So, that Sándor, he—”

Okay, time to call this out into the light before it drove Triss nuts.

“Jen, I see what you’re trying to do with Sándor.”

“Well, yes, he’s a valuable ally, and—”

“No, I mean, you’re trying to use him to fill the Julias-shaped hole in my life. And I get it. He fits the bill, sorta, I guess. He’s handsome as fuck, and he used to have a family, like Julias. And he’s probably a nice guy, when he finally removes the stick from his ass. Not nice like Julias was,” suave and smooth and charming, “but nice. Plus, he’s a literal monster, and probably doesn’t give a shit about my fucked up mouth.” She kept walking. If she stopped, it would have given the conversation more gravitas than she wanted. Instead, she wanted to casually let Jen know that she knew what her friend was up to, in greater detail than Jen realized.

Jen grinned at her. “You forgot a big reason.”

“Ha, yeah? What’s that?”

“That he can be a great source of blood, and orgasms.”

Laughing, Beatrice finally stopped. Had to. She buried her face in a hand and laughed and laughed, until she was sure her Cloak wouldn’t be able to suppress the noise. Jennifer was relentless.

“I guess that’s true. You know it hasn’t really been that long since Julias died, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” Jen’s smile faded, and she stepped in a little closer. “But, it wasn’t last week either. It’s been long enough that you should at least start looking at other people. Not fuck them, but look. That’s all I’m hoping for, honestly, that you start looking.”

After a heavy sigh, Triss nodded, stepped in close to Jen, and set her hands on her shoulders. Jen set her hands on Triss’s hips, and she stepped in close as well, eyes a little wider than usual, surprised. Surprised even more, when Triss triggered a kiss, a proper one, deep, long, and slow. Kissing didn’t have the same impact without the Blush of Life, not as warm, or moist, but it was still pleasant and inviting enough.



More pleasing and inviting, was Triss's hands gripping Jen's ass through the snug skirt of her business suit. Jen purred, and pressed her chest into Triss's, squashing her large rack into Triss's, dwarfing them, burying them, and within seconds, Jen's lips found Triss's neck. Always on a hair trigger, Jennifer. Triss knew the moment she actively engaged Jen sexually, the girl would give in instantly; lo and behold.

"You've been patient," Beatrice said into Jen's neck. "I appreciate that, a lot. A ... a lot lot lot. We can have some fun later, ok?"

Jennifer tightened her hug, gave her another kiss on the neck, and stepped back. "You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Julias is gone, and it has been a while. Not nearly long enough for a stranger, you know? But ... I have missed you."

Her friend nodded, squeezed Triss's hand, and started walking again. "I've missed you, too. And, you have no idea how hard it is to see that ass every night, and not do something about it."

Triss laughed again. It felt damn good to laugh. Maybe she was feeling better because she had something she could do now, a project to work toward, to put her energy into. Whether or not dealing with Elen would succeed, and it probably wouldn't, it felt nice to be able to think about something other than Julias. For now, her focus was on finding a way to make Elen do what she wanted. The fact that that meant resurrecting Julias was such a distant dream that she dared not consider it possible. First step was making Elen obey commands. Resurrecting Julias would probably be step six six six.

And, as the weeks went by, she did find it easier to stop thinking about him. The waves of depression weren't gut wrenching anymore. Painful, yes, but they didn't make her want to puke up all the blood she'd managed to force feed herself, not anymore. More than once, she'd managed to fall asleep come dawn, with Jen in her

arms, and not dream of him. It was sad, knowing that she was slowly getting over him, and a colossal relief, too. Part of her had worried she'd end up like Jacob, and probably forever trapped in a loop of depression over Minerva. The guy had an amazing poker face, but Triss and Jen, and Aaron for that matter, were pretty sure the man still thought about her, all the time.

“Think Jacob will connect with Samantha at all?” Triss asked. If there was hope for him, then, by comparison, it'd be easy for Triss to find happiness again. Maybe.

“Maybe. He did say there was something special about her. And if she's Jack's mom, I can only imagine that's true.”

“Except, if it's the curse that makes Jack special, then there'd be nothing special about his mom. Except, you know, being the Prince's child.”

“Good point. But I doubt the curse is the reason Jack continuously throws himself in front of oncoming problems with such ... enthusiasm.”

Triss nodded. “Yeah. The way Samantha dealt with Athalia? Fuck, I should thank Samantha for that. I was kinda worried Athalia would find me and kill me when I had my guard down. Or, find a way to get into my dreams.” She shivered. That crazy skeleton monster, in her dreams, stalking her in the dark? Good god. “Samantha's got spirit. I hope she can get through to Jacob. Maybe, you know, settle him a little? Make him happy, if only a little?”

Jen nodded, eyes down, chin in her fingers. “I expect Jacob is using her, but at the same time, is genuinely intrigued by her.”

“So, he'll try and use her, but she'll melt his heart in the process?” After a few chuckles, Triss made the classic swooning sigh. “So romantic, and unrealistic.”

“One can dream.”

They laughed, and kept laughing as they found the giant rock blocking the entrance to the cave. Then, they stopped laughing, and the horrible reality of the situation they were both ignoring set in.

Time to see if Beatrice could summon Black Blood, without Jacob’s help.

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~~Jack~~

He woke up. That was a plus. He wasn’t entirely sure he would wake up, and the worry infected the dreams of his torpor. Scary nightmares, about things jumping out of an endless mist.

And, of course, he sat up in an endless mist. He expected to see a cave, but instead, found the tunnels of Dolareido. What the fuck?

He got up and turned around, trying to figure out what he was looking at. Yeah, these were Dolareido tunnels. He recognized the concrete work of the tunnels, and the way the old tracks were set up, tracks he’d walked along many times in the deeper tunnels when going to visit Azamel. They were beneath him, maybe three feet down, since he was on the edge of a landing platform.

“Jack,” Clara said.

“Clara?” He smiled as relief hit him, and walked over to join her. She was leaning against a subway gate, one of the older ones that used to be manned, with someone who’d check your ticket and everything. Beside her, Sándor sat on the floor, back to the wall. He’d woken up, and he wasn’t sweating excessively or panting heavily, so that was a good sign.

“Jack,” the Begotten said, a hint of smile showing, but only for a moment.

Jack hopped over to them, but slowed when he remembered he had no idea where the fuck they were. “Glad to see everyone’s alive, but, uh, where—”

“Still in the Underworld, or Realm of Ghosts, or Great Below or whatever.” Clara shrugged. “Sabrina took us here. Said not many ghosts drift this way, and we should be safe. She also said we should do our best to just avoid any ghosts we run into.”

“Right, right. Wandering, angry ghosts? Yeah, after meeting my sister, I’m happy to avoid ghosts.” Sure, he could probably survive any beating they threw at him, but he had no way to strike back. He had to imagine a ghost couldn’t go on the offensive forever, and would run out of juice long before they could kill him. Clara and Sándor, on the other hand, were not so impervious.

But, Clara said she could probably hurt ghosts, since they were spirits. Hopefully that was true, if it came to it.

“So, this is pretty neat, eh?” Clara said, gesturing around them. “Looks like we’re in Dolareido.”

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly.”

“Sabrina says it’s the first level of the Great Below.”

He quivered at that, and slowly spun around as he took in the sight, and scanned for potential threats. In the physical world, ghosts could hide anywhere, in anything, even air, but he had no idea if it worked any differently in the Great Below.

“The first level of the Great Below looks like Dolareido?”

She shook her head. “Sabrina said the first level is sorta like, a place where the environment reflects the underground stuff you’d find in the physical world.”

“First level? What’s—”

She put up her hands. “She doesn’t know. And judging from the conversation, the fact she knows as much as she does is a little unusual. We passed a few ghosts on the way here, and they were ... kinda spaced out. I don’t think they realized they were dead.”

He quivered again, and stepped in a little closer. “Ok yeah, that’s creepy.”

“Yeah, it is.” She said. “I didn’t want to leave, but she insisted it wasn’t safe. Lot of ghosts wandering around.”

Nodding, Jack paced back and forth, rubbing his chin. “Sabrina. Sabrina Sabrina. That name is familiar.”

“She says she died here in Dolareido. I’m guessing mosts of the ghosts we’re seeing died here.”

He rubbed his head and paced faster. “So, this Great Below place, or at least this top part of it, reflects the underground of the physical world. If we go deeper, we...” He shuddered again. The cold, sterile, unendingly bleak atmosphere of the mist-filled fake Dolareido tunnels, was sending spiders up his spine. It was just like back at home, with Mary, how her ghost altered and affected his old home, burying it in an oppressive blanket of death. “Well, the fact that there’s a deeper is enough to tell me: don’t go deeper.”

“Agreed,” Sándor said.

Clara nodded. “You’re awake now, and Sándor’s feeling a little better compared to yesterday. Let’s go back to the hole, and see if Sándor can get us out of here.”

The two men nodded, and Clara and Jack helped Sándor to his feet.

“I don’t think you should go,” another voice said.

Everyone froze, and looked around for the origin of the voice. It came up from the mist, a subtle green glow growing until it bathed the area in its gentle hue for a good twenty feet.

“Sabrina,” Jack said. “Um, hello.” Time for diplomat mode, and to put all his experience to use. “Thank you, for helping my friends out, while I was asleep. Greatly appreciate it, you have no idea. But, we don’t belong here, and we really need to—”

“There are others, in the tunnels,” the ghost said. Christ, those empty eyes were disturbing. “If you go now, they’ll notice.”

Jack eyed her, then looked to his friends with a wary expression on his face. Either the ghost was telling the truth, and it’d be dangerous to go, or the ghost was lying, and it’d be dangerous to turn their backs to her.

Sándor coughed, a harsh sound, and looked down. Yeah, he wasn’t in the best shape, even if he was willing to go. Clara looked at the man hanging over her shoulder, then over at Jack, a wince on her face. Thinking the same thing he was about Sabrina.

“We can ... stay for a little while,” Jack said, slowly turning his eyes from Clara to the ghost.

Sabrina smiled and clapped her hands twice. “Great! You can tell me about how Dolareido’s changed since I died. Right, Jack?”

“R ... Right.”

## Chapter 123

~~Natasha~~

When dawn came, she knew everyone else was getting involved in the search for Jack. For the first time, she wasn't concerned to learn he was missing, though. Jack, new Jack, cursed Jack, was as strong as the elders if he let loose, from what Damien told her. He might throw the Masquerade to the wind, but no one was killing that kid without napalm or a nuke.

The concern, when it came to Jack, was what would happen if he went rogue and decided to do whatever the fuck he wanted. He'd be another Viktor or Tony, except worse.

But, for tonight, she had a different concern.

"Noah and Caleb are with J-Jessy?" she said. The three of them, her and her boyfriends, were on a rooftop between the North Side and South Side, standing around and looking up at the light-washed sky.

"Yeah. They wanted to talk with Eric, according to Avery. But then Damien called about Jack, asking for some help running his trail." Art checked a message on his new phone, clearly had trouble pressing buttons on a touch screen, and put the phone away. Poor guy still wasn't used to technology, but it was high time he, and all the other Uratha learned what a touchscreen was.

Natasha nodded. The Prince was going to ask her to do it, no doubt, but she already had a mission. Investigate the tears. Antoinette knew how important that was, and she knew that Jack was strong enough to take care of himself in any circumstance now.

Tash dared not think about how Antoinette might react if she turned out to be wrong.

“You trust those t-two?” she asked.

Matthew, eyes locked on the sky, didn’t respond. Not ignoring her, and not choosing to remain silent, either. He just liked looking at the sky. It wasn’t exactly a pretty sky, not with Dolareido’s unending nightlife washing it out with a million lights, but he watched the blackness above anyway, as if looking for stars bright enough to poke through Dolareido’s light curtain.

“Course, yeah,” Art said. “Caleb can be a bit of a hothead, or a hotshot, depending on how successful his impulsiveness is. But Noah is a bedrock.”

She smiled at that. “Caleb. Jessy says he and Eric, umm ... really tore up a chunk of North Side.”

“Ha. Like I said, hothead. Caleb’s a smart guy, but a bit overconfident. He told us about that fight too, by the way, and how Eric lost control.”

“Uh oh...”

“Lost control, but somehow managed to not go on a rampage and start ripping everyone apart.” Shrugging, Art walked over to her and set a kiss on her forehead. “He’s a weird breed, Eric. Must be Dolareido.”

Dolareido, changing people to the point they could have sex in any circumstance. Yeah, that sounded right.

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“You know the drill Natasha,” Avery said from the couch. “But we’re splitting up this time. No hunts. Avoid talking to anyone.”



“Yes ma’am,” everyone said together. Natasha didn’t, but she nodded to Avery, enough to let her know she was listening and planned to follow her lead.

With a snort, Avery got up and started hand talking, using her hands to make sweeping gestures to emphasize her commands. It was cute. The Kindred elders in Dolareido preferred to stand like monolith statues.

“Me, Flow, and Carter are going to North Side, and we’ll check out some previous activity. The rest of you, check out South Side, and scout out trails that lead to the Cathedral. Natasha, take the boys and check out near the Grand Cathedral directly.”

“There? D-Directly? Why?”

“Because you know Maria. If she’s up to something, something involving spirits, there’s a good chance you can find evidence there. Plus, you’re sneaky. You and Art can stealth around, and Matthew will be your enforcer. So keep an eye open for those tears, and if you see something that points a finger at Maria, you know the drill. Recon only.”

The three of them nodded, and Natasha looked down as she started planning. She also looked down because she didn’t want Avery to see the expression on her face. From the way Avery had worded the command, it sounded like she figured Natasha would agree to spy on her old boss without issue. Maybe the boys gave Avery the impression Tash didn’t like Maria?

Well, she didn’t like Maria, that was true. But she didn’t hate her, not anymore. The woman had shown a softer side too, since Lucas’s death, and if anything, Natasha found herself wanting Maria to find a little happiness. Maybe in the future, she might even learn to like her, if they hung out more. If Avery turned out to be right, and Maria was up to something sinister, she wasn’t sure how she’d

respond. Ideally, she'd talk to her old boss, but that might be difficult with Matt and Art with her.

“And Clara?” Matt said.

“She'll be fine,” Avery said. “And if she's not, Noah and Caleb can find her. Having ten noses on that trail wouldn't help much more than two. And they've got Eric, and they've got that Damien fellow, who's going to bring his monster girlfriend. You know, the one that can open portals into the Hisil, Gurihal, the Dream Realm, and whothefuck knows where else?” She stomped over to the huge man, glared up at him, and poked him a couple times in the chest. “So unless you can think of some other way we might find her, other than by doing exactly what we're doing, feel free to suggest something.”

“Got nothing, boss,” he said, small smile turning the tense situation into a happy one. They were friends and family, not military. Arguments rolled off them like they were in a sitcom.

“Alright then, let's go.”

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There wasn't much ceremony this time. It wasn't Tash's first trip into the Hisil, and everyone had orders. Without Eric to be an X factor that needed guidance and monitoring, Avery didn't feel the need to be extra careful. To her, Natasha was harmless. Natasha wasn't harmless, but she didn't want to make any waves either.

But, if Maria came into the picture, she didn't know. Maybe waves would happen. After having been chased by the werewolves through the tunnels, the first time Natasha met them, and seeing first hand how strong, fast, and destructive they could be, she was confident she could adapt. She'd been working on it. She had her silver knife, and tonight, she brought a second pistol, a small one, with silver bullets. Not because she thought she'd have to fight the werewolves; they might even be right about Maria. But, she didn't live as long as

she had without preparing, when considering possibilities. If the werewolves and Maria got into a fight, better to have options ready.

Flow was waiting for them, and while the rest of the pack acknowledged her, er, it, with nods, waves, a few hellos, and otherwise perfectly casual greetings, Natasha stared up at the beautiful goddess of water. So gorgeous and angelic. So awesome, in the original sense of the word. And also clearly female, or at least feminine.

“Flowing Sanctuary,” Natasha said, voice wavering. “Um, d-do you know, if, uh, a spirit named Safe of Grey Street is ... okay?”

The swirling goddess looked down at her, crystal glowing eyes staring down with the strange impassion of an alien entity who thought of her with as much interest as humans did ants.

“Safe of Grey Street and its choir do well, in the ... rural areas, of Dolareido, where they stay.”

“Sh—it does?” So damn hard to remember spirits didn’t have genders. They embodied things, and sometimes embodied things often identified with a gender, but they themselves didn’t have them. The exception being Black Blood, that insisted it did. Strange.

“Yes. It avoids South Side, and the turmoils caused by Black Blood, Street-Tail King, and Red Tide. Do not worry.” Flow nodded from atop its spinning vortex of water, and without preamble, followed after Avery.

Natasha smiled, managed a tiny finger wave at the colossal creature, and followed after the boys.

The night was young, and it was important they didn’t overstep themselves, so they walked. Without traffic, pedestrian or otherwise, it wouldn’t take long, walking at a brisk pace, and it let them keep their eyes and ears open for nearby disturbances. It was a

recon mission, after all. Once they were within a mile of the Cathedral, they could get stealthy.

Crows with glowing eyes flew overhead. More rat-like blobs disappeared around the corners of twisted, leaning buildings, through the holes in strangely dark manhole covers, and some disappeared through minuscule cracks in building foundations. A few flying eels came around, spotted them, and flew away. Some creatures the size of dogs, made of concrete and wheels, drove by. All in all, it was a lot quieter than the entertainment district of South Side would be, if the route they were going there. But, from the Carthian half of South Side to the Grand Cathedral was a quiet route, both in and out of the spirit world apparently.

“I ... I hope it’s not M-Maria,” she said. “If it’s another Minerva situation, it’d be p-pretty horrible, right?”

“Yeah, it would be,” Matt said. “Avery would insist on stopping her, and something tells me Maria wouldn’t listen.”

“D-Do you think you could take her?” she said.

Art shrugged. “Maybe. You saw what happened when Matt and I tried to take on Jacob.”

She shivered. That had been a horrible night. Jacob, like all Nosferatu, had ludicrous amounts of strength, but she’d never expected him to be able to thrash two werewolves like they were children. The only reason Matt and Art survived the encounter and didn’t have permanent injuries to show for it, was their Gauru forms’ ridiculous healing ability, and Jacob’s mercy.

And Maria was Nosferatu, supposedly with the strongest Nightmare Discipline in the city. Seeing Matt succumb to Jacob’s Nightmare had been scary enough. Seeing either of them succumb to hers, would be worse.

“Why?” she said.

“Why what?” they said together.

“Why w-would Avery insist on stopping Maria?”

Art shrugged. “The tears—”

“What if the tears aren’t a result of whatever M-Maria is d-d-doing?” Assumptions were bad. It was important they dot the Is and cross the Ts, before someone died who didn’t need to die. The devil was in the details.

The two men looked at each other, as if never having considered the suggestion before.

“The red wraiths are hanging out around the tears,” Matt said. “And we know the red wraiths are talking to Maria somehow. We know the red wraiths have some kind of deal with Black Blood. That’s—”

“N-Not enough evidence.” She frowned, stomped her foot once, and folded her arms across her chest. “We need to learn more.”

Art smiled down at her. For a moment, she thought it might be a condescending smile, but it wasn’t.

“That’s why we brought you, to be the smart one. Matt and I? Hell, the whole pack? Dumb, dumber, and dumbest.”

She beamed, for a second, but quickly suppressed the smile. He may have been right about his pack, though she suspected Noah and Art were both a lot smarter than they let on.

“Alright, so, follow m-my lead tonight, ok?”

Both men simultaneously saluted with strict military posture. “Yes ma’am.”

Oh good grief.

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~~Beatrice~~

There were two ways to communicate with Black Blood. Perform a communication ritual, which seemed to be a pretty loose ritual involving burning some candles, and having a shit load of occult symbols drawn on the walls and floor and shit. The cave already had that, so, all she had to do, was put some vitae into the effort, like beckoning a bird with a bird call. Except, big dangerous bird.

The other way was with a sacrifice. That was required if Black Blood was to directly act on physical matter in a casual way, according to Jacob. Also required, if someone didn't know all the symbols and shit that Black Blood liked. If Antoinette or Maria or whoever else wanted to speak with the big bastard attempted to summon him, they'd have to sacrifice someone. Jacob could talk to him without that step.

And, Beatrice wanted to see if she could talk to him without that step as well, using the tools Jacob had given her. Deep as this pit she'd dug herself was, slaughtering kine was not fun.

She and Jennifer lit the candles. So fucking creepy how Elen hung in the center of the small occult cave, with much less room for the two vampires to back off and not be too close. In the other cave, they had plenty of room to walk around, without having to be within touching distance of the bowl in the center. It added weight to their actions, being so close to Elen. If she'd been a normal person, groaning or crying, Triss doubted she'd have been able to enact what was doubtlessly going to be act of torture.

She held up her hands, out to her sides like a big Y, looked up, and forced vitae through her limbs. Vitae was empowering. It was life energy, stolen from prey and used to fuel physical and magical abilities. Kindred could manipulate it to do any number of things.

Tonight, the goal was simple: use the environment around her, a giant summoning room, to beckon a god of death to her. Fucking. Metal.

It was sort of like a Crúac ritual. With Crúac, she had to infuse her vitae into the act, usually by sacrificing some of her blood, but not always. It was a strange feeling, but like riding a bike or playing an instrument, it was something attached to her, something she could use, like flexing a muscle, a strange muscle inside her. And like learning to ride a bike or playing an instrument, it was a skill that could be learned, to use vitae to reach out for the strange forces that permeated the fucking universe.

She'd learned. Now, all she could do was hope the thing she was trying to contact, was listening, and willing to come.

First, the cold came, the unnatural, piercing cold that wasn't a temperature, but an aura. It hit the skin and the bones at the same time, and Beatrice couldn't suppress the shiver that worked up her spine, inviting hard muscle clenches, as if she'd jumped into a pool of ice water. Black ooze began to trickle from the walls, thick, as if the Earth could bleed onyx. The symbols that covered the walls, floor, and fucking ceiling, oozed bits of blood as well, always black. The skulls underneath the iron bowl in the center cried tears of obsidian, and some of those tears went up, against gravity, and splashed into the ceiling.

She was used to Black Blood's presence now; as used to the presence of absolute death someone could get, anyway. But this time, Jacob wasn't around. It was just her, Jennifer, and Black Blood, a spirit creature entity thing that everyone was terrified of. If she said something wrong or did something to piss it—him off, she could easily end up a stain on the floor, along with Jennifer.

"I spy, with my little eye," the darkness said in a Southern drawl, "a young witch and her companion, looking to beckon the likes of

me.”

Well, that was easy. Too easy.

“Yes, Black Blood,” Beatrice said. “I ... I uh...”

“Y’all don’t need to be so stiff. I ain’t gonna hurt you, unless you do something to rightly deserve it.”

A god of death telling her to not be stiff, would have been hilariously weird in most situations. But she’d met the creature several times, and his personality remained consistent. He seemed like a happy guy from the South, except, with a strange obsession with flesh and death. Similar to Jacob, in his own strange way.

“Uh, thanks. Let me know if I’m approaching that line, k? Cause, yeah.” Cause Jacob wasn’t there, and she really didn’t want to fuck up and die.

“Reckon I will.”

Triss nodded, and glanced over to see how her friend was doing. Jen was beside her, a step to the side and a step back, away from the bowl. But Black Blood wasn’t summoned to the bowl. The spirit filled the room around them, having no body to possess, and not bothering to ‘manifest’ itself; apparently that took a lot of effort. Without a direct body to avoid, Jen slowly turned in circles, eyes scanning, hints of fear in her gaze. She stayed close to Triss. Triss stayed close to her.

“Black Blood, I summoned you to request your—”

“Aren’t you precious? I said don’t be such a stick in the mud, little witch. Speak freely.”

Don’t be stiff, he said, right. Ok, talk to the closest thing to the god of death she imagined she’d ever see, like she’d talk to Jacob.



Except, hopefully without the insults.

“Know why I called you?” she said.

“Malachi informed me. Said you were fixin’ to break this woman? Get her to use her flesh magics, in ways I can’t.”

That made her pause. “In ways you can’t? You can manipulate flesh?”

“Of the dead.”

Black Blood, weird spirit that grew with Dolareido, that seemed to embody death, or at least an artistic side of it, was capable of manipulating the flesh of the dead. It would explain why he needed, or wanted, a body if he was going to interact directly with the physical world. Somehow, she got the impression that was mostly just to make things easier for him. Or maybe, he just really got off on it.

“And ... how did you come to possess an ability like that?”

The oozing darkness laughed, and hints of the deep, alien bass underneath the voice rumbled the walls. “I am what I am. Has Malachi not educated you?”

“He’s told me some things about you, yeah. But I still don’t know what you are, Black Blood, where you came from, how you came to be, all that shit.”

More laughter, but quieter, as if the thing was thinking. Could a spirit think? It didn’t have a brain. Questions for a dragon, she supposed, not a witch.

“Powerful secrets, vampire. Ain’t no reason for me to share them with you. Maybe in a few hundred years, when you got the strength to be useful to me, we can trade for ‘em.”

Spirits had banes and bans, according to Jacob. Things that could hurt them, and ways to control them, rules they had to follow. What she knew about Black Blood told her he was some sort of spirit of death, and apparently dead flesh. The name Black Blood started to have a lot more meaning than just something creepy, and a good indicator of what the spirit looked like. Maybe the spirit thing was a literal incarnation of death in the sense of flesh. Surprising he didn't smell like rot, like Mark did.

“So, you won't give me anything for free? Gonna have to trade for everything?”

“Slicker than a fox, ain't ya? Yes, that's how things work, little witch. You do me a favor, and I do you one.”

“Alright.” She took a deep breath, and glanced over at Jennifer. Jen didn't like what she was hearing, but she stayed quiet. “What favor would you want from me, if I asked you to poke around inside Elen? I need her to—”

“To create and twist flesh, yes? To craft a vessel?”

“Yes. Jacob's filled you in on what I want to do, right? I want to ... to ... resurrect Julias.” She was tempted to say ‘resurrect someone’ but there was no point in lying, not to this thing. It knew everything, either because Jacob told it everything, or the damn thing eavesdropped with a thousand ears.

“And you know chances of success are low? Damn low. Even if this shell of a woman could do what you wanted, finding your man's soul in the great beyond is probably a lost cause?”

“Fuck, if you're convinced that—”

“Now now, hold your horses. I said chances are low, not impossible. Malachi took a stab at it, after Minerva was killed, but we ran into a couple problems.”

“Getting a body, and getting the soul.”

“Exactly. Now, I can craft me a fine body with the flesh of the dead, but it will be dead, and not like a vampire. The curse—”

“Curse?”

“Not that thing inside the kid, Jack. The normal curse that infects every single last one of you varmints. It latches onto your soul, and turns your body into a dead thing, half alive on the blood of victims. It’s special, and not something I can just create.”

She nodded, and slowly paced the bowl with Elen. The old woman’s eyes were closed. Sleeping maybe? Or comatose? She looked like hell, but she would not die, no matter how long they left her up there.

“So, what about creating a zombie corpse version of Minerva, and jamming her soul in there?”

The darkness chuckled. “A walking corpse is not a vampire. Many would consider it a fate worse than death.”

That, was a point worth considering. What would someone think, or feel, if they suddenly woke up a zombie corpse? Vampires were undead, true, but like the spirit said, they weren’t anything like zombies. Hell, all it took was a fresh meal to have a vampire’s body basically running like it weren’t dead at all. In reality, vampires were half-dead. If Black Blood somehow managed to give a corpse the ability to walk around under a soul’s influence, how the fuck would that work? They might rot standing, for all Triss knew.

“And, of course, getting the soul,” she said.

“The bigger problem, without a doubt. We killed dozens of people at the height of the experiment, and only managed the tiniest glimpse to the other side.”

“That ... that problem can wait. Let’s just see if we can get Elen to craft us a living body.”

“I’m fixing to, as long as you agree to my terms.”

Time to dance with the devil.

“Alright. What’s the deal?”

---

~~Jack~~

It didn’t take long to update Sabrina on Dolareido. She’d learned from more recent ghosts, and hadn’t died all that long ago. His smartphone really impressed her though, but predictably, he had no signal, of any kind.

“The Harlington building was re-purposed into a casino.”

“Aw, that’s a shame,” the ghost said. “I liked the food there. Very fancy.”

“And ... and that’s everything, really. That’s all I know about Dolareido. Sorry, I never did watch the news much.”

Sabrina laughed, a harsh and shrill sound, but it faded before any of them started to cringe. “I guess. But ... you still haven’t explained about you.”

He sighed, looked around at the subway platform, at Clara and Sándor, and then back to the ghost. “I was kinda hoping I wouldn’t have to.”

Sabrina frowned, and he flinched. Careful, Jack.

“You’re not human. Neither is she. Neither is he.” She hovered up and around, slowly drifting over them, mist leaking out of her and falling on them and the subway alike. More of that death cold crept

into his system. If he'd been alive like his two companions, it would have bothered him more; he could feel the cold leaching at his bones. But, he was already dead, and being cold meant nothing to him. Clara would be uncomfortable, but fine, for now. Sándor he wasn't sure about. The guy was healing, and quickly, but he hadn't eaten or drank anything, and while Clara could probably go a couple more days before dehydration became a problem, he doubted Sándor had that long. They both had something inhuman in them to fight that sorta stuff off, but he had no idea how long they could subsist on it. The trouble with a living body.

"Vampires ... exist," he said with a shrug. "I don't know if that should be really surprising though? You're a ghost."

She laughed at that, a sharp, short-lived laugh. "True."

"Right, so vampires exist, and so do most paranormal creatures you might think of. The usual stuff anyway. Vampires, werewolves, nightmare monsters, ghosts, uh ... probably other things."

"Ooh, scary." The ghost nodded, taking it all in stride. "I can see that you're not human, and that you're all different, but not much more. Like you're all half human."

"Vampire," Jack said with raised hand. "Clara's a werewolf. My injured friend there Sándor is a nightmare monster. And, we really need to find a way out of here and back to the rea—physical world, to get him treatment." Or at least some water.

"Wait here. I'll see if the coast is clear. Could take a bit to give the area a once-over though. Gimme a bit." With that, Sabrina flew away, body going horizontal like a bird as she disappeared down the tunnel.

"Clara," Jack whispered, "keep your senses open, for her specifically."

“Why? She’s helping us out.”

“She’s Sabrina Douville.”

Clara raised a brow. “How do you know her last name?”

“High school project, to look into some of the history of Dolareido. We had to present stuff, with pictures. I did some stuff about the colonials, nothing specific. But one girl in the class, one of those types that really likes crime dramas, you know? She did her project on Sabrina Douville.”

“Why ... don’t I like where this story is going?” She looked past him to the tunnel where Sabrina had disappeared, squinting, and scanning. Now she was scared.

“Sabrina Douville was a serial killer.”

“Of course she was, because why wouldn’t she be?” She threw her hands up, voice a whisper despite the anger in it. “Cause things would be too god damn easy if she was a saint.”

“Tell me about it.” They both chuckled. Dismay chuckles were a classic defense mechanism. “She killed half a dozen people.”

“How?”

“Stabbed them to death. No rhyme or reason to the kills. Four men, two women, spread out over a few years.” Unlike paranormal creatures, humans had to be pretty damn careful about killing. Their trails were too easy to trace back to them. Sabrina had been very careful to kill that many people in only a few years, and not get caught until the end. “Cops found her.”

“Suicide?”

“Nope. She tried to stab them. They shot her.”

Clara shivered and rubbed her arms. “No wonder she’s interested in Dolareido. It was her killing ground.”

“Will she harm us?” Sándor said. No waver in his voice, that was good.

“How would I know? I barely know how to deal with my sister.” And it was very much a problem he was avoiding. Saying goodbye to her had been heart wrenching, and saying goodbye to her a second time was going to be even worse, cause his mom was going to be there to see it, once he figured out how to send her on her way. “You’re better off asking Clara.”

“Ha, the fuck do I know about ghosts? Werewolves deal with spirits.”

“Ghosts are—”

“Not spirits. Made of the same stuff, but very different. If anyone knows how to deal with ghosts, it’s hunters.”

Oh, that was not a bad idea actually. He nodded as he put his fingers on his chin, and started pacing again.

“I’ll talk to Harcourt when we get back.”

“If he’s still got a brain left. Isabella looked like she wanted to do some serious shit to him.”

He shook his head. “She knows that’d be crossing a line. Those three are the Prince’s prisoners. They’re in a gilded cage, but they are prisoners, and if someone else fucks with them, Antoinette will deal with them.”

Nodding, Clara reached down for Sándor, and helped him to his feet again. “Alright, well, a killer ghost has tricked us into come into her lair. I vote we leave.”

“Yeah, agreed. But, I’m not sure she’s a threat. She probably is, but she is a ghost now. That’s changed her. Not to mention thirty years of hanging around a bunch of ghosts. I mean, she didn’t attack you while I was asleep, right?”

Clara looked at him, deadpan. “Jack, come on. You really think that a serial killer who’s become a ghost, will become less dangerous over the years?”

Yeah, no. Sighing, he stopped pacing, got under Sándor’s arm, and helped Clara walk the man to the edge so they could get down onto the tracks.

“Whatcha thinking Sándor?” Clara said. “Try and get back to the tear? Or get you somewhere where you think you can tunnel us out of here?”

After a few seconds of silence, Sándor spoke up. “Let’s check the tear first. Those spiders may have sealed it, but maybe not.”

“That reminds me,” Jack said, “what sort of ways are Begotten able to travel between realms? I hear talk of tunneling and pathways, but then, what Fiona did with a tear we found was very different, I think?”

“Begotten can create pathways between any realm and our lair. They overlap at the point of contact.”

“Right, I’ve seen that.”

“Begotten can also open any pathway we find created by other ... things.”

“What the fuck? Something else out there is creating interdimensional pathways?” Clara asked.



Sándor managed a small shrug with his good shoulder. “There’s a lot of things out there. Some of them would terrify you, or make you doubt your religion ... or your atheism. Some of these things can create pathways between realms, and many are permanent, and ancient. Begotten can only create temporary pathways to our lairs, or from our lairs.”

Things to doubt religion, or atheism. Well, that was a weird statement. Then again, cosmic horrors probably had that effect.

“And,” he continued, “if necessary, we can use a human’s mind, bestow a nightmare on them, and slip into our lairs.”

“How’s that work?” Jack asked.

“I’d need access to a sleeping human.”

“Sleeping human? How does—right, right, dream monster.” He was so used to dealing with flesh and blood, even when dealing with things very much not made of flesh and blood, that it was easy to forget that Begotten very much weren’t. Ghosts and spirits were made of ephemera, and could possess people and shit. Begottens’ Horrors were made of dream, or nightmare, or whatever the fuck that was, and they could quite literally go into people’s dreams, and do supernatural shit with them. Sándor had done that to Eric, before kidnapping him.

“You fuckers really are like Pennywise, aren’t ya?” Clara said. Sándor grunted, not happy with the comparison, but he didn’t deny it either. “Sorry, that was mean.”

They fell into silence as they went. Spotting hiding ghosts wouldn’t be easy. Apparently they had a habit of glowing green when in the Underworld, but they didn’t have to. Sabrina had snuck up on them once already without it, and being that she was a ghost, who the fuck knew what sort of tricks she had besides going invisible. You didn’t need much better than going invisible.

“If the tear is closed, then I will attempt to create a pathway to my lair.”

“And how’s that work exactly?” Jack asked. He’d heard some things, but better to be thorough. “Sorry. Know we’re asking a lot of questions, but Azamel hasn’t exactly been forthcoming with answers. Athalia and Mark don’t answer questions at all, and Fiona’s pretty new to her new life.”

After a small stumble, Sándor nodded. “To connect two different points, they must resonate with each other, be similar to each other. I can travel to my castle easily if we’re in a dark hallway filled with rooms.”

“Right, because of the hallways in the castle.”

“The more similar the two places, both in physical but also in atmosphere, the easier they are to connect. If they are not similar, it is ... extremely difficult and draining. No Begotten alive could connect the haunted village and forest of my lair, to a sunny daycare center.”

“I suppose that’s why so many monsters hide in closets and under beds?” Clara said. “I mean, assuming they do.”

“Yes,” Sándor said, nodding. “The Eshmaki, like Fiona and Athalia, will always have an easier time moving to their lair from darkness, or into darkness from their lair.”

Jack nodded. So many questions he wanted to ask about the details about how all that worked, but he refrained. It was obvious Sándor didn’t like talking this much, and was either doing it to keep his mind off the pain, or because he felt he owed Jack and Clara. Jack would ask him some more questions later, but for now, better to stop abusing the man’s kindness.

The tunnels raised into a slope, eventually brought them up onto a surface, and Jack stared at the surrounding insanity.

“I ... I’ve seen this before,” he said. In an old video game specifically, but he kept that part to himself. And just like in the video game, it struck a chord with him, one that got under his skin. Metal, wheels, tracks, rust, dead or dying lampposts, falling radio towers, and half destroyed warehouses. Oh fuck.

He was staring at one very large train graveyard, and given the fog everywhere and endless silence, it could have been a new chamber for a Begotten’s lair if it wasn’t already in the fucking Underworld. He very much did not want to go through the train graveyard, but Clara and Sándor walked toward it, so, they must have come through it with his body when he was sleeping. Safe to sneak through, then? Fuck no.

But they went anyway. They were going to check out the tear first, and apparently, they had to cut through a scene from his childhood nightmares to do it. And, true to form, there’d probably be ghosts hiding inside the chilling environment that awaited him.

“You, uh, know the way through here?” he said.

“Yea. Why, scared?” Clara said, grinning at him.

He nodded. “Yeap.”

“Jack, you’re now one of the strongest vampires, probably in the whole damn world. How the fuck can you be scared of some dirty old trains and cargo crates?”

A quiet, wavering chuckle crept out through the air, and it took Jack a second to realize it was him. Nervous, fearful chuckles.

“It’s, uh, just a thing, I guess. We all have our quirks, right?”

“Well, don’t worry. I carried both your asses through here, and nothing attacked us.”

Sándor, bless his nightmare soul, said nothing, and gave no expression. With neutral eyes, he looked over the overturned train carts, the dozens of train tracks, many on giant turntables, and many of them with a cart or two. None of the trains had the oldschool steam engine look or anything like that. Instead, each train was obviously meant for a subway, with lots of windows, a back door, a front door for a driver, and colorful paint jobs.

The paint was timeworn and tattered. The metal rusted, bent, and glass windows shattered or stained near black with soot and dirt. Instead of graffiti, he could see aged splatters of red; given his luck, they were probably old blood splatters. They weren’t in a tunnel anymore, and if there was a ceiling to the Underworld cave they were in, he couldn’t see it. Old lampposts stood, a few of them flickering with light from old, dying light bulbs. Plenty of power cables connected various tall, wooden posts, some swaying slightly with the gentle, cold breeze. Creeaak. Creeeak.

They walked forward, and every nerve in Jack’s body lit up to eleven as they stepped past various wooden gates, covered with chain-link fence, lined with tattered metal bars, and crowned with barbed wire. Several cargo crates, some of them on their side, sat in their path, and they had to weave around them. All of it was rusted to brown, and the brown was half faded to gray in the relentless fog of the ghost realm. The concrete floor of the tunnel was gone, and now they were walking on dirt and rock.

Subtle flickers of green light moved along one of the windows of a distant cart, before disappearing, and once again the train graveyard drowned in the ugly darkness of the Underworld, with only the weak, flickering lights of the lamp posts to fight against it. The lights were failing, doing very little against the endless dark gray fog. How the fuck were the lamps working at all? Ghost electricity?

He looked back at the tunnel they'd come from. From this angle, it looked like a descent into a maw of death, a hole in the ground at the bottom of the Earth. It looked inviting, compared going through a big train graveyard, with its sad history, obvious ghost presence, and oh, ten gazillion vantage points.

“Ok, uh ... pretty sure if I wasn't a vampire, I'd be dead from a stopped heart,” he said, rubbing his arms.

Rolling her eyes, Clara gestured ahead with her free arm, the other still holding Sándor. “Seriously, Jack, you have a ghost for a sister, and you're super strong because of the curse. You—”

“Fine! Fine.”

“Really, a phobia of trains?”

“It's not a phobia! And, it's not the trains themselves. Just, a creepy scene from something I once saw, when I was really young, left an impression, you know?” He gestured around him, sighed, and stepped ahead. “Fine, just tell me where to go.”

“Past that greenish train, take a left.”

After a few more shudders, he followed her directions, and withdrew his silver knife. Clara stopped when she spotted it, and waited for a few seconds before following again, now ten feet behind him. He didn't blame her. If she'd been ahead, waving a torch, he'd have steered clear.

The train graveyard was deadly quiet, and as the three of them moved, his ears adjusted to the sounds of his companions; he could hear their hearts beat. He snapped his head to the side as another subtle green glow drifted by in a distant window, but sighed shaky relief as it moved on. There was a warehouse, another old school thing, huge, with thin walls of wavy metal. It was all rusted, with

some holes torn into the corners of the metal sheets, showing darkness inside.

“Not that way,” Clara whispered.

“Thank god.” He looked away from the warehouse and continued along the path Clara pointed out.

He really didn't need to be so afraid. It was just trains. Sure, he was a vampire now, an undead creature. Sure, they were in some sort of underworld, or maybe the Underworld itself, with ghosts and shit, but that was just another realm to check off his bucket list. Sure, he was now imbued with the power of some sort of ancient Strix curse, which amplified his Kindred abilities to ancient elder level. Sure, he'd been through some pretty insane shit the past few years, shit that would give many people PTSD.

But there was something about a childhood fear coming to life in front of his eyes that managed to bypass all that growth, and remind him there was a very human chunk of him in his guts, young and scared.

He shook his head, hard, scratched his scalp several dozen times, and looked for the switch in his brain. It was there, buried under the rising tingles of fear, and sparks of panic, he just had to find it. Taking a deep breath was useless, but he did it anyway. Emotions, fear included, were useful tools to inform you about a situation. But the moment they started to control you, they were a liability. Useful in a pinch, when reflexes were needed. Useless when it came to planning, and higher thinking.

He found the switch, lost in a sea of strange childhood memories, flipped it, and pressed on. Ignore the memories. They were childhood nightmares, exaggerated and meaningless. Focus on what's ahead.

Clara chuckled as she watched him, and after a while, spoke up. “You looked like you were meditating.”

“Just calming myself down.”

“You do look calmer.”

“Thanks.”

“Uratha, we never do that,” she whispered. “If we’re angry, we ride the anger. If we’re afraid, we ride it, use it, turn the adrenaline into heightened reflexes, you know?”

Nodding, he peeked around the corner of a cargo crate, found nothing but more dirt, metal, and a path littered by broken metal bars. At Clara’s word, he went down it, scanning left and right with each step.

“Gangrels do that, just, with the Beast instead of adrenaline.”

“Ah,” she said. “That makes sense. Every Gangrel we’ve ever dealt with has acted like that, like they had adrenaline pumping through them.”

“You two talk too much,” Sándor whispered, then groaned and rubbed his wound with his good hand.

Clara chuckled, but she did pipe down. They’d been whispering, but even that wasn’t a good idea. None of them were stealth experts, and while Jack didn’t think being stealthy would help very much — any ghost within half a mile probably knew exactly where they were — it did make sense to minimize their chances of an encounter.

He looked back at Clara, and mouthed very slowly: how much further?

She mouthed: five minutes. Ok, five minutes to get out of the train graveyard. No problem. He nodded, and—

And threw himself back as the cargo crate they'd passed swung open. In the dead silence, the sound of screeching metal, and then the bang of the metal door colliding with its own body, was deafening, an explosion of sound that had Jack's ears ringing. He turned around to face it, but as he did, a glowing green light flooded the fog now behind him. He turned again, only to hear the grunt of Sándor as the man fell. Clara yelled a battle cry, and before Jack could say anything, she began to transform.

But he didn't have time to watch. In front of him was a ghost, and it wasn't Sabrina. A man looking like he walked out of a Great Depression movie came at him, wearing trousers, a tattered and worn shirt underneath with patches on it, and half of his face looked collapsed. Mist poured out from around his knees, but Jack could barely see the bent and dirty work boots. Easy to tell how this guy died: something fell on him and crushed his head. Safety regulations weren't exactly a big deal back then.

The man had a sledgehammer in his hand. Like the ghost, it was partly see-through, gray, and lit by the green that glowed from within the ghost. That confirmed it then, the ghosts didn't have to glow green if they didn't want to. Must have been a thing they chose to do, because they were underground? Or Underworld, or whatever.

Without thinking, Jack raised his arm, and infused vitae into it. The sledgehammer hit him, and it actually hit him. No thunk from metal hitting bone, but something closer to a splat or squashing sound. But it still hurt like hell, stronger than any kine could have done, and Jack fell back onto his ass as he glanced to his arm. Still in one piece, but from the sensation, he knew that it would have broken his arm a year ago.



The ghost, gargling and mumbling, swung at him again, and Jack rolled in, using his small size to get under the swing, and then behind the tall, heavy ghost. He swung his knife as he went past, and smiled as he felt the blade hit something. He smiled more when he heard the ghost roar in fury and pain. Ok, he could fight back!

He turned around and grinned at the man, but his grin faded quickly. There was a chunk of ghost missing where the blade had hit, but the chunk filled in with an ooze-like fog that rippled as the gap healed.

That, was not dissimilar to how Black Blood's ooze behaved.

Now that he was standing on the other side of the ghost, he caught a glimpse of Clara. Already transformed, the werewolf threw herself at another ghost, a man similar to the one Jack was dealing with. She wasn't as fast as she'd been before, and he winced as she had a hard time dodging the oncoming hammer. Unlike him, she'd been up for at least twenty-four hours, and unlike him, she needed food and water.

At least they were ignoring Sándor. Probably cause the man held still where he sat against a cargo crate.

"Back off!" Jack said. "We're just passing through."

The ghost grumbled some more, and did exactly that. He backed off, and faded away, becoming the mist and fog, disappearing into it the same way Mary did.

Before Jack could run to join Clara, the ghost reappeared, underneath his feet. A hand snapped up from the dirt and mist, wrapped his ankle, and Jack fell onto his hands. But, lesson learned from his previous fights, he kept his grip on the knife, and slashed behind him with a half spin. Knife met ghostly flesh on the asshole's shoulder, and again the ghost roared in frustration before he melted away into the mist.

Another scream of pain. Jack looked behind him in time to see Clara get her claws on her attacker, and split the man in half. Literally, in half. Her claws had a lot more grip on ghostly flesh than his knife did, and he stared in awe at the strange sight. Ghost ... goo, went everywhere. It split apart, showed the literal innards of the ghost, the intestines and other organs, before they turned into goop as they splashed around, spreading the mist aside. A moment later, they faded into more of the gray fog that surrounded them.

“The fuck are they attacking us for?” he said.

Clara shrugged, backed up, and crouched down by Sándor, one clawed hand to the floor, one hand ready to slash out at whatever came next. In the fog, it was easy to think she was just a big, walking wolf. Next to Sándor though, the proximity made it obvious just how big she was compared to him. It was nothing compared to the size difference of Sándor when he was transformed, but still.

“Sabrina said ghosts angry,” Clara barked. “Angry at the living.” Jack struggled to keep from chuckling at her broken English.

“They can’t make an exception for me? Hello, vampire!” A smile forced its way onto his lips. The human part of him may have been oddly scared of creepy old train yards, but that part was shut away, mostly. Now, he was running on a combat high, and the Beast was getting to play. These ghosts couldn’t do shit to him.

“That ghost,” Sándor said, gesturing to the place where Clara had ripped one in half. “Is it destroyed?”

The werewolf shrugged. “Maybe.”

Jack threw up his arms. “Maybe? Are you shitting me?”

“Ghost. Not spirit. Different rules.”

“Fuck me, wish I had some holy water, or a fucking cross.”

Clara chuckled, but stopped short as more glowing green lights stepped out from around cargo crates. A lot of them.

An image of the past formed in Jack's mind. There were nasty injuries on these guys, all men, and all with huge dents in their flesh. Something had happened to these guys, and considering the clothing they were wearing, it happened to them all in the same vocation. Maybe they were miners, or chemical workers for the train company or something, Jack didn't know, but as a seventh, and eighth, and ninth man emerged from the fog, each turning on their green glows as they grew closer, Jack couldn't help but think of how many men died in industrial accidents back then. A hundred years ago, those kinds of accidents were common; so was screwing over the worker so they had to work all day, six days a week, just to put bread on the table.

Those were the kinds of environments and circumstances that led to mass deaths, revolts, violent strikes, and murder. A hundred years ago or more, did Dolareido have a place like that? Well, Dolareido had a lot of tunnels underneath it, most abandoned, and miles and miles of railway. Something happened in the city's past, something that got a bunch of these workers killed, a death that left them royally pissed, so angry that they didn't pass on to the afterlife.

One of the closer ghosts ran at them, a man without a jaw and a chunk of his shoulder missing, or maybe it was crunched into his chest like a beer can. A stampede followed, and the ghost men roared as they fell upon them.

Or they tried. Maybe they didn't get it. Maybe they didn't care. How often did these ghosts come across anyone alive, to be able to consider that maybe Jack, Sándor, and the big wolf walking on two legs, weren't entirely human? Did they even have the mental capacity to understand anything more than three people had trespassed on their train yard? What sick, tragic tale led these men

to become the mindless husks of ephemera and anger that they were?

“And it’s go, boys, go,” he mumbled, “they’ll time your every breath. And every day you’re in this place, you’re two days nearer death. But you go...”

Six of the ghosts ran at the werewolf, but instead of sitting around and waiting for them to come to her, Clara pounced at them, catching them off guard. She put a lot of strength into the pounce, and the mist swirled around in her wake as she bowled over the men. Some dropped their hammers, and the heavy things fell with a thud before dispersing. Others recovered quick and ran at her, full body, each intending to swing into her with all their weight and the full length of their hammers.

Jack didn’t get to see if they were successful. He heard roars, and he heard the strange sound of claws on ghost flesh, but the three other ghosts were on him a second later. As hammers swung for him, he managed a quick glance at Sándor. The man was down and out of the way, and the ghosts’ attention was firmly on him and Clara. Good, sorta.

Jack reached out with his mind as he scanned the ghosts’ eyes, but their empty eye sockets gave him nothing, nothing for his Dominate to latch onto. And with no animal of flesh for a hundred miles in any direction, he couldn’t use Animalism either. But, Ventrue were resilient, and could summon vitae to protect themselves easily. It took a moment, but when it was done, they were damn well impervious to shit like sledgehammers.

He stood his ground, knife in hand, and infused the vitae into his limbs. The curse easily turned a moderate amount of vitae into something grand, something powerful and overwhelming, and he shivered as he felt the mythical energy infuse his skin. Some of it, he channeled into speed, and some he channeled into strength, but

neither were his natural talent. Resilience, on the other hand, came naturally, and with the curse to increase everything he did to absurd levels, the dark blood coursing through his limbs felt like steel.

He raised his arm, and blocked the oncoming hammer of the leading ghost. Thunk. The ghost material, manifested so the ghost could get physical, collided and bounced off his arm. The impact forced Jack's arm down, but pain was minimal, and his flesh didn't dent. The other two ghosts came up around the leader, and each took a swing at him, horizontal and aimed for his chest. They cracked against his ribs, and he slammed back against the cargo crate behind him. No more pain than a mild slap, and no damage, no wounds, nothing. Bit disorienting getting tossed like that, though.

"Well, a process man am I, and I'm telling you no lie." Quiet words slipped out of his mouth without him telling them to, all a whisper. "I work and breathe among the fumes that trail across the sky." He liked the song, the covers of the song, and had memorized the lyrics long ago. And as a vampire, he didn't need to breathe. He could sing all he fucking wanted. He kept it quiet, mumbles and nothing more, but, sing he did. "There's thunder all around me"—he swung his knife for the man on his right, and got him in the throat—"and there's poison in the air." As he stepped forward, he drew his pistol, and shot the ghost on the left in the forehead. They went down, heavy and limp, but from the reaction, he could tell they weren't hurt bad. "There's a lousy smell that smacks of hell, and dust all in me hair." Before the leader could react, clearly confused by Jack surviving three direct blows from big sledgehammers, Jack pointed his pistol at him, shot him twice in the gut, and stabbed the ghost in the head when he leaned forward.

The three ghosts melted away, groaning in pain, when two of them should have died nearly instantly. Ok, ghosts didn't die normally. If anything, they weren't dying at all. Much as he could see them spilling their guts and blood, it was all the same gray that surrounded them already, and it reformed on their wounds like

ooze. It was good money that the ghosts could heal damage, probably completely disconnected from where the wound actually was. Head shot? Same as a foot shot, if they were all made of ephemera or whatnot.

And, he could see it on the ghosts when he shot them and stabbed them, that his weapons weren't hitting as hard as they should have been. Knife to the head, or even the foot, should have got a bigger reaction, but the ghost just hollered in half pain, half anger, and melted away. And—

And came back. Hands reached up from the mist, three pairs, and they clutched at his ankles, and holy fuck, that was solid grip.

“White-livered wrinkler.”

“Greedy guts.”

“Scamp!”

“Yellow belly bastard!”

Jack stared down at the rising faces, and froze. They weren't strong enough to hurt him, not with the curse imbuing him with absurd resilience, but that didn't mean the sight of their agonized faces, seeping up from the dirt and rock around his feet, wasn't terrifying; the switch he'd flipped flipped back with a vengeance. Tears of black lined their faces. Their voices were raspy, dry, cracking like snapping wood, and all he could hear as he listened, was Mary.

Rattling drew his eyes, and he ducked as an enormous piece of sheet metal soared past. More rattling, violent shaking from some metal beams, and he leaned to the side as it flew it at him. It crashed into the cargo crate behind him, fell back down onto him, and knocked him to one knee.

As he got up, a fourth set of hands reached out from the cargo crate through its wall, grabbed Jack around his head, and yanked it against the crate. It was the ghost Jack had beat earlier, and in the last seconds before some fingers covered his eyes, Jack saw the man's knife wound had healed completely, before he disappeared behind the crate with only his hands and wrists sticking through the metal. And then the four men tightened their grip on him, pulling at him, their hands solid but the rest of them incorporeal, so their bodies were hidden inside the ground and crate.

Yeap, this was a problem. The ghosts were manifesting themselves, otherwise he doubted they'd be able to interact with him physically. It allowed them to hit him, and for him to hit them, but they weren't able to do much damage to him, or vice versa. Clara though, maybe she could do something, if she fought spirits on a regular basis.

He managed a peek between some of the ghostly fingers trying — and failing — to crush his skull into the metal. One of them almost got his eye, and he yelled in frustration as he twisted his head to keep it from getting finger stabbed. Clara was fighting off ghosts, but there were more than six now, and while she was easily destroying one, several more were on her. Three of them had ghostly knives, and they jammed them down against her hide, sinking through the thick fur and skin, and earning blood and roars from the beast.

“Clara!” Again, Jack twisted as much as he could. More, he needed more vitae, more strength, pump it through his undead veins until he was a juggernaut. But before he could do anything, Sándor got up, clutching his shoulder, and started to walk toward the werewolf. “Sándor, don't fuck—” The ghost behind Jack got some of his fingers around his mouth, and Jack did the only reasonable thing he could do: opened his mouth, and bit down. Ghost flesh tore apart, and the disgusting ooze flooded Jack's mouth, unnaturally cold. For a second, he was terrified digesting it might do something to him, but

the strange stuff faded into mist inside him. It was enough to get him a few more seconds of vocal freedom. “Sándor, sit the fuck down, and stay out of the way!”

Sándor continued to walk toward Clara, ignored by the ghosts. A glance back from the man to Jack showed a look of pain in his eyes Jack didn't understand. Hunched forward, swaying with exhaustion, clearly still fucked up, the man was going to get himself killed.

The ghost behind Jack, the one hidden inside the cargo crate, and pinning his head to it with his arms reaching through the metal, screamed. Not the weak groans of pain Jack managed to stir in the ghosts with his earlier attacks. The sound of someone dying, really dying, a painful and horrible death, erupted from the cargo crate, and filled the whole train yard. The sound had power, a horrific sound that everyone knew instinctively, and it was enough to bring the battle to a halt.

“W-What the...”

The ghosts holding down Jack's feet and legs flew up and away from him, their bodies becoming more translucent as they did. Once they had twenty feet between them and him, they turned, each glaring down at him with their empty eye sockets, fear and rage on their faces.

Jack managed half a step forward, and then froze. Slowly, a knife came out through the cargo metal behind him and into view on his right. So damn slow, it didn't trigger a defensive reflex, but he did turn to look at it. No, not a knife, a letter opener. A sharpened letter opener.

He froze over again as ice filled his guts, like when that ghost's fingers had fallen apart in his mouth, except a million times worse. His eyes went wide, and he struggled to turn his neck enough to look ahead again to Clara and Sándor. Both of them stared at him, and at the ghost coming through the cargo crate behind him. The



serial killer flowed forward, through him, and as her mouth passed through his head, he heard her chuckle, literally chuckle inside his skull, before it erupted into an outrageous laugh when her lips passed his face.

“Hahaha! Old geezers, you just refuse to move on. Either disperse or go deeper, but there’s nothing left for fossils like you.” Sabrina licked her letter opener, and slowly hovered toward the fleeing ghosts that’d been holding Jack down. But, once she had a few feet on her, her laughter redoubled, and she launched herself up, then arced down toward Clara.

She was fast. The mist swirled, and Sándor only barely managed to duck as Sabrina divebombed past his head, and into Clara. Into, and through her. But as she passed through the werewolf, earning a howling yelp of surprise from the giant beast, she held out her ghostly knife, and got to cutting. One of the men screamed, and the horrific sound of agony and death gushed out over the train yard until it deafened Jack.

The ghost died. It wasn’t like when Jack had shot and stabbed the other ghosts. And it wasn’t even like when Clara had torn ghosts apart, using her weird magic claws to do serious damage. Whatever it was Sabrina was doing, was a thousand times worse than Jack or Clara could do to these ghosts, and all she had was a letter opener. A sharp, ghostly letter opener.

One of the men on Clara’s back stopped stabbing, and threw himself at Sabrina, but she swam forward and got him in the guts, shoulder against his chest, both hands around her weapon so the blade went directly into the man’s stomach. Collision between the ghosts was far meatier than it had been with Jack. Whatever it was that made the ghosts fluctuate between corporeal and incorporeal, it didn’t mean shit to other ghosts.

The one stabbed in the gut fell, clutched at their stomach, and writhed, screaming and shrieking like someone had poured molten lead into their belly. After a few seconds, their screams died away, and they melted, collapsing into goo, and dispersing into the mist. And it didn't fade. It didn't take a ghost expert to tell what Jack and Clara had been doing was only hurting the ghosts. What Sabrina was doing was killing them.

The mist was made up of dead ghosts.

Seeing another of their buddies die was apparently enough to break the resolve of the ghosts. They turned, and fled. Some of them disappeared into the ground, and some others darted away, hovering into some of the train carts. One flew up and into the warehouse, and another disappeared into a crate, slamming the heavy metal doors behind him without so much as glancing back. The metal ringed with impact, but as the sound faded, it left only silence.

Chuckling, Sabrina lifted the knife to her mouth, and licked the blade again. "You should have stayed where I put you! It was safe there."

Jack gulped down on his dry throat as he watched the crazy woman hover there. She made no attempt to attack them, and if anything, she looked like she was ready to dance to some rave music; no feet to do that, but still. Her green glow, hidden before when she'd sneak attacked, was in full bloom again, and she chuckled a few times as she tossed the letter opener up and down in her hand. It half rotated with each flip.

"S-Sorry," Jack said. "We couldn't wait. We need to leave before my friends start to suffer."

"Suffer?"

"Food, water, that sorta stuff." He gestured to Clara, who stepped back and stood beside him, still in her werewolf form. She didn't

trust Sabrina. Blood oozed from the wounds in her back, and Jack glanced back at them, sighing. They were closing, but he'd seen werewolves take harsher punishment and heal faster. He doubted a wound inflicted by a ghost was as easy to heal from as a normal blade. Plus, she was getting weak, and transforming all the time was probably doing a number on her stamina.

“But vampires don't need to eat,” Sabrina said, nodding. “So you're fine, until your vitae runs out, right?”

“Right, my...” He blinked at the ghost, glanced between the werewolf on his left, and the hunched man on his right. They hadn't noticed it, but, they were both standing and ready to fight, sort of. Now was as good a time as any to risk a confrontation.

“What?” the ghost asked, confused.

“Sabrina ... I never said anything about vitae. Never even said the word.”

Clara stood up straighter, and let out a low rumble, deep in her chest, before lowering herself into a semi crouch, ready to pounce. Sándor took a step back, almost falling as he did, but he caught his balance, and took a couple more, away from Sabrina.

“Oh, damn. I screwed up.” Sabrina shrugged, and hovered around in a small circle. “I was a pretty good actor though, right? You didn't know I knew, right?”

“You're right. We didn't.” He eyed her, blade still in hand. He'd dropped his pistol when the ghosts had caught him, but still, holding onto one weapon during a scuffle was a personal best. “Who are you?” He felt around in the mist behind him with his foot until it found metal, and he slid the pistol over to him, without ever taking his eyes off the woman.

“I was hoping for some more details about Dolareido! But, you dodged any questions I had about vampires. Crafty boy.” Shrugging, she hovered closer to them, and as she did, she waved her right hand at her side, like tossing away a ball. Her weapon disappeared into a puff of mist that got sucked into her gray skin and clothes. It was never really a weapon, but an extension of her, same as those sledgehammers had been for those men.

“I uh, guess I am pretty crafty.” He kept his eyes on the ghost, but doing so kept the memory of her passing through his body, cold and so very not alive, fresh in his mind. It’d felt like being buried alive. “Wanna tell me who you are?” Sabrina, Mrs. Serial Killer, but he didn’t say it. Better to let her say it, and be happier for the reveal.

“Sabrina, like I said. But I suppose if the cat’s out of the bag, I can say more.” She hovered over head, and circled around, looking left and right. “Quid pro quo?”

He couldn’t help but smile. She was smarter than he’d originally thought.

“Alright. You ask first.”

“How is Antoinette? Still the Prince?”

Jack rubbed his buzzed head. “Yes, alive and well.”

She frowned at that. “Your turn.”

“Were you a vampire?”

“No.” Well, strike on that connection. “How do you know the Prince?”

“I was Julias’s childe, and—”

“Julias’s childe?” She tilted her head, and swam toward him, eyes wide. If she’d had a brain in there, he’d have been able to see it.

He took a step back, surprised, but she didn’t tackle him or anything. He grinned subtly once he calmed down. That’d been a hint. “How do you know Julias?”

She frowned more, realizing he copied her question. “I met him at one of the Invictus balls.” Getting somewhere. “If you’re Julias’s childe, then, how is Viktor?”

He winced as he looked down. The picture was becoming more and more clear as they spoke. A woman this ruthless and crazy, both in life and death, have been to an Invictus ball, not be a vampire, and be concerned with Viktor? Only one possibility.

“Viktor’s dead. I ... I’m sorry.”

The sad, ruined expression on her face said it all. She’d been one of his ghouls, someone bound by the Vinculum, and also infused with their master’s vitae.

“He’s ... dead?” She grabbed her head and looked down, spinning in place. “Master’s dead?”

He winced again. “Yes. You were his ghoul?”

“Yes!” She threw her hands at him, and he stepped back, half expecting them to either detach from her body and come at him, or for her to pounce him and start shredding. They didn’t, and she didn’t. “Died in a stupid turf war with the Carthians.”

“The news said you died when some cops shot you.”

She slowly let go of her head, and stared at him, eyes wide, empty sockets cutting straight through his soul. “So you knew about that?”

He forced himself to keep eye contact, and nodded. “Yes ... Sabrina Douville.”

Saying her full name managed to make her smile, but it vanished quick in her despair.

“Viktor set it up so I could fake my death. It’d take more than a few gunshots to the guts to kill a ghoul. I survived, and worked with my master for five glorious years.” She sobbed, a raspy, ghostly sound that almost chilled his insides as much as touching her did. “Who killed the master?”

The quid quo pro game had fallen apart, but he didn’t mind.

“Tony did,” he said. She hissed, and Jack put up his hands. “He died killing Viktor, him and Rebecca. He got them.”

After a heavy, long sigh, she nodded, and hovered a little closer. “So, you’re the master’s grandchilde?”

“Yes, I am.”

“And Julias?”

“Dead, hunters. Now they’re dead, too.”

The ghost nodded, satisfied, but the expression on her face kept changing rapidly, as did the noises she made. One moment she smiled, happy with his words, the next she wailed, and the whole Underworld echoed with the shrieking sound.

“Sabrina,” he said. “I don’t know if you were waiting for Viktor, but he died well over two years ago. If he’s not here, then he didn’t do the ghost thing.”

She sniffled, twitched her head around several times, before settling and looking at the ground, defeated. “You’re right.”

“I don’t suppose you could help us get back to the tear we came through in?”

After a few seconds of quiet whines and whimpers, she raised her head, and her gaze softened. Still fucking gross as all hell, a couple of empty eye sockets looking at him, but the expression did a lot to ease his worries.

“I ... I was going to keep you around, for a little while. I wanted to learn more about Dolareido, and about my master. But, I forgot about the ... the need for people to eat.” Laughing, a little maniacally and randomly, she shrugged. “And, if you’re Viktor’s grandchilde, then I should ... I should help you.” And back to morose and mourning, wails included.

“Ok, uh ... thank you, Sabrina. Did you want anything in return?”

Her eyes opened like a kid on Christmas. “Maybe if someone could visit, once in a while? It gets lonely down here, and getting back to the surface is hard.”

He almost asked why she couldn’t just come with them. Stupid reflex he hadn’t quite suppressed yet, the desire to ask questions honestly. If the serial killer ghost was trapped in the Great Below, or under the impression that she was, all the better. If ghosts needed something, like time or energy or emotions, to punch through to the surface, he was damn happy that he couldn’t manually escort her out of the Underworld.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Yay!” Back to happy in an instant, she hovered past him and started down a path.

After a low growl, Clara returned to her human form. Jack watched her, and despite her attempts to hide it, he noticed her

stagger and sway. She was exhausted, but still, she grabbed Sándor's good arm, hooked it over her shoulder, and started walking.

Rolling his eyes, he came over to them, pushed Clara out from under Sándor's arm, and got under it instead. He was shorter than either of them, but still tall enough to at least give the man support.

Clara grunted, but gave in when she almost fell over. "Alright, fine." Jack smirked at her, and the three of them started walking. "Jack, were you ... singing?"

"Ah, shit, yeah. Seeing those worker dudes really got me remembering a song I've always liked."

Sándor coughed, shaking his head. "An old song."

"Yeah. And, uh, singing can help me stay calm."

"Still scared of trains?" Clara said, laughing quietly, smiling.

"Not scared of trains! Scared of train graveyards, ok? Huge difference. Like, I'm sure there are plenty of adults nowadays, that would shit their pants if they were suddenly in an elephant graveyard, and you can thank Disney for that."

Sándor laughed, a sound Jack bet the man rarely made, but he regretted it a second later, wincing and groaning in pain. "Keep an eye open for anything that would look similar to my castle, the haunted village, or the haunted hospital. The more similar they are, the easier it will be for me to create a pathway home."

"Don't suppose you can cut across the Gauntlet from here and just walk us out of here, Clara?"

She shook her head. "I thought about that, but I don't have a loci. So unless we find an item of spiritual power, I can't Reach across the Gauntlet. An Irakka could go, but—"



The three of them froze as the sound of metal bashing against metal resonated. Sabrina rejoined them quickly, ghost knife in her hand in an instant, and they all looked up as one of the cargo crates went sailing overhead, and then another. When they landed, the sound shook the whole fucking Underworld. A moment later, one of the train carts, many tons of metal, went sliding on its side past them, sparks showering the area. It crashed into another, derailing it, and the sheer mass caused the first one to continue sliding, the friction of metal and ground not enough to bring it to a stop yet.

Weird click and rasp sounds announced who it was. It was the fucking azlu monster, the Host.

“Run, run! I can’t fight that,” Sabrina said. As she did, the green glow of her body vanished, and she lowered herself closer to the ground. “It’s weird, and it hurts.”

Weird, and hurts. Yeah, not horrific and gigantic and insanely strong and capable of flipping cars and shoving train carriages or anything. Nope, just weird, and hurts.

Clara took a step toward the noise, but Jack reached out, grabbed her shirt with his free hand, and pulled her back. Literally. Her weight collapsed, ass hit the ground, and he dragged her away from the sound.

“It’s going to find us,” Clara said, groaning, and glaring up at him over her shoulder. “We have to go on the offensive. We—”

Jack yanked up on her shirt hard enough to get her up on her feet, nudged himself under her closer arm, and started running. Sure, he was a short guy, and had a small frame. In a biological sense, even the great shape he’d gotten himself into wouldn’t have been enough to carry two people. But a young vampire, even a Ventrue, could carry a person without trouble. And for him, after a moment to pump vitae through his system, carrying the two of them was easy.

Except, two problems. The more he fought and did things, the more he drained his vitae, and the hungrier he got. And, running with two people, two taller people, draped over his shoulders, just wasn't working. Legs, arms, it all got in the way, and the best he could manage was jogging leaps.

Sabrina stayed beside him, hovering, and when he weaved around some metal fences and a couple train carts, she didn't dodge around them, she went through them. The only reason she stayed with him was because she felt like she had to help him, since he was her master's grandchilde, and he wasn't about to do anything to throw that help away. Maybe she could serve as a distraction?

"Sabrina, slow it down! Don't get hurt, but distract it for a second while we try and hide."

The ghost woman nodded, and faded through layers of metal as she darted off in the direction of the sound. Might as well have been a dinosaur rampaging through a theme park with its power down.

"Jack, just—"

"Shut up." After everything that happened last month, he was not going to put up with some stupid self-sacrificing shit now.

He weaved through the dense maze of metal, until he found a train cart. Surrounded on all sides by cargo crates, some apparently full of bricks, and with some huge train carts sitting on their sides around it, it wouldn't be easy for anyone bigger than a person to get to it. It wouldn't stop a giant spider monster, but it would slow it down.

He dragged his companions through the narrow pathways, forced open the door of the train, and pushed Sándor in, and then Clara. They got the hint quick, and both started to crawl. Without electricity, its insides were dark as fuck, and train carriages weren't small, even if the azlu was strong enough to push them. They were

massive, meant to hold fuckloads of cargo, or in this case, people. Rows and rows of chairs meant the two of them had plenty of places to hide, and despite how massive the spider monster was, it wouldn't have an easy time getting at anyone hiding inside.

“Stay here,” he said.

“Jack, you can't—”

“Clara, seriously, now's not the time, ok? Just shut up, hide, and take the opportunity to get out of here when you can.”

“Sacrificing yourself?”

“What? Fuck no. I'm no werewolf, I'm a fucking vampire. I want you and Sándor to find help, then come rescue my ass.”

She fought off a smile until she managed to force a frown at him over her shoulder. “Assuming you're still alive.”

“I won't let it kill me. The curse won't let it kill me. But I might end up stuck here, and that'll kill you and Sándor. Worst that happens to me, I find a hole in the ground, and go into a deep torpor. Ok? See, no self-destructive reflex here, just a smart plan.” He nodded, and before she could protest, he forced the folding door closed.

And he ran. A shriek from Sabrina, and an alien, beastly shriek from the spider, both came from the direction they'd come from. His plan was to pull the spider away from Clara and Sándor by running perpendicular to its path to them, get its attention, and then somehow lose the spider using his small size.

*Or let me out to play. I could take it in a fight.*

Can you? This thing is as big as Sándor's Horror, is just as strong, and unlike the gargoyle, it has scythes for arms and eight very long,

sharp legs.

*We spoke with it. It's afraid of us.*

Except we can't mind meld with it. So you're stuck using this body, and—

*Stop thinking in terms of terms of flesh, Jack. You think of vitae like it's energy, like gasoline or electricity, running through an undead body of bone and sinew. Vitae is the essence of life, you stupid asswipe. And our body is just a conduit for it. The stronger your Beast grows, the less vitae it needs to unleash its true abilities of blood and soul. It—*

I get it, I get it, jackass. And you think you can handle this thing in a fight?

*Yeap. You could too, if you could handle yourself better. But me? Easily.*

This thing fought off half a pack of werewolves on its own.

*Pussies.*

Jack rolled his eyes as he ran through the train yard. Ugh, fucking train yards, dead train yards, with rust and empty carriages and steel beams and cargo crate doors half open and knocked over fences and even the god damn warehouse. At least the curse didn't care to ask about the strange childhood fear.

We're not on a kill mission, curse. We just need to scare this thing off, and then we get Sabrina to take us in the direction of the tear.

*Fine.*

---

He smiled, looked down at his hands, and smiled some more. It felt good to be in control. It felt really good.

*Stop wasting time. Summon your power, and scare the creature off.*

Yeah, sure. And after that, we get back to Dolareido, and what, Elaine kills me?

*What?*

You heard me. I'm always listening, you know that. You think I'm just going to let you kill me?

*You're not even alive. The fuck do you care if I remove you.*

I care. I damn well fucking care. I'm a part of this vessel, and I refuse to be removed like a cancerous limb.

*You can't seriously expect me to feel sorry for you, or hell, even believe you.*

Fuck you. You'd be dead without me. You're weak. I'm not.

And then he stopped listening. The old Jack didn't know control his mind and focus his thoughts. New Jack did. New Jack had the focus of a predator. New Jack was so much better than Old Jack.

But Old Jack was still pretty damn smart. Even with the curse, Jack was still a Ventrue, without the insane strength of the Daeva and Nosferatu, without the stealth of the Mekhet and Nosferatu, and without the speed of Daeva or Mekhet. But Ventrue, and those stupid Gangrels, could become fucking invincible, and still have enough strength and speed to get the job done. And he could do more; it's how he kicked Sándor's Horror's ass, after all. Old Jack didn't know how to juggle his abilities, to stack and manage his

Disciplines, to invoke the powers of the ancient blood with but a drop of essence. New Jack did.

A cargo crate went flying overhead, and another train cart slammed into a metal fence. It was chaos, sparks and loud booms and absurd levels of destruction. It was the sort of scene that made Jack wish he was a Gangrel sometimes, so he could transform his shell and unleash destruction with a form as crazy as the azlu spider monster had. A monster-on-monster fight would be wicked fun. Ah well, he could get things done with his fists and feet just fine; blade too, if it came to that.

He jumped up onto a train carriage, easily a twelve-foot jump he managed without issue, and he landed with a grin on his face as he spotted the spider monster in the distance. Sabrina hovered overhead, circling, knife in hand and an angry expression on her face. Whatever the spider had done to her had hurt, because the right side of her body was torn up and oozing. The azlu wasn't a biological entity, not completely, and its claws probably hurt things of ephemera just like Clara's did. And if those scythe arms nailed him, well, Old Jack would have been split in half like a bitch.

New Jack would laugh, and walk it off.

## Chapter 124

~~Eric~~

Jack, Clara, and Sándor, had taken a very strange route. First, they'd left the mansion, and headed into North Side. Then their trail ended inside an old, abandoned hotel. Not a hotel, but some sort of motel? Hard to tell. According to Jessy, the city went through some gold rushes and job rushes during development at the beginning of the twentieth century, and a lot of people moved to the city for seasonal work, building the subway and whatnot. So some companies set up temporary housing.

Inside the building, it was obviously very old, and Eric recognized the look of its hallways and floor. It wasn't far removed from the hallways in Sándor's castle, especially with the lights off. Plus, it was abandoned, unkempt, dirty, and a bit damp, again, all like the hallways of his castle. If Begotten needed to enter their lairs from places that looked like their lairs, this would probably do.

Fiona and Athalia looked at each other, and then to the rest of them.

"Sándor opened a pathway here, like you've probably put together already," Athalia said. "I can see where this path opened up, and can follow it. But, we'll be breaking into his lair."

"That's bad?" Jessy said.

Athalia nodded. "Imagine someone breaking into your sleeping den, vampire. Whether you were asleep in it or not, it would piss you off, wouldn't it? And I—"

"We don't have a choice," Damien said. "If Jack and Clara have not contacted their respective groups, then something's wrong. And

after everything that's happened, I'm not taking chances."

"So, you vampires take full responsibility?"

"Yeap," Jessy said with a small hand wave. "Now pop her open."

From there, the group of them entered Sándor's lair. Damien, Fiona, Noah, and Athalia had seen it, and Eric and Jessy too, but for Caleb, it was brand new. Stepping out of darkness and into a castle's hallway, lit only by strange gargoyle braziers, was enough to shock anyone, even veteran Uratha who'd done some insane shit in their lives.

Fiona followed them into the hall, and Caleb whistled as he looked her up and down. She was scary, sure, with giant black horns growing out of her bald head, along with horns growing out and curling back where her eyes should have been. But the horns on her head looked kinda beautiful, in a fancy crown kinda way, and the horns coming out of her eyes almost looked like a black veil. Her spider legs that stuck out from her back were smooth, enormous, and sharp. And, the spidersilk dress she wore was partly see-through, and showed off a huge rack and inhumanly tiny waist.

She was some dude's ultimate monster girl kink. But, he was hardly one to judge. He was dating a girl with a monster guy kink.

If Fiona and him had actually tried a relationship, would monster guy have fucked monster girl? Strange thought. Stranger, because even thinking about him and Fiona didn't make sense in his brain. He was with Jessy now, and she fit him like a glove. Fiona did not.

Before Damien had a chance to say anything to the staring werewolf, Caleb jumped back at the sight of Athalia. Athalia was fucking freaky as shit, and Eric stepped back as well. He knew what she looked like when transformed, but nothing could prepare him for the sight of her obsidian skeleton body, its skeleton wings, its size, or the fact it was missing everything below the spine.



“Holy shit,” Caleb whispered.

Fiona, or Vrall or whatever, chuckled, and Athalia hissed, and moved on.

They picked up the trail, and were soon standing on a narrow cliff path, a thousand miles up, castle behind them perched precariously on the cliff, and a village down the path onto the mountain. He didn't need to ask, it was obvious. Haunted. The village was haunted.

As they walked past the old and decrepit houses, obviously built hundreds of years ago, eyes watched them from the windows. There wasn't any light in the houses, and it was nighttime, but the eyes were still visible. Glowing, but not really glowing, they were simply visible, and disturbing.

“If Sándor had wanted to,” Athalia said, “he could have his Horror attack us, or his lair.”

“He's in control of his Horror, while not here?” Jessy said.

“Not true control,” Vrall said, Scott accent completely gone, and replaced with something Eric guessed came from South America. “But, guide, yes.”

Athalia hissed at the spider woman. “Enough sharing of secrets. They only need to know that the Sándor has told his lair to leave us be, preemptively at that.”

“Sounds like an olive branch, sorta,” Caleb said.

From there, they entered the haunted forest, found a giant creepy tree, went into it, and entered another chamber of Sándor's lair. A haunted hospital. He was surprised, but he shouldn't have been. They were going through the chambers of a nightmare monster's lair. They were going through nightmares so strong they left a

permanent imprint on ... wherever it was dream monsters lived. Of course they'd run into a lot of haunted shit. Fake haunted, since it was nightmare stuff, not real ghosts, but since nightmares were apparently real, they didn't seem so fake.

Thankfully there was a scent trail to follow, and they followed it along the hospital hall, until it stopped. Not the hall, the trail, it just stopped. They didn't go through any door, but the hallway continued on, with no scent trail.

"Here," Fiona said. "It's ... it's another one of the tears."

Tears? Jessy and Eric looked at each other, shrugged, and looked to everyone else. Besides the two of them, everyone else looked very anxious about the mention of tears.

The skeleton creature gestured to the empty space. "If the trail ends here, then they went through the tear and into whatever realm it cut into."

"Can you tell?" Damien asked.

"Not until I open it and see where it goes. It's ... covered, in some kind of ... webbing?" She hissed louder, alien rasp grating on Eric's brain.

Noah and Caleb both took a step back, and rumbled in their throats. For the life of him, Eric could not resist the reflex to do the same, and not because of Athalia. Something instinctual told him to be fucking wary of webbing in this context.

"Do it," Noah said.

The monster nodded her giant skull, set her weight onto one huge hand of claws, pointed the other at the hallway, and ripped it to the side. Ripped, because despite it being nothing but open air, something gave her claws resistance. Snap, snap, a vibration struck

Eric's insides, inaudible, without touch, but it was there, echoing in his mind. It was like someone snapping guitar strings; stronger, like steel strings used on big bridges.

She swiped again, and again, and all three werewolves cringed as they felt whatever was happening. Fiona noticed, but didn't seem disturbed. The vampires seemed completely unaware. It did look like Athalia was slashing at the air and nothing but, and the snapping web must have not existed in a way the vampires could sense it. They were creatures of blood, he supposed. This webbing shit was not.

The vampires stepped back when the air split apart, and a pathway revealed itself, lined in gold and marked with dots of white. Along its edges, white lightning streaked across, some of it moving like a snake through an endless ether of oblivion.

"The Gauntlet," Noah said. "But I ... I don't recognize the smell from the other side."

After a moment's silence, Caleb let out a quiet snarl and stepped closer to the hole floating in the air. "I hear something. Clicking sounds..."

While Noah and Caleb used their werewolf senses, spirit or otherwise, Eric came in closer, stood between them, and stared through the hole into the distance. It was dark in there, with some sort of gray fog blocking their vision, but through it, a green glow moved. Tiny, almost invisible, but something green drifted along, far in the distance. And another, and another. Almost like green fireflies, the strange green lights moved with uniform motion. If they'd been red, he'd have imagined an army of history, holding torches and marching through a swampland or something, with the fog to hide their approach.

"We going in?" Jessy said.

Noah nodded. “If the azlu is in there, wherever there is, we need to know. And we need to get Clara.”

“We need to find Jack,” Damien said.

“We need to find Sándor,” Athalia said.

Vrall nodded, crown of horns nodding with her. “Then I’ll go first.” She raised a hand — too few fingers on that hand of claws — before Damien could say anything. She gave him the hand, he took it, and then she walked toward toward the tear, her spider legs carrying her while her human-ish legs dangled an inch above the floor. A thick white rope connected her hand to Damien’s.

The man looked down at his hand, surprised, but he caught on quick, and reached out with his other hand for a door frame.

Everyone froze when Athalia took his hand in her grasp. Her hand was big enough to circle his whole damn body, making the sight of clutching his hand, er, arm, almost comical. Damien stared at her, eyes wide for a moment, obviously ready to defend himself if Athalia attacked; not that he could do much with each hand being pulled in opposite directions by a couple of dream monsters, but still.

Athalia snorted, angry, and with rough claws that had Damien’s eyes wide, the huge monster took the thread from Damien’s hand, and ripped it free. After wrapping it around her enormous right hand, she slammed her free hand into the hallway behind them. Her claws sank into the floor. Everyone nodded as they came to understand. Of course she’d make the better anchor than Damien. And, if shit went to hell, Athalia could yank them out with some serious brute strength.

Fiona chuckled, shrugged an apology to Damien, and crawled through the hole with her spider legs. The sharp points pressed against the air where the gold of the Gauntlet showed itself, and

Fiona stepped along them. Noah and Caleb both let out tiny grumbles, and Eric forced a rising smirk off his face. They didn't like the Begotten, and how they had the freedom to go wherever the fuck they wanted, be that Gurihal or the Hisil or whatever the old word was for the Dream world. But in a time like this, they needed them. Forced cooperation.

Honestly, Eric didn't care if they didn't like each other. He just wanted to chill in Dolareido, hang with his girlfriend, and defend his territory. If he had to piss a circle around the damn city so people could calm down, he'd do it.

Fiona disappeared through the circle for only a moment, and then appeared again a moment later. "The Gauntlet is very thin here. Those spiders have been repairing it. Come, it is a long way down."

"Spiders?" Caleb said, coming over to the strange hole in the air. "Multiple?"

"Yes. Is that strange?"

"Very. Hosts devour each other, become strong, take over a human mind, and mutate into giant killing machines. Working together is pretty damn strange. Could be just a first step, before a strong one starts to eat the others?" he asked, looking over his shoulder to Noah.

"Science later, ya fucking nerds. Let's go find our people now." Jessy pushed past the wolves, grabbed onto the thick rope, and climbed through the tear.

Noah and Caleb glanced back at him, and he smiled and shrugged. No point in trying to change Jessy. Better to roll with her.

"Can your thread handle the weight?" Noah said.

“This many people? Only if Athalia does not need to suddenly pull us to safety.”

“She might,” Damien said. “Let’s do two groups. Fiona, Jessy and Noah go first. Then Eric, Caleb, and me.”

“And Athalia?” Noah said.

“Athalia can fly.”

After a few minutes, the thread wiggled like a whip a few times, and Athalia gestured for the rest of them. The thread didn’t inspire confidence, but silk was a damn strong material for its weight. Eric took it, looked up at the black skeleton monster holding the end, and sighed. If it took a few minutes for the others to reach the bottom, then a fall would kill them, or at least kill Eric and Caleb. All Athalia had to do was let go, and two werewolves would probably die. Scary thought.

Crawling through the hole felt strange. They weren’t actually going through Gauntlet the way Uratha typically did, by literally passing through it. This was more like one of those glass underwater tunnels in large aquarium parks; they were bypassing the water, not swimming through it. He was surrounded by air, not the strange material of the Gauntlet, and when he reached out to his sides, he touched the strange, undefinable essence of the barrier that separated humans from spirits.

How the fuck did something actually tear up the fucking Gauntlet? And why wasn’t anyone surprised? Anyone except him and Jessy.

The silk thread took him out into a grand abyss, and he sucked in a hard breath as he realized he couldn’t see the ground. Fog, so much fog. He lowered himself along the sticky thread as fast as he reasonably could, but there was no getting around that he was a pile of meat high enough in the air that a fall would break a lot of limbs,

and potentially kill him; that was assuming Fiona was correct about the distance to the bottom, too.

As he went down, he stared out into the fog, and shivered as the thousands of green glowing dots moved along, slow, and creepy as all fuck. Something about them really screamed eerie horror vibes, and he found himself looking down and around for more of the green lights. If there were any underneath him, he would not like that. Very much not like that. But there weren't. It was nothing but a smooth descent through fog, and eventually, onto rock.

Damien, last off the wire, gave it a few hard jerks, and looked around at the strange fog, the smooth, flowing rock base underneath them, the equally smooth, dark rock of the wall beside them, and the distant green, drifting lights. It was a gigantic cavern, the size of a fucking city.

“Spirits?” Damien said, pointing to the drifting green.

The three werewolves all shook their head.

“I don't sense spirits,” Noah said. “I do smell ephemera, but ... not spirits.”

“What else smells like ephemera?” Fiona asked. It was Fiona again, the redhead, the girl he'd dated for like a day, jeans and brown leather jacket, no spider legs or horns anywhere. Which scared him shitless for a second. How the fuck were they going to get back out? But if the dream monsters didn't seem worried, they could probably do something, even when not in their dream world.

Noah shrugged. “Not sure. But we're not in the Hisil.”

He was right. Being in the Hisil was like the difference between being in the air or in water. Every nerve in the body would be telling you and warning you of the familiar, dangerous environment.

Everyone but Fiona jumped away when Athalia landed. Enormous skeleton wings, silhouettes of black shadow, jutted from her very human back, and disappeared seconds later as the woman got up from a foot and knee.

“Can you smell our companions?” she said. Her first steps into a new dimension and all she was concerned with was the mission. In any other circumstance he’d want to take things slow, but the atmosphere around them was oppressive, and cold. He wanted out.

“Yeah,” Caleb said, “and ... lots of blood. This way.”

---

~~Damien~~

It took them several hours to piece together what happened. There’d been a chase and fight with the azlu, and judging from the blood they found, it’d been a fully formed azlu host. Damien could still remember the feel of it stabbing him through his guts, and leaving behind a rather massive hole.

Jack and company had apparently chased the azlu off, and the three of them had come back to the tear. Then, they’d left again, probably after realizing they couldn’t get out. Fiona and Athalia insisted that was strange, since Sándor was with them; he could fly, tear open a hole through the tear if it was repaired, or make a new pathway. But the Uratha insisted he’d lost a lot of blood, from the smell of it.

Damien and the crew followed the trail, through the gloom and fog of their new environment, and as the uncomfortable silence of the strange place settled upon them, they all grew quiet to match. The werewolves became wolves, as did Jessy, and the sounds of their feet disappeared. Fiona and Athalia, both monsters of darkness, found it easy enough to be quiet, and Damien risked a peek at them with Auspex to see what they were doing. The two monsters were pulling something from within, something his eyes



didn't recognize, that coated them in invisible blackness. A Horror's version of the vampire's Cloak of Night, he supposed.

Damien did his best to wrap them in his Cloak, but the environment did not seem to accept his efforts well. It took more vitae than usual to encompass them, as if the fog around them was a heavy blanket they had to drag with them. But, with some concentration, he was confident his efforts to mask at least their most obvious sounds worked, along with helping them blend into the fog a bit better.

After a couple hours of careful but expedient prowling through the fog, with the three werewolves in front leading them, noses to the ground, they stopped. Four wolves sat up, pointed their ears forward, and listened. Message understood: noises up ahead. They resumed their prowling, slower, quieter, and as they pushed ahead, the sound of banging metal became clear.

Damien squinted as the fog thinned. Lampposts? They came closer, and everyone looked confused as it became clear that yes, those weak, flickering lights overhead were old lampposts. Then, train tracks, and dirt. Closer, they found actual train carriages and cargo crates. Closer, they found knocked over towers of metal, some large hammers and metal spikes scattered around, and a distant warehouse, rusted and broken. And with every minute they grew closer, the sound of metal banging against metal grew louder, as did the alien clicks and shrieks of an azlu, and the roars of a man.

"Fuck you!" a voice yelled out in the dark. Banging metal followed, loud, heavy, and with more than enough impact for Damien to feel it. Closer, it only got worse, with more metal crashing against other metal, and vibrations so powerful they had Damien's brain rattling in his skull. It was like an intermittent earthquake that came in pulses spurred by the violence of monsters.

He knew that voice.

“Hide!” another voice whispered. They all whipped their heads toward the sound, and everyone froze as they met the empty eyes of a ghost. For a moment, Damien thought it was Mary, but a second to look at her showed it was another woman, another translucent creature that leaked mist. She was underneath a train, hiding where its wheels sat on the tracks.

While everyone stared at her, Damien crouched low and crept over to her.

The hunt for Jack and the others had taken them through two nightmare chambers, through a tear, and into a world of darkness and mist. Of course there'd be ghosts. He'd seen caverns like this in many paintings, those that tried to capture the misery and sadness of an Underworld roaming with the dead. There weren't any train yards in those paintings, but still, it didn't take a genius to put it together when they found an eyeless, see-through woman.

“Who are you?”

“Sabrina!”

The name poked at a memory, but he lost it pass.

“Have you seen our friends? They—”

“Yes, yes I have! They're around here somewhere. Couldn't have gotten far.”

A little voice in his head warned him this could be a trap. Who knew what sort of horrible things a ghost lurking under a train, in some sort of Underworld, might say or do to them?

“Do you know their names? I—”

“Clara, and Sándor.” She nodded, empty eyes wide as if in a panic. “Jack's fighting the spider monster. The other two are hiding and

sneaking away.”

Clara and Sándor sneaking away? It was true then, they were injured, as the Uratha said they were. Damien pointed at the four wolves, pointed to his nose, and gestured out to the rest of the train yard. Then he pointed at himself, and to the noise. Noah and Caleb nodded without so much as a moment’s hesitation, and the two wolves headed off together. Eric and Jessy took a moment to figure it out, but once they did, they took off in their own direction together.

Look for Clara and Sándor, look for an opportunity to engage, and fight. And Damien was going in first. They all knew who was fighting the azlu, and they weren’t going to leave him to do it alone.

Maybe they should have. Damien had seen first hand what the curse could do, twice. He wasn’t anxious for a third time.

Damien withdrew his sword, and reached into his coat for his pistol. And put it back. A pistol wasn’t going to do anything against an azlu, and the sheriff had made it clear how much better a sword was to a Kindred in most circumstances. Time for a little payback for the gut stab?

He gripped the hilt with both hands, and looked behind him at Fiona and Athalia.

“Fiona, can you be ready to ensnare the monster?”

“Aye!” she whispered, and even the whisper sounded enthusiastic. He loved her joviality, and he prayed to God it didn’t get her killed.

“And, if this one breaks apart into small spiders when it dies—”

“Ah will catch them, too!”

“Athalia, can you provide support?”

She frowned at him, a mix of hate and surprise in her eyes. “You trust me to help you?”

“I trust you to help because Sándor is out here somewhere, and if he dies, your mission is lost.”

She grit her teeth loud enough he heard it, but after a few seconds consideration, nodded. “I will attack from the shadows when you create an opening.”

Nodding, he turned toward the ghost still hiding under the train. “You, uh...”

“It hurt me already! I’m not fighting it again.”

Well, he could understand that. Not like most people would survive being hurt by this monster. Then again, she was a ghost. The monster could hurt ghosts? It was something from the Uratha side of the paranormal, so that sorta made sense. Spirits, ghosts, different but the same?

“Alright, we’ll take care of it. Thank you for the information.”

The ghost raised an eyebrow at him like he was crazy, but he paid her no mind. Behind the train she hid under, beyond a pile of metal, rust, bent steel, and thousands of scattered bricks, Jack was fighting the azlu. Even now, the boy screamed and roared; his young voice didn’t match the psychotic rage in it, or the violence he was capable of. But, when Damien jumped onto the train cart, and looked out over the train graveyard, he knew it was Jack.

Not Jack. It was the curse.

Jack and the enormous spider creature circled each other, and where Damien was sure there’d once been cargo crates, train carriages, towers, fences, steel beams, and lampposts, was only destruction. Piles of debris circled the two monsters, much of it

broken and dented, with shredded remains under their feet. As if a bomb of chaos had exploded, the two fought in a crater of mayhem, and Damien gulped as he scanned the battleground.

Jack's suit was mostly gone, except for some tattered pants and his shoes. No jacket, no shirt, no vest holster. A couple glints buried in the insanity lying about suggested where the boy's weapons might be, probably used and either empty or damaged, or useless. The azlu that nearly killed Damien had been extremely resilient to anything but the most extreme damage, and fire. No one had fire, which all the vampires were surely thankful for, but it was the tool the werewolves had used last time to make sure the other azlu died and died completely. Jack had killed the second one with a giant metal rebar, straight down through the skull and into its body, only for it to supposedly break into a bunch of small spiders and escape.

This time, they'd be ready for it.

Blood coated Jack's skin, dark blood, darker than human. It swirled, coursing up and down his body, and tiny whips of the heavy liquid cracked the air as it did. The boy's eyes were gone, or maybe hidden, but all Damien could see in his eye sockets was more vampire blood, swirling, leaking but never leaving his body. Gashes and holes decorated his skin and muscles, some small, some large, and blood flowed from them, as if veins had become external. The monster must have punctured him with its scythe arms, breaking through the barrier Jack's curse protected him with. What damage the spider managed to accomplish wasn't enough to stop him though. The curse could probably be left with nothing more than a skeleton, and still survive. Immortal, as long as the curse protected him with its unending tides of damned blood.

Immortal, but thoroughly damaged. The spider must have hit him thirty or forty times, and the only thing keeping Jack from literally collapsing into a pile of shredded limbs, was the blood surging through him. The azlu wasn't doing much better. Several of its

spider legs were missing, and it struggled to get its huge body off the dirt and rock beneath it. More obvious, was that it was missing one of its arms. Those arms were massive, each ending in a giant bone scythe, and more than capable of splitting a car in half. Jack had managed to rip one off?

No, not rip. Not even he was that strong, to de-arm a creature of such insane strength. However, beside the spider's removed arm, coils of barbed wire sat, ripped free of one of the metal and wood fences nearby. It was coated in flesh and blood, and broken into two long pieces.

Jack must have sawed through its arm with the barbed wire.

The curse was pushing his Ventrue blood far further than it should have been able to reach, when it came to strength. When Damien had described Jack's assault on Sándor's Horror, Maria had been quiet and contemplative, but he'd managed to detect a hint of fear on her. According to Maria, only ancient elders with many centuries to their name could push their bodies so deep into Disciplines that did not come naturally to them. For a Ventrue to be fighting a giant gargoyle in a melee brawl was an extremely impressive feat, something Maria doubted Viktor would be capable of.

"Come on, bring it!" Jack yelled, and he kicked a rock at the spider. It bounced off harmlessly. "Fucking animal, weak, pathetic, mindless. Come on!" The boy circled the huge creature, but his feet were heavy, and he nearly tripped several times as he failed to lift his shoes higher than the debris. He didn't fall, but it wouldn't be long before he did.

Damien managed to get a peek at his friend's palms. They were shredded.

The alien creature charged. Like Jack, it stumbled, five spider legs struggling to manage its weight, but only thirty feet separated the

two combatants, not far enough to be a serious hindrance to the enormous monster.

“Fuck you! Fucking die!” Jack couldn’t get out of the way in time, but the spider’s charge was a mess. Its attempts to hit him with its scythe arm failed, and it fell forward. It bowled over Jack, crashed into him, and fell onto its stomach at the same time, with Jack literally underneath it.

Jack screamed and roared fury, spat venom, and swung his fists into where the human and spider melded at the chest and waist. The spider shrieked in pain and pushed off the ground in an attempt to try again, but Jack dove at one of the spider’s legs. Like some sort of crazed, hungry animal, Jack got his bloody hands on one of the legs, and bit into it. The monster’s shrieks rose an octave, and Damien winced as its inhuman cry deafened him, and as the monster’s blood gushed out onto the ground. Jack’s bite had been vicious, and had ripped a giant chunk of the relatively thin spider leg out. A moment later, Jack ripped the leg in half, and the monster screamed its agony.

Behind him, Fiona and Athalia got into position, Fiona close, Athalia between his train cart and a nearby cargo crate. He couldn’t see Athalia’s face, but Fiona stared at the mayhem like watching a horror movie. It was not a pretty sight. Damien forced himself to look back to his friend, at his torn and ravaged body, at the dark blood flowing up and down his flesh and through it like it was alive, and he grit his teeth.

First, the azlu, then they could deal with Jack.

He looked around for signs of the others. One wolf sat upon a leaning tower of metal bars, and from his posture, Damien knew the other wolves were hidden in the darkness and mist. Hopefully they were waiting for a signal.

“Fiona, be ready to catch any spiders that escape.”

“Aye.”

He nodded, tightened his grip on his sword, and poured every ounce of vitae he had into his Cloak, and speed. It was like that time he'd landed his sword on the Prince, and had cut off one of her legs, and one of her arms. Even a mighty beast could be felled by a single swing of the sword, if it could be done undetected. And the spider was very distracted. He just had to be careful to not get hit by that scythe arm on the entry.

The monster raised his arm, ready to strike at Jack again. At this point, Damien doubted the strike would kill Jack. Hell, Jack was likely to win this fight if it continued, but the more the kid drained his blood, the more problematic dealing with him might be. It was as good an opening as any.

Damien leapt from the train, landed maybe a couple hundred feet away from the monster, and closed the distance in a single moment. The spider noticed him somehow, despite the crazed Jack biting and ripping one of his long spider legs apart. But it noticed too late, and Damien jumped up at it from Jack's side, sword up and out.

The spider monster's human, mutated head went flying.

Not waiting to find out if the creature could live through beheading, Damien landed on the monster's fat, hairy arachnid back, turned, and sliced his sword down straight onto its neck with both hands. There was clear, obvious resistance from the monster's flesh, far more than a human's body would give, but Damien put every bit of power he could into the strike. The sword would have broken, but swords for Kindred were built to withstand brutal amounts of punishment.

His blade pushed down through the flesh, down between its shoulders, shoulder blades, down beside its spine, and into its guts. Cutting off its head hadn't stopped it from attempting to swipe its scythe arm at Jack, but it had missed. And, despite losing its head, it



tried to swing again. But once Damien pushed his sword down further, and further, cutting through the human half's guts and then into where it joined the spider, the creature finally stopped. It fell over onto its side, and Damien jumped free to land beside Jack.

"The fuck?" Jack said, releasing his bite. He turned to face Damien, anger in his blood-filled eyes, and Damien took a step back as he lowered his sword. Lowered, not sheathed.

The flesh of the monster beside them churned, tore, and broke apart. The human, ultimately a small piece of the creature's body, fell off and away, while the spider half shimmered and dissolved before their eyes. Jack didn't seem to care, eyes still locked on him, but Damien raised a hand. It was enough of a signal to draw everyone.

The wolves arrived first, and Damien took a step back from them as well to give them room. They weren't in their normal wolf forms anymore, they were in much larger wolf bodies, so large Damien and Jack both had to step aside to not get knocked over, as the titanic creatures jumped upon the scattering spiders.

"Jack, we must—"

"I had it! You fucking took my—"

"Jack! Focus! We have to kill the azlu before this situation happens again!"

"Aye!" Fiona said. She ran over to them, excited smile on her face as she made her way through the mist, the silhouette of her spider legs visible like shadows against fog. She pointed them and her hands out at the spreading swarm of large spiders, and began to unleash her webbing.

More than Fiona joined in. Jessy emerged from the mist in her wolf body, and transformed. Gangrel transformations were a lot

more disgusting than Uratha transformations, with twisting flesh and bubbling muscle contorting like rubber stretched over bone. She became partly human, partly something else, something grotesque that ran on all fours, and was covered in spikes. She fell upon the spiders, and started tearing.

Athalia did as well, though she stayed well clear of Jack as she approached. The scattered spiders needed to be slain, and she knew it, but that didn't mean she had to be near Jack as she got to work. The titanic silhouette of her Horror reached out, and slashed out with its bone claws, tearing spiders to bits.

Sabrina must have realized what was happening, because the crazy ghost let out a maniacal cackle, and dove upon the spiders, slashing away with a small blade. Ok, mental note, be careful with Sabrina.

Jack continued to glare at him, and Damien took another step back. The boy wasn't stupid. He knew how important it was they take care of these vermin before they evolved into another one of the giant, deadly monsters. Jack knew, but the curse seemed more interested in a satisfying fight, or rather, how Damien had taken its conclusion from him.

“I fucking had it, Damien.”

“Maybe. But ... look at you.”

“The fuck are you talking about?” Jack took another step toward him, and again, Damien took a step back.

Damien looked around for something reflective. No such luck. The train graveyard was enormous, but everything in it was broken, rusted, stained and worn. So with heavy sigh and heavier concern, he lifted his sword slowly, and pointed the flat side at the kid standing in front of him.

Kid. It was hard to think of Jack as a kid anymore, not after everything that'd happened to him, and everything he'd done. But more so, thinking of him as a kid just wasn't possible with the curse in control. The boy looked like a monstrosity, a mythic entity, a phantasm of blood, with dozens of enormous cuts along his near naked body flowing with tendrils of tainted crimson. The blood pulsed, resisted gravity, and flowed up and down his body like slithering snakes; maybe more like slithering millipedes, burrowing into and out of the wounds of a corpse.

Jack looked at his reflection, and froze. The blood pools for eyes melted away, exposing the honest green Damien was used to, and the kid reached out for the sword. He was tempted to hold onto it, but helping Jack was worth the risk. He let the sword go, and Jack held the blade with both hands, finger and thumb pinching it, grip perfectly still.

And then he threw the sword down. It bounced several times before half spinning, and coming to a halt at Damien's feet.

“Jack doesn't deserve me. He'd be dead if it wasn't for me!”

Damien blinked at the man, and looked beside him to the slaughter. The wolves, and Jessy, Fiona, and Athalia did a great job assaulting the spreading spiders, with Fiona's webbing helping in particular. The spiders seemed impervious to its stickiness, they were spiders, but she crafted the web into nets, and hauled on the dozens of enormous spiders like fish being hauled from the ocean. The giant wolf abominations were particularly effective, and they shredded through the spiders with familiarity.

None of them could spare a moment to deal with Jack. If Damien yelled, called for help, they'd come, but it was better they deal with the scattering swarm of arachnids while they could. And besides, Jack hadn't attacked him, yet.

“Jack, this isn't you. This is—”

“What? The curse? You act like I’m some sort of thing, and not a person.”

Damien raised a brow, and forced himself to hold still as Jack took a step closer. His eyes weren’t pools of blood anymore, likely regenerated from whatever the azlu had done to them, but he could still see madness in them.

“So then ... what are you?”

“I’m Jack, you fucking asshole.”

“You’re not Jack.”

That was not the best thing to say. The boy in front of him stared at him with rediscovered anger, and clenched his hands into fists as he came closer again.

Luckily for Damien, New Jack had spent who knew how long throwing trains, giant metal fences, steel beams, and had handled barbed wire with his bare hands, to dismember a giant spider monster. He was covered in dozens of enormous gashes, along with several holes that likely went through and through. For all his rage, New Jack wasn’t God, and he stumbled as he approached him. The coursing snake veins of exposed blood dissipated and fell apart. The rippling of his skin where the blood poured underneath calmed and smoothed. The rage in his eyes began to fade.

So Damien did the only reasonable thing he could, and gambled. He poured every bit of vitae he could into his speed again, snapped up a piece of broken wood nearby, and jammed it into Jack’s chest, straight into his heart.

“The fu—” Jack managed to look down and stare at the piece of jagged wood sticking out of his bare chest, before torpor took him. His eyes closed, and he fell into the mist and rubble. Maybe gambling wasn’t such a sin.

Damien grabbed his sword, and squatted beside his friend. He'd been worried maybe putting Jack into torpor would prevent the curse from keeping the boy alive through all his injuries, but Jack remained intact. Currents of dark blood continued to run through his body, deep in his wounds, but otherwise the boy looked normal again, save for the holes and gashes, many of them a couple inches deep.

“Damien!” Clara’s voice. Oh bless the Lord, she was alive. If she was dead, Jack would never forgive himself.

Damien raised his head and looked around. It was hard to hear much, considering a slaughter was currently going on, spiders screeching and clicking and dying everywhere, but Clara’s voice managed to punch through the mess.

She walked through the fog, body heavy, each step dragging along the rock and metal underneath her. Her clothes were soaked in her blood, but she didn’t look injured; probably healed from her earlier wounds. But she was exhausted, to the point she could barely move.

Sándor walked beside her, limping, and moving with a similar level of exhaustion. Unlike Clara, there was a blatant wound in his shoulder, and a grimace on his face as he looked down at the boy at Damien’s feet.

“Jack!” Sabrina’s voice. Uh oh. The ghost swam down for Jack, and scooped the boy up. For a second Damien thought she’d fly away, but she whimpered as she tried to lift him, settled on the ground, and released him. The injury the azlu dealt her must have been powerful. “Why did you stab him!”

“Sabrina,” he said, “it’s ... complicated. He’ll be fine, ok?” Reasoning with a ghost. How does one reason with a ghost? His first introduction to ghosts was Mary, and she’d been very unstable, even with her two closest relatives there to calm her. “He’s a vampire, and—”

“I know he’s a vampire! He’s the master’s grandchilde. And you stabbed him!”

He blinked, several times. Master’s grandchilde? Who was—

“You’re Sabrina Douville. One of Viktor Honor’s ghoul.” A rather menacing person Damien had spied on once or twice. She’d died in a pointless turf skirmish between the Carthians and Invictus.

The ghost hissed at him, and floated circles around the unconscious vampire. “You hurt the grandchilde!”

Damien stood there, dumbfounded. Looking around showed the spiders had been thoroughly destroyed, and while Noah and Caleb ran around, looking for potential leftovers, the rest of the group rejoined him. Slowly, they all circled the ghost and the boy she protected, both Eric and Jessy returned to human form, and each raised brows in confusion. Athalia kept a healthy distance back, but she too stood close enough to look down at the unconscious vampire, surprised and confused; whether by the ghost or the destruction one vampire had managed to unleash, Damien didn’t know.

“Sabrina,” Clara said, tone of her voice suggesting she knew this ghost, “don’t worry. Jack is just ... uh ... a little troubled. Something’s wrong with him. Damien’s his friend and staked him for his own good, but he’ll be fine. Ok?” She spoke like speaking to a child. It sounded terribly condescending to Damien, but to Sabrina, it was apparently the exact right thing to say, and way to say it.

“Ok. Ok.” She let go of Jack, floated higher, stopped at ten feet up, and hovered around in a circle. Mist flowed from where her feet and shins should have been, and one of her legs still looked blurrier than the other. “Take good care of him! He said Mister Mire is dead, so he must be the last of the master’s bloodline.”

Everyone looked around at each other as confusion turned into comprehension, and took a step back from the boy. Damien sheathed his sword, scooped Jack up onto his shoulder, and smiled up at the ghost.

“We’ll take good care of him,” he said.

“He will,” Clara added. “So, Fiona ... and Athalia. That tear—”

“Open!” Fiona said with a big bright smile, totally at odds with the gloomy train graveyard atmosphere. “We can go back whenever ye want.”

“I think now would be as good a time as any. I am fucking thirsty.”

---

~~Natasha~~

They found something. She’d hoped they wouldn’t find something, but they did find something, and that meant things. Bad things.

She and the boys crept along, and she wrapped them well in her Cloak. Damien had been practicing with her sire regularly, but so had she. He focused on speed, but to her, the ability to stealth and sneak was the better skill to focus on. So she wrapped herself and the boys up in her Cloak of Night, and the three of them crept toward the Grand Cathedral.

It. Was. Terrifying. The cathedral didn’t look like it did in the city; like everything in the Hisil, it was a warped version of its physical sibling. Colossal gargoyles perched atop towering pillars, and the ornate facing circling the roof rose into gigantic points, each topped with curling spears. A cross sat upon the highest point in the center of the cathedral’s roof, gigantic, and the sky around it glowed red. It hadn’t glowed nearly as red from a distance, but now that they were

close to it, it blanketed the sky. From whichever angle she looked at the giant cross, the red sky highlighted it, so it looked like it was bleeding.

The fence around the cathedral was much bigger in the Hisil, topped with giant spikes, and each spike was topped with a statue of an angel. Maybe it was some sort of reference to how angels could dance on the head of a pin, but more likely, it was a statement of how angels, warriors of God, were not to be trifled with, evidently immune to the tips of the spears they stood on. Some of them were smiling, some of them were frowning, all of them were naked and beautiful, perfect examples of peak physical condition, and all armed with a sword and two angel wings.

Damien probably would have found the Shadow Realm version of the Grand Cathedral to be a powerful and majestic sight. Powerful, yes, but to her, it was creepy.

The parking lot was gone. Instead, the main gate opened up to a long, narrow path of dark asphalt, while all around it sat bushes with sharp branches, each covered in thorns. Another metaphor, something about the road to Heaven or God. The path stopped at the stairs of the cathedral, and the stairs were really, really big. Climbing up them would be tough for any human.

She was surprised there wasn't a big needle head people, or spirits, would have to jump through to get into the building.

Natasha, Matthew, and Arturo sat outside the gate, and looked on from a distance, as two red, hovering creatures with long claws flowed down the path toward them. A small growl drew Natasha's attention, and she looked down at Arturo; he was transformed into his wolf form, and Matthew too. Red wraiths. Taking a cue from his noise, she took them back further and further, and the three of them went completely silent as the two spirits started to talk.



And she didn't understand a single word. It almost sounded Egyptian, but it definitely wasn't. It sounded older, less refined, and harsher.

She looked down at the boys, and the two of them stared at the two wraiths with ears up and pointed. Whatever the spirits were saying, the boys understood it, and from how they were raising their lips in silent snarls, they didn't like what they heard.

Natasha reached into her coat, withdrew her sword, and crouched even lower, until she was head level with the two wolves. They backed up and up, keeping their bodies to the huge fence that circled the cathedral, until they eventually worked their way past the fence corner. There were no nearby structures, leaving only grass between the cathedral and other buildings. A long, winding path led to Three Kings Cemetery, but a look back into that darkness, with her special Auspex to pierce the blackness, showed nothing. They were in the clear to keep eavesdropping.

The two spirits didn't say much. It wasn't like people went around announcing their plans, though she doubted these spirits thought and acted with the same individualism and awareness of people. But they were talking, more strange words she didn't get, but one word stabbed her through the chest. Maria. There was no translation for Maria, it was a name, and they said it.

The three of them merged into the darkness the fence cast onto the grass, nothing but shadows, and the two wraiths drifted by. As they moved on, Matthew, the larger wolf, took a step forward, but Arturo nudged the wolf with his snout and stopped him. The wraiths continued on, and on, until they disappeared into the city heading toward the entertainment district of South Side.

Arturo transformed back into human shape, and remained crouched beside her. Matthew did the same, though he didn't transform as smoothly as Arturo did.

“They were talking about some sort of plan,” Art said. “Something about a ritual that will make blood flow.”

She shivered. “Make b-blood flow?”

“Yeah. They said a few more tears, and the ritual will work.”

She frowned, sheathed her sword, and took a deep breath. “Did they mention Maria?”

“They ... did,” Matthew said, tone sad. He knew she knew they did. “Said something about Maria will soon be ready to trigger the ritual.”

“They said rituals will make blood flow. They said the tears will m-make rituals work. They said ... M-Maria will trigger the ritual. In three different sentences?”

Art nodded with a weak shrug. “The First Tongue isn’t very good at describing linked logic or events in single sentences. Things get broken up.”

“And ... and you’re sure they said—”

“They said Maria,” Matthew said. “Come on, you heard it, I know you did. I saw you flinch.”

She frowned at the big man, but it didn’t last long. “C-Come on, let’s investigate the cathedral.”

“You sure?” Art asked. “We know what we wanted to know.”

“It’s strange for these spirits to be hanging out here, r-right?”

“Not if they work for Maria. Right?”

She shook her head. “Maria’s smart, very smart. She w-wouldn’t leave a trail. Spirits hanging around her d-den is a trail.”

Arturo squatted down in front of her as he looked around. “Maybe she started this deal with spirits before we showed up? So she assumed no one would track her movement in the Hisil. Figured her den was a safe place to do her work?”

“Maybe ... maybe.” If Maria had to do something extreme, like create a ritual site or something like Jacob might do, to give her the tools required to communicate with spirits, then it made sense for her to do it somewhere she felt secure.

Except, Damien often slept in her den now, and said he found nothing to suggest she had a ritual site or anything like that. And Natasha still couldn't help but feel Maria would create such a ritual site — or whatever she'd need — in a place that wasn't her den. Too many unknowns. Not enough evidence. There was only one option: investigate further.

“Let's go in,” she said.

The two boys looked at her like she'd lost her marbles.

“Uh, my nose is picking up something,” Matt said. “There's something in there.”

“I will keep us hidden.” To her surprise, her voice was solid. This was important. She wasn't going to allow another Minerva situation over a misunderstanding.

Art frowned at her, frowned at Matt, frowned at the cathedral, and sighed. “Alright.”

She nodded, and continued around the corner, toward the back of the cathedral. If it was anything like the cathedral in Dolareido, there'd be a lot going on behind it, a garden, trees, and another gate that took a very, very long path through trees near the street, then a winding path between old mausoleums, before eventually arriving at the Three Kings Cemetery a mile away. Buildings in the area

generally had a political or religious tilt, with things like christian and catholic schools, a couple of city buildings like a courtroom, and one food shelter.

In the Hisil, those buildings looked weird, very weird. The schools had colorful bars for doors, like a prison for children. The court building looked like it was upside down. Spirits drifted in and out of them every now and then, but for the most part, this part of the city was void of movement. Still, she did not relax her Cloak of Night, and kept the three of them shrouded as they crept along the huge fence that surrounded the cathedral. Further and further back, behind the building, there was indeed a garden, and she winced at the sight of it. Huge plants full of vines, covered in thorns, like some sort of overgrown evil greenhouse from a comic book.

The gate was open. They could have jumped over, but it would have landed them directly onto the nasty plants. Besides, she didn't see any spirits, and Art and Matt didn't see any either, so they went through the gate.

The backyard of the church wasn't really the back. It was the backyard, but it connected to a door on the building's side, and the three of them had to navigate the path of deadly plants to get to it. She assumed they were deadly anyway, and from how the boys avoided the thorns, they assumed it as well.

The side-back door, a far less impressive thing than the grand double doorway at the top of the front stairs, was little more than a slab of wood with a couple metal bars attached to it. But when Art gave it a tug, it didn't move.

"Locked," he whispered.

Nodding, she looked up, and pointed.

The Hisil did not detract from the Gothic majesty of the building, only enhanced. That meant there were a lot of beautiful stained

glass windows, with lots of ridges of stone under sharp facings. Above them were pillars, many with ornate gargoyles, and others with sharp protrusions. For anyone with good grip and body strength, it'd be an easy building to climb.

Up they went. For Natasha, this was beyond easy. She didn't even weigh a hundred pounds, short as she was, and Kindred strength made it easy for her to latch onto stones and metal, and jump to the next ledge no matter how high it was. Eight feet up? No problem. Twelve feet up? A minor problem, but not much once she put a little vitae into the leap.

The boys had a harder time. Art was very tall, muscular, and heavy. Matthew was taller, more muscular, and heavier. On more than one occasion, Art had to find a good spot to stop, reach down, and help Matthew; he was simply too big. But once they got past the purely vertical, most outward wall of the cathedral, it was easy climbing for all of them. Up sloped roofs, up tilted pillars that connected higher, up tall windows, and eventually up to one of the towers. Up, and into.

From there, it was a slow, quiet descent down into the cathedral. Such an enormous building, meant to be both a majestic display, but also a function as headquarters for Lucas. Lots of rooms, lots of hallways, and several floors.

The goal was simple. Red wraiths were hanging around the cathedral, so, figure out why they kept coming back to the cathedral. The Uratha were convinced the red wraiths were connected to the tears, or maybe even worked for Black Blood. The Uratha — or anyone but Jacob — didn't know what Black Blood actually did, what its goals were, what it was up to, or anything. Knowledge about it was priceless.

Whatever was happening inside the cathedral, it was likely dangerous, and it likely contained knowledge. The Uratha may have

wanted knowledge so they could know how to prevent another Minerva situation, or force the same conclusion. Natasha wanted knowledge so she could help the Prince find out about whatever it was threatening her city, be it Black Blood, or the tears, or Maria, or all of them. She wanted to protect the city. They wanted to protect the Gauntlet and the balance. Hopefully those two goals coincided.

The descent between floors continued without incident. No movement in the darkness within the cathedral, down the winding stairs of the tower, and onto the balcony that overlooked the church pews. The center hall of the gathering was the nave. The left and right wings were the transepts, and the presentation stage was the chancel. The balcony circled the nave and transepts, not the chancel, leaving the enormous, glorious pipe organ free to impose its majesty up to the high ceiling.

Candles lined the walls beneath them. The actual cathedral in Dolareido didn't normally do the candle thing, using electric lighting modeled to look like old school lighting when it could. It was made by a vampire after all, and when a vampire had the option to use electricity, they used electricity. But in the Hisil, electricity didn't power the lights of the cathedral, fire did. The candles were large, and arranged to look like crosses in a sloped pattern. Each pew had a candle cross between it and the wall, and beyond them, behind the pulpit and beside the organ on each side, was a much larger arrangement of candles, again forming the cross.

Without any electric light, or sunlight, the candle lighting was very moody, and she did not like the mood it was going for.

But, despite her and the boys walking from end to end of the balcony, all they found below them, was pews and candles. The pulpit, a much larger version than the one in normal Dolareido, didn't have anything creepy going on, or anything that would suggest spirit summoning. The pipe organ, also emphasized and

exaggerated by the Hisil's warping effect, actually looked like an instrument, not some deadly tool of musical summoning.

"What d-do you think?" she whispered.

Matthew and Arturo both sniffed the air deep, and looked down over the wooden railing.

"There's a loci down there," Art said. "But I don't see it."

"Then ... we should go d-down there." Sword in hand, she moved toward the stairs that led down into the right transept.

Matt stopped her, hand on her shoulder. "Tash, why are you pushing so hard to dig up more evidence? We know the wraiths are working with Maria. That's enough for us to—"

"We d-don't know that! And ... and ... and Maria's not the person she used to be. We ... we aren't being fair, by assuming she's doing something bad."

"You're defending her?" Art said. "You told us about how she treated you in the Invictus. And you told us what kind of person Lucas used to be, a man she loved, desperately. Come on, Natasha. You have to admit our suspicion is warranted. Let's go back and tell Avery what we learned. It's not like we're going to kick down Maria's door and kill her."

Natasha sighed and shook her head. They didn't know, they weren't there. That time when Maria had visited, and had actually talked to Natasha one on one, that'd been a very important night for her, and for the elder. Maria still owed Natasha for a lot of pain, but more than anything, for betraying her and handing her over to Damien and Lucas. But, elders took a long time to change, and Maria had tried. That was something, wasn't it?

“She deserves the benefit of a doubt.” She shrugged herself free of Matthew’s grip, and headed toward the stairs down. The sounds of their footsteps told her they were following, and she relaxed a little. She was being brave, but she still wanted backup when exploring a potentially dangerous area. Normally it’d be Jessie, but since she started working for the Prince, she had to get used to dealing with things on her own.

Except, of course, now she had a couple of werewolves willing to frontline for her, so, she’d be stupid to not take them up on it.

Once they were down among the pews, she took a step back and let Arturo and Matthew go first. They had the noses, and the extra senses to find something invisible like a loci. The two of them walked toward the organ, sniffed a few times, turned around, and walked toward the pulpit.

“It’s a small one,” Art said. “Not exactly sure what it’s drawing. Seems like ... a pretty vague influence. A command?” He shrugged. “It’s very weak. Nearby spirits were just little motes of essence, barely aware, and they took off the moment we got near the building.”

She approached the huge pulpit of beautiful, rich wood, and eyed it closely as she circled it. “Tony had something similar, I think. No wonder Lucas w-went to his old lair, to establish his new one on his return.” It was a pulpit after all, a symbol of authority, if indirectly instead of directly. “Would this b-be enough? For Maria to communicate with spirits?”

Arturo nodded. “Yes, but, barely. There are lots of ways to communicate across the Gauntlet, rituals and stuff, and taking advantage of a loci makes them work a thousand times better. Except this loci is weak. I ... I don’t think it’s what I’m smelling.”

“It’s not,” Matt said. “I think what we’re looking for is ... beneath us?”



“Maria’s lair?” Shivering, Natasha gestured to the organ, and a pathway cut perpendicular of the curving chancel back wall. Except, it wasn’t there. She walked over to the wall where the giant cross of candles sat on the organ’s right, avoided the candles, and pressed her hands against the smooth wall. “Um, the stairs are usually here.”

Matthew came up beside her, and knocked on the wall with a knuckle. “Solid. The Hisil’s probably recreated it somewhere else. This building have a history? Avery only knows a little.”

“A long and t-terrible history,” she said, her voice shifting into storyteller tonality without her meaning to. “Lucas came to D-Dolareido, established the Lancea et Sanctum, and often overstepped himself. The Grand Cathedral was b-built without the Prince’s permission. He attacked Carthians, had some killed. He ... killed the P-Prince’s ghouls, when she began to push back against him.”

The long and terrible history of Lucas, his growing relationship with the Invictus, his attacks on the Carthians, and his eventual war with the Prince, were stories told in whispers. Many of the Kindred in Dolareido didn’t know the specifics. Daniel knew them all, and now that Natasha was a young dragon, he shared with her sensitive details. And she felt comfortable sharing them with Matt and Art, to a point.

“This was his headquarters,” she continued. “He called himself Archbishop, and had b-bishops here, along with his congregation, and new recruits.” Like his new childe, Damien. “I ... I’m sure he did ... powerful things here. Some bad. Some good. Some ... horrible.”

“He sounds like a colossal asshole,” Art said. “Glad I never met him.”

If only she could say the same thing. She’d never met Lucas at first, since she’d been sired around the time he’d been supposedly

killed, over half a century ago. Her first meeting with him, fifty years later, had been a painful experience.

She nodded as she crouched by the wall, and looked for a secret switch. Nothing. “I—”

The cathedral began to shake, and the pews, the candles, and the ground. Several of the enormous candles fell over, some coming toward her, but she jumped away instantly, putting twenty feet between her and the deadly fire. Art had reached out for her to try and save her, but she’d been faster, earning a small smile from the man.

Earthquake? Felt like an earthquake, except not. Felt more like a volcano erupting under their feet.

“Let’s get out of here,” Matt said. “Avery said if Red Tide came around, we were to avoid it. It’s hard to predict, and it’s always angry.”

“Red Tide?” She put her weapons away, and pointed to the side door. “Uh, do we have to run quick? We can break down the door, and—”

The front doors of the church swung open, and true to name, a red tide poured into the church. A lot of red, a lot lot. Crimson. And it was blood. Natasha almost squealed, but managed to keep her voice under control as she snapped her gaze to the boys, but found neither of them panicking. In fact, they were standing their ground, each watching the oncoming wave of thick, red liquid as it crashed over the pews. Wood cracked and smashed, and many of the candles died to the splashing fluid as the entity filled the nave of the cathedral, and the transepts.

The Grand Cathedral was a massive building. Hundreds of people, maybe thousands could have filled the pews on the bottom floor. Red Tide filled the church until Natasha looked down, and found

the liquid churning and splashing up against the three-step stairs that led onto the stage with the pulpit. It was almost overflowing. Where, where had she seen this before? As the spirit thrashed and smashed weight against the walls of the church, tossed pews around, and roared with the anger of the ocean, she stared at the blood red liquid and where it splashed back and forth against the stairs of the stage. Where had she seen this before?

A movie, one she'd seen when she was still human, before her embrace. A man with a staff told the pharaoh to let his people go. The pharaoh said no. The man called upon God, and God turned the rivers to blood. In the movie, that had included a temple that doubled as a fountain and river. That scene had terrified her as a child.

Red Tide made that scene look tame.

She didn't really know what to expect from the spirit called Red Tide. According to the boys, the pack avoided it. It was in a turf war with Black Blood and Street-Tail King, and as far as the pack could tell, it was a spirit of blood, likely birthed hundreds of years ago by early vampire activity. When Dolareido's vampire population began to boom, back when the elders had grown comfortable with their work on the city, about two hundred years ago, blood became a commodity. According to the boys, that sort of event triggered all sorts of spirit development in cities; it was always cities with the greatest spiritual upheavals, because of the human population.

Well, if the boys weren't going to run, it was either because they knew it was pointless, or they weren't worried. They did just say they were supposed to avoid it, but now they stood their ground. Not long ago, they'd all run into Black Blood in the middle of the street, and the spirit hadn't touched them, so maybe Red Tide wouldn't be a concern either? Or, running was pointless?

She fidgeted, fought the desire to pull out her weapons, and watched the giant pool of red settle. As it did, something surfaced from the red. It didn't come up onto the stage with them, but rather emerged from the center of the red liquid itself, in the center of the pool. With only the two big sets of candles behind the trio still lit, the lighting drowned Red Tide in high contrast, emphasizing the shadows of its squirming body, and Natasha trembled as she stared. It was like watching some sort of god of blood who deigned it necessary to form itself, for communication purposes.

If it'd taken the form of a burning bush, she'd have turned around and bolted. Damien would have probably imploded.

Unlike Black Blood, who seemed to be made of black ooze, and a giant black skeleton that put Athalia to shame, Red Tide didn't show any bones. At first, the form it took was far closer to Flowing sanctuary, a torso atop a slowly spinning vortex. But as the blood dripped away from its body, she realized it looked nothing like Flow. The mass of its body, if that's what it actually was, looked a lot more like a tentacle monster with leathery red skin. Much as she tried to think of it more like an octopus or a squid, those weren't accurate. Tentacle monster was the best her brain could come with, considering the borderline panic surging through her, sending vitae into her fingers and toes.

It had a mouth, something huge and carved out of the red, with enormous white teeth within. It had eyes, dozens of them, all black and all over the upper half of its fat body. And, of course, it had tentacles, red tentacles made of leathery red that crashed down against the crimson liquid around it. Each forty-foot tendril cracked at the air, and Natasha braced herself to get splattered. She didn't. Somehow the entity's pool of red and dripping crimson droplets remained attached to it, like how Flow's water body followed her perfectly.

“Uratha. K ... Kindred,” it said, struggling with the second word. Uratha was a word in the First Tongue. Kindred was not. It had trouble with other languages then. “Why here?” Oh god that voice. If a kraken sea monster could have a voice, it’d be this.

She raised a brow as she looked up at the boys. Black Blood was verbose and even artful with its English. Flowing Sanctuary spoke well, too. Even Safe of Grey Street spoke decently. Red Tide struggled. Either it didn’t know English, was too stupid to talk in any language, or it just didn’t care. Then again, it was talking English, and since the Uratha spoke the First Tongue, it was doing it for her sake. How ... nice of it?

“Red Tide,” Art said, and he nodded to the spirit. “We’re here investigating the wraiths that abandoned you.” For some reason, he started grinning. Hitting the spirit in its ego was a surefire way to make it angrier. Damn it, Art.

The red kraken creature snorted, and slapped a tentacle against the pool around it. “You. Here. Hunting tears.”

Natasha opened her mouth, and shut it quick. Don’t speak unless spoken to was probably a healthy approach right now.

“Maybe.” Art stepped out from around the pulpit, and slowly walked the edge of the stage, feet inches away from the red liquid. “What’s it to you?” Wow. He was being very ballsy with the colossal, and likely very deadly spirit. Maybe it wasn’t allow to attack them? It had bans, like any spirit, but she didn’t know what they were. Far as she knew, the Uratha didn’t know them either.

“They grow. Black Blood near. Azlu.”

“Azlu?” Matthew, never leaving Natasha’s side, ground his teeth until Natasha heard a click. “Street-Tail King said the azlu showed up unnaturally.”

“Tears,” Red Tide continued, “and more.”

“More?” Art said.

“Azlu came for tears. Came for different ... reasons.”

Art, on the other side of the stage, looked at Matthew with raised brow. Something about Red Tide’s information shocked them, which was weird, because it mirrored what Street-Tail King told them about the azlu.

“Know what those reasons are?” Art asked.

The spirit snorted, a loud, booming sound that made the pews floating around in its body tremble. “No. I am ... controlling ... tears, until resolution.”

“Makes sense. If you can control them, you can prevent problems. But, I don’t understand why you’re here, in the Grand Cathedral.”

“Tear ... below.” It slapped the red water once. “Get out.”

Everyone stood up rigid, glanced at each other, looked at the floor beneath them, and then back to Red Tide.

“Are you sure?” Matt asked. “We can—”

“Yes. Get out.”

Natasha took a small step forward, and slightly raised a hand. “B-B-But, we’re trying to find out if—”

“GET. OUT.” The pool of red churned and boiled, and the kraken grew higher and higher, adding a dozen feet, and then another onto its colossal height, until a monster capable of swallowing a house stared down at them with its many eyes. “GET. OUT.” The cathedral shook, pews cracked against each other, and crimson liquid splashed up against the walls.

Natasha backed off. So did the werewolves. She didn't need to know much about spirits to recognizing when something far stronger than reasonable, was no longer willing to be reasonable. They turned, and fled; upstairs, because the titanic, angry blood monster didn't bother to move out of the way despite its orders. It wasn't a very nice monster. She found herself wishing it was Black Blood.

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They rejoined the rest of the pack in the apartment building Avery stayed in, and Natasha could see the pack leader was angry. But judging from the expression on her face, she wasn't angry with them specifically. Woo.

“Ran into Red Tide too?” Avery asked. That explained her mood, then.

Art matched her mood as he explained what happened. It wasn't usually what Art did when talking, but Natasha could see he was matching Avery's mood because it made Avery easier to deal with. It was a family thing, something family did when they were around each other for years and years. They figured out each other's personalities and learned to work with — or fight — each other's idiosyncrasies. If Avery was grumpy, it seemed she was happier if she felt everyone else was grumpy.

And Arturo played into that with expert control. The man really was smarter than he let on.

“A tear, in the Grand Cathedral?” she said.

He nodded. “But we didn't have time to find a way down there. Or, hell, maybe there isn't a way down there? Could be an underground passage or something that comes from somewhere else, or—”

Avery shook her head, “Red Tide ran into us, and told us ... mostly that we're useless and can't find the azlu. It'll kill them itself. Then

it moved onto the cathedral, and booted you three out because it doesn't trust us. It thinks the cathedral is a way to that tear."

"Red Tide's an idiot. It could be wrong."

"Red Tide isn't an idiot, idiot." Growling, Avery poked the big man in the chest a couple times. "It just doesn't think the same way we do. If it went to the Grand Cathedral because it doesn't want you three around a tear, then it's a safe bet there's a tear you can get to from the fucking Grand Cathedral."

Matt and Art sighed but nodded, growing quiet.

"Now," Avery continued, "you said you found red wraiths talking about Maria?"

"Yes," they said, in unison.

"And they were talking about the tears? And a ritual? Blood flowing?"

"Yes," they said.

Ugh, it was happening. People were making assumptions, and that was not acceptable. She stepped up, and Avery eyed her as she sat down on her couch.

"What, Tash?"

"D-Damien sleeps in Maria's den. He's with her all the time. He hasn't seen a thing t-t-to make him think Maria is doing anything strange, anything involve tears, or anything involving sp-pirits."

Every werewolf in the room, which was all of them save three, watched her with sad eyes. They all knew where Avery was going, and none of them looked ready to disagree with her. If anything,



they all looked convinced, even Matthew and Arturo, and that was not acceptable.

Avery shook her head. “Tash, come on. If it quacks like a duck, it’s —”

“There are plenty of birds that quack and look similar to ducks from a d-distance!” She glared at the woman as she stood in front of her. Avery was short, not as short as Tash, but short, and was sitting on the couch. Easy eye contact. “It’s ... it’s not smart, to assume anything.”

Avery watched her for a while, her hard expression softening to something closer to reasonable. After a minute of silence, Avery sighed and nodded as she sank back into her dingy old couch.

“The only reason I brought you in on this is because Matt and Art can vouch for you. But the evidence is piling up, Natasha. I trust that you’re not telling Maria about any of this?”

“I’m n-not. I made that promise, remember?”

Avery leaned forward, and held out her pinkie finger. “Swear? Even with this new info?”

Natasha blinked at the finger, at the woman, the finger, and eventually took it in her own. “N-No spit? Or cut open the palm?”

“You can’t spit or bleed without faking it.”

“True.” Tash looked down at where their two fingers were hooked, and then gave Avery her best serious face. “I swear.”

She meant it, too. But, just because she promised to not tell Maria about the pack looking at her like she was a target, that didn’t mean Natasha wouldn’t do something else to prevent a catastrophe.

“Alright,” she said with finality, then let go. “You really think Maria isn’t the cause of these tears?”

“T-Too many things don’t add up.”

“Yeah, I get that. If they did add up, I’m sure a lot more people than us would be looking at her. But, if you think Maria’s innocent, I’ll try and be more thorough with our recon.”

“Thank you. How long d-do you think you’ll be?”

“I don’t know. I’m not rushing into anything, Tash, but I’m not going to sit around and wait for shit to get worse.”

Which meant Natasha had an unknown deadline to race against, if she wanted to help Maria.

Mekhets hunted out the truth behind secrets like moths to flame; the curse of their bloodline. But she had a hard time believing her desire to find the root of this mystery was the only reason. A part of her wanted to help Maria, the part of her that was too damn nice.

Hopefully that niceness wouldn’t get her killed.

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~~Jack~~

Waking up from a stake in the heart was never fun. It probably wasn’t a good thing he recognized the feeling, but also probably something a lot of vampires did as they got older. Still, it really sucked. Pain flooded him, and only began to recess when his vampire blood filled the hole a piece of wood had put there.

He lifted his head. Apparently he was against a wall, and when he looked up at his hands, they were bound by some seriously hefty chains. Like, extremely serious chains. He gulped. Those were the sorts of chains someone would use to tie up a ludicrously powerful person.

There was light, some LEDs built into the ceiling, and he sighed relief as a few more glances around showed the familiar black marble under the familiar light. This was the Elysium Tower.

Movement drew his eye. There were people in the room with him, two of them standing very close, and a few standing further back.

After a harder sigh, and a few experimental jingles of his chains, he smiled at the two women in front of him, wearing business suits, with arms folded under their chests like they were in an important meeting. They kinda were, he supposed.

“Prince. Great grandsire.”

“Jack,” they said together. He chuckled a little at that.

“My little Ventrue,” Antoinette continued, “what have you gotten yourself into?”

Elaine came closer, and took his chin in her grip. She was gentle. “It is him. It’s in his eyes.” Eye contact. A dangerous thing, considering what the curse could do. But then, she was an ancient Ventrue, and one who’d survived the curse. If anyone could handle a mind meld with the Strix curse, it was her.

She had really pretty eyes, brown, with a hint of harshness to them he didn’t see in Antoinette. Maybe it was a Ventrue versus Daeva thing. He knew Antoinette could become an ice queen, and slaughter dozens with her bare hands if she needed to. He was sure Elaine could do the same. But Antoinette could hide her brutal side, pretend to be the innocent doe or the playful vixen. He doubted Elaine could ever disguise the edge in her gaze.

“It is him,” a quiet voice whispered in the dark. “Auspex sees only Jack.”

That was probably the sheriff, but Jack couldn't see him anywhere. Creepy. Impressive.

“He won't take over unless I let him. That seems to be the pattern,” Jack said. “He's never taken over without my permission.”

“He?” Antoinette said.

“He, it. It's a part of me. It...” He winced and looked away, only to get a glimpse of the people standing further back. Damien and Jessy, his friends and fellow Right Hands. They looked at him like he was dangerous.

He looked down at himself. Suit gone, weapons gone, pants half gone, shoes still mostly intact. His wounds were mostly healed, but some remained, and he winced. It wasn't like he didn't remember what happened in the fight, what he'd done to beat that monster in a legit fist brawl, but seeing the result of it must have painted a pretty horrible image for his friends. Seeing it actually happen wouldn't have painted a much better one, honestly.

“Where're the others?” he asked.

Antoinette sighed, came closer, and gave his cheek a soft pat. “Athalia and Fiona took Sándor back into the Dream, and likely off to speak with Azamel. Now that he owes them, he will be more apt to listen to their request.

Jack nodded. “That's ... good. He'll be fine.”

Elaine chuckled and gestured to Damien. Damien, a little hesitant at first, eventually walked up to join them. The door out of the prison cell was wide open, letting in more light from the hallway, and telling him where he was: one of those hallways he normally avoided. Antoinette kept prisoners in these cells, and she still had some.

“Sándor will be fine,” Damien said. “Once he got back into his lair through the tear, his recovery was quick. Clara will be fine, too. Sabrina—”

“Sabrina?” Antoinette asked, eyebrow raised.

“A ghost,” Jack said. “We ran into her when the azlu attacked us. She, uh, was Viktor’s ghoul.” Elaine, who’d been looking down in contemplation, raised her head at that, and they met eyes again for a few seconds. Jack continued. “She found out who I was, and pledged to help me, because I am ... Viktor’s grandchilde.” The words tasted bitter.

“That is strangely fortuitous, my love.” Antoinette stepped back to stand beside Elaine, and also held his gaze. “And from Damien’s recounting, as much as it pains me to say, you owe your life to the curse. It defeated the azlu, alone. Damien and his companions merely dealt with what remained.”

He choked on a small chuckle, looked at his palms, squeezed them a few times with the disgusting memory of what the curse did, and then looked back at the two elders. “Think ... think you can leave me here for tonight? I’m starving, but I need some time to ... to do a little soul searching, I guess. The curse is weak without blood.”

Damien nodded and stepped back with Jessy out of the cell. Elaine stayed with Antoinette for a moment as the two looked at him with worried expressions, before they too, eventually left.

“I will be here come dusk, with food, my love,” Antoinette said.

Daniel stepped out of the shadows, making Jack jump a little, before the man stepped past the Prince and into the hall.

Jack gave Antoinette a small smile, nodded, and closed his eyes. Antoinette closed the door.

Ok, curse. We need to talk.

## Chapter 125

~~Jack~~

Not much longer until sunrise. God, he was starving. Strong as the curse was, it wasn't invincible, and it'd used a lot of his available vitae to fight that creature.

Fought, and won. Don't forget that.

Jack silenced his thoughts as best he could, and waited, but the curse said nothing. Just as Jack had noticed throughout the battle with the azlu, and Sándor's Horror before that, and the attack on the hospital before that, the curse had trouble maintaining control after expending a lot of vitae. It, or he, was connected to the Beast in a way not dissimilar to Jack.

That meant, while Jack starved, became weak, and felt his Beast instincts kick into overdrive, the curse itself went quiet, growing weak as well. A flaw in the curse? A weakness. Despite how the Beast grew louder and louder inside Jack's head and chest as his blood lust increased, the curse said nothing. If the curse was simply the Beast given voice, it'd have an easier time taking over him when he was hungry, not a harder time.

The Strix curse wasn't the Beast then, but something that infected it, imbued it with power, indirectly imbued Jack with power, and ... what, created another personality in his head? Without a power source, of the 'essence of life' as it put it, the curse was weak. Jack became weak too. The Beast did not.

Feed. Feed. Feed. Find something with a heartbeat and drain it. Get blood. Get the essence of life. Devour. Fill. Blood. Blood. His Beast sounded like that, and now his Beast was insanely powerful, but that wasn't the voice of the curse. Or maybe, instead of thinking

of the curse as the power given to his Beast and the voice of the curse, he needed to start thinking of them as separate things? His Beast was now absurdly powerful, so was he, and so was ... this other entity, now inside him?

He chuckled, and let his head sag. It'd been a long time since he'd been starving like this, truly hungry, to the point he could feel a frenzy under his skin, ready to break free and take over. But the Prince had him locked up tight. An elder Daeva or Nosferatu might be able to break the chains with pure strength. A Gangrel could probably transform into something that let them slip free. A Mekhet would probably be screwed, and so was he. But that was good. If he frenzied, no one would get hurt, and someone would feed him some blood come the morning.

The last time he was this hungry, it'd been his first night as a vampire. He'd frenzied, appetite surprising even his sire, and he'd killed someone. Mrs. Pavala.

Mrs. Pavala. God, he was happy he didn't run into her ghost. The guilt would have ripped him in half.

It made him wonder, though. What were the requirements for becoming a ghost? It must have had something to do with the emotional and mental state of the person. Sabrina was so devoted to her sire, that dying in a skirmish with Carthians left her utterly unable to accept the reality. Mary apparently unlocked the memories Jack had suppressed inside her; suppressed, not wiped, evidently. And that had driven her into such a rage that she didn't move on either.

Clara had said to ask the hunters. Good idea.

*Jack.*

A tiny whisper pushed through Jack's thoughts.



Still with me?

*I'm here. You'll never be rid of me.*

Yeah, we'll see about that.

*Why do you hate me so much?*

Why? Why? Are you fucking serious? You snuck into my thoughts for months, years! You planted your claws in my brain and my personality, my instincts and desires, and twisted them. It wasn't until I freed you that I could even think clearly anymore.

*I gave you strength.*

You gave me a guilt complex. Christ, I've been through fucking hell, and it could have been so much better, and smoother, if you hadn't—

*Hadn't what? Gave you the strength to Dominate the hunters when they first kidnapped you? Or gave you the strength to Dominate Damien's mind, and save your lover? So many times, you tapped into my strength, and so many times, I pushed it on you so you could save yourself. You dragged yourself out of that fire you created to kill your grandsire, cut in half face to crotch, and you lived because of me. You got revenge because of me! Angela is dead because of me! You have a mansion. You have power and money. You have the Prince—*

Nothing. Nothing about what you have done, is why Antoinette and I are an item. If anything, it's in spite of your presence that I found such an amazing woman, a woman who likes who and what I am, and vice versa.

*And if it wasn't for me, she'd be in her basement, crying her silly, ancient tears, over her dead lover.*

You were just saving yourself.

*Exactly. Saving me. Saving you.*

Don't talk about us like we're the same person.

*I am you!*

No! You can't have me!

*Ha ha ha.*

Jack sighed and let his head droop. The lights were still on in the room, since it didn't matter to a Kindred how many lights were on, when dawn came. He looked up at his wrists, and how the wounds on his hands were healed. The memory of barbed wire cutting through his palms was vivid, and he gazed at them.

God, he was starving.

*Jack. Don't trust her.*

Who?

*Elaine.*

Fuck you. She's Antoinette's friend. She trusts her, and I trust the Prince's judgment more than my own.

*Elders are blind to the past, Jack. Think. Would Elaine really help her, just to help her, and you? What Kindred is so thoughtful of others?*

Julias was. You know, my sire? Her grandchilde?

*Don't be a fool. The Strix curse was created with a sacrifice.*

Yeah, and? That was centuries ago. What does—

*Think about it. Just ... think.*

The curse went silent, and Jack sighed relief. The curse needed blood to run, and now that Jack was starving, it couldn't keep it up. If the Beast inside Kindred grew louder and louder the hungrier the vampire became, why did the curse grow quieter? The more details he could put together, the more he had to work with with Elaine.

The curse, it, he, was Jack, in a way. He hadn't been lying. Somehow the curse had latched onto him and created an entirely new personality, something that existed parallel inside Jack, and shared his body with the Beast. It wasn't Jack fighting against his Beast. It was Jack and the curse, fighting for control of his mind, while the curse had also inflated his Beast's power to the extreme.

It was such a disgusting problem. If he could get rid of the curse, he'd be free of his influence, but so much weaker. Given the chance, he'd happily become weak, if it meant having this thing in his head gone. The curse was sick, and horrible.

And he had a point. Not about helping Jack out a lot, fuck that. Power wasn't worth having this abomination fighting for his god damn body. He had a point about Elaine.

Jack laughed, and smiled at the floor as he pieced together some memories. Not once had Antoinette left him alone with Elaine. Either she was around, or the sheriff was around. They didn't trust her either, not completely.

Then again, Jack had spent almost every night for a while now with some part of his body on her breasts. Head, back, chest, usually his dick. Antoinette really, really, really really got off on getting him off, and was more than happy to use Elaine to indulge her kink. And, of course, he was happy to go along with whatever Antoinette wanted. Thankfully, that was usually something he wanted, too.

Each time he met Elaine's eyes, he definitely saw an edge in them, something violent, something deadly, and some awareness lurking within. She was as old as Antoinette, and it'd be stupid to think that she couldn't fight the Prince if it came to it. And still, despite all that, Antoinette felt comfortable having sex with her, and smooshing Jack between their boobs like he was sliced meat in desperate need of being sandwiched.

Maybe it was because she was a Ventrue? Daeva were fast and strong, and very, very good at melee confrontations. Ventrue were not. Ventrue were generals, meant to give orders. Maybe Antoinette figured she'd be able to handle anything Elaine could throw at her in such close proximity?

No, that wasn't it. Antoinette trusted her. Antoinette legitimately trusted her. What sort of friendship did they have, for a secret as absurd as the curse, something Elaine used to have, to not break Antoinette's faith?

---

~~Eric~~

The moment they were inside his apartment, Jessy started to strip.

"Uh, again?" he said. "We went just a little while ago."

"Yeah, but I'm always horny after a successful mission."

He paused and thought about that. It was true, mission successful. They'd showed up, saved their friends, and killed the azlu. Not all of them, since a few spiders were apparently wandering around, not a part of the greater hybrid monster thing, but Caleb and Noah insisted the few that remained would not be a threat for a long time.

“What if I don’t want to have sex?” he said, and folded his arms across his chest.

Shirtless but still in her bra, she turned around and looked at him, hands behind her back and ready to unclasp the infamous barrier. But she didn’t.

“I’d call you a liar.”

He laughed, and leaned against the closet wall near his front door. “Oh?”

“Yeah! I am a mighty gorgeous piece of ass, and you are a werewolf with an endless libido.” Grinning, she came up to him, and pressed her hands against his chest lightly, before getting in closer and pressing her bra and breasts into his chest.

He took a deep breath, and told his libido to shut up for a moment. “Come on, you know what I want to talk about.”

She frowned, stepped back, jumped onto the couch, and bounced a few times before settling. “Do ... do we have to?”

“You don’t want to?”

“I don’t like doing the talking thing. I like doing the action stuff, the kissing and fucking, even the cuddling, I like that stuff. Talking about our ... feelings, and stuff, it’s not fun.” That was telling, especially how she looked away when she said it.

He sat down on the couch beside her, eyes down as he struggled to find a way to word this. He was not eloquent. He was a dumb motherfucker.

Kat hopped up onto his lap, and sniffed him several times. Considering the shit he’d gone through, and all the weird blood he’d gotten on him, she was probably smelling some of that. The spider

blood disappeared when he transformed, and he was thankful for that; suit remained intact too. But he could still smell it, and Kat frowned up at him, smelling it too and not happy about it.

“Sorry girl.”

Sighing, Jessy reached over, scooped up Kat the cat, and smooshed her into her bra as she hugged her. Eric doubted Kat cared about boobs, but she did care about soft things, and she rubbed her cheek into Jessy’s chest with the hug. Jessy smelled strange too, but Kat didn’t seem to care when it came to her.

“As you may have already guessed,” Jessy said, “I was, in fact, involved in a relationship once.”

That wasn’t what she’d told him before, but he nodded and rolled with it.

“With your cat?”

She laughed and nodded. “The cat, too. But, I mean with a person. A human, when I was just a teenager.”

“Oh? Want to ... talk about it?” He slid in a little closer to her, hooked his arm over her shoulders, and leaned back on the couch. Without comment, she snuggled into the nook of his arm, let Kat settle on her lap, and kept her eyes down as well.

“It was dumb. Just kid love, you know? It end badly.”

“How’d it end?”

“Told him I loved him.”

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Ouch.”

She laughed, and scratched Kat around the ears until the dumbass was purring like a motor. “No shit. He dumped me on the spot, practically running away.”

“Did this guy ... have tattoos, and piercings, and smoked, and whatnot?” This would have been the sixties, after all. “Maybe drove a motorcycle he really wasn’t old enough to handle?”

She laughed again. “Yeap, exactly. I fell for a bad boy, like every teenager girl does. When I told him how I felt, he bolted in the other direction.”

“Rough way to learn that lesson.”

“Yeap. And ever since then, it left an impression.”

He leaned in, kissed the top of her head, and rubbed her further shoulder as he gently hugged her. “I don’t think you can blame your view of romance on that single event. Don’t give the guy so much credit.”

“I know I know. But, I’d be lying if I said it didn’t affect me at all. After that, I found it easier to keep people at a distance, you know? And by then I was completely addicted to sex, so it wasn’t like I was going to stop fucking any time soon.”

He nodded, as if it was perfectly normal. Most people didn’t give into their desires with such passion, but Jessy did, and had the rough-and-tough personality to stay afloat in her world despite it. It was strangely charming. Her life could be written as some sort of coming-of-age story for aggressive women.

“Well,” he said, “I’m no psychologist, but my last marriage taught me one very important lesson.”

“Don’t marry money?”

He choked on a snorting laugh; her jab had been a mix of hilarious and painful. “I was the money in that relationship, remember?”

She shrugged and beamed up at him.

“The lesson,” he continued, “was just ... talk to each other. It can be strange, awkward, and even painful. It might feel cheesy or stupid, to try and put life shit into words. But, you have to do it, because it’s a thousand times worse when you don’t.”

Sighing, she turned her head up to him, and nudged her forehead into his neck. “How wise you are, old one.”

He turned his head to rest his cheek on her hair, and squeezed her further shoulder toward him. “I love you.” Off like a band-aid, and his heart rate skyrocketed the moment the words were out of his mouth.

She shivered when he said it, like she’d just heard a balloon pop near her head, or a gunshot.

“Say ... say more things.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. That was a lot better an answer than ‘I don’t.’

“You’re a lot more honest than I figured any woman could be. You’re passionate, and you know what you like. You’re smarter than you realize. You’re genuinely fun to talk to and be with. You’re the reason I’m happy to wake up every day.”

“Plus the money.”

“Yeap, I do appreciate the money, too.”



“And I’m fucking gorgeous.” She managed to put some of her usual attitude into the comment, but her voice wavered with nervousness as she said it.

He laughed. “You’re gorgeous and you cum more easily than a single mother testing her new high powered vibrator.” Well, if she was going to go there, he could too.

That earned some laughs from her, and she resumed petting Kat, while at the same time nudging her head into his neck some more.

“I ... I love you too, ok?” She shivered again when she said it. “Ugh, I sound like a trashy dime store romance novel.”

He shook his head, and hugged her closer. “No, you don’t. Really. I ... I don’t want that sorta shit to ever make you think you shouldn’t say something, ok? Presentation and shit, I know vampires are into that, Invictus especially apparently. But that ruined my last relationship, like it was fucking poison. And since we’re both in do-or-die vocations, last thing I want is for us to ruin shit because we don’t communicate.”

“But, miscommunication and stupid decisions are the cornerstone of romance plots!” They both gagged at the same time. And then they laughed. “Ok, now we’re definitely having sex.”

“Say what?”

“First ‘I love you’? Definitely need sex. Slow, tender, romantic, lovey dovey sex.” She set Kat on the back of the couch, and crawled onto his lap. Wearing only her suit pants and a black bra, she looked damn good. Smelled a bit weird, though. “Because you love me. Looove me? Looooove me.”

He blinked, and looked left and right as if trying to escape. Which earned a punch from the woman, right in the shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said between wince and groan. “Just, didn’t expect you to be so...”

“You awakened the little girl inside me! My heart is bursting!” She laughed again, shrugged, and leaned in close so she could hug him. “But seriously, I ... I’m fucking glad, ok? Really fucking glad. It’s damn hard for me to say shit like this.” She kissed his neck, sank her knees into the couch around him, and pushed her hips forward. “I love you. And ... it’s ... exciting to say.”

“It is pretty exciting. And ... soothing.”

“Fucking right. I ... god, it feels like I can finally...”

“Breathe?” he said.

“Vampire.”

“Oh, right.”

She shrugged again, and hugged him tighter, burying her face in his neck. “So you ... really love me?”

When she lifted her head, they met eyes, and Eric found himself staring; gazing, really. Something about her was so much easier to sync with, to be comfortable around, to not feel like she was looking for a way to stab him in the back, compared to the other women he’d been with. Funny, considering she was a vampire, and Sheryl was just your everyday human. Sheryl and him had had trouble looking each other in the eyes, unless it was sexual. With Jessy, he could meet her eyes, and they could look at each other without issue. They did it now, watched each other, gazed at each other, and it felt soothing.

Of course, soothing slowly turned into heat, as Jessy inched in closer, and nudged her lips into his. After a moment, he turned it

into a kiss, set his hands on her hips, and pulled her as close as her body could go.

“So, uh,” she said between kisses, “how do, um, couples normally fuck, after their ‘I love yous’?”

“You had it right, I think. Slow, tender, lovey dovey sex. Maybe some candles. Maybe in the tub?” Half for quality romantic sex, half to get clean.

Laughing, she slipped off his lap, stood up, and put her hands on her hips as she looked around in contemplation. “Do they really?”

“Probably not. Sheryl and I fucked in the back of the limousine.” Drunk.

“Ha. Sounds to me like you need proper I-love-yous sex. Candles — you handle the candles — and hot tub sound great. And I’ll get the lube.”

“Lube?”

Nodding, she tossed off her bra as she marched toward his bathroom. “Gonna have some nice, long, drawn out sex. Water sex requires lube.”

“Right, right.”

“And anal.”

“Right, right.”

---

~~Beatrice~~

Triss and Jen returned from their outing. Both fed, leaving a couple hours before sunrise, and that was usually a good time to head back home. It didn’t take a vampire very long to cross the city,

but more than one vampire had died to sunlight because shit happened on the way home. It paid to be cautious.

The two vamps crawled through the tiny entrance of the Circle's cave, and were greeted by the usual sounds of Othello fucking someone. The dumbass Daeva was a master of Majesty, and often had one or two or seven women gobbling his cock, though he didn't usually bring meals back to the cave, except for his ghoul Madison. She only knew about the seven-on-one orgy because she found him at Bloodlust one time, with seven girls fighting for room to get on him. But then again, he probably didn't need Majesty to make that happen, not in Dolareido, and not with a body like his.

And, as per usual, Othello didn't bother to close the hanging fur over his alcove, which meant Jen and Triss both got to see him and Madison having a good time. Tonight, Othello sat against the curved wall of the entrance to his alcove, so half of him wasn't even inside it. Soon he'd be fucking the middle of the cave, if someone didn't tell him to back the fuck up.

Triss marched over to him, black combat boots making a hilarious amount of noise against the stone.

“Othello, dude, what the fuck?”

“Beatrice. Been looking to talk.” The gorgeous man looked up at her with his usual half-glazed look, and smiled in pleasure. He always looked like he'd just taken a drag of something, despite how that didn't work for Kindred, but at least this time he had reason for his glazed look: Madison sat on her butt beside him, her ass pointed toward his alcove, while she leaned over his lap, and had his dick in her mouth.

Triss did her best to ignore the sight, but it was hard. Madison was a beautiful woman, black with very dark skin, super short curly hair, and very, very curvy. She wasn't chubby, but she had some meat on her bones, with a huge ass and big, heavy tits that rested

against Othello's leg while she sucked on his cock. Othello, with right hand down against the cave floor, had his left hand in her hair, and combed it encouragingly as she worked to get his huge dick down her throat. She succeeded, and Triss had to force her eyes up.

But, god damn, Othello was a beautiful fucker. The huge bodybuilder build would have looked too extreme on most people, but on Othello, it looked like a perfect counterpart to his laid-back personality. His brown eyes, long dark hair, and dark tan skin, highlighted his muscles just right, and Triss found her eyes drifting back down his chest, his abs, and down onto where Madison eased her head back up off his dick. She smiled up at Triss as she set a few kisses on the swollen head of her man's length, earning a thick drop of precum she licked up.

Fuck, what did he say? Right, talk, he wanted to talk.

“About what?”

“You've been going out every night with Jen, and from the looks on your faces, it isn't to fuck. What's up?”

Jen slid up beside Triss, close enough to touch shoulder to shoulder. “It's private.”

“Private? We're all witches and warlocks here.”

Triss snorted, and bumped her hip with Jen as she gestured down at the man currently getting fellatio. “Yeah, we are, but some things should be private. Catch my drift?”

He just smiled in that dumbass, ‘I'm too high to care' way, leaned his head back against the wall of stone behind him, and smiled at her. “What, don't like Madison?”

“It's not Madison I'm annoyed with. It's you.”

“Well, if you’ve got a problem, come down here and do something about it.” The threat was not a threat, from the playfulness in his voice, and the glint in his eyes. It was an invitation to have sex. “Come on, it’s been months since—”

Jen stepped in and sliced the air with her hand. “Don’t even, Othello.”

Realizing his mistake, he quickly put up his hands in surrender. “Sorry, sorry. My bad.” He was going to say it’d been months since Julias died, the dumbass.

Jen snorted and walked off to her alcove. Triss watched her for a moment before looking back down at Othello, and his proceeding blowjob. She doubted she’d ever have sex with him; way too dumb a man. But honestly, after everything she’d been through, it felt kinda nice to have someone not tiptoe around her about Julias anymore. The only person who normally didn’t give two shits about her dead lover was Jacob, and as infuriating conversations with her boss were, they were also liberating.

If Othello felt comfortable enough with her to invite her into his bed, again, she could feel comfortable enough to laugh at him, and appreciate the compliment.

“Can you just ... I mean, don’t actually start fucking in the middle of the cave, ok?”

“No worries, not gonna happen.” He gave her a lazy salute, and slipped his left hand back into Madison’s hair, earning a happy purr from her. A guiding grip eased the woman’s head back down, and she had to lean in while lifting her back to create the straight angle needed to get him to the base. But she managed it, mouth opened wide and lips spread around his girth, with a few licks sneaking in there. Othello had evidently trained her into a deepthroating pro.

“But, I guess I am being a stick in the mud,” Triss said. “Can you blame me?”

“Nope,” he said. “But, we are witches of the Circle, you know. We’re not Invictus, or Carthians, or Sanctified, and we’re definitely not dragons. We’re a small, seriously fucked up family.”

That, was damn nice of him to say, and she smiled at him for saying it.

“You just want a piece of my ass.”

“Ha, me? Madison here wants that ass just as much.” The hand in his ghoul’s hair slipped down her neck, down her naked back, and down to her ass. He gave it a slap, and used his right hand to keep Madison from lifting her head when she tried. Her ass rippled, and Triss licked a fang as she watched. Softer than Triss’s ass, but that didn’t change that it had the perfect shape and—

“Triss?” Jen said, head poking out from her alcove. Their shared alcove, really, since Triss and Jen slept together every dawn, these days.

“Wha? Ah, sorry, just ... distracted.”

Chuckling like she’d caught a kid with the cookie jar, Jen stepped out of the alcove and walked over to them. Except now she was naked, and everyone turned to watch the drop-dead gorgeous woman come join them. A woman of average height and tiny waist should not be allowed to have as many curves as Jen did. Her big tits and ass might not have been as big as Madison’s, but Jen was quite thin, giving her an almost Barbie doll look. Everyone had to watch when she decided to flaunt it. Though, when Madison tried to lift her head so she could gawk at Jen too, Othello forced her head back down onto him, balls deep. And from the shiver that went through Madison’s body, Triss could see the woman really got off on being dominated by her master.

Jen stopped beside Triss again, a bit closer to Othello, and gave him a gentle kick in the side. “Come on, leave Triss alone. She’s not like us.”

Othello grinned as he looked the naked Jen up and down several times. “Us? Been a while since you’ve been with your ghouls, Jen. Longer, since you’ve been with mine.”

Jen shrugged, squatted down beside the man, and smirked at Othello from only a foot away. Being naked in front of him meant nothing to her, except for maybe a fun game. The two of them were fucking bombshells, and they knew it.

“No, I haven’t, because I was...” Jen looked down, a bit of confusion on her face as she dug through some thoughts. But it faded after a while, hidden behind her poker face. She reached out, and flicked Othello in his big hard chest, causing him to wince and let go of Madison’s head, who took the opportunity to lift it and get a breath in. Which gave Jen the opportunity to reach out, and flick the man in his big hard dick.

“Hey, ow.” Othello frowned, but it only lasted for a moment before he laughed. They all laughed, a warm and oddly gentle sound. Even Madison laughed, and she leaned in, gave his dick a kiss like she was tending a booboo, before she took his length into her mouth again.

“Such a slut,” Jen said between chuckles. “Typical Daeva. Just wants to be the center of attention.”

Jen stood up, and the two women watched as Othello, still chuckling, leaned his head back against the alcove entrance wall, closed his eyes, and came in his ghouls’ mouth. The few shudders of his body were subtle, but the way the underside of his cock flexed with each gush of his cum pouring into his ghouls’ throat wasn’t. And, despite herself, Triss watched, eyes locked onto the man’s



cock, or at least, the tiny sliver of it she could see under Madison's lips.

He really did like being the center of attention. Hell, the man looked perfectly relaxed, content, and downright happy to be watched as Madison drank him. He really jived on the whole 'family with benefits' vibe the Circle liked to put out. And, maybe in another life, Triss would have thrown herself into the same orgy mindset. She loved being watched, and loved being the center of attention, too. Just, maybe not by a crowd of strangers.

Jen and Triss both gave Madison tiny finger waves, and went back to their alcove. Jen slipped under the furs, and Triss joined her, though she only took off her pants and boots. Not because she felt uncomfortable being naked with Jen or anything, just a habit. If her merger with the witches continued, maybe she'd end up like Othello, fucking her ghouls out in the open, and then falling asleep out in the open.

Or maybe she'd end up like Jacob, lost in an obsession with the occult. If she had to pick from the two, she'd probably go with the orgy mindset.

"So, what're you gonna do?" Jen asked. Without looking for permission, or needing to be asked, Jen pushed her butt into Triss's body, looking to spoon. And Triss spooned with her, because it was how they'd slept for weeks now, since Julias died.

"About Othello? I mean, I don't really care—"

"Not about him." Laughing, she turned to face Triss, and nudged their noses together. "I mean about, you know, what Black Blood asked."

"I ... don't know. It sounds like a good deal."

"It sounds like you'll become another Jacob."

She snorted, half between chuckle and groan. “Yeah, it does, doesn’t it? Think BB’s told him about the proposal?”

“Did ... did you just call him BB?”

“He’s not around. Besides, you heard him.” She shrugged. “He likes it when I’m frank with him.”

“Still, I don’t have the courage to insult a thing like ... Black Blood.”

“Not an insult. Nick name.” She shrugged again, rolled Jen back over, and cuddled up against her naked back. “Will you run off if I ... become another Jacob?”

Jen reached behind her and set a hand on Triss’s hip. “No. You know that.”

“Yeah. I do.” Sighing, Triss propped up her head with her right arm and elbow, and her left arm drifted down Jen’s body. She had promised her that she’d engage in sex again, and honestly, seeing Othello and Madison casually enjoying themselves sparked something in Beatrice. More than that, it was how casually Othello had decided to sit down in the open, and enjoy a blowjob. It was freedom, total freedom, and a strange sense of camaraderie that allowed Othello to feel comfortable enough to do that.

She didn’t know why that sounded so great, total freedom, a complete lack of borders. Maybe it was a Carthian thing; she used to be one. Maybe it was just her running from her pain, or maybe it was because she loved her friend in a strange way only witches of the Circle would understand. Maybe she was permanently scarred from losing a man she loved, and would never be able to have that sort of relationship again. Or, maybe, she was just sad, and hurting, and these witches were happy to use sex to help her with that.

An orgy with the witches, heh. Legs locked, with ghouls and thralls piled on or under them, fangs locked onto necks and wrists, dicks and pussies everywhere. She snorted as she thought of herself fucking Othello. Sure, it'd be really hot physically, but the man was too dumb. Aaron was a lot sexier, but so vanilla it was painful. Jacob? That, was a strange thought.

Then, of course, there was Jennifer.

A mewl from Madison, the telltale sign that sex had commenced, broke Beatrice. She could only listen to the mewls and whimpers of Othello's ghoul for so long, before she had to give in.

With an annoyed sigh, Triss sat up, and pulled off her tank top. Jen sat up with her, eyebrow raised, but when Triss also started removing her underwear, Jen's confused expression slowly replaced with an evil smile.

"We just fed, and listening to this is driving me nuts, ok?" Othello was a gorgeous hunk, and his ghoul was a beauty with a great ass, an ass Othello was undoubtedly taking advantage of right now.

Jennifer smiled at her, a touch of knowing in her eyes. Yeah, she understood, she got that Triss was finally feeling good enough that she could fuck again, or at least, fuck her again. She also understood that if she talked about it, she was liable to ruin the first time Triss actually felt good enough to want to fuck, in a god damn while.

Already naked, Jennifer let out a happy sigh, counter to Triss's annoyed one, as she Blushed Life. She moved the furs aside, sat back against the curve of the wall with a fur behind her, spread her legs, and got comfortable. Comfortable for Jennifer meant with right hand between her legs, teasing her clitoris with soft caresses, while her left hand teased along her left breast, caressing her nipple with the same light touch.

Rolling her eyes, Triss crawled over to Jennifer. She knew that's what her friend wanted, to have her be the one to engage, and to watch her body as she did so. Damn woman was obsessed with her ass, and crawling like a cat definitely showed off the ass.

Triss crawled onto her, and melted onto her. Jennifer caught her in a hug, and smiled into the following kiss, her eyes closing as their lips met. The Blush told their fake heartbeats to kick up, and with how squashed their chests were, breasts between each other's, they could both feel it.

"I've been dying to feel that tongue inside me again," Jennifer said between kisses.

"Ah, right, that's what this was about all along. My tongue."

"Not just that." Her friend's hands drifted down Triss's back, clutched her ass, and kneaded the meat of her buttocks.

Laughing, Triss inched her knees back along the furs. She stopped only a foot back though, and gazed down at Jennifer's tits. Big, perfect tits that the whole damn city had seen. Well, that didn't mean much anymore, considering Triss had been half naked at the last ball, just like her.

She set both hands around Jen's breasts, and squeezed. Not hard or anything, not the time for rough sex, but hard enough to feel the softness of them overflow her fingers. And her hard nipples demanded to be touched. Triss leaned in, and while still holding one of the supple tits, ran her long tongue up, down, and around it, using its extra length to coat and tease it.

Jennifer groaned, though judging from the look in her eyes, it was mostly in anticipation of having the tongue somewhere else.

Triss kept her mouth open, including the extra teeth on her cheek. She must have looked like a strange monster, half perfectly

human, half scary and freaky, with the crocodile cheeks opened up so her long tongue could hang and move freely. It had a slightly pointed tip, thickened out to normal human tongue shape after the first few inches, and then continued for nearly a fucking foot. She'd used it on Jen before, to great effect, and she had a lot of lost time to make up for.

Letting her tongue hang and drag down Jen's shivering body, Triss slowly inched herself back further and further along the blankets, leaving a wet trail down Jen's flat stomach, down her smooth mons, and then onto her swollen clitoris. Instant shivers from Jen, and she moved her hand out of the way to set it on Triss's shoulders. But Triss didn't give it to her yet. She hovered over her friend's pussy, and gently rubbed her tongue up and down her clit. They still had plenty of time before sunrise, no need to rush things.

Once it was obvious Jen was dripping with anticipation, Triss got down onto her elbows and stomach between Jen's legs, leaned in, and pressed her lips against her friend's cunt. As she did, she slowly pushed her tongue into Jennifer's body, fighting against the boiling hot, soaked insides, and pressing up toward Jen's belly with each inch she managed to push in.

"Oh! God, finally." Jennifer slid a hand through Triss's hair before she set her left hand onto the furs beside her, and right onto her own right breast, content to tease and play with her body, and watch Triss do all the work.

Triss managed a chuckle. Bitch wouldn't be relaxing once Triss got her prepped.

She set her lip snug to Jen's clitoris, and bathed it in massaging kisses, as she eased another inch of her tongue into Jen's clenching snatch, and then another. And then another. Jen wouldn't be able to see anything more than a perfectly normal looking upper lip beneath a set of snake eyes, kissing her pussy, but she could

doubtlessly feel a huge appendage fill her more and more. And Triss made sure to press up against the front wall of Jen's pussy again and again with a curling wave of her powerful tongue.

Jen closed her eyes, and came. Her hands reached out and grabbed Triss's shoulders, and held as the pleasure tremors worked through her. Her cunt squeezed, and fresh drops of juices trickled down onto Triss's tongue as her friend quivered. Husky moans filled the alcove, mixing with Madison's, even matching pitch; probably something Jennifer did on purpose.

When Jennifer's body calmed down, Triss lowered her jaw, snake style, keeping her upper lip on Jen's clit, but sliding her jaw down and down along her ass, so she could push in more of her tongue. A lot, lot, lot more.

"Oh fuck!" Jen pushed herself up onto her elbows, and stared down at Triss, as enough muscle forced its way into her clenching slit and into her quivering depths, to start stretching her inward. With the thickest, heaviest part of her tongue jammed into her friend's pussy, Triss had the leverage to start rolling her tongue really, really hard, forcing the tip against Jen's deepspot hard enough to push it into her by several deep, stretching inches, before the length of the tongue pressed upward in a wave.

Her friend stared down at the small distension that moved along her flat, smooth stomach, showing where Triss's tongue pressed up against it. When she got in close like this, and opened her mouth wide, Triss had the leverage and angle to jam the whole damn thing into Jen's tight little pussy, and Triss was a vampire after all. No reason she couldn't put in a little extra strength into it, to make sure it could bend and twist inside Jen's snatch, no matter how hard she clamped down.

The Ventrue set one of her hands on her stomach, just below her navel, and groaned as Triss's tongue pushed a shallow bulge of flesh

up against it. Her mouth opened, and her groans doubled in volume and pitch. Now, she sounded like an animal in heat, and she squirmed and wriggled as Triss's rolling tongue fought against her cunt's spasms. More wet heat dripped from Triss's tongue, and Jennifer's hands gripped the furs around her, desperate to hold on, as Triss forced her to cum again. And again. Wow, she really was pent up.

Triss spent a few more minutes on Jen, working out those saved up orgasms like popping bubble wrap. It was a pretty awesome sight, too, Jen sitting back relaxing on the furs, legs spread, body trembling, big tits jiggling, and a bulge moving back and forth along her belly where Triss tongue-fucked her. Hypnotic. And when Jen reached out and pushed against Triss's forehead, Triss grabbed her wrists and pinned them against the furs. No way girl, get your comeuppance.

Jen stared at the rolling distension working along her belly and reaching her navel, before her eyes finally rolled back and closed as she went limp against the furs and cave wall. More of her juices came out of her, not with the squirting force Triss had a habit of doing, but still, plenty. Beatrice stopped licking, and slowly removed her tongue, letting Jen enjoy her orgasm aftershocks as Triss's tongue lightly rubbed and pressed upward against her g-spot on the retreat.

"There, that oughta satisfy you for a few minutes, you slut." Laughing, Triss lay on the fur beside Jen, and watched her as she recovered.

Despite obviously still being in the throes of post-orgasm tingles, Jen sat up, trembly and wobbly, and crawled out of the alcove. "Be right back."

Triss raised a brow, and scooted across the furs enough so she could peek out from the hanging fur of the alcove. It kept her body

hidden, allowing her to watch Jen without Othello seeing her. But Othello was way too busy fucking poor Madison into a coma to notice Triss, or notice when Jen grabbed his lube. She walked past, swaying with each step, and stepped past Triss's fur barrier with an evil grin, before sitting down at Triss's legs.

Triss rolled her eyes, but spread her legs enough for Jen to kneel between them.

"I really meant to just have a quickie, you know?" she said.

Jen shrugged, leaned down, and planted a slow, gentle kiss on Triss's pierced clit hood. Instant electricity shot out from the sensitive nub beneath it, and Triss shivered as her body screamed its need. She'd denied it for so long, and a belly full of blood made it so fucking easy to light up every arousal signal she had.

"We can do quick." Nodding, Jen continued to kiss her clitoris, trapping it between her lips and burying it in full heavy licks of her tongue. Triss sucked in a breath at the sudden explosion of pleasure, and managed to smile down at her friend as Jen got comfortable on her knees. A moment later, Triss shuddered as Jen pressed wet, lubricated fingers against her ass.

Maybe Jen wanted revenge for what Triss had just done to her. Maybe she wanted to make Triss cum her brains for the pure sexual enjoyment of it. Triss was tempted to tell her to ease off, and keep this little bout of purely physical, meaningless sex to just a quick clit orgasm. But she didn't. She shut up, and let her friend slowly massage her asshole open, working lube into it as she did. She didn't mean for things to get this crazy tonight, but, god damn, she couldn't deny that she wanted it.

Jen sank two fingers into her ass to the last knuckle, and pressed them up toward her belly, all the while kissing, licking, and suckling on her clit. The familiar sparks of pleasure spread out from Triss's insides, from where her rings of muscle clenched around Jen's



fingers, from where Jen's lips played with her clit, and from where the two fingers kept driving up into her g-spot through her ass. Not even a minute later, Triss's head fell back as she felt the explosion of climax rip through her.

As her muscles clamped down, Triss reached out to the fur beside her, and pulled it aside just enough to peek out. Yeap, Othello was still fucking Madison. He was sitting, legs spread, back against the curved entrance of his alcove, body facing Beatrice's alcove. Madison sat in his lap, also facing Beatrice, and she had her legs spread even wider, hooking the outside of Othello's. Her body was limp, leaning back onto Othello's chest, and her head rested back against his shoulder, also limp. Her arms dangled at her sides, completely useless.

Othello had Kissed her, and was now fucking her near-comatose body. She was still awake, but barely, and in that hyper sensitive state that left her defenseless against any kind of stimulation. Othello lifted her by the hips, and lowered her in a delicious rhythm, and poor Madison mewled as her body shook, and a tiny squirt of her juices splashed onto the cave's stone floor.

Triss looked back to Jen, and choked on a laugh. Jen was grinning at her, and juices dripped from her chin, and neck.

“Enjoying their show?” she said.

“I ... I kinda am, yeah. That dumbass is just so ... laid back, and happy, and...” Triss groaned, and looked down at Jen's hand as it disappeared into Triss's body. “Fuuuuck ... you didn't—” Jen pushed her fist in, and Triss groaned again as she felt her rings of muscle squeeze around Jen's wrist.

And then Jen really did start getting payback. She pushed her fist up toward Triss's belly, and with her other hand, squashed Triss's lower abdomen down against the small distension her fist created along Triss's abs.

“Go on, keep watching them.”

Triss managed a weak smile. Damn it, even now, her friend was just trying to help her get over Julias in the only way she knew how: total overwhelming sexual stimulation. Sighing, Triss nudged the furs aside again, just enough to see Othello, and she licked her lips as she watched the man fuck his poor, defenseless ghoul in the ass. Madison had thoroughly soaked the stone between his thighs in her juices, but had stopped cumming for the moment as Othello gave her a break, hugging her with one arm, and fondling her huge tits with the other.

But after Madison started breathing normally again, Othello grabbed her hips, turned her around, and laid her on her back on the floor. He sat up on his knees, hands still around her hips so her ass followed him up a foot in the air, legs dangling around his hips, and her tits collapsed toward her shoulders with gravity. He fucked her hard then, and Triss watched, hypnotized by the sight. Othello was facing Triss, but his eyes were totally locked onto his ghoul. And from this angle, Triss could see Madison’s breasts bouncing around, her thighs rippling with the impact, and splashes of juices as the ghoul soaked Othello. Poor girl was cumming hard, and Othello showed no signs of slowing down, causing her cum to splash more and soak both their pelvises, until it was trickling down her stomach and onto her jigging tits.

Triss watched, and kept her own moan quiet, as she came again. Jen’s deep fisting hit her insides in that super deep way, that ‘oh god how’s it getting so deep’ kinda way that pressed up toward the belly, and made her insides feel like they were going to burst. It was wonderful. It was powerful. It was enough that Triss had to turn and watch as Jen’s tits bounced around with how much she was moving her fist inside Triss’s body. And a moment later, those tits were drowned in a squirt of Triss’s cum, as a crashing wave of pleasure spread up from Triss’s insides, and started to roll up and down through her, head to toes.

“You squirt even harder than Madison,” Jen said.

Before Triss could respond, Jen began fisting her again, fist pushing up toward her depths and abs, the other hand spreading flat along her stomach and pressing down against the fist. She pumped her arm back and forth, and Triss looked down to watch as her best friend drove her to another anal orgasm, hard, earning another hard squirt from her that shot out and splashed over Jen’s hanging, heavy breasts. And then another, and another. The waves of pleasure were overwhelming, and Triss struggled to keep her eyes open so she could see what Jen was doing to her. It was insanely hot to see her squirts hit Jen in her chest and soak her jiggling tits, no lie. No wonder men were obsessed with it.

When Jen was done, Triss let her head fall back as the tingly waves of climax danced up and down her body. She pulled the fur closed completely again, and collapsed, exhausted. The Ventrue had a perfect opportunity to tease her then, but didn’t. She slid her hand out of Triss’s insides, climbed onto her, and hugged her. Of course the bitch knew her body was literally dripping in Triss’s cum, and that Triss was currently way too tingly to push her off, so she squished her fat tits right on top of her. So wet. The girl was supposed to get back into spooning position, not this.

Sighing and rolling her eyes, Triss hugged her, nice and tight, and melted into the sensation. Post orgasm always got her feeling clingy, and Jen knew it.

“Thanks,” Jen said, her face hidden in Triss’s neck. “Feel better, too?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I ... I think I do.”

“No pressure for more. But, I do think you’d be happier if you let us in.”

“Us?”

Jen laughed and shrugged, and set a kiss on Triss's nose. "The Circle. And I don't mean Jacob's occult stuff, I mean the family. Julias ... Julias is gone, but we're not." She sighed, hit by something painful, sympathy pain maybe, and sank her head back onto Triss's neck and shoulder. "It hurts me when you're sad."

Triss hugged her, nice and tight. Jen was covering up how sad she was about Julias, and that was fine. Besides, Jen might have had a point about the Circle.

"I'm not going to become Jacob," Triss said. "Gimme a century and I'm sure I'll be banging everyone in the circle, and every ghoul too. Full orgies and everything, k?"

Jen chuckled, but it had a somber sound to it. She knew Triss was just making jokes to put the pain at bay, and because she knew what Triss was doing with Black Blood and Elen. But, that was fine. This was progress.

"What about Sándor?"

"What about him?" Triss asked. "Dude is totally not interested."

"He does seem resistant. Maybe..." Jen slid her body up and down Triss's a few inches, just enough for her wet breasts and stomach to rub into her. She spread her legs too, and nudged her pussy along Triss's leg. Good god this woman, worse than that Invictus bitch Jessy. "Maybe someone else?"

"Ha, who else would want to date a couple witches? One with a crocodile mouth and snake eyes?"

She planted her elbows on the furs around her and looked up, thinking. "Maybe—"

"Maybe we should stop trying to replace Julias, yeah? He's dead, and it fucking sucks, and it still kills me. But ... but he's gone, and

the more you try and replace him, the more it hurts.”

Maybe that was too harsh. Jen had loved Julias too, in her own strange way, and she was obviously trying to rebuild the trio dynamic she'd helped create. Jen frowned down at her, but it faded as she collapsed onto her side, and rolled to face away from her.

Triss didn't let her get far. She reached out and pulled Jen snug, turning her into the little spoon once again.

“Then what do I do?” the Ventrue said.

“What you're doing is fine. Really. Keep trying to convince me to have sex in more circumstances, I don't mind. And I'm sure sometimes I'll give in.” Cause, if the amount she'd soaked Jen was any indicator, her buried sex drive had just waiting for an opportunity to let loose.

“And if I think Sándor would help with some sexual healing?” Jen turned her head enough to look over her shoulder and grin at her.

Triss laughed. “Well, I mean, I'm pretty sure he's impervious to seduction, but uh, maybe? For a fling, maybe in the future? Just, don't try and force it, you know? Don't try and force someone into that...” That Julias-shaped hole in her heart and guts.

Jen nodded, and pushed her body closer. “Maybe some day in the future, we could have fun with one of our meals? Those hunters looked pretty tasty, and I know they're still in the city.”

“Heh, maybe. But Isabella looked like she was laying claim.”

“Isabella is nothing, and I doubt the hunters can be swayed by such pretty, shallow eyes.”

Isabella was a babe, that was for sure. But like many Daeva, she was only concerned with a hopeless pursuit of artistic expression, to

the point it consumed her. Her dedication to her play, her actors and actresses, it was definitely a passionate endeavor, but she and it were slaves to her blood's Daeva obsession curse.

“Well,” Triss continued, “just ... don't worry about it for now, ok? I'm happy with the way things went tonight. This was good. I want to do it again.”

Jen reached over her hip, took Triss's hand, and set it on her stomach. “Even watching Othello fuck Madison?”

“Ha, even that. It's good porn. That moron is fucking pretty.”

They laughed. It felt good to laugh. It felt good to be happy. It felt good to maybe even be a little excited. Cause maybe, just fucking maybe, if Black Blood and her could work together and find something that worked, she could bring Julias back.

Some more laughter filled the cave, laughter she didn't recognize, and Triss and Jen both looked at each other, confused. They both turned over, turning Jen into the big spoon, and Triss pulled the fur curtain aside enough so they could peek into the cave.

Maybe it was Aaron, finally showing the Circle his girlfriend? That'd be interesting. Maybe—

Maybe it'd be fucking Jacob, and holy shit, that was Samantha. Jacob wore a suit, a regal sort of thing, rich purple that no one else would have been able to pull off, but combined with a black bandage tied nicely around his eyes, he looked like god damn royalty. Even the god damn shoes looked amazing, and utterly fucking dapper.

Samantha wore something a lot sluttier than Triss imagined the young vampire would wear. Well, she was Daeva. Just a matter of time. It was a pretty dress though, white, and while the skirt was long, it had a couple splits that went way way up, showing the hip of the white thong she had underneath. Open back, with nothing but a

flimsy strap around the neck to keep the form-fitting chest snug to her tits.

Samantha was a milf. The short-ish wavy brown hair was cute, and her gentle face and expression were fucking adorable. Combined with the slutty dress and tight waist, she definitely gave off milf vibes. Plus, she had the dopey, content gaze of a vampire who'd just gorged themselves. A vampire with a full belly was a horny vampire, if they Blushed Life.

Jacob and Samantha stopped by Othello, who'd taken to fucking Madison in a gentle way now. He sat on his ass, back to the cave wall, legs spread, and Madison lay between his thighs on her back, her arms over her head and limp on the cave floor. Her legs were spread around his hips, but they weren't hooked on; they were too limp. Poor girl was still conscious, from the whimpers she made, but Othello had just fed on her, filled his belly up, and could probably fuck her for another hour.

"Othello, can't you control yourself?" Jacob said, Samantha's arm hooked in his own. He tried to walk past the dumbass, but Samantha took a second to respond.

Triss grinned as she saw it. Yeap, that was the look. Triss didn't get a good angle on it, being a good hundred feet from her and looking at her from her side, but it was hard to miss when a woman looked at something with 'I want to be fucked like that' eyes.

"Sorry boss," Othello said, but even as he said it, he kept his hands on Madison's hips, and gently pulled her back and forth along the stone, onto his dick. Nice and slow, just enough for the ghoul's big tits to ripple back and forth along her chest. "Hey, Samantha right? Jack's mom, Prince's childe?" He looked her up and down, and winked at her. "Looking good."

Triss and Jen both choked on their laughter. It was so bad, cheesy, and dumb, but on a beautiful dumbass like Othello, idiocy

and directness worked together to be strangely charming.

It worked on Samantha, that was for sure, but she managed to recompose herself a bit when Jacob gave Othello a kick in the foot.

“Don’t flirt with my date, you moron.”

“Sorry boss.”

Jacob laughed, a hearty, warm thing, and he slowly walked toward the alcove that led to his room. Slowly, because he knew Samantha still had her eyes on Othello. Judging from where her eyes lingered, she was more interested in looking at the man than the woman, but that didn’t stop her from licking her lips when Madison shuddered. Despite the ghoul’s near comatose state, she mewled, quivered, and though Triss couldn’t see from her angle, she probably squirted right onto Othello’s pelvis and cock, with how she was still lying on the floor tits up, legs spread wide and pussy pointed right at the man.

Samantha squeaked, and Triss and Jen both struggled to keep from laughing. Well, Othello was gorgeous, and was obviously giving Madison a good time. Considering the fucker only ever fucked the ghoul in the ass, it was a good thing he was at least fucking her gently now. Either way, it was clearly doing something for Samantha.

Maybe she had an anal kink too? Pretty common among vampires, gay and bi dudes included, considering it was clean twenty-four-seven. But from the look in the woman’s eye, it wasn’t the anal doing it for her, it was the sight of a strong man fucking a woman into toe-curling heaven, over and over, that had caught her attention.

Jacob was a bit taller than Othello, and a lot leaner, but Triss had a sneaking suspicion the man was built like a fucking Olympic acrobat under his suit. Not as big or brawny as Othello, but drop



dead gorgeous nonetheless, with defined muscle and abs and the works. Combined with his older look, and the salt and pepper hair, he definitely had that unusually sexy older man thing going on. Combined with the suit, he nailed the sexy older very very rich guy look.

Samantha looked Triss's way, and she gasped as she realized Triss and Jen were watching her from behind their dangling fur, only their heads visible. They both laughed, raised a hand, and finger waved at her. Once the shock of being spied on, and having been caught leering at a naked man passed, she managed to return the wave with a very awkward smile.

Jacob threw them a grin, and gave Samantha a small tug. "Ignore those sluts too. That's all anyone ever does here, have sex."

"Sounds, uh, relaxing?" Samantha said.

"The world could be collapsing around us, and these kids would celebrate with an orgy." Tilting his head back with a small roll as if rolling his hidden eyes, he guided Samantha into his alcove. But before she disappeared down its tunnel entrance, she managed a glance over her shoulder at Triss and Jen again, and a little Daeva grin showed itself.

"Well, uh, I think he's going to get lucky tonight," Jen whispered into her ear.

"Him? She's the one getting lucky."

"Heh, you think?"

"Totally. Samantha has Fifty Shades lover written all over her. If we snuck in there, guaranteed we'd find her naked with her arms tied up while Jacob does a bunch of dirty things to her."

Jen giggled, kissed her ear, kissed her neck, kissed her lips, and snuggled into her as she got comfortable on the fur. Still a while before sunrise, but it was nice to just hang. No dire emergencies hanging over their head, they could rest, and think. And Triss had to think. Black Blood's proposal was scary, scary as fuck, but he was looking for a witch to teach, and she needed his power.

Thirty minutes later, some feminine, labored moans drifted out of Jacob's alcove. Twenty minutes after that, they got loud.

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~~Antoinette~~

The next night, come sunset, she prepared a glass of blood, and opened the door to her love's cell. Both Elaine and Daniel were with her, and Antoinette carried the crimson liquid in a wine glass. Jack raised his eyes, and managed a petite smile for her, an expression that told her that it was indeed Jack, and not the curse lurking beneath his skin.

“Good evening my love,” she said, and she helped him drink. He guzzled it down, obviously starving, and the glass of blood would suppress his large appetite for an hour or two at most.

“Good evening,” he said, voice soft, calm, though his eyes glanced to Elaine twice. Once would have been natural Kindred instinct for analyzing their surroundings. Twice likely meant the boy had a thought on his mind, something that earned a tinge of concern or interest; in this case, it seemed concern.

Antoinette undid his chains. “How do you feel?”

“Healed, but, tired, and ... still starving.”

“Oui, I can imagine. The wounds you sustained were extreme, and would have rendered any Kindred on the brink of frenzy for healing them through the day.”

“I think I’m clear of frenzy, for now. But ... yeah, I need a meal.”

“Then you shall have it. Ashely and Julee are still recovering from our last tryst, but perhaps one of my prisoners?”

The boy shook his head, and rubbed his wrists where the shackles once held him. “Uh, actually, can we go on a hunt?”

“Oh? It has been some time since we have hunted.” She tapped her chin, entertaining the idea. Jack did not enjoy the reality that she kept prisoners, and her precious pets were already drained. “Will you discuss your predicament with us, young one? Your ... dilemma?”

Without hesitation, the boy nodded. “Yeah. We should talk. You, me ... and Elaine.”

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Elaine and Antoinette dressed up for the outing. It had been ages since she and her friend had legitimately gone hunting in the wild together; Antoinette, as all Daeva, grew far too attached to their ghouls to feed on strange, random kine. But such an idiosyncrasy did not control Ventrue, and Antoinette was delighted to join her friend, and her lover, on the prowl.

They could have hunted the shadows as Kindred often did, but such methods were simply too blasé for elders. For young Kindred learning to navigate their nightly trials, actual hunts were often required. For elders, prey came to them, and asked to be devoured. Sometimes she wondered if it would be better to let Jack perform his hunts alone, instead of being spoiled by her, but now with the power of the curse at his disposal, she was more worried he would cause a ruckus; as he once told her, his new strength lacked control.

Antoinette and Elaine both wore sleeveless, plunging dresses, with all the typical flair of a nightclub dress meant to accent sexuality to the extreme. Antoinette wore black. Elaine wore red.

Both went with loose chest straps, to insure that any who looked their way would be hypnotized by the possibility of their skin becoming exposed by roving fabric. Such a simple trick for distracting wandering eyes, timeless, and useful.

And, despite the years she and Jack had been together, she still delighted in dressing up for him, and stirring lust and awe in his honest gaze.

They went to Bloodlust.

Elaine smiled with predatory eyes as she looked at the kine that drifted within. Bloodlust did not have half what the usual nightclub of its size would have in activity, though that did not stop dozens of people congregating on the dance floor to grind their half naked bodies together. The smell of sex, of hunger, of drugs and alcohol, it mixed with the pulsing light and beating bass of the music, creating a concoction of stimulus that would drive the most saintly nun to wanton acts of rebellion and sin.

“This place has not changed,” Elaine said with a smile as she looked over Jack’s head to her. “Well, the music and fashion has, a bit.”

“Ben non. It changes as the kine change, and they have not changed much in the past fifty years.”

“True.”

They chuckled. Jack looked up at the two of them, perhaps a touch confused from how he raised a brow, and the two women laughed again. The boy likely felt humanity had changed drastically in half a century. It had, but only on the surface.

As Elaine and Antoinette walked, they made sure to keep Jack between them. It was an interesting game, to see how the kine reacted to the short, handsome man in his expensive suit, with two

tall, curvaceous goddesses at his sides. Men looked at him as if he must have hired two very expensive prostitutes that were clearly out of his league, though the more observant ones realized the flaw in that reasoning, and found themselves staring in confusion, and desire. Women realized far more swiftly that Elaine and Antoinette were not prostitutes, and they also stared in confusion, though after a moment, they looked down at Jack with intrigue.

Antoinette would make sure every kine knew that Jack was here with them as her date, and that they were quite sexually compatible. And, that both she and Jack indulged their beautiful friend in their sexual adventures. To show off for her love was an endless delight. To show off for the admiring crowd was a Daeva compulsion she had long ceased trying to suppress.

But, perhaps such tomfoolery could wait. Jack had looked dreadfully serious in her cell, and the fact she had locked him in a cell for the day had been plenty cause for concern. The matter was serious, and as much as enjoying a date with her lover with Elaine in tow naturally had her seeking outlets for a growing need to play and tease, she had to focus. Such a task was never easy with Elaine, who brought out such joyful memories from the haze of her past.

Focus. The curse. It affected her lover in ways she had not considered, and Jack wished to speak of it after eating, to her and to Elaine. She had been tempted to invite her sheriff, but she was confident she could handle whatever situation arose. Perhaps she was a fool.

The three started up the stairs, Jack first, and Antoinette noticed the lingering gaze of a young man, a kine who looked at them with envy instead of confusion. Elaine noticed her noticing, noticed the young man, and promptly slipped one of her red straps aside to show the stranger one of her heavy breasts in its entirety. She waited for his jaw to drop before she grinned, redressed, and

followed after Jack. Perhaps a meal for later, or a meal in the immediate, if the kine was brave enough to follow them.

He was not. Understandable. Antoinette and Elaine radiated an aura of power and control even kine could sense. And now, so did Jack.

The three of them sat in the largest booth, furthest back upon the second floor, and Jack sat between them. Elaine and Antoinette made sure to sit close enough for their thighs to touch the boy's, naturally, and such proximity drew the eye of a few kine that sat upstairs as well. But as Antoinette and her company settled into the darkness of the booth, observing kine returned to their own social groups.

One young couple were obviously celebrating their marriage, giggling themselves silly with alcohol pouring through their veins. One man entertained two women, and it was obvious at a glance that they were, indeed, prostitutes. They looked well paid, and happy to be there. In another booth, one woman entertained two men, who were obviously fighting for her affection. And in another booth, two women and two men were engaged in a game of truth or dare. It had turned sexual, as such games always did with such players, and one woman was kissing the exposed breasts of the other. From how the men were watching, it seemed they were enjoying the show their girlfriends were putting on for them. And from how the girls' hands were roaming, they were enjoying it as well.

Not her eyes, nor her Kindred senses, found any other presence in Bloodlust. No other Kindred, no Uratha or Begotten, and her network told her the three hunters, still under orders to not leave the city, were currently in one of the apartment buildings.

“I believe you are free to speak,” she said.

He nodded in agreement. “Yeah. I guess.” Sighing, he looked between them, and then down at the table, as if an anchor were latched around his head. “I ... I think I need something to drink, before I get into this.”

Elaine nodded, slipped out of the booth, and walked down the stairs. A moment later, she returned with the man she had teased before, and from the neutral, empty look in his eyes, the man had been Dominated. Antoinette would have found a woman for Jack to feast upon, knowing his preference, but it was not a sexual situation, and a male would do fine.

After a shuffle, a rather quick feeding from Jack, and then a moment from Elaine to set the unconscious man at the end of the booth, they returned to their original positions. Jack looked considerably better, and he relaxed back into the seat as he looked up.

“Thank you, Elaine.”

“You are most welcome, great grandchilde.”

“I almost didn’t want a meal. With a full belly, I ... I can tell the curse is stronger, too.”

Antoinette leaned forward and set her elbows upon the table as she looked to her lover. “You spoke of it as if it were conscious.”

“It is conscious.”

Elaine raised a brow, and looked over Jack’s head to her again, before she too leaned forward, elbows on the table. “Explain.”

“When ... when things get rough and difficult, it talks in my head. You’ve talked to it before, when it was in control.”

Antoinette sighed and nodded with the painful memory. “I had assumed it was something that intoxicated your mind.”

“It’s not. It’s got its own mind. Its own desires.” He shivered as he leaned forward as well, placing the three of them close, heads within inches of each other over the booth. “And last night, it almost attacked Damien, just because Damien finished off that azlu monster. It wanted a fight, wanted to win the fight, and Damien got the kill.”

That was an absurd reason to become irate. This curse, this voice that plagued her little Ventrue, was not mature or wise. The wise and intelligent were dangerous, but so were the stupid if they had too much power, not unlike an unstable explosive. And Jack was now carrying such an explosive.

“I do not remember the curse ever speaking to me,” Elaine said.

“You wouldn’t unless you freed it. Before, it was trying to change me, get its claws into me and alter me. But now that it’s free, it’s just ... in there, in my head, aware.”

Antoinette shook her head. “But you have never shown any sign of its presence.”

“It’s normally sleeping, or shut away or something. Sometimes it ... he ... says some things, but mostly he’s dormant. Normal stuff doesn’t awaken him. It’s when things get interesting that he comes up.”

Calling it ‘he’ did not sit well with Antoinette, but Jack knew the situation better than she.

“Interesting?” she said.

“Just what I said before, when things get tough. He’s never said a thing when you and I are together, romantically, or anything like



that. But, when I had to beat the hunters, or when fighting that azlu, or when ... when Julias died, he awakens.”

“It ... he takes control?” Elaine asked.

“No, he asks for it. Taking control back is ... difficult. I guess taking it from me would be difficult for him.”

Antoinette sighed, slid in closer, and slipped her arm around Jack’s shoulders. The first time Jack had broken free of its grasp, it was the sight of his mother, unconscious and dying, that had given him the strength to break free. The second time, Antoinette had had to remind the boy that Athalia was a mother, undoubtedly calling up memories of his own. The third time, Damien had simply staked the boy, and had likely only managed such a feat due to the boy’s solo battle with an absurdly strong, arachnid monstrosity.

“He has a survival instinct,” he said. “I ... that’s not all of it. He has a desire to live.” And with that, the boy looked at Elaine.

“He ... is aware, of what we are trying to do?”

He nodded. “Yeah. We need to get to work, and now. No more waiting. I want this thing gone. The hunters are dead, so’s Angela, so’s Jeremiah, so I don’t need him anymore. Him or his power.”

Elaine grimaced, a subtle expression that guided her eyes down onto the desk. “Alright. When would you like to begin?”

“Tomorrow night, if you can?”

Elaine nodded, and looked to Antoinette. She nodded as well. The sooner they dealt with this infection, the better for everyone. She did not want this explosive in her city for any longer than it had to be.

“Did you have plans tonight, my love?”

Jack smiled up at Antoinette, and leaned his head against her shoulder. “Need to check up on the Begotten. They wanted to talk to Sándor, and I want to see how that went.”

“Your mother would like to speak with you, little Ventrue. Perhaps tomorrow? I distract her with tasks of study, and of learning to control her Kindred abilities, but she aches to know what trials her son suffers.”

That earned several different pitches of moan from the boy, and he lowered his head onto the table. “I don’t know what to tell her about this ... this whole fucking problem.”

Antoinette pat the boy on his back, and kissed his cheek. “Neither do I.”

---

The curse spoke to Jack. An unnerving bit of knowledge, and she was not sure she wished she knew it. She was quite thankful that it remained silent during her romantic time with the boy; if it did not, it would have tainted past, and future encounters. But he insisted that it did, and she believed him.

Jack had departed to speak with Azamel and the other Begotten, while Elaine dug through her old, digitally record and photographed records, in search of information that could help the boy. Antoinette would check on their progress later, but for now, she wished to speak with her childe.

Samantha came back from her outing, and Antoinette met her in the lobby of her great tower. The woman was still dressed to kill, and considering she had not come home to the tower before dawn as she was meant to, she had spent the day elsewhere. And, considering who Antoinette had seen her childe speak with on multiple occasions, it was obvious with whom she had spent the night.

The guilty expression on the soft woman's face sealed it.

"I trust you enjoyed your night with Jacob?" she said, with an obvious smile that announced to Samantha the subtext.

"I ... I ... how did you know?"

Antoinette laughed, and motioned for her childe to follow her. She did, eyes downcast once the shock dispersed, replaced with more guilt and shame.

"You and your son are similar in many ways, my childe. Honest to a fault, betrayed by your green eyes." She gestured to the woman's dress, while Antoinette wore a suit. "And, of course, you walk with shame as if this were Halloween, and you had indulged the advances of a stranger interested in your seductive nurse façade."

"Oh god, the walk of shame." She buried her face in her hands, earning more laughter from Antoinette, who slipped an arm around the woman's shoulders as she guided her.

"Do not concern yourself with shame, my childe. You are Kindred. Such concerns are for kine."

"I ... I guess."

"Though, I was serious with my question, if you would be willing to share."

"Girl talk?"

Antoinette rolled her eyes, but nodded. "Oui, though such a demeaning term does not fully describe what I thought we could engage in. I speak to a very few of romantic topics, Samantha Terry, and I thought to include you in that petite circle. You are my childe, after all, not my daughter."

Their shoes clacked along the marble floor as they descended, and Samantha considered her words. Reframing their relationship as sire and childe was important. Much could be shared between Kindred family, that could not be shared between blood family.

“Perhaps,” Antoinette continued, “I was too blunt. My apologies. Elaine’s attitude can be contagious. I should have asked, how did your night out with Jacob fair, dear Samantha? It has been ages since I have talked of him with another in your circumstance.” Not since Minerva.

“Um, well, we went to see one of Isabella’s plays. That was ... spicy. Then we went back to his cave, cause I was curious about the Circle of the Crone, and occult stuff.” Judging from the rising energy in her voice, Samantha likely enjoyed suspense motion pictures that indulged occult fiction. “And, um ... one of his warlocks, uh, Othello, was...”

“Having sex with Madison in the open, I assume?”

Samantha gasped and looked up at her. “You don’t think Jacob asked him to—”

“Non, I am sure it was coincidence. Othello routinely engages with his ghouls in public, often with a host of enthralled kine to pleasure them. Visit Bloodlust with enough frequency, and you will doubtlessly find the lovely man and Madison, having anal — always anal with that man — sex, while several kine ... well, fill her completely.”

Samantha stared at her, eyes wide, and Antoinette had to nudge her to continue their walk.

“Um, well ... he was having sex with Madison, in the open, like you said. She was really ... really enjoying it.” Samantha shook her head and covered her cheeks with her hands. If she Blushed Life, doubtless she would have exploded. “So, uh, I’d eaten, at the play, so

when Jacob took me back to his room to show me all his cool artifacts, I kinda...”

“Threw yourself at him?”

“Yes!” She squeaked and hid her face again. “And before I knew it, we were naked, and ... and ... that man looks really, really good naked. I knew he was fit, but ... wow.”

Ah, there it was, the sexual fascination in Samantha’s eyes that would allow her to grow past her timidity.

“Kindred usually groom potential childer, and for good reason. Several years of misery and hard work from a kine, for an eternity of perfect physique? A worthy endeavor.”

Samantha licked her lips, and looked left and right, checking for any who might be listening, before she leaned in closer to Antoinette and whispered. “And, he ... he uh ... he knew what kind of things I’d like. I didn’t even have to ask. He just ... did them to me.”

Antoinette smiled warmly down at her childe. So naive, the young woman. Jacob had centuries of experience, and could easily read a young vampire’s desires, especially one with as open a soul as Samantha. No doubt Samantha would want the man to start gentle, to tease and caress with soft touches, to settle her. But once arousal pumped through her undead veins, Samantha would want a man to take her, grab her, hold her down, and make her do things. The sort of woman who, when in the throes of lust, wanted to be treated like a harlot. She wanted to be bound with hands behind her, and to be forced to give her lover pleasure. She wanted to be spanked, and penetrated with enough force to make her tender. She wanted a man to whisper into her ear that she was a dirty whore, and then have his hand tighten around her throat, as she soaked him in her arousal.

So terribly sweet and naive. She likely thought her desires taboo and uncommon. Little did she know how common her tastes were.

“And after we were done,” she continued, “we started talking. I talked about ... Mary. And ... he talked about his life, too.”

This, Antoinette had hoped for. Her gambit had succeeded. Now, to see if Jacob was manipulating Samantha, or being honest with her.

“Please, dear childe, continue.”

## Chapter 126

~~Jack~~

His trip to speak with Azamel had been successful, more or less. Azamel looked worse than ever, but he found her speaking with Sándor, and it seemed like they were coming to some sort of agreement. Not that Jack got to stick around long enough to find out more. Azamel promptly booted him out, saying her arrangements with Sándor were none of his business.

It was his business, kinda. It was his job to keep the different species getting along. But he left anyway, a bit thankful for her asshole attitude. He had his own problems to deal with, and they were stacking up.

First, get the curse under control, or gone. Second, find out what the fuck the tears were about. Third, find a way to help Mary. Fourth, rebuild his life in the Invictus.

“You really remember nothing?” he said.

Elaine, sitting at a heavy, dark table, tapped on her laptop a few times before looking at him. “I remember some things, young Ventrue. But you must understand. Torpor wears at our memories, and when Elders feel their blood lust grow too strong, we sleep for decades to calm the hunger. Decades of strange, vivid dreams.”

He sat down across from her, maybe four feet between them, and nodded. “I get that. But, this curse thing, it must have been a pretty big deal, right? It must have left an impression no amount of torpor could wipe.”

His great grandsire leaned back in her fancy office chair, and looked to the sheriff. Ever since Damien had returned Jack to the

tower with a stake in his heart, everyone was put on red alert or something. Jack was never alone. No matter who he was with, someone had their eye on him, and that was usually Daniel. It sucked. It really sucked. Antoinette assured him that if she was with him and Elaine, in any capacity, Daniel would not need to be there; the two of them could handle the curse together.

Two elders keeping tabs on him at all times? Bleh.

“Digging up those memories is difficult, Jack. I have been hesitating to do so.”

“I noticed.”

She raised a brow at that. “You did?”

He shrugged and offered a small smile. “I’m your great grandchilde, what do you think?”

Sometimes, just sometimes, he could be a real cocky brat. He knew it, and now, so did Elaine. It made her laugh, and it proved a point: just because he had a habit of wearing his emotions and thoughts on his face, didn’t mean he was an idiot.

“If Julias sired you, then I must consider that you are smarter and more resilient than you appear.”

He grinned, victorious, and leaned back in his chair as well. Ventrue to Ventrue. Of course there’d be a little bit of combative tension between them, like between political figures, or anyone who liked to talk a big game.

“Yes, I have been avoiding this,” she continued, “because it is a terribly painful past, Jack.”

“More painful than having him speak inside you, tempting you? More painful than ... yeah, shit Antoinette’s probably told you about



already.”

She winced and looked down at her laptop, but didn't type anything. “Even now, it listens?”

“Yeap.”

“But it says nothing?”

“Yeap. I think he'd prefer—”

“You call it he. Why?”

His turn to wince. “Because it is, he. I didn't think so at first, but after the last conversation I had with him, it became pretty clear. This isn't like I've been possessed by some alien, or spirit. This is like ... something that's grown out of me. The curse created him in me, or from me, or something.”

“Doctor Jekyll, Mister Hyde?”

He shrugged. “I guess.”

She nodded, opened her mouth, but closed it after meeting his gaze. No need to say it. If that was the situation, then the curse had created this second personality out of the darkest, most fucked up desires he had. Not exactly a nice thing to learn, that he could have those kinda thoughts inside him. But, then again, becoming a vampire probably had something to do with those thoughts, too.

“I will tell you what I can remember,” she said, and glanced over her shoulder at Daniel. She didn't want him to hear this, but considering the situation, it was unavoidable. “I remember hunger, and rage. I remember running through forests, with wolves at my side.”

“Hunting you?”

“Serving me.”

Ah. That made sense, and it was a pretty powerful image. Gangrels and Ventrue had an easy time controlling animals, and while Elaine was no Gangrel, that didn't mean she couldn't run through the woods with a pack of four-legged death machines at her beck and call.

“How long ago?”

“Hundreds of years, well before I sired Viktor. Before I met Antoinette.”

Before she met Antoinette. Well, she had met Antoinette a super long time ago, so of course her memories of pre-Antoinette would be hazy. Maybe she remembered some stuff about Antoinette when she was younger. Not exactly the right topic for the moment, but his curiosity jumped up and waved its arms at him.

“Do you remember much about meeting her?”

Elaine knew what he was getting at before he finished the sentence, and she chuckled as she leaned forward a little. “Hazy memories, without context, without words. But I remember some scents, some tastes, some emotions, and some images. Would you like to know what they were?”

“Yes, please.” And he damn well knew the look on his face said ‘tell me something sexy’.

“I remember the smell of skin, of kine, of wine. I remember the smell of stone; her castle, no doubt. I remember the sight of kine piled atop each other, bathing each other in bliss and sin. I remember the taste of one of her ghouls, a well fed and healthy male; rare for the time. I remember seeing your lover naked for the first time, and the shock of witnessing someone as tall and as well

endowed as her. I remember thinking her unusual eyes and white hair were surely a sign she was one of Dracula's brides."

"Ever find any proof of that?"

"No. And she denies it, though I know her memories of such a time are dust." She waited until he nodded, and continued. "I remember bits and pieces of the first time she and I touched each other. Even then, our relationship was purely one of friendship. She indulged in sexuality in such extreme ... abandon, that I was intrigued. I can remember my curiosity being piqued."

And Jack's, definitely. "I don't understand how two friends can just ... well, I suppose I can." Vampires being vampires. And, people being people. Not everyone attached romance with sex.

She grinned at him, and looked up as she dug through more memories. "I taught her much about being a commanding presence that will not yield to others. She taught me much about embracing pleasure."

"Sounds like a good trade."

Elaine leaned in, and grinned at him even more, a bit of that Ventrue edge in her eyes mixed with something playful, and very sexual. "Indeed. I remember the feel of thralls, bodies intermingled with our own. I remember the pleasure of having two men inside me, while your lover sat on the face of the man I sat upon. I drank the blood of our meals off her breasts. I held her in my arms, and massaged her body as a dozen kine took turns filling her sex with seed, one after another."

"A dozen men? Sharing?"

"Indeed." She giggled, a higher pitched sound than Antoinette would make, but still a mature sort of laugh that sent a happy jolt up Jack's body. "A shame such memories are a blur. They mingle,

and context is lost. But I remember once literally lying upon the bodies of her thralls and ghouls, as they carpeted the floor. Fingers, dozens, hundreds of wet, warm, hungry fingers entered me until I was taut. The shafts of men stood upright, being kissed by the lips of others, or by me, and their cum gushed up and onto my body, only to be kissed away by her entourage. Soon I sank into the skin and flesh of her thralls. They climbed over me, penetrated me, and I can remember the feel of the girths of half a dozen men trying to penetrate me as they covered me. They succeeded.”

He gulped. “Uh...”

Her grin widened. “Yes, at the same time. A night of such reckless abandon led to being stretched wide, to the point of absurdity. I climaxed again and again, soaking the flesh of Ann’s dozens of thralls, and as I did, she climbed onto me, and kissed my breasts and stomach. Soon, what her kine did to me, was done to her, and I kissed her breasts and stomach as the shafts of men and fingers of women filled her to bursting.”

He put up his hands and sat back. “Jesus. Ok, uh, I think I’m saturated on the kinky stories.”

“Oh? So soon?” She licked her lips as she watched him. “I have more.”

“Yeah. Starting to feel a little inadequate, hearing stories like that.”

More laughter. She shook her head and waved a hand aside, dismissing his words. “If physical stimulus was the only concern, young Ventrue, women everywhere would simply acquire several oversized vibrators, sit in a tub of lubricant, and spend every night filled to the brim with buzzing plastic.”

“Some do.”

“Yes, but do you deny that most women would rather the touch of another soul to give such pleasure?”

After a few seconds to consider it, he sighed and nodded. “Yeah. Antoinette’s told me about her past, the crazy orgies, and how she’s grown up, moved on, and is happier with the sexual dynamic we have. But to a young guy like me, I guess it’s hard to believe sometimes.”

“Believe it. In a few hundred more years, orgies may tire you as well. But the touch of a lover? Someone you genuinely care for? Ambrosia, and an aphrodisiac for all eternity.”

He grinned at that, and then frowned. “Kinda makes me feel guilty for, you know, all the orgies she’s been burying me in.”

“Do not feel guilty. Antoinette knows you are young, and it brings her endless joy to, as you said, bury you in novel pleasures.” Again, she grinned a devil’s grin. “And you are a man. I would be remiss if I did not admit men have a ... larger appetite for such lopsided indulgences.”

“Tell that to Natasha.”

Elaine laughed again, heartier than before, a laugh from the belly. “That small woman is such a delight, terribly cute, and cunning and intelligent. And to know the timid little creature has a grand hunger for large, animalistic men, multiple, is both hilariously cliché, and yet wondrously perfect. Have you seen the pornographic videos she has filmed?”

“Um, no?” Oh god what the fuck.

“Ah, perhaps I should not have said anything. But the little Mekhet has apparently been indulging in something of an erotic project? With her two deliciously ... massive boyfriends.” She leaned forward, really close, and spoke in a whisper. “Such a tiny thing.

Have you ever seen a woman's body struggle to hold the girths of men so much larger than her? You can actually see the shape of—

“I'm not deaf,” the sheriff said.

Jack almost jumped out of his seat. Of course his great grandsire didn't react at all, except to look to the corner where Daniel stood, and offer the man an inviting smile. Right, she was interested in him. A bunch of what she'd just said was probably embellished to make Daniel squirm; Mekhet generally did, when bombarded with TMI.

“Your childe,” Elaine said, voice louder and emphasized, “is growing up, Daniel. A part of that is learning how to enjoy our second lives.” As she looked at him, her smile faded, and an annoyed scowl replaced it. “A lesson you should learn.”

The man shrugged and looked to the side. He probably didn't want to have the conversation, especially considering he was in some sort of relationship with Athalia.

“This talk reminds me,” she said, looking back to Jack, “about something Ann told me. Apparently Clara is interested in you?”

He winced. “I guess. I mean, I've made it pretty clear I'm with Antoinette, but she's still ... yeah, interested.”

“And she has no desire to join you and Ann?” More grins. “I am sure you could satisfy five women.”

He didn't even smile or chuckle at that. Not that it wasn't kinda funny, just beyond absurd. “I'm one guy. And Clara isn't really into the whole ... sharing thing.”

“Oh? I have heard she has spent the night with four rather scrumptious ghouls, at the same time, more than twice.”

He winced again, and then, because his imagination was a dumbass, he couldn't help but picture what Elaine had described earlier, too many dicks trying to fit into too few holes, except with Clara and Jessy's ghouls. And Clara was beautiful, gorgeous, and fit as fuck. God damn it.

"She was drunk. And I'm guessing Jessy teased her about shit before that, and, yeah. If I was her, drunk and feeling ... neglected, and four gorgeous women showed up at my door, I'd probably let them in, too."

"And the times after that?"

"Yeah, probably then, too."

Elaine pat the table a couple times, as if patting his head. "Your honesty is a delight."

"Bites me in the ass a lot."

"No doubt. But, let us move on. I can regale you with more tales of your lover's overabundant sexual history later."

He leaned back in his chair, nodded, and took a deep, useless breath. "Alright. I've been hoping we could start working on this earlier, but you've been kinda—"

"As I said, the memories are painful. But also, digging up what I could of my records has been difficult. I have contacted my thralls, and they have searched tirelessly through my old records. Ancient tombs and old journals of parchment must be handled with care."

"I'm surprised you didn't, I don't know, keep meticulous detail of all that stuff."

She raised a brow at him, and shook her head. "You do not understand. Hundreds of years ago, superstition ran wild. Humans,

usually women, were frequently burned alive for suspicion of witchcraft. In an age where intelligence was either sought after, or actively destroyed, any vampire had to be wary of keeping records.”

That made sense. In the modern age, or hell, any time in the past two hundred years, record keeping was just a normal part of life. Before that, not so much. The further back you went, the stranger and rougher people were with information, and a woman keeping records about ‘curse’ and ‘blood’ and whatnot, was probably doing so at risk of her own life. No matter how strong a vampire was, they couldn’t stop a thousand humans armed with torches and flaming arrows.

“Yeah, you’re right. My bad. I just keep thinking you should have all this organized in digital journals.”

“I dare not record everything digitally. Some of my deepest, darkest thoughts lay within those books, written in English half a millennium old.”

“Even now?”

“Even now. My thralls will be taking digital pictures, and sending them to us across a secure network. But then we are to ... what is the word, ‘scrub’ the drives that see these images, as my thralls will with theirs.”

“Sheesh. Are all dragons that paranoid about their secrets?”

“Yes. The Invictus and Cathians are too stupid to manage such knowledge, and would destroy themselves with it. The Sanctified are not to be trusted, for they are sinister, and seek to rule all.”

Well, that was blunt. It made him smile. She really was a Ventrue, and his great grandsire.

“And the Circle?”



“The Circle are ... difficult to predict or understand. I would rather they did not have such knowledge, but they are the least troublesome of the four. They would at least understand the value in such ancient words, and many witches would either seal them away, or not use them for ill.”

“Many witches, but not all.”

After a heavy sigh, she closed the lid on the laptop, and looked at him with heavier eyes. “Yes. As you can imagine, I do not want Jacob to have such knowledge. He is ... far more deadly than your average warlock, and I do not trust his motives.”

“Neither do I, but the Prince seems to trust him.”

“That she does, to an extent. I have warned her against the man, but your lover is as old as I, and is a fount of wisdom and intelligence. If she trusts him, she has reason to.”

Considering Jacob seemed to have some sort of interest in his mom, he was happy to know Antoinette trusted him, sorta. Knowing Elaine didn't, on the other hand, sent concern up through him like he jammed a fork in an outlet. If Jacob hurt his mother, the fucker was going to learn what the curse was really like.

“What can you tell me,” Elaine continued, “about when you freed the curse? Leave no detail unspoken.”

Time to dig up his painful memories then. Ugh. But it was only fair. “I remember ... flashes of history, things the curse had seen. I told you this before.”

“Tell me more.”

He frowned. Of course she realized that he could dig up the memories if he really tried, and she had no qualms about asking him to suffer for it.

“When Julias died, the world went white. It was the first time I actually got to see ... the Beast, I guess.”

“Few Kindred have ever managed such a feat. The Circle speak of it, but no other.”

“Ch’yeah, well, people are better off. It’s a big, ugly thing, all smoke and fangs and teeth, and beaks, and fur and shit. And mine was wrapped in chains. It took me on a trip down memory lane, showed me you, and Susanna, and Viktor and Julias, each time they did something ... vampire-y.”

“You saw me, with Susanna?”

“And some other woman.” He winced as he tried to dig up the memories. It was hard. Old, hazy things, buried under alien instincts, weren’t like trying to remember yesterday. He had to find them, and re-watch them in his own mind, over and over, and do his fucking hardest to not let his own imagination pollute them. Each time, it felt like he was rubbing himself against the Beast inside, tearing away the skin of humanity, like a big chunk of pork rubbing against a huge cheese grater.

“There was someone else there,” he said, “a Sanctified I guess. I had no idea who he was, and the curse was showing me the memories in reverse. But after some more jumps, he showed me that same man, casting some sort of ... spell, I guess, on Susanna. Full on ritual stuff.”

“The Lancea et Sanctum is known to use Theban Sorcery, from time to time,” she said, scowling as she did. “Tell me, what can you remember of the ritual?”

“Susanna was on her knees in a drawn circle, and the priest dude had some things on the floor around her. Uh ... crucifix with Jesus on it ... a spear ... necklace with a cross ... and some things I didn’t

recognize. I think I saw a stone? Something black. And I think I saw a skull, maybe, of an animal.”

Elaine opened her laptop and typed away. “And the man?”

“A blur. Plus, hood. And ... and he was carrying a book. I thought it was a bible at first, then maybe that Testament of Longinus I know Damien reads.”

“Unlikely. Neither contain words of power.”

“You’ve read the Testament of Longinus?”

She grinned at him. “I’ve read the bible in various points throughout history, various versions. I have done the same with the Testament of Longinus, the Quran, the Torah, and others.”

“Damn.”

“Dragons hunger for knowledge, as you can imagine.”

He nodded, and laughed. “What about my mom?”

“What about her?”

“She’s a Daeva now, right? I can’t, for the life of me, imagine her being anything like Antoinette, all sexual and teasing. And now she’s a dragon, and I can’t imagine her getting hardcore into cataloging data or researching things either.”

“She is Daeva, but to call her a dragon is perhaps a bit premature. While she is a fledgling, she is Ann’s responsibility, and will be exposed to the most basic tenants of our covenant. But in Dolareido, she is not bound to her sire’s covenant, and may join another once she is no longer considered a fledgling.”

“Guess I never really considered joining another covenant. I get the Invictus. I understand them. It clicks.” Money. Territory. Power.

Much as he didn't approve of Michael's methods, he couldn't image dealing with another covenant's approach.

She nodded. "I—oh, one of my thralls has found something of interest." She clicked on her laptop a few times, eyes focused. "Jack, have you ever meditated before?"

"Meditation? Uh, no. Quieting the mind? Doubt I could ever do that."

"Then, little Ventrue, you are in for a painful learning process."

---

They ran into the obvious roadblock the moment he tried meditating: Jack never stopped thinking. Always thinking, always analyzing, like a typical Mekhet. If a Mekhet had sired him, it would have fit, though Jack didn't really have a desire to learn every secret or anything. He just had one of those minds that liked to analyze, to practice hypothetical conversations, or to just voice his own hypotheses to see if they made sense. Most things made sense in the mind, but once you put them to words, it was a lot easier to spot flaws.

Or, he played music in his head. Usually it was metal music, but even when he was just getting up to cross a room, a random diddy might play. No matter what he did, his mind loathed inner silence, and refused to ever let it happen.

The key aspect of meditation, was silencing the mind. Apparently most learned by focusing on their breathing, using the focus as sort of a shield against intruding thoughts. And if you did have an intruding thought, you had to learn to let it go. Don't latch onto it, don't process it, just, release it.

Yeap, he sucked at meditation. It wasn't his focusing that was a problem. He'd always had better focus than most. The problem was he was good at focusing on something like a manic psycho,

obsessing over it, and pouring energy into it. Focusing on his breathing felt like focusing on watching paint dry, and his mind screamed to be let loose.

He sat on his butt, on a pillow, in one of the cells in Elysium. The door was locked, with Daniel and Elaine outside. Despite their utter silence, he could sense Elaine's presence, and Daniel's. They were distractions. On top of that, breathing was pointless, and doing it was a very manual process for a vampire.

They spent a few days trying different approaches. Jack put his life on hold, his duties, his Invictus job as a Right Hand, to try new things with Elaine. Michael understood. It needed to be done, and if they didn't get this working, Jack would forever be a liability.

But Elaine had an idea, a scary idea, but an idea. And it fucking worked.

Jack stared into the flame of the candle, and focused on its shape. The curl of the flame; he dismissed the thought that tried to analyze why it was shaped that way. The difference in colors; he dismissed the thought that analyzed why there were a few different colors. The way it danced in the stale air; he dismissed analyzing the still air, and how a candle flame could dance in it. He kept his eyes on the burning aura, and let his mind grow quiet.

There was nothing else, just the flame. Only the fire existed. Vampire bane.

*Jack.*

And there he was. The curse, a voice in his mind, but nothing more. A thought, to be dismissed.

*Jack. You can't ignore me.*

Jack sighed slowly, and stared at the fire. A drum solo ran through his head, something from Lamb of God. He dismissed it.

*Jack, I'm not just a thought in your head you can suppress. I'm a person, stronger than you, and I will not be silenced.*

The flame danced, and Jack watched the orange and amber, until they drowned his thoughts in their eternal canvas. Fire. Simple, alive, and it reduced anything Kindred to ash and dust in seconds.

*You can't silence me. I can silence you, because I know control, but you ... Jack ... Jack! If you silence me, the fuck are you going to do when shit hits the fan, and you need me?*

He cast his thoughts into the flame, and let it devour them. All that was left was silence.

*Shit's going to get rough eventually, and you're going to come crawling back to me. You can't control the power of the curse. I can. You're nothing without me. When someone's on death's door, and the only person who can do shit about it is you, you'll come running back to me. You're nothing without me! Nothing!*

Words on the air, that drifted into the flame. Meaningless.

He smiled as he closed his eyes, and let his mind relax. The silence continued, like a small stream, and he could tell it separated himself from the curse. With time and effort, Jack could make that small stream into a raging river, and the curse would never be able to cross it.

He got up, and knocked on the door. Elaine stepped in.

“How did it go, great grandchilde?”

“I think we're making progress. He tried to talk to me, but I managed to ignore him. Like, completely.” Just like the curse had

ignored Jack in the Great Below, straight up ignored Jack to the point Jack might as well have not existed until the curse expended their vitae. How the tables had turned.

She sighed relief and touched his shoulder. “That is a step, then. It had helped me, but my circumstance was different than yours.”

“It’s a great first step. But, next time, let’s get rid of it completely.”

“That ... will be difficult. My thralls have found little in my archives, but there are some mentions of the Lancea et Sanctum.”

“Sounds like a place to start. I’ll see about talking to Damien and Maria.” He’d been avoiding Damien, but he had good reason. “And I need to talk with the hunters. Harcourt, ideally.”

“How about your mother?” a third voice said.

Elaine and Jack looked down the hallway, and Jack winced as he realized it was his mother talking. Shit, another person he’d been avoiding, and probably shouldn’t have been.

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The two of them entered her bedroom, and he spent a little time looking around at the walls where she’d hung up curtains, and the hilariously grand and massive vanity table. The mirror, wide and tall, showed off the various things she had scattered on the desk, and he stood in front of it as he looked down at them.

A picture of his dad, James, with his mother when they were young, back in the nineties. A picture of Mary and Jack when they were kids. A picture of Jack, not long before he died. A picture of his mom with Mary, something they took after Jack died, when she was finally moving on with her life.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

He winced. “Yeah.” Christ, the guilt hit him double hard, and he picked up Mary’s picture. His mom had finally managed to put her life together, then lost her daughter and her life in a single night, and now the only thing she had left, him, was avoiding her. Fuck. Fuuuuck. “I’m ... sorry, about that.” She really shouldn’t have gotten these pictures, but she did. Antoinette probably didn’t approve.

“I thought you were just being a boy, a man, doing what all young men do, and growing up.”

“I mean, yeah, but no. We’re vampires now. That old family approach to things doesn’t really apply anymore.” He set Mary’s picture down, and joined his mom on the edge of the bed. She was in a suit, just like him, though Antoinette liked her suits with a little more artistic flair than Invictus.

“Then why’re you avoiding me?”

“Because it wouldn’t be fair.”

She blinked at him. “What? Fair to you? I don’t—”

“Fair to you.”

“I’m ... not sure what you mean.”

Sighing, he gestured to himself as he turned on the bed, one leg pulled up onto the blankets so he could face her. “Mom, you’re a fledgling. Your job right now is to learn how to manage being a vampire. The only things on your mind should be”—he counted off on his fingers—“learning how to hunt, how to avoid the sun, how to keep your head low, and how to maintain the Masquerade.”

“Well they’re not. I’m concerned about my son.” She turned to face him as well, and she glared at him. It was her Mom glare. A powerful glare, but Jack had gotten used to facing it down, after his dad died.



“You know about the curse.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not my son anymore.”

“Mom, come on, I need you to stop jumping on that reflex, and listen to me.”

“I don’t—”

He swiped his arm across the air, hard enough to make the bed shake slightly. “Listen. To. Me!”

She recoiled a little, eyes wide, and he ground his teeth as he looked down. Hard to tell if that burst of anger was the curse, or just him, frustrated that his mom fell into old habits so easily.

“Jack...”

“That old family life is gone. You’re my mom, but you’re a vampire first. Hell, you’re the Prince’s childe before you’re my mom. No one, and I mean no one, not one single vampire in this whole city, is going to think of you as my mom first. You’re Antoinette’s childe first, and they’ll interact with you based on that. And me, I’m Jack, the guy who survived Lucas, the guy who survived the azlu, twice, the guy who beat the hunters. The cursed guy, who’s dangerous.”

She looked down, obviously wanting to say something, but knowing full well he’d interrupt her if she did. It wasn’t the listening he wanted her to do, but it was better than a meaningless argument.

“This week, I went to another realm, Mom. Like, literally, another realm of existence, full of ghosts.”

“Ghosts? Like...”

“Yeah, like Mary. My friends nearly died there. I took on a fucking azlu there”—his swearing earned a wince from her—”and beat it on my own. My other friends showed up to rescue us, and the curse nearly attacked one of them, just because I was annoyed they spoiled my fight.” He got up and started pacing, eyes looking around randomly as he tried to summarize his crazy life in a way she could understand. “And that’s just the curse, the latest and biggest problem, being a thorn in my ass. Before that, I was getting pulled into important roles in the Invictus, from organizing insider trading, to literally showing up in dark alleys and exchanging briefcases full of money. In the chaos of a bunch of elders dying and Natasha leaving, I became a Right Hand. The werewolves and monsters showed up, and I found myself playing liaison between them and vampires; Avery and Azamel have some rough histories in Dolareido, and the Prince and the Invictus thought it’d be a good idea to use me as a communication buffer.”

His mom stared at him, eyes wide. Some of this she knew, some she didn’t, but this was the first time he’d dumped it on her like this. He had to. If he gave her the information slowly, to try and parse like Damien or Natasha or Antoinette might, she’d rationalize each individual point away. Better to bury her in the truth until it broke her stubbornness.

“But,” he continued, “despite all that, I spent the first chunk of my vampire life not dealing with that. At first, I was just a dumb vampire, learning the ropes. Julias ... Julias, he held my hand, and taught me the basics. Taught me how to hunt, how to feed, how to avoid the sun, how to use my Disciplines in a bunch of different circumstances. And when he wasn’t doing that, Antoinette was helping me. And the two of them gave me time to get over my personal shit.”

“Personal ... shit.” She struggled with swearing, and he almost laughed. “How did that go?”

“It was hell, Mom. I killed someone my very first night, Mrs. Pavala. Drank her dead in a frenzy, and when I came back to my senses, I ripped her fucking head off to disfigure the corpse, so no one would point out the fang marks.” His mom knew about Pavala. She didn’t know about him decapitating her corpse. “I spied on you and Mary a bunch of times. I visited my own grave. Just ... just getting used to being a new person was brutal. A lot of vampires kill themselves in the first few months after their embrace.”

“Antoinette told me that. I...” She shivered and rubbed her arms. “When I first woke up, and she told me Mary was dead, I ... I thought things like that. But but, that’s when she showed me you!”

He sighed, sat down beside her again, and grabbed her hand. In the past, that’d be something she did to him. Seemed only fitting he do it for her.

“I’m here, alive, much as a vampire can be, and I don’t plan to go anywhere. But my life is one giant pile of crazy, with a lot of high stakes gambles. You know how many years I should have been a vampire before dealing with the shit I deal with now?”

“No.”

“Fifty, for the political shit, for being a Right hand, for dealing with Azamel and Avery. A hundred or more for the fucking monster fights and realm hopping. The shit I’m dealing with is not normal, but I’ve managed. It’s not a normal situation though, and you shouldn’t get involved in it.” He pointed a finger at her, and jammed it into her shoulder hard enough to make her wince and smack his finger away. “You, for the next few years at least, should be focused on nothing more than just learning to be a vampire, and enjoying the good parts of being a vampire. Find the things that are good about it, and embrace them. Being a vampire can really suck, but it can be really awesome too.”

She smiled at that, and met his eyes again. “Awesome?”

“Yes, awesome.” Ok, time for the sex talk. Why he was giving the sex talk to his mom, he didn’t know, but it was important she realized how different things were now. Thank god he wasn’t alive anymore, or he’d be vomiting everywhere from sheer awkwardness. “Go get laid, Mom.”

“What!?”

“Go get laid. Find a mark, drink them and fuck them.” More cursing too, because he needed their mother son relationship to evolve, or Samantha was going to get herself killed trying to protect him from something. “Hell, with Antoinette teaching you, I’m sure you’ll be a master of Majesty in no time, so, have yourself an orgy.”

“Jack!”

“I’m serious! Go, have an orgy. Enthrall a few kine and go nuts. Maybe go find Isabella and enjoy some time with her ghouls ... and her and Hella, if you’re into that.” He didn’t think his mom was bi, but the fuck did he know? “Go spend some of Antoinette’s money on some male prostitutes from the entertainment district. Hell, go to Devil’s Corner and rent out a whole troupe of hookers, if you want. Or just ask Jessy if you can borrow her ghouls. I know she’ll lend them to you. If you want, go talk to the witches, and see if they’ll hook you up. I know they’re basically in an orgy twenty-four seven.”

The mention of witches made her squirm. She’d have looked away too, but her eyes were already locked on her legs, the whole conversation obviously overwhelming her awkwardness limit.

“Jack...” She squirmed a little more, wriggling in embarrassment until she found the words. “Jack, I’m sleeping with Jacob.”

“Say what?”

---

~~Beatrice~~

Three weeks after her first meeting with Elen.

It was getting easier. She didn't think about him as much anymore, and didn't feel guilty when fucking Jen anymore, either. The guilt hadn't ever really been a problem; Julias would have wanted her to find some solace in Jen's arms. It was more the ache and misery that'd been a problem, and as the months went by, it faded.

She'd been worried that maybe her sessions with Black Blood and the immortal Elen would have her swimming in memories about Superman, but they didn't. It was a project for her to pour her passion and energy into, and that made it easier. Maybe she'd get to have Julias back, maybe she wouldn't, but holy fuck she was going to try. And that made it easier, took the edge off not having him in her life.

"Samantha's moans were really cute last night," Jen said.  
"Sounded like they were being gentle."

Triss nodded, and twisted her body to get a better angle. She and Jen sat in their shared alcove, naked, and were in middle of having their legs wrapped around each other, to celebrate dusk. And they had the fur curtain pulled open, cause, why the fuck not. She didn't care anymore if people watched. The only people in the cave were members of the Circle, and honestly, it was kinda fun, letting them see sometimes.

In a little bit, Jen and Triss would go outside, and take a trip to speak with Black Blood again. But, a little sex first, to start off the night proper.

"That a good thing?" Triss asked.

“I think so. With a woman like Samantha, she’ll have her strongest climaxes from rough sex. But a night of soft, tender sex? Emotions were involved.”

That made sense. Samantha reeked of the sort of woman who read trashy romance stories with the same shirtless guy on the cover, a guy who would treat her softly outside of bed, but treat her like a dirty dirty girl once in bed. It was a cute thought, for sure.

Triss frowned at where her legs were locked with Jen, and where their slits were squashed together. Scissoring sucked.

“This is like slamming two clams together, Jennifer.”

“Because your technique is atrocious. Come on, get in closer and grind, not thrust.”

Triss rolled her eyes. This whole thing was Jen’s idea, and the girl was a master of sex, but this attempt at expanding Triss’s boundaries was a failure. After a few more minutes of grinding and not finding a position Triss enjoyed, she collapsed back on her fur, and stared up at the ceiling. Her head drifted to the side, and she looked out at the empty cave.

Othello lay in his alcove, fur also pulled wide open. He was getting his good morning, er, evening blowjob from Madison, like usual, and like usual, he did it halfway in the opening of his alcove so everyone could watch. After having seen it hundreds of times, Triss should have grown bored of it, but she didn’t. They were both gorgeous, and it was arousing as fuck to watch them together.

So, with some porn to watch, Triss gave her hips a few extra swaying grinds. It barely registered on the pleasure scale.

“I give up.”

“You, are hopeless.” Jen reached down and slapped the one butt-cheek Triss had not pinned under a leg to the floor.

They both raised their heads and looked out to the cave as the shuffling of feet announced someone walking. Shy, soft steps. Samantha’s steps.

And Samatha came out, into the cave, alone. She wasn’t dressed, instead wearing one of Jacob’s furs wrapped around her, and she walked on tip toes as she came out into the cave, eyes cast in the direction of Othello’s hole in the wall.

Well well well, the Daeva’s sex drive had been awoken. It certainly wasn’t like she wasn’t getting her fill from Jacob, based on the moans, but if she was sneaking out here for a peek at what Othello was up to, maybe Jacob had left? The fucker’s Cloak was strong enough he could do that without any of them noticing.

Samantha froze when she spotted Jen and Triss. But before she could turn and flee, Jen waved, and waved her over. Chuckling, she prodded Triss, who rolled her eyes, and also motioned Samantha over. Yeah, sure, invite her over for a chat while Triss and Jen failed at tribbing. Perfect time for a conversation.

Samantha blinked, several times, before she came over to them. She averted her eyes quite a bit, staring at the floor as she got closer, and hell, Triss couldn’t help but chuckle at that. The woman was so much like Jack when he was younger.

“Samantha,” Jen said, voice soft, calm, and smooth like silk. “How are you? Where’s Jacob?”

“Jacob, uh, he had to do something ... witchy, I guess. And, um, I realized this morning — evening — that my clothes were all torn up, so I thought I’d ask Othello. Cause...” She looked over her shoulder, and her gaze lingered on the man, still mid blowjob. Yeah,

Samantha definitely wore her kinks on her sleeves. “Cause he’s always here, and I figured Madison might have something?”

So Jacob was gone then. He had some pretty important shit in his alcove. Leaving Samantha in there was a potential disaster scenario. Then again, Samantha was too nice to steal anything, and it wasn’t like she could read any of the ancient texts. Hell, Black Blood was trying to teach Triss how to, and progress was slow as fuck.

“Well, they’re a bit occupied, as you can see,” Jen said, “but we have clothes.” Still with her legs wrapped around Triss’s, Jen smiled at Samantha, got comfortable on the furs on her side, and locked her legs tight so Triss was trapped on her back. Ok, apparently Jennifer, Queen of the cave, had decreed she and Triss were to remain leg locked until this awkward conversation was over. “But first, you have to give us some good gossip.”

“Gossip?” Samantha forced herself to look at Jen, her squirming lessening with each passing second.

“Gossip! It’s been decades since Jacob’s had anyone in his bed. You have to tell us at least a little.”

“Bed. You ... you hear it, don’t you?”

Triss chuckled hard; sounded like a pig snort. “Uh, yeah. You sound like Madison does when she’s in the middle of a Kiss climax. Maybe a little higher pitched.”

“Oh god!” She threw her hands up to cover her face. Which meant she dropped the fur covering her, and she squealed as she scooped it back up. But Jen and Triss both got to see the woman naked. Damn. Lean, fit, handful breasts, and hints of softness to her that you could only get after having a couple kids. It only added to her hotness. Really, total milf.



“Jacob is a lucky man,” Jen said, because the slut knew exactly what to say.

It worked like a charm, and had Samantha smiling sheepishly as she held the fur snug around her.

“I’m being silly, aren’t I? Covering myself up, when everyone’s just ... you know.”

“It’s not silly,” Triss said. “You’re new to this. But it won’t take long before you’re walking around naked and fucking your meals.” She tried to unlock legs with Jen, but Jen fought back, reached down, and grabbed one of Triss’s ankles to keep her from getting away. At this point, the tiny amount of pleasure the position had before was completely long, and now Jennifer was just wrestling.

Wrestling was fun, but Triss was a Nosferatu. She could throw Jen over a building if she tried. Jen knew it too. She also knew Triss would never do that to her. Crafty bitch.

“If you’re still dating Jacob by then,” Jen added, “you could use your Daeva powers to treat him? Nosferatu have no way to entice kine into servitude with the Vinculum, but you do. Imagine the possibilities.”

Samantha forced her eyes up from the cave floor, and looked at the two naked women, eyes lingering on their bare pussies, and then up Jen’s body to her face. There was a hint of intrigue in those eyes.

“Possibilities?”

“Yeah,” Triss said. “You’ve seen Othello with a few kine. Not that hard to seduce people with Daeva’s Majesty. Treat your man to an orgy.”

“An orgy?” She laughed and squirmed inside her fur blanket. “I ... I suppose I could, couldn't I?”

Jen nodded, sat up, and Triss thought she'd relent with the silly position. But she didn't, just started grinding her hips into her from a sitting position, one arm behind her on the fur-covered floor for balance, the other clutching Triss's hips. Ok, that did feel a bit better, soft and swollen pussies squishing against each other.

Of course at this point, the damn slut was doing it to see how Samantha would react, not to get off.

“Imagine it,” Jen said, voice turning husky. “Half a dozen women, naked bodies entwined like Beatrice and I, each just waiting for a turn in your man's arms, all at your guidance.” Jen let go of her hip for a second, clutched one of her own breasts, and gently fondled the large tit until it conformed into her palm and fingers. “Or perhaps you'd prefer to be the center of attention? You could sit on Jacob's body, lean back, close your eyes, and relax as six women's hands caress, massage, and guide every inch of you.” She grinned as a thought came to her. “Or perhaps, you'd prefer it be six men?”

That got a tiny squeak out of her, and she shook her head like a child denying they'd stolen a cookie. Totally caught. The woman definitely wanted to be the center of attention, while a mountain of men did things to her. Well, Triss didn't know what sort of kinks Jacob had, but considering all the noise Samantha had been making the past few weeks, he'd been doing something right to satisfy the mom.

“It's funny,” Triss said, “you're not all that similar to Natasha.”

“Natasha Vola? Why do you ... oh...”

Jen and Triss laughed. Everyone knew what sort of kinks the little Mekhet had unlocked since meeting Matthew and Arturo. Word got around. That little woman was totally into being squashed between

two giant hunks of man meat, and apparently, the idea appealed to Samantha. Or maybe it was the idea of being tied up and forced that appealed to her so much?

With Jen distracted by her own stories, Triss lifted her foot, planted it on Jen's chest, and gently kicked her away.

“Get up and help the woman find some clothes, ya damn tramp.”

Jen pouted for a moment, sighed, turned off the Blush of Life, and stood. “Fine, fine.” She got up, stepped out, and motioned for Samantha to follow. Unlike Samantha, she made no attempts to hide her nudity. Bitch loved to show off like a Daeva, but unlike a Daeva, had no sense of subtly.

And Triss loved her for that. Love was a strange way of framing it, considering they were close friends with benefits, a lot of benefits, but not actually romantically interested in each other. Such a strange relationship, but one she was damn glad she had.

She sat up and dug around in the furs for her tank top and boyshorts, slipped on the black clothes, and got up as she watched Jen take Samantha to her old alcove, which sat higher up on the wall and required some jumping to get to. Jen used to keep her two ghouls up there with her, but now those two were usually out of the cave, doing recon shit. And sometimes they came back, either to report in, or to get in on fucking Madison or some kine Othello brought back with them.

Triss rolled her eyes. Of course going Jen's path took them near Othello's alcove for a minute, and Samantha's gaze lingered on Othello, and how the man was lying on his back, and gently forcing Madison to deepthroat his dick.

“We're not all a bunch of perverts,” Triss said, loud enough everyone in the cave could hear her. “Aaron's not around, but he's super vanilla. Only fucks in private, and has a girlfriend.”

“I d-don’t think I’ve ever talked to him,” Samantha said, stuttering as she forced herself to look away from Othello.

Rolling her eyes, Triss crawled out of the alcove, now officially the only person in the cave wearing any clothes, and walked over to Othello as Jen and Samantha disappeared into Jen’s alcove.

“Dude, ever consider you’re going to make Jacob jealous?” She pressed her back to the alcove entrance opposite of Othello, and watched. At this point, she kinda liked watching. It helped rekindle her sex drive, and Othello didn’t think of it as anything other than a crowd admiring his amazing sex skills.

True, honestly. Madison was never unsatisfied, and was usually fucked into a coma, Kiss or not. Triss had no idea how she kept her ass clean all night every night, considering it was all Othello ever wanted to fuck, but she did, and Othello repaid her with a dozen orgasms whenever they got to fucking. There wouldn’t be any fucking this early in the evening, minutes after dusk, but Othello did love to kick his night off with a blowjob.

“Jealous?”

“You’re kinda drawing Samantha’s eye.”

He shrugged, and slipped his fingers into Madison’s curly hair. Mmmm, fingers in hair. “If Jacob wants me and Madison to join them, all he has to do is ask.”

“Ha, you think he’d agree to that?”

The man shook his head with a small shrug. “Probably not. But she’s not looking because she wants a piece, Triss.”

“Oh?”

He nodded, suddenly looking quite sagely, despite being mid blowjob. “She’s just looking because it’s appealing. Gets her insides revved. Same as you.”

Triss almost denied it, but relaxed back against the stone wall again, and sighed. It was totally true.

“You’re providing free porn to everyone who enters the cave?”

That earned a chuckle from him. “Yeap.”

She rolled her eyes, extra hard, but after a moment she settled and watched the man. Something about the way he had his fingers in Madison’s hair, stroking and massaging her head, while at the same time being firm with his hand, was really hot. The girl had to take him to the base if he wanted, and couldn’t lift her head until he let her. Yeap, that kinda gentle domination was super hot. Not really Triss’s thing, but that didn’t change that it was sizzling. She’d definitely watch a shitty movie with sex scenes like this in it.

“Dildos,” he said.

“Uh, what?”

“Dildos. If you’re going to scissor, use some double-sided dildos. Or better yet, double-sided vibrators.”

She laughed. Good god, this man.

“You ever think about something other than sex, Othello?”

He shrugged. “I think about you.”

“That’s sex.”

“No, not sex. I think about ... how nice it’s been, having you around.” The usual, dopey smile he had faded, and he straightened his head up as he smiled at her. “Jacob’s never been the same since

Minerva died. He was always kinda crazy, and, you know...” Right, Othello was alive when Minerva was. Aaron and Jen were not.

“Witchy?”

“Heh, yeah, witchy.” The man sighed, and closed his eyes for a moment as he pushed Madison’s head down. Having a meaningful conversation wouldn’t detract him from building up a good orgasm, evidently, but they’d only been at it five minutes and Othello took a lot longer than that to cum. “Jen, Aaron, me, none of us really get it, the way Jacob does. We don’t really understand him. But now...”

But now, she did, in multiple ways. It hurt hearing that, but it felt good too. Just because Julias was dead didn’t mean her life came to an end, it kept going, and she kept growing.

But, god, if she could get him back.

“Is me being a buffer to Jacob’s crazyness the only reason it’s nice having me around?”

“Ha, no. You’re the most interesting addition in a long time. You make Jen happy. Even Aaron likes to talk to you, and that’s saying something.”

She grinned, and sat down. Since her early evening sex with Jen was a bust, at least she could watch Othello enjoy himself. The thought made her chuckle quietly. In the past, the last thing she’d want to see is this dumbass enjoying a blowjob. Now? It honestly made her happy, to see the man happy. She owed him a lot, since he came on that crazy mission to stop the hunters. Plus, free porn.

“And?”

“And you’re gorgeous; sharkmouth aside.”

She kicked him in the foot, causing him to lift his hand from Madison's head. The ghoul sat up, and looked at Triss with a warm, happy, almost smile.

"I don't mind the extra teeth," Madison said. "And I saw what you did to Jen yesterday. That was ... wow."

Triss grinned at the ghoul, a little more playfully than she meant to. Since she'd started fucking Jen a few weeks ago, it'd been a nightly thing, and it didn't take long before they stopped giving a shit if someone could see them. Not like it was a big deal for her fellow witches and warlocks to see her naked, considering she'd showered with Jen and them months ago. Plus, it was kinda nice, knowing she was hot enough to earn a small audience. Having spent decades as a Nosferatu, convinced she was hideous, and then joining a bunch of witches who thought shark teeth were cool? Yeah, she was happy.

Triss opened her mouth and let her very, very long tongue hang for a moment, before she pulled it back up quick, earning a surprised, excited squeal from Madison.

"Guess I'm the one who's jealous. Get back down there." Othello guided the woman back onto his big dick, and while she struggled a bit, Triss could see she relished every moment Othello forced her. Part of that was probably because she was a ghoul, bound by the Vinculum, and utterly, totally infatuated with her master. A much bigger part was probably because she just had that kink, like a lot of women did.

"I guess I fit in with you witches better than I ever thought I would," Triss said. "Jacob guessed it right."

Othello nodded. "He's pretty damn smart. He doesn't invite people into the Circle randomly."

“Indeed,” Jennifer said. She walked over to them, still naked, but without Samantha. Without a care in the world, she slipped past Othello, and sat down where Madison lay, shoulder to shoulder with the Daeva. She slid her legs under the ghoul, and rested her hands on the small of Madison’s back while her legs became a lap for Madison to lie on.

Triss rolled her eyes again, but laughed. It was strangely cute how Jen got her legs under Madison, and Madison just continued working away at her boss’s dick. Everyone in the damn Circle was so hilariously comfortable with each other. Hell, Aaron may have been vanilla, but he’d come into that shower with Othello when Jen and Triss were showering, completely unfazed. He may not have been interested in an orgy, but she doubted they’d even make him blink.

“And it’s more than that,” Othello said, eyes on her, even as he gently worked Madison’s head up and down. “We’ve all ... suffered, I guess you could say. Jacob you know. Aaron’s had major issues with his family, leading to some murder.” Murder? Holy shit. “I’ve lost people, but it’s in the past. Now we’re a family, witches and warlocks, no walls, no barriers. We can trust each other with everything, right?”

With everything. She smiled, a smile she knew must have looked kinda sad, but she nodded as she looked down. Part of her knew she was turning to her witches as a distraction to keep her from thinking of Julias. But, Othello made a good point, and she looked back up as she let the thought worm its way into her brain. She was a sad woman, sinking into a pit of occult rituals and orgies because of the pain she’d suffered, and that descriptor fit the other witches and warlocks too.

They were one big, twisted, strange family. And that did feel nice.

“Find something for Samantha?” she said.



Jennifer nodded, and gave Madison a gentle slap on the ass. It rippled.

“We’re of similar height and build. I lent her one of my suits.”

Othello shook his head. “Gonna be loose in the chest.”

Jen smirked at the man, and gave him a gentle backhand in the chest. Yeah, Othello had a broad torso, defined pectorals and whatnot. He needed a bigger chest in his clothes too, just like Jen.

They chuckled. Such a weird atmosphere, the three vampires and a ghoul sitting around, chatting, while Madison ignored them, busy with her task. This was probably how witches and warlocks did their meetings back in the day, back when people thought witches and shit were real. A group of vampires comfortable with each other, comfortable enough to chat while their ghouls got them off. In the future, if Triss got a ghoul, would that ghoul have their mouth on her pussy, fingers in her, while Triss described her night, or maybe their goals for the week, to her fellow Circle members?

Did Jacob come from that sort of environment? Likely. Fucker had probably spent every full moon in an orgy, with a blood sacrifice in the center of it all. She could definitely see him getting sucked off while reading from some strange book, in some ancient language only Black Blood knew.

And honestly, now that Julias was gone, she could kinda see herself doing that, too.

Was that the game? If she could bring Julias back, she could save herself from becoming Jacob? But in the process of pursuing that unobtainable goal, she might become something worse? Ugh, it was fucking poetic. She hated poetic shit.

Quiet clops announced Samantha’s approach. She’d gotten her shoes from Jacob’s alcove, but was now dressed in one of Jennifer’s

suits. She did look good in it, and she smiled sheepishly as she approached.

“Thanks, I—oh!” She almost squeaked again when she got closer, enough so she could face the front of Othello and see that he was still being sucked off. And, with Jen now sitting beside him under Madison’s body, Samantha blinked at her several times, before blinking at Beatrice, the only other person in the cave with any clothes on.

“Don’t mind us,” Jennifer said, “we’re simply socializing. Sit with us, get comfortable. But, I believe you already have been getting comfortable with the Circle, now that I think about it.” hilariously obvious conversation segue.

“I, uh ... b-better...” Like a fly to honey, she stared at Othello, doing a horrible job of hiding it. She was so much like Jack in a way, obviously too easy to read for her own good, and obviously a total hornball. Being easy to read wouldn’t serve her very well, especially not amongst a bunch of witches and warlocks, but the hornball thing could be an asset.

Triss rolled her eyes and laughed. “She might be fucking our boss, but she’s still the Prince’s childe. Maybe we shouldn’t try and get her into all ... this.” She gestured to Madison, who’d been doing a damn good job of gobbling up Othello’s cock right to the base.

Othello shrugged, and lifted Madison’s head. The ghoul eased up off him, but didn’t stop, setting calming kisses on his length below his swollen glans. Giving the man time to settle down from impending orgasm, so they could work out a bigger one, probably. And, of course, he wanted to show off his big dick for the new girl.

“I’ve met the Prince on a few occasions,” Othello said, fingers stroking down from Madison’s hair onto her back. “I guarantee you she’d be quite happy to learn her childe’s getting comfortable with sex.”

“It’s true,” Samantha whispered. “She ... she’s pretty sexually open.” She made a tiny gesture to Othello. “Are all Daeva like this?”

Jennifer laughed, and gave Madison’s ass another slap. Wiggle wiggle. “Daeva are the worst for it, but all Kindred eventually grow comfortable with our bodies. Then, the bodies of our ghouls, then other servants, and then, prey.”

“I suppose that kinda makes you uncomfortable,” Triss said. “Not because of yourself, but because of Jack.”

“Jack?”

“Yeah. We’re his friends, and this whole vampire thing was his life, before you showed up. Er, shit, that wasn’t supposed to sound mean. Jack’s super happy you’re back in his life. But you’re probably a little self-conscious about that, right? Like, everything you do, you can’t help but think ‘oh god what would Jack think if he saw me now’.”

She smiled, nodding. “I guess I do. Though, he’s tried to tell me I shouldn’t think that way.”

“Well, he’s right, you shouldn’t,” Triss said, shrugging. “Jack has been getting drowned in sex for, what, over two years? That kid has been fucking the most powerful vampire in the city, and probably one of the most powerful vampires in the damn country, almost every night. And you know what your sire is like. She’s buried him in boobs and pussy, hers and her ghouls’, and now Elaine’s undoubtedly. And she’s probably done it in very public locations.” Before Samantha could die from information overload, Triss continued. “He’s seen my tits, and Jen’s; everyone’s seen hers, but you know what I mean. He might have seen Clara’s too, considering she has a torch for him. He’s ... well, you see where I’m going with this. This is one of the few great things about being a blood sucker, and Jack certainly won’t judge you for sitting down and enjoying watching a beautiful — if dumb — man get a great blowjob.”

Jen and Othello smiled at Triss, that sort of ‘she’s one of us’ kinda smiles, before they looked up at Samantha.

She closed her eyes, took a deep useless breath, nodded, and sat down beside Beatrice. It was a clean cave floor, no problem for the suit.

“Ok, you’re right. Jacob’s said as much, and so has my sire.”

With a warm chuckle, Othello nodded toward Samantha. “You are a Daeva, like me. I’m sure the Prince has told you about the quirks you’ll run into, like becoming rather attached to your ghouls.”

“Y-Yes.”

“And she’s told you how much you’ll love showing off?”

“ ... yes.”

Laughing louder, the man gestured to Samantha, and wiggled his brows subtly for a tiny, powerful moment.

She blinked at him, at Jen, then at Beatrice. Shrugging, Triss reached down, and slipped her tank top up and off, making Samantha squeak and look down. The nipple piercings gave Samantha pause, but it was the snake tattoo running from Triss’s nipple, and down her body to disappear under her boy shorts, that made Samantha’s jaw drop. That got them all chuckling.

Never in a million years did Triss see herself just goofing around with the Circle like this, stripping like they were drunk morons playing strip poker. But something about what Jen and Othello said struck a chord, and for some fucking reason, she found herself smiling.

“I uh ... umm...”

Everyone watched Samantha with curious eyes. A bit of peer pressure could be just the right tool to help her come out of her shell.

“You’re very beautiful,” Jennifer said, “and, honestly, from the noises we’ve heard, we all know you’re a sexually aware woman. You don’t need to be shy with us.”

After another long, heavy sigh, Samantha looked down, and undid a few buttons of her shirt. The jacket was already open, and now that the shirt was a bit open too, Triss could see the woman had no bra. The clothes she’d worn last night on her date hadn’t really allowed for one, and Jen’s wouldn’t fit.

Othello smiled at her, smiled at the cleavage she now showed, and guided Madison’s head back onto his dick. He helped his ghoul with the motion, faster than before, up and down, and the talented ghoul worked her head with the rhythm.

Apparently that sparked something in Samantha. Well, she was Daeva, and now another Daeva was looking at her, specifically and only her, while getting sucked off. Like fire on kindling. The only thing that stopped Samantha from blushing hard red, and from her nipples pushing out through the white suit shirt, was she wasn’t Blushing Life.

After an audible gulp, Samantha undid another button, and then another, shivering blatantly with each one. Now her breasts were visible, pleasant handfuls with small, pink nipples. She set her arms down, and looked at Othello, and then at what Madison was doing.

Watching a shy milf slowly expose her tits so everyone else could admire? Fucking. Hot.

Jennifer almost said something, but decided to not. Instead, she leaned back against the wall beside Othello, shoulder touching his, and she too watched Samantha and her exposed breasts, as Othello

worked Madison's head faster. A growing twinkle shone in Samantha's eye, and she looked down for a moment before looking to Triss. Triss was happier watching the blowjob, but she smiled at Samantha too before looking back to the big idiot and his ghoul doing work.

Just a bunch of vampires, doing vampire things. That's what Jacob would have said.

Othello started to cum, and Samantha raised a hand to her mouth, covering it. Despite the obvious pleasure on the man's face, he kept his eyes open, and on Samantha, her face and her breasts. Once the shock of seeing the man cum from only six feet away passed, Samantha lowered her hand, and tried to sneakily shift her shirt open further, where it disappeared under her pants. She succeeded in opening the shirt more, but not in being sneaky about it. She even grazed her nipple, and traced the underside of one of her tits, completely hypnotized and not even aware she was doing it. Everyone pretended to not notice though, and instead enjoyed the sounds and sights of a beautiful dumbass cumming into his happy ghoul's throat.

Daeva loved sex, generally more than the other blood clans, but damn. Samantha radiated an 'I want to fuck' aura that Triss hadn't expected. She'd seen it on Jack, but only when he was in the company of the Prince. Like mother, like son? Heh.

"And don't worry about Othello, or us," Triss said. "Unless Jacob initiates it, no one's going to touch you. We're all a bunch of exhibitionists, voyeurs, and perverts, but we're not assholes."

Samantha managed a tiny, thankful nod, but her eyes were locked on Othello's cock, and where she and Triss could see the man's flesh literally pumping, until it overflowed Madison's mouth. Well, they had been at it a while. Giant orgasm was inevitable. White leaked out of Madison's lips, and down the man's cock, heavy trickles that

were damn near supernatural. Kinda like the fucker was a living example of those burger advertisements, the ones super dolled up and fake, except, not fake.

“You all really ... really feel ok with this sort of stuff, don’t you?” Samantha said. She buttoned up a button, but when Jen waved a small hand, she stopped at one, leaving three undone, and much of her breasts exposed. Nipples covered, but only barely. A damn sexy way to wear a white-button shirt.

“We do,” Jen said. She leaned forward a bit, squashing her bare tits on Madison’s back, and looked down at what Madison was doing. Satisfied, she leaned back again and gave the ghoul an encouraging couple pats on the ass. “Things do change sometimes, but, yes, we’re often here enjoying such freedom. And when we’re not, we’re ... well, your boyfriend can tell you.”

Samantha smiled. “Witchy stuff?”

“Witchy stuff,” Jen, Othello, and Triss all said together. More laughter followed.

Madison, after making sure Othello’s dick was clean, sat up and slipped between Jen and her master. He hooked an arm over her shoulders, hugging her to him, and she beamed with pride. Job well done. She’d probably noticed what her fellatio had done to Samantha, and had delighted in making a show of it. Well, Othello did take her as his ghoul for a reason.

“Is it always, uh, you?” Samantha said, gesturing to Othello. “Um ... having sex, in the open.”

“Jennifer used to fuck her ghouls,” Triss said. “She has a couple boys at her beck and call, and they were DP’ing her regularly. I’ve talked to her same as you’ve talked to Othello, mid sex.”

Samantha blinked at them, especially when she noticed Jennifer's eyes go down, saddened. "But ... not anymore?"

Triss shook her head. "Not anymore. She got in with me and Julias, and for a good while there it was the three of us. And ... now it's the two of us." Ugh, she really didn't mean to drag the mood down, but once the words were out of her mouth, everyone looked down with the fucking worst case of spontaneous depression. "Guys, guys, don't be like that, ok?"

Jennifer lifted her head and grinned at her, a knowing grin. She was there for every meeting Beatrice had with Black Blood and Jacob about their secret plan. She was there every time Triss took another step toward that goal. Hopefully she didn't think Triss was feeling better because she thought maybe Triss was thinking it might be possible to resurrect Julias. She was, but she was also feeling better because of Jennifer herself, and even the handsome moron sitting beside her.

Othello stopped Blushing Life, and the sexual tension in the air melted away. Mostly. Just cause his dick got soft didn't mean there weren't a bunch of people sitting around naked.

"You said your clothes were torn?" Jennifer asked. "How did that happen?"

"I ... uh..." Samantha squirmed, and considering her shirt was almost wide open, it made the motion so much more attractive. "We were playing hide and seek. He found me."

Triss laughed. "You definitely sounded quieter last night. I thought maybe you guys were doing something super vanilla, but now I'm guessing you were gagged?"

Samantha squeaked and covered her cheeks with her palms. "Oh god."

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~~Natasha~~

Natasha groaned as her phone began to ring, and she reached out for it. She'd have ignored it, but it was Jessy's ring, and it was important the two of them exchange a couple quick words every couple days, at the minimum. Even though she was a dragon now, she still kept up her safety check-in system with her friend.

“M-Matt, stop for a second! I need to check in with Jessy.”

Matt sighed, nodded, and let go of her legs. They'd been pinned to her shoulders, and now they flopped on the mattress, spread around the huge man. But, as she reached for her phone again, Matt sat on his knees, and continued fucking her in a very slow, deep rhythm. And of course since he sat back on his knees, ass on his heels, he pulled her up toward his pelvis so her legs hooked around his hips, her ass a few inches in the air. She mewled, and her hand pushed the phone aside an inch by accident. Thunk thunk. It bounced on the floor.

She rolled her eyes, pushed herself up onto her elbows, and glared up at the big man. “I meant stop fucking me! N-Not, stop holding me down.”

“Oh. Well, I'm gonna have to decline.”

She growled, reached up, and punched the giant in his chest. All she got for her efforts was a grin from the man as he used his big hands to ease her off most of his length, and then pull her toward him until she'd swallowed him to the base again. She looked at her spread lips, and how they soaked the man with each slow stroke, all while Jessy's ring tone continued in the background.

It stopped ringing, and she frowned up at her big dumb boyfriend again. But before she could find a good argument, her laptop, sitting on the nightstand nearby, began to ring as well. It was the vid

program she and Jessy, and all the Invictus used to talk with each other when they wanted video.

Arturo, naked and already satisfied, walked in from outside her bedroom, pointed the laptop at her, and pressed the answer button.

“Art!”

The program blinked on, and Natasha froze.

“Hey Tash, I—oh fuck yes!” Jessy leaned in toward the camera until her face devoured the whole screen, and her eyes filled with wonder and hunger as she stared.

“Art y-y-you asshole!” She grabbed the nearby blanket, pulled it over herself, grabbed one of her pillows, and threw it at Art. The evil man cackled as he ran out of the bedroom, dodging the pillow like it was a bomb.

“Something going on?” Eric’s voice said over the laptop’s speakers.

“Natasha’s getting it on!”

“Oh god. Jessy, come on, let her—”

Jessy’s head shifted left and right as Eric fought to get access to the laptop, but she fought him off. “Thanks Art!” she yelled.

Art stuck his head back into the room, but before he could say anything, Natasha threw another pillow at him. It hit him in the head, and the man yelped and retreated.

Natasha glared up at Matt, but he only smiled down at her. Her torso and pelvis were covered in the blanket now, but her legs stuck out with how her pelvis and ass were snug to the man’s body. It was obvious to anyone watching, with where Matt’s hands disappeared

under the blanket, that he had his grip around her hips, and was penetrating her.

“Check in completed. G-Go away now!” She’d end the conversation herself if she could reach.

“Can’t! Got some questions.”

“W-What do you want?” Natasha said, voice wavering.

“Couple things. First, how’s the hunt for evidence going?”

“Nothing new.” Natasha relented to the situation. The faster she could get this conversation over with, the better.

Several more trips into the Hisil had found nothing to exonerate her old boss. She, Matthew, and Arturo had explored much of the Shadow realm, and found several more circumstances of red wraiths drifting around, doing suspicious things. They’d found a tear, but hadn’t been able to get near it, with red wraiths surrounding it. And the wraiths had mentioned Maria a couple more times.

“Bummer. I hope that bitch isn’t sticking her fingers where she shouldn’t be,” Jessy said. “Second thing, tomorrow night, Fiona wants to get a bunch of us together at Bloodlust. Party kinda deal.”

“Oh. Um ... I guess we could g-g-oh!”

Matthew, apparently feeling even more playful than usual, started to fuck her again. Big, long, heavy strokes, each removing almost his entire length, before he swiftly pulled her back to him until he sank himself to the hilt. They’d been having sex for a while, and she’d had a drink of Arturo to finish him off only ten minutes ago. Her body was delighted to keep going, and with how horny she was, Matt sinking his length in until she felt her insides stretch inward to accommodate him, was heaven.

She managed a peek over at the laptop again. Jessy had moved aside a bit to make room for Eric, but the man was obviously trying to not watch. They were in Eric's kitchen, and Eric was preparing a meal; probably raw meat, considering he was Uratha. They were also naked, which made the whole situation even more embarrassing.

"I'm thinking Fiona's trying to get Damien and Jack to talk to each other. Jack's been avoiding him since that whole thing, and Fiona's definitely that bubbly 'everyone should always get along!' kinda girl."

"She's ... nice..." Natasha, unable to keep from moaning a little between words, glared up at Matthew, but the big man only grinned at her. This was payback, for that time Natasha got to watch Jessy and Eric have sex on vid call. Definitely regretted telling the boys about that.

"She is nice, and totally stacked. Some of the best tits you've ever seen. I'm gonna try and get her to strip at the party."

"D-Don't do that. That's mean."

"Bah, that's not mean! Besides, I'm just helping Damien come out of his shell." Jessy leaned in closer to the camera again, and grinned like the devil. "Like a certain someone else I know."

She glared at Jessy and scrunched up her nose, but the expression broke the moment Matthew picked up his pace. And the bastard must have been listening to Jessy, because he took her words as queue to fuck her hard, and fast.

Natasha squeaked as Matthew knelt up straight, taking her ass up into her air with him, and he began to pound into her. Her body, arched so her shoulders were on the bed with neck and head flat on the mattress, slid back and forth faster and faster, until the blanket slid right off her. She tried to grab it, but each time Matthew pulled

her toward him, he also thrust forward, and the impact had her whole body shaking; the bed shook, too. And each time he sank his cock into her, she let out small whimpers as the man stretched her until she thought she'd split apart.

“Oh my god, I can actually see how deep he's getting in you! Christ you are tiny. Eric, look at this!”

Between the hard thrusts from her boyfriend, Natasha managed a small peek at the camera again. Jessy was still leaning forward over her kitchen table, but now she had her elbow on it, her face in her palm, and she looked like she was drooling. Couldn't drool without Blushing Life, but from the glazed, hypnotized look in her eyes, she would have been. And, god damn it, Natasha knew she liked it when Jessy looked at her that way. She was starting to like it when anyone looked at her that way.

Dolareido, and Jessy, were corrupting her, bit by bit.

“You definitely need to wear something sexy,” Jessy said. “I will be.”

“You ... just want ... an orgy.” It was hard to get out the words, but she managed, despite the moans fighting for her air. “B-But, I won't —” She mewled and squirmed, and came. But Matthew was quickly approaching his own, and didn't slow down. She squeaked with each thrust, and reached up to try and fight against the hand's holding her hips. Apparently fighting to escape over-stimulation turned Jessy on, because she groaned openly when Natasha grabbed Matt's wrists, only to utterly fail at removing them.

The werewolf let out a growl, a hungry, possessive sound, reached down, and picked her up. He buried her in a big hug, sank her down hard on his cock, and thrust into her a few more times, each earning more whimpers from her as the tingles of pleasure refused to cease. And with how her laptop was pointed, now Jessy could see her back, and maybe Matthew's testicles, undoubtedly dripping with her

juices. She'd already soaked Matt before, but now, with Jessy and Eric watching her, she couldn't help but drench the man, and she hid her face in his chest as she locked her legs around his waist.

Jessy groaned, and moaned, until Natasha peeked over her shoulder to see what the damn woman was doing. Nothing, absolutely nothing. She just stared at Natasha, eyes locked onto her, her ass in particular; probably staring at the big mess Tash and Matt were making. Natasha's orgasms had only grown messier and messier, the more comfortable she'd grown with Matt and Art, and their increasingly rougher sex. And of course, the boys were werewolves, and made a big mess every time they came.

"Tash, I have the sexiest little dress you have to wear. Guaranteed Art and Matt will be all over you the moment you're in it."

She rolled her eyes, and sank her forehead onto Matt's chest as she hugged the man tight. She was still cumming, aftershocks rippling through her legs where they were snug around the giant's hips, and Jessy knew it too. But to Jessy, mid orgasm was a perfect time to propose dress options.

Why Jessy was her best friend, Tash didn't know. But she was. And she couldn't have asked for a better one.

## Chapter 127

~~Author's Note~~

This is a fun, silly chapter, a break in the story before things get serious. Feel free to skim.

~~Damien~~

After being pestered by Fiona until the Lord himself would have broken, Damien agreed to go to Bloodlust. He loved hanging out with Fiona, but going to a nightclub was the last thing he wanted to do, and she knew it. So she dialed up her pestering and playful prodding until he relented. It was probably healthy for him to socialize, even if he'd prefer to be home alone, or home with Fiona.

He picked up Fiona at her apartment. She wore a dress obviously meant to kill him, because he froze when she opened the door. A living man would have died instantly. A vampire was thankfully only struck dumb for several long minutes of staring and gawking.

A deadly green dress, open back, two tiny straps over the shoulders, holding up the tight, plunging bust snug to her huge breasts. The green glittered, and the extremely short skirt had a split that went up past her hip, with little green straps connecting the split. No underwear.

“What do ye think?” she said, grinning up at him before spinning around once.

“It's ... shiny.”

“It's sequin!” Giggling, she reached out for his chest, and undid a couple buttons of his suit shirt. “Come on ye dobber, show some skin!”

He frowned down at her fingers, but didn't stop her. "I probably should, I suppose. I'll never, uh, have cleavage like yours though."

Her giggles turned into squeaks, and she stepped onto her toes to reach up and kiss him.

"Aye, but I'm a pretty lass. Yer the lad, the man, and should be ... strong!" She raised her arms and flexed her biceps. Vrall may have been a very strong creature, but Fiona was soft. Thin, but soft, and didn't have much muscle to show off. It was adorable.

He laughed, nodding. She was too damn cute to not. "Unbuttoning my shirt makes me strong?"

She touched his chest, traced his pectorals, and ran her fingers down to his abs. "Aye."

The fire in her eyes blazed, and he gulped down on a dry throat. If he'd been Blushing Life, he would have pushed her back into her room, closed the door, and thrown her onto her bed. But with it off, he could ignore the biological half of him, mostly, and smile down at his girlfriend.

He did not look forward to going to some sort of impromptu gathering at Bloodlust, but if he was going with Fiona, he knew he'd have fun; not sexual fun, but fun. It was a public place, after all. But, Fiona made him laugh, made him smile, made him feel warm, and made him feel like he wasn't hiding out in a sewer rat hole anymore. Hanging out with her was always fun.

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Ok, maybe it might not be so fun.

Damien groaned, but Fiona pushed him up the stairs. All the kine had vacated the second floor, leaving only vampires and werewolves above the dancing kine beneath. And to Damien's surprise, there were a lot of vampires and werewolves.



There was no denying that Fiona had called it right. Tonight, the theme was sexual attraction. That made sense for a nightclub, but vampires and werewolves had some massive advantages. Vampires were groomed before their embrace, and turned usually when at peak physique and attractiveness. Werewolves overflowed with energy and life, probably because their wolf spirit wanted them to be the strongest vessel possible. So, everyone on the top floor was gorgeous, and considering what they were wearing, basically half naked.

The largest booth, further back on the floor, contained the group of people he'd expected, his friends and whatnot. But the contents of a nearby booth caused Damien to raise a brow. That was Caleb, Brianna, and the two vampires he'd seen sandwiching her at the ball. A couple other vampires were with them, women, members of Isabella's acting troupe. Both had their hands on Caleb. Another werewolf, Erica, sat closer to Brianna, and one of Brianna's male companions had his hands on Erica, evidently at Brianna's request. Fiona had somehow invited a lot of paranormals, paranormals he doubted she'd ever spoken to before. It wouldn't have surprised him if Fiona could easily get herself invited to a stranger's wedding, through her sheer sociability.

The smell of alcohol was blatant, and Damien noticed many bottles and glasses of alcohol at both tables. The werewolves were getting drunk — were drunk — and considering what he'd heard from Jessy, their blood was extremely potent. Any vampire who got a nibble was bound to be borderline high on the bliss.

He sighed, and forced his eyes to the group waiting for him. Jack sat in the middle of the group, with Elaine, then Eric, then Jessy on his right. On his left was Antoinette, then Matthew, then Natasha, then Arturo. Matthew was the only person there taller than the Prince, though Arturo seemed to match it.

Jack was dressed in an Invictus suit, shirt undone, same as Damien. The werewolves, on the other hand, were dressed for a club. Eric wore a casual shirt that was open to the navel, while Matt wore a tight tank top, and Art wore some kind of fishnet shirt, nothing underneath.

The women were dressed as he expected women to dress in a nightclub, except of course, taking advantage of their immortal beauty and endless money. Elaine wore white, Antoinette wore black, both dresses nothing but a few loose straps that barely covered their enormous breasts, and probably less of their legs. Jessy wore a see-through, tight dress made of some sort of thin, black material, and underneath he could see she had X-shaped nipple pasties on. Most surprising was Natasha, who wore a tube top, except, tube top was too generous a word. More accurately, it was a three-inch thick strap of black that circled her chest at the perfect position to hide her nipples; you had to have small breasts to wear something like that, and it looked amazing on her tiny frame. He couldn't see anyone's legs, booth table in the way where he stood, but he imagined she wore a tiny black skirt to go with.

She noticed his staring, and looked down, embarrassed. Which earned a laugh and elbow from Art in her side. Which earned a hard punch from her, a punch that landed in Art's side and didn't faze him in the slightest.

Damien smiled, took Fiona's shoulders, and forced her to sit down before he did. No way he was going to join this giant group and not be on the outside edge of the booth. Just getting Fiona to sit down was already enough to have people shoulder to shoulder. Once he sat down, everyone was thoroughly squished.

"How nice of you to join us, Damien," Antoinette said, with a little more edge to her voice than he felt strictly necessary. "I had been wondering, considering this was Fiona's event."

Fiona giggled and shrugged. “Fashionably late, aye?”

Damien twitched, but the Prince laughed and nodded.

“Ben oui.”

“Gonna be straight with ya,” Jessy said, “didn’t expect the elders.”

Everyone looked at her like she’d just lost her damn mind, but Elaine and Antoinette laughed more, eventually shrugging.

“I had heard,” Elaine said, “that the tiny redhead had invited Jack to a gathering at Bloodlust. Antoinette has spoken to me of the unusually friendly nature between certain members of her city, and I wanted to see it firsthand.” She leaned forward, placed her elbows together on the table, squashing her hanging breasts together, and grinned at Jessy. “Invictus are not known for playing well with others.”

Jessy grinned, but Damien recognized the itch of fear nagging at her. Talking buddy buddy with an elder wasn’t exactly smart, but somehow Jessy had managed to survive over fifty years talking like that. Maybe she knew something he didn’t, but regardless, she wasn’t so stupid as to not be a little afraid of Elaine.

“Invictus play well with others!” Jessy elbowed Eric’s side, and gestured toward Elaine. “Tell her!”

Eric put up his hands in total, abject surrender. Smart man. Jessy elbowed him again, earning a groan from him, but he only lowered his arms to drink more, and everyone laughed. Damn it, even Damien laughed a little.

“As Jessy and Elaine have made somewhat obvious,” Antoinette said, “she and I are not here to play ruler or bully, Prince or elder. Things in my city have been ... quiet, for the most part as of late, and I am taking the opportunity to show my friend that relations have

improved.” She nodded toward Jessy and Fiona, and then to Natasha beside her. “Three Uratha and a Begotten sit at this table. Surely a cause for celebration. My lover has done well.”

Everyone at the table smiled at Jack. Jack winced, like a kid being called out at a high school assembly, for doing a good job at something.

Damien caught his glance, and the two of them looked at each other for a moment, before looking away again. Something dangled around the boy’s neck, but Damien looked away before he could figure out what it was.

“Yeah, Jack’s gotten pretty good at keeping things smooth,” Jessy said. “If we had a Carthian and witch at the table, it’d be complete.”

“I’m not a miracle worker,” the boy said. “But, Garry and Michael have been playing nice with each other lately, mostly. Nothing to do with me though. They’re just biding their time and waiting for an opportunity to fuck each other over. But, hey, better than them fighting and—”

Antoinette shook her head. “Come now, let us not speak of covenant matters. We are here to relax. Speak of more enjoyable affairs.”

The group of them looked at each other, each taking turns making eye contact with others, before everyone turned and looked at Jessy and Fiona. Which sent Fiona into a fit of maniacal giggles. She grabbed a bottle from the table, poured herself a drink, and drank it down without bothering to check what it was. Apparently, she wanted to catch up to the intoxication level of the werewolves.

“What, only Fiona and me know how to have fun?” Jessy said.

Arturo shrugged. “More like, you two kinda vibe on this atmosphere.”

Jessy pffft'd, loudly, and gestured to the two elders. "Don't give me that. These two have probably held parties that make Bloodlust look tame."

"I didn't say it had to be extreme."

"Your eyes said it!" Jessy slapped a palm on the table, but the aggression was playful, and she grinned at the werewolf across from her. "But for real, it's a little hard to just let loose with a couple elders here. If Michael were here, or even Maria, I'd be ... uh, kinda questioning what shit I could get away with."

"Tonight, you may get away with anything," Antoinette said, offering Jessy a small flick of her wrist. "As you said, we have thrown gatherings that would make Bloodlust seem tame." And of course, the elder said that last bit with a touch of emphasis and sultry flair, putting some obvious images in everyone's head. Yeah, people knew what things Antoinette was into, and it didn't take much to piece together what sort of parties a Daeva elder probably held in the advent of her power. The orgy could probably have been heard a village away.

"Alright." Jessy leaned forward across the table, and grinned at Natasha. "Shown anyone else your movies yet?"

Natasha almost squeaked, but after taking a moment to regain her confidence, frowned at her friend. "Antoinette's seen them."

Damien smiled. Natasha was reliable in a fight, extremely fast, and her unusual bloodline allowed her to see in darkness most Kindred could not; whether or not Daniel could, no one knew. When bullets and swords started flying, she was confident, just, not confident in socially awkward situations. He had no idea how she'd managed to find the confidence to wear a tube top barely bigger than a belt.

She'd changed.

“I have,” Antoinette said, grinning, “and Natasha is quite beautiful in them. As are you two, you delicious pair.” The Daeva smiled at the two werewolves surrounding Natasha, and winked, earning some big dopey grins from them.

Movie? Well, if it was a movie containing Natasha, Matthew, and Arturo, it was probably spicy, especially considering the embarrassed look on Natasha’s face.

“I wanna see, I wanna see!” Fiona said, and she leaned forward over the table, squashed her chest down on it, and held out both hands toward Natasha with gimme grabbing motions.

“Um, uh ... m-maybe later.”

After a laughing snort, Jessy leaned in and whispered into Fiona’s ear. Squealing with delight, Fiona burst into more giggles, and bounced in her seat several times. “I wanna see I wanna see!”

Damien elbowed her in her side. Far softer than Eric elbowed Jessy in the side, though. Fiona’s giggles stopped, but her smile never faded, and she quickly gulped down more drink, as did the werewolves.

“I am delighted,” Elaine said, “that everyone here is so comfortable with each other.”

Natasha groaned, a tiny sound, while Arturo and Matthew laughed.

“I have to admit,” Art said, “every time I look around in Dolareido, I’m surprised. And happy. Tijuana was nothing like this.”

“How was it?” Fiona asked.

“Rough. Very rough. The covenants didn’t get along at all, and were happy to use regular joes and janets as fodder. No one treated

any of them with respect, and vampires killed them regularly.”

“What? Why!?”

He shrugged. “Don’t ask me, they just did.”

“If I may,” Elaine said. “There are many cities in the world where vampires are taught to accept their predatory instincts. We are predators. Humans are prey. Such views are ... antiquated, and narrow minded. But imagine being thrust into an environment where every other creature you shared your territory with displayed such behavior? A self-propagating issue, especially when your enemies behave the same way. And in cities where covenants turn streets into battlefields, the darkest instincts in any Kindred emerge.”

“You,” Jessy said, “must have an interesting history.”

“I do.”

“Tell us about yourself.”

Elaine raised a brow, leaned back, and hooked one arm under her bust, while the other reached up to tap on her lips thoughtfully. “Some of you know I am Jack’s great grandsire, some of you perhaps do not.” The group looked at each other. Yeah, they all knew by now, and Elaine laughed. “Gossipers. You know I am a dragon, and have belonged to the Ordo Dracul for centuries.”

“Yeah, but, I mean, if you’re Antoinette’s friend, and you definitely are from what we all saw at the ball, you must have some spicy stories.”

“You, young Gangrel, are a sex addict.”

Jessy laughed, hard, with a couple hard snorts sneaking into her hysterics. Apparently being called out on her sexual addiction was

hilarious? Damien didn't understand Jessy's sense of humor. But either way, her laughter was contagious, and several people also laughed; Fiona outright giggled herself into asphyxia.

"Yeah, I am. But can you blame me? Grew up in Dolareido, embraced half a century ago, and stayed in Dolareido that whole time. I blame the city." With a sly, knowing grin, Jessy nodded toward the Prince. "I am what she made me."

People laughed again. Damien rolled his eyes. Why, why did it always come to sex? It wasn't like Dolareido didn't have other venues of expression and pleasure, ranging from its plays and orchestras, to gambling extravagances. Not everything had to be about sex.

Of course, a glance at Fiona beside him sort of wiped away that thought. The tiny, tight green dress sent his imagination spiraling into pits of sexuality, until all he could think of was tearing it off her and throwing her onto the table. Ugh, these sexaholic friends were slowly but surely changing him, for better or worse.

"I am happy to have done you a service," Antoinette said to the Gangrel.

Elaine leaned forward and grinned at Jessy. "A little bird told me you have been enjoying your nights with a werewolf, transformed. That sounds interesting."

The Gangrel grinned the most evil grin Damien had ever seen, to the point everyone at the table except for the two elders looked a little worried.

"Truth or dare?"

Jack immediately threw up his hands. "No no, no. Bad Jessy, bad. We're here to hang, and show Elaine what it's like in Dolareido, with how we all get along. We don't need to—"



“Very well Gangrel,” Elaine said, evil grin a mirror to Jessy’s.

Oh Lord, help him survive this night. Help Jessy survive the night. Or not. You can take her, if you want.

“Awesome. Truth it is. The sex is great. It can get a bit rough, you know, having a giant foot-long shlong jammed into a hole and stretching me until I’m borderline bursting, but holy fuck, I just cum my brains out, every time. He’s so huge when he’s transformed, fucking strong as hell, and the danger just makes everything so much better.”

Everyone looked at Eric, and the poor man squirmed in his seat. Considering Jessy sat on his right, and Elaine on his left, he was surrounded by two sexually aggressive women who apparently didn’t have a single qualm about talking about sex openly. Well, considering how long he’d been dating Jessy now, he must have accepted his fate.

“It sounds delightful.”

“My turn. Truth or dare?”

Elaine tapped her lips a couple more times. “Truth.”

“How many times has Jack cum on your tits?” Jessy, was ruthless. No hesitation whatsoever. Jack threw a bottle at her, but she caught it without issue. “What? Come on. If I had a dick, I know I’d be doing everything I could to—”

Eric elbowed her again. She elbowed him back. The antics continued until Matthew had to grab the table to keep it steady as the two pushed at each other.

“Dozens,” Antoinette said, bringing the lovers’ spat to a quick end, and the whole table froze for a moment as they realized the Prince said it, not Elaine. Jack groaned and sank into his seat.

“Fucking awesome.” Jessy held out her hand for Jack to high five, and when he didn’t, she simply held it there. After fifteen seconds of awkward silence, Jack groaned again and high fived her.

“Truth or dare?” Elaine asked.

“Fuck it, dare.”

Of course. Damien looked past Fiona and Jessy, and offered Eric a sad, knowing shrug once the man met his eyes. Eric returned it, and took a sip of his drink. This night was going to be weird.

Somehow, Elaine’s devious grin managed to grow more devious. “Remove the pasties.”

Oh no. If Elaine was willing to go that far, this night was doomed.

Jessy shrugged, pulled down the apparently quite stretchy and springy collar of her see-through dress, reached down, and peeled the X pasty off each nipple.

“Hold these,” she said, and she passed them to Eric, who rolled his eyes and slipped them into his pants’ pocket.

Damien did his best to avoid looking, but wandering eyes caught a glimpse of her naked breasts, and he frowned as he looked away. He’d seen the damn woman naked plenty of times through his telescope, fucking her ghouls, but this was a proximity he hadn’t expected.

Fiona, on the other hand, made no efforts to avoid looking, and she giggled as she stared down at Jessy’s chest. Damien’s girlfriend had larger breasts, but that didn’t change that Jessy was a very fit woman with visible feminine musculature, and her breasts were unusually large considering how low her body fat percentage was. They drew Fiona’s eyes, and hand, and she reached out to lift and

fondle one of those breasts through the see-through, skin-tight black dress.

“Ha. Fiona, you’ve seen these before. If you wanted to touch, you just had to—”

Damien stood up, pulled Fiona out of the booth, sat down, and sat Fiona on the outside edge. She whined and pouted, but three seconds later she forgot about why she’d been moved, and proceeded to nuzzle into Damien’s side. Her further arm reached across, slipped into his open shirt, and caressed his abs with her fingertips, while her eyes drifted between Jessy and Elaine. Well, better him than Jessy.

Jessy laughed. “Jealous I’m going to steal your girl?”

He rolled his eyes, again. “No, but I’m noticing it’s the women in Dolareido who are a little near-sighted with their sexual aggression.”

“Hey!” Natasha said. “I’ll have you know I’m v-very ... careful, about what I do.”

Jessy shook her head. “Then why did—”

“Because Art and Matt are assholes!” She folded her arms across her barely covered chest, and frowned up at the big guy on her left, and then the big guy on her right.

Damien raised a brow, and looked to Jack for explanation. The boy shrugged, confused as well.

“What can I say?” Art said. “You look great naked.”

“So do I,” Matt said. “But not as good as Natasha.”

“What happened? Tell me!” Fiona yelled. Thankfully her voice didn’t have enough impact to punch through the bassy music and reach beyond the top floor.

Matt glanced down at Natasha, who sighed and gave a very embarrassed nod. “Art turned on the laptop camera while I was having sex with her. Jessy watched.”

Fiona groaned and bounced in her seat. Considering the environment he was trapped in, Damien figured it was only reasonable he noticed his girlfriend’s large breasts jiggling in her tight dress as she expressed her frustration over not being included.

“Do ye vampires just, trade sexy things like that all the time? How come I dinnae get to see anything?”

“Probably cause you’re dating a priest,” Art said with a smirk.

“I’m not a priest. I’m a bishop. And the Testament of Longinus makes it clear that the word of God and His commandments are for kine, not Kindred.”

Art raised a brow at that, before he leaned forward and set a single elbow on the table. A slightly aggressive posture, one Damien recognized from Jessy’s playful side, and one he recognized from drunk men.

“So it’s cool if Fiona sees what we show Jessy?”

Damien sighed, shrugged, and slipped an arm around Fiona’s shoulders. “When in Rome, I suppose. I have no issue with Fiona wanting a peek.” And it wasn’t like he hadn’t taken plenty of peeks in his second life with his telescope.

“Yay!” Fiona leaned up, kissed his cheek, and then climbed onto his lap. Not much room for her, between him and the booth table but she made it work, sitting on his lap and leaning forward over the

table. She looked like she was about to say something, but took another drink instead.

Matthew put up his hands though. “Natasha’s in charge of distribution. I don’t mind being naked on camera, neither does Art, but Natasha—”

“It’s fine. It’s fine.” Sighing, Natasha shrugged and gestured to the table. “We’ve all seen each other n-naked to some d-degree or another.”

Art raised an eyebrow. “Damien—”

“Has spied on the city for fifty years,” Antoinette said, a touch of cold edge in her voice that made Damien freeze. “I know he uses telescopes from vantage points, as well. No doubt he has seen many of you naked.”

Jessy laughed and elbowed him, thankfully with less force than she did Eric earlier. “Bet you saw me doing all sorts of shit with my dudes.”

“Yes, I did.” Hopefully the disgust in his voice would get across that he did not enjoy doing that. Though, now that he was free of Lucas’s suggestion, he had to admit, some of those nights had been intriguing. “If you do not wish to be seen, close your curtains.”

Everyone laughed again, the elders especially.

“But,” Jessy added, “the only person who’s been seeing Elaine naked, is Jack and the Prince. How about you Tash? Boys? I bet you’ve seen the Prince with Jack, but seen Elaine?”

The three of them shook their heads.

Elaine laughed, a sultry sound, and met eyes with the Gangrel. “It is your turn to question, after all.”

“Ha! Alright, truth or dare? Dare you to dare.”

“Dare it is, child.”

“Pfft. Take out your tits.”

Jack winced. Antoinette chuckled. Damien and Natasha shared a glance that spoke volumes: this was not an environment for Mekhet. And yet, here he was, with a bubbly, fun, drunk woman who every much thrived in this environment, on his lap. Being here with her made it fun, despite the pains. Natasha was likely in a similar boat with her boyfriends.

Everyone’s jaw dropped as Elaine, without hesitation, reached behind her, lifted up on the white strap hooked behind her neck, pulled it up and past her blonde hair, and let it fall to her waist underneath the booth table. Eric gulped and tried to inch away from her, but Jessy did the opposite, and leaned in closer to the topless woman, pushing Eric toward her. Those were some very large breasts.

“Jesus. Why can’t Michael be as fuck-around free as you?” Jessy said.

“Because he is Invictus.” Elaine shrugged, and Damien forced his eyes down from the sight of her enormous, pale breasts rippling with the motion. Fiona did no such thing. “I am sure the man sits on a throne with a dozen thralls kneeling at his feet, stroking his ego as much as his cock. But he likely does so in private.”

Jessy utterly erupted, laughing until everyone was, even Jack and Damien. Though, poor Jack, was doing his best to avoid looking at Elaine’s breasts. Difficult to do, considering how massive they were, and how they hung as heavy teardrops and half nudged into his shoulder and chest.

“Come now Elaine, do not insult my Primogen,” Antoinette said once the laughter was done.

“If your Primogen had joined us, I would play nice. But they are not here.” Elaine grinned, lifted herself up a couple inches, and sat back down with impact. The jiggling effect was massive, and everyone, Jack included, watched the rippling of her bust. “And they are missing out. This is a fun game. It has been ages since a young Kindred has had the gall to be so forward with me.”

“My girlfriend,” Eric said, voice a half groan of something between annoyance and delight, “is definitely forward.”

Chuckling, Jessy pushed herself into Eric’s side. They were all already squished, but she squished him even harder, making sure her breasts pressed into his side, and that Elaine’s closer breast pressed to his shoulder.

“Do not be so uptight, silly children,” Elaine said. “They are breasts, nothing more. We all have them, men included. There is little to be embarrassed by.” Well, she certainly had the elder outlook Antoinette had.

Art and Matt looked at each other, and without saying a word, both took off their shirts, set them on the table, and then downed more of whatever they were drinking. Jessy and Fiona both moaned openly, and Damien coughed before flicking his girlfriend in the leg. She giggled, reached back, pat his cheek, and pointed.

“Come on, they’re so big! I have to look.”

“You are utterly adorable,” Elaine said, and she leaned forward enough for her huge breasts to press down on the table with their weight, as she grinned at Fiona. “How strange it is, for a monster of nightmares such as yourself, to be the most jovial of us all.”

Fiona beamed, a big, bright smile, and Damien's annoyance with the whole situation vanished. Of course, Fiona being Fiona, and very drunk at that, didn't hesitate to slip her shoulder straps down and pull her dress's chest down to her hips, exposing her breasts for all. More giggles. She brought her hands up to her chin in tiny fists, pushed her breasts together with her forearms, and bounced a few times on Damien's lap, obviously trying to mirror Elaine's playful bounce earlier. And it worked. Everyone stared at Fiona's equally huge, jiggling breasts for a moment, Damien included. He probably should have been putting the drunk woman's dress back on, but, for some reason, he didn't.

"Is this the plan?" Jack said. "We strip? I—"

Groaning, Eric slipped out of his shirt, and set it on the table. When Jack looked at him, eyebrow raised and obviously disappointed, the man shrugged.

"When in Rome, right? Vamps pay my paycheck."

Jessy cheered and gave her man a hard slap in the chest. "Totally hot."

"Aye!" Fiona said, blushing when she glanced Eric's way. But before Damien could feel jealousy over that — the two had dated, after all — she grabbed Damien's hands, set them under her breasts, and leaned back onto his chest. "Hold these for me."

He rolled his eyes, but when Fiona turned and set a kiss on his cheek, he turned and returned it, without thinking. And, without thinking, he looked down over the small woman's shoulders, at her large, pale breasts, at how her freckles lessened the further down he looked, and he shivered over how their bottom-heavy teardrop shape spilled over his palms.

"This," Jessy said, "is the best night ever."



“You’re all a bunch of horny kids,” Jack said, folding his arms across his chest.

“Agreed,” Damien said, and he leaned his head over Fiona’s shoulder a bit to offer his friend a smile. Jack returned it.

“Come now Jack,” Antoinette said, and she leaned down over him to kiss his ear. “The freedom to express the body casually is something I have fought for in my city. It delights me to see these silly individuals be comfortable enough to disrobe.” Her hands roamed over his chest, and undid a few buttons as seamlessly as a magician. “Besides, you have made great strides in controlling your curse. There is nothing to stop us from simply enjoying tonight, silliness included.”

Jack frowned up at the woman, but didn’t stop her. Soon the boy was left topless, and Fiona whistled appreciatively. Of course she’d seen the boy topless before, in battle circumstances, but there was no denying that Jack, despite his small stature, had the physique of an acrobat, or lithe warrior. A physique similar to Damien’s, lean and defined, though Damien had half a foot of height on him.

Jack had apparently acquired a necklace. Damien didn’t recognize it, and while the others probably thought it was a fashion choice, he knew his friend better. No, if Jack wore a necklace, it was either because Antoinette wanted him to, or it served a purpose. It looked to be made of string, thin, black, and quite subtle. Damien glanced down at it and caught Jack’s eyes, and the boy mouthed ‘later’.

“Your turn your turn!” Fiona turned around and got to work on Damien’s clothes. Of course, unlike Antoinette, she fumbled with every button, and Damien eventually relented and helped her. Out of the suit jacket, out of the shirt, he set the clothes on the table, and frowned at his equally topless girlfriend. “Mmm. Can ye drink me? Right now?” She turned as much as she could on his lap, bringing her knee in until they were touching Jessy, and she pressed

her breasts into his chest as she suckled on his neck. Her nipples were hard, and swollen, and everyone at the table knew it.

“In a little while,” he said. But, he didn’t stop the very horny woman from kissing his chin and neck more. He hugged her, held her close, and as he looked over her red hair at the rest of the table, he couldn’t help but smile. The moment he found the situation too annoying, the damn woman in his lap had him smiling.

After everyone had gotten a good look at Fiona’s soft, heavy breasts, all eyes slowly turned to look at Natasha.

She frowned, especially at Matt, Art, and Jessy, but after her frowns failed, she sighed, and pulled down the tiny tube top to her waist. The three she’d been frowning at all groaned together, and each stared longingly at the tiny woman’s small breasts and tight frame. She may have been extremely short, below five feet, but that didn’t change that her petite shape was feminine and alluring.

“Oh my god! So pretty!” Fiona bounced on Damien’s lap again, and gestured to Natasha. “She’s tinier than me! ‘N ye make movies! With these jimmys? Ah have tae see that!” Her accent grew thicker proportional to how drunk she was, evidently.

Damien had to admit, as he watched the tiny woman squirm between her two massive boyfriends, that it would be interesting to see her squashed between them. He’d seen Natasha naked through his telescope before, but a proper video was—

Oh good God, it was happening. It was just a matter of time, he supposed, but he didn’t expect it to come this way. Dolareido got him. He was now so comfortable with sexuality, that being topless and holding his topless girlfriend, among a bunch of other topless friends, merely registered as strange, instead of insane and utterly unreal.

Before he could say anything, Fiona snuggled her back into his chest, grabbed his hands again, and set them under her breasts again. Her swollen nipples pressed out from between his fingers, and he struggled to not caress them. Lord give him strength.

Everyone turned to Antoinette.

“I suppose you all expect to see the Prince of Dolareido strut about naked, like some common pleb?” she said. They all raised eyebrows as they looked at each other, but she laughed and nodded. “I am sure many of you wonder why I do the things I do, or why I have built Dolareido the way I have. Many of the decisions I have made are seeds, planted and prepared with centuries of care, knowing full well centuries more are required to bear fruit. I have a vision I wish to see into reality, and I do not expect others to understand the road I have paved.

“But, one piece of that vision, is to simply remove absurd barriers of shame and taboo over physical bodies.” Slowly, she slipped one of her straps off her shoulder, and then the other, but she used her hands to keep the loose chest against her bosom. And, earning a shiver from the whole table, she very gently, very slowly massaged each breast as she held her dress to them. “Our bodies are beautiful things, temples, to be cared for, shared, and flaunted.” Slowly, in a far more sexual way than anyone else had stripped, Antoinette slid the fabric down her breasts; it was a long journey. Bit by bit, she exposed her large, pink nipples, and the pale skin they sat upon. Slower again, she brought the fabric underneath her breasts, causing their mountainous weight to press down on her hands as she gently brought the fabric down further and further until it sat on her lap.

She let go of the dress, slipped one arm behind the very stunned Jack’s head, while the other teased up her stomach until the hand cupped her further breast. With a wicked devil smile, she gently

bounced her breast in her palm, and the whole table shivered again as the enormous pillow rippled.

It wasn't like people didn't know what Antoinette looked like naked. Considering the clothes she usually wore to balls, nothing had been left to the imagination. But there was something a whole lot different between wearing flimsy ball gowns, and actually being topless, and bouncing one of her breasts in her hand. Everyone at the table knew it. Matthew did his best to not accidentally press his body into hers, probably to avoid Natasha's wrath, or the Prince's, but also to not block anyone else from seeing what he was seeing.

"Fiona," Jessy whispered, but loud enough everyone could hear, with her eyes still locked on Antoinette, "this party, was the best idea ever."

"Aye!"

Elaine was the first to laugh, and she leaned in toward Jack as she too hooked an arm behind the boy. The two busty women leaned in toward him, and considering their height compared to the boy's, their huge breasts squashed to his shoulders, spilled over them, and pressed to his ears and cheeks as well as his chest and sternum. It was a very succinct way of summarizing the sort of sexual treats the boy was treated to, likely near every night.

Everyone looked at Jack when they realized, and the boy managed a tiny shrug — jiggle jiggle — and small grin. He was getting into the spirit of things, too.

"I really didn't expect things to go this far," Jessy said.

"It is just skin," Elaine said. "Though I admit, with the amount of skin on display, this night seems to have some sprung from some young man's mind. Yours, perhaps, Jack?" Elaine tugged on the boy's body, causing his head to bounce gently against her closer breast.

“Uh, I was perfectly content for us all to just sit down, catch up, maybe talk a bit about work? Last I checked, Avery was getting kinda uppity about Maria, right? So—”

“Avery’s ... giving m-me a little more time to look into things,” Natasha said. Her eyes had wandered from Antoinette’s bust, onto Jack’s defined body, and then to the boys beside her. Arousal. If she’d been Blushing Life, she would have been ready.

Natasha and Damien were similar, in many ways. As much as the horribly awkward situation left them feeling terribly out of place, their arousal was undeniable. And, unlike the vampires, the monster and three werewolves could do nothing about their growing arousal. Everyone could smell sex slowly saturating the air.

“There, you see mon petit? Let us relax and socialize for a night.”

“With our boobs out?”

“Indeed,” Elaine said. “Antoinette wanted to prove to me how successful her Dolareido petri dish has been. I am convinced. Though I had hoped to see perhaps one more covenant join us tonight.”

“Wait,” Jessy said, “we’re all just ... fungi in your petri dish?”

The Prince smiled. “Oui.” She said it without hesitation or stutter or waver.

“I’m not sure how I feel about being treated like a lab experiment.”

“Feel free to challenge me for reign of my city then, young Gangrel.” Antoinette made a small shrug, before she half turned, and pressed her body into Jack even more, half hiding his upper body behind her bare breasts. “But it is my city, a city you have indulged in, have you not?”

As much as Antoinette — and Elaine — were making it clear that they were here to goof around, and not be powerful, important elders for the night, they weren't exactly being entirely truthful. No matter what happened tonight, it'd be impossible for the two women to spontaneously forget how powerful and important they were. They were doing a pretty good job, up until now, but Antoinette's question struck a chord that made Jessy hesitate. And Jessy never hesitated.

"You know," Eric said, "when I was fighting professionally, I went to a lot of crazy parties. I've done the topless thing in a booth, with a bunch of topless ladies. I've done the topless thing in a hot tub, with a bunch of topless ladies. Drugs, alcohol, the whole nine yards. And, uh, I don't think any of those nights ever really hit the ... dangerously hot factor tonight has."

Elaine and Antoinette laughed again. The rest of them laughed too, but the two elders evidently found the man's strange compliment the perfect balance of words, because they beamed big smiles at him.

"I have heard Uratha taste wonderful," Elaine said, and she half turned to face Eric. Which of course, squashed one of her breasts into his arm, and he froze; likely more because of the elder and the power she radiated, not because of contact with her chest. "May I?"

Jessy snarled, a half serious, half playful sound, and she cuddled into Eric's other side. "Hell no. He's mine. And he's not really into the orgy thing, despite my best efforts."

"Eric is a gentleman," Fiona said, sounding off with a strange bit of triumph in her tone.

Eric looked over at the redhead, smiled, shrugged, and leaned his body into Jessy. "I don't know about gentleman, but I guess I just never really got the appeal of having three or four or ten people in the bed."

“The appeal,” Elaine said with an authoritative voice, and she turned back to Jack, “can be found in many places. For those such as Miss Vola, perhaps it is simply that new forms of romantic intimacy can be found with three, where it cannot be found with two. And for those like my good friend Antoinette, it is a way to introduce avenues of pleasure that can only be found with more limbs, more fingers, and more mouths, than two people can have.” She squashed her breast into Jack’s side again, overflowing his naked shoulder and chest, and nudged the closer breast against his shoulder. As she did, Antoinette did the same yet again, and the poor kid gulped as the two women buried him in softness.

Elaine and Antoinette were an interesting pair. Damien hadn’t expected the two of them to ride the same wavelength so obviously; not with the same synergy as Matthew and Arturo, but still, it was blatant that the two got along better than just friends. Best friends. The two women grinned at each other, then down at the small man half covered in supple flesh, and they chuckled more sultry, succubus sounds.

“There are d-different things we could do,” Natasha said, “then obsess about sex all the time, right?”

“Agreed,” Damien said. Finally, a voice of reason.

“I dunno,” Jessy said, “we’re a group of insanely hot people, in a club. Like Eric said, he’s been in these kinda situations before, because hey, it’s what people do.”

Natasha shook her head. “Not true! We could ... I d-don’t know ... play ... poker?”

“Strip poker?” Fiona said.

“Not strip poker! Ugh, n-not poker then. Maybe we could ... t-talk about our lives? Kine do that. They talk about who’s seeing who,

and sometimes they t-talk about who's getting married, or having kids."

"Former, sure," Eric said, "but the latter? Who's married and having kids? Not exactly a common topic in a club. And the music is usually too loud for anyone to do anything that needs details. Half the reason it's so loud, is to force people to talk with their bodies instead of their voices." He shrugged, and took a deep drink of his poison of choice. "And everyone's drunk. No one goes to a club for interesting conversation. They go to a club to shut their brain off, and jive either on the music, the dancing, or the sexual atmosphere; usually all the above. On the off chance you manage to find a place quiet enough where you can talk to someone, you'll get the most inane topics like fashion, misunderstanding tax brackets, or maybe where to score your fix for the week."

Damien listened and absorbed. Eric didn't talk much when others were present, likely because while the rest of them were quite familiar with the paranormal nightlife and the Danse Macabre, Eric's life had been far more normal, by Dolareido standards. If Fiona had been born in Dolareido, she'd likely have spent every night she could in clubs once she hit eighteen. Jack wasn't interested in that world before his embrace, and still wasn't. Only Eric had both lived as a human recently, but also spent time in the club scene as that human.

"Sounds pretty dull," Art said. "But who's seeing whom is always interesting." Natasha and Damien both looked at Art, eyebrows raised, surprised by his proper grammar. "What? I can speak good."

Natasha laughed. Damien laughed. The man was charming.

"My mom is seeing Jacob," Jack said, a scowl growing on his face. "So there's that."

Antoinette and Elaine both chuckled, motherly sounds, like they were used to the boy being silly. He'd probably spent a bit of time



complaining to them about his mother and Jacob, then.

“Jacob is not a bad match,” Damien said. Everyone stared at him, especially Jack, and Damien put up his hands in surrender. “Jacob is chaos incarnate, but he’s no fool, and he’s not all horrible. I’m sure he’ll treat your mother with respect, and introduce her to many aspects of her second life. And, just like you and Antoinette, the differences between them, personality and age, might compliment each other.” His voice quietened, and everyone leaned in a little closer as Damien found himself speaking barely above a whisper. “And Beatrice is a witch now. Surely you trust her. She’ll keep an eye on Samantha.”

The mention of Beatrice softened Jack’s eyes, and he leaned back in his booth seat as his gaze dropped.

“Yeah ... yeah, she will.”

“Do not worry for your mother, my love,” Antoinette said, and she leaned in to place a kiss on his head. “I have a close eye on the situation, as well.” Everyone did their best to ignore how the Prince’s nearest breast squashed against the boy’s shoulder and chest when she leaned in, but it was obvious every was staring. And, naturally, the Prince also noticed, decided to indulge her audience, and guided Jack’s chin up to her. They kissed, and everyone could see the tension in the boy melt away as Antoinette pressed her bust into him.

Elaine leaned in as well, getting cozy, and turned enough in her seat to fully face Jack, press both of her naked breasts into him, and reach out to touch his abs with her further hand. Good Lord, if this continued, they’d be seeing a lot more of those three in the next few minutes.

“Maybe,” Jessy said toward Eric, “it’s the tits? I could find us a girl with giant tits?”

“I’m an ass man,” the man said, voice completely flat and smooth. It was enough to cut through the mounting sexual tension, and have them all laughing, including the elders. They stopped groping the boy, and grinned at Eric.

More drifting eyes eventually settled on Fiona, and Damien raised a brow before he looked down over his girlfriend’s shoulder to see what people were staring at. It was obvious the three werewolves were aroused; he could smell it, and they squirmed in attempts to hide their erections. Fiona’s arousal was even more blatant, with her quiet panting and engorged nipples pressing against his fingers. She leaned back against Damien, intertwined her fingers with his against her breasts, and stroked her areola with a circling finger as she half closed her eyes.

“I think, maybe we should end this gathering now?” Damien said.

“I vote against that,” Jessy said, head turned and staring at Fiona beside her. “I want to see—” A balled up napkin hit her in the face, incoming fire from across the table.

Natasha frowned at her friend, though the frown melted away as Arturo leaned down over his girlfriend, and set a kiss on her head. And like Elaine had moments earlier, his hand reached across to find Natasha’s tiny waist, only to drift upward and tease along one of her small breasts. Matthew, evidently sharing a psychic connection with Arturo, did the same thing, at the same time. Poor Natasha mewled, and tightened up her lips in an effort to silence herself, her frown never leaving despite the obvious joy her boyfriends sent through her.

She managed a quick, desperate glance to Damien, and he nodded. Yeah, this was a bit too much for any Mekhet to handle, way too much open, social atmosphere, and way too many people for them.

Damien sighed and pulled down Fiona's hands from her breasts. "Come on, I think maybe we've all explored our sexual boundaries enough for one evening?"

"Speak for yourself," Jessy said.

"I agree with the Gangrel," Elaine said. "And besides, this is nothing." With a returned evil grin, she leaned back in her seat, and cupped both of her breasts in her hands. And with a voice like she was telling ghost stories around a fire, she did the same thing Fiona was trying to do, and caressed her nipples. "You have not experienced indulgence, until you have felt a hundred hungry eyes on you, while a dozen kine massage and fill every inch of you."

Fiona whimpered and tried to lift her hands back to her bust, but Damien held them at her sides, despite the two of them staring at Elaine, hypnotized. Everyone did. But after a moment, Antoinette reached out, and gently pushed her friend's hands down from her breasts.

"Come now old friend, not everyone here is as comfortable with this as you or I." Antoinette didn't have to say it. She was talking about Natasha.

Nodding, Damien slid Fiona's dress back up over her shoulders, despite her struggling, and slid out of the booth along with her. Back on his feet, he waited for the others to follow.

"I admit," he said, "the Prince has created a city with a sense of joy and freedom I hadn't let myself see, when I served Lucas. I ... think maybe some people will take a lot longer to embrace as sexual atmosphere as this"—he gestured to the booth filled with topless men and women—"but I cannot deny, it is very appealing."

"Aye!" Fiona squeaked, and she immediately tried to slip out of her dress again. He stopped the drunk by hugging her from behind and pinning her arms to her sides.

More laughter from the group, and they filed out of the booth. Natasha smiled at Damien, her eyes screaming ‘thank you’, and she slipped her tube top back on before she and her boyfriends, now wearing their shirts again, left Bloodlust. Eric and Jessy did the same, though Jessy didn’t bother reapplying her nipple covers; the see-through dress was better than being naked at least, Damien supposed.

Antoinette and Elaine both smiled at Damien, slipped their dresses back up and on, and slid out of the booth.

“There is hope for you yet,” Antoinette said, and she looked behind her to Jack who was putting on his shirt. “Coming, my dear?”

“Uh, yeah, I’ll be right there. Need to talk to Damien first though.”

The two elders nodded, and departed. Damien could almost hear the crowd below grow silent in admiration of the two inhumanly gorgeous women. Little did the bottom floor of Bloodlust realize how close it’d come to both those women stripping naked and fucking Jack in front of anyone who had the courage to come upstairs.

Eventually, it was only Jack, and Damien. And Fiona, but the poor girl was hopelessly drunk, and he had to sit her back in the booth to keep her from falling.

“Quite the night,” Damien said.

“Yeah, it was. I thought this might happen, when I realized who was coming. Jessy, and Fiona together? Recipe for a sex bomb.”

“I think it was Antoinette and Elaine that pushed things over the edge.”

He laughed and shrugged. “Only because Jessy didn’t, because they were here. But, once everyone got comfortable, I’m pretty sure we were ten minutes away from things getting ... uh ... voyeuristic.”

“Indeed,” Damien said.

“Natasha seems like the kind of girl who’d prefer to keep a distance between herself and others, when sex is concerned. Good call stopping the party when you did.”

“Physical proximity, maybe. Apparently she enjoys making—”

Jack put up his hands. “Let’s just, uh, ignore that fact.” Sighing, Jack grabbed his jacket and slipped it on. “I’m kinda surprised the night went so well, with me here.”

“You thought the curse would break free?”

Jack shook his head and leaned back until his butt rested against the table edge. “No. Elaine and I have been working on that. Meditation helps. We’ve got some other tricks too.”

“The necklace?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Helps keep the curse quiet. But that’s not why I thought people would be weird about this party. I figured ... well...”

Damien sighed, and leaned back against the table beside Jack. “That night in the Great Below, that was ... brutal.”

“You staked me.”

“I had no choice.”

“I know, I know. I’m happy you did.” The boy looked down, struggling to find the words. “Guess I’m just feeling ashamed of myself, for giving in like I did, and nearly attacking you.”

“I spent fifty years, the first fifty years of my second life, hiding in sewers, only to raise a madman from torpor. I launched an assault on the Elysium Tower, and tried to kill your lover. I spend every night feeling ashamed.”

Jack winced and shook his head. “Come on, you—”

Damien put up a hand. “It’s behind me. My second life is infinitely better now Jack, and you’re a big reason for that. And her.” He nodded to Fiona, who beamed up at him. “So, this curse, it’s a problem, and I want to help. Still want to help.”

The Ventrue sighed relief. “I know I know. I guess ... guess I just had to hear it.”

Damien pat the man on his shoulder. “I’ve been looking into Maria’s records like you asked, what she managed to salvage anyway. But I’ve yet to find anything.”

“Yeah, didn’t think you would. How many other vampires in history have managed to trigger this curse? How many vampires would be smart enough, or stupid enough, to write down details about it?”

“Only the dragons and the Sanctified would keep such journals, which is why I thought maybe you were onto something with your request. The issue is, most of the books Lucas had are in no way organized. Information, random, written as journals, without any sort of eye for detail or due process.”

“Heh, yeah, similar situation with Elaine. But she’s helped me a lot.”

Damien frowned. “I don’t trust her.”

Instead of getting upset with him, Jack laughed, and Damien raised a brow at him.

“Yeah, I don’t think anyone really trusts her. Even the Prince keeps an eye on her, though with her I suspect she’d probably think of any betrayal from her friend as an ‘oh you silly goose’ sorta situation.”

“Those two are ... an interesting pair.”

“Do ye swim?” Fiona asked after a hiccup.

“Uh, swim?”

“In the tits!” She gestured to where Jack had sat minutes ago. “Aw squished together like that, ye could swim in them.”

Jack raised a brow, and looked at Damien. “Don’t let her drink anymore.”

“I won’t.”

Nodding, Jack pushed away from the table, turned, and stepped away backward. “Once the curse is gone, things will be back to normal ... ish. I can get back to regular Right Hand stuff. We can deal with Terra Den and Jeremy long, and the Carthians. Hell, we can see about getting you some more freedom for your Longinus stuff.”

Damien laughed. “And your sister?”

“I ... Mom and I will figure out something. It sucks just leaving her there, but no one lives there, so she isn’t hurting anyone.” Jack looked down for a moment, searching for the words, though he’d already shared them with Damien several times. It hurt him, badly, to have Mary back in his life as a ghost. It hurt his mother, too. The only reason the situation was manageable, and not driving them to the brink of insanity, was because they were vampires and already buried in a strange, supernatural world.

“It’ll be nice to have things normal again,” Damien said. He couldn’t keep a little sadness out of his voice, like the idea was some lofty goal beyond them. It kinda was.

Jack managed a weak smile, but nodded, waved, and walked away. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Later then.” Damien nodded to his friend, and watched him disappear down the stairs.

Rolling his eyes, Damien stood up, turned around, and looked down at Fiona in the booth seat. She was busy reaching across the large, circular booth table, in an effort to reach some alcohol Natasha’s boys had left. It didn’t occur to her that she was too short to reach, or to scoot across the booth to reach from the other side, and she whined before looking up at Damien, as if he’d rescue her from her horrible predicament.

“You knew,” he said. “You knew Jack and I were avoiding each other.”

“Aye.”

“And ... and you knew, if you got us all here, we’d talk.” Because, much as Damien and Jack were very different people, they shared many things in common. A dislike of social situations like the gathering they’d just had, for one.

“Aye!” She pushed up onto her hands on the table, and almost got onto it on her knees before Damien gently pushed her back down into the seat.

“You, are smart.”

“I know!” Giggling, she wrapped her arms around him, and grinned up at him as she did. “Tits make everyone easier tae talk to.”



“I’m pretty sure tits make it harder for people to talk to each other”

She shook her head. “Yer wrong!” Giggling again, she reached up, pulled down on his neck, and kissed him. She smelled of life, joy, and alcohol. “Now, come ‘ere.”

“I am here. I—” His mouth froze, and he stared at her, jaw hanging, as she again slid the straps off her shoulders. Before he could say anything, she giggled, climbed back onto the table, kicked off her shoes, and slid the dress off her legs, leaving her completely naked. No underwear. “Uh, Fiona, you...” Damien gulped, and looked over to the other booth. In the darkness, he could see the werewolves and vampires grinding, touching, fondling, drinking. In another booth, two vampires were lip locked, bodies barely able to fit between booth and table.

Fiona grinned at him, and reached out for him. He approached, and once he reached the edge of the table, she sat up, inched forward toward him, and set her hands on his pants.

“Here?”

“‘Ere.” She slid her hands into his pants, found his length, and teased it. He wasn’t Blushing Life yet, but that didn’t seem to bother her.

“There’s ... people around.”

“Doin’ the same thing I want tae be doin’. Blush for me.”

He sighed, and smiled down at the very drunk, very beautiful, very naked busty little redhead. “Fiona, you’re drunk.”

“Ah am.”

Lord, give him strength. “And, we just spent a few hours with some—”

“Giant tits!”

“I was going to say beautiful people.”

“Aye, very beautiful. Natasha is so tiny, but the Prince and her friend are so tall! Tall, and busty, and ... and wow. The Prince’s tits are just ... mmmm!”

Why was it so extremely hot when a woman showed obvious sexual interest in other women? He rolled his eyes again, more at himself than anything, and smiled at the naked woman trying to break him.

“They’re breasts, Fiona. We—”

“But they were huge!”

He laughed. This woman, his polar opposite, swimming in sin and alcohol without a single hint of shame or concern, was changing him. She continued to massage and fondle his soft length, eyes gazing up at him, and he drowned in her golden gaze. She squeezed her breasts together with her biceps, licked her lips, and placed a kiss on his stomach.

Lord, forgive him. He gave in, and Blushed. The smell of her, the taste of her, he had to have more. Even in this place, this very public place, he had to have more.

She moaned with a squeak as his length hardened in her hands, and she stroked it while she beamed up at him.

“In case you didn’t notice, Fiona, you also have really huge breasts.”

From the little Damien knew about women, telling a girl she had huge breasts wouldn't normally be met with overflowing giggles of pure joy. In Dolareido, the women — and men — were a bit more vain, sure, and a compliment like that might fly better. But Fiona took it like he'd struck some sort of magical chord that resonated with her whole being, something that made her feel beyond happy.

“Nae as big as the Prince's.”

“No, but I don't think anyone thinks her body is natural.”

“Fake tits?”

Damien laughed. “More like, she probably did something to herself a long time ago. The white hair, red eyes, extreme height, and breasts?”

Fiona tapped her chin at that, before nodding. “Yer likely right. But, there wasnae any plastic in there! A lass always knows.” Nodding sagely, as if admitting to some sort of ancient, secret wisdom, she let go of his length, and cupped each of her breasts. With enthusiasm, and absolutely no subtly, she bounced each breast in her hands, one then the other. “Big as Elaine's?”

He rolled his eyes for the hundredth time that night, leaned down, and kissed her. “Yes. And because you're little, your breasts look utterly massive on you. Jessy says you're half boob.” The compliment was ridiculous, but he knew it'd work. Fiona was like Jessy in a strange way, with similar social sensibilities. No wonder they got along.

Giggling like a maniac, she kissed him back, and slid further back along the booth table, until she was far back and between the curve of the booth seats. Shadows covered her, but Kindred eyes could see through the minor red lighting and the pulsing white to see the naked, curvy, beautiful redhead as she laid her body out on her back. One hand slid between her legs, and she masturbated casually,

as if she was in the privacy of her apartment. His Kindred nose knew she was dripping wet; she'd been aroused five minutes into the party, like the werewolves. Finally able to release her pent up arousal, she wasted no time touching herself.

“Come ‘ere, ‘n treat me like one of those kine at the ball!”

He chuckled, a sound he was starting to re-familiarize with the more he spent time with her, and he slid into the booth seat. Concern for people who might see them, gone. Concern for watching his back, gone. Concern for his appearance, and not looking like a proper bishop, gone. There was a meal on his table, and he was hungry.

“You know you’re a nightmare monster, right? Scary spider monster, so I’ve heard.”

She blew out her breath, lips bubbling together, and shook her head. “Lies. I’m a sweet, innocent young lassie, captured off the streets, tae be fed tae hungry, horny vampires!” As much as Fiona loved to indulge in naughty roleplay fantasies — like Natasha did, according to Jessy — she couldn’t act. Fiona smiled, giggled, grabbed a nearby drink and downed it before he could stop her, then laughed more heartily before lying down on her back in front of him, side toward him.

He leaned over her, and looked her body up and down, like he was admiring a meal. Half acting, half not.

She may not have been a good actor, being the silly, extreme extrovert that she was, but it didn’t take much for him to get into a mindset. If she wanted him to play the role of master vampire feeding on prey or slave, he could do that. They’d played this game before, dozens of times, just, never in public. The sheer audacity of doing this in a public place was a strange spice he wasn’t familiar with, but the time they spent on the roof of the Black Hall during

Antoinette's ball came back up in his mind, and he smiled darkly down at his girlfriend.

He took both her hands in his, and pinned them against the table above her head.

"Ah! Oh no!" she said, again, acting so utterly atrocious it was criminal. Maybe this was what people meant by 'so bad it's good' movies?

The bad acting didn't matter. Fiona's endless giggles and relentless smile filled him with joy, and he growled down at her like the dark, scary vampire she wanted him to pretend to be. He kept her hands pinned, a little of his vampire strength to ensure she was trapped, while his free hand reached across her body. He cupped her further breast, pulled it up onto the center of her torso, and let it go, just to watch it ripple as it pulled to the side with its heavy mass. Her pink nipples stood up, swollen and puffy, and he leaned in to kiss the closer one.

She shivered, mewled, and squirmed. "Nae, please stop!"

Chuckling, he sank his face into the enormous softness of her breast, while his right hand drifted further down her supple body. Soft, beautiful, and warm. His prey let out some pleased squeaks as he placed tender kisses on her breast, and she jutted her chest out, seeking more stimulation.

Instead, he lifted his head, and smiled down at his meal, as he sank his fingers into her slit.

"Nn!" Her jaw dropped, and she gasped openly as he pressed his fingers up against her g-spot. So much for foreplay. Fiona was already dripping.

"Watching everyone get half naked really turned you on, didn't it?" His mind clouded over with arousal every moment he was with

his nude girlfriend, until dark, dirty thoughts he always kept suppressed snuck up onto the surface. “You’re a bad girl.”

The dialog would have sounded hilariously awful in any other context. But with her body pinned under his grip, his teeth grazing along her swollen nipple, and his fingers inside her boiling, soaked depths, the words took on a life of their own. They had impact. They had heat.

Fiona mewled, and pushed her hips toward his hand. “I’m sorry! Please, dinnae be mean!”

He leaned up over her, higher, and brought his lips down onto her neck. “Naughty. Dirty. You need to be punished.”

She squealed again. He could feel her facial muscles smile, but her squirms continued, while her panting and mewls only grew louder. She was expecting a Kiss, the satisfaction of his fangs puncturing her neck, and flooding her with exhausting bliss. She wanted to cum on his fingers while he drained her.

He didn’t. He leaned back, and slid his fingers out of her.

“W-What? No, Damien! Come on, ye bawbag! I’m—ack!” She squeaked again when he pulled her off the table, and set her on his lap on her stomach. “What’re ye—eeh!” Another squeak, and she looked up at him over her shoulder, as he gave her large, soft ass, a resounding smack.

Poor Fiona was terribly drunk and aroused, and it only took her moments to sink into the new position he’d forced on her. She squirmed on his lap, but made no attempts to leave. He slapped her ass again, hard enough to hear the smack through the music, and she whimpered openly. He traced his fingers up and down the soft, pale skin, and smiled at how it turned pink where he’d slapped it. Growling quietly under his breath, he kneaded the meat of her

buttocks, squeezed and massaged its softness until it molded to his fingers, before he slapped it again.

He raised his eyes in shock as Caleb, Brianna, and the others walked past his booth. They were giggling and laughing, the werewolves obviously drunk, and the vampires obviously fed; maybe had a kine come visit them to be devoured. No doubt the group of them were off to enjoy sex, possibly together. They blinked at Damien, and Damien blinked at them, taking a moment to realize they could see he was still shirtless, could see Fiona's dress on the table, could see her frizzy red hair, and could see a bit of her ass where it stuck up on his lap.

He looked down at his girlfriend, his meal, and as if possessed, he gave her ass another hard spank, earning a squeak, and then a wavering mewl. The people watching chuckled between themselves, gave him a few finger waves, and walked off.

Fiona looked up at him again, and Damien grinned at her. She was stuck between a smile, and a shameful, shy gaze. The smile vanished when he spanked her again, and she bit down on her bottom lip.

“Ye’re being mean today ... Master.”

The words sent a shiver through his body, and he slapped her ass again. This bright, unashamedly merry little woman, was going to drown him in sin. Her mewl turned into an outright moan, and he spanked her one more time, nice and hard, enough to make her shift on his lap. Her body trembled, and her feet kicked at the booth a few times as she writhed in her need and want.

He often Kissed her early on, when they had sex. The Kiss filled him with sexual hunger, and left her a sensitive, exhausted, drenched thing who came at the slightest touch. But it also meant she was too exhausted to do anything, or make anymore noise than

soft whimpers. This time, he decided to wait. He wanted to Kiss her, and she wanted him to. The anticipation had them boiling.

He eased out from under her across the booth seat. “Get on your knees.”

Pouting and biting her bottom lip some more, she did as ordered. Soon she was on her knees and palms on the booth seat, and Damien licked his lips as he admired the sight of her swollen slit, and the wetness awaiting him.

He slid his pants down, got onto his knees on the booth beside her, aligned the head of his cock with her entrance, grabbed her hips, and thrust into her, hard.

“Nnn! Damien, ye’re ... being ... rough.” Again she looked over her shoulder at him with her face caught somewhere between her relentless, perfect smiles, and dropping her jaw in an ‘O’ of pleasure. The smile vanished when he pulled back, and slammed into her again, replaced with groans and her eyes half closing as they rolled up.

He wasn’t gentle, and didn’t use a more normal pace. He pounded into her hard enough to see her ass ripple when it slapped against his pelvis, and Fiona squeaked as she struggled to stay on her hands and knees. Her huge breasts swayed underneath her, and his Beastly hunger sent a growl through him as he watched the backside of her teardrop breasts jiggle with his thrusts.

He jackhammered into her fast, eyes locked onto the hourglass shape of her soft body, her large ass shaking as it slapped into him, and her huge breasts flopping around underneath her. It didn’t take long for her to cum, her tiny insides clamping tight around him and leaking juices as he slammed into her. It didn’t take long for him to cum either; she’d been boiling for a lot longer than he’d been, but no man could survive long when pounding fast into a woman’s hot, squeezing, soaked insides.



He slowed his pace, but not the roughness of his thrusts, and each time he slammed into Fiona, she let out a squeak. Growling again, he slapped her ass, earning another hard clench of her pussy around his cock. Muscle spasms massaged his length, and the poor woman struggled to stay on her hands as he filled her with his cum.

And then he started thrusting again.

“Damien! I—”

He slapped her ass again, causing her to clench as hard as she could, almost like she was trying to get him to hold still, but he set his hands on her hips and pulled her toward him, even as he pounded into her, again like a jackhammer.

“M-Master!” She managed to peek at him over her shoulder, and her smile was gone, replaced with only pleasure, before she collapsed onto her chest on the booth seat. “Slow doooown.” Again, she clamped down on his length, her juices dripping out of her along with his cum. He didn’t slow down. She tried to push herself back up onto her hands, but another orgasm ripped through her, and she collapsed. He didn’t slow down.

As he felt his second orgasm approach, he slammed into her hard, earning a weak squeak, before he again slapped her ass. Every time he did, her body clenched down on his cock, and he shivered as the heavenly friction along his glans sent sparks of bliss down into his pelvis and under his testicles. He took a moment to let his pleasure fade, before he again slammed into her, and again gave her ass a hard spank. Again she clamped down, and as the tiny redhead mewled on the booth, more of her juices coated him. If not for the music, he could have heard the drip drip of it against the seat.

He looked down at her ass, and smiled softly. Even in the red lighting and pulsing white light, he could see the skin was thoroughly pink. Ok, maybe enough spanking.

He slipped out of her, sat down, and pulled the tired girl onto his lap. He turned her to face him, set her legs so she sat on her knees around him, took her by the hips, and eased her down onto his cock. Instant tremors from her, and she hugged him tight as she buried her face in his neck and chest.

“Master,” she purred.

He growled, slid his hands down her naked back, and set them on her ass. He pressed down, making sure she was balls deep on his length, before he gave both her cheeks a couple of soft smacks. More purrs.

He leaned forward, scooped his arms up her back so she tilted backward, and he sank his teeth into her neck. Her purrs quickly turned into loud groans, and she clutched him tight as the sensation of the Kiss hit them both. She came again, wriggling and squirming in his grip like prey trying to escape, each twist and grinding sway of her body squeezing and massaging his length in wet, gripping flesh. It was more than enough to have him cumming inside her for the second time.

And then her blood hit him. The Kiss always filled a vampire with bliss, but also with life. His body responded with overflowing, overwhelming biological joy, and he flooded her insides until he felt his cum flowing out of her. While one arm held her waist, the other slid up to net his fingers into her frizzy hair, and he pulled, forcing her head back. With her face pointed upward and his fangs sunk deep into her neck, the redhead wriggled against him, hard nipples pressed into his chest, as her orgasm was forced to continue. Her thighs trembled, legs squeezed, and her insides clamped down in random spasms as the Kiss drove her into pleasure again, and again.

He squeezed her harder. The taste of her inhuman blood, the overpowering, intoxicating flavor of it, sent heat up through his undead body. All thoughts of Bloodlust, of the fact he was sitting in

a public booth, all gone, replaced with nothing but bliss and aching desire for the tiny redhead sitting on his cock. Human blood would have had him ready to fuck again. Her blood, her powerful, monstrous, delicious blood, did more than that. It clouded his mind, made it difficult to think straight, and demanded he take what was his: her. He was consciously aware of what her blood was doing to him, but it felt too damn good to give into its dark allure. It filled his stomach, and he took more, and more, as Fiona whimpered into his ear, her legs trembling and her depths clenching.

At last, he released his bite on her neck, his fingers from her hair, and raised his eyes.

Beatrice, Jennifer, Othello and his ghoul, and Aaron stood by the table, each dressed for a night out, and each looking at him with curious eyes. Jennifer and Beatrice in particular, looked very interested.

And beside them, was Jacob. He wore black suit pants, but all he had on his chest was an open white shirt, and Damien found himself surprised at how fit and lean the man looked. Actually, he looked similar to Damien, physically speaking, a thin frame with plenty of well defined musculature.

The other witches marched ahead of Jacob, but the man wasn't alone. He had Samantha beside him, and she was dressed the same as the witches, scantily, a black dress that complimented Jacob, particularly the exposed chest and stomach. It was the same sort of dress Elaine had worn tonight, something that hooked behind the neck, with plunging cleavage that dipped all the way below the navel. Another inch and he'd know if she was shaved or not.

Jacob and Samantha looked at him. At least, he thought Jacob looked at him. Hard to tell considering he was wearing some fancy glasses that stuck to his face, hid his eyes, and were very thin and streamlined. The man may as well have walked off The Matrix set.

Jacob chuckled and moved on, though Samantha lingered, and looked at him for a few seconds with hungry eyes, before she followed the elder.

“Now this,” Jennifer said, “is a surprise.” Chuckling, she slid into the booth, and didn’t hesitate to scoot in closer, until she was only a foot away from him. “My oh my. I saw the look in your eyes when you Kissed her, bishop of the church. That was pure ... fire.”

He grit his teeth and glared at her, but a shift in weight from Fiona broke his gaze as it sent bliss through him. Instead, he hugged the naked woman close to his body. A protective gesture, he knew it, and a useless one. But still.

Beatrice rolled her eyes and slid into the booth as well, opposite of Jennifer, while Othello, his ghoul, and Aaron moved on with Jacob. Thankfully, Beatrice didn’t slide in as close as Jennifer, keeping a few feet between him and her.

Fiona turned her head enough to glimpse at the Ventrue, though it was clear the tiny redhead was still very drunk, and now quivering in the relaxing waves of the Kiss, and orgasm. She was likely barely aware of what was happening. And, because Damien was obviously cursed to forever be caught in awkward situations, Fiona started to squirm on his lap again. He’d drained her enough to put a kine into a bliss coma, but she was a Begotten. Maybe it was Vrral pushing her, he didn’t know, but she pushed her hips back and forth as she hugged him, weak and tired, but not so tired she couldn’t wriggle on his lap, or squeeze his hard length.

“You just fed,” Jennifer said, smile wide, and almost manic. “The one thing that sucks about the Kiss: you can’t stop Blushing Life.”

He frowned at her. It was true. The sensation of Fiona’s exotic blood trickling down his throat, filling him with warmth and her Horror’s strange, alien power, had his body lit up with life and arousal. He wouldn’t be able to dismiss the Blush for another ten,

maybe fifteen minutes. A perfect opportunity for a witch to put him in a very awkward position.

“Don’t be an asshole, Jen,” Beatrice said.

“I’m not! I’m just surprised, that’s all. I never expected to find this. Jack and the Prince? Yes. Jessy and Eric? Obviously. Natasha and her boys?” Jennifer fanned herself several times with a hand. “I wish. But the bishop? Never.”

Beatrice shrugged, and gestured to Fiona. “Probably her doing.”

“I don’t suppose you two ladies could go?” Damien said, doing everything in his power to keep his voice flat and cold. He managed, but only barely, as Fiona continued to gently grind on him, her drenched insides boiling and squeezing.

Jennifer and Beatrice looked at each other, had some sort of psychic conversation, before Jennifer shrugged and shook her head. “If you didn’t want to be spotted, or maybe have company, you should have fucked your girlfriend in private.”

He growled at her, and Jen pulled her head back a couple inches. Unfortunately, the growl also earned a pleased mewl from Fiona, and she ground her body into him harder, flattening her breasts against his chest as she squeezed on his length. That, earned a happy groan from Jennifer, and she sighed wistfully as she watched.

“Come on, relax,” Beatrice said. “Your girlfriend is onto something.”

Fiona giggled, and leaned back until her back pressed against the table edge. He may have found the whole situation extremely awkward and unnerving, but she didn’t. Combined with the rush of her blood pouring through him, it was taking every bit of mental control he had to not grab Fiona’s hips and start bouncing her up and down.

Jennifer groaned again, and slid in a little closer. “That is a very happy woman. And a beautiful woman.” Her eyes slid down Fiona’s frizzy red hair, half-closed amber gaze, her freckled skin and pale, huge breasts, down her flat but soft stomach, and down to where the tiny woman’s slit was spread wide around Damien’s girth. It was thoroughly soaked, in her juices and his cum. Jen licked her lips.

When Fiona started to bounce, exhausted and panting, but determined to pursue more pleasure, Beatrice slid in closer as well. Both women stared, hypnotized by Fiona’s movements, and how the woman’s soft, heavy breasts jiggled against her torso as she did. And once Beatrice was a little closer, both women looked down, and stared at how Fiona’s tiny slit, smooth and soaked, blatantly leaked more juices as the woman came again.

Damien growled again, the rush of Fiona’s blood sending need and aggression through his limbs. The witches didn’t matter. All that mattered was his girlfriend, his prey, his meal. He reached out for her, grabbed her hips, and bounced her. He was not gentle. Fiona squeaked openly with each bounce, and leaning back as she was, her breasts bounced wildly, creating a mesmerizing sight that had Damien, and the two spectators staring.

As the tingling waves of warm pleasure started up his cock, he slammed girlfriend down onto his cock a couple more times, each hard enough to make her squeal, before he pulled her back onto him, hugged her close, and filled her with his cum for the third time that night. Both witches groaned in obvious envy, and Damien couldn’t help but smile, hopefully hidden behind Fiona’s hair where they couldn’t see it.

Ok, maybe a public place was a fun idea. His girlfriend knew him better than he did.

## Chapter 128

~~Beatrice~~

Damien was a sexy fucker. Yeah, she knew he was built all lean and lithe, and he had the face and hair of a young girl's emo vampire crush. But seeing him give into his hunger — caused by Fiona's blood she figured — was fucking hypnotizing. The dude bounced his exhausted girlfriend on his dick until her giant tits were almost hitting her in the face, and she was mewling and whimpering, until Triss and Jen were both squirming as they watched.

Fiona collapsed on Damien's chest, and he hugged her tight as they came. Which earned a longing sigh from Jen.

“What's it like?” Jen said.

Damien, clutching his girlfriend as he slowly came down from his pleasure high, looked at Jen, something between pleasure and annoyance on his face. Probably the sorta face Triss often had, when Jen teased her during sex with Julias. It was a cute face, she had to admit. And Damien was kinda asking for some teasing, being caught mid-fuck in a nightclub.

“What's what like?”

“Being the man, and draining a woman as you fuck her. Triss and I can't really speak to the experience. I mean, I've fucked plenty of kine while draining them, but it's not the same.”

Damien rolled his eyes, and held Fiona close to him, as if to protect her from them, and hide her body from their eyes. Heh, didn't matter now, not after seeing the curvy short stack bouncing on that dick like her life depended on it.

“It’s ... satisfying,” he said.

Triss laughed. “Satisfying? That’s it? Looked like you were enjoying the best thing in the world, dude. Maybe the better question is, what does it feel like to be inside a girl when she’s getting Kissed?”

Damien glared at her, but she saw more of that half pleased look in his eyes. “It’s wonderful, ok?”

Jen rolled her eyes, mirroring and mocking Damien. “No details? No talk of ... clenching, boiling heat, dripping juices, muscle spasms? Please, regale me.”

“No.”

“Ugh, you are such a bore.”

Triss shook her head. “He was a bore. Now, he’s sitting naked in a booth with his naked girlfriend, in public, fucking her and Kissing her, and...” She leaned back and underneath the booth a bit to double check something. Confirmed. “And, giving his naughty girl a spanking.”

Jen moaned, and sighed. “If you were Othello, you’d happily share every dirty detail with us.”

“I’m not Othello.” The Mekhet raised a hand, and stroked Fiona’s back. She mewled into his neck, coming down from her orgasm high, and delighting in his touch like a lovesick puppy. Hard to tell if that meant anything, considering Fiona’s personality, but maybe it did.

“True,” Jen said, “but now you’re part of the ... more active members of Dolareido’s nightlife, and its Kindred. I give it another year, then you’ll be inviting others for an audience to your lovemaking.”



“He’s not a warlock, Jen.”

“He doesn’t need to be a member of the Circle to enjoy putting on a spectacle.” She grinned at the man, and licked her lips enticingly. “And it was a spectacle. You’re a gorgeous man, Damien. Young girls everywhere would swoon over you, if your face ever found its way into media.”

Fiona nodded, though she kept her face hidden in his neck. It was pretty damn cute, especially cause her frizzy red hair rubbed into his chin.

“If you two insist on pestering me, can I ask a question?”

“Shoot,” Triss said.

“Did you two run into Jack and the others? They left not long ago.”

Jennifer grinned. “We did. Jack didn’t look happy to see his mother with Jacob.”

“Understandable.”

Triss frowned. “How’s that? Jacob is—”

“It’s not about Jacob. It’s about Jack.” The man sighed, leaned back in his seat, and stroked Fiona’s back as she hugged him. Silly girl would fall asleep if he gave her the chance, even with the pulsing bass-heavy music in their ears. “You know Jack suspects him of ... everything, I suppose. And since you’re here, making my life Hell, I should also ask: does he treat Samantha well?”

Oh, that. Laughing, Triss and Jen shared glances before grinning at the man.

“She’s here with him, isn’t she?” Triss said.

Jennifer nodded. “Indeed. Samantha has been enjoying her time with the Circle. And, she’s been enjoying her time with Jacob immensely. Intensely. Sort of like how Fiona seems to be enjoying yours.” Grinning, she reached out and touched Fiona’s hair, only for Damien to swat her hand away.

Damien eyed Jen, but when he looked at Beatrice, it was different. The look said it all. He expected Triss to keep an eye on Samantha, to protect her, to do the right thing.

She smiled at him, pat the naked man on his shoulder, nodded, and got out of the booth. “Come on Jen.”

Jennifer gave Damien her sexy look, her ‘if you and Fiona joined me I’d make Heaven look like a two-star hotel’ look. But she was just playing, teasing and whatnot, the damn slut, and she slid out of the booth to join Triss. Of course, the two of them took a moment to look back at the pretty boy and the naked short stack still sitting on his dick, and grinned.

They moved on, and slid into the booth Jacob had found.

“They’re a cute couple,” Triss said as she and Jen got comfortable, taking the other side of Samantha and Jacob, who had Othello, Madison, and Aaron on the other.

“Yeah,” Samantha said, “I think so.”

“Oh? Do you know about Damien’s past?” Jennifer asked.

“Only a little. My sire told me about Lucas, and what Damien did, attacking the tower and all that.” She nodded to herself as she thought about something. “I’ve seen Fiona a few times, and she seems full of life. Damien seems like the sort of man who needs that, like ... like his life has been taken from him, right?”

“You don’t think he’s a bit mature for her?” Othello said. “And not about the age difference. Age difference doesn’t really affect Kindred, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.” He gestured to the far, far older man beside Samantha. “But, Damien’s a pretty somber guy.”

Samantha shook her head. “Sometimes opposites attract. Sometimes, the best relationships are when two people fill in the gaps for each other.”

That was a nice sentiment, but Beatrice wasn’t buying it. “Eh, maybe. People need to have some kind of foundation to connect on. I have no idea how you and the boss are connecting, but I’m sure you have something.” That was a lie. She had a clue. The two were adults; like, embraced at an adult age, and that affected how their brains worked. And they’d both lost, a lot.

When the two were done fucking like animals, it was easy to imagine the two of them talking about their lives, and finding comfort in each other. Samantha would probably talk first, because her wounds were relatively new, and she was softer than Jacob. And once the woman’s sweet heart penetrated Jacob’s many, many, many masks, he might confide in her a grain of truth about him.

Jacob grinned subtly, hooked his arm around Samantha, and gently hugged her against him for a second. But he said nothing. He just smiled, and set a kiss on Samantha’s ear.

There was something there, in his expression. So fucking damn hard to read without eyes, but something in his grin caught Triss’s eye, and she raised a brow for a moment as she looked at the man. Maybe Damien wasn’t too far off the mark, asking her to look after Samantha.

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Beatrice and Jen took to the streets in Devil’s Corner. Triss made sure to wrap herself in the Discipline Face in the Crowd, so passing eyes glanced over her. Jen on the other hand, walked the street like

she was looking for a client for the night. Still wearing her nightclub dress, she definitely looked the part. A few times, someone stopped their car and asked her how much. She politely declined.

“Getting harder to find people,” Jen whispered to her.

“Yeah.” Triss slid her jaw to the side, causing some of her crocodile teeth to click together. “Makes things difficult.”

“If the Prince finds out—”

“I’m a lot more worried about that asshole Daniel. The sheriff is a cold fucker.” She shrugged, and nodded toward an alley. “There?”

“We did that spot two weeks ago.”

“Shit, you’re right.” She sighed heavy, but shrugged it off. No point in getting her hopes down yet. “And besides, I’m sure the Prince and the sheriff know something is up. As long as we’re careful, they won’t mind.”

“And if they told us we had to stop?”

Triss stopped and looked at her friend. Jen met her gaze, eyebrows furrowed. Sadness, mixed with determination maybe? At this point, Jen would follow Triss into whatever hell found them, but Triss knew Jen would have preferred she stop this insanity. And she knew Triss wasn’t going to.

“Then I ask Black Blood for help dealing with them.”

“You know he might actually do something, and it probably wouldn’t be good.”

“Maybe. He’s got some weird rules he has to follow. Can’t fuck with the city directly, I guess.”

Jen rubbed her bare arms, pretending to be a weak fawn any hunting predator would love to rob, or rape. Serial killers weren't exactly common, but if Triss and Jen got lucky, they might find a kine royally fucked up like that. But so far, just rapists and muggers, kine that probably didn't exactly merit what Triss was going to do to them, but she couldn't afford to be picky.

"Either way," Triss continued, "don't worry about them. People go missing from Dolareido all the time, the fuckers we don't care about."

"We don't, but someone else might."

That was always a possibility. Kine were dumb, but not so dumb that you could lower your guard; that's how hunters were made. If Kindred made a mistake, they could have a hundred, or even a thousand kine suddenly keeping an eye out for them, and who the fuck knew what might happen after that. Jacob, and even Garry warned her that kine were dangerous because they had this nasty habit of multiplying, and not in the procreative sense. More like, if you pissed off one kine, you could suddenly find yourself looking at the angry end of a mob.

So, vampires did things in shadows and darkness and shit, and now was no exception. Classic vampire shit, a combination of displays of power, but also trying to be secretive, so a thousand angry people with torches didn't show up at their door.

But in Dolareido, it wasn't a big concern anyhow. The Invictus and the Prince controlled the city, and that included the media. If some random human managed to get some footage of Beatrice abducting someone, and posted it to media, it would probably mysteriously disappear from the internet, while the person who posted it would find a Ventrue at their door, ready to do some memory wiping.

Of course, that was just the concern over whether the Masquerade would be shattered. It wouldn't change that she'd be caught violating it, and someone would come have a strong chat with her. If she violated it too many times, Jacob himself would rip her damn head right off her shoulders, or the sheriff would tie her up and leave her for sunrise as a warning to everyone else. Probably not a fun way to die.

Jen and Triss weren't flying blind in their hunt. Aaron knew a lot more about Devil's Corner than Triss figured, and when she'd talked about sacrifices, he'd pointed her in some directions, like this one. He knew she was up to some dark shit, but after what happened, he and Othello were perfectly willing to help her without asking questions

Jen and Triss drifted into another part of town, and ended up behind some whore house. Say one thing for Dolareido, it was gender progressive, criminals included. Women were treated the same as men, and women did nasty, horrible shit, just as much as the men. Didn't matter if you had tits or a dick, anyone could be a giant fuckwad, and if you knew where to look, you could find them.

So when they found a woman with a gun, holding up a couple hookers at gunpoint, Triss and Jen smiled at each other.

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Back in the cave with Elen, Triss and Jen sat their new sacrifice down in front of the bowl. A weak-willed mugger was an easy target for Dominate, and Jen had no trouble turning her into a mindless sheep; for a little while, anyway. If it'd been Jack, he could have permanently fucked up her mind, and a few other minds besides, at the same time. But Jack's role with the Circle was done. She didn't want him even more buried in the shit she was getting into, and the kid had a big enough problem to deal with already.

First step: summon Black Blood, and not with the sacrifice. Instead, she and Jen lit some candles, ensured the symbols drawn

on the walls and floor were still good, and began the ritual. Beatrice sent vitae through her, and tapped into the part of her, the hidden muscle that could reach across the air and into the ether. And as the energy of life coursed out through her undead limbs, she held them up, and spoke:

“Black Blood. I summon you.”

Black Blood came, in his usual style. First, the almost inaudible wails and cries of the dying, as if painful death was something that'd been cut into the spirit until he was literally scarred with the noise. Second, the presence of death, the odd, cold chill it sent through the spine. Third, the black ooze, or blood or whatever it was, thick and gross. It flowed from the cracks in the walls, the eyes of the carved skulls underneath the sacrifice bowl, and from holes in the ceiling and earth.

Black Blood surrounded them, his presence everywhere, and no matter how many times he and Triss had a talk, the insane overwhelming pressure of his aura was undeniable. It was fucking scary.

“Fresh blood tonight?” the deep, almost soothing, mostly scary voice said in a southern drawl.

“Yeah.” Triss grabbed the sacrifice, and pushed her toward Elen. They didn't know her name; made it easier. “Can we try and keep the mess to a minimum this time?”

The evil god of death and doom chuckled, and more of the black ooze seeped up into the bowl Elen hung over.

“Sure sweetheart. I'll try.”

“Dears,” Elen said, voice cracked, withered and dry. “Do an old woman a favor and get her a glass of water, would you?”

Jen winced, but didn't move. Of the three people—er, entities in the room, excluding Elen, Jen felt the most empathy for the old woman, but even she wasn't willing to entertain the delusional hag her strange requests. She didn't need water. Hell, the woman was so fucked in the head she never registered Black Blood's presence. The ooze flowed up off the floor, and pooled into the bowl under Elen's feet. Anyone else would have panicked to all fuck, screaming and kicking. Not Elen. She just hung there, like everyone was a-ok. Creepy, and weird.

More weird, was how it looked when Black Blood, or a piece of him or whatever, began to climb up the old woman's leg. Elen looked down at the creeping veins of black that inched up her loose skirt, and didn't frown or struggle or anything. She just looked at it, like noticing a rock on the road, before looking to the sacrifice standing in front of her.

“Are we carving up another one tonight, dears?” she said.

Triss forced down the wince. “Yes, we are.”

Even as Black Blood crawled up her neck, and the black ooze began to press into her right ear and left nostril, Elen didn't react. If anything, she smiled, a tiny smile, like an old woman going through her typical daily routine she was comfortable with.

“Without my tools and my book, there's only so much I can do, dear.” A bit of black slipped in between her lips. She didn't respond to it. Was she even aware of it? She had to be. Much as Elen's brain was permanently fucked, she had some awareness of her surroundings. A big hook skewering her wrists and holding her up? No big deal. But an alien death god thing oozing up into her mouth, nostrils, and brain? Fucking hell.

“Your tools are out of our reach,” Jennifer said.



“Yeah. Locked up in the Prince’s tower.” Triss jumped up onto the edge of the bowl, unhooked the woman’s thin wrists from the meat hook, and helped her down. A small chair waited for her, and Triss sat her in it. Then, she grabbed the brainwashed sacrifice, and put her on her knees in front of the old woman.

The veins in Elen’s body swelled, like a dehydrated bodybuilder, and Triss shuddered as they bulged and squirmed. Black Blood was in her fucking veins.

“Still not sure how you’re doing that,” Triss said.

A resonating voice, bassy, alien, mixed with Elen’s voice, came from the old woman’s mouth. “This vessel is almost empty.” Southern accent gone, Black Blood now adopted Elen’s decrepit old woman accent. The creepy factor soared to eleven. “She provides little more trouble than possessing a corpse.”

“Don’t be rough, deary,” Elen said, once Black Blood was done. “I’m just skin and bones, you know.”

“Silence,” Black Blood said. Christ it was like watching Gollum argue with himself.

Shaking, trembling, Black Blood guided the old woman’s hands onto the face of their sacrifice, and began to touch her flesh. The sacrifice pulled back, but Jennifer came around, and met the woman’s eyes hard. Another fresh dose of brainwashing from the skilled Ventrue was enough to get the sacrifice to hold still again.

The plan was simple. Elen refused to help them, but after some experimentation, Triss and Black Blood learned the woman’s mind was so empty, that Black Blood could possess her. Normally possession was a different process that took time, according to the spirit, and normally required the person to resonate with the spirit trying to possess them; again, according to Black Blood. A fire spirit could possess someone with arsonist tendencies, given time. But

since Elen was half dead and unable to die, Black Blood could sort of half possess her. And half force her to do things.

So Black Blood learned how to use Elen and her ability to manipulate flesh. An ancient creature learning to use a tool, a tiny, fragile, weak tool, meant only for subtle, precise work. One mistake and Black Blood might tear the woman apart from the inside out.

Elen frowned at the sacrifice, and gently slid fingers up and down her face. As she did, Jen pulled out a scalpel, and handed it to the woman. Triss pulled out her smart phone, brought up a picture of Julias he'd posed for, and pointed it at Black Blood. It took every bit of effort Triss had to not look at the picture this time, but she managed. No need for those painful memories, not now.

Elen got to cutting, guided by Black Blood, but Triss could tell it was Elen doing the more delicate stuff. Lifting her arms and pushing her hands forward? Black Blood. The tiny cuts, the quiet humming, the weird smile? Elen. Like a granny given a knitting needle and wool, she couldn't help but get to work when the tools were in her hands.

“Be a dear and get my book for me?” the old woman said.

Triss groaned. This woman, this damn woman, was so fucking senile, it hurt.

“I already told you Elen, a hundred times, I can't. It's locked up. The book, the knife, the other artifacts, all of them.”

Elen sighed and lowered one of her hands. The scalpel sliced into the sacrifice's face, hard, deep, down across her cheek, and blood flowed. The sacrifice screamed, pain breaking through Jen's Dominate. But before the scream could get too bad, Triss cracked the doomed woman upside the head, and picked her back up by her neck. Unconscious was still alive, and alive was all Elen needed.

“If you could get my book for me, and my knife, I’d do this for you, you know.” Sighing, Elen and Black Blood brought her cutting hand back up to the sacrifice’s face, and got digging. Her right hand sliced, and her left hand plied and plucked at the skin “It’s been a long time since I’ve had a fun project. Rebuilding sonny there”—she half nodded toward the phone—“sounds like a fun project for old Elen.”

Triss frowned down at the old woman, and looked at the face of the sacrifice. Unconscious, the woman they were cutting on couldn’t feel what they were doing to her, and if she woke up and saw, she’d kill herself the moment she got her hands on a sharp object. She wouldn’t be waking up. This was just an experiment, another lamb for the slaughter, or a better comparison, this was fucking Unit 731. She scrunched up her nose at the awful comparison, but it was partly true. Every asshole and douchebag Jen and Triss pulled off the streets and into this hole in the ground on the edge of Dolareido, were fodder to be fucked with as Black Blood and Elen worked to see if they could accomplish the first part of Beatrice’s plan.

The second part was going to be worse, but for now, she was focusing on the first part. Creating a body for her dead love.

“Is she lying?” Triss said.

“I don’t know, deary,” Black Blood said, and again Triss shivered. The fact his voice changed to match his host’s was god damn weird. “But this would be easier if I had her tools.”

The fact Black Blood could, on the fly, possess Elen, and actually use some of her magical flesh manipulating abilities, was damn fucking amazing considering he wasn’t supposed to be able to do much to anything that still had a soul. But still, Triss ground her teeth in frustration and almost started yelling. Every fucking barrier they ran into was infuriating. No matter how many times she told

herself this whole attempt to resurrect Julias was bound to failure, no matter how many times she reminded herself of what the Crone told her, she couldn't help but get her hopes up a little, which of course meant she got super fucking pissed the moment she ran into a problem.

“There are three elders in that tower, Black Blood, not to mention Jack. That's four people that could kick my ass instantly.”

“Jack,” Black Blood said as he worked on the woman's face, flesh sliding far more than it should have. Literally rearranging the woman's face. “That boy, a lot has happened since I last saw him.”

“I suppose Jacob's kept you up to date. And you kinda saved the day, when you gave Sándor an opening back there, to stop the ritual. You saw what Jack's become.”

The old woman smiled, but continued to cut into the sacrifice's face. “The curse inside him is ... interesting. It's been ages since I've seen something like it.”

Black Blood had run into something like it before? That was useful information. She almost asked, but shut up before she could. Better to bring it up to Jack, without Black Blood knowing.

Triss rolled her eyes, doing her best to pass off how scary what he'd just said was. “Focus BB. You have no way to manipulate Jack into working for you, no leverage.”

Black Elen Blood chuckled, a weak and sad little sound, but he-she nodded as he-she continued his-her work. “Don't I?”

“No. And if you fuck with Jack, consider our deal terminated.”

Again, the old woman chuckled, voice half mixed with the bassy vibration of the demon possessing her. “Alright dear.”

“As for the book and shit, I have no idea how to get them. No way in hell. I can’t sneak in there. Jacob couldn’t sneak in there, not with the fucking sheriff around. Plus, you know, dozens of thralls with guns and probably flamethrowers and shit.”

Jen made a thinking noise. “Breaking into the Elysium Tower is a lost cause. But, we do have another way in. Rather, another person.”

---

~~Jack~~

He grumbled and groaned, and Jessy laughed.

“Come on, your mom looked happy.”

“I don’t trust him.”

She shrugged, hooked an arm over his shoulders, and gestured to the city around them as they walked the street. “No one trusts anyone, dude.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Ha, you know what I mean.” She rubbed his buzzed head before letting him go.

“I don’t trust Jacob, and as much as Antoinette trusts him, a little, I don’t think she has a good perspective on it.”

“You don’t? She’s gotta be pretty damn smart to be as old and successful as she is, ya know.”

He shook his head. “Ever had a friend you watched degrade into a ... a bad person, despite your efforts to help them? And you were convinced if you just gave ‘em a chance, they’d come through for you?”

That struck home, and she lowered her eyes as they walked.  
“Yeah, I have.”

“And did they pull through for you?”

“No, they didn’t. But the Prince is old, Jack. She’s gotta be smart enough, or at least wise enough, to not make that mistake.”

His turn to shake his head again. “You’d think, but Antoinette is ... a bit of a softy, honestly. Yeah sure, a lot of people in the city think she’s some kinda ice queen, and she can be when its time to get professional, but her friendship with that old fucker is ancient.” Daniel saw it. The sheriff had no delusions about Jacob, and would happily cut the man’s head off if he saw an opportunity and reason. Jack was happy for that, at least. “So yeah, the Prince thinks Jacob can be trusted, and I’d be an idiot to ignore that, cause you’re right, she is smart and wise. But at the same time, she’s not a robot. She and Jacob have a history.”

“Like she and Elaine do.”

“Y ... Yeah.” He winced and looked up at her. “What do you think of her?”

“Elaine? Smoking hot. Got that tall, busty model looking going for her.”

Jack groaned, earning a laugh from the Gangrel.

“No, I mean—”

“I know what you mean. Can she be trusted? Or at least, trusted more than any self-respecting vampire would trust someone in this kinda circumstance. Honestly? I don’t fucking know, man. I met her eyes, and she ... well, she kinda reminded me of Viktor.”

A chill ran up Jack's spine. "Yeah. That secret has slipped out, and I guess now she doesn't really mind people knowing she's my great grandsire."

"And Viktor was a fucking sociopath."

"Maybe he wasn't always? I have a hard time imagining Elaine willingly siring someone like the Viktor I met."

"Or, maybe Elaine was different back then compared to now?"

He nodded at that. It was possible. Elaine told him as much, that she was a completely different person back then, ran through the woods with pet wolves at her side and stuff.

Speaking of pets. He looked up, and smiled as he noticed Mulder and Scully perched on a powerline. They'd come down for some cuddles and snacks later, but for now, it'd be damn weird to walk around all these people with a couple crows perched on his shoulders. And he didn't want them with him when he was underground in Isabella's lair.

"Maybe," he said, "maybe Viktor wasn't always the asshole we knew. He sired Julias, and he had to know Julias was ... was—"

"Better than the fucking rest of us." Jessy sighed, shook her head, and slipped an arm over his shoulders again. Half hug, while walking. Not comfortable, but a glance up told him he should let her do it. "Christ, still can't believe he's gone sometimes."

"Me neither. But, you knew him a lot longer than I did."

"I did yeah. I never got as close to him as you did, Jack, but yeah, knew him most of my second life. I—" She stopped hugging him, made an awkward cough, and fixed the shoulders of her suit. "No sissy shit. We're supposed to be enforcers here, and get Isabella back in line. Let's go." She didn't hesitate a moment last night to

show everyone her nipples, and get pretty damn ballsy with an elder vampire, but to let it show that she was genuinely sad over Julias's death? That was a line she couldn't cross, not yet at least.

That was fine. Eric had that covered, Jack was sure. They were a great couple, and he was happy they got together, and not Fiona. Eric was good for Jessy, and honestly, Fiona was good for Damien.

The two walked the street in silence for a while, on a slow path to the Lamanar Theatre. Michael and Jack had talked after his few weeks of meditation practice with Elaine, and concluded that if he felt the curse was under control, the man should get back to work. Work, in this case, meant having a talk with Isabella Leauvion and Hella Vendram. The two lovers were neglecting their duties — they were supposed to be a thorn in the Carthians' sides — and Michael wanted to remind them that just because the hunters were defeated, they didn't get to sit around doing nothing.

So Jessy and Jack, two Right Hands, were going to pay an unannounced visit, and remind them. Jack was down with the idea. Supposedly the hunters that remained in the city were still in Isabella's care, and Jack wanted to see just how caring that care was.

“So, last night,” Jessy said. “Wow.” Of course, with time to recover from talk of Julias, Jessy's more normal personality reemerged. Give it to the Gangrel, she bounced back fast.

“Yeah, wow.”

“Like what you saw?” She gestured to herself. At the moment the both of them were in suits, full on secret agent suits that practically screamed hidden pistol.

He rolled his eyes. “You're hot Jessy, and you know it.”

She grinned. “Yeah, but it's still great to hear.”



“What, Eric doesn’t tell you?”

“Oh he does, but you can never have too many compliments.” She grasped the air and put her hand in her pocket, as if saving the compliment for later consumption. “But, damn, lot of tits at that table. Elaine and Fiona have huuuge boobs. And of course, your freaky lover’s got tits the size of Georgia.”

“They’re not that big.”

Jessy set her hand on his shoulder, leaned in, and gently hit her forehead against the top of his head. “Dude, yes they are.”

He pushed her away and did his best to hide his smile. Fail. “Don’t suppose you could act like a proper lady for the rest of the night?”

“Fuck that. Last night’s put me into perma horny mode. Natasha and her boys are fucking perfect, aren’t they?”

“From the conversation, it sounded like you’ve seen them having sex already, multiple times.”

“Yeap. Surprised you haven’t seen the tape. Natasha’s become a full-on porn director. Your lover’s seen it.”

He shuddered. “Antoinette’s just respecting Tash’s privacy, probably.”

“I bet if you asked Tash, she’d trade.”

Oh god, he knew where this was going. “You just want to see me having sex with the Prince.”

“Bingo!”

“You know if we were kine, working for some normal business organization, I’d report you to HR?”

“But we’re not kine. We’re vampires, and you know as well as I, the best god damn fucking thing about our seconds lives, is”—she leaned in close again—“how good we are at fucking.”

Again, he pushed her away, and again he failed to keep the smile off his face. Yeah, it was true. With a little will and vitae, a Kindred’s body Blushed Life, and as long as the Kindred had the vitae to fuel it, they could push their body to pretty massive biological extremes. He’d gotten a lot better at it in the past near three years, and now, if he wanted, he could orgasm and stay erect as much as he wanted.

But Antoinette insisted they don’t let things go too far. She had a few stories for him about powerful vampires who literally held meetings while their ghouls gave them fellatio and whatnot. Elaine admitted to having a meeting with Antoinette about dragon business while the two of them were fucked by some ghouls, too, back in their heyday. Not exactly an objectively bad thing, but too much of anything meant the impact of it lessened.

“Besides,” Jessy continued, “I don’t pester everyone like this. But you? Fair game. Natasha? Ha, took years to get her to come out of her shell, and the result has been fucking glorious. Damien and Fiona? Well, Fiona didn’t take much to nudge her out of her shell. Basically had no shell when I found her.”

“Found her?”

“Mhmm. Fucked Eric while she was sitting right next to him. He fingered her. Great times.”

“I’m guessing this was before Damien started dating her.”

“Ha, of course. And I bet Fiona’s constantly using her big doe eyes to drive Damien crazy.”

Jack groaned, annoyed with Jessy for putting images of his friend fucking Fiona in his head. “Like at the ball.”

“Exactly. Whoda thought church boy would fuck his girlfriend hardcore like that, on the roof of the Black Hall, where everyone could see her tits bouncing around?” She brought her fingers up to her mouth and kissed them, like a chef celebrating a masterpiece of a meal. “And after last night, I am fucking dying to see what it’s like when you fuck the Prince.”

“Of course you are.” Maybe he could use this as leverage? If Jessy was so desperate to see him and Antoinette, there had to be a way he could turn that to his advantage. Maybe get her to do him a favor or something. “Aren’t you into bigger dudes?”

“Eh, sure, I guess. I mean yeah, big tall and handsome is a preference, but it’s not like it’s required. Like, you obviously like the big tits, but I know the Prince’s ghouls don’t have em.”

“True.” No point in denying that. He’d fucked Ashley and Julee plenty of times, and found their thin bodies and small breasts intensely attractive. Just because he preferred large breasts didn’t suddenly change that small breasts were hot as fuck, too.

“So, like, is it kinda like a mommy kink?”

“What the fuck? No. No there is no mommy kink involved in my lovemaking with Antoinette.”

“Aw, come on, not even a little? Never called her mommy even once?”

“Not once.”

She pouted. “But, you do do the shit I’m thinking of, right? Like, hug and hold her while you have slow, gentle sex, and suck on her tits?”

He growled up at the Gangrel, but he couldn’t find any real anger to put into it. Jessy was just being Jessy, and after last night, he

couldn't blame her for being fixated.

She went on. "Or maybe you lie down on her lap, and suck on her tits while she gives you a handjob? Or maybe you sit on her chest, and fuck her tits? Or maybe—"

He held up his hands. "Yes, okay? Yes, we do a lot of that kind of stuff." And some other stuff, but no need to fuel the damn woman's growing obsession. "Figured you wouldn't be into that sort of stuff."

"Not really interested in it happening to me. But to see a little pipsqueak like you, deceptively sexy and ripped you little fucker, getting buried in tits and just covering them in cum over and over?" She groaned, and unlike his groan, hers sounded like an animal mid sex. "That's hot shit, man."

Okay, if he was going to use this leverage, he needed to plant an image in her head she couldn't resist.

"Last night, Antoinette and Elaine buried my dick in their breasts, and Ashley and Julee ate them out." He grinned as he said it, noticing how Jessy's jaw dropped in the corner of his eye. "It took a long time, but after like, half an hour, Elaine and Antoinette had cum so many times and had been grinding on me the whole time, I came all over them." Some pedestrians raised a brow as they walked past, but he didn't care.

"Fuuuuuuck."

"And then Ashley sat on my dick. Antoinette sat on my legs, Elaine on my stomach, and they squashed her between their soaked tits, as they grabbed her hips and ground her back and forth."

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck."

"So of course they Kissed her, and basically humped her while she came, and I came, and—"

“No! No no no!” She grabbed him by the suit jacket and shook him. “You’re lying.”

Bullseye. “Nope. Ashley absolutely drenched me, being doubled Kissed like that. Then they replaced her with Julee, and we went through the whole process again. I—”

Jessy pushed him off the large sidewalk, and into an alley. Her eyes were wide with manic hunger, and she pinned him against a wall as she glared at him.

“You’ve never talked about your sex life like this before. You have to be lying.”

“Nope.” He grinned, one of those evil, playful grins he learned from his sire.

Jessy burst into whining groans and threw up her hands. “You asshole! Show me!”

“Nope.” He felt a little bad about abusing this. Much as he loved sex, like everyone in Dolareido, Jessy was clearly a sex addict. She’d happily have meetings in the middle of an orgy if others would let her.

“God damn you Jack. You just won’t show me because—”

“You know Antoinette would happily let you watch us have sex, Jessy. Old and powerful as she is, and a Daeva, she loves to be the center of attention. You probably noticed it at the club, if not before. She’d fuck in the center of Bloodlust, complete with an audience, if she thought she could control the media freakout.” Porn and other sex-oriented material had a habit of going viral instantly, and beyond the control of any governing body.

She grit her teeth and glared harder. “Ok, so ... Wait, you’re trying to manipulate me. You want me to do something, or get you

something, for a peek of the action?”

“Yeap.”

“You sneaky fucker,” she said, and he smiled. “You sneaky god damn fucker. Fuck you, fine. What do you want me to do?”

“Handle the talking when we meet Isabella. She ... she uh...”

Jessy burst into laughter, and nearby people looked into the alley as they passed.

“Dude, you fucking serious?”

“She’s scary!”

“She’s just a pretty girl who knows it and uses it, paired with some serious ice queen vibes.”

He shuddered and shook his head. “I can feel my balls freeze and pull back up into my body when I’m around her.”

That earned a laughing snort from the Gangrel. “Yeah, she’s like Antoinette without the nurturing half. No idea what Hella sees in her.”

Jack shrugged. “Her plays are a big success.”

“Her plays have nudity and even fake sex scenes. Fake.” She air quoted ‘fake’. Yeah, Isabella probably would have her troupe having actual sex on stage, and call it fake later. “Sex sells.”

“Heh, yeah. But I read her plays are also genuinely good. Erotica kinda stuff, like the actual genre, exploring sexuality and whatnot.”

“With singing?”

He laughed. “No singing.”

“Damn. I like the songs.”

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They stood outside the Lamanar Theatre, and whistled. It was such an old, beautiful building, and when they stepped into the lobby, the royal theater look was blatant. Giant white pillars carved from stone, gold braziers, gold chandelier, and red carpet and drapes around. Old, all very old, but beautiful.

“I used to think this was Hella’s home, not Isabella’s,” Jack said.

“It used to be like that, but Isabella kinda moved in when her old directing efforts took off.”

Jack rubbed his chin as his eyes tracked the floor. “Hope she didn’t force herself onto Hella’s living situation.”

“Ha! Nah. Those two are in love.”

He nodded as the two approached an usherette, the same usherette that tried to stop Jack last time. That time, he’d brainwashed her to leave him alone, and he explored the upper floor until Isabella found him. She’d taken him along the catwalk, then to a wall where there’d been a hidden passage. But it seemed like it could only be opened with a password or something, so, no point in going exploring. Vendram or Leauvion would just have to come get them; no way in hell they didn’t know two vampires had just arrived.

If they didn’t come get them, well, then Jack and Jessy would just have to kick a wall down.

Jack looked into the usherette’s eyes, and before she could say anything, Jack shook his head. “You’re going to ignore us.”

“I ... am going to ignore you.” The woman nodded, and walked away.

“Jesus Jack. That took you, what, half a second to do?” Jessy gave him a small nudge in the shoulder. “Getting good.”

“It’s not like that. The curse is like a raging river, and all I’m doing is trying to let out just a little bit of it.”

She grimaced as the two of them pushed past the heavy, hanging curtains that led into the auditorium. “Like a mad dog on a leash?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“That sucks.”

He laughed. “Yes, it does. Usually. I mean, it’s not all bad. The power’s there, but I have trouble controlling it.” Sighing, he reached up and gently stroked his shirt where the necklace sat underneath. Elaine said it was some ancient occult object that helped suppress Beastly urges; not something she had during her struggles, but something the Ordo Dracul had that she could now borrow.

It worked, a little. It tingled on his skin, and he could feel the sharp edge on his desires blunted. He could also feel the readiness of his Beastly instincts lowered, like someone had thrown a big blanket over them. Not a good thing, if shit was hitting the fan. Thankfully the city had calmed down quite a bit, and he could take a breath and focus on other problems.

Once Jessy and Jack got close to the big stage, Hella Vendram stepped out from behind a heavy curtain. Hella was very attractive, a bit tall with a fit body and tan skin, lots of badass scars from her human days, and tonight she wore her dark hair short, very short. He thought she might have been from Brazil, or maybe her kine parents had been, since she had the typical Dolareido accent.

“Just going to show up unannounced?” she asked, half yelling. She wore typical jeans and t-shirt, completely at odds with the



decor, but totally predictable for a Gangrel. “I suppose you’re wanting to cash in on the favor.”

Favor? He almost asked about it, but stopped himself. Right right, avenging Barry.

“Not really, no. Not yet at least. We’re here because Michael’s pissed you’re not out there, dealing with the Carthians,” he said.

Hella groaned, and motioned for them to come join her. They did, and they followed her backstage where scene props were, and then down below to the dressing rooms. There was no threat here, nothing to make Jessy or Jack hesitate or look over their shoulders for a knife coming for the back. Of course, Kindred would always be Kindred, and it paid to not be too carefree, but Jack felt more or less relaxed.

Hella used a key to open a secure door, and another to open another secure door. Then it was down, and down, into an underground passage. Stone and metal, deep in the Earth where only a creature that didn’t need oxygen could feel comfortable.

“Last time I was here, I couldn’t find anyway in,” he said. He’d been down there before, and other than what looked like some kind of tunnel through water deep in the Earth, Isabella’s secret path starting from the catwalks above seemed like the only way in.

“You can never be too careful.” She shrugged at him. “There may be more ways, there may not. I have no obligation to tell you.”

Jessy growled, a very animal sound, but nodded. “Yeah, we know, Hella. Kid was just curious.”

Hella smirked, but shrugged again. Good, no follow up meant she wasn’t feeling too aggressive. If she wasn’t on edge, than Isabella might not be either.

After a long journey down spiraling stairs cut into stone, they came out into the cave that was Hella's home. Not the way he came in last time he was here, this time stepping out from behind a heavy curtain, and out onto a higher part of the cave. The very well decorated cave that might as well have been a scene from *The Phantom of the Opera*. It even had some dress mannequins, and a big comfy, fancy four poster bed.

"No no no!" Isabella, wrapped in some sort of gorgeous, blue, fluffy nightgown that belonged on a woman who'd recently killed her rich husband for his money, walked around the bed. A couple of Kindred sat around it, as did a couple of kine, likely ghouls, and everyone was watching the two Kindred on the bed. "You're not capturing the sheer taboo nature of the act."

Jack raised a brow, looked at Jessy, who returned the confused look, before they both shrugged and followed Hella as she led them down the winding twists on the floor of the cave. Lots of lit candles, hanging curtains, beautiful paintings, a chandelier, it was like Maria's den, except less morose.

On the cave floor beside the bed sat another kine Jack hadn't seen before, and whoever he was, he was out cold. Alive, but comatose, from a Kiss no doubt. The two Kindred on the bed were hidden under the blanket, a white woman and a black man, and the man was currently lying on the girl's back. And, from the smell in the air and the flushed look on her cheeks, they were very aroused; probably them who Kissed the kine.

"Taboo?" Jessy said, smirk on her face as she approached, taking slow steps down the carved stairs of the stone cave. "What's taboo about this? Ass fucking? Not really the best position for that, F Y I. Get a pillow under your hips, girl."

The group of actors and actresses chuckled, but Jack rolled his eyes and shook his head. Yeah, he'd forced Jessy to handle Isabella

so he wouldn't have to, but that didn't mean Jessy had to go all ... Jessy on him. Fuck. He really should have asked for something better.

"It's a period piece," Isabella said as she folded her arms across her chest. "I don't suppose you understand what that means?"

Jessy raised a brow, looked to the two people covered in a blanket on the bed, at the fancy old fashioned dress on the foot of the bed, at the field worker's clothes beside them, and then to Isabella. "Oh, I get it. Black dude, white girl?"

Isabella almost snarled, but a sheet of ice covered her cold face instead. "Indeed."

"Harcourt involved?" Jessy nodded to herself, as if she'd come to a great idea. "Dude's smoking hot, and black."

It took every ounce of discipline Jack had to not hit Jessy upside the head. That could wait till later.

"None of the hunters are members of this performance," the Daeva said, glaring.

Jessy raised a brow, and gestured with her chin to the other side of the cave. A few more actors and actresses stood around, chatting, nodding, and holding up various costume pieces in front of themselves. Some sort of feedback group then. Two of the hunters, Dennis and Marge, stood with them, chatting away.

"Jessy, I'm going to speak with the hunters," Jack said. "Can you —"

"Yeah yeah. Don't forget what you owe me though." Jessy winked at him, walked over to Isabella, and sat down on the foot of the bed, big grin on her face.

The more Jack thought about it, the more he realized he'd made a bad trade. Jessy liked confrontation, and considering how condescending Isabella often was, the Gangrel was probably aching for an opportunity to get uppity with her. Maybe Jack could haggle with her over his deal?

He laughed quietly to himself as he approached Dennis and Marge. He hadn't even asked Antoinette if he could make a deal like that, a sex tape or something of them together, to give to Jessy. No way she'd say no, or so he thought, but there was a chance she'd say no. Maybe. Possibly.

Nah. Antoinette was perfectly comfortable with the idea of fucking in front of an audience, both in person, and planet-wide. So comfortable, she'd take requests from the audience for positions, mid sex. He could see it now. She'd be riding him, pull out her smart phone, and put up a global poll for people to vote on the next position. Live voting.

Maybe Jessy and Antoinette, and Elaine, had more in common than he thought?

"Marge, Dennis," he said once he got close.

The group of vampires backed away, offering him small bows. Uncomfortable. One of the vampires was younger than him, but the other few were older than him. They all looked a little frightened. The two hunters, on the other hand, looked terrified of him, which of course soon had the other vampires even more scared.

"Jack," Dennis said eventually. "You uh, you here for us?"

"No. You can all calm down, I'm not here for any of you." That managed to dial them down from nine to eight on the panic scale, at least. "Jessy and I are here to ... speak to Isabella." He didn't mean to pause there; just wanted to avoid telling these guys what they were actually going to say to their boss. But the pause made it sound

indirectly threatening, and the group of them, vampires included, stirred and looked over him to Isabella.

“She in trouble?” one of the actresses said.

“Covenant business,” he said. Which only made things worse. Fuck. “Don’t worry about it. So, Dennis, Marge, how is it in Dolareido?”

“Could be worse,” Marge said, a small smile managing to emerge. “I mean, considering we were pretty sure we were dead, when you ... you know. Being stuck in Dolareido is, um, frustrating, but we’re pretty happy compared to the alternative.”

“They holding a grudge for Barry’s death?”

“Nope,” they said together.

“Good. Isabella and Hella treating you well?”

“We’re not really sure,” Dennis said. “How do vampires normally treat prisoners in Dolareido?”

Jack looked down as he held his chin. Tell them? No, probably not a good idea. Maria, Michael, Viktor, Jacob, they all did some pretty nasty shit to kine they felt deserved it, or kine they wanted to use as kindling for their actual purposes. Even Antoinette kept live prisoners indefinitely, as potential emergency blood sources.

“Not like this,” he said. “You guys aren’t true prisoners. You’re an opportunity. The Prince is a peaceful Prince, and she’ll play the long game to make that peace a reality. You two and Harcourt are another tool in her toolkit. Once she’s satisfied you guys understand what we’re about, she’ll let you go.” And if she’s not satisfied, she’ll probably lock the three of you up. But no reason to tell them that.

“How long will that take?” Dennis asked.

Jack shrugged. “No idea. How much of Dolareido have you seen? Er, better question. How much of Dolareido have you seen with vampires doing what they do in it?”

Marge nodded. “You mean, have we seen vamps go on hunts and stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ve seen a few, yes. Been to Bloodlust a few times.” She squirmed a little as she said it. “And we’ve been fed on a few times.” And from the way she wriggled when she said it, that feeding had been intense, pleasurable, and sexual. Dennis’s reaction was identical.

“Anyone slip you any of their blood?”

“No,” Dennis said. “But I mean, how would we know if they had?”

“Overwhelming infatuation and obsession with one of the Kindred, generally unwarranted.”

Marge winced and looked down. “Uh, I don’t think there’s been anything like that. But, uh—”

Laughing, Jack put up his hands. “If you’re in with the vamps in Dolareido, it’s like ... winning the lottery, and going on vacation in Las Vegas. Yeah, you’re going to get buried in so much sex and indulgence, you’ll get whiplash.”

“You got that right,” Dennis said, and he smiled at some of the nearby vampires. They returned it.

“Where’s Harcourt?” Jack asked.

Dennis shook his head. “Dunno. Despite her best efforts, I don’t think Miss Leuvion’s been able to convince Brace to get involved in

her plays.”

“That the reason she got her claws into you so early? Just ... for the plays?”

“Seems to be a large part of it, yeah. There’s been a few occasions where she’s kinda negotiated with other Kindred to get to talk to us; probably traded for it.”

Jack raised a brow at that. “But, you’re not trapped under Isabella, or Hella. You’re stuck in the city, but no Kindred is allowed to keep you under their thumb.”

Marge nodded. “I guess. She is a bit ... insistent, that we should be careful about leaving the comfort of her care, though.”

Jack frowned at that. Of course the damn woman would be manipulating the hunters, without actually quite breaking the Prince’s decree. He’d fix that before he left.

“Any idea where I can find Harcourt?”

“Probably hanging with the Carthians.”

Interesting. Harcourt had a personality that didn’t exactly fit the hunter mold. Maybe he felt more comfortable in the borderline anarchist environment of the Carthians?

Jack nodded. “Alright, I’ll talk to Isabella, and then ... well, keep your heads down, ok?”

“You mean right now?” Marge asked.

“I mean in general. City isn’t perfectly safe.”

“It is filled with vampires. I mean—”

“It’s not that,” Jack said. “Just ... be careful.” Before they, or the listening vampires could interject, not that they would considering they were afraid of him, he marched back from where he came, to get involved in the conversation between Jessy and Isabella.

Conversation, not argument. Surprising. Considering Jessy being Jessy, he’d expected to find his fellow Right Hand throwing curses at the older Daeva, but she hadn’t. Nope, she’d sat down on the bed with the two actors, and was in the process of ripping the blanket off them.

“No no!” Jessy said, voice louder, but not angry. Impassioned was probably a better word, though Jack had trouble understanding what was going on. “The sex shouldn’t be gentle. He should be grinding into her. Come on, if we’re playing up the rich girl seduces farm hand, it’s been a long, slow tease, right? When he gives in, it should be like an animal!” She gestured to the two on the bed, who were actually having sex — or had been — until Jessy interrupted. Authenticity, or at least compelling performances, evidently meant a lot to Isabella.

“Madam Herrington,” Jack said, frowning at his partner, “did you speak with her?”

“What? Yeah yeah, she knows what’s up. If we have come back down here, we’ll crack some skulls and ruin her next play.”

Hella did not like that threat. The Gangrel prowled over toward them, but Isabella held out her arm and cut her off.

“The Right Hands are correct,” Isabella said, no effort made to hide the ice in her voice. “Mister McDonald does not care for the arts, and we have become too involved in our passions.”

Jack managed a small smile. “I get you.”

The Daeva’s glare could have cut steel. “Do you, Mister Terry?”



Wow, damn. Much as Isabella was a cold woman, Jack half expected her to treat him with at least a little politeness. He'd gotten revenge for Barry, one of their actors. But no, the fact the Right Hands had come to interrupt something important to her meant she was pissed. Time to play diplomat again.

“Yes, I understand, Madam Leauvion. I know how it feels when you get a hook, in the brain, you know? I know exactly what it's like when something grabs you, and you spend all night and day sinking energy into it. It eats you up, in delightful masochism. And for any Daeva, I imagine that that's an even stronger sensation. You want to master your craft, and create works that resonate.” He said ‘resonate’ very carefully, with emphasis and articulation, and the satisfied smile on Isabella's face told him he'd struck home. “And when outside interference gets in the way, it's beyond frustrating, because you know that the energy filling you right now can be fickle. You want to strike while the fire's hot, right?”

“Are you an artist, Mister Terry?” she asked, some ice in her voice gone. “You speak like someone who knows.”

“I've dabbled, when I was human.”

“But not since?”

“No, I guess not. Haven't really had the time.” Or the desire, really. Ever since he was embraced, his mental energy naturally gravitated toward different things, usually anything that involved growing his skill, power, and status as an Invictus. Being a Ventrue had changed him. He used to have a lot of skills, a natural at anything he put his mind to, and it was a bonding point between him and Antoinette. But he wasn't that guy anymore. Kinda sad, really, now that he thought about it.

And because he could not fucking stop wearing his emotions on his sleeve, Isabella smiled as she watched him, catching what he was thinking.

“My troupe are afraid of you, Jack,” she said, and Jack raised a brow at the dropping of title. “The hunters, and my Kindred. The stories about you, about the things you’ve done, the hunters have corroborated them.”

“Is that why you got your fingers into them so quickly? To ask them questions about me?” Ugh, he didn’t want to talk to her. She was mean. Jessy was supposed to be talking to her, and was, and he was the idiot that interrupted that.

“Partly. Partly for more obvious reasons. Partly because I did wish to see them in my work. And, partly, because they are delicious.” She licked her lips as she said it, and it was pretty damn obvious she meant more than just their blood. To seal the image, Hella grinned a big grin beside her.

Time to spoil her night even more, then.

“Right, well, you’ve been hogging them. Let others have a turn,” he said, earning a bark laugh from Jessy.

Isabella scowled, and the ice returned in full force. “I have not been—”

“I really don’t have patience for a back-and-forth of indirectness, Isabella. You know what I mean, and you know what you’re doing. Marge and Dennis are supposed to be seeing more of Dolareido, so Antoinette can convince them we’re not really worth other hunters’ time, remember?”

Fuck. One moment he had patience, and the next he didn’t. Something about Isabella and her deceitful, manipulative attitude really got under his skin, and now that he had the power to rip her into pieces, fear didn’t hold back his tongue.

Yeap, this was why he wanted Jessy to do the talking. With Jessy, getting uppity and angry and stuff was the norm. With him, cutting

through the bullshit and getting a point across quickly, was taken a lot more harshly. Both because of his known past as a keeper of the peace, and his recent curse.

“I thought you were a Right Hand of the Invictus, not an assistant to the sheriff?” she said, a sneer slowly creeping across her face. “Michael would prefer we keep them locked down here indefinitely. Yet, it seems like you’re putting your lover’s desires over his.”

Wow, she didn’t back down, like he thought she would. Hell, she’d said it herself, the hunters corroborated the rumors. She knew what he could do.

Jessy was right. Isabella had eyes for growth in the Invictus hierarchy, and she never forgave him for becoming the next Right Hand. And the problem was, she’d just insulted him in front of a group of people. His status was at stake, and to an Invictus, status was everything. He understood that, got that, and fuck him, he even kinda liked that about the Invictus; the Ventrue in him was coming out.

He snarled, very quietly, and took a step toward her, eyes locked onto hers. She took a step back, so did her girlfriend, and the two of them glared at him like angry animals suddenly cornered by a much larger animal. Every Kindred nearby froze. The Beast in his gut roared its triumphant power, and theirs huddled back, whimpering.

“You think I’m Antoinette’s bitch, is that it?” The word choice had everyone staring, and he ground his teeth hard enough his fangs emerged. “Michael wants you to get off your ass, and stop Garry from pushing in on our territory more than he already has. But you’re so self absorbed, you can only think about indulging your obsessions.” He nodded toward the hunters behind him, who had drifted closer along with the other vampires. He was now the center of attention for everyone in the cave. Lovely. “And hey, I get it. I know exactly what it’s like when something grabs hold of you and

you can't help but pour every bit of focus you have into it. But instead of a reasonable conversation, you want to be a fucking pain in my ass?" He took another step forward, and again Isabella and Hella stepped back. "You know what Michael wants you to do, and you'll do it. Now you know what the Prince wants you to do it, and you'll do it, because it's the smart thing to do. And because I told you to."

Hella slipped under Isabella's protecting arm, and marched toward him, eyes glaring. "You can't just walk into our home and—"

Jack met her eyes. The world stopped. Everyone watching petrified, and Hella became a statue as she realized what was happening to her. What had happened to her. She was what, maybe thirty years embraced? Not even in her ancilla years. Breaking past the barrier all Kindred — and paranormals — had guarding their mind was easy. More than easy, he had to make an active effort to hold back his Beast and keep it from ripping into her damn mind. It was a gamble he did not want to make, but the situation was quickly spiraling out of control and he had to get it under control, now.

With another quiet growl, Jack pointed at her, and then slowly pointed at the bed. With a quiet whimper and broken eyes, the warrior woman inched her way over to the bed, and sat down on the foot of it.

"Let me make this perfectly clear," Jack said. "This isn't a negotiation. Don't mistake my kindness for weakness or passivity. You're all members of the Invictus. Do what MacDonald says, or I'll make you. You're all Kindred of Dolareido. Do what the Prince says, or I'll make you. Understood?"

Everyone except for Hella and Isabella nodded vigorously. They nodded too, once a few moments of deadly silence passed.

"So this is how it is?" Isabella said. "We're to be enemies?"

“You fucking shitting me?” Laughing, Jessy hopped off the bed, and put a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Dude’s the best friend you could ask for. He just saved you a whole lot of pain. All you gotta do is listen, and everyone comes out better.” She saluted the two Kindred, waved to everyone else, and turned to leave with Jack.

She did a good job hiding that she was actually pushing Jack to guide him back out of the cave. Good. Part of him kinda wanted to stay and throw a few punches, and he knew that was a damn bad idea.

---

“Thought you were going to let me do the talking?” Shaking her head, she gently elbowed him in the side as the two stepped back onto the Dolareido sidewalk.

“I was! I was. Just, fuck, I wanted to make sure the hunters weren’t being treated like prisoners.”

Jessy shrugged at that. “Yeah sure, but that doesn’t mean you needed to burn that bridge with Isabella.”

“Hard to not burn a bridge with that bitch.”

“Ha! Agreed. But still, you’re normally pretty good about this sorta shit. What happened?”

Sighing, Jack looked down and stared at the toes of his Invictus shoes as he walked. “That sort of shit always annoys the ever living fuck out of me.”

“Yeah, I get that, but you didn’t let it get the best of you, before now.”

“I didn’t have this curse back then. Now, I can ... I can have Isabella on her knees with the snap of a finger.”

Jessy raised a brow at that. “Damn, that’s badass.”

He snorted. “I feel like a kid who’s found his dad’s gun, a shitty pistol with a quick safety and hair trigger. One fucking mistake and I’m going to kill someone.”

“Better be careful then.”

“Yeah, I know. But fuck me, knowing I can tell an asshat to fuck off and get to work now? It’s ... it’s like god damn fucking candy! Knowing that if I wanted to, I could make her drag her pretty ass into the Invictus HQ, and openly admit she’s being lazy? Hell yes.” He looked up at Jessy, and she blinked at him, apparently not really aware of the sensation. “You’ve never dealt with someone stronger or richer than you, and all you can think is ‘fuck I wish I had the power or money to deal with you?’ But you couldn’t?”

“Eh, I mean I guess? Normally I kinda just ... try, and get beat up for trying.”

He blinked at her, she smiled a big dopey smile, and he laughed. “Not me. I just fantasized about it. But, now I’m the... ‘big dog.’” He air quoted that, naturally. “I can tell an asshat to stop being an asshat. I can genuinely fix things.” And he wanted to fix things. Christ, if he could just fix everything, his purpose in life would be complete. He could die happy.

“Sounding kinda like a dictator there, you know? Waving a big ole ‘I know best, follow me’ sorta flag over your head.”

He winced at that. “I know. I’m not an idiot. I shouldn’t just go around, bullying people into doing what I want them to do, because I think I know best. Setting myself up for a historically cliché fall doing that.”

“Maybe a bit, yeah. But I’m a little more concerned about how things are gonna be after you get rid of the curse.”

“Get rid of it...”

“Yeah.” She nudged him with her elbow again. “You know, that thing you wanted to do?”

He frowned at the street beneath him. “Yeah.”

“Ok, um, you sound hesitant, and that’s kinda scary. Last I heard, this curse thing was horrible, you hated it, and you wanted to get rid of it?”

“I do, I do. But I’ve had it under control for weeks now, and ... and it’s easy to forget the horrible shit, and only remember the good shit.” The power in his fingertips, for one.

“Well, whatever you do Jack, I’ll back you. You’ve earned it. Julias chose well. But take it from someone who’s burned a lot of bridges: don’t burn a lot of bridges. If you do get rid of the curse, the fuck you gonna do if Isabella decides it’s time to shove you around?”

Sighing, he shrugged and looked up at the Gangrel. “I’ll ... ask for your help?”

“Ha!” She clapped him on the back and laughed. “A Ventrue, ask for help when his pride is on the line? I’ll believe it when I see it.”

---

~~Antoinette~~

“I think I have seen far too many naked bodies the past few weeks,” Samantha said.

Antoinette laughed, and smiled at her childe beside her. The two sat in one of her vehicles, being driven by one of her thralls, a large vehicle, but not quite a limousine. Deliciously overindulgent without being gaudy.

“You spend much of your time with witches and warlocks, my childe. Expect to be surrounded with flesh and sin.”

“It’s not really the image I think of, when you say witch. I think cauldrons and warts and stuff. And warlock just makes me think of Jack, playing video games in the living room.”

Again Antoinette laughed. Young Jack, a boy, indulging his growing mind with the rising media of the current age. Such an image, so at odds with the current reality.

“Then allow me to correct your assumptions, Samantha. Long ago, in the woods distant from nearby villages, Kindred of the Circle of the Crone would gather. Come the full moon, they would sit around a fire managed by their ghouls, and they would pray to old gods, gods of the elements, and gods of forces beyond understanding. Sometimes they would sacrifice an animal to the flame. Sometimes a person.”

Samantha gasped. “A person?”

How silly her childe was. Antoinette had told Samantha all this already, but her childe was the sort of woman who needed to hear information many times, and in many forms, before it sank past her skull. With time, she would sharpen her mind, despite the natural inclination of her first life’s habits. She would have to.

“Indeed. Consider the myths you have undoubtedly come across, about some of the more barbaric acts performed by the occult, hundreds of years ago. Many such stories are simply tales of the terrible things the Circle has done, worshiping ancient gods or pursuing dark magics. And, as you know, many such stories are filled with sex.”

Samantha looked down and shivered; a shiver of delight, not fear. “There’s definitely been sex.”

“I am sure that Jacob, in his younger years, indulged in carnal delights of a similar nature to my own past. Though, some key



details would be different. I preferred walls, and beds of silk. Jacob would have undoubtedly preferred fur rugs.”

“Yeap, there’s fur.”

“And he would have included members of his family.”

“F-Family?”

“The Circle of the Crone embraces an ancient tradition, sometimes called the Family. Kindred are given roles, such as Mother, Father, and others, such as the Maiden or the Whore.” The details and purpose of which evaded her. She was no stranger to secrets; such was the way of the Ordo Dracul. But the secrets of the Circle were far more infuriating, as they rarely wrote what they believed or acted. A culture propagated either by frustratingly cryptic scripture, or through verbal story. “I am sure many in such a tribe would have joined in, and engaged each other sexually during some of their rituals.”

“I ... uh, haven’t had anything crazy like that happen to me.”

“Yet.”

“Yet.” She shivered again and smiled as she looked up to her. “But honestly, I think it’s a little easier to, um, open up, sexually speaking, in that environment I guess? Beatrice and Jennifer are so nice, and they’ve got their legs around each other all the time.” She put her hands up to her cheeks and shook her head, as if the very images going through her mind would condemn her. “Triss, she uh ... Jennifer likes to ... put her whole fist inside her! And not in her, you know, vagina, but in her...”

Antoinette could not help but laugh. “And that startles you?”

“Kinda, yeah. She gets really deep, and you can actually see her fist pushing up against her insides! And Triss cums and she

absolutely soaks Jen, and—”

Antoinette leaned forward, and grinned at her silly childe beside her, causing her to freeze solid, an infant caught with hand in the cookie jar.

“You have watched them. Several times.”

“I ... um ... yeah. I didn't mean to! But they have sex with their little cubbyhole cave open so I ... can't help but notice, when I come or go.” Sighing, she looked out the window at the passing houses, and ran her fingers back through her hair. “Aaron doesn't seem to be interested in doing that sort of stuff, but Othello...”

“Ah, Othello. I enjoy the man, as one Daeva to another, but his mind is perhaps on the other end of the spectrum from mine, or any dragon's.” If the man had a mind at all.

“He. Is. Gorgeous.” She giggled, and Antoinette raised a brow at her, but did not stop smiling as she leaned back and watched her childe be a child. “So much muscle! And Madison, she's so pretty, and...” More giggles. “Her poor ass.”

“You have not had anal sex with Jacob yet?”

“Antoinette!” Her giggles disappeared, replaced with shock. “I ... I uh...”

“As I am sure Madison has made abundantly obvious, anal sex can be quite enjoyable for those with the proclivity. I never much fancied it, despite many efforts to. Alas.” She shrugged. “You are a vampire now, sweet childe. Any and all concern with which orifice you indulge should be dismissed.”

Trying to indirectly convince her childe to have anal sex with Jacob was a hilarious topic, but Antoinette kept her face smooth and calm. It was obvious Samantha was indulging her rediscovered

sexual desires with Antoinette's old friend, and that was a connection Antoinette found value in fostering.

"I ... I suppose that's true, isn't it? Every time I see Jen and Triss have sex, they're so ... free to um ... use any part of the body."

"Indeed."

She giggled again as a thought struck the sweet childe. "Not sure how Madison keeps herself clean for Othello all the time, but she does. And she ... she really loves having sex with him. Is it because of the Vinculum?"

"With the blood bind, a ghoul or thrall will be forever wholly infatuated with the master, unless steps are taken to break it, such as months without either contact or vitae fed to the ghoul. Such a bond could lead to sexual arousal, but it is no substitute for sexual skill. If Madison enjoys anal sex with Othello frequently—"

"Very frequently. Like, almost every night." She squirmed and wriggled as more dirty thoughts ran through her innocent mind. "She cums and soaks him too, just like Triss."

"Then I am sure the man has the skills and knowledge to earn such pleasure."

Samantha leaned toward her, as if sharing a dark secret only to be shared among close friends, women sipping wine around a table in the living room. "One time, Madison was giving him a ... blowjob. Triss and Jen sat with him and watched. And ... and I did too! Even opened my blouse for him." She cupped her cheeks in her hands again. "I showed him my breasts, and he stared at them, and came in his ghoul's mouth! Ugh, I felt so ... hot, and guilty! I told Jacob later. He just laughed and said next time, I should give Othello a strip tease."

“Of course he did, childe. Though I suspect he would not want you to partake, at least not without his presence.”

“Y-Yeah, but still. In that cave, I could ... I could walk into that cave, strip, and ask everyone to have sex around me, while they watched me. And ... and they would!”

Oh Jacob, what have you done to her sweet, innocent childe? Not so innocent anymore. Antoinette laughed, finger against her cheek, and she smiled at Samantha as she pondered.

“Be careful, childe.”

“I know I know. Don’t wanna put myself in that sort of situation, buried that deep with the Circle, and suddenly—”

“It is not that, Samantha.”

“No?”

“Non. If you wish to become very close friends with the Circle, then by all means, do so.” And by all means, share every detail with your sire, sweet little Terry. “If you want to swim in the flesh and fluids of the witches and warlocks, by all means, do so. Enjoy yourself. My concern is that you remain aware that you are Daeva, and Daeva can often become obsessed with their passions.”

“I never really thought of sex as a passion of mine.”

“And yet...”

Samantha sighed, dreamily at that, and smiled at her. “And yet, I look forward to seeing Jacob, half because I enjoy spending time with the man, half because the sex is so damn good. Is that shallow?”

“Not at all. As you said, you enjoy talking to the man.”

“I do. He’s ... he’s fun, in a strange, chaotic kinda way, you know?” Another longing sigh. “He makes me feel young.”

“You are young, compared to my old friend.”

“Heh, that’s true, isn’t it? But he seems young too. He laughs, makes jokes, actually funny, witty jokes. He’s smooth, you know? Really ... suave, and smart.” She squirmed some more. “And he’s really, really talented.”

“Go on,” Antoinette said. Samantha always needed a small nudge, to be let out of her shell to share details of her love life. And she wanted to share them, otherwise Antoinette would leave her to her privacy. But Samantha, young and inexperienced, was unaware of her own desires, despite how simple it was to read her. Antoinette could, and Jacob could.

“Last night, at Bloodlust, after the others left, he was kissing my neck, and then he ... slid his hand inside me.” She avoided eye contact with Antoinette, horribly embarrassed, but the sheer joy radiating from her helped her push through. “But then Othello and Madison came back, and when they realized what was happening, Madison sat down beside me, and Othello beside her. And Othello, he started doing to Madison what Jacob was doing to me.” Again she buried her face in her hands, this time while looking down.

“It sounds like a delightful time. Othello’s ghoul is beautiful.” Antoinette leaned in a touch and whispered. “How many times did you climax?” After a small quiver, and while still looking down, Samantha kept one hand to her face to hide it, while she held up the other with three fingers high. “Oh my.”

“I don’t know what it is!” She threw her hands up as she sat up straight and lifted her head, exasperated. “Jacob gets his hands on me, and I just ... melt.”

“The man is ancient, my childe. He has slept with countless women, and from what Minerva told me, he enjoyed using his skill.”

“Ancient. Kinda like you...”

Antoinette smiled, but kept it gentle. “I see where your mind wanders. Oui, what Jacob does for you, I have done for Jack.”

Samantha managed a half grin. “And you enjoy that? The sex being so one sided, I mean.”

“Oh, immensely. To share my skill with him? To please him? Jacob feels the same when he is with you, I am sure.”

She smiled at that, and started to curl her hair around a finger. “He’s spoiling me. And that ... that makes me kind of nervous, honestly. If I was still human, I’d think maybe he was just a horny guy saying and doing all the right things to keep me in his bed. But, he’s a vampire! He could have any human in his bed, any he wanted. A few drops of blood and a kine is enthralled, right?”

“Correct. Three servings. Every Kindred with power is spoiled for choice in my city, sexually speaking.” Antoinette tilted her head to the side and raised a brow. “Are you concerned Jacob is unhappy with you?”

“I was at first. Thought maybe he was just getting close to me, so he could ... I don’t know.”

Ah, perhaps Samantha was not as naive as Antoinette thought, if she considered Jacob’s interest in her to be a way for him to manipulate Antoinette.

“Kindred will forever look for ways to better control wherever they roost, Samantha. Jacob undoubtedly took an interest in you because you are my childe, as a possible means to influence me. Do not hold it against him. I would have done the same.” And she

currently did so, in a way. “But since then, you have made it clear he is quite interested in you.”

“All the sex—”

Antoinette put up her hand. “It is not the sex, Samantha. You have made it clear he is interested in you, because of the topics you have shared with me. Jacob does not speak of Minerva lightly, and yet you have told me that he has, indeed, spoken of her to you?”

“Y-Yeah, he has.”

“He’s spoken to you of his tastes?”

“Yeah. He likes jazz.”

Antoinette grinned and relaxed back in the car seat. “Oui. He does.”

The two grew quiet as the large car drove along. The street grew darker as they grew further from the entertainment and business districts of South Side, and quieter, the crowds eventually vanishing. Soon, the car came to a stop at the end of a driveway, and Samantha’s old home awaited them.

“Are you ready?” Antoinette said.

“I ... I am. Let’s go.”

## Chapter 129

~~Antoinette~~

She felt it the moment she and Samantha stepped up to the comely home. Cold, in the bones, an unnatural sensation that pulsed through her being. Her Beast recognized it, and its instincts kicked in, growling and snarling at the invisible waves of murder and anger that radiated from the house. It did not like being so close to such an aura; Kindred were masters of controlling kine, but had no talents whatsoever that allowed them to manipulate creatures of ephemera, spirit or ghost.

Antoinette had spent centuries learning to affect ephemera and the beings composed of it, largely in an effort to expand her control of everything. One more tool in her kit, to enact her goals on the world. But ephemera and ephemeral beings refused to be cooperative. Every scrap of knowledge she had discovered was uncovered through painful trial and error. The trouble with being a pioneer, was how little help there was to be found, even among colleagues.

Much of her knowledge pointed to the same conclusion: avoid entities made of this strange material. They were beyond the control of vampires, except through strange rituals and ornate symbols hundreds of years of experimentation barely lent meaning to. Tonight, she needed the help of such a frustrating entity, and she was not sure if it could be garnered.

Samantha opened the door, and Antoinette smiled as she followed her in. Best to be pleasant and polite when dealing with ghosts.

“It’s ... it’s not much, I know, but—”



Antoinette held up a hand. “Come now Samantha, I am not so disconnected from reality that I do not understand the trials of a normal citizen. I know the price of eggs.”

That, apparently, shocked Samantha, and she glanced at the likely empty fridge before blinking at her. “You do?”

“Of course. It pays to be economically aware of both the grand, and the petite.”

“Oh. I ... I’m kinda surprised. You’re a billionaire.” Smiling sheepishly, Samantha slid off her shoes on a mat beside the door, and stepped into her kitchen. Antoinette did the same. “You don’t have to—”

“Neither do you. This is no longer your home.”

“I ... guess you’re right.”

“But it is your daughter’s home.” Antoinette set a hand on her child’s shoulder, offered her a reassuring nod, and a gentle kiss on the forehead. “Now, by all means, show me the house that was once your home.”

Samantha beamed. Undoubtedly the woman delighted in the idea of showing her home to others, with inevitable joy over showing the rooms and bedrooms where Mary and Jack grew up.

And show she did. Antoinette could see Samantha felt slightly uncomfortable walking through her old home wearing a suit and skirt, and doubly so with her sire at her back. But a moment later, she fell into what must have been a routine, something she perhaps once had before Jack disappeared from her life. Did she have a book club? Did other women visit, drink wine and share stories? Perhaps after James died, she looked for solace in friends. Perhaps, after Jack died, she found solace only in the arms of her daughter.

The daughter who had died, and come back to her. The daughter she could not let go of.

Samantha showed her the kitchen, and the living room and its expensive couches. She showed her downstairs, the family room, with its large television and guest bedroom. She showed her the basement, and the 'movie' room James had built. Every minute, she spoke of memories, of her family, of the friends that once visited her and her husband. She spoke of the people who visited when James died, friendships rekindled. She spoke of the people who disappeared, when Jack died, people who could not be near her due to her broken state of mind.

They came to the bedrooms on the top floor, and Samantha sighed softly as she opened the door to Mary's bedroom. Cold. So terribly cold.

"If it wasn't for Mary," she continued, "I'd ... I don't know." With heavier sigh, she moved over to Mary's quaint little vanity desk, and stared into the mirror. "Mary, are you there honey? It's Mom."

No answer, but the temperature in the room did lower. If Antoinette Blushed Life, her breath surely would have been visible in the air.

Samantha traced her fingers along the desk, scooped up a bright blue bracelet, and smiled at it as she plucked it experimentally, its elastic nature gently snapping back against her. "This is Antoinette, my ... my sire. Sire and childe, the vampire thing. She's the one who saved me. Well, Jack saved me, really, and Antoinette turned me so I wouldn't die in ... in that hospital bed." After several moments of painful silence, she sat on the edge of the colorful bed, and smiled up at Antoinette. A weak smile. "And that's good! It'd probably be very awkward if Jack sired me."

"And painful," Antoinette whispered, "for your son, I mean. It comes at no small sacrifice to create a childe." With a smile to

match Samantha's, Antoinette sat down beside her on the edge of the bed. The very act earned a startled stare from the woman, as if Antoinette would not dare set her derriere on a simple woman's simple bed. Silly woman.

"It does?"

"Oui. As you know, the Beast itches to escape at all times. It is nothing more than a hungry animal, and understands little of the Masquerade or the Danse Macabre. And ... when a Kindred does something that is, perhaps, rather animal and mindless, from wanton slaughter, to spreading the disease of vampirism, the Beast grows stronger, while the humanity in a vampire grows weaker."

Samantha stared at her all the more, like she had just admitted to murder. "You ... hurt yourself, to embrace me?"

"Ben oui, and I am glad I did."

"But, you didn't even know me!"

"But I knew Jack, young Kindred, and I knew him well. As did Julias, a man I..." Antoinette sighed, reached out, and pat her young childe on the shoulder. Mentioning Julias was a mistake. Her poor childe instantly devolved into a pit of sadness and misery, and she looked down at the floor as guilt washed over her. "Come now, Samantha. Do not blame yourself for Julias's death. Does Beatrice blame you?"

"No ... Sometimes she looks at me, and I can tell she's thinking about what it'd be like if Julias hadn't saved me. But she's never been angry with me."

"Perhaps you should talk with her about him?"

"I ... I don't think she'd like that."

“No, undoubtedly she would not. But rarely are the things we need the things we want, or would like.” Sighing, Antoinette looked around at the room, a dead, young woman’s room, and shook her head. “And unlike many Kindred, you were embraced at an age where you know very well how true that is.”

“Ha, do I? I feel pretty stupid compared to every vampire I’ve met.”

Antoinette stroked her childe’s back a few times, a gentle touch to remind her that her sire was her friend, and not simply her boss. Hopefully the message sank in. “And yet, there are many Kindred who are forever trapped in the minds they had when embraced. Appreciate the wisdom of your experiences, my childe, and—”

The once cold room grew colder still, and Antoinette looked to the floor as bits of mist began to flow up through the hardwood. The lights flickered, flickered, and died. The unnatural chill built upon itself until Antoinette could almost feel an ache in her bones. She flexed and unflexed her fingers as the familiar waves of death and foreign emotion given raw form filled the room.

A being of ephemera was manifesting itself.

“You,” the darkness whispered, with all the broken rasp of a corpse, “you’re ... a vampire, too.”

“Oui.” Antoinette considered standing, but did not. Samantha did not, and under the current circumstances, it was likely the better idea, to follow suit.

“Baby!” Samantha smiled, so joyous it was blinding, and she waved a hand at the darkness around them. “This is Antoinette, my sire. She’s the one who turned me, so that I wouldn’t die.”

The blackness remained silent for a moment, and again, Antoinette followed Samantha’s cue to remain silent as well. Ghosts

were unpredictable. If Samantha had found a way to communicate with her daughter regularly, whatever approach she used was best mimicked.

“You saved Mom,” the darkness said at last.

“Your brother and his sire saved your mother, young specter. I was merely chosen to be the one who would sire her, to spare your brother the burden.”

“Burden...” A quiet hiss of sadness. Antoinette could not help but imagine a lamenting serpent. “Why’re you here?”

Antoinette looked up toward the center of the room and its ceiling, as movement began to stir within the black. Limbs, a head, leaking mist that fell from a woman’s body where legs should have been. A hint of leg was still visible, but there was no denying the bottom half of Mary’s ghostly form was a classic rendition of a shade. It hurt to see. Whether Mary’s specter was actually Mary’s soul, or the pain of her death scarred the immaterial realm, a scar given form by ephemera, Antoinette did not know. But there was no denying the creature brought Samantha much joy and pain.

No mother should be forced to suffer the death of their only daughter twice. Once alone was too great an injury for most.

“I am here to meet you, Mary Terry. You are the daughter of my childe, after all.”

“Are ... are you taking good care of Mom?”

Antoinette looked to Samantha.

“She is, honey. She is. Very much.”

The ghost, a silhouette against the obsidian, drifted closer to Antoinette. Empty eyes. Terrible, and tragic. How long had it been

since Antoinette had come so close with ephemera given form and will that was not a spirit from the Shadow Realm? Many decades, and even then, not with such proximity. That specter had also died a sad, traumatic death, in an equally sad, traumatic circumstance. Such was the way of things, she supposed.

“That’s good,” the ghost said. “Good. Good. Good. Good.” With time, Mary came closer, until only several feet separated the hovering ghost from the two vampires. “Are you here to tell me to leave?”

“Non. Your presence in my city has attracted no attention. Your future will be something to discuss with your family, Mary. I will not intervene.” A lie, but a white lie. “Are you ... stable, Mary? Many ghosts struggle to remain in the physical world. It takes a powerful feeling to keep a specter among the living, and unliving.” And if a shade had the power and raw emotion to remain stable in the physical world, it was generally accompanied by being mentally unstable. One look at Mary’s twitching facial expressions proved that.

Mary hissed, a loud, raspy sound, and the blackness around them shivered with frustration.

“I’m here. I’ll protect Mom, and Jack. That’s all that matters! I...” Her empty eyes lowered, and she drifted down toward the floor. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“Honey.” Samantha got down on her knees on the floor with her daughter, and set her hands on her legs. No attempt to hug her child, though Antoinette could see the woman desperately wanted to. She had visited her child many times, then, since discovering her here, to learn to hold back that reflex.

The fact Mary loved her mother and brother was obviously a great part of why she did not cross over, or disperse. But that would never be enough to create a ghost in most circumstances. Events left scars

on ephemera proportional to the emotional weight they carried. Her death carried plenty, to be sure, but not enough to create a ghost.

Jack had later explained to Antoinette that Mary was angry with him. Not long after Jack had been embraced, he had wiped her mind of a chance encounter. A powerful and difficult feat for a young Ventrue, but now that the nature of his curse was understood, to some degree at least, such a display of power made more sense. Regardless, Mary's memory was restored after death. Anger, mixed with love, a concoction that had decimated entire kingdoms in the past. And, according to Jack, Mary had been able to monitor and discern more about what had happened to her, after her death. More anger to fuel the pyre of her ephemeral rage.

And then, there was fear. Perhaps in her first moments of awakening, a moment Antoinette knew was likely followed by dispersal for most spirits that failed to coalesce, Mary realized what had happened. She had realized she was dead, and was now a ghost. Fear of the beyond, of the unknown, perhaps drove her to seek shelter in the one place she could feel safe: home.

The Prince felt a touch guilty for analyzing, but the moment required it. Her research required it.

“Mary,” she said in a soft voice. “Your brother has saved your mother's life from the hunters, and destroyed them. They are dead. He is a powerful vampire with money and resources at his disposal, and he strives to create peace in this city. Your mother is alive, as alive as a vampire can be. She is my childe, and I will protect her, with limitless resources, and the strength of an elder vampire. They do not need your protection.” She offered the watching ghost a small nod, and a gentle smile. “How does that make you feel?”

“I ... I don't know. I'm happy! Happy, and I feel ... lighter. But, but I can't leave! I can't. I can't I can't.”

“You don’t have to leave, baby. You can stay here, as long as you need.” Samantha inched closer, and her knees touched the ghost. If the touch was unpleasant, she did not let it show.

“Mom, you have to be careful. That thing, the thing making the lines, it’s still here. Other ghosts, they see it, and they’re afraid.”

“Lines?” Antoinette said.

“Lines! Cuts, in the world! I can see through them, and sometimes things go through them. And ... and the lines are making something. I don’t want to go there. I don’t!”

The Prince raised a hand slowly. “Mary, listen to me carefully.”

“I don’t want to go there! I—”

“Mary!” Antoinette cut through the specter’s words with a shout of pure ice, a voice she did not want to use. But it silenced the ghost, and left her and her mother staring at her, shocked. Good. “Mary, tell me, have you seen what has created these lines, these cuts in the world?”

She shook her head, body trembling and vibrating. Even as she spoke, she began to fade away. “It’s dark where it comes from, Mom’s sire. It’s dark. Even the strange things that sometimes come through, the ones that can talk and have claws, it’s not dark where they come from. Where this thing comes from, it’s ... it’s dark. So ... dark...”

---

~~Natasha~~

Someone was watching Maria’s home.

Natasha growled under her breath, and reached for her pistol. Still there, in its vest holster. She reached for her other pistol. Still there, opposite side, and armed with silver bullets. Knives? Still there, one



silver, the other normal. A—normal? What metal were knives usually made of? Steel? She whipped out her phone and made a quick note to look up the answer later.

She wrapped herself in Face in the Crowd, and slowly approached the Grand Cathedral from a fair distance. A quick peek up at a nearby building through her binoculars showed an Uratha was watching the building, and a second peek revealed it was Noah. He was a pragmatic Uratha, and probably did the math already that Maria couldn't be trusted. Tash wouldn't be able to appeal to his empathy, like she could Matt and Art. If he saw Natasha going into the cathedral, he'd report it to Avery, and that'd lead to awkward conversations.

So, better he never knew.

As she grew closer to the huge building, she escalated her Obfuscate Discipline, wrapping herself in her best Cloak of Night. Training with Daniel had definitely upped the quality, and she felt pretty sure she could avoid a werewolf's senses, even when moving forward.

She shivered as a deadly memory jumped up from her past. Her, hiding in the darkness, from a group of monsters that turned out to be a bunch of werewolves. That'd been such a terrifying night, and in the end, they'd been able to catch her. Of course there'd been a bunch of them, and they'd been strong enough to rip through metal and concrete in the pursuit. This time there was only one, and she was much better now.

She hopped over the fence. Nothing stopping her from just walking through the front door, except she wouldn't be able to cloak a door opening. If Noah saw the door open but no one going in or out, he'd investigate. She didn't want that. This was going to be a private conversation, and she had to have a face-to-face for it.

Unlike the Hisil, getting into the cathedral through a side entrance would be easy. She walked toward the back of the church, and—and found another werewolf! Caleb, the hothead. Ok, one werewolf keeping an eye on the cathedral, she could understand. Two? It wasn't like the pack was large and had the bodies to spare. Were they preparing to run into Maria's den now? No. Judging from how Noah and Caleb were patrolling at a distance, they were just keeping an eye on things.

That's how wolves did things. They hunted as a pack, but they also had scouts that would roam and stalk potential prey. They didn't just blitzkrieg the enemy like a bunch of Carthians. And that meant she had to be extra careful.

Climbing the cathedral was super easy, compared to the Hisil's version. A hop up onto the slopped roof, and then in through one of the windows. She did her damndest to keep every motion slow, and found a window darkened by one of the cathedral's towers to open. Unless someone was watching with night vision goggles, they wouldn't notice the window gently sliding open, and her slipping in.

The nave was empty. She knew some Kindred occasionally visited, like her childe Vivi. For kine turned Kindred who found their life over and a second life given to them in a corpse that sucked life out of others, soul searching was inevitable. Many who turned to Longinus's teachings were either religious before their embrace, or became religious, in some bid to find meaning in their second lives. She could never understand that way of thinking, but it worked for Damien, and even Vivi.

Now she realized she'd been half hoping Vivi was here. They didn't talk anymore, but not for any drama reason. They just grew apart. It'd be fun to catch up with her, talk about her growing role in the Invictus, and her interest in the Lancea et Sanctum. But if the Uratha killed Maria, there'd be no revival of the Lancea et Sanctum. Damien probably wouldn't be able to do it alone.

Natasha didn't care about the Lancea et Sanctum, not really. She cared about finding the truth. What Mekhet didn't?

She rubbed her arms as she walked down the isle, and stopped in front of the pulpit. A bible sat on its wood surface, and she smiled at it as she stepped around. It was hard to imagine Maria standing up and giving lectures to listening Kindred. It was hard to imagine Damien doing it too, but then, the first time Natasha had ever seen Damien, he'd been doing just that. She'd snuck into Tony's old lair, and found Damien helping out some Kindred with understanding their faith.

She smiled at the memory. A lifetime ago. And Damien had been so strangely suave and charismatic when talking about Longinus, that Tash now had a hard time thinking it was even the same person she knew now. He even had a girlfriend now. A very horny girlfriend. A very drunk, horny girlfriend.

Maybe Fiona enjoyed playing up the stereotype? Fiery redhead from Scotland who loved to drink and fuck? She seemed like an airhead on the surface, but no one who lived in the paranormal world could stay like that for long. No, Fiona was smarter than she let on, and probably just had fun acting like the girl she could no longer be, since a nightmare monster came along and decided to share a body with her.

Tash shook her head, trying to dislodge the images of that night. Everyone topless! Which, now that she thought about it, wasn't really all that shocking, at least not in the amount of new skin. She'd seen the Prince naked, and Jack, and her boyfriends of course, and Jessy, and Eric, and Fiona; she'd caught Jessy fucking Eric one time in Bloodlust, with Fiona right there. Newcomers to her mental catalogue of people's breasts and chests: Elaine and Damien. Elaine looked like everyone knew she looked like, the tall, glamorous, busty blonde model look, with a hint of harshness in her eyes that

reminded Tash of her old boss Viktor. Scary. And Damien would have fit perfectly on a Twilight poster.

Matt and Art had teased her unendingly when they got her home, partly because they were drunk, and partly because they saw that Tash had found the situation highly arousing. She'd gotten a bit angry at them, and they apologized. As they fucked her. Damn boys!

But, seeing how comfortable everyone was with each other, had put Natasha into a certain mindset again. She was excited to make her next movie, something really naughty and dark. Maybe too dark? It was just a movie though, a fantasy, not real!

She stopped, blinked, and shook her head harder this time. Stop. Thinking. About. Sex. Ugh, Jessy's corruption was complete, so complete Natasha was thinking about sex while on a dangerous mission, and in a church!

It wasn't just that. What she was doing now could potentially put her at odds with the Uratha, and that meant she might lose Matthew and Arturo. She was thinking about them, because if she made a mistake, they could be out of her life. Bad, because she'd lose out on the best sex she'd ever had, and was getting frequently. Worse, she'd lose out on an amazing relationship with two amazing men, men who cared about her, men who ... might love her.

Maybe she should have invited them? It'd have been really mean to put them between her and their boss like that. Help her, make Avery angry. Pick Avery over her, and hurt her feelings. So she'd made the choice for them, which was kinda mean, too. But this was her choice, and she didn't want them put between a rock and a hard place.

Sighing, she stepped toward the organ in the back, and then around back where the curving wall held a door. Then she went down, and down, into Maria's den. The woman had spent decades carving herself out a long hall in the rock, and Natasha shivered as

she looked at the beautiful stone. Tiny lights lit the way, but it didn't take long before she came to the first barrier of bars.

Bars wouldn't stop a determined Kindred or paranormal, but they would stop a kine, at least momentarily. A moment was all that was needed for a quartet of highly trained ghouls armed with sniper rifles, explosives, and flamethrowers to take down anyone trying to break their way in while Maria slept, and that included almost any paranormal who was up during the day. At night, Maria had only one ghoul, a disfigured, jolly man with a hunch back, who happily kept Maria company, and her den clean. At night, Maria felt more than comfortable defending herself against any threat.

So, being the brilliant mastermind Natasha was, she knocked on the bars. "Hello?"

After a few long moments, Maria's ghoul sauntered up to the gate. It took him a while, being that he had to open the other gates in the way too, but he arrived eventually, and smiled at her.

"Natasha."

"Hello Matthias. How are you?"

The man smiled again, mouth a little crooked and warped, and he dialed in a code on the wall panel. The bars raised, and he smiled wider.

"Good. Good." Nodding as if everything in the world was right, the man began the walk through the long tunnel back to Maria's den, and he did it quite slowly.

"Damien here?"

"No. Only me and the master." After a small grunt of acknowledgment, he nodded to her again, and stopped following her. Apparently he'd noticed a bit of dirt on the floor, and since the

man was never without his broom, he got to sweeping, leaving Natasha to go on without him.

Natasha returned the man's smile, and gave him a small pat on the arm, his smaller arm. The touch surprised him, and he flinched away slightly, but when he realized what'd happened, he smiled at her again, and got back to sweeping. Far as Tash knew, Maria treated Matthias well, but the man's mind had never really settled into adulthood. He was damaged, and Tash knew to be gentle with him.

She moved on, and after passing a few more gates already opened, she came into Maria's den. A giant dome room, with huge paintings on the curved stone walls and ceiling, hanging curtains, and various desks covered in old tomes. There was a grand piano, and near it against the wall, a very Gothic casket, huge, the sort of casket a rich family would get their dead lord, three hundred years ago.

Maria sat at the piano, playing some classical piece Natasha didn't recognize. Maria was a virtuoso, and could play anything anyone else could. She could play it blindfolded, given a few days to memorize the sheet music. When Natasha saw the movie *Gattaca*, there'd been a minor bit where the actors mentioned a pianist who had twelve fingers, and how there was music only he could play. Maria wouldn't need twelve fingers.

She wore her usual white dress, something a rich woman might wear by her lonesome, two hundred years ago. White mist leaked from the cracks in her ruined skin, and disappeared on the floor like dry ice fog, something that even seasoned Kindred tried to avoid having touch them. Nosferatu came with many sorts of mutations and deviations, from hidden, huge crocodile mouths and snake eyes like Beatrice, to Bob, a classic Nosferatu vampire from the movies, to Kindred like Maria, who looked like a corpse risen from a lake and possessed by a ghost or something. The mist was harmless though, and Natasha ignored it as she approached.

“Madam Turio,” she said. “I ... H-How are you?”

“Madam Vola.” Her crackling, dry voice was soft, and Natasha almost didn’t hear it over the music. The elder continued to play. “I trust you are doing well?”

“I am.” She came closer, until she eventually stood beside her old boss, and the huge piano she played.

Maria’s eyes didn’t meet Natasha’s, and they didn’t look to the sheet music in front of her either. They locked onto her fingers and didn’t let go, as if she could see something in her ruined skin Natasha couldn’t.

“Does your career in the Ordo Dracul blossom?”

“Um, sorta? It’s ... it’s d-definitely a weird covenant. The Prince is slow to show me secrets, but when she does, it’s...” Scary.

“Yes, I imagine your time with the dragons will be filled with strange things. Terrifying things. That is why you originally left them, is it not?”

“I...” Sighing, Natasha stepped in a little closer, and set her hands on the side of the piano. “It was, and it still is. B-But, I’ve learned a lot since then, and I think I’m ... I’m strong enough now, to deal with it.” She smiled at Maria, and though Maria didn’t lift her eyes, Tash knew her old boss saw it. “You’re part of the reason for that.”

Maria’s playing faltered. Just a moment, a fraction of a second where Maria hit a note a little softer than she should have. That was more vulnerability than Maria ever let show.

“I made your life difficult, Natasha.”

Hearing Maria drop the titles was enough to make Natasha’s hand slip, and she almost fell. That wouldn’t have been a fun way to have

this important, and quickly turning emotional conversation with her old boss, with a split lip.

“Y-Yeah, you did. But, you also gave me responsibilities. A lot of p-people think I’m just a ... weak little Mekhet. But you helped me become a Right Hand of the Invictus. Daniel may be my sire, b-but ... I first learned how to take care of myself from you.”

Maria’s playing didn’t falter this time, but she did smile, a tiny thing that her broken lips struggled to make. “Why have you come to my den?”

“I ... w-wanted to talk, about ... stuff.”

Without slowing her playing, Maria sighed and shrugged. “I don’t talk as much as I should, I suppose. Ever since Lucas disappeared, so long ago, I don’t talk to anyone, save for Matthias.”

“What about Damien?”

She smiled at the mention of the young man, and shook her head. “It is painful, to look at the man sometimes. He looks and behaves nothing like his sire, but I can sometimes see hints of Lucas in him. Sire to childe, I suppose.”

“Have you, um, ever considered siring someone?”

“No. I do not wish this Nosferatu curse on anyone.” That was more compassion from Maria than Natasha expected. Maria was a cold, cruel, calculating woman, and to hear her openly admit to an act of empathy was alien to her ears. Maria noticed her notice, and she shook her head as she closed her eyes, still playing. “Nosferatu are twisted, Vola. They rarely sire unless they are compelled by their scarred minds to do so. And what Kindred who do not kill themselves upon awakening and seeing their deformities, slowly grow to be as twisted as their sires. I would not inflict that madness on anyone, unless I had to.”



That, was true. Nosferatu were generally the least counted of the blood clans, because of the reasons Maria said. They hated themselves. Only Nosferatu who were either psychotic, or twisted up with resentment, were willing to pass on their curse. Sometimes, it was easy to forget that not all Kindred could take a friendly stroll in public.

“M ... Maria, I wanted to talk to you about—”

“About whether the rumors about me are true. About whether I am actually delving into dark arts, and attempting to resurrect my lover Lucas.”

Natasha just stared at Maria, which must have looked amusing, because Maria looked at her, laughed a quiet, crackling sound, and looked back down at her fingers as she played.

“You know?”

“Of course I know, young vampire. I do not need to be Mekhet to understand the value of information. I have more ghouls than Matthias, and many thralls. Not long ago, I was council member of the Invictus. I am now the only thing keeping the Second Estate alive in Dolareido, save Damien.” At last, she stopped playing, and slowly closed the lid over the piano keys, before looking at Natasha with an amused, disappointed look. “Surely you know better than to think I wouldn’t know.”

“I ... I um ... It’s just that, it’s...”

“And I know that Avery has taken an interest.”

Natasha froze. “You d-do?”

“Of course. She watches me now, convinced I am up to no good.” Sighing, Maria ran a finger through her long, black, ruined hair, and groaned with frustration. “She lacks subtly. The fool woman is but a

child compared to me, and knows nothing of Dolareido. Her first visit was short lived, and her second visit will be as well, if she continues to push me.”

The details of Avery’s first visit were sparse. Kindred didn’t like sharing information if they didn’t have to, and this was quickly turning into a situation where some more information about Avery, and Simon, and even Minerva, would be useful.

After a few moments of silence, Natasha dug deep, found some courage hidden in a corner, and spoke up.

“Maria, w-what caused Avery, and Simon, to kill Minerva?”

The elder looked down and away. “You should ask Jacob.”

“I can’t! He’d ... he’d never tell me.” She’d gotten the man’s attention once, and she’d prefer to not get it again.

“Yes, well, you should hear it from him, not me. And, poor Jacob, Avery still has not told him the details of it anyway.”

“But this isn’t about Jacob anymore. This is about ... about you.” She could say that, right? She promised Avery she wouldn’t tell Maria about what the werewolves were doing, about digging up evidence in the Hisil against her. And she wouldn’t. But Maria already knew about the rumors, so, it was ok to talk about related things, right?

Self deception, the worst kind of lies.

“I suppose it is about me, isn’t it?” She got up and walked toward a big wooden desk, with a huge, well worn leather chair behind it. On top of the desk was a laptop, but mostly it was covered in big old books. The tome of Longinus was obvious, not dusty at all, and she ran a finger along its cover as she settled in her seat. “Rumors abound that I’m speaking with dark creatures in darker shadows,

that I commune with demons or spirits, that I enact terrible rituals, bathe in the blood of virgins, and sew together the body parts of the dead, all in some desperate attempt to revive Lucas.”

Those were the rumors, but Tash didn't say it. Maria felt like talking, and years of having her as a boss taught Natasha to shut up when Maria spoke. She didn't do it often, and when she did, it paid to pay attention.

“I cannot blame people for thinking that,” she continued. “I can, however, blame them for thinking I am some heathen witch of the Circle, dancing naked around a sacrifice under the full moon.”

Natasha almost giggled, until she realized Maria wasn't joking.

“They ... d-do that?”

“That, and worse.” Sighing, Maria slumped in her chair, abandoning her normally regal posture, and stared down at the books on her desk. “I let the ants scurry and trade useless rumors. They cannot harm me.”

“M-Maybe not, but the Uratha—”

“Let the Uratha watch. They will find nothing.” She groaned, raised a hand to her face, and half covered it in her fingers like she was clawing away the irritation in her mind. “The damn dogs will find nothing here. Perhaps they would be better off chasing Beatrice? Kine disappear from the streets at an increasing rate, all by her hand. And yet it is I people assume tamper with ungodly forces to resurrect my love?”

“Wait, what?”

“The witch Beatrice, she steals kine off the streets, likely to be sacrificed in some horrible ritual. And what possible reason could a witch her age have to perform such disgusting acts?”

Natasha gulped and looked down. The spirits in the Hisil, the ones obsessed with flesh, they said nothing about Beatrice. What was going on?

“As for Minerva,” Maria continued, “she died because Simon was an impulsive idiot. Jacob and the Prince know more details than I, but Minerva was attempting to find ways to commune with spirits. That in and of itself is not something extreme that warrants murder, and yet, Simon and his pack killed her for it, or something related.”

“The Uratha are d-devoted to defending the Gauntlet, and maintaining a balance.”

“Indeed,” Maria said. “What could little Minerva have been up to, to earn their wrath? Doubtless whatever rituals she was performing to commune with the other side were endangering the balance those bloody dogs are so concerned with. And few knew how much Jacob and Minerva loved each other, and how much information they shared.” Growling, she slammed a palm against the desk, and Natasha jumped as the impact sound echoed sharply in the large dome cavern of rock around them. “Suspicion is pointed to me! And yet it is that blasted witch who has the tools to reach across the barrier, to ask the spirits for their aid. Doubtless Beatrice seeks to raise her dead lover, and I ... I do not blame her. The idea has crossed my mind countless times, Natasha. To have that fool in my arms again? I have indeed contemplated the depths of depravity I’d be willing to sink to, to have that in my second life again, and I...” She ground her teeth until Natasha could hear it, and the elder looked down at the table with defeat.

Information overload. Mental note! Learn more about whatever Beatrice was up to. If Julias’s death had hurt her that badly, then doing something crazy, especially with Jacob and Black Blood’s help, was entirely possible. Maybe the spirits had it wrong? Maybe Beatrice was contacting them, and telling them her name was Maria, to throw people off?

And Minerva. Antoinette had only told her a little about Minerva, and Maria filled in the holes. Minerva was doing something to the Gauntlet, and the werewolves killed her for it. But what exactly?

“You’re ... n-not trying to resurrect Lucas.”

“No, I am not. I have delved into Theban Sorcery before, and found it ... well, the details of my exploring will remain my own. But I have touched its secrets, and have found mysteries hidden within the many tomes I managed to recover from Lucas’s archives. Talk of resurrection was rare, and what few authors were willing to speak of it were obviously terrified.” She motioned for Natasha to come closer. After a second’s hesitation, she did, only after becoming painfully aware that she’d told no one she was coming here, and she’d snuck in. If Maria killed her for some sort of resurrection ritual, no one would know. Eep. “Something is amiss in this city, Natasha. I am sure you’re aware of it. Something sinister plots underneath us all. And now werewolves are at my door, as if guided.”

Natasha stared, dumbstruck, and did her best to not look like she knew exactly what Maria was talking about. “You think you’re ... b-being framed?”

“I have done terrible things in my centuries of life, Natasha Vola. In my younger days, I slaughtered an entire village once, when they discovered what I was. Rather than let them arm themselves with fire and force, I killed the group that discovered me, and killed the rest while they slept. Men, women, children.” The elder’s voice was cold, solid, and she met Natasha’s shocked gaze as if her eyes bared her soul. Maybe they did. “I have ... I have done many things. But to violate the laws of God to such a degree? To rip a soul from the great beyond? We are already damned creatures, Natasha. Why would I dare invite such judgment from all the Almighty upon me?”

That, was something Natasha hadn't considered. Maria Turio was a devout worshiper of God, and follower of the path of Longinus, even when she officially served as a leader in the Invictus Council of Dolareido. Everything pointed to Maria being the one doing something sinister in the city, the strange rumors, the talk of resurrection that came out of nowhere, the spirits in the Hisil that spoke of her and a ritual, everything. But Maria was the last person in the city who'd do something as unholy as using dark magic to resurrect someone.

"The T-Testament of Longinus, it doesn't ... support resurrection, in some way?" She'd read the book, but it was large and, just like the Christian bible, filled with vague references, contradictions, and passages that could be interpreted a million different ways. Studying it would have been an exercise in futility.

"It speaks of the unholy act of the embrace, of siring childer, and how vile — and necessary — such an act is. It speaks of the path Kindred must follow, of the work we must perform, if we ever wish to see the light of God. But true resurrection? To be raised from the dead, whole? The Testament of Longinus specifically says only one thing about it: that only God controls the fate of the dead." She shivered as she said it, and set a single hand on the book. "Who am I to defy God's will? No. No, I would never do such a thing."

"Then the rumors..."

"Perhaps started by some Carthian under Garry's influence? To stain my name and cause problems. Or perhaps started by whatever it is that lurks within the city. I do not know. But when I find out, little Vola, I am going to bestow a Nightmare upon them so fierce and horrendous, they will wish they had never been born."

---

~~Jack~~

“Ladies, uh, I think Elaine and I were going to try out some kinda ... ritual thing, right?” He squirmed and wriggled, but the women burying him didn’t move.

Antoinette, Elaine, Ashley, and Julee all either sat on him or lay on him, and had done a damn good job of pinning him to the bed. He wasn’t getting up without using vitae to do it, and that would definitely spoil the fun mood everyone was in. Ashley and Julee didn’t normally get to enjoy a whole bout of sex from beginning to end without someone Kissing them, so they were in particularly cheerful moods.

“Are you suggesting we should stop?” Elaine said, and she grinned down at him from where she sat on his stomach, her knees snug against his sides under his armpits. Naked, she gently eased her body back and forth along his abs, and a shiver ran through her as Antoinette, sat behind her, slid her fingertips up and down Elaine’s stomach.

Elaine was tall, but Antoinette was damn tall, and she grinned over Elaine’s shoulder down at Jack. She’d sat on his pelvis, with full intent on fucking him after Jack had made a mess on Elaine’s breasts, at least until Jack interjected just now. Yeah, he was an idiot, but it was obvious that being around Elaine sorta broke Antoinette’s normal control. Since her old friend’s arrival, she’d fuck him all night every night with Elaine. Kinda like when friends get back together after having been apart for years, they sorta devolve back into how they were when they last hung out.

Apparently, Antoinette and Elaine were total sex addicts when they got together.

He tried to lift his arm, but Ashley lay along it, pinning it, and she cuddled into it and him as she looked up to watch what Antoinette did to Elaine’s body. Julee did the same for his other arm, and she sighed dreamily as she watched.

And Jack couldn't help but watch too as his lover slid both her hands up to Elaine's cum-soaked breasts, and massaged. First slowly, in gentle, teasing motions that circled the woman's swollen nipples, before sinking her fingers into her friend's breasts until they almost disappeared in the softness. His white cum slipped out from between her fingers, only for Antoinette to spread it around in circular patterns, until her hands cupped the undersides of Elaine's breasts. Then, she squeezed, and drew her fingers forward, like she was milking Elaine, and his cum dripped off the blonde's hard nipples and onto Jack's abs.

"I ... I'm afraid I have to insist. There's only so many hours in the night, and—"

Antoinette pressed her chest into Elaine's back, and her breasts were big enough Jack could see their contours squashed outward by the contact. Her left hand continued to massage the ever increasingly horny Elaine, while her right hand drifted down, and down, and down the tall blonde's flat stomach, before settling on her slit. And with an evil grin, Antoinette slipped her fingers into Elaine's body.

Ashley, Julee, and Jack all stared, hypnotized, as Antoinette fingered Elaine like playing an instrument she'd mastered. The shifting of her hand was obviously massaging Elaine's swollen clitoris, while her fingers curled and pressed against the woman's insides toward her front. And while she did that, Antoinette's left hand continued to play with the woman's breasts, with obvious focus on caressing the woman's nipples, like she might for herself.

Two minutes later, Elaine came, for what was probably the seventh time that night. A couple drops of her juices leaked out from between Antoinette's already drenched fingers, and onto Jack's stomach. As she came, Elaine leaned back, and turned her head enough so Antoinette could happily kiss and suckle the woman's naked neck.



It only got more hypnotic as Elaine, apparently not satisfied, took over breast-massaging duty. She cupped her breasts and caressed her nipples with gentle twists and full, heavy kneading motions, each causing Jack's cum to swirl around on her skin. It freed Antoinette to use both hands on the woman's pussy, and force in more fingers, and more, until Elaine groaned openly. With what must have been five fingers inside her, she pumped her hips toward Antoinette's hand, and smiled like an evil succubus down at Jack, as she again climaxed.

And just like Antoinette, she had no trouble remaining in full control during orgasm. She set her wet hands on Jack's chest, leaned forward, and humped Antoinette's fingers as she came, all the while grinning down at him, her enormous, coated breasts bouncing lightly underneath her. She came again, and again, each earning some loud, pleased groans from the Ventrue, and each earning more trickling drops of her fluids.

After five minutes of that madness, Antoinette finally stopped, and pushed Elaine off him. She wasn't gentle, and Elaine bounced on the bed a couple times, landing beside Julee.

"There, you harlot. Satisfied?"

Elaine laughed, and climbed onto Julee. "Not yet."

Jack rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help but turn his head to watch Elaine as she pressed her breasts down onto Julee, sank her fingers into the ghoul's smooth, tiny slit, and simultaneously sank her fangs into her neck. Julee came in seconds.

"Sometimes I wonder which of us is the Daeva." Rolling her eyes, Antoinette leaned forward, pressed her body down on Jack, and kissed him. "I will be coming to this ritual."

"You will? You uh, normally let Daniel keep an eye on me during this sort of stuff." It was hard to focus on the conversation, with

Elaine only inches away, facing toward him and Julee. Her breasts were squashed on Julee's, and jiggling as the woman pumped her hand up and down inside Julee's trembling body. The ghoul's hips and legs went up into the air, and splashing sounds filled the room as Elaine fingered the squeaking girl so hard, the bed shook. It was a huge bed.

“Oui, but I would not be a good ruler if I did not examine things for myself, once in a while. And Daniel is preoccupied.”

The sheriff, preoccupied. He almost asked, but stopped himself. If she said preoccupied, it was probably a secret, and he was happier not learning anymore secrets these days.

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“This is a very scary room,” he said. “And, it kinda looks like what I thought the inside of a mad mathematical genius's mind would look like.” He pointed down at the symbols drawn, or etched, into the floor in some sort of version of the Fibonacci sequence, white lines cut into the black marble.

“Perhaps it was?” Antoinette said, smiling at him. She sat at a large table, a very long thing covered in laptops and smart phones and tablets, and several chairs waited for people to sit in them. Only Antoinette and Elaine did though, both looking into their own laptop screens, while Jack stood in the center of the room, on the center of the strange design underneath him.

If this was what it felt like to be a specimen of some kind, trapped in a big glass jar while scientists poked and prodded, he officially now felt bad for the specimens, and Elaine and Antoinette hadn't even gotten to poking and prodding him yet.

“Um, I ... I know you're both pretty high ranking members of the Ordo Dracul, right?”

“Correct,” Elaine said, eyes still on her laptop.

“And from what I know, dragons, they ... do a lot of experiments, right?”

“Correct,” Antoinette said, mirroring Elaine’s tone and posture. Creepy.

“You’re not going to tie me up, cut me open, and examine my insides, are you?”

The two women laughed, the sort of laugh a doctor might make when a patient makes a joke they’d heard a thousand times. A joke they might still find funny, but one they’d heard before. A professional, practiced laugh, and he suddenly felt less like a specimen, and more like he did during his first dentist visit as a kid. Fucking. Terrified.

“We will monitor the situation closely,” the Prince said, with a voice far too similar to the aforementioned dentist. “I do many experiments here, my love. But none of them are gruesome.”

Elaine chuckled, and this time, she sounded less the professional dentist, and more like a crazy mad doctor, like Frankenstein in the movies. “Dragons never share where they do their really gruesome experiments.”

He groaned and hugged himself until he was almost crushing his suit jacket. He’d partly expected to be doing this naked, either because the ritual would require it, or because the two women would want to have some fun at his expense. Wearing a suit was comforting, and he was glad to have it, especially now.

Antoinette tapped a few things on her laptop, and then a strange humming sound filled the room. Jack raised a brow as he looked at the two women, but neither of them indicated that something was wrong. The lights turned off, and Jack spun around in a panic, but again the two women showed no sign of movement in the hint of light that remained. The hum grew louder, and changed in pitch,

apparently adjusting as the two ladies did something on their laptops.

Then the chandelier over him turned on. His head snapped up, and he blinked several times as his eyes adjusted to the strange blue light. It wasn't a normal looking chandelier. It was huge, and it had giant crystals where you'd normally find light bulbs or candles. He'd noticed the crystals held strange blue flame when he'd come in, but he just figured it was ornamental or something. Antoinette did spend a lot of money on some crazy aesthetic stuff.

It definitely wasn't an ornament. The blue fires inside the crystals grew and grew, until the whole room was blue. The light danced, never perfectly solid, flickering and swaying the way fire does. Beautiful, but it was pretty unnerving to be directly under a huge chandelier that looked like it belonged in Hades.

“Um, is this the ritual?”

“We are attempting to find the wavelength that the curse operates on, Jack,” Elaine said, “if it operates on one at all. Give us time.”

“Wavelength?”

Antoinette nodded, stood up, and approached him with a tablet in hand, camera pointed at him. “Yes. I cannot elaborate further my love, unless you wished to join the Ordo?”

“Um, nah.” He shook his head, and smiled up at Antoinette as she started to circle him, her eyes still on the tablet with it pointed at him. “I don't think crazy experiments and stuff are really my thing.”

“Oh?”

He laughed. They'd had this conversation before, but it was fun to repeat it. “Money, power, those things I get. Crazy experiments delving into ... weird stuff? No thanks.”

Elaine joined Antoinette, pointing her own tablet at him and tapping on various things on its screen. “You would happily live your second life as a lawyer, I assume.”

“Fuck yeah I would. Arguing for a living? Love it.”

“Lawyers are quite attractive,” Antoinette said. “Though, I suspect much of that is due to the attractiveness some evil characters carry.”

Elaine nodded, and swiped her finger across the tablet. “A man with power, money, and intelligence? Quite attractive. Powerful and forceful? Deliriously so. Why, as a rich, successful lawyer, you could have four women in your bed at the snap of your fingers.”

“Four?” Antoinette said. “How salacious.”

“Hey! I’ve never ... snapped my fingers.” He frowned at the two evil women and put his hands in his pockets with defiance.

“Of course not,” Elaine said, “you are not a lawyer. Once you become a licensed attorney, finger snapping will come naturally. I —” She froze, her eyes widened, and she stared at the screen like she was watching a horror movie.

“W-What? What’re you looking at?”

Antoinette checked Elaine’s tablet, and her eyes went wide as well. Welp, time to get super fucking paranoid.

“It is ... as the Begotten describe,” she said.

“You can see that?”

“Hints of it, of ... blackness, of tendrils that wrap you.”

He groaned and rubbed his head. “Sounds like the curse, yeah.”

“And something else, my love. Hints of the past.”

“The past?”

Elaine glared at the screen, and she shivered. Which of course dialed Jack’s worry up to eleven. The elders didn’t get scared over anything, but the look on Elaine and Antoinette’s face was pretty damn close.

“The Strix,” Elaine said.

“The Strix? Those ... owl things?”

His great grandsire nodded. “Striges, strange creatures of ephemera that haunt Kindred, and specifically Kindred. They stalk us, twist and manipulate, and cause strife of unparalleled insanity. Wherever the Strix are found, tragedy for Kindred follows.”

“Fuuuuuck. You can see them?”

Elaine lowered the tablet, and the look she gave him fucking hurt, like, she was a mom apologizing to their kid that Christmas was canceled. “Two perch upon your shoulders.”

He immediately tried dusting off his shoulders, like anyone would if they found a spider camping out there. “Really? Like ... actually, right now?”

“Worry not,” Antoinette said. “We are looking at the scars of the past. Elaine, if you would?”

With a heavy nod, the elder stepped into the circle beside him, and Antoinette pointed her tablet at her.

“Anything?”

“Non. You are clean, old friend.”

“Good. If those ... things, were irremovable, I would...” Sighing again, she looked down at Jack, and pat him on the shoulder. “I

suppose I knew, especially now that you have told me so much, great grandchilde. But I never thought it would be so...”

“You two are really freaking me out. Can I see?”

Antoinette shook her head. “Alas, I cannot record beings of ephemera, or the scars left upon it. The lens we use to gaze upon these living memories is custom, and the software of these devices cannot see what our eyes can.”

Of course.

“Sounds kinda like the Northern Lights,” he said. “I’d heard old cameras couldn’t get them on film.”

“Indeed,” Antoinette said. “I cannot share the secrets I know, but I am comfortable sharing that ephemera defies recording. Entities, such as spirits, or ... ghosts, resist film, analog or digital. When they can be captured, they are blurs, or glowing eyes, rarely more.”

“I guess that explains a lot. If people could actually take pictures of ghosts, then—”

“Then the supernatural world would be known to all,” Elaine said. “The world of the paranormal resists discovery. The Beast knows how to hide us from lens and mirror. Werewolves can somehow twist the minds of those nearby, driving them mad with lunacy. Begotten are ... beyond my understanding.”

“For all we owe these gifts,” Antoinette said, “they are not perfect. Given time, humanity will discover us. They will find vampire and werewolf, monster and spirit, ghost and specter, and I will see to it that when they do, they do not fall upon us with weapons of the future.”

Elaine smiled down at Jack and rolled her eyes, before walking back over to her friend. “Yes, I know of your delusions, Ann.”

Antoinette copied Elaine's eye roll, but didn't retort. "I am sorry my love, that I could not find more. But this does give Elaine and I a starting point." She took both tablets back to the table, turned down the chandelier until it was only a soft glow of blue, and turned the regular lights back on.

"And," Elaine said, "my ghouls have sent more information to us. There is talk of something I did, from well before I met Ann. Something I did involving the sacrifice of animals to quiet my insides."

"Insides?"

"Insides. The journals were always vague, and the few that survived the centuries tell little. And many were ... written by a woman driven mad by urges she could not understand."

He winced and looked down. Yeah, he knew those urges, back when the curse was locked up tight. It'd been slowly turning him into a psychopath, someone that reveled in murder and butchery, and it blinded him to using his brain. Who knew how long Elaine dealt with that before she found a way to remove it? Decades? A century?

And that was a problem, that Elaine had experienced the curse when it was bound and locked up, but never when it was freed. She'd somehow purged it, but it'd still been trapped by the binding at the time. Would whatever Elaine managed to dig up even work for him?

"This ... this new Jack," he said, "in my head. Did he show up on your tablet thing?"

Elaine sighed again, and walked over to the table to rejoin Antoinette. Both shook their heads.



“No, little Ventrue,” the Prince said. “This voice that speaks to you, if it ... if he were a creature of ephemera, I feel confident my device would have been able to expose him. We found marks of the curse, and the scars of the striges, but that is all.”

Groaning, he walked up to them and stood by the table. “Anything vampire-y ever show up on that thing? Like, ever try to see the Beast, or something?”

Antoinette managed a weak smile for him. “I tell you this in good faith. Please do not share it, with anyone.”

“Done.”

“I have attempted to discover the Beast and the soul, but have found neither. I suspect they exist somewhere protected, beyond my reach. For now. My device can see when Kindred use various abilities, those that reach out beyond themselves, such as Majesty or Dominate. But no more.”

“Powerful machine. I won’t tell anyone about it, honest.”

The Prince nodded. “Very good. Of course, Natasha and Daniel know of it, and your mother has seen it as well, but I would still prefer you do not speak of it with them. Secrets can be slippery things.”

He nodded, walked around, and kissed her. “I get ya. Don’t need to be a dragon to appreciate the value of a secret.”

“Are you off?”

“Yeah, gonna head back to my place. My ... new place.” A mansion. A big, empty mansion.

“Ah yes. That is an interesting problem to have, my love.” She closed her laptop, turned off the tablets, and turned to face him,

voice growing serious again. “I would have recommended against creating ghouls or thralls, considering the curse. But then again, you have become an ... infamous figure in Dolareido, and perhaps beyond. Acquiring ghouls and thralls is important, if you are to defend large, unwieldy assets, such as a mansion.”

“Agreed,” Elaine said. “And now that we know we can at least see hints of the curse in Antoinette’s device, or at least Jack’s freed curse, perhaps we could examine anyone with whom he shares his blood?”

Antoinette nodded. “Agreed.”

“I ... I guess you’re right. The curse, or New Jack or whatever, is pretty damn self serving. I doubt any ghoul I create is going to want to betray it, and by extension me. If anything, they’d probably be more infatuated with me than the typical ghoul.” Which brought its own share of scares. The last thing he wanted was a Misery situation.

“It is not all bad, my childe.” Elaine put on the sweetest, most evil smile, and she leaned forward over the table toward him. “Most Kindred’s first ghoul is someone they find physically attractive.”

Uh oh. He knew where this was gonna go.

“Ah, ben oui, you must look at the bright side.” Antoinette turned to face him fully in her chair, and combed her hair over a shoulder as she grinned at him. “If you do bring a ghoul into service, or two, or three, by all means, find ones you are attracted to. I would happily put on a show for them as they watched. Perhaps, with time and trust, they could even join us in bed?”

Jack put up his hands and shook his head. “Let’s, uh, put that idea on hold for a moment then, k? Cause four women draining me dry is already a lot. Seven is—”

“A delightful time,” Elaine said. “Imagine it, Jack. You, sitting back in your lover’s arms, head between her breasts, watching as six women suckle and pleasure each other. Each time a woman was ready for you, just shy of orgasm, they would be placed on your shaft, and would cum immediately. Round and round it would go, women taking turns creating a glorious spectacle. Whoever was lucky enough to have you cum inside them would be rewarded with a Kiss.”

He stared at his great grandsire, and the room went silent as everyone absorbed the utter absurdity that was Elaine’s sex drive.

“You’re crazy, you know that?”

“Pfft. Your lover, the high and mighty Prince of Dolareido, has played such games before, and with larger numbers.”

Jack gulped and looked down at Antoinette. “Uh, you have?”

“I have indeed, but with men, of course.”

He shook his head in a desperate attempt to stop thinking about the images they were putting in his head, before a painful conversation jumped back up from memory. “Ah shit, that reminds me. I made a really stupid deal with Jessy. She wants to ... er, get to see ... us, you know? Like she has with Natasha.” Like the Prince and Elaine had with Natasha too, apparently.

“Ah, I see,” the Prince said, and she leaned back in her chair as she smiled up at him. “Does she seek a live performance?”

“What? No! No ... Well, I mean, she’d probably prefer that, but I think she’d be happy with a sex tape.” Ugh, sex tape. The fuck was he, a useless fashion influencer making headlines for no damn good reason?

“Does she wish to join in?” Elaine asked. “She seemed interested, at Bloodlust. Eric seemed resistant, but I am sure I could persuade him.”

Jack put up his hands like he was trying to stop an airplane from landing on his front lawn. “No! Jesus. That’d be beyond awkward. That night at Bloodlust was weird enough.”

The two women laughed. Would he be so shameless when he was five hundred years old? It was such a long time, it was hard to wrap his mind around it. Hell, neither could they, considering how many memories they’d lost to time.

“I’ll ... think about it, a ghoul I mean.” He turned, took a few steps toward the door, and looked over his shoulder at Antoinette. “You’d really be comfortable with another ghoul in the bed?”

“If she were your ghoul? But of course. You are comfortable with two of mine, after all. I would be comfortable with one of yours.” Her smile turned absolutely serpentine. “Or two, or ten.”

He gulped, waved, and left.

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He fiddled with his necklace as he opened the door of the car, and stepped out onto his driveway, two things on his mind: the fact New Jack didn’t show up in Antoinette’s machine thing while other hints of the curse did, and an orgy. The first thought was very depressing. The second was very not. He smiled to himself as the car dropped him off in his mansion, and he entertained what Antoinette and Elaine had suggested.

“You’re one dude, Jack, with one dick. One rather normal-sized dick, I might add. Five women, or more? Good fucking god.” He laughed as he opened the door to the mansion, closed the big fancy door, and sat on the big fancy stairs. “But it would be pretty nice to have some ghouls taking care of this place. Who, though? I

shouldn't go picking up random kine as ghouls. I should ... socialize, I guess. Hah, no wonder Mekhet rarely have ghouls, they suck at socializing even more than I do." He laughed again and rubbed his buzzed hair as he looked around.

Images danced through his mind of women dressed in playboy bunny outfits, dusting and sweeping and doting on his every need. He didn't really have any needs beyond blood and someone to take care of the mansion, and an army of playboy bunnies would do that perfectly. And of course, whenever Antoinette came to visit, she'd insist they all get naked and watch the Prince fuck him. After one or two bouts between Jack and Antoinette, then the bunnies would jump in and—

He slapped himself in the face, hard, enough to hear the sound crack. "Jessy. Blame Jessy. This is all her fault. I—"

Knock knock.

Groaning, and happy as fuck he wasn't Blushing Life so he wasn't sporting a stiffy, he got up and opened the door.

"Beatrice, hey."

"Hey Jack. Can I come in?"

"Yeah sure." He stepped back, let her in, and sat down at the stairs once again. She sat beside him, dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt. Black combat boots, too. "How you doing? How's Mom?"

"Heh, your mom? Why don't you ask her?"

"I do, occasionally. But I can't really think straight, knowing she and Jacob are together. Really gets under my skin."

"You hate him?"

“I ... don’t hate Jacob. But the man is—”

“Unpredictable. Chaotic. Fucked up and weird.”

“Ha, to say the least,” he said. “I was talking to him once, when Avery and Clara ran into us. Avery pleaded with the man to let the past go, and he uh ... well Clara got in his face a bit, and he backhanded her. Hard. Would have put any human in the hospital.”

“Yeap, that sounds like Jacob. He really fucking hates Avery. And I—”

“Can’t blame him?”

Triss sighed and lowered her gaze. “Yeah. I know what it’s like.”

“Yeah, you do.” He leaned forward and set his elbows on his knees. She did the same. “The hunters are dead, except for three, and I’ve talked to those three. They seem nice.”

Triss snarled, but it faded quickly. “Yeah, at least Brace does.” After a moment, she started laughing. “God, that moron was hiding behind fallen trees in that fight in Sándor’s dream, and it was like watching a cartoon character. Dude was panicky as fuck, but he just kept hiding and crawling and helping.”

“He’s a goofball.”

“Ha, yeah.”

He nodded. “It’s good we can think of him like that, you know? I know we ... we were both pretty consumed with hatred, during that whole ... during the worst time of our lives. And it’s a good thing it didn’t follow us to the point we can’t even think straight, and see every human as a villain. See where I’m going with this?”

“You think Jacob hating all the werewolves is fucked up and wrong.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“There’s just one problem with that, Jack.” She shrugged and let her head droop. “Jacob’s already told them he’d let up if they told him the one thing he wants to know.”

“Yeah, that’s true, isn’t it? Whatever Minerva was doing, Avery thinks it’s worth not letting Jacob know.”

“And you trust her over Jacob?”

“Honestly?” He shrugged, head drooping like hers. “I don’t know. She’s pretty headstrong, but she hasn’t tried to do anything sneaky.”

“Hasn’t she? She’s getting pretty close to Garry you know.”

“Isn’t Garry gay? And isn’t Avery dating some random kine?”

She laughed. “Yeah, I didn’t mean romantically, dumbass. I meant, Garry’s talking to her, more frequently than you’d think necessary. Makes you wonder.”

Ugh, more covenant bullshit. He got up and paced in front of Triss, and she leaned back and watched him; they’d done this dance before.

So, Garry and Avery were getting close, closer than Triss figured was just friendly. The Invictus had tried to get on Avery’s good side, and had partly succeeded, but that effort had mostly stalled with the hunters gone. Avery insisted there were still problems in the city to be dealt with, remnants of the azlu, and other problems from the spirit side of things, mostly on the word of David. If Avery and Garry got really close and chummy, that could be a problem, since Garry continued to push against the Invictus.

“I don’t suppose you could ask your old boss to fuck off?” he said.

“Ha. You know he won’t. And Garry and I were ... I guess we were kinda friends, but he gave me orders, Jack. If I disagreed with him about something, he’d just shrug, hear me out, and if I couldn’t convince him — I rarely could — he’d just tell me to do it anyway.” After a heavy sigh, she shook her head and leaned back. “So, yeah, your mom’s doing well. Like, really well.”

“Oh god, do I dare ask?”

“Haha, probably not. But I don’t mind telling you your mom has great tits.”

Oh god. He clawed at his face with his fingers, a desperate and futile attempt to tear the images out.

“She hasn’t—”

“She hasn’t fucked anyone besides Jacob, despite Jen and Othello’s attempts.” Her following grin had his eyes bleeding. “But, you know, witches do a lot together.”

“That’s my mom!”

“Oh come on, she told me what you told her. You literally told her to have an orgy!”

He paced faster, each turn followed by his head snapping to the side to glare at Beatrice while he waved his arms in the air. “Yeah but that was just a psychology trick! Mom’s kinda ... well, Mom’s Mom. If I want to convince her of something, I hit her with an extreme example, so the normal stuff doesn’t seem so crazy. I was hoping she’d just ... I don’t know, get comfortable using Majesty to seduce kine, and use them to let off a little steam.”

“She’s letting off a lot of steam, I can tell you that.”



“Oh god.”

“I mean, I knew you were a horny guy, Jack, I just didn’t expect it to be hereditary.”

“I’m not hearing this, I’m not hearing this.”

“Dude, your mom’s a total milf.”

Game over, man, game over. He pointed his finger at his temple, pulled the invisible trigger, and died standing up, which sent Triss into hysterics.

“End me.”

“Ah come on, don’t be like that. You think your mom’s comfortable knowing her sire is fucking your brains out all the time? And not just her, but another vampire, and two ghouls?”

He sighed and continued pacing, this time slowly, head drooping and arms limp. Zombie pacing.

“I guesssss. And ... and if those two had their way, it’d be more than just them.”

She laughed. “Really?”

“Yeah. I need to get some thralls, to help manage this fucking mansion. I can do that with Dominate, but the only way to make sure a thrall is totally trustworthy is the Vinculum. Feeding my blood to someone is ... risky. Who knows what’ll happen with the curse. But the conversation went to ghouls from there, and...”

“Ah.” She laughed again, leaned back, and set her elbows on some of the stairs behind her. “Isn’t creating ghouls draining?”

“Yeah. Takes effort to infuse enough vitae into vamp blood so it’ll give a ghoul their powers. But I’m confident I could create ... well, as

many as I want, with this curse fueling me.”

“Damn. That’s a lot of tits.”

“I—”

“Don’t lie to me, you little hornball. I know exactly where your mind went when the idea of owning a mansion with a bunch of servants came up.” Grinning at him, she raised her hands up to the top of her head, and held up fingers, pretending to have bunny ears.

He rolled his eyes. “I ... Ok, yes, the idea had occurred to me.”

“Hot. Julias and I”—she winced with the name, but pulled through it quickly—”had some fun with his thralls sometimes. Honestly, it was pretty awesome, having a bunch of kine walking around, naked, doing whatever we wanted, often to us at each other’s request. I think it’s pretty much par for the course any Kindred who gets power starts getting a bunch of kine fuck toys. I say do it.”

“And the curse?”

“Well, try one Vinculum bind and see what happens.”

“You say that like there are people just lined up, willing to devote their life to a master. I don’t want to force someone.” He frowned at the air, but it faded as a bigger problem presented itself. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin on meeting potential thralls or ghouls. I don’t hang with kine very ... ever.”

She shrugged at that, like it was the simplest thing to fix in the world. “Ask Michael for tips. I know he’s got a bunch of thralls and ghouls. Hell, ask Antoinette? Julias liked to hang out in clubs and stuff, talk to people, get to know them, and when he found someone he thought could use a hand in life, they became a thrall. Though he did pick up a lot of thralls through the Invictus when he got the

mansion. He didn't blood bind them though, or at least not very often."

Yeah, Julias was a master of subtle uses of Dominate.

"He was good at that sort of stuff," he said. "I'm not."

"That's why you should ask the Prince. She'll hook you up. I bet she's got a hundred kine she could easily recommend, either as bodyguards, cleaners for your new digs, or fuck toys."

He scratched his head and looked down. "Yeah, I could. But ever since Elaine's shown up, she's been ... acting like a horny, reckless teenager, honestly."

"You're shitting me."

"Nope. You know when you saw us leaving Bloodlust a few days back? Elaine and Jessy got into a bit of truth or dare, and ten minutes later, everyone at the table was topless."

That earned raised eyebrows from the Nos, and she leaned forward, suddenly intrigued. "Everyone?"

"Everyone. Damien, me, Eric, Matt and Art, and Jessy, Fiona, Elaine, Antoinette, and even Tash."

"Holy shit. I mean, it's not like I don't know what they all look like naked already, considering the shit they wear to balls, but still." She tapped a clawed on one of her crocodile teeth for a moment. "Antoinette and Elaine would fuck you in the middle of Bloodlust with an audience, wouldn't they?"

"Definitely."

"Can ... Can I be there when that happens?"

Oh god not this again.

“You and Jessy? Thought you girls were into big, strong guys and stuff?”

She laughed and shrugged. “I mean, sure. But Julias did a good job grooming you, Jack. You’re fit as fuck, and I’d definitely enjoy seeing you squashed between a pair of giant tits.”

He frowned at her. “I’m not sure I want my mom hanging around you anymore. You are definitely a bad influence.” He folded his arms across his chest with some emphasis. “You are banned from seeing her.”

They laughed. It was fun. It’d been a damn long time since they’d laughed like this, hard, loud, not since Julias was with them. God, it felt good.

Once the laughter died out, Triss shook her head. “I’m not here to talk about sex and shit though.”

“Eh? From how the conversation started, thought you just wanted to hang?”

“I was just trying to get you relaxed before I dropped a shit bomb on you.”

He threw up his hands, and groaned. “Thanks, I guess. Shit bomb?”

“I was ... doing some stuff. Witchy stuff. I was talking to Black Blood, and he, uh ... kinda mentioned something I thought you should know.”

Uh oh. Triss doing witchy stuff didn’t sit well with him, but who was he to judge? Blackmailing people and financially exploiting corporations was a nightly job for Jack, and that job could get pretty dirty. Maybe not as dirty as the sort of shit he figured a witch might

do, but still. The thing in what she said that got under his skin, was the mention of Black Blood.

“That ... thing, do I want to know what it said?”

“He said.”

“He?”

She nodded. “Black Blood identifies as he, at least ... just, yeah, he. And yeah, you’ll want to hear it.”

“Something tells me I won’t, but, fine, shoot.”

“Black Blood mentioned that he’d seen things like ... the curse before.”

Jack froze. No more pacing. After a heavy gulp, he slowly looked at Triss and winced.

“You think he ... can do something for me?” Please say no, please say no.

“Yeah, I think he can.”

Fuck.

“What else did he say?”

“Not much. I asked, but he said if he was going to tell anyone more details, it’d be you. And...”

“And Black Blood’s a spirit. He won’t tell me anything without making a deal.” Again he threw up his hands before letting them fall, like weights were tied around his wrists. “Elaine’s been trying to help me, but all she has are ancient texts and stuff. Not exactly thorough documentation. Plus there’s the whole issue that I’m the

first person in our bloodline to break the binding placed on the curse. She didn't, Viktor didn't, and Julias didn't."

"What about Elaine's sire?"

"Susanna, I have no idea. If she's alive, no one knows where she is. I'm happier keeping it that way." His great great grandsire was worse than Viktor. She was a fucking psychopath, someone who genuinely enjoyed killing, causing carnage, massacring kine, and worse. She was ... everything the Strix would probably want a vampire to be, according to what he knew from the elders of Dolareido. Was the voice in Jack's head actually some sort of residual copy of Susanna?

"You ok?"

"Yeah, yeah, just ... yeah, thinking. Ok, I need to talk to Black Blood."

Sighing, Triss stood up and nodded. "Figured you might say that. I can help, if you want."

"You can summon Black Blood?"

"Yeah." It took her effort to keep her eyes on him, as if she wanted to look down and away. Guilt? Shame? He wasn't sure, but something about Black Blood made her uncomfortable.

"Actually," he said, "I ... I think I want to talk to Jacob too. Might as well get both at the same time."

"Jacob? This about your mom?"

"No ... well, partly. But it's about other things too. He can summon Black Blood, right?"

“Sure, but ... well, Jacob and Black Blood are a dangerous combination, Jack.”

“Ha, think I don’t know that? But I can handle it. Things are different this time.”

“Different? How?”

He looked down at his hands and slowly flexed and released his fingers. “Because now, if Jacob tries something or crosses the line, I’ll kill him. I know I can.”

## Chapter 130

~~Beatrice~~

She walked into Jacob's alcove, down its curved path, and stopped at the fur curtain that blocked off his homely hole in the Circle's cave. She'd heard the noises, but decided to barge in anyway. If the two of them wanted some privacy, they could easily fuck somewhere else.

Bingo. Triss smiled as she pulled the fur curtain aside, leaned her shoulder against the curved entrance of his alcove, and watched.

Samantha. Sweet, innocent, naive Samantha, was tied up. Her hands were cuffed behind her back, and judging from the thick chain between the cuffs, they were some heavy duty handcuffs. Daeva were strong, like Nos, but Samantha was a fledgling and wouldn't be breaking through handcuffs like that. But at least they looked fuzzy. Very thick, but fuzzy.

She faced away from the entrance, so she didn't notice Triss, which was perfect cause god damn, this was fucking hot. Jacob was sitting all comfy and lazy with his back against the wall, facing Triss, and the dude was naked save for a gray bandage wrapped around his eyes. Samantha sat on his lap, squirming and wriggling, as the man held onto her hips to keep her from falling back.

Two kine sat nearby, a man and woman, youngish. Jacob's thralls? Triss didn't recognize them, but he wouldn't bring them to the cave unless they were blood bound. They were naked, obviously drained of blood, and had dopey, exhausted smiles on, despite being unconscious. Lots of juices around too. She didn't know if they fucked each other or if Samantha and Jacob did something to them, but either way, damn.



Samantha let out a squeak as Jacob bounced her, his hands hooking her ass. Dude could probably throw a firetruck, so using just his arms to bounce her would be damn easy, enough that he could sit back and watch, as if he wasn't doing a damn thing.

Triss opened her mouth when Jacob noticed her, but slowly closed it. Hey, it was pretty damn hot, watching the beautiful milf obviously enjoying herself. And you should never interrupt a woman about to orgasm.

She didn't have to wait long. Two minutes later, Samantha's whimpers turned into panting groans, and she collapsed forward against Jacob's chest. He set a kiss on her head, and gave Triss a pleased smile. Triss mouthed 'how many times?' and Jacob answered 'three'. Yeap, that was one happy milf.

"Didn't take long for you to really let loose, did it?" Triss said.

"W-What? Beatrice! I—" She tried to push away from Jacob, but she had no hands to do it, and when she tried to use her legs to push away from the wall, Jacob gave her a hard downward yank, straight onto his dick. She squeaked, and her body trembled as she collapsed onto Jacob's chest again. Ah yes, the prolonged orgasm, fucking awesome.

"What brings you to my humble abode, Beatrice?" Jacob said, voice perfectly level and casual.

"Wanted to talk about witchy stuff, but it can wait a bit."

"Good." The man winked at her — it was all in the eyebrows — and gently eased Samantha back, and back, and back. She slipped off his cock with a groan, landing on her back between his legs, and Jacob slid a nearby pillow under her ass.

Triss grinned down at the woman, since she was now on her back and looking up at Triss, upside down. Grin turned into an outright

groan when Jacob slid Samantha away a bit, grabbed his cock, aimed it a bit lower, and slid the woman back closer to him.

“Jacob!” Samantha squeaked, lifting her head to look down her naked body to the man. But before she could try and sit back up, Jacob settled his grip on her hips again, and gently bounced her back and forth along the pillow and into his body.

Samantha managed to open her eyes again and look up at Triss, and the fuckton of emotions there were amazing. Embarrassed, panicked, overwhelmed with guilt and shame, and most of all, completely maxed on the pleasure scale. Well, Jacob was old as dirt, and had probably literally fucked a hundred thousand women in his lifetime. Not only that, the fucker knew people, knew them inside and out, knew how to read them, how to manipulate them, how to control them. Or, in this case, knew exactly how to make them cum their brains out.

And sure, of course Jacob could make Samantha climax easily. Sure he'd probably pushed things on her, made her try new things against her will, knowing full well she'd absolutely love it once she gave in. Or, didn't give in, but he did it to her anyway, to great effect. And sure, Samantha was cumming her brains out right now, and probably even harder now that Triss was here to watch; all part of Jacob's plan to turn Samantha into a total sex freak, to be sure.

But none of that was what had Triss struggling to keep her smile hidden. It was how Jacob looked at Samantha. Jacob always had a twisted happy look on his face, typical Joker sorta shit, but now, his smile was soft, gentle, and dare she think it, endearing. He seemed genuinely happy to be pleasuring her. It wasn't like Jacob couldn't sleep with any woman he wanted; his Nos mutation was easily hidden, and the bastard was smooth as silk when he wanted to be. Either with money or a drop of blood or a witty tongue, Jacob could have half a dozen of the most beautiful, big-titted bimbo models in Dolareido riding his dick all night.

He never did that sorta shit though. Hell, Triss was pretty damn sure Samantha was the first woman Jacob had slept with since Triss had joined the circle. Maybe even since Minerva. Whatever his reason, he seemed genuinely happy, even if it was only a little. Certainly not little for Samantha, who was squirming and wriggling and trying to escape, but completely trapped as Jacob gently bounced her ass on his dick. Yeap, they'd switched to anal. And considering how quickly he'd penetrated her, the girl had already been prepped and lubed.

“Who's idea was this?” Triss said, gesturing down at Samantha, and then to the two spent kine.

Jacob grinned at her. “Hers.”

“N-No! It wasn't! I—nnnn.” Poor poor Samantha bucked her hips, and started squirming and wriggling extra hard, only to have her efforts defeated, and rewarded, with more pleasure.

“I think she's got a crush on Othello,” Jacob said. “I'm just helping her release those fantasies, so she's Madison right now.”

“Ah, that explains it.”

Samantha was definitely the sort of milf who'd more or less ride any sort of sexual atmosphere, from what Triss had seen. If Othello had been more into tit fucking Madison, Samantha would probably be using her — albeit much smaller — tits on Jacob. If he'd been more into just lying back and letting Madison ride him cowgirl style, Samantha would probably be doing that for Jacob, showing off her body and dancing on him.

Triss was tempted to voice the obvious comparison between Jack and Samantha, but, nah, no good to ruin the sex by bringing up the mom's son.

“I was trying to convince her that if she wanted, she could invite Othello to watch, maybe fuck Madison beside us. Or, you know, we could both fuck her at the same time.” Jacob shrugged, hands still wrapped around the women’s hips. “But Samantha’s shy.”

Triss laughed, came around, and sat beside Jacob. Just witches doing witch stuff, talking and fucking and talking while fucking. Plus, maybe a different part of Jacob’s personality would come out, if she talked to him now? She’d seen him fuck Samantha before, but never up close like this, and she’d never really talked to him during.

Course, Jacob could probably chat about anything, from politics to chess maneuvers, and it wouldn’t mess with his fucking. Just came with the territory of being five hundred years old. Triss, on the other hand, found sex extremely distracting and enticing, and from her new vantage point, she watched Samantha again struggle and wriggle to try and escape Jacob’s grip, super embarrassed by Triss’s new position. All that struggling just made sex feel better, got everything tighter, and Samantha again erupted into mewls as Jacob bounced her on his dick a few more times.

Samantha’s thighs trembled, her toes curled, and some fluid slowly trickled out of her clenching, empty pussy, down her folds and skin, and onto Jacob’s dick. Yeah, she really was riding Madison’s wavelength. The fact that Triss watched her cum, and cum from pure anal, was hitting all the milf’s buttons, and she groaned again as Jacob resumed bouncing her.

“You two been getting along?” she asked, eyes still locked on the obscene, beautiful display.

“Nope. We hate each other.” Jacob nodded, as if speaking obvious fact, and he nodded toward Samantha. “Don’t we?”

“Jacob you ... you...” She managed to lift her head long enough to give Triss a very guilty gaze, before it fell back, and she succumbed to Jacob’s rhythm.

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“So, how long did it take you to figure out Samantha wanted to be tied up and punished, sexually?”

“Five minutes.”

Triss laughed, and leaned against the entrance of the shower. A nearby building had open showers, some old factory that used to do manual labor of some kind. It'd been repurposed into some kind of office building, but there was still an open shower in the basement that the kine didn't use. Far as Triss knew, no other Kindred knew about it save for the Circle, and it wasn't like the other covenants didn't have easy access to showers. The witches didn't.

Jacob stepped under the shower, and Triss whistled as the water hit his hair.

“You know boss, you're a damn sexy guy. Why don't you normally show off more skin? Every other vamp in Dolareido does.”

He was a damn sexy guy. The lean build kinda reminded her of Brad Pitt in Fight Club, but the wavy salt and pepper hair, a few inches long, gave him that mature older man vibe. Of course, when he removed the bandage and turned to face her, that vibe vanished. Jacob's eyes were straight up gone, eyelids too, and they looked like they'd been removed with a serrated spoon. Yeah, better he keep the bandage on.

“I'm shy.”

“Ha! You don't know the meaning of the word, you asshole.”

He laughed, shrugged, and started soaping up. She'd never tell the man, cause she'd never hear the end of it, but dude had a great dick, and she grinned as she looked him up and down as he lathered it. Samantha was lucky. Fucker probably did a ritual on himself to get a dick like that, like Antoinette probably did for the tits.

“It’s a useful trick, to make people think I’m a scrawny little old man underneath my clothes.”

“Not like muscles indicate much about a vampire’s strength. All vamps know that.”

“Who said it was for them?” He grinned at her, washing the lube off his dick while looking right at her. The dick washing was kinda hot. The empty eye sockets were not. “I deal with plenty of things that aren’t Kindred. As far as they know, my strength is proportional to my size.”

“Strange thought. I’m too used to dealing with vampires, and shit like Jack, strong in a small package. I forget there’s crap out there like Uratha.”

He snorted quietly at the U word, but looked away from her and into the water.

Oh fucking god, the water pooled inside his eye sockets! Jesus fuck. The bastard must have noticed her face, probably all fucked up with disgust, and laughed at her, before he leaned forward to let the water fall out of his eyes. Like dumping out a couple cups.

“Dust and dirt gets in there, ya big baby.”

“Uh huh.” Well, she’d felt weird before, thinking about Jacob in a sexy way. And he was sexy, especially now that she’d seen him making Samantha cum her brains out. But it was probably a good thing he also grossed her out.

“You obviously have something you want to ask, Triss.”

“Maybe I just want to watch you shower.”

“After what I just did?” He pointed at his eyes, and borderline cackled.

“Just look the other way or put the bandage back on, and we’re golden.”

“Ha. Get as old as me and it won’t bother you. You think Maria’s skin bothered Lucas?”

Triss shivered at that idea. “I figured she and Lucas didn’t fuck.”

Jacob threw his head back and laughed even louder. “That old myth that elders lose their taste for sex.”

“Bullshit?”

“Bullshit. Besides, Maria looks fine in the dark.”

Nothing could stop the ugly snort laugh Triss made. “Ha! Paper bag body?” She gestured putting a paper bag on her head.

They laughed again. God damn, it felt weird, and awesome, laughing with her boss like this. She used to talk to him all the time, before Julias died, but it’d never been personal back then, mostly meaningless insults. After he died, the only thing she ever talked to Jacob about for a long time was revenge, the hunters, and Crúac. So, macabre shit. And now her world was even more macabre, more fucked up, with the sick shit she was doing a couple times a week, but it didn’t feel so bad. At least, not when she was talking with Jacob about it, now that their relationship had evolved. Kinda like colleagues chatting about work.

And if things kept going the way they were, with Samantha igniting everyone’s sex drive like napalm on paper, she knew she’d be seeing a lot more of her and naked Jacob. Two more weeks and they’d probably all get together in the same room, fuck their partners, and have a friendly chat while doing it. Just witches, doing witch things.

“Put a few hundred years under your belt, and you’ll be pretty damn surprised with what turns you on.”

“Samantha already seems pretty, uh, awoken.”

“What, some kine for foreplay, then some handcuffs, anal, and a visitor?” He laughed again and shrugged. “A century ago, I met a vampire who couldn’t even get horny unless she was tied up, and getting split-roasted by three men at once, while hanging horizontally from a pole like savages were about to cook her over a fire.”

She held her hands out in front of her and tried to mentally arrange the girl and three men doing that. Didn’t exactly fit. “That sounds like it’d be difficult to make happen regularly.”

“Sure, if you’re kine. She was a Kindred. She had a bunch of thralls ready to do whatever she wanted.”

“That reminds me. Any rituals that actually involve having sex?”

After a few seconds pause, Jacob shrugged. “Rituals are mostly about intent. The steps in the ritual create the physical barriers to overcome to give it weight, and mental steps so you can appreciate what you’re doing.”

“Yeah, you told me.”

“Then use your head, dumbass.”

She frowned as she rolled her eyes. “So, if the ritual needs steps, then the steps also need to be a barrier. I can’t just, do something I was already going to do, and call it a ritual. It’s something I need to overcome in the specific context of a ritual.”

The naked man grinned at her. “Look at you, thinking like a scientist.”



“Yeah yeah, fuck you. So, if I wanted to do a ritual that ... I don’t know, affected someone sexually, I’d have to discover the ritual, and in the act of discovering it, will be shown steps to perform it. The steps will probably involve sex, but that doesn’t mean it’ll be easy or enjoyable.”

“It’ll take effort, and vitae, and no ritual is done for free, but that doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it.” He turned off the water, and got to drying with a towel.

This was an interesting side of Crúac, and she grinned as she felt the buzz of excitement and interest run through her. It didn’t always have to be super dark shit; certainly leaned that way, but didn’t have to be.

“So, have you—”

“Yes, you horny little fuck,” he said, cackling again as he put his eye bandage back on, “I’ve done rituals during an orgy. Many, in my younger days, usually to give me power over people, alter the way they think, and have villages sort of ... protect me, in a way.”

“Protect?”

“Ever see a creepy vampire movie, or read a creepy vampire story, where everyone in the village or city or whatever is acting weird, and they all sorta try and dissuade our intruding main character from investigating disappearances?”

“Oh, I get it. You had the whole town brainwashed. That’s some classic vampire shit. And pretty awesome, honestly.”

“Yeap. But convincing an entire village to get in on an orgy isn’t easy. Convincing them to do it, outside under a full moon, with me at the center with seven virgin girls, each lined up and taking turns sitting on my dick? That took years of effort to set up.”

Wow, that was a damn powerful image. “And the virgins—”

“Enjoyed themselves immensely,” he said, grinning at her. “And since I know you’re a horn ball teenager who can’t see past her own tits: I Kissed every one of them during the act, and then bled my wrists into a ritual bowl.” His grin widened, right into Joker territory again. “Those seven became my ghouls. I had them for fifty years. They protected me and fed me. I had a cave nearby, one you couldn’t climb into without modern climbing gear, unless you were a vampire. During the night, I came out, and—”

“And fucked and fed on those seven ghouls.”

“Of course.”

All she could do was laugh. This man was supposed to be a big, bad, powerful Nosferatu, a master warlock, and all around scary fucker. And he was all those things, but he was also a damn silly guy. It was hard to be afraid of someone when laughing at them, and with them. Maybe that was part of his shtick.

“Samantha know about this sorta stuff?”

“Some. I can’t just dump all the crazy on her at once. But, she is coming to appreciate the Kindred life, and the Circle, pretty quickly, wouldn’t you say?” The grin that followed was so perfectly smooth and suave, Triss found herself staring at the man. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed how much the rest of you have taken an interest in her.”

“She’s ... surprisingly fun,” she said.

“Yeah, she is. She’s had a rough life, a damn rough life, but she’s pulling through.”

Triss raised a brow at that, and tilted her head to the side slightly as she looked at the man. If she didn’t know better, she’d think that

was some genuine concern in his voice.

“You like her.”

He barked a laugh. “Uh, yeah. I happen to be fucking her, in case you didn’t notice?”

She shrugged. “People who barely care about each other fuck each other all the time, for a lot of different reasons. Hell, people who hate each other fuck each other sometimes. And you damn well know that.” No point in giving the man tidbits of advice about the nature of people. He knew more about that than she ever would.

“Aren’t you wise to the ways of the world.”

“Jacob, come on, don’t dodge me. I’m not going to think less of you for liking someone.”

He got his pants on, but instead of reaching for his shirt, he looked at her, face unreadable. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I mean, if she’s the first girl you’ve really ever opened up to since Minerva, then of course you’re going to be ... I don’t know ... feeling a bit guilty about it?” Dangerous waters she was treading. If she said the wrong thing, or crossed a line, Jacob wouldn’t hesitate to break her arm or something. That’s what shit was like in the Circle, good and bad.

He stared at her, and she did her best to keep her eyes on his eye bandage. She also did her best to keep her weight on the balls of her feet, in case she had to dodge a punch.

“Being kind of hypocritical, don’t you think?”

“Uh, what? Not—”

“Julias died months ago.”

She snarled. Ok, if this was the direction the conversation was going to go, if he was willing to get their words dirty, then fuck him.

“Months ain’t very long, asshole.”

“You dated him for what, bit over two years? I was with Minerva for decades, kid.” He said ‘kid’ with all the viciousness of an angry mentor, someone who knew where to dig to deal damage, someone whose opinion he figured she thought highly of. And she did.

“You saying I didn’t love him as much as you did Minerva?” She regretted it the moment she said it, not because she might hurt his feelings, but because he wasn’t going to mince words on this topic. And much as she tried to push past it, this topic was still sensitive as fuck. If he wanted to, really wanted to, he could drop a few words and leave her a weeping mess.

He took a step toward her. She stood her ground.

“I’m saying you weren’t with the man long enough for his death to leave too deep a scar, dumbass.”

“I—”

“Shut up.” He came in closer. Again, she didn’t back off, but she damn well knew she should have. He was only two feet from her now, and if he wanted to get in a punch, she wouldn’t even see it coming. “Ever talk to an old person, someone who’s been with their partner for decades, and then suddenly they’re alone? It’s not just that the person they loved more than the whole world is dead, but that a part of who they were is gone. A part of their routine, a part of how they operated. Imagine waking up and you’re suddenly missing a hand. You reach for a doorknob, don’t remember the missing hand, and then walk straight into the door. You can’t even open a can of fucking beans anymore.”

She almost laughed, but the man’s tone crushed the possibility.

“When you lose someone you’ve been with for that long, a part of you is chopped off,” he continued, “and you don’t recover, so much as learn to live with the handicap.”

“But ... we’re vampires, Jacob. We live forever. We get to recover, right? And ... you too?”

“Yeah, we can. But that doesn’t mean recovering from that sort of wound is easy. You were with Julias for a couple years. And yeah, I was happy for you, kid. Seemed like a great relationship. But you weren’t with him long enough to have him become one of your hands. I was with Minerva long enough that she was. So if you’ll excuse me, don’t compare your situation to mine. It’s not about guilt for me, unlike you. It’s about a million things you’re not nearly old enough to understand. It’s about ... testing out a new hand, and trying to my damndest to give it a fair shot.”

Sighing, Triss finally took a step back and lowered her head. It was all true. She’d loved Julias, loved him with everything she had, but a bit over two years wasn’t long enough to develop the same sort of reliance and cooperative existence Jacob was talking about. It meant she would recover, where he might never.

“If ... if Minerva was that important to you, why did you give up on resurrection?”

He snorted a sad laugh, turned, and started putting on his shirt. “Gave up for the time being, Triss. You still have a long way to go with your attempt before you’ve put in as much work into it as I did. And I never really gave up. I’m just ... biding my time.”

“Biding your time?”

He grinned, that usual, half psycho grin of his. “I’ll tell you more about it sometime. But for now, keep doing what you’re doing. Hey, maybe you’ll learn something I didn’t.” He walked past her, and she

fell in beside him as he stepped out into the empty night streets of North Side.

“So, about Samantha,” she said.

“You saw her naked and cumming just an hour ago. That horny to see some more of her?”

“What? Dude, I—”

“Give it a few more weeks and I’m sure she’ll let you touch her. Hell, one more week and she’ll probably want me and Othello to fuck her at the same time.”

Triss facepalmed and groaned. “No! Dude, no. I meant, you ... so you really like her?”

He rolled his eyes — all in the head motion — and laughed again. “Yes, you idiot.”

“Good, good.” She nodded, and smiled to herself as she looked out at the empty street, the street lights, and the images running through her head. “You really just, gonna share her with the whole Circle?”

“That wasn’t originally my intention, but the more it comes up, the hornier she gets. Who am I to say no to her desires? Not like I haven’t done all that and worse in my lifetime. Like I said, village, orgy, seven virgins.”

Triss should have laughed, but she didn’t. Instead, she set a claw on her lips, and thought about it, about that milf sitting on Jacob’s dick, except with Othello and Madison there, and Jen and Triss too, everyone just fucking each other and being happy in a very weird, intimate, witchy atmosphere.

“It ... does kinda make me ... feel guilty,” she said. “I know Julias and I weren’t together super long, but still. And ... and we were a little more conservative with the sex, you know? I mean yeah, Jen was always with us, and sometimes we invited some kine, but without Julias, I feel...”

“You know damn well the man wouldn’t want you to feel guilty.”

“Sure, yeah, and—”

“Sexual healing is a thing. Jen’s been trying to help you with that this whole damn time. Hell, whatever happened to that dude she was obviously trying to get you with?”

She smirked at the man. Jacob damn well knew the man’s name was Sándor, and he was doing that guy thing guys did where they pretended to forget a dude’s name. Course, he wasn’t doing it for the reasons a guy would.

“Sándor, dumbass.”

“Well, go find him and fuck him.”

She shook her head and sighed. “Dude is boring.”

“He’s a stoic fucker, I’ll give him that. But he’s probably fucking miserable, and I’d bet good money that’s a big part of why he’s so boring.”

“So, you think, what? If I fuck him, he’ll be more fun?”

The asshole grinned at her like a happy pirate. It wouldn’t have surprised her at all if he suddenly broke into a sea shanty. “I think if you and Jen fuck him, he’ll be more fun.”

“Jesus fucking christ. How does Samantha put up with you?”

He hooked an arm over Triss's shoulders, and laughed a merry laugh, again, like a pirate. "That woman has a bigger sex drive than I do, and kinkier tastes. It's just taking her a little bit to uncover them."

"You're corrupting her."

"Not even a little. If anything, she's corrupting me."

They laughed again. The idea of sweet, naive Samantha corrupting Jacob was pretty funny, and honestly, Triss could see it. Samantha was a walking bundle of sexual desire, and if Jacob kept nudging her onto paths the woman very much wanted to go down, it really wouldn't be long before things got super crazy in the Circle's cave. And, much as she tried to find that idea unappealing, Triss didn't. If Samantha and Jacob wanted to fuck right next to Triss and Jen, at this point, Triss wouldn't mind. Samantha's sweetness, combined with the milf vibe, was too damn hot. And, to her surprise, she didn't mind the idea of Jacob being there either. She didn't want to fuck him, but she'd be lying if she said she didn't find him attractive, or the sight of him fucking Samantha insanely sexy.

Sexual healing, Jen said. Sexual healing, Jacob said. Or were they just some horny witches that wanted to escalate the already insanely sexual Circle into full on orgy sex? Probably both.

"Sándor's busy with the other Begotten. Azamel's dying, and he's going to replace her as the leader of their little group, supposedly. Or at least their guardian."

Jacob shrugged, arm still hooked over her shoulders. "Sounds like a powerful individual, politically speaking. Even better reason to get him into bed."

She rolled her eyes again, but some tantalizing images of Sándor drifted up from memory. Him, basically naked, getting dressed by Jennifer for the ball. He was damn fucking sexy, too. But the man



reeked of maturity and wisdom, and pain. And yeah, it was obvious now that that pain scared her. The man was just so fucking broken, and it scared the shit out of her to see what losing a family could do to a man, a father and husband.

“Pretty sure he’s not interested.”

“Probably feels guilty.”

“G—” Fucking shit. She sealed her lips. Everyone feeling guilty for everything these days. “You think ... I...”

“I think you should cut yourself some slack, you moron. Guilt is normal. It doesn’t mean you’re doing something bad, just that a part of you thinks you are. And guess what? We’re all idiots, and think things that are wrong all the damn fucking time. You know damn well Julias would want you to move on and find happiness, and get laid. I know damn well Minerva would want me to do the same. Still feels weird, being with another vampire, even one as nice and sweet — and horny — as Samantha. But a big difference between you and me, Triss, is that I’m aware that these feelings are dumb, that it’s ok to feel them, and it’s ok to let them go.”

She did her best to keep her voice steady, but it still came out a little wavery. “Sometimes you make it easy, for me to forget you’re really fucking old, and actually probably know a lot of shit.”

“All part of my charm.” He winked at her — all in the eyebrow — and let go of her. “If you want to keep trying to resurrect Julias, go ahead. Lots of witches and warlocks have tried, and failed, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be done. And if you feel guilty for fucking someone, while trying to resurrect your old lover, don’t worry about it.”

“And if I feel guilty because I ... because I’m trying to resurrect him? Because I’m killing kine to do it? Because—”

The man held up a hand. “That’s part of being a witch, Beatrice. That’s a big part of being a member of the Circle of the Crone. And it’s personal.” He sighed, a serious sigh, and she raised a brow. Jacob saying serious things was one thing, but for Jacob to actually sound serious, to use a heavy sounding voice? That was rare. “You’re stepping into deep shit, but sometimes that’s what’s needed to change the world.”

“What?” She blinked at him, and he looked away. That line, ‘change the world’, he said that with a straight face and a straight voice, and there was just no way Jacob would say a cheesy line like that with a serious voice unless he really fucking meant it.

“Keep working on it. I won’t judge. Stop working on it. I won’t judge. Hell, I think you’re better off abandoning the attempt, Triss, but fuck me, who the fuck am I to judge any of that shit? All I’m saying is, you fucking dumbass, is that it’s ok to do whatever, and feel whatever. There are no rules, nothing written in the sky that says how you should think or feel.”

“That’s, uh, a very anarchist philosophy.”

“Yeap. S’why Garry and I get along.”

After a few more chuckles, Triss took a deep breath and dug up another conversation topic she didn’t want to have.

“Jack wants to talk to Black Blood.”

Jacob’s laugh returned, with a healthy dose of that cocky asshole vibe coming through again. “Heh, of course he does. Who tipped him off?”

“I did.”

“Naturally.”

“He deserves help, Jacob.”

“Does he?”

“Yes, of course he does!” She grabbed the man’s shoulder and forced him to stop on the sidewalk. “Dude, I owe him so fucking much.”

Jacob’s psycho smile faded away, and he stared at her, the sudden silence around them fucking haunting.

“Even after Julias died helping him? To save his mother?”

“Yes, even after that.” She grit her teeth and shoved him. “And don’t give me that shit. You know damn fucking well that was all Julias, dying a stereotypical, valiant death, like he was fucking destined to. And if it wasn’t for Julias, you wouldn’t have Samantha, the first woman I’ve ever seen actually manage to make you smile. Actually, genuinely, really smile.”

Her rant got louder and louder, and only at the end did she notice the subtle smile on the asshole’s lips.

She growled and shoved him. “You asshole. You already knew all that.”

“Catching on, ain’t ya?”

“The fuck? What the fuck are you digging at me for?”

“Just wanted to make sure you really understood your feelings.”

“Oh fuck you.” That hurt. That fucking hurt. Not that he’d tricked her; Jacob tricked everyone, and with the Circle, he tricked in order to teach them lessons the painful way. They lasted longer that way. What hurt was what she’d said, the way she knew Julias was bound

to die because of the kind of guy he was. She didn't want to remember him like that.

Jacob grinned, hooked his arm over her shoulders again, and resumed their walk down North Side. "I'll talk to Jack, and so will Black Blood."

"Thanks. And ... fuck, you are so damn hard to talk to."

"Am I?"

"Yes, you are. One minute you're hinting I should join you and Samantha for a good fucking. The next, you're ... making everything hurt."

He chuckled, and half hugged her with his arm. "Gotta come at you sideways to get past the defenses."

"Defenses?"

"Yeah, defenses. Everyone has defenses, in the brain." He pointed at his temple with his free hand. "They try and predict conversations, so they can say shit to defend themselves from others, and from words. They block emotions, and keep shit at a distance." He hugged her a little tighter, and leaned in to bring his lips close to her ear. "You're the best witch I've had in a long, long time, Triss. I'm not gonna let you close yourself off to shit. You want to be a witch? You learn to embrace pain, and accept it. Don't rationalize it or explain it anyway, just accept it for what it is, and learn that it's ok to feel pain."

"The ... same way you do, when learning Crúac."

"Exactly." He gave her a small shake. "Learn that you can do whatever you want, and that you don't need to chase some idealism some fool taught you. It's all ok. Do whatever the fuck you want. No

one out there has the answers. No one fucking knows a god damn thing. For sure, no one knows of any correct way to do life.”

She smiled and looked down at the sidewalk. That made a lot of sense, in a sad, and freeing sort of way.

“You probably loved Fight Club, didn’t you?”

“Heh, to a point,” he said. “The allegory was a bit thick. And I wasn’t kidding, about your first point.”

“First point?”

“You said I was hinting you should join me and Samantha. I’m telling you, Samantha would come her fucking brains out if you did. She really likes you two, and Othello and Madison. Especially Othello. Mostly Othello.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “I wonder if she’s using me, to get to him?”

Triss rolled her eyes so hard she could see her fucking brain.

---

~~Jack~~

A few days later.

Triss had told Jack that Jacob would come get him when he was ready, but that it might take a few days. BB — yeah, she called him BB — was busy, apparently, doing who the fuck knew what. Maybe that’s what Daniel was trying to figure out? The man vanished randomly, sometimes for weeks at a time. He was less a sheriff, and more a detective, hunting down random shit that happened in Dolareido.

Sighing, Jack squirmed on the bench in the small room, and watched the two ladies change. The two ladies were, of course, Elaine and Antoinette, and both were trying on some of the latest fashion trends. La DaFraam was an upscale, overpriced fashion

store, the sort where you could get something almost straight off the runway, instead of the watered down version that flowed out into the real world over years; Antoinette had given him a small lesson about the nature of fashion.

The store was open all night. All the fancy stores and restaurants in Dolareido were; just that sorta city. It was also the kinda store where the employees wore whatever they wanted, and were strongly encouraged to look gorgeous doing it. Three women and one flamboyant man were the employees tonight. The clientele was obviously supposed to be women, or men easily manipulated into buying expensive things for their girlfriends and wives. He'd never seen so many lacy bras in his life.

Antoinette sat beside him on the bench built into the wall of the changing room, legs folded, hair pulled over her shoulder, and she combed it absentmindedly with her fingers as she watched Elaine.

“Perhaps the red one?”

Elaine nodded, slipped the dress off, and slid into the red one.

“I thought we were looking into possible thralls?” he said. “I mean, not that I mind this.” He gestured to Elaine, and waved his hands toward her ass. She was wearing a black thong, high hip, and holy sweet mother of god there was just something so arousing about watching a woman put on and take off clothes while wearing a thong.

Antoinette chuckled and shrugged. “We are.”

“We are? Looks like we’re shopping.”

“Veronica Tam, one of the assistant buyers here at La DaFraam.”

“Veronica? The girl with the blue hair?”

“Indeed. She has been exposed to the world of the paranormal.”

“Really? How?”

Antoinette shook her head with a quiet but annoyed sigh. “A chance encounter. Unfortunately, Kindred are not perfect, and make mistakes. Normally, as you know, an Invictus Ventrue would be sent to make sure she does not remember.”

“And I’m to be that Ventrue?”

“No. I am told that the woman did not panic when she discovered a vampire in the act. In fact, it was likely she had seen a vampire before, and had kept it to herself. This was likely a second sighting.”

“Oh, so she’s ... kinda trustworthy?”

The Prince nodded. “She managed to notice the presence of vampires in my city, and did not open her mouth, of her own volition. Likely, the only reason she was caught spying, was due to her raised interest. The vampire who noticed her said she did not attempt to film the act. She simply wanted to see more of the world hidden in her shadow.”

“Ah, I get it. She’s a classic innocent young woman who finds herself pulled into things bigger than she is.” Sounded familiar, too damn familiar.

Elaine laughed, but said nothing as she admired herself in the mirror. Skimpy little red dress, and Jack forced himself to look away and back to Antoinette.

“Oui. And we are going to offer her an opportunity. My file on her says she recently left the arms and money of her parents, and a relationship with a man, only to then move to Dolareido where she lives by herself. She is alone, and struggling to survive, likely deep in debt.”

That was strangely detailed information, and Jack raised a brow at her. Her smile was flawless, best poker face ever, but it was obvious she'd done a little digging outside the usual means. Maybe she'd been looking into getting Veronica as one of her own thralls?

“So, she has good enough eyes to catch a young vamp making a mistake, and enough brains to keep her mouth shut. She doesn't have a support mechanism in her life. And, she went out of her way to look into stuff, without risking taking a picture; just wanted to see shit with her own eyes. Together, it all ... makes her a perfect option for a thrall.”

“Agreed,” Elaine said. She slipped out of the red dress, and instead of grabbing for another, she reached out, took Jack's hand, and pulled him up to her. “Look her in the eyes when she comes in.” His great grandsire smiled at him, and met his eyes. Powerful, deep, brown, scary eyes. “You will see it, plain as day. Instead of the mindless gaze of a sheep, you will find the eyes of someone with—”

“A brain?”

“Ha, in so many words.” Elaine winked at him, walked over to the door to the changing room, and stuck her head out, careful to use the door to cover her naked chest. “Veronica dear, could you come here? I have a question.”

Of course they were going to do this now. Jack almost interjected, but the click clack of Veronica's heels silenced him.

“How can I he—elp!”

Elaine yanked the woman into the changing room, closed to the door, and turned her to face Antoinette and Jack. With hands on the kine's shoulders, Veronica wasn't going anywhere, and she rapid fire blinked in total confusion and shock.



Jack groaned and gestured at Elaine. “You’re going to scare her to death. Probably thinks we’re going to rape her.”

Elaine rolled her eyes, but kept her hands where they were, and the kine close enough her breasts pressed into Veronica’s back and shoulders. “Hardly.”

“W-What’s going on? I’ll ... I’ll scream if you don’t—”

Antoinette lifted a hand and swiped the air gently. “Come now Veronica, you are an intelligent woman, are you not? You understand who we are.”

“Who you are? I ... I...” The pale woman turned paler, and her arms fell limp at her sides. “Oh.”

That was surprising. Veronica looked at each of them, and her eyes fell as she realized the situation she was in, body going limp with submission. Smart, and she was quick on her feet to come to the conclusion that fast.

Veronica was maybe twenty years old, and looked absolutely terrified. Not just terrified cause she realized she was in a room with three vampires, but because she was young and inexperienced with ... everything. Obviously in over her head after moving out from her parents’ place, and trying to make it in a cruel world. Another young person who found out too late that you couldn’t live on a minimum wage like you could fifty years ago. Probably took out a loan, maybe with some unsavory people. To land a job at a place like La DaFraam, she had to know her craft, so she wasn’t stupid.

Stupid enough to be impulsive with her life, like leaving her parents’ money, and how she went looking for a vampire the second time. Smart enough to know how much shit she was in, and make solid efforts to dig herself out of it. Antoinette had it right, Veronica was a perfect option for a thrall. Beautiful, smart, but fucked by circumstance, and in need of help.

She was also fucking gorgeous. A bit short, maybe five two, and quite thin; the short black skirt she wore showed that, especially considering its waist was some kind of mini-corset that stopped below the navel. The whole getup was, what was the word, chic? And sexy. She wore a white top with long sleeves, and a very, very spread, open chest, cleavage that reached the navel, and made sure her large breasts were on display, no bra.

Of course large, because Antoinette and Elaine were apparently convinced Jack could never have too much boobage in his life. And while that may have been completely and totally true, it was ridiculous. He wasn't going to pick a thrall based on the size of their rack. Probably not.

"I love this hair," Elaine said, and she raised a hand enough to run her fingertips along its ends. Shoulder length hair, dyed bright blue, with bangs that cut down along one half of her face. She probably had cute anime posters in her room, or in the modern age, as her smart phone background.

"Th ... thanks," she said, eyes glancing up to get a peek of Jack and Antoinette. Nervous as fuck.

Jack looked up at Antoinette, but she smiled down at him, and gestured to Veronica. All in his hands then. Fine, sure, whatever, because he had loads of experience engaging potential thralls. Ugh, this might just become a train wreck.

"Veronica Tam," he said. The fact it was him talking in the authoritative voice, and not the two insanely tall, one topless, gorgeous women, surprised her. "I'm informed you've discovered some pretty scary stuff, in Dolareido's nightlife." She managed a trembling nod. "We're here to talk about that."

"How ... how do I know you are what you ... imply you are?"

He pulled aside one of his cheeks with a finger hook, and grew his fangs. Her eyes widened, and she quivered, gazed locked onto the sight of his fangs emerging, and then reverting at will.

“Satisfied?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Good.” He leaned forward, and gave her a hard look, the sort of look Julias gave when negotiating with corporate types. It was a good face to use when bullying people, but it was also a good way to make sure someone didn’t lie to you. “We don’t let people run around knowing about us, Veronica. Dangerous.” Her eyes widened even more, and he put up his hands. Shit, that’d sounded like a death threat. “We’re not here to kill you, calm down.” Probably not here to kill her, at least.

“Then ... w-what do you want?”

“My love,” he gestured to the tall white-haired beauty at his side, “informs me you’re in debt, Veronica. Considering how young you are, and that you don’t have access to the assets of your parents, or the support of your old boyfriend, you probably took out a loan with less than reputable types.”

She winced with every word. “Life hasn’t been ... what I expected.”

“And to make things worse, you stumbled onto a nightlife that should remain secret.” He thought the speech was coming along nicely, honestly. Talking with an authoritative style wasn’t that hard. Maybe it was just his Ventrue half having fun?

“I ... I did. But I won’t tell anyone!”

“Indeed.” He grinned at her, and sat up straight again. “You have two options, Veronica. The first option: I can wipe your mind of the encounters you’ve had with our kind.”

“B-Brainwashing?”

“I’d be removing the memories of those encounters, nothing more.” Still, kinda like brainwashing, but no point in making things even scarier for her. Hopefully he wouldn’t accidentally delete her whole brain while he was in there. “The second option: come work for me.” And he gave her the Julias grin, the suave, smooth, flirtatious and confident grin. He’d practiced it in the mirror some more, and thought he was getting pretty good at it.

“Work for you? But, I ... um ... what does that mean?”

“At first, you’ll be taking care of my mansion.”

“Mansion!?”

He chuckled, a very Ventrue, cocky laugh. Damn, it came totally naturally. “With time, you’ll be given more responsibilities, and more knowledge, as your worth is proven. And you’ll be payed handsomely.”

Talk of money had her eyebrows going up. “How much?”

“At least double what you’re paid here. At first. Given time, your salary will grow to be larger.”

If her eyes could have fallen out of her skull, they would have.

“Wow ... Do I, um, get to think about this? It’s such a big decision, and—”

“No. Like I said, we can’t let someone who knows about us go running around. When you leave this changing room, Veronica, either you’ll have lost your memory of us, or you’ll be working for me.”

She sniffed a small whimper, nodded, and looked down again. “I see.”

“There’s a price to pay, if you want to work for me.”

“P-Price?”

He nodded. “A drop of my blood.”

“What!? But isn’t that how—”

“No, it won’t turn you into a vampire. But it will bind you to my will, Veronica. You’ll be my servant, until I decide otherwise. You will do as I tell you to, and you will be compelled to do so.” He stood up, and looked down at the small woman. “Understood?” He almost scared himself with how easy he found all this, being boss-like and confident. He didn’t feel confident, not at all, but pretending he was hadn’t only become easier the past few years, it’d become downright fun.

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. She just stared up at him, dumbfounded.

“I can assure you,” Antoinette said, “my love will take good care of you. You will be treated well.”

“Very well,” Elaine whispered down at the small woman, voice blatantly husky. No need to say ‘sex is involved’ when a tone like that did it for her. “I can also assure you, you will enjoy having Jack as a master, but you will be required to do whatever he wants of you. Whatever. He. Wants.”

“Again, just taking care of my mansion ... at first.”

She stared at them, completely overwhelmed by the bomb they’d just dropped on her. And, much as Jack knew he sounded and looked confident, more thoughts boiled up that made him nervous.

The fuck would the curse do to his blood? Would it affect Veronica in some strange way? He had to find out, but it'd really suck to learn it made his blood toxic or something.

They waited, and waited, and after a few minutes went by, Veronica took a deep breath.

“I’ll work for you. What ... what do I have to lose, right? I have nothing here, just ... debt from a loan shark, and no friends or anything anymore.”

She’d convinced herself, and Jack. Took guts to come to a decision like that, that quickly.

Jack nodded, and held up his wrist. “Are you sure?”

“I’m ... I’m sure.”

He nodded again, slower this time, and sank his thumb into his wrist. Skin punctured, he held out his wrist to her, and with an effort of will, told his blood to pool at the wound. A single, large, thick droplet of inhumanely dark blood.

Shivering until her knees almost hit each other, she took his wrist, and kissed it. Her eyes went wide, wonder and shock combined, and she let out a small moan.

“Wow. It tastes ... amazing.”

He smiled. Better to let her know he didn’t know what it tasted like. The Vinculum worked on vampires as much as humans, so a smart vampire was damn careful about what they put in their mouths.

“Wonderful!” Elaine said. “May I have a taste of your new thrall, Jack?”

He rolled his eyes, sat down beside Antoinette again, and gestured to the kine. So far so good, not dead on the spot or anything. “Veronica, have you ever had a vampire feed on you?”

“Um, no? I ... How would I know?”

“Pleasure,” Antoinette whispered, with the same husky tone Elaine used earlier. “Extreme pleasure. And normally, the master is the first to taste of a new thrall, Elaine.”

Elaine shrugged, and lowered her hands from Veronica’s shoulders down to her hips. She was so damn tall compared to Veronica, her breasts almost sat on the blue-haired woman’s shoulders.

“But she looks so utterly delicious.”

“Pleasure?” Veronica said. “It won’t hurt?”

Elaine chuckled down at the woman, and sent her into more quivers as she leaned down, and set lips along her neck. “Not at all.”

Jack had seen Elaine feed on Julee and Ashley many times, and every time, the two women loved it. More than loved it, they came their brains out, because Elaine always got her fingers inside them whenever she did. And considering the mischievous look in her eyes now, he knew she was going to do it again.

“I think ... I think I will have the first taste.” He got back up, and stepped in front of Veronica. “You’re mine now, Veronica Tam.” He didn’t mean to say that, or say it in such a dark, gravely voice, it just came out, a statement of pure power. And he knew the curse wasn’t the reason he said it. That was all him and his Ventrue self, the part of him that delighted in the idea of controlling someone else. They hadn’t lied. He’d treat her well. But, damn, out of nowhere, he suddenly found himself saying these things as if he’d said them a hundred times, to other thralls and ghouls that served him. He was

her master, she served him now, and that meant he got to feed on her whenever he wanted.

She nodded, and made no effort to move away as he leaned in, and set his lips on her neck. Her whole body trembled, but as he sank his fangs into her skin, her trembling melted away. She collapsed back, but Elaine remained standing, her breasts against Veronica's shoulders, one of them nudging into Jack's face as he drank down his first gulp of the woman's warm, delicious blood.

And he stopped. After what was essentially nothing more than a sip, he licked the girl's neck, closing her bite wound, and he stepped back.

Veronica, panting heavily, stared at him, eyes wide with a new stimulus she'd never felt before. Her nipples hardened, points against the thin white material of her shirt, and her face flushed. She was aroused.

And as much as he'd like to say it was just the Kiss that had her boiling, he knew it was more. The clothes, the blue hair, the adventurous attitude, she'd been half scared and half excited the moment Elaine had pulled her into the room. Having the tall blonde constantly pushing her big, naked breasts into her shoulders had definitely put her in a mood. The Kiss just convinced her body it was ok to give in.

"Wow."

He smiled and sat back down beside Antoinette. "There."

"Do ... I taste good?"

They all chuckled. There was something so perfectly sweet about a question like that, it stroked the Kindred sense of humor just right. Kind of twisted, but true.



“Yes, you do. Very. I look forward to Kissing you again.”

“Kissing?”

“The Kiss,” he said. “It’s what we call feeding. And the next time it’ll be ... well, Elaine, you can show her.”

“Ah, finally.” With a hungry growl, Elaine lowered herself down to the other side of Veronica’s neck, and sank her teeth into her.

“Oh! Oh ... god...” Veronica melted against Elaine’s body, her eyes locked on Jack, and she struggled to stay standing. Elaine kept her from falling, one hand slipping up the girl’s exposed sternum and neckline in an intimate hug, the other sliding down her stomach, and down onto her skirt.

Jack almost chimed in to say something, to tell Elaine to stop. Veronica hadn’t given permission for anything sexual. But he stopped himself. The look in Veronica’s eyes screamed the bliss of the Kiss, the adrenaline of her life being suddenly changed, the danger of her circumstance, and the joy in a chance to show off her body for her new master.

One taste of his blood, and she was already that deep into the Vinculum? It took three tastes. How far would it push her with the second and third dose?

Much as he tried to remain focused on his concerns, or at least not hypnotized by Veronica’s sudden pleasure, there was no chance. Elaine was too damn good. She spread the already very open chest of the shirt apart, and hooked it around the outside of the thrall’s large breasts. She had subtle nipple piercings, studs. Veronica blushed furiously, but all she could do was tremble, nipples swollen and begging to be touched. Elaine obliged, one hand clutching and squeezing the woman’s breast with a little more frantic energy than Jack figured she would; she was hungry.

Her other hand pulled up the thrall's skirt, exposing a black thong, and Elaine groaned as she slipped her hand underneath the waistband, and into the thrall's underwear.

"Pierced," Elaine said between gulps. "I bet there are many hidden decorations to find on this beauty."

Veronica's tried to say something, but it came to a quick end, as Elaine made sure Veronica's first full Kiss was world shattering.

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Back in his mansion, Jack sat down on the base of the stairs of the ridiculous grand entrance room, or lobby or whatever it was, and sighed. He'd handled the conversation with Veronica well, so well Antoinette said she'd been impressed. Apparently, he did the authoritative Ventrue thing like a natural. Veronica had been thoroughly convinced, and enamored.

"One thrall in development," he said to himself, and he checked off a non-existent list on a non-existent clipboard. "Woo."

He didn't feel good about it, but at the same time, didn't feel as bad as he thought he should have. The choice had been given, and it'd been a good one. Forget, or join. And join was definitely a good option for someone like Veronica who needed some rescuing from shitty life circumstances. But the look in her eyes after she'd taken some of his blood, that was a little unnerving. She'd looked at him like she knew him, like she liked him, and the girl had known him for ten whole minutes.

But, that was the whole vampire human thing. He was a vampire, she was a human. Kindred and kine. Kine, a term that meant cattle, or cows. He wasn't supposed to think of her as an equal, because she was prey, and he was the predator. A part of him knew that, accepted it, and liked that. Another part of him very much did not.

“Julias would understand. He didn’t use the Vinculum, usually. He created most of his thralls with Dominate.” But the man had a knack for Dominate, subtle and powerful, that Jack just didn’t have. Julias could gently nudge people in certain directions, or keep them under his control for weeks, even months. Jack could easily brainwipe someone with the power of the curse and leave them a total empty husk, but to manipulate their minds like a master puppeteer, wasn’t a skill he had. Yet.

Maybe things would be fine? Ashley and Julee had amazing lives, relative to other humans. And with some more years under their belt, Antoinette might embrace them. They’d no longer be slaves to her, and gain the power of a vampire, but they’d also have to deal with all the hardships that came with. Maybe Veronica would find herself in the same situation in the future?

That was assuming nothing was wrong with her. Antoinette and Elaine took her to the tower to check her in the weird, humming machine, ritual circle thing, and if no trace of the curse showed up on her, they’d deliver her to the mansion. His first thrall, an attractive girl with a head on her shoulders. Much as he originally wanted a thrall just to help him with the mansion, she’d be good for collecting information.

And, considering how she reacted to Elaine’s touch, there was no doubt in his mind Veronica would try and seduce him. The look in her eyes, how she’d watched him, basically eye-fucked him as Elaine fingered her, painted a clear picture. The Vinculum was damn powerful, even when only at a third its true strength, and now Veronica was thinking about Jack in a sexual context thanks to Elaine.

Damn it, Elaine. He didn’t need to put sex on Veronica’s mind so damn early in this whole situation. Jack was already spoiled as fuck in the sex department.

Antoinette didn't like the idea of sharing him with other vampires; Elaine was the exception, considering their history. Sharing him with ghouls and thralls though? To her, that was basically like using a sex toy on him. She'd prefer it be her ghouls, or his, to a random kine off the street though, because then she'd at least know where those toys came from.

Elders. They looked at kine like humans looked at sheep. Sure, they cared for them, even loved them, but they raised them as pets, cattle, an animal they could use for self gain. It was still hard to think of them like that. Julias had a hard time thinking about them like that, too.

Knock knock. Fucking hell, again?

"Maybe she'd even open the door for me?" He laughed at the thought. Yeah, it'd be so fucking weird to have someone do that. And yet, they not only would, it'd be damn expected from vampires that his thralls served him like that, opening doors for him and shit. Ugh.

Before he could open the door, he stopped, and grit his teeth. He felt it, the presence of another vampire; no need for Auspex when an elder comes knocking. Knock knock, to the tune of Shave and a Haircut. Which pretty much sealed who the fuck it would be.

He took a deep, useless breath, and opened the door.

"Jacob."

"Jack! Long time no see."

He growled, made no effort to hide it, and didn't move. "Jacob. I— Triss, hey." The other Nosferatu stood behind her boss, and he gave her a nod. She returned it.

Chuckling like an asshole, Jacob took a step forward. Jack very much wanted to stand his ground, and may even push the man back. Maybe even punch him. But judging from the look on Triss's face, Jacob was here to help him talk with Black Blood, and it'd be stupid to bite the hand that fed him.

He could bite it later.

Sighing, he took a step back, and the witch and warlock followed him in.

"Nice place," Jacob said, smiling pleasantly. "Oh my, quite the chandelier."

"You can blame Viktor for the fashion."

"I could," the elder said, "but you killed him, remember?"

He winced at that. Right, he knew that, and so did Triss thankfully. But, damn, it was frustrating just how much better Jacob was at amassing information and using it as a weapon than Jack was.

Well, time to rip off the band-aid.

"How's Mom?"

Jacob's manic grin softened for a moment, and that surprised Jack. Jacob was a master at the psycho smiles, so much he could have entire rooms of people all creeped out of their minds. To see his expression soften into something resembling normal, was strange.

"I suppose you think I'm here to tease you about the fact that I'm fucking your mom? Maybe I should grab a towel and whip your ass with it while I'm at it?"

“ ... what?”

“If we’re gonna throw barbs like idiot jocks in a locker room, might as well go all the way.” Laughing again, he hopped up onto the first stair, grabbed the railing, and hung off it toward the lobby. “I’m game if you are, but I didn’t plan on it.”

“You seriously not going to take advantage of the ‘I fucked your mom’ angle?”

“Nope. Because while it may be hard for you to believe, Clarice, I actually kinda like your mom.”

Kinda like? He rolled his eyes, but the heat in his throat settled. Well, that was better than using her to manipulate him and Antoinette. And, much as Jacob was fucking chaos incarnate, it was hard to dismiss the things he said. He wasn’t a liar, not like that.

“And,” Triss said as she stood beside Jack, “the Circle likes her. She’s fun, and sweet, and a total hornball.”

He shoved her away, and she laughed as she joined Jacob. The two of them were getting along, better than Jack figured they would. Either Jacob was rubbing off on her, or she was on him, and considering the big smile she had on, he guessed the former.

“I suppose I should just accept that Mom’s taking my advice. Taking it in a direction I didn’t predict or want, but, she is. And as long as she’s happy, I’m happy.”

Triss grinned and nodded. “It’s not like we’re not treating her with respect. But I do think we were all a little surprised at how, um ... easily she got into the spirit of things.”

“Obviously it’s because I’m a smooth and sexy fucker,” Jacob said, lifted his eye bandage high enough to expose one of the empty

sockets, and winked at Triss. No eyelid, but the wink was obvious from the face muscles, and Triss groaned and pushed him away.

“Fucking gross, dude.”

Jack watched the two, arms folded across his chest, and every bit of analytical skill he had running at one hundred percent. Was Jacob legit, or was all this a careful manipulation of Jack’s expectations? Even the softer smile he’d had on for a split second, which told Jack he was legit, could have been faked. Any elder could act their way to an Oscar in their sleep. For now, it did seem like Jacob liked his mom.

“So ... how’s this going to work?” he said. “We doing this here, or —”

“Gimme a few weeks,” Jacob said, “and sure, we could summon here. But it’ll probably save us some time if we head to my altar in Three Kings Cemetery.”

He frowned at that. “Why only now?”

“Say what?”

“I’ve been waiting a few days. Why’d it take so long for you to show up, if we’re going to use that site?” He’d seen that site. Any witch or warlock would have been able to perform any crazy ritual there, considering how much shit was in there. The work had already been done, then.

“Oh, I had things to do,” Jacob said. “And so did Black Blood.”

“Uh huh. Or maybe you just like being a dick to me.”

Jacob, chuckling, jumped off the stair and toward the door. “Yeah, that’s it, Jack. My life choices are made to annoy you.” On the way

out of the mansion, he smacked Jack on the back of the shoulder.  
“Come on, dumbass.”

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The crazy cave beneath Three Kings Cemetery was straight out of a horror film. The secret switch hidden in the mausoleum, the hidden stone stairs, the cave itself, the hanging warning sign, and the quiet, constant wailing in the background, it was all a lovely concoction of doom and gloom. Honestly, it was pretty badass and metal, and he could understand why Beatrice found herself drawn to it.

The problem was the badassery and metalness were only surface level. Once you got past that, the Circle of the Crone was fucked up, into some really nasty shit, and you had to have the stomach for it. He'd managed to stomach it, when it meant helping Triss so they could get revenge for Julias. Slitting the throats of a bunch of kine, like sheep, was not something he figured he could do regularly. Even if every kine they'd sacrificed had been a horrible killer, and he knew they weren't, doing shit like that regularly would fuck him up.

He grimaced as they stepped into the main room. The big bowl where Jacob had ripped out the throats of the kine Jack had dominated was right there, huge and rusty and gross, and held up by a bunch of skeletons. Chains dangled from the stone ceiling. Strange symbols were etched into the walls and floor. An unnatural dark fought against the single candle Triss carried, preventing any light from reaching too far, especially to the back wall. No one was in the room, no one spoke, but he could hear quiet banshee shrieks, as if someone had sealed their dying sounds in the walls, deep beneath the cemetery above them. Or maybe they were hearing the dead from the cemetery, angry at them for violating the sanctity of their resting place.

It was the sort of place he wouldn't be surprised to see Sabrina rise from up the bowl, and get revenge on him for killing Viktor.



Jacob walked up to the bowl, turned, and leaned against it, like the rust and blood meant nothing to him.

“We never did talk about payment,” the bastard said.

“He’s not paying us,” Triss said. “He’s already paid me, you fucker. And if I have to, I can summon Black Blood without you.”

Jack folded his arms across his chest, tapped his foot on the stone, and glared at the elder. No need to say anything, or play stupid verbal jousting games with the asshole, not with Beatrice helping him.

“Ha, not for me, stupid slut.” He shrugged, and hopped up onto the edge of the huge bowl. It didn’t budge. “I meant for Black Blood. He’ll want something from Jack.”

“Don’t suppose I can give him an IOU?”

Jacob laughed. Triss laughed. Jack did not. It wasn’t supposed to be funny.

The elder hopped down, rubbed his hands together, and held them up. “Black Blood, I summon thee.”

Black Blood had to have the same sense of humor as Jacob, cause Jack figured it’d take a lot more than that single, short sentence, to summon a creature as insanely powerful and larger-than-life as Black Blood. Jacob said it’d take weeks to prepare his mansion, so maybe it was the hundreds of symbols? Maybe the symbols were exact things, and not just random gibberish? If Antoinette had to get crazy with weird mathematical symbols, crazy weird blue light that was most definitely not just blue light, some kinda hidden machine that made the room buzz, and a special lens to be able to see ephemera, then it made sense Jacob’s ritual room was a lot more exact and designed than it initially seemed.

So, if Triss wanted to summon Black Blood, she'd have to use this room, or any others Jacob created. Or, maybe she knew how to create all the crazy symbols too?

And of course, Jacob's single sentence was enough. The wailing, always just below noticeable noise, increased until it was very much noticeable. A horrible cold filled the room, the sort of cold he felt when he visited his dead sister. Black ooze bubbled up from the stones around his feet, from the cracks in the walls, from the ceiling, hidden in shadow. He forced himself to stay where he was, but with each passing moment, it was clear Black Blood's presence was crossing over to join them.

The candle flickered, but didn't die. The ooze avoided it. Not even vampires could see in absolute blackness, and this deep underground, that's exactly what they'd get if it went out.

"My my, look what we got here." A deep, rumbling voice filled the room, layered with rasp, the sort of rasp he heard from his sister. And it had a Texan accent. The accent was pleasing, but the alien, gravely depth mixed with grating rasp, was very much not, and he winced as the words cut his ears.

"Black Blood," he said.

"Jack Terry. I understand Malachi has been bedding your mother?"

Oh fucking god. He threw up his hands, glared at Jacob, and glared at Triss too. They both chuckled.

"Black Blood, Beatrice told me you know a thing or two about the curse."

"Indeed I do," the darkness said. It came from all around him, no source, and Jack kept his eyes on the sacrifice bowl in front of him for lack of anything else to look at. The skeletons were crying black

tears. “The Strix have got their claws into you, boy. Took them a bunch of generations, but they got them into you.”

He forced himself to not shiver at the mention of Strix. “Tell me more.”

The ooze laughed. “And why would I do that? No profit in that for me, boy.”

He rolled his eyes and looked over to Triss. She shrugged. They all knew the conversation would go this way. Well, fuck that.

“You must think I’m an idiot, spirit,” Jack said. “You think you can control me with a carrot on a stick? I’m not going to let you drag me along in a string of manipulative conversations. So how about you shut the fuck up, and I tell you how it’s going to be.”

The room went silent. Jacob said nothing, Triss said nothing, and Black Blood said nothing. The quiet wailing in the background softened, muffled, and the cold aura permeating everything settled. Good. If he’d managed to shock everyone, then maybe he could make some progress.

“I don’t trust Jacob, but I don’t trust or respect you, Black Blood. You might be big and powerful, but everything I’ve seen and heard about you shows me you’re nothing but an opportunist. You’ve never done anything directly. You rescued me and my crew from Sándor’s nightmare, and again, you helped Sándor in his nightmare, to put a stop to Jeremiah’s ritual. But we both damn well know you did that shit for your own personal gain, for acquiring favors, and for learning.” Jack tapped his temple once, and grinned. “Don’t think I don’t know you’ve been up to something, Black Blood, and have been for years.”

“Ha. I think you might be overestimating me, Ventrue.”

“Yeah right. You wouldn’t drop information for Triss unless you knew she’d tell me, and you knew it’d trigger this conversation. So, this is how it’s going to be. You tell me, for free, if you can do something to get rid of this curse, and the likelihood of success. And then you tell me what you want in exchange for helping me get rid of it. Don’t think I don’t have options, Black Blood.”

Better to not tell the spirit what those options were. Damien finding some information about the binding ritual, and Elaine’s experiments, could be a great step toward dealing with the curse. And even Antoinette might be able to help, if he asked her, told her to go nuts with her experiments, even put him on a table and cut him open.

But, all of those options would be slow to produce results at best, and outright torturous at worst. If Black Blood had a direct solution, he wanted to know.

The darkness chuckled again, and Jack folded his arms across his chest as he tapped his foot. Negotiating mode. Black Blood was basically like every corporation Jack had dealt with the past few years, evil and greedy. It’d be in his best interest to treat the fucker like one.

“Tell me, boy, what do you know about diablerie?”

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~~Natasha~~

“Uh, Natasha, that’s a pretty dark story,” Art said.

She nodded and looked down, not able to keep eye contact. “I know, b-but it’s ... it’s only a fantasy. The kind you could read about, but seeing it on video might be a ... b-b-bit crazy.”

Matt nodded, and ran his hands along her hair. She closed her eyes, and switched from kissing Art’s length, to Matt’s. At this point,

she was a total sucker for hands through the hair, and she beamed up at Matt as she set a suckling kiss on the head of his girth. The hot water fell over them, and she wiped some off her eyes so she could see Matt stare down at her with hunger.

One hand around the base of Matt's girth, and another around Art's. They were supposed to be cleaning up after sex in her apartment, but as usual, the boys had joined her as she showered, despite her protests; at this point, they knew which of her protests were serious and which weren't. And, as usual, the boys had quickly bounced back from their orgasms, and were ready for thirds.

Down on her knees, she shivered in secret delight as she looked up at the two big men watching her work. Something about the way they looked at her, like she was theirs to be used whenever they wanted, was so dirty and wrong, and it sent tingles through her like crazy. It wasn't like she didn't know women had fantasies like this, she just never really thought she'd be one of them.

Now that she had the movie director bug, worming its way through her brain all night every night, demanding she plot and prepare and obsess over it, stories ran through her mind. Erotic plots, full of naughty, erotic stuff.

"I'm all for playing a villain," Matt said, voice wavering a little as Natasha's growing skill sent obvious jolts of pleasure up through him. "I mean, as long as people know it's a movie, I say we really indulge some taboo fantasies."

Tash grinned. Matt got it. They were just fantasies, and they could get really naughty with them. Really naughty! She was just one woman, a small one, and they were two huge guys with big muscles who could be pretty damn scary if they wanted to be. And, more important, she was a rich woman with a skill for tech. Setting up high budget film setups, and then doing some quality editing? She

was excited to sink hundreds of hours into the project, and on the next, and the next.

Matthew came first. She gave him doe eyes as she suckled and kissed the fat glans of his cock, and when waves of his cum poured into her mouth, a gentle push of her tongue against his cock caused it to flow down from her lips, and down her body. And seconds later, she did the same for Arturo, hot water flowing down over their bodies as she worked her hand on his girth while her lips wrapped the whole of his glans, and milked him.

Work done, she stood up, and flicked some water at their faces.

“There. D-Done?” she said. Matt nodded, and after a moment of exaggerated contemplation, so did Art. “Good. You’re b-both addicts.”

Arturo grinned down at her, and plucked the soap off the shower wall. “Yeah well, you can blame Dolareido for that. In fact, scratch that, you can blame you for that.”

She yanked the soap from him, and lathered up her loofa. “How so?”

“Matt and I have been in sexual relationships before, like we told you. But even in the most active relationships, we didn’t have sex this much.”

“That’s ... n-not my fault!” She frowned at him, but it didn’t last. “Is it?”

Matthew came up behind her, and set his hands on her hips. Then up her hips to her breasts, where he massaged and caressed. She wasn’t Blushing Life anymore, but that didn’t stop the man from entertaining himself with the softness of her small boobs. And, after having it done to her hundreds of times now, she kinda liked it, standing there and letting the man touch her. It was relaxing, in a

weird sort of way. If she'd been Blushing, it'd have worked some heat through her, but without it, it was pleasant, and she sighed contentment as she rested her back against his abs.

"It is," the big guy said.

Art nodded. "Mhmm. You're too damn hot, Natasha."

She rolled her eyes, and ran the loofa up Art's abs. Abs everywhere. Abs she could make really pop on the screen with some lotion and high contrast lighting.

"I'm n-not ... not super hot."

"The fuck?" Art said.

"I'm not like, you know, the other girls." Girls they'd all seen topless now. "They'd all ... look b-better in the movies I want to make."

Matt chuckled, and with her head back against his sternum, the warm vibrations flowed through her. "I admit, they all have big, beautiful boobs."

She frowned up at him, but as she did, the man leaned down over her, and his hands slid down her body.

Art mirrored his friend's chuckle. "Yeah, they do. Can't say I wasn't imagining what motorboating those would be like."

She outright glared at her boyfriends, but again, they both chuckled at her, and Matt set a kiss on her head.

"And yet, all I think about every day and night, is getting inside this tiny, little body," the giant said.

"Yeah," Art said, and he squatted down in front of Natasha so he could grin up at her. "I don't go to sleep, thinking about putting my

dick between a couple big tits.”

“Giant t-tits.”

He laughed, and traced a finger up and down her stomach. “I go to sleep thinking about getting my dick inside this tight, tiny little pussy.” His finger ran down to her mons, and he caressed the soft skin. “You have no idea, Tash, no idea how hot it is to see you penetrated by Matt and me, to see your stomach stretch around our dicks. No idea how great it feels, how your little body—”

She frowned at him harder, and folded her arms across her chest. “P-Pedophile.”

Both men laughed, and Art leaned in, and kissed her. “You look nothing like a kid, more like, one of those tall, skinny models they sometimes use for fashion shows. Just, miniaturized.”

She tried to keep frowning, but she couldn't. This conversation was dumb, and fun, a conversation they'd had before. Both men had assured her they were attracted to her, intensely so, and considering how easily they grew aroused around her, she believed it. Still, after everyone had their boobs out, she couldn't help but feel a little envy, and jealousy when her boys had given them looks.

Sometimes a girl just needs to hear that her man, or men, are attracted to her, right? Ugh, so girly. Antoinette would probably berate her for the lack of self confidence.

She hugged Art, and kissed him. And Kissed him, just a little. And that was dumb, cause then they spent another twenty minutes fucking in the shower. Ah well, at least they were already clean when they were done.

---

Dressed in her suit, she sat at her kitchen counter and popped open her laptop, careful to not open any apps she couldn't let the



boys see; all of them were password locked, too. The boys wandered around in her kitchen and dug through her fridge. They were hungry, especially after she'd taken a small sip of both of them, and they ate food to get energy back. Her fridge used to have only bottles of blood, but now it had raw steaks, too.

If any kine ever looked in her fridge, she'd have a lot of explaining to do. She'd need to get a Ventrue to wipe their mind.

She smiled as she watched them. Both wore jeans and only jeans, and there was something intensely appealing about men wearing nothing but jeans, walking around in a kitchen, preparing food. She supposed vice versa was true, too. Unfortunately just looking at raw steak was enough to gross her out, vampire after all, and she grimaced each time she glanced at it.

“Hey, we don't judge your food!” Art said.

“N-Not the same. I don't think spaghetti is disgusting to look at.”

Both boys grimaced at the mention of spaghetti.

“No thanks,” Matt said. “If it didn't run or fly or gallop before it hit the plate, I don't want none of it.”

“Um, b-beer and wine didn't do that.”

Art laughed, nodding. “True, we made an exception for alcohol. But if we stopped drinking it for a while, or spent a lot of time in the Hisil, we'd probably lose a taste for it.”

“David can't drink it,” Matt said. “Poor guy. Doesn't eat meat much anymore, either. He'll go on hunts in the Hisil and eat a spirit, and that's pretty much the only way he can get nourishment these days.”

“Why?” she asked.

They looked at each other, contemplating. Answering her was probably giving her information Avery would consider secret. But before she could say it was alright, Art shrugged and sat beside her at the counter.

“Werewolves can get closer and closer to our spirit halves, or further. Getting closer changes more than just our tastes, though. It changes how easily we transform into our wolf halves, and changes how easily we get nourishment from different types of food. I could eat a sandwich, if I really had to. David would just puke it up. His body wouldn’t accept it.”

Ah, that made sense, sorta. “And you and Matt are ... b-balanced?”

Matt shrugged and nodded. “I like to think so. The further we are from our spirit halves, the harder it is to get into wolf form. But then it’s easier to get along with humans. Eat a sandwich and stuff, you know? Less chance for instinct to kick in if, say, you hear a gunshot.”

“But if something does trigger your instincts, they can be harder to control,” Art said. “Vampires have similar issues with their Beast, right?”

“I ... I guess.” She never really thought of it as a balance to strike. The Beast was something that ate at vampires, demanded they succumb to its instincts and hunger, and gave no worries about things like the Masquerade or consequences. To her, it was just something to avoid. But to someone like Jessy, it was a source of power and confidence, that she could tap into the Beast’s strength without completely giving into it.

Art’s phone buzzed, and he sighed. “Probably Avery. Gimme a sec.” He stepped away and pulled the phone out of his pocket.

Natasha watched him for a second, but looked away. They had an unspoken agreement in their relationship, that they wouldn’t pry

into each other's covenant business. He was a werewolf, a member of Avery's pack, who belonged to the Hunters in Darkness group, called Meninna in the strange language they spoke, them and spirits. Sure, he wasn't a member of a secret organization of mad scientists who did experiments that bordered on insanity, like she was, but that didn't mean she shouldn't respect what secrets he had. Art and Matt did the same for her.

"I'm surprised you haven't brought up Maria," Matt said.

Tash froze and stared at her laptop. Better that than letting Matt get a close look at her eyes, that were probably wide and singing 'I visited her days ago!'.

"Everything's b-been quiet. Avery said she'd give me t-time, so I'll keep looking for evidence."

"Still think she's not up to something?"

Of course she thought Maria was up to something, just, not anything to do with Lucas. Getting that information into Avery's head was another problem entirely. It wasn't like Natasha had a catalog of quality evidence proving Maria was innocent, just her word, and a damn compelling argument.

"You know," she said, "M-Maria is a devout worshiper of God?"

"Right, right, the whole Longinus thing."

"Yeah. She's ... she's a true believer, you know? I worked with her for decades, and she was..."

"Cruel." Matt reached over and wrapped an arm over her shoulders.

"Yes, b-but ... consistent." Pretty much the opposite of Jacob. "I trust her. She wouldn't ... d-do something that went against her

beliefs, even if she really wanted to. And the Lancea et Sanctum doesn't condone dark magic stuff." She almost laughed as she said it. Dark magic? What was this, a fantasy story? Fifty years of vampire-y stuff, and the idea of magic still made her reel in shock, that something like that could actually exist. No wonder she ran from the Ordo after Daniel sired her. "Or at least, they don't condone ... doing things that they think God wouldn't like. Resurrection is—"

"It might not be resurrection, you know." He let go of her shoulders, set his elbow on the counter, chin in palm, and winced as he looked at her. "Spirits don't go around, talking about vamps unless they're connected. She's up to something, Tash, and there's no way she isn't. If you think it's not resurrection, fine, it's probably not, but you heard those spirits as much as we did. And Avery and the others have found more spirits, talking about some kind of ritual, with those red wraiths mentioning Maria specifically.

"I ... I d-don't know why they're mentioning her by name."

"Maybe because they're working with her? And that's ... not good."

Sighing again, she closed her laptop and set her chin on it. "I know. I know."

Arturo put his phone away, groaned, put on his shirt and socks, and walked to the door of her apartment. He got his jacket, and tossed Matt his. "Let's go."

"Go, where we going?" Matt hopped up and joined Art at the door. Natasha did, too.

"Got a sighting on those azlu that got away. Clara said there were some that weren't merged, dealing with those tears, right? She thinks she's found them."

“Oh shit, let’s go.” As if summoned to do his destiny, Matt hopped around like a fool, putting on his shirt and socks at the same time, before he slipped on the jacket and rubbed his hands together. If Natasha didn’t know any better, she’d think he was excited. He was definitely energized. They’d told her the Hunters in Darkness specialized in killing Hosts, like the azlu, and whenever the opportunity arose, they were all over it. It was their purpose.

It made her smile. Vampires didn’t have that. Vampires were selfish, and everything they did was to further their own goals; which covenant they stuck with was determined by those goals, not the other way around. Sure, some vampires gave themselves a purpose, something bigger than themselves, but the werewolves did it naturally. To them, their purpose was as intrinsic as their wolf halves.

“Can I c-come?” she said as she got close to Art. “I have tonight off, and—”

A harsh thud interrupted her, and she blinked up at Art, confused. Did someone just slam a door? No. It felt kinda like that, but she didn’t hear a slam or anything. Art had reached out for her, maybe to steady her from the sudden vibration? Earthquake, maybe?

Art looked sad. Very sad. He looked miserable. Why? Matt was bursting with energy and eager to go on a hunt, but Art looked like someone had just ruined his life and told him to accept it.

Tash looked down, and blinked. Something was sticking out of her chest, straight through her blouse. A piece of wood? And it was sticking out from the right spot on her chest to stab her heart. But, that was crazy. Why would there be a piece of wood in her heart?

She blinked up at Art, and the man winced, as if she’d just shot him. Matt started yelling, but she couldn’t hear him, only see the shocked and angry look on his face. She collapsed, Art caught her, and before she could say anything, everything went black.

## Chapter 131

~~Eric~~

His dad's face broke into the biggest smile Eric had ever seen, when Jessy lifted her shirt.

"Holy hell," his dad said. He sat up in the hospital bed, and twisted his whole body to face her.

"I know, right? I got pretty lucky, getting this lean without losing the tits." With white t-shirt and black bra in hand, she bounced in place several times. Both men stared, hypnotized. Laughing, she pat her abs with one hand, still holding the clothes up to her collar with the other. "I should do modeling."

His dad laughed. "I think you might be onto something." With a groan, Eric elbowed his girlfriend, and she laughed as she lowered the clothes back on. "Son! You stay outta this!"

"Dad, that's my girlfriend."

Jessy shrugged, and flashed the old man again, complete with a few more bounces and jiggles, before getting her clothes back on for good. "Don't worry you old fucker, I'll send you a picture."

His dad laughed harder, and winked. Which of course sent Jessy into hysterics, his dad too, and Eric had to drag her out of his dad's room.

She continued laughing as they walked the hospital halls, earning some strange looks from doctors and nurses, before they eventually left the building.

"You're spoiling him," he said.

“Yeah well, he deserves it. He looks great.”

“He does. Doc says he’s been busting his ass. Not an easy thing to do, dealing with atrophied muscles and bed sores and diabetes and who the fuck knows what else. He’s lost eighty pounds, and considering the amount of muscle he’s put on, he’s lost more fat than that.” He was damn proud of his dad, but he never expected the promise of tits to be the way to get him moving again. There was probably more to it than that, but on the surface, it certainly looked like tits had been the carrot.

“How long till he’s out of there?”

“Next week.”

She smiled, and slipped her hand in his as they entered the parking lot. “Great. Where’s he gonna live?”

“He still has his old apartment, but it’s a pretty shit place. I’m thinking I’ll set him up in some nice retirement condo.”

“Frander’s Estate?”

“Yeah.”

“Awesome.” She nodded, and tightened her grip on his hand. After a few steps, she swung his arm back and forth with hers, like a kid happy to be out on a stroll. “Invictus own it. Not that that means much; we own almost everything in Dolareido. But yeah, I’ve checked the place out before, some routine Invictus checks and shit. Pretty sweet place, with some very sexy care workers.”

“Uh, I didn’t think he’d be getting sponge baths or anything.”

“Ha! This is Dolareido. If he wants a sponge bath from a pair of sexy care workers wearing bikini thongs, and only bikini thongs,

he's getting it, for the right price. Frander's Estate can hook him up."

Oh god, the image of his dad paying women for services like that was enough to send a skin-crawling jolt of nausea through him.

"Please stop."

"Or, if he wanted a massage with a happy ending, he can get that, too, for a price. I don't think the care workers will actually sleep with him, but yeah, sex work is pretty much everywhere in Dolareido." She raised a brow as she looked at him. "You must have known that."

"Yeah, I've known that since my fighting career took off. Got introduced to a lot of stuff like that." Just, didn't really think about old folks getting that treatment, especially his dad. Gross.

"Right, right. You mentioned the parties and shit you went to when you were rich, back at that Bloodlust get together. Didn't seem like you were too into the atmosphere though, back in your heyday."

"I wasn't, but I thought I should have been." A painful lesson, and one learned too late. "Just never really jived on that sorta group."

"Maybe what you needed was the right person to jive on it with?"

He laughed. One thing Jessy wasn't good at, was subtle hints. "Yeah, ok, maybe. That night was kinda fun, awkward as it was. And I am a guy. Breasts are awesome."

"Like father like son?"

"Oh god, don't. You're going to make me puke."

"Ha. That night went perfectly. Elaine's a crazy bitch, and I think I like her." Jessy leaned up toward him and kissed his ear as she



whispered. “You know she’d be all over you if you let her.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’d share me with another vampire?”

“Honestly? Not sure. I’m kinda attached to you now, and letting another vamp touch you does sound like it’d make me jealous.” She tapped her chin a few times. “Still want to get a kine on that dick though.”

“Of course.” And after how much she’d helped with his dad, he kinda felt like he owed her. He already owed her a lot, too.

A mad grin appeared, and he eyed her suspiciously.

“So Jack’s gonna make me a sex tape.”

Uh oh.

“You attracted to Jack? Cause of the party? Didn’t think he was your type.”

“Dude, everyone at that little party was smoking hot. Sure, not everyone was exactly my cup of tea, but that doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy coffee occasionally.”

“Wait. Do you even remember what coffee and tea taste like?”

She grunted and elbowed his side gently. “Shut up. My point is, just cause he’s not my ideal doesn’t mean Jack isn’t one sexy little fucker. And I am damn excited to see what he looks like squashed between all those tits.” She held her hands out in front of her chest. “My god, the tits on Antoinette.”

He laughed. “So, assuming I eventually agree to a threesome, is that the sort of person you’re going to find me? Just, find the woman with the biggest boobs?”

“Nah. With you, I’m gonna find someone super tiny, like Natasha. I wanna see someone small try and fit your werewolf dick, you know? See the outline of your cock on their belly while you stretch them to near bursting.” She quivered and smiled maniacally with her words, and rubbed her arms with her free hand, the other squeezing his. “I could get under her, and you fuck her doggy style, and I Kiss her while you fuck her, and—” He elbowed her in the side, gently, and she laughed.

His phone buzzed. He groaned, checked, and raised a brow. “Uh, it’s from Avery.”

“Avery? The fuck she want with you?”

“Dunno. Says she has something important to tell me. And she figures I should bring you, too.”

“Important, but willing to have me hear it?” Jessy frowned as she looked at the sidewalk. “Yeah sure, I’ll go. Bitch will probably make me wait outside, though.”

---

He sniffed the air as he stepped into Avery’s usual apartment building. Something was off. He expected a stronger smell, considering the building was populated mostly by Uratha, and Uratha had a distinct odor. Biological odor aside, they also had a spiritual odor, something he could only get a hint of; Avery told him he’d get a better nose for it as he got older.

“You know, we’ve been talking about sharing you with humans, and maybe a vampire,” Jessy said, “but we never brought up the other options. Fiona’s dating Damien, and I know that choir boy wouldn’t share. And Athalia ... yeah, not her. But what about the other werewolves?” She smirked at him as they started up the stairs. “They got some hot bitches.”

“You know, I’m pretty sure they take offense to being called bitch.”

“What? Why?”

He shrugged. “Guess they think you’re calling them a dog. Wolves got a lot more pride than dogs.”

Her hand gripped his shoulder for balance as she snorted on a laugh. “That’s the insult they take away from that? Not the, you know, being an asshole part, just the reference to a dog?”

“I guess, yeah.”

The snorting laughter continued, until Eric had to slip an arm behind her to keep her from falling down the stairs.

“Uh, pretty sure we’re here for a serious meeting, Jessy.”

“Bah, it can’t be that serious if I’m allowed to be here. Even if I’m outside the door, they wouldn’t let me close if it was important.”

He nodded, and looked ahead as they stepped into the hallway. A shitty, old apartment building with lots of strange smells, mostly age and the growth and shit that came with it. There was also the smell of Avery’s pack, just, not as strong as it should be. And now that he was only a dozen feet away from the door to Avery’s apartment, he knew he should have been smelling them more. And hearing them more.

Without a word, Jessy reached into her pants under her shirt, and pulled out a pistol. She’d insisted on a quick stop at her apartment before coming here, for an innocent pistol she assured was absolutely required before she went visiting anyone in ‘werewolf country’. It paid to be a paranoid vampire.

“Do come in,” a voice called from the other side of the door.  
“Don’t make us force you in.”

Eric and Jessy looked at each other, and then to the ends of the hallway. And out of the fucking air, stepped a few Kindred, on each side. Every one of them had guns in hand, and not pistols. Two assault rifles and one shot gun, for each group.

Evidently, it wasn’t just Eric getting stronger as the months went by. He recognized a few of these vamps from the scuffle he’d gotten in with them on the streets months ago, and they weren’t this sneaky then. They’d been practicing. Whichever of them had been using Cloak of Night, they were damn good to keep two groups from him. Or each group had someone who could, and even then, skilled.

Then again, the last thing he’d expected coming here was a sneak attack from a group of vampires. He’d let his guard down.

“Turner! Mandleson!” Jessy snapped her head to glare at each group, eyes wide with animal rage. “I’m going to—”

Eric put a hand on her shoulder, his eyes also on the two groups. It was enough to calm her down, at least so she didn’t suicide by running at either group. Surrounded by vampires armed with heavy weapons that could rip through the two of them meant they were fucked. Yeah, this was a trap, and they’d walked into it. But he knew how to roll with a punch. She didn’t. If she didn’t calm down, she was gonna get them both killed in some last stand.

Jessy boiled with rage. She knew they were stuck, and she needed an outlet. The outlet became the door someone had told them to walk through, and she kicked it hard enough to break the door frame. She marched in, looking for a fight, but with at least enough control to keep her hands down.

“Jessy, can’t you control yourself for one fucking second?” a voice said.

Sighing, Eric followed her in.

“Garry!” Jessy glared at the man, glared hard, but kept the pistol aimed down, thank god. “Garry you fucking sack of shit, what the fuck is this about? Where’s Avery?”

“Avery’s busy.” The elder stepped off the couch and grinned at them. “Come in and sit down. You’re not going anywhere for a while.”

“What happens after a while?” Eric asked. He stepped into the apartment, and the six vampires in the hallway followed him in. If they’d lowered their weapons, he’d have considered transforming, getting into melee, and beating them to a pulp. Probably a dumb idea. Vampires were fast as hell, and would pick the weapons back up and riddle him with metal before he finished transforming.

Garry shrugged. “You go home. No harm, no foul.”

Jessy threw up her arms, earning a few guns pointed at her. “What the fuck? The fuck do you think you’re doing, holding us hostage for a night?”

“Just making sure some other things go smoothly.”

“Other things?” She stomped up to him, and glared daggers at the man. At least she didn’t punch him this time. “What the fuck are you up to?”

“Private.”

“You don’t get to say private! You’re holding us hostage! You fucking—”

Garry punched her. Eric tensed, but six guns only ten feet away all pointed at him, and he froze in place, every muscle tight and ready to pounce. It wasn’t a soft punch, or a hard punch. It was a vampire

punch, and Jessy went down with a crack. She tried to get back up, but she only managed to get to her hands and knees before she stopped. A punch like that would have put a human in the hospital from brain damage, let alone the bone damage. Her jaw was broken.

“You fucker,” Eric said, glaring at the man and making sure his eyes read ‘you’re dead’ in big, bold letters.

“I owed her that.”

“Bullshit. You—”

“Eric, shut up.” Garry sighed, shrugged, and walked up to him. Not a shred of fear on this guy. Even the vampires with guns in their hands looked at Eric like he’d rip them in half if he got his hands on them, cause it was true. But the elder vampire looked at him like he was a pup he could smash around without effort.

Eric growled, but shut up.

“Good dog,” the fucker said. “This wouldn’t have happened if you’d played nice and worked with Avery, Eric. You’d probably be helping her.”

“Say what?”

Shrugging, Garry walked over to the window of the living room, opposite of them, and leaned his ass against the sill. “I suppose it doesn’t matter if I tell you a little. Neither of you are leaving this room until it’s over anyway.”

For a moment, it sounded like Garry was some sort of cliché villain, explaining his master plan. But no, he was just looking for a way to fill the time while he waited for whoever to do whatever. And judging from what he’d said, that whoever was probably Avery.

“Avery,” Garry continued, “is making her move, tonight.” He stepped over to them, reached down, picked up Jessy by the back of her shirt collar, and threw her onto the couch, hard enough it rocked back and forth a couple times.

Jessy almost screamed in agony, but once she settled, she held her jaw in her hands, groaning. Eric sat down beside her, and winced as he examined the wound. She batted him away.

“Ee’ll heal.”

“Yeah, it’ll heal,” Garry said, going back to the window, “so just sit back and wait. No one’s going to hurt you — more — unless you make them. And believe me, I’d fucking love to take this bitch and rip her jaw clean off.” His words earned some harsh glares from Jessy, but she couldn’t start yelling a storm with a broken jaw. “Avery’s got to do her thing, and she wanted to make sure no one got in the way.

“And that thing is?”

The elder bastard smirked, and shrugged. “I’ve told you plenty already. Who the fuck do you think I am? Jacob? Taunting you with half info?” He laughed, a quiet chuckle that reeked of a man who both loved and hated what he was doing. The sort of sound a barfly made when he was going through the motions at his local waterhole, lots of drunk-fueled laughs, even though everyone there knew, including the man himself, that he hated every moment of his life.

Eric knew those sorts of people, met plenty of them, and Garry sounded just like them.

His laughter died away, and eventually, the man sat against the windowsill and looked out into the night. “So just sit tight, and everyone will be happier by tomorrow night.”

The wolf in Eric wanted to transform and rip the man apart. The wolf also realized Garry was dangerous, and could kick Eric's ass in a straight fight, let alone with a bunch of vamps helping him, guns in hand. All Eric could do was agree, and—

Jessy's phone buzzed, and she reached for it. She didn't get far, maybe six inches, before someone had a shotgun two feet away from her head.

“Let it ring,” Garry said, smile fading, voice darkening. “But if I'm guessing right, shit has officially hit the fan.”

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~~Damien~~

“Relax the wrists, fool,” Maria said.

Damien smiled, but kept his eyes focused on the sheet music. Mozart's Sonata Number Sixteen, in C major. A whimsical piece, with lots of broken chords for the left hand, and a flighty melody for the right. Simple enough he could play it without having to look down at his hands constantly, good practice for developing finger awareness.

They continued for a time. Maria sat beside him on the piano bench, and watched with analyzing eyes. Her face was terrifying, as was her body, her aura, and the white mist that leaked from her, but after months of working with her, and learning with her, it all faded to background noise. It didn't bother him. And her harsh attitude didn't bother him as much anymore either. She could be cruel, but after a time, it became apparent she wasn't cruel to indulge some sadistic urge or resentful, deep-seeded hatred.

She was cruel because she demanded the best from those she was willing to work with. If she was being cruel, harsh, critical, it was because she felt the person worthy of her time, and her help.



It probably wasn't the best approach for someone like Natasha. She was a sensitive sort, and would do better with someone who could nurture her. Not Daniel, either. He was just as cold as Maria, but at least without the cruel, harsh approach. Antoinette, on the other hand, was probably a perfect fit for Natasha, someone who could use a soft word and razor sharp wit to help develop the tiny Mekhet's skill.

Damien had no problem dealing with Maria's approach. Harsh, critical words were pretty much the norm in the Lancea et Sanctum, both Lucas's, and from what he knew about other cities that practiced, other bishops. That was life in the church, and it only grew harsher for Sanctified. It was never to be taken personally. Well, almost never.

He continued playing for a while until their lesson was done. An hour of playing increasingly complex music, until eventually he couldn't keep up. And only after he failed to play a piece a few dozen times did she consider the lesson done.

"Is it this hard for kine?" he said between clenched teeth. "Feels like I'm trying to ... to carve into a piece of metal, with a knife."

"Neuroplasticity. The ability for your mind to adapt to new organization. Learning to play an instrument is easy for kine children, but difficult for kine elders, as the mind grows resistant to adaptation."

"Can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

"Precisely. But for Kindred, you have a different barrier. Unfortunately, our minds will forever lack plasticity. But at the same time, our will creates a larger effect, once you learn how to direct it. As you are doubtless aware, it is not only our wounds that heal while we sleep, but changes to our body revert as well. Cut hair regrows. Piercings are pushed free of skin, and holes mend. Tattoos vanish."

“But, if I make a mental effort before I sleep, those things stick around.”

She nodded. “Yes, and what we are doing here is not so different. Playing an instrument is a more complex task, filled with thousands upon thousands of micro changes to your muscle memory and conscious awareness, but still, not dissimilar.”

Forever Kindred had to manage their human half with their Beast. It made things difficult, but if one could master it, like Maria, they could do some truly marvelous things. Becoming a virtuoso with the piano and organ, and using the power of being Kindred to do it, was beyond impressive, more impressive than a kine using biology to master something. Then again, she had centuries to work with, kine didn't.

But he had centuries to work with too, potentially. That'd been a scary idea in the past. Now, he was starting to look forward to it.

“How goes your relationship with the Begotten?” she said, getting up and heading over to her desk. The idle chit chat had never been a thing before, but lately over the past few weeks, it'd become normal.

He smiled. “She's smarter than I thought.”

“Ah, can't have that. Smart women are troublemakers.”

What? He blinked at her, and she didn't even smile as she sat down and started typing. Did she just make a joke?

“Sometimes I wonder about her, though. She's so joyful, but considering who and what she is, I can't help but think she's running from something.”

“No doubt. She is a monster of nightmares. And while I do not think she is the brightest creature, I expect she's more aware of her surroundings, and the people within, than it appears.”

“Agreed. But, how do I approach that?”

Maria raised a brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if she’s smarter than it seems, then—”

“Then what? Do you want to drag her into philosophical conversations? Or politics? Perhaps you wish to talk with her about the nature of Longinus, of God, Jesus Christ, and the journey the damned must take if we wish to ever see the light of the Lord? Or, perhaps you wish to speak with her of the works of Chopin and Beethoven?”

“I...” He turned around on the piano bench to face her, but ended up looking down as he frowned in thought. “I guess not. We don’t talk about those things now, and I know she’d be bored of those topics the moment I got the first word out.”

That earned a smile from the Nosferatu. “She is a classic extrovert, Damien. Her mind is connected to her body in a way you and I will never understand. She thinks thoughts with her mouth, and feels emotions with her limbs. Do not try and change her. It won’t work.”

That, was true. “It amazes me we get along.”

“Normally I would argue you need much in common with a partner for romance to last, and that the old adage ‘opposites attract’ is juvenile idiocy made manifest. But, sometimes, two people of vastly different minds can complete the other. I am sure Fiona has helped eased the weight on your heart, has she not?”

He winced. Fiona may have been smarter than he figured, but Maria was too, and he’d already figured Maria was a genius. It was disturbing how she could understand things about him, when he’d never told them to her, things that were personal and hard to put to words. Not hard for her.

“She ... has. A lot.”

“And I am sure you’re helping her in a way she does not understand, but needs. Perhaps, someday, the two of you will be able to articulate why you enjoy each other’s company so well; you’ll probably verbalize it better than her, and sooner. But nevertheless, you are likely helping her in some fashion you do not yet understand.”

“Should I ask her about it?”

“Perhaps. Such a powerful question could break a flimsy relationship.”

He winced again. Flimsy? Was it flimsy? He didn’t think so. It was just fun sex at first, Fiona taking advantage of his awkwardness and seducing him. And he’d been happy to be seduced, tied up in a spider web and fucked by a terrifying, gorgeous spider monster.

Every time he took a drink of her, and lost himself in the bizarre, intoxicating taste and power of her blood, he loved it. She loved it. They fucked almost every night, and sometimes went back to the jungle so Vrrall could participate. Vrrall liked to tie him up in her webbing, but when it was Fiona, she liked being tied up instead. So many kinks explored, like a bucket list she was having a blast burning through.

And when they were done, there was cuddling, and chatting. The chatting was usually one-sided, her talking about the things she liked, and him reacting to her statements. He liked doing that. Occasionally he’d chime in with his own thoughts, but he preferred listening to her, and she liked sharing her thoughts with him. It was almost as if she needed to say her thoughts to think them at all, and needed him to listen, so she could listen to herself.

Damien frowned, and then smiled. Attempts to think of Fiona filled him with joy, and moments later, desire. Happened every

time. It was kind of frustrating, honestly, to forever be distracted. But the thought of her sitting on his lap, legs wrapped around him, hands tied behind her, breasts squashed to his chest, and her whole body wriggling to escape him as he slapped her ass, and sank his fangs into her neck, was glorious. It was the wriggling and squirming, like she was prey trying to escape a predator, that really seemed to strike a chord in him. And her, evidently. Trapped, helpless, struggling fruitlessly to get away as he devoured her, with his cock buried in her, drenched in her juices. They both loved it.

He sat up straight and shook out his head. Good Lord, give him strength, that woman was going to be the death of him.

Maria laughed. She'd been watching him, and considering how damn smart she was, could probably read his mind.

"It's a rare thing to enjoy someone's time so, my student. Enjoy it while you can. You—"

Both of them stood up as a noise echoed through the tunnel and into the dome. Matthias groaned, grabbed a broom, and headed toward the noise, but Maria held up a hand, and clicked on a few things with her computer mouse with the other.

More noises, and this time he recognized the sound of bending and breaking metal bars.

"The Uratha have come," she said.

Damien stared at her. "What?"

Sighing, she stepped around the desk, and wiped off her dress of non-existent dust. "They're on the cameras. Matthias, stay out of the way, no matter what happens. Damien, you..." She frowned at the dark tunnel ahead of them, and let out a quiet snarl. Not for him, but for the approaching werewolves. "You may do what you wish."

“What I wish?” He stared at her before peering into the tunnel. Another crunch, this time louder, and accompanied by some groans and growls. The gates were being opened, forcibly.

“Yes, what you wish. I will not force you to partake in this battle.”

“Battle?” Gulping hard on a dry throat, he hopped over to his desk and scooped up his pistol and silver sword. It didn’t have the length or heft of his proper sword, but the steel sword wouldn’t be as effective as the silver-coated one. Supposedly. The silver bullets would work well; he knew that from testing them on Carter.

Except, there didn’t need to be a battle.

“Battle. They’re here to stop me from communing with spirits. From threatening the Gauntlet.”

“But, I haven’t see you—”

“Yes, I have not done these things. But they think I have.”

“Then just explain!”

She snapped her head to glare at him, and he recoiled. Those eyes were like fire against an icy coldness, against an arctic oblivion. He took a small step back, and tightened his grip on his sword.

“I do many things in my private life, Damien, things I would not have these wolves see. My second life is my own, and I will defend that privacy.”

Oh good Lord, save him from the pride of elders. He slowly nodded as the reality sank in, that Maria was going to stand her ground, and not let werewolves investigate her private life, because she was prideful. Quite the sin. But then, Kindred were not forbidden from sinning. It was just, her pride was going to get her killed.

He stayed where he was, and waited, standing a few feet back and to the side of her. Leave? The only way out was through that tunnel. The werewolves would let him leave probably, but, he didn't want to. Madam Turio had extended him a helping hand when no one else had. He wasn't going to let her die over a misunderstanding.

He set his gun aside for a second, quickly activated the emergency app on his phone along with a short text, and picked his pistol back up. No signal down here, not for a cell tower or anything, but Maria had wifi. With any luck, Jessy and Jack would get his message, and come running. And if they didn't, well, they'd find the mess later, cause he wasn't leaving.

Maria met his eyes, and slowly, her gaze softened. And perhaps, for just a sliver of a second, she smiled, before she looked back to the tunnel, and the sound of yet more crunching metal bars.

It didn't take long for the werewolves to enter the dome. They didn't come far, stopping at where the tunnel opened into the dome, and every single one of them looked ready for war. Not for arms; werewolves didn't bother with weapons. It was in their eyes. Each one of them was ready for a fight, or something more animal than that. They were ready for a hunt.

Maria was in her white, old fashioned dress, as usual. Damien wore his Invictus suit. The werewolves, on the other hand, were dressed like a bunch of Carthians, jeans and t-shirts everywhere. It was a little insulting, honestly, considering who Maria was, and that they were currently underneath the Grand Cathedral of Dolareido.

"Explain yourselves," Maria said, the cold bite of her words enough to silence the murmurs of the werewolves.

"Us?" Avery said. "You know why we're here, vamp. You have some explaining to do."

Maria ground her teeth until Damien could hear it. Eesh.

“I will explain nothing. My personal life is none of your concern.”

“Personal life? It’s not personal when it starts affecting others.” Avery stepped forward, not a trace of fear on her. Either that was dumb, or she genuinely was capable of fighting Maria. Unlikely. Elder vampires were a different breed of dangerous from anything Damien figured a werewolf was capable of. But then, werewolves had a habit of hunting as a pack, while vampires had a habit of going solo.

Not quite solo, not with him here.

“I have done nothing,” Maria said.

“Bullshit. You’ve been talking with spirits, Maria, and whatever you’re doing, it’s fucking with the Gauntlet.” She came closer, until the two short women were only inches from each other. “Fuck, we’ve got azlu in the city for a reason. They’re trying to repair damage someone’s creating. That someone”—she pointed at Maria—“is you.”

“I have done nothing of the sort.”

“Then you won’t mind if we take a look around. I—”

Maria reached out, slow enough that it didn’t register as an attack, and pushed Avery away with one hand. “You will leave my domain at once, or so help me, I will make what Viktor did to you, all those years ago, seem like a discourteous conversation.”

The look on Avery’s face was enough to have Damien tighten his grip on his sword. Slowly, he looked from Avery to the other werewolves. He expected Caleb, David, Noah, Carter, Brianna, Monica, Mason, and Erica. The three he didn’t expect, were Arturo, Matthew, and Clara. All three were here. They didn’t look happy to be here, but they were here.



Damien squinted at Art and Matt, and they both returned it, but it lacked conviction. If anything, they looked guilty, and soon they looked away. Did they do something to Natasha? Probably tricked her, misled her, so she didn't know they were coming here tonight.

That better be all they did.

His eyes found Clara's, and unlike the boys, she didn't look away. But the expression on her face was obvious: sadness. She knew this was going to end badly, but she was here anyway.

Something had convinced them to follow Avery on this mission, and from the looks on their faces, it was more than simple, mindless devotion to their boss.

"Viktor's dead," Avery said, "and we both know you're a pale comparison of that asshole."

Maria clenched her fists at her sides. "Am I?"

Damien gulped and glanced over his shoulder. Matthias stood off to the side by Maria's coffin, scared, worried for his master. With the way the conversation was going, he wasn't out of the way far enough.

"Seriously Maria, we're not here to fight. We're here to stop you. Just show us what you're up to, give us your loci and whatever other tools you're using, and we'll be on our way."

"I will give you nothing." No hesitation. Not a single moment to consider the fact she was looking at a dozen werewolves, and that, unlike during the day, there weren't four ghouls sitting nearby with high-powered rifles.

Maria saw this coming, judging from how she was reacting. Why weren't those ghouls here? If she'd known this sort of situation was

inevitable, she should have had her trained guard with her during the night. But they weren't. Why?

"I'm serious, Maria," Avery said. "I've got a dozen spirits calling you out, a bunch of holes in the Gauntlet, azlu running around trying to fix them while they eat up humans doing it, and I know there's a loci nearby. I'm not leaving until this situation is resolved."

Maria took a step forward, again reached out with one hand, and pushed Avery back a foot. Maria rarely touched people, and seeing her push around the alpha of the pack had Damien borderline ready to snap with rising vitae. He leaned his weight onto the balls of his feet, and did his best to watch the pack in the corner of his eyes, while also watching his boss.

"I do not know what you're talking about," Maria said, rage so heavy Damien could feel it. "But you will leave, or I will make you."

What to do what to do what to do. The tension was building, both women waiting for it to snap before they attacked. What would Jack do? What would the sheriff do? Jack would try and play diplomat, and when it failed like it would in this ridiculous situation, he'd use the curse to force peace. Damien didn't have the curse. The sheriff, on the other hand, would make a tactical decision and approach it with cold, ruthless efficiency. Daniel would cut their heads off before they realized he meant to get violent at all. But that approach was lost to Damien as well, since the werewolves had walked in, ready for violence. And he just wasn't fast enough.

He had only one option. When Maria created an opening, he'd have to take it, and disable as many of the wolves as possible. And, if he was going to do this the way Daniel would, that meant kill. He didn't want to do that, but he would if he had to, if Maria could create the opening. And he knew she could. Maria was a Nosferatu. She had absurd strength, and the ability to Obfuscate herself. He

doubted Cloak of Night would help her in this situation, but the ability to punch through concrete would.

But, it wasn't her strength or her stealth abilities Maria was known for. People told stories, like children telling ghost stories around a campfire, of Maria's true talent, and it terrified Kindred. It terrified him, too.

He took a step away from Maria as he felt her vitae rise. No need for Auspex, he could feel it. The werewolves could feel it, too. It were as if the vampire had reached into some dark, ancient well, where a buried and forgotten creature of old slept, and had taken hold of its power. She drew it up, and up, an overflowing river of vitae that made Damien and the werewolves alike stare in shock.

She looked past Avery to other others, and whispered. "A gift. Take it."

Silence fell on them. The wolves stopped breathing, stopped moving, stopped anything. Damien stared at them as the terror built up in their eyes, and the Beast inside him shrank onto itself, horrified by proxy. Now would have been the perfect time to strike, but he couldn't move his feet. The aura that radiated from the corpse lady was a wall of cold death, and he couldn't help but stare at her and her victims, as the werewolves slowly realized what was happening.

They started screaming.

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~~Jack~~

"Diablerie? I ... I know about it."

"Ha. I reckon you do," Black Blood said. "If I'm guessing right, and I think I am, your ancestor did it, right? Drained some other vamp till they turned to dust."

“How would I know if she had?”

“Don’t try and fool an old soul like me, Jack. I know you were given peeks of the past, and I know that event would have scarred the very essence of the curse. It wouldn’t have forgotten.”

“Uh huh.” He folded his arms across his chest, and tried his best to keep his expression neutral. Hard to negotiate with another party, when the other party knew more. First rule of negotiating anything was learn as much as you can beforehand, and Black Blood already had him beat. Best Jack could do was feign knowledge, until an opportunity presented itself.

The ooze around his feet rippled with the alien voice, rumbled, like a fucking bellowing alligator.

“I know how to free you, Jack. The question is, how much are you willing to help me?”

“Help you? I don’t—”

“Come now, boy. Surely you understand by now,” the black water said.

Jack took a step back as the water began to rise. Triss did too, her eyes going wide as she looked at the rising mound of strange, obsidian liquid. Apparently this was not a common occurrence, and Jack unfolded his arms, as if maybe he could physically fight the spirit if it came to it. He knew he couldn’t. Whatever Black Blood was doing, Jack had two options: run, or wait.

As far as anyone could tell, Black Blood had never directly affected anything, only ever indirectly, working his magic. The only times he’d done anything remotely close to direct, was when in Sándor’s nightmare, and even then he hadn’t been too hands on. He’d interrupted things, but that was it.

But, just because he never did things himself, didn't mean he couldn't, just that everyone figured he couldn't. There was a very real possibility that he could, and Jack couldn't help but consider that possibility as the mound of water grew, and grew, and then exploded outward. He threw up his hands to block the wave, but he might as well have been blocking the ocean. It engulfed him, and Jacob, and Triss, and the candle went out.

“And then there was darkness,” Jacob said, chuckling. They were underwater, but not underwater, if Jacob could talk.

Jack groaned and pushed himself to his feet. Blackness, everywhere. Ugh.

Except, not. The candle was out, but there was still enough light to see by. Creepy, eerie, stereotypical spooky green light. He looked around, trying to find the source of it, but wherever it was coming from, it lacked an origin, just like the spirit's voice.

“The fuck was—”

“Now,” Black Blood's voice said, resonating all around Jack's body, “I can show you.”

He was still in the cave, still with the big ritual bowl, so how the fuck was the spirit going to show him anything? Course, soon as he thought the thought, shadowy silhouettes danced before him.

“You couldn't just fucking tell me?” he said.

The presence laughed. “Where's the fun in that? Now, watch.”

Jack watched, and did his best to ignore the fact he was now inside the black ooze that was Black Blood's body. Triss had calmed down, so this was probably a normal thing for her, though the way Black Blood had decided to engulf them was not. Fucker was full of surprises.

Two shadowy figures stood within the bowl, slow dancing, bodies made of wisps of smoke. A man and woman. The smoke didn't have enough detail for Jack to know if they had clothes or not, but by how they were dancing, he figured they had to be, probably something old fashioned.

“What do you know about diablerie, son?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “One vampire drinks another to death.”

“Ha. You say that like it means nothing, like vampires just go around in their corpses, thinking it's perfectly fine and normal to be sucking on humans, and turning their life into something else, something you varmint call vitae.” The spirit laughed, deep and rumbling, raspy and alien, and Southern, all at the same time.

“You say that like it's unusual for one species to prey on others.”

“It's unusual, boy, for one species to basically be dead when they're not.” Black mist pooled up around Jack, thickening in the strange water that surrounded them, and taking the shape of a human body; it had a head, two arms, and two legs, at least. “There's more to your kind than you'll ever understand. Take it from your pal Black Blood, the vampire is a strange, strange creature. That curse lurking around inside you is proof.” The voice still came from everywhere, but the wisp creature beside Jack posed with each word, as if it was doing the talking.

He was prompting Jack, to try and get him to ask ‘what's this got to do with diablerie?’ in a predictable way. Jack folded his arms again, and said nothing. Which of course only made Black Blood laugh again.

“Dablerie, Amaranth, is when a vampire shows their true nature, boy. Corpses, waltzing around, sucking the life out of others cause they ain't gone one of their own. And nothing, nothing shows that

dark part of a vampire, quite as strongly as when they suck the soul right out of another bloodsucker.”

Soul. The S word. Jack squinted one eye at the wisp of smoke beside him, and then looked back at the two figures dancing in the bowl. The man grabbed the woman by the head, yanked it back, and brought his face down to her neck. Fighting, struggling, and not the sexy kind.

“This a memory?” He gestured to the two wispy figures, one dying to the other.

“Indeed.”

“This is nothing like what happened to Susanna.”

“Oh? This man convinced this woman that they were soul mates, destined to be together, forever. So consumed was he with her, he devoured her, down to the soul.”

“Susanna wasn’t fucking dancing with the person she killed.” He’d already told Black Blood about Susanna’s ritual, but the spirit loved his drama and monologues.

“This man,” Black Blood continued, “gathered the ashes of his dead lover, and brought her before the Strix. A tree, deep underground, dead, ancient, a haven for the owls that haunt your kind.”

It was like he’d ripped the memory straight out of Jack’s brain. Holy shit.

“You didn’t mention you already knew about the tree...”

“You didn’t ask.”

Oh this mother fucker.

“What ... what are they?” The bastard knew more. He had to.

“Ah, the striges? The Birds of Dis. Ephemeral creatures that haunt your kind and loathe you for daring to pretend you are human.” Black Blood chuckled, and his voice shook the cave with its deep vibrations. “Can’t say I blame ‘em.”

“I get that they’re ephemeral or whatever, but ... but what are they? The fuck do they care about vampires?” He looked to Jacob when he said it, but the bastard just shrugged and nodded to the wisp beside Jack.

“You may as well ask what is a vampire, and where did they come from?” Black Blood continued.

“Uh, yeah, I did ask that, like, the day after I was sired.”

Triss and Jacob laughed, and Jack couldn’t help but smile a little. Laughter was contagious. Even Black Blood laughed.

“The owls. They’ll never forgive you, vampire, for your refusal to let go of your human half. That’s all you need to know.”

Jack snarled, smile gone and replaced with a flash of rage in an instant. He slashed his arm at Black Blood as he jumped back from him, but all it did was pass through him, like punching smoke.

“The fuck it is! Susanna’s curse is fucking ruining my life! I want it gone! I haven’t done a fucking thing to deserve this. Never even met a Strix.” He’d remember if he ever met a ghostly black owl with glowing yellow eyes, and a need to ruin his life.

Triss stopped laughing, but Jacob didn’t. At least he kept it quiet, unlike the spirit.

“Regardless,” Black Blood said, “the intent of those creatures is not my concern. What I can offer, however, is my assurances that I



can extract the curse.”

“Extract?”

Chuckling again, the spirit gestured to the remaining shadow silhouette on the bowl. Whoever they were, they lay flat on some invisible ground, as a swirling mist surrounded them. At first it seemed like it was the strange, only partly real black water that was everywhere, but as Jack squinted, it became clearer that this was part of the memory. A swirling tornado of blackness that fell upon the man, and cut into his chest. All shadow smoke, no detail, but it was enough for Jack to see the man writhe in obvious pain.

But when the tornado cleared, the man got up. The shadow silhouette faded, and Black Blood chuckled his usual chuckle.

“That’s it?” Jack said, gesturing to everything around him. “That’s all I have to go on, that you can actually do something about this curse? That you can ... extract it?” Which didn’t look pleasant at all, from the shadow memory.

The shadow clone asshole hovered behind Jack and around him, with a sliver of a smile — fucking huge mouth — on the wisp’s face that he could see through. Disturbing.

“Take off the necklace.”

“What? The necklace?”

“The necklace the dragon gave to you. Take it off.”

“Why?”

Shadowy hands he couldn’t feel settled on his shoulders from behind. “So I may see this curse, in your mind, boy. The necklace is suppressing your Beast, and the curse is attached to the Beast,

infects it, alters it, changes it. And you and I both know this curse is more than a simple infusing of power and desire.”

“I’m not letting you inside my head, Black Blood. Forget it.” He brushed the wisp of shadow away, and walked toward the exit. Of course, the moment he did, the green light that allowed him to see vanished. “Oh fuck you.”

“Boy, I’m trying to help you.”

“Bullshit. You just want the curse for yourself.” How the fuck some sort of spirit thing would be able to extract a curse that seemed very Kindred specific, he had no idea. All he knew about Black Blood was the spirit was obsessed with the dead.

And, like he said, Kindred were dead.

“You say that like it can’t be two things. Think, son. My good friend Malachi has grown rather attached to your mother, and we both know it doesn’t do her well, seeing you fight this curse.” The spirit’s shadow floated up and over to the bowl, and he sat on its edge as he looked at him. No eyes, but the mouth that cut clean through the shadow’s head seemed to be pointed at him.

Jack glared at Jacob, but with the bandage over his eyes, it was impossible to read him. His smile softened a little, but that could mean anything from a poker master elder like Jacob.

“Leave my mom out of this.”

“Very well.” The shadow shrugged, and raised his arms to point at the cave around them. “Dolareido has been my cooking pot for centuries, boy. You know the sort of things I get my hands into. Ever hear of me interfering in a bad way? Have I ever done wrong by you, boy? Ever hurt your Prince, or the city? What have I done to make you doubt me?”

That was true, much as Jack hated to admit it. There wasn't any doubt that Black Blood was up to no good, same as Jacob, but that didn't mean he should automatically assume they were nefarious fuckers. If they could help themselves and help him at the same time, they might just do it, out of the kindness of their hearts. Otherwise, Triss wouldn't be with them, right?

Jack trusted Julias. Julias trusted Triss. And Triss trusted Jacob and Black Blood, at least enough for this conversation to happen.

“So you ... you've extracted this curse from someone before?”

“This exact curse? Probably not. But I have helped a vampire before, and ripped out the taint the Birds of Dis left on their Beast.”

“What happened to him?”

The shadow laughed. “Lived another good five ... days.”

“Five days!?”

“The man had enemies, being a diablerist. Without the power of the curse to protect him, he couldn't defend himself. The idgit.”

Triss snorted on a laugh. Black Blood didn't talk like some sort of ancient spirit of death and the dead. He talked like Yosemite Sam.

Jack paced side to side, looking at the shadow in the corner of his eye, and turning thoughts through his head until he got dizzy. He wanted the curse gone. Sure, his meditation sessions helped suppress the curse, specifically its voice and hungers. Combined with the necklace, he felt mostly safe that the curse and the voice in his head were under control. Mostly wasn't good enough. He wanted to be back to normal, even if that meant throwing all the power away. Walking around with a nuke tied to him that he could accidentally set off at any point was torture.

He stopped, and stared at the waiting shadow.

“Who are you?”

“Me? I’m Black Blood. Haven’t you been paying attention, boy?”

No, he was lying. Sure, his name was Black Blood, but everything else was a lie, had to be. Spirits didn’t behave like this, behave like ... Jacob. Spirits were far more one-track minded, right? He’d seen a few by this point, and they didn’t bob and weave with their words and intent like this, like someone with a human mind would. And the fuck did a spirit want with a vampire curse? What could he do with it? Why was Black Blood so interested in death and the dead? Spirits vibed on human emotion, but death wasn’t an emotion. Corpses were corpses, piles of meat and bone, empty, useless to a spirit, right?

“Don’t fuck with me, Black Blood. Who are you? What are you?”

Jacob’s smile was unchanged, but Triss looked confused, eyebrow raised as she looked between Jack and the shadow.

Silence settled on them for a minute, before the shadow hopped off the bowl, and floated toward him.

“Take off the necklace, invite me in, and I’ll show you.”

Clenching his teeth until his jaw cracked, he took off the necklace, and glared at the spirit like he meant to kill him.

“Fine, come in.”

Black Blood laughed, came in closer, and set his hands of smoke on Jack’s shoulders. And as Jack stared at him, the shadow opened eyes, like someone slicing through rubber with a knife where his shadow’s eyes should have been. Eyes, windows to a soul.

And then, it was just the two of them.

Jack stumbled back, almost falling on his ass as he looked around. This place. This place again.

For just a moment, he thought it was the exact same place where he met the azlu's mind. But it wasn't. The giant dome was there, but it wasn't black. It was Jack colored. His memories danced along the walls, shifting, oozing with every color of the rainbow, altering his memories into a mess he couldn't understand. But it was him.

Last time he was here, it wasn't his mind, it was the empty mind of the azlu's host, a dead person with a body kept alive by the spider's infestation. This time, it was his mind, or at least some sort of pocket of it, one that could allow for interaction. Not like the strange, endless white oblivion, when he'd talked with his Beast. No, this was his human mind.

And the curse was there with him. His Beast, the giant mass of black smoke with claws and talons, feathers and fur, beaks and fangs, all mixing and sliding in and out of its body, stood behind him. Except, maybe it wasn't really his Beast? Or maybe it was, being controlled and pulled along by the curse, the other voice that now lived in Jack's head. Maybe it was attached to his Beast like an infection. Or, like a parasite, one that needed to be extracted.

"You fucking suck, you know that?" the curse said in that deep, disgusting, alien voice.

Jack smirked. "This body is mine, and I'll do what I want with it, and you. Fuck you."

"You silenced me."

"You silenced me! Last time you took over." He swiped his arm through the smoke. Predictably, his arm passed straight through it.

Not like he could win a physical confrontation with a non-physical part of him.

“You’re weak, Jack. Weak, and...” The many heads of the Beast turned from him, and faced the other side of the large dome they were in.

Jack didn’t want to look. He knew what’d be there, and he wasn’t looking forward to having this conversation, but it had to be done. Sighing, he slowly turned on the white stone underneath, and faced Black Blood.

If the god of death truly existed, he would have looked like this. A giant, black skeleton, one that put Athalia to shame. He came out of the ground from a black pool, a slowly turning whirlpool of onyx ooze that dripped off the giant skeleton’s body as he climbed up from the depths of some strange hell to reveal himself. Small strands dangled off his bones, looking almost like the remains of clothes someone might find on a corpse a thousand years old. His eyes were completely empty, endless voids of obsidian. Athalia’s eyes had small white dots for irises, but Black Blood had nothing.

“What is this?” Jack said, gesturing around them. “I thought this was ... for human connections only.”

“I reckon you did. Assumptions will be the death of you, boy.” The enormous skeleton didn’t have the room in the giant dome to completely pull himself out of the pool, but he managed his torso and arms, and that was more than enough to tower over Jack forty feet above his head. “Spirits enter the minds of humans all the time. Twist them, mold them, and turn them into perfect tools for their goals.”

Jack ground his teeth, and paced side to side again, looking at Black Blood with each turn. “You’re not taking me over.”

“Ha! No I ain’t. I’d have competition.” The spirit leaned forward, and pointed his giant, black skull at the hovering smoke behind Jack. “This curse of yours, is aware.”

Before Jack could say anything, the Beast grew. And grew. With a hissing snarl, the body of the Beast and curse expanded, taking up more and more of the white stone ground until Jack had to step back to make room. Bigger, until it, he, was bigger than the skeleton half Black Blood managed to fit inside Jack’s mind.

“You,” the curse said, voice dropping an octave until it rumbled inside Jack’s skull as much as the dome, “are no spirit.”

Jack reared his head back. “You fucking serious?” The curse had been reading his mind before, as usual, and apparently agreed with him.

“This thing,” the curse continued with a smoky arm gesturing toward the giant skeleton. “It’s no spirit. It walks and talks like one, it hangs around with them, but it’s no spirit.”

Black Blood did something then that Jack hadn’t expected, something the fucker probably thought too good for a vampire. He got angry. With a rumbling rasp that sounded eerily similar to the curse’s, Black Blood growled, and sank his fingers into the stone like it was made of sand.

“You’re not like the last curse I tasted. You, are aware.”

“No shit.” The curse growled as well, and Jack stared on as he did his best to ignore the growing pain in his skull. This metaphor for a conversation between two demons in his brain was about as comfortable as two dueling jackhammers would have been.

“Ain’t this a surprise. What are you then? A remnant, some shred of will from the Strix? Worthless vermin.”

“And what are you? Some forgotten thing who’s lost everything? All power? All relevance? Dropped at the bottom of world and left to rot where no one would find you?” The Beast pressed in closer, until its swirling mass of beak, snout, fang, and everything else, came within several feet of Black Blood’s face. Several feet wasn’t much when you were big enough to walk over buildings.

“Wait wait,” Jack said, swinging his arms in the air. “How do you know he’s not a spirit?”

The Beast looked down at him, and Jack froze. For all his bravado whenever the two of them clashed wills, there was no denying the Beast and the curse were a duo shitloads stronger than him. They couldn’t hurt him without hurting themselves, but that didn’t change that the power Jack had been given, was at the curse’s beck and call more than his own, and he was looking right at a metaphorical representation of it.

If there was one way he was going to die, it’d be pissing off a metaphor.

“How can you not tell?” the curse said. Well, yelled, and Jack winced as he put his hands to his ears. “Spirits are reflections. They’re shadows. You saw it, we both did. Spirits can only pursue what birthed them. This ... thing,” again he gestured to the enormous skeleton, “is not that. He thinks. He feels. He’s something else. I can smell the presence in him, like a soul.”

Jack almost said something, shut up instead, and stared at Black Blood.

“And you,” Black Blood said, “are residue, leftovers from a dying breed of meddler.” The skeleton raised his head high, and pushed more of his body up and out of the black lake he was still only partially free of. “Jack! You coulda told me this thing was aware. Gonna be hard to pull it outta you with it fighting back.”



“You’re not taking me! You don’t get to have me,” the Beast yelled.

“Ha! Hell you gonna do about it? You ain’t real, curse. Just some shadow, a leftover from your Strix masters. You’ve gone and wrapped yourself around this boy’s Kindred half, but don’t think that’ll save you from me. Why, I’m fixin’ to—”

The curse hit him.

Hit might not have been the best word. An ocean doesn’t really hit something. An ocean crashes. The wave of smoke that poured out of the curse slammed into Black Blood like a tsunami, a weightless form suddenly weighing millions of pounds. Black Blood’s skeleton body fell back, and the small world shook around Jack as the black spirit’s weight dragged over the stone.

No. Not a spirit. The curse said it, and Jack knew it was true, knew it from the first fucking night he ever met the monster. Black Blood wasn’t a spirit, he was something else.

“Jack,” the curse said, and the swirling maelstrom turned to look at him. “The fuck are you thinking? I saved your ass so many times, and you’re going to hand me over to this? This fucking thing? And the fuck do you think he’s going to do with me?”

“I...” Jack gulped and stared up. How the fuck was this happening? What was going on? Yeah, he knew that this whole experience was happening in his head, and if he really wanted to, he could hit Black Blood too. But the curse just knocked him to the ground like ... like he could, like he could fight him off if he had to. Holy shit.

“Well now,” Black Blood said, a rumbling chuckle rising up through him and the whole dome as he recovered. “Seems I underestimated the situation.”

The world went dark. Black mist poured up from around the giant skeleton, up from the pool half his body remained within, and flowed up and over everything. Black everywhere. The curse and Black Blood should have blended into a big mix of obsidian that looked the same, but his brain could tell them apart as easily as red and blue. And, as the seconds went by, it was easy to see the dome was filling up with Black Blood's particular shade of black.

Cold dread poured over Jack like an avalanche, and he fell to a knee. Death buried him, invisible creeping fingers that sank into his limbs, his muscles, and pulled him down until he went to both knees, and his hands. Black Blood hadn't even touched him, and he struggled to keep from getting crushed into the ground.

And the curse suffered the same. It went down with a crash, and a host of talons reached out to brace against the stone, but he couldn't move either.

"Let me make this perfectly clear, curse," the god of death said as he pressed down on Jack, on the curse, and the Beast it rode. "There are rules. I follow them. The only reason I play this game, and don't rip the boy you possess into shreds, is the rules. But don't push me, varmint, or I'll—"

Jack's Beast roared, cutting through Black Blood's words and resonating until Jack's skull felt like it'd burst. Rage poured out of the curse, rage Jack was all too familiar with. The rage he felt when he'd first been kidnapped by Angela and Jeremiah. The rage when they tortured him. The rage when he escaped. The rage when multiple chances to kill Angela slipped through his fingers. The rage when she'd killed Julias. Rage that was partly his, and partly not.

Back then, he'd thought that rage was all him, and that his situation had awoken some part of him that legitimately wanted to rip off Angela's skull and fuck it, just for spite. Some part of him,

something animal and insane, wanted to unleash cruelty so inhuman, they'd put nightmares to shame.

That disgusting, abhorrent, overwhelming rage burst from the Beast and the curse, and threw Jack back into the wall of the dome. His Beast swirled, and shrieked, a banshee cry that sounded like a hundred crows going to war, and a dozen wolves preparing for the hunt. A thousand claws struck out from the Beast, each matched with a pushing wind of smoke, each an ocean crashing against the force of a fucking planet.

But it worked. Black Blood snarled an annoyed rasp, and his presence lifted. The explosion of the Beast's rage settled, at least enough for Jack to fall back off the wall and to his feet. His own groan might as well have not existed, with these two titans roaring and screaming at each other. Like, Godzilla and Ghidorah, having a shouting match in someone's skull.

Except, this was his skull. Jack had let Black Blood in, so he could prove he could do something about the curse. He hadn't expected the curse to fight back. But that didn't matter. This was his skull, and Black Blood only got in because he allowed him.

Rules. He said he followed rules.

Black Blood reached out, set a hand on the swirling mist of Jack's Beast, and unleashed his own hell. Raw, cold death radiated from his skeleton palm, and engulfed the dome and everyone in it again. No rage, no hatred, at least not the sort the curse had. Black Blood was simply annoyed, like a god would be annoyed with a gnat. It was more than enough.

With a rasp and roar, Black Blood reached upward with his left hand, and pressed down on the smoke body of the Beast with his other. A hailstorm of black ice rained down on the curse, summoned by Black Blood's raised hand, even as the giant skeleton pressed down on him harder, and harder, until the wriggling mass of the

Beast squashed to the white stone. Black shards pummeled him, crushing any attempt for him to form his myriad of limbs into something more concrete.

“Here, in the mind,” Black Blood said with a quiet chuckle, “you can resist me, curse. Out in the physical realm, I’d crush you into paste.”

Except, he wouldn’t, couldn’t. He had to follow rules. Time to take a stab in the dark at what some of those rules were.

“Black Blood! Enough!” Jack yelled.

Black Blood slowly turned his giant skull to look down at him. “You’ve put up with this lowlife for this long, Jack? Color me impressed.”

“I said that’s enough! This is my mind, and you’ll behave like a guest. Let him up.”

That brought the giant to a standstill. They stared at each other for a moment, one small vampire meeting the gaze of a giant black skeleton, currently in the process of crushing into the ground the Beast and curse Jack had considered nuke-level dangerous. Letting him into his mind had been way too risky, stupid move, but maybe there was something to salvage from this.

With a snort, the skeleton released the Beast. Immediately the curse rose to his full height, or metaphorical power or whatever, and shrieked complete, abject hatred at the entity.

“Curse! Enough! Or I swear to fucking god, I will ask Antoinette to lock me up and do experiments on me until she can figure out what to do with you. Months and months of lying around, tied to a table, doing absolutely nothing.”

He wasn't sure if it was the threat of Antoinette removing the curse, or the threat of months of boredom that did it, but the curse calmed down. It shrank down to something only moderately colossal, and hissed and snarled and cawed, but didn't attack Black Blood. Finally, some progress.

"Black Blood," Jack said, stepping in closer. "I have heard your proposal. I have no idea how or why, but I believe you when you say you could remove the curse." With the obvious intent to use the curse for his own personal gains. Black Blood was some kind of entity of death, or dead blood or something, which must have meant he had a bridge to Kindred other beings didn't; Kindred were walking corpses, after all. If the curse affected vampires specifically, and Black Blood could interact with vampires in this sort of way, in this psychic-communication-Discipline-using kinda way, maybe he really could just throw the curse into a jar, and use him like an ingredient in deadly magic.

Course, the curse could hear these thoughts. They could have a nice fucking chat about it later.

"Well then," Black Blood said, emphasis on the drawl, "let me just —"

"I didn't agree to that. You proved you could do it, and that the payment would be you get to keep the curse for yourself. Am I right?"

Black Blood glared at him for a few seconds before speaking. "Yes."

"Then this meeting is concluded. I'll contact you after deliberation." Just like Julias taught him. Position of power. Control the meeting.

The Beast rumbled, a heavy chuckle, predatory and amused. Black Blood, on the other hand, remained silent for ten whole fucking

seconds. Might as well have been eternity.

“Very well.” With an annoyed sigh, the huge skeleton lowered himself back down through the huge pool of blackness he’d come up from. “But, make sure to chew on this nugget, boy, before I go. Diablerie was the sacrifice this curse’s original owner used to be blessed by the striges. Imagine then, what some vampire might have to do to expunge it completely, without the help of someone like me.”

Before Jack could ask what the fuck he was talking about, the skeleton disappeared into the onyx water, and moments later, the mind meld ended. A flash of white hit Jack’s eyes, and then he was back in Jacob’s cave. Triss and Jacob looked at him, heads tilted to the sides, and judging from expressions and posture, they’d been waiting a whole three seconds or something. Yeah, that made sense. The mind meld with the azlu had felt like it took minutes, but it’d only taken seconds, from what Clara had said.

“We’re done here,” Black Blood said. “Think about what I said, boy. Might just save your life.” The shadow silhouette fell apart, like droplets of ink in water. And a moment later, the black water that engulfed them fell apart too, draining through the floor, the walls, even the fucking ceiling, defying gravity and oozing away like sentient slime.

“That, was weird,” Triss said. Weirder was how her candle re-lit as the black water left, taking the green glow with it. “His shadow just touched you, and then he says we’re done?”

Jacob laughed. “They had a chat, dumbass, in here.” He pointed at his own temple. “And judging from the kid’s expression, it didn’t go well.”

“It went fine, Jacob.” Jack frowned at the man, and almost laid into him. Who the fuck was Black Blood? The curse was adamant he wasn’t a spirit, and considering Jack’s own suspicions, he had no

choice but to believe him. The curse had known the azlu creature was ancient when they'd had the mind meld, said he could smell it on the spider. And for all his asshole attitude, the curse didn't seem interested in lying. Raping and pillaging, torture and mass murder, sure, but not lying.

"What'd he mean?" Triss asked. "About, thinking about what he said?"

"It's personal."

"Personal? He said it could save your life. Doesn't exactly sound personal."

"I'll ... tell you later, ok, Triss? Promise. Just, needs to be between me and him, for now." Hopefully Black Blood would respect that. It wasn't the end of the world if he told Jacob, and Jacob told Triss, but it was something Jack would prefer to get figured out before anyone else did.

The fuck had Elaine done to get rid of her curse?

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Back up on the surface, Triss and Jacob left. Said they had their own shit to do. He had no idea what those witches were up to, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know. They weren't involved in the covenant disputes, so it wasn't like they were preparing for war or anything.

He watched their backs as they left, and sighed. Beatrice was becoming more and more like Jacob each passing night, and he didn't like that. Not because he felt Jacob was an asshole. But, he was pretty damn sure whatever sort of dark shit Jacob regularly got into wouldn't help Triss get over Julias.

A couple caws drew Jack's eyes up, and he smiled as his friends flew down to him. Mulder and Scully perched on each shoulder, and

he offered each some oats from his pockets. They pressed into his neck, and he gave each of them a few scratches behind the head, before—

*You seriously going to let that thing have me?*

Jack almost jumped, before he looked down at his necklace, still in his hand. Shit, forgot to put it on.

*Just listen to me for once, asshole.*

I listened to you far too much. Listening to you has caused me nothing but pain.

*Bullshit. But don't distract me, this is fucking important. That thing, Black Blood, he's no fucking spirit.*

I ... believe you.

*I know. But there's something else. I recognized the smell on him.*

Tell me about it. Every time I'm around Mary, that creepy, cold, dead feeling, feels like that.

*That's her aura, and yeah, it's damn fucking similar. But I said smell, something you'd never pick up unless you learned how to use your nose like a proper Kindred. Like a proper—*

Get to the point.

*I smelled something a lot like that fucker Black Blood, every time we found one of those tears.*

Ice ran through Jack's veins, and his eyes opened wide as he watched Jacob and Triss disappear around a building corner as they walked off.

You're sure?



*Damn fucking sure. I'm not saying it was him, but it sure as fuck smelled like him.*

The portal Fiona took Damien and me through was his, according to him. Sky called it a verge? It said the verge was from before Black Blood's time, and that Black Blood had claimed it.

*That one was a lot older, and stable. The new tears are the problem. They're the ones the azlu are going for.*

Maybe he just ... investigated the tears before we did?

*Maybe. Or maybe the fucker's up to something. Talk with Azamel. She's still alive, right? Before the old bat croaks, see if she can piece something together.*

That wasn't a bad idea.

Think the Uratha have picked up on this? They can smell spirit stuff.

*Probably not. I couldn't smell this part of him until the mind meld.*

Nodding, Jack quietened his mind, and slipped the necklace back on. The curse would have protested, but Jack did it quick, on reflex, fast enough the curse didn't know he was doing it until it was done. Thoughts, into the flame. Urges and raw desire, into the flame. And with the necklace on and telling his Beast to settle, Jack could think clearly once again. Just him and his thoughts, in the haven of his mind.

And that's when he realized his phone had buzzed when he'd come back up from underground.

"Busy busy busy. I miss my old job," he lied, and checked his messages.

The first buzz was from Avery. She wanted him to go check out something in Devil's Corner. Ugh, long way from here.

The second buzz had been distinct, and only now that he could think, did he realize what the unique buzz indicated. Damien or Jessy had triggered their emergency app. Checking the phone proved it. Damien had sent out an alert.

“Shit. Shit shit. Where is Damien right now?” He pulled up the Invictus GPS tracker, and couldn't find him, only his last known coordinates. The Grand Cathedral of Dolareido. That meant he was under it, in Maria's dome. “The fuck? Why would he ... fuuuuck.” He sent Antoinette and Michael a quick message, and took off running straight for the Cathedral. It was nearby. He could be there in five minutes.

But if he guessed right, five minutes might not be enough.

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He threw open the Cathedral doors, and Mulder and Scully each flew into the building and up high, scouting. No one inside. He ran to the pulpit, up onto the stage, and beside the organ where the curved wall held a door at the corner. He ran down, almost falling over steps as he jumped down them four at a time, down and down, until he came to the tunnel of Maria's den. Mulder and Scully each took a shoulder once again, and he marched forward.

The gate was torn open. Didn't take much analysis to see it was done by hands and claws. Shit shit shit. Yelling echoed through the stone, screams, hollers, and visceral cracks and breaks. They were fighting.

He ran faster, balls of his shoes slamming into the smooth stone as he darted through one broken gate, then another, and another, each one torn open. The Uratha had come, and had zero intention of letting something like rules stop them from their hunt. God, if they

killed Damien, he wasn't sure what he'd do. God, if Maria killed all of them, he wasn't sure what he'd do then either.

He came out of the tunnel, and into Maria's den. A huge dome, with the walls covered by history. Hanging drapes and curtains that looked like they belonged in Jack's mansion. Paintings, many obviously Catholic, decorated her walls. A huge piano. An actual coffin. Maria was old school, the sort of vampire people told stories about, stories of fear and reverence. She was the vampire people thought of when someone said Dracula, not Antoinette and the other dragons.

As Mulder and Scully resettled on his shoulders, Jack looked around, and gulped.

Avery, or probably Avery, judging from the lighter color of her fur, held Maria up by the throat in the center of the huge room. The vampire's arms were gone, ripped off, and bits of bone stuck out from the loose sleeves of her ruined dress. She glared down at the werewolf, eyes full of ancient rage, but despite her legs being free underneath her, she made no attempts to kick the werewolf.

More werewolves, all the werewolves, stood around, each fully transformed into their big war forms, and each covered in blood. The place was a mess, with curtains ripped and one of the desks smashed. Their big foot claws had left a lot of huge gashes on the once pristine, smooth stone floor, and shards of metal and wood were everywhere.

One of the werewolves held a large man by the back of the collar. Dead? No, breathing, unconscious. Maria's ghoul, Matthias. A nasty gash sliced across his chest, exposing his muscular body underneath.

And one of the werewolves, one Jack recognized intimately, one that had literally once licked him, stood on Damien, her massive weight and strength pinning his broken, battered body. She half

turned to face Jack, and her visible eye widened as she recognized him. But Jack didn't look at her for long, eyes falling and staring hard at his friend on the floor.

One of his legs was gone. And, like Maria's, it hadn't been cut off cleanly by a sword or anything. And it hadn't been ripped off either. The pant leg, the flesh and bone, it was mangled and shredded.

It'd been bitten off. And Clara had clothes stuck to her snout.

Jack met her eyes, clenched his fist, and took a step forward. The pack, who'd already half turned to face him, all turned completely, and in unison. A lot of them had blood on them, and since vampire blood turned to ash in seconds, that was their own blood. A quick glance to the floor showed Damien's pistol, slide back and awaiting a new magazine, while his sword sat on the other side of the den, soaked in blood.

The wounds on the werewolves' bodies hadn't healed, not completely. Some of them audibly sizzled, as if they'd been burned by acid, and still were. At least seven of the werewolves had huge gashes on their bodies, but none of them had cuts deep enough to put any of them out of commission.

He took another step forward, and both Scully and Mulder let out announcing caws. Every single werewolf took a step back, including Clara, abandoning her position atop Damien to get herself closer to Avery, who stood the furthest back.

"Jack," Clara said. "We—"

"You know, I tried. Everyone in this damn city wants to kill each other, or at least jump to violence as their first step in negotiation. But I really fucking tried to help everyone get along. Everyone has their reasons for doing shit, for getting in each other's way, but I thought for sure, if people just talked to each other, everyone could just ... live and let live."

Clara looked down. Even in werewolf form, it was easy to read the shame on her.

“Jack,” Avery said, turning to face him, hand still wrapped around Maria’s throat and holding her up at a distance beside her. “Turn. Leave. This is our business. Our hunt. Go.” As typical of transformed Uratha, her speech was broken, choppy, and harsh, almost like a bark.

Jack took another step forward, and both of his crows took the air, cawing and circling above, like vultures. And again, every werewolf, save Avery, took a step back.

“Jack,” she continued, “I’m warning you. Go.”

And with a hardening glare, he licked his fangs, and took off his necklace. “No.”

## Chapter 132

~~Antoinette~~

Veronica, still unconscious, lay in the ritual circle, bathed in the blue light of her chandelier. Antoinette and Elaine both pointed their tablets at her, observing with keen eyes as the humming machine in the background ran through the various wavelengths the devices were programmed to respond to. They started with the same frequency that had detected the remnants of the Strix upon Jack's person, and moved outward from there.

Nothing. Antoinette breathed a sigh of relief, sat at her nearby table, and logged the event.

"I guess the curse does not spread so easily," Elaine said. "I had thought that, perhaps, since he has loosed it upon himself, it would affect his blood."

"As did I. But it appears we worried over nothing. Did her blood taste different than another kine's?"

Elaine shook her head as she sat across the table from her. "No."

Nodding, Antoinette closed her laptop, and combed her hair over her shoulder. "Très bien. Though, I will perform this test once again, if Jack ever elevates her to ghoul. A drop of his blood might not contaminate, but perhaps if infused with will and vitae, it may."

"Perhaps." Elaine took several of her own notes, sighed, closed her laptop, and leaned back. "I have not seen Daniel for some time, Ann. Where is that old stone?"

Daniel was, as often this past year, searching for the mysterious disturbance within Dolareido. Whether that be through direct

espionage, or separating from his body to explore the city as a projection with Auspex, she did not know. Such was the case with Daniel. He would do what he felt necessary, and while he always ensured her he would do as she bid, and that he would not risk his second life needlessly, he pushed himself.

Her sheriff may have been quiet as a stone, but she knew the man cared for her city, as much as she did.

“He hunts.”

“Ah. Keeping secrets, old friend?”

Antoinette rolled her eyes. Such was the game. They both kept secrets from each other, her and Elaine, and it was a mutual understanding that they do so, but never to the other’s detriment.

“Naturally.”

“Mhmm.” Elaine laughed, shrugged, and leaned forward over the table. “Does he still suspect me of foul play?”

“Has he ever?”

“Of course. I doubt he thinks my arrival here coincidental.”

“But he knows it is not. He knows you are here because of Jack, and the curse, and the legacy you have created.” Antoinette smiled at Elaine, her devious smile. “And for other reasons you refuse to share, I am sure.”

Elaine returned the smile. “Naturally.”

They chuckled. Such an old, silly game, the Danse Macabre, one they both laughed at, and yet, one they both played with dedication.

“Though if it is the sheriff’s touch you are after, I am afraid he seems quite interested in Athalia.”

That earned a sneer from her old friend.

“That woman is a pile of hate, rage, and baggage.”

“And Daniel is a rock, a foundation, that she could perhaps use to rebuild herself.”

“Then the sheriff sees potential in her I do not. She is Begotten, forever doomed to fight against hungers greater and more damaging than you or I could manage. And she is a broken woman, a mother who has lost her vile daughter.”

“I think, perhaps, there is more to this than is obvious.” She leaned in, voice softening. “Daniel forever feels a failure, for what happened with his childe Natasha, and how she fled the Ordo in her fledgling years. The man needs a project. Athalia is, perhaps, that project, someone he can help.”

A twinkle danced across Elaine’s eyes. “They are using each other.”

“You know very well we all use each other. That does not mean there is not genuine emotion to be had.”

“Too true.” Nodding, she looked past Antoinette, to the distant thrall sleeping upon the floor. “This Veronica Tam is quite the treat, and to Jack’s physical tastes, I am sure. Did you find her specifically for him?”

Laughing, Antoinette shook her head. “No, but when I examined her file, I knew she would fit well.”

“Fit well on Jack’s length, you mean?”

This again. The woman had a one-track mind, indeed.

“I knew she would fit well as his first thrall for a host of reasons.”



Elaine grinned at her, a knowing grin, stood up, and slowly walked over to the thrall. “Do not be coy. You think I have not noticed the way your eyes brighten, every time you have found a new way to spoil your lover?”

“I do no such thing,” she lied.

“Ha. Ann, I have never seen you as overjoyed as when you are spoiling your little Ventrue.” She reached down, and scooped the unconscious woman up onto both arms, horizontal and against her chest. “Like, a rich man, who delights in seeing his woman light up with bliss when he buys her jewelry.”

“Ugh, do not paint it in such an ugly light. Such a stereotype is unbecoming.”

Elaine shrugged, sat Veronica in a chair at the table, and sat beside her. “I think it is sweet. As you said, we all use each other. The boy clearly enjoys being spoiled, and you clearly enjoy spoiling him. And there is an undeniable connection between you two.” After a nod and affirming smile, she reached out and brushed the tiny thrall’s hair behind an ear, exposing the piercings there. “And from how this one reacted, I am sure she will bring the boy mountains of erotic pleasure. You are not concerned she will attempt to seduce him, when you are not present?”

“I am sure she will try, especially once the Vinculum is complete. But she will fail.” Antoinette smiled at the thrall, and adjusted the shirt with the wide, plunging cleavage, to cover the woman’s breasts correctly. “And besides, it will not be as if she is not allowed to participate. Once the Vinculum is done, and Jack is sure of her loyalty, I look forward to seeing her join us.”

Elaine laughed, a hearty sound, and she shook her head. “You mean you look forward to seeing Jack struggling to handle the sheer eroticism you are planning to bury him in. I do not think he truly appreciates what our stories have implied.”

True. Her love did not grasp that when Antoinette or Elaine talked of sleeping with dozens of ghouls and thralls at once, they were being literal.

“And I look forward to his growth as a Kindred.”

Elaine nodded, but her eyes settled on Antoinette, and a mischievous grin grew. “We spend far too much time speaking of your little Ventrue, and romance.”

“That ... is true.”

“Like young girls, indulging in flights of emotion.”

Sighing, Antoinette nodded, and sat up straight. “And as fun as that is, perhaps we should stop. It is great having you here, Elaine, so that I can, as you said, indulge these flights of emotion. I have had only Natasha to speak with, and she does not appreciate my situation as you do. But, I think you are right. Far too much time, speaking of love and sex.”

She was not sure she believed her own words. Once a cold, tactical queen of Dolareido, and now a lovesick girl who could not think of anything else but her little Ventrue? Perish the thought.

“Agreed.” Elaine’s grin only grew, and she winked. She did not entirely believe her own words either. “Azamel’s end approaches. What are your plans?”

Straight to business then.

“Jack informs me she plans to have Sándor replace her. I see no issue with this. As broken a man as the gargoyle is, I think he will fit the city better than Azamel. She has a habit of—” Her phone buzzed. A message from Jack. She pulled out her phone, and stared at the message. “Merde.”

“Ann? What is the matter?”

“Jack ... believes that Avery is confronting Maria, and he is on his way to stop her.”

“Oh. I can ... imagine how that will go. What do you intend to do?”

“I sha—we shall go.” If worse came to worse, and she had to confront the curse, better to have Elaine with her. “And observe.”

“Observe?”

“Observe. If Maria dies, so be it.”

---

~~Damien~~

Maria’s wrath was inhuman. The werewolves clutched their skulls, and screamed absolute and utter despair, as the elder vampire forced a nightmare upon their minds. Whatever it was, whatever the poor fools were forced to see and experience, it had them horrified. Many reached up and clawed at their faces with their fingers. Others fell to their knees. Matthew and Arturo resisted for a few moments longer than the others, but they too fell, gasping and yelling as something wicked scarred their souls.

All except for Avery. Her necklace glowed a gentle blue for a few moments, hidden inside her white t-shirt, but before Damien could put two and two together, the woman transformed.

She transformed fast. Within seconds, the enormous beast of muscle, short gray fur, and claws erupted from the once small woman. Damien should have reacted, but it all happened so damn fast. Avery should have been on her knees, screaming and crying like the others, but she wasn’t. The pack leader grabbed Maria by the throat with one colossal hand, and Maria’s arm with the other.

Maria's eyes widened with shock, and the Nightmare she held over the pack vanished, her vitae plummeting as she realized what was happening. But it was too late. The werewolf squeezed, and pulled.

The only thing that kept Maria's head attached to her shoulders, was Avery's mercy. The werewolf had caught Maria totally by surprise, and if she'd wanted, she could have squeezed and popped the unprepared elder's head right off. But instead, she ripped off Maria's left arm.

Maria screamed, a sound that shattered the cries of the werewolves, and Damien's paralysis.

He brought up his pistol and fired at Avery. Two caught her in the shoulder, and she dropped Maria's arm; it was already falling apart into tiny cinders and ash. But the werewolf, roaring in agony as silver burned her flesh, turned and put Maria between him and three more oncoming bullets. The bullets hit the Nosferatu's body and stopped, turning Maria's scream of surprise into annoyed grunts. Bullets would do little to a vampire, especially one as old as her. But that didn't mean they didn't hurt.

"Put her down!"

"No." Avery glared at him over Maria's shoulder, woman held at arm's length in front of her. "Drop weapon. Now."

"I—" He didn't get to negotiate.

Maria shrieked like a banshee, and drove her right fist into Avery's wrist. Crack. Avery's roar buried Maria's scream of rage, but the Nosferatu was free, and she wasted no time. She threw herself at Avery's stomach, tackling a monster almost twice her height. Not enough weight to push her over, but the following punch was hard enough to send Avery to the floor, rolling fast, until she hit the wall with an enormous thud.

And because physics were a thing, Maria went the opposite direction, but she landed on her feet. Five feet up against the wall. She hopped off, but before she could land on the floor, a stampede of giant beasts ran toward her. Her, and Damien.

He pointed his pistol and fired at the nearest wolf, one with black fur, one he thought he recognized. Arturo. He knew Art was fast, a breed of werewolf that did cloak and dagger, same as Mekhet, but Damien wasn't prepared for just how fast something that huge could be. The giant wolf ducked several bullets, but two managed to catch his leg, and he fell, momentum carrying him past Damien and into the back wall near the piano.

Damien didn't have time to capitalize. The rest of the pack charged, and judging from the size, and angry roar of the oncoming goliath, he'd just shot this one's best friend. Matthew was bigger than every other werewolf in the pack, and he shook the Earth with each step, claws tearing into the stone as he charged.

Damien pointed his pistol, and shot the beast. One, two, three, four. Matthew kept coming, the gaping holes in his side, shoulder, and thigh, caused by the silver bullets not enough to slow him down. Wincing, Damien pointed at the man's face, and pulled the trigger.

Click. Empty.

He ran at Matthew, and at the last moment slid between the giant's legs. Sword in hand, he sliced at the brute's legs on the way past, and managed to get his silver sword an inch into one of Matt's calves, before he rolled to his feet. Blood gushed and coated the sword, and sizzled. Judging from the roar Matthew unleashed, the silver was working.

Another werewolf ran for him. Monica he guessed, from her position and the darkness of her fur, but the werewolves all looked similar when transformed. He knew she was young, possibly the

youngest of their pack, but she was fast. She was damn fast, like Arturo. She caught up to him far faster than Matthew had, and Damien barely had time to turn and face her when the colossal creature slammed into him.

The empty pistol flew out of his hand. He had another magazine, but no way they were going to let him reload. That was the problem with this fight. If he'd been up against other vampires, he could have exploited their solo nature; vampires sucked at cooperation. The werewolves, on the other hand, moved like they could read each other's minds. They moved together, flowed around each other, and circled him and Maria seamlessly. The moment his pistol landed, a nearby werewolf slammed a foot down on it, and kicked it away behind him.

That was fine, he still had his sword, and he drove it down into the werewolf who tackled him. She'd gotten her hands around his waist, her claws into his skin, but hadn't had the chance to tear into him yet. They collided with the floor, and he pulled on the blade, slicing into her back by her right shoulder, and drawing the blade up until it hit bone.

She screamed, a canine scream that blocked out his hearing with how close she was, and she threw him to the side with her one good arm. He somersaulted through the air, landed on his feet, and dashed for the nearest werewolf. They were all close and circling him. Better he take the fight to them, and prevent them from getting into their practiced positions.

He lost track of who was who. Fur, muscle, fangs and claws, they were everywhere, and they were all close enough to cut him open from head to crotch with one good swipe. He ducked under a werewolf's sideways slash, and sliced up with his sword, catching the towering behemoth along the abs. Might as well have been cutting steel. They roared and stepped back, and clutched their bleeding stomach with one hand. Damien's only advantage in this

fight was silver. If he could deal a serious wound to every werewolf, maybe he'd have a chance.

Another came up behind him, and Damien dove forward away from them, crashing into the wounded werewolf's shoulder and knocking them over. In the tumbling mess of limbs, he rolled over and out of the way of the attacking werewolf's pounce. Fast as these brutes were, especially ones like Arturo, they still weighed hundreds and hundreds of pounds. They'd never be as fast as him. He sliced out at the arm of the werewolf that'd barely missed him, getting her deep in the forearm until he felt blade hit bone. He wasn't strong enough to cut through werewolf bone, not at this angle, but that didn't mean he didn't get through muscle and tendon.

He got up, and glared at Clara. Avery and some others were fighting Maria, and Damien was doing his best to get to her to help her out. Every other werewolf was trying to catch him, and judging from their swings, were willing to kill him if they had to. Clara on the other hand, watched.

No time to say anything or call her out. Another werewolf came at him, and Damien went up and over, a large jump that left him exposed, but they hadn't expected it. He sliced his sword across the werewolf's head, getting ear and skin, but again didn't have the leverage to get through bone. Nothing bleeds like the scalp, and red fountained over the werewolf, the floor, and his sword. It sizzled over the silver, until Damien could smell it.

The dome shook once again, thud thud thud, and Damien turned to find Matthew charging him. Damien lifted the sword, ready to leap at the man and sink his blade into his chest, but at the last second, Matthew threw his weight down, getting on all fours. For a moment Damien was sure the beast meant to run into him like a charging bull, but Matthew had to know he wasn't fast enough to catch Damien.

Sure enough, another werewolf pounced over Matthew, directly over him from behind, hands out and reaching for Damien. Arturo. Despite the bullet wounds still bleeding everywhere, the werewolf came at him, rage in his eyes, animal hunger, and a need for violence.

Werewolves stood at Damien's sides, blocking his escape routes and forcing his hand. He jumped, up and over Matthew, and over Arturo, but the smaller werewolf — still bigger than most of his companions — reached up mid pounce, grabbed Damien's foot, and brought the vampire down with him as he slammed into one of Maria's desks. Wood shattered, splinters went everywhere, so did a laptop, and a pile of books.

By the time Damien realized what'd happened, Matthew's colossal weight slammed into them, and the three rolled up into a pile. Almost enough weight to break Damien's bones, but not quite, and he scampered away from the pile of claws tearing and scratching in a frenzy, ripping open his suit and skin.

Werewolf claws burn, they burn a lot. It wasn't like a knife, or a claw from any regular animal. Something about werewolves and their claws let them cut into things claws shouldn't have been able to cut, and burn like they were on fire. They cut through his suit like butter, and his skin, but he rolled away before they got too deep.

He jumped to his feet, and turned to face another werewolf. Clara. She walked toward him, several werewolves behind her, struggling to stay standing as they recovered. The silver wounds hurt them, badly.

“Clara,” he said, “don't make me—”

Clara opened her mouth, and roared.

Sound slammed into him, deafened him, and he raised his sword to prepare for her pounce. Rather, he tried to raise his sword. He



looked down at his arm as it hung limp, and squeezed the sword as hard as he could, but his fingers barely responded. He tried to lift his arm again, but his body had grown weak, too weak to lift its weight.

Clara's walk turned into a charge, and he stared at her as she sank her feet's claws into the stone. She'd done something to him. That roar, it'd hit him, did something, sapped away his strength and paralyzed him. And she was running straight at him.

Move. He squeezed the sword harder, but his body didn't want to respond. His strength was there, but it was hidden, buried under the roar that echoed through his body, its vibrations seeping into his bones. Move. He poured vitae into his limbs, but they refused to respond. Something was blocking his brain from communicating with his arms.

Move. Move! He focused his mind and told it to ignore the strange vibration coursing through him. Whatever Clara had done, it wasn't something physical. It was a Discipline, the werewolf equivalent, and whatever it was, it was confusing the fuck out of his insides. But, it also didn't last.

The vibration in his body settled, and the moment he could feel strength flow through him again, even if it was only a small amount, he poured every ounce he had into his legs, and jumped.

Clara saw it coming. She reached out and grabbed his ankle as he flew overhead. Inertia turned his world into chaos as her grip pulled down on him while his body kept trying to flip over her. He managed to keep his grip on his sword, and he swung it—

The world turned white, and he screamed. His body collided with hers, draping over her shoulder, and his scream died away as he watched his sword fall, half flying away with his momentum having pendulum swung him into Clara's back. Tink, tink, metal against the

stone, rolling away, before Clara rolled him off and set him on the ground.

She growled, and pressed down on him with one foot. Claws sank half an inch into his back, and he yelled as the burning sensation shot through him again.

“Hold still,” she said.

He turned his head and glared up at her. She met his gaze, and the animal rage in them melted away. Slowly, she turned her head, bits of his pant leg dangling off her enormous teeth, and looked to where his leg had fallen. Damien didn't bother looking. The sound of his leg burning away into ash and cinders in a matter of seconds was sickening enough.

He looked over to Avery, and winced. In the thirty seconds of fighting, he'd done a lot of damage to the werewolves, but there were too many of them. Avery had surprised Maria, somehow being immune to her Nightmare, and that'd changed everything. Even as Maria broke the arms and legs of werewolves that came at her, she was just one person, with one arm, and it wasn't long before Avery got her hand around the tiny woman's neck, and lifted her once again. Werewolves healed broken bones in seconds.

And once again, Avery ripped off her arm, her one remaining arm.

“Enough!” yelled Avery, barking voice cutting through the madness around them, and bringing everything to silence. She tossed the limb aside, and it rolled over the floor toward Damien, before it burst into cinders, and faded away. “Enough. Show secrets. Now.” Avery shook Maria, hard, and the tiny woman's legs dangled and swayed, like wind chimes.

“Fuck you,” Maria said, glaring eyes staring hard at the werewolf.

Damien sighed, and let his head drop to the floor, temple pressing to it as he watched Avery and Maria. Jack and Jessy weren't going to get here in time. He'd sent the message five minutes ago, so unless they—

He whipped his head around to the tunnel, and he breathed a sigh of relief as someone stepped into view, a small man with two crows on his shoulders. Well, holy shit. Thank God for miracles.

---

~~Jack~~

His friends circled above, and cawed a few points of interest. The werewolves were hurt, but recovering. The ones hurt by silver were recovering damn slowly though, and Jack knew they'd take days, maybe weeks to heal from wounds they'd normally heal in literal minutes, if not seconds. And the ones that weren't hurt by silver, did. One werewolf near Maria pushed themselves back to one clawed foot, and Jack winced as he saw, and heard, their leg snap back into place at the femur. Werewolves were ridiculously durable, and regenerated like an elder Gangrel.

Which just meant he'd have to break their limbs multiple times.

“You have five seconds,” he said, and he lifted his left hand, fingers out, “to let her go and get out.”

“Jack,” Clara said, “we are here to—”

“One.” He pulled down a finger, and steeled his gaze at Clara. A silent warning. He wasn't going to pull punches here.

“Jack!” Matthew this time, easy to tell apart from the others by his size. The giant roared. His leg was hurt, still bleeding. “We cannot—”

“Two ... Three...” He nodded toward Damien, and his friend pulled himself across the floor toward the closest wall.

Arturo, and probably Caleb and Carter, judging from how sneakily they moved, spread out from the group, moving to the sides. Despite the silver-inflicted wounds still bleeding, the wolves moved as if the holes and gashes in their flesh didn't exist.

“Four...”

Avery let out a bellowing roar, and threw Maria back against the wall, near her coffin. He'd been worried the pack leader would kill her, but maybe they needed her to find what they were looking for. Or maybe it just wasn't in Avery to be that much of a bitch. Either way, it took Maria out of the line of fire.

Brave of Avery to come at him first. No vampire would do that. Elders didn't do things on their own unless absolutely necessary; they had bigger fish to fry. Instead, they sent armies, underlings, thralls or ghouls, or their childer. He didn't blame them, honestly. Antoinette wouldn't have been able to create Dolareido if she kept risking her neck. Jacob wouldn't be the deadly witch he was now, if he'd gotten his hands dirty every time something needed to be done.

Werewolves worked differently. They thrived on doing things hands on, on dangerous hunts, on growing stronger by testing their mettle, and surviving things that would kill almost anything else. And their leaders taught by example, if Avery was any indication. He knew she'd run at him first, and the others would collapse on him when she'd created the opening. He also knew he could break her, grab her mind and turn into her an obedient dog, and end this whole fight before anyone got hurt.

He met her eyes, reached out, and her necklace glowed blue. Wait, necklace? Werewolves were naked, nothing but fur. Why'd she have a nec—

Her claws met his body, and he yelled out as agony scorched through him. Her grip sank into his shoulders, claws cutting through his suit and into his muscle and bone, and she roared at him as she picked him up.

Ok, so, whatever the necklace was doing, it stopped his mind from being able to reach hers. Good to know, but too little too late. That was one powerful necklace.

“Will do what I did to Maria,” she barked between snarls. “Teach you a lesson.”

Jack knew what it felt like to lose his limbs. It wasn't a memory he looked forward to re-experiencing.

Avery leaned in closer, until her growling snout was only inches from him, and her predator eyes were wide with animal rage. Her grip tightened, and pulled, and holy shit, there was enough strength in that grip to throw a car.

But his arms stayed where they were. The werewolf howled and pulled harder, but vitae coursed through his limbs, through his body, and out from the wounds her claws had created. Blood pulsed out from the holes, against her claws, defying the werewolf's will.

It was Jack's turn to snarl, and he slammed his head forward against her snout. Crunch. Her tight grip gave him more than enough leverage to put power into it, and he grinned as her blood gushed from her wolf snout and onto his forehead. He licked it off his lips. Damn, that tasted good.

Howling in surprise and fury, she let go and fell back, almost falling over as she clutched her face with one hand. The pack was surprised, but only for a moment, and they rushed him from the sides.

But before they reached him, Jack snapped his gaze over at one of the rushing werewolves, and glared. Just like the time he tried to get into Sándor's mind, he was met with a gate, and there was something growling at him from the other side of it. Though in the werewolf's mind, the gate felt more like rough foliage, a line of trees, the entrance of a dark, cold forest tipped with snow and dotted with rocks, and carcasses.

Jack was more skilled now, compared to then, better at controlling the curse. Back then he'd been worried about destroying Sándor's mind if he kicked down the gate. Now, it wouldn't happen. And even if it did, he wasn't going to just let them injure him, not after what they did to Damien and Maria.

And judging from the looks in their eyes, he wasn't sure they'd be able to stop themselves from taking things too far. Supposedly werewolves had a habit of going berserk when transformed into their Gauru form, and after seeing their leader get their face smashed in, several of the wolves roared fury that sent a thrill through Jack's body. Sounded an awful lot like animals going berserk. The thrill dancing up his spine was his curse reacting to their anger, anger that had their eyes wide and their mouths open as they looked at him like he was their next hunt. If he wasn't careful, they'd kill him.

He smashed the thick line of trees blocking him inside the werewolf's mind, and found the human half, Caleb, standing next to an enormous wolf. The wolf snarled at him, and lunged. But it was pointless. Jack snapped a hard glare at the beast, and a moment later, the wolf fell to the metaphorical floor of the metaphorical forest, whimpering, defeated. Caleb fell a second later.

Caleb wasn't immune to his Dominate. And his wolf half wasn't immune to his Animalism.

Back in the real world, Caleb turned, and with a roar of agony and fury, threw himself at the other werewolf charging Jack. The two went down in a heap, and claws found fur as they cut into each other.

Jack faced the remaining werewolf, and did something the fucker probably never expected from a Ventrue. He came in closer. The giant beast faltered, trying to slow so he didn't overshoot and tumble over Jack. An opening, and Jack stepped into it with a snarl and a grin. He poured his vitae into his arm, into the blood that flowed out of his wounds under his suit, and fueled a simple uppercut straight into the titan's belly.

Connection. His fist crashed into a wall of steel muscle, but an Uratha wasn't a giant gargoyle. Muscle bent, and the wolf's body absorbed the impact as Jack's feet were driven into the floor. Crunching ribs and damaged organs, Jack felt them. The wolf went up ten feet into the air, momentum carrying him over Jack's body, and he crashed into the remaining desk, shattering it on impact. It was a darker wolf, with a few gunshot wounds that weren't healing, and he curled up in a ball to clutch their stomach as he vomited blood.

Turning to watch what happened was a mistake. Another werewolf came at Jack's back, and claws sliced down from his left shoulder, down across his back, to his right hip, and his suit jacket and shirt shredded like paper. The claws struck against his skin, but didn't penetrate any deeper than skin deep. Blood gushed out wherever claws met his body, and blocked the inhuman weapons from getting into him.

But the claws still burned, almost as bad as fire would. He felt them cut through the summoned blood, and almost get past it, felt it down where his Beast controlled it. Werewolf claws were not normal claws.

Jack spun around, and grabbed the hand of the werewolf. They'd expected to do more damage, from how they'd stopped after the one slash. Gave him just enough time to get a grip on her wrist, and slam his hand down on it with the other. Bone cracked, and his driving fist crashed down on the wrist hard enough to push the broken bone through the flesh.

The werewolf shrieked and tried to step back, but he held on, and yanked. The pain must have been excruciating; he knew from experience. Before the werewolf realized he'd yanked on her, the momentum carried him forward toward her, and he kicked. He was no martial artist, but a side kick was simple enough, easy enough to use the whole body to drive a shit load of force into. His foot collided with her knee, and she shrieked again as she fell to her side. The moment her shoulder landed with the floor, Jack drew back his other foot, and kicked her like a football.

Physics didn't like that. His right foot drove into the werewolf hard enough to break every rib she had, and send her soaring through the air a good thirty feet, but the impact also meant his left foot flew out from under him. He landed on his palms, and another wolf dove at him. Probably thought he was wounded, or maybe that he couldn't fight on the floor.

He rolled onto his back as the wolf pounced on him, and tried to bite his face off. He got an arm underneath their neck, holding them back, but it only took them a second to realize he was strong enough to keep their teeth at bay. Instead they switched to their hands, and started slashing. Each rake of claws against his skin, shoulders and chest and arm and face, each was met with flowing, dark blood that protected him. But pain snuck through, getting to him, his Beast. Those claws were brutal, and they were going to wear him down.

*Jack you moron. Let me out. Let me fight!*

Fuck you. You'll kill them.



*Only if I have to. I'm better at this than you. Let me kick their asses!*

Shut up shut up!

He pulled his feet up underneath him, and kicked upward. With the ground to his back, he had good leverage to drive his weight into it, and his strength up into the werewolf's stomach. A lot of strength. He poured his vitae and his frustration into the kick, and the werewolf flew into the air, up and up, until they collided with the ceiling fifty feet up, hard enough they cracked their skull. Brains rattled, they landed hard, and Jack smirked as they bounced. Heavy things go crack and crunch when they fall from high heights.

He got back to his feet and found most of the pack ready for him, though now they were circling him and weighing their options. Two werewolves had jumped Caleb, and were trying to get through to him. They would. Jack didn't have the time to properly brainwash him.

Clara stood a little further back than the others, analyzing, looking for the right moment. She meant business, despite the sadness in her eyes. It hurt to meet her gaze.

Sighing, Jack reached up and tugged on his suit jacket shoulder. "Not again." A small tug was enough to rip the whole damn shirt and jacket off, leaving him shirtless, and he threw them to the floor as he glared at the wolves. "Just pack up and go, guys. Don't make me crack every single one of you in half until you do."

Taunting them was a mistake. The biggest werewolf charged him, and the whole damn cave shook with each slam of his feet. Paws? Nah, closer to t-rex feet than a fucking wolf's, with how big those claws were. He tore up the floor, literally, as he ran for Jack, and Jack stood his ground. Just a little guy, standing as a t-rex ran at him with mouth open, ready to gobble him up.

Jack met the man's crazed eyes, and reached out again. Again he found the gate of the man's subconscious, and he kicked it open, breaking down trees as he exposed the forest within. Physically strong as Matt was, mentally he was no different than Caleb. The crazy anger and rage that poured out of him, a berserk fury of aggression and need to destroy, none of it saved him from Jack's grip. Crushing his wolf and human halves was easy.

The man slowed, and slowed, and eventually came to a stop. He stared down at Jack, eyes shaking as the man struggled to escape Jack's Dominate. But he couldn't. He twisted and turned, pulled away, but came back a moment later, as if an invisible leash bound his limbs.

"Now!" Jack yelled. "Everyone's going to calm the fuck down! You're going to leave, and—"

Avery appeared over Matthew's head, healed, with something massive and black in her hands. She must have noticed when Jack Dominated Matt, and grabbed it then. Smart. Really, really smart. Smart enemies were a giant pain in the ass.

She threw the grand piano down at him. That was a lot of weight, and wide, and it came at him at professionally pitched baseball speed. The best he could do was raise his arm and block as much of it as he could.

It shattered on contact. The wood came apart over his arm and continued into him. Piano keys, piano wire, wood, it all slammed into him, and as much as the shield his blood provided protected him from any serious wounds, it didn't stop inertia.

The weight of the piano struck him into the ground, hard, and his skull slammed into the stone floor even harder. He heard a crack, and blinding pain flooded him. And then, blackness.

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Fucking. Finally.

Don't mind me, Jack. Bit of a drop in your concentration — and consciousness — there. Too bad.

Grinning until his cheeks hurt, New Jack pushed himself back up onto his feet. He poured waves of his vitae into the crack in his skull, and the bone sealed snug. Old Jack was like a child behind the wheel of a Lamborghini. No grace at all, and wasted power.

Bits of piano surrounded him, completely smashed. Avery, panting heavy, stood beside Matthew, and she dragged the man off and away. He didn't fight back; brainwashing hadn't been completed. Damn Avery interrupted before Old Jack could get his fingers into the man's consciousness very deep. Useless kid.

Jack snickered as he watched her drag the sandbag away, and his eyes drifted over to Caleb. His struggles were fading too, faster than they should have. Making the man fight the people he loved was probably too much to ask for without more than few seconds of Dominate and Animalism. If he'd had the time, Jack could make the man slit the throats of everyone he loved in their sleep, but no way he'd get that deep into the man's head in a few seconds, not with all the other werewolves there to stop him.

Clara took a step toward him, and he grinned at her. The shock in her eyes said it all. She knew.

“Jack ... don't...”

“You fuckers could have left,” he said, “but your noses are so far up your asses, you don't seem to get that you can't just do whatever you want.”

“Jack ... Please, just—”

He leaned down to his bare wrist, bit into it, and gave Clara his best devil's smile as he yanked back his head while swinging his arm out. Blood. His blood. With an effort of will, his blood gushed out from the wound, splattering over the floor in a big circle. Will kept the blood from immediately turning to cinder and ash. Will infused it with the Discipline. Will, would summon his legion.

The moment the ring of blood landed on the floor, Clara dove at him. What a bitch. She landed on him, pinned him, and got to tearing, claws slicing at his chest over and over. Well, he had been distracted. He'd have done the same thing.

But he wouldn't have done it with that look in her eyes. The other wolves, they looked angry, aroused with blood lust, and hungry for the hunt. Her? She looked sad. Fucking annoying.

He snapped his arms out as hers came down for the tenth time in two seconds, and he squeezed on her wrists. She howled, a lovely sound, and stood up to try and get away from him. Being that he weighed almost nothing, she had no trouble standing up, but he came up with her, grip still on her wrists.

"Jack's not home." Grinning at Clara, squeezing until her bones snapped in his grip, he flipped his legs up and pressed them to her chest. And pushed.

The slide and thunk of joints coming out of sockets was beautiful. The tearing of flesh, more so. But what really got his vitae pumping was the shriek of utter agony from Clara, as he ripped off her right arm. He'd planned for both, but physics were a bitch, and once the right arm came off, his pushing pressure against her chest caused him to spin off her, and he had to let go of her left arm so he could land on his feet.

Howling like an animal in a bear trap, Clara fell back and scampered away, getting back to her feet behind Avery and clutching the shoulder socket where her arm used to be connected. The arm,

now in Jack's possession, shrank. The fur sunk into the skin, clothes emerged, and the mass vanished, leaving him holding a normal human arm.

"Vampires can regenerate lost limbs," he said. "Maria and Damien will be fine eventually. But still, you deserved this." He winked at Damien as he waved the arm around in the air, and laughed. The man stared at him, not finding it funny for some reason. Church boy had no sense of humor.

He assumed werewolves could regenerate lost limbs, too. But if they couldn't, ah well.

"Jack!" one of the werewolves said, one with a few bullet holes in him.

Damien snapped his head to the dark werewolf. "Arturo."

"Ah, Arturo," Jack said. "I'd make some joke about beating you to death with your buddy's arm," he gestured to the arm, "but we know it'll take a lot more than something like this to kill you." He tossed the girl's arm over his shoulder, reached down, and grabbed something else, something that just so happened to be near him on the floor.

A silver sword.

The werewolves stared at him, some of them with eyes widening as they glanced down at the gleaming blade in his hands. Clara's glare lacked the rage the others had, but there was plenty of fear there, and seeing her take a step back from him as he waved the blade around was just marvelous.

*You're not going to kill them!*

Shut up and calm down.

New Jack rolled his eyes, and tossed the sword behind him too. Clink clank on the stone floor, until it stopped beside Clara's severed arm.

"Think I need a silver sword to kill you fuckers?" Laughing, he took another step forward, as Mulder and Scully cawed from above. "But you do deserve a beating, the kind your daddy gives before he finishes his last bottle and blows his brains out." Again the wolves stared at him, and no one laughed. Not a drop of humor in the whole damn place.

The moment's rest created a pause in the noise. Perfect. Werewolf ears perked up, and many of the giant beasts turned to look at the tunnel.

"Jack," Clara, voice wavering. "Don't!"

Ah, that's right. Clara'd been with him, when he'd kicked the gargoyle's ass. She had recognized why he bit into his wrist. And now, she'd recognized the noise. Which only made it all the better, cause half the werewolves looked to her, saw the fear, and snapped their heads back to stare at the tunnel with renewed anxiety. Oh it was so fucking good. Only thing that'd make it better would be someone playing creepy horror music on the piano. A glance back showed the remains of the piano, and he sighed. Damn.

When the quiet scritch scratch noise rose to a crescendo of squeaks and claws on stone, the tide broke, and dark brown washed upon the room like vile water. Thousands and thousands of beady eyes flooded into Maria's den, and the werewolves stood there, jaws hanging, eyes wide. Only when the rats made an obvious dash for them did they finally react.

David versus Goliath, except more like, ten thousand Davids versus a dozen Goliaths. Tiny bodies bit and clawed and climbed up enormous wolves, earning howls of frustration and rage from the titans as they did. Werewolves were brutes of aggression and

strength, but the fuck could they do when overwhelmed by thousands of rats?

Jack groaned with bliss as the rats flowed over each other and onto the werewolves. The mix of rage and panic was so damn good, he'd be hard if he'd been Blushing. Three of the werewolves threw themselves at the rats, slamming their giant hands and feet of claws around, killing rats by the dozens with each swing. Crunch. Splat. Jack laughed as the werewolves were quickly overwhelmed, and their assault turned into a hopeless defense, the titans doing their best to wipe rats off their limbs as his legion climbed up their bodies.

Laughing, nice and loud — wouldn't be any fun if they didn't see him coming — Jack walked up to the werewolves. Rats poured, scurrying around him, between his shoes, avoiding his steps with ease, and biting at the feet of closer werewolves. Who was this one? David? Carter? Didn't matter. Whoever they were, they looked at him, animal eyes staring, and Jack met their gaze with a wicked grin.

The werewolf dove at him. Mistake. They were probably expecting another fist fight, but now that his legion had come, Jack had a moment to do what he wanted. He reached out with his vitae, his mind, and grabbed the consciousness of the beast glaring at him.

David. The spirit talker. This man's mind was different than the others. They'd had minds that looked like forests, typical Northern forests with creeks, big rocks, bits of snow, lots of pine trees, shit like that.

David's was nothing like that. David's mind looked straight out of a Studio Ghibli film. A serene, glowing lake of turquoise, dotted with small islands of mossy boulders. Dense green grass that looked almost like shag carpet. Giant trees, thick as houses, each with veins in their trunks that glowed the same as the lake. Mushrooms grew

out the sides of the trees and boulders alike, some small, some enormous, white with hints of turquoise within. No sun reached past the dense canopies above, but the forest pulsed with light, the glowing veins, the mushrooms, all of it fading in and out in a slow beat.

David sat upon the edge of the lake, and his wolf sat beside him. His wolf glowed, unsurprisingly, turquoise.

“So you’re the one that talks to spirits,” Jack said. “Nice digs you got here. Makes me think I should pop some DMT and hallucinate about forest spirits with wobbly heads.”

David slowly got up and looked at him. Wow. The dude was a fidgety, nervous mess in the physical world, but here in his mind, he looked calm and confident.

“You’re chaos and destruction incarnate,” the man said, voice smooth.

“Ha! You guys marched into Maria’s den and got violent. Insult me all you want, but it’s you fuckers who stepped over the line.”

David watched him, unsettled. A tall white guy with broad shoulders and short, blonde hair, who looked beyond dull, but the way he stood there and looked at Jack, was downright creepy.

“Don’t hurt my family.”

“Oh I’ll hurt em, hurt em until they regret coming to my city. But I won’t kill them, be happy with that.” Jack walked over to a nearby tree, touched one of the larger, pulsing mushrooms, and promptly punched it so it tore off the tree trunk. “But now that we got a minute to talk, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask?”



“About Black Blood.”

The man frowned, but it passed quickly, the dude returning to statuesque posture. “What about it?”

“Do you trust him?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Black Blood. He’s up to something. I remember Avery saying once that you guys came here because spirits said you should, that something was up. I know you’ve been investigating the tears.”

“I won’t—”

“David David David.” Jack reached out, opened his palm, and pointed it at David. The world shifted, like someone had changed the channel on an old TV. Now David was on his knees in front of Jack, throat in his grip. “I’m not here for a friendly chat. I’m here to take advantage of a serendipitous occurrence.” The glowing wolf snarled, but Jack snapped his gaze to it, and the beast whimpered as it fell to its stomach.

“We ... we’ve been ... trying to find out who’s been making the tears. We d-don’t think it’s Black Blood, at least not ... directly.” This may have been in their heads, meaning Jack squeezing his throat was just a metaphor, but it was a damn good one.

“You think Maria’s been doing that, instead.”

“Yes. We ... think ... she’s trying to resurrect Lucas, and is going to ... do a ritual that threatens the Gauntlet.”

“And you think Maria’s been doing this, why? What’s your evidence?”

“Spirits ... are working with her. They told me.”

Jack squinted at the man, and his steady eyes. The way he choked out ‘they told me’ was solid, and hit Jack straight to the soul. Whoever this shaman was, he knew his shit, or at least he believed he did. He probably performed some strange ritual or binding to talk to the spirits, something that forced the conversation to happen on his terms.

“So you don’t think Black Blood has anything to do with this?”

“That spirit, it ... it gets its fingers into everything. So maybe. But Maria—”

Jack gave the man a hard shake, and David coughed in his grip. The idiot still thought Black Blood was a spirit. So either Black Blood really was a spirit — he wasn’t — or the fucker was playing a trick on the Uratha. And if Black Blood could convince experts in spirits that he was a spirit, the fuck else could he convince them of?

“Ok, thanks for the info. Now, get up, and go kick your friends’ asses.” Might as well take advantage of the situation. The werewolves were busy trying to stop his legion from biting off their toes. That give him a good ten, maybe fifteen seconds of in-the-real-world time, enough to plant a proper, more powerful suggestion in David’s head.

“I ... I won’t!”

Oh, the fucker was resisting him. How god damn mother fucking cute.

Jack glared into the man’s eyes, and squeezed harder, as black smoke oozed out from Jack’s body. David’s eyes widened, and unlike werewolf eyes, human eyes were infinitely more expressive. The emotions there, painted across his gaze, complete and utter terror, was better than any Kiss could have been.

The smoke poured out of Jack, out of his nostrils, his ears, his tear ducts, and then out from his pores. It engulfed him, onyx smoke, and fangs, claws, beaks, teeth, everything you could find on creatures vampires identified with. The wolf at David's side whimpered all the more, and the man in Jack's grip trembled as his eyes were forced to look higher and higher.

And Jack spoke, his voice an earthquake in the fool's mind that stirred his lake to boil, and his trees to fall over. As each tree fell, splinters and branches rained down on him and David as the trees collided with each other.

"I. Wasn't. Asking."

And with that, he forced his will upon the fool's mind, and placed a single key phrase in the man's subconsciousness. Sick 'em, boy.

He let go of his neck, and let go of the connection on his mind. Back in the real world, David stood five feet away from Jack, ready to pounce but never quite committing. Rats flowed past him, between his legs and onto the werewolves behind them. Ten, maybe twenty seconds had gone by, enough time for some of the wolves to realize what was going on, and that the legion were a distraction.

Well, not really a distraction. The rats bit and clawed, and some of the lucky ones managed to pierce skin, but werewolf hides were tough as fuck. The main result his legion could bring, was pain. The howls and roars of the werewolves as hundreds upon hundreds of teeth bit into their skin, was music to his ears.

His rat servants might not be able to do much damage to Uratha, but another Uratha could.

With a growing smile and cackle, he pointed at the werewolves behind David.

"Sick 'em, boy."

David turned, and charged into the group. And this time, they wouldn't break Jack's Dominate so easily. The rats split apart like the red sea, creating a path for David, and the werewolf sprinted down it full speed until he crashed into one of the wolves. David fell on them, and started biting and clawing. From how the victim shrieked, and how chunks of meat went flying, werewolves were as susceptible to werewolf claws and teeth as vampires were.

Matthew and Arturo didn't like that. As Avery and one-armed Clara tackled David, Matthew and Arturo ran past the chaos and toward Jack. Dumbasses. As they got close, Jack waved a hand, and a few thousand rats poured around Jack's feet and up into a wide mound. The rodents threw themselves at the giant wolves, and Art and Matt stumbled as their shins slammed into hundreds of furry bodies, and their feet turned dozens of rats into chili.

Jack ducked under their sloppy charges, got low, and punched upward, using the floor as his anchor for the uppercut. Oh, the delicious crunch of his fist hitting Arturo's jaw from underneath, the sound of bone breaking, the cut short howl. Fucking beautiful. The dark wolf stumbled back before falling, and the rats poured over him, more and more, until the huge beast disappeared under a carpet of gnashing teeth.

Matthew got his hands on Jack once his partner was out of the way, both hands clamping down. A close up of the giant showed a dozen wounds, and a thousand rat bites, but the fucker still wouldn't go down. He sank his claws into Jack's body, and immediately the difference in power between him and the other werewolves was obvious. Stereotypical tank of the team, a juggernaut, a hulk. A moron.

Jack ignored the titan's power as Matt squeezed on his shoulders. The blood coursing through him was stronger than this fool could tear through, not within a few seconds, and Matt realized it. So of

course the idiot double downed and snapped his head down to try and bite Jack's off.

Jack pulled his leg back, and kicked the werewolf in the crotch. With Matt's grip on his shoulders, he had a good anchor to pour strength into the kick, and holy shit, the result was amazing. Werewolves didn't have dicks, not when they were fighting like this anyway, but that didn't mean that part of muscle and flesh wasn't softer. Matthew went up into the air several feet, and fell to the ground, howling like he'd just learned Firefly was canceled.

"You two don't get to spit-roast me, fuckers. Do I look like Tash to you?" Fucking sacks of shit. Jack gave the man a hard kick, and the huge pile of meat spun a one-eighty on the floor, sending rats around as his limbs collided with their furry little bodies.

And the moment he did that, five werewolves jumped him. Holy shit. He laughed as the five titans leapt what must have been thirty feet, and all came flying through the air at him. Fast as he was, he was no Daeva or Mekhet, and the best he could manage was to half duck, before they collided into him. Well, before one collided into him. Werewolves were big as fuck, and even shoulder to shoulder, only one had room to catch him.

He went down with a thunk, and his rats retaliated. They wouldn't let their general lose. They swarmed up over the werewolf holding him, and the poor bastard howled and stood up, letting Jack go so he could swipe rats off his body. Blood, everywhere, rats dying by the dozens to their claws.

On his back, Jack spotted flapping wings above. Mulder and Scully, still cawing, still announcing information to him. Nothing he didn't already know, except that the werewolves were making progress managing the chaos. Rats continued to pour into the tunnel and into Maria's den, unending, fueled by the city and its endless population of rodents, but the werewolves were quickly

figuring out how to manage keeping rats off them. Surprising both the wolves and Jack though, was how much damage the rats did to werewolf skin. He'd assumed they'd have trouble breaking through werewolf hide, but then, he should have known better. He knew rats could get through concrete given time, and were making their own progress on cutting through werewolf hide.

The four remaining werewolves fell on him, like raptors looking to tear into a freshly caught fish. Claws and teeth all fell on him, biting and scratching, and he laughed. Was this what it felt like to be them, getting eaten alive by rats?

But as painful as it was, their claws and teeth, for all their strange magical shenanigans, couldn't get through his protective blood shield. Wherever they managed to cut skin, they got no further as blood poured out of the wound and wrapped his body. It coursed and swirled around him, covering more and more of him as the wolves tried harder and harder to rip him apart.

"Get off." He swung his fist out at a nearby knee. Crack. Kicked his foot up at a nearby chest. Crunch. Snapped his other hand up to grab the jaw bone of one of the werewolves, and yanked. Rip and tear. The wolf jerked his head away, but not before Jack ripped the jaw half off to the side, exposing throat and tongue and teeth. More howls of pain, and Jack grinned at the last werewolf.

The final werewolf got up and backed away. Not out of fear, though the beast was obviously terrified. Nah, the titan was just looking for more of his pack to surround Jack, cause one-on-one certainly wasn't working. Smart. Probably Noah, then.

Jack held out his hand. Mulder and Scully flew down, scooped up the silver sword, and dropped it in Jack's palm.

"Thanks, loves," he said in a shitty, fake Australian accent, and he laughed again as he threw the sword at Noah. Easily dodged, but the

werewolf was conveniently distracted by a giant mountain of rats that poured up and onto his legs, tail, and back.

Of course, throwing a sword never works like in the movies. You can't just grab a throwing axe, throw it at someone, and expect it to land blade first. It spins a bunch. But thankfully there's a lot of blade on a sword, and it was silver, so all it had to do was touch Noah, which it did. It nicked across his thigh, drawing some blood and some sizzling before it fell to the floor. Damn, that would have been so cool if it'd stuck him proper. Well, he didn't want to use the sword anyway. Fight would be over too fast.

Jack walked toward the remaining werewolves, big grin on his face with each step, and made a show of cracking his knuckles. He was a vampire, so no nitrogen buildup to pop in his knuckles, but still, he tried.

“Guess I'll just have to do this the old fashioned way.”

“Jack! Stop!” Clara again. She clutched her empty arm socket, catching bits of blood that leaked from it. Not bleeding nearly as bad as it should have been. Werewolves healed fast.

Poor girl, so stupid. Every time she looked at him, he could see the sadness there, and every time, it sent scorching heat through him. Not the good kind of heat. Bad kind. Angry kind. The kind that made him want to rip off her other arm and jam it down her throat.

Jack looked past her to David. He'd fucked some werewolf up before one of the werewolves got him in a head lock, and with Noah's help, managed to subdue him, but they had to ignore the rats biting on them to do it. A few of the werewolves were buried in rats, and combined with their wounds, were slowly succumbing to exhaustion. Combined with the bunch Jack had just beat up, Art and Matt included, most of the pack was incapacitated.

Except Avery.

The bitch stood in front of Clara, snout fully healed, and she stared at him with a delicious mixture of rage and growing fear. Finally, he was getting through her thick skull. Finally, she was starting to accept that she couldn't just go around fucking with shit in Dolareido like she owned it, not if she didn't want a vamp like him to come along and fuck her up.

More rats poured into the room. And more. And more. But they didn't swarm the werewolves. Jack stood in the center of the room as his army grew around him, piled high around his legs, and he licked his fangs as he looked around. Slowly, his legion flowed off the injured werewolves they'd buried, and came to join the whirlpool of flesh that built up around him. More, and more. The flowing mound of rats piled high behind him, until it towered over him, while the mound in front of him stayed at waist level.

Groans filled the room, injured werewolves that the rats had taken advantage of and injured a thousand times more. Now without rats covering them, they could recover, but it'd take them a while. They wouldn't be in fighting condition any time soon.

He took a step toward Clara and Avery, and they stood their ground against the oncoming legion, the leader and second-in-command of the pack. Like the Spartans before the Persians at Thermopylae, except this wasn't a movie. And much as people like to forget, the Spartans lost that battle.

"There, I stopped, see?" He slowly turned, and his legion of rats turned with him, as he gestured around at the wake of destruction. A thousand dead rats coated the floor, mixing in with the gashes left in the stone by werewolf talons. Rat guts, rat blood, rat fur, everywhere. But a thousand rats didn't matter, not when ten thousand more swirled around Jack, ready to die for him.

"Jack," Avery said. "Leave!"

Oh the audacity on this bitch.



“You come into my old boss’s home like you own the place. You ignore the rules of Dolareido. You hurt my friend. You hurt his new boss.” He came closer, and his legion followed. “And you actually thought you could hurt me.” He gestured to his shirtless torso and the blood coursing over his skin. They had hurt him, but the injuries were only skin deep. “I should put you in the ground.”

“We are trying to protect city,” Clara said. “Maria threatens Gauntlet!”

“Nah, she doesn’t. And even if she did, even if she fucked up and tore the whole thing down and the city burned because of her stupidity, that’s her choice. This city belongs to us, the vampires. Every kine in it is our fucking slave to kill or eat.” He stepped closer, and again, his legion followed. “They belong to me. The city belongs to me.”

He grinned as he looked to Damien and Maria. Both sat with each other, backs against the wall near her coffin, eyes locked onto him. Damien looked disturbed. Maria was shocked. God damn it felt good to make that old sack of shit surprised. So sure of herself all the damn time, but not anymore.

“It does not,” Avery barked.

“Ha! Yes it fucking does. It—”

Clara roared, and Jack froze. His limbs froze. His vitae froze. Everything in him froze, as the whole fucking cave echoed with the boom of her roar. Like someone set up a fucking explosion in his damn skull, everything stopped listening to him.

And that included the rats.

The swarms surrounding him scattered, rats being rats, and Jack stood there, staring, dumbfounded. Even as he heard the thud thud

thud of someone giant running for his back, he couldn't turn around. What the fuck?

Clara collapsed. Whatever she'd done, it drained her of whatever she had left. On her back on the floor, she panted openly, with only enough energy to hold her bleeding arm socket with her other hand.

He had to admit, she was damn impressive. Course it was hard to stay appreciative, when a giant werewolf pounced him from behind. The momentum should have slammed Jack into the floor, but Avery pounced at him too, straight on, and where Matt's claws sank into his back, Avery's claws sank into his chest. Whatever Clara's roar had done, it'd suppressed his blood shield enough for the damn wolves to hurt him.

Matt's claws hurt. Avery's claws burned. Whatever it was that'd allowed her to burn the azlu in the tunnels, something that made her claws glow dark orange, she used it now. And Jack screamed as his skin turned to ash around them.

Feeling flooded him. The vibration in his bones and skin vanished. Paralysis fled. His senses came back to him, his power, all of it. Whatever Clara had done had been temporary, and his control came back to him in a glorious flood of power. His Beast, his slave, its power coursed through him, and his blood shield burst into full strength again, rendering Matthew's claws borderline meaningless.

Avery's claws, on the other hand, burned, and burned. They tore through his blood, and ripped down from his collar to his chest, and down through his stomach.

"Get off!" Jack swung his arm to the side, and the back of his fist collided with her head. He made sure to hit her head, not just her snout, and the bitch went flying, half spinning sideways before slamming into the ground. And as she did, Jack drove his elbow into Matt's gut, hard enough the damn beast, already a wounded mess, fell back as a dozen ribs shattered.

With his power returned and the damn dogs off him, Jack resummoned his legion. They came to him quickly, resuming their protective circle around him.

He looked down at his chest, and winced. She'd burned him. God damn, the bitch had burned him, like she'd come at him with a flaming chainsaw. His ribs were exposed, so was a chunk of his collar bone, and some of the bone was cut through; only thing keeping it together and working was his blood. His guts were exposed too, old withered things, and he scooped them back into his stomach so his blood could get a proper grip on them, and keep them there, before it coursed over his body with its flowing veins once again.

Snarling, Jack spun and looked at Matthew. Stupid dog was on his knees, coughing up a fountain of blood, but his eyes were on Jack, ready to pounce him the moment his body got working again. So Jack drove his fist down at the man's stupid werewolf face, broke his cheek bone, and sent him to the floor.

"I fucking put the fight on pause, and you try and get a sneak attack in on me?" he said, gesturing to Matt, and Avery, and Clara. "Fucking hell, that's pretty damn good. I figured you'd die with your honor, but nope, you guys fight dirty when you need to. I can respect that." He walked over to Clara and squatted down over her. "Gotta admit, you've surprised me. No wonder you're second in command."

She growled up at him, but made no attempt to hit him. Not like she could do much exhausted, and with an arm missing.

"Good girl." Smiling down at her, he leaned down, pat her cheek, and gave her doggy snout a quick kiss.

An angry roar announced Noah's charge. Ah, Clara's magic roar earlier had broken David's brainwashing, the surface brainwashing

anyway. So naturally Noah decided to come at him while he was distracted.

Jack pointed a hand at Noah, palm open, and five thousand rats poured up in front of Jack like a tsunami. The mountain of meat crashed into the injured wolf, and buried him in biting teeth and claws. He bit and clawed in return, but the werewolf disappeared under the swarming bodies like one of those diggers in *The Mummy*. Only one of his giant clawed hands remained visible under the pile, twitching with spasms.

David stood there, frozen, shell shocked from his broken brainwash. The werewolf beside him was apparently smart enough to learn they'd been beaten, and just stared at Jack.

He loved that stare, the jaw agape, eyes wide, body frozen stare. The petrified stare. Seeing it on their faces despite the fact they were in their big war form was intoxicating.

He looked around at the rest of the pack as they watched Noah get eaten alive. The rest of them were battered, beaten, bleeding from a million holes, and struggling to stand. His legion left them alone for now, making an example of Noah, and only once the man stopped struggling against the swarm, did Jack pull his legion back.

What was left was a Jackson Pollock of blood. The rats had gotten through a lot of Noah's skin in that swarm, and had shredded through tendons. Wrists, ankles, behind the knees, under the shoulders, all the soft places, torn up. But the fucker was alive, and he'd live, given what Jack had seen these dumb dogs survive; they'd live through anything barring cutting off their heads, or cutting them in half, heh.

"Now, for the rest of you!" He swept his hand toward the rest of the pack. "I'm not going to kill you. Calm the fuck down, before I put you all in the ground." Please, please give him a reason to kill you. To feel their worthless hearts pop in his grip, splat. To break

bones. To see fear in their eyes before death takes them. God, he wanted that.

Avery, wobbly and shaking, rolled off her side and onto her foot and knee, half kneeling. She tried to get up, but Jack skipped over to her, and kicked her in the chest. The impact sent him back, but his legion caught him, keeping him standing so he could watch as Avery fell onto her back, clutching at her chest. More broken bones.

“Fuck me, look at this,” he said, and he gestured to his chest. Avery had wounded him, badly. Only thing keeping him upright was the Discipline Juggernaut, and his mastery of it. Blood flowed around and over him and over the wound, like crimson snakes, but her claws had burned him, greatly. He wouldn’t be healing the four giant gashes slicing him from neck to waist anytime soon.

“Don’t ... don’t hurt her,” Clara said.

“Ha! I said I won’t kill her. Didn’t say a damn thing about not hurting her.” He stepped over Avery and over her waist, grinning down at her. She tried to move, but was struggling to breathe. Major impact to the diaphragm and a bunch of broken ribs could do that.

She did manage to growl though. So naturally, he sat down on her sternum, forced her hands aside, and punched her in the face. Her head snapped to the side, and bits of teeth flew out.

“Let me make this perfectly clear,” he said between chuckles, and he punched her again. “You crossed a line. This is not like back then, when you and whoever that Simon dude was decided you could just kill one of us and not suffer consequences.” He punched her again. Blood soaked his fist. “While you’re in Dolareido, you answer to us, to me, and not the other way around. You don’t get to waltz into my city and think, just because you have a holy mission or what-the-fuck-ever, that it gives you the right to—hey!” She tried to get a swipe in at him, but he bat her hand aside, and punched her again,

in the snout again, and broke it again. “Don’t interrupt me when I’m talking.”

“Jack! Please! We understand!” Clara got up. Not werewolf Clara, normal Clara. Human again, she held her arm socket tight to her, blood dripping between her only set of fingers, and she wobbled worse than a drunk prom date.

“I know you understand. I bet the rest of you do, too.” He looked around at the group. More of the werewolves had managed to get back up, wounds healing, but they were still beat to fuck. Thousands of bite marks, not to mention the far heavier wounds Jack had inflicted personally. Werewolves were awesome like that. He could beat one into a pulp and they’d live, only so he could do it again. Some of them even looked ready to charge him again, but his rats swirled around him and Avery, daring the dumb animals to try.

“Then stop, please!” Clara begged.

“No.” He grabbed Avery’s oncoming claws, and twisted, breaking one of her fingers back until it hit her forearm, while the other gripped her wrist, squeezed, and slowly twisted her arm out of the way despite her every effort to stop him. “It’s the old farts like this one that need the biggest punishment. They just won’t learn.” Cackling, he set his free hand to her throat, and squeezed it as well. Big throat though, and he couldn’t get a proper grip on it. Didn’t matter. He threw Avery’s wrist aside, and punched her again. Not much left of her face anymore, and her blood gushed out of the gory mess. It soaked the floor.

The pack winced as he did it, and he could tell they were weighing their options. Attack him again, and risk getting more hurt, or even killed. Or just stand there and watch their boss get beaten black and blue for being a bitch.

David looked especially guilty, and Jack winked at him. Oh, he had plans for that man.

Through a garbled mess of blood and missing teeth, Avery gargled up something.

“I’m sorry, what was that? Speak up.” He stopped punching, and gave her broken snout a few light taps on the side.

“I ... concede.”

Laughing, Jack stood up, and rubbed his drenched hands together. Blood dripped from them and down onto the werewolf’s chest.

“There. Was that so hard?” He stepped back from the bitch, and held up his hands. “Fight’s over. You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here.” Nobody laughed. A shame. Jacob would have laughed.

The werewolves looked at each other, then at him. They struggled to stay standing, and some of them didn’t even try, trapped on the floor by their injuries. But everyone looked at him like he’d stab them in the back the moment they exposed their flank.

“Seriously, dumbasses, fight’s over. I could kill every single one of you right now if I wanted to, but I won’t. You can thank Jack for that.” There, you see, shithead? I can play nice. “So heal up, scoop up your wounded, and go.”

Well, he supposed he did look pretty scary, standing there with thousands of rats circling him. The rats climbed over each other, occasionally creating mounds a few feet high, before the mound collapsed and the rats flowed over each other like water. Thousands of tiny chitters. Thousands of tiny claws, scratching the stone floor. Thousands of whiskers and beady eyes looking around for their next target. They’d liked the taste of werewolves.

Clara was the first to listen. She really was smarter than the rest of them. Course, being that she only had one arm, she couldn’t do

much, but it started the chain reaction. Slowly, more of the werewolves transformed back into their human selves, and scooped up their wounded.

“Clara, take this,” Jack said, and he snapped his fingers. Immediately a hundred rats fled to the side of the room, and returned with precious cargo. Her arm.

She snarled at him, and turned her back to him, the first to do so. Brave. Caleb helped her pick Avery up, hooked her arm over Clara’s shoulders, and the two dragged the broken woman away. Transformed back into human form now, Avery was just a tiny thing, and her face looked worse than as if she’d just told her drunk, abusive husband about her affair.

Well, if Clara didn’t want her arm back, whatever. He snapped his fingers, and the rats devoured it, coordinated and quick. Piranha would have been envious with how quickly the rats gobbled it up. They would have been petrified by how easily the rats devoured the bones, too.

Watching the werewolves — now human — go was delightful entertainment. Each left a blood trail behind them, and Jack breathed deep the smell of it. He should have taken a drink of one them, but that was hard to do in the middle of a battle. He’d been lucky to get the moment he had to get his claws into David.

Ah, David, their shaman. The man looked at Jack again, and Jack finger waved at him, big grin on full broadcast. David looked away, and helped the more injured werewolves leave.

Jack watched them go, and only when they were truly well and gone did he turn around, and walk over to Maria and Damien. Maria still looked shocked, but as Jack approached, Damien went from disgusted, to anxious, like he expected Jack to attack him. Matthias sat nearby, frozen solid.



“You won’t have to stake me, buddy,” Jack said, squatting down in front of his friend. “You didn’t ruin it for me this time. I got to have the fun!” He clapped his hands together once, and blood splattered everywhere. Neither Maria nor Damien blinked, each staring at him like they didn’t know who he was.

“Jack,” Maria said at last. “Or ... curse?”

He laughed. “Come on, this is getting old.” He leaned in, and grinned at the two vamps. “Just call me the Ripper. I know you’re all thinking it.” He paused, gave them each a dramatic, evil grin, and stopped, once he thought about it. “Or, you know, Ripper, if you don’t wanna get all classics about it.”

The both blinked at him, then each other, and him again. Jesus fucking christ, no one in the whole damn city had a sense of humor except that Jacob asshole.

“Very well,” Maria said. “I ... have to thank you, Ripper, for saving me.”

“I was nearby when I got Damien’s alert. Surprised Jessy didn’t show up.” Shrugging, he reached down and held out his hand for Maria. She looked at it before glaring up at him, and he laughed. “That reminds me. Maria, there’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you.”

“Jack...” Damien said, eyeing him.

Oh the grin on Jack’s face. He knew it was there. There was no way he’d be able to hide it. He squatted down in front of Maria again, and leaned in a little closer.

*Don’t!*

“It was Jack.”

“What?” she asked.

“Jack.” Oh god this was gonna be amazing. “Jack is the one who killed Lucas.”

The explosion of shock on her face was perfect, and he felt his cheeks ache with his growing smile. Silence followed, and Jack glanced at Damien and his angry face, before looking back to Maria, waiting excitedly. This was too good.

“You ... you mean ... you killed Lucas?”

“Nope, not me. I was just a whisper in the boy’s mind, back then. Jack did it. Tricked Lucas. He possessed Damien here, and just when Lucas thought he’d won, he made Damien cut Lucas’s head, clean off his shoulders.”

“You’re ... lying...” Eyes locked, unable to blink, she looked at Damien. If he’d had time to prepare, he’d probably have been able to lie about it, but right now, all Maria had to do was catch a glimpse of Damien’s eyes, to know New Jack was telling her the truth.

Jack got up, and laughed, and laughed, and laughed some more, as he walked away from Maria and Damien, and headed back to the surface. His legion followed, spread out and carpeting the floor like a living, breathing flood.

There. Remember what Black Blood said to the vamp he helped? Five days, before one of his enemies got him. Try surviving without me now, Jack.

## Chapter 133

~~Antoinette~~

“There they are,” Elaine whispered.

Antoinette nodded, and took the binoculars from her. High up upon the enormous cathedral, the two elders watched the city, the streets beneath, and now the fleeing werewolves.

“Twelve,” Antoinette said. “They all live.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I am ... torn. Avery does not deserve death, nor does her pack. But they are a thorn in my side.”

“From what I hear, they think they are going to save the city.”

Antoinette sighed and shook her head. “Perhaps. But they will make enemies of us all doing so.”

The werewolves looked horrendous. Whatever Jack had done to them, assuming it was Jack, he had spared them, but he had also broken them, thoroughly. As hundreds of rats flowed out of the cathedral, hidden in the night and disappearing into the black of Dolareido, the twelve werewolves dragged themselves back toward their homes. Most lived near the Carthians, but Clara and Carter did not. And yet, despite their homes being in the entertainment district, they went with the pack, with Avery.

They no longer felt safe near the Invictus. That thin thread was now broken.

“Perhaps Maria is the one who injured them?” Elaine said. “She is quite the deadly woman, after all.”

“Rats flee the cathedral, by the thousands.” She handed the binoculars back.

Elaine took them, and Antoinette watched a smile slowly spread on the woman’s lips. “Impressive, to summon so many.”

“The curse is disgustingly powerful. And disgusting.”

Sighing, Elaine lowered the binoculars and met her eyes. “It was not all bad.”

“You remember such details?”

“I can remember ... the thrill of it, of the power. I can remember the sense of purpose and rage it gave me. But I never broke it free of its bindings. I could never do that.” She gestured far down below, underneath the gargoyle they stood upon, down to the scurrying lines of black that flowed over the gutters.

A glint of something crossed Elaine’s face. Envy, perhaps?

“You could do that now.”

“Not without great effort.” Sighing, she shook her head. “With the power of the curse unleashed, an elder vampire would be beyond formidable.”

Antoinette watched her friend for a while, reading the expressions Elaine felt comfortable surfacing. To summon an army, a legion of rodents, was indeed an impressive feat for a Ventrue of any age, let alone one as young as Jack. However...

“It would not be worth it, old friend. You have not spoken with the curse unleashed. I have. It is abhorrent, disturbing, and

twisted.”

“Then, perhaps, my ignorance shall be alleviated tonight? The army of vermin, the fleeing werewolves, I surmise the curse shall step out of the cathedral any moment.”

Sighing, Antoinette nodded. In all likelihood, Jack had unleashed the curse once again tonight, and she was terrified to learn the results. The werewolves left the cathedral alive, something she would not expect the curse to do, but then, maybe the curse had the forethought to consider ramifications. Maybe, instead of thinking of the curse as a compressed vortex of rage and sickening tastes, she should think of it as a malevolent villain, quite capable of intelligent decisions.

The thought was beyond putrid.

They waited another ten minutes, but nothing came of it. Jack did not step out from the cathedral, and there was no ignoring the dreadful aura that emanated from the building. He lurked within.

After a frustrated groan, Antoinette hopped down from the cathedral rooftops, and landed before its grand doors. Once Elaine joined her, they pushed them in, stepping over the blood of the werewolves, and walked into the church.

She did not enjoy the cathedral’s presence. Not for lack of beauty; it was a marvelous structure. It had been built without her permission, Lucas testing the limits of his political power. But Lucas was gone, and the cathedral, forever a reminder of the fool and his delusions, was a testament to his failure. And Maria, the poor soul, was attached to it.

It was dark in the cathedral. Distant streetlights managed to penetrate the stained glass windows, but only just. The candles that usually dotted the nave and chancel were extinguished, and the towering organ looked monolithic in the darkness.

In the third row sat a young man, shirtless, with a dozen cuts on his skin, none deep. He sat leaning back, arms hooked over the back of the pew, his head looking to the crucifix that stood before the pulpit. On the pew in front of him sat two crows, perched upon its back, and turned to face their master.

The two birds looked to the approaching elders, and both let out annoyed caws as Antoinette and Elaine drew near.

“Jealous?” he asked.

Antoinette blinked, turned back to Elaine who only shrugged, before she looked back to Jack. “I am not sure I—”

“I was talking to Mulder and Scully, dumbass.”

Antoinette froze, five feet back from the pew Jack sat upon, and she clenched her hands until her nails threatened to pierce her palms. Again she glanced to Elaine, and found her friend’s eyes wide, locked onto Jack. The boy had proved Antoinette’s concern and disgust with his very first sentence.

“Maria and Damien are downstairs,” he said, “alive, but not looking too hot. Maria will be out of commission for a few weeks or more. Maybe months. Damien too. Avery really fucked them up.”

“And yet you did not kill them,” Antoinette said.

“Who, Avery? Nah. Coulda. Hell, I was tempted. But then I’d have this jackass screaming at me for the rest of eternity.” He pointed at his temple. “And burning bridges is never a good idea. Unless it’s a really big bridge that would burn spectacularly.”

The ambiguity on whether he meant a metaphorical bridge or not, did not sit well with her.

“Jack,” she said, “I—”

“Jack the Ripper.” He laughed again, reached out, and lightly scratched one crow behind the head, and then the other. “Everyone’s been thinking it. Might as well go with it.”

The Ripper. She grit her teeth and walked down the isle a little further, until she stood beside the pew her lover sat within. Of course, it was not her lover, but the curse that fought for control of his body. She would not dignify it with a name.

“Where is the necklace Elaine gave you?”

“Here.” He waved his right hand a little, before setting his arm along the back of the pew once more. “Still intact. Jack took it off when he saw shit was about to get hairy. Can’t fight a dozen werewolves with his Beast being squashed. And in the fight, he let his guard down, so I came out to play.” The following laugh had her gritting her teeth.

“I see.” She stepped a little further down the isle, so she could look the curse in the eye. But her eyes fell to his chest instead, and she took a slow, deep breath.

She could see his rib cage. Four enormous claw marks cut from his neck down to his stomach, and each left lines of burned flesh and ash along the outside of the wounds. His ribs had been cut through, as had his abdominal muscles. Kindred blood slowly pulsed within the wound, keeping his innards inside, but wounds of that caliber, wounds that looked to be caused by blades of fire, would take an elder days, perhaps weeks to heal, no matter the amount of devoured blood.

“Avery got me pretty good.” He chuckled, gestured to his chest, and winked at her. “But I got her back.”

“You must be hungry,” Elaine said, joining Antoinette’s side. “Defeating a dozen werewolves and now recovering from those wounds will be draining.”

“Yeap. That reminds me, how’d it go with my new thrall?”

Antoinette could not keep a small frown from escaping. “Your taint does not poison her.” And she is not your thrall, demon.

“Ha! Shame. I was hoping it’d turn her into a super thrall or something.” He shrugged, and held out his hand sideways. One of the crows hopped onto his finger, and flapped its wings a few times, as Jack brought it in close.

“You were waiting for us,” Antoinette said.

“Jack sent you a message, right? Michael should be here soon, too. Probably with a bunch of ghouls and Kindred.” Shrugging again, he set the bird back on the pew in front of him. “I’ll be gone by then. Jack can handle the clean up.”

Antoinette nodded. “It is Invictus procedure, to deal with—”

“Not that clean up. I mean with Maria. She’ll ... well, she’ll be out for blood.” He laughed, a twisted, corrupt sound, and Antoinette’s spine shivered as if a ghost dragged its nails across her bones. “Garry’s gonna be pretty happy. I figure he gave Avery the nudge to actually attack Maria. Mission successful, sorta. Maria won’t be defending shit for a little while, which means Garry’s gonna go on the offensive. And you know Michael’s gonna have Jack front and center dealing with it.”

Antoinette grit her teeth and looked to Elaine. Her friend stared at Jack, eyes occasionally drifting to the two crows, before she looked to Antoinette. The curse was correct. Garry and Michael had been pushing at each other’s borders for months now, skirmishes, occasional gunfights, and far worse, economic warfare between Xnomina and Terra Den.

That was their prerogative. Antoinette enforced the Masquerade in her city, but if the Invictus and the Carthians decided to slaughter



each other, that was not her concern. If they crossed a line and brought the attention of the kine, then it was. But she had no stake in either covenant, at least, not before she met Jack.

“And you,” Jack said, and he snapped his head to look at Elaine. The sneer on his face turned Antoinette’s stomach. “You might have abandoned the gift you were given, but a lot can happen in hundreds of years. I won’t let you kill me, great grandsire. And I won’t let you have me, either.”

“Have you? I—”

Jack waved her off, like dismissing a child, and he looked past them to the crucifix beyond. “Christ, that fight drained me. Won’t be long before Jack takes over again. And the meditation, this stupid necklace”—he waved the small thing in his right hand around—“it all works. Shuts me right up. Problem is, Jack isn’t good enough to handle the shitshows coming his way, and he knows it. He’ll rely on me again, like he relied on me tonight.”

“He does not need you,” Antoinette said.

“Yeah, he does. And if someone finally manages to remove me or kill me, someone’s gonna kill him.” Laughing again, he looked down at the necklace in his hand, and slipped it on around his neck. “Good luck.”

His head lowered, and the boy drifted into torpor. Elaine and Antoinette exchanged glances once again, before looking to the birds. Mulder and Scully sat, and waited, and only when the boy raised his head once again did they caw a greeting.

The boy blinked at the two birds, then at Antoinette and Elaine, and then down at his chest.

“Holy shit this hurts.” He clutched his arm over his chest and groaned. “Fucking fuck this hurts.”

Sighing with relief, Antoinette sat down beside her love, and touched his shoulder. “Avery was a terror when she first visited the city, decades ago. Now she is a force to be reckoned with, I am sure.”

“You’re telling me. I knew she could do some crazy shit, but sweet fucking...” He reached out for her shoulder and clutched it tight. “Can we get out of here? I need to get away from here, from Maria. Need a drink, and sleep.”

“Yes, of course. But why flee Maria? She owes you her life.”

He shook his head desperately, and forced himself to stand. The shifting crunch of his broken bones, held together only by his dark blood swirling within his chest cavity, looked excruciating. How had the curse held a conversation as if pain did not bother it? For an elder to ignore pain was easy. For a neonate, it was nothing of the sort.

“She ... she knows.”

“Knows? I—”

“She knows, about Lucas.”

Antoinette frowned as she helped the boy out into the isle. Caws announced the two crows taking flight, and they found perches above to watch as Antoinette guided Jack out of the church.

Naturally, a dozen Kindred stood outside, Invictus, along with a dozen ghouls or thralls. Everyone was armed, swords, knives, shotguns, assault rifles, only weapons that could do damage to a werewolf. No Michael to be seen, though. Perhaps Damien had contacted him.

“Twenty three suits,” Elaine said with a grin. “But you are late. The werewolves are gone, and Maria and Damien need treatment. They await below.”

The vampires and ghouls looked at each other, and then to Jack. And waited.

“Sir?” one of the Kindred asked, stepping closer to the Invictus Right Hand.

Groaning and clutching his stomach, other arm wrapped over Antoinette’s shoulders, he gestured to the church nave behind them.

“Elaine’s right. Get in there and talk to Matthias. Get in a crew for clean up, and get Maria and Damien something to drink. They’re in worse shape than me.”

Several of the ghouls gulped at that.

“Yes sir.” Nodding, the crew rushed past.

As they did, two crows flew out through the open doors and perched upon a nearby gargoyle. Jack’s friends, and protective little creatures. Sometimes they joined her in her tower, and she had a feeling they would again tonight.

“Sir,” one of the Kindred said, and she stopped in front of them. “Do you want a drive back to your home, sir?”

“The apartment isn’t saf—oh, right, the mansion.” He groaned again and let his head drop.

“I think Mister Terry would prefer to stay with me this day,” Antoinette said, earning the nervous gaze of the young vampire.

“Y-Yeah.” Jack nodded, and managed a dismissing wave with his free hand. “Mister McDonald will get a proper report tomorrow night. In the mean time, notify him that the Carthians are going to be a problem.”

“Yes, Mister Terry.” She nodded, and followed the others into the cathedral as she pulled out her phone.

Maria knew where the mansion was, and if Jack spoke truly that she knew the boy was responsible for Lucas’s death, it was not entirely safe. If Jack slept within its depths in a secure room, it would be, but that did not mean the Nosferatu would not see the mansion burned atop him, and leave him a surprise gift upon awakening: explosives, and mountains of them.

Once the boy had the ghouls and thralls to defend his territory, he could play the game, but until then, he was vulnerable. The curse had a point.

But, the curse failed to understand something about people. Not everyone was cynical, and full of rage. Not everyone was bound to an endless cycle of destruction. The curse likely thought Maria would come for Jack, a slave to her emotions, and willing to sacrifice everything for them. But Antoinette knew better.

She would protect her love for the moment, in case she was wrong. But come tomorrow night, she would have a chat with Maria Turio, and see if her suspicions were true.

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~~Beatrice~~

“Holy shit,” she said.

“Holy shit indeed,” Jacob said.

The two of them sat on a nearby roof, low, and both pulled out their best Cloak of Night. Elaine and Antoinette were near, on the cathedral’s roof, and if Triss and Jacob weren’t careful, they’d be spotted. Jacob figured the sheriff wasn’t around if those two were together, but even if that was true, those two were elders. Just cause they didn’t have Auspex didn’t mean they couldn’t spot them.

Jacob's Cloak of Night was infinitely better than hers. It felt like wearing an ocean of darkness, compared to her, a pond. Hell, like this, she could walk right up to Joe and punch him in his stupid face and he wouldn't see it coming.

Beneath them, a dozen people walked past. She recognized every one of them. Uratha. And they were beat to fucking shit. Soaked in blood, holes all over them, and one of them was missing an arm. Holy mother fucking shit Clara was missing an arm. And the smallest person in the group, Avery, barely had a face anymore.

"Jack ... Jack wouldn't do that."

"Nope. The curse did that." Jacob chuckled, barely more than a whisper, and pat her on the shoulder. "But they're all alive. Damn."

"You were really hoping Jack would kill some of them, weren't you?"

"Of course."

"Did ... did you know this was happening tonight?"

The elder Nosferatu grinned at her, looked below, and didn't answer. Which was an answer itself. He knew. He fucking knew Avery was going to attack Maria tonight. He knew Jack would be in his ritual room while it was happening, and immediately make a dash for the cathedral when he left. Maybe he hoped Jack would be too late, and Maria would be dead or something.

The fucker arranged for Jack's meeting with Black Blood, to happen tonight, so this shit show would happen without his interference, or at least delay it. And most importantly, he'd probably been banking on the curse killing some of them.

"Jacob, you are a giant, fucking colossal asshole."

“I know, right?” He chuckled again, and gestured down to the werewolves walking past. “I could kill them, right now. I could jump down and end their fucking lives. I’d kill everyone except Avery, at first. But then I’d Kiss her, and drain her nice and slow, make her enjoy it, so her last moments were filled with self loathing.”

“Dude, you need to let this go.”

That, was dumb. Jacob snapped his bandage-covered eyes toward her, and slowly, he withdrew his hand from her shoulder.

“You had your revenge, Triss. I haven’t.”

“And you know it’s not the same. Jeremiah and Angela were fucking insane.” Christ, just saying Angela’s name filled her with rage. Then remorse, and frustratingly, guilt. “And they would have killed us all if they got the chance. Avery’s just trying to help.”

Sighing, the man shook his head. “Don’t give me that shit you little fucker. You killed her for revenge and no other reason. And for all your tiny little brain can manage, it can’t understand the larger picture here. You don’t get to rationalize bullshit. You don’t get to dismiss an action, because it fucking fits your world view at the time.”

“I—”

Jacob’s grip found her throat, and she froze, staring at him, as the man held her second life in his hands. “Listen to me, and listen closely, young witch. Rules, ideals, morality, these are inventions. People made them up. There are no good guys, no bad guys, no villains or heroes. There is no God in the sky telling us what we should or shouldn’t do, and no permeating energy in the universe guiding us onto a path of zen and inner peace. There’s only one fucking thing in this whole god damn plane of existence that’s real, and that’s the actions we take.” One hand still holding her throat, he pointed at his temple with the other. “You’ll never be a true witch

until you understand that. All that matters, the only thing with any meaning or value, are actions. Say what you want, think what you want, rationalize, appeal to whatever god or morality you want, none of it matters. The only thing that fucking matters, is what you do, or don't do. And Avery took something away from me that I can never, ever replace." He leaned in closer, and tightened his grip. "Do you really think you can convince me, that I shouldn't get my revenge?"

He let go, and turned his head back down toward the werewolves. Even with the speech, his Cloak was perfect.

"I ... I guess I can't." Sighing, she looked at the street as well, and furrowed her brow as rats poured out of the cathedral. Barely visible from a distance, the tiny, dark bodies disappeared into Dolareido, vanishing into dark corners, gutters, and a million crevices the city provided them. "But, it's not all that shit I was thinking about, dude. I was ... thinking about you."

Jacob said nothing, face still pointed to the street below, but his usual jackass smile was gone. She had to be careful.

"I mean, I don't think you'll be happy if you kill Avery, you know? Cause, yeah, anarchy and nihilism and all that, but I don't think you could ever be happy being a fucking killer. I mean, you are, but not that kind of killer. Avery's just trying to save lives and shit. And ... and you seem pretty happy with Samantha. Right?"

Using the Samantha word managed to make him wince, if only a little. For all the crazy sex Jacob and Samantha had, to the point every witch had seen the woman naked and cumming by now, there was more to their relationship than mindless sex. Sometimes they went into his alcove, and came out a few hours later, no sex had. A few hours, talking. Clearly they had some sort of connection.

"I like her, Triss. I like her a lot. But I'm not going to abandon my plans because of..." Sighing again, he crouched lower on the ceiling

as Antoinette and Elaine jumped down from the cathedral, and walked inside. “Whatever, it doesn’t matter. If I killed Avery now, people would blame this on me.” He gestured to the church, implying whatever it was Maria was up to. “Avery can wait.”

Triss nodded, and made damn well sure to not ask about what the fuck he meant by plans. Old as the bastard was, he probably had a dozen plans in motion at any given time, some of them probably decades, even centuries old. Better she didn’t stick her nose into shit; it might get stuck.

“Think Jack’s alive?” she asked.

“Overheard the wolves say he was. Maria and Damien too.”

“Really?” Damn, fucker was multi-talented to overhear that.

“Yeap. They injured the both of them, badly. They’ll all be out of commission for weeks, maybe months.”

“Daaaamn.” She shivered and rubbed her arms. For Maria to be seriously injured was a big deal. Yeah sure, Damien too, quick little fuck, but Maria was a force. Everyone was terrified of that bitch and her mastery of Nightmare. If they hurt her and Damien badly, then the Lancea et Sanctum was out of commission for a while. Which meant...

“Jacob?” she asked.

“Yeap. Now that Maria’s out of the picture, Garry’s going to push on the Invictus. He’ll strike while the iron’s hot.” Grinning, Jacob got up, and jumped away, back toward their cave.

“The fuck? Wait for me!”

---

~~Eric~~



Garry's phone buzzed, and he checked it. The frown on his face said it all. Whatever had happened hadn't gone exactly the way he wanted, but not as bad as it could have gone for him, either.

"Alright, get out of here," he said, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

Jessy, still cradling her busted jaw, gave the man the finger. She'd managed to get the jaw back in place, and her vitae or whatever was doing work to keep the bones together, but she didn't want to risk fucking it up more by talking yet.

"The fuck happened?" Eric asked.

"Go ask Avery about it. Or Jessy, once she gets debriefed." He shrugged, leaned back against the sill, and sighed. "That Jack, he's a real fucking problem, you know that?"

"Jack? You mean the curse?"

"Yeah, the fucking curse. Jack's gonna kill someone at this rate. Someone he wouldn't want to kill."

"Wha—"

"I said get out of here." Garry dismissed him with a hand wave, and a half dozen vampires pointed their guns at Eric.

Sighing, Eric and Jessy got up, and did as ordered. No one shot them in the back, or stopped them from leaving. They just walked out, and it was like nothing happened.

Snarling, Jessy pulled out her phone, and her eyes went wide. "Holy shit!" And of course, the talking was quickly followed by a groan of pain.

"Don't talk. We should have your jaw in a sling."

“It’ll heal by tomorrow night,” she whispered, slurring her words together so she barely moved her mouth. Healed by tomorrow, sure, but aching and fucked up for days. Sighing and groaning, she stared into her phone and texted something in it before showing it to him.

Tash’s, ASAP.

---

Jessy opened the door with her key, and they stepped into Natasha’s apartment. Clean, a lot of function over fashion. Very Natasha.

“Natasha?” he yelled. “Hey, it’s Jessy and Eric.” No answer.

Jessy grumbled and stomped forward, immediately regretted stomping and hurting her jaw, and instead gently walked her way around the apartment.

Eric sniffed the air, but it was hard to smell Tash. Not cause he couldn’t smell vampire, he could, plenty, but vampires didn’t smell very different from each other. Hints of ash and dust and not much else. But he followed what he could smell, and did his best to ignore Jessy’s scent as he drifted toward the bedroom.

Oh shit.

“Jessy, she’s in here.”

Jessy came in after him, groaned, and sat down on the bed beside her. A stake stuck out from her heart, a classic wooden stake, though thin, and shiny. Laminated? Whatever it was, it didn’t smell like wood. Smelled like nothing.

Without ceremony, Jessy yanked out the stake and threw it away, hard. It dented the wall before it bounced on the hardwood floor.

Eric stood beside her, and waited. He’d have to do the talking for Jessy.

Natasha sat up with a jolt, and Eric tensed like someone had just thrown a bomb into the room. Guess they woke up from a staking the same way they woke up come dusk: violently.

“What, w-what’s going on!?” Natasha spun around on the bed, and Jessy ducked her head back seamlessly, dodging a near backhand to the face. “Jessy? Eric? I—”

Eric put up his hands. “Calm down. You’re in your apartment. We just pulled a stake out of you.” Sighing, he picked up the stake and showed it to her. “Sunrise isn’t far off.”

She stared at him like he’d just explained the world was ending. But slowly, her eyes drifted between him, the stake in his hand, and Jessy, still at her side.

“Jessy, you—”

“Her jaw is broken. She’s trying to avoid talking.”

“Yeah,” Jessy whispered, wincing as she did. “You ok?”

“I ... I’m fine, I guess. I...” Her eyes fell, and she stared at the bed. From looking like a surprise apocalypse had hit, to looking like her heart had just been ripped out by her boyfriends, was—oh shit.

“The boys did this to you?” he asked.

Natasha winced, and scrunched up the bed sheets in her hands. Slowly, she pulled them up to herself, half covering her legs, and she buried her face in them as they pulled over her knees.

“The ... the p-p-pack went to confront Maria.”

“Jessy shared some details with me on the way here,” he said. “Apparently, Damien sent out an alert when they arrived.”

“He was there?” she asked, lifting her head from her blanket and knees.

“Yeah. Jessy got the message, but we couldn’t do anything about it. Garry had us locked up.”

“W-Wh—”

Eric held up a hand. “Jessy will fill you in. But yeah, Garry wanted us out of the way while Avery dealt with Maria. Was hoping Avery and the gang would kill her, I suppose.”

“But she didn’t?”

“No. According to what Damien’s told Jessy in the past ten minutes, the werewolves kicked their asses, pretty badly. It was looking bad, but then Jack ... Jack showed up.” The room went silent. If Eric didn’t know better, he’d figure the temperature of the room dropped, cause he sure as hell felt ice prickling his skin. “Is he really that bad?” he asked. “I mean yeah, Jessy and I found him dealing with that ... giant ... spider monster ... solo.” Dumb question.

Jessy nodded, slow, and not because of the pain in her jaw.

“I ... I haven’t seen him cut loose myself,” Tash said, “b-but Antoinette and Elaine think he’s dangerous. Super dangerous. And you mean he, um, d-did that ... to Avery?”

“Nearly killed her and everyone else in the pack,” he said. That was probably not the best way to word it. Natasha looked at him, eyes so wide he could see the white around them, and he put up his hands. “Nearly. No one died.”

The relief on her was blatant. “Good.”

“Good?” he asked. “Because of Arturo and Matthew? They’re the ones that staked you.”

She nodded. “It was Avery’s order. She t-texted Arturo something, and they were leaving, and then he ... he got me.”

“I mean, I get that it’s not deadly to a vampire. But still, I figured you’d be—”

“I am angry,” she said, voice a lot steadier than he’d ever heard it. “I am. W-With Avery, and the boys. But ... not as angry as the Prince will be.”

---

Stupid idea? Stupid idea. His life in a nutshell.

Sighing, he walked back into the apartment building, back up the stairs, back down the hallway, and back up to Avery’s door. A small knock and a few seconds later, he was in the apartment with a dozen werewolves. No Garry, and no other vampires with guns this time either.

The pack looked like shit. For a second, he’d thought they’d gotten into a fight with a swarm of killer bees, considering every one of them was covered in red welts. But they weren’t welts, they were holes, many of them still bleeding. Bite marks?

It didn’t stop there. Broken limbs, broken fingers, gashes, giant bruises, the works. The whole group had been thoroughly trashed. Some of them looked on the verge of tears as they sat around, licking their wounds; metaphorically.

“Holy shit,” he said. “I—” Words stopped, and he stared hard at Clara, and her one arm.

She looked away and shook her head. “It’ll grow back. In ... in time. A month ... or two.”

One of the joys of being a supernatural creature, especially a werewolf. He wasn’t sure it made up for the apparent lifetime of

strife, but still.

“What are you doing here?” Avery asked. She lay on the couch, TV off, with her head on the couch arm, and face looking up. It was barely a face. He’d seen lasagna with more defined facial features. “Looking for an apology?” Her words were a slurry mess, what with her destroyed and swollen lips and probably tongue, too.

“No. No, I figure you were doing what you thought you needed to do, so you could save the day.” Sighing, he looked between the group another time, and eventually his eyes settled on Matthew and Arturo. “How’s that working out for you?”

They looked away as well. Lot of guilt in the room. Except from Avery of course, who sat up and glared at him between puffy slits of red flesh for eye sockets.

“Might have gone better if you were there to help us.”

“Me? Why would I go?”

“Because if the Gauntlet comes down, this city goes down with it. Millions die. What about that aren’t you getting?”

“City’s been doing fine for hundreds of years.”

She shook her head. “Things are different now, and you fucking know it. The azlu showed up for a reason.” She gestured to David, and regretted it immediately, wincing and groaning before lying back down.

“So your plan is, what, to burn every bridge you’ve made?” he asked.

“Garry wouldn’t do anything he couldn’t recover from, politically. If he killed Jess, he’d start a war with the Invictus, and he’d be the bad guy. Can’t have that.”

Eric stepped around the couch and frowned down at her. “You mean that war he’s been slowly building up to, with Terra Den and the territory skirmishes?”

“Yeah, that war.” She shrugged, regretted that too, bit back a yelp, and relaxed back on the couch. “He promised me he wouldn’t kill you or Jessy.”

“He broke her jaw.”

“Like I fucking care.”

Muscles tightened, fingers curled into fists, and he glared down at the impulsive asshole as the wolf in him not-so-quietly suggested he kick her ass. It’d be easy right now, and dirty as hell.

“So what now? Maria’s still alive, and she’s going to want revenge.”

“Like I’m telling you anything.”

“You—”

“Eric, it’s obvious by now that you have no intention of joining the pack, or any pack. You’re a ghost wolf, and you’ve thrown your lot in with the vampires. That’s why Garry agreed to lock you up with Jessy for the night.”

He folded his arms across his chest, and glared. It wasn’t a good glare. He couldn’t muster up that kind of anger, put it all on the surface like that, like Avery could.

“I’m not a vampire. I’m not Invictus.”

“Sure. Whatever. Doesn’t matter. I’ll deal with Maria, or Garry will. I’ll do my fucking job cause it’s the reason I am what I am. It’s why Luna gave me this gift. And gave you this gift.” She gave him

the finger — not the gift she was talking about — and relaxed on the couch as she closed her eyes. “The problem is Jack.”

Wait, Garry will? Shit. If Garry wanted to make a direct move on Maria, now would definitely be the time. But from what he knew of vampire politics, it'd be risky.

“Jack. He—”

“Is possessed by something evil as fuck,” she said. “He kicked our asses, and enjoyed every second of it. I got him good and he shrugged it off. Jesus, if something pisses that kid off in the wrong place, he's going to kill everyone.”

---

~~Natasha~~

Jessy rubbed her shoulders and hugged her. The two sat on Tash's couch, in silence, watching the news that was on mute. Kine news was borderline meaningless to them, but she didn't know what else to do.

“Should we get ice cream?” Jessy asked, barely moving her mouth as she did.

Natasha managed a small chuckle, but it was soft and weak, and died a second later.

“It's not a b-break up, Jessy. They ... they did what they did because Avery w-wanted me out of the way. Probably thought I'd interfere.” Avery was smart enough to know Tash was still on Maria's side. Which was wrong. Tash was on the side of the truth, on hunting evidence, on understanding that events occurred with details, nuance, and degrees of granularity. People like Avery and their ‘stop something at all costs’ attitude were a menace. And stupid. The bitch was smart, and stupid, and that made her dangerous.



“Then they coulda just gone and did their thing without telling you! Staking you is crossing a line, Tash.” Jessy shook her head, groaned in pain, and then shook Natasha, softly. “Dump their asses. Then we can rent a few romance revenge movies and binge.”

Tash rolled her eyes, and leaned her head into Jessy’s shoulder. Much as Jessy was basically a man in a woman’s body, she tried to do the girly girl thing, even if all she had were clichés.

“They might have d-done it anyway,” Tash said, anger bubbling up, “even if Avery hadn’t t-told them to. Art and Matt, they ... p-probably thought I needed to be protected from what was going to happen.”

“You don’t need protecting! You were a Right Hand of the Invictus. You—”

“They weren’t p-protecting me from getting hurt. They were protecting me from ... from seeing something b-bad happen. M-Maybe to them, maybe to Maria.” And that, she had to admit, was a genuine concern. Natasha knew her strengths and weaknesses, and seeing horrible things happen to people was definitely something she struggled with.

“Bullshit. You’re stronger than that, Tash. You can handle things others can’t. Just because you haven’t turned into a hardass doesn’t mean they’ve got something you don’t. If anything, it’s the shitheads like Maria that are broken. They’ve lost something that you haven’t.”

Natasha smiled. Jessy was half right, and it felt nice to hear it, even if it was all mumbled.

“As m-much as I’d like to hang and watch movies, I need t-to report back to the Prince. And it’ll be sunrise soon.”

“Gonna tell her what the boys did?”

“It w-was Avery’s order. I have to.” And she might have told her even if Avery hadn’t given the order. What the boys did, it wasn’t just a huge violation of her trust, it was a huge strike against the Ordo Dracul in Dolareido. It was bigger than her, and she wasn’t stupid enough to think her personal feelings on the matter meant she could hide what happened.

“Damn. Shit is gonna hit the fan. Carter and Clara are definitely losing their apartments.”

“We need more information. We—” Her laptop, sitting on the nightstand beside her, rang. Jack’s avatar came up.

“Speak of the devil.”

Nodding, Tash accepted the call. Both women winced openly.

Jack sat in front of the screen, leaning back in a nice leather chair, one elbow on its arm and his forehead resting in his palm and fingers. Two crows sat upon his shoulders.

For a single, fleeting moment, Tash thought he looked like a king, a weary king, one who’d come back from war with its scars on his person and soul. Certainly on his person. He was covered from head to toe in cuts, and four huge gashes ran from his neck to his pelvis, deep enough the girls could see his insides.

Jessy leaned in over Tash’s shoulder, and groaned like she was in pain. Sympathy pain, probably. “Jack! Holy fucking shit dude, what happened?” And then she groaned in real pain from her jaw.

The boy sighed, eyes still hidden in his left palm, while his right hand found his buzzed hair and rubbed. Blood, everywhere, and not his own.

“You got Damien’s message?”

“Yeah, I did,” Jessy said. “But Garry had me and Eric held up. Didn’t want us interfering with whatever happened.” She frowned and rubbed her face. “Fucker broke my jaw. Only just got it working. God, you have no idea how much this hurts.”

Slowly, Jack revealed one of his eyes between his fingers, and stared at Jessy. She stared back. And they started laughing. Which of course ended quickly for both vampires, Jack clutching his gut with his other hand and groaning, while Jessy held her jaw and copied the sound.

“He let you go though?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, after Avery did whatever she planned to do. Which, from Damien’s text, you put a stop to.”

“Yeah, I guess. You ok Tash? You’re looking kinda ... I don’t know.”

She nodded and looked down. “It’s ... um ... the boys, they ... staked me, b-before they joined Avery.” It hurt saying it. It hurt more, seeing her friend’s eyes furrow with rage.

“Jesus. Avery’s order?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Well, I ... the curse beat her face into a pulp, if that makes you feel any better.”

“Y-You know what? It does.” She nodded sagely, earning a warm chuckle from the woman beside her.

“Damien didn’t go into much detail in his texts,” Jessy said, “just that you stopped Avery and kicked their asses. But he also said some things went down that were pretty bad. Wanna elaborate?”

He groaned again, and rubbed his forehead in his palm. “Maria knows that I killed Lucas.”

Tash froze. “What? H-How?”

“The curse told her. To fuck with me.”

“What a fucking asshole!” Jessy said. “But, I mean, it’s not like Maria can just kill you anymore, right? You got that curse protecting you.”

Jack peeked through his fingers again, and looked to Jessy, hidden weight pressing his whole body into the chair harder than it had a moment before.

“Yeah. Until that situation gets sorted, I’m gonna sleep here at the Prince’s. I’ll talk to Michael tomorrow night.”

Jessy shook her head. “Dude, you’re gonna need at least a week to —”

“I know, I know. But it has to be done, before Michael does something ... uninformed.” Sighing, the young man closed his eyes, and they disappeared behind his fingers again as he cradled his forehead. “And things get worse.”

“Course they fucking do.”

“We can’t trust Jacob.”

Tash blinked, and looked back at Jessy before Jack again. “Um, I d-don’t think any of us trust Jacob.”

“Dial it up to eleven, cause I’m convinced Black Blood and him are up to something.”

“B-But, what about your mom?”

He shook his head again. “Don’t tell her. I’ll talk with Antoinette about it, and I know she’ll agree. Telling Mom will only tip him off.”

Every time Jack got involved in anything, the weight on his shoulders grew. Now, he looked like he was being crushed by a mountain, face still half hidden behind his hand, while his other gripped the arm of the chair like he wanted to kill it.

“He ... he seems to like her, Jack,” Tash said.

“I think he does, too. But you and I both know elders will sacrifice almost anything to reach their goals. No offense to Daniel or Antoinette, but Jacob is the most dangerous vampire in this city. The fucker is too smart, and underneath all that Joker bullshit, I know he’s a calculating villain, playing for the long game.”

Sighing, Tash nodded, Jessy did too, and Tash leaned in. “Um, Art and Matt ... are they...”

“Clara and Avery got the worst of it. Art and Matt took a decent amount of damage from silver, from Damien, but they’ll be fine. Not sure how long it takes werewolves to recover from silver damage, but if it’s anything like vamps and fire, they’ll probably need a few weeks or more.”

Sighing heavier, she leaned back into Jessy. “I ... I guess I should be happy about that.”

“Nah,” Jack said. “I get it. And I saw the looks in their eyes. They looked guilty as all hell. Clara did too, considering she bit off Damien’s leg.” Both women winced audibly. “And I ... the curse, he ... tore off Clara’s arm.” They winced louder. “Far as I know, werewolves can regrow limbs, right?”

Tash nodded. “Y-Yeah. She’ll be fine! D-Don’t worry.” Her words didn’t seem to help much. The poor man sighed, and Tash struggled

to not wince again as she watched the flesh through his gashes rise and fall. “She ... she won’t blame you.”

“Sure about that?” He lifted his head and leaned back in the chair, and Tash could practically see the weights tied around his neck. “I ripped her arm off, Tash.”

“You didn’t! The curse did.”

Slowly, his fingers found the necklace he wore, and gently fiddled with it as he looked down.

“I could make some sort of comparison I suppose, between me and an owner with a dog. Who’s to blame if the dog bites someone? But it’s a pretty weak comparison.” He shrugged, and groaned for the effort.

Tash didn’t believe him. He thought it was an accurate comparison. Or, he felt it was accurate, even if he knew it wasn’t. Guilt was a horrible thing.

“Jack,” she said softly. “I ... can I talk them? The Uratha. I want to ... I d-don’t know, see if there was anything I could have d-done.”

“I’d give them their space for now, Tash. After tonight, shit’s gonna happen. You say Garry held you hostage, Jessy?”

“Yeap.”

“Then we have no choice but to assume Garry and Avery are working together. Now that Maria’s injured and out of the way, I fully expect Garry to make a move on the Invictus, and he’ll use Avery.”

“How?” Jessy asked. “Not like Avery’s gonna agree to join a covenant war.”

“She still thinks Maria’s up to something. Until I convince her otherwise, she’ll consider Maria and the Lancea et Sanctum to be overt enemies. And we know Michael will back Maria. Then there’s the whole thing with Terra Den and Xnomina, and...” He looked up, took another deep breath that showed his insides, and hardened his gaze as he looked back to the two of them. “Shit’s going to hit the fan, Jessy. And honestly, I’m not sure the Prince is going to do anything about it.”

Jessy got up and paced circles around the couch and nightstand. “Why didn’t Garry just kill me, then?”

“Cause he’s gotta play this right. If he oversteps, the Prince and the sheriff will call bullshit and interfere. And it’ll be hard for Garry to convince all the Carthians to go to war if he starts it with a sucker punch. But if he can get the Carthians and the Invictus to slowly boil up to more violent skirmishes, well, we’ll be at each other’s throats before we know it.”

Jack was right. Vampires weren’t soldiers, or robots. They were loners who only wanted to be left alone so they could feed and fuck. Garry couldn’t just say ‘fight!’ and have a hundred Carthians throw themselves into a might grinder. Lucas only managed that using a strange, magical influence from Tony’s old den. A loci, according to Antoinette.

But the Carthians and the Invictus already hated each other. If Garry built up the situation and got everyone on board through time and circumstances, then they’d fight for him, like they did against the Lancea et Sanctum. And if he built up the situation over time, like the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Prince would have a hard time saying either covenant was specifically at fault. She’d default to a neutral position, as long as the covenants didn’t damage the Masquerade or her city.

Jessy sighed and nodded as she paced. “And with Maria and Damien out of the way for a while, and you too for that matter, Garry has the room to push a little harder, all without ever making himself look the bad guy.”

“Yeap,” Jack said. “I’m guessing in the next week, he’s gonna incite some violence over some territory the Invictus have had for a while, that you guys probably took from the Carthians in the past decade or so. Something he can claim rightfully belongs to the Carthians.” He leaned toward the camera, the motion enough to have Tash frowning and looking away from his torn open torso. “And if he starts a war, you know what Michael is gonna ask me to do.”

Tash didn’t meet his gaze. Slowly, she nodded, and leaned back on her couch.

If the Carthians and Invictus actually went to war, Michael would ask Jack to kill Garry.

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~~Damien~~

Matthias lay beside Maria’s coffin, unconscious, drained, and happy. Maria lay within, its door open, and the coffin upright against the wall.

“Secure, sir,” one of the thralls said. A woman in an Invictus suit, with an ear piece and sunglasses. She looked ridiculous wearing sunglasses inside, but the Invictus generally preferred when their trained thralls and ghouls all looked the same.

He nodded, leaning on his crutch. “Very well. Leave us.”

The thrall raised a brow, visible over her glasses, before she looked to Maria. Maria nodded, as Damien knew she would. The



thrall, realizing her mistake not trusting the word and obeying the command of a Right Hand, gulped, nodded to Damien, and left.

The place was still a mess, but the blood had been wiped up, area bleached and coated in other cleansing chemicals, and emergency repairs made to Maria's gates. It'd be safe to sleep in. Maybe not as much as before, but enough for one night at least, especially now that Maria's specialist ghouls sat within the tunnel, fully armed.

Sighing, Damien hobbled over to the coffin, and stood there, eyes downcast.

"Madam Turio," he said.

"Mister Burksen," she said.

"I..." He frowned, still looking down. What to say? How to say it? "I..." Coming up with what to say was a part of the problem. He'd left Maria in the dark too long, and trying to come up with a convenient explanation for everything felt hollow and wrong. "I'll ... be honest with you, about anything you ask. Swear upon the Lord, Longinus, and my soul."

She stared at him, expression unreadable. Angry? Sad? Disappointed? He'd have an easier time reading a stone wearing a mask.

"Mi ... Damien. You fought well tonight."

He lifted his head, and stared at her. And for the first time probably in the woman's life, she looked away first, unable to hold his gaze.

"You don't want to know about what happened that night?"

"What's there to tell, Damien? That ... Ripper creature made it clear. Jack, forever surprising us, managed to ... defeat a Kindred

fifty times as old as he, in a battle of wills?” Sighing, she shook her head again. “The boy is a marvel, but there are limits. No, if Jack managed to break your will, then your will was compromised beforehand.”

“It—”

“Compromised by Lucas and his insanity, Damien. You lost faith in him, because he no longer deserved your faith.” She shifted in her coffin a little, and snarled in pain; probably tried to lift the arms she didn’t have. “He’d become a twisted man, and you saw that. He dragged you into Hell, and you went, despite your wavering faith. And in the end, it was a weakness Jack exploited. Am I correct so far?”

“Y ... Yes, Maria.” He looked down and squirmed in his shoes. Shoe. “In a way, it is—”

“It is not your fault Lucas died, Damien. And it is not Jack’s.” Pain wracked her voice, causing it waver, as if she were about to cry. “Lucas, and Lucas alone, bears the weight of his demise.”

Damien came closer, and forced himself to look Maria in the eyes. She was about to cry. If she’d been Blushing Life, tears would have touched her cheeks.

“You won’t kill Jack?”

“Of course not. I ... I am not some mindless, emotional woman, lost to reason in the wake of grief. I...” She shook her head. “Please, close my coffin and leave m—”

“Maria.” He interrupted her, and that was not something you did to an elder, especially Maria. “Why weren’t your ghouls here tonight?”

“What? Matthias—”

“Not him.” He gestured past him, down to the tunnel to the ghouls armed with rifles, too far to hear the two vampires speak. “Them. Your day guard. You knew the Uratha were a danger. You knew they’d come for you eventually. And yet you ... didn’t prepare.”

She slowly lifted her gaze to him, and it melted away in shame.

“I have my reasons.”

Sighing, he came in closer again, until his feet almost touched the bottom of her coffin.

“Maria. I saw the look in your eyes, when you asked me to leave. You were happy I was willing to stay, but you also wanted me to go.”

“I—”

“Don’t.” He leaned in closer, and grabbed the edge of her coffin with his free hand. It was a huge, heavy thing, black and filled with white lining, and as scary as Maria looked, it fit her well, like a vampire throne. Except now, it looked less a throne, and more a true coffin. “Just don’t. You were hoping they’d kill you, weren’t you?”

She didn’t have to say it. Her body sagged, and the once proud and mighty Nosferatu lowered her gaze again.

“Damien, do not pry. My business is my own.”

He snorted. “Bullshit.” Her gaze snapped up, but he held his stare. “Maria, if it wasn’t for you, my dreams would be dead and I’d be eating out of the palms of the Invictus for scraps. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t know a damn thing about how music, or history, or ... what women want.” Because for some reason, their conversations often drifted in that direction. “I fought to keep you alive tonight, and it wasn’t for any covenant reason. I stuck around, even when you said I could leave, because I genuinely wanted to keep you alive. By God, Natasha wants to keep you alive!”

That earned a few blinks of surprise from the armless woman.

“She does?”

“Yes! She’s been trying to convince the Uratha that you’re innocent of their concerns for weeks. Matthew and Arturo had to stake her tonight, cause they knew she’d interfere.” Hopefully Tash wouldn’t mind him sharing some of the info he’d gotten from her latest texts tonight.

“How horrible.” Her expression didn’t match her words. Much as she was depressed and distraught, knowing that Tash had been trying to help her managed to edge a tiny smile onto the corners of her lips. “I had no idea, about Natasha. She asked about Lucas before, and ... and what things I might do, but I didn’t realize she’d vouch for me.”

“Maria, you are a scary woman. Most of the city is terrified of you. But no one wants you gone. You’ve never earned anyone’s ire, except for that asshole Garry. Why ... why would you let yourself die?”

“Because! Because ... I am tired, Damien. I am tired of this life. I am tired of this Nosferatu curse, and looking like a corpse. I am tired of struggling against other Kindred like Garry Tones, or the Prince. I am tired of ... being alone.”

His turn to look down and away from her gaze. “I ... I don’t know how anyone will be able to replace my sire for you.” She wasn’t wrong. She looked like a corpse pulled out of a river. Only another Nosferatu could ever form a sexual bond with her, or someone strange like Lucas. “But that doesn’t mean there isn’t one. And that doesn’t mean you can’t have friends, like me.”

After a heavy, long sigh, she leaned her head back against the cushion of the coffin, and closed her eyes. “You are right, of course. I ... will not be so reckless with my life in the future, Damien.”

“Thank you.” Unfortunately, a short conversation wasn’t going to solve all of Maria’s troubles. A century of talking wouldn’t.

“And ... thank you, Damien, for ... for more than simply standing with me tonight. I have ... enjoyed our time together.” Her smile grew into something almost reaching genuine contentment. “Do not think that because I have lost my arms, and piano, that you are to stop practicing.”

His frown faded, replaced by a smile to match Maria’s. “I won’t.”

Perhaps a short conversation could do more than he thought it could?

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“Damien! I—what the fuck!? The fuck happened to ye?”

“Werewolves happened.”

Fiona gasped. “Eric?”

“No, the others. They attacked Maria. I was there.”

“What the fuck? Did—”

“No one died. And I can tell you more tomorrow night.” He sat down on the edge of his apartment bed, set the crutch aside, and the moment he did, the weight of his body pulled him down onto his apartment blankets. All energy, gone.

“Sunrise is in twenty minutes,” she said.

“I know. I ... I asked you over, because I need a drink.”

“Ha! Ye silly dobber. No need to dance around it.” She smiled down at him, standing in front of him by the bed, and looked him up and down. Slowly, the smile faded, and her eyes rested on the lump where his leg should have been. He’d changed his suit, and had

folded up the pant leg and tied it off at the missing stump, halfway down his thigh.

“It’ll grow back,” he said. “And—” He stopped himself as he watched her. Every second, her eyes grew heavier, and heavier, until she stared at the floor. Her shoulders quivered, and her breathing cut short with a few, quiet rasps. “Fiona, are you ... are you crying?”

“Aye! Of course I’m cryin’, ye wankstain!” She plopped down on the bed hard enough he bounced. He almost hissed or groaned in pain, but bit it down. Fiona never cried, and he didn’t want to interrupt.

“Why? You’ve seen me injured before.”

“We were nae dating back then!” Tears ran down her cheeks, and Damien stared, speechless. “And ... and I ahways have tae smile! Cause if ah didnae smile, no one would smile. ‘N folk keep getting hurt, ‘n... ‘n ... ya didnae call me!”

He stared at her, processing. Fiona, crying. Fiona, accent as powerful as it got when she was drunk, but there was no smell of alcohol on her.

“I only had time to trigger my emergency app. Auto message to Jessie and Jack. I—”

She backhanded his shoulder. Not with any real power, but with the strength of a weeping little girl. It hurt more.

“Everyone’s ahways fighting! I’m trying tae be positive, ye ken? Ahways smiling. But every time I look, someone’s hurt, and now tis ye!” She grabbed the arm she’d hit, and hugged it tight to her side. “I left home cause I knew, if I stayed, folk would get hurt.”

“You said you left because nothing happened there, and there wasn’t much to eat.” She’d also implied it was a boring as hell little

Scottish town, but better to not say it.

“Aye, and that’s true, but ... but I knew, ye ken? I knew, around me, folk would get hurt. I didnae want that! I came here cause Dolareido was supposed to be fun, and ... and no one I knew would get hurt. And...”

She wept. From perfectly calm, even happy one moment, to a fountain of tears the next. Not happy then, fake happiness? Or maybe she had been, but the reality hit her too hard this time for her to keep it at bay? He didn’t know. She wasn’t as simple as she appeared, or as dumb as she pretended to be, and the more he learned about her, the more he was convinced she didn’t know how complex or smart she was either.

He slipped his arm out of her grip, onto her shoulders, and hugged her close to his side.

“I won’t be dying any time soon, Fiona,” he whispered. “The hunters are gone. That threat has passed. Avery was put in her place by Jack. That threat is ... under control.”

“But, I hear Garry and the Invictus are gonna have a go?”

“They might, yeah. But if that happens, I can handle it.”

“And the tears! Azamel still says someone’s up to something! Dolareido could—”

He hugged her tighter, and she twisted so she could wrap her arms around him. Seeing him without a leg triggered something in her, made everything more real for her, like he was a soldier come home from war. What to say to her, then? Fiona was young, and despite the huge burden she had to carry with being Begotten, still young at heart. Amazing as she was, maybe he needed to say something a little softer?

“It’s going to be okay, Fiona.”

She laughed between her sobs, and buried her face into the side of his chest. “Liar.”

Ok, maybe not that.

“I ... I’m not going to go anywhere, Fiona. I’m not going to die.”

“But—”

“And if shit happens again, I’ll make sure to message you, ok? We can set up a system, like Tash and Jessy have. If Azamel lets you.”

“Azamel is ... is nae going to be around much longer.”

And there was that. The only parental figure Fiona had in the city was dying. Her world was being turned upside down over and over, and seeing him lose a leg probably snapped whatever foundation she’d felt comfortable building.

“Then we can talk with Sándor. Cause if ... if I’d known...” If he’d known she would react this strongly to seeing him hurt again, he might have taken Maria’s offer to just walk, cause he couldn’t have Fiona cry like this, never again. If he’d known Fiona was this ... this... “I love you, Fiona.”

She froze. The sobbing stopped, and her arms stopped squeezing. She didn’t pull away, but she’d turned into a statue.

“Yer ... yer just saying that to make feel better, about ye nearly dying.”

“No. I’m not.”

“Yer ... just being nice, cause I’m crying like a baby.”



“That’s not the reason either.” He turned his head and put a kiss in her big, frizzy red hair. Maria was a big part of the reason he’d said the words. She’d helped him see Fiona in a new light. And, honestly, seeing Fiona now, crying, over something very real, helped him see her differently again.

“I ... I...” She rubbed her face into his chest, and squeezed him again. “I think I do, too.”

Relief flooded him, but a moment later, he laughed. She pulled away, frowning at him.

“Sorry! Sorry. Just ... think?”

“Aye! Think! I’m nae some old bawbag like ye.” She buried her face in his side again, and this time hit him with her forehead a few times. “I dinnae know what ... what it feels like, ye ken?”

He closed his eyes, let her hit him with her head a few times, and a few times more, before he hugged her tight to his side. He set his cheek on her hair, and rubbed her arm.

“It feels like ... like, you want to hold them tight in some desperate need to be so close that it’s impossible. It feels like, you want them around you all the time, even just sitting near them. You want to hear their voice, all the time. It feels like you want to touch their body every night. And it feels like ... if you saw them wounded, you’d find yourself bawling uncontrollable tears. You wouldn’t be able to help yourself. If they hurt ... you hurt.”

That quickly went from soft to not soft, but it seemed to work. Fiona burst into loud sobs again, and hugged him even tighter.

“Aye! Tis like that.”

He smiled into her hair, and grit his teeth against the pain. He had half a femur, and all the flesh around it was just a chewed up

lump. It hurt, immensely, but holding the crying little redhead was far more important. The moment was too meaningful to let something as meaningless as pain ruin it. He didn't want it to end. Anything, he'd give anything, if he could keep holding her like this.

But sunrise was coming. Fiona, sniffing, pushed him onto his back, helped him get settled, and set her neck to his lips. Despite the rush, the thrill, the intoxicating impact of her monster blood on him, and despite his need to stay up and talk with his ... his love, he succumbed to his daily sleep.

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~~Jack~~

Elaine smiled, finger waved, and left, leaving him alone with Antoinette in her master bedroom.

He collapsed onto the bed, naked, and dragged himself toward its center, before collapsing again. Even with a stomach full of fresh blood, he felt like total shit. His wounds had closed enough that his insides weren't visible anymore, thanks to the meal, but he could feel how fucked his innards were.

He could also feel how quickly he was healing. Ventrue and Gangrel were tougher than other blood clans, harder to injure, and could generally regenerate faster than the other blood clans. Gangrels especially, considering how easily they could morph their bodies with Protean. And Jack was probably healing faster than Michael could. The curse was a scary fucker.

Sighing, he touched the necklace around his neck, and shook his head. "Not taking this off anytime soon."

"Oh?" Antoinette said, sat nearby at her vanity desk. He couldn't see her, with his eyes pointed at the dark marble ceiling.

“Oh? You ... you talked to him, Antoinette. Twice now. You know how fucking horrible he is.”

Her sigh was audible.

“Oui, quite. But he also accomplished something tonight I fear you could not have done on your own.”

He almost yelled a retort, but after a few seconds to think about it, he laughed. She was baiting him. “Yeah, ok, Emperor.”

“Quoi?” She chuckled softly. Yeap, he’d caught her leading the conversation. Tricksy Prince.

“You know if I rely on this curse thing, until I can’t function without him, my journey toward the Dark Side will be complete.” He shook his head and spread his arms, still staring at the ceiling. “I have to get rid of him, before that happens. And if I find myself in that sort of situation again, I’ll talk my way out of it, instead of using my fists.” Not that he thought words would have worked tonight, but stranger things had happened.

“Ah. Forever thinking ahead, my love.”

“I guess, yeah.”

Movements in the bed, indents and shifting sheets, announced Antoinette’s approach. Slowly, she sank onto the sheets beside him, naked as well, and kissed his cheek.

“The necklace works well, then, if you had to remove it.”

“It does, thank god. But it’s not a perfect solution. The only perfect solution is just getting rid of him.”

“The Ripper.”

“Oh god please don’t. He doesn’t deserve a name.”

“Agreed.” Nodding, she cuddled into his side, careful with her arm, and kissed his neck. “For all the horrors that happened tonight, no one died.”

“Yet. Garry’s going to take advantage of this situation, and people are going to die.”

“Perhaps. But it has not happened yet. Peaceful resolutions have been found in more hectic situations. Do not lose hope.”

He turned his head, and met her third kiss, eyes closed. It would have been awesome if he could just ask her to deal with Garry for him, but she’d say no. It wasn’t her place, and it didn’t make sense for her covenant goals.

“I hurt Clara.”

“Oh, my dear Jack.”

“I ... ripped off one of her arms.” He knew she knew, but she hadn’t mentioned it yet. And he had to talk about it.

Antoinette sighed, and nuzzled her cheek against the top of his head. “It must have been horrible.”

“It ... it was, yeah. The curse was driving, and he ... fucking brutalized them.” The sound of snapping bone, shrieking werewolves being eaten alive, and the sensation of Avery’s face collapsing over and over to his fists, it was all burned into his memory. But the worst of it, was the look on Clara’s face, when she saw him get back up from the remains of the piano, turned.

“She will regrow the limb. Uratha are resilient.”

“Thank god. If I’d permanently fucked her like that, I—”

“The curse did that to her. Not you.”

“Yeah, yeah I know.”

Nodding, she sat up, twisted a bit to look down at him, and smiled. “I admit, I am somewhat relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“For such a horrible thing to occur, for the curse to unleash itself upon the Uratha, and for Maria and Avery to confront each other so, and yet no one perished? And better still, the necklace works better than I originally thought. I know there are many trials ahead, and that Dolareido suffers inevitable mayhem not seen since I enacted the purge. But all things considered, tonight could have ended so much worse, my love. Do not be so hard on yourself.”

“And Maria?”

Her face drifted down, and she sighed as she traced her fingers down his chest, softly, careful of his wounds. “I will speak with her privately. But I suspect it will not go as badly as you believe.”

“Uh, I killed the love of her life, Antoinette. She—”

“She knows what sort of man Lucas had become. Give the woman some credit, Jack, she is wise.”

He held up three fingers. “Three, Antoinette. Three elders, off their rockers with madness, have nearly killed me. Lucas, Tony, Viktor.”

She laughed. Such a nice sound, despite its almost villainous tone. She just had that sort of voice. “Maria is different. I will speak with her, I promise. And if I must, I will extend my protection to you officially as the Prince, since you killed Lucas in my defense.”

That was an interesting political angle. Antoinette had to be careful with whatever things she did as Prince; making enemies of

both Invictus and the Carthians at the same time could get her killed. But, if she could make any decision she made seem reasonable, arguably defensible, then she could interfere with their business without risking her political position.

The Danse Macabre was such a pain in the ass.

“And Avery? She’s not happy I interfered.”

“You did, but you also let her live. She would be overstepping herself if she attacked you. And with the curse—”

“The curse I’m trying to get rid of.”

She frowned, a subtle expression, and she set a finger on his chin. “I want to be rid of it as much as you, my little Ventrue, but while it remains a tool, it would be foolish to discount it. A logical man such as yourself understands the value in accounting for all assets, yes?”

Damn, she was smart, using his own habits against him.

“Yes.”

“Indeed.” With a wicked smile, she traced the gashes on his chest; closed, but the discolored skin showed where they were. “And do not think that because I am Prince, that I would let tragedy befall you, even if it were an inconvenience to my position.”

“Uh, you saying you’d fight Garry?”

“Non. I am saying that I would not let him kill you, and I would officially remove you from the conflict, if he somehow managed to defeat you.”

He couldn’t help but grin at that. “So, dead as far as the covenants would be concerned, but not actually dead.”

“Exactly.”

“And sort of ... your prisoner, I guess?”

“Mmm. Precisely.” Grinning again, she leaned back in closer, and this time made sure to softly press her breasts against his side, a bit of her weight on his shoulder. She caressed his buzzed hair, and instantly, he melted. “Tomorrow night, you should take some time to speak with Veronica, and introduce her to your home. I will speak with Maria.”

“And ... and Tash, she—”

“She has informed me of what transpired. I will be speaking with the Uratha about that as well. Make no mistake, they harmed one of my dragons, and there will be consequences. But for now, worry not. Sleep.” He couldn’t see her mouth too well with how close she was, but he was sure he saw a smile there, absolutely serpentine.

Sighing, he nodded, and felt himself drift away as sunrise came. And as soothing as her touch was, he couldn’t get Clara’s screams out of his head.

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His daily torpor had not been fun. Lot of nightmares, swirling images of Damien and Maria getting torn up by werewolves, and of Clara, getting her arm ripped off. Him, ripping it off. Other images hit him too, like what he’d done to David’s mind, and when he’d turned Avery’s face into pulp, but it was Clara’s face that kept coming back, over and over, haunting him.

The curse, Ripper, whatever, didn’t have to hurt her like that. She’d regenerate the limb, but that didn’t mean he had to fucking rip it off. Totally unnecessary. The curse had done it to spite him. And he’d told Maria about Lucas, to make Jack rely on him.

Well, it wouldn’t work. Fucking jackass.

He got into an Invictus car with his new thrall to be, and soon, they stood at the door of his mansion.

“This is really yours?” Veronica struggled to stay standing, because she was still low on blood from yesterday, but also because she looked up and up and up until she almost fell over. Big, tall building.

“Yeah. Viktor Honors owned it, my grandsire, Elaine’s childe.”

“Child?”

“Childe, with an E at the end. Elaine sired him.”

“Oh right! I get it.” She nodded, rubbing her hands together nervously.

“Viktor died, then his childe Julias Mire, my sire, gained it. Then ... he died, to some hunters. You uh, may have heard about it on the news, about crows swarming a hospital.”

“Oh my god, that was your sire?”

He set a hand against the door, and half laughed, half sighed, as he looked down, shaking his head. “That was me.”

“No way. No way! You—” She squeaked and jumped back as two crows swooped down out of nowhere. And of course, low on blood as she was, she fell. But Jack caught her, snapping his hand out and catching her wrist.

“Yeah, me,” he said. Mulder and Scully cawed a few questions at him as they settled on his shoulders. “I’m alright, I’m alright. Still pretty torn up, but the cu ... I heal quick.” Nodding to no one, he let go of Veronica’s wrist, offered her an assuring smile, and pushed the door open.



The entrance of the mansion was absurdly fancy, with the giant chandelier and the enormous staircase with curve railings, and red curtains and some giant paintings, all the beautiful Victorian stuff. Except the dust, that sucked.

“This is yours? I ... I can’t even imagine how much this would cost. In this economy!”

Laughing, Jack hobbled over to the stairs clutching his stomach, sat down, and pulled some oats out for his friends. They pecked away, and Veronica stared at the two birds as much as the mansion around her.

“I was barely earning more than minimum wage over three years ago, Veronica. Now I ... well, salary isn’t really a thing. The Invictus pay me, but there’s the Xnomina corp, and contracts that I affect as a Right Hand, and—” He stopped himself, and laughed again. God, Julias had info bombed him the first week of his life as a vampire, because he knew Jack liked that. Jack should probably go slower with someone he didn’t really know. “I’ll ease you into it. All you have to do for now is clean this place.”

“By myself? It’s, uh ... pretty big.”

“No. I’ll be recruiting more thralls into service, but for a little while at least, you’ll be on your own.” Mulder flapped her wings at Veronica, and Jack chuckled as he nudged his head into the bird’s body. “Calm down. She’s my employee.” Slave. The word was slave. A happy, well-treated slave, and soon to be well-paid slave, but a slave, bound to the Vinculum. Never forget that she’s human, Jack, and you’re not.

He really shouldn’t have been so hard on himself about it. He gave her a fair deal. Memory wipe, or become a thrall. But it still ate at him.

“Can they understand you?” She stepped in a little closer, eyes on the birds. No disgust, but plenty of apprehension.

“Crows are damn smart.”

“Uh, not that smart.”

He laughed and nodded. “Vampires have lots of special abilities, like being able to talk with certain types of animals.”

Her eyes went wide. “Really?”

This, was strangely fun. She was so new, and innocent, but also interested, and smart enough to figure things out, to understand implication and impact. Antoinette knew what she was doing, picking Veronica for him.

“There are five types of vampires,” he said, and he held up five fingers. “Well, probably more, but most cities have five, including Dolareido. Ventrue like myself are naturals at Animalism, speaking with animals and controlling them, and Resilience; we’re damn hard to kill. But all the blood clans can do these things, too, just not as well.” Well, Gangrels were naturals at those things too, but no need to confuse her yet. “An ability unique to Ventrue, however, is Dominate. Which is ... brainwashing, essentially.”

She gasped, but didn’t recoil. If anything, she only grew more intrigued.

“Wow. Um, is that what you’re doing to me?”

He winced, but quickly wiped the expression away. He was the vampire, she was the thrall. Maybe some day he’d embrace her, or another Kindred would, her Vinculum would be broken in her first death, and she would rise a vampire in her second life. But for now, she was human.

“No.” He pressed his thumb to his wrist hard enough to pierce his skin, and a small effort of will brought his dark blood to the surface. “Any vampire can create a Vinculum between thrall or ghoul, and master. Serve me well, and your future will be limitless.” No wonder Julius didn’t like doing this. It felt very vampire-y, like, the dark kinda things vampires did. The sort of things the Beast wanted to do.

She beamed at the sight of his blood, leaned in, and kissed it off his wrist. A second later, she groaned, and her eyes fluttered. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she’d just shot heroin.

“Why ... why does it taste so good?”

“One of the great mysteries,” he said, smile subtle. “Be careful what you drink. My blood won’t make you immune to the blood of other vampires.” Nodding, he slowly slid his finger back along the wound, and the skin closed underneath the finger, like a magic trick. Predictably, Veronica gasped, and he outright laughed. She was fun.

She smiled at him, and her eyes lingered. There it was, the haze of the Vinculum. Another dose and she’d be completely bound, and willing to do nearly anything he asked. Hell, two doses was apparently enough to have her physically interested in him. Very interested. If he asked her to call him master, strip, and give him a blow job right now, she probably would, and enjoy doing it.

There was definitely a thrill in that. Thrill in being the master, and he could see she’d find thrill in being the submissive. But no thrill was going to tempt him to cheat on Antoinette. And, knowing Antoinette, she’d invite Veronica into their bed eventually anyway, inevitably satisfying his new thrall’s sexual desires.

Jack leaned back, and looked his thrall up and down a few times. Which immediately got her blushing, and she looked away as she rubbed her hands. Sure, he’d used an assertive gaze, but her response was so damn strong. No wonder some Kindred acquired a

bunch of thralls and ghouls, and just spent all their time fucking and feeding on them.

He got up, scratched Scully and Mulder behind the head, and walked toward a side hall. “Come with me.” Talking assertively, commandingly, it came naturally to him. No mental effort required, he just opened his mouth, and the once young, human Jack vanished, replaced by the Ventrue. It felt good to be in charge.

“Where we going?”

“A tour of the mansion. And then a tour of my sleeping cell.”

She jogged up to catch up to him, and walked beside him and slightly behind. A glance back showed her eyes on the birds, a smile of wonder still on her face.

“Wait, cell?”

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“Oh my god, you have a dungeon.”

She chuckled. He didn’t. Slowly, he gestured to the cells. His own room wasn’t in this particular wing of the underground labyrinth, but its tunnel was connected to this one’s, making it a good opportunity to show her the dark side of being a vampire.

“I have no plans to ever mistreat you, or any other kine, Veronica,” he lied. Never mistreat her, sure, but how many kine had he killed so far? “But not all Kindred are like me or my sire. Julias’s sire, Viktor, was a brutal man. He tortured and killed hundreds of kine to death over the decades, right here in these cells.”

“Jesus.” Her eyes went wide, and she took a small step back from the cell, and from him, too.

Mulder and Scully cawed a few times. They felt it, the death, the horrible things that coated the walls, invisible but permanent.

“Don’t worry, he’s gone,” he whispered.

“Um, what?”

“Talking to my friends.” He pet the heads of each bird again, before he stopped and looked at one cell. “You don’t have anything to fear from me, Veronica, at least not me consciously. But all vampires can do”—nasty shit that will give you nightmares for the rest of your life—“horrible things, when the circumstances are right. So, always be on your guard, Veronica, even from me.”

He glanced over his shoulder to her, past Mulder, and found a scared, and intrigued woman. Scared was good. Intrigued, not so much.

“You’re, uh, kinda scary for a little guy, sir. Um, no offense!”

He laughed and shrugged. She’d made him laugh, that was good. Great, even.

“It’s ok. Yeah, I am small, but size means little to a vampire. I...” How much to scare her? It was important she understand the reality of the situation, but if he utterly terrified her, she’d probably snap and run, and he’d have to wipe her mind. “I was in a fight last night.”

“Oh. Is that why you’re limping?”

Sighing, he nodded, and started the walk back to his wing of the underground tunnels. “No harm in telling you. I fought some werewolves.”

“Werewolves!?”

He nodded, and pulled open the gate to a neighboring tunnel. “I ... defeated them. Lot of broken bones, lot of blood.”

“You, by yourself?”

“More or less.” Further, into the tunnel, he opened another metal gate. “I made enemies last night, Veronica. And you need to know, because now that you’re my ... mine, my enemies are your enemies. I’ll do my best to keep you out of the line of fire, but know that your life is in danger while you work for me. You’ll be taught basic self defense, and more importantly, how to use weapons. Pistols, and shotguns.” The easiest for civilians.

“Oh god. What have I gotten myself into?”

He smiled at her as he opened the last gate, showing his bed. “If you’re as smart as some people think you are, you’ve found a road to a long, long, long life of intrigue, adventure, and power.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Oh my.”

“And if you’re dumb, you’ve found a road to an early grave.”

## Chapter 134

~~Jack~~

He knocked on Damien's door. Someone very much not Damien opened it.

"Fiona," he said, smiling.

"Jack! How are ye, ye bawbag? And who's this lass?"

"Veronica, meet Fiona, Damien's girlfriend, and ... a paranormal creature."

Both Jack and Veronica were dressed in suits, though Veronica's was less fancy. It was how Invictus did things. Vampires and their servants were well dressed, but it was obvious who the master was.

Fiona, on the other hand, was wearing a white button shirt, and nothing but. Damien was above average height, while Fiona was short, almost short as Tash; the shirt covered her enough to hide her ass, but only barely.

"Paranormal?" Veronica's eyes lit up, and she shyly waved at Fiona. "Hi, Fiona."

"Hi Veronica! Jack, ye here to see Damien?"

"Yeah."

"Damien!" She turned, hopped a bit, and waved down the hall. "Jack's here to see ye!"

Jack facepalmed. "I coulda done that."

Fiona stuck her tongue out at him, skipped down the hall, and came back with Damien, the biggest smile Jack had ever seen on her lips. Even Damien had something of a smile on, a bit awkward, and a bit happy, an emotion the man didn't show often. Something had happened between them.

"Damien," Jack said, and he sighed as he looked the man up and down. "Looking better. How long till the leg comes back?"

He shrugged with one shoulder, other locked onto the crutch he leaned on. "Fiona's blood is damn strong. A few weeks?"

"Yeah but those werewolf teeth are strong, too."

Maybe he should have worded that better. Damien winced and looked down at his missing leg, hidden inside his suit pants, folded halfway down the femur.

"Jack, about Maria."

"Antoinette's talking to her tonight," Jack said. "She seems to think Maria won't be as big a problem as I think."

The Mekhet nodded. "I agree with the Prince, then. Maria's not as ... obsessive as we thought. I think you'll be fine."

He had a hard time believing that. So far, elders were the ones that were either the most logical and wise, or the most insane and willing to burn everything to a crisp for their pursuits. But if both Damien and Antoinette were on the same page, maybe they were right? Maybe Maria wouldn't do everything in her power to catch him, tie him up, and slowly set him on fire? Nice thought, but he probably just jinxed it.

"Veronica, Damien. Damien, Veronica."

Veronica finger waved. Damien nodded a greeting.



“New thrall?” he asked.

“Yeap. I’m taking her around and introducing her to friends. She’ll be at the mansion most of the time, so, figured she should know who she can trust.”

“Ye can trust me, lass!” Fiona hopped past Damien, grabbed a very startled Veronica’s hand, and shook it with way too much energy. As long as Jack had known Fiona, she’d always been a happy hyper kinda girl, but this was a new level of enthusiasm. “Ye gonna build yerself a harem, Jack?”

Again, Jack facepalmed. “I didn’t plan on it.”

“That’s nae a no.” Giggling, Fiona slipped back into the apartment and beside Damien, and she cuddled his free arm to her side. “Lass, yer master’s dating the horniest, most beautiful vampire in the world. Be ready for—”

Damien nudged her side, and she giggled.

Veronica blinked at Fiona several times, probably also surprised by how bubbly the girl was. Well, bubbly was good. Bubbly was great. It was a nice reminder paranormals didn’t all have to be edgelords.

“Did you want to come in?” Damien asked.

Fiona shot Jack a quick look, complete with a harsh glare. Very much a ‘go away!’ glare.

“Uh, sorry, can’t. Like I said, showing Veronica my friends, so she knows who’s who, and meets them. Presence is important.”

“I’ll talk to you later then.”

Fiona smiled a thanks for Jack, waved, and took Damien back to his bedroom, bounce in her step relentless.

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Back on the street, he walked the sidewalks of Dolareido with Veronica at his side, her slightly behind him. He didn't ask her to do that, she just did it. And he'd be lying if he said he didn't kinda like that. The Ventrue half of him was happy. He had to be careful, or this whole situation would feed his ego until it burst.

“Uh, Fiona,” Veronica said, “ ... she said something about a harem?” She leaned in close enough she could whisper it and be heard over the street traffic.

Jack half laughed, half groaned, and motioned for her to walk beside him. She did, nervously, and he smiled at her.

“You and others will be responsible for my property. With training, you can become my day guard. With more training, you can become ... a lot of things. But, harem? That wasn't my plan. It's just ... sex and vampires go hand in hand. Cliché, I know, but you remember what happened when Elaine Kissed you.”

The thrall shivered and blushed. “That was ... amazing.”

He raised a brow as he looked at her. Sure, Julias had taught him a lot about reading people, but Veronica made no efforts to hide what she was thinking. She enjoyed that night.

“And I won't lie, Antoinette has two ghouls — thralls that have been elevated and given immortality — that join us in bed all the time. She, Elaine, and—”

She grabbed his arm, and her eyes went wide. “Immortality?”

He grinned at her. “Told you there'd be perks.”

Slowly, she let go of his arm, and shivered again. He recognized that shiver, the sensation of a new reality finally sinking in, the mind opening and letting in a myriad of unthinkable futures. It was quite a rush.

He started walking, and she meeped as she dashed to catch up.

“So,” he continued, “while I will be creating new thralls, you’ll never be asked to do anything sexual. Give blood on occasion, yes, but nothing sexual. And ... if you did want to do something like that, Antoinette would be there. We love each other, a lot.”

“I know. I saw it in your eyes, and her eyes, when you looked at each other.” She giggled as she joined his side again. “You’re so different from each other! And she is ... uh ... well.” At first she used a single hand to reach up and suggest height. Then, after a shy glance, used two hands to suggest a giant bosom.

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. Every moment with Veronica was like taking a kid to Disney World; evil corporate greed included, given he was Invictus.

“Antoinette’s got quite a history. She’s half a millennium old.”

“Holy shit.”

“Elaine, too.”

“Holy shit!”

“And you don’t have to commit to anything like what Fiona was suggesting. I’ve put enough on your plate as is.”

She blushed again as she looked down. “Well, this is Dolareido. I’ve done some crazy things, and I liked doing them.”

He smiled at her, knowing damn well he was giving her that ‘I knew that already, I’m your father’ kinda look, and kept walking. It wouldn’t exactly be fair to assume she’d done crazy things, just cause she lived in Dolareido. He’d been born and bred in Dolareido, and did absolutely nothing crazy his whole life. But, she did have blue hair, nipple piercings, and a clit hood piercing, according to Elaine. There was some fire in her, and she wore it on the surface.

“Next up on the list. Jessie and Eric.”

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He sent Jessie a text, and she directed him to Bloodlust, which of course meant loud EDM, lots of red light with bits of pulsing white that made the whole place feel like the inside of a literal heart, and lots and lots of drugs and sex.

“Ever been in here?” he asked.

“Not Bloodlust, no. It’s super expensive! And fancy and stuff. I’ve been to nightclubs, and a couple raves. But not here.”

Well, this would be quite a night for Veronica then. He walked up to the bouncer, and without a word, the bouncer stepped aside and opened the door for them; Invictus employee knew him on sight, after all. Veronica followed Jack in, and a glance back showed the utter awe on her face as she looked from the bouncer to Jack. Every moment was a new revelation for her, and Jack couldn’t help but enjoy it. This was too damn fun.

And he needed that. After what happened last night, he deserved a little fun, right?

People stepped aside for him as he walked past the bar, and stood before the dance floor. Some of them recognized him, but most didn’t. Maybe it was his limp, and how he avoided any hard steps to not put pressure on his insides. Maybe it was his eyes, and the confidence he carried, confidence he’d slowly built up over the past

three years and then some. Or maybe it was his aura, the vampire aura of the Beast even kine could occasionally sense. Whatever it was, kine stepped aside for him, and Veronica stared at him all the harder as they did.

Up on the second floor, he looked around at the booths. The closest one had a couple of Invictus vampires in it, two women. A kine male sat between them, and was being treated quite nicely with both vampires pressing their barely covered breasts into him as they nibbled on his shoulders and neck. Both had a hand in his pants, which Jack was thankfully unable to see with the table in the way. Judging from the look on the man's face, he was swimming in bliss.

Next booth had a male vampire, with a woman riding his lap, facing him. She had her dress down and off her shoulders, and she pressed her fake breasts into his chest as the man drained her.

Next booth beyond that had a scene Jack had actually seen before. No vampires here, but two male kine sitting outside of two females, with their hands up their girls' skirts, fingering them hard enough to make the two girls shake. They were loving it, and they buried each other in kisses and fondling hands.

Jack walked past them all with only a short lived glance, though he could tell Veronica wanted to watch, even if she didn't realize it. Moving on was enough to have Veronica chasing after him, and he smiled to himself as she did. The vampire in him loved that.

"Jessy, Eric," he said. "Oh, Natasha, hi. This is my new thrall, Veronica. Veronica, this is Jessy, a fellow Invictus, and Natasha, a member of the Ordo Dracul. Vampires. And this is Eric, a bouncer here, and a werewolf."

"Hey."

"H-Hello."

“Hi.”

“Hi,” Veronica said, and she gulped. Not audible this time, considering the music, but Jack noticed it anyway, watching her in the corner of his eye. She wasn’t just some random, pretty kine following him around. She was his thrall. Little kernels of awareness tickled up through his consciousness, demanding he pay close attention to her, protect her, and watch out for her.

Jesus, no wonder Antoinette felt so protective of Ashley and Julee. Veronica was his thrall, only dosed twice, and he couldn’t help but notice how much the Beast in him demand he protect what was his. If she ever became a ghoul, would he go shopping with her, pay for a decade of education, and keep her at his side at all times?

Daeva did that. Daeva were more protective of their ghouls, and anyone they fed on a lot, compared to other blood clans. So maybe he’d never have the same relationship with Veronica as Antoinette did with Ashley and Julee. Maybe he would. Antoinette treated her ghouls like they were precious, and that they’d leave the care of her nest some day. She was their master, but it was a strangely nice relationship, which was kind of twisted to think about. As long as he kept his head, and didn’t let the Beast consume him, he could keep his relationship with Veronica balanced and healthy, and some day, let her go. Hopefully.

“So, Jack,” Jessy said, and her grin grew. “Harem?”

He threw up his hands. “The fuck? Did Fiona text you?”

“Fiona? No. Why?”

He grunted and groaned as he facepalmed. “Not everyone needs a harem like you, Jessy.”

Veronica gasped and looked between Jessy and Jack. “She has a harem?”

“Had,” Eric said with an eyeroll. “Then we started dating.”

Natasha managed a weak smile as she looked to Jack, but it brightened when she looked to Veronica, and held up four fingers. “She has four ghouls. B-Big guys, and she’d ... well, you know. And at the same t-time!”

“Uh, you joined me in that orgy a few times, last I checked, Tash.” Jessy shrugged. Totally shameless.

Poor Tash. She winced and lowered her head, her plan having backfired. Jessy was shameless, but Tash was not. Jack almost made a comment about her having two boyfriends, and how awesome that was, no need for the shame. But, that could change very soon for all he knew.

Jessy pat her friend on the shoulder, and smiled at Veronica. “You are the sexiest thrall I have ever seen. Love the hair.”

“Thanks!” Veronica perked right up, and looked around with renewed vigor. “I ... I didn’t realize this place would be so, so um...”

“Full of sex and kine ready to be Kissed,” Jessy said. “Jack, can I have a taste? Or, you know, maybe borrow her? She’s very—”

Jack aimed a fist at her. “No. Bad. Down.”

“Aw come on! I lent your mom my boys!”

“She didn’t fuck them!”

Jessy frowned and looked between him and Eric. “But, I need a girl to—”

Eric slipped an arm around Jessy’s shoulders, and pulled on her hard enough to bring her down into his lap in a sort of capturing

hug. “Nice to meet you, Veronica. Don’t worry about anything she says, Jack won’t let anything happen to you.”

Veronica giggled as Jessy wrestled to get free. “This is all so new to me. It’s kind of hard to believe that ... that there’s two vampires and a werewolf in this booth. I—”

Natasha lifted her head, and pulled a cheek back enough to expose her teeth. On cue, she grew her fangs, and Veronica gasped. She did love to gasp, but it was warranted, considering how much her life had turned upside down in record time.

“You uh...” Eric shook his head. “You don’t want me to prove it.”

Jessy snorted on a laugh, but nodded. “Probably for the best.”

Veronica almost asked, but Jack waved at his friends and walked back toward the stairs, and she darted after him. But despite her enthusiasm to follow him, a glance back showed her stalling a bit, eyes dancing around to the booths again. One of the women was sitting on a man’s lap, facing away from him, and had pulled her top down so the dress was hidden by the booth. Diamond nipples bounced around on her jiggling breasts, and the kine smiled at Veronica as her mouth opened with moans, lost to the music.

Veronica stared, until Jack started down the stairs, and she squeaked and dashed after him again.

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“Your friends are nice,” Veronica said as she glanced around at the hall leading to his apartment.

He laughed and shook his head. “They can be, yeah. Jessy is a total sexaholic though, so be careful around her.”

“She won’t—”



“She won’t do anything without my permission, but that doesn’t mean she won’t put you in some extreme situations to tempt you.”

“Extreme?”

“Honestly? I expected to find her at the club, fucking Eric. She might have, if she’d known you were coming, even with Tash right there.” It’d hardly be strange, considering the group’s sexual history.

“Oh.” She giggled and shook her head. “She’s aggressive.”

“Very, and about everything. Tash is her opposite. She...” Sighing, he rubbed his hair, and opened the door. “There’s a lot of shit going down, between us and the werewolves.”

“Eric?”

“No, not him, the other werewolves, a pack of them. Tash dates two of them, and then shit went down yesterday and ... Best to not bring it up unless she does.”

She nodded, and followed him into his apartment. “Wait, two?”

“Yeah, two big guys.” He held up a hand indicating their heights. Seriously tall Art, and giant Matt.

“But she’s so tiny!”

He shrugged again and sat down on his couch. Not a fancy hall bench or whatever, just a nice, high quality couch, black leather, comfortable as hell. One of the things he loved that didn’t belong in a luxurious mansion. Or, maybe it could? It was his mansion. Maybe he could have a room dedicated to being comfortable instead of just looking it, while not being it. Or maybe he could just redecorate the whole damn thing like rich kids did these days, and have it all set up with black leather and shit.

“We all have our kinks,” he said. “You saw Antoinette and Elaine, and the type of women they are.”

Veronica giggled again, and sat down beside him. “You’re lucky.”

He winced and shook his head. “Luck in love? Extremely. In sex and money and power? Yeah, extremely. But I’m not telling you about the other shit, the unlucky shit, and it’s going to stay that way, for a long time. Don’t want you getting involved.” Fuck, it was really hard to not sound like some emo tragedy case when describing his situation.

“But you just told me a bunch of stuff.”

Laughing, he leaned back and clutched his chest as pain hit him, ending the laughter with a grunt. “Just the surface stuff, stuff all the Kindred in Dolareido know about. Nothing another Kindred might want to learn about, and use you to do it.”

“It sounds like you have a lot of enemies.”

“Enemies is ... a strong word.” He pulled out his phone, and flipped to a picture. “Here. We won’t be visiting these people, but yeah, this is Beatrice. She dated my sire. That’s him, too.”

Veronica smiled wide as she took the phone. Sharing pictures of people and talking about their lives, that was the sort of thing she probably did in her free time, before Jack adopted her. A social woman. Maybe she’d rub off on him.

Veronica’s smile turned to gasp, and she blinked at the picture on the phone. “That mouth is terrifying! And ... and she’s showing her tits! Ooh, the man behind her is handsome.”

“Ha, yeah, Triss and Julias. She took the picture and sent it to me. She’s a Nosferatu. They all have disfigurements, random. One of my

old bosses looks like a corpse, and she leaks mist out of her skin. Basically a walking, talking graveyard.”

“And your sire didn’t mind Beatrice’s, uh, Nosferatu features?”

“Nah. Crocodile mouth? Snake eyes and claws? Barely registers as strange for a vampire with a few decades under their belt.”

“She is beautiful, in a strange way. And scary, but wow...” She ran a finger down the picture over Triss’s exposed stomach. “How does she keep a figure like that? I—”

Jack laughed. Oh god. “She’s a vampire. She’ll keep the figure she had when she was embraced. The abs, the hair, the muscle, it’s permanent. She could get a haircut, and tell her body to not regrow it during her daily sleep, same with the tattoos and piercings. But otherwise, yeah, her body is permanently like that.” He pointed at his head. “Alas, I buzzed my head a few days before I was embraced. I’m stuck like this.”

She giggled. “Still, you’re so fit, and so’s she! It must be nice to be like that forever.” Her smile faded, and her finger slid over to the man beside Beatrice. “And Julias. He’s ... gone now?”

Not forever, not at all.

“Yeah, killed by hunters. We got revenge, but ... yeah. She was damn happy, back then.”

“But not anymore.” She lowered the phone, furrowing her brow.

“She’s a member of the Circle of the Crone, now, and since Julias died, she’s gotten really deep in it. Neck deep.”

“Circle of the Crone?”

“Witches,” he said. “Like, hardcore witches. Think orgies and sacrifices under a full moon in the middle of a forest, while someone wears the skull of a horse for a mask, witches.” That got her eyes super wide, almost comically so, and he smiled as he took his phone back.

“Scary.”

“Yeap. But Beatrice is a close friend. If she shows up, you can trust her. Maybe not her boss — a dude with a bandage over his eyes — or her friends, but she’s trustworthy. Jessy, Damien, Fiona, Natasha, let them in if they show up at the mansion.”

“Um, b-but not Eric?”

“Eric.” Jack sighed, leaned forward, and set his elbows on his knees as he considered. “The other wolves in the city are proving to be a problem, but Eric’s not part of their pack. But, he’s not a vampire either, and not part of any covenant. So ... if he shows up with Jessy or the others, it’s fine. Alone? Much as I hate to say it, tell him to leave.”

She gulped and nodded. Telling someone like Eric to go away would be difficult for her.

“And, um, Fiona? She’s...”

“Not a vampire, right. She’s a monster. And she’s be helping me with some serious stuff for a long time now. You can trust her.”

“Monster?”

“Monster.”

“I ... don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, honestly. There are vampires, and werewolves, and ghosts, and—”

“Ghosts!?” She sat up straight, eyes wide, like he’d just dumped ice down her back.

“Ghosts, and other classics.” Damn she was adorable. Probably how Julias felt about Jack, every time he dumped a new info bomb on him. “But Fiona, and a few others, they’re ... they’re monsters. Like, monster monsters. The things that creep under your bed, or hide in your closet. The presence that comes up through the drain and drowns you in your own bathtub. The creature that lurks beneath the water, or hides in the trees. Unique individuals, monsters of legend. Things that literally feed on your nightmares and...” Yeap, that was too much. Veronica stared at him like he’d just shot her mother. “The ones in Dolareido are not our enemies, but they are ... well, think Pennywise. You should probably—”

She jumped off the couch, and turned around in place several times as she clenched her fists in front of her, and squealed. “Nooooo!”

“What!? What?” He jumped up as well, and that fucking hurt.

“I’m afraid of clowns!”

He stared at her, and laughed, laughed hard enough he groaned and fell on his ass a second later, clutching his guts.

“None of them are clowns, but they’re all monsters, feeding on fear and able to create and feed on your nightmares.”

Veronica sat down again, shivering. “Very scary.”

“Very very,” he said. “But they’ve been some of my greatest allies. Fiona looks like a simple little redhead, right? But she’s a spider monster.” Veronica almost jumped up again, but he put a hand on

her shoulder and kept her down. “Not an ugly spider. Strangely sexy, in a weird way.” And, if he guessed right, Vrallar’takla of the Eight Blade Arach would enjoy taking advantage of Damien’s current weakness, like a spider indulging in trapped, wounded prey.

“I have a hard time thinking sexy when I think spider.”

“You’d change your mind if you saw her. You know, once the fear part past, cause she is terrifying too.” He scrolled through the pictures on his phone, and brought up another. “And this is my mom, recently turned vampire, sired by Antoinette.” And probably with the witches at this very moment.

“Oh! Oh, she’s pretty.” She wanted to say more. Probably something about how strange a scenario that must be, Jack dating his mom’s sire. A soap opera drama just waiting for a lit match.

“That’s from before she was embraced.”

“Who’s that beside her?”

Jack managed a weak smile, but didn’t put the phone away or change the picture. Instead, he looked at it, and let the memory hurt him, just a little.

“That’s my sister, Mary. Hunters killed her, trying to get to me.”

“I ... that’s ... horrible.”

“Yeah, it was. And that’s why I killed them.”

She stared at him, stared hard, trying to tell if he was joking. He held his face stone cold, and a new reality finally sank in for her. Jack, her master, had killed before. Multiple people. Deliberately.

Nodding, he got up, and motioned around. “Let’s check and see if there’s anything in the apartment we should bring.” Time for a

change of topics before things got too heavy. “You can—”

He stopped, raised a brow, and slowly turned to face the door as his Beast announced an approaching presence. A powerful presence, another Beast, and a familiar one.

“Jack? M-Master? What—” A few seconds later, a knock came from the door, and she stared at it. “Oh my god.”

“Vampire thing. That’s another vampire.”

“Oh, so I ... Right!” Shocked but still smiling, she hopped over to the door and opened it. “Elaine! I ... uh...” And of course, her face turned bright red.

“Veronica Tam, how lovely to see you again. May I come in?”

“Um! Uh ... is ... is that a vampire thing? The whole invite thing?” She looked back at Jack, and he laughed again, shook his head, and motioned for Elaine to come. “Yes. The master says yes.”

How’d she know he was here? Probably had her own thralls or ghouls in the city, keeping tabs on him.

Chuckling, Elaine stepped in. It took Veronica a moment to understand why Elaine didn’t close the door behind her, but she got it and closed it. Jack didn’t really want her to do any of that shit, especially not in an apartment, but it was too much fun watching her figure it all out.

Elaine turned, looked down at Veronica, met her eyes, and said, “Sleep.”

Veronica fell back, body gently collapsing against the wall. She sank down into the corner, instantly sound asleep.

“Elaine? What the hell?” He stood up, but failed halfway and fell back down, guts fighting against him. That was a damn impressive display of gentle but powerful Dominate.

“Calm yourself, Jack. I wish to speak to you.”

He frowned at her, eyes scanning for threat. Antoinette was out talking with Maria and some other stuff, and it wouldn't surprise him if Daniel was keeping an eye on her. Elaine, here, alone, was strange.

“You could have talked in front of her.”

She shook her head, and sat down next to him. “No, I could not. This is important.”

“Then the Prince—”

“This is between you, me, and the curse, Jack.”

He clutched at his chest with one hand, while the other gripped the arm of his couch. His eyes scanned her again, hunting for intent. His Beast stood up, ready for a fight. There was something in her gaze that struck him cold.

“What, you want to talk to him? I'm not taking off the necklace.” Not unless he had absolutely no other choice. Problem was, he was beat up and healing, and Elaine was five hundred years old. She was deadly powerful.

She didn't come over here to exploit him, did she? No, no way. That wasn't smart, not while she was in a city where the Prince was his lover. Relax, Jack, relax.

Except, remember what Black Blood said. If the curse was something the Strix placed on Susanna, because she fueled the ritual or whatever it was, by committing diablerie, how did Elaine



get rid of it? It wasn't a train of thought he wanted to go down, but Black Blood had sewn the seed.

“And I will not ask you to, great grandchilde of mine.” She smiled softly as she said it, and turned on the couch to face him. “But, I must know more.”

“What? Why?”

“I have dedicated centuries to the study of rituals and curses, childe. Many in the Ordo have. Antoinette knows that, but she would prefer to keep you out of the hands of the others.”

Jack winced, half from clutching his chest, half from imagining the sort of shit other dragons might do to him. And Elaine was one of those dragons.

“You ... wouldn't tell me that, if you'd planned to stake and abduct me, throw me in a box, and do experiments on me.”

She laughed, a hearty sound, and lightly touched his shoulder. “If I wanted to steal you away and dig into what makes the curse tick, I could have done that at many points. But if I did that, I would spoil the friendship I have with Ann. And that is not a friendship I would damage lightly.”

“... that's really the only reason, isn't it? If it wasn't for her, you'd do exactly what I said you would.”

Silence fell on them, and Elaine held an unwavering, analyzing glare as she met his eyes.

“Perhaps,” she said after a few seconds. “I am not Viktor. I am not so cruel as to ignore that you are an individual, with desires, needs, and a soul of your own. But I will not lie. If you and Ann were not in love, and hopelessly so, this conversation would be much different.”

He met her gaze and held it. It was scary, meeting the eyes of someone so old. She acted the horny-older-power-woman well, but like Antoinette, it was a mask, one she probably wore so perfectly and so often, it'd become part of who she was. Beneath it though, there was a different person. Antoinette had exposed her soft side to Jack an eternity ago, that first time at Bloodlust. Elaine though, he still had no idea what kind of person she really was.

“Alright,” he said. She had him at a disadvantage. Better to play along and see where this went. “What do you want to know?”

“He speaks to you, does he not? I want to know about his desires, Jack.”

He frowned again. Antoinette usually called the curse ‘it’, and resisted doing otherwise. Elaine didn’t.

“Not sure what to tell you that you don’t already know, Elaine. I —”

“Describe to me, in detail, little Ventrue. Describe to me ... how it feels, this personality that roams your mind. Describe to me the hate and rage. Describe to me the carnal lust this creature has for violence. Describe to me what it is like when the curse takes over, in minute detail. Describe to me the parts you do not wish for Ann or myself to know.”

He stared at her, blinking a few times as he processed what she was saying.

“Why?”

She leaned in, and her usually playful gaze turned into something a lot more desperate than he’d ever seen an elder show.

“Because, Jack, I need to know, and”—she gestured to the necklace—“you owe me.”

Sighing, he nodded and rubbed his head. “Alright.”

---

~~Damien~~

Fiona turned off the lights, helped him sit on his bed, undressed him, and slipped him under the covers.

“I’m a vampire, Fiona. Blankets—”

“Aye, I know, but this is fun!” Nodding, she threw off his shirt she’d had on, exposing her small body, her huge breasts, and all her delicious pale skin and freckles. “Ha! I saw that.”

“What?”

“Ye licked yer fangs!”

He blinked, and licked them on purpose. “I did no such thing.”

“Liar.” Giggling, she rolled onto his chest, carefully, and set her weight on her knees and elbows around him. At the same time, she kept her body low enough to lightly press her stomach against his, and her breasts against his chest. “Boob massage!”

“Uh...”

“Yer the wounded soldier. I’m the innocent lass who takes cares of ye, and falls in love with ye.” She giggled when she said love, and kissed him. “Looove.”

He wasn’t sure boob massage was a proper treatment for anything, but he wasn’t about to stop her.

“You don’t seem to mind that I’m missing a leg.”

“What? Cause yer aw mangled and broken?” She shrugged. “Vrall’s seen worse. And it works better with the fantasy.” Nodding,

she kissed him again, and groaned. “Loooove.”

He laughed. “You seem happier than usual.” Which was saying a lot. She’d been crying last night, but before then, she was always bubbly happy.

“Of course, ye goose.” She pressed her body down against him a little harder, flattening her breasts against his chest, and earning a groan from him. “Now, fuck me!”

He raised a brow. “I’m missing a leg.”

“Yer fine!”

“And I Kissed you just last night.” He brushed some of her frizzy hair aside to expose her neck. The bite wound was healed, as it always was when a vampire licked it.

She nodded, grinned, and then collapsed on him, on purpose. With all of her weight on him, he groaned again, in pain this time. The leg still hurt, a lot, but vampire healing and her potent blood had already sealed the wound, if only barely. Werewolf teeth were something else, and definitely not just regular teeth. The beating he’d taken elsewhere from the tackles and impacts was fully healed though, and he sighed bliss as he hugged Fiona softly to him.

“I am tired,” she said. “But ... but we said the words! The love words! There has to be sex.” Nodding, she pushed her weight back up onto her knees and palms, and crawled forward. Grinning at him the whole time, she slid up until her breasts dangled over his face, before she lowered herself down, and eased herself left and right, literally dragging her soft, huge, heavy breasts back and forth over his nose and lips.

It felt amazing.

“Um...”

“Ye think the Prince does this with Jack? The lad is always getting hurt.”

“I know she does.”

“Ha!” Giggling, she continued, slowly and softly caressing his face with the supple skin of her bosom. “Yer face is always smooth.”

“I shaved the night I was sired.”

“That explains it.” Nodding again, she gently eased herself back, and lowered herself until her lips found his neck. “Drink more.”

“More?”

“Aye, more. Ye still need blood, and I want to try something.”

He frowned, but it was hard to ignore the Beast in him demanding he do as she asked. He was wounded, badly, by a supernatural creature with teeth that burned like fire. More blood was needed to heal the extreme damage, and to regrow a leg.

But her blood was powerful, and special. Drinking it filled him with a dark hunger, made him want to pin her and fuck her until she collapsed. Hard to do that with a leg missing, and he didn't want to drink from her two nights in a row and risk hurting her. She wasn't Uratha. She didn't regenerate as quickly as they did, or Kindred for that matter. Vrall did, but unless Fiona was in her lair, Vrall was something she temporarily summoned, not something she was. Except, she still kinda was? Begotten were strange.

“You sure?”

“Aye.” She slowly eased herself back and forth along his body, and he gulped back the desire to groan. “Ye need to eat, and there is something I do want to try.”

Slowly, he slid his hands up her naked back, one for her shoulders, the other up into her hair, and he held her to him as he sank his fangs into her neck.

He fed on her fairly often, usually accompanied by sex. It was sort of routine by this point, but one they both loved. But no matter how many times he fed on her, there was no getting used to the strange, alien, overwhelming sensation of the Begotten's taint on her blood. Power, a dark hunger he couldn't quite identify as anything other than ravenous, it flooded his body as the warm, thick liquid filled and coated his insides.

The pain in his leg faded, and he squeezed Fiona to him harder, squashing her breasts to his chest as he devoured her. She whimpered as she squirmed in his grip, body quivering with the pleasure of the Kiss, even as it fought against the oncoming exhaustion it caused. The taste of her, and the sound of her mewls, had him hard in moments.

With a predatory groan he almost didn't recognize, he stopped the Kiss, and licked her bite wound closed. Trembling, she rolled off him, dislodging the blanket a bit as she collapsed onto her back. Her breasts spread and flattened against her chest, and her large, pink nipples swelled against her pale skin; he couldn't help but notice.

If he'd been in better shape, he'd have rolled her onto her stomach, lifted her ass up, and fucked her from behind, hard, spanking included. But no matter how much his Beast told him to do just that, he was missing an entire leg, bit off halfway down the thigh. Tossing Fiona around was just not in the cards.

He smiled as he watched the busty little woman breathe heavy, breasts rising and falling, her eyes closed. So damn beautiful.

“Fiona?”

“Aye. Just ... need ... a moment.”

“A moment for what? I—”

The world went dark. It'd already been dark in the apartment, lights off, but it went completely dark. He couldn't see his hands when he held them in front of his face.

Flickering lights, gentle in the black, each announced with the quiet clicks of very old fashioned light bulbs, bathed the room in a new light. Ok, he had not expected that. From lying in his bed one minute, to lying in someone else's bed the next. Where was he? The bed was smaller, a bit uncomfortable, and a metal tray stood beside him. A metal chair sat nearby, and so did a door with a small glass window, with some shadows drifting by it.

Yeap, this was a nightmare. This was Sándor's nightmare, the haunted hospital.

“Uh, I thought Sándor owned this?” Hopefully Fiona, or Vrall, could hear him, cause he didn't see her anywhere.

“He gave it to me,” the darkness said in a dark, quiet rasp, Scot accent gone and replaced with some vaguely Portuguese.

“Are ... are we here, so you can treat me? Patient at a hospital? I don't see that wo—” He shut up quick as from the dark corner of the room, eight giant spider legs crept out. They stabbed the floor and walls with their sharp points, but silently, her motions smooth and deadly quiet as she approached.

“You are here to satisfy me, Damien. Fiona enjoys being submissive, but I, as you already know, do not.”

Well, she was right about that. He didn't sleep with Vrall often, but when he did, he spent the whole time bound up and being a healthy mix of scared and aroused. He enjoyed it, but that didn't mean she wasn't a terrifying creature.

She slipped out of the dark corner, human-ish body floating, held up by her spider legs. No eyes, but giant horns that came out of her skull, and out from her where eyes should have been, curling back to join the others and creating a beautiful, black crown. Dark skin, like metal. A very sharp jaw and tiny, black lips. And a spidersilk dress that did a really bad job of hiding her inhuman, amazing proportions.

Chuckling, Vrall used her many legs to pull pillows and blankets together, set them behind his back, and propped up his torso with them, making the bad hospital bed comfy. Terrifying, being in what looked like some sort of hospital bed, back before medicine was all that advanced, but comfy. But then those spider legs spun some web, and wrapped, and wrapped, and wrapped him and the bed together. He relented every time Vrall wanted to bind him, but this time, he couldn't have done anything even if he'd wanted to.

That kinda added to the thrill, honestly.

He gulped as he glanced out the door again, and noticed more shadows shifting under the doorway.

“There is no one here but us,” Vrall said. “This chamber in my lair is empty, save for you, and myself. Ignore the creations of this nightmare. They are only as real as the delusions of your own dreams.”

He nodded, and did his best to relax back onto the pillows. The nightmare chamber was a stark reminder that being a vampire and being a true monster were not the same thing.

“I can smell the fear on you,” she said. “You don't like hospitals?”

“I uh ... guess they're kinda creepy?”

She laughed. “You are my patient, and this hospital, my hospital, is where I shall nurse you back to health. A lot more interesting take



on the soldier and nurse fantasy, wouldn't you say? A monster, finds a man wounded, and she saves his life. At first he is afraid of the monster, but after a time, they fall in love."

He squirmed a little. Yep, completely trapped. He wasn't getting up until she let him.

"In love," he said softly, and she sighed happily. "And, uh, definitely afraid." Nightmare hospital. Surely he wasn't the only one who thought a hospital, dark, with phantasms and whatnot of people who died from diseases or surgery gone wrong, roaming its halls looking for revenge on the living, was a terrifying nightmare.

"I will have to distract you." Nodding, she slid her claw fingers against her shoulders, palms out, slipped them under the hooks of her dress, and cut the spider silk fabric.

Fiona had large breasts, and so did Vrallar'trakla of the Eight Blade Arach. That was where the similarities ended. While Fiona had a beautiful body, small, curvy, soft but thin, Vrall was a much taller, skinnier creature, with long curvy legs, and an inhumanly tiny waist. And with how lean she was, with a small torso, her breasts dwarfed her chest. Dark, steel-colored skin, with a darker shade for her lips and swollen nipples.

With her weight on spider legs spread out around the room, blade tips against the floor and walls with the extreme precision and delicacy of a real spider, the hovering woman set herself horizontal over him, still hovering. Her heavy breasts hung underneath her like massive tear drops, legs stuck out behind her, and she lowered herself down onto him below where the spiderweb bound his waist. With a sly, tiny smile, she continued to descend, like a spider approaching a trapped meal, and soon her breasts settled along his thighs and pelvis. As her torso slipped between his legs — leg — she licked her lips, and snuggled herself in as close as she could to him,

squashing her breasts to him until his cock lifted between them and pointed up, nearly reaching her chin.

It didn't bother her that he was missing a leg. Well, Vrall had probably seen a million worse things in her lifetime.

“You've fed on Fiona, and took deeply. You must be bursting.” With her elbows outside his hips and on the blankets, she set one hand — two long finger claws and one claw thumb — along his covered stomach, while the other slid down his pelvis to his shaft, and with the smooth backside of a claw, guided it straight up toward her sharp chin, between her squashed breasts. Licking her small lips, she gently slid the claw up and down between her bosom, smoothly gliding along his skin.

“I...” He almost said something stupid, like ‘only partly, because a lot of that blood is going toward healing the leg’. But the truth was, Fiona's blood always elicited arousal in him, and a lot of it. A lot lot. It made him want to pin her down and feast on her as he fucked her into a coma. The only thing that kept him in control now, was half the blood going to healing the leg, and being tied up.

Vrall chuckled, a quiet, whispering sound, and slid her claw up to his glans. “I'd be lying, if I said I didn't enjoy how large you are between the legs, Damien. There are things I can do, I couldn't do otherwise.” Slowly, she traced circles around his glans, almost using the tip of her sharp claw but never quite. Little sparks of pleasure danced on the ripe skin, each accompanied by a small jolt of fear, and eventually, a small drop of precum. She let out a raspy groan, and he wasn't sure if it was because of his obvious arousal, or the fact that, despite all their time together, she could still scare him.

With his girth still between her huge breasts, she tilted her head down and down, and set a kiss along his glans. He quivered at the explosion of sensation, sparks dancing along his sensitive skin, and rippling waves of pleasure working down into him until the bliss

spread outward from the base of his cock. Muscles flexed, and cum gushed up through his length, hot and overwhelming.

Vrall smiled, and gently kissed his glans, softly suckling as several gushes of his cum soaked her dark lips. It flowed down back onto his length, and onto her breasts, coating her dark skin in thick lines of white.

“Already? And quite a lot.”

“It’s ... your blood, I—”

“And, I think, you occasionally prefer Vrall over Fiona. I think you rather enjoy being bound and helpless, on occasion.” Before he could defend himself, she laughed again, and waved a single, huge claw at him. “She doesn’t mind the occasional sharing with me. And I, her.”

“I—”

She tapped on his abs through the spiderweb with a claw, shaking her head. “Relax, my love. I am Fiona, and not. There are no secrets between us.”

Love? He hadn’t really thought about Vrall when he told Fiona he loved her. But then, Vrall was right, she was and wasn’t Fiona. He loved Fiona, so he ... loved and didn’t love Vrall?

Stop thinking, and just relax, like she told you.

Damien took a slow, deep breath, relaxed back against the mountain of blankets and pillows he was tied to, and watched as the beautiful spider creature nuzzled her chest toward his pelvis again. He had cum a lot, thoroughly coating his large cock that Vrall seemed quite enamored with. Chuckling again with her dark, raspy voice, she slowly shifted from side to side, nudging her cum-covered breasts around his length. The weight of her heavy breasts meant

they massaged his girth with each motion, supple skin spreading his cum more.

She stopped, and smiled at him again before she leaned her head down, and took his cock's head into her mouth entirely. Her could feel the flat side of her fangs, four of them, pushed to the top and bottom of her mouth so they wouldn't hurt him. And he could feel her small tongue gently tracing circles around his sensitive skin, while her small mouth and tiny lips, barely able to fit him, massaged back and forth along the base edge of his glans. The suction and grip of her lips, were very, very tight.

Fiona, for all her unquenchable sexual desire, was relatively new to sex. Vrall apparently had centuries of varying sorts of experience, and if she wanted to make Damien cum a second time in four minutes flat, she could, and did. The right pressure along the base edge of the head of his cock, massaging tightness from her taut, wet lips, all while her tongue caressed and teased him, was just too much. He squirmed for a few seconds, before another hot gush of his cum flooded her mouth.

She smiled around his cock, eased her motion, but kept him inside her, even as she let his cum flow out from her lips. More streams of white coated his length, and the two breasts squashed between his thighs and onto his pelvis. With her blood filling him and driving his body insane with desire, his orgasms were always long and powerful, and he stared down at the spider monster as she milked him for more cum, until her breasts were coated.

“Two,” she said once lifting her head.

Shaking as the climax settled, Damien gulped and forced his head up. “I—oh dear Lord.”

Using her spider legs, Vrall lifted herself up, stood upright with blade-feet dangling in the air, and turned herself upside down, a slow rotation that took time as her spider legs stepped around and

around the walls. Once completely upside down, she smiled at him again, before she descended onto him. One of her hands took his cock and pointed it up to her, while her other slid down her own stomach before slipping between her thighs. As she took the head of his length into her mouth again, she masturbated, and Damien stared as the strange upside-down position showed off her body in a way he'd never imagined. He could see everything, her flat, tiny stomach, her curvy legs, the underside of her jaw as her lips spread around his cock, and most hypnotically, her cum-soaked heavy breasts dangling upside down, and gently jiggling with her motions.

“Um, Vrall, you don't need the acrobatics to—” He sucked in a breath, and forced himself to keep his eyes open, gaze locked onto the underside of Vrall's jaw and throat, as she lowered herself down and down until her lips found the base of his girth. Again, a jolt of fear ran through him. She had four very long fangs in that mouth, and their flat, smooth sides slid harmlessly back and forth along his cock; they were bent out of the way, like a snake's. Fear melted away, or at least drifted into background noise, as he enjoyed to the tightness of her lips, and her throat.

Her slender neck bulged, showing how deep she'd taken him, and he shuddered as she again lowered herself until her lips kissed where his cock met his pelvis. With her large breasts hanging upside down towards her collar bone and shoulders, he had to look between them to see how her mouth slid up and down, and how her neck distended to fit him. They rippled with her subtle motions, and his cum trickled down them and onto his pelvis, and where the spiderweb held his abs.

Her hand between her legs worked faster. How she managed to not hurt herself as she masturbated, he had no idea. Spider precision. How she managed to not hurt him with her fangs, he had no idea. Vrall wasn't human, not even close, but damn, there was no denying how insanely sexy everything she did was. She swallowed his length whole again, her throat bulging as she kissed and suckled

the thick base of his girth. Slowly, she nudged her head around and around in a small circle, and Damien outright groaned.

With her legs pointing up, and one hand caressing her clitoris, her other reached down and teased his testicles. Sharp, very very sharp claws traced along the soft skin, hard enough he could feel the sharpness, but not hard enough to hurt. She must have felt him clench in preparation for pain though, cause her throat clenched up as well; probably trying to laugh. Gently, she cupped and teased his cum-soaked testicles instead, caressed, and massaged them, sending pleasant, soothing waves up through his pelvis that felt very much at odds with what was happening. He was bound to a bed in a haunted, abandoned hospital, and a giant spider lady was hanging upside down over him.

He couldn't help but push his hips upward toward her as a third orgasm hit him. Vrall kept him buried, and made no effort to move. Based on what her hand was doing between her legs, she liked what he was doing, that he was struggling to fuck her throat despite being tied up. Struggling, wriggling, she liked it when he did that, and he couldn't not do that as her slender neck and tight throat milked him.

Eventually he collapsed, and the spider lady slowly lifted herself up, lips squeezing tight as she did. Gripping, warm flesh along his cock's tip in post orgasm was almost painfully pleasurable, and he moaned quietly as she eventually lifted herself off him. And when she tightened her lips even harder over his glans, he groaned loudly.

Chuckling, the spider lady slowly turned herself upside up again, hovering in the air over him. How she managed to smoothly adjust eight massive, long, multi-segmented, extremely pointy legs, without so much as making a sound, he could not fathom.

“Vampires are such wondrous children of the Dark Mother. A belly full of blood, and your hunger is replaced with desire. A belly

full of my host's blood, and you're a slave to it. Exquisite." Slowly, she lowered herself, and set the little lips of her tiny slit against the underside of his cock, pinning it to his abs. Hot, and dripping.

He didn't believe vampires came from the Dark Mother, and Vrall knew that. But now was definitely not the time for a theological debate.

She slid forward, dragging her drenched pussy over his length, and without using her hands, arched her hips back and slid back, guiding his cock's head against and into her tight entrance. He shivered as the monster's gripping depths devoured him, and she wasted no time taking him to the base until he could feel how much he was stretching her.

Chuckling, she lifted her human-ish legs, set one of them on his chest and over his left shoulder, and then folded the other leg over it, also setting it along his chest and over his left shoulder. He froze as those razor sharp legs settled an inch from his left ear. The spider monster didn't have feet. Instead, her long shins came to razor sharp points, similar to her spider legs, and if she wasn't careful, she'd stab him.

Of course, Vrall didn't have to use two arms or two legs to do anything. Her eight spider limbs lifted her up, brought her forward a couple inches, and pulled her back and down in a circular motion, a fucking motion. And she watched him as she did, keeping her two legs where they were, crossed at the knee, gorgeous thighs pressed together, while she hugged herself, arms under her breasts. Chuckling, she traced the blunt side of her claws along her breasts, drawing lines through his cum toward her dark, swollen nipples, all the while she bounced back and forth on his cock, controlled by her spider legs.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew Antoinette probably did this with Jack, sit on him like she was getting comfortable on a

chair or couch, and fuck him in that position. But Vrall had an advantage, with her spider legs allowing her to bounce on him without needing to use any other muscle. She truly was just sitting on him, like he was furniture, or helpless prey ready to be eaten, but either way, it was strangely arousing. It was strangely awesome.

He'd never stop wanting to feel Fiona squirm, struggle, beg, and cum when he was in control, but he had to admit, there was something terribly alluring about a powerful woman in full domination mode.

“Who is tighter?” Vrall asked, voice steady, smile wicked. “Fiona, or myself?”

“I..” That was a trick question if there ever was one. “You’re both quite tight?”

She laughed again, and ran one of her claws up along her horns, not unlike a woman running fingers through her hair. Vrall had no hair, but the myriad of horns were fascinating and marvelous, and he stared at her as she combed her claws over them.

His eyes closed as her insides clenched, and wet heat trickled over him. The spider monster let out a raspy groan, and slowed her bouncing. Eventually she came to a stop, still sitting on him, and she smiled at him when he finally opened his eyes.

“Oh, not four?”

“Um, no, not yet.”

“Well, close your eyes, little fly, and enjoy. I aim for five. Or perhaps, six?” Grinning, she started bouncing again, and Damien groaned as his eyes closed again her soaked, squeezing insides milked him with expert control.



Vampires could get addicted to sex, with the Blush of Life letting them do some pretty interesting feats of sexual endurance. And with Vral exploiting how strong and strange Fiona's blood was, and the effects it had on him, he didn't know that that sort of addiction was a very real possibility.

"And," she continued, "I think we will have to continue this treatment, several times a week at least."

He melted into the bed, and gave into the spider monster. Of all the things to be concerned about, getting on the good side of his love's monster half wasn't one of them. He already was.

"I can agree to that."

"As long as you treat my host well," she said, "I will treat you well, vampire. I have not even begun to share with you the pleasures I am capable of." He winced as the woman clenched on his length hard, and she chuckled on him before letting out some more raspy groans. Her juices flowed over him, almost boiling hot, and it wasn't long before his joined them. "There. Four. I think I will aim for six. And you will not be going anywhere until they are had."

Lord, protect him from sexy horny monsters.

---

~~Antoinette~~

"Wait here, Daniel."

The man sighed, a quiet and subtle thing, before he sat within one of the pews. Which surprised her. Daniel shared much of her hatred for the Lancea et Sanctum, from centuries of conflict dealing with their absurd beliefs. The Ordo Dracul valued knowledge. The Church valued faith, and if they discovered knowledge that cast faith into doubt, they destroyed it.

Simply standing within the cathedral that once represented their existence in Dolareido had rage bubbling underneath her skin.

Daniel adjusted his glasses, and nodded toward the cross far above the pulpit.

“Sometimes,” he whispered, “I have to admire their faith. Sometimes, I wonder if, perhaps...” He shook his head, and straightened his spine. “If something happens, I’ll hear it.”

She nodded, and continued down the isle of the nave. Despite her desire to simply ignore everything about the cathedral and its contents, she could not help but stop and look up at the cross. A symbol of faith, of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and his Father. But to her, it represented nothing but frustration, an enemy, the banner hoisted by fools who would cast the world back to the dark ages with their fear and self loathing.

And yet...

Sighing, she continued on, and stepped down the path into the depths of the Earth, to Maria’s den. Once it had been Lucas’s, before the purge, and now it belonged to Lucas’s lover. Following the purge, there had been an unspoken understanding between the two women that, as Maria did not interfere with the purge, the least Antoinette could do was leave the cathedral standing for her. It was an agreement she did not intend to cease, but the following conversation could change that.

At the first gate, she frowned at the destruction and the shoddy, temporary repairs. Bent bars, ripped apart and destroyed by large hands with claws. Feats of strength Antoinette could accomplish now, but not during her neonate years. Even during her ancilla years, bending such massive bars would have required great amounts of vitae. To werewolves, they were minor obstacles.

An elder Daeva or Nosferatu could surely overpower a werewolf of any age, but only with the might of centuries under their command. Neonate and ancilla Kindred would have a much more difficult time managing the insane power and strength Uratha came to almost immediately upon their first transformation. A pack of werewolves, all with such power? A threat to any elder, to her, to Daniel, and to Maria.

Antoinette waited. No need to knock, not with Maria's elite guard standing within the long tunnel. Soon one of the ghouls came to her, bowed at the neck, and opened the gate. Antoinette returned the nod, and said nothing as she followed the ghoul to the next gate, where yet another ghoul opened the path. Four ghouls, four gates. Four more ghouls waited within the great dome, and Antoinette was not so confident as to ignore the threat they posed. One of them was armed with a flamethrower.

"Prince," Maria said from within her coffin. The large, black coffin sat upright against the back wall of the dome, and the pale woman stood within, leaning back lightly against its soft, white lining. It matched her dress. After meeting Antoinette's eyes, Maria looked to her nearest ghoul. "Go, and take the others to the first gate. Wait there until the Prince leaves."

The ghoul nodded, and took her companions into the dark of the long tunnel.

"Madam Turio," Antoinette said, and she stopped twenty feet from the armless woman. "You know why I have come."

"Yes, I imagine I do." With a heavy sigh, Maria stepped out of the coffin. Antoinette almost stopped her, but Maria would not let an injury as blazé as losing her arms keep her from standing tall and proud. "I do not envy your dilemma, Prince."

"You refer to the curse."

“Yes. Jack the Ripper, as predictable a name as that is ... is far more horrendous than I imagined. Mister Terry described its power and its desires to us before, but I couldn't have imagined.”

Antoinette held her poker face, but the conversation had moved in a direction she did not expect. And Maria knew it. Was this how it was to be, then? A jousting game, until the conversation eventually reached its inevitable topic? Very well.

“Twice, I have seen this curse's power first hand,” Antoinette said, “and its grotesque personality. My love's measures to keep it under control have proved successful, but they limit him. I understand he engaged the Uratha without those limits, and in the chaos, the curse was unleashed.”

“Correct. I ... appreciate what Jack has done for me, Prince. He knew the risk, and yet he went to war for me.” The woman stepped around a nearby desk, sat, and motioned toward a nearby chair with her head. “He is a valuable asset to the Invictus. And he is valuable to the Lancea et Sanctum, in a way.”

Antoinette smiled, grabbed the nearby chair, and set it near the desk to sit. As infuriating an idea as it was, that her lover had helped the Sanctified, Maria recognized it. But that was not the reason Maria would not wish to kill Jack. No, Maria's reason to spare the boy would be far more personal. All Antoinette had to do, was get the bloody woman to admit it. Easier said than done.

“My love has surprised us all, time and time again. But it is not his prowess that draws me to him, Madam Turio.”

“Oh?”

“The boy is unfalteringly honest, down to his soul. He strives for fairness in all things, and will pour his everything into any task he deems necessary.”

The Nosferatu smiled at that, and looked down at her desk. “Yes, quite true.”

“And ... he does not needlessly engage in violence. He’s committed to the city, to the Invictus, but also to his humanity. He spares those he can, when he can.”

Maria’s smile faded, betrayed by a frown. “Who is he to cast judgment, on who deserves to live?”

Antoinette leaned closer to Maria, forcing her to look up, and she met the woman’s eyes. While Maria may have been expecting a harsh glare from her, Antoinette instead softened her gaze, and offered her fellow elder a piece of her genuine side.

“He is a loving man who seeks to save all those he can. You have not seen him, as I have, Madam Turio, racked with grief.”

“You honestly expect me to believe Jack regrets killing Lucas?”

Ah, there it was. To get the Nosferatu to admit the true nature of the conversation, and abandon subtext, was the first chip in her armor. To convince her, Antoinette would need more.

“I expect you to use your eyes, consider what you know of Jack, and to combine that with what I am telling you. The boy—”

If Maria had arms, she would have slammed them on her desk.

“You! You, who first attempted to take Lucas’s life, fifty years ago. You, who set a purge upon the Lancea et Sanctum. You, who slaughtered Kindred old and new alike, because they had the nerve to believe in God! You expect me, to listen to your poisoned words?”

Antoinette leaned back, and let the woman’s wrath pour over her. It was a familiar rage, one Antoinette knew from many strifes in her past; the details were lost, but the emotions were unforgettable,

seared into her mind. Maria felt rage she could not reconcile, rage that fought against her reason and judgment, against her wisdom and experience. Rage that had burned for decades, and would not be crushed without struggle.

As much as Antoinette felt more than confident she would win a battle against an armless opponent, even one as strong as Maria, that did not mean a battle of wills would end the same. Maria's Nightmare was renown, and terrifying. Of course, the woman was seriously maimed, and such damage left her in extreme disrepair. For all the elder's posturing, she was likely barely able to remain out of torpor for this conversation. A stiff breeze could defeat her in this state, but that did not mean she could be so easily managed in the future. Antoinette had to choose her words well, lest the elder's Nightmare be a true concern in the future.

And for all the frustration the blasted woman provided Antoinette's life, Maria did not deserve death.

"Yes, moi, Maria." Enough games. "And yes, I despise your religion. I despise fools such as yourself, so void of intelligence that you latch onto a feeling, an emotion, and call it faith. The fact you have the audacity to act upon faith as if it were proof itself of a higher being, and worse, that a higher being condones and encourages your behavior, disgusts me. How dare you." Before Maria could retort, Antoinette put up a hand. "But that is not the reason I enacted the purge, and you know that. Lucas vied for power, and plotted my demise. He wanted Dolareido for himself, and his methods became brutal, and savage. I hunted him, and killed those that protected him and served him, because it saved the lives of Kindred and kine, and my city. And..." She leaned forward again, and met Maria's anger from mere inches away. "And he had become unstable, as you know Viktor had before his death."

"He..." Maria glared at her, but it was clear Antoinette had won the joust. Sighing, Maria sat back and sank into her chair, defeated,

but not by Antoinette. Defeated by her own wisdom and understanding of the reality Antoinette described. She had merely needed a push toward it. “He was not always so savage, Antoinette. He did not always desire to rule, or to crush others under his heel. He did not always dream of ... He...” Her eyes fell, and fell, and her soul fell with her.

Antoinette matched her sigh, and set her hand on the woman’s desk. The implication was clear: if Maria still had her arms, they could have exchanged a touch.

“I know, Maria. Tony was not always a bitter, resentful man, either.”

“You killed him, didn’t you?”

Antoinette smiled. The woman was dangerously intelligent, when she wished to be.

“A misleading word here. A touch of bait there. Viktor and Tony clashed, and to my delight, both died to their own foolhardiness.” No need to bring Jack’s involvement into the conversation.

“I can’t imagine doing that to someone you loved.”

“I ... did not enjoy it, Maria, but it had to be done. And we had loved each other, many years before, but not by then. His descent into cruelty was a process of decades. For Lucas, I am sure you would have felt the same way, if given time, and if you had not been given fifty years to—”

“To look upon my memories of him with rose-tinted glasses?”

Antoinette sighed again, and offered the Nosferatu a weak, knowing smile. “No one is immune to the influence of time, Maria. I am lucky, in a way. Tony became my enemy, leaving me with few options, and with years of the man antagonizing me and my city, I

did what had to be done. But, it hurt, Maria. Not a night goes by I do not blame myself, at least in part, for the Kindred Tony eventually became.”

“And Elaine? Viktor’s sire?”

“I suppose that secret has spread throughout the city, at this point.”

“Of course.”

After a heavy nod, Antoinette sat back and shook her head. “She knows it was my plan that led to his death, and she feels as I did about Tony. A childe we both created. A childe that grew and evolved into something horrible. Failures both, and we are partly to blame.”

Maria snorted on a laugh, and Antoinette raised a brow.

“Sorry. It’s just, three women, elders, all who’ve had the men in their lives devolve into cruel, savage beasts? God has a sense of humor.”

Antoinette laughed. “I suppose she does.”

Maria blinked at her, and returned her laugh, though it was short lived, ended by a harsh wince of pain.

“Jack is safe from my wrath, Antoinette,” she said, and Antoinette again sighed, this time in relief. “Though it may be in his best interest to avoid me. I ... was more comfortable, when I thought you or Daniel had taken Lucas’s life. Knowing it was Jack, I’m still not sure how I feel. Are ... are you sure it was Jack, and not the curse?”

“It was Jack, Maria. Lucas had won that battle, thanks largely due to you giving him permission to abduct Natasha.” As predicted, her words made the elder frown, half in anger, half in shame. “Jack



managed to surprise Damien with his fortitude and strength of will. And ... and that was that.”

She nodded. “As I surmised. If ... if you would leave me now, Prince. I must think on this.”

Nodding, Antoinette stood, and offered the woman a half bow. “Thank you, for listening, Maria. And now, I must ... deal with another problem, for another.”

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“Natasha dear, could you come join me?”

“Um, s-sure. Where are you Prince?”

“I await in cell 16.”

The pause in her student’s voice spoke volumes. She had informed her student of what was to be done. Now it was Natasha’s turn.

“On the way, Prince.”

Nodding, Antoinette ended the call and lowered the phone. “She will be here soon.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” her sheriff asked. The uncertainty in his voice was quite out of place. “She won’t respond as well you think.”

“I do not think she will respond well, Daniel, but she will respond. This is an important moment in her growth, and an important moment in our balance with these wolves.” She gestured to Matthew and Arturo.

The two men stood there, arms apart and over their heads, held up by chains. Both were conscious, though both were in terrible shape, riddled with injuries that had obviously been caused by

silver. For all Damien's faults, she knew firsthand how dangerous the Mekhet was. It did not surprise her he had managed to inflict such damage upon Avery's pack before his defeat.

The men were clothed, typical jeans and t-shirts. She had been tempted to strip them, to rob them of dignity as well as their freedom, but such crass methods were unnecessary for this action.

"You don't think we could transform and break free?" Arturo said. He pulled on the chains idly, causing his body to pull into the air a few inches, but the chains holding his ankles soon halted the movement.

Antoinette gestured to Daniel. "My sheriff does not need a silver sword to decapitate you, fool, transformed or otherwise. And..." She stepped forward, and set her fingers against the man's chest. Tall as Arturo was, they matched heights. "I need no sword to rip you in half, stupid man." Before he could respond, she waved the hand and took a step back. "Enough. This bravado is pointless. You are trapped, and Avery does not know where you are."

Matthew sighed and shook his head. "She can track us."

"If she realized you were missing. She does not, yet." If only these wolves understood how meaningless their words were. "Do not worry. Your fates rest not in my hands, but Vola's."

Both men winced, and looked down. If guilt were a spice, the two boys could be ground for ample supply.

After a couple minutes of silence, save for the panicked heartbeats of the two wolves, Natasha appeared in the hallway. And in her hand, she carried a stake.

---

~~Natasha~~

She stepped into the cell, and forced herself to look up at her boyfriends. They managed to meet her gaze, but only for a second, before they both looked away.

“Can ... can I speak t-to them alone?” This wasn’t the cell they’d once put Sándor in, with powerful chains capable of holding true monsters. If the boys transformed, they’d be able to break free, even with their injuries.

But they wouldn’t. If they did, Daniel would open the door and cut them into ribbons.

“Yes, Vola. Do be careful,” Antoinette said.

“They won’t—”

“Not of them. For them.” The Prince smiled at her, and once Daniel stepped out of the room, she closed the door.

A few LEDs built into the ceiling lit the room, enough she could see the boys’ faces, and how uncomfortable they were. Physical pain, yes, but it was shame and guilt that had them looking so ... defeated.

It made her feel good for a whole two seconds. Satisfaction melted away, replaced with only sadness, and a desire to hug her stupid boyfriends. But Antoinette taught her well, taught her to recognize those emotions, accept them, and ignore them. Maybe after a chat she could listen to them, but for now, those emotions would only blind her.

She slowly walked around the two boys, and her footsteps echoed softly in the cube room. She looked down at the strange stake, and tapped it lightly in her hands as she came around to stand in front of them again, before continuing to circle them.

“Tash,” Art said. “We’re—”

“Shut up,” she said, startling herself. More venom slipped into her words than she meant to. Channeling Jessy a bit there, maybe.

She walked around them a few more times, tapping her stake intermittently as she juggled possible conversation threads. What would happen if she started yelling? She ran a few scenarios through her head. What would happen if she softly asked for an explanation? She ran a few more scenarios. What would happen if she started crying? She ran a few more scenarios again, and frowned at herself. That last one was dirty, emotional manipulation.

Eventually she stopped in front of the two boys, and held up the stake.

“This w-wood is treated. There’s a very thin coating of something on it, just enough so that it d-doesn’t smell like wood.” She stepped up to Matthew, and lightly pressed its tip against the huge man’s shirt at the navel. “Do you have one, too?”

Matthew met her gaze, and nodded, before lowering it again.

“How long have you h-had it?” she asked.

Matthew turned his head, looking away. He’d only do that if this was pack issue, which meant Avery told them to get these.

Natasha reached underneath her suit jacket, and pulled out her silver knife. Both boys pulled their heads back instantly, and she quickly held up one hand palm forward.

“I’m n-not going to hurt you. Do you ... d-do you really think I’d do that?”

Art grimaced as he stared at the blade. “I did stab you, Tash. I ... wouldn’t exactly blame you, if you returned the favor.”

She rolled her eyes, took a step back, and leaned back against the wall. “I think D-Damien and Jack got enough revenge for that.” She gestured to them and their bodies. Their t-shirts didn’t do a good job hiding the nasty bruises, car-crash level bruises, or the nasty tears in their flesh. The particularly nasty wounds were wrapped in gauze, and she could smell the blood and damaged skin. Silver had done that.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Damien’s fast. But ... honestly, Jack was the bigger problem. Sure, we’ll heal faster from what he put us through, but if he’d wanted to...”

Art groaned. “We’d be rat shit by now.”

Tash expected such a remark to be laced with sarcasm, but Art’s voice had been solid, and he met her eyes with a rigid stare. Jack had scared them, badly. Not even their violent encounter with Jacob in his cave had left the boys this unnerved.

“Jack is...” Sighing, she shook her head. “Is not your concern. As long as you leave K-Kindred alone, he’ll leave you alone.”

The boys looked at each other, and then to her, obvious disbelief in their eyes. They weren’t simply afraid of Jack, they were concerned about him, the way villagers would be concerned about a nearby volcano about to erupt.

“The Prince,” she continued, “didn’t capture you to t-talk about Jack. She captured you, b-because you assaulted one of the Ordo Dracul. She has exercised her right as P-Prince of Dolareido, to take revenge on transgressions against her covenant. Against ... m-my covenant.”

Matt sighed and let his head droop. “Tash, we—”

“I know. You didn’t want to hurt me. Avery t-told you to keep me out of the way, and you knew you only had one way to ... t-to do

that.” She stepped up to them again, and looked up at each of them. Each managed to hold her gaze for a few seconds longer this time, before they both looked down. “You attacked me, a dr-dragon. And you ... you betrayed my trust, your girlfriend. You d-don’t get to do that! Ever!” Heat shot up through her, and she poked the tip of the stake against Art’s stomach.

Art pulled back enough to stop the wood from penetrating skin, but bound as he was, he didn’t get far. And slowly, as silence settled on them, the two boys lifted their eyes from the floor and looked at her. Sadness, sadness she felt, and understood.

This wasn’t just an issue about their relationship. Worse, it had almost nothing to do with that. As much as a part of her wanted to make it personal, to make it sting even more so she could be angrier with them, that wasn’t analyzing the situation accurately. They did what they did because they were a member of Avery’s pack, a group with their own motivations, same as any covenant. And when it came time to decide between their relationship with her, or their pack and their pack’s goals, they picked their pack.

And that hurt. It hurt so damn much, because she knew, if the situation had been reversed, she’d probably have done the same thing. If Antoinette told her the city was in danger, that her friends were in danger, and that she had to trick and lock Art and Matt up for a night so she could do something they didn’t want her to do? Yeah, she’d have done it, and she’d have hated herself every minute of every night from thereon out.

That’s what the boys were feeling now. The sadness, shame, it was carved into them in big bright letters, made even worse because their mission had failed. They’d lost everything.

Maybe if she was Antoinette, or Elaine, she’d punish them. Maybe if she was Jessy, she’d hurt them. Maybe if she was a witch, she’d cast a spell on them. Maybe if she was a Carthian, she’d wreck their

car; they didn't have a car, but still. Maybe if she was Invictus, she'd seize their assets and leave them living on the street; even less of a concern to them than a car.

But she was Tash. She just didn't have that kind of hate in her, and she knew it. Even now, she wanted to free them, apologize for what Antoinette and Daniel did, even apologize for what Damien and Jack did, and take care of their wounds. She wanted to snuggle up on her bed with them, cuddle, have lots of gentle sex, then rough sex, and Kiss them to end the night in bliss. She wanted all this stupid pain to go away.

"I ... I carried a silver sword, b-because I had to. Because I was told to. I bet it made you nervous, knowing I always had that. But I never hid that from you! You knew I had it! I..." Sighing, she shook her head. Avery probably told them to keep the stakes hidden; that explained why they were treated so vampires wouldn't be able to smell them.

Every way she looked at this argument, it always ended on how the boys chose to listen to their boss when push came to shove.

"You'll ... b-be staying here tonight," she continued. "And maybe longer, until I say otherwise. If Avery c-complains ... fuck her." She glared at each man, frowned her best frown, and left. Once the door was closed behind her, she leaned back against it and hugged her arms tight to her, body shaking. Don't cry. Don't cry.

"Natasha?" Daniel said.

"Sire. The boys will be staying here t-tonight. If that's acceptable?" Her best official voice wasn't doing too good either, wavering.

"Yes, Natasha." He looked at her, adjusted his glasses, and did nothing. Or that's what she thought he'd do, cause that's what he always did. Her sire was reliable, but had all the empathy of a stone;

it still boggled her mind he sired her. But after looking at her for a moment, his expression softened a little, and he sighed quietly.

He looked sad.

“W-What?”

“Natasha, I ... I’m hardly one to give advice about this sort of thing. But, take it from someone a lot older than you, someone who’s made a lot of mistakes in this department. If you love them, make it work.”

She stared at the stranger in Daniel’s skin, jaw slowly dropping. “Sire?” Thank god the cell door was soundproof when closed.

“We’re not kine, Natasha. We live a long time. You can’t make an excuse about career, or even a covenant getting in the way, because what do those matter to immortals? If you genuinely love them, make it work. Because, in a hundred years, they’ll be gone, and you won’t be. You’ll spend a hundred years more hating yourself and the happiness you could have had.” He cracked a tiny smile, before wiping it away with the thumb of his glove. “The memories are worth it.”

Daniel didn’t like to talk much. He preferred to let people come to their own conclusions, and that included how he handled his role as sire. At this point in Natasha’s second life, Daniel was sire in name, but there was no dependent connection between them. She was her own vampire, and Daniel was her superior in the covenant, nothing more.

To hear him talk like this, like a sire would to a fledgling, struck her still.

“They ... they attacked a dr-dragon. I—”



“And they should be punished for it. But if they love you, they’ll take that punishment with a smile if it means they get to stay with you.”

“They betrayed my trust!” She stomped her foot and glared up at the man, fists clenched.

“You know why they did. Is it something you can put behind you, and something they’ll apologize for, genuinely? Or not?”

“I ... I...”

He put up his hands lightly, palms toward her, and shook his head. “Like you said, they’ll be staying here tonight. Think about it.”

“I will. I ... w-will.”

## Chapter 135

~~Jack~~

As the two of them sat on his couch in his old apartment, he spared no detail. It wasn't exactly new information for Elaine; they'd have this conversation already. But it was obvious she wanted more info about the emotional side of the Ripper, about how he thought, how he felt, how the fucker took over Jack and basically became a new person. She wanted the information Jack had kept a little vague, to spare Antoinette. Of course, the Prince likely inferred a lot of it, but that didn't mean Jack was going to say it.

He described to his great grandsire, what it felt like to want to see someone die. Not delight in killing, because as horrible as that was, it didn't really get across how alien, weird, and absolutely fucking vile the curse was. To actually want to see the life go out in someone's eyes, because it scratched an itch that was basically existential for the curse, that's what Jack told her now. The Ripper would forever be furious, even if he piled a mountain of corpses, and fucked one in front of his next target, instilling disgust and fear in enemies and prey alike. A strange mix of unadulterated rage and carnal delight, aggression and hunger swirled into something only a genuine psychopath could empathize with.

He described what it was like before the curse was released, when those emotions and desires mixed with his own, and Elaine nodded as she closed her eyes, reminiscing. How much of her savage past she could remember, he didn't know, but based on the subtle smile, she could remember enough, and she sorta missed it. Missing it was not the reaction he expected to see, but if she expressed it now, it was because she felt comfortable letting him know she did.

Good thing Veronica didn't get to hear any of this. She'd run from Jack, screaming.

"Truly an abhorrent creation, this Ripper curse," Elaine said, opening her eyes.

"You uh, don't really seem like you think it's abhorrent."

She shrugged and leaned in closer. "When you have seen murder and carnage on the scale that I have, you become ... jaded."

"And, what? You miss not being jaded? You miss the thrill of killing people? Cause I've never been thrilled. The curse has, I haven't. Killing people just ... hurts, and makes me sick."

"I do not believe you."

"What? I—"

She came in so close, she could have kissed him. "At the height of blood lust and violence, in battle, where emotions run rampant, even kine can give into an urge so primal and instinctual, that killing becomes satisfying. And you, my childe, have a Beast, a part of you that both understands that, and craves it, as all vampires do. Try as you might to deny it, the Beast is not some dog on a leash you can order. It is a part of you, and it delights in the kill."

She had him there. Much as it sucked to admit it, the vampire part of him enjoyed killing; at least, when it came to securing power, safety, or resources. Hell, even the human part of him found an inkling of satisfaction from it, hidden underneath all the nausea and terror. But it wasn't the same as what the curse wanted.

"What are you driving at?"

"I simply wanted to ... see, a part of you I know you keep from my friend. You are far too self sacrificing an individual to let Ann know

how truly depraved the emotions of the curse are, and how his desires affected your own, before your separation.”

What a load of crap. She wasn't lying, but it was a half truth; fucking worse than any lie. And she knew he knew that, from the twinkle in her eye.

“Come on Elaine, enough with the games. I suck at them. Just tell me what you want.”

She sighed, her fun ruined. “I seek to understand the curse, Jack.”

“Understand?”

“The Strix placed it upon my sire, so many centuries ago. She sired me. I sired Viktor, and so on. The curse infected us and spread through us. The curse colored our perceptions and emotions for ages. I left Viktor to his fate, and disappeared into the world to find the ritual to save me from its influence.” She glanced down, weight pulling her eyes to the floor, before she corrected the error and smiled at him again. “And before then, as I once told you, I ran with wolves through forests, and I gave into the curse's lust for violence and death.”

“But you regained control of yourself, right? I mean, you came back to civilization, sired Viktor while you still had the curse, and—”

She held up a hand. “Its dark urges danced within me without relent, but by then I had learned to coexist with them. I pretended to be a creature of the night, but one with a secret; seducing a rich man was easy. Viktor took me to his balls and gatherings, and dressed me in clothes to make me presentable. And when people were gone, I would fuck him, and Kiss him, and feed him my blood. Eventually, I sired him, in the darkness and the empty streets of night. I fled soon after, leaving Viktor to his fate, as I only then finally realized the curse had to be removed.” Sighing, she turned back to face the wall with the television, and the nearby door where

Veronica was out like a light. “I remember no details, as confounding and frustrating as that is. I can vaguely remember running through the dark, naked in the woods. I can remember blood, and pain. I can remember hunger and desire, wanton violence, urges that overwhelmed me, boiling up from the curse.”

“And you want that back?”

“I want to understand, and appreciate it, in a way that...” Elaine sighed, and slumped. Seeing a five-hundred-year-old vampire slump, posture ruined and back curving into the couch, was a really strange sight, and Jack raised a brow. “I suppose I am seeking punishment, for passing this curse on, and then leaving Viktor to deal with it. I did not know that would happen, and yet, I feel guilt for it.”

He half frowned, half smiled. The whole situation was confusing, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out what she wanted. And it seemed like, neither could she, cause there was more to it than a guilt complex.

“I can remember in vivid detail what it was like before I freed the curse, Elaine. I couldn't even say Angela's name without frothing at the mouth with overwhelming, ridiculous, juvenile rage. But I also felt power with it, power and bloodlust and even bits of strange bliss.” He scratched his hair, and slouched back into the couch too, almost touching shoulders with her; woman was too tall. “So, there were tiny bits of pleasure, from feeling that kind of power, very dark side. But mostly it was just pain and self loathing, when the rush was over. I felt ... inhuman.”

“But you are not human. You are a vampire.”

He frowned at her and shook his head. “Is that what this is actually about? You're ... missing that part?” It was a pretty old story, and an integral one to Kindred, far as Jack knew. Vampires had to fight against their Beastly nature, every night of their second

lives, or they'd rot away and become nothing more than a draugr, a mindless husk only capable of hunting and killing.

She looked away, and unless he was seeing things, that was shame on her face. "It has been a long time since I have felt ... I do not know. Human? Empathy is a difficult thing for a vampire as old as I. Emotions are difficult to summon. Antoinette and I, much of our friendship is based on shared goals, playful rivalry, and sexual compatibility, not empathy."

He tried his hardest to keep his face straight when she brought up sexual compatibility. Fail. She laughed, and her shame melted away, making him smile.

"I get it, you know? Antoinette and I have talked about this before, about what it's like for her, being as old as she is. For a long time, she thought our relationship was really just her, uh, mooching off me."

"Mooching?"

"Yeah, cause I got this habit of wearing my emotions on my sleeve, when I'm comfortable with someone. I'm honest, to a fault, and Antoinette says she can see it all in my eyes. And she says she feeds on that, and..." Sighing, a happy sound, he relaxed back against his couch again, and smiled at Elaine. "Is that what all this is about? This interest you have in this curse? You came to Dolareido to investigate me, because Antoinette told you how psychotic the curse is, and that triggered ... what, some emotional memories?"

Her face slowly smoothed back into a stony visage. "Perhaps."

Bingo. There was more to this than a guilt complex, or a hunt for understanding the curse.

"Elaine, I'm sure you have a lot of reasons for coming to Dolareido, and more than just what we're talking about right now.

But, the curse? It's not human either, and I don't even think the Beast can feel the sort of joyful hate and rage it does. Yeah, humans can crave violence, and be angry, and the Beast can crave the hunt, but the curse isn't like that. It's ... it's so much darker. It's ... the sort of mindless rage and hate you'd expect of ... a ghost, tormented for years and devoid of any reasoning." He groaned and shook his head. It was too easy to see Mary becoming that ghost. "Mindless hate, and the animal aggression you'd find in a wounded, rabid, starving animal. The weird joy I felt back then, what the curse feels, it's sick, and twisted, and no human — or vampire — could ever feel that way. You don't want that, ok? You're better off."

She slowly frowned and looked down. "Am I?"

"Yes, you are." He sat up, and set a hand on her leg. That shocked her. Whenever they interacted, he made sure to avoid touching her; she was a sexual woman, and he didn't want to trigger something Antoinette might disagree with. But now, he squeezed her knee gently, and smiled at her. "Antoinette's told me a lot about what it's like, being as old as her. And I know a thing or two about the shit you must have dealt with, when you still had the curse. So, how about instead of plotting whatever you're plotting, scheming whatever you're scheming, just hang out in Dolareido for a while?"

And just like that, her frown turned into a smile. Slowly though, carefully, like how she probably approached everything, including this conversation.

"To what end?"

"Well, you're my great grandsire. We're family ... in a weird sort of way. And, well, you've got that thing going on, the whole 'I smile a lot and I'm a powerful seductress, but I'm secretly depressed' thing going on. Maybe hanging out here for a while will help."

For all the ancient elder's self control, he managed to earn a proper laugh out of her, complete with a cough of surprise.

“You, little Ventrue, are a delectable, and dangerously discerning individual. You are nothing like your mother.”

He grinned at her. She was only half right. He got his dad’s brain, sure, but he got his mom’s heart.

---

~~Beatrice~~

Triss leaned back against the mound of blankets in her alcove, and a quiet, deep groan worked its way up her throat, as Jennifer kissed her clitoris and piercing. Triss was trying to think about all the shit that’d happened, about Black Blood’s conversation with Jack, about the curse, about her old boss Garry about to start shit with the Invictus, but it was damn hard to think at all with a sexpert molesting her.

Triss turned her head, set the side of her face on the blankets, and looked out of her alcove to the big cavern. Othello wasn’t there. Probably out with Madison. Hell, maybe he was actually out doing witchy things? Dude was dumb, but you didn’t live to be his age without picking up at least a few things.

Ripples of pleasure spread outward from her insides, and she clenched down on the two fingers pressing up toward her pussy through her ass. The rolling waves hit her, head to toe, and she quivered as Jennifer eased her kissing, but kept her lips around her clit, while fingering her harder. Slut knew exactly how to make Triss cum, and milk her for it.

As the waves passed, Triss relaxed back against the blankets, only to tense up again as her ears picked up on some noise. But after a few seconds, she recognized the footsteps, and she relaxed again as Samantha inevitably came into view, Jacob behind her.

“Oh!” Samantha said, and she brought up a hand to cover her mouth. “You ... you two, always out in the open!”



Triss shrugged. Jen sat up and laughed. Jacob grinned, gave Samantha a playful slap on the ass, and shoved her. Samantha squeaked as she fell, landed on Jennifer, and on Triss at that, one of her hands planting into Triss's abs.

“Jacob, you fucking asshole,” Triss said, rolling her eyes.

She expected Samantha to get up instantly, embarrassed as she was. But she didn't. Samantha gulped, looked Beatrice straight in her snake eyes, before her gaze drifted down over Triss's body, her tattoos and piercings, her abs, and down her smooth mons to where her clit-hood ring sat. A small chain dangled from the piercing tonight, something Jen asked for, and it jingled as her friend continued to finger her ass.

Jen, a total jackass, pumped her fingers up and down harder, now that they had a guest, earning a burst of pleasure from Triss and her clenching slit. She'd just cum, and Jen was never happy till she'd gotten a few more out of her, the damn woman.

Again, Triss expected Sam to back off. But again she didn't. She stared down at Triss's flexing stomach, her spread thighs, her bouncing clit chain, and the two fingers working up and down in her ass. Insides already swollen and aching with pleasure, it didn't take long for Triss's muscles to boil, and waves of pleasure to spread out from where Jen's fingers pressed up against her pussy. Plus, the damn chain kept bouncing around, hitting her engorged clit over and over.

She came again, and clenched down on her empty cunt, hard. A tiny shot of juices landed on Jen's wrist, and then another, and another, as the damn Ventrue fingered her even harder. Didn't take Jen long to have Triss's thighs rippling with the impact of her fingers. Only after the fifth little squirt did Jen finally ease up; stayed inside Triss, gently curling her fingers up again and again to milk Triss like a damn cow, but at least eased up.

And even as Triss came down from her orgasm high, dragged out by Jen's constant milking, Sam didn't back off. Hell, she looked utterly hypnotized, eyes still locked onto Triss's slit and where Jen's fingers spread her thoroughly lubed ass. And Sam's hand, still pressed to Triss's abs, gently flexed and unflexed at the fingertips.

Reality came flooding back to the Daeva, and she yanked her hand back with a gasp.

"Sorry! Sorry. Just, you ... you're so beautiful."

"Ha, beautiful?" Triss pulled some of her dark hair aside and exposed her crocodile fangs, and, of fucking course, the lack of cheeks.

Sam shook her head. "Yeah, those are scary. B-But..." She looked behind her to Jacob, before she looked back to Triss with a smile. "And your abs are amazing."

Triss burst into laughter, and pulled herself back up a bit to sit more upright on the blankets against the alcove wall. Jen didn't take the hint. She just lay between Triss's thighs instead of kneeling, got comfy on her side, and continued fingering her ass.

For a brief moment, Triss remembered a moment with Julias. Him, her, before shit got crazy, before Jen, before the hunters. She'd admitted to him then that she really got turned on by the idea of being watched; they promptly fucked on the couch, after she'd spent some time masturbating for him. Christ, that was a fucking lifetime ago.

And now she had a fucking audience. Jen watched of course, cause the damn slut loved to watch her handiwork. Othello and Madison were often around, and they took a peek, frequently. Hell, even Aaron took a peek sometimes. Sam and Jacob though? Jacob had probably experienced every kink known to man and then some. Him seeing Triss get fingered in the ass didn't mean anything. But

Sam? Sam was brand new to the world of vampires, and the world of kinky sex. And she was, evidently, a total hornball. Having her around, watching Triss, totally hypnotized by it, hit Triss's horny bone in just the right place.

Triss relaxed back against the blankets, spread her thighs a bit more, and cupped one of her tits and massaged it, while her other hand reached down and massaged her pussy's lips. Hey, she liked Sam. Sam was nice. Sam was randy as fuck, twenty-four seven. Having her watch had Triss wanting to show off, and she did just that. She spread her slit's lips as she massaged them, and clenched down several times, knowing full well it'd put her insides on display, and all the juices leaking out of her.

Sam stared, frozen like a statue. Her eyes drifted some more, running up Triss's abs again, and the snake tattoo, up from its tail above her clit, to where it coiled around and bit into one of Triss's nipples. Her eyes drifted down again, and stared hard at Triss's spread open pussy as pleasure tremors shot up through Triss's body, causing her to moan, and squirt a couple more tiny splashes onto Jen's wrist. Damn, Sam was totally into watching.

Which suited Triss just fine.

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A few hours later, Jacob and Samantha came out of his alcove, and into the center of the cave. He wore a suit, and Samantha wore nothing but a blanket. The man grinned at her, kissed her, and left, leaving Samantha standing in the cave alone.

So Samantha did what she always did when Jacob left, disappearing into the night to do whatever the fuck the man did in his free time: she came over and stood in Jen and Beatrice's alcove entrance. Jen and Triss were still naked, sitting and leaning back against their blankets and pillows, talking, about Jacob, about what he did those few nights ago, about Jack and the werewolves and Garry's inevitable push against the Invictus.

They shut up though, when Sam joined them. She had a necklace on, a subtle thing, and she fiddled with it with a finger and thumb as she walked over to them. Gift from Jacob, maybe?

“You two,” Sam said, “you never cover up. Even after I ... saw.”

Triss shrugged. “I used to, but after hanging out with these horny witches for, what, over a couple years now Jen? Don’t even notice the nudity anymore.”

Jen nodded, and nuzzled into Triss’s side. “It hardly matters to any vampire with a few years under their belt, let alone members of the Circle of the Crone. I imagine if you wandered your Prince’s tower enough, Samantha, you’d find Antoinette naked with her lover all the time.”

Samantha groaned at that and shook her head. “Ugh, don’t say that. I don’t think I could handle seeing Jack and my sire having sex.”

Triss laughed and shrugged. “That white-haired bitch seems pretty damn happy with him, so he must be good at it.”

“That’s worse! Jack is too young to be good at sex!”

Triss and Jen laughed, and Sam laughed too, eventually, and sat down with them. She didn’t do a good job keeping the blanket snug, exposing her legs quite a bit. Yeap, the witches were rubbing off on her.

“Keep your head down from now on, Sam,” Triss said.

“Because of what happened a few days ago? Antoinette told me about it. Jack ... I haven’t talked to him yet.”

“Probably should give him some space. I got a peek at the aftermath, and he was pretty beat up. I’m sure the Prince is

pampering him while he recovers, but he'll ... well, knowing Jack, he'll want to deal with shit on his own and keep you from seeing it."

Sam sighed, and leaned back against the pile of blankets, only a couple feet away from Triss. "Yeah, you're right. Jack's too damn stubborn to ever ask for help, unless it was tactical."

"Ha, tactical. Yeah, that sounds like Jack." Triss shrugged and gestured to Sam with a hand. "Awkwardness aside, you must be proud of him. He's changed the Danse Macabre for the whole city in just a few years."

"I am! I am, but ... I'm worried for him. People ... Kindred die, and it's so scary, hearing about all these sad things."

Before Triss could say anything, something along the lines of 'yeah it sucks', Jen tapped Triss on the shoulder.

"Samantha," Jen said, "it is scary, and horrible. No one should have to go through what you did, or Beatrice, or Jack. But, you're immortal now. Don't make decisions to avoid pain or awkwardness in the moment. Play for the long game."

Samantha sighed and nodded, looking down at her knees. "How long?"

Jen reached across Triss's leg, and tapped Sam on a knee. "You were probably saving up your RSPs before you were embraced, yes?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, make all decisions the same way you made that decision. Plan for things twenty to forty years in the future, because it's a reality that you'll see those years. Not only will you see them, you'll be stronger, more powerful, smarter, and better equipped to reap the benefits."

Slowly, Sam's frown faded, and a smile appeared. She was finally getting it.

"I won't be old and weak in thirty years. I'll be even stronger than I am now."

"Yeap," Triss said. "Don't make the mistakes I made."

"Mistakes?"

"Ha, yeah. I hung around in crypts for twenty years, wasting my time fighting the Invictus as a Carthian, and pissing away my years cause I thought ... well, I didn't think. I just reacted to shit around me, cause I was angry."

"Angry?"

Triss pointed at her face. "Nosferatu asshole stalker embraced me. Not my choice. I woke up with a hunger for blood and a crocodile mouth."

Samantha winced and looked down again. "That's horrible."

"Yeah, it was, and it really fucked me up for a long time. But if I'd pulled my head out of my ass and stopped looking back at the human life I missed, I could have learned to enjoy actually being a vampire. Could have met people like ... Julias. Could have made a fortune. Could have gotten laid more. Could have done a lot of things." She was doing that now, just not in a way she could have possibly expected. Becoming a witch, learning rituals, learning to control the world with what was basically magic, no fucking way could she have predicted that. "Besides, a lot of Nosferatu have it worse than Jacob or me. Bob in the tunnels looks like one of those classic, creepy gross vampires. Liliana is usually with him, and half of her face is covered in eyes. But, if they can pull themselves together, maybe they'll grow up to be the next Maria."

They all shivered. A pretty awesome goal for any Nosferatu, but at the same time, Maria the corpse lady was fucking terrifying.

“Yeah, I can do that. I can play the long game,” Sam said. “But, all these horrible things are happening right now!”

Jen nodded. “That’s why Garry and Michael, and Antoinette for that matter, aren’t just throwing themselves into the grinder haphazardly. They’re old, and they’d like to get older. This war building between the Invictus and Carthians has been decades in the making, Sam, and Antoinette’s playing for centuries. So she’s going to sit back and wait, and only act when she sees the perfect opportunity.”

“B-But, Jack’s going to get hurt, and not in decades, but maybe in these next few months! And—”

Jen held up a hand. “The boy continues to surprise everyone, Samantha. Trust him.”

She frowned, a motherly ‘I know my son’ sorta frown. Sure, she probably trusted him to be efficient and effective at anything he put his mind to, but didn’t trust him to rely on other people for personal shit.

Beatrice laughed and looked at Jen. Jen traded a look with her, and a memory sparked between them, turning their smiles into sad little frowns. Now? Might as well be now.

“Hey, Samantha,” Triss said.

“Yeah?”

“What’s Antoinette told you about Elen?”

“Elen? The hunter, or, uh, the old woman that worked with them? I know Jacob has her locked up somewhere, but that’s it.”

Sighing, Triss sat up, Jen too, and they both leaned in. Samantha gulped, and leaned in as well.

“Jacob’s given me the witch,” Triss said.

Samantha raised a brow. “Witch, like you?”

“Er, kinda? She’s different. She’s more like a ... I don’t know if there’s a word for it. Fleshmancer? She uses blood, muscle, bones, all that kinda stuff, and somehow manages to do some very fucked up shit with them. Like, that old Egyptian thing, haruspex? She’s done that, with humans.”

“Oh god!”

“Yeah, lot of fucked up shit. But she’s, uh, pretty much dead in the head. Think major dementia, but worse. She’s a sick, ruthless bitch, but so clueless, she’s running on autopilot. And I’m trying to make her work for me.”

Samantha frowned at her. “What? Why?”

“Because I ... it’s...” Jesus, how to say this and not sound like she was insane. “She can do some amazing things, you know? Jeremiah and Angela, they used her as a weapon, but I’m thinking she can do some good. She can do things that ... maybe...” Yeap, she was going to sound like an insane person. “She might be able to give me back something. Hell, maybe you, too.”

“Get us back something? What?”

Time for the hard part.

“I think Elen can ... can maybe rebuild people, people we’ve lost.”

Samantha stared at her, not understanding her. But slowly, her eyes widened, and she sat up straight and away.



“You ... you don’t mean...” The Daeva’s hand shot up to her necklace.

Beatrice held up her hands in surrender before lowering them. “I’m trying, just trying. Jacob says I’ll probably fail, but still thinks it’s worth chasing, you know? There’s something here, a chance, and I’d be a fucking moron not to try. I have to ... to try something.”

Triss took a peek at Jen. Her friend looked back to her, but her sad gaze fell to Samantha, who was looking more and more excited by the minute. Watching her face was like riding an emotional rollercoaster by proxy. Excited, then happy, then scared, then sad, then angry, then excited again.

“That’s scary, Beatrice. That’s really, really scary.”

“You’re telling me. But I have to try. I owe it to...” Did she owe it to Julias? The man died a hero, and left her. Did she owe it to Jacob? He’d given her the tools, but she’d put in the time, the pain, and the misery. “I owe it to myself to try. If I can have him back, if even for only a little bit, then it’s worth a try, right? It wasn’t fair, what happened. It wasn’t fair to him, and especially not...” No need to say it. It wasn’t fair to Mary, just a girl who happened to be related to someone involved.

Samantha clutched the blanket around her with one hand, and her necklace with the other. “No. It wasn’t fair.”

“So, I’m gonna try. Crúac rituals, they’ll help. There are things I can try, and some of them are nasty, but I’ll try them.”

“Will ... will anyone get hurt?”

Triss shook her head. “Only people who deserve it, and even then, only when I have to.” Before Samantha could ask what she meant, Triss shook her head again. “You’re happier not knowing the details, Sam. Just be happy knowing the only people getting hurt deserve

it.” After a few seconds to process, Sam nodded, and Triss continued. “The issue isn’t that, though. The issue is Elen can’t do much without her book.”

“Book? Oh! Oh, the stuff my sire took, after Jack beat the hunters. Oh ... oooh...” She gulped and looked down. Yep, there it was, realization of what Triss was asking. “I ... don’t know if I can do that.”

“This isn’t a request you have to say yes or no to, Samantha, not now at least. But think about it, ok? I’m gonna keep trying. I have time, all the time in the world, and Elen’s immortal, somehow. She’s not going anywhere.”

Samantha clutched her necklace a little tighter, before letting it go and grabbing her blanket with both hands. “You can’t just ask Antoinette for the book?”

Jennifer spoke this time. “Antoinette and Jacob are old friends, Samantha, very old friends. But the Prince doesn’t trust him or the Circle enough to simply give us something that dangerous, especially after what we saw Elen do with it.”

“I know Jacob and my sire have a history,” Samantha said, raising her eyes, “but she can’t think that badly of him, if she’s letting me date him, right?”

Triss shrugged. “Not really the same, I guess. She probably trusts him with him a person. But with ... power? Probably not so much. But you’ve been seeing Jacob for a little while now, what do you think? Can you trust him? Me?”

Samantha thought about it, tapping her chin a bit as she did. On the surface, Jack’s mom didn’t seem like she had a lot going on upstairs, but at this point, Triss wasn’t going to assume anything. Sam was Jack’s mom, and Jack was too damn smart for a kid his age.

“I ... think I can,” she said. But before Triss could smile, or say something to encourage her, Sam looked at her, and the heaviness there struck Triss cold. “But, is this whole thing really a good idea? I’ve talked to my daughter, Triss, since she died. Multiple times. And it kills me, every time.”

“This isn’t the same!” Shit. Triss pulled back and winced. She didn’t mean to raise her voice like that, shocking her own damn, idiot self. “I’m not looking to get a glimpse of a ghost, Sam. I want him back.”

“I understand. I do! But ... but Julias would want you to be happy, right? And, I don’t know, you’ve seemed happy.” She smiled a little, and squirmed a bit, obviously entertaining the memory she had of Triss get fingered just a few hours ago. “I mean, I don’t know, I don’t get to see a lot of what the Circle does, but every time I’ve seen you, Triss, you’ve been mingling with Jen, Othello, Aaron, and even Jacob, and you ... seem happy.”

Silence fell on the alcove. Triss managed a glance at Jen, and her friend smiled at her as she set a hand on Triss’s leg. Yeah, Jen knew Triss was slowly but surely coming out of her pit of depression, and was, in a strange way, finding a place for herself in the Circle. Every day, she got over Julias a little bit more. Every day, his smile, his touch, the sound of his voice, they faded, just a little bit. And that terrified her.

“I still have to try.”

Samantha nodded with a weary sigh, the sound someone made when they knew exactly what the other was going through. “I understand. And I’ll ... think about it.”

---

~~Jack~~

A few days later, it was time for Veronica to become a full thrall, bound by the Vinculum. She'd not only managed to digest a lot of information about the paranormal world, she did it without freaking out. Apparently it was common for new thralls to crack when they found out ghosts and vampires and shit were real. But not her. The world of the Danse Macabre and the Masquerade intrigued her, a lot, and she found it infinitely more interesting than her old life. An ideal candidate for a potential vampire, if it ever came to that.

Well, either way, he was damn impressed. The young woman was smarter than she seemed, and seemed to enjoy her new life. She hadn't moved into her new apartment yet, but she was damn excited to do it, now that she could easily afford it. If she ever became a ghoul, she'd probably live in the mansion, but for now it was better she had her own place.

So, after some deliberation, and after his wounds healed — way too fucking fast — he gave his new thrall a call, for the final dose. And of course, he gave Elaine and Antoinette a call too, cause he had no fucking clue how it was going to go.

Elaine and Antoinette stood within the lobby of his mansion, and they watched with delighted eyes, as Veronica suckled on his wrist. He didn't think the third dose needed to be such a big one, but Antoinette suggested it should be, to commemorate the big moment, and to help the thrall associate the pleasure of ingesting vitae, with their new found adoration for their master. And as dark and twisted as that sounded, there was no denying Veronica was drinking his blood like it was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted.

“Wow,” she said, and she stumbled back before slowly lowering herself down to sit on the stairs. No crazy rage consumed her, nothing that suggested the curse affected her. Thank god.

Jack smiled, healed his wrist, and looked to Antoinette and Elaine. Veronica looked buzzed on pleasure, while the two elders looked lost in ancient, joyful memories, their eyes only half watching the thrall, and their smiles subtle.

“The Vinculum is complete,” Antoinette said. “How do you feel, Veronica?”

“I feel great! And...” She blushed as she looked down and squirmed on the stairs. “Wow. Um, I ... what now? Master?”

Jack shivered. Master. He hadn’t asked her to call him that, and he hadn’t planned on it. But, damn, it felt nice.

The two elders chuckled, looked at each other, and exchanged some psychic conversation only women were capable of.

“I think tonight,” Elaine said, “you should pay your friend what she is owed, no?”

“Friend? Owe? What—oh. Jessy. Damn.”

“Jessy? What about her?” Veronica asked.

“She, uh...” Wow, how to say this without freaking her out. “She wants to see Antoinette and me having sex, because no one in this city cares about privacy. She did me a solid, so I owe her. And of course Jessy wants a sex tape as payment.” Or more like, that’s what he’d sold her, cause he was an idiot.

“Oh. Um—”

“Would you like to come and observe, in person, dear sweet creature?” Antoinette said, in a deliberately deeper, huskier tone. “I do love an audience.”

Jack put up his hands. “You don’t have to—”

“I’ll do it!”

---

Veronica spent the next twenty minutes ooh’ing and aw’ing as Antoinette guided them through her tower and down into its beautiful underground labyrinth, far prettier than the underground tunnels under Jack’s mansion. Those looked like torture cells dug underground for World War One.

Veronica gasped for the millionth time when they stepped into Antoinette’s bedroom. The vault door surprised her. The giant room delighted her.

Within the room awaited Ashley and Julee, and Jack rolled his eyes as he found the two girls setting up cameras and professional lighting.

“Uh, what?” he said, gesturing to all the obviously professional filming equipment. Two cameras on tripods, one handheld, some light umbrellas, and a whole bunch of other stuff.

Antoinette shrugged. “This is but a small selection of my tools for recording.”

The prince’s two ghouls giggled as they bounced over. Naked. Oh boy.

“Is this the new girl?” they said together, and they smiled as they looked Veronica up and down.

“Um ... hi,” Veronica said, and she gulped as she looked between the two slightly taller girls. She hadn’t expected nudity, not yet anyway.

“Hi! I’m Ashley. This is Julee. We’re the Prince’s ghouls. And you’re Veronica, Jack’s new thrall? Wow, you’re pretty. Love the hair.”

Veronica blushed and squirmed in place, and cast a few nervous glances to Jack, expecting him to save her. Despite her enthusiasm on being a part of this, she was looking a little anxious now. Poor girl had no idea how crazy tonight was probably going to get.

“Are the cameras running?” Antoinette asked.

Ashley nodded. “Mhmm, set to the center of the bed. And she just has to press the red button on the handheld and it’ll record.”

“Excellent. Now, come here.”

Ashley and Julee came to join them, smiling, and they both shivered as Elaine and Antoinette took them into their hands. Naked and standing with their backs against the stomachs of the two older women, both younger women smiled at him and Veronica as Elaine and Antoinette ran hands up and down their naked bodies. The two ghouls watched him and his thrall, and erupted into squeals, and then melted into bliss, as Elaine and Antoinette devoured them. More than devoured, fingered. Antoinette took Julee, Elaine took Ashley, and the two vampires put both ghouls on display as they fingered and Kissed them, driving both girls to orgasm in record breaking time.

Veronica moaned as she watched, quiet enough she probably didn’t realize she did. Her nipples pressed hard against her white blouse, and she struggled to keep her hands at her side.

Antoinette lifted her fangs from the now unconscious Julee, and grinned at Veronica, before she and Elaine set the two ghouls gently on the floor at the foot of the giant bed. Nodding, Antoinette began to undress, slowly undoing a button of her suit, and then another, eyes on Veronica as she did.

“Veronica,” she said, “you may be Jack’s new thrall, but he is my love, and I his. Understand?”

Veronica gulped, and nodded.

“Excellent.” She slipped out of her suit jacket, her shirt, and then, her bra. Veronica’s eyes went wide as she stared at just how absurdly busty the Prince was. “However, I am a sharing lover. Am I not, Elaine?”

“Charitable beyond words.” Laughing, Elaine set her own suit on the floor, and slowly slipped out of her underwear, exposing her smooth mons as she slid the fabric down her equally smooth legs.

“Indeed. So, Veronica, if you perform well tonight, I promise you will be quite satisfied.” Antoinette gave a devil smile and looked to Jack, checking in if he was ok with what she was implying. He was, cause he was a guy, and when in doubt, he had to listen to his penis.

“P-Perform?”

Nodding, Antoinette slid out of her own underwear, grabbed the handheld camera, and brought it to her. “You shall record us. If you can remain focused on that task, and not touch yourself in any way, you will have what you desire. Understood?”

Veronica gulped again, so hard they all heard it, and she took the camera. “Yes, Prince.” She had a hard time taking her eyes off Antoinette’s now completely naked body. It was a lot of smooth, pale skin.

“Wonderful.” With a hearty, villainous chuckle, Antoinette crawled onto the bed. Elaine joined her, also chuckling with similar dark tones as the two elders found the center of the huge bed. They were having fun.

It was going to be one of those nights. Whenever these two fed together, it was like they’d become possessed by sex spirits; in Dolareido, that was perfectly possible. Both of them already Blushed



Life due to the meal, and both smiled at him with hungry succubus grins as they got cozy on the mattress.

He managed a soft smile for the obviously nervous Veronica, and stripped. “Don’t worry. Just point the camera at”—where the hell would Jessy prefer the camera point?—“wherever the action is. No need to get artistic. We already got a professional setup also filming.” He gestured to the other cameras already recording.

“Yes Master. I ... oh my.” She stared at him, eyes wide, and ran her eyes up and down his body as he tossed aside his suit, and Blushed Life. It took her a few seconds, but she managed to remember the camera, and she brought it up to point at him as she pressed the button. And, without even trying to hide the fact, spent a lot of time with it pointed at his body, his abs, his shoulders and chest, and his penis. And, well, considering he’d just watched two ballerinas get fingered into a mess of orgasms, and now had two well-fed, very horny women waiting for him on the bed, he was already getting erect.

Veronica licked her lips, breath quickening, but kept both hands on the camera.

He walked over the side of the bed, and both elders turned to face him, Elaine pressing her body into Antoinette’s back. Without missing a beat, she spooned with the Prince, propped her head up with her left hand and elbow, and reached around Antoinette with her right hand. Her exploring digits slid down his lover’s body, traced lines along her breasts, her waist and stomach, and then to her mons. A moment later, she set a single finger against Antoinette’s clitoris, and began to gently caress it as she grinned at Jack over the Prince’s shoulder.

“You have spent night after night indulging yourself with our breasts,” Antoinette said. “Perhaps, you would like to actually have sex with us tonight? Silly boy.”

Silly boy. It wasn't a tease she normally used. Elaine brought out a playful, dominant side in Antoinette. Normally she was in charge, but tender and inviting in contrast to her normally cold and domineering presentation. When Elaine was involved, Jack could see an older part of her personality emerge, something that wanted to play with him like a cat would its toy.

Well, he was perfectly cool being a cat toy.

He shivered, met their ancient gazes, and climbed up onto the bed with them, Veronica following. She didn't climb onto the bed, but she leaned over it, and kept the camera pointed. He knelt beside Antoinette in front of her midriff, all while the two ladies watched him with desire, and Elaine continued to massage his lover's clit in that super gentle, pre-sex kinda way.

"So, uh ... how to do this?" He gestured to the cameras and to Veronica.

Laughing, Elaine rolled onto her back, and Antoinette mirrored her. They scooted back further up the enormous bed, set their backs on the mountain of pillows so the two of them were half sitting, half leaning back, and resumed their dangerous smiles. Elaine lifted her left leg where it pressed into Antoinette's, slid it between her friend's, and used it to help pull the woman's legs apart. Chuckling, Antoinette complied, and spread both her milky white thighs.

"How about," Elaine said, eyes finally sliding off Jack and down onto Antoinette, "you enjoy your lover, for now. I will join in momentarily." The Ventrue turned onto her side again, snuggled into Antoinette's side, and resumed her gentle caresses of Antoinette's pink labia. They grew redder by the second as they swelled, the Prince's body on a hair trigger considering she just fed, and fed to the point poor Julee was comatose.

Plus, with Elaine, Antoinette got aroused very, very quickly, despite how her eyes remained fixed on him. Something about

treating him to a second pair of curvy hips and huge breasts really set her on fire. Soon to be three pairs, given her intentions.

“Skipping foreplay?” he said.

Elaine laughed. “Good heavens, no. I will handle foreplay. You, come, enter your darling Prince, and engage in some slow, romantic, tender, and caring love making.”

Not exactly what he figured Jessy would want to see. He raised a brow, but a nod from Antoinette sealed the order, along with her reaching behind her to grab a pillow, and set it under her butt, elevating it. He crawled over and between Antoinette’s legs, slid his knees under her thighs, and with a single hand, guided his hard length down, and into her slit. Wet, warm, she squeezed invitingly, and smiled her succubus smile at him as he slowly sank his length into her. And as he did, Elaine continued to caress and massage her clitoris, using two fingers now, and a little more pressure.

Veronica stepped around the bed toward the head, and leaned over the bed some more, groaning quietly as she did. The audio would get picked up by the camera, but Jack knew Jessy wouldn’t care. Hell, she’d probably like it.

He groaned as his eyes roamed over Antoinette’s mountainous breasts, flattened to her chest and spreading out over her ribs, but still massive. And after a second, his eyes fell to Elaine’s breasts, and he watched where they squished to Antoinette’s side. At least, he watched until Elaine grinned at him.

“Sorry,” he said after a few more seconds of staring, eyes on Elaine. “About, uh ... you know, the breast obsession.”

She laughed, even more warmly than before. “It is quite alright, young Ventrue. I am a buxom beauty, after all. I have seduced many with these breasts of mine.”

“I believe Jack’s obsession transcends typical masculine enthusiasm,” Antoinette said. “I believe we have entered fetish territory.”

“You are hardly one to talk, old friend. How many times have you cum to this boy’s lips around your nipples, hmm?” Rolling her eyes, Elaine snuggled in tighter to Antoinette’s side, and the Prince lifted her arm so the woman could press her chest into Antoinette’s ribs. The Ventrue’s two huge breasts squashed into Antoinette’s right breast where it pulled to the side of her torso, and pushed it back up onto her ribs somewhat. She did it on purpose, knowing full well the sight of their breasts smooshing together and molding into heavenly shapes was utterly hypnotizing to Jack.

“Dozens,” Antoinette whispered as she gently pushed her hips up to meet his in a gentle, excruciatingly slow rhythm. “Hundreds.”

Elaine nodded, validated, and she nuzzled her head onto Antoinette’s shoulder, planting a few kisses along the Prince’s alabaster skin as she did.

“You have been blessed.”

“Her, blessed?” Jack said. “I’m the lucky one, here.”

It was Antoinette’s turn to roll her eyes. “She means, because we can engage in sexual delights until Hell freezes over, and yet, you continue to drown me in your enthusiasm and desire.”

That, was true. He couldn’t help himself. The sight of her naked, combined with her confidence and desire, lit his body like it was kindling, even after they’d fucked hundreds and hundreds of times, with Antoinette drowning him in a myriad of kinks. The fact those kinks were very one-sided, like two-girl threesomes, or four-girl fivesomes, was icing on a very delicious cake.

“And,” Elaine continued, “how easy it is for a horny young Kindred to find himself unable to resist his hunger for his prey, fucking them as he feeds. And yet you do not.” She grinned at him, then Veronica, and then the camera.

Ah, cheating. He supposed that was true. Mentally, he wasn't capable of crossing that line. And to a paranoid creature like an elder vampire, that must have been a rare trait to find in another. His self control with Veronica must have settled some small fears in Antoinette's mind, too.

Elaine's massaging fingers grew faster, much faster, and Antoinette let out a quiet, relaxed sigh, as her insides started to spasm. The taller Ventrue kept up the pace for a minute, quickly pushing the Daeva up to orgasm, before she relented. The three of them watched Antoinette's body, admiring how the gorgeous goddess shivered subtly with climax, how her enormous breasts rippled on her chest and around her ribs, and Jack in particular indulged in the amazing sensation of her insides squeezing like a vise.

Antoinette laughed, reached up, grabbed his shoulders, and pulled him down to her. She wanted him to lie down on her, which was definitely one of their more intimate styles of lovemaking. If she felt comfortable doing this in front of Elaine, or Jessy for that matter, he was hardly one to deny her. He pulled his legs out from under hers, lay atop her, and rested his head between her breasts. Naturally, as she always did, Antoinette set her hands on his back, caressed and massaged his spine and shoulder blades, while her biceps pushed her breasts together up on her chest for him. Pillows. Giant, soft pillows. Heaven. She couldn't use her right hand this time, with her arm out so Elaine could cuddle in close, but Elaine's body helped keep her breasts together instead.

When Elaine started to move, he turned his head to face her, but he kept it resting on the glorious mountain of pillows as he watched

her. She slid down a few inches, and with the hand that'd earlier been massaging Antoinette's clitoris, she cupped the underside of the Prince's right breast. Jack watched as Elaine leaned in closer, until she was only inches from Jack's face, and with a devilish twinkle in her eye, she wrapped her lips around Antoinette's right nipple.

Antoinette sighed with bliss, and nudged her hips toward Jack. He almost didn't notice. He was too busy staring at how Elaine suckled and licked his lover's areola, how she grazed the sensitive skin with her teeth before kissing the nipple, and how when she pressed her face down into the softness, the enormous breast molding to swallow it in supple skin. Veronica had the same idea. She climbed onto the bed, probably hypnotized as well, and did her best to keep the camera steady as she came in closer, only a few feet away, as she pointed the camera down at Antoinette and her breasts.

As much as he loved sucking on Antoinette's nipples, there was definitely something to watching someone else do it. Ashley, Julee, they'd all done it, but Elaine showed a mix of patience and skill that left him speechless. Every kiss, every lick, every suckle and every nudge, it was so perfectly timed, while at the same time obviously meant to be a spectacle for him and the camera. Elaine may not have had the obsessive need to show off like Antoinette did, but he could see that where Elaine drew a more sexually aggressive side out of Antoinette, Antoinette drew a desire to show off out of Elaine.

No wonder the two of them were so dangerous together.

Antoinette's left hand drifted up Jack's back, and guided his head to her left breast. He groaned into it as he devoured it hungrily, opening his mouth and trying to encompass as much of it as he could; not much, compared to how much was there. It earned some more chuckles from the Prince, and quiet, controlled moans, when his hungry mouth slid higher, and greedily devoured her nipple.

He turned his head to watch Elaine, and she did the same for him, as the two of them suckled on the Prince's breasts. Antoinette pushed her hips up into him, and he nudged his body back and forth, bathing his cock in the tight, hot friction of her wet pussy, but his focus was wholly on her breasts. He mimicked Elaine, suckling and kissing in a rhythm soon in time with her.

Antoinette's insides clamped down on him hard, and her left hand pinned his head into the softness of her breast. And she did the same to Elaine, right hand burying the woman's face to her as another orgasm hit her. She came fast. He wasn't sure if it was because of the meal, Elaine, all the breast suckling, or that she'd suddenly become the center of attention of Veronica's camera. Probably all of it.

The two of them eased up on their suckling, and Jack groaned as he felt his cum begin to stir, heat building between his thighs and behind his testicles. But he didn't cum, not yet. As Antoinette came down from her climax and let the two of them go, Jack lifted his head, stared down at her lightly shivering, amazing body, and dared not move an inch. The electric pleasure running down through his length had him so damn close to orgasm, it took every ounce of effort he had to hold still.

"Oh, such self control," Antoinette said with her devil smile. "Elaine, be a dear and help the poor boy?"

Laughing with more warmth and merriment than Jack expected, Elaine sat up, and crawled behind him. Behind, and on top of him. He gulped as he looked up at Antoinette from between her breasts, and shivered as he felt his great grandsire's body press down on his. Her leg legs mixed in with his and the Prince's. Her pelvis pressed down on his ass. Her heavy, large breasts pressed down on his head, shoulders, and neck, and soon, he was staring up at Antoinette from between four breasts, all fighting for space against his body.

“Oh god,” Veronica whispered, and she pointed the camera at Jack’s face, her mouth open and her eyes wide.

With Elaine behind him, pressing her body down on him, he was thoroughly pinned, and he shivered under the sensation of her breasts molding to the shape of his neck and shoulders as she pushed her weight into him. Now with both arms free, Antoinette slid them down his body and pressed them against his lower back under Elaine’s stomach, her biceps pushing her enormous breasts up to keep them mountainous. She smiled at him, obviously delighting in squashing his head between four breasts; he certainly was. And for some damn reason, having it filmed didn’t bother him. Hell, he was kinda liking that too.

Elaine pushed her pelvis into his ass, and quickly found a fucking rhythm. Each time she pushed her body into him, she drove his hips forward, burying him that last inch inside his lover, and pinning his body to hers. Elaine made sure to press her whole body down onto him too, and when he looked up, he could see her head hanging over his, grinning with the same devil smile Antoinette had. And of course, each thrust of hers meant the four breasts currently enveloping his shoulders and head jiggled, the ripples in their soft, heavy tits traveling into his neck and cheeks.

He melted onto his lover as the two women squashed him in legs and boobs, and came inside her. Veronica moaned again, her blush returning hard, and she slowly panned the camera up and down the body of the two women sandwiching him.

“Ah, there we go,” Elaine said. He managed to look up at her for a moment, and how she kept her head hanging upside down over his so she could grin at him as she pressed her body into his back, breasts into his shoulders and neck. But apparently that wasn’t enough, because she pressed harder, and everything went black as her torso and breasts buried him, and his face sank in between Antoinette’s breasts. Elaine kept thrusting against his ass too, and



he moaned quietly into their breasts as the warm sparks of pleasure traveled up and down his cock, each earning a flex of his inner muscles, and a following gush of cum into his lover.

Elaine only stopped when his cum stopped gushing into Antoinette, and she pushed herself up. She didn't get off him though. Apparently, she was happier staying on top of him, with her breasts hanging and nudging against his head.

“Elaine,” Antoinette said, and she gave her friend a small wink.

Elaine laughed, slipped off Jack, and walked off toward Antoinette's nearby vanity desk. “So we are doing that, tonight?”

“The timing is perfect, non? I think this will be a most enjoyable experience. And visual delight.” Antoinette reached down, flipped him over onto his back, smiled at him, and then smiled at the camera. She reached back, set some more pillows behind her so she was a little more propped up in a sitting position, and she pulled him snug to her belly, so that her breasts rested on his shoulders.

“Uh, what're you going to do to me?”

“Elaine is going to treat you.”

“You two treat me almost every night.”

“Oui, but I think tonight will be especially fun.”

He raised a brow, looked up at her, and melted as she grinned at him. Whatever it was she was thinking, it was fun for her. If she was having fun, he was having fun. No thinking about stupid shit like curses and ghosts. Not even thinking about the fact they were being filmed. Nope, just two lovers and their friend, having a lovely night of sex.

Elaine returned with a bottle of lubricant in her hand, hand towel in the other, and she crawled along the bed back toward him. Like Antoinette, whenever traversing the bed was necessary, she made sure to crawl like a strutting cat, back arched down, and breasts swaying underneath her; Veronica was quick to get that on film, too. As he stared at Elaine, she came up to his legs, straddled them, reached down, and poured lubricant onto his cock.

“You have soaked my breasts and sex in cum over a dozen times, since I have arrived in the city,” she said, eyes on him, one hand spreading the lube, the other drizzling it onto him. That was a lot of lube. It was already coated in his cum, and Antoinette’s, but if she was going to tit-fuck him over a long time, it was a good idea to get some fresh lubricant.

“Y-Yeah,” he said.

“But we have not had anal sex, not once.”

“Umm...” Whoa.

She set the lubricant aside, used the towel to dry her hands, and inched herself further forward along his legs. Eventually, she slowly lowered her pussy down onto the underside of his cock, and pinned its length along his lower abs. Her swollen labia leaked wetness around his girth, and he shivered as she eased her smooth slit back and forth an inch. And sure enough, Veronica came in closer, and pointed the camera straight at where Elaine’s pussy spread around his girth. One of his thrall’s hands squeezed the blankets, as if afraid she’d touch herself if she didn’t.

Grin unending, Elaine leaned forward, set her left hand on his chest, grabbed his length with her right hand, lifted her ass up, and guided his length up to tease his glans along her folds. But, she guided it back further, and as her grin grew even more, she slowly started to lower her ass onto his cock.

“My dear friend has told me you have yet to enjoy a woman’s ass?”

“Um.” He looked up at Antoinette behind him, who shrugged and nodded. “She told me she doesn’t really enjoy anal, and considering how spoiled I already am, it’s not like I was going to push the issue.”

“She may not, but I certainly do.” Her ring of muscle clenched and unclenched, and between each clench, the elder lowered her large, curvy ass down further and further onto his cock. Holy fuck, that ring of muscle squeezed so hard, it brought everything to a standstill, and he shivered as the elder shifted her hips about, working the lubricant around and around. Deeper, the texture was different, but still hot and soft, and he gulped as her clenching sphincter swallowed another inch of him.

Veronica let out a quiet meep, and crawled down the bed a few feet so she could film from behind. Yeah, Jessy would definitely want that.

Eventually, Elaine’s ass found his thighs, and she let gravity bury her balls-deep on his cock. Her hands found his chest, and she teased fingers up and down the muscles, while he stared at her stomach, her smooth mons, and how with her sitting like that, he couldn’t see where he penetrated her. It almost looked like they were having regular sex.

At least it did, until Elaine leaned back and set both her hands on his legs. Veronica squeaked again, and came back to sit beside Jack and Antoinette as she pointed the camera at Jack’s pelvis. Tilted back, it was obvious how Elaine’s asshole was spread around his cock, and how her gorgeous, empty pussy above clenched in spurts, only to leak some of her juices down onto him.

Laughing and grinning at the camera, Elaine reached down and teased her clitoris, catching it between two fingers and softly running the two digits up and down along the soaked, very swollen

flesh. It earned more clenches, clenches Jack felt, the thin wall of flesh between her two holes allowing him to feel the different ways her insides flexed. And with her leaning back like that, his cock's natural up-and-forward angle pressed up toward her pussy.

“Jesus,” he whispered.

“Jesus,” Veronica whispered.

Antoinette laughed and rolled her eyes, but said nothing. She kept him snug on her stomach, his head between her breasts, her breasts on his shoulders. Her hands teased his chest and abs, fingertips sliding up and down his skin, but her eyes were locked onto the sight of his cock as well, and where it entered her old friend.

“Quite the sight, is it not?” Elaine asked.

“I ... yeah. But uh, is it pleasurable for you?”

She licked her lips as she looked down. “Aw, a gentleman, to be concerned with my pleasure. But do not worry. I enjoy this quite a bit.” Her caressing finger sped up, and Jack sucked in a quick breath as her insides clamped down. “Plus, I have only moments before devoured a meal. Moments after that, I suckled upon my friend's breasts, and then rubbed my naked body against her lover, as he filled my friend with his seed. I”—her voice grew deeper and huskier as she gazed down at him and his body, before grinning at the camera—“am very, very close. At this point, I stiff breeze could drive me to climax.”

Leave it to a Ventrue to be blunt as fuck, but bombastic about it.

He groaned as she set both her hands on his legs again, and started to bounce. Her ass jiggled as it collided with his thighs, and he stared at her body as she rode him. Her huge breasts rippled almost like water against her chest, and her flat stomach rolled with the motion of each downward bounce. Her drenched ring of muscle

clenched on his cock hard enough he worried she might hurt him, but she was an expert. She inched her hips forward a little as she bounced, each downward motion causing his cock to drive up and forward toward her belly and pussy from the inside, before her ass devoured his length completely.

Three minutes later, she was cumming. Her bounces slowed in pace, but increased in strength, and she continued to lean back with her hands on his legs as she milked her orgasm. Every couple of seconds, she lifted her butt off him, then slammed it back down, causing her breasts to almost jump off her chest before settling down, hanging with their mass. Her insides clenched once she devoured him, the lubricant allowing the skin to keep sliding. And her exposed pussy clenched on itself, causing more juices to leak out of her. More, and more.

Veronica gasped, and brought the camera in close, and close, until she was almost blocking Jack's view. She had the camera pointed straight at his cock, Elaine's trembly slit, and the juices leaking out of her. Yeah, vampires made a mess when they had sex. Not exactly the most ideal way for Veronica to learn that, though.

Elaine stopped bouncing, and instead slowly ground her hips back and forth an inch while keeping him buried to the hilt inside her ass. She grinned at him, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from her clenching pussy, and how the pink slit, a little spread with her thighs apart, leaked more juices. That was a hefty orgasm, and her body quivered with it, tremors working through her and causing ripples to dance along her thighs and heavy breasts.

“And,” she said as she stopped shivering, “after the first taste of bliss, the following are always much, much easier to catch.”

He managed a slow nod, but otherwise said nothing, just watched as the busty blonde grinned down at him.

“Perhaps my love would enjoy some poses?” Antoinette whispered. “Or, perhaps Jessie would?” She gestured idly to the camera.

“Ah, leave it to a Daeva to consider fashion at such a time.” Shrugging and laughing, Elaine turned to her right a full ninety degrees, and set her legs out on the bed on his left side, beside Veronica. She folded one over the other, pulled up her knees closer, and sat up straight. “Perhaps, your love would like to cum inside a business woman? That must look quite tantalizing on film.” If she’d been wearing her suit, she would have looked exactly like she was sitting in an office chair at work. And, her sitting on his lap, naked, with his length buried snug in her ass, made it a thousand times hotter.

“Hmm. Non. Something else?”

Elaine tapped her chin, thinking, and turned one-eighty, putting her legs on the right side of him. She leaned back over his left side, pressed both hands down against the blankets underneath her, and arched her back, pushing her breasts up toward the ceiling. Oh good god. Each position earned a tiny groan from him, and a louder one from Veronica, as she slowly panned the camera up and down Elaine’s body.

“A swimsuit model, perhaps?” his great grandsire asked.

He almost said something, like ‘yes fucking please’, but stopped himself. It was a game, a game they played often. Tease him until he came. He loved this game.

The Prince shook her head. “Non.”

“Picky, are you not?” Rolling her eyes, Elaine turned away from him, straddled him with knees outside his legs, sat up straight, and reached her hands up. “Perhaps, a voyeur, spying on a woman as she showers?” She ran her fingers back through her long blonde hair,

elbows up and out, and ass gripping hard despite her very slow, sensuous back-and-forth hip motion.

He sucked in a small breath, and Antoinette chuckled.

“I think you have found it, oui.”

“Ah. Your lover is a dirty boy. Quite reprehensible, to spy on a woman while she bathes. Something I am sure that harlot Jessie would gladly do.” She turned her head enough to get a peek at him and the camera over her shoulder, but she didn’t stop grinding her ass down onto him, and she didn’t stop playing with her hair, either. With her elbows up and her back arched lightly, her heavy breasts were visible from behind, the outer curve of each jiggling slightly with every forward thrust of her hips.

And, of course, her ass was on full display. She was a curvy woman, like Antoinette, thin with the discipline of an athlete, and blessed with the genetics of a curvaceous goddess. So, like Antoinette, she had a great ass, and when he wasn’t staring at the teardrop curve of each of her breasts visible along the sides of her torso, his eyes were locked onto her ass, and where his cock penetrated it.

He was cumming a minute later. And Elaine, chuckling the whole time, milked him, grinding and swaying and posing for him relentlessly, even as his hot cum gushed into her and soaked everything inside. Veronica whimpered, and slowly panned the camera up to his head where it sat between Antoinette’s breasts, and then back down over his chest, his crunching abs, and where his cum trickled out of Elaine’s ass down onto his pelvis. Elaine’s muscles trembled, clenching in random spasms a few times, and warmth flowed down onto his testicles. She was cumming too. God damn, she really did enjoy this.

Elaine turned to face him again, without removing his length from her insides. He groaned as the movement reignited pleasure

along his sensitive skin, and caused more of his cum to trickle down his length out of her. And of course Veronica groaned as well, and she leaned in so close she finally did block Jack's view, all so she could get a closeup of Elaine's pussy.

Chuckling, Elaine leaned forward, weight on her knees, and slid forward an inch, guiding his cock to press forward toward her pussy. Apparently she wasn't done. She smiled at the camera, at Veronica, and bounced. She raised her hands to her breasts, and played with them, squeezing and massaging, all the while driving her hips back and forth on Jack's body.

"I can be Antoinette," she said between a few planned, expert moans, "dancing for her lover." With a wicked smile, she slid her hands up to her hair and combed her fingers through it, elbows up and out again, except this time with her body facing him, and her hips moving seamlessly. And as Jack stared, she twisted her hips in a circular motion.

He recognized that dance. That was a belly dance, the slow, sensual kind. The Ventrue riding him slowly twisted her and shook her hips left and right, while constantly driving them back and forth. She slid her hands down her body, elbows still up, until her fingers found her breasts where she traced playful circles on the huge, rippling mounds.

She bounced faster, driving her ass back and forth, until she sighed with pleasure, and slowed. More juices trickled down her pink lips and onto his body, mixing with his cum still sneaking out of her gripping ass and onto his cock.

"You're not human!" Veronica said. "This is ... just ... oh my god, how you are doing that?"

Elaine and Antoinette looked at each other, and laughed.



“I think your new thrall has earned a taste,” Antoinette said, and she ran her fingers down Jack’s body, down his abs, and down to the wetness Elaine’s empty, clenching slit dripped onto his pelvis. “I think Jessy will be satisfied.”

Jack peeked over at Veronica. The poor girl was delirious with arousal. He could smell it, and so could the elders. Her face was red with embarrassment, but also excitement and desire. And she had earned it; she still held the camera up, pointed at Elaine, slowly working the woman’s whole body.

“I think you’re right,” he said with a grin. Ok, yeah, this was fun.

Veronica gasped, and beamed at him. Her eyes melted with desire as Jack groaned, pleasure rippling through him as Elaine slipped off him.

Chuckling, Elaine grabbed his ankles, and pulled him off Antoinette and toward the bottom edge of the bed like he weighed nothing. She motioned for Veronica, and the girl bounced off the bed and joined them, standing before Jack. Elaine took the camera from her, sat down beside Jack, and helped him sit up as Antoinette also came to join them. The tall elder stood behind Veronica, and folded her arms across her chest as she watched, smiling, one of her fingers teasing a swollen nipple.

“She is yours, my love, your pet. Give her her commands.”

Veronica, standing a foot in front of Jack, nodded excitedly. “Please, Master?”

He groaned softly, and licked his fangs. The Ventrue side of him almost came right there, with how his thrall, his pet, said ‘master’, and looked at him with doe eyes.

“Strip.”

She mewled, and obeyed. Antoinette helped her, undoing buttons and taking her clothes as she shed them. Short, with pale skin, thin but soft, with large breasts that covered her ribs. The blue hair contrasted it perfectly. The three vampires each took a moment to admire the pierced nipples, the pierced belly button, and surprisingly, the tiny chain that dangled from her clit hood. When did she put that on?

“Am I ... attractive enough?” she said, arms shaking at her sides, and eyes drifting back and forth between Elaine and Antoinette. The two elders chuckled quietly, but Antoinette looked at Jack with an obvious ‘make her feel more secure’ gaze.

Jack smiled at his new thrall, and held out a hand for her. “I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about fucking you since Elaine kissed you that first night, Veronica.” Her eyes lit up. “Now, sit on my lap facing me, and take all of me, slowly.”

Her whole body shook with adrenaline, and she took his shoulders into her trembling hands. He couldn’t wait to Kiss her, and not just because of the effect adrenaline had on the taste.

The difference between Veronica and the two elders was instantly apparent. She whimpered as she lowered herself down onto him, eyes locked onto his abs and below. Antoinette and Elaine normally controlled their descents, and used subtle dancing rhythms as they devoured him. Veronica was struggling to not collapse with need, and every inch she took him was met with shivering muscles and hot, dripping juices. She’d been on edge for a long time.

Her groans filled the room as she took him to the base, and she stared down at her spread lips, and the tiny chain dangling from her clit hood. It rested against Jack’s skin where cock met pelvis, only an inch long, and he smiled at Veronica as he looked down as well. That was an interesting sensation. That, was a fun sensation.

Elaine kept the camera pointed at Veronica's body, aiming it over Jack's shoulder so she could pan it up and down over the thrall, slowly but constantly drifting between her breasts, and to where her spread pussy soaked Jack. Antoinette stood behind Veronica, and set her hands on the thrall's trembling shoulders gently. The look in her gaze said it all: you're in charge of her, so have fun with her.

Now Jack understood why the two elders often had evil smiles on, cause he couldn't help but smile like a villain as he met Veronica's desperate gaze. She was so horny, so desperate for stimulation, so overwhelmed with the insanity of her situation, and so compelled by the Vinculum, her body was already a hair's breadth away from cumming. And seeing her that close, made him want to tease her.

"Happy?" he said to her.

"Yes, god, yes."

"And you want more?"

She mewled as she squirmed, desperate and boiling. "Yes, please."

"Then, hold still."

"What? Master, I—"

"Hold. Still." He set one hand on her hip, while his other reached down, and picked up the tiny chain by its end. And as he met his thrall's desperate eyes, he lightly jingled it.

"Nnnn!" She squeezed his shoulders, her jaw dropped, and her mewls turned into squeaks. Wriggling and squirming, she stared down at her clitoris, where it nudged against his pelvis whenever she involuntarily moved her pelvis forward, and moreover, how her piercing bounced along it. And she squeezed, hard, from even the smallest jingle, causing more of her juices to leak onto him.

There was only so much holding still she could do, before she started moving her hips. She tried to keep it hidden, but between all her mewls and whimpers and desperate squeezing on his shoulders, she started rocking back and forth. He didn't stop her. Her own attempts to stop herself, and simply being unable to, were delicious to watch.

She came, and her body turned into a writhing mess. Her muscles clamped down in spasms, and a new coating of hot juices trickled out of her as her insides milked his cock. He let go of the chain, set both hands back on her hips, and watched his thrall cum her brains out.

“Oh god, oh god!” Mewling, she leaned in closer to him, huge breasts pressed together by her elbows, hands still on his shoulders. She trembled like a leaf.

His evil smile grew, and he slid his hands up her sides, and up to her back. Antoinette let go and stepped back as Jack slowly pulled his thrall in closer, and the kine melted into him as he held her, her huge breasts overwhelming his chest in supple softness.

He breathed in her neck, the smell of life, of sex, of desire and sweat and juices, and hidden blood. He growled into her throat as he pressed his lips to it, and hugged her all the tighter, cock hardening until it hurt in anticipation. He was the predator, and she was his prey. His thrall. His, to devour and fuck and command.

He sank his teeth into her, and Veronica squealed as her whole body clamped down. Every muscle flexed and tightened, before relaxing into the bliss of the Kiss. Her warm blood flooded his mouth, and he growled into her more as he drank down the delicious liquid of life. And as he did, he grabbed her hips again, and forced her back and forth a couple inches on his lap. Not fast for either of them to cum, but more than enough to have pleasure building for them as the Kiss overwhelmed them with bliss.

Before Veronica passed out, he stopped. He licked her wound sealed, and let out a heavy, satisfied breath as he looked up at Antoinette. Even as he did, he kept moving his thrall back and forth on his cock, so hard now it might explode.

Antoinette grinned at him. “Have fun with your new pet, my love.”

He growled into his limp thrall’s body, picked her up, and set her on the bed behind him. She barely managed a squeak as he set her closer to the center of the bed, turned her over onto her stomach, and pulled her up onto her knees. He got on his knees behind her, aimed his cock at his thrall’s dripping slit, and slammed into her, balls deep. The result was powerful. Veronica’s body trembled, and her ass rippled with the impact, all while her depths clenched in desperate need. Her chain jingled against his testicles, undoubtedly teasing and torturing the poor girl’s now overly sensitive clitoris.

Antoinette crawled onto the bed, slid closer, knelt beside him, and with a husky little chuckle, slapped Veronica’s ass, hard. Jack froze as his nearly unconscious thrall whimpered, exhausted, but her insides told a different story. She squeezed harder than ever.

“Holy shit.”

“Indeed,” Antoinette said. “She is that type, as many are. Go, give into your more ... masculine urges, my love. Fuck her until she bruises, spank her, choke her, she will love it.”

He gulped, stared down at the extreme hourglass figure of his tiny thrall, and how her butt rested snug to his pelvis. And after a few seconds of hesitation, he slapped her ass. Veronica managed a squeal this time, quiet from how exhausted she was, eyes still closed, but her mouth was open with her constant panting, and her insides gripped him like a vise.

He growled, tightened his grip on her hips, and fucked her. Hard. Like a jackhammer, he pulled his hips back and slammed them forward, while pulling his thrall in to meet each thrust. Each impact was hard enough to shake the enormous bed, and earn desperate little mewls from Veronica as she quivered. A moment later, he slapped her ass again, hard enough the skin turned pink, and the woman came instantly.

But he didn't stop. Ignoring her whimpers, he pounded into her again and again, refusing to let up just because she was cumming. Her muscles clamped down in a desperate attempt to slow him, but he pushed through her drenched, boiling squeezes, and sank himself to the hilt again and again as fast as he could. A small part of him told him he should probably ease up, or the poor girl might get hurt. A bigger part noticed the wetness around his testicles growing, and growing, until each thrust made a splashing mess.

It only drove him on. He slapped her other ass cheek, earning more clenching spasms from the little thrall, and he fucked her hard again. And again, more of her juices splashed over his thighs as each slap of his testicles against her clit and piercing sent liquid everywhere. Her quiet whimpers and mewls grew quieter and quieter, but he continued, stopping every so often to give his thrall another good slap on the ass, drawing another hard clench out of her trembling insides, before he fucked her again.

Finally, as the boiling heat under his cock rose up and flooded his length, he slowed his pace. He thrust into her, and stayed balls deep inside her as his cum filled her. After a second, another hard thrust, testicles slapping her clit piercing, and more hot juices trickled down their skin, some of it hers, but now some of it his. He spanked her again, pulling a desperate, weak little squeak, and earning another little squirt of her hot juices onto his testicles.

And of course, Elaine filmed it all. She panned around, made sure to get Veronica's side and probably show off how great her profile

looked with her ass in the air. But she spent most of her time beside Antoinette, looking over her shoulder, with the camera pointed down at Veronica's ass, and how her tiny pussy was spread around his cock and drenching it.

Just as Jack was about to pull out, Antoinette knelt behind him, pushed her stomach and breasts against his back, reached around him, and grabbed Veronica's hips. Second time in one night he got sandwiched between two women.

“Again, my love. Again.”

He blinked up at her, up at Elaine, who just kept filming with a big grin, and he looked back down at Veronica. She was still awake, eyes partly open, but with her cheek against the blankets and mouth open, she did little more than drool and whimper. And her insides continued to spasm, silently begging him for more.

With his lover pressing her body against his back, Jack set his hands on Veronica's hips along with Antoinette's hands, and fucked his thrall again, and again. They kept going until she couldn't squeak anymore.

# Part 9



## Chapter 136

~~Jack~~

Ten days after the incident.

The ‘incident’. It was the nicest way they could put it, and the most succinct way. It also let them talk about it without putting everyone on edge too much. Avery and Garry had thrown the first punch, because Avery was convinced Maria was up to something, and Garry pushed her into acting. Pushed, or tricked, because even Carthians were Kindred, and never did anything directly. Easier to call it the ‘incident’, instead of ‘the opening act of what was going to be war’.

“You gonna be alright?” he asked Veronica.

She nodded, smiled, and waved. “I will. Mulder and Scully will caw if something happens, right?”

“Right.”

“And,” Jessy added, leaning against the open door of his mansion, “you got the Invictus emergency number. Speed dial it and some armed thralls and a clean up crew will come running.”

“She can call me, ya know,” Jack said.

His partner shrugged. “You’ll probably be busy if something happens. But don’t worry about it, Veronica. No one’s gonna attack the mansion, not with your master’s reputation.”

Mulder and Scully cawed from a nearby statue outside, some old shitty thing from Viktor’s past. And a few more crows beyond that cawed as well. Friends of his friends. Jack smiled at them, waved,

clicked his tongue a few times, waved to Veronica, and left with Jessy.

It didn't take long to find the first tunnel entrance, one of the old, closed doors to the abandoned subway. Locked doors weren't a problem for Kindred, and Invictus had keys anyway. Past that, they took a trip down one of the tunnels, found a closed-off service ladder, went down again, and were in the deeper level of the tunnels. He didn't expect to run into any of the Nosferatu that lived down here, but this was the tunnels they typical slept in. It was also the tunnels that connected to Azamel's favorite spot.

“So, dude, watched the tape last night.”

Oh god damn it. That was going to make this whole night an awkward pain in his ass.

“I don't suppose you can not—”

“Dude, where was the tit fucking?”

“I ... what?”

She held out her hands in front of her, as if holding giant breasts. “I was looking forward to seeing some tit fucking. Cause, I mean, come on.”

This woman, good god. He laughed, and laughed, until he had to clutch her shoulder to keep from falling over.

“Sorry. It just didn't come up.”

She grinned at him, one of those playful grins she made a lot these nights. Something happened between Eric and her, probably in the 'love you' department, and the woman was unusually happy all the time these nights, like Fiona had become.

“Still though, when Elaine got on your back, and the two of them just flattened you between their tits, I could literally see your cheeks get squished. It was fucking adorable, and hot as hell.” She shivered and bounced in place a few times. “Hell, it was all really hot. Elaine, posing like a fucking fashion model, mid ass fuck. Veronica, soaking that dick each time you spanked her. Fuuuuck that was good.” She hooked an arm over his shoulders, and walked with him down the tunnel, grin only growing. “I can guarantee she’ll be masturbating to that every night until ... well, every night, except the ones she gets to fuck you again. That on the menu? Maybe more movies, too?”

“If this were any other job, I’d get you fired for sexual harassment. And then sue you. This is not appropriate work behavior.”

“Aw, come on. Dude, you were totally rocking it in the video. Even Eric said you were in great shape. You look tiny in the suit, but naked, you’re gorgeous.”

The compliment shouldn’t have worked. Hell, if anything, knowing Eric watched the tape should have made him feel uncomfortable. But he was so desensitized to sexual embarrassment at this point, he just couldn’t feel awkward anymore. And the fact people liked the sight of him naked was an ego stroke he couldn’t deny.

“I didn’t plan on making anymore movies. But knowing Antoinette, she’ll bring it up again. Or just, you know, invite you and others over to be an audience.” She had the facilities to basically set up a stage play, except it’d be a bed, and Jack and Elaine and Antoinette would be on it. Probably the ghouls and thrall, too.

“I’d totally be down for an invite.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

She laughed, and Jack groaned. At this rate, everyone in the damn city would know they were down here, or at least everyone who already lived in the tunnels, the younger Nosferatu specifically. But, maybe hearing him joke around with Jess would endear him to them a bit? All the neonates avoided him, and that stung sometimes.

“I want to get Tash in on seeing me fuck Eric when he’s transformed, but I’m not sure how. When he’s transformed, cameras and shit don’t work right, so I can’t just record it or do it live and stream it.”

Good fucking god.

“Whyyy?”

“Fuck, I dunno. Eric says Luna or the moon or whatever might actually be, like, an actual deity or person or something? So she or it is kinda, I dunno, keeping an eye on things and fucking with nearby tech? Which is all sorts of creepy, the idea of a moon chick watching us and—”

“Not that! Why do you want to Tash to see Eric transform and have sex?”

“Fuck dude, why not?” She shrugged and let go of him. “She has two werewolf boyfriends. I’m hoping—”

Jack shook his head and waved a dismissing hand. Ugh, the woman did not get it. “Tash kept her boyfriends locked up, in chains, for three days before she released them. Art and Matt have an official warning from the Prince that they crossed a line against the dragons, and that they’re on thin ice; the Prince told me Tash agreed with it, too. Those two wolves owe the dragons, and the Prince is going to collect. You really think that relationship is still going?”

“Hell yeah. Those two idiots got it bad for that girl.”

That was not the response he expected.

“Um, they betrayed her trust. And, you know, staked her. Staked her! Ow!”

Of all the people he expected to be understanding about this, Jessy was not one of them. Hell, Jessy was the first person he figured would throw fists over something like this.

“I get that,” she said. “And hey, when Tash told me what happened, I thought for sure those two morons were done, relationship over. But I’ve seen them since it happened, you know? They’re miserable.”

“Being locked up in a cell for a few nights, dangling from chains I might add, can make anyone miserable.”

She shook her head. “Not like this. If they were kine, I’d expect them to be pissing their money away on booze right about now, brooding over the relationship they destroyed in a bar or something. They’re totally fucked up.”

Sighing, Jack stopped and faced her. “So, what, you think she should forgive them, because they’re sad?”

“I don’t—”

“Cause honestly, if I’d been them, I’d have done the same thing.”

Apparently that was not what she’d expected to hear. “The fuck?”

“And I bet Tash would have done it, too.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am. And come on, Jessy. If Michael, your sire, told you shit was about to go down and the Invictus were needed to fix shit or mountains of people were going to die, Kindred included, you’d do it, too. Maybe not for the Invictus, but to save the lives of hundreds of paranormals, and millions of kine? And you know damn well you’d lock Eric up against his will if you thought he’d stop you.”

“I ... fuck, I don’t know! I’d ... fuck me, I don’t know. I’d have talked with him first! Avoided needing to lock him up at all.”

“Even if Michael told you not to talk to him about it?”

“Fuck, I ... fuuuuck.”

It all boiled down to logic, something he knew Natasha understood. It probably ate her up, knowing that, if the roles had been reversed, she’d have done what Matt and Art did. Shame, guilt, all that shit Jack was all too familiar with, just not in the same context, thank god. Art and Matt did what they had to, because they knew Natasha would interfere, and to them, keeping her alive was more important than their relationship to her.

Tragic, cliché, but very real. It was a sad story. Art and Matt liked Natasha, a lot, probably loved her. But the situation just didn’t allow for that relationship to continue without issue. Vampires of different covenants often didn’t get close to each other, because they often ended up on the opposite side of issues, either because of personal beliefs or the orders of their superiors. Avery thought she was saving lives, and so did her pack. It sucked, a lot, that Avery went up against Maria when Natasha was convinced of her innocence. But Avery was convinced, still was, and the only reason she and her pack weren’t banned from the city — or dead — was because she didn’t try that shit on Antoinette.

A weird, tricky situation. It always was. No chance any of these groups were going to get along smoothly, no matter how much Jack tried.

But he'd keep trying. Once Avery was healed up, and maybe a little less angry about getting her ass kicked by Jack and the Ripper, he'd talk to her, and maybe Matthew and Arturo, too. But for now, Azamel.

"It sucks," he said. "It really fucking sucks for her. But the boys did what they did cause they didn't want her hurt or dead, and because they knew they had a job to do, a job they would sacrifice themselves to do. Can you imagine her asking them to put her before the beliefs of their pack? Hell, they genuinely think they're saving the city, the whole damn world, from some nasty shit. And I don't blame them, after all the shit I've seen; that you've seen too, FYI."

"Then, the fuck do we do? The boys are miserable, they really don't want to lose Natasha, and I like them. And Natasha's miserable, cause the boys put the pack before her, and betrayed her trust, and—" She threw up her hands. "The girl finally manages to get some good dick, regularly, and stupid shit up and ruins it."

"We do nothing. Er, well, I try my best to smooth shit over with Avery, and hopefully convince her she's wrong about Maria, but otherwise, yeah, I have no idea. It's up to Natasha if she can forgive them, and accept that there's just some aspects of their relationship that won't ever be ... rectifiable? Werewolves aren't vampires. They're wolves. They have a pack, and they serve that pack." He smiled, a pathetic little thing, and started walking again. "Vampires aren't that selfless."

"Ha, yeah, I guess we're not." She hopped up to catch up to him, and pat him on the shoulder. "You're a bitter old man trapped in a kid's body, you know that?"

"I do." She wasn't the first person to say it.

"I wonder how Eric feels about it," she said. "He's got no pack, but he is a werewolf. He's got a higher calling and shit."

“I dunno. He—”

They both stopped, and stared into the darkness of the tunnels ahead of them. Flickering old lights were the only thing illuminating the dirt, dust, cracked concrete, and ancient tracks of the old subway. Up ahead at the furthest visible bend in the tunnel, one of those lights turned off. And then the next one, and the next one. They didn't pop, like old lights did when they went out. They shut off, like they lost power, except they were on the same circuit; should have all died immediately.

Jack looked behind him as the lights kept going out until the looming presence enveloped them, and buried them in darkness. The smell was next. He snarled and wiped his nose, but there was no covering the smell of rot and decay.

“The fuck?” Jessy said, wiping her nose as well.

“Mark.” With a heavy growl, a shit load more sinister than he'd ever do in the past, Jack took a step further into the black. So dark he couldn't see shit, even with Kindred eyes. Fiona and Athalia might be able to see in blackness like this, but vampires were fucked.

“Mark? Explains the smell.” Sniffing, Jessy walked forward a little; easy to tell from the sound in the absolute silence. “The fuck you want, Mark?”

Silence was their answer. What an asshole.

“Mark,” Jack said. “I'm here to see Azamel.” More silence. “Look, I need to speak with her. Shit's about to ... get hectic.”

A quiet, hissing rasp filled the air, and Jack froze. Vitae pumped through his limbs, under his skin, ready to defend him from a surprise slash that might come out from the dark. He knew that rasp, and didn't like hearing it now.



“Athalia?” Jessy said. “Come on guys, we’re not here to pick a fight. Let us talk to Azamel.”

“Azamel is dying,” the darkness said, in a voice fitting darkness all too perfectly. “Let her die in peace.”

Jack shook his head. “I know, and I’m sorry, but the Invictus and Carthians are going to use every tool they can in this shitstorm coming our way. I need to talk to her.”

A few more seconds of silence before another hissing rasp. “Why?”

“Because I want to do everything I can to keep the Begotten out of it. And ... and because I’ve learned some things, about the things we’re worried about.” And this was where shit might get awkward. He hadn’t exactly been upfront with Jessy about their search for the mysterious force acting in Dolareido, the thing Azamel warned them about, the thing he was pretty sure was Black Blood. But with shit getting more and more problematic, now was as good a time as any to tell her.

“Let them come,” another voice said.

“Sándor.” Jack sighed relief. Mark didn’t like Jack. Athalia didn’t like Jack, especially not after everything that’d happened. But Sándor was a voice of reason; plus, he owed Jack.

The darkness melted away, leaving Athalia and Mark standing in the distance, a lot further than the woman’s eerie voice had suggested. Sándor walked past them and up to Jack and Jessy, face neutral, as usual.

“Jack.”

“How’s it going, Sándor? I have to say, the Prince is pretty happy with how things are going with the Begotten, since you’ve been

added to the city's ... paranormal scene." He almost used the word family. Nope, bad idea, especially with Sándor and Athalia.

"Considering your hungers."

"I have a lot of practice controlling my hunger," he said, voice ever flat. "And Azamel is smart, and wise. She knows a lot of ways to feed without exposing ourselves, leaving a trail, or killing someone."

Wow, those were a lot of long, complete sentences. A big step up from how Sándor usually talked.

Jessy laughed. "Sounds like she's gotten smarter since the last time she was here. Apparently, she caused a lot of problems last time she lived in the city? It was before my time."

Sándor nodded, not a smile or a frown anywhere on his face. Dude was totally stoic. If Jack put him in a room with Daniel, it'd be like watching two trees talk. He was tall, not as tall as Daniel but still tall, a white European dude with dark hair buzzed short like Jack's, and some gruff on his face. Right now he wore some jeans and a black shirt, typical wear for anyone hanging out in old abandoned tunnels, and a glance Jessy's way showed she noticed the muscle definition through the shirt. He did look healthier since the last time Jack spoke to him, and especially since being under Jeremiah's control.

"It was a long time ago," Sándor said. "And, if you want to speak to Azamel, I'll allow it. But be brief. She grows weaker by the day."

Jack winced and looked down. Much as that wasn't his fault, he still felt guilty about it.

Then again, Antoinette told him Azamel had some pretty lofty plans, the sort that put Dolareido in danger. Ruined plans, now. He shouldn't have felt bad for her. But, he did.

Jack and Jessy nodded, and Sándor took them to Azamel's hole, a big room with a large concrete stage in the center that once probably housed engineering equipment or something. No shitty old cushioned rocking chair this time. Old Azamel lay on a bed, coughing weakly, but true to form, she had a lit cigarette in hand, and she took a puff on it between coughs. No point in telling her to lay off it now.

Athalia and Mark hopped onto the concrete stage and sat with her, each taking a small chair near her bed. Somehow, these strange, disturbed individuals, were a close family. Sándor climbed onto the stage as well, though it was obvious the man didn't really feel comfortable getting as intimate as the others, preferring to stand off to the side.

Sándor motioned for Jack to come up, and he winced as he climbed onto the stage with them. Athalia and Mark both frowned at him, but he knew they didn't blame him for the situation. They did, however, not want him there, that much was obvious. Still, annoyed as they might have been, Azamel raised her free hand and gestured for him to come closer.

"Azamel," he said softly, and he stood beside Athalia as he smiled down at the old woman. "You look like shit."

She coughed, and managed a small grin, before giving him the finger. Not a very good middle finger, other fingers barely able to bend, but she managed.

"Jack. What do you want?" Despite her attitude, she did look like shit. Paler, skin more sunken, veins sticking out, hands trembling. Horrible, fucking horrible. Jack never knew his grandparents from either side of his family, but they were all dead, to various things. Never in his life did he ever see a family member on a hospital bed until the hunters ruined the life of his mother, and killed his sister. This was different. This was watching someone wither away to

disease and age, not stab wounds. This was a sickening reminder that vampires were immortal, and everyone else was very much not.

“I wanted to talk about the shit that happened last week.”

“You let your curse unleash mayhem and carnage.”

“Let ... is a strong word.” He clutched Elaine’s necklace. “I had to do something, but letting the curse out was an accident.”

Athalia snorted, but her eyes were down and refused to look up.

“I am aware of the situation, Jack,” Azamel said. “It does not concern us. We’ll stay out here, until...” She coughed, grabbed a nearby bundle of paper towels, and hocked up something into them. The paper turned red. After a heavy groan, she cleared her throat and tossed the paper towel into a garbage bin beside her. It was full of them. “When I’m gone, Sándor can do what he wishes, but he assures me he’ll remain neutral as best he can.”

“Neutral, like how you tried to recruit Eric?”

The old monster frowned as she glared at him. Only the small pile of pillows behind her back and head kept her upright enough to look at him. “Yes. I saw these problems coming, vampire. Maybe not this curse that infects your bloodline like a virus, but everything else. Something is out there, and the werewolves are chasing it. But they’re mostly blind, and they’ll attack anything they think looks — or smells — like what they’re hunting. They were bound to stir trouble with the covenants, like they did with Fiona.”

He sighed, grabbed a nearby, empty wooden chair, and sat with a groan of his own. “Alright, so, the rest of you, you’re going to stay out of this?”

Mark nodded. Athalia finally lifted her head long enough to look at him, frown, and nod. Sándor nodded as well.

“Fiona,” Sándor said, “is a different matter. She’s grown extremely attached to Damien.”

Azamel shook her head. “She is a butterfly. She will tend to her new love, but war? She will not go to war, and Damien will not let her.”

True. Damien knew better, and he wouldn’t want Fiona getting involved anyway. But that didn’t mean that she wouldn’t, if push came to shove.

“I’ll talk to her,” Jack said. “Much as I should be pushing to have as many helping hands as I can get on my side, First and Second Estate, it’d be better if the Begotten stayed out of this.” Everyone nodded. “Now, the other thing I wanted to talk about. I’m ... really leaning toward Black Blood being the thing that’s going around making new tears, and he’s probably the thing you warned us about.”

Azamel groaned and shook her head. “We’ve found tears in the dream realm, and other realms you cannot imagine. Black Blood is a spirit, and is limited to—”

Jack held up a hand. “Yeah, I get that Begotten are special monsters capable of getting all Cthulhu on me and going to different dimensions or whatever, but that doesn’t mean you’re the only ones that can. And Black Blood, I ... there’s something more going on with it, him, whatever. Don’t think of him like other spirits.”

Sándor spoke up, drawing a raised brow from everyone. “Black Blood is the reason I was able to break Jeremiah’s ritual on Azamel. The entity wouldn’t help us, if he was this threat Azamel’s worried about.”

“Unless he wanted you to owe him one,” Jack said. “Or ... some other reason. All I know is, Black Blood’s already told me that a lot

of the old tears in Dolareido, really old ones, are his. Whether he made them or someone else did and he claimed them, I don't know. But now there are new tears, and—”

“Um, the fuck?” Jessy asked, with a bit of bite in her tone and hands in the air.

Yeah, he knew that was gonna happen. With another groan, Jack looked over to Jessy, wincing the whole time. “You know some about it already, Jess. But shit's been going on for a while now, something we've all be trying to hunt down, something going on in the shadows and cracks of the world.”

“Cra—”

“Literal cracks of the world. Like, dimensional shit. Something's going on out there, doing something, and we don't know what yet. But Azamel and others think it threatens Dolareido. So we're tracking it down. Avery thinks it's Maria. I think it might be Black Blood.”

Jessy stared at him, eyes wide, before she threw up her hands. “The fuck did you tell me that for!?! God damn it, now I gotta keep it secret! Holy fuck, I don't want Black Blood as an enemy!”

Despite himself, he laughed. “Come on, you had to have some idea, right? The mysterious meetings and shit.”

Frowning, she paced in place and shook her head. “Plausible deniability, man. Fuck.”

Sándor snorted, stepped closer to the edge of the stage, and glared down at Jessy. Glare was too strong a word, cause the man didn't put out much emotion, but the impact was still the same. Jessy met his eyes, and everyone went quiet.

“I’m new to the city,” Sándor said, “but I’ve been given a home here. However brief my stay, I’d prefer to help as much as I can. So keep this a secret, vampire, or you might risk everything.”

Jessy winced all the more, threw her hands up again, and paced around like an anxious canine. “God damn it.”

“Sorry Jessy,” Jack said. “But you needed to know; you’re my partner. Normally it’s me and Damien dealing with this, but, yeah, you’re in the know, now. If it’s any consolation, Natasha knows about it, too.”

That got her attention.

“Natasha knows?” She frowned, but with less anger. He recognized that look. Hearing that hurt her. “She didn’t tell me. I mean, she ... she kinda hinted at some stuff, but...”

Athalia snorted, got up, and joined Sándor’s side, glaring down at Jessy. “She didn’t tell you because you have a big mouth.”

“Hey, fuck you!”

Athalia shrugged and gestured to Jessy as she looked at the rest of them. “It wasn’t a good idea to tell her, Jack.”

“I’ve worked with her for years,” he said. “I trust her. Besides, she’s dating a werewolf, and sooner or later Eric would figure out something was going on, too. Avery’s probably told Eric as much, he just doesn’t understand the scope.”

“So I can talk to Eric about this?” Jessy asked.

Jack sighed and shrugged. “Use your judgment, I guess. He is a werewolf. He’s going to get involved one way or another.” Eric was still a bit of a question mark. Sure, Jack wanted to trust the man, but he was an Uratha, and if Avery and her pack were any

indication, the werewolves couldn't ignore their instincts. Those instincts evidently included dealing with the Gauntlet, like it was fucking existential for them.

"Ugh." She threw up her hands yet again, and paced around some more, eyes on the ground and face in a permanent frown.

Azamel laughed, and coughed, and laughed some more. "You trust people far too easily, Jack."

"Yeah well, friends at your back are worth the risk." He gestured to the three Begotten around Azamel. "Aren't they?"

The old woman smirked, and took a puff of her cigarette. "You're a vampire. What does a vampire know of friendship, and family?"

"Plenty." Jack leaned over Azamel's side and met her eyes. "Black Blood. I don't know what he's up to, but I have some evidence that proves he's either responsible, or at least has involved himself, in these new tears we're finding."

The old woman gestured to Sándor. "Then, Sándor, when you find the next tear, take the boy to it. If he's found a way to trace these tears to the spirit-not-spirit, let him prove it."

Sándor nodded. "Alright."

Nodding, Jack got up, and turned to leave. But, stopped, and turned back to face the old monster. "You know, you've been a pain in the ass for a lot of vampires in Dolareido, Azamel."

She grinned at him. "Good."

"But I never wanted this to happen to you. I ... I'd be happier if everyone just fucking got along and found a way to coexist, you know? Even ... even the hunters. Let them hunt the assholes, but not everyone, right? It doesn't need to be like this."



Athalia snorted again, but didn't meet his gaze. She sat with Azamel again, and sighed as she shook her head, looking down.

"Your naivety," Azamel said, "is heartwarming. And besides, your Prince is doing good work. I understand one of the hunters, Brace Harcourt, has been seen with Clara Moreno."

Jack raised a brow. "Really? When?"

"Two days ago."

Clara hanging with Brace? He had no idea how to feel about that, except, a little bubble of something tickled up his gut, something he didn't like the feel of.

Felt a bit like jealousy.

---

Sándor took him and Jessy back through the tunnels.

"I can't believe she didn't tell me," Jessy said.

Jack shook his head. "Come on, you know why. The less people that knew, the better. Hell, you didn't want to know when I told you just now!"

"Yeah but that's a professional call! One I can understand. I know shitloads of things I don't tell you or other Invictus. Tash though, she's my best friend."

Jack looked to Sándor for help. The man kept walking, and avoided eye contact with all the smoothness of a statue.

"Well, you said yourself you didn't want to know."

"But this is big shit! And you didn't tell me, and neither did Tash, and ... Arg, you not telling me doesn't bother me at all. Invictus

being Invictus. Tash not telling me though, that stings. She's not even Invictus, she..."

"She understands this is a big problem, bigger than her, bigger than you, and didn't tell you at the risk of the friendship."

She winced. "Which sounds an awful lot like what Art and Matt did to her, doesn't it?"

Jack smiled. "There's a small comparison to be made there, yeah."

"Ugh. I suck at this shit. I just wanna go home, fuck Eric, have a snack, fuck some more, and maybe push around a few Carthians for being shortsighted assholes. I don't want to do this cloak and daggers crap! Do I look like a Mekhet to you?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"I don't want to play political games and move pawns against each other in this Danse Macabre shit. Do I look like a Ventrue to you?"

He laughed. "No."

"I don't want to paint or dance or sing or act in one of Isabella's stupid plays, I ain't no Daeva. Bitch doesn't even do musicals! I don't want to scare people with a BOO in the shadows, either. I ain't no Nos. I just wanna hang around and fuck and claim my shit as mine like any self respecting Gangrel does."

He nodded. "Perfectly reasonable. Unfortunately, not in the cards. I've officially pulled you into this cloak and daggers, pawns and secrets game. Now suck it up, princess. I need someone who can stick with me officially as a Right Hand, but also knows about this shit I'm sure Black Blood is up to, cause I know it's gonna come out of left field and fuck everything up somehow. Do I have your sword?"

She blinked at him. “My sword? What?”

“Lord of the Rings.”

“Oh, right. Uh, no, but you can ... have my axe? Fuck me, I don’t know, you stupid nerd. Yes, I’ll keep my mouth shut, and keep an eye open.”

He grinned at her and pat her on the shoulder. Much as Jessy was a loudmouth, shit had grown too big for him to keep her out of the loop, especially now that Damien was out of commission for a while.

“Speaking of Black Blood,” Sándor said, “what is Beatrice up to?”

Groaning, Jack shook his head. “Fuck, I don’t know. She’s doing something with Jacob, and it’s probably not good. I know Jacob has Elen somewhere, and considering what Elen could do, and what Jacob can do with Crúac, it scares the shit out of me what he might be up to.”

“You don’t think that has anything to do with the threat Azamel warned you about?”

“No, or not originally. Azamel warned me about these new tears showing up in Dolareido, in the spirit realm and elsewhere, before all the shit went down with Jeremiah.”

“What about the older tears?”

“Spirits called them verges,” Jack said. “The werewolves didn’t seem to be too concerned about them, far as I could tell. And they’ve been around for a damn while, from what the crow spirit I met said. So that’s definitely got nothing to do with whatever Triss is up to.”

Sándor sighed, which earned a shared, raised brow between Jessy and Jack. For Sándor to make any sort of expressive noise that

wasn't words was strange.

"You want revenge on Elen?" Jessy asked.

"Elen is ... a tool, a literal one. I don't desire revenge against her. I can't help but feel frustrated when I think of her, but revenge? No."

Jack smiled at the man as they resumed their walking pace. It was almost shocking just how much the gargoyle had managed to open up over the past few months. Azamel was such an influencing factor on the lives of the Begotten in Dolareido, it was mind boggling. She could be a total bitch toward vampires, but to the monsters, she was like ... what, a nice grandmother? Maybe one of those super nice grandmas that could unite a whole, dysfunctional family, and have them sitting together at the table, getting along and getting fat on lasagna?

Hard to imagine that towering behemoth elephant monster being a loving grandma sorta character, but the fuck did he know?

"So," Jack said, "it's not Elen you're worried about, it's Triss?"

"I suppose. It's a matter of ... concern, that a member of the Circle of the Crone has access to a woman with Elen's abilities. Like you said, Crúac rituals are a problem."

"Dealt with them before?"

"I have. In my younger years, I occasionally befriended a vampire who needed protection during the day. I'm good at ... guarding." Well, he was a gargoyle. Standing around, guarding shit, fit him perfectly. "With Elen at her disposal, and after ... your sire's death, I think she'll—"

Jack put up a hand. "Yeah, I know. But I trust her. If she's going to do some dark, witchy stuff, then I say let her. It's a horrible path to go down, and I know it's not going to go anywhere good; if

resurrection was possible, I'm sure someone somewhere would have heard of someone having succeeded." And that was a strong statement, considering the person he was closest with was basically a five hundred-year-old scientist. If there'd been a single successful example, Antoinette would have it written down somewhere, in some form or another. "Maybe she'll ... fuck, I dunno, not do what I'm worried about. Maybe she'll create a shrunken head she can use to speak to the beyond, instead?"

"That," Jessy said, "actually sounds kinda cool."

Jack facepalmed, but couldn't help but laugh. To Jessy it probably all sounded neat and interesting. To Jack, dealing with the dead was becoming a recurring nightmare in his second life. He had to visit Mary again, and see if she was willing to move on yet. Not a conversation he was looking forward to.

"Julias is dead," Jack said eventually, "and yeah, it really sucks. I miss him, and I can't even fucking imagine how much it hurt Beatrice losing him. But he's gone, and if she's trying to do something with Elen so she can talk to him again, or worse, that ... isn't good."

Sándor nodded. "Agreed."

Jessy stepped in beside the gargoyle, opposite of Jack. "Really? I mean, yeah, I get that it's all pretty dark, nasty stuff, but damn Sándor, you lost your whole family, something I doubt any of us could appreciate. If Triss and Jacob are trying to maybe break the rules a bit, I figured you'd want them to?"

If it hadn't been Sándor, Jack would have shut Jessy up before she could have finished the sentence. But Sándor was old as dirt, and had seen more than Jack and Jessy combined, probably by five fold. Jack was less concerned about her hurting the dude's feelings, than he was Sándor uttering a single sentence of unknowable truth

that'd shatter her mind or something. Or he'd just punch her super hard.

Sándor kept walking, and Jack could practically see the man becoming his stoic, gargoyle self, walling off emotions. But after a few more seconds, his expression softened to something vaguely resembling a bit of emotion, and he shook his head.

"I miss my family. Every day, I miss them. But they're gone, and only a madman would think it'd be a good idea to ... break a law as old as time." He shook his head again, and managed a small glance for Jessy before he looked back to the tracks ahead of them. "The dead are gone, and the living are not, for now. It's what makes life worth living."

"Arg, yeah, I know. I get it, I do," she said. "But fuck, it must be so tempting, right? I mean, we deal with crazy shit all the time. Vampires are half dead already. You're a nightmare monster, and far as I know, you guys have hopped around realms and shit. And what about that weird ghost realm? I—"

"That's not where souls go," Sándor said. "They go somewhere we can't reach. There are realms we can visit in this fallen world, and something beyond we can't. It's blocked from us by some great abyss that..." Sighing, he shrugged, and dismissed the notion with a tiny wave of his hand. "I have visited many places in my time, and have found strange dimensions with strange beings, but life and death is something that things with souls must contend with. No one has managed to violate that, not without great consequence."

Whole shit load of things there Jack wanted to ask about. Fallen world? Great abyss?

"Vampires can do some nifty things," Jessy said. "But—"

Sándor shook his head. "A vampire's ability to occasionally raise someone as a vampire, even after they've fully died, is not the same

thing. A soul doesn't run from the world within seconds of death, and..." He shrugged again. "I've seen things, but I don't really know anything."

Jack forced down a chuckle. The man knew a lot.

"Well," Jack said, "if you want to talk to Beatrice, go ahead."

"I'm ... not sure I should."

Jessy laughed, and hooked an arm over Sándor's shoulders. For a second, Jack thought the man would throw her off, but he didn't. He did turn his head enough to look at her with a quiet glare that could cut through steel; Jessy's impulsiveness was stronger than steel.

"Cause Jen was trying to get into your pants?"

"Among ... other things."

"Ha! Come on dude, let the witches show you a good time. If you want to check up on Triss and Elen, and interfere, you'd be in a pretty good spot to do it from that close. They'd treat you right." And with a wicked smile, Jessy looked at Jack, and he froze. "Way I hear it, Samantha's getting pretty cozy with a lot of those witches."

Jack frowned. "Oh you bitch."

"She's got your genes, Jack. I bet she's—"

"I get it, I get it." Before the conversation could run off course into typical Jessy territory, Jack put up his hands in surrender. "Sándor, do you know how ... how much longer Azamel has left?"

"No. Weeks, I imagine."

"And could ... could Elen do something for her?"

Sándor shook his head. “It’s a wound to her Horror, and to her, down deep where the two meet. She’ll be gone soon. I just hope I can ... be the rock she’s been, for the others.”

Jessy blinked at the Begotten, and let go of him as she backed off. Yeah, depressing. Jack probably shouldn’t have asked.

“You’ll do fine,” Jack said, and he touched the Sándor on his shoulder lightly. “If you need anything, anything at all, ask.”

“I owe you, Jack, not the other way around.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t care. I’m serious. If something happens, come get me, alright?”

“ ... alright.”

---

~~Natasha~~

Two weeks after the incident.

“Just ... just try and k-keep your head down. Please?”

Vivi shook her head. “Sire ... Tash, Garry’s attacked the Mirrden district. Michael isn’t going to just let me sit around doing nothing, just because you used to be a Right Hand.”

Natasha groaned and sighed, and looked up to the candles organized into a cross. Within the cathedral, young Invictus were safe from Garry’s aggression, mostly. Maria was below, but still gravely wounded. Her elite ghouls patrolled the outside of the cathedral, but they wouldn’t be able to do much if an ancilla decided to attack. Thankfully ancilla weren’t exactly common in Dolareido, and Garry wouldn’t risk his strongest Kindred on attacking the cathedral now, not with Maria out of the way for a while.



Damien, sat on the other side from Vivienne in the pew, managed a slow nod. “McDonald has already given orders for Kindred to take up defensive positions around the district. Skirmishes have been minor so far, but I expect damages in the future.”

Natasha shook her head. “The P-Prince won’t like damages.”

“At this point Tash, I’m not sure Garry or Michael would let the Prince’s disagreement stop this inevitable war.”

That was true. It was beyond stupid, but it was true.

“She’ll stop them,” Tash said, “if she was to.”

Vivienne frowned and looked down, twiddling with her fingers. She was a small woman, like Tash, though not as small. A quiet, thin girl with pale skin and black hair to her shoulders. Natasha sired her almost a decade ago, and immediately after, their relationship crumbled. She wasn’t prepared for a childe, and not like a parent might not be prepared for a literal child. This was different. This was Natasha’s greatest failure, her sheer ignorance over what it would be like to bring a human into the Danse Macabre and Masquerade, and how it changed Vivi’s personality enough that the two of them clashed.

Since then, she’d come to understand and appreciate her own sire a lot more. Sire childe relationships were never easy.

Vivi had become her own person now, an Invictus with a growing future, and an interest in the Lancea et Sanctum, an interest that nearly got her killed during Lucas’s return. Since then, Natasha and her talked on occasion, but not as childe and sire, especially now that Natasha was no longer in the Invictus. Damien kept an eye on Vivi for her these nights, and she appreciated it, but it was also great to have talks like this every so often.

Damien shook his head. “The Prince and the sheriff are two, against over a hundred, Tash. And since Antoinette reopened siring, we have reports the Carthians have embraced thirty new Kindred in the past couple years.”

“Fledglings. B-Barely neonates,” Tash said. “And the Invictus have done the same.”

“You d-don’t need to be as old or as powerful as you two,” Vivi said, “to use a gun. And as strong as the Prince and the sheriff are, one lucky molotov is all it’d take to kill them. This ... this isn’t the medieval ages. We don’t need to wait decades for Kindred to become strong, before we can do crazy things. It’s making Garry and Michael confident. Too confident.”

Impressive for Vivi to speak up like that, considering she was as timid as Tash used to be. And Damien was an imposing guy to be around, even with a leg missing. But then, the two had connected before, through their religion. Maybe her beliefs were becoming a foundation she could use to become more confident?

“She’s right,” Damien said. “Garry is going to push harder on the Mirrden district, and he knows that numbers give him power. Michael’s in the same boat. They’ll fight it out, and if the city starts to get damaged, the Prince will be put in an awkward spot. She’s not stupid. She’s controlled the city through politics and the fact she rarely interferes with covenants. But if she does...”

Natasha sighed, and mirrored Vivi, fiddling with her hands and fingers. They were right, of course. In most cities, whichever covenant ruled the city did so with might, often through numbers, hardware, financial assets, and an elder or three at the head. When the Lancea et Sanctum stepped over the line, the Prince enacted the purge, and used many thralls armed with modern weapons, along with Garry’s Carthians, to defeat Lucas. But this time, the Carthians weren’t her allies. And as strong as the Prince and Daniel were,

along with several dozen trained thralls at their disposal, they couldn't go to war against the Carthians without exposing themselves to the Invictus, or vice versa.

The Danse Macabre was all too similar to countries going to war in the modern world. Lies, deception, exploiting loopholes in treaties, and forcing retaliations so one party could claim to be the victim and justify their aggression. And, like modern warfare, the tools of battle between covenants had changed to espionage instead of raids, and assault rifles, flamethrowers, and grenades, instead of swords. Even elders as strong as Antoinette and Daniel would have a hard time managing that chaos.

Sighing to match theirs, Damien grabbed his crutch, and hopped out from between the pews. "Ladies, if you'll excuse me."

Vivi and Tash nodded, and Tash fingerwaved at her friend as he hobbled past the pulpit and to the hidden stairway down to Maria's den.

"He looked happy," Vivi said.

"Mmm?" He certainly wasn't happy about the topic.

Her childe smiled and looked back down at her hands. "I remember when I first met him, when Lucas was alive, down in Tony's old underground base. He ... he liked talking about God, and Longinus, and you could tell he was passionate about his beliefs. But when Lucas started asking for the congregation to get ready for war, you could ... see his heart sink."

"He d-didn't realize how far his sire had fallen."

"Neither did we. I'm glad I backed out at the last minute, me and the others. But when I saw Damien after that, he looked even worse. Even after he replaced you, and started working for Maria, he was always depressed. Me and the few other Invictus who didn't go with

Lucas that last night, we talk to him sometimes, about God, and tried to make him happy. It didn't work." Slowly, Vivi looked at her, smiling. "But ever since he met that Fiona girl, he's gotten happier. And lately, he's been really happy."

"I guess him and Fiona have g-gotten really close."

"Must be. And ... and you? I um, I heard you were getting really close to those werewolf boys. But then something happened?"

Natasha grumbled and looked down. Heat boiled up through her, and not the good kind. The scalding kind, the kind that made it impossible to think about anything other than pain, and maybe burning down a building.

"They staked me, t-to keep me out of the way, because Avery had the pack attack Maria." No point in keeping it a secret. Everyone knew about what Avery did. Natasha getting staked though, that was a secret.

"Oh. That's ... horrible! Did it hurt?"

She nodded. "Yes. B-But I've been hurt a lot worse. That's n-not the issue." The boys didn't stake her to be violent. Calling it violence almost seemed wrong. She was a vampire. Staking her was less about violence, and more about taking away choice. It was like, what if she'd come up behind the boys and dosed them with chloroform? Chloroform didn't work like they showed in the movies, but the idea stood. What if she'd come up and just drugged them, and then tied them up, until she could come back and release them after she'd done what she needed done? Sure, the violence was bad, but taking away their choice to get involved in the whole affair was a hundred times worse.

It was infuriating. It was beyond infuriating. And no matter how angry she got, she only got angrier, because she couldn't entirely blame them. If push came to shove, if Antoinette told her the city

was in danger if she didn't do something, and she knew she'd have to lock Matt and Art up in a basement to do it, she might. No, she would do it. She'd do it because she trusted Antoinette and Daniel with her life; especially her sire, after what he did, when Lucas held her hostage. She'd do it because saving the lives of Dolareido, its kine and Kindred, was more important than her relationship.

Vivi touched her shoulder, and Tash snapped her head up, forcing the girl to pull her hand back.

"S-Sorry, Vivi. Just ... I get angry thinking about it."

"I don't blame you. They didn't trust you, and did something so horrible because of it."

Sighing, Tash leaned forward and set her head against the pew in front of her. "Yeah, b-but ... I don't blame them, not completely. And that makes me angrier. I d-don't ... I don't want to be able to do what they did, you know? That's not ... that's not..." Love.

"Tash, you look miserable. And I bet they're miserable, too. You have to talk to them."

"I had the Prince lock them up, hanging from chains, for th-th-three days! And now the pack and the Ordo are on bad terms. Jack's gonna try and s-sort things out, b-b-but he ... might not be able to."

"If they're as miserable as you are, I think they'll risk pissing off their boss to talk to you."

She shook her head. "No! No, not yet. Not ... n-not until the Ordo Dracul aren't the reason that we might get into an argument." She couldn't take an argument with Matt and Arturo, not now. It'd shatter her, and she knew it. And that made her angry, too. Antoinette could handle an argument, even a brutal one. If she and Jack suddenly found themselves in an argument over their future,

Antoinette would steel herself, and be brutal with the man. Because she knew her relationship with Jack was solid, and would survive it.

And after what happened, Tash didn't know what to think about hers.

---

~~Antoinette~~

One month after the incident.

Natasha and her friends began calling the confrontation between Maria and Avery the 'incident', not long after it occurred. That night, her city changed, and the new point of reference was an adequate one. The Right Hands of the Invictus were busy almost every night now, as Garry Tones took advantage of Maria's helplessness.

Garry took back the Mirrden District, as predicted. No Kindred died, but there was damage. Antoinette knew to mention it at the next Primogen meeting, but she knew neither the Carthians nor the Invictus would back down. Naturally, she would be forced threaten them, to keep their disagreements from damaging her city. It was a dance they had all danced before, the slow increase of hostilities that would eventually lead to deaths.

"No one's died yet," Garry barked, "so don't freak out."

"How dare you." Michael clenched his right fist where it sat on Antoinette's glass table, and he glared daggers into his fellow Gangrel. "Several thralls and ghouls were injured."

Garry shrugged. "We were careful."

"You destroyed several vehicles! The fires drew the eye of the city, the media, the police."

"Yeah well, had to be done. You wouldn't back off. Fire works pretty well." The man grinned, leaned in, and grin evolved into

smirk. “Mirrden’s mine. I got a whole team set up there already. Now, how about you fuck off, Michael?”

Michael snarled. Maria, wearing a rather fluffy white gown that covered her shoulders and growing potential arms nicely, snarled as well. Jacob, opposite of Antoinette, grinned, but said nothing.

“You can’t honestly expect we’ll let you keep it,” Michael said.

“You took it from me. I was just taking it back.”

“Idiot boy. The area did not always belong to you!”

“Not like you had a fair claim on it, asshole.” Garry swept his arm through the air, dismissing Michael’s words.

“You risked the Masquerade,” Maria said. The woman did not need arms to make sweeping gestures, with how expressive her corpse eyes were. “We did no such thing, when we forced you out from the district.”

“Risked, but not violated in any way.” Garry shrugged, leaned back in his chair, and gestured to Antoinette. “Prince? Did I overstep? Is there anyone in the whole damn fucking world that thinks this dispute’s been anything more than a turf war? Hell, most agencies think it’s some third party hired to do some property damage or scare some assholes into paying back their debts.” Information Garry had likely secured through Terra Den’s power.

“Garry Tones is correct,” Antoinette said after a time. “The Masquerade remains intact, and relatively undamaged.”

Without missing a beat, Garry, Maria, and Michael fell back into squabbles. From across the table, Jacob smiled, and more often than not, his eyes fell to Antoinette; the bandage over them did, at least. No need for words, his grin said it all.

Jacob and Garry had worked together before. Garry likely manipulated Avery into attacking Maria, or rather, nudged her in that direction. Jacob likely nudged Garry, without the Gangrel realizing, into nudging Avery. The Nosferatu wanted Avery dead, though he would not risk his neck to do it, or his influence over his pawn Garry, who liked Avery.

And now with Viktor, Tony, and Lucas gone, Garry was free to be aggressive, stirring trouble in a way Jacob desired. But to what end? To kill Avery indirectly, as Antoinette did Tony and Viktor? Or did he simply wish for Garry to remove Maria and Michael from power? Whatever the man's goals, he had succeeded in creating chaos.

Perhaps that was his goal. To create chaos for chaos's sake? No. Jacob, despite his beliefs and attitude, was not some force of chaos incarnate. He had goals.

Sighing, Antoinette raised a hand, and the squabbling slowly ceased.

“The confrontations between the Invictus and the Carthians must not draw the suspicion of the kine. If, at any point, someone violates the Masquerade in relation to these skirmishes the two covenants insist upon, I hereby decree that I will send Daniel to execute said violator. A zero-tolerance policy, in regards to these skirmishes. Do I make myself clear?”

The three elders looked at her, glaring, but silent. They knew it was coming, the bloody fools.

“Harsh,” Jacob said, smiling unwavering.

“Oui, it is. But we have peace in this city, and we will continue to have peace in this city, even if only on the surface. If the Invictus and Carthians wish to poke and prod each other, very well. Dolareido is my concern, not your meaningless disputes. You are guests in my city. Do not forget that.”



Michael glared at her, and for the first time in many years, she found obvious aggression on his face. For the man to conspire against her, that was expected, but to openly show hostility? That was a level of confidence and bravado she had not seen in some time.

“Do you take issue with my command, Mister McDonald?”

“In a manner of speaking, Prince.”

Antoinette met the man’s eyes, and she responded to the growing fire there with cold ice. “Then speak.”

“If you’re so concerned with the Masquerade, why do you let the Carthians openly attack and damage my property?”

She leaned forward in her grand chair, over the glass table of her highest office in her Elysium tower, and offered Michael a single second of visible rage. A fleeting moment, her mask removed, and furor exposed. It was enough to have the man draw his head back a touch, enough for him to realize she was the stronger of the two of them, and that it would do him well to remember that.

“As Garry said, he has only acted in a way that could not possibly lead to investigative reports from curious kine with eyes for the paranormal. Your ridiculous ‘turf war’ is of little concern to me, as long as my city continues to operate, and the Masquerade is upheld.”

“It might seem like just a turf war to you, Prince,” Garry said, “but to some of us, it’s a fight for the god damn land we grew up on. I have vamps who call these places home, who grew up in these places, who know the people and consider it their fucking responsibility to keep those kine safe. These Invictus assholes think it’s just territory, a place to expand so they can fuel their fucking money machine. Yeah, fuck that, and fuck them. Times are different now. I got plenty of new Kindred with their own names, their own

pasts, and they got as much right to be a part of this city as these money-loving sacks of shit.”

Ah, yes, the new Kindred. There was of course, the unfortunate truth that she was a dragon, a member of the Ordo Dracul, a secretive organization that ultimately recruited few members. Numbers were a powerful advantage. In the past, her age and strength would have been enough to handle a hundred young Kindred, but with today’s technology, such feats were risky. While her thralls were well trained in weaponry and modern technology, it was difficult to forever check for possible threats such as hidden explosive devices. And no elder, not even her, could survive being doused in napalm and lit aflame.

She had to be careful. To rule over her city with an iron fist was simply not an option anymore. The only thing that kept the Invictus, or the Carthians for that matter, from launching a full scale assault on her for control of Dolareido, was the nature of Kindred. Vampires were not werewolves, and did not cooperate instinctively. They fought for themselves, no matter how altruistic they perceived themselves to be.

Garry could not ask his Carthians to jump into a meat grinder for him, nor could Michael and his Invictus. As long as Antoinette remained a just and appreciable ruler, most Kindred would respect her position.

The issue, however, was that no matter how hard she tried, forever events continued to spiral out of her control. True conflict was inevitable between the Invictus and Carthians, they all realized it, and this whole meeting was nothing but pointless pretense.

She sat back, and shook her head. “You have been warned. Overstep, and I will interfere. Am I understood?”

Garry and Michael nodded, though they looked at each other like dogs, ready to strike.

“And Maria, we spoke of this before, but it bears repeating here for the others. I do not condone what Avery has done. Whatever misguidedness led to her blatant attack, rest assured she is being dealt with.”

“You worry about the wolves,” Micheal asked, “but not the Carthians?”

“Dolareido is a Kindred city. The Uratha do not have permission to affect the lives of Kindred.”

The man snarled. “Simon—”

“Was removed from the city the moment he overstepped himself. Avery is more reasonable than Simon, to some extent at least, and I would be a fool to ignore her value. She did catch and eliminate the threat of those azlu spider monsters in my city’s underbelly, after all.” She looked to Jacob for his expected retort, but he said nothing. The ever present smile faded, but his gaze remained on Antoinette, bandage-covered eyes aimed at her. “But she will be dealt with. She owes the Ordo as well, for assaulting Natasha. There shall be ... compensation.”

After some time to ponder, Maria sighed and nodded. “Very well, they do have their uses. I will leave it in your hands, Prince. But the next time Avery intrudes upon my estate without permission, I will kill her.”

Antoinette smiled, and nodded. How nice of Maria to dispense with bravado, and state her intent plainly.

“Dismissed,” Antoinette said. As everyone stood, she raised a hand. “Jacob, I would like to speak to you of private matters.” Once the others left, Jacob offered one of his usual, quiet chuckles, and sat down in a chair much closer to her. “Daniel, would you be so kind?”

Her sheriff nodded, and left, leaving Antoinette with her old friend Jacob the warlock, and forever thorn in her side.

“What’s this about, oh Prince of mine?”

“Samantha.”

He laughed. “Straight to the point? Not very dragon-y of you.”

“Yes, well, this is not a matter of the Ordo Dracul, or my role as Prince. This is about my role as sire, and my childe, who has spent an increasingly large amount of time in that den of yours.”

Laughing harder, Jacob leaned in and grinned at her. Not a sinister grin; she had seen many of those. No, this grin was playful, and dare she think it, cheerful.

“Worried I’m mistreating her?”

“Non. She is quite ... enamored with you. Though she is wise enough to temper her expectations, she nevertheless finds herself excited to visit you, and your witches.” While she subtly encouraged her childe to pursue relations with Jacob, she had long made sure Samantha knew to be careful with her heart and the Nosferatu before her.

His grin grew into an almost wondrous smile, and he leaned back in his chair as he looked up. “I wonder if it’s in their blood.”

“You mean her and Jack?”

“Yeap. Something about her just...” He shrugged and shook his head. “It’s personal stuff, but you probably know what I’m thinking. You’re dating her son.”

She returned his smile. She knew of what he meant, of the boy’s inexplicable ability to make her forget she was ancient, and instead,

bring out the playful, younger side of her she had long suppressed.

“I wanted to ask about your...” She frowned as she looked down, and tapped a finger against her chin. “I do not presume to know your intentions, or wish to impose upon your designs, old friend. But I cannot help but worry about her. Her son has become the focus of many events and dilemmas, and her daughter’s ghost haunts her home, and potentially Samantha herself as well. The mother of her daughter’s killer is close friends with my sheriff, and —”

Jacob held up his hands. “Yeah, I get it. Shit’s pretty crazy, and she’s gone through hell. I should be careful, use kid gloves.” His grin softened, and he relaxed into the chair. “You’ve done a good job, helping her get over that shit.”

“Have I? She spends much of her time with you these nights, not I.”

“Ha. Yeah, but she’s been ... been helping me, as much as the other way around.” And as quickly as it had softened, his grin spread wide once again. “And I didn’t have to push her very hard, to get her to open up, with the whole Circle.”

“Oh Jacob you fiend, you did not.”

“Ha! I did. Fucked her in front of everyone. She loved it. Embarrassed as all hell, but she loved it.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, leaned back, and laughed, mirroring the Nosferatu. A topic unbelievably crass, when it came from Jacob, but in Antoinette’s ideal world, such sexual joys would be commonplace.

“It has taken Jack years to be comfortable with only a fraction of such exhibitionism.”

“Yeah well, he’s younger, and he’s a guy. Lot more girls in the porn industry than dudes.”

“And yet, Othello—”

“Othello is porn incarnate. The porn gods came to Earth, found a new baby, and imbued him with all the porn powers, creating the ultimate avatar of porn. He’s the exception that proves the rule.” He tapped his chin, mocking Antoinette and mirroring her in return. “Your childe has a huge crush on him.”

“Does she? The man is a mountain of meat, and last I heard, refuses to have any form of sex other than anal.”

“Yeap. But Samantha seems to embrace kinks of all types. One little push and I could have her—”

“Please do not trade my childe around like a sex toy, Jacob.”

“Nah, nothing like that. I’ll be there. But, I’d be lying if I said she wouldn’t like being passed around like a toy.”

Again, Antoinette rolled her eyes. Not because Jacob was incorrect; he was not. But, his word choice was so boorish, it did not do justice the sexual delights and pleasures he was describing. Antoinette desired a world where such pleasures were accepted without taboo. Jacob, on the other hand, used the very fact such acts were taboo to increase the bliss they provided; likely to great effect, with a woman like Samantha.

“To imagine sweet Samantha engaging in such salaciousness. Please be a little more artful with my childe, Jacob? She is in a delicate stage in her second life.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “I like her, Ann. I’m not just fucking her for kicks. And the Circle likes her.”

“The Circle. That reminds me. I wished to ask of Beatrice. I...”  
How to phrase the question, without inviting Jacob’s elderly instincts? “I worry about her, Jacob, and the path she may be going down.”

“Well, don’t. At least, don’t worry enough to stick your nose in. Let Triss do the shit she needs to do, to learn hard lessons the hard way.”

“Jacob, come now. I let you keep the Elen woman because—”

“Ann, you’re not letting me keep her. I’m holding her. You really want to push me on this?” Her old friend smiled, but the playfulness was gone, replaced with challenge. “You can play your games with the others, but you and I both know this city is ours, not just yours. Run your experiments, I’ll run mine.”

Frowning at the man, she slowly reached out, and touched his closer hand. “Jacob. I am not your enemy.”

Jacob pulled away, stood up, and donned his usual smile. Jack called it the Joker smile. Antoinette knew it as the man’s favorite mask.

“Stay out of my way, leave me to mine, and we won’t have any problems, Prince.”

She almost said something, almost pointed out how Jacob’s interference caused many of her current troubles. But he would doubtless retort with how he helped her plant the evidence that led Viktor and Tony on their goose chase; merely the latest in the ways her old friend had helped her.

“But,” he continued, “I won’t let Samantha get involved in any of that shit. You got my word on that.”

Antoinette sighed relief. “Thank you.”

Jacob's manic smile softened as he nodded to her. And before Antoinette could catch a glimpse of the man's true self emerging, he pulled up the hood of his robe, and left.

Antoinette sat in her office, alone, and leaned back in her chair as she combed her hair over her shoulder. She trusted Jacob with Samantha. She mostly trusted Jacob with Dolareido. She did not trust Jacob with Black Blood, and the dark rituals they might pursue. Would the man let Beatrice walk a deadly road, only to learn a painful lesson? Surely he cared for his student more than that. Witches taught with brutal methods, but there was a limit.

The dead were gone, and if Beatrice came face to face with that reality in the most gruesome method the universe could possibly provide, it might break her.

Antoinette groaned, a classic sign that it was time to set aside her troubles, and rest. And she knew how she wanted to relax with the remaining hours of the night.

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She shivered, and let out a quiet, soft moan, as her love sucked her nipple into his mouth, and bathed it in warm kisses.

Sat upon a large white couch, deep underneath her Elysium tower, she leaned forward a touch to help Jack have easier access to her body. She wore a simple black robe, and she had opened the chest to reveal her breasts. Jack lay upon the couch beside her right, his head and shoulders on her lap and folded legs, and the boy gently devoured her breast over her higher thigh. The boy was still in his suit shirt and pants, jacket over the back of the couch, and she had already opened his pants' fly to slip his hard length out from the hole of his boxers.

She set her left hand upon her lover's head, and lightly stroked his buzzed hair, while her right hand lightly stroked his girth. A



gentle touch, far too teasing and soft to lead him to orgasm. Tonight was about relaxing, and relax they would.

“You and Elaine have been ... different, my love.”

He raised a brow as he opened his eyes and peeked up at her from underneath her breast. Laughing, she leaned back, lifting most of the heavy weight from his face.

“Different?”

“Indeed, different. You used to be nervous around her, and she treated you with a degree of ... dominance, dare I say it. But, not long after Avery’s attack, that changed.”

Jack sighed and nodded. “We had a talk. Talked about some ... personal stuff, really, about the curse.”

“Ah.”

“I’m surprised you picked up on it, to like ... the exact day.”

Chuckling, she squeezed the base of his length, and gently worked her hand up and down a single inch in a firm massage. The boy groaned, and she chuckled as she used her left hand to lift her left breast, and set it upon the boy’s face again. He opened his mouth, and again took her swollen areola between his lips. Sparks danced through her, spreading from her breast into her chest, and outward, gentle sparks she knew to trust and let build.

“If it is personal, I will respect that. Though I do hope you will share with me some degree of detail in the future?”

The boy nodded underneath her. She nodded in return, and again stroked his hair, lulling her lover until his eyes drifted closed again. She trusted him, and despite the dangerous games she knew Elaine played, she trusted her as well.

A quiver ran through her body, and again she moaned, a precise little sound, meant entirely to stir pleasure from the man feasting on her. And naturally, it succeeded, and Jack groaned into her breast hard enough she felt the vibration. A drop of his precum rose to the tip of his glans, and while most of her hand remained wrapped around his length, she used her index finger to gently spread the warm fluid around and around the swollen head of his shaft.

“Veronica. Has she served you well?” she asked. He nodded. “And, has she tried to seduce you, without me present?” He chuckled into her bosom and shook his head. “Ah. I am convinced she would like to. Perhaps I scared her into submission?” He nodded, and it was Antoinette’s turn to chuckle. “Good. Also, I have learned of another woman I think would make a wonderful thrall, for a Kindred like yourself.”

Jack opened his eyes, and stopped suckling, pulling his head back. “You don’t have to—”

“Nonsense.” Her left hand pressed against the boy’s head, and nudged him back into her breast, covering his mouth so he could not speak. “You have done very well with Veronica. I believe you have exposed her to too many elements of the Masquerade too quickly, but I am impressed nonetheless. She manages her new role well.” She leaned forward a little, squashing her breast into her love’s face so only his eyes were visible under her supple skin. “And it arouses me to no end, when you fuck her until she is nothing more than a quivering little creature, cumming over, and over, on your length.”

Jack groaned into her breast again, and she smiled all the more for him. Her hand slid off his girth, and danced up his stomach and chest, deftly undoing buttons. With a wicked grin, she spread his shirt, exposing his delicious, tight little body of muscle, and slid her fingers down his abs before again gripping his cock.

“It has gone so well that I would suggest you acquire, perhaps, three new thralls?” she said. His eyes opened wide again, but she stopped him from moving, hand on his head keeping him firmly trapped underneath her breast. “An expedited schedule, oui. But warranted and earned. Your territory must be kept at high presentation, and your daily sleep well protected.” She worked his length in more earnest, occasionally switching to a harder, massaging grip at the base, before raising it to work the whole length with a softer grip. “And I want to see more women succumb to your Kiss, and climax upon you.”

Butterflies swirled in her chest as the boy groaned around her nipple again, and his cock flexed in her hand. A gush of his cum squirted high and landed against his abs, and she made sure to aim the following squirts to land in the same place. She caught some of the hot, thick liquid against her fingers, and spread it around his girth, allowing her hand to more freely slide over his skin so she could milk him, and earn another, and another splash of white cum over his hard stomach.

She leaned back against the couch, exposing more of Jack’s face, but her breast was heavy and large enough he had no trouble keeping her nipple in his mouth. And as the tingling began to grow in her chest, sparking down toward her pelvis, she let go of his cock, cupped her other breast with her cum-soaked hand, and raised it to her mouth. She met his eyes and watched him, as she lifted her right breast to her lips, and suckled on her engorged, aching nipple.

She watched him watch her, as the two of them built the pleasure in her chest, until the pleasure sparks grew hard enough to make her muscles clench. The electric pleasure flowed outward from her sensitive areola into her chest and core, and down into her pelvis and legs, causing her muscles to lightly spasm in gentle orgasm. He recognized the signs, and they both eased the force of their suckling, settling instead into a tender rhythm of kisses and caressing licks, that teased the final sparks of bliss from her.

She let go of her breast, released a pleased sigh, and slid her fingers down through the cum that pooled in the indentations of his abs. Again, she took his cock into her hand, and now with wet fingers, gingerly stroked the whole of his length, while her other hand caressed his buzzed hair in the way she knew would lull him into heavenly relaxation.

“Natasha,” she said, turning her head to look to the entrance of the breakroom. “You wish to speak to me?”

“S-Sorry! Sorry.” The spying little creature squeaked, and stepped out from behind the archway. Jack turned his head enough to look at her, but Antoinette turned it back, burying most of his face under her breast again.

“Come now, Vola. You have both seen each other in the throes of passion. You have no reason to be shy with each other. Now, what did you wish to speak of?”

Gulping, the little Mekhet came over, and stood in front of the couch facing toward Antoinette, perhaps ten feet away. She did not sit down, choosing instead to squirm and wriggle on her feet.

“P-Prince. I wanted to ask about your ... your um...” The tiny woman’s eyes ran down Antoinette’s body, her exposed breasts, and to Jack’s face, or what little she could see of it.

As usual, Jack’s face was mostly hidden when he lay in this position. The weight of her breast and supple skin on his visage both soothed him and aroused him, she knew, so she ensured it buried his lips, his nose, one eye, and all of his chin. And from underneath the heavy softness, her little Ventrue set a kiss upon her, despite Natasha being so close. Finally, the man was beginning to accept her way of thinking.

Perhaps obtaining his first thrall was the first step to the man’s sexual awakening? The young vampire likely already thought

himself awakened, considering the pleasures Antoinette bathed him with. How adorable. He would understand eventually, when a dozen thralls and ghouls, all at his command, washed him with their naked bodies.

“Yes, Natasha?”

“I w-wanted to ask about, if someone was going t-to talk to Avery, about ... relations.”

Antoinette sighed, gentle and sad. It was a delicate situation, and she had to handle it gracefully.

“Jack, my love, this is your area of influence.” Or delegate it, like a true manager.

Sighing, Jack turned his head enough so his features were no longer covered by her breast. But she did not pull back either, content to let its weight sit on the side of his head and face. The situation was oddly amusing, and she found herself enjoying teasing the two of them.

“I sent Avery a text not long after the incident. Told her I’d pay a visit once everyone was feeling healed up.”

Natasha looked down, frowning. “I know. I was wondering if ... I could come?”

Antoinette could not see Jack’s face very well, except for the tip of his nose, but she knew he would be smiling.

“Yeah, sure, I—” The boy’s voice cut short, and a shudder worked through him, as Antoinette resumed stroking his length with her right hand. Wet as it was, she settled her grip along its center, high enough so her index finger could massage the base of his glans. “Uh, yeah, sure. But neither of us are on good terms with them. You really want to go?”

“I do. I want ... t-to see how bad those terms are.”

Antoinette watched Vola as the tiny Mekhet struggled with her internal torment. Now that her relationship with Arturo and Matthew was damaged, she did not know what to do about it. Antoinette had given her advice, but ultimately Natasha already knew what to do, intellectually. Emotionally was another matter, and only time would give her perspective.

“Then yeah, sure, come along, but it won’t be for a few weeks.”

She sighed and nodded. “I can w-wait. It’ll be good ... to...” Her eyes roamed back down Jack’s body, to his cum-soaked abs, and to his shaft as Antoinette stroked it faster. The Prince knew how to make her love cum in minutes, and now, with his friend watching, it was a prime moment. A tight, massaging grip that worked most of the length, while using the top of the hand to work his own cum into his skin and glans, had the boy quivering in moments.

Antoinette released a pleased sigh, and Natasha stared, wide eyed, as Jack turned his face back into the Prince’s breast, and came yet again. Thick waves of white fluid gushed onto his hard stomach, and both women watched with delight at how his abs, flexing in spurts as the boy quivered with orgasm, were soon covered in a second layer of cum. Enough fluid that it pooled into the indentations of his muscles, and rose and fell with each flex and fake breath.

“I must apologize,” Antoinette said to Natasha. “Poor Jack is forever forced to entertain my ... kinks.” With an evil smile, Antoinette slowly milked more cum out of the shuddering man in her lap, and Jack exploited his Blush of Life to prolong his pleasure. Only once his abs were drenched in white did his climax relent, and Antoinette softened her grip.

“It’s ok, r-r-really. I mean, after ... all the making and trading tapes and stuff. It’s ... nice.” She smiled, shivered a little, and fingerwaved at Jack. “A few weeks then. B-Bye.”

Antoinette nodded to her student, Natasha returned it, and Jack managed a weak wave with his dangling left arm. Natasha laughed softly, and took a few extra seconds to admire Jack, and Antoinette as well, before finally turning.

As Natasha stepped away, Jack resumed his suckling, harder, and Antoinette closed her eyes as she melted into the touch. With her free right hand, she cupped and caressed her free breast while her lover insisted on devouring her left breast with increasing vigor. Her swollen nipple, bathed by the boy's loving tongue, sent sparks through her chest again, and she shivered as she let them build. Let soon evolved into encouraged, and she melted into the boy's kisses all the more.

Natasha, now completely hidden behind the archway leading out of the room once more, poked her head in yet again, enough to get a peek. Antoinette smiled at her, winked, and lifted her right breast up to her lips again. With Jack massaging and licking her other swollen areola, Antoinette had but to set a couple kisses on her other breast, for the orgasm to spark. The small jolts of bliss spread out from her nipples into her chest, and she melted back into the couch as she indulged the pleasant sensation.

To climax from her nipples lacked the sharp power of her clitoris, or the rolling depth and waves of having her insides pleased, but it was pleasing nonetheless, tiny, electric shivers that spread out from her chest into her limbs. Jack knew to ease his kisses, her nipples growing painfully sensitive as the pleasure spread, and she purred bliss as the boy set only soft kisses on her breast underneath her nipple instead.

Antoinette smiled down at her lover as she leaned back, and set her right hand on his naked stomach. He continued to nuzzle his face into her breast, but instead of suckling and licking her nipple, he set the gentlest kisses on her pale skin, and smiled into the softness. With a small turn of his head, he managed to smile up at

her from underneath her breast with his eyes, and she returned it as she caressed his scalp.

“Relaxed?” he asked.

“Mmm oui, quite. And you, my love?”

He laughed, and nuzzled his nose into her breast. “Yeap. Just want to stay here forever.”

With his eyes blocked again, Antoinette risked a peek to Natasha, and offered her a knowing smile. The look on her face said it all. That Antoinette could orgasm from simply having her nipples kissed and caressed surprised her, but also, that their way of relaxing struck ache into her. She missed her boyfriends.

Antoinette offered her student a small nod, and slid her right hand up to Jack’s chest, where she began to tease the indentations of his pectorals, as her left hand continued to stroke his buzzed hair.

“Jack my dear, have you spoke with Matthew or Arturo?”

“Nope. I’ve been avoiding the Uratha as a whole, really.”

“I think, perhaps, you should speak with them, before you speak with the rest of the pack.”

“This about Tash?” He sat up, considered thoughtfully, laid upon her lap once again, and re-hid his face under her breast. A far better place to be. “It’ll be an awkward conversation.” His voice, muffled by her body, earned a chuckle from her.

“Undoubtedly. But, I believe you have the delightful ability to disarm people, my little Ventrue, and help them see situations in a new light. Matthew and Arturo are trapped under the rule of their leader, but, perhaps you can help them ... bypass such a limitation?”



“Uh, you’re asking a lot.”

“Am I?” She gave his chest a gentle, playful slap. “You know I would violate my role in the Ordo, if it meant saving our relationship. I know you would do the same against the Invictus.”

“But you wouldn’t sacrifice the city to save it, would you? Throw away millions of lives for us? And hundreds of paranormals?”

Ah, a painful truth. “I would be tempted, by love. But no, I would not.”

“I think this is more about Matt and Art trusting Avery so much, they figured she had to be right about saving lives, that there was no way she could be wrong.”

Sighing, Antoinette nodded. “Oui. But then, they let the situation escalate until they had no choice but to detain Natasha, my love. They handled the situation poorly.”

“Yeah, they did.”

“And,” she said with a deep, huskier voice, and she leaned forward, purposefully squashing Jack’s face under her bust, “we would never betray each other’s trust. If my city were in such terrible danger, we would be discussing it, at length, long before such measures were necessary.”

He grinned from under her bosom; she could feel the muscles flex. “I know, but that’s also cause we trust each other enough to get into arguments about stuff. Rock solid relationship, right? We love each other.” All muffled, of course. “They—”

“They love Natasha, I am sure of it. But even though their goals are not so dissimilar, they went against Vola in favor of Avery, because they are wolves, and follow their leader. You, my love, could help show them the folly of their ways, the folly of such blind trust.”

“Sure, I can try. But, don’t you still have a punishment to hit those two with?”

“Oh yes, and one will be given. And I believe my student has one in mind.”

## Chapter 137

~~Author's Note~~

Sex scenes will now be wrapped in ~♥♥♥~ and ~/♥♥♥~. This way readers can easily skim them if they're not in the mood. Let me know what you think.

~~Beatrice~~

One month after the incident.

“She still hasn't retrieved the book,” Jennifer said.

“Yeah, well, she might, might not. Doesn't mean I'm gonna stop.”

Sighing, Jennifer nodded, and stepped up to her side. The two of them stood in the cave on the outskirts of Dolareido, where Elen dangled over Jacob's ritual bowl, helpless. It was almost frustrating how the old woman didn't seem to mind or care, frustrating and scary. Vampire immortality could be a pain in the ass, what with the Beast being a constant concern, the crazy torpor dreams, the ever growing blood lust, being made of tinder, and the worst, never being able to experience the sun again. Triss would happily accept all that, and even her shitty Nos deformities, if it meant she didn't have to experience whatever Elen's cursed immortality was.

If being a vampire was considered a curse, the fuck had happened to this witch? Christ, shit was fucking terrifying. Beatrice fiddled with dark magics and shit regularly now. How long before she stumbled onto a ritual that fucked her over like Elen? Maybe like, a vampire that was immune to fire and sunlight, but couldn't feed anymore? She'd just get hungrier and hungrier, until all that remained was the Beast, raging inside her, demanding blood that it just couldn't get. And Triss would be trapped in that hell, never able

to quench her thirst, and never able to take control of her body from the Beast to at least kill herself.

Yeap, she had to be careful. Jacob told her a few horror stories already about some witches that attempted to make themselves stronger with some nasty dark deals. Crúac wasn't like a vampire Disciplines, which called on the vampire's vitae. Crúac was using vitae to reach out and touch something, something out there in the endlessness that surrounded them, and then that something responded to the intentions and desires of the witch that started the ritual. A third party. She had to respect that third party, whatever it was, because it didn't always play nice.

Triss gave the old woman a small push on the leg, and she swung gently, not saying a word.

“If there's anyone this could work for,” Jen said, “it's Samantha. Her daughter...”

Nodding, Triss stepped deeper into the cave, and squatted in front of one of their failures. “Assuming it's her daughter. Could be a shadow of her.”

“I suppose.”

“It's not as if I know how ghosts work. But, even if it's a shadow of her, if we put her in a working body, does it matter?”

A glance back showed Jen shaking her head.

“I can't imagine it'd go very well. Have you not read Pet Sematary?”

Triss shivered, and covered the failure with a blanket. She had read Pet Sematary. Not a night went by she didn't think about Julias coming back wrong, and cutting off her head or something.

“I’m not some grief-stricken dad, Jen. I’m a witch. You’re a witch. Jacob’s a witch. Hell, she’s a witch.” She gestured to the old woman dangling. “We’re not doing this blind.”

“No, but we are trusting this woman to do what we want.”

“Trusting? Black Blood’s been forcing her.” Sighing, Triss squatted down by another failure, the most recent one. A step in the right direction, but if the public saw it, they’d be outside with pitchforks, calling her Doctor Frankenstein.

“And you trust Black Blood?”

Triss laughed. No way she couldn’t with a question like that. “You know I don’t. But I trust Jacob.”

Jen raised a brow. “No you don’t.”

“No, I don’t, not completely, but I trust him enough. Hell, even if he’s fucking with me, he’s not gonna work against me, Jen. This could help him, too.”

“Minerva’s been dead for decades, Triss. He’s moved on. He’s got a girlfriend.”

Triss pulled the blanket over the latest failure, and rejoined her friend near Elen. Elen’s crazy magic prevented the corpses from rotting somehow, so they didn’t have to worry about flies or the smell. Even better, they got to reuse the parts, which was pretty much the nastiest thing Triss figured she’d ever do, ever, in her second life. But she did it.

“Yeah, I know. And that girlfriend of his really wants her daughter back.”

“So Jacob will help us, to help Samantha.” Jen sighed and nodded. “It would be nice. Every time I look at her, she seems happy, but

you can see the horrible sadness underneath it.”

Silence hit them, and they let it sit for a bit. No need to say it. Triss and Sam had that sadness in common.

But fuck that depression shit. She was getting closer. Every night, she and Black Blood and the brain dead bitch got closer.

“You’re right,” Triss said, “but she’s been recovering, too. And hell, you saw her last night.”

Jen and Triss both sighed dreamily. Yeah, Jacob had fucked Samantha in the middle of the cave where everyone could see. Othello had been in the entrance of his alcove, fucking Madison’s ass like usual, and Samantha had apparently spent a couple seconds too long gawking. So Jacob grabbed her, stripped her, handcuffed her hands behind her, and fucked her standing. Which of course led to fucking her on her knees, when she couldn’t stand anymore. It was so good, even Aaron stopped reading to take a peek.

Jennifer laughed, and cradled her cheek with a palm. “Her crush on Othello only grows.”

“Don’t think I don’t know you had something to do with that.”

Jen daintily pressed one of her hands against her chest, and she gasped. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Ha! She told me you told her stories about the things you and Othello used to do, sharing ghouls and stuff.”

Her friend chuckled and shrugged. “I was merely explaining to her that, despite his obvious anal fetish, Othello is a talented lover who pleases his ghouls immensely, especially Madison.”

Triss snorted on a laugh. Far as she knew, Jen had never slept with Othello, but they’d done basically everything else with a ghoul

or three between them, back in the day before Jen and Triss were a thing.

“If Jacob were any other dude, you know he’d be super jealous of Othello, with the way Samantha looks at him.”

“But not Jacob. The man is...”

Triss grinned and dragged a claw along some of her teeth. “So confident and secure in himself, it’s fucking hot.”

Yeap, Jacob was hot. Triss had never thought of him like that before, but after seeing him with Samantha, she couldn’t not think of him like that. The fledgling Daeva had completely changed Triss’s mind about the man’s appeal. The salt and pepper hair, the ripped, lean body, the sheer ridiculous confidence, it was too damn good.

She’d never fuck him. No way she could picture herself doing that, not after everything they’d been through, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t appreciate his hotness, and enjoy it by proxy with Samantha.

Jen laughed. “I was going to say talented and open-minded. Samantha is certainly satisfied, sexually speaking, and considering how relaxed and playful Jacob is—”

“Sexually speaking.”

Jen’s grin only grew. “Sexually speaking, I imagine Samantha will be seeing more of Othello, from much closer.”

Yeap, that was definitely a possibility. Othello had been in the circle for forever, and him and Jacob had an easygoing friendship. If Samantha had a problem with Othello, Jacob wouldn’t push her, but it was obvious the girl had a thing for the big guy. And for Madison. And for Triss and Jen, for that matter.

“Alright, pinky swear time,” Triss said, and she held out a hand to Jen.

“Over?”

“Over Samantha. If, for whatever reason, we find ourselves naked and with Samantha on us, or you know, vice versa, I pinky swear to ... to um ... Fuck, I don’t know. You set the limits.”

“Oh, I understand.” Jen stepped in closer, and put her hands on Triss’s hips. So much for pinky swearing. “She’ll never be what you are to me, Triss, but if you’re comfortable with it, I wouldn’t mind getting to touch the Daeva a bit.”

“Touching. Ok, sure, touching is acceptable. But no kissing.”

“Assuredly not! Jacob won’t let Othello kiss her, or us, and I would never. Kissing is...” She leaned in, and kissed Triss, nice and slow. Which was pretty strange, considering they were in a cave with corpses and an old witch for a prisoner, but they’d been at this for months now. “Kissing is intimate.”

“Very intimate,” Triss said, nodding, and returned the kiss. “Well, kissing on the mouth. Kissing other body parts should be fine, right?”

“Right, of course.”

They laughed. This was silly, and dumb, and kind of exciting. Samantha’s attitude was just so damn contagious. She really got into things, and rode whatever wavelength the room had going. Definitely not Jack, and yet, had a bit of Jack in her, something that got everyone relaxed, disarmed, and feeling more open and stuff.

No wonder Jacob was into her. Elders were ancient, and all Kindred pretty much universally agreed elders were kinda fucked in the head, too. Being super old could do that, but it was also cause



elders took long torpors when their blood lust got out of control. Decades of sleeping, crazy torpor dreams, yeah, that shit did strange things to their minds. So if the crazy elders found some Kindred that managed to spark something in them, made them feel happy, those Kindred were special. Jack was special, and apparently so was his mom.

She was also gorgeous, and very fuckable. The lean but soft body, the handful breasts, the cougar hips and ass, the wavy brown hair to her ears and shoulders, the green eyes. No wonder Jacob couldn't keep his hands off her. The squeals and mewls, the 'oh please don't oh pretty please' doe eyes she gave, despite obviously boiling with horniness, it'd drive any Kindred to the brink.

Jen was obviously thinking the same thoughts, and they grinned at each other before kissing again.

And then reality came snapping back, and Triss stepped away as she looked around. Room full of corpses. Right, not the time to be thinking about sex.

“We—”

Feet on stone shut her up, and both vampires turned to the entrance of the cave as people approached. People? Jacob coming made sense, if he was gonna pay a visit, but Othello and Aaron didn't visit; preferred to leave her to it and not interfere. Then who the fuck?

A pale man stuck his head in first.

“Aaron?” she said. “Um, the fuck?”

Aaron stepped into the cave, wearing a small frown. The Gangrel sighed, shaking his head, and gestured to the man walking in behind him. Triss figured it'd be Othello, but her Beast said otherwise. Othello was a hundred-year-old Daeva, and her Beast would

instantly recognize the older vampire's aura. This aura wasn't his, but whoever the fuck it was, it was big.

"Sándor!" Jennifer said, and she let out a little purr as she dragged a single finger along her collar. "What a wonderful surprise."

The man met Jen's gaze, cold and neutral, and he stepped deeper into the cave.

"Sorry Triss," Aaron said. "Sándor here ran into me, and insisted."

"Insisted?" Triss asked. "You mean forced you to show him the location of this cave?"

Her friend sighed and nodded. "Yes."

"That seems hardly necessary," Jen said, getting a little closer to the Begotten. "You could have just asked."

Sándor shook his head. "If I'd done that, you would have brought me elsewhere. Or covered up this." He waved a hand to Elen, still dangling from the hook Jacob had hooked her onto all those months ago, and to the several corpses in the back of the cave covered by blankets.

Beatrice blinked at him, then at Jen, then back at him. "Aaron, you can go."

"You sure? If you need—"

"We'll be fine."

Aaron glanced between her and Jen a few times, double checking, but after Sándor stepped aside, the Gangrel nodded, and left. Which left the two vampires alone with the crazy strong Begotten, in a room that might as well have been a set for a horror movie.

“Kinda getting some judgmental vibes, Sándor,” Triss said. “Gonna be honest with you up front, so maybe we can skip some bullshit. I don’t really care what you have to say about any of this.”

As usual, the man’s face showed nothing. The stoic thing could be really sexy sometimes, especially on a dude like Sándor who’d obviously earned it, but right now, it was very much not. Right now it made her want to punch him.

Sándor stepped forward, and walked around Elen, slow steps with hands on his jean pockets. “She’s catatonic?”

“She gets like that sometimes,” Triss said, shrugging. “I got ways of making her talk.” Or rather, Black Blood did, but not like she was gonna tell him that.

The man stopped by the corpses, and like he’d been practicing his poker face his whole life, his expression stayed neutral. He knew they were bodies, cause Triss didn’t bother trying to hide their shapes, just cover them up so they didn’t creep her out so much. No one liked seeing half-mangled faces crossed with the faces of other people.

“This woman ... has caused me a lot of pain.” He looked at the dangling flesh witch, and a crack of a frown broke his stone face.

“Yeah, and I get that you—”

He shook his head. “She was a tool. The wielder is dead. Still, looking at her, I...” Sighing, he grabbed one of his shoulders and rotated it a few times. Nervous twitch? “The curse she used on me was powerful, and intricate. I’m worried about someone else using her to do it again, or similar binding rituals on other paranormals.”

“Well, don’t worry, I’m not using her to cast any curses.”

“And Jacob?”

“Jacob’s dumped her on my lap. He’s...” Groaning, she stepped up to Sándor and gave him a gentle shove on the chest, enough to force him to take a step back from the prisoner. “He’s not involved. This is all on me.”

He raised a brow, and looked past her at Jen.

The Ventrue smiled and shrugged. “I’m moral support.”

Triss smiled at her. Yeah, moral support. Sounded dumb, until anyone thought about it for more than two seconds. Damn right she needed some fucking moral support.

Sándor didn’t laugh, or smirk, not even a chuckle; he understood. He nodded, and looked back at the old woman.

“I’m not sure how useful she’ll be to you without her tools.”

“Well, Prince has all the tools, so we’re making do.” For now.

He looked at the bodies, again without a frown or anything. “Any progress?”

She tilted her head as she eyed him. The ole stink eye, to see if he’d react. But Sándor’s poker face was perfect, and he looked between her and the corpses as he waited for her answer.

“A little. That’s why we’re reusing some bodies. We only kill kine who deserve it, but even with how big Dolareido is, it’s not like we can just burn through hundreds of assholes.”

“A struggle all Begotten understand. The more we hunt, the more nightmares we spread, the greater chance a ... hero, like Jeremiah, finds us.” He stared up at the dangling old woman for a while, before another frown managed to pierce his poker face. “I could help.”

Ok, talk about a one-eighty.

“Uh, you didn’t sound like you wanted to help a second ago.”

“You’re committed. I’ll tell you about Elen, what I’ve seen her do, and what she did to me. If you want.”

She eyed him some more, squinting one eye and scanning. Lying? Not lying? He had a great poker face, or maybe that was just his resting gargoyle face. Either way, unless Samantha pulled through and got her hands on that book, Triss was forced to crawl, when a little more info, a little help, could turn that into a walk or run.

“That sounds like a painful discussion,” Jennifer said. “Are you sure?”

“I am, and it will be painful. But, there is an ancient tradition men and women use to defeat painful memories,” he said. The two vampires looked at each other, eyebrow raised, before blinking at him. And, holy shit, the man managed a small smile. “Alcohol.”

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Jennifer suggested Bloodlust. Beatrice suggested her old catacombs. Sándor went with the catacombs.

“South Hill Cemetery,” Triss said, and she sighed a classic, nostalgic sorta sigh as she gestured around. “For two fucking decades, I used this catacomb as my hangout spot. Nearby kine thought it was haunted.”

“Twenty years,” he said, vodka in one hand, candle in the other. “Long time.”

“If I’d known,” Jen said, “that she just needed someone to come along and be nice to her, I would have have.”

“Yeah well, I was a bitch, and didn’t want anyone’s help.” She took them down a level where it was dark, and she sat down in her usual

corner. Fuck, been months since she'd sat in this corner, back when she learned Julias died. "Don't ... don't suppose there's anyway I can get drunk?"

"If only." Jennifer sighed, and sat down next to her, close enough to touch knees. With the two of them in jeans and t-shirts, it wasn't a problem to sit in dirt and dust, and they got cozy with their backs against the shelves of coffins. A few skulls sat around, exposed and sitting pretty on the shelves next to the big corpse boxes, and Sándor blinked at them several times.

"Why are there exposed bones?"

"The elders of Dolareido," Jennifer said, "have classic tastes, if perhaps a little colored by fantasy. This"—she gestured around them—"is what happens when vampires many centuries old remember the past with fondness."

"I like it," Triss said. "They think it's like, Gothic or whatever, but to me it's metal as fuck."

Sándor nodded, and sat down across from them. Much as catacombs looked huge in movies, they were actually pretty damn small usually. Dug caves that didn't go very deep didn't have the luxury of being huge. So him sitting across from them nearly put him in touching distance, and he crossed his legs at the ankle, same as Triss, as he set the bottle down on the cold stone in front of him.

"I have seen catacombs like this, centuries ago." Nodding, he popped open the bottle, and took a sip. Not like he could share or anything, so no glasses. To his credit, the man gulped down a mouthful, and didn't so much as twitch. It'd been a long fucking time since Triss had had a drink, but fuck, you didn't go around swigging vodka like it was beer.

"You remember those years?" Jennifer asked. "Vampires have to sleep, after the blood lust gets too strong. Years, usually a decade or

two or three, until the blood lust settles. And in torpor, the dreams —”

Sándor lifted a hand, gently interrupting as he nodded. “I once served as a vampire’s guard while she slept. Thirty years. I know how much torpor can change you, and ... blur the memories.”

“Thirty years of guarding someone?” Triss said. “Holy fuck. How much did they pay you?”

After a small smile she almost didn’t catch, the man took another swig. If it burned, he didn’t show it. “I owed them my life. Thirty years of living, sleeping, and working in their home, above where they slept, seemed like a good trade. And I’m good at sitting around.”

“But ... if you know what torpor can do to vampires, I’m guessing this story doesn’t end well?”

He shook his head, and took another drink. If he was human, she’d tell him to slow down before he puked all over her old catacombs. Or hurt himself.

“She woke up ... paranoid. Very. I had to leave. This was centuries ago.”

“And you remember the details?”

“Better than a vampire would. But, not really, no. Blurs, buried, lost.” He frowned at the bottle in his hands, and set it on the stone. “It’s better to forget a lot of things.”

The two women nodded. No getting around it, some memories were better lost. She never wanted to forget Julias, not ever, but she wasn’t stupid enough to think she was in the right headspace right now. Maybe in a hundred years, the best thing for her would be to forget him?

Or revive him, have him back, and spend century after century with the man she loved.

“Elen,” Sándor continued, “cut off the skin of my back, my human back, and carved a curse into it. She placed it on a stone in my lair, and gained control of me and my Horror.”

Triss winced and sucked in a breath. “I saw that, yeah. She use her book to do that?”

“A book, with a lot of rituals in it. And a knife. I don’t know where she got the book, but the knife was something she created.”

The two vampires exchanged looks again. They didn’t want to ask, but they had to.

So Triss took the plunge. “How did she make it?”

“Sacrificed a child.”

Triss threw up her hands. “My fucking god! Every step, every mother fucking step, is just one giant road of nasty shit, isn’t it? Why the fuck is this so hard? Why the fuck is everything about this always just ‘oh look you want to resurrect someone? Better be willing to literally kill babies to do it’ sorta shit!?”

Sándor watched her, a hint of a smile on his face, before he held up the bottle as if clinking her own, and took another drink.

“The Prince took the knife, didn’t she?” he said.

“She ... did, yeah, with the book.”

“Then, if you can get the book, perhaps you can also get the knife?” He took another drink, a sip this time, and met her eyes. “Or you could kill an innocent.”



Triss glared at him. “Julias loved the kine. Fucking loved them. First date I ever went with him on, it was obvious just how much he envied them, cause they lived in the moment, and vampires like him couldn’t help but plan plan plan. Danse Macabre shit, you know? When he got the mansion, he got thralls using Dominate so he wouldn’t have to use the Vinculum except for just a few special circumstances. He was one of the few vampires in the damn city that thought kine were more than blood bags. Last thing I’m going to do, is sacrifice a fucking child, so I can see him again. Do I look like someone willing to walk right into some shitty Greek tragedy to you?”

Sándor didn’t look away, the whole rant. And when she was done, he laughed; dude was definitely getting drunk for him to actually laugh.

“He sounds like he was a great man,” he said, and he drank again. “Not a night goes by I don’t hate myself for what I did, helping kill him.”

Ah shit, the vodka was making him say the stuff he probably shouldn’t. She dumped a fucking rant on him, about how awesome Julias was. Fucker was the reason Julias was dead! Except, not really, and they both knew it, but fuck, he probably felt guilty as all fucking hell, all the fucking time, and fucking fuck she fucking just fucking went the fuck on...

She crawled over to him, sat beside him, and Blushed Life. Before he could say anything, she grabbed the bottle, and took a swig.

“Holy fuck this burns. Oh my fucking god, I forgot what alcohol tastes like. Why the fuck would anyone drink this?” Whatever. She took another drink.

He blinked at her, and the bottle in her hands. “You’re going to puke that up later.”

“Yeah, well, I hear Daeva do this sometimes. Blush, eat and drink human food, and puke it up later. Thought maybe I might be able to get a little drunk off it while faking life.”

Jennifer smiled at her, but didn't join her. “Count me out. I'll be the designated driver ... And, I do believe the Blush won't allow you to absorb the food, Triss. You won't get drunk.”

“Shit.” What a fucking waste. She handed the bottle back. “Well, if you get really drunk, can I have a drink of you, Sándor? I saw what Fiona's blood did to Damien. Dude looked really...”

“Horny,” Jennifer said, nodding.

“Well, yeah, that, but kinda tipsy, I guess? It was weird.”

Sándor chuckled again. It was a nice sound, coming from the usually closed off guy.

“I've never had a vampire feed on me, I don't believe. Maybe hundreds of years ago, but I've been avoiding people, in general, for some time since crossing the ocean. Before then, vampires and monsters had a ... difficult relationship. Superstition and whatnot.”

“You were nightmare monsters,” Jennifer said. “I can imagine there were issues.”

“Yes. But here in Dolareido, there's a strange peace. And it's ... good. I was scared of it at first, but Azamel's shown me what Dolareido can be like. Fiona as well. She's in deep for that Damien fellow.” He raised his bottle high before taking another drink. “I owe him, too. And you.” He nodded to Triss.

“Ah, that what this is about?” she said, gesturing to the bottle. “Paying us back? Cause I don't think anyone really feels that way. We wanted Jeremiah and Angela dead. Freeing you ended up being easier than killing you.”

“Regardless.” He took another drink. “Azamel’s helped me calm down, and ... yes, if you wanted a drink of me, I wouldn’t say no.”

Jennifer rubbed her hands together, and slid over a bit so she sat on Sándor’s other side, opposite of Triss. In the past, Sándor would have ignored her, or moved, but now he gave the girl a small smile, and took a sip of his drink. It was hard to tell how depressed he was. Sad, yes, but how sad, how drunk, how stoic, Triss couldn’t figure out. It was all blending together in his calm, solid face, the sort of face a ship captain might use if he was staring out to sea in self reflection, or some shit.

“Might take you up on that,” Triss said.

He nodded. “Fiona says it does intoxicate Damien, in a fashion, but also gives him some ... hunger.”

“Hunger?” Jennifer asked.

“The vampire says it’s hard to define, according to Fiona. But he ... loses control, and ravages the girl. Thoroughly.”

Triss and Jen shared a few confused blinks. Hunger equals ravaging?

Jen was the first to laugh. “That explains why Damien fucked her in public.”

“K, well, maybe not, then,” Triss said. Of course Jen gave her an evil glare, so Triss just shrugged at her, a ‘maybe’ shrug. Now was not the time to try and get into Sándor’s pants.

He nodded, took another drink, and leaned back against the coffin behind him as he looked up at nothing.

“Elen can take objects,” he said, “and imbue them with ... power. I don’t know this power. It’s not something us creatures of the dream

understand. Vampires might understand it better. There's power, in flesh, and life, something visceral, and it's only found in the physical world."

Triss shrugged. "I've noticed, but I don't have any fucking clue if vampires can do that shit. We drink blood, and when it's fresh, it's ... definitely more powerful. There's something in it that has power, and we convert it into shit vamps can use."

They all nodded, like it was a shared school lesson they were trying to learn. It was a part of their life, but it's not like any of them truly understood it. Vampires, drinking blood, fancy magical powers? Sure, an everynight thing, but none of them knew how or why it worked, not even Jacob.

"The world's a crazy place," Triss said eventually.

Everyone nodded again. Yeap, they'd been thinking the same thing.

"Sándor," Jennifer said, "do you ... want to talk, about what happened to you?"

Before the poor guy could say anything, Triss waved a harsh hand at her friend.

"Leave the dude alone. We're talking about the now, and the shit we're trying to do. No need to bring up that ... that shit." Or Julias, for that matter.

Sándor managed another small smile for her, but set the bottle down and shrugged. "I don't normally drink. Even before Margaret, I didn't drink. It's not a good idea for Begotten with hungers like mine."

So Margaret was his wife's name. Very old school.

Jen gestured to the bottle. “But you’re drinking now?”

“Azamel’s helped me find ways to sate my hunger, so it’s under control. Mostly. And...” He shrugged, grip still on the bottle’s neck, and he tipped it side to side, gently sloshing the contents around. “You know what I’ve gone through, in a sense. But at the same time, you’re willing to do something I’m not. I wanted to know why.”

“Ha! Why? Cause I’m a fucking idiot, that’s why.” She took the bottle from him and gulped down some more. Burned the whole way down, and she coughed a few dozen times. “Cause I can’t let anything go. Cause I can’t let him go.”

She handed him the bottle, and he took another drink. Poor guy was going to wake up wishing he was dead, at this rate.

“You must have loved him, dearly.”

“Fucking right I did. He really helped me out of a dark spot, and I did the same for him. We had a great relationship. We loved each other! I...” She groaned and flopped onto her side on the dirty stone floor. Not in a ‘oh god I’m gonna cry’ kinda way. More like a ‘ugh fuck Mondays’ sorta way. “The fuck is the point in being a witch, if I can’t use it to bring back the man I loved, you know?”

Silence again, until Sándor sighed, and tapped her hip with the bottle.

“Aaron told me you were becoming quite happy in the Circle? Jennifer seems to think so, according to him.”

“I ... I am,” Triss said. “I really am, no joke.”

Jennifer laughed, reached across Sándor’s lap, and poked Triss in the ass. So of course Triss had to sit back up and slap her hand away.

“I like to think she is,” the damn slut said.

“I’m not lying. I am happy with you guys. Ok? But with Julias, it was ... it was more, you know? Christ, I felt...”

“Peace,” Sándor said, eyes downcast, voice heavy. Yeap, the vodka was doing a number on the man, cause there was some genuine sadness on his face.

“Yeah.” Sighing, she slid in a little closer to Sándor, until she was arm to arm with him, and she gestured out to the emptiness around them. “What was Margaret like? And your kid?” Yeap, they were going there.

He laughed, a weak little thing, and took another drink. A long, long drink, and Jennifer eventually took the bottle away from him.

“You may be Begotten, but you’re not immortal.” She set the bottle aside, out of arm’s reach, and frowned at him.

He laughed again, just as weak, but nodded as he leaned back. “Margaret was a royal pain in my ass.”

Both women jaw dropped. That was not what they expected the man to say about his late wife, killed by the people who’d fucking enslaved him.

“It’s true,” he continued. “She was stubborn, and she pestered me constantly. If took any longer than five minutes to do something, she’d prod me until I did it.” He lazily reached across Jen for the bottle, but she gently pushed his arm down, and he chuckled as he fell back against the shelf behind him again. “And Theo, he was a troublemaker. He was five, but he was a smartass, and loved to find holes in any order you gave him. Tell him go to bed, and he’d wait until you said ‘now’, cause otherwise, he’d pretend the order was for later.”

The girls laughed. Ha, that was a smartass kid, for five. Oh god, five.

Sándor laughed and shrugged, and almost fell over onto Triss. Considering he was sitting down, nearly falling over put him in drunk territory. Least he wasn't slurring and drooling everywhere.

"But that's important, you know?" he continued. "It's important to remember things as they were. You can't look at the past with rose-tinted glasses, if you want to make smart choices." He gestured to Triss. "Tell me something you didn't like about him."

Ah shit, what she didn't like about Julias? Fuck, she'd spent months just idolizing the memory of him, thinking about the way he liked to hold her, about his smile, his great body and ridiculous sex skills, his—

Rose-tinted glasses. Julias had told her he'd hit his fiance, not long after he'd been embraced. A good, hard hit. He'd taken her to the hospital, and it was the last he ever saw of her.

Sándor was right. Julias wasn't ... hadn't been perfect. It was important she remember that. He wouldn't want her to remember him as something he wasn't.

"The sobbyness," she said. The gargoyle raised a brow, and she laughed. "Like I said, Julias loved kine, and envied them. But ugh, he could get really emo about it sometimes. Really emo art, emo music tastes, emo ... everything. Like, god, I know Daeva that are less up their own ass than you, Julias."

Jen and Sándor laughed, and she did too.

"Margaret, she ... she knew what I was, before we were married. And that stubbornness is how she managed to ... get to know me."

That made sense. Sándor reeked of closed-off brooding asshole, when Triss met him. It'd take a woman with a hard, stone-breaker attitude to punch through some shit like that.

“And Theo?” she asked.

“Theo. I played games with that kid every weekend, and he shocked me every time; too damn smart. But, it wasn't how smart he was that really caught my attention. It was his honor.”

“Honor, in a five-year-old?”

“Yeah. If we caught him doing something bad, or if he tried to wriggle out of a punishment, but we called him on it, he'd accept defeat. ‘You got me, daddy’, he'd say.” More laughter. “It was so strange, listening to a kid that age, willing to use tricky tactics, but also have this weird sense of honor about it.”

There was no stopping everyone from smiling, and from silence hitting them again as they absorbed the reality. His wife was dead, and kid, too. Triss had gone through hell when Julias died, but how fucking bad had it been on this poor fucker, losing his wife and his fucking child? And then being forced to work as a slave for the killers for years?

But the bastards who'd killed them and Julias were dead. Revenge had. Woo.

Jennifer sighed, and handed Sándor back the vodka. “Don't hurt yourself.”

The gargoyle smiled at the bottle, but set it aside, no drink.

“It's easy ... to get lost in the memories,” he said, closing his eyes, head tilted up. “I can still remember the smell of her favorite shampoo. I can still remember the way she scrunched up her nose when she was angry with me. I can still remember how she'd try



and take charge, when we had sex, but it never lasted. She'd start trembling and..." After a few surprised blinks, he coughed. Probably surprised by his own words.

"Queen in the streets, freak in the sheets?" Jennifer said.

Triss choked. Sándor laughed.

"That's as good a description as any," he said. "Sorry, for mentioning it. Maybe a little too much information."

The two vampires laughed, loudly. God, that was cute, thinking he could embarrass them. Sure, he was a fuck load older, but he wasn't a vampire. His hunger didn't pull him into sexual situations like the Kiss often did. Any vampire with a few decades under their belt, except for maybe the more unlucky Nosferatu or the super shy types like Tash, was basically a sex expert. If Sándor literally waited around for decades, guarding shit, and hunting things like a fucking hawk hunted and killed prey, dude probably wasn't the most sexually exposed.

"Nonsense," Jen said. "Sex may be a private matter to most, but to Kindred, it's as common and practiced as feeding itself. And only a fool thinks sex isn't an important aspect to understanding a person." Nodding, she pat the man on the shoulder. "If she liked to take charge, but then became submissive during, it sounds to me like she really enjoyed herself."

"Definitely," Triss said.

Sándor looked at each of them quizzically, before taking another drink. The dude could certainly hold his liquor. Begotten thing, or, gargoyle specific thing? He coughed on the drink, didn't spill any though, and looked to Jen.

"I've known plenty of vampires, and yes, they're usually quite sexually ... comfortable. But I admit, when you two helped show me

to the rest of the Kindred at the ball, I was a little ... surprised, with how sexual everyone is." Ha, there it was. "You two were half naked, and I was sure you'd be the only ones. The night did not go as I imagined." Damn, a bottle of vodka really helped this guy loosen up.

"Did you like what you saw?" Jen asked, grinning at him. Of course the grin vanished when Triss reached across Sándor's lap and slapped her friend on the leg; easiest body part to hit from where she was.

"Jen, everyone liked what they saw. But you don't show up at the party with your tits hanging out. Everyone has to loosen up first, and then you let the tits come out." And people had definitely loosened up, at that party.

"After what Avery did," Sándor said, "I imagine there won't be anymore balls for some time."

Triss shrugged. "Eh, maybe. Antoinette or the suits might host one just for Invictus, the dragons, and maybe witches and Begotten can come to those. Course, the Carthians have parties all the time, shitty little things, twenty people in a room, jumping around to bad music."

Sándor shuddered. "Punk music."

Oh god. Triss snorted on a laugh and punched the man in the shoulder; softly, of course.

"More like EDM and stuff these days. But, ugh, fuck punk music. I'm a metal fan."

Apparently she'd said the magic word, cause the obviously half drunk, slowly-becoming-more-drunk man's eyes sparkled.

"What sort?"

“Oh, I like classics,” she said, “and some of the newer stuff. So I flop between shit like Iron Maiden, or sometimes I’ll listen to the bands that grew up listening to Iron Maiden, you know? I can get into power metal too, maybe progressive or symphonic stuff, or metalcore and shit if I’m in the mood for something heavy. Not too big a fan of the really heavy stuff, death metal or speed metal, but I can groove on it sometimes. And—” Jen slapped her in the leg. Revenge, for the earlier slap, the bitch. “Hey! I know a metal fan when I see one, Jen. We are all connected, by the great metal web consciousness.”

The gargoyle nodded. “She’s right. It’s a thread that binds us, and is stronger than steel.”

Jennifer sat back and rolled her eyes. “Oh no.”

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~~Eric~~

Six weeks since the incident.

Eric sighed, and pat his ear. This music was going to kill him. Thudding bass, like a heartbeat, big and strong and loud as all fuck. Hard on his new ears, but at least it wouldn’t lead to any hearing loss, now that he could recover from damage like that. His knee was testament to the new regenerative powers he had. No, the music was going to kill him cause it barely qualified as music, and every moment he could hear it, all he could think about was how much it sounded like life, sex, and everything in between. Probably on purpose.

He sighed some more, and tapped a few fingers on his bicep, arms folded across his chest. On the dance floor, two vampires were the center of attention of fifty people, and everyone pressed their bodies in tight as they danced. Bodies grinding, sweating, everyone horny and looking to let off some of that energy.

The two vampires would be going home with at least half a dozen humans in tow, and he doubted they had to use any Discipline to do it. Dolareido was just that kinda place. Well, once they were off the property, they weren't his concern anymore. All he had to do, was make sure everyone in Bloodlust got along.

Several people, some at the bar, some in booths, some on the dance floor, turned to look behind them toward the door, to stare at the new girl walking in. They knew her; she was a regular. Most of them had probably seen her naked at some point, having sex in the club, or just dancing and not giving a shit if her clothes slid off. She was completely, utterly shameless. And he smiled as she noticed him, and walked his way.

Jessy wore a ridiculously short black skirt tonight, basically a tube top that'd fallen around her hips somehow. It was so damn small, it exposed the hips of her black thong, and a bit of its underside, too. She also wore a fishnet tank top, though the wiring was so thin and sparse, it was barely a top at all. And, so she remained 'decent', she had some black nipple pasties on, X shapes that just barely covered her nipples.

"I know that look!" she shouted over the music.

"Look?"

Laughing, she came over to him by the wall on the first floor, and she made sure to put a bounce in each step. Lean as she was, Jessy had fairly large breasts, a genetic gift she was super happy to have, and a huge ass she was super proud of earning. Jiggling them for admiring eyes was a regular part of her nightly routine. Utterly shameless.

He laughed, matching hers. He couldn't help it. Something about her brazen attitude and 'fuck the world I'm gonna be happy anyway' personality was so damn perfect. It was one of the things that made

Fiona so appealing, too, but she didn't have the edge Jessy had. Eric couldn't joke about life shit with Fiona.

"Yeah, the look! You want to take me to church and make me ask for forgiveness, for my obvious sins." Nodding, she kissed him, and made sure to make a show of it. Full on body pressing, hands on his shoulders, the works. Either she was showing off, or she was staking her claim; probably both. "Garry been giving you any trouble?"

"Nah. Haven't seen any Carthians in here." And he was damn happy for that. Now that the two covenants were in some sort of unofficial turf war, the Invictus didn't want Carthians in their club. If he had to kick a vampire out, it could get nasty.

"Good." Nodding, she stood beside him, and leaned up to his ear. "We should talk."

He raised a brow as he looked at her. "When a woman says that to a man, she—"

"Not that kind of talk." With a wink, she kissed him again. "This is about ... other sorta real shit."

"Oh." The only other 'real' shit, if not about their relationship, would be about Dolareido and the insanity hitting it these days. "Now?"

"Nah. I got tonight off. I wanna dance. And then dance." The second dance might as well have been said by an evil snake. "Just figured I'd tell ya, in case something comes up."

"Sort of like, scheduling a meeting?"

"Exactly. I am Invictus, ya know."

He laughed. He thought of the Invictus more as the mafia, not business types scheduling meetings and sending e-mails. Guess he was wrong.

“Sure you want to dance? Couple of vamps already on the floor.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fucking Daeva sluts.”

He slipped an arm over her shoulders, and pulled her in. “You’re prettier than them.”

“Fuck yeah I am.” She nodded, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“I saw Marge and Dennis out there.” He nodded toward the floor.

“The hunters?”

“Yeap.”

She rubbed her hands together. “I bet those two have been the focus of a lot of vamps, since Isabella stopped putting such a tight leash on them, the bitch.”

If only she knew. Jessy came to Bloodlust all the time, but Eric worked here, and vampires came through often. Uratha used to too, before the incident. Lately it’d only been vampires, but despite the obvious problems raining down on them from Garry, the Invictus continued to come for a good meal. And that meal occasionally included Dennis and Marge.

It was hard to wrap his mind around. Garry was literally fighting them for territory, but the vampires just kept on Kissing and fucking. And most of them weren’t old enough to be so jaded they’d consider a turf war to be something to scoff at. So, why were they all so relaxed, or at least, not marching like soldiers on the Carthian half of South Side?

Vampires. They were vampires. Each and every one of them had an instinct to guard what was theirs, but at the same time, to prioritize keeping themselves alive. They didn't have any natural urge to work with each other, and hell, they considered each other rivals for their food. Garry and Michael had their work cut out for them, getting over a hundred vamps, each, to actually fight together as a team.

So the fact Jessy had made it pretty damn clear she'd fight anyone who threatened Eric, was quite awesome. He pulled her tighter, and set a kiss on her temple.

"Marge is pretty hot," she said, "don't you think?"

Saw this coming.

"Yeah, she is."

"Tiny, for a hunter."

"Yeap."

"And she's got that light dark skin, you know? So hot."

He raised a brow. "Am I in love with a racist?"

She elbowed him in the side. "Dude." But she laughed a moment later, took his hand, and guided him onto the dance floor. "I'm gonna see if I can get a bite."

"Need me for that?"

"Mhmm. We're gonna rescue Marge from those Daeva bitches, I'm gonna get a taste, and we're gonna get to know her a little better."

He rolled his eyes, but followed.

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The mission to get a bite had been successful. But, to his surprise, it'd stopped there. Something else had crossed her mind, and the moment his shift was done, she took him out of the club.

She curled up against his arm, and rubbed her cheek into his shoulder. In her apartment on her couch, they put on a movie, and enjoyed watching some god awful sports flick. He suggested something a little ... less shit, but she demanded cheesy, happy ending sports movie. Honestly, after Jessy had ground her ass on Marge and Dennis enough, and then got a bite of Marge to boot, he'd figured she'd want sex the moment they got out of the club. Or, while still in the club. But, nope, shitty movie.

He smiled down at her as she watched the credits. "I love you."

Still holding his arm, she grinned up at him. "Figured it out?"

"Bad movie? Curling up on couch? You were definitely fishing for something. Couldn't be sex. So I put my man brain to work. Must have wanted an 'I love you'."

"Bad movie? The fuck?" She sat upright, and glared at him like she was ready for war. "Field of Dreams is a fucking classic."

"Ghosts? Playing baseball? I mean, maybe if it was basketball."

"Ok, now who's racist?" she said, grinning. Before he could retort, she snuggled into his arm again. "Love you, too."

"Kinda surprised you didn't jump me when we got here. Figured a Kiss with a hunter would have really got you going."

"Yeah, it did. But I talked to the two vamps there too, and they mentioned some shit that went down with Garry a couple nights ago. Before I knew it, I was in work mode, and ... ugh, fuck that. Killed my mood. But I'll be damned if I let Garry ruin my night off."



He laughed, earning a quizzical look from her.

“You’re still wearing the, uh, stripper outfit.”

“Dude, when you’ve been wearing crazy, uncomfortable shit like this for as many years as I have, you barely notice.” Shrugging, she climbed onto his lap facing him, and hid her face in his neck. “Plus I was kinda hoping the mood would come back.”

“Field of Dreams is not the sort of movie to watch if you’re trying to get in the mood.”

“Ha, it wasn’t about that. It was about ... I dunno, reminding myself I got something here, something I won’t let Garry fuck up, you know.” She slid her arms under his and hugged him tight. “Hanging out with my boyfriend, my ‘I love you’ boyfriend, and watching some cheesy old movie together? Dude, I’ve never done that.”

“Never?”

“Never ever.”

He slipped his arms up her back and teased his fingertips up and down her naked spine. “Guess there’s a lot of firsts for you, in this whole relationship department, isn’t there?”

“Yeap. I want to do all the cheesy romantic shit, you know? Like ... I’m sitting at the table, drinking coffee, and giving you a handjob. Except, you know, cup of blood instead of a cup of joe.”

He chuckled, and slipped a hand up to trace her shoulder blades through the fishnet. No point in telling her her idea was very much outside the ‘vanilla cheesy romance’ field for most people.

“Sounds lovely.”

“Or, I’m on my bed, lying on my stomach, working away on my laptop, while you’re fucking me from behind.”

“Didn’t we already do that?”

She laughed into his neck and kissed his jaw. “It was awesome. Tash loved it.” After another kiss, she grabbed his shoulders and leaned back. “Or I’m trying to take a shower, and you’re just relentlessly eating my ass while I’m trying to wash my hair. That one sounds fun.”

“I’m noticing a pattern here.”

She shook her head. “No pattern.”

“Sounded like you were trying to do something very non-sexual in those three examples, while your horny boyfriend pestered you for sex.” Which hadn’t happened a single time, in their relationship. Not cause he wasn’t ready and willing, but the girl’s sex drive was absurd, and by the time he was ready for sex, she was already asking for it.

She tapped a chin thoughtfully. “That’s how relationships work, right? We get comfy with each other, so then naturally I stop wanting to fuck you, and you pester me for sex constantly. Which leads to me being all ‘bleh whatever loser, cum faster’ and I sorta halfheartedly satisfy you while I go about my day.”

“Um ... that’s a pretty dysfunctional, toxic relationship.”

“Ha! I know! No idea how anyone could, like, not want to fuck their SO, you know? Put a dick in my hand and I’m fucking boiling.” Nodding, she slipped off the couch, reached down, and yanked on his pants. “Damn, all those sexy fantasies got me back in the mood. Get nekkid.” With a big happy grin, she Blushed Life, bringing color and thickness to her skin, and she tugged on his pants some more.

~♥♥♥~

He chuckled, rolled his eyes, and undid the fly of his pants. She yanked them off, and did the same for his boxers as he undid the buttons of his shirt. Ten seconds later, he was naked, sitting back on her couch.

“Keeping the stripper outfit on?” he said, gesturing to the hilariously tiny skirt, and the fishnet top.

She grinned down at him as she kicked off her skirt, and slipped a hand under her thong down to her slit. She didn’t take it off though, content to gently masturbate underneath the fabric as she stared at him. So naturally, he slid his hand around his shaft, and did the same, watching her as he worked the bottom of his length in his grip.

“I do look fucking hot in this, don’t I?” She snapped the hip of her black thong, and jiggled her tits around in the fishnet top with a few bounces. “It’s the nipple pasties. They really complete the ensemble.”

“Undoubtedly.” Nodding, he stroked a little faster, and melted into the couch a little more. Him being watched by her and vice versa sparked a memory. “Still sad about not getting what you wanted?”

“Eh?”

“In Jack’s sex tape.”

“Oh, dude!” Laughing, she grabbed her phone out of her purse, and got on her knees between his legs. The phone he expected, but not the position. She slid in close, squashed her breasts against his thighs and testicles, and set her elbows on the couch around him as she put the phone over his stomach. With the screen facing her, she

slid her fingers around and around, looking for something, eyes fixated and lips stuck in an evil grin.

“He ... sent you another tape, didn't he?”

“Yeah! I haven't given it a proper watch, but look at this part!” She started the video and turned the phone to face him, holding it up on his stomach for him. The steady camera meant tripod, and it was aimed at Jack's waist from a front angle. He was sitting on Antoinette's stomach, getting treated like a king on some sort of giant bed. The kid eased his hips and forth, cock disappearing into the Prince's utterly massive tits, and Julee and Ashley were snuggled into her sides, keeping her breast together on her chest, and sucking on her nipples. And from the expression on the white-haired woman's face, and the subtle noises she made, she really, really liked having her nipples suckled.

The Prince's breasts were already coated in cum.

“Damn.”

“I know, right! Must be like, fucking a cloud.” With a manic grin, she flipped the phone back, jumped to another scene, and pointed it back at him.

Now Jack lay back, lying on Antoinette's body, head between her — now clean — tits, Ashley and Julee cuddling into her sides still, while Elaine and Veronica both lay on the bed around him. The two women, one very, very much taller than the other, had their huge breasts squashed together on the boy's pelvis, fighting for space around his dick.

“Damn damn.”

“Yeah, such a lucky fucker. And...” She flipped the phone back, and jumped around a few times. “Yeap, this whole video is, from beginning to end, an hour of tit fucking. Jesus, they got like, five

positions they try. Oh! Oh shit, got one here where Jack's sitting on Elaine's stomach, fucking her tits, but Antoinette's between her legs, eating her out. Fucking hell, imagine, Prince of the whole damn city, your girl, eating out this other chick you're in the middle of tit fucking."

"Definitely lucky." There wasn't any point in trying to make Jessy jealous. She was so confident in her sex appeal, him even trying to suggest he might be more attracted to someone else was always met with laughter. If he suggested he was attracted to another woman in general, it was met with Jessy's attempt to convince him to invite said girl into their bed.

It was a wonderful problem to have.

Jessy grinned at him, put the phone down beside them on the couch, leaned down, and set a warm kiss on the base of his shaft's swollen head.

"I got big tits too, ya know."

He smirked. "Not that big."

"Oh you fucking asshole." Frowning, she knelt higher, batted his hands away, grabbed his dick, pointed it up, and slid it up between her breasts against her sternum. She still had the fishnet top on, keeping her breasts snug together, and trapping his cock between them. But, large as her breasts were, they weren't 'bury the dick in softness' large, and a lot of his length stuck up from between them through a hole in the fishnet.

He stared, and gulped. "Ok, yeah, that's pretty hot. No wonder the kid's got a thing for it."

"Yeah. And—oh, Eric. Transform!"

"What, now?"

“Yeah now! I wanna try something. You always go full primal on me when you transform, and I want to see if you can relax instead and let me lead.”

“You sure? I don’t know if—”

“It’ll be fine.”

He rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help but smile and shrug. “Alright. Don’t blame me if it doesn’t go your way.”

“Awesome.” Nodding, she grabbed her phone and texted something. “Inviting Tash.”

“Be ... cause you want her to see what it’s like when a werewolf has sex. Um, isn’t she in a rough spot with her boyfriends right now?”

“Yeap, but this ain’t about that ... exactly. Now come on, transform, and fuck my tits.”

He rolled his eyes, again. If Jessy had her way, there’d be a giant orgy every night, with werewolves and vampires and kine and everything. Healing the world and uniting everyone through sex, including Tash and her damaged relationship. Well, she and the Prince did connect on that, in a strange way.

He took a deep breath, and let out the wolf spirit inside. Luna told him to breathe, and he did, slow and steady, pulling in each wave of oxygen and focusing his mind on the pull of his diaphragm. The beat of it, the relaxing pulse of air, he held onto it as the hungry, aggressive animal inside came to the surface.

“Oh fuck ... oh fuck...” The small woman between his legs gulped as she watched his girth grow, and grow, the dark skin turning into flesh red from top to bottom. “Gonna need to, um ... yeah.” She scooped up the sides of the net fabric on her body, pulled it off and

tossed it, before she pushed her body in closer to his thighs and pelvis as more of the wolf in him emerged. His thighs grew as thick as her whole body. His cock jutted up from between her breasts, spreading them, length reaching past her collar, and eventually her chin before stopping at her lips.

“Fuck yes,” she said, eyes wide and looking him up and down as the transformation finished. Her breath was a mess, panting, tiny gasps of arousal coursing through her. He was tempted to do the same, but no. If he wanted to remain in control, he had to breathe deep, with each wave of life from the air a cooling breeze on the boiling hunger of the wolf inside.

He rumbled under his breath, a deep purr, and his mate shivered between his legs. In his human body, his shaft was plenty large, and she liked to use both hands and her mouth on him at the same time. Now, she gulped as she looked down at the huge, red shaft between her breasts. Her two hands left most of his cock uncovered, and her grip was not wide enough to circle it.

“Right. Ok. You just stay there mister big bad wolf. I’m in charge.” Nodding, she tightened her grip around the top half of his shaft, and leaned in with enough weight to surround the knot of his cock with her breasts. The softness of her breasts around the sensitive skin stirred growls from him, the milking grip of her fingers stirred more, and when she opened her mouth wide to try and fit the glans of his length, he outright growled with desire.

Breathe. The voice in his dreams told him to breathe. He wasn’t like those other Uratha. He was in control. He was something different, a new breed, a werewolf of the city. He could control himself. Breathe.

Jessy stared at the sight of his abs and chest rising and falling with each, deep breath, and she quivered as she slowly eased her lips along the tip of his length. She couldn’t open her mouth wide

enough to fit much, managing only a couple inches before he grew too thick, and she groaned onto his cock as she suckled on what she could. More saliva dripped down over his length onto her hands, and she worked her fingers in a massaging grip over where his cock filled the valley between her breasts.

“God damn, you smell like ... a fucking beast,” she said.

He rumbled his reply, another purr full of bass he knew his mate enjoyed. She said she could feel them ‘right down to her cunt’, and the look of joy on her face confirmed. He rumbled again, as the first sparks of pleasure flowed down his sensitive skin, reaching between his legs as flexing muscles leaked precum into his lover’s mouth. It came back down over his length, spread around and around by Jessy’s roaming tongue and massaging lips.

“I never really get to fuck around with this cock like this, you know? You always kinda just ram it into me when you’re transformed. Not that I don’t fucking love that, but this is...” She shivered again as she hugged her breasts together, squashing them around the thick base of his length, while her two hands continued to squeeze and work up and down.

Again, he took a deep breath as he felt the first dancing tingles of pleasure. His mate wanted to take control tonight, but she was so small compared to him. He wanted to grab her, ram his length into her, and make her squeal as he claimed her.

No. Respect your mate’s wishes.

He slowly reached out, and set one hand around her left shoulder, his other around the back of her head, until he covered the whole of her upper body in his palms and claws. But he didn’t push her toward him, or thrust his hips into her. He held her, and rumbled his pleasure as his mate quivered.



She opened her mouth as wide as she could, and buried the first couple inches of his length in tighter kisses, as her hands tightened as well once they were wet with saliva and precum. With the knot of his length snug between her breasts, spreading them with its girth, most of his shaft stuck up from between them, giving her plenty of room to slide her hands up and down his length as she suckled.

He rumbled harder, harsher, almost a growl, and his cock flexed in her grip as he felt the heat build. Soon, each stroke of her hands earned a jolt of pleasure down his length until it reached between his legs, and his inner muscles squeezed, building more liquid heat. She moaned around his cock, and stroked him faster.

The first wave of cum poured through his length, sending pleasure sparks down through his swollen cock and out through his core. It was enough to overflow his mate's mouth instantly, and she blinked at him, eyes wide, as her cheeks puffed, and a flood of thick, white fluid flowed out from between her lips.

She pulled her head back and let his cum fall out of her mouth, onto his length, and her hands. "Holy fuck." Trembling now, panting faster, she stroked him slower, drenched grip tight and massaging, and milking, earning another gush of cum. Without her mouth to block it, it shot six inches into the air, splashing over her forehead, nose, and cheeks. She aimed his girth toward her with her hands, and the next gush splashed over her neck and shoulder, and then the next shoulder as she stroked him.

The last few waves came out slowly, heavy waves that flowed down his length on their own, and joined the rivers of white that coated her breasts. The X black covers she'd put on her nipples were lost underneath them.

"God damn. Never been covered in so much cum. And I had four ghouls, ya know." Laughing again, she stood up, slipped free of his

hands, ran a finger through the white that coated her chest, and smiled down at him. “Think you can hold still a little longer?”

He slowly nodded. Even with him sitting on the weak fabric thing of her den, its softness bending under his weight, she was only tall enough to be eye level with him when she stood. And the sight of his cum trickling down her body sent a surge through him that demanded he grab her, and slam her down on his cock. But he didn't. Control. Breathe. His mate wanted to try something because she trusted him, and he loved his mate.

She climbed onto his lap, such a little thing compared to him, and set her left hand against his chest. Her right hand reached down, grabbed his soaked length, and aimed it up toward her slit. But the tiny black thing there blocked it, and she laughed as she set her feet on the seat around them, squatting, so she could use both hands, one to guide his length up to her soaked hole, the other to pull the fabric aside.

Word. What was the word. Remember, words. Thong.

Once she'd managed to take the tip of his cock, already enough to spread her wide, she let go of the thong, hooking it around her swollen pussy, and took his shoulder again. Groaning, the vampire forced herself down lower, and her mouth dropped open as she looked down and stared at the growing bulge along her abs reaching higher.

“Fucking christ, every time. I've taken fat dragon dildos smaller than you, you know?” She shivered as she lowered herself down again, taking another inch, and her clenching, drenched insides squeezed on his cock enough to compress it, just slightly, just enough for flesh to slide along dripping flesh. “I mean, look at this.” As she finally took the last of his length above the knot of his cock, her knees found the seat outside his hips, and she whimpered as she leaned back. Her left hand pressed on his knee for balance, and

her right hand reached down, and pressed on the bulge pushing out against her stomach. It reached a little past her navel, and she still had a few inches if she wanted to take all of him.

That would come later.

“Bet you can feel this,” she said, and she pressed her hand against her lower abs and mons. Eric often did that, because he knew it pushed her sensitive insides down against whatever was penetrating her. And she obviously enjoyed it now. But he could also feel it, with how his red, engorged flesh filled her, stretching her wide and deep, so every trembling motion she made was delicious friction on his sensitive skin. And feeling her hand press her flesh against his cock felt amazing.

He set his enormous hands on her legs, and watched as his mate set both her hands on his shoulders, and ground herself around and around. Her slit’s lips rubbed against his knot repeatedly, drenching him, and her breath broke into heavy groans as she increased her rhythm. Watching her dance on his cock earned a deep, hungry rumble from him, and his cum-drenched mate quaked as she stared up at him.

She looked down again, and stared at herself as she came. Clenching muscles leaked more juices, demanding he grab her and fuck her, but he didn’t. Not yet. He rumbled again, and watched as his mate squeezed on his cock as she forced herself to push her hips back and forth, despite her climax. Muscle spasms inside her milked on his cock, sending jolts down through his length.

“Big bad wolf, being all noble and gentle with me.” She shivered as she lifted her ass, and bounced on him, taking him deep enough to stretch her cunt deep, but only ever rubbing her swollen lips against the top of his knot, soaking it. “Knowing you could ... snap ... anytime, and go ballistic on me? Fuuuuck, gets me so damn ... wet...” She bounced faster, cum-soaked breasts jiggling against her

chest, and insides clamping down as more spasms worked through her. Soon, her juices trickled down his testicles.

The feel of her heat, sizzling on his skin, drenching the last few inches of his cock in her cum, was too much. He growled at her, earning wide eyes of mild panic from his mate, and he tightened his grip on her hips.

He stood up.

“Eric! Holy shit, w-wait a second, Tash is—” She tried to grab his shoulders, but the moment he had his weight on the balls of his talons, he tightened his grip on her hips and waist, and worked her back and forth. His mate erupted into moans, and grabbed his wrists instead, small hands not able to circle half their girth. Soon she was horizontal, upper half leaning back and rocking back and and forth as he worked her on his length.

The door opened.

Eric snapped his gaze to the door. He’d been so preoccupied, so focused on his mate, he’d forgotten where they were, and—oh, it was Natasha, the small vampire. Right, his mate had asked her to come. Why? Because his mate liked it when others saw, especially this little one.

That was fine. He didn’t mind.

“J-J-Jessy,” she said, whole body trembling, eyes wide.

“Hey Tash, it’s ok. It’s ok, really, just ... fuuuuuuuuck.”

Eric bounced his mate on his cock once more, a gentle thrust of his hips and pull of his hands enough to have her body trembling. Each thrust sank her on his length until her taut slit rubbed against the top of his knot, and he pulled back, only to thrust into her again, each time drenching more of his length in her juices.

Natasha stared, frozen, eyes wide and hands shaking. Eric rumbled, a heavy rolling purr, and he looked at his mate's friend as he continued to thrust into Jessy's body. Mating left anyone vulnerable, but she was a friend of his mate's. Her presence meant they were safer to continue, not that they should stop.

He looked down at his mate, and rumbled louder as the first tingling sparks of impending climax hit him. The pleasure tremors buried him in desire, and he pulled his mate down onto his cock harder as his body demanded he satisfy it. Jessy squeaked, and trembled as her insides clenched harder on him, as if trying to stop him from fully burying himself inside. His mate was cute, and helpless.

He pulled her toward him, hard, and growled as he forced the knot of his cock against her squeezing muscles. His mate groaned, but continued to clench as hard as she could. Either she couldn't stop herself, or she wanted to fight him and make it difficult for him. He did love wrestling with his mate. He growled playfully, and pulled on her hips harder while forcing his own hips toward her in a slow, relentless push, until her trembling pussy spread more and more. With a wet slap, three more inches of his girth sank into her already stretched insides, earning a much higher pitched squeak from her as the knot of his cock forced its way into her slit.

Natasha let out a similar squeak, and stared at Jessy's dangling body. The Gangrel tried to hold onto his wrists, but soon her arms went limp and hung down underneath her like her legs, still spread wide by his own. That was fine. His mate was light, and he loved the way she fit in his palms. Like this, he could bounce her on his length, keep most of his cock inside her, and admire how his girth made her abs bulge well past her navel.

He stayed inside her, balls deep, bouncing her a couple inches fast enough to have her limbs swinging underneath her, and her cum-soaked breasts sliding back and forth over her chest. With each

bounce, the thickest part of his cock pulled out a little of her pink insides for him to see, before he slammed her back against him. Every stroke stretched her deep, forcing groans out of her, and she clenched on him as she came again. In the past, she'd told him she loved how much pressure the fatter part of his cock put on her g-spot. And he couldn't stop himself regardless. He had to get inside her, every inch, until his mate's insides were taut, and squeezing him so hard every bounce sent overpowering waves of pleasure into his body.

The first gush of cum filled her immediately, overflowing and oozing out of her, down her thighs and ass, and down his testicles. The second squirted out of her, splashing against his abs and pelvis as he bounced her again, and again. By the third, his cum flowed down his mate's thighs, and dripped from her toes. His mate trembled with each bounce, legs and arms swaying underneath her, and she managed to turn her head toward her friend.

“Sorry, Tash. I ... I tried to stay in control, you know? Figured it might be easier for ... for you, if you wanted a peek. Kinda ... kinda backfired.”

Natasha gulped, stared, and said nothing. Eric looked at her, earning a squeak of surprise, but he rumbled his contentment, and looked back to his mate, still bent backward with hips and lower back in his hands. His orgasm faded, flexing muscles no longer forced cum into her, and the pleasure waves died away.

But he wanted more.

With another blissful rumble, he turned his mate over, keeping her pinned on his length. She mewled openly, enough energy coming back to her to squeeze on his fingers at her sides.

“Eric? Slow ... slow down.”

“Jess! Is he—”

“I’m fine,” she said between groans, “just ... want him to slow down a bit, so you can get a better look.”

Eric chuckled, a deep, heavy sound, and Natasha stared at him all the harder. He didn’t understand his mate sometimes. But, if she wanted her friend to watch, it didn’t bother him. It was his mate he wanted, her, only her, all of her.

He set a leg down on the soft sitting spot beside him. The ... couch. He made sure to keep his claws off it, his shin and the back of his foot on the ... cushions. The words, the right words, crept in through the cracks of his mind, through the forests and shadows. And after another deep breath, they solidified. Couch. Cushions. Apartment. Living room. He nodded to himself, and lowered until Jessy’s own knees managed to find the cushions, and her hands found the arm of the couch.

With one hand wrapped around her waist, his other reached out, and held the arm of the couch as well, letting him lean forward so he could dwarf his mate underneath him. Content, he rumbled again, earning a mewl from his mate, as he worked her back and forth. Now that he was fully inside her, he had no intention of leaving, and he kept the whole of his length in her as he fucked her from behind. Each pull toward him, met with a small thrust of his own, bounced her large, firm ass against the solid wall of his pelvis, before he pulled back enough so her trembling slit started to spread as his knot fought to escape her vise grip. But before it did, he thrust into her again.

The smaller vampire came closer. Only one of his arm’s length away, she stood beside him and her friend, eyes wide and looking his mate from head to ass.

“He’s ... all inside you.”

“Fucking yes he is!” Jessy squeezed on the arm of the couch, and grunted between his thrusts.

“I c-can ... see how deep he’s pushing.”

“Fuuuuuuuuck.”

“I can ... see b-bits of your ... insides ... when he pulls back.”

“God damn it, Tash, you’re turning me—” His mate melted in his grip, body threatening to collapse as it quivered uncontrollably. His grip on her waist kept her where she was, ass up, snug to his body. Even as she squirmed, trying to slow him down, he didn’t. He was too close, and the heat of her juices soaking his cock was too much to ignore.

But then he looked down at the little vampire beside them. She’d come closer, eyes locked onto Jessy at first, but now, on him. Slowly, her gaze reached up to his face, and she meeped as he looked at her with one eye, his snout still pointed down at his mate. But she didn’t back away. Instead, she came a little closer, until she was only a few feet from Jessy’s side, and her eyes slid up and down Eric’s body.

She liked the way he looked, but, she was shaken, startled, and scared.

Eric rumbled, and slowed down, letting the building heat underneath his cock settle. And with a slow movement, so his mate’s little friend didn’t get spooked, he turned, and sat on the couch, careful of his tail. The big seat, barely able to manage his weight, creaked as he rested back against it, and hooked his hands underneath his mate’s thighs and ass, grip large enough to encompass them and her lower back.

With her thighs up, legs spread in his grip, and back resting against his stomach, he worked his mate up and down on his length slowly, and her little friend stared at them. She was mesmerized.

“You’re covered in cum,” the little one whispered.



Jessy chuckled between her groans. “I gave him a tit job before you got here.”

“Tr-Transformed?”

“Yeap. Totally hot. Got in the mood cause I saw Jack’s latest tape. Seen it?”

“No. B-But, I mean ... I’ve seen that kinda stuff, in person.” The little vampire’s eyes drifted up and down Jessy’s body, and then up to Eric’s head, where it naturally came forward from his shoulders, and hovered over his mate. “He’s really in control, isn’t he?”

“He is. He—” Jessy squealed openly as Eric lifted her up off the knot of his cock, and she pressed her arms down against her raised knees, forcing her back into his sternum as she quivered. “Fuck! Oh god, fuck that’s—nng!” She let out a heavy, deep groan, when he forced it back into her, and her body quaked again.

This time, he stayed inside her, every inch, and bounced her fast, making her moan between pants as he worked himself up to another orgasm.

When it came, he spread her legs more, making sure the little one could see everything, as he slowly worked his mate up and down a single inch. He normally thrust and thrust hard when cumming, but after the treat his mate had given him at the start of tonight, a part of him wanted to try that too. Slowly working her, milking his length, it was easier to focus on the pleasure as her trembling, soaked insides squeezed cum out of him.

It gushed out of his mate almost instantly, and the little vampire squeaked as she watched it pour down over his testicles. Heavy, thick seed that sent waves of bliss through him, demanding he fuck his mate until she squealed. But he didn’t. No, control, breathe. He went slow, using her body to milk his pleasure, and let her settle

from her own. And, let her friend watch, unafraid, or at least less afraid.

“Oh my god. You’re g ... g-gonna have a lot to clean up.” The little vampire hugged herself as she looked down at the mess on the floor, and then up to Jessy’s body. “He looks like he m-might ... puncture your diaphragm.”

“Ha! I’m fine. Fine...” His mate ran her hands up and down her body, caressing her skin and massaging his cum into it, before she reached down, and cupped his testicles. As his cum flowed out of her, it splashed over her wrists and palms, and she groaned as she lifted her hands again to rub her newly soaked fingers against her distended abs.

The little vampire looked up at him. “Eric, you um ... you’re ... wow.”

“Natasha,” he said, voice that choppy bark sound. “Mate likes ... when you watch.”

His mate’s friend smiled. “I’m j-just ... wow, you’re really in control. And, um...” She looked Jessy up and down a few times, but it was him her eyes lingered on. “You’re ... really hot.”

He rumbled a purr, earning a tiny squeak from the tiny vampire, and a deep groan from his mate. He let go of her legs, allowing them to settle down between his own, and grabbed his lover’s hips and waist. And slowly, he started to bounce her on his cock again.

“Again? Fuuuuu ... uuu ... uuuuck.” Jessy collapsed back against him, spread her legs, let her arms go limp, and lay against his chest as he masturbated with her body. And her little vampire friend watched.

~/♥♥♥~

## Chapter 138

~~Natasha~~

Finally, they were done. Took them forever, and the worst part about it, was Tash couldn't stop watching! She watched, and watched, and by the time Eric was done with Jessy, she was an utter wreck, a trembling, mewling, worn out mess of limbs. Tash thought her sessions with the boys could get silly long and messy, but this was a whole new level of fantasy.

Eric looked down at the — mostly — naked woman on his lap, before looking at Tash again. So scary, with the huge teeth, the predator eyes, and the utterly massive muscles that his short fur did nothing to hide. He had abs. Abs! Why would a furry creature have abs? Tash stared at them, and him, and then his stomach some more, as the enormous beast lifted the exhausted girl off his length, and set her on the couch beside him.

Werewolf penis. Huge, werewolf penis, covered in—

She shook her head, hard enough to bounce her brain around in her skull, and turned her backs to them.

“Eric! You should ch-change back! And Jessy, g-g-get cleaned up! And dressed.”

Jessy laughed, voice wavering. “He's just a big, sexy puppy, isn't he?”

Tash rolled her eyes, but looked back over her shoulder. He was so huge, and his shaft was absolutely massive, and ... werewolfy. She shook her head again and looked away.

“Sorry,” Eric said, voice changing mid word. The couch creaked and squeaked, announcing the man’s change back into human form. Once the squeaking stopped, Tash heard some shuffling. “I’ll just throw us in the shower real quick.”

Tash nodded, and moved into the kitchen. Jessy’s apartment wasn’t too dissimilar to Tash’s, just a little dirtier, but still had the usual Dolareido feel. Streamlined, blacks and silvers, everything sleek and expensive. The stools weren’t comfortable, but they were pretty; Dolareido’s motto for pretty much everything. It was better than being in the living room, where those two had made such a mess, Jessy would have to hire an Invictus cleaning crew to deal with it. They cleaned up blood, they could clean up werewolf semen. Or maybe it changed back into more reasonable amounts, when Eric changed back? Her dragon curiosity demanded she ask, and she promptly shut it up.

She glanced over her shoulder, and smiled as she got a peek of Eric’s naked body from behind, as he carried Jessy in his arms. The Gangrel was still shaking all over, but smiling like a giddy school child, and she grinned at Natasha passed Eric’s arm as the man took her into the bathroom.

They didn’t keep her waiting long. Five minutes, enough to get all the white stuff off them, and get Jessy into something a little more comfortable and decent than a thong and nipple pasties. Jessy came back in baggy, pink pajamas, because yes, she had big pink pajamas, as if it was her personal goal to not be stereotyped. Eric came back wearing some jeans, and nothing but jeans, and Natasha peeked at his body more than a few times as they came into the large kitchen with her. He wasn’t as big as Matt or Art, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t utterly gorgeous.

And, she couldn’t help but picture the werewolf now, the huge beast, with huge ... everything.

“So, Tash,” Jessy said, “apparently you’ve been keeping secrets from me?”

Uh oh.

“Um, I—”

“Jack brought me to see Azamel a month ago. He spilled the beans there, about this whole ‘dark presence’ or whatever.” She finger quoted dark presence, too. “Apparently, a bunch of you guys knew about this thing, and what it may or may not be doing, and have been investigating it without me. Like, Jack thinks that tear Eric and me went through to save him from that scary ghost place was this thing’s doing? Etcetera, etcetera.”

“Oh ... Oh.” She squirmed as she looked down at the countertop. “I—”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jessy hopped onto the stool beside her, and in typical Jessy fashion, rubbed Tash’s shoulders like nothing was wrong. “I mean yeah, I was angry at first. We’re best friends, and you didn’t tell me this big thing? Like, fucking hell, my feelings.” She touched her chest with her free hand, feigning deep offense.

Tash didn’t say anything. But she did sigh and lower her head, hiding her face behind waves of her black hair. Guilt was a shitty feeling.

“But Jack, the asshole, put it in perspective. Big nasty secret like this? Made sense to keep it secret, even from me. I can be a loud person, I know that. Must have been tough on ya.”

“So Jack—”

“Needed me to cover his six until Damien was healed up. And Eric”—she gestured to her boyfriend, who stood in the kitchen—“is

slowly learning more about it, too. Cause, ya know, werewolf. Spirits and shit. There's a connection somewhere there, between Black Blood, who Jack is convinced isn't a normal spirit, and the Shadow Realm and all that stuff."

"Y-Yeah." Apparently, Jack had let Jessy in on everything. Everything everything, if he told her about his concern with Black Blood. That meant Jessy had to be careful around Jacob, and not let him know that they suspected him and his so-called spirit friend.

"This what we were gonna talk about tomorrow?" Eric asked.

Jessy laughed and shrugged. "Kinda, yeah, but with Tash here, figured we should probably talk about it now."

"I'm sorry I d-d-didn't tell you, I—"

"Tash. Seriously, come on." Jessy leaned over her and hugged her. "Important shit is important. You didn't tell me cause the less people that knew, the better. Much as our friendship is important, the city at large is a little more important, right? Not like I'd be happy if our friendship got everyone killed."

She groaned. Of course Jessy had to say that, cause now all she could think about was Matt and Art.

Jessy chuckled. "I know that groan."

"N-No you don't."

"Yes I do. Tash, come on, you gotta talk to them."

"I will! With Jack. Later. W-When things are better." When Avery and the pack calmed down, healed, and hopefully wouldn't be looking for any excuse for a fight. And when Tash didn't get furious just thinking about Art staking her through the heart.

“K, well, my two cents? Jack’s definitely put a more logical spin on this, and I gotta give the kid credit, he thinks with his head on straight. The boys did you wrong, but they had good reason. Give them a chance to make up for it.” Jessy had said those words before, just last week actually, but now that Tash knew she’d known about the secret, and had been keeping that a secret from Tash, the words meant more. Jessy had her own, personal context now. Tash keeping a secret from her wasn’t nearly as bad as what Art and Matt did to Tash, but it was still in the same ballpark.

“The P-Prince, she wants me to ... to um ... ask them to do something.” Something she knew Avery would say no to, but would ultimately be the boys’ choice, not Avery’s.

It hadn’t been Antoinette’s idea. It’d been Natasha’s. But she hadn’t been serious!

Sighing, she looked at Eric again, and the man raised a brow as Natasha managed to meet his gaze. His werewolf form, the big deadly Gauru form, had been terrifying. But he’d been in control, really good control, enough that he’d managed to calm down and do exactly what Jessy wanted: show off how good they looked having sex. He really wasn’t the same as the others.

“If the b-boys agree to the Prince’s demand, it’ll get ... dangerous, for me.”

Jessy hugged her again. “Then it’s a good thing you know a girl with a sexy city wolf to help you out.”

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“B-Boys have too much influence on our second lives!” She thudded her fist against the table, squeaked, snapped a hand out, and steadied one of the stranger occult objects before it fell over.

The Prince and Elaine blinked at her, looked at each other, before Elaine shrugged and returned to her typing. Antoinette chuckled,

and pulled some of hair over her shoulder to comb it with her fingers, while she continued typing on her laptop with her other hand. The four women sat in the Prince's primary experiments chamber, the one with the crazy chandelier, and they had a bunch of artifacts on the table in front of them, including Elen's, and the strange necklace Antoinette had received so long ago that'd summoned a spirit, who'd warned them about Maria.

Samantha was there too, and she laughed as she held one of the strange objects, a shrunken head, and took pictures of it at different angles. Not to squeamish anymore.

“They do?”

“Yes! W-We make too many decisions, based on what the men in our lives are d-doing.” She frowned down at her laptop, closed it, and folded her arms across her chest. “I don't like that. I'm sick of it.”

The two elders grinned, knowing grins, but Samantha laughed harder, a hearty, warm sound. Samantha was fun. She didn't have the experience or wisdom of the elders, and she was nice enough to roll with whatever someone said. Natasha could say stupid things, complain about stupid things, and while Antoinette or Elaine would listen, and then offer some very valuable advice, Samantha would just listen. That was preferable, sometimes.

“Guilty,” the young Daeva said, “I mean, about making decisions with men in mind. I dunno. I just ... can't help but think about romance, when I make life choices. Maybe it's cause I was still human, not long ago, but the idea of dying alone was pretty terrifying, you know?”

“But you are immortal now,” Antoinette said. “Age is of no concern.”



Samantha nodded. “I know. But the reflex is still there. I keep thinking: oh, what sort of apartment should I move into? Will it be big enough for a man to live there, too?”

The two elders and Tash laughed. Ok, Tash might not have been able to go a night without thinking about her boyfriends, it’d been weeks since she last spoke to them, but she didn’t frame things like that anymore. Where to live? Would she have enough money? Or the classic, what school would their kids go to? Those thoughts had long died.

“It is indeed, all relative,” Antoinette said. “We are Kindred now, and most of those instincts will slowly fade away. But the instincts were there for a reason. It is not the man who must carry a child for nine months, nor deal with nearly as much oxytocin for the child, post birth. The desire for a provider, in human women, is nothing to be ashamed of.”

Elaine nodded. “Evolution is a cruel bitch.”

The Prince grinned at her friend before looking back to Tash. “But, evolution arguments aside, do you not enjoy considering romance, in your life choices?”

Tash sighed and sat back in her seat. It was true. Much as she sometimes told herself otherwise, she liked thinking about romance, a lot. She was one of those girls who liked stupid stuff like romcoms. Watching them could be painful, cause the characters were always beyond idiotic, but still, she liked them.

“Natasha,” the Prince continued, eyeing her, “I can see where your mind wanders. Do not think less of yourself, for indulging your feminine side.”

“And consider,” Elaine said, “that masculine and feminine mentalities are not absolutes, limited to biological sex, or even opposites on a spectrum. There is overlap, and there is nuance.”

“Indeed. Both sexes are capable of both ways of thinking. Though gender proclivities do exist.” Antoinette tapped her chin, thinking. “I digress. My point is, you should feel no shame over thinking about romance more often than a man might, the same as a man should feel no shame over finding explosions so enthralling.”

Tash snorted on a giggling laugh. “I suppose.”

“When you get to our age,” Elaine said, “those old holdovers from your first life will fade into nothing. Mostly.” The two elders shared a grin. “But you will miss it. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to make any choice in my second life based on a man — or woman — I might have feelings for. I have not made such a decision in centuries.”

Antoinette nodded. “And as much as I love your son, Samantha, my goal with Dolareido is not something I would alter, simply to placate him. The city is a labor of love, mine, and I would ask Jack to consider that, in decisions we might make.”

The young Daeva nodded. “Of course. He understands that. That’s my boy for you.”

They all nodded. That was Jack. As long as what you were doing made logical sense, he’d accept it. Weird as his relationship with the Prince was, the pair really did make a strange sort of sense.

“Quite right,” Antoinette said. “And, when you reach our age, you may very well wish a man was the reason you made certain decisions.”

“Or, you know, men,” Samantha said, gesturing to Tash with a warm smile.

Tash squirmed in her seat. “You’re the one d-dating a whole covenant!”

“What? I’m not...” Samantha buried her face in her hands. “Oh god, who told you?”

Natasha laughed, reached out, and touched the woman’s elbow. “S-Sorry. But, yeah, Kindred know. Antoinette didn’t tell me either. Someone p-probably said something pretty innocent, and then someone asked more, and ... yeah, information spreads.”

Samantha squirmed more, but managed to lower her hand and smile at Tash. “I’m being really dumb, aren’t I? Still being shy about stuff.”

Natasha shook her head. “It was a lot longer for me b-before I was able to, um, be a little more open about stuff. You’re ahead of me.” If it was really a race. Unlike the Prince, Natasha didn’t think sexual openness was necessarily a good thing. Not everyone had to embrace orgies.

Jessy seemed to actually be happier, now that she was having sex with one person, instead of four. Course, that one person could transform into a giant beast, and fill the girl up to the point Natasha had been thoroughly concerned something would rupture inside her. But the Gangrel liked it, and it was obvious she also really liked how blatantly dominant Eric was, when they fucked with him transformed. Girl probably liked switching it up, being in charge when Eric was in human form, and then giving in when he transformed and got those large ... large ... very large hands on her.

It reminded Tash of her boys. Her boys? She had no idea if they were still her boys. She hadn’t spoken to them in six weeks, and it was killing her.

“I should stop being ashamed,” Samantha said, smiling to herself as she took more pictures of her artifact. “It’s been ... a breath of fresh air. The freedom is exhilarating.” She fiddled with her necklace, and after a few seconds, clutched it tight. “Mary is happy for me. She’s, um, a little hard to talk to, being, you know, a ghost ...

And because it's so naughty! Hard to tell my daughter anything about it. But she's happy I'm enjoying myself, with Jacob and, uh, the witches." Before she could continue, she caught herself, shaking her head and frowning. "Sorry. I make it sound like the stuff I had to deal with before I was a vampire was hard. It's nothing compared to what you ladies deal with all the time."

Natasha was going to interject, and defend Samantha. She lost her daughter, of course she should have trouble with that. But Antoinette raised a hand, just slightly, enough to get everyone's attention.

"It is all relative, my childe. We adapt to our environments. The trials you faced, losing a husband, and raising two children? A massive hurdle, considering your world. Then to lose your son, and push on? Come now, Samantha. Impactful novels have been written about women who have struggled through such pain. And then, after what Angela did? You have more than earned the right to indulge yourself. Heal your soul."

"Heal the soul." Samantha smiled as she held her necklace. "Jacob and the witches are, uh, certainly helping me relax."

"How's Triss?" Tash asked. "I haven't t-talked to her in a while."

Samantha squirmed, and a hundred emotions ran across her face so fast, Tash couldn't identify them.

"She's good. She's a lot happier now, thanks to Jennifer. I, uh, didn't expect her to ... um..."

"Beatrice," Antoinette said, "was once a simple Carthian, a rebel with little in the way of a cause. Now, she is a witch, and every witch I have ever dealt with has had a certain confidence when it came to ... sexual exploration. Julias's death has scarred her, surely, but witches will embrace sexuality for reasons others would not consider. Healing the soul, as I said, or to make a fellow Kindred

feel welcome. Like a hug.” The white-haired woman grinned at Samantha. “I suggest you do not mention Julias to her, if you should ever find yourself in a sexual situation with her. She is healing, in a way that witches heal. Do not feel guilty if you indulge of her as well.”

Tash raised a brow as she looked at her boss, but wiped her eye to hide it. Antoinette was being awfully forthcoming, with her childe and getting close to the witches. Really close.

Not that what she said didn’t make sense. Witches, and all Kindred really, didn’t treat sex like humans did, and it probably paid to remind her very, very young childe that. But Jacob was a scary man. Getting so involved with the witches, no matter the reason, even sexy reasons, was dangerous.

After a few minutes of thinking, Samantha spoke up.

“But you’re right,” she said, gesturing to Natasha. “We’re vampires, not human women anymore. Focusing on romance all the time is dumb.” She didn’t sound too convinced.

“Perhaps,” Elaine said. “But I have been single for a very, very long time. I would be remiss to suggest that romance is not worth the effort.” Nodding, the elder leaned forward over her laptop and looked at Natasha. “Have you thought of a punishment for your two delicious lovers, yet?”

Ugh, not that. She held Elaine’s eyes for a moment, before she outright whined, and let her head land hard on the table. “I ... d-did. I didn’t think it was a good idea, but the Prince says it is. I haven’t t-talked to them in six weeks, though. I d-don’t even know if—”

Elaine shook her head. “Nonsense. Those boys will jump through hoops to win your heart back.” The most evil smile Natasha had ever seen snuck onto the woman’s face. “You are a woman. Dare I

say, it is in a woman's nature, to make men dance through hoops. And it is a woman's nature to, perhaps, enjoy it a little?"

Tash frowned at the ancient woman, but all that did was make Elaine chuckle, and return to her work. Yeah, a lot of women loved to make men do absurd stuff to win them over. Manipulation. A relationship built on manipulation was a horrible idea! And she wouldn't do it.

She could, she knew that. Some doe eyes, a trembling lip, and the boys would probably break and do whatever she wanted, assuming they were still interested in her. But the very idea of doing that made her want to puke, and then hurt any woman who did that to her man. Or men, in her case.

"Natasha's suggestion was a perfectly reasonable one," Antoinette said. "But she is hesitant."

"It could cause p ... p-problems, if they say no..."

"Problems have already been created. Avery knew she overstepped herself, attacking Maria, but in that circumstance, it is on the Second Estate to defend their position. The pressure I can put on the werewolf for that blunder is, ultimately, not as strong as what I can place on her for daring to attack one of the dragons of this city. For that, she must pay. And if you do not collect, Natasha, then I will collect myself, and Daniel and I will be considerably less delicate."

She gulped, and nodded. "Yes, Prince."

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Elaine and Antoinette left. Business, according to them. What sort of business they were up to, Natasha had no idea, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know. She was still struggling with knowing that some sort of dark, mysterious force was working in Dolareido, and in all likelihood, up to no good. Jack had updated her and Damien

about his suspicions it was Black Blood, and that made Jacob all the scarier.

“So,” Samantha said, stuttering and squirming a little. “Jessy. Um, she really ... has sex with Eric, when transformed?”

Oh god not another one.

“You c-could ask her yourself, any time. She’s completely, t-totally shameless.”

“I could, I could. But she’s, um, a little intimidating.”

Tash giggled. “Jessy’s just very upfront ab-bout what she likes.” Shrugging, Tash pushed Elen’s strange book aside. “Another one for storage.”

Samantha nodded, grabbed the book, and set it beside the pile of other weird artifacts. Her eyes lingered on the book for a second, before she fiddled with her necklace a couple times, and looked back to Tash.

“A lot of vampires seem to be very upfront about the things they like.”

Tash laughed and shook her head. “N-Not all of us.”

Samantha smiled at her. “True. You’re a lot more reserved. Every vampire I’ve seen half your age is, um, willing to do ... well, anything, anywhere.”

“Mekhet d-don’t like to get involved as quickly as other Kindred.” Much as she tried, she couldn’t help but grin a little at the new dragon. “Daeva ... are sort of the opposite.”

Samantha squirmed, but smiled too. “I thought maybe Antoinette, and Elaine, were maybe peer pressuring me a little. Not to sound

mean! Just, they're both very ... sexually aggressive."

"They are, b-but it's not because they're asshole teenagers who want to make you conform. Antoinette in particular, she knows w-what she's doing. If she asks you t-to do something, there's a very good chance it'll be good for you. It might make you happy, or b-better yourself for the future." Antoinette played the long game better than any of them.

"That's true. They're so old, and wise. But sometimes I do think they're, um, a little disconnected, from the reality for a fledgling like me, you know? Every night, I feel like I'm a little girl, overwhelmed with every new experience."

"Is Jacob helping? Or ... t-taking advantage?" Gently now. If she made Jacob sound like the villain she was sure he was, Samantha might get defensive.

Samantha sat back and thought about it. She might have been only a fledgling, but she was still a full grown woman in nine years, with plenty of experience under her belt. If Jacob was taking advantage of her, she'd know. Or, maybe not. There were lots of stories of older women being taken advantage of by scheming men, and vice versa.

"He's helping. He had my permission, the first time things got sexual. And the ... following time. After that, he um, stopped asking, but not because he wanted to take advantage of me. He learned what I liked."

Natasha returned the woman's shy smile. It'd been like that with Art and Matt, too. The first few times, she had to give them permission to do things to her. After that, once they were doing sexual things, the boys felt comfortable enough to surprise her, sometimes with some very kinky or rough play. And—



And stop thinking about the boys. You're a vampire, newly in your ancilla years. You're powerful. You're ex-Right Hand, and now you're a dragon of the Ordo Dracul. Antoinette wants you to investigate extremely dangerous ... things, about the nightlife of Dolareido, because she trusts you. Stop acting like an idiot little girl.

"That's good," Tash said. "Jacob has been ... d-difficult to understand, since Minerva died."

"Ah, right, Minerva." The young Daeva frowned, and leaned forward toward Tash, elbows on the table. "Jacob talks about her, sometimes."

"He ... d-does?" Tash blinked at her, several times. "He doesn't talk about Minerva with ... anyone."

Samantha sighed, nodding. "I can see why. It hurts him, when he does. And he doesn't talk about her much."

"It's a little strange, f-for your boyfriend to talk about their ... dead girlfriend, isn't it?"

The Daeva shrugged. "A little. But it's obvious he hasn't talked about her with anyone. And, he's so old, so ancient, that talking with him isn't like talking with a normal man. I can tell him anything, and he understands. I don't need to navigate any male ego."

"That must be nice."

"Ha. Come on, Art and Matt didn't sound like they had any ego problems."

"They are nice ... boys. Dumb, s-stupid boys."

Samantha nodded apologetically. "With Jacob, there's none of that. And it's not like we talk about anything sexual, when we talk about our past. But, I tell him about James sometimes, about how

we met, and how we fell in love. He talks about Minerva, and I can tell he's moved on, same as me. But, there is something there, something lingering around, and ... I don't know. James dying was horrible, and it scarred me, badly. Then what happened with Jack, and then Mary, so much worse. But he knows exactly what to say to me about it. But with Minerva, it's like, her death left ... something else, something more than just grief." She shrugged and sat back. "I don't know. It's a very weird relationship. I'm happy to be in it, but yeah, very weird."

Natasha absorbed, and did her best to not let Samantha realize she was saying very important information. No one knew much about Jacob. Even Antoinette said the man was a mystery, and she knew him better than anyone. Which might have meant that Antoinette let the man date her child, because she saw it as a way to learn more about the mystery man. Was that the main reason she let the relationship happen, or maybe even nudged Samantha toward Jacob? To learn more about him? Or was it all just a happy accident?

"I d-don't envy you. I mean, it must be amazing, dating such a wise man, and, um, being so close with his circle, and—"

Samantha giggled, reached out, and pat Natasha's hand. "You may think it's dumb to talk about boys, but I haven't been able to talk about boys in years!"

"Years?"

"After James died, I didn't date again. That was over ten years ago."

"That's ... a long time."

Samantha smiled, pat Tash's hand again, and sat back. A sensitive topic, surely, but the look on her face said she'd been through this conversation before.

“I’d been with him for a long time, when he died. We married young, and had Mary young.”

Right, Samantha was in her forties when she was embraced. Late forties, even. She looked beautiful.

“You d-don’t look like you’re in your forties, you know.”

The Daeva beamed. “Well, Mary really helped me get my life together. A couple years of taking care of myself did a lot to turn me around. But, as much as Mary was insistent, I ... never really talked to her about, you know, guy stuff.”

“She—”

“Oh, she told me about her boyfriends, but she was only in a couple relationships. And she didn’t talk to me about sexual stuff. I’m her mother. And, I didn’t talk to her about sexual stuff, cause I’d pretty much just be talking about James, her father, and...”

“Those would be some ... awkward c-conversations.”

“Exactly. And sure, I tell Mary about stuff sometimes now, but ... but talking to her now is hard. And sometimes I tell Antoinette about stuff, but she always has that, um, teacher aura, right? It can be annoying sometimes, talking to someone who knows everything, and has done everything.”

Natasha smiled. “Are you saying I d-don’t know anything?”

“What? No! No, that’s not—”

Tash laughed. “No no, I get it. I ... d-definitely didn’t do much socializing, for a long time. After Daniel sired me, everything was so ... scary. I didn’t handle it well. I ran, and the closest thing I could understand was the Invictus. I met Jessy, and ... Julias.” Natasha couldn’t help but laugh some more, silly memories dancing through

her head. “Jessy, she ... has d-definitely been an aggressive person, for a long time.”

“Maybe I’ll talk to her more, in the future. She’s intimating, but nice. She did lend me her ghouls.” Samantha grinned and drew a few lines in the table with her fingers. “Jacob says I should have slept with them when I had the chance.”

“They’re ... they’re very talented.”

Samantha blinked at her, before erupting into giggles. “Jessy?”

“Jessy. She ... she was there, and she s-sorta ... convinced me ... to join her.”

A perfect opportunity for Samantha to start teasing her. But, she didn’t. She smiled like a shy, guilty little girl, and nodded.

“I’ll tell you a little, if you tell me a little?”

Tash laughed. “D-Deal.”

---

~~Damien~~

Damien smiled at the little redhead beside him. She’d crawled into bed with him again. She had the key to his apartment, but none of the barriers he had up against his bedroom door were moved, boxes of clothes and whatnot. They served no purpose other than to let him know if someone had come into his room while he slept through the day. But he knew Fiona could get into his room without moving the door if she wanted. And she had. Scary.

He rolled under the covers, faced her, and laughed. She was facing away from him, and wearing one of her nighties, green, loose, and partly see-through. Judging from the sound of her breathing, she’d fallen asleep. And judging from the nightie, she’d planned to surprise him for some wake-up sex, but had apparently been

impervious to the draw of sleep. Probably fell asleep maybe twenty minutes ago.

So naturally, he did what any man would do when presented with this situation. A human man would likely use the bathroom upon waking and return, but not a vampire. He was free to press his naked body against his lover's back, slip an arm up her stomach under the nightie, and lean over her to set a kiss on her neck as his hand found her breasts.

“Nnnn.”

“Good evening,” he said, and he kissed her neck as he gently cupped the underside of her higher breast in his fingers and palm, and squeezed. Softly of course, enough so the huge breast's supple skin and great weight molded to the shape of his hand.

“Mmng.” Fiona squirmed a little, but settled again, and didn't move. “Mmm.”

This was, according to various sources — Jack and Jessy — a special right men were given once ‘I loves yous’ were exchanged. If the woman was still in bed while the man was waking, and the woman was also supposed to wake but hadn't, he was allowed to play with her breasts. Considering how deep a sleeper Fiona was, and how long it took her to wake up, the first time he'd tried it she hadn't resisted him at all.

“I like the nightie.”

“Mm.”

“Did you plan to entice me with it, when I woke up?”

“Mmhmm.”

“It's working.”

“Nmmm.”

He chuckled, a sound he was growing more and more used to every night, and kissed her neck some more. As he did, he caressed her breast, sliding his fingers around and teasing her skin, and soon her large nipple. Every so often he squeezed a little harder, and shivered as his fingers sank into her enormous bust.

And then his phone rang. He lifted his head and glared at the nightstand, Fiona between it and him. But without so much as opening her eyes, Fiona reached for the stand, feeling around like she was fumbling blind, grabbed the phone, and tossed it over her shoulder at him, all very unwieldy. He had to snap his hand out from under her nightie to grab it.

She knew the deal. If he was getting a call, it wasn't some silly, social thing. It was business, and important business at that.

He answered. “Yeah Jack?”

“Damien, hey. How's the leg?”

Damien looked down at the sheets, and tried to move his regrown leg. It didn't listen.

“Returned, but unresponsive.” He could feel it, but it refused to obey commands, vitae unable to force muscle and tendon to function. It would likely work again in the next week or so, with the help of his girlfriend's potent blood helping him, but an injury from werewolf teeth was ten times worse than he could have imagined. It could take longer.

“I was afraid of that.”

“Sorry, Jack. Werewolf teeth—”

“It’s no problem. It’s not that sorta trip anyway. I was ... gonna see Matthew and Arturo, and talk to them, about ... things, I guess.”

Damien frowned. “Be careful. Bring Jessy if you need to.”

“I’ll think about it. Thanks.”

Damien ended the call, set the phone behind him, and looked back to Fiona. By the Lord, she’d fallen asleep again. Rolling his eyes, he returned to snuggling her back, and again snuck his hand up under her nightie to find her breasts.

“Mmmgmgmg.” The cute little shadow monster stirred up from her slumber, but only managed to open her eyes for a moment, look up at him, smile, before closing her eyes and melting to the pillow again. Looking down over her, he could see a wet drool spot on the pillow cover.

“Jack’s visiting Art and Matt today. I don’t know if he’ll be able to do much.”

“Tash loves them,” she whispered, “and they love her. It’ll be ... fine ... mmmm.”

Quite half asleep. He chuckled, kissed her neck some more, and hugged her against his chest. And once she was snug there, he took full advantage of the special rule, and resumed fondling her underneath her nightie. It wasn’t long before her nipples began to swell, barely, but they did, and he could smell the growing arousal on his girlfriend.

“I love you,” he whispered into her ear.

“Nnnmmmm.”

“Should I let you sleep?”

“N ... no ... Wake me up.” Her words didn’t match her request. She snuggled into the pillow, and returned to drooling.

Wake her up, she said. He smiled, kissed her neck again, and fondled her breasts some more. Heavy, soft, addictive to touch. He could easily roll her over, and do all sorts of things to those breasts. And she’d love indulging him.

But, much as Fiona enjoyed having her breasts played with, and had indulged him many times in the past, it wasn’t what she really loved. So, he sat up, slowly pulled the blankets down so she wouldn’t notice, before he yanked her up onto his lap.

“Mmmmwha? What’s—eep!” She meeped as he set her pelvis over his lap, ass in the air.

And with a grin, he gave it a nice, wake up slap. Her meep turned into a squeak, and her elbows planted on the bed.

“Do me a favor?” he asked.

“What? What, I’m awake! I’m—nnng!” She squeaked again as he spanked her, before resting his hand on her ass, and softly kneaded the meat of it. Lovely, soft, pale skin. No freckles either. A large butt that felt absolutely wonderful in his palm. He teased it, massaged it, slid his fingers up and down it, from tailbone to thigh, before he gave it another, playful slap.

The result was immediate. Fiona didn’t always need a roleplay scenario to enjoy a spank, he’d learned over the past few weeks. She didn’t need to always be put into an extreme, submissive situation. She didn’t need to be Kissed, and rendered helpless. Often, she was plenty happy when he simply pulled her over his lap, and spent time admiring her lovely, amazing ass, and giving it a slap or three, or twelve.



With her doting on him the past six weeks, he'd gotten used to her being around a lot, and he continued to be surprised with how much he enjoyed it. Anyone else, even Jack, and he'd tell them to give him some space. But Fiona? He wanted her around. A lot. He wanted to hear her laugh, giggle, and talk about silly things he normally wouldn't care about, like movies or celebrity gossip.

And he really liked the squeaks she made, when he spanked her.

"Can you keep an eye on Jack for me tonight?"

"But, I thought ye said he was seeing Matt and Art tonight?"

"He is, but I don't trust the Uratha."

She looked over her shoulder at him, something of a frown and smile on her lips. "Aye, me neither. Except for Eric! He's yum."

Damien rolled his eyes, and spanked her again.

---

~~Jack~~

Jack didn't get five feet out the door before his phone rang. He had a mission tonight, for a friend, but he couldn't ignore this message. He kinda wished he had.

He got a ride to the Xnomina HQ, and stepped in through the front door.

"Mister Terry. Mister McDonald is waiting for you upstairs."  
Gloria Jennings sat at her desk, beautiful, in the reserved way most Mekhet preferred. She wasn't actually a receptionist, but she spent a lot of her days playing the role for Xnomina. He'd met her, on the first night he'd been embraced, when Julias took him to this building to see the council.

There was no more council, just Michael McDonald, an asshole with a chip on his shoulder.

“Madam Jennings, how’s your childe? Miss Pol and I haven’t talked in some time.” He could still remember talking with Amanda on several nights, when they had to worry about hunters. Hell, she’d helped him spy on his mom and sis. A fucking lifetime ago.

Gloria met his eyes, winced, and looked back down at the screen of her computer. “Yes, Mister Terry. She’s fine. Been in a few brawls with the Carthians though. She lost an eye.”

His turn to wince. “She’ll regrow it, I’m sure.”

“Mekhet don’t regenerate as well as others. She’s young, and ... it’ll take some time.”

He stepped in closer. Apparently a mistake, because she slid her chair back a few inches when he did.

He stopped, sighed, and looked away. “Know who hurt her? Which Carthian?”

“No. It was a brawl. Some random shot from a pistol.” Which meant more than just losing an eye. That was a damn heavy wound for a young Mekhet to suffer.

Nodding, he walked past her, and didn’t look back. Easier to imagine she wasn’t carefully avoiding getting too close to him, even though he knew she was.

She was scared of him.

He looked to other Kindred as they stepped off the elevator. Isabella Leauvion nodded to him, but walked past him with a bit more hurry than usual. Her new childe Danny, following her sire close, gave him a wide berth. Bruce, an old friend of Julias’s and a

Ventruue, met his eyes for only a moment before stepping around him, far around him. Vicky and Parker, the pair that loved running schemes in Devil's Corner, literally turned around when they saw him, and took the elevator down a floor. Probably to take one of the hidden exits, just so they wouldn't have to get close to him. Those two were assholes, but at least they were honest about it.

They were happy he'd kicked the hunters' asses, and that they could go about their second lives as usual again, barring the fight with the Carthians. They were happy, but scared of him. After hearing about what he did to Avery, scared elevated to terrified.

It's not like Jack had fought them all in a vacuum. They'd been injured already by Damien, and Maria had put on some damage on Avery too.

He sighed and shook his head. True as that was, they'd still been in good shape, and most of the pack had been unharmed. He'd defeated twelve werewolves, on his own, and everyone in the whole city knew it. The only vampires not avoiding him, were his friends, and his boss.

He clutched the necklace Elaine gave him, and took the elevator up.

Elaine. He still had trouble figuring her out. Whatever scheme she had, whatever her plans, they involved the curse. Except, meeting him had put a stop to those plans. Maybe? If he had to take a stab in the dark, he figured Elaine came to take the curse from him, now that it'd been freed. She definitely missed the power it used to give her, even when locked up, and probably regretted her decision to get her curse removed. Hopefully his talk with her helped her understand how bad an idea that was.

He trusted her. He didn't trust her. It was weird. It was how vampires did things, a mix of trust and mistrust, and he really fucking hated it. For someone as old as Elaine or Antoinette, it was

natural. To him, it was very, very much not. He wanted to be honest, about everything, all the time, and every single time he took a step into the real world, it quickly became apparent that he shouldn't be, couldn't be. He needed to play the game, the Danse Macabre, and get used to doing it in his sleep.

So, as he stepped into Michael's office, he put Danse Macabre on repeat in his skull. Play the game.

"Mister Terry. Welcome. Come, sit." The big guy gestured to the office table.

Jack bowed his head slightly. "Mister McDonald." He took a seat, putting only four feet between him and his boss.

Michael was a big man, bodybuilder build, white, with a shaved head and several tattoos. He even had several piercings on his face, though on him, they made him look like some sort of underworld boss, instead of a Carthian. Which was basically accurate. He was an underworld boss, and had the history to back up his tough guy routine.

"How goes your latest task?" Michael asked.

"The Carthians aren't going to let go of the Mirrden district without a fight, sir. I wasn't able to approach."

Michael sighed and leaned back in his office chair. "I suppose it was too much to hope that the rumors spreading about you would be enough to scare them off."

Jack shook his head. "I had three laser sights on my chest the moment I got out of the car."

"Which you could have easily survived."

Well, technically any vampire could survive a few bullet wounds. A gun pointed at a vampire was a mild threat, but still a threat, and he'd have been stupid to take it lightly.

“Did you want me to get violent at the time, sir?”

“No. Not yet. But with Mister Burksen and Madam Turio not yet fully healed, I do find myself ... wondering if you should be using that curse of yours more aggressively, Mister Terry.”

It took a mountain of effort to keep a frown from forcing its way onto Jack's face.

“The curse isn't reliable, Mister McDonald.” Jack tapped the necklace on his chest. “It's going to backfire, and when it does, it'll be worse than anything my grandsire ever did.”

Michael let out a long, heavy sigh, and met Jack's eyes. Well, at least he was willing to do that. No one else in the Invictus was, except Jessy.

“Strong words, Mister Terry. Viktor Honors was a terror, more than you know.”

“I know quite a bit, sir. My sire shared some stories with me, and I've seen the dungeons in my mansion.”

“Right, the mansion. I trust it is being well kept?”

Jack smiled. “Been keeping an eye on me, sir?”

“Of course. You have become a valuable asset. And the mansion is valuable property.”

“My new thrall keeps good care of it, and she takes to her training well.” She wasn't as scared of guns as he thought she might have been. “And soon she'll have help. Plus, I have many animals

guarding the building, more than just my two friends. But ... you didn't call me in here to talk about the mansion."

"No. I called you here because Garry is going after the Tanvar building next."

"The Tanvar building? That's one of our factories in North Side."

"A re-purposed factory. An office building now, and it handles a lot of the transactions Xnomina deals in."

You didn't need a building to handle transactions anymore, unless the transactions were physical in nature. Office building? No, that was Xnomina talk for a building with dealers on site.

Xnomina dealt with a lot of illegal drugs, but they were pretty good about keeping it out of the hands of anyone under eighteen, and making sure proxy dealers did the same. They dealt in illegal weapons, but were pretty good at keeping it out of the hands of random thugs, preferring to support other companies that went up against ... well, other companies, doing equally dark shit. Jack didn't exactly like how dirty a company Xnomina was, but at the same time, they didn't cross any major lines.

He could ask what sort of shit Tanvar got their fingers into, or leave it a mystery. In the past, he'd have been more comfortable not knowing, and too afraid to ask someone as important and strong as Michael.

"What sort of black goods does Tanvar deal in?"

Michael managed a small grin. "Cigarettes and cigars."

"Really? That's it?"

"You'd be surprised how many places in the world consider them illegal; in particular, buying from third parties."

It was easy to forget sometimes that Xnomina didn't just have its hand in national businesses. It was international, like any large company, and happy to get its hands dirty in the shadow economy. Like any large company.

"I—oh, right, Terra Den."

"Exactly. Mister Tones's new friend has his eyes on many fields of business, and Terra Den is no stranger to the black market. I have some intelligence that shows Garry's men investigating the building."

"That's a little surprising. With Madam Turio and Mister Burksen still out of commission for a while, I thought he'd have pushed in on the government district." Where the Cathedral was, and where the Second Estate liked to sink their claws.

"He can't move in on Turio and Burksen directly. That area has too many clean eyes. And he knows that, while Turio is no longer a council member for the Invictus, she is still my partner. She'll help me. I'll help her."

"No one helped her when Avery attacked. I got no back up, no—"

Michael leaned forward, and held Jack's gaze. "We were there ten minutes after you were, Jack. If Avery had actually killed Maria that night, don't think I wouldn't have done something about it, either." The man had a damn hard gaze, like steel. He might not have been as old as the Prince or Jacob, but that didn't change that he was centuries old.

Jack sat back and nodded. First names. He used to think they'd make him calmer, but they didn't. Titles were a nice barrier between him, other Invictus, and the nasty realities they had to deal with.

"So you want me to keep an eye on the Tanvar building."

“Yes. I think Garry will get violent over this one, as well. Be prepared to defend yourself.”

Defend himself. He meant use the curse. Well fuck that.

“Yes sir.”

“And Jack. Maria told me what you did.”

Jack frowned at the man, but kept both hands on the arms of the hilariously expensive office chair. A quick snap of the hand to remove the necklace, and he could go all out and kick this man’s ass. Probably. Hopefully. And as long as nothing bad happened, the Ripper wouldn’t get to have a say.

“I see.”

The big man shrugged and shook his head. “I had no love for Lucas, Jack. The man was an even larger pain in my ass than Viktor.”

Some tension melted from Jack’s body.

“I thought the First and Second Estate always backed each other?”

“Hardly. The Invictus and the Lancea et Sanctum often cooperate, yes, but there are many cities where they do not. And this city was quickly becoming one. We remained their ally almost entirely due to Maria’s influence. When the Prince enacted the purge, the Invictus did not participate, as you know.”

“I assumed you didn’t want to go up against the Prince?”

“Jack, please. The council was a triumvirate, we had well over a hundred Kindred at the time, and it wouldn’t have taken much to convince Tony to join us against his sire. No, we didn’t go against the Ordo Dracul, because it didn’t serve us to. We knew the way the



wind was blowing, saw what was happening to Lucas, even Maria did.” Sighing again, Michael leaned in, elbows on the table, and met his eyes again. No steel this time, just a man looking to talk. “I don’t have to tell you that you should avoid Maria.”

“Ha, yeah.” He squirmed in his chair a little as he met his boss’s gaze again. “I hope she’ll come around.”

“She will, in time.”

“Has she ... told anyone else?”

“Not to my knowledge, but don’t be surprised if more people find out. There are a lot of eyes watching you, Jack. Jacob and Elaine, the most obvious, but others as well. Don’t think Isabella will hesitate to get her fingers into your brain if she can.”

Jack squirmed again. “I don’t like her.”

His boss laughed. Not something he usually did. “She’s the best type of enemy to have, one that can be your ally in the right circumstance.”

“And Elaine?”

“Elaine. Those few times she visited, she did well, hiding her relation to your grandsire. Her motives are difficult to discern at best, but I’ve got a few ideas.” Which meant he had a couple of well-thought-out possible plans, if he had to kill her. “She is a genuine dragon though, devoted, and everything I know suggests she is indeed an old friend of the Prince’s. You can trust her to some extent.”

Some extent. Ugh. He already trusted her to some extent. It was trusting her completely that he couldn’t bring himself to do, and probably something Antoinette didn’t either. For the Prince, that was perfectly normal, but it grated him. He liked his great grandsire,

even more after their conversation about how ... damaged, she was. A genuine, real, honest conversation, that didn't manage to fully answer the question: what exactly did she originally plan to do to him?

“I'll start hanging out in the Tanvar building then. Rules of engagement?”

“We're the defenders in this idiocy. You're in the clear to kill any ghouls or thralls that get violent.” Same as before then. “And if any of the Kindred get violent, I expect you to not only deal with them, and defend the facility, but I expect any Carthians that are willing to get directly aggressive to die.”

Jack winced and looked down. “You know that will trigger a war.”

“Yes, but if we don't stop the Carthians, they'll continue to march on us until we have nothing left.”

“That'd take them decades at this rate.”

“No. This is the pebble that starts the avalanche. If we let them have Tanvar, they'll be swarming our other projects in a matter of months. We stop them here and now, and if it gets to the point of actual war, then at least it will be on an even front.”

Sighing, Jack nodded and stood up. “Then, later tonight I will get familiar with the building.”

“Jack.” Michael didn't stand up, but he leaned back and looked at him, eyes hard again. “No one else knows that you have my permission to kill. And if the first death of this war is to happen, it makes sense it should be your kill.”

“Why?”

“Because, as much as Dolareido has become quite terrified of your curse, they also respect your mind, and your position. Your mind, because you tend to err on the side of logic. Your position, because you are lovers with the Prince, one of the founding members of Dolareido, and she is the persistent voice of cooperation, now matter how foolhardy such an ideology may be.”

“I happen to agree with her on a lot of things, Michael.”

A hint of a frown crossed the man’s face. Him referring to Jack without the title, fine, but Jack referring to him without one, not so fine. Well, fuck him.

“Deal with Carthians at the Tanvar building, Mister Terry. If you kill no one, but keep the building secure, then all is well. But I expect you to keep that building secure, no matter what Garry tries. Understood?”

“Understood.”

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“Sometimes, I really hate this fucking city.” He slipped his hand back into his jacket pocket, and Mulder and Scully, now with fully bellies, took off and found high perches to watch him from.

“Aw, dinnae say that! Ye love Dolareido.”

He groaned at Fiona and shook his head. “Not tonight I don’t. I fucking hate this place, and the vampires in it.”

Giggling, Fiona hooked his arm and half hugged it as they walked. Not many people around outside this time of night, this close to the Carthian district, so he felt comfortable saying words like ‘vampire’ and ‘fuck it all to fucking shit hell fuck’ loudly.

He wore his usual Invictus business suit. Fiona wore blue jeans and a brown leather jacket. She fit in well in the area, but Jack

didn't feel like fitting in, not now. He was kinda hoping someone would come close, start yelling, and give him a reason to get violent.

"I love it. I met Damien, and Jessy and Eric. And Azamel, and..."  
Uh oh, she said the A word. Her giggles vanished, replaced with snuffles, and she hugged his arm tight to her side as she snuggled into him. The Begotten were more a family than he had ever expected, a close family.

"You really like her, don't you?"

"Aye. She's been ... been great to us."

"You think Sándor will make a good replacement?"

She shook her head. "I mean, he'll be good, right? He'll protect us, and guide us, but Azamel was the grandma who knew how to be soft and hard."

"She's definitely wise, I'll give her that."

Fiona nodded, and loosened her grip a bit so they could start walking a little faster. "I'd have ne'er met her back home."

"Dolareido is pretty welcoming to paranormals by contrast to a lot of places, I guess. I ... want it to be better, but stupid shit keeps happening. Damien tell you what Garry's been up to?"

"Aye."

"But you know to stay out of it, right? I don't care what Garry or Michael or Maria do, let Kindred deal with that shit, ok?"

She groaned but nodded. "Aye. But tonight's not about that, right? Ye're gonna speak with the lads."

"If they'll listen. Not sure it's going to go the way Antoinette wants it to. Avery's not exactly the sort of type to let things go. She'll

go after Maria again, somehow, and she might take a swing at me too. Matt and Art, they're in her pack, her family. They might—"

"Nae true, lad! Love will prevail!" She wiped her nose free of sniffles, let go of him, and hopped around as she got ahead of him. This was a level of happiness he hadn't expected.

"You got laid this evening, didn't you?"

"Aye, I did, ye nosy fucker."

"Don't think I don't know you're dying to talk about your relationship."

She exploded into giggles and hopped over to him. "Maybe, but not with ye! I talk to Jessy and Natasha."

That was probably for the best. Jack doubted he could handle a conversation like that for five minutes.

"Well, for what it's worth, Damien's happy. I first met the guy when he was out to kill the Prince, and a bit after that, when that failed. Dude was royally messed up depressed. Took a while before I thought he wouldn't just ... wait for a sunrise to get him."

Fiona sighed and nodded as she filed in beside him again. "Aye. He needed ye. I'm glad yer his friend."

He smiled. "I'm glad you came along. He really needed someone like ... well, you." It wasn't exactly a secret that Damien had that 'emo vampire' vibe going on, and would have fit perfectly in a really shitty movie where he was basically a stalker for a typical Mary Sue idiot. Someone like Fiona, on the other hand, fit him much better.

"I am a pretty lass. The prettiest."

Uh oh. That was Jessy talking.

“You hang out with the Gangrel too much. Didn’t you used to date Eric? Isn’t that a bit awkward?”

“Nae. I mean, we did for a wee bit, but it didnae last. He’s too...”

“Old?”

She giggled and smacked his chest. “I guess that works.”

“Damien’s a lot older.”

“Aye but not in the same way, ye ken?”

Yeah, that was true. Damien had a lot of hate and depression built up, but it wasn’t over the same sort of shit Eric did. Jessy fit him better. She understood things like divorce, or shitty wages, on a level neither Fiona or Damien had ever really dealt with.

“So, Fiona, you’re a shadow monster, right?”

“Aye.”

“You probably sneak around a lot and keep up to date on things in the city?”

She grinned up at him. “A wee bit. It’s dangerous to be going around, sneaking in the dark.”

“Been watching the Uratha lately?”

“Aye.”

“Seen what Clara’s been up to?”

She grinned some more. “Aye.”

“And ... gonna tell me?”

“I dinnae think I should.”

Jack squirmed as he walked. “Come on. It’s not like that. I hurt her in that fight, really bad. I just want to know how she’s recovering.”

“Her arm’s grown back. Uratha are strong.”

“Crazy strong. Takes Kindred decades to get the strength they get in weeks.” Nodding, they turned a corner, and Jack took a few seconds to look around. The Carthian district, the edge of it, where Avery’s apartment was. “I’m glad she’s feeling better.”

“And I hear she’s been getting to know that hunter, Harcourt?”

He grit his teeth, but shook his head, shaking it off. That shouldn’t bother him. If anything, it was good she was hanging out with a hunter. It’s what Antoinette wanted, for the hunters here to realize the paranormals weren’t enemies. And Clara and Jack weren’t an item, couldn’t be an item, and it was better for her to move on.

The Beast in him didn’t agree. The Beast told him he should own everything he felt he wanted, control and dominate it. Clara was very attractive, and a werewolf. The Beast wanted him to sink his fangs into her, and more besides. It wanted to bind her with the Vinculum, turn her into his pet, and feast on her every night, even as it trained her to be his guard dog.

He sighed and clutched the necklace around his neck. Even with it, the Beast grew louder all the time. Nasty side effect of the necklace? Maybe.

“Good for her.”

Fiona giggled some more, but didn’t push the issue. She did start keeping a closer eye on the environment. Carthians were probably

watching from windows, and no doubt some of them had the hardware to snipe them from a distance. Jack would survive it, and then there'd be hell to pay. Fiona wouldn't, but the Begotten weren't their enemies.

Jack opened the door to Avery's apartment building. Brianna stood inside, leaning back against a wall, and glaring at him.

"The fuck? Thought you said—"

Jack held up hand. "Not here for that meeting. I'm here to talk to Matthew and Arturo."

Brianna folded her arms across her chest and glared some more. A somewhat tall woman, dark skin, with short black hair, she growled and considered. Jack was just thankful the woman wasn't attacking, with the look she had on her face.

"Brianna, come on," he said. "I'm not here to fight anyone. We can deal with that shit later. This is a personal visit." She continued to glare. "Fucking hell, come on. You want to see Derick and Santos again, right? This is just step one of my ninety-nine step plan to get everyone in this city singing kumbaya."

"We ain't fighting with anyone."

"Bullshit. After what happened, the werewolves are being treated like Garry's buddies, and you know it. When's the last time you even visited Bloodlust?"

She tried to glare at him some more, but her eyes fell after a time. "Not since the incident."

Christ, even she was calling it that.

"I'm just gonna get Matt and Art, we're gonna go for a walk, and talk."



“What’s to stop you from Dominating them?”

“Two Uratha at once? I’m good, Brianna, but not that good. Besides, the necklace is on, and it’ll stay on.”

She scrunched up her nose and considered some more. Jack almost started yelling. This was the problem. No one trusted anyone, and some trust was needed if he was going to fix any of these problems that were fucking exploding all over the damn city. If he had to—

“Fine. Wait here. Avery doesn’t want you in the building.” She pulled out her phone and sent a text. Finally, progress.

It took a bit, but Matthew and Arturo stepped down the old stairs eventually, dressed in jeans and t-shirts. No limp. They were healed. Next week, Jack would have to visit the whole pack, Avery included, with Tash, and try and fix the whole situation. This would be a good way to test the waters, and if possible, repair something.

He was good at fixing things. That’s what he did. Supposedly.

“Matthew. Arturo.” Jack said.

“Hey lads,” Fiona said.

“Fiona, Jack,” Art said, eyeing them with some obvious suspicion. “Why’re you here?”

Jack nodded toward the door. “Come with me.”

The boys looked at each other, then to Brianna. She shrugged and gestured to Jack with a half swipe, before she sat on a chair. Guard dog duty.

They followed him, though the two men kept a close eye on Jack as he left the building. In retrospect, Jack was damn glad Fiona was

with him. He was confident Garry's goons posed no threat, not in this situation, not if they didn't want to overstep themselves and piss off the Prince and the Invictus even more. But the werewolves? He wished he had Damien with him, but Fiona would have to do. And it wasn't like she couldn't help him out, maybe even more than his friend.

"Couldn't send a text?" Matt said. "We got phones in the city because you guys told us to."

Jack laughed, and not a happy one. "Yeah, cause I'm sure Garry didn't also suggest it."

Art snorted. "Did you come here to threaten us?"

"No. Came to have a chat, so follow me. I like to walk and talk." He didn't mean to sound so forceful. A few years ago, he would have struggled to say something so directly. Not because he didn't have the personality for it, he very much did, but because he wouldn't have felt comfortable holding power over others. How the times had changed.

Fiona bounced around a few times before she fell in beside Jack again, and the boys fell in behind him. He didn't actually plan to just walk around randomly. He was going somewhere, but it didn't matter for now.

"I didn't come get you to talk about the problems on our laps, about Maria and shit," he said. "I came to talk about Uratha getting along with Kindred, in general. Brianna, and you two, for example." He looked back at the two men. They both had their eyes downcast, frowning, and grumbling a little. "Brianna's situation sucks because of the Carthian Invictus stupid little war. Mason's isn't so bad, but I'm sure he'd prefer if his girlfriend didn't find herself at the other end of an Invictus shotgun. And then there's you two, the idiots that staked a dragon."

“We didn’t have a choice,” Art said.

Jack shook his head, “Let me put it in perspective, guys. If I was in Avery’s pack instead of working for the Invictus, and Avery told me I had to do something where I knew Antoinette would either try and stop me, or intervene in some way, risking her life, you know what I’d do?”

Matt lifted a hand. “You—”

“The situation wouldn’t have happened, guys. Cause even though, if I was you, I’d have trusted Avery, I wouldn’t have let things get ... like that.” They rounded a corner, Jack shaking his head the whole time. Trying to explain the situation was so damn hard, because it wasn’t like they were exactly wrong for what they did. “This way to the diner.”

The boys looked at each other, brows raised, before looking back at him. “Diner?”

He laughed. Tash was right. They really did say things at the same time, a lot.

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“I’ll have this fancy chicken thinger, lass, and this! Oh, this sounds nice.” Fiona held up the menu for the waitress, and pointed at several things. No point in trying to say them, and not because she had a Scottish accent. It was a bunch of words Jack didn’t know either, French stuff. But he was pretty sure Fiona had basically ordered some sort of chicken with melted cheese, and a side order of oysters.

Jack glared at her. “Fiona, that is a messed up meal. How can—you’re just picking the most expensive things on the menu, aren’t you?”

She beamed at him before grinning up at the waitress. “And I’ll definitely be wanting dessert!”

Jack rolled his eyes. The guys got some blue rare steaks, predictably. Jack ordered nothing.

It was a quiet little restaurant, Invictus owned of course, but not a place for Kindred to get a drink. It was empty tonight, and the staff were all thralls. It was a good place to talk. The restaurant was also a front. They dealt in illegal goods using the restaurant, heavy drugs, shit Jack wasn’t happy to be supporting, but while Xnomina kept it out of the hands of kids, he wasn’t going to stop them.

Maybe in the future, when he had more of his fingers in the Dolareido pie, but not yet.

“Trying to buy us with expensive steaks?” Art asked. “Cause, I mean, that could work.” The man smiled, but Jack could see he was nervous. Still, it was a funny comment, and Jack laughed quietly. He could see why Tash liked these guys.

“No I’m not trying to buy you off. Just ... I know I can be an asshole when I argue. I’ve always been like that, since well before I was vampire, you know? Just wanted you guys to know I’m not an asshole, if I get uppity.”

“Uppity?” Art asked. “Not angry?”

“Yeah, uppity. Like this.” He leaned forward, elbows on the table. “You’re gonna listen to me while I explain the situation, got it?” They both frowned, but nodded, quickly getting what he meant by uppity. “Good. Avery did what she thought was necessary, I get that. I don’t have all the details of the how and why, so I’m not gonna make a judgment call on that action. She should be damn happy you guys have been of use, dealing with that azlu and whatnot, or the Prince would be more proactive about dealing with you idiots.

“But, yeah, she did something super risky because she really thought she was helping the city. I can understand you backing her, and so does Natasha.” He tapped the table with a finger. “That’s not the issue. So understand I’m here as Tash’s friend, not as the guy who’s hired to keep everyone getting along.” Sighing, he sat back, and food was served. The boys glanced at their meat, but it was clear their appetites were damaged. Fiona, naturally, devoured her chicken with gusto. Large appetite on the small girl.

“The issue,” he continued, “is that you violated her trust. And I get that you did it because it was the only way to do what Avery needed, but that’s the breaking point. You could have talked to her, explained the situation, asked her, and put some faith in the relationship. But you didn’t. You basically threw the relationship into the garbage, cause you thought for sure there’d be no way to save it, while also doing what Avery wanted. And sure, you probably also did it cause you thought Tash might get in harm’s way, and you didn’t want that. But, again, that’s violating her trust in you, and any faith in the relationship.”

He ground his teeth. “What should have happened, is you guys tell her — before shit hit the fan — that you might attack Maria at some point. You come to some sort of understanding, and accept that yes, you might find yourselves in a situation where you attack Maria, and have to do so without telling her. You trust the relationship to be able to survive that! You trust Tash to not fuck you guys over, either. Not stake her, set her aside, and basically abandon the relationship because you think being on opposite sides of a problem automatically means it can’t work out.”

They both opened their mouths. Jack swiped his hand through the air.

“Eat your meals. I’m not done.” They both grumbled, but did as ordered. Fiona smiled at him, big smile, mouth full of chicken. Kinda ruining the vibe, but whatever. “So, maybe the issue is that

your relationship wasn't strong enough? Which sounds like bullshit to me, cause everything Jessy's told me — which is a fucking lot — tells me Natasha is head over heels in love with you two idiots.”

That got them squirming. They looked at each other a bit more, and froze, as if finally coming to a realization. Then they looked at Fiona when she made some loud munching noises, before they slowly took another bite of their meal.

“I guess you guys hadn't gotten to that point in the relationship yet, or hadn't realized it anyway,” he said. “Well, Jessy says she definitely does. And judging from the looks on your faces, you feel the same way. I don't know why you didn't say it, or she didn't say it. Could be the two guys one girl thing. Not exactly a common arrangement.” He shrugged and put up his hands. “I'm not judging, and couldn't care less. I got a woman five hundred years older than me trying to get me to recruit my own harem. Dolareido, and anyone in its night life, aren't ever going to have normal relationships.”

Sighing, he leaned back. God damn, he loved to rant. A little too cathartic, really.

“So,” he continued, “she loves you two, you two love her, and there's a barrier between you: what the pack and covenants want. The issue isn't actually the barrier, much as it seems like it at first glance. The issue is your lack of trust in the relationship to be able to survive that. And, of course, that you literally stabbed her in the chest with a piece of wood. Stealth wood, from what Jessy tells me. So not only did you not trust Tash, you were prepared to violate her trust, ahead of time! No fucking wonder she's livid.”

They both winced, looking down, before they slowly took another bite of their meal.

“What do we do?” Matt asked.

“Tash is going to ask you to do something, something her and the Prince — probably mostly the Prince — have cooked up. It’ll be repayment for the assault. Do it. Even if it pisses Avery off, do it. Do it because you trust Tash to not do you wrong, okay? Even if means pissing off the Ordo, Tash wouldn’t do you wrong. Get it?” He stabbed a finger at the edge of the table, and relaxed. “A step in the right direction.”

The boys looked at each other again, sharing a few more winces before sighing and nodding.

“How’s a kid like you understand shit like this?” Art asked.

Jack shrugged. “It’s easy to see the flaws in shit when you’re looking at things from the outside. I’ve been a student of the human condition for a long time. I watch people, watch them squabble, watch them say stupid shit to each other, read about it all the time, and...” And it wasn’t something he’d ever be able to wrap his mind around. Typical person-on-person interaction was a chaotic mess of stupid. But, just like Julias and the kine he envied, Jack couldn’t help but envy those stupid people. They played the social game, found love, lost love, got laid, had fun, and all the things he’d been too afraid to do. “I’m damn lucky I found the relationship I did, cause I’m pretty sure I’d be single for eternity otherwise.”

Art smirked. “Certainly enough of an asshole for it.”

“Yeah well, shit needed to be said, and I don’t have the fucking patience for romcom bullshit. It’s funny when it’s a tv show. It’s ludicrous when it’s real life.” The waitress returned, taking their plates, and handed Fiona a small menu with a drawn picture of a champagne glass with something solid in it, and a spoon sticking out. Ice cream. Fiona grinned maniacally. Jack rolled his eyes. “So, get me? It’s a messy situation. Tash understands why you guys followed Avery that night, but that doesn’t excuse you violating her

trust in you, and you shitting all over the relationship. That's the problem."

Matt shook his head. "It's not that easy, Jack. We're Uratha. We follow the pack, and it wasn't like we disagreed with Avery. We still don't. Something's up with Maria, and—"

"You will leave Maria alone, or I'll put every last one of you in the hospital."

"Jack," Art said, "something—"

"Something is up. And you idiots are falling for it. But that's not what this little meeting is about. We can talk more about Maria next week. We're here because Tash is a good friend of mine, and she, and you two, deserve a chance. But unlike she, or you two, or most people, I'm apparently the only damn person in this city willing to just say things straight so shit can actually. Get. Fixed."

The waitress returned with two very fancy looking bowls filled with some sort of soft serve ice cream topped with cherries and bananas.

The two werewolves shook their heads. "Uh, we didn't—"

Fiona pulled both bowls in close, and got to work.

---

Jack lifted a hand, made a small wave, and Mulder and Scully rejoined him, perching on his shoulders. With Fiona and the two wolves gone, he wanted his friends close.

The Tanvar building, final stop of the night.

Like the restaurant, the Tanvar building was a front. It had offices, with computers, and he was sure during the day they'd be running, a bunch of people working at them. Probably not on the illegal shit though. Didn't take an office building full of office



workers to help move black market goods. They probably just did typical Xnomina stuff, trading stocks, while criminals under their feet rolled up illegal cigars and whatnot.

Right now, the building had a few thralls and ghouls standing around, some of them armed with rifles, some with shotguns, and most with pistols. A lot of suits. If the cops showed up, they'd know something illegal was going on just by the look of all the kine, standing around like secret agents, but the Invictus owned the cops so that wasn't going to happen.

“Jack.”

Jack smiled, and nodded to Hella. The Gangrel was dressed in a suit as well, a slightly tall woman with tan skin and short dark hair. Unlike her girlfriend Isabella, who wouldn't be caught dead in pants, Hella wore a normal suit.

“Hella Vendram. How's Danny?”

She raised a brow. “The fuck do you care about Danny?” Apparently, she hadn't expected him to remember Isabella's new childe's name.

“Just making conversation. You know we're on the same team, right?”

“Didn't give me that impression, last time you came for a visit.”

Sighing, Jack stepped past Hella, and down into the basement. Classically, a single bulb dangled from a cord, an old school bulb that would probably flicker and die on them any moment. But once he was past that, the stairs stopped at a door, he opened it, and a large concrete room welcomed him. It smelled of various chemicals, boxes were piled high, and a couple kine walked around with clipboard, checking things off.

Jack laughed. A paper trail was better than a digital trail. You could burn paper, when you were done with it. Digital information, if it left the machine it was created on, was borderline permanent.

“These boxes,” Jack said. “Just filled with cigarettes and shit?”

Hella nodded. “And other things along those lines.”

“But it’s not what the Carthians are after.”

“Not exactly. Terra Den wants to put a hole in what we’re doing here. Hurt Xnomina’s bottom line. We have a lot of shit set up so we can move all this crap through this building, and it’ll take time to get the same shit set up elsewhere. And we always keep a vamp or two here, and a squad of suits, to keep this area secure, you know? If the Carthians take it, that’s a vantage point we lose.”

“It’s only a vantage point if it’s helping protect an important area. The area is only important, because we’re fighting over it.”

She shrugged. “You can argue with McDonald over that. I got my orders, and like you made so abundantly clear on your visit, I have duties.”

He almost asked where Isabella was. Better to not poke the bear.

“Any Carthians actually attack the building yet?” he asked, reaching up and offering his pets some oats. They cawed, pecked at the food, and looked around, drawing the eyes of the thralls with the clipboard. Jack grinned at them, and fed his friends some more oats.

“Nah. But they’ve scouted the area, so they’ll probably show up any night now, before Turio or Burksen can be a thorn in their sides.” Hella leaned against a stack of boxes, and grimaced as she looked at the clipboard, once the two kine handed it to her. “Used to be that Garry didn’t know a damn thing about this building and what we were doing here. But that fucking Jeremy Long asshole and

Terra Den really know what they're doing. If they can, they'll take over our distribution, and that shit hole Montoya will have a new job."

"Montoya." Jack frowned as he wandered around, examining the boxes. "Right, that guy. I met him once, when I confronted Jeremy for the first time." When Jessy overstepped and punched Garry. Lucky she was still alive, after that. "Fucker still handing out loans to people he knows can't pay him back?"

"Yeap. Everyone knows about what happened, with Eric and Montoya's shark, some dude named Pitt, but it hasn't stopped Montoya."

And why would it. Now that his boss was a vampire, Long had access to all the information he needed to help Montoya pilot the paranormal world. Ultimately, Montoya didn't matter, now that Eric didn't owe him anything, but still, it was just another pain in the ass Jack had to keep track of.

"So," Hella said, "if you're here, I'm guessing McDonald thinks shit is gonna get really bad?"

"What makes you say that?" Almost a rhetorical question, but, he did kinda want to hear her answer.

"Everyone knows you send Jack the Ripper when shit is about to get real."

He snapped his gaze at her, and she took a quick step back.

"I'm not Jack the Ripper." Christ, did someone share what the curse wanted to be called? Did Jack say it to someone by accident? Or did people just extrapolate from his name? God damn it.

"Fine, Jesus. All the rest of us know, is when shit gets bad, McDonald sends Jack and his curse to fuck it up."

McDonald sends? Of course Michael would spin it so Invictus would think Jack did those things on Michael's orders. Not a bad plan. Michael would gain influence, and he knew Jack didn't want so much focus pointed at himself.

"I'm not here to fuck things up, Miss Vendram." Back to titles. Make this shit official. "I'm here to stop things from going to shit." A lie. Michael was hoping Jack would be forced to kill someone, so he could have his war. Problem was, Garry was determined, and quite possibly willing to sacrifice someone to make that war happen.

How to fix this situation? The more Jack looked at it, the more it looked like he couldn't.

## Chapter 139

~~Beatrice~~

Seven weeks.

“Here.”

Triss stared down at the book and knife, at Samantha, the book a little more, and then Samantha.

“How’d you—”

“Antoinette stores artifacts for years, even centuries. She was going to lock these up, until she felt ready to go back for them. And...” She squirmed as she put the objects back into a small, flat box, and handed it to Triss. “I’ll have to take them back, at some point. But ... but even if she finds out what I did, that’s a risk I’m willing to take, if it means Mary gets to live again.”

Beatrice winced as she slowly took the open box out of Sam’s hands. “Yeah, I get it. And thanks, a fucking lot, but you know I can’t guarantee anything.”

But she’d try, holy fuck she’d try. Finally, she had all the pieces. The flesh witch, the tools, and Black Blood. God damn finally, progress! Now Elen could make a proper body, living and breathing, and it’d be Julias. Proper, real, Julias. From there, she’d have to find a way to get his soul. The bigger hurdle.

But Jacob had given her a hint, that he’d managed to get a glimpse of the other side, but he had to kill a lot of kine to do it. Triss would look for another way, at first, but if she had to bide her time for the next ten years, slowly collecting asshats she didn’t mind killing, she would. If she had to leave Dolareido and find some place

where she could gather the worse humanity had to offer, and sacrifice them in some sort of gigantic ritual, she would.

Maybe somewhere with wildlands and poachers? No one likes poachers.

“I know, no guarantees.” Sam grabbed her necklace as she stared down at the box, too. “But it’s worth the risk.”

Damn, that was a heavy weight on the shoulders. Nodding, Triss closed the thin box, and set it aside. They were in the Circle’s cave, and it was just the girls. Jacob was out, so was Othello and Aaron, leaving only Triss and Jen with Samantha.

“I find it difficult to imagine,” Jennifer said, sitting down against the wall of blankets in Triss’s alcove, “that it would be that easy. To steal the book and knife from the Prince, I mean.”

Samantha frowned as she sat down beside her. “You think she knows?”

“Antoinette is really fucking smart,” Triss said, setting the box aside and sitting beside Sam so the Daeva was between them. “So maybe she does?”

“My sire is, um, distracted with things lately. This whole Carthian Invictus turf war bothers her. It’s almost like she takes it personally?”

Triss nodded. “Yeah I can see that. Antoinette’s built the city from the ground up to be a paranormal’s utopia, right? But shit keeps happening to fuck that up. She probably does take it personally.”

“And,” Samantha said, “she’s distracted with other things, too. I’m not exactly sure what. Might have something to do with my son, and the curse.”

Triss shivered. And, shit, Samantha noticed.

“That curse,” Triss said, “it’s definitely something no one saw coming. Jack seems to be doing a good job handling it, though? I mean, he used it to beat the hunters. And yeah, it was pretty scary, but he still managed it.”

Manage was a strong word. The kid wrecked everyone, a god damn slaughter, and he’d loved every second of it. There weren’t any words for how fucking sick and twisted it was. No point in telling Sam that.

“I suppose he ... did beat the werewolves with it, and is still fine. No one died, either.”

“Exactly. Don’t worry about your son. Kid’s smart, too damn smart.”

Sighing, Samantha nodded again, fiddling with her fingers. “It’s hard for any mom to not worry about her son.”

“True,” Jennifer said, “but circumstances are different. He’s no longer just your son. He’s your son and Julias’s child.”

Samantha gulped and stared at Jennifer. “Does ... that mean I’ll stop caring for him?”

Jennifer smiled and pat the woman on the shoulder. “In a hundred years, you may stop thinking of him as your son, yes. But that doesn’t mean you’ll stop caring for him. Simply that your relationship will change. Given time, you’ll no longer think of Antoinette as your sire, or even your superior. She’ll be another vampire.”

Frowning, Samantha looked down and rubbed her knees a little. “Not sure I like that.”

After a small laugh, Triss pat the woman on her other shoulder. “You’re welcome to fight against the Beast as much as you want. But —”

“I would like to also mention, Samantha,” Jennifer said, leaning in a little closer, “Triss and I talked about your ... increasing involvement in the Circle.”

Now? Really? Triss raised a brow at Jen, but the damn slut winked at her. Ah whatever, roll with it.

“You did?”

“Mhmm.” Jennifer nodded, and set a hand on Sam’s leg. “We just wanted you to know, if you ever did, oh I don’t know, find yourself thrown at us like Jacob did to you not long ago, we wouldn’t mind. In fact, I encourage it.”

Ok, Jennifer was laying it on pretty thick, but damn the way Samantha froze and stared at the blankets underneath her, was too fucking cute.

“What the damn slut means to say is, is that Jacob’s happier than we’ve seen him, ever, since you came along, Sam. And the two of you really seem to enjoy getting freaky with it where everyone can join in. So, yeah, we’re cool with you, you know, doing what you did last time.”

“And more,” Jen whispered, full husky voice mode.

So naturally, Triss gave Jen a good slap on the leg.

“It was supposed to be a sort of blanket, uh, statement, not a direct invite, Sam. Don’t feel pressured or anything.”

Jennifer shrugged, smile going full slut mode. Really should have been a Daeva. “That’s what it was.”



“Not it wasn’t! You might as well have invited her to fuck.”

“I did no such thing. I merely suggested that you and I have no issues with the rather open, and expressive way Jacob and Samantha enjoy their sexuality. And, perhaps, partaking of that sexuality a little with Samantha.”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Well, that went further than I planned. Not like Jen and I are gonna try and seduce you or anything, Sam, okay? Calm down.” Poor woman looked like she was going to burst into flames right in front of them. “Though, from the looks you’ve been giving Othello, I imagine he’s the one you’re excited about.”

“Oh god.”

Yeap, that made it even worse. Now she looked like she was going to violently explode in pure shame.

Jennifer giggled, flirty and sultry, and shook her head. “Othello feels the same way we do, I am sure, Samantha. And knowing Jacob, he wouldn’t mind at all, as long as he was there. Or, better yet, with both inside you?”

It wasn’t like they hadn’t told her these things already, but damn, it was so fucking cute how she boiled, even without the Blush of Life. Was it like this for the Prince and her boy toy? Did she love embarrassing the kid with new kink after new kink after new kink? If he reacted anything like his mother did, probably.

Ok, back to the heavier shit.

“We’re gonna test these out,” Triss said, patting the box, “tonight.”

“I ... probably shouldn’t come, should I?”

“No, probably not. It’s not a fun time, and Jacob wouldn’t want Jen and me sharing Circle secrets. Plus, it’s ... easy ... to get fucked

in the head about this kinda stuff. Emotional. Better to stay back, ok? Stay back, and don't get your hopes up. This probably won't work, but the book and knife bring us a step closer."

Sighing, Samantha nodded, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. "I trust you, Beatrice. Even if my sire finds out what I did, and punishes me. Even if I can't have Mary back. It was worth the risk."

Christ, Triss fucking hoped so.

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"Should we invite Sándor?" Jennifer asked. The two of them walked the desert outside Dolareido, on the way to the secret chamber where they kept Elen. Not really secret, if the Begotten knew where it was, but maybe Sándor didn't tell the others? Triss had to ask him.

"To this?" She motioned to the flat box in her arms.

"Yes. He seems open to the idea."

"I dunno. I think he's mostly interested in watching it all fall apart, so he can ... save our asses when it does, I guess."

Jen raised a brow. "That's a bad thing?"

"No, but I'd prefer to keep someone around who thought I had a chance of succeeding."

Chuckling, Jen stepped in closer and hooked an arm over her shoulders. "You like him."

"I mean, yeah, I guess. Or maybe I just like drunk Sándor?"

"Hmm. I don't know. Sober Sándor"—Jen chuckled at the name—"is so very ... stern. I like a hard man." She chuckled some more.

“Julias wasn’t a hard man.”

“Well, no, but he could be when he wanted to be. Sándor is similar, in that sense. He just always wants to be hard, and stoic, for obvious reasons.”

“Eh I dunno. I think the gargoyle dude’s really in tune with his gargoyle Horror. You heard what he said, about guarding a vampire for decades. I can see it now, dude literally perched on a rooftop or stone column or something, squatting for days on end.”

“That’s what you think of, when you remember the huge gargoyle?”

“Um, yeah? He’s a gargoyle.”

Jen leaned in, and set a kiss on her neck. “I was thinking, if he has two sets of arms, and two sets of wings, what else does he have two of?”

Triss choked on a laugh, almost dropping the box. Thank god no one else was out here to hear them, cause this was some stupid sex talk.

“You want to fuck the big gargoyle?”

“I admit, the size and strength of him in that form is terribly appealing. Come on, Triss. You don’t fantasize about being picked up by a huge, handsome monster, and being fucked like a toy? I bet that’s what Jessy enjoys most about fucking a werewolf.”

Triss would have laughed, but she didn’t. Jen wasn’t wrong. There was definitely an appeal to that fantasy. Really spoke to the teenage her, when she was first getting into metal, and thought shit like skulls and witchcraft were ‘bitchin’. Big scary monster scooping her up, holding her with one hand, and fucking her like, like Jen said, a

toy? Yeap, the young Beatrice, who'd watched Beauty and the Beast over and over, loved that idea.

"It's pretty hot, yeah. But I don't need some giant beast to get me off." She also really liked the prince the Beast had turned into in the movie. Snuggling up to a ten like that? In a rich castle? Yes please.

"With the arrival of the Uratha and Begotten," Jen said, "I can't help but wonder about it."

Triss shook her head. "Yeah, well, you can go ahead and keep trying to seduce Sándor. He's going to keep pushing you away."

"Yes, I've noticed that." Which Jen loved, no doubt. The harder a man was to get, the more appealing he was. Triss didn't really need that to find a man appealing, but bitches like Jen loved the chase.

"Think drunk Sándor shed any light on that?"

Jen nodded. "He is obviously a terribly broken man. What happened to his family is horrible, but then spending several years a slave to their killers? He hasn't had a chance to heal."

"And ... you think he needs some sexual healing."

Jen kissed her neck again. "It works. Samantha's been enjoying it quite a bit."

Triss expected her to add 'and you too', but she didn't. Nice of her. But it was true, much as Triss used to be against the idea. Yeah, sex was awesome, and she was damn thankful every night she had Jen. The guilty feelings had faded, and now she felt comfortable leaning back and just enjoying Jen's touch on her. And, hey, if she got a peep show of Othello and Madison, or Sam and Jacob, she enjoyed that too.

If she didn't have Jen, that wouldn't have happened. She'd probably still be in her catacomb, miserable, hating everyone and everything. Of course, it wasn't just the sex that helped her. Jen, the others, even Jacob, talking to them helped. But she'd be lying if she didn't say sex from someone she loved went a long way.

But she wasn't going to sleep with some random dude, and Sándor was still kinda in that random dude territory. Still, seeing him get drunk and talk about his dead family? Maybe she shouldn't think of him as 'some guy' anymore. Dude was smoking hot. Dreamy blue eyes in a steel gaze, dark gruff, the buzzed dark hair? No wonder Jen was all over him. And if she wanted to extend some of her sexual healing to him, undoubtedly dragging Triss along for the ride, was that so bad?

And Julias? Arg, knowing him, he wouldn't mind. He'd say something like 'come on Triss, we're vampires. Sex is part of the package. But I know your heart was always mine' or something super cheesy like that.

He'd say? Fuck, one night with the book and knife, and she was already thinking like he was back, or just around the corner.

"How about," Triss said, "you keep trying to seduce Sándor, but I'm pretty sure it'll take a long time. He's onto your tricks."

"Seduction is not a trick. It's an art."

"Yeah ok Miss Daeva. In the mean time, I'm going to keep working on this"—she shook the box—"and try and get my man back."

Jen grinned, but nodded and let go of Triss's shoulders. "If you succeed, I'll happily go back to the way things were."

"Well you were always allowed to sleep with other people, Jen, we told you that. Only thing off the table was sleeping with Julias or me

when the other wasn't there."

Her friend frowned. "Yes, but that was then. I ... don't see myself sleeping with anyone unless you're there, Triss."

Triss laughed, and kissed her idiot friend on the cheek. "You know that sounds an awful lot like a romantic relationship?"

Jen gasped. "How dare you."

---

Elen's eyes opened, and she grinned down at Beatrice from her dangling spot over the large, stained bowl. "My book. How wonderful. Be a dear, cut me down, and I'll be on my way." There was one thing Triss could count on when dealing with Elen: woman was too damn gone to plan an escape.

"I'm not letting you go, Elen. When we've resurrected Julias, we can talk about it." She managed to say the R word without wincing this time. "And I'm not letting you down to do whatever you want. For all I know, you could really fuck me up when you got these."

Elen nodded slightly. "Ok deary."

Sighing, Triss held up her hands, and concentrated. Jennifer walked around the cave, lighting the candles, and soon they had their mood lighting.

"Black Blood, I summon you."

They'd done this song and dance plenty by now. Even still, the approaching presence of Black Blood was not something she was ever going to get used to. The unnatural cold, the smothering weight, the creepy blackness, it all seeped and oozed into the cave, and under her skin. Might as well be fucking a graveyard; that sounded metal as hell, but in practice, it was really fucking disturbing.

Slowly, the ooze filled the room, dripping from the ceiling and flowing over their feet, there but not there, like mist. Cold death on the air, with a mind of its own and a form all its own.

“Success I see,” the voice said, bassy rasp filling the cave.

“Success.” Triss flipped through a few pages of the book. A language she couldn’t understand filled the pages, but the pictures gave her a better idea of what was going on. There was a picture of an animal skull, and a ritual circle beside it. Another animal skull, and the same circle beside it, with a few dots on its lines. “I can’t read a damn thing in here.”

“I reckon Malachi can,” Black Blood said.

“You can, I reckon,” Triss said with her thickest Texan accent as she frowned around at the dripping black liquid.

The damn monster chuckled. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“A spirit’s got to have their secrets.”

“But...”

“But if Elen can read it, it’ll be fine. I read what she reads.” The black ooze snuck its way up the sacrifice bowl onto the woman’s feet, then up, under, and over her skirt. The old woman’s veins bulged as the monster forced its way into her body. Her eyes rolled upward as he seeped in through her tear ducts. She shuddered as bits of the black forced its way under her fingernails and up her fingers. When Black Blood finally flowed into her through her mouth, it seemed tame by comparison.

“Can’t you find a better way to do that?” Triss asked.

“Maybe,” Black Blood said, accent gone, replaced with Elen’s sweet, deary grandma sorta accent. Still a big, booming voice though, layered with alien rasps that better belonged on a ghost or something, not an old woman. “But she’s our slave. I don’t like to waste my time.”

What a load of shit. Black Blood loved to waste his time. The fucker might as well have been the god of lounging about, indulging himself his weird hungers. Whatever. Triss unhooked the witch, and sat her in a nearby wooden chair.

“You in control?”

“I am.”

“May I have my book now?” Elen said, the actual Elen. “I haven’t had my book in months. I miss it.”

Triss looked back to Jen. Her friend shrugged, wincing, but gestured back to Elen. Yeah, it was fucking dangerous giving this bitch her tools back, but Black Blood was in control. That wasn’t necessarily any better. Giving the strange spirit the ability to manipulate flesh with all the power of Elen, a witch who’d enslaved a ridiculously powerful Begotten, had performed haruspex on humans, and even created some sort of flesh chamber thing, was a really fucking dangerous idea.

Triss handed the book to Elen, but the old woman’s shaky hands couldn’t handle the weight of it. Groaning, Triss held it for her.

“You need a fucking oxygen tank, too?”

“She would,” Black Blood said, “if she was moving under her own power. Mmm, this is interesting.”

“You can read it?”



“Like I said, she can. And her mind is telling me this is some language not recorded in history. A secret language, used by these flesh witches.”

“Oh god, there’s more than one?”

Elen nodded. “I can’t dig up her memories, not easily. Her brain is a pile of moosh. But some things remain.”

Jennifer stepped in closer. “Like how it is easy to remember a song for years, or decades?”

Elen nodded again, and held out her hand to the pages of the book. “I doubt you’ll learn anything about her coven, but, she can read this book.” A shaky hand slowly turned the page, and Elen hummed appreciatively as she scanned the pages. “Oh my.”

“Do be careful with my book, deary,” regular Elen said. “It took many years to write this.”

If things went well, Triss would have Julias back, and then she’d promptly throw this bitch into a crematorium, along with her book and knife. No need to tell her that, though.

“What’s it say?”

“I see rituals about manipulating flesh,” Black Blood said, “and they are ... almost cliché. There’s talk here about the life energy that binds all things, about the circle of life, and about how it manifests in the world in different forms of life.”

Jennifer groaned. “Any talk of bacteria, viruses, or fungi?”

Triss raised a brow. “Uh, what?”

“This drivel, talk of the web of life that connects all things, rarely ever speaks of where the overwhelming amount of life is.” Jennifer

shrugged. “A human’s pathetic attempt to understand a world they’re too stupid to imagine.”

Oh, now she got it. Lots of old literature or ideas about the power of life were utterly oblivious to things like bacteria and viruses. Stupid old people trying to explain their world as best they could.

“Perhaps,” Black Blood said, “but misguided as this witch’s beliefs may be, they still function.”

“Power of belief?” Triss asked.

Black Blood didn’t answer. Maybe he didn’t like the idea of talking about belief, like maybe it was relevant to him. There was an old idea in the Circle of the Crone that gods did actually exist, and that maybe they existed because people believed in them. Very American Gods. But Black Blood was a spirit. Different rules. Right?

Elen turned to the next page. “More, about animals, about the different powers they bring.”

“Tiger testicles for virility?” Jennifer asked, scowling.

“Things of that nature, yes. Bull, horse, rabbit, raven, frog.”

Triss tried to not laugh, but couldn’t help it. “Holy shit. Any mention of a cauldron?”

The two vampires shared a chuckle. Ok yeah, the shit Elen had managed to perform, the crazy rituals and witchcraft she did, it was super impressive. But the book was apparently something ripped straight out of a fairytale, with witches sitting around a cauldron, stirring in frog legs and newt eyes.

Maybe that’s what Elen did, in the old days? Maybe she had a bunch of witches, hiding out in a swamp? A village nearby, with people the witches got to royally fuck over, abduct their children or

something, and do their crazy flesh magic on? Silly as the fairytale shit sounded, the original fairytales were fucking nasty stories, full of nasty deaths, and a witch that could use flesh like a painter used paints, fit right in there.

“No cauldron, so far.”

“Well, figure out what she needs to get an actual living, breathing body working. We can probably get her anything she needs, or close. But we ain’t Frankenstein. I don’t have a basement full of crazy technology.”

“I doubt anything in here will require more than the flesh and blood of animals,” Black Blood said as he slowly turned to another page. Animals. That included kine, no doubt.

“This must be an interesting read for you, you old fucker,” Triss said. “You, some weird ass spirit obsessed with the flesh of the dead, corpses, death, and all that shit, and now you’re reading a book that’s completely about life.”

Elen smiled at her. Couldn’t tell if it was BB’s smile, or Elen’s, but again, no response. He, or she, turned the page, and kept on reading.

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~~Natasha~~

Eight weeks after the incident.

“Are we sure this is ... s-safe?”

Jack shrugged as he reached for the door to Avery’s apartment building. “Probably not.”

“B-But we’re gonna go in anyway?”

Jack nodded, wearing a half smile, and gestured to the air. Natasha almost squeaked as fluttering noises fell on them, but she

recovered quickly. It was a normal sight at this point, to see Jack with two crows on his shoulders. Mulder and Scully, his pets, and according to him, his friends. They had helped him in some dire situations. They'd even helped him during the attack on the hunters. At this point, they weren't just pets, and she had to remember that. They were his allies and informants.

Other Ventrue and Gangrels had done similar things, and all Kindred knew to be wary when crows, or rats, or coyotes were nearby. It just wasn't normally done in Dolareido, not in a city that never slept, and was steeped in technology. Cameras were everywhere, from store corners to patrolling drones. Using crows or rats was seen as old school, and ineffective, unless you were a very powerful Kindred and capable of using those elements easily. Viktor did that. Julias did that. Now, Jack did that.

“Jessy's nearby with a few Kindred and thralls for back up. And you know how much shit they'd be in if they attacked me when I'm acting as ambassador.”

Not really an ambassador. Peace keeper and negotiator. But she didn't correct him.

“I know. B-But, I hear about how angry Avery was, for what you did.”

Jack winced. “Well hopefully they've calmed down. I know they've healed up.”

“We have healed,” Brianna said, glaring at them as they came through the doorway. “I don't know how calm we are.”

Jack smiled at her, and nodded, almost like a bow. “Brianna. See Derick or Santos lately?”

She grimaced, and the expression slowly morphed into a frown. “No.”

“Well hopefully I can change that, get everyone cooperating again.”

“Pfft, good luck. And why’s she here?”

“She’s here as my back up, in case someone tries to attack me.” He reached up and stroked the head feathers of one of the crows. “She’ll peck your eyes out, you know.”

Tash giggled, but quickly shut up, doing her best to suppress her smile. That wasn’t the sort of quit witted joke Jack would make. That was the kinda comment Julias would have made. It still hurt, knowing Julias was dead, but it did make her feel good, seeing him in his childe.

“Don’t be a jackass,” Brianna said, also trying to suppress a smile. “I meant Natasha.”

“Natasha’s here for the same reason, but also, the Prince has business with Avery, for what Matthew and Arturo did to Tash.”

“Then she could have come herself.”

Jack shook his head. “You know that isn’t how this works.”

Sighing, Brianna gestured to the stairs. “Yeah, cause your elders are a bunch of pussy bitches. Only one of you with any balls is Garry.”

“Maybe. I’m not here to debate that.”

That was smart of Jack, to not defend Antoinette. The werewolves respected Avery for being the first into the fray, dumb as it was for the general to run in first, but Jack didn’t need to make more enemies here. He was peace keeping, not antagonizing, even if it meant someone insulting his girlfriend. How had the boy matured so much? Antoinette said he was an old soul, but usually that was

just how adults insulted someone without actually insulting them. Old soul was synonymous with bitter asshole.

Jack definitely had a cynical side to him people his age usually didn't have, but there was more to it than that. A little Julius in him, to soften how scathing his personality could be, maybe.

Tash and Jack walked up the stairs of the crummy old building, and Tash looked around with each step. Such a beat-up old building. But the werewolves were comfortable here; Art and Matt had told her repeatedly. They weren't comfortable in the city. Even Clara and Carter, who'd taken up the Invictus offer on living in expensive apartments until the incident, had told Matt and Art that they didn't like it. None of them were comfortable in the middle of the city, except Eric.

Maybe that was why Eric could handle himself when transformed, in a circumstance the others thought too dangerous? City werewolf?

Jack knocked on Avery's door.

"Get in here already," a voice called from the other side.

Jack sighed, and looked at Tash; so did the crows. Tash nodded, resolute. She could do this.

They went in, Brianna behind them, and the werewolf closed the door once they were in the apartment.

"Hello," Jack said, nodding to the group as Brianna passed them to join her pack.

"Yeah, hello," Avery said between clenched teeth, leaning back against the furthest wall, worn couch between them. "Why the birds?"

Clara stood beside her, arms folded, and she managed to look at Jack for a half second before looking elsewhere. Tash did the same thing, when her eyes met Matt and Art's.

"Scully and Mulder are my friends, and they notice things I don't sometimes." Jack stepped further into the room, and used a subtle little finger gesture to invite Tash to follow him. Being the center of attention of twelve werewolves was not something she wanted to do, but this was important. And if she didn't deliver the order, Antoinette would do it herself, and it would not surprise Tash if that ended up with someone dying.

"Well," Avery said, "spit it out. How much are we fucked, for trying to save everyone's asses?"

"You're not fucked, Avery. This isn't Tijuana. The Kindred here aren't your enemy. And whatever you think Maria's up to, you're wrong about it, for a bunch of reasons. Go near her again and it won't go well for you. But," he put up his hands before any of them could say anything, "I'm not here to threaten you guys. I'm here because Antoinette isn't kicking you out."

Avery snorted. If they were outside, she'd likely have spit on the floor.

"Why? I'm sure Maria and Michael want us gone."

"Much as my boss would like otherwise, the Invictus don't own the city. Antoinette does. You guys did good work, dealing with that first azlu, and she knows it. She also recognizes that there's something up in Dolareido, something going on. It's not Maria, despite what you may think, but there is something going on."

Natasha nodded. "I've been t-tasked with ... finding out what I can. I'm sure it's not Maria."

"How are you sure?" Clara said.

“Because I’ve t-talked to her. I ... I know her, well enough to know she wouldn’t do this.” Before anyone else could argue, she put up a hand. “B-But, something is going on, and I’m going to find out what. And to ... to do that, the P-Prince has ordered that Matthew and Arturo help.”

Every wolf in the room looked at the two men. They both squirmed, looked at each other, at Jack, avoided looking at Tash, and looked to Avery.

“And if I say no?” Avery asked.

Jack held out a hand and started counting on his fingers. “Without the permission of the Prince, you attacked one of the Primogen. You’re not too stupid to realize that Garry is now pushing on the Invictus because of the damage you caused giving him an opening.”

“That wasn’t—”

“But worse than that, Matthew and Arturo staked one of the Prince’s students, and fellow dragon.” Wow, he really did sound like Viktor when he got bossy. “So, the two responsible, will be doing the dragons a favor. Reparations. It’ll probably be dangerous, but too bad. Until Natasha says otherwise, Matthew and Arturo will be taking her in and out of the Hisil as she wishes, and front lining any efforts she makes where bodies are needed. Barring apocalyptic circumstances, they’ll be hers to use as she sees fit for the foreseeable future, until this hidden presence issue is resolved.”

The two boys blinked at Jack, before finally looking at Tash. She did her best professional face, nodding slightly, and hopefully conveying that she wouldn’t abuse this. She could, if she wanted. The dragons would love to get their hands on a willing Uratha to do experiments on, or maybe monitor how they managed to jump between worlds, so they could someday emulate it. If they agreed,



she could force them to do stuff like that. But she wouldn't. They had to know that already. They trusted her. Didn't they?

Avery shook her head. "Fuck that. You think I'd trust the Ordo for a second? This city ain't that far off from Tijuana, Jack. I'm not trusting any vamp with the lives of my—"

"I'll do it," Matt and Art said, at the same time.

Natasha tried to suppress her smile. She failed.

Avery didn't suppress her scowl, though. She stepped between the boys and Jack, and jabbed a finger into their chests. "I don't care how guilty you two feel about this. You know what happens when the Gauntlet fails? We didn't do anything wrong. We followed the trail, followed the evidence, and I made a call."

"I get that, boss," Art said. "And we all went in on your side. But you found a new tear since Maria's been sleeping in a box for the past near two months."

Natasha raised her eyes to the woman and glared at the back of her head. She found something, new evidence, to suggest Maria wasn't the problem, and she hadn't told them? A glance Jack's way showed he was thinking the same thing. What a bitch.

"That doesn't prove anything. And even if it does, I'm not losing two more of my pack to vampires. Not again."

Again. Jack and Tash looked at each other in the corners of their eyes. One minute, it was super easy to hate Avery for being an impulsive bitch. The next, it was easy to empathize with her. So many things had gone wrong for her in the past because of vampires. Getting her to trust them would take forever.

Matt shook his head. "I trust Natasha, Avery. And not just because we're ... were dating. I trust her, completely."

Art nodded. “We should do this.”

“I don’t want you to do this.” Avery folded her arms across her chest, and tapped her foot on the floor. “I told you what happened after Simon. And you fucking know what happened in Tijuana, you were there. You can’t just ... blindly trust a vampire cause you fucked her.”

The boys looked at each other, before they looked down at Avery, frowned, and stepped around her. Natasha’s dead heart would have skipped a beat if she was Blushing Life. Matthew took her right, Arturo took her left, and they both looked down at her with smiles. Then they looked back to their boss, frowning.

“We’re trusting her,” Art said, “because she’s smart as fuck, smarter than me, and smarter than you. We shouldn’t have done what we did to her.”

Avery turned and growled. “I gave her a chance to prove Maria’s innocence.”

“We didn’t even tell her when we were going in!” Growling right back, Art shook his head. “We ran in, guns blazing, when we should have worked with her to make sure what we were doing was the right thing!”

Oh god, it was happening. They were defending her against their boss, their pack’s leader. They were—wait. Matt looked down at Jack while Art talked, and the two traded quick smiles. They’d ... talked to each other, at some point. When? Why?

Avery threw her hands up. “We needed to surprise her! If Maria knew we were coming, she could have covered up everything, hid her tracks!”

Matt shook his head this time. “It doesn’t matter. If this is what the Prince wants, we should do it. I trust Tash to do right by us, by

all of us.”

Tash beamed up at the two men, but when Avery looked straight at her, she shrunk in place. The woman walked up to her, and short as Avery was, she was a good deal taller than Natasha, and she glowered down at her like she wanted to kill her. She probably did. But Jack was right beside her, and the woman glanced at him between her murderous glares.

“If you hurt my boys,” Avery said, venom in her voice palpable, “I’ll kill you. Get me?”

Her boys? Natasha frowned at her, but bit her tongue. She wanted to say something argumentative, like they were Tash’s boys, not Avery’s. But the room was already a pressure cooker.

“I w-won’t hurt them. But they will be taking me into the Hisil when I n-need to go.” She stood her ground as best she could against the pack leader, but there was no denying Avery was a powerful individual. Strong physically, but really strong in charisma, personality, confidence, and all the things that made a good leader. And easy as it was to think Avery was stupid, she wasn’t. No wonder it was hard for Matt and Art to go against her. A look around showed the pack all listened to Avery, and the more the woman spoke, the more they looked at Natasha like she was the enemy.

Jack shook his head. “She’s the nicest vampire in the whole damn city, Avery. Let it go.” He stepped past her, and looked to the other werewolves. “Again, understand that you crossed a line when you attacked Maria, and it’s only because of specific circumstances that the Prince doesn’t intervene. Attacking Natasha, on the other hand, was inexcusable. Matthew and Arturo will be repaying that debt.

“That’s not the only reason I’m here though. Garry’s on the warpath, and you wolves are partly to blame for that. Did he ask you to attack Maria?” He looked back over his shoulder at Avery, who stood between him and Natasha.

Avery sighed, shook her head, and rejoined Clara at the back wall. “I’m not squealing on Garry, Jack. Maybe he asked, maybe he didn’t.”

“Did he help you attack Maria? Give you information?”

Avery raised a brow. “Didn’t you hear me? I’m not saying shit about Garry. Only friend I have in the whole damn city.”

Jack frowned. Judging by the muscles Tash could see in his neck, he almost growled.

“I’m trying to be your friend.”

“You almost killed me. You almost killed Clara.”

“That wasn’t me! That was...” Jack clenched his jaw until Tash heard his teeth grind. “I’m sorry about what happened. I’m doing everything I can to get rid of this curse. I don’t want it. And I...” Jack looked at Clara. She met his gaze, and didn’t look away. But, she looked ... crestfallen, and she rubbed one of her arms as the two looked at each other.

Avery snorted. “Never heard of a vampire being sorry.”

“Come on, guys. This is me. Remember when that first azlu attacked? I could have left you to die to the second one. I jumped back in.” Jack turned around and looked at the werewolves standing in the kitchen. “Remember when you guys tried to kill Fiona, thinking she was an azlu? I smoothed that out with Azamel.”

“How about,” Clara said, “when you asked me to help you deal with the hunters, and I did?” Jack froze, and stared at her. Everyone stared at her. Clara sighed and shook her head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean ... I just meant that we’ve been through hell together, but you’re damn quick to say we’re the problem.”

Sighing, Jack took a step back, toward Natasha. “That’s not what I’m trying to ... Look, you guys aren’t a problem, ok? But this is a vampire city, and you’re guests. Work with me, alright?” He stood up straight and clenched his jaw again. “I came here for two reasons. Did the first,” he gestured to Art and Matt, “and the second, is simple. Stay out of the fight, okay? The Invictus and the Carthians have to work this out, and it’s going to get worse before it gets better. Keep your heads low, don’t get involved, and we have no problem.”

Avery snarled, but nodded. “Fine. We’ll stay out of the way, if you keep the fight out of our path.”

“Path?”

“We’re not done this hunt. Like the boys said, we found a new tear, and there’s a chance Maria didn’t create this one. Don’t get in my way, and we won’t have any problems. Got it?”

Even now, despite obviously being in the weaker negotiating position, Avery spoke like she was in control. Woman was so damn stubborn. But, the more Tash saw of her, the more it was becoming apparent how Avery worked. She was stubborn, because she had to be.

Jack managed a half frown, half smile. “Deal.”

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She smiled up at Matt and Art. The three of them stood on a roof top, one of the massive apartment buildings in the entertainment district. Even up here, the night sky was washed out from all the lights. No stars. She didn’t mind. She was happy.

“Blows my mind sometimes,” Art said, looking up. “Eric lives here, has lived here his whole life, and to him, not being able to see the stars is normal.”

Matt nodded. “He’s a new breed.” The two of them were leaned against the door they exited to get up here, and Tash stood in front of them, smiling.

“You two stood up t-to Avery.”

Art sighed, nodding, and scratched the back of his neck. “It wasn’t really about standing up to her.”

Matt nodded again. “It was more about, that ... that we...”

“We were morons. We shouldn’t have jumped the gun like that. We shouldn’t have stopped you from coming. We shouldn’t have—”

“We shouldn’t have done this without talking to you. We knew you thought Maria was innocent, and you might get in the way, and —”

“We didn’t want you to get hurt. But we shouldn’t have made that decision for you, and we shouldn’t have—

“We shouldn’t have thought that we couldn’t stay in the relationship, and do what Avery wanted us to do. We should have talked to you, explained things, and—”

“We shouldn’t have given up on us, and betray you like that. Betrayed us, like that.”

Us. She folded her arms across her chest, and did her best to look like she was an angry teacher, tapping her foot on the rooftop. It took a mountain of willpower to keep from smiling. “And you shouldn’t have st-staked me. That hurt.”

“We know!” They both said, throwing up their hands.

“That was horrible,” Art said, “and it’s my mistake. Matt argued, but I convinced him after the fact, and—”

“I let it happen, and then we just set you on the bed and left, and we thought for sure that—”

“The relationship was over, cause we knew we crossed a line. We shouldn’t have. We didn’t think. We’re—”

“Morons. Absolute morons. We didn’t want you to get hurt, and —”

She put up a hand, and sighed as she smiled. She couldn’t help it anymore. “You know I’m not going to b-be ... lenient, right? You agreed t-to do this, which means when I tell you to do something — about my goals — that you have to do them? If I want to go into the Hisil, you have t-to take me.” The boys winced, but they nodded. “And you have to trust that I know what I’m doing, w-when we’re there. You’re not allowed to stop me.”

“We do,” Art said. “We do. I ... staked you, because I knew you’d get involved, and—”

“And didn’t w-want to see me hurt.” She glared up at him. Getting staked hurt, but ultimately, it was an effective way of keeping her out of harm’s way. It only took a single night to recover from it, and they knew that. Still...

Matt nodded. “Avery can get pretty scary when she’s transformed. And Maria ... We knew things were gonna get bad.”

Art winced even more, looking away. “And it’s more than that. It’s because you’re too much of a threat, Tash, and Avery knows that.”

She raised a brow. “I’m n-not that strong.”

Art shook his head. “Bullshit. You’re damn fast, as fast as that Damien guy, and he fucked us up pretty good. If it’d been one-on-one, Damien would have had us with his silver. And you could have done the same. Avery couldn’t have that.”

Sighing, she came close, and pet them both on their chests. “And now, you know you ... you sh-should have talked to me, right?”

They both nodded. She almost made a quip about how they looked like two dogs, nodding in sync for their master. Probably a bad time to say that. And it made her feel a little bad. She didn’t want them to think of her like some sort of master giving orders. Though, that was basically what she’d be, until the weird stuff happening in Dolareido was dealt with.

And now, it was time for the big word, the word she was terrified to say, the word she knew she had to say. Especially after seeing them go up against their leader, for her. God, it scared her, scared her so fucking much, but she had to say it, had to get it out before it tore her up anymore.

“And you know ... know that I love you t-two, right? And ... that’s why it hurt so much?”

She couldn’t have hurt them more if she’d tagged them both in the crotch with a silver crowbar. She didn’t mean to! Just, it was the truth, and it had to be said.

There went her dreamy fantasies of a proper love confession after an epic battle, or lengthy session of lovemaking.

After a few moments, both boys squatted down; couldn’t squat very well in jeans, but they managed, weight on the balls of their toes instead.

“I love you, too,” Art said, and he took her right hand in his.

“I love you, too,” Matt said, and he took her left hand in his.

She sniffled. Not like she needed to sniffle, not Blushing Life, but she did anyway, and her hands shook a little too.



“R-Really?”

“Really,” they said together.

She gulped, and came in closer. Before she knew it, they had their arms around her, and she let them. Pain, gone. Terror, vanished. Oh god, it was really happening.

“Jack,” Art continued. “He visited, a week ago. Kinda dropped some truth bombs on us. Kid can be a real asshole, but, he’s good at cutting through the bullshit and getting to the truth of things.”

Was that all it took? For someone blunt to talk to them? No. They didn’t give Jack the credit he was due. If the man told them something harsh and scathing, it’s because he knew it was the only way to make things work. He was a lot better at the job the Prince had given him than he realized. Julias had taught him well.

“I’m glad he d-d-did.”

Glad, so very very glad. Part of her knew she should be angrier, that she shouldn’t give in so easily, but she just didn’t have it in her. Maybe that was sad. Maybe it was pathetic, and Antoinette would scold her for not being more stern. She didn’t care. Being in their arms again, feeling their chests against her, feeling their warmth around her, it filled her with butterflies.

Cozy. Safe. Warm. With these two idiots she loved.

Love. Jessy called it the L word, like it was something naughty, despite how much she was in love with Eric. When Jessy had told her she and Eric had said the ‘L word’ to each other, it took Tash a second to figure out what she meant, but the unending joy pouring out of her gave it away. And it hadn’t stopped. Now Tash could understand why.

With both guys squatting down on their toes, she was taller than them, making it easy to kiss one, and then the other.

“He also kinda spoiled things for us,” Matt said.

“Spoiled?”

Art nodded, kissing her on the cheek. “He told us you loved us. And basically figured out that we love you, too.”

She laughed. “That ... d-does kinda spoil the surprise. Well, thank you, for letting me s-say it without knowing.”

“Thanks,” Matt said, “for giving us a second chance.”

Art shook his head. “But, you have to know, we’re not against what Avery did either, about Maria I mean. Avery’s never steered us wrong, and she’s been hunting for longer than any of us. We did what she wanted because we believe in her, and ... and we still do, you know? What we did to you was stupid and wrong and horrible, but ... but it’s gonna take some serious work to convince us she’s wrong. We owe Avery that much.”

Sighing, she leaned into Art and rested her forehead down against his. “I was angry at m-myself too, you know? I couldn’t blame you completely. If the situation had been ... r-reversed...” She might have done the same thing. Maybe not stake them; they weren’t vampires. If she had to take them out of the equation, she’d find another way, involving either distraction, or maybe tricking them into Antoinette’s cell meant to hold monsters. She liked to tell herself she’d have talked to them instead, but maybe she wouldn’t have.

Speaking of cells.

“And I’m sorry, for leaving you locked up in the P-Prince’s cell, for a few days.”

Matt shrugged. “Doesn’t even ... It doesn’t matter. Really.” He kissed her cheek again. And then her neck.

Every inch of her wanted to melt into their arms. Not even Blushing Life, and she could feel tingles working through her. Every breath, she could smell them, scents she’d long started to associate with comfort and joy and bliss. The powerful beats of their hearts, the hardness of their muscles, even Matt’s damn whiskers. She melted into a sea of memories.

Sighing, she put a hand on Matt’s forehead, and gently pushed him back.

“Not ... n-not right now. We have stuff to do.” Self control! Success.

“You want to get to work tonight?”

She nodded. “Yes. Important things are happening, but everyone’s so focused on the C-Carthians and the Invictus, n-no one sees it.” Sighing again, she leaned forward, gave each of them a long, proper kiss, and stepped out of their warm embrace. Her insides screamed at her to get back in there, hug them, maybe Kiss them, maybe more, but no. She had a job to do.

Art frowned. “Into the Hisil?”

She met his frown, and nodded. “Into the Hisil. Is there a p-problem with that?” The boys blinked, and shook their heads. “Good. This deal isn’t just to p-placate the Ordo. I have a job to do, and you two are going to help me d-do it. Understand? If I say jump, you say how high.”

They both groaned, obviously disliking the idea of her going into danger, but they nodded eventually.

“Yes mistress,” Art said.

“Yes mistress,” Matt said.

She tried to keep a stern face, but she couldn't. Giggling, she hugged them again, and kissed them both again. Mistress? She kinda liked the sound of that.

Antoinette probably loved it, too, being called by her Prince title, or maybe even other things, like mistress, or queen? She could ask later, and she knew the Prince would tell her, in vivid detail.

Not now, focus.

“Ok, let's go.”

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~~Jack~~

“Mary, you there?” Nothing. The darkness said nothing.

Jack sighed, and walked through his old home, admiring the couches and the memories they sparked. If torpor ever wiped his mind of those memories, he'd feel sad. Hell, sad wasn't a strong enough word. Destroyed? Wrecked, ruined? Or would he just, not care? Antoinette had no memories left from her time as kine, but she didn't let it stop her.

But, after a few hundred intimate conversations with the woman of his dreams, it'd become apparent that the Antoinette from five hundred years ago, was dead. Whoever Antoinette was now, wise, intelligent, and self aware to the point of surrealism, she hadn't been that person back then. Whatever gave her her unusual body, probably experiments she performed on herself using the Coils according to her, that was just the tip of the iceberg for how different a person she was now. How much would Jack change as the years went by, and he had to go into deep torpors?

He ran a finger along a wall, and moved upstairs. Downstairs, the place had been repaired by some Invictus cleaners during the day when Mary wouldn't bother them. But he wasn't here to watch TV. Upstairs, the hallway pressed down on him, dark, and cold.

The cold only grew when he opened his sister's bedroom door.

"Mary. It's Jack. I wanted to talk." Again, silence. But the cold, the shadows that fell on him like a lead blanket, the mist that coated the floor, he knew she was here.

He stood at her vanity desk, admiring the jewelry, none of it particularly expensive. Mary didn't care about expensive, she just liked colorful things. She'd sooner wear bright green socks with cartoon frogs drawn on them, than pantyhose or whatever. And pink earrings with little words on them, like 'love'. But she had some other things too, more subtle stuff like silver and gold bracelets and necklaces, thin and quiet. His mom's new necklace was from this desk.

"You always loved to touch my stuff," the darkness said.

Jack smiled, and turned around. He'd felt her coming, like a deathly cold breeze that bit the skin. It was hard to see in the shadows, but movement came from above, swirling mists that betrayed the shape of a woman's face. She was mostly in the ceiling, but her head came through, and she looked at him with empty eyes.

"I was a kid. Just thought my older sister's stuff was shiny."

"You ate one of my earrings, once."

"I did? Wait, you didn't get your ears pierced when you were young enough for me to do that."

His sister lowered herself a little more, exposing her shoulders from the white ceiling.

“It was a clip-on.”

“Ah, right. I can’t remember.”

“You were three.”

“Well I don’t think anyone should be held accountable for what they do when they’re three.”

Mary smiled. Not a creepy, scary smile. A normal girl’s smile. Her eyes didn’t look nearly as large either; he couldn’t see into her skull. She floated down out of the ceiling, but stayed up high as she hovered around, like a fish near the surface of the water.

“You don’t visit often,” she said.

Jack sighed, and sat on her bed. “Mom visits you a lot.”

“She does. I like it. It’s like ... like nothing’s changed.”

He raised a brow. “Um, what?”

“When you disappeared, Mom and I got close. We talked often. You weren’t around. It’s like that.”

Muscles clenched in his jaw, and he took a deep, useless breath. She was very lucid; probably cause of his mom, talking to her all the time. A lucid ghost was easier to talk to, but it also meant she could think reasonably, come to conclusions she couldn’t otherwise, and might freak out over something not obvious. It’d almost be easier to deal with her if she was insane.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s ok. I’m dead. You shouldn’t spend all your time with dead people.”

“Technically I’m undead. Vampire. So, you know, it’s kind of a gray area.”

She laughed, a weird, raspy sound. “You shouldn’t worry about me, Jack. I’ll be fine.”

He was, and wasn’t worried about her. She was dead, and she made a good point that he shouldn’t be spending his time with dead people. But she wasn’t gone yet.

“I’m worried about Mom, more than you.”

She nodded. “Me too.”

“She been telling you much?”

Mary nodded, and slowly lowered herself down to sit beside him. It took a lot of effort to not shift away from her. This close, he could feel the unnatural coldness, and the unnatural death. Like, as if someone had given a cemetery the ability to speak.

“She’s told me a lot. Apparently she’s dating a vampire named Jacob?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.”

The ghost giggled. More of that raspy noise. “She told me you don’t like Jacob.”

“Jacob is dangerous. He’s old as dirt, and—”

“Isn’t your girlfriend the same age?”

“Yeah, but that’s different!” He threw up his hands. “Antoinette isn’t a creep.”

Mary laughed harder. Now, the laugh was definitely inhuman, both raspy, and strangely paced, exaggerated and weird. Eerie.

“I’m ... happy, that Mom and you are getting to have so much fun.”

“It’s not—”

“I know, I know. Mom’s told me about all the bad things that have happened. But, it’s still a lot of good things. Even all the sexy things.”

Jack groaned and rubbed his face with his palms. “Please tell me Mom isn’t sharing all the details of our sex lives with you.”

“Not the details. She’s my mom,” she said. He scrunched up his eyes nose as he eyed her suspiciously. She laughed. “She did tell me you’re a pretty lucky guy.”

“Lucky? Cause—”

“Of all the women.”

He rolled his eyes. “I mean, I guess.”

“You guess? Two tall, busty super models, two ballerinas, and now you’re making your own harem.”

“D-Did Mom tell you it’s a harem? It’s not a harem! They’re going to take care of my property, and they’ll be trained in weapons and ... stuff...”

Mary giggled some more. Yeah, it was a strange sound, but it probably wouldn’t sound so bad if he got used to it. With his mom visiting all the time, she was probably very used to it.

“I remember when you used to be so awkward around people.”

He shrugged. “Still am.”



“Not what Mom says. She says you’ve gotten very good at talking to people.”

“Talking to people is a skill. I’ve always been good at it, but it’s draining as fuck. Nothing natural or fun about it for me. Just ... these days, I don’t have a choice, so I guess yeah, I look less awkward to her.”

“Can’t be too draining, if you seduced four women.”

He threw up his hands, again. “That is not what happened!”

Giggling some more, she floated off the bed, and drifted around the room over to her closet. With a swipe of her hand, like she was pushing back against a tidal wave, the closet door opened with a loud thunk, hard enough to make Jack almost jump.

“Sorry. Hard to ... to do things gently. Hmm, all these clothes, and I can’t wear any of them.” She moved into the closet, and floated through the clothes. They didn’t move.

“Mary, I wanted to talk about ... about that thing, that you told Antoinette.”

The ghost snapped her head, glaring at him, before her body disappeared in the closet. Shadows fell on it, like a waterfall of darkness contained within, with only her head sticking out from its falling black.

“It’s still out there.”

“The thing that comes from the dark?”

The ghost nodded. Her motions weren’t smooth anymore, snapping like breaking branches.

He went on. “And you think this thing is what’s tearing up ... the world, here in Dolareido?”

She nodded again, eyes going wide, inhumanely wide. Panic mode.

“It is! It’s there. It’s tearing at things, at the seams. I can see other worlds, bleeding in, and this world, bleeding out! It’s ... it’s like staring into a crack from a barely open door, and getting a peek at things beyond.”

He managed a weak smile. The Shadow Realm, the dream realms, the Great Below or whatever it was, so many places out there that the physical world was sealed off from, and sealed off for a reason. Might as well call it an apocalypse, if the worlds started opening those cracked doors wide for each other.

“I’m here to talk about it.”

“I don’t want to talk about it! It’s out there. It might be listening.”

Jack leaned forward, and whispered. “You’re right. I’ve been hunting this thing for a while now, Mary. I don’t have proof, but I have a sneaking suspicion I know who’s causing these tears.”

“Who? Who who who? It can’t be a who! Has to be an it! It.”

Well, she was right about that. “I don’t disagree. But it, he, goes by the name Black Blood, and he likes to pretend he’s a he. Been using a Southern accent lately, but it’s not something he ... it, just has. He picked it.”

“I’ve never talked to it!” Her voice was piercing, but quiet. No one outside would hear them, but Jack could feel the shrieking sound cut through his brain. “It’s ... it’s darkness. It sneaks through the streets, and I can’t ... see it.”

“Can’t see it?”

“I can, but I can’t.” She lowered herself to the floor, body disappearing into the mist and shadow, so all he could see was wisps of flowing movement. “It’s sneaky. It drips around ... everything, like shadow.”

That sounded a lot like Black Blood, or at least the form he used when moving around. Jack had seen the giant skeleton that seemed to be his true form, and so had others, but that didn’t seem to be what he usually used.

“I’ve been trying to figure out what he’s up to, Mary. But I don’t even know if it is Black Blood.” Though at this point, it’d be stupid to not consider the spirit monster to be the most likely culprit. “Is there anything else you can tell me?”

She shook her head frantically.

He put up his hands. “That’s ok. It’s still a great help, knowing that you can sorta see this thing, and that you think it’s responsible for the tears.”

Her eyes shrank back to a more normal size, and the jittery motions settled. “Be careful Jack. Whatever it is, it’s ... it’s cold. Colder than me.”

He winced. Even without eyes, the fear on her face was blatant. A terrified ghost was a freaky image.

“Jack,” she said after a time, “do you know a Sabrina?”

Oh shit.

“Sabrina? You’ve met a Sabrina? When?”

“Last night.”

Oh shit oh shit.

“You mean, a woman came into the house?”

“No. She ... she came up from the ground, from the floor, from below. She said she was drawn here, following a trail. She asked if I knew you.”

He groaned hard enough his voice tore up. “Did you tell her anything?”

“No! She scared me. She pushed into my home, without my permission, so I pushed her out. It’s my home. Mine!”

“Good, good. Don’t let her in.”

“Who is she?”

He opened his mouth, and closed it. Tell his sister? It could be a mistake. She wasn’t stable, by any means, and if he told her something there was always the chance she’d repeat it to someone else in a fit of madness.

“It’s complicated. But she’s very dangerous, even for ghosts. Especially for ghosts. Don’t let her in. I met her in a ... strange place, somewhere beneath us, but not really. She ... helped me.”

“If she helped you, then—”

“Don’t, ok? Don’t let her in, and don’t talk to her. I saw her do things to ghosts, Mary, other ghosts, and it was horrific. Don’t let her in.” He rubbed his arms as he looked around. If Mary could defend her home from other ghosts, that was great. But Sabrina not being stuck in the Great Below was bad, bad for him, bad for everyone. She thought he was her friend, because he was Viktor’s grandchilde. If she ever found out what he did, the psycho would

probably creep through every wall, through the Prince's defenses, and cut his head off while he slept.

Could ghosts move around in the day? Could they enter any house uninvited? Could a ghost just, wander around? No, no way. There had to be limitations.

And he wasn't going to use his sister to learn more about those limitations. Much as he loved Antoinette, and he knew she'd love an opportunity to perform experiments on a ghost, he wouldn't let it happen. Not to Mary. Even if Antoinette said it might keep her around longer, to persuade his mom, he wouldn't let it happen. This had to stop.

"Mary. Do you ever think about leaving? About crossing over."

Slowly, she hovered out of the mist, and sat beside him again. He'd expected her to freak out, maybe throw him around, but she didn't. She sat there, half sitting, half hovering, head aimed down, and shivered.

"I can't leave yet, not until Mom is safe."

"She's never going to be safe, Mary. She wasn't safe when she was alive. Now she's a vampire, and it's not a safe second life. But she's got a great sire, the best vampire in the whole city, to take care of her."

"And you?"

"I'll be taking care of her, too."

The ghostly image of his sister smiled, but she turned her head and her hair hid her face. "It's not the same. This thing out there, it's not the same! It's dangerous. It's dangerous. It's dangerous."

“Ok, ok.” He put up a hand, and tried to touch her shoulder. Nothing but unnatural cold greeted him. “But what about after? You can’t be happy here, stuck inside this empty house.”

“I—” She stopped herself, and shook her head. “It’s fine. It’s ok. It’s ok. I can handle it.”

“For how long, Mary?” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and tried to see past her hair to her face. “I mean, christ, I said my goodbyes, to your corpse.” It hurt, saying the word. Cut his tongue like barbed wire. He said it anyway. “This isn’t good for anyone. You died, and it’s horrible, but it’s tearing Mom apart seeing you.”

“I’m going to protect her!”

“For how long, Mary? It could be years, decades, hell even centuries before we find out about this thing. I don’t know much about ghosts, but I bet being ... what you are, will start doing things to you, Mary. You’re going to hurt someone.” Barbed wire, meet serrated blade.

She snapped her head at him, an instant motion, and he jumped back as her eyes, empty and massive, glared into him.

“As long as it takes!”

The room exploded in mist and wind, and Jack had to raise a hand to stop trinkets, trapped in the sudden tornado, from smashing into his face. But before he could say anything, try and calm his sister down, she vanished.

Groaning, he got up, and got to work cleaning the mess.

---

He stood on top of the Tanvar building, binoculars in hand, and he scanned the rooftops. Mulder and Scully were out there, and out

here in North Side, it was dark enough they were more or less invisible against the night sky.

“See anything?” Ryan asked.

“Nope.” He handed the binoculars back.

Ryan Templeman. Ancilla, Mekhet, and accomplished Invictus. Indian, far as Jack could tell, with dark hair a few inches long, and a trim beard. No accent. He was older than Damien, but by this point, everyone knew Damien was the faster fighter, especially considering he'd been training with the sheriff. Still, Ryan was a powerful Kindred, and more than capable of taking on some Carthians if it came to it. He was also great at keeping people hidden in the Cloak of Night, hence, Jack's request to have him here.

He poked up his head up from behind the concrete, raised edge of the rooftop, and scanned as well. “I see crows, but that's it.”

Jack nodded, knelt behind the edge. “Mulder and Scully are smart enough to know if any of their friends are behaving oddly. And the other crows like them.”

Jessy chuckled, lying on her back on a blanket and looking up at the sky. “All hail the Crow Lord.”

“I'm not the Crow Lord, or whatever.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Yeah you are. I was connecting with a crow just yesterday, dude, and they told me about the Crow Lord.”

“Told you?”

“Well, you know, communicated.” Crows didn't communicate with words, even when using Animalism. Shared scents, images, noises, but no actual sentences. “Kept giving me impressions of

some dude with two crows on his shoulders, with an army of crows and rodents around him. And you had this huge ... presence, ya know? Pretty sure every crow and rat in the city knows about you in some way.”

He groaned and hit his forehead against the concrete. “I’ve gotten thousands of them killed.”

“Yeah well, you’re a vampire. You’re so far up the food chain, they look at you like you’re a god or something.”

“Other Kindred can use Animalism, too.”

Jessy laughed again, and started texting on her phone. “Not like you, they can’t.”

“It’s true,” Ryan said. “We’ve all seen the videos of what happened at the hospital. And there’s lots of rumors about what you did to the hunters, and then the werewolves. Did you ... really use rats as a living shield?”

Jack slowly turned his head and glared at Ryan. Ryan was smart enough to keep his eyes in the binoculars and scouting the horizon, but the silence probably tipped him off that Jack was staring at him. He inched away.

Tempting, to tell Ryan it wasn’t Jack doing that shit, it was the curse. But the reputation was a valuable tool. If people thought Jack and the Ripper were basically a team, it made it easier for him to get people to listen to him. It’s what Antoinette would do, much as it grated on Jack to be dishonest. A lie of omission, one of the worst kinds.

“Jessy,” Jack said eventually, “I don’t suppose you can just ... bark loudly, and make Garry throw his troops at us directly?”

“The fuck? I ain’t no dog.”



“Gangrel. Close enough.”

She rolled over, punched him in the leg, then rolled onto her back again and resumed texting. “Don’t make me kick your ass.”

Jack smiled. It was the reaction he wanted, and enough to make Ryan smile. Good. The more Jack could convince the other Invictus that, yeah sure he was crazy strong, but also not a Viktor 2.0, the better. He didn’t want people working for him cause they feared him. That sorta shit backfired, if history was any indicator. No, he wanted Kindred willing to do what he said cause they were on his side.

“Besides,” Jessy continued, “you’re the horny dog fucking five chicks every night. I mean, look at this.” She pointed the phone at him, showing a video of Jack doing exactly what she said.

The sound of groans and moans forced Ryan to lower his binoculars and look at Jessy, and the phone. He raised a brow, looked at Jack, and then back at the phone.

“Alright, I get it I get it. Sorry,” Jack said, kicking Jessy in the foot.

She snickered as she turned the phone back and returned to whatever she was texting.

“I’ve ... never seen the Prince naked,” Ryan said. “Wearing very little at the balls, sure, but never nude. Or, you know, doing that. Wow.”

“I know, right?” Jessy said. “The fuck did she do to get that body? Super tall, hips of a goddess, tits the size of mountains, and there’s the reddish eyes and white hair. Like, how?”

Ryan looked between Jack and Jessy, feeling for the atmosphere. After a few seconds, he laughed, and scanned the horizon some more. “She is a dragon, and one of the oldest in the world probably.

I can't even begin to imagine the sorts of experiments she's done with those Coils."

"You know much about the Ordo?" Jack asked.

"A bit. A lover of mine was a dragon, in a different city. But it didn't work out. She's still there, I'm not." He shrugged.

"What happened?" Jessy asked, with all the subtlety of a wrecking ball.

"Dragons are a secretive bunch. More secretive than the Invictus, as Mister Terry probably knows all too well."

"Yep." He gave up on trying to learn anything meaningful about the Ordo Dracul from Antoinette long ago.

"Well, some of the experiments she'd been performing were a little ... reckless. I didn't agree with using Kindred as subjects."

Jack and Jessy shivered. Doing nasty experiments on kine was horrible, but Kindred were much more resilient. That was good and bad, cause it meant you could literally cut open a Kindred's body and start removing parts, and they'd live. No end to the torment. A particularly cruel dragon could capture a Kindred they hated, lock them up, force feed them, and do all sorts of wicked things.

"But the Prince," Ryan continued, "doesn't seem the sort. Then again, what do I know."

Wincing, Jack nodded. "Dolareido is pretty tame compared to other Kindred cities. Hell, Xnomina's hands aren't nearly as bloody as they could be. I—"

Screeching tires broke the relative silence of North Side. And not long after that, gunfire.

“A drive by?” Jessy said, jumping to her feet. “Seriously?”

“Probably just testing our defenses,” Jack said. “Ryan, suppressing fire. Jessy, get down there and get physical. Scare them off. I’ll play my hand if I have to, but only if I have to.” He pulled his radio off his hip. “How many?”

Hella’s voice screamed back through the hand radio over gunfire. “Three cars, at least a dozen thralls.”

“No vamps?”

“Two, in the cars. They’re not getting out.”

“Don’t stick your heads out. I don’t want them knowing how many of us there are!” And no point losing any of their own thralls or ghouls in a stupid gunfight. “Stay low, play defense. Jessy is”—he snapped his head up as Jessy ran past him, and jumped off the building—” ... on her way.” Groaning, he got up and headed for the roof exit. He was not going to do a superhero landing. It’d have been comical, one hundred and forty pounds of small Invictus landing like a fucking feather. Also, he couldn’t do the crazy transforming shit a Gangrel could do.

He looked behind him as Ryan pulled out his rifle and started shooting. Silenced, medium caliber, nothing extreme. He knew Jack didn’t want him killing anyone, so the man should have been shooting at the cars and their tires, not the passengers. Hopefully.

Jack ran down the stairs, four floors worth, and ran into the small lobby. Halfway across, he fell into a slide, foot first, and slipped in beside Hella, four thralls, and two ghouls. A small force, meant to lure Garry into a stupid move, hopefully exposing his force so the Invictus could properly kick their asses with Jack as the surprise. But Garry wasn’t dumb. Even with Ryan escorting Jack to and from the building Cloaked, chances are Garry knew he was here.

“Any wounded?” he yelled.

Hella poked her head up over the window ledge and unleashed a few shells. “Not yet! Fuck! Fucking bulletproof cars.”

“Bulletproof?” Fuck. Terra Den.

He peeked over the windowsill just long enough to get a glimpse, and have a hail of bullets shattered the wood around him. Jessy, suit torn up, with some huge spikes coming out of her head, back, shoulders and elbows, and with some monstrous claws on, stood on one of the cars. And she was going to town. Slash slash slash. She'd have gotten through a normal car in seconds, but bulletproof? He had no fucking clue.

If the cars drove off, their hit and run would have served the purpose of figuring out some of Jack's defenses, particularly that there was an angry Gangrel around. It'd have been an effective drive by. But apparently these fuckers wanted more. They stuck around, shooting out from cracked open windows, and peppering the building with what sounded like shotguns and fully automatic pistols.

“Can a Gangrel cut through that with their claws?” he asked.

Hella shrugged, popped back over the sill, and fired a few more times. “Never tried.”

He looked beside him. The kine had bulletproof vests on underneath their suits, making them looking blocky as hell, and they only poked their heads up long enough to get in a few shots.

“Joe!?” Jessy yelled.

Joe? Gangrel, up-and-comer, but not for his mind. Dude was a fucking dumbass, and the definition of a stereotypical goon. Problem was, a Gangrel didn't really need to be smart, when they

could trust their fighting instincts, and transform body parts on the fly.

Jack peeked again. Joe tackled Jessy off the car, and the two fell down between the cars, out of sight. Shit shit, if Jessy died, it'd trigger a full out war.

If Jessy died, he'd never forgive himself.

He pulled out his radio and pressed the button. "Team C, engage. Get physical, and tell my idiot partner to ease up with the Protean shit before we make the news."

It didn't take long. Two seconds later, the gunfire ceased, only to start up again, aimed in a new direction: across the street. Jack poked his head out long enough to confirm. Team C, Derick, Bruce, and Kyle came out from the other building, Kyle and Derick at the lead, and they swarmed over the cars. Bruce was a Ventrue, not exactly equipped for physical combat, but he went in close anyway, shotgun blasting, giving the gunners no opportunity to shoot back. And Kyle and Derick were Nos and Daeva. They'd have no problems flipping the cars over.

Predictably, the cars took off. Bulletproof or not, they couldn't deal with Jack's older vampires in melee. That left Joe, apparently in a fist fight with Jessy. Or, sorta fists, because while they'd ditched the claws, they instead wore some scaly armor on their hands.

"Team C, pursue the vehicles until they're out of range. I don't want them doing anymore drive-bys. Ryan, get—" Clanks of heavy metal echoed through the mostly empty street. As Team C started down the road, four bodies burst up from one of the manholes. "Team C, stay on course! Ryan, cover Jessy." Jack put the radio down and looked at the kine around him. "Light em up!" Ok, that was a little cheesy, but without missing a beat, every kine there knelt up and unloaded their weapons at the newcomers.

Who was it? He recognized Kathy and Tilly, neonates. Oh shit, Tilly. Fuck fuck, if Tilly died, he'd have a super pissed werewolf on his hands. The other two, Bella and Steve, were ancilla, and a much, much bigger problem than Kathy, Tilly, or the vamps and kine in the drive-by. The three cars had been a distraction, and a bullet sponge.

Steve charged forward, holding the manhole like a fucking shield. Bullets shattered against it, filling the night with the sounds of crashing metal, and the light of ricochet sparks. The others sped up toward Jack's defense position, dashing left and right, and only getting clipped by bullets, instead of torn up like they should have been.

Tilly and Kathy dove through the window, straight over Jack's head, and threw themselves at the kine. Shit, shit shit. They might not know Jack had told everyone to try and avoid killing. Bullets? Aim for limbs, or the vehicles they might be using. But for all he knew, Tilly and Kathy were going to tear his thrall and ghoul support into literal pieces.

"Hella, get out there, support Jessy!" He pulled out his radio. "Ryan, I want those two assholes on the street riddled with holes. Engage in melee when you're dry. No killing!" Snarling, Jack threw himself into the chaos.

The six kine couldn't do much against Kathy and Tilly. Kathy was a Nos. She liked to wear a gas mask all the time to cover up whatever her deformity was, but she had no trouble getting in close proximity to use her Nos strength. And Tilly was Daeva. Fast and strong, and drop dead gorgeous. She wore nothing more than some tight jeans and an even tighter tank top, likely hoping jigglng tits would prove a distraction.

Hella jumped through her broken window, while Jack threw himself at the two women now inside the building. He'd been doing his best to suppress his aura, to keep his Beast quiet and calm, and

the necklace helped with that. If the enemy had taken more time to scout and recon, they'd probably have done things better, maybe accounted for him, but it didn't look like they did. Unless it was a trap?

Didn't matter. Take out Tilly and Kathy, before anyone was killed.

As the two ladies broke fingers and wrists of the kine, Jack ran up to them. They turned to face him as they clunked the heads of two thralls together, taking out his six kine in a matter of seconds. The two vampires' eyes went wide as they realized it was him.

He didn't give them a chance to turn realization into action. He drew back a fist, and slammed it into Kathy's sternum, vitae fueling his limbs. Fuck the Beast. Fuck the Ripper. As long as he maintained awareness, actively controlled his vitae, he could do without them. Besides, he was a Ventrue, and they didn't expect a Ventrue to go in with fists.

All vampires were strong. Daeva and Nosferatu were naturals at it, just like how Ventrue and Gangrels were naturals at Animalism and Resilience. But that didn't mean a Ventrue couldn't punch a hole through a concrete wall, they just had to put more mental effort into it, more vitae, more will. And the curse gave him that in spades.

Kathy went down with a crunch, ribcage shattered. She rolled and twisted around, clutching at her chest, and she glared up at Jack from behind her gas mask as she struggled to push past the pain.

Before she did, Jack snapped his gaze at Tilly. "Stop."

Tilly, fist drawn back and ready to punch him, eyes wide with panic, met his gaze. He kicked the gates of her consciousness down hard, and grabbed hold of her mind like he was grabbing a small, wild animal. Too soft a grip and she'd break free, wriggling and

scratching. Too hard a grip and he'd break her completely, killing her, or worse.

She lowered her first.

“Good. Hold still.” Again, he drove the command into her mind, smashing past her barriers, and crushing her snarling, little Beast. She relented.

With the necklace on, it took a hundred times more effort and control to summon up his vitae, and push it outward from his body using Dominate. The Beast in his guts could do little to help him, while the necklace remained. It was like going from riding a horse, to running beside the horse. He wouldn't be able to keep this up for long.

“Now, you!” He reached down, grabbed Kathy by the neck, and slammed her back down on the office floor. The vinyl cracked, and Kathy groaned into her mask. “I'm trying to save your idiot lives, so hold! Still!” He glared at her through the mask, and—

And snapped his head up as another body came up from the open manhole.

Garry.



## Chapter 140

~~Damien~~

His leg worked again. Barely, but it did. Tomorrow night, he'd go back to work, helping the Invictus secure their borders and priority locations against Carthian fingers.

But for the moment, he'd enjoy what was left of his free time with his lover.

He eased his hips back, and gently pushed them forward, until every inch of his girth sank into his girlfriend's trembling body. Once he was snug inside her, he spent a few seconds lightly caressing her ass, before he lifted his hand, and spanked it, earning a weak whimper from Fiona, and a hard clench of her exhausted muscles. They'd been making love for a long time now, and with a belly full of Fiona's blood, he intended to go for a while yet.

He smiled down at her. Drained of blood, she was barely awake, head turned and resting on her pillow, ass in the air. If not for him holding her hips, she would have fallen over.

They were in her apartment. Her cozy, small, cheap apartment. Thin walls meant the neighbors likely heard the mewls Fiona made; Damien could definitely hear the neighbors, at least. But there was something comely about being with his love in this environment. Cushy, according to Fiona. Quaint, according to Maria. They usually had sex in his apartment, or in her nightmare realm, but they had fun here sometimes as well.

He looked around in the darkness of her apartment; she liked the lights off, which made sense, considering she was a shadow monster. He grinned at the bed, at the bright pink cover, and the various stuffed animals. Most of them had fallen off the bed, but

Fiona clutched one now, snuggling into a big brown bear with a trembling arm. He almost felt dirty, fucking her from behind, spanking her, Kissing her, when the apartment made her seem so innocent. She was anything but innocent.

He smiled at the nearby laptop and the cute cat and frog stickers on it. He smiled at the vanity desk and the cute toys she'd arranged on it to look like a family of anthropomorphized animals having a meal around her makeup kit. He smiled at the posters on the walls, some of pop bands, some of cutesy cartoon animals, and one a rather detailed painting of a blue whale and unicorn swimming through the cosmos.

Fiona had the decor sense of an eclectic thirteen-year-old girl.

Chuckling to himself, he gently eased his length out of her squeezing, drenched insides, until only the head of his cock remained inside her, before he slowly pushed back into her yet again. No need to rush things. He'd cum once already, she'd cum half a dozen times, and their inhuman bodies would let them go for as long as they wished. He felt like giving her body a break, and letting her recover before he'd build her up to another onslaught.

He spent a few moments caressing her large ass cheeks, fingertips teasing along her pinked skin from earlier spanks, before he gave her ass another slap. Instant pleasure. The exhausted woman mewled, clutched her teddy bear tight, and clenched on his shaft hard. She cracked open her eyes, her left cheek pressed to her pillow, and she managed to peek at him before it closed again as she

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“Damien.”

Damien froze and whipped his head to the side. Every muscle, every fiber, every ounce of vitae and Beastly instinct he had kicked into high gear. Sword? Where? By the door. Leg? Working well enough he could move, and jam vitae through it if he had to. Fiona?

Out of commission. She was awake, but only barely, deep in a post-Kiss bliss coma. He ... he knew that voice.

“Athalia?”

“Indeed.”

Slowly, he released the building tension in his body. Fiona turned her head to look toward her closet where the voice was coming from, but otherwise she made no movement. Hell, her eyes were barely open as it was.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Watching you have sex with Fiona, evidently.”

At least it was Athalia’s human voice, and not the raspy voice of her alien, skeletal form. How did she get in Fiona’s closet? She hadn’t been there before. Ah, right, the lair. The Begotten had connected their lairs, and could move swiftly between locations that were attached to those lairs. Fiona had a door to her lair in her closet; they’d used it before. Athalia had come through it, silent as a ... shadow monster.

He frowned and tried to back away from his lover. Of course, doing that stirred Fiona from her coma, and she pushed her ass toward him, even as she reached behind her and grabbed his hand, her other arm still wrapped around her teddy bear. Her grip was weak, but the point was clear: keep going.

“Did you invite Athalia, Fiona?”

“M ... Maybe.”

He rolled his eyes, and spanked her again. Mistake. Fiona whimpered, and pushed her ass toward him as she clenched. By the Lord, this woman.

Another whisper from the darkness. “Finish up, we can talk after. I’ll wait.”

“I’d prefer—”

“Don’t worry, I won’t spy.”

It wasn’t like Damien wanted to stop, not with a belly full of blood, and with Fiona whimpering for him to keep going. And not just regular blood either, Fiona’s blood. Thinking straight was borderline impossible. The desire, the hunger, it tingled along his skin and buried his mind in fog.

It took only seconds to forget about Athalia, and start fucking his lover again, and this time much harder. For another twenty minutes.

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He slipped on his boxers, and threw open the closet door. Athalia stood there, arms folded across her chest, and a strange smile on her face. He knew that smile. That was a mischievous smile. Fiona often used the same one. Seeing it on Athalia was strange though. He figured a stone better capable of the expression, but apparently not.

“You ... spied.”

She chuckled. An even stranger phenomena than her smiling.

“Yes, I did. She seemed to be enjoying herself quite a bit, and you seemed enthralled.”

“It’s her blood. It affects me in—”

“Yes yes I know, she’s told me all about it.” Nodding, the tall, dark-skinned woman sat on the side of the bed, reached out, and pat Fiona’s shoulder. She lay under the covers, still snuggling her teddy

bear, and had fallen asleep the moment Damien had finished. “She really has absurdly huge tits for a little thing, doesn’t she?”

“It’s enough to make a Mekhet nervous.”

“Huge tits?”

He blinked at her. “Knowing you can show up here and get this close, without me being able to sense you coming.”

She smirked. “Be happy I’m an ally, then.”

He raised a brow, watching her as he put his suit pants on. And she watched him, her cold expression less cold, even appreciative. She liked what she saw.

“What?” she said after a time. “You’re attractive. I can see what Fiona sees in you.”

“I like to think she sees more than just an attractive vampire.”

“Of course. She probably also sees an emo vampire fantasy, too.”

He frowned. She rolled her eyes, and laughed. Who was this woman? This was not the Athalia he remembered, the Athalia that betrayed them during the assault on the hunters all those months ago.

“We love each other.”

“Yes, I know. I’m only kidding.”

“Forgive me if I’m not used to hearing you make jokes.”

Sighing, Athalia shook her head, and gently pat Fiona on the shoulder a few times. “I’ve had time to think about what’s happened. Azamel’s helped me put things in perspective, and ... and things are better. Fiona hasn’t told you?”

“No. She wants to, but she avoids gossiping.”

“That’s good.” She smiled down at her fellow monster, and stroked her shoulder a few times before looking back to him. “Azamel’s taught her well.”

“How ... much longer does she have?”

Athalia frowned, and moved down the bed to sit at the foot of it, by him. “Not long. Her human half is giving up, and so is her Horror. A wound we can’t see, but it’s there, draining her a little bit more every day.”

“I’m surprised she’s lasted this long, then.”

“Yeah. We’re lucky. She’s taught us as much as she can in that time, about how to feed without drawing attention, about how to avoid killing prey, how to balance our hungers. She’s...” She sighed again and shook her head. “Sándor may be powerful, but he’s no teacher or parent.”

Damien sat down beside her. It made him nervous, sitting close to her like this, but it seemed like the thing to do. Athalia was opening up, and that was pretty much a miracle, especially because Damien was part of the reason her daughter was dead.

“I’m surprised,” Athalia continued, “that you’re so rough with Fiona. The spanking? The hard thrusts? Thought the bed was going to break.”

He squirmed. “She insisted. And, I wasn’t lying about her blood. It does something to me, something kine blood doesn’t. But, yes, she um ... really enjoys it rough.” Why switch the topic from Azamel to sex? Well, Athalia was with Azamel a lot. Maybe she was emotionally exhausted, watching her friend and guardian slowly die, and wanted to talk about something more fun. Why talk to him, though? Damien had little to offer in the social skills department.

He was dating a Begotten though. Maybe that was why she wanted to talk to him?

“I can tell you’re wondering why I’m here.”

“I thought you wanted to talk to Fiona,” he lied.

“Partly true. But, I also wanted to talk to you ... about Daniel.”

“The sheriff?”

She nodded, looking down at her legs and rubbing her hands against her jeans. “We ... we...”

“Oh.” He smiled. That was not a development he expected. Sure, people knew Athalia and Daniel were interested in each other, but Athalia was a ‘tough nut to crack’ according to Jessy. Nothing short of divine intervention would help that woman relax, or so Damien had thought.

“I wanted to ask you, about being Mekhet.”

“Being Mekhet? I’m not sure there’s much to tell.”

“Anything’s better than nothing, and that’s all Daniel tells me. Nothing.”

He laughed and brushed his hair along the unshaved side of his head. “It’s hard to answer that question, honestly. I’ve been Mekhet far longer than I’ve been human. That makes it hard to draw comparisons to who I was before. But, I suppose there’s one very ... distinct aspect about Mekhet.”

“Oh?”

“We have trouble coming out of our shell.” He pointed at his temple. “We live in here, and it’s a struggle to turn thoughts and feelings outward, and get them into the body, to be expressed.”

“That applies to any introvert.”

“It’s no mistake that almost all Mekhet are introverts. My sire was an exception, not the rule.” He shrugged. “For Mekhet, it’s stronger. It’s a Beastly instinct, to keep thoughts hidden. It’s ... also a Beastly instinct, to hunt secrets, and information. It’s like candy to any Mekhet.”

“Maybe that’s why that damn man is always trying to learn more about me, even if he doesn’t make it obvious.” She grinned. “I suppose that explains why you fuckers are always spying on people.”

“Not ... always.”

Grin turned to laugh, and she gave him a weak backhand against the shoulder. “Anything else?”

“I suppose if you’re trying to get Daniel to come out of his shell, feed him your blood. Though that’ll lead to a pretty ... extreme result.”

She shivered and looked down again. “That’s not easy to just, do, for some of us.”

“Understandable.” Athalia had a rough history with other paranormals.

“Fiona has ... gone on at length though, about how much she enjoys it, and what comes after.” Athalia gestured to the bed and the sleeping redhead within.

“Of course she has.” That girl. She and Jessy were alike in so many ways.

“And I got to see it for myself.”

“And you accuse Mekhet of spying.”



“Well, after hearing Fiona rave about how good a lover you are, I had to get a peek.” She grinned again. “Nice to see she wasn’t exaggerating.”

“So you dropped by, hoping for said peek?” He managed to keep a straight face, despite the compliment. Barely.

She scrunched up her nose a little and smiled. Whoever this woman was, she wasn’t the Athalia of old. Whatever Daniel and her had been up to, it’d done wonders for her.

“Daniel is most definitely not willing to get that aggressive, though. I think he’s ... afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Of hurting me. Not physically, emotionally. Probably thinks getting rough will ... trigger me, I guess.”

He nodded. “You’ve had a rough life.”

“I know. But I’m not looking for gentle, lovey-dovey sex all the time, okay?. Sometimes, sure, but all the time? I’m a grown woman, damn it.” Frowning, she kicked her legs back and forth a little. “I want what Fiona and you have. I want the dumbass to ... to make me feel small in his arms. Small, and helpless, but protected and safe, you know? As he pounds me into a coma.”

“You’re ... being awfully forward with me, about all this.”

“Well, you’re a church boy, right? Think of this as a confession. You’re not allowed to share this with anyone.”

He groaned. That, was smart. She wasn’t exactly confessing her sins, but she was still confiding in him in a similar manner.

“Alright.”

She nodded again. “My daughter ... is gone. It had to happen. Azamel’s helped me accept that, and Daniel’s the first man who’s made me happy in a long time. For the first time in my life, things are looking up. So this whole complaint is stupid, and juvenile, but god damn it, I want the man to be a man, and stop treating me like I’m made of porcelain.”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Oh shut up.” She rolled her eyes and shrugged. “I want the man to hold me down, choke me a little, pull on my hair, spank me, maybe even tie me up. Is that so much to ask?”

Oh good Lord. Hearing it from her made it sound absolutely filthy, but in truth, it was all things he’d already done with Fiona. Frequently, at that. Filthy was the wrong word. Some women — a lot of women, evidently — liked feeling helpless and meek during sex. Athalia was anything but helpless and meek, same for Fiona, but he knew from experience that, if he took Fiona’s wrists and held her down, she immediately grew aroused.

Never in his wildest dreams did he think he’d enjoy doing that to a woman, until Fiona asked him to. Well, Vrall did, technically.

“I don’t know how to get Daniel to come out of his shell. Your blood would probably work, like I said.”

“I’ll work on that.”

“Other than that, it’s hard to say. It’s not like there’s a one-size-fits-all solution to getting people to come out of their shell. Fiona’s is ... is a unique case. She’s so happy, and radiates joy so powerfully, it’s overwhelming. But truthfully, it was her Horror that told me what Fiona wanted, sexually speaking. Vrall is a little...”

“Wiser?”

He grinned. “I wasn’t going to say it. But Vrall definitely understands things, about people, about Fiona, about me, things I suppose I will too, if you give me a few more centuries learning about them.”

“Vrall won’t be of much help to me. Not like she’ll ever talk to Daniel.”

“Then, all I can do is suggest being honest with the man. He’ll respond best to bluntness.”

“Yeah, but, I’m afraid of ... scaring him off, I guess.”

“Daniel? The man’s been close friends with a succubus for hundreds of years. I’m sure he’s seen debauchery of truly epic scale.”

“Ha! That’s true, isn’t it?”

“I’m certainly no expert on this topic. I think you’d get a far better answer asking the Prince herself.”

“I’d ... rather not deal with the Prince.”

He smiled. “Me neither. Maybe Natasha? She—”

His phone rang. Maria’s ring. He got up and retrieved the phone where he left it on Fiona’s desk. A text message.

~Xnomina is under attack.~

---

He left Athalia with Fiona. She could explain why Damien left for him, and he trusted her with his girlfriend. Considering who she was, he trusted Athalia with Fiona more than most. They were a family. A very weird family, but a family, and they’d protect each other with their lives.

Maria's arms had regrown, but she couldn't use them yet. Avery hadn't simply torn them off, though that'd been what it looked like. If the werewolf could call upon weird magical fire into her claws, maybe she could do other things to cause other actions to inflict more damage? Whatever she'd done, Maria was taking a long time to heal. She wouldn't be helping him tonight.

He landed on the roof of the building across from Xnomina. The HQ was on fire, at least, as much as a building of concrete with marble tiling could burn. The contents were the issue. The desks, the tables, the paintings on the walls, the decorative curtains, the chairs, they all burned, visible through shattered windows.

He crouched low and scanned the streets. Kine gathered to watch from a distance, but no cops or firefighters had arrived yet. They'd likely been delayed by the Invictus, and on purpose.

What was the point in this? The Carthians attacking the Invictus headquarters in the middle of the night made no sense. A distraction? He knew Jack was at the Tanvar building, along with Jessy and a few others. If the Carthians wanted Invictus eyes on the Xnomina building instead of the Tanvar building, this would work. The problem was the Masquerade. Vampires could not be caught fighting out in the open, and Xnomina was near the entertainment district. Kine were everywhere.

Damien pulled out his binoculars, and engaged his Auspex. He peeled back the curtain of chaos, and scanned for the Beasts of nearby Kindred, perhaps in the crowd. A sweep over the people below showed several Kindred, young Invictus neonates, staring at the building in horror. Understandable. Most of them had remained relatively peaceful with the Carthians; fist fights and the like in secluded areas hardly qualified as true violence to vampires. Fire, on the other hand, was a very clear statement: we want you dead. No vampire who touched it would survive, barring a miracle.

He used his free hand to dial Gloria Jennings. Thank the Lord, she answered.

“H-Hello!?”

“Miss Jennings, report.”

“Mister Burksen! Thank god, where are you?”

“On the Mardok building.”

“I’m in the bunker! I’ve got a dozen neonates with me.”

The bunker, below Xnomina. She’d be safe there from anything save for a particularly strong, particularly foolhardy elder Kindred, but Damien didn’t sense Garry anywhere. Elder he may be, Damien was confident he’d be able to pierce the man’s Obfuscate with Auspex if he was around. He was no Nos or Mekhet.

“The building won’t burn down. You’re safe in there.”

“I may be, but other Kindred aren’t! Amanda’s up there! But the bunker is locked down and won’t open cause of the fire!”

Shit.

“The fire can’t spread. Not enough things to burn. It’ll pass in an hour. I don’t even know how the upper floors managed to—”

“The Carthians. Gunshots hit the windows from the outside, and then fire rained in. And then some kine and a few Kindred stormed the building, and ... and I ran. We all ran, for the stairs and got to the bunker.”

So, the Carthians had broke the windows, threw fire into the building, and then sent a contingent to rush inside. Dangerous for them, even if they had ghouls doing it. One mistake and one, or all

of the Kindred would be dead in flames. Hell, if he was lucky, they'd all be dead.

No, much as he wished otherwise, if Carthians died during this stupid raid, it'd elevate the situation. Even if it was their own stupid fault, it'd intensify the squabbles, the turf war, and Kindred would start outright trying to kill each other. Jack didn't want that, and now that Damien was trying to rebuild the church in Dolareido, he didn't want it either. And he didn't want his friends to get hurt, friends like Jack, and even that damn idiot Jessy.

"Where's Mister McDonald?" he asked.

"I don't know!"

"How the fuck did the Carthians rush through the building? Don't we have defensive measures?"

"I don't know, I don't know!"

"Either way, stay where you are. I'll deal with this." Sighing, Damien turned and—fucking jumped out of his own skin. "Sándor! How did you—"

The man leaned over the roof edge and peered out into the fire. "Athalia dropped me off."

The damn shadow monster was beyond sneaky, her and Fiona both. They made Mekhet look like stumbling children.

"Leave. Jack told the Begotten to stay out of this."

"Is that what this is? Problems with the Carthians?"

"You could say that. Now if you'll excuse me." Damien blanketed himself in the Cloak of Night, backed up, and made a running leap off the roof. The street wasn't wide, and reaching the building next

to the Xnomina HQ easy enough, even with one leg refusing to work well.

A glance back showed Sándor followed him, jumping across to the next building without issue. Half jump, half fly. This high up, no one would see them, especially not with a nearby fire to watch and film.

And that was the problem. A fire meant kine, with smart phones and whatnot to film the mayhem. The Kindred inside had to be careful. A Masquerade violation meant death for whoever was stupid enough to get caught, especially if that meant getting caught on film. Maybe that's what the Carthians were hoping for? Put the Invictus in a position where someone might use their Disciplines to escape the flames, get caught on camera, and earn a swift — or not so swift — death at the sheriff's hands.

“Don't follow me, Sándor. If Garry finds out you're here, he—”

“I'm just watching.”

Damien frowned back at the man, but shrugged. As long as he didn't get involved, he couldn't make things any worse.

“I need to get into that building.”

“The building's contents are on fire, Damien.”

“Then it's a good thing I'm wearing a fire retardant trench coat.”

The man didn't smile, or make a sound. Eerie, how calm and stoic he was, considering a large building was on fire not far away, and outright war was just around the corner.

“If you die, Fiona is going to—”

“I’m not going to die. But I am going to do something, before everything goes to Hell.” Before an Invictus or Carthian made a mistake and broke the Masquerade, if he could help it.

---

~~Jack~~

He snapped his gaze back down at Kathy. “Hold still. Stay there.” He punched through her consciousness and crushed her Beast beneath his will. It was dangerous to hit her mind so hard, but he didn’t have time for shit anymore.

Jack turned, and glared out the broken window, surrounded by the groaning bodies of thralls, and two paralyzed vampires. On the street, Jessy had switched off, and was doing her best to take on Steve.

“Jessy, get to the shadows!” Christ, if she did anymore crazy transformations, and some random kine got a picture of it, that was it. The Prince would side with the Carthians, and the Invictus would be finished.

Would that be so bad? If something happened to Jack, Antoinette said she’d declare him effectively dead, and keep him in her tower. And—no, he couldn’t just let that happen. The idea of the love of his life killing the people he worked with, and maybe even his friend Jessy, in a great purge, was gut wrenching.

Jessy nodded, still grappling with the other vampire, and threw the two of them into an alley. Better than nothing. But Steve was ancilla, and Daeva. If Jack couldn’t keep tabs on them, there was always a chance Jessy would lose that fight. He had to deal with this shit and deal with it now.

Hella and Joe rolled up toward the Tanvar building, and then into it, glass cutting into them as they tossed and turned. Jack couldn’t



watch, eyes still locked on Garry, but at least those two were off the street.

“Garry, the fuck is this?”

The man grinned as he walked forward. The idiot wore no weapons, no armor, just jeans and a black t-shirt, and he licked a fang as he approached the building.

“Knew you were here.”

“Spotted me?”

“Nah. I’ve shared this damn city with your asshole boss since I was just a young vamp. Him, that fucker Viktor, and that bitch Maria. I know how he thinks.”

Jack looked up outside the window. Hard to see black on black, but some subtle motions told him Scully and Mulder were around, and more crows besides. But this part of North Side didn’t have the same crow and rat population of other places like South Side, where they grew fat on the leftovers left by the night life and tourists. If he wanted to summon a legion, their numbers would take time to swell. And he didn’t want another hospital incident anyway.

“So, what, you came here to fight me? I’m trying to keep everyone alive.”

Garry snorted. “You know what, kid? I believe you.” He came closer.

“You ... do?”

“Yeap, I do. Julias was a good man, and now he’s dead. And the white-haired queen, sitting pretty on her fucking throne, would just love it if everyone took it up the ass for her.”

So much for cooperation.

“So, what, you’re here to kill me?”

“Maybe. I’m here to kick your ass. We’ll see if killing is necessary.” He came closer, and Jack took a small step back. Not retreating, just making room for the asshole to hop into the lobby of the building with him. The glass crunched under his combat boots, and his fists clenched and unclenched at his sides.

Jack glanced to Hella. As much as Team A, Hella and the kine, were supposed to be guarding the building, and his six, the kine were out of the fight, and Hella was dealing with a Gangrel just as old as her. Joe was supposedly only thirty years embraced, but the bastard was strong. A dumbass, but strong. A big man, bigger than Garry, with a shaved head just like his boss. He had no trouble thrashing Hella around.

Past Garry, Jessy and Steve had vanished, but Jack could hear their yells and grunts of fighting. Behind the elder, Bella had vanished as well. Damn Mekhet. But Ryan’s gun wasn’t firing anymore either. The two were probably engaged, and Mekhet fighting Mekhet was a game of assassins. Whoever spotted the other first usually won. Better for Jack to not draw attention to Ryan’s existence, if the man wasn’t shooting anymore.

Team C were still out of the picture, and if those three cars came back, the fight would quickly swing in the Carthians’ favor. And if Jack reached for his radio right now, there was a good chance Garry would jump him.

Garry. The youngest elder in Dolareido, barely old enough to be an elder. The files on him told a different story. He’d grown up in Dolareido, and even from a young age, gave the Carthians some direction; usually to fight against the First and Second Estate. The issue was, the files on him made one thing abundantly clear: the man was really, really good at fighting. Not smart, but stupid either.

Not a good leader, but not a bad leader either. In typical Carthian fashion, his Kindred followed him, listened to him, because he was 'real', because he didn't bother with the Danse Macabre bullshit.

Or he didn't used to. After the Terra Den maneuver, maybe his covenant thought of him differently? Maybe coming at Jack directly was a chance for Garry to show his covenant that he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty if they went to war, unlike the other elders? Or maybe his ego demanded it?

"Where're the others?" Jack asked.

"Others?"

"The other Carthians. Intel told me if you idiots really came for the Tanvar building, there'd be a lot more of you."

The man smirked, and wiped the corner of his mouth with his knuckles, like a boxer might after a fight. He had the scars of a street fighter, including a nasty one on his lip, probably from a fist busting it open badly enough to require stitches. Those were things he'd gotten when he'd been kine. Hell, Jessy got into a lot of fist fights when she'd been kine, and she didn't have a quarter of the scars Garry did.

This dude had been baptized in fire before he'd ever been cursed with his own Beast.

Garry shrugged, and came closer. "Hitting the Xnomina HQ."

Jack froze.

"You sent Kindred up against Michael? They'll die."

The bastard grinned. "If they were trying to take him down, sure. I ain't Lucas though. Kamikaze? No thanks."

“Then—”

“Go ask em, if you survive.” And the man came at him.

Without hesitation, Jack reached into his jacket, pulled out two pistols, and unloaded bullets at Garry. A little vampire strength allowed better control of recoil, and he held the trigger down on both pistols. Fully automatic.

Maybe Garry didn't expect him to be willing to shoot him. Maybe he thought Jack would want a fist fight or something. The man's eyes widened, and he staggered as a dozen bullets slammed into his chest. Predictably, he wasn't wearing a vest, vampires never did, and he stumbled back as the metal tore through his shirt and flesh.

But, he was a Gangrel, and an elder. Predictably, he adapted. Before Jack had managed to get through half the magazine, the bullets no longer sank into Garry's skin. They slammed against his t-shirt, ripping the fabric, but flattening against his hardened body before falling to the floor. Protean.

Jack had never dealt with a Gangrel using their Protean ability. Sure, he'd seen Jessy use it, transforming into animals, or evolving strange, monstrous limbs. It could do other things, too. He'd heard stories about the strange and insane things Michael had done, when putting a stop to a brawl between the Carthians, Jessy, and Eric. But Michael was twice as old as Garry. The younger elder wouldn't be able to transform into a towering creature straight out of Resident Evil. Would he?

“That hurt.” Snarling, Garry dashed for him again, a dozen holes in his chest barely fazing him.

Jack stepped back, eyes wide as the man came in close, full on punching distance. Not just punching distance, boxing punching distance. No hay makers or stupid shit like that. He closed the

distance quick until only two feet were between them, and the man brought up both hands before putting out a swift jab.

Jack poured vitae into his body, preparing the blood barrier he'd relied on so many times now. But with the Beast tied down, leashed by the necklace, it was like trying to get a car out of mud. Garry's punch collided with his chest, and Jack flew back, spine crashing against the lobby desk. He slumped down, ass on the floor, back against the front wall of the desk.

There were several small holes in Jack's chest. Jack blinked down at his suit shirt, then at Garry's knuckles. He had a spike on each knuckle.

Gangrel didn't usually do small transformations. Subtle wasn't in their toolbox. Transforming into large predators, or monstery shit like Michael could do, or even just some super long claws, sure. But subtle? Never.

Jack grabbed his radio. Mistake. Garry pounced at him, a literal pounce, legs turning into enormous wolf legs that launched him at Jack. A moment before Jack's finger hit the button, Garry slammed into him, and the desk exploded. It was one of those big desks with a solid wood wall on the front and sides. And directly behind it was the door downstairs, that managed to stop Jack's body with a welcoming thunk of his skull.

Garry got up from the mess of torn wood and splattered computer parts. A handheld radio was in his hand, and grinning, he crushed it in his grip. Not like Jack couldn't contact his friends with his smart phone, but it was in his jacket pocket, and that'd take more than a few seconds to get out and use, unlike the radio.

“No hard feelings, kid. I always liked your sire. Julias was a cool guy. His sire, not so much.” With a very animal growl, Garry stalked toward him, legs bulging against the inside of his jeans with increased muscle mass. Weirdly shaped legs. How the fuck did what

was probably very wolfy feet work in those boots? No, Garry was probably just controlling the transforming perfectly to conform to the boots.

Everyone thought the Carthians were brutish morons, shortsighted idealists, and all-around fools. Garry certainly acted like one sometimes, too. But he didn't fight like one.

Jack forced himself to his feet, glaring at the man. "Garry, I'm trying to keep everyone from killing each other."

"You're an Invictus, drunk on power and control. You might have good intentions now, but we know where those lead. You're gonna be the next Viktor at this rate. Thanks, but no thanks."

"Garry, you—"

The man charged him again, and again, the Gangrel transformed. Jack expected more spiked knuckles, but instead, the man grew a tail, something long, thick, and covered in spikes along the spine. He leaned forward as he charged him, and this time the man full on tackled him, driving his weight — more than he should have had — straight into Jack's chest.

The door at Jack's back exploded, wood splintering as it shot outward and around them. But when downward stairs greeted them instead of a flat floor, the world started to spin. Wack, wack, wack, each bounce on the hard surface punched him in the back, sides, legs, but he was light enough it didn't hurt too bad. Garry had let go of him after the first bounce, and had continued to tumble, turning their bodies into rolling balls. He was much heavier. Hopefully he'd break a bone or two on the way down.

They landed at the bottom, against the next closed door, this one made of metal. Garry was up in an instant. Just as Jack rolled onto his back to face the man, so Garry didn't start pummeling him in

the back, Garry sprouted a giant claw, and sliced open the lock down the door seam.

Clawing through metal that thick, that easily, that precisely, took skill, and power. Jack gulped.

Garry kicked the metal door open, reached down, and grabbed Jack's foot. Before Jack could kick him off, Garry dragged him into the room, and threw him, hard. The first few wooden crates to block Jack's path broke apart, while others scattered over the floor.

"Michael and I know each other pretty well," Garry said, following Jack in, boots crunching over the smaller boxes the crates had held. Cigars rolled away from his boots. "If you were wondering why you were put here to guard this building with only a small force, even though there was a risk I would show up, it's cause Michael's hoping I might kill you."

Forcing himself to his feet, hand on a nearby stack of crates, Jack glared at the asshole.

"Michael doesn't want me dead. He wants me to use my curse."

"He wants you to use the curse, sure. He wants you to trigger the war." Garry pointed at both his temples. "Think, Jack! ... is that the right meme? Mike can't shut up about memes. Kid spends way too much time online."

Jack stared at Garry, blinking several times. "Um ... yeah, it is."

"Ah, good."

"What the fuck is—"

Garry charged him again. The tail was gone, and this time, enormous claws broke through the man's boots, tearing at the concrete basement floor as he sprinted at Jack. So much for subtle

transformations. Every time the man came at him, he did it differently, a different tactic, a different body part. The best Jack could do was bring up vitae through his limbs to defend against the Gangrel.

Fast, so damn fast, almost as fast as a Daeva or Mekhet his age would be. The man got in close, ducked left, but twisted right, and slammed a fist up against Jack's face. He'd tried to block the left, falling for the feint, and it cost him, his ass on the floor and the world spinning.

“But,” Garry said, “Michael's a smart fucker. He wants you to use the curse to start the war, but he also wants you gone, before you turn into another Viktor. So he's doing what all elders do. Making sure that both possible outcomes are good for him. Play chess?”

The fucker was taunting him, knowing damn well getting Jack pissed or frustrated would make it easier to kick his ass. It wasn't just that people didn't realize how smart Garry was, but rather, Garry didn't let people realize it. He'd been playing dumb, all these years, letting people like Jack think he wasn't smart enough to play the Danse. Fuck!

“A fork,” Jack said, “in chess.”

“Ha! You surprise me, Jack. I didn't think kids played chess these days.”

“You—”

Again, Garry came at him, but Jack saw it coming; fucker kept coming at him whenever Jack responded, but the trick would only work so many times. He rolled back, over the table, and Garry sliced down where Jack had been. The man had summoned four giant claws, and they slammed down into the table, skewering it. Apparently less for slicing, more for stabbing.



With a second to react, Jack pulled the necklace off and stuck it in his pocket. Remain in control, remain in control. There weren't any pianos in the basement for someone to smash into his head, just a big room filled with wooden crates and metal tables. As long as Garry didn't somehow nail Jack in the head with one of those tables so hard it put him in torpor for a second, the Ripper would stay out of this.

Garry grinned at him, yanking his hand free, and slowly walked around the table. "The fuck are you even doing, working for the Invictus? You're just a nobody, some random kid Julias liked. Carthians? We've been fighting since long before our embrace. We've had homes taken away, friends lost, streets corrupted and turned into nothing more than shitty coffee shops and mini banks, half of them fronts for black markets and loan sharks. Carthians have been fighting for the people who fucking live in this city, like I've been, almost two centuries."

Jack kept the big table between them, strafing around it, peering at the man around the few crates that remained on it. "Half of the shit the Invictus does in Dolareido only works cause the kine embrace it. This is a city of sin, Garry. We don't force anything on the kine. Be happy we keep shit under control like we do. Far better than most do."

"Just because—"

"Don't give me that shit. You're no champion of the people, Garry. You got an agenda, like everyone else."

Snarling, Garry snapped his foot out, claws still pushing through the boots. He slammed his heel against the table, driving it at Jack, but Jack was ready. He jumped up, letting the table slide underneath him. The bastard had kicked it hard enough, it crashed into a third table, filling the room with the thunder of metal slamming into metal, and more crumbling crates.

Garry dove at him again, leaning forward, with a tail sprouting out from behind him again. He expected Jack to do anything he could to avoid the charge.

Jack came in, getting low. Garry wasn't a tall guy, but he was taller than Jack, and getting under him was easy. And with the necklace off, the Beast in Jack's guts poured through him, flooded him with instinct, drive, and power. The curse and the Beast were entangled, and as the Beast let out its rage, the curse's power came with it.

Jack drove his fist up into Garry's chest, and the man flew into the air, hard. He collided with the wooden beams of the basement ceiling, cracking them before he bounced back down to the floor. And before the man could recover, Jack dashed forward and kicked the man in his side, sending him flying through the air again. He didn't go high, but he did go far, crashing through more crates and sending them tumbling as he flew.

Growling, Jack stomped after the man, but he'd disappeared in the mess of crates and tables. It was a huge basement; had to be, to move all the merchandise.

"Holy shit," Garry said, standing up a good fifty feet away, grin on his face. "A Ventrue, throwing a punch. Now I've seen everything."

"Julias taught me how to punch."

"Funny. Viktor would never punch."

"I'm not Viktor!"

Garry grinned some more, and walked toward him, stepping onto and over crates with casual grace. He kept the tail, and the huge talons poking through his boots. He walked like a fucking dinosaur.

“You know Jack, you could just walk away. Give me the building, and no one has to get hurt.”

“You said you were attacking Xnomina right now! People are getting hurt.” He had to deal with this and deal with it now. If people were dying back at the HQ, he had to get there and help. Michael could deal with it, but what if something happened? Jessy was here, Jack was here, and Damien was still out of commission. Isabella was at the HQ, but he trusted her to defend the building as much as he trusted her to prioritize the Invictus over her plays.

The elder snorted. “People that deserve it.”

Snarling, Jack came at him, and Garry grinned the whole time. He was enjoying this.

Jack threw a crate at him, but Garry slapped it aside. It was good enough for Jack to close the distance completely though, and take a swing at Garry’s face. The Gangrel brought up his arms and blocked, and Jack had to take a second to mentally register that. A block? Vampires almost always dodged, once they realized the vamp they were fighting had some serious Vigor to put into their punches. They simply had too much power to risk blocking. But when Jack’s fist hit the man’s forearm, it felt like punching a steel wall, and—

Garry’s fist collided with Jack’s face, and Jack went flying. The world spiraled, until collision pain quickly reminded Jack he was in a room full of painful corners. But Jack recovered quickly, Beast instincts grabbing hold and forcing him up from the mess of destroyed crates. There were sharp points on Garry’s knuckles, and sharp pain in Jack’s cheek. He ignored it.

“You think you’re so righteous,” Jack said. “You’re doing the exact same shit with Terra Den. Hell, you sired Jeremy Long.”

“I ain’t happy about any of it, Jack, but it has to be done. The Invictus are a problem, and they need to be gone.”

“Then why aren’t you attacking Xnomina yourself?”

“Too big a risk. The battle could get pretty hectic, you know? Way too many humans in the area. Gotta protect the Masquerade.” The grin on his face said it all. He was lying, and making no attempt to hide that fact.

“Bullshit. You’re here cause I’m here. You’re here cause the Carthians are afraid of me, and don’t want to get into this war unless they know I can be beaten.”

Garry paused, and his grin grew. “I’ve been building up to this war for decades, kid. And it needs to happen. You fucking Invictus are scum, bad for the city, bad for everyone, and someone needs to get rid of you. When Viktor died, I started getting ready.”

“Started? You ... You wanted Michael to take the Mirrden district.”

More grins. “But then you pulled this curse thing out of your ass. Now Michael knows what I’m doing, and he’s hoping you’ll put the dent in the Carthians that allows him to win this war.”

“We don’t need to have a war!”

“Yes, we do.”

There wasn’t any arguing with this man. Garry didn’t hate Jack, but he hated the Invictus. He hated Michael and Viktor and Maria, Xnomina, and everything the First Estate represented. He hated them down to his bones, and there wasn’t any way Jack would get through to this man with a simple conversation.

Jack bit into his wrist, and splattered his blood on the floor.

Grinning, Garry bit into his wrist, and did the same thing.

The swarm didn't take as long to arrive as Jack thought. Scully and Mulder came in first, and took to high perches in the room, up in the wooden beams overhead. Other birds came in as well, but in North Side, the rats were the larger population. Hundreds of dark brown bodies poured down the stairs and toward the two vampires, massively outnumbering the few birds that navigated through the three doors it'd take to get into the basement.

And then they started killing each other.

Jack stared down at the carpet of bodies, at the hundreds of furry creatures that'd served as his legion many times before. Normally they were summoned by his blood, the dark liquid infused with vitae and sending a pulse into the world that vermin could not ignore. They'd come to it, and upon reaching the source, understand who was their master. From there, Jack could use Animalism to direct and guide them, like a general plugged into the minds of his soldiers. With the Beast guiding his actions and reflexes, it was a smooth poetry of control.

But now, the rats arrived, and found two masters. Maybe if Ripper had cast the Discipline, there'd be no question about who was master, but Jack couldn't use the curse with nearly the same level of skill.

*You're right. You can't. Let me out. Let me deal with this cocky fucker.*

Jack snarled, shaking his head, drawing a raised brow from Garry.

"You really just decided to show up with a few cars for a distraction, and five vamps to take this place?" Jack asked. "Sounds very ... not-tactical. Sounds random."

"Yeah well, sometimes you gotta go with instinct."

“Bullshit. You don’t win wars with instinct. You’re just an idiot doing shit on the fly.” If he could antagonize Garry enough, get him angry, he might make a mistake.

“And the Invictus are paranoid fools, desperate to protect their house of cards. Cause that’s what it is, a house of cards. All your rules, all your money, your ranks and protocols, it’s all there to keep your stupid bullshit from falling apart.” Garry came at him, grinning the whole time, but stopped short. Instead, he spun, and swiped at Jack with his tail.

Jack raised an arm to block. He’d fought a long-ass battle against a giant gargoyle with four arms and a tail. Paying attention to shit like extra limbs felt natural, at this point. And if he could stop the tail and catch it, he could get the upper hand.

Except, when the tail came within inches of Jack’s arm, it erupted in spikes, suddenly covered in them, like a medieval mace. They punctured through his suit, his skin, and sank an inch into his flesh and flowing vitae, earning a yell from Jack. Garry ripped the tail back and out, shredding skin on the way, and as Jack stumbled to the side, Garry closed in, opposite of his tail, and sank his right fist into Jack’s face.

The world turned around again as Jack went flying, landing on a pile of rats. They softened the landing, but the creatures were mad with confusion, and they bit at each other as they scampered over and around him. Rat claws tore up his suit, and dozens of rats bit into him in the chaos of swarming bodies.

Jack jumped to his feet and scanned the ceiling. The crows weren’t fighting, but they cawed at each other incessantly. Mulder and Scully were in there, he could hear them, feel them, and they were trying to convince the other crows what to do. They weren’t listening. Hundreds of chittering rats bit into each other, dozens of cawing crows sat overhead, and crates lay everywhere, scattered and

broken, with cigars and cigarettes carpeting the floor. The room was mayhem.

“Your problem,” Garry said, “is your attachment to routine, schedules, structure. You can’t evolve, can’t adapt, can’t roll with the punches.” The man threw aside a nearby table, sending rats bowling over, like a wave of water. “All I have to do is do something a little unexpected, and your plans crumble. I make friends with a suit, and you fuckers don’t have a clue. I show up here, willing to get my hands dirty, and you idiots don’t have the first fucking idea how to deal with it.”

Jack took slow steps back, giving himself a few extra seconds. Vampire blood coursed through him, filling in the holes the bastard was putting in him, but failing to prevent them. Garry was fucking deadly, punching straight through Jack’s defenses like Avery’s claws had. If he wasn’t careful, the Gangrel was going to cut him in half.

“Guilty. I do love routine.”

Smiling, Garry came at him again.

Jack met his eyes, and reached out.

The difference was immediately apparent. No small creature guarded the inside of Garry’s skull. A roaring, massive Beast waited behind the gate of his mind, a huge creature, swirling mist of black pouring around what could only be a really big ... cat? A tiger? Lion? No, it had black fur, and it was way too big to be any Earth cat.

The colossal creature prowled left and right behind the gate, a gate everyone had. You couldn’t simply walk into someone’s mind, you had to get past the barrier. And when dealing with paranormals, you had to deal with the creature inside. Garry’s gate looked like a chain link fence, topped with barbed wire, guarding a prison. A second gate, then? And the prison had a guard dog. Cat. Thing.

Garry stood beside his Beast, hand on its shoulder. He couldn't reach its back, with how big it was. And he was petting it.

Snarling, Jack kicked open the front gate to the prison, and marched forward, his own Beast following behind him. Before the curse had awoken inside Jack, freed by his stupidity, he'd never been able to really see these mind-to-mind engagements before. He could feel a person's mind when he attempted to Dominate them, same as any Ventrue could, but to actually see the inner battle that took place was something that'd only started happening after his first conversation with his Beast, and the curse bound within. A side effect of the curse or something.

He kind of wished he couldn't see this. He didn't want to know what sort of man Garry was on the inside, see that the man's mind was a prison fortress, but also something scarred, something that carried weight with it. Shame? Guilt? He couldn't tell, but the place reeked of an early twentieth century prison, and there were bloodstains on the path that led to the inner building.

"Get out," Garry said, grinning, as he scratched the back of his Beast's arm.

Jack looked up at the dark, cloudy sky. It cracked with lightning, and rain fell, sound drowned by thunder.

"Submit," Jack said

Garry snorted a laugh. "No."

Jack hadn't come alone. His own Beast followed behind him, obviously eager for a fight. It rose up, dwarfing Garry's, a tornado of black mist, and it snarled with alien tones Jack's brain struggled to recognize.

"Submit!" the curse said.



Garry just grinned. “No.”

Before Jack could say anything else, Garry hopped up onto the back of his own Beast. The metaphor slapped Jack in the face hard, and he ground his teeth. Gangrel’s didn’t fight against their Beasts, not like the other blood clans did. Gangrels found a way to keep their Beasts up on the surface of their skin, right on the edge, ready to empower them. That’s what he was looking at now.

Garry’s Beast roared. Garry roared. Somewhere, somehow, the two entities blurred, and the combined force of their roar smashed into Jack hard enough it sent him backward. Him and the curse both.

Back, in the real world. Back in a room filled with fighting rats, tables and destroyed crates, with smaller boxes everywhere crushed under Jack and Garry’s fight. Back, where Jack was losing the fight.

“Get out of my head!” Garry’s voice. He’d stumbled back, after ejecting Jack from his mind. Well, at least it took him effort, cause right now, Jack felt a little humbled. That was the first time anyone had ever managed to do that to him, since the curse had been freed.

*These ignorant fools, oblivious to what goes on inside the mind. Be happy I let you see.*

If you didn’t have to, I’m sure you wouldn’t let me.

*Pfft. I’ve awoken true awareness in you. These weaklings, completely unaware of the Beast within. Even this idiot Garry, a Gangrel, so in tune with his Beast, doesn’t get to see what you do.*

Jack snarled and shook his head again.

Garry came closer, slower this time, eyeing Jack with a suspicious smirk. “I’d heard this weird curse thing wasn’t the big gift some

people say it is. There's rumors going around, saying it's a problem for you. That maybe it's driving you insane."

Insane. Christ, am I insane?

*You're not insane. You're stupid! Let me out! This asshole is stronger than you. Stronger than your stupid boss.*

How the fuck is Garry stronger than Michael? He's been losing against the Invictus for decades, and is young as hell compared to him.

*Your boss has been sitting in a chair for centuries, ruling a covenant through a council. Garry here has been putting his neck on the line, fighting, and fighting, and fighting. He's risen to his position because he's earned it, not because he just happened to live long enough.*

You heard about what Michael did to Eric.

*And you saw, felt, what just happened when we tried to Dominate this fucker. You saw what happened when you tried to summon the legion. You really think this fist fight he's aiming for is just his way of beating you? He's toying with you! Let. Me. Kick. His. Ass!*

Jack shook his head again. "I'm not insane."

"You look insane. Your eyes were flickering around just now, like you were having a conversation in your head."

Fuck.

"I'm not insane." And the last thing he needed was Garry knowing about the curse having its own persona.

“Then I have to say I’m pretty disappointed, Jack. This all you got? This is the prodigal childe, the young Kindred that escaped the hunters, defeated an ancient Begotten, got his revenge on his sire’s killers, and took down Avery’s pack? She told me about that fight, told me about how strong you were. What a letdown.”

“Is that what this is? You just looking for a good fight? People are going to die, Garry! Kine and Kindred.”

“Like you care about kine.”

Jack clenched his fists hard, and glared daggers into the asshole.

“You—”

“You know what I think, Jack? I think you’ve convinced yourself of some real bullshit. You got good intentions, but that’s all. In reality, you’re just this cynical little punk kid who got his hands on his daddy’s gun, and now you’re tempted to use it on everyone and everything. I think you’re on the fast track to becoming another Viktor. I think, given time, I’ll have another maniac asshole, convinced he’s better than everyone else, willing to crush the whole city under his thumb to get his way, willing to torture kine and Kindred alike for whatever reason he can think up at the time.”

Ice ran down Jack’s back. Much as Garry was jumping on some serious assumptions, the words weren’t alien. Jack had thought them before, especially when the curse had been sealed and secret, but seeped into his thoughts, corrupting him. He’d been terrified he was becoming another Viktor.

“I’m ... not Viktor, Garry. I won’t let it happen to me.”

“Yeah well, you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t trust you.”

So that’s what this was, then. It wasn’t just Garry wanting to prove to his Carthians that Jack wasn’t the threat the rumors made

him about to me. He wanted to make sure Jack wasn't becoming another Viktor. He was determined to make sure Jack didn't. And nothing Jack could say would make him think differently.

“Tell your people to back off, Garry. Tanvar building is ours, but no one has to die over this stupid turf war. Work with me, and the Invictus and Carthians can get along. I have bigger fish to fry than this.”

“Bigger fish?”

Shit. Tell him, don't tell him? He was sure Black Blood was the problem, and Black Blood worked with Jacob. And Jacob occasionally worked with Garry.

“Back off Tanvar and I'll tell you.”

Garry snorted on a laugh, and charged.

Jack grounded himself and poured vitae through his limbs as the man dashed forward. More, and more, he infused his will into the dark, thick blood coursing through his undead body. If there were kine or weaker Kindred around, Jack could easily Dominate them and turn them into his slaves for this fight; assuming they weren't already under his command. That was how Ventrue won fights, with an army.

He had to get his army back.

Jack held out his hands around him, and focused. Rats. His legion. They were confused, torn between the two pulls, the elder Gangrel, and Jack. Even now, in the mayhem of chitters and squeaks, he knew the rats knew him, just as they knew Garry. The Gangrel was known as the Fighter to the rats, someone who fought against other creatures at the top of the food chain. And Jessy was right, they knew him as the Crow Lord.

The Fighter versus the Crow Lord, and the rats were getting pulled in both directions.

Fuck that. They were his army. How many times now had he summoned his legion? Even if the curse had been the one to do it, he'd done it with Jack's body, Jack's blood, Jack's vitae. The curse was just an amplifier. Jack could do this without the fucking Ripper.

He poured his will into his blood, and prepared. Garry came at him, fingers elongating into massive claws, and he struck at Jack's head, fully intending to behead him. But Jack raised his arm and blocked, summoning a wave of vitae into the limb. If he hadn't, Garry's blade fingers would have cut straight through the arm and his neck. But Jack managed to harden his body enough to block it, even if the blade managed to pierce his skin.

Hell, he'd been counting on it.

The pain was immense. He recognized it, too. It was pain like when the werewolves sliced him with their claws, a pain that went well beyond what a simple blade should have been capable of. With the werewolves, he was pretty sure they had some sort of magical empowerment. With Garry's claws, it was vitae. He didn't know how or why, and neither did Jessy, but their claws could do ridiculous damage, more than enough to cut through Jack's hardened skin, and muscle, until his claws slammed into Jack's bone and came to a dead stop.

With a bit of will, Jack's blood flowed out of the wound, down his arm and elbow, soaking through his suit jacket, and coating the floor. And with every drop of the thick liquid, he poured his command.

Immediately, the rats stopped fighting among themselves. The crows overhead ceased their squabbling. Every dark eye in the basement turned, and looked at Garry.

Jack could feel it, how his will smashed against the Gangrel's. Their Beasts silently snarled and growled at each other, but now Jack had recast the Discipline, and fueled it with a dozen times more effort and vitae. Every bit of training, every fucking drop of effort and will he had, every shred of concentration he could spare went into those drops of his blood, all with the one goal of roaring louder than Garry's Beast could.

The rats, ripping through boxes of cigars as much as they poured over them, flowed onto Garry's legs, and obeyed, taking advantage of how he exposed himself attacking Jack. He leapt back, but a dozen of them had already latched on, and they bit and tore at his jeans in seconds. The man landed back on one of the tables, growling like a tiger more than a man, and tore the rats from his legs. A few precious seconds spent dealing with rats was a few more seconds of rats closing in on him, surrounding him, flowing over the crates and overturned tables like a living brown carpet.

Jack bit into each of his wrists, and splattered more of his blood over the floor. Much of it landed on the rats, but they didn't care. Spreading his vitae onto his territory was how he created the connection with the horde, how they recognized him as the ruler of the land, and their master. Controlling hundreds of rats was difficult. Controlling thousands was extremely difficult, and exhausting. Doing it and overpowering Garry's own attempts to control the swarm, was overwhelming.

But he did it.

Snarling, Garry jumped to another table, glaring at Jack as he spun, kicking off the rats that managed to reach it. With crates everywhere, including still on most of the tables, move from table to table was difficult, and Garry kicked and killed rats by the dozens as they worked together to get him.

“I might not be much of a fist fighter, Garry. Not much of a gun fighter, either. But I am good at one thing.” Jack pointed a palm at Garry, and focused.

Not many crows had come, but enough did, and fifty birds descended toward Garry like bombers. They made diving passes upon the man, clawing at him before moving past and retreating to the rafters of the basement. He ducked and weaved with the reflexes of a boxer, deftly dodging each crow, but the bombardment left him vulnerable to the rats, and a few managed to latch onto his legs again.

They ripped into his shins and calves, biting and tearing with their little rat claws, and Garry snarled as pain ran across his face.

Maybe taunting him was a bad idea. Much as Jack had the upper hand now, the basement was just one room, and one covered in a mess of debris. Moving around in it wasn't easy, and Garry knew that. If he could get his footing, he could come back at Jack again, and then Jack would have a hell of a time keeping Garry from ripping his head off. He could sprout claws, or—or grow fucking wings.

Garry's shirt ripped apart as two wings erupted from his back. Bat wings. Massive bat wings, complete with unusual, long claws on the thumb and fingers. Not bat wings then, but demon wings. Air pushed outward from the sudden explosion of mass, and birds collided with both the wings and the rafters and crates as they struggled to compensate. Garry's tail grew as well, getting longer, growing as thick as a leg, with spikes at its tip growing longer. The man's boots tore apart as his feet expanded in size, and Jack took a step back, eyes wide, as what might as well have been the feet of a raptor straight out of Jurassic Park crushed the edge of the metal table like squeezing a beer can.

Grinning, the bastard jumped off the table, and leapt at him. Half fly, half pounce. Garry closed the distance faster than Jack predicted, and he took a dozen steps back as he tried to compensate, rats barely avoiding his feet. Only vampire reflexes kept Jack from stumbling over the crates and fragile boxes of tobacco.

Garry slammed into him, hands crashing into his shoulders. So heavy. Whatever Garry did, his mass had increased drastically, and Jack stared up at the man as he fell to his back, pinned, with a couple wood crates breaking apart underneath him. Garry had grown taller, his arms and legs thicker, and his fangs had grown longer. All his teeth had grown bigger, and sharper. This wasn't like fighting a vampire anymore. He was fighting something as heavy and big as a werewolf.

The playful look in Garry's eyes was gone. Hell, the human look in his eyes was gone. His pupils were dilated, and they had a slit shape to them, like a cat's. His mouth and nose stuck out a little more, almost like a snout. Oh good god he really was transforming into some sort of bat demon man thing. And comical as that was in theory, it was terrifying from up close.

The grip on Jack's shoulders quickly hit crushing levels, and Jack screamed as something in his arms went snap.

"If you just got out of my way, Jack, I wouldn't have to—aaargh!"

Garry let out a scream of his own, albeit far more inhuman, as Jack kicked the man in his crotch. The impact was hard enough to push him away slightly, and Jack brought both feet underneath him, and kicked again. With both feet planted against the man's chest, Jack drove him straight up into the rafters hard enough for wood to splinter and break against his back, skull, and wings. He came down six feet away, and rats poured over him the moment he did.

There weren't enough rats in the area to provide Jack a true swarm, but there were enough to give Garry a hell of a time getting



back up. He roared his frustration as his wings snapped out, sending a hundred of the furry creatures about, and stopping more crows as they tried to harass him. Judging from the angry look on his face, he didn't like that Jack had taken control of the swarm, despite his attempts to block him. Well, fuck him.

Jack screamed again as vitae forced his bones back into position. He screamed some more, as he rolled onto his side, then onto his hands, and forced himself up. Pain was an old friend at this point. The Prince told him getting used to pain was a part of any vampire's second life, but she also admitted Jack had found himself in extremely painful situations far too often. Broken shoulders sucked, a lot, but when compared to getting his hands cut off, or getting his entire chest cavity cut open by magical werewolf claws, this was nothing.

With vitae forcing his bones together well enough to function, he ignored the pain and stood up.

*You're slow. You waste vitae and you make stupid decisions. You can't control the power the Strix gave us. Let me deal with Garry!*

Shut up shut up!

Snarling louder, Jack grabbed one of the nearby tables. They were long things, big enough for twenty people to sit, and covered in crates. The metal bent slightly in his grip, and he dug his feet into the floor as best he could as he lifted the table up on an angle, raising the further end higher, until its legs were higher than the other tables. With its weight pressing down toward him, he had the friction to anchor himself to the floor, and he spun, swinging the table toward Garry.

Crates went everywhere, and rats squeaked as they disappeared in the debris. Impact, hard enough to partly bend the table's edge around the elder vampire, announced success, but so did the dying squeaks of the rats. If the curse had been in control, he could have

guided the rats like they'd been an extension of his body, and simply moved them out of the way. If the Ripper had swung the table, he'd have smashed the table into Garry's body so hard, the man would have folded in half.

Jack wasn't the Ripper, but that didn't mean he couldn't kick this man's ass.

Garry, on his butt with a battered table beside him, hissed and groaned as he got up. He clutched his side for a moment, but only a moment, before standing up straight again; as straight as a beast with a tail and wings would, anyway.

“Been a while since I've had a good fight. Thanks for that, kid.”

“Fuck you, Garry. This isn't a game. People are dying.”

The Gangrel laughed. “You think? Christ, if only you knew.”

“Knew what?” Probably a dumb question to ask. Letting Garry know that Jack didn't know what he meant was a classic blunder in the Danse Macabre, but at this point, he didn't care.

“Invictus and Carthians have been killing each other, in this damn fucking city, for centuries. None lately, but before you were embraced, every so often, a vampire would just disappear.” The winged creature took a step toward Jack, before casually using his other foot to knock away a dozen rats. Less rats took their place, and less, and less. There should have been more.

Jack may have taken control of the rats in the immediate area, but Garry had stopped more from coming. Shit.

“The Prince—”

“Has been doing her best to keep us cooperative, and she's succeeded. That don't mean we don't kill each other, Jack, we just

make sure it stays out of the limelight. You know how many friends I've lost to the Invictus, in just the past twenty years? Five. Five vampires that, as far as the other covenants care, simply left the city. They know what really happened, though. The Invictus are good at covering their tracks, but they know. And as long as her precious Masquerade is upheld, and her city continues to function, that fucking bitch Prince won't do a damn thing. Lazy, useless whore."

Jack took a step back as another slew of his rats died to Garry's tail. They'd bit into him a hundred times, but the damage was superficial, just like it'd been with the werewolves. And unlike with the werewolves, Jack didn't have thousands upon thousands of rats this time, and they weren't replenishing either.

"You—"

"Viktor was responsible for their deaths."

"Then what the fuck!?! He's dead! Move on!"

"Michael and Maria will follow in his steps. They're Invictus. They'll do everything they can to gain control, until eventually they can oust the Prince, maybe kill her, and rule the city. But you," he pointed at Jack with a long claw, "are convinced you Invictus can play nice, and it's pissing me off. You're all assholes who'll run anyone over for a dime."

"You talk like you didn't kill any Invictus either."

He snarled, and took a step closer. "Yeah. Revenge. Justice served."

Jesus. Jack knew the Invictus and Carthians squabbled, but he had no idea it was this bad. Killing each other, and then covering it up so the Prince couldn't act it on? Holy fuck.

“Garry, we—”

The Gangrel charged him, a burst of speed that sent the corpses of rats, and dozens of crates flying. There was no arguing with this man, no getting through to him. He hated the Invictus, hated them with a passion, and had been playing shadow games with them for decades. Centuries.

The only way Jack was going to talk some sense into Garry, is if he knocked some into him first.

Garry came in close, and swiped, raking claws straight down, starting at Jack’s head. Jack stepped back, avoiding the swipe, but only by an inch. There was an opening, one Garry left on purpose, fully expecting a Ventrue to back off. So Jack stepped in, and drove his fist into the man’s sternum. Might as well have been punching metal. But it was enough to force the Gangrel a step back.

Jack was good at recovering quickly when he got hit, but Garry was better. The fucker might as well have been a boxer. A punch to the chest hard enough to break bricks wasn’t enough to stop him for long, and he came in again. And, he got bigger.

Seconds later, Garry was an eight-foot gargoyle-like creature. Well, damn, *déjà vu*. He wasn’t nearly as big as Sándor, but he also moved a shit load faster, vitae fueling his movements. Charging forward, Garry’s footsteps shook the boxes and rat corpses with the vibrations of his weight, and his charge sent them outward like a runaway train breaking through wooden walls, smashing them to bits. Jack could only keep backing away, until his back hit the wall.

In the back of Jack’s mind, a nasty thought ran in circles. Jessy had told Jack about Michael’s fight with Eric, and the crazy shit Michael did. Sure, Michael had zero tact, and if Jack had to guess, the man focused on his Protean transformations more than Garry did. But so far, Garry hadn’t done anything Jack couldn’t handle. Sure the transformations were scary, but they weren’t all that much

crazier than what Jessy could do. Sure, the man's fighting skills were far better than Jack's, but they weren't anything Jack hadn't dealt with from fighting the werewolves.

Garry, the youngest elder in the city, was feared by Maria and Michael. Hell, he'd been feared by Viktor, considering the man had invited Garry to his balls to try and placate him. Much as Jack's grandsire was willing to be a shitty asshole and have a shadow war with Garry, he didn't want to take the man head on.

There was only one explanation for the elder's behavior in this fight. The curse had been right. Garry wasn't trying. Jack almost laughed; the gamer in him found that very insulting. Why wasn't he trying? Did he not want to kill Jack, or was he testing Jack, thinking he might be holding back as well, and waiting for an opportunity to strike?

Garry got close to Jack, stopped, and spun. A giant tail with large spikes on the tip came swinging for him, and he had to drop to the floor to keep from getting hit. The tail came down, and Jack rolled to the side, putting another table between him and the elder. With a heavy roar, Garry kicked the table, knocking it over and sending it at Jack.

He caught it, but the damn thing was heavy, and Jack was not. It drove him through a dozen crates before slamming him into the wall. Garry followed the path of destruction, snarling with every heavy step.

Jack reached down, and picked up the table by its edge, forcing it onto its side. It was big enough for Jack to use it as a shield, and Garry's oncoming tail smashed into it. The spikes on his tail skewered the table, and when Garry yanked back on his tail, the table came with it. His tail was stuck.

Why was Garry playing with him? What was he trying to do? If he was trying to spare Jack's life, the asshole could have just talked to

him. Christ, he had to know Jack was more willing to talk than Michael would be. Didn't he? Or did he really believe Jack was another Viktor, just waiting to be let out?

Garry stumbled back, the weight of the attachment throwing off his balance, and Jack took advantage. He pounced at the man, driving both hands and feet into the floor and launching himself at Garry's torso. His foot collided with Garry's face, and the huge beast fell backward, balance ruined. The wings flapped wildly, smashing crates and creating a mountain of chaos, sending Jack back as one of them crashed into him before he got the chance to drive his boot up the man's nostrils.

Jack landed on his back, and groaned as crates broke his fall again. Wood crates were going to haunt his torpor nightmares for years, after this.

*You suck at fighting.*

Yeah, I get that.

*You are right, though, as was I. Garry could be coming at you harder than he is now. He may be young for an elder, but he's had to kick some serious ass to get where he is. And he kicked us out of his mind. Me! He removed me! He's dangerous.*

Little late warning me now.

"Garry, stop! This is stupid!" Snarling louder and louder, Jack forced himself to his feet. "You think I don't realize you're just fucking with me? The fuck are you trying to do? Hope I'll trigger the war?"

Garry ripped his tail free of the table as he got up, and stomped his feet as he came at Jack again. "The war never ended! This was just a break, a breather."

“You’re wrong!” Jack jumped back, ran, and slid. It was a big room, and despite all the destruction and chaos, the broken tables, dozens, probably hundreds of smashed crates, and dead rats everywhere, there was still a lot of room to move around. Once Jack had some space between him and Garry, he slid under a table, and hopped up. Now, a whole bunch of shit blocked Garry’s view to Jack.

“Get back here!”

“We had a truce, and you and Michael are ruining it!”

“How the fuck is it a truce if both the people in charge are trying to break it?” Crates smashed, and Jack put another stack of them between him and the Gangrel, as bits of cigars and shards of wood flew overhead.

“Don’t give me that shit. You don’t want to see Kindred dying anymore than I do.”

“Says you. I’ll dance on the ashes of every Invictus.”

Garry’s voice was full of anger and rage, but something else, too. Something was on Garry’s mind, but the more Jack thought about it, the more he realized it couldn’t be the usual, like the Danse Macabre and shit. That just wasn’t Garry. Garry was a Carthian, and had dedicated his life protecting his people. Sure, the man had gotten out of his comfort zone lately, going to Viktor’s balls, and working with Terra Den. Not exactly the sort of shit Carthians would normally do, but Garry was willing to get his hands dirty, and blacken his soul, if it meant helping his covenant.

Garry probably hated himself, for playing the Danse. He probably hated himself for the Carthians that died, and felt the only way he could stop it from happening, was playing the game, and killing all the Invictus. Deep seeded rage Jack would never be able to appreciate. Even when the curse had ransacked Jack’s mind, all that rage had been on the surface, and explosive. Garry hated the

Invictus in the same way roommates could hate each other. Hate from intimacy and familiarity; they had to share a city, after all.

“That’s not true. You don’t hate the Invictus. You hate what the Invictus have done, to you and your friends. But you know damn fucking well that Maria and Michael aren’t that bad. That was all Viktor!”

“That’s funny, coming from his grandchilde.”

“I am not Viktor!” Christ, this was like arguing with a crazy person. A mad man. Garry was certainly mad with rage, to the point he couldn’t think clearly.

Crates flew overhead, dozens of them, and the room echoed with metal hitting metal. Jack threw himself to the side as the closest table smashed forward. It collided with the table behind where Jack had been, and more crates flew around. Maybe putting barriers between him and the Gangrel hadn’t been the best idea.

Crows above panicked and flew away, but Mulder and Scully didn’t. They flew overhead, cawing, announcing Garry’s approach.

A couple of crates flew up and smashed into the rafters above, each thrown by the elder, directly at the crows. And both Mulder and Scully fell.

Jack froze, staring up at the rafters above, at his two friends as they disappeared behind the walls of crates that surrounded him. For a quiet, freezing moment, Jack watched a few black feathers slowly spin and fall.

No. No no no.

“Jack!” Garry jumped over one of the knocked sideways tables, and landed on the concrete beside him. “If you don’t want anyone to die, just—”



Jack turned, vitae pouring through him, over him, around him, coursing through his skin and the nicks and cuts this stupid fight had given him. The blood broke through his suit, his jacket and shirt, and coiled onto him as it slithered around, and around his joints.

He drove his fist into Garry's face, and the man flew back, spinning through the air like he weighed nothing, before he collided with the floor, his own claws tearing up the concrete. His jaw half hung off his face, broken, and his animal eyes were wide with pain.

Jack stomped after him, glaring, hands clenched, and hell burning through his veins.

“I'm going to fucking kill you.”

## Chapter 141

~~Natasha~~

“Transform.”

“Um, what?” they said together.

She sighed, and shook her head as she gestured around them with her flashlight. They were deep in the tunnels, the old ones. Spooky, scary, utterly terrifying, and dark. But she had her sith sight, and would be able to navigate extreme darkness that even the werewolves wouldn't be able to see in. That was partly to keep her safe, but mostly to make sure the boys could calm down before they got to the surface, if things went badly.

Long, big, empty tunnels with nothing more than a few big metal crates on wheels on old tracks. Jessy said these old tunnels were like the ones she found in that scary ghost place, and that alone had Natasha's spine crawling. Big terrifying werewolves on a berserk rampage, she could handle. Ghosts creeping up on her and slithering around in the black? No thanks.

“Tr-Transform.”

Art shook his head. “You mean the Gauru form? Jesus, that why you brought us down here? No way.”

She frowned at him and folded her arms across her chest. “Why?”

“It's dangerous,” Matt said.

“I know that.”

Sighing, Art squatted down and ran a finger along the tracks. Matt walked past him and gave the cargo crate a shove, but it didn't move. Everything down here was decrepit and abandoned. A perfect place to make some mistakes.

"Damn, this place is old," he said.

"D-Don't change the subject. I told you to transform."

Art shook his head some more. "Tash, come on, you can't ask us to just transform at will. Gauru is dangerous, and primal. We're not Eric. We have trouble controlling ourselves."

"I know, b-but I need to know I can trust you if I n-need you to transform. And it could happen."

"Why would it happen?"

"B-Because I'm going to find out what's going on in this city. I don't trust Avery to do it. Jack is busy. I'll d-do it. But I need to know what tools I have at my disposal." The boys winced. Much as the situation had seemed romantic at first, the reality was they were her tools until her mission was accomplished. "You have to do what I say, remember? If I decide we confront Red Tide or Street-Tail King, then we will. And I n-need to know I can trust you to ... t-to do what I say." And to not go berserk and maybe attack her.

Growling, Art stood up and looked to Matt, but spoke to her. "This ... isn't a good idea, Tash. You heard about what Eric did the first time he transformed."

"You've transformed hundreds of times, haven't you?"

"Yeah, but the wolf is ... it's always there. You vamps know what it's like, with your Beast. But when we use the Gauru form, it'd be like ... like letting your Beast out, and asking it to cooperate."

That was a scary idea. The Beast was nothing more than a bundle of instinct and desire. It wanted blood, territory, safety from the sun and fire, and occasionally, to spread the curse of vampirism. When vampires lost the ability to think and feel, when they lost their humanity, they became draugr, mindless slaves to the Beast. It almost never happened in Dolareido, but, sometimes, it did.

“I remember,” she said, “when we were trapped in the t-tunnels, after the azlu surprised us. Remember? You were both in Gauru form, and ... and it was scary. But you calmed down.” She nodded toward Art. “You were under control, and you helped M-Matt get control quickly. I trust you.” And she was fast, damn fast, fast enough to avoid them if she had to. Training with Daniel wasn’t wasted time.

Sighing in unison, the two men stood in front of her, and backed up. Art motioned for her to do the same, and once forty feet separated them, Art and Matt shared glances.

She knew what she was asking was mean, but they also knew what they’d done to her had been a hundred times worse, and they owed her. As far as she could tell from her time with the pack and her boys, they treated the Gauru form like how vampires thought of the Beast. Powerful, useful, dangerous, and existential. A vampire was not a vampire without it, and for the Uratha, their Gauru form was the ultimate expression of the wolf spirit half of them. She was asking them to give her command of it.

But that was the deal. They’d crossed the line tricking and attacking a dragon, and they had to pay up. She tried to frame it that way in her mind, knowing if she made it personal, it could get venomous. Yes, they’d hurt her, physically too, but more so emotionally. No, they didn’t do it for personal reasons, they did it because Avery demanded it. Yes, she was in a position to hurt them back. No, she would not. This was only about doing her job to hunt down the threat.

She loved them.

The two men began the transformation. Clothes disappeared into growing layers of fur, and muscles grew enormous. Limbs grew longer, their frames grew wider, and talons and claws erupted from toes and fingers. She gulped as the two beasts continued to grow, and she found herself taking a small step back. Sometimes, it was easy to forget that Art and Matt were both huge. Before, she used to be around them so often, that she got used to how big they were, Art being quite tall and Matt being absolutely massive.

But seeing them transform, it was a powerful reminder that their transformed states were even bigger, bigger than Eric's transformed state. Matt was the frontliner for the whole pack, and Art was their sideliner. Matt went in first, the pack followed, and Art attacked the prey from the back or side to prevent it from escaping, until the rest of the pack joined in. Both were partly solo roles. Both were werewolves that had to be big and strong enough to take care of themselves in a fight, or maybe take on their prey alone if things went badly.

So, she felt perfectly justified in being quite scared, as she looked the two beasts up and down.

Of course, looking at the two werewolves immediately hit her with memories of Eric and Jessy. She'd imagined, sure, but she had no idea just how primal it'd be, the enormous wolf monster using Jessy like a toy. Her hard abs distended with his shaft's thickness, showing just how insanely deep he—

She shook her head hard. Maybe if she didn't have Jessy for a best friend and Antoinette for a boss, she wouldn't think about sex all the time? But, she did have a horndog for a best friend, and an exhibitionist and sexologist for a boss. Not a night went by in that tower that something sexual didn't happen. The only reprieve she had from it was when she hung out with her sire.

Tash, mental note: ask your sire how his time with Athalia is going.

“Are you both ... under control?”

They both nodded, slowly, like it was difficult for them to manage. Not a good sign.

“Good.” She came closer, slow steps, like approaching a wild animal. That probably wasn’t smart. She needed to calm down, and not walk like she was approaching a vibration-sensitive bomb. “Can you talk?” She knew they could, but she needed to be sure.

“Yes,” Art said, voice a guttural, quiet bark.

“Yes,” Matt said. Good, she was more worried about her gentle giant than Arturo.

Her gentle giant. She was already thinking about them like that again. God, she was pathetic. No no, that wasn’t fair to her. She just didn’t have it in her to hold a grudge. Maybe she should? No! She was better than that.

She could ask Antoinette about it later. For now, she had to stop thinking about stupid romance crap. This was about work.

With both of them transformed, Arturo must have been almost nine feet tall, and Matthew was taller. Considering she was a little under five feet, it was beyond imposing how huge they were. She had to look up just to see their abs; of course they had abs, because for some reason all werewolves had to look ridiculously sex and fit, even when transformed.

“Squat down for me, p-please.”

They squatted down, all the way down. Flexible.

Nodding, she stood in front and between them, and looked between them. Wolf eyes, dark and aware, on huge wolf faces. Wolf face wasn't an accurate description though, because their teeth were longer, and snouts a little shorter relatively speaking. They had ridiculous massive shoulders, juggernaut muscles that connected up into titanically thick necks that bulged where their heads leaned forward naturally.

“Can I ... touch?” She might have to touch them after all, if they got into a fight and she had to use them for cover, or maybe climb them, or something.

Matthew looked at Arturo, and Arturo nodded. Matt generally looked to Art when it came to decisions, and it made sense, cause Arturo was a smart, quick-witted guy. But seeing the giant beast still look to his friend to make decisions made her smile. They were still them, even in their war forms.

Tash reached up, and with a shaking hand, touched Arturo's face, now that it was level with hers. Her fingers found the side of his snout, and she lightly stroked the short fur. Those, were some absolutely massive teeth.

Arturo managed a quiet chuckle, a deep rumbling sound that made her squeak and lift her hand off him.

“We're in control,” he said. “Won't hurt you.”

She gulped, nodded, and touched his snout again, and Matt's as well with her other hand. They were wide behemoths of muscle, and unlike vampires, were very much alive. Each breath they made was deep, their exhales heavy enough she felt the air drift around her. Heat poured off their bodies, warming the cool underground. And this close to her, she could literally hear their heartbeats. Babum. Babum. Drums in their enormous chests.

She touched their arms. Yeap, pure steel, and very warm, under a thin layer of fur. She touched their enormous shoulders, and behind them, where their backs curved forward to connect to their forward-leaning wolf heads. The fur there was longer, fluffier, like a mane. Ears, shorter than wolf ears, but wider. Again, good for fighting, less likely to get caught. She slipped a hand into Matt's, and gulped as she stared at the enormous thing utterly dwarfing hers. Eric's hand was big enough to circle most of Jessy's waist, when he transformed. This hand probably could circle all of Natasha's, mostly cause she was so much smaller than Jessy, but still.

"Natasha," Matt said, voice a deep rumble.

"Still in control?" she asked, leaning in closer to the giant's snout.

"Yes. No hunt. Easy to ... breathe."

Breathe. That was something she'd heard Jessy say Eric talked about. For some reason the man thought it was important, that he breathe. Meditation, maybe? Whatever it was, both werewolves did it, and she watched their chests and stomachs slowly expanding with each, slow, deep breath.

"Ok, that's enough for now. Y-You can transform again."

Matt looked to Art. Art nodded, and transformed. Into a wolf.

She shook her head. "What? No, I meant—"

Matt transformed into a wolf as well. Two wolves stood in front of her, and perfectly in sync, sat down. Like doggies!

"Nooo, you know I can't resist d-d-dogs!"

Art panted, tongue hanging out, and strode up to her. He nudged his big wolf head into her side, and rubbed his thick furry mane against her hands. Soft! Oh god, so soft. Matt did the same, grinning



a big, dopey grin as he rubbed his bigger body against hers, almost knocking her over.

She sighed, but couldn't wipe the smile off her face. Before she knew it, she knelt down and hugged them, and buried her face in their big warm furry necks.

“You know I'm still m-mad, right? You ... you really hurt me. You tricked me. It ... it w-won't be easy to forget.”

They both whined, doggy whines, and she felt her heart break. That, was cheating.

“But, it's ok. I understand why you did it.” Funny. It was easier to be direct and honest about things when they were big dogs. Maybe they transformed for that reason? Art was too damn smart.

She sighed again, smiled, and pet their backs and chests as she hid her face in their necks some more.

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~~Damien~~

This close to the building, his phone stopped working. No signal. But, he'd been talking to Gloria just minutes ago. He knew the Carthians had some anarchist hacker types, but blocking out communications in an area? Terra Den, had to be, probably trying to cause problems for him and any other Kindred attempting to salvage this mess.

No use in waiting anymore. He jumped through a window.

The Xnomina building didn't have bulletproof glass except on the top floor, where the big meetings were often held. He jumped in through the third floor, after noticing someone had already put some bullets through it. The glass shattered easily enough, and he landed on foot and knee as he looked around the office room.

Fire greeted him.

No amount of training could ever prepare a vampire for dealing with fire. It radiated heat, unleashed sparks, crackled like a malevolent beast, and licked the air randomly. The heat didn't exactly bother him; he was undead, and temperature meant little. The issue was the combustion that came with it. One misstep and a wave of flame might hit him and set him ablaze like paper in a fire pit.

Sure, Kindred often got fire retardant clothing, as Damien did, but that didn't mean anything against a blaze.

"Amanda!" No answer. The roar of the flame wasn't too large; the building wasn't on fire, just the furniture and whatnot. But it wasn't nothing, and he strained his hearing against the noise of the burning furniture and the sprinklers trying to put it out. "Amanda!" Still nothing.

He hugged his coat tight over his head and ran into the hallway. The sprinkler kept the hallway wet, and there wasn't much in there to burn. Walking through it soaked him; probably a good thing. He growled as he slowly lowered his coat as he walked the hall, hands ready to draw if he needed to. If there were any Carthian kine in the building, he'd deal with them. Jack told him to avoid killing, even the thralls and ghouls, and he would try, but fire limited his options. If he had to cut through a dozen bodies to get to Amanda, he would.

Nothing. He stalked forward through the hall, checking and opening doors for each office. Not all were on fire, but most were. The Carthians must have attacked the building from multiple sides, and thrown in molotovs or incendiary explosives. He found the traces of what could only have been small explosions in many of the rooms.

Molotovs were perfectly reasonable for Carthian thralls and ghouls, but the latter? Some kind of military tech probably. Terra

Den's work. Invictus used to have the technological advantage in any confrontation with the Carthians, but that advantage was slipping away.

This didn't make any sense. Garry and Michael were trying to bait each other into overstepping themselves, so one covenant would clearly be considered the villain of the war. That'd make it easier to get the Prince on their side, and to rally the Kindred of their own covenant. This attack was like two countries who held an uneasy truce, suddenly having one of their leaders declaring war for no obvious reason. There'd be hidden, and non-obvious reasons, sure, but no obvious one. War was complicated, and the average person was either too stupid to understand or too unwilling to care about details. They needed a big 'here's the enemy and here's why, kill them!' sign.

With the Mirrden district and the Tanvar building, the Carthians had a reason to get aggressive. It was territory they used to own, and territory that directly affected their half of South Side. If any Carthians died attacking those, the Carthians would rally together, and the Invictus would too. The Invictus would certainly get violent if one of their own died. Both covenants would rally and go to war.

For the Carthians to attack Xnomina obviously painted the Carthians as the aggressors, attacking a building they'd never owned or wanted to own. The Invictus would rally, but maybe half the Carthians would probably think Garry was crazy for attacking it, and probably war hungry.

That was the Danse Macabre, having to trick your own covenant into doing what you wanted it to do. Michael and Garry wanted the war, preferably with the other overstepping, but both were probably willing to start the war on even ground. Attacking the Xnomina HQ was not how to do that.

Unless this was all a distraction? A pretty damn risky distraction, using fire. But effective. Damien was here, and—and so was Isabella.

“Madam Leauvion.” Damien ran across the hall as he saw the woman step into the fire escape stairway. She held the door open for him.

“Mister Burksen. I take it you came here when you learned the building was under attack?” She held a contemptuous smile, dressed in a trench coat of her own, something to protect against the flames.

“Madam Turio sent me.” He looked up and down the stairway. Metal, surrounded by walls of concrete. The air was hot and filled with the smell of burning chemicals and smoke, but none of that bothered a vampire.

“Have you seen Miss Vendram?”

Right, of course she’d be worried about her lover.

“No. I know she wasn’t here, though. Rest assured. Miss Jennings is in the basement bunker, and says the neonates here are down there with her. But, she thinks Miss Pol is still up here.”

“Amanda?” Isabella groaned as she leaned over the metal railing and looked down the spiraling stairs. “She’s in here? Damn. I hope she’s not dead.”

Damien nodded and looked past Isabella up the stairs. But instead of running up them to the next floor where any vampire running from an invading force might go if cut off, he stayed still, and kept Isabella in the corner of his eye.

“How did you know to come?” he asked.

“What?”

“You’re always down in your underground lair with your troupe, mastering your art. How’d you know to come here?”

“Because Mister McDonald contacted me, you damn fool. I still have internet down there.”

“Right.” The phones had been working earlier. “You left your troupe?”

“Yes.”

“Because you thought Miss Vendram might be here.”

“Yes. Why am I justifying myself to you?”

Because every word she said made her seem more suspicious, but he couldn’t put a finger on it.

“Alright. Cover my six. Do you have a weapon?”

“I’m Daeva, Burksen.” She raised a hand and curled a few of her fingers. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Of course. It wasn’t only Ventrue who relished hubris.

“I think we should check each floor for survivors before checking the top floor, and see what Mister McDonald has to say. Assuming he’s still here.”

“Of course. Lead the way, Right Hand.”

He frowned at her and her thinly veiled contempt, but stepped past her and started up the stairs.

And stopped. He turned, and eyed Isabella, earning a raised brow from her.

There was no way she didn’t know Hella was with Jack tonight.

“You knew Hella wasn’t here.”

“Excuse me?”

“You knew Hella wasn’t here. She’s with Jack, defending the Tanvar building.”

She blinked at him, confusion and surprise on her face. But whether they were legitimate, he couldn’t tell. She was a professional actress, and old, older than him, perfectly capable of telling the most convincing lies.

“I’ve been Invictus for a long time, Burksen. We know the drill. Hella was told to keep that information to herself, I’m sure.”

“While you, what?”

“While I spied on Carthian activity. We’ve played this game many times, and know how to keep our work lives out of our personal lives. And besides, McDonald has explained that we share information on a need-to-know basis.” Snarling, she turned and looked down over the railing. “You were there for that meeting.”

“I was. But I also don’t believe for a second that you and Hella wouldn’t have talked to each other regardless. You don’t care for Michael or the Invictus and their rules.” He spread his legs and leaned his weight forward onto the balls of his feet, all slight and hopefully not noticeable. “Which means you knew she wasn’t here. Which means you just lied to me.”

Slowly, her annoyed face shifted into a playful grin, the sort a cat might make before finishing off a terrified mouse.

“You’re right, of course. Silly me, I should have thought of another lie, but I didn’t expect to run into you. Aren’t you still recovering?”

He ground his teeth and glared at her. "I'm healed. That's why I'm here."

"I see." She tapped her fingers on the railing, long nails sending echoes through the stairway of metal. "Your girlfriend's blood must be quite potent."

He didn't answer. He didn't move. He wasn't fully healed, and if Isabella lunged for him, getting out of the way wouldn't be easy. It'd been stupid of him to not draw the sword preemptively, and now it sat between his shoulder blades, useless when Isabella, someone perhaps just as fast as him, was six feet away.

"Explain yourself."

"Why should I?"

"Because I'm a Right Hand and I demand answers."

"You're a church boy. You work for Maria, and she isn't Invictus anymore."

"The First and Second Estate remain allies." The Second Estate basically didn't exist, and it'd take years for Maria and Damien to get any traction. But they wouldn't let that stop them. "Regardless, I remain a Right Hand."

"So you say." She smiled at him, her typical deadly, sharp smile, and took a step away from him. Back to a wall of concrete, she leaned against it, folded her arms across her chest, and tapped her fingers on her arm. "I am here because a war is about to erupt, and I have no intention of throwing my life away because of the ambitions of a stupid old man."

Stupid old man, not men? If she'd said men, she'd have meant Garry and Michael, but she didn't.

“You don’t agree with Michael’s plans for war.”

“Of course not. Do you?”

He winced.

She laughed. “There, you see? We are not so blind as to ignore stupidity when it knocks on our door. It must be dealt with. And right now, that stupidity is the one remaining councilman of the Invictus. Even Viktor, tyrant that he was, attempted to make peace with Garry.”

“Because it served as a better grounds to manipulate, not because he wanted peace.”

“Nonetheless, fake peace is still peace.”

“Then you’re here to kill Michael? I find it highly unlikely you could kill him.”

“In a straight fight, of course not.”

“But ... but if fire is at hand...”

“Then a surprise attack from one of his oldest Kindred, using flame, will lead to a swift death.”

Damien almost reached for his sword, but stopped himself. The step back to the wall she’d made wasn’t her lowering her guard, it was her inviting him to make the first move, leaving himself open.

“You’re telling me quite a bit,” he said.

“Perhaps I don’t think you’ll live to tell anyone.”

“No, I don’t think that’s it.”

“Oh?”



“You’re telling me because, like you said, I’m not so blind that I can ignore stupidity. You’re hoping I’ll help you, because you realize you’ve been put in a dangerous situation. You can’t risk fighting me, and taking a swing at Michael, so you’re trying to make the best of a bad situation.”

Her smile grew. “And? It’s not like Maria holds Michael in particularly high regard.”

“Maybe not, but she wouldn’t throw away her only ally with power either.”

“True. But if Michael died, and we let the Carthians take a more dominant position, there doesn’t need to be a war.” Her smile grew until it turned sinister. “I am more than capable of running this covenant, well enough to keep it out of harm’s way. Enough to serve my purposes, at the very least.”

A growl crept its way up his throat. “Isabella, did you talk with Garry and organize this attack on Xnomina?”

Her smile did not falter. “Of course. I needed the opening, after all.”

That, did not make sense. He raised a brow as he watched her, trying to figure out what her intent was, because her words did not match the reality. If she wanted to work with Garry to help kill Michael, this was a pitiful attempt. The attack on Xnomina accomplished nothing but to be a grain of sand in Michael’s shoe. The building was not that important, and even if it were, it wouldn’t burn down. The government would want to investigate, but the Invictus controlled them, and everything would easily get swept under the rug.

If his regrown leg had been operating at one hundred percent, he’d have jumped away, and gone for his sword or pistol. He was at a physical disadvantage, and skilled as he was, Isabella was about

twenty years older than him in Kindred years. Fighting her, and maybe beating the answers out of her wouldn't be easy. But, there was another way.

He reached into his core, summoned his vitae, and used Auspex. With plenty of his lover's blood filling him, vitae was in ample supply, and he had no trouble fueling the Mekhet Discipline to its fullest. And with its power coursing through his senses, he asked himself a question.

Did Isabella conspire with Garry?

The Beast whispered in the only language it understood, sensations and images. Isabella stood there, and for a brief moment, Garry stood beside her. Isabella looked away from him, and Garry from her, and the Beast changed Isabella's expression to match Garry's: disdain. They had not spoken to each other, or at least, did not seem to have cooperated for this particular attack.

So, Isabella was lying about working with Garry. Why? Was she trying to trick Damien? Or did she suspect he might actually be the one responsible for the attack on Xnomina? Damn Kindred and their infuriating, ever present paranoia.

The drain on his vitae was immediate. His Beast did not like doing this, reaching out and grabbing secrets from the air, reading into a thousand subconscious ticks from his victim, or communicating with otherworldly forces for the answers he sought. He didn't know how Auspex truly worked, neither did Lucas or Daniel, but all Mekhet relied on its strange ability to see beyond what could be seen.

Sometimes Auspex provided answers. Usually, it just made things more confusing. But nonetheless, he asked his Beast another. Why was Isabella here?

Again, images and sensations. A quiet hum, like a night street in the rain. Isabella on a rooftop, daggers in hand, with Hella behind her, beaten and broken. Michael, and Garry, in an alley with fire behind each of them. And ... Elaine, on the rooftops, beside Isabella?

He frowned as he struggled to parse the images. Isabella was an opportunist, that much was obvious, but the images made it seem like she was doing it to defend Hella. Maybe she was? Maybe she really did love Hella to the point she'd risk her life and run into a burning building, to see if there was an opportunity, any at all, to end this conflict before it began. To kill Michael.

Or he was reading the Beast's message wrong, and Isabella really was just an opportunistic bitch looking to take down either Michael or Garry, whichever one netted her the bigger gain. Maybe something orchestrated by Elaine?

"You're lying," he said.

"Am I?"

"Yes, you are. You didn't speak with Garry. You're here because you sense an opportunity. And ... you said you worked with Garry, because you wanted to see what I would do."

She rolled her eyes. "Damn Mekhet." Unlikely she understood how Auspex worked or the extent of its abilities, but Mekhet were notorious for learning things they shouldn't have been able to.

"You think I'll help you kill Michael?"

"I just wanted to test you."

"Don't give me that. If I said yes, let's kill Michael, you'd do it." He relaxed, a little, and gestured to her. "How arrogant are you, to ask me to betray the Invictus, here in Xnomina?" Not to mention the building was currently on fire.

“Oh calm down, bishop. We’re just talking.” She licked a fang. “And it’s not like you haven’t rushed a building with aim to kill an elder before, either.”

“You’re a snake.”

“Ha! Am I?”

“Yes. You will twist and worm your way through any scenario, all with the goal to pursue your vain interests.” He slowly reached for his sword, watching her intently, vitae pouring into his legs in case he needed to move. “You will accompany me as we check the rest of these floors.”

Her smile turned absolutely serpentine, obviously meant to mock him. “You trust me at your back?”

He did his best to mirror the smile. He knew he couldn’t. Devious grins and slithering smiles were not tools in his repertoire, and all it did was make her laugh.

“No. You’re going first.”

She stopped laughing. “I don’t think so.”

“I could easily tell Michael that you’re conspiring against him.”

“Oh please, he already knows. Were you embraced yesterday?”

Of course. Damien had been taught to serve God, and that the Lancea et Sanctum were extensions of God’s will. The other covenants, particularly the Invictus, were taught to pursue power and money to the point it was expected for the young to eventually conspire against their elders. Jack had told him once that the Invictus were essentially ‘Sith’, or dark Jedi or something. The Star Wars analogy proved more and more correct with each passing moment.

“You can continue your games against Michael if you want,” he said, and he raised his sword to point it at the Daeva, “but tonight, I’m here. We will check the floors for any trapped Kindred, and we will check them together. If you so much as look to the exit, Hella Vendram will be directing those plays without you.”

Her smile broke, and she glared daggers into him as she pushed from the wall, and started up the stairs.

---

What did Jack always say? Why didn’t things ever go smooth? Jack often laughed when he said it. Probably making a movie reference Damien didn’t know.

The saying was terribly true, regardless. Things never went smooth. In stories, things always had crystal clear purposes, obvious villains, and blatant choices to make, usually juvenile, simple moral choices. The obvious choices weren’t always obvious to the characters, but the choices, the deceptions, the moral imperatives, they were made obvious to the reader. This situation was anything but simple. He was in a burning building with a potential villain, potential ally, and they were attempting damage assessment, perhaps rescue any trapped Kindred, while also trying to figure out why the Carthians had attacked it. A feint? A ploy? They didn’t know, and that made each step through the building unnerving.

He hated not knowing. All Mekhet hated not knowing.

Using fire on the building was a surefire way to annoy the Prince; she wanted her city to run smooth. Each time one of the covenants drew her eye by disrupting her city, they risked her wrath, and this attack certainly risked angering her to the point she might make an example of Garry’s overzealousness. She made the rules. If she wanted, she could change them. Maybe she’d decide to enforce a ‘no Kindred deaths’ rule, and any individual caught murdering another Kindred would die to the sheriff. But that could backfire, considering there were only three dragons in Dolareido. Strong as

Natasha, Antoinette, and Daniel were, they couldn't bully the whole city.

He sighed and shook his head. Consider the Danse Macabre later. For now, worry about the Masquerade, the fire, and any Kindred lives to save.

The hallway was mostly fine. Sprinklers were on, and the hallway was nothing but marble. But the heat was great, and he winced as he opened one door, and then another. The fires in most rooms were out or dying, the sprinklers finally winning the battle. Or rather, the sprinklers stopped the flames from devouring the last remnants of couches, desks, tables, and electronics, battle already won. No Kindred or kine.

He kept his eyes on Isabella as she did the same, and she grinned at him over her shoulder every so often. Surprisingly, she didn't use her Majesty to try and seduce him. Perhaps she thought he'd realize what she was doing before she managed to get her hooks into his mind. Perhaps she felt her opportunity to betray Michael tonight was a lost cause. Or maybe she just wanted to genuinely help him find anyone who might be hurt.

They did find some Kindred, trapped behind flames. A couple of neonates, terrified, backs to the wall, and eyes wide with Beastly panic. The Beast knew to avoid fire, but it could also be a stupid creature, and when it took hold it often caused Kindred to pursue instinct to the point of fault. But with a little ingenuity, and a long sword, Damien moved the burning material and helped them out from risky situations.

Damien and Isabella reached the top floor, where there were no flames. There were a few rooms up on the top floor of the Xnomina HQ, but most of the floor was dedicated to the council room, where the triumvirate used to host their private meetings. It was also where they frequently gave orders to the Right Hands.

A deadly presence loomed within, one he'd grown familiar with. Damien knocked.

"Yes, come in."

He pushed open the door, walked in, and with a glance over his shoulder, silently ordered Isabella to do the same. She rolled her eyes, but did.

"Mister McDonald," he said.

"Mister Burksen. Madam Leuvion." McDonald stood at the other side of the large room, hands behind his back, eyes cast out the large window, and he scanned the streets below. The calm stance reeked of foreboding.

"Sir, most of the Kindred who were in the building are downstairs in the bunker, and we saved a few others we found trapped by flame."

"Yes, as I expected."

"But, Madam Leuvion and I haven't been able to find Miss Pol. Her sire says she was in the building, but—"

Micheal shook his head, and slowly looked over his shoulder to Damien. "Amanda Pol ... is dead."

---

~~Jack~~

Garry recovered quickly. He ignored his ruined jaw as he forced himself back to his feet, and a single, hard flap of his wings launched him away from Jack. The wind gush sent crates everywhere, and dozens of them smashed into Jack's body hard. He didn't care. The corners of wooden crates were sharp things, and they cut into his suit, but failed to pierce the coursing rivers of blood that flowed over him. Nothing more than bug bites.

*Feels good, doesn't it? Just give in. Easy to let the power out when the rage takes hold.*

Jack ignored the voice, and stomped after Garry.

“You hurt my friends.”

The demon Gangrel stumbled over crates as he stepped back, and with a sickening crunch, realigned his jaw. He moved it around a few times, like a snake adjusting its jaw bones after yawning.

“They were scouting for you. I—”

“They’re my friends!” They were still alive. He still had his connection to them, Animalism and his spread blood telling him his two friends weren’t dead. But they were injured. They were dying. “You have any idea how easily birds die, Garry? You have any idea how brittle bird bones are? You have any idea how little blood a bird has, and how easy it is for a bird to bleed to death?”

He had to give Garry credit, the elder didn’t let Jack’s sudden aggression surprise him. Garry ran at him, full on monster style, talons tearing up the concrete floor as his tail whipped around behind him. And despite his massive size, Garry was fast, faster than Jessy’s story about Michael suggested the older Gangrel could ever be. Maybe that was the secret to Garry’s success, a balance of powers instead of dedication to Protean transformations. Either way, the man charged at Jack like a bullet.

Jack let him tackle him. Jack didn’t have the speed or mass, but once he had an anchor or leverage, the curse gave him the strength to do serious harm. Grappling was a great anchor.

Garry’s enormous claws sank into Jack’s delts and back as the man grabbed his shoulders again. His shoulders didn’t break this time though, even as the elder’s crazy claws pierced his blood shield. The agony was white noise at this point, lost to the scalding inferno



surging up and down Jack's spine. Garry tried to move his claws, to cut through Jack, to shred him and rip him into pieces. But he couldn't. His claws were stuck, trapped by the blood.

Jack didn't have much room to move, with the huge gargoyle-like Garry squeezing on his shoulders, but he had enough. He got his hands around the man's thickened wrists, squeezed, and twisted. For all Garry's strength, he rolled his head back and shrieked like some sort of night monster, as Jack's fingers began to break bone, same as Garry had done to his shoulders earlier.

Trapped on the floor underneath Garry, Jack twisted his body, and got both hands onto one of the bastard's wrists. Garry stood up, but his claws, still stuck in Jack's body, took him up with him. Clenching his teeth and growling, voice unrecognizable to even him, Jack twisted hard, and harder, until bones broke and flesh ripped.

Garry forced himself away with another hard flap of his wings, the two of them blasting Jack with insane amounts of wind, enough for Garry to rip one set of claws free of Jack's body. But the other remain lodged where it was as Jack destroyed the man's wrist, like twisting a piece of celery in half.

The flesh tore, and Garry screamed again as he got away, leaving one of his hands behind.

Jack let go of the limp, useless hand, and stared at Garry as the elder's appendage and claws erupted into tiny cinders. The tiny puff of flame was too small and weak to set flesh on fire, and the cinders turned to ash a second later, falling to the floor over Jack's shoes.

"You hurt my friends." Jack shook out his shoulders, his blood forcing bones back into place, and filling the holes the fucking Gangrel managed to create. The elder was strong, very strong, to be able to penetrate straight through Jack's defenses, but not so strong that he could free himself when he committed to a grapple.

And not so strong he could resist Jack's strength. "You hurt my friends!"

Garry snapped his wings again, putting fifty feet between him and Jack as he leapt away with the gush of air, landing on the opposite side of the room. One of his arms dangled, wrist a mangled mess, and drops of dark vampire blood fell to the floor before turning to ash. Anger filled his beastly eyes, and his tail slowly slithered behind him as he glared at Jack.

"So this is you, eh? Once I push you to the wall and threaten your pets, you freak out." Garry pointed his one remaining hand at Jack. "Look at you. I've seen rage like that before, you know. Guess where?"

Viktor. The bastard meant Viktor.

*This guy just won't shut up. Kill him! He attacked your friends, your pets. Kill him. There's no Carthian in this city who's a threat once this guy's gone.*

Garry was definitely a threat, that was true. Even as the Gangrel pointed at Jack, his hand began to regrow. Ventrue and Gangrel were more resilient than the other blood clans, and didn't take as long to heal, but to regrow a limb in moments? Jack had only ever seen Viktor perform such a feat. And yet, there Garry stood, doing exactly that, regrowing his demon hand complete with claws.

It hurt him, drained him, to do it. Jack could see the pain and effort it took Garry to replace his lost appendage. But there was no doubt the Gangrel was strong, stronger than he let on, to be able to replace a limb that quickly.

*Just let the anger out. You can kill him easily.*

Don't think I don't realize that anger is a part of you. You're trying to corrupt me.

*So? Feels good, doesn't it? We haven't really mixed with each other since you broke my chains.*

Jack snapped his head to the side.

I hated every moment of you mingling yourself with my emotions! We're not doing that again!

*Then let me out and I'll deal with things myself.*

I'm not—

*He killed your birds, Jack. He deserves to be punished.*

Jack forced himself to look back to where he knew Mulder and Scully had fallen, but he couldn't see them with all the tables and crates in the way. Animalism couldn't find them anymore. He couldn't hear them. The room had grown quiet as the swarm died away, but Mulder and Scully had continued to caw despite their dying numbers. Had. They were silent now, and probably dead.

Dead. His friends. Dead.

Garry does deserve to be punished, doesn't he?

*Fuck yes he does. Kill him, and kill every Carthian who tries to avenge him. You think any of them can stop me? Us?*

That was a pleasing thought. He didn't have to play ambassador, peace keeper, or any of that shit. He could just force the issue. Kill Garry, dismantle the Carthians, and bring peace that way.

*Just get angry. Remember how good it felt to get angry? Remember when Angela first kidnapped you, and you let the anger out, so you could escape? Remember how mother fucking good that felt, all that power?*

Settle down there, Palpatine.

*I'm just being honest. You should try it sometime. You want to let the rage out, and to rip this fucker into bits. Him and his whole damn covenant.*

You're lying.

*Lie, me? Never. The truth is far too much fun.*

Jack slowly grinned at Garry, glaring. Of course the Gangrel didn't hear the joke. He wouldn't hear anything in a moment.

"You killed my friends. I can't hear them anymore." He came closer, gently kicking aside some crates as he did. No need to rush this. "You killed ... my friends."

Garry stood his ground, eyes locked on Jack as his hand regrew, skin shifting and tearing as it spread over new muscle and bone. His massive claws returned, and the Gangrel flexed his fingers to test them, like breaking in a new pair of shoes.

"Consider it a down payment for the things the Invictus have done to me."

"I haven't done anything to you!"

"You're Invictus, kid. You think I would have gone easy on your sire, just cause I liked him? Viktor was a fucking menace, and his two buddies aren't exactly innocent, but your sire kept working with them."

"Julias tried to change things."

"Your sire was as useful as a pacifist in a war."

"We're not at war!"

Garry let out a slow, deep growl from his demon mutt face. "Yes, we fucking are."

Jack lunged for the man, but Garry flapped both his wings hard, hitting Jack with a blast of air and a mess of debris. The moment his feet came in contact with the floor again, Garry charged, talons ripping up the floor as he smashed through the chaos. Jack braced for impact, but Garry ducked low at the last minute, body bending with flexibility Jack hadn't expected. And instead of going for a slice or stab, Garry's claws shortened at the last second, and he got his grip around Jack's wrists. Probably wanted to return the favor.

Jack twisted in the Gangrel's grip as the monster's huge weight fell on him, but Garry had grown stronger. No, not stronger, the fucker had just been pulling his punches before.

*He was taunting you.*

No, he wasn't. He was trying to figure out what to do.

*Like that's any better. So he's just being smart about the fight, making sure he didn't show his hand and make a mistake.*

I don't think that's it, either. He was...

*He killed your friends!*

Jack glared up at the vampire, and tried to get his feet under him so he could kick him off. But, even transformed into some sort of big gargoyle demon thing, Garry was a fighter through and through. He got between Jack's legs and held his hands down, doing some proper grappling.

Jack grit his teeth, and pushed his wrists up, slowly lifting them off the floor against Garry's efforts. Blood slipped in and out of the holes in Jack's body, flowing and coursing over his skin as he channeled his frustration. Garry's eyes widened, and the following thrill that coursed through Jack's body was euphoric. Garry was afraid.

The Gangrel roared, and his sides split open. Holy shit. Two more arms erupted from the man's sides, forming in a mess of blood and breaking bones like something out of *The Thing*. Jack's eyes went wide, and soon a shredding cry cut through his throat as Garry sank ten claws into Jack's sides.

"Get off me!" Jack forced his hands higher and higher, Garry's grip on his wrists unable to stop him. His hands grew closer to the man's throat, and no matter how hard Garry pushed against him or squeezed his wrists, he couldn't stop him. Jack's vitae refused to let his bones break, just as its coursing veins filled him with strength.

If he got his hands around the man's throat, he was going to rip his head off.

Garry let go of his wrists and jumped up, claws from his extra pair of hands ripping free of Jack's guts on the way out. But before Jack could get back up, the man snapped at him with his tail. Snapped, with teeth, cause the damn thing turned into some sort of snake head as it closed in on him.

Its giant fangs sank into Jack's body, but the pain was nothing at this point. If Jack could—no, Garry had other plans. He whipped his tail to the side hard, and Jack went flying, the huge, eyeless snake head letting him go. The world, once again, turned into a big, spinning mess, and Jack tucked into a ball as the inevitable pain of wooden crates catching him became intimately familiar.

When things stopped spinning, Jack got his hands on the floor and pushed up. But Garry's talons found his back, and squashed him into the floor as the huge monster pinned him.

"I said get off me!"

Garry's huge talons sank into Jack's back, but they didn't matter. Vampire blood rushed through the wounds, forcing his body to keep working, no matter how much Garry cut into him. And try as the

brute might to pin Jack to the floor, physics were still a thing. Unless Garry had an anchor, all he had to work with was his own body weight, and at this point, Jack was confident he could throw a truck.

Sharp wood cut at Jack's skin, and he blinked down at the crate that'd been crushed under his chest. With a grin, he slammed his palm down against the wood, and sure enough, a long splint of it broke from the rest of the crate, trapped under his hand.

He forced himself back up onto his palms and knees, even as Garry tore at his back. But for all the Gangrel's insane might, he couldn't cause any real damage. His talons slowed as they cut through muscle, only for Jack to heal the muscle around them. The claws couldn't damage his bones at all.

Garry's weight shifted, and Jack twisted. Slicing air told Jack he'd just barely avoided getting Garry's claws to the side of his neck; fucker wasn't holding back anymore. Garry stepped to the side, unable to keep his balance as Jack rolled, and he had to step off his back or fall over. But he didn't go far, staying close and slicing at Jack with two of his four arms.

Jack let them hit him, pouring his vitae through his limbs. Hate, rage, burning heat that blocked out everything, it hardened his body as he fueled the Discipline. Garry's claws stuck in Jack's left arm, and right side, serrated claws tearing his suit and flesh alike. But his right arm was still free.

Snarling, a completely inhuman sound, Jack slammed his right hand upward. The splint of wood, shy of a foot long, had a nasty edge to it that ran from tip to side, and it cut up Jack's palm and underside of his fingers with impact. But it was worth it.

Garry tried to step back, but his claws were stuck in Jack again. He shrieked like a demon banshee as he twisted and turned his head, but Jack held onto the stick, making sure it remained lodged

in the underside of the man's jaw, up through the soft flesh, up through his tongue, and into the top of his mouth. He could tell from how deep the makeshift stake went that it wasn't hard enough to punch through the bone of the roof of the Gangrel's mouth, not one as strong as Garry anyway, and its tip didn't penetrate into the man's skull. But the screams of pain from the creature as he tried to pull his head back from the wood skewering his jaw, tried and failed, were exquisite.

If Jack had tried to stab the man in the heart, Garry's body, hardened skin, ribs or muscle, would have broken the stake on contact. Hell, Garry would have probably somehow managed to twist or dodge, likely recognizing the stabbing motion. But an upward stab for the jaw? He hadn't seen that coming, the fucker.

Garry still had two more arms though, and as Jack twisted the piece of wood inside the man's flesh, the Gangrel shoved him away hard. Jack held on. Wood broke apart from the shift in angle and momentum, Jack's hand snapping up and away as Garry threw him back. Six inches of the jagged wood remained lodged in the Gangrel's jaw and tongue, and he shrieked all the more as he clawed at his throat with the smaller set of claws, trying to grab it.

Jack stood up from the floor again, grinning as the huge demon struggled with his wound. That had to hurt. But not enough. It didn't hurt him enough. Garry had to suffer, had to scream, had to—

Slowly, Jack turned his head, and looked down at his two birds. He recognized them instantly, surrounded by the corpses of rats and a few other birds. The shape of their feathers, their beaks, he knew them on sight, and he gulped on a dry throat as he stared at them.

*The fuck are you doing? Get him! Look at him clawing at his throat like a bitch. Totally open! Sucker punch him, and rip out his guts!*

Mulder ... Scully...



*They're dead! Come on, focus!*

I ... I can do something. I was too late for Mary, but they're ... still alive!

He shook his head hard enough his brain smashed against his skull, and he fell to his knees beside his pets. They were still alive, but in shock. Only when he got onto his hands beside them, and nudged his fingertips against their heads did they respond.

Scully first. She flapped one of her wings, but it didn't bend right, and she shuddered. A tiny clicking sound in her throat told him she was in pain, a lot more than a broken wing would cause. Another click told him he should get away from the other two-leg who gave her pain. Mulder tried to touch Jack with his beak, but his neck was twisted too far, and he couldn't straighten it out. He managed a quiet caw, but it was cut with some weird coughing sounds. Jack had never heard a bird cough before. It sounded horrible.

The searing heat in his veins, gone. The boiling rage clouding his thoughts, gone. He almost scooped up his friends, but they struggled more the moment he touched them, both clicking and coughing some more noises. Too much pain.

"Jack," Garry said, stomping toward him, "I'm not fucking done with you." The wood was out of his throat, and the hole was healed over, blood splattered over his chest.

Garry was a deadly vampire, and the insane healing he showed off now was proof. The transformations, yeah they were impressive, something Jessy couldn't do, but the healing was what was extreme. Killing him wouldn't be easy, if Jack even could. And by the time he'd be done, it might be too late.

"Garry, stop. I have to save them."

“You fucking kidding me?” Snorting, Garry came at him faster, leaning forward, weird snake tail whipping around behind him. “You expect me to—”

“I killed Lucas! Ok!” Jack snapped his gaze to the man, and met his fucked up gargoyle eyes. “I killed Lucas, when he attacked the Prince. Not only him, I fucking killed Viktor and Tony, too. I started that fire. I killed them!” Oh fuck what was he doing? If this didn’t work, if Garry didn’t give him five minutes of peace for this info, this could be a problem. Would Michael or Garry care? Did Tony have any Kindred that still loved him, or maybe kine who did? How many Kindred would want Jack dead over this? How many wouldn’t? He had no idea. It was why he and Antoinette decided to keep it a secret, because the repercussions were so unknowable.

Well, fuck it, another cross to bear. He was fine with that, if it meant he could help Mulder and Scully.

Garry froze, weight driving him forward in a skid, and he had to open his wings to keep from falling over. Eventually he came to a stop five feet from Jack, and he stared down at him, mouth hanging open.

“You’re lying.”

“Do I look like a fucking liar to you?” He ground his teeth as he stared at the man. But he was desperate. He needed to get Garry to back off now. “Viktor and me, we were in that old building, hunting Tony, and he said he wanted to kill the Prince. I ... disagreed with that. I shouldn’t have said it. He cut me open. I had to set the building on fire to survive, and to make sure he ... would never hurt Antoinette. And Lucas, his suicide squad had nearly killed her, but I jumped out and surprised them.”

“You expect me to believe you killed that squad?”

“The Prince had killed a lot of them already. The others, I ... I killed by using Damien. I Dominated him, and killed them. And then I killed Lucas, with Damien.”

“You—”

“Garry, just ... just back off for a minute and let me help them, ok? I ... fuck, I don’t know what to do.”

*Idiot! You’re letting your guard down! He’s going to get you. Stab you in the back when you’re not looking. Something! Get up and fucking defend yourself!*

After a second, Garry sighed, and squatted, just like a gargoyle perching. Well, at least he wasn’t charging at him, like he should have been.

“If you were so attached to them, you shouldn’t have let them come to a fight, you fucking idiot kid.”

“They wanted to help! They...” He shook his head again. “You’re right, you’re right. I ... shouldn’t have brought them.”

“Christ, you really are just a fucking kid. You expect me to—”

He snapped his gaze at Garry hard enough the man leaned back.

“Look, I told you all that, because I know how much you wanted Viktor and Lucas dead. I did you massive favor. The least you can fucking do, is let me save my friends!”

Garry blinked several times, eyes shifting between Jack and the two dying birds. Deliberation written on his demon face, the Gangrel frowned as he looked down, tail slowly slithering on the floor behind him.

The whole situation was pathetic, Jack begging the man like he was, but during the whole fight, Jack had noticed Garry had been holding back. The Ripper was convinced Garry was just being smart and using tactics, and every Kindred instinct told Jack similar. No way Garry was holding back because he didn't want to fight Jack, maybe didn't want to hurt him. Everyone was convinced Garry was an asshole, an anarchist who just wanted to watch structures and organizations burn. Repercussions, those meant nothing to a Carthian.

But Jack knew better. The Ripper had been wrong about Maria. Hell, everyone had. And if she could surprise Jack with her leniency, maybe Garry could too.

“You know this fight isn't over,” Garry said. “You know I'm still going to keep fighting until the Invictus are done.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Garry groaned, stood up, and gestured down at the birds with one of his arms. “You can embrace them, same as a vampire. You can't turn an animal into a Kindred, but you can turn them into undead pets.”

“I know, but I don't know—”

“Just drink them until they're drained, and then feed them your blood with your will and vitae infused in it.” He took a few more steps back, and folded his four arms across his chest. “You're lucky I believe you, kid.”

Jack managed a weak smile for his enemy, before he reached down, and scooped up Scully. Immediately she twitched and squawked in pain. Things inside her were ruptured, and touching her anywhere ignited her body in agony.

“I know, I know, but ... but it’ll pass, ok? You’ll be fine. You’ll be fine.” He brought her up to his lips, and sank his fangs into her body.

Birds were so incredibly light, and so much of their body was air, feather fluff, and delicateness. So fragile. Christ he’d been an idiot. After how much they’d helped against the hunters and then against the werewolves, he thought they’d be safe and out of the way. Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid.

Scully was empty of blood in only a few seconds, and dead. Trembling, Jack sliced his wrist and forced a drop of his blood into her tiny beak. Crows weren’t small, but they weren’t large birds either, and he had to focus to get his blood to land in her little, still mouth.

Mulder. He looked to his other friend, and froze. Mulder wasn’t moving anymore, or breathing. Jack gently set Scully down, and snapped Mulder up into his grip. His head was still twisted way too far, and Jack shuddered as he looked his friend over. As delicate as he could manage, every muscle tense, he slowly turned Mulder’s head back to face where it should have been. Tiny things went crunch inside his neck.

“Oh fuck.” He lifted the crow to his lips, and sank his fangs past the feathers. Crow blood tasted horrible, but he didn’t care. The moment he felt Mulder’s corpse run dry of blood, he set the bird on his lap and performed the same procedure, opening his little beak, and dropping blood into it.

This wasn’t like with Veronica, where all she needed was vampire blood in its natural state to fuel the Vinculum. This was properly infused blood, dark crimson he used his will to pour his vitae into, his energy, his essence, his everything. It was how Julias revived him from death, and how Antoinette saved his mom. A drop of

blood, infused with a vampire's desire for the chosen one to live again.

Live? No, that wasn't right. To be infected with the curse of being Kindred. But animals couldn't become true vampires, so Julias had said. God, if the Ripper got his claws into them ... No. No, this wasn't the same as embracing a vampire. The birds would be safe from the curse. They had to be. Had to be.

He set both birds down on a nearby table. Scully's right wing was bent and broken, with a tiny bone sticking out of it halfway, but only barely. Slowly, he slid the wing back to her side where it should have been. It stayed there, mostly, but it remained crooked. Mulder's head remained facing straight, but the neck was bent strangely at the middle, and Jack knew if he picked the bird up, his head would lull to the side.

"Please ... please work ... please work..." He leaned over the table and set his weight against his palms on it. "Please work, please work."

"Jack, we're not done."

Slowly, Jack turned to face the man. He wanted to be angry at him for attacking his birds, but he couldn't be. The fucker had just done what any smart vampire would have done, especially a master of Animalism like him who knew how useful animal friends could be.

"Don't fuck with me, Garry. You haven't been taking this fight seriously at all."

"And you? You haven't really let that curse thing out completely, except for the past two minutes, and even then. Avery told me what it's like when you do, told me every detail."

"I don't want to let him out!" He spun and stared at Garry as he kicked a crate aside. "I don't want it!"

“And yet here we are.” Still transformed into his huge demon form, the Gangrel took another step toward him, and his snake-head tail raised until it hovered over his shoulder, ready to strike. “You use that curse thing when it suits you. You use it against the Carthians.”

“Would you leave if I could somehow remove the curse, right now? Would you stop trying to trigger this stupid war?”

Garry snorted. “No. But like I said, the war never ended, kid.”

Clenching his fists until his fingers threatened to snap, Jack stepped away from the table with his two friends, moving closer to the center of the room. When they started swinging again, he had to keep them out of the way.

“I don’t want this war, Garry. Give me time and I can fix this.”

“Like you fixed Viktor, Tony, and Lucas?”

“I didn’t want to kill them, Garry! I had to.”

“And what, you don’t think you have to kill me?”

“I don’t!” He took a step forward and stomped his foot. It didn’t make much impact, light as he was, but still. “Those fuckers deserved to die. You don’t, okay? I don’t want to kill you. I want us to get along. I want us to—”

Garry roared, a straight up demon roar, and swung his body. The weird snake head on his tail morphed, spikes emerging from it again, and Jack ducked underneath it. It slammed into the table beside him, and Jack rolled away to put some distance between him and the Gangrel.

“You might not want to, but I want to kill Michael, and he wants to kill me!”

“So the rest of the city has to burn because you two hate each other?”

Garry leapt at him, landing on one of the tables before pouncing at him. But Jack was ready for it, and he ran at Garry before rolling to the floor and underneath him. Garry tried to hit him with his tail, but Jack made sure to get another metal table between him and the asshole, and again Garry lodged his spiked mace into a heavy metal object.

Garry spun, taking the table with him and getting on the defensive, expecting Jack to lunge with the opening. But now Jack had a new plan. He wouldn't let the Ripper have his way. The Ripper had to be strong enough to kill Garry, probably, and if Avery told Garry everything, Garry either knew that too and had a plan to escape, or overestimated himself.

But Jack wouldn't kill him. He'd fix this problem before the city burned down around them. If that meant he had to lock Garry, Michael, and Maria up in a fucking room and make them shake hands, then he'd do it. The Ripper could kiss his fucking ass.

“Maria and Michael will gladly see me dead, stupid kid. This war is old, and—”

“For the love of god, Garry! Let me fucking fix this! I have more important shit to worry about than this stupid war, and—”

“More important? The fuck is going on that you think is more important than this war?”

Jack froze, and stared at the man. “You don't know?” If he was good friends with Avery, then surely she'd told him about it? Or, did she really distrusts vampires so much, she wouldn't even tell him?

“The fuck are you going on about? I—”



“Jack!”

Both vamps snapped their heads to the doorway as someone else ran down to join them.

Jessy, oh thank god she was alive. Though, her clothes were torn to shreds, holes everywhere, and some nasty holes were clearly visible in her flesh, too. She didn't let it stop her, and she raised the barrel of her shotgun as she limped toward Garry.

He had to give Jessy credit, she was brave as hell. Elder Gangrel transformed into a demon gargoyle thing? Didn't matter to her at all. She shot shell after shell at Garry, and limped closer with every shot. Garry shrieked as pellets tore at his skin, most bouncing off the hardened leathery surface, but plenty managing to pierce and shred.

He took a step back, stumbling back against crates, but not falling. Jessy shot him again, and again, each forcing him back a step until his weight began pushing one of the tables out of the way.

“Break my fucking jaw and think you can get away with it!” she yelled after sinking another shell into him. “Fuck you! Fuck you!” Another shell, and another, until bits of Garry's skin came off and burned away as tiny cinders in the air. More, until bits of his wings ripped apart, creating holes that tore as Garry tried to flap them.

Click click announced Jessy was out of shells, and Jack winced as he waited for her inevitable charge. But the moment the gunfire stopped, she reached into a small bag on her hip, and loaded more shells into the gun. Seamless and smooth, no hesitation, no fumbling. Holy shit.

But both she and Jack jumped back, falling over, as Garry exploded. As crates caught Jack's ass, holding his weight, he stared at where Garry had been, and where a giant black cloud of smoke

now hovered. Easily thirty feet across, the black smoke swirled on itself, so thick Jack couldn't see halfway through it.

There were eyes in the smoke. Two glowing yellow eyes.

Jessy got back up and shot shells into the black smoke, but they did nothing. With a hissing snarl, the smoke flowed up to the ceiling of the basement, and seeped through the cracks in the rafters.

"Shit, he's getting away!" Jessy motioned to Jack. "Come on, get up and get over here!" Without waiting, she loaded a few more shells, and half limped half ran back up the stairs.

Jack hopped up, and got halfway across the room before looking to the table at his side, pressed up against the wall near the stairs. Mulder and Scully lay there, still unmoving, still dead. Snarling, he forced down his rage, and ran after her.

"Ah shit, he's gone."

Back in the lobby, Jack looked around for where Garry could have come out, but all he found was more smoke slipping out through cracks in the walls.

"Jesus, I didn't know he could do that."

"He's an elder Gangrel, Jack. Course he can do that." Sighing, Jessy walked over to the kine Kathy and Tilly had taken down. "You fuckers alright?" They managed some weak groans. "Good enough."

Jack leaned against a wall leading to the front door, and sighed as he looked down at the kine. Kathy and Tilly were gone.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I got the upper hand on Steve, but then Bella got me from behind. Then Ryan stabbed her in the back, and then Joe got him,

and—yeah, big fucking orgy.”

“They alright?”

“Yeah. Derick came back, and Steve and Bella ran, but that Bella bitch came in here, and I thought she was gonna go for you so I chased her, but she got Kathy and Tilly out instead. Then I heard fighting, and I came down, and yeah, you know the rest.”

“Hella?”

“Hella and Ryan are in the building over there.” She pointed across the street. “Recovering. And—”

“Boss.” Derick walked in with Bruce and Kyle, and the trio of vampires nodded to Jack. They were unharmed. “We good?”

“We’re ... good. Garry won’t come at us again tonight, and we need to get back in contact with the HQ.”

“We have been,” Bruce said. “We were on the phone with some people in the Xnomina bunker, until we lost the signal. Must be jamming us somehow. Building’s on fire, but most people seem to be safe. Amanda though, her sire thinks she’s still in the building. Last thing she said before we lost contact.”

Ah shit. He’d been hoping Garry had been lying to throw Jack off.

“We need to—”

Bruce waved a dismissing hand. “Mister Burksen’s there.”

“Mister Burksen’ leg barely works,” Jack said, grumbling. “Fuck. Fuck fuck. Derick, Kyle, Bruce, get back to Xnomina and make sure everything’s fine. The rest of us are pretty fucked up, and I ... can’t go yet.”

“Yes sir.” Nodding, Derick and the others left. Still afraid of him, but less so. Good.

“Jack?” Jessy asked. “You uh, seem pretty distracted. Figured you’d be happy. We kicked Garry’s ass. Still got this dumb building, too.”

Wincing, Jack walked back down the stairs to the storage room. The merchandise was a mess, but most of it was salvageable; didn’t really matter anyway, it was the locale that was important. A heavy, dry gulp forced its way down his throat, and he trembled as he stepped into the big room, and then stood beside the table with his two crows.

Jessy followed, poking her head in through the door. “Fuck, lot of dead rats and birds in here. And ... oh.”

“I ... I fed them my blood.”

“You did? What, how? You were in a fight, with fucking Garry.”

“It’s ... it’s a long story.” He put his necklace back on, leaned forward, and set his palms on the table around his two friends. He was still shaking. “They’ll ... get back up, right? I drained them, and fed them my blood. Put as much vitae as I could into it, you know? I’ve never done anything like this, and...”

“Oh shit. I don’t know, dude. I’ve never tried the whole undead pets thing, you know? I ... I don’t think anyone in the city has.”

“Garry has. He ... he told me what to do, and from the look on his face, I could tell it was ... personal, for him.”

“You’re shitting me. What the fuck happened down here?”

He shook his head. “Later. I...” Sighing, he let his head dangle between his shoulders.

They were just crows. Hundreds of crows and thousands of rats had died serving him, since he'd become a vampire. Why not get worked up over them?

Because he was selfish, and he'd grown attached to these two. Pet wasn't a good enough word for them. They were his friends, his partners, and—

Mulder's wing twitched.

"Mulder! You ok buddy?" He reached out with Animalism, and clucked his tongue several times.

Slowly, the crow moved more. A tail feather twitch, a small opening of the beak before closing it again. His eyes opened.

"Mulder. Christ, I didn't want you to stick your neck out like that. You could have stayed up in the rafters, kept a barrier between you and Garry. You..." Jack sighed, lowered his weight onto his elbows, and smiled down at his friend. "You ok?"

Mulder managed a couple quiet, gravely coos, and hopped back up on his feet. Jack winced. Yeah, like he'd suspected, Mulder's neck had been broken, and now his head didn't sit straight. Mostly straight, but not quite, like he had a crick in his neck, and not a small one, but a 'oh god how are you still alive' sorta crick, with a super tiny bulge against some feathers showing that a bone likely pressed against the side of his neck.

But Mulder showed no signs of pain. He looked up at Jack, cawed, and hopped closer, getting under his head. So close, Jack smiled down at him, and clucked his tongue several times. The busted neck looked disturbing, but from so close, Jack could also see Mulder's breathing didn't look right. Breathing, yes, but it didn't match his movements, and lacked the usual natural shifts along with the typical bird twitches and quick head turns. He didn't look quite alive.

A few more caws, and Jack gulped. In the past, Animalism turned their connection into sounds, images, and sensations in his mind that he could interpret, and occasionally some very simple words. But the caws Mulder made now were not so simple. They sounded a lot like ‘I am glad you are ok, master’.

Mulder hopped over to Scully, and pecked at her broken wing a few times, before he cawed over her. Jack gulped again. His pet crow had just asked his other pet crow ‘are you ok, Scully?’ complete with name.

“Mulder, I ... I don’t know if—” Scully twitched, and Jack sighed relief. “Oh thank god. Scully, you ok?”

Scully went through the same process, twitching a few times more before she finally hopped up to her feet. It was the same thing, a crow but not a crow, the same unusual, solid breathing, the lack of normal bird twitches, the obviously broken wing that didn’t fit snugly to her side like the other. But she was in no pain, and Jack smiled as the tension melted out of him.

He touched her broken wing. Still no pain from her. She cooed a few times, clicked some more, and hopped over to him to take shelter under his head and between his arms. Animalism interpreted for him what she wanted to communicate, the sensations and emotions, but like with Mulder, the attached words and meaning were far, far more complex than they would normally have been.

~Are you ok, Jack? Did that vampire hurt you, Master?~

Holy shit.

“I’m fine, guys, I’m fine.”

~What happened?~ Scully stretched out her wings, including the broken one. Jack almost told her to stop, that she might hurt

herself, but the wing stretched out completely, broken bones pushing out the wing with only a little trouble. ~What is happening?~

This, he had not expected. Sure, he'd known vampires could revive animals, Julius had told him, but he'd said nothing about this, about a pair of crows suddenly able to use actual sentences.

“Jack.”

Jack lifted his head back. Jessy hadn't said that. Scully had.

“Jack,” Mulder said, like a talking parrot.

“Jack,” Scully said.

“Jack.”

“Jack Jack.”

Mulder and Scully looked at each other, cooed a few times, before they both nestled against the inside of Jack's arms, one bird each.

“Jack.”

“Jack.”

“Jack.”

“Jack.”

“Jack,” Jessy said, laughing. “Guess they're taking well to being revived.”

He rolled his eyes, but laughed all the same. “Crows can learn to talk in captivity.”

“Jack. Master. Oats?” Scully asked. Asked, not just said, but asked, complete with inflection.

“They uh ... can’t really do that, though,” he said. Parroting words was one thing. Crafting sentences was something else entirely. “Sorry buddy, I don’t have any oats on me right now. And ... and I don’t think you’ll want them, when you get them.” He chuckled again, lowered his head down between his arms and shoulders, and both birds nudged their heads into his chin.

“No oats?” Mulder asked.

“You’ll ... you’ll see.” Because they weren’t alive anymore, not really. Just like vampires, they were undead creatures with flesh bodies. They needed vitae to survive now, but unlike vampires, they couldn’t produce their own.

He wouldn’t be feeding them oats anymore. He’d be feeding them his blood, infused with vitae. Or they’d die.

“They look pretty beat up,” Jessy said, and she clucked her tongue a few times. They clicked back. “Seem ok though.”

“I ... I owe Garry, for this.”

“Fuck.” Jessy grumbled as she joined him at his side. “I was afraid you might say that. Dude, he injured them, right?”

“It was a fight. I can’t blame him for that. But I...” Might as well tell her, she already knew. “I told him, about Viktor and Tony, and Lucas.”

“Ah fuck. Fuckity fuck. Why?”

“I couldn’t help Mulder and Scully with him on my ass. I needed to give him something, so he’d let me help them.”



“So you dropped the biggest truth bomb you could on him?” She didn’t sound too happy about it.

“They were his enemies too, Viktor and Lucas at least. Figured he ... he’d cut me a little slack so I could save my friends, since I helped him so much. And he did.” Because the fucker wasn’t as bad as they thought he was.

“Indirectly. It’s not like you killed them as a favor to him.”

“I know. But ... but it was better than nothing. Better than fighting, hoping to win, making Mulder and Scully wait, and risking their lives.” He nodded down at the two crows still between his arms on the table. “Mulder was dead by the time I...”

Sighing, Jessy pat him on the shoulder. “Hope it was worth it.”

“It was.” Nodding, he stood back up and held out his arm. Mulder hopped up and walked up to his shoulder, but Scully, broken wing and all, flew up to his other shoulder. Thank god, if she couldn’t fly anymore, he didn’t know what he’d do.

“You know it’s going to bite you in the ass though, right? He’s gonna tell, and soon the whole city will know you’ve killed three elders.”

Sighing, he reached up, stroked the back of Scully’s head, then hesitantly did the same for Mulder. Again, his friend didn’t complain about any pain, and showed no signs of it, but Jack had to force down a wince as he felt the broken neck through Mulder’s feathers.

“I’ll deal with it if ... when it comes up.”

“Right. Well, I got your back.” Nodding, she looked around the mess of a room, and whistled. “You two really went fucking nuts. Curse help out much?”

“The curse is the only reason I’m a tenth as strong as I am, Jess. But if you mean did the Ripper help much, no he didn’t. I kept him suppressed ... mostly.”

“That’s good, yeah?”

“Mostly.”

She chuckled as she squatted down and picked up a pack of cigarettes. “Sure we shouldn’t head back to Xnomina?”

“It’s a feint. Garry isn’t willing to throw his covenant into a meat grinder yet.”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.” Jessy jumped up and sat on one of the tables, and leaned on a stack of crates. “Like, I get that Garry and Michael are trying to bait each other into triggering the war, because whoever can claim to be the victim has an easier time of it. But ... I don’t know.”

“You don’t?”

“I mean yeah, with the Invictus it makes sense. If Garry kills one of ours, then we all happily work together to kick his ass. But, well ... the Carthians aren’t like that.”

“They’re anarchists.”

“They’re a community, Jack. We’re playing this poke game with them, trying to make the other overstep, get caught, go too far, but the Carthians don’t need someone on their side to die for them to pull together. They don’t have anyone like that Isabella bitch, who just wants to do her plays. They don’t have anyone like Jacob or the Prince, happy to do their creepy shit or experiments behind closed doors, away from the rest of the world. The Carthians, every last one of them, is personally invested and attached to this city.”

“You don’t think Isabella is invested? You just said—”

“I’m saying, if Michael told us all to go on the offensive with no cause, some of us are gonna drag our feet. Isabella, definitely. Bruce has his own shit. Vicky and Parker are running their whore houses, and would love nothing more than to be left alone so they could continue bathing in blood, money, and tits and dicks. Shit like that, you know? But with the Carthians, they’re...”

He sighed as he slumped back against a table, leaning his ass against it. “Yeah, I get you. The Carthians are united, more united than us anyway. The Invictus are too self centered.”

“Or they were. Garry getting Terra Den under his thumb is pretty, uh, anti-Carthian. And—”

Jack’s phone rang. Damien’s phone. He answered it. “Damien, thought you guys were being jammed or something?”

“We were, but whatever was causing it was short lived.”

Jack smiled. It was good to hear his friend’s voice. “Damien, did —”

He stopped short as someone else walked down the stairs to join them. Ryan, with a big grin on his face, and Tilly the Carthian held hostage in his arms.

“Jack,” Damien said over the phone. “We ... we think Amanda’s dead.”

## Interlude 3

~~Author's Note~

This chapter is 100% sex, just for funsies. Also contains some very minor swinging elements.

~~Samantha~~

Othello was so handsome. Ugh, the thought made her feel so guilty. Jacob was super handsome too! But Othello was the sort of handsome you found on a book cover, standing on a porch of a mansion by a tropical beach, hair blowing in the wind, wine glass in hand, half naked beauty beside him. Even Jacob admitted the man was pretty, too damn pretty. The big muscles, the abs, the long dark dreadlocks, tan skin, and those happy, almost dopey brown eyes. It was all very dreamy and exotic.

Plus, he was a Daeva like her, and every time they met eyes, she knew he knew exactly what went through her Daeva mind.

So, when she'd shown up at the Circle's cave to see Jacob tonight, she'd come a bit early. She wanted to watch Othello do what he always did whenever she was around: have sex with his beautiful ghoul Madison, and sometimes a couple other ladies too. Did he sit around waiting for Samantha to show up, so he could tempt her? Or maybe he enjoyed Madison's body twice a night, every night, since even before Samantha was embraced? She didn't think Othello knew her schedule, so, probably the latter.

She walked up to his alcove, smiled as she found the fur curtain pulled open, and smiled wider as she found Madison and Othello, kissing and fondling, already naked. Othello was just the sort of man who'd only bother with clothes if he had to leave the cave or

something, and the sort of man to keep his woman naked whenever he was naked. And Madison happily obeyed.

“Hi Othello. Hi Madison,” she said, and she stopped in the entrance of his alcove.

“Samantha,” Othello said with a small nod.

“Sam! How are you, girl?” Madison’s smile was pleasing and warm, and it relaxed Sam instantly, despite the fact the woman was currently sitting between Othello’s open legs, facing away from him and leaning back into his chest, while the strong man groped and massaged her breasts. Madison had amazing breasts, huge, and they matched her curvy figure really well.

“I’m good! Just came to see Jacob. We were going to stay in, relax, you know.” It took a lot of effort to keep her voice steady, because Othello was looking at her, at her suit, and as he stared with hungry eyes, his hands continued to massage Madison’s body. He was good. Madison was panting lightly, and her nipples were completely swollen. And, after Othello whispered something into her ear, Madison giggled, slid a hand down to her pelvis, spread her legs inside Othello’s, and gently caressed her swollen clitoris.

Was he trying to tempt Sam, on purpose? Jacob warned her he would. But then, he also said to tease Othello in return if he did.

“Jacob’s not here yet,” Othello said. “Want to wait here for him?”

Madison nodded. “Oh yes please. I’d love that.”

Samantha tried to hide her relieved smile, but she knew she failed. There was always a chance Othello or Madison would say they wanted some privacy when Samantha visited like this, but it never happened. Privacy didn’t seem to matter much to anyone in the Circle, except Aaron.

“Thanks. I was going to show Jacob something, and—”

“Oooh, lingerie?” Madison said.

Samantha jaw dropped. “H ... How’d you guess?”

With a heavenly, womanly sigh, Samantha leaned back against Othello’s big, wide chest, and groaned openly as she continued to slowly masturbate. “You have that look in your eyes, like you’re excited to show something off. And you just came in and aren’t carrying anything.”

Evidently, Madison was smarter than she let on. Othello was, as Jacob put it, dumb as a brick, and Sam would be lying if she said she didn’t think that reflected onto Madison. But the ghoul grinned at her, pleased with her guess, and Sam squirmed.

“Just a new bra and panties.”

Madison and Othello shared knowing grins, before Madison clapped her hands together.

“Wanna show em off? We can let you know if they’re good.”

“Um...” She did. She really did. She remembered that time when she let everyone see her breasts, all so Othello could get a look while Madison gave him a blowjob. It’d been intensely erotic.

When she told Jacob about her random and unexpected bit of exhibitionism later, he’d said it was okay. Encouraged, even. Which of course made her gasp, cause she hadn’t expected she’d ever do something like be naked with other people, but Jacob had only grinned at her. He was super smart, and wise, and knew what she liked better than she did. He’d told her, encouraged her, to get naked around the others, and if they wanted to masturbate or have sex while looking at her, all the better.

He was so secure with himself, like Antoinette was. Must have been an age thing. No wonder Jack was into Antoinette so much.

After a deep, useless breath, Samantha nodded, and Madison grinned and clapped a couple times. She leaned back into Othello, and the man behind her grinned a gentle smile, eyes on Samantha, hands on Madison's breasts. The ghoul also slowed her masturbating, way down to that 'gonna make this last' pace, which sent a shiver through Sam's whole body.

"Ok, uh ... d-don't judge too harshly!" She undid the buttons of her blouse, and eyed Madison and Othello with her best motherly glare. "I mean it."

Both put up their hands in surrender.

"Swear to God," they said, in unison. Must have been a thing they shared.

She frowned, but it melted away as the shivers of excitement and nervousnesses worked through her. The blouse slipped off her shoulders, and she set it on the big pile of blankets and pillows in Othello's alcove. For a moment, she covered her bra and breasts with her forearms, but that was silly. They'd seen her breasts before. They'd seen her naked, being fucked by Jacob in the middle of the cave before. That had not been part of the plan that night, but damn Jacob knew her kinks better than she did, and she'd cum so many times with the other witches watching.

She lowered her arms, and Madison and Othello whistled.

"White! Ah, it's like, half sexy, half cute!" Madison, giggling, leaned forward and set both hands on Othello's knees. She ground her ass into the man, eyes on Sam, waiting for more.

Normally, Jacob would be around, and he'd be the one pushing her to do things like strip for his witches. But now, the only person

pushing her, was her, and she shivered as she undid the fly of her jeans, and slid them off.

“Oh, girl, a white thong? That is beautiful, and sexy. You’re like, a bride on her wedding night, the sort who knows how to have a good time.” Madison scrunched up her nose, grinning. “And I saw the way you stuck that booty out. Been taking dance lessons?”

“Oh my god, how did you know?” With her jeans still around her ankles, Samantha stood up straight and stared down at the ghoul. “Antoinette, she—”

“Knows her way around a man, teaching you to work your ass like that!” Madison chuckled some more, enjoying herself way more than Samantha expected. The woman had a loud, fun attitude, and Samantha found it both overwhelming, and endearing.

“I didn’t ... mean to, it just...”

Othello shrugged. “You’re a Daeva. It’s natural. Embrace it.”

A Daeva, right, like Othello. Expression, sensuality, Daeva loved to embrace those things.

Nodding as she steeled herself, she kicked her jeans off, along with her shoes, leaving her in nothing but her bra, thong, and socks; no necklace tonight, not with what she had planned for Jacob.

Madison laughed. “Girl, you are gorgeous, but you can’t wear socks with lingerie. At least, not that kind.”

Samantha laughed and nodded, nervousness melting away, replaced by giddiness. “You’re right, yeah.” Getting some sexy socks would have to wait. For now, she slid out of those too.

“Dance for us?” Madison said. Smiling up at Sam, the dark-skinned, gorgeous ghoul got onto her elbows and knees, and wiggled



her naked ass in the air in front of Othello.

“I ... I don’t know. I’m not very good.”

“We’re not strangers in an audience!” Giggling again, Madison wiggled her ass some more, causing her large butt to jiggle lightly in front of her master. “Please?”

Othello’s eyes drifted between Sam and Madison, before he eventually reached beside him, grabbed some lube, and drizzled some on his ghoul’s ass. As Othello slipped two fingers into her ass, Madison’s eyes rolled up in bliss, before she managed to right them on Samantha again.

Samantha was instantly hypnotized. She stared, awestruck by how Madison’s ass spread around Othello’s hand as he worked the lube into his ghoul’s butt. Without realizing she was doing it, her body began to move, hips slowly dipping left and right, and back and forth.

According to her sire, the key to an enthralling dance, was to look like you were making love to the air itself. Every motion, every sway, should draw motions – and watching eyes – to the hips and ass, the center of the body. And every motion should sway as if the air itself was lucky to exist between her thighs. Put in a more modern and delicate way: all in the hips. And maybe it was her Daeva blood, or maybe she’d always had a dancer hidden inside her, but she found she was actually pretty good at moving her hips through the air in swaying, interesting patterns.

“Oh, you’re really good!” Madison said, voice wavering a little as Othello fingered her. “Strip tease? Please? You’re so hot, it’s really making me...” The overly honest ghoul groaned openly, only to whimper in frustration as Othello withdrew his fingers from her.

But her whimper turned into a mewl of joy as the man took her hips, and aimed her ass down toward his very long, very thick shaft.

Strip tease? She hadn't planned on stripping! But, then again, maybe she had? It was hard to know. Every time she was with the witches, she felt like a teenager again, too stupid to think more than five minutes ahead.

Nodding and squirming, she reached behind her, undid the clasp of her bra, and earned some hungry smiles from her audience as she let the bra drop just enough to expose her breasts. She wasn't blushing yet, and that was the only reason her nipples weren't hard, and heat wasn't building between her thighs. She continued to sway her body as she played with the bra, using it to cup her breasts and earn more sighs of bliss from her audience. Antoinette was right, this was fun.

Being Daeva was, in a way the other blood clans would never truly appreciate according to her sire, absolutely, deliciously, guiltily fun. Without thinking, she Blushed Life, and both Othello and his ghouls groaned with excitement as they stared at her.

She let the bra slide off her forearms onto the cave floor, and blushed red from head to toe as she exposed her body to Othello and Madison. The way Othello looked at her breasts like he wanted to pounce her and devour her, was instantly arousing. And the look on Madison's face as the man took that moment to grab her hips, and pull her down onto his cock, was enough to have Samantha boiling. Ugh, Jacob needed to come back, and soon, so she could throw herself at him! He—

“Whoa, what is this?”

Samantha squeaked and covered her breasts and thong with her hands as she spun around. “B-Beatrice! Um ... hi...”

The Nosferatu blinked at her, then past her at Othello and Madison, grinned, and slowly brought her gaze back to Samantha. “Strip tease show?”

“I ... um...”

Beatrice laughed and shrugged, before she slid into the alcove and sat down beside Othello, with only a few inches between them. Super casual, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. “That is a gorgeous thong.”

Oh no, she was going to watch too. Well, that wasn’t—

“Oh my, now that is a beautiful woman, wearing some beautiful underwear.” Jennifer, sexy and ridiculously gorgeous Jennifer, looked her up and down with the same look of Othello, though the Ventrue’s eyes were considerably sharper. Othello was a gentle soul. Jennifer was not. She kind of scared Samantha, but she was also incredibly beautiful, and Samantha blushed a hundred times more as the vixen complimented her.

“Thanks. You really think it’s pretty?”

“Samantha, you are so delicious, it’s killing me.” Jennifer smiled at her, smiled down at Triss, and then at Othello and Madison. Othello had put his legs together so Madison, still on her hands and knees, had something to kneel around while she fucked him, and to make some room for Beatrice. Slow, gentle sex. And despite the fact there were five people in the small alcove, no one was watching the two people having sex. Everyone was looking at Samantha instead.

Jennifer’s grin grew into something almost evil, and she slipped past Samantha into the small alcove too. As she did, she undressed. It took her only seconds to remove the suit and strip down to only her underwear, before she tossed all of it onto the pile of growing clothes, leaving herself completely naked.

She sat down on Othello’s other side from Triss, and smiled up at Sam as she Blushed Life. Gaze locked on Samantha, the Ventrue’s body lit up with arousal; Kindred eyes could see it easily, from the

increased heart rate, to the swelling nipples. Jennifer had gotten horny in just seconds, looking at her.

Jen gave Madison's leg a gentle, affirming slap, gave Othello's arm the same, and spread her legs as she leaned back, getting cozy in the pile of furs next to Othello close enough to touch shoulders. She set one hand on one of her large breasts, the other on her pussy, and masturbated, just like Madison had before.

"You are such a horndog," Triss said, looking past Othello to her lover, but even as she said it, she Blushed Life and pulled off her tank top. "Ah whatever. While in Rome." Her crocodile teeth were scary, but Triss's body was so beautiful, a work of art with all the tattoos and piercings, and she was so lean! She looked like an Olympic athlete.

She leaned back, and set her eyes on Samantha too. She didn't masturbate, but she did watch her with hungry snake eyes, and stroked one of her hardening, pierced nipples with the blunt side of one of her claws.

Samantha gulped, took a deep, useless breath, and started the dance again. She hooked her thumbs in the waistband of the thong, and eased it around in a circular motion around her hips, as she ground her hips side to side, in and out, as she rotated on the spot. It was wet.

"Oh my god," Jennifer said. "Where does a woman like you learn to dance like that?"

"From her sire I'm guessing," Beatrice said. "Remember, she lives with the queen of sex."

"True, true."

Othello, eyes still on Samantha, let out a soft moan, and he set both hands on Madison's hips again. Everyone turned and watched

as the man bounced Madison on his cock, and the curvaceous ghoul mewled and whimpered with the increased speed. With her leaning forward, her hands on his knees, and her knees spread apart around Othello's legs, Samantha couldn't help but stare at the black woman as her huge breasts rippled underneath her. But, more than Madison, it was Othello she couldn't stop staring at, as the man smiled at Samantha as he came inside his ghoul's ass.

Samantha knew he was cumming. She'd seen those dopey, dreamy eyes of his cum many times already. And seeing them now had her thong soaked.

"Oh, it's g-going to be ... one of those nights?" Madison said between pants.

"Those nights?" Samantha asked.

"Yeah. Sometimes Othello cums first if he's really horny. And second, and third, and fourth, before I get to!" She leaned back, set her back against the man's abs and chest, and Samantha couldn't help but let out a small groan as she saw a few trickles of white leak out of the woman's ass and down onto her man's testicles. "But he's a vampire. He'll stay hard for me, and cum again ... and again ... until it's eventually my turn." The way she said 'turn' was enough to make Samantha's legs weak.

"Typical man," Triss said, and she gave the man a slap on the shoulder. "Dude, always treat the girl first."

Othello rolled his eyes, but even that had a softness to it. The man just wasn't capable of being mean. Instead, he looked back at Samantha, let go of his ghoul's hips, and he smiled up at Sam as Madison gently ground her ass against him once again. His eyes lingered on her thong, and her thighs, and only now did Sam realize her thong was more than wet, it was dripping. He could see how wet she was. They all could.

“Triss, come help me?” Jen, one hand still caressing her clitoris, motioned for her lover to come to her.

“Fine fine, you damn slut.” Laughing, Triss got up and stepped over Othello’s legs, still in her jeans. As she did, Jennifer turned where she sat, and set her back against Othello’s side, legs out along the wall of the alcove so Samantha was looking at her profile. She spread her legs, and Triss got down on her knees between them.

The Nosferatu opened her mouth wide, and let out her inhumanly long tongue. She looked at Samantha through the corner of her eye, winked, and lowered her mouth down onto Jen’s wet pussy. As she did, she forced in the long, long long long appendage into Jennifer’s clenching body. Madison turned, looked down at Jennifer beside her, and moaned. Samantha moaned too. So did Jennifer. Everyone stared at how a growing distension moved along Jennifer’s flat stomach, a bulge that flowed back and forth from her mons to nearly her navel.

Triss’s tongue had filled the woman to bursting, and was rolling like waves inside her. Big, powerful, thick waves.

“Don’t stop,” Jen said.

“Ah won wop.”

“Not you. Samantha.” Even as the beautiful seductress obviously writhed in extreme pleasure, and the bulge on her belly grew as Triss forced her tongue in harder and harder, Jennifer looked at Samantha, her cheek and ear resting against Othello’s shoulder. “Keep dancing.”

With another gulp, Samantha started the dance again. Around and around she went, slow rotating circles, with her ever teasing to remove the thong, but never actually removing it. Each time she turned, she whipped her head around quick, desperate to not miss a moment of the four lovers enjoying each other. She’d been around

them during their lovemaking before, but never like this, not all together, and not all so focused on her. And not while she Blushed Life so they could tell how deliriously aroused she was.

As Jennifer started to cum, her eyes half closed, and she smiled up at Samantha as she trembled. One hand reached down and ran fingers through Triss's hair, while her other caressed one of her breasts. Her body shivered in such a beautiful way, large breasts rippling with her occasional tremors, Samantha had to stop dancing for a few seconds to stare.

And then Othello came again! Madison laughed, leaned back against his chest, and pointed down at her pussy for Samantha to look. She was dripping wet, but she hadn't cum yet, obviously on edge but not able to cross over, while her lover pumped more cum into her. Leaning back like that, Samantha could see the man's cock flex between spurts, and see some more of his fluid leak out of his ghoul. And through all that, he stared at Samantha over his ghoul's shoulder, eyes lingering on her breasts and hard nipples, her waist, her thong, and her thighs where a few beads of wetness trickled.

Something touched Sam's shoulders. She let out a loud squeal, and everyone froze as Samantha turned around.

"J-Jacob! Don't ... don't scare me like that."

The man grinned at her, but his grin softened as he looked around at what was happening. "Took my advice, I see."

"Um, I uh ... yeah."

"Well, looks like you've got everyone mad horny, each and every one of them looking at you. Bunch of horny, punk ass kids on my lawn."

She gulped, and squirmed slightly, guilty. They were still staring at her, staring, and cumming.

“I guess ... I guess they are.”

Jacob stepped in closer, set his hands on her hips, and put his lips to her ear. “Get on your knees.”

She shivered, and her knees shook. That voice, the whisper, the dark tone, it was all so perfect! The man jumped out of one of her novels, and spoke to her in the same tone she'd always thought those dark, scary, handsome, dangerous men had. Without telling herself to do it, she'd already gotten down on her knees, and was looking up at Jacob with her hands on her knees. Her body was acting on its own.

The man smiled down at her, and stripped. He'd been wearing one of his scary robes, very witchy sorta clothing, and it hid his physique super well. But she knew what he looked like underneath, and so did everyone else. The man may not have been as wide and muscular as Othello, but his lean body, defined muscles and abs, and salt and pepper hair, were all intoxicating and perfect. The bandage over his eyes made him look mysterious, and she stared up at him with heat boiling through her as the man tossed the robe and underwear out of the alcove.

He blushed life, and immediately, his large cock rose to life. It earned a mewl from Madison, and she bounced on Othello faster as she stared at Jacob's naked body. Even Jen and Triss wanted a peek, Triss taking a break and lifting her head so she could get a proper look. Everyone wanted to see what Sam would do.

Samantha, hands shaking, reached up, set one hand on the front of his leg, the other on his hip, and knelt higher. The smell of arousal on him was obvious, and she breathed it in as it mixed with the arousal everyone was emitting. Jacob's gaze was pointed at her, no one else. She couldn't see his eyes, since he didn't have any, but it seemed pretty obvious he was looking at her through the bandage,



and it was her that had him hard in seconds, before she'd even touched him.

God, she was soaked. She could feel more of her juices trickling through her thong and down her thighs. If this kept up, she was going to start masturbating like a horny kid.

She set her lips on Jacob's cock, slipped it into her mouth, and worked her head back and forth in a slow, massaging rhythm, her lips tight around his glans. No hands. He liked it when she only used her mouth. She kept her grip on his leg and hip, and tilted her head around and around as she suckled on his cock, her tongue occasionally slipping out to lick and tease around it. The satisfied smile on Jacob's face had her heart fluttering.

Another moan drew her eyes, and she turned her head enough so she could look at the audience. Oh god, they were all staring even harder, especially Othello. The man smiled at her over Madison's shoulder, grabbed his ghoul, and again bounced the beautiful woman on his cock. Poor Madison still hadn't cum either, and drops of her juices trickled from her slit as she bucked on the man.

Jennifer, on the other hand, was well on her way to another orgasm as Beatrice got onto her stomach between Jen's legs, and forced her huge tongue back inside her. The beautiful Ventrue moaned openly, and held Beatrice's head to her pussy with one hand, while the other pressed to the fur beside Madison's leg. With her face still turned to look at Samantha, back snug against Othello's side, she licked her lips as their eyes met, and shudders running through her told Sam she was cumming again already. Cumming, and staring at Sam as she gave the elder vampire a blowjob.

Samantha couldn't help but moan around Jacob's cock as she pulled her head back and forth a little faster, lips massaging the base edge of its bulbous tip. She had to keep her mouth open wide

to fit him, and old her would have trouble keeping this up. The new her, the vampire, had little trouble, and ran her tongue around and around, caressing him and earning a drop of precum on her tongue, and another, and another. And as he trickled juices into her mouth, Samantha couldn't help but peek at the other vampires frequently, each of them with eyes locked on her, and what she was doing to their leader.

Jacob let out a small, happy sigh, and pulled back. He set his hand around the base of his cock, and masturbated, while aiming his cock down at her body. He was going to cum on her, in front of all these people.

A splash of warm liquid landed on her lips and neck. Another landed on her sternum and shoulder. Another landed on one breast, and then another for the other. And more. She knew Kindred could exploit the Blush of Life with practice, and do truly crazy things sexually speaking; Jacob had shown her before. But even with all the times she'd had sex with Jacob, he'd never done anything this lewd! Warm, thick strands of white cum splashed over her again and again, and she gasped as the coating grew thick enough it dripped off her breasts.

Finally he stepped back, and Samantha managed to turn her eyes from him to the rest of the group. They all stared at her, looking her up and down, smiling, grinning, and hungry. She must have looked like a painting, or like six men had just taken turns cumming on her.

The look in everyone's eyes set her body to boil. The moment Jacob decided to touch her, or fuck her, she was going to cum and cum hard, she knew it. And everyone was going to see.

“Go, and get Madison to clean you up.”

“W-What?”

“Sit in front of Madison.” He squatted down and gave her ass a slap, and she squeaked before crawling over to Othello’s legs. Not close enough. Jacob pushed her shoulders gently, and with her whole body shaking, she slid in closer, kneeling beside Othello’s feet, on the same side as Jennifer. Still not close enough. Jacob gave her another small push, and she whimpered as she slid even closer, her knees now beside Othello’s. Still not close enough. She slid in closer again, her knees now nudging against Jennifer’s side and Othello’s thigh.

Madison grinned at her, leaned in, and set a hand on her shoulder. “Come on, get in here.”

With a shivering little whimper, Samantha knelt up high, and leaned forward. She had to put her hands on something to keep from falling over and onto Jennifer and Madison. Her left hand found Madison’s right shoulder, and her right hand found Othello’s left shoulder, above Jennifer’s head. A hard, big shoulder, owned by a man who was looking at her with obvious ‘I want to fuck you’ eyes.

Madison took Sam’s hand, the one on Madison’s shoulder, and pulled it past her so it could rest on Othello’s other shoulder. Sam, holding both Othello’s shoulders, looked at the ghoul between her arms, and then at the man, her whole body shaking. It only got worse when Madison leaned in, and set her lips onto Samantha’s wet, hard nipples.

“Nn!” Samantha squirmed, and her fingers dug into Othello’s muscles as his ghoul began to clean her. Kisses and licks, each hungry and powerful, were placed all over her breasts, each cleaning a section free of cum. Not only that, but the ghoul spent time massaging her skin, rubbing and spreading Jacob’s cum into her body, under her breasts, into her stomach and chest, and up to her neck. And when Madison had spent some time cleaning the upper, lower, inner, and outer edges of her body with her tongue, she set

her lips back onto Sam's nipples. Cleaning those tiny things shouldn't have taken very long, but Madison slid her hands onto Sam's body, held her hips, and kept her close while she began to lovingly suckle.

It felt good. It felt great. Powerful jolts of electric pleasure coursed into Samantha's body through the sensitive, swollen nubs, and she whimpered as her eyes again found Othello's. He was loving this.

Jennifer reached up, took Sam's hand, the one on the shoulder Jen was leaning against, and guided it down onto her body. Down to her lips, chin, neck, against one of her huge, supple breasts, and then down to her stomach. She grinned up at Sam, and helped pressed Sam's hand down on her abdomen, against the bulge Triss's writhing tongue was creating inside her.

"Press down."

Samantha gulped, nodded, and pressed down. She whimpered again as she felt Triss's tongue fight against the pressure, and she looked down at the Nosferatu to see what how she felt about this. Beatrice rolled her snake eyes, but didn't stop. If anything, she worked her tongue against Jen's insides even harder, and deeper, and Samantha moaned openly as she watched the bulge along Jen's abdomen reach her navel. That, was deep.

As the tingling bliss in her breasts continued to grow, Madison's kissing only ending long enough so she could switch breasts, Jennifer came again. Even as her body trembled with orgasm shocks, she kept her eyes on Sam, and what Madison was doing to her breasts. And, without being asked, Samantha pressed her hand down against where she knew Jen's g-spot would be, squashing it against Triss's tongue. She could feel the tongue through Jen's body, feel it wriggling and fucking her, and making her whole body tremble.

Triss pulled away, exposing Jen's soaked, dripping slit, sat up, and let out a frustrated groan. "Alright, fuck this."

"I'm sorry!" Samantha squeaked. "I—"

Beatrice threw her a confused glance, before she leaned back, and kicked off her pants and thong. "What? No, I'm horny, damn it! I can't stand it anymore. Jen, get to work."

Chuckling, Jennifer sat up. Despite her confident expression, Jen's whole body trembled with the effort, and a small moan escaped her as she crawled out of the spot from Othello's side. Beatrice replaced her, though she didn't lean back against Othello's shoulder.

At least until Jen, chuckling, pushed Triss so she fell into Othello's side.

"Hey!"

"Relax," Jennifer whispered, kneeling between Beatrice's spread legs, and winked at her as she coated her right hand in lube.

Triss rolled her eyes, but she wriggled into a comfortable position against Othello's arm. Othello lifted his arm so Triss was instead snuggling her back into his torso, her shoulder nudging into Madison, and the man set his arm across the woman's chest in a loose hug.

"Hey, you fucker." Triss squirmed again, this time in an attempt to escape Othello's hug, but it ended the moment she let out a moan. A glance down between her legs showed Jennifer had already managed to sink a finger into the woman's ass, and was pushing in more. And more. And more.

Jen winked at her lover, and sank her fist in to the wrist, earning a loud, trembling groan from the squirming Nosferatu. If Beatrice

really wanted to get out of Othello's hug, Sam knew they'd let her. And Triss wouldn't care if she offended them anyway, and would forcefully escape if she wanted. The Circle knew Triss well though, and the super lean Nosferatu slowly relaxed back against Othello's side as Jen gently eased her fist back and forth inside her lover's ass, while her other hand teased and played with her clitoris and clit-hood piercing.

Before Sam could say something, like maybe they were being a little too forceful with Triss, she gasped. Two hands took her hips, and before she could look behind her to see what was happening, Jacob slid her thong aside, drove his hips into her ass, and sank every inch of his thick length into her dripping slit. He sank his cock into her hard, the angle driving it forward down into her g-spot, and she collapsed forward as the pleasure exploded outward from her insides. Her left hand pressed hard against Othello's shoulder, and her right hand pressed high against the cave wall behind Othello and Triss. So far forward, Madison wasn't able to keep sucking on her breasts. In fact, Sam had fallen so far forward, her left breast was against Madison's, and her right breast now sat directly over Triss's head.

So close! Everyone was so close. She was pressed against Madison, and her face was inches from Othello's. Her knee nudged against Triss's side and ass, too. She tried to back up so people could have a little more room, but Jacob slid in even closer, and Sam had to press her left hand harder against Othello's shoulder to keep from squashing Madison even more.

Othello glanced past Sam to Jacob, silently asking something, but before Sam could tell what happened, Othello's arm currently hugging Triss slid forward toward Sam a little, and touched her stomach. Then down lower, and lower, and Samantha's body erupted into panting whimpers as she realized what the man was about to do.

As Othello's hand found her aching, swollen, dripping clitoris, Madison also took Sam's left hand, the one pressed hard against Othello's shoulder, and pulled it down. Samantha outright squeaked as her chest planted against Madison's, now only her right hand against the cave wall keeping her from falling into everyone. The ghoul set a kiss on Samantha's neck, and another, and another, and Sam's whole body melted into butter as the ghoul's warm, life-filled flesh gently rubbed against her. Melting quickly turned to boiling as two of Othello's fingers pressed against her clitoris, and rubbed it in gentle, circular massaging motions, while Jacob continued to fuck her from behind hard enough to make her tremble.

She managed to look down, and meet eyes with Beatrice only foot a below her, as Sam's first orgasm ripped through her. She let out ungodly noises that were beyond embarrassing, groans and mewls, and her whole body shook worse than an earthquake as the pleasure exploded. With her chest rubbing into Madison's, Othello caressing her clit, and Jacob slamming into her hard enough he had everyone shaking in rhythm, she couldn't help it. The electric explosions of pleasure rushed out into her chest, and down into her toes until they curled.

New wetness coated her inner thighs, and she knew it was hers. So wet, she felt a few beads of it nearly reach her knees.

"Ok, I admit," the Nosferatu said between panting groans, "that is very ... very hot."

"Extremely," Jennifer said, her eyes mostly on Samantha. She sank her arm deeper into Triss, and deeper, until her gentle fucking rhythm inside her friend's ass showing up on Triss's defined abs, and the bulge pushed past her navel. God, that was so deep! And Triss was loving it.

Samantha managed to pull her head back a bit, fighting against the trembles in her legs and arms, and stared at Madison with wide

eyes as the ghoul slid Sam's left hand down her body, down to her empty, soaked slit, and down further, to Othello's heavy, warm, soaked testicles. The ghoul grinned at her, and helped guide her hand in a massaging motion on Othello's balls, gentle circular motions, just like Othello had done to Sam's now aching, sensitive clit.

Sam's eyes eventually looked from Madison to Othello, and her whole body set alight as the gorgeous man smiled at her. He liked it. He liked it so much, Sam felt the muscles squeeze as the man pumped cum into his ghoul's ass, for the fourth time. He came, and came, and came, body pouring buckets of cum into his ghoul, just like Jacob had earlier when covering Samantha. And as he filled his ghoul's body with his cum, he kept his warm, heavenly gaze on Sam, and refused to look away even as a small groan escaped him. She felt every flex in her hand. So much cum, Sam felt it trickle out of Madison's body, and soak his testicles, and Sam's hand. So warm. So wonderful. The feel of its thickness coating Sam's fingers had her mewling, and she pressed more of her weight into Madison's chest as she continued to massage the fellow Daeva's heavy testicles. Now, she was massaging his cum, and Madison's juices into his skin, and the hungry look in his eyes said he never wanted her to stop.

Everyone looked to Triss as the woman let out a feminine whimper, a sound Sam rarely heard from her, and the woman started to tremble. Her hands reached up, and clutched Othello's hugging arm like she was on a roller coaster. Her eyes closed, and her body shook as the pleasure worked through her, making her toes curl and her thighs tremble around Jennifer. And a moment later, a hard squirt of clear fluid shot out from her empty pussy, and hit Jennifer in her heavy, rippling breasts.

"Wow," Samantha whispered. "W ... Wow."



“Beatrice is as much an anal addict as Othello,” Jennifer said, chuckling.

“Not a fucking addict,” the shivering Nosferatu barely managed to say.

Jennifer rolled her eyes, and pumped her fist inside the fit woman’s ass again, not bothering with her clitoris anymore. Everyone watched, hypnotized by the way the distension moved back and forth along Triss’s abs, and the way her body writhed in obvious pleasure. The first orgasm had tipped Triss over, and now, every following orgasm would be easy to reach. Sam knew the feeling.

Jacob thrust into Samantha again, hard, and she collapsed forward completely, hands falling, and all of her weight pressing into Madison again. Her left, cum-soaked hand pressed to the girl’s thigh for balance, and her right hand slid from the wall to Othello’s shoulder belonging to the hand playing with her clitoris. The man stopped caressing her clit, but he kept his fingers on it, happy to keep touching her as she came on Jacob’s cock in seconds. Triss looked up at her, struggling to keep her eyes open as she came too, but apparently she really, really wanted to watch Samantha cum. They all did.

And when Jennifer reached out, took Sam’s right hand, and set it on Triss’s stomach, Triss made no effort to stop her. If anything, she looked excited, openly groaning when Sam accidentally pushed down on the woman’s lower abdomen, just above the pubic bone, over her g-spot. Didn’t mean to! But Jen put her hand right there. God, she could feel Jen’s arm working Triss’s insides. And she could feel it as Triss’s muscles clenched hard, another orgasm hitting her, and a hard squirt of fluid again splashed against Jen’s chest and dangling, shaking breasts. The splash hit Sam’s arm, and she groaned as the warmth coated her hand.

Madison hugged Sam close with her left arm, but her right reached down, took Sam's left hand, and guided it back down. She thought maybe Madison wanted her to keep massaging Othello's testicles, but instead, the ghoul guided her hand to Madison's slit. As the ghoul forced two of Samantha's fingers into her clenching pussy, she moaned into Sam's ear, and whispered, "drink me."

Sam returned the groan, and sank her teeth into Madison's neck. Her Beast took over, and gave her no chance to say no. The ghoul moaned, and her body shook with spasms as she immediately came on Samantha's fingers, hard. Clenching, hot muscles leaked juices onto Samantha's hand, and the woman pushed her hips toward her, desperate for more. And Sam obliged, lost in a haze of heat, desire, and the Kiss. She pumped her hand back and forth hard enough to make the ghoul's body shake, and she clamped her teeth down on her prey to make sure she didn't escape.

And to make it all a delirious concoction of carnal pleasure, Othello's hands took his ghoul's hips, and he fucked her, bouncing her a couple inches at a rapid pace, as Sam fingered her and drank her.

Her own muscles clamped down on Jacob's cock, and she groaned into Madison's neck, their voices mixing. She lost track of the pleasure. Madison's blood flooded her, filled her with passion, life, heat, desire, and bliss. It also blinded her to anything else. Dimly, she was aware she was still pumping her hand back and forth in Madison's pussy, and that the ghoul was cumming so hard she was drenching Sam's hand. She was also aware she was cumming too. Was Jacob? She felt him pump her faster, and then slam into her with fewer, harder thrusts. She felt Othello do the same, his grip on Madison matching Sam's fingering, until he slowed, and slowed, and stopped.

Sam pulled back, and gasped, looking the sleeping, panting, sweating ghoul up and down. "Oh ... oh god."

Othello grinned at her, and licked his lips. “That, was hot.”

Jacob nodded, and kissed Sam on the neck. “Sizzling like Tom Selleck in the eighties.” Chuckling, he slipped back, pulling his cock free of Sam’s quivering insides. New heat dripped out of her, vanishing into the growing mess of fluids. He had cum inside her, enough that she could feel it trickling down her thighs until it reached the furs beneath them.

Sam went weak at the knees, quivering, and she stared on in awe as the unconscious, trembling ghoul collapsed back onto Othello’s body. With a playful laugh, Othello lifted Madison up and up, until his huge cock fell out of her ass. A fountain of white cum poured out of the woman, and Sam squeaked as it drenched the man’s abs like a flood, before Othello lifted her toward Jacob. He took her, and set Madison out of the way on the other side of the alcove.

“That was ... amazing,” she said. Hard to get her voice steady, with tingles still flowing up and down her body. Her thighs wouldn’t stop shaking.

Jacob laughed. “Was?”

“W-What?”

“You just ate. I know you’re not done yet.” Grinning like some mad genius, Jacob picked her up from her waist like she weighed absolutely nothing.

“Jacob! I—” She gasped sharply as the man lowered her down, onto Othello’s lap, facing him, her knees outside his waist. So close! Close enough her knee was under Triss’s side, and the woman adjusted to sit back against it and Othello’s side before grinning back up at her.

Sam froze and stared down at the huge man, and his huge cock currently lying on his abs, coated in a mountain of his cum, cum

that'd literally flowed out of his ghoul's ass seconds ago from what must have been half a dozen orgasms. Smiling his usual dopey, fun smile, the huge Daeva set his hands onto her hips, and pulled her up and forward a little, until her ass hovered a foot over his pelvis, and her dripping pussy was directly over his shaft.

If he cared that her thighs were covered in Jacob's cum, and it was still dripping out of her pussy, he didn't show it. And considering his abs, his utterly amazing abs, were absolutely buried in his own cum, it was hard to tell whose mess was whose. Vampire sex could get so insanely messy.

"I ... I don't know if ... um ... uh ... are you sure?" Oh god it was happening. It was happening! This stupid, silly schoolgirl sexual fantasy she'd been having was happening. Oh god oh god oh god.

Jacob leaned back in, and gave her another kiss on the neck. "I'm not done with you yet, but I think you want a turn with Othello, right? Get passed around the Circle like a lovely little sex toy."

She turned red from head to toe, and peeked at Othello's warm eyes before looking down. As she did, Othello reached down, took his cock, and raised it to point it at her ass. He let go, and the huge shaft had enough firmness to stay upright as it pulled forward, and its fat glans rested against the crack of her ass.

She stared back at Jacob, but the man smiled at her, winked — all in the face muscles — and gave her a tiny shove toward the Daeva. And Othello, with slow and casual hands, lowered her down onto his cock. There was no doubt the man would want to fuck her ass; it was his fetish, apparently, and the only way he would fuck Madison. Jacob knew Sam had a thing for Othello, and had introduced her to anal sex largely because he knew she'd been fantasizing about it, after seeing how much Madison enjoyed sex with Othello. But this? She hadn't expected this!

Her whole body buzzed with a fresh meal and renewed need. Her nipples ached, and her labia were beyond swollen. Everything was soaked, and dripping. God, she was even hornier than before, and she knew it. She knew she was going to love this, and everyone was going to see how much she loved it.

She stared at Othello, grabbed his shoulders for balance, bit her lip, and the big guy let out a small, deep moan, as he set the dripping wet head of his thick cock against her sphincter. Jacob had helped her get used to this, and she knew to relax her muscles, but it was hard! So hard when she was so nervous, with her hands holding Othello's shoulders, and the feel of his huge muscles filling her palms.

Slowly, Othello eased her down onto his thick girth, and she squeaked as the warm, drenched head of the Daeva's cock pushed passed her clenching ring of muscle, and into her.

"Oh ... no..." She whimpered like a scared puppy, and the two men chuckled as Othello sank her down, and down, and down. Jacob was a very well endowed man, and had fucked her ass on several occasions. She liked having sex with Jacob, a lot, and did, a lot. But Othello was even bigger, and she found herself gasping as the man's thick girth filled her up.

The whole situation was quickly regressing her into some tiny girl with stupid sex fantasies about being penetrated by the men on romance novel covers. Except, not a fantasy anymore. She let out a whimpering whine as her ass molded snug to Othello's thighs and pelvis, and she pressed her hands against his huge chest, trying to lift herself up off the huge thing filling her. Othello didn't let her. He pushed her down until her pussy pressed to his cum-soaked pelvis, and she whimpered, defeated, aching for more.

Jacob chuckled, and a glance back showed his evil grin. He said wasn't done with her yet, but Jacob had so much patience. If he

wanted, he'd happily wait, or hook her up to toy and leave her like that for the whole night, before indulging himself. She didn't think he'd wait that long this time, but he did sit back, and watch. He had that grin too, his thinking grin, the one he used when he was planning a new thing to do to her. It sent chills through her, and she whimpered again as she looked back to the big, dumb, handsome man between her legs.

She managed another quick peek over her shoulder to see Jacob scoop up the near unconscious Madison. For a moment, she thought he might start fucking her; considering Sam was fucking Othello, she wouldn't blame him. But he didn't. He sank his teeth into the ghoul, indulging in the pleasure of the Kiss, but his eyes landed on Sam, and he grinned at her, even as he gestured for her to continue and enjoy herself. He was going to have a drink, before he came back for her.

She shivered in anticipation.

With a weary groan, Triss forced herself to sit up straight, still snuggled under Othello's arm, and looked at Sam.

"Sorry, about all this anal. Othello really likes it, and I like it, so—"

"It's fine! It's ... fine," she said. Jacob had long proved to her she was a lot more naughty than she thought she was, and that she liked all kinds of kinks. All kinds.

She let out a slow, wavering moan as Othello tilted her hips back, forcing her to lean back slightly, and he flexed his cock inside her, drawing it toward her belly. Instant sparks of pleasure as the fat girth stretching her depths pushed toward her slit, and she gripped the man's huge wrists tight as she stared at him.

He was good. He was so, damn, good. And huge. She felt like she might burst.

With a less weary, happier groan, Jennifer sat down beside Othello opposite of Triss, snuggled into his side, and watched Sam, same as Triss.

“Look at her. She’s obviously enjoying herself.” With a sly grin, Jen reached out, and traced a line down Sam’s body, from collar to sternum to stomach, all the way down to her mons, leaving a tingling trail wherever her finger touched. “I bet she’s been dreaming of this moment for a while.”

“I ... I um...” Sam’s eyes found Othello’s, and she blushed horribly. Not that she hadn’t been blushing horribly this whole time, but now she felt her fake heartbeat right up in her cheeks.

With a warm, dopey, happy smile, Othello met her eyes, and moved her again. His big hands held her easily, and he pulled her a bit forward as he also moved her up and down. He knew exactly where to put her, and exactly how to move her, to make sure the head of his cock pressed toward her pussy with each slow, deep, circular bounce of her body. And each time she felt his hard, huge cock press toward her belly through her ass, tingling sparks of pleasure erupted outward from her swollen depths. The haze of sexual bliss, combined with a stomach full of a fresh meal, had every inch of her quivering with desire and bliss, to the point it didn’t take much at all to have her nearing orgasm.

She outright squeaked, when Jacob took her wrists, pulled them behind her, and clicked something around them. Handcuffs! Their handcuffs, the fuzzy ones that Jacob had made, the comfortable ones. The super strong ones!

“Jacob! I ... I...” Oh no. No no. She stared at Othello, at Beatrice and Jennifer, as her whole body lit up. She squirmed and wriggled, and tried to push up off Othello with her knees, but he held her down, and smiled his warm smile. He saw it, he must have, how much her body responded on its own to what Jacob did. Oh no no.

She squirmed harder, pushed her knees down harder against the fur to try and sit up and get away, but Othello held on. Embarrassment coursed through her, and she kept struggling, but all that did was make her muscles clench tighter, earning some groans from the beautiful man fucking her ass.

Wriggling on him too much soon had her whimpering, and Othello forced her down on his cock harder and faster, making her body shake and forcing outright squeaks from her. Oh no.

Triss and Jen both stared at her, eyes wide and hungry, as Sam came. She twisted and turned, trying to hide herself, but it was pointless. All she could do was tremble like a leaf as Othello's fat cock reached her deepest places again, and again, making her insides spasm and clench. And soon, more of her juices leaked from her, dripping down onto the mess on Othello's abs.

"Wow, you really love the handcuffs, don't you?" Triss said. "I mean yeah, I saw it before, but damn."

She tried to say something, but electric jolts coursed outward from her core where Othello's cock pressed toward her belly, robbing her of any breath. She managed to keep her eyes open, despite her trembling thighs and curling toes, but her mouth hung open too as she panted and mewled. With how everyone stared at her, she probably looked like some sort of horny slut, gasping with pleasure and cumming from anal sex; Othello hadn't even touched her pussy. It was beyond embarrassing.

It was beyond arousing.

"Look at this," Jennifer said, voice softening, like she was discovering a dark secret. She reached out again, slid her closer hand between Sam's thighs, and this time didn't stop at her mons. Expert fingers traced along her aching clitoris, and Samantha shivered as the woman moved her hand down further, and then into her.



“Jen!” Samantha sat up straight, eyes wide. Oh god, she hadn’t expected that!

But Jennifer just grinned at her, and pulled her fingers out of her and away half a foot. A couple dangling lines of thick juices connected her fingers to Sam’s pussy, Sam’s juices, and Jacob’s. Oh god oh god. Sam quickly looked to Triss, hopeful the woman would stop her girlfriend from what she was doing. But Triss just sat there, smiling, eyes looking Samantha up and down, and after a few moments, set one of her hands on Samantha’s leg, while the other reached between Triss’s own thighs to gently caress her own clit.

Vampires could have sex all night if they wanted. Normally Jacob would stop after an hour or two, so they didn’t lose the whole night to it. Tonight, there didn’t seem to be any sign of stopping.

“You,” Othello said, voice deep, a whisper that tickled up her spine and made her body buzz, “are gorgeous. And very, very tight.”

She couldn’t blush anymore. Her whole body was red, lost to embarrassment and arousal. Climaxing from just anal sex was embarrassing enough, but when Jen sank her fingers back inside her, and then another, palm up, and started curling them toward Othello, toward Sam’s g-spot, she couldn’t take it anymore. She tried to get away again, pushing with her legs, but Othello’s grip on her hips was solid, and the handcuffs made sure she couldn’t use her arms, either to push away, or to hide herself. Everyone got to watch as waves of bliss rolled out from her insides, up into her chest, down her legs, and into her toes. Trembling and whimpering, her head rolled forward and her jaw hung, as she stared down at the beautiful man she straddled, and the juices she leaked onto Jen’s fingers. A lot of juices.

And then Othello started to cum; the man was a machine. Sam froze, and stared at the handsome Daeva as his muscles flexed, and his eyes closed for a second, before opening again to drink her up.

He'd been looking forward to this, she could see it in his eyes, and Sam stared at him as the man filled her ass with his cum. Waves of it filled her, gushes, each accompanied by a hard flex of his huge cock that pulled toward her pussy. Each joined by a whimper and shiver from her.

"You are easily one of the most sexual vampires I have ever met," Jen said. "Daeva indeed." For a second, Sam thought she was talking to Othello; he'd cum, what, six, seven times tonight already? But no, Jen was talking to her, and Sam shook her head desperately.

"I'm not!"

"Oh?" Chuckling, Jen slipped her hand out of Sam's insides, and ran them up onto Othello's huge abs and chest. Wetness, strands of arousal, connected Jen's fingers to Sam's leaking body, and she traced the wetness along Othello's muscles. And Sam watched her fingers, hypnotized.

"That ... that's cause, I fed, and ... and..."

"A stomach full of blood definitely makes it easy to get the body going, and it rejuvenates you too, but it doesn't make you hornier than you normally would be." With a pleased sigh, Jen slid her hand back down between Sam's thighs, and slipped two fingers inside her once again, palm up. "You'll just have to accept that you are, eternally, a horny vampire." And before Sam could say anything, Jen started to finger her, hard, hard enough to make the Ventrue's body ripple with the fast, firm motion she put into her arm. Her large breasts jiggled, rubbing against Othello's side, but the man didn't even notice. He kept his eyes on Sam, gazing her up and down, and licking his lips as he watched her mewl and squirm on his cock.

"Jen! Slow ... slow down..." It was no good. Sam came in seconds, pleasure pouring outward from her swollen, aching insides, but Jen didn't stop. Sam looked to Triss for help, but the Nos grinned up at

her, got comfortable against Othello's side, and masturbated faster as she watched her.

Jen wasn't done. Her other hand reached behind Sam, grabbed her ass, and used the grip for stability so she could pump her other hand faster, slapping her fingers against Sam's insides. Rough! Oh god, so rough, Sam's whole body trembled like a jackhammer, as did Jen's, her arm shoving back and forth like a piston, each forward draw making a wet slapping sound. Sam's insides clenched hard, but Jen didn't stop, and before long, Sam felt her insides begin to pulse with waves of pleasure that forced every inch of her to tense and squeeze in rhythm.

Juices flowed out of her, and she stared down at the holy mess she created all over her thighs, Jen's hand, and Othello's abs. Little splashes soaked Jen's palm and everything else, encouraging Jen to pump harder, until Sam couldn't even moan anymore. If she'd been human, she'd have started seeing stars from not being able to breathe. As a vampire that wouldn't happen, and all she could do was wriggle in Othello's solid grip, as Jen made her cum on his cock again, and again.

Finally Jen stopped, and she chuckled as she slipped her hand out of Sam, and again painted her juices over Othello's muscles. She had plenty to work with.

“Glorious.”

“Othello,” Jacob said, “get over here.”

Samantha, slowly coming up from her climax high, managed to look back over her shoulder to Jacob, knowing she must have looked guilty as hell. What was he doing?

Nodding, Othello pushed himself down away from the wall, until he was lying down on his back, torso only slightly propped up by the blankets underneath him.

Sam squeaked as Jacob's hands, hands she knew well, took her thighs, lifted, and turned her around. He didn't lift her up much, keeping Othello inside her, and setting her legs outside his. With a big devil grin, he took his large cock in his hand, and winked at her. Oh no.

Jacob knelt down in front of her, and she wriggled and squirmed again. They'd never done this! Sure, they'd used toys, but never two men at once! Never. And both men were big. And she was not.

Her lover pressed his cock's head against her drenched lips, and pushed into her, slowly. She clenched and squeezed, panicking, but Jacob kept going, forcing past her tightening insides. She mewled like a cat as he penetrated her, taking his sweet time filling her up, until she couldn't help but push her hips toward him.

With Othello lying on his back, Jacob had his knees around the man's legs, so he could sit up on his knees as he pushed into her. He grinned down at her as he sank himself to the base, filling her, stretching her, and he stayed there, not moving. She squirmed some more, not sure if she wanted him to stop before she died of embarrassment, or pound her until she was a mewling, whimpering mess.

Jennifer chuckled and slid over to them. With an evil grin, she slid in beside her, naked body pressed to Sam's side, and she slid her free arm down Sam's naked chest. First, over her breasts, both of them, taking the time to caress her swollen areola, and sending sparks through Sam's chest. Then lower, down her body, her stomach, and down her smooth mons. Then lower, to where her aching clitoris sat just above Jacob's cock.

"Jen, you ... you shouldn't, I—nnnng." Sam shivered, and her legs shook around Jacob, as Jen caressed her clitoris. Not hard thank god; it was super sensitive by this point. But the woman knew

exactly how hard to push her sensitive body, and she used two of her soaked fingers to massage the tiny, engorged bud.

Sam outright gasped when Triss joined them. She knelt down beside Sam, opposite of Jen, and reached out across her chest. Chuckling, she did the same thing as Jen, caressing each of her breasts and cupping them playfully with one hand. On her knees, she had both hands free, so her other hand slipped down Sam's stomach, and down to where Jen's hands were. Her fingers stopped a couple inches higher, and with her evil smile only growing, she pressed down.

Sam's squeals and whimpers turned into heavy groans, as Triss squashed her g-spot down onto Jacob's cock.

Then the boys started to thrust. Like in-sync machine pistons, they found a rhythm that worked together almost instantly. Jacob pulled out, then Othello as they lifted her up a bit. Then Jacob thrust into her, hard enough to make her breasts ripple, before Othello pulled her down, and thrust up into her, both men fully sinking into her. Around and around and around it went, and they were not gentle, turning her into a squeak toy in seconds.

Through it all, Jennifer continued to tease her clitoris, approaching but never crossing that point of painful. After a few seconds of the boys becoming aggressive animals, Jennifer leaned up and over Othello's shoulder, then Sam's. She set a kiss on her shoulder, her neck, and then lower, finding her free breast and enveloping it in her mouth. Jennifer's breasts were huge, and she pressed them into Sam's side as she kissed and suckled Sam's nipple, finding a rhythm that matched the boys. And Beatrice, she kept her one hand on Sam's other breast, massaging, while her other hand pressed harder down against her mons, crushing her g-spot onto Jacob's cock.

Sam was only barely aware of any of this. Thirty seconds into the madness, she closed her eyes and went limp, body refusing to listen anymore as orgasm hit her. Vaguely, she knew a big muscly guy was under her and in her ass, that two women were caressing and playing with her, and that her lover was fucking her pussy hard enough to bruise her, if she'd been human. But the new Samantha came and came hard, until splashes soaked her thighs.

“St ... op ... need a ... break.”

No one listened. She opened her eyes enough to see Jacob, and the evil smile he loved to use when fucking her. Even without eyes, the man's expressions were powerful, and she melted as his face silently spoke a thousand words: you're mine, now cum for me.

She didn't need much encouragement. Her eyes closed as she came again, muscles clamping down despite how her spread, limp legs only managed to quiver on the blankets. Someone's hand wrapped her throat. She didn't know whose. All she could feel was two people massaging and kissing her body, while two more fucked her with an almost desperate rhythm. And then they filled her with cum again.

At some point, the others stopped, and Jacob had her all to himself. He rolled her onto her chest and knees, lifted her ass up, knelt behind her, and fucked her hard.

And everyone watched. She was a trembling mess at that point, but her Kindred body rejuvenated her fast enough that she could keep on going, and going, and she melted into the floor as she came on him. And everyone watched, big smiles on their faces as their boss ravaged her. He thrust into her again, and again, until she felt his cum oozing out of her pussy, trickling down her mons and stomach, and down her thighs, joining the mess already there.

No wonder Antoinette warned her about how vampires could get addicted to sex. She couldn't wait to do this again.

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“Oh my god oh my god oh my god.” She covered herself with her arms as best she could, and shook her head until her hair was smacking her in the eyes. “Oh my god.”

“Chill girl, chill.” Triss laughed, shrugging.

Everyone lay in Othello’s alcove, spread out around the blankets. Jacob, then Sam, then Othello, then Jen, then Triss. The only reason the room didn’t stink of sex and flesh was because they were vampires, and all that stuff faded away after a while. Except for Madison, she lay on the other side of the room, asleep, and snuggled up to some pillows, smiling.

“I didn’t mean to ... to touch you like that, Triss,” she said.

“Sam, you barely touched me. Besides, if I’d had a problem with any of this, I’d have walked off.” She laughed, shrugging again. “Not like I give a shit about peer pressure from these fuckers.”

That was true. No one had done something they didn’t want to do. Everyone here was comfortable enough to tell each other to stop if they didn’t like where things were going. Even Triss, who’d been a bit annoyed with Othello when he got his arm around her, didn’t actually try to get out of it. She’d enjoyed herself.

Jacob chuckled, leaned in to her, and kissed her. A good, proper kiss. A romantic kiss. She sighed into it, but pulled away when she heard a couple swoons. The girls were grinning at her.

Before she could say anything, someone else walked up to the alcove. Aaron!

The Gangrel blinked at them, each one of them, rolled his eyes, and walked off.

## Chapter 142

~~Antoinette~~

“It burns?”

“Burns is too strong a word,” Daniel’s voice said over the phone. “But the contents burn. I witnessed some incendiary explosives as well.”

“Terra Den’s work.”

“Undoubtedly.”

She groaned as she rubbed her forehead. Seated in her beautiful chair, in her beautiful office, at the top of her beautiful tower, all she felt was rage. How dare Garry, how dare he flirt with the edges of her commands.

“Response from the city?” she asked.

“No police or firefighters yet. And I haven’t heard any gunfire.”

“And the Kindred?”

“I’ve seen nothing to suggest a Masquerade violation.”

If someone violated the Masquerade, the situation would have been far easier to resolve. Execute the infidels, and silence those who complained. But the more Garry and Michael dodged her rules, the more her power slipped away. How much longer before the Carthians or Invictus proclaimed her an unworthy Prince?

Would that be so bad? Dolareido was her city, despite Jacob’s claim of co-ownership. It was her experiment, her time and effort



that had produced its balance. And for all its troubles, it was one of the more peaceful cities when it came to the covenants. She was proud of her work.

But the more things slipped through her fingers, the more she wondered if her efforts were in vain. Would it not be better to simply leave, establish a more secure power base in a smaller area with no other Kindred presence, and enjoy blissful centuries with Jack?

As much as the idea pleased her, she knew it would not be enough. Despite what absurd and juvenile romantic fairy tales suggested, one could not find contentment in romance alone. One needed to find their own reason to exist, something that drove them and gave them purpose. And while her research into realms of ephemera were of great interest to her, it was her quest to prepare for the future that drove her. Dolareido was the fruit of that preparation, and she would not abandon it on a flight of wistful whimsy, or disparaging anger.

If she had to kill Michael and Garry, and whomever believed in their cause, so be it.

“What do you think, old friend?” she said to the phone on her desk.

“I think Garry has been careful. Anyone who sees this will think the building’s been attacked, but nothing here suggests paranormal activity.” Doubtlessly, the man was giving one of his stone glares at the building as he spoke. “Conspiracy theorists and journalists alike will have fun theorizing about underworld crime, but nothing more.”

“Daniel ... do you consider Garry’s attack to be a breach of my rules?”

“Much as I hate to say it, no.”

“Do you think I should change my decree?” Kindred were staunchly advised to avoid killing each other in Dolareido. She had said as much in Primogen meetings and public gatherings alike. But there had been no official declaration. As long as they upheld the Masquerade, and did not interfere with her city on any meaningful scale, Kindred were allowed to kill each other. And indeed, sometimes they did, despite the assurance from the Carthians and Invictus that no murders had been performed. Pretty lies.

Cooperation, that was what she strived for in Dolareido. Cooperation. It was one of the reasons she kept as much distance from the covenants as she did. History and psychology alike taught the folly of a heavy hand. If she changed her ways and adopted the role of totalitarian, she knew it would end in disaster. Perhaps now, perhaps in another hundred years, it would eventually end in catastrophe.

“I think if you get between these two angry, fighting dogs, you’re likely to get bit, Ann. Michael can probably pull ten, maybe twenty of his strongest to fight us, and Garry could likely convince most of his covenant that we should be disposed. And nothing unites people quite like a common enemy.”

She groaned again as she cradled her forehead, and combed her hair over her shoulder with her other hand. “Agreed.”

“I did see Sándor nearby.”

“Understandable. If he is to replace Azamel, then I am sure he wishes to be aware of what the covenants do.”

“Should I ... ask him, about the tears?”

“No. Jack and his companions will handle the hunt from that angle. Natasha will approach it with the aid of the werewolves.” Forced aid, but aid nonetheless. “We will continue our own pursuits as we have.” Dangerous games and deadly uses of Daniel’s Auspex.

“Understood.” Daniel hung up, and Antoinette turned to her laptop.

Camera feeds showed the contents of several of her cells. Humans, kine she had abducted years ago, and rendered catatonic with drugs. Kine who deserved it. Would she sacrifice another, and summon Black Blood once more? The spirit refused to cooperate, but she was not without the power to force a discussion. The dark creature was not omnipotent.

Sighing once more, she shook her head and closed the laptop. A knock at her door announced Elaine’s arrival, and Antoinette smiled.

“Come in, my dear.”

“Ann,” Elaine said as she entered. “Trouble?”

“As always.”

“Garry being a pain in the ass, mm?”

“Naturally.”

“I could seduce him, perhaps?”

“He is homosexual, Elaine. Quite immune to your charms, I suspect.”

She rolled her eyes as she sat down at her desk across from her. “This is why you should abandon this city. It is slippery, and refuses to bow to your ideals. The Ordo would much prefer you focus on your studies.”

“I am sure they would. But the Ordo remain blind to the future.” Before Elaine could retort, Antoinette waved a dismissing hand. “How goes your attempt to steal Jack’s curse for yourself?”

Elaine half grimaced, half smiled. “Come now, you know it is not that simple.”

“Is it not?”

“No, it is not. Do not presume to know my intentions, or that I am so shallow as to be motivated by greed and nothing else.” Her smile did not falter. “And besides, if you truly felt that way, you would not have let me as close to the boy as you have.”

Antoinette grinned at her. “Do you think I ever let my guard down around you, old friend?”

“Why, yes, I believe you do.” Elaine returned the grin as she leaned forward over the desk. “At least a little.”

They laughed. It was good to laugh. The games they played, as insidious or manipulative as they may be, would not break their friendship. Others could not understand, but none of them had friendships as old as Antoinette and Elaine had theirs. What games Elaine played would come to light eventually, and until then, Antoinette would keep an eye on her. But she also trusted her, and had much more pressing concerns.

“Jack,” Elaine asked, “is he not at Xnomina, and the fire?”

“No, he is elsewhere.”

“If he were, would you interfere?”

“I have instructed Daniel that, if Jack is found in a situation where his death is inevitable, he is to save the boy. And from there, Jack will be prohibited from operating with the other covenants. Effectively dead.”

“All to maintain your glorious neutrality and indifference.”

Antoinette squinted her eyes at the woman. “I see you have come to make a point about something.”

“Of course. I see this growing war between the suits and the anarchists, and I believe it is foolishness.”

“Naturally.”

“I meant your refusal to take sides.”

Ah yes, this again.

“In the last city you laid claim to territory, what balance did the Kindred strike?” Antoinette was referring to Berlin, a city her old friend had taken up residence in for several decades during the 1900s. She also knew how this conversation would go, they had had it before, but such was the guilty pleasure of elders and elder kine alike, repeating conversations.

“The First estate ruled, and the Second Estate was their close ally, similar to Dolareido. But the Carthians outnumbered them, like a growing swarm of vermin. It is far easier for a lout to recruit a fellow lout, than for the others to grow their numbers.”

“Did they fight?”

“Frequently. There was no active war, as per usual, but the Prince was always one transgression away from demanding it.”

“And you saw no possibility for peace?”

“No.”

“Then, which side would you have picked?”

Elaine leaned back in her chair as she looked down. “I am not sure. They left me to my pursuits, and I never interfered.”

“Did you consider any of their views more worthy than the others?”

“No.”

“Then—”

“I was not Prince of that city, Ann. You are Prince of this one. I did not care if Berlin’s Kindred killed each other, nor if the city suffered for it. I only cared for my experiments. But Dolareido is your experiment, and you are the Prince of it.”

“You ask me to play favorites, when that itself would damage my experiment.”

“Better that than war.”

“You said yourself that in Berlin, it did not come to war.” True outright war was terribly rare among Kindred. Elders ruled, and elders were far too paranoid to risk their second lives in a struggle that, to them, was ultimately a fleeting moment in a lifespan measured in centuries. The purge Antoinette had herself enacted was an exception, not the norm.

Naturally, Elaine had been thinking of the purge as well.

“Ann, you fought Lucas and killed his bishops, and you did so because the man was a stone’s throw away from assaulting you with over a hundred Kindred. If peace and cooperation was possible, then —”

“Cooperation is possible. It is simply a matter of time and effort to find the balance.” And that time was running out. The fact her fellow Kindred could not appreciate the impact the exponential growth of technology would have on their futures, was forever infuriating.

“And if it is not?”

“Then we are all doomed, Elaine.”

Elaine sighed and waved a dismissing hand of her own. “Do not be so negative. You have done well here, and the other dragons acknowledge that. But ... we have both seen this behavior before, in other cities. Now that the Invictus are considerably weaker, with the Lancea et Sanctum essentially dead, Michael and Garry will fight, and many of the Kindred you are attempting to ... herd, will die. Better you take a stand now, and bring one covenant to its knees.”

“So that I may rule with fear, and begin the cycle of tyranny that has killed so many other cities?” And elders alike. She was not so foolish as to ignore the tinge of fear that crept up her spine at the idea of her city’s Kindred rebelling and uniting against her. Such rebellions did happen, rarely, but they did. Kine were not unique in that regard, nor for their fondness of chopping the heads off their rulers.

Elaine frowned, but managed a slow nod, acknowledging the point. “There is a reason dragons rarely rule, Ann.”

Antoinette leaned back as well, sighing as she combed her hair over her chest. “This squabble between the covenants is but a wound earned from tearing free of old traps around our legs. With time, the covenants will cooperate.”

“And the Lancea et Sanctum?”

“I spoke with Maria. She is far more reasonable than her lover was. So is the boy.”

“Lucas’s childe?”

“Oui. He is ... a pleasant surprise. As much as it pains me to admit, Damien is a perfect example of what I strive for, Elaine. He

still holds to his beliefs, idiotic as they are, but he is also willing to cooperate with me, and understand the value in an open mind.”

“Even if you somehow made these puppets dance to your tune, what of Jacob?”

“Jacob.” Sighing, Antoinette looked down at her hair as she gently slid her fingers through it. “What do you think?”

“Of Jacob?” Elaine chuckled and licked a fang. “I am sure Samantha is enjoying herself.”

“You know Jacob is likely connected to the strange ongoing in my city, to these dark veins pulsing within it.”

“Yes, of course. But how dangerous do you truly consider them to be if you are willing to let Samantha ... ah, of course. Not willing. Encouraging.”

Antoinette closed her eyes for several moments before she offered her friend a questing gaze. “Do you trust Jacob with her?”

“You saw him with Minerva. His relationship with Samantha is not the same, but perhaps that is a good thing. If you are asking whether the man will drag her down into whatever dark games he plays with darker gods, then I would say no.”

“And Samantha herself? I let her take those two artifacts.”

“Why are you asking me? You know Beatrice’s plan will fail.”

“I am asking, because I doubt myself.”

Elaine shook her head. “You are the Prince. You cannot let anyone know you doubt yourself.”

“Then I hope you appreciate that I am willing to share this secret with you.”



Her old friend smiled, and tapped her desk with a fingertip several times. “Allowing me to share a bed with your lover, hardly a challenge. But letting me see your weak side in regards to your precious city and its denizens, that required centuries of effort.”

“Must you taunt me so?”

Elaine laughed, stood up, slipped around the desk, and leaned her butt against it by Antoinette as she smiled down at her. “I can provide my thoughts on this war between the Carthians and Invictus, but as for Jacob, Beatrice, and the dark arts they pursue? I am afraid I am as in the dark as you. You play dangerous games, Ann.”

“I do. But there is a glimmer of hope.”

“For Dolareido?”

“Do not be absurd. Dolareido has far more than a glimmer, and will be fine. If I have to personally bind and bury Black Blood to make it so, I will find a way. I meant ... for Jacob.” And, loath as she was to think it, God have mercy on her damned soul if Samantha paid the price for her plans.

Would Jack ever speak to her again, if something happened to her because of Antoinette?

---

~~Jack~~

Jessy threw up her hands. “Ryan, the fuck are you doing?”

“What? She stuck around to spy on us. No one saw me grab her.”

“So? We spy on each other all the time!”

“Yeah, but she tried to kill us. She tried to kill Mister Terry.”

“They weren’t trying to kill him! They were—”

Jessy and Ryan argued back and forth about the implications. Jack, on the other hand, paced in place and juggled information, while Mulder and Scully watched the chaos.

Crap. Crap Crap. Amanda, dead? Oh fuck. Oh fucking fuck. If that was true, then shit was officially going to hit the fan. People knew Amanda, Jack had worked with her. She was just a young Mekhet, Gloria’s childe, and a damn nice woman. Pretty much the perfect person to kill if you ... wanted ... a war...

Jack squeezed his phone, but stopped himself short before he shattered it.

“Damien,” he said, “tell me exactly what Michael said.”

“He said little more, Jack. Just that Amanda had died in the fire.”

“No more details?”

“No.”

“And you didn’t ask?” He couldn’t keep the bite out of his voice.

But his anger rolled off Damien without a problem. Thank god for friends.

“Michael wasn’t in the mood for talking. Understandable, I believe.”

“Yeah, understandable.” And a great way to avoid being questioned. “Is everyone else safe?”

“Yes. The fires are out. The attackers were quite thorough and managed to set many offices on fire, but ultimately the damage is just to decor. And ... Amanda...”

“Damien, I need you to go full Mekhet mode. What else did you see? Spare no detail.”

Damien didn't hesitate. He instantly went into painstaking detail, about his approach, about how Sándor had watched from afar, and how Isabella had been there, possibly to take advantage of the chaos and flames, and kill Michael. He talked about the fire, about the strange incendiary devices probably from Terra Den, about Gloria in the bunker, about finding some Kindred trapped by the fire that he saved, and finally about reaching Michael's office where the boss had dropped the horrible truth. Amanda was dead.

Jack didn't believe it for a fucking second. She may or may not have been dead, but he doubted she died to Garry's feint. No way in hell Garry told the fucks he sent to harass Xnomina with bullets and molotovs — or whatever crazy shit they used from Terra Den that seemed to burn so damn well — to be so aggressive they actually killed Kindred. The ones Damien saved would have probably been saved by the sprinklers. No, Garry's feint was just to make sure eyes were turned toward it while he came for an old fashioned brawl with Jack.

If Amanda was dead, Michael probably killed her, taking full advantage of the chaos so people would have to blame Garry. And if that was true, Jack was going to rip the man's head off.

“Thanks Damien.” He put away his phone, and joined Ryan and Jessy. “Shit has officially hit the fan. Garry hit Xnomina, poking the bear to draw attention. But ... Michael says Amanda's dead, died to fire.”

Everyone stared at him, Tilly included. And slowly, the Daeva's eyes went wide as she realized what had just happened to her chances of living through this night.

Ryan let out a low whistle. “Amanda dead is pretty bad. Jesus. Think we should get revenge?” He gestured down to Tilly, and her

eyes went even wider.

“Just start with how and why.” He gestured to Tilly as he looked at Ryan and Jessy.

Jessy threw up her hands again. “Ryan got it in his head that after that the scuffle, gloves were off. So—”

“So, I was following Bella as she got Kathy and Tilly out of here. But Tilly stayed behind, probably to get a peek and see what we were up to, when Garry booked it. So I thought, might as well grab her and learn what she knows.” Ryan nodded toward Jack. “You can do that, right?”

Jack shrugged. “You’re the Mekhet. Isn’t digging up secrets your deal?”

“Eh, sorta. Isn’t Damien your buddy? Auspex doesn’t let me just learn things at will. I have to point it in a direction, and it isn’t exactly forthcoming with simple, direct answers.”

That made sense. Mekhet and their ability to discover secrets were well known, but it wasn’t like they could learn anything and everything. The Danse Macabre would be borderline pointless, otherwise.

Sighing, Jack squatted down in front of Tilly, and she shivered as she looked between him, and his two undead crows perched upon his shoulders.

“Tilly,” he said.

“... Jack,” she said. Her voice trembled.

A part of him loved that, the fear in her eyes, the obvious terror that she was so close to him, Jack, the Crow Lord, the Ripper, and a bunch of other nicknames he didn’t particularly care for. But, a

larger part of him hated it. Christ, couldn't they all just get along? Why the fuck did they have to fight this old mans' war?

"Tell me, when Garry sent his goons to attack Xnomina, did he give them instructions to avoid killing?"

"Y-Yes! Yes, he did. He gave us all a debrief. I mean, much as Garry really debriefs, you know? He said he wanted a piece of either this building, or you, and the others were to piss off Michael and Xnomina. No killing."

Every word came out stammering, and Jack struggled to keep his wince hidden. He loathed this.

"She lying, Ryan?"

Ryan eyed Tilly for a moment, concentrating, before he sighed and shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Don't think so?"

"Like I said, Auspex doesn't just hand me the answers on a silver platter, man."

Sighing, Jack eyed the woman as she squirmed. A beautiful Daeva, average height and ballerina build, short red hair, and a few freckles. The type who was perfectly comfortable using that body to make herself seem weak and meek. Of course, she was a vampire, just as strong as any male her age, and the look and squirming and lip trembling, it was all an act.

Except the fear. The fear behind it all was very real.

"D-Don't, Jack. Don't, I'm not lying, I'm not—"

"I'm not going to hurt you, calm down." He reached out, and grabbed her mind, same as he had not long ago. With the necklace

on, the Ripper had no say, and the Beast wasn't a raging tide of insane strength. Breaking into her mind without shattering it was easier, and he didn't hesitate to punch through her mental barrier again, and grab hold of the little vampire hiding within.

The sound of her begging hurt. Fucking Christ it hurt. God he hated this. Julias would have hated this, too.

"Tilly," he said, staring into her eyes. His two crows cawed, like an echoing choir. "Tell me, what was Garry's plan tonight?"

"He ... wanted to take the building, or fight you, or maybe both. The other team was supposed to make sure no one interrupted us here."

"And your rules of engagement?"

"N ... no killing."

Sighing, he let go of the girl's mind, stood up, and paced the floor they'd cleared of boxes and rat corpses.

"Damn," Ryan said, "you really are good at that."

Jack managed a small smile for the man, before setting his chin in his fingers as he thought. To Dominate another vampire to the point he could ask them important information like that, should have been difficult. But Tilly was only a neonate, plus the curse made it easy, and honestly, Jack knew he could probably Dominate her without the curse. He was really, really good at it.

Tilly stared at him, half terrified, half angry, now that he'd violated her mind like that. Of course she was angry. He'd be angry too if someone took a trip into his mind against his will, the only sanctum anyone truly had. It made him sick, but holy fuck, he was really good at it.

He avoided looking at her as he paced. How to fix this, how to fix this?

Sighing, he looked at Ryan, and Ryan met his eyes. Yeah, this was also going to suck, but he had to do it.

The man didn't even see it coming. Jack grabbed his mind, and crushed his Beast under his heel.

“Ryan. Go help the others at Xnomina. Forget that you captured Tilly.”

Ryan nodded, and left.

“Holy shit!” Jessy backhanded him across the shoulder, earning a few annoyed squawks from Mulder. “Dude, what the fuck?”

“Jessy, do me a favor and go upstairs. If Hella or any of them show up, tell them to go wait on the roof.”

She eyed him, half frowning half squinting. But after a few seconds, she sighed, nodded, and left.

Leaving him alone, with Tilly.

“If ... if you hurt me, Mason will—”

Jack squatted down in front of her again, and she froze up. Scully clicked at her a few times, and Jack smiled at his friend before scratching the back of her head. All vampires knew Animalism, but it was the Gangrels and Ventrue who were naturals at it. A young Daeva like Tilly probably didn't have a clue how to communicate with animals, and seeing the two undead crows on his shoulders obviously scared her.

“Tilly. You know what I did to the werewolves when they stepped out of line. Mason was there. I beat them, broke them, tore off

limbs, and—” He stopped as the painful memory cut through his guts. Playing the bad cop was surprisingly hard, sometimes.

“That ... that wasn’t you, that was the curse. Jack the Ripper.”

Sighing, he nodded. “You’re right.”

“I am?”

“You are, mostly. This curse makes me damn powerful, Tilly, but the Ripper is a whole different beast.”

“And—”

“And you’re right, I didn’t beat up Avery and her wolves. The Ripper did.” He leaned in closer, and she winced and pulled her head back. “That doesn’t mean I couldn’t.”

She gulped.

“But I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t because, apparently, I’m the only person in this whole damn city who thinks we don’t have to settle everything with violence.”

“Um, is that a joke? You’re no pacifist!”

“Never said I was a pacifist. Hell, I’m completely against pacifism. You think something’s worth having, you better be willing to fight for it.” Groaning, he sat down on the floor, a few crates against his back, and the area cleared of rat corpses. “And what I think is worth having, is what my love thinks is worth having.”

“The Prince?”

“Mhmm. She wants everyone to get along. She genuinely thinks we could all cooperate, stop fighting, and embrace the future together. And you know what? I think it’s doable.”



Tilly eyed him, like he was a tiger behaving far too much like a friendly house cat, liable to snap and kill her the moment she let her guard down. Typical Kindred.

“Uh huh.” She didn’t believe him.

“Problem is, most of the Kindred are convinced it’s not possible, and a few of them are such monumental assholes, they’re willing to cause strife so they can take advantage.”

“Garry isn’t—”

“I didn’t say Garry. If anything, Garry’s holding back, and trying to figure something out that doesn’t involve killing everyone. Oh, he wants to kill Michael, and destroy the Invictus, but he doesn’t want to do it over the ashes of dozens of Kindred who don’t deserve it.”

She snorted and looked the other way. “You expect me to believe you like what Garry’s doing?”

“I think Garry’s not half the asshole the Invictus think he is, but he’s doing what he thinks he needs to do. With Viktor gone and Lucas gone, he’s taking full advantage, cause he’s genuinely worried for you guys. Getting Terra Den under his thumb, nudging Avery toward Maria, he did that shit because he’s a good guy trying to help his people.” He shrugged. “Sure, he’s a dumbass, and is dipping his toes into nasty shit, walking down hypocrisy lane, but his heart’s in the right place.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“That hard to believe someone out there actually thinks we can all get along?”

“Yeah, it is. And why are you telling me?”

“Because something just happened that’s going to start this fire, and if I don’t break a few rules, a lot more people are going to die.” He held up a hand, and Scully jumped onto his finger. He pet her head with the other, and she nestled into the shape of his palm and fingers, taking shelter, as he looked to Tilly. Yeap, this was a dangerous game, but if he didn’t do something, shit would get a lot worse than tonight. “You heard what I said about Amanda. Amanda Pol.”

Tilly froze, and gulped again. If she’d been Blushing Life, she’d have gone as pale as a vampire.

“Pol? Uh, black chick, kinda short and tiny? Long black hair?”

“That’s the one. A good friend of mine, actually. She helped me with personal shit on a few occasions.” Like helping him spy on his mom and sis before everything went to Hell. Slowly, he slid his fingers down the back of Scully’s head, before scratching some of her feathers, his eyes locked on Tilly. “So understand how much faith I’m putting in my lover’s hopes for this city, when I tell you I’m going to let you go.”

“Let me go? But ... but if we killed Amanda...”

“Then you’ve officially gone too far. Invictus will claim you crossed a line, and they’ll engage in war. The Prince will be put in a difficult position, because she wants to stay hands off, but she can’t just let the covenants go to war, not in the streets.”

“We never wanted the Prince to—”

“You were naive to think you could fight the Invictus, and she wouldn’t get involved eventually, Tilly. Christ, I’ve talked to her a thousand times about this. If you idiots only knew by how thin a thread you were hanging. You know in other cities, the Prince would throw up a bloodhunt against vamps for shit like this?”

Tilly glared at him and squirmed in place. “There aren’t any dragon Princes in other cities.”

“Probably not, true.” Far as he knew, other cities were almost always run by the First or Second Estate, and occasionally by Carthians; anarchist cities. For a city to be run by a witch or a dragon was almost unheard of. And it kind of made sense. The Invictus or Lancea et Sanctum would rule with the peace of the gun, and kill anyone who stepped out of line immediately. The Carthians would try ruling without a structure, and it’d fail. But dragons and witches? Dolareido was a weird city.

“So you’re ... really going to let me go?”

“Yeap.”

“Because of Avery and Mason.”

“Nope.”

“Then why? Don’t give me this peace shit.”

“Because I owe Garry.” He gave Scully a kiss on the beak. “But more so, because I want him to realize someone in this city is actually not an asshole. Because I’m trying to create peace, whether you believe me or not, and if I have to be the first one out of the trenches singing Christmas carols, so be it.”

“Trenches?”

“World War I, the Christmas Truce ... you know?”

She raised a brow. He buried his in a palm. Carthians.

“Um, then ... thanks, I guess.”

“And Tilly.”

“Y-Yes?”

He reached out, and smashed into her mind once again. “You can’t tell anyone about this, except Garry.”

Slowly, she nodded, like a zombie. The suggestion, buried in her subconscious, would overpower her consciousness. She wouldn’t be able to tell anyone except Garry, and would have trouble even thinking about why she couldn’t. Eventually she’d piece together why, but the suggestion would remain nonetheless. Jack couldn’t let this secret get out and backfire on him.

It was a game, wordless, no one allowed to outright say what they were doing. a trading of intent with Garry and only Garry. Christ, he fucking despised every moment of this. The Danse Macabre could go to Hell.

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“I can’t say I’m too happy with how the situation resolved,” Michael said.

Jack held the man’s gaze. It was the next night, and Jack had had the opportunity to heal and put on some clothes that weren’t ripped to shreds. On his shoulders sat Mulder and Scully, and they both looked around the office room curiously. This was the first time they’d ever been allowed in the building, but considering they weren’t actually crows anymore, it’d be fine. And if it wasn’t fine, well, fuck whoever told him otherwise.

“The Tanvar building remains under our control.”

Michael, sitting at the table while Jack stood at the tail of it, shook his head. “A lot of merchandise was damaged.”

“Not all that much. And considering we stopped Garry’s attempt to take the building, it was well worth the damage.”

Michael raised a brow. It wasn't smart, talking back to Michael, but Jack was out of patience with the man. Every time they met eyes, Jack held them, despite knowing damn well doing so would only make his boss angrier. Hell, he might eventually realize Jack suspected him of killing Amanda. Calm down, and tell your Ventrue half to back off.

Jack looked down.

"Ideally," Michael said, placated, "you would have killed the man."

"Garry was very powerful. He healed rapidly, and his transformations were difficult to predict. It felt like I was fighting Sándor for a while there. Only reason I survived is Jessy."

"I'd heard you had resoundingly defeated the gargoyle when you fought in his dream."

"That was the Ripper, sir." And defeat was a strong word.

Michael glared at him. "So you didn't unleash it upon Garry."

"For the most part, no."

"Even though your life was in danger."

Yeah, danger you were hoping would either lead to Ripper killing Garry, or Garry killing Jack.

Mulder and Scully cawed, and Jack clicked his tongue at each of them. Shhh.

"I understand you want me to use the curse as a tool, Mister McDonald, but that's playing with fire. I'll use it as a last resort and nothing else."

The absolute statement was enough to earn Michael's glare, but eventually the man stood up, walked over the window, and stared

down at the crowd below. People still stood around and looked at the damaged building, gathering outside the police tape that circled it.

“You’re trying my patience, Mister Terry.”

Not trying it hard enough if he was still willing to use titles.

“Sir, I understand what you’re asking for, and I understand why, but this is a personal matter. I cannot just ... use the curse like a weapon.” He’d already told his boss about all the shit he had to go through to keep it under control. He carefully avoided mentioning that the Ripper was an actual voice in his head, but he made damn sure Michael knew Jack went through Hell to keep it contained. Michael had even given him time off, and a lot of it, to get it under control, but now he wanted Jack to use it like it was a Discipline he could summon with vitae.

“And now that Miss Pol is dead?”

Now that Miss Pol is dead, I want to rip your fucking head off, take over the Invictus, and use that position to get some peace with Garry.

But, no. Much as that idea sounded appealing, Jack knew he couldn’t defeat Michael, not unless he went full psycho Ripper on his ass. One of these days, he wouldn’t be able to wrestle control of his body back from the Ripper, and that wasn’t a risk he was willing to take. Besides, even if he did unleash the Ripper, there was a chance Michael would still win. He had to do this the vampire way, the Danse Macabre way, by being a sneaky, scheming dick.

“We can force the issue a different way,” Jack said. “If we — you — call out Mister Tones for this transgression in a Primogen meeting, perhaps he’ll acknowledge he’s overstepped?”

“Perhaps. But I expect he’ll only admit to the harassment of Xnomina. A foolhardy Kindred not prepared and getting trapped in the crossfire? He won’t take credit for that.”

Of course he won’t. He knows it wouldn’t happen. No, the only reason Amanda was dead was cause Michael killed her.

“What’s the next step then, sir?”

“Our recon teams need a couple weeks to secure details, but I expect us to make a decisive strike against Terra Den. In the mean time, keep up defensive measures near the Tanvar building.”

That made sense. If Terra Den was giving the Carthians a new suite of tools to fight with, removing that advantage would make a prolonged battle harder for the anarchists. He almost expected Michael to say they were going to launch an attack on the Carthian half of South Side, and the buildings they knew many Carthians considered home. But that would likely only catch young Kindred sleeping; older Kindred slept in hideouts.

But it would come to that eventually. Now that Amanda was supposedly dead, the Invictus had no reason to hold back. In a month, Jack knew Kindred would be killing each other every chance they got.

Not if he could help it.

---

~~Eric~~

The night Jessy had come back from her tussle with the Carthians, she’d been cut up and exhausted, with some literal holes in her body. He gave her some of his blood, but apparently she’d already fed; needed a lot of blood to heal from her wounds, she said. She also went to sleep under his bed. These days, she’d sleep in his bed, trusting him — and his extra layers of blackout curtains — to

keep her protected from the sun. But from what she'd told him, the Carthians couldn't be trusted to 'play fair' anymore.

Thralls and ghouls were outside on nearby rooftops during the day, watching the building in case other thralls and ghouls decided to attack. That'd be crazy. Vampire servants attacking during the day? He had trouble imagining it.

So, while Jessy slept under his bed like a corpse, he gave Avery a call.

“Eric? The fuck you want?”

He rolled his eyes. “God, you're a bitch.”

“Yeah so I've heard. What do you want?”

“Just want to know what's going on.”

“You're dating a big time vamp, ask her.”

He raised a brow, and looked out the living room window into the sunlight. “It's—”

“I meant ask her after dusk, asshole. Or better yet, why didn't you ask her last night?”

“She doesn't like telling me everything.” She told him far more than she probably should, normally. “Probably something to do with being a Right Hand.”

Avery snorted. Just a phone call, no vid, but he could clearly imagine her annoyed expression. “Not sure what you want me to tell you.”

“A little heads up? If the Carthians and Invictus—”

“We're staying out of this, Eric.”



“Gonna be kind of hard. Isn’t Mason dating a Carthian? Isn’t Brianna dating some Invictus?”

“We’re staying out of it. Let the fucking vamps kill each other.”

He sighed. “Do you have to be such a bitch all the time? You need to get laid, Avery.”

“Hey, fuck you! I have a boyfriend.”

He almost laughed. That was a surprisingly juvenile retort, and from an older woman like her, it was hilarious, and cute.

“Uh huh.” He was tempted to dump some dating advice on her, something along the lines of ‘sex good, go have it, you cold bitch’ but decided against it. He was dumb, but not that dumb. “Any progress finding out who’s causing those tears?”

“Still got spirits wandering around, talking about Maria, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“You really still think it’s her?”

“I think she’s involved, but, maybe not directly, or even ... I don’t know, ok? A new tear has been created since Maria’s been on the mend.”

“Which proves—”

“It doesn’t prove anything, jackass. Just means there’s a chance she’s not the one making them.” More groans. “Besides, that little vamp is gonna check it out with my boys.”

“Right. Heard about that.” Tempted, so very tempted to tease her about Natasha drafting her two ‘boys’. “I’m not allowed to participate in this Carthian Invictus stuff either. Jessy says as long

as you don't help Garry, I shouldn't help the Invictus." But he had a sneaking suspicion Michael would override Jessy's order eventually.

"Makes sense, I guess."

"But I am invested in this city."

"Meaning?"

He rolled his eyes. "Meaning, if ... if shit goes sideways, I'll help, ok? I like this city. I like the people in this city. I'd like to keep them alive."

Silence, but eventually Avery let out a long, annoyed sigh.  
"Thanks."

"Holy shit, I think that's the nicest thing you—"

She hung up.

---

A week later, Tash showed up at his door.

"Hey Tash. Guys," Eric said, nodding to the vampire and her two werewolves.

"Eric," Tash said, meeting his eyes with a smile. It didn't last long. He could see it in her eyes when her composure broke, and she started squirming. Awkward.

Well, they had seen each other naked. They'd all seen each other naked and having sex, but to him, it didn't feel like a big deal. He'd seen orgies before ever meeting Jessy. That was Dolareido for you, a city of sex, Slut City, and the sooner you didn't let it bother you, the sooner you got to enjoy the good side. According to Jessy, anyway.

And sure, he could tell Jessy wanted more intimacy than her old life ever gave, more personal romance. But at the same time, he'd be

lying if he said he didn't like showing off with her, being the center of attention, and being admired. He'd been a professional fighter after all. Fucking Jessy on camera for Tash, or doing it person? He was surprised at how perfectly comfortable he was embracing his girlfriend's shamelessness.

So, Tash might have felt a bit awkward, but he didn't. Hell, even if he would have in the past, Jessy had rubbed off on him enough that an orgy with neighbors wouldn't make him blink.

He stepped back and motioned for them to come in. They did, and the boys threw themselves onto his living room couch without a word. If they felt awkward about stuff, they didn't show it. But then, they were a pair that'd — according to Jessy — been double teaming women since before Natasha. Being seen naked and fucking probably didn't mean much to them.

“Jessy ain't here,” he said.

“I know. B-But, you know I'm not here to talk to her anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess.” She wouldn't have brought the boys, otherwise.

“Jessy's busy with the Carthians,” the little woman said as she followed him into the kitchen. “But, I know the werewolves and monsters have been t-told to stay out of this fight.”

“Yeah.”

“I am kinda surprised you, um, d-didn't really commit to the Invictus by now.”

He put up hands and shook his head. “The devil pays my salary, but that don't mean I'm just gonna throw 'em my soul. If they want that, I'll need more than money.”

She smiled. “The Invictus have a lot of money.”

“S’long as I can pay my bills, I’m good. Don’t need a fancy house or a yacht.”

“Didn’t you used to be a p-p-professional fighter? And, um, kinda a big deal?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t about the money.” He shrugged as he sat on a stool, and left it at that.

Natasha nodded as she sat beside him. “I need your help.”

“Need my help?”

“Er, well, want.”

“Not sure I understand.”

“I’ve been going into the Hisil lately. You ... know about what happened with M-Matt and Art?”

He nodded. “Jessy filled me in.” He threw the two men a glance, and they looked back at him. Yeap, that was shame in their eyes. Guy shame, subtle, hidden in a cold, sad gaze. So Eric put up his hands again. “And I don’t plan on taking sides on anything, including whatever Avery’s pack is up to.” Neutrality may have been a boring hill to die on, but he already had a grave plot there and everything.

The boys managed some small smiles, but again, in typical manly fashion, the sadness was hidden in the eyes. Not sad about him, sad about Avery.

“This isn’t about that. It’s about tracking d-down whoever, whatever, is leaving these scars in the city. And I know you can help us.”

“Me? Cause I’m Uratha?”

Art raised a hand. “Well, that, and because we know you’ve been sneaking into the Hisil and being a dumbass, tracking down and killing spirits.”

Eric winced. Those spirits were a menace, spreading influence for things like hate and greed. He’d been slipping into the Hisil at some loci in the city. Finding them wasn’t that hard, once you knew what to look for, people behaving strangely and odd behavior cropping up almost unprovoked. Devil’s Corner had more than a few small ones.

“I’ve been in Dolareido my whole life,” he said, eyeing the other two wolves, “and apparently, some mystical moon bitch decided I’m gonna be a werewolf and deal with the crazy shit out there. Spirits, crazy spider hybrid monsters, whatever.” The more he talked, the less he sounded like his usual reserved self, and the more he sounded like Jessy. “So if I want to take a trip into the Shadow Realm, and do a little spring cleaning, in my town, I will.” Everyone in the room looked at him, faces hunting for more. Eventually he shrugged. “Not like I’ve been hunting big game. Not yet, anyway.”

“Eric,” Matt said. “It’s not Avery you need to be worried about, if you step over the line and fuck something up. It’s not even the Prince. It’s Black Blood.”

Eric gulped down the rising lump in his throat. For months now, he’d been avoiding Avery and going on these hunts, learning what it meant to be a werewolf in a spirit world, how to hunt and even eat spirits, and he’d killed a few spirits old enough to have names. The name ‘Black Blood’ came up frequently. So did the others, Red Tide and Street-Tail King, but Black Blood was the spirit that had the city feeling like a monarchy.

“I’m keeping my head down enough to avoid Black Blood. It’s not going to care if I deal with a few spirits that got uppity.”

Eric hadn’t run into it Black Blood yet, or any of the three warring assholes in Dolareido’s Hisil half. He planned to keep it that way.

Just like how he wasn't getting involved with the Invictus or Carthians. If the Invictus wanted his help dealing with werewolf-y things, then he'd help. But the war? No chance, not unless they put a gun to his head.

Natasha wasn't Invictus, though. If she wanted him to get involved in shit, he had every right to say no.

"You know the city, right?" Natasha asked.

"So do you."

"Yeah, b-but not like a werewolf would."

He sighed. "You want me to help you track down these tears."

The question hit her hard, and she looked down as her little hands fidgeted on the counter for a few seconds.

"Sorta. Matt and Art already know where a new one is. We scouted nearby, but it's ... it's dangerous. They w-want to inspect it, but there are red wraiths nearby, and ... and..."

"I've seen a tear before."

"Y-Yes."

"So's Jessy."

"And I'd take her! B-But, she's busy, like I said."

Which sucked. He didn't get to see her as much as he used to, and when he did, she was angry. Angry about Amanda, angry about Garry, angry about Michael, even angry about Jack and the kid's refusal to go on a killing spree on some 'punk ass Carthians'.

"Talk with the Begotten yet?"

She shook her head. “No. That’s another reason why I came to you. You, um, you know them b-better than we do.”

“Ha, do I? Azamel offered me a job. I said no.”

“Better than us,” Art said. “We tried to kill one of her pack.”

Her pack? Uratha did think of pack as family; they essentially were. And Fiona was a part of Azamel’s strange, messed up little family. Eric had trouble thinking of anyone in that context though, except maybe Jessy.

“I don’t know how much help I’ll be with Azamel.”

“And you helped rescue Sándor! From that g-g-ghost place. And you w-went through a tear to do it.”

That was true, much as he hated to admit it.

“Guess I am kinda involved. I hate that.”

Matthew laughed, and everyone raised a brow as they looked at him. “I mean, come on. You’re dating Jessy. You really think you coulda said no to her best friend? She’ll kill you. Jessy, I mean.”

That, apparently, hadn’t crossed Tash’s mind, cause she looked back to Eric with a big beaming, mischievous smile. He’d seen that smile before. That was Jessy’s smile. Damn woman rubbed off on everyone.

---

Another trip into the tunnels. Dust, dirt, concave walls of concrete, flickering old lights, ancient railroad tracks, a bygone era of technology abandoned for taxis. Fuck taxis.

He wasn’t exactly sure why Dolareido stopped using the subway; it was before his time. Maybe the way it was built just didn’t match

up with the way the city evolved. Maybe the vamps wanted to keep the tunnels empty for new vamps to live in. Probably a mix of both.

He sighed, taking a sniff. Both Art and Matt did too.

“Smell something strange,” Art said. “That blood? Smells like ... you?”

“Yeah. Athalia and I got into a tussle down here. She helped me snap out of my...”

“Kuruth.” Art said.

Eric nodded. Somehow, the gray matter in his brain understood the word, and it sent a chill down his spine. He’d never shared the word with Jessy, but it was the reason he hesitated when she wanted him to transform for sex.

“You know the B-Begotten more than I thought,” Tash said.

“I guess.”

“Kuruth,” Matt said. “It ... it’s strange.”

“How’s that?” Eric asked.

The man crouched over the tracks where Eric had fought Athalia so long ago. “You’ve felt the berserk rage in you ... once.”

“Twice. I fought Caleb and—”

Matt shook his head. “Caleb told us what happened. That wasn’t Kuruth. That was ... Kuruth-lite.”

Art choked on a laugh. “What he means, is when you’re in Gauru form, you can’t not attack something. You have to fight. Not attacking while in Gauru is like holding your breath. You can’t do it forever.” Most definitely not Eric’s experience. “And if you



completely lose control, you kill something. Doesn't matter what, doesn't matter who, something has to die. That's Kuruth. The urge to hunt consumes you. All you can smell is blood. All you can see is blood. It grabs hold of you, and ... well, you know what you did to Pitt."

Yeah, he knew. That's what it'd been like the first night he transformed. When he got into a fight with Caleb and then Michael, he'd lost control again, but it hadn't been anywhere near as bad as that first night. He'd still been in a little control, and had felt other feelings than just blood lust.

"I get those feelings," he said, "when in Gauru, but never ... never that bad, never something I can't control. I mean, yeah there's an animal drive when I'm with Jessy, but I've never wanted to attack her, when transformed."

The two men nodded.

"Last week," Art added, "Tash had us test our control. It went well. It went too well."

"Too well?"

"Yeah. It felt strange, you know? Normally if we go Gauru, we get consumed with a need for violence. What I expected to happen, was Matt and I would basically have to hold our breath, suppress the urge to fight until we couldn't anymore, and go to a different form so we wouldn't. But it didn't happen."

Matt stood up, nodding. "Something ... something in Dolareido, maybe? Something told me to stop trying to suppress the urge, and instead, just ... breathe through it."

"Not like we haven't breathed when in Gauru form before," Art said, "but here, in this city, each breath was ... unusually calming, I

guess?” He shrugged and gestured to Eric. “I’m guessing this has something to do with you.”

“Uh, not with me. But I know what you mean, yeah. Avery said I have Cahalith dreams, and ... I mean, I know my dreams have been visited by Sándor. Fucker got into them and really screwed me up.”

Art nodded. “But...”

“But, before him, something else has been in my dreams. Something ... grand, I guess. Something that really wanted to give me the impression she was the moon.” And of course, his brain auto used ‘she’, cause something in him insisted ‘it’ very much thought of itself as ‘she’. “I dunno. Just, every so often, she gets into my dreams. Not much lately, and not to say anything important when she does. But back then, she ... she thought it was imperative, I guess, that I learn to breathe through the rage. Like ... like she wanted me to get to somewhere on the other side of a river I had to swim through, or something.”

The two boys looked at each other, before smiling back at him.

“Cahalith,” they said. In unison.

“Yeah, I know, I just said that’s what I am.”

“And Clara and Avery,” Art said. “But they haven’t said anything about any sort of presence visiting them.”

“But...”

“But,” Matt said, “sometimes they do have strange dreams. Visions and stuff.”

“Ugh. I’d prefer to just be left alone. Let me do my thing. I wanna hunt some nasty spirits? Let me hunt some nasty spirits. I don’t want some moon presence visiting my head.” He didn’t feel

comfortable talking about himself this much, not with these people anyway. With Jessy, sure. But Jessy trusted Tash, and Tash trusted Matt and Art. “Can’t a guy just be left alone?”

All three of them shook their heads, and he sighed.

“Come on, we’re almost there,” Tash said, and she offered him a sympathetic smile.

She wasn’t wrong. Another twenty minutes of casual walking, and they came to the large room Azamel called hers. A concrete stage covered in furniture, with plenty of open space around it, including a railway that cut through the room along the stage; probably for carts, not actual trains.

But no Azamel. Her chair was there, and the smell of cigarette ashes was powerful, but no old woman. Mark was there, and Athalia. Sadly, no Fiona. The redhead was fun, and a hundred times easier to talk to than anyone else in her family.

“H-Hi,” Natasha said. “Um, we came to talk. B-But, where’s Azamel, or Sándor?”

Athalia, sitting in a chair on the stage with a book in her hand, shook her head, but didn’t look up from its pages. “Azamel’s in her lair, resting. And before you ask, no, she doesn’t have much time left. She’s surprised she’s lasted this long.”

“Old people can be stubborn,” Eric said. “I should know.”

Natasha looked at him, confused, but everyone else knew what he meant. Even Athalia, who’d probably had the most fucked up life of any of them, smiled. She didn’t like the vampires, or Avery’s pack, but she didn’t seem to mind him. Maybe even liked him, if the woman was capable of it.

“You’re still welcome to join us,” Athalia said. “We can’t pay you, but your old man is feeling better, isn’t he? I bet you have plenty of money saved up for him.”

“Yeah.”

“Then you can ditch the vamps and sleep in our lairs. You won’t need your gilded cage anymore.”

That was a tempting offer, a lot more than it had been, with the vamps pushing on each other hard enough to break something. Now that he had money and his dad wasn’t sitting in a hospital costing him an arm and a leg, Eric could be free of the Invictus chain around his neck, and just do his own thing.

Except, he knew that was ignoring the future. It’d only be a matter of time before the vampires got him involved in the war, one way or another.

But, he trusted Jessy. And hell, he trusted Jack to do something about the war before it ruined everything. Maybe he wouldn’t have to get his hands bloody with vampire ashes?

“I’ll pass.”

Athalia smirked. “Knew you would. Sucking at vamp tits really that good?”

It was tempting to make a crass comment about Jessy’s tits, but he just shrugged and shook his head. “They haven’t done wrong by me yet.”

“Yeah, well, just wait until Michael shows up at your door and demands your help.”

“I’ll say no.”

“That’ll be hard if your dad ends up in the hospital again, under mysterious circumstances.”

“Jessy wouldn’t let that happen, and neither would Avery.”

“Last I checked, you’re not in Avery’s pack. She won’t go to bat for you. She—”

“P-Please,” Tash said, stepping forward and putting up her hands. “Jack will do something about the war. This isn’t about that. This is about the ... mysterious threat.” She air quoted the last bit. “It was the B-Begotten who first told us about it. We’re here because we want your help.”

“Want?” Athalia said. “Sounds to me like you need our help.”

That earned a growl from Arturo. He took a step forward, and Eric didn’t have to look to know the man had shifted his weight onto the balls of his boots.

“Uh, no, want. You’re not the only things around that can jump between realms. Matt and I can handle whatever we—”

Natasha looked back at the man, and Art shut up immediately. Damn. If Jessy were here, she’d probably make a comment about the man being whipped. Well, not comment, she’d just make the whip crack sound.

“I d-don’t like to do things unprepared. After seeing blood wraiths scouting the tear, it’s obvious that something strange is going on. I’m n-not going to risk making a mistake when we don’t have to.” Nodding, she managed a small smile. “Or at least mitigate.”

“So, what, you want our help investigating the tear?”

“Yes please.”

Eric almost laughed. Natasha had grown bolder since he'd known her, but she was still a cute, tiny, soft, and quiet thing, and hearing her soft voice make some very heavy requests was funny. She wasn't asking for help moving a couch. She was asking for a Begotten to risk their lives.

Athalia groaned and shook her head. "I—"

"I'll go."

Everyone looked to the opposite tunnel as the sound of footsteps rang. A few seconds later, Sándor joined them, face its typical neutral. Eric didn't know the man very well, but the fact the guy was reserved, quiet, and stereotypically stoic told Eric enough. Sándor was not the sort of man you wanted to fuck with. What was that line? Beware the fury of a patient man?

"Sándor," Athalia said as she got up and hopped down off the stage. "You don't have to. Azamel dumped this problem on their laps for a reason."

"Azamel will be dead soon."

"And—"

"And I am not Azamel." The man slowly shook his head as he stepped up beside Athalia, touched her on the shoulder once, and smiled. A tiny smile, like it was something he struggled to do. She frowned, looking away, and Sándor's smile faded, before he walked past her. He spared a glance for Mark too, but Mark — the damn man smelled like rot and death — shrugged, indifferent.

"You'll help us?" Tash asked.

"Yes."

"Um, n-not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but ... why?"

“Because there’s something here worth defending.”

“Here?”

“Dolareido.” He nodded toward Eric. “The Uratha must have felt it by now. There’s ... something going on, in this city, something more than just these tears. Something ... good.”

Maybe he was talking about Luna. Maybe it was something else. Whatever it was, the man wasn’t wrong, but it was a damn hard thing to notice when vampires were triggering wars around them, and everyone was convinced the tears popping up around the city were sinister in nature.

The three werewolves nodded, earning a confused glance from Natasha.

“I d-don’t know about that,” she said. “But ... b-but if there is something happening, I suppose vampires probably wouldn’t notice, would they?”

The werewolves shrugged, but Sándor managed a small nod.

“Probably not. Except, maybe, the Circle.”

Natasha looked down and squirmed. Talk of the Circle always made vamps nervous, even more than talking about the Ordo Dracul. Much as vampires thought the dragons were creepy in a Frankenstein kinda way, weird scientists doing crazy shit, it was the Circle of the Crone that seemed to really make vamps anxious. Witches, warlocks, blood magic, insane stuff any normal vamp avoided.

Maybe Eric should take a trip to visit them? Talk to Triss or something, and see if they knew anything about the weird entity that sometimes talked to Eric in his dreams.

“W-When would you be ready, to um, come help?”

“Now.”

---

~~Natasha~~

She knew Sándor could take them into his lair, and then take them into the Shadow Realm through one of his tunnels, but they decided to let the werewolves take them. Matt and Art insisted. The Shadow Realm was their territory, and they didn't have any delusions about the boldness of that claim.

As much as the werewolves were unique for their strange ability to hop between the physical and spirit realm, the nightmare monsters could go anywhere. Absolutely anywhere! She shivered as cold memories ran through her mind, of the strange things she had seen whenever the Begotten or Black Blood were involved. Sure, she'd seen some strange things when she dealt with the Uratha, but it was whenever the monsters or that crazy spirit were involved that things got bizarre, and terrifying. Cosmically terrifying.

Sometimes, she wished she could go back to when she thought the only things out there were vampires, and maybe some other paranormal creatures like werewolves. Even spirits and ghosts weren't all that weird, compared to Black Blood — Jack insisted it wasn't a true spirit — and the other things she'd seen in the ... the ... cracks of the universe, or however one could think of it. No more of that, please k thanks bye.

They walked Devil's Corner. No need for Cloak of Night to keep them hidden, they weren't doing anything any vampires would care about. And they wouldn't be bothered by people on the street, not with four fit guys walking with Tash. Of course, sometimes she kinda liked it when kine tried to push her around, so she could push them back; a guilty pleasure for any vampire.



“Natasha.”

Natasha almost jumped. Sándor’s voice. He’d come closer to her as they walked, and had started walking beside her without her noticing. Sure, she’d been lost in thought, like usual, but the man could be damn sneaky when he wanted to be, evidently.

“Y-Yes?” She scanned around, doing a quick check for the boys. Matt and Art followed behind, eyes on Sándor, and Eric led ahead.

“I wanted to talk about Beatrice.”

“Oh. Um ... I’m n-not sure what I can tell you. Triss and I don’t talk a lot.”

“No, but you knew Julias well.”

“Oh ... oh.” She rubbed an arm as she looked down. This was going to be a painful conversation, for the both of them. “Sure you d ... d-don’t want to ask her about him?”

“I did.”

Of course he did. The man’s attitude could break down a concrete wall if he put some force behind it.

“Then I’m not sure w-what I could say.”

“I’m worried about Beatrice.”

“We ... we all are. We know she’s d-doing something, something witchy, and ... yeah.” No one talked about it, but they all knew she was probably trying to resurrect Julias. Everyone conveniently pretended to not know that.

“I know what she’s doing.”

“You d-do?”

“Yes, but it’s private. That’s not what I want to talk about.”

Ok, apparently Sándor knew more about this than she did.

“Then I’m not sure w-what I can tell you.”

“You knew Julias well.”

“I did.”

“Better than Beatrice.”

“I ... d-don’t know about that. I never dated Julias.”

“But you were friends for decades. You worked together.”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Tell me about him, if you can.” Sándor looked down to her, and met her eyes for a few seconds. Such a solid, heavy gaze. He knew he was asking her to talk about a dead friend, someone she’d known for many years. Someone he’d killed.

She took a deep, useless breath, and began.

“Julias was ... an enigma. He w-wasn’t anything like Viktor.” Though now that she thought about it, Jack wasn’t anything like Julias either. And Viktor wasn’t anything like Elaine.

“Triss told me he was ... emo.”

Natasha choked on a laugh, and smiled up at the man. “Kinda, y-yeah. Did she tell you a lot about him?”

“Not a lot, but some. But I ... felt I should get a different perspective, if I’m going to make a decision.”

“D-Decision?”

He shook his head. “It’s personal. I hope that isn’t a problem.”

“No, I guess n-not.” At this point, she trusted Sándor, at least a little. And if the man was getting involved with Triss, it was probably to help her. She knew he’d lost his family to the hunters, so if anyone could understand Triss’s pain, it was Sándor. “Julias was smooth. Suave. He could have the whole room kinda ... w-watching him, like he was a celebrity. I knew he d-didn’t really like that. Or rather, he didn’t like that he liked it.”

A pause indicated she was offering Sándor a spot to jump in with comment. He didn’t. Listening did seem to be his superpower.

“He ... was sad, about becoming a vampire. He was sad he t-took to it so well, too. As he got older, he started t-to envy kine, just as his hate for vampires grew.” She expected Sándor to chime in with that, but he didn’t. He did glance at her, though, eyebrow raised. “He d ... d-didn’t want to be part of the Danse Macabre, but he was really good at it. So he kept getting deeper into it, and ... eventually replaced his sire on the council. He didn’t want to, but he knew he could do the best good for D-Dolareido there.

“As for him and Beatrice, she was uh ... sorta his opposite. Nosferatu either get super sad, or super angry, b-because of their deformities. She got super angry. She and Julias, when they finally spoke to each other, they kinda ... got along, you know? In a way m-most people don’t. He really helped her learn how to ... to think about things. How to not be angry all the time. And she helped bring a sp-p-park back into his life.” That sounded horribly cheesy, and stupidly poetic. Beatrice would hate it. Julias would li ... would have liked it. “He was the sad, lonely billionaire. She was the firecracker p-punk that taught him to smile again.”

Sándor laughed. Good, cause she was going for a joke. It was a short laugh though, two seconds at most, but his hard face kept a subtle smile for a few seconds more.

“And then Angela killed him,” he said. The smile stayed, but it was a sad smile, the sort someone wore when they were empathizing with someone, with a pain they knew all too well. But at least he didn’t say ‘and then I killed him’. That would have been very ... well, a very Julias thing to say. And from what little she knew of Sándor, it was something he would have said, months ago.

Time changed everyone, she supposed. So did Dolareido, evidently.

“He ... t-t-taught her that she didn’t have to hate everyone, or herself. But now he’s gone.” Tash glanced back at her boys, shivered, and looked back to Sándor. “If it wasn’t for Jennifer, she’d p-probably be right back to hating everyone and everything. And if it wasn’t for J-J-Jacob, she’d...”

“Not be pursuing the dark arts.”

The dark arts. To everyone else, it was magic, or blood magic, or witchy witch stuff. Sándor really was very, very old.

“I’m really n-not the best to talk to about this. Julias t-talked to me and Jessy about his relationship, but not a lot. He p-probably talked to Jack more.”

“Jack.” Sándor sighed softly, noise lost to the quiet, menacing nightlife of Devil’s Corner. “The two people I should talk to about this, are the last two people I want to talk to.”

“Are you worried about Triss? I mean, on a ... p-personal level?”

“ ... yes.”

Why the hesitation? His face went back to its usual stone cold visage, but for a second, there’d been something close to concern.

“D-Don’t you have enough on your plate, with your new Begotten friends?”

“I suppose.”

“But, if it’s Triss you’re worried about, and the sort of stuff she’s up to, b-because of Jacob, then you might want to talk to the Prince, or even Elaine. They know Jacob better than any of us.”

“That is a good idea. Thank you.”

They walked in silence for a little while after that. Sándor obviously had something in mind, something that involved Triss. For a second, she thought maybe he wanted to sleep with her, considering Jennifer had dragged him around with them during the last ball, and both women had been dressed to kill that night. But if that were true, he wouldn’t need to do anything other than let her drag him back to her den. Not true, then. Maybe Sándor wanted to be Triss’s friend?

That would be difficult. It was obvious that Sándor preferred to perch on the sidelines, like a quiet gargoyle, and not get directly involved. But he was getting involved anyway. Compelled by circumstance, maybe? Either way, he’d have more trouble making friends than even Natasha did, let alone with someone as damaged as Beatrice. But, then again, stories had been circulating about how comfy the Circle were with each other. Maybe Beatrice had become easier to talk with.

Her mind shifted back onto task. Natasha looked around at the people smoking on the sidewalks and street corners, at the convenience stores with bars on the windows, at the cars with peeled paint and dented bumpers, and at the prostitutes with crows feet making zero attempt to disguise what they were up to. This was the place Eric wanted to fix, and she couldn’t blame him.

She smiled at the man's back as he scanned the streets, same as her. To Kindred, kine should be left to their own devices, and Kindred would blend in, wolves among sheep. The Invictus got a little more involved, and tried to rule with money. The Lancea et Sanctum got a little more involved, and tried to rule with religion dogma. The Carthians got a little more involved, and tried to sew anarchy, and other 'fight the machine' philosophies they were devoted to, no matter how shortsighted. None of them were like Eric, a man who had no views, no agenda, nothing. He just wanted to give a little back to the world he grew up in.

That was how Natasha knew he'd help. The vampires were all selfish, paranoid things. The nightmare monsters had their own world, and the werewolf pack had a creed they followed. Eric, on the other hand, was a Dolareido man through and through, and he really just wanted to help. That talk about Jessy being her friend, and Eric having to help her because of it, was just pretense. He'd have helped regardless.

It was almost, as Antoinette would say, drôle. With anyone else, she'd have to find a way to manipulate them, make a deal, convince them, all that nonsense she knew she was just as reliant on. If someone showed up at her door and told her people might die if she didn't help, she knew it wouldn't be her first reaction to leap to her feet and lend a hand. The Beast in her told her to be more cautious, to worry about herself first. The werewolves weren't like that, especially Eric.

She stepped up beside him. "How're you d-doing?"

"We're about to take a trip into a dangerous world, to investigate something we've all been stumbling around blind about for how many months now? Years? I'm pretty nervous."

She raised a brow. He didn't look nervous.

“You’ve b-been ... sneaking into the Hisil for a while now, haven’t you?”

“You could say that.”

“Killed Needle Swords yet?”

He looked down at her, frowning. She’d hit a nerve.

“No.”

“Oh. Um, m-maybe we can ... can help?”

“Avery’s made it clear that—” He stopped as he noticed her smiling.

“Matt and Art are ... m-my uh, slaves? Um, no, that’s too harsh. Indentured assistants, until the tears issue is resolved.” She tapped her fingertips together, very evil like. “If you help me, I’m n-not against helping you.”

“That,” he said, “is pretty damn manipulative of you.”

“True.” It was a very vampire way of doing things. A very Antoinette way of doing things. In truth, she couldn’t force the boys to do something that didn’t strictly deal with the tears. But they already wanted to kill Needle Swords, and this would be an excuse for Matt and Art to do it. Using them as ‘slaves’ to deal with Needle Swords was pretense. Pretense pretense always with the pretense.

“I was gonna help you anyway, though.”

“I know, b-but ... but I’d prefer we trade. Call it a Kindred reflex,” she said. He laughed, and it was her turn to raise a brow. “W-What’s so funny?”

“It’s not only a Kindred reflex.”

“Oh?”

“Spirits only deal in trades, too.”

---

~~Jack~~

Mulder and Scully sat on a curtain rod, cawed a few times, and fell silent as Jack sat with his girlfriend.

For the first time, ever, Jack told Antoinette about what the Invictus were up to. He left out key details, like Michael’s plan to eventually attack Terra Den, but he told her about the Tanvar building, Michael’s goals for the curse, everything Garry said, Xnomina, and Amanda’s death.

“You think McDonald has killed Amanda?” Antoinette said, gesturing at the air in front of them. They both sat on a couch deep in his mansion in one of the random rooms, a room of red curtains and red furniture. Luxurious, and pointless.

“Yeah. Or, I dunno, staked her and locked her up somewhere.” He groaned and shook his head. “Fat chance. I’m sure Michael would kill one of his own if it meant getting to have his war. And it’s working. Gloria’s majorly fucked up, and a lot of Kindred are already getting ready for a proper war. People liked Amanda.” Like him.

“There is always the chance he is not lying.”

“Yeah, maybe, but I saw the look in his eyes, you know? He was ... cold.” The memory sent lava through his veins. “Wanted to fucking kill him right there.”

“My dear, when is the last time you fed?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been—”



“Summon Veronica, would you? Feed, and then speak.” If he didn’t know any better, he’d think she was suggesting he eat a banana cause his blood sugar was low.

Sighing, he pulled out his phone and sent a summons Veronica’s way. A ‘summons’, not a text or call, cause apparently there was an app for that. A knock came at the door a minute later.

“Come in, dear,” Antoinette said.

Veronica stepped in, and bowed to Antoinette and Jack. “My Prince. Master.”

“Sit.” Antoinette slid aside, and motioned for her to sit between them.

Oh poor Veronica. Jack almost laughed as he watched the girl squirm as she approached. Jack was in a suit, as was Antoinette, while Veronica wore a simple maid’s uniform, a button shirt and skirt with the black and white patterns of the Victorian maid outfits. A gift from Antoinette. The button shirt had a lot more cleavage than strictly necessary, and Jack knew it was a combination of the shirt’s design, but also Veronica actively putting her cleavage on display. She wanted Jack to notice.

Of course, the fact Antoinette was there, made Veronica nervous enough to rub her hands together and avoid eye contact with her. Veronica loved to try and grab his eye, and Antoinette knew it, and she knew Antoinette knew it, and so on. Naturally, Veronica was terrified of the five hundred-year-old vampire, but Antoinette thought the girl and her futile attempts to seduce him were charming and delightful. The woman didn’t have a jealous bone in her body, not when it came to sex.

Jack opened his mouth to ask Veronica if it was ok to take a drink. He stopped himself. That wasn’t very master like. It also wasn’t what pleased his thrall. She was happier if he took from her,

imposed upon her, held her down and gave her no other option. She was happier when he got possessive, and treated her like she belonged to him.

And he kinda liked doing that.

Once Veronica was comfy between them, he turned on the hilariously fancy couch, leaned in, and set his fangs to her throat. He couldn't see much, face turned toward the couch and buried in her neck, but Veronica's noises announced she was overjoyed at the sudden Kiss.

"My dear," Antoinette said. "May I suggest pulling on the thrall's hair?"

He raised a brow, but did as suggested. Between quiet sucking sounds, his closer arm reached up, netted fingers into Veronica's blue hair, grabbed a large handful, and gently tilted her head back to expose more of her neck. The reaction was immediate, and Veronica moaned openly as she quivered.

Whenever he got rough with Veronica, she loved it. He could smell the arousal on her. At first it made him a little uncomfortable, but every time he did something like grab her hair, choke her, spank her, the results were immediate and impressive. Yeah, he could get used to this.

But, now was not the time for sex. He finished taking of her, and he took deep. Veronica mewled and whimpered all the way down into a post-Kiss coma.

"Feel better, my love?"

He broke away from Veronica, and she slumped against his shoulder, out like a light. Her blood pulsed through him, and he smiled down at her before looking up to Antoinette.

“It’s easy to forget I have a thrall now. That I can just ... order her to come, and I can drink. No hunting involved, no borrowing from you. Nothing.”

“The joys of being a powerful vampire.”

“The curse’s power.” He winced, stood up, set the unconscious Veronica down on a couch chair, and held out a hand to Antoinette. She took it.

“Perhaps. If ... when the curse’s power is gone, you will rise to natural power quite quickly, Jack, be rest assured.” Standing, she leaned down, kissed him, and the two set out for the lobby.

Would he? How much of his power was because of Julias’s blood, versus the curse itself, versus his own natural talent? He managed a slow nod, and Mulder and Scully flew down to his shoulders as they stepped out into the lobby, with its grand door and grander stairway.

“Your birds,” she said, “you are content with them?”

“What do you mean?”

“While done rarely in Dolareido, raising pets as undead is often a process not unlike grooming a potential childe. But your two crows are visibly damaged, and forever will be.”

He shrugged and shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. They’re my friends, and I wasn’t going to let them die.” She smiled down at him, and kissed him again. A proper, long kiss, and he blinked at her semi-closed eyes as she indulged. “Uh...”

“Many older Kindred would abandon these two, and find crows undamaged to become their undead familiars.” Ah, she was happy he was showing compassion.

“I guess.”

Familiars. The word made him smile. If Julias were still alive, he'd probably make a joke, like 'yer a wizard, Harry' or something.

"These two may draw attention from kine."

"I thought about that. But, they don't look too bad, right?" He nudged his head toward Mulder. "His neck looks a little crooked, that's all. No one'll be able to tell there's something wrong unless they touch him." He nudged Scully next. "And Scully's wing looks broken, but lots of birds have broken wings and stuff." He'd already taken a stab at fixing it so it looked more natural, and it did, with no more point sticking straight out of it. But it was still definitely broken, like Mulder's neck. Anyone who touched them, or watched them for a minute, would quickly figure that out.

"I do not disagree, but be wary. If they violate the Masquerade, it will be on your head, my love."

He gulped. That wasn't a warning from his girlfriend, that was a threat from the Prince.

"Understood."

"And while I am glad you have told me what you have, it may be ... prudent, that you do not tell me more. Our relationship puts a strain on your position with the Invictus as is. If McDonald discovers you shared delicate information with me, the consequences would again, be on your head."

"I haven't told you anything you can't figure out on your own."

"That is a dangerous game to play."

"I know."

"But, you are also correct. I have eyes and ears everywhere. I know, for example, that Tilly escaped the Tanvar building, only to be

re-acquired? I suspect whoever caught her the second time disguised the act with Obfuscate, but she left the building a second time, and that, the eyes and ears I have within my city, did witness.”

God damn. She really did have eyes and ears everywhere.

“I ... let her go. I got a phone call from Damien, telling me about Amanda, but then Ryan brought in Tilly, and I let her go.”

“Why?”

“Because if there’s going to be any peace in this damn city, someone has to make an act of good faith, right?” Even if it backfired and got people killed, it was better than just letting everything build in the pressure cooker until it exploded.

“Master.” Mulder said. “Master. Nice.”

“Smart.” Scully said, nodding.

Jack smiled at his two friends. “I uh, didn’t expect Mulder and Scully to get smarter, when I brought them back.”

“A gift from your blood. They may now serve you as proper agents, instead of animals drawn by instinct and only the barest wisps of intellect.”

“As long as I keep feeding them my blood.”

“Indeed. It has been ages since I have owned undead familiars.”

“You had your own?”

“Oui. Cats.”

A vampire lady with immortal cats. Too funny. He laughed, and she smiled.

“Though it may interest you to know Elaine has a great experience with familiars. When I first met her, ages past, wolves followed her.”

“She mentioned that. I figured she meant living wolves.”

“She did. But several were undead, risen by her hand, and they served her faithfully.”

“Did ... something happen to them?”

Antoinette sighed, and opened the front door. “The details are lost to me. The details will likely be lost to her as well, but it would do you well to talk to her of them nonetheless. If only so she may teach you what it is like to own familiars.”

He joined her at the door, and they shared another kiss, before she slipped into the car waiting for her. Leaving him alone in his mansion, with a real shitty to-do list to burn through.

His phone rang, and he answered it. “Damien.”

“Jack, I wanted to talk with you.”

“For the love of god, please tell me nothing else has happened.”

“No. I wanted to speak with you about Elaine.”

“You mean what Auspex showed you? Dude, I have no doubt Elaine paid Isabella a visit, and put the idea in her head to kill Michael if the opportunity presented itself.”

“And you still trust her?”

“Kinda, yeah?” It was hard to gauge Elaine, with everything that’d happened. “I was just going to talk with her now, actually, about familiars.”

“I don’t trust her.”

“Good. If we all trusted her, that’d probably be a bad thing.” It also meant the one-on-one conversation he was about to have with her would, as always, be that strange balance of ‘trust her don’t trust her’ that drove him up the fucking wall.

Why couldn’t people just get along?

## Chapter 143

~~Jack~~

“So you let Tilly go?” Elaine asked, chuckling as she stepped in past the door.

They were in his mansion, and Mulder and Scully sat on his shoulders, eying the much, much older vampire. Idly, Jack noticed that neither of the birds crapped anymore. They’d always been smart enough to not do that in the mansion, but apparently it wouldn’t have mattered anyway.

“How do you know that?”

“Do you think I came to this city alone? I have eyes and ears everywhere.”

He eyed her. She laughed. There was some truth in her statement, sure, but a lot of lie, too. Maybe Antoinette told her. Maybe not. Elders be doing elder things.

“You’re probably wondering why I called you.”

She shrugged as she stepped past him, and slowly started up the stairs. “It’s been a week since your fight with Garry. I assume you want to talk about that fight, and the curse.”

He followed her up the stairs, eying her as she picked a seemingly random direction. This was the first time she’d been in his mansion without Antoinette, since the Prince was usually with her, especially when Jack was involved. But ever since the Avery incident over two months ago, Antoinette had been willing to take her eyes off him, even if Elaine was around. Kinda weird, considering how badly that incident had gone, but then again, no one had died. Plus, with



Elaine's necklace, his Beast was quiet and the curse easily suppressed.

And, for some damn reason, Antoinette trusted Elaine, a lot, more than she should. And Jack trusted Antoinette.

"Yes and no. I also wanted to talk about Mulder and Scully."

"The crows?" She paused, glancing back at him, before she swung open a double door, and walked in.

"Yes, the cro—could you stop walking around randomly opening doors? This is my home, you know."

"This was my childe's home," she said, and he had to follow her into the room to hear her properly. "Your successes are his, and his are mine."

"Isn't that the exact opposite of how a parent child relationship is supposed to work? Kids inherit from their parents, not the other way around."

"Indeed, but it is how sire and childe relationships work. Or did you think Kindred embraced kine in some biological need to reproduce? Of course not. Kindred spread the disease of vampirism for many reasons, but above all, subconscious or not, they do it because childer are terribly useful tools."

He frowned, but it faded as Elaine walked around the large room. This one had a big window overlooking the backyard, its huge lawn and its statues. It was a long room, with several long tables side to side, running its length, and several unlit candles on the table in fancy candle holders. Equally fancy, ridiculous lighting fixtures lined the walls, decorated by gorgeous red curtains. The chairs and their red cushions looked uncomfortable, but beautiful nonetheless, complete with gold trim.

No way would Viktor have used this room for actual dining. Dude was a vampire. No, but he probably had kine in here, tied to the table, to be shared with other Kindred in a feast. So, dining, sorta. And considering the dude's tastes, those kine probably didn't always live.

Christ, it was easy to forget sometimes that a lot of people had probably died in this mansion, not just in the dungeon beneath it. Which sent a new kind of chill up Jack's spine. Sabrina, Viktor's ghoul, might pay him a visit some time, and if she was going to come at him from anywhere, here seemed a likely place.

"Which first then?" she asked. "Your pets or your engagement with the Gangrel?" Without so much as a glance his way, she sat down at the head of the table, and folded one leg over the other as she set her hands on her lap. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was looking at Antoinette, with the half playful half serious expression on her face.

"Mulder and Scully. And ... isn't their a better word than pets? I never really thought of them as pets." He sat down at the table corner next to her. For a second he was tempted to sit at the other end of the table, like that scene out of Tim Burton's Batman. But he was no Michael Keaton.

"Attendants or agents then. Or, as some vampires with a love for the classics prefer, familiars." She smiled, expression softening. Apparently she'd liked what he said about the word pets. "What would you like to know?"

"I know I have to feed them my vitae now, and their wounds at death are permanent." He vaguely gestured to his stomach, where the sealed stab wounds Rebecca had left him would forever remain. "That right?"

"Indeed."

“And they seem to sleep all day now, and are up all night. From dusk to dawn, to the dot, just like a vampire. That normal?”

“Mhmm.”

Mulder hopped down onto the table, flapped his wings a few times, and tilted his head to look up at Elaine, making his broken neck bend in a disturbing way. Scully hopped down beside him, but stayed by Jack’s hand, looking up at him instead.

“Jack.”

“Jack.”

“Mother?” Mulder said, and he gestured to Elaine with a forward head tilt, and a quiet wing flutter.

“She’s my great grandsire,” he said. He’d already told them this, but now that some intelligence had awoken inside his familiars, maybe it was time to reiterate some important facts. “Samantha is my mother. You remember Samantha, right?”

Both birds nodded. It was infinitely easier to communicate with them now, to share complex ideas, and even get their feedback on things. They were still birds, though. They thought like birds, and framed things like birds, but there was no question they were scary smart now. Familiars, yeah.

“Anything else I should know about them?”

“They are quite resilient, now that they are undead creatures. They are half vampires, in a way.”

“Sunlight—”

“Is of no danger to them. They are undead, and they are given fake life by the power of your vitae, but they are not vampires

themselves. It is only the damned who must flee fire and sun.”

Oh what fun it was, having banes now. Fire and sunlight, two of the most damn common things on the planet, only beat by water and air.

“You ... had wolf familiars?” Time to take a trip down memory lane, hers, and hope he could dig up something useful.

Her eyes grew sharp, but she kept her hands on her lap as she juggled the question in her mind. “I did.”

“Wanna tell me about them?”

“No.”

“Because...?”

“Because losing them was painful. My life back then is a blur, but I can remember the touch of their fur, the strength of their bodies, the undying friendship. I can ... I can remember enough, to still feel pain when I think of them.”

That was a better response than he could have hoped for. He smiled at her, earning a raised brow from the elder, but her expression softened as he scratched the back of each of his familiars’ heads.

“That’s good.”

“Good?”

“Yeah. Means you got some humanity left in you.” And considering the warning Black Blood had given him about Elaine, he’d been worried she didn’t. The fuck did she do to get rid of her curse, if her sire had had to commit diablerie to get it? Bathe in the blood of a thousand innocents? Or maybe repeat the ritual, drain a

vampire dry, supposedly devouring their very soul, and offer their ashes as a sign of ... what?

Doing the ritual a second time didn't seem likely, but that didn't mean she didn't have to do something equally as fucked up, to get rid of the curse.

“Did you believe I was a draugr?”

“No, but Viktor wasn't a draugr, and I bet my grandsire didn't have enough humanity to fill a thimble.”

“But your sire had plenty, enough that it slowed his—”

Jack put up a hand. No way was he going to let Elaine talk bad about Julias.

“I get it. Some traits are passed on from sire to childe, but a lot aren't.”

“Precisely. I know Viktor did not care for familiars, for example, or animals at all. Did my grandchilde?”

“Julias didn't do pets, or familiars.” Sure, he summoned rats every so often, and possessed them with Dominate, too, but he didn't really care for animals much. Jack, on the other hand, had always wanted a dog. His parents wouldn't let him, for the usual reasons.

“They will serve you well,” she said. “Better than you know. You may communicate with them from vast distances as well.”

“Wait, really?”

“Mhmm. Your connection to them no longer requires them to be near.”

“Holy shit.”

“I am surprised that you are surprised. Did my grandchilde not explain?”

“Julias didn’t exactly have decades to train me. And ... my second life got pretty damn busy pretty much the same night I was sired.”

“Ah yes, that is true. A kill on your very first night.”

He winced. “I try to not think about her.” Pavala.

“You are soft.”

“You think? Cause I look at a cold bitch like you, and sure, you’re hard, but I’m not impressed. Soft things can bend and get back up, unlike you. But if I hit you in the right spot, and you’d shatter.” For some reason, he just blurted out his thoughts, and his thoughts wanted to come out swinging.

If he offended her, she didn’t show it. Her smile grew, and she licked a fang.

“The Ventrue in you grows.”

“Yeah, I guess it does.”

“But you are soft, regardless. You remind me of Ann, convinced you can find peaceful solutions others have used force to solve for thousands of years.”

“If you think Antoinette is soft, too, then I’m happy to be soft.”

“I knew you would be. But if you did as I would do, Garry would be dead, and so would any Carthians that challenged you. You could have ended this war swiftly and minimized damage. The Invictus could expand without issue, and power would pour into your hands.”

Of course the conversation drifted in this direction. It surprised him, but it shouldn't have. She was his great grandsire, and had a right to give him a bit of that 'disappointed mother' attitude. No wonder Mulder and Scully said what they did.

"Dooming everything to a shitty cycle that people have been doing since they were smart enough to form hierarchies? No thanks. The Carthians would eventually reform, and a bunch of Invictus would probably defect to join them, if I turned into a tyrant and just forced my will on them."

She laughed, loudly at that, and both birds hopped away from the sudden burst of sound.

"You and Ann, my word. Romanticists."

"Thanks, I guess."

"How did your battle with Garry go, then? Is he as romantic as you?"

"He ... isn't. But he's not the soulless asshole Viktor or Tony or Lucas were. I don't want to kill him."

"Bold of you to assume you can."

Jack winced and looked down. Ventrue hubris was a pain in the ass.

"The battle got pretty fucking bad, but I barely used the Ripper at all, just for a minute. Didn't even let him out."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. For a second there, when Garry hurt my friends," he gestured down at his two familiars, "I lost it. Only one thing on my

mind for that split second: make Garry suffer. That ... that overwhelming hate, you know? Like, not natural hate.”

“How do you know it was not natural?”

Of course she'd ask that, because she, like most elders, probably thought everyone was capable of extreme hate, down to the bones. And sure, Jack didn't necessarily disagree with her, but it wasn't nearly as common as she probably thought. If Maria and Athalia didn't hate Jack as much as everyone thought they should, then crazy, insane, inhuman hate and rage weren't the, as Antoinette would probably say, pervasive 'raison d'être', that Elaine thought they were.

“Because I was practically foaming at the mouth for a moment there. And for that moment, I had the power of the curse, the full power, the shit that ... thing, brings to the table. I mean, seeing Mulder and Scully get hurt like that”—he made sure to scratch the back of their heads lovingly—”brought anger out of me, and that was me, all me. But something else came with it, hate and excited rage that ... that was the curse, I know it. And the power that came with it, was his.”

Elaine raised a hand and tapped a finger to her chin in the same way Antoinette sometimes did. “Memories dance along the edges of my mind, my childe. I am sorry I cannot remember the details, but ... but I do remember the rage and hate, and the power that came with them. I remember how much it infected me, as well.”

“It was like that for me, when the curse was bound. When I freed it, all that fucked up shit manifested as its own personality.” He fiddled with his necklace. “I'm guessing there's an emotional connection. Hate and rage, that obscene fury and almost perverse ... joy, summoning that feeling from the curse was the same as summoning its power. Which is how the Ripper manages to use the power so freely, I guess.”



“Emotion. Yes, I suppose that makes sense. The Strix are fueled by such reckless, all-consuming hate.”

“That help with your research? I still want this curse gone.”

“It does help, yes. There are old ideas, fictions about vampires being possessed with pure rage.”

“But, not fiction?”

She nodded. “Perhaps not. There were rituals performed, superstitious things, absurdly archaic and unscientific, but something for me to start with.”

“Thanks.”

Her next smile was borderline sinister. “Is that the only reason you summoned me here?”

As expected, the damn woman saw through his words easily.

“No. I wanted to talk about Isabella.”

Elaine rolled her eyes and leaned back in the chair. It was a dining chair, couldn't lean back very far, but she managed.

“Must we?”

“Yeah, we must. I'm talking to you now as a Right Hand of the Invictus, not your great grandchilde, and this Right Hand isn't happy that you've been sowing dissent in our ranks.”

“Sewing dissent. Quite the word choice.”

“Yeah well, I'm in official mode.”

“What fun.”

“Spill it, Elaine. Why’re you fucking with the Invictus?”

Slowly, she unfolded her legs, leaned forward, and set her hands and elbows on the table as she smiled at him. “If all it takes is a gentle nudge to topple your empire, does it deserve to exist?”

“Oh god, is this some existential crap?” He sat back away from her, and Mulder and Scully hopped up onto his shoulders immediately. “You here to fuck with Doleirido because you’re an agent of chaos?”

“Hardly. I am not Jacob.”

Jack winced. Knowing Elaine thought of Jacob basically the same way Jack did was not a good thing.

“Seriously, why did you talk to Isabella?”

“Oh, many reasons. I dislike Michael. I like Isabella. The Gangrel is a barking mongrel liable to burn this city down with his obsessions. Isabella wants quiet. Isabella wants nothing more than to pursue her passion, and she knows the Invictus and Carthians are only barriers to that goal.” The elder shrugged. “I was planting a seed. It is how elders operate, after all, young Kindred. Plant seeds, sometimes tiny things, and wait for them to grow. And we can wait a long time, my childe.”

“You make it really hard to trust you, you know that?”

“Is that something you desired? To trust me?”

“Yes! Of course I want to trust you.”

“Learn to guard your back, Terry. You—”

“It’s not about that!” He almost slapped the table, but stopped himself at the last moment. Neither Scully nor Mulder so much as

reacted to the sudden movement though, a nasty reminder they weren't really crows anymore. Half bird, half something else.

Elaine blinked at him, confused. "Is it not?"

"No, it's not. You and Antoinette might be comfortable half-suspecting even your good friends, but I'm not. Maybe it's cause I'm only a few years embraced, but fuck me, the idea of living centuries not being able to fully trust even my best friend? Damien and me, we trust each other with our lives. More than that, we trust each other with secrets, the personal kind. We trust each other with everything. The idea of ... of not being able to do that in a century? Just because life wears us down, breaks us, makes us paranoid? Fuck that."

During the rant, Elaine's eyes remained on his, still confused. It was like he was speaking another language.

"I admit, I struggle to think in those terms."

"Yeah, I get that. You're like, five centuries old? I can only imagine the amount of people who've tried to backstab you. Some you probably knew for a long fucking time. But it doesn't have to be that way. Antoinette doesn't think so, and I don't think so."

"You two. At a glance, you do not fit at all. But the more I hear you talk, the more I believe your relationship will survive for a long, long time."

"Thanks."

"But not for eternity."

He rolled his eyes. It was true, of course. If him and Antoinette were still alive in a hundred thousand years, would they still be together? Probably not. But he'd cherish every moment they were.

“And when we’re not together? Will you stab me in the back then?”

She tapped her chin, thinking about it. She thought hard, too. It wasn’t a hard question, Jack thought. She’d either say no because she liked him, or she’d say no because she’d lie in hopes of him lowering his guard for the potential opportunity to betray him. But her sitting there, thinking about it, was strange, like she wanted him to know that he couldn’t trust her. If that was true, why would she want him to know, unless he really could trust her?

This statement is false. The liar paradox. But that was the way of people, kine or Kindred or whatever, walking talking jumbles of double speak, capable of thinking one way but feeling another.

“I do not know, my childe. But I suggest you learn to balance trust with distrust, if you wish to survive the years. There is only one way you could ever truly trust someone wholly and completely.”

“And that would be?”

“The Vinculum. Though, even that and the obsession it brings can backfire.”

He shuddered. “Julias once told me about vampires who drink each other’s blood, creating a Vinculum pairing.”

“Do you think ill of the Vinculum? It binds your two crows to you, now that they are your familiars.”

That was true, he supposed. Mulder and Scully no longer flew out to the city, to explore and socialize with other crows; he didn’t know if they even could anymore, considering how much they’d changed mentally. They were his slaves now, undead slaves. At least with Veronica, there was the possibility — and his intended plan — that she become a ghoul, and then someday her own vampire. Dying during the embrace would free of her of the Vinculum, and from

then on she'd be his childe, not his slave. He had no intention of siring her any time soon, but it was the plan. With the crows, they—

Mulder and Scully, on his shoulders, nuzzled into the side of his head and crooned.

“Jack. Nice. Protects,” Mulder said.

“Jack. Master. Good master,” Scully said.

Elaine smiled at him, and made a subtle gesture toward the two birds. “Ah, the tragedy of our second lives comes in many forms.”

“I suppose it does.” He scratched their heads again before looking at his great grandsire. “You're never gonna be straight with me, are you? About your intentions I mean. You're gonna leave me with half truths, and I'm gonna spend the rest of eternity not quite able to trust you.”

“Of course. I would have it no other way.” She tapped her chin again. “But, I think it is safe to say that the dilemma you have, the curse, this Ripper character, is not what I had envisioned when I decided to come to Dolareido. When I recall what I can centuries ago, I remember power, and hate, and rage. I remember unleashing it upon kine who did not deserve it. I remember ... rivers of blood.”

“I told you, it—”

She waved a hand again. “I remember guilt. I remember the power that rushed me with the hate, rage, and strange elation of indulging such reckless abandon. But I also remember guilt, and how it ate at me, as surely as the curse ate at me, biting and clawing and destroying who I was, dragging me down ever closer to becoming draugr. And perhaps, if it had ever succeeded, I too would have manifested a personality, the same as you. Perhaps it would have eaten who I am, devoured me, leaving only the personality that you are forced to share your body with.”

That was a fucking terrifying thought. The curse, eating him up, driving him to the point of becoming a draugr, and then the curse taking over with its own manifested personality. Jack becoming Jack the Ripper permanently. Eesh.

“And you have absolutely no idea how you got rid of it.”

Her grin could have cut glass. “No. Only that it was difficult.”

Yeah he didn't believe that for a second. And she knew he didn't believe her. Hell, she seemed happy that he didn't believe her. If she was trying to be his teacher, to help build him up into a proper vampire capable of taking care of themselves by hardening him, exposing him to the nasty side of vampires in a way only someone close to him could, she was succeeding. He didn't like that.

He almost told her, about what Black Blood said. He almost told her because it ached at him so fucking bad that he couldn't trust her completely, and the naive part of him was willing to risk it, just to get the secret out of his throat. That naive, hopeful part of him was dying. The only thing keeping it alive, was Antoinette.

“Slept with her yet?” he asked.

Elaine blinked. “Mmm?”

“Isabella.”

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Elaine laughed, hard enough her long, wavy blond hair gently bounced on her suit's shoulders.

“Come now Jack. Must you be so crass? Besides, when I am not spending my nights wrapped around you,” she grinned at him all the more, “I am quite busy with my own affairs.”

“Those affairs include Isabella.”

“That does not mean I slept with her. Though when you reach my age, little Ventrue, you will come to realize how little that means.”

He had a hard time imagining a future where he didn't think of sex as a big deal. But, then again, considering Antoinette and her kinks, it probably wouldn't be long before he thought of sex as nothing more than a stress relief tool ... or a tool of manipulation. He wasn't sure if he liked that, either.

“Are we done here?” she asked. “If I had known you invited me here to interrogate me, I am not sure I would have come.”

“If I'd known you'd be messing in Dolareido's affairs, I—”

“Messing in its affairs? Do not be so cruel! Dolareido is my friend's personal project, and I dare not dream of making life for her more difficult than it has to be.” Her words dripped of sarcasm. Apparently, messing with other dragons' projects was something dragons did? Or maybe, it was just that Elaine and Antoinette had that sort of relationship where they felt comfortable challenging each other, and screwing with each other.

He'd known friends like that, usually dudes, who were just as likely to help each other as sabotage each other's efforts, usually as a playful joke. Camaraderie, but not the kind he'd ever pictured for himself. When he was human, he hadn't had a real good friend since he was super young, but even then, their friendship had been different from the other boys, because they didn't tease each other when they played games and whatnot. Jack just didn't like that sort of friendship, at least not then. Now, he could imagine teasing Damien about a few things, sure, but actually giving the man trouble as a sort of game?

Maybe he'd feel different in five hundred years. He doubted it.

“You dragons are unpredictable as all hell, you know that?”

“But of course.” With a wink, she stood up, and stepped around the table’s corner to stand in front of him. Before he could say anything, she took the shoulder of his chair and pulled it aside, pulling him out from under the table, and pointing him toward her. As much as Mulder and Scully were his devoted familiars, they both hopped off and onto the table, out of the way of the five-hundred-year-old vampire that was their master’s ancestor, as she sat sideways on his lap.

“Elaine, what’re you—”

“You may not understand me, Jack, but I have helped you, have I not?” She traced a finger along his neck. Sparks sizzled through him, and he turned his head to look away. Not good not good. “This necklace is a gift from me, to help you control the curse.” She plucked at it a couple times, until he swatted her hand away.

“It also suppresses my Beast. Weakens me.”

“True, but I wore it, long ago, so my journals tell me. It is safe.” She teased her finger along his jugular before she plucked at the top button of his suit shirt. “I have not forgotten our conversation, about how terrible this entity inside your mind is. I have listened.”

“But...”

“But? There is no but. I listened. I learned.” She licked a fang as she leaned in closer. “I am not some monolith, devoid of reason, only capable of mindlessly pursuing my goals. While I do not expect, nor want you trust me completely, little Ventrue, I do expect you to respect me. I am intelligent. I am wise.” Her lips touched his forehead, and he gulped.

“I believe it.”

“Good. Now, tomorrow night I have time to spend with you and Ann and the girls. What should I wear? I was thinking, perhaps, a



corset, with long gloves and thigh high stockings? And a thong, of course. You seem to love those.”

He gulped again. God damn.

“Who doesn’t?”

“Indeed. A woman’s ass is the ultimate incarnation of beauty and allure.” With another wink, she shifted on his lap, softly hooked the back of his neck with one arm, and rested her hand on top of her huge cleavage with the other. Of course she had the first few buttons of her suit shirt already undone, and from this close, there was no ignoring the black bra underneath, and how it was designed to show off her enormous breasts.

“Uh...” Push her off? Nah, there was no way she’d cross that line and try and start something with him, not without Antoinette here. If his girlfriend was here, sure, Elaine would do everything in her power to seduce him right in front of her. And Jack might even let her do it, just to see if he could make his girlfriend jealous, cause so far she was immune to the emotion.

But she wasn’t here. Nothing Elaine could do would break him.

“Though you seem utterly infatuated with breasts.”

“Yeah, I can’t deny that.”

“Undoubtedly your next thrall will be a busty woman.”

“Should I really be picking thralls based on their cup size?”

“Of course not. But a city this large has many possibilities for thralls, ghouls, and future Kindred. Antoinette is simply taking your kinks into account.”

He frowned and looked away. This was embarrassing.

“It’s not like I only care about breasts.” Ashley and Julee had small breasts, and he’d ravaged them on multiple occasions.

Elaine laughed, heartily at that, and with her free hand, cupped the underside of her breasts under her shirt, and bounced them. And for the fucking life of him, he couldn’t help but stare at the soft flesh as it jiggled in her bra.

“Accept and enjoy your kinks. You will find life much more enjoyable.”

“I guess...”

“You could find thralls yourself, but your lover is Prince. Perhaps in thirty or forty years you will develop an eye for them, but in the mean time, let the Prince help you. And let your girlfriend indulge her kink, which as you know, is to indulge your kinks.”

That was definitely true. Antoinette was at her happiest and most sexually fulfilled when she was drowning him in sexual delights. Even the times he’d brought her to half a dozen orgasms and had her drenching the sheets, she didn’t have quite the same twinkle in her eye as when she found some new way to pleasure him.

“And besides,” she said, “I would enjoy recreating the nights Antoinette and I shared, oh so long ago. Dozens of legs intertwined, blood filling our bellies.”

“I uh, not really sure—”

“There would be no other men there, of course, you selfish boy. Only women and yourself. Women, with mouths upon each other, fingers inside each other, a sea of breasts for you to drown in. You could have that, you know. With time and Ann to guide your choices, you could have half a dozen thralls to take care of your mansion and your desires alike in a year, maybe two. And more

thralls and ghouls beyond that as the years go by. Most Ventrue do oh so love to grow a following, after all.

“Those stories Ann and I have shared with you would no longer be stories. Imagine it, Jack. Imagine the glory of a dozen, or two dozen. Thralls and ghouls, all hopelessly addicted to you, all eager to please you.” Her smile had grown absolutely evil at this point, like a cartoon villain. “Antoinette and myself would be seated between them, caressing each other’s bodies, while twenty women dripped blood into our mouths and suckled between our legs. You would wade through the women as they desperately tried to veer you off course, but you would press on until you found us. First, you take Antoinette. She gets on her hands and knees, and women bury her body in massaging hands and loving kisses, while two ghouls slide under her so they can suckle her breasts, as you penetrate her from behind. She climaxes immediately, drenching you. She’s been waiting.

“And then I shove you! I mount you as you stumble back, and guide your cock into my ass. I grin down at you, my childe, and groan hungrily as I work myself to bliss. Your servants press their naked breasts against my back as they slip their hands around me to finger my empty sex. More join, suckling on my breasts. More and more come close, fingering each other as they struggle to find places around you. Until, perhaps a little angry with me, my old friend rejoins us. She turns me around and pushes me down, pressing my back to your chest. She climbs on top of me, and presses her naked body down onto me, grinding and—”

Jack pushed her off.

Elaine was ready for it, sliding off his lap seamlessly. She chuckled, a husky sound, and she dusted her shoulders off as she grinned down at him.

“You have a kink for being a trouble maker, don’t you?” he said. “I mean, that and the usual Ventrue domination stuff.”

“It is true. I cannot help myself.”

“Well, mission succeeded, ok? All I can think of now is owning a harem and sharing it with Antoinette.” Cause it was a damn sexy fantasy, and if his body was permanently that of a man in his early twenties, he doubted it was one he’d ever grow out of.

Chuckling again, Elaine stepped out of the room, and Jack rolled his eyes as he followed after her. Mulder and Scully flew to his shoulders and reclaimed their perches.

“I enjoyed this conversation, Jack. It lets me know you are far wiser and sharper than most men your age.”

“I wonder about that.”

“It is true.” She winked at him, and opened the front door. “And, though you may not believe me, and it would serve me right if you did not after all I have said, I am ... pleased, that you wish to trust me.” Licking her lips, she walked down the front door stairs and down the street, and into the awaiting car, purposefully shaking her ass in her skirt the whole damn way.

If there was one way he was going to die, it’d be from trusting a femme fatale.

---

~~Beatrice~~

Things had gotten very ... shitty.

Triss, Jen, Aaron, and Othello, all stood on a rooftop in South Side, close to where the Carthians and Invictus shared a border. The Cloak of Night was generally good enough to keep vampires hidden in big open areas like this, but now that every vampire in the whole

damn city was on high alert, maybe not. Skilled as she was at Obfuscate, Beatrice had to dial it up just so vampires blocks away didn't see them.

In the distance, Carthians patrolled their streets. In the opposite direction closer to the entertainment district, Invictus patrolled their streets. They were hidden, many using Cloak of Night, others hiding in cars or in the crowd, but with a pair of binoculars and four sets of eyes working together, Triss and her friends managed to spot a few of them.

“They're going to kill each other,” Aaron said. “The moment one of these roving bands runs into the other, there's going to be a fight.”

“In the street?” Jen asked. “Far too many kine around.”

Othello shrugged. “A gunfight won't break the Masquerade.”

Triss shook her head. “Yeah it will, cause there's no way the Invictus could suppress the police response enough to avoid having them intervene. Imagine, a gun fight in the streets, kine around, maybe getting hurt, and no cops show up? On top of that, the fuck would happen if one of any of the, you know, billion smart phones got a picture of a vamp getting a bullet in the neck, and then getting back up?”

“I guess you're right. I thought maybe the Beast would hide us from the cameras.”

“A blurry face on a phone screen can only go so far. Christ, sometimes I think the Prince really has a point, you know? The crazier technology gets, the harder it's getting for us to stay hidden.”

“Agreed,” Jennifer said. “But I suppose there's two schools of thought on that. The Prince's, using cooperation to manage and mitigate. Or Jacob's...”

Triss snorted. “You mean bringing everyone back to the stone age?”

“I don’t think he’d aim for the stone age. But ... maybe before the internet.”

Aaron raised a finger. “I’d be ok with that, I think.”

“You?” Triss asked, looking right at the Gangrel. “Figured you’d be all ‘oh it’s the dawn of a new age!’ and other poetic crap.”

“The internet has become a cesspool of stupidity. Normally, stupid information dies off as newer, better information replaces it. Civilization grew smarter, and smarter, because information that proved more effective survived longer than the poor information. But that’s not the case anymore. Now, we have a world where just zero-point-one percent of the population contributes in any meaningful way, and almost always as technological growth, while the rest of the population, barely smart enough to use a keyboard or smart phone, uses that technology to spread their idiocy.”

“I—”

“God fucking forbid we let experts be the leading voice on topics. God fucking forbid we use our amassed historical knowledge as a guide on what mistakes to avoid. God fucking forbid we actually use the internet as an open forum for scientific pursuits across the world, instead of a megaphone for the loudest, most ignorant shitheads. God forbid—”

Triss set a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Dude, dude, we get it. Holy shit.”

Aaron, who’d been staring down at the streets below, had been slowly getting angrier and angrier, with full-on posture changes. For a second, he’d looked like an angry dog. Well, he was a Gangrel, but the man never showed it. He had far more in common with a

Mekhet than any Gangrel. At least, he did, until now. Totally new side of him.

“He, uh, does make a good point,” Jennifer said after putting a couple more inches between her and Aaron. “The technology boom, particularly the internet, has come with many negatives. Would it be so bad if the world went back to a place where exchanging information across distances became difficult? It’d be better for vampires, surely.”

“Eh I dunno,” Triss said. “It’s hard to really analyze a problem that big, you know? Like, fuck, we’re just minnows trying to understand the ocean. I say be and let be, and ride the waves as they come.”

They all looked at her for a while before eventually nodding, and looking back to the streets below. It was a powerful statement, Triss thought, and a viewpoint she’d come to appreciate more and more as the months went on. A very Jacob way of looking at things. It was impossible to know everything, so do what you can, learn what you can, and ride the waves as they come. Don’t let ignorance paralyze you, but keep an open mind to any and all information.

It was how witches did things, and it especially applied to crúac rituals. It was also probably how some witches stumbled into truly nasty shit and accidentally summoned Cthulhu or something. Ah well, no guts no glory.

“So, Aaron,” Jen said. “We’ve yet to see your girlfriend.”

“Yep.”

“Will you bring her to us at some point?”

“Nope.”

“Oh come on, Aaron. What do you think I’ll do to her?”

The man gave Jen a look so deadpan, Triss snort-laughed hard.

“The same thing you did to Samantha.”

“I did nothing to her! Well, other than a few sexual things, but those were harmless!”

Triss shook her head. “I uh, think we did a little more than that to her. We corrupted her.” More like, the Circle corrupted everyone eventually, except for Aaron. “He probably wants to keep his girlfriend safe from evil lesbianism.”

Jen shook her head. “I am no lesbian. I’m bisexual. So are you.” She blew a playful breath at Triss, hard enough to make Triss’s hair bounce against her cheeks.

“Same thing to a God-fearin’ gun-totin’ good man like Aaron.” Othello winked at them before giving the Gangrel a loving pat on the back. “Give it up, Jen. I’ve been offering to share girls with Aaron since before either of you came around. He’s not interested.”

“Not everyone has to wear their sexuality on their sleeve,” Aaron said, face still unfazed as he looked down below. “Or indulge in every kink known. I like my relationships quiet and private.”

Aaron might like to keep his sex life vanilla, but he wasn’t even remotely fazed by the stuff he saw in the Circle. Maybe it wasn’t about his taste, and more about him not trusting the Circle to respect his relationship? It wasn’t like Triss ever brought Julias back to fuck in the cave where everyone could watch, or maybe even participate. The idea of Othello or Aaron, especially Jacob, watching her make love with Julias, grossed her out.

Julias. Triss’s laugh faded, and she looked down at the street below as old memories teased through her. With Jen’s help, she’d done a good job moving on, letting the bite of those memories fade. But every night, Elen got closer and closer to creating a vessel for



him, and to see Julias's face emerge in her creations tugged those memories right back up from the muck.

Talk with Black Blood, Elen, and Jacob had convinced Triss that if she wanted her man back, the vessel had to be good. Great. Damn well near perfect. If she didn't get the body right, his soul might reject it, like a kine body rejecting an organ transplant. Course, she had no idea if that'd happen, and the others didn't either, but Jacob had some nasty stories in his books, talking about weird shit like souls in the wrong body basically rotting the body apart, and other oddness. Elen didn't seem to know much about souls, but she talked about dumb shit like 'life energy' and how it knew where to go, and where not to go.

It was part of the reason Jacob had given up on resurrecting Minerva. He had no way to get her a body. Black Blood and him said they were going to put her in a jar, or maybe a mannequin or something, and had even worked toward making her an undead body, but neither of them figured it'd be able to hold her. It wouldn't match, wouldn't fit. But with Elen's help, they could make it fit. Once Julias's soul was in the body, the flesh witch could work her magic, and make it work.

It was a good plan. It was a great fucking plan, except for one giant glaring issue she couldn't figure out. How to rip a soul out of the god damn afterlife. If Jacob and Black Blood were right, she'd have to do it with some giant sacrifice that killed thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of people. And even then she'd need the help of someone that could ... understand souls? Someone that could do more than just grab at things with fingers and a thumb. She needed someone like Black Blood.

It really did seem fucking pointless to try. If she was onto something, if it could really work, Jacob wouldn't just be answering her questions, he'd be throwing himself at the project. The man had known and loved Minerva longer than Triss had Julias, so wouldn't

he go crazy psycho excited and do anything in hopes of seeing her again? No, he'd given up on the idea, and was damn convinced Beatrice would fail.

So Triss came at the project with low expectations. Julias was gone, she kept telling herself over and over. Julias was gone, Julias is gone, and she'd never see him again. This project of hers was just her ... trial by fire, to becoming a proper witch. It'd fail, it'd scar her for eternity, and she would forever be a better witch for it. And her vow to be Black Blood's student would begin, following in Jacob's footsteps. Not that Jacob had ever been Black Blood's student, those two were partners, but close enough.

Christ, what if it did work? What if she had Julias back, and—

She killed the thought, killed it dead, instantly. She would not get her hopes up. She would not.

“Triss,” Jen said, “you’re doing it again.”

“Eh?”

“Staring off, and—”

“Right, I know. I’m just thinking.”

Jen slid in beside her, before setting an arm on Triss's opposite hip, arm hooked behind her. “Whatever happens, I’ll be there.”

Triss smiled and nudged her head into Jen's. Yeap, totally cheesy, and she didn't care.

“Let’s go see Jack.”

---

They knew Jack was home; Triss texted him. Othello whistled as they approached the mansion, and he spent more than a few seconds admiring some of the statues. For just a split second, Triss

thought he might have had an eye for art. But, no, he was just admiring the statues that showed some boob.

He whistled again when they stopped at the enormous double doors, and Triss knocked. Big boom with the door knocker and everything, straight out of a movie.

Someone very much not Jack opened the door.

“Uh, hello?” Triss said, eying the maid up and down.

The maid was fucking hot. A short woman, curvy, with blue hair, and a button shirt that was pretty much completely unbuttoned, showing a very nice bra holding a pair of very large tits. The color scheme screamed maid, but the clothes were modern, suit shirt and tight skirt and whatnot.

The kine gasped, but after staring at Triss for a few seconds, let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, Beatrice. I’m sorry, this is the first time I’ve seen you face to face. I didn’t ... I apologize.”

“Apologize? Oh, right.” Triss touched her extra teeth, and dragged a claw along them, earning some quiet rapid clicks. “Um, don’t worry about it. Who are you?”

“I’m Veronica. The master’s servant.”

Oh, a thrall. Maybe a ghoul, but Triss didn’t get that sense.

“Aren’t you a pretty thing.” Jennifer stepped forward, and Veronica stepped back, eyes going wide again. Yeap, she was new, and Jen’s aggression scared her.

“Jen, don’t wear out your welcome,” Triss said. “Veronica, can you —”

“The master says you’re welcome to come in; you have an open invitation. He’s a little busy at the moment, but I’m sure he’ll be with you soon.” Too damn cute, the way she kept looking at them, then at the ground, then remembered her obvious instructions, tried to maintain eye contact, and kept failing. “In the mean time, I can take you to—”

“I’ve seen the inside of this mansion a million times, Veronica.”

“Oh ... right. I’m sorry.”

Ah shit, now Triss felt bad. Sure, having another women tell her where she could and couldn’t go in her dead boyfriend’s mansion struck a nerve, but Veronica didn’t know better. And it was Triss’s problem anyway.

“Forget about it,” Triss said. “Can you take us to the ... fuck, I don’t know what it’s called. The room with red couches? Over there.” She gestured down the hall.

Veronica nodded, and after taking a quick peek at Othello, twice, she guided them through the halls. Aaron and Othello both looked around with wide, curious eyes, and Triss had to fight to keep from laughing or teasing them. For dudes like them, money like this just didn’t make sense. Why build a fancy place like this that’d only attract attention? Witches hid, because it made sense to. Not like most people could appreciate or understand crúac rituals and the other shenanigans she knew Jacob got up to. Invictus, on the other hand, fucking loved to posture, pose, fluff up, and show their tail feathers.

Veronica opened the door, and let them go in first. God damn, she really was doing the whole servant shtick. Did Jack like that? Probably not; he had that in common with Julias. But then again, Julias rarely acquired thralls, and had no ghouls, while Jack was only a few years embraced and had a thrall already. Maybe the kid had a desire to be in charge Julias didn’t?

“Do you ... need anything?” Veronica asked, smiling at each of them in turn.

“Uh, yeah,” Triss said, sitting on the couch with Jen. “How’d you know who I was? Jack describe me?”

The boys took a different couch, a wall of old wood behind them, smoothed and carved and decorated with red curtains. Of course they admired it, the guest room’s walls, the candle holders on the walls and the fake candles in them; Julias had replaced Viktor’s real candles with fake ones. The room and everything in it just reeked of wasted money, but the boys were hypnotized by it anyway. Sluts.

“The master showed me a picture of you and his sire.”

“Picture? I—oh my god.” She laughed and buried half her face in her hand. “That brings back ... memories.”

Veronica squirmed a little. Yeap, she’d just tripped over a shitty situation without realizing it, until now.

“I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have—”

“Jesus girl, relax.” Triss shook her head and waved a hand. “It’s ok. It was a long ... it was a time ago.” Not that long, Triss.

“Still, I ... um...” Poor girl was going to shatter. She’d tried to be all proper and shit at the door, like a good servant, but apparently being around four vamps was a bit much for her.

“We’re not going to bite,” Othello said, and he smiled at the girl as he leaned back on the couch beside Aaron. “Unless of course your master lets us.”

Triss promptly kicked the table between them, a small wooden thing with a red cloth over it, right at the asshole’s shins. A good thunk and a surprised grunt from Othello announced success.

“Dude. Keep it in your pants. And trust me, you don’t want to get on Jack’s bad side.”

“It’s ok,” Veronica said, squirming a little more and blushing a lot more. “The master has ... warned me, about certain vampires.” Despite herself, the thrall managed a sheepish smile for Othello, before she nodded her head to the rest of them.

Jennifer laughed. “Considering it’s Jack, I imagine Veronica has been thoroughly seduced and ravaged by two very powerful Kindred besides Jack, no? And routinely, I imagine.”

Oh god. Triss hid half her face in her hand again, but watched as the tasty thrall squirmed and blushed even harder.

“The master has a ... pretty amazing sex life, I admit.”

Antoinette, Elaine, the Prince’s two ghouls, and now Veronica. Dude was getting five pussies on the reg. As amazing as that sounded, Triss knew some vamps who pushed it a lot further.

“If I know Jack,” Jennifer said, evil gleam in her eyes, “and I think I do, at least a little, I suspect you’ll have more legs in your bed with time. I imagine the boy will build a harem, something to be a symbol of his power, a source of food, but also, something to protect and cherish.”

“I can see it,” Triss said. Jack and Julias had a lot in common, but not everything. Veronica was proof.

Jennifer grinned. “And his mother will, too. I see the desire in her eyes.”

Triss and Othello, even Aaron laughed at that. Veronica stared at them like they’d spoken mysterious, powerful words, which had them all laughing again. If only the thrall knew how big Samantha’s sexual appetite was.

“I haven’t spoken with Samantha yet,” Veronica said. “She’s very pretty.” From the way she said it, Triss could see she was stepping out of her comfort zone, and probably into territory she considered dangerous, talking about her master’s mom.

Jennifer’s grin erupted into something Triss had seen far too often.

“Pretty, yes, and absolutely sala—”

Triss put a hand over her friend’s dumb mouth and shook her head, hers and Jen’s. “We’re not gonna talk about Samantha, not like that, not in her kid’s mansion.” And honestly, a part of her didn’t like the idea of pissing Jack off. Sure, the kid’s personality basically rendered him harmless for stupid shit like social gossip, but the thing inside him, Triss wasn’t so sure. If the Ripper flipped out and decided to rip off some heads cause someone insulted his mom, it wouldn’t surprise her.

Jen sighed and nodded, and Triss let her go.

Veronica put a hand up to her mouth, glanced at the door, and closed it, while staying inside the room. Then, with wide, hungry eyes, she stepped closer to Triss.

“Is it true the Circle does, like, witchy stuff? Sacrifices, orgies under the fool moon, that kinda stuff?”

Oh good god, it was too fucking precious. The thrall was hungry for tidbits, and looking at the four of them like they were special, like they were gods or something. No wonder vampires often got themselves a thrall or three. What an ego stroke.

“Who told you that?”

“Jack and the Prince kinda mentioned it. Ashley and Julee said more, but I don’t think they know as much.”

“There are certainly orgies,” Othello said. Veronica blushed horribly when she looked back at him, but her eyes came back to Triss with more curiosity.

Triss rolled her eyes. “Yes, there are orgies, or at least the Circle does that sorta stuff. We don’t, not really, but we could, sure. Jacob probably did, hundreds of years ago, orgies under the full moon, complete with a fresh goat’s skull, covered in blood, hung around his neck.”

“Whoa.”

Whoa, yeah. That shit was fascinating, and terrifying. But it sent giddy jolts through Triss, to see a young woman, a kine no less, think that shit was neat. Lots of women and teenage girls went through a witch phase, and delved into occult stuff. But lots of women were also obsessed with murder documentaries and stalker podcasts. That didn’t mean they all wanted to be detectives.

“I do suggest,” Aaron said, “that you tread carefully, Veronica. The four of us are pretty friendly, but Jacob guards his secrets and guards them well. He’d have no problem killing you if he thought you were being too nosy.”

Veronica straightened with a gulp. “B-But ... isn’t the master’s mom dating Jacob?”

“She is. But she’s not involved in anything related to the Circle beyond that, and Samantha’s smart enough to be careful with her questions.”

“I see. I ... I’ll be careful.”

Probably a good idea to scare the thrall some now, before it bit her in the ass later. Sure, Jacob wasn’t as scary as people thought he was, but in some ways he was scarier.



The door opened, and in walked Jack. Everyone sat up straighter, and as much as none of them would say it, they all felt their Beasts recoil in the presence of the kid. Triss knew about the necklace he wore, and that it kept his Beast quiet and subdued, but that didn't mean they couldn't sense it, sense how massive it'd become. It was like someone had taken a tiger, already a damn strong Beast, and given it a bunch of steroids, too many, so it was bursting at the seams with strength to the point it was unnatural, and grotesque.

The kid looked good. He wore a damn nice suit, gray, something Julias would have worn, and he wore it well, good proud posture putting his chest and shoulders on display, and Triss bet he didn't even realize he was doing it anymore. Confidence came off him smoothly, naturally, so much like Julias it almost hurt. God damn, the difference three years and a mountain of bullshit falling on your lap can make. Anyone else probably would have broke, but not this damn kid.

And then there were the two crows. Mulder and Scully had been with Jack a long time, and everyone was used to seeing two black birds whenever Jack was around. Except this was different. This time, the two crows sat on his shoulders, and stayed there, instead of immediately finding perches overhead. And they didn't look right. They stood there, heads turning with almost mechanical precision, and every member of the Circle blinked as they noticed the birds were damaged. One of them had a broken neck and crooked head, the other a broken wing. Neither bird seemed to care, or even notice.

The two crows completed the image of one scary fucking Ventrue.

“Beatrice,” he said, and he smiled. Not so scary to his friends. “Jennifer. Oh, Othello, Aaron, hey.” He nodded to the boys, a half apology for not expecting them. “Thanks Veronica, you may go.”

Veronica smiled, half bowed to him, and left, closing the door behind her.

“You have a type,” Jennifer said, gesturing to the door, then down to her own bust and the suit shirt she wore. Like Veronica, she had plenty of her buttons undone. Unlike Veronica, she didn’t bother with the bra.

“Ugh, don’t start. It’s Antoinette, she—”

“Delights in delighting you.” The fellow Ventrue giggled and swooned. “Soon these walls will be bustling with a delightful harem of bare breasts, bouncing boobily along.”

Past Jack would have squirmed at being called out. This Jack sighed, but smiled, and leaned back against the door, hands at his sides.

“I mean, yeah, once I accepted being a vampire, I did kinda envision growing up to have a harem I guess. Dracula’s brides, right? Monica Bellucci.” Everyone groaned with desire, in unison. “Then I met Antoinette, and didn’t think it’d happen, and I didn’t care. I love her, and she’s already wearing me out with all the things she likes to try. But now she’s also pushing me to get a harem, and ... I should stop calling it a harem.”

Jennifer shrugged. “It is what it is. Of everyone in this room, only Aaron and Beatrice do not have thralls and ghouls with the express purpose of being fed on and fucked.”

“Cause Aaron and me are good people. The rest of you are going to Hell.”

Jack laughed. “Yeah, I guess. And in this modern world, it’s even worse, everyone trading sex tapes or putting on shows for each other with webcams.”

Triss raised a brow, and looked at Jen. Jen looked at Aaron. Aaron looked at Othello. Othello grinned.

“You made a sex tape,” the Daeva said.

“I ... well, yeah. Hasn't everyone in this damn city?” Jack asked. Every witch and warlock shook their heads, and Jack threw up his hands. “What the fuck?”

“Witches are a little more hands on,” Triss said, shrugging.

Jennifer's eyes positively gleamed. “I must have this tape.”

Jack just rolled his eyes. “I can only take so much embarrassment. And from what I hear, you witches are all pretty cozy with each other, and my mom visits Jacob frequently. The last thing I want her to see, is me with five women, on tape.”

Jennifer held out a single hand, palm up, and curled her fingers. Very evil sorceress vibes. “Give it to me.”

Jack laughed and shook his head. “So anyway, why are you all here? Just visiting?”

“Kinda yeah,” Triss said. “I was worried about you. Things are heating up pretty bad out there.”

“You're telling me. Those two fucking assholes are going to get everyone killed.”

“Two?”

“Garry and Michael.” After a heavy sigh, Jack walked across the room and sat in an empty sofa chair. It was surprising the chair didn't break under the weight on his shoulders. The two birds cawed once each, and nudged their heads into his neck, earning some neck scratches from him in return. “Now that Amanda's dead, things

aren't just heating up anymore. They're catching fire. Gloria is devastated. Four skirmishes in the week since her child's supposed death, and a dozen Kindred have lost limbs."

"Supposedly?" Triss asked.

"I don't wanna talk about it until I know for sure." Poor kid. He leaned back in the sofa, and rubbed both temples with one hand as he looked up. "Those two idiots are gonna push the two covenants together harder and harder until there's a big fight. People are going to die. And I'm gonna be in the middle of it, trying to stop it."

"You could always just let them kill each other," Aaron said.

"I'm Invictus. I'm a part of this, even if I don't want to be."

Othello raised a hand. "I get the impression the Prince would prefer you stay out of it. Leave the Invictus, request sanctuary, and stay with her?"

Again, the kid shook his head, just like Triss knew he would.

"I'm not going to let people die cause these two assholes hate each other."

"A very un-vampire thing to say," Jennifer said.

Jack laughed. "Yeah, I know. But it is a Julias thing to say. Shit doesn't need to be like in other cities. And so help me god, if I have to break Garry and Michael in half to make it happen, I will."

"Or kill them," Aaron said.

"I ... yeah, that. I don't want to do that. Garry doesn't deserve that, much as I can't stand his guts. And Michael ... is quickly approaching the point I think he should die, but he's my boss."

"Would you kill him if you could?"

Jack eyed Aaron, suspicious. “Hard to answer that question. Sorry.”

Aaron put up his hands. “No offense taken.”

“Othello,” Jack asked. “You know much about Garry and Michael? You’re older than any of us.”

“Sorry Jack. I keep my head down and stay out of everyone’s affairs.”

“Useless,” Triss said, smiling at the dumb oaf. He returned it with a wink.

Though in retrospect, she should probably be careful teasing Othello, considering how much Samantha was into him. He could get at Jack through Samantha. But, nah, Othello wouldn’t do that. Half because he was just too much of a lazy nice guy, but also cause he was just as afraid of Jack as everyone else. He’d been there, when Jack got revenge, after all.

“Ask your beloved,” Jen said.

“Antoinette and I are pretty careful about what we tell each other. If Michael suspects Antoinette’s been playing favorites and telling me shit she shouldn’t, and vice versa, it’ll cause problems. He’s already annoyed that she and I are basically joined at the hip. I’m sleeping with the enemy.”

Triss nodded. “Yeah. If the Prince was a Carthian, it wouldn’t fly.”

“Exactly.”

“But, dude, I’ve seen that Ripper curse in full swing. I bet you could kill Michael.”

“I don’t want to kill Michael!” Jack sat up straight and slammed both palms on the arms of his chair. Everyone flinched, except the birds. The birds might as well have been statues on his shoulders. “He’s not some colossal asshole like Viktor was, or Lucas. If Amanda isn’t actually dead, if this is some big trick, then he’s only a normal asshole, that doesn’t necessarily deserve to die. And, he’s an asshole with connections. Killing him could be a pain in my ass for decades after.”

“Only if you get caught,” Jennifer said, smile growing sly.

“At this point, I think everyone would turn their eyes to me if Michael vanished, with this curse rumor hounding me.”

“True.”

“I just ... I know Garry and Michael hate each other, and I get that they’ve been fighting each other for a long time, but they really, really hate each other.”

Aaron lifted a finger. “You grow to hate what you fight. History and psychology has taught us that quite well. Put two forces against each other long enough, and they’ll eventually hate each other. They’ll look for reasons to justify their conflict.”

“Yeah, I guess. It still feels worse than that.”

“Ask Maria?” Aaron said. “She might know more.”

Triss winced. Aaron and Othello didn’t know Jack avoided Maria because of what happened to Lucas, and she planned to keep it that way. To Jack’s credit, he didn’t flinch or anything.

“Maria and I aren’t on the best of terms.”

“So? If Kindred are going to die, it seems like something worth risking. Besides, you saved her from Avery, so she owes you, right?”

Jack looked down in thought. “Yeah, you’re right. I should talk to her.”

“Careful, Jack,” Triss said. The others looked at her, eyebrows raised, but Triss ignored them. “She’s a cold bitch.”

“I will. Damien will be there. I might just ask him to ask her.” Jack lifted his head, and his old smile came back. “The four of you really came over here just to help me out with Invictus Carthian problems?” They all nodded. “Uh huh. I’m naive, but not dumb, guys.”

Triss laughed again. “I brought them. It was just me. I wanted to talk, you know?”

Pain hit the kid’s face, and Triss knew it hit hers, too. But they looked at each other and held each other’s gazes, and everyone else went deadly quiet as they watched.

“Thanks,” he said after a few seconds, long enough for the two of them to share a silent conversation. Julias was dead, Beatrice was feeling better, so was Jack, but every so often they’d remember him, and it still hurt.

“We’re keeping an eye on shit,” she continued, “but Jacob’s given us orders to stay hands off.”

“I half expected him to say you should back Garry if he ever has his back to a wall.”

“Well, he might have said that, but I couldn’t tell you if he did, right?”

“Nope, I suppose you couldn’t. How’s Mom?”

It took every bit of control she had to not look at Othello. “Jacob and her hang out a lot. Relationship seems to be working. What, you

don't talk to your mom?"

"I do, occasionally. But with everything that's happened ... She's the Prince's childe, you know? Antoinette doesn't want her getting involved in this war."

"Well, don't talk to her about the war, man." Triss laughed and shook her head. "Talk to her about normal shit."

"When is the last time any of us have talked about normal shit, and didn't feel like it was dumb juvenile crap?" Jack shrugged, sat back, and looked to the group of them.

They all looked at each other, each wincing with understanding. Kid had a point. If the conversation included anything like weather, who's dating who, or financial struggles, Kindred got bored. All that shit was from their first lives, and even then it was dumb. Now, each and every night was a night spent chasing their agendas, and even the most pathetic agenda from the most fresh fledgling included shit like building a hideout to survive deadly daylight; epic, relative to their first lives. They'd all completely lost the ability to give a fuck about any of the old life crap.

Well, they may have, but Samantha hadn't, not yet.

"Don't talk to her then, listen to her. Your mom's got a lot to say, you know? I mean, we talk to her, and I'm sure her sire talks to her, but I can tell she's got things she wants to share she can't really share with them, only you. And her daughter." Who they were all convinced Samantha still talked to, regularly.

A tinge of pain ran across the kid's face. "Yeah, good point. And thanks again, for visiting. With so many Kindred out there scared of me, it's nice to know you're not—"

"Terrified," Othello said with a smile and a nod. "Still terrified. But Triss says you're still you. Seems she's right."



“I hope so,” the kid said, twiddling with his necklace. “I hope so.” Nodding, he got up and went for the door. “So did you—”

“Dude,” Triss said, grinning, “give the boys a tour.”

Jack rolled his eyes, but it was obvious the kid was glad for some normal company. And she was happy to give it, before the Carthians and Invictus really went to town on each other. Cause holy fuck, if Jack died in this war, it wouldn't just eat Triss up, it'd eat Samantha up. And the Prince? Jesus fucking christ, what would she do?

Better to help the kid out now, and honestly, do a check up and see how he was doing.

God, imagine the look on the kid's face if Julias walked back into his life?

Imagine the look on his face if he found some sort of freak Frankenstein creation that looked like Julias, with a thousand pounds of wrongness in him. Like, some sort of freak nightmare, some failed creation begging to be put out of its misery.

It was easy to think ‘no guts no glory’, when it was her own life on the line. Someone else's? Her love's? His childe's?

---

~~Eric~~

Avery wasn't around. Clara, Caleb, and Noah weren't around. Most importantly, Flowing Sanctuary wasn't around.

Eric had gotten pretty good in the past few months at avoiding them. Avery would give him a lecture, and the spirit Flow would shut him down. But he knew where they often hunted now, and avoided those places when he could smell them. And now that he was familiar with their scents, he felt a lot more comfortable exploring the city, as long as he was careful.

Better yet, he had backup this time. Natasha and Sándor stayed back and watched; the monster was stuck in his human body in the Hisil, so it was better he stay with the vampire. But the three werewolves, Eric, Matthew, and Arturo, were free to run down their prey.

Needle Swords. A humanoid spirit, tall, covered in a gray cloak. The gangly white creature wore a plague doctor mask, with two large, black eyes. It was the fingers that gave it up though. Each finger was a long needle, the sort you used to shoot up, the sort Eric had seen thousands of in two different phases of his life: the back alleys, and the bathrooms of the rich.

Eric and Matthew sprinted for the spirit, both in their monstrous wolf forms, the bigger form Urshul. It didn't have the power of the Gauru form, or the stealth of the normal wolf form Urhan, but it was big, strong, and fast. If any spirit got in their way, they could break through, and Eric had every intention of running this spirit down hard tonight. No sneaking, no stalking, no scouting the area or looking for a weakness. Just run the fucker down, and kill it.

When Needle Swords noticed them, it ran. Gross, lanky legs, long and thin, broke into a sprint, and the creature vanished down a dark alley. But Eric knew this city and knew it well. He'd lived here his whole life, and spent years driving a cab. And strange as the Hisil was, with its curved buildings, alien sky, and corkscrewing lampposts, it was still Dolareido. It was different, but the same. A shadow of the real, or more like the other half of the same coin. And he'd learned the city's shadow half well in the past few months.

Matt slowed down, letting Eric take lead. Much as Avery's pack had probably spent most nights of the past couple years exploring Dolareido's shadow half, they would never know it with the intimacy Eric did. Moving through the alley, rushing past the tiny black, living orbs that skirted the walls, with strange colorful eels flying overhead on their way to flashy entertainment buildings, was

perfectly instinctual to Eric. His giant paws didn't hesitate to drive him forward, and he pushed hard.

These alleys existed all over Dolareido, and by design. The vampires loved dark alleys for all the typical vampire shenanigans it let them pursue, but also, for all the stupid shit it encouraged humans to do. The vampires wanted humans to get into bad habits like abusing drugs. And humans being dumb as fuck, flocked to those vices like they were on sale and supplies were low. But in Dolareido, the supplies were endless.

And hey, Eric got it, he understood the desire, the reasons. The amount of poor people he'd met growing up who turned to shit to escape how fucking horrible life was, was endless. The amount of stupid rich people he'd met who'd gotten hooked without ever knowing just how addicting it was, was endless. But some things went too far, and this spirit helped push people over the edge.

The dark alleys between walls of white and gray concrete looked black this deep in the alleys where the street lights didn't reach. They were a ways off from the entertainment district; the few light spirits that wandered into Devil's Corner inevitably went back from where they came from. Worse, the alleys here were deeper, and longer than in the physical world. A lot longer. Space-defying longer. Eric had circled these buildings from the outside before, but had only ever gone through them once, here in the Hisil, and it was not an experience he wanted to suffer again.

But here he was, chasing Needle Swords through the long, dark alley, where shadows swarmed them and blocked out the sky, because he was an idiot. Because for some stupid fucking reason, his dad had rubbed off on him, all his stupid talk about caring for the people in your community and caring about where you came from. For some idiot reason, Eric wanted to do what his dad told him he should do, when Eric first started making money. Help people.

Of course he was only telling himself half the truth, and conveniently avoiding the other half. Family drama shaping his personality and sealing certain behaviors into his subconscious? Everyone had to deal with that shit. But the howl of the wolf, the thrill of it, the rush, the blood lust, the hunger and instinct? That was the shit he'd been ignoring, until now.

Rushing down his prey as it ran through the alley, clicking and squeaking inside its mask, felt good. Felt great. Felt fucking incredible. Eric exposed his fangs as he panted, four feet catching the asphalt and sending him forward with increasing speed as he let the rush drive him. Catch the prey. Hunt it down. Bite it. Tear it open. Defend the territory. Devour the life of the weak.

The human part of him expected Needle Swords to beg for its life as Eric closed the distance. The wolf in him knew the spirit didn't understand the concept. Or it did, it just wouldn't do it. Wasn't part of its nature. And all spirits, more than any biological thing, were slaves to their natures.

Eric closed the distance, Matt close on his heels. The spirit was fast. Those long legs did work, and the spirit ran like an Olympic sprinter, gray, patchy cloak flapping in the air behind it. Its feet were long, but mostly human, and nothing standing upright would match the speed of something running on four legs.

Of course, the spirit wasn't stupid. It'd been around for decades, maybe longer, and had built up a name. Other spirits served it, and sure enough, spirits crept out of the darkness to try and stop Matt and Eric. None of them came at them directly, which made sense considering the sort of spirit they served. But they still got in the way nonetheless.

Plague masks. Tiny plague masks came out of the dark of the stupidly long alleyway, and soon, the bodies they wore. If Eric didn't know better, he'd think a bunch of children wearing costumes had

jumped out of the sewers from manholes, black blankets over their bodies, and each wearing a plague mask.

They weren't kids, they were spirits. They didn't fly, but they did hover, and the black cloak dangling from them didn't do a good job hiding that their legs weren't exactly normal. Misshapen, grotesque, and small, their limbs did little except hang underneath them. Their arms were longer though, and their hands stuck out from the black cloth, exposing sharp, long thin claws. Needle-like claws. Not like Needle Swords, whose fingers looked like whole, actual needles, but sharp claw versions.

It only took the third one of the little spirits to land a blow to let Eric know how sharp. He roared and looked over his shoulder, and barked approval as Matt collided with the spirit. Wolves were huge. Urshul wolves were gigantic. The small spirit's head didn't even reach the top of Matt's shoulder, and hundreds of pounds of solid muscle slammed it into the wall behind it.

Spirits weren't soft, floaty things you could move your hand through unless they were hiding in Twilight, and they couldn't do that in the Hisil. Here, they were solid. Here, they could bleed; didn't have organs, but they often bled, as a representation of damage. The spirits that embodied things like trees wouldn't bleed, but they'd break or burn. The ones that embodied aspects of the streets like asphalt wouldn't bleed, but they'd crumble. But the ones that liked to take the shapes of animals, humans included, bled just fine. They often bled strange colors, but they bled, and it tasted great.

The child-like spirit died, and blood gushed out of its plague mask beak. White blood. An incarnation of its ephemeral body. It, and the spirit itself, were made of it, and fueled by essence. And it was the essence that was fueling and delicious.

Would this fucking bastard Needle Swords taste good, when they caught up to it?

Matt recovered quickly and chased after Eric's tail, and Eric ignored the gash in his side. It'd heal in a few minutes. It'd heal in a few seconds in Gauru form, but here, and in a hunt, Gauru form had one purpose: combat. It wasn't good at anything else, just fighting. And in a hunt, he wouldn't be able to control the desire for combat like he could back in the physical Dolareido, with Jessy. Better to stay in Urshul, and run the prey down.

More of the child-like fucked up spirits came out of the dark and swiped at them with their claws, only to disappear into small holes Matt and Eric were too big for. They wouldn't have chased them anyway, but it was infuriating to have an obstacle course to navigate to catch up to Needle Swords. Focus, Eric. These little bastards are part of a choir, but Needle Swords is in charge. Take it down, and the others won't have as much of an effect. And it was important to always remember the ecosystem. Wipe out one species and you create a vacuum that can cause unknown knock-on effects; true in the Gurihal, and true in the Hisil.

Eric ducked to the side of one spirit, and then to the other. And finally, light announced they were quickly approaching the end of the alley.

A shadow put a stop to that, and Eric slammed all four paws down hard. He skidded to a halt, and stared up at the enormous spirit that now blocked his path. A golem? Something made of asphalt, humanoid, with a big glowing eye in a big featureless skull of concrete. And it'd already raised one of its enormous hands in a big fist, intent on crushing Eric into pulp.

Before Eric could so much as yelp, Matthew flew over him, and in Gauru form. Might as well have been Goliath himself with how ridiculously huge Matthew was. The massive werewolf slammed

into the street golem, and raked his claws down the creature's body. The two crashed down onto the street, and a thousand small black rat-like observers scattered as the giant creatures collided with a lamppost.

Eric watched them for only a few seconds. A few seconds was long enough to see that the titanic werewolf had cut gashes down through the golem's body several times already, each rake of his claws sending piles of debris from the mouthless spirit's form. It tried to hit Matthew, and managed to land a single punch. A considering how big its fists were, and what material its body was emulating, the punch hit hard enough to send Matthew onto his side.

But he got up a second later, and again threw himself at the golem, ripping and tearing. Biting. The sound was surreal, werewolf claws and teeth breaking through asphalt like a pick axe destroying rocks, but by the dozens. The golem thrashed, but it was slow and heavy, and Matthew took bites out of its hard body as he wrestled it back to the street.

“Go! Follow prey!”

Eric gulped, nodded, and chased after Needle Swords as it ran down the street.

But it didn't get far. Twenty seconds later, the tall spirit suddenly spun out of control and fell over hard, rolled and skid, and eventually came to a halt in a mess of agony. Something else had pounced it.

Another wolf arrived, appearing almost out of thin air where Needle Swords had fallen. Arturo planted his paws on the sprawled and struggling spirit, pinning it under his huge Urshul weight. Nodding, he looked to Eric, and waited.

Eric did the only reasonable thing, when a fellow wolf offers you captured and defeated prey. Hunt finished, prey secured, Eric dove onto the spirit, and sank his fangs into its neck. With Needle Swords on its stomach, it couldn't do anything but writhe in panic as Eric bit hard, and killed it.

Finally. Now, time for the new, mysterious tear.



## Chapter 144

~~Natasha~~

“Is it d-dead?” she asked.

Eric nodded as he dragged the spirit’s body back into the alley. Still in the big wolf body, he wouldn’t be able to talk, but body language was fine.

She didn’t expect him to take a bite out of the tall, gangly thing. But he did. Natasha gulped as Eric ripped and tore at the humanoid in the plague mask, and gulped down a chunk of its flesh. She gulped again when Arturo did the same. She outright squeaked when Matthew, back into his huge wolf form, slipped past her, and tore at the body as well.

“Um ... uh ... is that edible?” She didn’t understand. It made sense for a wolf spirit to eat prey spirits, but this thing was a weird spirit of human inclination and physical manifestations. Drugs, and drug abuse. A wolf wouldn’t eat that, right?

Well, they weren’t wolves. They were werewolves. Maybe they had stronger stomachs? They were hunters, and that role extended to hunting anything they deemed dangerous to the physical world.

Or maybe they were eating it the same way someone might eat paper with a secrete message written on it, just to destroy it. Ask later, focus now.

After a few bites each, the wolves backed off, and returned to their human forms. Eric wiped his mouth, even though there was nothing there. Art and Matt did no such thing, and laughed when they saw Eric do it.

“That was disgusting,” Art said.

Eric nodded, shrugging. “Yeah, it was. I don’t eat city spirits often. But after my first successful group hunt, kinda seemed like the right thing to do.”

Matt nodded, smiling, but his face scrunched up a second later, obviously unhappy with the taste. “There are other ways to get essence. Eating spirits is ... well, some Uratha like David do it a lot.”

David, the strange fellow of the pack. The boys called him an Ithaeur, someone who talked to spirits all the time, whether they wanted to or not.

“Yeah I know. But the best way to learn is by doing, right?” Shrugging, Eric motioned ahead, and the group of them stepped back onto the curving sidewalk of the Hisil’s Devil’s Corner.

“Or b-by asking someone who knows more,” Natasha said. “Avery knows more.”

Eric rolled his eyes and slipped his hands into his blue jeans pockets. A t-shirt and jeans for him and Art and Matthew; the fashion was timeless and immortal. At least Sándor wore a dark button shirt, and dark jeans. Only Natasha wore an ensemble that cost more than a hundred dollars: a proper suit, black. Invictus habits died hard.

“Surprised to hear you say that,” Art said, looking down at her.

“W-What? Why?”

The man squirmed and looked around, but no one else said anything, and he sighed.

“After everything that’s happened, I figured you’d be against Avery in most things.”

Natasha frowned up at Arturo with an urge to yell at him. She didn't used to get that urge, not over stuff like this.

“Just b-because ... she ... Just because she t-told you two to ... Just ... b-b-because she...” Natasha grit her teeth, looked down, and took a deep, useless breath. It was so damn hard to find the words, when every time she remembered what Arturo and Matthew did to her, she got upset. She hated not being able to steel herself like Antoinette told her to, to set emotions aside and be logical about things. But, remembering the sudden understanding that a stake stuck out from her chest, and that Arturo had staked her — and Matthew by accessory, since he left it there — filled her with rage.

It was so much easier in the stories. The boys had apologized to her already, and they'd meant it, and she'd accepted their apologizes. And they were now, gladly, trying to fix things. So why couldn't she let it go?

Because this wasn't a story. Real life wasn't nearly so neat and tidy. They'd hurt her. Even if what they did made sense, a little, and might have even been something she'd have done if the situation had been reversed, they'd still hurt her. It'd take time for that to heal.

“Just because,” she said at last, “Avery jumped the gun d-dealing with Maria, doesn't mean she isn't smart, and wise. It d-doesn't mean she doesn't have a lot of experience, or hasn't learned a lot of things.”

“Yeah.” Matthew smiled down at her, a fleeting bit of eye contact announcing he recognized her thoughts. And they hurt him. “But, let's be real. Avery's a bitch.”

Natasha smiled. Smile turned into a giggle when she noticed the pun, and she rolled her eyes. So did Eric. The boys laughed though, cause they were the type to think puns were hilarious. Horrible people.

Sándor looked like he was about to say something. But, predictably, he didn't, and the group kept walking.

Natasha looked around, and got her brain's cogs turning as she took in the sights of the Shadow Realm. Now that the boys had successfully helped Eric, it was Eric's turn to help them. First thing on the list: check out the new tear Avery's pack found some weeks ago.

"I've been out here," Eric said. "I didn't see anything weird."

"It's a ways out," Matt said. "Edge of the city."

Art nodded, but he didn't look happy about it. "Spirits hang out where they can find the most activity on the other side. If we left the city and went into the desert, we'd find few spirits if we jumped into the Hisil, and few loci to allow us to jump at all. It's humans, and us, mingling with each other and the environment that creates disturbances. Spirits are drawn to those, you know? So it's strange this tear is on the outskirts."

"There are other tears," Sándor said. "Some are on the edges of the city, and some are closer to the center. And some defy easy placement." Like the nightmare chambers.

The werewolves nodded. Sándor nodded.

Natasha nearly tore her hair out. "And n-none of you have t-t-t-talked to each other about them!?" The men all looked at each other, each with one or both eyebrows raised, as if what she was asking didn't make sense. Ugh, men. "W-Why not share what you know with each other? First things first, plotting all known tear locations on a map."

It took them a second, but eventually the four men got it.

"Makes sense," Art said. "We've marked them on a map already."

“As have I,” Sándor said. “Mapping the nightmare realm is tricky, but there is an art to it.”

“I suppose if we share what we know, we might see something we didn’t see before.”

Natasha nodded, and pulled out her phone. But of course it didn’t work, or at least, not well, screen flickering and whatnot, and the GPS was useless. She put it away, grumbling.

It wasn’t like she didn’t understand them. And as much as she wanted to blame it on men being typical men, refusing to cooperate and turning everything into a competition even if it killed them, she knew that wasn’t fair. Trusting someone else was almost always a bad idea when dealing with things like vampires, werewolves, nightmare monsters, and what have you. Still, it was easy to see why Antoinette got so frustrated.

They continued walking for a while. Spirits avoided them, especially now that they’d made a kill. They whispered to each other, alien creatures Natasha could only barely comprehend visually, and couldn’t understand verbally. The First Tongue, according to the boys. Arrogant to think it was the first language ever spoken, but it wasn’t like she could challenge it.

As they walked, Matthew and Arturo changed into wolves. Not the big, scary wolves she could have sworn came out of the Neverending Story, but normal wolves. Wolves were still utterly huge beasts, and she didn’t have to crouch to pet their backs as they walked. Petting them, their fur, their warmth, she did it automatically without thinking about it. That was good, right? It felt nice, to forget about what they did, the arguments she and Art were getting into lately, and just touch them again.

She smiled down at Matthew, and scratched behind his ears. Big, deep scratches, complete with some fingernails. He struggled to keep walking, wanting to stop and enjoy it, but he compromised by

leaning his side into her. She did the same for Arturo, and the huge wolf let his tongue dangle as he panted joy.

They walked like this for a while. It felt good, to be near them again. It felt nice.

Eric and Sándor glanced back at her, said nothing, and continued on. She thought maybe they might judge her, for being nice to Matt and Art, considering what they did, but Eric and Sándor didn't seem to have that in them. Those two would probably get along well, if it weren't for how they first met. Maybe—

Everyone stopped, and looked across the street. Natasha squinted into the darkness of another alley, and sucked in a breath as a slithering motion along the asphalt pulled into the shadow.

“Let's ignore it,” Eric said. “We don't need its help.”

“It?” she asked.

“Street-Tail King.”

Oh. She gulped as she stared at the dark alley, and found her hand drifting to her sword hidden under her suit jacket. Darkness radiated from the alley, to the point it not only failed to conform to where the few lights hit the walls of the buildings around it, but also dripped out onto the sidewalk like oil.

Matt and Art changed back to human form again, and they both stared across the street, ready for a fight.

“We haven't talked to it,” Art said, “since it talked to us last time. You were there, Natasha, Eric.”

She was there, and she'd been thoroughly disturbed by it. She wasn't a werewolf, or a spirit animal or anything like that, but she could still feel how disturbing a creature Street-Tail King was. Not

as powerful as Red Tide and Black Blood, but conniving and scheming. Manipulative, and smart. It'd have made a good Kindred.

“Maybe ... m-maybe we should.”

The four men looked at her.

“You—” Matt opened his mouth, but silenced himself. Wincing, he looked down before looking to Art for help. Of course, Art could only do the same, wince and squirm. They were bound, and had to do whatever she said.

But she wasn't so stupid she'd ignore their advice.

“I'll do it,” Eric said.

Art shook his head. “It'll offer the same deal as last time.”

“That's fine.”

Natasha shook her head this time. “J-Jessy won't like you ... getting involved like that.”

“I'm already involved. And Jessy will understand.”

No she wouldn't. Jessy was perfectly happy to get herself in deep water, but if Eric did, she would be pissed. Very, very pissed, and Eric knew it. The fact he was willing to face Jessy's rage to, potentially, gain information to help the city, was oddly heroic. And dumb.

“Eric,” Matt said, “Street-Tail isn't some minor spirit. It's a count. If you agree to a deal, it'll enforce it.”

“The azlu are fucking with Dolareido. Killing people. I want them gone. And if these tears really become the problem Azamel warned us they might ... yeah.”

“We can—”

“You’ve been here for two years and we’re still finding traces of azlu.” Eric walked up to Matt and looked at him, face steady. “You may want to hunt azlu cause of the Gauntlet or some bullshit, I want to hunt azlu because every person who dies in my city is—”

That apparently crossed a line. Matt stood there and took it, but Art put a hand against Eric’s chest and shoved him back.

“We care, Eric, ok? We have to have this conversation again? We care, and Avery cares. But we’ve done this longer than you, and we’ve seen what happens when we get in deep with spirits.”

“Eric,” Matt said, “spirits are tricky. It’s not going to play fair, if it can.”

The offered deal from Street-Tail King was that, if it told them why the azlu were here in Dolareido, and why so many were showing up, then they’d have to deal with the mystery, no matter what. If Street-Tail told them some ancient curse was summoning the azlu, and the only way to stop it was a suicidal sacrifice, then Street-Tail would enforce the deal.

So, the way to deal with the situation, was to talk without committing to anything. A vampire would straight up lie, but Tash didn’t think that was a good idea with spirits.

“Let’s t-talk to it,” Tash said, nodding to Eric. “Don’t say you’ll do anything, but we should talk to it. And I w-want to talk to it t-too.”

Sándor watched, half interested, but the boys looked terrified. They chewed on their lips and looked around, as if they could find something lying about that might change Natasha’s mind. It made Natasha’s heart ache, seeing how scared they were over just the possibility Natasha might get hurt.



“Alright,” Eric said, before looking at the boys. “Don’t worry guys, whatever deal I’m making, it’s just between me and Street-Tail.”

The boys didn’t look consoled, but they eventually sighed and nodded, and followed after Natasha and Eric. Sándor followed behind, eyes scanning the sky. The man was a gargoyle. It made sense he’d keep his eyes up and looking at the perches and stuff, if he lived up there, constantly looking around for prey and whatnot. How much exposure did he have to the Hisil? Begotten could get around anywhere as long as they found tunnels, or created their own to places they’d been before. Plus, he was super old. He probably knew more about spirits than he let on, probably even more than the boys, but would rather not say anything.

But he did come with full intent to help them. Maybe he’d say something, eventually.

The approach to Street-Tail King felt considerably scarier without Avery and the whole pack. It was really, really tall, as tall as Matthew when he was in his werewolf form. She tried to pierce the darkness around the spirit with her special Auspex, but it didn’t work. Whatever it was that radiated around the tall spirit, it wasn’t normal darkness, but as they got closer, she could see its silhouette, and its great height.

“No Avery?” it hissed, and it chattered its teeth a few times, sending a disgusting shiver up Natasha’s spine. Rats could be quite cute. Street-Tail King was not.

“No Avery,” Eric said.

“Or Flowing Sanctuary, I see.” The huge rat creature took a step forward, and Natasha froze. Light from the streetlights cut across its body, and she looked it up and down, taking in the strange form. Wererat, but not really. It could have been a wererat, a ten-foot-tall monster, but there was asphalt in its fur growing out of its body, along with bits of metal, some rebar sticking out of its huge

shoulders and hunched back, and of course, a long tail that looked like a big strip of road, broken and crumbling.

Worse, were the rats. Bloody brown and black things that didn't look fully formed, some of them even hovered slightly, and dozens of them scurried up and down Street-Tail King's body. Like, a mother spider carrying her children on her back, except a giant rat walking on two legs. Nightmare fuel.

"You killed Needle Swords," the spirit said.

"I did."

"Who gave you the right?"

Eric growled, a very wolfish growl despite his human form. "I'm Uratha, that's my right. Needle Swords was yours?"

"It was."

"Wanna tell me what the fuck you were doing letting that freak affect my side of the Gauntlet so much?" Eric took a step closer to the huge rat, and glared up at him. He took affronts to Dolareido personally, which would forever make Natasha smile. He'd only been alive a bit over thirty years? He acted like he was Antoinette, thinking the city was hers. It was cute.

"We go where there is essence, Uratha. It's not our fault if the humans make it worse." The enormous rat shrugged, and licked one of its fangs with a long tongue. "Maybe if you didn't deny us the physical world, we—"

Art shook his head. "Not happening. You know your place, spirit. Don't push it."

The rat smiled, a strange thing to see on a rat face, and tapped a claw against the large front teeth of a rodent.

“That will change soon enough.”

Tash raised a brow, and looked back to the boys. But they also looked confused, and glanced between each other, and even Sándor, before looking back at the spirit. They wanted to ask questions, but they also knew better than to do so, not when every question got them in deeper with the spirit.

“Street-T-T-Tail King,” Natasha said, gulping once as she looked up at the spirit. Beady black eyes caught the streetlights, but there was none of the curiosity she might find in normal rat eyes. This thing was insidious. “We w-w-wanted to ... t-talk about the deal you offered Avery.” A shared glance between her and Eric confirmed, he wanted to do this.

The rat cackled. “I knew you would. One of you damn dogs would, eventually. Just can’t help yourselves. Gotta settle affairs, right? Gotta deal with the shartha.”

“Shartha?”

“Hosts,” Matt said. “Azlu, and some others.”

“Right, right,” the rat creature said. “There’s no beshilu here, or razilu or srizaku, but there are azlu. And more come.”

All three werewolves growled. Apparently the spirit said trigger words.

“B-Before we make any deals, we need some assurances.”

“That’s not how deals work, little Kindred. Buyer beware!”

She glared up at the monster. “You’re not a human s-selling stuff! I want to know more about the deal.”

The rat laughed, but didn't retort this time. Blobby rat spirits crawled down its back and disappeared into the darkness of the alley, but more emerged, hidden in the thick fur of their master.

"I don't have to answer anything."

"You will," Eric said, "if you want anyone to take the deal."

Natasha nodded. "Yeah, so tell us! Tell us if ... if it's p-possible. If you tell us why the azlu are here, why more are coming, and how to stop—"

"I did not say I knew how to stop them ... though I suppose I do, in a way."

"And it's p-possible?"

"Yes, it is. At the end of this mystery, you'll be able to do something." The rat laughed again. "I know what you ask and why, and I'll be generous and tell you! Because I want them gone, too. The mystery can be solved. The azlu can be dealt with. And if you are powerful, skilled, and careful, no one need die. But time grows short."

Eric looked to the others, but all they could do was shrug. It sounded like a good deal then, on the surface. It wouldn't be of course, but if they could make it work, then some information was worth the risk. Eric knew that, and was willing to get in deep with a 'count' to get in.

Jessy was going to be livid.

"Alright Street-Tail King, I'll play," Eric said. "You tell me why the azlu are coming to Dolareido and killing people, and I'll follow that mystery to the end, no matter what."

With a hissing chuckle, Street-Tail King held out a hand. A rat hand, complete with long claws, and a deadly aura even Natasha could sense.

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~~Eric~~

He should have known it wouldn't just be a trade of words. Much as Eric had been spending the past few months getting intimately familiar with the Hisil, he wasn't too familiar with how spirits functioned outside of what they ate. Spirits did deals and trades, to the point it was existential for them. How spirits managed to seal deals between them, he didn't know, but it was probably just as existential for them to satisfy any deal they'd agreed to as much as it was to make them in the first place. Spirits going back on deals probably wasn't a thing, or was damn rare.

An Uratha going back on a deal though, was probably possible, and would have nasty repercussions. But a smart, scheming spirit like Street-Tail King would have a way to make it a safe deal, for it.

Eric reached out for the hand, knowing damn well it'd be a binding contract, like signing a deal with the devil, but before he could touch the strange spirit, Sándor pushed his hand down.

“Hey!” the rat hissed. “Do not interfere, Begotten beast!”

Eric blinked at Sándor a few times, but the man's solid, hard expression stopped him cold.

“The spirit is just desperate to get its claws into you. It knows we're already on the path to dealing with the azlu, and it wants to gain something from it first.”

“I know that, but—”

Sándor shook his head. “Don’t play into its games, Eric. Avery was right.”

That was most definitely not something Eric wanted to hear, but something about the way the man said it didn’t stir a reflexive need to fight him on it. With Avery, sure, first word out of her mouth and Eric wanted to tell her to fuck off. But with Sándor, the man dripped of plain, almost boring honesty. It’d be like getting mad at a tutor for correcting his algebra; not that he’d ever had one.

“You really think we’ll find out why the azlu keep coming here?”

“Yes, I think we will. Maybe not from this,” the Begotten gestured to the rat, “but we will. And ... I’d prefer to keep Dolareido healthy and alive in the mean time. That includes you.”

Eric blinked at the man, several times. But slowly as they looked at each other, things clicked into place. Something had happened to Sándor, something that attached him to Dolareido in a way Eric hadn’t expected from the relative newcomer. Maybe it was Azamel, maybe not, but the man wasn’t the closed off statue he was back at the ball.

Sándor wanted to keep Dolareido safe, and he considered people like Eric to be Dolareido. And Eric could understand that. Maybe he should think about the nightmare monster the same way? Hard to do, when Eric’s first encounter with the man had been beyond violent. Plus, Sándor had literally entered his mind against his will, his dreams. Hard to ignore that. But he should.

“If you d-don’t think it’s a good idea,” Natasha said, looking up at Sándor, “then ... then I think we should listen to him, Eric. He’s older than any of us.”

Older didn’t mean wiser. But, it often did.

“Alright,” Eric said, taking a step back from the spirit. “Alright, let’s do this on our own.”

Sándor nodded. “In the future, don’t be so quick to risk your own life.”

“Yeah I know. I just...”

“Finally found something you wanna fight for?” Art said, smirking. “It’s like a coming of age story ... for a dude in his thirties.”

Eric bit back a sudden desire to spit venom at the asshole. But it wasn’t like he was wrong. He was the odd man out in this world, relatively new to all this paranormal shit, and just trying to figure out how, and what, and why.

“Besides,” Art continued, “I think Street-Tail King is going to point us in the right direction anyway.” The fellow Uratha grew a serpentine grin, and a glance Natasha’s way showed she was looking up at her boyfriend with a similar grin. Apparently Art had come to some sort of sneaky conclusion.

Street-Tail hissed. “Ha! Why would I do that? Stupid Uratha.”

Shaking his head, Art came closer to the spirit. “Because we’re not Avery, and we’re not Flow. We know you have beef with her.”

The rat hissed and took a step back. Not to get away from Arturo; seemed like the rat might be able to take him a straight fight. But instead to get away from the words he was speaking.

“Not with Flow. I know not the river guardian. But Avery, she...” The rat hissed and slammed its tail in the darkness behind it. It was loud, and heavy. “You’re Avery’s pack. I won’t help you. Interloper. Trade, yes. Help? No.”

Street-Tail King had a problem with Avery; probably from when she'd been with Simon. And it probably thought Eric was with Avery, considering how much Eric had already interacted with him and her pack.

"I don't care about Avery," Eric said. "I'm not part of her pack. Neither is Natasha." Might as well include her, since the rat saw her with Avery that one time. "Avery is a pain in our asses, too."

Street-Tail King snorted, only its beady black eyes visible as they caught the light.

"You bring two of hers I know belong in her choir."

Natasha raised a quick hand. "They're w-w-working for me. Bound, by ... a debt to me."

Eric suppressed his grin as he looked down at the little vampire. Smart woman, speaking a language the spirit would understand: economics.

"Does the Kindred speak truly?"

Matt and Art both sighed, and nodded.

"See?" Natasha said with a tiny smile. "I've lived in this city my whole life too, j-just like Eric. Avery isn't our friend. W-We're not here to do ... Uratha things. We're here because Dolareido is in danger. And ... and you care about Dolareido, don't you? I bet you grew up here, or ... or whatever it is spirits d-do, and ... and you're a part of this city."

Silence. But after a few moments, the rat's tail shifted over the asphalt of the alley.

"I do not like Avery."



“Me neither,” Eric said.

“Me neither,” Natasha said.

They looked to Sándor, but the man managed only a tiny shrug before stepping back. They looked to Art and Matt, and both boys groaned and looked away. They might have thought Avery was mean, but they still liked her. And considering they were her pack and had worked with her and under her for a bunch of years, that was understandable. The rest of them, though? Yeah, Avery was a bitch.

“Very well,” the rat said, and it gnashed its teeth a few times. “You do not lie?”

Tash put up her hands. “No lie.”

“Tssh. The word of a Kindred means little. You.” The rat pointed its eyes at Eric. “I can smell the city on you, in your flesh and bones. You’re a part of Dolareido. You swear you are helping Dolareido, and not just serving Avery?”

“I swear. Not that that means much.”

“It means more than it would coming from Avery’s pups.” The rat nodded from the darkness, smile returning and exposing pointed teeth. “I suspect you all know Black Blood is behind the tears.”

Matt, Art, and Natasha winced. Eric and Sándor frowned at each other. None of them wanted Black Blood as an enemy, but if these tears were a problem, then it certainly seemed like it was going in that direction.

“The tears wouldn’t explain the azlu,” Art said. “Not like this, not this ... cooperation, and multiple azlu showing up. Powerful spirits tearing holes through the Gauntlet isn’t unusual either, and sure

that sometimes attracts azlu attention since they want to strengthen the Gauntlet, but—”

“The azlu,” the rat said, “can sense what’s happening. They’re here, desperate to strengthen the Gauntlet, driven by their stupid instinct with overpowering need, because they can sense what’s coming.”

They all looked between each other again. That sounded ominous. That sounded stupidly over dramatic, and ominous, and the longer Eric spent as an Uratha, the more the stupid, crazy-sounding shit came true. If it sounded insane and ominous, it was probably very real.

“And ... that is?” Eric asked.

“Minerva’s legacy.”

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“No wonder Jacob despises her,” Sándor said.

They all nodded, wincing with every step. The situation had just gone from bad to shitty, and Eric and Sándor didn’t really know the details. Natasha filled in what she could.

“It was t-ten years before my time,” she said. “Before my embrace. But, everyone knows about it, about Simon the werewolf. So everyone ... d-dances around the subject, about Avery and Jacob.”

“She hasn’t told us everything either,” Art said. “Her pack got wiped out, after Simon left Dolareido. Only she survived. She met Flow when the spirit was just a tiny thing, barely awakened. Flow saved her life.” Sighing, Art sat down on a bench. It was almost comical, seeing the big guy sit on a bench in such a strange place, especially considering the bench was warped and uneven. “We only know a little about Minerva, and even that Avery doesn’t like us talking about much. We normally feign ignorance about it.”

Sándor shook his head. “I think we’re passed that now, don’t you think?” He didn’t sit down, but he took a stand beside the bench, and looked out to the street as they talked. Keeping watch. “If we can trust the spirit...”

“Spirits can lie,” Matt said, sitting with Art, voice hushed. “It’s rare. They prefer to do trades, you know? Everything has to be a trade, and if you’re caught lying, your credibility is shot.”

That made sense. Spirits weren’t humans. They didn’t have internal struggles of consciousness, and were much, much better at understanding other spirits upfront. It’d be like asking wild animals to lie to each other. Sure, animals tricked each other with their natures, but outright lying? Conscious deception with words? No, spirits could usually be trusted, even the manipulative, deceptive ones like Street-Tail King, who’d twist their words into half truths by their nature.

But they could lie, and that was important.

Sighing, Art leaned forward and set his elbows on his knees, heavy. “Natasha, cloak us please.” Heavy words, with zero of his usual flirtatious charm used on her.

Natasha did so, and as she did, an aura radiated from Arturo. It wasn’t the Cloak, something a vampire could do to make people effectively invisible. But it was something, like a prowling animal using brush to be unseen, despite them being in full view. It didn’t extend past himself, but if Arturo wanted to talk about sensitive stuff, it made sense to double down on stealth.

“I’ll tell you what I know,” Arturo said. “But I don’t know much. Avery doesn’t tell us much about what Minerva was doing, because it’s dangerous. She’s told Clara a little more, but...” Shaking his head, he put a finger to his lips. “Don’t repeat anything I say about Minerva specifically. I’m saying these words, no one else does, and keep it that way until we’re out of the Hisil, understood?” Everyone

nodded, though Eric noticed Sándor's lack of expression. Arturo's words didn't mean much to him, even if he wasn't the sort to stir the pot.

Arturo nodded. "Simon and his pack killed Minerva because she was looking for a way to tear down the Gauntlet."

Everyone winced. It was quickly becoming a habit.

"Tear it down?" Natasha said. "I ... I know she—"

"Minerva wanted to punch a hole in the Gauntlet, so she could communicate with spirits regularly; everyone familiar with Minerva already knew that. The damage she was going to inflict, on the other hand ... We doubt anyone understood just how much she was going to fuck shit up.

"The Ordo Dracul and the Circle of the Crone get into that shit all the time with their experiments and rituals. Minerva worked with both of them. She was friends ... lovers, with Jacob, and got her hands dirty in that business. She was good friends with the Prince too, and was a part of Antoinette's experiments with ephemera."

"Antoinette experiments with ephemera?" Eric asked.

"Yeah. It was a big contention point between her and Simon. We don't like vampires experimenting with ephemera because they're playing with fire. Things like the azlu show up and start killing people. Worse, they sew up the Gauntlet, strengthening it in their mindless pursuit of instinct, to the point they'd kill an area. If the Hisil and Gurihal are completely blocked from each other, the area becomes a wasteland of nothing, devoid of life. There's a balance to strike, and that's what Uratha do."

Matt raised a finger. "Other hosts do different things. Beshilu, rat hosts, gnaw at the Gauntlet and destroy it. Kinda like the tears we've been finding. But we've found no beshilu."

“Azlu though, more have come. We’re finding traces of the fucking spiders, and ... and we’re not sure why.” Sighing again, Art sank his fingers into his knees as he looked down. “Minerva wanted to reach across the Gauntlet, and eventually tear it down. She thought the separation between the physical and shadow was ... bad.” Natasha opened her mouth, but Art put up his hands. “It’s not debatable, Tash. It’d be bad. People would die or suffer, by the billions.”

“B-But ... did she want to tear down the Gauntlet everywhere?”

“We don’t know. Probably not. Maybe she only wanted to do it in a small area. But it wasn’t a risk Simon and Avery were willing to make. And ... and when Avery found out she wasn’t just researching how to do this, but had figured it out, they stopped her.”

Natasha’s jaw dropped. “She found a way t-to open a portal?”

“No. Portals exists. Doorways. Verges. They open and close, and sure, we hate that they exist, but they’re manageable. They can be stable or unstable, but unstable ones usually just collapse and fade. What Minerva was doing was more like ... tearing things apart at the seams. If she succeeded, she’d have created a permanent hole, and it would have damaged the Gauntlet around it. Simon was convinced the seams would keep tearing, and ... and it’d spread, like a hole in old clothes, you know?”

Natasha and Sándor might not have felt the horribleness that statement implied, but Matt, Art, and Eric all shivered. Ice ran up Eric’s back, and his breath caught in his throat. It wasn’t a human fear, like a fear of death or pain, of hunger or anything like that. The spirit wolf in him was fucking terrified of the idea of the Gauntlet disappearing, in a way he couldn’t express with words. It was ingrained into him, like instinct. The Gauntlet was existential for Uratha, and as alien an idea as it was, he couldn’t deny it. The fear

grabbed him and continued to jolt up and down his spine until it sickened him.

If the Gauntlet disappeared, billions would die, but it'd be worse than that. Spirit and flesh, everywhere. Things like hosts, azlu turning human bodies into giant spider monsters, would be common. Possessed people, possessed objects, spirits would have free reign to indulge physical pleasures until they were satisfied. Existence itself would become chaos.

“... that's heavy,” Eric said eventually.

Matt and Art smiled at him. They knew how much he'd dumbed down his thoughts to say that.

“I ... I can understand Avery n-now, I guess,” Tash said. “D-D ... Does Jacob know this?”

“He knows Avery killed Minerva because she was fucking with the Gauntlet. He doesn't know about the damage Minerva might have caused. He doesn't know Minerva was on track to screw over everyone and everything. He doesn't know his lover ... had found a way. He doesn't know, because if he knew it was possible, he might just try and do it.”

Eric gulped. Good god. “You're sure she figured out a way to do it?”

“Avery thinks so. Simon thought so. Avery won't tell me about it, but I can only assume it was some ritual.”

Sándor managed a small frown, but it was gone a second later. “So instead of pursuing more information about Jacob, and his accomplice Black Blood, you harassed Maria?” Ok, the man's face still didn't frown, but his voice certainly did, and it shocked everyone. Strange to hear anger coming from him.

“We didn’t know these new tears attracting the azlu had anything to do with Minerva,” Art said. “We thought maybe it was just Black Blood or Red Tide, or even Street-Tail overstepping themselves. What we do know, is there are spirits here talking about Maria, and about crossing the barrier. These spirits also hang around some of the tears we’ve found. We also know some of these tears rip more than just a hole from the Hisil to the Gurihal and back. Some go to other realms too, which was never Minerva’s plan, far as we know.”

“Right,” Matt said. “You went through one that went to somewhere else, didn’t you?” The big guy gestured to Eric and Sándor.

The Begotten nodded. “We did. A land of ghosts. I’ve seen it before in my travels, but I avoid it. All living creatures do.”

“And,” Art said, “the one we’re checking out tonight goes somewhere else.” They all opened their mouths, but Art put up his hands. “We don’t know where it goes. We couldn’t get a close look. There were blood wraiths everywhere. We want to get closer, but we’ll need a distraction.”

“You couldn’t do that before?” Sándor asked. “There’s less of us now than there’d be if your entire pack found this before.”

“We were injured. Jack kicked in our teeth. Avery planned to investigate it once we were all healed up, but even then, it’s tricky. The red wraiths are connected to Black Blood, and they might be part of its choir. If we piss them off, we might piss Black Blood off, and we still don’t know what its banes and bans are. Still don’t know how much control of the city Black Blood has.”

“Avery wants us to be careful,” Matt said. “She ... she really wants to avoid the same situation Simon created with the vampires.”

“Then explain M-Maria.” Folding her arms across her chest, Natasha glared at both of Avery’s pack members, eyes turning into

little daggers. Damn, cold. Ice cold.

The two boys sighed as they looked down.

“Black Blood deals in death,” Art said eventually. “And the dead. Maria lost her lover Lucas. These blood wraiths we know are connected to Black Blood have been caught saying Maria’s name. You heard them yourself, Tash.”

“I—”

“And when we went to investigate Maria’s den, we didn’t go in swinging. We demanded to see what she was up to, and she refused. If she’d just let us—”

“You would have violated her privacy! And—”

“If we didn’t act, and it turned out she was behind all this, the Gauntlet could be gone, Tash! Things would have—”

“B-But you didn’t know, and you made things worse! You c-could have—”

Sándor stepped between them, face solid and unmoved. “Later. For now, we’re here to get a peek at this tear. And from what I’m hearing, we have two options. Distract any nearby red wraiths, or dispose of them.”

“I’ve seen these wraiths,” Eric said. “Hovering freaks with giant claws? Obsessed with flesh?” That was weird, even by spirit standards. The only way spirits could awaken with a hunger for that, was if there was a lot of that in the physical world. And sure, Dolareido had its share of blood and flesh, but statistically, it was less violent than other big cities.

Unless Black Blood was involved, and had created the essence gatherings that formed the wraiths. Maybe they were part of its



choir.

“We need information,” Eric said. “Recap. According to you, Art, everyone who knew Minerva closely also knew she was trying to punch a hole in the Gauntlet. Like you said, there are portals and verges and gateways through the Gauntlet already, in Dolareido and in other cities I’m sure. But you’re telling us that what Minerva didn’t tell anyone, was that what she was doing was quite literally capable of damaging the Gauntlet in a real way, like, so it might ... all come crumbling down?”

Arturo nodded. “Avery told us that she told Minerva about what would happen, toward the end, but Minerva didn’t listen. She either already knew, didn’t believe her, or didn’t care.”

“And Jacob doesn’t know this.”

The boys shook their heads.

“Well, shit.” That’d make any interaction with the deadly-as-fuck elder a pain in the ass. “And you’re also saying only Avery herself knows exactly what Minerva was doing to threaten the Gauntlet, what ritual she was doing.”

“Yeah,” Art said. “But whatever she was doing, it didn’t involve tears, far as we know. Avery would have said something by now.”

Natasha raised a hand. “Or Minerva hadn’t gotten to that p-point yet where she’d need them.”

Eric nodded to the little vampire. “So the only reason we have to think these tears have anything to do with Minerva, is what Street-Tail King, a scheming, dirty, underhanded spirit told us. The spirits we’ve found around these tears are, instead, talking about Maria, and...”

“And finishing a ritual,” Matt said.

“A ritual.” Eric groaned and looked down the road and where it led to the edge of the city. “I can understand why you thought it was Maria.”

Natasha sighed, but slowly nodded. “M-Maybe, back then. But we know more now. A new tear was created while Maria was healing. And Jack has t-told me that he knows for sure Black Blood is connected to these tears. It’s connected to Jacob, but I don’t think it’s connected t-t-to Maria.”

“Which means,” Sándor said, “we have to consider that Black Blood is chasing Minerva’s legacy. Which, I think is safe to say, a bad thing. And it also means anything we do to put a stop to it, is going up against Black Blood.”

“And maybe Jacob,” Art said, “if the vampire is helping it. I ... christ, if Jacob’s trying to do what Minerva was doing...”

Black Blood, a spirit so strong it was basically a god, was a deadly threat, but an obvious one. Jacob was sneaky, and the worst enemy they could have asked for.

Natasha hugged herself as she looked down. “If Jacob...” Earlier frustration wiped away, she sat between her two boyfriends on the bench, and leaned into Art’s side. “No w-w-wonder Street-Tail King wanted to make a deal, to force anyone who knows the truth t-to ... make sure it gets dealt with, no matter what. Oh, oh god! What about Samantha, and J-Jack! What about—”

Sándor shook his head. “We don’t know anything for sure yet. The word of a spirit is usually good, but Street-Tail King seems to embody a lot of Dolareido’s dirty aspects. Lying could be included. For now, let’s focus on the goal, checking out this new tear.”

He didn’t sound convinced.

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The closer they got to the tear, the fewer spirits they ran into. Most spirits hung out in the more densely populated areas, wherever there was the most human activity on the other side of the Gauntlet. That meant the entertainment district with its high rise apartment buildings and hotels, jammed to the gills with residents and tourists alike. Out here toward the edge of Devil's Corner, there wasn't much activity.

Considering the edge of the city led out to a rocky desert, it was a perfect place for someone to do something they didn't want others to interfere with.

Natasha sighed, eyes still down on the sidewalk as they walked. She was a thinker. Eric was too, he supposed, but not like her, a forward thinker trying to solve problems. It was a good thing she was in charge of this adventure.

"If Jacob is helping Black Blood, I can't imagine he wants to d-destroy everything," she said. "He can't know!"

"That makes things worse," Art said. "If he knows, then our goal is clear: kill Jacob. And the Prince would help with that. If he doesn't know, then it gets more complicated. We'll have to convince him, and he hates our guts."

Natasha sighed louder and hugged herself as they walked. "Poor Samantha."

"If the man is intelligent," Sándor said, "he can be reasoned with."

Eric said nothing. He knew even a smart man can do stupid things, but they all knew that too. No point in saying it. And he was happier keeping his mouth shut.

"What if Jacob's not involved at all?" Matt said. "Black Blood could be doing this on its own. And even then, Black Blood might not know the damage it's going to cause."

Art shuddered. “If this is Black Blood’s goal, then ... then I don’t know what to do. I doubt we could beat it in a fight. Best we could hope is to find its bane, or somehow prevent it from being able to do the ritual, permanently.”

“Worthy goals,” Sándor said. “But for now, let’s focus on making sure this ritual, or whatever it is, doesn’t happen. Easier to do that, than fight Black Blood straight on.”

Everyone nodded. All this planning and speculating was pointless if they couldn’t deal with the immediate issue.

“M-Maybe Street-Tail King knows more?” Natasha asked. “It seems p ... p-pretty convinced that these tears are being made to try and do whatever Minerva was doing. How did it find out?”

Arturo shrugged. “It’s a sneaky bastard. If it didn’t want to be found, we wouldn’t be able to find it. You saw Red Tide, and you’ve seen Black Blood. Street-Tail wouldn’t be able to take any of them in a straight fight, but it still manages to fight for power in Dolareido. And it does it by being a really sneaky fucker.”

Eric had seen Red Tide from a distance once. Fighting that would be like fighting a ship-destroying kraken. No thanks.

Natasha looked up at Art. “But?”

“But, sneaky as it is, Red Tide and Black Blood are older, and an order of magnitude stronger. The fact Street-Tail learned what it did is surprising. I’m surprised it knew what little it did.” Art mirrored Natasha, rubbing his arms a few times, like he was cold. “Dolareido is a big place, a huge, dense city, with millions of people. The spirits here are powerful, with massive choirs. I’m sure Street-Tail King has been up to some crazy stuff for decades, so has Red Tide and Black Blood, and a lot of that stuff probably enters the ‘deadly as all fuck’ category. But this ... this is a step up. Street-Tail King put its life on the line, telling us anything.”

He was right, of course. The spirits had their own world in the Hisil, with objectives that had nothing to do with the physical world. They fought each other, made deals, alliances, started wars, and did all they could to spread their influence. That was the key, the driving force behind their actions, spreading influence. And for spirits, that meant spreading their very manifestation. Getting to the physical world was a way for them to do that, and experience pleasures only the physical world provided.

Sometimes Eric thought of them as mindless animals, slaves to their instincts. They weren't.

“We're almost there,” Matt said. “Let's get higher. Tash, keep us cloaked as best you can.”

A minute later, they were on the rooftops. No need to climb, there were fire escapes.

Natasha was an impressive little vampire. It was easy to think she was weak because of her size, but a cursory understanding of the paranormal world made that irrelevant. It was her attitude that made it easy to underestimate her, her meekness. But the truth was, the girl was really good. After dealing with a few vampires, some around Natasha's age, Eric had built an understanding of their capabilities, and Natasha defied them. Her, Jessy, Damien, and of course Jack, all of who were or had been Right Hands. No wonder.

She kept them wrapped in her Cloak, so any spirits that looked their way wouldn't see them. Arturo did his own thing, blending into the night shadows in a way that had all of them struggling to see him, even with him right next to them. Eric doubted either would be able to keep Street-Tail, Red Tide, or Black Blood from being able to see them, at least not when close. But from a distance? They should be good. Should be.

The last building at the edge of the city held a convenience store and some shitty apartments above it. The road kept on and on

though, asphalt disappearing behind the low hills of the desert. Maybe a quarter mile down the road, there was a gas station. And around the gas station, was a dozen blood wraiths, drifting around, massive claws dangling from long black arms underneath their smoky, dripping torsos of red and black, colors flowing like wet ink. No legs, just black and red smoke.

Above the gas station building, maybe five feet over its flat roof, was a tear. Straight out of a SciFi or something, it genuinely looked like a tear in reality, as if someone or something had dragged a claw along the air and cut through it to something behind it. As if the air was a curtain hiding something, and someone had taken a knife to it. As if ... a whole bunch of dumb metaphors that couldn't quite get across what they were looking at.

But it was something they'd seen before, all of them. And just like the one in the hospital, it looked frayed at the edges, like it really had damaged the material around it.

The group crouched at the edge of the building. Natasha squinted like a squirrel, either from trying to see the tear from a distance, or from how she had to focus to keep them all wrapped in her Cloak. Thankfully they'd brought some binoculars, and Eric took a peek.

"It's different than the verges," Matt said. "The other portals in the city, old and closed, you know? Jack came through one of them once, with Fiona and Damien. We checked it out. But it was old and stable. These new ones are ... well," he gestured to the tear in the distance, "not stable."

"So those azlu creatures are drawn to them?" Sándor asked. "Because they want to seal the tears?"

"Yeah, but we don't know why so many keep coming. Azlu want to block off the Gauntlet. They would see a hole and go to work on it like beavers. But it's really weird for multiple azlu to show up at the same time. Unless they can sense something we don't."

“How did they develop such an instinct?”

“A question for Father Wolf,” Art said, body a subtle blur of shadow beside them. “But you’ll have to go back in time a ways to talk to him.”

“How far?” The Begotten almost sounded serious.

“No idea. Ten thousand years? A million?”

“Quite the range.”

“Yeah well, none of us know for sure what happened to our ancestor, or if he even existed. But Luna holds us responsible. If you wanna know, ask her.”

Eric handed the binoculars to Sándor, sneaking a glance to Art as he did. If Luna didn’t talk to them, but talked to him, maybe he could ask? Then again, asking a supposed deity about the death of her supposed mate, was probably a great way to get smote.

“We don’t know,” Matt said, “how the hosts learned to do what they do. Might as well ask a normal spider how it learns to spin a web. There’s probably an answer, but best we can guess is instinct.”

“The instinct of a monster,” Sándor said. “A terrifying proposition.” After few moments of silence as they all absorbed what the nightmare monster said, Sándor lowered the binoculars, squinted, and looked again. “I ... don’t know what’s through that tear.”

Matthew shrugged. “We don’t either. We thought the tears always went between the physical and shadow halves, but then you guys found that tear in your nightmare room ... place ... thing, the one that went to that place with all the ghosts.”

“I’ve seen that ghost realm, long ago. I avoided it, but I’ve seen it. I’ve seen other realms connected to ours, as well. Dreams, nightmares, the spirits, the dead, but other things too. Odd creatures, and...” Sándor lowered the binoculars, and handed them to Matthew, without ever moving his eyes off the tear. Whatever he saw stunned him. “I don’t recognize what I see through that tear.”

“Is that ... bad?” Natasha asked.

With a heavy groan, Sándor tore his eyes away from the gas station, and looked each of them in the eyes. “I’ve seen the bright place, where nightmares cannot go. My horror cannot go where the Dark Mother doesn’t allow, but at least it understood what we saw through those woods and into the shining light of the bright place. But I’ve also seen across chasms between realms into ... into things I can’t understand. This tear reminds of that, of staring across a ... colossal emptiness, into things I can’t fathom, or reach.”

Mister stoic was also apparently a poet. And good with ghost stories, because despite his steady tone, everyone stared at him like he was describing their inevitable deaths to some deadly poltergeist.

“Begotten really get to realm hop, don’t they?” Matt said.

The Begotten nodded. “If I’ve been there, I can find a way to tunnel back there from my lair. If I’ve found a doorway, I can open it, no matter who has created it. I’ve opened some strange doors in my long life, made by strange entities. I say this so you know I’ve seen a lot of things, and...” He sighed again and gestured back toward the tear. “I don’t know.”

“How much longer till sunrise?” Eric asked.

“An hour,” Natasha said. “I’d prefer more time. Maybe ... m-maybe we should retreat? There’s m-more of those wraiths here than you’d thought there’d be, right?” She gestured to the boys, and they nodded. “We’ve learned a lot tonight. A lot ... lot lot lot. I...”



“Have to talk to the Prince.” Art nodded, and pat Natasha on the shoulder. “And we have to talk to Avery.”

Eric raised a hand. “Avery’s going to freak out that you told us about Minerva.”

“Yes,” Sándor said, “and so will the Prince, after a fashion.”

The little vampire nodded, looked down, and frowned. “It’s ... it’s such bad t-timing. The Invictus and Carthians are fighting, and it’s only going to get worse, and the P-P-Prince is...”

“Let those vamps do their thing,” Art said, “and we’ll take care of this. We have to take care of this.”

Matthew shook his head. “But if Avery pisses off those wraiths, Black Blood will get involved. We’re still not sure what its bans are. We think it can’t interfere with us if we don’t interfere directly with it, but we don’t know for sure. And we still don’t know what its banes are, either. No idea how to hurt it.”

“Then we’ll have to do this the sneaky way,” Art said, grinning.

Matt returned the grin, nodding. “Sneaky.”

Eric looked between the two men as they nodded to each other, and the glance between them spoke a million words. The two of them were so in sync with each other, it was like looking at one person. In that one glance between them, they shared a million ideas, a million plans and failures, and a million conversations. No wonder they were comfortable in their relationship with Natasha.

“Alright,” Natasha said. “Let’s head back. W-We can make a plan, and get a better look at that tear another night. And see if we can do it without B-B ... Black Blood catching us.”

Catching us, and killing us, Eric thought.

---

~~Antoinette~~

Within one of the changing rooms of Antoinette's tower, the elder delighted in one of her greatest guilty pleasures: playing dress up with another.

It almost surprised Antoinette, how little effort it required to convince her childe to try on the new dress. She knew better than to call attention to the behavior; the perfect way to make anyone stop a new, desired behavior, was to call attention to it. But still, Antoinette found herself smiling as her childe slipped the fishnet top over her head.

"I feel naked."

"And you look naked. Well, nearly."

Samantha squirmed and wriggled like a worm on a hook, and adjusted the black bikini top underneath the fishnet top. Again. It was a tiny thing, barely enough to cover her nipples, and considering it was latex, it reflected light beautifully. No doubt it would draw wandering eyes, as intended.

"Isn't this Jessy's shirt?"

"Of course not. Though, I have seen the Gangrel wear such clothes before. Brazen and blatant, are they not?"

Samantha frowned as she looked down at herself, at the high hip thong and tiny latex skirt, the fishnet stockings, and the top. "I look like I should be going to a rave, or m-maybe star in an action film where I wear sunglasses all the time. It's like ... if I wanted to use my boobs as a weapon, this is how I'd dress them."

Antoinette chuckled. "Ah yes, to empower your décolletage with the ability to kill. Such is the purpose of these clothes."

“I meant more like, how I literally look like a super villain or something.”

“Perhaps to you. To me, you look like a young woman from the eighties who spends her nights going to public, dangerous gatherings and hunting for thrills.”

Samantha giggled and spun around in front of the tall mirror a few times, trying to catch a glimpse of her reflection. Of course there were more mirrors about, with tri-sections surrounding her to let her see all of herself, and she grinned as she looked herself up and down, front and behind.

“I was never that kinda girl, you know?”

“Oui, but I have a sneaking suspicion you wished you had been. And with Dolareido’s infinite pleasures so close, I am surprised you did not taste them.”

“I met James when I was pretty young. And sure, we did some crazy stuff, but ... not crazy by Dolareido standards.”

“I assume that has been changing, with your growing relationship with Jacob?”

After a mischievous grin, Samantha paused in front of the mirror, and looked herself up and down several more times, confidence building in her expression. She also wore several silver bracelets and a necklace to match the black ensemble, along with heels; not the usual necklace she wore, not tonight. The dress was loud, as was all fashion from the eighties, and perfect for their mission for the night.

“I think you’re right. Jacob’s been, uh ... still helping me find ways to enjoy myself. Him, and the others.”

Antoinette, standing on the other side of the changing room and before her own array of mirrors, held a long dress of black against her naked body as she peeked over her shoulder at her childe.

“You tempt me to ask of Othello.”

“Oh god, Othello, him and Madison are—”

“Non non, do not tell me, childe. I am delighted that you have awakened to sexual bliss, but some things will lose their allure if you share them openly.”

“But, you always wanted to know everything I was up to? Especially the sexy stuff.”

Nodding, Antoinette let the black dress fall over her head. It was barely more than a few strips of fabric, with an open back and a cross over her breasts, loose strips that only decades of practice allowed her to walk in without exposing herself.

“I did, and do. But you must admit some pleasures are pleasurable because of how taboo they are, non? In the future, many years from now, such things will no longer be dark, dirty little secrets, and you may find yourself chasing the indescribable bliss of indulging such carnal sins, bliss you can only experience when knowing full well the acts are taboo. Chasing, but never again quite able to find.”

Antoinette rejoined her childe and stood behind her, looking the reflection up and down and admiring her choice of fashion. Samantha thought she looked like a villainess or femme fatale, and while Antoinette would not have used such descriptors, it fit, in a strange, naive way. Perhaps in the future, Samantha would feel more comfortably actively dressing to look, as Jessy would no doubt put it, a ‘slut in heat’, but for now, she would entertain the silly woman’s delightful flights of fancy.

“Therefore,” she continued, “if you have been indulging, perhaps ... some rather indecent acts with Jacob and the Circle, I would say to keep it secret, for now. If, say, you have experienced a rather joyous time with both Othello and Jacob filling your body with theirs,” she leaned down until her chin was over her childe’s shoulder, so she could look her in the eyes through the mirror’s reflection, “I would advise to keep it to yourself, for now. If you have ever found yourself with both of them inside you, together, while perhaps that infuriating Jennifer and intriguing Beatrice touched you, an act of pure obscene indecency, I would advise you to keep it to yourself ... for now.”

Every word had Samantha squirming and looking away, embarrassed as Antoinette described acts the woman had obviously already indulged in, or was on the precipice of doing so. And now, thanks to Antoinette’s words, sealing the acts as taboo in her childe’s mind, Samantha would enjoy them a thousand times more.

Oh, to feel that rush again, the joys of discovering a new kink, a new way to explore and embrace eroticism, when such things were discouraged. Blurry memories danced through her mind, teasing her with her inability to solidify them, but her memories were not so lost she could not recall sensations, and emotions.

“I do suggest you keep a journal,” Antoinette said. “Avoid mentioning anything that could break the Masquerade if discovered, and I would also suggest using pen and paper. Your memories can be archived safely, and in several hundred years, when deep torpors have rendered these memories hazy mirages, you can read your own words from a time long forgotten. It is a ... powerful experience.”

“I should do that! That makes sense.” Nodding, her childe spun in front of the mirror a couple more times, smile ever growing.

“You like Jacob. You wish to spend time with him. You wish to see him smile.”

Blinking, confused, Samantha looked up at her through the mirror. “Well, yeah. I mean, we’re dating.”

Antoinette could not help but laugh at the silly girl’s obliviousness. She was too charming for her own good.

“What I meant, young childe, is that you actively seek ways to make him happy.”

“Isn’t that what dating is?”

“In a sense. Dating often comes from a place of selfishness; a reasonable act, when you have yet to form a deep bond with the other. Only when two have been in a relationship for a time, and have developed love for the other, do you truly find joy in putting the other before yourself.” She leaned down over Samantha, and gently probed her temple. “Before yourself, not instead of yourself. Remember that.”

“O-Okay.” Samantha looked back into the mirror, nodding. The advice had sunk in, to some degree at least, and that was enough for now. “But, I know lots of people who’ve gone out of their way to put their partner before themselves, even when it’s a young relationship.” Perhaps not.

“Yes, but there is a difference between the wistful joys of a new relationship and all its novelty leading to powerful gestures — often done from a place of selfishness, not selflessness — versus a genuine, deep desire, to see your other thrive. You were married for many years, and happily, oui?”

“Yes. James and I loved each other, and often did things for each other.” No hesitation from her childe to speak of her dead husband. Naive and fragile in some ways Samantha may be, but sturdy and strong in others as well.

“I only bring attention to this topic, because there are some individuals that are inherently self sacrificing. Such individuals can display the behavior of one deeply in love, and yet, they are simply lacking in self confidence and self worth, and cannot imagine doing something for themselves. Such individuals do things for others and only others, and it can, and does, lead to terribly self destructive patterns.”

“You think ... I’m one of those women who don’t know how to consider themselves first?”

“I think you can be. I wanted to draw attention to it, that is all. And I apologize if I you were consciously aware of it as you pursued your relationship with Jacob. I am not there to monitor your interactions with the man, but as I said, you seem to enjoy his company, to the degree that I thought, perhaps, quite powerful.”

“Oh, I get what you’re getting at. I...” Samantha sighed as she looked herself up and down a few more times. “It’s a little early to think I might love him. I know I’m the sort to get, uh, swept off my feet easily, but I’m not a child, sire.” Even as she said it, she grinned at her reflection. Not a child, but she was well aware her emotional attitude when romance was involved, was quite powerful and juvenile, and fun. The sort of woman who genuinely found themselves caught in the drama of soap operas.

“Agreed.”

“But, he is great. And it’s not just all the sex.” She managed to say sex without squirming. Oh how her little childe was growing up. “I’m afraid to push too hard though.”

“Oh?”

“About his past, and about who he is. He talks about some of the things he’s done, interesting stuff you know? Exploring the world, and even some of the witchy stuff he’s delved into. But he doesn’t

talk about the personal stuff, like Minerva. At least, he doesn't tell me everything, like where the ... emotional scars are."

"It may take years for him to do so, but if your relationship continues to grow, I am confident he will." For all Jacob's troubled past, the man was not so broken that the touch of a good woman could not soothe his soul, at least a little. "Now, let us be off. I hope to make great progress tonight."

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All eyes fell on Antoinette the moment they entered Bloodlust. A few seconds later, onlooking eyes fell to Samantha, and soon after, Ashley and Julee. All four women were dressed to kill, inviting the gazes of the men and women in the club. It would make this teaching moment easier.

Soon, the four of them were upstairs. Ashley and Julee stood behind the booth, doting and ready, while Samantha and Antoinette sat within.

"How has your skill with Majesty progressed?"

"B-Badly. It's easy to find a meal with the witches, so I'm getting lazy. Othello's always sharing Madison, and Jacob has thralls and ghouls, and ... yeah."

"As expected." Antoinette rolled her eyes, and put a hand on Samantha's where it rested on the booth table between them. "We will—"

"Where is everyone?" Slowly, Samantha leaned over the edge of the booth seat, before sitting upright with a start. "Sorry, sire! I just ... I see plenty of kine, but aren't there usually at least some Kindred here? And I don't see any of the thralls or ghouls I usually do."

There was no avoiding it. Samantha was a Kindred of Dolareido, and while she was no Invictus or Carthian, the war affected the city



and everyone in it. To Antoinette's chagrin.

"This growing war affects many things. It simmers, for the moment, but soon I expect it will boil. All the Invictus and Carthians are preparing for that war."

Sighing, her childe nodded as she scooted back into the booth, and then closer again until she was almost touching Antoinette's side. The poor creature was afraid, perhaps for herself, but a single glance to her eyes screamed who she was truly afraid for.

She would forever be a mother.

"You ... can't stop the war?"

"That is a complicated question, Samantha."

"I know, but you're the Prince. You're super strong, and so's the sheriff."

"I am strong, young Kindred, as is my old friend Daniel. But we are not invincible. Plenty of Kindred my age have been defeated by hubris, and by ignoring the reality around them." After a heavy nod, Antoinette leaned over the table, setting her elbows upon it and netting her fingers together. "Here we sit, in a club, or perhaps a night lounge depending on your perspective, and we are able to do so because I am quite hands-off with the covenants in my city."

"But..." Her childe looked down at her own hands, set them on the table near Antoinette's, and twiddled them. "People might die. You don't want to stop that?"

"In other cities, there are often no-kill rules in place for Kindred. I have strongly discouraged killing, but have not outlawed it, largely because psychology and history have made it painfully clear that laws against behavior do not prevent that behavior, not without great consequence. And in many cases, encourage the behavior. In

other cities where the covenants rule with iron fists, the other covenants battle against them, and kill kine in secret. They wage war constantly, but unofficially.”

“But ... but because of how you do things here in Dolareido, it’s relatively peaceful.”

“Relatively. But despite my centuries of efforts, these infernal, infantile covenants cannot ever truly harmonize. With Viktor and Tony gone, it has been better, but the damage between Michael and Garry is severe. They have both killed Kindred, and hidden the evidence well.”

“Killed?” Samantha gasped as she looked up at her.

“Indeed.” Antoinette pat her childe’s hand once again. “If I decided to embrace ruling this city as many other covenants do, you and I would not be sitting here in a club, without worry of assassination. At best, we would be looking over our shoulders every moment, anticipating it. At worst, sections of the city would be under constant guard, with no-trespassing laws in place.”

“But, what if ... I don’t know, you dealt with the Invictus and Carthians yourself? Maybe the city’s Kindred, or at least Michael and Garry, aren’t ... redeemable?”

“There are many who would say the same of Jacob.”

Silence. Samantha stared at her, confused and shocked, but as understanding dawned, her eyes grew heavy and looked to the table and her fingers once more.

“He’s got a dark history, doesn’t he? Things he ... he hasn’t told me, but he’s hinted about them.”

“He does, my childe, but he is my friend for a reason. Be careful with him, but ... but trust that Jacob is not Viktor, or Tony or Lucas.”

A sly grin teased across Antoinette's lips, but she crushed it immediately. "Ask him sometime, about his wishes for the city. I think you will find the old fossil's plans to be both drastically different than my own, and yet, contain his own strange, twisted wisdom."

"I'm afraid to do that."

"You are dating an elder, Samantha. Be prepared to wade through darkness."

Her childe slowly smiled, strength coming to her. "I've waded through a lot of darkness lately. I ... guess I can handle a little more."

Jacob's darkness certainly was not 'little', but Antoinette returned the smile and nodded. Defying all odds, Jack had managed to deal with the nigh infinite troubles and pains that fell upon him. Perhaps Samantha could do the same.

Or Antoinette's hopes for Jacob would be in vain.

"Now, returning to the covenants. I will not stop this war as long as they do not break the Masquerade, because not only would it not be as easy you as believe, but also because there is more to this conflict than meets the eye. For now, understand that you should avoid speaking with either group until this war is over. As long as you do not interfere, they will not touch you. As long as I do not interfere, they will not touch you."

"M-Me? I ... I guess I am your childe. I'm a target."

Antoinette grinned at her childe, and winked. "Not a good one, not if whoever threatens you wishes to live. Unfortunately, Kindred are crafty, and it is better to be cautious than arrogant." Samantha looked up to her, wanting more information. Feeling charitable, Antoinette gave her a little more truth, to sate her hunger. "Garry

and Michael are not the men people think they are. There is, perhaps, a little hope that things will turn out better than my colleagues believe.”

“And Jack...”

“Thankfully, Jack is not the focus of this issue. Unfortunately, he is a valuable tool in Michael’s control. But I am confident Jack will discover a way to deal with this war with minimal deaths.”

“Minimal. Ugh.”

“Now, for the matter at hand. You are here to practice your skills, my childe. Once you can seduce men and women in this environment easily, we can move up to more difficult tasks.”

“Like?”

“Such as seducing a room filled with lawyers, for example.”

She cringed. “Lawyers? Bleh! Why not doctors?”

“Come now Samantha, doctors? Medical doctors? Sweet childe, they are walking, talking medical encyclopedias, without a single critical thought in their minds.” Antoinette laughed as she slipped an arm behind Samantha’s shoulders and gave her a gentle hug as she smiled warmly down at her. “Lawyers think. They look for logic patterns and logic holes for a living. They—I digress. Tonight, you shall seduce a couple.”

“Couple?”

“A couple. Go downstairs, catch the eye of two, and enthrall them. You will use Majesty, of course. You will Awe them.”

Samantha immediately began squirming, obviously still terrified with the idea of being front and center of such sexual attention.

Surprising, considering the woman had no doubt become exactly that among her witch friends.

“We uh ... we’re not going to sleep with them, right?”

“If you wanted to, and Jacob did not mind, I would say to indulge as you desired. Jack and I prefer to keep our physical relationship between us, and when we are feeling playful, we ask our close friends, and our thralls and ghouls to join us.” Speaking of Jack in such a manner almost earned a groan from her childe, but Samantha recovered quickly. “And I am under the impression you and Jacob are in a similar arrangement, though instead of close friends and thralls, you have the Circle.”

More squirming. “Kinda.”

“Then do not sleep with your prey tonight. Feed, and send them both into the sleepy bliss of the Kiss.”

“Um, if I get two kine up here, will you feed with me?”

“No. As you know, we Daeva prefer to feed on the same individuals. If you ever find someone to feed on regularly, given time, the thought of feeding on another will disgust you.” Antoinette nodded back toward her two ghouls, who remained attentive behind the booth, and they both smiled at Antoinette in return.

“Right, right.”

“Majesty, young childe, is about power. Other Kindred blood clans may think of it as nothing more than seduction, but seduction too, is a battle of power. It is not as direct as Dominate or Nightmare, but a battle nonetheless. You will not clash with the minds of those you enthrall directly, but indirectly.”

Samantha nodded. “I have to draw their attention, but not make it a straight on fight. So, like ... teasing a cat with a toy on a string. I have to get the cat to chase, even if the cat doesn’t want to.”

“An apt analogy. With Majesty, you can have anyone chasing you, desperate to satisfy you, to please you, and eventually, to serve you. Once you have had centuries to master it, you will have the power to enslave entire rooms. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of people, rendered hopelessly addicted to you.”

“Addicted. It ... it sounds dangerous, like it could backfire, you know? Obsessed fans can do some horrible things.”

“It very well could, my childe. But you are no simple kine musician. You are Kindred, and far stronger than the kine you feed on. You are the predator, and they are the prey. Remember that. Now, off with you. Approach the two kine you wish to enthrall for the night, reach into yourself, summon the vitae within, and call to them. They are cats, and you are their owner who wields the toy.”

Nodding, and taking a deep, useless breath, Samantha slid out of the booth, and walked downstairs. And without so much as a glance back, either. My my, how the young vampire had grown.

Antoinette smiled after her childe, but once she was gone, leaned back into her booth. Tempted, quite tempted, to message Jack and inquire about his current circumstances, but the two of them had decided to not ask about each other’s business. Jack had asked her about the Ordo in the past, but after she had explained that her secrets could not be shared, even with him, those questions ceased. He respected her and her position. And it was not long before they agreed it would lead to misfortune if Jack told her of Invictus business.

But she was the Prince, and had long earned some leeway. She texted him, a simple message.

~Are you alright, my love?~

Two minutes later, a response.

~Yeah. I think I'm gonna have to talk to Maria though. Not looking forward to that.~

How quickly the boy flirted with the rules. Do not discuss matters of the covenants.

~I do advise against that. Maria knows what you did, Jack.~

~It's the only way I'm going to learn about Michael and Garry. If I'm going to put an end to this, I need to learn. And I get the impression if I asked either Michael or Garry directly, it'd end in one of us killing the other.~

Antoinette sighed down at the phone before pressing it to her sternum. What to say, what to say? The boy wanted to learn about Michael and Garry's past, and that she could understand. But even she did not know the full depths of those two, and what had driven them to hate each other so. It was something personal, she understood that, but she had never uncovered their secrets. And even if she had, she would hesitate to share it with Jack.

Perhaps Michael had divulged his secrets to Maria? Or, considering her proximity to the man for so long, she had uncovered his secrets herself. With the woman's intelligence and tenacity, and Michael's stubbornness, Antoinette would bet on the latter.

~Be careful, my love.~

~I will, my love.~

She smiled. Jack never used poetic language. For him to indulge in flowing words was a rare treat.

Before she could slip the phone back into her purse, it buzzed once again. A message from Natasha, but not a normal text message. The little Mekhet used their secure channel in their custom software. Most dragons did not trust technology, and they were right to do so, but Antoinette had spent millions in secure software. It could be trusted. Mostly.

~Prince, I've learned something very important.~

~Oh? If it is of true importance, you may wish to tell me in person.~

Samantha returned, and Antoinette smiled at her young childe as she approached, a man and woman behind her. Two young kine, in their twenties, and both obviously quite drunk. But also, quite enamored with Samantha, nearly drooling as they followed after her, eyes wide with wonder. To them, Samantha had become the center of their world. Except, perhaps not. Another glance at their eyes showed that yes, they were quite enthralled in her Majesty, but not to the level of devoted servant.

Samantha would need decades of practice and growing power to reach such levels of Majesty. But still, considering the woman was not even a year embraced, this was good progress.

“Antoinette,” she said, knowing to not use the Prince’s title in front of kine. “This is Doug and Maggie.”

“Doug, Maggie.” Antoinette offered the two of them a playful nod. Naturally, both kine looked at her, her great height, white hair, and enormous bust, and even a fool could see the arousal spike through them. But it was Samantha that had them on a leash, and soon they turned their gazes back to the young vampire.

Another buzz from Antoinette’s phone.



~Yes, we definitely need to talk in person. But I need to tell you something right now. Jacob ... might be a problem. A big problem.~

A big problem. Natasha wanted to say enemy, but her timid nature, and the risk of the software being monitored, had her avoiding the word.

Antoinette kept her face stone cold, but only by suppressing a powerful urge to wince, as she looked over to childe, who beamed with pride over her successful hunt. Oh no.

## Chapter 145

~~Triss~~

Endlessness, everywhere. The infinite cosmos. Space, the final frontier. What the fuck ever.

Triss gulped as she stared up at the night sky. A quick glance around showed no buildings, no trees, no rocks, and no street either. No floor, no nothing. Beneath her was white, but it had no texture. Just, endless white, reaching out before and around her to endless horizons. Endless endlessness.

“Oh hey, I’m naked. Wonderful.” She blinked down at her body, frowning. The tattoos and piercings were there, as they usually were when she dreamed. No clothes though.

She touched her cheeks. Yeap, still gone, replaced with big crocodile teeth. Damn. Sometimes it was nice to dream about being human again.

She stared up again, and smiled. Stars. So many stars, tiny white dots against an endless black. Christ, what sort of infinite fucking universe had her dumb brain decided to invent, for a fucking dream?

She looked down. Below her was her Beast. No need to think about it, no need to convince herself, she recognized its swirling mass of black smoke, and all the strange limbs and claws and teeth and beaks inside it. It was beneath her, in that endless white she’d been in before, when learning crúac rituals. Except now, she was outside of it? Above it?

“Is this ... an out-of-body experience?” Last she remembered was falling asleep in the Circle’s cave. “Cause I’m pretty sure I should be

able to look around and see the real world and shit if I was having one, and I don't see no cave.”

“You are half right.”

Triss spun around quick and jumped back. She fully expected vitae to send her back a good distance, but all she got for her effort was a small leap, totally mistimed, and fell on her ass. Ok, so, no vitae. Shit.

An old woman stood in front of her, hunched, short, with a cloak of tattered gray covering her body and the top of her head. Long strands of dirty white hair hung down the sides of her face, and warts covered her visible skin. Not much visible skin with the cloak, but her feet and hands were visible, and so was her wrinkly, old, sagging face.

She had a cane in one hand. No, wait, not a cane, a walking stick. No, wait, not a walking stick, a fucking witch staff, considering the dangling skulls on top of it. It was thickest at the top, a crooked branch with a curve where the old woman had tied rope to hook through the holes in the skulls. They jingled lightly, making hollow bone noises.

Triss grumbled as she reached for her vitae again. Not there. Definitely a dream, except normally you had some measure of control in a dream, especially when it was lucid. She squeezed her eyes shut and imagined riding a giant dinosaur. Nothing. Damn.

“You're naked,” the old woman said. Even her voice sounded old, crackly, and not sweet.

“Sorry. I—wait, I'm not sorry. This is my fucking head, my dream, and I'll be naked if I want.”

The old woman grinned. “If this is your dream, change it. Put on clothes.”

“I’m not feeling very zen, apparently, and it’s not working.”

“Because this isn’t your dream.” After a quiet, disgusting, gargling chuckle, the old woman waved her stick at Triss slightly. Clothes appeared on her, the shit she’d gone to sleep in, a tank top and jeans and her combat boots.

“It isn’t?” Triss gestured down beneath them, at the endless plane of white, and the smoke creature wandering around beneath them, blocked by a floor of glass or something. “Certainly feels like a dream.”

“You were dreaming. But I wanted to talk to you without that nasty Beast of yours getting in the way.”

“So...”

“So I removed you from your dream.” The old woman gestured around with her staff. “You are in between, a place we can talk again.”

“Again? I—” Panic jolted through her limbs, and she took a step back as she looked the old woman up and down a dozen times more. “You! I had to sacrifice a bunch of people for a chance to talk with you!”

“You got my attention.”

Oh god this was happening. Happening happening, it was happening, oh fucking shit. She took another step back, looked around for any sort of exit to the strange dimension she’d found herself in, and sighed. Don’t panic. If the Crone, assuming this was the Crone, actually wanted you dead, she could make it happen, easily. Right?

Or maybe she couldn’t? The Crone was a god or something, and the more Triss dug into the world of dark rituals and shit, the more

it seemed like there were divine rules mere plebes didn't know about. Spirits had to follow rules, apparently, so why not gods and stuff? Which made her panic again, cause that meant maybe the Crone couldn't hurt her right now, until Triss said or did something wrong. Fuck fuck, how the fuck do you play a game when you don't know the rules?

“I did? I mean, I did sacrifice—”

“Five hundred years ago, a village, remote, even for that time, sacrificed the first born of their chief to me, a girl of ten years. That sacrifice carried with it enough weight to change the landscape in a way that persists to this day. You, and your paltry sacrifice of the unwanted, barely warranted a glance from me.”

Sweet fucking christ.

“Well sorry I didn't really feel like sacrificing—”

The old bitch tapped her staff on the white not-glass beneath them, making a quiet click click. More than enough to shut Triss right up.

“I said I noticed you, not the sacrifice.”

“Oh, uh ... sorry.”

The Crone managed a weak grin. “You're smarter than you look. I can see the wheels turning in that tiny little brain of yours.”

“Turning pretty slow right now, honestly. Why did you notice me? Who the fuck am I?”

“You're a sad little girl, who's lost her lover. And because you're smarter than most, you're dipping your toe in the water to see how cold it is before you take the plunge.”

“You’re ... talking about Julias, and what I’m doing to ... try and bring him back.”

“I warned you once to let him go, Beatrice.”

Something about hearing a deity use her first name was freaky as all fuck. Slowly, Triss’s gaze fell, and she stared down at her boots like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

“Yeah.”

“You ignored my warning.”

“Yeah.”

“I knew you would.”

Triss winced and looked away. “Well, yeah. Black Blood and Jacob told me it was possible, and I believe them.”

“I somehow doubt they told you only that.”

Doubt? So the Crone or whatever she was wasn’t omniscient. Good to know creepy weird larger-than-life creature things weren’t watching them through the rooftops with x-ray vision.

“Yeah, it’ll be hard. Yeah, there’s a good chance it’ll never work, they said as much. Yeah, I’m getting deeper into some pretty nasty shit, but ... but I have to try.”

When she finally managed to lift her eyes again, the old woman was smiling at her, the sort of smile a mom gives her kid when they trip and fall. Which of course sent rage surging through Triss, indignant and bitter. Which of course the old bitch saw coming, and her mommy smile faded, replaced with sadness.

“You should let him go, Triss. You have a good second life now, don’t you? He’d be happy for you and this new life you’re building

for yourself. And that Sándor creature might even be interested in you, yes? Julias would want you to find love again. So let him go.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Yes, I know.” With a heavy sigh, the old crone gently waved her staff.

The world came to life around them. Dirt flowed out from under Triss’s feet, and she squeaked as she jumped up. She landed on her ass, again, but dirt was a soft enough cushion to land on.

By the time she lifted her eyes up from the dirt, the rest of the world had come to join her. Grass, small rocks. Trees. Bugs! She snarled and swatted away a beetle or something as it crawled across her hand, and she quickly got back up to her feet.

Forests were supposedly romantic, but she’d never been in one. Born and raised in Dolareido, and embraced before she’d ever gotten a chance to visit other places. And it wasn’t like vampires often packed their bags and went places when sunlight equaled death. Now that she was in a forest, she was glad she’d never visited one before.

How the fuck could anyone think of a forest as romantic? Maybe it’d be better in the day, but at night, it wasn’t much better than that jungle nightmare world of Fiona’s. Bugs buzzed around and made high pitched clicking noises. Distant rustling in the darkness she couldn’t see announced wandering animals, raccoons and birds and shit. It was cold and windy; didn’t bother a vampire, but still. A glance up showed the stars were mostly blotted out by trees, mostly pines, and another glance down showed the dirt and grass were mixed with bits of bark and twigs, and wriggling things.

This sucked.

“Oh god, why? I’m a city girl.”

“Yes, of course you are. Witches everywhere cringe.” After a quiet, grandma chuckle, the old crone waved her staff again. A fire emerged between them, and Beatrice shrieked as she jumped back. She hadn’t shrieked like that in literal decades. “Calm down. You have no banes here, vampire. We are between.”

“Uh huh.” Triss eye the Crone suspiciously, but sighed after a while, and looked down at the fire. Circled by stones, it crackled and popped, and Triss found herself drifting closer. “You’re ... sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

Nodding, Triss came closer, and held out her hand. Waves of warmth hit her skin, and faint smoke drifted upward.

“It feels real.”

“I’m very good,” the old hag said, smirking. “Sit. We should talk.”

Triss sat. When a god comes to visit you, you fucking do what they want. That might change as the conversation went on, but for now, shut up and do as ordered.

So close to fire, instinct told Triss to back the fuck up before a random spark set her on fire, but a glance to the old woman and a nod from her told Triss it was alright. Well, if this wasn’t real, or wasn’t physical or whatever ‘in between’ was, and the Crone had pulled her out of a dream, then maybe the fire wouldn’t turn her into ashes the moment it touched her. She wasn’t stupid enough to stick her finger in the fire, but she got closer than her vampire instincts wanted.

Fire, was mesmerizing. The way it danced, the waves of heat that matched the flickering flame, the sizzle and pop of the wood, god damn. Fucking beautiful. A pretty sick joke that it was any vampire’s bane.



“The flesh witch,” the old woman said, “Elen.”

“What about her?”

“She is a broken thing. There’s little left of her mind, and she won’t last much longer.”

“She’ll die? Jacob thinks she’s immortal.”

“Malachi is correct. She’ll live on, even as her body breaks down. But another decade or so and there won’t be much left of her brain. After that, she’ll be nothing more than a pulsing mass of flesh, like cancer.”

“Damn, that’s rough. Do ... do you know who gave her immortality?” A dangerous question to ask a deity. But knowledge was too damn fucking tasty to resist.

“I do.”

“Wanna tell me?”

“No.”

“Uh huh. Was it you?”

“No.”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Alright, so what about Elen?”

“I’m sure you have guessed that she cannot create a replica of Julias to the exact degree you think is required.”

Oh shit oh shit. That was either very good or very bad.

“You saying I don’t need it to be perfect?”

“It needs to be perfect.” Very bad then. “If you summon his soul into a body it doesn’t recognize, the results will be as horrific as you’ve guessed. The stuff of nightmares.”

“God fucking damn it!” She buried her eyes in her palms and rubbed them against her skull, before looking back up at the crone. “I was going to look for a ritual that could maybe ... I don’t know, help somehow. Maybe get a piece of Julias somehow? Maybe ... maybe get a piece of me, a memory, to help?”

“Smart.” The old woman chuckled, a hoarse and horrible sound. Slowly, she walked over to a nearby bolder, and sat against it, as if sitting on the ground would be too much trouble for an old woman like her. “Tell me, do you know why members of my Circle use torture to learn rituals?”

“Because it forces them to find, uh, inner tranquility, I guess? To go zen and shit.”

The Crone laughed again. “Close enough. It lets you speak more directly with your Beast, and your Beast is capable of communicating across...” She gestured around her.

“Sounds like Jac—Malachi was right then.”

“Malachi is too smart for his own good. It’ll lead to his death.”

Triss raised a brow at that, but didn’t question it. She wanted to, but a little voice in her head told her this Crone thing wouldn’t randomly drop a line like that, if she had any intent on explaining herself. Don’t poke the bear.

“So crúac rituals come from you?”

“They don’t come from me, not truly. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have a hand in stupid vampires like yourself finding them.”

“And ... what are they, exactly? The rituals?”

“If I answered that, what fun would there be in being a witch?”

There was some truth to that, Triss supposed. Half the fun in all the dark witchy stuff, was the mystery of the forces they connected with. But it was also how witches got themselves killed, according to Jacob, and Lovecraft.

“So, am I being zen then, right now? To be able to talk to you?”

“No. Like I said, you got my attention. Or, maybe it’s better to say, you’re ... relatable.”

“Uh, I’m sorry, can you repeat that? Cause it sounds like you just said I was relatable, me, and you’re, uh, something I’m guessing is the equivalent of a goddess.”

“Close enough.” Chuckling, the old woman reached into her cloak with her free, wrinkly hand, and pulled out a small bag. Old school didn’t do justice what the bag looked like. Must have been a flap of deer skin tied together into a shitty bag by a shitty string made of who the fuck knew what. Which honestly made it pretty awesome. And she tossed it to Triss casually.

Triss caught it. “What’s this?”

“A ritual. A memory. Open it later, and it’ll help with building a vessel for your lover.”

“Oh ... oh fuck, really? I was thinking I’d have to go through some serious torture, zen out while Jacob ran barbed wire up my ass and right out my mouth. And we’d have to do it while bathing in the blood of a newborn baby or something.”

“That might have worked, yes. Your Beast would have called out to the beyond, and someone would have answered. But let’s skip

that part, shall we?”

“Holy fuck you are being way too nice. What’s the catch?”

“Time.”

“Time?”

“You’re running out of it.”

“Because of Elen?”

“No.”

Triss stared at the old woman, blinking, a lot. “You uh ... wanna tell m—”

“I can’t tell you more. The rules don’t allow it.”

“Rules? What the fuck are you talking about?” They did have rules then. Bingo.

“You’ve spoken too much, old crone,” a soothing, motherly voice said.

Triss jumped to her feet and her eyes snapped around. Not her voice, or the Crone’s. But before she could open her mouth, the Crone gestured to Triss dismissively. Not an enemy then? Then—

Light cut through the forest canopy. A glance up showed that the moon, which hadn’t even been there before, was now very much there, and shining down on them with its soothing light.

Rustling around the fire forced Triss to jump back. “What the fuck?”

Next to the old woman, was a wolf. A white wolf. It sat on its hind legs beside the Crone, and watched Triss with the classic, cold,

analyzing gaze of a wolf.

Ok, information overload. Having an out-of-body experience in some sort of in-between realm where a god had decided to have a chat with her, and help her out, for no reason at all, was already blowing her fucking mind. And now a white wolf with a soothing, feminine voice, was here to chat as well, right after the moon mysteriously appeared and decided to play spotlight.

“You’re ... the moon? Like, the one I heard the werewolves talk about? Luna?”

The wolf slowly nodded. “She catches on quickly. I can see why she interests you, hag.” Spoken without moving its ... her lips.

“Don’t be rude,” the Crone said.

“Funny, coming from you,” the god damn mother fucking moon said.

Beatrice threw up her hands, palms forward, surrendering. “Ok. Pause. Time out. I can’t handle this.” Clenching her eyes shut, Triss slapped herself. Hard. As hard as this weak fake dream-not-dream body could handle; not very hard, but good enough. Except other than a harsh spike of pain, nothing changed. She opened her eyes, looked for anything different, and groaned. Fuck.

“Don’t do as the Crone says,” Luna said, steady gaze on Triss, wolf mouth still unmoving.

“Uh, why? She just gave me a fucking shortcut to finishing making a vessel. I am damn well going to finish it, and then—”

“And then what, vampire? Reach across the endless oblivion, across the Abyss itself, and pluck the threads of your dead lover’s soul? Will you weave them together yourself?”

“I—”

“What gives you the right, vampire? You think you can defy the rules of life? Defy what gives life purpose?”

“I don’t—”

“You don’t have the right!” The wolf growled, baring her fangs. “You don’t get to pluck the essence of Soul from the beyond, because you are sad! Who are you, blood leech, half dead creature, balancing on the edge of life itself, to think you have the right to defy rules not I nor the Crone have ever managed to defy?”

Triss stared at the wolf. If this wasn’t a dream, it stood to reason she could very well die here if one of these fucking gods decided she should. Which wasn’t fair at all.

“Luna, please,” the Crone said, slowly shaking her head. “Let the vampire try. This isn’t about us.”

“Isn’t it? Why else would you pick this girl, if not because of what she is trying to do?”

“There is more to this than this vampire’s aching heart. The acts of Mict—”

“Do not speak his name!” Not so soothing or motherly anymore. Luna’s voice shook the forest, and Triss gulped as she steadied herself.

Sighing, the Crone waved a slow, dismissing hand toward the wolf. “Fine, fine.”

Triss dropped her hands, and fell on her ass by the fire. No point in standing anymore, and she couldn’t even if she tried.

“Can one of you throw me a bone and tell me why you’re both talking to me? Like ... the fuck?”

“I came to help you with resurrecting your dead lover,” the Crone said with a gross, toothy grin. She didn’t even try to hide that she had ulterior motives, and Triss could respect that.

The wolf shook her head. “She knows you’ll fail, vampire. Fail like we all have.”

“Like you ... all have?”

With a heavy snarl, the wolf stood up, and stepped around the fire toward her. Triss didn’t bother getting up. At this point, she might as well accept that her fake dream-not-dream muscles weren’t going to do a damn thing here, not against these two.

“You’re not the only one who’s lost someone close to them, who’s lost a lover. Who are you to defy the laws of life and death, vampire, when I have spent thousands upon thousands of years unable to reach mine? Me. Me!” The moonlight over them brightened, feeling less like the moon, and more like a searchlight.

“Luna, be calm,” the Crone said. “I’m helping her not because I think she’ll succeed. Even she doesn’t believe she’ll succeed. But she’s going to do it anyway, and I’d prefer she try before ... Well, I can’t speak about that either, I suppose. In any case, this witch has potential, and if things don’t go as ... he ... expects, then I would have her learn the futility of her pursuits. Only when her dreams are ash will she be a worthy student.”

“Uh, what? He? Student?”

“We cannot discuss he,” Luna said.

“But,” the Crone said with a small wave of her staff, “if he can flirt with the rules, so can we. And I think you would do well, following

in Malachi's footsteps, Beatrice. You have the potential to be a grand and powerful witch."

Ok, so Malachi wasn't 'he' then. Black Blood? She wanted to ask, but they'd made it clear they couldn't talk about whatever was going on. And the Crone said his name was Mict...

"Th ... Thank you, for the gift." She motioned to the bag in her hand. "And ... and I can't even begin to understand why you're both here, talking to stupid, worthless me. But, it's not like I don't understand, you know?" Slowly, she forced herself to make eye contact with the white wolf. She might as well have been staring into two galaxies, each contained within their own glass marble. "About how what I'm trying to do is fucked up. But vampires are already fucked up, right? We're half dead. And ghosts—"

"It's not the same," the Crone said. "A million others have attempted what you're attempting, Beatrice. You don't understand the weave, and how it draws the dead back to it. You don't understand what death does to a soul, and..." Sighing, the Crone shook her staff gently through the air, causing the dangling skulls to jingle and make hollow thuds. "You'll learn, the hard way. That's why I like you."

"Thanks ... I think. But I have to say, it's really fucking unnerving that a ... a ... whatever you are, took notice of me. Like, I'm not special."

"No, you are not special," the Crone said.

Kinda hurt to hear her say that, but Triss recovered quick.

"You two, um ... ever visit Jack? If anyone's special, that kid is—"

"The boy," the wolf said, "is not special. He's poisoned by the echoes of a menace."



Ouch for Jack.

“There are two in this city we could consider special,” the Crone said. “Women, paranormal creatures who have lost more than you could ever understand.”

“Women who ... oh.” Samantha, and Athalia.

“Enough of this,” the wolf said, and she growled quietly for a few seconds to seal in her point. “Beatrice, if you continue with this foolishness, you’ll find only pain. And the dark currents in your city will—”

The Crone shook her staff over the fire toward the white wolf. “Don’t. You want him to have even more freedom? You’ve already caused enough trouble with what you’ve done in this city. Don’t be angry because your little pet project Eric is taking so long.”

Triss felt like a little kid, eavesdropping on her two parents arguing, learning about things kids weren’t supposed to know about, like taxes, and adultery. Don’t move, don’t make a sound, and maybe she wouldn’t get drawn into it. Of course, the stakes were higher here, and getting drawn into it could very well mean a dead and sad Triss.

“Eric?” Shut up shut up shut up before you get yourself killed.

“Nevermind about Eric,” the wolf said, growling again. “I’m warning you now, vampire. If you keep going down this path, you’ll find only pain. Pain for yourself, pain for Jack, and pain for that poor woman Samantha whose hopes you’ve raised. Pain for everyone tied to this sickening cycle.” Damn this moon bitch was angry. Assuming she actually was Luna, a moon spirit goddess thing, and not a wolf, maybe she should have picked an angry, snarling badger or wolverine for this encounter? Would have fit better.

“I ... still have to try.”

“Of course you do,” the Crone said, chuckling, complete with a little old-woman phlegm. “I know you do, sweetheart. Luna knows, too. I tried, as did she, as did he.” He, again. They couldn’t speak his name? Jacob? Black Blood? Who the fuck could Black Blood have ever lost, though? “You’ll try, and you’ll fail, and that failure will leave its mark on you for the rest of eternity. And you will become a great witch because of it, one of the greatest. If you survive the ages.”

“But ... I thought you said I’m not special?”

Waving her staff slowly over the fire, the old woman sighed, and nodded. “You’re not. Yet. Now, open the bag.”

The wolf growled, snorted, and walked back around the fire to sit next to the Crone.

With a heavy gulp, Triss looked at the bag. Just a simple, little animal skin bag, and a pluck at its shitty string was enough to have it open in her palms. She had no idea what to expect, but as the flaps spread around her hand, she stared into the small, floating dot of red, and watched as it hovered up to her necklace. It sank into the small crow skull, and the world exploded.

---

Triss sat up with a hard jolt. She looked around in a panic, but nothing was out of the ordinary. Just her and Jennifer, cuddled up next to her. Jen was still asleep though, and that was weird. Vampires woke up at the same time, and not gently.

She looked across the cave. No one bothered closing their curtains anymore, not with how close they’d all grown lately. Madison slept beside Othello, where he also slept, the two of them naked and halfway out of his alcove.

Sleepiness hit Triss like a truck, and she collapsed back onto the sheets. The dream had woken her up from torpor. Holy fuck, that was a powerful dream.

But the sun was up, her Beast knew that, and the heaviness of torpor dragged her back down into sleep. She smiled as it did. She had a new ritual to try out.

---

~~Damien~~

“I don’t think Michael killed her.”

Damien sighed as he sat down in front of Maria’s desk. “I ... didn’t ask that.”

“You were about to. It’s in your eyes.” The elder smiled slightly at him as she typed a few things on her keyboard, before leaning back in her grand chair. Within her den below the cathedral, the elder had regenerated her arms well enough to use them as any kine would. Soon, she’d be as fit as the night Avery had nearly killed her.

He was tempted to ask how she’d use her renewed strength in the war against Garry. But he avoided the topic, for now.

“I ... do think Amanda’s death sounds like the perfect catalyst for this war that Michael wants. Too perfect.”

“It does.”

“And she may have been a neonate, but was no fresh fledgling. She’d been embraced near Jack’s embrace.”

Maria nodded. “It is hardly fair to compare her to Jack. The boy has survived trial by fire far too many times. Half to grit, and half to pure luck, I am sure.”

“Still, she had a few years on her. She was good enough to avoid getting caught by some errant flames. So I can’t see any other reason for her being dead, unless Michael killed her.” He trusted any Mekhet with a few years under their belt to dodge fire easily enough. “Coincidence aside, why do you believe Michael didn’t kill her? The man is—”

Maria shot him a glare, and he shut up fast. She might as well have cut through a glacier with a sword.

“You do not understand Michael. Do not judge him so harshly.”

“I ... You’re right, I don’t understand Michael. But you could tell me.”

Her stare only hardened. “No. I could not. Do not ask again.”

And that ended that conversation.

---

~Sorry Jack. I asked, and she shut me down hard. I think I made your job even harder.~

~Damn. Alright, I’ll be careful. Thanks~

Sighing, Damien put his phone away, and went back to his apartment. With the war bubbling under Dolareido’s surface, he didn’t feel comfortable going to Fiona’s. As much as Damien wasn’t technically Invictus anymore, he still worked for them as a close ally, and functioned as one. It made perfect sense for Garry to want to kill him as much as anyone else, and he didn’t want that shit following Fiona. He’d give Fiona a call, and they could go somewhere secret to spend some time together.

Of course, that was difficult to do, with Fiona apparently in his apartment and not her own.

“Um, Fiona?” he called out. He smelled her the moment he came into the apartment. Damn Begotten could get to so many places they weren’t supposed to, as long as they’d been there once before.

“In here!” In his bedroom. “Help me! Please!”

He knew her panicked tone, and this wasn’t it. This was her ‘I spilled the nail polish!’ tone. Still panicky, but not like she was being attacked. Smiling, he slipped out of his coat and shoes, and still wearing his suit, walked past his streamlined, fancy, borderline useless apartment, and entered his room.

“... what in the Lord’s name happened here?”

“I tried to do, um, tie myself up, ye ken?”

“I can see that.” He stepped up to his large bed, his ‘American Psycho’ bed according to Fiona, and grinned down at his girlfriend.

She was tied up, sort of. Apparently she’d managed to tie her ankles to the corners of his bed, spreading her legs. She’d obviously spent a lot of time focusing on a harness for her torso, and the black rope hooked around her shoulders, neck, breasts, and ribs in a symmetrical, beautiful pattern. And she’d also managed to get the soft-looking rope around her waist and chest, and behind her to bind her hands against her back. At least, that’d been her plan.

She looked like a cat who got tangled up in yarn. She squirmed and wriggled, ass in the air, hands behind her, but her hands weren’t together. Right hand too high up her back, left hand struggling to get it lower but only making it worse, every attempt she made to get her hands free pulling her right hand tighter, while getting her left hand caught closer to her ass. Something had clearly gone wrong in how she’d arranged the pattern.

She turned her head enough to look at him, cheek planted to the sheets, gold eyes frowning in half panic, half annoyance and

disappointment.

“This is hard!”

“I bet.” He came over to the bed and sat beside her, looking her up and down. “I didn’t realize you wanted to get tied up this badly. I can’t imagine Vrall would like this. She prefers to do the tying.”

“Vrall can go bugger off.”

He laughed softly, and took the rope she was tugging on with her left hand into his. He saw the mistake, a loop over the shoulder that should have gone around the wrist. There was a strange beauty to the rope, the symmetry and patterns against her skin. And, naturally, how it accented the shape of her large ass and breasts.

So of course, he took her shoulder, slid the loop down, and secured it around her wrist. How strange their relationship had come that, upon finding his girlfriend attempting to tie herself up and failing, his first instinct was to help her complete her foolish errand. So strange, and wonderful.

“You know we’re in the middle of a war, Fiona.”

“Nu uh! Ye’re nae Invictus.” She squirmed her hands in the knot, and her hands slipped free without much issue. “Yer nae doing it right! Ye need to loop it around in an X first, ye ken?”

“You know knots?”

“I do.”

“Or Vrall does?”

She rolled her eyes, squirmed some more, and tried to hit him with her ass. She succeeded, sort of. On her knees with her chest flat against the bed, ass in the air, she did manage to put some

weight into it, but her legs were spread by the rope keeping her feet and knees apart. A gentle push from Damien had her back to the center of the bed, ass up and face down once again.

“Vrall gets too much credit,” she said, grumbling.

“She’s an ancient spider monster who spins web as a way of life. And she’s tied me up plenty of times.”

“Aye, but I am a young lass with internet!”

He choked on a laugh, and did as directed, crossing the rope in an X between her hands before looping the final wrist.

The result was beautiful. Damien took his time, admiring how the rope circled her limbs, her breasts, her neck. And his admiring stirred something in Fiona pretty quick, because a few minutes later she was blushing and squirming again.

“Wait, is that why you did this? I’m in this war, even if I’m not really Invictus, and you wanted to surprise me? Take my mind off it?”

She grinned and nodded, cheek still planted to the sheets.

“Aye. Ye deserve something special.”

Uh huh. He got the impression her gift wasn’t exactly selfless. As much as Vrall loved to tie Damien up, web him up, and keep him helpless, Fiona wanted to be tied up, pinned down, and rendered helpless. They’d tied her up before, used handcuffs and the like, but never a full body thing like this.

“It’s definitely special.”

“Aye!” She was pleased with her gift, and herself, cause she damn well knew how attractive he found her.

So naturally, the only course of action was to not engage. He lay beside her, facing her, and smiled. The moment she realized he didn't plan to move, her eyes went wide, and she squirmed with renewed enthusiasm, and frustration.

“Tae fuck?”

He choked on a laugh. “What? I came home, intent on talking to my girlfriend about my day.”

“Aye, we can do that. After ye fuck me!”

“Carthians been giving you any trouble? They should be avoiding contact with the Begotten, but—”

She squealed in frustration. “After! Now, do me, ye wanker!”

He grinned at her. Jokes. How often did he make jokes? Never, except maybe one or two with Jack. This silly little woman got something out of him he didn't ever normally do, and it came so damn naturally.

Chuckling, he got behind her, and gave her a good spank, earning a happy squeak from her. Tying herself up, and then having him finish tying her up, had her glistening.

He didn't waste anymore time.

---

He didn't feed on her this time. He was healed now, fully functional, and didn't need her powerful monster blood pumping through his undead veins. Not that he wouldn't ever feed on her again, cause she loved it, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't crave the strange rush her unusual blood gave him. But sometimes, it was nice to be able to have a coherent conversation with his lover after sex.



When they were done, he untied her. They hugged, kissed, and spent the next hour chatting about things. Not serious things. Fun things. Music, movies, hobbies.

He could only hope Jack's night was going as well as his.

"I've been meaning to tell ye. Ye should talk to Athalia."

"Athalia? Why?"

"She was there, when Garry's goons attacked the Invictus building, ye ken? Spying. She might know something."

"I'd ... prefer to not involve the Begotten."

"It's just a question. It cannae hurt, can it?"

It very much could.

---

~~Jack~~

He took a deep, useless breath, and pushed open the doors of the cathedral.

Empty, as expected, and no candles lit either, as expected; middle of the night on a Wednesday, after all. Not much streetlight got in through the stained glass windows, high up as the beautiful windows were. And with how big the cathedral was, it was a damn spooky place to visit at night.

South Hill Cemetery used to have a problem with vandalism, according to Triss, before she took it as her home and basically haunted it. She didn't hang out there anymore, but kine still avoided it. But the cathedral had never had a vandalism problem, maybe because of how close it was to Three Kings Cemetery and Jacob's ritual room. Kine always avoided it, convinced it was haunted. Maybe Maria had more to do with that than Jacob.

Jack understood how they came to that conclusion, standing in the darkness and center isle of the huge building, with nothing but deadly silence to greet him. Creepy. If some evil priest dude suddenly came out singing Disney's Hellfire, it would have fit perfectly.

He and his familiars weren't alone. At the end of the isle, in the front line of pews, sat a woman. Jesus christ, did she know he was coming? He'd meant to show up as a surprise, throw her off, catch her off guard so she wouldn't have the time to set up arguments. So much for that. Probably a dumb idea to ask Damien to ask her about Michael, and basically announce Jack's intentions.

Mulder looked around, cawed a few times, and took to the air. He found one of the pews near the front, perched, and went quiet. Scully wasn't feeling as brave apparently. With a quiet croon, she shifted along his shoulder closer to his cheek, and nudged her head against his neck and jawline a few times. It was more expression than his crows usually used since becoming undead. She was afraid.

~It's ok~, he said through their connection. ~She won't hurt you. See Mulder? He's fine.~

~She might hurt you, master.~

~She might try. If she does, stay out of it, ok?~

~Ok master. Be careful.~

He kissed Scully's head, and looked back to the front pew. From behind, all he could see was her long black hair. She was a small woman, Maria. Not Natasha small. More like, Avery small, without muscle. But as he inched up the isle, Maria felt anything but small. The aura on her was massive, and cold. Mist dripped off her onto the floor, and the closer he got, the more it looked like he was entering a haunted cathedral. It got so thick he wondered if she had an ice machine hidden somewhere.

“I guess Damien asking you about Michael and Garry tipped you off.”

“Of course.”

“And I suppose you’re going tell me what you told him?”

“Of course.”

Sighing, Jack came closer, each step a quiet clop of business shoe against the beautiful floor. She didn’t respond. Eventually, Jack stepped around the front pew, and looked down at the seated Elder.

“That’s not good enough,” he said.

Maria, eyes on the crucifix behind the pulpit, didn’t even blink as Jack came into her view.

“I do not care.” Pure ice in her voice, and she made sure to keep her eyes on the cross, as if it gave her strength, or was her lifeline to keep her from sinking.

“Then I guess this conversation is going to suck.” He sat down on the pew on her left, five feet between them, and leaned forward to place his elbows on his knees. Mulder was on the other front pew, isle between them, and he watched Maria with one eye. Scully on the other hand, already seated on Jack’s left shoulder, stayed nestled against his neck and thankful it was a barrier between her and the evil corpse lady.

“I have nothing to tell you.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“Michael’s secrets have no value in winning this war.”

“Not winning the war, no, but they could help me stop it.”

She scoffed and slowly shook her head. “This war has been brewing for decades, child. It will happen.”

“You’re really happy letting it happen? With people dying, people who don’t need to?”

“Yes.” An instant reply.

“I don’t believe you believe that.” He sighed and looked down as he netted his fingers between his knees. “I’m thankful, you know.”

“Thankful?”

“That you decided to not make an enemy of me. At least, not officially.”

“And why is that? Fear for your life?”

“Because,” Jack said, “I don’t want to fight. I don’t want to fight you, or anyone.”

“You sound like Mire.”

Damn, he didn’t see that coming. His breath caught in his throat, and he looked at the corpse woman, even as she refused to look his way.

“I wonder why Viktor sired a guy like Julias. They were nothing alike.”

“They had more similarities than you realize. But, yes, they also had vast differences. Viktor didn’t sire him for posterity. He sired him because he knew Julias would grow into a powerful tool.”

Jack couldn’t imagine siring someone with full intent to use them like a tool in a toolbox. But, Elaine had said as much, and Maria was confirming. Would Antoinette use Samantha like a tool for some goal, in some shitty future he didn’t want to even think about?

“And you know Julias would be trying to stop this war.”

“Trying, and failing. He sat on our council, Jack.” Hearing her use his first name was freaky. “He argued with Michael constantly about the Carthians.”

“And what did you do?”

“I let them.”

“Didn’t really expect passivity from you, Maria.”

“I have my own goals. I will not let the Carthians and Invictus ruin my second life.”

“Garry assumed you’d want to get more involved. Hence the whole, you know, him going to war while you were injured.”

“I don’t care how stupid Garry is, or Michael.”

He raised a brow. “How did you even get on the council?”

“I am powerful, wise, and have connections. And I knew I could do much for the Lancea et Sanctum from a position of power, beside Viktor and Michael.”

“True that.” He smiled at her, hoping the casual language might earn some reaction. A frown, a grin, something. She didn’t look away from the cross, and her face did not change.

She was stone-walling him, and he wouldn’t be able to get anything out of her until he broke through that wall. Which meant this conversation had to get painful.

“Maria,” he said, “I need to know why Michael and Garry hate each other so much.”

“Ask them. I will not divulge Michael’s secrets.” At least she didn’t fall back on last names and titles. There was some hope for the conversation.

“I’m tempted, believe me. But I know it’ll end badly.”

“Obviously.”

“So I’m asking you.”

“And I said, no.”

“I’m going to stop this stupid war before it gets people killed, Maria.”

“Gloria’s childe has already died.”

“You don’t believe that.”

She frowned, but it lasted a whole half a second before her face solidified. “Damien tells you too much.”

“He is my best friend.”

“Yes, for some reason.”

For some reason? This woman, this fucking woman, was still thinking about Jack in a bad light. Sure, she was willing to leave him be. Sure, she accepted and knew Lucas had become a horrible person that needed to die. But the woman still couldn’t get past her hatred for him, and that was a problem, a problem he needed to resolve right now.

~Scully, Mulder, this is going to get violent. Get high.~

Both familiars took to the air, and found perches high up on the second floor balcony. It being a cathedral, the second floor was really high up. They should be safe. And with their new undead

bodies, they wouldn't die from a random piece of wood hitting them.

Time to poke the bear.

“You want a reason? Because, despite being sired by a fucking psychopath, Damien has a conscience. He knew what he was doing was fucking wrong, and that's how I managed to Dominate him. He was struggling with every single request his sire made of him, and it made him vulnerable. And that was a good thing, because only a fucking lowlife would be comfortable doing the things Lucas wanted to do. Damien couldn't stomach the shit Lucas demanded of him, and it was eating him up inside. And that's why he's my friend.”

Maria went completely still. Still no frown or eye movement, but all normal subtle movements stopped as well, the tiny things even vampires did, shifting weight or tapping fingers and stuff. It all stopped. He was looking at a statue. All that meant was he'd have to hit her harder.

“You get what I'm saying, Maria? You were lovers with a monster, and it made life hell for a lot of people. Damien's had fifty years of hell because of Lucas, and you're not innocent in that.” That earned a small twitch from her, but nothing more. “I don't know how many people Lucas killed who didn't deserve it. A lot, I'm guessing. A lot of good Kindred who didn't know better died attacking the Prince under his orders, too. Just thinking about the vampires that died, the ones Antoinette killed, the ones I killed using Damien, it makes me sick. Know why? Because unlike that shithole you loved — love — so much, I have a soul and a conscience.

“And that brings me to you, a bitter, fucking asshole. And I've been happy to stay hands off about it as long as you stayed out of the way, but it wasn't always like that, was it? You, stupid and out of your god damn mind, actually sold out the only woman to ever put up with your shit, and trust you. Natasha, one of the nicest people in

all of Dolareido. You sold her out, knowing full well it might get her killed, because you were so pathetic, so desperate, you'd do anything to help that monster." He leaned in toward her a little, enough so he knew she could see him in the corner of her eye. "You sold her out for thirty pieces of silver. Except not silver, you sold her out for dick. Hope it was worth it."

Slowly, the ghost woman turned to face him, just her head though, like a scene out of a horror movie where a corpse turns its head. And the ice cold fury in her eyes froze him to the bone.

If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be pissing off a woman like Maria.

"The only reason you are not dead, Jack, is because the Prince—"

"I already told the Prince I was paying you a visit, against her wishes." Interrupting an elder like Maria was a perfect way to make her angry. More kindling for the fire he was trying to build. "Whatever happens, happens. The Prince won't take it up with you, no matter what. You wanna take a swing at me? Go ahead, cause I'm not leaving until—"

She didn't move, still staring at him, but the world around them froze solid. Not frozen in cold, but darkness, as if black emptiness could bring things to a perfect standstill.

And that's when her vitae, and her will, slammed into him.

Jack stood up with a jolt, but it was too late. The shadows grew, and grew, and Maria slipped away, a blurry haze that faded into nothing as endless obsidian swallowed him whole. Shit, shit shit. He expected her to take a swing at him, not come at him using Nightmare. Oh shit shit fucking shit, Jack you fucking idiot.

He reached for his necklace. If he was going to take her in a fight like this, he—the necklace was gone. What? Where was the



necklace? Why was it gone?

“It’s gone because you’re gone,” a familiar voice said. His voice.

“What?” He spun around in the empty black, looking for the source. After three spins, he jumped back from a tall slab of something moving. No, not moving, a mirror, catching his reflection and showing his movements. A creepy mirror at that, with black vines for a frame, covered in thorns.

The mirror was tall, allowing Jack to see from foot to face, and he stared at his reflection, and the things behind it. Dolareido. His mansion. His old apartment. Bloodlust. Xnomina. The Elysium Tower. His reflection grinned at him, and Jack met the bastard’s eyes as more things slid past him in the mirror. Damien and Fiona, sitting around, chatting, with each other and the reflection still looking at Jack through the mirror. Natasha and the boys sat across from them, in Jack’s mansion, chatting away. Jessy and Eric faded into view, talking with the rest of them. Eventually so did Triss and Jennifer. His mom, Antoinette, even Elaine and Antoinette’s ghouls all faded in.

Finally, after the room was full of people happily chatting away, each often making statements towards the reflection in a language Jack couldn’t understand, Veronica faded in. His first thrall, dressed in her half suit half maid uniform, came up to the reflection, and tugged on his hand in that meek ‘please master do things to me’ way she liked to.

Jack’s reflection grinned at Jack, slowly turned around, gently took Veronica’s head, and broke her neck.

“No!” Jack grabbed the mirror, but the thorns stabbed into his hands and drew blood. Red, regular, normal blood.

His reflection grinned back at him again, and then the others. They didn’t notice what the monster had done, and kept talking with

each other. The reflection stepped over Veronica's twitching body, and got to work on the rest of the group. First Damien, his best friend. He pulled Damien's head off just as the man's eyes went wide in realization, only to crumble into ash. Fiona noticed, and erupted into harsh screams, but the reflection turned and slashed her throat open with a knife from within his suit jacket. She stared at him, eyes wider than Jack ever thought possible, and she fell to her knees, blood gushing down over her t-shirt.

He kept going. Art and Matt next, he stabbed each of them in the chest, straight in the heart, and blood squirted from the gaping wounds. Natasha shrieked, and the reflection cut her head off. It bounced once, twice, before crumbling into ash.

And on it went. Jessy and Eric died next, Eric only realizing they were under attack when Jack's reflection killed his lover. Then Jennifer, and Beatrice. Then Antoinette's ghouls. They all shrieked in terror and agony as they died.

The reflection took his time with his mom and Antoinette. He forced them both down on their knees, as if he had the strength of a god, and they were helpless to him.

"Don't!" Jack screamed into the mirror, squeezing it harder and shaking it. The thorns drew more of his blood, but the vines held the mirror solid.

"Please don't! Jack, please!" his mom cried, but the reflection didn't stop. Grinning at Jack, his reflection sawed through her neck, taking his sweet time beheading her and earning more screams, sending dark vampire blood everywhere before it turned into tiny puffs of burning cinder and cooling ash.

Antoinette shed a single tear, and closed her eyes, not saying a word or showing any weakness, as Jack's reflection did the same to her. He grinned at Jack with every slow sawing motion of his hand, blade slicing through his lover's neck like butter.

Surrounded by corpses and piles of soot, Jack's reflection walked up to the mirror again, drenched in blood and crimson-soaked ashes. Behind him, Elaine grinned, and she leaned down to hug his reflection from behind.

"If you had shared with me," Elaine said, not to his reflection, but to him, her brown eyes staring into his through the mirror, "none of this would have happened. If you had given him to me, they wouldn't have had to die."

"You ... you did this!?" Jack let go of the vines and punched the mirror straight on. It vibrated as his wounds splattered the flat surface with blood, but it didn't break, sending agonizing pain through his hands. "Elaine!"

She ran her hands down his reflection's bloodied suit jacket and shirt, and groaned in delight as she kept her gaze locked with Jack's.

"If only you had given me what I wanted. Now, well, I guess I'll be to the Ripper, what Antoinette was to you, Jack. And we'll do more than treat Dolareido like a petri dish. We'll control this city, and everyone in it will be our slaves."

Jack slapped his bleeding hands against the mirror again and again, desperate to get through, eyes blurring with tears. Stop them! Stop them! Do something! But he couldn't do anything, blocked, stopped by this mirror.

This must have been what it was like for the Ripper, locked in Jack's mind, unable to affect the world around him. Somehow, he'd lost the necklace. Somehow, the Ripper had broken free when Jack wasn't being vigilant with the meditations Elaine taught him. Somehow, something had happened, and now everything was over.

It wasn't fair! This was ... this was...

This wasn't real.

Jack pushed the pain in his hands out of his mind, and glared at his reflection and the vampire hugging him as he stood up.

“Maria...”

The people in the mirror didn't respond.

Growling, Jack glared at his reflection and the woman beside him, and he clicked his teeth together as he found the words. The words were there, buried in the obsidian endlessness that pressed in on his brain, filling him with a cold only death could understand, but he found them. He dragged them up from the muck, from a blurry underworld where Maria tried to hide them.

“This isn't real. This isn't fucking real!” Slowly, he pushed a finger against the mirror. His hands no longer bled or ached, and the finger's gentle touch was enough to put a spreading crack through flat surface toward its edges. The reflection's image was cut across in several places, but it still held its ground, glaring at him. “This is a nightmare.”

“Nightmare's can reflect reality.” Maria's raspy, corpse voice. The ghost woman stepped out from behind the mirror, and joined Jack, glowering as she eventually stood beside him and gestured at the mirror. “This curse is going to eat you up, Jack. It's going to ruin you, like it did Viktor. It's going to take over, and kill all the people you love. And Elaine wants its power, you know that. She'll betray you, and take the power for her own. Just as she sired Viktor to be her tool, she will use her great grandchilde as a tool.”

Jack forced himself to look in the mirror, to see his blood-soaked, grinning reflection, and the elder vampire still hugging him from behind. Elaine winked at Jack through the mirror again as she pressed her chest hard enough against his reflection's back, her large breasts pushed her suit jacket apart. The nightmare made sense, and every second he looked at his reflection, it threatened to

pull him back into groggy, horrific belief. It could be real, it could be so very real.

But it wasn't.

With a heavy growl, Jack withdrew his finger, tightened it into a fist, and punched the mirror again. And this time, it exploded, shards of the nightmare scattering over the endless black around them.

The threading splinters of breaking mirror extended past the dark, bloodied vines surrounding it. The threads shot outward up and around Jack into the black around them, cutting through the onyx, and filling his ears with the sound of shattering glass. And, as if summoned by his own mind, the darkness did exactly that, shattering and crumbling around him.

He turned to his side, and met Maria's eyes again, watching her as her Nightmare collapsed into nothingness. Piece by piece, the illusion crumbled, leaving the two of them still staring at each other. Back in the cathedral, back with pews and stained glass windows. Back among unlit candles and a crucifix hanging behind the nearby pulpit. The two of them stood by the front pew, facing each other, the way they had been in the Nightmare.

"You broke my Nightmare quickly," she said, glaring at him with intent to kill, fangs bared. No ice anymore. Just fire. "I suppose you have your curse to thank for that."

Surprisingly, he didn't. He clutched his necklace, thanked God it was there this time, and returned Maria's glare.

"Not really. It was just that you made a mistake." Perhaps more than that. Ventrue tenacity, and his fucking stubbornness certainly helped. But she had made a mistake.

"Mistake?"

“You crafted that nightmare yourself, didn’t you? Had some horrible idea you’d been brewing for some time that you wanted to hit me with.”

Her glare was her answer.

“Well, you made a mistake,” he continued. “You showed Elaine being ok with Antoinette’s death.”

Maria’s eyes softened, if only barely. “You honestly think that old snake would care if the Prince died?”

This woman. This woman! Just when Jack thought she wasn’t as bad as the rumors painted her out to be, she turned around and proved otherwise. No, she couldn’t be all bad, not when she was willing to let Jack live despite knowing he killed Lucas. She wasn’t the monster people thought she was, but she was a bitter, broken woman, sad with the world. Damien had said as much, but seeing her like this hurt him down to his guts. As much as Lucas deserved to die, Jack had been the one to kill him, and that meant Maria’s pain was partly his fault.

If he was going to do anything about it, he had to get through to her.

“Elaine is a crafty snake, I agree with you there.” He took a step toward the small woman, four feet now between them. “But she wouldn’t kill Antoinette, or let her die. Hell, if push came to shove, it wouldn’t surprise me to see Elaine risk her life to save Antoinette’s. That’s a friendship that won’t ever die.”

“I don’t—”

Jack took another step closer. “I know you don’t! You’re so convinced everything and everyone in this world is horrible. So convinced everyone’s a shitty person, deep down, so convinced that there’s nothing and no one in this world worth living for.”

Her eyes widened again at that, and she looked down as she took a step back. That'd hurt her, a lot more than he'd meant for it to.

“Damien told you?”

“What? Damien hasn't told me ... oh, oh Maria. Is that what that thing with Avery was about? You were hoping she'd—”

Maria hit him, hit him hard, and he wasn't prepared for it. Seeing her face crumble, her expression destroyed by the turn of the conversation, had completely pulled his feet out from under him, and he let his guard down. So when she put all her power into a punch and drove it into his chest, it sent him up and over, flipping once before sprawling on his back. His eyes snapped open wide, and he stared up at the ceiling as reality came back to him.

She'd broken bones. A lot of bones. So much for her arms not being fully healed.

Snarling, he pulled his necklace off and tossed it behind him. Scully flew down and scooped it up as Jack forced himself to his feet. Maria was already marching toward him; hitting him so hard had launched her back a ways, too. And thankfully she wasn't a Mekhet or Daeva, not enough speed to close the distance instantly.

He rolled to his feet, and summoned his vitae. Ventrue Resilience pumped through his undead veins, forcing his bones back in place and knitting them together well enough he could move without crumbling. Without his necklace to hold his Beast down, the unnatural power of the curse flooded him. It was a pale comparison to what it could summon when the Ripper was running the show, but it'd be enough to fight Maria. Fight her, and hope to god he could get through to her.

“Maria.”

“Silence! How dare you, how dare you! Vile, filthy child.” She dove at him, face locked in a snarl. But he stepped to the side, hands up and pushing aside her punch. “I’ll kill you!”

“No you won’t!” Christ, if she killed him, that’d really suck. This whole gambit would be pretty damn pointless if he died.

“You don’t understand me! You know nothing!” She came at him again, and instead of the cold, deadly woman who’d hit him with one nasty Nightmare, this woman was an inferno. This was good. Crazy rage meant power, sure, but it also meant mistakes, and emotion. It meant he might get through her icy walls and actually reach her.

“I know enough! I know how hurt you are! I know how much Lucas meant to you, and I can’t imagine how much it must have hurt to see him becoming who he was!” He ducked under her punch, and drove his knee up into her chest. He didn’t have the strength of an ancient Nosferatu, not like the Ripper did, but he could still throw a damn good knee, and Maria screamed in pain and anger as his knee folded her in half.

But she recovered quickly, too damn quickly, jumping back to her feet and coming at him again, throwing punches and claws alike. She didn’t have claws, but the ghost woman’s normal nails would have been enough to cut through suit and skin, with how much power she was putting behind those swings.

“Shut up shut up!” Her fist found his forearm, and the blow sent him spinning. Only Resilience kept his arm from breaking in half like a twig.

She’d expected it to break though, and he capitalized, crouching in close and driving his fist up into her jaw. As scary as Maria’s unusual Nosferatu deformation was, with her corpse skin and misty body, she was still a vampire, made of dry meat and bone. A hard



punch to her jaw sent her flying back, but she quick-stepped with the motion backward and kept from falling over.

“Maria, you know why I’m here, talking to you now? You know why I rushed over to get to you when Damien sent me that warning? Why I stopped Avery?”

“Don’t disguise your issues with Avery, and your need with information about Michael, with some sort of care for me, Jack.”

“You think I don’t care about you?”

“Of course you don’t care about me!” She threw herself at him, full on banshee, screaming while her white gown flowed in the air around her. But like he expected, she was full on rage mode, and not thinking straight.

He ducked underneath her, and threw a fist up, catching her in the stomach. She should have seen it coming, but she was blind with anger. Taking her down would be easy. She folded over his fist, and momentum kept her going, turning her into a ball that crashed onto the stage beside the pulpit.

“Maria! I came here to talk to you because I need information, yes. And I know that you hate me, hate me for what I did, but I never hated you!”

She recovered quickly, driven by hate he’d only ever known for someone once before. The sort of hate that boils in the blood and burns in the bones. The sort of hate that drives you like a whip on the back. She wasn’t thinking straight, she wasn’t thinking at all, but that’s what he needed if he was going to get through to her. He just needed to make sure she didn’t tear him in half before he did.

“Stupid child! Stupid, worthless child! You stole everything from me!”

“Lucas wasn’t everything! He was scum, Maria, and you know it! And now he’s gone, and I’m sorry it hurt you. I’m sorry I hurt you! But that doesn’t need to be who you are, a wounded animal who snaps and bites at everyone who sticks out a helping hand! Christ, I’m not your enemy!”

“You are my only enemy!”

She came at him again, faster, her Nos strength pumping through her. If she’d been calmer, maybe she’d have come at him smarter, or maybe back off, use Obfuscate, and trick his eyes. If she approached him cold and tactically, he knew he’d struggle to win this fight without Ripper’s help. But she shrieked as she came at him, a howling animal, fully intent on running him down and tearing into him.

He stood his ground, and as she swung her right hand at him, he caught it. The impact was massive, and his body shook down to his heels as her punch threatened to shatter his bones. But the vitae coursing through him managed the impact, and the two of them slid along the floor of the cathedral. She tried to pull her hand back, but he held on. Screaming like she’d gotten stuck in a bear trap, she swung at him with her other fist, and he caught that one as well, getting his fingers around her wrist. Strong as she was, she was still smaller and lighter than him, and now with both her hands trapped, every motion she made to get away took him with her.

“Maria!”

“Die! Die you stupid boy!”

“Maria! You made a mistake!”

“I have never—”

“You made a mistake! You trusted a man, and it turned out he was a villain! And you know it! You know it, and you need to accept

it. You need to forgive yourself, and accept that other people are willing to forgive you for it! Natasha, Damien, and me. I nearly fucking died because of you, and so did the love of my life, but good fucking god, we're willing to forgive you!"

"How dare you presume I desire your forgiveness!"

He yanked on her arms, causing them both to spin and stumble, nearly falling. "I'm here trying to get through to you, you stupid fossil, because I'm saying it's ok! It's ok that you made a mistake. We all fucking make them! You don't have to be an angry, closed off, hateful bitch! Natasha cares about you. Damien definitely cares about you. And hell, I care about you. You never did me wrong till that night you helped Lucas."

"Liar!"

Well, her icy walls were definitely down, but now he held a raging hellfire by the horns, and he wasn't making much progress.

So he did the only thing he could think of. Tough love. He yanked her in close, and slammed his head straight down at the bridge of her nose.

Her head snapped back as her nose broke with a satisfying crunch. She brought it up again, glaring at him, rage still burning in her eyes. And before she could do something smart, like use her legs, he yanked her in, and did it again, skull smashing her face in hard enough to make her grunt and collapse back. He let go of her hands, and she fell on her ass with all the grace of a legless dog.

"Listen to me, god damn it! I am not your enemy, and you know it! You're the one that fucked up, trusting a man like Lucas. You betrayed Natasha, and it nearly got a bunch of people killed. But I get it! I fucking get it. If Antoinette turned into some sort of villain, I'm sure I'd be helping her for years before finally breaking free of her. And every night thereafter, I'd be eating myself up, feeling like

utter dogshit for the friends I betrayed and the lives I might have ruined. Get what I'm saying? I'd have done the same thing! Made the same mistake!"

He crouched down beside her, ready to jump away if she swung at him, but she'd calmed enough to clutch her face and touch her broken nose as she glared at him. Probably just recovering for round two.

"And you know what I'd do if that happened?" he asked. "I'd apologize to the people I hurt. Because I know they would care about me, even if I fucked up. I don't know if it's because you're a Nosferatu, and got royally screwed in that department, or maybe it's just an elder thing, but it's clear you don't think anyone cares about you. Damien's been chiseling at that wall for over two years now and making progress, but I don't have his patience. People care about you, Maria, you stupid dumbass, but your head is stuck so far up your ass all you can imagine doing is brooding in your den for the rest of your second life, assuming everyone hates you.

"You didn't lose everyone when Lucas died. But you did fuck up, helping him. You made a mistake, and you need to apologize for it. If you swallowed your pride long enough to do that, you'd be surprised how many of us would happily be your friend." He hated playing shrink, but he hated when people didn't have a shred of awareness more. And he hated seeing someone suffer when they didn't need to, even more. "This doesn't need to be some ridiculous cliché of the scary vampire who lives alone, hating everyone and everything for a thousand years because of a tragic incident in her past."

Maria lowered her hand, and stared at him like he'd just ripped out her guts and stepped on them. Agony, and rage. No one had talked to her like this in a long long time, no doubt, and she definitely didn't want to hear it from him, a kid. The kid who killed her lover, at that.

“You insult me in a way no one ever has, and you expect me to believe—”

“Yes! Believe!” He threw up his hands. “Sorry, I’m doing a horrible job explaining this, but you aren’t making it any easier, Maria. What I’m trying to get you to understand, is you made a mistake, but instead of just owning up to it, you started alienating everyone. And you already did that before! So you went from closed off, intimidating Invictus, to terrifying hermit church lady. If you’d just apologized to the people you nearly got killed, to the people you betrayed, you’d be damn surprised. Not everyone is the bitter asshole you think they are. Not everyone is a twisted, hateful person who secretly wants everyone to suffer, or is willing to throw others under the bus for their own gain.

“So here’s what I want you to do. Look me in the eye and tell me you’re sorry about what you did.”

“You berate me in my own home and—”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I said that shit, I really am. Christ knows that was rude, and I hit below the belt. If Angela came up to me and told me ... anything, I’d have torn the building down trying to kill her. But Angela was my enemy. I’m not your enemy, ok?” He sat down, one knee up, and gestured to the scary woman sitting two feet from him. “Shit, I suck at this. What I’m asking is ... please, stop being an asshole, and let people in. Damien, Natasha, and me. I can be your friend, even if you hate my guts.” He leaned toward her and met her surprised eyes. “We’re not friends, but I never hated you. First time I met you, you scared the shit out of me, but I never thought badly of you. Hell, I was impressed. A Nos like you had every reason to go full villain mode, with your deformities.” No point in dancing around the elephant in the room, and his gut told him she’d appreciate the bluntness right now. “And after Viktor died, you and Michael invited my sire into the council, Viktor’s polar opposite. That told me a lot about you.”

“Viktor was a menace, and sadism grew deep in him.”

“Agreed.” He sighed, lowering his head as an idea popped up. If he wanted to get through to this woman, he’d have to show his hand, or at least relevant parts of it. “You know how Viktor and Tony died?”

“They fought over intelligence, and a mill was set on fire, killing them both.”

Slowly, Jack held up a hand. “I was there, and I set that fire, on purpose.”

Maria stared at him, unbelieving. But as they looked each other in the eyes for a while, the rage and hate slowly draining out of her expression, she eventually returned his sigh, and nodded.

“You killed Viktor and Tony.”

“Yeap.”

“How? Why?”

“Viktor took Julias and me because he needed back up, but also because he didn’t trust anyone else, I guess. If Julias got that intel, Viktor could trust him to give it to him. Tony and Rebecca were there, and Julias took her on while Viktor went after Tony. I went with Viktor. Him and Tony started arguing, and Viktor said something about taking the city from Antoinette — killing implied — and I said ... don’t do that.”

Maria winced, sucking in a breath, an almost casual expression that was very much not Maria. Progress.

“He attacked you.”

“Yeap, split me down the middle, face to crotch. Not deep enough to kill a fledgling, but damn close. Then Viktor and Tony started fighting for real. So there’s me, bleeding to death, and realizing the only way I could do something for the Prince, was if I took Viktor down. I had a lighter, from when Julias was teaching me about how fire was more deadly for older vampires. And it was a super old textile mill. Setting it on fire was stupid easy. Damn thing practically exploded.”

“You survived.”

“Crawled my way out of there, almost split in half and half burned up. Daniel found me.”

“Of course the sheriff did. The man has an infuriating habit of showing up randomly.” After another heavy sigh, Maria twisted on the floor to sit more on her side, a lady like position for a woman in a big white gown. “Why didn’t you tell Michael and I?”

“That I killed your fellow council member? Didn’t see that going well, even if you were happy Viktor was dead.”

“Prudence was smart.” She wrinkled her broken nose, and with a quiet, but still very gross clicking sound, she pushed it back into place with a palm. From how smoothly she did it, it was something she’d done plenty of times in the past. “You have been the center of many events since your embrace, Jack.”

“Tell me about it.” He pulled out a smile for her, something warm. Seemed fitting. “Sorry, for keeping it secret from you. And I got other secrets too, ones I’ll share with you, when I know it’s safe.”

“You come into my cathedral and demand I apologize for my actions, all with intent to learn my secrets about Michael, and yet you have apologized to me several times already...”

“It took a long time to realize what sort of person you really were, Maria. Antoinette sealed the deal, when she told me she talked to you about what the Ripper told you. Most everyone was convinced you’d come for my head if they found out.”

Her eyes fell, showing weakness, and she knew she was showing it, too.

“I knew the sort of man Lucas had become. And I knew that I could not blame you for what you did. I...” With a wavering voice, she shook her head, her long black hair lightly bouncing against her corpse skin. “I am sorry, Jack, for ... for all the things you rightly accused me of. Truly. I...” Sighing, she looked down at her fist, the one she’d hit him in the chest with. “I suppose all I really needed was to land one good punch, to realize it wasn’t what I wanted.”

His body relaxed, muscles releasing tension he hadn’t realized he’d still been holding onto. “Been there.”

“I have talked with Natasha, about what I did, but I ... did not lay my heart bare as I should have. And Damien, I let him get peeks of my guilt every so often, but even then, I have never truly apologized.”

“It’s understandable, it is. I didn’t come here cause I thought you were being unreasonable. If I was you, and had gone through the shit you had, damn right I’d be putting up walls and keeping people out. But, I also came here because I knew you were a good person, Maria.” He groaned with his own words. “Sorry, ‘knew you were a good person’ sounds like more stupid cliché shit, doesn’t it? Something right out of a story trope.”

“It does, the words of someone who has read far too much fiction written by teenagers.”

He laughed. She smiled. Great progress.



“What I’m trying to say is ... bad shit went down, is still going down, and everyone’s hurt. But we don’t have to be enemies. We can be friends—yes I know that sounds really juvenile, but I’m being serious. None of this secluded ancient vampire crap.”

“Easy for you to say, little Kindred, but I have been living a secluded life for over two hundred and fifty years.”

“Baby steps. Damien says you and him have grown a bond. Was he lying?”

She looked down. “No.”

“I’m no therapist, Maria. Just a kid who thinks most people, even assholes like yourself, aren’t as bad as they make themselves out to be, or as they think themselves to be. And I came here not just because I need information about Michael. I came because I want this animosity between us gone.”

She nodded, and reached behind herself to pull herself up onto the pew. Miraculously, nothing in the cathedral was damaged, and she sat down as she forced herself to look at him. Every time she did, it was obvious he’d pulled the scab off a big wound, making this whole conversation sting for her. But it had to be done if this was going to go anywhere.

“It will take time.”

He got up and sat next to her, a couple feet between them. Closer than before, but not too close.

“Yep.”

“I ... I am surprised at how much you remind me of Antoinette.”

“Eh?”

“You are both convinced Kindred can rise above their baser natures. Admittedly, your lover handles this dilemma of Kindred instinct and humanly desires with far more grace and intelligence than you.”

He winced and clucked his tongue once. “Agreed.”

“But, I can admit that, given time, this very conversation could have happened between her and I. Again, with her managing the nuance with far more grace than you.”

He chuckled this time. “Agreed.”

“Still, I ... must thank you, Jack. It has been a long, long time since anyone has argued against me for such things. Most are content to leave Nosferatu as disfigured as I well alone. And those that aren't, I drive away. Damien is the first in many years to share more than five words with me.”

“He's a good guy.”

“He is. And you, as well. Infuriating, stupid, juvenile, but I ... cannot hide behind my rage any longer. You are not someone deserving of my hate.”

“Thank you. And, uh, if it's any consolation, that nightmare you hit me with was ... effective.” If not for his stubborn tenacity — the reason Julias had sired him — and the mistake Maria had made creating the nightmare, he'd probably be a ball on the floor, screaming.

“It is, and isn't. Thank you. But, you must understand about Michael. If I tell you about his past, I am violating his trust.”

“I think at this point, violating his trust is a small price to pay if it means saving him and the rest of the city from his own damn stupidity.”

That did it. She nodded slowly as she looked up, as if looking to God for some sort of guidance.

“Michael had a childe before Jessy. A man, who grew to love Garry.”

Oh fucking shit. “Where’s this dude now?” He already knew the answer.

“Dead.”

## Chapter 146

~~Jack~~

“Dead? Did ... Michael kill him?”

Maria shook her head, and to his surprise, took a few seconds to comb her hair with her fingers. It was long and flat, and their fight had messed it up a bit. He forced down his smile. For a moment there, she reminded him of Antoinette.

“Garry was embraced here in Dolareido, not long before Michael and I came here, barely elders in our own right. We joined the Invictus, and Viktor established the council.”

“Surprising, considering he was a power-hungry asshole.”

“He was also wise, and his ... tendencies did not blind him, at least not at the time.” She shook her head. “I digress. Michael sired a childe not long after establishing himself in Dolareido. Back then the Carthians and Invictus fought with each other more openly; no kine technology to make it difficult. Deaths were rare, however. No open war, but the usual machinations of Kindred. Michael’s childe had a ... rough time, after his embrace. It was the turn of the century, after all.”

“Turn of the century? Oh, right, the 1900s.” Not a nice time to be gay.

“Kine often died in horrible circumstances, that long ago. Roland, Michael’s childe, lost his family. He was unstable before Michael embraced him. It only grew worse thereafter.”

“Rough.”

“Indeed. And considering the time period, homosexuality was difficult as well. Garry and Roland found solidarity in each other. And Michael was content to keep his hands out of it.”

“Until?”

“Until the Carthians grew more aggressive, starting brawls in the streets. Brawls that were ... perhaps warranted. The Invictus and Carthians have butted heads over territory since before he or I came to Dolareido, and it is now impossible to know what land originally belonged to who. Regardless, the violence grew, and Michael ordered his childe to never see Garry again.”

Jack slapped his forehead hard enough it echoed through the cathedral. “Has Michael seen a single movie in his whole life? Or read a fucking book?”

“Fiction? Rarely.”

“Figures.”

“Michael’s ignorance for storytelling aside, he knew Roland would defy him. Steps were taken to keep Roland from seeing Garry, and sometimes they were ... less than peaceful. And you know how Gangrels can be.”

“Yeap.” The idea of locking Jessy up in a box to stop her from seeing Eric was hilarious. Plus, being a Gangrel, she had ways to get through things other vampires couldn’t. Only powerful Gangrels could turn into clouds of smoke, but the younger ones still had ways.

“We don’t know what happened or how, but we do know Garry came to us, begging for us to find Roland. Apparently he’d threatened suicide. He was a fledgling, and fledglings are often unstable. And as I said, Roland’s first life had been unstable enough.”

Fledglings were unstable for a good reason. They'd literally just died, so that sucked. They woke up looking all pale and thin. They suddenly had a new set of instincts with a mind of their own fighting to get out. And the only way they could eat now, was drinking other people's blood. The ethical dilemma alone was enough to tip some new Kindred into suicide territory. Far as Jack knew, most managed to find some solace in that they didn't have to murder anyone, and hell, the Kiss was pleasurable. But it was still taking blood from unwitting, and sometimes unwilling victims.

Then there was the whole problem with being yanked out of their previous lives. Sure, lots of Kindred held up a facade so they could still interact with people from their first lives, but not family. Not close friends. You couldn't trick those two, not forever, and any kine that figured out what was going on either ended up bound by the Vinculum, embraced if the Prince allowed it, or dead.

And from what Maria said, Roland had issues in the family and friends department.

"You didn't find him?"

"Michael looked. He ... hesitated to trust Garry, but looked eventually. Perhaps it was that hesitation that led to Roland's demise, we don't know. But he was not found until the next night, a pile of ashes in his apartment, drapes pulled open."

"Damn that's ... that's really rough. Suicide note?"

"Yes, though it provided little resolution, only that Roland was miserable with all circumstances, and the promise of immortality seemed more a curse. He said goodbye to Michael, to Garry, and that was all."

"Fake?"

“Garry insisted Roland was extremely depressed beforehand, and Michael checked the handwriting. Either a rather cunning Carthian plotted against Michael and went after his childe to torture him, and faked the suicide, or the reality was as it appeared.”

Sighing — lot of sighing tonight — Jack leaned back against the pew, and motioned with a finger to his birds. They came down to join him again, and Scully dropped his necklace on his head for him. A small adjustment later and it was around his neck again, and immediately the Beast in his guts quieted. His two familiars got comfortable on his shoulders again, and he made sure to give each of them proper scratches on the back of their heads. The conversation with Maria was making him feel affectionate, and sad.

“So Garry blames Michael.”

“Yes. And Michael blames Garry, for creating the unusual situation for Roland at all, to pick between Carthian and Invictus.”

“And this was over a century ago?”

“Yes.”

“Long time to hold a grudge.”

“Is it?” She raised a brow as she looked at him. “I do not fault you for looking for the good in everyone, young vampire, but do not be so foolish to think that vampires — or any sentient — wouldn’t hold a grudge for hundreds of years. Scars last for a long, long time.”

He winced at that. “Yeah, I guess. Just ... damn, that is some serious drama shit. Personal shit.”

“I kept it secret for a reason.”

“I’m glad you told me, I am. But now I gotta figure out a way to use it to stop this war.”

She shook her head. “Do not be so stupid as to think this war is purely over the personal issues between those two. The Carthians and Invictus fight each other in every city with a vampire presence.”

“Yeah, I get that, and I get why. But I still think I can at least bring us back to a shitty truce if I can get those two to come to some kind of understanding.”

“Unlikely, but not impossible.”

Mulder and Scully cawed a few times, and rubbed their heads into the sides of his head. He took a few seconds to assure each of them he was fine, scratched them behind the neck, and stood up.

“Damien said you think Michael didn’t kill her.”

“Yes.”

“Damien’s also pretty sure Amanda’s good enough to not get caught in some shitty distraction maneuver from the Carthians, and accidentally go up in flames.”

“Damien is perhaps correct in that, I do not know. I know little of the fledgling, but her sire Gloria isn’t exactly a ... methodical sort.”

He laughed, earning a small smile from the woman that never smiled. Gloria Jennings was a bit of an airhead, which was all sorts of weird for a Mekhet. Then again, gossip was information, and Mekhet absolutely loved information.

“Three options then. Amanda screwed up and Garry’s distraction accidentally killed her. Which is what Michael says happened, and is using as his reason to go on the aggressive against the Carthians. Option two, Michael killed her, is lying about how she died, and is using the lie so he can go on the aggressive. Or ... option three, Amanda’s still alive. Michael says she’s dead, so if she’s alive, he



might have her stashed somewhere? But, why would he do that and not just kill her?”

“Because my once fellow councilman is not Viktor or Tony or ... or Lucas, young Ventrue. He is both smart enough to want to avoid creating unnecessary enemies, and not so bloodthirsty that murdering a child would not faze him.” She managed another small smile as she looked up at him from the pew. “In this regard, I suppose I am thinking as you, and not assuming everyone is a heartless bastard.”

“Let’s hope being an optimist doesn’t backfire and get me killed. I —” His phone buzzed, and he took a quick peek. “It’s Damien.”

“Go. We are done here.” Nodding, the corpse lady stood up, dusted off her beautiful white gown, and started up the stage, headed toward her den below. “Be careful, Jack. And please do not spread this information about Garry and Michael lightly.”

“I won’t. You got my word on that.”

She nodded again, took a deep, heavy sigh, and disappeared around the curved wall behind the gigantic organ.

~Dangerous, ~ Mulder said.

~She’s sad, ~ Scully said.

~She’s definitely dangerous, and sad. But not as sad as she used to be. Hopefully that tussle gave her a little ... closure, I guess.~

He checked the message from Damien.

~Fiona thinks Athalia might know something about Garry’s attack on Xnomina, ~ the message read.

~Shit. I really want to keep them out of this. If we start getting them involved, Garry might ask Avery for help, and she might even do it, too. We don't exactly get along.~

~Maybe. How did your heart-to-heart go with Maria?~

~Well. Got what I needed.~

~Great. How?~

~Brute force psychology.~ Jack laughed as he texted the message. Brute force psychology that nearly got him killed.

~Interesting. Perhaps the same can be used on Avery?~

Ugh. It had been borderline kamikaze to use against Maria, and very well could be again with Avery. But Avery's bitch attitude wasn't exactly unwarranted, considering the shit she'd put up with in the past, and her goals as an Uratha. Sure, she made everything a thousand times harder than she needed to, but she also wasn't hoping to kill Jack either. Hopefully.

~Natasha is handling things on that front. If Avery gives her trouble, I trust her to deal with it.~

~And any other trouble that comes her way? This Carthian Invictus turf war seems oddly timed, doesn't it?~

Jack groaned and rubbed his face. ~Because it's happening just as we started to figure out more about what the fuck Black Blood is up to? Yeah, I noticed that. But Tash and the Prince are a pretty deadly combo. I trust Tash with this, and we got our hands full anyway.~

They had to get this war dealt with as soon as possible, before something else bit them in the ass while they were too busy dealing with bullshit.

---

~~Natasha~~

The Prince sighed as she leaned back in her chair. On the top floor of the Elysium Tower, Natasha stood in front of her boss's large desk, squirming. Not because she was scared; she'd gotten used to the Prince, mostly. Scared because how this conversation went could have an enormous effect on the city at large, and she didn't really like having that responsibility. She was a Mekhet, and would always prefer to be on the sidelines.

Case in point, Daniel stood next to the Prince, and Tash knew her sire might say three words in the whole meeting.

"Please, spare no details, Miss Vola."

"R-Right." And she didn't. She told the Prince about the trip into the Hisil with the boys, Eric, and Sándor. She told her about their encounter with Street-Tail King; mentioning its name earned a scowl from her. And she told her about what Sándor said about the tear.

"Minerva's legacy..." Antoinette looked up as she sighed, and combed her hair over her shoulder with her fingers, down over her suit jacket's chest. "My old friend's experiments with ephemera had progressed further than I thought."

"Indeed," Daniel said, and he adjusted his glasses with a single finger. One.

Natasha nodded. "And Jack is convinced B-B ... Black Blood is responsible for the tears. Or at least, is connected to them."

"That creature is insidious," Antoinette said. "I believe Jack is correct. Black Blood is a spirit of grand intent, and if bringing down the Gauntlet is within its power, it will do so. Spirits would love nothing more than the freedom to visit the physical world ad nauseam."

“B-But Street-Tail King doesn’t want it gone.”

“Yes, that is peculiar, is it not? Perhaps it has something to do with what Sándor noticed, that the tear was not cutting to a realm he recognized. And then there is the incident of Jack and the Begotten becoming trapped in that strange realm of ghosts.”

“I’m n-not following.”

“Spirits do not like the Gauntlet. If Street-Tail King has given information that will usurp Black Blood’s plan to destroy the Gauntlet, we can only surmise that something else is at risk.”

“M-Maybe Street-Tail King is happy ruining Black Blood’s plans? They are rivals.”

“Oui, but even I would side with an enemy if we shared a goal of such colossal value.”

“Then...” She tapped her temple as she looked down, frowning, juggling thoughts. “The tears and M-Minerva’s legacy might overlap, but maybe something else would happen too?”

The Prince leaned forward, elbows on the table, fingers netted together in front of her. Classic thinking pose of a mob boss.

“Minerva threatened much, if Avery is correct. But I have no recollection of her experiments ever touching on realms other than the Shadow Realm. If these tears are opening ways to other realms, then I fear there is a connection.”

The way she said ‘other realms’ sent ice down Natasha’s spine.

“Maybe Minerva’s legacy, d-destroying the Gauntlet, could do the same to other barriers between us and other realms? Or maybe...” “Natasha held up her hands and mashed them together, as if squashing different colors of clay. “And instead of only the physical

and sp-pirit realms connecting directly, it'd be ... more of them? M ... Maybe all of them?"

Her sire smiled at her for a tenth of a second before nodding at her. "Smart." Two.

"And that does indeed sound like something a scheming spirit like Street-Tail King may be hesitant to allow. Though in truth, I am surprised it gave the information without enforcing a deal."

"It almost did! My ... the b-boys stopped it. They were convinced it wasn't helping earlier without a deal because it hates Avery, no other reason. They were right."

Antoinette laughed softly, shaking her head. "Perhaps. I doubt it was that simple. In all likelihood, it was waiting for an excuse to give the information without losing face."

"I guess that m-makes sense."

"This information is ... problematic. Dealing with Black Blood is never easy."

"And Jacob," Natasha said.

Antoinette shook her head. "I will not blindly assume that Jacob is also responsible or linked to Black Blood's actions. But, I have to accept that it is a strong possibility. Minerva knew Black Blood, but she knew Jacob best of all, and to my chagrin, it would not surprise me if my old friend knew enough about his lover to be able to recreate her experiment."

"B-But ... why?" Natasha raised her hands with a shrug. "Why would he want to do something like that? I mean, it sounds..."

"Apocalyptic," Daniel said. And that was three.

“Indeed. The sort of thing Azamel would warn us about.”

Natasha gasped. “You think she knew all along?”

“No. But Begotten know realms better than anyone, and I am sure she noticed something brewing.”

“I see. I ... um ... I p-planned to work with Avery, so we can get a closer look at this newest tear.”

“Prudent, and dangerous. Avery does not like what we dragons here in Dolareido do. And she especially does not like us after I forced her hand, indenturing those boys to you.”

“Yeah, b-but Arturo and Matthew are convinced she’ll help.”

“I see. Then, carry on, Natasha. Inform me of future progress. And well done.”

Natasha smiled, bowed slightly, and half turned to leave. But before she got any further, she looked back, knowing full well she shouldn’t ask this question.

“Ab-b-bout ... Samantha...”

“Nothing has changed, Miss Vola. Do not tell my childe what you are up to. All business of Black Blood is never to grace her ears.”

“B-But ... Jacob—”

“Is not proven to be our enemy, yet. And even if he is, Samantha is as safe with him as she would be elsewhere.”

Natasha stared at her boss before making a quick glance to Daniel. Safe, with Jacob, really? But all her sire had for her was a slow, sad nod. He agreed with Antoinette. He wasn’t happy about it, but he agreed with her.

“And if he is, um, an enemy,” Natasha said, “then ... Samantha’s in a position to ... d-do something?”

The Prince’s cold eyes confirmed. This was another ploy of the Prince’s, another way for her to control the outcomes of situations. If she had to use her childe, her lover’s mother, as a tool in her games, then she would.

Natasha gulped, nodded, and left. Jack wasn’t going to be happy about this, and if he didn’t hear it from Tash, he’d hear it from Jessy.

---

She sat down at her counter with the boys in her apartment. They each sat beside her, and all of them looked down at the counter in thought. A business meeting.

“I t-told the Prince. She ... wasn’t happy.”

“Understandable,” Art said. “If Jacob’s an enemy, that’s a big enemy to have.” He rubbed his nose, frowning. Right, Jacob had smashed his face in in a fight, effortlessly defeating him and Matt at the same time.

“Yeah. B-But she’s not going to stop Samantha from dating him.”

“Makes sense.”

“It does?” She blinked up at the big guy.

“She’d be tipping her hand if she did, you know?”

Natasha groaned, but nodded. The idea of sweet Samantha getting caught in the middle of all this was horrible. Horrible! She shrank on her stool and leaned forward enough to press her arms and shoulders against the countertop side.

Matt pat her on the shoulder, and rubbed her back, earning a small sigh from her.

“Tomorrow,” Matt said, “we can talk to Avery, and organize something, figure out a way to get to that tear.”

Art nodded. “And hopefully not piss Black Blood off too much doing it. Maybe Red Tide? He was looking for that tear we couldn’t find around the Cathedral.”

“Tear we couldn’t find.” She sat up, tapping her chin. “If Black Blood is making these tears, then m-maybe it created a tear there, in the den b-below the Cathedral, to make Maria look guilty?”

“Black Blood framing Maria?” Art looked ahead, entering thinking mode. They’d all thought these thoughts already, might as well voice them. “I guess that’d explain why we caught the blood wraiths saying her name. Black Blood wanted us on the wrong trail, and it had them spreading misinformation.”

“Exactly!” she said, grinning up at Art again. The grin quickly morphed into a frown before she could stop herself. “If...” Sighing, she looked back down, and shook her head. “N-Never mind.”

“What? Never mind?”

“Y-Yeah. I don’t ... w-want to fight about it anymore.” No more fighting about what happened with Avery and Maria.

“Oh.” Art sighed and looked down, like she’d hung an anchor around his neck.

Matt coughed, and they both looked at him, making him squirm a bit and scratch the back of his head.

“This relationship,” the gentle giant said. “It’s ... it’s important that we treat it like a relationship, right? And I’m no relationship



expert, but we should be able to have arguments, right? Not throw fists or anything, but if we have a disagreement, and we start yelling or something, it should be okay, right? We shouldn't worry about leaving each other because ... I don't know."

The gentle giant was smarter than he realized. Or were those Jack's words?

She smiled at Matt, leaned up and over, and gave him a kiss, a good one. "You're right. You're v-very much right. I ... I guess I was worried before, b-because it's an unusual relationship, so I didn't want to disagree over anything. D-Didn't want to stir the water cause it was so perfect. Perfect, and ... and not real." Both men were looking at her now, eyes heavy. She squirmed. It was a heavy topic, one she'd been afraid to have, but if Matt was willing to talk about, she should be too. And no offense to Matt, but she was the better thinker. "But real relationships aren't p-perfect, right? They're messy, and problematic, and ... and there should b-be room for us to get into arguments about stuff, and not w-worry the relationship will die."

Art sighed, nodding. "Yeah, same here. First time Matt and I have ever done the long term relationship thing; you can guess why. Been really careful to not do or say anything that might make anyone upset."

She slid off the stool, and both boys turned to face her.

"Well, it's a real relationship! I love you two. I d ... don't care that there's t-two of you. I d-don't want to think of this relationship like a fairytale. It's r-real, and we should be realistic about it." Before she could say more, Arturo's smile widened until he was laughing. "It's not funny!"

"I know, I know. I'm not laughing about that. I'm laughing cause this dumbass is smarter than me." He gestured to Matt, who nodded confidently, apparently already knowing this.

“Not that we should look for things to argue about,” Matt said. “But, uh, Jack said it best I guess. We didn’t have any confidence in the relationship. We should, right?” It was Jack’s words then. That kid was too smart for his own good. No wonder the Prince loved him.

She smiled, nodding. “Right. And it’s n-not like we’ll argue all the time. Romance should be fun! I like t-talking to you guys about stuff, and hanging out, and learning new things. I like the sexy times too, and...”

Uh oh. She said the S word. Arturo and Matthew both grinned at her, and she stepped back immediately. She knew that grin!

“Hey, w-wait a minute...”

Both of the huge men prowled toward her, and she squeaked as she jumped back and over the couch. But they were fast! Way faster than big guys like them should have been. Matt chased after her directly, rolling over the couch on his side. She squeaked again and dashed for the wall of the hallway that led to the front door. But Art was even faster than Matt, and the man got between her and her only escape.

The hungry grin on his face struck her still, and sent a tingling thrill down through her spine into her toes. And before she could recover, Matt swooped in from behind. She jumped to the side back toward the living room and the couch, but Matt plucked her out the air. Literally. And before she could say anything, he set her over his shoulders, and walked toward the bedroom.

She giggled. She very much tried to not giggle, but she did, a lot. She squirmed and wriggled, trying to get out of Matt’s grip, but trapped between her squeaky giggles and desire to punish her boyfriends for being so forceful was a tough place to be. And she giggled louder when Matt tossed her on the bed.

Both men climbed onto the bed with her before she could escape, and each took one of her hands, pinning it to the bed over her head, while they leaned in and kissed her neck.

“Blush for us,” Art whispered, voice half growling.

“Blush,” Matt said, the same hunger in his voice too.

“N-No!” Despite her best efforts, she couldn’t wipe the grin off her face.

Art nibbled on her earlobe softly, pulling it between his lips and placing kisses on it. “Blush. It’s been killing me not having you like we used to.”

“We’re dying,” Matt said, nodding, a deep purring rumble in his throat. More kisses. “I’m gonna explode.” Out with the sweet romantic talk, in with the carnal sexy talk, apparently. It was silly, and exciting.

“Dreamed about you a lot,” Art said, and he kissed her neck again, opening his mouth wide enough she could feel his teeth.

“R-Romantic dreams?”

“At first. I missed you. But after a while, the dreams got very sexual.” He peeked up over her chin long enough to kiss her, before going back down to her neck. His free hand found her blouse, and undid a button. “I need to get inside you.” A grunt. A growl. Barely words.

She squirmed in their grip, trying to slip free. She knew she couldn’t. She knew she didn’t want to. But she also knew trying to get away from them drove them crazy with lust. And, for some reason, she just found herself doing whatever made them hornier, even if she didn’t tell herself to. It was like a game she couldn’t help

but play, even though she knew the boys often got pretty crazy when she teased them.

“Blush,” they said, together this time. Her shirt was fully open now, and both men teased and massaged her small breasts with exploring fingers. Such huge hands.

“I dreamed I had you tied up,” Art said. “Hands up, dangling. I did everything to you.”

“I chased you down,” Matt said. “Caught you inside a big building. Grabbed you, fucked you on the floor.”

She gulped and managed quick peeks at both men. Those were some very aggressive fantasies. What sort of men did she get herself involved with?

Art slipped over her chin, and kissed her again. Then Matt did as well, before the both of them lifted their heads up so they could look down at her. Animal hunger in those eyes, and a lot of it, all aimed directly at her.

If she Blushed Life, she knew they'd be all over her, and she'd never seen so much hunger in their eyes. Exciting. Scary! Having business meetings with Uratha sometimes made her forget, but the moment sex was involved, it quickly became apparent that the boys were wolves, and they had massive appetites. Talking and negotiating with Matt and Art was easy. Talking and negotiating with two hungry enormous wolves intent on devouring her, was not.

Sighing, and trying to hide her smile again, she Blushed Life.

~~♥♥♥~~

Both men groaned, practically growled, and got to work. She squealed as they fell on her, their hands reaching under her clothes and pulling them off. The shirt came off with almost desperate

speed, their movements growing faster, almost frantic. The pants next, both men yanking them down and up hard enough she almost slid right off the bed.

In sync like practiced group hunters, they both jumped off the bed, and grabbed her underwear. She squealed again as they yanked them off. They pulled the bra off the same way, up and over her head like they were in a race against time.

They yanked her off the bed, and she squeaked as she landed on her feet between the two men. She thought they got her out of her clothes fast, but both men stripped naked in three seconds. Matt, hilariously massive, with his shoulder-length dirty blonde hair. Arturo, messy black hair down to his jaw, and tan skin. And both of them were so hilariously fit, she gulped as her eyes lowered and looked at their abs. Both of them of them were already aroused and hard.

Matt got on his knees in front of her, grabbed her hips, pulled her forward, and growled.

“W-Wait! I didn’t say you could—” She sucked in a breath hard as Matthew wrapped his lips around her slit, and devoured her. He’d done this to her dozens of times, and he knew her body better than she did at this point. Warm lips and a wet tongue buried her swelling skin in playful pressure, encapsulating all of her slit, making sure every inch of her was wet with his saliva.

She glared down at him and bopped him on the head, several times, but the huge man just grinned up at her, his nose pressed to her mons as he ran his tongue up and down against her clitoris in broad, slow strokes. The sudden electric jolts were almost painful. He made sure to keep every inch of her between his lips, refusing to let any of her sex free of his wide open mouth. It was almost like watching an animal devour a meal, a very handsome animal with long dirty blonde hair, and gentle green eyes.

Her body lit up like kindling in seconds, and her tiny grunts of failed escape attempts turned into little whimpers, as she felt her body begin to boil.

Art grabbed her butt cheeks, spread them, and before she could so much as squeak in surprise, he pressed his tongue into her other hole.

“Hey! Art, you d-d-dumbass!” She tried to whack Art in the head, considerably harder than she did Matt, but Matt grabbed both of her wrists. Chuckling, Matt continued to bury her pussy in big, wet kisses, pushing his nose into her as he devoured her, tongue getting rougher as she tried to pull her hands free.

It wasn't like she was dirty back there, where Art was mirroring Matt. She was a vampire, and every inch of her was always clean. But that didn't mean it wasn't a shock, to have a tongue pushing into her from behind! She wriggled and squirmed, and tried to move her ass out of the way, but Art locked his hands around her thighs and held her in place.

All she could do was stand there, and try to stay standing, as the two men slid their tongues along her sensitive skin.

“I'll ... g-get you for this!” She tried to hit Matt again, but his grip on her wrists was strong. And she didn't try very hard, cause as much as she squirmed and wriggled, she missed this. She missed feeling tiny and trapped between the two hornballs. She missed the way they jumped her and did things to her once she was stupid enough to Blush for them. She missed getting taken by them.

Matthew buried her whole pussy in ravenous licks and kisses, covering it and drenching it, even as it grew wetter on its own. Painful jolts morphed into euphoric waves of bliss as her clitoris swelled. He grinned up at her as he licked faster, and she broke into trembling whimpers as the pleasure sparks began to build between

her legs. The only thing keeping her from falling over, was Art's grip on her thighs.

She bit her bottom lip as she looked down at the big idiot eating her out. She squirmed some more, desperate to hold onto something, but Matt didn't let go of her hands. Trapped. Matthew slowed down and let her enjoy some sharp sparks of pleasure that jolted outward from her clit into her core and thighs, before he devoured her again. Arturo did no such thing, refusing to slow down. If anything, he experimented, sticking his tongue deeper into her tiny butt as she mewled.

She got wet so fast, faster than usual, and usual had gotten pretty fast with how often the boys and her used to have sex. And with long it'd been since they had.

Then they stopped. She blinked down at Matt, then looked behind her at Art as he reached into the nightstand cupboard, and pulled out a bottle of lubricant. Of course. She frowned at him, but she couldn't muster her serious, angry frown. All she managed was her chipmunk frown despite her best efforts to do otherwise, and she knew very well the chipmunk frown only made the boys hornier.

Arturo dribbled some lube on his fingers, pressed two of them against her already wet and stretched asshole, and massaged them against her skin. The lubricant worked quickly, and she squeaked as the man eased two fingers in deeper, and deeper, and deeper. With his palm pointed toward Matt, the man curled the two fingers toward her pussy, and she squeaked again as her swelling insides sent more jolts through her. Wider, heavier waves of pleasure, the sort you could only get from feeling something deep inside.

Matthew did the same. He didn't need lubricant though, dripping as she was, and she gasped as the man forced two thick fingers into her tiny body. With her wrists free again, she reached down and grabbed Matt's wrist, but he ignored her, overpowering her as he

sank middle and ring finger into her slit. Palm up, the evil giant winked at her, and pumped his hand toward himself.

“Matt! Slow d-d-d-d—” She clutched his shoulders with both hands, and spread her legs to try and keep from falling, as the two men fingered her insides. Arturo pumped faster, hard enough to make her butt ripple against his hand, but Matthew pumped harder, enough to earn some splashing sounds as his fingers slapped against her g-spot.

She tried to hold it back, but it'd been so long. And both of them were coming at her with such hunger in her eyes, her knees grew weaker by the second. She punched Matt's shoulders a few times, but they were weak little strikes, and soon her punches turned into a desperate grip to keep from falling, as her insides began to squeeze. The building heat in her insides exploded outward, rushing up into her chest and down through her legs to her toes, forcing them to curl and for her thighs to tremble.

They didn't let her fall. Each held a hip in their huge hands, while their other hand filled one of her holes. They slowed down a little as she came, giving her muscles enough freedom to spasm and milk pleasure through her, but they didn't slow down for long. The moment she stopped shaking like a leaf, they fingered her again, and harder.

“Please, slow ... d ... d...” She stared down at her tiny slit, spread by the brute's two massive fingers. Such a little thing opened wide by his digits, now drenched in her juices. Her smooth mons almost rippled with the impact of his fingers inside her, and for the second life of her, she couldn't stop staring at how hard the man's fingers worked back and forth.

Staring got ten thousand times harder when another orgasm ripped through her, but she managed, and she blushed from head to



toe as she caught a peek of the copious amount of juices leaking from her. Matt's palm was soaked.

As last Matthew stopped, and he smiled up at her again as he slid his fingers out of her. Arturo got the cue and stopped as well, but instead of letting her collapse on the floor, Art took her by the hips, and threw her on the bed. Literally threw, again. She bounced a few times, squeaking, body trembling and refusing to listen. But she managed to glare at Art as he climbed onto the bed beside her. It creaked under his weight.

Arturo grabbed her, turned her, hugged her from behind, kissed her neck, breathed in the smell of her hair, and whispered, "You're not getting away tonight."

"I ... you're ... horny dog!" Predictably, her weak insult rolled off his back. If anything, it turned him on more, earning another hungry, rumbling growl from him that vibrated through her, and sent another tingling thrill down her spine.

She glared at him, but it melted away as the man raised her, and lowered her down onto his cock. So hard, he was bursting, and she mewled as his thickness spread her ass. Both men were huge, and she was tiny. Every time they penetrated her, it was an overwhelming sensation of being stretched taut; this time was no different, even with how hard they'd fingered her. Her ass squeezed on him in spurts, and Art took his time, shifting back and forth to work with her clenching and un-clenching rhythm, slowly sinking her deeper and deeper, until she felt him stretching her wide, and deep.

In no time, her ass found his hips, and she pushed at his hugging arms as the sensation of her ass being filled until his cock pressed against her deepspot had her whimpering. She didn't actually want to escape, but some part of her told her to try anyway, to make them hold her down and take her. She pressed a little harder, and Arturo

tightened his grip around her chest as he growled down at her. Every time she tried to get away, the man's arms held her tighter, her breathing increased, and his heart rate did too.

Matthew crawled onto the bed, and Arturo sat back and rolled onto his back. The two of them were in perfect sync as usual, and Matt grinned down at her as he took his massive cock in hand, and aimed it down at her tiny entrance.

“W-Wait,” she said, voice wavering along with her legs. “Slow down!” She managed doe eyes for Matthew, knowing full well it'd drive him crazy with need, but she did it anyway. It'd make him get rough with her, pin her down and pound her. She never liked those things in the past! But now, she couldn't stop herself from teasing the boys, and pulling out that aggressive, hungry side of them.

Totally Jessy's fault.

Matthew went slow, at first. He liked to do that, and she knew it'd only be for the first penetration. Gently, he spread her little slit with his thick, hard shaft, and she squeezed down on him and Arturo both, as the giant pushed his length deeper into her. With Arturo already inside her and little room left, each inch Matthew forced into her was full of blissful, wet friction, and her legs quaked as the hard thing rubbed against every inch of her insides.

Eventually his huge glans pressed against her depths, and she sucked in a breath as the small sparks of pain were immediately buried in waves of bliss. Matthew sank deeper, and her insides stretched. He pushed deeper, stretching her more and more. She sucked in a breath as that sensation, 'that' sensation of being fucked so deeply she could feel it had her insides quivering, and her juices leaking out all over him.

She managed a quick peek down at her belly, and groaned. Tiny as she was, with a thin little waist and stomach, it meant the two boys

filled her completely, and made a small distension along her flat belly. God, she felt like she was going to burst.

Matthew growled down at her as he leaned down over her, an animal sound that rumbled in his chest and filled her with vibrations, and tingling chills. The look in his eyes was almost inhuman. She gulped as he came closer and closer, until he eventually got down onto his elbows, weight pressing against her blankets outside Arturo's chest. So close! So close his giant chest pressed against her, and she disappeared between the two huge men.

Both men growled this time, and thrust.

“W-Wait! Not so—”

They thrust faster, and her breath fled as the werewolves plunged into her body, hard. Not gentle, not gentle at all. She squeaked with each thrust as they buried her in their hard, hot, sweating bodies. Her muscles clamped down in a desperate attempt to slow them, but it only made things worse. The pleasure jolts, almost painful with their intensity, spread out from between her thighs, up into her chest and down to her curling toes.

She was cumming. They were cumming. Maybe two minutes into it and both men were growling around her as they pumped cum into her. Her insides clamped down with muscle spasms, milking them as she drenched Matt's cock. But they didn't slow down! They usually slowed down when they came, and sometimes when she came, so they could enjoy the pleasure more. But both men only growled, and continued to pound into her, hard enough she felt the bed and her tiny butt shake.

They rolled onto their sides. She squeaked with the sudden position change, but the men didn't stop. They thrust in rhythm, first Art, then Matt, both filling her and stretching her until she nearly burst, and until she felt their cum leaking out of her. Art

pulled out, then Matt, leaving her empty, before they did it again. Fast, constant thrusting that left her gasping, Blush of Life making her think she needed oxygen, even though she didn't.

The two men pressed their bodies into her, squashing her between them. Art slipped his hand up to her neck, and squeezed his fingers around her throat as he filled her ass with his cum. Matthew grabbed one of her outside thighs and pressed her leg tight around his hip. Both didn't stop.

She tried to say something, but Arturo's grip was absolute, squeezing with desperate need. A small part of her mind knew she could communicate if she had to, summon vitae and kick or something. A much bigger part of her mind melted against Art's chest as he squeezed her throat, and she looked up at them both with wide eyes as they thrust almost frantically into her.

They rolled over again, and she thought maybe Art would sit up and pull her back against his chest. He liked to that, especially when he had a hand around her neck. But he stayed down on her, pinning her whole torso between both men's chests. She was completely sandwiched between them, and tiny as she was, she disappeared between them. If anyone could see, she knew the only thing they'd be able to see of her, was her tiny legs spread around Matt's, limp on the blankets. Limp, until another orgasm ripped through her, and she found the strength to kick at the bed in desperation as the boys continued to pump into her.

She lost track of what was where after a while. Never had the boys been this rough with her, desperate and grunting like animals as they squashed her between them. Art let go of her neck at some point, so he could get better leverage on the bed and grind into her all the harder. Attempts to say words failed. All that came out were tiny squeaks.

Finally, they slowed down, and she sucked in a breath deep enough so she could moan instead of just squeak. Moan turned into groan as Arturo slipped out of her and sat back, huffing and puffing, and he wiped a drop of sweat from his brow.

But before she could comment — he looked amazing all sweaty like that — Matthew sat up, and turned her around, so she was on her knees and hands on the bed.

“Matt, w-wait! I need ... a break...”

He didn't listen. He spread his knees so his pelvis was aligned with her straight on, grabbed her hips, and yanked. The giant sank every inch of his massive length into her hard enough his testicles slapped against her clitoris, and she collapsed, arms giving out. The blankets caught her, and she turned her head enough to look at Arturo as Matthew pounded her from behind. He was grinning.

Each slap of Matthew's balls against her made a soaking wet splash, sound and all, and she knew it was mostly her. And it only got worse as the man pulled her into him, thrust into her hard, and stayed there, burying himself balls deep inside her as he came again.

Before Natasha could recover, Art grabbed her, pulling her away from Matthew. He threw her onto her back, spread her legs, got between them, grabbed her hips, and lifted her pelvis up. With Art on his knees and sitting up, he had to lift her hips high, and she stared up at him, exhausted, her shoulders and head on the blankets, as the man sank his hard cock into her ass again.

Bent like she was, a yoga bridge, she couldn't see much. But she could feel how his hard cock drove straight up toward her belly with each thrust, the angle and her position guiding it toward her navel. Each thrust into her cum-filled ass was hard, hard enough to make the bed creak again, and have her mouth wide and eyes locked onto the huge man pounding her.

She wanted to reach up and grab his wrists, hold on, but her arms wouldn't listen. She wanted to make some noises, at least squeak, but her body didn't want to breathe anymore. A kine would have started seeing stars. She could only lie there and tremble from head to toe as her lover fucked her ass.

More wetness flowed down her butt, making a splashing mess as the man didn't slow down. She managed to lift her head long enough to get a peek at Arturo's abs, and see a tiny squirt of her juices shoot up and hit them below his navel. And another, and another, before she collapsed back onto the sheets, and let the orgasm rip through her again. No use trying to keep her eyes open anymore.

Hands found her, moved her, turned her. Weight pressed on her, buried her between bodies. Matthew had come back, and now both were inside her again, grunting and sometimes even growling as they wrestled on the bed, rolling and thrusting and pinning her between them. She went limp, arms and legs dangling around them, and bouncing with each impact of their bodies. They were wild animals.

She came so hard, it hurt.

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“Bad dogs! B-Bad, bad dogs!” Marching in the front of the two kneeling men, she gave each of them a good smack on the head with a rolled up magazine.

“Sorry,” Art said, wincing after the smack she knew didn't hurt him at all.

“Sorry,” Matt said, mirroring Art.

“You’re supposed t-to do what I tell you, remember? That was the deal.” She thwaped them again.

“Sorry,” they said together.

She rolled her eyes, and did her best to keep the smile off her face. Success, but barely.

The two men knelt in front of her by the bed, while she stomped around, towel wrapped around her. No towel for them! This was a punishment. But it wasn’t like the boys cared they were naked anyway. And unlike her, their legs weren’t shaking.

Cum was still all over the three of them, and the moment punishment was given, shower time.

“You were both like ... wild dogs! Like, as if you had t-to ... take catch me and eat me or I might get away.” She wasn’t Blushing Life anymore, but if she were, that line alone would have had her hot again. The memory combined with the words was powerful. It wasn’t like the boys hadn’t ever ravaged her before, but tonight they went a little far. And while that idea was a bit scary for her, her body disagreed. She’d never cum that many times, or that hard before.

“It did kinda feel like that,” Art said. “And we ... we don’t want to lose you again, you know? I guess that kinda ... made us feel a bit desperate, when things got physical. Plus, you know, we hadn’t cum in weeks.” He grinned at that, and she rolled her eyes.

Matt nodded. The big lug was no doubt thinking the same thoughts as his best friend, but Art was better at articulating them.

“W-Well I’m not going anywhere.”

They smiled at that.

“Yeah?” Art said.

“Yes! Yes you b-big dumb...” Groaning, she set the magazine aside, and kissed Art’s forehead. “We can argue, b-but as long as we respect each other like Matt said, it’s ok. Arguments are fine, as long as w-we ... understand that we n-n ... n-need to try and understand each other, too. I’m not some young girl with st-tupid fantasies that love is supposed to be all roses! Love is hard work.”

Matt smiled up at her, and she leaned over to kiss him, a proper kiss on the lips.

“This whole love relationship, the long term deal, is pretty new to us,” Art said.

“Well, we are in love. So from now on, we d-don’t do things like ... like what happened, with Maria and Avery. We don’t betray each other. From now on, w-we talk to each other. Ok?”

They winced again, but she leaned in, kissed them both again, and motioned for them to follow. They did, frowns fading and growing into giant smiles as they realized she was taking them into the shower.

Soon all three of them were under the blast of hot water, and lathering each other, taking turns with the loofah. She smiled up at them, they smiled down at her, and tension melted away as she could see her words sink into her boys’ heads. They didn’t have to worry and be desperate with her, like she was gonna run away like prey. Like, a weak little doe, all ready to be gobbled up.

What would it be like if they’d transformed? She’d had sex with them once, when they went into their bigger, wolfier human bodies, Dalu. It’d definitely been an experience, being filled like that. But Dalu was nothing compared to Gauru, to the giant werewolf forms, and the aggression that came with it. What would it be like, if she had her hands around two, monstrous girths right now, with two giant beasts looking down at her with animal hunger and giant teeth?





She shivered as the image danced through her mind, and before she knew it, she slid down onto her knees, Blushed, reached up, and guided the shafts of both boys to her mouth. They both blinked down at her in surprise, but it wasn't long before they were both hard again. Long, hard, thick girths, pumping full of blood, teasing her with its rich taste and extreme power.

She smiled at them, opened her mouth as wide as it could go, and eased Matt's cock into her mouth, bathing his glans with her lips and tongue while her left hand stroked him. She did the same for Art, right hand stroking him as she kissed and teased his glans, until she could taste his growing juices. Sometimes she tried to suckle both at the same time, guiding both cocks to fight for space against her lips; they didn't mind.

She made sure to blink her doe eyes up at them, knowing each time it'd have them growling with desire. It did. She watched them as she leaned forward and slowly slid Art's length into her mouth, and then down into her throat, her lips spread by his thickness. Kindred had no need to breathe, and no gag reflex, after all. Her lover groaned, and she smiled up at him, and Matt next. She eased off Art, and did the same for Matthew, taking the man's ridiculous length and thickness into her until her lips found the base of him. And she stayed there for a while, one hand stroking Art while the other held Matt's side as she smiled up at him from around his girth.

She slid back off his length, and let its heavy weight sit on her face a bit, enjoying the heat of it, and how she could feel his heartbeat through it. She did the same for Art, nudging her face along his cock's underside, and planting kisses along its length, tip to base. Satisfied, she set them both against her lips again, and stroked both their lengths as she suckled on the two cocks while

they both watched her like she was a meal they'd been hunting with ravenous bellies all night long.

It didn't take long for them to cum again, and she let the white fluid pour down over her lips and chin before it flowed down her thin neck and body. Both of them stared down at her, surprised, and groaning softly in bliss as she milked them. They'd cum several times already, but weeks without an orgasm — and crazy regenerative werewolf bodies — meant they had plenty to spare, and it overflowed her mouth in moments, creating a huge mess that eased down her chin and tiny, slender body.

They both rumbled, and she shivered with the buzz of their voices.

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She stood up, washed their cum off her skin again, and motioned for them to kneel. They did. First, she took a drink of Matt, and the man sighed happily as his body relaxed with the power of the Kiss. He struggled to not fall over when she was done. She did the same with Art, kissing him, then Kissing him, drinking deep until the man fell on his ass and sat back against the wall of the shower. Werewolf blood was so damn good. Exquisite! As Antoinette would say. It had her body rippling with energy the moment it hit her stomach, and more besides once she'd taken deep of both of them.

“You t-two may be all big and bad and strong, but I'm the vampire.” Nodding and smiling as if she'd announced victory to a game, she stepped out of the shower, leaving her two thoroughly drained and exhausted boys struggling to get back up.

Tonight had been fun. Too much fun. What would it have been like if they'd transformed, and did to her what Eric did to Jessy? She'd probably burst at the seams.

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~~Antoinette~~

“Jack survived.” She sighed as she leaned back in her chair, seated in the top floor of her tower, and sighed relief.

Daniel stood beside her, and he nodded as he turned to look out the great window overlooking her Elysium. “He’s very good at his job.”

“Ah yes, the peacekeeper job? That was never supposed to apply to the covenants.”

“Either way, he’s making progress.”

“Yes, he is. Bullheaded and brazen, but he is. And perhaps that is what is needed to wipe the dust from the minds of those like Maria.” After a quiet chuckle, she stood up and joined him. “How goes your hunt?”

“Black Blood eludes me.”

“But not Jacob?”

“Not when he is here, in our realm, no. I have witnessed his traversing to other realms through the old gates, and my projection cannot follow him there.”

“Then it is good your childe is as effective as she is. She will find out more, about whether Jacob is to blame for this, or whether Black Blood is pursuing this strange agenda on its own.”

“I’d prefer you summon the creature. Interrogate it yourself.”

“I do not sacrifice kine at a whim.”

“But you will sacrifice my childe? And yours, for that matter?”

She turned to look at her old friend, but he did no such thing. Solemn, he stared out the window, arms folded across his chest.

“If necessary.”

“What constitutes necessary?”

“If there is an enemy that wishes to destroy us all, then defeating it qualifies as necessary. And I know you understand that, Daniel.”

Her old friend sighed, a slow and heavy sound, but nodded eventually. “Sorry. Just, nearly lost her once already, to Lucas.”

“You have nearly lost her more times than that. Natasha has been in danger many times, and has survived many times. Trust her.”

“And Samantha?”

“I have seen and heard enough to believe Jacob genuinely cares for her.”

“To the point he won’t use her against us if such a situation arises?”

She matched his sigh, and set a hand on his shoulder. “I do not know. I will have to ... reevaluate when more information is available.”

He nodded slowly, not pleased with her answer. And that was why her good friend could not be Prince. Powerful and intelligent as her sheriff was, he did not have the stomach for difficult decisions. She did.

She continued. “If Black Blood truly is pursuing Minerva’s legacy, then if it has any indication we are aware of its pursuits, it might change tactics. If we want to catch it unawares and put a stop to this

foolishness, we must pretend we do not know. I will not summon it.”

“You really think it doesn’t know what we’re up to?”

“I think prudence is required. Continue your searching, my sheriff, and I will continue mine.”

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“Mister Pavel. How unexpected.”

“Prince.”

Both she and her sheriff watched the Begotten as he stepped into the throne room of her kingdom. She leaned back in her chair, wearing her business smile, subtle, and dominant.

Sándor was an attractive individual, slightly tall, a lean but muscular man with a defined chin and some gruff on his face. His dark hair was buzzed short, not unlike Jack’s, and the shape of his blue eyes betrayed his Eastern European origins. If only he wore something better. Dark jeans and a black button shirt? For shame.

“For what do I owe the honor of this visit?”

“Wanted to catch up on a couple things.”

“Normally my love would handle contact between the races, but...”

“He’s pretty busy trying to keep everyone from killing each other.”

She grinned at that. “Officially, he is Invictus and will aid the Invictus in this war.”

The Begotten walked up to her desk, looked around at the luxurious but professional grand office of her Elysium Tower, and managed the smallest shrug.

“We both know that’s not what he’s doing.”

“All too true.”

“I wanted to talk about Jacob.”

Ah yes, of course he did. He had joined Natasha for her discovery, after all.

“I admit, your readiness to help Natasha has confused me, Mister Pavel.”

“Please call me Sándor. It’s...” He looked to the side for a moment, at the enormous wall of black marble with white veins, and the several carvings of dragons that circled various columns of the same material, before looking back to her. He was analyzing her, based on her environment. Intelligent. “It’s strange, hearing that old name.”

“Very well, Sándor.”

“I helped her cause it helps Dolareido, right? And I’ll help her again with this problem, as many times as needed.”

“It is that generosity that confuses me so.”

He managed another quaint little shrug. “Azamel—”

“Would not aid me or mine to such a degree, or so directly.”

He raised a brow at that. “Wouldn’t she? She told you about this weird threat, right?”

Antoinette considered that, and tapped her chin a few times as she watched the man. “Oui, that is true. But your generosity overshadows hers greatly.”

“I guess so. But I ... I’m not just replacing her, when she’s gone.” For all the man’s efforts to keep his stoic expression, a hint of a

somber frown took control of his lips. “There’s Julias, too.”

And for all Antoinette’s efforts to maintain her subtle, dominating smile, the man’s words struck a chord, and she let the smile go.

“Surely you do not blame yourself for his death. You were under the control of a dangerous witch.” A flesh witch she knew both Beatrice and Samantha were becoming increasingly involved with.

“Of course I ... My family...” He sighed, shaking his head. “The details are my business, Prince.” And there was that stoic expression once again.

Ah, of course, he blamed himself indirectly, due to the past. It was true that the man had been found and captured by hunters, but that did not necessarily mean he made a mistake in how he hid his paranormal nature. Forever a lesson that avoided even the wisest minds, that one could make no mistakes, and still lose. In this case, a lesson blocked by guilt, and Sándor reeked of it. It would be decades, perhaps centuries, before he no longer reviled himself for the death of his wife and child. It would be an eternity before he ever truly forgave himself at all.

Unfortunately, that also meant those that died while he was controlled by Jeremiah and his tool, were partly under the umbrella of his guilt. An absurd conclusion, intellectually. Emotionally, the reasoning was flawless, and she doubted anything she could say would help him. Perhaps Jack and his disarming ways could, but her? No, nothing she could say would help this poor soul.

“What do you wish to know of Jacob?”

“Whatever you’re willing to share.”

Nodding, she pulled her hair over her shoulder onto her chest, and ran her fingers through it as she looked up with memory.

“Jacob and I came to Dolareido over two centuries ago, with my childe Tony, and a rather bold, powerful up-and-coming Ventrue named Viktor Honors.” The names earned the faintest twitches from the listening man’s eyebrows. Azamel and the others had likely shared much of this story already. “A small town, buildings of wood, where every kine knew each other by name. Over the decades, I molded that small town into the Dolareido you see today. And, as much as I would like to say the credit is entirely mine, the others played roles as well. Viktor and Tony did little but take advantage of opportunities, but Jacob planted hints of the call of darkness within the city.”

“Call of darkness?”

“To sire Kindred who do not reek havoc, or violate the Masquerade without concern, or throw themselves into the sunlight at first opportunity, requires a somewhat unique mentality. And Dolareido was meant, from night one, to be our utopia. Jacob planted the seeds of interest in what occurs after sunset in those silly, ignorant, superstitious villagers. Potential Kindred. And it was not long before vampires from other villages came to our village as well, lured by the dark whispers within.”

“Dangerous, to have a city with rumors of vampires.”

“And that is where I came in, Begotten. I controlled who did what, and I made sure everyone obeyed the rules. With my guiding hand, the Masquerade was maintained and maintained well. Kine did not die to Kindred, or if they did, they were people no one would notice or care about disappearing. And over the decades, I molded this city into my utopia. But ... to my chagrin, Jacob pursued his own agendas, and he hid them well. Only as my experiments with ephemera grew did I come to realize my old friend had become close with a spirit named Black Blood.”

“He didn’t want you to know about it?”



“Jacob knew both his and my goals for a utopia overlapped, but also clashed. If Jacob ruled Dolareido, this city’s nightlife would host a far greater accumulation of dangerous affairs. Flirting with spirits with dark rituals. Deadly games where winners survived and losers did not. Freedom, and chaos. A utopia for vampires of a sort, but not the utopia of cooperation I seek.”

Sándor nodded as he looked down, pondering. “Sounds like a witch.”

“Indeed.”

“And Black Blood?”

She eyed Sándor for a few seconds, and he met her gaze, steady and unmoving. He realized she was analyzing him, and he let her. The Begotten did not lack for confidence, after a fashion.

“Unfortunately I know little of the creature. As far as I can tell, it had been growing in Dolareido since before our arrival.” He did not need to know the creature could be summoned with ritual and murder. The fewer that knew, the better. “I have discovered similar spirits, much younger than Black Blood, and with none of the older creature’s colossal strength. What bothers me most though, about the intolerable spirit, is that its nature is not natural to Dolareido.”

“It’s not? Far as I can tell, it’s a spirit of death and the dead.”

“Yes, but death is no more common in Dolareido than other cities. Less than, I must say.”

“And the blood wraiths?”

Sighing, Antoinette shook her head. “Blood is a frequent point of intrigue in Dolareido. But for those blood-and-flesh-obsessed wraiths to emerge from that intrigue is also unnatural. Or so I assume. The Uratha would know more.”

“Black Blood’s connected to them. It might have had a hand in creating them. Might explain their weird natures, if Black Blood itself is also an oddity. I’ll ask Avery.”

“They are not willing to share their information with me.”

He nodded again. “I’ll ask nicely.”

She blinked at the man, at his steady, solid expression, and she laughed. If he was joking, he was a master comedian for his perfectly unmoving face. Perhaps there was more to Sándor than a simple man scarred by guilt.

“Natasha has deemed you trustworthy, and while I do not share her views, I must admit circumstances suggest I should trust you.”

He frowned slightly at that, deliberating, before he looked past her to the enormous window that exposed her city’s beautiful skyline.

“If Black Blood is a problem, then why did it help me, when Jeremiah cast that ritual on Azamel? We were all blinded and bound by the spell, but Black Blood ... helped me get through it.”

“I do not know, Sándor. Perhaps so Jacob would not potentially lose Othello and Beatrice in the fray? There are far too many unknowns, which is why we need more information. It pleases me that you are helping Natasha, and I hope you will continue to do so.” She leaned forward and set her elbows on the table, adopting her usual business deal stance. “I doubt money has much value to you, Begotten, but I believe you align with my plans for this city. Continue to aid Natasha, and I will see to it that your stay in this city, however long that may be, is a rich indulgence.”

That earned a small smile from him, the sort a knowing soul would make when offered a contract for his soul from Satan herself. He was suspicious of luxury.

“Thanks.”

“There is something else you wish to ask?”

“Yes. I wanted to ask about Beatrice, and Julias.”

Of course he did, to seal in his scars with acid. She was tempted to give him the simple explanation, as Sándor himself acted the simpleton. But the man was centuries old, and far wiser and more intelligent than he wanted others to know.

“A stalker sired Triss against her will. Jerem Montallia. I imagine you have known vampires with similar pasts,” she said. He nodded. “I executed the fool, of course, but the damage was done. Beatrice changed quickly, donning the tattoos and piercings, and embracing the Carthian lifestyle. A rebel. But that changed when she met two men.”

“Two? Oh, Julias, and Jacob.”

“It is easy for most to think Julias has had the most effect on her. He taught her to love others and herself, if you subscribe to clichés. But it is Jacob that showed her she could pursue her own desires and agendas outside of romance.”

He nodded again, eyes stern as he stared at the window. Building the Dolareido puzzle in his mind, no doubt, each drop of information she gave a new puzzle piece to be placed.

“Her relationship with Julias,” she continued, “was painfully poetic. Julias, much like Jack and I, wanted the best for everyone, and for everyone to cooperate. An idealistic, albeit a realists as well, with the will to make difficult decisions when necessary. He was also quite depressed, and it was not until he met the rather harsh Beatrice that her spark kindled his love for his second life.”

“Not Jack?”

“Jack was to Julias what a child is to a parent. Julias found purpose in preparing Jack for his second life, but not happiness. Not for himself, at least. Beatrice and Julias created happiness for each other.”

“And now he’s gone...”

“Oui. And Beatrice, as you can imagine, has thrown herself headlong into the affairs of witches.”

Sándor nodded, frown betraying him. He knew, or perhaps had even seen what the Nosferatu was doing in the shadows.

“I see.”

“Sándor ... it would be a waste to tell you you should not feel responsible for the damage the hunters have caused. But if you truly wish to help those it has, do not go to them seeking to replace that which they lost. There is little you could do to offend them more.”

Another wince. After a few moments of silence, Sándor lifted his head, met her eyes with his steady gaze again, and nodded. “Thanks for the information. I’ll ... see what I can do, about ... everything.”

This man. This silly man. A stranger to their city, brought as a slave and tool by psychopaths, and yet he now felt bound by guilt to help them. The only reason he agreed to replace Azamel as protector for the younger Begotten, no doubt. How often did nightmares of his dead family haunt this poor man’s dreams, driving him to sacrifice himself for those he hurt? Proof, perhaps, that creatures of the nightmare had nightmares of their own.

“Be careful, Sándor. I tell you much of this information in good faith. Perhaps too much. But, as I said, Natasha trusts you.” And she had avoided saying anything too damning during the conversation, of course. “I advise you to leave Black Blood and Jacob be.”

“I will.”

“As for Beatrice, I can see that you feel a need to reach out to her. And to that I say, be especially careful.”

The tiniest smile graced the man’s face. “She’s stronger than you think.”

Antoinette leaned back in her chair, a touch of relief running through her. “Oh? I—no, I will not pry. If you think you can be of help to her, then by all means, do as you see fit. Jennifer certainly sees value in you.”

Sándor hid his smile, but she could see hints of it fighting to show through. “Thank you.” He nodded deep, almost a bow, and left.

She watched after him, and combed her hair idly as she pondered. What effect would this man have on her city? Surely better than Azamel, and the destruction she caused decades ago.

Eric and Sándor, Uratha and Begotten, both helping her Kindred student. A powerful turn of events.

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~~Beatrice~~

Romance was in the air, she could smell it. That had something to do with Jen relentlessly groping her, getting her hands under Triss’s tank top while Triss was busy looking through the binoculars. But more so because Clara looked happy.

Triss, Jen, and Samantha stood on a rooftop in South Side, closer to the entertainment district, spending a little time updating their impression of the ongoings in the city and its war, and also for some girl time. Girl time did not imply sex, just the opposite usually, but for some reason Jen felt handsy today. Triss didn’t mind. Sam, on the other hand, kept peeking and then feeling guilty about it and

looking away. Which probably had something to do with why Jen couldn't keep her hands off Triss.

"How's she doing?" Jen asked, chin on Triss's shoulder.

"Better than I figured."

Clara was doing the outdoor restaurant thing, the fancy shit. She wasn't dressed for it. Then again neither was Harcourt, but at least he was wearing some dark pants and a white button shirt, a few undone; everyone undid their buttons in Dolareido's heat.

Brace was a pretty damn hot guy, a tall black dude with quite a bit of muscle on him. Short curly hair, and random tattoos, most hidden by the shirt but some peeked out, and some were weird ritual magic shit. And of course he had a few scars on his hands, and a pretty awesome one on his face. Dude looked perfect for the tall, dark, handsome, brooding and scary hunter role.

But a single conversation with Brace Harcourt was enough to let anyone know the dude was a goofball.

And then there was Clara, average height, and damn fit, athlete's body; still looked small compared to Harcourt though. She had tan skin and long dark hair done in box braids, and the face made Triss think she came from close to the equator. Really hot.

Clara looked down and poked at her meal — blue rare steak — as she talked. Introspective? Sadness? Probably a serious conversation then, maybe about the vampires, or even Jack.

Far as Triss knew, Clara still had a thing for Jack, too. She hadn't talked to the girl in a while, but maybe now was a good time to change that? The Circle and the wolves weren't exactly on the best terms, but Clara had put in the work when Jack needed her, leaving her pack behind to do it. Maybe talk to her later tonight, get an update? Maybe—

Triss groaned and looked over her shoulder at Jen. The damn woman was happy to be a nuisance, hugging from behind and playing with Triss's nipple piercings without a single hint of remorse. The damn slut.

“Jen, you are insatiable!” Sam reached over and poked the horny slut in the shoulder, for good measure.

Jen shrugged, but didn't stop, cupping and massaging while kissing Triss's neck. Triss wasn't Blushing Life, so it wouldn't lead to anything, but honestly she really didn't mind. Jen was a Daeva trapped in a Ventrue's body, and that was fine.

“It's probably a good thing Clara's moving on,” Triss said. “Or at least trying.”

“I can't believe she had a thing for my son.” Sam, dressed in a gray suit not unlike Jen's, cupped her cheeks as she looked down from the building rooftop. “How'd my boy get so popular with the girls?”

“Jack has proved his mettle,” Jen said, finally done with the neck kissing, “time and time again. And Julias groomed him well. He looks quite spectacular naked.”

Sam gasped, a classic mom gasp. “You've seen Jack naked?”

Triss laughed and shook her head. “No but none of our clothes survive very long in the fights we get into. I've seen enough of the kid to know Julias must have put him through the fucking ringer to get him into the shape he is.”

Jen gave Triss's abs a gentle slap. “Like Triss here.”

“No one groomed me. I was just a vain bitch who liked it when people looked my way.” Which backfired of course. Fuck that Jerem asshole.

“In any case,” Sam said, “I’m happy Clara’s moving on. I don’t want my boy in a love triangle.”

“Triangle?” Jen laughed and returned Sam’s shoulder poke. “Kindred interests can get a lot more intricate than that. Or are you suggesting Othello and Madison aren’t both interested in you?”

“W-What? No no, that’s just ... sex...” Poor Samantha. She squirmed in spot and looked back down at the street below, obviously recalling all the things Jacob, the Daeva bimbo, and Madison had been doing to her lately.

Triss nodded. “Yeah, it’s just sex. And honestly, I say you’re in the clear to go nuts and keep doing whatever you want in the Circle, no drama to worry about with us. We’re all pretty buddy buddy with each other. But there’s been more than a few ghouls or thralls who’ve been jealous of someone falling in love with their master. Leads to some crazy weird love triangles and stuff.” Jacob had some fucking horror stories about that sorta shit, the sorta stories you told around a campfire at night. Supposedly. Triss’s experience with campfires so far was one, in a dream-not-dream.

“You mean, like with J-Jack!? He—”

“Will be fine,” Jen said, finally letting go of Triss’s tits, and instead taking the binoculars. “The man is careful, and with the Prince as his love, circumstances will surely be ... interesting, but safe. I doubt the Prince’s ghouls hold Jack in ill regard. And Veronica doesn’t seem the sort to stab Jack in the heart and kill him while he’s vulnerable.”

Oh god, why’d Jen word it like that? Sam groaned as she looked down, and clutched her face with both hands.

“Seriously Sam,” Triss said, “it’s fine. Jack’s fine. Other Kindred are fine. The stories Jacob’s told me weren’t from Dolareido. Your sire’s got a good thing going in this city.”



“I guess...” The poor Daeva sighed as she leaned forward and looked down, holding onto a nearby metal bar that stuck up from the rooftop for balance.

After a while, she clutched her necklace and frowned. She wasn't thinking about thralls and ghouls anymore, she was thinking about her daughter again.

Triss and Jen shared a look. Tell her? Yeah, tell her.

“I found a new ritual,” Triss said. “Should let me finish the vessel.”

Sam's eyes shot open. “Really? You told me you had to keep working on the vessel, and it could take months.”

“I ... had a surprise visit.”

“Visit?”

“From, uh, the Crone, I guess.”

Samantha gasped. The girl was just too damn cute, gasping and putting a hand to her mouth with wide eyes. Somehow, she embodied cliches. Jack was right, the woman may have been strong as hell, but it'd be a lie to say she wasn't the perfect example of the dumb mom who gets addicted to shitty phone games while watching and reading too many god awful romance stories that were nothing more than thinly veiled non-con fantasies. It was too cute.

“But I thought ... I thought that was just, mythology and stuff.”

Triss nodded as she stepped back. Jen kept watching the city with the binoculars, sweeping her vision and probably looking for more Invictus and Carthian activity. Tempting, very tempting to grab her tits from behind and see how she liked trying to focus with someone groping her. But, nah, Jen would like it.

“Mythology stuff,” Triss said, shrugging once she and Sam were in the center of the roof. “Jacob tell you much?”

“A little, but a lot of it was vague.”

“Yeah, understandable. He’s vague cause he has to be. Far as we can tell, if there are any mythic entities out there, shit like gods, we don’t understand them, and they probably evolve over time. But, there is crazy shit out there, we know that much. All those old tales from thousands of years ago probably got grains of truth in them.”

“Oh god. So ... gods...”

“Ask your boss. The Prince pokes at that world, right?”

“Kinda, but it’s more ... science, more about writing things down and doing experiments and stuff. So, I mean, I know there’s ephemera, ghost ghost spirit stuff. I know there’s Twilight, where ghosts like ... like Mary hide, and spirits too. I know there’s that spirit place where all the crazy spirit stuff live, like, uh, spirits of buildings or animals or emotions.”

“Yeap, that’s a pretty good summary of the shit we know. But there’s so, so, sooo much shit we don’t know, you know? The nightmare monsters know more but they don’t tell us shit. And crúac rituals seem to poke at that unknown stuff. Like ... ever watch those documentaries where scientists take those tiny submarines down deep in the ocean?”

“Oh yeah! And it gets all super dark and they can only see maybe twenty feet with their lights and ... and ... it’s so spooky, and dangerous.” Fear visibly ran across Sam’s face. Just like Jack, she wore her emotions on her sleeve. Unlike Jack, she hadn’t made much progress in learning to control that reflex. “Oh god, that’s scary!”

“It is fucking terrifying, no doubt about that. And one time, when Jacob and I were going ... diving,” no need to describe the tortures that entailed, “something spoke to me. An old woman, but a lot freakier and, uh ... god-like. She helped me track down Elen so Jack and the gang could take down the hunters.”

“Oh, wow. So ... so it'd be like, you were drifting along in the endless, crushing darkness, and something ... something freaky and huge and deadly found you?” Her eyes went wider and wider with each word. No need to get heavy with the description when Sam would do it on her own. Wild imagination on this woman.

“Yeah. That's a big part of being a witch, I guess. Probing at the dark side, going deep ocean diving and finding out Cthulhu's down there, sleeping.”

“Cthulhu?”

“I—what, seriously? You don't know about Cthulhu?”

“Um, I think Jack's mentioned the name once or twice.”

Oh god, a perfect opportunity to scare Sam. But, no, Dolareido life was scary enough, especially with the shit Triss and Sam were getting into.

“Anyway, so apparently this Crone creature has noticed me. Paid me a little visit in my dreams.” Actually, yanked her out of her dreams, but again, that'd probably scare Sam more than needed. “She ... gave me a tip, on how to make a vessel.”

“Oh wow. That's ... horrifying.”

Triss laughed. “I know, right? Believe you me, I am scared shitless. But I picked this road, and I'm gonna walk it. I'm gonna use this ritual and finish Julias's new body. His ... vessel, according to the Crone. And then we'll see about part two.”

Samantha squirmed and clutched her necklace. “You think it’ll work?”

“I think the Crone didn’t steer me wrong before. But ... but even the Crone thinks we won’t be able to resurrect Julias.” She wanted to be optimistic, but two fucking deities — three if she included Black Blood — already warned her it was basically impossible. Better to not get Samantha’s hopes up. “I’m gonna do the ritual in a few days. Then we’ll see.”

Nodding, Samantha paced in place, clutching that necklace again like her life depended on it. Head pointed down, the poor woman hyperventilated as if it’d help her, and didn’t stop. Triss let her. Sooner or later Samantha would come down from her anxiety, and Triss would be there to catch her.

Sure enough, a minute later, Samantha calmed down, and looked Triss in the eye.

“I ... want to see the ritual when you do it, if you don’t mind.”

“You sure? It’s not pretty, Sam. It’s going to suck, a lot.”

“I’m sure. If this is something we might do for Mary, then ... then I should see.”

Wincing, Triss nodded, rubbing her arm. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. I want to see.”

Poor woman was gonna be traumatized.

## Chapter 147

~~Beatrice~~

“Hey Clara.”

The werewolf raised a brow as she looked at her, but before the woman could find a polite way — or not so polite way — to get rid of her, Harcourt clapped once and leaned back in his chair.

“Ladies! Visiting?” And again, before Clara could find a way to tell her date that she didn’t want the vampires around, Harcourt grabbed a nearby chair. For three women. Total dunce.

Jennifer didn’t hesitate. She sat down at the small circular table and got comfy, leaned back in the fancy wire metal chair, folded one knee over the other, and finger waved at Brace.

Clara frowned at Jen, and ground her teeth subtly enough only the dumb dude at the table wouldn’t notice. But, Clara didn’t know Jen, didn’t know Jen was doing it on purpose, to make Clara jealous because she figured it’d get the two together faster, not because she wanted to steal Brace from her. Drama. Jennifer embodied soap opera drama. She really did have more similarities with Daeva bitches like Isabella than a Ventrue like Elaine.

How the fuck did Triss and Jen ever hook up? They kinda didn’t, not really. Sorta just evolved that way.

Triss took a moment to check her hair and make sure it was covering her cheeks. The Discipline Obfuscate had a lot of ways to keep people from noticing her, Cloak of Night being the most used. But Face in the Crowd made sure that while people could see her, they just wouldn’t care about her, and as long as she made sure her teeth weren’t obviously visible, it’d stay that way.

“We were scouting,” Jennifer said, nodding to the hunter. “The Invictus and Carthians insist on being a nuisance.”

Clara put up her hands. “We’re staying out of it.”

“You and the pack, or you and Brace?” The Ventrue grinned as she gestured with her head toward the hunter.

Harcourt shrugged. “Uh, both, I guess? The Prince has done right by Marge, Dennis and me, and she doesn’t want us getting involved. As long as people — kine, I guess — stay out of it too, I got no problem.” Without so much as a glance to Clara for permission, the hunter grabbed another nearby chair, slid it over, and gestured to the two remaining ladies. Clara looked annoyed, but with Brace, not the girls. She probably didn’t realize just how nice the hunter was, until now. Nice to a fault.

But then, maybe that’s what Clara liked? Jack was nice to a fault, or at least he used to be. Still kinda was, but also kinda wasn’t, curse or no curse. Growing up was painful, especially for someone like Jack, and every time Triss caught up with the kid it was easy to see he was growing more bitter and upset with the world. Harcourt, on the other hand, seemed impervious to that kinda shit, considering the rough life he’d had while still being a nice goofball. Maybe that’s what Clara wanted?

Or the girl was just dating a nice guy, cause Jack was off the menu and she finally accepted that.

Samantha glanced at Triss, and Triss gave her a playful shove. Go sit, dumbass. Smiling, Samantha took the other chair and got comfortable.

“I hope it stays that way,” Sam said. “No kine getting hurt, I mean. I’m uh, pretty new to this vampire thing, but—”

A waiter came up to them, but Clara shook her head, waving him off. Yeah, she was annoyed. Well, sucked to be her, an info update was important, and one of the best ways to get one was randomly, like this, catching people off guard so they couldn't formulate crafty answers easily.

“But uh, I'm more worried about Jack,” Sam continued. “He's going to try and fix everything himself, like he always does.”

Clara nodded, wincing a little as she took a memory dive. “He does seem to do that.”

Triss raised a hand. “But we're all staying out of it, right? I mean, you know, barring a really shitty exception, we're gonna let the two idiot groups duke it out. And Jacob says it's not the first time they've butted heads, and they're still here, so it can't get too bad, right?”

Everyone looked at each other, frowning or wincing. Yeah, she didn't believe herself either.

“How is Marge and Dennis?” Jennifer asked. “I see you and Clara are enjoying yourselves,” a bit of a pause to make it obvious what she meant, “but I do wonder about those two.”

Harcourt nodded, taking a bite of his steak and chewing it fast. “They'd been hanging out with Leauvion's crew for a long time. Jack apparently thought they were being, uh, hogged? But now they're seeing what the other vamps are up to. Invictus mostly, though. Not that I blame them. Dolareido's got this whole Las Vegas vibe going, and the crew and I had been doing backwater bullshit for years. Trying out hot tubs and fine dining,” he gestured to his meal, “seems to be more of an Invictus indulgence here.”

“It's not everywhere?” Samantha asked.

“I’ve been in a few cities. Clara too. We’ve seen some weird setups, you know? Dolareido’s the only one I even know of with dragons in charge; we rarely even hear of them, let alone run into them. But in other cities, the Invictus aren’t always rich and wearing suits. Sometimes it’s more like a military state. Sometimes the city doesn’t have any luxury at all, and the Carthians and Invictus becomes more like, local anarchist punks versus the local mob.”

“Tijuana,” Clara said, “was a little more ... extreme. The Invictus were brutal, and thrived on markets a lot nastier than the shit you find in Dolareido.”

“Oh?” Sam asked, with the enthusiasm of a mother getting drawn into a documentary about crime. “How ... how bad was it?”

Clara picked up on Samantha’s innocent mom personality quick, and she laughed as she leaned in a little toward her. “Heavy drugs sold to kids, sex slaves, and we ran into one incident involving organ trafficking.”

“Oh god. And you were fighting the vampires there?”

“It didn’t start out that way, but everything went to shit quick when the vamps realized we were in the city. They didn’t want to talk, just wanted us out. Then we ran into a new Uratha, Arturo Ibarra, and things got even more confusing. Eventually we had to leave.”

“Wow. That ... that does sound a lot worse than Dolareido.”

Harcourt nodded, chewing with one side of his mouth so he could talk with the other, smiling the whole time. “That asshole Jeremiah tricked us pretty bad. I mean, he didn’t have to try very hard; most cities we’d seen with vampires had a nasty side to them. But with Dolareido, he told us a lot of horror stories, and we came here full intent on war, you know? If we’d known the Prince was so strict about how kine are handled in Dolareido, a lot more than just



Dennis, Marge and me would have sided with Jack.” His smile faded for a while, but once he started chewing again, his smile came back, and he nodded to them all as he swallowed. Easiest way to a man’s heart, his stomach.

“Perhaps Dennis and Marge could visit the Circle?” Jen said, and she made sure to put a little slutness in her voice. “Or you? We’re all quite friendly in the Circle, and comfortable with each other.” Leaning back, the Ventrue made a small gesture to Sam, and to Triss behind her.

Harcourt raised a brow, but when he saw the other vampires not exactly deny what Jen said, he coughed and choked on some more of his food, before managing to swallow it down.

“I don’t think Harcourt is gonna be seduced by a random offer for an orgy,” Clara said, narrowing her eyes at Jen.

“Oh? I heard y—”

Triss slapped Jen upside the back of the head, and Jen went quiet after a tiny squawk. Harcourt blinked, confused, and Clara breathed a hidden sigh of relief as she smiled up at Triss. Yeah, Jacob might have hated the werewolves, but Triss didn’t, and just cause Clara had made a drunken mistake once or thrice with Jessy’s ghouls didn’t mean it was worth rubbing her face in it. Not that Harcourt would care, but Clara seemed worried anyway.

“Jen’s lewdness aside,” Triss said, “it’s probably best the hunters steer clear of the Circle. You are hunters, and the Circle don’t always do ... nice things, to kine.”

That earned a frown from the man. It didn’t fit his personality at all.

“What?”

Triss put up her hands. “Don’t worry about it. Nobody dying you’d care about. Check the obituaries if you don’t believe me. And I’m guessing the hunters do that regularly anyway.”

“Missing persons reports, actually. But obituaries sometimes too.”

“Ooh.” Samantha’s eyes went wide as she looked at Harcourt. “Do ... do you hunters stand around as you put up pictures on walls, and draw webs connecting them? Or is that all digital now? Do you, um, stay up all night reading newspapers about old, mysterious deaths? Do you do stakeouts and stuff?”

Clara, Jen, and Triss all struggled to keep from laughing. There was no denying the kind of woman Samantha was. But thankfully for Samantha’s sake, Brace was too dumb to pick up on it, and probably just figured she was an inquisitive soul.

“Uh, sorry. Don’t wanna give away trade secrets.”

“Oh! Oh, right, sorry. It’s just so fascinating! I’ve only been a vampire for half a year, not even, and all this cloak and dagger stuff is scary, and interesting!”

“It’s scary, I’ll give you that. Dolareido ain’t like the other cities my friends and I have dealt with.” He sighed as he leaned back, shaking his head. “Kills me that I couldn’t convince more of them to listen to me. But hunters don’t usually cooperate, you know? Solo gigs, sometimes a pair. They didn’t want to listen to me, didn’t trust me.”

“They listened to Jeremiah though?” Triss asked.

“Someone like Jeremiah doesn’t come along often. Dude had connections, magical tools, and the most insane force of will you’ve ever seen. He could have walked into a bar full of strangers, and had everyone in there following him into the pit of Hell thirty minutes later. And Angela, that psycho bitch was scary as fuck, but at the

same time, you knew she could get the job done. Whenever shit hit the fan, Angela always came out on top.”

Samantha sighed as she looked down.

Harcourt’s eyes went wide as he realized. “Oh shit, sorry.”

“It’s ok. That was ... it was...” Sam clutched her necklace for a few quiet seconds before lifting her head. “Bad things happened. But Jeremiah and Angela are dead, and I got to talk to my daughter again. I still get to, sort of.”

Brace leaned in. “I heard about that. I ... don’t want to overstep and tell you what you should do with your life. Or your second life, or whatnot. But, ghosts are dangerous, Samantha. Very dangerous.”

“Do you ... know a lot about ghosts?”

He shook his head vehemently as he took another bite of his meal. “Not as much as some of the other hunters I’ve ran into. But I’ve dealt with a few ghosts in my time, and it’s always the same story. Given enough time, ghosts turn bad. I don’t know why, probably something to do with that they’re ghosts and don’t exactly think, just ... do. But every ghost I’ve dealt with, I ran into because they started causing trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“Killing people.”

“Oh.” Samantha looked down again.

“But hey, I don’t know if that’s gonna happen to Mary. Probably lots of ghosts out there we don’t know about because they don’t do things to attract attention.”

But they all knew the dude was speaking truth earlier. And the truth fucking sucked.

---

“I think you were making Clara jealous,” Sam said, “flirting with Harcourt like that.”

Jennifer chuckled as the three of them walked the streets, not in any real direction, just wandering. They were hungry too, and looking for a meal.

“You have to admit, Samantha, that Harcourt is a delicious looking man.”

“Yeah, but he’s dating Clara! Or, you know, kinda is.” Young relationship, far as they knew.

“Jen was doing it on purpose,” Triss said. “She knew it’d make Clara jealous.”

“What? Why? That’s mean.”

“She was doing it cause she’s hoping it’ll give Clara the nudge she needs to be more proactive. The girl hasn’t had the most successful romance life in Dolareido, so a kick to the ass might get her moving, get her out of her rut.”

“Ooooh. That’s smart.” Samantha nodded as she smiled, understanding clicking into place. “Still mean, though.”

“I am a surgeon with a scalpel,” Jen said, returning Samantha’s nod.

Triss laughed, shaking her head. “More like a butcher with a cleaver.”

“Either way, the meat gets cut, and progress is made. Now hopefully Clara will take the initiative and find a little happiness.

And leave her interest in Jack behind before it gets her hurt. Or dead.”

“Dead?” Samantha asked.

“Of course. Jack and the Prince are an item, and if Clara ever pushes a little too hard, I can imagine your sire pushing her back. Off a thirty-story building.”

“Jesus,” Triss said. “I don’t think she’ll kill her. Unless...”

Samantha gasped again. “Unless!?” Damn, the Daeva was just too cute.

Laughing, Triss gave the woman a pat on the arm. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s go find ourselves some men to seduce and drain, and tomorrow night, I’ll try that ritual.” And hope to fuck it worked, and didn’t leave Samantha traumatized for it.

---

~~Natasha~~

“Jessy, J-Jack is—oh my god!” Natasha stared at her laptop, squeaked, and as realization set in, she groaned. “You said you’d be ok to talk!” Apparently, she should have given Jessy more than a five minute warning she was going to call.

Jessy and Eric were sitting on the couch, facing the laptop they had on the table in front of them. Kat the cat sat on the couch back, blissfully dozing the night away, while her owner and his lover had sex. The damn Gangrel was leaning back against Eric’s chest while the man had his hands holding her hips, and she had her legs between his, almost close enough together to hide her bits. Almost, but not quite, and the angle showed that the two were having anal sex, while a lot ... lot lot of white stuff trickled out of her sex.

Casual, lazy anal sex, judging from the complete lack of movement in the two.

“Sorry,” Eric said as he peeked around Jessy’s shoulder for the camera. “Her idea. We’d been relaxing, and then you texted her, and —”

“Th-This is how you relax!?” She leaned toward the laptop so she knew her angry face filled their camera.

Jessy shrugged and gestured to the cat only a foot away. “Kat understands.”

“Kat is a cat!”

Laughing, Jessy leaned back against Eric’s chest, let her head roll back onto his shoulder, and she slowly spread her legs until they nudged his apart. One of her hands drifted down to caress her very swollen clitoris, while the other teased and massaged her breasts. And the whole while, Eric kept his grip on her hips, and slowly pushed her back and forth.

Well, they were relaxing, that much was true. There’d be sweat if they’d been going at it rough, and there wasn’t any. Which meant Natasha really was interrupting their lazy relaxing sex, which she also knew they both kinda deserved with all the shit everyone had been going through, them included.

“I’ll call b-back.”

“No! Come on, don’t do that. You know I love it when you watch.” Jessy leaned forward until she was literally leaning over the table, and she planted her hands against it as she smiled at Tash. Which of course made her big breasts hang underneath her, and Tash had to make a very strong effort to not look at them.

Natasha didn't have the same bisexual tendencies a lot of women in Dolareido had. Or at least, not as much. That didn't change that Jessy looked really, really good naked.

"Fine! F-Fine. Just ... hurry up, ok?"

"Yeah alright. We've been kinda just grinding for a while now anyway."

~~♥♥♥~~

A moment later, Jessy was on her knees on the couch, a big towel beneath her knees, elbows on the couch arm, and she made sure to arch her back and stick her large ass out as she got comfortable. Eric got behind her on his knees too, lined his length up, took her hips again, and thrust and yanked at the same time, burying himself inside. Tash couldn't see the actual point of penetration, looking at their profile like she was, but the angle indicated anal again.

No matter how much she tried to not, Natasha couldn't help but watch Eric, his thick muscular arms, his defined abs, his hard ass, and his long cock, as he pounded Jessy's ass. Each thrust meant the woman's big butt hit his pelvis hard enough to have the whole thing rippling, and her big boobs jiggling under her. They also had her groaning as Eric picked up the pace.

Kat, right beside Eric from the camera's angle, didn't care in the slightest. She licked herself a few times, glanced at the laptop and Natasha, licked herself a few more, then settled on the couch back once again.

The boys weren't around. If they were, they'd probably say some stupid stuff like 'oh wow look at that' and maybe gesture to the way Jessy's body looked absolutely fantastic in that position, back arched down and ass up. They'd want Natasha to notice, and she would. But Natasha would notice Eric more, like she was now. An innocent treat! The boys didn't mind. And Jessy really liked it when

Natasha watched. So did Natasha, much as she kept trying to convince herself otherwise.

Eric liked it too, evidently. He twisted his chest a little, making sure Natasha could see the muscles as he built up a sweat. Show off. He made some grunts and groans that were less natural, more practiced, more the kinda noises a guy made when he was trying to be pretty for the camera. They weren't bad, Tash even kinda liked their more controlled sound, and she doubted Eric noticed he was doing it. A natural actor?

Either way, Jessy certainly loved hamming it up for the camera, and Tash could see it helped her get off, but she wasn't a good actor. Awesome and attractive and full of passion, but a horrible actor. She just did whatever felt good, and whatever she thought made her look hotter.

Natasha gulped, and stared on as Jessy bounced back and forth on the couch until she came. But Tash's jaw utterly dropped when Eric pulled out of her, set his cock along her ass, and came as well, drenching her back in layer after layer of cum. Tash had seen this done to her from her own perspective, but it wasn't the same as seeing it from the outside.

Vampires had the Blush of Life to let them basically fake life, and since that was an ability fueled by vitae, they could push it if they wanted. It made sense why some vampires got addicted to sex, and basically spent all night every night having it, as long as they had some blood to fuel their Blush. Werewolves didn't. Instead, the strange wolf thing living inside them drove their bodies to superhuman abilities, and that included regeneration. And that included, uh, all the juicy stuff.

By the time Eric was done, thick white lines flowed down Jessy's sides, down her ribs, and down to her teardrop breasts hanging underneath her, until they dripped onto the towel on the couch



cushions. The cum flowed down her waist, and some flowed down her ass when Eric backed up a bit, and trickled down her thighs as he coated her. Wow, she looked like a painting.

~/♥♥♥~/

“D-Do ... you always have anal sex?” she asked before she could stop herself.

Jessy, shivering as she recovered, eventually stood up and smiled down at the laptop. Having sex in the living room must have been common, cause she reached over, grabbed another giant fluffy towel, and cleaned herself off. She didn't bother hiding any of herself while she did it, of course.

“I like both,” the Gangrel said, shrugging. “Eric likes both. Why?”

“I dunno, I just ... I mean...”

“Well, unlike you, I don't have two guys to fill me up, so I can only do one hole at a time.”

Tash groaned and buried her face in her hands. Trying to talk to Jessy about sex was a mistake, always leading to more ridiculous, crass comments. Horrible talk like that was fine in the middle of sex, when everyone's brains were all clouded with hormones and stuff, but it was vulgar when everything was done.

Or was that just Tash still being a prude? Well, she wasn't a prude, she knew that! Not with her sex life. But still, Jessy was a bit much sometimes.

Case in point, Jessy made sure to wipe Eric's length off with the towel, and made a show of it for the camera. And Eric, completely corrupted by Jessy's evil ways, didn't stop her or twist away or anything. If anything, he posed a little, and subtly flexed his abs and stuff, like posing for the camera before a fighting match.

But he laughed, quite aware of what Jessy was doing, and how silly it was, and eventually slipped on a pair of boxers as he sat down. Jessy tried to sit down next to him, but he blocked her.

“Get dressed.”

“Ugh, fine.” Jessy reached down and put on her underwear and her blouse, and sat down with Eric. The sight of Jessy cuddling, like full on romantic lovey dovey cuddling, was a strange sight, and Natasha couldn’t help but smile. Which earned a flip of the middle finger from the Gangrel at the camera. “What’d you say about Jack?”

“R-Right, Jack. Jack is ... um ... Jack doesn’t know about Minerva’s legacy yet, right?”

Eric winced. Jessy shrugged.

“Course he does. I messaged him. Dude needs to know.”

Natasha sighed, leaned forward over her laptop, and rested her chin in a palm.

“He d-deserves to know, but it might have been better if he didn’t, you know? At least not yet. The Prince doesn’t w-want us to let Samantha know about Black Blood.”

“You fucking serious?” Jessy snapped her eyes to Eric, but he put up his hands in quick surrender, and she groaned as she leaned back toward the camera. “Samantha is the nicest vamp in the whole fucking city, and we’re just gonna let her keep dating that asshole Jacob?”

“The Prince thinks it’s ... complicated, and w-we shouldn’t try and make Samantha do anything. And if we d-did, it might tip Black Blood off. We need to be stealthy.”

“Jesus,” Eric said.

“Fucking right, Jesus! Samantha’s her childe! Jack’s mom! Like ... god damn it.” Realization set in, Tash could see it on her friend’s face, and Jessy leaned back on the couch and against Eric’s shoulder as she accepted the cold truth of the situation. There was some logic to the Prince’s choice, no matter how much they hated it. “Your boss is a cold bitch, Tash.”

Natasha laughed. “So was Maria.”

“Ha, true.”

“W-What did you message Jack?”

“Just that Black Blood is doing whatever Minerva was doing in the past, and is probably gonna get us all killed.”

Natasha frowned at her, and then Eric, who again put up his hands in surrender.

“She pays my salary, Tash. Plus, you know, the whole loving her thing.”

Right, loving her, and thus telling her very secret stuff. A dangerous thing to do, but something Tash would have to seriously think about in the future when dealing with Matthew and Arturo. She couldn’t break her trust with the Ordo, but there had to be a common ground she and the boys could walk on.

“Jack’s smart,” Jessy said. “He’ll talk to the Prince before he does anything.”

And that conversation might not go all that well. Tash had just recovered from a horrible situation with her boys, but what Antoinette was doing might even be worse. Sure it made sense, tactically, but emotionally she was being utterly brutal, leaving

Samantha in her situation and ignorant of it besides. Jack might not take it too well, and with the curse thing making him a ticking time bomb, things could get very bad.

“I got a m-message,” Tash said. “From the boys. They said we should talk with Clara.”

“How much Clara know?” Jessy asked.

“M-More than Avery used to, since Jack told her about stuff.” Repaying Clara a favor, Jack told Natasha later. “But, after all that’s happened, I think Avery’s caught up. They were investigating the t ... t-tears before Jack told her about the mysterious threat we’d been investigating. And after what happened with Eric, Sándor, me, and the boys in the Hisil? The Uratha p-probably know everything now.”

“How much is everything?”

“B-Black Blood is responsible for the t-tears, and that we’re terrified that it’s up to something. That it might t-tear down the walls between realms.” The communication software Tash and Jessy were using was secure, hopefully. “Clara knew, and now the boys know that the tears are happening in more places than just the Hisil. And it’s n-not like I could make the boys not tell Avery, not after everything we’ve found out.”

Jessy grimaced. “Shit. Sounds like we’re bedfellows with the wolves, whether we want to be or not.”

“But you’re busy w-with a war.”

“Fuuuuuck, don’t remind me.”

“We should go talk with them then,” Eric said. “Or at least talk with Clara, like Matt and Art suggested. She’s, uh, a little more understanding than Avery.”

“That was then,” Tash said, “this is n-now. A lot’s happened, and I bet she’ll be more willing to help us.”

Eric shook his head. “Maybe. Avery’s stubborn, and it wasn’t all that long ago a short vampire kid thoroughly kicked her ass.”

“Clara then?” Jessy asked. “I mean, back in the day, Jack could just go to anyone and have a chat you know? The monsters, the wolves, the covenants, whatever. Ain’t like that anymore.”

Sighing, Natasha nodded. “Clara then. I’ll t-tell the boys, and we can arrange a meeting. Matt and Art should have told Avery what we want to do, but ... but if you think we should go through Clara...”

“Clara,” they said together.

---

~~Damien~~

“I don’t think she’s dead.”

Damien raised as a brow as he met Gloria’s eyes. The two of them sat in his apartment, alone. Fiona had been there earlier, but when Gloria Jennings showed up, Damien thought it best the two vampires chat privately. And using her crazy Begotten powers, Fiona had gone into his closet, and literally disappeared.

Sometimes it was so easy to forget that Fiona, bright and fun and jovial and the only sunlight he could touch without immediately bursting into flames, was a monster of nightmares and darkness. An actual, literal, monster of fear.

Mental note: go on a hunt with her again sometime. She’d explained that Begotten like her could sort of feed by proxy, share in the hunt, and alleviate some of their chronic hunger issues. Something about vampires, and other paranormals, all being creatures of the Dark Mother. Azamel propaganda? Fiona had never

actually spoken to any sort of Dark Mother entity, but that didn't mean she didn't exist.

Damien leaned back in his couch as he watched Gloria. She sat in the sofa chair, leaning forward with elbows on her knees, eyes set and determined. He didn't need Auspex to see she wasn't lying.

"Why do you think that?"

"Because, I can ... feel her, I guess."

"Feel her? Ah, the childe sire bond."

"Yeah, exactly. I'd feel her if she died, right? I've heard sires talk about it, about how it feels when the childe dies, or when their sire did. They can feel it, literally. And I'm not feeling that."

"I've never sired. I wouldn't know."

"What about when Lucas died?"

"I was preoccupied." Collapsing on his knees in the pile of ashes that was his sire had been a scarring moment. Any emotion he felt then was a maelstrom, mixed, and unknowable except as agony.

"Well I have sired, and the moment Amanda opened her eyes from death, I felt it. It's subtle, but ... but it's there, always tugging at me." She shook her head, hard enough her short black hair bounced against the sides of her wide eyes. "I could be wrong, but I don't think I am. That little tug in my ... in my insides, it's still there."

Frowning, Damien nodded as he looked down, chin in his fingers. "Then we have a problem."

"Problem? This is good news! I just have to find her!"

“You know there’s a issue. You wouldn’t have come to me if you thought there wasn’t. You would have gone to Michael.”

She winced at that, and looked down as well. “I ... don’t trust Michael. He said Amanda’s dead, and when he announced it to the rest of us, he gave me a stern look.”

“You think he knows you’d realize she’s not?”

“I do.”

It was strange hearing Gloria talk flat and serious. The power of the sire childe connection, he supposed. It wasn’t as compelling as the parent child connection, but still, even a vampire could become quite protective of their childe, given the right circumstances.

“That is an interesting situation then. Michael is no fool. If he has hidden Amanda away, possibly staked and trapped in torpor, so he can use her as a catalyst for his war, then he must have realized there would be repercussions. He knew that you would suspect she lived. And he knew that, if and when this war ends, her being alive is a situation he would have to resolve.”

“Resolve? You mean—”

“If he was willing to kill her for this war, he would have by now. It would have been a simple affair for him to kill her when Garry’s distraction set the building on fire. The issue now, is what will Michael do when the war is over. Will he release Amanda? How will that go over with the Primogen?” Damien sighed as he fell back against his couch again, shoulders slumping as invisible lead weights attached to him. “So many unknowns.”

“You’re telling me! That’s why I came to you. After that look Michael gave me, I was afraid to tell anyone.”

“You told me, but not Jack?” No need to ask why not Jessy.

“I ... I thought about it. But Jack’s not Jack anymore, right? I remember the first time I met Jack, the same night he was embraced. Just a kid, intimidated as all hell by everything Julias was bombarding him with that night. Jack is not that kid, anymore.”

That was all too true, but not necessarily for the reasons she thought.

“Jack is trustworthy, Gloria.”

“Jack the Ripper is not trustworthy.”

He winced. There went any hope that that name hadn’t spread to common usage.

“Jack is not the Ripper. That is a separate thing.”

“So I’ve heard! But I don’t know what that means or anything. All I know is sometimes Jack can get pretty crazy, and people die. I know he’s been a problem for ... everyone! The werewolves, the Carthians, especially the hunters. I don’t trust him.”

“You don’t trust him, or you’re afraid of him? Given the things that have happened, I can understand the latter, not the former.”

“You trust the Ripper?”

“Jack. Is not. The Ripper. I can’t go into details. It’s highly personal. But understand Jack is doing everything in his power to be rid of the curse.” Damien’s own efforts to find details about the ritual used to seal the original curse in Susanna had proven fruitless time and time again, as expected. It’d been like looking for a needle in a haystack. “And he’s doing everything in his power to make sure this war doesn’t get anyone killed.”

“I have a hard time believing Jack will be delicate about this, or rescue anyone. That scene at the hospital was—”



“I was there, in person, Gloria. I saw how bad it got, to a degree you—” No, wait, no point in scaring her. Opposite of the point, actually. “I think you’d be surprised at how much good Jack has done, both with and without the curse. You should trust him. I do.”

She sighed as she leaned back as well, and looked around at his streamlined apartment of blacks, whites, and metals.

“You trust him with your life?”

“I do.”

“And with the life of others? My childe?”

“He’s one of the few people I would trust with those burdens.”

After another heavy sigh, she rubbed one of her arms as she looked down, resigned. “Alright. If you wanna tell him, I won’t stop you. But ... what should I do in the meantime?”

“For now, do whatever Michael wants. And if he wants you to kill Carthians, maybe drag your feet on that a little.”

“Sure, I guess. But I mean, you don’t think some Carthians deserve to get dusted? Some of them are real fucking assholes, you know.”

And the Carthians probably felt the same way about the Invictus. This turf war was hilariously stupid, and according to world history, utterly inevitable.

“Do whatever you can to avoid permanent repercussions, Gloria. Jack and I will get this situation fixed, one way or another.”

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~~Jack~~

He glared down at his phone, and the message Jessy sent. It was dumb of her, to message something this sensitive, but then again it was unlikely Black Blood was reading their messages.

~Eric and Tash found out that BB is trying to do what Minerva was doing, back in the day. Which is apparently apocalyptic? The fuck do we do?~

After a few minutes to let his hands stop shaking, he texted back.

~We focus on ending this stupid war, so we can focus on BB later. For now, Tash can handle it.~

~Sure thing boss.~

Boss. Ugh. She'd heard Jessy call Julias that. The memory hit him like a punch in the gut, and now was definitely not the time for a trip down memory lane.

He showed up at the Elysium Tower, with a single text message for the Prince. ~We need to talk.~

Naturally, she told him to meet her in the meeting room on the top floor, her main office. He did. Immediately, the room took on an air he was all too familiar with, and one he wasn't expecting: business meeting. Daniel stood in the corner, which was Antoinette's way of saying this conversation was not going to be a personal one, and he had to be aware of that. She knew what he was here to talk about, and she wasn't going to let their relationship affect the conversation.

He mentally rolled up his sleeves. He loved her, but they both knew situations like this were going to happen, and they had to be mature enough, and trust each other enough, to know it wouldn't affect their relationship. Hopefully.

“Black Blood is trying to bring down the Gauntlet?” he asked.

Antoinette nodded. “Indeed. The Gauntlet, and perhaps other things, we are not sure. Natasha is investigating, as is the sheriff.”

Jack looked to Daniel, and the man, dressed in his usual trench coat, nodded as he adjusted his glasses. The Prince purposefully left out how Daniel was investigating, because she knew it was better if Jack didn’t know. Just one of the many little quirks of their relationship, not being able to share all their secrets with each other. It hurt, but he knew it was the right call.

“And my mom?”

“Unaware.”

“And...”

“And will continue to be unaware.”

He frowned and took a step closer to her desk. Daniel took his hands out of his pockets. He didn’t go for his sword or anything, but Jack could see the grip of his sword poking up from over his shoulder. Knowing the sheriff considered him dangerous, even with the love of his life, was fucking infuriating, and Jack squinted at the man as he fought to suppress the growing rage. Throw it into the fire, like Elaine taught you.

Once he was calm, he looked back to the Prince.

“I guess you already know how this conversation is going to go.”

She nodded, her eyes steady. “Oui.”

“I don’t want Mom dating Jacob, or even getting near the guy, if we know Black Blood is actually up to some pretty nasty stuff. My mom is in danger being that close to Jacob. But considering how powerful Jacob is, the only way my mom would actually be safe from him would be if you locked her up in the basement of the

tower until this whole situation is resolved, if that ever happens.” Like Michael tried to do with Roland. “And, just because Black Blood is up to something horrible doesn’t mean Jacob knows about it or is helping the spirit. Plus, if we suddenly make Mom not see him anymore, we tip our hand about knowing what Black Blood is up to.”

Her smile grew. Not the loving, tender smile she usually shared with him. This was the smile of a pleased mastermind, glad someone she worked with was capable of thinking with the same sort of intelligence she was. Except thinking this way made him sick.

“Oui, that is how the conversation will go.”

Jack looked down as his fists shook. “You realize you’re asking me to let my mother continue dating a man who’s most likely involved in something so bad, it could get everyone in Dolareido killed?”

“Yes.”

“You know how difficult that is for me?”

She leaned forward and set her elbows on her big desk as she netted her fingers together. “She was your mother in your first life. She is my childe in this life.”

Vampires being vampires. Elaine told him Viktor sired Julius because he wanted a powerful tool. Samantha’s power hadn’t really shown itself yet, but that didn’t mean Antoinette wasn’t going to use her as a tool regardless.

That isn’t fair. Antoinette is just looking at all the options and picking the ones that make sense.

It's still heartless. Mom's not a tool, she's a person, and she trusts her sire to take care of her until she's capable of taking care of herself.

Antoinette hasn't thrown her life away, calm down. It's still perfectly reasonable that Jacob won't hurt her or anything.

Bullshit. Jacob and Black Blood work together and know each other well. Way too damn well.

He sighed. That was the impression Jack had, but not some sort of fact. His mom wasn't dating Black Blood. She was dating Jacob, another person, someone that could be reasoned with, and might not even be a part of what Black Blood was up to.

Worst of all, if they forced his mom to leave Jacob, it might tip Black Blood off.

"So I have to ... just pretend that it's ok if my mom keeps seeing the Circle, and Jacob?"

"Oui."

Slowly, he unclenched his fists, and forced himself to look Antoinette in the eye.

"Is that why you let Mom get so close to Jacob? I mean, Jacob was flirting with her way back when, and I just knew the asshole was doing it to get under my skin, and yours. But now—"

"You do not understand Jacob as well as you think, Mister Terry." Wow, she hadn't called him that in a long time. "He is not some enemy I am scheming against, some villain to be destroyed as Lucas was. Through the centuries, Jacob has proven time and time again to have more depth to him than one could know from the masks he wears and façades he displays. If he has taken an interest in my childe"—her childe, not his mom—"it is because there is something

to their relationship that creates a connection. And I would be loath to rip that from my old friend, because of our agendas.”

He watched her closely as she spoke, knowing full well he probably looked angrier and angrier as Antoinette told him only half the truth. Nothing fucking worse than a fucking half truth.

Heat boiled up through him again, setting off a fuse in his mouth. “I’m not in the Ordo. I don’t take orders from you. If I want to tell my mom about Black Blood, then—”

She raised the corner of her lips in a small sneer, and growled. “I am the Prince of this city, Mister Terry. The internal affairs of the covenants are their own business, but this is no such thing. This is business that affects my city in its entirety, and potentially beyond. You will obey me. Do I make myself clear?”

He glared at her, fists clenching again. The moment they did, Daniel shifted. A single inch, maybe a centimeter, but he did, as if ready to respond to something Jack might do.

Fuck them. He turned around, and left. And he made damn sure to not look back.

He knew the only reason the Prince wasn’t grabbing him right now and demanding he listen to her, and pay for the disrespect, was how much their relationship had grown. But right there, for a single stupid second, he didn’t give a shit.

---

The real name of the bar was Tanent’s Bar. Kindred called it the Border Bar.

Jack sat the bar, Bruce at his side, both of them pretending to drink. When the bartender, a Carthian thrall, asked for what drink, Bruce waved a finger and uttered a few words with some eye

contact, and the bartender left, convinced Jack and Bruce had ordered already. The joys of being a Ventrue.

This particular bar, riding the line between the Carthian and Invictus half of South Side, was a frequent haunt for Carthians and Invictus who liked to rub shoulders the way American football players did. You had to let off steam somehow, and fist fights were a way to do that. All in all, it was a very stupid place for any vampire to be, especially stupid now that the war had begun in earnest. No one was under any illusions anymore. One misstep meant a dead vampire.

But Michael told him to pay a visit, because Carthians were muscling and trying to turn the bar from its usual 'co-owned' state, to a Carthian bar.

Jack stared at the drink in his hand, fingers slowly tightening as he ran the conversation with Antoinette through his mind over and over and over again. His mom could die because of her. His mom was only alive because of her. She was still being cruel. She was also being smart.

The pendulum in his brain smashed against the two sides of his skull over and over, until the glass shattered in Jack's hand. The few kine in the bar stared at him, but the thrall bartender knew better. She wiped up the mess, and got him a new glass, making damn sure to not meet Jack's gaze.

Christ he hated how scared everyone was of him. Even Bruce avoided acknowledging Jack suddenly shattering a glass. God forbid someone anger the terrible Jack the Ripper. Fucking god. And—

~Master~ Mulder called from outside. ~Carthians approach.~

Jack groaned as his familiars announced the entrance of three Carthians. No, wait, five. No, wait ... eight.

“You’re fucking shitting me,” Bruce whispered.

“Apparently not.” Sighing, Jack turned to the side and faced the group.

Joe of course. He was young, bit over thirty years embraced, and despite how dumb he was, Garry kept putting him front and center. Maybe the dumbass was trustworthy. Or maybe he was better in a fight than they gave him credit for, and he just hadn’t had the chance to show his stuff.

Steve was there, Debby and Bella too. Kathy was there, but she hung out in back, eyeing him like he was some nasty thing that should be killed with fire. He almost expected to see Tilly, but nope. Maybe Garry had told her to avoid him? After he let her go and sent her to Garry, hopefully that act of goodwill had meant something.

Steve, Debby, and Bella were all serious, proven threats, Ancilla that were plenty dangerous in a straight fight. Joe was more dangerous, because he was itching to show he was worth all the attention Garry gave him. It was always the stupid, eager ones you had to look out for to do something really disastrous in the immediate, like throw a molotov like a baseball at a target five feet away.

“Eight of you, really?” Jack said.

“Was supposed to be a couple of us,” Kathy said from the back, “but then I saw you.”

Bruce nodded, and adjusted his tie. “Suppose if it was just me, it’d be two Carthians here. One to get my attention, one to stab me in the back.”

God damn it Bruce. Jack wasn’t trying to goad them. At the same time, he didn’t want Bruce to know he was actively trying to prevent



a fight at every possible turn. Michael wouldn't like open defiance. Defiance had to be sneaky.

The kine in the bar didn't need to be asked. They walked out the back door, each glancing over their shoulders as they did, half to make sure no one was going to shoot them in the back, half to see who the hell the small dude in the nice suit was. It was his first time in the bar.

“You think we'd stab you in the back?” Joe said, snarling with every word as he came in closer, pushing aside a couple chairs. At least he didn't kick them aside like some drunk moron.

Steve and Bella came up on his sides, but a little behind. Either they were content to let him throw the first punch, and probably take the first hit in return, or they were afraid of Jack. Both, from the glances they threw his way.

The Ventrue part of him fucking loved the scared, quick peeks. And even with the necklace keeping his Beast and the Ripper quiet, Jack could tell they loved it too. But Jack didn't. Jack felt fucking sick to his dry, withered vampire stomach seeing that shit.

“Look guys,” Jack said, sliding off his stool. “You know why I'm here. Michael guessed someone would show up tonight looking to cause trouble.”

Joe frowned at him. “The Border Bar is ours.” Either the man was too stupid to feel fear, or he hid it very well. Probably the former.

“You know it's not,” Bruce said. “And we're sick of giving inch after inch over to a bunch of—”

Jack held up a hand. Not in a quick 'shut the fuck up' gesture, but a slower 'I got this' gesture. Last thing he needed was to make the Invictus uncomfortable around him, like a lot of them already were.

Bruce knew Julias, and it was only because of that friendship he was willing to work with Jack.

“Give it some time, and everything will go back to normal,” Jack said. “Our bosses are having a tiff, but there’s no need for us to swing for the fences every opportunity we can.”

Bella laughed, but it wasn’t sincere. A fake laugh, the kind you used when looking for a fight.

“You fucks think we killed Amanda. We didn’t, but we know you think we did. You really expect us to believe you’re a peacekeeper, Jack the Ripper?”

He winced and looked down for a moment. That name, that fucking name was going to follow him everywhere. Garry you asshole, he saved Tilly for a reason. The fuck is this about, then?

Or, this wasn’t Garry’s call. Joe’s call? Why the fuck would Steve and Bella listen to this asshole? Maybe Garry was pulling his punches, and they wanted to step up the game? No one had died, since potentially Amanda, and Jack wanted to keep it that way. Maybe the others didn’t.

God damn assholes.

The angry looks on their faces said plenty. They were here for a fight, and they were looking for more than just a brawl. Fine. Knowing Carthians, they were going to get physical, use their fists, maybe some knives, and—

All eight of them reached behind their waists, pulled out hidden pistols, and pointed them at him and Bruce. Oh shit.

Jack pushed Bruce out of the way, just in time to hear the gunfire. Eight pistols, dozens of bullets, all pointed at the two Ventrue. At

least Bruce was down on the ground, and not getting shot as he scrambled for cover around the corner of the bar counter.

Jack however, was getting shot. A lot. He'd expected them to come at him with fists and knives largely cause, yeah they were Carthians, but also cause pistols made noise. A lot of noise. And while the Border Bar wasn't in a crowded section of South Side, there were still people outside.

They really wanted him dead. Christ, if they succeeded, did they even realize what the Prince would do to them?

Lead slammed into him, a fucking lot of it. Caught off guard, and with the necklace on suppressing his Beast, the bullets cut into him without issue. Tiny balls of metal that pushed through his suit and into his flesh, where Kindred blood put a stop to them a little too late. Jack collapsed back on his ass, only for Joe to come forward and aim at his head, pulling the trigger half a dozen times in a couple seconds.

Jack put up his hand, and summoned his vitae. Vampire blood poured through his limbs, turning his Kindred flesh into steel. Joe's bullets crashed into Jack's hand, and while Jack struggled to keep the flesh barrier between his head and the incoming bullets, a bit of vampire strength made it possible. Once Joe stopped firing, Jack yanked off his necklace, pocketed it, and stood up.

Every Carthian there stared at him, and their jaws dropped as blood seeped out of the hundred holes they put into his suit. Thick, dark, Kindred blood oozed out from the holes in his body, and snaked around his limbs, sealing skin and muscle and repairing bone. They still had magazines, but none of them bothered to reload as Jack glared at each one of them while he repaired his body and prepared for war.

“Think twice!” Bella said. “Do anything to break the Masquerade and you'll be in just as much shit as we will. Worse!”

Jack glared at the woman, then the door behind her. Still closed. People outside heard the gunfire, no doubt about that, and someone would be calling 911 by now. Invictus wouldn't be able to stop the cops from showing up here for long without it being suspicious. Which would be a huge problem if Jack needed to deal with these fuckers asap, but he didn't. All he needed to do was keep them from establishing some kinda flag of ownership. Even if they did stake a claim, it wasn't real, just posturing. But posturing would turn into a real claim with time, and that was something the Primogen could actually bring to the Prince as a legitimate claim for territory, and blah blah blah.

Necklace secure in his pocket, Jack had an easy time summoning and controlling his blood, and once he was sure he wouldn't be walking out of the bar with a bunch of holes punched into his flesh, he forced the blood to settle. It continued to pulse under his skin, and from the looks the Carthians were giving him, they could see it pulsing. Everything went quiet, except for the quiet clinks of flattened bullets falling out of his clothes.

“Just get out of here,” he said. “Don't make me make you.”

Joe laughed, that half psycho half scared kinda laugh. “The great and mighty Jack the Ripper thinks he can take us all on? You—”

Bruce popped over the corner of the counter, and shot once. The bullet went through Joe's skull, out the skull, and crashed into the pub wall.

Jack snapped his gaze back at Bruce, glaring hard enough Bruce didn't fire a second time.

“I ... He was open.”

The Carthians, ready to scatter and surround Jack, Bruce's bullet a perfect bell to signal the fight had started, managed to not jump around as Jack held up his hands, palms forward and empty.

“This is a fucking bar, on the border, and no one has claim on it. I’m not here to take it, just make sure you idiots don’t think you can, ok? Take Joe and get out.”

The Carthians looked at each other, obviously skeptical, but when Jack stepped back and gestured to the unconscious vampire, they relented. Frowning at him the whole time, they scooped Joe up, and gave him to Bella. She left first, hiding herself and the dumbass with her Cloak, while the others followed after her. Soon the bar was empty save for Jack and Bruce, and he breathed a useless sigh of relief.

Groaning, Jack turned around and looked up at his partner.

“Dude, what the fuck?”

“What? Michael told us to fight off any Carthians who try and take the bar.”

He was tempted to throw Michael a few insults, but he couldn’t trust Bruce. Much as he and Julias had been friends, Bruce was devoted to the Invictus, maybe a little too devoted.

“Michael wants this war a little too much, Bruce. Be careful throwing dynamite ok? Take it from someone who’s been at the center of too many big moments. One wrong move and you piss off everyone, cause a chain reaction, and suddenly everyone’s trying to kill each other, you included.”

“Didn’t you thoroughly dismantle an entire pack of werewolves?” Bruce put the pistol into his vest holster, hidden under his jacket. “Werewolves we were trying to get along with? Clara and Carter used to live in some luxurious suites, paid for by us before that incident, right?”

Jack winced with every sentence. “Yeah, I didn’t handle that situation well. And that wasn’t…” Bad idea to go around telling

everyone the curse had a mind of its own, but Kindred understood what it meant to have the Beast tugging at their emotions. “It shouldn’t have happened. My Beast got the better of me.”

“And that curse made it possible.”

Jack eyed the man. “What’re you getting at?”

“Use the curse next time Carthians show up and—”

“I used the curse to be able to do this!” He gestured at his chest and sleeve, riddled with holes, and idly plucked a chunk of lead out of his palm. Flesh sealed quickly.

“You know what I mean. Go on the offensive.”

“Two problems with that. First: there are a million ways going on the offensive could backfire. You think I can just march into Carthian territory and go on a killing spree? Just cause this curse makes me strong doesn’t mean a well aimed molotov isn’t going to instantly kill me. And the more we poke the bear, the more desperate the Carthians are going to get.”

“If they break the Masquerade, the Prince intervenes.”

“They’ll find a way to do some crazy shit without crossing the line. They attacked Xnomina, remember.”

“Alright fine, you don’t want this war to get more heated than it has to. What’s the second problem?”

Jack looked the man in the eyes, dead on, unable to keep the frown off his face.

“I don’t like killing people who don’t deserve it.”

Bruce met his gaze, but not for long, eventually looking down as he stepped back.

“That right?”

“Yes, it is. I don’t want to kill the Carthians, and I don’t want them to kill me.”

“Not many vampires in this city have a kill count as high as you, Jack.”

Jack froze for a moment, but let it go as he did the math. No, Bruce wasn’t talking about that thing with Viktor and Tony, or Lucas. He meant all the shit that happened after, the hunters Jack killed with the help of the curse.

If the man only knew how big the number really was...

Jack’s phone buzzed. He checked it. A text message from Damien.

~Gloria is convinced her childe is alive. Sire childe connection. I’ve told her to stay quiet about it.~

Fucking yes! Not exactly a guarantee that she was alive, but still. Also, shit. Ok, good that Amanda was probably still alive. She was a nice girl and didn’t deserve death. But, that meant shit would get complicated. If Michael had her stashed away, it meant he was using her to trigger his war, but also that he wasn’t heartless enough to kill her. Assuming Jack was right ... what a shitty moral gray area for Michael to be in. If he’d just killed Amanda, then Jack would probably end up killing him, problem solved. If Garry’s stupid distraction attack had accidentally killed her, then Jack could see himself easily being forced to kill Garry, and other Carthians besides. Again, problem solved, shit as it was. But this? The fuck was he supposed to do?

“We’re done for now,” Jack said. “If Carthians show up while we’re gone, it won’t mean anything. They came for the fight, not for the bar.”

“The fight they didn’t get. The fight Mister McDonald wanted.”

“Doesn’t matter. The Carthians know they can’t push us out, and that’s enough.” Jack headed for the back door. “Let’s get out of here before the police show up and give us trouble.”

“You know you could easily wipe their memories.”

Yeah, he could, with the curse’s help. And anything he could do to avoid using the curse, the better.

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After a change of clothes, Jack decided to do something he almost never did anymore. Take a walk.

He sighed as he walked the sidewalk, hundreds of kine passing by as they drifted from casino to casino, lounge to club. Drunk, high, happy, they didn’t know a damn thing about what happened in Dolareido, about the vampires that used them as cattle, none of it. That was the way it was meant to be.

Michael and Garry were going to ruin it, if they didn’t kill each other first. And then the Prince would get involved, and as ridiculously strong as Antoinette and the sheriff were, they preferred diplomacy over an iron fist for a reason. Sure, the Prince’s views defaulted to diplomacy, but there was also the tiny problem that there were only three dragons in Dolareido, while the Carthians and Invictus had about a hundred vamps each, since the Prince lifted the ban on siring. If Antoinette went to war against those two, who the fuck knew what’d happen. If she helped one, the other would help her, and then might backstab her when all was said and done.

Sighing, Jack looked up and caught a glimpse of Mulder and Scully as they drifted from rooftop to rooftop. Much as he wanted to think about the turf war, his mind kept going back to his mom.



Sure, she was a lot happier now that she was with Jacob, but that'd backfire pretty fucking badly if Jacob turned out to be an enemy.

Ugh, it hurt how obvious it was in hindsight. Of course Black Blood was up to no good, the spirit — not actually a spirit — wasn't exactly an embodiment of good things. Then again, a 'good' spirit might try and do exactly what Black Blood was doing, if it meant it got to do more spirit things.

No fucking wonder Avery didn't like vampires getting into all the spirit stuff. Shit was weird and complicated.

And yeah, all that shit itched at him, but it wasn't really what was bothering him, not completely. It was Antoinette's cold eyes when she told him to leave his mother alone, and let her continue seeing Jacob. Calculating, tactical, smart, and ruthless. Sometimes it was easy to forget how old she was, even though she'd told him on dozens of occasions a part of why she loved him, was cause of how he was honest about his emotions, and easily wore them on his sleeve. Antoinette, on the other hand, wouldn't blink if she had to kill a child to save two more. The Trolley Dilemma was probably a joke to her.

He knew that. He knew that about her from day one. But never in a million years did he think her ruthlessness would be pointed at him, and at his mom. His mom! Everyone knew by now that sure, Jack and his mom had some similarities, but she wasn't Jack. People could take advantage of her, her niceness and naivety. Could and would. He just never expected it'd be the love of his life taking advantage of her.

He stopped. People stepped around him, and some had to shove aside other kine to keep from touching him. Didn't need to be a vampire to feel the power and rage coming off him as he thought about Jacob, his mom, Antoinette, and Black Blood. Fists clenched

at his sides, he stared down at the street, at his shoes, and let the rage boil.

Don't let it boil. Throw it into the fire, like Elaine taught you.

Maybe he should talk to Elaine about it? Nah, she'd side with Antoinette. Anyone that was thinking clearly would. Well, his mom was his mom, and he couldn't think clearly about sacrificing her as a ploy to beat Black Blood at whatever he was trying to pull. Hell, he couldn't think clearly knowing his mom was having sex with Jacob.

Sex. Jacob. Ugh!

He laughed. Christ, he needed a laugh. Of course reality came running back and hit him in the face, hard. Now was usually when he'd go back to the Elysium Tower and be with Antoinette, talk about science and music, have sex, maybe feed. And he didn't want to. He didn't want to look at her, not now. Christ, if those Carthians at the bar had pushed just a little bit harder, he would have happily torn off some limbs.

~Clara is following you.~

Jack blinked, and looked up. Scully's voice. She perched on a power line, Mulder beside her, and both crows flapped their wings a couple times before looking across the street.

Sure enough, there was Clara. They met eyes, and she managed a small smile and wave.

~Know how long she's been following me?~

~Since those vampires fired all those guns at you.~

Scully and Mulder's vocabulary grew every night. It was almost scary.

~She probably heard the commotion and investigated.~

~Yes master.~ Mulder said. ~Clara is ... nicer, than the white-haired one, master.~

He rolled his eyes, chuckling. Yeah, of course they'd have something to say about his love life, considering how often they were with him.

Sighing, he walked across the street and joined Clara. He was in his usual Invictus business suit, and she wore a white tank top and blue jeans. They could not have looked more different.

“Hey,” she said. “Got shot?”

“Hey.” He smiled at her. “A lot, actually. You didn't see it?”

“Nah. Can smell it on you. Showed up cause the police showed up. Saw you leaving, but didn't get a good look. Figured you were done for the night when you went back to your apartment, but I—”

“Followed me anyway.”

“Well, yeah, you're kind of important. Sorry not sorry. Avery wants me keeping an eye on this turf war, and we both know shit's going to happen around you.”

He laughed. “Yeah. Just ... shit on my mind. Came back out for a walk.”

“Yeah? Dolareido's a horrible place for walks.” Naturally, someone bumped into her shoulder the moment she said it. People flowed down the wide sidewalks, and while they did a good job avoiding Jack these days, most people didn't have that luxury. “Why do you still have an apartment anyway?”

“In case I get shot up, and need a nearby source of clothes. Rich Side ain’t exactly close.”

“Touché.”

“I’m surprised you’re out alone, and not with the pack, doing Uratha things.”

“We’re laying low. I—how much do you know? Tash been talking to you?”

“Yeah.” He grimaced as he looked down. “Well, Jessy has, cause Eric talks to her.”

“Course he does.” Laughing, a bit awkward and a bit sad, Clara eventually shrugged. “You gonna do something?”

“About Mom?”

“Yeah.”

“Apparently I’m not.”

“Uh, you’re not?”

He shook his head. “Can’t. Might tip Black Blood off. Antoinette—let’s go talk somewhere, not out here.” Much as streets crowds were usually a safe place to chat, he didn’t feel comfortable talking about Black Blood in the open. Deadly secrets of the Danse, no problem. But not Black Blood.

“Yeah, sure.”

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“I’m not sure which is worse,” she said, gesturing around at his apartment, “the crazy mansion that looks like some rich old pervert stuck in the eighteenth century lives there, or this apartment.”

“American Psycho?”

“Exactly.”

He laughed as he plopped down on his couch. “Yeah, heard that before. Lot of Invictus vamps get these kinda apartments.”

“Any reason?”

“Easy to clean, easy to manage, I guess.”

“Easy to wipe down and clean blood off the floor, you mean.”

He laughed again, and she smiled as she sat down on the couch across from him.

“You know, all you gotta do is ask, and you can have your old apartment back. It was a luxury suite, Clara. Nicer than this place.”

She smiled for him, a pity smile. “Yeah, maybe. But after what happened with Maria and you, Avery’s happier avoiding Invictus attachments.”

“It’s not an attachment, it’s an apartment.”

“It was a bribe, Jack.”

He shrugged. “So? It was a bribe so you guys would play friendly. And it’s not like you’ve joined Garry and are hammering on us like he is, so it’s still in the cards.”

“Yeah, I guess. And I do miss the hot tub.”

“Hot tubs are pretty awesome.”

She grinned at him. “You’re avoiding the topic.”

“Of course I’m avoiding the topic! Last thing I want to talk about is Black Blood, and Jacob and my mom, and the fact I’ve been told to just ... let my mom keep dating him.”

“That is a pretty shit thing to be told.”

“You’re telling me.”

“And you’re gonna listen to the Prince?”

He leaned forward, set his elbows on his knees, and let his head dangle. “I guess.”

“The fuck? Why?”

“Because she’s damn smart, Clara. If I confront Mom about this, it’ll tip Black Blood off. If I try and be sneaky, and just randomly decide I don’t want her dating Jacob, that’ll lead to a fuckload of drama.”

“Drama, from Samantha?”

“She’s my mom. I mean yeah, she’s super nice, and she definitely tries to go with the flow wherever she is, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t a person. We’ve fought before.”

“Hard to imagine her yelling.”

If only she knew. Even someone like his mom could scream and rage, if her husband died and her son closed himself off to her.

“She likes Jacob. And for some reason, I guess Jacob likes her. I —”

“Ha, for some reason?” She leaned forward, and met his eyes with a little more seriousness than he was expecting. “You’re with a vampire just as old as Jacob, you know.”

He broke first, looking down again. “Yeah apparently, but that’s biting me in the ass now.”

“Because she’s an ancient monolith? Makes super cold, brutal decisions easily?”

“Yeap. Nailed it.”

“You had to know that when you started dating her.”

“Yeah, but I never expected to be on the receiving end of that coldness, you know? Figured it’d always be me standing beside her as she, and eventually we, made those grand decisions. And hell, I’m good at that, I’m good at making heavy decisions.”

“But...”

“But not when it’s my mom!” He jumped up, almost hit the glass table between them, and paced around. Marched around really, considering he stomped his feet. “Christ, she’s always been naive and stupid.”

“Hey, that’s mean.”

“Well it’s true! She’s not smart, and I’m not going to sugarcoat that. She’s not built for this fucking vampire world, the Danse Macabre, and seeing her get manipulated by Jacob—”

“You said yourself Jacob seems to actually like her.”

Fuck. Jack stopped pacing and glared down at Clara.

“I really have a hard time believing that.”

“Hey, like I said, you bagged an ancient elder vamp with the biggest tits in the world.”

“Hey! Not ... not the biggest.”

“And you know Jacob’s been doing witch stuff for centuries. It wouldn’t surprise me if he’s given himself a huge dick.”

“Oh god.”

“With like, bumps and ridges and stuff that feel great going in and out.”

“Please stop.”

“And it probably vibrates.”

Jack covered his ears and shook his head. “I’m not listening. Not listening.”

Clara burst out laughing, and for some damn reason, he did too, and he sat back down as they both laughed, belly bursting sorta laughter.

“All I’m saying is, give your mom some credit. If you’re interesting enough to bag a bitch like Antoinette, your mom can do the same to Jacob.”

“Yeah well, it’s biting us both in the ass now, I guess. Antoinette’s telling me to do something I really don’t want to do, and Mom’s dating a dude who could be trying to destroy everything.” It was a shit deal, either way. And it fucking sucked he couldn’t go to Antoinette and talk to her about this, cause he knew what she’d say.

Clara though, he wasn’t sure what she’d say.

“I guess it is, yeah. She’s half a millenium old. You’re, what, twenty-three, including your vamp years?”

He collapsed back against the couch, looked up and let his head rest against it. “I know, I know.” Ask her? It was dumb. It didn’t matter what Clara said, he knew what he had to do: not tell his



mom. But, he wanted to know what she thought anyway. “You think I should tell her?”

“Ah fuck, I was worried you’d ask.”

“I know you got an opinion on it. And I’m all ears.”

She groaned as she leaned back too, folded her arms across her chest, and did the contemplation frown. He expected an instant reply, but she was really thinking about this. Which probably meant she’d agree with Antoinette, considering how perfectly logical the Prince’s plan was.

“I say you tell Samantha.” Or not.

“What, seriously?”

“Yeah seriously.”

“But it’s not a smart move.”

Clara groaned, got up, and sat down beside him. “Ok, maybe I’m sounding like a bitch for saying this, but fuck the Prince.”

“I mean—”

“Fuck the Prince, fuck the Danse Macabre, fuck all the stupid manipulation and deception shit. Samantha’s your mom, and family is important. And I don’t mean blood.” She set a hand on his knee, but pulled it away a moment later. “I’m saying, if you really think your mom is in danger, do something.”

He stared at her, jaw dropping. “What?”

“I’m saying if you go through life, or your second life or whatever, only making the most tactically sound decisions, you’re going to grow into a cruel, heartless bastard. Sometimes making mistakes is

what makes life worth living, right? I mean, christ, look at romance. How many of the best romances came out of bad decisions?”

“I’m ... not sure—”

“How many friendships came out of really bad, stupid decisions?”

Jack winced and looked down. Damien. He let Damien live after killing Lucas. Hell, Daniel and Natasha had let him live, a massive risk, and they did it because they had a gut feeling he didn’t deserve to die. Antoinette would have killed Damien, if those two hadn’t asked for his sanctuary.

“I’m still not sure—”

“How many times have perfectly valid, tactical, calculated plans gone to hell, and the only thing that managed to save the day, or salvage something out of the fucking mess, was when people went with their heart?”

“Their heart.” He laughed at that, but it was a weak laugh, killed by Clara’s lack of one. “This really is werewolf versus vampire viewpoint, isn’t it?”

“I guess, yeah. What I’m trying to say is, it makes sense to make plans, but truth of the matter is, it’s impossible to know every detail about a situation, right? Shit always hits the fan in some way or another. If you’re an engineer and you’re building a machine, do the calculations. When you’re dealing with people though, there’s just so much chaos to it, so much emotion, so much unpredictability. Jacob and Antoinette are ancient, so I’m sure they’re better at predicting people than most, but I don’t care if they’re ten thousand years old, they’ll never be able to predict shit perfectly. But instinct, intuition, and good old fashioned heart has pulled me and my pack out of Hell dozens of times.

“We’ve dealt with vampires, maybe not as old as Jacob or Antoinette, but we’ve dealt with vamps who had money and people, agents, thralls, and big plans. That shit fell apart the moment bullets started flying. We’ve dealt with spirits crazy strong before, not Black Blood strong but still, and even their plans fell apart the moment things went head to head. And when people are struggling to stay afloat, and all you can see is smoke, it’s ... it’s not the fucking plans that save people or make things happen. It’s going with your fucking guts, and doing everything you can to help the people close to you, your important people. Your pack.”

Jack let her words sink in, before he gave her knee a small nudge with his own. “Trust my guts and my heart?” Which didn’t even work anymore, vampire body and all that. “Like an anime? Next you’re gonna tell me ‘don’t believe in yourself, believe in me who believes in you.’”

“Jesus, you are such a nerd.”

He snorted on a laugh. “You’re the one quoting an anime speech.”

“I was actually going for more of a hero vibe, maybe World War II. Like, we’re about to get overrun by bad guys, and all of our plans have failed, and now all we can do is fight for our lives, back to back, shoulder to shoulder.”

“That does sound pretty epic.”

“It’s how Uratha do things. We plan the hunt, but when teeth meets flesh, we go with our instincts. Life just has too many variables to plan for everything perfectly. And our instincts pretty much always tell us to help our friends and family, no matter what.”

He nodded, letting his eyes drift down as he tried to digest that view. Antoinette might have agreed with the idea that a plan couldn’t be perfect, but she’d never agree with doing anything based on gut instinct, or a feeling.

“I ... I wonder,” he said, “if I get as old as Antoinette, I’ll get...”

“Heartless?”

“She’s not heartless. She’s ... It’s ... Her heart is buried, I guess, under a shit load of rubble and ice. A big part of our relationship is me digging it up for her.”

Clara frowned at him. “A one-sided relationship.”

“It can be, a little. Normally it’s great. Different, but great, and ... just...”

“Just not now.”

“No. Not now.”

Nodding, she leaned back as well, mirroring him. “You got yourself in real deep shit, dating an elder, especially one as old as her.”

“It’s not shit, it’s ... ok yeah, it’s kinda shit, at least right now. I don’t want my mom to die in one of the Prince’s plots.” And Antoinette did plots. She set up a nasty plot to get her earlier child and a brewing enemy to fight each other, and it worked beautifully. And he knew she’d made dozens of plots, to get Dolareido to where it was today. She hadn’t said the words, but she’d implied more than a few times that the Invictus and Carthians had danced to her tune before, as she molded Dolareido into her city.

“Well, I won’t tell her. I’ll respect whatever you decide. But, yeah, if I was you, I’d tell her. Who knows, she might surprise you.”

The idea of going behind Antoinette’s back made him sick to his stomach. The idea of Antoinette sacrificing his mom for a chance at outsmarting Black Blood, made him boil with rage.

He forced the rage down as he looked at the woman beside him. “You and Brace getting along?”

She sat up straight, and blushed. That was surprising. Clara may not have been completely desensitized to embarrassment like a lot of vamps were, but she was still harder than the typical girl, social situations included.

“Yeah, we are.”

“That’s good. He’s not what you’d expect from a hunter, is he?”

“Nope. He’s a complete doofus.” She chuckled at that, shaking her head. “Not really, but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. And ... and it’s a good thing you two are getting along.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause ... cause I’m pissed at Antoinette right now. Royally, really fucking pissed at her. Holy fuck I never knew I could be this angry with someone I love. And if you were single, I might just do something really fucking stupid. That wouldn’t be fair to Antoinette, and it wouldn’t be fair to you.” And it was really stupid to say out loud too, and he regretted it the moment he did. Much as Jack had gotten a lot better at socializing in the past few years of being a vampire, he still occasionally did dumb shit like say too much. Might as well puke his mental guts all over her lap.

But she didn’t frown or wince, despite how over-the-top dramatic what he’d said was. If anything, she smiled more, and looked down at his glass table.

“Good thing, then. Brace is a nice guy. And strange as he is, we get along, really well. Plus there’s the whole thing with his sister, which I can relate with.”

Ok, good, awkward moment gone, thank god.

“Triss says the same thing. It’s surprising that he’s a hunter.”

“Yeah.”

He managed another small smile as Clara fiddled with her fingers.

“I’m ... glad you’re not scared of me, Clara.”

“Scared?”

“A lot of people are scared of me. Terrified of me. They think I’m a time bomb or something about to go off any second. And I kinda am, I guess. After what happened at Maria’s place with you and Avery and ... I’m glad we can still talk, you know? Christ, I’m so sorry. This fucking curse is ruining everything, and—”

Clara leaned over, and kissed him.

He froze, blinking at the beautiful woman. It wasn’t a quick kiss, the sort she might do if she was saying goodbye to the idea of the two of them ever getting together. It was a full blown, proper kiss, and she half closed her eyes as she leaned into him.

He didn’t push her away.

## Chapter 148

~~Jack~~

After ten seconds, or an eternity, Clara pulled away. She blinked at him a few times, surprised. Well, he was damn surprised too, half by the kiss, half by how he didn't push her away. And surprised again, but how much he liked it. Antoinette's kisses were perfect, every single time. Clara's were not. They were shaky and a little rough, and ... and he really liked that.

"Surprised you let me do that," Clara said, smiling. Not a big, happy smile. A sad smile. She knew what he was going to say.

"I am too. I ... shouldn't have."

"Shouldn't have? Jack, you're dating an ancient vampire who probably doesn't even know what romance feels like. I'm trying to get through to you that you don't need to be with such a cold bitch."

"That's not fair. She ... she knows she's different than me, knows her age has made her ... jaded. It's not something she just accepts, and turns me into some sort of fly in her web, Clara. She tries. She really tries to dig up those parts of her, the young parts that got buried in centuries of vampire bullshit."

"Can't teach an old dog new tricks, Jack. She's a deadly, ancient vampire, and she sees everyone and everything around her as a tool for her goals."

"I..." Fuck, it was hard to refute that point, after his argument with Antoinette earlier. But, a memory surfaced, and tugged at him, tugged until it hurt. "One time, when something bad happened to me, and it was partly her fault, she was ... she almost panicked with concern for me. Like, I was standing there in front of her, having

nearly just died, almost chopped in half head to crotch, and when she realized I'd gotten dragged into something she caused, she was terrified." The memory of waking up in her tower after Viktor had nearly killed him was a night he wouldn't forget. Especially cause he had sex with her for the first time not long after.

"Terrified?"

"Kinda, yeah. We hadn't been dating long, but I could tell her conversations with me were something she hadn't had with another person in ages. She was really, genuinely panicked that she might lose that."

"Not really sure what you're driving at."

"I ... I'm just saying that Antoinette knows she's lost a lot of what makes her human in her age, and I help her find those lost parts. And I don't mind doing that. Hell, I like doing that. I like helping her find those pieces." Jack loved to fix things. And each time, it felt great. It felt great because he loved her, and he wanted to help her. "It's not fair to say she's a cold, ruthless bitch. I mean she is, but that's not all there is to her."

"And you're really comfortable being her emotion dowser? Christ Jack, she's telling you to let your mom bite the bullet."

"That's not ... that's twisting the truth."

"Is it? If shit hits the fan, your mom's on the front lines. And the Prince, your girlfriend, told you to just accept that. She even let you argue?"

"I got to say ... stuff." It'd been a short argument, with Antoinette in her 'mastermind puppeteer' mode. Or maybe 'cold, ruthless queen' was the better descriptor.



“Jack, listen to me. Antoinette is half a millennium old, and if you think she’s cold now, it’s only going to get worse. I won’t.”

He looked away. “No, but you’ll die eventually.” She wasn’t a vampire.

“I got another hundred years left in me, Jack. And you know what I want to do with it? Spend it with a stupid kid who keeps thinking he can fix everything. Cause he’s got a great heart.” She pushed his closer shoulder into the back of the couch, forcing him to twist and face her. “And cause despite being a pipsqueak, he’s fucking ripped.”

He managed a smile at that, but he didn’t meet her eyes, not now. He didn’t want the temptation.

“Thanks.”

“And I’m not some ancient bitch vampire. I’m here on a fucking whim, not planning some plot or manipulating people.”

“Manipulating me a little bit, don’t you think?”

Frowning, she got up, pushed both his shoulders into the couch, and straddled him. He gulped as he blinked up at her, body freezing more than it did when she kissed him. Uh oh.

“Jack, listen to me, you god damn idiot. Antoinette is what, your first girlfriend?”

“N ... Not technically.” He kinda had a girlfriend before, sorta, temp prom date thing that died quickly.

She rolled her eyes, seeing through his bullshit instantly. “You’re like the naive girl who married her high school sweetheart, and never experiences anything else, never realizes there are other types of dudes out there who don’t suck.”

“I’m straight.”

“You know what I mean. Look at Damien! Dude’s dating a chick who can’t go five seconds without bursting at the seams with joy. You ever think you might be happier with someone like that?”

“Like Fiona? Not really. Pretty sure I’d go insane if I was around her too much.”

Sighing, she leaned in until they were almost kissing again, and with the couch behind him he couldn’t pull away.

“And me? You really want to spend however many decades with a cold bitch like Antoinette, when I’m right here? I’m warm, Jack. I’m warm, and I do everything by the seat of my pants. And I wouldn’t look to you to be some missing half of me that I desperately needed, for fuck’s sake. I look after me, for you. You look after you, for me. A healthy, normal, functioning relationship.”

She was definitely warm. So close, he could feel her breath on his body, and her warmth pushing through his clothes into his skin. He was lukewarm, and compared to him, she was a furnace. God, it’d be so easy to reach out, hug her, kiss her, touch her.

“And Brace? What about him?”

“Brace is great. Dumb, but nice as hell, and with a great body. Prime himbo material.” Apparently Clara wasn’t completely ignorant of memes. “And tall. Shit load taller than you.”

“Hey, low blow.”

She grinned at him. “But I’ve gone on two dinner dates with the dude, nothing more.”

“He seems like the three dates kinda guy. Maybe five.”

“Maybe.”

“And ... and you’re going to have that third or fifth date?”

“That depends on you. I’m not going to string Brace along, but ... I’m not gonna just sit here and say I don’t have feelings for you, Jack.”

“Christ, what do you want me to say, Clara? Yes, I like you. I like you a lot. I went to you for help with the hunters for a reason.”

“I should have asked for a better favor in return.”

He eyed her suspiciously. “Like what?”

“Obviously to have sex with me.”

“Um—”

“I’m kidding, Jack. But I would have asked for ... for something more personal, I guess, than being let it on a secret. Maybe a date.”

“You really want to piss the Prince off that badly, don’t you?” He peeked past her to the door, half expecting Antoinette to walk in. Nope, thank god. He didn’t need anymore soap opera drama. If Antoinette found Clara sitting on his lap like this, it could easily end in blood.

“I don’t give a shit about her, except that I think she’s got you wrapped around her finger. Even if she’s sincere, it’s still fucked up that you’re doing so much for her, and she’s just leeching off you.” Clara leaned closer, enough their noses touched. “I wouldn’t.”

Something had clearly happened to make Clara a little — lot — more aggressive about her desires. And Jack was floored. A lot of what she said he kinda agreed with, and it was making it very hard to not take her up on it.

That's what adults did, right? If they thought there was something wrong with their relationship, they evaluated. Fixable and worth it? Stay in relationship. Not fixable? Abandon. Abandoning a relationship was tough when it meant you were going to be alone, but Clara was right here, and very much willing to replace Antoinette. It was such a horrible way to look at it, but it was very true.

It was so easy to look at shit logically from the outside. But when looking at things from the inside, when buried in all the drama and emotion, everything got real blurry real quick. It'd be so easy to say yes, to dump Antoinette and her cruel bullshit. Clara was fun and ... and normal, emotionally, intellectually, in a good way. He wouldn't have to navigate Antoinette's maze of a personality with Clara.

And his Beast fucking loved the idea of holding Clara, hugging and squeezing her tight, cumming inside her and Kissing her, and drinking deep of that prized werewolf blood. Just one word, right now, and she'd strip for him and straddle him again, let him penetrate her, and they could fuck the rest of the night away.

But the moment the thoughts ran through his mind, he did what he always did: considered both sides of the argument. His true curse, he supposed, a need to understand things in a logical way, the way Antoinette would. It stopped him — usually — from making bad decisions. He just never thought it'd happen in a romantic context.

The moment he thought about leaving Antoinette and spending the next ten, twenty, fifty years with Clara, thoughts of Antoinette ran through his mind. And hit him in the guts like a fucking semi.

He wanted to wake up next to Antoinette. He wanted to talk with her, about all the things they talked about, things other people wouldn't find interesting but she did. He wanted to hold her, kiss her, have sex with her, and spend the next hundred or five hundred years with her. He wanted to work with her to get through shit like

they were experiencing now, not just abandon it because an easier option came along.

And amazing as Clara was, the only thing that was making him even consider taking her up on her offer right now, was that she was easier than Antoinette. That's all this was, a moment of weakness, because an easier option came along to tempt him.

He slowly took Clara's wrists, and pulled her hands off his shoulders. "Maybe she does have me around her finger. Maybe I have her finger in my grip. It's ... it's not fair to say that just because our relationship is different, it's bad."

"It sounds like a toxic relationship to me."

"It's not toxic, far from it. There are problems, like this shit that's happening now with Mom. But I'm not going to dump Antoinette because of problems, not ones that can be fixed."

Groaning, Clara got off him and collapsed back on the other couch. "Christ, you really do think you can fix everything."

"Not true! I think she and I can fix things."

"You really think a super ancient vampire is going to change for you? You sound like a stupid young girl, reading some shitty Twilight fanfic."

He couldn't help but laugh about that. "Maybe. It's ... it's not the same."

"Jesus you are loyal, so loyal it fucking hurts."

"Sorry. Can't go against my programming."

Her turn to laugh, and she leaned forward in her seat again as she shook her head. "Well, can't blame a girl for trying."

“No, I can’t.” He leaned forward, matching her as his eyes drifted toward her before looking back down. Couldn’t maintain eye contact, not after this. “I ... I would, you know? If I hadn’t met Antoinette, I would.”

“Thanks.”

“And Brace, he’ll—”

“Brace is nice! Too nice. Truth is we’ve been on more than a couple dates, and he’s very ... afraid to get aggressive.”

Ooooh. Brace was a nice guy, but too nice. Jack wasn’t some kind of girl expert, but Antoinette was, and talked to Jack about social dynamics constantly. The solution to this problem was simple. Brace needed to learn that nice and passive weren’t the same thing. Yeah, be nice to the girl, but when it came to sexual chemistry, be aggressive. Kiss her when she’s not expecting it. Take her wrist and hold her. Pin her against a wall and kiss her deep.

Dude probably just didn’t realize how much women hated being idolized and held up on altars.

“You are a werewolf. Maybe he’s afraid to get all masculine on you, cause he’s pretty sure you could kick his ass?”

“Only when transformed. Right now I am just girl, a hard to kill girl, but a girl, who is much smaller than Brace and would like to know what it’s like to have a guy sweep her off her feet.”

“And you expected me to do that?”

She laughed, louder this time. “You were different.”

They both laughed, and slowly let the laughter die. After a while, they looked at each other, both sighing, and Clara took the cue. She got up, and opened his front door.

“Don’t ... don’t tell Brace about this, ok?” she asked. “Just a moment of weakness, right?”

He smiled. “Too right.”

She left. He collapsed back against his couch, slapped both hands against his face, left them there, and groaned.

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Later that night, he decided to pay a trip to see the monsters. Anything so he could keep his mind off Antoinette, how pissed he was at her, and Clara, and how fucking easy it would have been to just say ‘yes’ and begin a relationship with a normal functioning woman. Was he against normal? Did he dislike normal? Did he love Antoinette because she was so strange, and hard to navigate?

And calling Clara normal was kind of an insult. She wasn’t normal, just, normal by comparison to people like Antoinette and Jacob.

And she was hot! So damn hot. He’d seen her breasts, a fucking long time ago but he had, and the image was seared into his brain. When she’d been straddling him tonight, if he’d reached out and touched them, she would have fucked him right there. And if he’d pulled her down to him, he could have Kissed her, drained her, left her an exhausted mess of arousal, and fucked her until—

Jack groaned and smacked the side of his head. Which of course made the hunter beside him raise a brow and look at him. He brought Brace with him, down deep into the tunnels of Dolareido, because Jack was a masochist.

“Still don’t think this is a good idea,” the hunter said.

“Damien and Jessy are busy dealing with Carthians. I need back up.”

“Uh...” The hunter scratched the back of his neck. “You know I’m only human, right?”

“Yeap.”

“I won’t be of much use to you.”

“You’re a hunter. You’ll be fine. I don’t expect anything bad to happen, I just need someone with a gun and a set of eyes.” Which could have been anyone besides Brace, but Jack didn’t trust anyone in the Invictus at the moment.

Braced eyed him, eyebrow raised. “I still—”

“And I wanted to talk to you.”

“Aaaaah, ok now it makes sense. Kinda. Whatcha wanna talk about?” Even as he asked, the hunter put another step between him and Jack.

“Dennis and Marge seeing more of the city?”

“Yeah. Told your mom about that, actually.”

“You talked to Mom?”

“Yeap. She and the Circle — Jennifer and Beatrice anyway — dropped by when I was on a date with Clara.”

“And you ... had a conversation with them?”

“Well yeah.”

Jesus christ this guy. Why would Clara like this guy, romantically? Then again, why was she into Jack? No accounting for taste.



“You were on a date with Clara. Insanely hot, single Clara. And when a few other vamps showed up, you...” He slowly looked at Brace, complete with slow dramatic head turn for effect.

“I ... pulled up some chairs for them.”

Jack facepalmed. “Dude.”

“What? What, I was just being nice.”

A small part of Jack very much wanted to just let this guy fuck himself over. If he was too clueless on how to be romantic in a way that actually worked, let him suffer.

It was the same part of him that wanted to grab Brace and have a drink. The same part of him that liked the idea of binding Clara with the Vinculum and adding her to his inevitable harem. A werewolf, his slave, sex slave, companion, and bodyguard? The fun he'd have with her, and the things Antoinette would do to her, the kinda sex you can only have when you hate someone. Hate sex.

Jack clenched his eyes and shook his head. Shut up, Beast. He was hungry, and it was fucking with him. Maybe bringing Harcourt was a bad idea?

No, he needed to talk to the dude. Jack owed Clara, and if he could fix this, he should. He couldn't fix much lately, but maybe he could at least fix this.

“How the fuck are you so nice, dude?”

Brace shrugged as he looked ahead down the tunnel and its flickering lights. “It's a long, stupid, sad story involving my sister. Life is hard for hunters. Every hunter I've run into has been ... well a lot more of them are like Angela than you might think. I swore I wouldn't be like them.”

There was depth to Brace Harcourt, much as he didn't give off that vibe. Goofball, sure, but not a complete moron. There were thoughts in that skull of his, and when shit hit the fan, those thoughts were actually damn useful. He kinda reminded Jack of Fiona, someone with a past and lifestyle that should have crushed their personality until they were bitter assholes. But somehow, they survived. Like they were more naturally buoyant than other people.

He envied them.

“And speaking of the other hunters.” Jack took a moment to wipe the rising malice from his voice. It was hard to say her name. “Athalia might want to know about Angela. She talk to you yet?”

“Nope. Ain't nobody been talking to us from that side of the fence.”

“You know much about Angela? Personal stuff?”

“Uh, not that much, no. She was close with Jeremiah, father daughter kinda relationship ... between psychopaths.”

“You know Athalia was her mother?”

“Know that, yeah.”

“You know they had a super rough history? Athalia was a Begotten when Angela was just a kid. I don't know all the details, just...” He sighed and shook his head. “Athalia feels so damn guilty about what happened to her daughter. Completely destroyed relationship, plus she did some nasty monstery things to her daughter when she was growing up. She didn't want to, but yeah.”

Brace whistled. “I mean, I knew Angela wanted to kill her, but ... I guess the group and I put it together that Athalia must have done something to her. Didn't think that, though.”

“So if Athalia asks you about Angela, try and answer if you can. And don’t sugarcoat it ... much.” Athalia definitely preferred things blunt, but even she wouldn’t want to hear the absolute worst things about Angela, especially not after what happened.

“Alright, I’ll try.”

“And back on topic. Clara the first girl you’ve ever dated?”

“What? No ... There’s been other girls. Sorta.” Sorta sounded a lot like fling.

“Uh huh. And the other girls, were all short flings brought on by dramatic hunter situations? Save the girl from the scary monster. Sometimes the girl’s grateful?”

“Well ... I mean...” Poor guy adjusted his trench coat and groaned. “So there was this one girl. Her parents died in an accident with a vampire. I helped her out for a few months.”

“Slept with her?”

“Uh, yeah.” Judging from the look on his face, she probably threw herself at him.

“And then you left, determined to continue your hunter job?”

“ ... yeah.”

“And...”

“And there was this other girl, a rookie hunter. We bonded a bit on a monster hunt.” He didn’t need to explain what bonded meant. “We went our separate ways when the hunt was over.”

“And...”

“And there was this other girl, another hunter. We ended up being rivals, kinda, in a ghost hunt. Somehow we got together, until, you know, the ghost was dealt with.”

Jack didn't need to ask about this girl either. No doubt the woman got aggressive and made the first move.

“So Clara is the first girl who's not traumatized or all ... hunter-brained,” Jack pointed at his temple, “you've ever dated.”

“Put it like that, I mean ... yeah.”

“Ok, that means social norms apply. If you're on a date, you focus on the girl, and other people should be told — politely — to go away. If she's giving signals, you reciprocate by getting closer. If she continues to give signals, you make a move, even if it's just touching her hand.” He was quoting Julias at this point. It sounded so easy to understand social cues when saying them, but knowing them in the moment was a whole different beast. “So next time you're with Clara, pay attention, and do something romantic, would you?”

Brace raised his eyebrow again as he looked Jack in the eye. “Why're you so concerned with Clara?”

“I owe her a lot. She was with us when we went after Jeremiah, remember?”

“Yeah but—”

“And anyone with half a braincell can see you ruining a good thing from a mile away. So hey, you did me a solid, and so did Clara. Now I'm gonna do the both of you a solid. Stop dragging your feet and be more aggressive with the girl.” Jack rolled his eyes, shrugged and kept walking. The cold shoulder was mean, but necessary to convince Brace he was being straight with him.

Jack also felt guilty. Clara was willing to abandon her potential relationship with Harcourt, for him. That was a strange, strange feeling, and Jack hated it. He also hated how it kept teasing some baser desire in him, the Beast in him, or his lizard brain, wanting more women to drink and fuck.

God, he hated all this soap opera drama.

“You like to give advice, don’t you?”

“Eh?”

“You got that kinda know-it-all personality.” Harcourt grinned at him. “But I mean, with everything that’s happened and you coming out on top every time, it’d probably pay to listen to you.”

Jack returned his smile. The guy really was way too nice and well adjusted to be a hunter.

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“Full house?” Jack asked.

Azamel coughed from her bed. Sándor stood nearby, watching like a gargoyle on its perch, off to the side and not on the stage. Athalia frowned down at Jack. Fiona waved. Mark didn’t so much as move his head. Other than the gargoyle, they were all sitting on the stage of concrete, Azamel with her blanket up to her waist, head and back propped up by some pillows, and a cigarette in hand.

She looked emaciated. He’d seen corpses in better condition than her.

“It won’t be long now,” Azamel said, coughing between puffs of smoke. Eventually she motioned to her fellow monsters with the trembling cigarette. “They’re here to bother the fuck out of me in my last days. So are you, apparently.”

Bother the fuck out of me. Not exactly how Azamel normally talked; close, but not quite. Sure she had a nasty mouth, but she normally talked with a bit of nobleness to her, like she was a queen born and raised in royalty a hundred years ago. A queen who hated being a queen, and hated everyone who insisted she be one. Natural potty mouth, sure, but not a casual speaker.

It hurt to hear her talk like that.

“Not here to talk to you at all, old bitch,” Jack said.

Everyone raised brows and looked at him, except Azamel and Mark. Mark smirked before disappearing into a book again, and Azamel laughed.

“The fuck do you want, then?”

“Wanted to talk to Athalia. I heard she might have seen something the night Garry’s little crew attacked the Xnomina HQ.”

Athalia groaned as she walked over to the edge of the concrete stage. “I see a lot of things. But you told us to stay out of this little turf war.”

“It’s only kinda related.”

“Kinda?”

“Ok mostly related. I want to know if you know what happened to Amanda.”

Again she groaned, hopped down from the stage, and landed in front of him. Her hard eyes always scared him, even now with the curse to protect him. A black woman, with long black hair and a tall, slim build, and utterly gorgeous. It wasn’t surprising the sheriff was attracted to her, but Jack couldn’t begin to imagine how the man was able to puncture her hard exterior.

“From what I’ve heard, Amanda’s death is a big deal,” she said. “Sorta Michael’s main point for why he’s given you vamps permission to use lethal force.”

Lethal force. Jack couldn’t help but smirk at the word choice. Vampires fighting vampires wasn’t some sort of organized affair run by a branch of the military or secret service. It was a dirty affair, chaotic, and personal.

“I don’t think she’s dead.”

Athalia’s face remained stone. “Oh?”

“I think Michael’s staked her and stashed her.” He looked to the others as well for a reaction. Fiona’s eyes went wide with surprise; she didn’t know. Sándor kept his face looking straight ahead, not directly at Jack, and his expression was made of stone. Not hard, mean stone like Athalia used, but the almost boring, indifferent stone a sculpture has.

Mark wasn’t any better. He sneered. Whether that meant he knew something Jack didn’t, or he was just delighting in Jack’s ignorance, Jack didn’t know. The dude was never happy since the Prince caught him spying.

Azamel, on the other hand, grinned at him. And no chance in Hell she grinned at him without meaning to, knowing full well he’d notice and jump to a conclusion from it.

Athalia smirked. “And what if he did?”

“I need confirmation. I’m going to do something stupid, super stupid, and I’d really prefer to know for sure if Amanda’s alive before I piss Michael off.”

“Aren’t you busy? Azamel’s convinced those tears are leading up to something nasty, and you’re running around dealing with some

stupid vamps and a turf war?”

“I’d love to be done with this turf war! That’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Then just kill Garry and his top vamps. Or kill Michael and take over. Whatever.”

Jack glared at her. What was it about him she didn’t fucking understand? “I don’t want to kill anyone, Athalia.”

“Your curse—”

“I don’t want to kill anyone! I am not the curse! I’m me, Jack, just a young guy who thinks we could all get along if we pulled our heads out of asses and worked together.” He’d been mostly hands off with Athalia since her daughter died, but if the conversation with Maria taught him anything, it was tough love worked; on adults anyway. “Think what you want, it fucking kills me that I’ve killed so many people. Fucking kills me. Nightmares, all the fucking time.”

“Not one of mine, much as I’d love to say otherwise.”

He hadn’t even considered that maybe one of the Begotten had managed to find a way to torture him with nightmares. Yeesh.

“Ok, well, I’m not a killer, and you fucking know it. Stop being a bitch, and be straight with me. I’m on your team.”

Athalia returned his glare before looking to Azamel, only to frown when her boss smiled and nodded.

“You know if I start talking about what I saw, I’m getting involved?”

“And I’ll do everything in my power, and the curse’s power, to make sure no repercussions come the Begotten’s way. If I have to



kill Michael and anyone else to keep you guys out of this, I will. I'm not here to ask for information to win this war, I'm asking for information so I can end it. No one wins."

Sighing, she stepped back and turned, and set her butt against the stage edge as she folded her arms across her chest. "And what about him?"

"Harcourt?" Jack shrugged as he looked up at the guy.

Harcourt put up his hands like he was about to be shot by a firing squad. "Just giving Jack some back up."

"You trust Jack?"

The hunter shrugged. "I mean, yeah? Dude seems cool. I've seen a lot of shit in my life you know, and ... and Jack's the nicest vamp I've ever dealt with. Ever."

Rolling her eyes, Athalia shrugged. "Fine. Amanda's alive."

Finally.

"Thanks. Did you see what happened exactly?"

"From a distance. I was dropping Sándor off, and the building was on fire. But I saw Michael and her talking. And then he staked her."

"What I thought then?"

"I guess. Except the girl didn't react to the stake, except to just stand there like she was ready for it."

"Like ... she was ready for it?" Jack winced and paced in place. "Ah shit. Shit shit shit. I thought Michael sprung it on her. Never even fucking occurred to me he convinced her."

"What's that matter?" Athalia asked.

“Means if I go on a rescue mission, I’m rescuing someone that probably doesn’t wanna be rescued.” That made everything so much more fucking complicated. God fucking damn it, why couldn’t things just go smooth?

“I expect you to keep your word, Jack,” Athalia said. “Putting a lot on the line here.”

“He will,” Azamel said. Everyone looked to her as she erupted into a coughing fit, and she wiped her lips off with her scrawny, cracked fingers, before grinning at Jack again. “So, Michael has conspired with Amanda to trigger his war.”

“I don’t know about conspire,” Jack said. “Might be blackmailing her or something.”

Azamel groaned, coughed again, and forced herself to sit up. Mark got up, but Azamel waved him off, and the man sat back down.

“This is concerning.”

“What?” Jack said. “Now it’s concerning you?”

“Yes, now, idiot boy. Before when Michael and Garry fought, it was typical vampire nonsense. But after Athalia told me what she saw, I’m feeling this battle is too personal.”

“And ... that’s a problem for you.”

“Yes, it is. The Invictus and Carthians fight each other in most cities, but usually for the typical reasons.” She took another drag of her cigarette, and blew the smoke at him. Even up on her stage, twenty feet away, she still managed to reach him with the smoke. “Michael and Garry are letting personal history affect their actions. Volatile. This city has enough problems dealing with the tears, and likely Black Blood itself, a far greater problem than this stupid war.

And I will not leave my family to contend with this idiocy when I am gone.”

The will and strength in that voice did not match her appearance. But everyone in the room paid attention anyway as power radiated from the old, dying woman. Even Brace stepped away from her, for the seventh time, and did his best to avoid looking directly at her. He’d seen what she really looked like, they all had, and no one wanted to mess with the giant angry elephant god, deathbed or not.

Jack put up a hand. “I’m working on it, ok? But the fuck am I supposed to do? Garry and Michael hate each other for some ugly personal shit.” No need to tell them the details. They—

“The suicide of Michael’s childe, yes yes, I know.” Azamel waved her free hand while smoking with the other.

“You ... you knew?”

“Of course. I was here long ago, boy. Remember? I involved myself in the affairs of Kindred quite a bit back then, almost ninety years ago.”

“Didn’t know you’d gotten that involved.” Jack approached the stage, but didn’t jump up when Mark glared at him. But again, Azamel waved her bodyguard off, and Mark relented, returning to his book. Jack jumped up, and sat down beside the old woman.

“I involved myself in the squabbles of Garry, Viktor, Lucas, and Michael, yes. It was a way for me to feed, to pursue my goals, to look for a nesting ground, where other Begotten could rest. To pursue my inheritance. Things didn’t go well.”

“So I heard. Antoinette says you destroyed some buildings.”

Harcourt took another step back. Of course, doing so put him a little closer to Sándor, and a look his way filled the hunter with

obvious awkwardness, and he stepped back from him too, getting closer to the tunnel entrance every minute.

“The vampires and I didn’t get along. I made a point.” She leaned in toward Jack, and squinted an eye as she met his gaze. “Sándor doesn’t have the ruthlessness needed to deal with the vampires, Jack. If this turf war is still going on when I’m gone, we may very well get dragged into it, like the Uratha inevitably will.”

“The werewolves are going to stay out of it.”

“Don’t be absurd. Give it time and things will happen, they always do, and Avery will side with the group she identifies with.”

Jack looked down. “The Carthians.”

“Exactly. And you know this turf war is a distraction. The timing is too perfect.”

“Yeah, yeah I know. I ... Fuck, I don’t know. I need to get Garry and Michael into a room together, and get them talking.”

“Ha! You think pop psychology will save the day? They are ancient predators, Jack. The only thing they understand is brute force.”

“The Prince—”

“Cannot deal with them without risking her precious city and her precious experiment. She has negotiated herself into a place of passive power, and now any move she makes will trigger the house of cards to fall.” Azamel puffed again, and blew the smoke upward; a step up, from blowing in Jack’s face like usual. “It would have been better if she’d ruled with an iron fist.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’m still thoroughly in the cooperation camp.”

“Of course you are. Well, understand that while Garry and Michael do not despise each other to the degree Garry and the Prince despised Lucas, that doesn’t mean their hatred isn’t real. And as you said, it’s personal. They will fight each other, like angry dogs.”

“Well, if they’re dogs, then maybe I should let them fight?”

She grinned. “You mean face to face? In what universe do sniveling, cowardly elder vampires ever risk their own necks? Garry, perhaps, he is still young compared to other elders. But not Michael.”

Jack threw up his hands. “I need some way to get those two assholes to stop. If it’s really because of this personal hate building between them for a fucking century—”

“Or whatever force is manipulating circumstance.”

“Or that, yeah. Black Blood?”

“Perhaps. I’m thinking Jacob.”

“Oh fucking god.” Jack grabbed his head and shook it. “Ok, I’ll worry about Jacob and Black Blood later.”

“Even though your mother is—”

“I know!” His voice bounced around the large concrete room.

Azamel sat up a little straighter, and everyone looked at Jack like he’d just challenged the devil to a ring fight. But after a few seconds of painful, awkward silence, the old monster laughed.

“You will not be able to resolve this anger between Michael and Garry.”

“I don’t need to resolve it, just bring it down from a boil to a simmer. If I can keep it simmering for all eternity, I’ll be fucking happy. But the moment a vampire makes a single misstep, I’ll wake up the next night to news of twenty dead vampires, and the Invictus going into full DEFCON 1. There’s going to be firefights in the streets. Kine are going to see vampires using abilities. The Prince will get involved. It’ll take another hundred dead vampires before things calm down. And I. Don’t. Want that.”

Azamel watched him for a while, her smile shifting between different types he couldn’t identify. She was thinking about something. Thinking about a lot of things, from how her eyes eventually looked up to the ceiling, and her smile changed again, before she looked back to him.

“Your only option is to force the two to confront each other directly, without their realizing, I imagine.”

“That ... will be difficult.”

“For you, and even for me. But you do know someone who’s good at manipulating people, don’t you?”

God damn it. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

---

~~Beatrice~~

“You’re sure you’re sure?”

Sam nodded. “Yes. Let’s do it.”

Beatrice nodded, and she and Jen stepped down into the basement of the old factory.

It took Triss a long time to find this place, abandoned and unknown, filled with undisturbed dust, and a giant walk-in fridge. And a small modification to the handle made it easy enough to lock

on the outside with a padlock that'd take a blowtorch to get through. A perfect place to stash stuff.

It wasn't just that she found some random, abandoned building from the bygone era of Dolareido's industrial boom. The building's wiring was totally fucked, and she made sure to extra fuck it, so in the random case someone decided to re-purpose the building, it'd take them weeks to get it fixed, plenty of time to get her shit and get out. And that wouldn't happen. This whole section of North Side was abandoned, and no one was going to randomly buy some shitty old building that must have been some big restaurant that failed.

She opened the padlock, and pulled open the big door. She held up a hand, stopping Samantha and Jen, before she stepped into the room, turned around, and ran a finger along the door frame. It was coated in blood, and she clutched her crow skull necklace in her left hand as her right hand ran the whole frame, beginning to end.

Ritual deactivated, the blood vanished. She'd have to cast it again before they left. She wasn't going to risk people finding this. She had enough things to worry about without breaking the Masquerade.

Once Beatrice motioned for them, Samantha followed in, and gasped.

“Oh my god.”

“The part of witchcraft people don't really appreciate,” Triss said. “The murder part.” Sighing, she squatted down in front of the pile of bodies, men and women she'd killed, and forced herself to look at them. “Before you ask, I made sure each and every person I've killed deserved it. Dolareido's a big, big city, and there are some nasty fuckers doing nasty shit, if you look hard enough.”

“I ... I believe you.”

Triss looked over her shoulder to the woman, and did a quick check on her expression. Samantha was definitely shocked to see a pile of bodies, six in total, piled up in the old walk-in fridge, but she wasn't freaking out. Girl had seen a lot in her ... what, six months since being a vampire?

"It's one of the reasons Dolareido is the way it is," Jen said. "I'm sure both Antoinette and Jacob made sure the city had an undercurrent of ... vileness, so they'd have access to people like these."

"Better than other cities," Triss said, shrugging. "Like Harcourt and Clara were talking about, vamps aren't so nice elsewhere."

Samantha gulped. "But—"

"But it's still murder, I know. And that's what it's like being a witch, Sam. It's why Jacob hasn't included you in anything the Circle does." Saying the 'Circle' helped eased the burden, but truth was the only people in the Circle getting their hands bloody like this were Triss and Jacob. "And hey, I went through that phase when I was younger, not wanting to kill people. Lasted a few weeks."

"A few weeks!?"

"The typical shit a Nos goes through. Woke up from a death that I didn't ask for, looking like a fucking shark. You're damn right I had anger issues. Didn't take long to learn that vampires are allowed to kill, and I knew exactly where to go for some therapy. Devil's Corner. Waited until I found a real asshole, someone who really fucking deserved to die, and I fucking killed them. Scared them until they pissed themselves, then I drained them, and I made sure it hurt." Triss slowly stood up and turned to face the very scared Daeva. "Lots of vampires do it, find humans who deserve death, and kill them."

"Like, um, vigilantes?"



“No, the Prince would stop any vampire vigilante, cause that shit would end up on the news eventually. But if you’re careful about what you do, you can find humans in this massive city that no one will care about disappearing.” She shrugged. “There’s a reason homicide and the real fucking shit crimes are lower in Dolareido than other cities. The Prince made it clear that vamps should focus on cunts who deserve to die, if we find ourselves needing, or wanting, to kill.”

Poor Samantha. She squirmed in place, eyes drifting between Triss and the pile of the bodies. “They’re ... they’re not rotting.”

“No. Elen showed me a trick to keep them from rotting.”

“Magic stuff?”

Triss nodded.

Samantha’s eyes went wider. “Wow.”

“My point is, you’re a vampire now, and you should feel ok with killing people. Which is a fucking horrible thing to say, I know, and I don’t really mean it. But at the same time, we’re predators. You have to be comfortable with this sort of shit, if you’re going to ... do witch things.” Like reviving your dead daughter. “Hell, you need to be comfortable doing it, in case shit happens.”

“Like Jack did with Mrs. Pavala.”

Ah right, the kid killed someone on his first night, and had to hide the evidence. Christ, what a shitty way to get introduced to his second life. It was nothing compared to waking up with a crocodile mouth, but still.

“Not exactly the same, but yeah. Or if you ever give up the Masquerade to someone who was alive, you’ll have to do something. That could mean killing someone.” Triss made damn sure to avoid

saying just how nasty that situation could get. More than a few vampires had been forced to kill innocent people because some kind got too deep or too lucky, and getting a Ventrue to wipe their memories wasn't a fast enough option.

"I ... I know." Poor woman. Sam shook her head as she hugged herself. "I know."

Jen sighed, and set a hand on the shivering Sam's shoulder. "We wanted to keep this from you, for obvious reasons. But we've been working with Elen to build a new body for Julias for a while, and we kept running into problems. We've had to ... acquire more and more bodies."

"Oh god."

Yeap, that sounded bad. That sounded really fucking bad. Seeing the shock on Sam's face was a kick in the guts.

"We're doing our best to be ethical about this," Triss said. "But yeah, I ain't gonna lie to myself about it. We're killing people, a lot of people, so we ... so I can try and resurrect Julias. And we can argue philosophy and shit, about if it's right to do that, even if I'm making sure I only kill scum. But I'm still gonna keep going. I'm neck deep in this shit, and I'm gonna keep fucking going."

Staring at her, Sam managed a heavy gulp, and looked back at the pile of corpses.

"I'm a vampire. I'm a vampire. I'm a vampire. I have a vampire son, and a ghost daughter. I drink blood. I'm half dead." Evidently she had a mantra.

"Alright. Now, don't watch if you don't want to. This is gonna get messy."

Samantha nodded, wriggling some more, eyes wide, but she didn't look away. The mantra worked.

Triss squatted down in front of the dead, her kills, and grabbed some dude's body. Some fucker who beat his wife and sexually abused his kids. Maybe she should pick a girl body? Not like Dolareido didn't have women the world was better off without, and she'd piled a couple of them here. Whatever. Julias was a dude, so maybe that mattered.

She grabbed the guy, yanked him toward her by the leg, and picked him up. Lifeless eyes. A quick glance Sam's way showed the woman staring at the corpse, right in the eyes. Rookie mistake. With her left hand holding the corpse up by the back of the neck, Triss closed the dead man's eyes with her right.

And then she cut his flesh open. Her Nos claws were short, but plenty sharp, and cutting through skin and flesh was easy enough. Through the throat first, through cartilage and muscle, and then the spine. The body fell away, ka-splat, with enough impact to cause what little blood the corpse had to squirt a bit from the neck hole.

Samantha screamed and spun around. "Oh my god!"

"Told you to look away." Triss gave Jen a sad glance, who returned it as expected. This was a bad idea, but the woman wanted to see. And after stealing the book and knife from her sire, the fucking Prince of Dolareido, the least the witches could do was let the woman see how the sausage was made.

Samantha managed a few more peeks, but each time it only lasted a couple seconds, as Triss's work only grew bloodier. She needed the skull, the seat of the mind, not the brains and eyeballs and jaw and stuff; apparently blood magic was a little behind the science of what actually held the mind, thinking it was the skull and not the brain. Whatever. Triss ran her claws over the skull, splitting skin, and she

tore it off. She sank her claws into the eye sockets, and scooped them out. She ripped off the jaw.

Getting the brain out wasn't so easy, and she knew it wouldn't be. But she'd come prepared, and she used a small metal long spoon stick sorta thing Jacob had given her. Because her boss literally had the tools lying around to get brains out of a skull. Scooping it out through the, according to Jacob, Foramen magnum, the hole at the bottom of the skull, was fucking nasty, but Doctor Jacob had given her good instructions.

Soon, all that was left was a skull. A bit bloody with gross, old dead man's blood and some flesh bits, maybe some brain bits still inside, but a skull. Strange how small it was compared to an actual head.

She held the thing in her hand, the first skull she'd ever extracted from a corpse, and she let the weight of it sink in. A skull, bone, seat of the mind. Ok yeah, maybe the old superstitions about skulls meant something, cause she felt a lot more than literal weight, holding it in her hands. This was something real, something more than a bunch of calcium meant to hold a brain in a protective cage.

Fucking chills.

She handed the skull to Jen. Jen didn't wanna touch it of course, and she grimaced when she held it in her palm, flashlight in her other hand. But once she felt the weight of it too, she stared at the bloody sphere of bone, and Triss got to see what she must have looked like when she held it. There was wonder in those eyes. Much as Jen didn't really consider herself a witch, she was a member of the Circle for a reason, and she'd stuck with Triss through shit that'd scare off any pussy Invictus or Carthian.

Triss squatted down over the corpse, and took a second to think. How to get it out? Bone saw and shit? Nah, fuck that. It wouldn't have the same weight, the same meaning and value, if she cheated.

She was a vampire. Crúac was blood magic for vampires. She had to do this shit like a proper vampire would.

She ripped the dude's shirt open, sank both of her claws into the chest sternum, and ripped the body a fresh new hole.

Samantha outright squeaked this time. "Oh my god! Triss, you ... what're you doing?"

Ripping a chest cavity open wasn't a seamless process. She had to break ribs, tear through flesh, and push shit aside. Messy. If the corpse had any blood left in it, she would have been soaked in gore before she was done. It was noisy too, and every crack, crunch, and squelching rip earned more panicked noises from Samantha.

But when Triss wrapped her right hand around the fucker's heart, and sliced it out with her left hand's claws, the same chills shot up through her hand and into her whole body. She stood up and stared at the organ in her hand, a flesh pump, a muscle that only knew how to move blood through a body and nothing more. But to a lot of cultures and beliefs long dead and gone, the heart was the seat of the soul.

She had a hard time believing that. Hell, she was a vampire, and had been for a decades now. Her heart wasn't anything more than a withered prune unless she was Blushing Life, and she damn well knew she had a soul. But holy fuck, holding the organ in her hand definitely had her questioning if she should dismiss those old beliefs. Power. Tingling, almost electric power coursed down through her arm and into her core. Holy fuck, what would it feel like to rip the heart out of a living person?

No wonder Jacob had all those tools for dismantling bodies in his main ritual room. Assuming that was his main ritual room. Dude had to have others.

“There, got what I need.” Triss picked the body up and set it beside the pile. Beside, not on. Didn’t want the guts and whatnot spilling on the other bodies and making a disgusting mess even worse.

“Finally.” Samantha turned around again, and looked at the skull and heart, eyes wide and locked. “It’s ... it’s really like in the stories. Witches and stuff.”

Triss grinned at the woman, pulled the big black — had to be black — jewelry bag out of her pocket, set the heart in it, and held it open for the Ventrue. Jen was considerably gentler with the skull than Triss was, and she was stuck somewhere between grimacing and smiling with each moment. But Triss could also see the intrigue there, the curiosity, the wonder, as she set the skull in the bag.

Even Samantha stared on, curious, making an effort to keep her eyes off the pile of bodies, but drawn by what Triss was doing.

Triss took a deep breath, pulled out her phone, and brought up a picture at an angle so Jen and Sam couldn’t see. Julias. Dude was sitting around reading a book when she took this picture, but he’d looked up quick and managed to get a pose. The classic, subtle but powerful smile, the sort really confident rich dudes who could secretly be mastermind villains had. Fucker was so damn photogenic, it was hard to take a bad picture of him. Not that she’d taken many, Masquerade risk that it was creating any sort of paper trail of a vampire. But she had a couple, and this was one of the better ones.

She dug through the memory, and let it envelop her. Julias’s damn, stupidly awesome smile. His big arms wrapped around her. His calm, soothing voice. His demeanor, the suaveness that she loved and hated. The way he had a big soft side that was so sappy, it was painful. To other vampires, Julias was a deadly ancilla. To her, he was a big mushy puppy dog. Except when he wasn’t, except when

he took control, and took her into his arms, held her down, and did things to her. Except when he kissed her.

She dug through the memory until it hurt, until she'd rather be cutting herself open and pouring acid in the wounds. She'd suppressed these memories, and let them fade as best she could. Jen had helped a lot. All the sex helped a lot. Hanging out with the Circle, watching Sam getting DP'd and loving it, and Triss watching, enjoying by proxy, it was all an indulgence that helped her forget.

And she threw months of progress out the window as she cast the ritual. She reached into her core, that part of her that could summon vitae the way everyone knew how to flex a muscle. The strange energy poured up into her, and she funneled it into her right arm. With a heavy sigh, she bit her wrist open, and continued to pour her energy through her and into the arm, until she summoned a large droplet of vampire blood. Dark, thick, so much thicker than kine blood. And she stared at it as she infused her vitae into it, and her memories.

The blood fell into the bag, held by her left hand. Another drop, and another. This wasn't a small ritual, something easy like a warding spell. She was summoning a piece of Julias, a chunk of who and what he was, something she'd use as the seed for his actual body, the seat for his mind and soul.

She was a child, reaching into dark water, completely unaware of what lay beneath. Well, maybe not a child, cause she was smart enough to be fucking terrified. Something lurked in the dark, something that listened to Triss and her ritual, something that was dancing to her tune. The Crone? No chance, she was too big, too powerful. Each ritual probably touched on something different, and each one probably came with its own risks of touching things that shouldn't be touched.

Didn't matter. In for a penny.

She stopped the bleeding, closed the bag, and held it up with both hands.

“Be found and returned, Julias,” she said. The words were stupid and cheesy, and every part of her thought she’d cringe saying them. No way witches did idiotic shit like chant crap verses like this. But when she said the words, she knew it was like knocking on the door of whatever was out there, listening, and waiting. “I call to the darkness that watches and listens, that knows the dead. Find, and bring a piece of Julias back to me.”

The room had been pretty damn dark before, with only Jen’s flashlight lighting it up. But when the still air turned into a swirling wind, and a howl that didn’t sound like wind at all filled the room, the tiny flashlight flickered, flickered, and died.

The bag grew lighter.

Triss held onto the bag with both hands as it shook. Something was inside the bag, and it fought to get out. Hisses, growls, it shrieked and wailed in the same pitch as the wind that filled the corpse fridge.

“Triss!” Sam yelled. “Triss, what’s going on!?”

“Nothing! Just stay put. Wait.”

What sort of rituals had Jacob cast that had repercussions a thousand times scarier? What crazy sort of shit did he do, that had everything around him reacting? She could imagine it, easily, Jacob sacrificing a kine under the full moon in a forest, and the forest flipping the fuck out. The fire would go out, animals would flee, and the wind would start shrieking like a fucking banshee, like it was now.

Thank god Triss’s little ritual didn’t last long. The bag got lighter and lighter, and soon it stopped fighting. The wind in the fridge



turned into still air again, and the shrieking died with it. The flashlight flickered again, and stayed on.

That was a quick brush with one of the more fucked up rituals. Jacob had warned her they could get nasty, and dangerous, and she might have to do more than just say a few words and sacrifice some vitae next time. Wrestling with the forces of darkness, struggling to keep them bound to the ritual, to force them to enact the witch's desire? Yeah, that sounded witchy. And what Triss did felt almost like she'd been teasing a cat with a toy, and then yanked the toy back.

Which of course meant there was a chance she pissed something off, and it might bite her in the ass later. No wonder witches supposedly made protection talismans for themselves and whatnot.

She lowered her hands, rubbed her crow skull necklace with her right, and let the bag dangle at her left. Tempting to look, but it could wait.

“It's ... it's done?” Jennifer asked.

“Yeah. Let's get back to Elen. I don't know how long this ... this thing will last, and I don't want to do this again.”

Her friend grinned. “You don't? You looked almost excited to be casting a ritual.”

“Excited ... yeah, I guess I was.” Excited. Terrified. Some mix of the two. She didn't really know.

Sam threw up a hand. “That was scary! Oh my god, it was like a movie! And I could hear howling, and and and—”

Jennifer gave Samantha a pat on the shoulder, and everyone went quiet as they looked at the bag in Triss's hand. It was a lot lighter, and not bulked with mass anymore, but it wasn't empty. Something

was in there, and it wasn't fighting against the bag anymore, but it wasn't holding still, either.

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~~Antoinette~~

“Ann, what ever is the matter, dear?”

Antoinette sighed as she looked down, and combed her hair over her shoulder. Elaine sat across from her at her desk, and set a hand on it as she leaned in and looked her in the eyes.

“My childe is in a terrible predicament.”

“Samantha?”

“Jacob is ... perhaps involved in terrible things, and I let my Samantha get close to him.”

Elaine sighed as she relaxed in her chair. “I thought you wanted that?”

“I did. But now that her life is in danger, I am ... regretting the decision.”

“Because her life is in danger? What has Jacob done?”

Antoinette shook her head. “I cannot share the details. My apologies, but this is deeply important, and dangerous.”

With a heavier sigh, Elaine leaned back in her chair as she shared a sorry smile with her. “Well, if it is Jacob we speak of, then I can only agree. Not about your regret over Samantha, but the man's tendencies. Whatever he is up to, it is probably quite dangerous. But ... I saw him with Samantha, Ann. I did not get the impression he was being insincere with her. Perhaps a little overtly flirtatious and playful, but not insincere.”

“I am sure Jacob seduced her to annoy both Jack and I, but since then, Samantha has shared with me details of their time together. I believe what was likely Jacob being his typical, mischievous self, has evolved into something more.”

“Ah, a classic tale of romance then? The mischievous man plays with a girl’s heart, only to find himself smitten?”

Antoinette could not help but smile at that idea. She had done the same to Jack, the first time they met in Bloodlust, oh so long ago. A young man, attractive, intelligent, squirming with fear and surprise, and she could not help but indulge her desire to tease the man, balancing his fear with arousal and intrigue. But then they had begun to converse, and she quickly found the boy far more interesting than he had any right to be.

Surely the same had happened between Samantha and Jacob? Her childe’s sexual indulgences did not exactly speak to typical juvenile flights of romantic fantasy, as Jacob, like Antoinette, did not mind sharing their lover with others; as long as they were there, of course. Perhaps that sexual freedom offended others, but to ancient vampires like Antoinette and Jacob, the act of sex meant little. It was the emotional exploration that carried weight. And Samantha had certainly spent time exploring with Jacob and the Circle. But once one took eccentric sexual tastes into account, Samantha’s tales of Jacob spoke of more than simple mischievous play.

“I believe my childe is safe. I believe Jacob is not a villain.”

“As do I. But then, one does not need to be a villain to be an enemy.” Sighing, Elaine shook her head as she tapped her chin with a finger. “But if something has happened that now causes you to doubt Jacob’s romantic interest in her?”

“No. But ... we should be careful with the Circle, I believe.”

“If the Circle will cause trouble, that is not a trouble that will befall Samantha due to simple proximity.”

“Perhaps. But physical proximity and emotional proximity are not the same thing. If Jacob does something, something dangerous for the city, Samantha may find herself involved.”

“I think you should trust Jacob to not use your child against you. He is many things, but he is no vile serpent.”

Antoinette sighed relief. She knew this, but to hear another confirm her beliefs was important, especially after her argument with Jack.

“Jack, he knows.”

“Oh my. He has told her?”

“No. And I gave him orders not to.”

Elaine smiled softly as she met Antoinette’s eyes again. “That is why you seem depressed. I cannot imagine that conversation with your love went well.”

“It did not.”

“Will he obey?”

“I am not sure. He is intelligent, and capable of tactical reasoning. But after what the hunters did to his mother, he feels immense guilt about her. No doubt the boy will do whatever he feels is necessary to fix whatever situation Samantha finds herself in.”

“Even if by doing so, the situation for others will worsen?”

“I ... do not know.” Jack was unique for a man his age in his ability to use sound reasoning. Given time, he would grow to become a powerful ancilla and eventual elder, with the power of his

will and the sharpness of his intellect. But at the moment, he was undoubtedly trapped between his intelligence and emotions, and the strange power the curse granted him.

“Well, since you are determined to hold your secrets from me,” Elaine held up a dismissing hand, not offended, “I believe I can safely say that Jack will not act without yet another conversation with you. And perhaps in this second conversation, you can plead your case?”

“True. But, I am also concerned about the emotional repercussions. Jack has never been on the receiving end of my decisions, not like this.”

“Ah.” Elaine nodded as she tapped her finger to her chin once again. “In that, I do not believe I can be of help. It has been centuries since I have known the taste of love, and I cannot even begin to imagine the strange circumstance you find yourself in. Young Jack, confronted with the truth about his love, that she can be cold and ruthless about someone as important as her own childe, and his own mother.”

“Please stop.” Antoinette groaned as she leaned back in her chair and combed her hair faster. “As you said, you have not known love for centuries. I have tasted it and I will not let it go. I...” Her frustrated groan turned into a weary sigh. The Daeva half of her would sooner see Dolareido burn than give up Jack. He was hers, and there was no universe where she would let him go. The human half of her realized how quickly that would destroy their relationship. To grasp sand tightly was to lose it.

“I do not know, Ann. Perhaps explain to him you do not make these decisions easily? Appeal to his emotions?”

“Perhaps. It would not be a lie. I am tempted to lock my childe up in the basement and leave her there until this issue with Jacob is

resolved. But, that would tip my hand to Jacob. And I do not wish to damage my relationship with Samantha as with Tony.”

“Come now, Samantha could not possibly become another François.”

François. How many years had it been since she had used that name for her now dead child?

“Did you not think the same of Viktor, Elaine?”

Elaine shook her head. “Viktor had a dark seed in him from night one. I sired him for the value he would provide me, you know that.”

Ah yes, Elaine could be just as brutal as Antoinette. More so, as a Ventrue with as troubled a past as her. But then, Elaine also had a soft side to her. The two of them would not be friends if her dragon rival had not displayed genuine moments of emotion and empathy over the years. Unfortunately, Elaine’s experience in romance was less than Antoinette’s.

Elder vampires did not indulge in true romance. Not because the opportunities did not present themselves, but because elders struggled to connect with their emotions, particularly where vulnerability was concerned. Jacob and Antoinette were oddities in that regard, and perhaps Daniel, given his interest in Athalia.

“I have told Jack that I would do much, sacrifice much, for our love. If I had to sacrifice my position with the Ordo, I would. But...”

“But Dolareido is more than a position in an organization. It is your child. You have spent over two centuries building it, nurturing it, and shaping it. If you had to pick between Jack and a project you have devoted your second life to, what would you do?”

Antoinette raised a hand, ready to slam it upon the desk. But she did not. Eventually she let the hand come to a rest, and took a deep,

useless breath as she looked at her friend.

“What do I do, Elaine?”

Elaine laughed and shrugged. “If I knew, would I hide myself away in the Ordo for decades at a time, focused on my studies and nothing else? You have done here what few dragons would dream of, let alone pursue.”

“And come the next gathering of the Ordo Dracul, I will advise them to not pursue it. This project has been...”

Elaine laughed again as she leaned in. “Come now, Ann. This city is a labor of love. Do not deny your attachment, and your successes.”

“Is it? I have apparently built my so called utopia upon a damned land. Black Blood itself rises from the dead and dying that came long before I or Jacob ever stepped upon these shores.”

“Such is the curse of us who live in the paranormal world, I suppose, to forever stumble upon deadly threats beyond the flesh.”

“I—” Her phone buzzed. A quick glance told her it was one of her thralls operating a drone. The joys — and terrors — of the future. “May I?”

“By all means.”

Nodding, Antoinette scanned through the images sent to her. The drone took pictures from quite high, but she recognized the streets of her city well, and knew how to read the patterns and behaviors below.

“A gun fight, at the Border Bar. How lovely.”

“How drôle,” Elaine said, mimicking Antoinette’s French accent.

Antoinette returned her friend's play with an annoyed grin, and scanned through more images. "A handful of Carthians, and ... oh, Jack and another Invictus."

"Any deaths?"

"I do not think so." The camera could do little to find Kindred hiding with Obfuscate, but the body language suggested angry Carthians, not Carthians struggling with war. "Jack's doing, I suppose. Even with Michael ordering him to push this war, he strives to keep my vision."

"Yes, you and the boy align on many things." Elaine's smile turned into a serpent grin. "For better or worse."

Antoinette rolled her eyes, and checked the next image. Jack, returning to his apartment. Jack, exiting his apartment building, with new clothes. Jack, going for a walk, and looking morose. A natural reaction, with the decision he now faced, a decision that left Antoinette anxious and depressed as well. What he decided would affect more than the city and her plans, it would affect their relationship.

Ice shot up through Antoinette's fingers as the next picture showed something she did not expect. Clara. And Jack. Slowly, Antoinette slid to the next picture, and the phone trembled in her hand as the image showed Jack going to Clara. It stopped trembling, when the next picture showed Jack and Clara going back into the apartment building.

"Ann, are you alright? You look like you have seen something horrible."

The next image showed Clara leaving the apartment building, alone. Thirty minutes later.



Five minutes is all it would take for that wolf slut to find her pleasure. Five minutes to destroy a relationship nearly three years old. Five minutes to rip away the first true note of pleasure Antoinette had found in centuries.

Slowly, Elaine reached out and took the phone from her. Antoinette did not stop her. After a few moments of silence, her friend sighed as she set the phone down on the desk.

“If ... if this were any other time,” Elaine said, “I would say to trust the boy.”

“But this is not any other time. Jack is livid with me.”

“I ... Yes, he is.”

“And people have betrayed each other for less.”

Elaine set her hand upon Antoinette’s. “Jack is not other people.”

“No.” She took another useless, deep breath. “But he is also not as old as you or I.” Old, ancient, and fully in control of their thoughts and actions. To understand the self, the desires of the subconscious, and to pursue such desires consciously was the purview elders, not young men barely older than boys.

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to pay Clara a visit, and rip this damn woman’s head from her shoulders.”

Elaine’s grin returned, larger. “Then, perhaps we should? Not everything must be devious plots filled with nuance. The Carthians at least understand that sometimes, the best approach, is to kick down the door.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps it is.”

---

Dressed in their business suits, the two eldest women in Dolareido walked the streets, knowing full well the night could end in murder.

Neither Daeva nor Ventrue were naturally talented at Obfuscate. To wrap the self in the Cloak of Night and hide the body, or nearby bodies and objects, was difficult. But Elaine and Antoinette were ancient creatures who had spent hundreds of years mastering the Disciplines, including those their blood clans did not have innate talent for. To hide themselves in darkness and disappear into crowds was a simple affair, and allowed the two women to approach the Carthian district easily enough.

“How long has it been since we have done this?” Elaine asked.

“Done what?”

“Take matters into our own hands. Walk the streets, ready to enact violence with our own might, instead of the might of those who serve us?”

Antoinette could not help but raise a brow as she looked at her old friend. “Strange to hear a Ventrue speak of using her own hands.”

“You say that, but I did much with my own hands in my youth.”

“You were cursed in your youth. Literally. And you have still not shared how you removed said curse.”

Elaine eyed her with a touch more annoyance than Antoinette expected. Antoinette knew it was a difficult subject for her old friend, but she also knew Elaine kept her secrets, as Antoinette kept her own.

“It was hundreds of years ago, Ann. Tell me, how much do you remember of the first time we met?”

“A blur. A haze of motions. Words, sentences, random. I remember you came to my castle. I remember we got along well, and indulged in my host of thralls and ghouls.”

“That is what I remember. Bits, pieces. There is not a single conversation I can detail, or a moment I can fully describe. And yet you expect me to keep secrets of such a time from you? I rid myself of the curse at a similar time.”

“That ... is true. I apologize. I am frustrated.”

“Clearly. But I have not forgotten. My thrall servants continue to pour through my notes, and I have delved into my memories as well as I can. They are ... not pleasant memories.” Elaine looked down as she cradled her chin in a couple fingers.

Antoinette knew Elaine well enough to recognize her pensive look. Whatever thoughts danced through Elaine’s mind, she was not sharing all of them, but she was struggling with them. Both Antoinette and Jack knew Elaine’s motives for visiting Dolareido were not pure, but there had been opportunities for Elaine to perhaps attempt to capture or subdue Jack in some way, and she had not used them. Several times now she could have staked the boy when his guard was down, and taken him from the city, back to her hold to perform her experiments on. Or perhaps even steal the curse from him through some brutal reenactment of the original ritual that would no doubt leave Jack a pile of ash. But she had not.

Perhaps it was not a matter of Antoinette’s original idea of what her old friend was up to being wrong, but rather Elaine found herself struggling to enact it? It would be a great betrayal of her old friend, but a prize perhaps worthy of any betrayal, for an elder of her age to have the curse at her whim. Then again, Jack had made it clear to Antoinette that the curse was a terrible thing with a mind of

its own. Perhaps her lover had convinced Elaine, directly or indirectly, to not pursue her original plan? It was almost expected at this point, that Jack would have such an effect on others. Her lover...

“Ann, you look ready to kill someone.” Thankfully, her old friend’s voice was lost in the crowds they past. “You are not angry with me. You are angry with Clara.”

“Obviously.”

“Will you kill her?”

“I do not know. Perhaps I will know when I see her.”

“If you kill her, you know Avery will go to war with you. You will be forced to expel her by force.”

Antoinette looked down for a moment as she let that reality settle upon her mind. Yes, if she continued to let her emotions, emotions she had long buried before she met Jack, now lead her into a confrontation, she could find herself triggering the problems she fought hard to prevent.

“Once, Avery and Simon confronted Viktor about some of his actions.”

“My childe did not react well to that, I assume? Even before I embraced him, Viktor did not take well to being denied, or accused.”

“He did not. He Dominated them. A rude awakening for Simon, to know an elder Kindred is a more powerful creature than even the most gifted Uratha.”

“A terrifying thought for the Uratha, I assume.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Do not underestimate Avery, old friend.” Elaine reached out and touched Antoinette’s shoulder. “It has been many years since Avery left Dolareido. Jack reported that she is capable of using a strange sort of spirit fire on her claws, correct?”

“Correct.” And that was a terrifying idea. The damage Avery had done to Jack ... the Ripper’s body, was immense. And the Ripper curse had displayed feats of true power, especially in defensive abilities, such that Antoinette feared if the creature could ever be killed by anything other than fire or sun. If Avery had managed to damage him so completely with a single swipe of her claws, that was not the Avery Antoinette knew when she served Simon.

“Then consider that when you confront her second in command.”

“I thought you wished for me to kill Clara?”

Elaine laughed and shook her head. “I am intrigued by the idea, but I think when we confront Clara, you will not kill her. Exile her perhaps, but kill her? No.”

“You think I am too soft.”

“Nonsense. I think you are too intelligent to risk another problem for your city.”

Antoinette was not so sure. So many decades she had spent without emotions running so loudly through her mind. She was not used to hearing them scream in her ear, scream for vengeance, scream for love and hate and pain. For the first time in many years, Antoinette did not know what she would do.

The uncertainty terrified her.

The two vampires walked through the front door of the apartment building the Carthians had adopted, and deactivated their Cloaks.

The werewolf guarding the small lobby, Caleb this night, jaw-dropped.

“Uh ... hello, Prince. Elaine.”

Antoinette glanced at Elaine. Elaine returned it with a knowing smile, before she met Caleb’s eyes.

“What room does Clara sleep in?” the Ventrue said. And one did not need Auspex to feel the power that radiated from her ancient friend. Poor Caleb never stood a chance.

“Clara.” His voice turned deadpan, and the expression from his lively face vanished. “She sleeps in room 105.”

“And I assume she’s there now?”

“No. She went out. Hasn’t come back.”

Had not returned? She left Jack’s apartment, without Jack, but had not returned. Antoinette nodded to Elaine, and left.

“Forget you ever saw us, young wolf.” A moment later, Elaine was beside her once again.

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It was perhaps a good thing Clara was not in her den, to give the Prince more time to cool. Antoinette still did not know what she would do when she found the woman. But oh, the delight that would flow through her, ripping the girl’s head from her body. As with all elders, she rarely used her own hands, but now she ached to feel them sink through the girl’s skin and bones. And yet, would she truly feel delight, once the moment had past?

“You sure you do not wish for your sheriff to handle this?”

“This is personal, Elaine.” Antoinette managed to summon a knowing smile for her friend. “And you merely wish to spend more

time with the man, despite how he has already made his interest in Athalia obvious.”

Elaine shrugged with an exaggerated eye roll. “A woman can dream.”

“Is there no one else you are interested in? Perhaps back in Europe?”

“Alas, no.”

“Are you even interested in Daniel? So far, you have only convinced me that you are interested in teasing and tormenting him.”

“Interested, of course. But in the way Athalia is? I do not think so, no.”

“Then I suggest you leave him be, for Athalia’s sake. The woman has suffered enough.”

Elaine looked at her quizzically. “Why do you care for her? Is she not a thorn in your side, along with the other Begotten?”

“I was concerned the Begotten would follow in Azamel’s footsteps, and rain arrogance down on my city. The damn woman did destroy a large building, last time she hid within my walls.”

“She does not appear to be that woman anymore. It seems she has a family now.”

“A family, in a way. Though now that the woman is dying, she has passed that mantle to Sándor, the gargoyle. And under his far calmer guidance, perhaps the other Begotten could become ... a part of my city.”

“Why Antoinette, are you opening your heart to others? Has Jack rubbed off on you?”

Rubbed off on her, in perhaps the worst way, if Antoinette was now plagued with such thoughts. Perhaps—

Both women stopped and stared down the street of the Carthian district. This late at night, not many kine walked the streets, making it easy for the two women to see who was walking toward them. She would not see them, as both elders had wrapped themselves in Cloaks of Night, and she walked forward with her head pointed down.

Clara. A beautiful woman, the sort who was both gorgeous, and ‘sporty’, as the children of the modern age would say. With hands in her pockets, the woman slouched horribly as she stared at the sidewalk, and all her usual predatory grace was gone. And in the quiet of the night, with only flickering street lights to show the woman, her sniffles were audible, and her tears obvious.



## Chapter 149

~~Jack~~

He left Harcourt with the monsters. Athalia said she wanted to talk to him, in private, and Harcourt agreed the same way a scared child might agree to something. But Jack knew the monsters wouldn't hurt him, not while he was still under the Prince's protection.

A part of Jack wanted to stick around, be a part of the conversation, maybe build some sort of bridge between him and Athalia, like she and his mom had. A much larger part of him knew he'd rage and snap, talking about Angela, and that wasn't what Athalia needed. The woman needed closure, not an enemy. And as much as she'd nearly become one, Athalia wasn't an enemy. Better to leave her be and let her recover without his interference. It wasn't like Beatrice was going out of her way to talk to Athalia; far as he knew the two hadn't talked to each other since she killed her daughter.

He wanted to fix things. It ate at him, like a fucking ant in his shoe, when he couldn't fix something. The problems with the Invictus and Carthians, the problems with Begotten and Athalia, the problem with Mary being a ghost, and now the problem with his mom dating a bastard who might actually be trying to destroy the fucking world or something. The shit he would do for a magic wand, so he could just zap away and fix the problems.

“Jack,” Sándor said, “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah, gathered that, from you coming with.” He kept the words light, playful, testing Sándor's disposition.

The gargoyle didn't so much as smile at the comment.

“And don’t worry. Harcourt will be fine.”

“I know.”

“I ... wanted to ask about Beatrice.”

Right, cause the man was a masochist and was determined to make himself feel even more guilty than Jack did about his mom. What a pair they were.

“Alright. Hit me.”

Sándor nodded. At least the two of them understood the value in being straight with each other, and not dancing around bushes.

“She and Julias. I understand they were a close couple. A bit of a ... two wayward souls finding solace in each other situation.”

Jack sighed. “Ah, you want to talk about Julias too.”

“Sorry. But—”

“It’s ok. We can skip the typical back and forths, the apologies and creeping on eggshells stuff. I’m guessing you’re sick of it.”

“Sick is a strong word. But ... I appreciate your candor.”

“Same. And yeah, Triss was your typical angry Nosferatu, and Julias was depressed with his second life. They really helped each other out. He helped her with her anger, she helped him find happiness again.” Jack put up his hands. “I’m quoting him, by the way. These are the things he told me. Though really it was the whole Circle that helped Triss get over her issues with her Nos deformities. They don’t care. Julias can’t take all the credit for that.”

“You were close with him.”

“Pretty close. Becoming a vampire put a strain on the relationship. But yeah, even when things got heated, we were still friends. Close friends. We talked to each other about almost everything, Triss included.” Ah fuck, that brought up the memory of the conversation in the hospital, the last normal conversation they had. “He was going to marry her; propose, anyway. She would have said yes.”

Sándor only barely flinched, but with this guy, that was essentially running him over with a train.

“Julias was ... You were there, at the end. I guess I don’t need to say how amazing he was.”

“No ... you don’t.”

Nodding, Sándor took a breath, pushing past the pain, same as Jack was.

“And Beatrice now?”

“We don’t talk as much as we used to. She’s probably doing some ritual shit that I’m happier not knowing about.” Jack looked Sándor’s way. If what he said meant something, Sándor didn’t react to it. “So, you want to know about Beatrice? She’s an angry punk on the outside, but on the inside she’s a normal girl, right down to fantasies of being a princess. When she was alive, she wasn’t anything special, just a really pretty, athletic girl who liked attention. Would be an instagram ass model if she was alive today.”

“Instagram ... ass model.”

Jack grinned at the man. Yeah, made sense Sándor wasn’t exactly up to date with online stuff.

“Internet, self made model, showing off her ass.”

“I see. She was that ... bold?”

“Ha! Vain is the word you’re looking for, dude. And before you defend her, she admitted it to me herself. She was a vain bitch when she was alive, and hey, if a girl wants to show off her ass for clicks and likes, or whatever they did back in 1990, by all means. But she got the attention of a stalker, a Nosferatu asshole. Course the Prince killed the fucker for siring without permission, but, yeah, waking up from death with a new set of big nasty teeth, that left her pretty angry. Down in the bones angry, you know?”

Sándor slowly nodded, eyes ahead and on the tunnel tracks. He knew. He probably knew better than anyone in the whole damn city.

“And Julias helped her overcome that?” he asked.

“Yeah. Julias was great at helping others. Not so good with helping himself.”

“Who is?”

“Good point.”

“And Beatrice. She’s taken to the Circle well?”

“Yeah, really well. I don’t trust Jacob, but I guess he called it right, getting her from the Carthians. And I guess I see it, now that she’s neck deep in it. Triss will make a good witch.”

“You didn’t think so before?”

“Nah. Before I knew her very well, I thought she was kinda like Jessy, loud and angry. But they’re nothing alike. Getting sired against her will really fucked her up, and that proud pretty girl she used to be shattered and turned into someone with a lot more rage and ... depth, I guess. Depth she probably didn’t want, but she got it

anyway. Jessy isn't like that. Deep as a plate. Awesome, in her own way, but yeah."

That managed to get at least a small smile out of the gargoyle.

"That's good."

"What, that Triss has depth? Why? You kinda gave me the impression Jen's attempts to seduce you with TNA was a failure." Jack put up a hand again before Sándor could ask. "Tits and ass."

"I see. I ... guess I am interested in Beatrice, yes. We've talked, and she's intriguing."

"Don't mind the crocodile teeth?" Jack pointed at his cheeks.

"No." A complete lack of explanation. Typical. But it made sense. Dude was a Begotten, and probably met a lot of monsters who looked fucking horrible. Just another day for a nightmare creature.

"Well, from what I can tell, Beatrice and Jennifer are best friends, and friends with benefits. If you want one, you get the other. Which, I mean, Jen's ridiculously hot, so I imagine most guys would be happy with that arrangement. But something tells me you're more of a vanilla guy?"

Even wording it like that, hoping to poke the guy's ego a bit and crack his shell, got nothing. Pure deadpan face.

"My life with my wife was ... not vanilla." Jack's words didn't crack Sándor's shell, but his own did, for a split second at least. He flinched, just barely. Interesting.

Jack chuckled. It felt good to laugh, after everything he'd been through lately.

“If you want to ask her out or something, I say go for it. Just ... just be careful. Julias’s been dead for a while, but not so long it doesn’t still sting.”

“I’m not sure dating is what I had in mind.”

Not sure? Dude had something in mind.

“Triss is awesome, but probably a little fragile right now. Julias was her pillar, you know? She leaned on him, and she isn’t the sort of girl to do that lightly.”

“I hear a lot of people relied on Julias.”

“Yeah, that’s true. He was a Right Hand of the Invictus before I was, and the Invictus relied on him heavily. Then his sire died, and Julias replaced him on the council. Everyone was happy about it, cause yeah, people trusted Julias to not only do his due diligence, but he also didn’t have ulterior motives. Usually. Of all the Kindred in the city, he was the only damn one you could trust to not screw you over.”

Sándor nodded as he took it in. “Dolareido is worse for his passing.”

“Yeah, it is.” Jack almost launched into a ‘it’s not your fault’ speech, but Sándor had made it clear he didn’t want to hear it. And Jack was happy to oblige. “I’m not entirely sure what you’re aiming to do, Sándor, but there’s no way you can replace Azamel, be a protector and teacher for all the younger Begotten, and simultaneously replace Julias, you know? If anything, replacing him is my job.”

“You’re a little busy to replace him, don’t you think?”

“I guess.” The turf war was definitely something Julias would have handled, and better than Jack was, but the shit with the tears,

Black Blood, and potentially Jacob, was a twist he doubted his sire would know how to handle any better than he did.

“And I suppose I’m not looking to replace your sire. But I am looking to heal the wound as best I can.”

“So you can fix things.”

“Yes. I have to fix things. Even if they’re not my fault, they’re still my responsibility. I ... have to fix what I can.”

Jack smiled at him. “I know the feeling.”

---

It’d be sunrise soon. A bit over an hour. Tomorrow night he’d pay Antoinette a visit, and see what they could do about ... about everything. In the mean time, he had one other thing to check up on, one other thing he was trying to fix.

He stepped into his old house, his mom’s old house, and let the darkness and cold envelop him. The house was officially haunted, and all those old movies made a lot more sense. Haunted houses weren’t just creepy, they had an aura. You felt death when you entered them, in a way only a ghost could cause. Unnatural death.

“Mary, you here?” He took off his shoes and set them beside the side door on the mat. Habit. The side door took him into the kitchen, and he walked through it as he looked around. “Mary?” She usually hung out in her room upstairs, but no reason to not ask out loud for her before he got there.

Sure enough, no response. But the place felt cold, weird and in the bones cold, and that seemed to be an indicator she was around. So he headed upstairs, and knocked on her door.

“Mary, you there? I’m coming in.” The memory slapped him in the face. He’d said those exact words before, when he was young

and she was still alive.

He stepped into her room, and the cold bit into him like knives. Not real cold. A vampire didn't really give a shit about temperatures outside of absurd extremes, but something about being around a ghost made that defense moot. It was painful cold in Mary's room, and mist flowed over the floor up to his knees.

Course all that was forgotten the moment he saw his sister sitting on the edge of her bed, looking through a photo album. It sat beside her, not on her lap like Jack figured she'd hold it. Then again, ghost.

"Hey Mary. You uh, learned how to touch stuff?"

She shook her head. "Mom helped me with this. It's ... it's taken a lot of time and effort, but I can turn the pages. Barely."

"Anything else? Open drawers or anything?"

"No. Not without either doing nothing, or throwing it across the room."

Nodding, he came over and sat beside her, picture album between them. "Been talking to Mom lately? Guess you have, if she put this together for you." Looked like a new photo album, a big one, and full of pictures his mom and Mary had taken. Even his dad was in there. The memories of the Terry family in one place.

"Yeah. She's happy!" The ghost opened her eyes wide as she snapped her head up, the motion a blur. Jack almost jumped back. Those empty eyes. "I'm glad. Mom should be happy. It's been so hard on her."

"Hard on you too, Mary."

"You're right, you're right. But I'm dead, and ... and that's ok. Mom has you now, right? And that Jacob man."



Fuck Jacob.

“Yeah, I guess she does. Not really a fan of Jacob, personally.”

“Would you be a fan of any man Mom dates?” Well, Mary was being surprisingly clear and articulate. He didn’t know if that was a good thing, or a bad thing.

“I guess not. But Jacob is a dangerous guy, scary dangerous, and —”

“Mom says a lot of vampires say that about you.”

Fuck. “I’ll fix that.”

“You can’t fix everything, Jack.”

“I can try.”

She laughed. A little too shrill to sound nice, but it was a lot better than angry Mary throwing him around with telekinesis and whatnot.

“Mom’s been pretty shy about it, but I think she’s getting laid, too.”

Ugh, he wasn’t old enough for this conversation. The idea his mom had to have sex, twice, to have two children still irked him. Give him another ten years and maybe he’d be able to think about it without cringing, but not yet. Mary definitely had a one up on him in that aspect of maturity.

“I guess she is.”

“Some pretty nasty, kinky sex, too.”

“What? Oh come on, Mom doesn’t tell you about that stuff.”

Mary grinned at him. Spooky. “She does, at least a little. And it’s not hard to guess what she means when she says something else. You know Mom, and how much she likes to undersell.”

“I guess.”

“Which means Mom is enjoying some pretty big sex fantasies. Like, orgies and stuff.”

Jack plugged both his ears. “La la la la la la.”

Laughing, Mary swung out to bat away one of his arms. But her hand past through it, sending a harsh jolt of cold up into his shoulder. Somehow, he managed to not yelp, but it wasn’t enough to stop her from dropping her empty eyes. He got ready to jump out of the way if she flipped out and decided to throw the bed or something, but she only sighed, and turned the page of the photo album. It took her a few tries, fingers passing through it again and again, but she managed.

Jack lowered his hands, and looked down at the pictures as well. Better to ignore how fucked up the situation was, that Mary was dead and couldn’t touch anything. Hell, with Beatrice doing crazy ritual stuff and flirting with Death herself, maybe she’d help his mom and Mary out? Which would undoubtedly end horribly, and probably make everything worse.

“I remember this picture,” he said. “Banana Bananza Waterpark.” Samantha, James, Mary, and Jack. Jack was a scrawny little kid, pasty white, and shivering. Water cooled him down a little too well.

Mary nodded, and pointed to the picture beside it. “There’s us when we went camping.”

“You hated it.”

“You were supposed to hate it, too. Didn’t think my nerd brother would like climbing trees.”

“I was ten. It’s a boy thing. Climbing or digging snow forts.”

Her smile returned, and she flipped to the next page. No need to describe any of these pictures, they both knew what they were. The last birthday Jack had when his dad was still alive.

“I’m happy Mom’s happy,” she said. “Every time she visits, or every time I...” Her fingers paused over a picture of their mom, her hugging their dad’s arm and smiling for the camera. “It hurts, seeing her hold onto me so tight.”

“I thought you didn’t want to ... you know...” Die. Leave. Pass on. Cross over.

“I don’t know!” She snapped her head up again, empty eyes wide, but Jack didn’t react this time. “I can feel something in me, and it wants to latch onto ... onto anything. But I’m scared of the dark places I can see! That place where that ... that thing comes from.”

“Black Blood?”

“I think so. I told Mom, but she’s...” Mary sighed and shrugged. “I don’t know. Something’s going on, and I don’t know!”

“Me neither. But I’m working on it, and so are a bunch of vampires. Mom’s sire, she’s—”

“Your girlfriend?”

Jack turned away. “We got in a fight.”

“Bad?”

“Pretty bad.”

“Don’t let her go, Jack. She’s good for you.”

“How do you know? What’s Mom been telling you?”

Mary smiled as she turned the page. “That Antoinette’s super smart, and assertive. Two good things for you, I think.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I think a more normal girl would probably bore you after a while, you know?”

Clara wouldn’t bore him. Would she?

“Well, that super smart, assertive part of her is part of why we’re in a fight.”

“Fights can be ended, you know? You can fix them and—” Her head twitched, fast enough it left a hazy afterimage that it snapped back into after a moment. “Sorry. It’s hard to ... to keep thinking.”

“Antoinette and other people are working on this weird thing with tears, the things you’re seeing. We’ll get it figured out, and then you can ... I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know either.” Slowly, Mary closed the book, and her body shimmered, like flickering TV static as she struggled with it. “I got a visit from that other ghost again.”

“Oh shit. Sabrina?”

“Yeah. She wants to get in. But you said to stay away from her, so I won’t let her.”

“Good! Good. Christ she was a scary fucking ghost. She’s dangerous, and not just for me, but you too.”

“I’m safe here. It’s my home. She can’t get in.”

The fact Sabrina was roaming around, not tied down like Mary was, was god damn fucking terrifying. The last thing Jack needed was that psychopath ghost learning Jack killed her master.

“Alright. I’ll go now.” He got up, but she got up with him, and floated in front of him, blocking him off from the door.

“Jack, I ... I don’t know what I’m going to do. M-Maybe, if things change in the future, I’ll go. Maybe if ... if things go differently, who knows. I know I can’t stay here forever. I’m ... I’m lucid now, but I know I’m not always like that. Something has to change.”

He couldn’t look her in her empty eye sockets, not from this close, not with what she was saying. Not with what he knew Triss was doing.

“I know.”

“But whatever happens, you can’t die, ok? Mom won’t be able to handle it. I don’t care what happens. I don’t care who you have to fight, or ... or kill. I don’t care what enemies you make. Don’t die, ok? It’s the best thing you can do for Mom.”

Don’t die. Just don’t die. Honestly, with the curse poisoning everything, him dying wasn’t what he was worried about. It was him killing everyone else.

The memory of Maria’s nightmare echoed in his mind, like a speaker shrieking with feedback, until he thought his ears would bleed.

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~~Antoinette~~

Once upon a time, in an age long past, Antoinette had given up on the idea of love. The very thought of sharing true intimacy, physical, intellectual, and emotional, with another Kindred was a silly,

juvenile thought, something most elders had given up on. And while Antoinette often avoided meetings with the Ordo, as she much preferred to work on her projects without interference, she had met plenty of elder Kindred deep in the recesses of the organization who had also given up on romance. The elder mind struggled to think in such terms.

Jack. Silly yet mature, cynical yet optimistic, logical yet emotional Jack, had dug up a part of her she had long thought dead, and she would not give it up easily, especially not for some plebeian mongrel. Jack was hers. If she had to kill Clara to keep it that way, she would. Illogical as it was and likely to doom the relationship, she would.

But seeing the damn woman walk the street, alone, struggling to not sob even as tears ran down her cheeks, ripped a hole clear through the bubbling anger in Antoinette's chest. Why? The damnable woman was her enemy, and all was fair in love and war.

And yet, something about seeing the werewolf struggle with her sadness as she walked the street pulled at something inside Antoinette. For the life of her, she did not know what, or why, but she released her Cloak, and walked toward Clara.

“Wha—shit!” Clara jumped back as she stared at the Prince. “The fuck? What are you ... oh shit.”

Sighing, Antoinette held up a hand and shook her head. “Peace, Miss Moreno.”

“Peace? Why are you even here? You—”

“I saw you, entering Jack's apartment. I saw you leave Jack's apartment, a while later.”

Clara's eyes widened, and she took another step back. “You came here to kill me, over that? You ... fucking psycho.”

Antoinette ground her teeth as she glared at the woman. “I came to parlay.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.” With a sniffle, Clara wiped her nose with her wrist, her eyes with her fingers, and took another step back. “And don’t think I’ll go down without a—”

“Clara Moreno, cease your incessant prattling! I am not here to kill you.” Though with the way Clara insisted the conversation go, she was making it increasingly easy to return to that plan. “I am here to talk ... about whatever happened tonight.”

“Yeah, go fuck yourself. I—” She spun around, hand out, and the back of her hand collided with air.

Elaine stepped back from the backhand, wearing a toying grin as her Cloak faded, and idly rubbing her cheek where Clara had hit her. “Impressive.”

“Two elders for one wolf? You two really that scared?”

“Of course not.” Sighing louder, full dramatic effect intended, Antoinette waved Elaine off, and her old friend stepped around Clara to join her again. “Forgive the Ventrue her ... mischievous ways. I wish to speak to you Clara, about Jack.”

“I didn’t fuck him, calm down.”

“I gathered.”

“Ha, how? Cause I’m crying?”

“By the time frame. Half an hour? Please.” A small attempt at a joke, to lighten the mood. She had indeed thought, for a furious moment, that perhaps Clara had seduced her little Jack. That idea had shattered upon seeing the woman’s tears, and now Antoinette did her best to recover the situation. It earned a surprised, raised

brow from the woman, and Antoinette could not help but mirror Elaine's domineering grin. But she suppressed it quick enough, and took another step toward Clara. "If I wanted to kill you, Clara, I could have arranged it, easily. No need to dirty my hands."

"Unless you wanted to bloody them. You come across as a cold bitch, but I've seen more than a few vamps just like you. When shit gets personal, you freak the fuck out and get vicious."

Antoinette glared at the woman, and a small part of her hoped the stupid creature would shatter into a hundred shards of frozen blood and gore, there on the street.

"I admit that, perhaps, I originally wanted a rather terse word."

"Terse? Gimme a break."

"I swear you will not be harmed, Clara. But I do wish to speak." She almost worded it as an order, but she knew Clara, like any of the Uratha in Avery's pack, would respond to even the most logical order with resistance. Better to ask, and save herself the headache. "Please."

Clara eyed her suspiciously, but after another sniffle, shrugged and nodded. "Fuck it, fine. The fuck do I have to lose."

---

"Bloodlust? Really?" No doubt the woman felt self-conscious about her clothes.

"It is a secure location. We may speak privately." Antoinette nodded to the bouncer at the door, and walked toward the side staircase. Kine ceased chatting to stare at the tall white-haired woman in the business suit, before their eyes fell to the tall blonde in a similar suit, and then eventually to the tan-skinned woman with box-braid hair, wearing a t-shirt and jeans. The kine knew better than to interfere.



Soon, Antoinette sat upstairs in her usual booth, far in the back. Elaine did not join them however, nodding before departing to find another booth. On the hunt, no doubt.

Clara eventually sat down across from Antoinette in the large, circular booth, eyes locked on Antoinette. Her tears had stopped, though Antoinette could see she was holding them back to save face. Such a child.

“I assume Jack has told you about the situation with Black Blood, and my order about Samantha.”

“You’re lucky he did. I was thinking about dropping by and giving Samantha a check-in, see if she’d put some distance between her and that asshole Jacob. At least I was until Jack said you told him to not tell her about the situation.”

“You disagree.”

“Course I fucking disagree. She’s your childe, isn’t she? The fuck —”

Antoinette held up a hand. “I did not invite you here to speak of Samantha. Know that if you warn her, I will consider that an act against me. And not a personal attack, but an official one, orchestrated by your pack.” She leaned in and glared daggers into the wolf. “Respect that you are guests in my city. Do not make me remove you.”

For all Clara’s bravado, for all her strength and rank as second-in-command of her pack, Clara was a gnat compared to Antoinette’s power. The wolf tried to hold Antoinette’s gaze, but failed, and looked down and away after several seconds.

“No idea what Jack sees in a bitch like you.”

Well, if the woman had no issue making this as personal as possible, Antoinette would stoop to her level.

“No doubt you assume the only thing he sees in a vampire comme moi, is the size of my breasts.”

Clara snorted as she finally regained her confidence, enough to glare at Antoinette at least. “I think you’ve got the whole ancient seductress thing down pat, yeah. I think you’ve got Jack all twisted up inside, so he can’t think straight when he’s around you.”

Not entirely an unwarranted opinion. Antoinette had indeed gone out of her way to become a seductress, physically and intellectually, even resorting to strange, forgotten measures to ensure her unusual body. To an outside eye like Clara, Antoinette’s actions must have seemed terribly shallow. But Clara was a young fool who did not understand her own heart, her own desires, or the reality in pursuing them. Antoinette took no more offense in her ignorant views about the Prince’s body than she would if a four-year-old child had insulted her shoes.

“We discussed my relationship with Jack once before. You thought I was selfish, that I was putting my desires before what was healthy for him.”

“I still think that.”

“Even after what Jack has told you, about my order about his mother?”

A hole in Clara’s opinion, that Antoinette would risk Jack’s anger instead of tricking him. Naturally, the werewolf sneered and looked away again as she realized it.

“You probably think he’ll come back to you like a dog on a leash, coming back to its master no matter how many times the master beats it.”

It took more effort than Antoinette wanted to admit, to not reach across the table and tear the damn woman's eyes out.

“He will come back to me, because we love each other, Clara. And while he and I are quite different, and it is through those differences that we have found synergy.”

“You know all that shit about two opposites attract is just that, shit, right?”

Antoinette found herself smiling. “Oh?”

“You think Uratha can't read about things? Fuck you. Yeah, I read stuff sometimes, and what do you know, turns out that shit about opposites attract is just romanticizing. You need to have common ground, or it's a doomed relationship.” Well well, the woman was smarter than she seemed.

“And you think Jack and I have no common ground? That we are opposites? Surely he has told you otherwise.”

She turned to her other side, now facing out toward the club and the other booths closer to the stairs and railing. “So he says. I can't see how a young guy can really have common ground with an ancient bitch.”

“Then you do not understand Jack at all.”

That earned a surprised glance from Clara, before she leaned back, folded her arms across her chest, and glared at Antoinette. “Enlighten me, then.”

“That is why we are here ... partly.”

“Partly?”

“Later. For now, let us speak of Jack then. You think Jack is a young man, a silly boy thrust into circumstances that have hardened him, and sculpted a man. Oui?”

“I guess, yeah. Dude was what, twenty, when he was embraced? That wasn’t even four years ago. He’s grown up into a pretty awesome guy.”

“Clara, I was attracted to Jack long before any of the events that molded him befell him. If anything, I have worked to undo the effects those traumatizing moments have had on him.”

“Uh huh.”

“I do not lie. The first time I met Jack, I thought him nothing more than an unusual choice for Julias Mire, nothing like him at all. I met the boy later at Bloodlust, in this very booth, and he displayed unusual courage, and unusual wisdom.” Clara did not need to know the details of that conversation. Jack, a young man with utterly no world experience, had remarked that Antoinette was lonely, even as the boy trembled beside her in fear. “I was attracted to him when he was ... unknown, when he was simply a young man with a mind that did not fit such a simple description.” Antoinette leaned over the table toward the wolf woman. “Jack is an old soul, Clara.”

“Old soul? And if I don’t believe in reincarnation?”

“Metaphor. Jack is not a young man, or rather, not young in many regards. Surely you have noticed that.”

“I have. Kid’s definitely got an inner grumpy asshole.”

“Quaint. Oui, there are aspects to Jack that allow him and I to communicate in meaningful, deep ways. I am sorry if that offends you”—though they both knew very well that she was not—”but in truth, Jack is not the sort of man you could spend the rest of your life with, Clara.”

“Says you.”

“That I do. Could you truly imagine discussing the minutiae of music or the acting techniques of the older versus younger generation? Could you spend hours discussing how dialog was written in older movies, versus the movies of now? Or how terribly modern movies insist on balancing audio?”

“I—”

“Can you imagine spending three hours comparing the writing techniques of authors? Or perhaps indulging Jack one of his hour-long rants where he does nothing but insult social media?”

“I—”

“Do you have any topics that could engage his mind? I have spent hours explaining to my love the intricacies of Mozart and the tragedy of Beethoven. I have detailed the rise and fall of communism in Stalin’s Russia. I have regaled him with talk of economics, the complexities of law, and techniques to manipulate stock and taxes. I have discussed the emergence of languages over the course of history, the discovery of spices by different cultures, and the psychology of genders, all to his utmost interest.”

“So you’re both nerds, so what?”

Antoinette leaned in closer, and forced Clara to hold her steady gaze. “Jack does not dance. Jack despises social gatherings, and only engages at my request. Jack did not indulge in alcohol in his first life, or drugs of any kind, and not because of any sort of fear, but because the idea of not being in total control of his mind at all times did not sit well with him. Jack’s perfect night includes solitude, perhaps an intriguing film, and hours of discussion.

“You,” she pointed at Clara, “are a social creature, non? Your best nights undoubtedly included enjoying the company of your pack,

perhaps joyful nights on the town, full of alcohol. Your most joyous days — something Jack will never see — were probably when you and your group hunted in the woods, or perhaps when engaging in a rough brawl with dissidents? Your most treasured memories likely include the sheer joy of sharing an experience with a group of others, likely often your pack, but also perhaps your family from your first life? I can easily picture you sharing in elation with fellow students when you were young, cheering over a sports team or some such. Perhaps even now. While Jack does not know the name of most sports teams, and not the name of a single player of any of them.”

Again, Antoinette leaned in closer, continuing to hold the frozen Clara’s gaze. “Be under no illusions, Clara. You and Jack would greatly enjoy each other’s company, for a time, but I have seen better matches than you two, who saw perhaps two months of shared bliss. The two of you would be nothing more than a temporary relationship shared between the young, full of short lived passion. But Jack and I will survive ages together. And while our differences are great, we connect in ways you do not appreciate, in the ways a husband and wife do. Our connection is not only sexual and emotional, as yours would be, but also intellectual, the ability for us to speak about what interests us, and to spark the genuine interest of the other.

“You would not connect with Jack in such a way Clara. Your relationship would be doomed before it began.”

Clara broke their gaze first, leaning back and looking down. And despite her attempts to hide it, the werewolf sniffled. If not for the music of Bloodlust, other booths would have heard her.

“You really are a bitch, you know that?” Clara forced down a sniffle, but it did not last, and she sniffled again as she struggled to control her tears. Those too fell, and she wiped them away quickly.

With a heavy sigh, Antoinette slid along the booth, closing the distance between the two until a single foot separated them.

“Clara, I ... apologize, for how I managed this. I admit learning of your time with Jack tonight left me ... infuriated.”

“Yeah well, you were right. Jack doesn’t want me. Even when he’s pissed at you, still doesn’t want me.”

“Do not be absurd. Of course he desires you, Clara.”

“What?”

“If Jack were not with me, he would happily succumb to your flirtations. You are an amazing woman, Clara, strong and beautiful. Not the most intelligent woman—”

“Hey!”

“But intelligent enough. Do not think you are unworthy. But do not be so childish as to not understand the difference between true romance, and a passionate desire.” Slowly, Antoinette offered the woman a gentle smile. An olive branch. “I am happy that you are so concerned for Jack, to the point you are willing to anger me. But I do suggest you be careful with Jack from now on, and do not tempt him further. Not because of him, but because of me.”

“That a threat?”

“It is.” She said it with no malice. The tears in Clara’s eyes robbed Antoinette of what anger she looked for. They would not have, in years past. “But you and I need not be enemies, Clara. Leave Jack be, and—”

“You don’t even know what Jack is gonna do, after this shit you’re pulling.”

“And the idea of losing Jack because of this development with Black Blood haunts me to my very soul, Clara, in ways you do not understand. You, who bursts at the seams with emotions. You who will never know centuries of...” Antoinette leaned back, pulled her hair over her shoulder onto her chest, and combed it with one hand as she looked out to the other booths. “I will do what I can to ensure our relationship survives. I know Jack will as well.” Now that the fury in her veins had calmed, it grew easier to see that, and to trust her love. Their relationship would survive this. It would.

“You got a lot of faith in him to still want you after this.”

“I do.”

Clara sniffled again before taking a deep breath and silencing her sobs. “Christ, I don’t even know why I’m crying.”

“Emotions are not always logical. And while it has been ages since I have shed tears, I am sure I shed plenty when I was your age.” She shrugged as she continued to offer her peace smile to the werewolf. “And if those feelings are of guilt, due to your budding relationship with the hunter Harcourt, do not be so hard on yourself. Your relationship with him is young, while your interest in Jack far older, and deserving of investigation.”

“Fuck, does everyone know I’m dating Brace?”

“Of course.”

“Ugh.”

“And, if I may be so bold, your future with Harcourt holds more potential than with Jack. While the hunter and my love share little in common, they do share some similarities in personality, similarities you undoubtedly find appealing.” His emotional forwardness, his deep rooted desire to do right, his adorable awkwardness.



“Yeah well, that may be true, but Harcourt doesn’t seem interested.”

“Oh? If you are willing to tell me, by all means.”

Clara wiped her nose, gulped down her tears, and sat up straighter. “Fine. I guess if anyone knows a thing or two about romance, it’s an ancient Daeva.”

Antoinette knew far more than most, about typical romantic interactions, true. Countless interactions from her youth that, while faded, had sharpened her social instincts into a scalpel. Countless books read. Countless young kine and Kindred seen, monitored, and documented. Her own romantic woes were strange, absurd things, and not easily understood, but Clara’s would be far simpler and easier.

Sure enough, as Clara explained the situation, the solution was clear. Brace Harcourt was a passive man, and a moron. Two hundred years ago, a woman would drop her handkerchief near a man she was interested in, and the man would return it, creating the avenue for conversation. If the man had the wherewithal to recognize what the gesture meant, he would pursue the woman with romantic interest. Signal sent, received, and the chase began.

In the modern age, the tools of the game had changed, as had the overall game itself. But in some ways, nothing ever truly changes, and the desires of those involved in the game of romance remained the same. Women enjoyed being chased, desired, even fought over. There was hardly any shame in that, but the modern world had most definitely altered the ways such a game was played. Women had to adapt.

“I will speak to the man.”

“What? Oh god, please don’t. I—”

“Clara, trust me to know how to be graceful, and discrete. The man will not even know what I am doing.”

“This is really fucking weird.”

“Perhaps, but as I said, I do not want us to be enemies.”

“We’re ... we’re not enemies, ok? Enemies are the fuckers I had to deal with in Tijuana. Enemies are the assholes that made Art’s life a living hell until we got him outa there. You and I aren’t enemies.”

Antoinette gestured out toward the booths nearby. Heads were visible over their backs, making it a simple task to see who was engaged in romance with others.

“You act as if romance is hardly a reason for enemies, young werewolf. I have seen houses destroyed over romance. I have seen atrocities you cannot imagine, over romance.”

Clara snorted on a chuckle, the sound mixed with her suppressed sobs. “Sounds like a soap opera.”

“Indeed. I have known kine to kill each other over romance, as I am sure you know. I have known kine to go to war for the love of another. Battles that flooded the streets have been fought over romance. Learn your history, and you will find romance has been at the heart of many wars.”

“Yeah well, I’m not that sort of person.”

Antoinette glared down at the werewolf, and Clara stopped sniffing. “Few who find themselves slaughtering others in a fit of passion and rage think themselves capable of it, Clara Moreno.”

Clara stared up at her as realization set in. “You ... you’ve killed people, over romance?”

“No. At least ... not in the way you think. My relationship with Tony was troubled, and...” She shook her head as she looked down. “My point stands. Your interest in Jack terrifies me, Clara. It terrifies me because Jack has helped me in a way I thought impossible. He has helped me find a joy I could not imagine ever finding again. And it also terrifies me, because I do not like what I imagine I might do, if I ever found myself reliving the tales I described, tales of romance and murder.”

They two looked at each other for a while. Antoinette was being dreadfully honest with someone she did not fully trust, and that was a risk. But if she was to encourage cooperation and understanding in her city, than she had to act as such.

“I believe we are done here,” Antoinette said, and she slid out of the booth.

Clara nodded, joining her. “Just so you know, I’m glad you didn’t kill me.”

“Naturally.”

“I mean it. I ... fuck, I don’t know. This is the last thing I expected.”

“Then I hope this experience has opened your eyes, young werewolf. Not all elder Kindred are heartless monoliths.” With a grin Antoinette walked toward the stairs, and Clara joined her.

“I guess. There’s still a bunch of elders in Dolareido I don’t trust at all.”

Antoinette aimed her grin down at the woman. “You trust moi?”

“Fuck no. But, after tonight, I guess I distrust you a little less.”

“That is something, I suppose.”

Before they reached the stairs, Antoinette turned, and looked down at the one of the booths they walked by.

Of course, Elaine. Her suit jacket and blouse were both open, and she straddled a woman's lap, a short creature with dark skin and frizzy short hair. The kine had both hands on Elaine's naked breasts, along with her lips, and she devoured Elaine's breasts hungrily. A man sat beside her, also of dark skin, shaved head. His fly was down, and he casually masturbated as he watched his wife — she wore a wedding ring, at least — kiss Elaine's bosom.

“Christ you vamps,” Clara said as they walked past, “are all ridiculous.”

“Oh?” Antoinette grinned down at the werewolf as she came to a stop at the railing. A spot they could both watch Elaine as she indulged the touch of the two aroused kine. “You are hardly one to judge. Did you not enjoy Jessy's ghouls? All four of them? At once?”

Clara blushed until her face looked near to bursting. “Everyone knows?”

“Naturally.”

“I was sad, and drunk, and—”

“Clara, my point is not to shame you. My point is, cease your incessant judgments, and enjoy your indulgences. Surely with how many times you have risked your life for worthy causes, you do not feel shame over drowning in an indulgence every so often?”

She looked down at the dance floor below. “I guess not. But I don't view sex as something you just ... do, like eating a fucking chocolate bar.”

“No, I suppose you do not. Though if you did, I would have said you were welcome to join Jack and I in bed, little werewolf.”

Clara blinked up at her, and gulped. “You serious?”

“Of course. You are beautiful. I would have gladly brought you to orgasm a dozen times as you rode my lover’s length. I know Jack would certainly enjoy filling you several times until it poured out of you. But, you have made it clear you do not separate sex from romance, and I will not share Jack with another romantic partner.”

The Uratha, predictably, blushed all the harder, and did not even look Antoinette in the eye as she squirmed. “Yeah. Probably a bad idea.”

Antoinette adopted her devil smile, and serpent voice. “Indeed.”

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~~Beatrice~~

The three vampires walked toward the outskirts of the city, on the way to the cave where Elen was kept hidden. Thankfully that meant roads that took them outside main city areas, desert on one side and city on the other, and that meant no kine around. No one to stop them from having a private conversation.

“You think Sándor would take the offer?” Triss asked. “Assuming I can get this ritual working, think he’ll try?”

Jen shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe? The man is clearly depressed over the death of his family.”

“Imagine that,” Samantha said. When Jen and Triss looked her way, eyebrows raised, she winced and shook her head. “Sorry. That sounded mean.”

Jen put a hand around Sam’s hip, hugged her, and kissed her cheek. Which of course earned a smile from Sam, cause the woman was so totally empathetic, any positivity sent her way had her smiling.

“Sándor visited us a little while ago,” Triss said. “Found Elen. He ... he’s not a stick in the mud or anything. Gives off that vibe, right? But he’s pretty open to stuff.”

Jennifer grinned at Triss, and then Sam. “And, he’s gorgeous.” And of course she said it without stopping her hug.

Sam’s earlier depression vanished, replaced with shy giggles. Too easy.

“He is.”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Oh god, not you too.”

“He is! He’s so stern looking, but kinda dreamy too.”

“Sam, he looks like a taller, older version of your son.”

“That is not true! That ... that is kinda true. But he’s not my son. And besides, Jack is a handsome man.”

Jen laughed. “He is. And Sándor is also definitely a handsome man. A bit tall, lean and muscular, with just enough gruff on his face to look positively beautiful. The deep eyes, blue, dreamy. The defined chin. The buzzed hair works well, I think. But I wonder how he would look with a full mane?”

“Fuck me I’m working with two Daevas. A full mane? He’d look like the dude on romance novel covers. Just brunette instead of blonde.”

“That does sound dreamy,” Sam said. “And ... and agreed, about everything. Sándor really is gorgeous.” She squirmed a bit as she looked down. “Now, don’t be mean! But, he kinda reminds of Viggo, you know? In that scene where they first see him, in Lord of the Rings.” She squirmed a little more. “Jack made me watch it.”

Triss laughed. “They were good movies. And yes, Viggo Somethingsen was stupid hot in that opening scene. Very sizzling.”

“Sándor does remind me of him,” Jen said. “And yes, I saw the movies as well.”

There wasn't any way around it, Sándor was fucking hot as hell. And as much as he gave off those smoldering, brooding stoic vibes, there was definitely more to him than that. Apparently alcohol worked on him, and helped bring out a side to him that really humanized him. Well, maybe not humanized, he was a Begotten. Whatever, he was a lot more interesting than he initially seemed.

Which made all that shit when Jen dragged him to the ball feel really strange now. Triss hadn't really thought about Sándor as anything other than a poor, fucked up dude who'd been royally screwed by life, back then. Now, well, dude was interesting, and hot, and wasn't put off by all the witchy shit Triss was up to. And the widower thing was, horrible as it sounded, kinda hot too.

A sharp jolt shot up from the bag in Triss's hand, right up into her fucking heart. Nothing magical, nothing crazy weird, not witchy, just plain old guilt. She was trying to revive her dead lover, and now she was thinking about Sándor in the exact way Jen had planned. But it wasn't anything Jen had done that'd really changed Triss's outlook on the guy, it was that night he got drunk with them, and talked about his dead family. Triss talked about Julias, for the first time in a long time, and it'd been ... nice.

Plus, he liked metal music, and apparently had a healthy, adventurous sex life with his wife. Which pretty much made him the perfect man.

She refused to think of Sándor that way. Fucking refused. She had a mission, and it made no god damn fucking sense to look for a man for her, when she was trying to revive one. Christ, how fucked up

was that? That she was even thinking it? Made her insides hurt like someone was jamming ice shards through her guts.

Jen just thought Sándor would be an awesome fuck; that was her main reason for dragging him into stuff, not romance or anything. And he probably would be. And that gargoyle form was, uh, scarousing. That'd be pretty interesting, honestly, and—

“If ... if he's open minded,” Sam said, “then maybe you should ask him? About reviving his family?”

“Yeah. Yeah maybe I will. I get the impression he'll say no, cause ... cause he's smarter than us.”

“Smarter...” The Daeva sighed as she stepped up close to Triss's side, Jen on her other, and she leaned in to press her head against Triss's shoulder. “Yeah, he probably is. But I don't care. I want my daughter back.”

---

“You sure?”

“I'm sure,” Sam said.

“ ... really sure?”

“Yes! Yes, I'm sure Triss.”

The three of them stood outside the cave entrance on the outskirts of Dolareido, the cave where they kept Elen, and their experiments.

“We've been keeping you out of this for a reason, Sam. Jacob hadn't gotten you involved for a reason, too.” They'd talked about this before. Getting Sam involved in the nitty-gritty of all this shit was a bad idea. Hell, Sam had understood that. Maybe it was because of how long the ritual was taking that Sam wanted to get



involved now, or maybe it had something to do with her ghost daughter?

“I know, but I’ve been thinking about it hard, and I ... I need to know more. If I’m going to ask Mary to jump into a body, then I should know how it’s made, beginning to end, right?”

Jen and Triss looked at each other. Yeah, it was a good idea. It was also a good idea to try completing the ritual with Mary’s ghost, before Triss jumped into the deep end and tried grabbing Julias’s soul from across the god damn universe.

Christ this would all be so much easier if he’d turned into a ghost, too. Why hadn’t he? Didn’t feel he had any unfinished business? Fucking asshole.

“Samantha,” Jen said, touching the trembling woman’s shoulder, “we don’t know if Mary’s ghost is truly Mary. We have no idea what will happen if we rebuild Mary’s body, and then ask your daughter to possess it.”

Triss and Sam stared at Jen as the woman pointed out the elephant in the room, and shot it with an elephant gun.

“I know! But ... but shouldn’t we try it with her first anyway? She’s here! And Julias ... Julias isn’t. And you said yourself getting his soul will be the hardest part.”

Hard was an understatement. Jacob and BB had said they had to kill a fuck load of people for just a peek into wherever souls went, and Triss was already pushing it with how many people she’d killed for her resurrection project. If she went after a little more a little faster, she’d get the Prince’s attention. And doing whatever ritual Jacob had done would take a fuck load more than just a dozen.

The only idea Triss had that could work, that wouldn’t leave her a smoldering crater of guilt, was to find a large, maximum security

prison, and kill everyone inside. And even that would be fucked up; not everyone in prison deserved to be there. Maybe someone like Jacob could harden himself enough to go on a slaughter spree like that, but she couldn't, and she knew Julias wouldn't want her to.

"It will be," Triss said, shrugging. "Figuring out how to get his soul will be ... a problem. Elen won't die, but she is falling apart, so we need to use her while we can. Get her to build the bodies first, and figure what to do about the souls second. Hopefully since she's immortal, her flesh magic will keep kicking, and keep our ... bodies alive." She almost said zombies.

"Then that means we should make my daughter a body soon, right? If it'll take a long time to do the ritual to get Julias's soul, we might lose Elen as our ... might lose her help before she gets to make Mary a body, right?"

"Yeah, you're right. I don't know long she has left before she's just a pile of meat that won't die, so ... you're right." It was stupid of them to think they could keep Samantha out of this forever anyway.

Triss knew why she didn't want Sam to see all the shit she was up to. Shame. Butchering kine like sheep so she could pursue a ritual for purely selfish goals? Yeah, it was pretty fucked up. She could only hope Julias wouldn't hate her for it. She did everything she could to make sure good kine didn't die for this. Hopefully.

"Alright then," Triss said. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

"Because we can't completely trust Elen, Black Blood possesses her. So you're going to be in a room with that ... thing. Dude. Dude thing. Still sure?"

That got a proper shock out of her, but after a few long seconds, Sam nodded again. "I'm sure."

---

Sam covered her face with her hands when Triss pulled down a blanket, exposing a pile of bodies. Inside the cave, with Elen dangling from ropes over a giant metal bowl, the air was thick with the smell of flesh. Not rotting flesh, since Elen knew how to keep it fresh and pulsing, but there was no stopping the smell of skin, blood, and all the other smells that told a vampire wounded prey was nearby. It almost made things worse. A pile of rotting corpses might have been easier to ignore than a pile of perfectly fleshy, borderline alive bodies.

“I ... I thought the ones in the fridge were the only ones.”

Sighing, Triss pulled the blanket back over the bodies, and then stepped over to one body in particular, sitting on a chair by the bowl. A blanket covered this one too, and Triss stared at it for a while before she looked down at the jewelry bag in her hand. Something shifted around inside gently, and didn't seem to show any signs of stopping, so hopefully she had enough time to get things going.

“Elen, I have a piece of Julias here.”

“Oh dear,” the old woman said. “I can sense it. I'm not sure what it is, but I can sense it.” Her voice was hoarse, quiet, but Triss didn't care. Fuck the old woman, she deserved worse than getting hung up by the wrists to dangle over a big bowl. Hell, Jacob originally had her wrists skewered with a giant hook, but the old woman's hands would probably rip off soon, and Triss needed those hands.

“You don't know what it is?” Triss held up the bag.

“I'm not a vampire. You do things differently than I would, dear.”

“Well, the ritual got the piece, and all I know is you need to ... uh ... fuse the piece into the body, and then you know what to do.”

She grinned at that, nodding. “I can do that, dear. I can fuse items into a body, and essence as well. I should be able to fuse whatever you give me.”

Triss eyed the old woman, before looking at the bag again. “And if it’s a soul? Can you fuse a soul?”

“What is a soul? I have played with magic for a long, long time, vampire. I have never seen a soul.”

“You don’t believe in souls?”

Elen smiled. “I never said that, dear.”

The damn woman was so hard to read. Her skin hung off her bones, and every look she gave had serious granny energy, but the words didn’t match. Plus, the whole nearly dead but refusing to die thing made her weird to talk to, every word a scratchy, whispering mess. No wonder the hunters used to go around with an oxygen mask for her.

Beatrice tightened her grip on the bag, and looked to Jen. Jennifer got to work immediately, lighting candles in the small cave. Samantha kept on staring, looking around at the mess, the covered bodies, the dangling old woman who refused to die, and the blood. Blood was everywhere, refusing to fade or rot with Elen’s magic turning the cave into one of her fleshy magic zones or whatever. All in all, it was a terrifying place to someone who wasn’t used to it, and Triss wasn’t used to it, let alone Sam.

It was only going to get worse.

“Black Blood,” Triss said, and she held up her hands, “I summon you.”

With how much death there’d been in the cave, and all the other preparations Jacob had taken to make it a summon-friendly zone,

Triss didn't need to do much to call the spirit. If she wanted Black Blood to have a body to possess, so he could walk around and do shit with his own hands, she'd have to kill someone and immediately call him. But she didn't need that for a friendly conversation. And in this case, he'd have a body to possess anyway.

Black Blood crept into the room as he always did, straight out of a horror movie script. Triss tried to get used to it, hoped it'd get easier to be around, but feeling the stabbing, unnatural cold of his presence as the walls began to bleed black, was too fucking much. You didn't get used to death.

Samantha froze. Her eyes flicked around in panic, but she didn't move, didn't even turn her head. Even when the black ooze began to creep up her legs, she didn't look down, still staring ahead at Elen and the wall behind her as the creeping blackness overwhelmed everything. The candlelight turned into weak little flickers, barely brighter than fireflies, and the still air whispered with the screams of the dead. More of the black ooze flowed into the small cave, seeping out of the bowl Elen dangled from, and from the stones and bones that held the bowl.

Samantha finally squeaked when some of the black ooze literally dripped upward, falling from the floor and splashing against the cave ceiling with all the urgency of a leaky drain. She hugged herself, hands against her biceps, and she backed away toward Jen as she looked left and right. Thankfully Jen caught her, done with the candles. Surprisingly, Samantha didn't jump or freak out at a hand catching her shoulder; too busy looking at the overflowing waves of black ooze that slowly enveloped them all.

It felt like being buried alive. It felt like being trapped deep in the hull of a sinking ship. It felt like getting stabbed in the guts in a dark alley, left to bleed out alone in the darkness. It felt like being locked up in an isolation ward in a straitjacket, with all pleas ignored. It felt like dying.

No wonder Samantha eventually screamed.

Beatrice looked to Sam and motioned down with both hands. “You’re fine, girl. You’re fine. See? We’re all here, alive.”

“Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god.” Ok, maybe this was a bad idea after all.

“Now who in the Sam Hill is this?” a Southern accent called from the darkness. Sounded like a regular dude, probably someone in his fifties. Also sounded like an alien creature with a booming, raspy voice.

Sam Hill. It was almost funny.

“This is Samantha Terry,” Triss said. “She wants to see what we’re up to.”

“Oh my, this is Sam Terry? Howdy.” The voice came from everywhere, BB not having picked a body yet. Sure enough, Sam spun around a few times, looking for the source.

“I ... I...”

Triss joined Sam and pat the woman on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about Black Blood. He can’t hurt you. Just don’t make any deals with him, no matter how small, or accept any gifts from him, no matter how small, and you’ll be fine.”

“Now Triss, you wound me.”

“Don’t give me that shit. You’d happily have us sign our souls away on a dotted line if you could make us.”

The darkness around them chuckled. “I don’t know about that. Wouldn’t be no fun if you were my slave. We’re partners. Business partners.”

“Uh huh.”

“Swear to God.”

“Uh huh.”

Again the darkness laughed, merrily at that, before his voice settled. “Samantha Terry. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Sam, hyperventilating pointlessly, stared at Triss before looking around randomly again. “You have?”

“Malachi talks about you.”

“M-Mala—”

“Jacob,” Triss said. “Old name.”

“Oh. He ... he talks about me?”

“I reckon he talks about you more than anything else these days.”

Despite how obviously terrified the girl was, Sam managed a small smile. “I ... um ... I didn’t know that.”

“Well of course you don’t. Heavens to Betsy, it wouldn’t be very manly for a man to go telling his woman how much he talks about her to his friends.”

Oh god, this conversation was going to drive Triss to drinking. Or, drinkin’.

“I guess so,” Sam whispered.

“I know about your boy, too.”

“Jack? My son?”

“I reckon so. Boy has made a lot of waves. Got a powerful force of will, that boy. You must be proud.”

Naturally, a compliment thrown her son’s way melted a lot of the ice the Daeva was currently buried in. She smiled more.

“I am.”

“Don’t let the smooth talker trick you,” Triss said. “Black Blood is an evil fucking spirit of death and the dead.”

“Well I think that’s a matter of opinion, little missy. Now, did you summon me just to trade barbs, or did you actually have something you wanted to get done?”

Triss held up the bag. “Need you to possess Elen again. I’m gonna put ... whatever’s in this bag on the body. You figure out how to infuse it into the body. Supposedly it should basically create a perfect copy of his body, or something.”

“Well now, that is some mighty fine magic you’re summoning, to get that problem sorted.” Black Blood went silent for a moment, probably analyzing the bag, and how whatever was inside it never held quite perfectly still. “Crúac ritual?”

“Yep.”

“Now where did a little witch like you learn a powerful ritual like that? I can do many things with a corpse, but to craft a living body perfectly after a dead person? That’s a sneaky bit of magic right there.”

“Had a visit from the Crone. She gave it to me.”

Silence. But before Triss could speak up, Black Blood jumped in again.



“The Crone paid you a visit.”

“Yeah. Didn’t have to sacrifice people like last time or anything. Totally random.”

Silence again.

“And she gave you a ritual. Why? Out of the goodness of her heart?” The darkness scoffed. “Unlikely.”

“Hey, you wanna take it up with her, be my guest.”

“I’m fixing to.”

Triss did not like the way he said that. That wasn’t the sound of a spirit curious as to why some god entity took an interest in Triss. That was the sound of a spirit who wasn’t happy someone he knew was getting involved in his affairs.

How much of what the Crone said had been about Black Blood?

Triss gulped down her questions, nodded, and motioned to Elen. “Well either way, let’s see if it works.”

Just as Samantha got over her fright of the spirit, she froze again as the black syrup oozed up the bowl, and up the dangling Elen’s tattered old clothes. Triss half expected Sam to start screaming again, but she didn’t, petrified as the obsidian liquid forced its way into Elen’s body. Under her clothes, under her fingernails, her tear ducts, her mouth, and her nostrils.

Elen didn’t fight it. Every night, her mind was a little further gone, and now she didn’t say a word as the spirit forced his way into her. Black Blood insisted even if her mind went, he could still use her magic, use her for years and years until she was nothing but a ball of cancer. Insisted, but also wasn’t completely sure. Fucker was one of those optimistic types.

“There now,” Elen and Black Blood said together, “let’s try out this item you’ve acquired”. Most of the booming rasp was gone, but a hint of it remained, mixing with Elen’s voice, Southern accent gone.

Triss glanced back at Jen and Sam. Sam was pretty much a statue, but Jen stayed close to her, close enough their shoulders touched. Should be enough to keep Sam from freaking out too much. But Triss kept her in the corner of her vision anyway, as she pulled the blanket off the corpse sitting in the chair.

“Oh my god! That ... that ... looks a lot like Julias.”

“You met him?” Triss asked.

“Only a couple times. He’d taken an interest in Jack, and was sort of tutoring, or mentoring him. He ... he was a very nice man.”

Sighing, Triss nodded as she looked to the corpse. “Too nice.”

The body did look a lot like Julias. Considering the amount of people they’d burned through trying to rebuild him, he’d ... it’d look like a fucking Frankenstein’s monster if they had to do it with tools, sewing needles and thread or whatnot. But Elen was a master of flesh magic, and Black Blood was a master of the dead. Together, the two were able to merge corpse flesh like people mixed paint. Strange bedfellows.

With Elen keeping the corpse from rotting, the body sitting in the chair looked like a perfectly normal, attractive dude. Even had blood in his body, keeping his skin looking normal. Eyes closed, he sat in the chair, unmoving, no heartbeat, no brain activity, nothing. If Triss opened his eyes, they’d stay open, lifeless. Last thing she wanted to do was look into the lifeless eyes of a Julias look-a-like corpse.

She jumped up onto the big metal bowl, and helped Elen down from the rope. As Black Blood got comfortable with the body on a chair in front of the corpse, Triss opened a small safe they had in the room. The cave was a good place to store Elen's knife and book, but no way Triss was going to leave the old hag alone with it. So Triss kept a key for the safe, one key, no copies.

She gave Black Blood the knife and book, and with shaking hands, the spirit set the book on her lap, and the knife on the book.

“Alright deary, let's see what the Crone's ritual dug up for you.”

“Don't call me that. You're not Elen.”

“Whatever you say, sweetie.”

For fuck's sake.

“Alright. I ... I haven't seen what's in this bag yet.”

“No time like the present, then.”

Right, no time like the present. No time like now, to reach into a bag and pull out a moving, living thing, that was supposedly the piece of the puzzle needed to craft Julias a proper body. If the vessel wasn't right, jamming Julias's soul into it could lead to some freaky shit according to Black Blood and Jacob. Like, anything from eyes melting in their sockets to straight up rabies symptoms.

If Triss fucked up, they might end up with a fully aware, functioning body walking around with no soul. And who the fuck knew how that'd end up? Jacob had more horror stories, about vessels without souls, constructs and shit, that could think and act but didn't have the spark of life in them. Sometimes they did crazy shit like start eating the hearts of people, convinced they could get a soul that way.

But, fuck it. No guts, no glory. She was a witch, and that meant risking nasty shit. That meant putting her god damn heart and soul into rituals that could leave her a scarred mess. That meant ... becoming like Jacob.

She reached into the bag, half expecting to get bitten by something. But her claws found something smooth, and circular, or spherical. Slowly she slipped her fingers around the shifting thing, and removed something that felt almost like a Christmas ball.

It was glass.

Triss blinked at the ball in her hand. A crystal ball, the size of a baseball, and it gave off a gentle golden light as it gently nudged around in her grip. It teetered on the edge of her hand, and she snapped her other hand up to cup it with both palms.

She was holding life in her hands. Life, or just a memory, she couldn't tell, but the crystal ball softly rubbed against the sides of her hands as images played within it. She stared into the ball, and forced down the rising urge to scream as it showed something she never, fucking ever, wanted to see.

Julias, on his knees, with some kine with a gun behind him. Julias, smiling. His last moments, and his last memories. Scenes of her. A lot of memories of her, playing through his mind.

Her lover had spent his final moments thinking about her.

She had said she'd need to do nasty shit. Christ, how many fucking times had she told herself this ritual stuff would get nasty, in all sorts of ways? Hundreds. But words didn't mean shit when holding the literal final moments of your dead lover in your hands. Final moments, in the form of a crystal ball.

It didn't get much witchier than that. It didn't get much worse than that.

Triss gulped down more screams, silencing every one of them, as she fought against her hands' urge to tremble. Slowly, she forced her eyes away from the repeating memories, and set the bulb against the corpse's chest. The only thing keeping her from drowning in tears was she wasn't Blushing Life.

"Ever see something like this?"

"No," Black Blood said, and his, or her, eyes stared with wonder at the shiny ball. "But I can tell what it is. The last piece of Julias in this world. Not what you expected, I guess?" Grinning, the flesh mage opened her book, and scrolled through the pictures and weird text. "Elen has a spell to merge a body with a magical object. It was meant to be used for protective talismans and the like, but I think it'll work with this."

"This ... This ... Christ, I'm holding..." She shook her head as she gritted her teeth, and refused to look into the ball anymore. "Just hurry up."

Elen nodded, reached out, and sliced into the body with the knife, below the sternum. Message clear, Triss slipped the ball into the corpse's abdominal cavity. Didn't get much closer than being inside.

Elen recited words from her book, and Triss took a step back. No need to be involved anymore, and the idea of the corpse opening its eyes with Julias's eyes was horrifying. What if it spoke? What if it looked right at her, and told her she was a fool for refusing to let him go?

All three vampires gasped, as the body changed shape. Naked as it was, it was easy to see where the changes happened. The muscles, the bodyfat, the hair, all of that changed subtly, enough that it fit his big and strong, lean but not six-pack-abs lean build, but it was a pale comparison to the changes of his face. A sliver of movement for the eyes. A millimeter for the eyebrow ridge. A touch of the ears. A trace

of the chin. Tiny changes that each felt like sliding a puzzle piece into place, until she froze at the sight of Julias's face.

Julias took a breath.

“Oh fuck!” Triss jumped back hard enough her head hit the cave ceiling, and she crashed into the ground with a thunk.

Sam did the same, not high enough to hit the ceiling though, and Jen caught her before she fell like Triss did.

Triss scampered to her feet and stared at the corpse. Not a corpse. A living person? Oh fuck oh shit oh fuck oh—

“Relax,” Black Blood said. “The body lives. The mind doesn't. He is an empty shell.”

He. Oh fuck, he. Triss forced herself closer, and stared down at the body of Julias. An exact replica of him, right down to the tuft of chest hair, the waves of his blonde hair combed back, and the very, very kissable lips.

She reached out, and touched them. The body didn't react, but it did breathe. Warm breath. It's not like breathing was something she associated with Julias; they were vampires. But seeing the body sit there, breathing, like a comatose patient, felt real. It felt so fucking real. And as she softly slid the blunt side of her claw along his lip, the heat told her it was real.

“It worked?” Jen asked.

Elen nodded. “So it would seem. The Crone's ritual worked. Once it was inside the body, I had the blueprint to fit the pieces together. It did a lot of the work for me.”

After a few more seconds to recover, Sam stepped closer.

“It worked? That ... that does look even more like Julias.”

Triss nodded. “It’s definitely him, right down to this.” She pointed at a spot on his chin. Julias was clean shaven, but sometimes he woke up from his daily torpor with a single hair on his chin. Something from before he was sired that he sometimes forgot to prevent from regrowing.

Sam gulped as she came even closer, until she touched Julias’s shoulder too. “So ... so if ... if I do the ritual, and we ... get the parts we need, we—”

“We can build your daughter a body.” Triss smiled at the Daeva. “I can’t guarantee anything, and we have no idea what’ll happen if Mary tries to possess it, but ... but it’s worth a shot, right?”

It almost hurt, watching the understanding work through her. Samantha really wore all her expressions on her face, her heart on her sleeve. From terrified to excited to terrified and back again, all as she realized what she had to do, what they all had to do, and then what could happen if things went badly. Triss was tempted to tell her to wait until they got Julias’s soul somehow, but that could take who fucking knew how long. Mary’s ghost was still around.

But if it wasn’t Mary’s soul, but some weird ghostly afterimage thing, the fuck would happen then?

Christ, they were all in over their heads. Even Jacob didn’t fuck with this shit, and Black Blood said souls weren’t something he could affect. It was all so big, so beyond a few vampires fucking around with crap. They were kids playing with their dad’s gun.

But Julias sat right there in front of her. A breathing, living body. Elen’s magic would keep him preserved, giving Triss the time she needed. She couldn’t waste this opportunity.

“Let’s do it,” Samantha said, and she clutched her necklace. “Let’s do it. I owe it to Mary to try. I ... I owe it to myself!”

Triss grinned. Wow, a pretty huge breakthrough for Samantha to say something as selfish as that. Good. The woman was so nice and giving, she was the last person on Earth that deserved the shit that came her way. Dead husband, dead son, sorta, and dead daughter, sorta, and woke up a vampire, not her choice. Woman needed some god damn happiness in her life. Sure, she was really enjoying being with Jacob, and the Circle was pretty damn good at soothing woes with mountains of sex, but if she could have her daughter back, just imagine how much happier she’d be.

Imagine how much happier they’d all be, if they could have their dead loved ones back.

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~~Jack~~

The next night, Jack sat in his mansion, on the stairs in the main lobby. There were much more comfortable places to sit than some big stairs; shit wasn’t carpet, or even wood, it was marble or something. His ass did not appreciate. But he didn’t care, he had thinking to do. And a habit he picked up when he was younger was sitting on the stairs between his living room and upstairs hallway. Mary and his mom would have to step over him or around him. And one time, his dad had tripped on Jack’s leg going up the stairs, and chipped a tooth. That day ended in a grounding.

“Veronica,” he said, “what do you think of Antoinette?”

“The Prince?” Veronica stood near him, wearing her modern maid outfit — with one too many blouse buttons undone — and she looked up at him from her spot at the bottom. “She’s beautiful and brilliant, master.”

“Be frank, Veronica. What don’t you like about her?”



“Don’t like? She ... I mean, I haven’t spent any time with her except ... sexually.”

“But?”

“But ... she um, she’s definitely ... not, um, like most people. Like ... people. Her and Elaine, they’re so ... calculated. Every word, every movement, everything is all so perfected and controlled.” She smiled as she looked down. “They’re gorgeous. But I wouldn’t want to be caught alone with them. I feel like they wouldn’t hesitate to use me as a shield if someone shot at us.”

Jack grinned. Yeah, that was one way of looking at it. Elaine and Antoinette wouldn’t give a shit about bullets, but they would definitely use a thrall as a shield if they had to for some reason. Not a ghoul though, someone they poured life, time, and energy into. Right? The idea of Antoinette sacrificing Ashley and Julee if she had to, to achieve her goals, was sickening. But if she was willing to risk his mom’s life, why not theirs?

Because there’s a difference between dooming someone, and making a calculated risk, Jack. Calm the fuck down.

Jack sighed as he clutched the necklace Elaine gave him. “You’re not entirely wrong.”

“But, you love her, right? I’m sure there’s good reasons. I trust your judgment, master.”

Ah yes, the mindless devotion of the Vinculum. That was something he was quickly getting used to, something all elders were probably completely used to, maybe even bored of. Given enough time, Jack would think and act in the same way as Antoinette, or Elaine. Or even Jacob.

But Jack would either eventually turn Veronica into a ghoul, and then a vampire, or he’d ween her off his blood, and then wipe her

memory so she could go back to her old life. He didn't have the stomach to be heartless, not when it came to people who didn't deserve pain.

“There are a lot of good reasons I love her. But we're having a bit of a fight, and ... No, never mind. Forget I said anything. That's an order.”

She stood up straight. “Yes master.”

He couldn't help but smile at that. Straight to the ego. He doubted all thralls were so subservient, but Veronica definitely gave that vibe, that ‘please master I've been a good girl, praise me love me fuck me’ vibe. Antoinette probably figured that out before picking her as a thrall for Jack. And honestly, she had been the one to pick her, not Jack. She picked well, cause god damn, the way Veronica looked at him, the happy sex slave look, struck a chord in him he didn't know was there. Maybe it was the Ventrue part of him, or just the guy part of him, he didn't know.

“The mansion looks clean.”

“Thank you master! It wasn't all that dusty, and there wasn't really much to clean upstairs. The ... the basement is harder.”

The dungeon. Yeah, upstairs in the mansion, it needed maintenance, but without regular people walking around, there wouldn't be much dust. The dungeon on the other hand was underground, and got damp and stuff. And there was outside the mansion, the huge lawns, the statues, the fountains, all of that needed maintenance too.

He needed more thralls.

“It's a big place.”

“It is, master.”

“It’ll need more than only you to take care of it.”

“I ... You’re right, master. I can try, but places like this usually have a crew working on it, I think. Yard workers, gardeners, cleaners and stuff. I don’t think you’ll need a big crew, unless you had humans over frequently, and a lot of them.”

“Definitely not.”

“I’ll do what I can, master. But ... did you have others in mind?”

“I don’t know, but Antoinette would. She knows what I li—need.”

“You trust her with everything, don’t you master?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Much as he didn’t want to admit it right now, he did trust Antoinette with everything. He didn’t want to trust her with his mom’s life, but she wasn’t really his mom anymore, she was Antoinette’s childe. And even if she wasn’t, Antoinette wasn’t doing what she was doing because she was an asshole. She was doing it because it’d potentially save her city, and the lives inside it.

He hated that he agreed with her.

## Chapter 150

~~Jack~~

He took a deep, useless breath, then another, and another, before pressing the elevator button. Up to the top floor. Up to Antoinette.

He stepped off the elevator and stared at the big door that opened to Antoinette's enormous main office. What to say? How to come at the conversation? What angle, what trick, what stance? He'd walked through a thousand different possibilities in his head, a thousand different ways the conversation might go, and he knew he wasn't a tenth as prepared for it as Antoinette was. She'd probably had this exact conversation with people before, or something like it at least; she'd had millions with how old she was.

So, what the fuck was he gonna do? Hell, he didn't actually disagree with her, and he hated himself for that. And it wasn't like they knew what was going on. Azamel was convinced the tears Black Blood was creating were dangerous, for everyone. Ok, fine. Now Natasha said a spirit was convinced Black Blood was trying to do what Minerva was up to, and that might potentially be apocalyptic. Ok, fine. Jacob and Minerva were lovers, very close, and there was no way Jacob didn't have at least some interest in what Minerva used to be up to when she was alive. Ok, fine.

Fuck. Fuck! He couldn't trust Jacob, but he couldn't quite come to the conclusion the dude was out to kill everyone. The bastard was strange, maybe a little psycho, but Triss wasn't, and Triss had grown pretty devoted to the guy. And if Triss thought his mom was in danger, she'd do something.

Of course, Triss was getting neck deep into dark magic shit, and considering what she was up to, it was only a matter of time before

his mom get involved. And that idea was almost as terrifying as Black Blood's tears dooming the city. If something happened, something involving Mary, and it turned into a fucking horror movie, what would his mom do? She couldn't even watch previews for horror movies without getting scared.

Jack slapped himself in the face. Focus. This isn't about your mom. This isn't about Black Blood or Jacob. Right now, this is about a stupid turf war between two stupid elders who don't know how to let go of a grudge. He had to get this situation fixed now.

He knocked on the office door. It opened, revealing the sheriff, who gave Jack a small nod before he backed off and joined Antoinette by the desk.

And there she sat, face neutral, hands on the arms of her chair, sitting straight up. Power pose. She probably thought he was here to argue about his mom. Well—

“How was Clara's visit?”

Oh fuck. Oh shit fuck. The shock on his face — he knew it was there — sealed the truth before he could say a fucking word. Fuck fucking fuck.

“You were spying on me?” When in doubt, deflect.

“I spy on everyone, Jack. This is my city.”

He sighed as he looked at her. If she was angry or offended, she didn't let it show, but considering what they were talking about, there was a good chance she was angry. Livid, maybe. Tear his throat out, just possibly.

“You don't trust me?”

“One of my thralls spotted you with a drone, Jack, and decided the footage warranted sending me.”

A drone. Well, the future was now, he had to be conscious of that. Maybe Scully or Mulder could drop some rocks on them?

“Alright. But I’m not here to talk about Clara, and I’d prefer to move on.”

Antoinette’s steel eyes were impervious. “Yes, perhaps that is for the best. For now.”

He did his best to hold her gaze. He managed, barely.

“I need your help.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I need to break our no business rule.”

“I will not help the Invictus win this war, Jack, you know that.” At least she was calling him Jack, and not Mister Terry.

“I know. This isn’t about winning it, this is about ending it. I’m trying to do you a favor.” And himself. Last thing he wanted was a bunch of dead people. Last thing he wanted was to be the one killing them. Last thing he wanted was the Ripper getting another foothold in his mind.

“Ending it? I am powerful, Jack. My sheriff is powerful. But I have used diplomacy to rule this city, not an iron fist.”

“You say that like you don’t have the ability to wipe out both Invictus and Carthians.”

She grinned, sly and smooth. “Perhaps.”

She was too smart to not have a bunch of shit set up for all out war if she absolutely needed it. Thralls, enslaved with either the Vinculum or her Majesty, trained and ready to die for her. Hidden explosives. Secrets she knew about people. Hell, it wouldn't surprise him if she had a nearby military base under her control, and if shit hit the fan, she could launch anything from a coordinated military raid, to a fucking missile strike.

But those were all end game options. If she used them, her vampire utopia would be ruined, the streets turned into rubble, with open war waged in the open. She'd have to start over.

“I need to get Michael and Garry in a room together.”

“Now that the two have declared open hostilities, they have refused to join my Primogen meetings until such hostilities have ended.”

“Not there. I need them together somewhere where it's a lot more ... where they can tear into each other.”

She leaned back in her chair. “Ah. You wish to recreate the scenario between Tony and Viktor.”

“Yeah.”

“That scenario took months of effort to craft, Jack. Years. I did not simply throw pieces of bait into the city, and watch the two men run headlong into danger.”

“I understand that, but this time you'll have better bait.” He walked up to her huge desk and set his hands on it. Negotiator mode. “Roland.”

“Michael's dead childe.”

“Michael blames Garry. Garry blames Michael.”

“That was a hundred years ago.”

He shrugged. “So? You telling me vamps don’t hold grudges? If anything, Kindred suck at dropping grudges. We’re all stuck.”

“That is ... not entirely untrue, though Kindred can evolve their minds. It is difficult, and takes effort, but we are capable. You are partially correct. Kindred do struggle to move on, trapped in our unchanging biology.”

“Exactly. I think Roland is a big part of why Michael and Garry hate each other.”

The Prince slowly nodded as she looked up. “Yes, I have always suspected as much. But you can confirm?”

“Maria told me. Details about Roland are uh ... a little more personal than I expected. His death wasn’t the sort of thing anyone would just forget. In another city, I’m sure Michael would have killed Garry for it. But not in Dolareido. And Michael’s been resenting Garry ever since ... and probably you, for how Dolareido is run, that he can’t just go kill Garry without upsetting you.”

Kindred on Kindred violence hadn’t exactly been outlawed, but the Prince had made it pretty damn clear it was discouraged. Killing an important Kindred would be a recipe for disaster. That sort of shit had led to the purge of the Lancea et Sanctum.

“You believe I should exploit the emotional attachment those two men had to Roland, and lure them into a confrontation, with their fury as the guiding beacon?”

“Yeah. Get them angry. Get them very angry. Get them so angry they can’t think straight, and barking like rabid animals.”

“Doable. They are Gangrels, after all.”



“Exactly. You get them livid and furious with each other, and trick them into doing something dumb. Maybe drop a hint about a cheap shot they could take to hurt the other, something they’d know would be taken personally by the other, something they couldn’t pass up on.”

“That, I believe, I can do.” Antoinette’s grin grew. “A devious plot. Well done.”

“Yeah well, I’ve run out of ideas on how to fix this. Azamel suggested this, not my idea.”

Apparently Antoinette wasn’t convinced, judging from the grin.

“I am sure.”

“Whatever. You going to help me or not?”

The grin vanished. “Jack, do not be curt with me. I am the one with grounds to be upset.”

“What, because of Clara? I said we can talk about it later.”

“I wish to speak of it now. You knew very well Clara is romantically interested in you, and yet you invited her into your apartment.”

“Excuse me for wanting to talk to a friend! Christ Antoinette, I ripped off her fucking arm. The whole damn city is terrified of me, and I thought for sure she would be too, but she isn’t. I just wanted to talk to her.”

“And is that all you did?”

“That ... She kissed me, ok? She kissed me, but I stopped it.” Eventually. “And I explained that nothing was going to happen

between us. I'm fucking pissed at you, but I'm not a moron. And I'm not unfaithful, you know. How can you even—"

"I spoke to Clara."

Jack took a step closer until his knees almost touched her desk. "You fucking what?"

Daniel took a step forward as well, and Jack slowly turned his head to glare at the man. But before they could say anything, the Prince held up a hand.

"Daniel, please leave us." She didn't look her sheriff's way, keeping her hard gaze locked on Jack.

"You sure?"

"Oui, I am sure."

With a stone cold gaze, Daniel adjusted his glasses with a single finger against the bridge, nodded, and left. One glance over the shoulder before he opened the door, and closed it behind him.

"I said, I spoke to Clara." Antoinette met his gaze again, though he didn't see anger there. Frustration, sadness, subtle in her practiced stare, but not anger. "And I admit that, perhaps in the heat of my rage, I thought you had betrayed me. But it was a fleeting thing, and I quickly realized that nothing would happen between you two. I trust you."

"I ... thank you. But, then if you went to see her anyway, you ... Oh fuck, did you kill her!?"

"Non."

"Hurt her?"

“Non.” The fact she didn’t react to the absurdity of any of these things struck him cold. God damn.

“Then ... what did you speak about?”

“Her relationship with you. Her inability to see how doomed it would be, regardless of whether I was a factor.”

“I ... That...” He didn’t disagree. Strange as Antoinette and Jack were together, and as different as they were, they also had a lot in common. A lot of shared interests. A lot of shared passions. He woke up excited to talk to Antoinette about stuff.

He knew damn well he’d have basically nothing to talk to Clara about. They liked each other a lot, and were attracted to each other, but it took more than that to have a lasting relationship.

“And Clara understands that,” she continued. “It was a painful conversation for her, but she understands that. Harcourt is a better match for her, but—”

“He doesn’t really know how to, uh, be a ‘man’ about it.” He air-quoted ‘man’.

She grinned. “Oh? You spoke with Clara about Harcourt?”

“Yeah. Before she ... yeah. I talked to Harcourt yesterday too, after that, and I think I gave him a decent nudge in her direction.”

“Oh Jack, please tell me you were discrete?”

“Um.” He scratched his buzzed head as he thought about it. “ ... no, definitely not.”

Sighing, Antoinette rolled her eyes and stood up. She motioned for him to follow as she stepped over to the giant window behind her chair.

“You made a mistake, inviting Clara into your apartment. I understand you were trying to salvage your friendship, but you put her into a dangerous and painful position.”

He groaned as he joined her in front of the window. “Maybe.”

“But I made a mistake as well. The thought of her touching you, had me ready to murder her. I made a terrible assumption, and went to her quite willing to end her.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, I did not, and while I like to believe I never would have, it was when I saw her ... her expression, as she returned to her den, that I realized I was being foolish.”

Her expression?

“You know I’d never cheat on you, Antoinette. I mean, yeah I’m angry at you, at the situation, but it’d take more than this to end the relationship, right? And even if I’d decided to end it, I wouldn’t touch any girl until we’d talked, right? I mean come on, this is me. The one thing, the one damn thing I got going for me, is I stick to my guns.” Sticking to his guns was a nice way to put it, an ego-stroking way. Truth was, he pretty much couldn’t break his word. It didn’t compute, didn’t resolve in his brain.

“I know.”

“And, I was telling Arturo and Matthew this, but ... there needs to be room in a relationship to be angry at each other. Problems happen. Mistakes happen, right? I mean, I know I’m preaching to the choir here, but—”

“I have forgotten more about the nature of human interaction than others will ever know, my love. But I became an observer of such things centuries ago, not a true participant.”

“I guess. I ... I’m just trying to say, we can get into arguments about stuff, and not worry about the relationship disappearing. Even about serious stuff like ... like what to do about Mom. We need to be able to trust each other.” Talking about relationships was hard, and awkward, and painful. And it sounded dumb saying shit like that, but they needed to be said, because they were true.

“I trust you, my love. I do not trust others. They will manipulate you, lie to you, deceive you, or take advantage of your honesty. Our relationship is precious to me in a way a child like Clara will never understand.”

He looked up at her, but she kept her gaze on the window, and her city, even as her expression softened into something pained and sad. To her, their relationship was more than a romantic one, it was something she was sure no elder her age could ever have. Combined with her Daeva tendencies, Antoinette was possessive. Smart enough to realize it, but still a slave to it.

It was a weird relationship, and he wouldn’t trade it for the world.

He turned, faced her, and gave her a small shove. Tall as she was, a foot taller than him, reaching her shoulders required reaching up a bit, but he managed.

She stumbled a little, something he didn’t think he’d ever seen her do before.

“I beg your pardon?”

He smiled up at her, and gave her another shove. Apparently being shoved by him was something so unexpected, she couldn’t imagine it ever happening twice, because she stumbled back again.

“Jack! You—”

“Antoinette. I know you think you need to be the ancient vampire in everything, all the time, even when you’re with me. But you know I know you’re still a person, right? Not a god or statue or something.”

“What are you—”

“I’m saying ... relax.”

She blinked down at him. “You are telling me, to relax? You? The boy with the weight of the world on his shoulders?” She said that last part sarcastically.

He shrugged. “You’re right you’re right. What I’m trying to say is, when it comes to ... to us, to you and me? We’re solid, ok? Like ... like...” He blinked at her, then down at the floor. “Like, you ... you know I want to spend the rest of my life with you, right? That includes the arguments and butting heads. I mean, fuck, I was getting worried that we never butt heads! It was too good, too perfect, too surreal. We should argue sometimes. Arguing is real.”

Score one for Jack, he’d managed to surprise the five-hundred-year-old Daeva.

“You wish to argue more?”

“I want a relationship where we can feel comfortable arguing. Little things, serious things. I want you to be comfortable knowing I’m not going to abandon this relationship just because we aren’t perfectly in agreement about everything all the time.” He looked down and squirmed a little. “I’d ask you to marry me, you know? If it made sense for us. If...”

“If I was not Prince. If I was not of the Ordo Dracul.” With a heavy, but happy sigh, Antoinette spun her chair around to face the window, and sat. “But, please understand the sentiment is received, my love. There is little I would not do for you. For us. And with my

childe, it ... it is a decision I made not only because I felt it necessary, but also because, despite the strain I knew it would put on our relationship, I knew ... felt, it would survive it.”

He laughed as he walked up to her, and took her hands into his. At least with her sitting, he was taller than her.

“But a visit from Clara and you freak out?”

“I did not freak out. Ancient vampires such as myself are beyond freaking out. We ... enact our will.”

“Uh huh.” He kissed her hand, and came in closer, until his knees were touching hers. “I ... I mean, I’m still angry about the situation with Mom. But I don’t really disagree with you about what you’re doing either. I guess maybe I’m angry at myself for not being...”

“Cruel enough, to potentially sacrifice your mother to save others? Come now Jack, no one should be forced to make such a decision. It was part of the reason I did not ask you. I knew it needed to be done, and if I laid the decision at your feet, you would tear yourself apart making it.”

He groaned as he nodded. “You’re too damn smart.”

“That I am.”

“Humble too.”

“Of course. Though I am no Ventrue.”

And back to laughing. “Clara thinks all this tactical, cold reasoning doesn’t hold up when the bullets start flying. That it’s will and love for your ... fellow soldiers I guess, that really save the day.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I mean, kinda? I guess I only believe that, when it’s about the heat of the moment.”

“As you said, when the bullets fly.”

“Yeah. I think if I wanted a military general making macro decisions, I’d want you.”

“You would do well in such a position, Jack.”

“Maybe.” And probably hate himself every day of it. He sighed, and as he leaned in, she leaned in too. With him still standing, he set his forehead down against hers, and they held each other’s hands in a ball on her knees together. “I won’t tell Mom.”

“Thank you.”

“Clara won’t either.”

“That is good.” She tilted her head upward, and kissed him.

He kissed her back. “I uh, wanted to talk about Michael and Garry. Things are getting pretty bad. The fighting’s getting worse. That whole thing with sparing Tilly, I’d hoped it’d calm him down and get him to back off, but...”

“He is angry, Jack. Angry to the core of his being. And perhaps, no longer reasonable.”

“I know that feeling.”

“Do not we all.” She grinned and kissed him again. “I will do what I can. With emotions as the bait, perhaps I will be able to have the two dogs chasing it easily enough. I will need ... two weeks. Do you believe you can keep their turf war managed until then?”

“Two weeks? Maybe. Amanda, she...”



“What? A secret?”

“Kinda, yeah. It’s Invictus business, but ... I know Amanda’s still alive. Michael staked her. Has her stored somewhere.”

Antoinette pulled back a couple inches. “Michael has tricked Garry. He has tricked me.”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“I should—”

“If you do, Michael will know I told you. This is an Invictus thing, and I shouldn’t have told you.”

“But you did.”

“Because something’s going on,” he said. “Michael didn’t stake her against her will. If that’d been the case, he might have just killed her outright. But Michael isn’t that colossal an asshole.” She raised a brow, unconvinced, but he set his hands on her shoulders. “He isn’t. The thing that concerns me, is it seems like he didn’t take Amanda against her will.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I don’t know enough details, but I do know she let him stake her. Maybe Michael’s blackmailing her, maybe not. But there’s something weird going on. The timing of this turf war is just too perfect.”

She nodded. “Indeed it is. I constantly find my attention diverted by it. I am ... researching avenues to deal with Black Blood, options, but my thralls bombard me not with information of the spirit, but of Garry and Michael and their infuriating skirmishes. If they violate the Masquerade, I will need to squelch the issue, and I have been

forever preparing to deal with those two if such a problem arises. It will get violent.”

“I’ll do what I can. But if we don’t get this issue between them resolved, they’ll keep pushing until someone dies or crosses the line.”

She nodded as she leaned back in her chair, but she didn’t let go of his hands either. “We will fix this. And then we will deal with Black Blood, you and I.”

“Ha. Partners?”

“Indeed.” Nodding again, she pulled him in to her, and before he knew it, she’d turned him around and set him on her lap. “I missed you last night, my love.”

“Because of—”

“You were not with me, and I admit that the troubles that befall my city have left me frustrated and stressed.”

Frustrated and stressed was what Antoinette used to describe Jack, as a precursor to sex. After those words, he’d usually wind up sitting or lying down, and Antoinette would be treating him to some sexual de-stressing.

Message received. He laughed, and turned on her lap. Yeah, she was a foot taller than him, a lean-but-curvy goddess, and he fit pretty damn comfortably on her lap. He nuzzled his head into the groove of her shoulder and neck, undid one of her jacket buttons, and another.

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~~Eric~~

He stared across the river, into the city of concrete and fake light. Behind him was the forest, chirping with crickets and caressing his

fur with a breeze smelling of bark and grass and moss.

“I’m dreaming.” Easy enough to tell that. He was in his wolf body, sitting on his haunches, and was able to talk without actually moving his mouth.

“Yes, you are,” the shining light above said. Above and below, the moon’s reflection shimmering in the river.

“Haven’t talked to you in a while.”

“I have been busy, young Uratha.”

“Busy?”

“Do not ask. I am not allowed to speak of it.”

Not allowed to speak of it? What sort of things could a moon goddess not talk about?

“Alright.”

“You are soon to work with Avery to investigate the tears in Dolareido.”

“I am.”

“How do you plan to deal with the blood wraiths that guard the tears?”

He shrugged, as much as a wolf could shrug. “You don’t know? Seems you’ve been eavesdropping.”

“I ... am not omniscient.”

“Big of you to admit that.”

“My reach is far, and my power vast, Uratha. Or did you think I had not touched this city?”

“Touched the city?”

“Surely you have enjoyed its sexual indulgences.”

“You—oh. Us being in better control of our Gauru form. Kinda thought one of the big sex spirits in the city was responsible for that.”

The moon shimmered a little more. “I would be lying if I said I did not consult with them. The choir of sexual spirits in Dolareido are powerful.”

“A moon spirit colluding with sex spirits to ... what, let Uratha fuck more?”

“I need not explain myself to you. But I am happy to know you have been indulging my gift.”

He laughed. “Jessy has been, anyway.”

“Surely you have as well. The power, the desire, holding her naked body and forcing your immense length into her insides, to—”

“Not going to talk about my sex life with some spirit god that gave me a curse I didn’t ask for.”

“Curse?”

“Being a werewolf.”

“I gave you a gift.”

“Uh huh. You knowing I fucking ate someone my first night transformed?”

“I do.”

“You think I wanted that?”

“How is your knee, young Uratha?”

He growled as he paced the river shore. “I suppose you think you can do whatever you want. Us humans are just pawns for you fuckers to play with.”

“I think you do not understand the game if you think you are but a piece on a chess board.” The moon sighed, somehow. “Regardless. How are you, Eric?”

“I ... I’m fine.”

“Do not lie.”

“Alright, better than fine. I’m great. My knee’s healed. I’m in the best shape of my life. I got an amazing girlfriend. I make great money. Dad’s out of the hospital and happily retired.” And probably looking at pictures of his girlfriend’s tits. “But I’m also neck deep in life or death shit.”

“You were always in danger, Eric. Now you can actually do something about it.”

“I still don’t know why me. It’s not like I’m—”

“No, it’s not like you are special. But Dolareido has been at the center of rising events for a while now. Others like me are here, and we’re invested in the outcome.”

“You mean the tears? And Black Blood?”

Silence.

“Luna, if you know about what’s going on, you have to tell me.”

“I am bound by the rules, as are the others.”

“Others?”

“Continue as you are, and you will learn more, I am sure.”

He grumbled and groaned and shook his head. “Why are you here, visiting my dream then, if I’m not important?”

“You represent my presence in this city.”

“Do I?”

“You do. Be thankful. It is why I speak to you. I wish to grow my presence in these walls.”

“Why?”

Silence, for a moment. But after a few seconds, the breeze in the forest grew to a hard wind, the river rippled under its power, and the distant city went quiet.

Rustling in the bushes. Eric turned around, and froze. A white wolf. The larger wolf crept out from the woods, deep eyes shining with stars of their own as she approached.

It didn’t feel like a dream anymore. It felt very real.

“Things are happening in this city, so I touched it with my hand. Enjoy the gifts I have given you,” the big scary white wolf said.

“But ... what?”

“I cannot tell you.”

“Then why tell me anything?”

“Because I am happy to see the fruits of my labor have helped someone.” She came closer before she walked past him, and sat by the river beside him. Close. He was so close to her. And dream or not, he could feel the power radiating from her, like standing in the eye of a hurricane. “Maybe things will be different in this city in the future. Maybe my children will find a little happiness, instead of this endless march to fulfill their father’s duty.”

“Father?”

“Father Wolf.”

Father Wolf, a mythic figure he knew next to nothing about. Except, what Avery had told him, about how his children killed him, and doomed the world to this weird split between physical and material. Sounded like a load of shit to Eric, but a moon goddess was sitting next to him. You could only take denial so far.

“I ... see.”

“I miss him, you know.” The white wolf shook her head and patted the water once with a paw. “And perhaps I made a mistake in my anger. My children have ... fought hard, carrying his burden, even the stubborn ones like you.”

“I’ve done his duty?”

“Are you not doing what you can to keep the spirits in Dolareido under control? Sneaking away into the Hisil to kill those you consider problematic?”

“I ... I was just helping out my city.”

“And that is why I chose you. Not because you are special, but because you consider this city yours, and it is this city that I consider special.” Sighing again, she lowered herself until she lay on the river shore. “Maybe my children will find a little respite here.”

“Are you, uh, giving the Uratha a break? Like, fifteen-minute break from work, in Dolareido? Cause this is just one city, and it’s not like I’ve been doing this Uratha gig long.”

“Perhaps with time, things will be different. Be happy that I am testing what can be done here and now, as my temper has ... waned.”

“Temper? How long ago did Father Wolf die?”

“Tens of thousands of years. A blink of the eye in the lifespan of Gaia.”

That was true. If the Luna spirit really was a spirit form of the moon, however that worked, yeah she’d been around for hundreds of millions of years. And the idea that he was sitting next to her was too damn big to wrap his mind around.

“What ... What is Dolareido to you, Luna? What’s so special about it?”

“I cannot tell you. But I am sure you will find more on your own.”

“But—”

“No more questions. I am not here to indulge your curiosity. I am here to see how you are doing, how you are enjoying my gifts, and to ... settle my guilt, I suppose.”

“Guilt?”

“It is my will that Uratha are to bound to Urfarah’s duty, these ... Forsaken children of ours. Perhaps they will not be so forlorn ... within Dolareido’s walls.”

At this point, he gave up asking. Either she didn’t answer, or her answers were beyond him.



But she'd made one thing obvious: she felt bad. Guilty about something she'd done thousands of years ago. Sad her, uh, lover was dead. Maybe lonely? The fuck did he know about spirits that were basically gods?

"Mason," he said, "he told me about what happened to him, when he first transformed. Killed and ate a bunch of idiot punks. Then he spent months just wandering around, life ruined. Everything was hard for him. Avery found him, and life got better. But he tells me Dolareido's the best place he's stayed, the only place he's lived in that, as an Uratha, he feels like he can be who he is."

Luna lifted her head, looked at him, nodded in a gesture his wolf brain recognized as a wolf's equivalent of a smile, and set her head back down on the river's edge.

"This city is a respite for more than just Uratha. I hope it stays that way. I hope you all survive."

Well, that was certainly foreboding, and he really wasn't up for more foreboding. Things had been foreboding for far too long, but he knew Luna wouldn't answer his question. She wasn't here for him. She was here for herself, and he was just the closest ear she had.

Who else like her was in Dolareido? As much as someone like her could be 'in' a city. Black Blood? Did they exist on the same level? So many questions, and she was going to leave him in the dark about all of it. And honestly he'd prefer to not know about any of it. Just let him keep doing what he was doing. Don't tease him with information about gods playing games.

Was that so bad? Just let a man enjoy his new werewolf life. Sure it had some shitty parts, and he constantly found himself driven by some sort of instinct, demanding he hunt spirits and look for weird balance problems between the Hisil and Gurihal. But the health, the power, the sex drive, it was all amazing. He was happier than he'd

ever been. And now she was hinting that it might all go up in flames.

But there wasn't any point in bitching about it. So, after looking down at the literal god paying his dream a visit, he did the only thing he could do. He lay down beside her, and watched the reflection of the moon in the river, and the reflection of the city lights across the way.

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~~Damien~~

One week later.

Somehow, no one had died yet. It'd gotten close. Jack had been involved in three skirmishes, and had caused serious injury to half a dozen Kindred. Damien had been in one, and had been shot several times. Jessy had been in half a dozen, and had beaten up and been beaten up as many times.

Two buildings had been burned down. Thankfully they were office buildings in North Side. One had been abandoned after the industrial boom, but another hadn't; empty at the time, thank the Lord. The Masquerade was still intact, but burning buildings made the Prince angry. She made that anger felt when she sent the sheriff knocking on their doors. He didn't give an order, barely said a word, but both the Invictus and Carthians got the message: damage to the city was frowned upon.

But Damien doubted Garry or Michael would listen. Maria would. She cared about the city, and the potential to slowly revive the Lancea et Sanctum within it. Michael and Garry did not. Like Jack said, they were dogs, barking at each other over a fence. But unlike most dogs, they were willing to fight and fight hard the moment someone gave them a nudge.

Damien peered through his telescope. He'd moved it to a better position, where he could watch the main street that crossed much of the city. A straight road, peering down its length allowed him to see all the way to the Carthian district. If anything strange happened, he might catch it before it showed up on the news. Might even catch some Carthian activity, and stop a fight.

But he wasn't looking down the streets to watch the Carthians at the moment. Right now, he was adjusting the focus and pointing it at nearby buildings, the tall buildings of the South Side entertainment district, and their enormous windows.

He stepped back, and Fiona stepped in.

"I can see!"

"Remember how to change the focus?"

"Aye! Aye I got it. I ... wow. Ye can see everything!"

Nodding, he sat down on the rooftop's raised edge, and looked down below. They were on one of the apartment buildings, shorter than the others, cause it meant the telescope could get a better angle seeing directly into the windows of other buildings. Peeping, obviously, but in Dolareido, people wanted to be peeped on. The windows were massive for more than sight seeing, but also being the sight.

Fiona burst into giggles a second later. She found one.

"Ah, gross! There's an old couple fucking on a sex swing!"

Try as he might, Damien couldn't help but laugh as well. "There's a lot of exhibitionists and whatnot in Dolareido, and they're not limited by age."

She groaned and pretended to vomit, but she was smiling. “I suppose it’s cute. The power of viagra!”

“Probably.”

She turned the telescope a bit. “This couple is ... two lads with little miniatures on a ... big table that looks like a ... battlefield?”

“You thought every window was going to be a perfect porn display, didn’t you?”

“The first one was! If I was eighty!”

Damien rolled his eyes, got behind his girlfriend, and gently nudged the telescope to point toward Jessy’s building. “Sixteenth floor, corner room. Jessy’s room.” Fiona moved her head a second and he doubled checked. “Yeap, that’s it.”

“Ye know where her apartment is?”

“Through no fault of my own, I promise. But I examine the city regularly, and Jessy had a habit of having sex in front of her window with her four ghouls. An orgy, against a giant window, is kinda hard to miss.”

“Ah bugger, blinds are closed now.”

“If you wanted to watch her have sex, just ask. She’ll give you a video or stream it or something.”

She laughed as she stood up and grinned at him. “Ye dinnae mind?”

“Born and raised in a city of sin, and then fifty years hiding in its sewers and tunnels. Pretty desensitized to public sex.”

“Aye, but I mean, most lads can get pretty prissy about their girls seeing other lads fucking.”

“I guess.” He shrugged, and gestured to the telescope. “The Lancea et Sanctum teach humility.”

“Ha. Are ye humble?”

“It wouldn’t be very humble of me to say I am humble.”

“But ye said the ... the...” Laughing again, she looked back into the telescope, and scanned nearby buildings. “Ooh, I see something good! Pretty lad, pretty lass.” She paused for a moment before she squealed and giggled. “He’s fucking her ass!”

Well, he couldn’t resist an invite like that. Promptly, he gave Fiona a nice slap on the ass. She jumped up with a squeak, turned around, punched him in the shoulder, blushed, and looked back through the telescope to hunt for more exhibitionists.

“You said you didn’t like anal,” he said. He hadn’t ever prompted her for anal, never asked, but they had talked about the things they liked. Damien barely knew what he liked, but Vrall knew a lot, and Fiona had experimented a heck of a lot in her short life. All behind closed doors with toys, but she knew.

“Aye, but that does nae mean I dinnae want to see some other lass get manhandled and fucked in the butt.” She motioned for Damien to come in, and he did.

In the window was what she said, a human fucking another human. The woman was on her knees, and the man was fucking her from behind; the angle made the anal penetration obvious. The brunette with the fake breasts looked out the window, and the pleasure on her face was blatant as she realized people were looking at her. She couldn’t see Damien or Fiona, far as they were, but there were dozens of nearby buildings that’d be able to see into the huge window.

“See?” Fiona said, giggling louder as she nudged him out of the way and took the telescope back. “It does nae need to be for me, to look hot.”

He decided to not ask about her porn habits. In the modern world, there was plenty of porn for ladies, free porn for anyone with an internet connection, and he was sure Fiona had explored it quite a bit. Dolareido’s sex-obsessed aesthetic didn’t surprise her much when she arrived.

She moved the telescope again, and giggled as she found someone else to spy on. “Did ye fight any Carthians yet?”

“Yeah, just yesterday. Maria wants me to try and get back the territory Garry took over after she was injured. I did a little inspecting, and got into a fight.”

She gasped as she turned around, and grabbed his hand. “Ye dinnae tell me!?”

“I was fine. I shot them a few times, but nothing serious.”

Gasp turned into angry frown, and she poked him in the chest. “Ye should still tell me. I’m yer girlfriend, and I ... I get worried about ye. Azamel says we should still stay out of the fight, but ... but ye’re in the fight!”

He reached out, and pulled her into a hug. She struggled a bit, not happy, but a good squeeze soon had her relenting and hugging him back.

“I’ll be careful.”

“Ye better.”

“And if you think there’s something you can do to help Jack, by all means, tell him. This isn’t Invictus versus the Carthians. It’s Jack,

trying to save both.”

“Aye I know. But Azamel still wants to stay out of it anyway.”

Damien wasn't entirely sure about that. According to Jack, she'd changed headspace, and was now trying to leave Dolareido a better place for her family before she died. Commendable, but 'better' probably didn't include vampires as a focus.

He kissed Fiona. She kissed him back. They nuzzled into each other, and he breathed in the smell of her as he slid his hands down her back. Once his fingers got to her jeans, filled by her large ass, he squeezed the softness and earned a small giggle and mewl from her. He—

His phone rang, and he knew the ring. Jack's ring. Lord, do you not have mercy for this poor soul who desperately wants to spend time with his girlfriend?

Fiona sighed and stepped back. “I know I know.” Nodding, she grinned playfully, and set her eye to the telescope again.

Damien rolled his eyes, and answered. “Hey Jack.”

“Damien. Whatcha doing?”

“Hanging out with Fiona and my telescope.”

“Let me guess. She's spying on people.”

He chuckled. “It's a large city, with large windows.”

“Part of me thinks Antoinette made sure the city was shaped this way, specifically so people would get eyefuls of everything.”

A reasonable theory. Dolareido had millions of people living in it, but it wasn't nearly as spread out and sporadic as some cities, like Los Angeles. It was more like Hong Kong, cramped, but with the Las

Vegas sexual flair. You couldn't walk anywhere without seeing every carnal sin.

Lucas hated that. To him, kine indulging in sexual pleasure was an insult to God's purity. Now, Damien disagreed, but a part of him could understand why a hyper conservative, volatile, angry man like Lucas would find Dolareido and the Prince's way of things so offensive. A small part.

"Need something, Jack?"

"Yeah. I know this is your day off, but—"

"We get days off?"

Jack laughed. "Good point. Can you get up here? North Side, Tanvar building."

"Your detail?"

"Yeah. Mulder and Scully are reporting some activity. I need some eyes that can get closer."

Damien closed his mouth and looked to Fiona. She glared at him. "I ... I'll be there."

"Thanks. Tell Fiona please don't hate me."

"She won't hate you." He offered Fiona a small smile, but all he got was glares. "She will be angry though."

"Welp, can't help that. Thanks."

"No problem." He hung up, and winced as he tried to smile some more for Fiona. "I have to go."

"We're on a date!"



“Jack thinks the Carthians are going to attack the Tanvar building again.”

“Get Jessy to—”

“She’s busy patrolling the border. There’s been more skirmishes there lately, more brawls. A couple Invictus nearly died.”

Frown only growing, Fiona marched up to him and put her hands on her hips. With her short stature and wide hips, it was a delightful image, and he couldn’t help but smile before putting a kiss on her forehead.

“I promise I’ll be safe. Jack just wants me to do some recon.”

“Ye just said some other Invictus nearly died!”

“I’m not Invictus.”

“Close enough!”

“Maria works with the Invictus, and I have the Right Hand title, but it’s not ... I take orders from Maria, not Michael.”

“And Jack?”

“It wasn’t an order. It was a request from a friend.”

“Nu uh! Ye know Maria would ask ye to do it, too.”

He slipped his arms around her and hugged her. “Fiona, come on, you know we’re doing everything we can to end this fight as soon as we can. What about you? Azamel still got you investigating those tears?”

“ ... sometimes ... from a distance!”

“That’s dangerous, too.”

“N-Nae it’s not! I stay good and far away.”

“We do dangerous things, Fiona. But I’ll do everything I can to make sure I don’t get hurt, ok?” Which was about as empty a promise as someone could make, almost as empty as when a soldier promised his wife he’d come home alive. The same soldier would sacrifice his life to save a comrade.

Damien was a little more selfish than a soldier, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try and help Jack if things got bad.

But, he also knew if things got really bad, he might just bail. Not because he was selfish; not by Kindred standards at least. But, the idea of breaking Fiona’s heart hurt. Really fucking hurt.

How did Julias do it?

---

~~Jack~~

He popped his head over the counter, and fired five shots before slipping back into cover.

“Would you go away!”

“Fuck you!” Gunfire followed the shout, and Jack ducked lower as a chunk of the countertop went flying past his head.

It was only a matter of time before they came for the Tanvar building again. Last time, it’d been about making a statement. This time, maybe Garry wanted it for its actual territorial value. Apparently sparing Tilly’s life hadn’t done much to persuade him to go easy on the Invictus. Maybe he thought Jack was trying to trick him.

No, that couldn’t be true. After everything that’d happened between the two when they were fighting, he felt Garry finally understood Jack was trying to help everyone. Then maybe the fact

no Kindred had died yet was because of that. Maybe Garry had been giving him time to get shit sorted.

Well either Garry thought he'd given Jack enough time, or Joe was taking initiative. Probably both.

Near him and by the broken front window sat Bruce again, a shotgun in hand. No Jessy. Instead he had Vivienne, Natasha's child. Poor girl was a vamp barely older than Jack. Supposedly defending this building was a good opportunity for Vivi to prove to the Invictus she was trustworthy, after that whole joining Lucas fiasco. The kid hadn't joined Lucas on the kamikaze mission, none of the Invictus Lucas had managed to recruit had, but building trust in the Invictus was a damn hard thing to do, especially after breaking it.

He envied the Carthians that. They weren't at each other's throats. And much as the Invictus looked like a fully functioning, prim and proper society on the surface, they were always at each other's throats, just silently. The Carthians were a family, a close gang, a bunch of stupid punks that were at least united in their stupidity.

It was easy to understand why the Invictus resorted to violence when dealing with Carthians. Only Viktor had actually tried to negotiate with them, and Jack was sure that was just a way to manipulate them. But Garry wasn't as stupid as Viktor thought he was.

There were other Kindred with Jack, upstairs instead of down in the lobby with him. Zack, Manchester, Derick again, and the pair Vicky and Parker. They also had a half dozen thralls and a couple ghouls, all in different floors, and shooting out at targets across the street. Everyone had guns.

It was raining bullets in Dolareido that night. The cliché made him groan.

Across the street, the Carthians were shooting at them from the closest building. Windows were gone, glass was everywhere, and bullets littered the walls. It'd take weeks of work for a cleanup crew to find all the casings, if they even bothered. It was a shootout between rival gangs, as far as the media knew. Problem was, now that the media knew, they watched the police like hawks. Awkward activity meant Masquerade risks. That meant the Invictus couldn't tell the cops to sit around doing nothing while guns were being fired.

That meant they were on a time limit.

"I'm giving you guys an out!" Jack yelled over the counter in the lobby. "Leave!"

"Fuck you!" Oh god it was Joe. Always with Joe. "Fuck you, fuck the Invictus! Fuck you all!"

Apparently, Joe had caused a few more brawls since Jack dealt with him a week ago. Say one thing for the moron, he was tenacious. Maybe he held it against Jack, for dealing with him last week. Maybe Joe had some long, serious problems with the Invictus, that left him filled with unending hatred for them. Or most likely, he was a moron, a stereotypical fucking idiot who looked at any sort of organized hierarchy as evil, and his idiot brain was overwhelmed with a need to burn it down. Stereotypical anarchist. Couldn't see past his own nose.

Jack poked his head up again. Bodies ran across the street, getting closer. Some of them blurred into shadow. Others crouched low and used hand claws for grip on the asphalt. One of them jumped high, and scaled the wall, going up. Vampires. No thralls or ghouls, just vampires. Carthians used less thralls and ghouls than Invictus, but still, they usually had at least some.

If they brought nothing but vampires, that meant business. Shit. Fucking shit. No Garry though. Was it Joe, trying to make a

statement? If Jack had to rip off the man's arms to put the fucker out of commission for a few months, he would.

Jack put his pistol away, and pulled out his shotgun. "Fuck this. If things get hairy, get lethal."

Bruce smiled and nodded, but Vivi blinked at him.

"You sure?" she asked. Poor kid. Older than him, but the look in her eyes told him one thing: kid.

"I'm sure. This is getting ridiculous. We're the defenders here, and I'm not going to lose people because I'm trying to keep people from dying. If it's us or them, it's them. Got it?" Whatever Antoinette was doing to get Michael and Garry to boil over and be willing to be in the same room together, it wasn't happening fast enough. Or this was a side effect.

Vivienne gulped, and grabbed her shotgun.

~Master!~ Scully's thoughts. ~Incoming! Five Kindred coming to you! More going up!~

Kindred could take a lot of punishment. Even a fledgling could survive a bullet through the head, as long as the bullet didn't rip open a giant hole on the way through. But a shotgun from close range did a lot more than a single hole. It'd rip a canyon through any Kindred that wasn't focusing on keeping vitae protecting their bodies, and still seriously injure one who was.

"Stay down, only take a shot if I'm up and being a target," Jack said. Bruce and Vivienne nodded.

Jack took off his necklace, stored it inside his pants' pocket in a little bag that would supposedly resist fire and tearing, and he poured his vitae through his body. No need to bring the blood out to the surface, not yet. Going juggernaut was unbelievably draining,

and he had to rely on the curse's power exclusively to fuel the absurd ability. The more he relied on it, the more he relied on the curse, and the more chances he gave the curse to get out. He'd avoided letting the Ripper out, truly out, for weeks now, and he was going to keep avoiding him for as long as he could.

He poked his head up, spotted movement behind a car, and fired. Pellets shattered the window, ricocheted off the hood, and earned a grunt of pain from a vamp who quickly ducked back behind the car. No time to evaluate, Jack aimed to more movement, a Kindred running across the street, and fired. But the Carthian jumped, easily clearing twenty feet, and probably landed on a windowsill on the floor above Jack.

He didn't want them to get closer. If they got too close, there was a good chance someone was going to die, and it wasn't going to be him.

Vivienne and Bruce stood up and fired. Bruce made an effort to aim, and mostly succeeded, but Vivi was obviously more comfortable with knives and keyboards, not firearms. She struggled with the recoil, and growled down at the gun in frustration before resettling the butt of it against her shoulder.

She shouldn't be here. Tash's childe was a Mekhet, and sure, Mekhet could be amazing in battle, but Vivi wasn't Tash or Damien. She was happier using words or computers to do her battles, not guns.

The whole situation was fucking garbage.

Jack ducked down, loaded a few more shells, and popped back up, only for some giant metal disc to smash into his chest. He flew back and crashed into the back wall, but with vitae enforcing his insides, the sewer cover hadn't managed to break any of his ribs. And he'd managed to hold onto his gun. Live and learn.

By the time he got up, several bodies jumped in through the big lobby front window. But not a couple of neonates like last time. No, two ancilla jumped in, Steve and Bella again, and they smirked at him as they immediately turned to their sides, and jumped Bruce and Vivi. Vivi went down before she could get off a shot, but Bruce got his barrel up and put a shell into Bella's arm, but only a graze.

Jack hopped up, and put a shell into Steve's side as he tried to punch the girl. "Get the fuck off her!"

Steve roared as pellets ripped open his shirt and side. He jumped against the distant wall, landed feet first, jumped off it, and came at Jack down low. Fucking acrobatic Daeva asshole. Jack took two shots at him as the man flew through the air, missed both, but once Steve was only a foot from him, ready to dodge a third shot, Jack swung the gun like a bat into the side of the man's head.

Steve flew to the side, half in a barrel roll before he struck against the wall of the office building's lobby. With how hard his head had been jerked to the side, Jack had definitely done something to the inside of his neck, tearing muscle and maybe breaking something. He'd be down for a minute though, and Jack had other problems.

He aimed his shotgun at Bella, but she was in a melee brawl with Bruce, the two of them engaged in some cross between a fistfight and a wrestling match. God fucking damn it. Jack ran for them, and swung the gun's but for Bella's head.

He didn't reach her. Metal shars slammed into his side, ripped up his suit, and sent him sprawling against a corner. Not a shotgun, but heavy caliber pistols, slugs heavy enough to throw his weight around easily.

"Fuuuuck." He got up as quick as he could, but his shotgun was gone, ten feet away and under a desk. Before Jack could get it, three vampires jumped in through the window.

Joe, and two other Kindred, ancilla, Garner and Kass. All four ancilla were older than Joe, but were following his lead. Why? The fuck did this idiot do to get the most powerful Kindred Garry had, to follow his lead? Figure that out later. For now deal with the fuckers jumping in.

Jack got up again, but as he did, he grabbed the manhole cover they'd hit him with, and threw it at the closest vampire, Garner. They didn't expect a kid barely over a hundred pounds to whip a hundred pound disc right back at them, and it crashed into Garner's chest hard enough to send him back out the window he'd come in through. Fuckers didn't understand. Just cause Jack wasn't a Daeva or Nos didn't mean he didn't have strength, and the curse had plenty.

Bruce and Bella fell wrestled on the ground, roaring and punching and even clawing. They were similar age, and Jack trusted Bruce to hold his own, or at least not get killed while Jack dealt with these three. And then he had to deal with the other vamps on the roof and other floors; he could hear the gunfire and shouting.

"Get out," Jack said.

Joe laughed, and pointed two pistols at him. "No." The dumbass didn't hesitate, and fired. Apparently Jack hadn't been thorough enough teaching the man a lesson at the Border Bar.

Jack brought up his vitae, and hardened his skin, flesh, and bones. With the thick liquid pulsing under his skin, and with his necklace off, he had no issue limiting the damage bullets did, to almost nothing. How stupid was this man that he'd try the same thing again? How the fuck was this moron giving him—

Joe quickly slipped his pistols into the holsters on his holster vest, reached over a shoulder, and pulled out a shotgun. Oh fuck. Jack dashed forward, but Joe didn't so much as blink as he lined up



the shot and unloaded the spray of pellets into Jack's face, from ten feet away.

Jack managed to get his hand up, but the metal pellets collided with it, and his right shoulder, and his chest. At least none hit his eyes, but the impact of a shotgun was too much, and Jack flew back again. His back hit the wall, and he slumped to the ground on his ass. Joe didn't hesitate to shoot at Jack again, but Jack had enough time to get his arm up to stop the fucker from shooting him in the face. So Joe aimed for his chest and stomach, and Jack groaned as the tiny bits of metal shred through his jacket and shirt, and flattened against his hardened skin.

"Tanvar building is ours. I don't know why the boss let you live last time he was here, but fuck that. Fuck that, fuck him, and fuck you, Jack." Joe shot again, stopping Jack's attempts to get up and pinning him to the wall again. "Cory, get the girl."

Cory, a vamp hanging just outside the broken window, hopped in, reached down, and picked up Vivi while Kass joined him. Poor girl was scared, eyes wide and clutching her arm. Broken, from one of Steve's punches. A young Mekhet like her wouldn't be healing that without a day's torpor and a fresh meal.

Joe pointed the shotgun at her chest, and fired.

"Vivienne!"

The small woman went down almost instantly. The pellets shredded in through her suit jacket, and smashed her down and back against the floor and wall as Cory let go of her. Jack stared at her, waiting for her to move, to scream out in pain, to do something, but she lay there, eyes half open, staring into space.

For a second, rage shot up through Jack like a lava geyser. If Vivi died, Natasha would never forgive him. She still felt guilty about her childe, about their failed relationship. But the rage died down before

anything could come of it. She wasn't a pile of ash. Still alive, just in torpor.

But Joe wouldn't be for long if he kept this up. Jack tried to get up again, but again Joe shot him, and so did Cory, using Vivi's shotgun. Cory was no ancilla, but you didn't need to be to use a shotgun. Kass shot him too, using some large caliber pistol that would have punched holes through walls easily enough. Jack blocked them all enough to keep from getting turned into swiss cheese, but bullets were bullets and there were a lot of them. Eventually the shards of metal punctured skin and lodged into hardened insides, only to be joined by more as the bastard Carthians riddled him with gunfire.

The whole night was quickly turning into one giant mistake. Jack had been sure Garry would pull his punches, after Jack had let Tilly go. And as far as it seemed, Garry had been doing exactly that. But Joe, this rat bastard, was apparently doing this on his own. Jack had made a big, big mistake.

"Holy shit you just won't die!" Joe groaned as he finally stopped shooting and loaded some shells. "Like shooting an elder. Except an elder wouldn't be stupid enough to get caught with their pants down like this. Well, whatever. Fuck you and your fucking bullshit. You're dead. We're taking this place, then we're gonna finish the job and take down Xnomina. You—"

Jack snapped his head up, and met Kass's eyes. He reached out with his mind, found hers, and slammed through her gate with all the grace of a wrecking ball. He put the power of the curse behind it, dangerous as all fuck and could potentially fuck her mind up forever, but he did it anyway, and crashed through her mind's barriers until he found the little woman and her Beast.

Stop him.

Kass dropped her pistols and grabbed Joe's shotgun.

“The fuck!?! You fucking idiot, don’t look into his eyes!”

Too late. Ventrue didn’t wear sunglasses for a reason. As long as a target could see his eyes, he could reach out and grab their mind. And he’d gotten pretty damn good at Dominating quickly over the past year. Kass didn’t stand a chance, and she wrestled Joe to the ground in seconds.

It turned into a dogpile after that, the two Carthians rolling around and struggling to get control over the other. Cory panicked and aimed down at the two wrestling Kindred, realized he was aiming a shotgun at his friends, and spun around looking for help. But Steve was in the corner of the room, trying to get his head on straight, literally, and Bella and Bruce were still grappling. Garner was outside, groaning and rolling around on the street, likely trying to get his ribs in order again.

That left young Cory, and Jack, as he got back up and glared at the man. Cory was smart enough to look down at Jack’s stomach, avoiding eye contact, but not smart enough to load another shell. Click.

Jack jumped over to him, landed in front of him, and with the ground as an anchor, drove his fist up into Cory’s stomach hard enough to tear through muscle and flesh. Oh shit, not what Jack wanted to do. The man erupted into screams of agony, and Jack threw him out of the lobby through the window with his other hand, ripping his fist out of the man’s guts at the same time. Vampire blood coated his hand, and a few seconds later, faded into ash.

Roaring, Beast in his throat dying to get out, Jack reached down and grabbed Kass. She was breaking out of his suggestion anyway, but before she did, he punched her in the back between the shoulder blades, hard. Crack. She screamed and flailed, but her legs turned into a twitching mess on the floor.

Before Jack could grab Joe though, he snapped his head to the window as another body came at him. Garner again, chest still looking a little caved in, but body functioning enough the man threw himself through the window and tackled Jack to the floor. For all Jack's strength and power, he was still a little guy, and Garner wasn't. The Nosferatu — everything below the nose hidden behind a face wrap with skull art on it for a jaw — got on top of Jack, and drove both of his big fists down into Jack's face.

As long as Jack had something he could use as leverage to deal with how light he was, melee combat was easy. The curse wanted him to summon a legion of critters, an army of creatures. The curse wanted him to grab Garner's mind and crack it, turn him into a mindless slave. But it could do brawling just fine, and Jack grabbed both the man's fists in his palms. And squeezed.

The sensation of breaking bones in Jack's grip had his guts churning and trying to push out food he hadn't eaten in years. And as Garner cried out and tried to pull away, Jack brought up his knees to his chest, and smashed both feet up into the man's already broken ribs. Cries turned into garbled squawks and wails as the man again flew out the window, and landed with a loud crack against the street.

This was insane. They knew they weren't as strong as him. They knew he'd taken on and beaten a pack of werewolves on his own. How insane did they have to be to think they could beat him in a brawl? Either Joe and his crew were even more stupid than Jack thought, or they were up to something.

~Mulder. Scully. See anything unusual?~

~No master, ~ Scully said. ~Your friends fight on roof.~

~Friends winning, ~ Mulder said, ~but confused. Battle seems pointless.~

~It really fucking does. Keep me posted.~

Jack got up, grabbed the twitching Kass up off the floor, and drove his fist into her throat. Breaking someone's fingers with his grip had been disgusting. Breaking in a woman's throat with his knuckles was a whole other level of disturbing, and he scowled at the woman as she fell back, clutching her throat as she stared up at him, as if she could somehow find a grip that could remove the huge dent in it. Eventually she fell back to the floor, uselessly gripping at her neck as she struggled to heal her back enough that her legs could work again.

Joe, on his back on the floor, opened his eyes wide as he realized what was happening. The perfect opportunity for Jack to jump the man and give him a stern lecture.

Fuck that.

Jack kicked the man in the guts. Hard. He pulled his punches with most Carthians, but not this group, not these idiots who were stupid enough to follow Joe. And especially not with Joe.

Every action he did he was usually careful of, now that the curse was fueling his movements. It was like every movement used to be driving a simple car, but was now like driving a tank. With rockets. And with the necklace off, it was easy to turn the rockets on, and Joe deserved to get run over by a tank; kick in the guts worked fine, too.

Joe tried to yell, but all he managed was an open mouth as he flew through the air over Bruce's head, and crashed into the other side of the lobby. The white drywall broke, and so did the wooden beams he crashed into. He didn't have enough mass to smash through the wall and into the other side of the building, but he got halfway there, ass and parts of his legs breaking through.

Jack didn't bother following through. He marched over to Bruce and Bella, who'd gone from a wrestling match to a chaotic mess of clawing, punching, and tearing. Say what you will about vampires, even a Ventrue gets primal when they have to, and Bruce had blood on his mouth where he'd bitten into Bella. Hopefully the man was smart enough to not swallow any.

Jack picked the woman up, and before she could so much as take a swing at him, he threw her at Joe. The younger Gangrel may have gotten stuck in the wall, but the collision with Bella was enough to drive him through it and into a storage room. Papers, more boxes; not with cigars this time.

"Holy shit," Bruce said as he stood up and dusted himself off, suit a mess. "You really are strong."

Jack managed a weak smile. "Yeah."

"And you ... want to get rid of this, uh, curse?"

"Yes, I do. And you'll be happy when I do."

"I guess. But—"

Jack put up a hand. "It's not worth it. Trust me, ok?" Before Bruce could answer, Jack got down on a knee beside Vivienne. Still in torpor, and—

Her eyes snapped to him. "They gone?"

"What? Did you—"

She sat up, and poked at one of the holes in her jacket and blouse. "I'm not a Ventrue or Gangrel, but I am smart. Wore a bulletproof vest. Small one, pretty thin. Works well for pellets."

He smiled. Didn't even occur to him. The crew had geared up, and they all probably had vests on to stop something like a shotgun from blowing a hole through their chests. Last thing Jack was worried about was a gun, especially from Carthians, but that'd change once the curse was gone.

~Master. Other vampires. Leaving.~

~Thanks Scully. Keep an eye on them, but don't risk yourself. If they notice you following them, get out of there.~ The Carthians shouldn't have things like sniper rifles, but with Terra Den fueling their war effort, he wouldn't put it past them.

“Alright,” Jack said, “now—”

Steve ran past him, at full speed. Kass too, recovering faster than he figured she would. Maybe he didn't punch her back as hard as he thought. Both were still blatantly injured, and in obvious pain, but they both ran past Jack like fire was chasing them.

Jack blinked after them. That was very much not Carthian behavior. Say one thing for the asshole punk anarchists, they didn't give up on shit. He was fully expecting to have to break their arms and legs, and send them back to Garry on stretchers or something, maybe with a post-it note on their chests with a shitty joke like 'Package returned. Reason: Damaged goods'.

“Guess I should have snapped their legs. I...” He slowly turned to face the hole where Joe had fallen through. Bella had already gotten up, managed one quick glance at Jack, before she ran out the front door as well. With Cory and Garner already outside, that left only Joe.

Joe walked out of the storage room into the office lobby by the door, made a quick glance at the hole he'd come through, and then made a quick glance to Jack. He was good at avoiding eye contact, and kept his eyes on Jack's chest, or looked at Vivi and Bruce

instead. It took most Ventrue a lot longer than a split second to Dominate someone, but with the curse giving Jack nukes when he should have had a BB gun, he could do it fast. Joe knew it.

“Fuck you.”

Jack smacked his forehead with a palm. “Really? You somehow manage to convince Garry’s strongest Kindred to come here and start a fight over a drop zone and distribution center for fucking illegal cigars, after we’ve already fought over it, and you have the fucking nerve to stand there like I did something?”

“Fuck. You.”

Jack threw up his hands. “The fuck do you want me to do, Joe? I’m trying to keep the peace, but I’m not going to let the Carthians march over the Invictus. I—”

Joe reached behind him, and tossed a small, circular object onto the floor at Jack’s feet. He did it in such a casual way, no one even tried to stop him.

Jack had never seen one of those before, at least intact like this. But some Invictus brains had put together the remains of one, from the Xnomina attack.

Time slowed down. An instant moment of surprise turning into a spike of awareness. Jack knew what that was. Jack had seen the damage it’d done to the Xnomina building. And the Tanvar building was flammable.

Jack summoned his blood, and forced it out of him and over his body. Thick Kindred blood gushed out of him, through his pores and skin, until every inch of him swirled with writhing veins of the dark, crimson liquid. And as he summoned the power of the curse, he threw back his arm against Vivi with enough power to break bone. But he had to get her away.



Bruce was closer to Joe, but further from Jack, and further from the incendiary explosive. As the fire exploded outward, rushing out from the small device like a cracking egg filled with napalm, Joe jumped back hard, but Bruce didn't. Jack stared, body frozen, limbs unmoving except for the one that flung out for Vivi, as the fire enveloped everything around him.

For a flash moment, everything froze, and he could see laughter in the eyes of the fire.

It crashed against his shield of Kindred blood, and the Juggernaut Discipline fought against the oncoming wave of fire. Liquid, infused with vitae, but still of Kindred, and still weak against flame. Unbelievably weak. The fire pushed against Jack, spewing everywhere in a strange, small, but point-blank explosion of something that burned. It took every bit of effort Jack had, every ounce of vitae he could summon in the instant, to keep the insane flame from reaching through the shield.

The building was just an office building. The outer walls were made of concrete, but it wasn't like Xnomina and its use of marble. There was wood everywhere, and drywall with wooden studs, and boxes and paper and cigars and everything between. It all quickly caught the unusual flame.

Jack spun around as his self preservation reflexes finally kicked in. Move, get out of the way, get the others out of the way, do something! But he wasn't a Mekhet or Daeva. Speed wasn't natural for him. Even if it was, Joe's apparent kamikaze was so insane, the fuck was Jack supposed to do? He turned and put his back to the flame as best he could, but the weird grenade had already done what it was supposed to do. Fire was everywhere.

Jack managed one quick glance back at Bruce as the man's pants caught the flames, eyes wide with a single moment of horrified understanding, before his fellow Ventrue erupted into screams. Jack

blocked them out as best he could as he scooped Vivi up, threw her out onto the street, and jumped out the window beside her. He was on fire, he knew that. The blood protected him, but it didn't protect his suit, and the flames spread along it like kindling. He could hear it in the crackling, in the strange roar of the flame, 'die vampire die'. He tore off his suit as quickly as he could, ripping off what remained of his jacket, shirt, and pants.

"Aaah!" Vivi, on her side on the street, shrieked as she flailed her right arm. Jack jumped up and snapped his gaze around, taking stock of the other Carthians nearby, before looking back down at Vivi. Some of the strange flame, carried by some sort of liquid, had gotten onto her arm, and was eating through the clothes and her flesh. And vampire flesh burned like paper.

Jack grabbed her arm with his blood-covered hand, pressed his shoe down against her chest, and yanked.

The arm came off easily, and he tossed it aside where it burst into flames. And he knew he'd never forget the weird sensation of how her flesh had resisted his strength for a moment before tearing.

Vivi stared at him, eyes wide, mouth open, and silence fell on them for a few seconds before she screamed again.

"My arm! My arm!"

"Vivienne! Calm down! You'll regrow the arm eventually," he said. She disagreed, from the noise she was making, screams and screams and screams, and existential terror in her eyes as she stared at him. Growling, he got down on a knee beside her, grabbed her by her remaining shoulder, and shook her. "You're fine! Yes, it hurts. Yes, it's miserable. Take a moment to feel it, accept it, and get control of yourself!"

Control. Get control of the situation. He looked around again at the nearby Carthians, but they were skulking away,

~Mulder, Scully, report.~

~Carthian vampires gone, ~ Mulder said. ~Your friends, confused.~

Jack reached for his radio. Gone. He looked over at his pants with the belt and equipment, and jumped for them. Radio, destroyed. Bag! He yanked out the small bag with his necklace, and sighed relief as he plucked it free before the flames could grab it.

The Tanvar building was not so lucky. Whatever was in that weird grenade, it burned hot, and fast, and the lobby burned like a Christmas tree in July. Flame poured out of the window as the insides of the lobby erupted, wood and paint and paper exploded in heat and smoke, and Bruce was still inside.

Jack looked up. His companions looked down over the building edge, realized what the fuck was up, and bailed, jumping off the building and out windows. It wasn't tall, and some of them landed on the ground, others on nearby buildings, and the ghouls and thralls could risk the fire escapes. They'd be fine. Vivi would be fine. The Carthians Jack had easily dealt with would be fine. Bruce would not.

Joe got out. Somehow, the stupid Gangrel clawed out of the lobby by the front door, some burn damage dealt to his chest, but he must have taken off the shirt quick. He knew what was going to happen, and how quickly to get it off him. He knew. He'd planned this.

He'd fucking planned this, to kill Jack.

Bella, Steve, Kass, Garner, and Cory all came walking toward Joe from where they'd run off to, but Jack, dressed in nothing but his fucking dress shoes and boxers, necklace bag in hand, walked over to Joe too, and put himself between him and his friends. He stared at them, his blood still pooling along his skin, and as the rage boiled up through him, the blood acted less and less like a blanket covering

his skin, and more like snakes, red snakes that bore out through his skin and back into it as they coiled around him.

The four ancilla and their young friend backed off, each of them staring at him with wide, panicked eyes as he stood between them and their leader. Jack stared hard at each of them as he ground his teeth, before he turned his back to them and looked at the building. It went up in flames. Sure the building itself would be left standing when all was said and done, concrete outer walls, but everything inside was doomed.

Bruce was gone.

Jack looked back at Vivienne. She'd managed to get control of her screaming, but the look of pain in her eyes was obvious. If she'd been Blushing Life, she'd have been drenched in tears. Slowly she sat up and stared at the burning building, her empty arm socket, and then to Jack.

He hated the look in her eyes. Guilt. Thankfulness. Shame. All the shit that comes with someone else making a hard decision in her favor. Christ, he already knew how the conversation would go later, about how she felt horrible he helped her in the middle of a mini firestorm when Bruce was there too. That he'd saved her instead of Bruce, because she was Natasha's childe, or because she was young, or because she was a girl. The thought of the conversation made him nauseous.

Jack glared down at Joe as the man got up. A big, nasty burn ran the width of his chest, deep enough Jack could see ribs; Kindred flesh didn't sizzle, it just turned into ash wherever fire touched it, leaving a window for Jack to see Joe's insides. The man was in agony, face scrunched up and teeth bared, but he got up to his feet anyway.

And he grinned at Jack.

Jack walked up to the much bigger man, and drove his fist into his chest. The fucker's sternum cracked in half on impact, and Joe fell to the ground with a howl of misery. But they were just sounds. Just the sounds of a stupid man who didn't matter.

*He's a cocky fucker. Full of himself. Convinced he knows what everyone should do.*

Shut up shut up.

Sure enough, Joe, with a chest cavity barely working anymore, forced himself onto his hands and knees, and grinned up at Jack. The defiant grin of a delusional man thinking he was a martyr.

*You know what you want to do, Jack. Hell, you know what you should do. Joe said it himself, fuck Garry. This moron is just doing whatever he wants, against his boss's wishes!*

Jack reached down, hooked his hand under Joe's jawline, and picked him up until his feet were dangling. Sure Joe was a lot taller than Jack, but not so tall Jack couldn't lift him high enough the man clutched at Jack's wrists as he hung like a dead fish on a hook.

"Why!?"

"Fuck you."

Jack glared hard, and with his free right hand, small bag clenched in his fist, he punched Joe in his fucked up chest. The man screamed.

"I said why!? Don't make me tear the truth out of you, Joe. Don't make me go dumpster diving through that fucked up heads of yours and rip out every stupid little secret you have."

*Imagine how worthless this loser's mind is. You think Garry has ever told him a secret worth a damn? Not a chance. He's a maggot.*

Joe coughed between his groans of pain. “Fuck. You. You’re just a stupid Invictus. Garry’s wrong about you. The moment we turn our backs, you’ll stab us in it. You always do that. You’re all fucking evil shits, every last one of you. And you’re the worst. Viktor’s childe. Going to fuck us all over in the end.” He talked well considering how Jack was holding him, even with all the grunts and struggled words. And he managed to look in the corner of his eye toward the burning building. “I guess your friend didn’t—”

Jack lowered the man down until Joe was on his knees in front of him. They met eyes, and Joe finally showed a hint of fear as he realized what was about to happen.

The Ripper ripped his fucking head off.

# Chapter 151

~~The Ripper~~

God damn it felt good to be in the driver seat again. God damn it felt good to end someone's life with his bare hands.

Jack the Ripper dropped man's corpse, and it burst into a pile of ash as it collided with the street. Joe was no more. Finally. Fucking finally! Irritating god damn worm. Jack laughed as he stepped onto the pile of ash, and kicked it away. Finally.

He looked to the Carthians who'd shown up. Some stared down at him from nearby buildings. Some stared at him from across the street. The four ancilla, Garry's strongest, stared at him from twenty feet away, each of them injured and hurting. Cory backed away, putting more and more distance from Jack as he clutched the hole in his stomach.

Jack looked at the bag in his hand. This stupid necklace. It forced down the Beast, and Jack, new Jack, was bound to the Beast in a way old Jack wasn't.

But it was also the only reason Jack wasn't staked and tucked away in a cellar somewhere for years while the Prince and Jack's bitch grand sire looked for a cure. So he sighed, and tossed the bag to Vivienne.

"Hold onto that."

"I ... wh-what? O-O-Okay." She snatched it up, and stared at him as he looked to the crowd of onlookers hidden around in the nearby buildings and alleys.

“All of you!” Jack raised a hand, like a fucking emperor, and grinned at all the stupid bastards staring at the kid in the boxers and shoes. “Your little leader is ash. I don’t know what Joe said to convince you all that you should try this, that you should actually attack us, attack me! I don’t know what lies he said, or what delusions he weaved, but let me set the record straight. Jack has been trying to keep the peace, to save as many lives as he could. Jack is the only damn reason I haven’t buried you stupid assholes in the ground.” He tilted his head to the side, and licked his fangs. “You should have listened. Now, you’re all gonna die.”

---

~~Damien~~

Oh God no.

Damien stared on from a distance, buried deep in his Cloak with binoculars in hand. Close enough to hear what Jack said though, just barely. No, not Jack, not anymore.

Stake him? Could he stake him? Last time Damien had staked the Ripper, the curse had just finished a one-on-one with a giant spider monster the werewolves struggled with. He’d been a tattered, broken vampire, weakened and drained. Now, Jack looked like he’d just finished his warm-up and was ready for a proper fight. It would have been funny that he was standing around in his underwear, if not for the look on his face, a blend of excitement and psychotic glee.

Damien scanned the sky for movement. There was none save for two crows, who broke off from what looked like pursuit of fleeing Carthians, and now circled the sky above. Like vultures. But no swarm came, no flock of crows, no legion of rats, nothing. Either the Ripper was saving them for when he needed them, realized they wouldn’t be of use with his targets fleeing, or he actually cared about the Masquerade. Strong as he was, even the curse couldn’t take on a few billion humans armed with flamethrowers, and nukes.



Jack walked toward the Carthians. Damien recognized them. Garner, Kass, Bella, and Steve. Garry had about ten ancilla in the Carthians, but not all vampires did combat well. These four did, and were often considered the biggest threats in the Carthians save for Garry himself. Frontliners, fighters, people who liked to throw down. People who probably agreed with an anarchist like Joe.

The four of them spread out as they circled Jack. Were they serious? Did they actually want to fight him?

No no no, everything was going wrong. Killing Joe was recoverable. Everyone knew the man had a problem, that he was hungry for action. But if the Ripper started wiping out Garry's whole covenant, everything would be over. The war would turn into chaos. The Prince would get involved. It'd be a giant mess. And Damien and Maria's goal of reviving the Lancea et Sanctum in Dolareido would be lost.

Damien pulled out his phone.

---

~~The Ripper~~

"Gotta be honest. I expected you fucks to run." He grinned at each ancilla as they surrounded him. "You really think you shitheads can beat me? Four of you?"

"You can't use your pets here," Bella said. "The cops will be here soon. You won't violate the Masquerade."

Jack tapped his chin with a finger. "True. I don't want to piss off the blue."

"You don't want to piss off your Prince."

"My Prince?" He raised a brow at that. "Ain't no Prince of mine. But either way, I won't summon my legion. Yet. But hey, if you

fucks think you can really fight me, you better commit. Otherwise Cory is gonna die.”

Bella stood up straighter before snapping her gaze to Cory.

Of course Cory stuck his head out from behind a car, and looked at Jack, confused. Looked him right in the eyes.

Poor Cory. The young Gangrel was only twenty years embraced, far as the Invictus knew, and a bit more timid than his stupid dog brethren. He clearly wasn't used to a Ventrue being up front and center, and a single mention of his name was enough to have the man looking at Jack with wide eyes.

Jack glared at him, and again, Cory didn't look away. Eye contact was powerful, even without Dominate. Predators knew that, human predators, humans who knew how to prey on weak-minded fools. If you wanted to crush someone's mind, break them, reduce them to a pathetic child incapable of a single thought, you met the eyes. Glare into their useless souls and make them submit. Cory couldn't look away.

Jack reached out, and broke the kid's mind. Like snapping a plastic spoon.

Come to me.

Cory walked to him.

Steve was closest, and he made a running dive to get in Cory's way, but Jack's suggestion was powerful and overruling. Breaking someone's natural desire for self preservation was the hardest part of the mind to break. Everyone had self preservation as the most basic, deepest instinct, and if you could override that, you could make anyone do anything.

Cory jumped over Steve, and ran over to Jack before standing beside him. Ah, the look of shock on Steve's face, and the blank stare in Cory's face. Fucking beautiful.

“So, get over here and fight me, fist to fist, or I rip off Cory's head, just like I did Joe. Or maybe I'll rip off his limbs first and see how much damage it takes before he finally goes poof.” Grinning wider, Jack kicked at the pile of ash under his feet again.

The four ancilla glared at him, but they were smart enough to avoid meeting his eyes. When the fists started flying, Jack wouldn't be able to break their minds. Even Jack the Ripper took longer than half a second to Dominate someone, and they probably knew it. That was fine. He wanted to get his hands dirty tonight.

“Well, let's hear it,” Jack said. “Let's hear the speech. Let's hear how much the Invictus suck, how horrible we all are. Let's hear about how we're all a bunch of soulless lawyers and greedy accountants. Let's hear the stupid bullshit about how Invictus are evil, and you Carthians are the passionate, sympathetic good guys trying to make this city a better place. Let's hear all the ridiculous, delusional crap you tell yourselves. Come on! Now's your chance for last words.”

They looked at each other, checking to see if anyone actually had something to say. Apparently they did not. The only thing Jack saw there was panic. Joe was dead, and Cory was soon to follow. Say one thing for the idiots, they were in it for each other. A bunch of morons who shared stupid ideals, and they'd die beside each other for their stupid ideals.

“Oh, before I forget.” Jack kicked at Cory's leg, the knee, the outside of the knee. Crunch. It was enough pain to immediately break his suggestion on Cory's mind, and the man fell to his side screaming. “Don't want you going anywhere.”

That was enough to set them off, and the four Carthians ran for him. Perfect.

Of course, the Carthians weren't so stupid to think they could just take him in a straight fight. They'd been outside for a bit now, and in the chaos, some of them had gotten some guns again. So much for a fist fight, Bella pulled out a pistol and unloaded on him while her three friends rushed him. Hell, it was actually a smart move. The bitch was a good shot, and Jack had to lift a hand and cover his face to stop bullets from slamming into his head. Some bullets hit his chest, and one hit his jaw, but they flattened against his skin and flesh, barely able to scratch him as his pulsing snakes of blood emerged again as she fired.

She threw the gun aside, getting the hint, and he grinned at her as the coils of dark crimson seeped back into his skin. Of course the moment he did, the other three Kindred dove at him, a delightful mix of fear and anger on their faces.

It quickly turned to mostly fear as Jack spun, and backhanded the fucker going for his back, Garner. Slow, already injured, Garner fell to his side hard. Useless. But Steve came at Jack fast, looking for some payback for Jack smashing his head in with a gun. And sure enough, he came at Jack with a knife.

Jack stuck his hand out as Steve came at him for the stomach stab, and Steve sank the blade up through his left hand. With vitae hardening Jack's flesh, Steve had come at him hard and fast, intent on puncturing him like he was a wall of wood, and the blade pushed up through Jack's palm, right between the middle and ring finger. The pain was an afterthought, lost in the glory of a good fight. A great fight! Jack clamped his hand down on Steve's hand, over his knuckles and the blade grip, and squeezed. Steve screamed.

Kass came at him opposite of Steve, and Jack was off balance, holding Steve and slowly crushing his hand into mulch, but leaving

his right side open. Kass's throat was looking better, but there was still a big dent there, and she didn't run with as much speed as she should have. Probably trying to avoid putting bouncing pressure on her fucked up back. Well, stupid her, she came at him a little too slow, and he turned to face her, Steve in toe, until they were face to face.

Kudos to her for still having the balls to come at him straight regardless, and she swung a straight punch for his face. He took it, head twisting slightly with the impact, but he punched her back a moment later, and he punched at lot harder. She went down, clutching her jaw; not broken, since she rolled with the punch, but close. She got up quickly and dove at him, full body tackle, maybe thinking if she got in close she could grapple him.

Jack spread his feet, braced his weight, and spun. Steve swung around him as his feet came off the street and stuck out with inertia, and Jack let go of his hand when he collided with Kass. A beautiful side-on collision that had them both rolling over the asphalt like fucking dolls. And hey, the knife was out of Jack's hand too, so that was nice. He watched, happy tickles working up his spine, as Steve and Kass rolled over the street hard enough to tear open skin.

And then thud, something hit Jack. The ground came up to Jack pretty damn quick, and he collided with his chest first before his chin crashed into it. Thankfully a Kindred used vitae to fuel their body, not their actual organs, not truly, or he'd have suffered a pretty nasty concussion from how hard his head hit the street. Someone had fucking tackled him when he'd been distracted. Bella was on top of him, and she was smart enough to pull out a knife as she dove for him.

Once, twice, three times she stuck him in the back with the knife, putting every bit of strength she had into it. But when she tried the

fourth time, he forced the blood out through his skin again, and the knife sunk halfway into his flesh, and got stuck.

He rolled over. She was a smart enough grappler to stay on top of him as he did, letting go of the knife, but she wasn't strong enough to keep him from pushing down on the street until he was sitting up. And she didn't expect him to drive his forehead into her chest. Not a good angle for maximum damage, but enough to send her back and reeling.

“Ow! That hurt!” He reached behind him and pulled the knife out of his back. “You got a little fight in you. I like that.” The best Ledger impression.

“Fuck you.”

“Ugh, my wit is wasted on plebs like you.” Laughing until it echoed through the street, he marched toward Bella, stomping his feet as he did. “Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of a Carthian bitch about the lose her head.” He winked at her, and waggled her knife in front of him.

And there it was, panic, fear. Bella scrambled to her feet and put her fists up, eyes on his for a split second before she remembered to avoid holding his gaze. It was kind of annoying, how everyone knew now how quickly he could Dominate people. It was so much fun when they didn't see it coming.

He took a step toward her. She took a step back. He chuckled darkly, licked a fang as he drank in the fear, and took another step.

“I'm going to cut open your gut, and rip out your insides piece by piece. I wonder how many organs it'll take before you pop. Then I'm going to rip your friends apart.” He pointed the knife at Garner, still recovering from what looked like a broken jaw, and Kass and Steve. They hadn't just hit each other when he threw Steve at her, they'd rolled over the street a dozen times at high speed. They'd broken

bones. Well, more bones. “I’m going to collect all your ashes into envelopes and mail them to Garry. And—”

Bella stopped walking. He stopped talking. She blinked past him, eyes snapping to something else, something she didn’t expect. Jack expected it, the sudden wave of power that came from behind him. It was bound to happen eventually, and it might as well happen now.

Slowly, Jack turned around, and sure enough, there he was. The mother fucking sheriff of Dolareido.

Daniel stood there in his usual dark trench coat, wearing his subtle glasses, and he looked at Jack with the steady gaze he always did.

“Carthians,” the man said. “Take your injured and leave.”

Jack laughed. Old faithful was a stone cold fuck.

“Howdy sheriff. If you’re gonna entertain me instead of these fuckwads, I’m cool with that.” Shrugging, Jack turned toward Cory, and kicked him. Of course he put force into it, bracing his weight as best he could, so he could send the dude half flying, half rolling toward Bella, screaming as he did. A fresh dent in his side, complete with ripped open flesh, threatened to spill his withered spleen.

She caught him as best as she could, but she wasn’t in the best condition either. All of them had broken bodies, and running on vitae to keep from collapsing. She fell back with a whimper of pain as the man flattened her to the asphalt.

The others joined her. Slowly, Steve and Kass got up off each other, Steve cradling his hand and Kass holding her throat. Garner clutched his broken chest and jaw, but after a couple steps, he collapsed, and cried out in agony as he did. Steve and Kass helped

him, each slipping under one of his arms and half carrying him as they walked.

“Bye guys,” Jack said. “But remember, we’re not done. You poked the bear. I’ll make sure you’re all dead, sooner or later.”

Each and every one of them managed a quick glance to him, and he relished the look in their eyes. They were terrified of him now. He’d have been hard if he’d been Blushing Life.

“Jack,” Daniel said. “Where is your necklace?”

Jack shrugged and gestured back to Vivi. “She’s holding onto it.”

“You didn’t destroy it?”

“Well if I did that, you, the Prince, and Elaine would bust my ass and do everything you could to lock me up, wouldn’t you?” He winked. “I’m just out for a bit of fun.”

The sheriff, predictably, didn’t react to his words. The perfect straight man, Jack could make a living telling jokes with this guy.

Daniel looked to the building beside them as it went up in flames. “We have four minutes before the police, and fire department arrive.”

“Of course.”

“Will you put the necklace back on?”

“Not until I’ve had a bit more fun.”

Daniel glanced to the fleeing Carthians. “I ... don’t think Jack would want you to.”

“I am Jack.”



The sheriff frowned. Subtle, but any sort of expression from this statue was saying a lot.

“Vivienne, are you alright?”

“Y-Yes.”

Ah, right, Daniel was her grandsire. Jack felt his smile grow as he looked at the sheriff, and then glanced toward his grandchilde. A menacing glance.

Message received. Daniel’s scowl remained, and he adjusted his leather gloves as he glared at the Ripper. “How do you want to do this?”

“I wanted a good fist fight, but these Carthians failed to deliver. So, I won’t summon my army, if you don’t use the sword. Deal?” Jack looked the man up and down a moment, waiting for a response. “Come on, hit me!”

Daniel hit him.

‘Hit him’ didn’t really put into words what it was like to get hit by a five-hundred-year-old Mekhet who’d been working as an enforcer for most of that. Daniel was a blur of movement. If there’d been any indicator, any tip off in his eyes and face, Jack didn’t see it. All he saw was a haze of trench coat and glasses come at him, and then a fist collided with his face.

Jack had been smart enough to pull up his vitae and reinforce his flesh, but he’d also let the blood coils seep back into his skin, dormant. Mistake. Well, even someone as awesome as him could make mistakes and underestimate someone. But damn, the sheriff hit a lot harder than a Mekhet had any right to, and Jack flew back as the world spun around him.

The moment he landed, Daniel was on him, grabbing him from behind. Not mounting and punching, like Bella had tried. Daniel was smarter than that bitch. Daniel got behind him, and picked him up by hooking his arms under Jack's armpits.

Daniel was a tall man. Jack was not. Daniel hunched over him as he hooked his arms up under Jack's shoulders and then his hands behind Jack's head, pinning him under the sheriff's weight and forcing Jack's chin down to his sternum.

"You serious, sheriff? A full nelson?"

The sheriff said nothing. What an asshole.

Well, grappling was definitely an art Daniel knew that Jack did not. And Daniel had a hundred pounds on Jack. For all intents and purposes, Jack was already defeated.

Jack pushed his arms forward and together, driving the strength of them directly against Daniel's grip against his head. It hurt having his chin driven down into his own sternum, but it also directly put the strength of his arms against the strength of Daniel's forearms and ability to keep his fingers entwined. And Jack was fucking strong. Daniel's grip broke, and he slipped his arms out before Jack could trap them against his sides.

But he was too close to avoid getting a proper backhand as Jack spun around. Back of the fist to Daniel's shoulder was enough to have the sheriff flung to the side, but like a fucking acrobat the man rolled through the air with it, and landed on his feet and one hand. With the sword still in its sheathe on his back, and the trench coat flapping in air, he looked like a fucking shitty cyberpunk ninja or something.

Daniel rubbed his shoulder where Jack hit him. It'd been a good hit, something broke, but Daniel adjusted the shoulder with an audible crunch, and rotated it around as he looked at Jack.

“You heal fast for a Mekhet.”

“Practice.”

Jack laughed. “You get beat up a lot?”

“Not as much as you.”

“Touché!” Jack rubbed his jaw as he grinned at the man.

In typical, cold, brutal fashion, Daniel came at him unannounced. Such a shame. The sheriff wasn't interested in goofing around. To him, this was just a job to get over with as efficiently as possible, and that meant no banter. Dude was not the sort to talk around the water cooler.

But Jack the Ripper was! People at the office loved him.

Jack ducked. Apparently Daniel didn't expect Jack to summon enough speed to do that, cause he collided with Jack, chest to Jack's upper body. Jack laughed as he punched up, and nailed the fucker in the chest.

“Haha!”

Daniel, somehow, managed to jump with the punch, and back as well, landing on his feet again, with minimal damage. There'd been contact, knuckles to bone, and the sheriff rubbed his chest for a second with the most dispassionate, stone face Jack had ever seen. This wasn't nearly as much fun as Jack had been hoping.

*Don't you dare hurt him.*

Shut up kid. I'm having fun. You lock me up for weeks and expect me to just sit around when I finally get out?

*If you hurt him, the Prince will—*

Do what? She can't hurt me, without hurting you. So shut the fuck up and let me have some fun. If he dies, he dies.

The Ripper rolled his eyes, and crushed the voice in his head. He was in the driver seat now, and he wasn't going to let some idiot child he was forced to share this body with dictate a god damn thing. Shut. The fuck. Up.

"You're fast, you know that?"

Daniel didn't respond.

"If you were using your sword, I bet you might even be able to hurt me. Maybe even kill me."

Daniel didn't respond.

"Course, if we were playing for realsies, I wouldn't be out here, would I? I'd be hiding in my tower, like the Prince. I'd be sending my legions, my thralls and ghouls, my pets, my army. I'd be sipping a fine red and looking out the tower window, while my latest ghoul blows me. Sound about right? Maybe something Viktor would have done?"

Daniel didn't respond. Fuck, this guy was more than just boring. He was professional. Ugh!

Sighing, and wearing his biggest, best grin, Jack pointed his hand at Daniel, and made the classic 'come at me' gesture. He was tempted to voice it, say something like 'come at me bro' or 'get over here!' or some such, but it'd wasted on this fossil.

Sure enough, Daniel came at him. Faster. Jack didn't manage to duck this time, and the fist came straight for his face, dead center on the nose. And the fucker put some power in it too, cause despite Jack keeping his vitae up and ready, strengthening his body and hardening it, his nose went crunch.

Jack flew back, hit the street, rolled a half dozen times, and collided with the front of a car. The bumper dented in, and so did the hood where the back of Jack's head smashed down onto it.

Seeing stars, Jack fell forward to his hands and knees, and blinked a bunch until the world stopped spinning. Concussion? Nah, vampire. Broken bones? Nah, super vampire. Broken nose? Apparently. Teetering, Jack stood up, got his bearings quick, and glared at the asshole a good fifty feet down the street from him.

Daniel clenched and unclenched the fist he used to punch Jack. He'd hurt himself, punching that hard.

Chuckling loud enough it echoed against the big, empty office buildings, Jack began the walk back to the sheriff. And naturally, Daniel stared at him with those cold eyes the whole time. Perfect.

“Come on, no speech? Nothing to say at all? Sheriff, I'm giving you the perfect opportunity to tell the audience what you're thinking?”

Daniel didn't so much as glance at the nearby Kindred, thralls, and ghouls who stared on. His eyes remained focused on Jack, hands at his sides, elbows slightly bent and ready to get his hands up again. Laser focus.

As Jack closed the distance, he reached deep down into him, found the biggest wrecking ball he could, and smashed it into the bastard's mind.

Jack the Ripper was strong, fueled by an ancient curse passed onto his bloodline by the Strix themselves, forged from the ashes of diablerie. He had power in spades. But tackling the mind of an ancient vampire as old as Daniel was a pretty big task. The most powerful Ventrue didn't go around dominating vampires of similar age, that's just not how it worked. With Dominate, you punched down, and broke the minds of weaker foes.

Punching straight, hitting Daniel's mind, was like a regular human punching a tree. Jack's assault came to a quick stop as he smashed into a giant wall of steel in the sheriff's mind. And within the metaphor of his mind, Jack the Ripper looked up and up at the steel gate that barred his way.

Beside him, Jack the weakling stood there, arms folded across his chest, a big stupid grin on his face, and he gestured to the gate.

“You think you can break that down?”

The Ripper snarled, and slashed out at the gate with one of his many claws. He poured his power into it, and sure enough the metal scratched and dented where his will struck it. But that was all.

“Yes.”

“Sometime this century?”

The Ripper snarled down at the stupid boy. “It wouldn't take a century.”

“It'd certainly take longer than a minute though. And right now, you and Daniel are standing in a street, with a bunch of Invictus and Carthians watching.”

The metaphor around them happened a thousand times faster than the physical world outside. The Ripper had time to think and work, but he knew he wouldn't be breaking into this fortress.

A glance around showed more than the steel wall. Beyond it, a steel building with no windows, square and beyond boring. And above that, a pale sky, with no moon or sun or clouds. And underneath their feet, endless dark stone, or metal, or something hard and featureless.

Fortress didn't do justice how fucked up this man's mind was.

The Ripper had traces of memory of the lives that came before him. He had shreds of moments from Julias's life, before siring Jack. Of Viktor's life, before he sired Julias. Of Elaine, before she sired Viktor. And of Susanna, before she sired Elaine.

None of them had minds like this, but then, his chain of memory didn't extend to their minds post siring a child. But he doubted any of them had developed a mind quite like this. Susanna definitely didn't. Her mind was an orgy of sex and gore and murder and rape and torture, an excess of stimulation that she relished. Elaine and Viktor and Julias's minds were predictable, small houses that slowly raised into castles, and would have continued to grow if this incarnation of the Ripper had stayed within.

What sort of fucked up past did Daniel have to turn his mind into this? No wonder he was interested in an angry bitch like Athalia. Her stupid loud voice was probably the only thing on the planet capable of penetrating this shit.

Snarling, the Ripper let the Dominate hold go. Instantly the streets of North Side were visible again, the heat of the burning office building, and the eyes of the onlookers. To them, they'd have seen a couple seconds pause in the fight, nothing more. To Daniel and Jack, it was a failed attempt to Dominate.

Daniel didn't even bother grinning, but he did take it as a sign to attack. Again, Daniel came at him, and again, it was a blur of movement. It wasn't just speed. Daniel was a masterclass assassin, and used his Cloak to hide his movements. Jack, normal Jack, still remembered what it was like when Daniel had slaughtered the dozen or so Kindred that'd been with Lucas, after he'd used Damien to kill him. The sheriff had been a ghost, appearing for only a second to slice someone in half, before disappearing again.

Well, Jack was not some young Kindred. Jack poured his vitae into his senses, into his awareness, and jerked his head to the right.

Daniel's fist came at him, for the head again, with enough speed to make a car jealous. But he'd underestimated Jack, probably because of the failed Dominate attempt. The curse was strong, very strong, and Jack summoned enough speed to tilt his head out of the way, and get his closer hand up and on Daniel's arm.

Finally, a look of surprise on the bastard's face. Subtle, but there, and it made the fight worth it.

Jack got his left hand's grip on the man's punching hand, his right, and he grinned at the bastard as he returned the punch, straight for the fucker's chest. And this time, with a firm grip on the fucker's wrist, Daniel wasn't going anywhere. All Jack needed was an anchor and he could pour his strength into something, and that anchor was their connection.

Broken bones. He felt them, the delicious sensation of bones breaking like fucking pasta noodles snapping in half, and Daniel's face lit up with pain and rage like he was Italian. No scream though. The others screamed, the Carthians, screamed like stuck pigs. But not Daniel, just a grimace. It took the sheriff a second to get his precious statue face back, but Jack had already lined up another punch.

Jack missed. Daniel stepped back far, twisting away even as his right arm stayed locked in Jack's left hand. But with some distance between them, Daniel had enough room to bring up one of his feet for a face kick, taking advantage of Jack's forward momentum from the missed punch. Punches hit hard, but kicks hit harder, and Jack only just managed to twist his head enough to keep the boot from colliding with his nose. It'd only just gotten realigned and he didn't want to do it again.

Apparently Daniel really was a ninja, because he balanced on one leg, and with torso facing Jack, kept the same kicking foot up in the air, bent at the knee and hip, and kicked out again, this time at



Jack's chest. Not the power of a full kick but it still fucking hurt, and Jack recoiled with the impact. Which left Daniel an opening to kick him in the face, with the same foot, all without lowering the leg. And he repeated the motion several times.

In a shitty kung fu movie, it'd have been silly, with exaggerated sound effects. With an elder vampire doing it, it was pain, and Jack groaned as the five-hundred-year-old Mekhet's boot collided with his chest and face hard enough Jack could feel his hardened flesh struggle against it. Daniel's boot also started to split with the strength of impact, but it didn't stop the sheriff from kicking him again and again anyway.

Snarling, Jack yanked on the man's hand, hard. That sent Daniel toward Jack's left, and Jack toward his right, and with enough force they both fell over. But Jack didn't let go, and he scrambled over to Daniel to get beside him. He punched down, but Daniel rolled out of the way. The street cracked around Jack's fist like glass. Daniel had half rolled, half flipped, getting back to his feet and yanking on his right hand. For a second Jack thought he was trying to get the hand back, but he yanked Jack right toward him, and like a yoyo, Jack came up to him.

Daniel slammed his forehead down against Jack's nose.

"Fuck!" Jack slumped down, dangling from Daniel's clutched wrist, nose broken again. "Oh you fucking asshole!"

"Jack, get a hold of yourself and—"

Jack squeezed. Fuck this. He didn't want to squeeze and potentially lose the anchor he had on the slippery bastard, but he did anyway, and Daniel's face broke into more delicious, subtle signs of agony as Jack crushed the bones in the man's wrist. And that created a lovely opening for Jack to get back to his feet, and punch the fucker straight in his nose. And Jack punched harder than this fucker. The man's glasses shattered and flew away.

And Jack didn't let go of his hand either. Oh the glorious way the sheriff twisted onto the street as he fell from the impact, and his broken wrist bones ground against each other. Nose shattered, he looked up at Jack with a quick snap of awareness, and far faster than Jack would have, recovered and got back to his feet.

"I'm going to beat the shit out of you," Jack said, grinning as he squeezed harder on the sheriff's broken wrist. It was enough to stop the man from whatever punch or kick he was about to throw. "I'm going to beat you into fucking pulp. I'm going to smash your bones." To prove his point, he yanked on Daniel's wrist again, and punched him in the other shoulder. For all Daniel's speed and strength, he didn't have the resilience of a Ventrue or the curse, and he almost fell again as the punch broke something. "I'm going to rip off your kneecaps. I'm going to rip out your teeth and make you swallow them. I'm going to break your face in until there's nothing left, and Annie has to spoon feed you blood for a decade before you can feed yourself again. I'm going to—"

A small jolt of pressure made Jack stop, and he blinked down at his chest. Something thin and sharp was sticking out of him.

Jack the Ripper growled as he looked over his shoulder, at Damien. "I'm going to fucking kill you." He spun, and Damien jumped back, but not fast enough. The back of Jack's fist collided with the man's side, and sent him spiraling through the air before crashing into a streetlight.

Jack let go of Daniel, and turned to face his so called friend, and his wide eyes. "I'm going to kill you. Then I'm going to rip Fiona's guts out, and ... and..."

---

~~Damien~~

Thank the Lord.

Slowly, Damien crawled back up, and cradled his side where the Ripper had backhanded him. The curse was faster than Damien expected, and that single hit was enough to break several of Damien's ribs.

But thank the Lord, Jack's eyes closed as he slumped forward, and fell on the street.

"Damien," Daniel said, and he gently held his broken wrist. "Thank you."

"Can't believe you agreed to a fist fight with ... the curse. You know it won a fist fight with one of those azlu monsters. It won one against Sándor too, you know. In his gargoyle form."

The sheriff sighed as he reached up to his broken nose with his good hand, and righted it with a crunch. Mekhet weren't as resilient as Ventrue or Gangrels, but Daniel was hundreds of years old, and could probably recover from simple wounds easily enough. Just, maybe not a dozen of them.

"Lesson learned."

"Did ... did he destroy the necklace?"

"No!" Vivi ran over to them, a small bag in hand. Her only hand. "No, it's here!"

Both men blinked down at her, before Daniel finally managed a small smile.

Damien took the bag from her, took out the necklace, thanked the Lord yet again, and slipped it over the head of the unconscious vampire.

"Vivi," Damien said, "your arm?"

“It caught fire, cause of that asshole Joe. Jack ... tore it off, to save me.”

“Leave it to Jack to make a hard decision fast.”

Nodding, Vivi knelt down beside the man. “I ... I knew the curse was dangerous. Everyone’s been talking about it. But he ripped Joe’s head off! Ripped it off!”

Farewell Joe. You will not be missed. Not by anyone outside the Carthians, at least.

“And...” Vivi sighed and shook her head. “And Bruce is dead, too. The fire got him.”

Damien winced as he looked up at the burning building. “Garry—”

“I don’t think it was Garry. Joe wanted to do this on his own. Or at least, it seemed like that.”

The sheriff raised a single finger. “Either way, the fight’s over. Damien, get everyone out of here.”

Right, get everyone out. He wasn’t Invictus, but he was a Right Hand.

“Right. And—”

Daniel reached down with his good arm, and flung Jack over his good shoulder. “I’ll get Jack to the tower, where we can awaken him safely.”

Damien stared at the man. How was the sheriff still standing? He’d watched the fight from a distance, as far a distance as he could manage with binoculars, so he could run in if he ever found Jack truly distracted. Damien was sure one good punch from the Ripper

would take Damien's head off; it nearly did. And Daniel had taken several.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. Get this situation handled." The sheriff nodded to his grandchilde, and the burning building.

Damien returned the nod, and as the sheriff disappeared into his cloak, Damien noticed the man limp as he faded. He was deeply injured.

The others didn't know, they hadn't seen. Damien knew. He'd seen how hard the curse could punch when he had to use his fists. The others didn't realize that Jack had punched the sheriff hard enough to break concrete, hard enough to break the legs of a giant spider monster, hard enough to kill younger Kindred outright. Hard enough he'd left a fist print in the street.

And why? Daniel could have come at him with his sword. That could have killed Jack outright. Maybe. The blood shield the curse could summon might have been strong enough to prevent it from cutting into him at all. And if he got angry, he might have thrown the Masquerade to the dirt, and summoned his legion.

Daniel risked his life to play it safe, and to avoid killing Jack too. All for Antoinette.

That was a friend.

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~~Antoinette~~

She removed the stake from the boy's back, and waited in front of him.

He dangled within her prison, arms up and bound by chains. The prison had been designed to contain even the most powerful

paranormal creatures, but the raw strength the curse demonstrated rivaled that of Antoinette or Jacob, ancient Daeva and Nosferatu and naturals of strength. If Antoinette needed to, she knew she had the strength to lift a truck and hurl its mass. If she needed to, she knew her strength allowed her to bend the hardest metals, and tear through the sturdiest walls. With centuries of power to draw from and a Daeva's natural affinity for strength, she was confident she was one of the strongest creatures on the planet.

The curse's strength terrified her. For it to be able to Dominate entities quickly and easily, summon entire legions of creatures easily, recover from and prevent wounds easily, and also summon absurd strength? How many years would a Ventrue need to achieve such power? A millennium?

Jack snapped open his eyes, and she found his eyes as the boy looked around in panic.

It was him.

"My love," she said, smiling. "How are you?"

"Antoinette? I ... oh ... oh." He looked down as depression rushed him with all the subtlety of the fire that burned the Tanvar building. "Oh christ, I made everything worse."

"How so?" She reached up and undid the shackles upon his wrists, and then the shackles upon his ankles. A precaution she was not sure would hold him, but the look in his eyes told her the truth. Perhaps it was the torpor, or the necklace, but he was himself again.

She needed to thank Elaine once again for the artifact. Whatever plots her old friend schemed, she had helped her love far more than anyone else had.

"That fucking asshole Joe attacked the building, even set it on fire. It got Bruce. Nearly got Vivienne."

“But not you?”

“It got me, pretty bad, but...”

Ah yes, the curse summoned its power to protect him. As deadly as the sun and fire were to vampires, those with the strength to summon the Juggernaut’s Gait to protect themselves were immune to them, and indeed almost all potential sources of injury. For several seconds. The curse’s ability to use its power for an extended period of time was nothing short of extraordinary, and no doubt had saved Jack’s life on multiple occasions. Terrible power at a terrible cost.

They walked together, and Antoinette held out a hand toward one of the many rooms filled with chairs and couches. A room with no other *raison d’être* other than socializing.

Jack sat down upon a sofa chair, and she sat upon the end of a couch near him.

“What happened?”

“That fucking asshole Joe. I knew he hated the Invictus, but I didn’t think it’d be this bad. He let it drop that he wasn’t happy with Garry, so I’m guessing Garry told him to ease up with his vendetta against us. He didn’t like that. Guess he exploded.”

“Oui, I imagine he did.” The damn fool. A perfect example of all the things Antoinette fought against. “And you killed him?”

Jack, sitting upon the chair in nothing but his boxers, looked at Antoinette as if an anchor hung from his neck.

“I ripped his head off.”

“Oh ... oh dear.”

The boy slowly nodded as he leaned back into the cushions, and closed his eyes. “Ripped Vivi’s arm off too. But it was the only way I could stop the fire from spreading.”

“The fire sounds unusually ravenous.”

“Yeah. It was some liquid or something, from one of those incendiary devices Terra Den’s made.”

Of course. Garry had chosen well, siring Jeremy Long. The Invictus underestimated the Gangrel’s ability to make decisions with the future in mind, as had Antoinette. And now their war was fought on even ground, whereas the Invictus usually had the advantage in terms of hardware.

“And ... the curse emerged.”

Jack nodded, eyes still closed. “It did.”

Antoinette mirrored Jack’s sigh, and watched the boy as he kept his vision sealed. Slowly, he let his head fall back against the couch, and his arms went limp between his thighs.

“It had the opportunity to destroy the necklace,” she said. “Once again, it did not.”

“He ... it knows I need it. It’s playing the long game, like a typical vampire. It thinks it’ll get me with time. If it destroyed the necklace, it knows when I eventually got control again, I’d stake myself, or you’d stake me and lock me up or something.”

A cruel, painful reality that Jack accepted without hesitation. Prudent, and disheartening, to say the least.

“And you believe you will be able to wrestle back control of your body every time?”



A painful question, but it had to be asked, and he finally opened his eyes to look at her.

“You know I don’t.”

“Oui. We are under a time limit.”

“More than one.”

“And Daniel tells me you did more than kill Joe.” Ah, poor Jack. The word ‘kill’ pulled a wince from him, and she reached out to touch his knee. “You nearly killed five other Carthians.”

“I was going to, before Daniel and Damien showed up. I would have. The Ripper would have. He would have killed every one of them.” Despite Jack’s attempts to refer to the taint that infected his mind as ‘it’, ‘he’ yet again rose in his words. The menace was a powerful force in more ways than one.

“Daniel tells me the curse challenged him to a fist fight.”

“It takes time to summon an army. The curse just wanted a fight it had a chance of winning. It couldn’t penetrate Daniel’s mind, so we know it isn’t God, despite its opinions.”

“That is good. But ... the damage my old friend suffered was severe.” The curse listened to every word they said, so Antoinette worded her statements carefully. But no doubt the curse knew how close it had come to defeating Daniel.

Jack winced and sighed again. “Could Viktor hit that hard?”

“Non.”

“Fuck, it’s so damn strong, despite me — and it I suppose — being a Ventrue. If Daniel had used his sword, it’d have been a different situation. Maybe...”

Maybe. Yes, the curse and its mastery of the Juggernaut Discipline was horrifying, if it could withstand the sword of her sheriff. But for all its power, the curse was not God, as Jack said. It could not penetrate Daniel's mind; no Ventrue could. And Damien, a skilled but young ancilla, managed to surprise it, and quite literally stab it in the back. Another weakness.

"The other Carthians," Antoinette asked, "why did they follow Joe into battle?"

"Not sure. Joe had beef with the Invictus, and with Viktor personally. I get the impression Viktor probably did some nasty shit to them. Like, seriously dark shit."

Antoinette tapped her chin with a finger as she let her mind wander. "I have monitored the activities of the Invictus since I arrived in Dolareido. Viktor Honors proved devious, frustratingly so. He performed many sleights against the Carthian in ways they could not directly accuse him of."

"Like any good businessman or politician."

"Indeed. I am sure Viktor has hurt their lives in ways even I am not aware of."

Groaning, Jack stood up, joined her on the couch, slipped under her arm, and cuddled into her side.

"Bruce is dead."

"I am sorry, my love."

"I ... I could have saved him, I think. Maybe. But Vivi was right there..."

The classic dilemma, and one of the greatest sources of guilt. When forced to pick between two people, one survives, one dies,

how does the chooser manage the guilt that follows? Antoinette had long grown immune to the irrational guilt such a choice led to, mostly, but for Jack, it would haunt him for years yet.

There was little to say. Jack knew the reality, far better than most. What was needed now was not words, but silence, rest, intimacy, and touch.

Sighing, Jack nuzzled into her side a little harder. Message received, she smiled down at the boy as she leaned back, and presented her lap to him. He set his head upon her legs, smiled up at her, and closed his eyes.

“Any luck getting Michael and Garry together?”

“I have pursued ideas, but I cannot share them with you.”

“Why? I—right, cause Michael might pick up on it if I say or do something odd.”

“Precisely.”

“I hope you get something together soon. I ... I don’t want to take this necklace off again.”

She nodded as she caressed his buzzed head, and earned a quiet sigh of pleasure from him as she brushed her hand against the grain.

“I am confident I can create the circumstance you wish, my love. I am not so certain you can turn it into the outcome you desire.”

“Neither am I, but I need to do something. It’s a shitty, sloppy plan, but it’s all I got.”

Nodding, she continued to caress his head, lulling the boy back into relaxation. “If there is a Kindred in this city that can force those

two mongrels to listen, it is you.”

“I hope so. Christ, I hope so.”

---

~~Natasha~~

Slowly, Natasha climbed out of the mess of limbs, and over to the camera. She flipped it off, and let out a slow, happy groan as her legs refused to stop shivering.

In her apartment, she and the boys had decided to make up for lost time from all their weeks separated. Sex, sex, and more sex. They were waiting until Avery felt she had a good opportunity to talk to Red Tide, and while Tash and the boys kept going into the Hisil to investigate stuff, they tried to remain more hands off. Didn't want Black Blood catching on to what they were up to. So, they had time for sex.

And Natasha had time to pursue her sudden interest in film! Well, not really film. Sure there was that, her getting to totally nerd-out on all the aspects to filming, the gear and lighting and stuff. But then there was the sex, and how much Dolareido — and Jessy — had poisoned her mind. A good girl does not like being in porn! But Dolareido insisted otherwise. Jessy insisted otherwise.

Despite her claims of being a good girl, she had enough self awareness to see where her sexual tastes were going. This latest film had a lot of ‘no please stop oh no don't you can't oh please not there no please let me go oh please’ dialogue in it. Also lots of grabbing, holding, fingers around throat, being held down, and getting fucked hard in all sorts of ways.

And it looked amazing on screen. Something about seeing her very tiny body and dainty frame bouncing around between two huge guys, was super arousing. It wasn't like Natasha was a curvy, super feminine creature, but having two big guys get all ravenous horny

and pound her until she was mewling and cumming and soaking them, all on camera, was strangely empowering. She didn't have to look like Jessie or Antoinette to be sexy.

But of course, part of that was just an excuse for the truth: she definitely had a CNC kink. Next time, maybe they could tie her up, like she was a prisoner? A helpless prisoner, not able to do anything, as two horny guards take an interest in her? Or maybe something a little more epic, like, she was a captured assassin! And two royal guards were having their fun with her while she plotted her escape.

Honestly, she kinda liked the former one better. Something about being helpless tickled her insides and made her smile. She definitely wasn't helpless, Antoinette had helped her see that. But in a sexual situation, when her boys were all over her? She was helpless when they fucked, a little, trapped between two much, much stronger men who were lost to their lust.

She squirmed with the pleasant memory as she saved the latest project to her laptop.

“Shower time!”

The boys sighed. Not a happy sigh, like her sighs. Annoyed sighs. But showering together was fun, and didn't always lead to sex. Not usually, at least.

They got showered — no sex — and changed the sheets on her bed. Then they climbed into it, and did the best thing ever. Post-sex cuddling. Though, since Art and Matt weren't into each other, just her, it made it difficult to find a good position. She tried being the little spoon, but that didn't work cause one of the boys got left out. She tried lying between them, but she couldn't hold onto both of them. Plus it made any sort of movement really awkward, legs and arms hitting people.

Ultimately, they had to settle on taking turns. So she cuddled Matt for a little while, kissed him and hugged him, then she cuddled Art for a little while. Kissed him and hugged him too. And then they did other stuff.

TV. Stream a movie and relax. Anything to make her stop thinking about all the horrible things happening.

“Words going around Jack really hurt the sheriff,” Art said. Thankfully he’d waited until the movie was over to say anything. A couple of hours not thinking about Jack and the sheriff’s fight had been nice.

Natasha whined and hit her head against his arm. “D-Don’t say that. You know it wasn’t him.”

“No you’re right. Guess I feel a little better about getting my ass beat by the Ripper though, if he was able to take on the sheriff. That dude is terrifying.”

“My sire isn’t ... t-terrifying.”

Matt, sitting on her other side, looked down and blinked at her. “Yeah he is.”

“Ok, he is. A little! B-But he’s not so bad, once you get to know him.”

Art laughed. “Hard to get to know a statue like him. How did you two ever meet?”

“It’s ... n-not a very impressive story. I was studying in university, and we met in the library. He was reading about some w-weird stuff, in the mythology section. I asked. We ... t-talked, sort of.”

“Sounds like the start of a professor-student porn.”

“Hey! There w-wasn’t any attraction there. Just, a shared interest, about mythology. Though thinking back on it, he m-must have been reading the book to learn about spirits.”

Ancient Egypt was a pretty big source of information about spirits, and how they interacted with humans. So much about their mythology was based on their environment. The desert, the Nile, the animals, and their lengthy interest in death. No doubt the Hisil around Egypt a few thousand years ago would have been a mighty sight, full of metaphor and powerful spirits. No doubt Antoinette had been researching it for her experiments. No doubt, Daniel saw something in Tash that night that made her a potential dragon in his eyes.

Natasha sighed as she melted against Matt’s arm. “Sometimes, I w-wonder ... about all the bad stuff that happened to me after becoming a vampire. Not me. My mom and dad. Sometimes I think ... m-maybe I resent Daniel for all that stuff.”

Art shook his head, and gave her a soft punch in the shoulder; he had the room, with her leaning against Matt.

“Not a chance. We’ve seen the look in your eyes when you talk about him, Natasha. Yeah, you’re sad about what happened to your parents. Anyone would be. But resenting him? Never seen that. If anything, you feel guilty.”

“I...” She knew she had a habit of feeling guilty about stuff. But awareness didn’t help all that much when dealing with a personality trait. “I guess I do. B-But about what?”

Art pulled her off Matt and into a hug against his side. “The stuff you told us about? About leaving the Ordo? Joining the Invictus?” He tightened his hug on her. “Why you thinking about this stuff now? Cause of Jack and Daniel fighting?”

“I guess, yeah. I ... I feel b-bad, knowing he got in a fight with Jack. More than I thought I would.” It’s not like she and her sire had a close relationship. “I d-don’t know. It’s weird. Daniel and I aren’t close, but ... but things happened, that make me...” Feel bad about him and for him. Leaving the Ordo when she was young had been painful, largely because, despite his cold exterior, she knew she’d hurt her sire.

Matt nodded to her. “I hear Jack, before the Ripper got out, did good work and saved Vivi’s life. That must make you feel good, right?”

“It does! It d-does...” A relationship she never quite managed to salvage. Part of her wondered if she’d do what Daniel did when Lucas showed up at the tower, with Tash as a hostage. Would she put Vivi’s life over the life of her friends? She didn’t know. She had a lot of questions about herself, about her relationship with Vivi, her relationship with Daniel, and how she fit in the Ordo. A turbulent time in her life.

Self reflection was a dangerous habit.

She smiled up at Matt and Art, and hugged each of them. As much as everything was getting super dangerous, the fact she could sit down and talk about personal, deep, important stuff with her boyfriends was a very big deal. It was, frankly, pretty amazing how much better her life had gotten in the past few years. Turbulent, with so many things having happened, but amazing.

And then the doorbell rang.

Natasha blinked at the boys, pulled out her phone, and checked for a missed message. Weird. People didn’t just show up unannounced, not in the modern world with technology available.

But a moment later, they all felt it. A heavy, powerful presence. The aura of an elder vampire making no effort to hide it.



Natasha gulped, got up, and answered the door.

“M ... Maria?”

“Natasha. I wished to speak with you.”

It was easy enough for an elder as powerful as Maria, and a fellow user of Obfuscate, to go walking through the city, and even building hallways, without being noticed by kine. With someone as powerful as Maria, kine could literally bump into her and think they'd tripped on their own feet.

But her Cloak was off now, and Natasha could see the corpse woman from close. Small as Maria was, Natasha was smaller, and she looked up at the disgusting, horrifying woman from only a couple feet away.

“T-To me? Is it ... important?”

Maria shook her head. “Personal.”

Personal? Natasha stared at the elder for a few seconds. Maria had visited her once before, where she'd sort of stumbled her way through an awkward conversation where the elder tried to salvage some trust between them. It'd been the first time Maria had ever shown any sort of vulnerability to Natasha, despite several decades of Natasha working in the Invictus, and years working as a Right Hand.

“Um, Matt, Art, can we meet up later?” They still had time before Avery got back to them.

“Sure?” Art said, squinting at Maria as he did.

Maria did a lot more than squint. She snarled. A quiet, dark sound, the sort you'd expect to hear out of a corpse in a white dress leaking mist everywhere. Natasha almost expected her to follow it

up with something like ‘you will die in seven days’ before she disappeared into a well.

“I’m s-sure. I’ll be fine.” Natasha stepped aside, and Maria stepped in. Maria could hold a gaze that’d break glass, and she pointed it at the boys as they put on their shoes and left. They tried to meet her eyes, but no one could beat Maria’s angry glare.

Once they were gone, Maria — not Natasha — closed the door, before she sighed and let the angry expression go.

“I am sorry for my anger. I am ... beyond redemption in that regard, I assume, when it comes to Avery and her pack members.”

“I t-told Avery you’re not dangerous, n-not in the way Avery’s investigating.”

“Yes, the way Avery is investigating.” Before Tash could say anything, Maria put up a hand. “I know you and the Prince and the Uratha are delving into something deadly within Dolareido, something outside of my purview. I was dragged into something, perhaps even framed, but I do not know enough to come to any solid conclusions. That is not why I am here to talk with you. Keep your secrets and keep them safe.”

Maria was smart. Maria was too damn smart. Natasha was sure Michael and Garry knew nothing about Black Blood, except that maybe it existed. The issue with the tears, the red wraiths protecting some of the tears, the potential damage Black Blood might cause to the Gauntlet and maybe even to other barriers between realms, all of that was well beyond what Michael and Garry could even think about, let alone plan to deal with. Those two lived in a world of territory, money, blood, and nothing else.

“Then w-why are you here to talk to me?” Tash stepped back and motioned for Maria to go wherever she wanted. She saw pink as she did. Pink sleeve? Tash blinked down at her arm. Oh shit, pajamas.

Well, she wasn't going to cuddle in a suit, but she didn't want to talk with her old boss in pink pajamas with blue bunnies on it either.

“I am here ... to talk about ... the harm I caused you, Natasha Vola.”

“Harm?”

“What I did to you, letting Lucas take you hostage.”

“Oh. B-But ... I thought we—”

Maria held up a hand again as she shook her head. “I had a ... painful conversation with Mister Terry. I realized that I have not ... that I have...” Sighing, Maria looked down for a moment, and then away. Whatever Jack had said to her had put a pretty big crack into her personality, because she never, ever showed vulnerability like this.

Hopefully that's what it was, vulnerability, and not some sort of trick so she could somehow betray Natasha again.

Betray. Ugh, such an ugly word. Natasha didn't like to think about what happened through that lens, but she also knew she had a habit of downplaying bad things that happened to her. Jessy had made it abundantly clear that yes, Maria had betrayed her; she'd had to yell it at Tash a few times, but she'd managed to sink the message in.

“I realized,” Maria continued, “that in our last conversation, I did not truly admit fault. That I did not apologize with the depth owed.”

“I ... thought...”

Sighing, Maria stepped past her to the TV, stood beside it, and peeked out the curtain before closing it again. Afraid someone might hear her apologize? Definitely vulnerable.

“No. What I said last time wasn’t good enough, Vola. I need to be clear, with you and myself. I need to admit painful truths, or I will be forever trapped in the past.” Maria looked at her, straight at her and into her, to the point Natasha froze. “I am sorry, truly sorry, Natasha. Not only did I do you a horrible deed, but I debased myself to do it. For a ... for something as juvenile as romance.”

Natasha gulped. Maria had implied all of this in their conversation about it, long ago, but she hadn’t really been able to say it.

“Romance isn’t j-juvenile.”

Maria smiled. “No, I suppose it is not. Nevertheless, it is important you understand that I am ... not that person anymore.”

Natasha got that impression before Maria had even said anything. The way Maria looked at her, the somber posture, the vulnerable expressions, it was all very not Maria.

“Th-Thank you, Madam Turio.”

Maria smiled at her. A genuine smile. Natasha froze. Can’t freeze twice, so she basically petrified. Which made Maria chuckle a little, before she pat her on the shoulder.

“If you ever need something of me, Natasha, ask. I did something horrible, and I will repay you that debt.”

Repay the debt? Did she know what she was saying? That was a pretty big debt, now that Natasha tried to put it in those terms.

“I ... I will, thank you.”

Smile unwavering, Maria nodded to her, and left.

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Tash the vampire, Sándor the monster, and Avery, Clara, Eric, Noah, and Arturo and Matthew the Uratha, all sat around in Natasha's apartment. Of course Natasha had trouble focusing on the task, considering the conversation she had with Maria just yesterday. Her conversation with Jack had apparently cracked the woman right open. A monolith no longer. Freaky.

Natasha, dressed in an actual suit now and not pajamas, shook her head. Focus! Important stuff.

"We f-found tears here," she pointed at the map displayed on her laptop, "here, and here, and here." Click click, she drew a thick red dot on each point.

"And we're ignoring old tears?" Noah asked. Natasha nodded. "Then, we know about tears here, here, and here." He took the mouse and repeated the procedure. "Thankfully none of the tears from the Gurihal — physical world — seem to be visible to the naked eye. Likely the work of Black Blood, not wanting the Kindred in Dolareido learning what it's up to."

Sándor nodded as he stepped in and took the mouse from Noah. Somehow, he knew how to use one. The elders preferred to use a touchscreen, and Kindred knew better than to push the issue; oldies liked to touch things with their fingers.

"I've traveled through the dream, and have found tears that could..." He frowned at the map of Dolareido on the screen. "How do I mark elevation?"

Natasha stood up straight. "Elevation?" She hadn't even thought of that! "Um, uh, g-give me a moment. I'll get this loaded in another program." Everyone stared on, Avery and Sándor with obvious confused expressions on their faces, as she loaded the 2D map of Dolareido, and set it as a flat plane in a 3D map of Dolareido used by the Invictus. A few seconds of tabbing between the programs, and she redrew the marks they'd made already.

Sándor took the mouse back, but frowned at the screen as the map rotated in three axes wildly.

Natasha managed to choke down a giggle, and took the mouse from him again. “T-Tell me where it is.”

The poor man sighed and nodded. Smart enough to use a mouse, not smart enough to understand how to hold middle click and drag a focus point through three planes.

“Up. Maybe a mile up.”

“Up there?” she asked. “W-Why?”

“It’s not easy to think about the dream realm as a place alongside the physical, unlike the spirit realm. But there is ... levels, to the dream world. There is distance.” He frowned as he looked down, processing. “It’s hard to think of it like that, but not impossible.”

Natasha was happy not trying. Maybe Begotten had some sort of sixth sense about it, but the time Natasha had been in the dream realm, she could not imagine trying to understand where it was in the physical world. It wasn’t in the physical world! Trying to locate where it fit in the real world was a strange idea.

“There is a connection,” Sándor said, reading her mind. “A geographic connection. Human minds are like tethers on the dream realm, and it’s ... attached to the world, in a way.” Nodding to himself, his words more for his own benefit than hers, he pointed at a spot. “Here. A nightmare about a city here. And here, a nightmare about a basement filled with the dead. And ... here, the hospital nightmare Jack, Clara and I found a tear in.”

She drew on the spot, but he shook his head. Of course, he was pointing at a 3D image on a 2D screen, and it took some back and forth before they got a good spot.

It made sense, in a strange way. The Begotten didn't tell Tash much, but Fiona told Damien a few things, and Damien told Tash a few things. Human minds — probably vampire minds too — dreamed, and lived in their own mental realm when they did, safe and protected, mostly. But sometimes they could have a dream or nightmare so powerful it created a mark in the dream world. It was a place, something to find. It had to have, if even in the most weird and indirect way, some geographic connection to the physical world.

She wasn't sure she entirely believed that, or if it was true, it could be like pointing out where a floating object was in the ocean on a map, and then saying it was still there months later. Maybe true, maybe not.

“And,” Sándor said, “here, here, and here.”

“Three above, three b-below?”

“Mhmm.”

“Dreams and n-nightmares?”

He shook his head. “Dreams and nightmares both go into the dream, which ... which isn't actually above, but it does feel like it rests above.” Oh god even Sándor didn't trust his coordinates. “The ones below are from The Great Below, including the one Jack, Clara and I came out of.”

“You went back there?” Clara asked.

“I've been there before. I'm sure I'll go there again.”

“Why?”

He managed a slow shrug as he looked at the screen. “Monsters go where we wish.”

Natasha blinked at him. It was easy to forget Sándor wasn't just a man, or even a paranormal like the vampires and werewolves. He was a nightmare monster, a whole different class of paranormal, a creature that vampires and werewolves could only look at with awe. More than once she'd heard Jessy or Jack compare them to Pennywise, in all regards, and that was far more terrifying an idea than any vampire or werewolf. Clowns were scary enough.

"It's still dangerous, don't get yourself killed," Avery said, earning a few raised eyebrows pointed at her. "If you're scouting for tears, and Tash is busy, ask us for help." More eyebrows raised. "Oh fuck off."

There were chuckles. Even Sándor managed a smile.

Natasha however, stared at the 3D map in front of her, and slowly rotated it with the mouse as she considered. That was a weird mess of dots.

"Anyone see a pattern?" Noah asked. Everyone shook their heads. "Natasha, any sort of algorithm you could run to test for possible patterns?"

"M-Maybe. I don't know how, but I could get someone in the Invictus to help." She stared at the arrangement some more. "But ... if ... if there's one more tear here," she pointed at a spot in Dolareido, beneath one of Sándor's, "I think I see a pattern."

"You do?" Noah almost sounded offended. Matt and Art chuckled at each other, earning a quick frown from the man. Private joke?

"Um, y-yes. Here. Three dots from above can be make a triangle. The three dots below can also be a triangle. B-but there's eight dots between them. Except, eight could be..." She added another dot, completing the point of a triangle, far sharper than the triangles above and below. Then she added some more dots, finishing more triangles, until the eight dots in the middle became twelve.



“It’d have taken us months, maybe years to find those,” Clara said, blinking.

Natasha smiled, and drew some lines, connecting the dots.

It was a weird shape, and a 3D shape at that. A six-pointed star plastered in the center of Dolareido, with a triangle above it that fit nicely into the star’s hexagon center, along with the triangle below it.

“I b-bet, if Sándor went looking, he might find a tear ... here.” She drew a dot above the three high ones he drew. “And here.” Another below the three on the bottom. She attached them with lines, completing an almost symmetrical, crystal shape. “I d-don’t know about how you’d find those. Those look ... high, and um, deep. But they’d confirm.”

Sándor returned to his usual statue face as he looked at the shape. “I can look, but you’re right. That is high, and deep. It would be dangerous looking for them.”

Noah shook his head. “It’s an interesting pattern you’ve created. And yeah, it would have taken us years to find those other tears, assuming they exist. We should check if they do. But we don’t have to find them all, just one or two to confirm this shape is probably what’s up. If it is, then...”

Avery nodded. “Then we check out what’s going on in the center.”

“We’ve been there before,” Clara said. “Didn’t find anything unusual. It’s just a street in South Side, right?”

There was only one special thing about that spot in that particular road. According to the map, it was basically the most center point of the populated part of the city. People typically thought of the Elysium Tower as the center Dolareido, but it was more the center of South Side and its entertainment district. There were other parts

to Dolareido, the more Northern neighborhoods, Devil's Corner, and Rich Side, and they skewed what would really be considered the population center of the city.

Thankfully the 3D map included a color legend for population centers. Everyone in Natasha's apartment could see the weird shape being drawn centered on it.

Natasha nodded. "There's nothing there. M-Maybe in the tunnels?"

Clara shook her head. "Been through there too. Didn't find anything."

"Then maybe there is no center p-point. Maybe these high and low t-tears are what need to be finished?" She pointed at the tears Sándor was afraid of looking for. "Or ... m-maybe whatever's going to happen in the center hasn't happened yet?" Finally, some potential good news. Everyone relaxed a little as they realized they might actually be able to get ahead of this problem.

"Then we can get some people on it," Avery said. "Or you can?"

Tash paced around in front of the laptop. People stared at her, waiting. In the past, that many eyes on her waiting for her words would have made her so anxious, she'd turn into a stuttering mess. Not anymore! Well, not so much.

"I can ask the P-Prince to have our best trained thralls investigate, but ... b-but if we're thinking this is something Black Blood is doing, then we should have a paranormal investigating, maybe?"

They all looked at each other. Who to send? Who was good enough to keep an eye out?

Sándor shook his head. "Too risky. Black Blood isn't like other spirits. We might need to bide our time, and only check that area

every so often.”

Arturo groaned and growled simultaneously. “You mean wait for it to make the first move? It’s already made first move! Lots of them!”

But the Begotten just shook his head. “Nothing has come of Black Blood’s actions yet.”

This time, Tash shook her head. “I d-don’t know. This war between the Invictus and Carthians is odd, and the t-timing is awfully convenient.”

They all nodded, even Sándor. Something was building up to something. Unfortunately, they had no idea what that something was. A ritual? A big explosion?

“Still,” Sándor said, “let’s go slow. I want to see what’s on the other side of that tear we found here.” He pointed at the far triangle point, the tear they’d found in the Hisil, the one he was confused about. “It’s important.”

“It better be,” Avery said. “I had to negotiate with fucking Red Tide to get it to help us.”

“Make a bad deal?” Eric asked.

“No. It knows Black Blood is a problem, and it wants it gone, too.”

“Didn’t have to convince it about the tears being Black Blood’s doing?”

“It already knew, the fucker. And it’s agreed to provide Black Blood a distraction while we investigate the tears. So as long as we do that, deal satisfied.”

Tash frowned. Red Tide was horrifying, and the idea that it was also smart enough to get information like that made it worse.

“So that’s the plan,” Clara said. “Tomorrow, we take a trip into the Hisil, and Red Tide provides a distraction.”

Eric raised a hand. “What kind of distraction?”

Avery shrugged and laughed. “I guess we’ll know when it happens. Red Tide, is an asshole.”

---

“She did what?”

Tash smiled as she sat down on the stairs beside Jack, in his big fancy mansion, and gestured to nothing in front of them, as if the memory was on display for them in the center of his lobby.

“She apologized! I w-was very surprised.”

Jack smiled at her, then at himself as he looked down. “Good. Good.”

Mulder sat on Tash’s shoulder closer to Jack, while Scully sat on his shoulder closer to Tash, so both birds were next to each other. Jack reached up and pet Scully behind the head, scratching under her feathers, and Tash did the same for Mulder. Of all the things Tash knew of Jack, she hadn’t known the boy had an interest in birds — crows, at least — until after he made friends with the two birds. Well, crows and ravens were interesting birds, and Kindred naturally gravitated toward them.

Would it be in the same, in a much smaller city? Maybe a town in the woods? Probably not. Dolareido overflowed with rats and crows, but in the woods, Ventrue and Gangrels probably acquired other animals. Owls, coyotes, maybe snakes. Owls would make for awesome, and hilariously cliché familiars.

“You sound, um ... I d-don’t know. Like you’re relieved, that she apologized, I mean.”

“I guess I am. I guess a part of me has been afraid I’d grow up to be an elder, trapped in my old ideas.”

“Oh, right. I g-guess that is a real fear. Some Kindred can’t change, except maybe from what long torpors cause.” And it wasn’t like those changes were wanted ones. The dreams were supposedly quite intense.

“I was wondering about that. Daniel. The curse tried to break into his mind, but couldn’t.”

“Well, I mean, n-no Ventrue could Dominate an elder, especially one as old as my sire.”

Jack shook his head. “His mind though, it was ... it was a fortress, Tash.”

“F-Fortress?”

“The curse sorta gives me a metaphor to see, to visualize what’s going on.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I guess it’s a side effect of it being able to communicate with me.”

Suddenly, Natasha knew exactly what it felt like to be a member of the Ordo Dracul. She very much wanted to dive into Jack’s mind, and unlock the secrets of the curse. She wanted to take a scalpel — metaphorical of course! — and dissect his brain. She wanted to do experiments and see how he responded. She wanted to record data, and then see if she could recreate whatever things about the curse made it... ‘the curse’.

It didn't take much to jump from that, to picturing herself a hundred years from now, wearing a lab coat or some such, and doing experiments on a strange creature she'd caught, something pinned down on a surgery table. If Antoinette could somehow do that to spirits, she'd probably do that. Maybe she already had, and just didn't tell Tash about it? She definitely had dark secrets she didn't tell her about, secrets Tash would learn with time. Spooky.

“Extraordinary.”

Jack laughed. “You sound like Antoinette.”

Uh oh. Caught.

“Daniel's mind,” he continued, “is ... Holy fuck. No wonder he is who he is. You got a hell of a sire. And honestly, I kinda understand his interest in Athalia now.”

“Oh?”

“She's the only woman who could penetrate that man's walls.”

That definitely made sense. Natasha struggled to even talk to the man, and Daniel actively tried to open his gates to her. Tried and failed, but tried. Athalia was direct and loud enough she could probably kick them down.

“I ... I w-wanted to thank you. About Vivienne.”

With a heavy groan, Jack stood up and paced in front of her. “Please don't.”

“D ... D-Don't?”

“Don't. It was a shit situation, and I let Bruce die to save Vivi.”

Natasha nodded as she squirmed. “Sorry.”

“Aw, come on don’t apologize. It ... It’s not like that. I just really don’t want to go through the typical conversations about it, you know? I don’t want to sit down and have a painful talk every time shit goes bad. Just ... Let’s just say Vivi survived and Bruce didn’t, and Joe was to blame. Done.”

Poor Jack. Why did horrible things keep falling in his lap? They happened so often, he’d grown frustrated not with the events, but with the conversations that followed.

How many horrible talks had Jack had in just a few years? It must have been dozens. Conversations with his mom, with Athalia, with Beatrice, and probably others Tash didn’t even know about.

Jack continued to pace, glancing her way every so often between what looked like compulsive scratches he made on Scully’s neck, like someone with a nervous tick scratching their head, which Jack also did. Scully liked scratches, so no harm no foul.

Mulder cawed from Tash’s shoulder. No need for Animalism. He was concerned for his master.

“I understand,” she said. “B-But, thank you anyway.”

He managed a small smile for her, before sitting down beside her again.

“Progress on figuring out the tears situation?”

“Avery’s got a plan. W-We’re gonna ... do something soon. Dangerous.”

“Need help?”

She laughed. “You know you c-can’t. You know—”

“I know. Gotta handle the fallout of this stupid Joe situation. Christ, I—”

Tash pat his knee. “Let me handle the t-tears issue for now, ok? I’ll be fine. Avery’s on board now.”

“Thank god. After ... after the fight the Ripper had with her, I was afraid they wouldn’t help me.”

Tash smirked at him. “B-But I’m not you.”

“Good point.”



## Chapter 152

~~Antoinette~~

“Feeling better, old friend?”

Daniel managed a small nod as he sat down across from her. Deep in her tower, in one of her offices, the two could discuss matters privately, without fear of spies or accidental ears from a wandering Samantha. A quiet room of soundproofed walls, with only two chairs, a single desk, and little else. A room she and her sheriff used rarely, and only when to speak of the most painful of situations.

The fact her old friend sat, instead of standing as he usually preferred, was sign enough.

“Your boyfriend hits hard.”

Antoinette could not help but chuckle. “You know very well my little Terry could do nothing of the sort, even if he wanted to. The curse is what allows him such power.”

“Perhaps. He was always unusually skilled.”

“True, but there is a difference between natural skill, and what the curse is capable of.”

“True indeed.” Daniel rubbed one of his shoulders, and earned a wince. For her sheriff to make any sort of expression warranted note. “The curse hits hard. Will take another day to recover.”

“I did not imagine you fighting the creature with your fists, Daniel. You know what terrible feats the curse has accomplished.”

“It was either that, or use the sword, and then the curse would have ... done whatever it wanted.”

“The curse takes longer than a single second to summon his legion, according to Jack.”

“Yes. But it could have tried anyway, and ... I didn’t want to use the sword.”

Antoinette sighed, reached out, and touched her friend’s knee. “I appreciate the risk you took. My love appreciates it as well. But ... but the Masquerade is more important than Jack, or you, or I.”

He nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

They both looked down. Yes, Antoinette had just given her sheriff permission to kill Jack if it was the only way to save the Masquerade. Of course, while modern technology was a curse, it was also a useful tool. If yet another swarm of crows was seen in the city, the Prince and the Invictus had stories in place to prevent the media from spinning it into something supernatural. But then, hunters could see through such lies, and more would come. And with hunters, came yet larger Masquerade risks.

A delicate balance, and her sheriff flirted with it, for her.

“You are lucky,” she said, “that the curse is smart enough to predict what would happen if it simply gave into its desires, and terrorized the city with its power.” She would lock it and Jack away until a better course of action could be found. The idea was disheartening, but a better reality than his death, or the death of the Masquerade.

“Agreed.” He rubbed through his shirt at a spot on his chest. “Didn’t feel lucky at the time.”

Was that ... a joke? From her sheriff? Ah, of course. An evolution in her old friend's state of mind, from a private visit he made following his encounter with the curse. A visit last night that left Antoinette surprised and delighted.

"How did your visit to Athalia's go?"

Daniel eyed her. "Have you been spying on me, old friend?"

"Certainly not. But I have eyes and ears everywhere, as you well know. Are you surprised someone noticed you?"

"I didn't try and sneak there..." He did not look convinced. "The visit went well."

Grinning, Antoinette leaned forward and met her sheriff's eyes. "Quite well, I imagine."

"Ann..."

She put up her hands in surrender. "Forgive a Daeva her sexual curiosity. But I can see the twinkle in your eye, Daniel, despite your attempts to hide it. I think, perhaps, visiting Athalia while injured has awakened your relationship to a degree it did not have before?"

The cold stare was her confirmation. Daniel was a true master of hiding his expressions, but the two of them had worked together for centuries. It took little more than a small fidget of a finger, for her to see the man's heart; or at least his guilt over a night of sexual bliss.

"She ... was surprised."

"That you came to her while injured?"

"Yes."

“Ben oui, she likely considers you a difficult man to penetrate, old friend.” And what woman was not tickled by the classic romance plot of the wounded soldier and the nursing lady?

“I’m ... not difficult.”

“Come now. Far be it from me to criticize you, or to point fingers, or to call attention to the troubles you and your childe have had.” Playful words, not meant to insult, but meant to draw attention to truth nonetheless. Daniel and Antoinette were comfortable enough with each other to navigate the most difficult and deadly of social mazes: offering criticism. “But, you are quite difficult. Women thrive on social cues, the meaning hidden in words and their inflections, the meaning in words said and not said, the stories shared in a glance. You, my old friend, offer little of this. Most would find it easier to strike a conversation with a stone.”

He smiled; again, a small thing. “I suppose.”

“Allow me to hypothesize how your evening with Athalia went.”

“ ... alright.”

“You visited her, perhaps unaware yourself as to why. Athalia was shocked to see the mighty sheriff injured. More shocked, to see he came to her while so vulnerable. And Athalia, a loud, angry, and scarred woman, found herself terribly uncomfortable by the circumstance. At first. But as the reality sank into her poor soul that you, old friend, decided to come to her to spend the rest of your night, she saw a side of you you had never shown before? Which led to some tender, and dare I say, emotional sex?”

While his steel gaze would have fooled most, Antoinette saw the break in his glare, the twitch in his lip, and the uncomfortable way he adjusted his glasses with a single finger.

“Yes.” Yes. Of course, yes. The most direct response to man could possibly offer. “It went ... well.”

“I am happy for you.”

“Though, she ... she told me she uh, wants me to...”

“Allow me another guess. She wishes to disappear into her man’s arms, and be treated like a naughty princess?”

“Naughty ... princess?”

Antoinette laughed. “Come now, you know exactly what I mean. She wishes to be taken care of. Understandable. Athalia has suffered many hardships, and would love for someone else to take the reins of many aspects of her life. She is tired. And beneath that harsh, brutal visage she wears, there is a woman who wishes to bathe in the sweet bliss of being ravaged by a man in control.” With a playful smile, Antoinette held out two palms over her lap. “In one hand, she wishes to be pampered, to recover from her life. In the other, she wishes to be taken, rendered helpless, and ... fucked. Relentlessly.”

Athalia was tragic in many ways. She did not want to be the ruthless woman she was, but her Begotten curse, combined with her traumatizing, guilt-laden past with her daughter, forced her to become an angry creature. Angry, resentful, and unwilling to let anyone get close, as if someone had given a wolverine the quills of a porcupine.

But Athalia was no master of the social game. She was easy to understand to anyone familiar with psychology, let alone an old creature and student of human nature such as Antoinette. Athalia harbored deep, hidden secrets, perhaps secrets she once hid from herself, that she wanted to give in to another, surrender, and indulge in the strange joy of helplessness. She wanted a man she could trust, a reliable man like Daniel, to hold her down, perhaps even tie her up, and force sexual pleasures upon her.

And Daniel knew this. While the man was certainly no master of social interaction, he had the intellect and years to be able to understand someone like Athalia. The issue was not her, but him.

“She didn’t say it like that. But, she ... did try and say that.” He sighed. “Guess I’m not good at talking.”

“Not true. You merely lack the confidence for social aggression.”

“Confidence?”

Antoinette nodded. “Or do you believe your history with others and social connections, has been solid, and has benefited from your habit of standing by, or stepping back? Your passivity?”

He winced slightly as he looked down. “I guess not.”

“Precisely. And that is why it is good to have a friend such as moi, mon ami.” Her smile grew as she leaned forward. “While I am no mind reader, I believe I can safely say that, after last night, your relationship with Athalia has grown. She will feel easier about opening herself to you, and will doubtless be thrilled if you were to take her roughly.”

“I’m afraid of hurting her.”

“Physically?”

“Mentally. She—”

“Is not made of glass, Daniel. Do not confuse the desire to be sexually submissive, with some sort of mental fragility. If anything, quite the opposite. The woman has been through Hell and has survived. She will not break if you take her hand and pin it against a wall.”

Slowly, perhaps a touch reluctantly, he nodded as he met her eyes again. “Alright. Thanks.”

“And do be sure to enthrall me with the details.” She beamed at him, and he rolled his eyes; again, barely.

How many times had they danced this dance? She wanted the best for her sheriff, and that included sexual fulfillment; low on the list of priorities for elders, who often found their satisfaction through the Kiss and nothing else, but still. But despite centuries of the two of them being close companions, Daniel rarely engaged her desire to talk of eroticism. Frustrating, considering Antoinette’s great interest in sexuality.

Perhaps now, with Athalia, he would grow more comfortable discussing sex? Or Antoinette would forever be doomed to a sheriff who kept his sex life private. At least Elaine enjoyed indulging Antoinette her sexual interests. Indulge and partake.

Hopefully the woman would not spoil Athalia’s first slice of joy in years.

“Natasha,” Antoinette continued, “has made progress. She, Sándor, and the Uratha have concocted a plan to learn about one of the more interesting tears. A dangerous plan.”

Daniel nodded. “I trust her, and Sándor.”

“But not Avery?”

He shrugged. “Do you?”

“No, I suppose not. I trust her heart, but she is ... not cold enough to make difficult decisions.” And, naturally, had helped nurture Clara to become as equally an emotional and irrational leader. “But regardless, Avery will fight to protect Natasha. And if she does not, Sándor certainly will. The poor man is bound to us by his guilt.”

“A useful leash.”

“A savage one.”

Daniel nodded. “But not one of our making. If Sándor wants to break his back helping us, I say let him.”

There was wisdom in that. A cold, cruel wisdom. Antoinette and Daniel often traded positions on who was the more cruel in how they managed Dolareido. And where Sándor was concerned, Daniel was a touch crueler.

“And your childe has also discovered this.” Antoinette reached across the wooden desk, and pointed her laptop toward the man.

“Dolareido. And ... a strange crystal drawn through it.”

“The location of tears, most found, some presumed. Miss Vola extrapolated, by eye.”

“She extrapolated this? Impressive.”

“Make sure to tell her that.” Like a wife, forcing her closed-off husband to expose his nurturing side to his daughter.

“I will. How goes your attempts to bind Black Blood?”

She groaned as she sat back. “You know it fares poorly. Finding rituals to bind spirits is difficult enough. Finding a ritual capable of binding that creature? I waste my time.”

They both knew the search would be pointless. She could summon it, but had no way to pin it. And each time she summoned it, she felt the spirit gleamed more about her than she did of it.

“And getting Michael and Garry to follow the Roland rumor?”

“With such little time, I had to use the most obvious draw.”



Daniel raised a brow. “And that is?”

“My little Ventrue is going to find two angry Elders hot on his tail soon enough. I will need your eyes, and perhaps sword, in two or three days.”

“Sounds rough. What’s Jack said?”

“Jack ... is not yet aware.”

“You didn’t tell him?”

“I will, tonight. But you know Jack. If he knew, he would find it difficult to manipulate Garry and Michael. My love is a poor liar.” Though, to both her joy and dismay, he grew more skilled at deception with each passing night.

“That’s why you love him.”

She smiled. “That it is.”

---

~~Jack~~

“You killed Joe.” Michael tried to keep the grin off his face, but a hint of it showed through. Asshole.

Jack nodded. “I did.”

“And from the accounts, severely injured not only five other Carthians, but the sheriff as well.”

Jack winced at that. “We agreed to a fist fight. The curse is ... better at fist fighting than it should be.”

“So it would seem.” Michael stepped up from the table, and paced back and forth between it and the large touch screen on the wall

that showed an interactive map of Dolareido. “Bruce Vanna is also dead.”

“Terra Den’s incendiary grenade spouts a liquid around. I managed to save Miss Maiorie from it, not Mister Vanna.”

“Mister Vanna was older, stronger, and a larger asset to the Invictus.”

Jack met the man’s eyes, and stared. “Bruce was further. I didn’t know if I could save him. I knew I could save Vivienne.”

Michael returned the stare. Michael may have been afraid of the power of the curse, but that didn’t stop him from being who he was, a powerful Gangrel and elder who was now the ruler of the Invictus in Dolareido. To him, Jack was now a problem, but a valuable tool, so naturally he was going to do what he could to use the tool without exposing weakness to it.

It was the sort of situation that made Jack question whether he should get rid of the Ripper. If he did, yeah sure Michael wouldn’t look at him like a nuke ready to go off in his face, but he’d also be free to get revenge on Jack for all the disrespect Jack was not-so-subtly showing him.

Well, not entirely true. Michael couldn’t touch Jack without earning Antoinette’s wrath. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t orchestrate a situation Jack couldn’t survive.

Kindred sucked. The Danse Macabre sucked.

“The Tanvar building is a loss,” Michael said. “A multi-million dollar loss.”

“There isn’t much I can do to stop the Carthians from burning down buildings, Mister McDonald. With technology, they could throw one of those flame grenades from pretty far away, and the

building's gonna burn." The attack on Xnomina made that obvious enough.

"They're salting the earth."

"Yes sir." Because Garry hates you so much, he's willing to burn down the shit you own, instead of take it for himself. "But, how many of those buildings were Joe's doing? I don't think Garry wanted Joe to go gung ho like he did."

"Only the Tanvar building, as far as I know, can be blamed on Joe's overzealousness."

Damn.

"Then ... we have a problem."

"Indeed. If Garry continues on this path, the Prince will eventually interfere, but not before he's damaged our financial basis considerably."

"What do we do?"

"We deal with Terra Den."

"Deal with, sir? Terra Den is a considerable portion of the city's income. The Prince won't be happy if we kill Jeremy Long." What a wonderful world they lived in.

"Maybe. Terra Den is a corporation, Mister Terry, not Jeremy Long himself. If he dies, that doesn't mean the corporation dies."

True enough. Terra Den wasn't a publicly traded company, but that didn't mean there wasn't other people in its chain that had serious holds over its shares. And of course, the fact Terra Den was basically a corrupt company meant that if Long died, someone else just as corrupt would take his place. Maybe that person would be a

little more open to running the business like it used to, instead of getting involved with Garry. Or maybe, willing to get involved with the Invictus.

Michael was smart, and that made him damn frustrating to deal with.

“You want me to kill him.”

“I want you to investigate the option. Talk to him first, and see what he’s willing to do. He’s under the impression he’s given the Carthians a tool we don’t have, and that impression needs to change. Make him understand that if he helps Garry continue to escalate the situation, we will rise to meet him.”

Oh god, what a nice, fancy way of saying the Invictus would start blowing shit up.

“Will do, sir.”

“And Mister Terry. Understand that the Tanvar building loss is your failure, regardless of that idiot Joe’s kamikaze. Do not let another major location burn down because of your pacifism.”

The two glared at each other for a while, long enough for the silence itself to send a message, before Jack nodded, and left. There was something in Michael’s eyes Jack didn’t expect, a question his boss wanted to ask, but didn’t. Something about the curse, maybe? Jack couldn’t tell. Michael was angry with him though, over something he didn’t say.

Fucking lovely.

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“Ready?” Jessy asked.

Jack glanced to Damien. He nodded. Jack nodded. They were ready.

They knew this wasn't going to end well, but it had to be done regardless. And with the death of Bruce and Joe, they all knew people weren't going to pull punches. Gloves were off. Kindred were going to die.

It wasn't the first time they'd been to the Terra Den building. It was where Jessy had punched Garry, turning a bad situation worse. It was where Eric — not with them tonight — confronted Long about his right hand man Montoya, and the death of his loan shark Pitt. It was where they learned Jeremy Long was a vampire, and Garry's new childe.

The building was typical, as far as Dolareido business buildings with shady backgrounds went. A few warmer colors than the blacks of Xnomina or the Elysium Tower, but still, slick and modern. The office plants in the corners of rooms were real. To someone like Jeremy Long, aesthetics were important. He wanted people to know he was dangerous and sophisticated.

He really should have been a Ventrue, and Invictus.

But Garry saw something in him, something that gave him an animal edge. You had to have that animal edge to be worthy of a Gangrel siring you, according to Jessy, some part of you fully willing to get crazy when shit hits the fan. Gangrels didn't look for potential childer who knew how to say one thing while meaning another. Gangrels didn't look for potential childer who knew how to use money as a weapon, or intimidate someone by wearing the perfect suit. Gangrels looked for the sort of people that would, in the heat of a fight, not only throw fists until they saw stars, but were willing to use their teeth if someone was stupid enough to get too close to their mouths. The sort of people who shut off their brains and went psycho animal when they had to.

Garry siring Long always seemed strange, but it told Jack there was more to the man than they realized. Which made any Invictus

nervous.

Long sat at his desk, dressed in a nice suit, and sporting an animal grin. Average height, and he filled the suit nicely. Chinese heritage, but born in the US. Short black hair, face shaved smooth, he had that eternally young, maybe sold his soul to a demon kinda look to him, considering the grin on his face.

To his left stood several thralls, sporting assault rifles. To his right stood several thralls, sporting anti-personnel shotguns. And at the office door the Right Hands just walked through, several thralls armed with shotguns and, hilariously, swords, let the three vampires in. Vampires with swords were deadly. Thralls? Even ghouls, stronger than normal humans, were laughably weak compared to vampires, let alone thralls. The fuck were they gonna do with a sword?

The shotguns though, those were a problem.

“Be aware,” Long said, “that this room is being recorded and monitored. If you do anything strange, we will all die in fire.”

Jack smirked. Quite the bluff, but the curse was strong enough to deal with fire. Though, maybe not an entire building on fire. They were several stories up, and the office didn't have windows. Less an office, more a cell. A fancy, beautiful cell, but Long definitely wanted anyone who came into his office to feel like they were trapped.

He wasn't lying, either. There were cameras in the corners of the room, and they moved a bit to follow Jessy as she paced around in the office. Cameraman were aiming them. Long trusted his employees quite a bit, if he was willing to give them a button that'd set the whole place on fire.

“Noted,” Jack said. “You like fire a lot, for a vampire.”

“It’s a powerful tool.” No accent, except for a pompous edge CEOs often seemed to have, like he was talking down to Jack.

“One mistake and it’ll kill you.”

“Yes, I am sure it would. “ Long tapped his fingers on his big desk as he met Jack’s eyes. Not afraid at all. Jack couldn’t exactly Dominate the man without it being a little obvious, especially since the man kept tapping his fingers on the desk. If Jack jumped into his mind, he’d stop doing that. Did he really have them all sitting on explosives, under the control of someone else, who’d detonate them if Long stopped tapping his fingers? Crazy.

“The fire is a problem,” Damien said.

Long chuckled. “For you.”

Jessy shook her head. “For everyone. You’re burning down the city.”

“You mean Garry is burning down the city. And hardly. Three buildings does not qualify as burning down the city, not in Dolareido. Are you aware of how many kine live in this city, Miss Herrington? Over four million. Buildings burn down.”

Jessy gave him the finger, but didn’t say anything. Long wasn’t wrong. It was true the Invictus and Carthians were causing property damage, but so far it hadn’t reached a level where the Prince would feel the need to intervene. Yet.

“It’s only going to get worse,” Jack said. “These incendiary grenades of yours are a problem, and I want you to stop making them.”

“No.” More tapping.

“You don’t think the Invictus could use fire, Mister Long? You don’t think we have the tech to put together a similar weapon?”

“I think you do. But I also think you realize burning Carthian property is a waste of time. What possible property target do you have that could affect the Carthians in any way if it were lost?”

Jack gestured at the room around them. “Uh...”

“You think you can destroy this building, Mister Terry? I let you in because you are no threat. I don’t care if you can summon a legion, and defend yourself from flame. You could not survive an inferno, and your legion is of no use here. If you tried, you would fail. And if you somehow succeeded, the damage you would cause to the Masquerade would be immense.”

This man was simultaneously full of himself, and paranoid. He was practically an elder already.

“We could burn this building down without being in it, you know.”

“I’d like to see you try.” And there it was. The Gangrel part of him.

“And Joe? Did Garry give you permission to give him some of those grenades?”

Long’s smile faded. “You killed Joe. Why should I tell you anything?”

“Joe killed Bruce. First, I might add.”

“Such is war.”

“That wasn’t war. That was an idiot man with a fucking delusion. And someone gave him a deadly weapon.”

“A molotov is just as deadly.”



“Bullshit. A molotov just splatters and quickly burns. That shit was like napalm, and unlike a fucking molotov cocktail, it didn’t come at me as a glass bottle with a burning rag attached to it. It was an innocuous little sphere.”

“Not innocuous enough, evidently. Thank you for the feedback. I’ll make sure future devices are less noticeable.”

This guy. This fucking guy. Jack stared at the man hard, ready to shatter his mind and turn him into a mindless puppet. But the man held his gaze as he tapped his finger. The best poker player in the world, or he was telling the truth about his defense measures.

This was definitely the sort of man who’d use his teeth in a fist fight if he had to.

“Jeremy Long, I am warning you. If you continue to bring fire to these skirmishes, the Invictus will respond in kind.”

“Then it’s a good thing the Invictus are the ones on the defense. It’s you who stands to lose territory.”

“Not true. We’ll take the Mirrden district back, but if we can’t, Michael is prepared to cause permanent damage.”

“Oh ho, permanent? Oh please, you have no leverage in this game.”

Jack stepped up to the man’s desk. Every thrall pointed their gun at him, and Jack ignored them.

“Xnomina has been in the business longer than Terra Den. The Invictus have been playing this game for a lot longer than you, or even Garry. You really think we can’t beat you at this?”

“I think you’re an old monster who’s gone too long unchallenged. Now, you’re fat, weak, and lazy, and the younger generation has to

take you down.”

Jack didn't know much about the Uratha, but that story sounded oddly familiar. Eric said something about it. Father Wolf?

“Long, I'm giving you a chance. Stop helping Garry with the tech, or we'll make you.”

“No. Now, if that is all, get out.”

Well, this was a waste of time, except to learn that Long was smarter and deadlier than he had any right to be. Garry sired well.

Jessy snarled, but when Damien turned to leave, she followed. Jack followed last.

“And Mister Terry,” Long said. “Stop digging up Roland's family, would you? My sire does not appreciate you stirring up the past.”

Old Jack would have worn his surprise on his face. But after years of bullshit and hard lessons, Jack kept his gaze cold and steady as he met Long's, before he walked out the door, and took the elevator down with his friends. The fuck was that about?

---

“Roland's past?” Jessy asked once they were out on the street. “Like ... Michael's childe before me, Roland?”

“Yeah. Been doing a little digging.” But not into Roland's family. In fact, he didn't know a single thing about Roland's family. “Can't really talk about it.”

Damien and Jessy blinked at each other.

“Uh, what?” Jessy asked.

“Really, can't talk about it. It's ... a weird situation.” The fuck were you up to, Antoinette?

Roland was Jack's best bet of getting Garry and Michael to trip up and make a mistake. It was the seed that had the two Gangrels hating each other so much, and if he could use it against them, he could maybe manipulate them with it. But if Antoinette was up to something that had people looking to Jack like he was up to something, that could very well bite him in the ass.

When in doubt, deny deny deny. Antoinette would tell him more when it made sense to.

Damien shrugged and pat Jessy on the shoulder. "If he says he can't talk about it, he can't talk about it."

"Ugh, fine." She gave him a sharp poke in the chest. "But make sure you call me if shit gets crazy, ok? You killed that fucker Joe and I wasn't even there to see it."

"Jessy, I nearly killed five other people. And I'm glad I didn't."

"What? Why? You don't think that fucking bitch Bella deserves it? She's been a thorn in my ass for decades, and I know a couple Invictus disappeared after a run-in with her."

Jack sighed. He was tempted to ask about her past, if she'd killed any Carthians in her fifty years, directly or indirectly. Sometimes the little brawls Invictus and Carthians got into weren't very gentle, and Julias told him plenty of stories about how they got pretty bad sometimes. Kindred died.

He stepped into a dark alley, and they followed.

"Jessy, I don't want anyone to die, ok? I ... Christ, you think I'm happy I killed him?"

"A bit, yeah. Joe was a douchebag. World is better off without him."

Glaring, Jack snapped his eyes to Damien, but his friend shook his head dismissively.

“Jessy,” Jack said, “the fuck would Julias say?”

“Julias?” She glared at him, but after a few seconds her anger broke, and her gaze fell. “He’d say stop making things worse, and look for a way to get everyone on the same page.”

“Yeah, and that’s what I’m trying to do. I didn’t want to kill Joe, the fucking curse did. Bruce died too. Vivienne nearly died. And ... christ, I’m just trying to get people to stop killing each other. Ok? This is the most stereotypical war hate shit I’ve ever seen. Garry isn’t Hitler, and Carthians aren’t nazis. Get me?”

“I get you I get you. But last I checked, the Carthians are coming at us hard, Jack, not the other way around.”

“They thought differently, when we took the Mirrden district from them those years ago.”

“No one died!”

“Jessy, I saw Joe’s eyes before I killed him. He was utterly convinced the Invictus ... and Viktor and me by extension, were evil and needed to die. I can guarantee you Joe has lost friends to Invictus. He...” Jack looked down. “Enough, ok? Enough.”

Slowly, she nodded, and gave him a gentle tap on the shoulder. “Alright, I get you. Just, you kinda gave me the impression with Long that you were ready to go to war.”

If Jack had to go to war, he wouldn’t be Jack for very long. He be the fucking Ripper, drowning the whole city in blood and ashes.

His phone buzzed. A message from the Prince.

~Expect contact from Roland's family soon.~

Uh, what? Roland's family? Dude died a hundred years ago, why would—oh god, what was Antoinette up to? She sent him that text message on their personal channel too, which wasn't exactly secure. They avoided sending anything other than romantic stuff on it.

Ok, time to visit Antoinette and see what the hell this Roland business was about.

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~~Eric~~

He could be doing something else, instead of risking his life like this. He could be back in his fancy apartment with his girlfriend. He could be showering with her, touching her. He could be relaxing in the hot tub with her. He could be going out for a night on the town with her. He could be taking her back to her place after she'd fed on one — or more — humans, getting her randy as all hell, and he could be spending the night fucking her amazingly huge, athlete's ass, at her request. He could be living the dream.

Instead, here he sat in wolf form in the Hisil, him and a bunch of Avery's pack. Jessy wasn't with him. She had to deal with the Carthians, defend borders, fight off punks like Joe. Except Joe was dead, and now the Carthians and Invictus were willing to open up with lethal force from the get go.

Which meant, while Eric sat here, waiting for Red Tide to make its move, his girlfriend was in mortal danger. Not unusual. She'd been in mortal danger plenty of times. But now she was in heavy, real, could die at any moment to an explosive hidden in a car danger. That idea irked him. He knew the only reason Michael hadn't shown up at his door with a dozen Kindred and demanded Eric help them fight the Carthians was because of Jessy. If she died, Michael would probably drag his ass into the war.

Course, at that point, Eric would happily join. Kill the Carthians who killed the best thing to ever happen to him? Sure.

He growled, and forced the thoughts out of his mind. Focus. Him and the pack sat in the shadow of a building near the edge of the city, the outer edge of Devil's Corner, hidden in Natasha's Cloak. Some of the wolves like Art could hide themselves, and Sándor was somehow able to hold so perfectly still, he stop registering as a living entity to Eric's wolf senses. Gargoyle, yeah.

It was quiet. The strange sky, this far from the city's center, showed its beautiful stars and oddly colored clouds. Few spirits wandered out here, the edge of the city; they were drawn to where humans stirred chaos instead. Which meant it was strange to see the red wraiths and their massive claws floating about at the city's edge, guarding the glowing tear. They should have been in the city, guarding Black Blood's territory.

Which was why Sándor, and everyone else agreed it was important to examine the tear. It was either a very clever diversion by Black Blood, or legitimate.

Eric looked over to Clara. Her, Caleb, Noah, Matt and Art, Natasha, and Sándor were there with Eric. The rest of the pack were working with Red Tide, deeper in South Side, to stir up some sort of trouble. Avery didn't know what that trouble would be, which meant the rest of them could only sit here and—

The city erupted with noise. Everyone looked down the street toward South Side, but the winding road and tall buildings blocked their view. They could hear it though. Crashing, smashing, and roars.

They all looked up as a cloud of debris shot into the air, and spread, almost like a mushroom cloud, with bits of red mixed in.

“Holy sh-shit,” Tash whispered. Props to her for keeping the Cloak up, because the sound rushed out to hit them, along with heavy vibration. A building had just collapsed.

Roars. Alien screams and shrieks. The oddly colorful sky over South Side darkened, and red splashed a quarter mile into the air. Clouds swirled and crashed down, disappearing behind the distant buildings, before sending another shock wave of vibration and sound their way.

Red Tide and Black Blood were fighting.

Well, if there was anyway Red Tide could create a distraction, this was it. It wasn't like the two hadn't fought before. Street-Tail King was happy to manipulate things from the shadows, and go for easy wins, but Red Tide was a big, angry, powerful spirit. Far as Eric knew, it rose up from the centuries of violence hidden in Dolareido, from even before Antoinette and her buddies showed up. Something to do with the blood, the way Dolareido attracted it, attracted vampires, attracted its weird, unspoken violence. Usually unspoken.

Sometimes it was easy to forget — he'd been born and lived here his whole life after all — Dolareido was a strange city. No wonder Luna took an interest.

Clara took two paw steps toward the noise, froze, growled, and looked back toward the tear they were scouting. Slowly, she looked to Eric, and the steady look in her eyes said it all: she wanted to help Avery.

Eric wanted to, too. They weren't even his pack, and he wanted to. He didn't know what Avery would do, now that Red Tide was causing a ruckus. Black Blood had made it clear she wasn't to interfere with his city, and if she did, he'd get his hands dirty. So the fuck was Avery going to do? She should have been here, with him and the others, in case shit hit the fan and they needed her.

That's what Clara was thinking, and it was quickly becoming what Eric was thinking. Say one thing for the bitch, Avery could get shit done.

The explosions grew closer. All six wolves and one vampire crouched low as a dust cloud rushed out onto the street, another crash of sound preceding it and slamming over the group with enough impact to have them shaking in its quake. Sándor didn't move an inch.

The explosions grew closer again, until enormous chunks of rubble flew into the air, and smashed into the street where they could see it. Still a ways away, but close enough it wasn't hidden by the winding street and buildings anymore.

They all froze until they looked like Sándor, as an enormous, black-tinted skeletal arm reached into the sky, body hidden by buildings, and slammed down. The city shook, and more rubble scattered skyward before raining down on everything within a hundred yards. Holy shit. But Black Blood's fury was met with an equally big, red tentacle, something that looked like it was made of blood and crimson leather, and it swept through the air before crashing down against a building out of their sight as well. Same effect. The whole city shook. Red Tide was not fooling around.

Eric had managed to avoid the giant kraken creature and its weird half-blood body in all his hunts. It didn't take many trips into the Hisil to learn that Black Blood and Red Tide were two juggernauts battling over the city the same way Godzilla might. Big, strong, and unstoppable. Avery was smart to avoid engaging them directly. With titans like them, you had to find out their bans and banes first, and smart assholes like Black Blood were good at hiding them.

Everyone in Dolareido either gave those two their room, or served them. Avery and her pack were the exception, because they were all apparently suicidal.



Sure enough, as the explosive battle loomed closer, the red wraiths circling the tear on the outskirts of the city headed toward them. Black Blood calling for reinforcements. Except one stayed behind.

Red wraiths spent a lot of time hovering around as wisps, clouds of red and black smoke. But when they needed to be involved and hands on, they solidified. Hissing creatures, they had human-like torsos, but no face, just a flat black mass with red demon eyes that glowed. Long arms with equally long claws, but no legs. They floated, like ghosts.

They were called red wraiths, or blood wraiths, cause each of the obsidian, hovering legless creature with claws, also looked like they were wearing a strange cloak or robe of dripping red. Literally dripping, as if they had wounds that never closed.

The gang expected this. Even had a plan on how to deal with it. Rush it while protected by Tash's cloak, and kill it. Avery's pack wasn't really good at subtlety.

All wolves looked to Tash, and she glanced back to Sándor. The man pushed off the wall of the building, and slowly, casually, got into a runner's stance. You didn't need Uratha senses to tell the man was calm, like this was just another Wednesday for him. No increase in heart rate, no jitters, nothing.

They took off in a dead sprint for the spirit. It was out in the open at the end of a street that merged into the desert, and they didn't know how effective the Cloak would be against it. Better to come out running.

Good thing they did. They still had fifty feet to go before the spirit turned its eyes to face them. They widened as realization set in, and it turned to flee.

And then it flew up.

Ok, kink in the plan, kink in the plan! The fuck were they supposed to do if the creature could fly? They—

Sándor swept past them, over them, and into the sky. A dark silhouette erupted from the man's back, utterly massive wings that looked colossal on his frame, and they spread to catch the air. They launched him with a single flap that sent the wind out in an explosion around them, and Sándor rode the wind like he'd done this a million times before.

He came down on the spirit hands first, thirty feet in the air, and the two came crashing down with a heavy thud. Sándor landed on top, and for a single second, the silhouette of the gargoyle was visible again, its titanic limbs, and its huge claws. And he used them on the spirit.

It only took a single second for the crew to catch up once he landed, but by then, the spirit was already wounded and dying. It slashed out, but Eric bit into one wrist, Caleb bit into the other, and they ripped its hands off as it flailed. It died a few seconds later.

“Mission ... s-successful?” Tash asked.

The wolves all looked around. Natasha quickly wrapped them in her Cloak again, but there was a lot of people in their group, and they'd literally just had a man fly through the air. It'd been quick thinking, but if anyone had been watching, they'd have seen the gargoyle, the pack, and the vampire.

But then, two giants were fighting in the city, not too far from where the group was. And considering the ridiculous amount of destruction Eric could hear, it was a safe bet all nearby spirits were either watching the destruction, or hiding for their lives.

“Get rid of the evidence,” Sándor said, gesturing to the body. Not an order. The man simply asked in the most deadpan way possible. Caleb didn't hesitate, grabbed the spirit, and carted it off. It'd

disperse into essence soon enough, or some rat bottom-feeder choir would find and devour it.

Clara and Eric hopped up onto the gas station, transformed back into human form, and stood near the tear that hovered at about head level. Sándor and Tash joined them. Noah, Matt, and Art backed off and returned to the city edge to hide in shadows. If someone else did spot them, hopefully they could do something, but even with Red Tide distracting the whole damn city, they probably only had minutes.

They all looked at Sándor, and waited.

“W-What do you see?” Tash asked.

Sándor stared at the hole. It hovered about five feet over the gas station’s roof, perfect staring height, and the dude did just that. Stared, with wide eyes.

And this close, Eric could understand why. They all stepped up closer, and the world went silent as the four—three of them stared into the endless, golden oblivion the tear was exposing. One of them was a bit too short to see.

“Um ... uh...”

Eric held out his arm, elbow bent and forearm up, and created a hook for Tash. She smiled up at him, reached up, put a foot against his thigh, and half hung from his arm, half pressing her weight into his leg, so she could get an extra twenty inches height. So damn light, he barely noticed her boot pressing into him.

“W ... Wow,” she said. Yeah, wow. “Sándor, you’ve ... n-never been there before?”

“No.”

“D-Do you know what, er, where it is?”

“No.”

A lie, maybe? Sándor had some idea, but he didn't want to tell them, judging from the expression on his face.

“Can we go in?” Clara asked.

Sándor shook his head. “No.”

“Why not? I mean, we've been in dream realms, and we've even been to the underworld. Can't—”

Sándor reached out, and gently pushed down the hand she'd been raising.

“You haven't been to the underworld,” he said, “not the underworld you mean. You've been to a realm of ghosts. It is not the same thing.”

“Ok, so ... what? What's that mean?”

“It means ... there are places too high, and too low, for living things to visit.” He held out a hand and moved it close to the strange white oblivion, but as his hand grew closer to the tear, he winced. The endless gold and white of whatever they stared into didn't like his hand, and tiny waves of white struck out against it.

Instant smells of burning. Everyone pulled their heads back and stared at Sándor as he casually lowered his hand, burn marks on his palm. That had to hurt, but the man barely reacted. Just, lowered his hand as he stared into the white before them.

“This shouldn't be here,” he said.

Clara choked on a forced chuckle. “Yeah, we know. That's why we're investigating.”

“It shouldn’t be here. It can’t be here. It...”

“Can it take us to another tear or not?” Eric asked. “Or, you know, same tear, just tearing into another place on Tash’s map.”

“It could. It probably does, but we can’t go there. Nothing living, nothing physical, no spirit or ghost or Changeling or...” He shook his head. “We can’t go through.”

“Then we’re done here,” Clara said. “Avery is going to be pissed.”

Pissed was an understatement. Investigating the tear had basically meant go through it, and learn more about whatever was happening, and how to stop it. It might have taken them to a new spot to put on the map. But from how it reacted to Sándor’s hand, it’d incinerate them in white fire if they tried.

Well, fuck.

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“Holy shit,” Clara said. “You guys ok?”

Avery groaned as she slowly sat herself on the couch. “Fine.”

They all went to Eric’s apartment. Lot bigger than Avery’s, good for a meeting. Plus, he had to feed Kat.

Kat didn’t mind the company of course, and she took her time visiting each person for her expected pets and scratches. Which was a lot. Avery’s pack of a dozen, Sándor, and Tash, each got a visit from Kat, even Avery herself, who glared down at the dumb feline as she got comfortable on Avery’s lap.

Avery, David, and Carter all sat on his main couch, each of them pretty beat up, with torn up clothes that showed they got into a fight of some kind or another. But they weren’t bleeding, so it couldn’t have been that bad if they could heal from it. Even werewolves took longer than an hour to heal from the really nasty wounds, the sort

caused by silver or powerful spirits. Or chainsaws, according to Carter.

“Eric, why is your cat ... doing that.” Avery gestured down at Kat, and how she snuggled onto the woman’s lap.

“Because she sees that I don’t mind you.” Though he doubted Kat actually cared what Eric thought. “And because you obviously don’t like her.”

“ ... yeah, I don’t like her.”

Tash giggled. “B-Because you’re ignoring her, she likes you.”

Avery threw up her hands. A big enough gesture to scare off any other cat. But Kat was Kat, and she gave no fucks. If anything, she purred louder.

“Your cat is—”

“Brain damaged, I know,” Eric said. Of course, the moment he opened the drawer with the cans of wet cat food, Kat meowed and came running. By the time he had a can in his hand, she was already rubbing against his legs.

“What happened?” Clara asked.

“Red Tide’s distraction was fucking chaos. Red wraiths showed up, and Red Tide started attacking anyone nearby. That included us. Black Blood itself showed up, and ... I guess Red Tide attacked us so Black Blood wouldn’t suspect us, but Red Tide pulls no punches. Some other spirits got involved, trying to take advantage of the chaos; fuckers hate us.”

Spirits did seem to default to hating Uratha. It made hunts into the Hisil pretty fucking annoying, but there was also a strange thrill to being universal hated, and feared. Uratha were strong, and could

deal with spirits in ways most things couldn't. But it also meant spirits might do something like get involved in a fight if they saw an opportunity to kill a werewolf. The respect and power said spirit might earn, if they managed to devour one of the pack, would be huge.

Bunch of assholes.

“We didn't know what Red Tide would do,” Carter said. “I don't think it knew what it'd do. But it worked ... right?”

All eyes fell to Sándor. Eric, in strategic brilliance, took extra long scooping food out of the can for Kat, in the corner of the room, out of the crossfire.

Sándor shook his head. “We got close enough to touch it. But ... we can't cross it. And I can't go there ... ever.”

Avery raised a brow. “Come again?”

“There are realms,” Sándor said, “that we can visit. The realm of spirits, you know well. The realm of dreams, Begotten know well. There are others. The realm of ghosts. The brighter places of the dream Begotten avoid. Darker places of the Great Below. You can go higher in the place of dreams, and higher to places above that. You can go deeper in the Great Below, where ... where more than the dead die.”

More than the dead die. For a stoic, quiet man, Sándor could be damn poetic when he wanted to be. Creepy.

“I can go high in the dream world, and deep in the land of the dead. But...” He shuddered as he looked down at his burned palm. “That tear cut into some place far above the dream, far above the places above those places. As if Black Blood had cut into...”

They all stared at him as the room grew deadly silent, until the only noise was Kat's licking and munching.

Heaven. He was talking about Heaven, or something like it.

Avery shrugged. "Ok, so, what's that mean to us?"

"It means ... I don't know. It means whatever Black Blood's planning isn't ... as small a plan as we thought."

"Small!? It's trying to tear everything down and—"

"That's small scale, compared to ... compared to what I was looking into."

Avery half got up, winced, groaned, and sat back down. "Explain then, for fuck's sake."

"I can't go into the realm that tear cut into."

"Yeah, I get it. So?"

"Monsters go where we want. There isn't anywhere I can't go. If there's a door, I can open it." His eyes hardened as he looked at Avery. "Anywhere. But ... I couldn't go where that tear went."

"W-What Sándor means," Tash said, "is ... we thought Black Blood was maybe trying to tear down the Gauntlet, right? And then w-we realized, maybe it's trying to do more, cause the tears cut into other places too. Other 'realms'," Natasha air-quoted realms, "that, um, are nearby?" She looked to Sándor, and he nodded. "Like, m-maybe it was going to turn everything into a big mixing pot, mix all the realms together. But ... b-b-but if Black Blood is making tears to ... to sacred places, maybe it's not about that?"

"Sacred places?" Clara asked.



“Places we’re not allowed to go,” Sándor said. “Places only ... souls can go, I guess.”

Avery laughed. “You guess? Thought you Begotten knew everything.”

“ ... we don’t.”

Well, that silenced the room pretty quick. Except for Kat. Finished, the damn cat jumped back on the couch, and without hesitation, once again got comfy on Avery’s lap, completely oblivious to the cold blanket smothering everyone in the room.

Sighing, Avery eventually set a hand on Kat’s head, and absentmindedly pet her as she looked down at the cat in thought.

“What’s that mean for us?”

Sándor slowly shook his head. “I’m not sure. But ... I think, according to the ritual symbol Tash drew, the center of the ritual is probably not the point we need to worry about. It wouldn’t make sense if the ritual is a 3D shape, anyway. It’s probably a point above or below, finishing the crystal shape, points where Black Blood is ... reaching, maybe using points higher and lower, to reach even higher, and even lower.”

“You said those places were dangerous,” Noah said.

Right, Sándor had said there were places in the dream, and in the underworld, that were ‘above’ and ‘below’ the six places he’d found in both realms. He could go to those places, but said they were dangerous. And apparently, the tear they found tonight, cut into a place even higher. Fucking confusing.

“They are dangerous. But we don’t have a choice, do we?” the Begotten said.

No, they didn't have a choice. Eric sighed as he sat down on his couch arm by Avery.

"Guess we go scouting," he said. "And if we're going into deep places, or really high places, we can't do that without your help, Sándor. Or maybe the others."

The others had avoided involving themselves in this tear business, except for Azamel supposedly being the first one to warn the Prince something was up. Other than that, Athalia, Fiona, and Mark didn't get involved. Probably on order too, since it'd become clear Black Blood was their enemy, and Azamel didn't want them getting hurt. Sándor apparently didn't agree.

When Azamel died, Sándor would be the big bad Begotten. They'd listen to him. Maybe then, he'd ask them to help?

Of course, the idea of Fiona getting neck deep in dangerous shit irked Eric. He liked Fiona. He still felt a bit guilty about touching her; way too young and bubbly for him. Sure, she was a lot smarter and more mature than she appeared, a lot like Jessy. But in ways, wasn't.

It was funny. Damien was older than Eric, but a better match for the young woman.

"I should go alone," Sándor said.

Caleb laughed. "You know that's bullshit, dude."

Clara nodded. "You take a group of us to scout a location, and we'll go together. Maybe not the whole pack, but I know Tash is going, and she's still got the boys on a leash. I'll probably go." A quick glance to her leader confirmed. "Noah and Caleb too."

"And me, I guess," Eric said. Because hey, if everyone was jumping off a cliff, there had to be a good reason.

---

~~Damien~~

Two days later.

Bella, Steve, Kass, and Garner all being injured meant the Invictus had an opening. Much as Jack did his best to keep the peace, the ramifications of the curse's actions meant the Invictus had the opportunity to push an advantage. And they did. Predictably, the Carthians pushed back, and they pushed hard.

And this time, people did die.

The Right Hands weren't there to see it, but a couple Carthians and Invictus died. In fire. Kindred on site said it was an accident, that one of the Carthians had one of those devices from Terra Den, and didn't plan to use it, but the brawl grew extreme. Kindred were using powers left and right in the basement of an old apartment building in Devil's Corner; officially abandoned, thankfully.

Buildings in Devil's Corner were built in that strange time period when humans thought it was a good idea to build large buildings with wood and brick. The result was extreme.

Damien stared up at the burning building as the fire department arrived. No delay this time, they arrived in droves, and immediately took to the ten-floor building with enormous geysers of water. But the building was doomed. It burned and burned, and Damien stared at the flame from across the street atop another building.

Vicky and Parker stood beside him.

"This was one of your dens?" Damien asked. They'd been the ones to describe what happened.

"Yeah," Vicky said, eyes wide as she looked the burning building up and down. "We had ... a bunch of prostitutes working here. We

got them out, barely.”

“More kine you enthralled with Jacob’s help?” Good to remind them he hadn’t forgotten those two had a strange artifact that helped them enthrall kine, an artifact they got from Jacob.

Parker grunted and threw Damien a hard glare, but he sighed and nodded as he looked back to the burning building.

“Jacob had nothing to do with this attack. He helped us out, and we let him dig his fingers into the kine in the area. This, this was the Carthians.”

Much as Damien wanted to interrogate the man further about what Jacob might have been up to with their help, he was right. This fire was because the Carthians and Invictus got into a fight, and it went bad, just like Jack knew it would.

And there wasn’t any chance Jacob let either of these two in on any secrets. They were hedonists, concerned only with their own pleasure, nothing more.

Damien believed them. If this was one of their brothels like they said it was, they didn’t want to lose it. The war was reaching out further and further, and now it was affecting everyone. At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before it reached out and affected Kindred who stayed out of reach of most issues. Leauvion and her acting troupe, for example.

The Begotten, for another.

He shook his head. No way the fighting would drift into their neighborhood. Sure, all Kindred used the tunnels, but the Begotten were well out of the way of the most commonly used tunnels. But then again, fights were chaotic, could lead to chases, and...

Damien pulled up his phone, and called Jack.

No answer.

First reaction: mild panic. The Right Hands were all on call with each other with this war on. The only reason they could have for turning off the notifications on their phones, or ignoring them, was they were in some sort of stealth mission, or they were indisposed. Or dead. So he called Jessy.

“Yellow.”

“Jessy. I’m here in Devil’s Corner.”

“Shit, yeah. That apartment building on fire. Our fault?”

“Carthian and Invictus brawl turned ugly.”

“Shiiit.”

“One of Vicky and Parker’s brothels.”

“Shiiiiit.”

“Four dead. Two Invictus, Donny and Carlyle. Two Carthians as well.”

“Shi—”

“I get it. And Jack isn’t answering his phone.”

“Jack did seem a little preoccupied last I talked to him. And we know there’s no chance he’s dead.”

That was true. Much as Jack had to worry about with the amount of enemies he’d made, there was essentially zero chance the man was dead. Unless someone found him with a high powered sniper rifle from an extreme distance and took out his head, or hit him with a nuke, the curse wasn’t going away any time soon.

“I—hold on.” A message from Jack.

~I’m gonna do something really stupid, and I need you and Jessy to head down to the Carthian district and stir up trouble. I need a distraction.~

“Jack ... is asking us to do something.”

Jessy laughed. “Of course he is. You know we’re both seniors on him, right? By fifty fucking years?”

“The boy has a knack for tactical reasoning and quick thinking.”

“Pfft, I guess. What’s he want?”

Damien looked at Vicky and Parker. They were both watching him, and making no efforts to hide their eavesdropping.

“Let me call you back.”

“Fine fine.”

---

“We seriously gonna do this alone?” Jessy asked.

“Yes.”

“Why can’t we ask for help?”

“Because Jack doesn’t want us killing anyone. And now that people are dying, we can’t tell fellow Invictus to avoid killing.”

Jessy grumbled as she leaned over the building’s rooftop railing. Most rooftops had them in Dolareido, railings or raised edges, as if Antoinette and the others knew they’d be frequently used by both Kindred and kine when they built the city. Considering the woman’s intelligence, she probably did know.

“Can’t believe Carlyle and Donny are dead. Holy shit, I was talking to them last night.”

Damien shook his head. “Don’t. If you get angry about it, you’re going to kill the Carthians we’re supposed to be distracting.”

Jessy frowned at him, but it didn’t last long. Eventually she relented and nodded before looking back out to the crowd.

“Eric says the shit they’re dealing with is getting even bigger than we thought.”

It was Damien’s turn to frown. “The moment we’re done with this war, we have to shift targets.”

“Done with this war? Yeah, I guess. But Garry and Michael have been at each other’s throats for a long time, you know? And even if they weren’t, Carthians and Invictus are like oil and water. Shit just doesn’t mix.”

That was true. Even if Jack managed to find a way to end this war, and return Garry and Michael to a truce, it’d be temporary. Somehow, somewhen, they’d start fighting again. Maybe it would be better to try and wipe the Carthians out entirely?

Not possible. Not only was Garry smart enough to have defensive plans, likely extreme ones, even if he did die along with his covenant, other Kindred would move to Dolareido and restart the movement. Unlike the Lancea et Sanctum, there was no shortage of young Kindred who felt their anarchist ideals were a better fit for Kindred society.

“We do what we can for now.”

“I guess.” She sighed as she rotated her shoulders, getting ready for a fight. “God, I want this shit over. I want to go back to Eric, and get stuffed by some giant werewolf dick, you know?”

Damien slapped his forehead. “Must you?”

“Ha! Come on, I know you’ve been fucking a spider monster girl. You can’t give me shit.”

“Fiona talks to you too much.”

“Fiona talking to me is half the reason you’re such a lucky man.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Jessy snorted on a laugh. “What, you think Fiona learned how to do that thing she did last night on her own?”

Damien squirmed. “You—”

“I didn’t touch her, calm down. Haven’t touched her since that night at the club with Eric.” Laughing, Jessy reached out and gave him one of her patented buddy punches in the shoulder. “Anything else you want to try with her? I can give her tips. I can give you tips.”

“No thanks.”

“Aw. You doing that guy thing, where you don’t talk about shit?”

“I’m doing that guy thing where I keep the details of my sex life private.”

“Well that’s no fun. Come on, talk to Eric about the sexy stuff! Trade pointers. Share measurements.”

“I’m not going to—”

“Haha! I’m fucking kidding, about the measurements thing anyway. Don’t mean you can’t talk to each other about what things girls seem to like and shit.”



“I saw far too much of what you like through your window.”

“Well if you didn’t go spying on the city with a fucking telescope all the time, you wouldn’t have seen it! And it’s not like you had to gawk while I enjoyed my ghouls.” She turned, put her back to the railing, and rested her elbows on it as she grinned at him. “Bet you enjoyed the show, though.”

He rolled his eyes. “You are attractive, I admit that.”

“Damn right.”

“But I never indulged myself watching you, if that’s what you were thinking.”

“Ha. I was wondering, yeah. Lot of people do, you know? Jerk off — or jill off — while watching the windows. That’s half the fun of putting on a show, knowing people are watching and enjoying it.” Her smile faded. “Much as I love Eric, and the sex is fucking great, I do kinda miss having more legs in the bed, you know?”

“I don’t know.”

She grinned. “I can guarantee if you asked Fiona, she’d consider it. Girl is just as much a hornball as me. You lucky fucker.”

Fiona was definitely that. And maybe in some sort of strange, distant future, Damien would do something as crazy as a threesome. But not yet.

“She’s not the barrier there. I am.”

“Ah man, you too?”

“Too? Eric?”

“Yeah. I mean, I can tell he’d love to ram that werewolf dick into some kine girl I’ve got my teeth in and legs around.” She fisted the

air, mimicking a sexual motion. “But he’s hesitant. PTSD from shit with his wife, and probably from living the rich life only for it to all to go up in smoke.”

Damien sighed. Why were they having this conversation? Jessy reaching out and trying to be his friend, he supposed. Jack and Damien talked about books and psychology when they wanted to have a fun chat, not sex. At least, not usually sex, and they both did their best to navigate the topic without too many details.

But not Jessy.

“We should trade sex tapes! Tash and I do it all the time.”

“All the time?”

“Yeah. Got a few vids of her now. Holy shit that little thing can take a pounding! And she makes my sex tapes look like cheap corner store garbage. Which, I mean, they kinda are. I just set up the laptop and point it at me and stream shit sometimes. Tash though, she’s gone full blown porn director. Fancy cameras and lighting and everything.”

Sometimes, just sometimes, in a tiny little dark corner in his mind, Damien could understand Lucas’s desire to purge the city of deviancy.

“I—”

“And don’t tell me you got a problem with public sex. Fiona told me about that time you fucked her in Bloodlust. Jen and Beatrice showed up and you fucked her anyway, right?”

“I ... that...”

Jessy winked at him. “I know all and see all.”

“You’re a gossip.”

“So’s Fiona.”

That, was true. Jessy’s gossiping annoyed him, but Fiona’s gossiping was cute and endearing. Or more likely, he was being biased.

“I don’t plan to have anyone else in our bed any time soon. And Fiona is happy with that.”

“Buuuuuuuuuuuuut?”

“ ... but I imagine you’ll be telling all this to her later.”

“Of course.”

“And you’ll put the idea of filming a sex tape in her head. Any idea she’ll love.”

“Undoubtedly. That little redhead is a perfect fit for Dolareido.”

Lord help him.

“I ... agree. She is.”

“Ha, right? And those tits, my god. Gs?”

“I’m not telling you her cu—you already know, don’t you?”

“Now you’re catching on.” She gave him a pat on the arm. “I got a vid from Jack, too. Couple, actually. Want?”

“I know, and no thank you.” That would add a new angle of awkwardness to their friendship he did not want. “Can we focus on the mission please?”

“Ugh, fine fine.”

“ ... am I insane, or am I noticing a pattern, that the women in Dolareido are very, very ... lustful?”

“Dude, you don’t think every girl out there wants to get railed? That the idea of getting thrown over a table and just fucking pounded doesn’t get her wet? You even pay attention to what erotic books and movies make the most money, and who’s buying the tickets?” She shrugged. “Girls are usually just more careful who they share this with, and the words they use. Not in Dolareido, though. Fuck that noise. Girls can be just as shameless as the guys. My favorite part of the city.”

Dolareido. Special for so many strange reasons.

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Jessy kicked in the door of one of the apartment buildings, and they both went in, guns blazing. Literally. Damien kept his pistol in his left hand, sword in his right, and fired several shots into the walls of the building. The heavy gauge rounds would penetrate the walls and cut into the various rooms on the bottom floor, as well as announce their presence. No fear of unwanted deaths. Only Kindred lived in this building.

“The fuck!?” the one Kindred in the lobby said. But she went silent when Damien snapped his gun in her direction, and put a bullet through her heart. A neonate, a fledgling at that, some young girl who’d likely been given guard duty for this nest of young vampires.

The cruel, harsh reality of being a Kindred: age mattered. Fledglings could barely function, neonates were weak, ancilla were strong, and elders were gods. The girl fell over, groaning and crying, unused to pain, but she’d recover eventually.

Jessy came in with a shotgun. Damien had insisted otherwise, but relented when Jessy promised she wouldn’t aim for any torsos or heads. He wasn’t entirely convinced. Yes, they both believed in

Jack's cause, but Jessy had issues with the Carthians. Damien had abandoned his issues with them with the death of Lucas, but Jessy was probably itching for an opportunity for some payback.

But he trusted her. Barely, but he did.

Kindred responded quickly. They poured out of the apartments and into the hall, leaving Jessy and Damien both aiming down a hallway filled with Kindred and open doors.

"Y'all have seen this movie before!" Jessy shouted. "Love John Woo!" Movie? What? Who?

Jessy threw herself to the side, and unloaded several shots from the shotgun as she did, mid air. Pellets ripped and tore walls, opened doors, the tile floor, everything. True to her word, she didn't aim directly for anyone, but that didn't mean the spray didn't catch some unlucky Kindred in the arms, legs, or even the chest and head. They screamed as they fell back, but none took serious damage, relative to what Kindred could handle.

Problem. More than fledglings lived here. Neonates with a decade or three under their belt came out of their apartments, and they didn't hesitate, unlike their young friends. Armed with pistols and shotguns of their own, they pointed directly at Jessy, and fired as she scrambled. The small lobby contained only a single staircase, and the path of apartments, but thankfully the hall entrance was smaller than the lobby, giving Damien and Jessy a wall to hide behind. He took the left. She took the right.

"Come and get it, bitches!" She poked her head out long enough to fire again, before quickly ducking behind cover as a hail of bullets came her way. The building's outer walls may have been concrete, but the interior was wood, and bits and pieces of it and drywall alike flew past her.

Which gave Damien the opportunity to poke his head out and fire a couple shots. The hall was a mess of splintered doors used as cover and Kindred firing through the holes Jessy's shotgun had made, but Damien managed to spy a few opportune shots. One Kindred screamed as they lost a toe. Another fell back, hollering as a bullet ripped through their knee.

Attacking an apartment building filled with fledglings and neonates was one of the greatest insults a covenant could give another. A good distraction. A good idea from Jack.

It was a fellow Mekhet that made a dash down the hall as Damien and Jessy reloaded, that got the worst of it. The moment she passed through the arch, Damien slashed down with his sword, and her right hand flew up into the air along with her shotgun. A moment later, it burst into a cloud of ash as it landed on the floor along with the gun.

The woman screamed and fell, and rolled on the floor, clutching the stump where her wrist used to be. She'd regrow the hand eventually, but Damien did not envy her the pain. He knew what it felt like.

Jessy, on the other hand, was not feeling so empathetic. She looked down at the screaming woman with a knowing eye, but a glance back up at Damien stayed her hand.

She spun around, and blasted a shell up at the stairs over their heads.

"Don't think you can sneak up on me motherfuckers!" She fired several more shells up at the stairs, and pellets ricocheted in a chaotic mess. But most of the hail of metal sneaked through the steps, and the Kindred above shrieked and yelled as they jumped back.

Part one of the distraction, complete. Damien nodded to Jessy and then to the door behind them. She did the same, and the two of them ran for the exit they'd come in from literally two minutes earlier.

They weren't in North Side. Close, but not quite. The Carthian half of South Side was filled with people, but they mostly stayed in bed at night, unlike the other half of South Side. Run down buildings and apartments, but not as bad as Devil's Corner. Damien and Jessy were mostly in the clear to make a ruckus without accidentally killing any humans. Mostly.

But the Carthians knew that too. As Damien and Jessy ran back out into the street, bullets rained down on them from above as a few eager Kindred poked their heads over rooftop ledges. Submachine guns. Damien and Jessy slid into cover behind a car, and covered their heads as the sounds of metal slamming into metal at high speed deafened them.

“Dude, Cloak us!”

“A little hard to do when we're being shot at!”

She rolled her eyes, poked her head up over the car, and shot up at the building across the street. The Kindred above ducked back into cover, and used a different tactic: aiming over the rooftop edge without actually looking. Which meant bullets went everywhere.

“Fucking hell man, Cloak us!”

“Give me a moment, for fuck's sake! I—” He pointed his pistol at the door of the apartment building they'd just left, and fired several bullets, each whizzing past Jessy's head and crashing into the metal door frame. The two Kindred about to stick their heads out jumped back into safety, but a moment later they came out just enough to return fire.

Jessy holstered her shotgun, grabbed the passenger door of the car they hid behind, ripped it off, and turned it into a shield. With left hand now preoccupied, she took out her pistol, and fired through its window at the two Kindred trying to get out of the apartment building.

“Do something!” she shouted.

The panic was half fake, half real. They had to be a distraction. According to Jack, they had to be a very obvious distraction, and obviously a distraction. The damn boy didn’t elaborate, and now Damien wished he’d forced him to, because now bullets came at him from above and beside, and the last place he wanted to die was beside Jessy in the middle of a pointless firefight.

Using the Cloak under duress was not easy. It was like trying to do a card trick, while being shot at. But Damien and Daniel had trained plenty, and that included using Obfuscate while being assaulted. Damien closed his eyes for a moment, blocked out the insane onslaught of sound, and summoned his vitae.

He grabbed Jessy’s shoulder, and focused. With vitae pouring up into his core, he forced it out into the world around them, and over him, Cloaking himself and his partner in its power.

“Alright, let’s go. Next target.”

“Christ, Jack owes me a hundred porn vids for this.” No longer shooting, Jessy put the door down, holstered the pistol and drew the shotgun, and followed him.

The Cloak of Night was not perfect. It was limited by two factors: his talent and abilities, but also the eyes of whoever he was trying to fool. A drunkard was easy to fool. A hardboiled detective with several decades of service would be a hard set of kine eyes to deceive. Vampire eyes currently shooting at the target trying to Cloak themselves, were borderline impossible to trick. But Damien



was skilled, quite skilled, and both he and his partner managed to escape from behind cover as the assaulting Kindred suddenly found their targets difficult to see.

Difficult, but not impossible. Their eyes would glide off Damien and Jessy, or see nothing but a hazy blur where the two were, but they still had some idea of where they were. And the only thing that kept the Cloak from breaking, was Damien constantly reapplying it, which took vitae. He couldn't do it forever, and the Carthians kept shooting at their general location regardless.

Jessy was no Mekhet or Daeva, but she was fast, and she kept up with Damien as he sped up. Their jog turned into a run, run into sprint, and sprint into a gallop no human could match. But they were pinned down, with more Carthians poking their heads out windows to lay waste to the area they thought Damien and Jessy were with bullets, bullets, and more bullets.

Step two: get up on a roof, and get the Carthians chasing. The chasing part was done a bit prematurely, and Damien snarled as said chasing Kindred managed to cut a bullet across his shoulder. Jacket and flesh tore, but nothing debilitating, and Damien snapped his hand and grabbed a fire escape railing. Jessy followed, catching his meaning without a word, and the two ran up the old, bent, rickety stairs of metal as the hail of bullets and pellets continued.

It was a tall building. Dirty windows, windowsills with peeling paint, and old brick stained by time surrounded the two Kindred as they scaled the wall. Some kine looked out the window, but remained oblivious to Damien and Jessy, as Damien's touch blanketed the metal stairs with Touch of Shadow. The shaking, the creaking, only a kine paying close attention would notice. Or a vampire.

The two Right Hands jumped the final ten feet up to the rooftop, but another Kindred waited for them. Damien recognized her, an

up-and-coming woman named Jody, and she aimed both her pistols at Damien's head.

Jessy pushed him aside, full body tackle. Bang bang. Jessy's scream announced she'd been shot. Damien crashed to the rooftop, rolled, and dove at Jody. She tried to right her aim, but as Damien closed the distance, he shot her, and the bullet landed in one of her thighs. Screaming, Jody took a step back as the pain hit her, and Damien closed the rest of the distance in moments. She didn't get the chance to shoot again, Damien slicing his sword up and cutting off one hand. And as she fell back, he brought the sword down, and cut off her other hand.

Jody fell on her ass and stared at both her wrists as she screamed, but managed to bite it down halfway as she looked up at Damien.

He pointed his pistol at her, but he already knew he wouldn't shoot. And the fear in her eyes when he aimed at her sent a jolt of nausea through him.

"Shut up and don't move." Sighing, Damien walked over to Jessy and crouched beside her. "Wounded?"

"Yeah. Bitch got me twice in the chest." Jessy stood up and rubbed her chest, exposing the bullet wounds. They didn't penetrate far, probably an inch. A bulletproof vest would have worked better than her own flesh, but Gangrels hated trying to move in one. 9mm bullets weren't the most effective against Kindred capable of hardening their bodies anyway, such as Ventrue and Gangrels. It made logical sense that she push him out of the way and take the bullet for him.

But he also knew that thought hadn't crossed her mind at all when she pushed him out of the way. She did it because it wouldn't even occur to her to do otherwise, like it would Damien.

Sighing, Damien helped her to her feet. "Thank you."

“Oh shut up, come on.” She pushed him off, but she teetered a little as she did.

Damien frowned, but there'd be no point in helping her. He knew that about her as well.

He broke into a run, and she followed. Cloaked, the two ran together, jumping across rooftops as they made their way through Carthian territory. They still had more ruckus to make.

---

~~Jack~~

He sat in the big empty room, and waited. A damn big room too, the basement of an abandoned library near the edge of South and North Side. There were people nearby, other buildings that had people in them, apartments and casinos. But the old library had a deep, deep basement. Apparently it'd been a storage facility for shit before becoming a library a hundred years ago, only to die when the internet swooped in and took over.

A lot of libraries adapted, became internet and information centers in other ways. Not in Dolareido. It was a surprise a library ever got off the ground at all. There was a bigger one in South Side, at a university, but you could barely call it a library anymore. An information hub, all computers and tablets, nothing more.

This library was the love project of someone who loved books, and no good deed goes unpunished. Alas, the tragic case of Dolareido. Antoinette would have found it poetic.

Jack looked around at the empty, dingy old room, the concrete walls, floor, dirty wood beams, and steel support pillars. And he grinned as Garry kicked in the door, literally. Old building, wooden door. It was bound to happen.

“Jack,” Garry said, and he stomped his way into the room. “I’m going to fucking kill you.”

Jack shrugged, threw his feet up onto the desk he sat behind, the only desk in the big empty room, and smirked at the Gangrel.

“Garry Tones. How nice of you to drop by.”

## Chapter 153

~~Jack~~

~Are you alright, master?~ Scully asked, perched on a powerline outside.

~I'm fine. Any kine wandering nearby?~

~No.~

~Any signs of Michael?~

~Not yet, ~ Mulder said.

The ability to communicate with his familiars over distances psychically was freaky and awesome. Normally Animalism required some sort of visual or auditory contact. But now that Mulder and Scully were his familiars, dead and revived as half vampire creatures, no auditory or visual connection necessary. Full on magical connection. Ye're a wizard, Harry.

Garry waited, tapping his foot, growing angrier by the second.

“Kill me?” Jack said after a perfect dramatic pause, voice dripping with sarcasm. “What did I do?”

Garry glared at him as he came closer, eyes scanning for weapons. Well, Jack had none. He sat in a crummy old chair behind a crummy old desk, and with his feet up on the desk, he hooked his hands behind his head, and grinned at the Gangrel.

Garry growled, a little more like a predator — from Predator — than Jack liked. Scary. While Jack wore his usual suit, various shades of gray, Garry wore the usual as well, a white tank top and

blue jeans. And with Jack sitting behind a desk, the situation reeked of a stereotypical Carthian Invictus encounter.

“The fuck are you up to? Fucking rat.” Garry came up to the desk, and licked a fang. Not the sexy kinda lick that Antoinette often did. This was an angry, get ready to fight kinda lick, like an animal getting ready to bite something.

It was an empty room, despite Garry’s obvious concern it wasn’t. No vampire sat around in the dark corners, waiting to spring up out of their Cloak, lit only by the few old bulbs flickering with age. Garry could tell. No explosives covered any surface. It was just a big, empty room.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Jack. I know you set up a meeting to talk to one of Roland’s relatives. The fuck are you trying to prove?”

Jack shrugged, and picked up a stack of papers on the desk.

“The fuck do you care?”

“The fuck do I care? You know why I care! Otherwise you wouldn’t be doing this.”

Grinning, Jack looked at the pages, picked one, and set it down where Garry could see the picture. A copy of a newspaper article from fifty years ago.

“1970. Mugger dies, quite randomly, in a dark alley. Stolen purse found on corpse. Cops delivered it to the woman who lost it.”

Garry’s eyes widened.

Jack flipped to another page. “1984. Car accident. A man nearly died, and the hospital needed a special kind of blood for him. Some

weird deficiency. And for some reason, a woman no one knew shows up at the hospital to give him a transfusion of her blood. She had the kind of blood he needed to save his life. Turns out she lived in your neck of the woods.”

Garry’s eyes hardened into sharp slits.

Jack flipped to another page. “1920. A robbery goes bad and the robbers take a couple hostage. Later, the robbers are found dead, the hostage were fine, and all the hostages can say is something happened in the dark. Something loud, and crunchy.” He couldn’t help but laugh as he read over the paragraph again. “Cops were pretty perplexed, and it was the 1920s. A lot of them got superstitious about it. Called Dolareido the Blood City.”

“Are you fucking serious? You tracked my...” Garry snarled and looked away. That was as good as admitting.

Jack didn’t track all this information, of course. He didn’t know the first fucking thing about it. Hell, the idea that Garry would go out of his way to help Roland’s family after Roland’s death didn’t cross his mind. It crossed Antoinette’s mind though, and she dug up the details without issue. She was too damn smart.

He kinda wished she’d told him she’d left breadcrumbs pointed to him, though, breadcrumbs for Garry to find. He understood why she didn’t, cause he might given up what was happening if she did, but still, risky.

“As you can probably guess now,” Jack said, gesturing around them, “no member of Roland’s family is on the way. I tricked you into coming here, to take a peek at this.” He gestured at the stack of papers.

“You tricked me here? You?”

“Evidently.” The right word to use to piss him off.

“ ... and the distraction in my turf?”

“You knew it was a distraction.”

“Of course I knew it was a fucking distraction.”

“And when your tail told you I’d been up to something here, you came running when you realized I was distracting you. You have had a tail on my ass for a while now, right? Someone who noticed I was looking up information on Roland’s family? Someone who thought I set up a meeting with them?” Someone that Antoinette tricked. “You thought ‘oh that fucker Jack is distracting me while he gets involved in my shit. Well surprise, Jack, I know where you are’. Sound about right?”

Garry stared at him until his eyes twitched. Every word Jack said was right, and Garry was going to boil over any moment as Jack rubbed it in how stupid the man was. He wasn’t stupid, of course. Antoinette was just really fucking smart, and even she couldn’t have put this together without Jack’s help. Even she didn’t anticipate how important Roland had been to Garry. But, better Garry didn’t know it was her plan, not yet. Probably not ever.

“Jack ... you’ve crossed a fucking line.”

“Have I? Just dug up some records.”

“You don’t—”

“Garry, shut up.” Oh the anger in the man’s eyes. It was kind of thrilling, doing this. As shitty a sport as bullfighting was, Jack couldn’t deny it must have been thrilling as fuck to be a matador. “Roland isn’t the first lover you’ve lost like this, is it? A little bird told me you were romantic with another man, someone in the Lancea et Sanctum. Lucas killed him.” Jack shook his head. “You really just can’t catch a break, can you? No wonder you hate Michael with—”



Garry flipped the desk. Papers went everywhere. Jack barely had time to react as Garry dove under the desk as it flew through the air, and tackled him. But Jack already had the necklace off, safe in his pocket, and his Beast responded just as quickly. He grabbed Garry's wrists before he could get them around Jack's throat, and held him at a distance. Jack was still sitting however, and inertia was a thing.

They landed in a roll. Jack wanted to kick up against the man's chest with both feet, push him off, but physics were a bitch, and the two landed and rolled the moment friction had a say in the matter. And Garry didn't come at him with some weak tackle either. The concrete floor ripped and tore up Jack's suit like a cheese grater as the two rolled until they eventually slammed into the wall.

No longer tethered to each other, Jack rolled up and away faster than Garry, and hopped up to his feet. Up and away. Garry, eyes wide with absolute rage, chased after him, and didn't bother with the slow build up like last time they fought. The man's clothes disappeared into his skin, talons erupted from his boots, a tail shot out from behind him, and giant wings burst from his back, leathery, with a giant claw on each main joint. Similar to the creature Jack had fought last time, but with some minor differences. Maybe he couldn't recreate the same shape every time? Well, either way, a gargoyle creature ran at him, and this time, Jack didn't have a dozen tables and a thousand boxes to hide behind.

Then again, Mulder and Scully weren't in the room either. They were circling outside, keeping an eye open for inevitable arrival of Michael. Which meant Jack didn't have to worry about them.

Garry charged at Jack with all the subtlety of a monster truck, mass included, and his talons tore up the concrete as he grew heavier, and bigger. His tail split into two, and flailed wildly behind him as spikes emerged on its tip. His jaw split down the center, and spread into mandibles. Extra eyes opened on his forehead, seven of

them, and his newly formed mandibles grew extra sharp teeth that would have made a crocodile envious.

“Holy shit!” Normally Jack would say that in his head, but sometimes you see something so damn freaky you have to say it out loud.

Garry, on the other hand, didn't say a thing. He probably couldn't with a mouth like that, except maybe for some sinister laughter. Jack was tempted to make the joke about that, but the bastard closed the distance so fast Jack had to roll to the side as the behemoth stomped past him. Each step hit the floor hard and pulsed the area with vibration, like Garry weighed twice as much as one of the werewolves. Sure, he was like a mini Sándor, but that was still huge. Plus, he was really freaky, like 'oh god it's going to eat my brains' freaky.

And the look in his ... nine eyes, was pure, unadulterated hatred.

Garry tried to veer and catch Jack on the roll, but whatever he did to his body, he was too heavy now. It was like a car trying to turn on a dime, or a transport truck. The freak alien gargoyle thing ran past Jack as he turned, and his talons ripped ravines through the floor as he struggled to stop his mass. But he managed, and picked up the chase again as Jack put as much distance between him and the Gangrel as possible.

“Kill you,” Garry said. Ok, apparently he could talk. It didn't sound human in the slightest, like some freaky demon without lips had to use only tongue and throat to make sounds, but he managed. “Fucking kill you!” A loud, raspy voice, mixed with high pitched shrills. Yeap, alien.

But the huge alien came to a stop — after digging a few more trenches in the floor with his talons — when another person walked down the tile stairs and stepped into the concrete room.

“Garry Tones,” Michael said, snarling as his eyes moved from the alien to Jack. “Mister Terry.”

Garry stood there, all nine eyes showing some weird mix of hate, rage, and surprise.

“Well well, Michael, nice of you to drop by,” Jack said, and he waved.

Michael’s eyes hardened. “What is going on here?”

Garry looked between the two of them, and snapped both his tails against the floor, but said nothing. He was confused, too.

Grinning like the biggest jackass alive, Jack turned, and walked back toward the desk Garry flipped. Right past Garry too, to help stoke that rage. The papers were everywhere, but after rooting through a few, Jack stood up with one, and turned to face the two Gangrels.

“Michael. I got a record here about a financial collapse in 1953, a street corner store. “ Jack squinted at the paper, dramatically of course, before smiling at his boss. “And three days later, the store opened for business again. Apparently they’d gotten an anonymous donation, and some new traffic.”

Michael just stared.

“This one is even better. 1921. Looks like whoever held Roland’s funeral didn’t have to pay out of pocket.”

“Jack,” his boss said. There went the titles. “I’m warning you.”

“I got a bunch more here. Looks like one of Roland’s cousins, the one who came to the funeral, suddenly came into a hundred grand. And one of his daughters got a free education. And her grand daughter is currently undergoing leukemia treatment for free. Some

sort of strange loophole in the insurance that doesn't actually exist, but Roland's family now thinks it does."

Jack shrugged, and grabbed another paper. "Here's a report about a guy who disappeared for a while. Addict, got mixed up in a bad crowd. Looks like he was about to get, uh, 'iced' by a loan shark, after a thorough round of torture." Yeap, the language on the report actually said 'iced'. "But then the loan sharks let him go. Told him to keep his nose clean, and his debts were wiped." Jack tossed the paper aside. "Now, I don't know about you, but the loan sharks I've met would sooner cut off their own children's fingers than give up an opportunity to make a statement to other customers. Oh, and this guy was dating another person related to Roland."

Garry took a step closer to Jack. "You had no right digging up shit about us, our past."

"This was ... is, our business, Jack. Not yours." Michael came closer as well, his eyes drifting between Garry and Jack, back and forth several times, rage building.

Jack blinked between the two guys. "Wait, our business? You ... knew? You two knew you were both playing guardian angel to Roland's family?"

Michael tilted his head to the side, like he was going to crack his neck. Vampires couldn't crack joints or knuckles, but the effect was still the same: intimidating. Michael was a big, beefy guy, and he looked like he was getting ready for a fist fight.

"We knew," Michael said. "Garry's useless guilt gestures—"

"Gestures? Guilt!?" Garry stomped his way toward Michael. "You try and buy everything! Even love! Money won't wipe away your guilt you fucking—"

Garry was already boiling at full rage, which was exactly what Jack wanted, but Michael still needed—

“You think your empty gestures mean anything, Garry? Roland is dead because of you! You tore him apart, and helping his family with your useless acts means nothing. At least money helps them. You pretend to be a vigilante guardian angel for them, and then disappear. Useless!”

Ok, the gaps in the puzzle were filling in. Garry and Michael knew that the other was helping Roland’s family out, and it turned into some sort of twisted competition over the years. That was a sort of a good thing? Kinda? It meant both had compassion for Roland, and Jack was banking on that. But it also meant they were trapped in some weird guilt spiral that had them trying to outdo the other. Which meant they were probably brewing up this rage guilt bomb over the past century.

Well, he had more than enough fuel to piss them off. Now the problem was whether he could use it to play psychologist.

“This is quite the soap opera drama, isn’t it?” Jack said. “You two idiots had some bad shit go down a long-ass time ago, and now, instead of talking about it and working out your differences, you’ve got the whole damn city fighting.”

Garry stopped marching, and turned to face Jack instead as he clenched his hands into fists. When he unclenched them, he grew out his claws until they were six inches, and sharp on the inside curve, like swords.

“The turf war is not personal,” Garry said.

“Wrong.” Jack kicked some of the pages under his feet. “Contempt, anger, all just bubbling under the surface, edging each little brawl and scuffle until it turned deadly. Four more Kindred

just died because of your bullshit! Oh, and don't forget the shit Joe pulled."

"Joe was..." Garry snarled and shook his head. "Joe was—"

"A fucking dog," Michael said. "A dog you fed with your lies and bullshit and delusions of idealism. Viktor hurt him, and you took advantage. And now Bruce is dead because of that mongrel."

More puzzle pieces.

"Joe didn't deserve what Viktor did to him!" Garry roared, outright roared, and the room shook with the vibration. "It doesn't matter anymore. The Carthians and Invictus can't coexist."

"It could!" Jack threw up his hands. Like talking to a fucking wall. Walls. "You don't see what I'm fucking pointing out here? You two idiots have been at each other's throats for so long, making everything worse for everyone, but you're doing it over the most idiotic reason! You both loved this dude, and—"

Michael's body erupted in an explosion of mass, flesh, and madness.

Jack jumped back and stared on as the man's height rose until his head hit the ceiling. His shoulders expanded wide, and his arms grew thicker than his original body. As his suit disappeared into his skin, a third arm erupted from his right shoulder and neck, thinner than the others, but longer, with long claws. His legs remained short, but their width increased more than enough to handle the hulking titan of mutating flesh.

His face devolved, eyes shifting over his bulging bone until everything looked lopsided. One side of his mouth grew larger than the other, and the fangs on that side of his mouth grew large enough to split skin. And as the Gangrel grew heavier and heavier, he leaned forward, and put his weight onto his enormous knuckles,

like some sort of mutant gorilla. As he did, another new limb shot out of his body, a tail, something leathery but still the beige color of his normal skin. The tail looked like it was made of hands connected to each other, holding onto wrist after wrist after wrist. John Carpenter would have been proud.

Jack stared on, and glanced at Garry, who didn't look super surprised by Michael's look, but rather by Michael's actions. Apparently he didn't expect Michael to flip out, but he'd seen it before. The two assholes had probably fought each other multiple times in the past, in secret. Elders didn't normally fight, but like Jack was saying, this shit was personal, even if they didn't believe it.

“Jack,” Michael said, voice deep and gurgling in his giant, fat throat. “You tricked me into coming here. You tricked me into thinking you were going to tell Roland's family about me. You tricked me ... and Garry, for what? To tell us that we've been fighting each other because of an emotional grudge based on nothing?” With a heavy, alien snarl, Michael's mouth opened far wider than it should have been able to, exposing a hundred misshapen teeth as rolls of neck fat fell over each other. “Your curse has made you a dangerous ally, but I was willing to put up with it. Now? After this insult? Die.”

How the hell did either of these two dudes manage to talk with fucked up mouths like that?

Michael charged him, the same way a gorilla would. Small, beefy legs doing double time between galloping crunches of his hands against the floor.

Jessy had told Jack about the crazy shit her boss could transform into. She should have taken a picture. He was not ready for the absurd insanity of the disgusting monstrosity straight out of Resident Evil charging toward him. Sure, Jessy could transform into weird stuff too. He'd seen her grow enormous claws and weird,

chitinous body armor. He'd seen her warp her skeleton so she could run on all fours, with a fleshy tail to match. Jessy was a strong Gangrel who'd displayed some impressive feats of Protean, but she had centuries to go before she could do anything like Michael was doing now.

*He wants to kill you. Hit him. Hit him so hard he learns his fucking place.*

Jack waited until the barreling monster was right on top of him, before he jumped, and drove his fist up into the titan's blubbery mess of a face. And he let the rage of the curse pour up through him as he did.

He didn't let the Ripper out. He had no plans to do that. Every time the curse got out, he got his stupid fingers deeper into Jack's mind, made it harder to push him out. But the curse had power. With the necklace off, Jack could summon some of that power. But in order to really tap into its ridiculous strength, he had to call on his Beast, the thing the curse infected. Gangrels did it all the time, but not Ventrue. Calling up the Beast and using it like a war horse was not something a Ventrue would ever be good at. But that didn't mean he couldn't do it.

This war horse came with a second rider, someone trying to rip the reins from Jack's hands. He had to be careful.

His fist collided with Michael's chin, or something approximating it, and the titan slammed up into the wood beams above. The fucker's mass was enormous, and parts of his body continued forward with momentum even as his skull hit the ceiling and came to a quick stop. Body parts a lot harder than Jack thought they'd be slammed into him, and threw him back until he smashed into the back wall, again. Only then did the giant collapse to the floor under his own inertia, like King Kong falling.



Groaning, Jack got up to his feet, and glared at the two bastards as he summoned up more of his vitae. More, and more of it, until he was swimming in it, until its tingling power rippled down into his fingertips.

“You’re both so full of yourselves,” Jack said. “Like Viktor. Just like fucking Viktor. So fucking sure of yourselves, of what you’re doing, of what’s led you here, that you think it’s okay. It’s not okay, you stupid fucks. Christ, how many fucking Kindred have died because of you two. Not Maria, not Viktor, just you two, poisoning every interaction so Carthians and Invictus couldn’t help but hate each other? All because you’re both so fucking full of yourselves you can’t accept you’re both pissed at each other when you should be reconciling! You should be learning how to coexist so shit like Roland doesn’t happen again, but instead, you blame each other, as if there’s no fucking way you had a part in it.”

He was tempted to bring up Amanda, but it’d have to wait. If Garry knew Amanda was alive, it might put him into politicking mode. He needed him emotional and stupid, not conniving like a typical Kindred.

“So you know what? Fuck the both of you. I’m going to beat some fucking sense into you. You don’t get to do this. You don’t get to be in charge, and be assholes, getting people killed because you’re both too fucking stupid to see you’re both nothing more than angry, idiotic, worthless morons. If you’d just talked to each other, come to some sort of understanding about Roland, how many people would still be alive?” Jack took a step toward Michael as the giant climbed back to his feet, and knuckles. “So yeah, I got you both here, tricked you, because you both need to be taught a lesson you’re too stupid to learn on your own. You’re both so pathetic, I could put you in a Shakespeare play and you’d fit right in with all the characters and their tragic bullshit. Get me? You’re both children, pretending to be adults, and neither of you should be in charge of anything!”

Well, that did it. Garry didn't even look at Michael anymore. The huge gargoyle creature let out an ear-piercing shriek, and ran for Jack, leaning forward with wings snug to his back, tails flapping around in the air behind him. No more thought, no more reasoning, no more words, Jack had insulted Garry enough the man went into full animal psycho mode. If Garry had his own curse, it'd have taken over.

Problem. Jack wanted the two of them to fight him, and each other. A big free-for-all mess where emotions would come out flying. But they weren't looking at each other. They were both looking at him, and even with their alien faces and strange expressions, he could tell they were both pissed. Royally, totally, didn't give a shit about the Prince anymore pissed.

But they both stopped when they heard the chittering, and the claws.

Jack stood his ground in front of the two beasts, and snarled as he glared between the two of them. They thought they were scary. They thought they were strong. It was a struggle to not laugh as he brought his vitae up to the surface of his skin, and pulsed the invisible force out into the world as he summoned his legion. The curse laughed in his head, coming right up to the surface with the Beast Jack needed.

He was in control. He was in control. He was in control.

Garry and Michael weren't as smart as they thought they were. Or more likely, they just refused to think a kid like Jack could actually be pretty smart. They refused to think Jack put this plan together; half true. And they refused to think Jack might have actually gotten ready for this fight they probably thought was a surprise.

It didn't even dawn on them he'd already prepared, had already left trails of his blood outside the building hidden in shadows, had already summoned legions of rats, and was ready for them.

Veronica, and several kine besides, would sleep for a week, he'd drained them so deeply, but he knew he'd need it. And he did.

Garry and Michael both turned to the stairway, and took several steps back as the legion poured in. The streetlights were, conveniently, out. There were plenty of dark alleys. There was a manhole directly in front of the building. The rats had no trouble flowing up onto the street, and down into the building's storage basement, like a flood of living, breathing brown water.

Garry responded a little faster. Maybe it was because of his lither transformation compared to Michael, or maybe because he'd seen Jack summon the legion before and was ready for it. But when the flowing tide of rats scurried over each other until they rose, like a brown ocean with thousands of dark, beady eyes, he took a couple more steps back. It was far more rats than last time. It was the same amount of rats the Ripper used to defeat the hunters.

He was in control.

Jack pointed both palms at the two fucking dogs, and squeezed them shut. The rats launched themselves at the two monstrosities, swarming over them and around them with all the gentleness of a tsunami. Both titans fell, huge bodies crashing into the floor as thousands upon thousands of tiny bodies jumped them, and bit into them. Rat claws were irritants. Rat teeth were deadly weapons, capable of breaking through anything. Maybe not deeply or quickly, but not even a Gangrel's Resilience couldn't keep thousands of rats from puncturing skin, and flesh, not for long.

The moment the two juggernauts went down, they thrashed around as they roared, and limbs cut through the swathes of rats like butter. Jack didn't like seeing rats die, but he had no choice. Small comfort. The two Gangrels ripped through them with their alien limbs, enormous claws, and ridiculous mass. Blood and fur

went everywhere. The squeaks of dying rats echoed through the huge basement. Hundreds of tiny, beady black eyes went out.

Jack jumped into the mess. Garry first. He'd hit Michael once, now it was time to hit the other bastard. Garry was on his back, twisting and turning and trying to throw off the myriad of rodents burying him. He'd found his footing though, and rolled onto a palm and knee, only to find Jack running at him.

Football kick, straight to the fucker's face.

Garry flew up and back, nearly hit the ceiling, and landed on his ass again, only for the rats to swarm over his new position. As Jack ran after him, the rats spread around Jack, avoiding his path. Moses, parting the Red Sea. And they parted just as smoothly when Jack jumped onto Garry's right arm, and punched down at his chest.

Crack. Jack felt it when his knuckles collided with the bastard's sternum, felt the bones bend and snap. The punch was hard enough to send Jack back in the air, and he stumbled back as he struggled to keep from falling over.

*You suck at this. You don't know how to use your strength with your small body.*

I'll manage.

*You'll get us both killed.*

Jack snarled as he shook his head. Shut up shut up.

Garry rolled over again, and spread his wings with a harsh snap. Rats went flying, squeaking and shrieking. Jack ignored the sad noises as best he could, and charged at Garry again.

Mistake. The sound of crushed rats and heavy impact announced Michael's charge, and Jack spun to face the giant. Something that

big shouldn't have been able to move that fast, but Michael came at him like a freight train breaking through a snowbank, with little bodies scattering in every direction as he bowled through.

His body slammed into Jack's, and Jack went flying. The world turned into a streaming haze of colors as Jack spun, body turning into a frisbee from the angle of the collision. He was just too damn light. Michael hitting him may as well have been like a truck hitting him, and Jack choked out a groan as he rolled, rolled, and smashed into the back wall. For the third time.

Michael fell over, his huge mutated body hard to balance, but he recovered quickly, as if stumbling onto his colossal shoulder was a perfectly expected thing. A clumsy oaf of pure strength. Blood coated him, rat blood, and in places Jack didn't expect.

A mouth opened up on Michael's chest, big demon teeth and a big jaw, and bit down on one of the rats. The creature died instantly, and the mouth disappeared a moment later, only to reappear on a different part of the man's alien body to do it again. Holy shit, it really was like watching *The Thing*. What the ever living fuck. Gangrels could do some crazy shit with Protean, but not this.

*You have no idea what an elder Gangrel can do. Garry is barely old enough to be considered an elder, but Michael is nearly twice his age.*

I can handle it.

*You mean I can handle it.*

Jack got back up, and yanked on his arm. Pop, back in the socket. The split skin on his head and knees healed over fast. Torn AC reattached.

Two Gangrels and a Ventrue. This was going to be a long, bloody fight.

But Jack had prepared well, and more and more rats poured into the room, his army of devoted servants. And they poured over the back of Garry and Michael again in a new wave they did not expect.

“You two fucking assholes,” Jack said, “you probably think I’m here to kill you, or to take your positions. You probably think I’m in this for me, that I’m here, putting my ass on the line dealing with you two, because there’s some way for me to spin this so I’ll come out on top. Christ Garry! I spared Tilly’s life for no fucking reason other than I’m trying to save as many lives as I can!”

He raised his hands, and the rats flowed off the snarling, clawing Gangrels, giving them a moment of peace. They were covered head to toe in bite marks, some of them deep enough to draw vampire blood. But just like Jack, their wounds healed over quickly as the writhing veins of Kindrd blood pulled skin over skin, flesh over flesh, in the most disgusting way to heal imaginable.

More rats poured in, more and more, joining the original swarm that now sat back and waited for their master’s next order, and both Garry and Michael peeked over their shoulders at the growing flood. The three of them were spread out now, each a good fifty feet from each other, but that didn’t mean much to a vampire. Ballsy of them to actually look away. Either they were intimidated by the ever increasing, scurrying flood of rats, numbering in the tens of thousands, or they didn’t think Jack would stab them in the back. They were right.

Garry spoke first. “I think—”

“I think,” Michael said, voice bubbling up through his titanic chest as a booming gargle, “that you’re a naive fool, child, and you deserve to die for disrespecting me. You need to die because of your curse, before it breaks the Masquerade and dooms us all. You will die painfully because of your manipulations.”

“My manipulations? You’re the one with Amanda hidden in a box somewhere, staked! The fuck did she say to you, Michael? The fuck did you say to her? The fuck happened?”

Garry froze and slowly turned to face the other beast. “Amanda’s alive?”

Ah fuck, Jack you idiot.

Michael snorted, and slammed one of his huge arms against the ground, the bigger arm. The whole body was pretty lopsided.

“It doesn’t matter. You know that. This war had to happen.”

Garry slammed his tails against the floor, hard enough the concrete splintered. “Except the Prince thinks I started this war! You motherfucker! People are dead because of you!”

“You’re the one who brought fire to this war!”

“You fucking deserved it, you lying fuck! Roland’s dead because of you!” Bit of a segue, but Garry was spitting venom at this point. Jack knew the feeling. No coherent thought, just pure anger driving the brain and turning every word into a mess. “You’ve ruined everything, again!”

“It does not matter! We should deal with the boy first. Then—”

Garry opened his crazy mouth, and bit into his wrist. Oh shit.

The elder splattered his blood against the floor. Jack quickly pulsed out his vitae and told the army to attack, but it was too late. The tide poured over itself, raised into giant mounds five feet high, and rushed toward the two elders. But as the rats reached Garry, the mound collapsed. Thousands of rats rushed over Michael and again poured over the titan to renew their assault, but the rats near Garry

fell upon each other. Chittering turned into shrieking as the rats killed each other, biting into furry necks and clawing at faces.

Stupid. Stupid fucking idiot! He gave them a break, a pause in the fight, and the moment he fucking did everything went to shit. It'd worked on Maria. A couple good hits in and she was able to at least talk to him. But the look on Garry's face, including all the extra eyes, was the same look Angela gave Jack when she tried to kill him in the hospital. Pure, utter hatred.

Garry loved Roland, more than Jack had figured.

Garry rushed Michael. So much for politicking. His massive talons ripped through the floor as the Gangrel summoned a new rage. Learning that Jack had tricked him using very personal history, with plans to beat sense into him? That pissed him off. Knowing Michael faked Amanda's death? That pushed him past the point of no return. Garry roared, more of that shrieking alien sound Jack attributed to H. R. Giger creations more than anything, and the younger Gangrel pounced the older.

Garry's form was big, but Michael's was bigger, thicker and taller and a shit load grosser. More importantly, heavier, and even though his legs were kinda small for his body, his titan arms rarely left the ground. He was too damn big to knock over. Garry crashed into him, climbed onto him, and tore into him like a lion mounting a water buffalo. And unlike the rats' teeth, Garry's claws were very, very long.

Micheal roared as the elder sank his claws deep into his hulking flesh, and tore into him. But the titan was too big, too much mass, and Garry's stab was like trying to kill a boar with a sewing needle. Sure, he punctured flesh, a lot, but all he did was make the creature angry. Michael spun around, sending rats flying and forcing Garry to hold on tight.



A fresh arm grew out of Michael's back, shooting out of his spine with zero subtlety. It cracked and broke on the way out, bones snapping and reforming as it added on length until it was the size of a normal arm, but covered in fleshy lumps that looked like knuckles buried under skin. It grabbed Garry's ankle, yanked him down hard, and slammed into the floor hard enough Jack felt the impact. And before Garry could get back up, Michael slammed both of his much larger arms and hands down against the alien gargoyle.

The rats swarmed over Garry and up Michael's arm. Many rats still fought amongst themselves, torn between Jack and Garry's control, but thousands, lost in the mess of orders from both Gangrels, worked together on Michael. Maybe Michael wasn't very good at Animalism compared to Garry and Jack, Jack didn't know, but maybe he didn't need to be considering he was a Protean expert. Either way, he made no effort to control the swarm, but Garry did, and in the chaos of the two of them trying to claim ownership, plenty of the rats knew to attack Michael with kamikaze intent.

They bit into him, his arms and legs, his back, his extra arms, his neck, his face, but Michael ignored them as he smashed Garry into the floor again, and again, and again. Garry tried to get up, but Michael went full ape mode, and slammed down both hands like an angry gorilla, hammering them down on the other Gangrel over and over. Bits of concrete broke, splinters turning into churned chunks as Michael crushed Garry.

The aggression came at a cost. The rats kept eating Michael alive, but the man just didn't care. For all his proper, controlled attitude, this Michael was a snarling, roaring freak of nature, hollering and yelling as he crushed his rival underneath him. It wouldn't have surprised Jack at all if he thumped his chest in a quick beat, like a gorilla.

"Michael! Stop!" Jack walked toward them, waving his arms in the air. "Stop it! Stop fighting! I'm trying to get you to see how

fucking stupid this fighting is! You morons let your hate over Roland's death poison every fucking thing you've done to each other for a century! Enough!"

*The fuck are you doing? You wanted them to fight.*

Fight, yes. Not rip each other to ribbons! They're going to kill each other.

*Yeah, and? Look at them tearing into each other. Wait until they weaken each other, kill whoever lives, and take over. It's a perfect plan.*

That wasn't the plan!

*Sure it was. You knew they'd fight each other if you forced it. And you knew there was a good chance they might kill each other. Win-win scenario. A very vampire plan.*

Shut up. Shut up shut up!

The worst part was, he knew the Ripper had a point. Jack wasn't stupid. He put this plan together knowing this might happen, that shit would get so crazy the two elders might actually flat out try and kill each other. Elders were paranoid by nature, and avoided risking their own necks, but not always, not Gangrels, not if you pushed the right buttons.

Roland was apparently a bigger red button than Jack anticipated. Or maybe he had, and a part of him hoped Garry and Michael killed each other. Maybe.

Jack ran up to Michael, and threw himself at the giant's back. The extra arms were still there, two of them, and they swung out to grab at Jack as he scaled the titan's bulging spine. But Jack was small, and ducked around the gross limbs as they brushed against bits of Jack's suit.

Climbing monsters was a lot harder in real life than video games. Holy shit, just trying to get a grip on something was basically impossible, especially since Michael's suit was gone, and all he was now was a towering behemoth of warped flesh. But Jack managed, getting his shoes hooked into blubbery flesh mounds as he scaled the titan, got one arm around his giant throat, and with a proper anchor, punched Michael in the back of the head, hard.

The giant teetered forward, and stopped punching Garry as he used his arms to keep from falling over. His arms reached out and caught the ground around Garry instead, and he roared as he spun around all the more. But Jack was a much smaller target than the huge gargoyle, and the extra limbs struggled to get a grip on him.

Jack punched him again, hard enough the blubbery layers of fat and skin split against Jack's knuckles. And he hit him again, and again, each time causing Michael to stumble forward. A human — or anything alive — would either be dead or unconscious from their brain bouncing around in their skull. Even an ancilla vampire would probably get knocked into torpor. Not an elder, and especially not Michael. But that just meant Jack had to keep punching him, slowly building a crater in the back of his damn head.

“Michael! Enough! You're going to listen to me, you fucking asshole, even if I have to—”

Something grabbed his ankle. Jack jerked his head down, and gulped. That wasn't an arm, that was a tail, that freaky long tail that looked more like a centipede made of arms and hands. It yanked on Jack hard, and lifted him into the air.

Michael whipped Jack into the concrete, and didn't let go. Jack grunted as the impact knocked the wind out of him; he didn't need the air, except to make noise, and his noises came to a sudden stop as his diaphragm stopped working.

Michael swung him again, onto his back this time, and Jack's skull cracked against the floor. Only his vitae and Resilience kept his head intact. But Michael wasn't done. He whipped Jack up into the ceiling, bending his body against the pillars above and tearing his suit into bits, before slamming him into the floor again. The Gangrel ignored the hundreds of rats biting into him, focused entirely on Jack, and slammed him down again, whipping him around between each slam.

Bones broke. Knees dislocated. Shoulders dislocated. Femurs snapped. Forearms snapped. Neck broke. All mixed into a maelstrom of sensation that was too big and overwhelming to register as pain. He could tell when each body part stopped working, but couldn't really feel the pain of bones grinding and tendons tearing. White noise. The colors of movement as Michael whipped him around were pretty lights, blurring together, and Jack stared on as he went limp.

Michael slammed him into the floor one last time, before his tail let him go, and the brute turned to face him more directly. He raised his two arms into the air, eyes locked on the jumbled mess of a vampire on the floor on his back. He was going to kill him.

The world went black. Jack tried to stay awake, to stay in control, but his skull had been smashed open. Still no pain, but he knew it'd come for him later. For now, all he felt, was his consciousness grow heavy as torpor pulled him under. And something massive rose up to take his place.

Everything faded away.

---

~~The Ripper~~

Michael's fists slammed down together, full body double hammer punch. And Jack took it, absorbing the huge blows into his hardening body. What a fucking joke, getting beaten up by an

oversized mutated gorilla. The Gangrel pulled both his hands away and stepped back, but when he looked down at Jack, probably expecting to see a splattered vampire going poof in a cloud of ash, he roared with frustrated disappointment, lifted his hands, and tried again.

But it was too late. Jack returned the snarl as he slowly sat up, his skin already pulsing and swarming with snakes of crimson. Arms and legs snapped into place. His neck straightened itself out, spine righting itself. Tendons and ligaments reattached, pulling joints back into their sockets. His skull sealed, cranium growing new bone to replace the old, before his blood covered the wound; regrowing skin could wait. He just needed his body functioning again. The pain of missing skin and exposed muscle and bone would be a fun spice on the fight anyway.

Jack put his hands up, and caught Michael's. Of course Michael was thousands of pounds heavy, and hilariously massive. His weight drove Jack straight into the ground, but Jack caught the weight regardless, his back against the concrete. Unharmed. Michael tried again, and this time Jack rolled out of the way.

"He gave you a chance," Jack the Ripper said. He couldn't help but laugh. "You spit in his face. Guess you die."

Michael wasn't listening. Just another stuck up elder utterly convinced of their superiority. What a fucking tool. The Gangrel charged him again, but Jack got in close. No point trying to beat him at the range game, so Jack got within a foot of the bastard, a full dash straight for his crotch. Old Jack would have gone for the chin. Old Jack was an idiot.

He punched Michael so hard his fist went through his dick and into his pelvis. The following high pitched shriek from the Gangrel was orgasmic; ironic. And before Michael could recover from what must have been the worst pain he'd ever felt in his whole second

life, Jack ripped his hand out, drove his strength into the floor through his legs, jumped, and smashed the same hand up into Michael's throat.

New Jack punched a lot harder than old Jack, and Michael flew back as his head snapped up hard enough to tear things in his neck. The way his weight, his back, his extra limbs and big, fat, disgusting, inflated limbs, all crashed into the concrete floor, was glorious, and Jack laughed louder, loud enough for it to echo in the room.

“Christ I've been wanting to hit you for years, you fucking sack of shit. Guess it's my lucky day. No one's leaving this—” He swung his arm out, and backhanded Garry. Fucker had gotten up, put himself back together, and sprinted for him. Not Michael, but him. What an asshole.

Garry was pretty tall all transformed though, and Jack had to backhand him in the shoulder. But he hit him as hard as he fucking could, poured every bit of vitae he could summon in the split moment into it, and the gargoyle creature flew to the side as his shoulder cracked and collapsed inward. Jack spun like a top, the force of the hit sending him flying back and turning on his shoes. Strong as he was, he wasn't a fucking ballerina, and he spun out of control and fell on his ass.

Laughing all the more, Jack got to his feet, and rotated his shoulders inside his ripped and ruined suit, and looked between the two Gangrels. Michael was, of course, still on the floor, trying to recover from having his dick imploded.

“As I was saying! Neither of you are leaving this room except in an urn.”

Garry dragged himself back to his feet. Talons. Whatever.

“Fuck you.” And the look in his eyes said it all. He was going to turn into a cloud of smoke again.

Jack pointed a finger at him, and poured his vitae through him out into the room, and further, out into the blood that he'd circled the area with. This area was his, he'd claimed it, and no one was leaving.

The swarm rejoiced, and rejoined him, abandoning the weaker Garry's call. His legion ceased fighting among themselves, and like a hive mind, a living creature of ten thousand autonomous parts, the rats threw themselves at Garry. And the rats dug into him, clawing, biting, tearing, and the Ripper spared no expense. The rats were told to use every bit of energy they could, every possible spark of effort they had, to bury Garry in agony.

Their teeth broke, and some of them broke their jaws. But that was the point of an army, after all, to sacrifice it to make the bigwig sitting behind the desk more money. He was the bigwig tonight.

"Where's that fuck Jeremy?" Jack said. "And his fucking grenades? Where're your ancilla buddies? I didn't hurt them that bad, did I? First thing I'm gonna do after I rip off your fucking head, is take a visit to Bella. Gonna fuck her and cut her open at the same time, see how long it takes before she turns to ash, all over my dick. Gonna—"

Garry shrieked his banshee cry, and slammed his wings outward hard enough they buried the area in a tornado of force. The rats couldn't hold on. And before they could reestablish their hold on the gargoyles, Garry burst into a cloud of smoke, and flew out the stairway.

"Fucking coward! You can't run from me! I'll get you!" He was tempted to chase him, but it'd be pointless. A Ventrue running through the street, waving his arms in the air like a mad man, foaming at the mouth? Not a very empowering image. Ah well, he'd get Garry later, probably over the ashes of all his friends. He knew where to hit him. Some kid named Mike.

Jack turned, and faced Michael. The big guy was only just getting back up off the floor, hole in his pelvis partially healed, but a thousand rats had been munching on him the whole time. His skin was covered in holes, and while they closed quickly, not quick enough. He couldn't heal from that, and the massive hole Jack had punched through his crotch, all at the same time.

Jack ran up beside the titan, and kicked him in the face. Michael collapsed onto his side, nose broken in, and he glared up from the ground as he recovered. Tough brute.

“Those transformations take a lot out of you, don't they?” Chuckling, Jack smashed his boot down on the fucker's face, knocking him back down. It half launched Jack into the air doing it too; the curse of being small and light. “They take a lot of vitae. You can't go around looking like Swamp Thing's inbred cousin, and pop out of here with that smoke trick at the same time. If you even can normally. Garry got that trick mastered, and you don't?”

“I—”

“Shut up!” Jack kicked the man in the face again, hard enough his shoe split at the toe. Ugh, not again. These were expensive shoes. Fuck it, it was worth it to see Michael's cheek split and the cheekbone dent. “That's probably why Garry's managed to do so well, despite being so much younger than the others. He's smart enough to know when to run. You, on the other hand, are used to giving orders, having them obeyed, and being a big, stomping Goliath of idiocy. If you were as smart as Viktor, maybe it'd work.”

“Viktor,” the giant gargled through the swarm of rats that poured over his neck and shoulders, biting and scratching, “was a tyrant. And you are no better.”

“I am better. Unlike Viktor, I'm more than willing to get my hands dirty. I don't need an army, they're just a nice bonus.” He kicked the fucking shithole again, hitting his mutated jaw hard enough it



cracked and dislocated. The cracking bone sounds followed by Michael's roar of agony made it all worthwhile. "So hey, good job, you fucked up so bad you're going to die, and I'm going to take—"

Jack spun around and brought up an arm, and poured his vitae through it until blood poured over the skin. But he'd been in the middle of a beautiful speech, a speech worthy of presidency. The best speech. No one did speeches like him. So, yeah, a little distracted.

Garry's enormous set of claws slashed into his forearm, hard. And for some reason, the claws also hit Jack's shoulder, despite his forearm being in the way. That was weird. He blocked the attack.

Jack looked down at left his arm as it poofed into a mess of ashes. Garry's claws were now sunk halfway through Jack's left arm above the elbow, and everything below the elbow was now on the floor as a pile of soot. Well damn, Garry hit hard, and cut clean through the forearm and into Jack's upper arm.

"Not running. Strategic retreat," Garry said, and he leaned into his claws, trying to push them through what was left of Jack's arm and shoulder. But the claws were stuck now, the blood shield that coursed in and out of Jack's body locking them down and refusing to let them go any further. Considering they'd gotten halfway through the arm and shoulder, and nearly into his torso, it was probably a good thing.

Jack smashed his remaining hand down against Garry's assaulting hand, right on the wrist, and the Gangrel shrieked like an animal as the wrist broke, and the claws came out like popping sticks out of the mud. Of course, that mud being Jack's flesh, having Garry's claws pop out hurt like a motherfucker.

Before Garry could respond, Jack kicked the man. Garry was smart enough to see the crotch kick coming, and twisted away enough it hit him on the inside of the thigh. But Jack kicked hard,

and Garry collapsed back as his leg threatened to break from the impact. It didn't. He rolled away from it in time so all Jack managed to do was put a good dent in it. Fucker was good, especially considering he had wings and two god damn tails.

Jack looked down at the stub below his left elbow. Dark vampire blood flowed over the wound, sealing it well enough to keep the wound from splitting. Regrowing binding tissue was easy for someone as strong as Jack. Regrowing half a limb was a little more difficult. He'd do it later. For now, he'd deal with these fuckers first.

"You came back. Honorable," Jack said, grinning at the man, "but foolish." Complete with a heavy Chinese accent.

Garry didn't get the joke. He charged Jack again, and a hard shake of his broken wrist snapped it back into place as the beast ran to him. He thought Jack was vulnerable, that he was weaker cause he was missing an arm. Fucking idiot.

The two crashed into each other, and everything turned into rolling colors again. That was good. Michael and Garry had the tools to fight from a distance, or at least a bigger distance than he did, with their Protean transformations. But when shit turned into a wrestling match was when Jack could really lay into the fucker.

They landed in a heap, but Garry landed on top. Garry wanted that. But before he could right himself in a full mount and claw Jack's face into mincemeat, Jack pulled his knees up to his chest, and kicked straight up. Short legs were easy to maneuver, and he got them right under Garry's chest and sternum. The huge creature flew up and slammed into the ceiling of the storage basement hard enough he cracked the beams above, and put a huge dent into the next floor.

Garry came crashing down, and Jack rolled away before the Gangrel could recover. Once Jack had a couple feet between them, he pointed his good hand at the man, and summoned his legion.

More rats poured into the room from the stairway, fresh recruits to join his reclaimed legion.

“The Crow Lord will not be undone by a couple of dogs!” Laughing until he thought he’d burst, Jack poured his vitae out into the world, and demanded his army come. The world went silent, even the rats ceasing their biting and chittering for a few seconds, as the sound of hundreds of beating wings teased his ears.

The wall of black feathers came in a moment later, just as Garry got up. He turned to face the new threat, and Jack could feel him try and break Jack’s hold on the animals with his Animalism again. But it was useless. Old Jack was like a general, while new Jack was a dictator. The birds, the rats, they obeyed him and only him. And they swarmed over Garry with the pure heartlessness of a swarm of piranha. Swarm of anything, really. Nothing said ‘heartless devouring force of nature’ quite like a swarm.

A shame he only summoned a couple hundred crows. Anymore and he’d be risking the Masquerade, even in this area where he’d sabotaged the lights.

The gargoyle fell to his knees and covered himself with his wings, but he couldn’t stop both a hundred beaks from pecking him, and many hundreds of rats from biting at his ankles, and then his legs, and then his thighs and chest and arms and neck. He looked up at Jack for only a split moment, a mix of rage and fear in his many eyes, before he looked back down and did his best to stop the rats from devouring him alive.

Fear, in the eyes of an elder. If only Jack had a camera to take a picture. Ah well, Beast would ruin a picture anyway.

Michael got up, and charged him. Even as bits of his body fell off, even as one of the extra arms he’d grown rolled off his back and burst into ash, chewed off by the rats, the giant charged him. Like an angry elephant, all mass and bronze, no finesse or grace at all.

But when you're that big, you don't really need any, and while Jack was busy directing his choir to trap Garry beneath a living, breathing blanket of fangs, claws, and beaks, the big brute smashed into Jack's side and flung him.

Jack flew through the air, for the millionth time tonight, and crashed in a roll. Again he smashed into the wall in the back of the room, opposite of the stairs, and he landed on his ass, back against the wall. He stared at the two elders as Michael tried to follow up his charge, but the big bastard fell over with an enormous thud as the rats worked through one of his bigger arms. Too thick to cut through it completely, but a hundred rats biting into anything was enough to weaken it, and one of the brute's giant arms cracked below the shoulder, unable to carry Michael's weight anymore.

Michael landed so hard, it was like someone had just shot a rampaging elephant with a high gauge rifle. And the moment he was down, the rats resumed their attack, joined by a few dozen crows.

Mulder and Scully stayed outside. Probably for the best. Jack didn't want old Jack screaming in his head for all eternity about a couple dead pets, assuming the Ripper couldn't eventually crush the other personality into fucking dust.

Laughing again, voice bright and cheery, Jack pushed himself back up to his feet with his one hand. It gave him trouble, fighting the broken bones and torn ligaments. The shitty thing about being small: people could throw you really hard. He was beat up, and for all his power, this damn body refused to heal fast enough. The stump of an arm was proof.

Just like when Avery got him good in the chest with her stupid fancy magic claws, he couldn't heal from everything instantly. Fucking infuriating.

Well, two elders down, and this body was only, what, not even four years embraced? He'd get stronger with time, stronger than any

other fucking vampire. Strong enough he could throw the Masquerade away, and become overlord of the entire planet!

It was always good to think big, and shoot for the stars.

“Ok, I’m done fucking around. Time to die.” Jack gently shook out his head until his brain stopped bouncing around in his skull, and marched his way over to the two Gangrel’s still pinned beneath his army. They used a lot of vitae to use their transformations, smoke cloud included, and they didn’t have the power or reserves Jack the Ripper, mighty Crow Lord did.

What would he do once these two were dead? Kill any Carthians who disagreed with him, or any that didn’t like him, or any that looked at him funny. Same for the Invictus. Except maybe Leauvion. The things he’ll do to her.

He chuckled. Hell, he giggled, as he tossed and turned the gory thoughts in his mind as he walked back over to Michael; he was closer.

“Christ, you don’t even know, Michael. You’re so fucking ignorant.” Jack squatted down beside the giant as he was devoured alive. “You’re not the first elder I’ve killed.”

“What?” Wow, he could still gargle a response, even as rats bit into his face.

“I killed Viktor and Tony, you moron. That fire? I set that fire, knowing full damn well what would happen.”

“You...”

Jack pat the downed man on his massive, disgusting shoulder.

“I killed Lucas too. Dominated Damien, and tricked that fucker good. Cut his head clean off. But I don’t have a sword now. So, I’m

just gonna rip yours off like I did Joe's."

Michael's eyes widened as his world shattered around him, realization setting in. Christ, it was better than murder. But hey, he got to do the murder part too, so best of both worlds. Jack set both his hands on Michael's head, and braced his feet.

Everything went black. Jack could still feel Michael's head, and even hear him, but someone turned off the lights, blanketing in the basement in total darkness no vampire could see in. The joys of a basement. Except, there wasn't anyone else in the room. What the fuck?

A few moments later, someone turned them back on.

The world froze. Jack froze. The sound? What happened to the sounds of the city? Gone. The sounds of his army were still there, but they stopped attacking the two pinned Gangrels as they looked to the stairway.

Everything had changed.

Jack slowly stood up as he looked around. The storage room was different. The same, but different. Darker. The few weak lights had grown weaker, and had changed shape. Instead of incandescent bulbs inside wide metal shades, they drooped from darkness, as if a layer of black fog coated the ceiling over their heads.

The floor had changed. It was damp. And the concrete was tinted red. Red veins moved along the concrete too, almost invisible in the dim, weird light of the strange bulbs above. And the walls trickled with the dark, crimson liquid, as if a flood of red water had soaked the area. As if a monsoon come by, and drowned the city in blood.

He knew where he was.

The Earth shook, and Jack fell back on his ass as vibrations tore the ground out from under him. He stared up and around at the ceiling as it warped and twisted, and lifted. The walls ripped and shredded. The support pillars, now a strange shade of black, came up off the floor as the ceiling above flew higher, and tilted back. It was like someone was opening the basement the way you'd peel open a can of sardines.

“Jack,” a voice boomed, deep and loud enough it vibrated his body almost as much as the tearing ceiling. He knew that voice, too.

“Azamel! The fuck are—”

The world tore apart. Thundering crashes and explosions of impact turned the basement into the center of a giant subwoofer blasting a fucking RATM song. Jack covered his ears, but his rats and birds did more than that. They scattered, squawking and chittering like the world was ending. It felt like it was.

Light broke through a line along the wall by the stairs, met by crumbling bits of concrete and wood and tile, as the ceiling raised higher. Only once it was hoisted up a few feet could Jack see the shadow through the growing crack of where the ceiling over his head was supposed to be connected to the ground by the stairs. It wasn't. It was rising.

Finally, a pair of hands pushed under the crack of the building's basement ceiling, and picked it up. All of it. Two fucking giant hands, each the size of Jack's whole damn body, and they trembled as they put Azamel's strength and power up into the building from the bottom up.

She lifted the library up off the ground, and pushed it back onto the street behind it. It was a pretty big building, three stories high. A small library, sure, but small libraries were still enormous buildings, and Jack stared on as Azamel's elephant god body came into view. He couldn't move if he wanted to, trapped at ground zero

as the building crumbled. Buildings weren't meant to be scooped up and pushed over, and the library ripped itself to shreds under its own weight.

Jack sat there as the wood, concrete, bars of metal, and even the fucking tile of the floor above rained down around him. Most of it rained behind him, past the back wall of the basement, and onto the mayhem of destruction that threatened to blow his eardrums. Again he tried to get up, and again he fell as the Earth decided it didn't want him standing anymore. It wasn't just the building falling over, literally directly behind him, that had the whole place vibrating. It was Azamel, her, her absurd size as she shifted and moved to pick up a fucking building and push it over. The whole nightmare trembled as she went retro and played a game of Rampage.

Dust and dirt should have splashed over Jack and the two Gangrels, and buried them in it. But as the building collapsed, they got buried in something else. Rain. Red. Fucking. Rain. The nightmare chamber didn't bother with things like dust and dirt, as if that wasn't worth the effort; more like whoever dreamed up the nightmare was a little more focused on other shit. And the rain fucking poured.

Finally, the crumbling building shut the fuck up, and Jack stood up. Reality smacked him in the face, and he snapped his gaze around. Garry was slowly pushing himself back up to his feet, but Michael was down. Not dead, not even in torpor, but down, a hulking mess of ripped open alien flesh that couldn't handle its own bulk anymore, just like the upturned library.

"Jack Terry," the four-armed elephant said again. And the bitch made no attempt to speak softly. That flubby elephant god's chest boomed with a voice so loud, what few rats and crows still remained either fled, or froze solid. Animalism would not move them. They were broken inside, mentally shattered, heartbeats skyrocketing and so much adrenaline pumping through their veins they were close to



death. Some did die, just rolled over and died, rather than process the fact they'd been pulled into a nightmare version of Dolareido, with an ugly elephant god who literally pushed over the building they'd been under.

“Azamel, the fuck are you doing?” He pointed his remaining hand at her. Way way up at her. “Don't interfere!”

The stupid, old beast sat in the middle of the street, cross-legged and knees apart, two hands empty and resting on her knees while two others held her symbols. Those two hands held a chain by each end, one end a dangling fishnet filled with hundreds of human skulls, the other a dangling corpse from a hook, like bait. A fishermen of men, literally. Jesus would have been proud.

On the ground beside her were two scimitars, the size of trucks.

He was kind of getting sick of all the big fuckers he had to deal with. First Garry transformed into a tall bat gargoyle thing. Then Michael transformed into a giant hulk mutating beast. There was Sándor, who transformed into a much more classic, but much bigger gargoyle than Garry. Even Athalia and her weird half-body-skeleton nightmare thing was pretty damn big. And if Jack stacked them all on top of each other, they wouldn't have been as tall as Azamel was now, sitting on her ass. What a pain.

“If Jack Terry remained in control, I would not have.” The monster leaned forward and looked down at the trio of vampires. “But you're not Jack Terry. You're an abomination.”

Despite her attempts to sound commanding and powerful, she sounded weak compared to the first time he'd heard her talk through her Horror. Winded, weak, and pathetic. A dying beast putting on airs. Considering Azamel the human — human body anyway — was an emaciated old woman on death's door, it made sense her Horror would feel the same way when they merged. How the fuck the two entities worked together, he had no idea. A big diff

between Begotten, and old and new Jack's relationship. But either way, they seemed linked. If she died, it died.

“Ha! Funny, coming from you, someone who owes their existence to the dark corners of other people's minds. You're nothing more than the reflection of someone else's fears. You'd be nothing without the people you feed on.” He grinned up at her. “So you can act all high and mighty and call me an abomination, but you and I both know you're just a leech.”

“How quaint, the vampire calling a true monster a leech.”

He shrugged. “I wasn't created in the mind of some terrified, religious shmuck running through the jungle.”

“No. You were created as a tool, nothing more than an infection for your masters to spread. And where are those masters now, you cursed thing? Where are their black wings? Shadows of shadows. Useless remnants of an age past, desperate to hold onto the Kindred who left them behind.”

“I...”

She was talking about the Strix. She knew them? Knew about them? Even he didn't know a damn thing about them, except what Susanna had to do to create him.

“Jack Terry. Are you capable of taking control, or not?”

“Old Jack is shutting up until I'm done.” Shrugging, Jack pulled the necklace out of his pocket. A sturdy string, barely a necklace at all. “This is the only reason old Jack even exists anymore.” An ancient artifact from back in the day when assholes made shit like this, hidden in caves or forests or underneath castles, deep in abandoned dungeons.

“Then put it on.”

“You know what? Sure.” The Jack inside was fighting to get back in control, and the Ripper knew he’d win that battle eventually. As long as there were two of them sharing this body, he couldn’t keep old Jack suppressed forever. Which meant, if he destroyed the necklace, old Jack would eventually retaliate. Go to Antoinette, lock himself in a box, wait for sunrise, something.

*You’re never taking this body.*

Yes, I will. You can feel it. You know each time I come out, I take more control.

*You sound like a Saturday morning cartoon villain.*

Jack snickered as he looked down at the necklace, and put it back into his pocket.

“I’ll put it back on, after I’ve killed these two.” He turned around, gave Azamel the finger over his shoulder, and walked toward Garry.

By this point, the man had regained his footing, and he took a small step back from Jack as he got into a fighting position. But the man knew he was outmatched. It was written in every one of his nine eyes.

“You do not get to kill these two,” the stupid booming voice behind him said flatly.

Jack snapped his head back. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You will not be killing Garry, or Michael.”

He laughed. “And why the fuck not?”

“Their deaths will create a vacuum. More chaos. I will not allow this city to—”

“The fuck do you care!?” He turned around, marched up the short stairway up to the sidewalk, and stared up at the fat bitch.

The nightmare version of Dolareido was pretty damn big, and impressive. A blood moon, with raining blood, and an especially large amount of it pouring over the Elysium tower too if memory served; couldn't see it from here. Only a couple cars in the street this far out from the city center, but just like last time Jack came to this nightmare, there were some people in the cars. Petrified, and made of literal stone. A few of them stood in windows of nearby apartments, more statues. One stood next to a streetlight. A fucking weird streetlight that didn't do a very good job penetrating the darkness of the city, which was also too dark for Dolareido in general.

Everything was tinted red. The nightmare wasn't subtle at all. Whoever dreamed this insanity had one very clear picture in mind of what Dolareido was truly like: a bloody place full of cold, lifeless people. Probably some dumb bastard in Devil's Corner who offed themselves cause their mom didn't love them enough. Roland, maybe? It'd figure, but nah, the nightmare looked mostly modern.

“I care because I will not leave my family to political chaos and a bloody, ash-filled wasteland.”

“Ah I get it. You want your nest to be a good place for your kids? Newsflash! They ain't your kids!” He laughed again as he faced Michael and Garry. “And besides, you really want these two idiots around? They've got the city fighting itself, vampires killing each other and burning down buildings, because they can't get over a grudge! Over something they didn't even do! Roland killed himself you stupid fucks! It's not your fault!” He pointed at Garry. “Or your fault!” He pointed at Michael. “It's Roland's fault! Get it? He killed himself! The only one to blame, is him! But you're both looking back at the past with rose-tinted glasses so thick, you've apparently turned this guy into a fucking martyr!

“You don’t even realize the Prince and the werewolves are trying to save the city from a strange, weird ritual being done in it, or on it or something, do you? They’ve been working on this problem for years now, and you don’t have a fucking clue. Course Avery won’t tell you, Garry, cause she knows what everyone knows! You, Michael, you’re both too pathetic, stupid, juvenile, shortsighted, and fucking deluded to take five fucking seconds to think maybe there’s more shit happening in Dolareido than your moronic grudge!”

Garry stared at him, obviously confused. He tried to hide it of course, but the hints were there. Michael reverted his transformation, a disgusting display of popping, gurgling bubbles of flesh and bone that shrank in on themselves like thick ooze going down the drain. But soon his suit emerged from the folds of muscle and skin, and Michael remained. A broken, tattered, beaten Gangrel, who half sat, half knelt, as he tried to push his weight onto his hands but only succeeded with one. He looked confused, too.

“Oh I’m sorry, did you not catch that? Let me repeat. No one told either of you for a fucking reason! Because everyone knows you two are so fucking worthless, with heads jammed right up your asses, that telling either of you anything was a recipe to tip off whoever’s doing it! You can’t be trusted by anyone, and hey! Guess what? You proved everyone right, by starting a war, over a fucking hundred-year-old grudge!” He marched toward Garry, and clenched and unclenched his only remaining fist. “So die, you fucking useless sacks of shit.”

He didn’t get much further. Azamel roared, a full on elephant roar, complete with a trumpet of her giant elephant trunk, and Jack whipped his head around in time to see her swing her hand for him.

She was slow, slower than he remembered. A giant, heaving creature soon to die of a wound it should have died of months ago. But, problem: he was pretty fucking beat up, too. Kinda had his body broken and smashed into mulch ten minutes ago, not to mention

getting his left arm cut off. And the fact she was fifty feet tall, sitting, made dodging a giant hand difficult.

But he managed. He jumped high, damn high, clearing twenty feet so her huge hand swooped underneath him, nearly smashing into the two Gangrels; no such luck, she avoided hitting them. He landed on his feet, and turned to face Azamel, ready to give her another speech. But the damn bitch took another swing for him, with her other hand, palm open. Jack jumped it again, this time jumping straight toward her.

Yeah, she was gigantic. Yeah, she was fucking strong as hell. Yeah, this was her nightmare, her home turf, and for Begotten, home turf meant a fucking massive advantage. But she was old and dying, weak, vulnerable. One moment of focus, one moment as she recovered from lugging those gargantuan arms around, and he'd reach out and break her mind. Breaking the mind of an ancient vampire like Daniel might have been out of his reach, for now, but an old, dying bitch with a superiority complex? He was going to make her rip out her tusks and stab herself to death with them.

“Oh I am going to beat your fucking ass until you're dead! I don't know where Sándor and the others are, but all they're gonna find is your fucking corpse you fucking—”

She swung at him again, with her third and fourth arms, and plucked him out of the air. That, he hadn't expected. Those hands had held the fishing net of skulls and the long hook with the corpse on it like they were symbols essential to her existence. He at least expected her to set those objects down if she was going to use those hands. But she let them go, and the net, the huge black chain that connected it to the hook, it all came crashing down.

The giant net of skulls fell apart, and hundreds of the beautiful orbs scattered over the red-soaked street, shattering into dust. The

hook landed on a roof of a parked car, and sank in through it, dragging the corpse along with and tearing it in half.

Azamel glared down at Jack as she brought him in front of her, holding him with both hands, like a god damn child holding a doll. He was just barely big enough that she needed to use two hands to make sure she completely encased him, with only his head and neck sticking up from between her leathery skin.

And before he could reach out through her dark eyes and into her mind to break the damn bitch, she slammed him into the ground. She was a lot stronger than Michael.

Jack, pinned on his stomach on the street in front of Azamel's knees, pushed his elbows down against the cracked asphalt. She kept his torso buried under one palm, and he managed to push up against it enough to shift the colossal weight. She may have been strong, but so was he.

“Let go of me you fucking—” The world cracked around him as a new weight slammed into him. Bitch just squashed her one hand onto the other, and she was not kind about it, pinning him to the street with both hands hard enough his vitae struggled to keep his bones from breaking into powder.

“Stay there,” Azamel said.

“Good job.” Garry's voice. That fucker. It was muffled, Jack buried under two giant hands after all and unable to see, but he could still hear him. “You ... should probably kill him. That curse—”

“I will do nothing of the sort.”

“I mean, he—hey! What the fuck!”

Loud sounds. Crashing. Thundering. Azamel was moving. Dealing with Garry. She kept one hand on Jack, and at this point Jack was a

pancake. The rage tore through him, boiled his insides, lit an inferno inside him until he was screaming and roaring as he pushed up against Azamel's hand. But she fought against him, trumpeting her stupid elephant sounds as she refused to let him go. Even as he dug deep, poured his power through his body until his remaining hand cracked the asphalt as he pushed against it, Azamel rumbled her weird god sounds, and pushed her weight down against him.

And through all that, Azamel's weight shifted side to side. Judging from the grunts, roars, and pained hollers of Garry, and Michael evidently, she was fighting them. And winning.

"You will cease and desist! You are trapped here, in my domain!" Her voice poured through her arm, into her hand, and into his fucking head. Supposedly whales could sing so loud, if you were in the water with them and near them, it could pop your eardrums. Same fucking thing.

"Azamel!" Michael's voice. "The curse has to be dealt with. He—"

"I am in control here. You will silence your useless mouth, or I will crush you into oblivion. Do you understand me, blood leech?" Old bitch had apparently caught the two of them, judging from the sounds she was making.

Yeap, she'd caught them. She lifted her hand off Jack long enough for him to see Garry in one of her left hands, and Michael in one of her right, both back in their human bodies and trapped in her grip. But the moment Jack got back to his feet, she'd already brought her hand back down on him, two of them, and not to pin him. She crushed him, like swatting a spider.

He poured his vitae through his limbs, his skin, his bones, his muscles, everything. He was Jack the Ripper. He was better than her, a dinosaur falling apart at the seams. He was better than these two fucking cunt Gangrels. He was better than them, stronger than them! It wouldn't be long before he could kill them all, every last



one of them, take the city for his own, and everyone in it. It wouldn't be—

Azamel swatted him again, hard enough he sank through the asphalt. Last thought before torpor took him: he probably made a funny human-shaped hole in the road.

## Chapter 154

~~Jack~~

He woke up, wet and broken. Someone rolled him over, but his eyes were closed, and opening them took a little more effort than he felt like using at the moment. But once on his back, rain hit his face, and his chest. Wasn't he wearing a suit? Shouldn't that block the rain? Oh, right, the fight he'd been in had thoroughly destroyed it.

Pain came next. He groaned as his body did its thing, and what little vitae he had left got to work forcing his shoulders back into their sockets. His neck straightened out; spine was fucked up. His legs straightened out, arms too. Everything got back together just enough that they worked, and he could feel the wrecked muscles screaming with agony.

But at least everything was working again, so he opened his eyes. Yeap, this was still the nightmare chamber that belonged to Azamel, the one that looked like Dolareido. Red rain fell on his face, and he stared up into the strange red sky as it did. He was still alive.

“Jack,” a booming voice said.

“Azamel.” He sighed relief as he sat up. Tried to sit up. His right hand found the street just fine, but his left hand didn't, cause it didn't exist. He almost fell over, but rebalanced and sat up eventually. Relieved as hell that it was Azamel, but god damn, everything hurt.

Slowly, Jack looked around, taking stock. Michael stood nearby, suit and body in better condition than Jack's, but the man struggled to keep standing. Too proud to just sit the fuck down. Garry wasn't. The other Gangrel sat ten feet off, by the curb in front of the now exposed basement they'd been fighting in. Just like Michael, his

skin was royally fucked, covered in bite marks. The two Gangrel probably healed or resisted the first thousand rat bites, but the next thousand got through, and left their mark. If Kindred blood was as thin as human blood, they'd both be bleeding to death.

Jack looked down. The necklace was back on, thank god. Fuck you Ripper.

Jack found the Ripper's thoughts, the curse's impulses, it's almost erotic need to destroy and maim, and cast them into the candle in his mind. Not easy to do, with fire burning through his muscles and bones, but getting thoroughly trashed was becoming so routine, he adapted quickly. When his thoughts were clear and normal again, Jack looked back up at Azamel.

There she sat, literally five feet in front of him, cross legged so one of her enormous shins was beside him, like a wall. Her scimitars were still on the street, and her other weapon, or fishing tool or whatever it was, was still a scattered mess. She wasn't even trying to clean it up.

"You appear normal again," Azamel said.

"Thank god," Garry said. "That was ... not fucking right."

The other Gangrel nodded. "Indeed. I was ... unprepared for how vicious it would be. And strong."

Jack laughed, but it switched to an aching cough, and he clutched his chest with his only hand. Yeah, those ribs didn't like doing that.

"You can see why I want to get rid of it now, right?"

"Yes. I can."

Jack nodded, and looked to Garry, then back to Michael. "You guys ... aren't fighting anymore."

Garry sighed as he shook his head. “You made ... some good points, Jack.”

Apparently Jack’s boss didn’t agree, or at least didn’t like agreeing. Michael’s scoffed, and shrugged. “You warned us something else was happening in the city, something I only have ... a small awareness of. That sounded more important than my quarrel with Garry.”

The Carthian leader laughed, but got the same result as Jack, wincing as his laugh ground to a halt. Yeah, none of them could do so much as bend over slightly without getting run over with pain, let alone laugh.

“If you hadn’t spared Tilly, I’d say this was all bullshit. But I owe you for that.”

Oh thank god, finally, communication. Actual talking.

“And...” Michael sighed and nodded toward the giant elephant monster. “Azamel spared us, if we agreed to a truce.”

Spared. Scary to think Azamel was in a position to kill all three of them. Well, they had beaten each other fucking senseless.

No. Michael and Garry hurt him, and they’d hurt each other, but the Ripper beat the two Gangrels. It ... he won that fight. And the only reason they were alive, and Jack was down, was because one of the most powerful entities probably on the fucking planet tricked him, pulled him into her nightmare realm where she was basically a god, and smashed him into the street hard enough to flatten a car. Multiple times.

“A truce is a good idea,” Jack said. “And you fucking know it.”

The two men sneered, at the same time. Which made them glance at each other, groan, and look away.

“Maybe,” Garry said.

“Maybe? I remember what the Ripper said. He ... told you guys a lot of shit I’d prefer he didn’t. But like Michael said, he warned you about something more difficult than your fucking stupid quarrel.”

Michael growled. “It’s not—”

“It’s fucking ludicrous. People are dead!”

Garry got up, teetered a bit, and pointed a finger at Jack. “Then why didn’t you tell us about it!?”

“Because you were both so fucking head-up-your-asses angry at each other over stupid shit, we knew neither of you were smart or mature enough to handle the information! You’d tip off the enemy!” Jack shrugged, and regretted it immediately, grumbling as the boiling pain smacked him around again. “Avery is your friend, Garry, and even she didn’t spill the beans. The fuck does that tell you?”

Garry glared at him for a few seconds before sighing and sitting down on the curb again, slowly, like an old man. He didn’t look any of them in the eye anymore.

Jack spared a glance for Azamel. She sat there, breathing heavy and deep, like she was permanently winded. But she seemed willing to let him keep going on his rant. Hell, looked like she wanted him to.

“Michael. What happened between you and Amanda?”

Michael sighed as he looked away. “She told me a friend of hers, a kine, was killed by Carthians in a brawl. She said the Carthians were reckless, hungry for violence, and accidentally shot her friend while starting a fight with some Invictus. Amanda wanted revenge. She came to me with a plan, and I agreed.”

“Yeah. Fuck you.” Garry held up his hand to Michael, middle finger up.

That sounded a little strange. He hadn’t heard anything like that from Invictus reports. “Did you double check the info?”

“No. She came to me the same night Garry attacked Xnomina. What reason would Amanda have to lie? It was a perfect opportunity.”

Too fucking perfect. Something wasn’t right.

“Make sure when you un-stake her that I’m there, Michael. Just you, me, and her. Damien too.”

Giving his boss orders was a recipe for confrontation, and Michael glared at him, broken and torn up face ready to pop. But just like Garry, he took a few seconds to think about it — finally, some motherfucking god damn reason — and nodded.

Jack looked back up to Azamel. “You knew I was going to deal with these two like this?”

“Of course.”

“How?”

Shrugging, the giant elephant gestured down at her side.

And out came Mark, a pile of squirming insects and rot. Literally. But at least Mark wore a dark, skin-like robe, giving his shape a human form, normal size. He had a skeleton in there too, but hard to see, among all the bugs crawling in and out of it.

He came out of the fucking shadow, something even the best Mekhet would struggle to do. The disgusting bastard was so damn good, Michael jumped back, and Garry almost jumped up ready to

fight, before he realized the man wasn't a threat. Surprise, to fight-or-flight, to eventual disgust, as the man's rotting odor spread.

"Mark," Jack said. "Didn't the Prince warn you about spying on me?"

The man smirked. "I spied on you, not her."

Azamel chuckled, and lifted one of her fingers, closest to Mark. A subtle gesture, and Mark disappeared into her shadow again. Holy fuck he was good. No wonder he had the guts to spy on the Prince and Daniel in their own tower.

"I prepared," she said. "It is not easy to open a tunnel the way I did."

"Why did you?" he asked.

"Because if I hadn't, what would I be leaving my family? A broken city, about to suffer the wrath of an infantile curse."

He sighed as he looked her up and down. It took a lot out of her to do that. It took a lot out of her to flip a building and catch three powerful vampires, too. A lot out of her.

Nodding, Jack looked between the two Gangrels, thinking. He could keep yelling at them, and he kinda wanted to, but at this point both men were willing to talk. Yelling no longer required.

"Garry, Michael ... Roland wo—"

Michael stepped closer and shook his head. "Don't, Mister Terry." Oh hey, he had a title again. "I can only forgive so much. You used a deeply personal issue between Garry and I to confront us. I ... can understand why, and you made points I have to consider. Perhaps Garry and I have been letting our past poison our interactions."

Holy shit, what the fuck did they say to each other while he was out? Did Azamel play peacekeeper?

“But,” Michael continued, “you are no longer to speak of it. Understand? So much as mention Roland’s name, and it will not end well for you.”

Jack nodded as he smiled up at the man. What Michael wanted to say, but couldn’t, was Jack finally punched a little sense into his thick skull, but he better not try it twice.

“You’ll start going to Primogen meetings again?”

“Yeah,” Garry said, “so calm down. We already said truce. First thing we do when we get back, is get our covenants to back off each other.”

“And Jeremy Long?”

“What about him? Dude is a cutthroat businessman, and he has the connections and the tech I needed.” He shrugged. “And you probably noticed, he ain’t no pussy Ventrue or Invictus.”

Michael and Jack rolled their eyes. Ok, well, insults were a lot better than bullets and fire grenades.

“And Mister Terry,” Michael said, “we will be asking for more information about this threat you warned us about.”

“I ... I’ll try and tell you what I can. But the more you know, the riskier shit gets.”

The man rumbled in his throat. “Risk it.”

“I think,” Azamel said, “that these two dogs have calmed enough to see reason.” Of course she could insult them all she wanted.



“Ok, yeah, I’ll tell you. Um, tomorrow? It’s a long conversation, and it can wait a night.”

“Very well. It has been a trying night,” Michael said. Bastard could barely stand, and called it a trying night, like he’d just done a heavy workout.

Jack looked to Garry. “Avery will tell you everything. Just tell her about what happened tonight.”

“I will. She better have answers.”

“If you want to know more after me and Avery have explained stuff, ask Natasha, or the Prince directly. They’ve been dealing with it a lot more than I have. I’ve had my hands full.”

Garry laughed. A big, full, happy laugh. What the fuck.

“Yeah, I guess you have.” He raised his left hand, and wiggled his fingers.

Even Michael laughed. Not as loud as Garry, but he laughed, before they both groaned quietly in pain. Fucking assholes.

---

Michael and Garry left. They promised the first thing they’d do when they were outside the nightmare was call a ceasefire. He believed them. Some guys just needed to throw fists in order to calm down and see reason. Typical guy thing. Jack couldn’t wrap his mind around that sort of mentality, but he damn well knew a lot of guys who thought with their fists better than their heads. And reconciled with them too, evidently.

Tomorrow night, Michael and Jack would un-stake Amanda, and figure out what the fuck was going on.

Jack stayed in the nightmare. He wanted to talk to Azamel, and he was terrified it was going to be a painful, heavy conversation.

“I will release the animals you brought with you into the dream. The rats and crows.”

“Thanks.” He dragged himself back up to his feet, and leaned back against a car. “Christ I’m hungry.” He glanced again at the monster’s giant ruined tools that she made no effort to clean up before he looked up at her.

“Do not worry, Jack. I think you made your point to those men. They will still antagonize each other, and occasionally serve as enemies, but you have successfully earned a truce between them. Similar future negotiations will be easier.”

He wasn’t worried about that. He was worried about the giant elephant monster who looked like she was about to keel over and die.

“Thank god. Christ, how can anyone stomach politics for five seconds? The people who actually do shit with it, are the morons, and they have power and money and ... you can’t do fucking shit about them without doing something drastic.”

“Power is not given to those who deserve it. It is given to those who either stumble upon it, or are willing to take it from others.” She shrugged, as if this was the most obvious thing in the world. “If those who deserved it were simply given it, the world would be ... boring.”

He laughed, but it stopped quick as his ribs stabbed into him again. Yeah, his body wasn’t healing very fast anymore. He was running on fumes, getting very hungry, and he hadn’t even tried to regrow his arm yet. Strong as the curse was, it couldn’t make something from nothing.

“Azamel, I ... Thank you. If not for you, the curse would have killed those two morons.”

“Most likely.”

“And it ... he...”

“The curse grows stronger, each time it takes over, doesn’t it, little vampire? Stronger and more difficult to force out of your mind.”

Jack clutched his necklace. “Yeah.”

“And you have found no way to destroy it?”

He shivered as he looked down. “Black Blood says he—it can. Or not destroy, so much as remove and take.”

“A dangerous bargain. We already suspect the creature of threatening an apocalypse, and you think it will help you?”

“Only to help itself. I dunno if Black Blood will eat it, or bind it and use it on someone else, or what.”

“Then I suggest you find another way to deal with it. I will not be here the next time it needs to be dealt with.”

He winced. “Christ, I’m sorry. I ... I didn’t know you’d help. I didn’t know you’d ... You can’t find someone to eat to feel better?”

The elephant ran one of her human hands down her trunk, but set it back on her knee as she struggled to stay sitting upright.

“I am afraid not, little vampire. I may not be dead yet, but I will be. Soon.”

Soon. She said it softly, and that just made it all the worse. She didn’t mean weeks or months, she meant tonight.

“This is my fault.”

She laughed, a weak and winded sound. “Is it? Jeremiah has hunted me for decades, Jack. This is his fault, and mine.”

Jeremiah. Just hearing the name was enough to send a pulse of rage through Jack, and looking at the dying woman only made it a thousand times worse.

“We saw the flashback in Jeremiah’s ritual. I thought you were being pretty reasonable.”

“About ruling a city as a monster? About exiling my sheriff?”

“All things considered, yeah? Far as human and monster relations go, you had something going there. Something ... not all that far from Dolareido, kinda.”

She chuckled, a little bit of the sound coming through her elephant trunk and making a trumpet noise.

“Perhaps. It doesn’t matter. If I had done things differently, as Antoinette does them, then maybe things would not be as they are. Or maybe I’d have died much, much younger.”

“A life well lived, then?”

“I think so. My inheritance is beyond my reach, but perhaps that is for the best. The new generation will be a fine replacement.”

“What is this inheritance? Antoinette talked about it, but none of us are really sure what it means.”

She smiled down at him, as much as an elephant face can smile, tusks in the way and all.

“You think I am powerful now, little vampire. Imagine what I could do in this world if I were a true monster.”

“True monster? I thought Begotten were true monsters? You’ve said as much.”

“We are ... potential true monsters.” She leaned forward over him, one set of hands on her knees, the other set pressing on the street. “You have no doubt noticed my kin cannot merge with our Horrors in the physical world.”

“Yeah. But I see glimpses of it sometimes, when you’re fighting and stuff.”

“Indeed. Begotten are limited by the duality of the human and the Horror. But there are ways to overcome this ... flaw, to become a beast and Horror incarnate. I could walk the realm of the real, in a form such as mine now, to transform into at leisure. I could reach out and crush the minds and dreams of all within my grasp. I could master my hunger. I could ... become legend, Jack Terry. I could have become a true myth.”

“Myth?”

“Tales of my existence, whispers, stories in books, pictures painted by dreaming artists, songs and poems. True Begotten who become more than they were become monsters of legend, vampire. That was my goal. I came to Dolareido when Jeremiah found my trail, and I planned to defeat him and his companions here.” She sighed as she looked up to the red sky. “Imagine it, little vampire. Imagine the tale of the hunters who came to defeat the great Azamel, and her friend Athalia. A man, hunting his once lover and ruler. A girl, hunting her mother, only to find her defended by a great and terrible monster. What a tale. It would have been legen—”

“Wait for it ... Dary!”

She looked down at him, and blinked.

Jack threw up his hands. Hand. “Sorry, shitty joke from TV.” And him, trying to distance himself from how much it hurt her to hear her say all these things, each word raspy and exhausted.

It would have been kinda scary, and maybe a problem, if Azamel became some sort of literal monster who could go walking around, being a tyrant. Like, a fucking actual dragon or kraken or something. But now her dreams were crushed, and now she was dying. It fucking sucked.

And the last thing she wanted to do with her life was make Dolareido a better place for the other Begotten. Christ, Jack couldn't even begin to think in those terms, think ‘I'm going to die, better do everything I can to help those closest to me first before I go’. How the fuck does someone think that way?

She was old, and she wasn't a vampire. That's how.

“You may go now, Jack. The city needs peace, if you're to prevent this darkness I sensed from destroying everything.”

“You want me to go? You sure?”

“I am sure.”

Jack looked down the street, where Garry and Michael had disappeared into a building, a storage building. Azamel had created a doorway to the physical world there.

“... you're sure you sure? There's no one else here. I don't want to leave you ... alone, you know? I—”

Mark appeared from the shadow of a nearby bus stop. Damn that guy was good.

“She's not alone. I'll make sure Fiona and Athalia are here, too. I can have them here in minutes.”

Jack nodded as he looked down. Yeah, that made sense. If Azamel wanted to die with her family, that was a hell of a lot better than dying alone.

It was funny. She was such a bitch, such a massive pain in their ass, but to the three she'd been protecting, she was the quintessential grandmother. Jack didn't know his grandmothers, but if they were anything like Azamel, at least how she was supposedly like around Fiona and Athalia, he wouldn't leave them to die alone. He'd stay right the fuck here and be with them until the end.

A part of him wanted to insist. A larger part of him knew that was wrong, weird, and awkward. She wanted to be with her family when she died. That wasn't him.

"Thanks," he said. To Azamel, not Mark. Fuck that guy. "I know you helped me because you want to help your family, but ... you still helped me. Now, and other times. And I'm still sorry that I couldn't fix it. I—"

"You cannot fix everything, little vampire. That is an essential lesson in life, and one you seem to struggle with." She coughed. Azamel in her human body coughed constantly, especially after Jeremiah wounded her, but Azamel the monster never coughed. She did now, and it sounded guttural, loud, and awful. "Learn to accept that failure is not always, and often not, because you made mistakes, or did not do your best. Will you berate yourself because six Kindred have died in this turf war?"

Will he? He already had. Bruce was dead. Joe was dead. They were entirely his fault. Weren't they?

Azamel shook her head before he could say anything. "I have known many like you, Jack. You have an honest soul, and are full of empathy. But you must learn to harden yourself, or your desire to help others, to fix every problem you stumble upon whether you are

involved or not, will break you. You will withdraw into yourself and try to hold the world at bay, as its pain and agony carve scars into your soul. You will grow bitter, and cynical. And I know you are intelligent enough to have seen this.”

Story of his life. Azamel would have been a great therapist, if she talked to him when his dad died. He had closed in on himself when that happened, and hurt his mother doing so. He’d gotten better about it since his first death, and the idea of going back to being a closed off, cynical asshole, criticizing every flaw around him, terrified him. If it wasn’t for Antoinette, he probably would have already, with all the shit that kept coming his way.

“Listen to me, Jack. The last words of an old monster who has made a million mistakes. Do not destroy yourself carrying the pains or burdens of others. Everyone must carry their own anchors, and while friends and family can help each other, you will destroy yourself trying to carry everyone’s.”

“I—”

“Do not argue, little vampire. I do not have the time or energy left.”

“You’re ... you’re right. Thanks, again.” He couldn’t even look her in the eye.

She nodded, and gestured to the building down the street. “Go. Make sure those two dogs put an immediate end to this war.”

He turned, walked toward the building, got two steps, and spun around. “Azamel, I—”

“Go, Jack.”

“But what about you? I can’t—”



“Do not worry for me.” Even as she said it, she struggled to stay sitting. The arm on her knee slid down to the street, and she leaned forward as her own weight dragged her down. She had to brace all four hands on the ground to keep from collapsing. Her breathing grew heavier and ragged, and her trunk dangled until it nearly hit the asphalt.

“Of course I worry! You’re dying! How can you just accept that!? How—”

“Jack.” She sighed again, smiling as she slowly shook her giant head. “I am glad to have met you. I am glad to have helped you. I am ... content.”

---

~~Damien~~

Damien checked his phone. A text had come in a few minutes ago, apparently.

~All Invictus, cease and desist any and all combat with the Carthians. Mister Tones and I have come to an agreement and a truce. Right Hands and senior members, report to the Xnomina Headquarters tomorrow night, 23:00.~

Damien blinked at the phone, several times, before showing it to Jessy. She blinked at him, the phone, then pulled hers out and did the same. They were sitting on a rooftop, Cloaked, and hiding from a dozen Carthians out roof hopping trying to find them. The phones didn’t buzz or make a sound, but the two vampires were hiding and didn’t have much to do for the moment. Good thing he checked.

Damien shrugged, pointed at the two of them, then toward the fastest street out of the Carthian district, and shrugged again. No reason to not just walk out then? They were about to take one of the more scenic routes to get around the patrols, but if things were

called off, then no reason to not just walk back? On the road? Out in the open?

No, probably a bad idea. The Carthians might not have—

Jessy stood up, and threw up a hand. “Hey! Whatever assholes are chasing us, check your phones! If you can afford one, you broke bastards!”

Damien facepalmed hard enough it made a slap sound. “Jessy, Garry might not have sent them a message yet.”

“Ah come on, you think Michael would send that message first? Pretty sure they’d stand next to each other, and actively watch each other send the message, ready to fuck each other up if one of them tried to trick the other, you know?”

That was true. Damien slowly stood up, and checked around the rooftop for any pursuers. No one. He pulled out his binoculars, and spotted one vampire on a rooftop a good ways away. They were looking at their phone.

“Either way.” Damien touched her shoulder, and wrapped them in his Cloak of Night again. “I don’t trust the Carthians to not take a shot at us for fun, or they might say they shot us before the message was received.”

“Dude you are paranoid.”

“You would do well to be a little more paranoid.”

“Ha. You sound like my sire.” She started down the fire escape, and he followed after her. “So, you think Jack convinced them?”

“Yes. And probably not without a fair bit of violence.”

“Yeah, probably. I’ll go back to HQ and check up on Michael. You?”

“Back to my apartment.” Or Fiona’s. He was starving. After two hours of playing hide and seek with a bunch of Carthians, draining his blood reserves to fuel his Cloak, reapplying the Cloak over and over, he was quite drained. If necessary, he’d feed on a random kine, but Fiona preferred to be the one he fed on.

Feeding on someone frequently wasn’t healthy for the prey, if done too frequently in a small time frame. But Fiona healed quickly, and he was happy to indulge. It almost always led to sex, and he’d grown quite addicted to both the rush her monster blood sent through him, but also the sex. One more step to becoming yet another proper Dolareidian.

Another text came in, from Jack, from one of his backup phones. He did have a habit of getting them destroyed.

~You guys ok?~

~Yeah, we’re fine. Distraction work?~

~Yeah, worked great, thanks. Got Michael and Garry talking. It was brutal.~

Damien showed Jessy the conversation, before he called Jack. Texting would forever be a frustrating nuisance.

“The meeting tomorrow night,” Damien said. “You’ll be there?”

“Yeap. And before that, Michael’s taking me to Amanda. I want you there. Jessy can go out and make sure the Invictus and Carthians fucking listen to the truce order while we deal with that problem.”

“Any idea about why Michael staked her?”

“Yeah. Amanda gave him a story about Carthians killing a kine friend of hers, so she wanted revenge. I’m mostly sure it’s bullshit. Something’s up.”

“Will you Dominate her to learn the truth?”

“I’d prefer to not. And that’ll only help if she’s lying. Can you use Auspex to gleam some truth from her?”

“I can try.” It was not Damien’s strong suit. Speed, stealth, sure. He’d even glimpsed the past from objects on occasion with Auspex, or caught a peek at a hidden truth about someone. What Jack was asking for was Auspex’s ability to sync Damien’s mind to a victim’s, essentially becoming them for a time. A useful trick for uncovering memories or discovering secrets buried in a person’s mind. It was not something Damien could do, or at least not well. It was something Lucas struggled to do, and used rarely.

“Think I should ask the sheriff?” Jack asked.

“It may come to that. But the man is busy.” Hunting for anything he could about Black Blood and the ritual, no doubt. “I think we should talk with Amanda first.”

“Agreed. Let me talk to Jessy for a bit?”

Damien handed Jessy the phone.

“Dude, you got Garry and Michael to fuck off? How? Wait, seriously? Holy fuck dude, that’s awesome! Oh .. Oh Michael is going to be a sour bitch for a while isn’t he. Fuck. Well fuck you, man! He’s my sire! I have to deal with him more than you!”

---

He found Fiona on his bed. For a moment, he thought she was lying on her side in a sexy position, curled up with her head buried

in his pillow, waiting for him to come ravage her. But as he came closer, he found her trembling, and her sobs muffled by the pillow.

“Fiona?” He sat down on the bed next to her, and stroked her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

She lifted her head, revealing her ruined mascara. She was never the sort to wear a lot of make up, but what little she did wear was smeared all over her cheeks, and his pillow. Tears soaked both.

“Damien!” She threw herself at him, as much as she could while lying, and flattened her chest against his. She hid her face in his neck, and cried. And not a tender whimper, or a sad sob. She bawled, almost screaming as she cried directly into his ear.

He didn’t mind. Confused, but didn’t mind. He hugged her, twisting so he was sitting directly on the bed, and she was half on his lap, half pinned against his chest. With one hand holding her waist and back, the other held the back of her head, and he leaned in to press his cheek against the side of her head, against the almost spongy texture of her frizzy hair.

“What happened?” he asked, after a few minutes of her cries. The fancy, expensive apartments of Dolareido had a lot of sound insulation, but she was borderline screaming. Neighbors might notice.

“Azamel ... she ... she...” That was all she managed. Back to loud sobs and cries, and more than a few heavy sniffles. Some snot probably coated his shoulder, and he didn’t care.

So Azamel was dead. It was amazing she’d lasted as long as she had, considering what Jeremiah had done to her. After the failed ritual, Azamel had withered down to nothing in a matter of weeks, but somehow held on. Far as Damien knew, she’d been training Sándor to be her replacement, and acclimating him to the family. Fiona wasn’t the biggest fan of Sándor, because he was a pretty stoic

guy, and preferred to be closed off. He was the father she now had to deal with, because the grandmother she used to live with died.

He sighed as he nodded, and stroked her head. He was tempted to say some platitudes, to offer some sort of condolences or sympathy. It wouldn't have helped, and he sucked at them anyway. Fiona didn't want meaningless words. She wanted Azamel. She wanted her grandma.

So he did the only thing he could. He hugged her close, and let her cry.

---

~~Antoinette~~

She stood in her tower, in the highest office, her grand office, and stared out the window.

'He's disappeared.' That was what Daniel had told her over the phone an hour ago. The man had been watching Jack, to perhaps interfere if the curse overstepped itself. And if need be, to remove Jack from the situation, deem him effectively dead, and remove him from the Invictus. He would no longer be allowed to help the covenants. A way to spare his life, to keep him for herself, while also satisfying whichever covenant succeeded in nearly killing him.

She snarled as she waited, grinding her teeth in a way most unbecoming. This had not been part of the plan. If the curse was released during Jack's encounter with Michael and Garry, Daniel would interfere. But while the Mekhet had looked for an opportunity to stop the Ripper, Jack and the two Gangrels disappeared. Which could only be the work of the Begotten. And since the Prince had no way to penetrate their realm of dreams, she was forced to wait until either Jack or the two Primogen found a way out of the maze of nightmares, or the Begotten released them.

If Azamel so much as—

Her laptop beeped. She turned and glared at it, ready to smash the thing to pieces. But self control won over, and she stepped over to examine the screen. A report from one of her thralls.

~Invictus and Carthians are both calling a truce.~

Well now, that was good news. If another building went up in flames, she would have been forced to pay a visit to the two infidels personally. Better news in that it likely meant Jack was alive, and had succeeded in his plot.

Then where was he?

It was another thirty minutes of agony before another report came in. Jack had been found, not far from where he had disappeared. Naturally, Antoinette sent a driver his way, and soon the boy was being escorted to her tower.

Not long after, the boy stepped into her office.

“Jack, you ... look terrible.” Normally she would have sat in her chair and offered him a seat in one of the visitor chairs. But she walked over to him, and set a hand on his shoulder as she looked him up and down.

He managed a weak smile, and nodded. Terrible was an understatement. His suit was in tatters. His left hand was missing. Chunks of his body looked dented and warped. His head missed a portion of skin and hair. He must have been in agony. And yet he did not show it.

“Azamel’s dead. Or ... will be, before the night is over.”

Oh dear. Antoinette sighed, and took Jack’s remaining hand. The office would not do for this conversation.

Jack said nothing as she took him back to the elevator he had just exited. He tried to look at her, to smile, but his eyes fell, and a heavy weight pulled on his expression. And as the elevator took them down and down into the quiet safety of her Elysium Tower's underbelly, he squeezed her hand.

She guided him to Ashley and Julee. Both girls were studying, each sitting on a couch while classical musical played in the background. They preferred EDM or dubstep, musical 'genres' crass enough to make Antoinette's skin crawl. But studying while listening to classical music was a proven methodology, and she insisted.

But they would soon be asleep, as Jack needed blood.

"My pets, if you please," she said, gesturing to Jack as she stepped into the quiet room of black marble and soft couches.

Jack did not so much as say a word. Normally he would insist he did not need their blood, that he could hunt on his own, or use Veronica. He had likely drained Veronica tonight to prepare for his bout with the two Gangrels, but that was not the reason he did not fight her on this. The poor boy looked drained, emotionally and physically.

Her two precious ghouls hopped up, and their smiles vanished. They stared at Jack, at his destroyed suit and broken body, and his missing hand. They both gulped, and walked to him, the invisible weight the boy carried dragging the two girls down with him through sheer proximity.

He took of both of them. No word, no fuss, and no attempt to treat the girls with a teasing hand or seductive Kiss. He simply drained them, quickly and efficiently.

Antoinette watched her lover as his wounds began to heal. The hand would take time to regrow, though considering the ludicrous



amount of power the curse had, it would take merely a single night. The other wounds, the missing skin, the dented and broken flesh, wounds that left bits of his insides exposed, it healed over at such a rate she could see it with her naked eye. A terrible, and terrifying power.

Antoinette set both girls down on the couches, and made sure they were set in comfortable positions, before she turned to Jack once again, and subtly reached out. He did not even look at her as he took her hand, and held it as they walked to her bedchamber. Their bedchamber.

He sat at the foot of the bed, and she joined him, the colossal room and enormous bed suddenly seeming quite empty and sad, as if to match his mood.

“You succeeded with Mister McDonald and Mister Tones?”

“Yeah.”

“You had to fight them, I assume.”

“Yeah.”

“And ... the curse was involved.”

He nodded. “Didn’t break the Masquerade, but it got close.”

“I am sorry to say it, but I cannot deny that the curse is a forced to be reckoned with, if it was able to defeat Michael and Garry in combat. Did they defeat each other first?”

“No. I mean, they hurt each other, but ... yeah, it was mostly the curse.” His shoulders slumped, and the poor boy’s hand fidgeted with the blanket. “Another thousand rats died because of me.”

She nodded, and cast her eyes toward the door of the chamber. There was an art to listening. If someone was looking down and away while sitting next to you as they spoke, it was sometimes the correct thing to look to the distance, adopting the ‘thinking gaze’. It was not a deception, either.

“It is a terrible shame that such horrible things happen through you.” She waited for his response. There was none. She would have to coax more information out of him. “What happened after? Daniel reports you disappeared.”

“The fight was getting out of hand until Azamel showed up and ... opened a portal right on top of us, into one of her nightmare rooms. Not sure how she did it. Someone turned off the light in the basement. Probably Mark. Turned it back on, and we were in the dream world.”

Ah. Azamel was far too powerful for her own good. Though if Jack’s words rang true, the old woman was dead, and no longer a thorn in Antoinette’s side.

How callous. Clearly there was more to Azamel than Antoinette knew, considering how devoted her friends, her family were to her. And, considering Jack’s reaction.

“Why did she do such a thing?”

“Two reasons, I guess. She wanted Garry and Michael to start a truce, so ... so when she was gone, the war would be over. She was worried if the Ripper killed them, it’d create a power vacuum, you know? Vampires killing each other, burning down buildings ... everything that’s been happening, just worse.”

“Azamel is wise, and old. She has likely seen such destruction before. The other reason?”

He sighed, looking down, hands between his legs and resting against the bed's edge. "She wanted to help me. And ... you should have seen her, Antoinette. She was dying."

"I am sorry, my love, but you saw her only days prior. You—"

"No, she was merged with her Horror thing, you know? She was this giant monster creature, and she ... she could barely sit up. And I was talking to her, and she was dying right in front of me. I was ... christ, I was talking to her, and she was nice to me."

"Nice?"

"Nice, in a way I'd never seen. Fiona said Azamel was nice to her, but all I ever knew was this bitch old woman."

"You are not alone in that, my love."

"But she ... she was nice to me. She could have lived longer, you know? It wasn't easy for her to do what she did, to yank me and Garry and Michael into the nightmare, opening a door right on top of us. She even flipped a building. It took a lot out of her. A lot lot out of her, and then she beat me, and—"

"She beat you?"

"Defeated me. Got her hands on me and squashed me." He gestured to himself. "Half of this is from her."

"Oh my. And the Gangrels?"

"The Ripper beat them. But they were recovering while Azamel had me pinned, and she caught them. They wanted her to kill me, because of the curse, but she said no, caught them, and forced them to agree to a truce."

Azamel was a better negotiator than Antoinette realized. And why would she not be a great negotiator? The old woman ran a city once, many years ago. To be a talented negotiator would have been a requirement, to at least some degree.

After a few moments of silence, Jack leaned against her, and set his head against her shoulder.

“She could have killed me, Antoinette. That would have been an easy way to get Garry and Michael on her side. They wanted ... want me dead, for tricking them, for abusing—” He jumped to his feet and threw his arms up. “Oh shit! I told them. Ripper told them.”

“Told them?”

“About the ritual or whatever being done in Dolareido. They know something’s up now.”

Antoinette sighed and nodded. “That is unfortunate. The more that know, the more difficult it is for us to hide our actions. But Garry and Michael are not capable of only animalistic gestures and loud noises, my love. They are elders, and can be intelligent, and even reserved, when it suits their needs.”

Jack did not look convinced. Considering the Hell he had just gone through, all to deal with Garry and Michael’s infuriating, infantile grudge, she did not blame him. But the poor boy did not understand. Kindred did not deal with slights as humans did. Humans abandoned their grudges as they aged, or they were destroyed by them. Vampires were immortal, and struggled to change. To spend a hundred years living a single mile from someone you blamed for losing someone precious to you? Such resentment in such proximity eventually boiled over.

Slowly, he sat beside her again, and she slipped an arm over his shoulders.

“I will speak to them, to ensure they understand what ails my city, and what they must do.”

“Yeah ... yeah ok. Michael and I are going to unstage Amanda tomorrow night, and see if we can figure out what happened. I’m pretty sure she lied to Michael about something, to convince him to use her to trigger this war.”

“Is that what happened?”

“Yeah. Something’s going on. Me and Damien are gonna find out. Do ... do you think Daniel could do that Auspex thing I hear about? Sorta ... learn about her, and her secrets?”

Antoinette tapped a finger against her chin. “If necessary. Daniel spends his nights ... hunting. But if this is being done tomorrow night, then you may summon him.”

Auspex was a terribly tricky and fickle ability. It did not turn secrets into an encyclopedia to be read. Antoinette did not trust what information it gleamed, but that did not mean something of value could not be learned. With Daniel hunting for more information about Black Blood, and skirting the edges of its awareness, his time was valuable. And yet, if they could learn something from Amanda that suggested Black Blood was involved, that would be useful information indeed.

She ran her fingers over Jack’s head, against the grain of his buzzed hair, and the boy relaxed into her touch.

“This is a victory,” she whispered. “No more do two of my Primogen kill each other’s Kindred. No more do they burn my city. And while they have learned of the dark presence earlier than I planned, I had planned to tell them eventually. They had to know, my love.”

“I guess.”

“And if Black Blood is involved in Amanda’s supposed lie, then there is something to learn. You may have discovered the perfect opportunity to uncover this plot.”

Jack looked up at her, eyebrow raised. She chuckled, and rubbed his head more. There was no chance Amanda would be carrying a secret detail in her mind that would be the key to ending the ritual. Kindred, and likely other paranormal entities like Black Blood knew particular vampires, like Daniel, were capable of uncovering secrets from the darkness of people’s minds, and even experiences. They were careful.

A game of shadows. Kindred played them well, but whatever dark art Black Blood pursued, it must have done so for many years now, decades. Centuries? She had to be very careful. A private conversation with Mister Tones and Mister McDonald was in order.

Jack looked back down, and silence fell on them once more. The poor boy was often forward with her about his ailments, now that their relationship had progressed so. Not tonight, evidently. Perhaps a little more prodding, to see if he wanted to speak of it, but needed to be coaxed yet again.

“Something else is on your mind, my love.”

He sighed as he nodded, and nudged his temple into her shoulder. “Yeah.”

“Do you wish to speak of it?”

“I don’t know. It’s ... weird.”

“By all means, if you wish to hold it in...”

“It’s not that. It’s...” He turned his head enough his forehead pressed to her shoulder. “Azamel. I ... I offered to stay with her, until the end.”

“Yes, I imagine you did.”

“She said no. Basically kicked me out.”

“And this bothers you?”

“It ... It’s not what she did that bothers me. It’s why. She was protecting me, I think. From me.”

“Protecting you?” she asked.

“Yeah. She said some things, kinda told me I need to get over myself. That I can’t fix everything. And I noticed something she was implying. That I ... I guess I seek out shit to get wrecked over. That I’m a glutton for punishment. That I’m making myself miserable.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah, fuck me, right? Do I have a case of martyrdom, or something? A masochist? Do I throw myself into situations where I have to ... have to carry a burden?”

She mirrored his sigh, and stroked his head more. “I would be lying if I said you did not drift toward such situations.”

His sigh turned into a groan. “Azamel thinks if I keep it up, I’ll grow up to be a bitter, cynical old man.”

Antoinette chuckled, a tender and motherly sound. “Jack, you are already a bitter, cynical old man.”

“Hey.”

“But there is also a deep need in you to help others. For some reason, there is a spark inside you that craves not pain, but to block others from pain. Do not think yourself a masochist. You are, however, doomed to an eternity of throwing yourself between others and the pain that would befall them, even when it would be a

poor decision. Even if nothing would come of it, except for more pain.”

“That ... does sound like me, yeah. I wanted to be there for Azamel when she died. Didn’t even fucking cross my mind that it’d be dumb to do that, that I’d be just throwing more weight on my shoulders. Azamel said she’s known people like me before, and she was insistent I go. Said Mark would get Athalia and Fiona, and that she didn’t need me.” He rubbed his forehead side to side against her shoulder. “Ugh, why am I like this?”

“You are not always like this. But when those you consider worth protecting are in pain, it is a reflex that takes over. Like Azamel, I have known people like you. But not Kindred.”

“Not all Kindred are selfish assholes. What about you?”

“You know very well my desires for a change in our nature, and in the methodology of our kind’s pursuits, is also a selfish desire. I am intelligent. I am wise. But I am no saint, little Ventrue. I am afraid you and you alone of the two of us, are burdened with such a horrible curse.”

He chuckled, but kept his head where it was. “That why I love you?”

“Partly.”

“Other part?”

“I am a buxom creature, and beautiful beyond words.”

He chuckled again. Good. It hurt terribly to see her little Ventrue suffer, especially when victory was had, and the pain should have been left behind. But Jack was Jack, and he picked up the pain and added it to the anchor wrapped around his throat without hesitation.



“I—” His phone rang. Connected to a private network, just for him, without fear of her monitoring his messages, or him monitoring hers. The joys of working for two different covenants. “That’s Damien.”

“By all means.” She released his head.

He checked his phone, and what little joy she had kindled in his expression vanished, ripped away by the inevitable.

“Azamel’s dead. Fiona’s crying in his arms right now. She ... she died not long after I left.”

Antoinette slowly nodded as she set a gentle hand on the boy’s. “Were Athalia and Fiona with her?”

“Yeah. They got to say their goodbyes, according to Damien.”

“Then I am sure she died content, my love. As content as a frustrating old woman like Azamel can be.”

Jack managed a slow nod, but no smile followed. “Yeah. I ... I think she did.”

Antoinette gently took the phone, and set it on the bed. With a tender smile, she reached out, and guided the boy to lie down, until his head rested upon her lap, his legs on the bed. There, she rested a hand on his stomach while her other caressed his head.

“I know you are in pain. I know you connected with Azamel in a way I did not. I know her death could have been avoided, if you, or any of us, managed to defeat Jeremiah before he enacted his ritual. I know the death of your sister, and Julias, at the hands of Angela eats away at you each and every night.” Her caressing hand gently slid over his face, and closed his eyes, before she returned to his buzzed hair. His eyes stayed closed. “But understand that not only are you not to blame for any of these horrible things, you also

managed to pull victory from these dire situations. You have done better than most would. Take solace in that knowledge, that more people would be dead or hurt, if not for your efforts.”

A tiny smile broke through his morose expression, eyes still closed. “Yeah?”

“Our second lives can be cruel, horrible affairs, but you and I both strive to make them better for ourselves and the people in them. It is one of the many reasons I love you.”

Jack’s small but powerful smile remained, and he nodded as he relaxed against her lap.

Antoinette pet his head, and pulled out her own phone with her offhand. “I must send Daniel a message.”

“Something secret?”

“Non.”

“Oh ... about Azamel.”

“Oui. I believe my old friend will want to visit Athalia.”

“Athalia? Really? Figured she’d want to be alone, and brood and stuff. Azamel’s death will hit her the hardest.”

“Athalia will indeed want to brood and withdraw into herself. But there is more to her than a cold woman, made of ice. She will not realize it at first, I imagine. There will be some resistance from her. But Daniel will — due to my guidance — melt her cold shell and ... I am sorry, I am speaking of deeply personal matters of my good friend.”

“You need more girl friends to talk about this stuff with.”

“I have Ashley and Julee, and Elaine.” She grinned down at Jack, and poked his nose, causing his eyes to open. “And I have your mother.”

“Oh god. You don’t talk to her about sex stuff about me, do you?”

“I do not say your name, if that is what you mean.”

He stared at her, eyes widening. “But she can figure out who you’re talking about?”

“Most likely.”

“Oh god.”

“If it is any consolation, your mother is happy that you are a talented, giving lover.”

“Oh god.”

They chuckled, but after a few moments, the weight returned to Jack’s face. He closed his eyes again, and she stroked his hair, as the boy no doubt turned a thousand possibilities through his mind, looking for a way he could have done better. A compulsion he had little control over.

So she did what she could. She caressed his scalp, and did her best to soothe his pain. She was intelligent. She was wise. But from the outside, she could only help so much. It was her curse, to watch the man she loved tear himself to pieces.

---

~~Jack~~

The next night, he woke up to a regrown hand. Hard to say exactly how that worked, what happened during the day while he slept and whatnot. No vampire would feel comfortable being filmed while sleeping, either.

His aches and pains were gone, too. He sat up, rotated his shoulders, twisted his wrist, flexed his fingers — both hands — and wiggled his toes. All in working order.

More than that. Realization came like a rush, and he looked down at the blankets. The war was over. Azamel was dead, but the war was over, and she helped. He told the Begotten to stay out of it, but Azamel helped him in the end.

Figures. The first time she did something truly compassionate for him, for vampires, and it was with her last breath. Christ, that fucking sucked.

Don't be sad. You won, Jack. Sorta. Now he had a massive amount of clean up to do. He had to deal with Michael, and their relationship was probably worse now. But hey, if he got through to Garry and Michael, and he thought he did, then maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Either way, worth it to get people to stop killing each other.

He looked down beside him at Antoinette. She smiled up at him, head still on her pillow, but she said nothing.

“I gotta get ready for that thing with Michael and Amanda. Then there's an Invictus meeting after, and I'll be going to that too.”

“I see.”

“I'll tell you if we learn anything, from Amanda. Should I involve Michael?”

“You have little choice in that matter anymore.”

“I guess. I'll, uh, try and be reasonable with what I tell him.”

“Indeed. Avoid telling him more than he needs to know. Unfortunately, that means exposing that Black Blood is suspect, and

possibly Jacob.”

“Damn. I’ll try and be discrete.”

She reached up from under the blankets, pushing them down enough to free her arm, and she rubbed his back. After a few moments, she used her nails, and scratched his back, sending pleasant chills up and down his body.

“It is the first night I do not need thralls scouting the city for potential Masquerade violations in many months. The first night in some time, I do not have to split my sheriff’s time between hunting for more of Black Blood’s acts, and worrying about what chaos the Carthians and Invictus might cause. All thanks to you.”

He grinned down at her. He recognized that tone in her voice, and the devious smile. She was purposefully stroking his ego.

He slipped back under the covers, cuddled into her side, and buried his face in her closer breast. Soft, heavy, supple, the huge pillow was ridiculously comfortable, and ridiculously massive. He never wanted to leave.

Antoinette bent her arm, its bicep under his head and neck, and rubbed his hair as she helpfully pressed him into her breast. They weren’t going to have sex. He had shit to do. But it was nice to spend ten minutes just cuddling with his lover.

It almost felt anticlimactic. The war was over, kinda. A truce. He didn’t need to worry about shit anymore. Mostly. He didn’t need to worry about getting sniped, or getting set on fire. He didn’t need to go on patrols. He didn’t need to deal with that fucker Jeremy Long. Now, he could focus on the much bigger issue.

He needed to talk to his mom. A weird as fuck thought to have, when burying his face in his super tall girlfriend’s super massive boob. But, the way Azamel spent her last bits of energy, or life,

helping him and his problems? Couldn't help but make him think of a mom. Azamel had never seemed like a mother to him, despite Fiona's insistence that she was, or a grandmother. At least until last night.

Mental note: make time for your mother, you idiot.

---

He took a slow, useless breath, and opened the door.

Michael waited in his office, seated at the large table, dressed in a nice suit, but looking beat up. He didn't show it, but Jack could see some cuts on his neck and hands that weren't fully healed. They were a million times worse last night, but there were still wounds that Jack's curse would have healed over night if he had them.

Michael realized it, too. He looked at Jack, looked at his exposed head, neck, and hands, and the fact he had both hands back. A solid poker face, but Jack could see the man was annoyed Jack had fully recovered already. Which would make the following conversation even more annoying, with Jack having to navigate the man's ego.

"Mister Terry," he said. Ok, titles, that was good, kinda. "I see your curse has healed you." Wow, he even approached the topic directly. Strange.

"It's powerful. Too powerful."

"Agreed. I also spoke to Maria last night, after our encounter."

"Oh?" Uh oh.

"She admitted to telling you about Roland."

Jack forced down the desire to wince, and kept his gaze on Michael. "Did she?"

“Don’t play dumb. I’m not trying to get you to out her. She told you, and you decided to take matters into your own hands. You somehow arranged a trail of evidence that led to both Mister Tones and I believing that you were going to interfere with our ... strange competition.”

“I—”

“You decided the only way to have Garry and I talk and sort out our differences, was to have us butt heads with you in the middle. A free-for-all, fists flying.” The man frowned. Jack didn’t say anything this time. Michael wanted his monologue, so he let him monologue. “And there was some wisdom in that. Garry and I have been dancing around this issue for decades, and we never speak of it. It’s private, personal, and it’s been slowly growing more and more painful over the years. It was ... a rather cold slap of reality, to know that it’s blinded us to larger problems. And”—he pointed a finger at Jack, hand still on the table—“you will tell me about this larger problem, in greater detail, correct?”

Jack nodded. “Yes sir.” Don’t smile don’t smile.

“Understand that the Carthians fight the Invictus and Lancea et Sanctum in most cities with a Kindred society, Mister Terry. My issues with Garry are hardly the reason for such an aged and widespread conflict. But Maria has helped me see that you touched a grain of truth with your accusations.” The man sighed as he leaned back in his chair. “I do not know how long this truce will last. But for now, Mister Tones and I will instruct our covenants to leave each other be.”

“Thank you.”

“And I am fining you a million dollars, for your transgression against me. You will donate the money to the Xnomina corporation.”

A million fucking dollars. Holy shit. Jack didn't have that in cash, but he had it in assets, stocks, all that shit. Not a big slap for someone like Antoinette, but for someone like Jack, the only reason he could even afford it was because of all the shit he inherited from Julias, what the Invictus didn't take.

"Yes sir." No point in arguing with him about it. Better this than making a big spectacle, and possibly another fight.

"You crossed a line doing what you did, Mister Terry. You disrespected me. But I know you did it because you wanted to save Kindred lives, and because the city faces a potentially larger threat. Those are the only reasons I do not have you killed." And the death threat, of course.

"It had to be done." Jack held a solid, cold face. He couldn't get too subservient now, or Michael might try and undermine him somehow.

Michael frowned harder. "I suppose it did." Nodding, he stood up and gestured to the door. "Now that that's out of the way, let's go awaken Miss Pol."

Jack mirrored the nod, and followed after Michael. Damien waited in the hall, and a small trade of smiles was enough to let him know things went well. The three of them got into the elevator, and no one said a word as they went down and down. This was awkward enough, and you didn't chitchat with your boss around, especially not a mob boss.

They came out on the bottom floor, one floor below where they kept the armaments. Down here, it wasn't like the Elysium Tower's basement, which was a maze of halls that connected to a myriad of strange rooms of many sizes. Listening rooms, changing rooms, wreck rooms, electronic rooms, a pool, and then higher, the experiment rooms Jack wasn't allowed to see. But in Xnomina, it was all business. Sure it was sleek and pristine upstairs, but the



basement was all metal, like some sort of military storage facility; basically what it was, considering the weapons it stored.

Michael took them down one of the halls to one of the storage rooms. You couldn't access a storage room without permission, and to get permission you needed to go through Xnomina. Unless you were Michael. He plucked a keycard out of his pocket, waved it in front of the scanner, and the big metal door went beep boop, and unlocked with a loud click.

Inside was a bunch of empty metal shelves in an otherwise empty room, some LED strip lights above, and a dark tile floor, beneath which was probably more metal. Invictus didn't fuck around protecting their shit.

In the center of the room, sitting in a metal chair, was Amanda, a stake in her heart. A somewhat short black woman, with thin long black hair, and a soft, kind face, even when in torpor. She had a little more bite to her than her face suggested though, kinda like her sire Gloria. Mekhet did love to be sneaky.

Damien approached first. He squatted down in front of her, and looked her up and down. Dressed in a typical business suit, skirt and all, she looked perfectly normal.

“Should I wait for you to read her first?” Michael asked.

“No. I might need her awake to help.”

The Gangrel nodded, and yanked the stake out of her heart with zero gentleness.

It took a few moments. Mekhet weren't exactly fast healers, and Amanda was only as old as Jack. But eventually her eyes shot open, and she sat up straight with a jolt as the hole in her chest sealed. A poor seal, just enough skin and flesh to keep her functioning.

The three men waited. Waking up from a stake in the heart was not fun, like waking up from daily torpor except with an even a harsher rush of awareness, and a whole bunch of pain. It was probably her first time getting staked, too. Combined with waking up in a storage room with three dudes staring at her, she was considerably freaked.

“Wh-What’s happening!? What’s going on? I ... oh ... Mister McDonald?” She blinked at him, the stake in his hand, and then Damien and Jack. “Ja—Mister Terry? Mister Burksen?”

“Miss Pol,” Michael said. “How are you?”

“I ... I’m in pain.” She clutched her chest, and after looking down at it under her palm, blinked several times at the hole in her suit. “I was staked?”

Michael gestured to the stake in his hand. “Take a moment to remember what happened. It was the night of the fire at Xnomina HQ, when the Carthians attacked.”

“Fire? Fire ... I ... what?”

Jack put up a finger. “As much as a building of marble and metal can burn. But yeah, we lost a lot of furniture and paintings and fake plants.” Which were replaced, of course. The Invictus would never let the Xnomina HQ look bad for any longer than a couple days.

“I see. Then ... w-why am I here?” She looked around at the storage room, more confused than Jack figured she’d be. “Xnomina storage?”

“Yes,” Damien said. “You don’t remember?”

“I remember ... I remember...” She blinked at them for the hundredth time before closing her eyes and clutching her head. “I don’t remember. I remember the fire, but ... I don’t remember any

details. I don't ... remember anything for the past few days. Or, few days since I was, um, staked."

Of course she didn't, cause if she did, she'd be able to answer questions.

Damien stood up, and set a hand on Amanda's shoulder. "I'm going to try and open your mind."

"I don't—"

He shook his head. "Auspex. You'll learn it eventually. Whatever Gloria is willing to share with you."

Ah, the joys of being Kindred. Secrets everywhere. No one told each other a damn thing, Mekhet especially. How did Auspex work? Only the Mekhet knew, and even they kept its more powerful abilities hidden from each other. Good chance that Gloria didn't know shit about the crazy things Auspex could do, while Daniel knew a lot. Would Gloria ever learn them? Maybe. Hard to use a crazy ability unless someone came along and taught you how, especially Auspex.

Amanda nodded, gulped, and waited, eyes wide. She was scared.

Damien smiled at her. A comforting smile, subtle but there, and a much bigger smile than Jack was used to seeing on the dude's face. He'd changed.

Whatever Damien did, or was doing, it didn't have any outer expression. Like a lot of Kindred Disciplines, it was something that affected someone else's mind in some way or another. A human watching wouldn't see anything. But everyone in the room could feel something change. Damien pulled up his vitae, like flexing a muscle and lifting a heavy weight, and pushed it out to touch Amanda's mind.

And then he stood there for five minutes with a strange look on his face, like he'd tasted something sour and wasn't sure if to like it or not. Jack watched, eyebrow raised, and glanced between all three vampires. Michael didn't show any expression. Amanda waited like someone was going to pinch her, but it never came. And Damien continued to stand there, sour expression slowly growing worse.

"I can't..." His frown turned into a wince as he concentrated, and pressed a couple fingers against his left temple like he had a headache. Vampires didn't get headaches. "I can't get through."

"That's fine," Jack said. "We can ask the sheriff. Prince says he should be able to help, considering how important this is."

"Important?" Amanda asked. "The sheriff? Um, I ... w-what's going on?"

Michael raised a hand slightly, palm forward. "Amanda Pol, it seems you've been tricked into doing something ... problematic. I will reveal more details to you in the future, but know that you are to not speak of this conversation to anyone until I say otherwise. This is important. Lives depend on you." Way to lay it on thick.

Poor Amanda. Her eyes widened to freakish levels. If she'd been human, she'd have been having a panic attack.

"I don't know if the sheriff will have any better luck." Damien stepped back and paced from shelf to shelf as he looked down. Good to see Jack wasn't the only person who did that. "I can reach into the memories, try and remember things from before a few days of the attack, but then I get blocked."

"You mean you succeeded at, um, doing the mind thing?"

Damien nodded to him. "Barely, but, yes."

That, was damn impressive for a Mekhet his age.

“I get blocked every time I use Dominate,” Jack said. “I have to punch my way through. Maybe it’s like that?”

“This is different. This is ... like ... I don’t know, it just blocks me. I don’t know. I don’t know if the sheriff will be able to do anything either. I am barely able to use this ability, advanced as it is, and I’m sure Daniel is a thousand times better at it than me. But trying to ... find the memories, all I find is something stopping me. Like trying to trudge through a deep swamp. Cold, dark, and full of death.”

Amanda almost stood up, but Jack met her eyes and shook his head. Just sit tight and don’t move or ask any questions, Amanda, and you’ll be fine.

“That’s ... so scary,” she said, brought up both hands to her face, and hid her face in her palms. Slowly, she lowered her hands, and blinked at one of them. “Um, did someone put a ring on my finger?”

The three men all turned to look at her hand. Yeap, she was wearing a single ring, a tiny black band.

“That’s not yours?” Jack asked.

“No. It’s pretty ugly. A black ring? And it looks old, worn and warped and—”

Damien grabbed her hand before she pulled it off. “Don’t touch it.”

“Uh, I kinda already am.”

“Don’t remove it. Let me see if I can gleam something from it.” Eyes locked on the ring, Damien held Amanda’s hand in one of his, and touched the ring with the other.

Same thing. He stood there for a good five minutes, face sour, but otherwise the room was silent. Vampires didn’t breathe or fidget

much, so even with four people in the storage room, it was just as quiet as before the vampires came in.

Slowly, Damien pulled the ring off her finger. Amanda winced as he did, Jack did too, half expecting it to explode, or for Amanda to drop dead. Deader. But the ring came off without issue, and Damien held it in front of him as he glared at it.

“I see ... the same thing. A cold, dark swamp, filled with dead things.”

“Fuck,” Jack said. “Not useful?”

“I see a black skeleton, huge, and its ... doing something to the ring. There’s a ... cauldron, and it’s dropping the ring into it. And then ... a street. Dolareido maybe. People ... drifting ... and the ring’s in the crowd somewhere. And then it’s on ... a corpse’s finger. The corpse is on fire.”

Amanda almost stood up, again. “Corpse? Fire!?”

Damien lowered the ring, and rubbed both temples with finger and thumb. Jack knew that look. The man was drained.

“I assume metaphor,” Damien said. “A corpse can be a vampire. The fire could be metaphor for inciting something.”

“Or not,” Michael said.

“Or not. The corpse could be the lie that you were told about the kine death, Mister McDonald, and the fire could be the fires the Carthians were spreading. There’s no way to be certain.”

Damien had told Jack about Auspex before, about how problematic it was to try and learn anything with it. It could be wrong. It could even give you one of those self fulfilling nasty

prophecy visions, where it tells you exactly what to do to avoid death, and you end up dying because of it.

“Either way,” Jack said. “I think we know where this ring came from.”

Michael raised a brow but said nothing. Of course he didn't want to admit ignorance in front of Amanda, but a quick glare from the man told Jack enough. He was going to make Jack tell him everything.

“Should we ask the sheriff to take a look at her?” Damien asked.

“Yeah, but if you think he'll run into the same barrier, it can wait until he's free.”

“Miss Pol,” Michael said, “I say again, speak of this to no one. If Miss Jennings or anyone else asks, tell them you were involved in private Invictus business about the war.”

She nodded again, but her eyes were locked on the ring. It would be freaky to wake up from torpor, have several days of your life missing from memory, and find a random ring on your finger.

“Now,” Michael continued, “some things happened while you were unconscious. Let me explain.”

Explain he did. He told her about what Amanda told him during the Xnomina attack, about what they did, him staking her, the following war, and the people who died. Poor Amanda. Every thing Michael said made her sink further into her chair, until she couldn't look him in the face anymore.

“Oh my god.”

“It wasn't your fault,” Jack said, and he spared a quick glance to Michael, complete with a hint of anger. Michael returned it. Yeah,

their relationship was going to suck now.

“Take your time recovering, Miss Pol,” Michael said, “and don’t be surprised if Mister Terry, Mister Burksen, or indeed, the sheriff, come to you again to ask questions or dive deep into your mind. Obey their requests, and you will be compensated. Don’t, and it will not end well.” He leaned down toward her, and eyed her. Classic mob boss eye, the sort that told her it was an offer she couldn’t refuse.

She took it, hook line and sinker, nodding like her life depended on it. Michael was a jackass.

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Michael sat down in the main office where they had their meetings, a big long table with lots of chairs, and a touch screen on the wall, similar to the top office where the triumvirate held their meetings. It wouldn’t be long before the other Invictus seniors showed up, and they’d have to do a debriefing of the damage, and the truce. But there was enough time for the big conversation.

“As far as I know,” Michael said, gesturing to two chairs across the table from him, “Mister Tones has gone to Avery to learn about this. I’m going to learn it from you two. I assume Burksen knows as much as you, Terry, since you seem to tell each other everything.”

If they told him Jessy knew, how would he react? Not good, definitely not good.

“He does,” Jack said. “The Begotten were the first to tell us about it. He’s close with Fiona.”

“I see. Azamel told you, then?”

“Yes, about two years ago.”

“Two years. Impressive that you kept it secret for this long.”



Jack nodded as politely as he could. “Yes sir.”

“And the dragons know.”

“Yes.”

“So then. Explain.”

Jack and Damien glanced at each other, and Damien nodded to him. Well, fine, he’ll do the talking. How did he get this ambassador job?

Jack told him quite a bit. He told Michael about Black Blood, though Michael knew of the spirit’s existence, but only barely. He told Michael about the strange tears showing up, and how it seemed to be the markings of a ritual symbol they were pretty convinced was not good. Like, might destroy the city, or even the world bad.

Michael took the threat to the city seriously, but he wasn’t convinced about the threat to the world. Fine, whatever, taking the first threat seriously was good enough.

“So Jacob is our enemy? I know he conspires with the spirit.”

“We don’t know,” Jack said. “Maybe? We’ve seen nothing to prove he is.”

“Bold of the Prince to continue letting her childe maintain her romantic involvement with him.”

Yeah, Prince’s childe, not his mom or anything like that.

“She doesn’t know.”

Michael raised a brow. “Mister Terry, are you telling me you’re letting your mother risk her neck? You?” Oh now she was his mom.

Jack didn't bother hiding his scowl. "Yes. This is important. We don't know if Jacob is working with Black Blood, but there's a chance, and in either circumstance it's better we don't tell her. We don't want Black Blood knowing how much we've uncovered."

"An intelligent and tactical decision. I assume this was the Prince's plan, and not yours?"

"... yes." Oh this guy, this fucking guy.

Michael must have seen the frustration in Jack's eyes, cause he chuckled as he kept his gaze.

"And Azamel is truly convinced these tears are a threat?"

"Was," Damien said. "She died, not long after your encounter with her."

Michael sighed as he leaned back in his chair again. "I cannot say that life won't be easier without her, but she was worthy of respect. You don't often run into women willing to use an iron fist."

"True enough sir," Jack said. "She was ... banking on accomplishing some things in this city. That's why she told us about the dark ritual being cast; we didn't know that's what it was at the time. She told us so we could put a stop to it, so Dolareido would be a good place for her goals. And for her family."

"More sentimental than she seemed on the outside, wasn't she?" And Michael threw him another eye, like Jack should know that about other people, too.

"Yes. I think we should trust what she told us. The Prince does, and the dragons have been working on this problem for a while."

"Does this have anything to do with why Avery attacked Maria?"

“Yes. The werewolves followed a trail of evidence placed by spirits that led to her. We’re convinced Black Blood tricked them.”

Michael glanced up as he thought. “And ... not long after that, Amanda came to me with an idea that would trigger the war Garry and I had been tiptoeing around for decades. An idea she has no memory of. And a mysterious ring has been found on her finger, that Damien’s Auspex revealed to be linked to something rather dark. Which means you think Black Blood has been creating distractions.”

Damn, he put things together pretty quick.

“Yes sir,” Jack said.

“You give this spirit a lot of credit.”

“We do,” Damien said. “And it’s earned it. Black Blood is a terrifying, brutally intelligent creature.”

Jack raised a finger slightly. “Problem is, it’s hard to tell anything with Black Blood. It isn’t malevolent, far as we can tell. It helped Sándor, when Jeremiah had us all bound in a strange ritual, the one that wounded Azamel.” The one you failed to stop. No, no don’t think like that. Stop accepting responsibility for everything. That last words of a dying woman, Jack. Stop beating yourself up. “Jacob and Black Blood saved me, Damien, and the others from Jeremiah and Sándor when he was still enslaved, when we were rescuing Jessy, Clara, and Eric. It’s a tricky situation. We have to be careful, and not let Jacob know what we’re up to.”

“Garry and Jacob are friends, of a sort,” Michael said. “You think Garry won’t speak to him of this?”

“Once Avery tells him the details? I hope not.”

Michael nodded as he sat back, and let his eyes drift off to nothing as he entered thinking mode. He came back after a minute, and hooked his fingers together as he set his hands on the table.

“Mister Terry. Your curse revealed some other, rather important secrets. Namely that you killed your grandsire Viktor Honors, Tony, and even Lucas, Damien’s sire. That deserves elucidation.”

Jack and Damien looked at each other. Tell him? Well, too late to not tell him.

So Jack told him. Told him about the fire, and then told him about how Jack was at the tower when Lucas attacked, and how Jack managed to turn the situation around. Surprisingly, Michael’s face didn’t get more angry at the explanation went on. If anything, he smiled.

“Impressive, Mister Terry. Thinking on your feet, and a pure display of will. And the curse did not help you dominate Mister Burksen’s mind?”

“No. Or, maybe it did, but at that time it was still ... getting its claws into my mind, I guess.”

Michael grinned as he leaned back, and folded his arms across his chest. “Very impressive. Julias chose well.” He gestured to Damien. “As did I, and Lucas, and the sheriff. Our childer have all been Right Hands at one point or another for a reason.”

“You’re not angry?” Jack asked.

“I am angry at myself and my agents for not having discovered this sooner. I am ... happy, to know that Mister Mire sired as well as he did. If I had known you’d already created so much chaos and change in Dolareido, Mister Terry, I would not have found your disrespect and disregard for the chain of command to be so

insulting. All this time, I felt I was being usurped by an idiot child. You've earned recognition."

"Um ... thank you."

The man's grin turned a little more sinister than Jack liked.

"But make no mistake. This curse of yours is strong, but without it, you would have died last night."

"Agreed, sir."

"You're not going to apologize for your behavior last night, are you, Mister Terry?"

"Probably not."

"Ha. There's a little more Viktor Honors in you than you might like to admit, Mister Terry. Ventrue, indeed."

## Chapter 155

~~Jack~~

Two weeks later.

“She sounds like she was an amazing woman,” his mom said.

“She was a total hard-ass and a bitch. But, yeah, she was pretty amazing in her own way. Fiona’s wrecked. I haven’t seen Athalia since, but I bet she’s taking it worse.” He took a sip of his red. “It had me ... feeling a little sad, and thinking about us, you know? We don’t talk as much as we should.”

“You’re Invictus. I’m Ordo, sort of. And you have big responsibilities. I’m just a fledgling, trying to learn the ropes.”

“I know I know. But still, we should talk more.”

She nodded, smiling as she sipped from her glass. The two of them were in his mansion, but not in one of the rooms. So many rooms, rooms he didn’t need. They sat on the stairs in the lobby, in front of the big double doors, with a cool bottle of blood and a couple wine glasses. Both in suits, too. They looked ridiculous, and they’d laughed about it the first time. And the second time. By the tenth time they saw each other in suits, they’d gotten used to seeing each other in expensive clothes. How quickly one grows accustomed to wealth, Antoinette would say.

Well, he couldn’t grow accustomed to a bunch of fancy rooms. He liked the stairs. Did in his old home, and he did here.

“My mom wasn’t like her at all,” she said. “A lot softer. I guess I got a lot from her.”

“And granddad?”

“Quiet guy. Reserved. Bit like you. But this was the 50s, right? The only time a man was allowed to be emotional was when he was drunk.”

“Heh, don’t feel all that reserved these days.”

“Me neither. But your girlfriend changed life for the both of us.”

He glared at his mom hard, until she raised a brow and took a sip.

“What has Antoinette been telling you?”

“What? About what?”

“Sex.”

She coughed up a bit of the blood, but managed to keep the glass close and sputtered into it instead of all over his very, very nice stairs.

“You want to have the sex talk?”

“Ugh, no, not really. Just hearing you say ‘sex’ makes me clench. I think we should just both accept we’ll never really be comfortable with each other’s sex lives.”

“You think?”

He nodded. “I think. I’m never gonna be comfortable knowing my mom has a sex drive. And Dad’s dead and gone, so I get it, but ... blech.”

Laughing, she took another sip, conveniently avoiding eye contact.

“Talking about our sex lives is probably a little weird for a mom and son to do. But at the same time, sex seems to be the most common topic in Dolareido. At least in this part of South Side. And with vampires.”

This part of South Side was half of the whole damn city. Jack grew up in the other half, closer to the Carthian half.

“True, true. It’s hard to talk about anything really without it coming back to sex in Dolareido. Or with vampires.”

His mom grinned, took another sip, and raised the glass to him. “So we can avoid talking about it, at least when it comes to each other. But a little bird told me you have a very satisfying sex life, and are quite the lover.”

“Mom! The fuck!?”

“Hey! No cursing in front of your mother.”

He squirmed, groaned, took another sip, and damn well did not look her in the eye. “It’s pretty great, yes, okay? Happy? You’ve scarred your son.”

“Very.”

“Well, a little bird told me someone’s been in the spotlight of a few orgies. Center of attention and everything.”

“Jack!”

“Hey, I can play dirty, too.”

She scrunched up her nose at him, total chipmunk mode. Kinda reminded him of Natasha.

“At least I’m not building a harem.”



“It’s not a harem! It’s one girl!”

“So far.”

His turn to scrunch up his nose. “You’re a Daeva. You’ll build something like one eventually.”

“Like your girlfriend?”

“Well, I mean, she has two ghouls, and—”

“Girl ghouls. That must have been fun.”

His mom wanted to keep teasing him about his sex life. She’d changed. Either her new life was rubbing off on her, or her Daeva blood was emerging. It all mixed into a weird concoction on the subconscious, how the bloodline emerged in personalities. Jack always had a bit of a superiority complex, and he had no idea if it’d grown because it was just who he was, or because he was Ventrue.

“It was fun! Okay? Lots of fun. And you’ll get a couple ghouls you’ll get attached to that you’ll bring along to your orgies.” There, that earned another nose scrunch from her. Point for him. “I’m sure Antoinette’s told you about that.”

“Yeah. And Othello is super attached to his ghoul Madison. Only feeds off her.”

Jack leaned in toward her. “How many times have you fed off her?”

“Madison? Um ... uh ... a few times.”

“Uh huh.”

“Ok, maybe ten times.”

“In the middle of sex?”

“ ... maybe.”

He laughed. Ok, maybe this wasn't so bad. If Mary could talk to his mom about this, maybe he could too? They were all adults. Well, he was barely an adult, but he was getting there.

“Ok well, I have one girl. You have zero. Is your first thrall going to be a boy or a girl?”

“What? I don't know that!”

“Mom, I'd be lying if I said most girls in Dolareido weren't, uh, swinging both ways. Which includes you, apparently.”

“That is ... not something I've thought about. Getting a thrall, I mean. Not even a year embraced.”

“That hasn't stopped some vamps. Vinculum works no matter how old you are. It's a big responsibility to have a thrall, but some Kindred, like Jessy, got themselves some sex slaves the moment they could.”

“Sex slave? That sounds horrible.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah I used to think the same thing. It's, um, a pretty popular fantasy for a lot of people. A lot lot ... lot of people.”

His mom squirmed and looked back down at her drink. “That's just a fantasy! We shouldn't force things on people.”

“More than a few vampires have taken a thrall or ghoul against their will. Much as it sucks, they're prey, and we're the predators. We get to do what we want to them.” He didn't like that. Julius didn't like that. And his mom didn't like that. “But, there are ways to offer it to them. If they say no, you can get a Ventrue to wipe their memory of the conversation. No harm no foul.”

“Antoinette told me about that.”

“And normally, you tell them they can become a vampire eventually if they accept the deal. Veronica’s on the same deal.”

“Aaaand the sex slave deal?”

“She isn’t a sex slave. She’s my thrall.”

“Uh huh.”

“It’s true! Veronica is not—”

“Master? You called?”

Veronica walked into the grand entrance lobby of the mansion, dressed in her maid uniform. Except, not the more modern, sophisticated maid uniform, which was a borderline suit. Nope, she came out in a maid uniform you’d wear if you were looking to play the role in a porn film.

Samantha blinked at her, blinked at Jack, and then back at Veronica. Veronica blinked at Samantha, at Jack, noticed Jack vehemently nodding for her to go back the way she came, and she one-eighty’d and walked away.

If there was one way he was going to die, it was from awkwardness about sex stuff around his mom.

“That, was not my idea,” he said. “Antoinette got her those clothes, and sometimes she, uh, randomly puts them on.”

“Uh huh. It won’t be long before my son has a bunch of servants to take care of his mansion and his sexual needs.”

“I have a girlfriend!”

“Who’s probably encouraging this degenerate behavior.”

“Degenerate? I—” He stopped. She was smiling. She was teasing him. So he did the only thing he could do. He laughed. He’d changed a lot, but so had she, and in more ways than her sexual tastes.

It was still kinda weird, thinking about his mom having orgies with the witches. Thinking of his mom doing sexual things to Madison, while drinking her, probably touching her, while Jacob did things to her? Yeap, skeeved him right out.

But it was still nice to talk to his mom about stuff, about life.

“I think getting a thrall might be a bit much right now,” she said. “I’m still trying to wrap my mind how to hunt, and how to make sure I avoid the sun. And Antoinette has me reading history books about cults and stuff. Takes up a lot of my time.”

“Interesting?”

“Kinda yeah. Apparently reading about dark cults scratches the same itch watching crime documentaries does.”

“Sounds like it would.”

“Yeah. The stuff I read about is pretty scary, and knowing it actually happened makes it so much more interesting to read about.” She took another sip as she looked up, hunting for a new thought. “The Prince is happy you put a stop to the war.”

“Azamel put a stop to it.”

“Aw don’t say that. Antoinette says it was mostly you.”

“I ... guess it was. I couldn’t seal the deal without Azamel.”

“I should talk with Athalia.”

“What? Why?”

“She’s lost so much, you know? She lost her daughter, and now she’s lost her mother. Mother figure.”

“Antoinette says her relationship with Daniel’s progressed quite a bit.” The Prince basically forced Daniel to go to Athalia’s side after Azamel died. Apparently it worked out pretty well. “I—”

A message buzzed his phone. Something from Antoinette.

~I would like to go out tomorrow night. To Bloodlust perhaps, with your friends, and mine.~

~Like last time?~

~Ben oui.~

~Uh, with mom?~ Please no please no. Talking about sex with his mom was hard enough. If everyone got topless again, and his mom was there, the awkwardness really would get lethal.

~Your mother has a prior arrangement.~

~Oh thank god. Sure, I’ll be there.~

~Wonderful.~

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~~Antoinette~~

“So Michael and I will stop trying to kill each other. For now.” Garry shrugged, and leaned back in his chair.

Antoinette, seated at the head of her table in the grand Primogen meeting room, offered Garry and Michael thankful nods.

“I am glad you have set your differences aside.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” the Carthian said. “But tempers have cooled a bit. We can keep the peace, for now.”

“Agreed,” Michael said. “Xnomina and Terra Den will handle the expenses for damages.”

Men. Instead of solving their differences with words, they solved them with fists, punching each other as if each collision contained meaning, as if each jab was a point or counterpoint in a debate. It was a method of arguing that humans — and evidently vampires — had been using for thousands of years before the invention of language, men in particular. And perhaps there was something to it, something to the raw exchange of brute force that spoke to a part of the mind she simply did not have, or had long repressed.

If that was what it took to get these two men to speak with each other again, with perhaps a rather harsh scolding from a young Ventrue, then she doubted she could have had the success Jack’s plan had managed. She could have done something no doubt, tricked them in much the same way she had Viktor Honors and her old lover Tony. But to come to this result? Only someone young, and likely male, could have thought this plan would have worked, and be correct.

“And the dead Kindred?” Jacob asked. Once again, her old friend was dressed in his old, dark robes. To him, the Primogen meeting should have resembled the meetings of the ancient days, of vampires hiding in caves and casting dark magics around a cauldron, boiling, with human bones within.

Jacob and Antoinette both knew he looked handsome, dashing, and oddly appealing in a suit, when he chose to wear one. It was part of what made it so infuriating, as if Jacob enjoyed taunting her with the lack of a suit, more than he enjoyed wearing the robe. Though she knew he wore suits occasionally, when taking

Samantha out to visit the more extravagant and expensive locations in Dolareido; it had many.

Of course, after such events, he took her back to his cave, where he and his witches indulged in an utter buffet of sexual delights. Suits had no place in an environment where sex was had upon fur pelts, and against sloped walls of stone.

“Three vamps dead,” Garry said, “each. Yeah, it sucks. But shit came out even. We’re not gonna throw fists over it.”

“Agreed,” Michael said once again. “Xnomina and Terra Den will negotiate some property contracts as well. Hopefully we can avoid issues with goods distribution, while maintaining some territory balance. The Mirrden District will be shared.”

Maria lifted a single finger from the table. “The Masquerade remains intact. All in all, for these two Gangrels to stop squabbling, with such minimal damage to Kindred, the city, and the Masquerade, is quite a feat.”

Antoinette offered the corpse woman a small nod. Even in Dolareido, where Antoinette did her best to foster a spirit of cooperation in its Kindred, elders included, they could still be quite callous with the lives of those within. Antoinette agreed with Maria, that six deaths was ultimately a small loss. Jack would not agree.

“Finally,” Jacob said. “I was worried about stepping outside my house, and getting shot up in a drive by.”

After that, the meeting went on as per usual. Maria spoke of the Lancea et Sanctum and her progress in reviving it. A dozen Kindred now came to the cathedral, and listened to her and Damien speak of Longinus and the supposed decree passed down to all vampires. Utter stupidity, but Antoinette let her speak. After, Garry and Michael spoke of the finer details of territory proposals, and how

the Carthians and Invictus could handle the borders better, such as at the Border Bar.

Garry and Michael knew of Jacob's potential allegiance to Black Blood, but they did not so much as look the man's way; no more than usual. All the Primogen were talented actors, a necessary skill that came to any vampire that wished to live for centuries. Antoinette however found herself looking at her old friend, and doing her best to read his expression. He had an advantage, with a bandage wrapped around his head to hide his empty eye sockets, but regardless, she tried. Nothing. The only expression she found was his usual pleasant, teasing grins, a few aimed at her, no doubt meant to tease her over how he had somehow started dating her childe, and her lover's mother.

Quite the intricate web. Quite the soap opera.

Everything was back to normal then. The Primogen conspired against each other, as they always did. Garry and Michael would no doubt pounce any opportunity they found to destroy the other, or at least castrate their position in Dolareido, but for the moment they put their claws away. Maria continued to slowly revive the infernal church. Jacob teased the three covenants over their silly goals, but otherwise did nothing to reveal his own goals. Antoinette did the same. The Circle of the Crone and the Ordo Dracul did not have goals relevant to Dolareido's politics.

Forever Antoinette played arbiter, acknowledging whose arguments made sense, and who would receive her permission to carry on. The city had changed much, since the death of Viktor and Tony, and again now that Lucas was dead and Maria was given permission to revive the Lancea et Sanctum. While each meeting tested her patience, she had to admit, it was a pleasant meeting, compared to the past. Progress, in a strange, hampered way, but progress nonetheless.



Through it all, not a single hint of Black Blood was mentioned. No talk of tears. No talk of dark rituals being cast in her city. Above all, no notion that anything was out of place, except for what could be observed naturally, that the werewolves continued to hunt for strange things.

She had already spoken with Garry Tones and Michael McDonald in private. They both agreed to keep an eye open, but they also both agreed that preventing dark rituals being cast across realms was not within their skill set. To their credit, they would try, and both realized how careful they had to be. All in all, a great step forward.

She had a moment to relax, for the first time in a long time.

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Tonight, she was going to have her little Ventrue, and every man and woman nearby, Kindred or otherwise, squirming.

“You seem oddly excited,” Elaine said. She joined the Prince in the changing room, and while the room was filled with dresses for Antoinette, Elaine now had many. There was no shortage of ways for a rich woman to acquire new dresses in Dolareido, and she brought them to Antoinette’s tower, by the dozens.

“I am. Despite the troubles that remain, things have been quite peaceful in my city for two weeks. Not only that, all the Primogen are cooperating. As well as can be expected, at least.”

“Your little Ventrue accomplished much.”

“With the help of Azamel.”

Elaine nodded as she slipped out of her suit, and admired her naked body in front of one of the many mirrors. Hangers decorated metal bars, each with a dress, all lined against the walls of black marble with white veins. The lighting above offered powerful

contrast, allowing for even the most untalented eye to notice what dresses created what lines and curves.

“The old monster was nothing more than an annoyance the last time she visited your city, yes?”

“Oui, very much so. But she spent her last moments helping my love, and my city.” Antoinette came up behind Elaine, admired the tall, thin and curvy blonde in the mirror, before she looked to the dresses at the side. What dress should her friend wear tonight?

“I suppose even an old fossil can change.”

“You think she changed?” Antoinette plucked a black dress from the rack, and stepped behind Elaine. Her friend took it, stepped into it, and pulled it up over her body, eyes in the mirror watching how the soft, thin, black fabric hugged her curves.

“I do, for her family. Athalia became the daughter she never had, if I had to guess.”

“And Mark?”

“The son, someone she relied on.”

“And Fiona?”

“Her granddaughter.”

“And Sándor?”

Elaine grinned in the mirror as she tied the back straps of the stress. “The son-in-law she found herself forced to pass her legacy to.”

The roles were not perfect analogies, and yet the comparison was accurate for how Azamel likely treated the other Begotten. Poor Sándor.

“Fiona will be joining us tonight. Perhaps she will speak of Azamel.” Antoinette looked over Elaine’s head, admiring her friend’s reflection, but they both shook their head after a few moments. Elaine stepped out of the dress, and Antoinette hunted for a new one.

“Quite a treat, little Fiona. Her enthusiasm, her joviality, her body.”

“Damien is a lucky man.” Antoinette found another dress, and they repeated the process. “I hope he has been a solid foundation for Fiona to stand on, as she weathers the storm of Azamel’s death.”

“And Daniel to Athalia.”

Ah, a quick sneer in the mirror from her old friend. Antoinette laughed, and set both hands upon Elaine’s shoulders as Elaine tied the straps of the black dress behind her neck.

“Keep trying, old friend. Perhaps you will sneak your way into their bed?”

“I somehow doubt Athalia will be willing.”

“Then you must seduce Athalia.”

“Ha, easier said than done. She does not like me. And I am no Daeva.”

“Are you not?” Antoinette chuckled as she pressed her chest against Elaine’s back, set her chin on the woman’s shoulder, and hugged her around her stomach. Elaine was tall, but Antoinette was taller, and she smiled at her friend in the mirror as she slid her hands up Elaine’s exposed stomach. The dress was barely more than a flimsy strip of fabric across her breasts, that left her back and stomach exposed, with straps that cut down across her sides to connect to a minuscule skirt.

“I am beautiful, and direct. But to seduce someone like Athalia, now that she has Daniel, I believe I would need subtlety. Have you ever known me to be subtle?”

“Not in the least. But with time, I am sure Athalia will grow more comfortable with her relationship, and more comfortable with Dolareido’s ways. I am confident you could seduce her, with enough time, and alcohol.”

She laughed. “Ah yes, she is not Kindred is she? Alcohol will go a long way.”

“But give her time. She mourns for Azamel. In a couple months, perhaps renew your attempts to seduce Daniel, and include Athalia in your efforts.”

“She is a terribly attractive creature, is she not? A bit tall, quite slim, the dark skin, the long black hair, the soft yet thin face?”

“And eyes of ice.”

“Indeed. I do wonder what it would be like, to sink my teeth into her, perhaps while she sits on your sheriff.”

“If you wish to make that fantasy a reality,” Antoinette said, “you must learn to seduce her mind, not just her body.”

“Then I am afraid I am lost.”

Antoinette laughed, and undid the knot Elaine had tied. She slid the dress down her friend’s body, and cast a glance to the door as quiet footsteps announced someone approaching.

“Jack, my love. How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” Which was, of course, not fine. “I—” His eyes opened wide as his gaze found the two women.

Antoinette was still dressed in her suit, but Elaine was now quite naked as she stepped out of the dress, wearing literally nothing. Naturally, without any attempt to communicate their devious plan, Elaine turned slightly to face her body toward Jack, and Antoinette turned with her. She set her hands against Elaine's stomach once again, and slid them up to cup her friend's delightfully huge breasts.

"We were trying on dresses, my love."

"Uh huh." He stood there, a half grin on his face, unbelieving. Though his grin faded away as his eyes locked onto Elaine's bare bust, and how Antoinette's fingers slowly caressed her old friend's pale vampire skin. And as Jack stared, Antoinette made sure to gently nudge the breasts up, hard enough they rippled lightly with their mass, before gravity molded them to her palms yet again.

It was the ultimate method to hypnotize her little Ventrue, and it never failed. The sight of a large breast rippling was his bane. But even as the boy stared on, Antoinette could see only a portion of the usual enthusiasm she would normally find. Still, a portion was better than none.

"Truly." Nodding, Antoinette let go of her friend, re-racked the dress, and plucked another. "It is often better to trust the opinion of another's eye over your own, where fashion for the self is concerned. Years of seeing yourself in the mirror distorts reality."

"Indeed," Elaine said, and she held up her arms while Antoinette slid the new dress down over her head, careful with her wavy blonde hair, of course.

Jack walked up to them, and sat upon a nearby couch. He attempted to avert his gaze, but after a few moments, he could not help but watch the display through the mirror. Considering Elaine now turned every motion into a sensuous, subtle dance as she slipped on the dress, Antoinette could not blame him.

They settled on a dress that consisted of a short skirt that reached up the back, tied in the front around the breasts, and also connected at the armpit for sleeves, while leaving both the shoulders and stomach exposed. The color? Nude. A dark white with a hint of flesh, almost the color of skin, meant to be worn with silver or white jewelry. It went well with her blonde hair.

“Uh, no underwear?” Jack asked.

Elaine shrugged. “The skirt covers everything. What use are panties or thongs, if others cannot see them?”

“I suppose hygiene isn’t a good answer. We’re vampires.”

The older Ventrue smiled and nodded, before she opened one of the large boxes sitting upon a vanity desk, exposing its many layers that raised sideways to show off its contents. Jewelry, necklaces and bracelets and rings, for arms and wrists, fingers and toes, and waists and throats. Tens of thousands of dollars worth of jewelry.

Antoinette had necklaces worth everything in that box combined, glamorous, and garish. She rarely wore them.

“What will you be wearing tonight?” Antoinette asked as she slipped out of her suit jacket.

“A suit.” He tried to say it gently, she knew, but a touch of frustration showed through. Not with her, but with his memories, with Azamel’s death, and the violence he suffered. With everything.

Poor boy. Azamel put a finger specifically on an aspect of his personality he suffered with, and now he battled against it, quite consciously. A battle she doubted he could win.

So she would distract him. And distract herself. Weeks, months of pouring through tomes, hundreds of experiments that summoned a myriad of spirits, and dozens of rituals tested. Combined with

countless hours managing each and every report from her thrall spies, watching and monitoring Carthian and Invictus, and Lancea et Sanctum activities, she had had little time to simply stop, and go out. Perhaps she could host another ball for all paranormals in Dolareido?

No, not yet. Some Kindred would still be angry over the deaths of fellow Kindred. But soon. A month or three.

“Of course, a suit.” She chuckled as she slipped off the blouse, and the bra. Jack watched through the mirror, eyes locked onto her heavy bust, and she smiled at him in the reflection. “But perhaps a different color than usual? And without the tie, I imagine. Open chest.”

“I’m not exactly tall or big enough to really do that. The werewolves, sure, but me?”

“Well, that is half the joy of a suit, my love. It accentuates the shoulders.”

Elaine laughed, slipped on a thin silver necklace, and walked over to Jack. She sat beside him on the couch, reached over, and slipped a hand in through his shirt, undoing the first two buttons so she could caress his sternum.

“It is true women prefer a tall man. The fabled six feet.”

“Hey.” The poor boy scrunched up his nose as he squinted at his great grandsire.

“You are a small man, but with a wonderful physique. Show it off, childe of mine. Yes, women prefer tall, but they will also be delightfully surprised that the little man has taken care of himself physically, to the point of acquiring the body of a professional athlete.” She grinned, and leaned in, snuggling to his side as she teased her fingers up and down his chest. “And women find a man

who has the determination and will to master his own body quite attractive.”

Jack squirmed a little, but did not stop Elaine. “I built the body, sure, but I only maintained it for like, a week, before I was embraced. I was hungry all the damn time before. I don’t do a thing to maintain it now.”

“The joys of being Kindred. Enjoy it, childe of mine.”

“Elaine,” Antoinette said, “come here and choose a dress for me, if you please.”

“Very well.” Elaine ran a finger along Jack’s neck, before she strutted her way over, each step ensuring Jack’s eyes drifted to her round derrière. Depressed as the boy may be, he could not help but watch. Understandable, considering it was Elaine and Antoinette toying with him.

“What color?” Antoinette asked, and she gestured to the hanging dresses beside her.

“Black.”

“Always with the black.”

“Black contrasts your white hair.”

“That does not mean I wish to wear only black for the rest of eternity.”

“Then you should not have altered your hair to be permanently white.”

“Perhaps I should dye it to be blonde?”

“Imitation is the greatest form of flattery.” Rolling her eyes, Elaine plucked a dress from the rack, and as Antoinette slipped out



of her skirt and underwear, Elaine slipped the dress on over her head.

A loose thing, backless, with tiny shoulder straps. Barely more than a tiny, thin towel, meant to drape over the breasts, and hang before tightening to the waist and wrapping the hips and ass. It meant she would not be able to lean forward without her breasts falling free of the dress. Not that she usually minded, but it was an annoying dance, to constantly be aware of one's posture.

Antoinette looked to Jack in the mirror. His eyes had fallen, and his mind drifted elsewhere, likely to dark thoughts.

“My love, would you like for Ashley and Julee to come, and pleasure you while Elaine and I change? This could take a few moments yet.”

“No thanks.”

Elaine chuckled as she looked to Jack in the mirror. “You could always masturbate while watching us change. There is a certain charm in that.”

“No thanks.”

The boy's great grandsire turned and faced him. “I could take care of you, while she changes?”

“Girls, I'm alright, okay? Just thinking.”

Girls? Antoinette chuckled, slipped the dress off, and Elaine found her a new one. Similar to the last, this one surrounded and hugged her bust tight. Decidedly less slutty, and a surprise, coming from her old friend.

“Forgive us, my love. But it saddens us to see you morose.” Antoinette slipped out of the dress. “I feel like exposing skin

tonight, but I do not want to have to dance with each step.”

“I see I see.” Elaine put the dress away, and found another.

She stepped into the dress, and pulled the black fabric up over her hips where it fit snug. The long, wide straps connected at the back of the skirt, crossed at the chest, and hooked behind the neck, the X over the chest hugging each breast snug. It was also just barely, slightly see-through.

“That looks pretty good,” Jack said. Both women looked at each other, and chuckled. “Hey, I know I don’t have any fashion sense, but I like—”

“Breasts,” Elaine said, and to prove her point, she stepped beside Antoinette, facing Jack while Antoinette still faced the mirror, and she cupped one of Antoinette’s breasts. The dress’s chest strap hugged it tight, while also having enough give that her breast was free to fill and conform to Elaine’s hand. “I picked the dress for this reason, of course. If you are going out with your busty lover, why not show off that bust?”

“You two are worse than Jessy.” Jack rolled his eyes, but he sneaked a couple peeks as Elaine continued to gently bounce Antoinette’s breast. Depressed as he was, he was a young man, and forever would be. A couple women willing to show off their bodies for him was one reliable way to distract him from his own misery. Temporarily, at least.

Antoinette gently slapped Elaine’s hand away, and turned to her own vanity desk. A black dress it was, so she had a wide assortment of jewelry that would match. Such was the wonders of a black dress.

Jack watched as the two women tried different forms of jewelry. Bracelets, necklaces, rings, and earrings. Predictably, he grew bored, no longer distracted by them as they lost themselves in the joy of fashion experimentation. Antoinette came up from her desk fifteen

minutes later, finally having settled on some subtle earrings and a more pronounced necklace. Pearls. A timeless classic, arranged in a helix-like pattern beneath her collar. But alas, Jack's eyes had drifted down yet again, and his expression had soured.

She would have to work hard to distract him tonight.

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It took the two women half an hour of trying different suits and jewelry on the boy to find a nice balance while also experimenting with the new color, and Jack stood there, obviously annoyed with being the center of their fun. But a small part of him enjoyed it, she knew, and every time he rolled his eyes as they stripped him out of a suit, unsatisfied, she laughed.

They settled on a dark blue suit for the young man. Very dark, with a hint of green. Double breasted, no tie, with a black shirt. And to finish the ensemble, a silver necklace, a couple silver rings, and a rather beautiful silver watch. Handsome, professional, but also playful and a touch mischievous.

They entered Bloodlust, and immediately all eyes found the three of them. Of course. They were gorgeous. Many of the denizens were used to seeing Antoinette and Elaine these days, but it had been a little while since they had last visited. The men and women of the club watched, eyes wandering over the two women, and the boy that stood between them. Newcomers were, unsurprisingly, surprised that a young man like Jack had two tall, curvy, gorgeous women on his arms, but now that the war was over, they would be seeing such a trio more in the future.

Bloodlust was an unusual place. A club, but not truly a club. And while the bottom floor had tables and booths, it also had a bar, and dance floor, where the prey danced to the heartbeat music. And upon the second floor were the large booths, capable of fitting ten people or more, where the music was a tad quieter, and the patrons were willing to spend thousands of dollars for service and space.

Arturo, Natasha, and Matthew already sat at the table. Beside Matthew sat Jessy, and beside her sat Eric. Elaine took advantage of the situation, slid into the booth first, and set herself beside Eric, quite close, shoulder touching his.

“Hey, bitch, he’s mine.” Jessy leaned forward over the booth table and gave the ancient Ventrue an angry glare. She knew very well Elaine was ten fold her age, and yet she felt comfortable enough to be aggressive. How playful.

Elaine chuckled and dismissed Jessy with a small swipe of the hand. “Hello to you too, Gangrel.”

“Jessy.”

“Yes, of course, Jessy.”

Jack rolled his eyes, and slid into the booth, leaving Antoinette to sit beside him close to the outer edge of the booth. Normally Antoinette sat in the center of the group, but to sit on the outside edge was a novelty she had not tasted in some time.

“Natasha,” Antoinette said, nodding to the little Mekhet. “Arturo, Matthew, Eric, Jessy. You all look lovely tonight.”

Little Vola smiled and waved. While her boyfriends wore loose button shirts with most buttons undone, and black jeans, she wore something far more scandalous. A tiny black skirt, terribly tiny, that left her hips and the hips of her thong exposed. And for her chest, a dangling piece of black fabric that tied to the neck with a small silver chain, and hung over the chest loose, unattached to anything. A glorified necklace, large enough to only barely cover her small breasts. If she leaned forward, everyone would see her delicious little torso.

Eric wore a purple suit. Bold. If he also wore gold jewelry, it would have been both hilarious and quite handsome, but no

jewelry. Instead, a white shirt underneath the purple jacket, two buttons undone, simple and direct. Fitting for Eric Tanverson. The purple was likely Jessy's idea.

His mate wore something quite simple and direct. A black tube top, and a short black skirt, similar to Natasha's, though unlike her little friend, she wore no underwear. Natasha wore no jewelry on her neck, as her top was already essentially a necklace, while Jessy wore one piece of jewelry: a choker, thin, black, with a tiny silver heart dangling from its front center. The message was clear: Jessy was a hyper sexual creature. She woke up and went to sleep every night — day — with sex on her mind. If Eric had not become an Uratha, he would no doubt struggle to match her sex drive.

“Prince,” Matthew and Arturo said, at the same time.

Eric nodded deeply. “Prince.”

Jessy, perhaps a little reluctantly, eventually nodded toward Antoinette, a little deeper than she no doubt wanted. “Prince.”

Antoinette returned their nods, with less depth, and smiled at the group.

“Where is Young and Burksen?”

“Young?” Matthew asked.

“Fiona Young.”

“On the way,” Jessy said. “Only been a couple weeks since Azamel died, right? I've talked to her a few times since, and she's been taking it pretty hard. Can't even say her name without the girl tearing up.”

“Damien says the same thing,” Jack said. “But she'll come. Probably.”

“And we’ve prepared.” Arturo gestured to the several bottles of whiskey on the table. Scotch, how drôle.

“She may be a paranomal,” Elaine said, “but she is still partly human. Take care she does not kill herself with the bottle.” Bloodlust did not provide bottle service in the same manner as other clubs. Acquiring a bottle and glasses was possible however, especially for an employee. Privacy was important in a Kindred-run night club that was half lounge, after all.

Eric reached out and grabbed one of the bottles. “It’s a sipping whiskey. You really shouldn’t shoot this. Enjoy the taste.”

Jack shook his head. “Something tells me she won’t sip it.”

Arturo shrugged. “Far as I know, her Horror thing won’t let her body get liver disease or alcohol poisoning. Probably not.”

“Hard thing to know,” Matthew said.

“Damien,” Jack said, “is confident Fiona can recover from most injuries pretty quick. Not Uratha or Kindred quick, but quick enough.”

“Probably a good thing,” Jessy said. “She told me Damien drains her multiple times a week. And—oh hey, speak of the devil.” The Gangrel waved as Damien and Fiona stepped into view.

Damien wore what everyone expected, a rather dark and professional, but subtle and quiet suit. No tie. Fiona had likely convinced the silly man to leave it behind, and undo the first two of his shirt buttons as well. If the man ever embraced his almost feminine beauty, he would be a force of pure seduction. Alas, like Daniel, it would never be.

Fiona on the other hand seemed quite eager to express her beauty. Not merely eager, excited. To her, it was a fun game, not to

be won but to be shared. She was a delightful mixture of innocence and carnal salaciousness, as was her dress. Of course the tiny, busty creature walked up to the table, and slowly turned, fully expecting everyone at the table to admire. They did.

Green, yet again. Antoinette did not blame her, as the color contrasted her red hair, freckles, and pale skin beautifully. A backless dress with tiny straps of silver chains that hooked to the dress front that hugged her bust before holding her waist snug. The skirt was not as short as Jessy or Natasha's, but it was split at the right side, and the split reached up past her hip, exposing much of the green thong she wore. And of course, cute green heels, two inches.

The three werewolves, apparently communicating telepathically, all clapped, earning giggles and smiles from the tiny ginger, before she slipped into the booth entrance opposite of Antoinette, and slid in close to Arturo. Damien followed her in, bringing the total amount of people at the booth to ten.

Damien Burksen. Fiona Young. Arturo Ibarra. Natasha Vola. Matthew Wilson. Jessy Herrington. Eric Tanverson. Elaine. Jack Terry. And Antoinette.

Quite the group. Sometimes she wondered if she should invite Jacob and Samantha, but that was not what Jack needed right now. Othello and Aaron? Othello was a gorgeous man, and Aaron was oddly beguiling, but Antoinette knew little of the two men. Beatrice and Jennifer then? Perhaps. They would certainly bring spice.

But considering the people in the booth as was, there was plenty of spice already.

“Scotch?” Fiona rolled her eyes, poured herself a glass, and shot it. “Ye racist bawbags.”

Natasha's werewolves blinked at each other, and Fiona burst into giggles as she poured another glass. But instead of drinking it, she slid it to Eric, who caught it with the confidence of a man who had caught many drinks in such a manner. She did the same for Matthew and Arturo, and they made a larger effort to ensure they did not get their pants soaked.

"Fiona hasn't had anything to drink in a couple weeks," Damien said. "She's making up for lost time."

"I!" Fiona waved her left hand in the air, finger up, as she shot another glass. Oh dear. "Am celebrating. Azamel is gone, and she told me I shouldnae be sad! I won't be sad anymore." Nodding, she poured a third glass. "To Azamel!" Before she could down the alcohol, Damien stopped her, which earned a sigh and nod from her. She sipped.

It had been some time since Antoinette had last tasted alcohol. Many Daeva Blushed Life and ate human food, only to vomit it later, and Antoinette did on occasion, but not for many years. She could barely remember the burn of alcohol on her throat, but she knew better than to shoot whiskey with such gusto. Fiona was apparently quite impervious.

The men grinned at each other, raised their glasses, gently hit them together, and held them out to Fiona.

"To Azamel," they said.

Fiona beamed, did the same, and the men shot their glasses for her.

It was almost enough to make Antoinette envious. Uratha were so effortlessly cooperative. Every act and motion was made knowing their kin were there to support them in some fashion or another. Kindred would never behave in such a manner, no matter how hard she tried.



“Did you wish to speak of Azamel tonight, Fiona?” Antoinette asked.

“Nae, I dinnae think so. I talked a lot with Athalia and Mark and Sándor. Damien and Jessy too.”

The group looked to Jessy, eyebrows raised.

“What? I can be supportive, you fuckers.”

They all laughed, even Jack.

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“How is your father, Eric?” Elaine asked, wearing her devious grin.

To Eric’s credit, he did not so much as blink. He sipped the scotch, his fifth glass, and nodded toward Jessy.

“He’s fine,” Jessy said, returning Elaine’s grin. “Pretty damn happy, I might admit.”

“Oh?”

Eric sighed after another sip. “Jessy’s been giving him pictures of herself topless.”

Matthew coughed, nearly spitting out his drink.

“Hey, fuck you.” Jessy displayed her middle finger to Matthew before looking back to Elaine. “Dude was a hard-ass, and I’ve dealt with hard-asses like him plenty of times. Eric was basically trying to yell him out of bed to start taking care of himself. Any idiot would know that’d never work. What the man needed was a carrot.” She jutted out her chest.

“Soap opera drama,” Natasha said. “You g-going to sleep with him too?”

“Fuck no. He’s old, and I’m dating his son.”

“Sounds like good television,” Arturo said.

“The fuck kinda television you—no, wait, I know. Hope that last season doesn’t burn you too hard.” Her smile was utterly nefarious.

Jack leaned forward and set his elbows upon the table. “You all need better taste.”

Fiona giggled and shook her head after sipping on her drink. “Sounds like good television tae me. She could say things like ‘that isnae how yer da does it’.”

Everyone in the room visibly cringed, and Antoinette found herself chuckling a touch louder than the rest of them. They all looked to her, and she waved a dismissing hand.

“Vampires live long lives. I have known a few to have indulged in the parent, and then the child, once the child was of age.”

Arturo shot his drink, struggled to manage the burn in his throat, and poured himself another. “Well, as far as weird sex goes, I suppose that isn’t all that weird if you measure your lifespan in centuries.”

“I am 78!” Jessy again displayed her middle finger to Arturo, for perhaps the fourth time that night. “I ain’t no old bitch.” Elaine reached across Eric, and flicked Jessy in the arm. “Ow! Hey.”

“Be kind to your elders.”

“Ha, why? Cause you’ve got experience? Old and wise?”

Elaine’s smile was positively serpentine. “Because we could kill you with a single finger.” And to seal her point, she lightly tapped a fang with the finger she used to flick Jessy.

The table froze for but a moment, before Fiona burst into giggles. Laughter from the others followed soon after. What hint of seriousness Elaine may have held in her warning was quickly lost and forgotten in Fiona's joyful, drunk laughter.

"So, Jack," Arturo said after setting his glass down. "I hear you've got a harem now."

"It's not a harem!"

"Yet," Antoinette said, earning some more giggles from Fiona.

"Ah think ye deserve a harem!" Fiona said. "And a'm wantin' tae see movies about that, too."

"You—wait, too?"

She nodded. "Jessy showed me the sex tapes." Fiona sipped her drink, sipped it again, and again, before leaning forward and grinning at the small Ventrue. "That's a lot o' booba."

Poor Jack. He squirmed and wriggled in his seat, glanced up at Antoinette with a hint of annoyance in his face, before he shared it with the table.

"Y'all have seen the tapes, haven't you?" he asked. Everyone nodded. "Damn it Jessy."

"What?" Jessy said. "Come on, it was awesome. Not Natasha quality, but still awesome."

"Indeed," Antoinette said.

Natasha squirmed between her two boyfriends. "Well, I mean, lighting is s-s-super important."

Jack raised a finger from the table. "If Tash wants to become the next porn star—"

“H-Hey!”

“All the power to her. But it’s not high on my list of priorities.”

“Fiona my dear,” Antoinette said, “do not fret. I am sure Jack will agree to more videos. He owes Jessy for her valiant efforts to distract the Carthians. Damien as well.”

Damien shook his head. “I’m good.”

Fiona laughed and elbowed her boyfriend before leaning over the table, eyes wide with wonder as she looked at Antoinette. “Aye?”

“Ben oui. Jack always repays his debts.”

Jack groaned and slumped back into the booth. “I was hoping I could pay her back with money or something.”

“The boss fined you,” Jessy said. “You really got money just sitting around?”

“ ... no.”

“Then porn please.” She set both hands on the table, palms up. “Please sir, I’d like some more.”

“Aye! More!” Fiona said, and she did the same.

“Ugh, fine.”

“Yay!” Fiona giggled up a storm, seduced everyone at the table to laugh with her, before she took another sip of her drink. Indeed, she and the werewolves had drunk quite a bit, and were now either tipsy or drunk, but they had drunk enough to render a kine comatose. A joy of being a paranormal creature, and still alive, unlike Kindred.

But they would never know the joy of the Kiss, and that made a Kindred’s undeath worth it.

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The bottles neared empty, and Arturo poured himself another glass. He missed, but corrected quickly. His aim was off, but he had also been watching Elaine.

Antoinette's gorgeous friend grinned at Jessy as she undid the front knot of her dress, where the sideways chest strap covered her breast and tied at the front before connecting into sleeves. With breasts now exposed, she turned toward the Gangrel slightly, enough to nudge her right breast into Eric's left arm, but her eyes were on Jessy.

Poor Eric. The man was drunk at this point, but he held his liquor well. Not well enough to not gulp as the tall blonde pressed her breast into his arm as she leaned in toward his girlfriend.

"You really don't hesitate to whip those out." Jessy said. "You could have said 'truth'."

"I am half a millennium old, young vampire. I have indulged in carnal delights you cannot fathom. You cannot seriously think this dare would give me pause."

Jessy rolled her eyes, and pulled down her tube top, revealing her own breasts in their entirety. While they were not as large as Elaine's, they were plenty large still, considering Jessy had the leanness of a fitness model, complete with defined abdominal muscles.

She had not even been dared to remove her top. But the Gangrel would not be undone, naturally.

"Bitch please, I can fathom a lot."

"We're doing this again?" Jack asked.

Ah, Jack. Sometimes his honesty devolved into foolishness. The most assured way to have a friendly group tease you, was to call out their behavior.

“Aye, again!” Fiona giggled as she slid the back strap of her dress up and over her frizzy hair, and let it drop to her lap, revealing heavy teardrop breasts. Damien rolled his eyes, but a smile sneaked its way through his annoyed expression.

The table went through the same dance as last time. Some shy glances from Natasha were soon dashed, and she pulled the hanging top off, slipped it past her hair, and set it on her lap. The men who had suit jackets on slipped out of them, and they undid their buttons enough to leave the entirety of their chests exposed. Jack complied, eventually, exposing his delicious muscle definition that rivaled the larger men.

Antoinette went last. Far be it from her to judge others based on the size of their breasts, but she must have been quite vain long, long ago, to give herself the body she had now. How terribly shallow of her. But, far be it from her to not indulge in what she had.

She leaned her head forward, reached behind, and pulled up the strap of her dress that hooked behind her neck. Slowly she pulled it up over her head, past her hair, and then down onto her lap, letting the X strap of fabric across her breasts fall with it.

The group went quiet as they stared at her body, men and women alike, and Antoinette grinned at them all. Even after centuries of drawing eyes and hypnotizing others with her crafted beauty, it still pleased her to do so again.

“I refuse to believe those are real,” Jessy said. “I mean, Fiona and Elaine? Yeah, some girls just got really huge tits. But you?” This woman, with all the subtlety and wit of a drunk young man. But her honesty was delightful refreshing. Poor Jack groaned and glared at his comrade, but he did not realize that while his honesty took a

different form to Jessy's, they were still both honest souls, and Antoinette enjoyed that.

“Centuries ago, I am sure I changed my body in some way, for ... obvious purposes.” Antoinette caught Eric's eye, before she leaned in toward Jack, and further, until she had to use her hands to lift her breasts and set them on the table. They were in the way. “You have seen the videos, non? You said as much.”

“Yeah, I did. Fucking waterbeds. But still, I...” Jessy gulped as she realized what Antoinette was doing. “I can touch?”

“Oui, you may touch.”

Jessy outright groaned hungrily, leaned out far over the booth table, and scooped a hand under one of Antoinette's breasts. Of course doing so meant she pinned Eric against Elaine's side, her breast pressing into the man's chest, but Jessy did not mind. Like a child in a toy store, she wanted to touch, and everything else vanished from her simple mind.

The Gangrel lifted Antoinette's right breast in her left hand, and her groan turned into a moan, as she bounced it in her palm. Of course, considering the size of Antoinette's breast, it overflowed Jessy's hand, spilling over her fingers and palm, hiding them in its softness as her breast spread out over Jessy's wrist. As much as Jack usually tried to dissuade Jessy's crass behavior, he stared at Antoinette's bust, and how it jiggled in his comrade's hand. Everyone stared.

“And you can cum from these?”

“As I said, you saw the video. I have sensitive nipples when I Blush Life.” She did not Blush, but she was tempted to. “I have cum many times from Jack's lips around my breasts. And often, with Elaine's, or Ashley and Julee's, while Jack is—”

Jack coughed and gently nudged her side with his elbow. How adorable. He looked frustrated, but in a pleasant way, a friend being teased by friends, in a friendly game.

Naturally, Jessy did not stop touching her, even as Antoinette spoke. Hypnotized by the Prince's flesh, Jessy continued to experiment, shifting her hand and fingers in various ways, and outright bouncing Antoinette's breast. And lost to her own desires, her hand did more than touch. It caressed. Her wandering fingers stroked the underside of Antoinette's breast, and her thumb teased up onto her nipple.

At least until Jack intervened. He grabbed Jessy's wrist, and slowly pushed it back toward her as he glared at her.

Jessy laughed and shrugged. "Sorry dude. But, holy fuck, yeah I'd have my head between those tits every minute I could if I was you. So soft, and heavy, and..." Groaning, Jessy pushed herself into Eric, bare breast squashing against his arm, and she sighed up to him. "I need a boob job."

"You don't need a boob job." Quite the sum of willpower in Eric, considering how intoxicated he was.

"I want giant tits."

"You have large tits, Jessy, especially at your bodyfat percentage."

Frowning, Jessy reached across Eric's chest, and reached under Elaine's breasts. Elaine was still snug to Eric's side, and she only chuckled when Jessy gave her breasts the same treatment as Antoinette's. Though, Eric did not stop his girlfriend, unlike how Jack had. He leaned back, and took a deep breath to relax himself as he looked between Jessy and Elaine, and how they were both still snug against his sides.

"J-Jessy!" Tash said at last.



Jessy rolled her eyes as she lowered her hand. “I was just window shopping.”

That earned a several happy chuckles from the group. But everyone ceased their laughter, when Daniel and Athalia walked up onto the second floor and stepped into view.

“S-Sire?” Tash squeaked and covered her breasts with her forearms. Silly girl.

Daniel raised a brow as he looked at everyone, before he looked down at Athalia beside him, his expression unreadable to everyone else. But Antoinette could see a hint of a smile teasing its way along his lips.

“Uh, why is everyone topless?” Athalia asked, gesturing to them. While Daniel wore a suit, no tie, Athalia wore a red, sleeveless dress that covered her chest up to her collar. Though as she turned a little, Antoinette could see the dress was backless, and the skirt quite short. The woman had a playful side, after all.

Jessy snorted on a laugh, and shrugged. “Because we’re all hot?”

“Here here,” Art said with a gentle slap of a hand on the table. Not too gentle, causing some of their drinks to spill over their edges.

Fiona giggled as she sipped her drink. “Because this is Dolareido, ‘n ‘ere, we have fun! An’ a game o’ Truth or Dare gaun off the rails, as usual.” Her accent grew increasingly thick, and Antoinette was convinced it was partly on purpose. But it was also delightful, and had the group laughing yet again.

Athalia rolled her eyes, clearly quite familiar with her fellow Begotten’s rather noisy personality. And while Athalia tried to look annoyed, Antoinette saw past Athalia’s mask, and to the sad woman beneath, trying to forget her woes. She had likely seen a side of Azamel none of them ever had, of a protective mother, both trying

to take care of her child, but also teach and prepare her. It would take her longer to recover than Fiona. But she was also happy to be here, and happy in the arms of her lover.

A practiced elder could tell much from the quick glances of a poor poker player.

“I’d say this is just a ploy to get the girls to take their tits out,” Athalia said, “but I’m guessing the girls are behind this insanity.” She eyed Antoinette, Elaine, and Jessy, with an abundant amount of disdain. Too much disdain. She was not serious. A classic personality type, to use exaggerated anger as a form of humor. Difficult for people who did not know Athalia well to understand, but once people did, Athalia likely had an interesting side to her Antoinette had never seen.

Daniel had seen it.

With a playful squeak, Fiona pushed on Damien’s shoulder.

“Make room for them ye knobs!”

Damien and Daniel both rolled their eyes, Daniel far more subtle, and everyone complied. Soon, they had somehow managed to fit everyone in the booth.

Daniel, Athalia, Damien with Fiona on his lap, Arturo with Natasha on his lap, Matthew, Jessy, Eric, Elaine, Jack, and finally Antoinette.

And predictably, most of them looked to the two newcomers expectantly.

Daniel shook his head. “I don’t think—”

Athalia reached up, and slipped the strap of her dress up over her head, past her long, thin black hair, and eventually down onto her

lap. Everyone's eyes widened as they not only witnessed the dark queen's naked, beautiful breasts, but the adornments they wore. The woman wore a silver necklace, but the dress hid that the necklace dipped down to her sternum, before branching and hooking both under and over her breasts before disappearing behind her as two chains.

Jewelry, meant to be worn with more revealing clothes, but jewelry with one express purpose: to make a woman's breasts look beautiful, sexual, and regal, when naked or nearly so. And it worked wonderfully, silver contrasting against Athalia almost onyx skin, and highlighting the length of her slender form.

Fiona clapped her hands, clumsily. "Ye bought it!"

"Shut up." Athalia frowned at her companion, but a grin broke through it with time. "Christ, what a fucked up city, everyone with their tits out."

Jessy laughed and shrugged. "Well, I mean, this would just be another Friday night in this place really, if it weren't for Elaine and the Prince. Kinda mixes things up a bit when big important people show skin. Speaking of." Her eyes fell to Daniel.

The sheriff looked to Athalia, and when the Begotten rolled her eyes and nodded, Daniel undid the buttons of his shirt, and exposed his chest.

Jessy whistled. "Damn dude, you're a washboard."

Daniel was that indeed. A touch thin, but not enough to damage the appeal of his athletic, muscular physique. Muscle definition from head to toe.

Athalia smiled, unable to hide that she was quite happy with her boyfriend's body. "There, we've all seen each other's tits, man tits included. Happy?"

Elaine leaned forward as she returned the grin. “We are all gorgeous, and I for one delight in seeing that beauty. I am quite happy. Your body, and choice of jewelry, are exquisite.”

Athalia tried to maintain her half steel, half sarcastic grin, but it slowly melted away as blush fought against her dark skin. “You’re all horny twenty-four-seven, aren’t you?”

Jessy and Fiona both raised a hand, noticed each other, and burst into laughter, Fiona’s laugh closer to a pleasant bird’s singing, high pitched giggles that had Damien smiling.

“Th-They are,” Tash said.

Of course, the moment she said it, Art slid his hands up to her breasts, and cupped the small things in his large hands. She squeaked, but instead of tearing his exploring hands away, she shivered. A trained reaction, perhaps. Her pornographic videos had grown increasingly themed around reluctance and other domination fantasies, and it was obvious the theme was her own choice. For Art to touch her so, without her permission, in front of all these people, tickled something inside her.

“I,” Matt said, “am pretty damn happy with Dolareido. We should have come sooner.”

Art nodded, even as he continued to cup and caress Tash’s breasts. Eventually she melted back against his chest, letting the others see that the man was playing with her rather sexually. He did not stop, and Tash smiled sheepishly as she looked down.

“Well, I’ve been here for a while,” Eric said. “Didn’t really get to see the good side of it until recently.”

“Same,” Jack said. The boy was more comfortable this time, compared to the last time they did this. And to Antoinette’s delight,

he even offered Tash some interested gazes, which had Tash smiling and squirming.

Antoinette tapped a finger on the table, gathering attention. “A shame. I feel I have done well with my city, but it is not perfect. And has an obvious bias for its paranormal denizens.”

Athalia took several peeks at Natasha, before she nudged her shoulder into Daniel. Soon, the sheriff slipped his arm up and over his girlfriend’s shoulders, and Athalia snuggled into him, pushing back his undone shirt so she could press her naked side into his naked side. While Fiona was obviously aroused, with swollen pink nipples against her pale skin, Antoinette did not expect Athalia to respond so quickly. But she did. She acted nonchalant, refusing to draw attention to it, but Antoinette could see the woman’s body language change, squirming slightly in her seat as her dark nipples hardened.

As if to justify her reaction, Athalia reached out, poured herself a glass of scotch, and shot it. And then two more, each earning a loud gasp from her. Evidently the younger redhead could handle the flavor with ease, compared to her senior.

“If I’m going to try and blend in with all these sluts, I’m going to need to drop a few IQ points.” With a sinister smirk, she poured herself a fourth, hesitated to shoot it, and sipped it instead.

“Things are better, aren’t they?” the sheriff said, glancing to Athalia before everyone else. “Now that Garry and Michael are leaving each other alone.”

“Aye!” Fiona nodded as she peeked at Tash, and immediately grabbed Damien’s wrists. After taking a moment to plant his hands underneath her large breasts, she nodded, as if she had put on a uniform, and she set her hands upon the table to resume drinking. Poor Damien was left with the duty of breast holder.

Considering how aroused Fiona was, and that she was sitting on Damien's lap, the vampire was no doubt fighting a desire to sink his teeth into her and drink her right there in front of them all. Drink her, and fuck her. And considering the sort of personality Fiona had, she would have no doubt loved that, to be pinned on the table and rendered helpless and put on display in front of everyone, as Damien Kissed her, and fucked her until she was a mess of sweat, quivering legs, and cum.

Antoinette met Damien's eyes, and grinned at him. He tried to hold her gaze, but as he realized she knew what dirty fantasies were no doubt going through his mind, he looked away.

"Better," Athalia said, nodding. "Azamel's gone, and that hurts, but she did good. Mark doesn't talk about himself much, but Fiona and I have it better than we ever have, here in Dolareido these days."

"I suppose I get little thanks in that," Antoinette said. Athalia looked at her, a touch shocked, but Antoinette waved a dismissing finger over the table. "I jest, young monster. It is indeed Azamel's efforts that accomplished much for your kind, and for my love."

"Agreed," Jack said, and he gave Athalia the best respectful nod he could manage from where he was, sitting half naked between two half naked women.

"We toasted tae her awready," Fiona said, "but ye werenae 'ere. Again!" She raised her glass.

Athalia and the werewolves raised their glasses, struggled to keep them steady, and all five of those with a heartbeat shot their drinks.

"So, Jack," Athalia said. "Your mom's not here?"

Antoinette eyed Athalia for a moment. The Begotten was difficult to predict when it came to how aggressive she chose to be. Would

she seek an argument? Would alcohol bring it out of her?

“Uh, that would be a bit awkward.” Jack gestured to the table and everyone in the booth.

“Ha, true. But from what she told me last night, I don’t think it’d be that uncomfortable.”

“Oh god, what’d she tell you?”

“That she’s having a very satisfying time with the witches.”

Jack groaned and rolled his head from side to side for a moment. “Yep.” Oh ho, tactical of him to maintain a cool head as Athalia poked an uncomfortable spot.

“Then again, from the movies Fiona showed me, I guess like mother like son?”

Jack jaw-dropped, before snapping his gaze at the redhead. “Fiona!”

“What? Hey, yer a handsome lad! ‘Twas a very sexy scene! The way aw those girls buried yer dick in tits.” Fiona leaned forward, and grinned at him, the grin of a blissful drunk, before she nodded toward Antoinette. “Jessy said it. ‘Twas like ye were fucking a waterbed!”

Athalia laughed. “Sorry, not trying to be mean. Can’t help it.”

Antoinette met Athalia’s eyes for a moment, and smiled. Athalia attempted to return the smile, but despite herself, she too found herself looking at Antoinette’s breasts. And from the way she quickly tore her eyes away, she had no doubt remembered the video, and how Jack had looked when making love to Antoinette and the others.

Athalia and Jack had a very fragile relationship, and had probably never occurred to the woman that Jack was quite attractive, and looked even more attractive with his length buried between Antoinette's bust. To see the Begotten squirm with the memory was pleasing. How did she treat Daniel in bed? Antoinette knew the beautiful woman wanted the sheriff to play the role of tall, dark, handsome, and dangerous, to pin her, or hold her tightly and take her. Outside of bed, it would be the reverse, with Athalia being the dominant, loud personality, and Daniel happy to follow along with whatever she wanted. An interesting pairing, to be sure.

Mental note, Antoinette. Tell Daniel to spend time painting Athalia's breasts in his cum soon. It would undoubtedly appeal to the dark corners of her mind, considering how much she now struggled to look, and not look, at Antoinette.

"I didn't plan to make a bunch of sex tapes," Jack said. "And I didn't plan to make a harem." He again gently nudged Antoinette's side with an elbow. "But when in Rome, I suppose."

Fiona clapped, leaned back and set her head back against Damien's shoulder as she turned into his jawline. "Can ye make a harem?"

"I could," Damien said.

"Will ye?"

"No."

"Aw, why nae?"

"Cause you're drunk and you'll change your mind in the morning."

"Nu uh! Ah want a dozen lads tae take care o' me!"



He rolled his eyes as he pressed his cheek down against her frizzy hair. “Twelve boys, and me?”

“Aye.”

“For sex?”

“Maybe.” She grinned a terribly cute chipmunk grin, earning a chuckle from Athalia.

“I agree with the harem idea,” Jessy said, nodding, and she gestured across the table to the sheriff. “You got a harem, Mister Sheriff?”

“No.” The man did not so much as glance at Jessy’s breasts and beautiful abs. Or anyone else’s breasts. Forever a stone.

“Ever had one?”

“Not to my recollection.”

Jessy frowned. “Ever think of building one? You’re as old as these two.” The Gangrel gestured to Elaine and Antoinette. “And now with a girl on your arm, I can personally guarantee she’d love to have a couple guys or girls to help with the fucking.”

“I think I’m happy with just the two of us,” Athalia said. Everyone went quiet as they looked at her, expectantly, until she groaned, shook her head, and sipped her drink. “For now.”

Jessy beamed with pride, as if she had just seduced Athalia to the ways of Dolareido. Perhaps she had.

“And you, Jessy?” Elaine asked. “Does Eric not want to share you with four men?” Throughout the night, she had leaned closer and closer into Eric, until now her closer breast was completely squashed against his arm. And Eric, drunk as he was, did what he

could to ignore her, but everyone could see the man had only so much will. Elaine was utterly breathtaking, and considering Jessy seemed happy to trap the man between herself and another topless vampire, there was no one to save him.

“Nah, he’s not. It’s a guy thing, I guess.” Shrugging, Jessy mirrored Elaine, and pressed her closer breast into him as she teased a finger down his chest. “I get it, not every dude wants to share with other dudes. Not every girl is as lucky as Natasha.”

“I’m ... p-pretty lucky, aren’t I?” Natasha said. She smiled brightly at Jessy, only for Arturo to again set his hands on her breasts, cupping the small buttons and gently teasing her nipples with roaming thumbs. Natasha shivered yet again, but remained sitting upright, as if being fondled was no reason to stop a conversation. How the little woman had changed.

Matthew grinned down at Tash and sipped his drink before looking to the rest of the group.

“Art and I have been best friends for decades. And we always kinda just, got along and shared everything, pretty much from day one.”

“Soul mates?” Antoinette asked.

“Ha! Maybe? Never really thought of it like that.”

Fiona took a peek over at the tiny vampire beside her, at what Arturo was doing, before she took Damien’s hands, still cupping her large breasts, and nudged him. Damien glanced around at the party for a moment, before succumbing to his little girlfriend’s desires. No longer simply cupping her breasts, Damien caressed them, letting their size and weight fill his hands while index fingers reached up and around to tease her thoroughly swollen, pink, large nipples. Unlike Natasha, Fiona was fully alive, and every touch Damien made upon her earned little shivers from her aroused body.

Antoinette glanced down at Jack. He struggled to not look, but Natasha and Fiona were wonderfully beautiful, inviting women, sitting directly next to each other on their men's laps, being fondled. And of course, Fiona was quite a busty creature, with breasts as large as Elaine's despite her short stature. Jack was Jack, he could not help his kinks, and he glanced at Fiona's bust more times than he probably realized.

"I have been dying to know," Elaine said, "what werewolf blood tastes like."

Jessy grinned. "I bet you have."

"Be a dear and share with me?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Cause I love my man, and he's drunk. He ain't making any decisions tonight."

"I am ... kinda drunk," Eric said, half smiling. But despite himself, he took another sip.

"I see." Nodding, Elaine turned to face Natasha's boys, even as she continued to press her chest into Eric's side. "Natasha dear? Consider it a favor to a fellow dragon."

Natasha blinked at Elaine before looking to Antoinette. To which of course, Antoinette simply shrugged and smiled.

"Elaine's blood lust is harmless," Antoinette said. "Though do not be surprised if she clamps her legs around the first wolf to give her some blood."

“Well unlike you, I am single. Single and loving it, I believe is the expression?” Elaine shrugged as she looked over her shoulder to Antoinette, but eventually ceased her relentless teasing of Eric. She sat up straight, and look to Daniel and Athalia. “And you two? How does Begotten blood taste?”

“Great!” Fiona said with a squeak. “Damien says so. It gets him very aggressive, ye ken? He’ll hold me down ‘n growl ‘n stuff.” It was hard to tell whether Fiona was blushing due to embarrassment over her words, or her arousal. Most likely the latter.

“Oh my.” Elaine smiled at the tiny Scot, before her devil’s grin found Athalia and Daniel again. Daniel held Elaine’s gaze without so much as a glance down, but poor Athalia, she did not have her man’s resilience. As Elaine leaned forward, Athalia’s eyes drifted down to Elaine’s enormous bust, before she righted her gaze. Several times.

“Daniel says I taste great, yes.”

“Taste, but...” Elaine nodded toward Fiona, eyes still on Athalia.

Athalia groaned and looked to the side. Of course doing so set her eyes on Fiona, who was still being fondled by Damien. And unless Antoinette was seeing things, Damien’s touch was slowly growing more playful. The music was not too loud on the second floor, and to anyone paying attention, Fiona’s moans were audible.

“Elaine,” Daniel said, “don’t—”

“It’s fine.” Athalia leaned in, the jewelry dangling around her breasts hanging forward slightly over the table. But before she said anything, she looked back to Daniel. “Can I tell her?”

Daniel smiled, a subtle thing, almost invisible, and adjusted his glasses with a single finger. “Alright.”

Athalia grinned back at Elaine. “We don’t know why, but when a vampire drinks a monster, like Fiona or me, they get very ... aggressive.”

Elaine purred. “How aggressive?”

“Fiona said it, growling and pinning. And ... choking. And spanking. And ... some hair pulling.”

If Elaine had been Blushing Life, the woman would have grown wet. A Daeva in a Ventrue’s body. The old dragon groaned as she wriggled in her seat, and slowly cast her hungry gaze toward Daniel as she leaned further forward until her hanging breasts rested on the table.

“Water everywhere and not a drop to drink for me.”

“Come now old friend.” Antoinette leaned forward and toward Elaine, and gently pulled her back to sitting upright. “You—oh. Moreno. Harcourt.”

Jack, who had been watching Athalia — and her naked body — with a strange fascination, as if he had never considered before that Athalia had a sex drive, snapped to attention and looked beyond the booth. Clara Moreno and Brace Harcourt walked up to the stairs, and upon noticing the large booth utterly filled with people, stumbled over.

Stumbled indeed, they were both drunk. Harcourt wore a white shirt, loose and mostly open, while Clara wore a white dress, a skimpy thing with two straps that hung tightly over each breast before connecting to a skirt. A terribly beautiful woman, and an exquisitely beautiful man.

The two of them stared wide-eyed at the booth, and the twelve people within with their torsos fully exposed. But before Clara could understand what was happening, Brace took her hand, and walked

over to the table. Well, he was a man, and intoxicated at that. Antoinette could not blame him for wishing to see. And the cherry on top, Brace had less social awareness than a beetle.

“Wow. Um, whatcha guys up to?” Brace asked, Clara at his side. The werewolf blushed horribly, but she was also perhaps a touch too intoxicated to stop herself from admiring the sights before her. Her eyes lingered on Eric and Daniel’s body, and Jack’s as well, before eventually settling on the myriad of breasts to feast her eyes on.

Antoinette expected her to look at the Prince for longer than she did. Yes, Antoinette was beautiful, but she was also unusually tall, unusually buxom, and had white hair and red eyes. It was a perfectly normal reaction, to stare at something statistically odd. But it was Natasha, and how her pack mate Arturo continued to tease and fondle her body that had Clara gazing. Had she seen the tiny creature’s pornographic films as well?

Jack sighed and shrugged. “We were celebrating Azamel. But apparently we’ve also developed a bit of a ritual now. Get together, get half naked, drink.”

Harcourt raised a brow. A considerable feat of dexterity, considering how he wobbled.

“Vamps don’t drink!”

“Not alcohol,” Antoinette said, and she licked a fang.

Clara noticed, and managed a small frown. But the frown vanished when Harcourt slid behind her, and slipped his hands around her waist to hug her. As if someone had just fed her decadent, delicious food, she melted back into the man’s arms, and smiled. Either alcohol agreed with her, and she agreed in return, vehemently at that, or something had occurred between her and Harcourt over the past few weeks. Most likely both.

Jack noticed. He frowned, for a moment, but the frown faded quickly, replaced with the first real smile Antoinette had seen him wear since Azamel's death.

"We," Fiona said, raising her glass as she did, "are bonny sluts! We deserve tae party 'n have fun."

"Fun includes tit fondling?" Clara asked.

"Aye, it does."

She nodded, grinning at the little redhead. "Glad everyone's happy, then." She shared a knowing glance with Jack, and the boy returned it, before she stepped a little closer to the table, Harcourt still behind her. "I admit, you are all pretty sluts. Matt, Art, seriously?"

Matthew shrugged, and sipped his drink. "Hey, I'm happy to be surrounded by a bunch of handsome dudes and very, very hot women who don't mind showing some skin."

She glared at him. "And you call yourself Canadian."

"Canada, I'll have you know, is slightly less concerned about boobs than the USA." He shrugged again, took another sip, and grinned down at his little vampire lover, who was still the subject of Arturo's attention.

"Uh huh." Clara turned her glare to Arturo. "Dude."

"What? We're all having a good time." Arturo, perhaps a little more drunk than his companion, slid his right arm around further to hug Natasha to his broad chest, caress and cup her left breast, while his left hand slid up her naked chest to her neck, and slowly wrapped her throat.

Natasha was, of course, not intoxicated, but the poor girl struggled to contain her doubtless growing arousal. All in the mind, without the Blush of Life, but it was enough. She did not stop Arturo, and melted into the man's huge arms, hands, and chest, as the werewolf hugged her tight. And the sight of the huge beast clutching her so intimately, had the entire table, Athalia especially, staring.

Clara watched her for a few moments, a few moments more, gulped, and slowly turned her increasingly distracted eyes to Athalia. "I uh, thought you wouldn't be down for this."

Athalia cast side glances at the two women being caressed and massaged beside her. She sighed, shrugged, and shot another glass of scotch before erupting into more gasps and coughs. She had only had half what little Fiona had had, after all, and was perhaps trying to catch up.

"They sold me on it," Athalia said, finally look to Clara. "I mean, yeah, they're all a bunch of sluts, but no one's getting hurt, and it's actually kinda liberating. They're just tits." With a playful grin Antoinette previously thought the woman was incapable of, Athalia leaned back, and shook her chest a little, causing her moderate breasts to jiggle side to side, and for the beautiful chains that clung to her chest around her breasts to sway as well. Considering her dark nipples were quite swollen, it was quite the sight.

Harcourt looked at her for perhaps a bit too long, and got a playful elbow in the gut from Clara. But then she and Harcourt both turned to the Prince, and took a few moments staring directly at her breasts. How quaint.

Clara said, "those are—"

"They are entirely real," Elaine said, and she leaned across Jack, cupped Antoinette's closer breast, and bounced it in her palm. The werewolf and hunter stared, hypnotized.



Jack of course rolled his eyes, but he did not stop Elaine. If anything, he could not help but watch as well. For Jessy to touch Antoinette perhaps annoyed him a touch, but for Elaine to touch Antoinette was quite normal at this point, and a regular part of sex for the little Ventrue.

“Damn,” Harcourt whispered. “That’s, uh, pretty insane.”

Clara rolled her eyes, but sneaked a few more glances to Antoinette as she faced the rest of the group.

“You know, there’s something to be said for hiding the goods.”

“Fuck that.” Jessy shook her head, and gestured around to the group. “We’ve got it right. And besides.” The Gangrel leaned forward and offered Clara a rather evil grin. “You enjoyed my gh—”

Eric elbowed her in the side. Jessy frowned at Eric and returned it, perhaps a tad harder than he had. So naturally, the man twisted enough so he could face her, and give her a playful shove of the shoulder. Which earned a dramatic jaw-drop from her, a glance to the group with a ‘can you believe this?’ expression on her face, before she returned the shove.

And the two of them grappled with each other for the next few moments, which soon had the group chuckling. Their antics were strangely adorable.

Harcourt whispered something into Clara’s ear, earning surprised eyes from her, but also, a strange grin. Part offended, part excited. Harcourt, drunk and riding the waves of joy the atmosphere exuded, slipped his hands over Clara’s breasts and pulled the two snug chest straps to their outer sides.

Clara managed a tiny squeak, and a squirm of surprise, but she made only a small effort to cover her breasts with her forearms, before eventually lowering them. And as she realized twelve more

people were looking at her naked chest with obvious desire, she hardened herself, took a step forward, her moderate, tan-skin breasts still on display, poured herself a glass of scotch, and shot it.

Which left her coughing and struggling to swallow the drink down. Eric did not look happy to see another person wasting the drink.

“Smooth,” she gasped.

The group laughed. And most importantly, Jack laughed.

## Chapter 156

~~Jack~~

Everyone was happy. Too happy. Alarm bells kept going off in his head, like the scene in a movie that sets up how happy everyone is, before shit goes down.

But nothing bad happened. He thought maybe Clara and Harcourt showing up would be the trigger of something bad. But nope, they were drunk, and happy, and it only took a few minutes before Clara had her tits out, and was working on getting blackout drunk. He doubted she could get that drunk, being Uratha and all, but either way, she laughed — hell, giggled — and even bounced around a little, showing off how hot she was as she got drunker by the second.

Jack didn't know shit about alcohol, but every time someone shot the scotch, Eric frowned.

Clara wasn't a sad drunk, evidently. Happy drunk. Genuinely happy. There were a lot of smiles going around. Well, the war was over, and as much as it sucked that Azamel was dead, she left the city in a pretty good place, all things considered. The monsters had Sándor to protect them, and that dude was ridiculously strong. And now, everyone was cooperating on the weird tears problem. Was it so wrong to just enjoy the night?

He really should have been, but he was struggling for some reason. He shouldn't have been, with two enormous sets of breasts around him from Antoinette and Elaine. Fiona and Natasha were both getting fondled, and loving it, and they were damn attractive, too. The room smelled of life, of desire, and his Kindred nose eventually blocked out the smell of the club to focus on everything around him with a pulse. The drunker and happier they were, the

more his Beast told him to indulge in their pleasure, and feast on them.

It wasn't just him. All the vampires in the room were getting drunk on hunger. Damien was two seconds away from drinking Fiona. Natasha was two seconds away from turning around and drinking Arturo and Matthew. Jessy was going to jump Eric any moment. Even the stone cold sheriff made a few glances Athalia's way every so often, sometimes at her breasts, sometimes at her neck.

But, like walking with a grain of sand in the shoe, Jack couldn't forget the old woman. He tried to not think about Azamel, he really did. But every so often, as he chuckled and laughed with the group of dumbasses, his mind went back there. No matter how much the seven topless women distracted him with their gorgeous bodies, and they were fucking gorgeous, Azamel's final words crept up into his mind.

No wonder depressed people started drinking. There was one thing alcohol was really good at, and that was turning you into a moron where your brain jumped on impulse thoughts, instead of spiraling down neurotic thoughts; usually. And considering where Jack's neurotic thoughts were taking him, he wanted to get drunk and leave them behind. He wanted to get fucking shit-faced, and forget all the crap his own damn brain refused to drop.

All those times he thought people were being stupid because they refused to face their problems, and drank themselves into a hole instead. Now all he wanted to do was stop tearing himself up inside for five fucking minutes. Alcohol would be perfect. Christ, that was painfully humbling.

It hurt for a few minutes, seeing Clara so happy with another man. A small part of him still wanted to have her to himself, a slave to his blood, someone to drink and fuck whenever he wanted.

Someone for Antoinette to fuck whenever she wanted. The Ventrue in him, wanting to legit build a harem.

They traded glances a couple times, and each time she offered him an olive branch smile. She really was happy. Maybe Harcourt had listened to Jack. Plus there was the fact she had her beautiful breasts out, and was apparently the sort of girl to get horny, and giggly, when drunk. Harcourt eventually put his hands over her breasts, covering them, but after a few seconds of the two of them chuckling, he lowered them again, and continued to hug her from behind as the two of them stepped close enough to touch the table with their thighs.

“I gotta admit,” Harcourt said as he leaned forward, and set his chin on Clara’s shoulder, arms wrapping her stomach, her breasts sitting on his forearms, “I’m really liking Dolareido.”

“Wonderful,” Antoinette said. “If I can convince hunters that I have worked hard to keep my city a safe place for humans, then other hunters will know to leave us be.”

“I mean, I can tell them, but a lot of us don’t exactly talk to each other. The shit Jeremiah set up was pretty unique. I know there are some organizations and shit, but getting into them is more a ‘who you know’ sorta situation.”

“Regardless, it is a step in the correct direction.”

Clara nodded, and took another sip. “Everyone getting drunk — vampires excluded — in Bloodlust and showing off their tits is kinda weird. At least I kinda thought, right? But Brianna is right over there, getting Kissed and fucked by Derick and Santos, at the same time.” With a giggling sigh, she shrugged and took another sip as she waved a shaky hand toward another booth. “I bet that’s fun.”

“What’s fun?” Fiona asked.

“Getting drunk by a vamp.”

“Aye, it is! Very!” Fiona raised her hands, leaving her drink behind as she leaned back and rubbed her back against Damien. “Show them!”

“Uh, maybe we should—”

“Aw come on!”

“Fiona my dear,” Antoinette said. “I am all for sharing our delights publicly, but not all at once. Tease out the pleasure over time.”

Fiona stared at Antoinette like she just said something prophetic and profound.

“Aye, I get ye.”

With a playful smile, Antoinette looked down at Jack, and he tried to perk up in time, but she caught his sad expression. Damn.

“Clara my dear,” Antoinette said, showing Jack one of her patented evil smiles before she flipped it innocent, and looked to the werewolf. “You want to experience the Kiss?”

“What? I was joking. And uh, aren’t you a Daeva? Don’t you stick to drinking your ghouls?”

“Daeva do indeed. But Elaine here, she has been dying for a taste of a werewolf.”

“Oh yes indeed.” Elaine leaned forward, and she made damn sure to show off her breasts as she did. “Jessy here refuses. Natasha refuses. But you.” The elder grinned at Clara and Harcourt. “You are quite drunk.”

“I am drunk,” Clara said, eying Elaine like it was some sort of poker game that she really sucked at. “But, that doesn’t mean I’m going to let some random vampire drink me.”

“I will make it worth your while.” With a chuckle, Elaine slid over Jack’s lap, and then Antoinette’s; large booths, built specifically for romantic activities. Out of the booth, she made no effort to cover her huge breasts, letting them hang and jiggle as she slid off Antoinette’s lap before standing up. She came right up to Clara too, until only a foot was between them.

Elaine was tall for a woman. Clara was average height, and she had to look up at the buxom blonde who radiated enough confidence to drown everyone in her ego. It was kinda sexy, honestly.

“Worth my while? I—”

Elaine came in closer. Clara almost took a step back. Harcourt did. He was in the presence of a super ancient deadly vampire, so yeah, it kinda made sense for the hunter to do that. But Clara stood her ground, wobbly ground, but ground nonetheless, and managed a half frown as Elaine came in closer and closer. So close she leaned in, and put her lips to Clara’s ear.

She whispered something. No one heard, not with the music pulsing.

Clara blushed, hard. The werewolf looked utterly fucking shocked by whatever Elaine told her, to the point she took a few peeks at the group, before eventually hiding her face as she turned around, and whispered something to Harcourt. And whatever she said to him had him gulping and nodding like a puppy.

Chuckling, Elaine came up behind Clara, pressed her huge, pale breasts against the woman’s tan back, and slowly turned her to face the group.

Jack thought the night had already been pretty erotic. Ridiculously erotic, considering Fiona was still being fondled, and was probably soaking wet. Matt, Arturo, and Eric were all struggling to not let their erections get problematic. Natasha was struggling to not just turn around and pounce her boys. Jessy was one second away from pouncing Eric. Hell, even Athalia, cold and mean Athalia, watched Clara and Elaine with wide, surprised eyes, as Elaine turned Clara to face the group while slowly sliding her hands up the werewolf's body.

Yeah, Clara and alcohol were an erotic mix. For someone like her, to actually agree to a fivesome with four dudes she didn't know, just because Jessy sent them? Yeah, she'd been drunk that night. And the next time. And the time after that, according to Jessy. And unfortunately for Clara, Harcourt was, evidently, easily seduced when drunk. Sure, Jack would bet his life that Harcourt wouldn't ever cheat on Clara, but Harcourt was also pretty easily dumbstruck by the sight of a confident, busty, tall woman with a fashion model body getting her hands all over his girlfriend.

But considering everyone froze solid and stared, Jack couldn't hold it against Harcourt. No one said or did a thing, as Elaine slowly set her lips to Clara's neck, while everyone watched. Her hands slipped up Clara's bare stomach, found her breasts, and cupped both of them in her hands, as she sank her fangs into her neck.

Clara's eyes opened wide, and she managed a tiny whimper. No one could hear it over the music, but they could see the whimper, see her lips tremble, and her eyes struggle to stay open, as she melted back against Elaine's body. And considering how dramatically Elaine had Clara's body pressed to hers, everyone could see how Elaine's huge breasts molded against Clara's back. But more so, everyone stared at how Clara's breasts molded to Elaine's snug fingers, and her nipples swelled, visible between Elaine's knuckles, as the vampire pulled her deep into the pleasure of a Kiss.



Jack had seen Elaine and Antoinette do this dozens of times, fondle a woman like Antoinette's ghouls or Veronica, while drinking them. It was always intensely erotic. And holy fucking shit, seeing Clara melt like hot wax against Elaine as the older vampire drained her, slowly, was scalding hot. And as Elaine did, she traded a very specific gaze with Jack.

He knew that gaze. She wanted to finger Clara right there in front of them all. But that wasn't part of whatever deal she'd arranged. Massaging Clara's tits and hypnotizing everyone with how obviously Clara was borderline having an orgasm in front of them all from the Kiss, was. Clara moaned, loud enough they could hear it, and finally her eyes closed as her body started to go limp. Not so limp that she couldn't keep standing though, and Elaine took full advantage, continued to caress and massage the werewolf's breasts as she took more from her, and more, and more.

Clara managed a quick peek at Jack, saw his expression, grinned, and quivered in the vampire's arms.

"Elaine," Antoinette said, "if you do not stop, what will be left for Harcourt?"

Finally, Elaine lifted her lips. Blood coated their inner contours, and she licked it off, making an obvious show of it for everyone watching. Everyone in the booth either knew how awesome it was to Kiss, or be Kissed, and every one of them squirmed. Yeah, everyone was either getting or giving tonight, after seeing that. Was that what Elaine had whispered to her?

"My god," Elaine said. "Natasha, Jessy, you two have been indulging in this for many months, and did not share? Shame on you." Half groaning, half growling, Elaine slipped Clara's dress back onto her breasts, and gave her to Harcourt. Clara had enough power to keep standing, Uratha and all that, but it was a tough battle. Her

legs wobbled a shit load more now, and Harcourt had to get under one of her arms and pull it around behind his neck.

Grinning, Elaine came up to Harcourt, leaned in, and whispered something in his ear. His eyes widened with the glee of a child in a toy store, told he could buy whatever he wanted. Nodding, and bouncing with new energy, Harcourt gave the group a goofy salute, a goofier bow to Antoinette that almost had Clara falling onto the floor, before he turned around and walked her out of Bloodlust.

He was going to take her back to his place, and fuck her silly. And considering what Elaine had just done to her, not only would Clara be helpless to stop Harcourt, the werewolf was going to cum her ever living brains out tonight. Which was pretty much exactly what Clara wanted from Harcourt, for him to set aside the nice guy shtick, and just fuck the shit out of her.

Elaine was a dangerous woman.

They all watched, smiles on their faces, cause they all knew what was going to happen. Of course, when Harcourt and Clara were gone, everyone looked back to Elaine. With her dress hanging around her hips, everyone could see how swollen her nipples were. The Kiss did that, got the vampire's body to Blush Life whether they wanted to or not, which meant Elaine's skin had color again, filled out again, and her pink areola were engorged. Having everyone look at her only made it worse, too. She was like Antoinette, and a lot of girls in Dolareido apparently. She liked being looked at.

Jessy stared at Elaine harder than the rest of them. She even nodded toward Elaine and nudged Eric when the man tried to look away.

“First time? Really?” Jessy asked the elder.

“That I can remember.” Elaine stepped to the table, replacing where Clara and Harcourt had stood. “Perhaps long ago, I tasted an

Uratha, but forgive an elder and their memories. To remember things that happened literal centuries ago is difficult.” She ran a finger down her sternum, and down over one breast before reaching her stomach. “That was ... energizing. Powerful. Beyond rich. God, what a feast.”

Jack had indulged in Elaine’s amazing body on dozens of occasions now. More. But despite everyone at the table having seen Elaine on video, enjoying sex with Jack and Antoinette and their thrall and ghouls, they weren’t quite prepared for just how direct Elaine could be. She wasn’t like Antoinette, who balanced her obvious confidence with subtlety and grace. Elaine was like a wrecking ball, happy to bowl everyone over with just how ridiculously hot she was.

And she was Jack’s great grandsire. For the life of him, he couldn’t help but kinda admire and even envy her confidence.

Antoinette chuckled, and motioned with a curling finger to Elaine. The other elder joined her, leaned in, and Antoinette whispered into her ear. A lot of whispering tonight.

Elaine grinned over Antoinette’s shoulder at Jack, stood up, and nodded. “Very well, I think I will.” She stepped back from the table a couple steps, and looked over to one of the booths. That was the booth Clara had mentioned, with Brianna and her two boyfriends. “I am already dying for another taste.” Elaine turned, winked at Jack, and walked over there, dress still around her hips.

She disappeared into the booth out of sight, and Jack gulped as he waited for her to bring Brianna, Derick, and Santos back with her. She didn’t. She stayed in the other booth, probably on a quest to seduce three people. And considering the belly full of werewolf blood, and that Brianna was probably drunk, Jack would bet good money she’d succeed.

Athalia laughed. “She’s really, uh, led by her loins, isn’t she?”

Antoinette shrugged. “She knows what she likes.” She leaned in and smiled at Athalia. “That includes you.”

“What? Me?”

“Elaine is quite attracted to you.”

“I think she’s attracted to anything on two legs.”

“Give Elaine a chance, and I think you will be pleasantly surprised.”

“I doubt that.”

“Oh? She delights in her own power and beauty, yes, but she also delights in the beauty of others. If you let my old friend in, for just a moment, I think you would find yourself treated to the powerful joy of someone who wants to delight in you, and have you delight in her.” Antoinette winked at Athalia, so damn subtle Jack bet only Athalia and him noticed.

“I guess that is a pretty nice thing,” Athalia said. “I mean, slut, sure, but still pretty nice.”

Holy shit. How did Antoinette do that? Get someone like Athalia to change her mind that fast? Probably a combination of her words, and alcohol.

“Now, if you will excuse us.” Antoinette slipped her dress strap back on over her head, took a few moments to reset her breasts in the chest straps, and made a show of doing it too, before she slipped out of the booth and stood up. “Jack, would you like to join me?”

“Yeap.” He hopped out of the booth, did a couple buttons on his shirt, and slipped his jacket back on. “What about you guys?”

He regretted asking. He knew exactly what everyone else at the table was going to do. Jessy and Eric were in a playful mood, which was kinda neat to see cause Eric didn't usually do the playful thing. They were gonna fuck, and probably break a couch. Natasha and the boys were two steps from fucking already, and after seeing Elaine Kiss Clara, Natasha looked like she was going to burst with need to do the same. And the boys looked ready to throw her onto the table and spit-roast her. Fiona was getting closer to orgasm by the minute, with Damien teasing and fondling her for so long. Damien looked ready to Kiss her right there, no shits given to those watching. And Athalia had the look of a woman, an older woman finally coming to understand that she had a major sex drive, that she shouldn't be ashamed of it, and was ready to go get her brains fucked right out of her by her tall, sexy vampire boyfriend.

And Daniel didn't look like anything. Maybe Antoinette could read him, but Jack sure couldn't.

"Alright then," he said, not able to look at them too long. Yeap, kinda embarrassing, just a bit. But then again, they'd just spent a few hours talking, mostly about sex, a lot of that time spent topless. And as far as he could tell, literally everyone at the table had, at some point, seen Jack naked and having sex with Antoinette ... and Elaine and Veronica and Ashley and Julee. Pretty stupid to get embarrassed at this point.

Jack and Antoinette left. Elaine stayed behind. A quick glance to her booth showed the woman had made some very quick progress. Brianna looked like she'd already been Kissed, and Elaine was already on her lap, touching her, kissing her neck, maybe getting ready to drink her, while the two men with Brianna watched, and touched the two ladies. Knowing Elaine, she'd treat them to a giant buffet of sex tonight.

The two of them took a limousine home, but not back to the Prince's tower. They went back to his mansion. And on the drive,

Antoinette reached over and pat his shoulder.

“I feel I did not succeed tonight, my love.”

“Succeed? With—oh, you were trying to distract me.”

“Cunning little Ventrue.”

“Heh. Well, yeah, you did succeed. Kinda hard to not get distracted in that environment.”

“And yet...”

“And yet, yeah, I am kinda stuck in a rut, I guess. You know me.”

“I do indeed.”

Jack glanced to the front window that blocked the back seats from the driver. Sound proof, far as Jack knew.

“I was pretty surprised Athalia got into it, so quickly. And she—”

“Is a terribly beautiful creature. Daniel is a lucky man.”

“Yeah. I’m happy she’s recovering. And Fiona.” He tried to hold the smile, but it broke, and he looked down as Azamel came into his mind again.

“They recover, and yet you do not?”

“That’s not it. I’m not still mourning her, not really, you know? Just, what she said. Still digs at me.”

Antoinette nodded, eyes ahead, thinking. Probably thinking up another way to try and distract him from himself.

He was cool with that. He could use the distraction.

“I did have fun tonight, Antoinette. And Clara—”

“I did not invite Clara.”

“You didn’t?”

“Non.”

“Angry she showed up?”

“Non. Surprised, and delighted, especially with how Elaine managed to open the woman’s eyes to a new experience.” Antoinette grinned at him, leaned in, and kissed him. “I am happy to see she is quite sexually compatible with Harcourt as well.”

“And, uh, Elaine evidently.”

“Ha, perhaps. Would it bother you, if Elaine slept with Brace and Clara?”

“Nah.”

“That is good, because Elaine will no doubt attempt it.”

“Cause she wants to tease me, sleeping with Clara when Clara used to be interested in me.”

Antoinette laughed and shook her head. “Not everything is about you, my love. Non, she will try to seduce her, because I saw the look in her eyes when she drank of her blood. Instant addiction.”

Jack laughed. Yeah, honestly, that was a lot better than the other reason.

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He tried to stay happy. He had every reason to be happy. But Azamel’s words pricked at him, like a sewing needle someone left in his clothes. People were dead. She was dead. And he was utterly

convinced he could have prevented it all, even though he also knew that was a stupid, illogical thought. And the worst part about it wasn't feeling bad; sure he felt bad but he wasn't beside himself with agony or misery or anything. The worst part was he couldn't quite shake it off, couldn't quite get back to normal, couldn't quite hold a smile.

Antoinette noticed. She noticed everything. She held his hand, and the two of them walked into his mansion, where Veronica quickly joined them. Thankfully she was wearing her modern maid's uniform, and not one of the sexy variants Antoinette and Elaine had given her, like the one she wore yesterday in front of his mom. Ho boy.

"Master. Prince." She bowed, but her smile faded as she looked at Jack. "Are you alright, master?"

"I'm fine." He knew she didn't believe him. He used the f word, after all. "How are Mulder and Scully?"

"They're enjoying their shower. As ... as much as undead birds can, I suppose."

"They enjoy it, trust me. They might not show it, but they enjoy it."

"Yes, master. They ... talk, sometimes. It's very weird to hear birds make sentences, and ask questions about things."

He smiled at her, and pat her on the shoulder as he started up the stairs with Antoinette.

"Trust me, Veronica, they like you, too." He smiled at her, earning a smile in return. It was nice, having her worry about him, even if it was half fake because of the Vinculum.



Antoinette took him up to one of his bigger rooms, leaving Veronica behind. The upstairs bedroom, with a giant four poster bed, red wood frame and headboard, and blood red blankets. Yeah, Viktor had been beyond cliché.

With a merry chuckle, Antoinette gently sat him down. Not on the bed like he expected, but in a chair in the corner of the room, another big thing with red wood legs and blood red cushions. Pretty damn comfy, and royal.

“Be a dear and sit still for me, would you? I would like to have some fun tonight, and I believe you will be happier for the experience.”

He smiled up at her and nodded. “I mean, sure, but I’m not—”

She kissed his forehead, and walked out. He’d expected her to get onto the bed, or ring for Veronica, not straight up leave. What was she up to?

Yeah sure, he was feeling kinda down, but he wasn’t depressed. At least he didn’t think so. But then again, at this point he knew better than to question his lover. If she thought something, it was probably right.

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~~Antoinette~~

Down in the lobby, she rang a small bell that sat on a small table. A holdover from Viktor’s love for the classics. Antoinette would have used a phone, and an app, but at the same time, the bell had a distinct enough sound, and loud enough, that Veronica would hear it. Jack likely used his phone, but sometimes indulging in the classics was enjoyable. Not even vampires were immune from reveling in nostalgia.

Veronica returned to the lobby, and her eyes widened as she realized Antoinette was alone, and had been the one to ring her. But she was an eager thrall, eager to please her master, and she knew that meant pleasing Antoinette. Slowly, she approached, eyes downcast, shivering slightly.

“Yes, my Prince?”

Antoinette grinned down at the trembling thrall. Usually, she felt she had long grown past the old her, the one that delighted in how others feared her might, and how they trembled in the wake of her power. But seeing Jack’s pet shiver before her sent tingling joy through her, awakening old desires. The Beast in her enjoyed this.

“As you can see, Veronica, your master is quite stressed.”

“Yes, my Prince.”

“Speak freely.”

“Um, he is pretty stressed out, isn’t he? He’s been like that for a couple weeks now. I thought he was getting better, but I guess not. He even said ‘fine’, like, as if that wasn’t a huge red flag.”

“He frequently finds himself carrying burdens he should not be forced to bear. And half the time, he carries them of his own accord. But he survives.”

“Aw. He likes helping people.”

“Oui, that he does.” Nodding, Antoinette motioned for Veronica to follow, and she did, eyes looking up to take peeks at Antoinette and her dress.

“I like your dress.”

Antoinette chuckled and looked over her shoulder, down at the small, blue-haired kine. “Why thank you. But I am sure you will love it more later, when it is on the floor.”

A hilariously silly line, but Veronica blushed brightly and squirmed all the more. Antoinette had just confirmed that the woman would be joining the two vampires tonight, in what would inevitably be an extremely sexually satisfying experience. It took little to get Veronica excited. That was part of the reason Antoinette chose her as a thrall option, after all.

Antoinette sighed as she sat down on a cushioned bench, and motioned to Veronica. “Far be it from me to encourage gender roles, but dare I say, women have a ... knack, for soothing the wounds of others. Non?”

Veronica smiled and nodded. Still afraid, still in awe of the Prince’s power, but slowly growing more comfortable. This was the first time the two of them had ever spoken to each other directly and in private, but it was a good first step to acclimating the child to the world of darkness.

“Yes, Prince.”

“And as your master’s thrall, you will be tasked with soothing his wounds. I will not always be there to see when Jack Terry’s injuries to his mind and soul bleed. Indeed, sometimes it will be you he may speak to you, in the privacy of darkness and walls. He may speak to you of his troubles, his woes. He may speak to you of secrets he needs to share. He may speak to you of ... many things.”

Veronica’s eyes opened wider and wider with each example. “But I’m just, uh, a kine. Not even a ghoul yet. I can’t—”

“You can do much.” Veronica was Jack’s pet, and just how human owners talked to their pets about personal things, Jack may very well do so with her. “So I will give you some advice: do not sit there,

and simply smile and nod when Jack speaks to you. Your master is a logical man. He does not voice himself to others with the mere intent of being heard, or to be echoed.” Though Antoinette sometimes wished he did. “If he talks to you of his troubles, respond.”

“Respond with what? I don’t know anything.”

“Your thoughts, whatever they may be.”

“Um, I’ll try, Prince.”

“Good. Now, for tonight, we will not simply be enjoying sexual delights. We will be helping your master, soothing his wounds. He is troubled, troubles himself, and needs to be distracted from himself.”

Veronica smiled. “Sounds like he could use a drink.”

“Agreed. But alas, he is Kindred. What he could use, is a Kiss.” Antoinette grinned down at the little creature. “Now come. We will prepare you.”

“Prepare?”

“Indeed.”

---

“Jack, my love.” Antoinette smiled at the man as she stepped into the room, her hands on the thrall’s shoulders in front of her. He yet sat within the large red chair in the corner of the room, a lamp on the nightstand beside him casting him in a powerful contrast. If he had been reading Edgar Allen Poe, it would have fit perfectly.

“Antoinette, you were gone for a while. I ... what’re you doing?” His eyes looked to her, before lowering to his thrall, and how she wore a classic maid’s outfit, and not her usual modern version. But also, it was an erotic version of a simple maid’s uniform, with no

skirt, exposed legs, and a large window for cleavage. White frills with black lines highlighted her limbs, long black sleeves that ended in white cuffs. She also wore a collar with a small black tie, and a headband of more white frills.

With how large Veronica's bust was, the silly dress struggled to contain her heavy breasts, with nipples barely covered by the white frills of the dress's plunging front.

"You, my dear love, need to relax. And perhaps indulge in your role as ruler of this house, and master of its denizens. Veronica, your thrall, your slave, will happily serve your every need."

"I know that. I—"

"Your every need, my love. You need not focus on her pleasure every time you touch her. By all means, you are Kindred and she is your servant. Order her to satisfy you. And when she has, satisfy yourself with her." With a playful, knowing smile, Antoinette walked the thrall over to Jack, and after a gentle tap on her shoulders, the thrall got onto her knees in front of him. "Now, give your delightful thrall an order."

"Antoinette, come on. You know I—"

"My love, your servant would very much like to serve your needs. Is that not so, Veronica?"

The blue-haired little creature nodded, blushing and smiling. "Yes master. I want to help you, however you want. Your love says you ... you could use some stress relief. I'll happily do whatever you want."

Jack blinked down at the woman nearly touching his knees, and then up at Antoinette. Of course Antoinette returned his stunned gaze with a devil smile, and gestured toward him. Yes, listen, indulge in your dominant desires. As much as Antoinette and Jack usually enjoyed sex where Antoinette controlled the pace, and Jack

enjoyed following her whim, sometimes the man enjoyed taking control. And she knew the man wanted to indulge that hungry, masculine side of him more, especially when Veronica was involved. Each time, Antoinette had to be the one to push him.

Let him chase his own desires, this night.

~~♥♥♥~~

Jack sighed, but Antoinette recognized the hunger and wonder in his eyes. There were things he wished to do, urges he wished to express that he could not with a woman as powerful as Antoinette. But a thrall, his own thrall, a servant who desperately wanted to be used, and perhaps a little abused, was an entirely different sexual delight.

The man's smile slowly grew, and he looked back down at the blue-haired pale creature at his knees. "Alright. I want a blowjob." Evidently, Antoinette's idea had struck a chord, because her love spread his knees, and Blushed Life. Antoinette did as well.

To Antoinette's utter delight, Jack relaxed back in the chair, slid his pelvis forward, set his elbows upon the arms of his chair, and set his chin upon his right hand's knuckles. He looked like a king. Perhaps weary, perhaps drained, but a king, comfortable in his power, and comfortable with the sexual delights about to befall him.

Smiling at her lover, Antoinette stepped around his pet, and stood beside the chair as she smiled down at Veronica. Veronica returned it, before she reached up, undid the fly of Jack's pants, and slipped his hardening length out through the flap of his boxers.

While Veronica had touched Jack's length on many occasions, this was the first time she had been given clearance to indulge herself like this, to be the center of attention before sex had even begun. She was nervous, to know her master's attention was fully on her, but also because so was Antoinette's. The poor creature. She

gulped as she shivered, but the signs of arousal were blatant, skin flushed and breath quickening as she leaned in until her shoulders hooked over Jack's legs, and her elbows pressed outside his thighs while her breasts pressed between them. And with excited eyes, she leaned in, and kissed the underside of Jack's glans.

Jack quietly sighed his pleasure, and smiled down at his pet, but he said nothing. He wanted to. Antoinette could see the subtle twitch of his face muscles as he often did when Jack suppressed a thought.

"My love," Antoinette whispered, and she turned to face him more directly as she leaned down over him. "Be specific with your pet. What exactly must she do? How best can she pleasure you?" Grinning at her love, she undid the buttons of his shirt, exposing his chest of muscle and defined abs, both for Veronica's eyes, and for the gloriously erotic, artistic image of a seated, dominant man with his suit jacket and shirt opened while his pet pleased him.

Antoinette was throwing enormous logs into the boy's furnace, heat for his ego. He was a Ventrue after all. A simple breeze upon the embers of his ego would have stoked it into a fire, but she wanted the boy to indulge an inferno of desire tonight.

Slowly, Jack nodded. Yes, now Antoinette could see the heat boil in more than his loins. It burned in his eyes.

Chin still resting upon his knuckles, he reached out with his free hand, and touched the glans of his penis. Slowly, he traced the base edge of the exposed, swollen, reddened flesh, drawing Veronica's eyes as he did.

"The edge here, is very sensitive. I like it when lips slide back and forth on it, when I'm in your mouth. Up and down."

"Yes master." Happy to get any information about her master, Veronica leaned forward a little more, squashing her heavy breasts

against the insides of Jack's thighs and the chair, her arms still hooked over his legs. With head forward, she slowly slipped her lips over the skin of Jack's glans. Once within her mouth, she slowly eased her lips up and down along the base edge of the bulbous tip, and she beamed with pride as Jack groaned softly.

"Veronica," Antoinette said, "I am sure you are aware by now, that vampires are blessed, sexually speaking. I—do not stop." Veronica, who had lifted her head at Antoinette's mention of her name, quickly put her lips around Jack's girth once more. "Vampires can indulge sexual desires all night, if they wish. There is no need to worry about an early climax. Do not hesitate to milk my lover of every orgasm you can."

She nodded, Jack's length still within her kiss, and she grinned up at her master as she resumed her gentle suckling of the head of his cock.

She outright melted and nearly stopped again, when Jack set his hand on her head, and rested it there, entwining it into her hair.

Antoinette chuckled as she watched the pretty creature, and how her eyes lit up with joy. Ashley and Julee behaved with similar, devoted adoration. Would they continue to, once they were sired? A painful question for another time.

The Prince stepped around Veronica and behind her. And as Jack looked up from his pet to her, Antoinette slipped out of her dress, slowly, teasingly. Now Jack was left with a dilemma. Continue to watch his pet bathe his cock in absolute adoration, or watch her, as she exposed her naked body to him. As expected, he struggled, and his eyes flicked between them, earning another chuckle from Antoinette as she eventually stripped down to nothing.

Without looking from her lover's eyes, Antoinette knelt down behind Veronica, and spread her legs as she moved forward. Soon



her stomach was pressed to Veronica's back, and the thrall could not help but lift her head up in surprise.

“Come now Veronica, do not stop. Obey your master.” Antoinette grinned from over Veronica's head toward her love, who quickly grasped the message, and helped guide Veronica's head back onto his girth.

And only once the tiny, busty, shivering little thrall was again suckling on her master's cock, did Antoinette press her bare breasts against the woman's back and shoulders, and slip her fingers under the crotch of the half maid's uniform, half swimsuit. Drenched. Antoinette growled down at the helpless kine as she used her left hand to pull aside the crotch of the uniform, while her right hand — middle and ring fingernails clipped — caressed Veronica's swollen, and nearly dripping clitoris.

Antoinette could not see Veronica's eyes from the angle, but the look of awe and hunger in Jack's eyes told her all she needed. Veronica was not only enjoying Antoinette's touch, she was delirious with need for it, and Jack could see it in his pet's eyes. Combined with how Veronica relished being treated as a sex slave, being told to fellatio her master as her master's lover touched her, was tickling the girl's inner desires in way she had likely not expected.

How utterly perfect.

Antoinette chuckled as she caressed the woman's clitoris, and teased over the small chain dangling from its hood. Her other hand reached around Veronica's hip, slipped between her thighs, and sank two probing fingers up into the girl's slit, earning some squirming groans from her. Oh yes, absolutely drenched, and Veronica could not help but clench on Antoinette's fingers as the Prince curled them toward her g-spot.

Poor girl. Antoinette had spent over five hundred years not only with her only body, but the bodies of many women. With a single thought, she could have had Veronica lost to orgasm. But tonight was about Jack, and Antoinette slowed her pace to match Veronica's.

Jack melted back in his chair, and held his pet's head tenderly as the blue-haired creature kissed and suckled on his cock. Veronica's body language was clear. To hold her head and pet her drove her mad with heat, and her insides clamped down on Antoinette's fingers all the tighter as Jack looked down to her with the adoring eyes of a master.

Whether Jack wanted to admit it or not, there was Ventrue inside him, someone that delighted in being in charge, someone that wanted to take prey smaller and weaker, and ravage them. And while Antoinette could not satisfy that craving, his pet — soon to be many pets — could.

Antoinette released a perfect, husky sigh of pleasure, as she watched her lover's eyes half close with bliss. He shivered for a moment, abs flexing with a jolt of pleasure, and he melted back once more as Veronica slowed her lips, and milked him during his first orgasm of the night.

And as she did, Antoinette fingered her harder, and trapped her engorged clitoris between massaging fingers. Veronica trembled and squirmed against Antoinette's chest and breasts, but Antoinette did not let her go. As the thrall descended into blissful rapture, Antoinette eased her stroking of the girl's clitoris, but only increased how hard she curled her other fingers against her depths. Just as Veronica milked Jack, lips still locked around his cock, Antoinette milked Veronica, easily driving the girl to more trembling squirms until drops of her juices fell from Antoinette's fingers.

The pet's fellatio technique likely suffered, trapped in bliss as she was, but Jack did not mind, eyes drifting between both women with obvious joy.

Eventually Jack lifted Veronica's head, and she let it collapse onto his pelvis and hip. Moaning and mewling, she squirmed and wriggled in Antoinette's grip, more juices trickling down onto the Prince's fingers.

"Master ... help..."

Jack chuckled, a playful, dominant sound, before looking to Antoinette. "I think she's done."

Nodding, Antoinette stopped. The girl was no Kindred, or even a ghoul. A thrall had no more sexual stamina than any normal human, after all, and Antoinette would have to temper her expectations.

As Veronica recovered, Antoinette gently pulled her back against Antoinette's chest. Veronica, still trembling, gasped as she looked up at Antoinette, only to freeze as Antoinette slowly slid a hand up the half swimsuit, half maid dress, until her hand found the cleavage. Both ladies looked to Jack, excited to see his reaction, as Antoinette pulled the dress's frilly white front down, exposing Veronica's large breasts and pierced nipples.

They were engorged, with small chains dangling from each.

"Beautiful," Jack said, eyes meeting Veronica's with pure, wholesome, dominant energy. Which Veronica absorbed, and she quivered with delight.

"To the bed, my love?"

"God yes." He stood up, length still wet with Veronica's saliva, and motioned for his pet to sit on the bed. She did, but before Jack

joined her, he motioned to Antoinette. “Antoinette, if you would be so kind as to sit back on the bed, and spread your legs?”

A direct request from her lover? He caught on quickly.

“Oh my. Am I to be the target of your pet’s affections?”

Jack laughed, his bright smile warming the room. “Yes.”

“Wonderful.” She climbed onto the large bed of red silk, piled up the many pillows behind her to create a leaning wall for her to sit back against, and she spread her legs.

Veronica knew what was about to happen. She was about to be asked to do something she had never done before: pleasure her master’s lover on her own, without the aid of Jack, or Elaine, or Ashley or Julee.

Julee and Ashley would be terribly jealous, but Antoinette would make it up to them. An orgy perhaps, with them at the center. And a decadent ice cream to follow.

“Veronica, get on your elbows and knees, and eat out my lover.”

The little blue-haired creature gulped, nodded, and crawled onto her knees between Antoinette’s thighs. She quivered with every inch, undoubtedly from a mix of post orgasm bliss dripping down her thighs, but also fear. She was quite terrified of Antoinette, but Antoinette could see that only added to the silly little creature’s arousal. And as Veronica got comfortable on her elbows, lips a single inch from Antoinette’s swollen, wet flesh, the adrenaline pumping through her was obvious.

“Envelop me in your mouth completely, little thrall. And use slow, heavy strokes. I will tell you when it is time to grow faster.” Unlike Jack, Antoinette had no trouble describing specifically what she found pleasurable.

“Yes, my Prince.” The little thrall gulped again, obviously scared she would do something incorrectly, but considering how many times she had had her lips on Elaine, and Ashley and Julee at that, Antoinette trusted her to do well.

And besides, watching Jack embrace his more aggressive desires, and unleash them upon his pet, was terribly arousing. Antoinette would need little, to find climax.

Veronica wrapped her mouth around Antoinette’s smooth, swollen slit, and did as ordered. With slow, heavy strokes of her tongue, she bathed Antoinette’s lips and clitoris in wet warmth, and Antoinette sighed as immediate, powerful sparks of pleasure shot outward from where Jack’s pet kissed her. Sharp, the tingling shocks spread out through her legs and down to her toes, announcing that she was indeed, quite aroused, but Veronica’s pace would not be enough to send her over the edge. For now, Antoinette could relax, and enjoy the build, while watching her lover indulge himself.

She sighed blissed as she hugged her breasts together up onto her chest, crossed her wrists, caressed her aching nipples, and smiled up at Jack as he got onto his knees behind Veronica, and pulled aside the crotch of her uniform. The smile on his face was positively joyful.

“Really?” he asked. The boy was, of course, referring to the strange blue gem sticking out of his thrall’s derriere.

“Of course. She will be quite tight, I do believe.” She had chosen a rather large anal plug for Veronica, after all.

Veronica smiled around Antoinette’s sex, but did not stop. She was learning quickly.

Chuckling, Jack hooked the bottom of the uniform around one of Veronica’s butt cheeks, exposing her for him, and he lined up his

cock with her sex. Antoinette could not see the point of intimacy, with Veronica's ass raised and blocking her view, but the changes in expression in the thrall's eyes were clear as night. Jack was caressing her entrance, her folds, her clitoris, the piercing dangling from her clitoris hood, with his glans.

And then the boy grabbed her hips, and slammed himself into her hard enough her delightful rump jiggled with the impact.

Veronica almost collapsed. But as a heavy moan escaped her, and her eyes rolled up with bliss, she managed to keep her mouth around Antoinette's sex. A moment later, she resumed licking, and Antoinette smiled rewardingly as she teased circles around her large, swollen, pink nipples that jutted out from milky skin.

"Damn, that is ... very, very tight," he said.

Antoinette blew her lover a kiss. "I can imagine."

Jack looked down, and the hunger in his eyes doubled, as his gaze slid down Veronica's butt, down her back and maid uniform, to her head where she was firmly set against Antoinette's slit, and then to Antoinette herself. Naturally Antoinette had to create a display for him, to tease him with her wondrous body, and she did so, plucking playfully at her nipples with one hand while the other gently pressed up against the other breast in waves, causing it to ripple. And in his attempt to also create a delicious scene for her, he slowly eased his length out of Veronica, and delightfully flexed his core, as he thrust into his trapped thrall.

Veronica again groaned, but with her elbows spread underneath Antoinette's thighs, and head practically resting against her sex, she would not fall over easily. And once she recovered, she resumed licking.

"Faster," Antoinette whispered, flicking her eyes down to Veronica. Jack's pet nodded, and did as told, burying Antoinette's

clitoris in almost desperate licks that doubled the jolts of bliss coursing down through the Prince's legs.

Jack also grew faster, but with far more haste than Veronica. He tightened his grip on his poor pet's hips, and slammed into her in rapid speed. The tiny creature resisted her master as best she could, and moaned around Antoinette's slit as she struggled to withstand the sudden assault.

Antoinette could pay little heed to the small blue-haired girl between her legs. Her eyes were locked onto her lover as he pounded his pet with need, with power, with hunger. And while both their eyes lingered to watch the thrall's lovely ass jiggle, rippling against his pelvis and abdomen before pushing forward toward the small of her back and then toward his own body again, they eventually looked to each other.

Antoinette watched her lover, and drank in the sight of his hungry eyes, his flexing abs, and his tightening arms as they squeezed and yanked on Veronica's hips. Jack watched her, and drank in her body, the way her breasts flowed with inertia against her chest and arms, and the delighted, lustful expression Antoinette offered him.

Antoinette came first. A touch embarrassing, but she had been quite ready for some time, after seeing her lover cum, and then fingering his pet to orgasm soon after. She shivered as the sharp pleasure sparks shot outward from her clitoris, and spread out through her pelvis, some reaching down through her thighs and toes. She set a hand on Veronica's head, and the pet knew to cease her licking, but Antoinette also did not let her raise her head. It felt delightful to keep Veronica's warmth upon her slit, as the pleasure shocks continued to pulse.

The moment Antoinette came down from her pleasure high, Jack thrust harder, and faster. Veronica raised her head as she gasped, and her eyes rolled up as her jaw dangled. For a single moment, she

tried to look at Antoinette again, but it was for not. She collapsed, cheek pressing to Antoinette's inner thigh, and she came yet again as Jack fucked her.

Jack came as well. Antoinette lifted her eyes from the exhausted, mewling girl to watch her lover as his eyes focused on his pet. With his grip solid, he did not fuck her gently. He thrust hard and fast, driving into her with enough speed and force to have the bed creaking and shifting. But he slowed as he filled his pet with his cum, and he loosened his grip.

Of course, as Antoinette had taught him, Jack gave his thrall a rather harsh slap on the ass, earning another weak mewl from her that undoubtedly had her drenched insides milking every drop of his seed out of him. Again, and again, each earning more noises from his pet, carnal and salacious. But all good things come to an end eventually, and Jack stepped back from his thrall, exposing his soaked length.

He chuckled down at Veronica, and lightly pushed her ass to the side, pushing her over. She landed outside and beside Antoinette's legs, quivering, and smiling in obvious post-orgasm bliss.

"I believe I am feeling envious." Nodding, and donning her playful smile, Antoinette slid down the bed closer to her lover, and rolled over onto her knees, beside Veronica. And then onto Veronica.

"M-Master?" the thrall asked, trying to peek past Antoinette to Jack. But Antoinette covered the woman in her shadow as she knelt around her while also pushing Veronica onto her back. This left Veronica's face directly under Antoinette's breasts.

"Your master," Antoinette whispered, "is a generous lover, is he not?"

She blushed all the harder. "He is."



Antoinette nodded, and looked back to the young man. “My love, if you do not mind?”

Jack groaned as he stepped up to her. But her love knew better than to jump directly to sex with her. He slid between Veronica’s legs on his knees, took Antoinette’s hip into his left hand, and eased two of his right hand’s fingers into her insides.

Antoinette smiled down at Veronica as she lowered herself down a touch. Still on her hands and knees so she did not crush the tiny, busty creature, it did not take much to lower herself until her heavy breasts rested against Veronica’s neck and chin. Of course the terrified thrall dared not move, gazing up at Antoinette, unsure of what to do or say, as Antoinette let out a sultry, perfect moan.

“Veronica dear, treat your master’s love to your delightful touch.”

“I ... don’t know—”

“What the Prince means, my pet,” Jack said, “is she wants you to play with her breasts, the way you’ve seen me play with them. Do it.”

Veronica froze.

Antoinette smiled yet again down at the scared pet, and as Jack’s fingering grew harder and deeper, she arched her back and slid her breasts onto the thrall’s face. “Come now, do as your master ordered.”

Veronica’s eyes lit up with a new form of arousal. She had not considered that Antoinette would want her to pleasure her, while her lover also pleased her, as if Antoinette would not want to feel pleasure from her with her master already doing so. How silly.

The thrall tilted her head back, opened her mouth, and Antoinette’s swollen nipple slipped between her lips.

Instant sparks of pleasure flowed upward from Antoinette's breast into her chest, and she groaned down at Veronica as she smiled at her. An encouraging groan, the sort she had used for Ashley and Julee many times. It worked wonders, Veronica's eyes lighting up with new confidence, and she made her own happy mewl as she suckled and licked.

And of course, Jack's two fingers were pressing down against her g-spot again and again, a delicious rhythm that sent deep waves of bliss up through Antoinette's body and down her legs once more. Her insides boiled, and pleasure tremors worked through her as the two bathed her body in delight.

"Your pet," Antoinette said as she looked over her shoulder, "is quite beautiful, and talented."

Jack smiled at her. "I think so too."

Another peek down at the thrall, and Antoinette caught her prideful expression before she half closed her eyes as she again bathed Antoinette's swollen areola in happy kisses and suckles. Growing bolder, she brought up both her hands, and squeezed them down along the outsides of Antoinette's breasts. Her hands were far too small to encompass much of Antoinette's bust, but she still managed to cup and caress the skin, until one hand found the untouched nipple, and softly massaged it as well.

As much as Antoinette adored the sensation of lips on her nipples, and had indeed climaxed dozens of times from it and it alone, her lover was currently gripping her ass with one hand, and slowly increasing the pressure and speed of his probing fingers with the other. The pleasure his fingers sent through her as they pressed down hard against her aching g-spot grew explosive, and Antoinette released a practiced, but quite real moan as the tremors built, and built, and built.

The orgasm flowed out, and Antoinette's moan elevated to masterful groan. She peeked over her shoulder at her lover, but he was busy staring at her drenched slit and lips, and the juices she leaked onto his hand as he fingered her. And he did not slow down. Antoinette's groans grew weaker as the pleasure tremors pulsed through her, until her thighs shook and her toes curled. Three years of frequent sex together meant her lover knew how fast and how hard to push her, and soon Antoinette found herself struggling to manage the pleasure as the boy fingered her through the orgasm, drawing it out until the waves of bliss working up and down her body grew almost painful. He fingered her harder, harder than he normally did, and Antoinette quivered as a hard clench of her insides soaked the boy's hand. The noises were utterly lascivious, soon turning into a wet splashing sound as her lover's fingering grew rough enough to have her flowing juices splashing her ass and thighs.

A glance down at Veronica showed the thrall staring up at her in awe, slowing her suckling, but still offering gentle kisses. And as Jack finally let Antoinette come down from her orgasm, she slipped back further toward her lover, and then down onto the thrall, to bury Veronica's breasts with her own. Soft skin upon skin, Veronica gulped as she looked down at how her large breasts disappeared beneath the Prince's.

“Make my lover happy, little thrall, and I will reward you in ways you cannot imagine. And my lover craves one thing at this moment, little thrall: my pleasure.” Smiling down at the shocked thrall, Antoinette knelt higher once more, until her enormous breasts were again resting against the beautiful blue-haired woman's neck and chin. “The other, s'il vous plaît. And gently, little thrall. I grow sensitive.”

Veronica gulped, nodded, and resumed her work, now with the other breast.

Antoinette released one of her darker, hungrier groans, as Jack lined his length up with her slit, and slammed his cock into her. Orgasm aftershocks still tingled and shivered their way through Antoinette's body, and she clenched her depths in response to the sudden penetration. She was drenched. Jack's cock was already covered in juices, his and his pet's, and Antoinette's dripping entrance provided no resistance despite her squeezing muscles.

Jack took her hips, and fucked her. No one had touched him since his orgasm within Veronica, meaning it would take him several minutes at least to build up to another orgasm. And he seemed determined to do it while pounding Antoinette hard enough she could see her breasts jiggle against Veronica's face, and her ass shook hard with each impact. A peek again proved it, her plentiful derriere rippling as her deliciously lean, muscular lover fucked her with almost desperate speed.

Antoinette succumbed. She had planned to spend the night being rather dominant with Jack's thrall, but now Jack was fucking her as hard as he had Veronica moments before. Harder. It was terribly difficult to appear regal and powerful, when the body decided to rebel, and explode with pleasure. Antoinette sighed bliss as she lowered herself down to her elbows, squashing her breast over Veronica's face as her lover thrust into her hard enough she felt his testicles slap her tingling clitoris. Juices splashed, and Antoinette let her eyes drift nearly closed as he built her up to climax far faster than she had expected.

She clenched on his length hard, earning a hungry, animal groan from her lover, but he did not slow down. And as Veronica suckled and kissed and massaged Antoinette's breasts, the Prince quivered in the rising bliss. The heat boiled over, and her depths erupted in spasms as Jack fucked her from behind, each stroke driving his cock down against her g-spot before reaching deeper.

It was not long before each slap of his testicles against her swollen nub became a wet slap of soaked flesh. She drenched him yet again, and more besides, and she let out another perfect moan as Jack refused to stop. Pressure, delicious pressure, hitting down against her g-spot again and again, even as her clenching muscles tried to stop him. The pleasure slowed for only a moment before it boiled over yet again, and she trembled as her squeezing depths leaked more fluid onto her lover. It trickled down her thighs, down her stomach, and onto her breasts, no doubt reaching the suckling thrall.

She had not soaked her lover this terribly in some time. Perhaps the prospect of teaching his thrall how to properly tend to her lover's needs appealed to her in ways she had not expected?

Jack finally slowed, and Antoinette sighed with satisfaction as she pushed herself back up onto her hands. She backed up again, and again lowered herself down onto Veronica until their breasts molded together. She knew what it meant when Jack slowed in such a manner.

“Your master cums inside me as we speak, little thrall.” Antoinette grinned down at the deliriously aroused tiny creature, and titled her torso from side to side slightly, pressing their breasts together all the more. “He is a surprisingly talented lover, is he not?”

“He is! He is.”

“Indeed. I taught him well.” Antoinette grinned over her shoulder at her little Ventrue, and found her tingling body singing as she recognized the look of rapture in his eyes. A hard clench of her depths pulled a groan from him, and Jack offered her a slow, deep thrust in return, as he poured his cum into her depths.

Antoinette pressed her body down against Veronica, and gently rubbed their breasts together. They were both well endowed,

Antoinette absurdly so, thus she knew Jack could see both their breasts pushing out to the sides of their chests. Sure enough, Jack moaned, the sound he used when something both erotic and awe-filling caught his eye. He no doubt stared at how Veronica and Antoinette's breasts squashed against each other, molding to each other's shapes as they pressed outward from their chests. And she made sure to grin down at the scared, yet enthralled kine as she did.

Eventually Jack removed himself, and Antoinette rolled off his pet. The two women lay beside each other, Veronica panting with exhaustion and desire, and Antoinette still quivering with orgasm aftershocks.

Antoinette sat up onto her elbows, and licked her lips as she looked to her lover, who knelt between her legs, cock hard and dripping.

“All that, and he has yet to feed.” Laughing, Antoinette gestured to her love. “How would you like to finish this, Jack?”

It took him a moment to realize he was still in charge of this night, and he grinned like a serpent as he realized what Antoinette was willing to do for him.

“Sit back please, and let Veronica lie on you. I want to fuck her from the front when I drink her.”

Oh my, so direct. With a husky purr, Antoinette did as requested, sliding back up onto the mound of pillows until she was half lying, half sitting. And as if Veronica weighed nothing at all, she sat the girl down on her ass between Antoinette's thighs.

“Master? I—” She went silent as Antoinette softly wrapped a hand about her throat, and gently eased her back, until Veronica lay upon Antoinette's stomach. With her other hand, Antoinette lifted each of her own breasts, so Veronica had the room to rest her head against

the Prince's sternum, while Antoinette rested her breasts upon the girl's shoulders.

"Spread your legs," Jack ordered.

Veronica gulped, and did so.

Jack, with an almost sinister grin, settled over top Veronica, and lowered himself down onto her. The most basic of missionary positions, but such a position was more than enough to bring a girl to orgasm when the Kiss was soon to be involved. Especially when said girl's ass was filled with a terribly large plug.

Jack slid his knees under hers, and eased his soaked cock into her dripping slit, the small chain dangling from her clitoris sliding along his length and its veins. Immediately Veronica gasped, and she pressed her hands against Jack's chest in loving adoration as she panted. Well, the thrall had cum many times, and was both exhausted, and still quite sensitive.

Chuckling, Antoinette slid her hands up to the frilly cleavage of the dress and where it sat under Veronica's breasts, before she cupped both of the large mounds. Veronica looked up and back to catch Antoinette's gaze, and she shivered as she looked back to her master, while Antoinette began to softly massage the woman's breasts. The tiny chains that dangled from her nipples were alluring, and Antoinette grinned at Jack as she gently bounced the pet's breasts until the chains bounced as well.

Veronica was still not used to the change in pace vampires often made during sex. To go from rough 'doggy' to gentle missionary was not something she was used to yet. The girlish squeal she made when Jack leaned forward, and with Antoinette's help, wrapped his lips around Veronica's left nipple, was utterly delightful.

They spent some time like this, Antoinette massaging both of the pet's breasts, enjoying the feel of their softness and heavy weight

spilling over her palms, and how her swollen nipples jutted out with her piercings. They were beautiful, and Jack hungered for them. And Antoinette relished the look of delight in his eyes as he suckled upon his pet's nipple, pulling more whimpers from her, while Antoinette massaged the breast into his kiss.

“Veronica, Ashley and Julee will be terribly jealous when they hear of tonight. The next time you join my ghouls and I in bed, do try and make it up to them, would you?”

“Y-Yes Prince, I—nnng!” Her voice died away into a helpless mewl, as Jack lay upon her, buried his chest against her breasts, and sank his fangs into her neck. “Master!”

Jack growled into his pet's neck, and Veronica squeaked. He devoured his pet, face half buried into Antoinette's right breast as he drank from the right side of Veronica's neck. And as he did, he thrust into her again, and relied on the Kiss to let such a poor position easily push the thrall into rapture. Like an animal, his thrusts grew more and more impactful, and Antoinette's hands slid down to find his firm ass to squeeze, as her lover grew rougher with his pet. He continued to drink her and drink her, until Veronica looked up, met Antoinette's eyes, and drifted away into bliss.

Jack did not drain her until she slipped into unconscious. Rather, he drained her until she nearly had, as Antoinette had taught him; prey were far more fun to play with if they were still awake. He grinned at Antoinette, and slid his cock out from Veronica's insides. He had not orgasmed. He spread his legs, put Veronica's between his, and inched forward over her, until Antoinette was forced to spread her legs to make room for his knees, as he got comfortable on Veronica's stomach.

Ah, she knew what he wanted. Chuckling, Antoinette once again set her hands upon the pet's breasts, the outer contours, and pushed



them together on Veronica's chest rather than let them pull aside to her ribs with gravity.

Jack leaned forward, set his hands on Veronica's shoulders, his knuckles snug under Antoinette's breasts, and set his cock in his pet's bosom. Of course, with a stomach now full of blood, the boy would need to be treated to orgasm again. And again.

Veronica, panting and shivering as she struggled to stay awake, managed to peek up at her master every now and then, as he fucked her breasts. But her arms dangled limp outside of Antoinette's legs, and her head rested snug between Antoinette's breasts, gently lulled to one side, with a drop of drool on her lip. But she was smiling.

Jack came. White seed spilled up through the valley of Veronica's breasts before rolling back down, with the girl half sitting up as she leaned back against Antoinette's stomach. Antoinette squeezed Veronica's breasts around his girth, and massaged them bottom to top in a milking motion, earning another gush from Jack, this one splashing against Veronica's neck. And another gush, and another, that soon collected along Antoinette's wrists and hands, only to be massaged into the woman's skin.

But he was not done. He reset his length between his pet's breasts, and they resumed, now using Veronica's cum-soaked flesh to satisfy him. Antoinette could not fault the boy for indulging his Blush, now that his stomach was full, driving his desires, his arousal. And most importantly, for truly indulging the more masculine side of his lust. So she grinned at her lover over Veronica's head, and continued to milk his length with his pet's body, until the boy came yet again. It did not take long. Antoinette was an expert, after all.

His fifth orgasm soon ended, though he knew better than to simply walk away. He stayed snug to Veronica's body, cock still buried between her breasts, and let the Prince milk him of every last

drop. And when thick gushes of white ceased to flow onto his pet's sternum, she continued anyway, knowing full well each time she squished his pet's breasts against his length until it mostly disappeared between them, the boy loved it. They had done this with her own breasts, and Elaine's breasts, hundreds of times, and doing it with his pet's breasts was a joy. The way Jack shivered as his sensitive length basked in the warm, wet bed of Veronica's bust, all at Antoinette's whim, was glorious. His eyes half closed as he stared down at the bed of soft flesh, and how Antoinette's massaging fingers spread his cum over and around, until it spilled over her knuckles.

Antoinette was herself partly to blame for a night of such reckless indulgence. She could not help but drink in the sight as well, gazing down at her love's cock and how it shifted back and forth as Antoinette bathed it in his pet's bust. And, to her utter delight, Jack came yet again. A dangerous game, allowing the Blush to let him ride the edge of sensitivity so he could cum once more, and so quickly, but after the troubles that had befallen her lover, he deserved it. She squeezed Veronica's breasts snug around his cock, until his sixth orgasm of the night buried her in such waves that it overflowed completely, and soon Antoinette found her own breasts soaked in cum as it flowed up, over, and around Veronica's neck, and onto where Antoinette's breasts rested on the thrall's shoulders.

Antoinette let go of Veronica, and the spell was broken. Jack sat up straighter, and slid back a foot as he stared down at his panting, whimpering, cum-soaked prize.

~/♥♥♥~/

“Holy shit. I ... kinda really gave into it there, didn't I?”

“I remember when you found three orgasms to be an absurd idea, and it took forty minutes of sex to bring you to that limit.” She gestured down at his pet, and how her bust, and neck, and

shoulders, and stomach, were entirely coated in white. “You have cum six times tonight, and three of them in ten minutes. I have seen Jackson Pollocks with less mess.”

“Fuck. I should probably tone it down a bit.”

“Perhaps. Again, as long as you do not find yourself enjoying fellatio while simultaneously discussing important business matters with Kindred underlings, I do not think you have crossed a line.”

“Business before pleasure?”

“Or vice versa, but never together.”

He grinned, nodded, and leaned in again. Not to fuck Veronica anymore, but to kiss Antoinette.

“Thanks. I needed this.”

“You are most welcome, my love.”

---

~~Natasha~~

They all left after the Prince and Jack did. Everyone getting half naked, and five of them getting quite drunk, was always going to be a concoction that led to sex.

Daniel and Athalia left first, though they didn't go down the stairs. Athalia took Daniel's hand, and took him further back, into one of the back corners of Bloodlust's second floor, where it was darker, with a more isolated booth.

Jessy and Eric left a moment later. Knowing the look in Jessy's eye, she wanted to get back to her place, or Eric's, and spend the rest of the night with a fully transformed werewolf inside her. Would a drunk Uratha still be drunk when transformed? Probably not, considering how quickly they recovered in that form.

Damien and Fiona left. Damien had to carry her out, and she giggled the whole time. Giggled, and tried to fondle and kiss Damien as he helped her. It was comical. Fiona was such a happy person, even when mourning.

And that left Natasha alone with Arturo and Matthew. To her surprise, Arturo stopped fondling her, and set his hands on her bare stomach instead, hugging her.

“N-Not gonna try and convince me to have sex here?” she asked, looking up over her shoulder at the man.

“Nah. I can hear Athalia and Daniel starting to, though. Figured you wouldn’t want to do that with your sire nearby.”

“And,” Matt said, “we know you’re more comfortable with walls, and a camera with good lighting.”

She frowned — playfully — at Matt before looking back to Art. “They are? Y-You can hear them?”

“Barely. Music is pretty damn loud, but yeap, I can hear her moaning.”

Daniel, and Athalia, having sex, in a public place. Natasha blinked at Art and Matt a few more times, before she picked back up the other half of her dress, and slipped it back on. It really was nothing more than a necklace with a dangling bit of loose fabric in the front that barely managed to cover her breasts. She really liked it.

She grinned at her boyfriends, held a finger up to her lips, and pointed down at the seat. Stay, while she did a little investigating. They both blinked at her and each other, before they smiled and nodded.

She slipped out of the booth, and poured vitae into her Cloak. A lot of it. She’d have to drain both her boys tonight, cause doing this

was going to leave her ravenous, but she wanted a peek, and to Cloak herself from her sire was going to be difficult. Maybe impossible. But what was the worst that could happen? Her sire learned she was a pervert? She made porn! For fun! Good porn, but still porn. That ship had sailed.

Her sire was distracted though, supposedly, and with the darkness and the pulsing music covering everything, it was perfect for sneaking.

She didn't have to go far. One booth over, and she found a place to peek around the empty booth's corner, and into one of the further back booths.

There they were. Tash's sire really was a handsome man, shortish brown hair and beige skin, a bit tall and lanky, but with half his clothes off, all his muscle definition was blatant. In a different world, maybe Natasha and Daniel could have been an item. They had similarities. And horny as she was right now, it was easier to imagine her in his arms.

But Athalia fit so much better than Tash did. The woman sat on his lap, facing the table, Daniel behind her, and she ground her hips around and around at an almost desperate pace. Her dark breasts jiggled against her, bouncing along with the chest chain that circled them.

The hottest part, was how Daniel had one hand around her throat, squeezing, while the other disappeared under the table. Tash lowered her head to peek underneath, and shivered as she saw her sire's hand on Athalia's sex. Hard to see anything from where she was, but it was obvious the man was stroking her clitoris while Athalia bounced on him.

And it was nice. Super hot and sexy, yes, to see Athalia already close to orgasm; the whole night must have been turning her on

more than she wanted them to realize. But it was also nice to see Athalia happy.

It got a thousand times hotter when Daniel sank his fangs into her neck.

Natasha knew, intimately, the feeling of Uratha blood rushing through the body. Thick, warm, delicious, and unbelieving energizing. Like cocaine mixed with an orgasm, maybe. But from what she knew about Begotten blood, it was different. It was like getting the aggression meter dialed up to eleven, and drunk, while also being outrageously horny.

For the first time, Tash got to see what Daniel looked when some genuine, real emotion was on his face. Maybe her sire could do what Tash could, and see better than most vampires in the dark. Hopefully he couldn't see Tash, still Cloaked, jaw dropped, staring, as her sire's eyes lit up with hunger, and desire.

Athalia's eyes half closed, lost to the Kiss, and orgasm. But Daniel was now riding on a wave of energy, and apparently whatever sort of dark, aggressive urges Begotten blood gave. He turned Athalia around, ensuring the now limp and exhausted woman rested her chest against his, and her head slipped into the nook of his neck and shoulder. He took her hands, both of them, and held them behind her against the small of her back. And with both his hands behind her, he pressed her toward him.

It was a strange mix of gentle, and dominant. Athalia was trapped in post-Kiss bliss, and she squirmed on Daniel, almost like she was trying to get away. She couldn't, not exhausted like she was, and not with Daniel keeping her pinned against him. And Daniel was more than strong enough to keep her hands pinned against the small of her back, while also pushing against it to keep grinding her pelvis into him. She wasn't trying to get away of course, but she made

those movements anyway, as if she liked how it felt when Daniel stopped her. She probably did.

Considering Daniel just fed on her, Athalia was going to spend at least the next thirty minutes, if not longer, riding the sheriff.

Tash almost sighed happily as Athalia nuzzled into Daniel's chest, and hid her face in his neck. Too cute.

Curiosity satisfied, Tash left. From what she saw, she had enough information to fill in some blanks about what kind of person Athalia was. Cuddling up into her man, melting against him, hiding her face cause she was probably super embarrassed, and loving it, it was all so beautiful. And sexy.

If Azamel hadn't just died, the sex probably would have been a fair bit rougher, too. But, crazed as Daniel probably was, with a belly full of Begotten blood pulsing into his body, he seemed to have the presence of mind to fuck her in a way a little more reserved. Plus, it was probably Athalia's first time having sex in public.

She was definitely enjoying it, though.

Tash smiled, and sneaked away. It was so romantic! Or at least, romantic in a Dolareido way. Some nice, gentle but dominant sex in the booth of a night club? All cuddled up and hugging and holding each other? That was pretty romantic for Slut City.

Tash came back to her booth, but found the boys both peeking out into a nearby booth. Not Daniel's, they couldn't see it from here. They were peeking over into the booth Elaine had disappeared into.

Tash grinned at the boys, and sneaked closer to the other booth. Sure enough, there was Elaine, one of the most promiscuous — and powerful — vampires Tash knew of. The blonde elder sat on Derick's lap, while Brianna the werewolf sat on Santos's lap. Brianna looked absolutely exhausted, and was struggling to keep from falling over.

Elaine was stopping her. She was leaning over onto Brianna, squashing her breasts against the slightly shorter, dark skinned werewolf, and kissing her neck and hugging her. Not a Daniel and Athalia hug. An orgy hug, meant to maximize skin-on-skin rubbing.

Santos and Derick were obviously high on werewolf blood, and probably a little scared about the fact a five-hundred-year-old vampire had just come to turn to their threesome into a foursome. Elaine probably bullied her way into their group, at least a little, but considering the look on their faces, and Brianna's, they were happy to give in.

Elaine, that woman, marching around and doing whatever she wanted. That confidence was enviable, but Natasha didn't trust her. Not because she was the biggest slut Tash had ever seen; no vampire cared about promiscuity, especially in Dolareido. She didn't trust her, because she was sure Elaine was up to something. Jack knew it, and Antoinette knew it, but neither of them seemed to want to do anything about it.

It was hard to ask them about it, especially Antoinette. Elaine was a dragon, in a way Tash might never be, deep into the biggest secrets the order had, just like Antoinette. And they'd been friends for centuries. How could Tash tell her boss that she wasn't being suspicious enough of Elaine? It wasn't like Elaine didn't ever deceive her, considering Antoinette didn't know Elaine was Viktor's sire, and those vampires had all known each other before coming to the USA.

Either Antoinette knew something Tash didn't, or Elaine was tricking her again.



## Chapter 157

~~Beatrice~~

The war was over. Jacob laughed when he told her that. Told her it was temporary, because the Carthians and the Invictus and ‘Churchies’ always eventually got in each other’s face and business. Tale as old as time, he said. But either way, for the moment, there was a truce, and that meant people could breathe easy; dumb metaphor considering vampires.

Triss and Jen were at the cave when Sam showed up, and she smiled and waved at them before she slipped into Jacob’s alcove. They hadn’t started working on crafting a body for her daughter yet, but they had scouted for potential people to kill. They’d brought Sam on those trips, too. Sam hadn’t liked that, but at the same time, exposing some of the horrible shit kine got up to settled her guilt, a little. Some kine really had it coming.

Ugh, Julias would not agree with that. He’d have counter arguments and shit, and most frustratingly, they’d be good ones.

Killing humans was a shitty thing to do, and Triss didn’t exactly like that it came easier to her than other vampires. Probably part of the reason Jacob took her under his wing. Probably part of the reason she got on the whole witch wavelength so easily. It wouldn’t be easy for Samantha, but the woman insisted on being part of the process. Best Triss could do was make it as easy as possible for Sam, and hopefully avoid scarring the woman for the next hundred years.

“I worry about her,” Triss said. Jen and her sat up in Jen’s alcove, a half dozen feet above the ground floor of the cave.

“So do I.”

“Elen’s still kicking. Last Jacob checked, he thinks she’ll be good for longer than we thought. More than long enough to get her daughter a body.”

“And when Elen’s mind goes?”

Triss shrugged. “She’ll still be alive? Jacob thinks whatever magics she’s powering will keep. No brain, but a pulsing, beating pile of flesh. And if we lose her somehow, we have her book, and her knife. We’re witches, right? Maybe we can put something together, a ritual or talisman, to keep her shit running.” Last thing she wanted was her Julias body to die because Elen’s magic stopped.

“New goal?”

“Eh, not yet. Strike when the iron’s hot, right? Or some other bullshit analogy. Let’s get Mary a body, and then we can worry about preserving Julias. Not like we’ll need to worry about Mary’s.”

“Assuming we can put Mary in the new body.”

“Black Blood says there’s something in the book to help with that. Mary can’t just hop into the body; that’d be possession and temporary, according to him. To actually put the soul into the body and bind it is different.”

Jen sighed and shook her head. “Binding souls to empty bodies. You know, four years ago, the biggest thing I worried about was staying out of Tony’s way, and which ghouls I wanted.”

Laughing, Triss slipped an arm over Jen’s shoulder. The two of them were sitting, leaned up against the cave wall with some blankets behind them, reading stuff. Triss was a moron, and didn’t do much reading in the past. That fucking changed when Jacob put a bunch of ancient tomes in her lap and told her to read them so she didn’t get herself killed doing some ancient ritual wrong. Lots of stories about people dying in weird, mysterious circumstances.

Some of them were straight up horror stories, with people's hearts exploding inside their chest, or eyes melting inside their skull.

The Circle had their own books, but were pretty damn secretive about them, Dracul-level secret. And according to Jacob, they didn't like writing shit down in general. Word of mouth, stories told and not written, that was the way of the Circle of the Crone.

She still hadn't told Jacob the details about the vision, about when the Crone and the motherfucking moon had had a chat with her. Maybe she would some day, but not now, not yet. It wasn't like she didn't trust him, but she didn't trust him, not completely anyway. Same for Black Blood.

"I'm hungry," Triss said.

"My boys aren't here. Want to go hunting?"

"Sure. I wanna go talk to Jack, too."

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"Uh ... hi," Triss said, and she damn well knew she had one eyebrow raised right up to her hair. "Thought you had someone to answer the door for you."

Jack squirmed, wearing the sort of rich, royal red robe a dude would wear, a hundred years ago, after getting laid. All that was missing was a pipe.

"Uh, Veronica's indisposed."

"That she is," the Prince said from the top of the stairs.

Triss and Jen both looked up, and gulped. The white-haired bitch was so, so, so fucking hot. Wearing only a purple silk robe, and barely wearing it at that considering how loose she'd tied it, she looked like some sort of goddess of sex and power. Which had

probably been her intent, when she did whatever she did, to give herself the crazy features, and the crazy huge tits.

“I was gonna ask if you wanted to go hunting,” Triss said. “Been a while since we’ve done that.”

“Oh. Um...”

“The lord of the manor has recently fed,” Antoinette said, grinning.

“I can see that,” Jen said, and she winked at Jack. “Has your harem grown?”

“It’s not a harem!”

“Of course not,” Jen said in a motherly, dismissing tone, which of course had Jack frowning and fuming.

Triss snorted on a chuckle. “Dude, you’re a Ventrue. Embrace it.”

“Uh huh. Um, Antoinette, did you—”

“I would prefer to spend the night together, you and I, my love.”

Jack shrugged and nodded toward Triss. “You heard the lady.”

“But,” the Prince continued, “I would like to speak to Beatrice privately. If you do not mind, my love.”

She did? Well, sure, probably to talk about Jacob, Samantha, and the nasty shit Triss was up to that Antoinette had to know something about.

“Yeah. Let us in.” Triss folded her arms across her chest and gave the little punk her best angry face.

He rolled his eyes as he motioned for them to come in. They did.

“You can’t run a mansion without servants,” Jen said. “And you are a vampire, and a Ventrue. You might as well make those servants a harem.”

“He will,” the Prince said as she walked down the stairs. And of course she made damn sure to sway those big hips under her tiny waist as she did. Just like Othello, the girl couldn’t help but flaunt her body with every motion. Jen did that, but it was something she actively did. She had to think about it and make the conscious effort to show off her body as she walked around. Daeva though, they did it as easily as kine breathed, and just as subconsciously. They couldn’t not do it.

And Triss was just as susceptible to looking at them as anyone else. Antoinette was hot, freaky hot, too hot in a weird kinda way. Super tall, white hair, red eyes, and utterly ludicrous tits? Yeah, it was actually hard to not look at her, and get pretty damn intimidated. Sure, dudes liked Jessica Rabbit, but there was a limit. Well, whatever, Jack liked it apparently. And if people could look past Triss’s crocodile teeth, or even find them oddly appealing, then there was damn sure a lot of people who were into girls as tall as giants with the white hair, red eyes, and tits each bigger than their head.

And Big Tits wanted to talk to her.

“Come Beatrice,” the Prince said once she got down to them. Hell, even barefoot she walked like she was on a fashion runway. “Let us leave the two Ventrue to discuss Ventrue interests.”

“Harems,” Jennifer nodded, and she grinned at Jack as she stepped in beside him. Jack inched away, but she inched after him.

Jen had balls to tease Jack with the Prince right there. But knowing Jen, it’d be her dream come true to be the subject of some angry sex from Antoinette.

Of course the Prince just laughed, and motioned for Triss to follow her down the halls of the mansion. She did, and she took a moment every so often to admire how damn pretty it all was. Yeah sure, Viktor's taste had been hilarious cliché for Dolareido, but all the royal reds, the golds and woods, it made every wall, every bench, every fucking window god damn gorgeous. And when the Prince took Triss into a private room, she got hit with the same sense of wonder.

And then memory. And then sadness. She'd been in this room before, with Julias.

“I—oh. I am sorry, dear Beatrice.”

“Sorry?”

“Do not attempt to deceive me, Beatrice. I can see the pain in your eyes. For a single moment, I had forgotten that you frequented this mansion to be with your love.”

Triss looked away. Wearing her emotions on her face in front of a Daeva was dumb, but it wasn't like she had a good poker face to begin with. Which made the whole conversation pretty damn dangerous for Triss. She couldn't lie, not well, especially not to the Prince.

“Lot of painful memories here, yeah.”

“But you came of your own volition?”

“Didn't plan to hang out. Like I said, just wanted to take Jack out hunting.”

The Prince smiled down at her as she sat in a luxurious chair, red and gold. “I am happy to know you are still friends with the boy.”

“It was a bit rough at first.” Triss sat down on the couch across from the seat, and did her best to ignore the memory of the time she’d fucked and cuddled Julias on it. “Even blamed him, for a little while. But my head calmed down eventually.” She pointed at her temple for a second. “And moved past it.”

“It will be a cold day in Hell, young Nosferatu, when someone can simply move past losing someone they loved with such fervor.”

Triss looked away again. God damn it, she didn’t come here for this.

“It’s a work in progress.”

“Jennifer has helped you with that, I assume.”

“She has. But I didn’t come here to talk about Julias, or my shit, Prince.”

“Indeed, but I am asking nonetheless.” She said it in her Prince voice, her ‘do what I fucking tell you to do’ voice, solid and flat, without a hint of anger or anything.

Triss frowned at her. “Yeah, Jen and me are pretty damn close.”

“And close with Samantha.”

“I—that what this is about? Your childe? You asking me if I’m ok, cause I hang out with Samantha?”

“Why can it not be both? Oui, I test the waters, to learn what waters my childe swims. But I am concerned for you as well, Beatrice. The waters you swim are dark and murky, and I can only guess what lies beneath.”

“You...” She almost asked if Antoinette meant about Elen, and what Triss, Jen, and Samantha were up to. Sure, Triss was a shit

poker player, but she wasn't stupid enough to just reveal her hand flat out. "You know a lot about what I'm up to."

"Oui."

"But you let me keep pursuing it."

"Oui. There is no way to be taught the lessons you are going to learn, young Nosferatu. Those are lessons that can only be learned through trial and fire."

"And Sam? You're okay with her learning lessons the hard way?"

Antoinette sighed as she leaned back in the chair, and folded a leg over the other. "I do not know, Beatrice. But I am no coddling mother, content to wrap my childe in protection forever, preventing her from learning how to handle her second life. There are pains we Kindred face that are wholly unique, and you and her face a perfect example."

She knew. This damn bitch knew Sam stole Elen's book and knife. She knew Sam was going to try and resurrect her daughter. God damn it.

"I'm doing my best to keep Sam out of trouble."

"I appreciate that."

"But she knows what she wants."

"Does she? Or is she a single mother desperately grabbing onto things that could bring a semblance of her first life back?"

"She..." Triss smiled as she met the Prince's eyes. "She's Jack's mom."

"Ah oui. You mean deceptively intelligent, and surprisingly wise."



“Ha, yeah you could say it like that. I mean sure, she’s a broken woman in a way, and every night she struggles to claw herself out of a pit of misery. And that’s a deep fucking pit, Prince, deeper than anything I’ve ever dealt with.” Triss wasn’t so full of herself to think losing Julias held a candle to all the horrible shit that fell in Sam’s lap. “But she’s climbing.”

Antoinette returned the smile. “With Jacob’s help, I assume?”

“Ugh, it’s so sweet, you have no idea. It’s like reading some divorced mom’s shitty erotica, about a woman discovering how much she likes BDSM or something. Except the dude isn’t some sexy, scary obsessive stalker billionaire in this story. He’s Jacob.”

“You do not find your boss terrifying?”

“I mean, kinda? It’s not really the same, but I guess that’s a part of what turns Sam on about him, yeah. But other than that, he’s a fucking goofball.”

“He makes her laugh.”

“Yeap. And while I bet Sam would love to read that shitty erotica about the obsessive stalker billionaire who wants to dominate every aspect of his obsession’s life, I think Jacob’s been a lot healthier for her.”

“And her, him?”

“I...”

“I did not forget the request I made of you, so long ago, young Nosferatu. Jacob walks a dark path, and I am hoping you can steer him out of it.”

Triss shook her head. “You say that, but I’m not really ... I don’t know, I’m not in a position to help him.”

“Oh?”

“Maybe Sam is, but Jacob doesn’t involve either of us into whatever shit he’s up to. Maybe he will, some day, but so far he’s ... he’s content to let me get my hands dirty with my own shit, but not his.” Way to dance around the topic. How long could she talk about the crazy shit she was up to, without ever saying ‘resurrection’?

“I am sure Jacob watches you closely, Beatrice. I did not know the witches he had before you well, the witches from many decades ago, but there is a reason for that: they were not noteworthy. You are.”

“Thanks ... I guess.”

“It was a genuine compliment. Do you think I would let my child become entangled in the affairs of witches, if I did not feel at least one of them was worthy of consideration?”

Triss laughed. “Well, worthy of consideration I may be”—from a couple of gods too, apparently—“but I don’t know if I can help Jacob. I ... I mean ... maybe? We talk, and sometimes I get a small glimpse of the man in there, behind the clowning around and the jokes.”

“My old friend is difficult to dig out of his own mask.”

“Good a way of putting it as any. And I think Sam’s getting closer to him than me.”

“Perhaps romantically. But you are his colleague, and his friend.”

“Is Jacob even capable of having a real friend anymore?”

“I do not know, young Nosferatu. I do not know. But you can try.” Antoinette’s smile returned, and got a little evil as she leaned forward. Triss did her best to not notice how her huge tits almost hung out of the robe. “Sam refuses to describe her intimate time

with the witches in the detail I wish, but she has hinted, more than once, that you have touched her.”

“Oh god.”

“Have you?”

Triss squirmed and looked anywhere but at Antoinette. “I mean, a little? It’s hard not to, you know? Jacob keeps putting her in more and more, uh, exposing situations, and she’s just...” Fuck it. “She’s cumming her brains out, and you can just tell she loves it when everyone’s watching her. So Jacob’s in her, Othello’s in her, Madison’s on her, so I guess, I mean ... yeah, I’ve touched her? A tiny bit?”

The look of joy in Antoinette’s eyes was actually kinda scary, like, a bit of that psycho joy. Jacob would probably have those eyes when doing his rituals and stuff, if he had eyes.

“Samantha, the center of attention, in an orgy.”

“I mean, is orgy the right word?” Triss squirmed a little more.

“Ha, perhaps not. Regardless, I am happy to know my childe can embrace such indulgences. As you said, she has suffered greatly. I am glad my Daeva blood has helped her find some joy in her second life.”

“Is it your blood, though? Jack’s, uh, got similar sexual tastes.”

“Similar, yes, though not the same.” The Prince leaned back and teased her lip with a finger as she let her eyes wander. “I do wish I could see it. I would enjoy seeing my childe in the middle of such pleasures, with Jacob and Othello sheathed inside her. To see her blush and squirm in embarrassment as she orgasms? Truly beautiful.”

“You really do got a thing for sex, don’t you? Like, Dolareido’s got this whole Slut City thing going on, and that is entirely your fault, isn’t it?”

The Prince grinned at her. “Oui, it is.”

“Well, your childe’s fully embracing it now.”

“I would oh so love to see it. Alas, she is Jack’s mother. That is a sexual boundary I think would be best not crossed.”

“Probably not.”

Antoinette laughed. It was a strange sound, cause even though the Prince was the sorta vampire to control every single sound they made, the laugh sounded genuine too. Half fake, half real. How did anyone last five minutes talking to this woman?

“Back to my earlier question. How do you feel about my childe and Jacob as a couple? Do they help each other?”

“I think so. I mean, I’ll be straight with you, I thought Jacob got into Sam’s pants for the advantage, you know?”

“Many assumed such.”

“But they hang out. They talk about stuff. They fuck a lot, sure, and now that Jacob’s got her comfortable with the group, she’s fucking Othello and Madison a lot too. And Jen and me get a little involved in that sometimes. But the two of them still fuck each other without the rest of us, a lot, and it gets super cheesy romantic, you know? Hugging, cuddling, kissing.” All the shit Triss missed. “Sam seems happy, and Jacob seems ... less psychotic. Dude always smiled, but now his smiles look more normal, you know?”

“That I do, Beatrice. Do you believe they love each other?”

“Jesus, that’s a heavy question. And personal.”

“That it is. We speak of things deeply personal about those we care about, but we are not gossiping. We are concerned with our friends, and would like to see them both happy.”

Triss eyed the Prince. A little. Couldn’t exactly give her the stink eye, considering she was the fucking Prince.

“I think Jacob’s got a lot of baggage in the way of genuine love. But if there’s anyone who can dig through that shit, it’s Jack’s mom.”

It was the right call, calling Sam Jack’s mom there, and Antoinette smiled as she nodded, and leaned back, relaxing in her chair.

“Perhaps you are right.”

“And uh, why are you so concerned with Jacob? You call him old friend, but I haven’t really seen anything to show that. You two come off as rivals, more than friends.”

“Can we not be both?”

“I guess if anyone can be both, it’s elders. Not like I know what’s going on in your heads.”

“Precisely.” Say one thing for the white-haired queen, she had confidence. And an ego. “Jacob and I have been at odds for centuries, young Nosferatu, as witches and dragons can often be; whenever they have the fortune of meeting each other, which is rare. Jacob and I disagree on almost every single aspect of how to run a city.”

Triss laughed. “Something tells me Jacob doesn’t want to run the city. So yeah, I guess he disagrees with your ideas, but isn’t

interested in fighting you for the throne?”

“To an extent. But that is not why Jacob and I are friends, Beatrice. We are friends, because we share many of the same passions. We share much of the same vision, strange as that may sound. We share in many ideals and ideas, and we respect each other’s pursuit of them.”

“Share a vision?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“You just said you disagree on almost everything.”

“Almost. Where there is overlap is quite important. But if you wish for details, it would be better to ask him.”

The Prince was nudging Triss in Jacob’s direction again. Concerned for her friend? Maybe. Concerned for her childe? Most definitely.

“Alright, I’ll keep an eye on Jacob and Sam. I mean, I am keeping a close eye on Sam already, but Jacob, I kinda thought he was ... getting better, you know?”

“I believe he is, Beatrice. But my old friend wears many masks. Be careful with him. And be careful with this dark road you walk. It has destroyed many a soul before.”

Yeah, she figured that.

“Alright, we done?” Triss asked. Antoinette eyed her. Probably didn’t like Triss’s tone. But after a few moments, she nodded. “K, I’m gonna get something to eat, then head back. Probably gonna find Sam in the middle of an orgy.”

“I hope so.”

“Ha. You think all the sex is doing her good?”

“I think she will calm as she grows more comfortable and confident with herself, and her second life. But for the moment, I believe embracing the joys of being Kindred will help her recover from her traumas, oui. What she needs is time, time to recover from her wounds, deep and plentiful they may be.” The Prince tapped her chin. “She is lucky to have a lover as skilled as Jacob, non?”

Triss stood up. “You could say that. I bet Samantha didn’t realize how slutty she could be, when she got involved with witches.”

Antoinette smiled, a devil’s smile. “I did.”

Figured. Fucking elders.

“Oh, can you tell Jack thanks for killing Joe? What an asshole.”

Antoinette’s smile faded, and she sighed as she nodded. “I will mention it, but Beatrice, do not be so callous.”

“Callous? Over Joe? Everyone hated that fucker.”

“Indeed. And yet, your old companions were willing to listen to him, and attack Jack directly.”

Triss shook her head. “They weren’t my companions. I didn’t fit in with the Carthians very much, and Bella and the gang didn’t really cross any bridge for me.” Which wasn’t surprising in hindsight, considering Triss covered that bridge in land mines and spikes. “But I know they weren’t idiots. No idea why they helped Joe.”

“They helped Joe, young Nosferatu, because they saw something in his words. To attack Viktor’s grandchilde? You know not the horrors Viktor performed upon simple, young Joe.”

“I—”

“Viktor Honors indulged in rather ... torturous methods of interrogation, as his mind turned against him in his age,” the Prince said. Which sent all sorts of shivers up Triss’s spine, because Jacob was a shit load older than Viktor was. “And while Joe, or anyone else could never prove it, he insisted Viktor had tortured him once.”

“Yeesh. Like—”

“He cannot remember the details, but I know the man suffered nightmares of staggering pain and trauma ever since. Things Viktor carved into the man’s subconscious. Torture.”

“Viktor ... did something to his head? Wiped the memory of being tortured?” Not like it was hard. Even Triss had managed to hit the fucker with a Nightmare a few years ago. If she could affect his mind, Viktor could have the dude eating his own hand.

“Indeed. The man has been nothing but rage ever since. Had. And your prior superior Garry Tones did his best to quell the boy’s rage, and turn it into a valuable resource.”

“Sounds like a shitty thing to do.”

“Perhaps, but the point still stands. You thought Joe was nothing more than a mindless brute. Did it ever occur to you that he was suffering, young Kindred? Did it ever occur to you that Garry did his best to steer the man’s rage away from self destruction? Did it ever occur to you that Joe’s death is a tragedy, and not a blessing?”

“No ... no, I suppose it didn’t.”

“Then let that be a lesson to you, Beatrice. People are complicated. Nothing and no one is who they seem on the surface, even souls as honest as Jack or Samantha.”

Triss winced as she reached for the door. “Point taken.”



“And please, do not tell Jack of Joe.”

“Heh, yeah. Kid would tear himself up over it, wouldn't he?”

“No doubt.”

Triss sighed, nodded a few times, opened the door, and smiled back at the Prince.

“Ok, enough with the heavy shit. Hoping to find Sam enjoying herself.”

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She guessed right.

“Triss! Jen! You're uh ... you're back early.” Sam squirmed as she forced herself to meet Triss's eyes.

Sam was a damn beautiful woman of average height, maybe a little less, thin and fit but still with some of that milf curvature to her. Big green eyes like Jack, softer though, and wavy brown hair to her ears in a modern woman kinda way. And at the moment, she wore nothing more than the white thong she'd worn the night the whole Circle — minus Aaron — had gotten pretty damn familiar with her.

She sat on Jacob's abs, facing his upright dick, her hands around it. And a quick glance at her thong showed how soaked it was; Jacob had probably been teasing and fingering her before. Or maybe, Madison had. Whatever the case, Triss and Jen had apparently missed the foreplay of this foursome.

Beside them, Othello and Madison did what they always did, without exception: anal sex. Only ghoulish regeneration kept that poor woman's ass in healthy condition. Othello was on his back beside Jacob, almost shoulder to shoulder with the man, hands on his girl's

hips and holding on as Madison slowed danced and gyrated on him. Like Sam, she was facing away from her master, toward the entrance of the alcove. Unlike Sam, she was very much penetrated, and she waved at Triss and Jen like they were old friends, and they had simply caught her riding her new horse.

Sam was definitely the shyer of the two naked women, but they were both the happy sort, smiling and brimming with joy, even when embarrassed. It made Triss smile.

“Jacob, dude.” Triss walked over to them, making Sam blush even more and stop working her hands on her dude’s cock. “Aren’t you the leader of a cult of witches? I’m getting the impression you’d prefer this was just a hook up group for orgies.”

Jacob laughed, shrugged, and hooked his hands behind his head where it rested, half raised on the curving wall of the alcove and its blankets.

“I would think any witch joining a coven would expect orgies.”

Othello raised a hand. “I joined expecting orgies.”

Madison grinned back at the Daeva. “You get orgies, remember? We fucked a few kine two nights ago!”

The man shrugged. “More orgies.”

Giggling, Madison reached over and pat Sam on the leg. “Men.”

Triss snorted on a laugh. Men? Yeah sure Othello was a total horndog who couldn’t go a single second without thinking about sex, but Madison, Jen, and evidently Sam, were just as bad, if not worse.

Case in point, Jacob sat up, and whispered something into Sam’s ear. And Sam lit up like a neglected Christmas tree in July. Nodding,

she managed a quick sheepish peek at Triss and Jen, reached down, and pulled aside her white thong. That was one soaked pussy. With her other hand still wrapped around Jacob's dick, Jacob had no trouble lifting her up, and gently lowering her down on his cock, turning her into a mewling, squirming girl each and every inch.

The damn milf loved being watched like this. And Triss couldn't help but do exactly that. She loved being watched, too.

Before Triss noticed Jen take off a single sock, a naked Ventrue hopped down onto the blankets, half sitting half lying against the wall a couple feet from Jacob. Course her eyes weren't on Jacob, they were on Sam. If it were anyone else but Jen, Triss would feel jealous her girlfriend was looking at someone else, but Jen was Jen, hilariously honest about her promiscuity, but oddly loyal to her relationship with Triss.

And the boys didn't even glance her way, other than to acknowledge that she'd come joined them. Jen was stupid fucking hot, hotter than all of them, but Jacob kept his bandage-covered eye sockets aimed at his lover's ass, and Othello did the same with Madison; though both Othello and Madison spent a fair amount of time looking at Sam, too.

Triss couldn't blame them. Everyone else in the room was pretty comfortable with sex, but no matter what Jacob did to Sam, she always had that guilty face on when she got fucked. And it was so damn fucking hot, everyone watched her. Which only made Sam look more guilty, and get more turned on, which had everyone staring even harder. A pretty vicious, sexy cycle.

Jen turned enough to look up at Triss, and held out her hands to her, big smile on her face. Shameless.

"Ugh, fine. Gimme a sec." Triss walked over to her own alcove, fetched her box of goodies, kicked off her clothes, and walked back to the sex room. Rolling her eyes, Triss got down on the blankets

behind Jen, turned into her so Triss was the big spoon, and placed a vibrator against Jen's thighs as she set the vibration to low.

Instant purrs from Jen. Not every night required a deep tonguing. Sometimes it was nice to lie down and let toys do the work. And after a few minutes of teasing Jen's thighs with the vibration, she gently set the small blue toy against her clitoris, and teased it in caressing circles. Jen melted into her, and the two prepared for a show.

Jacob tightened his grip on Sam's hips, and got to work. He pushed his hips up into her hard, hard enough that she bounced on him, literally, and the poor girl immediately erupted into squeaks as her ass rippled with the impact, and her modest breasts bounced against her chest.

“Jacob! W-Wait! Slow ... down...”

Jen and Triss had missed it, but whatever they'd done to Sam before the two had come back from their hunt, had already put the milf on edge. Jacob pounding into her hard enough his balls slapped her clit, and her breasts jiggled up and down on her chest, was more than enough to push her over. She leaned forward, grabbed Jacob's legs, and held on for dear life as she came on his dick.

Poor Sam. Yeah Jacob, Othello, and Madison had probably been teasing her before Jen and Triss showed up, but for her to cum that quick? Sam knew she was a firecracker, and she knew they were all staring at her in erotic awe as she climaxed damn fast. Whatever embarrassment she'd been feeling before tripled.

And Jacob being Jacob, he loved torturing his poor girlfriend, so he pounded into her for a while, making sure he pushed her up to that point where her body kept cumming and didn't know how to stop. Sam was one of those girls he could push to orgasm, and keep her there, pounding into her until she was whimpering and begging.

Or Jacob turned her into that kinda girl? Nah. Like mother like son, Sam fucking loved sex. Like childe like sire, too.

Jen shivered against Triss as she came closer to climax, but she had a ways to go yet, and Triss was gonna take some time building her up. They were basically watching porn, which meant sit back, snuggle, relax, and build up.

Jacob slowed down, and Samantha sucked in a useless breath as she eventually managed to sit up straight again. Her thighs were still trembling though.

“Is everyone just gonna ... watch me?” Sam asked, looking to Othello before looking over her shoulder to Triss and Jen again. Everyone nodded. “Whyyyy?”

“Hottest girl here,” Jacob said, nodding, like it were an obvious fact.

Sam blushed hard, and half covered her breasts with the compliment, as if she'd just realized everyone in the room found her too damn gorgeous to not gawk at. Yeah, it really was damn fucking hot watching the milf get off on a hair trigger.

“Yeah! The hottest.” Madison slipped off Othello and his dick, came around between Jacob's legs, and smiled at their newest friend. Apparently Othello had whispered some orders to her, cause she came at Sam with a mission. Jacob made Madison nervous, but that didn't stop her from leaning down, and now that Jacob wasn't pounding away anymore, the ghoul was in the clear to bury Sam's clit in kisses.

“Ah! H-Hey, that's sensitive!” She clutched Madison's head, but didn't push her away. Wriggling like a worm on a hook, she held on as Madison planted playful, teasing kisses on Sam's undoubtedly over-sensitive clit.

Othello came around, got behind his ghoul, and sank his huge cock into her ass once again. Madison groaned, but didn't stop, continuing to plant more of those light kisses on Madison's clit, and earning more weak mewls from Sam. And Sam, poor sweet Samantha, started to grind her hips down into Jacob, unable to stop herself.

Triss sat up, grabbed a much bigger vibrator from the box, the curved one with the stupid flipper tongue on it for the clit, and slipped it into Jen's pussy. Her girlfriend groaned openly at that, but kept her eyes on Sam, even as Triss pushed it in deep, deep enough to fill her right up, and bury her clit in its lip. Her groan got outright carnal when Triss turned on the vibration.

Madison grinned up at Sam, pushed herself up, grabbed both the Daeva's hips with her hands, and set her mouth to one of the pale woman's very swollen pink nipples.

Sam squeaked, and hugged the curvy woman kissing her tits. No more shyness from the Daeva. Well, still shy, but sheer horniness was driving her now, and she made no attempts to hide it as she held the beautiful ghoul playing with her breasts, while Jacob took Sam's hips and ground her down against him.

Triss couldn't help but match Jacob's pace with the dildo, earning a quiet groan from Jen. Something about Sam was just too fucking intoxicating to not watch. Cause she was a Daeva? That had to be part of it. Othello certainly liked putting on a show, was damn good at it, and often had people watching. Sam could apparently do the same thing, she just didn't know it.

Plus, Sam being the only one wearing a shred of clothing, a beautiful white thong that looked like it coulda gone with a wedding dress, while in the middle of a foursome, was perfect.

Madison got her fingers on Sam's clit, and that was it for her. Sam hugged the woman tighter, and came hard, squeaking and mewling.

Triss couldn't see what was happening between Sam's legs from where she was, but judging from how the woman quivered and shook, she was clamping down on that dick hard and drenching it.

Sam recovered quickly. The old Sam would have taken minutes to get control of herself again, but this Sam managed to get back to it in thirty seconds, still trembling like a leaf on Jacob's dick, but functional. And after coming up from her second orgasm, the look in her eyes was total horndog, almost like a completely different person. She pulled Madison up so they were facing each other, and Sam managed a dreamy, groaning smile, as she reached down, and sank fingers into the ghoul's pussy. Returning the favor. Madison sighed bliss, and leaned in close enough to rest her forehead on Sam's shoulder, as the Daeva fingered her.

Of course Othello took it as a cue to start pounding his poor girl's ass. He tightened his grip on her curves, and thrust into her hard, the impact enough to have her big ass rippling and her large breasts jiggling against her chest. Madison held onto Sam like she might fall, and Sam only fingered her harder, her mouth open and eyes drifting up to look at Othello, as the two quickly rendered the ghoul an utter mess.

Triss stared at the dark-skinned beauty, and matched her thrusting with the toy to Othello's pace this time. Neither Jen or Triss were really paying attention to each other anymore, lost in the display. They'd both seen Madison cum hundreds of times, but watching her cum with Sam's fingers in her was a different matter entirely. It wasn't long before Jen pushed her ass into Triss, quivering, and Triss made sure to keep fucking her girl with the toy until juices reached Triss's palm.

Jacob lifted Sam up, right off his dick, and set her on his stomach. That was one very ripe cock, ready to explode.

Jen and Triss both groaned as Sam, lost in an obvious haze of overwhelming horniness, guided Madison's head down, and down, until the girl slipped Jacob's cock into her mouth. And again, Jen and Triss watched, eyes locked on how their boss's cock pulsed with cum. Even Sam leaned over to the side so she could look down and see what Madison was doing, her hand in the girl's hair, and nudging her down to take Jacob deeper.

The girl was literally helping Madison depththroat her lover's cock, easing the ghoul's head up and down. Only when Jacob stopped cumming, did Sam snap her hand up, letting go before she did.

“Sorry! Sorry, I ... I just kinda...”

Madison laughed, leaned forward, and kissed Sam's right breast. Sam slipped her fingers into Madison's hair again, and held her there with one hand as she leaned back, and planted her weight on Jacob's abs with her other. Damn, she was really getting into it, moaning louder than normal as the ghoul soaked Sam's tit in Jacob's cum directly from her mouth.

Triss kept working the toy inside Jen the whole time, barely aware of it as they both watched the most amazing porn vampire-kind was capable of. Apparently whatever Triss had been doing had been good, cause Jen had cum at least twice, and Triss only stopped now that Sam was taking a break with Madison sucking on her. And because she felt how soaked her fingers her with Jen's juices.

But christ she was so damn fucking horny now. Sam didn't even have a cock in her anymore, but seeing her sit on Jacob's abs, clutching Madison tight to her tit while the ghoul suckled on it and covered it in white? Mother of fuck.

“Jen, my turn.”

“Ah, damn.” Sighing, Jen sat up and crawled her way down to the center of the small room, ass swaying — on purpose — as she did.



She returned a moment later, two vibrators and lube in hand.

Triss lay beside Jacob, almost close enough to touch shoulders, and spread her legs. Screw Jacob, she didn't care about him; dude was sexy as fuck in that 'older man' kinda way, but that wasn't it. Their relationship was way too fucked up for there to be any sexual attraction. But lying shoulder to shoulder so they could both watch Sam and Madison put on a display? No prob. Best seats in the house.

Jen didn't waste time. Triss was damn wet anyway, but she didn't really expect Jen to just go shoving things into holes without prepping her first. But damn it, Jen, half distracted by watching Sam and Madison all over each other, sorta just jammed the first vibrator into Triss's pussy.

"Hey! Ow!"

"Oh calm down. You're a big girl." Jen, sighing haughtily, at least took the time to coat the second one in plenty of lubricant before she pressed it against Triss's ass, and eased it in. And because Jen had a thing for seeing Triss stuffed up to the lungs by things thicker than her own damn arm, she sank the biggest vibrator they had deep into her ass, and turned both on.

Both Madison and Sam turned to look at Triss, as she melted back into the blankets and groaned like a fucking animal. Ok, two very large things pushed into her, spreading her until she was fucking taut and borderline skewered with how deep Jen had pushed them in, and suddenly turned on so they vibrated fast and hard? That was a lot of stimulation, and Triss struggled to keep her eyes open.

"Ease ... up..." Fuck, her voice was a wavering mess already.

"Ha, fine fine." Jen dialed down the two toys to a much lower setting, and used both hands to gently ease both of them in and out of Triss's body. Delicious, wet friction deep inside her, rubbing

against those fucking spots that had sparks tingling down through her thighs and into her toes. Much better. Triss relaxed back against the blankets again, reached down, and gently caressed her clit and piercing, as her eyes drifted back to Sam.

Sam was in another world. She was doing that Daeva thing, her clan's blood taking her for a ride and forcing her to indulge in whatever she was focused on. At the moment, that was sex, and all the crazy indulgences that came by proxy. Case in point, Sam grabbed Madison's hips, and pulled her forward, toward Jacob. The ghoulish didn't expect this, and she had to scramble a bit with her legs, getting them around Jacob instead of between his legs.

And once Madison was straddling Jacob, Sam pushed her down, right onto his cock. Madison let out a surprised grunt, and grabbed onto Sam's shoulders for support as she looked down. Not often the ghoulish got to be doubly penetrated like this, and rarely by the fucking five-hundred-year-old deadly vampire. Maybe never. Triss had never seen it. Madison was afraid of Jacob, but Triss recognized that look in her eyes as she stared down at her pussy spread around his thick cock. She kinda liked being afraid.

"God, that's ... so much," Sam said. With her hands on Madison's hips, Samantha looked the beautiful dark-skinned ghoulish up and down, eyes lingering on the curvy woman's huge, jiggling breasts.

Triss couldn't help but gawk when Samantha leaned down, and took one of those big tits into her mouth. Madison immediately groaned and set her hands on Sam in return, getting balance while Othello pumped her ass. Everything was jiggling. Sam eventually put her right hand on Madison's left breast, steadying it and massaging it while she sucked on the other.

Something about seeing a grown woman kissing and suckling another woman's tit, was god damn glorious, especially with how many groans and moans Madison was making. Triss melted back on

the blankets as she watched, and idly stroked her clitoris, sending almost painful jolts of bliss down into her depths where Jen's toys were unpacking luggage and moving in. Even if she'd paid porn actors and actresses to come and put on a show for her, it wouldn't match this quality of porn.

Of course with Sam sucking on her tits, Jacob giving her a slow ride, and Othello pounding her ass, Madison didn't last long. She came again, groaning, then giggling, then groaning some more as another pleasure wave hit her. And as she did, Sam got in even closer, getting their legs all mixed up and hers on top of Madison's, all so she could get so close she could hug her. Full on breast squashing. God damn. Sam half hugged, half humped her, and sank her teeth into her.

Madison didn't get a chance to recover from her orgasm. Another hit her in the most obvious way, legs twitching and toes curling as Sam drank her. She even tried to push away from Sam for a few seconds, overstimulated, but Sam held on with a vampire's strength, squashing their breasts together as she devoured her meal. And she continued to hump against her as she did, all while Othello pounded her ass. Poor ghoul had three people fucking her at once. Combined with the Kiss, she turned into a squirming, mewling mess, and eventually went limp, arms dangling at her sides.

After a couple of long, drawn out minutes, Sam pulled her head back, and inched back enough the two women weren't squashed together anymore. She gulped, licked her lips, and looked down at the exhausted, almost comatose ghoul.

"Oh my god, she's so beautiful." Sam cupped both of the woman's large breasts, and watched, hypnotized, as they lightly bounced in her hands from Othello's fucking. The damn Daeva was quite content to keep pounding away at Madison hard enough she bounced on Jacob's cock. Of course Othello wasn't going to stop just cause Madison was exhausted, and he continued to thrust into her

ass, half because it felt good probably, but half cause he liked watching Sam play with his ghouls' breasts. So did Triss and Jen, and the both of them stared at Sam as she playfully groped the woman. Jen had the better view, seeing from the side, but with how huge Madison's tits were, Triss could see plenty from where she lay beside Jacob. Giant water balloons bouncing around on Sam's palms.

"Nn ... nnn." Still awake, but just barely, Madison's head rolled to the side, still holding a tiny smile despite nearly passing out. "Mmm ... nn!" She managed a weak moan as Othello finally lifted her off Jacob's cock, then his own, and set the near comatose ghoul beside them on the blankets, opposite of Tris, cum leaking out of her ass.

Which meant now Sam was between two horny guys, with no Madison between them.

The look in Sam's eyes as she looked down between her legs, at Jacob's hard cock pointing up, and Othello's cock pointing ahead at Sam with the guy now kneeling upright, was pure excitement and embarrassment. Jacob's dick was soaked in Madison's juices, glistening even, while cum dripped off Othello's cock, a lot of it, landing on the blankets between Jacob's legs. Samantha stared at both with the ravenous look of a vamp who just had a fresh meal and was in desperate need of fucking.

Of course Jacob knew that. He grabbed her ass and thighs, lifted her like she was a feather, turned her around, earned a surprised squeak from her, and lowered her down back onto his pelvis.

Sam took one look at Jacob with her crazy horny 'fuck me before I explode' eyes before she gave in, grabbed his cock, and lined it up with her slit. Of course Triss stared hard at the sight, cause damn it was fucking arousing as all hell seeing a milf take a big dick so fast because she was so damn horny. She took him to the base, leaned forward, and kissed Jacob. Big, long, happy and charged sorta kiss,

and Triss couldn't help but stare at that too, close as she was. Even when Sam started moving back and forth on Jacob's body, determined to keep kissing him as she fucked him, Triss watched the kiss. That wasn't just some mindless horny kissing. That was intimate, lovey dovey kissing.

But the kissing stopped when Othello lined his cock up with Sam's ass, and pressed its huge, fat tip against her entrance.

"Ah! W-Wait, I'm—" Her voice broke into a wavering moan as she stared back over her shoulder, and watched the big guy ease his lubed and cum-drenched cock into her ass. "Oh ... oh god..." And just like that, her dainty moans turned into animal groans. More than all the stuff that came before, Othello slowly easing his huge dick into her ass with Jacob already fully penetrating her pussy, had Sam's eyes rolling up and her mouth hanging open.

Othello took her hips in his hands, and gave her a few, slow, deep strokes, pulling more groans out of her and forcing her to wriggle on Jacob as she struggled to handle it. But before Othello could pick up speed, Jacob raised a hand, like a captain giving orders to his troops.

"Othello, sit back and hold still."

"W-What?" Sam blinked down at her man, before looking back at Othello, confused. The big guy was still snug against her ass, both dudes balls deep in her, but neither of them moved an inch.

"I feel, as leader of this bunch of misfits and morons, that I deserve a break, and special treatment." Jacob hooked his hands behind his head again, elbow almost touching Triss's head, and relaxed back against the blankets and curved wall. "You do the work, honey."

Triss laughed. Honey. On any other man, Jacob's stupid sexist bullshit would have warranted a smack or worse. But on him, Triss couldn't help but laugh about it; Jen too.

“Me?”

“Yes you. Othello! Punish her.”

Othello did as ordered, and gave the quivering Daeva woman a firm slap on the ass. Sam squeaked, sitting up straighter and hugging her hands against her collar, forearms covering her breasts.

“I ... um...” Blushing to new levels of red, Sam peeked back at Othello, back to Jacob, before looking to Triss and Jen again. The girl loved giving in, being taken, forced, held down, fucked hard even as she begged for a break, all that. But forced to do the fucking on her own? Especially with an audience? New territory.

Of course Triss was too damn horny to think any of this was anything other than the best porn someone could ask for. She idly plucked at her one of her nipple piercings, other hand teasing her aching clit, while Jen continued to work the two toys in and out of her. Though Jen was barely paying attention, keeping her hands moving with muscle memory more than anything. She was watching Sam, too.

Jacob raised a hand at the elbow, snapped his fingers, and again Othello gave the girl a good smack, louder this time. Sam’s squeak devolved into a mewling moan, and she lowered her hands to place them on Jacob’s chest. She managed to peek at the girls again, and the look of utter guilty pleasure on her face was fucking carnal. Which of course Jacob noticed, so he snapped his fingers twice, and Othello quickly spanked the girl twice more. Probably not just for Sam, considering how good it’d feel for the dudes to have the trembling girl squeezing on their cocks like a vise with each spank.

Sam, whimpering now, got to work. She pushed her ass back, molded it against Othello’s pelvis, before she worked it forward, aiming her hips down and toward Jacob. Othello sat back a little more, giving her more room, and she took it, sliding forward off half

their lengths before devouring them again. First ass, then down to devour Jacob to the hilt.

Triss managed to tear her eyes away long enough to grin at Jen. Damn slut was making sure to match Sam's new, pitifully slow rhythm. It'd take a good hour to cum at this rate.

"Faster." Jacob snapped his fingers again, obviously enjoying his roll as drill sergeant, and Sam mewled as Othello spanked her again. She picked up the pace, getting to at least a slow fucking rhythm, taking both men to the hilt before easing up and forward off them half their lengths. Again, Sam peeked at the girls, and again she looked so damn guilty, like they'd caught her with her hand in the cookie jar. Some cookie jar, considering her mouth was hanging open, and she was panting and moaning with each weak thrust.

"Jacob, I ... I can't. It's ... it's hard to..." She slowed down again, arms visibly trembling where they pressed down on Jacob's chest. So, of course, Jacob snapped his fingers again, and held up three fingers while wearing a big, evil, mastermind grin on his face. "W-Wait! I—" She squealed after the first spank, squeaked after the second, and let out a tiny kitten mewl after the third.

Triss recognized that mewl. That was her 'one stroke away from cumming' mewl.

Trembling head to toe, Sam tried again, and this time tried a different tactic. She leaned forward, and set her elbows around Jacob's ribs; fucker still had his hands hooked behind his head like a king or something. With better leverage, she bounced her body back and forth, getting a few good slaps of her ass against Othello's body, even hard enough to make her modest breasts jiggle and sway underneath her.

From where Triss was, she got a great damn view of the action, each downward plunge onto her boss's thick cock going deep enough for Sam's smooth little swollen pussy to squash against his

pelvis, each stroke drenching the dude. And of course, with Sam sitting forward like that, and Triss lying right next to Jacob, Sam couldn't help but look at Triss with how close she was; barely a foot between them. More of that pleasure-soaked guilty expression, eyebrows raised, eyes barely open, mouth dangling open and tongue almost hanging out of it.

Jacob knew exactly how to have Sam so horny she couldn't even talk. And it was so damn fucking hot, Triss couldn't help but clench down hard, and melt into a god damn fucking mess of orgasmic bliss. Powerful shocks deep inside her where she was stuffed exploded out from her core, up into her chest and down into her fucking toes. She didn't look away though. She smiled at Sam as she trembled on the blankets, knowing full well she was soaking the two toys inside her, and Jen's hands too, no need to look. Way too good watching the Daeva milf getting her wildest sex fantasies fulfilled.

Sam collapsed forward, and came too, managing another, knowing peek at Triss before her eyes rolled up. Her cheek planted against Jacob's shoulder, the one closer to Triss, and the Daeva looked up to her, inches away now, as she melted like butter. Othello got a grip on her hips and kept her snug against him, but the two dudes were happy to hold still — probably relishing how good her milking clenches felt — as she came.

“My dear, sweet sweet Samantha,” Jacob said, clicking his tongue several times in disappointment. “You have failed me for the last time.” Ok, yeap, dude was full on embracing the evil mastermind role at this point.

“I'm sorry, I—nn!” She squeaked again as Othello grabbed her arms by the biceps, huge hands easily circling them, and pulled her up until she was sitting upright again. “Wait, I'm still—”

“Othello my good minion, this sex slave isn't doing her duty. Punish her more thoroughly.”



Oh god, Jacob, the bastard. He had everyone smiling and laughing — everyone but the mewling Sam — but the few seconds of smiles and chuckles quickly jumped back into carnal delight, as Othello pulled back, and thrust into the ‘sex slave’. He thrust hard. Every inch of the dude’s fat cock slammed into her, and her ass rippled against his pelvis and hips. And poor, sweet Samantha, let out the most salacious moan Triss had ever heard. Say one thing for Jacob, he knew what buttons to push to make Samantha boil. Apparently those two buttons were: sex slave, and getting man handled by multiple men.

Jacob lay there, hands behind his head, pleased smile on his face, like a king watching someone get punished for doing a poor job. Totally cheesy, but it did wonders, because Sam erupted into squeaks and pants. She squirmed, trying to get away from Othello’s grip, but a few seconds later her arms went limp, dangling from where Othello held her biceps. She tried to keep her head up, but she only managed it for a few seconds at a time before it fell down again as the girl whimpered in defeat.

“Dude,” Triss said, gesturing to Sam, “you just gonna lay there while Othello does the work? She...” Triss gulped as she watched Sam, and shut up. Ok yeah Jacob was being a lazy ass, but it sure worked, cause Sam managed another hazy peek at Triss again, before she came again. Pussy swollen like crazy, she trembled on Jacob like she was trapped in an earthquake, and more of her juices leaked out onto him as Othello pounded her.

Jacob swatted Triss’s hand away. She swatted his hand away. They slapped at each other a few times. This was a very strange orgy.

“Jennifer,” Jacob said, “control your woman!”

“The fuck? She—” Triss groaned deep, right down into her guts, as Jennifer pumped the two huge dildos inside her again. And god

damn it, it really didn't take much to have Triss up to boiling over at this point.

Being so close to Jacob didn't matter to her, good or bad, he was just there, her weird-as-fuck friend and boss. But Sam, god damn, watching her wriggle on Jacob's cock was amazing. Othello pumped her ass hard enough to have her bouncing on Jacob too, the sort of pounding you only gave a girl if she was comfortable with it. Jacob had been training Sam to handle quite a bit, and probably indulged her sex slave fantasy regularly, in ways Triss didn't know about.

Triss melted into the blankets, and let the heat inside her build up again. She managed a peek up at Jen, half guilty about watching Sam and Madison so much, but Jen wasn't even looking at her. She was admiring Othello, and the work he was putting in on Sam's ass. And with the skill of a damn master, Jen pumped Triss's insides at the same pace, making it seem all too well like they were all connected in some big mess of limbs and sex.

Climax ripped up through Triss hard, and she groaned as the waves coursed up and down through her body. She clenched hard, soaking the toys, until Jen pulled the smaller dildo out of her pussy, while keeping the far larger one in her ass. An empty pussy meant Triss's insides were free to clamp down hard, and force a hard squirt of her juices onto the arm holding a toy in her ass. And harder again, her juices landing onto Jen's big tits and soaking her.

Before Triss could recover, Jen shoved the dildo back into her slit, and Triss melted back into the blankets again. Sam was in the same boat. Othello and Jacob didn't give her a break. They fucked her, and fucked her, and fucked her, until cum leaked out of both her holes, white drenching her thighs. And with Othello holding her upright by her biceps, everyone could see Sam's expression on her dangling head. She'd cum her ever living brains out.

After a good while, Jacob and Othello finally eased up. How many times had they cum in her? A couple times each, at least. Vampires doing vampire things, taking human pleasure and dialing it up to eleven. But eventually they slowed down, slowed down a bit more, and stopped. Orgy over.

Well, that'd been an unexpected bout of fun. Triss and Jen were done, Othello and Madison were done. But Jacob and Sam weren't. The elder sat up, still beside Triss, hooked Sam's legs around his hips, spread his under hers and crossed them at the ankle, and hugged her. He whispered into her ear, quiet things Triss struggled to hear. Words like 'you ok?' and 'pushed you a bit hard there' and 'c'mere' and sweet stuff like that.

Jacob hugged the exhausted woman, and she hugged him back, burying her breasts against his chest and slipping her arms under his. With a whimpering sigh, she set her head against his shoulder, turned it, and faced Triss as the two of them kept on going. Except, it wasn't an orgy anymore. It was two people fucking, two lovers, slow and sweet, the only motion caused by Jacob's gentle and steady grip on her ass, while Samantha softly ground her hips toward him.

Everyone watched as the two fucked for a little while longer, so slow it was hypnotic. But sure enough, Samantha and her hyper sensitive body trembled on the man's cock, and after giving Triss a smile, she turned her head in to face Jacob's neck, and buried her face there as he came inside her again, too.

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"You really like her, don't you?"

Jacob raised a brow. "Just picking up on that, are you? We talked about this already. Christ. Why is every witch I recruit a dumbass."

Triss laughed as she looked back down at the city street below. They were on the Carthian Invictus border, on a building rooftop, looking down at the Border Bar to see if there'd be anymore fights. Nothing so far. Hell, the whole damn city had gotten pretty quiet now that those two covenants were leaving each other alone.

She was in her usual jeans and tank top. Jacob was in his dark, spooky witch robes, which coulda been made from human skin for all Triss knew. Too dark, but maybe he'd dyed them. She wouldn't have put it past him. Weird he was comfortable wearing the spooky robes in public, but unlike her, he could Cloak them both and keep them hidden easily, even from powerful Kindred. No chance someone was going to spot them.

"I mean, you really like her. Like, might love her."

He rolled his eyes; all in the head motion. "I'm trying." Wow, a direct answer.

"You two get along pretty well."

"She's fun," he said. "I like talking to her. She listens." Another direct answer. Apparently Sam was the antidote to the dude's insanity.

"What, I don't listen?"

He grinned at her. "Not even a fucking little bit."

"Ha. Well, I think she does more than listen. I think she talks, and you listen."

"Kinda happens when two people talk. At least, when the two people haven't been lobotomized as of late."

"Uh huh."

“And when the two people respect each other.”

“Sorta excludes most relationships.” She shrugged, and gave her boss a gentle punch in the shoulder. “Sounds like you guys got something special.”

“Maybe.”

“Hesitant?”

“Like I told you, I got scars from losing Minerva. So don’t expect me to start singing in the rain just yet.”

Jacob was so self aware, it was actually kinda irritating. How do you talk to someone who actually truly understood themselves? Half of talk between people was supposed to be about two idiots trying to figure shit out, especially about themselves, but Jacob already had a shit load about himself figured out. How the fuck did Sam talk to Jacob? How the fuck did Jack talk to Antoinette, for that matter?

“No ‘I love yous’ said yet?”

“Nope.”

“Well, if it matters, you two certainly look like you got something going on.”

“Hard to judge a relationship from the outside, Triss.”

She nudged his shoulder. “You telling me you’re not into her?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Nodding, Triss leaned over the roof edge, elbows on the railing, and she grinned at the old bastard. “I talked to the Prince.”

“Of course.” He leaned over the railing next to her. “What’d the old girl have to say?”

“She’s actually pretty happy about Sam.”

Jacob laughed. “A Daeva, happy her childe’s embraced sex. Whoda thunk.”

“Well, that, yeah, but she sounded happy about ... you.”

For a moment, Jacob’s lips fell into a frown, before he shook his head, and his usual smile was back.

“I was pretty happy for Annie, too, you know, when her relationship with Jack turned out to be more than just some fling.”

“You two really are friends, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“You say that like it’s obvious.”

“She’s good friends with Elaine, too. And Elaine’s done more to undo Antoinette’s work than I ever have.”

“What, really?”

“Yeah. I don’t know much about the Ordo”—she didn’t believe that—”but Elaine has gotten in Antoinette’s way a dozen times, back in Europe. The Prince was a young elder, just entering into her true power, and Elaine visited her castle. The two hit it off immediately, which probably included a whole lot of sex on top of a mountain of servants.”

Triss grinned at the man, but her imagination couldn’t resist. Jacob was one of those natural storyteller types. You couldn’t help but listen and get absorbed, and Triss instantly imagined those two big-titted bitches, squashing themselves against each other, while a

couple dozen guys and girls did things to them. Kinda hard not to imagine it, considering she'd just talked to the Prince yesterday, and the damn woman had her tits nearly hanging out of her robe.

Or, Triss, you're just as much a horny slut as every other girl in Dolareido was. Slut City.

"But then they started doing Kindred things," he continued. "Dragon things. So imagine Doctor Frankenstein, doing crazy experiments in his—her basement, and then another dragon comes along and steals information from her, or gives her some information while knowing full well it's wrong info, sending Frankenstein down the wrong path of research."

"Sounds like a dick thing to do."

"It is, to kine and their short lives. Vampires live in a different world. Give it a hundred years and you'll approach things differently. Professional rivalry means nothing next to a friend you can trust with personal stuff, when you measure your lifespan in centuries."

"Does Antoinette trust you?"

"With personal stuff? Absolutely." His grin did that crazy thing it sometimes did, and went full Joker on her. "Professionally? Absolutely not."

"I can't imagine you pushing her out and taking over Dolareido."

"Honestly? Me neither. Been here for a long time, but if I wanted a city that did things my way, I wouldn't start it here."

She blinked at the man, and gave him a small nudge with her hip. "You'd leave?"

"I've thought about it."

“But...” But he was the only stable thing she had in her life, the asshole. And considering how unstable the fucker was, that was saying something.

He returned her hip bump, which was fucking hilarious considering he was a five-hundred-year-old vampire wearing a leathery robe probably made of human skin. Triss couldn't help but laugh, even as she gulped at the thought of her boss suddenly not being around anymore.

“I'm not going anywhere for a while, and even if I did, you could come.”

“Come? Leave Dolareido?”

He gasped and covered his mouth with a hand. “Leave Dolareido? But, Dolareido is life! No other city in the world exists! Beyond the walls, it's an endless wasteland! Radiation has poisoned the world!”

“Shut up.” She looked down at the street, and tried to process. “Vampires don't usually leave their cities.”

“You're right. But they do sometimes. Antoinette and I had big ideas when we came to America, and I think we succeeded in most of them. She definitely has.”

“But ... not you?”

He shook his head. “My goals have changed. If I want to obtain those goals, I need to make big changes. And you're invited.”

“I ... I don't...” Christ, that was such a scary thought. Leave Dolareido? Vampires had a healthy paranoia of leaving their home; being deathly allergic to sunlight did that. “Holy shit I don't know. When?”

“Not sure.”



“Jesus fucking christ, Jacob. That’s ... I...”

Jacob laughed again and pat her on the shoulder, before going back to scanning the streets below. “Don’t worry about it for now, kid. When the time comes, you’ll know, and I’m sure when it happens, you’ll have a better idea what you want to do.”

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“Jen, come on, what’s this about?” It took a lot of mental effort to not mention what Jacob told her, but it’d been super personal. If her boss wanted Jen or the other witches to know, he’d tell them.

“It’s a surprise!”

“I’m not going to bang some random kine you found.”

“No no, it’s not that kind of surprise.”

Triss raised a brow. Jen was one of those girls who fully embraced how sexually freeing being a vampire was. Which meant they had sex on the mind every minute of every night; similar to Elaine, according to Jack. Both Ventrue. Funny. So for Jen to have a surprise for her that didn’t involve sex was pretty strange.

Jen guided her through the streets of Dolareido. Just a few years ago, Triss wouldn’t have felt comfortable doing this. If someone noticed her face, it’d have ended badly. But Triss had gotten pretty damn good at the Face in the Crowd discipline since then, considering how much she’d had to use the Obfuscate disciplines in that time. Shit got crazy, and she’d had to adapt.

Beatrice was good for her age, damn good. Some vamps got good quick, or they died. Triss survived. Jacob knew what he was doing when he picked her.

Ego stroking aside, Triss was now plenty comfortable walking down the street, knocking shoulders with the kine. She still kept her

black hair shoulder length and framing her face, hiding her crocodile teeth cheeks a bit, but still, she wasn't worried. She was good enough, powerful enough, that it just wasn't a concern anymore. Which of course Jen took full advantage of, and started taking her out to places in Dolareido, places Triss had avoided in her younger days.

Case in point, Jen guided her to a fucking lounge. The Quiet Note. Oh god, hippies. No no no. Triss tried to turn around, but Jen laughed and pushed her in anyway.

The Quiet Note was, predictably, quiet, with maybe a hundred people sitting around on nice leather couches along the dark walls, and small circular tables spread around the floor. There wasn't much lighting, just some dim lights above. There was a bar, but the sort of bar that didn't take orders whenever a performer was on the stage on the other side of the room. The Quiet Note was written on that wall over the stage, written in gentle lights that didn't illuminate a damn thing. Even the walls had wallpaper, gray flower-like designs against the black.

The place was hideous. Just looking at it made her feel like she should have put on sweatpants and start writing shitty poetry.

"Ugh, this place is horrible," Triss whispered. "This is ... this is the sort of place Julias would have come to."

Jen laughed into her ear, careful to stay quiet. The whole place really had that silent observer vibe.

"It's neat. Interesting people show up."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Nope, you'll see for yourself." With a wicked grin, the damn Ventrue took Triss's hand, and over toward one of the couches in

the back. Not much light there, good for a couple vampires who didn't want to be bothered.

Triss sighed, sat down, and looked over at the bartender. A woman, heavy, strong, and she cleaned some glasses as she watched more people come in. Apparently they knew Jen, to just let her in. Girl probably fucked with the bartender's mind, a bit of the ole Dominate; harmless. Jen was pretty damn strong, too, for a vampire her age.

"Cloak me too," Jen said. Shrugging, Triss touched her leg and wrapped her in Obfuscate as well. People would see them on the couch, but not really see them. Perfect for vamps hunting humans, and eavesdropping.

It took a few more minutes for the place to calm down, for the chatting to die out, and for the rustling to stop. The few lights in the place turned off, putting Triss and Jen in absolute dark, with only the people closer to the stage getting any of the light.

Someone came onto the stage, some dude, but the lighting didn't do a very good job showing who it was yet. Like it was part of the song, the build up, the fiddling with the lighting by someone offstage, and the tuning of the guitar by whoever just sat down on a stool in front of the mic.

People smoked. People drank, quietly, sipping their wines and shit, no beers. More than a few people were high, judging from the smell. But honestly, everyone was pretty damn chill, happy to be there, and happy to shut up and wait for whoever was on the stage to entertain them. Some of them wore jeans. Hell, a few of them wore t-shirts. Triss was still using Face in the Crowd, so she didn't give a shit about her jeans, tank top, and army boots. Jen wore a casual suit, and Triss expected more of the kine to be wearing suits like that too, or nightclub dresses, but nope, just a bunch of jeans, and a few eclectic tops and jewelry and stuff.

Yeap, this was the sort of place Julias would have liked. Full of introspection and self reflection, full of hippies going on soul journeys. Much as Triss loved her man, this sorta crap really irked her. Probably cause it was her impulse to respond to self reflection with a healthy dose of anger and bitterness.

Triss looked at Jen, glared, and mouthed 'well?' Jen grinned at her, and nodded toward the stage.

The lights finished turning on, and a very, very handsome man raised his face toward the mic. A white dude, with dreamy blue eyes, but they were hard, almost betraying their color. No beard, but he had a bit of dark gruff on his face, and dark hair so short it looked almost buzzed. He was a little tall, and muscular and lean. He wore some navy jeans too, and wore a black button shirt with a couple buttons undone.

That, was Sándor.

Triss stared at the man as he took a deep breath, adjusted an ear piece that was probably playing a metronome or something, and set his pick against the strings. Sándor, with a guitar. She knew the dude liked metal music, and that was pretty awesome, but he didn't say anything about playing an instrument. Embarrassed, maybe? Not so embarrassed the super antisocial gargoyle wouldn't play live in front of a bunch of hippies who were likley music and poetry snobs.

"Hello again," he said, voice soft, and deep. "I lost someone important to me, a couple weeks ago." The crowd aww'd. Triss clenched. "Well, maybe important isn't the right word. She was someone who ... who'd been holding a lot responsibility, and a lot of dreams. Those dreams are dead now, and those responsibilities are mine." He looked down, and Triss wasn't sure if the somber, hard look on his face was sexy, or stupid.

Oh god, was he going to play a super emo song? Some sort of ‘my life sucks my family is dead everything is horrible life isn’t worth living’ kinda song? Please no, she was just starting to like the guy.

“I thought about playing something about that, something that fit, something ... mournful, or regretful.” If he played Hurt, Triss was going to kill him. She loved the song, but she could only stomach so much misplaced guilt. “But she wouldn’t want that. She’d probably hit me for thinking it, if she was alive. She’s gone, and she wanted her family to get on without her. That was her goal. So, I’m going to play a few of my favorite songs, instead.”

He strummed the first chord, and picked the first few notes. The world stopped. The crowd sucked in a breath, before they settled into their seats, ready to go on a familiar, amazing journey. They knew the song. She knew the song. Anyone with fucking ears knew the song.

“On a dark, desert highway. Cool wind in my hair. Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air.”

Triss froze, down to the fucking bone. She knew her mouth was open a little, and that Jen was looking at her, confused. Triss didn’t care. Girl probably didn’t even know the song. Damn kids these days.

She couldn’t look away from the man. His picking was perfect, but that was to be expected. If a paranormal learned to play an instrument, they had decades to master it, and from the way he held the guitar, she knew he had. It was easy to picture it, now that she could literally see it. Sándor, in a chair at home, picking away, practicing the hours away. A gargoyle with time to spend.

But it was his voice that ripped her to pieces. He sounded good. He sounded great. He sounded like fucking Bob Seger.

“Triss,” Jen whispered, “you—”

Triss punched Jen in the leg, softly, but kept her eyes on Sándor.

He didn't play some sappy song about regret or sadness. He didn't have to. It was on his voice. And god damn it, she wanted to hate it, to hate him for it. She didn't want to hear anguish or heartache or grief. She didn't want to hear the misery in his voice. But she did, just hints of it, little slivers of the man's past and soul coming through in his tone, as he sang about something completely different.

Ok, yeah, this was a lot better than him singing a sad song. This was perfect. This was too damn perfect. Butterflies flew around in her stomach, and she did her best to ignore them.

She melted back on the couch, and watched, and listened to the man charm the whole fucking crowd. Everyone was quiet. In any other place, people would have been cheering; which woulda been weird cause Sándor didn't put any energy into his body. He was reserved, solid, steady, and only his voice and his fingers showed emotion. But it was enough. To anyone who actually gave a shit about music, it was enough.

No one else in the bar knew the dude lost his family to a bunch of hunters, and then became the hunters' slave. None of them knew the dude had a wife and kid that he loved, dead. None of them knew the dude was hundreds of years old, and that family was the first good thing to happen to him in a long fucking time. None of them knew the dude blamed himself for more deaths, including Julias's.

Triss knew, and she could hear it in his voice. It fucking hurt, like fire on the skin. But she couldn't look away, and the butterflies multiplied.

# Part 10

## Chapter 158

~~Antoinette~~

Three months later.

She stared down at the corpse, and sighed. Sigh turned to frown. Frown turned into snarl. In her youth, she would have likely elevated to outright rage, and destroyed all in her vicinity. But she had long learned to control her anger, and she quelled it now as she stood, confused and frustrated.

Blood seeped out over the lines of the ritual circle, over the dark tile, and around her feet. She stepped about it effortlessly as she motioned to Daniel.

“It does not come.”

“No,” her sheriff said, “it does not.”

“We did the ritual correctly.”

“If the book is to be believed.”

She snatched the book off the nearby table. Deep in the tower’s basement’s basement, she was free to explore the darkest, most sinister, vile experiments, free of watching eyes or worry of contamination. Down, deep in the earth, surrounded by metal and stone, only she, her sheriff, and her tools existed.

The summoning circle was the same as it was before, though all electricity had been disabled. Only candles would do for this ritual. And the corpse, a woman, a murderer, was not old. The younger the sacrifice, the stronger the resonance.



Antoinette was not happy to kill someone so young, but dealing with Black Blood was too important. Dolareido was built with such options in mind, that it would have an underbelly where black hearts could enact their desires, only for Kindred to capitalize and use such kine for whatever purpose they wished. The city was a utopia for paranormals, not for kine. But she tried. She had found a balance, after all. There was less crime in Dolareido compared to similar cities, and what crime was committed was often untraceable, allowing Kindred to make problematic kine simply disappear without drawing the attention of the media.

But she did not enjoy using such a tool. Several criminals still sat within her cells, and she did not enjoy their presence. And killing them was never a joyful act. Worse was killing a young woman, a troubled girl who had killed her ex boyfriend and his new girlfriend in a fit of rage and madness. A crime of passion, and Antoinette did not enjoy being the judge, jury, and executioner for the woman.

But a body was needed. Black Blood was summoned by death, by decay, by corpses and blood and lifeless mounds of flesh. She could not contact the spirit without it. And yet, even as the girl died in the circle, spared the horror of death as she had been unconscious for it, there was nothing. The dark mist and oozing black blood, it did not appear. Antoinette and Daniel were left standing in candle light, in deathly quiet, with only the spreading blood of the corpse to remind them they were not frozen in time.

With a heavier sigh, Antoinette flipped through the pages of the tome. A terribly old book, she had had to encase each and every page in protective plastic, lest a gentle breeze destroy the parchment. And the cover, a leather of some kind, was encased in the clear plastic as well. Laminating or varnishing had been options, but she worried it would damage the rituals themselves, to permanently alter the book that held them.

A dragon was no dragon if they did not attempt to eliminate unknown factors from their experiments.

Alas, the experiment was for naught.

“Do you want to summon it normally?” Daniel asked.

She shook her head. “I summon it to attempt to bind it. I do not desire another pointless conversation. The damn monster made it perfectly clear last time we spoke, it will not parlay with me. And ... I do not wish to kill another soul this night.”

“Then I’ll call the clean up crew.”

She nodded. They could not let the thralls see the ritual circle, however, thus Daniel and Antoinette took steps to alter and damage the ritual. Once the site was sufficiently ruined, they left, and several thralls stepped past them into the room, armed with an assortment of cleaning tools.

No one was allowed to see the rituals she cast, save for Daniel. Not Natasha, not Elaine, not Samantha, and not her thralls or ghouls. These rituals were beyond dangerous, and only Elaine and Daniel could be trusted to have the mental fortitude to defend themselves from the prying minds of other Kindred. She did not share with Elaine for a different reason. It was best to keep her old friend out of this business with Black Blood and the tears, though as the months went on, that might change.

Daniel and Antoinette stepped into her main experiments room, where the resonance machine could summon spirits by amplifying the resonance of objects. No one sat within, so Antoinette sat with Daniel, and noted down her results, or lack thereof.

“I had meant to ask of Beatrice,” Antoinette said. “How goes her own experiments?”

Daniel sighed, but did not sit with her. He closed the metal door, locking them within the large room of black marble, the hanging chandelier and its blue light, and the nearby ritual circle of mathematical precision that decorated the floor.

“No sign of Julias.”

“Naturally. I am sure she and the flesh witch have finished preparing his body, but to pluck his soul from the afterlife? Every dragon in the world would beg to learn how she managed to accomplish such a feat.”

“And ... a few women kine have gone missing. Some of them young.”

Antoinette sighed as she leaned back, and met her old friend’s gaze.

“What do you think will happen?”

“I think Mary is dead, and Samantha is going to ... learn the hard way, that death is permanent.”

Permanent. So they assumed. Bold words for half-dead bloodsucking monsters of myth.

“Keep an eye and ear open for whatever catastrophe Samantha may unleash,” Antoinette said. “I will let her make these mistakes, but I will not allow them to break the Masquerade, or risk her life. Protect her from whatever creation or mayhem she may cause.”

Daniel nodded.

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~~Jack~~

The Carthians stared at him, some of them dropping their jaws. That was fine. A little shock and awe, and fear, would make

negotiations go better, hopefully. Julias taught him how to negotiate, and his sire knew the value in using both good cop and bad cop techniques.

So let them think he was the bad cop for a moment.

He held the pub door open long enough for Scully and Mulder to swoop in, and the two birds circled over the heads of the dozen Kindred waiting inside, before they landed on his shoulders. One still had a broken neck, the other a broken wing. It only made the Kindred in the bar more nervous as they looked between Jack and his two friends.

Jack would have scratched and pet both crows normally, but it didn't fit the image. Right now, he was Jack, childe of Julias Mire, Right Hand of the Invictus, Jack the Cursed, Jack the Ripper, or as he sometimes heard down the grapevine, That Annoying Little Asshole. Whatever, as long as they listened, he didn't care. And with the hilariously expensive black suit jacket and vest, the red shirt underneath, a black tie with a hint of a flowing pattern of blood red lines, and the two crows on his shoulders, he looked like a mob boss, or the devil's assistant, or Viktor's grandchilde. They knew him by that title, too, and it was a valuable negotiation tool.

There weren't any kine in the bar, except for the ghoulish bartender, and a few thralls and ghouls at nearby tables. The thralls and ghouls were particularly terrified of Jack at this point. He hated that. At least with the Kindred the fear was mixed with some predatory instincts. With the kine, they were straight up scared of him. If he grabbed one and threatened them, they'd freeze up. Viktor would probably have loved that.

Jack looked between the bar-goers without a pulse. Steve, Bella, Kass, and Garner were in the bar, Garry's four ancilla. He had others, but these were the four Garry used when things got physical. They were also the four ancilla Jack had thoroughly thrashed after

killing Joe. Cory wasn't around. Good. He was still pretty young, and Jack didn't want to look that dude in the eyes, not after ripping a hole in his guts.

It was a typical bar, homely, with pictures of friends on the walls, and not all of them flattering. People knew each other's names here. He had to give that to the Carthians, they were better at fostering connections.

Lots of wood stools around dingy tables. Always stools, or chairs with short backs. Made it easier for people to socialize with each other, to quickly turn around and engage in new conversations. That was the point of bars, for people to drown in meaningless rapidfire conversation, something Jack doubted he'd ever be able to enjoy.

Jack walked up to the four ancilla. They sat at a table near the center of the room, and Jack grabbed a nearby chair from another table as he approached. He slid in close enough, sat down a foot back from the table, and leaned back as he looked between the four vampires. The whole room had gone deadly silent, everyone staring and watching, and more than a few Kindred put their hands closer to their nearby jackets hanging off chair and booth backs. Knives, guns, all of it hidden, all ready to come out if Jack got aggressive.

"I'm not here to follow up on my promise," Jack said. "I'm not going to kill anyone. I don't plan to, ever."

Bella snarled at him. Tan skin, a bit tall, with curly long black hair. And most importantly, Gangrel.

"You were pretty adamant you were going to kill us."

"The curse gets vocal. Sorry about that."

"More than vocal." Steve leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, and glared at Jack. "Gonna apologize about Joe?"

“No.”

Bella’s stare lit up like he’d thrown gasoline on a fire.

“You killed our friend.”

“Joe came at me and mine with fire. Bruce is dead because of him. And from what I can tell, that attack wasn’t something Garry told you to do, was it?”

The four of them looked between each other, angry, and wearing their thoughts on their sleeves. No, the attack hadn’t been Garry’s order.

“Joe had a good point,” Bella said.

Jack shook his head. “I don’t care how much Joe hated Viktor.”

“You might, if you knew what Viktor had done to him.”

Yeah, maybe he would.

No, he would not pick up pain that belonged to someone else. Enough of that shit. Whatever issue Joe had with Viktor, it wasn’t on Jack’s shoulders.

“No, I wouldn’t. I’m not Viktor. I did everything I could to stop Carthians and Invictus from killing each other. And I’m here for one reason only.” He leaned in closer, and the four ancilla stared at him like he was ready to flip the table and start a brawl. “To tell you I’m not going to kill you. I’m going to make every effort I can to make sure the curse doesn’t kill you. Okay?”

Slowly, the four ancilla sat up straight and traded glances. He knew those glances, the kind that said a hundred things, but outside observers wouldn’t understand any of them.

“And Carter and Sheela?” Bella asked.

“Donny and Carlyle died in that fire, too. Our bosses agreed there’d be no repercussions. We were all idiots.” Some idiots greater than others. Thankfully, that hadn’t included Jack this time. “Be happy I’m not seeking revenge for Bruce. It wasn’t just Joe who killed him. You were all involved, and we were the defenders in that fight. So I say again, I’m making a promise to not deliver on the curse’s threat. But that’s with the stipulation you pull your heads out of your arrogant asses and accept how much you fucked up that night. Do we understand each other?”

He glared at each ancilla, and Mulder and Scully both crowed once, announcing Jack controlled the conversation. He did control it. It was for everyone’s benefit, because if it wasn’t for him forcing these idiots to see reason, there was a good chance they’d stir up trouble in the future. If he had to force peace down their throats, he would.

It was times like these he realized how easy it’d be to become a dictator. It was so damn simple to assume he was right, everyone else was wrong, and if he could just force everyone to do what he wanted, everyone would be happier. A nice, lovely, cobblestone road of good intentions, with a big flaming gate at the end of it.

It took a moment for the ancilla to nod, after a fair bit of staring and more than a few sparks of anger, and fear.

“We understand,” Bella said.

“Good.” Jack stood up, adjusted his tie, and looked to the rest of the crowd. Everyone was watching, and more than a few of them still had mouths parted, like they’d expected shit to go a lot worse than it did. It could have. Even with a few months for everyone to calm down, tempers were still high between the two covenants.

But the Carthians responded well to direct, open dialog. So did Jack.

He stepped out into the night, and both his friends took to the sky before any nearby kine noticed the strange, small guy in the expensive suit with two birds on his shoulders. Ok, work done. Time to move onto good times. He had a couple people who were aching for a celebration.

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He smiled at the three girls in the limousine with him. He sat beside Veronica, while Leilani and Rachel sat on the other side, looking at them, shy smiles on.

Jack had changed his suit. The black suit and tie with the crimson shirt were intimidating, and that wasn't his goal tonight. All three ladies wore dresses, dark as well, not crazy revealing like you'd find in Bloodlust or other nightclubs, but pretty nonetheless. They also had bags with them, with swimsuits inside. Because apparently, that's what the girls wanted for a celebration for Lei and Rachel becoming fully enthralled in the Vinculum: a trip to the Elysium Tower. Elaine had suggested the pool, because of course she did.

Veronica pressed into his side, and nudged her shoulder into him a little harder than necessary. She smiled up at him, before looking at his two new thralls, and they smiled brighter. All three of them were under the same contract: serve faithfully, grow more intelligent and skilled in combat, allow Jack to drink of them freely, and they'd be elevated to ghouls, and eventually Kindred. Sex was not in that contract. Swimsuits were not in the contract either. But it was damn obvious all three were eager to show off their bodies, and do everything they could to have sex with him. He'd made it damn clear it would not affect how quickly he'd consider siring them, but that didn't seem to matter. The Vinculum was a powerful, binding force.

Ok, maybe it was a harem.

Veronica Tam was a short woman, with blue hair to her shoulders, and blue eyes. Pale, and with large breasts.



Rachel was a couple inches taller than Jack, with a pixie cut of blonde hair, green eyes, and a thin but soft build. And even larger breasts.

Leilani was about Jack's height, tan skin on a lean, athletic body, with long wavy black hair, dark eyes, with a narrow and mischievous smile. Smaller breasts than her two fellow thralls, but still quite large, considering how lean she was. She almost looked like a bustier Clara, which was a pretty weird thought, considering Antoinette had picked the girls.

Jack had made it abundantly clear to Antoinette that he didn't want to pick thralls based on cup size. Yeah, he liked boobs, but picking who would be his servants for years, maybe decades, based on the size of their breasts? Pretty damn shallow.

She'd made a lot of good counter-points. They were kine, he was Kindred, and he was allowed to be picky. There were plenty of potential thralls in the city, and while he liked boobs, plenty of Kindred were perfectly happy to bind kine that didn't have huge breasts; some even preferred small. Those Kindred could have those thralls. And for the final point, that he was building a harem, and that meant sex. Lots and lots of sex. Why not go with the things he liked?

Of course he countered with how attractive he found Julee and Ashley, and despite trying his hardest to not, Natasha too. But Antoinette found him a couple more busty kine to enthrall anyway. And honestly, now that people were visiting his mansion more, maybe having more than one helper was a good idea.

And as Veronica snuggled into his side, and Leilani and Rachel watched her with envy, he couldn't help but feel his ego grow. Yeap, he wanted a harem. He, evidently, wanted a trio of gorgeous girls to tend to his every whim while he and his lover lay back and enjoyed themselves. Hell, more than a trio. Ten girls fawning over him,

doing anything and everything they could for a chance to touch him? Yeap, his brain had gone off to fantasy land, and was now thoroughly brainwashed and drowning in the Ventrue side of him.

He almost offered Lei and Rachel another 'you can go home if you want' ticket. He had already. But it was clear they wanted to come, and it only made them sad when he even suggested they didn't need to be with him. And it had them smiling and blushing when he even so much as suggested an order. If he gave them a proper order, they'd obey, happy to oblige and hoping for a reward when they did.

No wonder Kindred got full of themselves as they got older. Thralls and ghouls were like injecting pure narcissism and hedonism straight into the ego.

They stepped out of the limousine outside the Elysium Tower gardens, and both Lei and Rachel gasped as they looked the building up and down.

"This is where the Prince lives?" Rachel asked.

"I told you which building it was." Jack shrugged and motioned for them to follow. They did, side by side, each practically glowing with excitement, and fear. Veronica was a little afraid, and she always would be; Antoinette had that effect. The others had met Elaine and Antoinette, several times, but not as intimately as Elaine's first meeting with Veronica. They were damn scared of Elaine, and utterly terrified of Antoinette, the Prince, their master's lover.

Hopefully tonight would alleviate that a bit.

He took his time walking up to the building, letting the girls look at the garden maze. Jack took a moment to peek, too. Christ, four years ago he went into that maze with Antoinette, sat down on a bench with her, tried to Dominate her at her request, to test his power. Then Tony showed up, and Jack walked right past him,

probably nearly getting himself killed in the process. Tony really hated his ex, and probably started plotting Jack's death at that very moment. Half to scorn his ex, half because Jack didn't act like the scaredy cat an elder expected a fledgling to.

Four years. Might as well have been a fucking lifetime.

"Oh my god," Rachel said as they stepped into the building. "This place is huge! And pretty!"

Jack grinned at her as he looked at the walls of the huge lobby. Black marble with white veins of lightning. Columns stood around made of the same material, with dragons carved into them, coiling the pillars.

The stairway down had them gawking as well. It wasn't exactly common, a stairway that opened up into a larger stairway that went deep underground, but there it was. The stairway he'd been standing on, when he controlled Damien, and used him to kill Lucas. Jack took them deeper and deeper, and as they passed rooms, the girls took peeks. He didn't stop them. There weren't any important rooms connected to the main staircase, but there was plenty to see. Giant rooms filled with everything from computers, enormous TV screens, and giant speakers, to art rooms filled with paintings and sculptures.

Ashley and Julee waited at the bottom of the stairs, and they waved excitedly.

"Hi!" Ashley said.

"Hello." Julee said.

Lei opened her mouth, but Ashley jumped in close.

"Oh my god you're pretty! Jack is lucky." Ashley reached out, grabbed Rachel's hand, and immediately pulled her off toward one

of the changing rooms. “Come on, let’s go get changed! The mistress and her friend are already swimming.”

Jack’s thralls looked to him, a little shocked by Ashley’s outgoing attitude. But he laughed, shrugged, and motioned for them to go with her. They did, and he caught their excited smiles returning.

Jack rolled his eyes, and went to one of Antoinette’s changing rooms to get into his swimming trunks. Why Antoinette picked Ashley and Julee to be her ghouls, he’d never quite understand. They were smart, but they weren’t exactly wise. Antoinette couldn’t talk to them about philosophy or politics. She couldn’t talk to them about the existential crisis of being a vampire, or human for that matter. She couldn’t talk to them about much, really. But she loved talking to them, cause they enjoyed life in a way she — and Jack — struggled to.

Antoinette and Julias would have had a lot to talk about. They both looked for the same thing in other people.

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He walked into the pool room, tugged at his necklace idly, and smiled as he spotted Antoinette and Elaine. They were in the pool, swimming, which was an interesting problem for Kindred. Without the Blush of Life, vampires had a habit of sinking. But both elders were already Blushing Life, and floating along easily enough. A wasteful indulgence for most Kindred, spending blood on the Blush like that, but they were beyond secure in their ability to get more blood.

That was one of the joys of Dolareido. Even young Kindred had an easy time hunting.

Jack grinned down at the two women as he came closer, walking past a dozen pool chairs over the white tile of the enormous room, before coming to the edge of the enormous pool. Not Olympic size, but close. There was a hot tub further in the back, and that thing

was huge too, but it was empty, the only people around for the moment just Jack and the two most powerful women in the city. Probably the two most powerful women in the state.

“My love.” Antoinette smiled up at him and swam toward him. “I trust your thralls are changing?” She set her hands on the pool edge, but stayed in the water, its surface at her chin.

Black bikini. Black string, tiny bikini. Wet hair. So simple. So god damn hot. Plus the fact her boobs refused to sink, and floated up against her chest until they bobbed just under the surface of the water.

“Yeah. They’ll be here in a minute.”

Elaine swam up beside Antoinette, and put her hands on the pool edge too. Similar bikini, but red. With a decidedly more evil grin than Antoinette’s, she reached out and ran a finger down his shin.

“You will let me touch them this time, yes? You have had these two new thralls for a month now, and I have yet to taste.”

“I might.” He rolled his eyes, and sat down on the pool edge, both women parting so he could sit between them, his legs hanging at the knee in the warm water. “They’re both anxious to get physical.”

“Of course they are,” Antoinette said, and she hooked both her hands over his right knee, elbows hanging off, and set her chin on her hands, weight on his knee. “My love is a gorgeous and wonderful man. What woman would not wish to sleep with him? Especially after having, no doubt, heard stories of his sexual prowess from their fellow thrall Veronica.”

“Undoubtedly.” Elaine mirrored Antoinette, hooking her hands over his other knee so she could rest her chin on them, elbows hanging off either side of the other leg. “I presume you told them they are allowed to sleep with each other?”

“Yeah. I don’t think they have yet, but after tonight, I’m guessing they will.” Leilani and Rachel both knew the pleasure of the Kiss now, but not the Kiss when combined with sex. Ashley and Julee were on each other every single night, according to Antoinette. Veronica, Lei, and Rachel probably would be, too. “Any news about Garry?”

“Non, mon amie, nothing new.”

Jack nodded, before grinning down at Elaine. “Managed to fuck him yet?”

“I will have you know, I respect the man’s sexuality. He is entirely homosexual, and there is little I can do to change that.”

Surprising to hear that. Elaine kinda gave off ‘I can make anyone want to fuck me’ vibes.

“And Avery’s pack? Sleep with anymore of them?”

Elaine wiggled her eyebrows. Subtly, sexily, but a double eyebrow wiggle was funny, and he couldn’t help but laugh.

“I have, in fact. Mason and his Kindred girlfriend made delightful bedfellows.”

“Uh huh. He transform?”

His great grandsire shivered and half closed her eyes. “Oh yes. You cannot imagine how overwhelming it feels to be filled by something so huge.”

“Sounds painful.”

“At first, but the body adapts. You feel ready to burst, but then things swell, engorge, and the friction and pressure become orgasmic.”

“Uh huh. You know I have a perfectly average-sized penis, right?”

Elaine shrugged, chin still on her hands, still on his knee. “If large penetration was all I sought from sex, I would stay at home with some large toys.”

“Some girls do.”

“We are not those girls.” Antoinette laughed, reached out, and plucked at his trunks with a finger. “And how did your meeting with Michael fair?”

“The boss still leaves me alone, for the most part. I’ve been doing a lot of negotiating with Terra Den, and that isn’t exactly fun. Apparently I really pissed Jeremy Long off, when I threatened him about the incendiaries he was making. Guess he didn’t like my Ventrue attitude.” He had to be careful how he worded these replies. They hadn’t included Elaine in their search for answers about the tears and Black Blood. She probably knew about it, considering who she was. And considering who she was, she’d probably concocted her own plans to take advantage of the situation somehow.

“Should I get involved?” Antoinette asked. “None of the corporations I control interact with Terra Den, but that does not mean they could not.”

“It’s fine. I can handle it. What about Garry and Michael at the Primogen meetings?”

“Dogs, barking at each other. But that is how it has always been. I am happy they are talking, even if it is little more than angry noise.”

“Gangrels.” Elaine sighed and rolled her eyes. “Mongrels.”

Antoinette smiled at her friend. “Spoken like a Ventrue.”

“Gangrels are good for little else than being at the forefront of a battle.” Elaine shrugged before she set her hands on the pool edge beside Jack, and pushed herself up. Considering how little a string bikini covered, her breasts rippled against her chest quite a bit, and Jack watched. No point in trying to hide how much he loved that anymore. Elaine chuckled and sat beside him.

“That is hardly fair,” Antoinette said, and she pulled herself up on Jack’s other side. Same thing. She made sure to push her breasts together with her arms, showing off just how absurd they were as they jiggled, before she sat beside him, too. “I have known many Gangrel to be valuable. Two of them are my Primogen, after all.”

Elaine laughed. “They started a war.”

“That is hardly the fault of their blood lineage. Ventrue, Daeva, and Nosferatu are as equally likely to start wars, non?” Shrugging, Antoinette snuggled into Jack’s side, and turned to face him. She leaned down, he tilted his head back, and she half closed her eyes as she brought her lips to his. “Blush for me.”

He did. She sighed happily, and nudged her face into his, burying him in the kiss. He had to put both his hands back against the wet floor to keep from falling over.

A hand slipped its way under his trunks, and teased soft fingertips along his still soft member. He had to do some mental gymnastics to realize Antoinette’s left hand was beside him, and her right hand was on his chest. Which meant Elaine was touching him.

No point in resisting, or being shy about any of this anymore, not after the stuff they’d done. He melted into Antoinette’s kiss, and with her enormous bust squished against his arm and chest, along with Elaine’s expert touch around his cock, he could already feel his fake blood begin to fake pulse.

“We’re not gonna wait?” he asked.



Antoinette sighed, but sat back up straight, and gave Elaine a soft slap on the wrist. She sighed, mimicking Antoinette perfectly, and sat up straight as well.

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They didn't have to wait long. Giggles announced Ashley's arrival, and the three vampires looked back to watch the five kine approach. Ashley wore a yellow bikini with blue dots. Julee wore blue, no dots. Both were very skimpy, almost as skimpy as their mistress's.

And then there were Jack's thralls. Apparently they'd decided to coordinate colors, cause they all wore white. Hell, more than just color, they all wore the same swimsuit. Bikinis, exact same brand. High hip bikinis, unlike Ashley or Julee's, and just as skimpy as Elaine and Antoinette's. Which meant every step they took included a fair amount of jiggle.

Much as Jack was instantly hypnotized by the sight of thralls, his thralls, strutting toward him with full intent on showing off with every step, it was their necks his eyes locked onto. All three of them wore chokers, white chokers that matched their bikinis. As thin as their tiny bikini strings.

Jack looked at Antoinette, and frowned at her. "Your idea?"

"Of course. They are your sex slaves, after all."

"They're not my..." He groaned and rolled his eyes, but he could feel his smile breaking through.

Antoinette grinned down at him, and motioned for the kine to come closer. "Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel, come, swim. The water is warm, and you need not stand on ceremony while in this room." Her grin turned a tiny bit evil. "Elsewhere, I am Prince. But here, we swim, and relax."

Ashley clapped, ran past Elaine, and jumped into the pool. Water splashed over Jack and the elders, but they were already soaked. Now that he was Blushing Life, there was the first shock of getting wet, but the water was warm, and he laughed. God, it did feel nice to relax. This whole night was going to be the sexual equivalent of binging on ice cream and streaming a TV series, a pure, ridiculous indulgence. And maybe an indulgence he deserved, after everything that'd happened.

Julee jumped in after, far gentler, and Jack's thralls took the nearby stairs down instead. They each took excited glances at Jack, looking up him and down; Lei and Rachel hadn't ever seen him near naked, and while Veronica had probably told them what he looked like, it was still a first. He was happy they were happy with what they saw. Not a night went by he didn't thank Julias for making him bust his ass to get in shape.

Of course, their eyes got stuck on Antoinette and Elaine. Anyone with a pulse would get their eyes stuck on those two, considering their bikini tops only had enough front to cover their nipples, and nothing else. The fabric strained.

Jack couldn't help but smile at his thralls as they got comfortable in the water, and more comfortable with the situation. More comfortable as they looked steadily less afraid as Ashley and Julee started playing with some pool toys. But then less comfortable, as they grew more aroused. Old Jack wouldn't have picked up on the signs, the squirming, the flicks of hair over shoulders, the glances. And human Jack wouldn't have noticed the flushing skin, announcing increased blood flow.

He noticed it now, and he noticed they noticed. And he noticed they liked that he noticed their growing interest.

Ashley and Julee had fun, goofing around in the pool, jumping and swimming and diving and hitting each other with pool noodles.

Lei, Rachel, and Veronica had fun too, but it quickly became apparent they were doing more than having fun. They were showing off. Every motion, every jump they made, every dive, every time they bumped into each other, they made sure to do it in a way that showed off their bodies. At first it was actually kinda irritating. He wanted his thralls to have fun, not spend every moment of the night trying to get his attention. But that was what thralls were, mental slaves, and it was stupid of him to expect them to ever do otherwise. Even Ashley and Julee made damn sure Antoinette got eyefuls of their lithe ballerina bodies.

It was the nature of a vampire and thrall or ghoulish relationship. It wasn't balanced, or a two-way street. His thralls would be obsessed with him, until either the Vinculum was broken — not an easy task — or they were embraced, ending the Vinculum in the moment of their death before they awoke as vampires. He doubted he'd ever get comfortable controlling them like this, but then again, they agreed to the contract, and eventually he would embrace them. If they proved themselves as thralls, they'd become ghouls. If they proved themselves as ghouls, they'd become his childer.

“Master,” Veronica said as she swam close. “Will you swim with us?” Brave of her to get this close, actually touching his knees with her hands. She even managed a couple shy glances up at the two elders.

“I think,” Elaine said, “he very much would like to join his pets. But let us move to the hot tub?”

Ashley swam up to them, and set both hands on Elaine's knees. “Yeah! Hot tub! So much better for sitting around, talking, and touching.” Much as Ashley loved her mistress, she and Elaine had grown pretty close, physically speaking.

“Agreed,” Antoinette said, and she stood up. Which had everyone pausing and watching. “Come.”

Jack got into the hot tub first, opposite of the two-step stair. Antoinette came in, sat on his left, then Elaine on his right, each strutting and swaying hips. Then came Ashley and Julee, who found random places to sit, only to drift to other places every few seconds. Then came his thralls, and they sat by the stairs so they could look directly at Jack, each of them biting bottom lips or fidgeting with their fingers.

It was like, a perverted, grown-up version of being a kid in a candy store.

Antoinette leaned down, and whispered to him. “Whatever you want, my love, they will do. And I would like to see that.”

Jack grinned up at his lover. Yeah, of course she would. She’d really, really gotten off on seeing him get more aggressive and dominant with Veronica. It was hard to be dominant with Antoinette, considering how much bigger she was than him, and curse aside, a dozen times stronger than him. But it was easy to be dominant with his thralls, and each time he did, it had Antoinette boiling.

“Rachel, Lei,” he said, “stand in the middle of the tub, and take off your tops.” He kept his voice solid, but quiet, almost teasing. He’d practiced this voice, the ‘sexy dominant man’ voice. Apparently it worked.

Both thralls sucked in surprised breaths, glanced at each other, blushed bright, and stood up.

“Yes, master,” they said together, before they walked to the center of the tub. Slowly, they undid the knots of their tops, first the bottom string so the small triangles of the tops dangled over their nipples, and then the top string. They let the tops float away in the water, and Ashley snatched them both up with a giggle, before tossing them out of the tub.

Rachel's breasts were utterly huge, almost as big as Elaine's. The blonde pixie cut combined with being a little taller than Jack almost made her seem like a smaller version of Elaine, too. Unlike Elaine, her nipples were pierced, with tiny studs in each.

Lei's breasts reminded Jack of Jessy, considering both women were athletic, though Lei wasn't quite as muscular as the Gangrel. But like Jessy, she had larger breasts than a woman as fit as her would normally have, and Jack licked a fang as he looked between her abs to her large, tan breasts and dark tan nipples.

You're obsessed with breasts, dude. Just accept it.

"Come closer," he said, voice darkening a little. Just playing, having a bit of fun, but both thralls shivered at his tone.

They came closer. Time to see if they really wanted to get in deep with how sexual these nights could get. They were allowed to back out, he'd made that clear.

"Veronica, come, and do the same."

Veronica slipped between her two new companions, and made the same dance when taking off her top. Heavy pale breasts, with pierced nipples. More bottom heavy than her fellow thralls'.

"Now, come closer."

They came closer.

"Closer."

They came closer, close enough their knees touched his, and the knees of the two elders. Poor thralls. Veronica had been through this sort of teasing a few dozen times, and it always had her shivering and blushing with excitement. But for Lei and Rachel, this was entirely new, and they glowed red with embarrassment, and

desire. He didn't have to compliment them. He damn well knew his eyes told them how extremely hot he found them, and the erection pushing up against his trunks did the same.

“Now, press up against each other. Kiss, and touch. I want to see my pets ... my slaves, pleasure each other.” Calling them slaves irked him, for a moment. But Antoinette was right. In the heat of the moment, with their hearts pumping and their nipples swollen, his thralls wanted to be treated like sex slaves. It was a fantasy. And a pretty damn compelling one, considering how all three girls shivered, despite how warm the water was.

They turned to face each other, kept him in the corner of their eyes, and hugged each other. Three girls, topless, in thongs and chokers, squishing their breasts together, all because he asked them to. Yeah, his ego was going to burst.

Jack slid his trunks off, earning some quiet sighs of delight from the girls, and he leaned back against the wall of the hot tub. He almost masturbated, but decided against it. Better to keep everything building up, so—

“Ashley, Julee,” Antoinette said, “join them.” She looked down at Jack. “If you do not mind, my love.”

“Not at all.” Power couple? Power couple.

Lei and Rachel gasped as they looked to the two ballerinas, but Ashley only giggled as she slipped out of her bikini, top and bottom. Before Julee could so much as say something, Ashley yanked her friend out of her bikini too, and pulled her over to join the three other humans.

Ashley set her body against Lei's back, pressing her breasts into her, and slipped a hand around her and under her thong. Julee did the same for Rachel. Veronica, between everyone, managed a quick

peek at Jack, before she melted into the roaming, fingering hands of Lei and Rachel.

Rachel leaned down, and set her lips to Veronica's. With Julee's naked body against her, and fingers inside her, hidden under the bikini thong, Rachel melted quickly, and her kiss on Veronica was deep. Her hand under Veronica's thong grew faster, as did Lei's. Veronica managed to turn around, peeked at Jack again, breathing heavy, and she kissed Lei the same way Rachel had kissed her.

Five women, rubbing against each other, with the three in the center burying each other in slow, hungry kisses. It took every ounce of willpower Jack had to not jump and drink them right there.

Elaine took off her top. Antoinette did the same. Before Jack could say anything, both elders stood up, and moved into the group. He thought maybe they'd go to Ashley and Julee, but nope, Antoinette slipped in beside Julee, lowered herself down, and pressed her chest into Rachel. The blonde woman stared, eyes wide, but they rolled up and closed as Antoinette rubbed her body against her, and slipped her fingers under her thong. Elaine got behind Lei, wrapped a hand around her throat, and slipped her other hand under her thong, too.

The moment any girl didn't have someone pressing into her, Elaine or Antoinette arranged it so they did. Ashley and Julee frequently found themselves ducking down so they could bury their faces in all the breasts, either the vampires', or the thralls'. Ashley in particular was eager to taste the new women, and she spent most of the time with her lips around Rachel's enormous breasts, experimenting with her tongue on pierced nipples. Rachel loved it.

Antoinette took Veronica's hand, and guided it under her own bikini bottom, before taking the girl's head, and pressing it to her breast. Elaine pressed her butt into Julee, and Julee eased her

fingers into Elaine. So many fingers, feeling, caressing, entering, with breasts pressing to shoulders and backs, and other breasts, in a mess of squashed skin.

But no one came. They got close, but always Elaine or Antoinette stopped them. Lei at one point clutched Julee tight to her tan breasts, and gyrated against Antoinette hard as her voice melted into whimpers. But whimpers turned into desperate mewls as Antoinette stopped fingering the girl.

For fifteen minutes, Jack watched all seven women get closer and closer to the edge. Every single one of them made sure Jack got to see everything. Fingers playing around underneath bikini bottoms. Breasts squished, molding against each other, malleable flesh conforming against other breasts, shoulders, and backs. And moans that got louder and more desperate. But the two elders made sure not a one of them climaxed.

Antoinette stepped back first, evil grin only growing. “Everyone is prepared, my love.” She let out a practiced, perfect hungry growl, and stepped through the water closer to him. Her pink nipples were absolutely swollen against her pale skin. “But hot water makes for terrible sex. Perhaps you would like to lie down?”

All seven women moved over to him, and they lined up, shoulder to shoulder. Every one of them looked ready to burst, though Elaine and Antoinette used it to look even more in control of their sexuality, while the five others looked like they were going to fall over and masturbate if someone didn’t help him.

“Yeah, I think I will.” He stood up, and got out of the tub. They weren’t the only ones who looked ready to burst. His cock was so hard, it hurt. It only got worse when his three thralls moaned — on purpose — as he stood up, exposing his body entirely. Water droplets trickling down the body did add to the sexy factor, no lie.



Antoinette nodded to her two ghouls. “Fetch us several of the thicker towels, if you please.”

The two ghouls jumped out of the hot tub, not bothering with the stairs, and returned with a mountain of very fluffy towels. Without missing a beat, they threw them on the floor by the tub, stacked them, and created a makeshift bed. They held out their hands, Jack took them, and the two ghouls lowered him down onto the towels like he was royalty. It was a game to them, one they’d played before and were excited to again.

Antoinette came out of the tub first, hips swaying with each step as she stepped over Jack, and grinned down at him.

“Pets,” she said, “prepare him.”

Ashley and Julee giggled as they got down beside him, each on opposite sides, and Ashley grabbed the nearby lubricant they used. Thick silicone-based stuff for fighting off water. The blonde ballerina wasted no time, and drenched his hard cock in it before she wrapped it in her fingers and spread the lube around it.

Antoinette stepped over him, and smiled like the devil as she lowered herself down onto him. Ashley shifted over to Jack’s shoulder, held onto his cock, and shivered as she watched her mistress pull aside her bikini thong, and lower her pink slit down over his length. Jack shivered too. No matter how many times he had sex with the Prince, it was always amazing how she knew exactly how to move, how to squeeze, how to instantly bury his cock in pleasure with her gripping, wet muscles.

She straddled him, knees snug to his side, and looked to the hot tub still full of ladies.

“Come join me. If you are to serve my lover, your master, you should learn to serve me.” She curled a finger at the three thralls. “Sit with me, and suckle upon my breasts.”

“All three of them?” Jack asked.

“Ben oui. Come.”

Jack chuckled, and motioned for his pets to do just that. They did, each of them blushing and quivering. Still on edge, still dying to have someone push them over, his three pets sat down beside Antoinette, Veronica and Leilani on his left, Rachel on his right. They gulped as they looked down at Jack, eyes sliding up and down his body before up Antoinette’s, where her thong was pulled aside and her pink lips were spread around Jack’s cock, before they looked up to the elder vampire’s gigantic breasts.

Lei and Veronica, shoulder to shoulder, leaned forward. Lei was closer to Jack’s head, and she had to put a hand down on Antoinette’s thigh to get leverage, but she managed to get her lips against Antoinette’s breasts, closer to the inside, while Veronica put her lips to the outside. After a few kisses led to an encouraging, blissful sigh from Antoinette, the two thralls brought their lips to her nipple. Jack couldn’t see very well with Lei’s head in the way, but from how close they were, it was obvious they weren’t just kissing Antoinette’s breast. They were kissing each other, with her swollen nipple between them.

Rachel stared at the sight for a few moments, before she leaned in to Antoinette’s free breasts, and set her lips around the Prince’s other nipple. And she made sure to stay out of the way, so Jack could see how her lips enveloped and pulled on his lover’s areola until Antoinette’s large nipple filled her mouth.

The reaction was instant. Antoinette loved to have her breasts played with, especially her nipples. To have three girls kissing them had her insides clamping down, hard, and Jack groaned. His three pets turned and looked at him, and each of them blushed and smiled as they realized what happened. They looked back up at

Antoinette, fear and anxiety melting away, and resumed kissing and licking.

Jack turned, and watched Elaine slowly step out of the hot tub. Her eyes were on him, and she grinned at him as she made a showing of leaving the hot water, her long blonde hair flat to her back and shoulders. She reached up and slid her fingers back over her hair, draining some water from them, and looking exactly like a model doing a pool photoshoot as she did. Everyone looked at her, especially the two ghouls, and Elaine grinned at them before Jack again.

Elaine stepped over Jack's legs, and got down on her knees behind Antoinette. Antoinette leaned back against Elaine, and Elaine pressed her chest into Antoinette's back as she snuggled up behind her, reached around her waist, and slid her fingers down Antoinette's stomach, her bikini bottom, and onto her clitoris.

Antoinette held perfectly still, curled a hand onto the back of Veronica's head, another onto Rachel's, and held them closer to her, encouraging them to more thoroughly kiss her bust. With Elaine's fingers caressing and massaging her swollen clitoris, Antoinette's insides clamped like a vise. It was a game they'd played before, just not with this many participants. Jack had to hold still while Antoinette was buried in pleasure, forced to endure her powerful grip on his cock, and how hot and increasingly drenched her insides were. Boiling heat, combined with pulses of clenching muscles. She was going to edge him to orgasm.

"I trust, my love, that Leilani and Rachel will be joining us regularly?" Antoinette nodded with a motherly smile down at the thralls, and she ran her fingers through their hair as they continued to kiss her body.

"I—" He sucked in a breath as Antoinette squeezed, hard. Toying with him. "I plan on it."

The two girls managed quick peeks at him, more excited smiles, before getting back to Antoinette.

“Wonderful.” Antoinette motioned to Ashley and Julee. “Elaine deserves pleasure, my pets. Come, take a leg each, and see to her needs.”

Jack raised a brow as he glanced between the two ballerinas. Both crawled past his thralls, past Antoinette, past Elaine, and got behind her. Ashley sat over his left leg, Julee his right, and both of them lowered themselves until he felt their smooth pussies squash against his quads. He couldn't see what they did with their hands, but whatever it was, it required more lube. Ashley soaked her hand in it, and got to work on Elaine, while Julee had already been reaching between Elaine and Antoinette's body to get access to Elaine's front.

Julee was probably fingering her pussy, and Ashley was fingering her ass. Judging from the sounds Elaine made, it wouldn't be long before she came.

But Antoinette came first. She shuddered, and tightened her grip on Veronica and Rachel's heads.

“Stop,” she whispered. Everyone did, though she still kept the two girls pinned to her breasts. For Jack, it was all he could do to not use his Kindred strength and drive his hips up into her to push himself over the edge. Her insides edged him closer and closer, but without enough friction, it'd take him forever to cum this way. Antoinette, on the other hand, had four other people pleasuring her.

The muscles spasms of her insides were so damn tight and pleasuring, it was almost torture.

Antoinette, coming down from her orgasm, reached over, and picked Lei up.

“W-What!? I—oh...” Lei bit her bottom lip as Antoinette turned her until she was facing Jack, before she sat the girl down on his lower abs, her ass snug against Antoinette’s thighs and pelvis.

Tall as Antoinette was, and with how utterly huge her breasts were, they pressed around Lei’s shoulders and outside them, so Veronica and Rachel had no problem finding her nipples again. They resumed their work, gentler this time, letting Antoinette’s hyper sensitivity settle. But it was Leilani Antoinette had her attention on now.

“My lover,” she said, “is quite a handsome man, is he not?” She chuckled as she hooked her arms under Lei’s arms, and then around Lei’s stomach before reaching down between the girl’s legs. Breasts ridiculously gigantic, her arms had to hook outside and underneath them so she could get her hands between Lei’s thighs, causing her breasts to spill outside along Lei’s shoulders and arms where Rachel and Veronica continued to suckle.

Lei looked terrified. She had no idea what was about to happen. Her tan skin glistened with water and sweat, and her large breasts and dark nipples shuddered against her chest.

“He is. I ... I really like these.” Lei pointed down at his chest, and his upper abs.

Jack grinned up at her, took her hand, and pressed it down against his stomach. Lei shivered, and ran a finger along the indentions of his abs. She had abs of her own, but they didn’t have the same hard chisel Jack’s did.

“Would you like to cum?” Antoinette asked. “You may cum for your master, while your master master cums inside me. I am sure he will enjoy watching you squirm.”

“I—nn!” Lei gasped, and set both her hands against Jack’s chest, as Antoinette slipped both her hands under Lei’s white thong, and

sank fingers into her body.

Jack reached up, wrapped his hands around each of Lei's breasts, and massaged them while caressing her swollen nipples with his thumbs. Normally he'd use his mouth, like Veronica and Rachel were, but he couldn't sit up with Lei straddling his stomach. It was nice like this, lying back, and touching his thrall for the first time as she melted into the touch of his lover.

Lei came quickly. Her mouth fell open in a moan, and she leaned forward as she grabbed his shoulders with an almost desperate grip. She stared at him, eyes struggling to stay open, wet dark hair falling down around her face as she shook.

Chuckling, Antoinette reached up, hooked a hand around Lei's throat, and pulled her back up until she was pinned to her chest. Veronica and Rachel continued to suckle on Antoinette, growing bolder and using a hand to massage and caress the huge, pale pillows, but their eyes switched to Lei, and they stared as Antoinette tightened her grip around Lei's throat. And considering Antoinette was the greatest sexpert in the world, she knew exactly how to keep fingering the thrall during her orgasm. Antoinette would never be satisfied with her victim having a simple orgasm, one and done. She had to milk it, and turn the girl into a quivering mess riding the edge of overstimulation until she couldn't breathe anymore.

Jack smiled at Lei as she melted back into Antoinette, shaking, one hand around her throat, the other under her white bikini bottom. He continued to play with her large breasts, squeezing them softly, molding them to the shape of his palms, and enjoying how her hard nipples pressed into them, while the gorgeous girl trembled. But then Antoinette came again; Elaine hadn't stopped playing with her either. The tall blonde grinned over Antoinette's head, straight down at him, and pressed her body into Antoinette's back, smooshing her body into her, as she had Antoinette sighing in pleasure and clenching on Jack's cock.

And then Jack came. He lowered his hands, set them on Lei's hips, and smiled as he let out a small groan as Antoinette milked him. It was enough to have every single girl — except Ashley and Julee — looking at him. Apparently they liked his quiet groans.

Veronica and Rachel, after a gentle push from Antoinette, inched closer to Lei than the Prince. They leaned into Lei, pressed their bodies into hers, and kissed her.

Jack shuddered as he met Antoinette's eyes, and she blew him a kiss as she squeezed on his cock in rhythm. She moved, just a little, a small grinding motion that nudged her back and forth on him, and into Lei and Elaine's body, while she continued to finger the squirming girl. Pleasure overload. Jack's eyes fell back down to his thrall, and he groaned again as Lei's mouth found Veronica's. Veronica's hand slipped into Jack's, entwining with his fingers around Lei's breast. Rachel caught on and did the same, getting her fingers in with his around Lei's other breast, and soon she pressed in closer and nudged her nose into Lei's neck. Lei turned to look at her, and melted into Rachel's kiss as the woman set her lips to hers.

Antoinette knelt up, and his cock slipped out of her, tight muscles milking him until his length pulled forward and pressed to Lei's butt. Before Lei knew what was happening, Antoinette lifted her hips up, and dropped her down onto Jack's cock with zero preparation.

“Nnng!” Lei managed a gasp, but it turned into a guttural groan as Veronica and Rachel lowered their kisses down her jaw, neck, and chest, until they wrapped around her nipples. Apparently whichever girl Jack was having sex with got the luxury treatment, two girls kissing and licking her breasts. Strong as Antoinette was, she also had no trouble taking the girl's hips, and pushing her back and forth, hard.

Jack shivered. He'd just cum, and his glans was still sensitive. Not as sensitive as Lei though. With three girls doing things to her, and his cock inside her, the girl melted in seconds, shivering again as her body slipped over the edge.

Jack sat up. Rachel and Veronica backed away, confused, making room for Jack as he slipped his arms up Rachel's sides, then behind her, and held the trembling woman to him as he gave into his hunger. There was nothing like how a woman's body squeezed when Kissed, and he growled into Lei's ear before doing exactly that.

"Master! Oh ... oh god..." Pinned between him and Antoinette, with the Prince still forcing her hips back and forth, making the thrall fuck Jack whether she wanted to or not, Lei could do nothing. She went completely limp, and mewled openly as her body fell into the Kiss. Her quivering insides drenched him in juices. Her noises faded, growing weaker. Her legs quivered, even as her arms dangled. And Jack growled louder as he drained her.

Warm, thick blood coated his insides, and quickly shot out from his stomach into his limbs, pumping fake life through him as pure ecstasy. But he didn't drain her into a post-Kiss coma. He came close though, before he pulled back, licked his lips, and lay back down. Lei, still pinned to Antoinette's chest, sat there on his cock, trembling, whimpering, and drooling a little.

"That ... looked amazing," Rachel said. "She's still shaking."

Chuckling, Antoinette worked the exhausted girl back and forth a few times more, but eventually slowed, and let Lei come down from her orgasm. Jack expected his lover to pick the girl up and replace her with another, but instead, Antoinette slid out from between all the bodies, and crawled over to Jack, giant breasts swaying underneath her. Licking her lips, she sat on her side and hip, and slipped her thighs under his head, giving him his favorite thing: a



lap. And the angle meant her breasts nudged against his forehead, but didn't block his vision.

Elaine replaced Antoinette, and lifted Lei off him. "Rachel next then?"

"Oh god yes." The taller of the three thralls straddled Jack, even as Lei, still trembling, lay beside him and snuggled into his side, breast against his ribs. Rachel's eyes were on his cock, and she reached down and guided it up toward her, before lowering herself down. Again, a new sheathe of drenched, hot, clenching muscle enveloped him. And with a belly full of fresh blood, Jack's cock was hard as stone.

Unlike Lei, Rachel didn't melt. She got hungry. She met Antoinette's eyes, and the Prince nodded to her with a playful smile, before nodding to Veronica. Some silent girl talk. Whatever they said, Rachel reached over for Veronica, and pulled the girl up onto Jack's stomach. Veronica let out a small squeak, but it melted away as Rachel pulled her in close, until Veronica was forced to get her legs over Rachel's. Whatever kisses Lei shared with Rachel and Veronica moments before was nothing compared to how Rachel locked lips with Veronica now, hugging and holding her tight as she ground her hips back and forth on Jack. And with how busty both women were, their breasts squashed against each other and pushed outward to the sides of their chests. Jack could see them rippling against each other, even with Veronica's back to him blocking some of his view.

And then Elaine came in closer. As if replacing Antoinette, she pressed her breasts against Rachel's back, put her hands on her hips, and helped grind her down against Jack. And she wasn't gentle. Before long, the slightly smaller blonde was bucking back and forth on Jack, with Veronica held tight to her, all at Elaine's whim. A minute later, Rachel held onto Veronica for dear life as she lost control, and came. Everyone held still for a few moments as

they let Rachel tremble on his cock, her insides squeezing and milking, but Elaine forced her to move again before she'd finished recovering. Just like Antoinette, Elaine knew how to make a girl cum long and cum hard, until the toes curled and legs trembled.

Elaine came again as well. She peeked back behind her at Antoinette's two ghouls still fingering her, and grinned down over Jack's two thralls as they buried each other in desperate kisses again, but her eyes locked onto Jack. Whatever Ashley and Julee were doing to her out of sight, Elaine licked her lips with obvious pleasure. Like Antoinette, an orgasm wasn't enough to break her control, and she continued to make Rachel fuck him, even as she shuddered.

"May I, Jack?" Elaine asked, and she nodded down toward Rachel.

Jack slipped an arm under Lei, and helped her cuddle into his side. "Sure."

Elaine's eyes lit up with a new hunger, a vampire's hunger. Before Veronica or Rachel knew what was happening, Elaine leaned down, set her lips onto Rachel's neck, and sank her fangs into her.

Jack knew it the moment it happened. Rachel's whole body went rigid for a single moment, before the overpowering pleasure and relaxing bliss of the Kiss hit her. Her insides clamped down and muscle spasms pulsed through every inch of her pussy, milking him hard as Elaine drank her, and forced her hips back and forth. To an elder, a Kiss was hardly enough reason to stop fucking.

Rachel's eyes opened wide, and her kiss broke. Veronica leaned in over Rachel's other shoulder, exposing Rachel's face to Jack, and she ground her body into her new thrall friend. Both Rachel and Elaine stared at Jack, Elaine's eyes lighting up with the pleasure and power of the Kiss. It left Rachel drained and slipping into a coma, but it lit Elaine's body on fire, and her eyes glared at Jack with

predatory need. Rachel could barely keep her eyes open, and Jack found himself looking between the two of them, admiring the contrast as Elaine only grew hornier and more energetic, while Rachel slipped away, even as Elaine continued to make her fuck Jack with the strength of her hands on her hips.

Before Jack could cum again, Elaine broke her Kiss, and lifted Rachel off his cock. The feel of her quivering insides squeezing him as he slipped out of her almost broke him, and he ignored the pleasure as best he could. But, damn, he was going to burst the moment someone did anything else to him. And Elaine knew it. She grinned at him as she set Rachel down beside him, and the nearly sleeping thrall didn't hesitate to cuddle into Jack's side, opposite of Lei, squashing her breasts into his ribs and chest and resting her head on his shoulder as Jack moved his arm out for her.

Elaine grabbed Veronica, pulled her thong aside, and sank her down onto Jack's cock, still facing Elaine.

"Nn! M-Master, I—" Veronica stopped as she looked over her shoulder, and noticed Jack's expression. She probably recognized his O-face. "Master..."

Jack did his best to smile for her, but pulsing waves of hot cum shot up through his cock into her, and he desperately wanted to thrust his hips up. But he couldn't. Julee and Ashley were still both riding one leg each, drenching his quads and thighs in their juices. Elaine was straddling both legs near his pelvis, both ghouls pressed to her back and butt. Veronica sat on his cock, facing away from him, her body and breasts squashed into Elaine's. His head rested on Antoinette's lap, and Lei and Rachel were both snuggled into his sides. He couldn't move without disturbing the giant mess of limbs.

Veronica moved though. She ground her body back and forth on him, her groans getting desperate and turning into mewls as she milked him. Unable to keep looking at him, she clutched Elaine's

hips and buried her face between the much taller woman's breasts, as she did everything she could to milk Jack like Antoinette had taught her. All Jack could do was lie there, and watch the young woman dance on his cock.

"May I?" Elaine asked, again. Someone was feeling greedy tonight.

Jack forced down a groan, barely. "Yes. But slowly."

"Master? I—" Veronica squeaked as Elaine pulled the thrall's legs over her hips, clutched the small girl tight to her, leaned down, and sank her fangs into Veronica's neck. Poor Veronica erupted into whimpers and arched backward; Elaine was so much taller than her, she had to. One of Elaine's hands held the small of her back, and dipped her back as the other clutched her ass hard, and forced her to keep moving back and forth as Elaine drained her.

Thankfully, Elaine listened to Jack. She Kissed Veronica slowly, taking her time drawing the thrall's blood into her. Sex with Veronica had only just begun, and Jack would feel guilty cutting her fun short. Elaine knew exactly what Jack wanted though, and she made sure Veronica came her brains out. A very long, slow, drawn out Kiss, all the while making the girl grind, and even bounce on his cock, stimulation Jack desperately wanted.

But before another orgasm came his way, Elaine gently lifted Veronica off his cock, and set the exhausted, trembling girl atop Rachel. Gravity ensured she slid down onto Rachel's back, spooning her, and from the panting breaths, Jack knew she was thoroughly exhausted.

"Elaine," Jack said. "You are a greedy bitch."

Elaine laughed as she crawled forward, breasts jiggling underneath her as she got over his pelvis. With a wink, she undid the knot of her red bikini bottom, and tossed it aside.

“I am your great grandsire. You owe me tribute.”

“Uh huh. I—” He sucked in a breath and watched, as Elaine lowered herself down onto his cock. He knew that angle.

He never considered himself an anal guy, but the way Elaine eased her round ass down onto him, leaning back as she did so he could see her empty slit shiver, even drip with juices from previous orgasms, as his cock slowly entered her ass, was glorious. Julee and Ashley had definitely prepared her.

His three exhausted, drained, barely conscious thralls all lifted their heads slightly, and stared with dreamy eyes at the sight of Elaine’s empty slit hovering a couple inches over his pelvis as her ass molded to him, and her asshole took him to the base.

Ashley and Julee both slid in closer, and pressed their chests against Elaine’s back as the elder vampire leaned back to let them both slip under her arms. With a devil grin Jack recognized from Antoinette, Elaine slowly ground her ass on him, dancing in a slow, swaying motion, as both of Antoinette’s ghouls reached between her thighs, and slipped their fingers into her pussy.

All three of Jack’s thralls let out tiny moans as they stared.

With Elaine leaning back, her heavy breasts partly flattened against her ribs, and they softly rippled with her dancing motions. The angle she sat at and leaned back on meant his hard cock pushed forward, toward her belly, and she made sure to keep every inch of him in her ass as she clenched the ring of tight muscle around the base of his length. She liked the feeling of his cock pressing toward her pussy like this, from inside her ass. And he shivered in bliss as she danced on him, as both ghouls slipped more fingers into her slit, spreading her and filling her. He could feel it through the walls of her flesh.

Elaine came again quickly. Probably her third or fourth orgasm, considering how long both ghouls had been playing with her. Ashley and Julee pulled their hands free, and almost like they'd planned this, they both gently pulled Elaine's vulva apart, just a little tension against the skin near the thigh, allowing everyone to see Elaine's insides and how they clamped with muscle spasms. A juicy orgasm that had more of her cum dripping out of her and down her skin, soon reaching her ass, her thighs, and Jack's abdomen.

Chuckling, Antoinette reached forward. She still sat on her side, one hip to the floor, legs bent slightly and creating a nice lap for Jack's head. But with one hand against the floor for support, she could easily reach forward with the other, breasts sliding over Jack's face as her long arm found her friend's pussy, and eased two fingers into her.

Ashley and Julee were extremely well versed in the art of sex by this point. But Antoinette was Antoinette. Jack didn't know exactly how she got it so perfectly every time, but she knew exactly how to curl her fingers, what pressure to use, what motions, to have Elaine cumming again in seconds. And unlike Ashley and Julee, she kept her fingers inside her old friend, fingering her through her orgasm.

"You realize Jack is my lover, before he is your great grandchilde, oui?" Antoinette asked, and she fingered Elaine harder, quickly bringing up another orgasm out of the very-slightly trembling vampire. Ashley and Julee slipped off Jack's legs, knelt beside him, and watched their mistress's work with hungry eyes.

"Blood before romance, dear." Only a tiny bit of husk came through in Elaine's voice, mid orgasm.

"I hardly believe that. And you are no blood relative."

Elaine grinned at Antoinette, leaned forward, and set her hands on Jack's shoulders. Antoinette removed her arm so Elaine was free to take charge. And take charge she did. Jack gulped as the tall

woman's huge breasts swung back and forth over his head, as his great grandsire rocked back and forth on his cock hard. Finally, a proper fucking rhythm. Every orgasm he'd had so far had been edged, or with Elaine or Antoinette grinding the girls back and forth on him, pleasure reaching almost painful levels before his body decided it was time to cum. But Elaine bounced on his cock with a purpose, and she grinned at him as she slid her hands down to his chest, and pressed down on him as she bounced.

He came. He grabbed her hips, and now that Ashely and Julee were sitting beside her and not on his legs anymore, he thrust up into her, managing to pull a few quiet moans out of her, before she came again as well. It was cheating, really. She'd just fed, on two kine. Her belly was full of blood and her body was on fire. A random feather on her back could have made her cum. But damn, it was still amazing that a tall, busty woman was riding him cowgirl, and cumming on him as he fucked her ass.

"My god," Lei whispered, and she nudged her head against his chest as she looked to Elaine's thighs, and where her empty pussy dripped a couple more drops onto him as he pounded up into her. Hot, thick gushes of cum his flowed out of him with each hard clench of his muscles, filling her ass until he could feel it leak out of her and join hers.

Elaine slowed as her trembling came to a stop, and Jack slowed as his pleasure sparks finally died down. The damn woman timed it, a rhythm to make sure they came together. Christ it felt amazing.

"There. I think I am satisfied." Nodding, Elaine knelt up off his cock, and slid in behind Lei. The kine gasped, scared again, but eventually melted into Jack as Elaine pressed up against Lei's back.

Jack looked to his left. Rachel had moved down so her head was on his chest, snuggling his side, and Veronica behind her scooted up a bit so she could rest her head on his shoulder, squashed to

Rachel's back and Antoinette's leg. She wanted to be touching him too. Lei shifted down so she could snuggle into his side lower down, giving Elaine the room to snuggle in over Lei's head, and rest her head on Jack's shoulder, opposite of Veronica, both of them close enough to nudge their heads into his jaw.

Ashley and Julee blinked at the six of them, then at each other.

"Oh my god!" Ashley clapped her hands, and giggled like a mad scientist as she crawled onto Jack. "We survived."

Julee's eyes widened, realization kicking in, and she clapped once as she followed her friend onto Jack.

"We never survive."

"Come now my pets," Antoinette said, "that is not true ... is it?"

They both nodded.

"We always get Kissed early on," Ashley said. She beamed as she gestured to the three thralls. "Not tonight!"

"Sorry," Jack said. "I didn't—"

Ashley grabbed his cum-soaked cock, and sat on it with all the grace of an ox. Well, that was sudden. He winced for a moment as she handled him with far too little gentleness; an erect penis wasn't exactly immune to pain. But once he was inside, he shivered as the excited ghoul bounced and danced on him. She was dripping wet, and very, very tight.

Ashley grabbed Julee, and pulled her up onto Jack's stomach, facing her. With more giggles, Ashley pulled Julee in close, until she was pressed up against her like Veronica had been to Elaine or Rachel a bit ago. And in the same way, she hugged her close, and set her lips to her friend's.



Antoinette chuckled, but didn't interfere. Normally she'd have said something, to remind her pets they weren't to do things without her permission. But they were right. They rarely got to 'survive' a whole night.

Everyone watched as Ashley and Julee took turns, neither of them going more than few minutes before they traded off who rode Jack. It suddenly became a game for the two excited ghouls: who could make Jack cum first. Julee was, naturally, horribly embarrassed by the game, but both girls had been on edge so long, it didn't take much to have them getting into it, and cumming seconds later.

They really did like each other. Maybe even loved each other. They were intimate friends before Antoinette found them, and watching them now, it was easy to imagine. They kissed each other, hugged, massaged, and ground against each other, as they traded off who had Jack inside them.

And with a belly full of Lei's blood keeping him hard and boiling, they both got to make him cum once each.

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Jack took his thralls back to his mansion. They had their own rooms, and now that Leilani and Rachel were fully bound by the Vinculum, they were invited to stay as well. It wasn't easy, getting his exhausted, drained thralls into some clothes so he could take them outside and into the limousine, and the fact all three girls took every opportunity to drape themselves on him made it even harder. Almost like drunk girlfriends who couldn't stand under their own power. Three of them.

But he managed. With Elaine's help, he got them into the limousine, and they went back to his place. The moment the car pulled up into his long driveway, two crows circled above, waiting.

Once Jack opened the front door, Mulder and Scully flew down, and into the mansion.

“Your pets serve you well,” Elaine said.

Jack, with Veronica in his arms, looked back to her and nodded toward the limousine. “Wanna help?”

She blinked at him, like he’d just suggested she pick up dog shit with her bare hands.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Mulder. Scully. Go back and keep an eye on my thralls please?” After a few annoyed caws, his two friends flew back out, and landed on the limousine. “Thank you.”

Elaine grinned at him as she followed through the mansion halls. “I am your great grandsire, an esteemed dragon, and elder Kindred. I am not your assistant.”

“Uh huh.”

It took a minute to get to Veronica’s room, big as the damn mansion was. He’d given her free rein to decorate it however she wanted, and she’d taken that to heart. Gone was the rich red and royal golds, now replaced with pinks and blues; she had a thing for sky blue, hair included. Stuffed animals, a laptop with stickers on it, a white cabinet with color trinkets and toys inside. Decorations on the walls, felt pictures with words of vague, meaningless advice on them. But at least one of the cute posters was funny. ‘Wake a sleeping princess at your own peril.’ He’d laughed when he saw it.

He tucked her into bed. She tried to stay awake, to say something, but all she managed was a quick smile before she passed out. A glass of water and some multivitamins stood on the white nightstand beside her bed. She’d need them.

Time for the other two.

He scooped Lei out of the car next. Fast asleep. Their rooms weren't setup yet, and he didn't want them waking up disoriented and confused, in a room they didn't know. So, he brought Lei into Veronica's room, and tucked her into bed with her new colleague.

And then of course his mind wandered. Ashley and Julee had been all over each other, while riding him. That'd been damn hot. And the way his thralls had been all over each other had been basically every man's dream. He hadn't expected them to get so into it with each other, but he did tell them they were free to be sexual with each other, whether he was around or not.

So of course now he had images in his mind of his three thralls fucking each other, and then him and Antoinette walking in, catching them by surprise, and punishing them appropriately.

One more to go. After retrieving her from the car, he tucked Rachel into the bed, and smiled down at his thralls. Three beautiful women, all deceptively smart and aware. And with some more years under their belts, ghouls, trained in weapons and martial arts. And sex. He really was living the dream.

A dream with a nightmare looming around the corner. They still didn't know what to do about the tears. They'd investigated, found some of the ones Natasha had predicted, but no way to seal them. So while Natasha and the werewolves looked for ways to do that, Jack, Damien, and Antoinette looked for ways to deal with Black Blood.

He kinda wished they switched jobs. Sneaking around, looking for any information he could on how to deal with Black Blood was like cutting random wires of an active bomb. A nuclear bomb.

“Does the necklace continue to serve you?” Elaine asked, following him back into the lobby. Damn woman hadn't lifted a finger to help him, and had enjoyed every minute of watching him do the labor.

“You know it does.”

Mulder and Scully sat on the stair railings, one on each, and they both cawed at Elaine; once, and quietly.

“That is good. And I do believe I have uncovered something that may be of interest to you, in regards to the curse.”

“Shit, really?”

“Mhmm.”

“Anything to do with how you got rid of the curse?”

“I...” Sighing, she sat down on the lobby stairs. That, was strange. She knew he liked to sit on the stairs often, but seeing her do it was straight up odd. “I have information regarding that as well, but I do not think you will like it.”

“Oh.” Jack sat down beside her. “That’s why you came with me tonight.”

“Indeed.”

He took a deep, useless breath. “Alright, hit me.”

“With which information?”

“What information did you get about how you got rid of the curse?”

He almost wished he didn’t ask. Try as Elaine might, she couldn’t hide the look of shame and guilt. They were subtle of course, just tiny hints in her eyes, unnoticeable to someone who didn’t know her. But he’d been around her for many months now. He knew her well enough.

“I committed diablerie.”

Jack slowly looked away as he flexed his arms, hands clutching at his knees. He stood up, and paced in front of her, both his birds watching from the front railing posts. Black Blood had been right, then.

It wasn't like Kindred didn't commit murder. Jack had killed before, and diablerie was killing another vampire. Except it was more than that. He didn't know if souls existed, or if some kind of energy at a level beyond human consciousness existed, or any of that shit. But he knew something did, and Julias had explained to him in no uncertain terms just how fucked up it was to commit diablerie.

You drank another vampire to death, and beyond death. You drank them until everything they were, everything deeper than skin and flesh, was consumed. It was the most fucked up thing a vampire could do. And far as Jack knew, any Prince in the world would have a diablerist executed.

She was trusting him a lot, telling him this. God damn it.

He took another useless breath, and after a minute of equally useless pacing, he sat back down beside Elaine.

“Alright. Tell me more.”

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~~Author's Note~~

Ok, that was three chapters of sex. Woops! Time to focus on story for a bit.

## Chapter 159

~~Jack~~

“Not long after I sired Viktor, I left him, and disappeared.” Elaine held his eyes, for a while, but eventually she looked down. “I was not proud of abandoning him. I do not think he ever forgave me, even after my return.”

The two of them were still on the stairs in his mansion. The stairs were the best place for a conversation, and their magic powers could hopefully disarm an elder vampire.

“I wondered about how you could have been his sire, without anyone knowing.”

“It was not an easy feat. I met Antoinette after I returned, and avoided Viktor. When the man realized I had returned, he wanted nothing to do with me, and I had to make concessions to him so he would keep our connection a secret.”

“But you never told him about the curse.”

“No.” She flinched.

“He never found out about what you did? To get rid of your curse? He never found out you were ever cursed, or that he still was?”

“No.”

Jesus christ, that was cold.

“Julias told me diablerie marks you. Makes you ... easy to notice. Like, you become tainted.”

Those words hurt her a lot more than he thought they would. She winced. Elder vampires didn't wince, unless it was acting, or someone just sucker punched them hard in the emotions. Making an elder wince was tantamount to cracking them over the head with a steel beam. It felt bad, doing that, but he needed to know.

"It does. I avoided contact with everyone for years, hiding in caves, terrified a Kindred would find me. It was quite some time before the darkness left my mind and Beast, and before the ... the addiction left as well."

His turn to wince. Being terrified made sense, considering how diablerist were pretty much a kill-on-sight situation in cities with a Kindred presence. And then there was the whole addiction thing. A diablerist around other Kindred was a meth addict surrounded by ... meth.

"You remember?"

"No. Only small details, certain memories that burned themselves into my mind, while most are lost."

"But you remember killing another vampire. You remember breaking free of the curse."

"I do."

"You told me you didn't remember. You told me—"

"I lied." She smiled weakly. "You can understand why."

"If Antoinette knew—"

"Antoinette is not the concern. The Ordo, is. I violated the third law. The Ordo would not suffer a diablerist to live." She laughed and shook her head. "Not one so stupid as to admit to it, at least."

“You ... think there are diablerists in—”

“There are diablerists, vile and putrid beings, who continue to commit diablerie regularly, who are in positions of power, young Ventrue. While a curious Mekhet may discover them, they...” She shook her head. “Do not worry. None of the Primogen here in Dolareido are tainted. And neither am I any longer.”

“Does anyone else know? Antoinette?”

“No.”

“Jesus fuck. You told me, but not her?”

She smiled at him, gaze steady, eyes carrying a billion hidden meanings he could barely scratch the surface of. “You are my great grandchilde.”

“But you two have been friends for centuries. Plural.”

“She does not know what it is like to have something vile inside, poisoning her every action. I do.”

“Your curse was still bound.”

“And yet I can still remember its claws, deep in my soul.”

Jack shuddered. “It ... it’s better now for me, in a way. Now that the curse is free, at least it’s distinct from me. Before, it felt like it was me, slowly becoming some sort of violent psychopath. Christ, I was fucking convinced I was turning into Viktor.”

“You were, in a way. How Julias managed to stay above the curse’s influence, I do not know.”

“Julias was ... he was one of a kind. He—”



Nodding, Elaine stood up. Apparently she didn't want the conversation to go down that road.

"I have shared with you a dangerous secret, my childe. If you somehow convinced my peers, or even others here in Dolareido, about what I have done, it could end quite poorly for me."

"That's part of the reason you told me, right? That I can't exactly prove it. Whatever you were before, you seem pretty normal now. The Begotten say you look normal."

"Indeed. But there are ways." She shook her head as she slowly paced. She was uncomfortable. Hell, Jack would have been too, dropping a truth bomb like that. "I have not told you the worst of it."

"Oh christ."

Chuckling, she shook her head again. "And I will not. For now."

"You're ... gonna dangle a carrot in front of me, information, about something even worse you've done?"

"Quite perceptive of you, childe of mine."

"And the thing you want me to do? The reason for the carrot?"

"You, are going to join me in a ritual."

Frowning, he looked between his two pets.

~Do not trust her, master, ~ Scully whispered into his mind.

~Do not trust her, master.~

"What ritual?"

"In my hunt to find a way to remove the curse, I discovered a ritual that will ... let me take a peek within."

“Within ... me?”

“Precisely. I wish to take a look inside, Jack. I want a peek at the curse.” She stopped pacing, and smiled down at him as she hooked her hands behind her back. He knew that look. That was a happy business look, like someone excited to make a contract, a binding one. The look of a Ventrue delighted with the way negotiations were going.

“You can’t expect me to agree to that.”

Her smile didn’t waver. “I do.”

“Why?”

“Because it is connected to how I removed the curse.”

“You committed diablerie to get rid of the curse.”

She flinched, just barely. “Yes, I did.”

“You might do it to me, to get the curse back, now that it’s unbound, out and swinging.”

Her smile slowly faded, and she came closer to him. “You trust me that little?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You told me, sweet childe of mine, what the curse is like. I have seen its disturbing rage and sick fetishes with my own eyes, as well. I have...” With a heavy sigh, she gestured back toward the door. “Do you know what I spend much of my time researching, for the Ordo? The dark secrets I have written and stashed away into the depths of records hidden from all eyes? Terrible mysteries I have not shared even with my good friend, your lover?”

“I ... The Strix. You’ve been researching the Strix.”

“Naturally, and I am sure my old friend suspects. I am known as an Architect of Terror, in the Ordo Dracul.”

“Right, I remember hearing that title, the night I met you. I never understood what it meant. You said once it meant researching the Beast?”

“Indeed. We dragons keep our secrets, young Ventrue. But I feel comfortable enough to tell you that I research the Beast, this creature that exists inside all vampires, and that I delve into uncovering its mysteries. Why is there a creature inside us? Why does it have its own desires, its own instincts? How is it awoken in us, when we rise from our first death? My research into striges is proxy to that research.”

“I guess that makes sense. You had to learn about them, if you were going to remove their curse.”

She sat down beside him again, close enough her shoulder touched his. “That necklace you wear is one of the results of my research, something I found in my efforts.”

Sighing, Jack reached under his suit shirt and pulled out the necklace. “I ... do owe you a lot for this.” Owe didn’t even do it justice. She taught him how to pull his thoughts away from his Beast, separate him from it, and gave him a necklace to force it to shut up. If it hadn’t been for Elaine showing up, the curse would still have been running rampant in his mind, fighting him for control every night.

He owed her his life. And Elaine did seem to take his warning to heart, about how awful the curse was, especially now that she’d seen it for herself after his fight with Avery. It’d be pretty damn strange for her to suddenly betray him now, unless her goal was to lull them all into a false sense of security.

Look at you now, Jack. Thinking like a true Kindred. Fucking lovely.

“Jack,” she said, “it has been centuries since I committed that vile act. I stowed myself away, knowing what it would do to me. Only after the horrible taint fled my being, and the voices stopped, did I —”

“Voices?”

Nodding, she looked down again, and leaned into him a little. Not a sexy lean. He expected sexy leans, sexy touches, sexy anything, flirtations she knew would go nowhere but enjoyed teasing him with anyway. This was a weary lean. A tired, even exhausted lean.

“I can barely remember them. And I did not record anything of my time hiding from the Kindred world. Any record could be used against me. But there had been voices, of the vampire I killed. They lingered in my mind, and they were ... unhappy with me.”

“Just like—”

“I do not know if the voices are similar to the curse’s voice. Perhaps they are related. You said the curse was created by the Strix, with an act of diablerie as the sacrifice, confirming my suspicions.”

“Yeah.”

“Then I can only assume there is a connection. This curse, this taint, it is connected to the Strix, and to the devouring of souls.”

Devouring of souls. Amaranth. Diablerie. Yeah, no wonder diablerists were a ‘kill on sight’ situation.

“So, I would look like a diablerist, if someone with Auspex looked at me? Cause I’m pretty sure I’ve been thoroughly examined by peeking Mekhets.”

“Indeed. The curse is ... unique. Striges have ways to infect, to take hosts, and the marks they place upon the soul are similar to those left on a diablerist before the taint dissipates. And how this is connected to our Beasts is of great interests to me. The fact you are not tainted is another unique element I wish to learn of.”

“Christ. This is ... all pretty fucking terrifying.”

“I know. I have waited to bring this idea to light because I was not sure if I could trust you.”

“Trust me? You’re the one who committed dia—”

She put a hand over his mouth, long enough to shut him up before lowering it. For a moment, she looked angry in a way he had never seen, but it faded quickly.

“I have danced around this issue long enough. I had to tell someone, and it makes sense for it to be you. I have a black mark upon my soul, for all eternity I imagine, but the infection, the taint, has faded to nothing. I ensured it did, before I returned to the world, and met your lover, her sheriff, and returned to my ... abhorring childe Viktor. Years of fighting against an addiction so powerful you cannot imagine, while hiding in caves.” She nudged her shoulder into him again. “Is it truly strange that I would hide such a past?”

Things clicked into place. She wasn’t being sneaky — or at least not entirely — because she was trying to maneuver Jack into a position she could use to kidnap him, or somehow remove his curse. She was being sneaky because if Antoinette or Daniel, or hell maybe Jacob, found out what she did, they might do something about it. Maybe even kill her. They’d certainly be ashamed of her. And on top of that, she looked ashamed, too.

“I still can’t believe you told me.”

“The others do not understand. Could you truly live with this curse for an eternity, Jack? Would you not do all you could to remove it?”

He would. He damn well would. No matter what Jack said or did, the Ripper was a psychopath killer, always riding some weird edge of rage and sick fetishism for gore and death. You didn't get much more fucked up than that.

“But ... but diablerie...”

“It is beyond vile, childe of mine, and yet you will be more disgusted with me when you learn who I devoured.”

“Oh god.”

“But that is a secret I will keep for now, to share later, after you have indulged me. Will you allow me to perform this experiment upon you, without your lover or anyone else knowing? I cannot risk them tracing the ritual to its roots. It is ... connected, to my past.”

“You—”

“I swear I will not kill you, Jack, in any capacity.” She sighed, still leaning against him, like she had an anchor around her neck, pulling her down. He knew the feeling. “But we flirt with such dangers. It must be done in secret.”

He wanted to trust her. The look in her eyes was genuine, as far as he could tell. If she'd tried to look overtly pained or guilty, he wouldn't have believed it. Elders didn't get to be centuries old by regretting their decisions until they self destructed. Whatever regret or self-loathing they had, they repressed it and grew into monoliths of power and will. He could see it in her eyes, the will to push past the shitty things she'd done, and it didn't get worse than being a diablerist.

“You think this will help us get rid of the curse?”

“I do. While it will not remove the curse, it will garner us knowledge. Intimate knowledge.” She said ‘intimate’ with a glint in her eye. Not the sexy kind of glint. The mad scientist kinda glint.

Was he stupid enough to trust her? She was going to put him in the center of some kinda ritual, just him and her, no Antoinette, no sheriff, no back up. But after everything that’d happened, and all the help she’d given him...

“Fuck me, I’ll do it.”

---

“I will be hosting a ball soon,” Antoinette said. “Tempers between the Carthians and Invictus have settled well enough.”

“You think?”

“Oui. Do you disagree?”

He shrugged. “Eh, I’m fifty fifty on it.”

“That is as good as it ever gets between covenants.” Chuckling, Antoinette reached up and pat him on the head.

They were in one of the bathrooms in her tower, lying back in a huge tub, Jack half sitting up half lying while Antoinette leaned back against his chest, between his legs. Bath time. Completely unnecessary for vampires, but still damn relaxing. And it was one of the places Jack and Antoinette had their best conversations.

It might have had something to do with the fact it was a comfy way for Jack to play with Antoinette’s breasts. At this point it wasn’t even sexual, he just really liked the feel of heavy, soft, supple flesh filling his palms. Case in point, his hands were cupping her breasts at this very moment, and gently bouncing them in his palms so the

water's surface slipped above and below the tops of them over and over.

He had a problem. They'd tried those squishy stress balls, but it just wasn't the same. Antoinette had even gotten him a giant stress ball that looked like a boob, nipple included, with a similar texture and malleability and everything. Still wasn't the same.

If the rest of the city knew how much he was obsessed with tits, it'd have probably damaged the whole image he was cultivating for himself. The man in the black suit, the guy with two undead crows, the Ventrue with a mansion, imposing but intelligent, deadly but reasonable, tiny and terrifying, stuff like that. It was all true he supposed, but only half the time. The other half of the time, he just wanted to sit in a tub with his lover and play with her boobs.

"So everyone's coming?"

"Ben oui. Avery and her pack are invited, as is Eric. The Invictus and Carthians. Sándor and his monsters. And the Circle."

Jack frowned. "Ugh, really?"

"Of course. Do not be silly, my love. You cannot seriously imagine I would not invite them."

"I was hoping."

"Despite the fact the city is mine, and I rule it, Jacob is as responsible for this city's original growth as I. He will always be invited."

"Damn."

"And besides, he is dating your mother," she said, making him groan. All that did was make her laugh. "Come now, my love. Their



relationship has lasted for some time. Surely you do not still hold it against him.”

“We don’t trust him.”

“We do not trust Jacob with grand affairs that affect the city. But I trust him with your mother’s heart.” She hesitated for a moment, before chuckling again. “And body.”

“Please don’t.”

“You do not want your mother to enjoy sex? She told me you explicitly told her to ‘get laid’.”

“That was before Jacob.”

“If it is any consolation, I believe she is enjoying Othello’s touch nearly as much as Jacob’s.”

Jack lifted Antoinette’s breasts high, let them go so they hit the water with a splash, and set his hands on the sides of the tub, grunting. It took a lot to break his desire to fondle. Antoinette drove over that line with a truck, and she laughed.

“Yeah,” he said, “I know, but I’m trying to not think about her that way. She’s my mom.”

“Well, I am afraid you will be forced to think of her that way. I will be encouraging a friendly environment at this ball, with thralls and ghouls to be shared, and skin to be laid bare.”

He groaned and squirmed underneath her, making her laugh again. Maybe in a few hundred years, he’d have an easier time thinking of his mom as a sexual person, but not yet. He told her to get laid, but he hadn’t expected his mom’s sex life to suddenly be a part of his life. Healthy separation! He didn’t want to be in one of

those creepy families where everyone was so comfortable with each other, they didn't mind seeing each other naked.

Unfortunately, that was exactly the sort of environment Antoinette wanted. Well, she didn't have living family from her first life anymore. He did!

"Can we ... at least avoid having mom and I see each other naked, and especially avoid us seeing each other, uh, sexually occupied?"

"I doubt your mother will be having sex at the ball. Though I would not be surprised if Jacob pushes her into some delightfully erotic situations."

"Oh god."

"But she is just as squeamish about the idea of seeing you naked and having sex, as vice versa."

"You haven't shown her any of those films?"

"Non, of course not. She is your mother."

"Thank you. Know if anyone else has?"

"I do not believe they have, though Jessy and Fiona seem intent on showing everyone."

He was getting more comfortable with the idea of half the city having seen him naked in the movies. He looked good in them, and the ladies looked amazing in them. But if his mom ever saw them, that'd be a whole new level of awkward he doubted he could handle.

"Different topic. Beatrice. She ... she uh ... she make any progress?" He was terrified to ask Beatrice about it. Better to think she'd never succeed at whatever she was trying to do. Or maybe

succeed beautifully. No. No, it was too tempting to get his hopes up, too good to be true.

“I know little,” she said, half lying. For his benefit, he knew. “Perhaps Sándor knows more?”

“Sándor? Why him?”

“I know the young Nosferatu has been visiting a lounge the man frequents. I have come to understand Sándor is a musician.”

“Wait, really?”

“Indeed. I have not had the fortune to visit myself, but my spies say he is quite the marvel.” She raised a leg into the air, long, milky white, and ran a finger down it before settling it back into the hot water again. “Musicians will forever be attractive, my love. And mastering an instrument expands the mind in powerful ways. Learn to play one.”

“I will I will.” Procrastination was easy when he was alive. It was twice as easy now, with eternity for a lifespan. “But, uh, Beatrice is visiting him?”

“She is visiting the lounge. I assume she is speaking to him, but I have not informed my spies to confirm. Such activities are quite personal, non?”

“Yeah, yeah they are. But I could ask her.” He knew Sándor had been asking about her, and Julias, months ago. But he also knew the man hadn’t acted on it. With all the rumors about dark rituals and resurrection going around, Jack found it hard to talk to her sometimes. They still did, but there was a wall between them they couldn’t quite tear down.

“Perhaps. I would approach the subject ... not delicately, but perhaps indirectly. Beatrice likely has Jennifer pushing her toward

the man, or any man, in a desperate attempt to have the girl penetrated.”

Jack coughed on a laugh. “I thought—”

“I doubt Beatrice would ever let Othello touch her, or Jacob. And Aaron would not be interested in their sexual affairs. Non, I believe Beatrice has enjoyed the hands of Jennifer many times, and perhaps your mother as well.” Oh god. “But not another man’s, except maybe a fleeting moment with a kine she and her friend have hunted. Knowing Jennifer, she would delight in nothing more than having Beatrice penetrated by a man, while Jennifer pleasures her.”

“Elaine and Jennifer. I’d swear they were Daeva.”

It was Antoinette’s turn to laugh again. “Agreed.”

Jack slipped his hands back under Antoinette’s breasts, and resumed the most therapeutic form of stress relief known to man: playing with a woman’s boobs.

Tell her about Elaine? No, definitely don’t. As much as Elaine and Antoinette were good friends, she was his great grandsire, and she’d trusted him with the biggest secret she probably had.

He was taking a hell of a risk trusting her, but Elaine had pulled through multiple times, especially with the necklace. If he told Antoinette what she’d done, it’d probably lead to a confrontation, and then Elaine not helping Jack. Christ, just thinking the thoughts put holes into the idea. He couldn’t trust Elaine, not completely.

But he saw the look in her eyes, when he’d finally gotten through to her about how horrible the curse was. There’d been something there, something real, and after last night, he did trust her. More, at least. Hopefully his habit of trusting people wouldn’t get him killed.

Besides, he had a few contingency measures.

---

~~Beatrice~~

She threw up her hands. "It's hard with claws!"

"Trim the claws." The stupid Mekhet shook his head at her like she was brain damaged.

"Dude this ain't like most things. It's part of the Nosferatu shtick. If I trim them they just come back." She eyed him, and pointed a claw at her right cheek. No cheek there, just giant crocodile teeth. "See these?"

Damien leaned away from her slightly. "I do."

"One of the first things I did when I realized I was a vampire was try and rip out the extra teeth. They grow back."

"Everything a vampire has grows back."

"Not like this. The deformities can't be suppressed or plucked. They just come back, quick as the body can remake them. Being a Nos fucking sucks."

Sighing, Damien took her right hand, and gently set it back down on the piano keys. "You're playing the piano, not typing on a keyboard. Or tenderizing a steak, for that matter. Stop hitting the keys so hard, and use more of the underside of the tip of the finger. Relax your wrists."

Ugh, why did she agree to this? Two weeks of this shit and she still struggled to play Mary Had a Little Lamb.

"I'm fucking trying, but it feels nicer to just hit the keys with my fingertips. Must smash."

"Yes but you'll ... I suppose you'll never strain a muscle, but you will make it harder on yourself to get the patterns and flow between

them. You're playing an instrument. It's a dance for your fingers."

"I don't dance. I headbang." Beatrice leaned back, let her head fall back over her shoulders behind her, and groaned. "I suck at this."

"Yes, you do."

Arg, this man. She sat up straight and glared at him, and Damien met her gaze with the tiniest smile. Somewhere along the line, he'd developed a sense of humor. Triss wasn't sure she liked it, but at least he had one.

They were in his apartment. Apparently the dude had gotten a piano, which seemed kinda weird to Triss considering he had one of those keyboard pianos on the shelf. Maybe he just preferred a real piano; Maria probably did.

He had a really nice apartment. Fucking Invictus money. Just like Jack's old apartment, it was all streamlined and modern and fancy, lots of black and silver, and she fully expected a serial killer had lived in it at least once. They were in his living room, the piano near the giant window, drapes closed, with some couches behind them pointed at the nice TV.

On the couch was a little redhead, flipping through stuff on her smartphone and occasionally looking up to giggle at Triss. She wore jeans and a t-shirt, like Triss, and neither of them really fit the apartment's look. Damien did. Dude was dressed in a casual dark suit, something Maria probably insisted on.

Well, whatever. The man seemed to be doing pretty well for himself, considering only four years ago he'd been a sewer rat hiding from everyone.

"You're a shitty teacher."

"Probably. You could ask someone else for help."

“I can’t ask a kine to fucking help, jackass.” She pointed at her teeth again, and her snake eyes, and her claws. “And I don’t want to go around asking people who know me. I just wanna do this privately, you know?”

“Aye, we know.” Fiona beamed at her, big smile on, before looking back at her phone.

Damien looked back at Fiona before back to Triss, eyebrow raised. He didn’t know why Triss was here learning this shit, or he did a good job hiding the fact he knew. Considering Fiona was Fiona, he probably did know, and was just pretending he didn’t for Triss’s sake. Nice of him, if annoying.

“Listen here, red tits.” Triss threw a glare and pointed finger at Fiona. “I’m doing this for me, okay? Jacob says I should expand what I know about things, cause it’ll help me be a better witch. Learning an instrument is mind expanding, right?”

Fiona nodded, eyes still on the phone. “Aye, but I bet there’s something else yer looking to get expanded.” As if she’d made the wittiest joke ever, she burst into giggles, but kept her eyes on the phone anyway.

Damien smiled, too, but Triss shot him a glare and the smile vanished.

“Beatrice, learning to play an instrument as a vampire is difficult. You’re constantly fighting your Kindred biology.” He pointed at his skull. “I told you. Your brain is influenced by the vampire curse.”

“Yeah yeah, but”—she gestured at her tattoos and piercings—“I can use the Kindred part of me to adapt, right? I got this shit after my embrace.”

“I told you it’s possible, but it’s ... difficult, to narrow down the focus.”

“Sounds like the same problem I’d have if I was alive and trying to do this. Just exercising a different muscle.”

“More like, the same problem kine would have, plus a whole new problem on top of it.” Damien shrugged, and played a short tune.

Triss scooted close enough on the piano bench to hit the man with her shoulder. “You think I don’t have focus?”

“I—”

“You have any idea how much focus it takes to do witch stuff? The fucking ... ugh, never mind. My point is, I got focus. It’s just these damn claws!”

Fiona giggled again. “Why don’t ye ask Sándor for help? He knows how to play a lot of instruments.”

Triss eyed red. “Maybe I will. If—”

A phone rang. Damien sighed as he stood up and pulled a phone from his pocket. “Yes Natasha? I ... oh.” He looked to Triss and Fiona before nodding. “Yeah, I’ll be right there.” He hung up. “I have to go. Important business.”

Triss eyed him, too, but not the same eye she gave Fiona. No, Damien was serious, and he immediately walked to the closet and put on his trench coat without so much as looking Triss’s way again.

“Alright, guess I’m outta here.” She stood up and—

“Stay, with Fiona. Practice. She can help.”

Slowly, Beatrice sneered as she glared at Fiona, which Fiona returned with a big, bright grin. The wonder child had started learning to play along with Triss, and unlike Triss, was a natural.

“Sure you trust me alone in your place?”



“I don’t.” Damien nodded to Fiona. “Vrall could easily beat you in a fight.”

Fiona’s grin grew absolutely maniacal as she hopped off the couch and joined Triss on the bench. “Ye think ye can take me, lass?”

Triss rolled her eyes, especially when she saw the smile on Damien’s face as he closed the front door behind him. Ugh, they weren’t wrong. Beatrice was plenty strong for her age, but the Begotten were strange, and strong. Fiona, aka Spider-Woman, would probably win any fight the two of them got into, especially if she got the drop on Triss. Well, give it a couple hundred more years and the tables would turn, assuming Fiona was still alive.

“So!” Fiona pulled down the cover for the piano keys, set her elbow on it, chin in palm, and smiled at Triss. “Ye like Sándor?”

Oh god damn it.

“It hasn’t even been a year since Julias died, Fiona. Gimme a break.”

That earned a small flinch from the girl, but Fiona recovered quickly. She shook her head and gave Triss a gentle shove with her free hand.

“Aye, but ye know Julias would want ye to be happy.”

This girl. She was blunt like Jessy, but none of the aggressive was there. To Fiona, there was a silver lining to everything, and joy hidden everywhere. All you had to do was go looking for it. The fact the girl had lost her adopted grandmother only shy of four months ago, didn’t seem to put a dent into that personality at all.

“Fiona, you’re what, twenty? You don’t know. You haven’t experienced enough shit.”

“Aw come on, that’s ... only a little true. Damien and I love each other.”

“You’re a kid.”

“But Damien’s nae. He’s experienced a lot of stuff, and—”

“He’s a pedophile.”

Fiona laughed. “And the Prince? Or Jacob?”

Triss couldn’t help but laugh, too. Yeah, vampire relationships were weird. You didn’t keep getting older when you were sired, you sort of half-stopped aging. Sure, you got smarter, maybe even wiser, maybe even more mature, but a lot of your personality and who you were stayed the same. It was part of what made it so damn hard for a vampire to learn to play a fucking instrument!

“Ok, yeah, vampires can be a little weird with the dating ages.”

Giggling, Fiona scooted in closer on the bench until they were touching hip to hip. “I hear Samantha is getting some fantasies crossed off her bucket list.”

“She ... is, yeah.”

“Details!”

“You know I’m not going to gossip about her behind her back.”

“I get ya. But, what if I told ye I’d heard some things from another gossiping vampire?” Damn it, Jen. “And she said Samantha was getting quite full, from both ends, ye ken? Like—”

“Ugh, fine. Yeah, Samantha’s enjoying sex with the Circle. Witches and orgies go hand in hand, I guess. There, ya happy?” She pulled up the cover off the piano keys, forcing Fiona to stop leaning on it.

“Aye.” Giggling again, Fiona set her right hand on the keys, some octave high up, and played a simple tune. “Vrall used to have worshipers for that sort of stuff.”

“Before you?”

“Aye. Musta been over a thousands years ago.”

“That’s ... kinda interesting, actually. I can picture it, ancient tribal people in a jungle, worshiping some scary, sexy monster of spiders.”

“Aye! The memories are blurs to me, ye ken. They’re not mine. But Vrall remembers them well enough. Folk, making sacrifices to her. Folk, mostly lads, surrounding her and filling her and covering her in white.” She licked her lips.

“Jesus, with memories like that, no wonder you’re a hornball.”

Giggling, Fiona shook her head. “Nae, I was always like this, before Vrall came to me. Masturbated myself raw the moment I figured out how.”

“Is it ... a redhead thing?”

“Lass! ... maybe?” She erupted into giggles again. Damn, her laughter was contagious. No wonder Damien loved her. Just being around her was enough to have Triss laughing, smiling, and forgetting just how shitty everything had been the past year; envy over her natural piano skills aside.

“And I’ll have you know I’m not here to learn to play for Sándor. Sure, we’ve been talking more, and sure, he’s really good at the guitar ... and singing...”

“He is, isn’t he?” Fiona blushed a little as she squirmed for a second. “He’s tall.”

“He’s ... a bit tall, yeah. Not very—”

“And he’s lean, and has muscles.”

“Ok, yeah, he’s got a nice body. But—”

“And he’s got those eyes! Deep blue eyes that are so ... mmmm.”  
Fiona set both her elbows on the piano keys, oblivious to the noise it made, and sighed a dreamy sigh as she set her chin on her palms.

“You have a boyfriend.”

“Pfft. Damien and I are allowed to look at other folk! I happen to know he thinks Jack’s new thralls are sexy as fuck.”

“They are pretty hot,” Triss said. Jack was probably thoroughly enjoying himself, with three sex slaves to tend to his — or Antoinette’s — every whim. “Kid really has a thing for tits.”

Fiona giggled as she sat up straight, leaned back a bit, and bounced on the bench a couple times. No bra was keeping those things in check.

“Ye think—”

“No chance in Hell Jack, or the Prince, or Damien, will ever let you get involved in any of their shenanigans, Fiona.”

“Aw, but Damien would come, too! I’d never leave him behind.”

“Pretty sure that’d be too awkward for Jack and Damien.”

“But Art and Matt—”

“Aren’t most dudes. They’re more like ... me and Jen, I guess, without the bisexuality.”

“True. Tash is lucky as aw fuck.”

Triss set her claws back on the keys, and tried to relax the wrist and fingers. Not the fingertips, but the undersides. Stop smashing the keys. After a few minutes of experimenting, she managed to play a simple five-note melody with her right hand. It was so damn hard to get the volume consistent. Sometimes she pressed too hard and it was almost ear-splitting loud. Sometimes she pressed too soft and it barely made a noise. Maybe she should start with the keyboard piano?

Fiona brought up her phone, flicked through some things, and put the phone in front of Triss, between her eyes and her fingers, forcing her to look.

A video of Natasha, hands tied behind her, getting choked and fuck by Arturo from behind, her whole body on display. Matthew walked up to her, huge dick in hand, and spent some time rubbing his cock's head against the girl's obviously drenched, very tiny, very smooth slit, all while Arturo pounded into her ass, before Matt eventually shoved himself balls deep into the little girl.

The camera was in the perfect spot to show everything, even the small bulge on the girl's belly. The dudes were huge, and she was very petite and thin.

Triss groaned pushed the phone aside. "I get it. Come on. Can you stop thinking about sex for a moment, and—"

"Ye ever wonder if Sándor can fuck when merged with his Horror? Cause I know."

"You ... do?"

"Aye. Sándor does nae like to talk about himself much, but lately, I've managed to coax a few short conversations from him. Managed to piece a few things together."

Triss looked down at the piano keys, keys she should have been hitting to try and work some muscle memory into her stupid Kindred brain. But instead, she let out another annoyed groan, and looked at Loki incarnate.

“Can he?”

She scrunched her nose in a wicked, evil grin. “Aye. Apparently it’s very ... large.”

“Oh come on. He didn’t tell you that.”

“Nae, but he said a few things about time spent with his wife when in his lair, and certain ... anatomical problems because of size.” Somehow, her grin only got more evil.

Well, that’d certainly make Jen happy, if she could somehow convince the dude to indulge her.

“Your, uh, Horrors, make a habit of having sex? Can you all even have sex?”

“Vrall can, as you know. Sándor can. But I dinnae think Athalia or Mark can.”

“Heh. Well, the spider girl is pretty damn hot, admitted.”

“Aye! But she likes to tie Damien up. That’s nae fun.”

“Because you want to be the one tied up.”

Fiona nodded like accepting a gift of chocolate. “Aye.”

“Any ... any idea what Sándor likes? Or what his Horror would like?”

“Nae, sorry.”

Christ, now Triss was picturing it. Big, muscular gargoyle dude, oddly handsome in that ‘oh shit please don’t eat me enormous monster’ kinda way, with a girl not even half his height on his lap. Less sex than it would be like being a sex toy in a giant monster’s hand. Which tickled the witchy part of her so damn much. Sure, she loved being pampered and being treated like a princess, but god damn there was some part of her that wanted some demon beast with a cock the size of a log to use her like a toy.

Which of course made her feel guilty again, cause fuck, she liked Sándor, and the idea of fucking someone she liked rubbed up against the part of her that still wanted Julias in her life, the part of her that missed the fuck out of him. The part of her that was getting neck deep in shit with an ancient spirit of death, a flesh witch, and some ridiculous pursuit everyone told her was impossible.

Then what the fuck was she doing here, learning to play piano? So she could impress Sándor? God damn it, she fucking hated this, and hated herself for it, too.

“Alright. I’m gonna get going, anyway.”

“Already?”

“Yeah. I stole a keyboard to play on. I’ll practice back at my place.”

Fiona eyed her, obviously suspicious. The girl made no attempts to hide her emotions; if anything, she exaggerated them on purpose.

“I know ye’ve been hanging with Sándor occasionally. Ye—”

“Don’t, Fiona. Just don’t.” Before Fiona could apologize, Triss waved a dismissing hand. “It’s fine. But like I said, it hasn’t even been a year.”

“Ok ok.” She put up her hands in surrender. “Talk later then?”

“Yeah, later.”

---

~~Eric~~

“Oh my fucking god. That fucking ... that fucking ... fuck!”

Eric raised a brow at Jessy, but he knew he didn't have to ask what she was angry about. She'd tell him. Say one thing for Jessy, he never had to worry about her hiding her feelings.

The two of them sat in his apartment, curled up on his couch, watching some comedy drama episodes. He wasn't a big fan of sitcoms, but comedy dramas were a different beast, and he did occasionally laugh watching them. A guilty pleasure. Jessy didn't feel a shred of guilt about it, but she didn't really feel that way about anything she liked.

“Look at this!” She showed him her phone. Someone had sent her a video.

Jack, lying on his back, on what looked like a bunch of giant white pool towels. His head was on Antoinette's legs, and she was topless, giant tits hanging right over his head. On Jack's right was Rachel and Veronica, with both snuggled into him somehow. On the left, Leilani, and Elaine, doing the same thing. Jack had introduced them yesterday. They were all naked, and the three kine were exhausted. Elaine and Jack had probably Kissed them, and fucked them.

The perspective of the camera was from whoever was currently riding the kid. The camera pilot turned it around to point at her, and lo and behold, Ashley the ghoul blew the camera a kiss, before panning the camera down her body. Julee sat behind her, hands running up and down her naked skin, before settling above the blonde ghoul's very smooth, very small slit. And Ashley made damn sure the camera remained pointed right at where Jack penetrated



her, as she ground her body around and around on him while her friend played with her clitoris.

Jessy groaned like she'd just be run over by a semi. "She must be so tight. Like, look at that tiny waist! Probably hard to fit a single finger in that pussy."

It was true. The Prince's ghouls had skinny bodies, the sort you had if you were a professional acrobat or ballerina or something. Kinda like Natasha, but taller, average height.

"They are pretty skinny."

"I know, right? And—" She groaned again as Elaine reached out, smiled at the camera, took it, and aimed it at Ashley proper, so the video had Ashley and Julee as the center of attention. But Elaine also occasionally took time to aim the phone down at Jack and how he was drowning in a sea of huge breasts, before she aimed the phone at herself and teased her own breasts, then pointed it at the Prince and teased her breasts, before pointing it back at Ashley.

That, was one spoiled kid.

Kat sat in Jessy's lap, and she pawed at the phone, earning a laugh from the vampire. As much as Eric loved his cat, Jessy apparently loved her more, and possibly vice versa. A shame she was spayed. If he could find another cat as chill as Kat, he'd be able to have a family of cats too useless to even hunt a mouse. Which was fine. Jessy was a hunter, and he was a hunter. They didn't need a third.

"Seven girls," Eric said. "That's—"

"A lot of pussy."

"I was going to say intimidating."

She restarted the video, because of course she did. “Talk to Avery lately?”

Talking about Avery and the pack was one thing. Doing that while Jessy held out her phone for the both of them to watch the kid Ventrue get fucked, was another, and weird. But he’d gotten pretty good at just rolling with Jessy and her brazen attitude by this point.

“How’d you know?”

“Tash sent me a message about it.”

He sighed and looked back to the TV, the show on pause. Try as he might, he couldn’t help but take peeks at the video. It had audio, and Ashley wasn’t exactly quiet. Hell, judging from the way her, and even the shy Julee, were bouncing and dancing and giggling, this was a treat for them.

“Avery wants me to come with her on some hunts.”

“Sounds like business as usual.”

“Yeah, maybe. But we talked about some other stuff, some Uratha stuff, and I get the impression she’s gonna try and include more of ... that.”

“That?”

“She’s going to try and be my mentor, teach me what she knows, and turn me into her student.” Which wasn’t exactly a bad idea. Avery’s pack wanted to stay in Dolareido. Eric lived in Dolareido and didn’t plan to leave. He was going to have to get along with Avery eventually, and she knew he kept going into the Hisil on his own to do his own hunts. So naturally, she was worried he was going to fuck something up, maybe knock out a key pillar of the ecosystem, and ruin everything.

She was also probably going to try and teach him about the history of the Uratha, what she knew of it, and about Father Wolf and that shit. Considering he'd been visited by the actual moon, on several occasions, he probably should have taken Avery more seriously. But Eric knew himself well enough to know he wanted to do things on his own, his own way, even if it meant making mistakes. Got that from his dad, no doubt.

“Yeah, Avery does have that preachy kinda personality, doesn't she?”

Eric laughed. Any other girl, or reasonable person, would have sided with Avery. Not Jessy. His girlfriend knew how important it was for some kinds of people to make their own mistakes and forge their own path, even if it meant walking over broken glass in bare feet. No wonder his dad liked her.

“Send more pictures to Dad?”

“Hell yeah. He didn't tell you?”

“I told him to stop telling me when my girlfriend shows him her tits.”

She laughed and punched him in the shoulder. “I made a deal.”

“Pretty sure that was for one showing. Not a feed of pics.”

She shrugged as she grinned at him. “I mean sure, I can stop. But last I heard, the dude is exercising, eating well, even doing some actual resistance training, you know? My tits have healing powers.”

“You checked up on my dad?”

She waved the phone, still showing Jack in the middle of his three ... four ... eightsome. “I message him every so often.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. And I know you don’t, you asshole.”

“I ... I talk to him.”

“Once every month on a thirty-minute visit.” Before he could defend himself, she put up a hand. “I know I know. Men. To get you dumbasses to actually talk about shit is like pulling teeth.”

“Funny, coming from you.”

“The fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re practically a man.”

“Fuck that! Just cause I’m awesome and speak my mind and know what I like and shit doesn’t mean I’m masculine. I talk to Tash about girly stuff all the time.” She jammed her finger into his shoulder. “You should talk to your dad more often.”

“I should.”

“Then do that.”

“I will.”

She poked him again. “Don’t make me nag. I suck at nagging. I go from zero to a hundred quick and start throwing things.”

“I’ll talk to him, don’t worry.”

“Good, because he’s probably excited to show off his new girlfriend.”

“I—wait what?”

Laughing, Jessy scrolled past the porn vid to a picture. “See?”

Yeap, that was his dad, in much better shape now, half hugging a woman while looking at the camera. A caretaker was taking a picture with his dad's phone, and the woman under his dad's arm was smiling bright. An older lady, like his dad, a black woman whose curly hair had started going white. She had a nice smile.

She looked nothing like Eric's mom.

"I ... didn't know."

"Course you didn't. Your old man's probably embarrassed, maybe feeling guilty over having a new woman in his life, or maybe some other reason. You'll never know if you don't talk to him." Nodding at him like she'd just spoken the words of God, she scooped Kat up, and set her on the back of the couch.

Before he could say anything, Jessy pushed him onto his back on the couch, pulled his closer leg up so it was on the couch, and she climbed between his legs. Thump, she fell onto his chest with her whole body, almost knocking the wind out of him.

He rolled his eyes, but hugged her as she got comfortable, lying on top of him, her legs between his.

"I guess that vid got me thinking," he said.

"The vid of Jack?"

"Yeah."

She grinned at him as she inched over his chest further until she set her lips on his. "Get you horny? Cause, I mean, damn. Antoinette's tits are—"

"Not exactly what I meant."

"Not exactly?"

“I mean, I know you’ve been wanting more people—”

She shoved her hands down against his chest as she forced herself up, weight on her palms. Ow.

“Really!?”

He pushed her hands off his chest, and she fell down, making him wince as he prepared for her skull to dent his sternum. Thankfully her elbows hit the couch cushions instead, catching her weight.

“Yes, if you want—”

“Oh my god you have no idea how fucking much Jack’s and Natasha’s vids have been driving me crazy!” She thumped her forehead against his sternum once, like a goat. “Can we—”

“Keep it reasonable, if you please.”

“Ugh, fine fine. I’ll keep it reasonable. Baby steps. Ya big baby.” She got up off the couch, scooped Kat up, and hugged the cat tight to her chest and shoulder as she paced circles around the couch. “I gotta plan this. I suppose you don’t want another dude in the bed.”

“Probably not.”

“Probably.” She leaned over the back of the couch, Kat snug and purring into her chest, and grinned at him. “Any dudes you’d be willing to share me with? Gotta worry about that fragile male ego, ya know.”

He didn’t bother sitting up. “No, I don’t know any guys I’d be happy sharing you with.”

“Mister big bad werewolf gonna be all possessive of me? Hold me down and claim me?”

“Nope.”

“Aw, please? Jealous guys can be kinda hot, when they get all possessive and stupid and shit. Puff up their chests and—”

“Nope.”

She frowned, but resumed pacing her circle around the couch. “I know a girl who’d be happy to join us.”

“Who is it?”

“It’ll be a sur—”

“No surprises.”

“Spoil sport.” She stopped pacing in front of the couch, held Kat up from under the cat’s arms, and rubbed foreheads with her. “Marge.”

“Saw that coming.”

“Hey! She goes to Bloodlust regularly, and we talk and—”

“And you Kiss her.”

Jessy grinned. “Yeap.” Not a hint of shame or guilt there, just mischievousness. “She’s been hesitant to leave Dolareido. From what I can tell, the whole fiasco with Jeremiah broke her, you know? Might not go back to being a hunter. Might give it up.”

Understandable. That’d been one giant shitshow that’d had monsters on both sides, and got a whole bunch of Marge’s friends killed. He didn’t know what sort of history Marge, or Brace or Dennis had before coming to Slut City, what sort of things might have driven them to be hunters, but considering everything that’d happened, no one could blame them if they decided to give it up.

Well, give it up was probably an exaggeration. They were hunters. You didn’t go down that road for no reason, and no one came out of

that vocation without mental scars. Marge, Brace, Dennis, they'd all probably keep hunting, but maybe visiting neighboring cities, or keeping an eye on what went on in Dolareido. An interesting move on Antoinette's part, letting them stay in the city, but she did like to play the long game.

"Marge is pretty hot," he said.

"Fucking right? Love the tiny body and the light black skin, you know?"

Eric rolled his eyes. This girl.

"I haven't talked to her much."

"Well, I can guarantee she'd agree to it."

"I suppose she'd agree to anything in the middle of a Kiss."

"Hey! I didn't coax her into anything."

"Uh huh."

Jessy rolled her eyes, mirroring him. "I didn't! Just a talk between two ladies, a talk that came up several times, with maybe a Kiss here or there..."

"Uh huh."

"I can guarantee she would be delighted to sit on that dick."

"Uh huh."

Laughing, Jessy came over and sat down beside his hip, her ass on the edge of the couch. "Slut City's really rubbed off on her. Give her a few more years and she might even agree to become Kindred." After a confident nod, she hugged Kat snug to her chest, and cradled her on her back, like a baby. Kat made no motion to escape.



“Really?”

“Yeah. She didn’t get into the whole hunter thing the way most people do. I haven’t suggested it to her or anything, but I can see the signs. She’s pretty surprised with Dolareido and how Kindred do things here.”

“Still. She used to hunt vampires. I bet she’s lost friends to them.”

“Yeah, she has. But you never know.”

Jessy put Kat down on Eric’s chest on her side, rolled Kat onto her back, and buried her face in Kat’s belly. Kat didn’t mind. If anything, she liked having her belly touched, and she purred away on Eric’s chest as Jessy rubbed her face back and forth in the fur.

His phone rang.

Jessy groaned, and grabbed it off the glass table. “Avery.”

“Ignore it.”

“Dude, you know Avery hates phones. If she’s calling you, it’s important.”

“How about, we go find Marge, and have some fun, and Avery can —”

Jessy laughed, but shoved the phone into his face. “Don’t fucking do that! Don’t tempt me. Come on, this is important.”

He groaned, but answered it. “Yeah?”

---

Eric and the entire pack of werewolves stood in front of a tear. It was in a basement, under a factory in North Side, an abandoned one. Assuming it was Black Blood making the tears, it’d done so in a place humans weren’t likely to find it, but unlikely didn’t mean

impossible. Hell, it was a wonder no kine had found one; they were a lot more hidden in the physical realm than the other realms, but still.

Jessy was with him. Natasha too. Everyone wore typical casual clothing, jeans and t-shirts and whatnot, everyone except Natasha. The little vampire wore a suit with a skirt and a trench coat, almost like she wanted to look like a tiny version of her sire. It looked good on her.

“Garry wants to get involved,” Avery said, talking to Clara. “I keep telling the dude to back off.”

“He’s committed to the city.”

“He’s going to get himself killed.”

Clara shrugged. “You ever meet an elder vamp that could take a younger person’s advice?”

“Nope.”

They continued talking, trying to find some way to get Garry to stay out of their Uratha business. Eric had a few ideas, but he doubted any of them would work. Garry was just one of those guys who liked to get his hands dirty, and see things get fixed with his own eyes instead of in spreadsheets. Eric could respect that, but it was also problematic. If Garry found a way to get involved in spirit affairs, or cross the Gauntlet somehow on his own, it’d make everything so much more complicated. No wonder Avery wanted to get Eric under her thumb.

Matt and Art both stood by a stack of pallets, chatting, while Natasha walked around the tear with phone out, taking notes. Caleb and Noah were there, talking to each other about the tear. David stood by himself, watching the tear, eyes filled with wonder. Monica

and Mason, Carter and Erica, and Brianna, all there. Big crew, all to check out this one tear.

“I d-don’t know,” Natasha said. “It shouldn’t exist. It’s n-n-not in the plan...” Frowning, she scrunched up her nose as she stood in front of the large, horizontal cut in the air, and stared into its deep blackness. “It’s just ... a random tear?”

Avery walked up to the little vampire, and matched her frown as she stood in front of it. “These things aren’t random. Sure, there are ways to cut holes through the Gauntlet, but the natural ones aren’t cuts or tears. They’re more like sinkholes, and they’re rare as fuck. This”—she gestured to the tear—“is made. Someone tore this open, and we all know who.”

Eric sighed as he watched from the sidelines. Jessy sighed with him, but she only did it to mimic his sigh and try and make him laugh. Didn’t work. They’d thought they had the spirit’s plans figured out, but this threw a wrench into everything. It didn’t fit into Natasha’s graph at all. The first and only mistake she’d made, when predicting the tears.

Jessy walked up and joined her friend. “So this just doesn’t fit anywhere in your calculations?”

“No.”

“Hmm. We going in?”

“W-What? No we’re not going in! We don’t know what’s through there!”

Avery stepped closer to the tear, and sniffed. Clara did the same.

“The Gauntlet is pierced here,” Clara said, gesturing to the tear, “but it doesn’t come out in the Hisil. And ... and it doesn’t feel like

the normal Gauntlet, almost like it's ... I don't know. Almost like it's brushing up against the Gauntlet, but not quite?"

Natasha sighed and put her phone away. "We n-need a Begotten to help us, then. Who should I call?"

Jessy put up a hand. "Call Sándor! Gorgeous Mr. Stoic will save the day."

Tash frowned up at Jessy and glanced past her to Eric, but he just shrugged and offered the little vampire a sympathetic smile. As deliriously horny as his girlfriend was, he trusted her. And considering he couldn't go a single night without her trying to get him to look at other women, least he could do was let her look at other guys. It wasn't like Sándor was a threat anyway, considering the dude kept a brick wall between him and everyone else.

Natasha called him, and sure enough, Sándor the gargoyle came, promptly at that. Casual wear, jeans and t-shirt like the most of them. What did a gargoyle do for fun in his spare time?

"This is unusual," Sándor said. "It cuts into the Great Below."

Eric sucked in a breath. The Great Below. Ghosts, wandering weird planes of dark stone in what seemed like a gigantic, endless cave. But not an empty cave. It apparently reflected parts of Doareido, especially the older parts.

"You sure that's where it goes?" Jessy asked. "Cause, like, I'd be down for visiting a realm with something other than ghosts and shit."

"Perhaps one day I will take you to the realm of the Fae."

"Haha ... Wait, seriously?"

“A dangerous place, and a dangerous journey to reach it. But it teems with life, and ... interesting creatures. Dangerous creatures, but interesting ones as well, some you would no doubt recognize.”

Jessy stared at Sándor like he'd just told her Santa was real. Maybe he had. A realm of fairies and shit? It'd probably make perfect sense for a jolly fat dude flying through the sky delivering gifts to exist there.

Damien stepped into the basement, expression as stone as Sándor's as he walked up to the tear.

“W-What kept you?” Natasha asked.

“Jack wanted me to check out something with the Carthians. He's still trying to patch up some problems with Bella and them.”

“Bella's a bitch,” Jessy said. “There ain't no fixing that.”

“That does seem to be the case.” Damien shrugged before looking the tear up and down. “It—”

“Goes back to the Great Below,” Jessy said. “So I vote we don't go there, cause that place ain't fun. Let's just close it.”

Avery shook her head. “We can't. If we could, we'd have closed the others, too.”

“Then the fuck do we do?”

“Go in, like we did with the others,” Clara said. “There has to be a reason this tear exists. I doubt it's easy for Black Blood to make them. And if it made one that isn't on Natasha's chart, which has been right about all the other new tears so far, we should check this one out. It's new, too.”

Sándor shook his head. “Too dangerous.”

Avery walked up to Sándor and gave him her usual angry face. Considering how small she was, it should have been cute, but Eric had seen too much of Avery's angry side to find it funny anymore.

They argued for a while. A lot of back and forth, Sándor saying they could die, Avery insisting Uratha could handle it, Jessy insisting ghosts were scary. Eric didn't say a word.

Eventually they settled on a plan. Avery, Tash, the boys, Eric and Jessy, and Sándor would go in. Clara and the rest of the pack would stay behind, in case Black Blood decided to start shit while they were all preoccupied. Damien would stay behind with her.

Eric shouldn't have answered the damn phone.

---

~~Natasha~~

Sándor went in first. Apparently last time they went through a portal like this, from one of the dream chambers and into the Great Below, it'd been cut very high. Plummet to your death high. Sándor insisted he could fly even when not in the dream realm, if only momentarily, so they followed him.

Avery made a few comments about how weird it was that the Gauntlet was there, and at the same time sort of not. It probably had something to do with the location of the realms and how they connected to each other. If the Gauntlet was a barrier between the physical and spirit realms, then why would going from the physical to the ghost realm brush against it? And how did you brush against a barrier? Was the Gauntlet less like a wall, and more like a nebula? Were there other types of barriers, blocking different realms?

She needed to draw a map. Some sort of fancy, weird, alien, special map that talked about realms and stuff. Antoinette would love that, both to have the map, but also to see Natasha step outside her comfort zone of science, and look into the crazy magical world

they lived in. Sometimes it was easy to see how the Prince and Jacob ever became friends, with so many overlapping interests. The Circle was full of witches, and the Ordo was full of mad scientists who'd happily do something like try and mechanize a portal to a Hell dimension so they could harness it for fuel.

Antoinette probably had something like that in her basement already.

Natasha kept her boys close. She'd been in the Great Below a couple times over the past few months, but it was always creepy. A giant cave that went on and on and on, with all sorts of disturbing scenery. One night they found an ocean of dark water, with little glowing wisps swimming in it. Sándor had been adamant they don't touch the water. Another night they found a well, big and made of stone, with a rope and bucket pulled up. Jessy had tossed a rock in, and it never made a sound. That same night, they stumbled onto what looked like one of Dolareido's tunnels, one of the super old ones, and it went down. And down. And down. They didn't follow it much further.

And then there were the ghosts. Thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of them, in the distance. Whenever they came close, which was rare, they looked like white blurs, sometimes with more defined forms, and often wisps that faded into nothing. But at a distance they carried green lanterns. Tash and her crew had been damn careful to avoid them whenever they came here, but it wasn't all that hard, mostly. Whatever the ghosts did, they floated about doing their own thing, moving as a giant, slow-moving swarm. Like thousands of green fireflies, except moving with all the speed of turtles.

The only thing anyone could see past a few hundred feet in these strange endless, enormous cave tunnels, was fog, and floating green lights.

There were levels to the ghost realm, according to Sándor. He made sure they didn't go any lower than the top layer. His own trips into deeper layers he only talked about a little, giving them hints about 'dark' and 'mysterious' things he avoided, ghosts that transcended ghosthood, and strange places where the ghosts were bound by stranger laws. He even mentioned a river, something that acted as a barrier between the first layer and the ones below it.

A genuine journey into the pits of a strange afterlife. This was exactly why Natasha had fled the Ordo when Daniel had sired her. Crazy, horrifying things. It was so much easier to worry about real things like money and power and blood, all the Invictus ever cared about. But the dragons dipped their toes into so many strange places, and now she was dipping hers, too. And despite herself, she kinda liked it.

Her phone didn't like this place, though, and attempts to take pictures failed. Figured. If she had time, she'd get a sketchpad and draw things, but she wasn't exactly a skilled artist.

The cave went on, and they walked. Rolling waves of stone, usually smooth, sometimes not, the occasional enormous boulder bigger than a house, and then patches of sand, as if they were walking on a beach. Far as they could tell, the realm didn't change under their feet, so all they had to do was turn around when they wanted to go back. Still, it was a super easy place to get lost, and if it hadn't been for the Uratha or Sándor, Tash would have preferred they leave a trail of breadcrumbs to follow.

"This place is empty," Eric said, gesturing around, "and I don't see anything important. Maybe we should go."

Sándor nodded. "It is empty. If Black Blood tore a hole open to here, then either we can't see why it did, or it made a mistake. Perhaps the tear wasn't meant to exist, since it doesn't fit on Natasha's predictions."



“The predictions could b-be wrong,” she said. “I mean—”

“Tash,” Avery said, “you’ve been right about all this shit for months now. Get your head out of your ass, and stop defaulting to ‘I could be wrong’ anytime someone pokes at the plan. Yes, we all know you could be wrong. Congrats, that’s life. But when you got a plan that seems to be working, you fucking default to believing it first, questioning it second. Get me?”

Tash squirmed as she looked away from Avery. “I-I know.”

It didn’t take more than a second for Jessy to march up to Avery and stare down at her. “Hey! Don’t be a bitch. Christ, you like this with that Henry dude? Guy must have the patience of a saint.”

Avery glared up at Jessy like the vampire was only an inch tall. “Don’t bring my personal life into this.”

“If you plan to live in Dolareido, don’t expect much privacy.” With a very evil wink, Jessy licked one of her fangs.

“Strange, cause I thought I’d done a pretty good job of keeping my private life private.”

“Oh? A little birdie told me a certain werewolf bitch, short, milf body, silvery blue eyes and black ponytail — you might know her — has a thing for giving her man handjobs in locations she probably shouldn’t. Movie theaters and stuff, you know? Where it’s all dark and no one can see what you’re doing.”

Everyone stopped, and stared. Matthew and Arturo dropped their jaws. Natasha backed up, several times, until she put the boys between her and the volcano.

“You ... fucking spied on me? When I was just hanging out with Henry?”

“Invictus spy on everyone.”

“We’re allies!”

“Pffft. We’re acquaintances with similar goals. Thralls and ghouls all over the city are watching you, and Jack isn’t the only vamp in the city with some animals to help him.”

“You fucking ungrateful little shit!”

Jessy didn’t back down. If anything, Avery’s anger was gasoline on her fire. God, Jessy could be such an evil bitch. And right now, Tash was glad to have her as a friend. Maybe.

“Oh get over it. We’ve got all sorts of intel on the lot of you and the sort of shit you get up to when you’re not locked up in your little apartments with drapes shut tight. I know Carter’s found himself a little kine fox who’s into older guys. I know Erica’s been exploring her dom side, whips included. I know Monica’s got really close with a kine couple. Everyone knows about Mason and Tilly, and Brianna and Santos and Derick. Bet you didn’t know Noah, your resident closed-off antisocial asshole, has become really close friends with a couple girls who—”

“I get it! Holy shit, don’t you fucking respect people’s—”

“And I know you, oh holier-than-thou bitch, not only like to take charge when fucking, but apparently you really got a thing for anal.” Without dropping the grin, Jessy shrugged like it was no big deal. “Vamps really go for anal a lot, cause there’s no clean up required, right? We’re ready for anything, all the time. But werewolves gotta eat, right? Must be a pain in the ass — ha!— to get prepped for anal sex with your man all the time.” Jessy leaned down toward Avery, full-on eye contact engaged. “All. The. Time.”

Tash stepped behind Matthew. Hopefully the width of her giant boyfriend would be enough to block the impending explosion.

“I ... I ... am a grown woman, vamp. I’m not going to be embarrassed about the things I like.” Which was an obvious lie, considering she was blushing. Not a lot, not nearly as much as Tash would have been if Blushing Life, but still, more than they’d ever seen the woman blush.

“Uh huh. Well, be nice to Tash, or I’ll have every dirty, sexy little secret you Uratha have, all out in the open. And I got more.”

Jessy wasn’t lying. She had a lot more secrets than that, for sure, with all the tools the Invictus had for spying on people, plus the stuff she knew about Clara and her time with Jessy’s ghouls.

“Be nice? I’m not being mean. I’m—”

Eric raised a hand. “It was a little mean.”

Avery glared daggers into Eric, before looking to Matt and Art. “What do you think?”

The boys looked between each other, before squirming a little.

“You can be harsh with us all you want,” Art said. “But, uh, yeah you kinda cross the line when talking to other people.”

Matt raised a hand. “Not that Jessy isn’t crossing a hundred lines right now—”

“Says the porn star,” Jessy said, chuckling.

“But, um ... maybe be a little nicer?”

Tash smiled up at the back of Art and Matt’s heads. Aw, her boyfriends were defending her. Which normally she’d appreciate, but Avery was a dangerous bear to poke. Wolf.

Avery glared at Matt with enough intensity to melt steel. And when Tash peeked out from behind her, Avery leveled her gaze

straight at her. It was like staring into the eyes of a raging storm.

But after a few moments, Avery took a deep breath, sighed, and relaxed.

“Sorry, Natasha. I’ve dealt with a few Uratha like you before, and ... I guess I’m just falling into old habits. You’re smart, ok? Just go with it.”

Slowly, Natasha stepped out from behind Matt, and offered Avery her best apologetic smile.

“Th-Thank you. And I know Jessy is a bitch, but—”

“Hey!”

“She means well. And I’m not made of g-glass, Jessy. I can handle a little criticism. I had Maria for a boss for a long time.”

Jessy groaned and scrunched up her nose. “Christ, right. I don’t miss having that bitch in the council.”

“M-Maria wasn’t that bad. She just ... w-wanted to make sure things went well.”

Avery laughed as she started walking, and everyone else followed her cue. “I get that. I hate that vampire corpse bitch, but I get it.”

Crisis averted. Everyone started moving again, Sándor at the front, with Eric and Tash’s boys behind him. The girls took the back this time.

Jessy leaned in toward Avery, walking beside her. “You’re really hot, by the way.”

“Don’t start.”

“Aw come on, don’t be like that, I’m just trying to settle the water. Besides, I wasn’t lying. You really got that milf—”

“I never had kids.”

“Cougar then, whatever. You got this tiny, compact, deadly woman thing going that is fucking hot as sin. And the pony tail down to the ass makes you look like a nineties action hero or something.”

Avery rolled her eyes, but Tash could see a hint of a smile there. While Jessy had absolutely zero tact, she had the unnatural ability to disarm people, at least when sex was the topic. Usually. Sometimes.

“Sorry if I’m not as comfortable with sex as you, vamp. Having a pulse and body hair and a menstrual cycle kinda gets in the way of that whole immortal succubus vibe.

“Then it’s a good thing you’re in Dolareido, so you can get every wax imaginable whenever you want, night or day.” Jessy winked at Avery as she came in a bit closer, and bumped hips with her. “And I know you do.”

“Fuck I hate you.”

“No you don’t. I’m delightful.” Jessy nodded, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Just ask Eric.”

“The pup might be a bit biased, don’t you think?”

“True.” Not deterred, Jessy hip bumped Avery again. “You looked great by the way.”

“Looked? You—”

“You and Henry didn’t bother closing the drapes. Not all the way, anyway.”

“We didn’t fuck against the window!”

“That don’t matter. It was an apartment building. Lots of people with telescopes, and drones and stuff. Wasn’t just my spy that saw you riding that dude on the couch.”

“Oh fucking god.” Unable to take it anymore, the poor woman hid her face in her hands. “They recorded it, didn’t they. You got me on tape.”

“Pfft, please. I got everyone on tape. It’s Dolareido.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll—”

“Watch it with you? Sure. You got no idea how hot that firm ass of yours looks with a dick in it. And the way you rode him, facing away, squeezing his legs? Poor guy was just trying to survive how much of a hornball you were being.” Jessy leaned in closer again. “Your legs were shaking.”

Natasha, standing with Jessy between her and the pack leader, gulped on a dry throat as she peeked up at her friend, and then across to Avery. She was blushing again, but at least she didn’t look angry; not livid, anyway.

“I’m not making porn for you, Gangrel.”

“Too late now.”

“And I ... I ... I know what I like. Henry’s a nice guy, and I guess I like—”

“Putting on a show? Taking a kind guy and pampering him with all sorts of kinks he never thought a girl would happily satisfy?”

Cowgirl anal, and then enjoying it so much you can't help but get all tingly and swollen, and everything inside just fucking boils. Before you know it, you're soaking guy's balls, hands clutching his shins as you cum." Thankfully she whispered it, because Avery blushed a thousand times worse than before, but the boys didn't hear it. Tash did, with how close she was. "It's an interesting spin on the trope. Hardass boss still likes being in charge in bed, but likes being gentle? Dommy mommy? It's unique. Usually the hardass bitch boss wants to be submissive in bed."

"Jesus christ, is sex all you ever think about?"

"No, but I think about it a lot. Everyone does. I'm just honest about it." Shrugging, she gestured down at Tash. "You must have seen the vids of this girl getting stuffed with cock right up to the lungs." This, Jessy didn't bother whispering.

Oh god damn it. Tash punched Jessy in the hip, but Jessy just laughed.

Avery took a quick peek at Tash before looking away. "I ... have."

Tash gasped. "Avery!"

"What? Everyone in the pack talks about it, about Matt and Art suddenly being porn stars. I wanted to see what the fuss was about."

Jessy growled like she was about to sink her fangs into a fresh meal. "Tash is so small, you can actually see their dicks pushing out against her belly. Fuuuuuuuck it's so hot."

Now it was Natasha's turn to be hyper embarrassed, but at least she couldn't blush without the Blush.

"At least she fucks them while they're in human form," Avery said.

Jessy grinned. “For now.”

“For now?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna break her, and get her to fuck the boys when they’re transformed at some point.”

This was ridiculous. Why were they talking about this when walking through the fog of the Underworld? Ghosts everywhere, hidden in the mist. Ghosts above and in the distance, hovering along, thousands of them, green lights on a path Tash didn’t understand. It was a scary place! But the moment Jessy saw the opportunity to steer the conversation toward sex, she did with the utmost gusto. The girl had a problem.

Avery sighed and shook her head. “It’s weird.”

“Nah, come on. What girl hasn’t fantasized about getting pinned down by some huge, oddly handsome monster, you know? And filled to bursting and—”

“Not that. I mean, Dolareido. There’s a presence here, something that calms the wolf in us. I thought for sure Eric was going to rip you in half if he transformed when you guys were intimate.”

“He nearly did.” The grin on Jessy’s face was positively filthy.

“Not ... not that kinda ripping. Girl, what the fuck is wrong with you. No, never mind, forget I asked. What I’m saying is, there’s something weird about Dolareido. The whole damn city is odd. Like, I feel like there’s something ... else, happening. Someone or something out there is fucking with this city in ways we don’t know about. Apparently Eric’s talked to the actual Luna, so maybe he knows something, but he doesn’t tell me shit.”

“Well stop being an ass and he’ll tell you more. Use a carrot.”



“A carrot? Bribe him?”

“I mean, kinda? I got his dad in good shape by promising him pictures of my tits. That seemed to work. Maybe it runs in the family?”

Tash groaned. Avery groaned. There was no helping this woman. The only person who was as devoted to sex as the entirety of their personality, was Othello, and Othello didn't go around poking and prodding people with it. Far as Tash knew, the gorgeous man was content to be a sex addict in silence. But Jessy, she turned it into a game. How uncomfortable could she make people with her sheer abrasiveness and shamelessness?

“I'm not going to show your boyfriend my tits.”

If her comment had been an attempt to throw Jessy off, it didn't. The woman was impervious.

“Nah. But Eric's trying to do his own thing as a werewolf, right? Get this whole vigilante thing going, while you're against that. Maybe if instead of trying to convince him to do otherwise, you actually help him out? I don't mean physically help him on his hunts, but maybe teach him a thing or two, without trying to turn him into your bitch?”

“I haven't been trying to turn him into my bitch. But I'm not so dumb I can just ignore—”

“That's exactly what I'm talking about. Let the dude do his own thing, and—”

Natasha put up a hand, and gestured forward. The boys had stopped, and all of them were looking out into some sort of ravine, complete with jagged, sharp rocks, and lots of places to fall.

Slowly, everyone came up to the edge of the ravine and looked down. Fog, but not so thick they couldn't see it was about a hundred feet down, climbable even. Tash half expected to see green lanterns down there, but no, no ghosts, near or in it. Left and right, it was one long canyon cut into the dark rock, and weirdly enough, it looked half natural, as if time and weather had created it, but also that it'd been helped along by human hands with tools.

Tash squinted as she crouched down, tapped her vitae, and gazed into the mist and dark. She peeled away the darkness and found identifying marks as best she could, cuts in the black and gray stone, and several old chisels. As she adjusted, she found more things, more bits of metal, man made, things like shovels, and some old railroad carts. All of it was rusted and worn.

There were more than rocks and old tools down there. With what Jack and Jessy told her about the old train graveyard they found months ago, she had to assume the Great Below reflected the places it was close to in the physical realm, or was connected to them somehow. This long canyon had to be reflecting something from Dolareido, maybe from its massive expanse era, same as the train graveyard.

She sucked in a useless breath. There were enormous spiderwebs down there, many of them. God damn it, not again.

## Chapter 160

~~Jack~~

“So, uh, what’re you gonna wear to the ball?”

Elaine laughed as she lit another candle. “Obviously whatever I can that is both luxurious and fashionable, and scandalous.”

He watched her as he paced around the mansion’s basement’s basement. Viktor had several large rooms carved deep into the Earth, offshoot rooms from the empty cells and the secure sleeping room. Torture rooms. Something about blood got into concrete and changed it, altered the color. You could never quite get it out, far as Jack knew. Doubtful Viktor tried. Fucker probably enjoyed sleeping down the hall from the smell of death.

Well, either way, the room was useful, once he removed the chair Viktor had probably tortured people on. Now it was just a big, empty concrete room. Was empty. Candles sat in the room corners and in the corners of the symbol Elaine drew on the floor, which she of course drew with blood because why the hell not.

“You could wear something not scandalous, you know.”

“Where is the fun in that?”

“Elaine, come on. You’re five hundred years old. I seriously doubt you get excited by wearing something scandalous anymore. You could strut naked in a packed football stadium and not even blink.”

She grinned at him over her shoulder, before dipping her small, dark brush into a black jar filled with blood, and working on her symbols again.

“I could.”

“Then why bother with scandalous?”

“Just because I have played the game for hundreds of years, does not mean I no longer enjoy the game. We go through phases, young childe of mine, we all do. Antoinette knows what it is like to be filled by half a dozen men, at the same time, while another half dozen coat her in white. And yet I have seen her enjoy some of her most fulfilling sexual moments with you, a single, small man.”

Jack frowned, but it just made her laugh.

“What I mean,” she continued, “is that Antoinette is now in a phase in her life where she finds her greatest joys in fulfilling your sexual desires. Perhaps in a hundred years, you will wish to do the same with her, and she will enjoy that you will enjoy satisfying her with a myriad of kinks.”

“What’s this got to do with scandalous clothing?”

“Phases. Your lover and I show off our bodies for different reasons than your younger companions, now that we are as old as we are, but we still wish to show them off. I am blessed to have been sired at the height of my beauty, and I am blessed to have had the genetics to be so lovely a creature.”

“Not lacking for confidence, that’s for sure.” Ventrue she was.

Again she laughed. “Well, unlike your lover, I am all natural.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Dressing scandalously is, for Antoinette and I, a game about making other people squirm. The goal is not to show off, but to force reactions from others. Surely you noticed how many times

Antoinette has done something, not with the intent of drawing the eyes of others, but to make specifically you wriggle?”

Jack groaned and paced faster. “Yeah, that happens a lot.”

“After centuries, you learn to accept reality, and stop seeking validation. She and I are beautiful, and no longer look to prove it. We look to tease others, and indulge in this mischief.”

“That’s what you matured into? Teasing people? Cause I knew more than a few girls in high school who thought the best thing in the world was teasing young guys. A little flirting, a boob smooch, anything to get the guy to blush or squirm.”

“As I said. Phases.”

“I don’t buy it. I think you’re both just a couple girls who’ll always be a couple girls, using tits and ass to flirt and tease cause you like causing, as you said, mischief.”

“That would imply Antoinette and I are quite young at heart. Do you believe that?”

He eyed her, even gave her his best stink eye, but Elaine just laughed as she drew another line on the concrete floor. No, he didn’t believe that. As much as he loved Antoinette, there was no denying that was she was old, right down to the soul. Hell, that was part of the reason he loved her.

“Think of it as nostalgia, then,” she said. “Antoinette and I are indulging our nostalgia, when we act like young women. Forgive us old monsters our guilty pleasures.”

That did make a lot more sense. Nostalgia was a powerful force, and even Jack, in his mid twenties now including his nine years, found himself occasionally listening to old songs or watching old movies from his childhood for a taste of it.

“I suppose of all the silly immature habits an elder could have, being outrageously flirty is pretty reasonable.”

“Indeed.” Laughing, she stood up, walked over to another corner, and continued expanding the symbols below. “I suppose you told Antoinette that I was here?”

“Yeah.”

“You do not trust me?”

“I trust you enough to try this. Not so much that I won’t tell Antoinette you’re here. I’m a pretty trusting guy, Elaine, to a fault, and I didn’t tell her anything about your past or what we’re up to. But I made sure she knows we’re up to something, in case you stake me, throw me in a box, and ship my ass to Europe.”

“Come now my childe, I would never use something as dull as a box. An expensive coffin, on the other hand, would be far more comfortable.”

“Pretty sure there’s issues with shipping dead bodies across borders.”

“Then it is a good thing the Ordo can make such issues disappear.”

He hadn’t considered that. In Dolareido, the Invictus had their fingers in every aspect of running the city, from the mayor to the police to its criminal groups. A lot more than that, considering how big an organization the Invictus was. The different cities normally ignored each other, but when they had to, Invictus had ways to help each other out, and that probably included getting into other countries without issue. No reason to think the Ordo Dracul didn’t have the same systems in place.

“So, um, are you gonna stake me?”

“It is always a possibility. Will my great grandchilde be so valuable a prize, I steal him away and lock him in a dungeon somewhere, where I can experiment upon him in peace?” She shrugged, laughed again, and lit another candle, as if she hadn’t just threatened to basically be his undoing. “I suppose it will depend on developments. But, for what my word is worth, it is not my plan. It is clear the curse you bear is not a blessing.”

“You did remove yours for a reason.”

“Mine had been bound, eating away at me as a whisper I could never quite define. You said the same of yours, before my grandchilde’s death broke it free.”

Jack winced. “Julias’s death didn’t break it free. I did.”

“Regardless, your tales of your time with the curse before then were quite vivid, while my memories of it are blurry scars.”

“But...”

“But now, your curse is no longer bound. It is free to run amok in your mind, instead of some insidious part of your subconscious. I do wonder if it could somehow be extracted.”

Jack paced some more, if only so Elaine wouldn’t see the moment of surprise on his face. Yeah, Black Blood had suggested that very idea, and Black Blood gave the impression of a villain who liked telling the truth, so he could make people suffer with it. The idea was there, an option Jack considered every night now, letting Black Blood extract the curse. No way he’d do it knowing the spirit-not-spirit was performing some kind of ritual the size of the damn city, but still.

“I assume,” she said, “you will be wearing a suit to the ball?”

“What dude won’t be?”

“I suppose that is true. How many variants can you make of a suit, before you retread ground? Suits three hundred years ago looked closer to penguins than they do to the suits of today, and yet, still suits. Women have so many more options.”

“Yeah well, guys don’t wear suits for how they make the guy look visually.”

Elaine smiled, like a teacher glad her student figured something out.

“Correct. The world of fashion for men is an entirely different beast, filled with social posturing and silent proclamations of power and control. I do not envy the fashion game men play. I am quite content to be judged solely on my looks, particularly when it comes to a ball.”

“Easy to say when you’re thin and have huge breasts.”

Licking a fang, she came closer, walked past him, and scooped up a book from the floor.

“Do not forget my ass.”

He rolled his eyes, even as he took a couple peeks at her ass and the suit skirt snug to it. Anal sex had become pretty norm for them, because Antoinette liked burying him in kinks, but wasn’t a fan of anal herself. So Elaine was a tool Antoinette could use to treat him, an ass for him to fuck. Which Elaine seemed to enjoy, being treated like a sex toy by her friend. Elders were weird.

It really was a great ass, though.

“I wonder,” she said, “about your friend Beatrice.”

“Triss? What about her?”



“I’ve come to understand she and Sándor have spoken to each other several times over the past few months.”

“I know, but—”

“And several more times besides, when pursuing the dark path your friend follows.”

Jack winced again. “Really? I was hoping she ... fuck, I don’t know. Beatrice and Sándor are nothing alike, but then so was Triss and Julias. Maybe ... Maybe she and Sándor could get involved, romantically, and help each other be a little happy.” If that was even why they were hanging out. If Sándor was hanging out with Triss because of the whole resurrection rumor, Jack wasn’t sure if that was a good thing.

“You do not hate Sándor for his role in my grandchilde’s death?”

“You know I don’t. He wasn’t in control of himself. And fuck me, if Triss can get past his role in Julias’s death, I can.”

“Perhaps. I wonder if Sándor’s guilt, and Beatrice’s resentment over his part in Mire’s death, has led to a strange connection between them. Perhaps he aids her in her ultimately futile goal, to settle his guilt? The poor fool reeks of it.”

Slowly, Jack sucked in a breath as he shook his head. “I trust her. She’s smarter than she seems. Same for Sándor.”

Elaine raised a brow as she met his eyes. “I am surprised. Ventrue normally prefer to control their friends, and meddle in their lives.”

“I get that. Part of me really wants to get involved and say something about what Triss is doing, and Sándor’s involvement. But I won’t.” He gestured to the circles drawn into the floor, and the candles at the connecting points between lines between the circles. “Ready?”

“Indeed. Kneel in the center, if you would please.”

“Kneel.” Yeah, he hated this. “Reminds me of the vision I had, of Susanna, and the priest binding the curse. You ever find that dude?”

“No. There was much chaos during the 1500s. Upheaval, death, communities ruined by flame or disease. I have no idea what happened to my sire, as you know. And I have no knowledge of the priest who bound her curse. If she told me of him, it is too far a faded memory.”

“He was in the vision, but I can’t really remember what he looks like. Like trying to remember a dream, but he was there, casting the spell on Susanna. And he was there, watching, when Susanna sired you.”

Elaine nodded as she flipped through the pages of her book. Her very old, very creepy book.

“Shadows of my past.”

“Think they’re still alive?”

“No. They would be ancient elders by today, and I have not discovered any elder Kindred older than I, few as they are, that could be those from your vision.”

“Damn.”

“As I said, the time period was fraught with dangers for Kindred. With the curse bound and weakened, Susanna and her extreme tastes — as described by you — would likely have led to her exposing herself, but without the power to defend herself, not against an entire mob armed with pitchforks and torches.”

“But those urges were because of the curse ... right? It didn’t have any visions from before Susanna cast the ritual and got the curse.”

“Naturally.”

“I ... remember what she was like when it and her were in full bloom together, slaughtering people by the thousands. It was just like when the curse gets a hold of me, that crazy blood lust that’s psychopathic. Like ... rage, and eroticism, mixed into some kinda gorefest.”

“Then the question is, how much of the curse’s personality is a product of the Strix, and how much of it is a remnant of Susanna?”

“Lot of questions about Susanna.”

“Indeed. If only my sire would reappear, and answer all our questions for us in a dramatic storytelling moment.” Elaine looked to the concrete tunnel stairs, and waited. No one appeared. After a minute, she sighed and shrugged. “Alas, we are on our own.”

Jack chuckled and knelt in the center of the circles. The chuckles vanished, and he gulped on a dry throat as he looked down. He felt it. Holy shit, he felt it, felt the invisible lines in the air circling him and tugging on him. He felt the power in the blood, the dead life used to tear down the barriers between physical and otherworldly. He felt wind swirling around him, even though the air was still.

It’d always be a shocker that magic actually existed. For some reason, it was easier to believe in vampires, werewolves, and stuff like spirits and other realms and dream monsters. But magic? It felt too silly, too ridiculous, but kneeling in the center of a ritual circle smashed him the face with the truth of it. And it was terrifying.

Elaine stepped outside the circle, and fetched a knife from her purse. More like a curved piece of stone that looked like it’d been chipped out of a bigger piece of stone, complete with a wooden handle bound to it by leather strings. Just looking at it was enough to put images in Jack’s head of someone getting sacrificed under the full moon, having their heart cut out or something.

His great grandsire looked the book over a couple more times before she set it down, and walked over to him. Face steady and unfazed, she nodded, and slowly dragged the knife across her palm. Kindred blood resisted leaving the body naturally, so Elaine had to focus, eyes locked onto her split palm, until a thick, heavy, dark droplet of vampire blood fell and splashed onto the floor beneath her in front of him.

White lightning cracked across his vision, silent, and blinding. He closed his eyes and looked away, but when another one of her drops of blood fell, it hit him again. Not actually there then, but inside him. He ground his teeth as a third droplet summoned a third bolt of lightning, brighter than the others, blanketing his vision in white until it was all he could see.

And then he wasn't kneeling. Standing, naked, in white, endless white that curved at edges beyond any distance he could ever reach. A dome, not endless, but it certainly felt like it.

He'd been here, multiple times. As far as he could tell, it was some sort of interaction point in his head, some place his mind created when it needed to communicate with other entities at a level deeper than dialog. If psychics existed, true telepaths, and he assumed they did with all the other shit that apparently existed, they probably had their visions or conversations in this place.

Elaine stood there as well, also naked. As much as seeing the tall blonde naked would usually send Jack's mind into the gutter, it didn't seem to be how this place worked. Naked meant as much as clothed in this place: nothing. Plus, there was a ravine between him and her, some sort of pit carved into the white, exposing endless black, a canyon that couldn't be crossed. It was maybe ten feet wide, and Elaine and him were maybe twenty feet from each other, but he just knew, no matter what they did, this canyon couldn't be crossed.

“It has been some time since I have gleamed the inside of a mind,” Elaine said. “Someone else’s, or mine. I rarely cast such rituals, even at the height of my experiments.”

“I see it far too often.”

“Oh?”

“Something the curse does, I guess. Whenever we Dominate, it lets me see this.” Jack gestured around him. “Dominate didn’t let me do that before.”

“Indeed. Dominate does not let you meld minds with your victim. It is predatory, not an exchange.” Elaine folded her arms under her breasts as she came closer to the edge and looked around. “If the curse allows you to see this part of your mind frequently, it is perhaps using your mind in ways a vampire cannot normally.”

“Yeah, maybe. It was in here I ... I freed the curse.” And as if his subconscious was intent on torturing him, a sledgehammer materialized in his hand, dangling and half resting against the nothing floor. A moment later, the chains appeared on the floor too, giant and broken, surrounding him.

He tossed the hammer aside. Fuck his subconscious and its masochistic desires.

“Then ... perhaps it is not that the curse is using your mind in a unique way, but rather it is letting you see into it in a way not normally possible. Perhaps the curse is letting you see what the Beast sees, when it attacks someone’s mind.”

“You mean this room isn’t mine? This isn’t my head? It’s the Beast’s?”

“I imagine there is overlap. But to Dominate someone is to use the power of the Beast, as is all acts of using our Kindred

Disciplines. It is not you, but the Beast that makes true contact with another's mind, in order to Dominate. After a fashion, at least. Thus, if you are seeing this room when other Kindred do not, you are being shown something the Beast normally cannot show you ... or perhaps simply prefers to not show you. That is until it is cursed by the Strix."

"You make it sound like it's an animal guarding its own interests."

"I would not be the first Kindred to come to such a conclusion. The difference now, is that your curse connects both your Beast and your consciousness." She looked down, chin in her fingers. It was easy to see now why she was a dragon. It wasn't just the lust for power, cause she could have easily been Invictus if that was all she wanted. But in her eyes, he spotted some real hunger for knowledge, as if everyone else vanished and questions and answers were the only things that mattered anymore. "Perhaps it—"

A heavy growl silenced the both of them, and Elaine stepped back as a growing black mist seeped up from the white floor near Jack's feet. Up, and up, and up, until a cloud of smoke stood twenty feet over Jack, twisting and swirling on itself. Red eyes flowed within, occasionally joined by a beak, or set of fangs, or a snout, or mandibles. Claws occasionally reached out from the cloud to touch the floor, sometimes talons, and sometimes a tail or a black feather.

Elaine blinked at Jack, and blinked up at the Beast and the curse melded to it.

"Extraordinary," she whispered.

"So here's the bitch, finally paying a visit." The Ripper snorted, a guttural sound mixed with rasp and bass. Here, inside Jack's head, the curse felt like a Goliath. Standing beside it ... him, was enough to have Jack trembling, and he had to force himself to stop shaking as the curse hovered closer to the canyon edge.

“You are the curse.”

“I am Jack the Ripper.”

Elaine squinted at the giant creature. “You are a Strix creation, infecting my great grandchilde’s Beast.”

“And you’re nothing more than a whore Susanna pulled off the streets, cause she knew you’d make a valuable asset.”

After a few seconds of cold staring, Elaine growled. “What do you remember of my sire?”

“More than you.”

“Tell me.”

“Why the fuck would I tell you anything? You’re nothing. How much power did you have hiding under your nose, but instead of releasing it like Jack here, you fucking removed it?” The curse laughed, and his titanic body of compressed black mist vibrated.

“You are an unseemly creature.”

“And you’re a waste. Susanna saw potential in you, you know? She groomed you, prepared you, because she thought your tits combined with your aggressive personality and quick reasoning, she could get some real value out of you. Not exactly a lot of women like that five hundred years ago. But what did you fucking do? You ran from power, and then spent the rest of your life chasing it again.”

“Chasing it?” Jack asked.

“Chasing. You heard it yourself, Jack. She’s an Architect of Terror, and according to her, that means she’s spent her time with the dragons studying the Beast. Now why would someone do that, someone who used to have power, power attached directly to their

Beast?” The cursed laughed, a heavy rumble that shook the metaphor room. “She wanted the power back, of course. She did everything she could to find a way to get the curse back without the Strix influence.”

Laughing all the more, until both Jack and Elaine were wincing, the curse extended an arm, something covered in feathers and ending in claws. He pointed it to the endless, infinite wall behind Jack, and waved an arm. The wall disappeared under an image, blurry colors that danced over the white, and both vampires watched, intrigued, and maybe a little terrified.

And then the projection came to them. Both vampires jumped back, startled, as the image the Ripper summoned became 3D, and surrounded Jack. It didn't cross the canyon, leaving Elaine to look on from a distance, but she had no trouble seeing with how defined the blurry images slowly became.

“Now that she's here,” the Ripper said, and gestured to Elaine with a freshly sprouted black arm, “I think it's time to show you what sort of person Elaine really is, Jack.”

Viktor. Elaine. A party. Jack winced as he stepped back from the images sitting around fancy tables drinking wine and whatnot. Not this again.

“Beast,” Elaine said, “you cannot scare me off with a simple memory.”

“But this isn't your memory, is it? You showed up out of nowhere after disappearing for years, and now look at you, watching Viktor, after a failed attempt to get back on his good side.”

It was true. This was Viktor's memory. This must have been not long after Elaine showed back up in Viktor's life, and the man didn't want anything to do with her. He sat at one end of the table, and Elaine sat near the other. Jack didn't know anything about the



party, who the people were, or how Elaine could show back up years later and just invite herself into their home. But she had. She chatted with the kine, the ladies in their gowns and bodices, and men in their penguin suits with lots of trim, from probably the 1700s. The rich people of Europe.

Elaine, the past Elaine, kept glancing Viktor's way, and every so often, she licked a fang. Not exactly a big tell, and easily mistaken for someone just being hungry, especially a vampire. But combined with the hunger in her eyes, the mad scientist hunger, it was obvious what was going on. It was a look she'd given Jack many times when they talked about the curse. She wanted to experiment on her childe.

The memory changed, this time to Julias.

"Ripper," Jack said, "don't—"

"Shut up." The creature chuckled as he slammed a hand against the white floor, before it again changed into a different floor. A street, Dolareido, maybe eighty years ago. People walked it, but not packed to the shoulder like today, and the clothes were kinda drab. Right after the industrial boom in Dolareido then, maybe?

Julias walked alone, face unreadable; probably on a mission for the Invictus. Slowly, Jack's sire looked up and then left, toward the road and across it. Old cars drove by, slow as hell considering it seemed to be the 1940s at night, and the city wasn't glowing so much back then. Someone on the other side of the street had caught Julias's attention.

Elaine. She met Julias's eyes, before disappearing into the crowd.

The Ripper sliced the image in half, and Jack jumped back as the creature's claws slammed into the street. The street vanished, and the images faded, leaving the three of them in endless white once again.

“How many times did you come to Dolareido, to see if you could somehow capture Viktor or his childe, and lock them away so you could experiment on them, hmm?” The mocking tone was palpable.

Elaine wouldn't be deterred. She stood her ground and stared at the monstrosity across the ravine, and even tapped her foot, like some kinda impatient mom.

“I admit it,” she said, “and I know the others have surmised as much. I had great interest in the curse, and sought a way to isolate it.”

“Isolate it, or reunite with it?”

“I never wanted you back, monster! Disgusting, abhorrent, vile creature. You are a tool to be harnessed and nothing more!”

Jack winced as he looked Elaine's way. Was that the first time she'd ever raised her voice? Hearing her get emotional like this, loud, angry, was strange as all fuck.

“Oh really?” The Ripper formed a head, a crow's head, enormous, and it reached out from the giant ball of mist with a snake's body for a neck. “And this ritual we're in? This isn't some little magic circle to let us just talk, is it?” Bird head still attached to the weird, long, black snake neck, the Ripper pecked at the space over the canyon, and his beak collided with the air. There was a wall there, invisible.

“I have no intention of telling you anything, creature.”

The Ripper snarled hard enough Jack felt it in his throat. But after a few moments, the curse purred. “Then how about a trade?”

“A trade?”

Uh oh.

“You want to know more about Susanna, and the Strix gift. I want to know more about how you removed the gift from yourself. The ritual. Who you killed. All of it.”

“Why do you want information? You are a tool. A magical tool, but a tool, and one to eventually be disposed of.”

Another growl. “Says you. But either way, I’ve been here, digging through the memories hidden in the echoes of the Strix. And I have images that will interest you.”

Before Jack could say anything, the Ripper summoned up another image. Not a memory from Viktor or Julias, but Elaine.

“Don’t,” Elaine said, eyes growing wide as she realized what was happening. “Don’t.”

But the Ripper just laughed, and the Beast creature hovered out of the way so they could see what he wanted them to see. Elaine, naked, covered head to toe in blood. She was in a hut, some sort of wooden cottage or something, and there were three corpses around her, two men, one woman. One of the men was in her arms, Elaine sucking the man dry, her arms wrapped around his chest and holding him to her.

Her eyes were wide and crazed, like a hungry, rabid animal.

Elaine dismissed the image with a swing of the arm. “This isn’t—”

“Oh it’s very real. The Strix gift still flowed through your veins back then, and any moment where you brought me out, the memories are vivid. Would you like to see another?”

“I—”

The Ripper didn’t wait. It pulled up another image, with a similar result. Except this time, there were two people, a man and woman,

and Elaine was currently in the process of drinking the man mid sex, with the woman behind her, pressed against her back lovingly. Another wooden home from easily nearly five hundred years ago.

The image fast forwarded quickly, showing the violence as a rapid display of carnage. Elaine, ripping the man's throat open with her teeth, still mid sex. The woman screaming in shock. Wolves, literal wolves, breaking into the house. Wolves eating the woman alive.

Meal complete, Elaine stood up, smiling widely as the dying man's fresh blood dripped down her jaw, neck, and her naked body.

Jack looked away. "She got rid of the curse for a reason, Ripper. You're not showing us anything we don't already know, or will fucking sway us about anything." A peek Elaine's way showed stubborn defiance, but he recognized the guilt he saw last time they talked, when she explained some of her past to him. To have it rubbed in her face by someone as fucked up as the curse, must have fucking sucked.

Jack knew the feelings, too. He knew what it'd been like to have fucked up, thoroughly twisted thoughts running through his mind. The things he wanted to do to Angela would have landed him in a psych ward as much as a prison, if he'd been human.

"Then how about this," the Ripper said.

The image swirled around Jack, but not all that much. Still some sort of wood building, but no snow outside. Elaine gone, wolves gone, corpses gone. No, wait, Elaine was there again, in bed, with another woman, and Susanna.

Elaine gasped. This was Susanna's memory. Or was it Elaine's, from the moment of her embrace?

"There she is. The first vampire to hold me." The swirling mass of black smoke drifted over top now, and pointed down at the

hallucination that surrounded Jack with a myriad of his flowing claws. “Look at her. Tiny, and unassuming. How’d she seduce you?”

The elder Ventrue snarled. “That does not matter.”

“Uh huh.” Laughing, the curse pointed again, this time at the man watching them from the side of the room. The Sanctified vampire. “Recognize him?”

Elaine shook her head. Of course she couldn’t recognize the face, considering it was blurry.

“I suppose you can’t sharpen the memory,” she said.

“Nah. Sorry. Reaching across five centuries of time, through memories that have echoed in the veins of the Strix gift, isn’t exactly easy. Moments where I came to the surface, moments where I was called, used, or where my beloved Beast was called, those are moments I remember. But even then, five hundred years is too damn long to keep the memory crisp.” He chuckled again. “With time, and maybe a little help from a smart dragon with some crazy rituals on her side, I might be able to recall more.”

“If...”

The Ripper shrugged. Considering he was currently a giant hovering ball of black smoke filled with swirling, disappearing and reappearing feathers and claws and beaks and fangs, shrugging looked weird as fuck.

“You know what I want, old bitch. You know I want control of Jack’s body. I want it, the body, the mind, the soul. I want it all, and I want it now.” Oh fucking god he even sang it to the tune. “But if you’re not willing to help me with that, then tell me about the ritual you used to destroy the strand of me that lived inside you?”

“Tools do not live.”

Another cackle. “I’m not a tool. Christ, I sound like a broken record.”

But all he earned was another snarl from Elaine. “You can’t conjure up the memory of how I removed my curse?”

“Can’t remember things I wasn’t there for. This strand of me split off from you when you sired Viktor. But if you come over here,” he gestured to the floor near Jack, by where Susanna, Elaine, and the third woman were having sex on the bed, “I can delve into your memories on my own. Might be able to sharpen up some of these blurry images, too. Maybe even remember some names we’ve both forgotten.”

“I think not.”

“You wanted to talk to me. You wanted to see what I’d be willing to share. I’m willing to share a lot, if you’re willing to tell me — or show me — what you did to remove your gift. I figured you committed diablerie, but what I need are the details.”

“You will learn of it eventually, but not until it is too late to do anything about it.”

The Ripper laughed. “Nice bluff. If you remembered exactly what you did, you’d have shared it with Jack by now.”

“Not everyone is as eager to embrace Amaranth as you, vile creature. When Jack is freed of you, it will not be over the ashes of other Kindred. I will not have my childe suffer as I suffered.”

Jack blinked at Elaine. That sounded altruistic, and much as he knew Elaine could just be acting for the Ripper’s benefit, there was something about this place, this metaphor room, this endless white space in his skull, that stripped away a lot of the bullshit. He believed her.

With an annoyed growl, the Ripper slashed away the image, and Jack ducked as the Beast's claws sliced right through him. They passed through him like knives cutting through fog, thank god.

The projection faded, but another replaced it almost immediately. Oh fuck not this one. Jack stepped away from it, but the metaphor room didn't react to his feet on the ground. Efforts to walk away didn't do shit, and he stopped trying as the image around them grew, and grew, until they were in blackness.

Susanna, on her knees, with a vampire in torpor beside her. A huge, withered tree, deep underground. And glowing yellow eyes in the darkness, a dozen of them at least, bodies hidden in the black around the tree branches.

"You forsook their gift, vampire. But I have a shred of a few memories I haven't shown Jack, a few things I'm sure would be of use to you."

Elaine paced the canyon as she stared at the tree, and what it represented. Answers. To someone like Jack, he was happy to leave dark dirty secrets to die in black caves that meant nothing but death. But to a dragon, answers to something like how or what or why the Strix did anything was borderline existential. After all the history she had with the curse, and now the fuzzy memories she had of it teasing her, combined with the Ripper taunting her with power she didn't know she'd given up, Jack couldn't blame her for staring with hungry eyes at the image the Ripper conjured.

"And if I cannot remember the details of the ritual I used?"

"Then do what you can to help me take over this body. Get rid of the necklace, and keep the Prince and her boring sheriff out of my way. Do that, and I'll show you more than I showed Jack. I'll show you what it was like in Susanna's mind, when she first used the curse, when she first used me, when I was free. I'll show you everything I know about how she learned about the Strix, how she

knew where to go, what to do, everything.” Two arms of black mist erupted from the Beast’s sides, and crashed into the ground hard enough the entire endlessness around them shook, shattering the image. It decayed into nothingness around them. “All yours! If you give me what I want. And I want my freedom.”

Jack gulped as he stared up at the monster, before looking back to Elaine. If she either gave the curse information about how Elaine got rid of her curse, likely allowing the Ripper to prevent such a thing from happening to him, the curse would help her. Or, if she helped the Ripper take over Jack permanently, he’d help her. Either way, Jack would lose the battle for his body, and probably switch places with the Ripper, a voice with no control in his head, while the Ripper got to do whatever the fuck he wanted.

Elaine looked at the curse, the Beast it infected and controlled, and then looked to Jack. They met eyes for a bit, neither of them looking away, and Elaine gave him a small smile and nod.

“I did not begin this ritual to barter with you, curse. I am here, to understand my enemy. And now I do. You are no bastion of ancient power. You are a child, a cruel and sick thing without a shred of humanity, wielding power you do not deserve. Strix indeed. Any bargain we made would be tainted. The moment you had your freedom, you would rain destruction on everything around you, including me.” Elaine swiped an arm through the air. “And besides, the conversation was mostly a distraction while the ritual took hold.”

“What are—” The Ripper sucked in a snarling breath as he stared across the canyon.

Chains snapped out from Elaine’s side of the ravine, and crashed into and over the curse. The Ripper’s snarl turned into an ear piercing shriek of fury, and Jack covered his ears as he watched the giant thing come crashing to the white floor. More chains snapped



out, more and more, crossing the uncrossable canyon, and wrapping around the creature.

The Ripper roared and shrieked. Any attempts at words were nothing more than garbled curses mixed with guttural sounds.

“Holy shit,” Jack said. “You bound it?”

“Only for the moment.” Sighing, Elaine reached behind her, and pulled out her ritual book from nowhere. Metaphor room, right. “This ritual you sit within, Jack my childe, can be used to suppress the Beast in draugr, if only momentarily. At great cost to the caster, I might add. But it should suffice long enough for my purposes.”

Jack winced as he tried to hear her over the sounds of the Ripper screaming. “Uh, purpose? I thought you wanted to have a chat with the curse?”

“That was part of my purpose. And now for the other part.”

“I didn’t agree to—”

“Of course you did not.” Elaine looked down at her book held in one hand, while her other hand pointed out at the curse. The chains had come out of nowhere before, but now that she had the book in hand, the chains were coming out of it now. “Rest assured, this will be of no issue to you, Jack.”

Jack eyed his great grandsire, but said nothing. The fuck could he do? She was on the other side of the canyon, and far as he could tell, the only way she was able to do anything across it, was cause Jack was currently sitting in the middle of a fucking ritual circle, powered by her vitae and her weird book. If it wasn’t for the Ripper, Jack doubted he’d even be consciously aware of any of the shit that was happening in his skull.

Another chain shot out from the book, this one tipped with a spike. It didn't surround and tie up the curse like the others. It sank right into the giant pile of black smoke's flank, and ripped out a chunk of it. Again, the curse screamed.

And then it was done. Elaine smiled, closed the book, and the dream ended. The screaming disappeared, she disappeared, and Jack disappeared. It all went away like someone blowing out the candle in an otherwise pitch black room.

Jack opened his eyes. Back in his mansion, in the basement. Back with Elaine. Groaning, Jack tried to stand up. No good, his body didn't want to listen, as if he was human again and had just gone back to the gym for the first time in years.

“Elaine, the fuck did you—”

Elaine stumbled back, dropped her book, and almost crashed into a wall. Only a snap of her left hand stopped her skull from getting cracked like an egg. She didn't use her right hand, cause it was holding something.

A tiny vial. He saw only a glimpse of it before it disappeared between her fingers.

“Elaine.” After another groan, he forced himself up to his feet, driving vitae into his limbs. “You took something from the curse.”

Elaine peeked over her shoulder at him, and stumbling even worse than he was, she gave him a small grin before she grabbed her purse and put the vial inside.

“Do not think me so altruistic I will risk my life for zero gain, childe of mine.”

“Thought the gain was learning more about the curse, Susanna, and the Strix.”

“I doubted the curse would ever share such knowledge. If I gained it, then I would be a terribly happy dragon, but I knew I would not. Instead, I intended to acquire some of its vitae.”

“Its vitae?”

“When the curse takes control of you, it fills you, yes? Dominates every inch of you, and alters your vitae.”

Jack walked over to her, eyeing her closely with each step. “Yeah.”

“I had two choices, if I wished to acquire some of that vitae. Wait for you to lose control to the curse, and somehow acquire vitae from it in some ridiculous battle that could very well spell my doom. Or, extract it via ritual.”

“Extract it? How the fuck does that work?”

“In the same manner Dominate allows us to penetrate the minds of others with merely eye contact.”

“Magic.”

“Precisely. Though far be it from a dragon to use such an archaic term.” Chuckling, her own energy returning, she scooped the book back up, and motioned for Jack to follow her.

Jack wasn't so keen on following her, considering she'd lied to him about the ritual. But then again, she had to lie, cause the Ripper heard everything they said. Couldn't exactly plot behind his back when he got to eavesdrop on everything.

“You really do whatever you wanna do, don't you?”

“Of course. It is the prerogative of elders.”

“Uh huh.” Rolling his eyes, he followed after her as she walked up the stairs. He looked behind him at the ritual circle, and how the

marks in the floor were now black, as if they'd been burned to ash. Did all rituals do that, or just ones that dealt with horrible shit like Strix curses?

Jack locked the door to the basement behind him. The real one, the thick metal one with giant metal bars. After that, he closed the wooden door that hid how ridiculous and obvious the giant metal one was. Much as he trusted his thralls, he didn't want them stumbling onto information they shouldn't have. Last thing he wanted to do was mentally scrub his own thralls' minds of any secrets they were better off not knowing.

He felt a little guilty blocking off chunks of the mansion from his thralls, but only a little. The Prince did the same, and didn't let her ghouls into her room during the day while she slept, either.

“So what, now you have a vial of the Ripper's vitae? I thought the vitae part of our blood didn't last when outside the body.” Plus the whole burning away to cinder and ash part.

“It would not, normally. But we of the Ordo Dracul have measures to keep things in the state we need them.”

“And what're you going to do with it?”

“I cannot tell you. But do not worry. I plan to help you deal with this curse, Jack. That has not changed.”

He wanted to accuse her of lying, get in her face about exploiting him and making him drop his guard. But, again, it was hard to fault her for her tactics.

“Could you stop acting like it's no big deal?” he asked. It was, however, much easier to fault her smug attitude. “You make it so damn hard to trust you.”

“Never trust me completely, young Ventrue. All decisions must be calculated. But...” Sighing, she stopped walking and turned to face him. “I do hope you will trust me, perhaps more than I think you should.”

Fuck, she was doing that thing with her face again, little hints of guilt showing through. And for the fucking life of him, he couldn't throw it out as some sort of trick. It looked, and felt, genuine.

“You came to the city years ago, to take a look at Julias.”

Her lip twitched. “I did. The curse did not lie to you.”

“You wanted to get him under a scalpel, didn't you?”

“I ... wanted to explore possibilities. I was visiting my good friend Antoinette, and—”

“Was that the main reason, or was seeing if Julias was a candidate for you to steal and operate on your primary reason?”

“Can it not be both?”

Jack folded his arms across his chest, and tapped a foot on the floor. Full on frustrated parent stance.

“What stopped you?”

“From what?”

“From abducting the man. I can understand being careful around Viktor. He knew who you were, was a powerful elder, and had the curse feeding his power. You were afraid of him.”

“I ... was.”

“But Julias? In that memory, he was still a neonate, and I doubt Antoinette would have gone to bat for him at that point. Why didn't

you kidnap him? Afraid Viktor would find out? Afraid it'd cause an incident?"

After a few quiet moments, Elaine slowly shook her head, and set a hand on the front door of his mansion.

"Perhaps I was hesitant to acquire a power I once nearly destroyed myself to remove?"

"Maybe."

"Perhaps ... I did not wish to see someone who was nothing like myself or his sire suffer."

"Again, maybe. I admit, I do like that second reason quite a bit."

She smiled. "You look for the best in everyone."

"I used to. But everyone's been telling me that's a bad idea. Antoinette, you, even Julias told me to be careful about it."

"Then I suppose you will have no choice but to trust in your judgment. Can you trust me? Will I betray you? Antoinette does not think so, but she also knows to listen to the old lesson: trust no one. And Daniel has never trusted me. That leaves you, childe of mine, with only yourself to believe. What do you do?"

"I ... don't know."

With a wicked grin and a small wave, she walked out of his mansion, and under the watchful eyes of his two crows perched on a nearby statue, left. Jack watched her go, and idly flicked at the necklace around his neck, the only thing keeping his Beast down and the Ripper down with it.

If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be from trusting the wrong person.

---

~~Eric~~

Every hair on his body stood up. His heart rate jumped. Adrenaline flooded his system. Breathing quickened. Every faculty he had prepared for war.

But nothing came. They stood still, looking around, listening so close Eric could hear Begotten and Uratha heartbeats, along with his own. Nothing.

“Can you smell it?” Sándor asked.

Eric shook his head as he squatted down next to Natasha at the ravine edge. “Only traces. If an azlu has been here, it’s been gone for days.”

“Days,” Art said, “but it’s been months since the last one died.”

Avery groaned as she joined them. “Which means there’s another one. Fucking christ.”

“There’s been some disappearances,” Matt said, “of people who work in North Side, over the past few months. But I hadn’t seen anything to imply azlu.”

Art nodded. “It’s getting sneakier.”

Avery shook her head. “Azlu don’t get sneakier. It’s a creature as old as Father Wolf. It can’t get any sneakier than any real spider does.”

“If it’s th-that old,” Natasha said, “then m-maybe it’s evolving? Some real spiders are ... very sneaky.”

Eric shuddered. All the Uratha did.

The boss woman groaned again. “Terrifying thought. I’m going to assume it’s been doing the same thing it’s been doing for the past million years, and just hiding until it thought we’d leave. They are smart enough to do that, sometimes. Then it got hungry and only recently starting feeding.”

Art nodded. “I suppose that’s more likely than it suddenly getting smarter at how it hunts.”

“So this is its lair?” Eric asked, gesturing down at the small canyon. “I’m not seeing any bodies.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Maybe it was hiding out here? Might have a lair somewhere else, and relocated here? Here, because...” He gestured back to the path they came from. “Because it has a new tear to try and sew up?”

Right. Azlu were driven by some sort of great, ancient instinct, to plug holes between the spirit and physical world. They also took it too far and covered the Gauntlet in so much webbing that all flow between the two realms stopped. And when flow stopped between the two realms, the area died. Not died as in death, which the spirit realm was perfectly equipped to mimic or embody. Death as in, void of everything. Life, death, all of it, like turning a color movie to black and white.

The tears were why the azlu were in Dolareido, according to Avery. Sure, azlu showed up in places with a lot of human activity to do their thing, since human activity was one of the strongest forces for punching holes through the Gauntlet at a large scale. A big, active, lively city like Dolareido was bound to attract azlu. But three, or more, in only a few years? No, they came for the tears, driven by their instinct to sew them up as best they could.

Eric stared down the path they’d walked. Natasha did too.



“Why is there a t-tear here, then?” Natasha said. “W-Wouldn’t the azlu be here, trying to close it?”

Avery shrugged. “Maybe that’s why there’s only a few traces of the azlu being here. The tear is new, and the azlu only stayed for a little while, trying to sew it up, gave up and left and started feeding. It might come back bigger, stronger, and better equipped.”

“Either way,” Eric said, “I guess we have something to hunt, now.”

Natasha shook her head. “We’re b-busy! We have to stop the ritual.”

Eric gestured around. “We don’t even know what the ritual is, Tash, or how to close these tears. Best we got is to let the azlu keep doing what they’re doing. They’ll close them eventually I’m guessing, after they’ve killed a few dozen innocent people.” Knowing how fucked up vampires could be, especially Antoinette and Jacob, it wouldn’t have surprised Eric at all if they’d be perfectly okay with that. Maybe they had dungeons full of humans they deemed ‘fodder’, to be sacrificed in situations just like this. But unless they had literal dozens of people tied up in cells, people that deserved a horrible fate, Eric wouldn’t agree to it. And he knew they didn’t. As many people as there were in Dolareido, it didn’t have dozens and dozens of murderers just lying around, ready to be plucked like ripe fruit for dark rituals and shit.

He didn’t even want to think about the rumors about Beatrice.

“Regardless,” Sándor said, “we won’t accomplish anything here. Let’s leave, and leave a guard post on the physical side of the tear.”

Eric suppressed a smile. Guard post. Dude talked like he was alive hundreds of years ago. Probably was.

“Agreed,” Avery said. “If we catch the azlu around, we can get here asap and burn the fucker. But we all know it won’t be that easy.”

Something's going to happen that's going to throw a wrench into things."

Yeah, that was true. Much as Eric wanted to disagree, this was too weird. Why a tear that went nowhere, that wasn't on Tash's graph? There were tears many years old, maybe centuries, and none of them were on the graph, but all the new ones, all seemingly made in the past three or four years, were all on it. This new one wasn't. The only thing it did, was lead them to the remains of azlu activity that'd only temporarily been in the area.

Easy to think the azlu had just been around for a bit, and examined the tear, before leaving. Scarier to think Black Blood created the tear to point them at the azlu. And damn it, it was too scary an idea to not share.

"I wonder," Eric said. "Is Black Blood ... actively making us hunt azlu?"

Avery spit on the floor. "I was wondering about that. Disturbing idea, that that spirit is making us chase something that's its problem, considering it's the one creating the tears. More disturbing because now we have to do what it wants. Ain't no Uratha gonna let one of the Hosts live, especially us."

Right. Avery and her pack were Hunters in Darkness, the Meninna. Their specialty was hunting Hosts, Shartha. The perfect predators to deal with azlu, and azlu were inevitable with literal tears in the Gauntlet showing up.

It did all fit together way too perfectly.

---

~~Beatrice~~

"You sure you want to be a part of this?" Triss asked.

Sándor nodded, subtle, but sturdy and solid. Pretty much summed up the dude's whole personality. Well, that was fine. She could go for some sturdy and solid right about now.

Triss sighed, and looked to Jen and Sam. Jen managed a small shrug, and Sam just stood there, shaking, eyes on the floor. Poor girl.

"I'll stay out here," Sándor said eventually, after a glance Sam's way. Before they could say anything, the man moved to the center of the abandoned building's basement, and stood there, facing the stairs. Stood wasn't even the word. Dude turned into a fucking statue, holding so still he'd make a vampire in torpor envious. If he was breathing, Triss couldn't see or hear it. God damn.

Nodding, Triss stepped into the walk-in fridge first, and undid the magic seal. Jen and Sam followed her in, and Triss closed the door behind them.

"W-Why is Sándor helping us?" Sam whispered, doing her best to avoid staring at the pile of bodies Triss had in the corner of the huge fridge. With the giant door closed, they were able to talk privately.

"He's ... keeping an eye on things," Triss said. "He wants to be a protector, I guess, for the paranormals in Dolareido. He feels indebted to Jack, and me, and the others for helping him." And he felt guilty as all fuck for getting Julias killed, and indirectly, Mary. No point in trying to convince him otherwise. Dude knew logically that Julias's death, Mary's, and his own family's weren't his fault, but knowing it emotionally was a different thing altogether. At least he didn't keep trying to apologize for it. Triss wouldn't have been able to handle it if the dude suddenly got on his knees and tried to say sorry for everything; she'd probably have ripped his heart out. Sándor didn't use words, he just did shit and let his actions speak for him.

She understood that. She appreciated that.

Sam gulped as she took a step toward the bodies. “Ok, ok. So ... so I...”

Triss gestured to the pile. “Grab a body, any body.” Sam already knew this, but the girl was trembling. Best to say it all again. “You need the skull and heart, and put them into a container.” She held up a small black bag, identical to the one she’d used when she did the ritual herself. “Then, you need to remember the person you’re trying to ... clone, essentially. That’s what the ritual’s going to do, take the power of the dead person, trapped in the mind and heart, and combined with your memories and vitae, turn it into a ... a defining blueprint, a magical one.”

“But I can’t cast a ritual, or do magic, or any—”

“I’ll be casting the ritual. Just follow the steps.” Like helping a kid jump into a pool for the first time, Triss had to help Sam with every inch, including repeating instructions, and promises of help. It fucking hurt. Sam shouldn’t have had to do this.

Christ, how did Sándor feel about this? To him, this was an opportunity to maybe help some people get back what they lost, people that wouldn’t have died if he’d just done a better job defending himself from Jeremiah years ago. Or, it was an opportunity for him to clean up the inevitable mess Triss and Sam were going to create, when all this backfired, and they accidentally created some sort of monster they had to put down with fire.

Damn it. Now all she could think about was that fucking sickening scene in *Alien Resurrection* where Ripley had to kill her fucked up clones with a flamethrower.

“Samantha,” Jen said. “You can stop any time you want to, you know that. You don’t have to do this. We don’t know if any of this is going to work, ever.”

“I know. But ... but I want to try.” Nodding, still trembling, she walked over to the pile of bodies.

She knew the deal. Much as Triss wanted to do this for her, Sam had to do it herself. It was the deal with the ritual, and all rituals. It wasn't about the fancy symbols or the words or the tools. It was about the symbolism, and the effort put into the ritual. It was about the sacrifice. If you had that, and the mentality for magic and shit, you could cast rituals. Triss most definitely did not want to teach the rituals to Sam, especially not the way witches did, with pain and suffering.

The poor woman reached down, and grabbed a man's body. It was fine if it was a man. The sacrifice just needed a skull and heart, while the painful part came after. And fucked up and sexist as it was, Triss had to admit, it was easier cutting up a man than a woman. She didn't blame the Daeva when she found an older man, and got to work.

No claws. She brought a knife.

Jen didn't watch, but Triss did. This was important, and if Sam was going to join Triss on this fucked up journey, the least she could do was watch and make sure she did it right. Sure enough, Sam struggled, but Triss watched and waited for Sam to ask for help. She didn't. Grimacing, Sam sawed at the man's head, breaking through the skin with the obvious clumsiness of someone who didn't know what they were doing. She'd watched Triss tear bodies apart, and bring pieces to Elen, so they could sculpt the body for her daughter, but she hadn't taken part in the process herself. Triss didn't want her to, but now she could see that was a mistake. Sam was struggling, but hopefully, this would be the one and only time she had to dismantle a dead body.

It took time, and more than a few times Triss thought Sam would burst into tears. She did sob a couple times, making Jen flinch and

glance over her shoulder to the gory mess before quickly looking away. But the mother pushed through, sawing and carving, until she peeled the skull out of the dead man's torn open skin. She looked away when she scooped out the insides with a spoon Triss had given her for this exact purpose.

“Here,” Sam whispered, and handed the skull to Triss. Triss met the woman's eyes, gave her a silent ‘you're doing great’ smile, and dropped the skull into the bag.

Next was the heart, and that was going to be harder. Cutting open a face, ruining it, separating a skull from spinal cord, and scooping out eyes and brains was tough. But there was something absolutely guttural about cutting open someone's chest, and Sam quickly ran into the biggest issue when she set the man between her legs, lifted the knife, and stared down at his shirt. She had to get inside him.

She slammed her knife into the sternum, and the crunch of breaking bone was audible. Everyone winced, and Sam dry heaved several times. If she'd been human, she'd have puked everywhere. She looked away and closed her eyes, even as she yanked down on the knife, and forced it through the rest of the sternum, and down through the man's abdomen. Slowly, she set the knife down, and forced herself to look back at the body.

No gloves. It'd ruin the weight, the impact, and both were core ingredients in the ritual. So with hands soaked in the blood of a dead man, she set them into the chest cavity of the corpse, palms facing out, and pulled. More things went crack and pop, and Sam again dry heaved as she stared down into the insides of the victim. Heart, lungs, diaphragm, esophagus, stomach, small and large intestines, spleen, kidneys, liver, all of it was there.

It was the ultimate dose of reality. Vampires were special. Something in them kept them ticking, despite the fact their organs were withered and no longer functioning. Shoot a vamp clean

through the stomach and it didn't mean shit. Humans, on the other hand, were blood bags, running entirely on electrical signals and the flow of oxygen. Sacks of meat. Vampires needed them, but whatever it was that so was so special about life, whatever it was humans had that made them the center of so many aspects of the paranormal world, it didn't do shit to keep them from dying. Humans were beyond fragile.

Mary had been stabbed to death. This, was a really fucking shitty way for Sam to learn what it felt like to stab through flesh and bone.

She reached between the lungs with one hand, grabbed the heart, cut the pipes with the knife, and plucked the organ. And just like Triss, she stared at the disgusting, bloody thing in her hand. She felt it too, the power, the spark of weird, mystical voodoo, something Triss didn't know and neither did Jacob. Life. Whatever it was that gave kine life, traces of it were left in the heart and mind, something that crackled silently and sparked invisibly.

Sam took a slow, useless breath, and set the heart in Triss's bag.

“And now ... I have to remember Mary, and bleed into the bag?”

“Yeah. For me, I had a picture on my phone I—”

Sam nodded, and clutched her necklace tight in one hand, soaking it in the dead man's blood. One of her daughter's necklaces. And like she was clutching her daughter herself, she closed her eyes, and shuddered. Little shivers worked through her, head to toe, and she sniffled a couple times. She wanted to cry. Hell, she was crying, but without the Blush, there weren't any tears to join it, no sniffles, no choking sobs as the throat swelled. All she had were tremors, little things that grew into larger things, until she let out a low groan.

Poor woman. Triss loved Julias, loved the fuck out of him, and digging through her memories until Julias was forefront in her mind so she could empower the ritual, had been fucking horrible.

One of the worst things she'd ever done, even compared to all the painful torture she'd gone through to learn crúac rituals with Jacob. But she'd known Julias for only a few years. Sam knew her daughter for over two decades. On top of that, she'd bonded heavily with her daughter when her son disappeared. And on top of all that, Sam was her damn mother. No parent, ever, fucking ever, should have to know what it's like to lose a child.

After a few more moments, the trembling woman settled, let go of her necklace, and faced Triss. Nodding, she dragged the knife across her palm, and held it out over the bag.

Drip.

Drip.

Triss closed the bag, and met Sam's eyes. The woman looked destroyed. Normally Sam did a damn good job keeping her sadness at bay, same as Triss, but the girl was a little too honest for it. You could always see a hint of sorrow behind her eyes. Now it was all laid bare, and Triss couldn't look into those eyes for long. Felt like trying to stare down a blizzard raining ice shards straight into the eyes.

Triss closed the bag and raised it high. "Be found and returned, Mary. I call to the darkness that watches and listens, that knows the dead. Find, and bring a piece of Mary back to me." Nodding, she handed the bag to Sam, and with a shivering hand, the poor woman took it.

Death descended on them. Triss didn't know who listened to the ritual, what spirit or god or whatever decided to entertain their stupidity, but someone or something answered the call. They stood there, looking at each other again, and the two of them gulped as the air twisted and exploded into a hurricane. Black mist swirled around them, disappeared, and reappeared, toying with them as it worked its magic. Felt like something twisted and horrible. Not



Black Blood, but not too far removed, something just as fucking death like.

Worse was the bag. The contents moved, and bounced and jiggled, as if someone had locked up a ferret in there. They knew what it was now, a crystal ball being formed and bouncing around with some sort of life blueprint, but until it was done, it seemed like it wanted to get out. Sam clutched the bag to her chest hard as it struggled, pinning it, like letting it go would mean the end of the world.

Eventually, the wind disappeared, the black mist disappeared with it, and the bag in Sam's arms calmed down. Still moved, still wiggled, half alive and looking for a body to complete and a soul to fill it, but calm. Sam nodded, her own body calming as she looked down at the bag, and then at Triss.

“Can I ... look?”

Triss smiled and nodded. “Yeah, but uh, maybe outside,” she said, pointing to the fridge door.

The three of them walked out of the fridge, Sam still shaking but smiling, and Jen smiling warily, like she was afraid she'd jinx the good luck. Smart girl.

Sándor looked their way as Triss closed the fridge door behind them. “Success?”

Sam nodded, and held up the bag. Slowly, with a trembling hand, she reached into it.

The tiny crystal ball glowed a gentle gold, lighting up the dingy basement, and their four faces, each of them wide-eyed as they stared at the small moving images on the perfect, smooth surface. Even Sándor widened his eyes as he realized what the crystal ball showed.

It was evening, sun setting. There was an alley. Samantha and Mary were walking beside each other, smiling, laughing. They didn't see the woman coming toward them. No, they saw her, they just didn't think it was a woman about to stab them both, dozens of times.

More than that, other images flickered over the ball. Scenes of Mary and Sam, standing over Jack's grave. Scenes of Mary, going shopping with her mom. Scenes of Mary and her mom watching a movie together, both of them wrapped in a big blanket on a couch, eating popcorn.

Mary's thoughts. The last thoughts she'd had, before she died. The things they wanted to do that day, or week.

"We were ... gonna watch one of the new Marvel movies, you know? She really likes Chris Evans."

Likes.

There wasn't any holding back anymore. Sam stared at the ball, clutched it tight in one hand, caressed it with the other, fell to her knees, and screamed once. One very deliberate, agonizing scream.

The three of them stared down at her for a bit, frozen. But before Triss or Jen could snap themselves out of being struck dumb by Sam's too powerful, too overwhelming display of enough raw emotion to break a mountain, Sándor squatted down beside her.

"May I see?"

"W-What?" Sam said between her choked sobs.

"I would like to see your daughter's final living moments."

Sam blinked at the man, as if he'd just asked something insane, or maybe offensive. But after a few seconds, she nodded, and held out

the small orb to him.

He didn't take it. He looked, and leaned in so he could look better, but he didn't touch it, as if it'd be sacrilege. As if picking it up from her hand would break the poor woman. Like, maybe killing her daughter again.

"She's beautiful," he said, a small smile on his face. "And she looks really close to you."

"She ... She was. She wasn't at first, but when Jack disappeared, things changed. We relied on each other, you know? After James, and then Jack, we only had each other."

Sam went on. She held out the orb for everyone to see, and the small crystal ball gently teetered in her palm, half alive, as Sam described Mary and their time together. With one hand she clutched her necklace tight, the other the crystal ball, and her sniffles slowly passed as she described her daughter to them all. She'd told Triss stories about her before, but not these, peeks into the most private, tender moments between the two. It took a lot of effort to keep from crying with her.

But it wasn't Samantha Triss stared at. Yeah, she looked at her, and sometimes got lost admiring the memory she could see in the crystal ball, but damn it, it was Sándor she found herself looking at. Julias would have been super sad and empathetic with Sam, and would have done everything he could have to make her feel better. Yeah, it woulda been sappy and annoying, but it would have worked with some time. Julias could make anyone smile if given time.

But Sándor didn't do that. His eyes held something different. Understanding. Quiet, calm, understanding. And it was exactly what Sam needed. Who the fuck else was she gonna talk to about this? Athalia? Maybe, but Athalia wasn't the sort of person to just sit and listen. Maybe Triss judged the other Begotten too harshly, but she couldn't picture Athalia doing this, just sitting there and listening.

Sándor listened, steady face absorbing everything Sam said in a way no one else would be able to.

After a while, Sam stood up, and gently touched Sándor's chest once.

“Thank you. I know it's ... it's...” Sighing, she put the crystal ball back in the bag, and held it tight to her chest as the four of them made for the exit. “It's hard to find someone to talk to about Mary. I do with Jack sometimes, and I've talked to Athalia, but it's hard.” Despite herself, she smiled at the gargoyle. “It's easier to talk to you, for some reason. Thank you, for listening.”

Her eyes lingered on Sándor, and her shivering faded as the man returned her eyes with pure, solid evenness. To anyone watching from the outside, Sándor would probably have seemed the asshole, dispassionate and uncaring. Couldn't be further from the fucking truth.

Dude was a gargoyle. That didn't sound like anything crazy before, but now, Triss could see how the dude bagged a wife. He listened to people. Genuinely listened.

“So, we doing this tonight?” Triss asked, gesturing to the bag. “We can, if you want.”

“No. I need to talk to Mary again tonight first. Can we start tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Yeah sure, whatever you want, Sam.”

Samantha smiled at her, and started up the stairs out of the basement. “Um ... did you want to see her, Sándor?”

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It was such a trip, seeing the place where Jack grew up. Sam had taken her here before once, so she and Jen could see Mary, and

break the ice before they did any crazy shit involving putting the ghost daughter into a soulless husk body replacement. It'd become very obvious from the get go that Mary was unstable. She randomly yelled, or twitched in classic ghost fashion, and had trouble talking about some things.

But she loved her mom. Ghost or no, Mary loved her mom, and it was apparent in every word she said, the one time Triss had visited. Hopefully this visit would go as well.

First, the kitchen, where the side door of the house connected. The Prince kept the house on ice, so no one was gonna buy it, meaning Samantha got to keep it in the same condition it'd been the day she died, except for whatever changes Sam made on her visits.

Sándor kicked his shoes against the small steps outside before following them in, as if he'd walked into the house a million times before. Was the house he used to live in with his wife and kid like this one?

Triss watched him for a couple seconds, long enough for him to realize and meet her gaze with stoic curiosity. She looked away, and ran a finger along the counter tops of the kitchen.

“A lovely home,” Sándor said.

“Thank you.”

“It's ... easy, to imagine your children coming home from school, and entering through this door.” He slowly closed the kitchen door.

Sam looked back at Sándor with a big smile. Funny, she never smiled at Triss or Jen like that when the two of them had talked about her home. Homeowners sharing some sort of shared appreciation for home owning? Well fuck, all Triss knew was apartments and a crypt.

“On days I was home during the day, I used to give them snacks when they got home from school, right here.” Sam stepped around the counter to the other side of the kitchen, the dining room, stepped behind one of the wooden chairs, and set her hands on its back as she smiled down at the table.

“They had good lives growing up.”

“Musta,” Triss said, and sat down on a stool by the counter. “I don’t know Mary, but I know Jack pretty well. Kid is ... well, you know.”

Jen joined Triss at the counter, standing on the kitchen side and leaning down so she could set her elbows on it.

“Kindred are rarely as direct and honest as Jack. Those that are usually die young.”

“Jack was always a peculiar one growing up,” Samantha said. “He never did things ... gently. Everything had to be done with conviction, you know? Do it right and do it honestly, or don’t do it at all. Before James died, Jack was loud and proud about that sort of stuff. After, he got ... quieter. And then angrier.” Sighing, Samantha looked up and around at the empty kitchen, the wood corner cabinet, the stairs nearby, everything. “When I met Julias, I thought maybe Jack would find a father figure in him. And it seemed like that was happening, except, then he disappeared.”

Julias, a father figure. Definitely a cheesy dad who’d love shitty puns one day, and then have deep, meaningful conversations with his kids the next. Triss would be the loud, angry mom. They’d balance each other out.

Jennifer came up beside Sam and put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s always a problem with Kindred, how it affects the people they leave behind.”

“I know. My sire explained it, and I don’t blame vampires for keeping everything secret. But I ... I kinda wish I got to see Jack become the man he is, you know?” Slowly, she looked to Beatrice. “And I’d have loved to see how his relationship with Julias grew, too.”

Triss tried to hold her gentle, sad, eyes, but she couldn’t.

And then of course there was Sándor. For just a split second, the dude looked sad too, something in the subtle furrow of the brow, but then he went back to his usual steady self. Triss could only imagine the weird balance of thoughts running through his mind. Hopefully the guy could get it through his thick skull that no one blamed him for anything.

“Sorry about the cold,” Sam said. “The house is always cold now, and nothing I do heats it up. That’s because Mary’s here. Doesn’t bother vampires, but I’m guessing it bothers you?”

“No,” he said. Lying, telling the truth, no way to know. “Don’t worry about me.”

Easier said than done. Mary the ghost, the unstable and dangerous as all fuck ghost, couldn’t direct her hate toward Jeremiah or Angela anymore, but she could sure as hell point it at Sándor. Considering how often Sam visited her daughter, especially the past few months, she’d probably told Mary everything about Jeremiah, Angela, Sándor, all of it. Whether that had prepared Mary to be calm, or just given her time to get angrier at Sándor before their inevitable introduction, Triss had no idea. And unlike the vampires, Sándor wouldn’t survive getting a random kitchen knife in the skull from a murderous ghost.

They went upstairs. Sam paused on the stairway, looked down at it for a few seconds, smiled, and went on up to the small hallway. Bathroom on left, Jack’s room on right, then the parents’ bedroom on the back left, and Mary’s bedroom on the back right.

Triss paused in the door frame to Jack's room. "Dude never got into posters or anything?" She'd seen the room before, but only for a moment. Now she took a good look at the double bed in the corner, the perfect spot beside the desk where a computer probably used to be, and the bare walls.

"No," Sam said, peeking past Triss into the room. "He would get super passionate about things, extremely, sometimes for months, but he didn't have any interest in expressing it. He used to tell me, what's the point in hanging posters of his favorite bands or games on the walls. You can't listen to or play a poster."

Jen chuckled. "I thought all young boys embraced hobbies with enthusiasm?"

Triss shook her head. "Nah. I get it. Some people just prefer to experience things and don't care about expressing them or owning them. Not a fan of wearing their interests on their sleeves."

Sam nodded. "Unless you get him talking about something that interests him. Then you're in for hours of chatting, and ranting."

Chuckling turning into outright laughter, and Jen walked into the room and ran a finger along the desk.

"Boys and their toys."

"I'm not so sure," Sam said. "I do wonder if Jack is a little different than other people. Sometimes I'd find him listening to a song, headphones on, and it was like ... like he was in another world. Or he'd be watching a movie, and get so absorbed into it, it was like the movie became his world. Books, too. Sometimes, when something would catch his interest, it'd dominate his thoughts. He'd tell me sometimes he'd have dreams about whatever it was he couldn't stop thinking about, even if it was as random and silly a thing as trying to find a way to fit his desk against the wall at just the right angle so the sun wouldn't touch his screen for twenty



minutes in the evening.” She laughed. “It turned into a project, and soon he had new light-blocking drapes set up with a string that he could pull on and tie to the side of the bed post, so they’d block the light at the specific time of day, but then he could untie it and let the loose after.”

Before Triss could laugh, and maybe make a friendly suggestion that Jack might be on the spectrum, fog began to fill in the cold room. It’d gotten chillier as they talked, but vampires being vampires, it didn’t mean much to them. Triss only noticed because Sándor’s breath had started turning into mist.

“Sometimes,” a whispering voice in the growing darkness said, “he’d get so caught up in whatever was on his mind, he’d forget to eat or sleep. It’s a wonder the kid made the few friends he did.” The group’s eyes eventually settled on the bed, and the misty white thing that formed there. Mary, looking sweet and innocent, legs hanging off the bed side and breaking apart into mist that mixed in with the rest of the rising fog. “But if I ever came to him with a problem, something that was bothering me, like my closet door not closing all the way, or my computer doing something weird, Jack wouldn’t rest until he’d fixed it, you know? He loved to fix things, even if he got super obsessive about it.”

Samantha smiled and nodded as she sat down beside the ghost, no fear, no hesitation, but no touching either. Her hand would probably go through her if she tried.

“Mary,” Sam said. “You know Beatrice and Jennifer, right?”

Mary didn’t get up, but did look up at the two vampires. Empty eye sockets. Yeesh. If only she could wear an eye bandage like Jacob did.

“Hi.”

“Hey,” they said.

“And, uh, Mary, this is Sándor.”

Sándor took a step closer until maybe five feet separated him from the ghost woman. He didn't say anything though. Instead, he did that thing he often did, and just stood there, waiting, and listening.

Mary frowned.

## Chapter 161

~~Jack~~

Usually the dreams vampires had during their daily torpor weren't extreme, just small flights of imagination or memory, like any kine's. Torpor dreams only got super vivid and extreme when a vampire went into deep torpor for months, or even years, to settle their blood lust. Jack's dreams last day were unusually vivid, and they were all of the same thing: Elaine, betraying him in some fashion or another, usually with a damn evil grin plastered all over her face.

“What do you think? Should I trust her? Fuck me, it's so hard to trust her. She's smart and conniving and she plans ahead, same as Antoinette. Christ, it wouldn't surprise me if she had that ritual lined up to do on Viktor, and maybe even Julias, but couldn't get the situation for it. Maybe she needed cooperation for it to work? Maybe she waited all these years just so she could get one of her childer on her side. Or maybe she realized she couldn't get what she wanted with the curse bound by that Sanctified dude's binding ritual, and she knew it'd break with time?”

Jack paced back and forth in one of the rooms of his mansion, a large one with hanging red drapes on the walls, with several couches of red and gold. The typical, usual fancy room for entertaining guests and whatnot.

“Of course, I'm letting my dick get in the way of thinking straight. But I mean come on! Look at her!” He held up his phone, and flicked to one of the many, many images he had of Elaine; none had been taken by him. This particular one had Elaine full on posing for a closeup, hands squeezing her breasts, with his cum filling the

space between her fingers and dripping down everything. Naturally it'd been Ashley who took the picture and sent it to him later.

“God damn her. Stupid ... fucking ... blonde...” He groaned again as he struggled for a good insult, failed, and sighed as he put the phone away. “And hey, I love Antoinette, and she’s so hot it’s unreal. But I’m not gonna lie. I’m a guy, and with a tall busty woman flirting with me twenty-four seven, fucking with my head as much as she fucks me and my lover, it’s damn hard to think straight whenever she’s the topic. And fuck me, now she’s got a vial of my blood! Or, the curse’s blood. Something. And she’s gonna do something with it.” Sighing, he flopped down on the couch next to his two friends, and yanked out the phone, and flipped to another file in the gallery. A video, Elaine indulging herself with him, this time filmed by Antoinette.

Scully cawed, hopped down from the back of the couch onto his shoulder, and pecked at the phone a couple times.

“Sorry. You ever get laid, Scully? Ever raise any chicks?”

“No,” she said, full on emulating a human voice.

“I’m sorry. Sensitive topic?”

“No.” She hopped across his shoulder a little closer to him, and nestled under his ear. “Familiar, master. Don’t want children, master.”

Yeah, there was that. His crows weren’t crows anymore, they were familiars. Undead familiars at that. Maybe they’d learn to Blush Life over the years, and go on to live fulfilling sex lives ... if birds actually cared about sex for sex’s sake. But they’d never have children, ever, and any biological desire for it was gone. His pet crows were zombies, sorta. The only thing they genuinely craved was vitae, and to serve their master.

Hopefully, with time, he could find ways to restore some of their old bird desires, or maybe help them discover new ones.

Mulder hopped down onto his shoulder too, and pecked at the phone a couple times. “Lei.”

“Lay?”

“Leilani. Veronica.” Damn, Mulder was getting good at enunciating.

Jack blinked at the crow on his shoulder, and flipped through more of the vids and images on his phone until he found one of the two thralls.

“Shinies,” Mulder said.

“Shinies? Wha—oh.” Laughing, Jack flipped to an image of the two girls playing with each other’s breasts, the two of them wearing some rather large and, indeed, shiny piercings in their nipples. Like full on fancy earrings, except on breasts.

“Shinies.” Mulder pecked at the phone. Jack couldn’t hold it anymore, and burst into laughter hard enough he dropped the phone.

“Ah, shit.” He picked it back up and showed Mulder the picture for a little while longer. Hopefully it was the piercings Mulder was attracted to, and not the fact they were piercings on breasts. It’d be pretty damn weird for a bird to be into tits, let alone an undead bird. Both had gotten eyefuls of his thralls, naked and whatnot, and Jack hadn’t really minded, because why would he? Not like ghoul crows would be embarrassed or care about human sex, or real crows for the matter.

He chuckled. It’d make things awkward real quick if Mulder tried to pluck at errant nipple piercings while the girls were in the middle

of sex.

His phone rang, and the sound announced it was Antoinette. He answered, video call.

“Hello Antoinette,” he said.

“Jack, my love. How do you fare?”

“Alright. Just fed Mulder and Scully.” He pointed the phone at each shoulder.

“Master,” Scully said, and she pushed her head against his neck under his ear.

Antoinette smiled slightly at Scully. “Your servants adjust to their new lives well. Though I suspect I will become jealous if — I believe that is Scully? — continues to flirt with you.”

“She’s not flirting. She’s ... bonding.”

“She is undead, my love, and already bonded to you by the Vinculum. She is as obsessed with you as your thralls are.”

“But she’s an undead crow, not a person. I ... don’t imagine she has sexual feelings for me.” Raising a brow, he looked down at the bird beside him. Scully cawed a couple times, fluttered her wings, and sent him a couple images into his mind. Very flattering images of Scully basically being the center of attention of Jack, his thralls, and even Antoinette. Gifts were included, each of them shiny trinkets that could be carried by a bird’s claws or beak.

“Jack?” Antoinette said.

“Just get her a ring or necklace and she’ll love you, too.”

“Ah, a whore for jewelry.”

He shrugged. "Aren't we all?"

She laughed. "I wanted to ask about last night, my love. I know you and Elaine were doing something dangerous."

"Yeap. That's why I told you she was here." After a second to think about it, he scrunched up his nose and leaned in toward the phone. "You get jealous of Scully but not Elaine?"

"Elaine would never try and steal you away from me," she said. Jack froze. Yeah, she just might, physically. "At worst she would attempt to seduce you, and allow me to watch as I watch you now."

Ah, streaming sex. The future! A million new ways for people to indulge sex sex sex and more sex.

"Well, I promise you I won't let that happen."

Her smile turned evil. "Not with Elaine. But I would not mind watching you engage with your pets."

"Mulder and Scully?"

"Non! Silly boy. You know I meant Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel." Antoinette leaned back in her chair, having called him from her office, and she teased her lip with a finger as she smiled at the phone. "I think I would much enjoy watching you indulge your masculinity with your servants, be it in person or through video."

Jack rolled his eyes. His lover was a succubus, through and through. Whatever she could do to indulge him sexually, she'd do it, and love every second of it.

"I'd prefer to have you with me, you know."

"If, and when, I descend into torpor for some years to calm my blood lust, I do fully expect you to satisfy yourself and your thralls,

my love.” She licked a fang. “Though do make sure to record what I miss, so that I may view your sessions at my leisure.”

He hadn't really thought about that, honestly. Kindred could enjoy the Kiss to a sexual degree without actually having any sex. Far as he knew a lot of vamps, especially Nosferatu like Maria, did just that. When Antoinette went for one of those multi-year torpors, he just expected he'd abstain from sex, and satisfy his Kindred urges with the Kiss alone.

“You know I don't need to do that.”

“Oui, I know. And I adore that you would gladly give up sex for such a time for me.” Again her smile turned serpentine. Really similar to Elaine's evil smiles. Those two had more in common than he realized. “But come now, we are both Kindred, not kine. As long as you recorded the event for me to view later, and did not indulge in the touch of another Kindred, I would be happy to let you fuck your thralls and ghouls as often as you wished.”

“Eh I dunno. I think I'd feel pretty awkward.”

She leaned in closer to the phone. “Then picture vice versa. Me, naked, in bed, with Ashley between my legs kissing my sex, while Julee caresses and suckles my breasts, the three of us anxiously awaiting your rise from torpor in several months. I grab the camera recording us, bring it close, and whisper how much I miss you, as I climax.”

That, was a strangely arousing image. Jack was sure he'd get jealous if Antoinette started fucking a guy thrall or ghoul while Jack was down and out with an extended torpor. But two girls Jack and Antoinette slept with often? Two ghouls at that, completely bound and addicted to Antoinette by the Vinculum? The psychology of sexuality was a strange thing, especially when mixed with Kindred shenanigans.



“Um, let’s cross that bridge when we get to it. I’m still not sold on the idea.”

Antoinette sighed and relaxed back into her big leather office chair. “Very well. Last night, you and Elaine did something relating to the curse.”

“We did.”

“But you will not tell me the details.”

“I uh, wasn’t entirely sure of the details honestly, when I agreed to it.”

She raised a brow. “You trust my friend that much?”

“There’s been some developments. So, I mean, I guess I trust her more than I used to.”

“With your life?”

“I ... think so.” And christ, after the shit Elaine told him, she was basically trusting him with hers.

“You play a dangerous game, my love. I trust Elaine in many regards, but in matters of our pursuits in the Ordo? Dangerous indeed.”

“That’s why I told you we were up to something. Insurance.”

“Make sure to keep me informed. Though I must say, I do wish you would tell me more about what you two are planning.”

“It’s ... It’s kinda private. I’ll leave it up to Elaine to tell you more, if she wants to.”

His lover frowned at the phone, but let it go with a sigh after a while.

“I trust you, but this curse that haunts you affects more than just you and her, my love. The next time either of you intend to do something involving the curse, I would like to be involved.”

“Yeah, ok, I agree to that. But you’ll need to convince Elaine more than me.” And that wouldn’t exactly be easy. Elaine wanted to make sure Antoinette never found out about what she did to get rid of her curse, and she’d probably jump through some hoops to keep every encounter Antoinette now had with the curse, or with rituals affecting it, to a minimum. The Ripper had a nasty habit of spilling secrets when he thought it’d create some chaos.

And she hadn’t even shared her worst secret yet. Who the fuck did Elaine commit diablerie on? She wouldn’t have brought it up if it wasn’t relevant. But what connection could whoever she committed diablerie on have to Jack’s situation? Someone she knew? Someone important to her, or important to someone else? If not a random vampire, then—

Then another vampire with the curse. That was the only relevant connection Jack could think of. And the only vampire Elaine had access to do that to back then, would have been Viktor, and she certainly hadn’t killed him. Then either she’d committed diablerie against a childe of Viktor’s no one knew about, or maybe one of Susanna’s, or ... she’d committed diablerie on one of her own childer none of them knew about.

The only person alive today with the curse, as far as they knew, was Jack. If he did the ritual Elaine did to remove the curse, that meant he’d have to sire someone first, and kill them. No fucking wonder she said she didn’t want him to suffer what she’d suffered.

“Jack?”

“Sorry. I ... gotta go. I’ll see you tomorrow night?”

Antoinette eyed him, making no effort to hide that she suspected him of something. “Very well. I trust Elaine to an extent, but please, if you believe my old friend is up to something devious, likely involving her role in the Ordo, bring it to my attention. If not me, then Daniel.”

“Will do.” If Daniel found out Elaine was a diablerist, or had been, it could end badly. In a straight fight, Ventrue were hard to kill, but Mekhet were fast as fuck, and one as old as Daniel could probably trick even elder eyes with Obfuscate. There was a reason people sometimes called Mekhet assassins. Damien and Daniel were perfect examples.

He hung up, and called Damien.

---

~~Damien~~

Hanging upside down was interesting. Even when Blushing Life, he didn't need to worry about blood flow or anything like that. He was perfectly free to watch and admire how strange everything seemed when upside down, even if it was a spooky, haunted hospital room.

Fiona's blood pulsed through him, strange, alien, forbidden blood that had him and his Beast hungering in a way it didn't really understand. Drunk and horny, was the best way he could interpret it, with hints of something else, something dark and monstrous. When Fiona's blood filled and fueled him, a part of him wanted to go on a hunt, but not for more blood. He wanted to get out there, and scare someone, hunt them and terrify them until his role as living nightmare was fulfilled.

But mostly it just got him drunk, horny, and aggressive. Probably because of how the blood interacted with the Kiss.

Fiona liked it when he got aggressive with her. She liked it when he pinned her down, or tied her up. Sometimes she even liked it when he picked her up and threw her down on the bed, or couch. Spanking, hard fucking, or even forcing her to give him a blowjob, hand on her head. It all tickled something in the tiny redhead that always had her delirious with arousal.

Vrall, on the other hand, liked it when he got aggressive, cause it meant she had stronger prey to trap. Even now, with Fiona's blood telling him to fight and hunt, he struggled against the webbing encasing him. No good. Vrall had cocooned him shoulder to feet an hour ago, and had loved every minute of spinning him in her web as he struggled. She'd loved it so much, she was dripping wet by the time they'd moved onto sex.

But now they were done, and the spider monster hung upside down beside him, several of her very sharp blade-like spider feet balancing on razor tips on spider silk. She was pressed up against his cocoon, and gravity made sure her huge breasts pulled up toward her shoulders, and his, since they were face to face.

Vrall was beautiful, in the exact opposite way Fiona was. His human girlfriend was a shining ray of light, with soft features that matched her unending giggles. A gorgeous ginger that was very huggable.

Vrall had skin the color dark steel, a sharp chin and tiny, sharp lips that were often curled in an evil grin. No eyes. Instead, she had black horns that curled back from where eyes should have been, giant ones that melded into her forehead before curling back over her head, along with several other horns, covering her bald head like hair would have, or a crown. Two claw fingers and a thumb, and instead of feet, her shins ended in sharp blade-like points, same as the eight enormous spider legs coming out of her back. She was tall, with a ridiculously tiny waist, but with a large ass and huge breasts like Fiona's. Inhuman, feminine features exaggerated, almost like

her strange beauty was the drawing light of an anglerfish. It wasn't hard to imagine some human she'd drawn into one of her nightmare chambers stumbling onto her, getting hypnotized by her curves, and walking straight into a web.

She kissed him with her black lips, and smiled.

"You do not visit me enough."

"Fiona would get jealous," he said.

"I am Fiona."

"So you say."

"I am Vrall, and Fiona."

"She says she's Fiona, and Vrall."

"Then, I am afraid you are dating the both of us, vampire. And I demand my fair share." She hugged him with her human arms, hard enough her huge breasts, still hanging upside down with her, squashed against his web-covered chest and nearly hit his chin.

"Never took myself for a polygamist."

She laughed. "To Fiona's chagrin."

"You think?"

"Indeed. She is like the vampire Jessy, in a way, addicted to sex and seeking to experience it in greater thrills."

"Oh. You mean she wants to have a threesome." He rolled his eyes. It was a lot easier to think clearly now, now that Fiona's blood was finally beginning to settle within. "Those can get pretty awkward, I do believe."

“Less of a problem for vampires, I do believe.” Laughing again, she kissed him more, and rubbed the base of her two biggest horns into his forehead. “One bite of Fiona and you’d be hard as stone, even in front of an audience.”

“Maybe.”

“Imagine it. Sweet little Fiona, sitting atop you while another woman holds her from behind and plays her body like an instrument.”

He rolled his eyes again. “You watched that vid Ashley sent Jessy, didn’t you?”

Vrallar’trakla of the Eight Blade Arach grinned like a schoolgirl. “I did.”

“Is it just me, or are all the women in Dolareido out-of-their-mind horny? Figured that was usually male territory.”

“Dolareido encourages sexual freedom. I think the women here overcorrect.”

“Overcorrect?”

The beautiful spider monster nodded. “I have seen it in cultures before, over the ages. When something has been enforced or restricted for a long time, and is suddenly given the opportunity to not be, people will first dip their toes in water to test, and then almost immediately after, people jump into the deep end of the pool. Overcorrection.”

“Example?”

“I knew a tribe that feared the color blue, and—”

Damien raised a brow. “Blue?”

She chuckled. “In their past, they’d lost ancestors to it. Blue tree frogs, and certain blue plants, all poisonous. It became part of their culture to fear deep, powerful blues, including the ocean. They avoided it, considered it evil, and would paint their weapons with it, assuming it would kill their enemies. Of course, they painted their weapons in the blood of blue tree frogs, only perpetuating the falsehood, now that a single wound from their weapons caused severe illness.

“But, after some centuries, they realized it was not blue that was deadly, but the blue tree frogs, and the blue plants. This understanding came when they accidentally created a blue paint that caused no harm. Before long, the tribe had painted everything blue. Their clothes, their tattoos, all of it.”

Damien laughed. That was so strangely innocent. It’d probably been the cause of a lot of unfortunate misunderstandings, and likely got a lot of the tribe killed before they realized blue wasn’t evil, but the image of a remote culture suddenly deciding to paint everything they had in blue in some sort of celebration, was delightful. It was the sort of story that’d have Fiona laughing herself to stitches, and as she slipped ‘awwws!’ between her gasps.

“It is a common thing in culture,” she said. “In Dolareido, all women are actively invited to be as sex obsessed as the men, with no fear of judgment. Some women were bound to overcorrect. Female vampires are probably the perfect example.”

Ah yes, female vampires, coming into their power and realizing no other vampire gave two shits how many people they slept with. Just part of the hunt, or the politics, after all. He could see it, a female vampire realizing just how free they were now to fuck and fuck and fuck, and get a little trigger happy. Especially with Jessy going around telling every girl she met that they should.

“I think Jessy was a little nuts before she was embraced, honestly,” he said.

Vrall laughed again, and kissed him again.

---

Coming out of a nightmare chamber was an interesting thing. The Begotten had ways to get around that didn't involve opening and closing their lair's exits, burrowing through darkness and whatnot. But generally speaking, if a Begotten wanted to bring others into or out of their lair, they had to merge one of the chambers with a place in the real world. A hard thing to do, supposedly. They had to open up the chamber over top reality, and the more similar the place in the physical world was to the nightmare chamber, the easier it made the process. Which was why Begotten often used rooms that were utterly pitch black. Lot of places in their lairs were pitch black, too.

According to Vrall, that wasn't an option for some Begotten. Some of the monsters were aquatic, and all their lairs had to support an aquatic environment. Those kinda Begotten lived near rivers or coastlines, and had to trick prey into coming close to the water, often when it was dark.

But the Begotten in Dolareido all shared a chamber across their lairs, the Dolareido nightmare chamber, and that made getting around the city easier for them. Lucky that such a chamber existed. Vrall seemed convinced the chamber was a little weird compared to others, in how perfect it was for Begotten to travel Dolareido. Azamel told her the chamber was unusual because Dolareido was unusual, in a way they didn't understand yet. Almost as if there was something about the city that amplified things that affected the other realms.

Which of course made more sense than Damien liked. There were too many strange things about Dolareido, affecting way more than just the physical world. At this point, they had no choice but to accept that the city was special, for a reason none of them knew.



Which made figuring out what the fuck was going on particularly difficult.

Damien sat up in bed. He'd had sex with Fiona in bed, then she'd opened her lair overtop them and onto, or into, the nightmare hospital Sándor shared with her, in one of the empty patient rooms. Hard for her to do when someone was with her; she said normally you'd lure a person into crossing into the chamber, not open it on them. But considering they'd made the room pitch black for the process, it'd been doable.

Then Vrall had hung him up from the ceiling and cocooned him, and had enjoyed every minute of his struggles; her blood had him fighting like a drunkard. But now that they were done, she opened the haunted hospital chamber back into his bedroom, and closed it. She stayed behind to recover, leaving him alone in his bedroom, and his phone on the nightstand blinking a tiny blue light, the only light in the room.

He checked the phone. A message from Jack.

~I'm starting to trust Elaine more, and less.~

~Sounds like an oxymoron.~

~Just keep an eye on her for me, would you? I'm getting into some deep shit with her, and I don't trust myself to be smart about this.~

~Jack, she's one of the oldest vampires around. I doubt I can keep an eye on her without her realizing it.~

~Then keep an eye on me.~

Damien blinked at his phone. Keep an eye on Jack? He was already doing that, considering the kid was basically a walking bomb if he ever took off his necklace. But the text message was so

straightforward, Damien sensed the urgency in it. Something new was happening.

~I will.~

---

~~Beatrice~~

Triss braced for flying projectiles, fueled by a ghost's wrath. But it didn't happen. Mary stared at Sándor with her empty ghost eyes for a few moments, everyone else watching and waiting, but she didn't attack. Eventually her frown faded, and she smiled. A creepy ghost smile, but at least she didn't smile from ear to ear, literally.

"Mom's told me about you."

"Has she?" he asked.

"She says you're trying to make up for all the things that happened."

Slowly, the man nodded. "I am."

"Why?" Say one thing for the ghost, she didn't pull punches with her questions.

The man took a breath, which in itself was a huge emotional expression for the gargoyle. "I—"

"You were brainwashed, right? Straight out of a movie. Brainwashed and forced to do bad things." The ghost's head twitched, one of those freaky twitches that were instantaneous.

"That doesn't mean—"

"Don't be dumb. Don't blame yourself because other people are evil." Mary nodded, like what she said was the most true thing in the world. She might have been dead, more dead than even a

vampire, but Triss could see the Jack in her expressions. Conviction. “You want to help people, sure, do that. But don’t think bad things happened because of you. You didn’t stab me.” The words pulled another scary smile out of her, and she looked at Beatrice. “Thanks again, for killing Angela.”

“Don’t mention it,” Triss said, wincing slightly.

Killing Angela had not been satisfying. Vengeance wasn’t satisfying. Sure, it’d settled the part of Triss that’d been willing to burn the planet to cinders if it meant killing Angela and Jeremiah, but it did absolutely nothing to make her feel better. The pain, misery, all the cliché tropes she thought would never apply to her, applied to her in spades, and killing Angela didn’t do jack shit about them.

There was no way a ghost would get that. One thing Triss picked up on her last visit, and from her conversations with Sam about her, was that Mary the ghost was unstable as fuck. They had no idea if a single thought ran through the girl’s head, or if she was a bundle of memories given a ghostly body, ready to pop and snap at any stimulus that crossed a line.

Tonight was going to be terrifying for Sam.

“So don’t be dumb,” Mary said, looking back to Sándor said.

“I ... I’ll try not to,” he said. And god damn, he even looked down, and looked a little sad. Triss had only ever seen him look like that two other times: that night he got drunk, and when he was behind a guitar.

Shit, no wonder he hadn’t taken the opportunity to speak to Mary until now. If he blamed himself for her death, this would be the first time the guy got to talk to someone that died because of him. That was the really fucked up thing about ghosts. Not that they were crazy, unstable, couldn’t be touched, and could throw shit around

with their ghost powers. It was the fact they were dead, truly dead, murdered and gone, and yet they got to stick around and have their say. Vampires weren't the same; well, usually.

But Sándor was a trooper. He looked up and stepped back, giving the vampires the floor, his face steady once again. Now Triss wanted to either get a glass in his hand, or a guitar, since those seemed to be the only ways the dude could express himself. Practically the opposite of her. Practically the opposite of Julias, for that matter.

Christ, stop comparing him to Julias. That is all manner of fucked up.

“Mary,” Samantha said. “I have the ... the crystal ball.” She held up the black bag, and only now did Mary notice it was moving slightly. Judging from her reaction, Sam had already described to her daughter everything about the ritual, or at least that it'd make a crystal ball that liked to jiggle.

How much did Mary know about the dark shit Sam was getting into? If there was one thing that'd make ghost Mary flip the fuck out and start attacking and destroying shit, it was learning her mother was a murderer of kine by accessory, and was engaging in dark witch magic. Considering the shit Mary was about to see, hopefully her mom had prepared her for at least some of it.

“Can I see?” Mary asked, staring at the bag.

Nodding, Sam reached into the bag, and pulled out the small, glowing crystal ball. Everyone froze as they waited for Mary to flip out over seeing something a living person would never be able to see: their final moments etched into a magical object.

Mary leaned in, empty eyes wider than humanly possible. “That's ... me?”

Sam smiled. “It’s a part of you. Can you see the things it’s showing?”

“I can. I can ... I can...”

Staring into the crystal ball was a hypnotic experience for all of them, considering how seamlessly it showed Mary and Sam in the alley before they were stabbed, and the thoughts going through Mary’s mind at the time. For Mary, the crystal ball must have been like staring into the heart of the universe. She didn’t move, didn’t say a thing, for entire minutes. Just sat there, the only thing letting everyone know time still moved being the ebbing mist around them, and Sándor’s slow breathing.

“That’s me.”

“Just a part of you,” Sam said. “Just a blueprint.”

“I don’t understand the blueprint part,” Mary said. So Sam had told her some stuff already.

Well, time to be the witch in all this, and take charge. Beatrice stepped forward, and the ghost looked at her.

“There’s three things we need to get someone up and walking around,” Triss said, doing her best to look the ghost in the eyes. There was a reason Jacob usually covered his empty eye sockets with a bandage: empty eye sockets were freaky as fuck. And Mary’s empty eye sockets were enormous and far too expressive. “A body and a soul, everyone knows. But the blueprint part, that part was a little more abstract, and we had to figure it out.” No reason to tell them about her visit from the Crone. “It’ll be the glue to keep everything together. Makes sure the body and soul fit together snug and in the right places.”

It took effort to not shudder. The fuck would have happened if they’d tried to jam a soul into a body without the blueprint, or glue,

or whatever? A fucked up abomination probably, something snarling and drooling and stumbling around, all twisted and shit, except all the twisted parts would be inside where no one could see, until the abomination jumped someone and bit out their throat in some pointless attempt to devour their flesh and soul and fix their own body. Yeap, nightmare fuel.

Or maybe instead of being Mary, it'd be whoever's brain was in the skull of the body waiting for them back in the cave? Also a shitty outcome.

“I see,” the ghost said. “I ... I'm scared.”

Sam put the crystal back in the bag. “Don't be scared, baby. Even if this doesn't work, you're still my baby girl. Nothing is—”

“If it doesn't work, then ... then does that mean I'm not Mary?”

“Mary, don't talk like that. You know you're—”

“Mom!” Everyone froze like ice when the ghost shrieked, everyone except Sam. The sudden sound washed over her like a shrieking baby's routine crying washes over any mom's back, after a while. “Mom, you don't know that. I might not be her.”

“How can you say that?”

“We talked about this, mom! Jack told me I might not be me. He visits sometimes, and he said ... he said...”

Oh fucking shit Jack. Stop being so damn honest with people.

Triss gulped as she looked between everyone in the group. A glance Sam's way showed her looking at Triss, letting her handle the question. Well, she did decide to take charge. Time to follow through.

“We don’t know, Mary. None of us know a thing about ghosts. No one really does. And we’re not going to lie to you. If resurrection was a sure thing, something people had figured out before, then my boss would know about it. He’d know about it, and so would other people in the Circle. Someone, somewhere, would have written about it succeeding. They haven’t.” She squatted down in front of Mary, maybe a little closer than was safe, and looked up at the kid. “There’s a lot of ifs in all this. But your mom and I are in this shit deep. Me for Julias, her for you. She’s got an advantage though, cause the hardest part, the soul, it could be right here, in front of us.”

Mary looked between them, spending some time on each, before her empty eye sockets settled back on Triss. “I don’t want to be a ghost anymore. I don’t want to ... to be seen by that dark thing anymore.”

“Thing?” Jennifer asked.

“The dark thing. It goes to a dark place, and it’s watching the city, and waiting. It ... oozes. It draws lines everywhere, and it’s ... scary.”

Holy fucking shit. Black Blood, what the fuck are you up to?

“Not gonna lie,” Triss said, “this ritual needs the help of Elen.”

“I know.”

Triss looked Sam’s way, and Sam slowly shook her head with a wince. She hadn’t told Mary this part, yet.

“Yeah, but you don’t know we have a friend who helps us force Elen to do what we want. Black Blood, a spirit.”

Mary shrieked again, and jumped back. Jump turned into hover, and she pressed her back against the wall as she crawled up it until she was half against the wall, half pressed to the ceiling. Mouth

open wide like her eyes, she stared down at Triss, head occasionally twitching in that freaky fast way ghosts apparently did. Whatever movie director or SFX dude who first thought those crunchy body motions for ghosts was a good idea, fucker had probably seen a real ghost sometime in their life.

“Black Blood! It’s out there! It’s ... it’s tearing at things, drawing lines and cutting them. It’s dark and death and—”

“Has he ever hurt you?” Triss asked.

“ ... n-no.” And like her panic was a balloon someone had popped, she deflated. “No.”

“But he can see you?”

“It ... he can! He can. He moves through the city, in that ... place between, where I hide, where we can’t touch things. He can see into that place. And everywhere he goes, it’s like ... like he leaves a trail of ... of...”

“Yeah, that sounds like Black Blood.” Triss shook her head as she stood up. “This is all dark magic shit, Mary. And Black Blood is willing to help us.”

“Why?”

Because Triss sold her soul to the spirit. Well, not really, but pledging to work with him for who knew how many decades or centuries, to be a student and partner, was pretty damn close.

“It’s complicated. But you don’t have to worry about Black Blood, he’s on our side. He’s also going to be the one controlling Elen. We’ll want her up and aware in case ... something happens.”

Slowly, the ghost hovered back down to the bed.



“I’ve taken a peek at Black Blood,” Mary said. “From inside the house, I mean. He’s scary.”

“He’s fucking terrifying,” Triss said, laughing. “But, same could be said about us, you, and the gargoyle over there, to a normal person.” A flick of the wrist to Sándor helped draw a small smile from the ghost. “He helped us build your body. He is a spirit of the dead, and deals with dead stuff.”

“Like me?”

“I ... don’t know. You said he can see you, even when you’re hiding in your, uh, ghost place?”

She nodded. Ghost place, or whatever the proper name for it was, was a place ghosts could apparently hide in the physical world. Far as Triss knew, spirits could do the same thing. But if that was true, then Mary would probably have something to say about spirits other than Black Blood, cause there was probably a few spirits roaming Dolareido, hiding out of view. Black Blood was no ordinary spirit.

Triss stood up. “He’ll be there, when you enter the body. Your body. Are you ok with that?”

“Mom?” Mary asked.

“I’ve seen Black Blood,” Sam said, “as much as anyone can see him. He’s very, very scary. But he’s only helped ... and made jokes. A lot of stupid jokes.”

Triss and Jen laughed, which soon had Mary smiling too. A creepy smile, ghost and all, but a happy smile.

“Ok,” Marry said, “let’s do it.”

Sam smiled bright, turned on the bed, and faced her child full on. “Ok. If you think something’s wrong and you want to stop, you can

stop anytime you want.”

“I know.” Nodding, Mary turned to face her mom, and leaned in toward her, almost like she was going to hug her. And Sam held her arms open to her, like she was going to hug her back. When the two touched, Triss froze, for the umpteenth time that night, because it almost looked like the two were able to touch. But before any weight or impact could sink in, Mary’s body broke apart into mist, glowing a soft blue.

The glowing mist tightened, shrinking, and at the same time, floated into Sam’s necklace. It was a quiet, almost anticlimactic thing, how easily and smoothly Mary flowed into the necklace, almost like she’d done it dozens of times before. It quickly left the room empty of mist, and lifted the crushing cold. No more ghost. No more haunted.

Wait a minute.

“Uh, Sam,” Triss said, once Mary was completely gone, and the mist around their feet was gone, too. “You uh, you wear that necklace a lot, and—”

Sam scrunched up her nose at Triss as she stood up. “She’s never in it when I’m with Jacob.”

“Oh, good. Cause that’d be weird.” No kid, no matter who or what, should ever have to see their mom in the middle of an orgy.

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“Sure you don’t want Jacob here?” Jennifer asked as they entered the cave, buried nice and far on the outskirts of the city in the desert rock.

“I thought about it,” Sam said, following behind her as they worked past the rocks and stone. “But you said it yourself, you and Triss, that Jacob thinks this can’t be done. I ... I don’t know. I sorta

want him here, but another part of me thinks it'd be better if we do this without him. It's a part of his life he's abandoned, right? You said he tried to revive Minerva decades ago and couldn't."

"Yeap," Triss said.

"Then maybe we shouldn't involve him. Don't want to get his hopes up."

Triss chuckled. Jacob get his hopes up? She didn't even know if the dude was capable of hopes anymore, with how old he was, and all the crazy shit that'd happened to him over the centuries. If he managed to find some happiness with Sam, and it seemed like he had, that was likely the best the dude could hope for.

Did he tell Sam he was thinking about leaving Dolareido? Would she go with him? Would Antoinette even let her?

Sam paused in the entrance to the cave, and looked back past Triss. "Sándor, did you want to come?"

Slowly, the gargoyle shook his head. "I'll stay out here. I don't want—"

"Don't be like that. You heard what Mary said. And besides, no offense to Beatrice or Jennifer, but ... it'd be nice to have someone else nearby who's been a parent. You ... you might have some ... I don't know, insight, into whatever happens?"

Triss looked back at Sándor and watched. What would the dude do? Close off? Walk away? Shake his head, say nothing, turn around, and wait, like a gargoyle?

Sándor took a deep breath, and looked to Triss. Eye contact. Christ it was hard to look the dude in the eyes. Look at him anywhere else, sure, he was a stoic dude who didn't express much. But the blue eyes had hints of more, a lot more.

She'd hung out with him several times, since that night she saw him playing guitar. Talking to Sándor was easy, no awkwardness at all. Great listener, and was happy to do it, too. But looking him in the eyes was a whole other beast.

"Come on," Beatrice said, after a few seconds. "We don't know what's going to happen. It'll be nice, having a strong Begotten around in case shit hits the fan. And besides, you've met Black Blood." Nodding, she took out her phone and turned on the light.

"Met is a strong word. A couple of very short encounters in the dream." But he nodded, and walked in. "Alright."

The next part was going to be a little rough. She glanced back at him a couple times as they took him through the small passage, and she gulped on a dry throat as madness came into view.

Somehow, the man didn't say a word, as he entered the flesh cave, but the look in his eyes said a million things.

Elen hung from the hook over the giant metal bowl, but at least Triss had made her some cuffs to dangle from, instead of having the metal skewering her wrists. She dangled high and was bound with some extra rope, too, just in case she suddenly turned hulk strong and tried to fling herself off the huge hook. No chance, but still. And fuck, the woman looked awful, as emaciated as ever. The only reason her arms weren't popping out of their sockets was because of whatever strange magic that made her immortal. But considering she was in a deep sleep, she couldn't have been that uncomfortable.

Sándor stared at the walls covered in markings, most in blood, some fresh some old, some etched into the stone. He stared at the candles Jen lit, and then down beneath the bowl, and the carved — or maybe real and petrified — skeletons that held the bowl up. He stared at the pile of bodies in the back of the cave, covered in a tarp. He stared at the body of Julias and Mary, both sitting in a chair, and both covered in tarps of their own.

“A terrifying sight,” Jennifer said.

“It ... isn’t the first time I’ve seen something like this,” he said, after a few more look-arounds.

“Oh?” Jen raised a brow before leaning over and lighting another candle. Enough light for Triss to turn off her phone’s.

“Long life. Met a few witches in the past, other side of the ocean.”

“Like her?” Samantha asked, nodding to the dangling, sleeping Elen.

“Maybe. Dark hut deep in the woods, a book, a cauldron.”

Triss laughed. “A cauldron? No shit, really?”

Sándor nodded. “I’ve served witches before, as a guard.”

“Any interesting stories for me?”

He met her eyes again, and holy shit, she saw the faintest hint of a smile there. “Yes. I can share them ... later.”

“Yeah, later.” Nodding, Triss walked over to the two bodies sitting in chairs. One of them was breathing.

Slowly, like it ... he, might jump up and bite her, Triss lifted the tarp up and took a peek at Julias. She glanced back at Sándor, and sure enough, the dude took a peek at Julias as well, before he looked away. No need for words, that hurt him. But she did offer the guy a small nod and smile, before looking back at Julias, and gave the body a couple pokes and prods. Still living and breathing, still just sitting there, waiting for a soul. Black Blood was poking at that idea for her, and assured her Elen wasn’t an issue; even if she did lose her mind, the magic keeping the bodies alive would keep ticking, and Black Blood could possess her and make her do things,

too. Which meant Beatrice had time to focus on the more immediate concern.

Triss set the tarp back down over Julias, and pulled the tarp off Mary. Nah, not Mary. The body was a corpse, not living or breathing yet, and didn't look like Mary when you looked closer. At least the body parts they'd sewn together to look like Mary didn't have seams, magic and all that.

Sam stared at the body, and clutched her necklace. "Should I ... ask Mary to come out now?"

"Not ye—actually, maybe you should."

Sam tilted her head to the side. "You hesitated."

Triss came up, and whispered into Sam's ear. "Mary hiding in your necklace is a secret, right? If Black Blood can't see or hear us right now — not sure about that — then let's keep it a secret as long as we can. If we summon him first, he'll see how Mary got here."

"You ... really don't trust him, do you?" Sam whispered back.

"Scorpion and the frog, you know? Let's be smart about this." Triss had no idea what sort of dark shit Black Blood was up to when he wasn't with them, but she knew he was definitely up to something. And had probably been up to somethings for a long time, centuries even. Plus, considering he was a spirit of death and the dead, she didn't like the idea of him knowing how to get his hands on Mary when she wasn't protected in her home.

Nodding, Sam stepped back, lifted her necklace, and whispered to it. Quiet, tiny whispers Triss strained to hear, and failed.

Sure enough, the presence of Mary the ghost was obvious. Cold, mist, the usual, it all built up in the small cave. With the half dozen

candles Jen had lit, it really gave the creepy mist a whole new level of scary factor.

Mary rose from the mist, no color except for hints of white and blue and compressed fog, and she was see-through, same as always.

“Oh my god,” Mary said, and her head snapped left and right rapid fire as she took in the sights. “It’s a ... a witches cave.”

“Literally,” Jennifer said, smiling as she gestured around. The marks and lines, the ritual symbols, the candles, the big bowl, the hanging woman, the dead bodies, the two sitting bodies, all of it. An unsuspecting kine stumbling onto the cave would have said the same thing.

“Literally,” Triss said. “You can take a second to get used to it if you want, Mary. We don’t know what’s going to happen. Better you get comfortable with your surroundings, I guess.”

That might have been a mistake. Mary drifted over to the back of the cave, and shrieked when she realized the mound was a tarp over bodies. Everyone — save Sándor — threw up their hands and covered their ears as the ghost screamed. Uh oh.

“Baby! Baby, don’t worry!” Sam ran over to her, and got between her daughter and the dead. “It’s ok! It’s—”

“They’re dead! Dead dead dead dead de—”

“Baby! I told you about ... about what we did.” Wow, Sam had told her daughter more than Triss figured she would.

Triss, a lot slower than Sam, joined the two of them at the pile. “We were careful, Mary. Very careful. It’s why it took so long to get everything ready. The only people we killed were absolute shitholes who deserved it. Rapists, murderers, abusers.” She didn’t think they’d have to have this conversation, but the closer they got to this

day, the more apparent it became it couldn't be avoided. They needed Elen for the ritual to put the crystal ball into the body, and no way in hell were they gonna take the flesh witch or the bodies out of here. Too dangerous, too risky. Acclimating the unstable ghost to a room full of bodies and body parts was their only option.

After seeing Mary now, body twitching hyper speed and shifting in place left and right, again at hyper speed, maybe it wasn't the better idea. Maybe take the dangerous flesh witch out into the world, maybe to Sam's home, set up a hundred different ritual symbols in her basement, summon Black Blood, give Elen the knife and book, surely that'd be perfectly fine. Compared to a ghost flipping the fuck out, maybe.

“Dead! Dead dead—”

“Mary!” Triss swung her arm and pointed at the bodies. “These were people like Angela and Jeremiah! Okay? You sad those two are dead?”

The ghost snapped her head and glared at Triss, panic and rage in her big empty eyes. But sure enough, saying Angela's name brought a spark of awareness to her, and she stopped doing that weird ghost-snap thing. Hovering there, mist pouring off where legs should have been, she slowly looked from Beatrice to Samantha, then back to the bodies.

“I'm not sad those two are dead.”

“Damn right,” Triss said. “Look, Mary, yeah, this shit is nasty. We're witches. But you trust your mom, right? She helped us prepare. She was there, when we killed the people we used to make this.” She gestured to the corpse woman sitting in the chair. “You don't need to trust me, or Jen or Sándor, but you trust Sam, right? She's been with us, every step of the way.” And that journey had been one fucked up mess of guilt and murder. Every person they killed, Triss had to make damn sure they deserved it, and convince



Sam of it. The only reason Sam agreed to any of it, was because now she had Kindred instincts telling her killing kine was fine. She didn't agree with those instincts of course, but it was a shit load better than how she would have felt about it before she was a vampire.

“I ... I trust Mom.”

“Good. Now, you trust me about Black Blood, and Elen?”

“I ... do.”

Nodding, Triss gestured to an empty space by Sándor near the cave wall. Sam walked over there, every bit of her looking half ready to panic over what was about to happen, and what had just happened. Mary slowly mirrored the nod, and floated over to hover beside her mom. Jen stood beside Sándor.

Black Blood you fucking asshole, don't do anything to make this worse.

Triss faced the bowl, and gulped. “Black Blood, I summon you.”

Mary's presence was classic ghost creepy. The mist, the cold, the air of death, her instability, it was borderline cliché. Scary, but cliché. The spirit's presence, on the other hand, was like swimming in a graveyard, and having the graveyard sing to you at the same time. It was massive, ethereal, and beyond something as simple as people. To something like Black Blood, vampires were only just slightly deep enough into 'dead' territory to even warrant his notice. Like, a god, only barely noticing his worshipers. And she hated the idea of thinking of that asshole as a god.

Sure enough, when his black ooze began to fill the room, everyone froze and waited, except Mary. She hovered down closer to her mom, and then behind her. Triss made a quick glance at the ghost, trembling in obvious fear behind her mom. This was going to be rough.

Mary's presence, her mist and fog, it all disappeared into the black ooze that soaked them all. The black blood dripped down from the ceiling, and up from the floor into the ceiling. It leaked from the walls. It flowed from the eyes of the skulls underneath the giant bowl the flesh witch dangled over.

"Well I'll be," the darkness said, more of that deep booming voice with an alien rasp mixed in. "Is that Mary?"

Mary looked around randomly for the voice, head snapping, body shaking.

"D-Don't talk to my daughter," Sam said. "She's not comfortable with you."

Triss grinned. Say one thing for Sam, she was a mom, through and through.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am." A thick, Southern drawl, as always. "And is that Sándor? Dolareido's new Batman?"

Triss threw up her hands. "What the fuck? Batman? You've never seen any Batman shit."

"I have indeed."

"Bullshit."

"You think a spirit can't watch a movie? I'm fixing to clock you upside the head, girl."

"I think—" Triss grabbed her hair and shook her head. "Never mind. Yes, Sándor is here. Yes, he's invested in what happens to Dolareido. He lives here now." As if Black Blood didn't already know that.

Black Blood chuckled, deep voice almost shaking the walls. “Then I am glad to have helped the man.”

They all looked Sándor’s way.

The gargoyle stared on, face a rock, slowly looking at random objects as he searched for the source of the sound.

“Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome. Now, three vampires, a monster of nightmares, and a poor lady outside her body. I imagine you’re all here ‘cause you’re ready to start this shindig?”

They all looked Sam’s way.

Sam gulped, pulled out the black bag, and removed the crystal ball inside. “I’m ready. Mary?”

“R ... Ready,” she whispered, still hiding behind her mom, empty eyes wider than ever.

“Ok baby. You just stay there for now. We gotta get the body ready.”

“Okay.” Mary, the deadly ghost who’d thoroughly trashed Jack in the past, now looked as meek and helpless as a little girl.

“Time to wake Elen, then.” Black Blood’s booming chuckle had them vibrating literally this time. He was like one of those jolly uncles a family might visit with their timid kids, and the uncle’s plan to get the kids more comfortable with him, was to laugh and be merry like fucking Santa Claus. It didn’t work in that scenario, and it didn’t work in this scenario. Mary stayed back and away, and drifted closer to Sándor, as Sam stepped up to the body.

“Elen,” Triss said. No response. “Elen!” She reached out and slapped the woman’s ankle.

Elen opened her eyes. No jolt or snap of life and the usual shit that’d come from getting woken up with a pinch of pain. Nope, just an old woman coming out of a long sleep with all the casualness of coming out of hibernation.

“Oh my,” she said, tired eyes drifting around the room. “Is that a ghost?”

“You,” Mary said, and she snarled very inhuman-like as she glared at the flesh witch. “You helped Jeremiah and Angela.”

“That I did, sweetie.”

“Why!?” A punch of sound, high pitched with far too much volume, and everyone winced and crouched like they’d just gotten shot. Except Sándor.

“Jeremiah wasn’t the only person who thinks monsters should die.” And again, with all the grace and rush of a slug, she looked to Sándor. “Enjoying freedom, Pavel?”

Sándor said nothing and showed nothing, but Triss did see a tiny twitch in one eye from the Begotten as he watched Elen. Dude could have yanked a shotgun out of his back pocket and shot the bitch right there, with that exact expression on, and no one would have been surprised.

“Hush you,” Black Blood said. “You’re just a tool now, Elen. See what your blood thirst gets you.”

Triss blinked around at the darkness. Was Black Blood being a hypocrite? She didn’t say it. Honestly, she didn’t even know if it was true. Had Black Blood ever killed anyone?

Before Triss could suggest it, Black Blood began the possession process. A grotesque sight, watching black ooze creep its way up Elen's legs and into her body through any orifice it could, tear ducts included. Mary and Sam stared, and poor Mary looked all sorts of disturbed. She looked at what Black Blood was doing the way a kine would look at a ghost.

Once Elen was possessed, Triss jumped up onto the bowl, got her down, put her in her wheelchair, and Jen armed her with the book and knife Sam stole from her sire.

“Alright,” Elen said, Black Blood's Southern accent gone, rasp mixed into her old woman's voice, “bring the body, and the mold.”

Right, Elen called the crystal ball the ‘mold’. Triss was sure blueprint fit it better, but whatever. She took the body's chair, and slid the corpse over to her, all while doing her best to not look at the ghost Mary. Sam stepped up too, crystal ball in hand, and the golden glow fought against the harsh black mist that clung over everything.

Elen smiled and nodded, flipped the pages of the book with her extremely scrawny, wrinkly fingers, found the page, and hummed to herself—himself as he cut a line across the naked body's side. That knife looked like it belonged in a museum, and was way too fucking sharp.

“Insert the mold, Samantha.”

Sam gulped, both hands clutching the crystal ball, but after a few seconds and a few seconds more, she pushed the ball into the flesh of the corpse.

Everyone watched the body expectantly. Even Mary the ghost wandered closer, eyes stuck on her potential body. At first, nothing, but a moment later Sam gasped, the first to notice the changes.

Triss glanced back and forth between the ghost and the body in the chair. Yeap, it was changing. Black Blood had used his command of death and the dead to craft them the body from corpses, and even do some magical surgery and shit to try and get it as close to Mary as they could. They'd gotten pretty close, Triss thought, but only now that the nose shifted a few millimeters, and the eyes adjusted outward a few millimeters more, did she realize just how fucking important the small details were. Things like height, hip, tits, all of that morphed with small adjustments too, but it was the head, especially the face, where the super tiny mistakes made a giant difference. The blueprint fixed them.

And then it was Mary.

“Oh my god,” Mary said, and she hovered over to the body, so close she was almost touching Elen. The corpse took a breath. “Oh my god!” She snapped back, almost teleporting as she put the big ritual bowl between her and the body.

Elen chuckled. “Calm down, deary. Empty body, empty mind.”

Sam motioned for her daughter to come back, and she did, staring at the awaiting naked body.

“It's me.”

“No, baby,” Samantha said, shaking her head. “It's just a vessel. You're you.”

Triss smiled slightly at Sam. Vessel. It wasn't the sort of word someone like Sam would use, but Jacob and Triss used that sorta language all the time. Dark magic, rituals, Sam was getting neck deep in it and was changing more and more every night because of it. Maybe she'd leave the Ordo and become be a witch? Or maybe she'd ride some kinda line between them, like Minerva had.

Hopefully Sam wouldn't follow in all of Minerva's footsteps.

“W-What do I do now?”

“Possess the body,” Black Blood said. “You saw how I did with this one. Though it should be easier for you.”

“Easier?”

“You’re not like me, sweetie. There’s a much smaller barrier between you and the humans. Ghosts possess people sometimes, and corpses. And considering this body has no mind or soul, and is eagerly awaiting its missing soul, you should snap into place like a puzzle piece.”

“I ... I still don’t know how.”

Elen shrugged. “You’ll figure it out. Touch the body, and move into her. It should come naturally.” Chuckling, Elen closed the book, and picked at her fingernails with the bloody knife. “I could force you into the body.”

Sam glared at the old witch. “What do you mean?”

“I am a spirit of the dead. I have ... some ability, to affect ghosts.” Black Blood returned Sam’s glare with a teasing grin. “But I don’t think it will be necessary.”

“Don’t touch me!” Mary glared at Black Blood, the crazy sort of ghost glare that usually announced incoming flying objects and murderous intent. From terrified of the god spirit of death one moment, to ready to brawl him the next.

Elen put up her hands, smile unwavering. “I wouldn’t dare, child.”

Jen stepped up behind Elen and rolled her a few feet away, earning a merry chuckle from the old woman. It was all a game to Black Blood, their lives, the rituals, the experiments, using Elen. To Black Blood, everything here was a side note, something he was

experimenting with while he did his own shit elsewhere. Well, whatever, as long as he did what was asked of him. If he didn't, Triss would call off the deal, and the fucker could rot. But honestly, she got the impression Black Blood was the sorta fucker to follow through on his deals. An asshole, but a trustworthy one, like Jacob.

Sam stood beside the body, and motioned to her daughter. "Whenever you're ready, baby. Take your time. If things go bad, Elen can keep the body alive. Right?"

Elen nodded. "Julias's body waits in that chair, and has for months now, without food or drink. Elen's flesh magic is connected to her own life, and she's made herself immortal, albeit in a strange way. As long as she's alive, which should be indefinitely, we can keep our vessels alive and kicking. Unless someone comes along and damages them in a way that would kill them quickly; avoid cutting off heads or stabbing hearts, please."

His joke didn't earn a smile from anyone, but Triss did have to suppress hers. Bad time for a nasty joke with Mary and Sam here, but Triss did like dark humor.

Everyone went quiet as they waited. Nothing to say anymore. It was all on the ghost, now.

Mary floated in front of her double, and stared at the vessel, its eyes closed. Eye contact would probably have been a bit much, so Triss didn't open them. After a minute of hovering and staring, Mary turned around, and sat in the chair, on, and into her body.

The mist sucked up into the body like she had a mega vacuum in her mouth. A deep, heavy, unending breath they all heard, like the cave had transformed into a wind tunnel. All the mist, hidden beneath Black Blood's presence, swirled around them like a whirlpool before flying into Mary's new body through the mouth and nose. And as quickly as it started, it stopped. No bang, no



explosion of light, nothing. The ghost, the ghost presence, it was all gone. Only one candle survived.

Well, that was pretty damn anticlimactic.

“Did it work?” Beatrice asked. “It—”

Mary opened her eyes.

“Mary!?” Sam squatted down in front of her child, and looked up at her, green eyes wide.

“M ... Mom?” Mary looked at her mom, eyes wide too. Green, with hints of blue, like Jack’s. Like Sam’s.

“Oh god, baby!?! Are you ok? Do you remember anything?” She threw herself at Mary and hugged her, almost knocking the chair over. Triss got there quick and stopped it, and Sam didn’t even notice. Just a bundle of tearless sobs as she hugged Mary.

“Mom!” Oh thank god, Mary hugged her back. Not a mindless zombie, then. “It worked! It worked, oh thank god!”

Triss sighed relief, and looked around for Jen. Her friend did the same, before she went around and re-lit the dead candles.

Sam stood up and brought Mary with her, hugged her and spun her a couple times and hugged her a few times more, and finally let her go.

“I ... I can’t believe it worked.” Sam managed a whole three seconds before she hugged her kid again. “Are you alright? Is everything working?”

“I’m ok mom. I’m ok. I ... I can think again.”

“Think?” She let her go again and stepped back. “You mean ... as a ghost...”

“I couldn’t think, not really. Any thoughts I had hit me so hard, like in a dream. Just ... images, sounds, scents, they came and went and every second I was just trying to hold on. I—” Mary finally looked down at herself, then at the room full of people. “Ah!”

Jennifer laughed and stood beside Sándor. “After what we’ve been through, Mary, I think you can stop worrying about the nudity.” But before Mary could say anything, Jennifer turned Sándor around anyway. That got a chuckle out of everyone, save the gargoyle.

Triss caught a peek of the man’s eyes before he finished turning around though. There was a hint of ... something there. Concern? Disbelief? Whatever it was, it wasn’t the unmatched joy she saw in Sam’s.

Triss also took a moment to take in Black Blood’s eyes. Elen’s eyes were old, lots of wrinkles and sagging skin, hard to read, but she did look interested in what was happening, like a scientist making mental notes.

“So you remember everything?” Triss asked.

Mary half turned and nodded to her, big smile in full bloom. She really was a pretty lady, a bit taller than her brother, decently lean, if a bit soft. Her face had a certain softness to it too, like her mom, and she had brown hair to her shoulders, also like her mom. It was a little hard to see the similarities between the two when looking at the ghost, but they were blatant when looking at the actual body, especially now that she was up and moving.

“I remember everything. I remember ... getting stabbed in that alley. I remember running home, not really knowing I was dead at first. I remember when Jack and Mom found me there. I remember —” She snapped her gaze to Elen. Thankfully, this time the head snap didn’t do that freaky instant snap thing it did when she was a ghost.

Elen chuckled, and balanced the knife on one finger over the book, teetering it so its blade tip and handle end tapped the book over and over.

“It appears the possession was a success.”

“I don’t feel like I’m possessing a body,” Mary said. She squirmed a little, covering her breasts and privates, so Triss wrapped the tarp around her they’d used to hide her body. “Thanks. It ... It feels like me. I don’t think I could, um, de-possess it? Or anything like that.”

“That’s good,” Elen said. “Then it appears this was a success. Body and soul, and the mold to fit them together.”

Mary took a deep, slow breath, and leaned into her mom, who happily hugged her again, with one arm this time so they could walk together, toward the wall. They leaned their heads into each other. It was so precious, Triss thought she might just puke, in a good way.

“I’m alive again,” Mary whispered. “I ... I can’t believe it.” It was inevitable. She sobbed. And unlike her already sobbing mom, Mary had plenty of tears to make.

Sam hugged her full on again, and the two of them cried for a little while.

“It worked,” Jen said, turning Sándor back toward the group. Triss made sure to watch his expression again, but relaxed as the man smiled, barely, and set his eyes on the two hugging women.

“It worked,” Triss said. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to get back Julias’s soul to do the same, but at least Mary’s alive.”

Mary let go of her mom, and with the biggest, happiest, tear-filled eyes Triss had ever seen, she waddled her way to her, tarp still wrapped around her with one arm, and hugged Triss as best she could with the other arm.

“Thank you.”

Well, shit. Triss smiled over the girl’s shoulder at Sam, and pet Mary on the back once. She was tempted to tell the girl it was all about Julias, and Mary was just a test run. But that shit wasn’t true. Seeing Sam smile like that was so god damn amazing, it made the fucking shitshow they’d pushed through seem worth it.

Slippery slope, thinking it was okay to go around murdering people so they could resurrect someone.

“You’re ... welcome.” She pat Mary on the shoulder, and gently pushed her away. Yeap, girl was still crying. “Fuck me, it actually worked.”

“It did!” She giggled, and for a moment there, she looked just like Sam. “Oh my god! Oh my ... god...” Slowly, Mary looked around at the room again, and this time her eyes lingered on the pile of bodies in the corner. The tarp covering them didn’t do a good job covering the limbs sticking out closer to the bottom of the pile.

It only got worse as Mary, now in the flesh and a living breathing person, took in the rest of the reality. An old woman, a flesh witch, possessed by a god-like spirit of death, with a knife and weird magic book in hand. Symbols carved into the floor and walls. A giant metal bowl, where the smell of blood would never fade. This wasn’t the scene you’d expect for a happy family reunion.

Sam came close and guided her daughter toward the exit. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

“I ... I’m ok, I am. I still remember everything. It’s just, when I was ... dead, all this stuff seemed ... I don’t know, reasonable? It...” She shivered and took another step toward the cave’s exit. “Ok yeah, I agree. Let’s go somewhere else.”

Jen came up and stood beside Mary, opposite of Sam. “My dear, you live and breathe once again! We must celebrate!”

“Jennifer, we are most definitely not celebrating in one of the ways you like to celebrate.”

Jen laughed and leaned in front of Mary to look at Sam. “We. The way we like to celebrate.”

Triss grinned after them as they made for the exit, but didn't follow. Neither did Sándor. Mister Gargoyle watched them go, his small smile turning into a small frown when they passed him, his eyes locked on Mary.

“I can't see her anymore,” Black Blood Elen said.

Triss looked down at her. “Say what?”

“I am a spirit of death and the dead. I can see others who touch that realm.” She grinned up at her. “Why do you think I like vampires so much?”

“Didn't think you liked all vampires. Just Jacob ... and me, I guess.”

“Ha. Perhaps. But it is also because I can connect with vampires in a very real way. A physical way, if necessary. You are partly dead, after all.” Slowly, he handed Triss back the knife and book, grin unfading. “With ghosts, I can see them, where they move, where they flow, even when they hide out of my reach. I can't see her anymore. As far as I can tell, she is alive.”

“I guess that's as good a confirmation I can hope to get.”

“Indeed. Who is truly alive, when any scientist ultimately considers everyone to be robots, and slaves to determinism.”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Oh fuck off, you’re not a scientist, or a philosopher.”

Elen laughed, in that quiet granny way. “True. She’s alive, and we will be hard pressed to prove otherwise.”

Sándor joined them, glancing back over his shoulder to the curve of the cave entrance, now that everyone else was gone.

“Can you tell?” Triss asked.

“No. I will be able to tell if she dreams, but vampires dream as well. Are they alive?”

She shrugged. “No fucking clue.”

“Then I consider this a success.” Elen chuckled again. Chuckled turned into a gargling mess, and black ooze poured out of her mouth. The black mist in the cave grew denser, and more of the ooze poured out of her from her other orifices. Eventually the black blood coated the floor, and oozed along the walls and ceiling again. Elen was no longer possessed.

“I...” Sighing, Triss kicked at the floor a few times, and paced around for a half minute. Fuck, she had say it. Really didn’t want to, but she knew she did. “Thank you, Black Blood. Sam’s lost so damn much. It’s nice to give her back a piece of it. A damn big piece.”

The blackness around them rumbled with a chuckle.

“That’s a mighty fine thank you, little pardner.”

Oh god. She rolled her eyes again and flipped her middle finger up at the whole cave. “Yeah yeah.”

“And I look forward to Samantha’s continued pursuits of the dark arts.”

“I—wait. You think Sam’s going to join the Circle?”

“I do indeed. She’s got the itch now, after seeing what it can do.”

“Did you fucking help us knowing that?”

The darkness chuckled again. “A little.”

Triss would punch the fucker in the face if she could.

“Please leave her alone.”

“I reckon she’ll come to me, Triss. Or Jacob. And besides, you don’t think Samantha fits in the Circle?”

“I think she does, maybe a little too well. And I think she’d probably live a happier second life if she stayed the fuck away from the Circle.”

Again the darkness laughed. “Maybe. Maybe. But witches don’t become witches easily, Beatrice. Something drives them. And you know Sam has the fuel for that fire.”

Before she could snap back and tell him to leave Sam the fuck alone again, the blackness disappeared. The mist seeped into the walls, the black ooze vanished into the cracks in the stone, and the heavy presence of death incarnate went with it. Elen slumped, exhausted, and probably asleep.

“Yeah you better run!” She threw up her hands, stomped once, paced a couple times more, and groaned. Okay, yeah, Black Blood taking an interest in Samantha was not good, but it wasn’t like Sam wasn’t neck deep in witch shit all the time. For three months she got to see the darkest, most horrible shit humanity had to offer, and then watch Triss and Jen kill that person. She watched them drag the body back to the cave, and with Elen’s flesh magic, dismantle

the body like it was nothing more than a bunch of parts attached at the joints.

Much as it sucked, Black Blood was right.

Sándor took a step closer to her. His frown hadn't left.

“What's on your mind, Mister Stone?”

Even the hilarious and perfect nickname didn't change his expression in the slightest.

“Nothing.”

“Uh huh. This is about Mary, right? I mean, there's no way we could have done that without Mary's soul floating around.” She gestured to Julias. “I have no idea what to do with him. Yet.” She gestured to Sándor, too. “How about you? This shit works. We got proof. Maybe you want to revive the people closest to you.”

His frown remained, and instead of looking at her, he looked back to the cave exit.

“I ... don't know.”

“Ch'yeah, I get that. It's pretty fucked up,” she said, gesturing to the pile of bodies in the back.

The man looked behind him at the bodies, then Triss, then back to the exit.

“I guess I'm not convinced yet.”

“We really only killed people who deserved it, Sándor.”

“Not that. I mean that it worked.”



“Oh. I ... fuck, I don’t know. She’s walking and talking and smiling. Crying. She remembers everything that’s happened to her, and she’s acting a lot more like a normal person instead of a psycho ghost. What more could anyone ask for?”

He nodded, expression softening a little as he looked down, thinking.

“I agree.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t feel ... I don’t know.”

That was fucking unnerving. It’d be easy to chalk it up to the dude just being wary and shit, which made perfect sense, ‘cause she was, too. But Sándor was ancient, nearly as old as the Prince as far as he knew. His instincts meant something.

“Let’s keep an eye on her then.”

“Agreed.”

“And ... let’s be happy for Sam, ok? Christ, did you see the look on her face?”

“I did.” He met her eyes for a second time before looking away. A second was enough. If something happened to Mary now, it’d only make things a thousand times worse for Sam.

Triss scooped up Elen’s cuffs, and put them back on the old bitch. But before she could hang the immortal witch from the hook again, Elen opened her eyes.

“Resurrection,” she said.

Triss froze, and stared the old woman in the eyes. “What about it?”

“Long have witches such as I sought for a way to revive the dead. Hundreds, thousands of years. Perhaps you’ve finally done it. If you succeeded, please write it in the book.”

This fucking bitch. Triss didn’t know if it was her age and failing mind that had her focused on her book, or if Elen had been so obsessed in life that her magic was the only thing that mattered to her. Either way, it was pretty fucking annoying, having the old hag make a request like that, considering she was a prisoner and never getting out.

And yet, Triss nodded anyway.

“Okay.”

If she succeeded. The first witch to ever successfully complete a resurrection.

Fuck.

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She really wished Sándor came, if only to see the look on Jack’s face.

“M ... Mary?” Jack took a step back, making both his crows flutter in surprise on his shoulders. But he didn’t fall, half because one of his thralls got behind him and caught his weight.

“Jack.” Mary grinned, and looked around at the big front door of his mansion. “This place is ... wow! Can I come in?”

Jack stared at her, green eyes wide in that way Sam sometimes did. Total shock. Triss couldn’t help but laugh.

“Um ... sure?” Jack, dressed in dark suit pants and a white shirt, suit jacket and tie nowhere to be seen, motioned for them to come in. They did. Each step had Triss and Jen laughing, Sam and Mary

smiling, and the thrall — Veronica — staring. Jack took a couple steps back, still staring.

A second later, Veronica had her phone out. Three seconds later, the other two thralls came running from the second floor, and they gasped as they stared down from the top of the stairs, half behind the railings.

“Jack, you dumbass, stop running.” Giggling, Mary walked up to her brother and held out her arms.

It took a second for the reality to sink in, but once it did, Jack made a small finger gesture to the nearby railing at the bottom of the big stairs. His two crows flew over to the railings, each taking a post opposite each other, and both crows stared at Mary, too. Lot of staring.

Jack didn't recoil when Mary hugged him. Hell, if anything, the kid hugged her a little tighter than was probably normal for him, and Samantha let out a weak sob as she came up and hugged them both at the same time.

Jack snapped to attention, pulled back, and looked to Triss as his eyes shifted from shock, to confusion, to worry.

“Does this mean—”

“Julias is still out of my reach,” she said. “And ... and could be, for a long time. I put that on hold, cause your sister was around and your mom deserved help first.”

“God, I ... I—” The air got knocked out of him as Mary hugged him again, his mom too. But he managed to keep looking at Triss, and the shock in his eyes melted away to something Triss rarely got to see on the kid. Joy.

## Chapter 162

~~Jack~~

He sat down on his stairs, close to the left side near Mulder. But once he was settled, Mulder hopped down on his shoulder, and Scully joined him on his other shoulder again. He almost told them to get back up on the railings, but based on their reactions, they wanted to be close to him while he had this conversation. They were picking up on how freaked he was.

“I can’t believe you’re alive.”

Mary smiled her usual, big smile, and sat down in the middle of the stairs, almost close enough to touch him.

“Only happened an hour ago. We snuck into a store to get me some clothes before coming here.” She gestured down at herself, and the jeans and t-shirt.

His mom sat down on the stairs too, beside Mary, and she made sure to sit close enough their hips were touching.

“She’s alive,” his mom said. “She has a pulse. She breathes! And she remembers everything.”

“You do?” Jack asked. No point in trying to hide his shock anymore, so he just stared at his sister, wide-eyed and frozen.

“Yeap. I remember all the times you guys visited me at home. I remember ... being a ghost. I remember how crazy it was, and how hard it was to control my thoughts and actions. I remember you,” she pointed at Jack, “being mean about who I was and what was going to happen to me.”

“I ... I ... was just trying to be realistic.”

Mary laughed and shrugged. “I know. You’re an asshole, Jack. I appreciate that.”

Damn, it really was her. Same mannerisms. Same cheeriness he saw in his mom before Mary died, and often found in Fiona. Bubbly. Excitable.

“Jack is an asshole,” Triss said. She grinned at him as she leaned back against the closed mansion doors, Jen beside her wearing the same proud grin.

“I am not...” He threw up his hands. “That doesn’t matter! What happened? How ... How!?”

Mary and his mom looked to Beatrice, and the Nosferatu shrugged and pushed off the doors to come closer.

“You probably know I’ve been up to some nasty shit for a while.”

Jack forced himself to tear his eyes off Mary and looked at Triss. “Yeah, but it’s not like you’ve been stepping on any toes or doing something horrible. Not horrible by Kindred standards, at least. Right?”

“Right.” Thank god she didn’t wince when she said it. “But things did get pretty bloody and gruesome. Took time, but we got a body ready with Black Blood’s help.”

Of course, Black Blood. Jack winced and sucked in a breath between his teeth.

“You really have to work with him?”

“Yeah. I know you got a thing against him, Jack, but he hasn’t done wrong by you. Last I checked, he saved you from Angela and

Jeremiah. Twice.” She held up two fingers. “Besides. It’s not like we trust him completely. Fucker has his own agenda for sure, but for now, he’s willing to help us with this.” Before Jack could respond, her two fingers turned into an open palm, silencing him. “We finally got everything finished tonight, and Mary slipped into the body. Bam. Puzzle pieces, clicking together.”

Jack groaned as he processed the info bomb. “I ... guess that’s...” It took a second, but he wiped the bad thoughts away and flicked himself in the chin hard enough to jolt his brain out of negative spiral. “I shouldn’t judge what you did. Stupid of me.”

“We’ve been through Hell together, Jack. You don’t think I’m being careful about this?”

“She is, Jack,” his mom said. “And ... And look!” She squealed, causing both crows to flutter their wings in surprise, as she hugged Mary again, earning a squeak from her. “She’s alive!”

“Alive!” Mary hugged their mom back, and the two of them rested their heads against each other’s. “Oh my god I’m alive. And every thing’s so different, I—” She slowly turned her head and looked up the stairs. Oh shit, Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel were poking their heads out from the wall down the hall on the second floor, where the railing connected. “Jack?”

“They’re my thralls.”

“You built a harem.”

“It’s not a harem!”

“Jack my dear,” Jen said, grin turning absolutely evil. Just like Elaine. “Of course it’s a harem.”

“It’s ... none of your business. And—” A giggle from above. He snapped his head up and shot a glare at his three thralls, and they

squeaked and disappeared. “Okay, Mary. I assume Mom has been filling you in on a lot more than she probably should, about the Masquerade?”

Mary nodded. “You mean the secret nightlife stuff? Yeap.”

“Ok, good. I mean, I want to be happy and hug you and take you out to celebrate, but—”

“But you want to make sure that a, uh, ‘kine’,” she air-quoted kine, “isn’t running around Dolareido breaking the Masquerade, and getting you in trouble, or worse, getting us all killed.”

Jack leaned forward and looked past Mary at his mom. She whistled and looked away, which was actually a little weird. Yeah sure, his mom was brimming with energy and joy to the point she looked like she’d explode, but the whistling and looking away was silly behavior made her seem younger. Much as the whole situation with Mary could be connected, he got the feeling her relationship with Jacob had something to do with the change in her behavior.

The idea of Jacob making his mom behave like a young woman felt really fucking weird. But, she was smiling.

“Mom. Did you tell her absolutely everything?”

“Not absolutely everything! But ... a lot.”

Jack groaned and ran his fingers over his buzzed scalp. “Ok, I guess that saves us the trouble of explaining the Masquerade and everything it contains.”

Mary’s grin was quickly mirroring Jen’s. “Yeap.”

“Okay okay. I ... I don’t know what to do, honestly. We don’t let kine go around knowing about paranormals unless they’re bound to someone by the Vinculum.”

“That won’t happen.” His mom stood up and looked down at him, balancing happy and stern on her face. “After everything that’s happened, Mary—”

“It’s not about Mary, Mom. It’s about the Masquerade and the hundreds of vampires it protects in this city alone.”

Triss waved her hands through the air a couple times, like steering a landing plane. “Dude, she knows what’ll happen if she opens her mouth. After all the shit that’s happened, I’m pretty sure we can trust her to not go talking about vamps.”

That was true. As dangerous as it was to have a kine going around free without a leash of some kind, Mary had been neck deep in the worst the paranormal world had to offer.

Sighing, Jack waved a placating hand. “You’re right, you’re right. But what about ... you know, life stuff? Mary was pronounced dead. Her body’s buried in a graveyard. The only way she can go back to living a normal life is if she gets a new identity.”

Mary frowned as she looked down and rubbed her palms on her knees. “A new identity probably wouldn’t be enough. People knew me. If I ran into someone who knew me, it’d be ... like that time I ran into Jack.”

Jack winced again. Wiping the memory of his encounter with his sister from her mind, only for her to find it again as a ghost, had sucked. He’d apologized to her, but she’d been a pretty damn angry ghost at the time, and had smashed him halfway through a wall.

“Then you have few options,” Jennifer said. “You can either leave Dolareido and start a new life elsewhere.”

“I don’t want to leave Mom.”



“Or you can stay here and become a Kindred. There will still be the threat of being found out by people you once knew, but you will be able to manage them.”

Jack, Mary, and their mom all exchanged glances.

“You’re ... not going to yell no, Jack?” their mom asked.

“I want to. But I’m a vampire, and you’re a vampire. Mary knows exactly what she’d be getting into if she agreed.” And try as he might to find a better way out of the situation, he couldn’t. His mom wouldn’t let Mary go, not now after she’d just gotten her back. But it wasn’t a good idea for a young vampire to leave the city, even with their mom; sunlight was a bitch. And if she got a new identity in the city, while still having to live a normal life, it drastically increased her chance of getting found out.

It wasn’t like vampires didn’t have this problem. Jack avoided the firm he used to intern at. He avoided the school he’d been going to before that. He avoided the neighborhood he used to live in. And thankfully, as a vampire, his skin was paler and tighter, making him look different than he used to in general. Plus, he didn’t exactly have a large ring of friends.

Mary didn’t have to become a vampire to live that life, but it’d be much easier as a vampire. Ventrue could wipe people’s memories. Mekhet and Nosferatu were natural at Obfuscate and its child Disciplines like Cloak of Night and Face in the Crowd. Gangrels and Daeva weren’t exactly good at hiding, but they could use Obfuscate too if they had to, and Daeva could turn people into doting slaves if the circumstance called for it. A human couldn’t do any of that. Plus, the superhuman strength and speed went a long way, when vamps needed to clean up a mess.

Mary raised a hand triumphantly. “I think—”

“I think,” Jack said, and he lowered her hand with his, “that you should think about it. If you wanted to stay human, we could make it work. If you wanted to become a vampire like Mom and me, we could make it work, if we can find you a sire.”

“I thought Mom—”

“Mom is about a year embraced. Siring isn’t easy, for a bunch of reasons. She shouldn’t be embracing anyone. And I can’t, not with this curse in me.”

“I would, if I had to,” his mom said, leaning forward and putting her elbows on her knees so she could look past Mary and back at him. “If no one else will, I will. I don’t care how hard it is.”

“You’ll care if Antoinette does. She’s Prince. Just because she’s your sire doesn’t mean she’ll give you a pass if you embrace someone without her permission.”

“She certainly didn’t for mine,” Triss said, shrugging.

With a purposefully loud sigh, Jack shook his head and dismissed everything with a wave of the hand. “Please, no one commit to anything yet. Let’s just ... just be happy for the moment. Mary’s alive.” He poked her shoulder for good measure. She poked him back. Instant smiles.”And she can keep it that way for a good long while. I’m sure Antoinette will let you stay in the Elysium Tower, and you’ll have access to anything you want.”

“Good idea,” their mom said. “We should go back to her place, and relax. It’s safe there.”

Relax. Jack smiled at her and nodded, and she returned it, her eyes giving him a tiny hint of the shit she’d been through lately, before she looked away. Hell. She’d gone through Hell, since Mary died, and had been stuck there this whole time, working with Triss and Jen, and Black Blood, to get her back.

And Jack was getting in the way of her happiness with unwanted doses of reality. Well, reality could wait, at least for a night.

Jack raised a finger. “So, uh, we going to Antoinette’s first? Or did you want to see Jacob, Mom?” That, was a question he thought he’d never ask. Felt gross in his mouth.

“I’ll send him a message.”

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Sure enough, there he was. It was a strange thing, Jacob having a smartphone. It was easy to think of Antoinette and Elaine, and even Daniel, using smartphones, considering how much they relied on technology. The witches didn’t give two shits about technology, though.

But Jacob was, as always, a fucking weird guy. He sat there on one of the stone benches, dressed in a burgundy suit and a burgundy tie, complete with black sunglasses that hid his eyes. He looked really good in it, honestly, and filthy rich. Jack bet the dude was filthy rich, and probably never touched a dime of it, except on ridiculously expensive suits no one else would be able to pull off.

The man stood up as they approached, smile growing as he saw Jack’s mom, before vanishing as he saw Mary.

“Clarice! Long time no see. And Samantha! And who is...” He sucked in a breath as he came closer. “Is that ... Casper?”

Casper? What the fuck? Jack folded his arms over his chest and glared at Jacob, but before he could say anything, his mom ran past Jack, and threw herself at him, full on hard enough to knock him over if he hadn’t been expecting it. But Jacob stood his ground and caught her, and wrapped his arms around her as she buried her face in his neck.

“It’s Mary!” she said, voice muffled by the Nosferatu’s suit’s shoulder.

Jacob looked — pointed his head anyway — at Jack, and then at Beatrice and Jennifer as they rounded the corner.

The group of them were standing at the entrance of the hedge maze, one of them anyway, where it opened up to the front of the Elysium Tower. While the tower itself was Antoinette’s private home, the whole area was considered an Elysium zone: no violence of any kind allowed, to Kindred or kine. In the maze, maybe half a dozen young Kindred hung out, usually. Jack didn’t sense any right now, but they could have simply been suppressing their presence. Or they’d bailed when they realized one of the most powerful Kindred around for dozens, probably hundreds of miles, was only a couple hundred feet away. Which meant the group had some privacy.

Mary came forward, and she looked Jacob up and down a couple times. Yeah, that probably happened with everyone the first time they saw Jacob.

“Mary,” their mom said, once she let the man go, “this is Jacob. Jacob, this is Mary.”

Jacob again looked at the group of them, before he finally settled his hidden gaze on Mary, and held out his hand.

“Well holy shit. You look great, kid.”

Mary smiled and shook his hand, leaning back and forth slightly as she brimmed with energy.

“I feel great! It’s amazing, having a body again. You have no idea what it’s like to just ... float.”

“That I don’t.” Jacob walked around Mary, and looked her up and down a few times, too. Mary posed, no hesitation at all. “I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” Triss said. “We went through Hell to make it work, and it only worked cause Mary was still hanging around and—and stop looking at your girlfriend’s daughter like a piece of meat.”

“She is not meat!” Jacob threw up both hands. “She is a living wonder! And a precious gift.” Big smile returned, Jacob walked up to Triss, and hugged her, hard.

“Boss, don’t hu—urk!”

Well, dude was an ancient elder. If he wanted to squeeze Triss hard enough to pop her like a balloon, he could. He nearly did.

“Can’t believe you did it,” he said. He gave her a few more squeezes, the last one pulling a tiny very-not-Beatrice squeak from her, before he put her down. Then he aimed his sunglasses at Jen. “And you—”

“Observed. I don’t deserve hugs.” Jen put up her hands and stepped back. Twice.

Mary giggled, and so did her mom. Contagious laughter. If Fiona had been there, they’d probably have triggered an unending laughter train that’d kill anyone who needed oxygen.

“Sorry honey,” his mom said to Mary. “Jacob is a little eccentric.”

“Putting it mildly,” Jack said, rolling his eyes. “I’m surprised we’re meeting here.”

His mom nodded to the tower. “I didn’t tell Jacob why. I wanted to surprise him. But I also wanted to get Mary somewhere safe.”

Safe was a good idea. There weren't any hunters anymore, save for the three that were getting along with Dolareido's paranormal world. And the Carthians and Invictus were getting along again. The only dangers Jack was worried about, were Jacob and Black Blood, and they were big dangers. Black Blood was part of the reason Mary was alive again, and Jacob was standing right there in front of him. And Jack was the only person in the group who knew Jacob might be someone he'd have to confront in the future. It made it damn difficult to look at the man, and let him be so close to Mary.

"You came without knowing why?" Jack asked.

Laughing all the merrier, Jacob came over to him and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Samantha asked me to. What, Antoinette wouldn't go somewhere you asked her to go?"

It took effort to not wince at the comparison. A lot of effort. Jacob knew Jack didn't like thinking about him with his mom, and comparing their relationship to his with Antoinette really hit that nerve. Worse, the bastard winked at him. Hard to see considering he was wearing sunglasses, but the eyebrow and cheek muscles moved enough.

"If she wasn't busy."

"Well, I wasn't busy. And I'm glad I wasn't. Holy shit I never thought Triss would actually do it. I never thought ... well, fuck me. Shows you what I know. Figured an old man my age would learn to never assume." He came back over to Mary and Sam, and clapped once. "We need to celebrate!"

"We need," Jack said, "to give Mary a break."

His mom sighed, but nodded, and gently touched Jacob's chest once. That was an intimate touch, a knowing touch, and Jack

ground his teeth into powder. Silently.

“Jack’s right, that’s why we came here. My sire needs to know, but we also want a quiet, safe place for Mary to recover.”

Triss stepped in beside her. “And because, as much as we’re all happy as shit, we’re not stupid. Keep expectations realistic, right?” She elbowed Jack’s mom in the side, gently, but enough to make her oof. “Something could still go wrong. Everything seems good, but the fuck do we know, right? Something could still go bad.”

“Way to jinx it!” Jacob shoved her in the shoulder. “Come on! She’s breathing. She has a pulse. Looks like she remembers things, right?” Mary nodded. “Then—”

“No,” Jack said. Maybe a little harder than he meant to, because everyone looked at him, faces serious. “Beatrice is right. Everything is great so far, and I’m damn happy Mary’s alive. But we can’t assume it’s a perfect, happy ending for all quite yet. Realistic expectations.”

His mom looked like she was about to say something, but sighed and nodded as she lowered her head. Before Jack could say something, Jacob came in beside her and hugged her with one arm.

“You are one cold knife to the gut, Jack,” Jacob said.

“I’m just—”

“I know, being realistic.” The elder smiled at him, even as he rubbed his mom’s arm. “The world needs realists. Keeps the rest of us from jumping off cliffs, thinking we can fly.”

“That’s my brother.” Mary laughed again as she gave Jack a gentle punch in the shoulder. “I don’t know anything about anything, but if this doesn’t last, well at least I got to hug my mom again. And you.”

And again, before Jack could say anything, Mary swooped in and hugged him.

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“Young Miss Terry?” Antoinette asked.

Mary nodded, hands at her sides and plucking idly at her t-shirt hem. “Me.”

Antoinette sat upright at her desk, red eyes a fair bit wider than Jack was used to. Shock. He knew the feeling.

“My men were wondering why Jacob stood at the base of my tower, and yet did not come to see me.”

“That was me,” Jack’s mom said, and she raised a hand. “We wanted to get here fast, so we could put Mary somewhere safe, but I also wanted to see Jacob.”

“Understandable. I assume he was quite surprised to see your daughter alive.”

“He was!” Sam giggled and gestured to her daughter beside her. “It worked! Can you believe it?”

“I ... do find it difficult to believe. But I am beyond glad. Terrified, perhaps, but beyond glad. I am sure you must have had access to powerful tools to achieve such a feat.”

Powerful tools? Jack raised a brow and looked beside him at his mom and sis. They both squirmed.

“Beatrice and Jennifer did not join us, I see,” Antoinette continued.

“No, sire. They figured we’d want some quiet time, just the two of us. And ... I’m pretty sure they’re afraid of you.”



The Prince grinned. “As it should be.”

Slowly, Antoinette pushed herself up to her feet. Ghost Mary had seen Antoinette before, but she still quivered a little at the sight of her. No two ways about it, Antoinette was very tall, and the white hair and red eyes were intimidating as hell. Combined with the black suit and skirt that looked like they cost as much as a car, Mary seemed a bit overwhelmed.

“I have to admit,” Antoinette said, “this is unprecedented.”

“That’s part of the reason we’re here,” Jack said. “It’s safe here, in case things go ... wrong.”

“Wrong, my love?”

“Yeah. Like, this happened only a bit ago. We don’t know what might happen.”

“Your son is forever the pragmatist,” Antoinette said, grinning at his mom, before grinning at him. Cute, making him look like the cold voice of reason in all this, when Antoinette was the colder one when it came to it.

“Yeap,” his mom said, aiming her own grin at Jack. “Jacob said the same thing.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “We thought maybe you could check and see if Mary’s ok, too? Like, with your dragon tools and stuff.”

“You would like me to prove that Mary Terry is alive and well.”

“I mean yeah, if it’s possible.”

Antoinette set a hand on Mary’s shoulder, and looked down at her with a serious gaze.

“I am sorry, but I can do no such thing. At least, not in regards to whether Mary is truly alive in the sense of the soul and self.”

“You can’t?” their mom asked.

“Non. And while I cannot discuss the fine details of my work in front of Mary, or Jack for that matter, I feel comfortable enough explaining this. My machine cannot pierce into the inner chamber where the soul resides. I am afraid the best you could hope for, is to ask a Begotten to monitor her dreams, should she have any.”

“We thought of that,” Samantha said, “but Sándor says he can’t, uh, reach the soul.”

“But he will be able to tell if she dreams, non?”

“Yeah, I believe so.”

“Any entity with a brain can dream in some form or another, but the dreams of someone with a soul should be quite distinct versus those without, to a Begotten, I imagine. After the ball, we should arrange such a test. Though, I do think that with Mary’s current state, we can currently ask the most basic, and perhaps most powerful question, as a test.” She looked down at Mary, and his poor sister quaked. “Do you feel alive, Mary?”

They all looked at her.

“Do I feel alive?”

“Oui. Do you feel alive? A ... je ne sais quois. A feeling. A kernel of awareness and desire inside you, something hidden inside emotions.”

Jack raised a hand. Well, this did suddenly feel like class.

“Emotions aren’t enough?”

“Non. Emotions can be found in anything with a brain developed enough to respond to chemicals and stimulus, same as dreams. But a soul? We know it exists. We know it affects us. But to understand it, quantify it, and measure its effects? It is how we know we are more than robots simply responding to stimulus or following processes and routines, and yet, we cannot define how we know.” She nodded as she tapped a finger on her chin. “One of the many areas of study in the Ordo.”

Jack nodded as his eyes drifted away. That made sense. The debate about whether people were sentient, or self aware, or had souls, it was all still-running debate among philosophers and scientists alike. Determinism and the nature of a soul seemed to disagree with each other, but at the same time, it was hard to dismiss that Jack felt like he had a soul, some sort of hidden spark inside him that was impossible to define or quantify. And considering the crazy shit Jack got to see in his four years of being a vampire, crazy shit even by vampire standards, he was pretty confident souls were a thing.

“I ... think I do?” Mary said. “I’ve never really thought about it before.”

“I would like to say you would know instantly, but I have no way to know such a thing. Take your time, child of my childe.” Antoinette softened her smile, and gestured to the door. “Explore the tower as you wish. There are many rooms where the contents are sensitive, but they will be locked. You need not worry, so wander freely.”

“Thank you! I uh, was kinda worried you’d lock me in a box, to keep an eye on me.”

Jack grinned. “Or do experiments on her.”

Her own grin slowly turning sly, Antoinette walked over to him, leaned down, and kissed him. Deeply. Jack blinked at her when she

pulled away, and then at Mary, who kept glancing his way with wide, surprised, sheepish eyes.

“I would never do experiments on someone so precious to my own childe.”

Jack chuckled and rubbed his head. Conveniently, Antoinette didn't say she wouldn't do it, just not to him and his family. And she said it knowing they'd pick up on it. Crafty.

His mom spoke next. “Mary and I are free for the rest of the night, then?”

“Indeed. Go, celebrate. This is truly a wondrous occasion. Perhaps in the future I will implore you let me examine Mary in detail, but nothing serious, and it can wait. If you decide to go out into the night, remember that she still looks exactly as she did as kine. Be careful and remember the Masquerade. I trust your discretion.”

The two girls cheered, literally, and made for the door. But before they got out of the office, their mom turned around.

“Jack, you want to come too?”

Jack took a moment thinking about it. The look in his mom's eyes was so full of joy, it was almost overwhelming. Mary met his eyes too, and unlike his mom, she knew Jack well enough to know he really wouldn't like getting dragged around playing tour guide, not with the two of them bubbling with excitement and chatting nonstop. No judgment, it just wasn't his thing. Well, maybe a little judgment between brother and sister, him judging her chatty ways and her judging his hermit ways.

Back to old habits between the two of them. That made him smile more than anything that'd happened tonight.

“No, you two hang out and have fun. I know you’re dying to.” He winced. Fuck, that was a poor choice of words. “I’ll catch up with you later, Mary.”

“You sure, Jack?”

“Yeah. Go crazy. Mom’s a millionaire now, or near it. She’ll buy you stuff.”

“Oh my god she is!” Mary hugged their mom around the shoulders and dragged her out with her excitement meter cranked to eleven. “I want ice cream! And then shoes!”

Jack and Antoinette looked at each other and waited until the door closed. A soundproof room meant they couldn’t hear the elevator ding, but they waited anyway until they were confident Mary and his mom were on the way down.

“Jack,” Antoinette said, and she motioned to the chair in front of her desk.

Jack sighed heavy as he sat in it, and Antoinette sat on the other side of her desk, waiting. She knew he’d want to have this conversation, and she was happy to wait for him to get to it. The Prince was too damn smart.

“I’m terrified,” he said after a bit.

Antoinette sighed, mimicking him as she leaned back in her chair. “Understandable.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course. Your dead sister is alive once again. The implications alone are massive. I will not be able to keep this secret, and can guarantee witches and dragons from other cities will come to see

your sister. Her life will be in danger, as others will be tempted to wisp her away for their own experiments.”

Jack stared at her, until he knew his mouth was hanging open. “I meant because she seems to be alive, but might not be! She might just be a body walking around with a ghost possessing her.”

“Ah yes, that.”

He threw up his hands. “I hadn’t even considered all that other stuff!”

“I will handle that element of the problem. Dolareido is my city, and while I am embarrassed with the sheer chaos that it has suffered these past few years, be under no illusion. I control my city.” She tapped a finger against the table a couple times.

“Hey you don’t need to convince me. I know you let Garry and Michael bash heads. You could have stopped them.”

She grinned. As powerful and deadly and ancient as Antoinette was, even she wasn’t completely immune to an ego stroke.

“I could have. At great cost, but I could have. My point is not to boast, my love. What I meant, is that I have control of this city in ways not even the Invictus understand. Were it not for Jeremiah and Elen and the magical abilities they brought with them, I would have easily crushed their invasion. I can keep your sister safe from outside threats.”

Jack winced and looked down. “Right, Elen. You think ... she was involved in Mary’s resurrection.”

“Undoubtedly. Your mother stole Elen’s knife and book from my many artifacts.”

“What!?”

Antoinette put up a settling hand. “Beatrice is not stupid, Jack. She asked your mother to steal the items, so she could pursue resurrection to help your mother, and herself. I am sure that was partly because she was afraid I would say no, if she or Samantha asked me directly. But, perhaps even unknown to Beatrice herself, she wanted to know if your mother had the commitment to follow this dark road to its end.”

“Well, damn. I can’t believe ... Holy shit.”

“It is worse than that. Beatrice and your mother paved that road with corpses, though with your connections in the Invictus, I expect you suspected.”

Jack sucked in a breath through his teeth and looked to the side. “I mean, a little. Invictus get reports of kine deaths that are strange, or people who go missing that fit that ‘nobody will miss them’ bill. There’s been more of them than usual, the past few months.”

“Indeed.”

“And Mom, she ... she’s changing. A lot. Faster than I can even understand.”

“You suspect the witches are responsible?”

“A little. I mostly blame Angela.” And like someone cracked a whip along his back, pain shot up his spine and into his skull. “But, yeah, knowing Mom’s been involved with murdering kine — shit kine, but still — and getting involved in witch business, is terrifying. Mom isn’t hard enough to ... well, I guess I was wrong about that.”

Antoinette smiled at him. “I had thought that with everything that has happened, you would understand that your mother is resilient.”

“I do. She’s also sensitive.”

“And you are not?”

Jack squinted at her. Too damn smart.

“I am, too, but I’ve gotten pretty good at putting a wall between me and other people. She hasn’t.”

“Which makes her resilience all the more amazing. She marched through the valley of death, and felt every horrible thing she did, all so she could give her daughter a second chance at life.”

Another whip crack on Jack’s back.

“Fuck, I am so fucking terrified, Antoinette. Mom’s so deep in with this witch shit, and ... and she’s so fucking happy! So fucking happy, that all I can do is think about what’ll happen if she loses Mary again.”

“Then it is a good thing her mother’s sire is the Prince, and her brother is a powerful Invictus. Assuming Beatrice’s ritual is a true success, Mary will be safe from outside influence.”

There was that. He could see things from his mom’s perspective easily enough, that Mary was her daughter and their mom could protect her. It was as blind and stupid a belief as when a mom holds their arm out to stop their kid from going forward in their car seat when about to collide with another car. An instinct that wouldn’t do jack shit in the modern world. But, with a Prince’s resources and Jack’s resources helping her, it was a lot more doable.

Until it wouldn’t be.

“I know Mom is going to ask if someone can sire Mary.”

Antoinette nodded slowly as she let her eyes drift. “Indeed, and such a thing is not uncommon for family members who become vampires.”



“I wanted my family to grow old and live normal lives. Neither of them are cut out for the Masquerade. Or ... Or at least I didn't think they were.”

“Julias sired you because he knew your tenacity would ensure you would deal with your second life and carry its burdens no matter what. But not all Kindred who succeed do so because the skills they had in their first life translate well. Many rise to the occasion, a painful and horrible experience, but a defining one. Nosferatu are almost always embraced this way.”

“A lot of Nos are unstable, hateful, and suicidal.”

“That is true. I do not make these points to disagree with you, Jack. I make them, because I wish for you to understand that people change, and can adapt. Your mother has been a prime example.” Before he could say anything about his mom and her happy nature, she put up a hand. “Finding a sire for Mary is not something to be rushed. Spend time with her, and speak with her about it. There are ways she can continue her life as kine, if need be, but I suspect your sister will follow in your footsteps.”

“And be the first Terry to become a vampire willingly.”

Sighing, Antoinette shook her head. “I did not realize you hated your second life so much.”

“You know that's not true. I wouldn't have met you otherwise, and that makes all the Hell worth it.” He smiled at her, and she smiled back. “But, there has been Hell, and a part of me would be much happier knowing Mary wasn't involved in any of this. Maybe get her into another city with a new identity and a fat wallet. Away from me, away from the curse, away from the Masquerade and the Danse Macabre. Away from hunters and monsters and ghosts and —”

“Jack. Those elements exist in other cities. She may go through life without them finding her. She may not. But no matter what happens, she will be well aware of them now. Unless you know a Ventrue strong enough to completely remove months of her memories, memories forged as a being of ephemeral matter?”

“I ... don't.” Ripping out specific memories was one thing. Wiping out entire months? Not a chance. And he had no idea if he could even try, since she'd made the memories as a ghost.

“No matter what happens, your sister is now intimately familiar with the world of darkness. She will notice it, whether she wishes to or not. And vampires notice when others notice.”

Shit. Shit shit.

“It's just ... she's alive, you know? Alive, I think. And I want to keep that going, if only for Mom's sake. You saw the look on her face.”

“I did indeed. I have never seen her so happy. And while I am sure she carries some concerns over the ritual, and the nagging fear that her daughter's resurrection was not entirely successful, she is happy.”

Jack looked up as he ran a hand over his head. “I still can't believe it.”

“Neither can I, little Ventrue. Neither can I.”

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~~Natasha~~

“Oh my g-g-g—”

“Everyone says that.” Samantha smiled so bright, Tash feared everyone in the room would burst into ashes. She stood beside her

apparently very alive daughter, arm behind her and hugging her tight. And Mary smiled in the same way, so bright it was dangerous.

“I d-don’t understand. I ... I knew Beatrice was—”

“You knew.” Samantha nodded sternly. “I’m sure every vampire in the city with, um, an ear to the ground, knew Beatrice was up to stuff, right?”

“That’s ... true.”

“We’re all super shocked,” Mary said, holding on Tash’s gaze for as long as she could before looking up and around to drink in the sight of the tower. “Oh my god this place must have taken tens of millions of dollars to build!”

“It was the t-time to build,” Tash said, “that was the bigger problem for the Prince. It took decades.”

“I can imagine! It’s a giant underground palace!”

Well, maybe not the size of a giant palace, but it was a huge underground complex. Only someone who planned to live for hundreds of years would sink the time into building it.

“I ... I um, I d-don’t know how I should ... um ... Are you...”

The two women giggled. They had the gigglefits, as if they were drunk. Neither of them were.

“I’m alive!” Mary swung out both arms and came for her. Tash froze, not sure what was happening until Mary hugged her as tight as she could. They’d never met.

“I’m h-happy for you!”

Without missing a beat, Mary set her down and spun around a couple times like a ballerina. Unlike a ballerina, she tripped, but her

mom caught her before the poor girl could smash open her head on the black marble. Vampire reflexes putting in quick work.

“Sorry Mom.” Mary bounced in place a couple times before tugging on her mom’s arm. “Show me all the clothes you bought!”

Samantha laughed and laughed, and directed Mary in a new direction, toward her room. Their conversation devolved into the typical stuff women — not Tash — talked about when they were so excited and joyful they fell into abject mindlessness: clothes. Whatever heavy conversation moments that would normally follow having your daughter get resurrected, it seemed the two had already had.

“Want to come, Natasha?” Mary asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Um, I don’t want to intrude. You two m-must have things you want to talk about.”

“Mom and I talked a lot when I was a ghost. And we’ll talk more tomorrow! And get ice cream. But I want to have fun right now, and meet Mom’s friends.”

Tash squirmed in place, but she knew she was smiling. “Okay.”

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“You really think it’ll be a problem?” Mary asked. She was standing behind a changing screen, with both Samantha and Natasha sitting on a nearby couch. Samantha had her own room, and the Prince didn’t skimp on the extra bedrooms. It was huge, with a huge bed, walls and floors of Antoinette’s beloved black marble, and a giant walk-in closet where Mary perused her mom’s selection. Natasha and Samantha got to watch from nearby, with mother and daughter occasionally switching positions.

Under normal circumstances, Natasha would have found this clothes game silly and boring. But watching the two women

overflow with happiness and practically bounce as they switched off and both tried on Samantha's clothes — they were similar size — was too heartwarming to not enjoy.

“I d-don't know about problem,” Natasha said, “but it will be something that needs to be done. The Masquerade is very important, and this situation is extremely ... extremely extremely unusual. W-When people learn about someone coming back from the dead, they'll come to investigate.”

Mary peeked around the screen. “But not when I was a ghost?”

“Ghosts are rare, b-but not so rare we haven't heard of them. There are people out there who d-dedicate themselves to dealing with ghosts, either because the ghost is hurting people, or ... b-because they want to help ghosts move on.” It only took a second to see the dismay cross Mary's face. Tash looked away. “But no one's ever heard of a resurrection.”

“Then they should read the bible.” The dismay vanished, and Mary giggled as she stepped out completely into view. “How about this?”

Samantha sat up straight with a jolt. “I don't think so! I won't have my daughter wearing that!”

“Mom, it's your dress!”

“I'm a vampire.”

“That doesn't mean you get special exceptions on how much skin you can show!”

“It's different when you're a vampire! It's normal.”

“Uh huh. I don't believe that.” Mary came closer, out of the giant closet, and did a little twirl in front of them.

It was a very revealing dress, black, with a skirt only just barely long enough to cover the ass and privates, and a single strap behind the neck to hold the flimsy chest somewhat in place. Mary had modest breasts like her mother, and that was good, because anything larger would be a liability in that dress.

“Samantha is p-partly right,” Tash said. “Vampires don’t worry about sex. Usually. It’s fun, a way to hunt, b-but it’s not as important to us as it used to be. Romantically, I mean.” Despite herself, Tash grinned. “B-But cuddly time is still as romantic as ever.”

“Tash gets two boys to cuddle with, at the same time,” Samantha said with a laugh. “She gets all the cuddles.”

Mary burst into even louder laughter as she disappeared behind the changing screen again. “You’re a lucky woman, Tash.”

So that was how Samantha wanted to play it? As Antoinette would say, en garde.

“W-Well, I mean, your mom has lots of people to cuddle with t-too. A lot lot.”

Mary, only halfway behind the screen, stepped back and blinked at Tash. “Um, what?”

“Natasha!” Samantha turned and gave Tash a begging look. “I haven’t told her everything.”

Uh oh.

“Um, f-f-forget I said anything.”

“Oh I don’t think so! I know Mom’s been having a healthy sex life with that Jacob man. And she’s right, he’s definitely got that terrifying but sexy, handsome older man thing going. But she hasn’t

told me anything about other ... cuddles.” A second later, Mary came back out in her jeans and t-shirt again, yanked her mom off the couch with some effort, pushed her toward the closet, and sat beside Natasha. “Gimme the scoop!”

Tash gulped and looked to Samantha.

The Daeva shook her head. “Tash, don’t tell her a thing.”

Mary’s grin turned huge and evil. “Oh, so there is something to tell?”

“This is a classic case of do as I say, not as I do, advice from mother to daughter. So Tash, don’t tell her anything.”

“So Mom’s been having more fun than she’s told me about!” Giggling and half bouncing on the couch, Mary got back up, pushed her mom further toward the closet, and sat back down. “Mom, tell me! You told me Kindred have active sex lives. You were sparse about the details.” Oh thank god she was going to interrogate her mom, and not Tash. Tash would probably have cracked.

Samantha rolled her eyes and dug through the hanging dresses. The goal was to find something to wear when the two went out tomorrow night to find her daughter some clothes, but when Mary had found her mother’s rather revealing dresses among the others, the goal had naturally diverged. Despite Samantha’s efforts to keep it from doing so.

“Well excuse me for not wanting to talk about sex with my dead daughter!”

“So there is sex going on with these multi-person cuddles.”

Samantha groaned, and plucked a rather plain but elegant business suit with a skirt, and held it up against her body. “How about this?”

“Ugh, a suit?”

“You saw your brother. He wears half a suit even when he’s home alone.”

“I just figured that was ‘cause he has mansion, and has to keep up appearances or something.”

“Nope. He’s been seduced by the rich life now, and the life of titles and power. And I’m sure you will be too.” Nodding in that ‘mother knows best’ sort of way, Samantha disappeared behind the changing screen with the suit.

“Hey! Don’t change the topic! I want to know what my mother’s been up to!”

“Your mother is a responsible adult, who also can’t get pregnant or diseases.” Conveniently, she left out that if Mary slept with a vampire, neither of those things would apply in that scenario either.

“And Othello is r-ridiculously handsome,” Tash said. The words came out before she could stop them, and she snapped a hand up to her mouth, as if she could reverse time and stop the words from escaping.

“Natasha!” Samantha said, peeking out from behind the changing screen.

Mary looked at Tash like a hungry dog. “Othello!?”

Ah well, too late now. She’d find out who Othello was eventually.

“He’s a witch. W-Works for Jacob.”

“I know about him, but, what’s he look like?”

“Um, he’s average height, but really muscular. T-Tan skin. Long dark hair he’s had in dr-dreadlocks lately.”



“Sounds like a man you’d find on a romance novel cover. Milf finds romance in Hawaii!” Mary waved both hands high in the air, like she was dancing in the tropics.

Natasha burst into giggles. She couldn’t help it. As much as she felt for Samantha, who was probably dying of embarrassment over this, Mary was just too happy for Tash to not pick up on it. Was she always like this? Samantha had said her daughter was a happy girl, before she died, and Jack had confirmed. Jack had also said Samantha and Mary were similar. Fiona-lite, he’d called her. It was easy to see why.

“N-Not to ... ruin the fun,” Natasha said, “but have you thought about what you’re going to do? Not about p-people finding out about Mary, but that Mary’s ... alive. The ... personal stuff. What you w-want to do with your life now.”

Samantha came back out from behind the screen in her suit, smile only slightly damaged by Tash’s words. She posed, as if she was the woman in stock photos of the ‘woman in office’ category, and Mary golf clapped, subduing her bursting joy so she could tease her mother about her reserved choice of clothes. Tash had never been this comfortable with her family, way back when.

“We haven’t,” Samantha said. “She’s only been alive a few hours now. We thought we’d get here where it’s safe, and then we could talk about it.”

“But ... you’re n-not talking about it.”

Both women sighed, and Tash winced. Calling out the thing they were avoiding wasn’t very tactful of her. Jessy was rubbing off on her.

“It can’t wait a few hours?” Mary asked.

“Samantha and I will b-be asleep in a few hours, and won’t be up until sunset. And the P-Prince won’t let you leave until we know what your plans are.”

Samantha sat down on the couch beside Mary, opposite of Tash, and slipped an arm behind her daughter so she could rub her further arm.

“What do you want to do, Mary? I know Jack would want you to live a happy life as a human.”

Mary frowned and leaned into her mother. “Yeah. Asshole didn’t come get us when he got changed. Or, what’s the word? Embraced?”

“In his d-defense,” Tash said, “he wasn’t allowed. He didn’t have much power back then, politically. And the Prince hadn’t allowed siring back then either. When he finally got the power and p-position to do things like ask about siring, things were ... v-volatile.”

The hunters. The curse. Even the stupid azlu showing up. It hadn’t been an environment where Jack could sire, or get someone to sire his family. Convincing his family, or failing to convince them and siring them against their will, would have been problematic. Failing to convince them and then wiping their memories would have been horrible and traumatizing for him too, after what he’d done to Mary before.

Jack’s introduction into his second life hadn’t exactly been smooth, either. Stabbed. Killed a kine on his first night. Killed more Kindred. Fought a giant spider monster in the sewers. Only a moron would have wanted that for his family.

“She’s right,” Samantha said. “Dolareido’s calmed down a lot, but only recently. But that’s fine! You’re alive again, and now you can make a choice. And as much as Jack has a good point about how dangerous it is being a vampire, things are so much better now.

Antoinette does everything she can to keep the peace in Dolareido, and it's worked."

Mary leaned into her mom for a moment as she sighed, but it was a happy sigh.

"I don't know. But, a life as a vampire does sound like it could be a good life."

Samantha held her daughter's head and cradled it into her chest and shoulder, and looked to Natasha, waiting. Hoping.

Natasha gave her a smile. "I like b-being a vampire. Yes, there's a lot of dangers. Yes, you lose the sun, and food. F-Fire can kill you so easily." Mary, still half hiding in the nook of her mom's neck, turned enough to look at her with scared eyes. "But if you can handle it, it's a great second life! The Kiss is wonderful. It's great, being p-powerful. You live forever. You never grow old. Live long enough and you get to be rich; b-but with the Prince as your mom's sire, that's taken care of. And, um, as a lot of p-people in Dolareido already know, the sex is constant, and everywhere."

Mary perked up and sat up straight. "Constant, you say?"

Samantha pulled her daughter's head back down to her and pinned the girl's head against her shoulder, frowning at Natasha the whole while. But her frown vanished and she giggled as Mary tried to get away from her. Unfortunately for Mary, her mom was a vampire, and easily held her in place. That led to some wrestling, before they burst into giggles again and Samantha let her daughter go.

"I suppose," Samantha said, "that there's no avoiding it. You're alive, your mother and brother are vampires, and this is Dolareido." After a heavy groan, Samantha gestured to the closet. "Yes, it was a slutty dress. Because all vampires are sluts."

Tash frowned, which sent both women into giggles again.

“Don’t be like that, Tash!” Samantha said with a big smile. “I suppose I should just accept it. Now that Mary’s alive, she’s going to see that side of Dolareido’s night life. Aaaaaaand I’d feel more comfortable sharing some of your videos with her.”

Oh no.

“Videos?” Mary asked.

“Yes. Natasha is something of a movie director. And cameraman. And star.”

“A star! Of wh—oh.” Slowly, Mary’s smile turned utterly mischievous, and she leaned in closer to Tash. “Really?”

Time for some self defense.

“Your brother is no better! There’s half a dozen videos of him floating around.”

“Oh god!” Mary threw up her hands and covered her face. “Oh god, really?”

Samantha groaned in shared dismay, and pat her daughter on the shoulder. “You made a joke about Jack and his harem, sweetie, right? It, um, wasn’t inaccurate.”

“I mean, you told me about him and Antoinette, and that they have ghouls and thralls, and that they can be, uh, close. But I was a ghost! I didn’t really picture what that meant! And the implications!” She shivered and rubbed off her legs, like bugs had crawled on her. “Oh god, now I’m picturing it! Jack is ... is ... Oh god, Antoinette is so tall! And...!” She held out her hands in front of her, cupping imaginary breasts the size of beach balls.

Tash couldn't help but laugh, and trying to hold it back turned it into a snort. "She is. And she has a really ... r-really good friend that often joins her, Elaine."

Mary counted off on her fingers. "Holy shit that kid is getting pussy."

"Mary!" Sam gave her daughter a discouraging slap on the knee.

Tash nodded. "At the same time. On film."

"Oh god!" Mary tried to sound grossed out, but it broke into laughter soon after. "I don't want to see that."

"Me neither," Samantha said, trying to hold her frown.

A moment later, both women leaned forward slightly and grinned at Tash, until she groaned and waved a hand.

"You're both like Jack."

Mary raised a brow. "How so?"

"Horny p-perverts."

---

~~Antoinette~~

It did not take long for Jacob to come to her. Jack had left only moments before, and the man had likely been hiding in wait. With her sheriff on constant vigil, the Nosferatu could not sneak past him, and Daniel brought Jacob to her. A formality, and a game.

She did not rise from her desk, but she did gesture to the chair in front of her desk as she leaned back in hers.

"Daniel," she said, "if you would be so kind? I feel this conversation deserves privacy."

Daniel nodded, eyed Jacob for several moments until the Nosferatu chuckled, before leaving. But once the door was closed and Daniel could no longer hear, Jacob's laughter stopped, and he walked toward Antoinette in a direct line before sitting. Jacob did nothing directly, normally.

"Ann," he said.

"Jacob. I assume you are here to discuss one of the most extreme developments in either of our careers?"

"Ha! Yeap."

"Dare I ask how much of Mary's resurrection is your doing?"

The man, wearing a wondrous burgundy suit and black sunglasses, leaned back in his seat and shrugged. Why could he not wear such interesting clothes more often, instead of his usual dark robes that reeked of witch things.

"Not much. Beatrice did this all on her own. Jen helped her, but she doesn't really have the same bug."

"Bug?"

"You know, the spark, the part of you that really drives you."

"Obsession."

The man grinned. "Alright, obsession. I knew Triss would have it. Jen, not so much. But she sticks by Triss's side and helps keep her on her feet, which makes it worth it to keep her around."

"And Aaron and Othello?"

"They have their uses. Aaron's smart, and I talk with him about things sometimes. And Othello's a useful walking talking bag of muscle."

Despite the inevitable seriousness of the conversation, Antoinette could not help but enjoy the entertaining prelude. They always were with Jacob.

“My childe certainly enjoys him.”

“Oh my. She tell you more about our time together?”

“She refuses to share intimate details, but she has admitted to enjoying time with Othello and you on several occasions. Considering Othello’s tastes, it is easy to imagine your time together. I need only suggest a certain act, and she instantly devolves into a wriggling mess.”

They both chuckled. While Jack had become more comfortable with sexual indulgence, he had not always been. Once, the mere suggestion of a foursome would have had the young man squirming. Delightful. And now Jacob was enjoying a similar time with Samantha, relishing corrupting her with physical bliss, as Antoinette had Jack.

“But I didn’t come here to gossip about sex, Ann.”

“I would prefer to chat with an old friend about the physical joys he has found with my childe, than what you wish to speak of.”

Jacob’s smile faltered. “Why?”

“Because it terrifies me to know that my childe has swam in the blood of a dozen kine. It terrifies me that Beatrice has reached into a world not even you nor I have managed.”

Her old friend leaned in closer to her. “It is fucking terrifying, isn’t it?”

“Extremely.”

“And word is going to get out. People are going to come here to see if it’s true.”

“Indeed.”

Jacob sighed and leaned back once again. “She’s Sam’s kid. I’ll do everything I can to keep her safe.”

It was Antoinette’s turn to lean forward. “I knew you would, Jacob. But that is not why you have come tonight, is it?”

“No. I wanted to take a poke at the mighty Prince’s brain and see what she has to say about how Beatrice did it.”

“You do not know?”

“Hey hey, don’t go implying that a witch’s boss doesn’t know the details of what his subordinates are up to! Because I do, obviously. I know everything.” The sarcasm was palpable.

“Except about this.”

He laughed. “I know what she did. But have you ever heard of someone putting a ghost into something?”

With a heavy sigh, Antoinette stood up, walked away from the desk, and stood before the enormous window looking out over her city.

“I have.”

Still at her desk, Jacob tapped on its surface with his finger. “And what happened?”

“Violence.” Unfortunately, Antoinette was all too familiar with the history of ghosts possessing things. Beings of ephemera were not true beings, not in the way living creatures were, especially those



with souls. Their desires almost always ended with violence, when they were given the form to enact then.

“That makes me wonder,” Jacob said. “I’ve never seen a ghost respond to someone so well as Mary. And I’ve never seen a ghost respond so well to possessing a body.”

Antoinette looked back over her shoulder at the man. He was not using his usual, playful voice and mischievous demeanor. His academic side was showing through. The man she had become friends with centuries ago was showing through.

“You think she is not a ghost, but Mary’s actual soul.”

“You ever prove ghosts weren’t souls, Misses Dragon? Any of your fancy experiments with ephemera and spirits give any hints?”

“You know they have not. And it has been ages since I have had the opportunity to experiment upon a ghost.”

Jacob chuckled, but it soon devolved into a groan. After a couple seconds of annoyed contemplation, he got up, and joined her at the window.

“Too late now. Can’t detect a ghost hiding inside a living body.”

“Correct.”

“And I suppose you didn’t experiment on Mary when you had the chance because she’s your childe’s daughter.”

“And my lover’s sister.”

The man grinned up at her. “Must have taken a lot of willpower, to not head over to her house and lock it all down for your experiments.”

“Do you think I am so heartless?”

“I think I know what it’s like to have answers in reach. Consuming. Really brings out the obsessiveness in people like you and me.”

She rolled her eyes, which only earned another chuckle from the man.

“Yes, I admit that I had to control myself. But it was never a possibility that I would experiment upon Mary, ghost or soul.”

“Even now, that she’s right under your nose?”

“As you said, even if she is a ghost, there is little I can do to unveil the truth, barring extreme measures.” An exorcism relied on the body and its soul fighting against the possessing ghost, or spirit. She had no idea if it would work on Mary since she did not fight against the body she possessed, and regardless, performing one was not easy, as Jacob well knew. “And I am inclined to believe she is not a ghost. The last I heard of a ghost possessing a living person, the result was disastrous.”

“Was that person brain dead?”

“No, they were not.”

“Was that person a perfect body for the ghost, right down to the genetics?”

“No ... they were not.”

Jacob shrugged, and ran a finger down her window. Shameless destruction, but at least a vampire’s fingers did not leave oil.

“Then we’re both in the dark.”

“Is that why you visit this night? To taunt us both?”

“No. I came to...” He turned and placed his back against the once perfectly clean window. “It really is ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“What is?” She blinked down at her old friend. She blinked again when he removed his sunglasses, exposing his empty eye sockets, forever cursed to look as if someone had removed them, and his eyelids, with a serrated spoon.

“All this running around and dancing, freaking out, because we resurrected someone. We’ve done centuries of work, of research, and you know as well as I a lot of us do it for two reasons: to become truly immortal, or to bring someone back from the dead.”

Despite her best efforts to keep a straight face, she knew fatigue broke through her visage, and she sighed as she looked back to the city.

“It has become an all-consuming pursuit of many dragons, and witches I assume.”

“And don’t think the Invictus and Carthians, or even the fucking churchies wouldn’t jump at the opportunity to do either.”

“Indeed.”

“Christ, I’m just so tired of it, you know? So fucking tired of digging through the mess, all because of this hilarious life and death bullshit. I mean christ, vampires are half dead, but what’s that even fucking mean? We still don’t know.” He shrugged as he looked down and sighed in the same manner she had. “It’s just so tiresome, you know? I’m happy for Sam, I really am, but something’s gonna happen to ruin it eventually. Someone’s gonna come along and kill Mary, or Jack, or maybe Sam will die, leaving her two kids fucking broken. Maybe someone sires Mary, and then she gets unlucky and catches a sunrise or a big spark from a fucking fireplace, and then Sam’s back to square one. It’s just all such bullshit. What fucking god thought this was a good system? This stupid fucking mess of

life and death. It's like one big machine just churning out crap because the old crap breaks."

"Jacob..." What on Earth was the man speaking of? Sick of life and death?

"I'm just so fucking tired of it." Jacob pushed himself off her dirty window, and slowly walked for the door as he slipped on his sunglasses once again. "Whoever thought up this fucking game was a colossal asshole."

She stared after the man as he opened the door to her office, exposing Daniel waiting outside it beside the elevator door. A quick button press and the door opened, already waiting for Jacob. He stepped on it, and offered Antoinette one of his smiles, now heavy and crippled.

She did not have the heart to stop him.

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Jack and Antoinette awoke to next night's sunset, and turned to find each other first, as they often did.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good night," she said, rolling her eyes before kissing her silly little lover. "You smile."

"Do I?"

"You do."

"I guess it's because, despite all the insane shit attached to the fact my sister's alive, she's alive."

"She is indeed. Though let us quickly check." With a nod, she slipped out of bed, and sat at her desk.

“Think she went freaky zombie on us during the day and ate someone’s brains?”

She smiled at her laptop as she looked over at her lover, still in the bed. But like her own smile, his lacked genuine joy. He truly was concerned.

A moment later, Antoinette brought up a video feed on her laptop. She found the young woman in the smaller entertainment room, asleep on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. The television was on, displaying news. She had fallen asleep trying to update her knowledge of current events.

“There, you see?” Antoinette pointed the laptop at the bed, before she rejoined her love and slipped under the sheets. “And if she had done something unusual, my thralls would have messages waiting for me.”

“Thank god.” He sighed relief as he slid closer to her, and snuggled into her body, acting the large spoon against her back. “Still trying to wrap my mind around this whole thing.”

“You are not the only one.” Alas, she could not share the conversation she had with Jacob last night with anyone. The words he spoke rang in her mind, and sent her thoughts spiraling into memories of Minerva, and how her death had affected the old Nosferatu. Jacob had never spoken with Antoinette so clearly about his misery, as the night following her death, and last night.

Jack chuckled as he kissed her neck, took a few more peeks at the laptop, and returned to kissing her. “I have a feeling she’s gonna asked to be embraced.”

“Oui, I imagine she will, after all she has seen. There are few who could ignore their own mother and brother being Kindred, and their own trials at that. I cannot imagine someone coming back from the

dead after experiencing existence as a ghost, only to wish for a regular life.”

“Yeah. I mean, I hope she realizes it’s not all sunshine and rainbows.” He chuckled with his own silly joke. Two things vampires could never see again.

“I am sure whoever sires her will explain, in great detail, the hardships of our second lives. As I am sure you will on top of that.”

“I—oh, look.” He pointed to the laptop. Samantha, dressed in her pajamas — a habit she refused to break — had already found her daughter and was gently shaking her awake. Antoinette and Jack watched, and both relaxed as Mary stood up and hugged her mother. Their behavior looked normal, if terribly excited.

“All is well.”

“It ... it actually kinda looks like it is.”

Laughing, she turned in bed to face the boy, and nudged her nose into his.

“Our lives are difficult, but they are not always horrible.”

“No, I guess they’re not.”

Nodding, she gently pushed her lover onto his back, and slipped onto his body. He did not resist. It had become a common routine for them to spend some time come dusk to enjoy each other’s touch, even if it did not lead to sex, as it likely would not now. But Antoinette insisted on ‘cuddle time’, as Natasha would put it, and she nuzzled down onto her lover to rest upon him.

Which of course Jack loved, as it caused her breasts to overflow his chest and shoulders, before she could reach her head down far enough to kiss him.

“The ball is in several days.”

“Ah shit, I don’t have anything to wear.”

She laughed before kissing him once again, making sure to squash her bust into him as she did.

“I will find you something, my love.”

“Sexy suit?”

“No doubt.”

Soon, her little Ventrue was the one laughing, and he leaned up to return her kiss.

“You know we’re trying to stop Black Blood, and maybe Jacob, from causing an apocalypse, right?”

“That is the most cynical view possible, but oui, I understand that.” And it gave Jacob’s words last night an uncomfortable weight.

“But you still want to have a ball?”

“Oui, that I do, to maintain appearances.” Another quick kiss. “And I have information. Sándor believes the tear at the base of the ritual, deep in the realm of ghosts, has shown signs of activity.”

“A lead!”

“Indeed. Though both he and Natasha have been distracted by a new tear that does not fit into her chart. They investigate it, and will continue to investigate it, as well as follow Sándor’s lead on how to approach dealing with the original tears.”

“So some progress on Natasha and Avery’s side. What about ours?”

“Unfortunately, Black Blood eludes my attempts to summon it. It does not appear to follow the rules of other spirits, as you surmised.”

Groaning, Jack let his head fall back to his pillow. “Should I ask Triss to summon him? It?”

“Stopping Black Blood in its entirety is our future goal. Stopping its ritual is the immediate goal. Let Avery, Natasha, and the Begotten do their work. When they are ready to act, they will come to us for reinforcements.”

“Makes me worried for Sándor. The guy is obsessed with helping Dolareido.”

Antoinette nodded as she relaxed further, letting her head come down between her shoulders so her forehead could find her love’s.

“You are quite right, but he is not only a powerful creature, he is Begotten, one of the few capable of reaching into these strange realms. And from what Natasha has proven, such a skill will be required if we wish to stop Black Blood’s ritual.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ coming.”

“But, Avery and Natasha are convinced more azlu are hiding in the realm of ghosts. And perhaps, hiding in wait.”

Jack shivered. His fear was warranted. The infernal creatures had proven to be deadly, resilient, and unhealthy for her city. At worst, they could prove to be a massive Masquerade risk.

“So, what you’re telling me, is we’re coming up short on ways to stop Black Blood himself—itsself, but we might be ready to interfere when it starts the ritual? Assuming it’s going to start at the bottom tear.”



“Correct.”

“But there are azlu around. And the two times we’ve dealt with azlu, Avery lost one of her pack, and ... I went ballistic against the other one.” Again the young man shivered. “That reminds me. Sabrina make an appearance yet?”

“Non. And if she did, it would be an extremely unusual event. Ghosts linger in the world, but I have never heard of a ghost leaving another realm, this Great Below, to return and cause mayhem.”

“She did, somehow. No idea. Maybe she talked to Mary from across the realm? All I know is she talked to Mary, and that she can hurt other ghosts with that knife of hers.”

“Then it is a good thing your sister is no longer a ghost.”

“True.”

“And it is also a good thing that Avery and her pack can manage ghosts in much the same way as spirits. If she runs into Sabrina, she will manage.”

“True...”

Antoinette groaned and sat up, driving her weight through her hands into the boy’s chest to crush him into the bed. His wince told her she had succeeded. “Jack. Do not tell me you are thinking of helping them.”

“I uh, I think I am.”

Without any hesitation, she wrapped her hands around his throat and gave him a hard shake, hard enough to have the bed trembling.

“Do I have to stake you and lock you in a coffin to keep you from throwing yourself into harm’s way?” She shook him several more

times, determined to sink her words into his mind. Though upon reflection, she realized shaking him in such a way that had her breasts bouncing about in front of his face was not the best way to get through to the boy.

“Come on. We don’t have any idea on how to lock Black Blood up, or kill it. If I can put the curse to good use and help Avery and Tash and Sándor, I should, right?”

“I would prefer you did not put yourself into direct confrontation with that abysmal spirit, Jack, or azlu monsters.” Her grip relaxed, and she rested her hands on his sternum.

Sighing, Jack reached out and set his hands on hers, and held them gently to his chest.

“Antoinette. If shit gets as bad as we think it might get, not stopping this ritual is not an option. And that means dealing with the azlu, too.”

Matching his sigh, Antoinette looked to the laptop. The two women were sitting on the couch now, cuddled into each other once again, and watching whatever was on the television.

“There are three women who will be especially upset if you die on another one of your heroic adventures of self sacrifice, my love.”

Jack looked to the laptop, but when he looked back to her, he smiled.

“No self sacrificing here. I fully plan on living through this.”

Ah yes. While Antoinette’s words did not seem to resonate with the boy, Azamel’s dying words had reached him. Hopefully her death would keep her love from a similar fate.

---

~~Eric~~

The sheriff was a creepy guy.

“No no no! Come on, Sam. You’re a Daeva, lean into it!” Jessy said. Eric winced as Jessy grabbed Samantha’s shoulders and pointed her to face the changing mirror. “Needs more cleavage.”

Sam looked to her daughter pleadingly, but Mary just laughed and gestured to the mirror.

“She’s right Mom. You have to lean into the sexy vamp milf thing. Don’t get all embarrassed just cause I’m here now.”

“Mary!”

Natasha groaned and rubbed her forehead with both hands. “Jessy, d-don’t corrupt everyone please.”

“I am not corrupting! Mary just said it, Sam is a total milf, with the witches under her thumb, and tits. And the city knows it too. She should lean into it and really build herself a reputation.”

“As a slut,” Samantha said, frowning softly at her reflection. Though even Eric could see the conflict in her eyes. She didn’t believe her own words.

Eric, a good ways back from the girls, glanced Daniel’s way, but the man stood in front of the window and stared out into the street. The clothing store was closed, and everyone who walked up to the store wanting in, took a quick glance at the lanky man with the trench coat and glasses, and left.

Jessy raised a triumphant hand. “Yes, as a slut. All Daeva go through that phase. Boss tells me it usually lasts a decade or three, before they ease up on the crazy sex. I say enjoy it. Now, you need something that tells everyone you are milf supreme, but you also need something that says you’ve got the special privileges of a Prince’s childe. So, lots of skin, but also maybe something really

sparkly? Maybe super obvious, flashy jewelry? It'd be gaudy on someone else, but you can pull it off 'cause of your title."

"She's got a point, Mom. Maybe not sparkly exactly, but yeah, go fancy."

That got a chuckle out of Jessy, and Eric. He couldn't help it. Jessy's brazen attitude was rubbing off on him, but it also looked like it wouldn't take much to get Mary on board with the sexual lifestyle of Dolareido's vampires. There were definitely similarities between her and her mother, but some extreme differences too. Mary was definitely more outgoing.

Eric got up from the short backless bench. It wasn't very comfy anyway, just a bench meant for changing into absurdly expensive shoes. And much as it was fun to watch Jessy corrupt people, and see ladies try on particularly revealing expensive clothes, it was probably best he get out of there before someone said something so embarrassing, Samantha burst into flames on the spot.

So he came over to Daniel, and stood beside the man, looking out the window. Eric was in a casual suit, his work clothes. It was a nice suit, dark, no tie, but it looked like shit compared to the other clothes in the place. Who needed a two thousand dollar dress that was barely more than two straps connecting into a skirt half an inch long?

"Spot any azlu?" Eric asked. He knew the answer, but maybe a little small talk with the ancient vampire would make him seem a bit less creepy.

"No."

Ah, the natural straight man. Problem with that was Eric wasn't a funny guy. He couldn't rebound jokes off him. Which meant talking with the straight guy, especially one as scary as Daniel, would be an awkward, painful conversation.

“You’re here to keep an eye on Mary, I assume.”

“Mary and Samantha.”

“Right. When this gets out, Mary’s going to be the focus of attention for a lot of people.”

“Correct,” the sheriff said.

“And Black Blood? Any sign of it?” Eric lowered his voice. There were dozens of racks of clothing, and a couple of walls, between him and the girls, but they were also vampires. Good hearing.

“It hides, even from me.” Right, Jessy said Mekhet as strong as Daniel were capable of some extremely weird shit. Like, could find and spot shit hidden behind, between, or underneath anything. No one really knew how. “And you? What of the new tear?”

“Nothing. An azlu’s been there, and we think it came back when we were gone. There’s more webs. But it’s gone again when we show up.”

“It sounds like a distraction.”

“Yeah, our thoughts exactly. But we can’t find traces of it elsewhere.” Which was terrifying in its own right. Azlu killed and ate humans, and werewolves too. It’d come out sooner or later to feed, and as much as paranormals weren’t human, they did like to prevent innocent people from getting killed.

On top of that, Avery didn’t know how the azlu spread. They were hard to kill, but that didn’t explain how they’d survived for thousands of years. They reproduced somehow, and it was a good bet they had to eat to do it, both humans and essence. Dolareido becoming the breeding ground for azlu was a big no no, and Avery considered it an existential problem that had to be dealt with.

Which meant Avery was hyper focused on the azlu, even as she tried to help Natasha stop the ritual. Which meant keeping their attention on the ritual was getting difficult. Which Black Blood wanted.

“It’s vexing, isn’t it?”

Eric looked up at the man. “What?”

Daniel nodded back behind him, but otherwise stayed still and continued staring out the window.

“Black Blood has been a thorn in our sides for two centuries at least. At first, we didn’t know about it, who or what it was. But it’s shown up in our lives on several occasions, interfering in our experiments. It toys with us, using its grand power, and strange knowledge. It’s taunted us, broken our experiments multiple times. It’s laughed at us as we poked and prodded at things we didn’t understand back then.

“What relationship Jacob developed with it in that time, we still don’t understand. But we do know Black Blood has never actively harmed us. It’s been a menace to us dragons here in Dolareido, and we know it’s been involved in various rituals Jacob has cast over the years. Some of those rituals caused trouble, attracted attention, but all damage to the Masquerade was repairable. And the kine that died were kine the city was better off without.

“So now we’re all convinced Black Blood is trying to bring about ruin. Even assuming Black Blood is to blame for the short war between Carthians and Invictus, Azamel caused us more harm in her first visit here, decades ago. Simon and his pack caused us more harm in his visit here, decades ago. Viktor and Tony caused us more harm. And Lucas caused us the most harm of all.” Daniel had said all of this with a straight face and monotone voice, but when he mentioned Lucas, the man finally scowled, slightly. “Fucking religious zealot.”

Holy shit, the sheriff was capable of cursing. Holy shit, the sheriff was capable of actually talking. And apparently he was pretty good at it, lack of inflection aside.

“You think ... we shouldn’t be bothering with Black Blood?”

“I think assuming the spirit is trying to be our undoing is a mistake. There is something going on here, something we don’t understand, and getting in Black Blood’s way could end ... problematically.”

“You should have seen him fight Red Tide. It was like watching a giant monster movie.”

Daniel sighed. The man might as well have screamed in frustration, knowing what little Eric knew about the sheriff.

“We’re walking into a trap.”

Eric winced as he looked back out the window. “Yeah, probably. But our hands are tied. We have to stop the azlu, and knowing what we know about Minerva, we have to stop Black Blood too.”

“A spirit more powerful than any of us truly understand. A spirit that has never harmed us, directly at least. We are poking the bear.”

Eric laughed. Daniel didn’t. Ok, so much for sharing a chuckle.

“We probably are, but—”

“Eric! Dude, I got three girls back here half naked and you’re nowhere to be seen!” Jessy stomped out from around the corner wall of the huge, winding clothes store, came up to him, and grabbed his hand. “Come on. I need a man’s opinion, too. The sheriff will be as useful as a paperweight for this, so get over here.”

Daniel shared only a quick glance and the tiniest grin Eric had ever seen, before Eric was dragged back to watch Jessy corrupt Samantha and her kid. But honestly, it didn't seem like it'd take much. Horniness seemed to run in the Terry family.



## Chapter 163

~~Beatrice~~

“I am amazing.”

Triss blinked at her boss. “Uh, what?”

Jacob stood in her alcove’s entrance, and leaned his shoulder against the stone as he grinned at her. Jeans and a black shirt, compared to her jeans and black t-shirt. Weren’t they quite the pair of witches.

“I’m amazing.”

“Because...?”

“Because I knew just who to pick to be my best witch.”

She rolled her eyes. “You gotta be shitting me.”

“Nope.”

She grumbled as she looked around for Jen. Nowhere to be seen. The Ventrue did still have two ghouls to take care of, and while she didn’t fuck them anymore, she did take them out for training and stuff. Probably doing that, then. Given a few years, or decades, ghouls could get pretty damn strong and do some impressive shit. Something to do with vampire vitae being in their blood.

“And I suppose you want me to explain how I did it?” she asked.

“Nah. Black Blood filled me in on the details. And while I would love to know how you learned that crúac ritual, the one to turn a body into a perfect vessel, I know you won’t tell me. Yet.” Wearing

his usual grin, Jacob sat down in the small room of curved stone across from her, the typical bandage wrapped around his eyes. “Witches do love to keep their secrets. Just make sure to write it down before you die.”

“Die?”

He shrugged. “We all die eventually. You’ll do the Circle good to give us some hints about what you did. Make it cryptic, though. Only members of the Circle should be able to figure it out, and make it hard for even them, too.”

“Hard for other witches to figure out? Why?”

“Gotta make ‘em work for it! A good fifty years of deciphering some weird riddle or puzzle, maybe?”

She laughed and put her book down. It was some sort of encyclopedia about ghosts and stuff, the weird accounts seen through history, the different religions and what they thought about ghosts, and the different ways ghosts could supposedly interact with the physical world. It was the sort of shit Triss wouldn’t have cared about before, but now that she was a witch, every word was oddly interesting. Like, really oddly. Like, she was actually enjoying learning about shit nerd style. Oh how she had changed.

“Yeah, I guess I can do that. Write it in a book soon, lock it away in a bank safe and tell them not to open it for a hundred years. It comes out, goes into a museum, some witches steal it away, yada yada.”

“Exactly.”

“Though if Antoinette’s right, a hundred years from now we’ll be worrying about spaceships and trying to navigate an absurd amount of tech that’s bound to expose the whole vampire race.”

Jacob's smile went through a few phases. Defiance, disbelief, then acceptance. He had a lot of smiles.

"That is a possible future."

"You don't think it's guaranteed humans will eventually go all Star Trek on us and shit?"

"You mean the full cooperation between all nations? Fuck no. But sure, lots of technology. It'll be Hell for vampires. But there are other options too."

"Such as?"

Jacob held out his hands like he was preaching to his congregation. "So many possibilities! Which one would you consider? Maybe post apoc? Or maybe something weirder."

"Weirder?"

"Weirder. I—ah never mind. It doesn't matter." He shrugged and flicked a dismissing hand. "Antoinette is convinced vampires won't be able to weather the coming storm of technology. Instead of just cameras everywhere, it'll be infrared cameras. Instead of paying for shit with credit cards at the cashier, it'll be gates we walk through that auto-read the credit cards embedded in the back of our necks, and it'll scan for life signs, too."

"Think our Disciplines will let us get past them?"

"At first. Eventually the technology will get good enough it'll spot a vampire doing anything. And after that, the technology will be updated to actively find vampires, so they can wipe us out."

"That ... is a pretty fucking terrifying idea. Hard to imagine it happening any time soon though."

“Ah ben oui,” Jacob said, pulling a French accent out of his ass, “zat is why we must prepare for ze future!” It wasn’t a good accent.

“Ok, stop scaring me. Good thoughts, boss man. Talk to Sam since last night?”

“Just a quick message. She wants to hang with her daughter, ‘til the ball tomorrow, and I’m happy to let her have that chance.”

Beatrice smiled at the man. “You’re such a softy.”

“I am a cuddly teddy bear.”

“Something tells me Sam will wear something fit for a sexy mom like her.”

“Don’t think she’ll dress a little more reserved, with her daughter there?”

“She’s Daeva, dude. She’s happy and excited right now, and that means she’ll want to show off.” Because that’s what all Daeva did, pretty much no matter their mood, but especially when they were happy. “And honestly, I think we’ve successfully destroyed most sense Sam’s sense of shame. She’ll wear something slutty, and I bet Mary will too.”

“Oh my,” Jacob said in a very sleazy way.

“Dude. Gross. She’s your girlfriend’s daughter. You ... You haven’t actually slept with a mom and daughter at the same time before, have you?”

Raising a brow, the man looked up in an exaggerated attempt to remember. “Honestly? I couldn’t tell you.”

“Dude!”

“What!?” He laughed as he shrugged. “I told you, I used to have orgies with entire groups of people under the full moon. Entire villages!”

She frowned. “Villages. You sure you’re not exaggerating?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

She threw up her hands. “Ok, well, in the modern era, it’s pretty gross to expect sexual activities to be shared among family members. Assuming Mary becomes a vampire, maybe in a thousand fucking years when Mary and Sam don’t see each other as mom and daughter anymore, maybe! And only maybe then!”

“Aw.”

“Christ I hope Sam knows how much of a pervert you are.”

“I’m pretty normal by Dolareido standards.”

“That’s not saying much.”

Laughing again, Jacob reached out, grabbed her book, and popped it open as he leaned back.

“What’re you gonna wear to the ball, young witch of mine?”

“Not sure yet. Jen’s got something lined up, and I’m sure it’ll be as revealing as she can get away with. And well, considering how much skin was on display at the last ball, ghouls getting sucked off or fingered where everyone could fucking see, I could probably go naked and no one would care.”

Her boss’s laugh was warm. She expected a snicker or some stupid, childish laugh, but nope, the man’s voice softened, and so did his expression.

“Sometimes I think my old friend wants to capture the feeling of her youth, discovering all the ways her body can enjoy sexuality without worry of disease or pregnancy, or having to recoup.”

“Well shit, I don’t know what the Prince’s motivations are, but being a vampire is pretty damn sexually freeing ... you know, for the other blood clans.” Nosferatu didn’t have it so easy. Triss and Jacob were lucky, compared to a lot of them.

Jacob sighed and nodded. “Poor Bob.”

“Bob? Oh, right, Nos in the tunnels. Dude looks like he walked out of an old vampire movie.”

“Don’t forget Liliana, with a dozen too many eyes.”

Triss shivered. “We got off easy in comparison. Especially compared to Maria.”

“Yeap.”

The two of them sighed, and their eyes slowly drifted down. Jacob was probably just doing it to empathize with her; not like he cared about his deformities anymore. But Triss still did. She was over them, mostly, but sometimes it still sucked that she had to make sure no kine ever saw her face. Vampires often socialized with their prey before enjoying the meal. She couldn’t. She wasn’t much of a socializer, but she wouldn’t mind taking a stab at it every now and then.

“Either way, we should be damn happy about how things are going,” Triss said. “So I’ll wear whatever Jen has lined up for me. Our second lives are good, and I just did something no one else has managed. I wanna celebrate and show off how fucking awesome my ass is.”

“Ha. I’m sure Sándor will like that.”

She blinked at her boss. “Uh, what?”

“Dude is clearly an ass man.”

The alcove echoed with the slap sound of Triss’s hand hitting her forehead.

“I—”

Jacob laughed and shook his head. “Don’t be an idiot. He likes you, Triss.”

Shit.

“You think?”

“Yeap. I’ve seen him looking at you. Dude is obviously tied down by all the nasty shit attached to him, and to you, but somehow you’ve managed to pierce the dude’s stone exterior.”

“I ... I mean, I have talked to him ... a few times.”

“More like a dozen times.”

“Dude, you following me?”

Jacob put up his hands in surrender. “Nah. You’re just very readable.”

“Fuck.”

“I gotta ask though, Triss. It’s clear you seem interested in Sándor, and—”

“I barely know the guy.”

“Is that right? Cause Jen tells me you got him drunk once, and the man talked about his dead family with you. Doesn’t get much

more personal than that.”

“Fuck.” Damn you, Jen.

“And for the life of me, I don’t see what you see in the man. He’s basically just Daniel with a pulse.”

“He’s...” Much as she wanted to disagree with him, there was some truth in that. A little. “I like him. He listens. You can understand why a woman would like that in a man.”

He snickered. “I’ll listen to a woman when she has something smart to say.”

“You mother fu...” She rolled her eyes and laughed. This asshole. “How the fuck does Sam put up with you?”

“Not sure. I think she’s after my money.”

Damn it, she laughed again. “Well, I like Sándor. Daniel is a ruthless, cold monolith, you know? And maybe Athalia likes that, cause sure, Daniel is stable and direct and probably everything Athalia wants, or needs, in a man. Sándor is ... not that. He’s just quiet. And there’s a gentleness in him that pokes out sometimes.” Especially when the man had a guitar in his hand. Or a drink.

“Which brings me to my point. You like the guy, but you’re intent on bringing Julias back.”

Triss snapped her head to the side. “Don’t.”

“I think I will.” Jacob leaned forward and gestured to her before setting his hands on his knees. “Julias has been dead for what, almost a year now? And now you’ve put yourself in a weird spot. You’re trying to resurrect your dead boyfriend, the man you love, but you’re also moving on. That’s pretty fucked up.”



“My personal shit is—”

“Not fucked up for you, you fucking dumbass. Sándor. Dude is doing everything he can to make up for his contribution to what happened to Dolareido, to you. And for some reason, you’ve decided to flirt with the guy, while trying to undo the damage he caused.”

“I haven’t been—”

“So imagine things from his point of view. You’re doing everything you can to bring Julias back from the dead, a guy Sándor helped kill, but you’re flirting with him? How fucked up is that?”

“It’s not like that!” She slammed both hands against the furs underneath her. “It’s not like that. I’m...”

“You’re learning to play the piano.”

She stared at him and ground her teeth together, causing the large crocodile ones to shift and click.

“You have been spying on me!”

“I spy on everyone. Get over it. You’ve been learning to play the piano, ‘cause you want to connect with the dude.”

“I ... He ... He’s not Daniel, ok? Give him an instrument and suddenly I’m having a conversation with a normal guy. Normal-ish. I like that. He’s a friend.”

“Well, poor guy is probably ripping himself apart in that quiet, stoic way he seems to love, every time you smile at him a little longer than you should. So why don’t you back off and leave the man alone. Stop torturing the stupid fucker.” He leaned forward again, and stared straight at her with his covered eyes. “Or, and this is probably the much healthier option, let Julias go. Dude is dead, and his soul is gone to wherever souls go. You want to pluck it out

of some realm we've never reached, not even the Begotten have reached, not even Black Blood? Might as well be chasing one very fast goose. So how about you do yourself a favor, and do that poor bastard a favor, too. Forget about Julias. Forget about this resurrection business. Enjoy a happy life with Sándor. Get married. Get a house on the prairie. Have two point five kids."

Triss flexed her hands, careful of her claws, and stared at Jacob so hard she felt her whole body shivering. Vitae pumped through her. Her Beast, which normally and rightfully cowered in the presence of Jacob, very much wanted her to take a swing at the fucker and see if she could at least hit him. But god damn it, the image of her living on the prairie with Sándor, and a few kids, was just too fucking hilarious. She laughed again, and Jacob let her, his smile returning as she laughed and laughed until the room eventually grew quiet again.

She looked down, and slumped. "Fuck me, Jacob. I don't know what to do. I want Julias back, but ... but you're right. I keep trying to convince myself I can do it, but I know a part of me doesn't believe that shit. The chances I can bring him back are slim to none. Fuck me, why didn't he stick around, like Mary?"

"You know why. He died happy, thinking of you, you dumbass."

Triss squeezed her claws into the fur she sat on, and sighed. "Fuck me. Fuck him. He left me."

Sighing, Jacob got up, and gave her shoulder a pat before he made for the exit.

"Things will change soon enough. I'll ask you again, when the time comes."

"What? Jacob, what?" She raised her head and watched Jacob, but he kept walking, and didn't look back.

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“Like this,” Sándor said, and he played a simple tune.

Beatrice grumbled, and tried. But just like with Damien, her fingers refused to hit the keys the way she told them to.

“Fuck. Fuck!” She slammed her hands on the keys, before glaring at Sándor.

Sándor chuckled, a quiet sound, and he again played the simple tune.

“You treat the keys like enemies.”

“They are enemies!”

“The keys are your friend. You need to relax and treat them kindly.” He set both hands down on the keys, and played a nice harmony with his left while playing a melody with his right. “I don’t know what it’s like for a vampire, but for the living, we need to play it slowly at first to create the muscle memory.”

He talked so calmly and smoothly, he sounded like a music teacher, happy to teach an idiot kid like her. She loved and hated it.

“I mean, it’s a bit different for vamps,” she said, “but my teacher insists you still learn the same way. Just do it slow and often.”

Mary laughed, and Triss threw a glare at her over her shoulder. She was sitting on the couch with her mom, scrolling through websites on the laptop on the table, and giggling up a storm as they watched funny videos, or swooned over videos of cats. Jennifer sat nearby on another couch, scrolling through her phone, likely updating herself on whatever was happening in Dolareido. Parties, plays, new movies, any place that’d make for interesting hunts.

The group of them were in Sándor’s apartment, but it wasn’t much of one. Sándor had only moved in recently, and sure, the crazy

expensive apartments in Dolareido were gorgeous and sleek and all black and metal and shiny, but he didn't have anything in it. A couple gray couches, and that was it. Except for one particular interest: music. He had several guitars on their stands, two acoustic, two electric, one of them a seven string. One bass guitar, too. There was a metronome on the table between the couches, and some sheet music for some Romanian piece none of them could read, staff or language. Plus, the electric piano Triss and Sándor sat at.

Apparently the man's interest in music was deeper than Triss originally thought when she first saw him play.

It wasn't the first time she'd been in the apartment, and she'd tried the piano on her last visit. Apparently the man could play a lot of instruments. It was why she was trying to learn — secretly — from Damien, because some stupid part of her thought it'd be cool to impress Sándor with something that was clearly one of his interests.

Jen came tonight because they were best friends and did everything together. Mary and Sam came because Sam had become their friend, somehow, and Mary followed Sam. And honestly, Mary was hilarious.

It wasn't a date. She would not think of it as a date.

"Triss, come on." Mary got up, and leaned over Triss's shoulder. With her right hand, she played the tune, Mary Had a Little Lamb, with a big jackass grin on the whole time.

"Oh fuck off." Triss shoved her away and glared at her with as much hate and rage as Hell could summon. "You don't get a pass just 'cause you have a pulse, now."

Giggling, Mary jumped back onto the couch beside her mom.

“Maybe it is a little easier,” Sándor said, “for people with pulses to learn to play instruments.”

“Tell that to Maria,” Triss said, groaning as she slumped. “Girl can play ... well, anything, far as Damien says.”

“Been hanging with Damien?” Jen asked, lips curled into the tiniest grin.

“He’s mentioned it before.” Triss rolled her eyes, but she knew Jen caught her. Thankfully her best friend wasn’t one of those jackass friends who liked to screw each other over for laughs, usually. Instead, she nodded and looked back to her phone, like Triss’s explanation had been fine. No need to explain Damien’s connection to the piano lessons.

“It could be because you’re undead,” Sándor said. “It might have something to do with your mind, and your Kindred body. If you never touched an instrument when you were young...”

“I didn’t.”

“Then maybe the stepping stones aren’t there. You’ll have to build them. It could take time.”

“Ugh. I’m only early twenties, in vamp years. I don’t think in terms of centuries yet.”

Sándor laughed. Actually laughed, too. It wasn’t nearly as happy as Mary’s, or as full as Julias’s would have been, but it was a laugh. It made her smile.

“That is, unfortunately, a painful truth about playing an instrument. It takes time.” He set his fingers to the keys again, and played something stupid complex. Like, really fucking fast complex. His fingers were a blur, and at several points his right hand actually

moved over his left hand as his fingers danced over the white and black keys.

“I know that song...” She stared at the keys as she racked her brain. “That’s ... Symphony X!”

The man nodded as he came to a stop. “I never learned to use a pitch wheel, so it won’t sound the same.” He gestured to the electric piano. “And regardless, this doesn’t have one.”

“Dude, still, that’s thirty seconds of awesomeness. Fucking christ how long did it take you to learn that song?”

“I learned it after our conversation in the crypt. It took a week.”

“A week...” It’d take her a fucking lifetime to play like that. Which she had, assuming she dodged enough sunrises.

She blinked at him as the first part of his response sank in. He’d learned this months ago, after that time in the crypt when he got drunk? They’d talked about metal music, and how they both loved it, but he hadn’t mentioned his own skill back then. Any other guy would have happily mentioned they played an instrument. She would have, too.

“I’ve been playing for centuries,” he said. “Once we get you past this hurdle, you’ll be able to learn complicated songs in a short time too.”

“Pretty big hurdle.”

“Evidently.”

She frowned at the man, and again earned a small chuckle and smile from him. Always small, hesitant things, like it was a struggle for him to find the emotions. She was sure the man had the emotions, especially if he was capable of having a wife and kid, and

feeling all the guilt he did, but he just didn't show them. His body language was stubborn. And for some stupid fucking reason, she really liked trying to draw emotions out of him.

"Let's try a different tactic," he said. "Instead of playing a song, play this." He set all five digits of his right hand on the keys, and pressed five white keys down, left to right, thumb to pinky.

"A dexterity exercise. Dude I'm not a kid."

"No, but you are undead. You said you've never played an instrument?"

"Yeah."

He nodded as he looked down at the keys, brow slightly furrowed. His thinking face.

"You need to learn the same way a child does."

"Well fuck me."

That earned another small smile from him, short lived though as he went back into thinking mode.

"Your vampire brain doesn't know how to work your fingers in the right way. I'm confident you understand music, and you can tap your finger to a rhythm." He gestured to her, and she demonstrated, easily pressing one of the keys in a moderately fast rhythm. She even hummed a bit of Megadeth with it. "So maybe the problem is lower down in your brain. Using individual fingers to press individual keys."

Slowly, Beatrice did as told. Thumb, then index, then middle, then ring, then pinky finger. It did not go well. The electric piano was set to sound like a real piano, volume sensitivity included, so it was

blatantly apparent when she hit some keys too hard and some too soft.

“Ugh, I hate this.” She started over, thumb, then index, then—

“Go from left to right, then right to left. Only hit your thumb and pinky down once. Like this.” He played the pattern, pressing keys in order from thumb to pinky and then back to thumb, playing the three keys in the middle twice each.

Grumbling, she tried again. And like she’d run her head into a brick fucking wall, it did not happen. She couldn’t go backward, at all, not unless she reset her fingers first.

“I fucking hate you.”

Sándor froze for a moment. “I’m sorry I—”

“Not you. My hand! Listen to me you fucker!” She lifted the stupid thing and glared at her fingers and their claws, before slamming them down on the piano. At least she had enough control to ease up before she hit the keys. Hard enough the sound made everyone jerk a bit. Soft enough she didn’t shatter the piano.

“I think,” Mary said, raising a hand. But her mom pulled it back down before she could say anything. Not fast enough for Triss to not notice though, and throw a harsh glare back at the giggling woman. Maybe giving the ghost a body was a bad idea.

Sándor made one of those tiny smiles again, and set his hand on the keys, near hers.

“Slowly,” he said, voice doing that thing it did where it got quiet and deep.

She took a peek at him, and he took a peek at her. Any other guy would’ve just looked away and back down at the piano, but Sándor



did this thing where he looked straight into your damn soul. Blue eyes. She wasn't sure if the man was going out of his way to make eye contact with her, or if he lacked the usual tick people had to avoid too much eye contact. Maybe it was because he was a gargoyle, and sitting there staring at shit was a part of who he was.

So she looked away first, ignored Jen's knowing glance, and got back to trying to make her fingers work. Mary and Sam didn't notice the shared gaze, thank god. They kept laughing as they brought up some website to check up on their living friends' life updates, and they commented rapid fire on it. Who was getting married, who got divorced, who got pregnant. It was enough to make Triss's eyes roll like it was their job.

But god damn, it was nice to hear Sam laugh like that.

Triss looked up from the piano to Sándor, but the man wasn't looking at her anymore. He was looking at Mary and Sam, listening to them. His face was doing that stoic gargoyle thing, no emotion there, pure neutrality, but his eyes were only a foot from Triss's, and she could see more. So much more, like looking into a fucking ocean.

His phone rang. He checked.

"A message from Jack. Business."

"Business with Jack?" Triss asked.

"Important. I'm sorry, I have to go." The man nodded as he got up and headed for the door. "Feel free to stay, everyone." He nodded to the girls on the couches, and then to Triss. He paused for a moment, just a tiny moment as he looked at her, and then he was gone.

Mary and Sam looked up from their laptop to the door, and then back to Triss.

“That was kinda cold of him,” Mary said.

Triss shook her head as she tried to play the pattern again. “Nah. Well, I mean, I guess, but it’s not cold for Sándor. That’s just who the dude is.”

“A lot of men like that in Dolareido,” Jen said, looking over her phone to everyone. “The sheriff, of course. And Eric and Damien are pretty reserved, too. That said, they’ve both had sex at Bloodlust.”

Mary perked up. “They have!?”

“Not with each other.”

“Oh.”

Triss turned around on the piano bench to face the gossiping bitches three. “Jessy’s to blame.” Might as well join them. “She corrupted Fiona. Fiona and Jessy corrupted Eric. Then Fiona moved on and corrupted Damien, carrying the disease from host to host.” Seeing the tiny redhead on his lap, riding him despite being utterly drained and exhausted, and thoroughly spanked, was pretty damn hot. Triss didn’t really care for spanking, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t insanely hot seeing a little, big-titted chick like Fiona cum her brains out from it. Or watching Sam enjoy it, either.

Jennifer chuckled as she nodded. “Daniel might as well be a stone, however.”

Samantha giggled and sat up a little straighter to look between everyone. “A little birdie told me Daniel was having sex at Bloodlust too, with Athalia.”

Jen blinked at Sam like she’d just shot her. “Public sex? The sheriff?”

“Yeah.”

“What else did Natasha say?”

“W-What? I didn’t ... say it was Natasha.”

Jennifer laughed and shrugged. “Come now, who else would tell you such a thing?”

“The Prince might!”

“Would you ever refer to your sire as a little birdie?”

Sam sighed and slumped, earning a sideways hug from her daughter.

“No.”

Jennifer leaned back in her sofa chair and gently tapped her chin with her phone as she looked up.

“The sheriff is a gorgeous man, in that tall serial killer sort of way.”

Mary choked on a laugh. “Serial killers are hot?”

“To women of an age, absolutely. I’m sure your mother has watched many movies where she’s found herself drawn to the killer.” Shrugging like it was the most obvious thing, Jen looked back down to her phone and got to scrolling.

Sam however, squirmed and inched away from her daughter, only for Mary to pull her back in the sideways hug.

“Mom! What’s wrong with you!?”

“Honey, it’s not true! Jen’s exaggerating.”

“I know that look, Mom! Liar.”

As the two women erupted into the most ridiculous argument Triss had ever heard, Jen grinned and winked at her. It wasn't a wink about Mary and Sam. It was about Triss, and Sándor.

Triss shook her head. If Sándor was interested in her romantically, he didn't show it. Friends, sure, but not romantically. And that was probably for the best. He was just a calm, quiet, reserved dude who talked to everyone like that.

So Jen sent her a message on her phone. Triss checked. A picture of a dress, the one Jen planned for her to wear to the ball tomorrow. The damn woman was going to play the game again, try and seduce Sándor like he was some sort of trophy to be earned. Damn hilarious, and impossible. Triss chuckled as she shrugged, put the phone away, and got back to trying to get her stupid mother fucking fingers to dance on the piano keys.

She wasn't flirting with Sándor. Jacob had made a good point, and she knew it was in her best interest to listen to the damn bastard. What kind of fucking idiot would she have to be, to flirt with another man while trying to resurrect her lover? What sort of stupid, useless, depraved sack of shit would she have to be?

She was just hanging out with her friends, that was all. If the man thought differently, he wouldn't have bailed the moment Jack called.

Right?

---

~~Damien~~

“I can't believe it.”

“Believe it,” Jack said. “She went out looking for dresses with Mom yesterday.”

“Alone?”

“Nah. The sheriff was with her. Plus I think Tash and Jessy went, and Jessy probably dragged Eric along.”

Damien nodded as he circled the tear. “I can understand the sheriff going with them. Mary being alive is insane, and he can keep an eye on things.”

“Not exactly the best use of his time, but...”

“But we’re stumped.”

Jack sighed, and circled the tear in the opposite direction of Damien. Deep in the factory basement, it was highly unlikely any kine would find it. But they would find it eventually, unlike the other tears that were extremely well hidden, the ones in the physical world at least. They had to close it somehow.

“I really have no idea,” Jack said. “This tear doesn’t match the other ones. I mean, I know Black Blood has some tears around the city not on Tash’s chart, but they’re super old, and as far as Avery and the Begotten know, they’re stable. No danger to the Gauntlet, and no unusual amounts of essence flowing through them and stuff. Am I right?”

Sándor nodded. “Yes.” And of course, the man stopped there.

“I told Antoinette I’m going to help you, Sándor. When you think shit is about to hit the fan, get me.”

Sándor let out the tiniest sigh as he looked back to Jack, but he nodded. “I expected as much.”

“Fuck. I’m damn predictable, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

“If it’s as bad as we think,” Damien said, “Jack should probably be there. The sheriff too.”

Jack nodded. “And Avery, and Sándor. Damien?”

“You have to ask?”

After a quick laugh, Jack shook his head and shrugged. “Well, I mean, you are a Mekhet. Not exactly meant for straight confrontations.”

“No, but I work well when I have someone else to be a distraction.”

“I can do that,” Jack said.

“Better than anyone I know.”

“Dude, what about Jessy?”

Damien laughed. “I suppose she beats everyone for that. I have firsthand experience.”

They spent more time circling the tear, and then the area. Mason the Uratha was there, hanging by the door, keeping a lookout for eavesdroppers, and providing any extra information he could. Unfortunately, that was none. The Uratha didn’t know why Black Blood made this tear, and they didn’t know how it ... he, made any of the tears. The joys of being a colossally powerful entity, you got to break the rules the little people thought were immutable.

Damien and Jack parked in front of the tear, and stared at it, both folding their arms across their chests as they peered into it. You couldn’t get a good look at the other realm from this side, but anyone who saw it would pretty quickly catch on that it was a tear in the literal air, sitting there, something that could be entered. It also

radiated with the strange coldness of death that the Great Below seemed to love.

The other tears, the stable ones that'd apparently been around for years, or centuries, were invisible. Only a Begotten could open one, and according to Fiona, they closed up after being passed through. So they weren't tears at all, but doors. These tears, on the other hand, were very much tears, and the Uratha were terrified of them doing exactly what tears had a nasty habit of doing in anything else. Getting bigger.

"That's objective number three, I suppose," Damien said.

"Eh?" Jack asked.

"Closing the tears."

"Ah, right. Yeah, we're pretty fucked if we can't figure that out. I mean, I suppose we could start an azlu farm, and make them work for us." He grinned at Damien and Sándor, and shifted his weight back and forth from the tips of his toes to their heels.

A distant snort announced Mason's disdain for the idea.

"We stop the ritual first," Sándor said. "Then we can worry about closing off the tears."

"I know," Jack said. "Just trying to lighten the mood." He grinned as he quickly checked his phone, weight still shifting back and forth on his feet.

The Begotten nodded. "You're a lot happier than ... than the young man I first met."

Damien opened his mouth, but said nothing. Where was the gargoyle going with this?

“The curse was driving me insane at the time, literally. Plus Angela was ... yeah.”

Sándor shook his head. “I meant, you seem even happier now.”

“You mea—oh, because of Mary. You have no idea how happy I am, man. And how happy Mom is.”

Sándor nodded, a tiny hint of a smile showing through. And then a frown. Damien raised a brow as he watched the man, but as soon as Sándor noticed, he seamlessly returned to his statue stance, standing some ten feet away and leaning back against the dirty factory wall. It was all old concrete down here, covered in dust and dirt, announcing how many decades it'd been since anyone had touched the decrepit building.

Such was Dolareido's history. The industry boom came and went, and the city evolved into a sort of Las Vegas clone. Or rather, half of it did. It was a big city, and lots of neighborhoods were far from the more sinful areas, quiet and calm neighborhoods like Jack's family's. The other half of the city built skyscrapers and embraced the advancements of technology, and sexuality along with it.

It still irked him sometimes. But even Maria found preaching against sexuality was a holdover from ancient ideas.

“I am glad your sister is alive again,” Sándor said eventually.

“But,” Jack said, “you're worried it won't last.”

The Begotten slowly looked down and away. “I don't know. I see no reason to think Mary's not fine. I haven't checked her dreams yet, though.”

“Let's ... save that, 'til after the ball?”

“The ball?” Damien asked. “Why?”



Jack shrugged. “If there is something wrong with her, it can wait until after the ball to find out.”

“Uh, if we can find out if your sister is—”

“No.” The kid dismissed him with a small wave of the hand. “It can wait, ok? She seems fine, and we always have someone watching her. On the off chance there is something wrong with her, it can wait. She deserves it, and Mom deserves it. Besides, we’re busy.”

After a few heavy seconds of silence, Damien and Sándor nodded, but it was clear what was happening. The kid was avoiding a potentially very painful dose of reality. It was probably clear to Jack, too.

“Very well,” Sándor said.

Time for a topic change.

“Daniel’s last attempt to break the spell on Amanda’s mind failed,” Damien said. “Though he’s pretty convinced it was Black Blood’s doing.”

Jack’s shoulders slumped. “Which ... fucking sucks.”

“More than we thought?”

“Black Blood and Jacob have done some fucked up shit, I’m sure. The Prince tells me as much. But neither have ever been direct enemies before, you know? If they’re the ones that tricked the Carthians and Invictus into fighting, that pushes them over the line.”

“Ah,” Damien said, looking down. “Yeah, I guess ... I hadn’t really thought of them as anything other than enemies for a while.”

“Well I haven’t.” Jack groaned as he looked up at the ceiling beams. “They saved our lives before, you know. Fuck me, am I the only one that doesn’t default to assuming everyone is an enemy?”

Damien shook his head. “At this point, I think you should change that stance, Jack. It’s going to get you killed. It’s going to get other people killed.”

Jack opened his mouth, and closed it. And the following few heavy seconds of silence were a hundred times worse than the ones before.

“Sorry,” Damien said. “That was mean.”

“Yeah, it was, but honest, and that’s why we’re friends, man.” After a slow breath, Jack looked back to the tear, watched it for a few moments, and looked back to Sándor. “How are we keeping an eye on that tear you think is going to be important?”

“Mark does quick visits, very quick. Athalia and Vrallar’trakla aren’t ... sneaky enough, to risk it.”

Damien smiled. He said Fiona’s Horror’s name smoothly, no stutter or hesitation. Damien still couldn’t do that.

“Aren’t sneaky enough?” Jack asked. “They’re both, like, super darkness nightmare types, right? Jesus, how dangerous is that place?”

“It’s below where you’ve seen of the Great Below. There are ghosts there that ... have been sculpted by the land, and their memories. Some are small, some are large, many are violent.”

Damien raised a finger. “Shaped by land and memories?”

“Deeper into that realm, I’ve found rivers of flowing black ice, and bridges made of bone. As always, it appears to be wrapped in a giant

cave, but deeper in, the cave seems to be larger. Infinitely larger. Some ghosts, if that is what they are, fly through the darkness and fog, serpentine and dragon-like. Some crawl like spiders, and hide in the darker places. It's ... almost like the spirit realm, except instead of being shaped by its sister realm, it's shaped by the minds of its inhabitants, their memories and emotions." He frowned as he looked down. "Mind is probably the wrong word. You ... You saw what Mary was like, when she was a ghost."

Jack shuddered. "I did. And if the ghosts down there get warped and shaped by their memories, that is ... pretty fucked up. I imagine a lot of those ghosts are angry about dying."

"Yes. Very. I avoided them on my few visits, but it was close. Mark is much better at avoiding things than I."

"Smart," Damien said. "But that means we can't keep a vigil on the tear."

"Correct. Mark will continue risking a quick visit now and then, but it is a dangerous and draining journey. We've seen strange markings carved into the ground around the tear."

"Still don't know where the tear goes?" Damien asked.

"No. I believe it goes deeper, but ... I'm pretty sure if I go through, I would die. Or something like dying."

Damien and Jack both shivered, this time. All this realm stuff didn't sit well with vampires. Uratha were comfortable with the idea that every thing in the physical world had a reflection on the spirit world. Dream monsters were comfortable with that realm, and dream realms, and other realms too. Vampires very much preferred to keep their feet on the ground, the physical one, made of asphalt.

But apparently some of the tears were cutting into realms even the Begotten refused to visit, and that was a scary thought.

“Okay,” Jack said, “I guess you should keep checking it out. The moment you think something is about to happen, let us know. I doubt whatever ritual Black Blood starts there will be done instantly. There should be a window of time to catch him in the act. Hopefully.”

“And if we miss that window?” Damien asked.

“Then I guess we’re fucked.”

They all sighed, even Sándor.

“Okay,” Jack said, “we need a happier topic. The ball. Fiona going?”

“She is. And she’s very excited to show off her new dress. She didn’t have much money in Scotland, or much access to ... Dolareido-friendly attire.”

“Well, tell her I look forward to seeing her in it.”

Damien squinted his eyes at Jack. “I will. Should I heavily imply to her that you also want to see her breasts in said dress?”

Jack laughed and shrugged. “I mean, sure? I bet half the people at the ball will be thinking the same about Antoinette.”

“Antoinette is an ancient vampire. Fiona is a young, innocent flower.”

That was too much, and the two of them burst into laughter again.

They made for the door, nodding to Mason as they approached, but Jack stopped and looked behind him.

“Sándor, we’re heading out. Wanna come? I’m waiting on a call from Mom, then we’re gonna hang out at Antoinette’s tower. But

until then, we're free agents."

Damien suppressed his smile. It wasn't long ago Jack would have preferred to not invite someone else to socialize; the kid was just naturally introverted. Maybe he was trying to expand his views, or maybe he was just trying to keep Sándor close, where he was valuable. Honestly, Damien would have preferred it'd just be the two of them hanging out, purely because he was just as introverted as Jack. But Sándor had more than earned a place beside them. Assuming he wanted it, of course. The man seemed to be the most introverted of them all.

The gargoyle looked down slightly, thinking, before slowly nodding. "Okay."

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Mulder and Scully perched on Jack's shoulders, and cawed curiously at Sándor, and the thing he stood beside.

"You spied on the whole city with this?" Sándor asked.

"I did. Though I preferred weaker telescopes, things I could move easily. Now I don't need to do that, so I set up a proper telescope."

The gargoyle nodded slightly before leaning back into the eyepiece. It was an interesting building they stood on, tall but not as tall as others, which meant a telescope placed on the roof corner had access to multiple streets and many buildings worth of windows to peer into, up and down.

"It still surprises me a vampire hid in the city for half a century."

"You're telling me," Jack said. He sat on the edge of the building on the opposite side of the roof, looking down at the streets below. "The Prince and the sheriff didn't know what happened in the chaos of the Purge. Lucas got away, and took a long nap. Damien spent

fifty years hiding in sewers and spying on us. Pretty damn impressive.”

“If the sheriff knew I was hanging around,” Damien said, “I’m sure it would have been a different story. I was basically anonymous. I walked the streets plenty of times.” Which was technically true, but he also spent most of his time hiding in the tunnels.

“It still blows my mind,” Jack said. “About the weird place Tony had underground, that Lucas took over. The wurm’s nest, according to Antoinette, whatever that means. Place had influence, bent people’s minds. Dolareido really is a weird city, isn’t it?”

Sándor aimed the telescope down to the street. Unlike Fiona, the man was naturally gentle and smooth with the motion, any excitement he might have felt over its extreme telescopic powers tempered by his age and wisdom. Or the man was just really chill, which was Fiona’s belief.

“Places affected by essence,” Sándor said, “most likely.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, that’s what Avery said. Tony had been using it, not knowing it was giving his voice some power. Then Lucas found it and used it. A perfect storm of shit.”

“You’re telling me,” Damien said. “I still can’t believe how much things have changed. The Lancea et Sanctum is alive, again. Barely, but it is. I’m not hiding anymore. I have a nice apartment in the expensive center of South Side. I have a girlfriend.”

“I was still human four years ago. So uh, I think I got you beat.”

“True.”

“Sándor,” Jack said, “I wanted to ask you about Mom. You were helping her and Beatrice, right?”

The man stepped away from the telescope, a hint of sadness showing through.

“I did.”

“I’m not going to ask about what you did or how you did it. I’m guessing Triss would prefer to keep that information between her and Mom and the witches. And you.”

Slowly, the man nodded, face returning to its usual neutral state.

“Cool.” Jack stood up and walked over to the man. “I just wanted to ask about Mom and Triss. I mean, Jen was there too, but she’s ... Honestly I have no idea about Jen. She likes Triss, romantically even, and is willing to help her in her witch pursuits, far as I know. But...”

“But,” Sándor said, “Jennifer does not seem interested in a committed romantic relationship. At least for herself.”

“Friends with benefits,” Damien said.

Jack laughed. “A good a descriptor as any. But, my mom, how was she during all this? I ... I was pretty adamant she needed to let Mary go, that she was dead and gone and her ghost had to follow. Knowing she kept working at resurrecting her despite that, fucking stings. I feel like shit.”

Sándor looked down at the kid, before he sat back against the rooftop railing beside the telescope, and folded his arms across his chest.

“She was a mother. Beatrice tempered her expectations, but she was committed to helping her daughter. I think ... if Mary had moved on, Samantha would have accepted it. But as long as Mary remained, a ghost, your mother would do everything she could do revive her.”

“Ah fuck. Now I feel even worse.”

“Don’t.” Sándor shook his head, eyes falling again. “You did the right thing. It’s not good for people to hold onto the dead.”

No one said a thing for a few seconds after that. The night was just filled with heavy silences.

“Which brings me to my next question. Beatrice. She, uh ... she doing okay?” As if the question was a little too painful, Jack turned his attention to his birds, and scratched each of them behind the neck.

“You want to know about her progress with resurrecting Julias?”

“No. She told me that’s far off, and Julias’s ghost isn’t hanging around. Unless she can pull off some really, really freaking shit, I ... I don’t think she’ll ever revive him.”

The gargoyle slowly nodded. “Perhaps. She has proven remarkably talented at ... witch things.”

“Agreed. But Jacob’s a freaking master of that stuff, and even with Black Blood’s help, he hasn’t been able to bring back Minerva. Triss knows that. I think as the months have gone by, she’s accepted that, but a part of her refuses to move on ‘cause ... well...” Jack shrugged as he sat down beside Sándor, and held out a hand in front of him, sideways. Without hesitation, Mulder flew down and perched on his finger, before cawing once at Sándor. “She’s stubborn.”

Damen laughed, earning Jack’s glare and ire.

“Come on, Jack,” Damien said. “You’re one of the most stubborn people I know.”

“That’s ... only a little true, right?”



Damien laughed and shrugged, got up, and set his eye to his telescope. The roof wasn't only selected for its altitude relative to other buildings, but also for its darkness. It was forever in the shadow of a neighboring building, which blocked the lights of a nearby casino. Anyone who looked out their windows, or looked up from the streets, would be partially blinded by the casino and other extravagant lights that could never quite land on the specific corner of the building with the telescope.

Sure enough, some of the windows were open. Plenty, actually, as was common in Dolareido. Many of them showed kine dancing and drinking. Others showed kine sitting upon couches and watching the television, often with an arm raised in triumph or dismay. Several had men sitting while a woman stripped, usually while standing on a table. One had women — and one man — sitting around while a man stripped on a table.

And of course, several windows showed people having sex. Three of them showed a young couple having sex. Two showed a man with two women. One showed a woman with two men. And one of them showed a couple well into their seventies having sex, which didn't exactly match Dolareido's tone. Jessy would probably have said it was awesome, old people getting 'randy' and having sex so openly. Old people simply did not care what others thought.

Damien aimed the telescope down, and scanned through the streets. Populous a city as Dolareido was, the wide sidewalks were packed with kine, going about their business in the nightlife. At this time of night in this part of the city, that business was almost exclusively some form of revelry by rich people. Suits, dresses, and nightclub attire were everywhere.

Not a single one of them knew the whole city could collapse around them at any moment due to some mysterious ritual no one understood.

“I think,” Jack said, “Triss will eventually let this go, like Jacob did. But you’ve been hanging with her more than I have lately, Sándor. Am I right?”

“I ... do not know. I think a part of her wants to let it go. I think a part of her is determined to see this to the end. She is stubborn, and she is intelligent.”

Damien raised a brow as he took a peek at Sándor, before sticking his eye back into the telescope eyepiece. He said ‘intelligent’ with a little more inflection than the man usually used.

“She is,” Jack said. “And I really do think she’d be happier if she let this go. She’s gotten really close with Jen, and I know she’s ... uh ... been a little more intimate with my mom than I’d probably like.”

Damien coughed, causing the telescope to swing up. Thank the Lord it was very heavy and mounted on a tripod. Not easily knocked over. If it fell, it was more than large enough to punch a hole through a car’s roof, let alone a kine’s head.

Sándor nodded, as if what Jack said was the most normal thing. “All the witches I’ve known have been very free with their sexuality. And hundreds of years ago, that was empowering.”

“It’s not now?” Jack asked.

“I suppose it is. But back then, women were property. Most witches were women, and you can imagine how freeing it was for them when they broke free of their social chains.”

“He has a point,” Damien said. “Witches had a habit of being women. I can imagine it being very terrifying, and exhilarating, for women back then to break free and ... be powerful.” He had to admit, witches were an extremely popular and compelling image of female power. Then again, that was cultural, and inaccurate.

Witches had always been both male and female, at least as far as vampires and the Lancea et Sanctum were concerned.

“Well, either way,” Jack said, “I’m happy Triss is getting over losing Julias. Maybe not happy about her moving on by touching my mom, but still. And she’s been hanging out with you, how’s that going?”

“She ... She seems happy. Happier than she was before. She’s learning piano.”

Damien raised his head. “Is she?”

“Yes. But she ran into some barriers with the basics. I think I helped her find the problem.”

Damien almost asked what, but that’d give him away. And if Triss didn’t tell Sándor it was Damien teaching her, better to leave it a secret.

“What was that?”

“She tried to...” He stopped. “I think I’ll keep it secret unless she shares it.” The gargoyle nodded to himself as he looked off into space, brows furrowed slightly. He was a heavy thinker. Damien could relate. He was also thinking about Triss more than Damien expected.

“But she’s enjoying herself?” Jack asked.

“Yes. I think. She spends a lot of time thinking about what she’s still trying to do, with Julias. But, she often comes out of those thoughts, and enjoys the moment. Laughs. Smiles. Your mother has helped her a lot with that, in a strange way.”

Sighing, Jack held Mulder closer to his chest, and gently stroked the bird from head to tail feather.

“I know I was being an asshole, telling Mom she needs to let Mary go when Mary was still around, but ... I don’t think it’s the same with Julias. She needs to let the man go.”

“I don’t think you were wrong,” Damien said, “to tell your mom that. Resurrection is unheard of. No one could have seen Mary’s resurrection coming.”

Jack smiled at him, and raised the shoulder Scully sat on in his direction. Scully flew over to Damien, making him jerk back a bit, but she hovered there for a second before she eventually settled on his shoulder. How the bird managed to fly with a screwed up wing, he didn’t know, but she’d managed somehow, and she stretched the crooked thing before hooking it against her side. Other than her moment of flight, Scully’s movements were not very bird-like, and far more stone gargoyle-like, just sitting there perfectly still and occasionally twisting her head around to look at stuff. She didn’t breathe.

“Agreed,” Sándor said, eyes raising as he pulled himself out of whatever spiraling thought hole that’d caught him. “About Mary. As for Julias, I ... don’t know. Jacob and Beatrice have accomplished extreme things. And this time, they have both Black Blood, and Elen.”

They went silent for a moment with the mention of Elen. The witches’ prisoner. Someone who could perform haruspex, and flesh magic. Yeesh.

“It’s a pretty scary road,” Jack said.

Damien gestured up to the crow on his shoulder. “Two dead birds and two dead people sitting on a rooftop with a literal nightmare. Is the witch stuff really that scary?” Of course it was, but it was worth it to try looking at things from a different perspective.

“Heh. Figured you’d be the first one to say sacrificing people in dangerous witch rituals was a bad idea.”

“I would be, but I’m playing devil’s advocate for a moment. We really in a position to be judging witches for dipping their toes into stuff like that?”

The two vampires looked to Sándor.

The gargoyle spent some time looking down, thinking, arms still folded across his chest. It was strangely easy to talk to Sándor, about anything, probably because of how much he preferred to sit and listen. Which made him the perfect man to ask a question to, if you could find the right question.

“I witnessed some of what they did,” he said. “Beatrice is trying very hard to keep her hands clean. Relatively speaking. She’s well aware of the dangers of the road she walks.”

Jack nodded. “Beatrice always was smart, way smarter than any Carthian I’ve dealt with. Kinda surprises me Jacob took so long to recruit her.”

“She is special.” Again, the gargoyle nodded with his usual quiet stoicism. He’d said ‘special’ with a little more inflection than usual, like he had with ‘intelligent’ a moment ago.

The longer Jack and Damien hung out with the man, the more obvious it was becoming that he had a lot of thoughts, and just preferred to not say them. He’d mastered the art of saying less than he knew, which was a very dangerous skill.

“Yeah,” Jack said, smiling a little as he looked from Sándor to Damien. He saw it too, the way Sándor instantly went into think mode the moment they said Beatrice’s name.

It could have meant a lot of things. Maybe Sándor was still tearing himself up over Julias's death, and how many people it'd affected, especially Beatrice. Maybe Beatrice reminded him of his dead wife. Maybe the guy was trying to find a way to stop Jennifer — and by proxy, Beatrice — from her constant flirting with him. Or, maybe, the guy liked her.

Unfortunately, Damien couldn't navigate social dynamics to save his life, and Jack wasn't much better. So Damien gave Scully a few strokes of the back of her head, and shrugged at Jack.

"I'm not sure what Triss is going to do," Jack said after a while, "but with how close she is to Jacob and Black Blood, we need to keep an eye on her." Sándor furrowed his brows a little harder, going from slight to actually noticeable, as he looked at Jack. "Which means, since you're the only one of us that's been involved with her, uh, extracurricular activities..."

"I'll keep an eye on her," Sándor said. He opened his mouth again, but after a few seconds of silence, he got up and turned to face over the railing and toward the streets below. Silence. Jack and Damien said nothing.

After a slow breath, Sándor leaned forward and set his hands on the railing. At this point Jack and Damien had caught on it was best to just shut up and wait until the man was ready to speak. It took a while. Sándor squeezed the railing, and looked up at the night sky, all stars hidden in the constant night lighting of Dolareido.

"I won't let anyone else die," he said at last. "I don't care what I have to do. I won't let anyone else die."

Damien and Jack blinked at each other.

"I get that," Jack said. "But, I mean, we're all on that page. Right?"

It took a few more moments before Sándor eventually nodded.

“Right.”

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~~Eric~~

“No Mary or Sam this time?” Eric asked.

Jessy laughed and shook her head. “Nope. I got a few dresses I wanna check out.”

“Ball is tomorrow.”

“Yeah but I know they got a few things here in my size. Come on.”

He nodded as he looked around, and took a deep breath.

The clothing store was basically the same as the last one. A large floor filled with racks of clothes, dresses and suits, and shoes, with a few winding paths separated by walls that didn't quite reach the ceiling. There weren't many people in the store, but ten people was plenty when you were dealing with the crazy prices of Dolareido's nightlife.

“Sometimes I wonder why Dad doesn't come visit Bloodlust,” he said, “or take advantage of the money I give him and go shopping for better clothes.” Eric lifted the sleeve of a suit he passed by, checked the price, groaned, and let it go. “And then sometimes I completely understand.”

“Wasting money is fun!”

“It's not so fun when you don't have a lot of it.”

“You have a lot of it now.” Jessy rolled her eyes as she scooped a black dress up from the racks, and held it against her body in front of him. She was in a casual suit, like he was, because coming to a place like this in jeans and a t-shirt would have been grounds for getting arrested.

“I didn’t always.” He checked the price tag, groaned like before, and put the dress back. Which of course just made the vampire laugh.

“Me neither, remember? Rough life and all that before Michael found me.”

“Then where’s your natural aversion to wasting money?”

She shrugged, grabbed another dress, and did the same thing. “Gone. I’d like to say it’s ‘cause I’ve got a lot more years under my belt and feel comfortable spending. But I’m pretty I’ve always spent every dime I got, even in my first year.” Her first year as a vampire, she meant. “I was a dumbass with money.”

“I’m guessing you also spent any money you got your hands on when you were alive.”

She laughed and shrugged, even as he pushed her ridiculously expensive dress down and helped her put it back.

“Yeah, I probably did.”

“My dad would have given you a whipping. With a belt.”

“Kinky.”

“Not so much when you’re eight and your dad’s giving you a whipping cause you bought some candy without his permission.”

“Oof, that sucks. Kinda surprised he was doing that in the ... what, nineties?”

“He was old school.” Eric made no attempt to hide the contempt in his voice when he said ‘old school’. “But I’m exaggerating how bad it was. He was an ass, but not that much of an ass.”



“Good. I’d stop sending him pictures if he turned out to be a shit dad.”

Eric groaned, again, which of course sent Jessy into fits of laughter as she pulled him along.

“About the ball tomorrow,” she said. “Any expectations?”

“A little. If you-know-who is going to make a move, it might be then.”

She nodded as she grabbed another dress, did a quick test for him, and slung it over her shoulder before he could check the tag.

“Well, if the person of the hour isn’t there, then we’ll know something’s up. They’re invited.”

It was annoying avoiding saying Jacob’s name, but with how everything was building up, it was probably for the best. It wasn’t like Jacob wasn’t smart enough, or powerful enough, to spy on them. He could literally be in the room, and Eric doubted either of them would be able to sense him until he got close. They had to be careful.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“I expect to see a lot of skin, I suppose.”

“Well that’s a given. It won’t be like our little parties at Bloodlust, though, everyone topless and shit.”

“To your dismay.”

“To my utter dismay.” She nodded and stood tall and proud, before slumping and grabbing another dress. “I look forward to Mary being there.”

“Poor kid. Been alive for a few days and now she’s going to be sideline to an orgy.”

“Ugh, I wish. Nah, no orgy.”

“But there will be a few thralls and ghouls, naked, and getting drained mid orgasm, right?”

“Of course. That’s not an orgy! That’s just a banquet.”

“Uh huh.” He rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t help but chuckle. Vampires were a strange bunch. “I seriously doubt Samantha will let anyone touch her daughter.”

“Yet. It’s not like Sam has a leg to stand on, with the way her sex drive has exploded since being sired.” And another dress went onto the shoulder.

They continued shopping for a bit. Jessy got ten dresses over her shoulder — so much for ‘few’ — before she was done looking around. She also checked her phone for a second, sent someone a text, nodded, grinned at her phone, put it away, and dragged Eric to a changing room. No one stopped them from sharing one.

“I got a surprise for you,” she said, smile somewhere between excited and malicious. She pushed him gently until he had to sit down on the bench in the small room of white walls, a tall mirror behind Jessy.

“You do?”

She winked at him and opened the door, just barely wide enough to reach through it, and as the smell of a new person hit Eric’s nose, Jessy pulled them in.

“Marge?” Eric asked.

“Hello! Jessy told me to come. Said she was going to buy me a dress.”

Jessy nodded, scooped the dress off the bench beside Eric, and handed it to her. “Here ya go.” Eric hadn’t gotten to see what the dressed looked like, but in Jessy’s palm, it didn’t look like much more than scarf.

Marge was a small woman, with light-dark skin and tiny facial features, very cute. Her hair had grown out, and she’d straightened it so it came down in waves to her shoulders. She wore a casual suit too, no jacket, white shirt. At the last ball, she’d worn a white dress that covered her a lot more than whatever Jessy had just handed her. Chalk one up for Jessy, she’d corrupted another one.

“Thanks! I’ll go—”

Jessy rolled her eyes, took Marge by the shoulders, and pushed her to the center of the changing room before sitting down beside Eric.

“Change,” Jessy said, with a little more aggression than Eric expected. He blinked at her, and she grinned at him before nodding to Marge.

“Um, what?” the hunter asked.

“Change. Take off current clothes. Put on new clothes.” Jessy laughed.

“You mean—oh. We’re doing that now?” The small hunter gulped as she looked between Jessy and Eric, blush hitting her cheeks.

“Um, what?” Eric asked.

Jessy slapped him on the knee. “Sit back and enjoy.”

Oh god. Eric groaned, but a quick glance between the two women settled his nerves. Yeah, it was pretty obvious Jessy was bullying Marge into this, probably like how Isabella had bullied her into staying with her troupe for a while. And it was obvious Marge didn't expect to suddenly have to put on a strip tease for Eric and the vampire. But at the same time, Marge looked intrigued. Dolareido had rubbed off on her, too.

“Jessy,” Eric said, turning his head to look at her, but keeping Marge in the corner of his eye. “Did you really ‘convince’ Marge to do this, by offering to buy her a dress?”

“Dude. It’s an expensive dress.”

He grumbled again and leaned back until his shoulders pressed to the wall of the changing room. Which earned a small chuckle from Marge. She looked embarrassed and caught off guard, but she also looked like she knew enough about Eric to expect his grumbling. Someone had been filling her in on his personality, and he knew who.

“Hey, you!” Jessy pointed at Marge. “Get naked.”

Eric shook his head. “Marge, you don’t—”

Marge undid the button of her skirt, and slid it down, exposing her naked legs. Small as she was, there was muscle there, giving her legs more shape than the skirt suggested. She quivered as she did, and Eric could almost hear her heart rate pick up.

“Marge is going to be our little slave girl for the next few weeks,” Jessy said. “It’s my turn.”

“Turn?” Eric raised a brow as he blinked at the Gangrel, but when he looked back to Marge, the hunter didn’t protest. Instead, she undid the buttons of her shirt, blush showing through her chestnut skin as she exposed her small white bra. That was a tiny stomach.

“Turn! Isabella had her for so long, and—”

“Jessy, she’s not a toy.”

Jessy grumbled as she folded her arms across her chest. “I know that, I’m just playing. Marge and I have been hanging out at Bloodlust, I told you that. And Marge is a—”

“A hunter,” Eric said, earning a short pause from Marge. But a hand wave from Jessy had her resuming her undressing, and she undid the bra, slowly. She let it fall, exposing her dark, tiny, but very hard nipples standing from her small breasts.

Shrugging, Jessy got up, came up behind Marge, and cupped her breasts from behind, instantly earning another quiver from her prey. The small woman met Eric’s eyes before she looked down as Jessy massaged her breasts, a tiny hint in her eyes giving it all away.

This woman, Marge, Eric had met girls like her before. She acted shy, and maybe a little part of her was, but a much bigger part of her liked being the center of attention. The whole thing with the conservative white dress at the ball was probably her not sure how to handle herself, considering she was going into a ball full of vampires for the first time. But that hadn’t been the kinda girl she really was. No wonder she’d found herself at Isabella’s mercy; the woman was a dominatrix and probably loved dominating someone like Marge.

Which honestly made Eric feel a little better about the girl getting bullied into this by his girlfriend. Much as she looked nervous and a bit scared, and was, she was also obviously aroused. And it wasn’t long before his werewolf nose could smell it, too.

“I am a hunter,” she said, managing another shy peek at Eric. “But, it’s not ... it’s not what people think. I didn’t get into it like most people. I was sort of dragged into it. And after seeing

Dolareido, I can ... I guess I can see why a lot of people get seduced by this nightlife.”

“Exactly,” Jessy said, and she lowered her right hand down Marge’s slender stomach, and down under her white panties. Marge didn’t stop her. The little hunter managed a tiny gasp, and another peek at Eric, before she melted back into the vampire.

~♥♥♥~

“You make it sound like you want to be a vampire, too,” Eric said, eyes struggling to not watch Marge wriggle. His willpower didn’t last. Jessy knew exactly how to have Marge boiling, and the hunter pressed back against Jessy, silently begging for more, and Eric watched with growing hunger.

“I don’t know. M-Maybe?” she said between tiny mewls.

“Isabella was trying to convince her,” Jessy said. “I’m trying to convince her, too.”

Eric looked up from the working hand in Marge’s underwear, and up to Jessy who had her chin on Marge’s shoulder, evil grin pointed at him.

“Yeah?”

“Yeap. Marge is awesome, and we know she’s got skills. I wouldn’t mind having a childe like her.” Nodding, the Gangrel raised her other hand, and wrapped it around the small woman’s throat. Instant response. Marge squirmed more, and the crotch of her underwear darkened with wetness.

“I hadn’t even thought about that.” Slowly, Eric took another deep breath, and again tried to lift his eyes. Still no go. Seeing his girlfriend play Marge’s body like an instrument was too compelling, a lot more arousing than he figured it’d be honestly, and his eyes

locked onto the prey in her grasp as Marge got closer and closer to orgasm. Either her time with the vampires had put her body on a hair trigger, or she naturally had one. Dolareido did seem to attract those types.

He was no different. He was already hard.

“And she can satisfy the boys for me.”

“Boys?” Marge asked, eyes snapping open wide and head turning to look up at the taller woman behind her.

“My four ghouls. They miss doing the four-on-one thing, you know? They get laid regularly, but that’s just with random kine at the club. They’d love to have a girl they can all pound on at the same time.” Jessy tightened her grip on the girl’s throat, pulling a meek little whimper from her. “Which I know you’d love.”

Marge squeaked again.

Laughing, Jessy let go of the woman, and gave her a small shove. Marge stumbled but didn’t fall, some of those hunter reflexes coming into play despite how her body was clearly two seconds away from orgasm. Poor woman. Jessy was a bitch, and left her boiling.

“Ok, now suck off my boyfriend while I try on some dresses.”

Eric stared at Jessy for a few moments before looking at Marge. The hunter met his eyes, blushed, and got on her knees. He hadn’t expected this.

Humming like she was working on a garden, Jessy walked over to the bench past Marge, scooped up a dress, stepped around her, put her back to Eric, faced the large mirror, and undressed. Eric wanted to watch that, and he did a bit, but Marge was between in his legs and on her knees in seconds, and slowly undoing the fly of his

pants. He didn't stop her. He told Jessy he was willing to let other people join them, though he didn't expect it to happen at a clothing store, that was currently open, with kine walking by just ten or twenty feet away.

Marge grinned up at him, again giving him a peek of that quietly mischievous personality that loved being the center of attention. If, and when she got more comfortable with the nightlife, there was a good chance she might actually become a bit of a brat. He'd met a few of those types when he was famous, and they were very good at getting people to pay attention to them. No wonder Jessy had been drawn to her.

As Marge pulled his length out of his pants, and let out a quiet moan as she leaned in while looking up at him, he had to wonder how much of this relationship between her and Jessy was Marge scratching Jessy's itch to be dominant with someone, or Marge tricking her into doing just that. Women were crafty creatures.

Marge wrapped her hand around the base of his cock, pulled it toward her, and set it along her face so it pressed against her cheek and went past her eye and over her forehead. Before he could say anything, she kissed it and slid her lips up the length of it until she found the swollen tip. Gently, she wrapped her lips around it, and took her time bathing it with her tongue as she got comfortable, scooting in a little closer.

“How about this?”

“W-What?” Eric snapped his attention back up to Jessy.

“Dude. Pay attention.” Somewhere along the line, she'd already changed into a black leather dress. “How about this?” Grinning like a giddy idiot, she did an elbow-in-the-air dramatic magazine cover pose.



“Uh, looks a little plain.” And it was a little plain. Sexy as fuck, but it was just a black leather dress with a short skirt and a tight, slim top. No flair or anything.

“Ha. Better fashion advice than usual. We should do this more often.” Nodding, she stripped down to nothing but little black underwear, did a little dance for him meant to make her tits and ass bounce — they did — before she grabbed another dress, and slipped it on over her head.

“I didn’t think I’d ever be good at giving fashion advice.”

“You’re better than the boys. Probably ‘cause of your history.” Shrugging, she faced him and came a little closer, now wearing a white dress, just as short as the first, but also with a stomach window cross laced. “This?”

Eric squirmed as Marge slid more of him into her mouth. “Better.”

“Better, but...”

“Not really digging white on you.”

“I look good in white!”

“I mean, you do, but it doesn’t really fit your ... vibe.” A small groan sneaked in through his words, and he frowned down at Marge. She only grinned up at him as she slowly dragged her lips back over his glans until she placed a kiss on the tip, before enveloping it again.

“What? I can’t pull off fair maiden?”

He stared at her, and gestured down at the girl between his legs with one hand. Jessy laughed, but nodded after a second and picked up another dress, and stripped again.

“Alright, how about this?” She looked in the mirror and slid the olive dress down over her body. It didn’t have sleeves, or a back, and it hugged her whole body snug. Very snug. It was also partly see-through.

“That ... kinda ... works.” He breathed deep as a pulse of bliss worked its way from the head of his cock down underneath it and behind his testicles. Flexing muscles built up pressure, and he let the breath go as he felt pleasure building.

“You think? The fabric is really thin. I feel pretty naked in this. Which is awesome.” Nodding, she sat down beside him, and grinned down at Marge as she reached down, and slid her fingers into the girl’s hair. “Think Fiona will wear something similar? She likes green. It’s a redhead thing.”

“She—” He shivered as the first pulse of cum shot through its length, and the hard flex of his cock in Marge’s mouth announced it. If she was going to lift her head, she didn’t even try, not with Jessy’s hand in her hair. Instead, she slowed her hand on the base of his girth, and eased how much she licked and suckled, using her grip to milk his cum onto her tongue instead.

Jessy kept her hand where it was.

“She does like green,” he said, after a few more seconds of watching Marge. She didn’t stop, gently working her hand up and down his cock as he flooded her mouth with his cum. His girlfriend continued to keep the hunter’s head pinned where it was.

Oh. That’s why she was doing this, or at least this specific act. As insanely horny and kinky as Jessy was, she was a vampire. That meant the only thing that went down her throat she wasn’t willing to vomit up later, was blood.

So she hired — sort of — Marge to do the job for her. And she did just that, her eyes drifting between Jessy and Eric as she swallowed

down his cum. Unfortunately for her, he was Uratha. The moment she swallowed him down, another gush of his cum poured over her tongue, and another. She blinked up at him as she continued to stroke him, earning another pulse of pleasure down through his length and into his core, and another wave of the hot, heavy fluid into her mouth. And another. She swallowed them down again, blinking up at him a few times in surprise. And then again, because he was still hard.

Jessy outright purred as she watched, before looking back up to him. “I know, right? Fiona looks so damn good in green. But she prefers the brighter shit, and it goes well with the skin and freckles and stuff.” Winking at him, she took Eric’s right hand, and slid it into Marge’s hair, until his palm was holding most of her head and gently pinning her on his cock. Marge shivered, and smiled up at him with her shy-but-not-so-shy eyes.

Satisfied, Jessy got back up, and slipped out of the dress, making sure to sway her ass left and right as she did. It was a damn tight dress, and it hugged her snug as it pulled up over her curves.

“I was thinking,” she went on, “we can’t let Marge in on the big secrets, but she wants to get a little more involved in other stuff. She is a hunter, you know?” She grabbed another dress. Blue, this time. Not see-through, but with how loose it was it might as well have been. It was nothing more than a couple of dangling straps over the chest that tied around behind the neck, very loose, and connected at the waist before splitting into four strips for a skirt that reached all the way down to her ankle. The four strips were thin, and barely covered anything, including her underwear.

“Need to wear a blue thong with this,” she said, “or, you know, nothing.”

“Marge wants to get into ... hunts?” he said. Before he realized he was even doing it, he nudged Marge’s head toward him, helping her

take another inch of his cock. She didn't resist.

“Yeap. Her, Harcourt, and Dennis. Harcourt probably ‘cause he’s with Clara now, and getting interested in whatever she’s up to. But the dress, what do you think?” She spun around a bit, fast enough the leg strips swung out for a second, and the straps on her chest swung out enough to expose her breasts for second, too. At least they settled back over them when she stopped spinning, covering her nipples, barely.

“I think I like it. It’s very fancy.”

“Ha, right? This looks more Daeva than anything, but whatever, I’m cool dressing up like a pretty bitch for a night.” Nodding, she sat beside him again, and reached between his legs as she faced him. She winked at him, intertwined her fingers with Marge’s, and helped stroke his length faster. “Isn’t this fun?”

“I do like a lady in a dress.”

She laughed. “You know what I mean, jackass.”

Before he could respond, she leaned in and kissed him. She purred into him, even moaned a little, and stroked his length faster, squeezing it the way he liked, the way she learned after being with him for months.

He came again, and Jessy chuckled into his lips as she milked him into Marge’s mouth.

Ok, yeah, he could get used to this.

## Chapter 164

~~Jack~~

“There’s going to be a lot of vampires there, Mary,” Jack said.

“I know.”

“They know you’re a resurrected person. They’re going to be watching you all night.”

“I know.”

“Some of them might even try and corner you, and, uh, ‘convince’ you to come with them.” He air-quoted convince.

She laughed and shrugged. “I know.”

Him, his sister, and his mom were in a limousine, currently on the way to the Black Hall, with a loyal thrall driving them. His thralls weren’t coming. Maybe next time, but he didn’t feel entirely secure with his three girls coming to the ball, not when Jacob was still an unknown factor. Antoinette wasn’t bringing her ghouls, either.

Mulder stayed back at the mansion, playing watch duty with the girls. They’d gotten used to the undead familiars, and were probably playing with Mulder right now, making puzzles for him to solve with their shiny jewelry and stuff. Find the ring under the cups, dig in the couch for a bracelet, things like that. The birds’ minds were never the same after being turned undead, but there was still a sliver of crow in there, and Jack was thankful his thralls were happy to play with them.

Scully, on the other hand, flew overhead, following the limousine, sending Jack updates about whatever she saw. She'd stay outside once they arrived, his scout. Maybe in the future he'd invite her into the ball, but for now he wanted her outside and doing recon, hopefully without anyone noticing.

"Not to mention the dress," he said, gesturing to Mary.

"Hey! I picked a nice dress."

It was a nice dress, white, with tiny straps that hooked around the neck and hugged a snug front to her chest, before ending in a skirt that went long, and split at the thigh. It could have even been a normal fancy dress, and not hyper sexual, if not for the fact the chest was really thin, width-wise. Her breasts were almost popping out the sides, held in only by the extra strap that pulled on the chest and went around the back, almost like a swimsuit. Topped with some fancy, but subtle jewelry, she looked great. Too great. Surrogate father instincts kicking in, maybe? Or just brother instincts.

"A little more revealing than I'd like," their mom said.

Mary gestured to their mom. "Pot calling kettle black, don't you think?"

Jack groaned as he glanced at his mom, and looked away. Yeap, Mary was right, their mom was dressed in an even more revealing dress, black, and pretty much the same as Mary's except the chest also split down the front to show off an absurd amount of cleavage, all the way down. Like, now he knew his mom shaved her privates smooth, all the way down.

At least they were wearing underwear, tiny thongs, but he wasn't happy being able to tell the color of them matched their dresses. That was information no man should ever have to know about his sister or mother, vampires or not.

“You know you could wear suits,” he said. “Lot of ladies wear suits.”

“To the ball?” Mary asked.

“I mean, a few ... jackets open and shirts undone to only the bottom button ... with no bra.” Still, slightly more conservative than the dresses they were wearing.

“That does sound pretty sexy, honestly.”

He groaned and shook his head. “Mom, please keep her out of trouble.”

“I will ... try.”

“Mom!”

Their mom giggled, reached out, and gave his knee a slap.

“Come on, Jack! Mary’s alive, and it wouldn’t be fair of me to tell her she’s not allowed to enjoy herself the way we have.”

Jack put up a hand. “She’s been alive for three nights. How about we ease her into things?”

“No!” Mary slapped his knee, much harder than their mom. “I’ve been a ghost for so long, I have a lot to make up for. I’m going to enjoy myself tonight, in whatever way I want. And unlike you two, I can get drunk.”

The idea of his sister getting drunk at a Black Hall ball sent his mind spiraling into some very disturbing imagery. Disturbing for him, at least. He didn’t want to stumble onto his sister getting fingered and Kissed by three vampires while lying on a table naked, like a meal. Which was exactly what a lot of vampires there would think the moment they saw her.

“Mary,” their mom said, “I know I don’t have to give you the sex talk. And I know it’s not an issue with vampires anyway, but at least be careful? You can drink, sure. You can... ‘socialize’, if you want.” She struggled hard with the word socialize. “But remember, it’s a room full of predators. All of them will be looking for a meal, and that can be a fun time for both parties, but not all the predators play nice.”

“Then it’s a good thing your sire is the Prince, and she’s going to make sure everyone gets along.” Grinning like an evil imp, Mary nodded and drummed her palms on her knee. She was excited. “Don’t worry. I won’t leave the Black Hall without at least one of you.”

Jack sighed, but nodded. That was a good compromise. Unfortunately, it meant she had the entire ball’s duration to get herself into trouble, and she was good at that. Very good.

The limousine pulled up to the building, and he watched Mary’s eyes light up as she looked out the car window. Their mom was right. He should lighten up and let her enjoy herself however she wanted.

Christ, she really was alive. This was his sister, a reckless, bubbly girl who never thought more than five minutes ahead. And she’d been happy back in the day. And she was happy now.

He smiled as he watched her, and for the first time in a long time, let himself imagine what it’d be like to have his mom and sister back together and in his life again. Terrifying, considering his mom was dating Jacob, and had become intimately familiar with Black Blood. Horrifying, because he knew it was likely Mary would want to become a vampire, and join the nightlife.

But maybe...

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“Now presenting, Mister Jack Terry, Right Hand of the Invictus. Miss Samantha Terry, childe of the Prince, and young dragon. And ... Miss Mary Terry, biological child of Samantha Terry.” The presenter, dressed in a suit better suited for a penguin, actually did a double take at the card in his hand. Someone — probably another one of Antoinette’s thralls — must have given it to him at the last minute.

“Holy shit,” Mary whispered, leaning over to Jack. “That’s ... wow.”

The Black Hall was a ballroom, but Mary apparently hadn’t quite prepared herself for what that meant. It meant chandelier. It meant a huge floor filled with talking people, and tables with expensive and pristine white cloths over them. It meant lots of fancy clothes. It meant a second floor that you walked up to with either of two, giant, curving staircases that spread out and turned into a balcony that circled the ballroom. It meant a small orchestra playing live music up on the second floor, with the ceiling acoustics making sure everyone could hear it. It meant an entire building filled with black marble; it didn’t have the same white lightning veins the Elysium Tower did, but it wasn’t far off. It meant luxury.

Jack held out his elbow, and nudged Mary with it. She nudged him back.

“No, you idiot. Take my arm.”

“Oh, right!” Giggling, she hooked his arm, and walked with him, their mom right behind them and closer to Mary as they moved toward the crowd. They had a small staircase to go down, a circular one that opened up in the ballroom, and Jack made sure they took each step slowly so the people could get a good look. A show of confidence.

Bella was nearby. They spotted each other instantly, and Jack held her gaze for a few moments. Friend? Foe? She looked at him, his

mom, his sister, and frowned as she disappeared into the churning crowd. Neither then. Well, that was good enough for him.

More than a few people stared at Mary, leaning over to whisper to each other as Jack came closer to the crowd. Some actually stopped what they were doing to look at her, trying to discern if she was a vampire or not. It didn't take long before everyone realized she was not. The only non-paranormal in the ball not bound by the Vinculum, save for the hunters, and thus a huge Masquerade threat. But also deeply connected to the Prince and Jack, two people no one wanted to cross.

Jack didn't know if Mary knew how weirdly, quietly tense the whole night had become because of that, but if she did she didn't let it show. She was all smiles, genuine, big smiles, as she looked at the tables near the walls of the giant building.

“No food?” she asked.

“No, dear,” their mom said. “I told you to eat something before you came.”

“I did, a little.”

“Good. The only food that'll get on those tables is other kine.”

“Ooooh.”

Jack bit down on his groan. Sex was everywhere in Dolareido, and he had to accept that his sister was going to get into it faster than his mom did. Like, maybe tonight fast. Hopefully she wouldn't end up getting involved with Jacob or witch orgies, but knowing Mary, she'd end up getting involved with some 'bad boys' or something.

Don't think about that, just focus on having a fun time at the ball.

Yeah right. He hated these things. Even with all his new found money, physical, social, and political power, he still hated these things. Too many people, too many shoulders to dodge, too many eyes to consider, too many everything.

But at least he was better at it. Socializing was a skill, and it was useful. So was wearing a good suit that made him look professional and sexy. He had both. The suit he wore now was silver, with a silver vest, black tie and white shirt, and all sorts of bits of flair, including a silver chain that connected from a vest button to a genuine handheld antique watch in his pocket. It was the sort of suit Viktor would have worn, fabulous and imposing.

“Jack!” Out of the crowd came a bouncing redhead in a green dress. A genuine ballroom dress at that, no cleavage or anything, with a big fluffy skirt made of a dozen layers. Her hair was straightened too, and bounced around her shoulders in waves.

“Fiona?”

“Aye! Ye like?” She spun around for him as he came down the last step.

Oh. The dress was plenty covering from the front, but it had no back. At all. The back cut so low he could tell she wasn't wearing any underwear.

“Nice ass,” Mary said with a wink.

Fiona burst into giggles. “Damien said I should wear a dress that was nae so focused on my tits. I went with ass.”

Jack looked past her to the crowd. A lot of people were still watching, but a lot had gone back to their conversing, too. One man stood there looking their way, and when he noticed Jack noticing, he nodded as he came over. Damien, wearing a far simpler black

suit, but without a tie, and with many of the shirt buttons undone, exposing his lean body.

A few women were wearing the same sort of suit, but Damien had that pretty boy look to him that really sealed the deal, according to Antoinette. Romantic vampire mystique. Jack could see it.

“Hello,” Damien said, nodding to the group. “Antoinette didn’t come with you, Jack?”

“Nah. She’s gonna arrive fashionably late, probably with Elaine. Anyone from the Circle here yet?”

“No.”

“Uratha?”

“All here.” He gestured around. “Mingling.”

Jack had half expected them to group up. But apparently they’d gotten used to Dolareido enough to socialize with the vampires individually, many of them sipping alcohol while talking. Comfortable enough to get drunk, which meant comfortable enough to let their guard down, mostly. Not that werewolves would get drunk from just sipping wine, but it did look like a few of them were doing more than sipping. Hopefully they wouldn’t get loose tongues.

Eric he expected, of course. With Jessy on his arm, slipping him more glasses, the man was going to get at least a little drunk. She was wearing a fancy blue dress, but of course it had a lot of skin showing. Marge, for some reason, stood with them, smiling and laughing as she sipped her own drink. It wouldn’t take much alcohol to get a small kine like that drunk. And considering her history with Isabella, probably Kissed before the night was done.

Natasha was there with her boys. They were both wearing silk shirts, partly see-through, with most buttons undone. One in black,

the other in white. Both in pants of the opposite color. Either they were playing off the fact they usually went everywhere together, or Natasha was.

The tiny Mekhet wore a black dress, something that hugged her body damn tight with laces along the sides, from thigh to armpit, no underwear. Latex? It was shiny, that was for sure, and it wasn't like vampires could sweat, so they didn't have a problem with the material. She turned to face Jack and waved to him from a distance, and he waved back, cocking an eyebrow. She smiled and shrugged. The latex also had a window between her small breasts, almost completely revealing them. God damn, she'd changed.

"You two look great, by the way," Damien said, nodding to Mary and Samantha. His socializing skills were getting better. Jack doubted his mom or sister could hear the likely dozen rehearsals in it.

Both women smiled bright.

"And you," Mary said, "look like the main character in a novel I read not long ago."

Jack shot his mom a glare, and she whistled innocently as she looked away. She'd heard that from Antoinette, and told Mary. And Mary naturally saw the opportunity for a joke.

"I know!" Fiona burst into giggles again as she hooked her man's arm. "But he's mine. Go find yer own."

"I think I just might." Nodding, smile growing larger, Mary looked around at the room. "This really is less a ball and more a night club with an orchestra.

"Vampires," their mom said. "It's, uh, a weird balance with vampires."

Her daughter nodded. “Pretentious but obsessed with sex. Sounds about right.” Before their mom could stop her, Mary scooped a glass of red wine off the tray of a nearby serving kine, and downed it.

“Mary!” Their mom took the glass and gave it back to the server. “That could have been blood!”

Jack snorted on a laugh as he imagined his sister downing a glass of blood. Vampire humor.

“Nah, I could tell from the consistency.”

Their mom gasped. “Don’t tell me my daughter is an alcoholic.”

“Wine connoisseur,” Mary lied as she rolled her eyes. “Come on, Mom. Introduce me to some people.”

“You don’t want Jack to—”

“Jack can do it later. But I don’t think he’ll be able to get away from the ... official capacity of his position.” Mary snickered and grinned at him. “Everyone knows him, apparently.”

“That’s ... true.” Jack groaned and waved her off. “Yeah, she’s right. Go have fun. But please don’t drink yourself into a really stupid decision.”

“I plan to do just that.”

Their mom elbowed Mary in the hip, hard enough to get a small yelp out of her.

“Don’t worry, Jack. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

Keep an eye on her until Jacob showed up, sure.

His mom and sister walked off and disappeared into the crowd, and were immediately swarmed by people asking questions, mostly

about Mary. Mary managed to handle it with her typical social enthusiasm, and any worry she might have had about saying the wrong thing, or that she was talking to literal killers, didn't seem to affect her. How the hell could she be so good at socializing naturally, when Jack had to spend years training at it?

Jack looked up. On the balcony, behind the thick marble railing, stood Daniel. He wore a fancy suit, nothing sexy about it, and he kept his gaze on the crowd below, scanning left to right. Usually the man preferred to be completely unseen during these events, or in a less obvious position. But there was a woman standing beside him, this time.

Athalia. And her eyes were pointed at Mary.

“Oh shit,” he said.

Damien looked at him, and followed his eyes up to Athalia. “Oh shit.”

“I fucking forgot. Christ, with all the shit that's been happening, I fucking forgot.”

“Think she'll be angry?”

Jack winced as he stared at Athalia, but the Begotten's eyes were transfixed on Mary.

“I ... think she might be. Fiona, Athalia say anything about Mary since she got a body?”

Fiona shrugged as she moved to stand in front of them both. “No, but I have nae talked to her much the past few days. She's been hanging with her lad, Daniel.”

“Hopefully,” Jack said, “he's been helping her stay calm. She's probably furious that Mary's alive while Angela ... yeah.”

“Ye think?” Fiona frowned as she shook her head. “I dunno. I think Athalia’s a lot calmer these days, and she’ll be happy for Sam.”

“Or she’s still deciding,” Damien said, looking to Jack. “What do you want to do?”

“Let’s just leave her alone for now. Daniel’s with her. He’ll keep things cool.”

“Aye,” Fiona said. “Good idea. Come on then! I want to show off.” Smile unwavering, Fiona grabbed Damien’s arm, and pulled him back into the crowd.

Poor Damien. He hated this shit as much as Jack did, and he looked to him with begging eyes. If it’d been anyone else pulling Damien, Jack would have saved the man from the unwanted social situation. But his girlfriend? Jack just smiled and waved, and Damien managed to glare at him before disappearing behind bodies. He’d pay for that later, probably. Ah well.

Mary and Fiona, and probably the Uratha, were here to have fun, socialize, get drunk, etcetera, while every vampire in the place was looking for a way to uncover some information that’d give them a leg up in the Danse Macabre. Balls weren’t had for fun. They were had as a political arena free-for-all, where everyone got to engage and try and walk away from skirmishes with more information than the other person. Not coming wasn’t an option, because even if you gave away more information than you earned in the arena, it was usually worth it for the information gained, anyway.

Which meant every political player would be here. Sure, some of the tunnel dwellers, particularly the more deformed Nosferatu, would stay out, despite the open invite. But any vampire who gave a shit about the city and their place in it was here. Sure enough, Jack spotted Michael, chatting with Maria. He spotted Garry, chatting with Isabella; no idea what that was about. He spotted Bella and her Carthian buddies talking with Avery and a few Uratha. He spotted



Garry's childe Jeremy Long talking with Parker and Vicky, probably about their brothels in the seedier corners of Dolareido. Business propositions. Even the younger vampires, Tash's childe Vivienne, Gloria's childe Amanda, Jordan, Garry's boyfriend Mike, and even the Carthian Cory, had gathered to talk, probably to play the politics game at a more ground level, where young vampires lived.

Cory glanced over his shoulder, spotted Jack, and inched himself away until a random body stood between them. The guy would probably never forget what it'd been like to have someone punch a hole in his guts, literally.

Jack sighed, and stepped aside as a few more people were announced at the door. He found a corner to stand in, and sure enough, the corner opened up with more space as nearby vampires drifted away. They didn't want to look scared of him, but they made sure he had at least eight feet of free space in any direction at all times.

At least until Garry came up to him. Jack raised a brow at the man, but Garry just laughed as he parked beside him, a wine glass full of blood in his hand. He wore a suit, but it wasn't especially fancy or anything, soft blue with a blood red shirt under the blazer. Interesting choice.

"You really hate these things, don't you?" Garry asked.

"You don't?"

"I can enjoy a party. Maybe not this one, with everyone looking to stab each other in the back."

"They're not looking to stab each other, just ... get an advantage over each other."

The Gangrel shrugged and sipped his drink. "Whatever, same idea. At a proper party, no one's looking to fuck each other over.

Just fuck each other.”

“I guess that’s better.”

Garry laughed. “Though, at the Prince’s parties, I guess it’s both. She coming or what?”

“You know her.”

“Right. Gotta be fashionably late and shit.” Chuckling again, more than Jack had ever heard the man laugh at a ball, Garry looked around them at the empty space that’d been created. “You really scare people.”

Jack reached under his shirt enough to pull out a sliver of his necklace for a moment. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine if a necklace is the only thing keeping you from going on a killing spree.”

“I wou—”

“You wouldn’t. The curse would. Sometimes I think I shouldn’t have listened to Azamel, and just killed you instead.”

Jack sneered at the man. “You would have anyway. She stopped you, remember? Unless you think you can kill me now.”

Garry grinned at him and took another sip. “Nah. And besides, you got work to do, right?”

“I do.” The ritual wouldn’t stop itself.

“Gonna let me help?”

“If a problem comes up where I think you can help, I’ll let you know. But it’ll probably be a too-many-hands situation.”

“If shit hits the fan, and I could have helped but you didn’t get me, then I’ll really kill you, you know.”

Wincing, Jack looked out to the rest of the crowd. “If that happens, I’ll probably already be dead.”

Sighing, Garry took another sip of his drink, and pat Jack on the shoulder. Jack froze. He didn’t expect physical touch. No one did. At least twenty vampires took notice, and stopped talking as they stared at Garry give Jack an almost buddy-buddy shoulder tap, before walking off.

Having Garry talk to him personally like that was weird, but it was weirder that he didn’t ask about Mary. He wanted to, that much was obvious. Everyone at the party was sneaking glances at her, walking a little closer than necessary so they could see past the other vampires and check out the girl who got resurrected. A glance up showed the sheriff still watching her, Athalia too, so it wasn’t like anyone was gonna try anything.

Thankfully, his mom was still with her, and entertaining people’s questions. More vampires were happy to watch from a distance and not give away that they didn’t understand how someone could ever get resurrected, but a few of the braver vamps were comfortable enough walking up to his sister and mother and actually asking. Jack couldn’t hear with the music and crowd drowning him out, but the peeks he managed between the moving shoulders showed his mom deflecting questions as best she could.

Go over and help them? Maybe when an ancilla or elder decided to question them. Until then he—

“Garry chatting with you and patting your shoulder?” a woman’s voice said. “That was odd.”

Jack turned, and nearly jaw dropped. He didn’t, because he’d gotten pretty good at controlling his expressions compared to who

he was four years ago, but it was damn close.

Clara stood there in a white dress, her dark box-braid hair done up in some weird, top-heavy tower thing with a small metal rod stabbing through it to keep it up. The dress was very, very revealing, lots of lace straps that crisscrossed and held a couple white triangles over her breasts before connecting to a long skirt with two splits that went very high. White thong, very tiny, which according to the dress, she wanted everyone to know she was wearing. It all matched her tan skin perfectly.

“Jesus,” he whispered.

Her smile brightened. Oh shit, he said that out loud.

“It’s a nice dress,” she said. “Elaine helped me pick it out.”

“Of course she did. Did she, uh ... accomplish her mission?”

“Mission?”

He gestured to her. “With you and Harcourt.”

“She—oh. Christ, she’s still trying to get us into bed?”

“Yeap. I’ll take that as a no?”

“Nah, she hasn’t succeeded. Yet. She’s been flirting with me incessantly, and ... after that time she Kissed me, I gotta admit, it’s been harder to say no than I’d like.” She grinned and scrunched up her nose like a squirrel. “And Harcourt is a guy. If I showed him another woman’s tits, giant tits, in the palms of yours truly, I’m pretty sure he’d break instantly.”

Jack gulped and looked around desperately for a drink. A server walked by, ten feet away, and Jack scooped up a drink, almost startling the server, before he went back to Clara.

“Elaine’s pretty convincing.” The memory of Elaine holding Clara’s naked breasts and Kissing her in front of everyone was seared into Jack’s mind. The thought of her riding Clara while Harcourt fucked them had naturally come up in his mind, too. The thought of Jack fucking Clara and Elaine together, instead of Harcourt, had come up a lot more.

“I hear she managed to seduce Mason,” Clara said.

“Yeap.”

“And, uh, I hear she even managed to get him to transform for her, for sexy times.”

He choked on a laugh’. “She’s pretty adventurous, sexually speaking. Every werewolf trying transforming now, for sex?”

“Most. I haven’t.”

“But...”

“But Harcourt is open to the idea.” She laughed and shrugged, and sipped her own glass. “I have no idea how it’d go, you know? I mean, with a guy werewolf and a normal — or vampire — girl, I can kinda understand. But a girl werewolf?” She held up her hands, created a ring with a thumb and index, and then penetrated the ring with her other index finger. Then she increased the size of the hole using her whole hand, and again penetrated it with just a finger, now much smaller by comparison.

Jack laughed until he had to reel it in before he spilled his drink.

“Maybe. You’ll never know unless you try.”

“I suppose. We’re all pretty new to this whole sex thing. When transformed, I mean. There’s something damn weird about this city,

that we can transform and not feel a need to go berserk, assuming we transform where there's no fighting or hunting."

"Sure it's the city doing it?"

"Double sure. You don't understand, Jack. Gauru form is all aggression and a need to hunt, claw, bite, shred, and kill. It takes over you and—"

"Vampires have Beasts, you know." Not to mention Jack's unusual circumstance.

"Yeah but that's only a problem when you're literally starving, right?"

"Yeah, and when you get a little too used to ... hunting, clawing, biting, shredding, and killing. Beast instincts get louder and louder until they take over. Then you're just a mindless draugr that needs putting down."

"Then I guess being draugr is kinda like Gauru form, mentally. It's not something you fuck around with." Clara nodded as she looked out to the crowd. "Never met a draugr."

"Pretty big Masquerade risk. No draugr in Dolareido while I've been a vampire, but they do sometimes pop up." And were taken down by vampires. Jack did not look forward to joining a hunt like that.

"Happier thoughts!" She sipped her drink and nudged him with her elbow. "Your sister's alive. No one saw that coming."

"No one tell you?"

"We knew. Matt and Art told us because Tash told them. But we were all a little ... scared."

“You’re telling me,” he said. “Mom is beside herself with joy, and Mary is right behind her. They’re both so happy, and all I can think is: this is too good to be true.”

“I don’t know about too good to be true. She was a ghost, right? And she has a body now, right? A ghost possessing a body isn’t unheard of.”

“I guess. It’s ... not really the same.”

“I guess not. She really seems alive. And, um, excited.”

Jack winced as he managed to get another peek at his damn sister. She was working on another glass, and was getting a little too close to a vampire that’d approached her. Zack, a Daeva in Isabella’s troupe. Behind him was, speak of the devil, Isabella Leuvion and her lover Hella Vendram. Hella wore a nice white dress, but Isabella wore black, tight black, with a long tight skirt. Hell, she had a black under bust corset on, tight enough it’d be a breathing hazard for a human. She wasn’t saying anything, just watching as Zack chatted up Jack’s mom and sis, probably on his boss’s orders.

And Mary was responding, giggling even as she smiled at Zack and nodded about something. She was flirting with him.

“You’re nothing like your sister,” Clara said.

“We’re ... similar in some ways, I guess. But no, we’re not.”

“Almost seems like Natasha would fit you better as a sister.”

Jack laughed. “She’s a lot more similar to me than Mary, yeah, but that’s not really what you find in family members, you know? You’re similar over ... less obvious stuff.”

“So where do you and Mary overlap?”

A deep need for honesty, even when it was dumb.

“I’d rather not say.”

It was Clara’s turn to laugh.

“Where’s your harem?”

“I—it’s not a harem! Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel are back at the mansion. I’ll bring them to a ball when I feel comfortable about it.”

With an evil grin, Clara nodded toward one of the nearby ghouls, a man, who was slowly getting herded toward the one of the tables by two women, looked blatantly nervous. Two Carthians having fun with one of their ghouls, and judging from the look on a man’s face who was watching nearby, it was his ghoul. He was having fun letting a couple other vampires prey on him.

“You don’t want your girls getting Kissed by other vampires?”

“No.” In fact, the idea of his thralls being rounded up and herded by other vampires grated on him, badly.

“Typical man. Doesn’t wanna share.”

Jack raised a brow at Clara, but she just grinned at him as she sipped her wine. It couldn’t have been her first drink, with the way she tilted a little when she sipped, and the way she was smiling at him.

A part of him was tempted to ask her about them, her and Jack, maybe say something about how much he wished it could have worked. But somewhere deep in his dumbass brain, a kernel of wisdom was growing. Let sleeping dogs lie, or something like that. She’d moved on, and judging from the way she waved at Harcourt when he peeked out from the crowd before striking up a conversation with Natasha, Clara seemed pretty happy with him.



Which confused him, cause the man was clearly empty in the head. But maybe that was the better fit for Clara. No accounting for taste.

She turned to ask him something, but before she could, the announcer spoke up.

“Presenting elder Jacob, leader of the Circle of the Crone, and his witches Beatrice Damor, Jennifer Denver, Aaron Jones, and Othello Manu.”

---

~~Beatrice~~

The crowd stared at them, more than a few of them dropping their jaws. Every single witch, coming together, after what had no doubt become the biggest point of gossip in the whole city, would attract a lot of attention.

Jacob wore a suit that looked more like some sort of hybrid between an expensive business suit, and an Indian man's dress; the suit's jacket buttons were off to the side and the jacket was snug around his neck before reaching past his hips. Purple, which he'd taken a liking to lately. Combined with the sunglasses, he looked like some sort of rich Indian billionaire fashionado. It was actually kinda annoying how well he pulled off eclectic shit.

Othello wore some simple dress pants and a black silk shirt that he didn't bother to button, and Madison stayed snug at his side, wearing a classic open back red dress. Simple, but effective, and Triss could already see a lot of eyes going Othello's way.

Aaron wore a gray casual suit, no tie. No tie, because Jen had yanked it off and threatened to garrote him with it if he insisted on wearing the most boring possible clothes combination in the history of ties. She'd also undone the first few buttons of his shirt and forced him to keep the jacket undone, also under threat of violence. Eventually, the man submitted.

Then there was Jen and Triss. Matching dresses, because Jen wanted to make a statement: they came as a pair. It was Jen's way of being romantic, Triss supposed. For whatever reason, Jen wasn't exactly interested in romance herself, but despite that, she was basically Triss's girlfriend. It was a weird friends-with-benefits-but-more situation, and Triss was happy for it. The matching dresses were almost heartwarming in that light. And sexy as fuck, when considering it basically announced to everyone at the party that they came together for sexy times, too.

They both wore black, loose dresses that hung, open back with a long skirt, split all the way up past the hip, with the waist of the dress held snug with a tight strap. Opposite of the split, the dress didn't cover the arm or shoulder or anything, saving that for the side with the split, where the dress had a shoulder and sleeve. So, left shoulder covered, right leg covered. Right shoulder naked, left leg naked. And considering how little fabric actually went into making the dresses, it basically meant everyone got to see Triss's entire left leg and left ass cheek, no underwear, and most of the right side of her torso. They got to see most of her tattoos. If the dress had been any looser, her right tit would have been out.

Jen wore the same dress. Jen and Triss did look similar, crocodile teeth and green snake eyes aside, so it actually kinda worked. It sealed the 'pair' motif. And it pulled a lot of eyes, just as Jen knew it would.

The five of them — er, six, with Madison — stepped down into the pit of doom. Christ, she hated balls, and not just because they reminded her of Julias.

"I know you're all wondering," Jacob said, voice loud enough for everyone to hear, not loud enough to ruin the music, "but if you want details, I'm afraid you won't get them. Now stop bothering my girlfriend and her daughter." And like he'd just told a bunch of

children to stop being noisy, he walked straight through the crowd toward Sam, and pulled her to him.

Cue big fancy kiss, complete with Jacob dipping Sam. Cue swooning sigh from Mary.

Triss and Jen shared glances and rolled their eyes.

“Boys,” Jen said, looking behind her, “go have fun.” Her two ghouls followed in behind, dressed in some casual suits not unlike Aaron’s, and nodded with a couple of evil smiles before they moved into the crowd.

“You know some other vamp might try and poach them.”

“Maybe. But after learning that the great Beatrice managed resurrection, I think most people will be a little hesitant to cross us.”

“Heh. Fuck, people are going to bother me with questions, aren’t they?”

Jen grinned as she nodded to the crowd, who were slowly recovering from Jacob’s epic entrance. “If Samantha or Mary were stupid enough to reveal who was responsible, probably. Neither of them are exactly trained in controlling their tongue.”

“I think Sam will be fine. Mary, not so much, but she doesn’t know enough to be a problem. And I don’t think she’ll blabber ... assuming she doesn’t get too drunk.”

Both girls chuckled, a little nervously, when Mary downed her drink and moved onto another. But surprisingly, Jacob stopped her from shotting the next one. A short exchange between them and Sam led to some laughter, and Mary nodded as she sipped the drink instead.

Damn, Jacob. The dude had no business being as suave as he was, or looking as good as he did in the clothes he wore.

Triss spotted Jack, and she waved at him. He returned the wave. So did Clara. Holy shit she looked good in a pretty, slutty white dress. Like, more than good. Like, now Triss really pitied the kid being forced to pick between her and Antoinette.

Instead of going to talk to the kid, Triss did a little more recon at the base of the stairs where she was still considered 'not quite in the pit'. She wouldn't get swarmed by curious people as long as she stayed here, before she'd inevitably join the arena. Not yet.

She spotted the werewolves, mingling, getting drunk, getting horny. More than a few of them were either looking Mary's way, Jacob's way, or Triss's way. She spotted most of the vampires she knew, though Miss Tits and Miss Bigger Tits weren't here yet. Begotten? She spotted Fiona, showing off her ass instead of her tits tonight. Mark? No sign of him, thank god. Sándor? No, she didn't see him, but she knew he was either coming or already here. Fucker was probably hiding in the crowd, or maybe up on the balcony with —

Athalia. Oh shit. Triss nudged Jen's side, and both of them looked up to see Athalia and the sheriff on the balcony, looking down at Mary.

"Oh shit," Jen said.

"Oh shit, I forgot," Triss said.

"Forgot what?" Aaron asked as he stepped in beside her. He looked up. "Oh."

"Don't worry about it," Othello said, voice smooth and undaunted as he walked toward the crowd, arm over Madison's shoulders. "Athalia will be fine, now that she's getting some dick."

Jen and Triss both groaned as they watched the gorgeous idiot wander off.

“He does make a point,” Aaron said. “Crude, but pointed. Athalia isn’t the same woman she was before.”

“Should we talk to her?” Triss asked.

“I ... wouldn’t. She’s still Athalia, after all. Changed, but still her, and probably struggling with what she’s seeing. Give her time.” Nodding, Aaron the Wise walked into the crowd after Othello; probably to keep an eye on the moron and keep him from stirring up trouble.

He made sense. Athalia and Beatrice avoided each other, for the obvious reason, and now Samantha was getting to have exactly what Athalia was denied: reconciliation and reunion with her daughter. It must have fucking sucked to see that.

It didn’t take long for Othello to find someone to talk to, with the obvious attempt of getting them in bed. Bella, the asshole. But she did seem a little receptive. Maybe it was because it was Othello, and the dumb bastard could disarm most people to get them naked. Maybe it was because Madison’s red dress left little to the imagination, and Bella was looking at a tasty meal. Maybe it was because Othello was smarter than anyone realized, and he was trying to defuse the tension Bella was carrying out.

Nah, probably the first option.

Jen took Triss’s hand, and the two walked into the crowd. Sure enough, people took interest in them. Plenty of them were a bit put off by Triss’s mouth, but plenty didn’t seem to mind, either. More than a few took a long time looking at her ass, and considering the dress left the whole left ass cheek completely exposed, they got to see a lot. No point in denying it, she liked the attention despite her

words to the contrary, and Jen knew it. And, she had a fucking amazing ass.

So when she caught a peek at Sándor in the corner of her eye, and the man was clearly looking at her fucking amazing ass, she grinned. But before she could go and flaunt a little more directly, some vampires closed in on her. A lot of vampires, all Carthians.

“How’d you do it?”

She spun around, and grinned at the bald bastard. Garry. Soft blue suit with a red shirt. It looked surprisingly good on the old fucker with all his scars and shit, almost like a retired fighter enjoying his fortune or something.

“I don’t work for you anymore. I’m not telling you anything. Besides, you don’t know if I did shit.”

“Word is out. Beatrice the witch resurrected Mary the ghost.”

She groaned and looked at Jen, but Jen shrugged. Neither of them had said a thing.

“Who—”

Garry shook his head. “It wasn’t Sam or her kid.”

“Then...” Slowly, Beatrice looked through the crowd with a piercing gaze until she found the culprit responsible. Jacob, still with Sam, talking and flirting with her. People gave him space, but at the same time, the dude was weaving a tale for all nearby listeners, and getting people’s attention as Sam listened with awe. Probably about some witchy activity in a dark forgotten jungle or something. Probably preceded with a tale about how Beatrice resurrected Mary, the bastard.

Mary, standing beside her mom, listened with just as much awe. At least at first. After a while she drifted to the side a bit, and resumed her conversation with Zack and a few other vampires. She had a lot of people's attention, for multiple reasons, judging on where they were looking. And considering the girl looked tipsy already, she was already pretty damn receptive. If Sam didn't intervene, someone would have their fangs and dick in that girl before the night was over.

"Your boss is a scary man," Garry said, "and he seems hellbent on making sure you have a rough time of it."

"God damn it." She rolled her eyes, and gave her old boss a gentle shove of the shoulder. "How'd you ever become friends with that loser?"

"Not sure." Garry laughed as he looked to Jacob. But then his eyes changed. They settled, and the joy she saw fell away, replaced by an expression she'd never seen on the dude before. Regret? Nah, she'd seen that. Sadness? Seen that, too. Whatever it was, it was about Jacob.

"Well," Triss said, and she looked to the rest of the vampires who'd followed Garry, "I ain't telling y'all shit. And it's not like any of you have ghosts just hanging around asking for bodies, so don't even think about it."

The crowd frowned between each other. They'd been hoping for something. Fuck 'em. She grinned at the group, and pushed through them. Maybe it'd bite her in the ass later, dismissing them all like this, but she wasn't going to let town gossip bully her or make choices for her. Besides, none of them would do shit to her with Jacob as her boss, or Mary, considering her mother's sire was the Prince. It paid to have friends in high places.

Thankfully the crowd didn't follow her. They were getting more from Jacob anyway, and whatever ridiculous story he was telling. So

Triss took Jen's hand, and the two of them went Sándor's way.

"Not even going to try and hide it now?" Jen asked, giving Triss a small tug so she stopped walking. They couldn't see Sándor anymore, with the crowd in the way, but good bet was he picked a spot and didn't move from it, like a gargoyle.

"What?"

Laughing, Jen came in closer and put her lips on Triss's ear. "The way you were chatting with him, at the piano?"

"I like him. He's a good friend."

"He doesn't talk to anyone else, you know. Not the way I saw him talking to you, then."

"That's just cause he had an instrument in his hands. He's like that when he can focus on music."

"Boys and their toys." Jen chuckled again, and gave her ear a kiss. "But it's more than that and you know it."

"I don't know shit." She turned her head enough to glare at her friend, but Jen stayed close to her, pressing against her back as she half hugged her and spoke into her ear. Thank god the crowd and the music drowned out the whispering.

"You're acting like a teenager in denial, Triss."

That, was frustratingly accurate. Much as Triss wanted to deny it, it wasn't hard to picture her doing exactly what that description implied. A dumb fucking girl, unable to stop herself from flirting with someone because she knew she liked him, no matter how much she told herself otherwise, or told herself it was a bad idea.



Christ, it was easier when she didn't have a shred of awareness, down in her crypt, thinking everyone thought she was hideous. Then along came Julias, gave her a chance to think otherwise, and somewhere along the way, she started using her fucking brain and thinking about life and shit, too. Fuck, unlfe really was so much fucking easier when she was just angry at everyone all the time and didn't have a single real thought in her stupid head.

"I ... still want to see him."

"Then let's go see him." Jen gave her a quick kiss on the neck, took her hand, and the two of them worked through the crowd to find the man.

Sure enough, there he was. He stood there against the wall that connected up to the stair railing above, arms folded across his chest, eyes scanning the crowd just like the sheriff's did.

He wasn't wearing a suit. He was wearing some dark black pants, very dark, and a black shirt, no buttons, with a deep neck cut. It was partly see-through. He also wore some subtle black string necklaces, that gave his nightclub-friendly getup a certain air of mystery. Combined with the dark buzzed hair, short facial gruff, defined chin and god damn deep blue eyes, he looked fucking handsome.

Also, holy shit the abs. See-through shirt doing work.

Triss looked at Jen with a big frown. Jen returned it with a big smile. The clothes had been her choice, no doubt. She'd done her best to give Sándor the 'dangerous man in the corner' look, the sexy quiet guy who probably trafficked millions of dollars worth of cocaine as a hobby, and had six sex slaves at home all waiting to hop on his dick, look. It didn't match his personality at all, but it did look really good.

"Hey," she said.

“Hello,” he said. He kept his eyes on hers, despite how much skin both she and Jen had showing. Dude had control, that was for sure.

“Jen’s idea?” She gestured to his clothes.

“Yes.” Totally neutral voice and expression. She’d have to break past it, and she didn’t have a guitar or piano to use.

“I am a fashion expert,” Jen said, “to a point. I’m no Daeva. Speaking of, I see sweet Samantha, but not her sire.”

“The Prince hasn’t arrived yet.” Sándor took a moment to look Samantha’s way, and the tiniest sliver of a smile appeared before quickly fading.

“Lazy bitch,” Triss said, and she stepped over to stand beside the Begotten. “Athalia’s here.”

“She is.”

“In all the commotion trying to bring Mary back, I never thought about Athalia, and what she might think about all this.”

Sándor nodded as he looked down for a moment, did that thinking thing he did, before looking back up to his fellow Begotten on the balcony.

“I did.”

Jennifer stood beside Triss, and peeked past her at the man. “We know you did. You never stop thinking about other people.”

Triss threw a frown at her friend, but Jen kept her gaze on Sándor, impervious to Triss’s judging eyes.

“You’re right,” he said after a few moments. “Athalia will be fine. She’s happier now, now that she has someone. She ... thinks more clearly, and is less prone to anger.”

Jen nodded as she leaned back and scooted in a little closer to Triss until they were touching hips. Triss didn't move. It'd become pretty normal at this point, and Triss often found herself getting close enough to Jen to touch her casually like this, anyway.

Sándor noticed, and he smiled slightly at them before nodding back out to the crowd. "Samantha and Mary are happy."

"Fucking right they are," Triss said. "After everything that's happened, and the work we put in? I am damn fucking happy they are happy."

The man nodded, and looked at her. And ho ho ho, he couldn't help but look down for a split second at her tattoos on her chest and shoulder, and how one of them was clearly a snake coiling around her tit to bite her nipple. The nipple was covered by the dress, barely, but anyone with eyes could deduce what the snake was doing.

And then Jennifer, watching like a hawk, and being an utterly evil bitch, gave Triss's dress a small tug, right on the hip. The damn dress didn't work with underwear, so both her and her stupid asshole best friend weren't wearing any. Which meant, for a brief moment, Jen pulled the loose half skirt aside far enough to expose Triss's pussy for the whole damn ball to see.

Thankfully, in the endless second it took to slide the dress back, no one had been looking at them anymore, not after Garry got his Carthians to leave her alone, and Jacob, Sam, and Mary were hogging all the attention. Sándor noticed though. Jen's motion caught his eye, and he looked down for just the briefest second before straightening up and looking away. He'd seen.

Yes, she had a perfectly smooth pussy. Yes, she was wearing one of her clit hood piercings. Yes, it was one of the fancier ones.

Triss snapped a deadly glare at her girlfriend. "Jen—"

“Hand slipped,” the lying evil Ventrue bitch said, putting up her hands in mock surrender.

Growling, Triss looked back to Sándor, but the look on his face destroyed any anger she had. He was blushing. Barely, just the tiniest bit of rose showing through his beige skin. But it was a shit load more expression than she’d ever seen the guy give, except when he was drunk.

But she and Sándor were just friends, and she wasn’t trying to bang the dude. Totally.

“Now presenting, Prince Antoinette of the Ordo Dracul, Voivode, and her fellow dragon Elaine, Architect of Terror.”

Everyone looked to the front door, and prepared for an assault of boobage.

The two ladies did not disappoint. Elaine wore a black dress that actually seemed a little tame at first glance, shoulders and sleeves and a long tight skirt with only a tiny split at the bottom. But a second look showed it had a boob window, a big one, revealing the entirety of the inside of her breasts without quite revealing the nipples, while also exposing all of her stomach. The top was damn tight, and squashed the two huge pillows together. That was a lot of underboob.

Antoinette wore a white dress with bits of gold trim that sparkled, and just like her boss Jacob, it was a dress only someone with a lot of clout could pull off without looking stupid. No sleeves, and no straps either. The top was actually more a corset, and it squashed her giant tits together until the two pillows looked like they were ready to spill out and over. The corset also had an open front, revealing almost the entirety of her boobs, and her stomach, before the corset met the long skirt with two slits that exposed both legs, completely.

Just a couple pairs of tits on stilts.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Antoinette said, and the orchestra stopped instantly. “We are gathered tonight to enjoy peace between the covenants once again. While there have been deaths, on both sides, we must acknowledge that the nightlife of Kindred society is a dangerous game. Mistakes happen.” She said mistake with a little more emphasis than everything else, but she kept her gaze steady. Michael and Garry frowned. “Let us embrace peace where we can, when we can. So feast tonight, and enjoy respite.”

Nodding, satisfied with her speech, Antoinette and her friend descended into the crowd, and immediately got to mingling. Jack joined her, and so did her little student Tash and her boys.

That was a quick speech, and not exactly all that important or impactful. Apparently Antoinette was going for casual. Considering it was the first ball since a literal war, Triss figured she’d have gone for something big and bombastic.

“I’m sensing a theme,” Jennifer said, nodding toward the two tall ladies, her eyebrows wiggling. Obviously she meant about their enormous underboobs.

Triss nodded, held up her hands, and made a squishing gesture, as if squashing two large melons together

Laughing, Jennifer nudged her hip against Triss again. “Crude but accurate. Their breasts are definitely ... together. And with convenient entry points for penetration.”

“I didn’t say it out loud for a reason, you know.” Christ, this girl just couldn’t help but dial up the sexuality to eleven when Sándor was around. She did the same thing when Julias was around, too.

It was Jen’s way of trying to help Triss move on. She never really was convinced Julias could be resurrected, and even with Mary’s

revival, she probably still wasn't. She wanted Triss to be happy and try dating Sándor. But Triss was a stupid dog with two bones.

“The women of Dolareido dress with...” Sándor frowned slightly as he looked down, searching for a word. “Purpose.”

Triss snorted on a laugh, and elbowed the man in his side. “Dude, don't be so PC about it. You ain't gonna offend anyone here.” She pointed at Isabella and her troupe. “Sex is just a hobby time for them, and part of their plays.” She pointed at the werewolves. “All of them have been seduced by vampires and whatnot.” She pointed at Elaine and Antoinette. “Those two have probably slept with more people than Jacob. So, thousands.” She pointed at Samantha and Jacob. “And it took a whole six months before Samantha, fresh off the press, got seduced into orgies.” She pointed at Jack. “Don't even get me started on him.” She pointed at Damien and Fiona. “Found him fucking his girl at Bloodlust, so he's exploring new ground.” She pointed at—

Sándor lifted a hand, and gently pushed hers down. “I see.”

Laughing, Triss smiled at Jen, and Jen returned it. Ok, yeah, Triss was in a good mood, now. Hell, a great mood. It'd been so fucking long since she'd been able to laugh and smile, and seeing Mary hang out with her bro and mom before wandering off to get drunk — and probably laid — was making her feel warm. A lot of vampires were still giving Mary room, afraid of her, or her mom's sire, but Zack was legitimately trying to get into her pants. And his courage, spurred by Isabella probably, was slowly making others more comfortable around Mary, too.

Things were good. Christ, that was a weird feeling. She still had Elen, and was still working on resurrecting Julias, but she didn't have to worry about that right now. Her boss had said some upsetting things, about leaving and things changing and shit, but that wasn't something she had to worry about right now, either.

Not stressing out, not being angry, not wanting to tear someone's head off, or being worried about something, she had no fucking clue how to handle it. Julias would. Julias would have swept her off her feet and made sure she delighted in every moment.

But not Sándor. The dude stood there and watched the crowd. It was what he did. Maybe a part of him wanted to do more. She bet a part of him wanted to go upstairs and sit down with the orchestra. But dance and socialize and shit? Not a chance.

And yet, for some damn stupid fucking reason, she wanted to see if she could pull him out of his shell. There was someone in there, someone that, yes, probably liked quiet and doing nothing but thinking or reading or shit, but also probably liked engaging with another person. The musical talent, his relationship with the late wife and kid, it all pointed to there being someone underneath the layers.

Was she attracted to him just because he was complicated? Gotta peel the onion? Christ, how fucking girly was that.

Jen elbowed her, softer than Triss had elbowed Sándor, and Triss turned to look at her. She looked worried. Fuck, Triss probably had her anxious face on.

Triss gave her stupid slut friend a pat on the leg, shrugged, and looked back out to the crowd. Some of the crowd had gone quiet, and when other people noticed the quiet, more of them grew quiet. Slowly, more and more people looked to the staircase on the opposite side of the ballroom, and the person walking up them.

Samantha. Alone. Jacob stayed behind, chatting away with Aaron and Othello and some nearby Carthians. Slick of him, keeping an eye on Mary; metaphorically. It gave Sam time to do something none of them had thought about. Talk to Athalia.

Sam had probably thought about it. She'd probably thought hard.

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~~Antoinette~~

She watched after her childe, and sucked in a slow, useless breath. For all the fear Samantha likely felt, she marched toward something that would be terrible and painful, and did so without hesitation. Well, perhaps a little hesitation.

Why did the Terrys feel the need to approach their problems in life so directly? Others either avoided their problems, rationalized them away, or ignored them. Jack and Samantha felt some sort of innate need to face their problems, as if only through allowing painful realities to skewer their souls could they survive existence itself. An admirable quality, when tempered with wisdom, which seemed to vanish the moment either Terry found themselves in such situations.

“She going to be alright?” Jack asked.

“I believe so.” Nodding, Antoinette set a hand on her lover’s shoulder, and slowly guided him through the crowd. Naturally, everyone gave them space, half avoiding her, and half avoiding the dreaded Ripper. “Daniel assures me Athalia has calmed with time, and while I am sure seeing Mary alive again will be ... distressing, I expect both Samantha and Athalia will handle the situation well.” To be sure, Antoinette looked up and caught her sheriff’s eye, and he nodded in confirmation. “Regardless, Daniel is there, to keep the peace.”

“Sure you don’t wanna go up there and make sure? Or maybe I could—”

“Jack.” She gave her foolish man a loving stroke of his buzzed hair, forcing him to relax somewhat. “Trust others, if you please? Not all problems must be handled by you.”

He sighed, but shrugged as he nodded. “Okay okay.”



“We are here to socialize and enjoy ourselves.”

“Mutually exclusive ideas.”

She laughed, and looked behind her to Elaine. Her friend had drifted off already, and was flirting with a certain werewolf named Mason, and his terribly cute little girlfriend Tilly.

“If you make the effort to socialize and enjoy yourself tonight at my ball, I will reward you. Perhaps we shall take a journey to your mansion, after fetching my precious pets of course, and enjoy a rather long, relaxing bath, with you at the center. Elaine would come, of course. Hours spent simply resting in hot water, with seven women pressing their bodies against yours, slowly moving and massaging you with the softness of their skin.”

He grinned up at her, attempting to appear masculine and in control of his desire, but she could see how her vivid imagery had his imagination running wild.

“That does sound like a good time.”

“Indeed. And that is why we are here. To enjoy ourselves.” She nodded toward Jacob and Mary. “Have you spoken with Jacob?”

“No. Think I should?”

“I think it probably best if you wait to see if he engages you. No reason to rush an uncomfortable encounter.” And Jacob might find it odd if Jack actively sought him out. The ball was largely being held to make sure Jacob did not suspect her of suspecting him and Black Blood, thus, it was imperative they behave normally. Normally, Jack did not like her old friend, despite how Jacob managed to make friends of anyone he wished to. Even now, while many Kindred watched the old Nosferatu with trepidation, he spun a tale that had everyone nearby enamored, including Mary.

Was he keeping an eye on Mary? Feeling protective, perhaps?

“I did talk to Garry for a bit.”

“And how did that fair?”

“Pretty well, all things considered. I think most of the Carthians aren’t terrified of me anymore.” He nodded with emphasis, as if attempting to convince himself.

Antoinette looked back to Jacob, and watched him long enough for him to catch her gaze between the moving heads of the crowd. He looked her away, or at least his head pointed her way, and they looked at each other for a time. What are you thinking, old friend? A second later, Jacob smiled at her, and returned to his tale of orgies in a dark forest.

Antoinette looked up, and caught her sheriff’s eyes again. Her childe and her sheriff’s lover stood with each other, talking, calmly at that, while Daniel stood ten feet off. While he did not watch the two women directly, he would have no trouble watching them through the corner of his eye. Both women stayed at the railing as well, and everyone could see that, despite the obvious tension, they were both talking openly. And, perhaps, with a little emotion. Sympathy. Perhaps, empathy? Eventually Athalia nodded to Samantha, and Samantha returned it with the language she knew best: hugs.

Less concerned the Begotten would rip her childe’s head off, the Prince looked to the Kindred of the ball. As the minutes went by, and alcohol and blood lust coursed through the crowd, it was not long before the more sexual nature she had fostered in her city began to emerge. And to her delight, Mary’s eyes went wide as she took it in, almost forgetting the rather handsome vampire Zack attempting to woo her.

A male ghoul now lay upon a table, shirt open and pants nowhere to be seen. Three Kindred surrounded him, one with hand around his hard girth, stroking, while the others leaned in and set their fangs to his neck. A female ghoul, trapped in the corner by the stairs, whimpered as two men pinned her, and fingered her under her dress as they too sank their fangs into her neck, turning whimpers to mewls. Several other thralls and ghouls were similarly trapped, and often disrobed to complete nudity and forced to stand for others to admire, before predator descended upon prey. Mary looked around with growing eyes, and tipped another glass of wine into her mouth to vanish, before she again took in the sights.

To Antoinette's growing pleasure, it was not only her Kindred indulging in sexuality. The Uratha could no longer resist the call of the vampires of Dolareido. Mason and Tilly touched each other openly, while Elaine stood beside them, only for Tilly, brazen Carthian that she was, to reach out and touch Elaine. Elsewhere, other Uratha enjoyed the touch of vampires, especially Brianna, who found herself surrounded by several Kindred, most of them women. They watched, admired, cooed and swooned, and chuckled with envy as they sipped their glasses of blood, while Derick and Santos pressed their bodies against Brianna from both sides, and fucked her. Not humped her, as last time, because tonight both men had their pants open and Brianna had her tiny black dress pulled aside to allow both men to penetrate her. She'd come prepared to enjoy them, together, with an audience.

Despite all that had happened to Antoinette's little Ventrue, the young man still struggled with seeing others enjoy sex. He found himself trapped, wanting to both watch, and wanting to not watch. Thus, Antoinette could not help but tease him, and point to where Isabella Leauvion, infuriating Daeva and constant thorn in many sides, had taken her far more rough-and-tumble Gangrel lover Hella, and was openly massaging her breasts under her dress, while Hella, and Isabella's childe Danny, attempted to drink from one of their ghouls.

“Even those accursed actresses relax and enjoy tonight’s festivities,” Antoinette said. “I am elated.”

Jack laughed, a touch nervously but a laugh nonetheless. He did not enjoy Isabella’s presence anymore than Antoinette did, but the woman was an influential figure in Dolareido activities. Naturally, she would come to the ball, and engage in its political activities. To see her engage in sexuality, however, was a litmus test of a sort, to see if the city’s Kindred had calmed and were willing to let their guards down.

“Christ, this is a bit much, isn’t it?” Jack asked.

“Oh? I do not believe—”

“For Mary, I mean.” He nodded in her direction, though it was clear he was afraid to look, dare he witness his sister engaged in some of the activities on display.

“You said yourself that your sister was far more outgoing and socially adventurous than you.”

“Yeah, but not nightclub orgies adventurous.”

Antoinette raised a gentle brow before looking to his sister again, who had turned to flirt with Zack once more.

“I wonder.”

“No no,” he said, “don’t wonder. No wondering. I’m much happier thinking she just visited bars, got a little drunk, and maybe slept with a few guys. No drugged orgies in her past. Nope.”

Antoinette laughed, leaned down, and kissed her silly lover. “Very well. Ignorance is bliss.”

“Exactly.” Satisfied, he returned her kiss, and let her guide him around the crowd. They had work to do, after all.

First, a visit to Maria and Michael. Small pleasantries, nothing more, to ensure all was well, that Michael did not begin new conflicts with Garry, and that Maria was careful about her growing church. Next, they moved onto Garry, and Jack said nothing as Antoinette prodded the man to confirm he, too, chased no conflict with his nemesis. She made no mention of Roland; best to leave a painful past buried, in this circumstance.

The Kindred of the ball watched her with curious eyes, many seeking to overhear her conversations, as if she would say something sensitive in such a location. Careful words allowed them to dance around topics without anyone knowing what they meant without more context, of course. She chuckled as she noticed a few rather frustrated Kindred attempting, and failing, to decipher the cryptic messages she shared with her Primogen.

What Kindred not focused on the Danse Macabre, instead focused on the feast. Another thrall disappeared into a throng of Kindred, and her dress was ripped from her, literally, and thrown to the air. She squealed in shock, and then in bliss. And Mary, far more experienced in the ways of sexuality than her poor brother realized, watched on with wide, intrigued eyes. Every Kindred nearby would no doubt smell the rushing blood within, and notice her nipples pressing out against her dress.

So Antoinette did her best to steer Jack clear of her, but unfortunately, her final stop would take them close. A visit to Jacob, her final Primogen.

“Old friend,” she said, Kindred parting to let her come close to the Nosferatu.

“Prince,” Jacob said, smiling and nodding with his usual gusto. “Quite the night! And so many reasons to celebrate.”

“Indeed.” She returned his mischievous smile, as well as his nod, before she looked to where Mary stood ten feet away. Zack had ceased his flirtations, as had all nearby Kindred, and the group of them stared at both Antoinette and Jacob, undoubtedly expecting the two of them to engage in verbal jousting of a sort.

“Garry and Michael are getting along again,” he said, “which is great. Lot less barking, and explosions.”

“Quite so.”

“But, much as that’s great and all, I think it’s the little firecracker right here that has everyone talking.” Jacob slid — literally — over to Mary, and hooked an arm about her shoulders. To her credit, Mary did not seem to mind at all, and she beamed a big, if nervous smile. “No one could have seen this coming!”

“My childe did,” Antoinette said, and she smiled up at Samantha, who returned the smile with one of her own. A wave, as well. Her conversation with Athalia had not dampened her spirits, then.

“True, true. Triss did, too. Crazy when students outdo their masters.”

“The cycle of life.”

Jacob raised a brow, before he burst into laughter, and Antoinette herself could not help but offer a chuckle. The cycle of life, and especially the idea that students surpassed their masters, did not apply to Kindred.

“Mary, child of my childe, how fair you this night?” she asked.

Mary gulped before giving a small bow. “Very well! I’m, um, a little overwhelmed by...” She gestured to a nearby ghoul, a man, who had his shirt undone while a male Kindred placed playful, experimental bites upon his chest.

“I did warn you,” Jack said, smirking, but also groaning. He also offered Zack a rather harsh glare, and the man, quite elegantly, disappeared into the crowd. Which of course earned a frustrated sigh from Mary, and a laugh from Jacob.

“I’m surprised by one thing,” Mary said. “There’s no dancing!”

“We dance sometimes,” Antoinette said, “particularly if it is a ball with few kine. And while I do love to dance, I enjoy encouraging my city to embrace their desires more.”

“Mom said the same thing. But with this guy?” The young kine giggled as she gestured to Jacob, which of course sent the old Nosferatu into rolling laughter that was utterly delightful. Either a master actor, or he genuinely found his lover’s child, and her rather courageous personality, hilarious.

“What about this guy?” A voice from one of the stairways. Samantha, coming down to join them. Daniel and Athalia remained upon the balcony, and a glance up showed the woman held the smallest smile as she snuggled into the sheriff’s side.

Samantha and Jack, forever able to disarm people in ways Antoinette would never be able to.

“Your man,” Mary said with a giggling snark, “is a smooth bastard.”

With a giggle to match, Samantha almost ran down the last few stairs to join them. She likely would have jumped, if not wearing such a revealing dress.

“He’s a dangerous man,” Samantha said, and she slid in beside Jacob. The old Nosferatu let go of Mary, only to slip his other arm around his lover’s shoulders.

“I’m not dangerous. I haven’t done a thing.”

Antoinette did not react in the slightest, and to Jack's credit, neither did he.

"You're always up to something," the young Ventrue said.

"True enough. But tonight, I'm just here to party with my scorching hot girlfriend. You know, your mom?"

"Jacob!" Samantha gave the man a playful slap on the chest. "Don't tease him."

Antoinette grinned as she looked about. A few Kindred stepped back, perhaps expecting Jack the Ripper to make an appearance and assault the eyeless witch. But to his credit, Jack groaned in a pleasing, humorous way, and shook his head.

"I hate parties," he said. "Or, you know, 'fancy balls'." Naturally, he felt the need to air quote 'fancy balls', particularly emphasized as he looked about at the sexual acts blossoming around them. "But, I gotta admit, things are going pretty well." With a playful shrug, he stepped up to Jacob, and held out his hand. "You've been dating Mom for a while now. I suppose I should at least try and get along with you."

Samantha's smile threatened to scorch everyone around her, and Mary's drunk giggles were absolutely indecent. Thankfully Fiona was off elsewhere with her lover, likely forcing the poor Mekhet to watch someone enjoy a Kiss, while naked and penetrated. She—

"Mary?" Jack asked.

"What? I—oh." Mary lifted a hand, and touched her nose. A drop of blood above her lip, and now on her finger. "Um, nosebleed?"

Everyone nearby went quiet as they stared at her, waiting. Only Samantha mustered the will to break the sudden silence, and come close to stand with her daughter.



“You okay, sweetie?”

“Yeah, of course! I feel fine. I feel—” She swayed back, and Samantha instantly caught her hand to keep her upright.

“Mary! You sure you’re okay?” Samantha’s voice rose in pitch, and volume. Nearby Kindred took a step back.

“I said I’m fine. Just a little lightheaded.” She gestured around with her right hand. “Been drinking a lot, I’ll have you know. And...” Mary’s voice trailed off, and her eyes squinted on her right hand. Squint grew into wide-eyed surprise, and she began to shake. “Why ... why are my fingernails bleeding?”

Mary teetered once again, and her weight gave out completely. Strong as Samantha was, the angle was awkward, and she was forced to lower her daughter to the ground.

“Oh no. No no no.” Samantha took her child’s hand and held it. “Triss! What’s going on!?”

Antoinette snapped her gaze to Jacob, but the man stood there, mouth slightly parted, as surprised as everyone else. The crowd of Kindred spread and turned into a circle. The orchestra went silent. Daniel stood beside Antoinette a second later, staring down at Mary as she began to convulse.

Beatrice joined them, her running announced by the clack clack of her shoes in the now deadly silent ballroom.

“Holy shit. What the fuck is going on?”

“She just fell and started bleeding!” Samantha yelled. “From her nose, and her fingers, and—what’s going on!?”

“I don’t fucking know!” Beatrice grabbed Zack and shook the man by his shirt. “You were with her! The fuck happened?”

Zack shook in the strength of her grip, and with his own fright, as his eyes widened at the Nosferatu. “Nothing! Nothing happened!”

She snarled, threw the man aside, and slid onto her knees beside Samantha.

“Triss, oh god what’s happening to her?”

“I...”

Everyone stared on as poor Mary’s convulsions grew worse. Jack joined his mother on the floor, and clutched one of Mary’s hands close to him, smearing her blood over his suit as he tried to steady her.

“What the fuck. This a seizure?” he asked.

Triss shook her head. “That doesn’t make any sense! You don’t start bleeding from—oh fucking god.”

Mary, with her head propped up on Samantha’s lap, managed to open her eyes. She continued to tremble, and her limbs shook with harsh jerks similar to a seizure. But she was awake, and aware. She looked up at her brother, her friend Beatrice, and her mother.

Blood slowly trickled from her eyes, from her tear ducts, and flowed down her cheeks.

“I knew ... I knew it,” Mary said. Somehow, despite the spasms, she spoke, words broken and sharp. “I knew it.”

“Baby! Don’t talk. Don’t say anything. We’ll get you back to Elen and—”

“I knew it.” She jerked hard, head twisting to the side, and a heavy spout of crimson gushed from her mouth over the floor. “The dreams...”

Samantha clutched her daughter closer to her, pulling her up higher on her lap to bring Mary's head to her stomach. "Sweetie?"

"The dreams were ... were all wrong. They weren't ... right. They were just ... empty, and cold, and—" Again, she vomited over the floor, what little food and alcohol in her stomach dwarfed by the river of red. It coated her mother's bare leg and skirt.

Jack and Beatrice shared glances before the boy squeezed his sister's hand to him.

"Triss, mom, get her up," he said. Triss nodded and moved to grab Mary, but his mother did not move. "Mom!" Like a hammer smashing through glass, Jack was not gentle with his mother. He grabbed her shoulder, hard, and shook her harder. "Mom, get her up! If Elen's the only one that can fix this, then we take her to Elen."

"R-Right, right." Sweet Samantha, awareness coming back to her, managed to tear her eyes away from her daughter's gaze long enough to do as Jack commanded.

Antoinette looked to her sheriff. What to do? There was nothing they could do, except maybe rush Mary and Beatrice to the flesh witch. To save what, seconds? Magic was not something to be done in the moment, in the lightning strike of an emergency.

But it was better than nothing.

"Come," Antoinette said, and she gestured to the front door. Immediately every Kindred between her and the exit of her Hall stepped aside. "Daniel, help them."

"It's okay," Mary said, shaking her head. "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay."

“It’s not okay!” Samantha said. “Don’t talk like that, baby!” Even panicked, Antoinette’s sweet childe could not help but talk gentler with her daughter than the situation demanded. Samantha hooked Mary’s arm over her shoulders, while Beatrice did the same with the other, and the two of them sprinted for the door, Daniel and Jack behind them.

But Mary fought back. She shoved against Beatrice, jerking limbs finding enough control to send the Nosferatu into a half turn and falling to the floor. Samantha held onto her daughter, but the sudden shift in weight sent her to the floor as well, clutching Mary to her chest as she fell onto her back.

“Mary, what are you doing!?! Stop it! Stop! We need to—”

“It’s okay. I got to hug my mom. I got to see Jack again.” The bleeding woman let out a jerked, quiet wail, and turned her head enough to cough up another splatter of crimson. Slowly, as the seconds ticked by, she looked back up at her mother, and reached up for her. “I got to ... hug my mom ... again.”

“I said don’t talk like that! We can ... we can...”

Mary’s arm fell.

Where there was silence, now there was an eternity of oblivion. No one moved. The living did not breathe.

Beatrice scampered over to Samantha as Jack ripped himself out of his petrification, and again fell to his knees at his sister’s side. At the base of the stairs leading out of the pit of the ballroom, the three vampires sat around Mary, and waited. And Daniel, for the first time in centuries, looked back to Antoinette with panic in his eyes. He did not know what to do.

“Mary?” Jack asked.

His mother stared down at her bleeding body, and gently shook her several times. “Mary? Mary?”

Antoinette walked over to them, as slow as she could manage, and she looked down at her child and lover as the two of them continued to wait. No more spasms. No more sudden gushes of blood. And in the cold silence of her Black Hall, she could both see, and hear, that Mary’s body had gone entirely still, inside and out.

“Mary ... please don’t go. Please ... please ... please don’t ... leave me again...” Samantha lifted the bloody corpse of her daughter higher on her lap until she could hug her tight. No care for the blood soaking her dress. No care for the crowd staring in disbelief. No care but for the empty vessel in her arms.

“I ... I don’t understand,” Beatrice whispered. “She was fine just five minutes ago! What the fuck—”

Every soul in the room jumped back, and the three vampires around the body fell to the floor, as a loud scream erupted from Mary. Mary’s eyes and mouth were still open, but the noise had not come from her.

Antoinette tensed and readied herself, as the ghost of Mary shot up into the air overhead, and released another shriek that brought the ballroom to its knees as people clutched their ears. Glasses shattered, and soon, so did the windows, as the ephemeral being screeched and clawed at her face while flying in circles above.

“I’m not her! I’m not her! I’m not her!”

## Chapter 165

~~Jack~~

Everything happened so fast. Too fast. If someone was sick, they didn't just spontaneously fall over and die, right? And they didn't start bleeding like that!

But Mary had done just that. Five minutes. In five minutes, she'd gone from laughing and chuckling and drinking, to puking up blood. More than puking, the blood had come from her eyes, and fingernails, and everywhere. Her body lay on his mom's lap, soaking her in more blood as she shook.

She managed one final smile for him before looking back up at their mom, who clutched her head on her lap snug to her waist.

"I got to ... hug my mom ... again."

Her limbs went limp. Her breathing stopped. Her heart stopped. Her empty eyes stared on, blood lining where tears should have been.

Jack stared at her body, identical to the one he'd said goodbye to a year ago. In the hospital, she'd been cold, pale as a vampire not Blushing Life, with cheeks sunken in. He hadn't dared look under the sheet to see her wounds. This time, she was a mess of crimson on her skin and revealing dress, blood that coated him, and utterly drenched his mom. Warm blood. It'd been so warm.

He looked at Beatrice, and she looked at him. A billion words in a single glance, but they all boiled down to three: what the fuck.

His mom burst into sobs, and clutched Mary's body close. "Mary ... please don't go. Please ... please ... please don't ... leave me

again...”

Jack winced and looked away. Christ, not again.

“I ... I don’t understand,” Beatrice whispered. “She was fine just five minutes ago! What the fuck—”

A ear-piercing shriek erupted from Mary’s body, and everyone fell back on their elbows. He knew that shriek. He remembered the pain it put him through when it threw him through a wall like he was a paperweight.

Him, Triss, his mom, the whole fucking ball, everyone stared, frozen and unmoving as the ghost of Mary flowed out of the bloody corpse. Mary, but different. It was her ghost, the same creature he saw haunting his old home, but any semblance of calmness or sanity was gone. Worse than the time she tried to kill him. Her empty eyes were wide to an extreme, and her hair thrashed around like it was alive.

She circled above, screaming louder, until it broke the petrification of the crowd. Everyone covered their ears, and drinking glasses shattered as they hit the floor. A moment later, every glass that hadn’t been dropped shattered anyway, as the rising shriek of Jack’s sister buried the ball in fury and misery. It was beyond loud. People groaned and screamed too, some falling to their knees and clutching their heads, Jack included, but their groans and yells were completely buried under Mary’s.

The windows shattered, and while they were hidden behind enormous, thick black curtains, the explosion of glass was enough to stir them like sails in a hurricane. Bits of glass went everywhere, and the crowd dropped to their knees, either dodging the flying clear blades, or doing their best to keep their eardrums from popping.

“I’m not her! I’m not her! I’m not her!” She yelled and shrieked as she circled overhead, clutching her face and dragging her nails down

through it, cutting through her see-through skin. The wounds healed instantly, but she tore at her cheeks again and again anyway, each time letting her jaw hang open further and further until her mouth was open almost an entire foot.

The ballroom filled with mist as it cooled, white fog pouring from ceiling corners like someone had set up a hundred industrial dry ice fog machines. In seconds, it flowed over the balcony down onto everyone below, before the ballroom pit was filled with mist up to the waist of anyone still standing. The cold came next, cold that bit into the bones, cold not even a vampire could ignore.

“Mary!” Jack yelled as he forced himself to his feet. “Mary! Enough!” He looked his mom’s way, but only her head was visible in the mist. She was staring up at her daughter’s ghost, eyes wide. Shock.

“I’m not her! I’m not her!”

“What do you mean you’re not her!?” He snapped his gaze left and right as he tried to get some sort of bearing on the situation. The drapes still covered the windows, thank god. No one could see in. But nearby kine would be able to hear what was going on. Hell, half of Dolareido probably heard the opening scream.

He looked Antoinette’s way. She was staring up at the ghost as well, but unlike everyone else, her mouth wasn’t agape. She was processing, and looked around to start damage control at nearly the same time Jack did. She caught his eye, nodded, and looked to Michael. Of course he was still standing, and being an obvious presence while doing it, posing in just the right way he could see everything going on around him, and let everyone know he wasn’t spooked by some ghost. Luckily Mary didn’t seem to notice him. He’d be more than spooked if Mary decided to ram glass shards through his eye sockets.



Michael met the Prince's eyes, nodded, and pulled out his phone. The expression on his face said it all: phones weren't working. Of course not, not with a raging ghost around. But Michael thought fast, and made a small signal with his hand to someone in the crowd. Another vampire, a Mekhet, quickly vanished and disappeared.

They'd get out of the Black Hall, and contact the Invictus thralls and ghouls in the city government. They'd make sure the police and fire department wouldn't arrive any time soon, and hopefully get the guards outside to stop anyone from getting close.

"I'm not her! I'm not her!"

"Mary, stop!" Beatrice jumped up and waved her arms in the air. "Fucking stop! What happened!? Tell us what happened!"

Jack winced as the inevitable shriek followed. Triss didn't know how hard it was to talk to Mary when she was angry, but she found out quick when Mary swooped down over them, close enough to nearly touch their heads, and screamed. They both fell.

"I knew it! It was the dreams! Empty dreams. Wandering in nothing. Nothing! Should have known. Should have known! But I wouldn't see the truth! Couldn't accept it. Couldn't ... couldn't..." Her screams faded, and her insane expression settled as she finally turned her empty eyes from Jack and Triss, to their mom.

His mom had one hand out, and was holding it open, palm up, toward Mary.

Jack looked at his mom, and stared through the mist as both he and her slowly got back to their feet. She took special care to lay down Mary's body before she did, and she stood up with no fear in her eyes. Only sadness.

“Baby,” she said, voice so quiet Jack doubted anyone else could hear it with their ears still ringing. “It ... didn’t work.”

“No! No ... no it didn’t.” Mary shook her head violently as she hovered in place. No legs, and instead of the fancy dress, she had back on the simple clothes she had when Jack first found her. “It didn’t. It didn’t. It didn’t.”

“I know, sweetie. I know.” Their mom steeled herself, and Jack stared on as she reached out, and gently ran a hand down the place where she should have been able to touch her daughter’s cheek. “But you remember, right?”

“Re ... member?”

“What you said, just ... just before you died. Just now.”

“I got to ... to hug my mom again.”

Samantha nodded, took a deep, useless breath, and lowered her hands. “And it was worth it, right?”

“It ... was.” Mary the ghost swam back up in the air. Thank god their mom was there, or she’d have been ripping the whole ballroom into a mess, with probably more than a few casualties. “It was. I was ... happy.”

“Then ... then it was worth it.” Nodding, Samantha gestured around them. “This isn’t your home, is it?”

“No! No it’s not.”

“Then you should go home. It’s safe there. I’ll come visit you again.”

Mary lowered herself down even closer to her mom, until they were face to face. While Mary’s face had returned to normal, ish, it

was still a ghost's face, with empty eyes and hair that shifted and moved with a breeze that didn't exist.

“You're not angry at me? For not telling you?”

“About your dreams? Honey, you couldn't have known this would happen, not like this. No, I'm not angry. Now please go wait for me at home. I'll come visit you before the night is over.”

Jack stared at his mom. It was crazy how calm she was, how strong she looked. It was his mom, standing in front of a raging ghost, talking with her usual gentle mom voice, a voice he'd heard a million times before. She'd used that voice even when their dad died. Hearing it now, it was like someone hit Jack upside the head with a baseball bat, just how much strength it took her to use that voice.

He looked around at the crowd. Everyone had gone silent, and were staring, either at the mist that flowed around them, or at the ghost Samantha was soothing. No one moved, not even the people on their knees in the chilling fog. And despite how deadly silent it was, Mary didn't seem to notice, or care.

Because it wasn't Mary. It was something else.

“Okay. Okay, I'll...” Mary the ghost stared down at her flesh body through the mist, and her whole body shifted and twitched, like a bad signal on analog cable. Jack got ready to get thrown around like a baseball. But slowly, her image returned to normal, and she nodded as she smiled at their mom. “Okay.”

“Cya later, baby. Don't worry, everything will be fine.” She nodded, smiling, and blew her daughter's ghost a small kiss.

Mary smiled, a little wider than humanly possible, before she sank into the mist, into the floor, and was gone.

It only took moments for the ball to return to normal. The mist faded into the ground, and stopped seeping from the ceiling. The bone-chilling cold went with it, along with the heavy presence Jack had grown all too familiar with over the years.

Which left a ballroom full of confused and shocked people. They started talking again, but no one dared talk loudly, as if their voices would resummon the ghost who just thoroughly thrashed their good time. Jack threw a glare their way, and everyone shut the fuck up quick, before he walked over to his mom. She'd already gotten back on her knees, and was closing Mary's eyes.

No, not Mary. Just a vessel, a failed one.

"I'm ... sorry," he said. "I told Sándor and Damien to wait until after the ball, to check her dreams. I ... I didn't want to ... I was avoiding..."

His mom smiled up at him, nodding. "Thank you. I'm glad you did. It was ... It was good, while it lasted." Not sobbing anymore, not crying, not shaking. She'd turned to stone.

"Fuck me fuck me fuck me," Triss said, pacing in place. "I don't fucking understand. I—"

"She said it," Samantha said. "She said she wasn't her."

"Not her? I—oh fucking shit, you mean she isn't Mary?"

"Maybe ... maybe." Nodding, Jack's mom stood back up, and looked to Beatrice. "Can you take the body back to Elen? She might be able to do something with it, but ... but I ... but I don't think it'll ever work, if Mary's right."

If Mary was right. If Mary was right, Mary wasn't Mary.

"Mom, you—"

“I don’t care if she’s not Mary.” She looked Jack’s way, and her steady, steel gaze struck him still. “She’s my daughter, and she’s in pain, and I’m going to go make sure she’s okay.” After another slow nod, she clenched her hands into fists, and walked up to Daniel, who still stood between the crowd and the stairs to the front door. “I need to get clean, and change clothes. Can you take me back to the tower?”

Daniel blinked down at her, mild shock still in his eyes, only half hidden behind his glasses. He looked back to Antoinette and Athalia, got confirming nods, and took Samantha up the stairs leading outside. The moment the front doors opened, they vanished in his Cloak.

“Triss,” Jack whispered, “you—”

“I’ll be fine.” She managed a weak shrug for him as she knelt down and picked up the body. More clack clacks of high heels announced Jennifer’s approach, and Jack stepped aside to let the witch join her friend.

But before they left, Jack spoke up. “Jacob—”

“Had nothing to do with this,” Triss said, eyeing him with her green snake eyes. “Neither do Othello or Aaron. You got questions, you come to me. But this was—”

“I’m not judging. Really, I’m not. Just ... wanted to know if there was anything I could do.”

It took a few seconds for her to realize he was being serious, and her expression broke into the same sadness he knew was on his face.

“Nothing. There’s nothing. I’m ... fuck me, I’m so sorry, Jack. Your sister ... christ.”

“You heard her,” he said, sighing heavy and shoulders slumping. “She’s not her.”

“Fuck me.” Groaning, Triss looked past him, and scanned the crowd. Not for Jacob or the other witches, they were still there and she kept looking. Sándor? Jack looked back, and sure enough, the man was gone.

Oh shit, Sándor. Poor bastard was going to need a therapist after this. The one fucking thing that someone had managed to fix, something the hunters had broken, something he blamed himself for, and it went down in flames.

Triss sighed, probably coming to the same conclusion, and walked to the door with Mary in her arms. Weightless to a Nosferatu’s strength.

Jen paused at the base of the stairs for a moment, before leaning in to whisper to Jack.

“I appreciate your need to fix things, Jack. I appreciate your need to force people to accept truth and reality where you can, as well. But listen to me. Do not push your mother on this, not tonight. She’s worked toward this goal for months, and has bloodied her hands in ways you can’t imagine.”

“I can imagine a lot.”

A quick snarl from Jen gave him pause. She was serious.

“Give your mother space, and let her accept this reality on her own terms. Okay?”

“Okay, I get you. I won’t push her.”

“Good.” With a small nod that looked as heavy as an anchor, Jen left with her girlfriend.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Antoinette said, voice raised slightly, and she stepped up to stand beside Jack. “Tonight, we have seen ... something unfathomably horrible. Please forgive me, but I must dismiss you all. Expect another ball in the future, but for now, the pleasantries must end.”

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Jack stuck around as people left. He wanted to go see his mom, but knowing she'd be with Mary, and Mary would be unstable as fuck, it was a bad idea. No one calmed Mary down like his mom, and his presence could send her into a proper destructive mood. Anyone's presence could right now, save for his mom's.

The Carthians and Invictus left, and so did Aaron and Othello. The Uratha stuck around, but even they eventually left, except for Eric. Him and Jessy remained, Fiona and Damien too, and they joined Jack as he pulled himself up to sit on one of the tables along the walls.

“That ... was fucking horrible,” Jessy said.

“Yes,” someone said. Everyone looked up when a voice they didn't normally hear in their friend conversations jumped in. Jacob. “It was horrible.”

Jack glared at the man. Everyone at the table knew Jacob was a threat, and possibly working with Black Blood to fuck up the whole city, and worse. He should have been trying to avoid letting Jacob know that Jack suspected him. But with how shitty the situation was, he had a good excuse to glare at the man.

“You...” Jack clenched his teeth and looked away. Don't blame him, this was on Triss. Her words. But holy fuck, it was so much easier to want to blame Jacob than it was his friend.

And Jacob knew it, too. Jacob shook his head as he sighed, and took off his sunglasses. Everyone at the table winced and looked

away, but Jack lifted his eyes and stared the man straight in the empty eye sockets.

“I gave them the tools, Jack. And a fuckload of warnings, too. I told them this wasn’t going to work, but they deserved to try, right?”

“You warned them?”

“All the fucking time, kid. But I knew they’d try something. And I ... all I can do is make sure my witches’ mistakes don’t kill them, so they can learn from them.”

“You sound like a parent who thinks the best way to teach his kid to not get electrocuted, is to let them get electrocuted.”

The old Nosferatu shook his head again. “It’s not the same, and you know it.”

“I—”

“I’m going to go check on Samantha, and Mary.” He put the sunglasses back on, and walked away, leaving everyone at the table to stare after him. Only once the front doors closed behind him, did people relax.

Jack looked to Antoinette. She stood in the center of the ball, arms folded under her breasts, red eyes pointed down as she went into think-tank mode. She’d be there for a little while, processing how best to handle the situation, how to manage the response from the government and media, and how and when to set up the next ball. Forever planning. He loved her, and normally he’d be right next to her, obsessing over details and planning. But at the moment, the only thing he could think of, was Mary’s bleeding eyes, and the utter fucking despair on his mom’s face when Mary fell over.

He looked over at Eric and Jessy. The werewolf had an arm around her shoulders, stroking her, while she leaned into him. Both



looked troubled. He looked over at Damien and Fiona. Same situation, though Fiona pressed her face into Damien's chest to cry. Natasha stood in the pit with Antoinette, nodding whenever Antoinette whispered something, and took notes in her smart phone. But she spared a glance for Jack, and the look in her eyes was heartbreaking. She'd been getting along with Mary, quite a bit.

Everyone got along with Mary.

Jack leaned down, picked up a piece of broken glass, and held it in front of him, high up, between him and the chandelier. What a shitty fucking night.

---

~~Beatrice~~

The trip out of the city was a quiet one. Jen stuck with her, but didn't say a thing. Better to stay quiet until they were out of the city, even with how good Triss was getting at her Cloak. But that wasn't the main reason neither of them were talking.

Thirty minutes later, thirty really fucking long minutes of carrying a corpse she never wanted to carry again, they were outside city limits, and out in the desert on the way toward their hidden little cave.

"Sándor left," Jen said. Thank god she said it first.

"Yeah. Kinda bailed on us, didn't he?" Which was kind of a dick move on his part, and very out of character for him. "Probably went somewhere to brood. Maybe cry. Maybe rage a bit."

"Did he?"

"Yeah. As a recovering brooder, I should know. If I had to guess, he's back in his lair, sitting on that big throne in his castle, and just ... being a statue, collecting dust, tearing himself up over this."

Because no matter what anyone said, the dude would never stop blaming himself for Sam's pain.

Jen sighed, but nodded as she touched Triss's shoulder.  
"Probably."

"Once we get the body back in Elen's, uh, aura or whatever, we should go check on Sam. I ... I guess she'll be in Mary's room, with her ghost again, and ... crying, maybe." They couldn't get teary without Blushing Life, but she could sob and cry just fine. Funny enough, Sam hadn't sobbed or cried, back in the ballroom, once Mary's ghost appeared. If anything, it was like something had suddenly cast her out of iron.

She didn't want Mary to see her cry. She wanted to make sure Mary, or Mary's ghost, didn't freak out and make everything quickly go from bad to worse. Christ, what sort of fucking person did you have to be to be a ... a mom? It wasn't the same as being a sire, not at fucking all, and Triss's stupid vampire brain couldn't understand it.

They stepped into the cave, and set the body on the chair next to Julias's. Thankfully his body was still breathing, and hidden under a blanket. Made it easier to not picture him with blood gushing out of every orifice and then some.

"Oh dear," Elen said. Dangling from her hook, her emaciated body hadn't changed much in the past few months. Maybe she'd stay like this for the rest of time? Pretty shitty situation, but one she deserved.

Triss snarled. "Don't."

"The ghost and the body didn't agree with each other. What a shame."

“I said don’t.” Triss came up to the bowl and glared up at the flesh witch with enough venom to kill an ox. “I didn’t come here to talk to you. Just make sure the body doesn’t rot. We can still use it, fix it up, and do the ritual again.”

“All flesh in this cavern is safe from decay.” The old bitch offered a cracked, evil smile, and met Triss’s eyes with all the care and concern of a retired granny watching her favorite TV show, while high as a kite.

“Good.”

“But no matter what happens, no matter what magic you use, you cannot bind a ghost to a living body for forever.”

“That...” Growling, Triss kicked the metal bowl hard enough the room echoed with the impact, before she stormed off.

Getting out of the cave took a bit, but once she was back out with Jen behind her, she screamed. Full on roar screamed. Tore up the voice screamed. Screamed until it fucking hurt, screamed.

Jen said nothing. She stood beside Triss and waited, wearing a weak, patient smile.

“You could rub it in my face, you know,” Triss said. “Say ‘I told you so’ and shit.”

“I didn’t tell you so.”

“You basically did. All the times you tagged along, I could tell you never really thought this would work.”

“I ... was routinely surprised at how much you accomplished, Triss.” Jen came up behind her and hugged her, not caring about the blood she got on her hands. “I stuck it out because I knew you’d

accomplish something amazing, the same way Jacob knew. And I stuck it out because I love you.”

Triss sighed, and leaned back into Jen. Jen eventually became turn and hug, and hug eventually turned into kiss.

“You love me?”

“Don’t be stupid. Of course I do.”

“But you don’t want me to yourself.”

“I...” Jen frowned a little as she looked up slightly, thinking. “We’ve had this conversation before. I’m just not interested in some sort of dove pairing. I don’t want a relationship with one person to be my significant other. The idea has never interested me. I love you, I know you love me, and I want you to find someone else to love, too.”

“You are so weird.”

“Yes, well, so are you.”

Triss chuckled, which of course was Jen’s goal. Christ, how much shit she did, just for Triss. How little Triss did for her.

“Alright, let’s go see Sam.”

Jen shook her head as she stepped back. “I got a text from Jacob. He’s visiting Sam.”

“Really? He’s comfortable being around Mary?”

“No idea. But he feels compelled to go to Sam, and you saw how quickly he got along with Mary when she was ... alive.”

“She got along with everybody,” Triss said. “But ... it’s weird. I guess I had trouble thinking of Jacob really loving someone else to

that point. Always got the impression Sam was kinda like a fling for him. Some fun.” Even when earlier evidence suggested she was more.

“Apparently not.”

Triss looked down at the desert rocks as she weighed her options. Go see Jack? Nah, nothing to say to the kid, not really. Go see Othello and Aaron? Nah, they’d be back at the cave, Aaron reading, Othello ... doing whatever he did when he wasn’t fucking Madison.

“Sándor,” Jen said before Triss could. “You want to find out if Sándor’s okay.”

“I ... I guess I fucking do.” Before she could stop herself, Triss threw up her hands and paced back and forth. She’d taken off her heels at a certain point and tossed them; you can’t pace in heels. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“You like him.”

“I like Julias! I love Julias! I—”

“Triss, your chances of seeing Julias again are slim to none, and you know that.”

Triss cut into Jen with a harsh glare, but Jen stood her ground.

“Then why am I still hoping to bring him back?”

“Because you loved him, and you cherish those memories, and being teased by the possibility of having him back is a lure most people wouldn’t be able to ignore?”

A deadly lure Triss had read more than few stories about, a lure that’d destroyed plenty of people, like prey to an anglerfish.

“There’s more to it than that.”

“Because you’re self-destructively obsessive?”

Triss laughed. A weak, shitty laugh, but at least it was a laugh.  
“Aren’t we all?”

“Because you’re afraid of letting go and moving on? Afraid you might find happiness again without him? Afraid of how horrible and guilty you’d feel if you actually managed to find happiness again, when Julias was the first taste of it you had in twenty years?”

“I ... Fuck.” Triss walked up to Jen, and hugged her again, tight this time. “I am so fucked up.”

“Yeap.”

“Why am I ... stuck in this stupid high school romance drama? Fuck me, after what happened tonight—”

With a tender chuckle and soft hug, Jen wrapped her arms around her again, and gave her neck a quick kiss.

“Worry about what we can affect in the moment. We can talk to Samantha tomorrow night, unless she contacts us before then. For now, let’s go see Sándor and see how he’s dealing with this.”

“Alright. You’re right.” Nodding, they both got underway. “You know, I just realized something. Mary was alive for exactly three days and three nights.”

“That ... is rather disturbing, isn’t it?”

---

Beatrice stepped into the big, empty room that once served as some sort of boarding room for a subway train, maybe for workers down in the tunnels. A prototype maybe or something, from a century ago, because it’d obviously never been finished. The train tracks went past a big concrete stage, but otherwise, all that was in the room, was the room.

At least until Azamel showed up. She put a bunch of shit on the boarding platform, crap furniture that looked far more homely than it had any right to. The old lazy recliner was still there. The ash tray was still there, too. The bed, the changing screen, the couch, a few other chairs, it was all still there, shit anyone could have lifted from a flea market. Not that there was a reason to shoplift from a flea market when everything cost less than dirt.

No Mark, thank god. No Fiona. Probably with Damien, crying her eyes out. They'd only seen each other like, once, but it was obvious they'd have probably become best friends if they'd gotten to spend some time together, considering how similar they were.

No Sándor. Shit. But there was someone there, sitting in a chair beside Azamel's, and reading a book. Athalia. Shit shit.

"Sorry," Triss said, glancing up at Athalia only long enough to see Athalia was looking at her. "I'll go."

"Don't," Athalia said, voice solid and steady. Well, that was a lot better than the shriek full of fury and agony Triss expected to hear from the Begotten. They'd had more than enough of that tonight.

Triss blinked at Jen, who blinked at her, before they both looked back at the deadly woman on the stage. She'd changed out of her ballroom dress. Triss and Jen still hadn't.

"You uh, don't want me to go?" Triss asked.

"No. You want to see Sándor, I assume."

"I ... do."

Nodding, Athalia set the book down on Azamel's chair arm, and leaned back in her own.

"I'm not going to attack you, Beatrice. Calm down."

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t quite believe you.”

Athalia rolled her eyes. “It’s been ... painful, these past months. For you, for me, for Samantha, for a lot of people. But the past is the past ... for most of us.”

Triss winced. The past was quite suddenly and painfully very much not the past for Sam.

“Yeah, I get that.”

“I’ve had a lot of time, and help, to come to some ... realizations. I don’t hate you, Beatrice, and I can’t blame you for what I did.” She shook her head as she looked to the side. “I can never forgive you, but I can’t blame you, either.”

Triss blinked at the Begotten, and again at Jen who returned the same, shocked expression.

“I—”

“Don’t. We’re done chatting. You want into Sándor’s lair?”

Okay, no chatting, but at least her relationship with Athalia had jumped a few rungs, up from ‘potential murder victim’.

“That where he is?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes, I’d like to see him.”

Sighing, Athalia stood up and jumped down from the platform. “I can get you into his lair. We’re connected, here in Dolareido. But Sándor made it clear he didn’t want to be disturbed.”

“He can’t lock the door to his lair?”



“He can, but won’t. He ... doesn’t like the idea of us not being able to come to him for help, if we need him.”

Triss winced and looked down. “Of course he doesn’t. Dude just ... really wants to be helpful, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, he does. He’s one of the few.” Athalia eyed her, and didn’t hide her sneer. “So if you hurt him, we won’t be on such good terms anymore, vampire.” And back down the ladder to potential murder victim again. “Alright, come with me. I’ll open up a path to his castle.”

“Thanks.”

Athalia snorted, less like a pig and more like a deadly giant skeleton nightmare titan, all raspy and shit. Beatrice and Jennifer both shivered a little as they followed her. For her age, Beatrice was a damn strong Nosferatu, and Jen was an impressive Ventrue too, but Athalia in her Horror form could probably rip her in half like a phone book if she got her hands on her. And despite what she said, she’d probably enjoy doing just that.

So naturally, Triss and Jen both brought their vitae up in their bodies and readied for a fight, as Athalia took them down the tunnel, around the corner, and into absolute darkness.

“We really need—”

“Yes,” Athalia said. “I need darkness. It makes it much easier to open a path.”

Darkness. Far more darkness than the tunnel should have had, considering they’d just come from a room with flickering, old, but still functioning lights. But this wasn’t the first time she’d gone into a lair with the help of a Begotten, from Athalia specifically, so she was used to it. A little.

Sure enough, after a minute, they weren't walking in darkness anymore. They were in some sort of old fashioned medieval room, complete with shitty old tables, shitty old chairs, plates with no utensils, and some some cracks of light coming through that what looked like some shitty old wood door made of planks.

"There," Athalia's Horror said. Beatrice suppressed the urge to squeak. "Goodbye."

"Wait, goodbye? What if we ... fucking hell." Triss spun around and looked for any hint of the giant black skeleton monster, but now that they had a few shreds of light to work with, her eyes adjusted enough to tell her that Athalia was already gone. Fucking freaky.

"I guess we're stuck here," Jen said. "We ... really should have changed clothes first."

"Running out of time before daylight. Besides, least you still got your heels."

Groaning, Jen took a couple steps on the hard stone, took her heels off, and set them on one of the tables.

"Uneven floor and stones filled with cracks and grooves? I'd break an ankle."

"You know that's always a concern with heels. Stop wearing them. They fucking suck. If you weren't a vampire, they'd be ruining your feet and fucking up your spine."

"A worthy sacrifice in the name of fashion."

God damn it. Triss laughed, and opened the shitty plank door. She recognized this place. It was the hallway she'd chased Jeremiah through, the one that led into some sort of big main chamber of the castle. She'd followed him through that too, out into some sort of

big, haunted village, high up on a cliff edge. This time though, she guessed Sándor would be in the main chamber of the castle. His castle.

Careful to avoid the metal gargoyle braziers on the walls and the flames inside them, she and Jen made their way down the hall of what could only be described as a medieval castle. Like, not one of the fancier castles from the 1700s and shit, with lots of pretty marble. No, this castle was old as dirt, with walls made of stacked stone, and ceilings made of ridiculously thick, solid, ugly boards. Some walls were made with wood, too, and every room she bothered to peek into as they made their way for the big door at the end of the hall, had some kind of big wood pillar holding up the floor above. This was the sort of castle you'd find a thousand years ago, and a thousand years later.

The big fucking door at the end of the hall was a pain to budge, but with a little muscle, she and Jen slid it open.

The absolutely fucking massive main chamber looked like it'd taken a major earthquake up the ass. The giant pillars that used to hold up the ceiling, way way way up, were knocked over. Not one, not two. Dozens of them. They were big pillars too, ten foot wide pillars of stone. And around them were the destroyed statues of Sándor. She didn't really get a chance to explore this place, last time she was here, but she remembered the statues standing on top of some pillars, holding up the massive stone roof overhead that she could barely see in the darkness. Some of the statues stood between two pillars, vertically, so they held up a pillar to the ceiling.

Just a bunch of rubble, now. Some pillars still survived, which was a good thing because the castle — this ridiculously massive room in particular — would probably fall right on their heads otherwise.

“What the fuck happened here,” she said.

Jen walked over to one of the huge piles of rubble, and looked down at the stone and ruined statue.

“Claw marks.”

“Ah shit, really?” Triss joined her and stared down at the mess. The big fire braziers on the walls cast a lot of firelight, but the place was just so damn fucking huge that they didn’t do a good job lighting the room. Still, once she got close she could see claw marks. Big claw marks. Bigger than an Uratha could make, claw marks.

Slowly, Triss turned around and looked at the other pillars. Some of them had been pushed over, and some had been slashed down. No Uratha was strong enough to do this, and even fucking Jacob would struggle to break one of these big-ass pillars. But as Triss inched her way toward another pile of rubble, it was clear the big gargoyle had done this. Some of the claw marks were too high for anyone else to reach.

“You think...”

Shivering, Triss rubbed her one naked arm as she looked down the big room toward where she knew the throne was. Too far to see, too dark, but the giant door leaving the castle was behind her, and she knew from what Jack told her the throne was in the other direction.

Much as it was easy to think of Sándor as the stoic guy she’d really gotten to like, it was also true he didn’t talk about his Horror much, or even let them interact with him while merged with it. They knew he had some pretty nasty hungers that were hard to satisfy, relative to other Begotten, but otherwise he kept all that shit to himself. Whatever hunts he did, he did alone.

The memories of the time she’d seen him in that form came flooding back. It hadn’t been him. Jeremiah had somehow gotten control of the Horror without Sándor, and without him, the Horror

was a monster in the classic sense. Mindless and hungry. And really fucking powerful. Challenged Jack the Ripper and survived powerful.

God fucking help her if she had to deal with that thing. Athalia said Sándor was in his lair though, which, far as she knew, guaranteed he was merged with his Horror. But then, what the fuck was with all the destruction?

“Jen ... I’m going to do something really stupid.”

“And you want me to leave in case something bad happens, so I don’t get hurt.”

Triss looked back at her girlfriend and blinked at her. “What? No. We’re way past that phase. You’re coming with. If I die, you die with me.”

Jen laughed, but shut herself up quick when the laugh echoed in the giant room.

“Alright.” Grinning at her, Jen came up beside her, and nodded toward where the throne was supposed to be. “Think he’s there?”

“Might as well check there first.”

“Cloak of Night?”

“Probably not a good idea. He’d see through it, and if he’s doing this,” she gestured around at the destruction, “then he might slash first and ask questions later.”

“Right.” Jen gulped and rubbed her arms a bit. “Right.”

And with that, the two women started the walk down the giant chamber toward the supposed throne. It was such a big room, shaped like some sort of titanic hallway. Jack told her it reminded

him of the Mines of Moria. Naturally, she'd called him a nerd for saying it, but she'd seen the movies, and she admitted the imagery had been fitting. Not nearly as big, but still.

And now it'd looked like that big fire demon thing in the movie had run through the whole place and destroyed it.

It wasn't just the pillars. The floor had talon marks from where the huge gargoyle had gripped into it with his big raptor feet. It had some claw marks, too, like he'd sliced down at the floor, or maybe fell to his knees and tore at it. The walls in some places were covered in claw marks, as if Sándor had drifted around randomly looking for anything solid to take a chunk out of it. Literal chunks. Bits of stone half as big as her sat beneath some braziers with giant claw marks in the walls, before a few talon marks on the floor led to another pillar. This one was still standing, but four enormous claw marks ran halfway around it, from Triss's side toward the side in the direction of the throne. It was like he'd just casually dragged his claws on it while moving along.

Christ, she really wished she'd thought to change clothes. But the night was going by at breakneck speeds, and she just wanted to make sure people were okay. Mary was a ghost again, so there wasn't anything Triss could do about her. Sam was probably a wreck, but Jacob was with her. Fiona had Damien. Jack had Antoinette and other friends. Sándor had ... who? Fiona was with Damien, Mark seemed as personable as a trashcan, and Athalia made Isabella look warm and fuzzy.

But Triss had some blood on her dress, and was currently walking toward a potentially crazed twelve-foot gargoyle. Yeap, this was dumb.

Sure enough, the end of the room eventually came into view, just a blur in the darkness before they got close. A giant stone throne,

big enough for even Sándor to sit on. Except it was on its side, and cracked in half.

The gargoyle sat in the now empty spot where the huge throne used to be, a sort of relaxed sit with one elbow on a knee, palm holding his chin. His two — no, four — gigantic wings were limp and hanging to the floor, and his tail was dead still where it lay between them. His head hung between his shoulders, with two giant fucking black horns sticking out of it. Each arm was a slab of muscle, almost as big as Triss's entire body. His torso was human shaped, save for the four arms and wings, and he had the muscle definition of a professional bodybuilder; on a giant gargoyle monster, that was a hundred times more intimidating.

He looked maybe as big as a car, until they got closer, the trick of perception faded, and they realized he was actually as big as a truck, literally. A dark blue truck, like some sort of steel color. The only clothes he had on was some sort of leather loincloth thing. Not even any shoes to hide his giant raptor feet and their talons.

He turned his head, looked at her, and stopped, going statue mode on her, expression locked in something blatantly morose. She wasn't sure if she was just fucked up in the head from looking at her own reflection so many years, but his gargoyle face was handsome, human-ish too, with a very hard, defined chin and eyebrows that crossed into hyper-masculine-demon-skull territory.

He didn't say anything. The gargoyle stared at them, down at them, despite the fact he was sitting. It was hard to get a read on his eyes in the dim firelight, but they were dark.

Triss gulped on a dry throat, and looked to Jen. Jen gulped, and looked from her to Sándor.

“Sándor,” Jen said, “you disappeared after the ... the...”

Sándor let out a deep, slow rumble, a growl in his chest so low it was more like a mini earthquake coming from directly in front of them. Triss shifted her weight onto the balls of her toes, ready to bolt. But the big monster didn't move, only slowly turned his head back to stare off to the side at nothing.

His breathing was super slow, maybe one every ten seconds, and each one made his chest and abs slowly increase in size before deflating. It was like that fucking scene in Jurassic Park where the paleontologist dude rested his head on the tranqed triceratops.

“Sándor,” Triss said, after a healthy amount of silence. “Come on, man. You just upped and vanished, and I ... I guess we were kinda worried about you.”

Another heavy rumble. The vibration went through the stone floor and into her feet, until her teeth nearly buzzed.

“We were worried,” she continued, “because of what Jen said tonight. You know, that you always think about other people? And hey, we get it, we're feeling pretty fucked up, too. Like, holy shit what happened tonight was fucking awful, and I feel awful, and Jen feels awful, and we'd be with Sam right now if Jacob wasn't running damage control with her.”

Jacob's name managed to get a small turn of his head, and a furrow of his very heavy brows, before he looked away again.

“And,” Jennifer said, “we thought, if we felt horrible, then Sándor is probably feeling miserable. We thought you'd go full statue mode, and collect dust.” She shivered as she glanced beside the gargoyle at the giant, cracked, stone throne.

Another rumble, but otherwise, Sándor did exactly what Jen said: pretended to be a statue.



Well, fuck that. Sándor was one of the damn few good things to happen to Dolareido, after Jeremiah and Angela fucked everything up. Triss wasn't going to let him turn into her, younger her, brooding in a crypt somewhere.

“Dude, come on, talk to us.” Triss stepped around in front of him. Christ, she really did have to look up at him, even though he was sitting. Must have been twelve feet tall when standing, at least, more with the horns. “If it were anyone else, I'd say sure, give the dude his space. But you've been doing the stoic, 'give me space' routine ever since I've known you. Time to come out of the box!” And for some stupid reason she didn't understand, she kicked the giant monster in the foot. Might as well have kicked the tires of the dark blue truck the gargoyle matched. Didn't budge at all.

“She's right,” Jen said. “This is an intervention. We're worried you're going to...” She looked behind her at the destroyed pillars. How the fuck had the gargoyle managed to destroy that much solid fucking stone, in such a small amount of time? “Going to close up even more. We don't want that. You may have noticed, we like you.”

No response.

Triss steeled herself, and stepped forward, between the monster's legs.

“So, why don't you come with us? Or we can stay here, whatever. But let's ... talk, I guess.” Christ all fucking mighty, how did Jack do this? Be all honest and direct and shit, but also reasonable and meaningful? She could do direct and honest, sure, if it involved yelling and breaking things. But being honest and open was a shitload harder when it was time to be quiet and gentle.

Samantha wouldn't have had trouble. She'd be all tender, stroke Sándor's shoulder, pet his head, and hold it to her chest.

Triss couldn't do that shit to save her life. What she could do, was yell at people until they listened.

“Sándor!” She took another step, now between his knees. “You wanted to make it up to Dolareido for what you did while the hunters controlled you. Well guess what, you asshole!” She gave his thigh a kick, for good measure. “People like you here, so that means when horrible shit happens, you can't just go running off to be alone and brood. You have friends now, and friends are supposed to do this thing where we talk to each other, and bond over horrible crap like this. We're supposed to go get Sam, and hang out and get drunk — that ship's sailed — and cry over how awful what happened to Mary tonight was! That's what people do! So fucking wake up! Wake up and—”

One of his giant arms snatched out for her. Fast. Damn fast. The titanic hand wrapped her waist, and lifted her. Holy fuck it was nearly big enough to completely wrap around her.

“Triss!” Jen managed a single step before one of Sándor's other hands snatched her up.

And then the juggernaut got up.

With a heavy rumble, the titan got to his feet, using his two free hands to help push his huge weight off the floor. Slowly, he walked forward, aimed toward the other end of the giant chamber, pace leisurely but at the same time, heavy as all fuck, like the dude was dragging a dozen iron balls and chains behind him.

He brought both Jen and Triss closer to his face, and growled down at them. The rumbles earlier were enough to make her body buzz, but a growl was like trying to swim in a wave pool with a huge bass speaker strapped on her back, blasting R&B. She froze, and stared at the monster as he took turns glaring at each of them.

“I wanted to be left alone,” he said, “because sometimes I can lose control, and the gargoyle’s hunger ... leaks out.” Holy fuck the voice was deep, and it reverberated through Triss and everything nearby. “I stay quiet, and keep my thoughts to myself, because I could kill someone if I let them out!” A heavy shake had Triss beyond disoriented, and she struggled to figure out where up and down were as the gargoyle stomped along. Each step made the floor vibrate, like a fucking scene from Jurassic Park, again. He could probably walk quietly or stalk if he wanted to. He didn’t want to.

“Sándor!” Jen screamed. “Stop! Please!”

The gargoyle didn’t listen. He roared. Triss and Jen both covered their ears — thank god their arms were free — as the booming sound pulsed through them and out against the giant chamber’s walls, only to echo and slam back into them.

“For hundreds of years, I have seen nothing but pain. When I finally taste joy once again, I lose it. Always I remain, watching. I thought this place would be different, but snakes in the shadows plot our doom, and every effort we make to find some peace, is destroyed!” He lifted them both, and stared up at them as he again roared. His hot breath poured over them. Triss had no idea if it smelled bad; she’d stopped breathing. “Centuries of...” He looked down and away before letting out another growl. “It doesn’t matter. It is my pain, and I will bear it. But you two poke and prod and absolutely persist on invading my world! You two are so determined to rip the wounds open and bleed me dry!”

Holy fucking shit, the first time the man really let out his feelings, and it turned out he wanted to destroy everything around him? Triss knew that feeling, and a part of her wanted to tell him to calm down. But she also knew her pain was probably just a penny in a jar compared to his, and if she said something like ‘I know how you feel’, she might just get deservedly smashed into pulp. A shred of wisdom showing through, a bit too late.

“We’re not!” Triss pushed down against the huge fingers wrapping her waist and ribs. No good. Trapped like a mouse. “We just want to help!”

With heavy steps, Sándor walked by one of the giant pillars still standing. He raked one of his free hands against it as he leaned into it, the muscles of the giant arm bulged, and his claws ripped through the stone. Giant chunks of pillar crashed into the floor, heavy enough they broke on impact.

He stomped along, picking up a little speed, and Jen and Triss yelped as they came to a sudden halt when Sándor again raked his claws against another pillar. With his huge body giving him inertia, the claws sank deep, and bits of rock flew everywhere. Triss and Jen covered their heads and faces with their forearms as stone chunks rained down.

Triss knew what he was doing. She’d done it a million times before, when she had something in her hands she didn’t want to break, usually her phone, but at the same time, really really wanted to break something because she was super angry. So she’d break something nearby instead. It did not feel good to be a smart phone right now.

“Vampires,” he said, voice quiet, half growl half rumble, “do not understand. I do not speak of this, because it isn’t your burden to bear. Your Beast is a quiet thing, whispering in your minds. A Horror is...” His voice trailed off as a heavy growl replaced it, and the giant beast lifted them high again as he bared his huge teeth and fangs. “Why can’t I simply be left alone!” His four wings flared out, stirring up air hard enough to have Triss’s hair blowing around violently, and his wings dwarfed everything in shadow, like he’d opened a ship’s sail big enough to block out the stars.

Jen and Triss managed some quick peeks at each other as they stared down at the gargoyle. Say something say something say

something, and make it smart.

“Because we like you.” Apparently the best she could come up with was a Disney line. It’d only have been worse if she said they were family or ohana or something. Dead. They were so dead.

Slowly, he lowered them both back down until they were chest level with him, and he leaned over them. His dark eyes glared down at them with something a little more than just rage, and it sent a chill through Triss’s spine.

That was hunger.

He rumbled deep, very deep, a cross between growl and purr, and he held them both only a few feet from his chest and head as he brought in his two other hands. He wrapped their legs in two new sets of fingers, and stared down at them as he licked his giant fangs.

Triss had asked Damien a few questions about Begotten during their piano lessons, questions about horrors, because she knew Sándor would dodge answering them. Apparently, Horrors came in a bunch of varieties, and came with a specific hunger. Fiona’s Horror hungered to punish people. He wouldn’t tell her about the others, maybe out of respect, maybe because Fiona wouldn’t tell him, but he knew all Horrors hungered to make people afraid of them. It was, according to Fiona, literally how they fed. Vampires drank blood, and Begotten drank terror as long as it was directed at them or the things they did.

Sándor didn’t talk about his Horror much, almost never with Triss, and according to Fiona, almost never with her or her weird little family. But they did know a few things: he rarely ate; when he did it was something he did alone, away from the others; and it was brutal. How they knew it was brutal, Triss had no idea, but it was, according to Fiona, not exactly a common hunger for Horrors.

Triss's mouth dropped open, and ice shot up through her limbs, as the gargoyle tightened his grip on them. Not hard enough to hurt yet, but panic set in as Triss struggled against his grip, and couldn't move. She tapped into her vitae and put Nosferatu strength into her limbs, and managed to get his fingers to shift a little, but not nearly enough to get her free.

She was trapped, and from the look in the gargoyle's eyes, she felt pretty sure she was two seconds away from getting eaten.

Sándor rumbled again, much closer to purr than growl, and brought both vampires up closer to his face. Not in punching distance, but close. But of course Sándor saw that coming, and slid his hand around her torso up, forcing her arms up, where he clutched them together in the hand. With one hand holding her hands together over her head, and one hand holding her feet together underneath her, she felt like a shish kebab.

"Sándor!" She squirmed and wriggled, and got nowhere. "Sándor, you asshole, we were just trying to fucking help!"

He wasn't listening. His hungry eyes slowly slid down from Triss and Jen's eyes, to their chests.

Triss looked down. In the commotion, she'd completely forgotten she was wearing a loose dress, and not only had one breast come out, the shoulder on the other side had fallen enough for both breasts to come out. And a quick glance at Jen showed she was in the same circumstance, hands trapped over her head, feet trapped underneath her, breasts out. Two hands for each vampire.

The nightmare monster rumbled, eyes dilating, and he brought them both in closer. Now he was very much in punching distance, but Triss couldn't get her hands free, even as she pumped more vitae through her.

"Sándor, the fuck are you doing?"

He didn't respond. He didn't even look up to meet her gaze. He just brought her in closer, both of them, and again licked his big teeth. His breathing quickened, and as Jen and Triss both went dead silent, they could hear something going thump thump, and getting faster.

A peek down showed a very, very, very large bulge in his leather loincloth. Oh fucking shit.

Someone else's voice cut through the sudden silence.

"Sándor!" Jen screamed, and not a girly scream. That was rage. Triss snapped her eyes back up and looked at Jen, and found her friend glaring at the giant, hungry, and apparently horny gargoyle. The titan turned his head to look at her, eyes blasting one message: you're my prey. "Sándor, you will not touch us! How dare you cross that line! We are not your prey, in any way! Our bodies are not yours to do with as you please! Now put us down!"

Triss and Sándor both stared at her. Jen didn't normally yell or scream, and she never talked with that harsh 'I'm going to fucking kill you if you don't listen to me' voice. And the way she said 'in any way' spoke volumes, like she'd said it before.

Triss and Jen didn't talk about their sires all that much. Triss's was a stalker who died not long after siring her. Jen's was a bastard who was going to use her and her sex appeal as a tool in the Danse Macabre. Not much to say, really. They both had a shitty past on that topic.

Sándor froze. Both vampires stared at him, waiting. Triss gave up squirming, and found her gaze drifting between the giant gargoyle and her girlfriend, who was looking at Sándor like she'd rip — or bite — his dick off if he dare touch her with it.

Apparently, she got through to him, because Sándor's eyes closed for a few seconds. When he reopened them, something closer to

human was in them again, and he took deep, heavy breaths as he forced himself to look away. He put them both down, let them go, and took several steps back, refusing to look at them as he did.

Triss and Jen fixed their dresses, came up beside each other, shared some quick affirming nods, and looked to Sándor. Of course the giant gargoyle closed in on himself, took several more steps back, and blocked their view of him with his wings, like a curtain.

“I am sorry,” he said, quiet, deep voice rumbling. “The Horror, it ... it’s ... hungers can get ... vile.” His voice died away, let out as a long, rumbling sigh.

Wincing, Triss looked to Jen. Her girlfriend was scowling, but when she noticed Triss looking, she shook her head and wiped the scowl away. Getting touched without permission set her off pretty hard.

“It’s ... alright,” Jennifer said eventually. “Or rather, it’s not alright, but I understand. Your Horror is a greater presence in your life than the Beast is in ours.”

Sándor sighed again, and took another step back, still blocking their view of him with his giant wings.

“Please, go.”

Triss and Jen shared a look again for a quick silent conversation. Leave? Don’t leave? Jen sighed as she looked down, then back to Sándor, and then gestured to him. Yeah, them showing up had probably just made things worse, but if they left now, there was a good chance the damn idiot would lock himself up in a cell somewhere out of some need to punish himself.

Things could have gone worse. A lot worse. Triss and Jen were stupid to just violate the dude’s personal space like this, and stupid to prod and poke him. Of course that didn’t justify him nearly eating



them, or killing them, or doing something else, but still, he was a nightmare monster. You don't walk into a lion's den and complain when the lions attack you. Christ, Sándor would probably kill himself if he woke up from some rage-fueled rape and murder fest, only to realize he'd killed them.

"Okay," Triss said. "No harm no foul, okay? Your Horror is ... intense. And, uh, a little volatile." Apparently the image of the quiet gargoyle, perched and watching silently, didn't always apply. "But we weren't lying. Shit happened tonight, and you shouldn't be here by yourself, brooding about it." Though, looking around again at the destruction, maybe a little time brooding by himself to calm down was a good idea. "What happened to Mary tonight is not your fault. We know you think it is, because of what happened before, with Jeremiah. But it's not. It's not anyone's fault. Tomorrow night, we're going to go visit Sam. And then maybe we'll visit you again, if you'll let us."

The gargoyle squatted, lowering his height to maybe seven feet, and he lowered one of his wings enough to peek over it at her. Then at Jen. And then he disappeared behind it again as he let out another one of those pained, rumbling sighs.

"We want to see you again," Jen said, mirroring Triss's inflection.

Another sigh, but he did stand up again, and turned to face them.

"I ... didn't want you to see me like this."

"Well, we did," Jen said. "And we ... were stupid, to ... poke and prod you."

Triss took a step forward. Sándor took a step back.

"Okay, okay," she said. "Sorry. We'll ... we'll go. But I'm serious, Sándor. We're still good, okay?"

He nodded as he took another step, and then another, before he turned and walked away, back toward the destroyed throne. Each step made that thump sound, but they faded into a quiet echo as he disappeared into the long darkness of his chamber.

With anyone else, the incessant need to blame themselves for everything bad that happened would have gotten really fucking annoying. With Sándor, it wasn't annoying, but it made Triss's insides ache seeing it. He hated himself for helping Jeremiah, and hated himself for Mary's death. Seeing her die, again, and seeing Samantha's one bit of joy crushed, pushed him over the edge.

And they'd just gone and made things worse.

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"We could have died," Triss said up at Athalia. Bitch was back in her chair, reading again, like nothing had happened.

"Oh?"

Jen snarled at her as she stood beside Triss, glare pointed at the Begotten. "He was ... not Sándor."

Athalia closed her book, leaned forward, and stared at the two of them like they were children. Took a lot of effort to not jump up there and punch her stupid face in.

"You two spend a lot of time trying to play nice with Sándor."

"Uh, yeah," Triss said. "He's a nice guy. A cool guy. And he seems to really care about Dolareido. Why the fuck wouldn't we want to be his friend?"

"You're both idiot children. He's Begotten."

"So are you. So's Fiona."

“Fiona and I are young. Think of Azamel. Think of her relationship with Jeremiah. She was old and powerful then, over a hundred years ago, and the mere act of existing meant she influenced her surroundings in extreme ways. She was a force of nature. If she had the physical youth of Sándor, and the power she had when she died? She’d have taken this whole city, because she wouldn’t have been able to help herself.”

Triss raised a brow. “Wouldn’t have been able to help herself?”

“Yes. In the...” Athalia gulped down something painful as she looked down. “In the same way I hurt Angela when she was young. I have to make people afraid, vampire. Have to. And me, specifically, I have to destroy. Azamel has ... had to conquer and dominate. She had no choice. Fiona must punish those who transgress. I expect you know a lot of this already. Fiona has a big mouth.”

Triss squirmed a little. “A bit.” No need to tell her she got the info from Damien.

“And I know Fiona doesn’t know much about Sándor, because he refuses to tell her. But he has told me some things. And I’m going to tell you because you’re ... closer to him than anyone else.” She sighed again as she looked down and shook her head. “He’s an ancient Begotten with hungers and urges that are absurd. Begotten don’t normally live for centuries, but his gargoyle Horror keeps him alive, like a statue. And thanks to that age, he’s become a ... a slave to his hunger, in ways most Begotten don’t know. And he’s Ugallu, an incarnation of the fear of exposure.”

“Exposure?”

“Imagine approaching a church, a cathedral, and a gargoyle over the door stares down at you. You feel it staring into you, and you know you can’t escape its gaze. That is who he is. It is existential for him. He watches. He waits.”

That, was a fucking eerie feeling, and a nightmare Triss knew she'd had before. She shivered.

Athalia nodded, noticing. "What he doesn't like to share is how deadly his hungers are. He hungers for prey."

"For ... prey? Isn't that—"

"It is not what all Begotten do. Listen to me, you—" She bit off her own insult and shook her head again. "Sándor hungers for prey in the most literal sense. I have ways to mitigate my hunger, my need to destroy and create ruin. Fiona and Mark can do the same. Sándor's Horror feeds off one very specific thing: the fear of being eaten. It's the deepest, truest fear any living thing knows, and his gargoyle is so old, that hunger is massive." She leaned forward. "You know Sándor. You know what sort of person he is. Now imagine what it's like to have a hunger that grows so large, it eats you alive from the inside, worse than any pathetic blood lust a vampire might have. Imagine what it's like for a man like Sándor, to be driven to hunt, and kill, and to indulge and feed on the fear the prey feels."

"Azamel tried to help him, and maybe she helped a little, but his Horror is too old and too strong. That little battle with the Ripper could have gone much, much worse. Sándor does everything he can to keep his Horror bottled away, but sometimes it gets out, and ... and he has to hunt someone down, and kill them. And he has to make them fear it. He has to make sure they know they're being chased, that something deadly is after them. He has to make sure they realize they're dying because they were hunted down, that they were prey and he is the predator that ends them. Imagine it! Imagine a creature of terror living in your fucking soul!" She slammed her palms against the chair as she stood up, and glared down at the two of them like they'd just smashed her car. "Imagine it haunting you, every moment you're awake and asleep, driving you to hurt everyone around you! Imagine—"

Triss threw up her hands in surrender. “Athalia! We ... we...” She blinked as she stared up at the woman. Her dark skin was starting to gleam with hints of sweat, like she was getting ready for a fight, and her eyes had hints of tears. “Athalia...”

Athalia clenched her fists as her eyes snapped between Jen and Triss, before she looked away again and sat down. Her arms were shaking.

“Sándor...” Her voice caught in her throat. “Sándor, he hates himself every time he has to feed.”

Oh. She wasn’t talking about Sándor anymore. She was talking about herself.

Triss and Jen slowly looked to each other again, until Jen came up to the base of the stage.

“Athalia...,” Jen said. The Begotten snapped another harsh glare at Jen, but Jen didn’t move. “Athalia, talk to us.”

“Talk to you!? You ki—” She bit her words off again, this time covering her hand with her mouth.

There it was. She cut through the bullshit, and buried them all in silence. Jen and Triss traded a somber look, for the millionth time that night, before Triss eventually came up beside Jen, and set her hands on the stage.

“You’re right. I did kill Angela.”

“You!” Athalia screamed through her fingers. “You ... You...” The moisture in her eyes built until a couple tears ran down her dark cheeks, and she closed her eyes again as she looked away. “Don’t. Just don’t.”

“Athalia, I—”

“You didn’t kill Angela! I killed Angela. I fucking killed her. I fucking killed her the moment I didn’t let her go when she was born. I wanted to keep her, and me and my Horror, we destroyed her.” Athalia fell back in her chair and covered her face with one hand, but it couldn’t hide the tears that dripped from her jaw. “I killed my baby girl.”

Triss and Jen stared at each other. Jesus fucking christ, Aaron was right. She had changed.

“Athalia,” Triss said, “you didn’t kill Angela. You know you didn’t.”

“I may as well have. I ... I just wanted a daughter.”

Oh fuck.

“This ... is about Mary, too, isn’t it?”

Athalia took a few seconds to force down her sobs, before exposing her face again. “Samantha didn’t deserve to see her daughter die. No one deserves that.”

Triss looked down as the memories hit her in the guts. The gun in her hand. Angela, glaring at her, asking Triss to kill her. Triss pulling the trigger, with Athalia not far behind her, begging for them to stop. Seeing Mary die in front of Samantha must have ripped those memories out of whatever deep, dark hole she’d buried her own daughter’s death in. Mary, blood coming out of everywhere, on her mother’s lap, saying her last words before she went cold, only for something angry and horrific to burst out of her.

Sighing, Triss pulled herself up onto the stage enough to sit on it, legs dangling off the edge, head facing away from the poor woman.

“I’m not sorry I killed Angela, Athalia. But I am so fucking sorry it went down the way it did. Everything, everything about it was ...

what a fucking shit show. And now I'm just trying to put some of the pieces back together, you know?"

"You ... must despise me, for what Angela did ... to Julias."

"No. I was angry at you at first, but that was then. Like I said, you didn't kill Angela, and you're not responsible for her choices. I don't care how much trauma she suffered as a kid, there's no excuse for what she did. Or what Jeremiah did." Triss kicked her bare feet out a few times and let her heels hit against the concrete stage. "I ... fuck, I don't know, Athalia. I was just trying to help. Trying to help Samantha get back something she lost, and trying to help Sándor, cause the dude seems like a classic case of a repressed, self-loathing nice guy. And I'd prefer he didn't blow his brains out." Repressed, self-loathing nice guys had a habit of doing that.

After a few quiet moments, Athalia's sobs came to a stop, and she sniffed as she sat up straight, and looked down at Triss, Triss looking back over her shoulder to watch her.

"What're you going to do about Samantha? I figured you'd be with her, tonight. So did Sándor."

"I'm gonna talk to her tomorrow. Jacob's with her now, and I know she wants some time with her daughter ... daughter's ghost."

Saying Jacob's name earned a small twitch from Athalia, and she looked away as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "You really trust him."

"Jacob? I didn't used to, and I still don't, but he has come through for me pretty often. He's surprised me a lot, especially with Sam." Triss smiled at Athalia, her best 'let's not hate each other' smile; hard to do with her mouth. "He's really helped her find some happiness, you know? And, uh, Aaron tells me you've found a little with the sheriff."

Athalia smiled slightly, probably calling up a pleasant memory of the most boring vampire in the world.

“He has.”

Nodding, Triss got up, and squatted down beside Athalia and her chair.

“Look. I don’t know what happened to Mary. I’m going to find out. But ... but it’s looking pretty bad. That sucks like fucking hell for Sam. And as much as Jen and I are her friends, we’re never gonna be able to connect with her the same way you could. Sándor, too. You think you can ... visit her a bit? Maybe talk about ... parent stuff?”

Athalia chuckled, weak and sad, but she did, and she nodded as she met Triss’s eyes.

“I didn’t know if she wanted to talk to me. We talked those couple times, but...”

“I—fuck, I guess if you only had Jack to go off, you wouldn’t know. They’re not much alike. Sam loves to talk and socialize, and I don’t think the woman is even capable of holding a grudge.”

“She did seem ... very huggy, the few times we talked.”

“Exactly. You two are basically opposites, and I’m sure you’ll hit it off.”

Athalia slowly found another smile. “Alright. It would be nice to talk to someone, about ... about what it’d been like, being a mother. Sándor listens, but he doesn’t talk much, and he’s a man.”

“Sándor. You got any advice on how to puncture his shell? I’ve managed to get something out of him a few times, when he’s got a guitar in hand, or some alcohol. But usually he’s a closed book.”



Except, uh, right now, where he nearly fucking ate us.” And other stuff.

“You ... like him, don’t you? Really like him.” Athalia asked. Triss groaned and rolled her eyes, which was apparently enough of an answer. “I’m not sure. He’s had a rough past, and I don’t mean like the rest of us. I mean ... he’s lost a lot of people in his life. The family Jeremiah killed wasn’t the first one.”

“Jesus.”

“The only thing that will work is time, I imagine. And music and alcohol. And, honestly, probably simply being around him without pestering him.”

“No pestering?”

“No. Sit around with him and enjoy some silence. Stop trying to get into his pants constantly”—she threw an annoyed, but playful glare at Jen, who looked away with a whistle—”and try spending some time with him, watching the world the way he does. Avoid the drama talk. He’s too old for it. It’s all stuff he’s heard a million times before. Just, hang around him and shut up.”

Triss scratched her head. Just, stand around, not saying anything? That was surprisingly difficult to do. If she was standing around, she was either listening to music, or bitching and ranting about something, or on a stakeout and not exactly just vibing, which seemed to be what Athalia suggested doing. But if she was right about it being existential to Sándor, and she probably was, then maybe it was a good idea.

“Will do.” Triss hopped down from the stage and looked back at Athalia. “I’m serious, Athalia. I’m ... I know I’m angry about losing Julias, and I doubt that’ll ever completely go away. But I ain’t got nothing against you, not anymore, and I’m hoping you don’t have anything against me.”

Athalia let out a slow sigh as she nodded. “I don’t hate you, Beatrice. I ... Like I said earlier, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive you, but I don’t hate you. You have nothing to fear from me.”

Triss smiled, nodded again, and left, Jen at her side.

Once they were a little ways down the tunnel, and hopefully out of Athalia’s hearing range, Triss nudged her friend.

“I fucking hope Sam doesn’t hate my guts. Two daughters dead ‘cause of me.”

“What?” Jen shook her head, slipped an arm around Triss, and half hugged her as they walked. “Beatrice, you know Samantha isn’t going to hold you responsible for this. Maybe tonight, while she’s still...”

“Angry as all fuck and refusing to show it?”

“You know it’ll just be for tonight. That’s why we’re letting Jacob talk to her and not us, right? Tomorrow night we’ll talk to her again, and we’ll figure out what to do.”

Triss threw up her hands. “The fuck do we do? You heard Mary. She’s not her.”

“She’s a ghost again. That means she’s psycho.”

“Doesn’t mean she’s wrong. She’s ... she’s not Mary, Jen. We knew that was a possibility. It’s not her. It’s the only explanation.”

“Unless—”

“I literally had a god show up in my fucking dreams and give me that ritual, Jen. It should have worked.” And hopefully she’d get to have another conversation with that Crone bitch, so she could

scream at her for not telling her Mary's ghost wasn't Mary's soul at all.

"Then ... what do we do? Just accept that we can't help Sam?"

"I have no fucking idea. We're vampires. We got time. But if it's not Mary, and it's probably not, then there's nothing we can do, except doing what we're doing for Julias. Which..."

"Has come to a complete stop because no one anywhere has any idea of how to pluck a soul from the afterlife."

Groaning, Triss ground her jaw until her crocodile teeth clicked. "Not entirely true. Black Blood said they'd managed a peek to the other side."

"By killing mountains of people, Triss. You really want to do that?"

"No, no I don't. There is a billion other ideas out there."

"But they're all bullshit, according to Jacob. Pop-culture nonsense."

"Then we go full nerd mode, read a few thousand tomes, and see if we can dig up something."

"Something no one else ever managed to make work?"

"That we know of." Before Jen could say anything, Triss shook her head. "I know, I know. It's not gonna happen. But until I come to a decision, I might as well keep trying."

"Very well." Jen sighed as she leaned her head down against Triss's shoulder, and kept walking. But after a couple stumbles, she groaned and looked behind her.

"What?"

“I forgot my heels in Sándor’s place. Maybe we can—”

“Nope. Dude is going through some shit and apparently that includes a lot of destroying things. You saw the look in his eyes, and the, uh, bulge in his pants. He was ready to crack and do some pretty horrible shit.”

“I know.”

“And you were ready to kick him straight in his junk if he tried, weren’t you?”

“I was.” She nodded, with a little conviction and a dash of pride on her face. “No one gets to use me like that. Never.”

“Did—”

“No, my sire didn’t. But the idea...” She growled, but kept her temple on Triss’s shoulder. “I regret yelling at him, though.”

“Fuck me, why? He was going to use us like dolls and probably break us in the process.”

“Because he’s clearly hurting. And sure, I get what Athalia is saying. I should stop prodding him, and stop trying to coax him out of his shell. But ... now he’s hurting, even more. I made him feel guilty.”

Triss laughed and hugged her stupid girlfriend harder. “Better than how he’d feel if he actually, you know, ate us.”

“I know. But still...” After a long, heavy sigh, she let out a playful, quiet chuckle, and turned her head enough to lean in and give Triss a quick kiss on the cheek bone, above the crocodile teeth. “He was huge.”

“He was.”

“And muscular.”

“Very.”

“And handsome.”

“Yes, he was.” Apparently monster-fucker was a kink a lot of women in Dolareido had.

“And you saw the size of those bulges in his loincloth.”

“I ... did.”

“And that there were two.”

Triss blinked at her. “I did not notice that.”

“I mean, I think I saw two. You think? He does have four arms and four wings.”

“He doesn’t have two mouths or four eyes.”

Laughing, Jen shrugged as she stood up straight, and picked up their pace a bit. “Maybe it’s just wishful thinking.”

Leave it to this girl, to be a beacon of defiance when it came to defending her personal boundaries, but still be perfectly comfortable being the biggest slut Triss knew. It was strangely amazing, and Triss grinned at her girlfriend as Jen let out a yelp. She’d stepped on a pebble.

## Chapter 166

~~Jack~~

“Mary?”

No answer.

“Mary, you there?”

No answer.

His mom sighed and shook her head as she pulled out a chair and sat down at their old kitchen table.

“I talked with her last night. She ... She’s pretty angry. Not at anyone, except maybe herself. She thinks she’s not Mary.”

No one thought she was Mary anymore. Everyone at the ball heard what she said, and considering her body had gone from perfectly fine, to dead, in five minutes flat, it was pretty obvious there was something wrong with whatever his mom and Triss had done. Or, if not wrong with the process, wrong with the target. And as much as it hurt to think about, it was probably the latter. She wasn’t Mary. She was an afterimage, an echo, some ephemera remnant, and the body had rejected it.

“You know what I’m thinking,” Jack said as he pulled out a chair and sat beside his mom.

“I know.”

“And I know what you’re thinking. That it doesn’t matter that she’s not Mary.”

His mom nodded, eyes hardened and pointed down at the table.  
“It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.”

“You’re wrong.”

Jack opened his mouth, but closed it after a few silent seconds. There was no arguing with his mom when she was like this. Logic, out the window. Evidence, out the window. As much as he loved his mom, her absolute refusal to use her brain and break things down into cold hard math, ever, was infuriating. Antoinette did cold logic with everything, even the things Jack wouldn’t. The Prince and his mother were polar opposites.

“Alright, we’ll do this your way. What do we do now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mom, you have to know your next step. You can’t just blindly drift through your second life reacting and never planning. You’re going to catch a sunrise like that. You have to figure out what you’re going to do.”

“I am going to make sure Mary ... Mary’s ghost, is given everything she needs to be happy.”

“She’ll never be happy, Mom. She’s a ghost, and an angry one.” No need to recount what happened yesterday. If his mom hadn’t been there to stop Mary’s ghost, she would have done some real damage to the people in the ball. Even a vampire would struggle to survive getting cut to bits in a tornado of broken glass, which he was pretty sure Ghost Mary could do.

“It’s better than being alone,” she said, “haunting an old house with no one in it, until she turns into some sort of ... local legend that turns out to be real, and hurts people.”

Jack raised a brow. That was a specific example. Probably some horror movie his mom saw at some point, with teenagers breaking into a haunted house at night on a dare, only for some of them to die. She never could handle horror movies. Horror anything.

“You said she talked to you yesterday?” he asked. After the incident, he knew his mom went to visit her. He also heard Jacob went with her, which made him nervous as all hell.

“She did. She was ... crying. She...” His mom took a slow breath and looked behind her, at the stairs up to the bedrooms. “You heard her, at the end. She was happy she got to ... to see us again.”

Lowering his head, Jack reached out across the table, and set a hand on his mom’s. She turned it enough to hold it, and the two of them looked down.

“Mom, I ... I don’t want you to tear yourself up over this. Mary’s gone, and her ghost ... Maybe she’s just like Mary, whole enough to even be considered Mary. She certainly seemed like her when she was in a body, and ... Fuck me, I should have told Sándor to check her dreams, or Fiona.”

“She got three days with us again. I spent every moment of those three days with her, and we had fun, and we talked and cried and laughed and...” Her voice caught in her throat, and she squeezed Jack’s hand as she shuddered for a moment. “I’m not going to lose her again.”

She was already lost if Triss’s ritual didn’t work. His mom knew it, too.

“I guess we’re back at square one again. It’s easy to keep this house locked down, so Mary’s ... Mary can stay as long as she wants.”

“Yeah...”



“But, what’re you going to do? Are you going to try again?”

She shook her head. “We had to do some ... bad stuff, to make that body, and to do the ritual. And we’re pretty sure we did it right. Doing it again will lead to the same result, and I ... I can’t do all that, just to spend three days with her again, and see ... see that again.”

Jack squeezed her hand back. “No one would expect you to, Mom, especially Mary.”

“Then I guess we go back to the way things were. I’ll talk to Mary again later, maybe tomorrow night. Me and her, we can ... figure something out.”

It was like watching a desperate rat try and figure its way out of a maze. No matter what path his mom took, she wouldn’t be able to get free. The shit reality that Mary was dead and gone was closing in around her, and watching her struggle against it made Jack want to puke like he was still kine. Everything sucked.

“Sounds like a plan.” Nodding, he got up, and pulled on her hand. She resisted for a bit, but he was determined, and eventually she got up. He didn’t let go of her hand until they were out of the house.

In the driveway, Beatrice and Jennifer waited. They must have shown up while Jack was inside with his mom. Beatrice in her usual white tank top and jeans, Jen in a casual suit, and both of them looking like they’d just put their dog down.

“Sam,” Triss said, taking a small step forward. “We ... We were ... We didn’t know if...”

His mom ran the fifteen feet between her and Triss and Jen, and hugged them both, squeezing them both in her arms.

“Why didn’t you come visit last night, after what happened!?”

Jen blinked at the woman between her and Triss, and then at Jack, who of course could only shrug. If they thought his mom would blame them for what happened, they didn't know her very well. But, they probably thought she'd be too upset to be reasonable at the time, which was actually a good bet.

"We just thought you'd want space," Triss said, and she hugged his mom snug and tight, before Jen did the same thing. "She in there?"

"She is, but she's hiding. She's thankful though."

"Not angry?"

"Not at you or anyone. Just ... mad at herself." Samantha sighed as she relaxed her hug, and let both ladies go. "But she's thankful, super thankful, for what she got to have."

"She react to Jacob well?" Triss asked.

"She still remembers everything that happened when ... when in the body. She reacted to him just fine." Jack's mom smiled and nodded, and took another step back. "I'm going to see my sire, and ... I don't know, talk about stuff I guess. You two, you um—"

Triss put up a hand. "Everything's on pause until we figure out what to do. But..."

"But it's not looking good," Jennifer said. "And, you already know that."

"I do." Nodding, Sam gave each girl another quick hug, before she pulled out her phone. Probably texting for a ride. "We should talk, later, in the future. What're you gonna do, Jack?"

"Not sure yet. I got some time."

Triss stepped up to him and managed a quick look in his eyes before she looked down and away slightly. Shame? Guilt?

“Let’s hang for a bit, then.”

“Yeah, we can do that.”

---

“So Jacob really had nothing to do with it,” Jack said.

Triss shook her head as she sipped her blood. Back at his mansion and in one of the smaller dining rooms, they had some privacy, and a nice table to sit at. Plus, he had blood in the fridge, so he got the bottle before they sat down. Jen insisted he get his ‘pets’ to pour their drinks, but he wasn’t that lazy. Jen also insisted getting ordered around would turn them on. He insisted that did not apply to orders a rude customer might give a waitress.

“Not really,” Triss said. “I mean, yeah, he’s a witch and he’s helped me become a witch. He’s taught me a lot. I’ve done some pretty intense shit, thanks to him. But resurrection? He’s pretty much told me to give it up, multiple times. And I’m pretty sure he knew it’d fail, even with Sam’s situation.”

Jack sneered, but Jen reached across the table corner and gave him a firm shoulder slap.

“Jacob has treated your mother well, and is one of the few joys in her life, Jack,” his fellow Ventrue said. “You may not like him, but he is very sweet, kind, loving, and tender with her.”

“Tender?”

“Indeed. After he and Othello have fucked her into a near coma, he often spends time hugging and cuddling her, and asks if she’s okay. It’s very sweet.”

Jack slowly pushed his glass aside, and let his head fall against the table, hard enough his forehead made the whole damn thing shake.

Triss laughed halfheartedly as she sipped her drink again. “Jen, that was mean.”

“Well, he was being mean.”

“No kid likes their stepdad. That shit takes time, you know?”

“Oh god kill me now,” he said into the table.

“Alright, I think we’re avoiding the serious shit,” Triss said. “I know the Invictus, and the Prince, track murders in Dolareido. I bet you know we’ve scooped up some assholes from Devil’s Corner, and killed them.”

Slowly he sat up, groaning as he rubbed his temples, trying to scrub away the image Jen put there. No such luck.

“You’re not the only vamps who do that. More than anyone else lately, sure, but ... but I know the Invictus, and the Ordo Dracul, occasionally kidnap kine, and either kill them, or lock them up for experiments or blood. People the world is better off without.” Though he said that with a little hesitation. It wasn’t a healthy habit to go around playing God.

“Your mom was ... involved in some of it,” Triss said. “I’m not happy about it, but she insisted. She’s seen ... and done, some pretty dark shit.”

“Fuck...”

“And you know we have Elen.”

“Yeah.” Which was pretty fucking terrifying.

“Well, she’s been helping us.”

“Not sure how you’re forcing her.”

“Black Blood. We got Elen at the center of a ritual room. Basically gives him the clear to, uh, half possess her. I don’t think he can full possess her, or anyone with a pulse. But close enough.”

He shivered. Okay, yeah, Black Blood being involved so directly was pretty fucking scary. Forcing Elen to work for them? Scarier.

“And Mom was okay with this?”

“Nope. But she was desperate. Very desperate.” Triss sighed as she looked down and sipped her drink again. “Seeing her daughter’s ghost all the time was getting to her.”

“Of course it fucking was.” Jack rubbed his temples harder. “I told her. I fucking told her she had to let Mary go.” Before the women could say anything, Jack put his hands down. “I said I wasn’t judging, and I meant it. I’d have done the same thing. I’m just ... fuck me, it’s just such a shitty situation.” The fact he had to dodge around saying he was basically plotting to undermine Jacob and Black Blood made it a hundred times worse. He couldn’t tell them. He wanted to, christ he wanted to, but he couldn’t.

“But after last night,” Triss said, “I think ... I think she’s going to let her go. You see the look on her face?”

Jack shook his head. “I think she’s going to give up on the idea of getting Mary back, but now she’s going to adopt her ghost like a homeless cat she found on the street who reminds her of her dead cat.”

“That a bad thing?”

“Considering what we know about ghosts? Yeah. It might take a year, or two, or a hundred, but Mary’s ghost is going to snap and start breaking the Masquerade eventually.”

“Proving ghosts exist doesn’t prove vampires exist,” she said.

“Pretty damn close.”

“He’s right,” Jen said. “As much as it’d be nice to let Samantha take care of Mary’s ghost, it’ll not only be a problem in the future, it’ll keep Samantha from ever truly recovering from Mary’s death.”

Triss winced, and downed the rest of her drink. “Yeah, you’re right. Fuck me, I know you’re right. And you heard Athalia, Jen. Accepting what happened has really helped her.”

Jack raised a brow as he looked between the two ladies. “You talked to Athalia?”

Jen nodded. “We did.”

“And ... it went well?”

“It did. Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

Triss cut in. “She’s never going to forgive us, or me especially. But at the same time, she doesn’t want to hate me, and she doesn’t want me to hate her. She ... She’s moving on. Painful as all fuck for her, but she’s moving on.”

“I’m sure Daniel played a part in that,” Jen said. “She’s a volcano, but he’s a sturdy mountain. They go well together.”

“Opposites attract,” Jack said, “and have a habit of destroying each other.”

Triss laughed as she poured another glass. “Dude, you are too fucking young to say smart shit like that. Be dumb like the rest of us.”

“Sorry. Having a 500-year-old girlfriend rubs off on ya. But honestly, yeah, I can see Daniel being good for Athalia. And maybe Athalia’s ... spicy attitude, will spice Daniel’s life up a bit.”

“Ha, maybe,” Triss said. “My point is, if Athalia can move on, Sam can, too. Just ... we need to be careful about it. Sam already knows what we’re all thinking, and she’s thinking it too. So convincing her will be problematic. And maybe unnecessary, if she eventually accepts it on her own.”

“My mom isn’t exactly good at confronting her own biases and changing her mind about stuff.”

“Then let’s give her time before we poke at her and see if we can get her to let Mary’s ghost go. Agreed?”

Jack let out a heavy sigh before taking a long drink of his glass. “Agreed. I’ll give her space.”

“Good.” Triss leaned back, and set her eyes on her drink on the table. “Fuck me, why can’t things just go smooth? First this shit with Mary, now with Sándor.”

“Something happened to Sándor?”

Triss and Jen traded a few looks, before Triss got back to drinking.

Jen took over. “Sándor’s powerful. Very powerful.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. Only thing the Ripper’s taken on who could manage it.”

“And, well ... his hunger is powerful, too. I don’t want to get into details, it’s very personal. But—”

The door knocked.

“Come in,” Jen said, as if she owned the place. Jack rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help but smile.

Veronica poked her head in. “The hunter Harcourt is at the door, master. Should I bring him in?”

That was strange. Jack looked to the other vampires, but they shrugged.

“Yes, bring him in.”

Veronica smiled, bowed slightly, and left.

“Veronica,” Triss said, once the thrall was gone, “is a very pretty young lady.”

“You’ve seen her before.”

“Yeap. Still. She legal?”

“She’s as old as I was when I was sired.”

“But you were five years old when you were embraced. I remember.”

Jack frowned at Triss, which of course only made her laugh.

“Veronica, Rachel, and Leilani were all old enough to drink when I bound them.” He didn’t like the word bound, but every time he used it around his thralls, they seemed to like it very much. In fact, Antoinette encouraged use of the word. Jen probably would, too.

“Uh huh. Well, she’s got the tits you like.”



Jennifer grinned as she nodded, and shook her chest from side to side a bit, just enough to make sure she created a little jiggle. “Indeed. I should know.”

Jack glared at the two of them, and an extra glare for Jen. “Don’t even start.”

“Imagine it.” Chuckling with the haughty air Ventrue did love, Jen leaned in and winked at Triss. “Those three lovely young ladies, struggling for a turn on Mister Terry, while Antoinette rests his head on her lap and strokes his hair, and Elaine hogs him all to herself.”

That, was entirely too accurate an image, and he almost asked her how she knew about the video. Unfortunately, he knew his expression changed enough to say it all anyway, and both girls erupted into laughter.

He smiled. Honestly, if teasing him let them laugh again, he was okay with that.

“Careful, Jack.” Triss said. “Sex like that will warp your mind, you know. Inflate the ego.”

“He’s Ventrue,” Jen said. “What fun would there be in his sex life, if he was not trying to inflate his ego at every moment.”

Jack threw up his hands. “Tell that to Antoinette. She’s the one—” A quiet knock on the door ended the conversation, thank god. “Come in.”

Rachel came in, then Brace Harcourt, followed by Veronica and Leilani peeking in through the door. Harcourt nodded, waved, in a predictably goofy way, and sat down without waiting to be asked. Any other Invictus would have been offended. At this point, Jack could only chuckle. It never even dawned on the man that it might be offensive to do that.

“That will be all,” Jack said, nodding to his thralls. “Thank you.”

The thralls all returned his nod with a deeper nod and bigger smiles, and left. Which of course gave everyone the opportunity to admire the way they walked when they left, because they made damn sure to sway their hips when they did.

Triss licked one of her crocodile teeth as she looked at Jack. “Dude—”

“No,” he said, and she grinned as she shut up. “Now, Harcourt, how can I help you?”

“Uh, hoping to be the one helping out, actually. Wanted to talk about your sister.”

“Mary’s ghost? We were just talking about her and my mother, and what to do. Or, basically, not do.”

“Not do?”

Jack nodded. “We were going to leave them alone for now.”

“Oh. Well, I mean, I can tell you later then.” And with the most honest ‘woops guess we’ll talk later’ expression on his face, Harcourt got up and headed for the door.

Jack gently slapped the man’s wrist as he walked by. “Sit down you moron. Tell us what’s on your mind.”

“Sure sure.” Harcourt shrugged and sat back down. “I was talking to some hunters out in the world. Told a few of them Dolareido is a pretty calm situation, the few vampires here are damn committed to not killing people, shit like that.”

“The Prince will be happy about that ... assuming a hunter doesn’t think you’ve become someone’s thrall and are just trying to

dissuade hunters from coming here.”

“Ha, maybe. Could happen. But I think I convinced them. Anyway, I also called up an old gal I know who specializes in ghosts.”

Triss leaned in, and she did not look happy. “You told them about Mary?”

“No. I just wanted to know what Francene was up to, how she was doing, was she in the state, yada yada. She’s close enough we could get her here if we wanted. And she could help.”

“Help how?” Jennifer asked.

“With ... doing that thing we want ghosts to do? Move on, and stuff? Francene hunts ghosts, and has ways to, uh, kill them, however that works. But I heard she also has ways to help them pass on if she can get them to cooperate. Supposedly.”

The three vampires looked at each other, and all leaned back in their chairs. They hadn’t considered that possibility, at least, not for a while. Getting Mary to ‘pass on’ on her own had been an option, but if she wouldn’t, then making her pass on was also an option, but a shitty one. And they didn’t know how to do that. If a hunter could come along and force the situation, that could be the way to do it.

“No idea how it works?” Jack asked.

“No. Never been my bag. You have to do rituals and place candles and stuff. I can barely speak English, let alone read Latin.” He reached out for the bottle on the table, swished it once, blinked at it, gulped, put it back, and leaned back in his chair. “Francene owes me. I can get her here, and she can deal with Mary.”

“Deal with,” Jack said, with a specific, heavy tone.

“Yeah. I know, it sucks. But you want options, right? I mean, I know the werewolves might be able to do something, since they can hurt spirits and stuff, but that—”

“Probably involves biting and tearing.”

“Yeah. And, I mean, you witches,” he gestured to Triss and Jen, “probably have something, somewhere, that could help. But—”

“Not lying around,” Triss said. “I mean yeah, if I go digging, I’m sure Jacob can find something. But it’s not something he’s ever dealt with, or is an expert on. I bet other Crone witches are, but not here in Dolareido. So, like, gimme a year or ten to learn about it, and sure, I could maybe manage something.”

Jack sighed and shook his head. “I ... would prefer deal with this situation sooner rather than later.”

Jennifer stabbed a finger down at the table. “Don’t you dare do anything without telling your mother, Jack.”

“I won’t, I won’t. Just ... need to figure out how to tell her. She won’t like this.”

Triss raised a hand. “Then maybe we don’t do it? Maybe we just ... don’t ... do anything?”

They all sank in their chairs. Not doing anything was definitely an option, just a really painful one.

“I ... wonder,” Jack said. “Antoinette’s been dealing with ghost stuff, or spirit stuff anyway, for a long time. You think she knows how to do the stuff Harcourt’s talking about?”

“Maybe,” Triss said. “I’m sure she knows something. But ... maybe not the sort of shit Harcourt’s talking about. She’s probably got rituals to trap Mary’s ghost, lock her in a jar, bind her to an object,

all sorts of crazy shit. But just ... help her move on? She'd probably have said something if she knew, right?"

"Probably." And maybe not. Antoinette could be damn ruthless when it came to her role in the Ordo Dracul. Whatever allowed her to further her knowledge about spirits, ghosts, and whatever else lurked in that weird world, she'd pursue. And he knew what it was like to have an obsession. It was like going through life wearing horse blinders, and it got very easy to get so focused on whatever was in front of you, you forgot anything else existed. Even other people.

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~~Antoinette~~

"I am sorry, my childe, but there is little that can be done for Mary, not with the knowledge I possess, not in the manner you seek."

Samantha sighed as she sat at the table across from her, deep in the tower in Antoinette's primary experiments room.

"I know. You'd have brought it up months ago if you could have." The poor child. She groaned as she leaned forward, and buried her face in her hands. "And ... I suppose you know about what I did."

"Stealing Elen's book and knife? Of course, my childe."

She groaned louder. "Why didn't you stop me?"

Because it was in Antoinette's interest to let her childe get closer to the witches, and to Jacob.

"Because it was a valuable lesson to a dragon."

"Lesson?"

“Us in the Ordo Dracul can teach our students with many methods. A simple one is to let our students pursue a mystery to its end, and to document the path well. To understand the implications of each step upon the path. To understand the tree of causality, and how each event ripples out to create new events.” Antoinette reached out, set a hand upon her childe’s, and gently pulled it down from her face to rest it upon the table. “I am sorry. Truly. But I thought it best to let you chase this mystery, though I felt only pain waited for you in the end.”

Samantha nodded as she stared down at the table. “I ... I’d say that was harsh, too harsh, but all you did was let me do what I wanted to do. I’m not a little girl who needs to be protected by their mom.”

“Indeed. Though, believe me, young Daeva, I wish such lessons could be learned in a less painful way. And I also admit, I was quite surprised to see Mary alive and well. A small part of me was even convinced you had succeeded. Jacob, as well. But...”

“But it was a fool’s hope.”

“Most hopes are, young childe, but do not dismiss them so easily. Such hopes can often lead to great change. Regardless, you are now left with the same situation you were in months ago.”

“I know. Mary ... Mary’s ghost, she’s even more unstable now. I talked to her after what happened, and it ... it was obvious. She can talk to me, but anyone else, she’ll probably attack. She’s ... happy, about getting those three nights, but she’s also more...”

“Anyone would become erratic after going through such an experience, Samantha. I can only imagine how traumatizing it must have been for Mary’s ephemera mind, where every emotion and memory affects her body in very palpable ways.”

Samantha nodded as she leaned back, and looked behind her at the summoning circle where Antoinette performed her experiments.

“I don’t know what to do. She says she’s not Mary. And ... And I...”

“Even if she is not Mary’s soul, she is still an entity, with some form of strange awareness. And she has the memories of your daughter, does she not?”

“She does.”

“Then, I cannot fault you, for feeling for her as if she were your daughter, Samantha. And I cannot fault you for wishing to continue taking care of her. The house will remain off limits to kine and others, but...”

“But it can’t stay like that forever.” She looked to Antoinette, with a hardened gaze unbecoming her. “I ... I can’t do anything, not yet. But give me some time, and I’ll get there.”

Antoinette kept her face neutral, but seeing her sweet child struggle with something no one should ever have to deal with, was almost overwhelmingly painful. As with Jack, being with Samantha unearthed a sense of empathy she thought long lost. And that was dangerous.

“Samantha, you and Beatrice may keep Elen’s knife and book until you are satisfied, but I do ask that you return them once you are done. As for Elen, I suppose Jacob considers her his property.”

“I don’t know. I think so, but I think he just got her so he could use her to teach Beatrice stuff. He ... He seems invested in her, you know? Like, I can tell when we talk, that he’s proud of her. Maybe even has high hopes for her. But...”

“But?”

“But, Jacob, sometimes he ... he talks like ... like something’s about to change. Like, he’s excited for how much Beatrice has learned, and how quickly. He’s super proud of her. But then his

expression changes, he talks about the future, and then he goes quiet. I wonder if he's thinking about leaving, but he's hesitating because of me."

Naturally, her childe would find the most guilt-inducing conclusion.

"Has he suggested when this may happen, my childe? As old a friend as Jacob is, he does not tell me as much as I wish he did."

"No idea. It's hard with him. Vampires as old as him, they..."

Antoinette smiled. "They do not think in the short term."

"Exactly." Slowly, Samantha looked down, and twiddled her fingers on the table. "God, I feel horrible for thinking this. But I don't want him to leave me. He's the first man I've known in a long time that can make me laugh, and makes me feel safe while also making me try new things, and ... and..."

"And who satisfies you sexually?"

Samantha squirmed a bit, but nodded. "Yes."

"Sexuality is a vital aspect of romantic connection, Samantha. Perhaps less so to vampires, but nonetheless, do not feel shame for it." Before her childe could respond, Antoinette gently squeezed her hand. "I do not know what Jacob will do, but you are the first person I have seen him bond with so deeply since Minerva. I trust he will not casually cast you aside."

That managed to pull a smile from her. "You think so?"

"Truly. Though, I am curious about this concern of yours, that you think he may be leaving."



“Well, lately, he talks about changing things, the sort of way someone might if they were going to move away, you know? He wants to make...” After struggling to find the words, she shrugged. “It’s more in how he talks about things, but yes, I do think something’s been on his mind a lot lately.”

Oh sweet childe, if only she knew.

---

“Black Blood, I summon thee.”

She looked down at yet another sacrifice, and sighed as all that met her words, was silence.

“It resists yet again,” her sheriff said.

“It does.”

“Then we have no choice.”

Antoinette nodded. “If Samantha’s inklings are correct, then I suppose we do not.”

“You trust your childe’s intuition that much?”

Antoinette offered her old friend a gentle smile. “Do you trust your childe’s?”

“Natasha has over fifty years of training.”

“Indeed, but we both know there is more to her success than simple training. Part of her skill is because of the blood, your blood, and I have faith in mine. I have high hopes for my childe, Daniel, and I would be a fool to dismiss her intuition. We begin tonight.”

Black Blood was a crafty entity. It had to be. Despite its immense power, something prevented it from directly intervening with Antoinette or the others when in the physical realm. According to

Natasha, it also seemed blocked from directly interfering with the Uratha in the spirit realm. Whatever rules it was bound by, those rules seemed unbreakable.

Except, it did not seem to be bound by all the rules spirits were bound by. Many of them, but not all of them. Jack thought it was not a spirit at all, and Antoinette had been inclined to believe him. Quite inclined.

She reached down, and stabbed her fingers into the man's corpse. A stereotypical criminal, a business man, fat, unseemly, who had used his position and money to financially ruin innocent people. When his crimes crossed into darker territory, Antoinette decided to remove the ridiculous kine from the world. Not the most powerful sacrifice, but it should have worked.

Even so, she expected the ritual to not work, thus, a poor sacrifice was of little consequence. Furthermore, the kine's blood would work just as well for the next ritual.

"You sure this will work?" her sheriff asked.

Antoinette chuckled softly as she gazed into her book in her left hand, and drew lines onto the floor with her right hand's blood-soaked fingers.

"I am. It is not a true spirit. And considering what Black Blood has done in multiple realms, I am forced to assume it is something greater."

"Which means this ritual could get us killed, Ann."

"Then we finish the ritual when the time comes. When Black Blood is distracted."

Daniel sighed as he stepped up beside her, and watched her paint more symbols. Often she was forced to stab her fingers into the

corpse, to renew the blood; the ritual would be weakened by transporting the blood in a container.

For months they prepared for this ritual. For months, they researched, books upon books, abandoned tomes, artifacts lost and forgotten and unearthed. For months, she dug into the archives of the order, and spoke to her fellow dragons for clues on this treasure hunt. She had been successful.

They were ready to begin.

But she would not spring the trap, not yet. What good would it be to confront a godly entity directly? They had to bide their time, and wait. And the longer they waited, the closer they came to ruin. Antoinette could be patient, and wait decades for a plan to come to fruition, but knowing Black Blood could very well destroy her city and beyond at any moment, left her forever anxious.

“Daniel,” she said, after having painted one section of the floor in several hundred symbols, in exact, specific locations. It had taken three hours. “Bring me three more sacrifices.”

“Alright.” Daniel took a second to look at her work, made for the door, but stopped as he reached for the latch. “We only have five more kine in storage, Ann.”

“Then we will need to find more.”

---

~~Beatrice~~

Three days later.

“A little birdie told me,” Jen said, “that the Prince has been plucking people off the street. Vanishing them.”

“Oh shit. Really?” Triss asked.

“Mhmm. And she’s not being subtle about it.”

“That’s ... kinda fucked up. How she doing it?”

“I heard she’s taken some inmates from a nearby prison.”

Triss winced. That was rough shit. Lots of the inmates in jail for nasty shit didn’t deserve the sentences they got. And sure Triss and Jen made sure sure the people they killed deserved it, half because they wanted to, half because Sam begged them too, but she wasn’t so sure Antoinette would be as nice.

Triss and Jen curled on their blankets and furs in Triss’s alcove. They hadn’t seen Sándor since the incident in his nightmare chamber, and they’d only chatted with Samantha a couple quick times since. Shit was still tense, everyone still felt guilty and horrible, so everyone went into passive mode until people started to feel better.

Thankfully, as fucking horrible as Mary’s death had been, it had basically been a reset back to the way things were just a week ago. People were recovering quickly. And after three days of people lying around feeling like shit, sex drives returned. Across the cave, Othello was doing what he usually did: fucking Madison’s poor ass. And of course he did it in the entrance to his alcove, so everyone could see Madison and her spread legs, since she was facing out. Long, slow, tender anal sex, with Othello sitting up and hugging her from behind with one hand, while his other caressed and massaged her clit. It was damn romantic.

So Triss lay on her side, cuddled into Jen’s back, the both of them watching Madison melt away.

Triss almost said something about Mary, but stopped herself. Finally, a night where they didn’t feel like total shit. Why fucking ruin that?

She leaned in, kissed Jen's neck, and slid a hand around her, undid a couple buttons, and slipped her palm around Jen's lower breast. This damn beautiful woman and her huge tits. Big pillows that were lovely to squeeze and fondle and caress. Girls like Triss and Sam had to get by on average breasts, while it seemed like every other woman in the city was packing giant badonkas.

"You should get some nipple piercings," Triss said.

"I suppose I could."

"Then you can know what it's like to wear a nipple chain and have people tugging on it."

"I'll have you know, I did not introduce you to nipple chains. You owned them before, no?" She turned her head enough to smile at her, before she looked back to Othello and Madison.

Laughing, Triss snuggled into her back a little harder, half holding her so she could keep playing with her huge tit, and half holding her because she still felt like shit. And thank god their relationship had long hit the point Triss didn't need to feel shy, or guilty for being clingy. She wanted cuddles.

"No word from Sándor," Triss said.

"No. How often do brooding sessions last?"

"I ... suppose I would know, wouldn't I?"

"Of course."

"They can last for a few days, sure. I was hoping we'd see him soon, so we could talk to Sam together." Triss sighed, undid another button so Jen's breasts were both free of the fabric, and continued to tease and massage. It wasn't all that sexual, at least not enough to trigger a bout of sex. If they kept watching Othello, sure, it might

happen, but Triss just wanted to snuggle with her girlfriend, and fondling while doing so was an idea she picked up from Jack.

According to the kid, breasts were pretty amazing as a stress toy, as long as you were gentle. Super relaxing to squeeze softly and feel how the softness molded to the fingers and palm. And of course, having a busty girlfriend who loved being touched made it all the better.

“Maybe he went on a hunting trip,” Jen said.

“Yeah, maybe. I still wonder why he didn’t ask us to help him with that shit. I mean, we’ve been dipping our hands in some deep blood for months now. He couldn’t have asked for our help? Maybe we could have ... locked him in a box with one of our targets?”

“From the look in his eyes, Triss, I get the impression there wouldn’t be much left of the target once he was done.”

Triss shivered, and let go of her friend’s boob. Mood ruined, even with Othello only a hundred feet away.

“Still, I think we could have helped him.”

Jen shook her head, turned over onto her back, and gave Triss a kiss. “I don’t think he needs help finding prey. He’s really, really old, remember? The problem is just what Athalia said it was. He hates being what he is.”

Sighing, Triss returned the kiss, rolled over, got perpendicular with Jen, and put the back of her head on her girlfriend’s stomach as she lay down. Without missing a beat, Jen slipped her hands into Triss’s hair, and combed it with her fingers.

“Vampires go through the same problem.”

“Not like him,” Jen said. “To vamps who get over becoming what we are, who learn to accept that we have to drink blood to survive, someone like Sándor who refuses to embrace his hungers sounds ... almost juvenile. But then, he’s not a vampire, and his hungers are —”

“Massive and extreme, I know.” Sighing, Triss reached up and grabbed at the air overhead, as if grabbing butterflies. “I get it. He’s not the same as us. He has to feed and take it all the way. He has to go full ... monster.” She groaned as she let her hands drop. “Christ, no wonder Athalia calls us blood leeches. Compared to Begotten, we’re just ... mosquitoes.”

Jen mirrored her sigh and continued combing Triss’s hair. “I suppose they beat us in the drama, self-loathing department.”

“Tell that to Fiona. How that girl is so cheery, despite having, what, a dozen kills to her name, I have no idea.”

“No guilt, I suppose. She has to punish people who’ve done bad things.”

“I guess,” Triss said. “And Mark?”

“We know nothing about Mark.”

“And Azamel, she ... she tried to make it work, I guess. I still remember what Jeremiah’s ritual showed us. She tried to make it work for her, her hunger and shit, and it backfired in the end. Athalia basically tried to ignore it, and it backfired on her, too.”

“Yes,” Jen said. “As much as vampires think we have a monopoly on second life drama, I think the Begotten have us beat. And Sándor has everyone beat. It’s no wonder he’s sad all the time.”

“I wonder what sort of woman his wife was. Margaret.”

“He said she was determined, and a pain in his ass. That’s part of the reason I thought being so direct with him would help him open up. Apparently, it was the wrong call.”

“It probably would have been the right call, maybe twenty years ago. I’m guessing losing his wife and kid to Jeremiah, and then being a slave for a few years after that, broke him.” Triss sat up with a jolt. “Oh fucking christ.”

“What?”

“Is that why I like him so damn much? He’s broken, and I want to fix him?” She clutched her face as she stared down at Jen. “Oh my fucking god, I’m eighteen again.”

Chuckling, Jen sat up and hugged her. “I like him because I feel like ... he’s a kitten, who if I can coax him out of his box, he’d be a lion.” And of course, she licked her lips after saying lion. “But, after what Athalia said? Maybe we should ... wait a little bit on that.”

“Yeah, probably a good idea. Maybe we should—”

Jacob came by, dressed in his evil witch robes, with a weird smile on his face, one Triss didn’t think she’d ever seen before.

“Beatrice, come have a blather with me for a second.”

“What the fuck is a blather?”

He laughed, and held out a hand for her. “Conversation.”

“Uh huh.” She took his hand, and he yanked her up onto her feet like she weighed nothing.

“Jen, stay here, watch some porn.” Nodding, he took Triss out of the cave.



Once outside, he wrapped them in his Cloak. It was a crazy powerful Cloak, so no one would hear a thing.

“Shit’s about to go down,” he said.

“What?”

“Things are happening.”

“What things?”

“The drop has been made. Five by five.”

“Jacob!” She gave him a hard shove, but he brushed it off, chuckling as he did. “What’s going on? The fuck are you talking about?”

He smiled at her, but after a few seconds of weird silence, the smile faded.

“I wanted to know if you thought about what I asked.”

“Fuck me, now?”

“Yeah now.”

“About leaving? I didn’t even understand the question, Jacob.”

He leaned in and set a hand on her shoulder. “Things are going to change, Triss. Tonight.”

“So ... you’re leaving, now?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of? Dude, you’re freaking me out. Just tell me what’s going on.”

He set his other hand on her other shoulder, and stared into her soul, straight through the eye bandage. Now, she was thoroughly freaked.

“I’m moving everyone, Triss. We’re all moving.”

“I, uh, what?”

“I’m changing the rules for this stupid game, Triss. Everything. And we’re all going. That shit I said before about leaving? I didn’t mean I’m leaving. I meant everything is. I’m changing the rules to this stupid fucking game, and I want to know if you’re okay with that.”

“Okay? Jesus Jacob, I still don’t even know what you fucking mean!”

“Oh. You don’t know.” He let her go and started walking in the direction of Dolareido. “I can’t explain everything. It’ll take too long. The Prince is up to something, and if I don’t get this stone rolling now, I might never. We’re out of time.”

No fucking way. She grabbed his hand and yanked on it, hard enough to half turn him to face her.

“The fuck did you bring me out here for then!?”

“I thought maybe you knew what was happening, at little a least, but you don’t. The Prince and her friends have been keeping secrets and keeping them well.”

“Secrets? Jacob, my head is spinning. Just tell me what’s happening.”

He let out of a heavy sigh. Whatever it was he’d planned to do, her not already knowing about it had slowed down his attempts to

explain enough to the point he was just going to go without her. Well, fuck that.

“If I told you there’s another way to see Julias again, another way to have him in your life, would you take it?”

“Are you fucking serious? I—”

“Answer the question,” he said, voice cold and hard.

She froze. “I ... I mean ... I...”

He turned and faced her, eyebrows heavy, but it was like something had just carved his face out of steel.

“You were finally moving on, weren’t you? Finally ready to let him go.”

“Not ... Not ready. But, I was getting there. After what happened to Mary, and ... yeah...” She gave his shoulder another shove. “And you told me to! You told me to forget about him and move on!”

He nodded, every shred of joy gone from his body language. None of the usual chaos Triss was so familiar with, and liked. It was like she was looking at a monolith.

“I suppose I should have told you you didn’t have to move on. But, fuck me, I didn’t know if it’d work. We’re so close, and now Annie’s doing what she always does: tries to keep the status quo, keep the peace. But it doesn’t have to be like this! We can change the rules. We can tear it all down, and change everything.”

She gulped on a dry throat as she stared at him. “Jacob, you’re scaring me. What ... What are you doing? What’s going on?”

“There’s no time.”

“What the fuck!?! You pulled me out here and started talking about resurrecting Julias again, and—”

He came in, came in fast. One moment he was standing there a few feet from her. The next, directly in front of her, inches from her face, and the moving air he'd pushed aside came a second later.

“I didn't say resurrecting Julias, Beatrice. Think bigger. Think so much bigger.”

“I ... I still don't—”

“Don't worry about it. I thought you knew, thought maybe Jack told you the little he knows, maybe you'd pieced things together. It doesn't matter. I thought maybe we'd talk about it, maybe I'd show you, maybe ... It doesn't matter. We can talk later, after I've torn down the walls.”

Before she could say anything, he stepped back, and vanished.

“Jacob? Jacob!” Nothing. Silence.

She stood there, unmoving, staring, processing, and each time her slow-ass brain managed to absorb something he'd said, a shard of ice stabbed her in the back.

---

~~Damien~~

Fiona recovered from Mary's second death quickly. It wasn't because she'd only spent a little time with Mary in the time she was alive. Fiona got attached to people in a matter of minutes, especially someone like Mary. But she also bounced back, never forgetting what she lost, but at the same time, immune to being dragged down by a memory.

They'd go visit her ghost soon. It'd probably make Fiona cry again, but she insisted.

For now, they sat on Fiona's bed, surrounded by cute stuffed animals, with Fiona sitting on Damien's lap. Naked, with her hands tied behind her back, she rested her head on his shoulder, legs wrapped around his waist and hips. He'd fed on her, fed deep; it being the first time they'd made love since the incident at the ball, they both had some pent up desire to spend. An hour later, Fiona was absolutely exhausted. Still exhausted from the Kiss, and she would be for many hours yet, and exhausted from an hour of Damien ravaging her, driven to almost animal aggression from the strange, powerful kick of her blood.

He peeked down over her shoulder, and grinned. Her hands were cuffed, and resting against her lower back, and her ass was bright red.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Nnnmmmn."

He chuckled as he kissed her cheek, the rush of her blood finally settling. Mostly. He was still quite hard, so he set his hands on her ass again, and gently moved her back and forth against him.

Damien had never considered himself to be a breast man. He'd never considered himself a sexual man at all, but that likely had something to do with a healthy dose of brainwashing in his young life, and harboring resentment toward Slut City. Having a healthier second life and an amazing girlfriend certainly changed that. And the feel of her very, very, very large, soft breasts squashed against his chest, was euphoric. The werewolves were all extremely fit, and all the vampires were groomed before siring, often at a point of peak physique, always with some degree of abs and whatnot. Fiona's body, on the other hand, had a hint of softness to it that he adored. She liked chocolate.

He smiled down at her, and pushed forward a bit so she was forced to lean back, body arching as he kept his hands on her lower

back. Her head dangled between her shoulders, and her chest jutted out, allowing her massive breasts to flow back and forth against her like water as he softly fucked her. Her freckles on her pale skin were utterly gorgeous, and he leaned down to kiss the ones he found along her sternum and top of her breasts.

He came inside her again, and gave her a few extra hard bounces, earning some tiny, weak squeaks from her. Fiona was borderline comatose, but he knew she was still awake, and from their conversations, he knew one of her favorite kinks was to be rendered borderline catatonic with exhaustion, and get used like a sex toy.

He slid her off, gently rolled her onto her side, and uncuffed her. She quivered like a leaf every moment, even as he slid her under the blankets, grabbed one of her favorite stuffed animals, and set it against her chest. Without thinking, she slowly slid her trembling arms around it, and hugged it against her as she melted into the bed and pillow. Why she wanted to snuggle with an octopus, he didn't know, but the stuffed animal was indeed a cute octopus, and she loved it.

It'd been a gift, him to her, but not his idea. Jessy had suggested it, because apparently despite her being ... Jessy, she knew how to shop for a bubbly girl like Fiona. The Gangrel was somehow simultaneously very dumb, and very smart, and he doubted he'd ever figure her out.

Chuckling, he curled up under the blankets with his girlfriend, snuggled in behind her, and hugged her.

“You okay?” he asked again.

“Mmn ... mnnn.”

He grinned down at her, kissed her neck, and slid his hugging arm higher. Big as her breasts were, with her on her side, the upper one squished the lower, and he slipped his hand between them. So soft,

so heavy, he gently cupped and squeezed her higher breast, earning a couple more half-asleep groans from Fiona.

And then he squeezed and fondled it a few times, because it was apparently his right as boyfriend if the girlfriend was ever too tired to wake up in the morning, or was too tired to stop him after sex. He didn't necessarily agree, but Fiona — and Jessy — insisted it was true. And ultimately, he was a man, a weak man, and if his extremely busty girlfriend was comfortable with him playing with her breasts whenever he wanted, he had to take advantage of the offer.

A wise young man once said: breasts were pretty amazing as a stress toy, as long as you were gentle. Super relaxing to squeeze softly and feel how the softness molded to the fingers and palm. And of course, having a busty girlfriend who loved being touched made it all the better.

“Still a lot of hours in the night,” he said.

“Mmm.”

“I told you we should have waited ‘til later. What am I gonna do now until sunrise?”

“Mmm.”

“I could tie you up and leave you like that, all night.”

She managed a quiet, weak chuckle as she turned over onto her back. Naturally, he slid the blanket down to her stomach, so he could admire how her giant breasts squished and spread against her chest. She took the cute octopus with her, holding it on her chest.

“Mn ... mmmm.”

“Or I could lie here with you, and hold you all night long.”

“Mmmmm.” She turned into him, and snuggled into his chest. She couldn’t get too close, with the octopus now between their sternums, but she tried anyway.

He slipped his arm around her back, and kissed her forehead. “I love you.”

“Mm.”

He laughed again, and—

The phone rang. Jack’s ringtone.

Groaning, he let go of Fiona, and fetched the phone from the nightstand.

“Jack.”

“Damien. You ready to fight an azlu?”

---

Wearing a comfortable casual suit, and a trench coat with a very long sword between his shoulder blades, Damien joined Jack on the street, and they made their way to the tear.

“I could be back with Fiona, you know.”

Jack laughed as he glanced up, likely checking to see if his crows were following. They were.

“Did I interrupt something?”

“We were finished. But sometimes I do like to cuddle, you know?”

“Cuddling is nice.”

“And I Kissed her, so she’s very ... vulnerable, right now.” Damien didn’t really consider himself the ‘talk about sex with friends’ kind



of man, but living in Dolareido with Fiona for a girlfriend was changing him. Plus, after everything Jack and Damien had seen of each other, and of their girlfriends, there really wasn't much to get shy about.

Jack grinned at him. "I have to admit, that sounds nice. I can't exactly do that with Antoinette. Can't Kiss her. And I wouldn't snuggle with my thralls or her ghouls. Bit too personal."

"There is ... something satisfying, about holding her when she's so weak she can barely lift a finger. Sometimes I ... never mind." There was such thing as too much information. Talk about sex, sure. Actively describe how Damien, on a couple occasions, snuggled with Fiona after sex, found himself playing with her breasts until he was hard again, climbed onto her, and fucked her breasts while she was too exhausted or weak to do anything but smile and mewl? Bit too much.

If Fiona had her way, there'd be a full video recording of one of their longer sessions like earlier tonight. She'd share it with everyone, and point and giggle and swoon over every single thing, particularly the cuddling. And knowing his girlfriend, it'd only be the beginning. Before long, he'd be joining Natasha, Jessy, and Jack as, apparently, porn stars.

Jack grinned at him again, but it faded as he sighed, the two of them turning an alley in North Side as they headed around the building to enter from the back.

"Talk to Mary?" Damien asked.

"I tried. She hides. I know she's talked to Mom, but I'm pretty sure she's talked to no one else ... except maybe Jacob."

Damien glanced Jack's way. That couldn't have felt good, knowing the man they all suspected of concocting an apocalyptic ritual, was

able to talk to his ghost sister while he couldn't. He shouldn't have asked. Time for a topic change.

“Azlu. We know it's there, now?”

“Avery says she's seen signs of it,” Jack said, “a few times, and it seems to be following some kind of schedule. Pretty normal, animals do that.”

“Azlu are animals?”

“I mean, prehistoric half flesh half spirit animals, but still animals. Avery says it'll show up any time now. She thinks the spot's become some sort of hot spot for them and they come through every few days. They want to seal up the hole, but haven't, because we always have someone keeping guard.”

“We don't right now?”

“Caleb's been hanging out this time. He's Irraka, whatever that means, and can stay hidden and stuff.”

“Like the Cloak?” Damien asked.

“I guess. Supposedly he's pretty good at hiding, better than most Irraka according to her.”

“She does seem to know her stuff.”

Jack scoffed. “She tried to kill Fiona, thinking she was an azlu.”

Damien shrugged. “I mean, she is a human spider monster hybrid thing, just like azlu. A thousand times more attractive than an azlu, but still.”

“What, her sense of smell couldn't tell the difference?”

“Maybe she thought it was a unique breed or something?”

They both shrugged as they opened the door to the back of the old abandoned building, and into the basement. As he did, Scully and Mulder flew down and perched on his shoulders.

“Sorry buddies,” Jack said. “We’re getting into some potentially dangerous stuff tonight. I can’t take you.”

Both crows flapped their wings a few times, and cawed at Jack.

“Not happening. We’re gonna fight an azlu. That means spiderwebs, and ghosts, considering where we’re gonna be fighting. Way too many ways for you two to get hurt, or maybe even left behind if something horrible happens. You’re staying here, where it’s safe ... er.”

They squawked.

“No arguing! No, wait for us up on the building. I got Damien with me, and Sándor, and a bunch of werewolves. I’ll be fine.” He slid a hand along one shoulder, forcing one crow to hop onto his hand, and then the same for the other. “Now go.”

After a couple more loud caws, they obeyed.

“We could use them,” Damien said. “Where we’re going, scouts would be very useful.”

“Caleb, Monica, and Carter can be our scouts. I’m not risking my friends, not again.”

“Aren’t I your friend?”

Jack laughed and shook his head. “Hell no. You think that’s why we hang out all the time? I just need you for a shield.”

“Makes sense. Very Danse Macabre of you.”

They chuckled as they walked down the stairs into the basement of the building.

Avery and Clara were there, along with Caleb, Noah, Carter, David, Erica, Mason, and Monica. Which left Art, Matt, Brianna, and Eric missing from the Uratha of Dolareido. Sándor was with in the basement too, though it only took a small glance to realize the man was distracted by something, eyes pointed down, brows slightly furrowed. Furrowed was unique for him, a change from his usual neutral expression.

Everyone was dressed casually and ready for a fight. T-shirts, loose jeans, sneakers or army boots and whatnot. Damien expected to be the only one wielding weapons, save for Jack, but Carter had a flamethrower with him. Which made Damien and Jack extremely nervous.

“Hey,” Jack said, offering a small wave. Damien said nothing, no need.

Everyone looked up, and a few of them returned the wave. Sándor nodded, but otherwise, went back to whatever thoughts were probably torturing him.

“Where are the others?” Damien asked.

Avery spoke up first. “Black Blood’s in the spirit world. We spotted it up to something, making some kind of move near one of the tears. Brianna, Matt, Art, and Eric are investigating, along with Tash and Jessy I guess. And Flow.”

Flow, the giant water spirit that worked with Avery. It’d been forever since Damien had seen her ... it, and the sight had been damn impressive. How Avery had recruited its help, no vampire knew, and the spirit Flowing Sanctuary was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

“You think he’s going to create a new tear?” Jack asked.

“I think ‘it’”—she emphasized it—“is definitely up to something. The fact I don’t know is infuriating, and I have no choice but to play the recon game. But, it’s going to do something at the same time I think the azlu are going to check out this tear.” She gestured to the literal tear in the air behind her. “So something’s up. We’re gonna catch this azlu, kill it, torch it, and the other team is gonna report back what Black Blood’s up to asap. Sándor has that Mark fellow watching the other tear, deep in the Great Below, and he can report back to us, too.”

“You think tonight’s the night of the ritual?” Damien asked.

Sándor shrugged slightly. “Mark reports nothing unusual, but that could easily change.”

“He got a way to get to here from there?” Jack asked.

“Not to this specific place, no. There will be a delay information, if something happens. Athalia is waiting in the tunnels, in case Mark does report something. She may be able to help, and perhaps ask for Fiona’s help.”

Damien sucked in a breath between his teeth, loud enough everyone looked at him.

“Fiona...,” he said, “may not be available.”

Avery glared. “And why is that? This is kind of important.”

“I ... Kissed her, a couple hours ago. Thoroughly. She’s completely drained. So, I mean ... unless we fight in the dream realm, where she can merge with her Horror and help us...”

Every single werewolf groaned, and Damien shifted in place a couple times. Shit.

Clara raised a hand. “Why isn’t Daniel coming with us? He’s the sheriff, right? This seems like his kinda bag.”

“I texted him,” Jack said. “He said he was busy with the Prince.”

“Busy?”

“Busy, which is sheriff-speak for doing something extremely dangerous and relevant. Otherwise, I’m sure he’d be here.” Jack walked over to join the crowd, and Damien followed behind. “We going in?”

“Yeap. Caleb, stealth up and go in first. Carter, Monica, follow him in, scout out the area. Damien, cloak us up.”

Damien nodded, and tapped into his vitae. Deep into his vitae. He was great at the Cloak of Night, but Cloaking a whole group of people? Difficult. It was a good thing he had a belly full of Begotten blood.

“Anyone staying on this side?” Jack asked.

Avery shook her head. “Everyone joins the hunt. Besides, it’s not like we need someone on this side, holding a rope. Wouldn’t do anything.”

“True, I guess.”

Leave it to Jack to voice Damien’s concerns. The idea of all of them going through the portal and into the Great Below, was a scary idea, because it meant they were at the mercy of the tear. Sándor was coming with them though, and if for some reason they couldn’t use the tear, he could get them out. He was Begotten.

Damien walked around, and touched everyone on the shoulder. Some physical contact would make it easier. They couldn’t keep touching him, which would have made it even easier, but a quick

touch would hopefully be enough. He didn't need to with Carter, Monica, or Caleb, thank the Lord. Still, that was half a dozen werewolves, and Jack, and Sándor, he had to cloak.

Going through the tear was a strange business. It looked like it was thin until you got close, and then you could see the tear had a thickness to it only visible from within. Avery had said it reminded her of the gold and white you saw when crossing the Gauntlet that separated the physical and spirit realms. And it did look similar, though instead of gold, there was black. Endless black, like looking into oblivion. He thought he saw stars, but the white dots in the distance moved noticeably when he did. If he wanted to, he could reach out and touch them.

He did not touch them. Crossing the Gauntlet had been scary enough, and according to the Uratha, there was a chance things lived inside the wall separating the spirit and physical world. And, according to them, it held secrets they had no way of discovering. So he kept his hands to himself as he crawled through the tear, and got back onto his feet on the other side.

The Great Below. One unfathomably giant cave, with walls of dark rock so tall they could fit a city, skyscrapers included. Fog drifted, ebbing and flowing like a slow, lazy ocean. Swarms of ghosts miles away moved, drifting over land and through the air overhead, holding green lanterns. From so far, the lanterns were only distinguishable as green dots, surrounded by blobs of haze.

Around Damien and the group, were spiderwebs. Big spiderwebs with heavy threads. Damien was all too familiar with spiderwebs and how constricting they could be, but the difference between these and Fiona's was obvious. Fiona's were precise and graceful. These were only barely subtle, meant to catch things that had to go through the area against their will. But, there weren't enough of them to keep Damien from walking around fairly easily. If the webs were actually meant to trap something, they were doing a poor job

of it. Residue, then? Something the spiders left behind as they did ... whatever it was they did?

Caleb, Monica, and Carter were invisible, hidden in shadows cast by the enormous boulders or the giant rock wall. Everyone else came in after Damien, and he made sure to spread his cloak out to engulf them as they did. He wouldn't be able to hide a transformed werewolf, but as long as everyone stayed in human form and stayed close, it should be alright.

He gulped when Sándor went through. For a fleeting moment, the shadow of the gargoyle surrounded him, and the man's size dwarfed everyone. Jack and Avery, the two last, noticed as well, and they looked between each other before looking to Damien through the tear. Avery hadn't seen the gargoyle before, and its size shocked her.

Once they were through, they all turned to scan what they could see. Nothing but rocks, and webs.

"The azlu's gotten bigger," Avery said.

"How can you tell?" Jack asked.

"The webbing's spread. Used to just be in the ravine before." She walked over to the small canyon they'd found earlier. Sure enough, the webbing in the ravine was bigger, too, and a couple of cocoons lay between some larger rocks within. "We think it's been coming down from the other end of the ravine, before it comes here." She gestured to the ravine, and where it eventually ended as it collided with the colossal wall of stone near the tear, and went on for probably miles in the other direction.

Damien squatted down beside the ravine, and gestured to the two cocoons. "What are—"

"You know what those are," Avery said, growling.



It was not a Kindred's prerogative to worry about kine lives, but that didn't mean they didn't. Vampires had been human once, and if one was completely incapable of feeling any empathy for one murdered in such a way, they were likely well on their way to becoming a draugr. And as much as Damien had a troubled history full of manipulation from the Lancea et Sanctum, even the Sanctified felt they were serving a duty to both God, and kine, by helping them, and they often did so with compassion.

Damien and Jack were visibly bothered by the cocoons. Avery looked livid.

"It's a big city," Jack said after several moments of silence. "There's no way to track down how the spider got these bodies, not easily anyway. Is there another tear it's using? We've been watching this one."

"It's azlu," Avery said. "The Hosts do not follow the same rules as us. I'm sure it's found many places where it can cross over between realms. Like spiders, crawling through holes in a screen door. I doubt it killed those humans here, or ate them here."

"Pretty smart for an arachnid," Damien said, "going to multiple locations to do its business. Not exactly common behavior for a spider."

"Maybe they are evolving..." Sighing, Avery stood back up and gestured forward down the ravine. "I didn't want to believe it."

"Given enough time," Sándor said, "anything can evolve."

The three of them looked at him, eyebrows quirked. A strange thing for a gargoyle, who emulated statues, to say.

"Alright," Jack said. "So we sit here and wait?"

“Yeah,” Avery said. “We—” Her head snapped up, and she looked to the tear.

Jack and Damien did the same, and froze. Time stopped. Avery stopped breathing. Every nearby werewolf turned around, an eternally slow motion, too slow, and meaningless.

That was Jacob.

Standing on the other side of the tear, he held a book in his hand, and was dressed in robes that could have been made of dead skin dyed black. He lifted his head long enough to grin at them, before he resumed reading from his book. Whatever he was reading, it wasn't English.

“Damien,” Jack said, face still pointed at Jacob. Message clear. Stop the 500-year-old vampire who could easily kill Damien with a single punch if he got his hands on him.

Damien withdrew his sword, his pistol, and bolted forward, pouring every bit of vitae he had into his body and his speed. Get through the tear, stop Jacob from whatever he was doing, and don't die in the process. Fiona would kill him if he died here.

He pointed his pistol, and shot nine times in half a second. But he already knew what would happen. Just as looking through the tear betrayed what passing through it had been like, the bullets hit the tear, and didn't go straight through it into Jacob. They veered, and disappeared into whatever blackness awaited them in the endless oblivion the tear's sides exposed.

Something black came seeping out of Jacob's book, mist, and following it, a black, skeletal arm. A skeletal arm they all recognized, much smaller than the colossal one that could crush buildings, but they knew it. And as Jacob lifted his head to again smile at Damien, the hand of the skeleton slashed down across the tear.

And it started to close.

Damien went as fast as he could, and it only took him a few seconds to reach the tear from where he'd been. But a few seconds was enough to have the tear shrink a few inches from all sides. And Damien was forced to grind to a halt at the last moment. If it'd been a normal hole, he could have jumped through, but not this hole, not without veering off path just like the bullet.

“Damien,” Jacob said through the tear, “do me a favor, would you? Tell your buddies to stay put.”

Damien glared at the man through the tear. Shoot at him again? Wouldn't work. Stab him? Same problem. It'd be like spear fishing, except with the water warping the length of space itself. Make some pointless threats? No. Get as much information as possible.

“Stay put?”

Jacob nodded as he closed the book. The skeletal arm sank back into it, and once the pages hit each other, a small gush of black mist came out of it from all sides.

“Just stay where you are. Don't use Sándor to get out; he can't burrow from this spot anyway, the azlu made sure of that. And if you go roaming, you won't like what happens. I made sure of that.”

“So you knew we knew you were casting a ritual.”

“Of course.”

“And I suppose anything I say, asking you to stop, will be pointless.”

“Of course.”

“Then at least tell me something!”

Jacob chuckled, crazy smile continuous, and he leaned down a bit to peek at Damien through what was left of the shrinking crack. “Just stay where you are, and we’ll see each other again.”

Jack joined them, eyes blazing.

“Jacob you fucking—”

“Be careful you don’t lose that necklace, Jack. I’d hate to learn you killed everyone before we got to speak again. Though, if you killed Avery, I wouldn’t mind.” Jacob grinned at them through the ever shrinking hole, before it vanished completely.

Jack and Damien slowly looked at each other, before turning to face the werewolves and Sándor, and the endless cave of death and ghosts.

“Trap?” Avery asked.

“Trap,” Jack said, nodding. “What’d he say, Damien?”

“He told us to stay here. He said we’d speak to him again if we didn’t leave this spot.”

Jack and Avery both half growled, half groaned, and threw up their hands. Almost like a synchronized dance for a moment, there.

“Sán—” Jack stopped himself mid yell, and quieted his voice. “Sándor. Can you get us out of here? Or to wherever that tear Mark’s watching is?”

The Begotten shook his head. “Not from here. Opening my lair here is difficult, and I can’t burrow. These ... azlu webs, are blocking me. We’ll need to go.”

Jack clenched his fists until his whole body shook. “He tricked us. He fucking tricked us.”

Sándor came closer. “Let’s keep moving, and get away from the webbing. I can force my lair open there, and then take us to the tear deep beneath us.”

“Yeah ... Yeah, okay, let’s go. Avery, sorry about—”

“The azlu can wait. If Jacob’s going to start an apocalypse, I think that takes priority.” She threw up her hands again and ground her teeth. “Fuck me I knew it. I fucking knew it, but my hands were tied. We have to kill the fucking azlu. And it’s not like I could have left someone on the other side of the tear to stop him. It’s fucking Jacob! He’d have just instantly killed whoever I left to guard it! Fuck fuck fuck fuck!” She managed to not yell, but she did put enough venom into her voice Damien kept a good distance.

He smiled slightly, but hid it quickly. As much as Jack and Avery didn’t get along, they were similar in many ways. Perhaps that was why they didn’t get along.

“Caleb, Monica, Carter,” Avery said to the darkness. “Scout ahead. We need to get away from this area, without stumbling into any more fucking traps. We...” Her voice trailed off as she stared into the distance, head tilted up slightly.

Everyone looked up. One of those tiny, distant green dots, was moving closer.

---

~~Scully~~

~Master is through the door, ~ Scully sent to Mulder.

~Master is through the door.~

They both nodded as they looked down over the edge of the tall human house. Not a house, not really, but that’s what the other crows called them, and it was hard to break old habits. And with

dozens of their old kin nearby, cawing and hunting, Scully couldn't help but think about things the way she used to, sometimes.

They knew their master was through the door to the other world, because they couldn't sense him anymore. Ever since he'd brought them back from the black place, they could always sense him, except the few times he wasn't in the world anymore.

~Master said wait. Wait?~ Scully asked.

~I don't know. Wait?~ Mulder asked.

~Wait?~

~Wait?~

She thought about it for a moment.

~Wait.~

~Wait.~ Mulder sent.

So they waited, looking down over the building edge of the human home-not-home.

After a long moment, a few winds, and the cooling of the night, Scully looked down. The door had opened, and was closing.

~Did you see?~

~See?~

She flapped her wings and nodded down at ground below them.

~See! Saw something ... something... ~

~I don't see.~

Mulder didn't see. Mulder often didn't pay attention. But she saw. She saw something move, something that didn't match the wind.

A few winds later, it happened again! The door opened, and then closed. But she saw no one! Just bits of dirt and rock moving with the wind. Or maybe, not the wind?

She flew down, and smelled the air. Someone had been through here! Someone she hadn't seen. But she recognized the smell.

Mulder flew down a few winds later and did the same thing, patrolling and pacing as he sniffed the air.

~Recognize smell?~ she asked.

~I do!~

~From where?~

~I don't know~

She squawked at Mulder a few times. He squawked back. They both looked at the door blocking the path into the human not-home. It was closed.

She pushed against it. Too heavy. Too big. It didn't move. Winds definitely wouldn't move it, either.

~Something's happened, ~ she sent.

~Because we smell something? We smell lots of things.~

~We smell something we know!~ And it was weird that she couldn't remember it. She smelled the wolf people. She smelled the monster who watched and waited. What was the other smell?

It smelled like ... like ... skin? Old skin? And ... blood?

~Wait! I know! I know! I know!~ She hopped left and right until Mulder cawed at her. ~I know!~

~What is the smell? What is it?~

~Do you remember the dangerous blood drinker? The one Master warned us about?~

~Jacob.~

~Yes, Jacob. Jacob's smell!~

Mulder hopped over and pecked at her a few times. ~Blood drinkers have no different smell. They all smell like dust.~

~Jacob smelled! I've been near him before, when he was... ~ Wearing the weird clothes. The dark clothes. The scary clothes. The clothes that smelled like death.

~You think dangerous blood drinker was here?~

She pecked at Mulder a few times. ~I do! Master is in danger!~

~What do we do? Master told us to stay out of danger.~

~Master didn't know!~ She flapped her wings, and joined the wind again. With the wind beneath her, freeing her from the ground, she could go wherever she wanted, safe from the humans below with the night sky behind her, hiding her.

Mulder joined her, and the two of them flew toward the center of the big place, with all the colors and lights and noise.

~We should tell the Prince blood drinker? Master's mate?~ Mulder asked.

~I don't know. Should we?~



~I don't know. Should we?~

~I think so.~ She cawed once, and the two of them turned in over the dark ground as some warmer wind helped them fly higher. ~She can help!~

---

The Prince woman blood drinker couldn't help. Both Mulder and Scully perched outside her nest, at the top of the not-home, but the see-through wall showed she wasn't there. They pecked at the see-through wall a bunch of times, and made a lot of noise, but she didn't come.

~What now?~ Scully asked.

~Door at ground?~

~Why? Fat man?~

~Fat man.~

They flew to the ground, and pecked at the multiple see-through doors that blocked them from getting into the not-home. But there was no fat man sitting behind the small wall he usually sat behind. Was someone else there tonight? Maybe, but they weren't there now.

As panic set in, Scully flew over to the tiny, flat, weird forest near the tall not-home, and perched on top of one of the square bushes. Mulder joined her, and perched close, close enough they leaned into each other.

~Girls?~ Mulder asked. ~Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel?~

~They can't understand us.~ Unless they tried to use their human voices. And that could take time. They had to act quickly!

~Then ... the other blood drinkers in master's family.~

---

Mulder and Scully perched on the see-through wall of someone the master called Jessy. No one was there. They flew to the see-through wall of Natasha. No one was there. Master had said they would be busy tonight, but what else could Scully and Mulder do?

They found the nest of the wolf humans. Not all of them went with the master, but Scully didn't know who went, or how many. Mulder squawked and pecked at the see-through wall of their nest, but no one waited inside, no one came, no one answered.

Scully and Mulder took to the air again.

~The Prince must be in her nest, ~ Scully sent. ~She's always in her nest, deep where she doesn't let us go.~

~Yes. But how to get to her?~

Why had they not made a plan for this!?

~I ... I ... don't know what to do, ~ she sent.

~We can trust master.~

~But the Jacob blood drinker is too dangerous.~

Mulder fluttered his wings. ~Do you think he's in his nest right now?~

~No. He's out in the world, doing dangerous stuff.~

~Then ... maybe we should go to his nest?~

Scully looked at Mulder. ~Dangerous!~

~Yes. But, if he's not there, maybe Beatrice is?~

~Beatrice... ~ The master had said they couldn't trust her, because she was Jacob's family. But, he also didn't think she was helping him with whatever he was doing, whatever it was that made everyone so scared.

~One of us should go find her, ~ Mulder sent. ~Other goes to Master's pets, and try and get them to reach Prince?~

Scully cawed once, nodding. ~I will go to dangerous blood drinker's nest. I will find Beatrice. She can help.~

~Are you sure?~

~Am I sure?~

~Are you sure?~

~I think I'm sure.~

Mulder cawed once as well. ~I will go to Master's home, then. Be careful, Scully.~

---

The dangerous man and his family of blood drinkers often nested in a cave, far outside the man world. Mulder and Scully explored much of the man world, and the outer edges of it. The blood drinkers didn't try to hide the cave other than it being deep in a crack in the world, and many blood drinkers knew where it was. Most were smart enough to stay away from it.

Scully flew down into the world crack, hopped over the rocks, ducked under sharp bushes, and walked into the cave. It had a small entrance, but plenty big for her, and she hopped and hopped as she stepped into the scary darkness. Something in the rocks told her it was dangerous here, that animals didn't come here. No six-legs or eight-legs, no biters or hunters. But she had a goal and she was going to chase it.

Scary! The cave was scary! There was one of those hard bowls in the center, humans called it metal, and it was old and dirty and smelled like blood. There was a man, a blood drinker, with his family woman that he liked so much. Sex. Blood drinkers had sex all the time. Neither of them cared about Scully, so she hopped along through the large cave, looking at the alcoves, small caves inside the cave, filled with soft things humans and blood drinkers liked to sleep on.

One of them had Beatrice and her family Jennifer in it. Scully took a deep smell of the air. She could smell the dangerous man, or at least his clothes, but it was faint. Was he gone? She could only hope he was gone.

She hopped over to Beatrice and Jennifer's alcove, and cawed.

Beatrice sat up, and looked at her, eyebrow raised. "Uh, the fuck?"

## Chapter 167

~~Beatrice~~

Beatrice stared at the crow that'd wandered into the cave. That, was unusual. Rats, sure, sometimes they approached the cave entrance, but the people inside, the lack of food, and the overall air of 'don't come in here or you'll get eaten' the cave gave off dissuaded rodents and insects. The entrance was also full of sharp brush, and not friendly to birds.

The crow hopped over to her, and the motion announced who it was. It had a broken wing.

“Scully?”

Jennifer sat up. “What? I—oh! Um, that ... that does appear to be Scully.”

“Scully, what're you doing here?”

The crow hopped up to the alcove, and flapped her wings a few times, settling. The broken wing looked nasty when she did that, but it did work, fully flapping and everything. Triss couldn't help but smile at the thought of her flying, like a car with some drag on one side.

“My Animalism sucks. Jen, help me out?”

Jennifer rolled her eyes. “Learn to step outside your comfort zones of Disciplines.”

“You can talk when you can Cloak. At all.”

Chuckling, Jennifer leaned over to the bird, and clucked her tongue a few times.

Scully clucked back, crooned, cawed, and hopped left and right a bit. Pretty damn animated. Triss looked past her to Othello and Madison, who were still going at it, and deep into the heavy, grunty loud parts of sex. Madison was borderline comatose, Othello having Kissed her, but the big lug just kept pounding away, making the poor girl cum again and again and again. No wonder they didn't notice the bird.

Aaron would have noticed instantly, but the dude was out with his supposed girlfriend none of them had seen. Triss was starting to doubt she existed.

Jen snapped her hand out, and grabbed the bird.

“Jen, what the fuck!?”

Jen snarled as she held the shocked bird by the body, pinning her wings, while her other hand grabbed her feet.

“Scully, listen to me closely. If you're lying, I'm going to rip you in half. Say it again.”

Scully took a few seconds to recover, but eventually she clucked and cawed again.

“I ... I don't believe you.”

Scully cawed again.

“Shit. Shit shit.” Jennifer slowly let go of the crow's body, but not her legs. “She says Jack's in danger.”

“Jesus, I figured it'd be something like that if she came looking for help. But why are you—”

“She says Jacob’s the danger.”

Beatrice froze. “What?”

“Jacob’s the danger. Jacob’s been up to something, and everyone knows, everyone except us, and they’re all out dealing with stuff right now connected to it.”

Oh fucking shit. Triss groaned and buried her face in her hands. No no no. Jacob, what the fuck are you up to?

“She know details?”

Jen shook her head. “She’s a familiar, not a person. Probably not safe to give her too many details, cause, you know.” She gestured to how easily she’d caught the bird.

“Did Jack send her?”

“No, she came on her own, because she thinks Jack’s in trouble. She thinks Jacob might have done something, and apparently, he’s been up to something for a while?”

Triss leaned in close to Jen, and whispered. “When Jacob took me outside a bit ago, he ... he thought I knew about something, about ... something.”

“About ... something.” The word was quickly losing all meaning.

“He was up to something, and he thought I already knew about it. Apparently Jack and the others already know. And ... And whatever it was, it was big. He ran off to do ... whatever it was.”

“And you’re telling me now?”

“I had to fucking think about it, okay?” Triss sighed as she looked to the crow. “Why’d she come here, and not visit the others?”

“She says she can’t get to the Prince, but Mulder’s still trying. She tried everyone else, and they’re all gone.”

“All of them?”

“Everyone with a window.”

Groaning louder, Triss slid back and smacked herself in the face a few times. “Jacob Jacob, what the fuck are you up to?”

Jen and the bird clucked at each other a few times more.

“She says whatever it is, everyone’s been trying to stop it for a while. Something to do with Black Blood.”

Black Blood. Hearing the name in this context was like getting stabbed in the fucking spine with a fucking icicle.

“So, Natasha?” Triss asked. Jen shook her head. “Damien?”

“With Jack.”

“The werewolves?”

“Most of them are with Jack. The others aren’t at their home.”

“Eric?” Triss asked. “He’s probably with Jessy.”

“Not home.”

“Sándor?”

“Probably with Jack,” Jen said. “Scully says they’re all grouped up to fight a spider monster. I assume she means an azlu, not Fiona. And ... she thinks Jacob’s interfered.”

“Fuuuuuuck. Wait, what about Fiona? She around?”



“Scully doesn’t know where she lives.”

“Fuck. I don’t have her in my phone either. Fuuuuuck.” She snapped her gaze over to Othello, who was slowing down. For half a second, she thought about going over there and telling him, getting his opinion. But, no, that’d be stupid as fuck. Othello was her friend, but he’d been Jacob’s friend for fucking decades. Did he know what the fuck Jacob was up to, then? Probably not. Didn’t mean she could trust him.

“Triss?”

“Let’s go outside.”

Jen glanced over at Othello, nodded, and the two—three of them left, one of them still a hostage. Once they were outside, Triss wrapped them in her cloak, and they put a bit of distance between themselves and the cave.

“Okay,” Triss said, “we gotta figure this shit out. Jack’s in danger. A bunch of people are in danger. The bird thinks Jacob’s to blame. Everyone knew about this except us, and everyone also happens to not be home! Fuck. Fucking christ fuck fuck!” She threw up her hands and marched around, stomping on the ground and sand. “What the fuck is going on!?”

“She says she thinks the Prince is home, but she doesn’t have a way to get to her. Not easily, anyway.”

“Not like the Prince has a pigeon carrier service set up. It’s the twenty-first century for christ’s sake. Fucking fuck! Why doesn’t she go back to the thralls and ask them to contact the Prince?”

“Mulder’s already doing that, but it’s a complicated situation.”

“Complicated,” Scully said, earning a small jump from both vampires.

Triss threw up her hands again and pointed at the bird. “I fucking forgot she can talk. She can explain it to Jack’s thralls!”

Scully shook her head. “Can try. Complicated. Mulder will try.”

Jen couldn’t help but smile at the talking crow. “Mulder getting those girls involved is already going to piss Jack off, and you know it. And Mulder’s going to have to try and explain what’s happening with bird talk, at least enough so they can contact the Prince.”

“He can just fly in there and yell ‘call Prince! Call Prince!’?”

“Scully,” Jen said, “is Mulder under orders to not tell the girls about the dangerous stuff Jacob is up to?”

“Yes.”

“Which could make it difficult for a crow to figure out how to approach the situation. He’s a crow, Triss, not a human.” Nodding, Jen clucked and crooned at Scully a few times more, getting similar in return. “But, Scully thinks he’ll succeed anyway.”

Triss rolled her eyes. Damn slut was just being patronizing now, since she could talk to the bird a lot faster with Animalism.

“Okay,” Triss said. “I ... oh fuck.” She threw up her hands again and paced around some more. “Do I even want Mulder to get the girls to call the Prince? Is that something we want happening?” Scully flapped her wings a few times, trying to get away, but she wasn’t going anywhere. “Christ, we don’t know what Jacob’s up to! Do we even want to ... to ... I don’t fucking know!”

“True. We don’t know what Jacob’s up to, exactly. But ... do we ... trust him?”

“We should! We fucking should! He helped us when we were fighting Angela and Jeremiah! And he and Black Blood saved Jack’s

ass before then, too! Remember? Black Blood saved him and all his friends from Sándor's nightmare that first time. And me, the second time! We should trust him!"

Jen frowned slightly as she looked between Scully and her.

"Triss, I know we ... we should trust him, but we also shouldn't trust him. Even he'd say something like that."

"I know! But..."

"And we know he's been up to something. And he's been talking to you about it, more than anyone. And apparently, everyone knows, and they're not happy. So, I guess ... you're the only one with any idea what Jacob's up to that we can talk to. Do you trust him?"

"Fuck me. I ... kinda trust him. Trust him enough to give him the benefit of a doubt! Trust him enough to get a little angry at the idea of the Prince, and apparently everyone on the fucking planet, trying to get in his way!" She stomped around a few more times for good measure. Maybe kicking rocks and sand would help summon answers. No such luck.

Jen watched, listened, and when Triss was done, they all looked down and tried to wrap their minds around the problem. It was like trying to find a path in fog thick enough to strangle them.

"We need more information," Jen said. "Scully, you're sure everyone's gone? Anyone we could talk to?"

"All gone! Checked all see-through walls!"

"Windows, Scully."

"I know. I said! See-through walls!"

Triss couldn't help but laugh. Bird brain was not human brain.

“You checked all the windows,” Triss said, “and it sure fucking sounds like people are all out there, doing only god knows what. You said Sándor was with Jack, too?”

“Master said so. Damien with, too. And wolf people.”

Triss pulled out her phone, and sent out a few texts. She tried to be as discrete as possible, in as short a time as possible. ‘Hey, what’s up?’ And waited. And waited. And waited.

No response from Jack.

No response from Natasha.

No response from anyone’s numbers she had, Sándor included, but he was probably in his lair, or in the tunnels. Or like the crow said, with Jack.

They waited ten minutes. A god damn fucking eternity. No answers.

“What about Athalia?” Jen asked the bird.

“Don’t know.” Scully pecked at Jen’s fingers a couple times, but Jen held on. “Don’t trust Jacob.”

“Yeah, well, I do,” Triss said. “I shouldn’t, but I do. But ... but I ... fuck me, we need more information! But who the fuck—”

“Athalia,” Jen said. “Let’s go see if Athalia’s home.”

“Athalia. You fucking serious? She—”

“Triss, come on, you talked to her not too long ago. She—”

“She won’t kill us. That doesn’t mean she’s our friend, Jen.”

Jen shrugged. “Do you have a better idea? We go to the tunnels, find what Begotten we can, and ask them what’s going on.”

“And ... the Prince?”

“There’s nothing we can do about that. She’s going to find out. She probably already knows, or Jack’s thralls are calling her right now. And that ... could be a good or bad thing. Fuck me, I don’t know. Let’s go.”

---

Scully perched on Jen’s shoulder, and the two occasionally clucked at each other. After a while, Jen didn’t bother holding Scully hostage. Mulder had obviously reached the girls by now, which meant the Prince knew, or knew whatever Mulder could communicate. No point in holding his partner captive anymore.

Triss tried to understand Jen and Scully, but it was pointless. She just didn’t have a knack for Animalism. It came naturally to Ventrue and Gangrels, and if Aaron had been around, she might have asked him for help. But she wasn’t sure she could trust him anymore than Jacob, and that fucking sucked. Thankfully, she had Jen. And even if she didn’t, Jack’s two crows were scary smart. Not smart enough to navigate complicated secrets and delicately communicate that with some uninformed thralls, but still, smart. Ish.

Christ, what was going on? She was in the tunnels, going on a trip to maybe, hopefully, find Fiona or Athalia, or maybe even that asshole Mark, and ... do what? Ask them what the fuck was going on? Not like they’d spill their secrets if they thought Jacob was an enemy, considering he was Triss and Jen’s boss. Fucking fuck, the whole trip could backfire so easily, and land Triss and Jen in a cage with some stakes in the heart for all they knew.

Was she overreacting? No she wasn’t overreacting! Jack’s familiar, on her own, decided to come find her and Jen. This wasn’t some fucking prank. Oh god, everything was going to fucking

implode tonight, and she didn't even know what the fuck was going on.

Jen and Triss finally entered the room with the concrete stage. No Fiona or Mark, but Athalia was there, reading a book as usual. And when she looked down and spotted Triss, Triss expected to see her scowl, or at least stare at her with her usual icy glare. Instead, Athalia's expression softened a little, to something even passable for happy. Well, happy might have been too strong a word. Slightly glad.

"Beatrice. Jennifer. Visiting?" Literally the nicest greeting the woman had likely ever given in her life.

"Uh, kinda. Um..."

"You have a crow with you."

Jennifer nodded, shifting her shoulder with the bird slightly. "Yes. Jack's familiar Scully came to us."

"That's strange. Why would she do that?"

Triss squirmed as she came closer to the stage, until she was only a foot from it and looking up at Athalia.

"You ... you know about ... uh..." She scanned Athalia for something, but the Begotten waited, confused. "So, yeah. There's ... uh..."

"Out with it, Beatrice. Is this about Mary or Samantha?"

"No. No I don't think so. I mean ... maybe? It's..." Oh fucking christ, was she really about to do this? "Do you know if ... if Jacob's been up to something?"

Athalia's eyes shifted into her usual ice daggers, and her familiar scowl resurfaced.

“Up to something?”

“Yeah. Up to something. Up to something ... big ... And now Jack’s in danger, and probably so are a bunch of people.”

Groaning, Athalia closed her book and gently set it on Azamel’s old chair. She stood up, cracked her knuckles, and made fists as she glared down at the two of them.

“You remember you work for Jacob, right?”

Of course she fucking remembered.

“Yeah.”

“And you’re here, because Jack’s familiar came to you, because it thinks her master is in danger ... from Jacob?”

Triss groaned and rubbed her face with her palms. “I know! I know, okay. Dude is my boss, and sure, that might not mean much to most vampires, but it fucking means something to me. But ... but Jack—”

“Is the only vampire in the whole damn city you can completely trust.”

Sighing, Triss put her hands on the stage, and let her head dangle between her arms and shoulders.

“Yeah. If the kid’s in danger, yeah, I should help him. Fuck me, even if it’s to stop Jacob, I should help him.”

Athalia sat down beside Triss, legs dangling off the stage, eyes looking out at nothing, face stern.

“Sándor told me he, Jack, Damien, and a bunch of the werewolves are hunting azlu tonight.”

“The fuck does that have to do with Jacob?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you.”

“Girl, I’m trying to help Jack, okay? Jack, and Sándor. You just said he’s with Jack. I help the kid, I help him, too.”

Slowly, like she was weighing a thousand possibilities in her head, Athalia eventually turned her head and looked back down at Triss. That, was a scary face. Athalia sucked in a breath between clenched teeth, before nodding and looking ahead again.

“Jacob and Black Blood have been up to something for ... we don’t know how long. Years, probably, especially the past few years. They’ve been creating tears, strange tears that cut from one realm to another. Physical, spirit, even into the underworld. Even to places Begotten can’t go.”

“Tears...”

“Yes. Tears. Black Blood and Jacob have literally been tearing holes in the ... fabric of reality, if you want to get comic book movie about it. They’re pursuing Minerva’s legacy.”

Oh fucking shit. Minerva.

“Jesus fucking christ, what—”

“Minerva wanted to punch a hole between the physical and spirit realms. Maybe a permanent one. Black Blood and Jacob are taking it a step further. They’re going to tear down the walls between all realms.”

Triss threw up her hands. “Okay, you hear yourself, right? Tear down the walls between realms? The fuck? He’s one vampire—”



“With the help of an entity we’re all quite sure is no simple spirit.”

Fuck, she had a point. Triss knew something about spirits from everything she read, and from what the werewolves and Jack’s friends were willing to tell her. Black Blood didn’t seem to fit the bill, not completely, what with doing weird shit like penetrating Sándor’s dream realm, twice.

“I don’t know what this has to do with azlu.”

“I don’t either. Sándor said Avery was ready to ambush one, using a tear they found that didn’t fit the pattern.”

“Pattern?”

“Long story. But if you’re sure that Jack is in danger, because of Jacob—”

“I am.” You didn’t need Animalism to sense the panic in Scully. If Scully had been some regular crow, then sure, Triss wouldn’t have taken it too seriously. But the bird was literally undead, a familiar, and that meant quite a fucking lot. Combined with what Jacob had told Triss earlier, yeah, she had no choice but to take it seriously.

“Then I have to go.” Athalia hopped down from the stage, and started down the tunnel the way Triss came from. “Damn it, Fiona. Perfect night to get drained.”

“Um, I’m sorry, you have to go?” Jennifer stepped aside to let her walk past, but followed after her at a healthy distance. “Going to tell us where?”

“The tear Jack and the others went through didn’t fit the pattern. They’re through it right now, hunting azlu in the Great Below. If you’re telling me the bird says Jack is in danger, from Jacob, then I’m going to that tear.”

Triss jogged up beside her. “You know we’re coming, right?”

“You know I will kill you if you get in my way, right? The cat’s out of the bag. Jacob is doing something we want to stop. You work for Jacob.”

“Okay, then we—”

Oh fucking shit. Athalia’s glare was deadly. She didn’t mean just stop him. She meant stop Black Blood. And ‘stop’ probably meant kill, both of them if possible. You didn’t stop someone like Jacob without cutting his head off.

Jennifer jumped in front of Athalia, and held out a hand, like creating a barrier. “We want to come, but that doesn’t mean Jacob has to die.”

“Get out of my way, Jennifer. I didn’t have to tell you anything. I told you because I thought you deserved to know. But that doesn’t mean you get to stop me.” Athalia held out a hand, pointed it at Jennifer, and the tunnel went silent as darkness spread out from the Begotten, blocking out the flickering lights of the old tunnel. The shadow of the skeleton monster with no legs, and enormous bone wings, slowly moved inside.

Triss jumped between her girlfriend and the crazy monster lady.

“Whoa whoa whoa. How about we figure out what’s going on first? Okay? We get to Jack and Sándor and that Avery bitch, and we just stop Jacob from getting them killed, or whatever. Killing or not killing can be figured out later, okay?”

Athalia snarled as she shook her head. “You don’t fucking get it. I told you what he’s been up to. You tell him we know, and everything dominoes. We take care of this now, tonight, all of it, because Jacob sure as hell plans to. He’s done something to get rid of the others, get them out of the way, I don’t know, so he can do his ritual

without interference, and start a fucking apocalypse!” She took another step forward, and the enormous shadow in the dark followed her. “So get out of my way, before I rip you in half. I need to contact the Prince.”

Triss gulped, and joined Jen’s side, but otherwise the two ladies were in Athalia’s way, in the kill zone.

“Mulder’s taking care of that.”

“Says you.”

Jen gestured to Scully, and Scully gave her wings a few flaps.

“Mulder at Master’s nest! Talk to Master’s pets. Pets talk to Prince blood drinker.”

Athalia snarled. It sounded nothing like normal Athalia, and far too much like the skeleton monster.

“I guess that’s a good thing. The bitch and I aren’t in each other’s phones.”

“Same,” Triss said. “And no one else is answering their phones. Like, no one. Which means you got no one to go to for help, except us.”

Athalia ground her teeth hard enough Triss could see the jaw muscles bulge, even in the weird darkness.

“Alright.”

---

“It’s gone.”

Triss stared at Athalia, and then at the empty basement. “Gone?”

“Gone. It’s fucking gone!” Athalia kicked a nearby wooden box, and Triss braced herself for exploding wood from the sheer strength of the impact. But it didn’t break, only rolled over with the strength she’d expect from a kine woman. Begotten were strange. Out in the physical world, they seemed basically human unless calling on their Horror, and the best they could do when not in their lair, was summon some kind of shadow of it. The shadow of her Horror was probably strong enough to kill Beatrice and Jen, at the same time, if they weren’t careful. Without it, she was weak.

“And, uh, Jack and Sándor were on the other side of it?” Triss asked.

“Yes, probably. The tear opened up to a place where at least one azlu was frequently visiting.”

“And this tear isn’t in the pattern? Whatever that is.”

“Yes,” Athalia said. “Ultimately, Avery figured Black Blood made it to direct her attention to the azlu.”

“Which means ... you expected a trap all along.”

“Maybe. She thought Black Blood just wanted to give her a distraction.”

Triss groaned as she paced around, digging her claws into her scalp.

“Christ, now I wish I had the Prince’s phone number.”

Jen raised a hand. “We can still go talk to her.”

Athalia shook her head. “We’re running out of time. If you want to run downtown and get her, go ahead. But Mulder can explain to her what’s going on. And as much as I don’t want to trust a bird...”

She gestured to Scully, still perched on Jen's shoulder. "He's a familiar, not a bird. So, I can assume he's done his job."

Jen and Triss squirmed. Trust Mulder? Don't trust Mulder? He was a familiar, true, but also a bird.

"I'll go," Jennifer said. "Alone."

"Jen, you don't know what she'll do! If she's been working against Jacob all this time, and she finds out we know about all this shit, she could stake out right there, or worse."

Sighing, Jennifer made for the stairs. "Scully's with me. And I can update her on what Athalia's doing. And ... if Jacob and Black Blood are going to ... to do what Athalia says they're going to do, we need her help and we need it now. You know damn fucking well we have to stop Jacob."

Athalia snorted and folded her arms across her chest, but a quick glance her way showed her rolling her eyes, and nodding. She agreed with Jen. She didn't want to agree, but she did.

Triss sprinted up to Jen, grabbed her, and turned her around. Before her best friend could say anything, Triss grabbed her shoulders, and kissed her; Scully had to move.

"Don't ... Don't get yourself killed, okay? The Prince plays nice but she'll kill you without a second thought if she thinks she has to, Jen."

Jen grinned at her, gave her a quick kiss back, and started up the stairs again. "I'll just seduce her, of course."

Triss stared after her as she disappeared through the door. Christ, the whole night was turning into one giant clusterfuck of insanity.

“Okay,” Athalia said. “I can’t open this tear. It’s gone, like it never existed. I’ll open up my lair, and from there, I can tunnel us into the Great Below.”

Great Below. Fucking scary name.

“You can get us to where Jack and Sándor are?”

“No. I can get us where we think Black Blood is going to perform the ritual, or I can get us to another place in the Great Below that’s ... not exactly close, to the others.”

“Not exactly close!? The fuck does that mean!?”

“It means I can’t just burrow into wherever I want! That’s not how it works!”

“What fucking good is it if you can’t—”

“We came here first for a reason! So we can use the tear and—”

“Well the tear is closed, and we don’t have a fucking clue what’s happening in this ‘Great Below’, so unless you have a better way to —”

“The fuck am I supposed to do!? I can’t burrow wherever I want! Opening up the lair is hard, and burrowing for myself can be just as hard! I need to know where I’m going, and—”

“Okay!” Triss threw up her hands for the millionth time that night, and paced around, stomping hard enough her army boots protested with loud clunks. “Okay, okay. You think we should help Jack, or try and stop Jacob and Black Blood on our own?”

She rolled her eyes. “You really think the two of us could stop Black Blood? Besides, that tear is deep in the Great Below. Very deep, on lower levels. I’ve never visited it, only Mark and Sándor.

Mark because he can hide even better than me or Fiona. Sándor, because he's strong enough to survive."

"So it's dangerous."

"Extremely, for more reasons than your boss or Black Blood."

"Then I guess our only option is for you to drop us off in, uh, normal Great Below or whatever, and we run over to Jack and Sándor."

Athalia sucked in a hard breath as she paced, same as Triss. "We can try. It's a dangerous place, too, and it's not like I have a map of the area. It's massive, hard to navigate, and ... and I don't know if I can get us to Sándor ... at all."

"Oh my fucking god this is bad. This is very bad. Why didn't they leave anyone on this side of the tear to ... to..."

"What? Stop Jacob or Black Blood from possibly closing the tear behind them? Fist fight a five hundred-year-old vampire and his god friend?"

"I get it," Triss said. "That'd backfire pretty badly." She'd seen Jacob easily beat Matt and Art in a fight, at the same time. One werewolf wouldn't do shit if Jacob was serious. Avery was smart, keeping everyone together as a group. She'd need them all anyway, if she was hunting azlu. "We need to get to them. We need some fucking way to get to them."

"I'll open my lair right now, and get us as close as we can. Just, be careful of all the ghosts. A lot of them are—"

"I have an idea."

Samantha, please don't hate me.

---

“This is stupid,” Athalia said.

The two of them ran down the street, wrapped in Triss’s Cloak. Every so often, Athalia ran out of breath, but then massive, shadowy, see-through, barely visible skeletal wings erupted from her back and carried her for a little while, hovering her an inch over the rooftops, before they jumped to another ceiling. Triss wasn’t sure if anyone would have been able to see it with how subtle they were at night, whether she had them wrapped in her Cloak or not.

“Yeah well, stupid is the theme of the night. My girlfriend is risking her neck talking to the Prince. She might not even need to, if Mulder already got Jack’s girls to do it. At least Jen can be specific with the details.” She checked her phone. Still nothing. “Where the fuck is everyone!? I texted half a dozen people!”

“There’s no signal in the Great Below, or in the spirit realm.”

“Fuck me, the others are in the spirit realm?”

“Probably, if Avery was concerned the azlu might escape to there, perhaps wounded. This way the others can ambush it. Or maybe Black Blood is up to something, and they’re investigating.”

“I thought you were in the know,” Triss said. “Figured you all told each other everything, and apparently decided to leave me out!”

“You know why we left you out. And we don’t tell each other everything. That’s a recipe for a leak.”

“You’ve watched too many spy movies.”

Athalia let out one of those weird, raspy snorts that sounded more like her Horror than her.

“I’ve texted them, same as you, and they aren’t responding. We can safely assume the others are also busy.”



Triss mirrored the snort as best she could. “And through all this cloak and daggers shit, it never occurred to you to get the Prince’s number on your phone!?”

“Sándor has it on his. Otherwise, we Begotten keep to ourselves. If I needed to contact the Prince, I would physically! Her or Jack or the others! We know where they live! And last I checked, it was Jack’s job to act as liason for us!”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Not like we all live in different places in this giant fucking city or anything, far away from each other! Put people in your phone!”

“Would you even tell the Prince if you could? If Jen hadn’t said she would go, would you even tell her? You know she’ll kill Jacob if she has to.”

That, was a fucking painful truth, and at the moment, Triss did not want to think about it. She snorted again, but a glance back showed Athalia smirking. Damn bitch.

“You can’t tunnel or burrow your way to the Prince, or something?”

“I could, but it’s not easy. And in case you haven’t noticed, I’m a little busy trying to get to Sándor! We’re already wasting enough time!”

This bitch. This fucking bitch. How the fuck could Daniel stand being around her?

Eventually they stopped at a lovely little house in the quiet neighborhood section of Dolareido. No expensive houses or anything, and a few small apartment buildings nearby, but otherwise it was a pretty comely place, with front lawns and shit. But holy fuck, even standing in the house’s driveway, she could feel the cold dread emanating from it.

“Alright, let’s go,” Triss said.

Athalia froze in the driveway. “You ... You go.”

“Athalia, if she’s coming with us, she’s going to have to be around you.”

“I ... I...”

“Come on! We don’t have time for this shit. You want to save Jack?”

“I want to save Sándor.” But the small twitch in her lip said it all. She wanted to save Jack, too.

“Right now that’s the same thing. You’ve never been to the Great Below, right? So we need a ghost to help us, right?”

“I could find them without her help.”

Triss threw up her hands. “Maybe! You could ‘maybe’ find them without her help! Jacob and Black Blood are apparently doing some apocalyptic shit according to you, and Jacob’s closed the tear they took to get into the fucking underworld. Guaranteed he’s sprung a trap, and that trap could be fucking deadly, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Then like you said, we don’t have time to fucking waste, and we need help.”

If they went to the Prince instead, she was as likely to just lock Triss up in a cell instead of actually help her. This was the better option. Hopefully.

“You know I don’t trust you about this, right? You like Jacob. Jacob is our enemy.”

“I get it! I get it I get it, we can worry about it later.”

Athalia rolled her eyes, took a single step up the driveway, and stopped.

“I...”

“Athalia, holy shit, Mary is—”

“Don’t you dare tell me Mary won’t mind, or will forgive me for what my daughter did. Mary is not Samantha.”

“She’s ... okay, she’s not Sam. She’s got a temper. But she didn’t throw a fist at Sándor when she met him, either.”

“Sándor—”

“Mary knows who he is, and what happened. She let it slide with him. She’ll let it slide with you.”

Athalia took one more step before stopping. “You didn’t tell her ... what I did, at the end? Jack didn’t tell her?”

“No. I didn’t. Don’t think Jack told her either.” If he was smart. No need for Mary to know Athalia had tried to save her daughter’s life, at the end.

Nodding, Athalia slowly took another step, and another. She was the sort of woman who tried to keep up appearances, put on a strong face, all that shit, but when it came to this, she looked nervous as fuck. So Triss did the best thing she could do: take point, and not look at her.

“Sorry Sam.” She bashed in the window to the side door with her elbow, and unlocked the door. “Sorry, Mary.” One step into the kitchen, and she sucked in a useless breath. That, was some bone-chilling cold.

Athalia followed her in, and rubbed her arms as she gulped hard enough Triss heard it. She shivered openly, and chewed the inside of her cheeks as she looked around. Much as Athalia was half nightmare monster, she was also half perfectly normal human, and the unnatural cold radiating from the whole damn house turned her breath into mist.

“Mary,” Triss yelled. “Mary, you home?” She smacked herself in the forehead. Of course she was home, if the place felt like a graveyard in the middle of winter in Greenland. “Mary! This is important. Big time fucking important, and we need your help.” No answer. Triss reached down, almost took off her shoes, smacked herself in the forehead again, and walked from the kitchen into the living room. “Mary!”

Athalia followed, slowly, peeking left and right as she did, rubbing her arms every step of the way. Adrenaline, anxiety, and freezing her balls off had her quivering like a leaf in a hurricane. Half from the cold, and likely half from adrenaline and nervousness. And fear.

Triss got halfway up the stairs to the bedrooms before she realized Athalia wasn't following her. Instead, the Begotten walked around the living room with slow, gentle steps, and looked around at the furniture, eyes wide and hypnotized.

“Sh ... Shouldn't we get Samantha?” she asked.

“She's the last person I want involved in this. Christ, I can see it now. Someone goes to take a stab at Jacob, and she jumps in the way. Dies for him. We all cry. Very tragic. No thanks. I'd rather her angry than dead.”

Athalia sighed but nodded, and finally joined Triss on the stairs. She didn't get far. The first door, Jack's old bedroom, instantly caught her eye, and she stared into it. A simple, small, nerd's bedroom, complete with an overused computer desk.

“I can’t believe that kid ... came from this.”

“Yeah, me neither. But then again, Samantha—”

“Has an unusually strong will, too. Just ... so different than her son.”

“Different, and kind of the same.” Shrugging, Triss continued down the hall. Samantha and her dead husband’s room on the left. Mary’s on the right. “You ready?”

“No.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Triss opened the door.

Sure enough, the biting mist flowed out of the room and over them like it had a mission. They both braced for inevitable chaos, but all that followed was silence and deadly cold. After a few more seconds of patiently waiting for an explosion that never came, Triss walked into the room.

“Mary?” she said. “Mary, it’s Beatrice ... and Athalia. We need to talk.” No answer. “Mary, it’s super important. Jack’s in trouble.” No answer. “I uh, don’t know if you remember Athalia. You might have seen her at the ball. You ... You know who she is.”

Still no answer. The room looked like any young girl’s bedroom, despite Mary being older than Jack, very colorful and bright, but the mist and dark lighting changed it into a twisted version of itself. Triss very much did not want to stay in.

Athalia stood in the center of the room, still rubbing her arms and shivering, and she looked like she’d jump through the ceiling if someone popped a balloon.

“I’m ... Athalia,” she said. “And ... I need your help.”

The bedroom door slammed closed. So much for popping a balloon. Both girls jumped and spun around, but no one was there. And the mist around them grew thicker, and colder.

But no Mary.

“Keep talking, I guess,” Triss said, sitting down on the corner of Mary’s bed.

“Y-Yeah, okay. Um, Mary, I ... I know what Angela did to you was ... horrible.”

“And Mom!” The mist twisted and swirled with a powerful gust, and Athalia covered her face as the wind had her long black hair scattering.

“And your mother. And ... I can apologize. I can say I’m sorry...” Athalia looked Triss’s way, before a tiny, nervous smile appeared on her lips. “But, I didn’t do those things, Mary. Angela did. I made a lot of mistakes raising her, but she made her own choices. And your mother knew that. That’s what we talked about, at the ball, remember? She came up to speak to me, and not for the first time. She—”

“I know!”

The bed spun, banging against the walls and desk, and Triss squeaked as she clung for dear unlife. Athalia jumped, and the homicidal furniture flew underneath her, catching her as it crashed into the walls. Dent, dent, dent, the drywall gave way to the bed smashing into it, over and over, and Triss and Athalia half rolled over each other as the mattress bounced and slid and tried to buck them off. The vanity desk took one good hit, and a couple dozen cute bracelets and necklaces scattered over the floor. The mirror shattered, and rained broken reflections into the mist below.

As quickly as it'd started spinning, the bed came to a stop in the center of the room. The floor disappeared in mist thick enough to bury someone alive, and the cold only grew worse, until Athalia's dark skin started changing color.

"Mary!" Triss said, sitting up, but not daring getting back on the floor, not when the bed was a kneecap risk. "Mary, you fu—"

Athalia touched her shoulder and shook her head, before she looked up and around at the bedroom ceiling.

"Mary, I know you're angry. What happened to you is horrible, all of it. And ... And even though I know it's not my fault, and Angela's decisions were her own, I still feel horrible. There's nothing I can say or do that will make this better. You're angry. You should be angry. You deserve to be angry. And ... And I know there's nothing Samantha can do to make it better, either. She wants to, I know. God, I know what it's like to have an angry daughter, and have every fiber of my being want to do nothing but help her. But your mother can't."

Triss stared at Athalia. That was a fucking heavy topic, and if Mary didn't take it well, she was liable to smash Athalia into mulch, and Triss into kindling.

The mist spoke. "She ... She doesn't understand. She thinks I can get over this. I can't! I can't I can't I can't!"

Athalia nodded as she took a deep breath, shoulders shaking. "I know. Your mom doesn't know what it's like to be angry, so angry that it's all you can feel. Nothing else but anger, right down to your insides. So angry, that it doesn't matter what anyone says. It doesn't matter what happens. Nothing will ever change it or take it away. Nothing."

The mist between the bed and the door parted, and Mary slowly floated up from the depths of the cold. Holy fuck, she looked worse

than last time. Her clothes were ripped and torn, her face was covered in strange cuts as if she'd cut herself open with her fingernails, and her giant, black, empty eye sockets were massive and twisted. And sad.

“Mom doesn't understand.”

“Your mom is too nice.”

“She is!”

“She always been that nice?” Athalia asked.

“Yes! Even ... Even when Dad died. She was sad, but never angry.”

Nodding, Athalia crawled off the mess of a bed, and stood in front of the ghost. Still shaking like a leaf, still obviously so cold hypothermia was gonna be a real risk, not to mention her kneecaps, but she did it anyway.

“Mary, Beatrice and I came here because we need your help.”

“My help?”

“Jacob and Black Blood, they—”

Mary hissed and pushed away from Athalia, and into a wall, disappearing.

“Black Blood! Dark. Black. Scary.”

“Very scary!” Triss said. “But, he's up to something, Mary, and we think he's going to ... uh, break everything, I guess.”

“Break everything?” Mary asked, still hiding, voice gently filling the room.



“Yes,” Athalia said. “Black Blood has been sneaking around the city, in the spirit world, the physical world, and other worlds, leaving tears that go to other places. It’s a ritual. We think it’s going to tear them open more, and ... collapse all the walls between realms. It’ll merge everything, or destroy everything, we don’t know. But ... But it’s a very real possibility that Black Blood is going to get everyone in this city killed, or worse.”

“Mom!”

“Your mother, and everyone.”

“But Jacob—”

Triss shook her head. “Jacob is working with Black Blood, Mary.”

Slowly, the ghost stuck her head out from the ceiling. “Jacob? But ... But he was nice, and ... and fun and—”

Triss put up her hands. “I’m as in the dark as you, but ... but Athalia’s right. I know Jacob’s up to something, and Athalia knows Black Blood’s up to something. Pretty sure they’re doing this together, and ... and it’s bad. Very bad.”

“But, what can I do? Black Blood is ... he ... He’s not normal!”

It took a lot of effort to not laugh at that.

“You’re right. It’s not normal,” Athalia said. “But, it sprung a trap, and now a bunch of people are in danger, including your brother.”

Mary’s eyes opened even wider. “Jack?”

“He’s trapped in the Great Below, with Damien, a bunch of the werewolves, and Sándor. Jacob’s trapped them down there.”

Mary covered her face in her hands, but she was see-through, and her freaky black voids-for-eyes stared through them.

“Jack’s in danger?”

“Yes. We don’t know how bad, but considering Jacob locked him down there, and he knows Sándor could get them out ... I’m betting he has some sort of trap in wait to stop that.”

Beatrice nodded, and took the risk getting off the bed. What was that chittering sound? Oh shit, Athalia’s teeth were hitting each other with some extreme shivering.

“Mary,” Triss said, “can you stop freezing the place so much? You’re gonna kill her.”

After a few seconds, and a few pained stares from the ghost through her see-through fingers, Mary lowered her hands, and the mist faded a little. Less mist, less extreme cold. Athalia smiled at Triss, still shivering, but at least not likely to pass out anymore.

“Sorry! Sorry sorry sorry. I can’t help it. I can’t help it. I can’t—”

“It’s okay,” Athalia said. “We came here, because we’re going to go help Jack.”

“No one else can?”

“Everyone else is gone,” Triss said, “except for maybe the Prince, and Jennifer is already on the way to speak to her. Maybe she can come with us?” If the Prince and the sheriff didn’t come with them, the trip into the fucking underworld was going to be scary as all fuck. They didn’t have any time to spare, but it’d be nice to have two elders for back up.

“I still don’t know what I can do.”

“You’re a ghost,” Triss said. “The Great Below is full of ghosts. We need your help.”

“B-But ... I...”

“You’ve been there before,” Athalia said. “Haven’t you?”

“Only a peek! Only a little peek. It’s ... heavy there. Heavy. It pulls you down! I ... I...”

“We’re going down there,” Triss said. “One way or another, Athalia and I are going down there, and we could use your help.”

“But I ... it’s ... Black Blood is scary!”

“Damn fucking right he’s scary.”

“It,” Athalia said.

“He. H—nevermind. Yes, Mary, he’s fucking terrifying, but if we don’t do something, Jack could die. Sándor could die. Damien—”

“Damien?” Mary let out a tiny squeak. “Poor Fiona.”

“Yeah, exactly. So, we’re going to go, and we don’t have anymore time to waste. We have to go now. You in or you out?” Christ she felt like shit, pushing Mary like this. Mary’s ghost. Whatever. The girl was clearly distressed as fuck, and bullying her to get her help was one of the grossest things Triss had ever done.

“I’ll ... I’ll go. Mom—”

“I’ll text your mom before we go, whatever you want. And I’ll do everything I can to make sure you see each other again, and come back safe.” She had no idea how to do that, but she’d fucking try anyway.

Slowly, empty eyes flicking between Triss and Athalia, Mary nodded, and gestured to her desk.

“Take one of my things. I can hide inside.”

Nodding, Triss stepped over to the desk. Poor thing was a mess, but at least most of the jewelry was still on the desk. She scooped up a nice bracelet, and slipped it on. It wasn't silver, or a chain, or black rope, or any of the jewelry Triss would have worn. It was a candy bracelet, the kind kids wore and ate, but made with fake candy, meant to last. Very colorful. God damn it.

"I mean it," Triss said, holding out her wrist. "I'll make sure you get back and get to talk to your mom again, okay?"

"Okay..."

"Anything you want me to say to her before we go?"

"Just ... Just tell her that ... that whatever happens, it's okay. I love her, and I'm happy we got to have those three days together, and—"

Triss groaned and shook her head. "That is the most sad shit I have ever heard! Mary, come on, if I text her that, she's going to freak."

Mary smiled, nodding. "Tell Mom I'll talk to her later, then."

"Better," Athalia said, and she smiled as she stepped back, and motioned to the bracelet.

Seeing a ghost suck itself into an object was freaking weird. The mist, Mary, the cold, it all condensed and flowed into the bracelet like it'd become a black hole. Silent and surprisingly subtle, everything that was the ghost entity sank into the bracelet. Just, upped and flowed into it, until everything in the room went back to normal. Just a normal, not haunted girl's bedroom.

Triss stared at the necklace. Athalia stared at the necklace. Thinking about Samantha carrying around her daughter's ghost in a necklace on and off for months, was disturbing.

“No time to waste,” Athalia said.

“Right.”

Once they were outside, Triss and Athalia checked their phones. They were working again.

“Nothing from Sándor or Mark,” Athalia said.

“Nothing from anyone for me, except Jen. She tried to call me.” Triss dialed back. Jen answered instantly.

“Beatrice Damor.” That wasn’t Jen.

“Prince?”

“Indeed.”

“Uh ... can I speak with Jen?”

“No, you may not.”

Triss ground her teeth together, loud enough the Prince probably heard it. “If you—”

“Your dear Jennifer is alive, Beatrice. I am sure you understand that I cannot allow her to leave until this matter is settled.”

“Matter? You’re the one keeping secrets. I don’t even know what the fuck is going on.”

“You know enough. I cannot risk Jennifer giving Jacob any more information.”

“You ... fucking...”

“She will be fine,” Antoinette said, voice ice cold, “but she will remain here, for the time being. Surely you can understand why I

am doing this.”

“Not a trusting bone in your whole body.”

“Perhaps. But regardless, Jennifer tells me you are actively seeking to save my love from a trap my old friend has sprung.”

“I’m ... trying to get there, yeah. Athalia and I are gonna try something.”

“Wonderful.”

“Um, I assume you’re going to come with me? Or at least Daniel? I—”

“Unfortunately, my sheriff and I are preoccupied with a non-trivial matter.”

“Non-trivial? Your boy wonder is locked up in the fucking underworld!”

Silence, for a few more seconds than was healthy for Triss’s sanity.

“I know, Beatrice. And I fear for him, and for what he may do.”

“What he might do?” Triss asked.

“Do what you must to save him and the others, Beatrice. Though I must ask, please, leave my childe out of this.”

Triss opened her mouth, but said nothing. Sam wasn’t at the Prince’s? Then where the fuck was she? Maybe with Jacob? Shit.

“Fine. I haven’t even talked to her yet.”

More silence. The Prince didn’t believe her. Why the fuck wouldn’t she? Unless ... Samantha wasn’t answering her phone.

“I am warning you, Miss Damor.”

“I’m leaving her out of this, Prince. You got Jen, right? I’m not gonna risk her life on a shitty lie.”

“Very well.” Definitely didn’t believe her. “Unfortunately, my student is busy in the spirit realm, or I would send her to join you. You must do this on your own.”

“I don’t even know what I’m doing! All I know is, Jacob’s locked Jack, Avery, and Sándor in the Great Below or whatever.”

“Athalia’s knowledge is more than enough to suit your needs.” A few muffled groans came in through the background. Didn’t sound like Jen, though. “I must go now, Beatrice. My task awaits. I must thank you, for sending Jennifer to me. Jack’s thralls were not exactly specific with details. I was ... not sure if I would be able to time this correctly, but now I have a time frame to work with.”

“Time frame?”

“Indeed. It all happens tonight, Beatrice. I pray we will speak again tomorrow.”

Beep.

“That fucking bitch!” Triss stared at her phone and squeezed. It took every drop of willpower she had left to not crush it into powder.

“What did she say?” Athalia asked.

“She’s busy, doing something. Something pretty fucking important. Any idea?”

“No. It likely has something to do with Jacob and Black Blood, but she keeps her secrets.”

“Everyone keeping fucking secrets.” Because she was Jacob’s friend and student, and apparently her boss was up to something so bad, literally everyone else was getting ready to stop it.

He’d said she could see Julias again. He’d said there was a way to do it, without resurrecting him. He was going to change everything, and bring them along. Christ, Jacob, you fucking idiot.

“We’re running out of time,” Athalia said.

“Yeah ... yeah, I know. Let’s go.”

---

~~Eric~~

“Come on girl, we all saw it,” Jessy said. “You know, before Mary, uh ... yeah. Gimme details.”

Groaning and tearing her hair out, almost literally, Brianna shoved Jessy away.

“You have a problem.”

“You’re the one getting DP’d at a ball. I ain’t never done that.”

“You ... shit, really?”

Jessy laughed and stuck out her tongue. “Never.”

“Fuck.”

Eric and Tash traded a knowing look, rolled their eyes, and followed after them along the sidewalk. Arturo walked up ahead on the sidewalk in his wolf form, and Matt did the same behind them. This deep in Devil’s Corner, the spirits were a lot more aggressive and deadly, and it paid to pay attention. Jessy, on the other hand, was far more curious about Brianna and her relationship with Santos and Derick.



“Don’t believe her,” Eric said. “I’m not sure there’s a kink out there Jessy hasn’t conquered.”

Jessy promptly gave Eric the middle finger without turning around.

“This is diplomacy. Jack’s not here to play nice guy or liaison with the Uratha or whatever, so I’m gonna step in and fill his small shoes.”

“By pestering them about their sex lives?” Eric asked.

“Yes. Best icebreaker.”

Time to put a stop to that. Eric came up behind her and gave her a good tug on the shoulder. Before she could shake him off, Natasha stepped around her, and took her spot beside Brianna.

“Asshole,” Jessy said.

“Sex addict,” he said.

“You love it.”

“I do, but some day someone’s going to get really upset with you.”

“I’m just trying to—”

“I know, I know.” He leaned in and put a kiss on her cheek. “You can sexually harass me later.”

Brianna snorted and looked back. “I mean, she wasn’t lying. I did get DP’d, in public. But Dolareido just seems to really have that vibe going for it, even in the spirit realm. We can sense it. I’m sure you can, too.”

Eric could. Dolareido was more than just a city, it was an epicenter of some seriously weird shit. Ancient deity talking to him

in his dreams, and doing some weird mojo on the whole city, it was all par for the course in Dolareido. Giant sex spirits that could have been gods elsewhere, they almost seemed blasé here, and after being in the city for a while, Avery's Uratha were getting pretty comfortable with Slut City's vibe. Just, not quite Jessy level of comfortable, not yet.

"I blame Jessy," Tash said. "She infects people. Like a v-virus."

"An awesome virus," Jessy said.

Brianna chuckled, but let the conversation die. They were getting closer and closer to where Black Blood had been spotted, the tear they'd investigated weeks ago. Apparently he, it, whatever, had been doing something particularly ritual-ly. Caleb and Monica hadn't been especially clear on details, because they hadn't dared get close. Sneaking around in Dolareido wasn't like sneaking around in a forest. It was difficult, even for Irraka. Borderline impossible for Cahalith like Eric.

Cahalith. Storytellers, like Avery and Clara. Why Luna decided he should be a storyteller, he'd never understand.

Brianna was Rahu, like Matt, a bit tall and pretty muscular, more than Jessy. Black, short hair, and a really nice ass. Jessy was probably testing the waters to see if she could get Brianna to join them for a threesome ... or maybe a fivesome, with Derick and Santos. Which Eric would say no to of course, but now that they'd had a little fun with Marge, he'd opened the floodgates.

The group stepped into a dark alley, and Natasha wrapped them in her Cloak. Art didn't need it, fading into shadow, and he scouted ahead while the rest of them got closer together. They went through a few alleys, and a few more, now hidden from the watching eyes of the spirits in the shadows. And there were a lot of eyes. The strange black blobs the size of rats were everywhere this deep in Devil's Corner, probably under Street-Tail King's control. Some of the eel-

like things flying around swam past on the way to South Side. And some spirits that looked like tires rolled on past, more than a few of them screeching like someone burning rubber. Any of them could have been spying for Black Blood, too, or Red Tide, if it'd somehow dominated their choir.

The buildings were old, older than they were in the physical world. The Hisil did that, emphasized key details until they were hilarious exaggerations. Hilarious if you were looking on from a distance, but terrifying if you were face to face with buildings that looked ready to collapse any second, with dingy brick walls falling apart, many with giant holes some of the rat spirits were using as doors. The windows had bars, and the bars were thicker than in the physical realm, Gurihal, thicker, rustier, and covered in spikes.

A few demons Eric had come to recognize as spirits of addiction scurried off. Addiction came in many forms, but drugs were a particular breed that refused to die, like cockroaches, and they looked like cockroaches, too. Some of them walked upright, and had needles for fingers like the fucker Eric had killed months ago. As long as they stayed small and stupid, the effect they could have on the real world would be minimal. It was when they got large, large enough to have unique names and complex motivations, that they started having real effects across the Gauntlet.

He hadn't been hunting in the Hisil in a while. It was probably time to pick it back up. Much as they had to worry about Black Blood and the potentially apocalyptic shit he was up to, that didn't mean he couldn't keep doing clean-up duty for the city.

They rounded a corner, and stopped.

That, was a lot of blood wraiths.

A dozen of the creatures looked down the dark street, facing away from Eric and the gang thank god, their long black arms hanging at their sides, and absurdly long claws hanging below them. Legless

creatures with human-like torsos, they hovered a foot over the ground like evil genies, and their onyx, ink-like bodies were draped in red cloaks that looked like they were made of blood. Dripping, crimson blood. Eric couldn't see their eyes from behind them, but he remembered what they looked like. Slitted, glowing white eyes.

Natasha held up a hand, and slowly looked to Eric. Eric shrugged. The fuck were they supposed to do? They had to get to the tear to investigate, and this was the path they'd planned to take. It was a detour, a huge detour, ducking left and right through a dozen streets and alleys they didn't have to take to get to the city outskirts. No one knew they were going to take this path.

“You are too easy.”

The group spun and faced the alley's other direction, but Eric already knew who it was.

“Street-Tail King,” he said, growling.

The giant stupid rat stood in the shadows of one of the buildings. It was a dark night, an especially dark night, and now it was all too obvious why the shadows were especially thick. This fucker and the black wraiths were doing something.

Hisses behind him confirmed. The dozen blood wraiths turned and faced the group, and they chuckled as they tapped their claws together. Trap.

“You fucker,” Brianna said, fists clenched at her sides. “The fuck are you doing?”

“Stopping you from interfering with Black Blood.”

“You know if Black Blood succeeds, it's going to ruin everything for you. Get out of our way!”

“Black Blood is persuasive,” the spirit said. Its asphalt tail twitched twice, before it settled on the ground behind it. Several large rat-like dark blobs pulsed and moved on the hump on its back, before they flowed off its body and down into the shadows. “It insists we will survive the great change.”

“Survive, maybe.” Brianna took a step closer to the huge spirit and pointed a finger up at it. “But even if you do, so what? You want across the Gauntlet to the Gurihal, but it won’t be there anymore. It’s going to ruin everything!”

“You don’t know that.”

“The fuck do you mean—”

“Black Blood will tear down the walls. At first, I wanted to stop it, because it may bring everything crashing down, as you say. That’s why I told you.” The giant, two-legged rat twitched its whiskers, and plucked at one of them with long claws. “He insists otherwise.” He?

“It lies.”

The spirit shook its head. “I am bound, Uratha. I have no choice.”

“Bound?”

The rat slowly shook its head. “You don’t understand. Mictlantecuhtli will not stop until she is his once again. He has bound me, and I have no choice.”

“Mictawhatnow?” Jessy asked. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Natasha snapped her hand out, and yanked on Jessy’s arm, silencing her. The little vampire’s eyes were wide, and staring at the rat.

“One of his many names. It does not matter.” Street-Tail King shook its head again. “Ignorance is bliss. Be happy he only wants you to remain here. Malachi is ... generous.”

Eric looked back at the dozen blood wraiths. Fight? Two vampires and four werewolves against the twelve of them, and Street-Tail King? Doable, maybe. But turning the current insanity into a fight was a bad idea, when none of them had the slightest fucking clue what was going on.

“Well, uh, thank you for your generosity, in sparing our lives,” Brianna said, gesturing around them, “but you know damn fucking well you can’t keep us here. You”—she pointed at the rat—“are bound by your bans! Think we don’t know? Think we don’t know you aren’t allowed to get caught in light, exposed? We spread your name and how you’re involved, and you break. Power, gone. Avery will—”

“Then it’s a good thing we do this in the darkness,” it said, smirking, and gesturing around them, too. Metaphorical darkness, and in the spirit realm, literal.

“And tomorrow? We left you alone because you’ve been useful, rat. Tomorrow Avery will—”

“There will be no tomorrow. It all changes tonight, Uratha. You cannot stop Mictlantecuhtli. He has bound me, and he will—”

“Fail.”

Everyone looked up at the new voice, and as the thundering roar vibrated through their bodies, Eric’s muscles tensed until his bones hurt. He reached down for Tash to throw her out of the way, but she already had her sword out, and was dashing for the blood wraiths. Fast, so damn fast she was just a blur.

Eric managed to follow the blur long enough to see Tash get past the spirits, and slice one of them through the neck. It took one whole second for her to get the sword out and dash thirty feet. The sword wouldn't do much damage to a spirit, except she got it in the neck so deep, it let out a screech that broke everyone's paralysis, like a popped balloon.

Then the water hit them. A raging river, heavy, overwhelming, and powerful. It crashed against the wall beside them first, and the bricks smashed in. The building groaned, and spirits within shrieked, as chaos erupted.

Art, Matt, Brianna, and Eric all transformed into the Gauru form, and readied for war, even as the water ripped the world apart. Eric didn't know how Flow got above them, or how it'd managed to stay out of sight as long as it had, but spirit took its shot, and buried everything below it in enough water to rip the buildings apart. Most of the water fell onto Street-Tail King and Black Blood's servants, but Flowing Sanctuary was not a precise, delicate spirit. It hit the whole damn area with a tsunami. The only reason Eric didn't crumble into a balled up piece of paper was his transforming, and in the chaos, he couldn't tell if Jessy was as lucky.

As the water ripped and tore everything apart, Eric sank his talons into the street and stood up while catching his claws on a building wall. The water had pushed them into one of the buildings, and it was falling apart around them. But as much as his friends were in a mess, the blood wraiths were worse. They didn't have much mass, and as the water broke down walls of what looked like the inside of a decrepit apartment building, the wraiths slammed into the chairs, couches, counters, and straight through walls of drywall and brick. One of the unlucky ones crashed through a wall, went through the apartment Eric was in, and into a window. The metal bars acted like a strainer, and the spirit broke apart as it was pushed through.

Flow didn't stop. More water crashed on them, and more. The only thing that kept the building from falling on their heads was the steel support beams, but the spirit realm didn't care about materials. Everything was ephemera. Everything did its own thing based on how it felt as a reflection of the physical world. And the steel beams didn't think too highly of the old, dingy apartment building it was mimicking.

The building collapsed.

Hundreds of floating black blobs, rat spirits with beady glowing eyes, flowed away in the flood as the water broke through more walls. Other spirits hidden in the building, tiny things with little claws in the cupboards, and larger ones that looked almost like doors, and old televisions, with rust and broken limbs, grabbed onto any surface they could as the water swirled. The ceiling fell on them, and Eric covered his head with his huge arms as wood and tile and carpet buried him.

Water again. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't figure out which way was up or down. He opened his eyes but found only darkness, and flashes of movement as layers of building crashed onto him. Enormous pieces of floor and wall bigger than him broke apart, and steel beams rolled through the water and broke his ribs.

Something grabbed his arm, and lifted. As the water cleared from Eric's eyes, he raised his claws and swiped down at the colossal creature lifting him. He stopped halfway. It wasn't Street-Tail King.

"Okay?" Matthew asked, voice a growling bark. The Rahu was titanic when transformed.

"Yes."

The huge werewolf nodded, turned, sank his claws into a pile of rubble, and lifted. Water continued to churn around them, and a glance up showed the night sky. It hadn't been a very tall building,



four floors, but still, Eric didn't expect to survive having a building dropped on him.

Oh fuck, Jessy. He snapped his gaze around. More chaos. The water thrashed and tore at more walls of nearby buildings, creating whirlpools filled with chunks of brick and wood. Rubble was everywhere, and the water crashed into it like rapids, contained and angry.

Maybe fifty feet away, in the alley between a mountain of knocked over brick, concrete, and splashing waves, Street-Tail King stood. Two werewolves tore at him, roaring and howling, massive claws taking chunks out of the rat that splattered against the water. Brianna and Arturo. The ephemera chunks behaved like flesh, for a few seconds, before they disappeared into the blue and broke apart like ice melting.

Eric looked to Matthew. The titan pushed through the flowing water and headed for Street-Tail, but two black blurs jumped out of the depths and onto his back. The blood wraiths sank their huge claws into his muscles, and the blades passed through flesh with far too much ease.

Eric took two steps toward him before Matthew spun around and crashed into the water. Splashing rapids buried him, and Eric lost him in the darkness as the giant werewolf thrashed and crashed into whatever debris was too heavy to flow away.

Movement in the corner of Eric's eye whipped him around, and one of the spirits erupted from wet black, claws out. Eric snapped his arm out and sank his claws directly into the creature's face. It screeched, a sound far too similar to the sound Mary's ghost made, before it swiped at Eric's arm. But Eric swung his arm to the side and smashed the spirit toward one of the collapsed walls, and the creature's hands lost track of their momentum, missing his arm as he lifted the dead thing up, and then down onto the wall.

The sensation of spirit flesh breaking and ripping apart in his claws was euphoric. The sound of crashing water turned to thunder, and his heart beat became war drums in ears. Faster, and faster. The strange smell of ephemera filled his nostrils, a scent his human half couldn't understand, but the wolf spirit longed for. The smell of the hunt.

Somewhere, deep inside him, he knew the Cahalith part of him was happy for this. What meaning was there in negotiating with a spirit? What story could be told from such a boring event? But a battle, with such high stakes? Perfect. If only there was an audience, like there'd been in the old days when he'd fought for spectators. Like a gladiator.

A simple glance around satisfied him. Spirits were watching. Spirits of the air and the crow watched from a distance, paralyzed. Spirits of darkness, of disease, of addiction, small and weak, unformed and pathetic, barely more than motes of essence, stared on. Spirits of technology, of streets and cars, of surveillance and lethargy watched on, petrified. Flowing Sanctuary's reckless destruction had broken an entire building, and the ambush the stupid rat had set for them. It had also summoned an audience.

He stomped through the water, looking for his mate. The undead ones didn't need to breathe, but that didn't mean she couldn't die again if one of those bloody clawed ones found her. He sniffed the air, hunting for the scent of ash, but found none, only water and dying spirits. He looked down at the churning waves, but found only darkness and water. No mate, or her small friend.

Another one of the bloody spirits rose from the water, a broken, bleeding thing. An easy kill. Eric sank his claws into it, and ripped it in half. It tried to scream, but its ephemera body could no longer make sound, torn asunder.

Where was she?

Matthew burst from the water, one of the spirits clawing and stabbing, but its body was in his mouth as the Rahu devoured it. The other tried to escape his clutches, but the enormous Uratha ripped it in half easily.

So much for the ambush. The spirit of streets and rats underestimated them. Eric snarled as he turned to face the giant rat, and let the fire in his chest guide him toward the hunt. He wanted to find his mate, but she could fend for herself. The hunt was important.

They wouldn't stop until the streets overflowed with the broken, shattered bodies of Black Blood's servants.

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~~Natasha~~

She stared down at the insanity from on top a nearby building. It was tilted, bent, warped, and looked kind of like a laundromat. Judging from how the spirit realm made the building look, it was a good bet the laundromat was a corrupt place in the real world, a front for some shady business. Typical for Dolareido.

The only reason it wasn't crumbling underneath her, was because Flowing Sanctuary had directed its power straight down at the alley, and the building across from where it'd started. How a water spirit worked, Tash didn't know, and still didn't know, despite asking Matt and Art. They always gave her vague answers, things like 'spirits, yo' or 'ephemera has the power to create mass from nothing' which seemed absurd to her. Though, in retrospect, Mary's ghost was an ephemera being, and she made things from nothing, mist and stuff.

One of the blood wraiths let out a screech as it sliced at the water. Could it hurt Flow? Was the river that smashed and sloshed in the alley and debris actually Flow's body? The Uratha could hurt spirits with their claws and teeth in ways Tash's sword couldn't, but then

again, slicing one of them in the neck with her very normal metal sword had certainly hurt it.

Now, was not, the fucking time, to be taking, mental notes!

The new river ripped the apartment building apart, until it literally fell on her friends. She suppressed a squeak, and stared on as the werewolves, now transformed, turned what was once an ambush into a quick battle they were easily winning. Flow had attacked the way it did, because it knew the werewolves would be fine. But, where was Jessy?

In the water, she spotted Brianna and Art ripping into the giant rat, but it fought them off, lifting one by the throat with one hand, and landing a slash across Art's chest with the other. Tash snarled as she gripped her sword, and ran over the rooftop of the building opposite the one that collapsed into the churning waves. Eric and Matt were in there, between piles of rubble and floating boards, fighting off more of the wraith spirits. But the moment they made headway, a couple blood wraiths jumped from the water or shadows and threw themselves at their backs.

She almost jumped down to help them, but they could handle the wraiths. Eric was probably looking for Jessy, but she was probably buried under a pile of bricks and three feet under water. For the moment, a safe place to be. Brianna and Art needed her help now.

Tash stared down at the jump. She'd climbed up high to get away from the wraiths in the insanity, five floors. Maybe she could shoot Street-Tail King? Gun soaked, might not fire. And she was pretty high up. She could see in the darkness just fine compared to others, but there was just too much chaos.

She smiled as a memory came back to her, something Jack said he'd done, something Clara had confirmed.

She took a deep, useless breath, held her small sword in both hands, blade pointed down, and jumped.

Falling was a strangely freeing sensation. Weightlessness. She'd fallen from great heights before, even broke a leg once, and it'd left the idea of jumping off buildings deep in the 'don't do that' section of her subconscious. But she was a professional, damn it. Falling five floors would take about two seconds, an eternity, when trying to land on someone's head in a chaotic brawl.

The brawl moved to the side slightly. Natasha grit her teeth as she twisted in the air hard, and held out the blade with one hand instead. It was the only way to get it over Street-Tail King's skull. This was going to hurt.

It hit the stupid creature straight in the head, and she screamed as she squeezed the hilt tight as her weight and speed forced the blade through its skull. It felt like she'd just stabbed a giant tree stump, and the impact jolted her body hard enough her shoulder wrenched. But she didn't let go as the blade got halfway down before it got stuck, and Tash crashed against the spirit's back. She didn't let go.

Screaming louder as pain tore through her shoulder, she squeezed tight, reached out for the blade, and caught it with her other hand. She held on as the rat mirrored her scream, pitch included, and thrashed around hard, tossing both werewolves into the water, before it reached back and tried to grab her. It couldn't. It shrieked and roared and smashed its asphalt tail into the water again and again, sometimes swinging high and slamming into her back. But it was all sporadic, random thrashes, a dying creature not sure what was happening as a piece of metal sank deeper and deeper into its skull. A living creature would have been dead already.

Brianna and Art erupted from the water, and pounced the huge two-legged rat full on. It fell over, and everything turned to black so

deep even Tash's eyes couldn't penetrate it. Water, crashing around her, thrashing, bodies, claws, and a hundred rat-like blob things falling into the water with her. She held on through it all, even as the grinding in her shoulder screamed in her skull to let go. No need to breathe, but that didn't stop panic from flooding her as bricks and concrete and flesh and fur smashed into her until she was trapped against the street.

But the chaos settled, and the enormous body pinning her moved. Oh god no, still alive? Enormous hands grabbed her, claws nearly puncturing her skin, and yanked her up through the water. Oh shit oh shi—

“Natasha,” Brianna said, half barking.

“Oh! Oh...” Natasha looked down at the giant body beside her in the water, her sword still trapped in its skull. It wasn't moving anymore. “It w-worked. I—ow!”

Brianna made a tiny yelp sound, and let go of her. Which of course led to Tash falling right back into the water. Groaning, she got back up and clutched her dislocated shoulder.

“Sorry,” Brianna said.

“It's fine. Just, give it a g-good yank. Downward, please.” She leaned forward, and gestured to her dangling arm with her good arm.

Brianna wrapped her giant wolf hand around her wrist, and forearm considering how big the werewolf's hand was, and yanked down. A sickening sensation, especially since her Kindred body fought to get the arm back into the socket on its own, but all it did was pull the bone closer, into the wrong spot. Brianna yanked hard enough to almost pull her back into the water, but Tash stayed up, and let out a blissful sigh as the humerus bone slipped back into the groove.

The raging river stopped thrashing and slamming into everything. The water calmed. The rat was dead, and so were the blood wraiths.

“Dangerous,” Art the huge werewolf said, looking at Tash while gesturing to Street-Tail King’s body.

“Yes, it was. B-But we don’t have time for this! We have to get back!” She grabbed her sword, put a foot on the giant rat’s head, and yanked. Street-Tail King’s body was covered in fresh bite and claw marks, and weird colors bled into the water. The same color gushed out of the hole Tash left in its skull.

She knew who Mictlantecuhтли was. Antoinette would too, and she needed to know.

Art half growled, half sighed down at the creature. “Sad.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess.” She never liked Street-Tail King, but at least it’d been direct about its nature. It’d even helped them before, for selfish reasons, but still. “I ... I w-wonder what happened? How’d Black Blood bind it?”

Brianna shrugged. “Don’t know. Spirits can bind each other, if very ... very powerful.” It was hard for her to talk in her werewolf form, but she managed. The water didn’t provide any resistance to her huge body, and she walked through it quickly, causing it to splash against her thighs as she made her way to the other two werewolves. “Okay?”

“Yes,” Eric said, visibly shaking. Soaked and torn up, bleeding from several holes, he looked ready to rip something open and eat it raw.

“Where’s Jessy?” Tash asked.

Eric snarled as he looked down at the water, and tread around, pushing over piles of rubble and digging through them as he looked

for her.

“Flow,” Brianna said, “enough.”

The water rumbled, a deep, ocean-like sound of power and majesty. It listened and obeyed, and the water receded. Slowly at first, as if Flowing Sanctuary struggled to control itself, but it did, and the water formed together into a spiraling whirlpool that went up instead of down. Up and up, until a torso and arms that looked more like misty waterfalls formed, along with a blank face with glowing white-eye slits, a little too similar to the blood wraith’s eyes for Tash’s comfort.

The huge angel wings were less calming, and far more intimidating, than angel wings should have been. Safe, her spirit friend, made her feel safe. Flowing Sanctuary made Tash feel like she’d stumbled onto some sort of ancient underwater temple, and it’d protect her as long as she was in it, but it’d also crush and drown anyone it didn’t like.

Tash backed away from the huge spirit until at least one werewolf was between it and her.

“Reckless,” Art said with a growl.

“You were surrounded. I needed to create the opening. Appreciate my help, Uratha.”

Art dismissed her with another growl and a hand, er, claw wave, before he walked down the alley, the water now shallow enough it didn’t pass his ankle. But he was a werewolf, so, tall ankles.

“Jessy,” Eric barked.

“Looking,” Art said, and he pushed over a pile of rubble. Not there. He flipped over another pile. Not there.



Tash followed after him, but stopped as she looked down. Red. That was a lot of red. The blood wraiths dripped red from their weird bodies, as if they'd been draped in cloaks made of magical blood that dripped and dripped and never stopped. But that blood disappeared and didn't do anything. Now, as Tash stared down at the alley full of ankle-deep water, creeping ripples of red joined the river, until it looked a little too much like a certain scene in The Ten Commandments.

Everyone stared down, even Flow, before the rumbling started. Rumbling turned into a gentle earthquake, complete with vibrations heavy enough the water rippled and made micro splashes. It only grew worse as the rumbling grew louder, and the splashes of red pushed against Flow's river body.

"It comes..." Flow said, powerful, feminine, scary angel voice sounding way too small compared to the oncoming bass.

"W-What? I ... oh fuck." Tash tightened her grip on her sword, and backed up until her back hit the other wall in the alley.

"Uratha," a voice said, loud and heavy enough Tash felt it in her guts. "Uratha, come out, and die." It came closer, and closer, the destroyed building the only barrier between the giant red mountain of blood water, and Tash and her friends.

She gulped. "Red Tide."

## Chapter 168

~~Jack~~

“Why would ghosts care about us?” Noah asked, gesturing to the approaching green lights. Thankfully, they were taking their sweet-ass time coming their way.

Jack ground his teeth as he looked around, checking for any ghosts that might come up out of the ground and do ... whatever it was ghosts did to living, breathing people. Or in his case, non-breathing people. His encounter with the ghosts of angry workers from the industrial boom had been violent enough he knew anyone with a pulse would struggle to survive dealing with them. At least, humans would. Werewolves would fair better. And this time it wasn't just him, Sándor, and Clara.

“They care,” Sándor said, “because they're angry. We're alive. They're not.”

Noah frowned as he stared out at the lights. “Kind of cliché.”

“Not so cliché,” Jack said, “if it's true. Clara told you what happened last time we ran into them, I assume?”

Nodding, the werewolf gestured back to Clara and Avery, who were inspecting nearby webs.

“So we've got three problems,” Noah said. “Ghosts, the azlu, and Jacob and Black Blood are probably tearing down the whole world right now.”

“Yeap.”

“Any idea why Jacob wants us to stay here?” Noah asked.

“He wants us to deal with the azlu,” Jack said, “and otherwise, not interfere with him, I guess.”

“Agreed,” Avery said, joining them. “But I ain’t waiting. Let’s go.”

Wincing, Jack nodded, and followed after Avery as she marched ahead. A glance Sándor’s way showed the man doing his usual stoic thing, but even he looked a little concerned. They were stuck, and the only way out of it, was to expose their flanks to ghosts and giant spider monsters. Fucking. Great.

Everyone went silent. Sándor took rear, and Jack and Damien took middle, with Damien doing his best to keep them wrapped in his Cloak. Brutally difficult for anyone except an elder, and every time Jack looked Damien’s way, it was obvious the man was struggling. The original plan was to sit and wait for the azlu to show up, not go marching forward through a giant, dark cave, filled with enormous rocks the size of hotel buildings, and ravines deep enough it’d take hours to climb back out of them; assuming falling into them didn’t splatter their bodies apart over the jagged rocks. It was going to be a tough time for the vampire Cloaking them.

Mist was everywhere. It came and went as they walked, sometimes peeking up between the uneven floor up to their ankles, sometimes reaching up to their waists and hiding everything below it, and sometimes disappearing entirely. More than a few times, Jack ducked down to see if he could see what the hell was happening around his feet when the mist reached high, but the mist was too thick. They had to go slow, but they had to go fast.

At least they had a path to follow. The ravine with the spiderwebs continued on, sometimes filled with mist, sometimes not, and every so often it stopped having webs, too. But after another five or ten minutes of walking, they found traces of another web. The spider was in here, somewhere, and much as the werewolves struggled to smell much in the Great Below, they could smell the azlu.

The green lights stopped coming closer, and many faded away. Everyone stared up at them, trying to figure out what was happening, why the ghosts stopped approaching, but no one had a clue. All they could see was, in the distance and way, way, way up, lights drifted by, going in the direction of ... something. All except one.

A pair of ears poked up from the mist, and Jack flung himself back as he yanked out one of his pistols. A wolf. He snarled at the damn werewolf as he put the pistol away, and the creature morphed back into human form with a few sickening crunches of bone. Caleb.

“It’s up ahead,” he whispered.

Avery and Clara looked between each other, wincing.

“Sándor,” Avery said. “Can you burrow yet? Open your lair, or whatever?”

“No. Still blocked.”

“Then we push on past it,” Clara said. “I hate this. We hate this. But the azlu has to wait.”

Caleb nodded, transformed back into a wolf, and disappeared under the mist that hung around their waists. How he managed to prowl around, while spending energy using the Uratha version of Cloaking on himself, Jack didn’t know. His own Beast instincts knew how to meld him with a crowd, and hunt among sheep, not literally hunt with nose to the ground and eyes peeled like a wolf.

He hated not being in control, but it was better to let Avery and her pack lead.

The shallow ravine the azlu used was on their right, so Avery, with a growl and snort, moved them more toward the left. Jack could see the frustration through the back of the short woman’s

head, but it was the urgency and panic he was more worried about. Everyone was feeling it. They had to get away from the webs, from the azlu, as soon as fucking possible so Sándor could get them out of the damn underworld.

She froze. Everyone else promptly did, too. No need to explain. The visible werewolves leaned forward, weight on the balls of their feet, ready to transform. Noah had the flamethrower now, and since he wouldn't be transforming, he stayed in the center of the group, surrounded on all sides. Damien drew his longsword. Jack drew a shortsword and pistol. Sándor did the same as the Uratha, though he turned around to face behind them and slowly tightened and released fists at his side.

Something was nearby.

“Azlu?” Jack asked.

Avery shook her head, half turned and put a finger to her lips.

Nodding and biting his tongue to force himself to shut up, Jack raised his pistol and held it over his sword hand's wrist. Sword was a strong word. Big knife. But it did make it easier to handle the thing when working with a pistol. Not that he figured they'd be of much use, but still, it was better than—

He jumped back and unloaded six bullets down at the mist in front of him, but it was too late. The ghost giggled as she flew away, a glistening knife in her hand, and the most manic smile Jack had ever seen. Big, empty, black eyes, that didn't match her soft face at all, and a gray, see-through body whose pants — jeans, they looked like — combined with flowing waves of mist at the knee. She wore a t-shirt, something from the nineties, and her long hair went past her shoulders. He recognized her.

A tiny bit of string flew through the air, and disappeared into the mist.

“Oh fuck oh fuck.” With his knife hand, he scooped some fingers down his neck and chest. When his fingers found the knife wound, the pain followed, and he groaned as he took a few steps back, clutching at the skin as it struggled to heal. The burning sensation came a moment later, like the ghost had cut him open with dry ice. No normal knife wound felt like that.

She’d come up from the mist, and had sliced him across the sternum, deep enough to penetrate his shirt, skin, and a bit of bone. And his necklace.

Everyone looked his way before looking up at Sabrina. She laughed like a banshee as she circled overhead, fifty feet up and out of reach. Apparently the Cloak of Night didn’t do a good job of hiding from ghosts. Or maybe, it didn’t do a good job of hiding from her. Considering what she did to the other ghosts Jack ran into on his first trip into the Great Below, she was a scary, powerful creature. And judging from the crazy, evil smile she had on, she was happy to slice Jack’s chest open. She’d gone for the necklace on purpose.

“You were told to stay where you were!” she screamed, before cackling again.

Jack breathed deep and fast until he was hyperventilating, but it did nothing. Panic set in, and he clutched at his chest again and again, hoping the necklace was actually still there, and seeing it disappear in the mist had been a trick of the eye. It hadn’t.

“Sabrina!” Clara yelled. No point in staying quiet anymore. “What are you doing!? You did that to—”

“Viktor’s killer! Jack killed Viktor! Killed my master! Killed his own grandsire! Black Blood proved it to me!”

Everyone froze as they looked between Sabrina and Jack, and only then did they realize his necklace was gone.

It hit him like a wave. Overwhelming, overpowering, the Beast and its instincts rushed him and buried his thoughts in primal hunger. He winced as he looked away from them, closed his eyes, and summoned the flame in his mind Elaine taught him. Throw the thoughts, throw the feelings, throw it all into the fire and let it burn away. Empty your mind.

It didn't work. He couldn't do it, not now, not with everything falling apart around them and a gun to their heads.

"Sabrina," Damien said, aiming his longsword at her. "How dare you."

"Me? Me!? He killed Master! Vile, horrible vampire!" She cackled again as she hovered in circles. "Black Blood told me what to do. Jacob told me what to do. You should have stayed where you were, and killed the azlu. Now you all have to die."

They all looked to Jack again, and he gulped on a dry throat as he met their eyes. Avery's gaze was mostly steady, but he spotted some anger there, and fear.

"I'm fine," he lied. "I'll be fine. Let's just get this done. Don't drop a piano on my head again and we can all—"

A harsh, raspy growl cut him off, and every wolf looked in the direction of the inhuman sound. They all recognized that sound.

Without a word, all the werewolves — save for Noah — transformed. Clothes disappeared, fur emerged, and their bodies grew to massive sizes as the war form came out. Huge muscles and long claws, each werewolf hit at least eight feet tall, towering animals with crazed eyes and bared teeth. Noah transformed into something different, muscles getting bigger and body getting definitely hairier, but otherwise still a human dude. One of the other werewolf forms.

The werewolves spread out, and Noah backed up as he pointed the flamethrower in the direction of the noise, and turned on the small ignition flame at the tip. The flamethrower was basically a pressured jug of fuel in a metal container on his back, ready to spit a flammable liquid out as a stream, hitting the ignition flame on the way out. If Jack got hit and wasn't ready for it with his blood shield, it'd kill him instantly, and Damien had no such defense.

The two vampires steered clear, backing away, until they'd reached Sándor's position. Jack looked at him, Sándor looked back, and shared a very knowing glance. If shit went bad and the Ripper came out, there was a good chance it'd be up to Sándor to do something about it.

"Get what you deserve!" More cackling from the dead ghost above. "Get what you deserve! Tricked me. Tricked me!"

Her laughter was insane, and constant. And purposeful. Was she pulling the azlu to them? If so, that was a good thing, sorta. Deal with it now, and they could focus on the bigger issue. The delay was a problem, but if they could deal with it quickly, then that was better than nothing.

He thought the azlu was trying to avoid the werewolves. Maybe it had been. Except there were thirteen werewolves in Dolaredo including Eric, but only nine of them were present. Maybe it sensed an opportunity.

Damien jumped ahead. No, not jumped. Flew. Jack and Sándor spun around as several other ghosts appeared in the mist, and threw themselves at the two of them. Not blue collar workers from the fifties, like the ghosts Jack had run into before. These three looked like regular men and women, wearing modern clothing, or maybe a decade or two old.

"We'll be free!" One of them said.



“Soon, free!” The woman laughed and smiled, big, empty, black eyes staring into Jack’s soul.

“Free!” the third one said. “The god of the dead promised us. No more Great Below. No more wandering. No more weight pulling us deeper, and deeper. We’ll fly! To the heavens!”

Black Blood had, evidently, recruited some ghosts to help him, and had promised them quite a bit.

“Black Blood—” Sándor didn’t get to finish. The girl tackled him, and the two of them fell into the mist. Even five feet from Jack, he couldn’t see Sándor or the ghost wrestling him to the ground. At least the man hadn’t looked too surprised by the situation. Considering the sorts of journeys the Begotten had been going on to prepare for stopping Black Blood’s ritual, he was probably well acquainted with ghosts at this point.

Jack didn’t get time to make a judgment call. He went down as one of the other ghosts tackled him, and started punching him. Hard. Very hard. It was a strange feeling, getting punched by a ghost, because the weight felt off. It was like getting hit by a gust of wind so strong it could send you flying, somehow limited to a single fist.

Thankfully they weren’t using the crazy telekinetic shit Mary did to him, the first time he met her ghost. Maybe it was something ghosts could only do in areas important to them? Whatever the reason, getting punched by something clearly stronger than a human, was infinitely better than getting tossed around or squashed under a thrown boulder by a crazed super ghost haunting her home.

Problem was, he knew from last time defeating a ghost wasn’t easy without something that could really hurt them. Last time, that’d been Sabrina. He had werewolves this time, but they were a little busy, judging from the encroaching rumbling, screeching, and the howling wolves.

He stared up into the empty eyes of the ghost directly over him. There was nothing for Dominate to latch onto, nothing to conquer and enslave. The thing punching him, its great strength still incapable of hurting Jack with the curse coursing through him, had as much presence of mind as an amoeba. Just like Mary's ghost.

Jack winced as the memory cut him, before he glared up at the ghost, summoned vitae into his limbs, and punched him in the face. The ghost's face half collapsed in as Jack made sure to punch the fucker hard enough it'd have killed a kine instantly. It flew back in the air, ten feet up before it fell back into the mist, head snapped back far enough it nearly came off. As long as the ghosts were going to manifest physically, he could at least punch them.

Jack got up, snarling and spinning around. Burning, pulsing sensations rippled through him, and he ground his teeth as he looked for the nearest target. Damien was up, and already slicing through the ghost woman that came at him. But while the slice earned a shriek of pain from the ghost, and literally cut her in half, she reformed a second later, and fled into the mist.

"We can't kill them," Jack said.

"Yeah. Any ideas?" Damien asked.

"Sabrina saved us last time."

"Yes, well, old friends and all that."

Yeah, old friends that come back with a mind to kill. Karma was a bitch.

Jack spun around. "Sándor? You okay? Sándor!"

Another ghost flew into the air, before two enormous shadows reached up, grabbed it, and ripped the ephemeral thing in half.

Again, ghost shrieks echoed through the giant cave, but the ghost reformed a second later as it collapsed back into the mist below.

Sándor stood up, a tiny frown on his face and a bleeding lip, but otherwise he seemed fine. Jack looked at the blood on his chin a little longer than he'd have liked, before he looked back to the Uratha. Most of them had run off a few hundred feet away, and their howls and roars mixed with the cries of an animal that shouldn't have existed. Waves of mist pillowed and spread, like a giant shark swimming under water and pushing waves with its mass. Bodies flew left and right, massive, furry bodies, but they landed on their hands and feet before dashing back at the giant creature.

The azlu had arrived, and it was big.

Noah and Clara weren't with their pack. Noah, still in his larger, muscled human form, pointed the flamethrower at the spider far in the distance, but he looked around at himself, at the fog, and at the new nearby ghosts that poked up from the mist. More ghosts. Some of them looked modern, but Jack noticed a few that wore old fashioned clothes from the fifties or sixties. All of them had twisted faces, giant black empty eyes, and mouths that opened far too wide.

Clara stood with her pack mate, transformed into her enormous war form, teeth bared and claws at the ready. When one ghost poked up from the mist, she slashed down at it, but the ghost ducked away and disappeared into the thick fog. One unlucky ghost wasn't fast enough, and Clara raked her huge claws down the ghost woman's face and neck. The result was far more visceral than anything Jack, Damien, or Sándor managed, and the ghost wailed as it clutched the wounds the claws left, before she fell into the mist. She didn't come back up.

"Plan?" she half said, half barked. More ghosts poked up from the mist, and more.

“Plan, plan, right.” Jack ran over to her, sword in hand, and he parked a little ways from them so Clara could keep swiping at whatever got close to Noah. The further Jack stayed away from the dude with the flamethrower, the better, but it was becoming obvious they were surrounded by more than a few ghosts, and they had to get their backs together. “The ghosts know what Noah’s going to do. We protect him, get him to Avery, torch that azlu, and then we get the pack to deal with the ghosts.”

“Trying!” Clara said. “Too many!”

*You won’t make it. Just look how far away Avery and the azlu are.*

Shut up.

*Jacob played you like a fiddle. He knew Avery would bring fire to deal with the azlu, so it can’t spread when it dies. Black Blood knew Sabrina would freak if she learned you killed her master. Now ghosts are everywhere, convinced Black Blood is going to free them from this prison. They’re not going to let Noah torch the bug. Black Blood gave them orders, and they’re going to follow them. You’re fucked.*

Shut up!

*Look, dumbass. Look how many ghosts are between you and the spider. Jacob set this up so Avery would get herself killed fighting the azlu. Can’t say I blame him. He hates her, with every fiber of his being.*

Oh fucking shit, the Ripper was right. If Jacob had the opportunity to achieve some crazy, ridiculous dream, and kill Avery as some sort of icing on the cake, he would.

“Sándor, help Clara. Keep Noah safe. Damien, you’re with me. We deal with the azlu now. Noah, use the fire on the ghosts. I’m betting

it'll do at least something. Let Damien and me get away before you accidentally kill us.”

Sándor and Damien both nodded, without hesitation. The instant trust was beautiful, and a problem. Without the necklace, they shouldn't have trusted him so quickly.

Noah threw him a harsh glare. “We brought the fire for—”

“We don't have time to kill the azlu the proper way! I know if we kill it and let it do the multi-spider thing, it'll escape and reform later. We have more important things to worry about! So just keep the ghosts preoccupied, and let me save your boss's stupid ass! The ghosts are trying to stop you, not me!”

Jack ran off in Avery's direction, and didn't look back. The ghosts looked at him, but the few that got in his way lost their heads as Damien ran past him as a blur, and sliced their skulls off in a single swinging motion. They reformed in moments, but it was enough of a delay for Jack to run past, unblocked.

The ghosts didn't pursue. He was right. The Ripper was right. Sabrina had orders to take Jack's necklace, but the other ghosts were told to keep whoever had the flamethrower away from the azlu, to force Avery to have to fight it the old fashioned way. And of course, without the necklace, there was always the chance the Ripper would replace the azlu as the threat.

Now he was kinda regretting not just listening to Jacob, and waiting where he'd left them. But it wasn't like he was going to let Jacob trigger fucking Armageddon, either.

He almost looked back when a loud roar erupted, and the cave floor vibrated with impact. He recognized the sound. A giant, angry, four-armed gargoyle made that sound. If Noah made a mistake and torched Sándor ... Jack didn't even want to think about it. But shitty as it was, better Sándor than Jack or Damien. He might survive.

The azlu was just as disgusting as the others they'd seen. A spider had gotten an old woman, crawled into her, and ate her from the inside out. Then, a giant monster body came out of the host's waist, almost like a centaur had a horse's body below the belt, except it was a disgusting, freaky, mutated, monstrous spider body. The host's body was also mutated, pulsing with muscle and equipped with giant scythe-like arms made of bone. And too many eyes.

David and Avery tore into its sides, and it spun around, shrieking and screeching and swinging its arms at Carter. But the old werewolf was fast, and ducked under the arms before jumping the monster straight on and landing on the human half of it. Jack couldn't tell who the others were in the chaos. They were covered in blood, and they stood up from the mist as broken bones snapped back into place. Erica, Caleb, Monica, and Mason, all four of them with huge gashes on their body, gushing blood that disappeared into the fog. It only slowed them down for moments before the wounds closed, and the blood-soaked beasts again threw themselves at the giant monster.

"Noah!" Avery yelled, feral eyes looking in Jack's direction. "Fire!"

"Can't get here! Ghosts are blocking him! Black Blood knows what you planned!"

"Fuck!" Evidently not happy about the news, she sank both her claws into the fat spider body, and got to tearing, until the monster's blood gushed over her.

"Damien," Jack said, "look for an opportunity to get in there and end this quickly. Stay hidden as best you can until then."

"On it." Damien slipped away, crouched into the mist, and vanished, his Cloak and the fog working together to make him almost invisible. His friend was tired. Cloaking all of them for so long had drained him. How well the Cloak worked on the spider monster, Jack didn't know; didn't seem to do much against ghosts.

But with seven werewolves trying to tear it into bits, it wouldn't notice a vampire hiding in the mist.

Jack, on the other hand, wanted it to notice him. He walked straight up to it, and fired every bullet in his magazine as fast as he could. Big as the werewolves were, the azlu was gigantic, and aiming for the lower half of its body, where spider body connected to human body, was enough to avoid accidentally shooting them. It shrieked as it noticed the new pain sensation, but when it tried to take a step toward Jack, one of the werewolves sliced at one of its many legs hard enough it stumbled. Jack slapped in a new magazine and unloaded it as fast as the gun allowed. And another magazine. And then another. The azlu shrieked and screamed, and hints of the human it possessed came through in its voice. Jack emptied his last magazine into it, before holstering the pistol. Dozens and dozens of bullets, and the damn thing just refused to die.

He pulled up his Beast, and sent vitae into his limbs. Mountains of it. Without the necklace, it was like riding rapids, a torrent of energy and instinct that hit him and threatened to drag him under the overpowering current. If he'd been back in his mansion, or maybe in the Elysium Tower, he'd find some peace and quiet, and throw his thoughts into a flame. Now, all he had was chaos, roars and shrieks, blood, and an enemy he had to kill and kill now.

He jumped straight at the giant spider monster, and sank his shortsword into its chest. With anything else, the short blade would have sunk straight through the chest and into the organs, and ended the fight in seconds. With the azlu, it was like trying to stab through a thick layer of wood, and his sword penetrated maybe three inches before it came to a stop, and Jack was left dangling from it like a fish on a hook. Jumping at it with his small body had not been the smartest plan.

The monster swung both its arms down for him, and while he managed to swing aside enough to avoid one, the other bone scythe

arm collided with him and smashed him into the ground. Thick Kindred blood coursed over the wound, summoned under the skin and thick enough it stopped the monster from getting through the limb. The stone ground was not forgiving, but nothing broke, and Jack groaned as he forced himself back to his feet.

He had to be careful. He couldn't have a repeat of what happened with him and Avery, or Garry and Michael, and let the Ripper out by getting pulverized.

He managed a glance back to Sándor's group. Enormous shadows cut through the air over pillars of flame that shot out in random directions. With all the mist, the distance turned everything into a blur, and he couldn't tell what the fuck was happening over there. But he didn't hear any screams of pain, so, probably alright enough he could focus on the giant spider monster trying to kill him.

Avery and the others ripped and tore into the creature with more ferocity than Jack could manage. Claws, ripping through exoskeleton, drawing splatters of more monster blood, until the whole place smelled of it. The spider turned and slashed at one of the werewolves, and they dashed out of the way before disappearing into the mist. Shadows enveloped them, and they ceased to exist, only to pounce from the mist on the spider's other side, and get his mouth around one of the enormous spider legs. But the spider was too big, too strong, and a solid kick of the spindly leg sent the werewolf flying back into the mist.

It quickly got worse. As Jack looked for another opening to jump onto, or maybe get under the damn spider, or maybe get his sword back, the huge thing jumped. Apparently eight legs and monstrous strength allowed for some pretty big jumps, and the huge thing cleared twenty feet with half a dozen werewolves stuck on its body. It landed hard, nearly collapsing onto its side, but managing to stay standing, while three of the werewolves fell off.



As Carter got back up, a spider leg came down onto his chest, through him, and pinned him to the floor. Screams mixed with roars, but Jack couldn't see the man now that he was below the mist. His clawed hands stuck up through the surface of the fog, and swiped at the spider leg several times, before falling back down below.

Avery roared. Not a normal roar, something that'd hurt the ears but otherwise do nothing. It was a blast wave. It erupted from her like an explosion, and everyone not currently attached to the monster with a clawed grip flew away, and they didn't land nicely. Whatever it was Avery just did, it hit Jack hard enough he fell back and slid over maybe thirty feet of stone before stopping, and when he got back up, he was facing the wrong way.

He spun back around in time to see Avery's claws erupt with flames, and sink into the spider's large abdomen. The whole fight had been filled with screaming and shrieking monster sounds, and it only got worse as bits of the monster's flesh caught fire. It wasn't normal fire. It faded away quickly, thank god, but once Jack ran back in to join the fight, he could smell the burning hair of the spider's body.

Those claws hurt. He knew.

Six werewolves took the opportunity to jump back up from the mist, and tear into the spider's big fat abdomen where Avery had left a nasty gash. Blood rained, and Jack took a step back as the monster spun around at high speed, trying to dislodge the pack. They held on, sinking their claws in as deep as they could go, as if they were trying to burrow their way into the spider's insides. It bucked and roared, and sliced at them as it turned the human half, but couldn't get anything more than passing grazes on the wolves that cut but didn't kill.

Jack wanted to help, but any time he got close, the spider spun around again and swiped hard. With his blood shield protecting him, he'd survive a hit, but all it'd accomplish would be getting sent flying again.

The spider finally stopped bucking and spinning long enough to turn its human half again, and raise both arms, ready to take a big swing down at one of the wolves with both hands. Before it tried, a blur of motion cut through the mist, and slammed into the side of the spider's head. The spider's swings went wild, twitching randomly and slashing at nothing and everything around it.

Damien hung from his sword, both hands holding the handle tight, the long blade skewering the monster through the temple, all the way through. He'd put a lot more power into his jump than Jack had. But the monster wasn't dead. It swung its body in random directions, not swinging at anything in particular, but its death throes were still deadly as fuck, and Jack backed away again.

Okay, monster was dying, that was good. Carter was down and not getting up. Not good. He could still hear Clara and the others fighting ghosts off behind him. Not good. Help Carter, or help Clara and Sándor?

"Damien! Help them finish it off!" He spun around, and jogged toward Clara. The werewolves behind him continued to rip and tear into the spider monster, but it'd die eventually. It'd break apart into a bunch of smaller spiders, with the azlu's spirit half hidden inside one of them. Maybe they could catch it? No, not a chance in the mist. They'd have to find it and kill it again later, but for now, he had to save as many people as he could. And he knew he'd never forgive himself if something happened to Clara. And he hated that he knew he still felt that way about her.

He got maybe fifty feet before motion caught his eye. He spun around again, half expecting to find a giant spiderweb launched at

him or something, but instead, he found the black, empty eyes of a ghost, and the glint of a knife.

“You killed the master!” Sabrina swung the knife down, and Jack sucked in a hard breath as the metal cut along his forehead. The only thing that stopped it from cutting deep into his skull, was reflexes and the blood shield. Whatever the fuck that ghost knife was made of, it cut through the blood with far more effectiveness than it had any right to. It was just like that time Avery had got him with her claws.

Sabrina had used the knife to kill ghosts. Apparently it could kill more than that.

“It was an accident!”

“Liar! Master Honors wouldn’t die to an accident!” She came at him again, swinging fast, and Jack backpedaled as best he could. Behind him, the sound of a flamethrower spewing fire in random directions only grew closer.

“He wanted to kill someone I loved, so I set the whole building on fire to stop him. I didn’t think—”

She half cackled, half snarled as she dove at him like she wanted to tackle him, and he rolled to the side. But the moment he was back on his feet, she dove again, forcing him to again duck. And again, she swung her knife at him, pushing him back toward Noah and the flames.

“You didn’t think fire would kill a vampire!? Well then this is going to be ironic!” Her manic laughter reached psycho levels as she pointed behind him, no doubt at the fire Noah was spewing everywhere. He didn’t dare look.

“That’s not irony!”

“What!?” She came in close and stabbed up for his guts. He sidestepped and risked a punch, and grinned as he felt knuckles smash into ghost flesh. As long as she was manifesting herself physically, a fight was a two-way street.

“Irony is when something extremely unlikely happens! A pilot dying in a plane crash isn’t ironic. A pilot having a random plane fall on his house and kill him while he’s sleeping would be ironic!” One perk about being a vampire he never truly appreciated, was getting to argue while fighting. No need to worry about breath management.

“Nerd!” She swung again, shoulder to hip, and he jumped back only far enough to keep the blade from piercing skin. His shirt and suit weren’t so lucky, getting a second cut through it. “How could you!? How could you kill the master!”

“Your master was a psychopath! A violent asshole!”

“The master was loving! He adored me!”

“Probably because you’re a fucking psychopath! And a violent asshole!”

She shrieked, mouth hanging open further than a human mouth could, and the noise forced him to squint as his ears struggled.

“You don’t deserve to live! Master’s grandchilde is a killer! A monster! Without the necklace, you’re just a monster!”

“What do you—”

“Black Blood told us! Told us everything! Master Honors had the curse, but he kept it controlled. Your sire had the curse, but he kept it controlled. You’re the first one to release it! You’re the monster!”

He'd told her everything, then. She went for the necklace first because it was his weakness. She didn't know what that meant.

It was his turn to snarl, and he stepped in closer to the ghost. She was freaky fast, almost as fast as Damien, and her body was hard to keep focus on with how it leaked the same mist they were fighting in. But he came in close enough to drive his fist into her face, and as she hovered back in some weird sort of ghost pain, complete with angry alien screams, he jumped toward her and again punched her, bringing a fist down and putting the power of the curse into it as hard as he could. He didn't have time for this.

As usual, the power and his bodyweight didn't get along, and he flew back from the impact. But so did she. Her ghost body broke apart from the punch, face literally breaking in half like a log to an ax, before she fell into the mist rolling, causing the mist to spread around her in waves.

"I'm not a monster."

He didn't wait to see her reaction. Hopefully having her face smashed apart would give him at least a few seconds of peace.

He managed another ten feet, before his body stopped working. A small glint between and above his eyes forced him to look up, and he groaned. That, was a knife.

"You killed the master!" Sabrina said, and she yanked the knife out of his skull as he fell into the mist. "You killed my love!" His face planted against the stone, and as torpor pulled him under, Sabrina stabbed him in the back again, and again, and again.

---

~~Beatrice~~

It wasn't the first time she'd been in Athalia's lair. By all accounts, it should have been awesome. An enormous cave that went straight

down, with downward spiraling ramps of rock along the walls. At the bottom, a pile of bones. Lots, and lots, and lots of bones. The whole thing was super metal. And it was so dark, each step had to be carefully calculated. She'd survive falling. He'll, she could survive tripping and rolling down the whole damn spiral until she landed in the bones, vampire and all, but she'd break every bone in her body. No time to spend the next week in torpor healing.

Beside her floated the giant skeleton monster, Athalia. In some ways, she looked similar to Black Blood's supposed true body, a giant black skeleton. Similar roots in being super scary and shit, probably. Black Blood was some sort of spirit or god of death and the dead, and you didn't embody that much better than a black skeleton. And there were few things people feared more than death.

They didn't go far. Just as Triss was about to ask what the plan was, Athalia hovered over to a wide tunnel connected to the wall of the huge pit, and disappeared in blackness. Complete, utter, total fucking blackness. Triss followed as best she could, which wasn't very well.

"Uh, Athalia, I can't see shit."

"Just keep walking."

"Easy for you to say. Can you see?"

"Eshmaki like myself and Fiona can see in darkness, yes. We are darkness."

"Uh huh. Fiona's the biggest ray of sunshine I've ever met."

Athalia snorted on a quiet laugh. "Her Horror's body count is in the many thousands."

That was more than a little disturbing, actually.

“How’d someone like Fiona get a Horror so ... murderous?”

“The Horror comes to us in our dreams, and devours us. Becomes us. Fiona is not the sort to feel guilty for doing what comes naturally. Like a spider.”

“So ... Fiona’s dreams attracted a spider Horror, because they both lack guilt?”

The darkness chuckled quietly. “Or perhaps because spiders are happy creatures. Have you ever met an unhappy spider?”

Apparently Athalia found a bit of her shitty sense of humor when merged with her Horror.

“No,” Triss said.

“Do not judge things you do not understand.”

“Uh huh, thanks for the life advice. Now when are we—”

The darkness peeled away, and Triss stared on in awe, at the cave they stepped into.

It was huge. It was beyond huge. Endless mist covered the floor in a cave with walls so far and so big, she couldn’t contextualize how big they were. A thousand feet high? A mile? Titanic pillars of stone reached up from the ground to touch the ceiling, and once she dipped her head left and right to try and get a little sense of depth, she could only gawk. She might as well have been trying to see if she could move her head enough to make the moon move in the distance. It was too big and too far.

The whole place had a strange, eerie glow, subtle but there, something almost green, almost blue, despite the whole place having no real light source. The light was just ... there, quiet, and

subdued, like it was afraid to grow brighter and reveal the secrets of the underworld.

In the distance, tiny green fireflies drifted around. She squinted and dipped her head left and right again. Nope, not fireflies. Bigger, and further.

“Holy shit,” she said.

Athalia sighed as she nodded. “Yeah.” She was back in her human form again, and looking just as overwhelmed by the sight before her as Triss.

“You know where the others are?”

“Yeah. That way.” She pointed to some place in the distance.

“Uh, you sure? Cause this all looks identical.”

“Sándor pointed it out to me before.”

“Uh huh. And you ... went there and visited it, physically, right?”

“ ... no.”

Triss groaned and buried her face in her hands. “We’re going to die.”

“No we’re not. Now sum—” She cut herself off as she took a step back, and looked directly ahead of them.

Triss almost asked what was the problem before her Beast announced the presence of another vampire. And their Beast was one she was intimately familiar with.

“Aaron?”



Maybe fifty feet in the distance, someone stood up from the mist, a normal looking white dude, average height, average build, and short blonde hair that was so predictable you almost didn't notice it. He wore the most typical blue jeans she'd ever seen, and a black t-shirt with absolutely nothing on it. The Gangrel gave the sheriff a run for 'most boring man on the planet'.

"Oh, it's you." He nodded slowly, face still deadpan as he slipped his hands into his jean pockets. "We weren't sure who'd come through."

Triss almost walked over to him, but halfway through her first step she noticed Athalia had taken a step back. The tunnel behind them was no longer a black, endless cave, but more of the same Great Below cave, and a rock face with some curvature to it that led nowhere. Athalia had closed her lair off, and looked like she was getting ready to open it again.

"Aaron, what're you doing here?" Triss asked.

The man frowned slightly before he looked up, turned to the side, and paced, as casual as ever. "What do you think?"

"I ... oh shit." She looked to Athalia, hoping to see something to prove her thoughts wrong. But of course not. Athalia looked at Aaron like he was a threat.

"You guessed it," he said. "So please, go back the way you came. We can talk when Jacob and Black Blood are done."

"Fucking shit, really? You? God damn it, Aaron! You're the one fucking person in the whole fucking city I expect to keep a level head!"

He winced and motioned for her to calm down. Which, of course, only made her fucking furious.

“I do have a level head. I’m not yelling or screaming in an underworld realm filled with angry ghosts. Notice the lights?”

She snarled at him, but she couldn’t help but look past him and up at the endless fog in the titanic, endless cave.

“The green lights?”

“The ghosts carry green lanterns when they’re out, drifting around. Not sure why. On some endless journey to find something, probably.”

She gulped. The green lights were blurry dots in the distance, but there were hundreds of them. Thousands. Okay, yeah, no yelling.

“So you know what Jacob’s up to.”

“Yeap,” he said.

“And you’re on board.”

“Of course.”

“Of course? He’s going to start a fucking ... I don’t know, a fucking apocalypse or something.”

The Gangrel sighed as he shook his head. “He’s going to fix it.”

“Fix it?”

“The world. It’s broken into pieces. He’s putting them back together.”

“Oh my fucking god, you sound like a cult member.”

Her fellow witch shrugged, and took a step closer. “Yeah, I guess I do. But is it really a cult, if they’re right? You know other realms exist.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“You know there are barriers separating them.”

“I guess.”

“And chasms, separating others. That’s step two of the plan.”

“Oh my fucking god, there’s a phase two?”

“Yes,” he said. “First step is tearing down the walls, and bringing the realms we can touch back together. The spiritual, the physical realm, the dream, and the ... remnants.” He gestured around them. “There are other realms too, attached to these that we don’t know about. The tears will spread and bring them together, too. And then, we bridge the chasm to reach the realms beyond, and combine everything.”

“The fuck is in the realms beyond?”

“You know what.”

She sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. That’s what Jacob meant, when he said there was a way she could see Julias again, without having to resurrect him.

“Why the fuck are you telling me this? This is some pretty typical villain monologuing dumb shit.”

He smiled, and even chuckled a little. Rare, for Aaron.

“Jacob thought you deserved to know. And besides, villain? Beatrice, just think about what Jacob and Black Blood are doing for two seconds, and tell me I’m playing the role of villain, here.”

She opened her mouth, and slowly shut it. Christ, right back to wondering if she was doing the right thing, trying to stop Jacob.

“So everything will just be ... merged?”

“Yeap.”

“No more death? No more life? Everyone just ... together, all the time?”

“We hope.”

“You hope!?”

He slowly nodded. “There’s no way to tell exactly how things will go, not for sure. But it has to be better than—”

“Than what?”

“Than everything.” He took another step toward her. “You look me in the eye and tell me losing Julias wasn’t like going through Hell on Earth.”

She frowned, but she looked away before she could stop herself.

“That’s ... not fucking fair.”

“Think about it. You get to see Julias again. Jacob gets to see Minerva again. Sándor gets to see his wife and kid again. Everyone’s lost someone.” He looked to Athalia. “You, get to see your daughter again, in a place where monsters and humans and life and death don’t even exist anymore. She’ll have no more reason to hate you.”

Athalia stared at Aaron, but even her icy expression broke.

“My daughter...”

“No more life, no more death, no more pain. We get to see the ones we lost, be with them, and this life and death cycle, this bullshit of nothing but misery will be over.”

“Jesus fucking christ, Aaron,” Triss said. “I ... I thought you...”

It was his turn to look away and wince.

“Like I said, everyone’s lost someone.”

“I thought you hated your family.”

“You don’t know anything about my relationship with my family.”

“I fucking asked! I asked, and you never told me a damn thing.”

He smiled. “I suppose you did. And I suppose I didn’t.”

Athalia let out a snarl as she finally took steps forward, or more like stomps, and tightened her fists at her sides. “We don’t have time for this. My daughter is dead, and nothing Jacob or Black Blood does will bring her back.”

The man sighed, and leaned forward slightly, putting his weight on the balls of his toes.

“I didn’t think you’d listen. Beatrice, maybe, but not you.”

Triss got between them and held out her hands. “Aaron, we just want to save Jack, and then talk to Jacob.”

“Says you,” Athalia said.

God damn it, not now. Triss threw the woman a glare, and Athalia returned it, not backing down. If she decided to fight Aaron, she was going to rip the poor guy into bits.

“Aaron,” Triss said, “for your own good, just step aside, okay? I mean, fuck me, what if it’d been the Prince or the sheriff who came through Athalia’s tunnel? The fuck can you do to stop them?”

He grinned. “I wonder.”

She blinked at the man, and the growing presence of the Beast inside him. Far as she knew, far as anyone knew, Aaron was a young vampire, maybe twenty-five years embraced. No one knew who his sire was, but that wasn't uncommon for vampires. Much as the Prince ran a tight ship, people had children they didn't tell people about, or young vampires came to the city and found sanctuary in a covenant.

But as Aaron smiled at her, the presence inside him grew larger, and larger. Oh shit.

"I doubt I could beat the sheriff or the Prince in a fight," he said. "It was never the goal. Just, slow them down, and let the boss finish what he needs to."

"Dude, you could fucking die."

He shrugged. "Won't matter, in the end. Dead, alive, it'll all be the same soon enough."

"Holy shit dude, you're..." She sighed as she looked down, and gently rubbed the fake candy bracelet with a thumb. "Tell me one thing."

"Sure." God damn it, the way he was so open with her about all this made everything about it even harder.

"Your girlfriend. She exist?"

He smiled at her with the most gentle, bittersweet smile she'd ever seen. "Yes."

She winced again, and ground her teeth until they clicked. All this time, all this fucking time, the dude had been playing sleeper agent. Well, not really, but he'd been hiding shit from them, hiding how close he actually was to Jacob, hiding a lot of shit. And he even had a girlfriend, someone he cared about! He was still going to go

through with this, like, some sort of mindless devoted cultist working for a god of death and his right hand priest?

That was fucking twisted.

“Get out of my way, Aaron.”

“No.”

She took a step toward him, and that was enough. The Gangrel burst forward in speed, more speed than a Gangrel should have, and knocked her over. More than knocked her over, she screamed as something sharp cut along her body. Landing on her back on stone wasn't fun, and losing track of everything as she rolled under mist less so.

She got back to her feet in time to see Aaron, or what was once Aaron, getting thrown fifty feet by the shadow of a giant skeletal arm, a shadow that came out of Athalia's body. Athalia summoning shadows of her Horror, Triss had expected. Aaron being covered in spikes, standing taller and lankier than before, and having two huge bone spike hands coming out of his mutated wrists, she hadn't.

“What the fu—”

Aaron jumped out of the mist and came running, this time at Athalia again, and really fucking fast, like a sprinting cheetah. But he didn't run on four feet. He ran on two, leaning forward, with a fleshy tail covered in fucked up bone spikes swinging left and right behind him. His mouth was royally fucked up, filled with giant teeth that cut through his own lips. His clothes were in tatters, and chunks of his flesh were stretched and protruding in strange places. An extra arm came out of his side, small, with a normal hand armed with ridiculously long claws.

Gangrels as young as Aaron couldn't manage transformations like that. He'd transformed into something out of *The Thing*, like,

possessed human alien zombie monster hybrid what-the-fuck shit. That was ... That was Garry-level shit.

Even Athalia stared in surprise, and almost didn't respond to the fucking weird monster's crazy speed as he rushed her. But Beatrice wasn't far, and she threw herself into his side hard enough the both of them tumbled over the stone. If he hit Athalia with one of those arms, he might cut the damn woman in half, and no way she'd survive that. Hell, he might cut Triss in half, no matter how much vitae she pumped through herself to harden her body. She wouldn't survive that, either.

"Aaron," she said through clenched teeth, "don't make me fucking kill you!"

Aaron the movie monster clicked his fucked up teeth together, and spread out some of the weird bone spikes coming out of his cheeks, like an insect working uneven, mutated mandibles. Whether the man could even talk anymore, she couldn't tell. He didn't try. His head twitched, snapping side to side with disgusting speed, almost like Mary's ghost did when she got twitchy.

He looked like the sort of monster you killed with a shotgun when it rushed you, and she didn't have a shotgun.

Aaron rushed her again, and again the speed was crazy. They were supposed to be of similar age, but her Beast told her otherwise. Beasts always sized each other up, a sort of silent judging of each other's hidden aura, auras that could be suppressed. Aaron, apparently, had been suppressing his, far too well. Crúac ritual, maybe? Or maybe a ritual to get this strong? Whatever he'd done, she wasn't going up against an equal. This fucker would kick her ass easily.

Except she had backup.



Before Aaron reached her, Athalia flew into the air, literally, and came down on him with two giant shadowy arms. Squash. Aaron disappeared under the mist as the two hands punched down on him hard enough Triss felt it through the stone. The arms disappeared a second later, and Athalia landed beside where Aaron was. But he wasn't. The mist was too damn thick and didn't behave like mist should, same as Mary's mist. It didn't move out of the way fast enough. And when Athalia kicked at where Aaron supposedly was, she found nothing.

He came up out of the mist behind her, and swiped at her back with his two claws. Triss ran for him, but they were too far. Athalia surprised her though. Without hesitation, she rolled forward and away from Aaron, and came back up away from the vampire facing him, snarling. He'd nicked her back enough to draw blood, but only just.

Aaron dove at her, but Beatrice was close enough this time, and she again collided with him. She held on, and the two of them rolled through the mist and over the stone, hitting a few rocks and getting more than a few scrapes.

Holding onto a Gangrel transformed and squirming and slashing, all covered in spikes and teeth and whatnot, was not easy. Random parts of Aaron stabbed into her arms and legs, cutting through skin and muscle. But she was a fucking Nosferatu, and strong as fuck. Even a Gangrel transformed into some weird horror movie monster couldn't get out of her grip. And she had claws, so she returned the favor, clutching Aaron's arms to his sides and sinking her claws into his stomach and chest. More screams. If there were any nearby ghosts, they were on the way.

When a bone spike somehow managed to stab her in the leg, she let go and rolled away, clenching her teeth through the pain. She tried to get up, but her leg didn't appreciate it, and she fell back on her ass as Aaron disappeared into the mist again.

A grunt and scream told her he'd found Athalia.

She forced herself to her feet, pumping vitae through her leg until it sealed itself well enough to work again. Athalia and Aaron were hidden, somewhere under the mist, but she could hear them, roaring and shrieking at each other. She dragged her damn leg and speed-walked toward them, but slowed as she looked up and around.

It was getting darker. A lot darker.

Another scream told her Aaron had hurt Athalia, badly. Sure enough, she spotted a few flicks of blood flying through the air, and she dragged herself over to where they came from. It got darker again. Another grunt, and a huge shadow came crashing down through the mist. Another alien shriek, before it got darker again, until Triss couldn't see anything.

"Triss," a raspy voice said, "hide."

For a second, she thought it might have been Mary going all banshee on her, but she was still in the bracelet. Maybe Aaron, talking with that crazy mouth?

Aaron stood up, looking left and right, bits of blood on his fucked up face and arms. He spotted Triss, but looked away quickly. Looking for Athalia, then. He hadn't killed her.

It wasn't his voice, then. It was Athalia's Horror's.

Triss wrapped herself in her Cloak, the best Cloak she could manage, and crouched until only the top of her head stuck out of the mist. Watching Aaron twist and turn, looking for the woman he'd just been stabbing, was freaky as fuck. He really embodied the scary alien monster vibe, a complete one-eighty compared to the Aaron she knew. The Aaron she thought she knew. Seeing the calm,

calculating, logical man side with Jacob had her wondering a lot more than she wanted to, too.

Save Jack now. Worry about Jacob later. If the man made a good case, maybe Triss would agree with him, and maybe even Athalia would? But for the moment, it didn't matter.

Slash marks cut through a nearby boulder, and Triss almost screamed at the random explosion of sound. No Athalia, but then again, Triss couldn't see shit in darkness this thick, just a slight silhouette of the mist, the boulders, and Aaron maybe fifty feet away.

Aaron spun around, looking at the explosion of violence. Another slash hit stone, a boulder closer to Aaron. Triss held very still, statue mode, not turning her head or fake breathing or anything. Aaron spun around again. Mistake. His gross spiky tail and weird alien limbs went flying as another slash cut through the air, this time right on top of him, hitting him in the back.

All blurs. The only visible thing was shadow, and darker shadows. The green lights in the distance were gone. The mist and fog were just a slightly different shade of black and gray. How the fuck could Athalia see anything? And where the fuck was she? This wasn't in the dream world or whatever, so she still had her physical, human body around, probably lying under the mist.

If Athalia made a mistake, she'd slice herself into a chunky mess of limbs.

Jack had told her about this, about Athalia doing this in the dream, that time he'd gone on a rescue mission to save Clara, Eric, and Jessy. Athalia had vanished, the area went dark, and she'd started slicing up things randomly, with enough power and speed anyone she hit was probably dead. And apparently, she couldn't aim for shit when doing it.

Aaron got back up, a few enormous cut marks along his back, deep enough they exposed bone, or at least maybe, considering how dark everything was. With the weird shrieking sound he made, it was a wonder he managed to get back up at all. His tail snapped around behind him loud enough it made noise, almost like a whip crack, and he clicked his mouth mandible things together as he took a deep breath through his nose. Smelling the air. Oh shit, he was looking for her body, and unlike vampires, living bodies had scents and heartbeats.

He took a step in a random direction, slowly. Another slash came down, but missed Aaron, slicing the ground beside him hard and fast enough it left a huge wake in the mist. He held still, waited for the mist to settle, and took another slow step. Again, a slash down at the ground near him, but missing him. It'd been big enough, and fast enough, to cut a car into four pieces.

Aaron crouched low, and only the tips of his spikes poked up through the mist, as the Gangrel went into prowl mode. Shit shit shit, he figured it out.

The sound of rocks ripping apart filled Triss's ears. One of the random slashes hit a little too close to Triss, and she almost threw herself to the side. Hold, very, still. That was the plan. Except now Athalia couldn't see Aaron, and he was on the hunt for her real body.

Aaron stood up, with a woman held by the throat with his new, gross hand and arm coming out of his side. Shit fucking shit! He drew back his one of his spike-tipped arms, and—

And lost it. The arm came flying off, and Aaron let out a guttural shriek as he let go of Athalia and fell away. Before he could so much as turn around, the other arm came off, and Aaron fell back as his screams jumped an octave. Triss couldn't see what the fuck

happened, but something blurry in the dark had got him from behind. Athalia's Horror?

The darkness around them shattered, exposing the distant green lights, the unending fog, and the overwhelming walls of the colossal cave.

Athalia stood up and backed away from Aaron, panting, bleeding, but alive. Okay, good to move then. Triss ran over to her, and the two of them looked down at the growling vampire as he knelt, staring up at them with his alien face, both shoulders missing arms. He still had the weird arm sticking out of his side, but he wouldn't be doing much with that.

Mary floated behind Aaron, looking like the Grim Reaper with how her black eyes were furious with rage, and her mouth was full of sharp teeth.

"Holy shit," Triss said. "When'd you ... How'd you—"

"I can touch things here. I can ... hurt ... kill..." Mary clenched her fists in front of her. Bits of Kindred blood dripped from them, before burning away to ash. With a raspy snarl, she hovered around until she was in front of Aaron, and she glared down at him all the more. "He almost killed Athalia. We should kill him."

Good thing Sam wasn't around to hear this.

"In his defense," Triss said, "Athalia was trying to kill him, too."

Slowly, Aaron transformed back into his normal body. The extra arm, the alien face and messed up spikes, the tail, it all disappeared. His clothes were full of holes, but in better condition than they should have been. He'd figured out how to not ruin his clothes doing crazy transformations. He was definitely older than he'd told her.

“I guess I lose,” he said. “Didn’t expect Mary.” Bastard didn’t even have the god damn courtesy to look upset.

“Damn fucking right, you asshole. Christ, you trick me for years, team up with Jacob and Black Blood to break the whole damn world —”

“Fix.”

“Whatever! And you were straight up going to kill whoever came through this, uh, burrow or tunnel or whatever.” She gestured behind her at the cave wall Athalia had tunneled them through.

He shook his head as he looked down. “Jacob didn’t expect you. And I wouldn’t want to hurt his favorite student.”

Favorite student. She hissed as she looked away, and paced around in the mist.

“You ... fucking asshole.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Boss’s orders. Slow people down.”

“God damn it, Aaron. I—”

“We kill him or leave him?” Athalia asked.

“I don’t want to kill him.”

“He’s a threat.”

“He’s not a threat anymore. He has no arms.” And if Mary could do that because they were in the Great Below, the fuck could the other, stronger ghosts do?

“He’s a Gangrel, right? Frustratingly good at regrowing limbs.” Athalia wasn’t wrong. Gangrels were good at that cause of all the body morphing shit, and Aaron was apparently older and stronger

than Triss or anyone else knew. “So unless you have a stake on you, we should—”

Mary grabbed Aaron, earning a pained grunt from the man, and then a pained scream, as the ghost ripped off one of his legs. And then the other, each leg taking her a few moments of concentrated effort, like a human ripping apart a piece of cardboard. Holy sweet mother of fucking god, Mary was strong. Maybe they didn't have to fear the other ghosts. Maybe the other ghosts had to fear her?

At a certain point, Aaron stopped screaming, and his eyes rolled up as the man thankfully slipped away into torpor.

“Jesus fucking christ, Mary. You—”

“We're running out of time. My brother is out there, maybe dying, maybe dead.” She tossed the armless, legless body into the mist, near a big boulder. Triss had seen dogs treat sticks they'd found in gutters with more care. “Your friend is alive, right?”

“Kinda, yeah. I mean, if he'd been younger, you'd have probably just killed him.” Young neonates like Triss couldn't exactly survive losing all four limbs. Maybe a Ventrue or Gangrel could, but even then it'd be a close call. “He's older than I thought. He'll be stuck in torpor until someone feeds him some blood.”

“Lucky for him,” Mary said, more of that inhuman rasp coming through, almost like Athalia's Horror's voice. “Let's go.” And without so much as a glance back, the young woman drifted forward in the direction Athalia had suggested when they first arrived.

Triss and Athalia glanced at each other. Athalia looked tired, panting and sweating, some blood dripping down her side and leg, but even she noticed what Triss noticed. Mary wasn't scared or jittery or anything anymore. She was angry, and determined. And Triss wasn't sure if that was better or worse.

Athalia followed after her, but Triss took a moment, and squatted down beside Aaron's body. His limbs were already gone, disintegrating into tiny flames that turned his flesh into small piles of ash. Seeing the guy without any limbs was a new kind of sick and twisted, and she was thankful she didn't have a pulse or working stomach organ, or she'd have probably puked at the sight of him. But, he was alive, shriveled and drained, but still Aaron. All someone had to do, was give him a few pints of blood until he'd generated his limbs, and he'd wake up, in a week or five.

"Fucking ... fuck. Aaron, you ... fucking asshole. You could have talked to me ... God damn it, you fucking idiot, you could have fucking talked to me." She knew the dude hated his family from when he'd been alive, but was any of that true? Like he said, she didn't know shit about him, because he refused to tell her.

In the end, she didn't know the guy. But that wasn't quite true, either. She knew him ... a little. Quiet dude, read introspective books, thought about shit day-in day-out all the time without pause. That wasn't a lie, right?

She stood up and sighed. He wasn't dead, no need for drama. Hopefully a ghost wouldn't find him while they were gone.

"You better still be alive when I get back." She jogged after Athalia, and a very scary ghost lady.

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~~The Ripper~~

He turned his head enough to get a peek at the bitch stabbing him. Her face hadn't reformed. She literally had a crater through the center of her head, so the damn thing was split in half, but even like that he could see the crazy expression in her eyes. She stabbed his back again and again, cackling and screaming, and once her mouth fully reformed, he could see the wide, psycho smile.



Damn. That ghost knife really fucking burned.

“Lady,” he said, grinning as he looked down, and pushed himself off the ground, “if you weren’t already dead, you’d soon wish you were.”

“You—” She shrieked again as he jumped up to his feet. “You—”

“Black Blood didn’t tell you why I wear the necklace, did he?”

“Weakness! Your weakness!” Her face finished reforming, and she came at him again.

He stepped into her, faster than that idiot Jack could, and drove his fist through her chest and out through her back. He expected it to feel like punching through mist. Instead, her body resisted, like jelly strong enough it could have been flesh. But his fist still went through her, and her screams became endless as she collapsed back into the mist again, a hole through her body. Eventually, they stopped.

He touched his forehead. Yep, she’d put a tiny slit clean through it. Fucking hilarious. The stab wounds burned like all fuck, more of that icy pain that told him they weren’t regular wounds. Hell, even moving his limbs felt weird, considering he had a small hole in his brain. But his Kindred body adapted quickly enough. If she’d been smart, she’d have stabbed him in the heart, where the weird ghost wound would have probably put him in torpor for days. Stupid bitch.

He laughed, and laughed, and looked around him at his options. What to do, what to do. Sabrina didn’t get back up this time; he’d hurt her a lot. Finally, a bit of peace and quiet from her god damn stupid screaming.

*Don’t you fucking do anything!*

Funny, isn't it, Jack? I kept expecting some big, emotional moment to be how you let me out again, like the first time. Like the time you killed Joe. Ripped his head clean off, remember? You did that, not me. Maybe you are a monster.

*Shut. The fuck. Up.*

But hey, if getting hit or stabbed in the head does it, then that works for me. You should probably watch your head more. Now, you have to watch all your friends die.

*You fucking—*

The Ripper laughed, and forced down the voice in his head. That's all Jack was anymore, just a voice, one he could crush and bury. Christ, how long had it been since he'd come out to play. Way too long. And all that time, he'd been waiting, preparing, building his strength, getting stronger. The body was his, this time. He wouldn't let go of it, not again. There wasn't some giant elephant bitch to crush him into a pancake to force it, this time.

He licked his lips, and looked to Clara. Still transformed, the huge wolf fought off half a dozen ghosts that swirled around her. They'd figured out werewolf claws hurt. Sándor was in there too, back to back with Noah and taking swings at any ghost that got too close.

Oh god, this was too perfect.

“David!” The Ripper turned and looked back to the pack. “David! Get over here. I need a distraction.”

David, surrounded by his pack, stood over the dying corpse of the spider monster. It hadn't broken apart yet. When it did, Avery and everyone would be very distracted.

David looked to him, then back to Avery. When she nodded, David ran over to Jack, temporarily getting on all fours before almost

skidding to a stop beside him. Werewolves really were titanic creatures.

It was a simple plan: kill everyone. He was confident the Prince, the sheriff, maybe Elaine, someone would come looking for him, and he could explain only he'd survived. And then he could kill everyone back in the physical world when they let their guard down.

But in order to kill everyone, he had to get rid of the biggest threats first. The dude with the flamethrower, and then Sándor. The gargoyle fucker would probably be an easier fight than last time, since they weren't in his lair, or the dream world or whatever. But he also had a brain now, and fighting a super strong, giant gargoyle monster with a brain might actually be harder than his battle with the dumb, mindless brute had been. So, sneak attack him, or Noah? And what about Damien? He'd probably be able to tell The Ripper was in control if he used Auspex on him. And what if the sheriff did the same?

Whatever, he'd wing it. What fun was there in violence if you over-planned? It was so much better to go with the flow, and kill anything you could get your hands on. And in the Great Below, they had nowhere to go until rescue came.

“Let's go.”

David nodded, and the two of them ran toward Clara. Once they arrived, Clara wasted no time, and ran up to David, ghosts chasing after her. The two fell into a dance they both knew well, David slipping past her and crashing into the ghosts chasing her, and her dodging his pounce with ease.

Clara skidded and turned, and chased after David, only to pounce past him and get another ghost that'd been chasing her. And just like Sándor and Noah, she got back to back with him, and systematically fought off and shredded the ghosts.

“Noah!” The Ripper said, in his best Jack voice. One part pussy, one part entitled know-it-all nerd, one part superiority-complex Ventrue. “Stop with the fire!”

Noah nodded as he let go of the trigger. The igniter was still on, but he stopped spewing liquid flame everywhere. The way the flame interacted with the Great Below was interesting, burning beneath the mist and causing the unnatural stuff to avoid the flames. The ghosts themselves reacted even more oddly. A few of them were on fire, literally, but the liquid flame dripped off their bodies without making any sort of dent in their mass. Some of them dispersed to escape the flame. Some didn't bother.

It certainly hurt them, though. They screamed and roared, just not with the musical agony the Ripper would have hoped to hear. Burning alive was pretty much the most painful way to die, far as he knew, and whatever the ghosts were suffering didn't reach nearly the same level. Ah well, at least it was hurting them enough they avoided the fire.

Spirit magic bullshit was the only thing that'd really kill them. Spirit magic ghost knife. Spirit magic werewolf claws. If it wasn't fancy spirit magic crap, it wouldn't do much to a ghost, or a spirit. Which meant that Sabrina bitch would be coming for him again. He'd deal with her after he'd gotten rid of Noah and Sándor.

“Get lost!” The Ripper yelled at one ghost, thankfully one not on fire, and charged the bastard from behind. One solid punch to the back of the head was enough to have his skull collapse in, and the ghost fell into the mist and dispersed.

The nearby ghosts looked at the Ripper, apparently a little surprised he'd come back. They looked to the distance where the werewolves were ripping apart the dying azlu, and then around, as if looking for someone to tell them what to do. No one did. The ghosts

roared with frustration, some even spat curses, and they all flew away.

Clara and David stayed with each other, still back to back, and moved closer to Noah and Sándor. Everyone was panting, exhausted, and the breathers were sweating. Everyone was an easy target.

“You guys okay?” Jack asked, carefully stepping around strips of fire on the stone. It was really fucking hard, finding the right balance of pussy bullshit to say, but he felt he did pretty good. He’d been listening to it for years.

“Yeah,” Noah said. “Fire didn’t do much but scare them off, even when I hit them directly.”

“Shame.”

Noah raised a brow. “And the others?”

“Carter took a big hit. Might be dead. Avery and the others are fine, though.” Nodding, the Ripper came in closer, and stood beside the man as Noah looked off to where the azlu had been. A little closer. A little closer. Slightly behind. Act like you’re checking their six. Perfect. He’d have preferred to kill Sándor first, but he had to work with what he got.

That sweet, sweet moment, when everything goes right. Sándor was looking toward the azlu, now that the ghosts weren’t swarming them. Noah was relaxing, and lowering the nozzle on the flamethrower. Clara and David were walking toward their pack. Everyone had their back to Jack the Ripper. It was all perfect.

The Ripper drew back a fist, aimed it for the back of Noah’s head, and—

Got punched in the face by Sándor. The Ripper rolled with a groan and came back up on his feet, snarling as he touched where the bastard had punched him. A pretty damn hard punch, too, something the gargoyle's Horror could have done, not him.

“Sándor!?” Clara said as she spun around, and looked between the bastard and the Ripper.

“Well, fuck me.” Sighing, the Ripper wiped off the shoulders of his suit, and rubbed his hands together as he looked between the three werewolves and the nightmare monster. “Dude, you ruined it. I was going to punch his head clean off. You were all gonna turn around, shocked, and just as you realized what was happening, I was going punch you in the guts and rip out your innards.” He pointed at Sándor, and twiddled his index finger toward his stomach. “How'd you know it was me?”

Sándor made the tiniest frown a face could make, but said nothing. Because of course he said nothing. Fucking asshole was ruining the game.

The Ripper could have tried to keep up the facade. Kept trying to be Jack, and convince Sándor he was wrong. He could have played the long game, looked for the perfect opportune moment to make as big, and dramatic a revelation as he could. Kill them all in the most poetic, perfect way. Alas, real life wasn't a story. Sometimes you had to make due, and roll with the punches. That was fine. He could take a punch.

The three werewolves spread out slightly, finally realizing what'd happened. With two of them transformed, they'd be a problem. Best deal with them, first.

The Ripper licked a fang, grinned, and offered Clara a tiny finger wave. “David, old friend. Would you kindly—”

David froze, the command ringing throughout his whole being. Poor guy. He never knew about the command the Ripper left in his mind, all those months ago when he'd Dominated him. So much for being the spirit guru of his pack.

He turned, and sank his fangs into Clara's neck. She roared as she fell back, but she couldn't dislodge the man, and the werewolves fell into the mist as David tore her open with his claws.

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~~Antoinette~~

Jen glared at her, but the glare faded into nothingness, and her eyes closed, as paralysis and torpor took her.

"Necessary?" Daniel asked, as he gently set the woman on the bed in the cell, before joining Antoinette in the hall. Scully stayed with Jen, the bird having come to the conclusion that she was to protect Jen, as if Antoinette were not trustworthy. The strange ways a crow's mind, an already intelligent species, interacted with the gift of Kindred unlife, was quite interesting. Pets given unlife often became almost robotic with their newfound intelligence the taint gave. The crows, on the other hand, still held personalities of their own.

Something for her fellow dragons to research later, research likely already done. She had other worries.

"Prudent."

Her sheriff nodded as he followed her, and the two of them descended once again into the deepest layers of her Elysium Tower.

"You are concerned for Jack?"

"Of course I am concerned for my love. But ultimately, I am more concerned for the city, and the world at large."

“I know, but—”

“Enough, Daniel. Do not distract me.” This conversation was ridiculous, beyond cliché, and she would not entertain it. They had far larger worries.

It was Daniel’s attempt to console her, she knew. Alas, the man would forever have the social grace of an ox. She appreciated his desire to settle her nerves, but it was best she not think about Jack and the predicament he was in. The Prince and her sheriff had a ritual to complete, and until it was done, she would encase her heart in ice.

Deep down in her tower, in the chamber she had painted in thousands of symbols with blood, the Prince and her sheriff withdrew their blades, and began the second phase.

The kine dangling from chains screamed and shrieked. Antoinette did not enjoy the noise, and she tuned it out as best as possible. The fact these kine were little better than scum did not make such butchery enjoyable, and forever she would be unable to process how some Kindred could revel in such violence. But it had to be done, and to her chagrin, the sacrifices had to be awake for the act. Pain, and fear, were components in the ritual.

Intestines splattered over the floor, and the hanging sacrifices, mouths gagged and eyes covered, twisted and writhed in absolute agony. The Prince had not engaged in such carnage in many decades, but the ritual was clear. The symbols had been painted in the blood of the dead, and now, the fuel was to be life represented: more blood, and the organs. The ancient Egyptians knew far more than the modern era realized.

“Now,” Antoinette said, “if you would be so kind. I do not have your book or knife; Beatrice hid them well. But I believe I have conducted the ritual correctly according to my records of the book, for a task as large as this, and this knife will suffice.” She held out



the blood soaked knife, an ancient thing, stashed away in her vaults. A knife baptized in the blood of an innocent child. “I had originally planned to perform this ritual myself. How fortuitous Beatrice left you where she had. And I believe you are the expert in this art?”

Elen managed a small grin up at the Prince from her wheelchair, reached out with a slow, unsteady hand, and took the knife.

## Chapter 169

~~Natasha~~

“Um, w-what do we do?”

The werewolves looked between each other, before settling on Arturo. With them all still in their Gauru forms, the physical differences between Matthew and Arturo were even more pronounced, with Matthew towering over Brianna and Arturo by a nearly a foot. But it was Arturo they looked to for a decision.

And then Arturo looked down at her.

“Run?”

Welp, looked like she'd be making the decision after all.

She groaned, rubbed her eyes with her palms, and ran over to Eric. He was still digging through the rubble, looking for Jessy. But considering there was a giant mountain of red blood on the other side of the biggest pile of rubble trying to kill them, and they all knew a red kraken lurked underneath, Jessy could wait.

“Eric, we have to go.”

“No. Jessy.”

“Eric! She'll b-be fine! She'll be safe, hidden!” God, please, let her be safe. “We have to go!”

Eric snapped his head and stared down at her, rage in his wolf eyes. For a second, she got ready to dodge a claw swipe that could probably cut her into ribbons, but none came. The werewolf took a few, deep breaths, fought for control, and won. Eventually he

nodded, and gestured down the alley toward South Side, opposite the direction they'd originally been moving in.

“This way? Closest tear. Casino.”

Right, a tear, one that led out of the spirit world and into the ghost place. It was in the basement of one of the casinos here in the spirit world, but the spirits didn't use it, as if they didn't want to end up in the Great Below.

Tash didn't want to go there, either. Damien and Jack told her plenty about the Great Below and how scary it'd been. The story about what Sabrina had done to those other ghosts also sealed the image of how deadly a place it was. But, it was less scary than dealing with Red Tide.

“Okay. Let's go.”

God, if Jessy died because of this, she was going to kill herself. Or Michael would do it for her.

The four werewolves dashed down the alley, Tash following behind Eric, and Flow behind them. Red Tide chased after them with all the subtlety of a monsoon, and Tash squeaked as the earth trembled underneath her. This wasn't like the time it'd followed them into a cathedral. This was like a scene from a movie, a giant river crashing through the streets and bulldozing over every car, pushing them over and dragging them along with the waves of red.

The only reason the red river didn't reach them, was they stuck to the alley. They ran past building after building as they headed back toward South Side, and Red Tide destroyed every building on the way, one after the other. It was a constant earthquake, bricks and concrete and whatever else the old buildings were made of crashing into the water Flow left behind it. But most of the sound and vibration came from the much, much larger spirit, its own body burying the area in destruction.

Nearby spirits ran for their lives. Spirits of rats, crows, flying things that glowed and probably represented electricity or handheld devices, things on wheels or made of asphalt, snake-like things that belonged in casinos, everything panicked and ran or flew, as Tash and her friends left Devil's Corner, and ran into South Side. There weren't any cars, nothing that'd have been a very temporary thing in the physical world, but benches, lampposts, power lines that Dolareido still hadn't bothered burying, all were there, twisted modern versions that were simultaneously slick, and warped to point toward the center of South Side, the economic center of Dolareido. All roads led to Rome, and they followed the path as the giant spirit followed after them.

"It's destroying everything!" Tash said. "I thought they w-weren't allowed to destroy the city!"

"It's bound," Flow yelled from behind, pouring over the street as it followed them, but keeping its human half formed and ahead of its watery body. "Black Blood is forcing it to take actions against its nature."

"Twisted," Matthew said. Even running at full speed, the huge werewolf managed to control his breath enough to speak. Easy for Flow and Tash, not so easy for the werewolves.

"Anyway we can use that against it?" she asked, weaving around a bench. "You were g-gonna use a ban against Street-Tail King, right!?"

"Street-Tail King was a weakling," Flow said, voice even steadier than Tash's. It didn't feel fear. "Compared to Red Tide. Red Tide's bans are likely connected to violence, and not something we could easily exploit. And we still don't know its banes."

Banes, right. Bans were rules spirits had to follow, defined by their nature. Banes were things that could hurt them. What could be used to hurt a giant incarnation of Dolareido's bloody, violent side?

Probably something like, the pistol of a kine who once worked for the mob, and then swore off violence when they met someone they wanted to marry, or have children with, or something else equally as dramatic and powerful. Which meant, Tash and her friends were fucked.

The alley shrank as the buildings grew taller and bigger. The deeper they got into South Side, the less room the structures provided, as everything was meant to direct pedestrian traffic into the buildings, the casinos, the bars, the clubs. Eventually they came to a solid wall, and had no choice but to steer toward the street, onto one of the wide sidewalks.

Now Red Tide was only fifty feet behind them, and the noise was overwhelming. Tash jumped over another bench and looked behind her, before snapping her head back and running faster. It was getting closer. Giant red tentacles stuck out of the pouring crimson waves, and smashed left and right against the buildings they ran past. Sign lights shattered, and huge glass windows, bigger and exaggerated versions of the ones in Dolareido, exploded into millions of pieces. The street was four lanes wide, the sidewalks massive so they could handle the busy city, and most of the buildings on the street had some distance between them and the sidewalk. Red Tide was large enough its flooding waves hit it all, while each tentacle smashed anything they could with reckless abandon.

A bit of its squid-like face poked up from the front wave, a wave of red water as high as a small building showing hints of the strange mouth and enormous teeth of the monster. Not good not good.

“There,” Brianna said, and she pointed to one of the casinos. “Can cross to other casino here.”

They all turned on a dime and ran through the front entrance spinning door.

Dolareido was a strange place in the spirit world. Tash knew that already, and had expected to see some weirdness in a place dedicated to pleasure and gambling.

Nothing could have prepared her for the sheer insanity of Devil's Blood. She'd had peeks into some strange buildings in the spirit world before, but the Devil's Blood casino was one of the larger, more important casinos in Dolareido. In retrospect, maybe its connection to the spirit world was why the owner changed the name, a century ago. There were lights everywhere, shining and powerful, burying areas in white and gold beams. The walls were lined with gold. The gambling machines and tables were made of gold. The chairs were made of gold. Cushions looked like they were made of expensive silk, the color of blood.

In the center of the gigantic room, was a fountain. Three gold statues of men held up a massive gold bowl over their heads, and red water flowed down over their perfect bodies, while three women statues on their knees gave the men some very deep blowjobs. The blood, or red water hopefully, continued down the men's bodies onto the women, over their hair, and down into another giant bowl filled with red where the ladies knelt. That was not the version of the fountain in the physical world.

It was such an extreme display, Tash paused to stare at it. But the sound of street and metal tearing apart behind her sparked her awake, and she ran up to the ticket booth. Gold bars blocked the way into the casino.

“Let us through!”

The spirit in the booth was, predictably, also made of gold. It was humanoid, androgynous, and wearing necklaces, bracelets, and all sorts of body jewelry also made of gold. A flat face, lacking defining features except for a very scary mouth full of teeth. And for some reason, a red see-through sun visor, the sort a ... a ... horse gambler

might wear at the racetrack? Dolareido had no racetrack! But, it did succinctly paint the image of something that embodied gambling.

“Sorry, need a ticket,” it said, voice monotone and almost robotic.

“We d-d-don’t have a ticket! We—” She jumped aside as Matthew tore ahead, and ripped through the bars, metal breaking away to his claws with loud snaps. Gold wasn’t a durable metal, but you didn’t go tearing through it like paper either, especially not in the spirit world where it was probably a very durable metaphor, literally.

“S-Sorry!” She managed a small wave for the spirit, who’d gotten up and was baring its sharp teeth as it pointed at them.

“Hey, stop! The owner’s going to—”

Its voice disappeared under the rumbling bass. Tash took a quick peek back again, and almost froze as Red Tide crashed against the entrance of the building. Unlike the buildings of Devil’s Corner, Devil’s Blood was a modern casino that swam in money and was one of the primary income sources for the whole city. It was sturdy down to the foundation. It held, barely. Red Tide let out a roar that vibrated in Tash’s teeth as it bashed against the walls of the casino, its blood body unable to pass through the spiraling doors.

Flow managed. Its angel-like body came through the doors first, only for Red Tide’s colossal waves of red to smash against it and drive its clear body through the entrance. Flow let out a grunt of pain, or whatever it was spirit’s felt, but it recovered quickly, and followed the rest of them through the hole Matthew carved.

The casino was full of spirits, speaking in that werewolf language Tash didn’t know, chatting away like nothing was happening. A few of them looked closer to fairies than anything, wings glittering with gold dust, bodies humanoid but featureless, and glowing every color of the rainbow as they flitted between machines. A couple looked like giant piles of slime, with green tentacles and several fleshy eyes

floating inside the semi-clear bodies. They were beyond gross, and left a trail behind them as they moved between the machines. The sex spirits were obvious, because they did look kind of human, or human genies, though the ones here looked like they were made of crystal.

So many spirits, Tash found herself trying to identify what sort of motivations, emotions, and elements of existence might make them. Greed, gluttony, sex, infatuation, addiction, sex, so many things, so many spirits coming here to indulge in ... in what? Essence, bleeding over from the physical world? That's what the Uratha said. And when the Gauntlet grew thin in areas, usually in areas highly populated by humans, essence bled over in abundance. Spirits hung around in droves, and sometimes managed to slip into the other side, hide in Twilight, or possess people, anything to keep eating the essence, and spread their influence.

Dolareido was the sort of city to really test the limits of the Gauntlet, then. Sin and indulgence and passion, and even history, big moments of history that sculpted the lives of millions of people, it had it all. No wonder Black Blood was here.

“Any r-rules the Casino will use to stop Red Tide?” Tash asked as she jogged after the werewolves.

“Not for forever,” Flow said, following in behind her. “The Casino serves the blood money. Red Tide is part of that blood flow in Dolareido. It has power here.”

“Then why isn't it—” She squeaked when another earthquake ripped through the place. Red Tide broke through the front wall of the casino, the whole wall, concrete and metal and gold and spiraling doors and everything. A flood of red water poured into the building, and buried the machines and tables in waves.

“It's supposed to ... deal with red tape, first,” Flow said. “It shouldn't be able to break into this casino without permission.”



“Black Blood?”

“Yes. Black Blood controls much of the city. It’s probably given Red Tide leeway it shouldn’t have.”

The spirits in the casino went nuts. Whatever they were saying, it turned into shrieks and yells, and they scattered like cockroaches. A few of them literally looked like cockroaches. All of them dashed into whatever hole they could find, back doors, under counters, up to the gold, rounded ceiling to find crevices along the walls, anywhere they could go to get out of the path of the werewolves, Tash, and Flow. But when Red Tide forced its way into the casino, the spirits redoubled their panic, and ran in random directions, colliding with each other and gambling machines alike.

Most of them disappeared under the flood of blood. Where the blood of the fountain ended, and Red Tide began, Tash couldn’t tell, but it quickly didn’t matter as the giant spirit overtook the entire first floor of the casino with all the subtlety of a Hollywood apocalypse.

Tash and the others jumped, and grabbed onto the railings of the floor overhead. There was a second floor, and third and fourth, the upper floors circling the main floor so the center was open for the big fountain and the hanging pretty lights. It was all very expensive looking, very Dolareido. And it was a godsend as it allowed Tash and the others to scale the outside railing of each floor until they’d thrown themselves up to the fourth floor. Even Flow managed to climb, turning into a spiraling mini tornado of water that jumped from floor to floor.

The group stared down at the red insanity below, until Red Tide revealed some of its squid-like body through the red liquid, the giant tendrils, and a massive mouth so scary it’d make a lamprey envious.

“W-What now?” Tash asked.

Arturo looked up and around as he sniffed the air. “No exit up here.”

“Not a real casino,” Eric said. “No fire escape.” Tash didn’t bother adding how it was a perfect metaphor for gambling addiction.

Brianna let out a rumble from her furry throat as she glared over the railing, down at Red Tide. “The tear is in other casino.” She made a vague gesture to one of the walls. A solid wall of gold that looked very, very thick. “That way.”

Well, shit.

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~~The Ripper~~

He expected Noah to turn and try to help Clara. And it was obvious the guy wanted to do exactly that. But Noah was a smart man, the critical thinker type, really fucking annoying. He pointed the flamethrower straight at the Ripper, and let loose. Well, so much for taking advantage of their desire to not kill Jack. The others, sure, they might, but this asshole? Not so much.

The Ripper ducked into the mist and dashed to the side. Vitae pumped through his limbs, and with the power of the curse, he easily created more. Mountains of it, until he felt ready to burst. Sure, he was no pussy Mekhet or dumbass pretty Daeva, they were always speedy, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t pump fuel into Celerity until he was damn fast. Dodging the flames was easy enough.

He was stronger now. So much stronger.

Sándor, bless his stupid dumbass heart, was with Clara a second later, and already throwing David away. Blood went with the huge werewolf as he flew through the air, but it wasn’t his. It all came from his claws and his mouth. Maybe Clara was dead already? He

honestly would have preferred to kill her himself directly, and indulge in torturing her, and Jack, but alas, beggars couldn't be choosers.

For now, the asshole with the fire.

The Ripper dashed in, but he knew what would happen. No matter how fast he was, all Noah had to do was turn. And sure enough once the Ripper closed the distance to almost nothing, Noah got the nozzle pointed at him once again, and fired.

The Ripper engulfed his body in Kindred blood, the power of the Juggernaut's Gait overflowing and empowering him. As liquid flame smashed against the blood shield, it instantly burned the shield away, and the Ripper screamed as the fire reached skin. But it lasted only a moment before the Ripper pushed through it and crashed into Noah.

They both came tumbling down, but the Ripper jumped back up, grabbed the damn gun by the front nozzle, put a foot against the man's chest, and yanked it off him, hard. Noah let out a groan as something dislodged in his shoulder, and the straps holding the tank to his back tore free. The Ripper threw the stupid contraption aside before he leaned down, and punched the fucker straight in the throat. He didn't have time to put a lot of strength into it, not with Sándor standing up just twenty feet away, but it was enough that the asshole's throat made a very satisfying crunch, and half collapsed to Jack's fist.

Noah fell back, gasping and clutching his fucked up neck, and disappeared under the mist. Lots of choking noises followed, along with some gargling. Beautiful.

"Finally." Sighing, the Ripper looked at his body.

The suit was partly ruined, with bits of cinders dying away as they tried and failed to burn the clothes. Flame retardant. His blood

pulsed around him, but it struggled with the parts of him that were burned. And there were a lot of parts. Animal snarls bubbled in his throat as he looked at his forearms, and how much of the muscle had burned away. He could see his tendons when he flexed his fingers.

He concentrated, and pulled up more of his vitae. The curse turned the smallest drop of human blood into a reservoir of energy, and he used it to tell his flesh to recover. It didn't, at least, not as quickly as it normally could. As much as he knew he was borderline invincible with the power of the Strix at his command, borderline was a nasty contract with deadly caveats. Fire, sunlight, werewolf claws, and apparently ghost knives, would be a problem.

Whatever. If he had to walk around as nothing more than a skeleton with tendons and pulsing, snake-like tendrils of Kindred blood, than he would. For now, he was mostly intact.

Sándor popped up out of the mist, body drenched in blood, Clara's blood, and a hint of a frown on his lips.

“Ah, Sándor. She alive?”

He said nothing.

“Christ, you're worse than the sheriff. No banter at all.”

Still nothing.

“Guess I'll talk for the both of us, then.” The Ripper licked his lips as he walked closer, and tore off the remains of his burnt suit jacket. “Imagine my surprise when that fucking ghost went for the necklace, all at Black Blood's order. He knew once it was off, it'd only be a matter of time before I came out, and fucked you all up. Maybe I'll thank him, after I stop Jacob.”

“You want to stop Jacob?”

“Uh, yeah?” And an inkling of an idea of how to do that, was startling to formulate. “I mean, it’s not hard to understand why Jacob’s doing this. Love of his life spends decades researching how to remove the barrier between worlds, then dies. The old fuck naturally becomes obsessed with her research, and in his manic depression, sees an option. Take her idea to the next level, and fucking change everything. No more death, no more life. Turn everything into a big soup of existence.” The Ripper shook his head and shrugged. “Can’t say I blame him for coming to that conclusion. But, fuck that, I happen to like life and death, pleasure and pain, up and down, left and right.”

“I doubt Black Blood would go along with Jacob’s plan without his own motivations.”

“True. I’m sure the fucker’s up to something. Whatever. I’ve faced him once, I’ll do it again.”

Sándor actually looked surprised at that. Barely. Just another idiot that didn’t understand who the Ripper was, and what he could do.

“Now,” the Ripper said, “time for a rematch.”

“We’ve never fought.”

“Technically correct. The best kind of correct.” The Ripper came closer, flexing his fingers into fists, and wearing his favorite evil grin.

And the best, most awesome thing ever happened. Sándor took a step back. Either the man was trying to trick him, or Sándor really was weaker when not in his lair. Which meant the Ripper had free rein to beat the ever living shit out of this fucker, and—

A blur came at him, from the side, but the Ripper was waiting for him. He turned just in time, brushed the sword aside with the back

of his left hand, and drove his right fist into Damien's face as the stupid Mekhet's momentum carried him forward. He couldn't have landed the punch better if Damien had stood still and asked him to hit him, and the dude's face collapsed inward like a watermelon to a sledgehammer. His fellow vampire, clotheslined by the punch, flipped once before smashing his knees and skull into the stone, and skidded for a while before rolling like a broken dog toy. Still alive though, damn.

The chink chink ding of the sword disappearing in the fog, matched the following silence fucking perfectly.

"Fool me once, and all that shit." The Ripper licked a fang as he took another step toward Sándor. The werewolves that'd fought the azlu were coming, but judging from the speed, they were exhausted, battered, and a few of them looked a little more than broken. And only five came. Either the Carter fucker was dead, or too hurt to move.

"Jack," Sándor said, "you must—"

"Oh this oughta be good. You wanna give a speech? Try and call the kid out? I've locked him up six feet under cement, in a coffin wrapped in chains. Insert metaphor about the chains here. Like, maybe, chains about guilt or misery or something, whatever."

The Begotten frowned slightly yet again as he took another step back. No response, though. Damn. He really was no fun.

"I don't know why Beatrice likes you."

Finally, something he said earned a proper reaction from the gargoyle. He blinked.

"She—"

“She likes you, dude. I guess it’s the whole stoic, mysterious, dangerous guy shtick. I guess maybe it’s because you’re one of the few dudes around who’s genuinely nice, like that idiot Julias was. Of course, like Julias, you’ve got a dark side, right? I bet that hits a deep itch inside her she wants to get scratched. Wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if she — and her slut girlfriend — fantasized about getting railed by a giant, twelve-foot gargoyle. And then, because Beatrice really is nothing more than a stupid young girl who wants to be a princess, she’d shift into Belle mode and try and care for you, tend to your wounds, pet your head, teach you how to fucking waltz.” He gagged. “Which is probably exactly what a pathetic worm like you needs in his life. Ah well, too late. Now you die, and I’ll make sure to show her your head before I rip her in half, and have some fun with her useless girlfriend. Maybe—”

Sándor spread his wings. Apparently if you managed to get the dude angry, he grew wings, big shadowy wings, four of them. They didn’t have the texture the Ripper had seen when he’d fought the Horror, way back when. Whatever Begotten did to summon the power of their Horror when in non-dream places, it made them come through as shadowy silhouettes, temporary. And yet, the wings stuck around. The four wings flapped in slow, heavy motions, creating winds casually, like they were accidental. The mist spread out, revealing a lot of the floor between Sándor and the Ripper, and the Begotten stepped into the open space.

“You are chaos incarnate.”

“Nah, just a guy who knows what he likes.”

“You are no man.”

The Ripper rolled his eyes. Ugh, semantics.

“Alright, let’s go, tough guy.”

“Last chance, creature. If I have to kill you to save everyone, then I will.”

It was like trying to banter with a cliché paladin from some shit fantasy story, pointless and futile. So, the Ripper did the only reasonable thing possible. He punched each of his palms, and ran at Sándor.

For now, a fight. And then, control.

Sándor pulled back one of his own arms, and threw a punch at the Ripper, from about five feet too far. It was the warning sign the Ripper needed to know a shadowy arm was about to form out of nothing and come straight for him, and he dodged to the side at the last second. The asshole shouldn't have been allowed to be so fast with such a huge extra body, but he was.

“Dude,” the Ripper said, getting up and dusting off his already ruined white shirt before gesturing to the huge shadowy creature overlaying Sándor. “Is this a JoJo reference?” No response, not even a grin. “Christ you suck at this.”

“This isn't a joke.”

“It's all a joke! Every fucking minute of all this is a joke!” Laughing until his guts hurt, he closed the distance with the bastard, and readied for a fight.

But of course, that was when the other werewolves finally arrived, healed enough they could run. Still only five of them, Monica, Avery, Erica, Mason, and Caleb. No Carter. What a shame.

Avery jumped for him first, but the Ripper sidestepped easily. He was faster than last time they'd fought. And stronger.

“Too slow!” As she turned to face him, he slipped in close and uppercut. “Shoryuken!” Fist, against werewolf flesh, nice and solid,



and infinitely more satisfying to hit than the weird ghost shit. Avery flew back with the impact, and landed thirty feet away with a nice, satisfying thud. Damn werewolf bodies were fucking tough. He'd been hoping to put a hole in her guts.

The other werewolves came in without hesitation, full on sprints meant to tackle something much larger and heavier, and slower than the Ripper. They were desperate, and exhausted. Perfect.

One of the werewolves went to the side before turning hard and diving at him, while another werewolf jumped for him straight on. Hard to dodge two angles at once, so he jumped into the werewolf that went for the side pounce instead. But he wasn't so stupid to try and tackle them head on, so he slipped under them, and let them land on him instead. One solid punch to the chest sent the dumbass dog flying, complete with the crunching bones of a ruined sternum.

The other werewolf came in low and tried to bite him. The Ripper kicked them in the face hard enough they yelped and backed off, giving him the time to get back up, only for another werewolf to grab him from behind, huge hands wrapping his biceps. And of course, another werewolf came for his exposed chest.

He leaned forward, brought his feet up behind him, and drove them both into the guts of the werewolf holding him. The stupid mutt let go as they fell back, yelping from having their guts caved in. To top it all off, the Ripper managed to land on his feet, like a mother fucking acrobat. All those backflips and squats he'd been doing in Jack's mind over the months, paying off.

"You fuckers don't understand," the Ripper said, licking his teeth as he marched toward the werewolf that had planned to get him while he was held. "I don't have my army. That's a shame. But that means I get to put every single drop of vitae I have into—" He snapped forward, fast, spread his legs wide while facing to the side, and smashed his fist into the unprepared werewolf. A big, wide

stance for a stable punch, rooted to the ground. The punch couldn't reach very high, and the stupid wolf was too damn tall, so he punched the fucker in the knee. It went crack, and the werewolf fell over with a roar. "Into my body. Admittedly, it's not as epic as I'd have liked. There's something magical about a swarm of rats eating someone alive, you know? But hey, if I have to rip every one of you in half with my bare hands, that'll do."

The remaining werewolves stepped back, and looked between each other as they spread out. They knew they couldn't take him in a direct fight.

"Jack," one of them said, gray fur, and older looking than her pack. Much as she tried to hide it, she was hurting, and not just from what the Ripper had done to her.

"Don't insult me, Avery."

She snarled and bared her teeth. "Ripper. Stop. No time."

"I'll deal with Jacob and his pet buddy soon enough. But you and your pack? I'm going to kill every last one of you."

"Stupid. Jacob will ruin everything. You need our help."

"I don't need anyone's help." Well, except maybe Sándor's. He laughed and shrugged. "Y'all are so convinced he can really pull this off, but no one else ever has."

"Father Wolf—"

"Oh fucking god, you actually think I give two shits about your fucking religion. That's cute. Listen, the only fucking religion that matters, is—" He dashed forward hard, fast enough Avery could only half respond and try and dodge. But he'd planned to do something he'd never done before anyway, something she wouldn't predict. He side kicked, full Mortal Kombat side kick straight into her big

fucking ass. Okay, not actually the ass, but his kick hit her in the side below the hip, and she yelped as she fell down from the impact, rolling a good thirty feet.

He bounced off her from the kick, and landed with a stomp, before he turned around and faced the rest of the werewolves still standing. And as he did, Sándor marched toward him, hands bloody, eyes glaring, shadowy wings still out. He looked angry.

“You never did tell me if she was alive,” The Ripper said. “Clara, I mean.”

Sándor still said nothing. Typical.

“Cause, I mean, it’d be a shame if David killed her. Imagine how guilty he’d feel, killing someone he loved.” Oh this was too good. “Being responsible for the death of someone he cares about? Yeesh, that must suck.”

Sándor said nothing, but one of his eyebrows did twitch. Progress. A nice precursor to the goal.

Before the Begotten could reach him, one of the werewolves stood up from the mist, mouth covered in blood.

“Ah, David. Would you kindly kill your friends?” The key phrase had already been said, but saying it again felt poetic and fitting.

David dashed for the nearest werewolves, the ones still standing, and they turned to face him. They were considerably more prepared for it this time, almost like they’d learned from their last encounter with the Ripper and his jedi mind trick ways. But even prepared, werewolves were huge beasts, and David had gone full psycho rage mode. What was it Eric called it? Kuruth? The Uratha roared, drooling everywhere as he barked and charged, and three of the other werewolves tackled him as best they could. One wrong move

and David would bite their throats out, same as he did Clara. One wrong move and they'd accidentally kill him.

That was how you played a good game of chess. You made sure no matter which move the enemy made, they lost something.

Sándor didn't look. Instead, he came at Jack, pulled back one of his hands, and punched at him from about a foot too far for it to hit him. As he did, the silhouette of the gargoyle encompassed him, the entire gargoyle, overlaying his own body, giving Jack a peek into what lay behind the curtain for a fucked up creature like a Begotten. Sharing his body with a monster, right down to the soul. Sounded annoying.

The Ripper ducked under the fist, which was no easy feat considering how big it'd become. He came up close in Sándor's face, and struck upward for the man's jaw, but Sándor stepped back. More than stepped back, he used some big fucking half invisible wings to hit Jack with a blast of air hard enough it nearly knocked him over. The mist around them pushed away, though it resisted as best it could, almost like a weightless sludge, and it quickly reformed around the Ripper.

"Hold still!" The Ripper came at him again, pumping more vitae into his limbs.

Apparently Sándor didn't like that. He flew up, wings again blasting the area with wind as he pushed himself up into the air, and then came down for Jack like a swooping bird. The Ripper hadn't expected a literal swoop. A diving punch or something, sure, but a swoop, no. Sándor came in low, and used some fucking aerodynamics to turn the fall into pure speed he shifted forward with his wings, so his shoulder collided with the Ripper's gut. It was like getting hit by a train.

The Ripper skidded and rolled, and hopped back up to his feet in seconds.

“You hit hard,” he said. “As hard as you hit me in the dream place.” He gestured to his chest, and where a tear in the clothes showed a visible dent in the flesh. It reformed quickly, and vines of blood leaked through some tears in the skin to slither around him.

Sándor frowned slightly as he flexed his fingers and tightened them into fists, before walking toward him. Each step, the Ripper could see the silhouette of the huge gargoyle, as if the mist made it more obvious that the dude wasn't human, and that he had the shadow of a nightmare monster following him everywhere. But unfortunately for Sándor, it was only a shadow, and that had to be a weakness. The dude's human body was flesh and blood, and if the Ripper could get a good hit in, the dude would pop like stepping on a cockroach. Of course, he didn't want to kill him, not yet. He needed him, for now. Killing would come much later.

The Ripper came in again, but Sándor took a step back instead, and spun around. It looked pretty fucking weird, until the shadow of the huge tail came through the mist like Jaws under the water, pushing a wave of the mist as it moved until it crashed into the Ripper's side. He grabbed onto the tail, but the silhouette fell apart, just like the mist, so he had no choice but to roll over the stone ground again. Well, that was fucking annoying.

“You're a Ventrue,” Sándor said, slowly walking toward him. “A general. A dictator. What are you without an army?”

“I—”

“You cannot Dominate me, and you know it.” Now the bastard was talking, except he was still just as boring and dry as ever.

He grinned. Dominating him was the plan. Dominate him, and turn him into a fucking taxi. Finding the right opportunity was the issue.

All those months, sitting in Jack's mind, they weren't wasted. Time spent growing, spreading, infecting, expanding through the kid's body and brain, and through the Beast. Strength, power, all that jazz, he had more of it, more than they could wrap their tiny, useless brains around.

Damien was down with a broken face, he wouldn't be getting up anytime soon, and the werewolves were distracted with David. Maybe now was the time to gamble, to see if he could get a new tool?

"Yeah, well, we'll see about that." He got up, and looked the gargoyle in the eyes. Sándor stared back, maybe forty feet away. That was all that was needed for the connection: Sándor, being able to see the Ventrue's eyes; and the Ventrue, pouring vitae and will into the act of Domination.

The connection was formed. Time came to a near standstill. The Beast formed inside Sándor's mind, and looked at the fortress he now sieged.

It was the same as that one time Jack took a peek at the dude's mind, when they captured him when he was still a slave to Elen's magic. An enormous, gothic gate, surrounded by endless darkness in all directions, with a gothic — naturally — castle behind it. Between the gate and the castle, a set of red eyes, glowing and hungry, stared out from the black.

The Ripper could only maintain a vague awareness of what was happening outside the connection, back in the cave of the Great Below. Noises, growls, werewolves still fighting to get David under control, and David practically foaming at the mouth with rabies. Somewhere out there, Sabrina and the other ghosts were recovering and looking for an opportunity to strike, and while Black Blood probably gave them instructions only to slow them down, or maybe get the werewolves killed, Sabrina wanted Jack dead. He had to

work fast before she tried to stab him again. Thankfully, a few minutes here in the mind was only a single second in the real world.

“You can’t get in,” Jack said.

Mother fuck. The stupid kid climbed out of the black ground, and dusted off the metaphorical rocks and metaphorical chains the Ripper had locked him up with. Either the Ripper didn’t do the best job burying him, or the kid was stronger. Obviously it was the former. Hard to do things thoroughly when fighting a half dozen people.

The Ripper, the Beast, combined, one entity of pure power and desire, looked down at the small man beside him. They were in the boy’s head, here, where the curse’s power let them see the inner workings. Which meant the kid was going to get to see him break Sándor’s mind. If he had time, the Ripper would bury him properly, but he didn’t, and they both knew it.

The Ripper rumbled displeasure, and flowed over to the gate, body of smoke and claws and fangs hovering over the obsidian not-ground.

“I said you can’t get in.”

“Watch me,” the Ripper said, voice a booming echo of bass and rasp that permeated the fucking universe.

All those months waiting, were not wasted.

The Ripper summoned his strength, the curse’s strength, the Beast’s strength, and poured it into his will. Here in the mind, will was all that mattered, and he had mountains of it. Fucking. Mountains.

The first crash against the gate was euphoric. Loud. Powerful. Heavy enough the entirety of Sándor’s mind vibrated with the

intensity of it. This wasn't like last time, with Garry's mind. This would be different. Either the Ripper would break Sándor's mind and turn him into a slave, or he would kill the Begotten in the process.

Again, he smashed the gates. Again, it resisted. Again, the huge creature behind the gate rumbled, its glowing red eyes waiting. The Ripper could feel its power, this Horror creature, and how it existed differently here than the one he'd fought in the dream. Similar, but different, as if the one in the dream had been the physical body of the weird nightmare entity, while this thing here, in Sándor's mind, was closer to the true entity. Similar then, to the Beast the curse infected, and to Jack himself, who stood beside the curse, and winced with each impact.

"You're a fucking plague," Jack said, "ruining everything you touch."

"You're a weak, useless ant. You can't take any of the things you want."

"I have all the things I want."

The Ripper glared down at Jack with a few dozen of his eyes. "Bullshit. I see your desires."

"Correction, then. I have all the things I want that I know would actually bring me happiness. The other wants are just impulses, things to feel and then let go. You probably think I genuinely want to fuck anything with tits, or to actually rule the world."

"You do." Of course he did. He was Ventrue. And regardless, the Ripper saw into Jack's mind, saw his deepest, truest desires.

"Buullllshit." And of course, while the curse could hear Jack's thoughts, Jack could hear his thoughts, here in the mind. "You really can't separate compulsions from genuine, conscious desires,



can you? Fuck me, you really are, like, some twisted sort of incarnation of Freud's Id."

"I ain't the one fucking your mother."

Jack threw up his hands, groaned, and paced around, shutting up. Good. Useless kid.

The Ripper dug deep, until the ancient hate and rage of the Strix were all that remained. Until all he felt was fury, hunger, and the perfect balance of the two that led into something humans could not understand. Gangrels understood it, because more than the other blood clans, they rode close to the Beast, and risked having it overtake them regularly. They felt it, and grew addicted to it, to the feeling that embodied everything the curse knew he was. That delicious combination of animosity and craving, a need to rip and tear so existential it was almost sexual.

The Uratha understood it, even if they refused to admit it. He knew if he asked them if they felt alive, full of energy and zest, and lust, after finishing a satisfying hunt, they'd all say yes. Gangrels, too. It was only insufferable little fucks like Jack, the ones that denied the nature of the vampire, that looked at him with disgust.

"You're full of it," Jack said.

"Coming from you. That. Is. Rich!" The words were a great climax to the building of his power, and he smashed waves of black smoke, and a myriad of limbs into the gate. Feather and fur, claw and talon, fang and mandible, it all crashed into the great barrier, and smashed the gateway open.

The darkness beyond lit up, at least enough that it wasn't impenetrable to the eyes anymore, and the courtyard to the gigantic castle within awaited. It wasn't the castle from Sándor's lair, but it looked similar, more modern, less ancient stones and shit. A big, beautiful, gothic castle, but with no lights on; or fires or candles or

whatever. The courtyard had plants, but they were all dead. Trees, a garden, bushes, all of it nothing but broken branches, twigs, and brown dirt without a hint of grass anywhere.

The castle's front wall had huge windows, old, and so dirty he couldn't see through them. In the center awaited a massive double door, twice the height of the one in Jack's mansion, made of old metal that'd lost its shine at least a century ago. It was, as far as the Ripper could see, what a castle from the 1600s would have looked like, if left to rot and die.

One difference. This castle had gargoyle statues on the walls. Over the windows, over the doors, on the roof, there were gargoyle statues, and each one of them looked kinda like Sándor. A big gargoyle with a human-ish face, four giant wings, four arms, raptor feet, long tail, muscular, and big fucking horns.

Jack and the Ripper looked up at the building, then left and right down its lengths. Much as the gargoyles on the building were big, and looked like the gargoyle, none of them were the real gargoyle. The monster with the red eyes was gone. All show, no strength? Unlikely. But wherever the Horror was, it wasn't here anymore. And neither was Sándor himself.

"He's old," Jack said, voice quiet as he scanned the building and surroundings. "And ... not in the best mental health."

"Of course. He let his family die."

"He didn't let his family die, fucking asshole. I—christ, nothing I say can make you understand, can I? You don't have an ounce of empathy in you."

The Ripper grumbled, and pushed forward toward the castle. "Empathy? Empathy gets you killed. The fuck good is empathy if you're dead. Gobble up all the power you can, fuck empathy, and fuck life. Literally."

“You really are nothing more than the Beast given a voice, aren’t you?”

Grumble turned to roar as the Ripper turned, and slammed four enormous wolf-like hands down on the black floor around Jack. The little fucker didn’t so much as twitch.

“I am the voice of one of the greatest reasons life even fucking exists, you useless little fuck. Where the fuck would humankind be if not for greed, aggression, and lust?”

“Yeah, you got us out of the primordial muck, and let us beat competitors and evolution, I’ll give you that. Congratulations. But now? Antoinette’s got the right idea. Cooperation is how we get above—”

“Above what? Biology? The need to eat, fight, and fuck? Why would we want to?” The Ripper rolled a few dozen of his eyes, faced the castle door, and threw his will against it.

It opened without fighting him. Unusual. Open invite? Whatever, he moved inside, if only so he wouldn’t have to keep listening to Jack’s useless prattle.

The inside of the castle was not a castle, not really, not matching either what he’d expect a castle’s insides to look like, or even what the outside suggested. It was a giant room with hanging chandeliers above, each decorated with thousands of candles, but only a few candles on each chandelier were lit, providing a small amount of light. Dust was everywhere, covering the smooth white walls, and the smooth stone of the castle floor. A room that’d once been cared for, and was no longer.

It was a long room, rectangle, more than wide enough for the Ripper and the incarnation of his will and the Beast to enter, and long enough it’d take a few minutes of walking to reach the other side. At the end of the long room, was a stone throne, rather fancy

and carved with intricate gargoyle faces, and almost large enough for the gargoyle itself if he wanted to sit. Instead, the huge gargoyle perched on top of it, red eyes staring, and Sándor the man sat in the throne, looking far too small for seat.

Much as the Ripper wanted to charge at the man and the reflection of the Horror guarding his mind, he couldn't ignore the giant paintings on the walls. Half of them were bordered in gold, and the other half were bordered in black, all of the metal borders carved with the same gargoyle face indentations that were on the dude's throne. And there were dozens of paintings.

"Holy shit," Jack said, following in behind the Ripper and now staring at the paintings.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what the paintings were of, so detailed they almost looked like photographs. The one closest to the door was of a woman and a young boy, both wearing modern clothes, both smiling and cheering as they laughed about something over dinner. The painting was a picture, taken from Sándor's perspective, him sitting and eating something on a dinner plate.

A genuine, happy memory, from the sorry fool's life.

Next to it was another painting, the black-bordered one, again taken from the perspective of Sándor. The same home as the one before, with a couple corpses on the floor in pools of blood, and Angela and Jeremiah in the background.

On the other side of the room in another gold-bordered painting, was a woman, dressed in some rags, and judging from the room they were in, it was a memory from a couple hundreds years ago. A wood cottage somewhere, maybe? Whoever she was, she was smiling up at Sándor, the sort of smile someone used when they were in love.

And next to it was another painting, again of the woman, this time dead in the woods and ripped to shreds by wolves.

Jack and the Ripper walked toward Sándor, but stopped when they eventually came across four more paintings, two on the left, two on the right. On the left, another woman, this time with three kids, having fun in the grass, probably three hundred years ago. Beside that painting, one that showed a couple dozen men and women coming up over the grassy hill, armed with pitchforks, one pointing a butcher's knife at Sándor while another ran his pitchfork through the wife, while the kids were cut down by swords. Looked like a village figured out Sándor wasn't human, and decided to wipe him and his family out. Fucking humans.

On the other side of the great hall, something far more tame. Again, a pretty lady, very young, dressed in clothes so old it was likely that Sándor was older than he thought he was. Beside that, an old woman, sitting in front of a fire in a stone house. A picture so pristine and wholesome it was revolting. She wasn't moving. None of them were moving, since they were paintings, but the picture somehow conveyed the message perfectly.

"Sándor stayed with her until she died of old age," Jack said. "Jesus."

"Pathetic."

"Why? Because he actually formed a connection with someone so strong, he stayed with them for decades?"

"Because he—"

"You know some animals in the wild mate for life? Or at least try to. You telling me they—"

"Are one spike of bad weather away from going extinct for being that fucking stupid." The idiot kid would never understand. Jacob

was right. Evolution was right. Survival of the fittest. Adapt.

“Jacob is done with that idea, last I checked,” Jack said.

“Then I’ll rip his damn head off and put everything back to status quo.”

“Yeah, good luck with that. You really think you can beat Jacob, and Black Blood, just you?”

The Ripper laughed. “It’s a good thing Sándor will be joining me as my driver, and bodyguard.”

Jack winced, and the two of them continued on, small man walking next to the enormous, tainted Beast, as they approached the man on the throne. Much as the Ripper wanted to ignore the paintings, Jack looked at them, and in this place their thoughts were apparent to each other. More memories of Sándor’s greatest moments of happiness, more times he’d found love, and more times it ended horribly.

One painting in particular was particularly graphic. It was a point-of-view painting again, except this time from a good ten feet in the air, looking down. A woman’s corpse was on the floor, and a gargoyle’s four hands were covered in blood. Oof, dude killed his own woman at some point. Or rather, his Horror had.

“Solution seems simple to me,” the Ripper said, gesturing around with a few hands at the paintings. “Every tragedy here happened because he keeps falling in love. Harden up, fucker.”

“You’re fucking heartless. But ... he does seem to get the short end of the stick. A lot.”

The Ripper laughed again, loud enough it echoed through the walls of Sándor’s mind. If the gargoyle had just accepted his fate,

and instead indulged in his hungers and strength, there'd be no paintings.

“The paintings...” Sándor’s voice. “Are they worth it?” They looked to him and his throne, and from so close, it was obvious the throne was a dusty, dirty thing, with more than a few cobwebs on it.

“They’re not,” the Ripper said. “Not that it matters. I’m here to break you, and make you my tool, just like Elen did. I’m not your fucking therapist.”

“They are worth it,” Jack said. “The fuck is the point in life if it was just some static, endless spree of carnal indulgence?”

“Sounds pretty fucking pointed to me,” the Ripper said. “Kill, fight, fuck, rape, eat, all at the same time. And don’t tell me I’m the only one who feels that way.” One of his smoky arms gestured to the painting where Sándor’s Horror had obviously ripped his woman into literal bits. “Susanna had it right. The Strix have it right. Give into the desire to dominate and destroy, and swim in the spoils. Kill anyone that gets in your way.”

Sándor sighed, a heavy sigh that stirred the air in the place, like a sad wind. Ugh, there were too many similarities between this shit, and that pussy Julias’s fucked up personality. No wonder the sharkmouth bitch liked the two of them.

Jack stared up at the Ripper, before gesturing back to Sándor. “The Ripper is wrong, and Jacob is wrong. And you know it. Otherwise why are you here in Dolareido, trying to make up for the shit Jeremiah did, and trying to make everyone’s lives better. Why are you protecting us?”

Slowly, Sándor looked down. “Sometimes I wonder.”

Jack walked up to the throne, and looked up at the man. “I’m the last person that can talk about this. I’m young as fuck compared to

you. But holy fucking shit, there's one thing, one thing I fucking know, and that's that ... that ... Fuck I don't know how to say it without sound so cliché it hurts. But you know, right? You know the only thing that makes things good, is when things can get bad, too. The only thing that makes up, up, is down.

“The Ripper is just a shortsighted compulsion, a fucking child, like an idiot college student who finally gets to eat all the ice cream they want, until they're begging their mom to cook them a real meal because they're sick of it, and they've gained thirty pounds. And Jacob, the guy is fucked up, depressed and broken, and thinks this”—Jack gestured to the paintings—“is a bad system, that it sucks so bad that he's going to tear it all down, for everyone. He's selfish, and even I'm smart enough to understand you can't just melt everything into a big soup of existence, and call it better than life! Even if it's fucked up, even if it's short for some people, and unfair as all hell, it's still a fucking amazing thing, and it's...” He choked for a second. “It's worth fighting for.”

The Ripper growled down at the stupid, tiny vampire beside him. “Did you just quote Lord of the Rings?”

“Just one part of one fucking sentence. Fuck off.”

Sándor lifted his head enough to look at Jack, and managed the smallest smile, before standing up.

“You're right, of course. I knew. It's a hard lesson a love of mine taught me a long, long time ago.”

Well, fuck. Much as the Ripper wanted to speed this along, it was all a metaphor for breaking into and eventually Dominating the man's mind. It was taking time, because Sándor's mind was taking time to break into. Only a few seconds had passed back in the real world, and that was a few more seconds than the Ripper wanted.



Sándor got off the throne, and the Horror followed. It landed, hard, heavy, and growled up at the Ripper as it glared red eyes at him.

A battle of wills, then. Sándor stood beside Jack, and the two of them looked on, as the Ripper and the Beast faced off against the Horror. It wouldn't be a literal fight, with dodging or uppercuts. Everything in here was just a metaphor for the curse, crashing against Sándor and his Horror.

A hundred limbs came out of the Ripper's body, shadowy things armed with claws, feathers, fur, gigantic muscles, talons, and everything in between. The titanic gargoyle, only half as tall as the Ripper and the Beast he controlled, held out his four hands, and the two of them engaged, grips locked.

Dominating the Uratha had been easy. The wolf spirits within were nothing compared to the curse and the tainted Beast. And now, the Ripper was confident he could defeat Garry's Beast in a battle. And he was confident he could beat the gargoyle Horror as well.

But it wouldn't be easy.

The castle shook violently as the two behemoths began, squeezing on each other's grip. They pushed into each other and roared at each other, until the floor tore apart under their claws. The paintings fell off the walls. The chandeliers trembled, and candles fell around them, like raindrops of fire.

The Ripper pushed forward, and the gargoyle roared with frustration as it failed to match his might. It dug its talons into the floor, and pushed against him harder, but the Ripper didn't budge. He would not lose this battle. He would win, break this worthless fool's Horror, and then break the small man hiding behind it. He would use him as a tool, and together they'd kill Jacob, stop Black Blood, kill the bitch Prince and her dog sheriff, and turn Dolareido into their fucking playground.

Sándor, a gnat compared to the curse, stepped up to the Ripper, and beside his Horror. And just like his Horror, he held out two of his hands, and triggered the confrontation. The Ripper was forced to meet his two hands with two of his own, and somehow, he slid a foot back.

The Ripper snarled down at the human. The fuck was this? A stupid fucking little worm, a fucking useless human, working with the Horror he despised?

“Fucking ... hypocrite,” the Ripper said, booming voice wavering.

“No.” Sándor glared up at him, small hints of anger showing through his stoic face, and he took a step forward. “A warrior might hate his sword, but he’d be a fool to never use it.” Oh good fucking god, he really was just as stupidly poetic and brain damaged as Julias. “I’m not going to let you kill anyone, parasite.”

This was fucking insufferable. With the Uratha, he’d expected it. With Garry, he’d expected it, the active cooperation between human mind and paranormal creature. But Sándor and his Horror? He’d fully expected the worthless, broken man to watch while the Ripper and the gargoyle duked it out.

The Ripper snarled down at the stupid little man loud enough the paintings that’d fallen vibrated and slid across the floor.

“You don’t get a say in the matter. I’m going to—”

Jack, the fucking little twerp, stood beside Sándor, and reached out his hands. A battle of wills, again, enforced and triggered, and the Ripper locked two of his many hands with the damn brat. It was like some shit scene in a shit movie, where the power of fucking friendship would overcome their troubles.

“Jack!”

Jack grinned up at him. “Did you really think I’d just sit by and let you do this?”

“I will lock you away in a cell of pain beyond your reckoning, you fucking insect! I will make an iron maiden seem like a vacation. I will find the darkest, most fucked up corner in your mind, and make you relive it over and over until you wish for a death that will never come! I will show you Ann’s face as I rip her head off, and force you to see it for the next hundred years!”

“Go fuck yourself.”

The Ripper let out a thousand roars, and a thousand tendrils of shadow snapped outward against the walls of the room of memories. Their claws ripped and tore against the white surfaces, and shredded through them and the memories alike as the curse sank his grip into Sándor’s mind. If he had to damage the bastard’s mind to take him over, then so be it.

“This isn’t in the world of real, Jack,” the Ripper said, and both Jack and Sándor winced as the Ripper’s voice boomed over them. “In here, I am king. In here, I am god. Every day I grow. Every night, my infection spreads and empowers the Beast within. I will not be expelled by a child, a broken man, and some manifestation of human fears; nothing more than a shadow.” A dozen more of his dark limbs shot out and sank themselves into the smooth stone floor, and another dozen. The building shuddered again, and cracks formed on the walls.

The look of surprise on Jack’s face made everything worth it.

“You and I are going to kill Jacob, Sándor. Then we’re going to kill the Prince and her dog. Then we’re going to—”

The building vanished in a shower of exploding white shards. The paintings, walls, the stone, the throne, the fucking ingrates that refused to simply bow down and serve him, it all shattered, as if

he'd been looking at a painting on a jar that'd been smashed with a hammer. Or a fist.

The Ripper stumbled back and clutched his jaw. Back in the real world, with mist and fog and stones and werewolves and fucking ghosts. Slowly, he turned, and looked at the mother fucker who'd punched him, the mother fucker about to get his guts ripped out.

Damien. The useless Mekhet stood there, or rather slouched there, struggling to stand. His neck was crooked, half broken, but that was nothing compared to his face. His jaw was shattered, nose too, and the cheek and eye socket of his right eye was smashed into his skull.

“How much vitae did you use to Cloak yourself so I couldn't sense you coming?” the Ripper asked, voice quiet and coming through clenched teeth.

Damien coughed, one hand at his side struggling to make a fist. A broken finger or two. The hand he'd used to punch the Ripper, then. He didn't say anything though. Probably couldn't with one side of his jaw almost hanging off his face.

“All of it, then. All you had, just so you could get in one good hit on me. Ha.” The Ripper rubbed his jaw. A bit of a sting, but otherwise, Damien hadn't hurt him in the slightest. “Surprised you didn't look for your sword instead, but I guess you noticed what I was doing, and realized you didn't have time, right?”

Damien said nothing. Christ, another fucker who just refused to banter with him. Well, at least the Mekhet had an excuse, jaw and all.

The Ripper snarled with the power of the curse, ensuring the dead Mekhet heard the strength of it as the rumbling bass pulsed out until the stones vibrated. A quick glance Sándor's way showed the man had stumbled back, and was clutching his head as he groaned

in pain. Good. The Ripper had been fully willing to leave the man a husk, empty and broken, as long as he was still capable of using that unique Begotten talent to get around between realms.

Unfortunately, Damien had ended the connection before the Ripper had been able to Dominate Sándor. He'd certainly hurt the fucker's mind though, deeply.

“Whatever, I'll just try again. But I think I'll wait until I've killed everyone else, this time.” Grinning and exposing a fang, he took a step toward Damien. Damien took a step back. The fear in his one open eye was subtle, and glorious. “I'm going to—”

Again, another interruption came his way, but he was ready for it. He twisted at the last moment, same as he'd done to Damien before, and drove his fist straight into the chest of the werewolf that leapt at him from the mist. One of those fucking Irraka assholes, sneaky as shit. And judging from the furry tits, it was probably Monica. She went down with a yelp.

Another wolf came at him, and another. Avery, and ... David! The Ripper glared at his slave, but David's eyes were filled with pesky free will. They came at him side by side, and made no effort to hide. They should have.

The Ripper stepped into them, expecting them to pounce, but they didn't, almost like they were learning it was better to stay on the ground. Smart doggies. Both skidded to a stop and stood up straight, and both swung down at him with their claws. David, the Ripper wasn't too concerned about, and he let the shaman wannabe rake him on the side while he faced off against Avery. Werewolf claws hurt, a lot, and punctured through the snaking vines of blood that coated the Ripper's body.

But not enough to stop him. Avery's claws, on the other hand, were glowing with more of that red flame, and no way was he going to make that mistake twice. He ducked in closer to the old werewolf,

close enough punching wasn't very viable. But a hard spin was enough to drive his elbow sideways into her ribs, and she fell over as several of her bones went snap crackle pop. It gave him time to face David, sidestep another down slash of claws, and when the mutt tried to bite him, the Ripper drove his fist up into the bottom of his jaw. There was a very satisfying crack, and yelp.

“Not sure how you broke free of my command,” the Ripper said as he walked after the stumbling werewolf. “Whatever. Guess you die.”

Before he could sink another punch into David, with full intent to put a hole straight through his chest, more claws on stone announced dogs running at his back. He waited for half a second before turning around, and driving a fist into the first wolf that came at him. Clara. God damn it, she'd healed from the shit David had done to her, though the Ripper could see she was still bleeding horribly from her throat and her sides. David might not have been Avery, but those claws were still unusually deadly.

Dumb bitch came at him first, with the two other wolves as her backup. With those injuries? Typical leader bullshit.

She yelped as his fist hit her shoulder, and shattered the bones inside. He wanted to follow up and curb stomp her face into mulch, but the other two wolves were on him in a second. The moment he faced them, they grappled him, both getting their hands around his arms as they both reached down and bit into his shoulders.

Unless his math was wrong, one of them had to be Mason, and the other had to be Noah, considering the way his throat had a weird bulge and dent in it. God damn it, he'd gotten up from having his jugular smashed in. And he recognized Mason from when he'd been fighting the Azlu. Smart fuckers, biting his throat and shoulders at the trapezoid, trying to disable him. Would have been smarter to pretend to be dead.

The werewolf claws and teeth punctured his blood barrier, and managed to reach skin, flesh, and bone, but still not deeply enough to stop him. He drove his fist up into Noah's face, haymaker into his cheek, and the wolf fell back as bone shattered and teeth fell away. Mason twisted and threw the Ripper into the floor, but he held onto the furry fucker's big arm, forcing Mason to pick him back up when he tried to stand up straight. He wrapped one arm around the fucker around the elbow, got his fingers around the giant wrist, and yanked. Mason shrieked as he clutched the half-arm stump, a sound the Ripper didn't think wolves made, but was ecstatic to hear. The dumb bastard fell into the mist, howling.

The Ripper stomped over toward Mason, but again only got a few feet before another wolf came at him. That Monica bitch again, popping up out of the shadow and mist. He hadn't punched her hard enough. But the moment he lifted a fist, another one of the sneaky fuckers came at him. Carter? No, the old wolf was nowhere to be seen. Had to be that fucker Caleb.

Another wolf with tits was coming his way, too. Erica, probably. But for the moment, Monica and Caleb were half a second away from getting their claws and teeth into him. The Ripper turned and faced them, and when they closed the distance, he let them. Only when their claws started to penetrate his shoulders and sides, did he lash out, and drive one of his fists into Monica's throat. And this time, he poured his rage and vitae into it, until his arm was coated from fist to shoulder in vines of swirling crimson.

The wolf's eyes went wide, staring at him, before she fell into the mist, her blood coating the length of his forearm, huge hole in her throat.

Caleb roared the moment he realized what happened, of course, and sank his teeth into Jack's throat, with full intent to kill him. And maybe he could have, with how hard he bit, and how angry the wolf was. But the Ripper shoved the wolf hard enough to rip his

throat out of the wolf's mouth, leaving behind chunks of his vampire flesh. That surprised Caleb. The Ripper double downed on that surprise, and returned the favor, raking his own fingers in a scooping motion along Caleb's throat. And unlike Caleb's teeth, he got a lot deeper than half a fucking inch.

Caleb stumbled back, clutching his throat, or where his throat used to be. Yeah, fuck the werewolf. Blood poured over his chest, gallons of it, soaking his fur and the floor. Some of it had splashed onto the Ripper too, and he dragged a finger along where it soaked his shoulder before giving it a taste. That, was some fucking tasty blood.

He turned and faced Erica as she roared something fierce, full psycho anger mode on her face. More of that Kuruth shit or whatever. But a mindlessly aggressive animal was an easily tricked animal, and he stood his ground as he waited for her to come at him.

Claws grabbed his shoulders from behind, and something warm and wet fell on his head. What the fuck? He turned around long enough to look up, and see the huge werewolf holding him, and the blood pouring out from where his neck used to be. Caleb, glaring down at him with the same psycho rage in Erica's eyes. He was dying, hell, he was dead, and he didn't care.

“Let go of me you fucking—”

Erica raked her right hand's claws down his body, from his face to his hip, and with all the weight and rage she put into it, the claws pushed through his blood and skin, and hit muscle and bone. Pain hit him, blinded him, scorching fire all he could feel or think. He tried to open his eyes, but only one of them listened. He tried to twist out of Caleb's grip, but for just a split second, all he could think or feel, was pain.



He summoned his vitae and poured the Beast's ancient rage through his limbs, until the agony became white noise. Finally, his body responded. He drove his elbow back into Caleb's gut hard enough he felt something pop, and the enormous wolf fell over. He didn't get back up this time. Erica, on the other hand, took another slash at the Ripper, and while he dodged at the last second, her claws managed to shred one of his shoulders.

He was supposed to be stronger than them, faster than them! What the fuck was going on? Jack, and Sándor, those mother fuckers. They'd ... weakened him.

He snarled at Erica as he looked down at his body with his one remaining eye. Bits of his insides were visible, dark Kindred bleeding coiling around underneath and around his bones to keep everything inside. His shirt was nothing more than a few strips of fabric, and he could see some ribs where Erica had caught him. Jesus fucking christ, getting hurt so bad by some young bitch because Caleb decided to get all heroic and shit? It was enough to make him puke. Part of his shoulder joint was visible too, a sliver of bone under the binding muscles and slithering snakes of blood.

He returned Erica's favor, and punched her back. She was close enough, and that psycho mode didn't exactly have her in the state of mind to retreat or dodge incoming punches. His fist collided with her chest, right below the neck and shoulder. Her collarbone shattered as she half spun with the punch, and the bitch stumbled away before falling into the mist, her left arm a dead, hanging, useless limb. If he'd punched her two inches closer to the middle, her weight would have let him punch straight into her organs.

Mother. Fucking. God. He stared down at himself again, at the myriad of wounds, before looking around at whoever was still standing. Just Damien, who looked like he could barely lift a finger, and Sándor, who looked like he was having a midlife crisis,

clutching and squeezing his head with his eyes shut as he groaned between his teeth. The werewolves were, finally, down.

They really had no business being as resilient as they were. It took vampires a century or more to get that tough. These fuckers were only a decade or three old in werewolf years, and they'd fought a giant spider monster, taken a few dozen wounds from its giant scythe hands, and now fought him? Fuck them.

The Ripper snarled down at where Caleb fell, but when he walked over to him, he found a human's body instead, throat still missing. Dead, thank god. He stumbled over to Monica, or who he'd assumed had been Monica. Yeap, it was, now a dead woman. Two down, seven to go? Except Carter wasn't making an appearance, and considering the azlu had skewered his chest with one of those giant spider feet, he was probably dead, too. That left six.

He spotted Avery, trying to get up, and failing. He spotted Noah, in the same boat. Mason and David were with each other, and they'd managed to stand up, but the only way they could was by leaning on each other. Erica's head poked up enough from the mist, but her psycho rage was broken, and every time she tried to get up, something gave out, causing her to fall over. And Clara was below the mist, hidden, but her wolf whimpers were obvious.

Six fish in a barrel.

"Don't move," the Ripper said, gesturing to Damien with a little twirl of a finger as he slowly walked his way over to where he'd left Clara. Sure enough, she was there, alive, and clutching her ruined shoulder. The wounds David gave her had ripped open, and were bleeding everywhere. Werewolf on werewolf violence was, apparently, very effective.

He grinned down at her, and ran a single finger down his face. Bits of his skull were visible through the gashes Erica had left, he could feel it, and the look on Clara's wolf face confirmed. Yeap, he

looked like a walking, talking corpse, something that should have died of its wounds but refused to. The snake vines of Kindred blood continued to flow around him, often coiling in through wounds and over visible bone, but those fucking werewolf claws were something special. His body felt like it was on fire, waves of agony that rippled through him. But he'd heal, eventually.

And he knew just who to kill to make himself feel better in the meantime.

Growling loud enough the vibration pulsed through him, he glared down at Clara with his remaining eye.

"I'll kill Erica later," he said, and he glanced her way before blowing her a kiss. "After I have some fun with her, of course. Payback, for the eye." Grinning at Erica until he saw the fear in her wolf eyes as he gestured to his wounds, he licked a fang, and looked back down at Clara. "I don't suppose you'll transform back into a human, so I can see the normal Clara's expression? I want to make sure Jack sees it, so I can bury him with the memory for the next thousand years."

Of course she didn't transform back, and the words only got more glares from her. But that was fine. Just part of the fun. And besides, her wolf eyes showed plenty of anger and fear, and would work just as well.

He kicked her in the leg hard enough something snapped, and the howl that followed was beautiful.

"Avery, gonna do something? I'm about to kill your second-in-command bitch." Never in his life did he figure he'd get as much double use out of the word bitch. "No?"

Avery tried to get up again, but something in her leg wasn't working right. Probably a wound the azlu gave her she'd been ignoring that the Ripper had reopened.

“Don’t,” Avery said, wolf voice wavering.

“Don’t? That’s it? That’s all you got?”

“Please...”

Oh good god. Laughing, he used his foot to roll Clara off her side onto her back.

“You know, I thought I’d have a speech lined up for you, Avery. Something to really seal in the deal that I’m going to kill you and your pack. Something snarky, fun, with some great imagery. But ... fuck it. I got shit to do, places to be.”

He stepped over Clara’s neck, feet on either side of her temples, and squatted down over her. She tried to swipe at him, but he backhanded the wrist of the one good arm she had left, and she yelped and whimpered as the arm fell away. Whimper turned into high pitched whine when he smashed his fist down against her face hard enough something cracked.

“Now this is the life,” he said, chuckling, and he punched her again, causing her stupid dog tongue to hang sideways out of her big snout. “Christ, you have no idea how much of a pain it’s been, having to wait months and months inside this pussy kid’s head, waiting for a chance to come out. Finally.” He punched her again, and a bunch of her teeth flew out, a splatter of blood following them onto the stone. Her eyes stared at him, tears running down her fur, and he laughed. “You nearly had him, you know? Jack. If it wasn’t for Antoinette, the two of you would have been fucking like bunnies, and even getting romantic and shit with each other. But hey, this is close, right? Instead of fucking you, he kills you.” The dread in her eyes was perfect, and he shivered with bliss as he drew back a fist.

It didn’t move.

He snarled and pushed the fist toward Clara. It didn't move. He tried harder, grinding his teeth until his vitae had to jump in to stop them from cracking. The fist didn't move.

*You're not killing her.*

The Ripper snarled, and as he stood back up and clutched his head, the snarl turned into a roar. He summoned the curse, the taint, the infected Beast, and poured the strength of them onto Jack. Bury him. Lock him away. Tie him up. Leave him dangling from a hook over a pit of spikes. Lock him up in a coffin and throw him into a pool of wet concrete.

But try as he might to lock the fucking kid away, he couldn't. The Ripper screamed and roared, and clutched his head as he stumbled back, single eye glaring death at Clara before snapping around. Avery was staring at him. Damien was staring at him.

“I. Will. Not. Go. Back!”

*This is my body! My life! And these are my friends! My family!*

“They're nothing! They're worm food! Tools to be used, or bags of meat to be fucked, drained, and butchered! You do not get to control me! You do not—”

*Ripper, this is not a negotiation.*

“The fuck are you ta—” The Ripper's hands lifted in front of him, and opened. He tried to close them, but they refused. He tried harder, until the blood coils slithered around his fingers to keep the bones from snapping.

Slowly, his body bent over. He poured every bit of rage he could summon, until the Beast howled and shrieked and tore his throat. But his body wouldn't listen. Muscles clenched until his joints

creaked, and something inside him forced him to reach down through the mist around his feet. They found something solid.

He picked up Damien's sword.

*Ever seen Fight Club?*

## Chapter 170

~~Eric~~

He walked over to the wall of gold, and tore at it with his claws. His claws left a scratch, but nothing more. He tried again, snarling, growling, and eventually roaring with each swing of his claws against the wall. The gate Matthew destroyed to get them into the casino, was apparently nothing compared to the strength of the walls they'd need to break through to get out.

“Quite the m-metaphor,” Natasha said. “You can get in, b-but you can't get out.”

He snapped her a harsh glare and a quick growl, which earned a growl in return from Arturo. They squared off against each other, baring their teeth and leaning in close enough to pose a threat. One wrong move and they'd rip the other's throat out.

“Stop,” Brianna said, and she snapped a bark at the both of them. “We—”

“You sent us in here,” Matthew said, throwing his own snarl at Brianna.

“There is tunnel! Connects to other casino!”

“Below us!”

Eric stamped his foot hard, and his talons dug at the crimson carpet as he glared at the others.

“Now we're trapped! What can—”

A gunshot forced the four werewolves to spin and face the source of the noise. Little Natasha, gun pointed up and away, glaring at them.

“Enough! W-We don’t have t-time for this! This casino connects to the neighbor casino, yes. But now Red T-Tide is guarding the exit, and the connecting path. We have to get back down there, and past Red Tide. How!?”

The four werewolves stared at her, each of them breathing heavy. They knew they were riding the coattails of Kuruth, and each moment they stayed in their war forms, the more likely they’d freak out, rage, and kill anything that was alive, including each other. Natasha knew it, too, from the look on her face, and she glared at each of them like a teacher royally pissed with her students.

Slowly, the four of them nodded, each of them taking deep breaths as they forced their hearts to calm. Breathe, Luna had told him. Breathe.

“Can we fight it?” she asked.

Arturo shook his head. “Maybe with whole pack. Maybe.”

That was a big maybe. As strong as Uratha were, and built from the ground up to deal with threats like spirits, they couldn’t fight spirits strong enough to control entire cities, not without exploiting its bans or using its banes. If they fought it without them, it’d take Avery’s whole pack, Flowing Sanctuary, and Eric, and a lot of luck to bring down something that big. Which made their situation really fucking problematic.

Eric looked down over the railing, and rumbled in his throat. One of the huge spirit’s red tentacles reached up, all the way up, and its tip brushed against the floor near Eric’s talons. He suppressed the urge to slash it open. No point, yet.



Tash came up beside him, careful of the tendril, and peeked down over the railing. “Can we d-distract it?”

“Easily,” Arturo said. “Red Tide is angry. Stupid. Always hungry for blood.”

“Like a vampire?” the little vampire asked. “Oh. You m-mean, it always wants to fight.”

“Yes.”

“So we b-bait it with a promise of a fight?”

“Perhaps,” Flow said. “Black Blood is forcing it to attack us, so there is uncertainty.”

As if someone tied an anchor to Natasha’s neck and threw it over the railing, her head slumped and her body tightened. Eric knew what she was going to say before she said it.

“We have to get out of here, and b-back to the physical world, to tell people what’s happening. If we can’t kill Red Tide, then someone will have to d-distract it.” She pulled her head up against the weight, and looked to Arturo.

Arturo nodded, leaned in, gave Natasha a lick on her cheek, and before she could say anything more, he jumped over the railing.

Everyone stared down over the edge of the balcony as Arturo landed on the floor below them, the third floor, and sliced at the huge red tendril still reaching up for the rest of them. Red Tide let out a bellowing roar, as if a whale had decided to bring down the walls of Jerusalem with only its voice. Everyone covered their ears except Flow, as the vibration ripped through the whole building and churned the blood lake until it boiled.

Arturo leaned over the railing long enough for Red Tide to realize who'd hurt it, before ducking away as a dozen enormous tendrils lashed out for him. The railing of gold and glass shattered, and the entire floor bent under the weight of the spirit as it pulled some of its kraken mass up out of the blood lake. The squid, octopus, monstrous entity, was deeper than the depth of the lake itself. Only maybe eight feet of blood waited below, but something far, far bigger came up and out of it, showing its giant, circular mouth, hundreds of its teeth, and two of its dark, squid-like eyes.

"I know you, Uratha," it said. "How. Dare. You. Come out and die."

However strong Red Tide was, it couldn't lift its own mass, not completely. But it wouldn't need to. With some of its tendrils pulling on the second floor and already pulling the entire balcony down, cracking and breaking the gold until it slanted down toward the bottom, once it got a good grip on the third floor balcony, the same thing would happen.

But it was distracted.

Tash reached out, and tapped each of her friends on the arm. The wolf in Eric told her she'd just used a Discipline, something invisible, something that warped and twisted air and light and perception, and told everyone and everything watching that there was nothing there to see. It was like a smell, something his human nose would never find. And hopefully since it wrapped him, Brianna, Tash, and Matthew, it'd hide them from Red Tide well enough they could slip past it.

"Go," she said.

Eric and Flow went first. There was no time to climb down the individual floors, so they did the only reasonable thing: they jumped to the bottom floor. Some of the larger machines poked up from the red waves, and with everything made of solid gold, they were strong enough to withstand his weight. Flow had a harder time, but it

managed to come down as a solid, thick stream of water, spinning like a compressed tornado. If Red Tide noticed, Arturo quickly rectified that. They didn't have a chance to look back and check, but the noises Red Tide made were deafening.

Brianna and Matthew came next, both landing on the fountain bowl held up by the now drowned gold men. Only the bowl remained visible.

Eric breathed deep the smell of blood. The Hisil realm was all ephemera, nothing was made of flesh or metal, but the spirits and the realm itself did their best to emulate reality. They failed in a lot of ways, but Red Tide captured the smell of blood almost perfectly, and Eric had to force down the rising urge in his guts that told him to rip and tear. It only grew worse as he watched the colossal monster smash tendrils against the floor Arturo jumped around on.

Arturo would be fine. He was fast, and all Irraka were sneaky. Once the coast was clear, he'd run, and live to hunt another day. The rest of them, on the other hand, were dead if Red Tide turned around.

Tash jumped down last, and Flow softened her impact with an arm of water. The little vampire landed, wetter now, but otherwise without a sound, and the five of them scanned the area for a path. The flood of blood wasn't uniform. Certain areas were higher, especially all the areas around Red Tide itself, like when Flow managed its body when moving over floors and ground. There were patches of floor visible with no blood, but too far to reach. And whatever tunnel door existed between the two casinos, it was probably nearby, and buried in red. The casino exit they'd come in from was their only option.

Eric pointed to another gambling machine, some exaggerated, ridiculous gold box. They all nodded, and everyone took turns jumping to the machine. Flow first, again turning into a spiraling

tornado of water that bounced on the machine, and shot off into the distance closer to the exit, where no blood waited. They all looked Red Tide's way, but it didn't notice. Natasha next, following Flow's example. Then Brianna, and Eric. It was a hard jump, and Eric didn't like how the huge gold box teetered slightly when he jumped off it.

Finally came Matthew. When the huge werewolf landed on the gold machine, it teetered over, and crashed into the lake of blood. They'd managed to put a decent distance between themselves and the kraken, so the blood around the machine was only a foot deep. But it was more than enough to launch a huge wave of blood in all directions as the giant gold machine crashed into it.

Red Tide ceased its constant roaring, and spun around, sending glass shards everywhere as its dozen tendrils ripped the railings of the third floor aside before they slammed into the blood with the creature. It glared at them with one of its giant eyes, and again slammed its tendrils, causing waves of crimson to spike up around it.

“Uratha should die. Meddlers. Forsaken.”

That word. Forsaken. It shot fire up Eric's veins, and he took a step toward the creature. But a small hand on his elbow stopped him.

“Let's go!” the little vampire said.

He growled as he turned, and the group ran for the exit, now a giant hole from when Red Tide had smashed through it to get in. But they already knew what would happen. A wave of red crashed against them, hard, and threw them all into the chaos of crimson rapids. Flow let out an inhuman shriek before Red Tide's body overtook it, and its blue waters disappeared beneath the waves.

“Flow!” Matthew said, and jumped back to his feet. Eric managed to stay on his feet long enough to look to the goliath werewolf, but

the waves flipped Eric over a second later. Matthew, on the other hand, had enough weight that he rushed through the waves fast enough to reach them, and intercept a giant, red log.

Not a log. One of the kraken's tendrils came slamming down from above, but Matthew stood in its way, and caught the oncoming behemoth limb before it hit the back of Natasha. The little vampire spun around long enough to realize it, and stared. Matthew had managed to stay standing. The titan slashed his arms to the side, and his claws ripped through the tendril, sending a splatter of blood the same color as the crimson that surrounded them into the drink.

But another tendril came sideways, crashed into Matthew's side, and smashed him into the ticket booth. More glass shattered, and rained down on them and the blood like sand.

"Kill," Red Tide said. "Kill Uratha. I can. Permission. Kill."

Eric found something to get his claws on, one of the giant oversized slot machines, buried in six feet of crimson. He pulled himself up over the surface of the rapids, only to find one of the tendrils pushing under the crimson, creating an enormous wave as it smashed through the slot machines and sent them flying. Eric climbed on top of his machine, and launched himself upward as the tendril swept the machines aside. He landed on the second floor balcony, but it was uneven flooring, damaged and ripped into chunks from when Red Tide was trying to catch Arturo. He had to climb, and before he could find a good foothold, another tendril smashed against the second floor, directly beside him.

The floor shattered. The world turned upside down as he fell down into the crimson water, and went under.

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~~Natasha~~

"Matthew!"

Her words were cut short. Crimson buried her, and she closed her eyes as the heavy liquid smashed her back against the gold gate Matthew tore threw earlier, now pushed even further aside by Red Tide's earlier entrance. She was light enough she held onto the gate, and when the waves passed by, she climbed up the metal until she was near the ceiling of the first floor, blood churning around her legs.

Matthew. Where was Matthew? The wolf stood there, glaring at Red Tide, somehow having blocked the absurd attack, but Red Tide's next attack sent the werewolf flying, and poor Matthew's huge body smashed into several of the slot machines hard enough they bent. Glowing coins spewed out of the machine and into the red liquid, and Matthew groaned as he eventually managed to stand up from the red lake. His left arm was backward.

Natasha pulled out her pistol, and shot every bullet in the magazine as fast as she could, straight at Red Tide's face. Whether the ephemera blood of the spirit's body didn't technically wet the pistol, or she got lucky, she didn't know, but the pistol worked fine. Unfortunately it was just a 9mm, and the bullets couldn't penetrate the monster's hide. They hurt it, enough it pointed one of its eyes at her, and charged.

It was like watching a tsunami of blood, coming straight at her.

Before Red Tide could smash her into the gate and through it, turning her into spaghetti cinders, Arturo leapt down from the third floor balcony, and landed on Red Tide's body. The creature bellowed and twisted, turning around with surprising speed, tendrils slapping the red lake even as they smashed pillars and gold machines hard enough to shatter them. The floors above collapsed, and fell into the lake around Red Tide, and all the while Art ripped and tore at its body. Tash's bullets couldn't penetrate it, but werewolf claws could.

Brianna erupted from the blood, next to Natasha.

“Brianna! We n-need to—”

The werewolf let out her own challenging roar, and charged Red Tide. Oh no.

“Matthew! We—”

The huge werewolf’s limbs snapped into place, and once he could stand up again, Matthew followed Brianna’s example. Oh no no no.

Another werewolf came up from under the blood. Eric! Before she could even call his name, the werewolf ran at Red Tide as best he could, red liquid parting against his waist. Every single wolf roared, like a chorus, and the three werewolves in the crimson jumped at Red Tide. Matthew managed to jump over one of the tendrils, but Eric and Brianna were thrown aside harder than if a bus had hit them going fifty.

Okay, everything was going from bad to worse. The werewolves were going berserk, and without them, she wasn’t getting out of the shadow realm; wasn’t like she was going to leave her boyfriends behind anyway. Where was Flow?

“Flow! Flow!” She jumped down in the red water. With Red Tide distracted, it only reached her knees, most of its mass pulled toward the center of the huge casino, in the empty space between all the balconies above. “Flow! Come on, I n-need you.”

A patch of water floated in the crimson, close to the torn open gate. Like oil on water.

“Flow!” Tash managed to get to it, and she reached down for it, but her fingers passed through it, unable to grab it. “Flowing Sanctuary!”

Some weird groaning noises came out of the water, and two glowing white eyes appeared. But that was all. No body, no giant

mist arms or mystical wings, or any of the swirling tornado water Flow normally used as a body. Still alive, but couldn't form. Did it need time? Did it need Red Tide to leave, so it wasn't surrounded by its blood body again?

“What do I do what do I do.” She pulled out her sword and clutched it tight as she looked back at Red Tide. Arturo wasn't on its head any longer, now wrapped in one of its tendrils. But Red Tide's grip didn't last long, as Brianna came up from the blood underneath the tendril and got her teeth into the limb. Blood squirted out of the red leathery tentacle, and it only got bloodier as Brianna got her claws into it and tore through it.

Red Tide didn't expect that. It didn't expect Uratha to give it so much trouble, judging from how it slammed its tendrils, like an upset toddler. It shrieked and roared, like some sort of angry whale, again loud enough that the blood lake churned and vibrated. It swung the tendril as it let go of Art, and the werewolf crashed into the sloped floor of the broken, collapsing second floor balcony. A second later, he was up, and jumping down at the kraken yet again.

Red Tide saw it coming this time, and slapped Arturo out of the air, sending him soaring until he landed near Natasha. She covered her eyes with her forearm as the wave of crimson hit her and knocked her on her ass. When she lowered it, Arturo was half standing, half leaning against a wall, arm broken, and one of his legs too.

“Art! Stop!”

Arturo glared at her, and she froze. She recognized that look. Matthew had given her that look once, when they'd been trapped in the tunnels beneath Dolareido. Arturo had managed to calm him down while Matt tried to rip their way free through mountains of rubble, but it'd been clear the larger man had been a hair's breadth



away from going berserk. It was easy to forget how volatile Uratha were when the violence started.

Art growled through clenched teeth before he looked back to Red Tide. His ears stood up, and he stumbled to the side, like a wolf trying to get into a better position before the prey charged into it. Red Tide was coming.

Tash stared up at the huge monster as it came for them. Matthew and Brianna were stuck between being wrapped in, or currently fighting, a giant tendril each, their claws tearing into the huge limbs that were crushing them. Eric bit and ripped another, but Red Tide managed to ignore him long enough to look straight at Tash and Arturo. And it charged.

Arturo scrambled, not in fear, but with frustration. His limbs weren't working, and every inch of him wanted to attack Red Tide. Red Tide knew it. It rushed them hard and fast, and Tash covered her face with her arm as she prepared to get thrown around like a ragdoll. If the huge kraken broke the limbs of Uratha like it was nothing, there was a good chance it was going to turn her into kindling.

Blinding white light buried her instead.

She let out a squeak as the light snuck around her forearms and punched through her eyelids, and she braced for inevitable death. Sunlight? Fire? What happened?

Her eyes adjusted eventually, and she lowered her arm. Not dead? Nope, still alive. A quick peek left and right showed she was still in the same place, despite the white light that now covered everything. She looked down, and gulped. Something was underneath her, glowing gold slightly. It was behind her. It was beside her, and above her.

She looked up.

“F-Flow?”

“No.” The angel face smiled at her, glowing white eyes similar to Flowing Sanctuary, but on a face that looked more like a ball of white light, now gentle enough to not burn her eyes.

“S ... Safe? Of Grey Street?”

The angel smiled. Its face and its body looked like they were made of solid gold light, human shaped but without any defining features. Two white eyes and a white, tiny smile, were the only facial features against a blank canvas of glowing gold. Behind it, two angel wings spread out, the same gold as its body, and they were massive.

Its stomach was open, sorta, gold body having encompassed around Natasha in a bubble. Safe almost looked like a pregnant woman, holding a sphere that connected to her stomach, with Tash safely inside.

“B-But, you’re...”

This was not the Safe of Grey Street she remembered. Safe looked like an egg, with wings! She, er, it had been an egg with wings, both the first time Tash ever saw it, and the last time, though it’d been a much bigger the second time. And, the last time, Tash did see the hints of something ... human-ish inside the egg.

“I have a new name,” Safe said, hints of femininity in its otherwise powerful, multi-layered voice. It almost sounded like a choir. “Sanctuary, of Dolareido.”

“Sanctuary?” Tash gulped as she stared up at the angel, and then peeked down behind her at the pool of water also named Sanctuary.

Nodding, Sanctuary released its protective bubble. Its arms spread out, letting it go, and the light of the sphere fell away, like a flower opening up to bloom. The rolls of gold gently flowed back into the

angel's stomach, and once again, the angel had the slim figure of a tall, muscular woman.

It turned around, leaving Natasha standing behind it, and it faced Red Tide.

“Cease, Red Tide. These Uratha and Kindred are under my protection, as is Flowing Sanctuary.”

Red Tide had already ceased, stunned by the interference. It stared at Sanctuary, weird mouth half under the blood and churning it like a slow motor.

“Black Blood and I. Arrangement. I kill.”

“Black Blood does not own Dolareido, and you know it.”

“We have a pact!”

Sanctuary spread its wings, and tiny bits of gold dust fell from them onto the floor around it. Red Tide hissed and pulled back, and the red lake it brought with it pulled back as well. Flow, now a puddle, came to a stop on the casino floor.

The werewolves stared at Sanctuary with dropped jaws. Its radiance must have broke through their berserking, because each of them stopped biting and tearing at Red Tide. But Red Tide still had two of them in its grip.

“Then we are at an impass,” Sanctuary said. “I will defend Dolareido, and give sanctuary to those who need, and deserve it. Black Blood will destroy this city, and you are helping ... him.”

Him? Everyone had trouble figuring how to call spirits' gender, because sometimes they did look masculine or feminine. But the Uratha insisted they were all 'its', and that included Black Blood. Didn't it?

If Black Blood really was Mictlantecuhtli, then, that made sense. A very weird sense, but, sense.

Red Tide roared again, and slashed out with two of its tendrils, straight for Sanctuary. Sanctuary did not move. It held out its hands, and more gold light erupted from them, a wall of light, curved, like the one that'd encompassed Tash earlier. The tsunami of blood crashed against it, and Sanctuary did not falter. Waves of red shot out to the sides, blocked by the huge barrier, and Tash stared through the gold wall at the endless flood that could not reach her.

Arturo could, though. His body passed through the barrier, as if it were a sift blocking anything not alive.

“Art!” Tash let out another squeak as she ran over to him. “Art, you—”

“Alive,” he said, voice a guttural growl. He forced himself to his feet, and stared through the gold barrier at the waves of blood that continued to crash against it. His eyes were wide. “Must save others.” Alive, but barely out of Kuruth, if he couldn't formulate a sentence.

The others! Eric had managed to get out of Red Tide's way, and was standing on the fountain, beside the Kraken. Matthew and Brianna were still in its grip, though, and while Red Tide was distracted, it was still tightening its grip on the two wolves.

“Jessy, now,” Sanctuary said.

“Jessy!? W-What—”

Tash and Arturo both fell back as a blast of wind and light crashed against them. Sanctuary pushed its barrier forward, and it erupted, an explosion that cut through the blood and parted it, all too similar to another scene from The Ten Commandments. Whatever Sanctuary did, it was big, and it sent the blood to the sides of the

casino hard enough it pushed over hundreds of gold machines, and launched thousands of glowing coins through the air.

The blast wave hit Red Tide hard, and the creature roared as it stumbled back. It was so big, stumble wasn't the right word, more like a giant slab of concrete getting pushed along the ground by a hurricane. Whatever Sanctuary threw at Red Tide, its giant squid-octopus-kraken body smashed against the back wall of the casino.

Something on four legs ran past Tash, and she almost slashed at it out of reflex. But it went past her, straight up to Red Tide, and up its face. It wasn't very big, not as big as a werewolf, but it was big enough that the spikes on its body tore through Red Tide's squid face, and pulled another giant roar of pain from the monster. It got the kraken in one of its eyes!

Red Tide's roar turned into an alien shriek, and its tendrils went wild, slashing at everything nearby, and letting go of its two hostages. The werewolves flew in random directions, both crashing against walls before falling into the blood. They didn't stay there long. Sanctuary darted over to them, wings carrying it far faster than it should have been able to fly, and it wrapped Matthew and Brianna in gold bubbles, before taking them back over to Tash and Art.

Before Tash could say anything, Sanctuary did it again, and grabbed Eric and ... Jessy! And brought them to Tash.

"Let's go," Sanctuary said, and again, it smiled at Tash. "Quickly."

"R-Right." She got up and made for the exit. It really wasn't much of an exit anymore. The gold gate was mostly gone, and Red Tide had smashed through the revolving doors, and put a hole maybe thirty feet wide in the gold wall. Like an octopus, it'd fit its body through a hole far smaller than it, to get into the casino.

Everyone went into automatic mode. Eric helped with Brianna, Arturo helped with Matthew, and Jessy ran beside Natasha, still on

all fours. It was her strangest form, an animal form she'd developed years ago, something like a giant wolf, but covered in spikes. She still had a human-ish face though, with a snout and teeth way too big, making the whole form terrifying.

“How!?” Tash yelled as they got outside into the blood soaked streets.

“Safe came and found me,” Jessy said. “I was trapped under some rubble, and one of those blood wraiths found me when I finally got out. It saved me.”

“Saf—Sanctuary came?”

“It's been trying to stop Black Blood for a little while now, I guess. It came 'cause it knew something was up, what with Red Tide wrecking everything.”

Tash looked behind her at the angel. And it was an angel. Sanctuary followed behind them, with Flow at its side, a little tornado of water, barely more than five feet tall, half its usual size. It looked drained.

“Quickly,” Sanctuary said. “The tear, right? In here.” It ushered them to the right, and they dashed in.

They came in through the revolving doors of another casino, and went through the same process as before. A shocked spirit told them they needed a ticket, they ignored it, and tore through the gold fence blocking off the rest of the casino.

“Where's the basement?” Tash asked.

Arturo pointed to the staircase, on the other side of the casino.

They got five feet before the wall between the casino they were in, and the casino they'd just escaped from, cracked, like an earthquake

ripping a canyon through the Earth.

---

~~The Ripper~~

“You can’t.”

*I can.*

“Bullshit. I am in control. I am in control!” He tried to let go of the sword. Every drop of will and vitae he could find, he poured into the hand. Let go of the sword. Let go of the sword.

*When I realized what I had to do, I found a way, you fucking asshole. There’s no way I’m letting this continue.*

The hand holding the sword slowly pointed the long blade toward him. It was too long to point the blade at his chest, not with his hand on the handle, but that wasn’t Jack’s goal anyway. Apparently, the kid was thinking nuclear.

“You’re just a fucking kid. A child! A stupid, useless, worthless, weak maggot!”

*Julias knew differently.*

Slowly, the longsword found its way to his neck. The Ripper pushed, twisted, writhed and fought, but all it accomplished was the sharp blade sawing gently against the blood barrier along his neck. The blood barrier was fading. Somehow, despite all the energy and rage the Ripper poured into the coiling dark crimson snakes that made him a god, the fucking kid was weakening it.

“You won’t, you fucking little shit. You won’t leave your precious Miss Big Tits behind. You won’t leave your—”

*They’re all dead if I let you live. Antoinette will understand.*

“You ... won’t ... have ... me!”

Shit shit shit shit shit. He squeezed the handle harder, until his arm trembled, bones threatening to break, but the fucking kid kept the blade where it was.

The Ripper looked around, panic surging through him. Someone had to stop him, save the kid from killing him and himself. Sándor? Dude was still clutching his head like something had popped inside it. Damien? That dude was one step away from collapsing into torpor. The werewolves? The ones that managed to get their heads above the mist were either coughing up blood and falling right back down, or were staring at him, shocked, and looked about as ready to move as Damien. Fucking useless and weak, every last one of them. What fucking good were they now, if they couldn’t stop Jack!? Useless!

He managed to get his second hand on the sword, but it didn’t help, dooming the second hand to squeeze and shake violently, but accomplish nothing.

“Someone fucking stop me! Stop me before this fucking kid kills himself!” Again he stared around at the group of useless fucking shits he’d annihilated, but every last one of them stared on. One of the wrecked werewolves managed to get their ruined head above the mist, and they stared at him too, as dumbfounded as the rest of them. Clara.

Looking up didn’t help. Some of the ghosts were back, including Sabrina, and she stared down at him even more confused than the fucking mouth breathers. Fucking useless!

He forced his legs to move, until he managed to get himself over to one of the giant pillars of stone, and smacked his head against it. Jack refused to let him summon enough strength to so much as rattle his brain, let alone knock him into torpor. He tried again, and again, but it wasn’t long before Jack forced him to walk away from



the pillar, all while forcing the blade against his neck harder, and harder. The only thing that kept it from cutting straight through, was every fucking ounce of will the Ripper had.

*I'm sure Antoinette is doing something to save the others, and to stop Jacob. Maybe she'll succeed, maybe she won't. But none of it will matter if an evil like you is around to ruin it. I don't know what Elaine's done with my blood, but I know it didn't have a copy of the curse in it. And as far as she's aware, the only one left of Susanna's bloodline with the curse, is me. So, it dies with me.*

“You ... can't! You fucking can't! I will not ... end ... like ... this! I will go down fighting! Swinging! I will die with my fingers around the throat of God! I will not die to a shit ... like ... you!”

*Yeah. Go fuck yourself.*

The blade sank deeper.

“Jack?”

The blade stopped.

The Ripper and Jack looked to the sound. A voice they recognized, raspy and twisted, but familiar all the same.

“Mary?”

Mary the ghost hovered on the mist maybe fifty feet away, her black empty eyes wide, staring, confused. Beside her stood Beatrice and Athalia, also staring, confused. Everyone so damn fucking useless.

“Jack, what the fu—” Beatrice, halfway to taking a step forward, took a step back. “Ripper.”

The Ripper snarled at her. Mistake. Jack slid the blade a little deeper against the side of his throat.

“I ... can’t ... stop him!”

“Stop him? The fuck are you talking about? You—” With a snarl of her own, Beatrice jogged over to him, but came to a stop ten feet away, afraid to get closer. “Jack ... Ripper, what the fuck?”

“Stupid kid. Stupid fucking kid. He ... he ... won’t ... get his way! It’s mine!”

“It’s my body! My life!” Jack’s voice, cutting through. “I won’t let you use it to hurt anyone else.”

“You don’t deserve it. Weak, stupid, worthless kid. Just a dumb fucking pussy, pathetic. You let everyone walk all over you. You let stupid people run things. You’re a fucking bitch.”

“You’re a monster.” Again the stupid little maggot’s voice cut through. “A movie monster of the week. Just a kid’s impulses on steroids. No substance, no real motivation, just a pile of desires! Fuck you, you don’t get to do what you want.”

The blade slid a little further.

“Jack!” Mary hovered in close, close enough to touch him, and she did. She took the sword, and yanked it from his hands with enough force she nearly broke his fingers. Holy shit she was strong.

“Mary—” His head snapped. “Fucking don’t—” His head snapped again. “You don’t get to—” Another snap. “It’s mine!”

Beatrice came a little closer. “What do we do? Jack, tell us—”

The Ripper let out a roar, causing Mary to squeak and drop the sword, and for Triss to jump back. But she was way too slow, and he

got his fingers around her neck. The look in her eyes as she realized what he was about to do was euphoric.

“You die.”

---

~~Beatrice~~

But his fingers didn't squeeze. He tried, tried until his body made weird little cracking sounds, but his fingers didn't squeeze, thank fuck. Once Triss calmed down, she slowly pulled his fingers away from her neck. It was like trying to bend the fingers of a corpse with rigor mortis, but she managed to get him off and backed away.

“Jesus fucking christ.” She held her neck with both hands as she looked to Athalia. “Jesus ... fucking christ.”

Athalia came closer, looking around, eyes locked on Sándor for a moment before looking back to Jack.

“The fuck did you do to Sándor?” Athalia asked before Triss could. Oh god, Sándor. The poor guy stood there holding his head like it was about to explode.

The Ripper grinned at Athalia, but when he tried to reach out for her, his arms refused to move, twitching oddly.

“Kill—don't kill—fucking do—fucking die—I'll—” He snapped his gaze back to Sándor, then Athalia and Mary, then Triss. Yeah, this was a Gollum situation. Sorta. Kid was straight up fighting the Ripper like split personalities fighting over the body.

Where the fuck was his necklace? Hell, where the fuck was his skin? He looked burnt, cut open, clawed open, bit open by teeth, and she did not like that she could see bits of his skull. The fact he only had one eye made it a thousand times worse.

“Sándor?” Athalia asked. “What’s going on? You ... Are you alright?”

He didn’t respond. Just, groaned. That dude never made a sound unless he really fucking meant it.

“Athalia, Mary,” Triss said, “can you hold Ja—er, the Ripper still?”

The two looked between each other for a few painful seconds before nodding.

The Ripper snarled with enough venom it probably tore up his voice. “Fuck you, you can’t—” Giant, skeleton shadow hands encircled him, and at the same time, Mary came up to him and set her hands on his shoulders.

“Jack,” the ghost said, voice somewhere between a gentle whisper and a fucked up, raspy, scary thing. “Jack.” Her grip was solid, here in the Great Below, considering what she did to Aaron. She could hold him. Maybe.

Triss wanted to watch, to see what would happen, but for now she had another concern. Sándor. She came up to him and touched his shoulder, but he didn’t so much as flinch. His eyes were closed, and he was shivering.

“W-What happened?” Triss asked. “I—” She looked around, and gulped. Now that the Ripper wasn’t the center of her attention, everything else clicked. There were ghosts hovering above, and one of them, a girl, was holding a knife, and she looked very angry. There were werewolves standing around, but it looked like it took everything they had left just to do that. Damien’s face was a crater. “Who did all this?”

“I did,” the Ripper said, chuckling. “I never got the chance to finish Dominating the gargyle. Alas, I tore his brain up on the way out.” He had one of those super sick, twisted laughs, the kind that

let you know the guy probably jerked off to videos of people getting run over by trains.

“Sándor, dude.” Triss took his shoulders and turned him to face her. Still no response, still closed eyes. “Sándor ... come on, man. It’s me, Triss. Got Athalia with me. We came to ... rescue you.” She gulped as she looked around again. Damien and the werewolves were trying to move closer, but only the vampire managed to cross ground, and she’d seen snails move faster. She gave Sándor a gentle shake. “Dude, come on. You’re scaring me. The fuck did that fucker do to you?”

The Ripper’s sick laugh cut through the silence. “He’s—He’s hurt, and—I fucked him up and—” Jack’s head thrashed around hard, and he clenched his teeth as he snarled. A human would have been foaming at the mouth. “I am me. I am mine. You won’t have me. You won’t hurt anyone else. You are nothing but a parasite. You are nothing.”

Holy shit, the kid looked like he was exorcising a demon, eye glaring around at everyone. More head snapping. More grunts and groans. Everyone froze, even more than they already had, as the kid writhed and squirmed in the ghost and Begotten’s grip. From the way Athalia and Mary were shaking, they were having trouble holding him. Oh shit oh shit.

A few yells. One scream, the sort you heard on a battlefield a thousand years ago, when people with shield and spear charged the front line. And then silence.

“Bring him over here,” the kid said, slowly lifting his head and looking to Triss with his one eye. “I’ll see if I can fix him.”

Triss blinked at Jack, or the Ripper or whoever it was, before looking back to Sándor. She might as well have been talking to a wall, trying to penetrate whatever was happening inside his head.

“I uh, not sure I want you in his head again. He—”

“He’ll recover,” the Ripper, or Jack said, “with time. But we don’t have time. Bring him over here and I’ll do some quick clean up. The Ripper damaged the place where we make conscious connections.”

“The white place?” She’d met her Beast there, sorta. She went there sometimes when learning Crúac rituals.

“Basically, yeah. I have to Dominate him, and try and fix him. Fix what the Ripper did. I won’t let the Ripper touch him. I won’t. I won’t. I won’t. I won’t.” He growled deep in his throat. “Enough! Enough! I won’t!”

Oh sweet Jesus fuck. Whatever battle Jack was having inside his head, it looked like he was winning, but it could have been a trick. But, the fuck were they supposed to do? Athalia and Mary wouldn’t be able to hold him, and if they did nothing, they were fucked anyway.

“What do you think, Athalia?” Triss asked.

“I can get us to the portal, to where Black Blood is performing its ritual. But...” She looked up at where the ghosts were. Were. They were gone. “We need Sándor’s help.”

“Agreed.” Nodding, Triss grabbed the man’s arm, and pulled him toward Jack. He didn’t resist, but didn’t help either, completely unaware of what was happening outside his head.

Damien stared on, still too exhausted to do shit. He’d gotten closer, and when she looked his way, all he gave her was a small nod. He agreed with the plan, then, or didn’t have the energy to argue with it. Good enough for her.

The walk from Sándor to Jack wasn’t long, but it felt like an eternity. Her foot hit something, and she gulped as she leaned down

enough to see through the mist directly at her feet. She shouldn't have. The smell had been warning enough, but she was a dumb fuck who wanted to see. That, was Monica, human Monica, with a hole straight through her throat.

Triss glared at the Ripper, but it didn't last. His face switched between maniacal villain to distraught kid every second, completely ruining any anger she could summon. Seeing Sándor fucked up had pulled her rage right up to the skin, but again, watching Jack struggle with the curse blew it all away. Poor kid.

Once she got Sándor close, Athalia tightened her grip on him with her big skeleton arms, but they all knew it was superfluous. She and Mary might be able to hold the Ripper for maybe a whole five seconds if shit went bad. Might. Worst of all, they all had to avoid making eye contact. It was fine if the Ripper looked at them, but if they looked him in the eye, he could make the connection, and then they'd have to deal with the fucker in a willpower battle. Which was exactly what he was looking to do with Sándor.

She came in close, and closer, until she was only five feet away from the kid, outside of possible kicking distance.

“How do I—”

“Open his eyes.”

Fucking christ. She took a deep, useless breath, reached up over Sándor's forehead, and pulled up on his eyes. They were bloodshot.

The dude stopped struggling. No moving, no squirming, nothing. He didn't lower his hands from his head, but he did come to a complete freeze, eyes pointed straight at Jack. And Jack, or the Ripper or whoever, didn't move a muscle either. They both came to a complete standstill.

Which was naturally when the fucking ghosts made an appearance again. One of them popped up from the mist, and tackled Damien to the floor, earning a gargled holler from him. Another tackled Avery, and the old wolf went down with a yelp. The other werewolves went down a second later, hidden in the mist, but the noises of ghost fists punching flesh, earning roars and harsh groans, were everywhere.

“Shit! Shit shit shit.” She let go of Sándor, and thank god the man stayed where he was. “The fuck do we do? The fu—Mary!? Mary, where are you?” She was gone, vanished, like a fucking ... ghost. “Athalia, the fuck do we do!?”

“I don’t know! I’m a bit busy!”

Shit. Shit fucking shit. Whatever Jack was doing, Dominating Sándor to somehow play repairman, she had no idea how long it’d take. Mental stuff usually took seconds, maybe thirty, but the fuck did she know? It was pretty fucking unique circumstances.

So, she did the only thing she could think of. She ran over to Damien, and—jumped back when Mary came up out of the mist.

The ghost that’d been punching Damien came up out of the mist with her, and Mary had her fingers around the ghost’s throat. Not like ghosts needed to breathe, but whatever it was Mary was doing, it wasn’t choking. The ghost screamed and cried in her grip, but Mary stared into the empty eyes of her fellow dead with her own, and squeezed harder.

The ghost, just some random dude, probably from the nineties, withered away in her grip. Bits of white came off the ghost’s body, especially the ghost’s face, and as Mary unleashed a banshee shriek, the mist exploded outward and away from them ten feet in all directions. The ghost in her grip cried out, but it was a dying sound, getting weaker by the moment. Whoever Mary was killing, she was actually killing them, a ghost. You didn’t need to be a fucking



exorcist to recognize one ghost absorbing the other, complete with skin and body and clothes and everything getting sucked into Mary's open mouth like she was a literal black hole.

One minute, there was a man struggling in her grip. The next, everything that ghost had been, became a puff of white fog that went down Mary's gullet. The mist around Mary, burying the stone again, and Mary floated a few feet up as she looked around at the other ghosts. Somehow, her giant, empty, black eye sockets, and scary big mouth filled with increasingly numerous, increasingly sharp teeth, looked ... happy? Excited?

No, Triss recognized the look. She'd seen it a few times, on more normal faces. The excited hunger vampires got when they were about to feed.

The other ghosts came up out of the mist, and came at Mary, showing the same fucked up expressions.

"Free!" one of them said.

"Free! Black Blood will free us!"

"No more weight!"

"No more darkness!"

Oh fuck, they'd made a deal with Black Blood. Now it made a lot more sense why a bunch of ghosts were suddenly jumping into the mix.

"Mary," Triss said, "we should—"

Mary dove at the ghosts, and ripped into them, literally. Claws came out of her fingers, just like Beatrice's, and she ripped the ghosts into puffs of cloud and fog. They screamed with each slice and each chunk that came off them, as if Mary's claws were made of

acid, and the screaming only grew worse when she gobbled up the chunks. Down the hatch, like a fucking eagle snatching another bird straight out of the sky.

It was a slaughter. The other ghosts had their fists, but Mary's features were growing scarier and scarier by the second. Her teeth grew longer, and now she had more of them. Her eyes had always been large, black voids, partly see-through like the rest of her, but one glance into them now had Triss frozen. Now they looked more like ... endless space, like oblivion.

“Die!”

Triss blinked at Mary, but Mary's mouth hadn't moved. That wasn't her voice.

Everyone spun around. Another ghost came out of the mist, a woman, and she lunged straight for Jack. She had a knife in her hand.

“Mary!” Athalia said. “Do—”

Mary swooped down like a fucking jet, straight down at Jack, and collided with the girl hard enough the whole area exploded outward with mist. It felt like a hard gust of wind, and Triss took a step back as the fog washed over her.

Mary had stopped the ghost, hands holding her wrists, and was matching death glare with death glare.

“Sabrina,” Mary said, voice a raspy hiss.

“Mary! Let go! Jack should die for killing the master. Him, and his family, and that includes you!” Sabrina struggled against Mary, and while neither hovering girl had legs below the knee, it looked like they were both bracing against the ground as they pushed against each other.

Her argument wasn't very compelling.

“Black Blood sent you.”

“Of course! Freedom is—”

“Before! I meant before! When I was just ... just new, and hiding in my home, and you came up from the ground and spoke to me! You wanted to be my friend, but it was a lie! You were trying to get close to Jack!”

“Yes! The stupid boy should die! He killed the master! He killed my love!”

Their voices grew louder and harsher, until everyone was wincing with the nails-on-chalkboard shrieks, everyone except Sándor and Jack. They were still off in Lala Land. Everyone else covered their ears as the two ghosts screamed at each other loud enough the mist that reformed around them rippled. But as much as Triss wanted to get away before she lost her eardrums, she stared on as Mary changed more, and more. Her mouth grew bigger, lips peeling away slightly, just enough to show off a few more of her crazy teeth. It made her mouth look scarier than Triss's.

Triss expected Sabrina to freak out, but the other ghost only returned the shrieking and screaming, and a few of her features changed as well. Her hair raised and grew longer, and turned into tendrils that hovered in the air behind her. She grew claws of her own, and the clothes on her body grew looser, and weirder, until they looked less like clothes and more like dirty rags that grew out of her skin.

Mary was right behind her. Her mouth only got more monstrous, lips splitting back further until her cheeks were gone, and all that was left was sharp teeth. Her eyes raised at the outer corners, turning into slanted, big slits. Her clothes, already a torn mess, ripped even more, until the strips dangled from her and hovered in

the air like Sabrina's hair. More and more of the clothes shifted, breaking and molding together, until they'd changed into strange rags that hung off her arms and chest, hiding her legs entirely.

Neither of them looked human anymore.

Athalia moved away from Sabrina, but she had to keep Jack where he was, next to Sándor. Her options on where she could go were limited. She did manage to cover her ears at least, even while her Horror's silhouette arms stayed outstretched and held Jack firmly in two giant hands.

"Mary," Triss said, but she couldn't bring her voice above a whisper, and it disappeared under the screaming.

Sabrina spun the knife in her hand into a reverse grip, and yanked hard on her arm, pulling it down enough to stab Mary's wrist. Mary's scream increased in pitch, but otherwise kept going, endless. She didn't need to breathe. She didn't even need air to make noise at all. It was an unending string of screams that crossed the line from noise, into an actual attack that hurt everyone nearby, including the two ghosts.

"You won't touch him!" Mary screamed, and she raked her left hand down, the one Sabrina had stabbed. Apparently the knife hadn't hurt her enough to stop her from using the arm. Or, she was a ghost, and the actual location of the damage didn't matter. Either way, Mary sliced her claws down Sabrina's chest, and Sabrina twisted as she tried to escape, her right hand now free.

But Mary kept her right hand's grip tight on Sabrina's left hand, and yanked the woman close again. Sabrina didn't see that coming, and got whipped around hard, right into Mary's left hand. Again, Mary raked her claws down Sabrina's torso, and this time they went deep enough they left scars several inches deep in the ghosts see-through body.

“He killed Master! He—”

Mary drove her hand into Sabrina’s gut, and ripped her claws up through it until they came out of Sabrina’s face. Triss braced for gore, but all that happened was a bunch of weird ghost stuff splitting apart like snow. That, and Sabrina’s shrieking coming to a sudden stop.

Mary wasted no time, and opened her big, horrifying mouth, and sucked Sabrina in, or her body, or whatever it was. The white see-through misty ghost stuff went into her mouth, like a vacuum cleaner sucking up dirt from the floor. And just like that, she was gone.

Everyone stared at Mary as the horrifying creature quickly turned to face Jack, and hovered over to him.

“No one will touch you or Mom,” she said, whispering, but her voice still a shrill mess of rasps and weird nails-on-chalkboard scratches. “No one. No one. No one.” Her claws found his head, and she stroked his short hair. “No one.”

Slowly, Mary turned her head, and set her giant, slitted black eyes on Athalia.

Athalia gulped, let Jack go, and the silhouette of the Horror faded away. Slowly, she backed up, wincing as she did. She was still hurt from her tussle with Aaron.

Triss came a little closer, and when Mary didn’t throw her the same evil glare she’d thrown Athalia, she came closer again.

“Jack’s currently on a trip in Sándor’s mind, Mary,” Triss said.

“How long?”

“Not sure. Should be done by now.” And thank fucking god it took longer than expected. If Jack saw what Mary had done, how the fuck would he react? Thankful? Terrified?

Jack, or maybe the Ripper, slowly turned his head and looked her way. She looked right back at him.

---

~~Jack~~

It wasn't easy. Finding the will and determination to put a sword to his own throat, was not easy. But buried in his own mind, watching the Ripper ruin everything? He fucking found it, found the spark in him, the drive, whatever it was people found when the bullets started flying, and they needed to run up that beach.

Julias was right about him.

“Fuck you! You're just an ant! You'll never—”

“Shut up.”

Jack slammed the cellar door on the giant creature. The curse, whatever magical Strix powers it gave him, it turned all the crap happening in his mind into metaphors he could see, at least whenever the Beast and mental Disciplines were involved. Conscious awareness of all the stupid crap that was supposed to be done by the Beast's power, subconsciously. It fucking sucked.

Supposedly, Triss had seen the same place before, the white room, some place in the mind where the consciousness and the Beast interacted, and could even do some weird magical shit. She'd remembered it, probably because of some Crúac weirdness. Maybe this weird conscious awareness of what was happening in the mind was what gurus talked about, when they talked about enlightenment? Or maybe he just had a super active imagination.

Case in point, his imagination summoned a really creepy looking cabin in the woods, with white wood boards for walls, a shitty wooden floor, boarded up windows with dusty old white curtains, and furniture and decor that came straight out of the Great Depression. A mounted buck head on the wall, a fireplace with a chimney, and a rug that had all the shades of white and brown that only someone who'd bought a car when they came with built-in ashtrays would own.

And in the corner of the room, was a big cellar door on the floor, with a big chain over it, keeping it closed. Mostly closed. The curse smashed up against the cellar door, opening it a few inches, and shaking the chain hard. The curse snarled and shrieked, and clawed at the wood floor it was trapped under. Several of its shadowy arms crept out from under the cellar door, and pushed up against it or yanked on the chain harder, but it held, for now. And it would for as long as Jack could hold him down there. He didn't know how long it'd be, but for now, he was in control again.

"You can't trap me in this ridiculous memory forever," the Ripper said, hissing and snarling.

Jack frowned back at the Ripper, gave him the finger, and opened the front door of the cabin. He was tempted to quote some lines from the movie, but while the asshole trapped in the basement of his mind might have been able to pull quotes and laugh about shit, all Jack could think about, was the feel of Damien's face against his fist. Clara's. Monica and Caleb's throats.

At least the violence was over, and he could start fixing things. He had to fix things. Just one fucking thing, anything, before he did what had to be done. Mary, Triss, and Athalia were waiting for him back in the real world, and from the sounds managing to pierce his ears during Dominate, violence was picking back up again. He had to work fast.

Sighing, he stepped through the gates of Sándor's mind, and into the mansion. Sándor did not resist him. Unlike Jack, Sándor wouldn't be consciously aware of what was happening in his head. He'd probably know Jack got to see a peek of his memories, but not the literal representation of them, paintings on the walls of a decrypt castle hallway.

That was fine. He didn't need Sándor to be consciously aware of what was going on. The representation of his consciousness was plenty helpful.

"Here," Jack said, and he motioned to one of the paintings. "Help me."

Sándor sighed as he looked at the picture. The gargoyle Horror waited, perched on the throne, but Sándor the man stood with Jack, and the two of them helped put back up the picture of the wife and child he'd lost to Jeremiah and Angela.

Dominate was a powerful Discipline. Elder Kindred used it to literally tamper with the memories of people. If Jack could use it to help undo some of the damage the Ripper had done, that was at least one thing he could fix.

"Sometimes I wonder," Sándor said, or the representation of him did anyway, with the same tone he'd said it with before.

"Stop wondering. This is who you are. And you know, just like you already said you knew, that it's worth it." They moved onto another painting. Another painful memory, put back on the wall.

"Yes. But I have lived a long life. I ... I'm tired."

"Yeah, I can see that." They moved onto the next picture. The old woman, sitting in her chair by the fire. "She passed away in her sleep?"



Once the painting was back up, Sándor stood in front of it, eyes locked onto the old woman wrapped in a blanket on the chair, and nodded.

“Rozalia. She’s the one that insisted I live on, and ... find reasons to keep living.”

“Sounds like a smart woman.”

“She was.”

Jack gave the man a small pat on the shoulder. “I could give you the speech again, but you already knew it before I even said it the first time. And she probably said it better than I could have.” Sighing, they moved onto another painting. “Though I am gonna pull the guilt card here, and say you do owe us a bit, for all the shit that Jeremiah did when he used you.”

“Shameless.”

Laughing, Jack helped hang up the final picture. “Yeah well, I’m a vampire.”

“True.” Sándor nodded, the tiniest hint of a smile showing through as he helped the painting settle, before returning to his throne.

“And speaking of vampires. How do you feel about Triss?” Maybe this was a little wrong, using Dominate to get a peek into Sándor’s head, but if this was the one thing he could fix before he died, along with stopping Jacob, then it’d be a good life. Right?

“I ... like her. But she scares me.”

Jack laughed. “She scares you? I’m guessing it’s not the mouth.” Sometimes it still caught him off guard. Triss was gorgeous if you looked at her from the front, mouth included, but the moment you

got a profile shot with her hair pulled out of the way, the crocodile cheeks were disturbing.

“No. She ... She...”

Jack shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, I get it. She’s a bundle of aggression and very direct about what she wants. Might not actually know what she wants, but once she thinks she knows, she’s pretty ... I don’t know the word, courageous? About pursuing it. Her first date with Julias, she basically forced the guy to take her out to Bloodlust.”

“Forced her?”

“Yeah. Big step for her. And if I’m guessing right, and I think I am, she’s tried to be direct with you?”

Sándor sank slightly in his throne, and gestured to the wall. One of the paintings changed, colors flowing over each other until a new image formed. Sándor the gargoyle, holding Triss and Jen in his giant hands, both girls looking pretty scared.

“Well, shit,” Jack said.

“Yes. I...” Sándor groaned, but gestured to the painting again. Again it changed, this time showing Triss and Jen, fixing their dresses, and then giving Sándor some very ‘it’s okay don’t worry about it we’re fine’ looks. Everyone hated those looks, Jack included. Sándor included.

“At least you didn’t ruin it. If they said it’s okay, believe them. They’re vampires, right? Twisted, kinda fucked up vampires. They’ll brush it off.” Very much a pot calling kettle situation. “Seriously Sándor, Triss likes you. Jen likes you. The Ripper wasn’t lying. I can’t even begin to give life advice to someone who’s been through all this,” he gestured around at the paintings, “but Triss — and Jen, surprisingly — are great people. Just talk to them and give them a

chance, and I think you'll be surprised at the happiness you can find." And to wrap his shitty little bite of wisdom in a pretty bow, he gestured to the painting of the old woman sitting by the fire. "Right?"

Might have been shitty, juvenile advice, but Sándor thought about it for a while, blank face looking down for a short eternity before nodding.

"You are right."

"Okay, I think everything is back together enough. I can't fix everything, but your subconscious should clean up what I can't after a few night's sleep. I think. Hopefully." Shrugging, Jack gestured to the man on the throne, and gave him a small salute before walking out the colossal door. One glance back showed Sándor leaning forward, putting an elbow on his knee, and putting his chin on his fist. Classic thinking pose. And hilariously, the four-armed gargoyle perched overhead mimicked him, two hands holding onto the huge stone throne, the other two adopting the classic thinking pose.

Jack had been tempted to talk to Sándor about Julias, and the weird situation Triss was in trying to resurrect him despite her growing interest in Sándor. But at a certain point, he'd be abusing Dominate, and how Sándor had opened his mind to him. It was time to get back to the real world.

Reality snapped back into existence. Fog. Mist. A giant, empty cave, with green fireflies in the distance. And Sándor standing a few feet in front of him, slowly lowering his hands from his skull.

The two looked at each other for a few moments, awareness coming to Sándor, until eventually the man nodded, Jack returned it, and the two looked to the crowd.

First, Jack looked at Triss. Eye contact. She braced for a mental fucking, but he gave her a gentle smile instead, and looked to

Athalia. A small nod for her, before his eyes moved to his sister's ghost, directly in front of him. Holy fuck.

“M-Mary?”

The ghost nodded, and lowered her hand down from his face.

“Jack.”

Mary the ghost looked a thousand times worse than she had the last time he'd seen her, and she'd looked like hell on wheels then, destroying the ball. Now, she had a mouth that made Beatrice look tame, and her eyes were straight up demon eyes. Her clothes had changed. They'd gotten more and more torn and tattered the last few times he'd seen her, but now they were dangling strips of wrinkly sheets that were half merged, like some sort of cloak or robe that hid her legs and turned into mist. And she had claws.

“What happened to you?”

“I was scared before, but not anymore. I'm going to protect you. Okay?”

He blinked a few times, before looking down at himself. The pain hit him like a wave, and he sucked in a useless breath between clenched teeth. He dug deep, and poured vitae into his limbs as best he could. Now that he had a second, the wounds managed to seal enough that his insides weren't visible anymore, bones and muscles hidden. If Avery had hit him with her claws when they had the weird red glowy thing going on, it'd have taken multiple nights to heal from, and that was with the power of the curse. But the other wolves and their magic-but-not-super-magic claws, plus the fire, he could heal that in a single night with the curse's power.

He didn't have a night. Some scar tissue thin enough he could still see the dents in his body was good enough for now.

He reached up and touched Mary's hand. One of her hands was on his shoulder, and she smiled at him with her crazy mouth.

"Protect me?"

"Those other ghosts, and that horrible Sabrina! I got them. Killed them. Ate them." She floated away a few feet, and held out her claws in front of her. "I ... ate ... them."

Sabrina was dead? And the other ghosts? He gulped on a dry throat as he stared at his sister, or, some thing, some monster, that looked like a twisted version of his sister.

"You can do that?"

"I ... I didn't know. I just ... I just did it."

Sándor let out a quiet sigh, and everyone looked to the man as he lowered his hands.

"I've seen other ghosts do this," he said, "deeper in the Great Below. Old ghosts. Angry ghosts."

Mary snorted and shook her head. "I'm not old."

"True. But your circumstances are special." The poor guy winced and clutched his skull again, but managed to recover before Triss could touch him.

Which was when people finally realized Beatrice was here, as in, Jacob's student, the enemy. They all slowly looked at her, even the werewolves and Damien, who managed to stumble their way over.

Jack forced himself to look at them. And they forced themselves to look at him. The Ripper getting out when it did was the worst possible thing that could have happened, they all knew it, and they all knew they couldn't let it stop them.

“I’m not letting him out again,” Jack said, “even if that means...” He half expected someone to say something, maybe something like ‘no way, you can’t kill yourself’. But the looks on their faces, even their werewolf faces, said it all. They were terrified of him, and they didn’t disagree with his plan.

Sándor gave him one hard look, but he turned and faced Athalia. “What’s going on? I thought you were going to stay in the physical world, in case something happened.”

“Something did happen,” Athalia said. “You idiots let your guard down and got locked down here, and it looks like one of those azlu things’s webs was blocking you from tunneling out.”

“How’d you find out?” Jack asked.

“Your birds,” Triss said, offering a tiny smile and tinier wave. “They realized you were trapped down here. They went looking for help. Couldn’t find any. Eventually Scully came to me.”

Scully and Mulder, taking the initiative? He’d given them specific instructions to stay out of harm’s way, especially where Jacob and Black Blood were concerned. But, he had encouraged them to think for themselves. Good thing he did.

“Okay,” he said, “let’s take a few minutes here to recoup. I ... The Ripper did a lot of horrible shit, after the ghosts and azlu showed up. Let’s ... figure out ... who’s still alive.”

Beatrice and Athalia stared at him, only now the reality of what happened sinking in.

Damien managed to join them on his own, but his face wasn’t doing any better. It was taking everything he had to not fall into torpor on the spot. The werewolves transformed back into human form, and all of them managed to get back up on their feet, too.

Barely. They joined the group, and every one of them kept Jack in the corner their eyes.

“Carter?” Jack asked. Avery shook her head. “Fuck.” Nodding, head sagging like the old anchor was back, Jack found a big rock to sit on, and winced every second it took to get on it. His insides were on fire, and he kept flexing his right hand, feeling the tendons fight against wounds.

Sándor moved from person to person, and helped them all sit on a nearby rock. They needed it. The werewolves were stubborn, but even they accepted the man’s help, and sat or leaned against the big rock a little ways from Jack. They refused to have their backs to Jack, even as they tried to hide it.

Damien sat down on Jack’s rock.

Jack couldn’t help but laugh, and it sounded a little choked. “Damien you fucking idiot.”

The man shrugged, and of course regretted it immediately. Everyone was fucked up, beaten and broken, but Damien couldn’t heal as well as Jack or the wolves. His jaw was still fucked, and every motion he made, he took care to not put any momentum into it that might make his jaw move. Give him another twenty or thirty minutes and he might be able to heal the bone enough to get the jaw working, but that was it.

“Okay, elephant in the room,” Jack said. “The curse is under control again, and will be for the rest of the night. Even if something happens, I’ll take back control immediately. You saw me do it, and I’ll do it again.”

The wolves, Sándor, and Damien all looked at him, eyes heavy. They knew what he meant. For now, he’d found the will he needed to bring the curse under control, by trying to kill himself. And it fucking sucked.

Cry later. Fix the problem now.

“Second elephant. Uh, Athalia and Beatrice and Mary are here.”

Triss threw up her hands. “If you’re worried I’m some sort of sleeper agent, don’t be! I had no fucking clue what was going on, that Jacob and Black Blood were up to anything, and fuck you guys, I resent being kept in the dark.”

Jack smiled at her. “Yeah, we figured. But if you knew, you really think you’d be able to keep the secret from Jacob? That he wouldn’t sus it out?”

Flailing hands turned into limp arms, and she grumbled as she slipped them into her jean pockets.

“Well fuck me.”

He almost apologized, but they had no time.

“You here to stop us?”

“You fucking kidding me? I’m here to save your ass! You and Sándor and everyone else.”

You and Sándor. The gargoyle glanced her way, and she glanced his. Just quick glances that didn’t mean anything to anyone else, but Jack knew Triss pretty well, and after the shit he’d seen in Sándor’s mind, he knew him well enough, too.

“Once we’re past the azlu webs,” Jack said, “Sándor can take us through a tunnel down deeper, where Black Blood is performing the ritual. We expect resistance, especially if Black Blood’s convinced a bunch of ghosts to help him.”

“Sabrina was unstable,” Sándor said. “Easily manipulated.” Mary snarled at the man, but Sándor didn’t react. Probably for the best. “I



don't think Black Blood will so easily manipulate the ghosts deeper in the Great Below."

Jack raised a finger. "Before we get going, I need some details. What happened with Scully and Mulder?"

"After Scully came to me, bitching and whining," Triss said, "we realized everyone was gone. Everyone except maybe the Prince, or the Begotten. Since everyone's convinced Jacob's behind all this, I figured, hey, Prince might not exactly trust me, you know? So Jen and I went to see Athalia. She told us what was up."

Everyone looked at Athalia, but she just shrugged.

"Jennifer and Beatrice were in the dark, and if not for her, I wouldn't have come, or have Mary for backup. And those ghosts and that Sabrina girl would have killed Jack, and probably the rest of you, too."

"Yeah, so don't you fucking judge us." Triss pointed a finger at Jack, and twisted it around a few times. "Shit is going down, and I want to talk to Jacob before everything explodes. You all think he's going to start an apocalypse. I think the man deserves a chance to talk."

Everyone looked to Beatrice, listening, before looking to Athalia again.

"Hey, I told her the plan was to stop Jacob and Black Blood, no matter what."

"And that's bullshit. Jacob may be a lot of things, but my boss is not some fucking psychotic murderer out to kill everyone." Triss pointed at Jack again. "And I've seen him with your mom. You might not like to think it, asshole, but Jacob's been great with her. Fuck me, he might even love her."

It was like someone stabbed him in the ass with a red hot poker, and he ground his teeth as he forced down the reflex to cringe.

“I know.”

“Well then, what the fuck? Y’all just gonna hunt him down and kill him? I want to hear what he has to say! And you fucking owe me.”

He let out a slow sigh before nodding. “Jen—”

“Went to go see Bitch McBig Tits. And now your asshole girlfriend is holding her hostage.”

“And Jen—”

“Told her what was up, about all this.” Triss gestured around her. “I asked the Prince for her help, but she said she was too busy.”

Too busy meant she was doing something directly connected to the situation. Rescue? Maybe. But more likely something to do with stopping Jacob and Black Blood. She didn’t tell Jack what sort of stuff she was up to, explaining that it was better they didn’t all share with each other every secret, in case Jacob managed to figure out what someone was up to, he wouldn’t figure out everything. Not putting all the eggs in one basket, and shit like that. It made Jack feel like he was working for the government, and vomit inducing as that feeling was, it did make sense.

Nodding, Jack rubbed his head a few times. Pain. Still not enough new skin to protect all the bits. He looked back to Sándor, and watched as the man checked in with everyone.

Athalia, Mary, and Triss had come down to save their asses. And they’d succeeded, mostly. He did owe Triss for that. The idea of bringing his sister along terrified him, but Mary wasn’t Mary. It was

her ghost, a remnant, something not her. And at the moment, she was the scariest one out of all of them.

Which pretty much sealed the deal on whether or not they were coming.

“I know Sándor and Athalia are coming. And I can’t stop you two.” He gestured to Triss and Mary, but all that got him was a couple frowns in return. Triss’s frown was scary, and Mary’s was utterly horrific. He moved on. “Damien, Avery, Clara, David, Mason, Erica, Noah. I ... don’t think you should come. You’re injured, and—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Avery said. “Even if we were missing our fucking arms—”

“Hey,” Mason said, and he gestured to his half arm. The werewolves laughed, though they regretted it immediately, each of them groaning and clutching their ribs.

Every single werewolf looked like they’d been through hell. Bleeding, faces smashed in, visible dents in their bodies, broken limbs they’d managed to get together enough to function, barely. It was a mess. And every time Jack forced himself to look Clara’s way, she looked back at him, and for some reason neither of them looked away, until it started to sting.

Jack only had one eye, and while he’d managed to heal some of his face, he knew it still looked pretty fucked up. The fact a werewolf had raked him straight across it was probably still blatant. And she looked like someone had smashed her face in with a hammer. If she had any teeth left, he couldn’t see, since she could barely open her mouth and her lips were swollen. One of her eyes refused to open, even more swollen. Her cheek bone looked broken, and from how her arm dangled, he knew that was worse than broken.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. The Ripper, never satisfied with just a physical beat down, taunted her, found what he thought were

the best words to hurt her, and used them. It was a good thing Harcourt wasn't here, or the Ripper would have ripped his guts out and worn them like a hat, all for Clara's sake. Anything to hurt her. Anything to hurt Jack.

So they stared at each other for a little while, just long enough it made things worse, before they finally looked away.

"Then, I guess we get moving," Jack said. "We continue on, get out of the range of these spiderwebs, and Sándor pops us open a tunnel to the center tear, a few levels down." And to seal in the imagery of how fucking scary that was, he pointed down, at the endless mist beneath their feet.

Mary hovered over to him. He almost recoiled, but forced himself to meet her empty black gaze as she gently poked one of his wounds. Gently enough to not hurt him, thank god.

"I'll protect you. And Mom."

"Mary, I—"

"I'll protect you. And Mom! I won't let anything happen to you. Mom won't be alone! It won't happen! Won't! Won't! W—"

"Mary," Sándor said, "the ghosts deeper in the Great Below are extremely violent, and their age has made them inhuman. They won't be..." His voice trailed away as Mary slowly turned her head, a full one eighty degrees, and glared at him. It was enough to have everyone squirming.

"We believe you," Triss said, hands raised placatingly at Mary. "Just, everyone's a bit beat up, and maybe a little crazy right now. We need to be smart, right?"

Mary drifted away from Jack and joined Triss's side. The two of them continued talking, but Triss managed to sneak a glance Jack's

way, and a nod. She was on Mary duty, then. Thank god someone was. If Jack had to play chauffeur to his unstable, and apparently crazy psycho strong, and mutated sister's ghost, it wouldn't end well.

“Jack, a word? In private?” Sándor asked.

“Uh, sure, yeah.” He looked to Damien, but before his dumbass friend could get off the rock to give them privacy, Jack hopped off instead. After giving Damien a small pat on the knee, and an eye roll, he walked off with Sándor maybe fifty feet. Everyone watched them, except Mary. No doubt he wanted to talk about her, and she was the only one who didn't have the presence of mind to realize that.

“Your sister's ghost has changed.”

“Yeah, you said that.”

“I've seen ghosts like her before. Ghosts evolve as they age, especially those in the Great Below. It only gets worse the deeper you go.”

“But she's never been in the Great Below.”

Sándor nodded slightly as he looked down, before taking a quick peek at Mary through the corner of his eye.

“She's ... on an accelerated path. Likely because—”

“Of all the shit she's been through. Getting resurrected, dying again, all the other shit, I can't even fucking imagine.”

“Indeed. I've seen ghosts like her before. Some places called them the moroi, or moroai. They were devourers, and that included living things.”

“Jesus...”

“Other places called them banshees. They are ... violent ghosts, Jack, and hungry.”

A banshee. That’d certainly explain the constant screaming and wailing she did when fighting or breaking things.

Jack rubbed his buzzed hair. There were a slices through it where skin had grown over but hair hadn’t, and he frowned down at the mist as he rubbed it some more.

“We’ll run into more ghosts like that, when we go deeper?”

“Maybe. The ghosts down there evolve into many strange things, often abandoning human shapes. We’ll avoid them, as best we can. But...”

“But we might need Mary’s help to deal with them, right?”

He looked Jack in the eyes, face solid steel.

“Yes, and it could get her killed.”

They looked at each other for a few uncomfortable seconds before Jack looked down and rubbed his head more. Her dying wouldn’t necessarily be the worst thing, and they both knew it. And holy fuck, Jack felt like fucking dogshit for thinking it.

“It’s a good thing she’s here. We need her help.”

“I know, and I don’t disagree. But I thought you should know ... I’ve never seen a ghost as ... degraded as her, not get worse.”

# Chapter 171

~~Damien~~

It'd been a long time since he'd been in this much pain. Maybe that time he'd helped Jack and the others bring down Jeremiah and Angela? Fighting Sándor's Horror had certainly been painful. Maybe that time the azlu had stabbed him through the stomach, straight through him, and left a large hole in his guts and spine? That hadn't been too painful, considering how quickly he'd gone into torpor, only to be awoken by Beatrice's blood.

Beatrice. The Nos took a peek his way, long enough for them to share that uncomfortable memory, before she looked back to Sándor. She'd been doing that a lot. He'd thought maybe she'd been taking piano lessons from him to impress the gargoyle, but seeing her watch Sándor as he and Jack talked, sealed the deal. She liked him. It was understandable. Sándor was a great guy. But Triss was not only Jacob's protege, she was also trying to resurrect her dead lover. It was a love triangle even a soap opera couldn't match. Love square, with Jennifer involved.

He watched her as best he could, but he knew even if she tried something, he was in no condition to stop her. There wasn't a drop of vitae left in him. He'd managed to heal his jaw enough it worked again, but that was the best he could do. If someone so much as looked at him too strongly, his face would probably crack like an egg and spill his brains. He had his sword back, but swinging it would be near impossible. He was tempted to give it back to Jack, but considering what the kid had tried to do with it, maybe he could wait on that.

The kid was willing to kill himself to stop the Ripper. He'd legitimately tried. And the moment Jacob and Black Blood were

dealt with, he'd try again. Maybe someone could stake him before he did, but that'd only delay the inevitable. The necklace had ultimately backfired, given them all a false sense of security, and now Monica and Caleb were dead because of it. The kid would never forgive himself for that.

Lord, please, the kid didn't deserve this.

"You guys absolutely sure you want to come?" Jack asked.

"Enough already," Avery said. "We're going."

He winced as he looked between the six remaining werewolves, before nodding, and looking to Beatrice.

"Triss, I—"

"I'm going. I need to talk to him. You'll either have to stake me or kill me, because I'm going."

Jack sighed and looked to Athalia.

"Don't look at me. I'm not dragging her back. Besides, I'm here now, and we know for sure Jacob's going to try something tonight. I'm going, too."

He looked to Mary.

"I'm going! I don't want to hurt Jacob, but if he's going to let that ... that ... black thing, tear everything down, then what happens? What happens to you, and Mom? No! Black Blood is—"

"The reason you got to try a body again," Triss said. She regretted it the moment she said it, eyes widening, and she took a step back as she put up her hands. "Sorry. Fuck me, I'm sorry. But you're all so convinced Jacob and Black Blood are out to kill everyone, but—"

"Not kill everyone," Jack said. "But they are going to—"



“What, start an apocalypse, that then that kills everyone? Bullshit. Fuck, I had to kick Aaron’s ass to get here, because that dude is so convinced what Jacob wants to do is good for everyone, that he was willing to die for it. You get that? Jesus christ, Black Blood is the reason Jeremiah didn’t kill all of you!”

Silence heavy enough a graveyard would be envious. Everyone looked between each other, with more than a few wincing. Only Sándor managed to keep his eyes on her.

“Beatrice,” Sándor said eventually, “we don’t want to kill them. We want to stop them. That’s all.” Unfortunately for the man, the tone in his voice, monotone as it was, said it all. Stopping them most likely meant killing them, or at least killing Jacob. Whether Black Blood could even be killed or destroyed was still a question mark.

Jack let out a snort. “My necklace is gone. We could get everyone to comb this place for it, but you know damn well we’ll never find it in time. Hell, a ghost probably had orders to run off with it. It’s gone. That was Black Blood’s fault.”

Slowly, Damien put up a finger.

“He did tell us to stay put. This fight wouldn’t have happened if we—”

“If we what?” Jack said. “Just let Jacob destroy the—”

Triss threw up her hands. “He’s not destroying the world! We don’t know if—”

“He’s going to break the whole fucking universe,” Avery said, and she dragged herself toward Triss, rage boiling in her eyes. “He lost his girl, and now he’s pissed and wants to merge it all, get rid of the whole life and death cycle. He’s a bastard who’s throwing a hissy fit, and he’s bringing us all down with him.”

“Oh fuck you.” The Nos walked up to Avery, and met her glare with her own. “Jacob has done more for me than anyone. He deserves the benefit of a doubt.”

Jack shook his head. “We’re pretty sure he and Black Blood triggered the war between the Invictus and Carthians, probably for the distraction.”

“Did he kill anyone?” Triss asked, eyes snapping to Jack.

Jack hesitated. “No.”

“Then what the fuck? Everyone running in with guns out ready to kill him, but—”

“He’s going to get everyone killed!” Jack threw up his own hands, and got in Triss’s face, even closer than Avery. “Killed, or turned into soup, I don’t fucking know! We have to do something.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Enough!” Everyone snapped their heads to Sándor, and the man let out a slow breath. For a split moment, there was something more in his expression than his usual stoic calmness. He looked angry. “Enough. We have no time. We will go, and figure out how to handle the situation when we arrive. I am not willing to let Black Blood alter the fabric of the entire world, but Beatrice is correct, as well. Jacob and Black Blood deserve the benefit of a doubt.”

Everyone listens when a quiet man speaks.

Slowly, they all nodded, and looked to Jack. Jack shrugged and motioned to Sándor. And again, a hint of emotion came through the man’s face. Surprise? Awkwardness? He didn’t expect to suddenly have everyone looking to him on what to do.

It took him a second to find the words. “Let’s go.”

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The werewolves struggled to keep up, for a little while. After five minutes, their wounds healed well enough they managed to follow, though it was also because Sándor slowed down to a fast walk. No point in tiring them, or himself out, before he opened a tunnel into what was going to be utter chaos. They didn't know what they were walking into, how could they? All they could do was go through Sándor's tunnel, and come out near the deepest tear, where Jacob and Black Blood were working to destroy the world.

Damien and Clara took up the rear. His legs mostly worked, and so did hers, though one of her arms was borderline useless. Sándor glanced back frequently, scanning for ghosts that might dive them, but it looked clear. And Mary hovered above, circling, also looking for ghosts to scare off. Or more likely, devour.

"You trust her?" Clara whispered, and she nodded toward Beatrice.

"Mostly."

"Mostly." After a quiet growl, not nearly as intimidating in her human form, Clara clutched her ruined shoulder.

"She's smarter than she seems," Damien said.

"You sure? 'Cause so far, all I know is she's been trying to bring back her dead lover, and in the process, caused Samantha a shit load of pain."

Damien shook his head. "That's not a fair statement."

"You know the details?"

"No..."

"Then," she nodded again in Beatrice's direction, "don't be so quick to assume you can trust her. She was willing to get her fingers

into some very fucked up pies, Damien.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“I ... fuck, I don’t know. Gotta tell someone.”

“Jack?” he asked.

“Nah. His head’s not ... it’s not on right.”

That was putting it lightly.

“Sándor?”

“I thought about that, but ... you seen the way they look at each other?” She leaned in closer. “Triss was genuinely concerned about the dude. Almost like she came down here just to save him, you know? And I think Sándor is ... well, he’s hard to read, but I think he’s not oblivious to it.”

Damn. If Clara could put it together, there was a chance other people would, too. It wasn’t exactly a bad thing, if Beatrice was interested in Sándor, or vice versa, but it did make things complicated.

“Jesus,” Clara said, “I’m glad Brace isn’t here.”

“Oh?”

“He’d be dead.”

“Maybe.”

“Ha, I guess. He is a hunter. Dude’s got some tricks up his sleeve. But ... after what happened, with the Ripper?” She shivered. “You just know that fucking psychopath would have killed him in the most horrible way, just to hurt me.”

“That ... is true.”

“And fuck me, I...” Wincing, she looked to Jack, then back to Damien. She opened her mouth again, but no words came out, and she sighed as she slowly looked down.

“It won’t happen again,” he said.

“You know that for sure?”

“I do.” Damien gestured to the sword on his back. “He tried to kill himself, Clara, to make sure it didn’t happen again. The resolve it’d take to come to that conclusion, is immense. And I can guarantee that’s still his plan.”

She slouched, and that invisible anchor he’d grown quite familiar with hung off her neck in front of her.

“Carter’s dead. And Ja ... the Ripper killed Monica and Caleb. Fuck ... fuuuuck. Avery won’t even talk about, it. She’s—”

“Focusing on the mission so Jacob doesn’t trigger Armageddon. Your boss has the right idea.” The fact Clara had almost said Jack killed her pack mates didn’t escape him. She was cracking.

“I know. I know, alright?” She put a hand to her jaw. Like Damien, her mouth was a royal mess, split lips and missing half a dozen teeth, lopsided, and he was pretty sure her left cheek bone was cratered. “And—”

“Clara, we’re going to see this through. Either we save the day or we all die trying. Lord willing, we stop Black Blood and Jacob from destroying everything, and we live to see another night.”

Lord, what sort of insanity led him to being the voice of will and courage? That was not the territory of Mekhets. And yet, it was land

his sire had walked, frequently. Perhaps a little of him was showing through. He prayed it was only a little.

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Getting clear of the spiderwebs took longer than they expected. A fifteen minute journey. Not exactly an eternity, but it felt like one, with everyone forced to walk as their injuries continued to heal. No one managed to recover fully, though Jack's injuries seemed to become an afterthought for him. He still looked like hell, but whatever strange power the curse gave him, it allowed him to continue pushing and fighting until he was well past what most vampires could handle. Even if he lost both arms and legs, and had his guts ripped out, he'd keep fighting. The only way to legitimately kill him, would be to cut off his head.

Damien hated that he was thinking about it. He hated that Jack had been thinking it, too, and likely still was.

There were many spiderwebs, far more than anyone expected, giant things that reached high and connected colossal stones to colossal pillars. The azlu had been busy, probably doing its best to do what it did, weave webs, while also only eating when absolutely necessary to avoid gathering attention. Smart.

Why it had an instinctual need to weave webs that separated the realms, strengthening the walls between them, the Uratha didn't seem to know. But it was what they did. And considering Black Blood and Jacob were trying to tear down the barriers between realms, they wanted the azlu gone as much as the Uratha did. Which carried some scary implications. How much of their fights with the azlu over the years had been orchestrated by the spirit of death?

Sándor held up a hand, looked around, and a hint of a grimace showed on his face.

“Give me a moment. Burrowing from here isn't easy.”

“Why?” Noah asked.

“No true darkness. No similarities with my lair. No pathway to reuse, no portal, nothing. This will be ... draining.”

Sándor held out his hands at his side, and squeezed them, as if grabbing the air. As he did, the silhouette of the gargoyle emerged. Four enormous wings and four enormous arms reached out, and did the same, the four hands grabbing the air and pulling it in toward Sándor like invisible curtains. As he did, darkness fell on them. The green lanterns in the distance disappeared, and eventually so did the giant boulders and pillars, the distant, almost infinitely high walls, and the mist. Soon, all any of them could see, was blackness.

Damien wasn't too far from Athalia when Sándor started, and so close, he could hear her breath quickening. Whatever it was Sándor was doing, it was enough to have Athalia in literal awe. Truthfully, Damien had never seen anything from Sándor to make him think the gargoyle was some monolith of strength like Azamel had been, but then again, he hadn't ever witnessed Sándor engage his strength outside of a simple fist brawl with the Ripper. And back then, it'd only been his Horror, separated from Sándor himself.

Now, Damien couldn't help but stare up at the disappearing cave, and how the gargoyle in front of them somehow managed to bury it all in darkness. He didn't just wrap them in a pocket of black. He brought darkness down on the whole area. A hundred yards? Two hundred? Three? It all vanished behind the veil.

Athalia's breathing changed, and vanished. Damien looked at her, but the darkness was too thick. Pitch black. He could hear her though, and it wasn't her anymore. Athalia's Horror didn't breathe, but he could hear the giant bone hands on stone.

“We in the dream?” Jack asked ahead.

“No,” Sándor said, deep voice a rumbling bass. “We are burrowing. It cuts near the dream.”

Burrowing, indeed. They were moving. Damien sucked in a useless breath as he looked around. Still too dark to see anything, but there was movement in the black, as if the darkness itself was a river they were swimming through. His feet didn't move, and the ground he stood on remained solid, but his Kindred eyes caught enough hints of something to tell him they were moving. A kine would have gotten motion sickness, if they'd somehow noticed.

One minute of silence. One minute of no one saying anything, waiting with baited breath — the breathers, anyway — as Sándor brought them deeper into the Great Below. Sándor had already described to them what they'd find, but they all knew there was no way they'd be able to appreciate it until they actually saw it.

They were right.

Sándor pulled the darkness open, like someone pulling apart an onyx curtain of Saran wrap, and the light spilled over them. Light was a strong word. More like, hints of reflection, as if light had managed to sneak its way into Hell, and they were getting glimpses of it shining against the endless walls of the endless depths.

“Holy shit,” Triss said, looking up and around.

The Great Below from before looked cozy compared to the world that welcomed them now. The ceiling was just as high, miles high, as if they hadn't gone deeper at all, but the pressure on Damien's skin told him otherwise. Everything felt heavier, and everything looked darker. Stone, endless stone, with stalactites big enough to destroy city blocks if they fell, and stalagmites as tall as skyscrapers.

The differences were immediate. There was no mist. Everything looked wet, was wet, with lines of water dripping down the rock faces that surrounded them. Or at least, it looked like water, slowly



trickling down the stone, until it fell into the black around around their feet. Damien almost jumped up when the water soaked through his shoes, but the silence told him to stay put and don't move.

Black water, shallow, but everywhere. Oh good Lord.

"It's not Black Blood," Clara whispered. "It's ... from the same place, I guess? It's not the spirit. I'd smell it if it was."

Everyone relaxed, slightly, and looked back out to the cave. This one had more cave tunnels to it, colossal winding paths that led into each other, creating less a maze of tunnels, and more an endless array of warped, twisting and turning pillars of stone so massive they were beyond reasoning. From wide births in the stone above, bits of light fell on them, giant beams that were soft, afraid to light up the blackness with anything more than subtle, passive illumination.

There was no color. No green lanterns of ghosts searching for whatever it was they searched for. All they could see, no matter the direction they looked, was a giant cave that looked like the evil twin of the cave they'd just come from. The fact they now had to walk in cold black water several inches deep, made it a thousand times worse.

"Watch where you step," Sándor said. "The Great Below isn't ... stable."

"Earthquakes?" Triss asked.

"No. It's not solid matter. It will change if something decides to attack us."

"What the fuck? How?"

“I don’t know. The few times it happened to me, it was very strange. The ghosts here have evolved into little more than monsters, and the Great Below alters with them wherever they go.”

Triss groaned as she clutched her arms and hugged herself. “Fucking lovely.”

Sándor faced ahead, took a small sideways step closer to Triss, and walked forward.

---

~~Beatrice~~

Well, she was in the shit, now. Deep shit. The deepest shit shat by a god of shitting. Every second that passed, the familiar air of the Great Below sank deeper into her. Her combat boots wouldn’t let water this shallow in, but that didn’t stop the atmosphere from punching her in the guts over and over. She knew this feeling. She’d felt it every time she’d summoned Black Blood for his help.

Death. Not rotting corpse death. Not violent death. Not even the blood or guts or anything death often came with. Just, death, the sort of death you found in a graveyard, but only at night. A heavy, cold blanket, something that pushed you down and sucked the heat and energy out of you.

She’d gotten used to the feeling. She’d had to. Every time Black Blood answered her, she’d had to stand in the presence of the huge bastard, and drink in the essence of him, whether she wanted to or not. It wasn’t the sort of a thing a human could do. Hell, she doubted anyone who wasn’t already half dead could be around Black Blood too long. No wonder he and Jacob worked together.

Sándor took a step closer to her, or more like, slid a little closer to her, and started ahead. She smiled at the back of his head, but something else punched her in the gut. A memory. Julias, slipping in a little closer to her, back on their first date, and she’d been like

an angry cat, hissing at him. Christ, she was stupid. She was so fucking stupid.

The water splashed around them as they walked, but it was thicker than water, and didn't make much sound. They walked slow, and scanned left and right with each step. Mary stayed close to Jack, and Athalia stayed close to Sándor, pretty much directly beside him, a little ways back, close to Triss too. And every so often, she gave Triss a worried glance. Worried about them all dying, worried about Sándor, or worried about Triss's weird relationship with Sándor, she didn't know.

Triss glanced back. The werewolves were so beat up, they were nothing but a liability at this point, and that included Damien. They should have listened to Jack and just stayed put. But then again, she couldn't blame them. If the world really was about to end, then it was all or nothing, even if 'all' included six werewolves and one vampire who wouldn't be able to do shit. They knew it, and they'd rather die as sacrifices in a battle, than do nothing. Badass, but probably futile. They didn't know Black Blood like she did. They didn't understand just how fucking powerful he was.

Gravity yanked down on Triss's right leg, and she yelped as she half plunged into a fucking hole in the water.

"The fuck!?"

Sándor had a hand on her in an instant, and he pulled her up and away. Actually, he fucking threw her, and she yelped again as she fell back on her elbows with a splash.

Before she could say anything, a huge arm shot out of the black where she'd sunk, and lashed out for Sándor. A big, black arm, just as black as the dark water, it had too many segments, three elbows that bent and twisted, and let the arm snap out at Sándor.

Sándor jumped, the silhouette of four titanic wings pushing him back with a hard gust. Athalia and Jack came up to the hole, but the arm pulled back into the black like a whip, splashing them as it vanished.

“The fuck was that?” Jack asked.

Sándor could only sigh as he let the silhouette of his Horror fade away. “A ghost.”

Mary hovered over to the hole, and stared down into it with her black gaze. For a second, Triss wasn't sure which was the deeper and scarier, the hole into death she'd almost fallen into, or the girl's eyes.

“It's gone now,” Mary said. “Whatever it was, gone. Gone gone.”

“Gone, as in gone away?” Triss asked. “Or, gone, as in ... not human anymore?”

“Both.” Mary slowly ran her long claws over the water, as if tempting the other ghost to attack her. “I can ... smell it. Smell what it was. Something angry. Something that killed. Something that was stopped.”

Jack risked coming a little closer. “Stopped?”

Mary came closer to the water until her nose almost touched it, and she hovered there for a few seconds. Gravity pulled her hair and rags down, but far too slowly, as if the girl was borderline immune to ... existence.

“Executed, for drowning people.”

Triss snarled as she got up off her butt. “Well ain't that just fucking fitting.” Groaning, she slapped her ass. Yeap, soaked. But at

least she didn't get any water in her boots yet. "Okay, so holes in the ground. Any other surprises?"

Sándor offered her a small smile, and a smaller shrug. "I'm sure there will be. Ghosts pass through, and the place changes."

"Almost like the spirit world?" Jack asked.

Sándor shook his head. "More immediate. Be on your guard. We still have another half hour of walking."

"Why drop us off so far from where we're going?" Triss asked.

"If we came out too close, Jacob or Black Blood might notice."

That was true. Their entrance wasn't exactly subtle, and Black Blood and Jacob would probably intercept, or squash them the moment they stepped out of Sándor's tunnel, or something. Which meant, the only reasonable course of action, was to drop them off far enough they could approach sneaky style.

Which meant there was a good chance she'd walk into another hole that'd try to kill her. Except she couldn't drown. How the fuck would that work?

"Let's keep going," Jack said. "We're running out of time."

On they went. Jack, Sándor, Mary, and Athalia took lead, scanning the floor and sky for potential doom. Everyone else stayed directly behind them, with enough distance that if a ghost explosion suddenly blew them up, it wouldn't take out the whole group. Probably. Triss stayed in the middle of the group, able to help someone if some ghosts came at them from behind. Probably.

Sándor glanced back over his shoulder. For a second, Triss thought he was looking past her at the werewolves, or maybe Damien; they were still all royally fucked up. But they met eyes, and

looked at each other for a few seconds. It wasn't as if Sándor normally avoided eye contact, it wasn't his style. But something in his eyes caught Triss off guard, and she stared into his gaze, unable to look away.

Something had changed. He gave another barest hint of a smile, and looked ahead again.

Ten minutes later, Sándor held out a hand, and everyone stopped and crouched. A deep, rumbling sound filled the air, followed by a heavy crash.

Triss crept up and joined the front line. She almost asked what was up, but the shadows ahead moved, and she shut up quick as she watched.

That, was big. Black Blood? No, and whatever it was, it moved ahead with the same colossally slow movement she'd expect from a giant dinosaur. Big, heavy steps, each that crunched the stone underneath it. No talons, but big, flat, almost circular feet. It moved on all fours, but it was in a squat, like a gorilla or something. It didn't have a head. Instead, the chest had a single, big fucking eye, and it glowed white as the giant thing moved along.

Wherever it walked, the ground and shallow water spread apart. Crunching stone, earthquakes, massive vibrations pulsed out with each step, before its weird giant feet even hit the ground. It let out a bellow, without a mouth, and looked in their direction.

Thankfully they'd been smart enough to get behind some big rocks when Sándor had put up his hand. A giant white beam of light shot out from the creature's weird eye, and passed over them like a searchlight. No one moved. Even the werewolves, wincing in pain as they crouched in awkward positions, didn't so much as groan, as the blinding light moved over their cover.

It moved on. The strange searchlight pointed ahead of the towering creature, and it walked away, each step it took still splitting the ground apart and leaving behind craters.

“Mary,” Triss whispered, shaking her bracelet, “maybe you should hide in here? Other ghosts might, uh, sense you, I guess?” It might sense living things too for all she knew, but ghosts did seem able to interact with each other in a way they couldn’t with living things.

Mary frowned at her, and looked to Jack, but Jack gestured to Triss. Finally, a bit of trust. Mary hovered over to her, and slipped into the bracelet, like a puff of smoke coming out of someone’s mouth, in reverse. One second there, the next, gone.

“Thought I recognized that bracelet,” Jack said.

Triss grinned at him, and plucked it a couple times. The elastic band snapped the cute bracelet back in place, earning a smile from the kid.

They moved on. Endless, giant pathways surrounded them, and they all looked the same, but Sándor seemed to know where he was going. And whenever a strange noise came up, everyone ducked into cover.

The ghosts down here weren’t fucking human. Sándor had said that, but this was insane. The gorilla ghost twice the size of a T-Rex was just the beginning. One ghost went by that looked like a centipede, made of human torsos, and wherever its hands touched the shallow black water, the water recoiled and refused to flow back, as if the ground the centipede touched was tainted. Another ghost flew by, on an actual wings, with human arms dangling from its underbelly. The pillars moved aside rather than let it touch them, and considering how titanic the pillars were, the whole Great Below groaned with the sound of shifting stone.

Another flew by, hovering a few feet over the water. It looked like a giant eel, except massive, maybe fifty feet long, with wriggly, moving skin. It didn't get close, and Triss had to squint, but unless she was wrong, its skin was made out of human fingers. No eyes, and a giant mouth that looked all too similar to Mary's, or what Mary's might become. As it hovered along, the cave let out quiet, but very deep moans, and the stalactites above pulled down, lengthening. The eel was like, some sort of zipper or something, and the cave followed its path by dragging the giant stalactites closer to the ground.

One ghost left Triss hypnotized. Whatever it was, it stayed mostly under the water, with only some bumps from a likely very warped spine sticking out of the water's surface. The bumps were skulls. And as it passed, stone pillars grew up from the ground in its wake. They came up slowly, and reached about ten feet high, maybe four feet wide. And on each one was a crucified skeleton. Stranger, was the pillars didn't disappear or anything. They stayed there, permanent, dozens of small pillars in a scattered pattern behind the borderline invisible spirit, marking the path it had swam, as if some sort of horrible crusade crucifying sinners had come by.

That, was a scary fucking thought. The ghost of a crusader, maybe? That was one very old, very powerful ghost. Jesus fuck, what if they came across the ghost of someone who burned witches? Or the ghost of a witch that'd been burned?

She glanced down at the bracelet. Mary was on the road to becoming a twisted, fucked up ghost like that, something that embodied an aspect to a ridiculous degree. A entity of murder, or rage, or hate. Sabrina had been on that road, too, before Mary ate her.

Christ, poor Sam. There was no stopping it now. She had to say goodbye to her daughter's ghost, because if they brought Mary back to the surface in her current condition, there was a good chance



she'd kill people. And that'd probably include innocent people. Heartless as Kindred could be, they did try to keep innocent people alive. Save for a few assholes like Honors, vampires in Dolareido didn't like seeing nice people die, and that was exactly what would happen with a hungry, angry, volatile monster ghost like Mary. Though, truthfully, the elders would be more concerned about a ghost attracting unwanted attention and breaking the Masquerade, more than anything.

How much of Mary's change was Triss's fault, she didn't know. She had a sneaking suspicion it was mostly hers, and another sneaking suspicion Sam might hate her for it. She knew she wouldn't. Sam just didn't have that in her. But, still.

They continued on, and even though no one had to ask for it, they went slower. No one touched the ground where the centipede left dry craters in the water. No one touched the skeletons on the stone pillars. You didn't need magical powers to tell this place was fucking deadly to all life, and the only things that'd survive down here were either already dead, or half dead. They couldn't stay long.

They stopped at a river. A deep canyon with thick shadows cut through the stone, and the apparently endless water around their feet flowed into it, slower than water should have. They could hear the water below, but from high up, it was borderline impossible to see, more black moving inside blackness.

“Uh, can we get a lift across?” she asked Sándor.

He shook his head as he gestured down the river.

“It's grown since I was last here. But there was a bridge. Hopefully it's grown, as well.”

Shrugging, she followed after him.

Bridge was not the word she would have used. More like, path of the damned. It was a bridge, but made of bones stained black. They were arranged in an ancient, brutal pile, as if someone with no understanding of art or architecture took a bunch of corpses, stuck them together, and let them rot until the bones fused. And somehow, it worked. The bones worked together to create a massive arch that crossed the wide canyon.

You couldn't build a bridge out of bodies, she knew that. But this place didn't give a shit about things like physics. She stared down at the bones, piled on each other, a mountain of dead, thousands of corpses, now broken apart into nothing more than rib cages and limbs and skulls. The bridge had no railing, no overhead arches or suspension beams or anything. It was just one long, thick stretch of bones, and they creaked and rattled as the group stepped on them. Sometimes they broke, old bones turning to shards, but the bridge held strong.

Triss, like any metal head, normally really loved that sort of aesthetic. Except down here, it didn't look pretty or artful. There wasn't anything awesome about a pile of dead bodies, even if they were down to nothing but bone, and that's exactly what they were walking on. A big pile of the dead that somehow shaped itself into a bridge. It looked ugly, and vile.

What crazy-ass ghost created it? What sort of monstrosity could go around creating structures out of thousands of corpses? Had to be someone from history, someone important, who built their world on the backs of the dead. Someone who thought they were above death or something. Maybe after a thousand years of being trapped down here, they evolved into something fucked up that went around, crafting shit out of bones?

She gulped as she peeked over the edge of the ugly bridge, and down into the river below. Something was moving down there. She glanced over at Sándor, and he nodded, knowing, but didn't react

otherwise. So everyone just kept walking along, or sneaking along, as best they could.

Everyone came to a stop after they got off the bridge and rounded a curved wall, and stared out into a new area of what the fuck.

Now, it looked like actual, real, artful architecture. Unlike the pile of death they'd just come from, now everyone was forced to look up, up and up, at a giant archway, made of bones big enough for gods. Multiple of them, towering overhead as they circled an area miles across. So damn big the giant boulders the crew had been using for cover looked like pebbles. Each archway had to be at least half a mile tall, the tops nothing but blurs no matter how hard she squinted. They didn't reach the top of the cave, not in this part of it, not even close, but they tried.

In the center of the area were standing stones, dozens of them. Not like the super famous ones. These were each as tall as a sky scraper, half as tall as the pillars of the archways, but only maybe ten feet wide, and they stood in circles, each circle a bigger circle around the smaller one, with some space between each stone. Compared to the pillars of the archways, they looked like toothpicks with how thin they were. Someone had carved etchings on their sides facing the center, and they glowed red with enough light to light up ground zero.

Above, were the ghosts. No green lanterns, as if whatever brought ghosts this deep into the Great Below destroyed whatever ghosts used to find their way. These ghosts looked like blobs of black ink or ooze, but they flowed through the air overhead, circling the archways and touching along their tops. Hundreds of them. Thousands, with shapes like centipedes and dragons and everything in between. They howled, but so far up, it didn't sound much louder than the whispers of thousands of children.

From the look on Sándor's face, the standing stones, and ghosts above, were new.

Black Blood stood in the center, between the standing stones. Actually fucking stood, a giant black skeleton sixty stories high at least. Black ooze dripped from his body, some of it so thick it looked almost like a robe made of black slime hanging from his shoulders and hips. His eye sockets each held a small white, glowing dot, and his fingers ended in claws. The endless ooze mixed with the black water at the base of the stones, causing it to boil around Black Blood's giant skeleton feet before it settled and flowed away.

Black Blood was rarely seen in his actual true body, if that's what this even was. Triss had dealt with him a dozen times, but always either as some shadow of his presence, or while he was possessing a body, often a corpse, and more often, Elen. To be here, in what was basically Hell's evil goth twin, in the presence of a fucking towering god, was paralyzing. Triss and the crew managed to get behind some rocks, but otherwise, every one of them was borderline petrified as they gazed up at Death.

"The fuck do we do now?" she asked.

"We stop the ritual," Jack said. "I see some pretty important-looking stones, judging from all the glowing writing on them. Let's just smash them."

"Direct," Sándor said.

"Uh huh. You think you can smash things that big?" she asked. Jack and Sándor shared a quick look before nodding. "Well, damn."

"What about her?" Athalia asked the boys, gesturing to Triss. "She'll give away our position."

Triss glared at her. "I am literally right next to you."

“You’ll wait until I’m not close enough to rip your head off.”

“For fuck’s sake, Athalia. Trust me a little, okay?”

Athalia glared at her. “Tell us then, Beatrice. You wanted to talk to Jacob, to figure out what was going on. When we go down there, if he tries to stop us from breaking the ritual, we’re going to kill him. What’re you going to do?”

“I ... I don’t fucking know. I want to stop him too, okay? But we don’t have to kill him.” If they even could.

The boys looked at each other again, shared a few small frowns, before Jack nodded.

“She comes. If she tries to stop us, we politely, gently, stop her instead.” And as if he hadn’t just given her a threat, Jack gave her his best friendly smile. Normally it’d have been cute. With the four big, deep scars across his face, and the single eye, it was a lot more intimidating than he probably realized.

Triss scrunched up her nose before gesturing to the others behind them, around another big ass rock. “And them?”

Jack looked to Damien, and made a few gestures with his fingers. Damien made a few back. It was like some shitty military flick, but sure enough, the two idiots nodded after a few seconds, made a few more gestures, and nodded again.

“They’ll follow as best they can when Black Blood is distracted,” Jack said. “We figure maybe they can ... do something?”

“You figure they ca—nevermind. Okay, so, we go in, and ... what? Break down those giant fucking stones, while Black Blood just stands there and watches? Look at him!” She pointed at the giant. They were still probably half a mile away, and the titan looked enormous. Like, Godzilla’s little skeleton brother enormous.

“Black Blood isn’t allowed to interfere with us directly, right?” Jack said. “The Uratha said as much, and it does seem like he can’t just ... kill us.”

“It ... he, affected us directly, twice,” Sándor said, “in my lair.”

“Yeah but he didn’t kill anyone, hurt anyone, or anything, really. First time, he mostly just yanked us clear with Jacob’s help. Second time, he broke Jeremiah’s ritual, at least long enough for Sándor to get in there. Both those times, he was in the dream world, so maybe he has more power there? And Eric and Tash say he’s stomped around in the spirit world, but doesn’t get to directly interfere with them unless they step on his toes, whatever that means. And in the physical world, he doesn’t get to do shit, right?” He looked to Triss, and waited.

She didn’t want to spill secrets. Jacob was still her boss, and she didn’t want to fuck him over. Then again, she didn’t want him to go causing apocalypses in his free time, either.

“Black Blood can’t do shit without possessing a body, and that pretty much has to be a corpse if he wants to do anything hands on, usually ... Otherwise, he’s stuck to wherever his summoning rituals are drawn, and even then, seems limited to talking. Maybe some, like, super light interaction. At least that’s how it works in this physical world anyway, which this ain’t.” She gestured to the giant stone pillars. “I can’t tell what the fuck those things are, but if I had to guess, they let Black Blood get a shit load more hands on while between them.”

“Then we don’t get between them,” Jack said.

“You know Jacob’s going to have some way of stopping you.”

The kid grinned. “Most definitely. Sándor, can you get up high somewhere, and swoop in when Black Blood is distracted? Hit one of those standing stones from behind hard enough to knock it

over?” Considering how skinny the stones were, relative to their ridiculous height, yeah, easy to imagine them falling over like dominoes with a small breeze, if hit from up high.

Sándor nodded.

“I’m going to distract Jacob,” Jack said, “pretend I hurt everyone so much that I had to come alone. Triss, uncloak me. Sándor, fly up high. Athalia, go with Triss and follow me in after, as a second distraction if necessary, or whatever you think will work. Triss, summon Mary—”

“She can hear you.”

He blinked his one eye at her, sighed, and leaned in toward the bracelet. “Mary, stay hidden until you see an opportunity to really fuck up the ritual. Sound good?” The bracelet vibrated slightly. “I’m guessing that’s a yes.” Another vibration. “Alright then. Sándor, you go.”

Sándor nodded, scanned the sky, and spread his wings. In any other place, he’d be giving himself away, but here everything was so dark, his Horror’s silhouette was almost invisible against the black. But to be careful, he flew behind one of the titanic pillars of stone first, and climbed.

Triss stared at him as he did. It was so weird, seeing his human body move as if it could fly, or climb vertical slabs of rock, but it did. Something about how his Horror interacted with his human body. However it worked, it looked really fucking cool, with a giant badass gargoyle overlaying his body as he found grooves for his huge claws to fit into.

A minute later, he was so high he looked like a dot against a giant black canvas.

Nodding, Jack dusted himself off. He didn't have a suit jacket or shirt anymore, but at least his pants were in decent condition, save for the knees. Burned off.

“Alright, I'm going,” he said, and he looked to the rest of the group. “We know what's up, guys. With me, I mean. If there's an opportunity to end this, and I get killed in the process ... just let it happen, okay?”

Oh sweet Jesus fucking Christ. Triss snapped her hand out and grabbed the dumbass by the shoulder. The bracelet vibrated.

“The fuck are you talking about?”

He grabbed her wrist and pulled it down. She tried to keep her grip on his shoulder, but he softly smiled at her as he easily forced her to let go. She might as well have been trying to fight Jacob's strength.

“Triss, come on, you saw the aftermath.”

“Yeah, and that ain't your fault.”

“I know it's not my fault, not really. But it's still my burden.”

“The fuck?”

He rolled his eyes — eye — and put a hand on her shoulder. He pushed her down until she was sitting, and she couldn't even so much as struggle in his grip. Holy fuck.

“The Ripper killed two people tonight, Triss. It nearly killed a whole bunch more.”

“That was the Ripper, not you.”

“I know. But I'm not letting it happen again.” Slowly, Jack looked to the rest of the crowd. Damien, and Avery and her werewolves



were close enough to hear everything. “I’m not. Letting it. Happen again.”

She stared at him, and he stared at her, single eye cutting through her like a knife. There was a bit of Julias in that eye, that level-headed, hard determination, the sort some people had when they found the mindset to do whatever had to be done, like cut off their own hands to escape handcuffs.

Well, fuck him and his stupid bullshit.

“We can just stake you when this is over, and figure out what to do.”

“Maybe. Maybe. And I’m not even saying don’t do that. But I am saying that so far, no one knows how to get rid of this curse.” He looked down when he said it. He was lying. “So, sure, once we’ve stopped Jacob and we know the city, and the fucking world, is safe, maybe we can try that. But no matter what happens, I’m not going to let the Ripper hurt anyone, ever again. No matter what.”

She didn’t get to say anything. The asshole got up after his stupid speech, and walked toward the standing stones.

The bracelet vibrated again. Snarling after Jack’s shadow, Triss leaned into her wrist, and whispered.

“We’re not letting anything happen to Jack, don’t you worry. I didn’t lose Julias just so I could lose his childe, too. And there ain’t no way I’m leaving your mom alone.”

She winced the moment she said it. Mary may have become a crazy psycho ghost, but she wasn’t so stupid she wouldn’t get the implication in what Triss just said. If Jack was gone, Sam would be alone. That meant Mary was already written off.

The bracelet vibrated slightly, once, and went still.

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~~Jack~~

He took a deep, useless breath, and walked forward. It was the sloppiest, shittiest plan he'd ever come up with. Plan A: knock over the big stones. Plan B: be a distraction so his friends could knock over the big stones. End of plan. If he knew what Antoinette was up to, maybe he'd be able to do something smarter or more nuanced. But he was flying blind, and those big pillars with the bazillion etchings on them looked important.

When in doubt, break stuff.

He didn't have his gun; no ammo for it anyway. He didn't have Damien's sword; wouldn't really help him much anyway. He didn't have his own sword; left behind with the azlu, and then lost in the fog, with no time to find it. It was just him, in torn up suit pants, and some soaked shoes; at least they weren't dress shoes. Presentation was important, so the Invictus had a nice cross between dress shoe and combat shoe he'd grown fond of.

He chuckled quietly at himself. Much as his imagination and thoughts tried to distract him from what he was looking at, reality came back with a vengeance as he got closer, and closer. The archways were beyond massive, supported on bone pillars thick enough it'd take minutes to walk around a single one. The standing stones in the center of the strange area looked like toothpicks because of how skinny and short they were in comparison. They were all colossal structures, and he gulped on a dry throat as he found himself staring up.

Black Blood looked like a small action figure, standing beside those things.

The huge skeleton was leaning over, and talking to someone. It was just bass-filled rasps from a distance, but as Jack grew closer

and closer, the rest of the sound spectrum filled in, and he could make out words.

“—will be alright,” Black Blood said. “Don’t you worry yer pretty little head none.”

Pretty little head? What the fuck?

Ice shot up through Jack’s limbs, and he ground his teeth as he glared up at the huge skeleton. He wouldn’t talk to Jacob like that. Who would he talk to like that? A girl. What girl? Not Triss, not Jen, they weren’t here. And there weren’t any other girls that’d be here that he’d talk to like that.

Except his mom.

He tightened his fists until his fingers trembled, and he walked faster. The pain vanished. His muscles and tendons boiled with vitae, and hints of the crimson snakes he used bubbled in his wounds, ready to emerge and protect him. If they were holding his mom hostage, he was going to rip Jacob into fucking bits.

Except, Jacob wouldn’t do that. Much as it fucking hurt to think it, Triss said the man might actually love his mother, and from what he’d seen, he had to agree with her. Then, why the fuck was she here? Maybe it wasn’t her. Maybe it was some other person, or a girl ghost, or—

It was her. Once he got close, he squinted hard enough he could see Jacob beside her, and the two stood beside a table. A wooden table by the looks of it, and definitely not a normal part of the decor. There were things on it, but he was too far to see. But he’d recognize his mother’s silhouette and posture from a mile away.

If Jack died, what would happen to her?

If Jack didn’t die, what would the Ripper do to her?

As he grew closer, but still a frustrating distance from the closest of the standing stones, Black Blood turned and faced him. The giant creature, with a skull taller than Jack's body, chuckled as he squatted down, causing his knees to poke out between the center circle of standing stones.

"I do believe I spy, with my little eyes, a little Ventrue," Black Blood said. Jack snarled up at the spirit god, and came closer. "Hold up, kid. You got that look in your eyes — eye — that tells me you're itching to stir trouble."

Beneath the giant skeleton was the tear, a mostly vertical slit cut through the air filled with strange, shifting colors, a few feet over the shallow black water. Looking at it now, it was as thick as one of Black Blood's claws, or thicker, like the skeleton had run the claw through tight fabric to tear it.

Jack took another step forward, enough that he could see past the standing stones on his left, to the table where Jacob and his mom stood. Both of them peeked their heads around their closest stone to see him. The Nosferatu wore his usual black eye bandage, and the scary dark robes that everyone pretty much assumed were made of human skin, dyed dark. His mom wore a suit, nothing special. He'd probably asked her to join him, without explaining the significance of it before she arrived. Fucking asshole.

His mom stared at him before she darted in his direction.

"Jack! What are—"

Jacob dashed out and caught her shoulder. "Wait, Samantha."

"Wait? Jack's—"

"Here to stop us, Sam."

“Us?” Jack said, glaring across the way to his mom and the fucker holding her shoulder.

His mom’s mouth fell open as she looked him up and down.  
“Jack! What happened to you?”

“What happened to me!?! Jacob knows!” Jack glared at them, fists shaking, and he took another step toward the nearest standing stone.

Mistake. Black Blood slammed a hand down in front of him, close enough he could have squashed Jack into mulch. But he didn’t. The ground shook and the water splashed, soaking Jack’s legs, but Jack didn’t budge. He flinched, but he didn’t take a step back. And with Black Blood’s hand flat against the ground, he could see over it to stare at his mom and Jacob. Close enough they could talk, far enough they had to yell at each other to be heard.

Black Blood could have scooped him up. He wasn’t. Either playing nice, or he literally couldn’t touch Jack.

“Black Blood!” his mom said. “Don’t hurt him!”

“I won’t,” the titan said. Hopefully he was lying, and literally couldn’t hurt him. “As long as he stays back. He’s here to disrupt the ritual.”

“J-Jack? What happened? Why’re you—”

“I assume,” Jacob said, “he didn’t listen to me. Right, Jack? You pushed on, Sabrina interfered, and—”

“You let the Ripper out,” Jack said, and he pointed at Jacob, glaring. “Sabrina cut off the necklace. It’s gone! The Ripper got out and killed two people! Caleb and Monica are dead! The others are half dead, dying. I had to leave them behind! That’s how I got these injuries, Mom. A ghost gave me a couple. Avery and her pack,

Damien, and Sándor gave me the others. Anything to stop the Ripper from killing them!”

His mom stared at him, a mix of fear and understanding on her face. So, she knew, or at least knew Jacob had left a trap for him that he'd have to get through to get here. That must have taken a lot of trust, for Jacob to straight up tell her that he'd left a trap to stop her son from stopping them.

Jacob sighed and shook his head, before turning and walking back toward his table of ritual shit. There were plenty of strange things on it, multiple books and artifacts, and even a small cauldron. A witch's toolkit.

“I refuse to feel sorry for any of Avery's pack, Jack. And you know why.”

“You fucking—” He took a step toward Jacob, but Black Blood let out a rumbling, raspy growl. “The fuck were we supposed to do, just let you up and end the world!”

“I'm not ending it! I—” He laughed as he threw up his hands. “I knew you'd see it like that. I knew you'd all see it like that. What would a kid like you know? Sam, maybe you can convince him?”

Jack stared at the back of the bastard's head, before setting his one eye on his mom.

“Jack, I ... I um...”

“You seriously going along with this? You know what he plans to do? What they plan to do!?” He gestured up at the giant skeleton.

“I know! Jacob told me. He told me about the barriers between realms. He's going to tear them all down.”

“You realize that means changing the entire fucking world, right? Everything’s going to smash together and change! Everything!”

“Yes! Everything! Everything will change!” The fear and worry vanished, and she stared at him as something rose up he almost never saw in his mother. Rage. “Everything should change! Do you have any idea what it’s like to lose everyone you love, Jack? Because I do! I know what it’s like to lose a husband. I know what it’s like to lose my only daughter. I know what it’s like to lose my only son!”

“I wasn’t dead! I—”

“You were! You were gone, and for all Mary and I knew, you were dead! It took years for us to accept that! You were gone, and James was gone, and we only had each other. And then I lost her! I lost her twice!”

“But—”

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to lose a child, Jack? To lose a part of you like that? Of course you don’t, and you never will. And don’t even tell me losing a vampire childe or a ghoul is the same. It’s not!”

He looked away. Of all the crazy shit he expected to run into down here, his mom defending Jacob was not one of them.

“Mom. Everyone could die.”

She scrunched up her nose like a chipmunk, but it didn’t last. The rage faded away, and she looked back to Jacob.

“It won’t matter if that happens,” she said, “because when Jacob and Black Blood are done, all those realms will combine. We’ll all be together, in the same place, and stuff like life and death won’t even be a thing! Right, Jacob?”

“That’s the plan,” Jacob said, and he picked a book off the table. “There was a time when that’s the way it was, the way it already worked. Then everything broke apart, got split off, separated into smaller chunks, and became one giant mess.” With bandaged eyes pointed down at the book, he stepped around one of the closer standing stones, and got to writing. Jack half expected the man to write with Kindred blood and his fingertip, seemed witchy enough, but instead the man used a knife. He was too far for Jack to see any details, but it was a large knife, and somehow it cut through the stone as easily as butter. The blade was dark red. Kindred blood? Probably his.

Whatever symbols he drew, each one glowed red when he was done drawing it, casting him in increasingly bright crimson light. Against the reflection of the black water beneath and around him, it looked all too much like a scene out of a horror movie.

“You really think you can just ... fix everything?” Jack asked. “Cast a ritual, against everyone else’s will, and change the whole world? You really think it’ll fix—”

Jacob snapped him a glare, and even with the bandage covering his empty eye sockets, Jack could feel the harshness in it.

“You really asking me that? You? I have never seen a kid so obsessed with trying to fix things, as if every problem you ran into was a personal challenge to your ability to fix them. Well here’s some advice from the grown ups, Jack. Life is unfair. You don’t get to fix everything.” He closed the book hard enough it made a slap sound, before he walked over to him. “And you know it. You know the world is fucked two ways from Sunday, and yet you still try and work with it. It’s a rigged game, and for some reason, you keep betting against the house.”

“You—”



“I’m not playing this stupid game anymore. Not me. Not your mother. We’re going to bring it all back together. Life won’t be unfair anymore.”

“Because there won’t be life anymore! This is suicide!”

Black Blood growled, loud, and Jack took a step back as he covered his ears.

“It ain’t suicide, little man,” Black Blood said. “You have any idea how long I’ve been down here? How many cycles I’ve suffered?” As the monster talked, his voice changed. The Southern accent faded away, and something else replaced it, something Jack didn’t recognize. Something old, with harsh syllables, and no care for how guttural and abrasive it was. He wasn’t playing anymore. “Do you have any idea, little vampire, how many times I have watched the rise and fall of civilizations? Do you have any clue, how many times I have seen the world of souls rip itself asunder. The rise and fall of kingdoms, burying themselves in corpses.” The colossus gestured around them. “There is nothing about this great machine worth sparing, little vampire. It is a broken system, its cogs and gears spinning endlessly, even as they rust and tear themselves to bits.”

Black Blood leaned in closer and closer, until the giant skull was five feet away from Jack. Jack could have sat in one of his eye sockets.

“Souls, ripping each other’s vessels into chunks, and sending each other across the chasm. I have watched it for thousands and thousands of years. I have risen and fallen with the tides of civilization, and each time I rise again to witness the slaughter that binds and feeds me. But before this endless slog of murder, when I was nothing more than a tiny mote of existence, I saw witness to the great divide. Everything, torn apart, existence so whole and complete rendered into limp, useless little realms that do nothing but churn. But I remember. Before the rivers of this broken

existence grabbed me and tainted me, I remember. I will bring it together again, little vampire. I will have her back.”

Each word was a growling rasp, but Jack understood every one. He stared up at the huge skull, and the glowing white dots in his eyes. From so close, he could see that they were white fire, burning inside empty voids.

“Her?”

“My Lady of the Dead.”

“Wait. You’re serious? You—”

Before Jack could go on a lovely rant intent on ripping into Black Blood for being a colossal asshole, willing to destroy the world for the sake of a girl, Black Blood slammed his other palm down beside him. The black water exploded outward, and Jack flew back from the impact of the dark waves against his chest.

“Do not presume to understand me, vampire! You know nothing, understand nothing. Malachi has been my companion for over two centuries, and he is not foolish enough to presume to understand my reality. You do not know what it means to live in the currents of existence, to be controlled by its ebb and flow. You do not know what it means to be bound and chained by the realms! You know nothing of an existence measured in millennia.” After another heavy growl, Black Blood pulled back his second hand, and gestured to Jacob and Jack’s mom. “Malachi realized how broken and futile this existence was, as did I. And together, we have the power to change it.”

Groaning, Jack pushed himself back up to his feet. His mom almost ran over to him, but stopped when Black Blood glanced her way. She had instructions to not touch Jack, maybe? Or maybe to not leave the standing stones area? Figure out why later, stop Black Blood now.

If he did, his mom was going to hate him. Well, as long as she was alive, she could hate him all she wanted. And for Jacob, Jack was tempted to try the ‘would Minerva really want this’ angle, but considering the sort of research Minerva did that got her killed, it was probably something she was interested in. Maybe only academically, but regardless, not a good angle.

And fuck him, he didn’t entirely disagree with them, either. Mostly, but not completely.

“How long have you been trying to do this?” Jack asked.

Jacob chuckled as he moved over to another standing stone. It took him a bit to reach it, with how far apart they were, and he walked between Black Blood’s feet to do it. Still close enough he could stop Jack, if Jack tried to dash for one of the stones.

“You want me to explain my master plan? I think we already did that.”

Snarling, Jack looked to his mom. The look she gave him almost broke him, but he glared at her with as much anger as he could pour. Finding real anger to throw at his mom was almost impossible, but tonight, he stared at her with his one eye hard enough he was afraid she’d die on the spot with how she squirmed under his gaze.

She looked away, walked after Jacob, and whispered in his ear. Jacob stopped carving his etchings long enough to hear her out, before he nodded, and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. Probably just a bit of familiar action to calm her down. The idea he’d kiss her on the cheek, in this circumstance, just because he wanted to, was too difficult to stomach right now.

“Black Blood was experimenting with tearing holes through realms since before Avery killed Minerva.” Jacob didn’t stop writing his symbols as he talked. Much as the dude liked to talk, he was also

smart enough to not let it stop him. Too smart to let a villain monologue be his undoing. “You probably found some of those old tears, right? Stable, not actually tears.”

“Yes,” Jack said.

“Him and Minerva, testing things. Black Blood had even tried making portals before Minerva, to mixed success.” He nodded as he glanced down at his book, and drew another symbol in the stone. “After she was murdered, it took a while to figure out just how far she’d gotten in her research, notes in her books I had to decipher. The few books Simon didn’t find. She’d found a way to destroy the Gauntlet, and Simon and Avery killed her for it.” He sighed as he lowered his head, earning a kiss on the cheek from Jack’s mother. He smiled at her, before returning to etching his ritual symbols. “That’s when Black Blood and I decided to make it happen, on a grand scale. Step one, tear down the walls.”

“And step two?”

“Trickier, but more than doable once spirits and gods have full freedom to act. You may have noticed entities like Black Blood can’t just go around doing whatever they want.”

“I have.” And the idea of things like Black Blood being able to just walk around, doing whatever they wanted, was terrifying.

“Like he said, chains of the realms. We tear down the walls and merge the realms, and most of those chains are gone.”

“Let me guess. You ran into problems.”

Jacob nodded, smiling to himself as he approached another standing stone, this one closer to Jack.

“We ran into a lot of problems, of course. Those azlu spiders kept showing up and undoing our work. So, with some Crúac and some

collected hair to point me in the right direction, Black Blood manipulated some spirits to leave a trail of bread crumbs for a certain pack of werewolves. They could do the dirty work of killing azlu, while Black Blood and I focused on this.”

“And the fact Avery and her pack could die doing this? Just icing on the cake, right?”

Again, Jacob glared at him, but another touch from his mom on the shoulder settled him.

“I didn’t know Simon was dead, at the time. But Avery is just as deserving of death as that mongrel was. Besides, Avery’s pack is Meninna. They live to kill hosts like the azlu. I could have sent her a card showing a picture of an azlu and she’d have come.”

“Uh huh.” Jack glared at his mom again, but spoke to Jacob. “And the wild goose chase Avery went on, looking for something Maria was up to?”

“A few years ago, I intercepted one of Ann’s item orders and replaced it. I knew she’d use it in her resonance machine, so I made sure it’d summon a spirit that’d tell her Maria was up to something. Plus, getting the blood wraiths who love Black Blood so much to repeat the same lie.” He shrugged. “A small bread crumb, with no evidence to back it up, and Avery and her crew went to Maria looking to kill. If Avery had any sense in her head, you never would have had to interfere. Am I wrong?”

No, he wasn’t wrong. Avery jumped the gun, and judging from what Jack knew about Uratha, that seemed to be a common problem. And considering Maria was looking to die at the time, it turned that whole situation into dynamite. But none of that was directly Jacob’s fault, not really.

Jack clenched his fists, but kept his gaze on his mom. She tried to match his glare, but she looked down, her momentary burst of rage

already burned away. His wasn't, and wouldn't be any time soon.

“And Amanda?”

“I slipped a ring on her finger. Black Blood and I did a lot of work on it, so it'd alter her memories and get her to behave as it did. Of course, do you really think an elder like Michael would throw an entire covenant into war over one young vampire's dead human friend? Michael grabbed the opportunity, faked her death, and had the Invictus and Carthians killing each other because that's exactly what he wanted. I just gave him an excuse. A very weak excuse, that he exploited, because he's a dog who wants his bone. Am I wrong?”

Jack's fists ached.

“Why do those things?”

“Going around and ripping tears between realms was bound to attract attention. I needed people distracted. This ain't exactly easy.” He gestured at the stones, newly formulated, according to Sándor, and also to the tear between them. “Distracting you and the Prince, though, that was beyond hard. Impossible, actually. Julias picked well. Everyone else, I can have running after their vices, or willing to killing each other over the most meaninglessly shit, with the drop a hat. Hollow, pathetic. Not you, though. Can't seem to get you off the trail.”

“And the curse? Azamel. Jeremiah and Angela and—”

Jacob sighed, shook his head, and moved onto another stone. “Sorry. That wasn't me. And trust me kid, I wouldn't wish a Strix curse on anyone. After seeing what it did to Elaine?”

Jack froze, and finally tore his eye away from his mom to stare at the elder vampire.

“What do you know about Elaine?”

“Lot more than Annie does.”

“You ... you know about—”

“Yeah, I knew her, and I know about what she did to get rid of the curse. Poor woman went through hell you can’t imagine to overcome that. Worse than anything, and I mean anything, you could ever know.”

“You knew her before Antoinette did?” Jack asked.

“Barely. I met her, when she was recovering from her addiction, and from ... curse withdrawal, if you can believe it, on top of her other issue. I helped her, on a few occasions, from giving in and killing some random young vampire in the region. Not exactly an easy feat, stopping a vampire my age, practically foaming at the mouth like they had rabies. But yes, I knew her, and helped her, at least enough she didn’t make her condition worse.”

God damn it, Elaine.

“And,” Jacob said, “you’ll be delighted to know we’re not going to let you keep that curse. It’s not fair to you, and damn it, kid, I like you. Black Blood and I helped you out a few times already, for good reason. You’re good people. Plus, the curse could be a valuable tool.”

Jack took a step back. Okay, if they tried something, it’d be the perfect opportunity for Sándor and the others to swoop in and break stuff.

“I’m not—”

The water in front of Jack erupted. He bolted back a dozen steps, but it wasn’t fast enough. Someone with dark skin and wearing a hoodie came out of the water, sending it in all directions, and from under them, a blonde woman sprinted at Jack.

---

~~Eric~~

Never had he expected Safe to get so powerful, so quickly. Sure, Eric had run into the spirit on a few occasions, ever since it'd grown past its simple beginnings and actually adopted a more complex existence. Safe became Safe of Grey Street, and Grey Street was one of the friendliest places in Dolareido. And naturally, it did what all spirits did, especially as they grew stronger: tried to spread its influence.

For spirits, spreading influence usually meant literally spreading what they represented. For a spirit of fear, that meant making more things afraid, and affecting the physical world in those same areas. For a spirit of safety, becoming a spirit of sanctuary was an ultimate expression of that safety. And if Sanctuary of Dolareido got out of control, it'd turn the whole city into one nest of pure safety, where nothing even remotely dangerous happened, ever. A dangerous possibility.

But for now, Sanctuary was the only reason Red Tide hadn't killed every one of them. It was the only reason Jessy was alive.

"Quickly," it said, and it flew forward through the casino. The spirits of addiction, greed, lust, money, lights, and a few spirits of violence and shadows, scattered. Halfly because of the Uratha that most spirits hated or feared, and halfly because a spirit that'd been slowly earning a name for itself busted into their den of sin with a flare for the dramatic, apparently. The giant glowing wings were enough to send them running like their ephemera lives depended on it.

The pack followed after Sanctuary, but it wasn't easy. Each step was pain as Eric's body fought against the wounds Red Tide had dealt him. Getting a broken bone was nothing for the spirit wolf to heal. Healing a few dozen, often of the same limb, was not so easy. Red Tide hit like a semi, and it was a wonder Eric's brain hadn't



come out through the back of his skull each time he'd gotten hit. The other werewolves weren't any better off, the three of them struggling to keep up, and almost tripping over their talons.

Once they got to the center of the casino, thankfully not blocked off by a giant fountain this time, the cracked wall again boomed with impact, and the crack grew longer. Again, another boom of impact, and the seam through the gold wall reached from floor to ceiling, cutting through the floors above. Blood already poured out of the crack. No balconies this time, but the ceiling was high, twenty feet up, and when Red Tide came through, it was going to flood the first floor instantly.

Eric fell in beside Jessy. Alive. His mate was alive. The rage melted away enough he could think clearly, and he watched her back and her weird, alien form as they ran. She didn't use it often, strangely terrifying as it was, but the fact she'd managed to seriously wound Red Tide was beyond impressive.

"Where?" the smaller vampire asked.

"Here," Brianna said, and she tore ahead of the pack as they approached the bar.

Before she could hop over it, another boom shook the casino, and they all turned long enough to see the massive crack split open. Blood poured through it like an avalanche of liquid, ripping and tearing everything apart as it came straight for them.

"What—" Natasha didn't get to finish. Sanctuary wrapped her up in its arms, and flew past the bar and to the door downstairs behind it.

The rest of them followed, throwing themselves through the door hard enough it nearly came off its hinges. Eric glanced back long enough to see Matthew make sure everyone else was in before he came in, following behind Flow. Mistake, looking back like that.

Eric's shoulder slammed into the concrete wall — not gold — of the staircase, and he snarled as he pushed off it and continued down the stairway as it weaved down and down.

The basement of a casino was a strange place. Above, it was all glamour and indulgence. Below, it was security, steel, things harder than steel, electronics, and even more greed. One of the more slimy spirits, some combination of greed and gluttony, slithered down the hall of cold blue, and put up a hand.

“No access! You need—”

Sanctuary blasted past it, and the spirit threw itself against the wall, flattening its green, slime, slug body. They ran past it down the hall of concrete, and when they came to another gate, this one of steel, Brianna crashed into it first, and tore it open. Apparently, it'd been resealed since the last time they'd visited with Sándor weeks ago.

With a heavy roar, Brianna ripped the bars apart, muscles bulging through her fur as the ephemera metal gave her resistance. Once open wide enough, they ran through, and took a right into one of the doors. Again, a giant slab of metal. Brianna went at it with her claws, but something went crack in her shoulder, and she yelped as she stepped back. She'd broken her arm, or re-broke it, after Red Tide had broken it only minutes before.

Matthew pushed past them, slammed both hands directly into the metal, sank his claws into it, and pulled his arms apart. The metal gave him trouble, but there was little that the goliath werewolf could not rip through, with leverage. He didn't have leverage to tear it apart, but once he put his feet against the wall, and pulled on the door, it came off with an ear-piercing shrieking tear.

As they scrambled in, the ceiling above cracked. A roar shook the casino, a hundred times louder than Brianna's, and the vibration pulsed through their bodies. Blood dripped from the seam overhead.

“Quickly,” Sanctuary said, and it dove through the room, wings carrying it while it carried a squirming Natasha.

The large room held nothing of real value to a spirit. Spirits wanted essence, and the only way to get that was to collect it from the physical world, at loci where it bled from the physical world into the spirit world, or from literally devouring or absorbing other spirits. The room in the real world would have been where a casino held tangible, real world cash, once upon a time. It was there in the spirit world, too, massive mountains of cash bills, utterly useless to anyone and everyone.

It did glow an unusual green though, similar to the slime spirit outside. And if they touched it, it'd probably summon some nasty spirits who'd defend it as if their lives depended on it. Not trouble they wanted.

In the center of the dark, metal room, there was the tear, a cut in the air that looked all too similar to a tear in fabric made by a knife. However Black Blood had made it, he'd cut it diagonally about seven feet wide, three feet thick at the center. Not at an easy fit.

“It looks different,” Brianna said. “Smells different.”

Eric took a deep whiff. It was true. Something about the tear was different.

“It still goes to Great Below,” he said. “But ... there is...”

“No time,” Sanctuary said. “Go, quickly.”

Tash stared up at the angel, eyes wide. “B-B-But what about—”

“Once you are through, I will leave. Red Tide cannot pursue me beyond its realm.” The angel spirit smiled down at Tash, and gave her a tender pat on the head.

“Flow!” Brianna said, and she transformed back into human form with far more speed than Eric could manage.

The water spirit nodded and jumped toward her. Its blue body condensed, its features vanished, limbs and wings gone, and its eyes and mouth melted away into a tunnel of water that leapt straight into Brianna’s chest. Avery’s necklace. The spirit disappeared into it, leaving Tash staring at what just happened with jaw dropped.

“Can you—”

“I cannot,” Sanctuary said. “Flowing Sanctuary has a pact with Avery. We do not have time to discuss this, Natasha. Quickly, through the tear.”

“B-But, you—”

Sanctuary picked Natasha up, and threw her through the tear. Everyone froze.

“Well shit!” Jessy let out an upset snarl, but jumped through the tear after her friend.

Brianna let out the same snarl and followed in after her.

Matthew and Arturo looked between each other, at the spirit who just threw their girlfriend to her possible demise, and jumped in after her as well.

“Sanctuary,” Eric said.

“Eric.” It smiled at him, and pointed him toward the tear. “Thank you for your help, in my growth. Take care of her for me, would you?”

He stared at the angel, and almost said something. But another crashing thud from Red Tide splintered the ceiling, and blood rained

on them. No time to talk this through. No time to figure out what happened to the tear, and where it'd take them. No time to tell Sanctuary it had no chance against Red Tide, and it probably wouldn't be able to escape, either; it probably already knew.

He jumped through.

The tear was both physical and not physical. He could touch it, and once inside it, it had some sort of ground or floor to touch. Almost like passing through the Gauntlet. And whatever the tear cut through, it did cut through the Gauntlet, but it didn't take him through it. The darkness of whatever the tear cut through resembled the gold eternity of the Gauntlet, with something like stars in the distance, white dots that didn't quite hold still.

He didn't have time to stop and admire the obsidian endlessness around him. The tear opened up to another realm, and he fell through it, stuck somewhere between crawling and walking, and then falling on his face on ... more water? At least this wasn't red water. It was black.

He got back to his claws and knees, and looked up. And up. And up, at the giant skeleton god that squatted down in front of them.

"Welcome," Black Blood said, in a harsh accent Eric had never heard before, "to the apocalypse."

## Chapter 172

~~Beatrice~~

Holy mother of fuck.

Athalia and Triss stared out from behind a rock, now much closer to the standing stones, close enough to hear what everyone near them said. Triss had her Cloak dialed up as high as she could take it, to the point she was going to be ravenous and depleted soon. Athalia had some tricks of her own, and she managed to help bury them in shadows that blended into the black water nicely. Whether Black Blood was just pretending to not notice them or not, Triss couldn't tell, but a sneaking suspicion told her he had, him or Jacob. No way they didn't have precautions set up to let them know when people approached.

But the gang had no choice. So Athalia and Beatrice got closer, staying low and keeping some of the giant boulders between them and the standing stones. Once close enough they could hear and see, they peeked out, listened, and jaw dropped. They looked at each other, eyes wide, before looking back to stare out at the titan, and Jacob, and apparently, Sam.

Jacob, god damn it. How much chaos had he stirred, just so he could have distractions? Hearing that he'd had nothing to do with Azamel's arrival, or Jeremiah's, settled a huge pit in her stomach, but still, a lot of shit had gone down that was his fault. Kinda. Sorta. In typical witch fashion, typical Jacob fashion, he'd found a nice moral gray area to ride and fuck people with. Give a man enough rope and he'll hang himself, and Jacob was handing out miles of rope for free.

Samantha. Seeing her tearing herself apart as she stood there beside the man, listening to him, her eyes peeking at Jack every few seconds as Jacob explained his master plan like a villain — which he probably loved — was painful. Poor Sam. If anyone on the fucking planet would understand the desire to hit a big reset button on the whole fucking universe, and put everything back together so that even life and death didn't exist anymore, everyone together forever, it'd be Sam.

Then of course, there was fucking Black Blood. No wonder every time Triss was around him, she felt like she was in the presence of something so much fucking bigger than he let on. But in no fucking universe did she'd think he'd have a lady he was trying to get to.

Things went from bad to worse before she could blink. Mark jumped out of the fucking water like the Bogeyman, and Elaine came up with him. The water around Jack was only a few inches deep, but that didn't mean shit to Mark. Jack dodged back instantly, reflexes no Ventrue of any age would normally have, leaving Elaine grabbing air. She jumped to the left, and Jack jumped back and to the right.

And then he came to a standstill. He squirmed and wriggled, but something had locked his feet down. Not Black Blood, he hadn't moved. Eventually the kid looked down with his one eye, and stared.

“What's going on?” he asked. “I—Elaine!”

Elaine smiled at the kid, before she walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Much as the kid evidently wanted to punch her, fists shaking at his sides, he couldn't.

The water at his feet spread away, pushed by something, and glowing red lines, like the ones Jacob had carved on the standing stones, lit up the ground around Jack's feet. He was standing on a ritual circle. Elaine had baited him into it.

“Elaine!?” Samantha ran over to her, and eyes wide. “What’re you doing? Jack, what’s—”

“We knew your son wouldn’t cooperate. He doesn’t trust Black Blood, even though Black Blood is the only way ... the only reasonable way, to remove his curse.” Sighing, Elaine took Samantha by the shoulder, and gently pulled her away from her son. “His heart’s in the right place, but you know your son.”

“I ... I do, but—”

“He will do everything he can to stop Jacob, and Black Blood, even if it means getting himself killed, Samantha. Is that not right, childe oh mine?” Elaine, dressed in a business suit and skirt that looked horribly out of place, guided Samantha back to Jacob’s side. “Black Blood will need tools, once the realms are converged. If he can convert the curse into such a tool, then it will be valuable. If not, then it will be destroyed. Either way, your son will be free of it.”

“Mom! Don’t—”

“Don’t what?” Elaine said, snapping her gaze back to Jack. “Save you from yourself and your stubbornness?”

“You can’t trust Black Blood to—”

“Are you so blinded by your distrust that you cannot see what Mictlantecuhtli has done for you? The times he has saved you?”

Mictawhatnow? Triss and Athalia looked at each other, expecting the other to know, shrugged, and looked back to the insanity.

“You’re the one that told me to trust less, Elaine,” Jack said.

“We are not speaking of the Danse Macabre, Jack. Black Blood is beyond ancient, and his goals are amiable.”



“Amiable? He’s going to...” Jack looked up at Black Blood before slowly turning his single eye to Elaine, anger gone. He’d thought of something. “Elaine, who did you kill? Who did you ... you know...”

It was like someone hit the elder in the gut with a sledgehammer. She looked away and took a step back, before setting a hand against one of the standing stones.

“It does not concern you.”

“If you’re siding with Jacob and willing to break the whole fucking world, I think it kinda does.”

Elaine shook her head desperately, the practiced motions of an elder vampire thrown out the window, hair bouncing against her shoulders.

“This world is a cruel place, little Ventrue. Jacob understands that. Your mother understands that. Mark understands that.” She gestured to the man in the hoodie, standing a ways off, arms folded across his chest and head pointed up at the ghosts circling above. “This broken machine grinds its gears, and we are caught in its eternal cycle of misery. Enough, I say. Enough.”

Well, fucking shit. Stopping Black Blood and Jacob was already going to be insanely tough. But Elaine and Mark, too? Fucked. Triss and the gang were absolutely fucked.

“Now, bear witness,” Black Blood said, “to a miracle.”

Nodding, the god of the dead reached down for the tear, and slipped a claw into it. The ghosts above howled, and the water rippled as everything shook. The standing stones didn’t budge, immune to whatever the fuck Black Blood was doing, but everyone else felt it. Energy. Triss looked Athalia’s way, half expecting her hair to stand up like lightning was about to strike, but it didn’t. The water around her rippled, instead.

Movement above forced them all to look up, and everyone's jaws dropped. The ghosts overhead swirled over themselves, bodies half merging and overlaying with each other, and came down. Like a funnel or tornado, hundreds of the ghosts, maybe thousands, slowly crept down from on high and reached down for Black Blood. And like he was controlling the fucking weather, Black Blood reached up with his other hand, and a black glow — however the fuck that worked — shot out of his bone palm. The ghosts came down to it as if Black Blood's palm was the sole point of ground the tornado could land on. The tunnel's tip twisted on the way down, until it finally reached him.

Black Blood let out a groan, like a fucking dinosaur exerting itself to lift something big. Kinda applicable. He pulled up, and up, and tore the fucking universe apart. Triss's jaw dropped, again, as the giant skeleton lengthened the tear, pulling it up with him as the skeleton lifted. The ghosts above helped him. Almost like someone holding a rope, the tornado of dead straightened, and Black Blood squeezed on it harder with every foot he managed to tear the portal's opening. The swarm of ghosts went from howling, to screaming, and Triss covered her ears as the banshee shrieks hit hard enough she felt it in her withered guts.

Again, the god of death groaned, whatever he was doing obviously taking a massive amount of effort, and he squatted down in front of the tear. Higher, and higher, his claw ripped the tear further up, until he was standing again. Then higher, until the tear reached his chest. Higher, until the giant tear reached his head. Only then did the giant god stop ripping a hole through the world, and let go of his tornado of ghosts. Released from whatever Black Blood was doing to them, their shrieks faded into gentler-but-still-horrible howls, and the tornado lifted until it again became the swirling hurricane above.

Colors danced inside the tear. Blues, reds, greens, golds, violets, and strange colors that didn't make a lick of sense.

“Stop!” Jack pulled and pulled against whatever was holding him, but invisible chains bound his arms and legs. Considering how strong the kid was with the curse to help him, there was no way the ritual binding him was using strength to do it. Magic.

Black Blood let out a sigh, and even with his strange, new alien dialect and anatomy, he sounded exhausted.

“You okay?” Jacob asked.

Black Blood nodded as he stood there, arms hanging at his sides. Not like a skeleton needed to breathe, or a giant death god or whatever, but he looked drained. Ripping tears through the dimensions took a lot out of him. That was good for Jack and the gang then, hopefully.

Jacob nodded, and gestured to Jack, head still pointed up at Black Blood. “Gonna be able to do the ritual for Jack?”

“Yes. In a moment.”

Nodding, Jacob opened his book, and resumed carving symbols.

And then a bunch of people fell out of the bottom of the new-and-improved tear, a few feet over the black water. They landed with quiet splashes, but ended up dogpiling on each other, and they scrambled as they tried to get to their feet. Oh god, Natasha, three werewolves, one fucked up weird looking spiky wolf vampire, and Brianna.

“Welcome,” Black Blood said, looking down at the newcomers, “to the apocalypse.” If a skull could smile, it’d look like that.

Before the werewolves could so much as howl, Jacob tossed his book and knife back onto the nearby table, and launched himself toward the invaders. Holy fuck he was fast. It didn’t even take one second to get up to there face, and drive a fist into the closest

werewolf's snout. They didn't get a chance to respond. Jacob punched hard, and the werewolf went down. The biggest one managed to come to their senses enough to try and take a swing at him, but Jacob ducked and drove his fist up under their jaw. Like a fucking Hollywood movie, they flew up and back, and landed on their back in the water. And the final werewolf, Jacob got in close and slammed his elbow against their chest. They went down, clutching their broken sternum, gasping. It was like watching an adult martial artist dismantle a bunch of children.

The four-legged little spiky monster, a Gangrel, probably Jessy, got up long enough for Jacob to get a hand on the back of her neck, and he lifted her up. And as deadly as the girl's weird monster form was, it couldn't do shit to someone directly behind her. He held her out, and she roared and clawed at the air around her, doing her best to turn around, but unable. And of course, Jacob grinned as he looked at Natasha and Brianna.

“Don't make me.”

“Okay!” Tash said, and she put up her hands. “Okay, okay. Stop, please. We ... we d-didn't mean to...” Slowly, her eyes turned to the giant skeleton feet beside her, and then up, to Black Blood. “Oh ... god...”

Triss and Athalia shared looks again. If they were ever gonna get a distraction, it didn't get much better than this. Where the fuck was Sándor?

Movement, a hint of something in the water's reflection. They looked up.

That, was a flying man. For a moment Triss expected to see him with legs pointed straight behind him, and one hand pointed straight ahead. Superman. But before the memory of the word could rip her guts out, a hard squint managed to bring the man into focus. Sándor wasn't flying like a superhero. He was flying like a fucking

monster, arms at his chest and legs behind him with knees bent. A gargoyle, looking to land on something, or perch, or rip it to shreds.

The silhouette of the gargoyle surrounded him, so thick it almost blocked out any sign of the man. With four ludicrously massive wings outstretched, he was coming in hard and fast, aimed straight for the closest standing stone. No wonder it'd taken him so long to get involved. He'd climbed super high so he could dive bomb like a fucking falcon.

Black Blood looked up toward the oncoming shadow, and raised a hand. His arm was long enough to reach the furthest standing stone on the outside of the circle, the one Sándor was aimed for.

Again, energy permeated the air, and the black water churned as the invisible force worked through everything nearby. Triss and Athalia both froze as they watched, knowing full well Sándor was going to fail, and knowing full well they couldn't stop him. Black Blood saw him coming, and from how calm and direct the titan's movements looked, he'd been prepared. And the gargoyle was too high up, and going way too fast, for anything the girls said to matter.

Before Sándor could reach the standing stone, a giant red circle erupted from the black water. It circled the entirety of the standing stones, along with Jack, Mark, and Elaine, close to its edge. The light cut upward, reaching high enough it disappeared from view, higher than the standing stones, the archways, and probably all the way up to the gigantic cave's roof.

Sándor was going fast enough to punch through a concrete wall, but when he collided with the light, he came to a complete standstill. The barrier erupted with more light, almost blinding red, and a strange red circle drew in the air where Sándor hit it, filled with shit loads of symbols Triss had never seen before. It was like a bird crashing into a window. The silhouette of the gargoyle, and the

man, squished against the light like it were some solid barrier, before he plummeted.

“Shit!” Triss jumped up, and ran past Athalia. The woman tried to grab her, but Triss saw it coming and dodged it. Sándor was falling like a fucking stone, and if someone didn’t catch him, the man was going to die. If he wasn’t already dead.

Too far. Too far! She ran fast, knowing full well Jacob and Sam and Natasha and fucking everyone was staring at her. She didn’t care. Athalia wasn’t fast enough, and the werewolves and Damien were way too fucked up to do anything. Someone had to catch him, and she was going to fucking—

Sándor opened his wings. Like a parachute opening, his fall came to a harsh stop, before he resumed falling, much more slowly. Oh thank fucking god. She slowed to a jog as she got closer, staring up at the guy as he came down, and down, circling in spot like a leaf falling from a tree.

He landed beside her, and collapsed to his knees. He tried to put his weight on his hands on the cave floor, and fell over with a grunt. He’d aimed his left shoulder for the standing stone, like he’d been trying to break down a door, and hit the barrier instead. No more left shoulder. Somehow, the only noise he made was another quiet grunt as he used his working arm to push himself back up to his knees, and looked at his ruined arm.

“Jesus fucking christ.” Triss got down on a knee in front of him and put a hand on his good shoulder. “You hit that thing hard, man.”

He nodded as he looked down, and regretted it immediately. His collar bone was fucked, the shoulder, the upper arm, everything. The collision had crunched the arm against his own body, and probably snapped a bunch of his ribs, too. And of course, the only noise the gargoyle made, despite the excruciating pain, was a grunt.

“Can you stand?” she asked. It’d probably be better to lie down, but it wasn’t an option.

He didn’t nod this time, but he did try to stand. And of course, failed, and almost fell over again. She grabbed his good arm, and pulled him up with her. Once on his feet, he slouched bit so his busted arm hung in front of him, but otherwise the man didn’t move or go anywhere.

“I think,” he whispered, looking to the red light barrier, and past it to Jacob, “that we’re blocked off.”

She laughed. It wasn’t funny, but she’d entered gallows humor mode.

“Well well well,” Jacob said, yelling a bit so his voice carried. “I knew there’d be more of you. Hi, Triss. How was your trip?”

She rolled her eyes, and walked toward the red light barrier. “Hi, boss. It sucked.”

Jacob gave her a big wave with his free arm, the other still holding Jessy by her neck.

“Aaron alive?”

“Yeah, barely.”

“Good. And hey, you set this up?” he asked, gesturing to Natasha and the others who’d fallen out of the tear.

“Dude, I didn’t even know what the fuck was going on until a few hours ago. Fuck you.”

Laughing, he shrugged and nodded, and threw Jessy with all the grace of a kid throwing a big stick. The girl spun through the air, went through the red light barrier as if it didn’t exist, and crashed

into the black water not too far from Triss. Gangrels were usually pretty good about landing on their feet, but Jessy crashed and rolled before sliding to a stop, drenched.

The red light barrier was a one-way barrier.

Jacob marched over to two of the werewolves, and before they could so much as roar or snap a bite at him, he grabbed one by the foot and repeated the process, and then the other, launching them like frisbees. It was almost comical, but the werewolves landed much harder, and Triss winced as she heard a few crunches.

“Stop!” Tash yelled. “Stop! P-Please. We’ll ... we’ll go, okay? Right, Brianna?”

Brianna glared at Jacob, but the girl wasn’t an idiot. One look at the Nosferatu, and then Elaine and Mark, Jack, Samantha, and then up at the giant skeleton, was enough to break her resolve. She slowly nodded, and walked toward Triss and Sándor.

“Come on, Eric,” Brianna said.

The final werewolf got back up, glared down at Jacob, but followed after Brianna and Natasha. His tail hung between his legs slightly.

“Y’all were already pretty beat up, huh?” Jacob asked. He walked after them, dusting his hands off, and ushered the newcomers out like an annoyed mom getting her kids out of the kitchen. One after the other, they walked through the red light barrier, and each of them grimaced as they glanced back. Well, that’d been unexpected, for everyone, including them. If they’d been more aware of what was happening, they might have been able to actually do something, and they knew it.

“What happened?” Triss asked Natasha as she walked past, and checked on her boyfriends. It was her boyfriends, as the two



werewolves transformed back into human form once they managed to get to their feet. The last one was Eric. They all looked beat to fuck, like they'd gone ten rounds with hands tied behind their back.

“We were in the spirit w-world,” she said, “when Street-Tail King tried to, um, capture us.”

“It slipped what Black Blood was up to,” Brianna said, gesturing around. “But, I guess everyone already knows. The fuck happened to the tear? It shouldn't have brought us here.”

“Black Blood has connected them,” Jacob said, walking back to his table and fetching his knife and book again. “They all lead here, now, even the ones he managed to open across the chasm.”

Sándor coughed, eyes widening. “He managed to reach across the abyss?”

Jacob grinned, and resumed drawing his symbols on the standing stones.

“I have,” Black Blood said, filling in. “Tiny tears that will not to rip apart. That is a bridge to build, not a barrier to destroy. But I have peeked into the realm beyond, and touched it. It will be my beacon, for the bridge I will build once the realms are combined.” The massive skeleton gestured to enormous tear beside him. “Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair.”

Everyone stared.

“He's joking,” Jacob said, laughing with a hearty, full laugh, while somehow continuing his work. “The Ozymandias quote, I mean. Ugh, I told you, Mict. No one gets your sense of humor without the Southern accent.”

Black Blood shrugged, and squatted down over Jacob while looking out to the rest of the crowd now standing around the red

barrier. Sándor and Triss, Tash and her boys, Brianna, Jessy, and Eric. On the other side of the barrier, Jack in a binding ritual, Elaine, Mark, Jacob, Black Blood, and poor Sam, who struggled to look anyone in the eye. She hadn't expected any of this, and every moment, it was obvious she was drowning. She'd jumped in the deep end and didn't know how to swim. The rest of them weren't much better off.

“Who else hides in the shadows?” Black Blood asked.

“I—”

Black Blood snapped his glare at Jack, and the poor kid shut up instantly.

“It does not matter. Watch from the dark, or from the sidelines. You cannot cross the barrier.”

He wasn't lying. They all felt it, some sort of rippling energy that told the air to bow down and listen, the same way a fortress wall would if you put your ear up to it. A fortress wall bigger than the fucking Great Wall of China.

Athalia stayed hidden. Maybe she'd get to do something, use shadows, or maybe tunnel in, so that made sense. The rest of them though, Avery and Clara and what was left of their pack, they dragged themselves over to Brianna and the wolves. Everyone back in human form, they all took a moment to check in with each other. Even Damien joined them. With all the Cloaking he'd done, and the punch to the face, dude was running on empty.

“Where's Monica?” Matthew asked, clutching his side. “Where's Carter? And Caleb?”

Avery glared past them at Jacob, but before they could all give him the same glare, Clara came in closer. She whispered something,

and Brianna, Matt, and Art all froze, before peeking over their shoulders at the kid in the ritual.

Jack looked away.

“Street-Tail King had specific instructions,” Jacob said, “as did Red Tide. As did Sabrina and the other ghosts. If you’d listened, no one would have been harmed.”

“Fuck you,” Art said.

“He’s not lying!” Samantha came up to the barrier, eyes pleading. “Jacob told me about the stuff he did. If people had just listened, no one would have been hurt. If people weren’t so ready to kill each other, no one would have been fighting!”

“He’s going to get everyone killed,” Avery said, and she marched up to the barrier as if she didn’t basically have to drag herself to do it. “Your boyfriend is going to get everyone fucking killed.”

“That’s not what’s going to happen!”

“Says you. Uratha have been guarding the barrier between the Hisil and Gurihal for thousands of years.”

“And I,” Black Blood said, still squatting down, skull face pointed at Avery, “have witnessed it for thousands more. Do not confuse what you recognize as normal, as the same as correct in the large scheme of things, wolf. You do not get to decree this broken world as the way things should be done.”

“And who gives you the right to change it for everyone?”

Black Blood gestured to Jacob and Samantha with a hand. “Those of us who have enough awareness to recognize a broken system.”

“Sounds like a load of bullshit to me.”

Jacob sighed and shook his head. “Don’t bother, Black Blood. She’s a stubborn breed. Part husky, probably.”

Triss fought to keep the grin off her face. Even now, the mother fucker could not help but make jokes, and god damn it sometimes they were funny.

Triss gave Sándor a small pat on his good shoulder, and walked up close enough to the red barrier she almost touched it. From this close, it was easy to look everyone in the eyes, if they had them. Jack looked miserable. Samantha looked like she was about to tear in half. Mark and Elaine watched, expressions neutral, except Elaine looked a bit ... wounded.

She’d done something, something really nasty, something Jack didn’t even want to say. Jack said she’d killed someone, but that didn’t really seem enough to warrant all this madness. Despite her efforts to hide it, she looked wounded, and guilty. Not guilt about causing Armageddon, ‘cause that probably seemed perfectly reasonable to an elder. Guilt about something else.

“You really couldn’t have told me about any of this?” Triss asked, gesturing.

Jacob looked her way, and paused etching his symbols long enough for his eyeless gaze to sink in, before he sighed and got back to it.

“I was tempted, I was. But in the end, I couldn’t risk it. Sorry.”

Sándor joined Triss’s side. “And you, Mark?”

Mark folded his arms across his chest, and stared at Sándor from under the shadow of his hoodie’s hood.

“You’re not the only one who’s lost people.”

“Azamel?”

Mark shrugged and spit to the side. Gross. Everything about the man radiated gross. It made sense, considering what Triss had seen of him so long ago, when she and Jacob took a trip to visit Azamel. Dude’s Horror was a pile of maggots, insects, bones, rotting flesh, and slime.

It was hard to imagine someone doing something as insane as all this, so they could see someone like Azamel again. But the fuck she did she know? Somehow, the old bitch had Athalia’s complete trust and devotion, and Mark’s, and Fiona’s. Hell, she’d convinced Sándor to take her place.

She almost asked Jacob if he didn’t think she’d want this, too. She’d lost someone, and all of this was a way for her to see him again. But she already knew what his answer would be. She wouldn’t be willing to remake the whole fucking universe to do it. He was right, not telling her. Maybe right after Julias died, maybe she would have, maybe, but now? Fuck her, changing everything for everyone like this was just way too much.

She couldn’t get any closer than this, and they didn’t have any more available distractions. Now or never.

“Now, Mary.”

Jacob lowered his knife and looked her away, eyebrow raised. For the first time in Triss’s second life, the man’s expression switched to full on shock, as Mary’s ghost shot out of the bracelet. The ghost wasted no time, and bolted forward toward the closest standing stone, near Jack. The wall of red light didn’t stop her in the slightest, like wind pushing through a screen door, and she threw herself at the standing stone, claws out, and enough wind followed behind her Triss fell forward and hit her head on the barrier, and fell back on her ass. Again.

“Mary!?” Sam said. “What—”

Black Blood snapped his hand out, and the whole Great Below noticed, an explosion of movement that was beyond fast. Nothing that big could move that fast. The arm snap cut through the air, and made a weird boom sound before a ripple pulsed outward. The pulse picked up the water and turned into a tsunami that smashed into everyone, throwing them all to the ground. Triss was already on her ass, and the wave slapped her to the ground hard. The stones of the whole fucking cave groaned, the ground vibrated underneath her hard enough it inched her across the stone, and her teeth rattled in her head.

She sat up, wiped the black water from her face, and stared up at Black Blood. His hand was still out to the side, in Mary’s path, and Mary was in his grip. Literally. He held her in his palm, and let out a booming growl as he brought her in closer to his skull face.

“Do not. Touch that.”

Mary shrieked and screamed, twisted and squirmed, but Black Blood held her as easily as a kid would a worm they dug out of the mud. Well, shit. Whatever limitations bound Black Blood, they didn’t apply to ghosts.

“Black Blood, don’t hurt her!” Sam yelled, looking up at the giant and waving her arms.

“I will not hurt her.” He brought in his other hand, and held it over Mary’s ghost, palm facing down at her. “I will bind her.”

Before Sam could ask, a sparkling chain fell out of Black Blood’s grip, slithered down out of his palm, and slipped around Mary’s shoulders. Around and around, until it’d snaked her four times, and Black Blood set the bound ghost on the ground beside her mother.

It was weird, seeing a ghost that could go in and out of a bracelet, and otherwise be made of mist whenever she wanted, be bound by chains. Flashbacks to The Muppet Christmas Carol movie with the two old farts as ghosts in chains hit Triss. Creepy scene in the movie, creepy scene here. Mary still didn't have legs, but otherwise she was stuck to the ground and shallow black water, like any person would be if their arms were bound at their sides and they were put on their ass. Worse, she tried to get up, and she couldn't. She tried to scream and shriek, and she couldn't.

“Baby?” Sam said.

“Mom!” Mary frowned up at her, gave Black Blood a death glare, and frowned up at her mom some more. “What are you doing! Stop them! Stop them! Stop them!” No crazy banshee shrieks, but she could still talk.

Samantha stared down at her daughter's ghost before kneeling down beside her.

“Mary, what ... what happened to you?”

Mary shook her head. “Doesn't matter. Stop them! You can't—”

“Stop them? They're going to fix it all, baby. We can be together! You and me, and the other Mary. Jack, and your dad, too! You don't miss your dad?”

Dad. The word hit the poor ghost harder than anything any of them could have said. Mary's evil black eyes softened, and her psycho monster mouth softened, too.

“Daddy?”

Well, shit. Another one bites the dust. Mary stopped squirming, and instead sat there, somehow looking pitiful and sad despite the banshee face. And Sam, good ole Sam, didn't hesitate to run her

hand over her daughter's ghost's head. Bittersweet, to be able to touch her ghost here and nowhere else.

“Jacob,” Elaine said, “how much longer?”

“Not sure. Half an hour? Maybe more.”

“Then I suggest Black Blood performs the removal now, before the Prince and her sheriff interfere. She might come through the tear, same as the others.” And as if to seal that point, she and Mark both stepped closer to the tear, ready to punch whoever came through it.

Jack tried to yank himself free of his invisible chains again. No good. Kid could punch through a bank vault, but the ritual didn't give a damn.

“You can't—”

“Cannot what, oh childe oh mine?” Sighing, Elaine shook her head and gestured around them. “Please stop fighting us. Jacob has outsmarted and outwitted every one of you, all for your own good. You deserve better than this fallen world has given you. And I will not let the curse exist for one second longer than it must.”

“Not let it? What do you mean? I thought—” The kid blinked, several times, as his expression changed to realization. “You ... You resent it.”

“Of course I resent it!” Holy shit, another first time for Triss. Elaine got angry, and yelled. “Do you think I did not suffer under its influence? Do you think I remember my past with its power at my beck and call with fondness?”

Jack looked down. “I thought—”



“You thought I was nothing more than a power-hungry Ventrue, willing to throw your life away so I can acquire that dreaded curse’s power for myself.” She came up to him, and gave the man a rather harsh poke in the chest. “I am trying to help you. I also want this vile thing destroyed. Or, if Black Blood can use its power as a tool for his whim, that will satisfy as well. A fitting fate, for such a horrible thing to be reduced to a tool, I think.”

After a few moments of painful silence, Jack eventually lifted his head, and glared at Elaine with his one eye, and then at Jacob.

“You’re all so convinced this is the right thing to do, merging the realms or whatever, that everyone will be happier this way. And I get it. You’ve all experienced the worst this shitty existence has to offer. I fucking get it. But don’t get it twisted. You’re not trying to change things because you think everyone will be happier. You’re trying to change things because you want things to be better for yourself, because you want to be with the people you’ve lost.” He let out a snarl, glared at his mom hard enough she shrank, and glared back at the elders. “Instead of letting go of the people you’ve lost, you’re going to change the whole world. You’re all selfish.”

Triss stared at the kid, long enough for Jack to glance her way, before he looked back to Elaine and then to Jacob. Powerful words. The kid had a gift for them, Ventrue or not, and everyone paused to absorb them. Even Jacob stopped carving symbols, for a few seconds at least, before he got back to it.

“I think we’ve earned the right to be selfish,” he said. “Everyone who’s seen the worst life has to offer would agree.” With his book-holding hand, he pointed at finger at the rest of them, eyeless gaze still aimed at his work. “Clara, lost a brother. Am I right?”

Everyone looked at Clara. She opened her mouth, ready to say something, but nothing came out, like someone had come along and yanked out her voice. Eventually she looked down.

“Avery. Lost a bunch of your old pack, right? Mates you knew for decades? Closer than family?”

Avery snarled, but even she eventually looked down.

Jacob continued. “We know what Triss has lost, and Sándor, no need to bring that up. But it keeps going! I bet everyone here has someone they wish they could talk to again, right?” He gave them a moment to respond, but all he got was grunts, growls, and eyes looking down. He was right. “Damien! You can talk to Lucas again, and you can bet your ass it’ll be a different conversation, now that the dude won’t have his head jammed up his ass with some religious delusion. You’ll actually be able to talk to him, and maybe convince him a thing or two.” They all looked to Damien, and through his battered and broken face, there was surprise.

Jacob went on. “Athalia! Come on out, you bitch. I know you’re out there. How else could Beatrice have gotten here?”

With a quiet snarl, Athalia stepped out from behind her rock, and joined the rest of them at the red barrier.

“It could have been Fiona.”

“As if Fiona would have the sense to stay hidden, looking for the right moment to strike.” He gestured at the red barrier. “Too late for that, regardless. So answer my question. You really don’t want a chance to talk to your daughter again?”

“My daughter hates me.” Athalia did her best to say it straight, but there was a hint of a waver in there, and Triss looked away. She’d said hates, not hated. She still hadn’t moved on.

“It won’t matter,” Jacob said, with enough confidence to have everyone listening, whether they wanted to or not. “None of it will matter when everything and everyone is together. What could she hate you for, when there’s nothing to hate you for?”

“Or to love her for,” Sándor said. The words cut through the silence like a knife, and just as quickly as everyone had been listening to Jacob, now they were listening to the gargoyle. Except he didn’t follow it up with anything, of course. He didn’t need to, everyone knew what he meant. Without context, everything was meaningless.

Jacob shook his head. “Love will still be a thing, you losers. Existence! You make it sound like—”

A sword stabbed up through the water, near Black Blood’s foot, and close enough to Jacob that the man jumped back. He set the book and knife on the table, turned, and ran back toward the random sword, but jumped back again when a geyser of blood shot out from around the weapon.

What in the ever living fuck.

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~~Antoinette~~

She pushed through the blood and flesh until it consumed her. Walls of undulating muscle and meat. A sea of crimson, warm, and full of life.

She dared not open her eyes. Forward she pushed, Daniel ahead of her, one hand behind for her to grasp. He could see not see either. But their instructions were simple and direct, and it was apparent their exact direction was less important than simply pushing forward. Such was the way of magic; such an archaic, idiotic word, but nevertheless, magic. Intent and sacrifice mattered more than specifics to witches. Dragons followed different rules, but within the tunnel of flesh, it was no dragon experiment that guided her.

With her free hand, she risked dragging a finger along the wall of flesh they pushed through. It had a heartbeat. Elen insisted flesh

was no mere amalgamation of chemicals, arranged in such a way as to convert fuel into ATP, or self-replicate DNA. Life and flesh were connected, and deeply bound to existence in the physical world. The physical world was, according to the deranged old woman, alive.

Such ignorance could only be found in a witch, of course. Defining life itself was no easy feat, and yet practitioners of mysticism and stupidity tossed the word about as if they understood the universe. And yet, as Daniel and Antoinette pushed forward, she could not help but feel life, in something as undeniable and primal as a beating heart. Whatever tunnel this was, whatever it passed through, it did not appreciate them turning its flesh and veins into a passageway. Anything alive would have drowned or suffocated.

Kindred were, of course, an exception to that rule, as they were to many.

Daniel stopped, and squeezed her hand. She squeezed it in return. They were there. They were ready.

She could not see, but she felt the vibrations through the blood and flesh that pressed on them. Daniel cut through the flesh barrier before him, the same as he had to get them onto the abhorrent path. And once he did, gravity turned on them. Forward became up, backward became down, and she squeezed Daniel's hand before she could fall back into the tunnel of endless flesh. Something cold poured over her, a harsh contrast against the pulsating, warm blood, and when gaps of air fell with them, she dared to open her eyes.

Daniel jumped through the hole, and took her with him. He jumped into the darkness, and the two of them landed on their feet in ankle-deep black water.

“Antoinette!?” Jack's voice.

A spark of joy and relief ran through her, only to be crushed by the sights before her. The tear, now colossal and filled with every

color she knew, and more. Jack, stood and seemingly paralyzed over a ritual circle whose lines of red pushed the black water from its circumference. Black Blood, a black skeleton of absurd size, looming over them. Standing stones taller than the entity, covered in thousands of red symbols. A dark cave of nigh infinite measure. And a barrier of red light that circled the standing stones, and Black Blood alike.

Jack. Poor Jack. Her lover looked terrible, shirtless and with several claw marks across his flesh with only scar tissue covering them. Similar claw marks cut across his face, leaving him with one eye. In truth, she doubted her lover would, or perhaps even could, die in battle, not with the power of the curse to protect his vessel, but the blade was two-sided. His necklace was gone, and the claw marks were thick. Werewolves.

The Ripper had fought the Uratha.

Beyond the red circle waited a host of faces. Beatrice stood closest, eyes wide, mouth agape, staring at the Prince. Athalia and Sándor, the werewolves, Damien, and even her student Natasha. How she had come to be here would, no doubt, be an interesting story. And sure enough, most of the werewolves looked debilitated with extreme injury, as did Damien. And she counted ten werewolves. Three were missing. A glance Jack's way confirmed her suspicions.

She took a second to wipe the infinite blood from her face and eyes before glancing down at herself. Soaked to the core in blood, crimson wet drenched her business suit, as it did for Daniel and his trench coat. He spared a moment to remove his glasses and shake them off, before donning them once again and scanning the area.

“Jacob,” Antoinette said, and she clenched her fists at her sides. When her eyes fell to her childe, who huddled behind her lover, fire burned through Antoinette's spine. “Samantha. How long—”

“I wisped her away tonight,” Jacob said, one arm out and blocking off Samantha. Or, protecting her. “She didn’t know what I was up to, if that’s what you’re wondering. Wanna tell me how you got past Black Blood’s barrier? We worked pretty hard on that, you know. It goes under us, too.”

She glared at the man, and took a moment to push her now red hair over her shoulders and behind her, before her eyes finally settled on Elaine. Fire became an inferno, and her fists trembled all the more.

“You side with Jacob, Elaine? Why?” she asked. Jacob deserved no answers.

Elaine did her best to keep guilt from her face, or any emotion at all. But Antoinette knew her friend well, and a trace of shame cut through her, followed by her own rage.

“I have made mistakes in my life, Ann. I would see them undone.” Her words wavered, even as her old friend forced herself to meet Antoinette’s gaze. What trials had Elaine suffered, to come to such a ridiculous conclusion?

“Undone?”

“The realms will be merged,” Black Blood said, in a voice she had never heard before, in an accent so beyond ancient she could not hope to identify it. “This broken world will be fixed. First, the fallen world, and then across the chasm to the realm beyond. All, back to the way it once was.” In the most cliché fashion, the god of corpses felt the need to explain himself. Good. Elen’s haruspex had attempted to draw out Black Blood’s plan, but had failed. It was too grand an idea for paper and pencil to convey.

Antoinette slowly set her glare upon the giant, and he stared down at her. She would not show fear, not before this relic.

“All this time,” she said, slowly turning her gaze from Black Blood to Jacob. “All this time, you two have conspired to ... undo the world?”

“You may have hope for this world,” Jacob said, “but we don’t.”

For the first time in the hundreds of years she had known the man, his smile was gone, not even a whisper of it, and his face had become deadly serious. Black Blood was beyond terrifying, but it was not the god of corpses and death that petrified her. It was Jacob, her old friend, and the way he stood. This was not the man who embodied chaos, and the joy chaos brought. This was a man who would die for his beliefs.

“Jack,” Antoinette said. “Has Jacob’s ritual been completed?”

“No. He’s still got some more shit to do. But, uh, Black Blood is—”

“Unable to interfere.” She looked up at the nearest standing stone, and then at Black Blood, who leaned in closer to her as he guessed her intentions. “I had suspected as much, for a long time. Elen’s haruspex proved it. Without another to act as his intermediary, what he can do and not do is quite limited. His reach is different, in different realms. And down here, in the depths of the forgotten, his power is vast, where ghosts are concerned.” To prove her point, she aimed a finger up, at the swirling ghosts above. “Drawn here, I assume? To help power this ... insanity?”

Black Blood let out a deep growl that vibrated the ground and churned the water about them.

“I am a shepherd, and—”

“You,” she yelled, moving her finger to point at the skeleton instead, “are a fossil from a bygone era! Your power has waned, and despite Jacob’s best efforts, you are still but a shell of your former self. You have been all but forgotten by the surface world, and have

lost almost all power to affect it. It takes a colossal amount of effort for you to touch the physical world, and correct me if I am wrong, but you are currently spending that effort, on this.” She gestured around at the standing stones, and the hurricane of ghosts above.

Technically true. Black Blood, or as Elen discovered, Mictlantecuhtli, could not touch her directly, not without absurd effort and sacrifice of energy. But that did not mean he could not wield forces that could. Curses, rituals, voodoo dolls or their ancient equivalent, tainted items, a host of methods to enact his weakened influence. She had to be careful. But in the moment, face to face with her, he could not touch her.

She had chosen the right moment to strike, had waited for it, and now she had to act.

“Sire, please,” Samantha said, “Jacob’s not trying to hurt anyone. I —”

“Childe,” Antoinette said, and she glared at Samantha until the ignorant pup looked down. “I can understand how you have come to side with Jacob on this. I can understand how others have come to side with him.” She gestured to Elaine, and then to the many standing beyond the wall of red light. “I can understand how those forced to watch this madness could, perhaps, side with Jacob if they were given the opportunity. But...” Sighing, she shook her head and looked to Jacob once more. “I would have loved to discuss this with you, Jacob. I would have loved to sit, and philosophize with you. But instead, you have decided to ignore our friendship.”

Jacob shook his head as well, and gestured to her. “We can still be friends, Ann. Just step aside, and in the new world, we can still—”

“Daniel. Deal with Elaine. Kill her if you must. I will deal with Jacob.”



Her sheriff, forever her weapon, did not hesitate. Whatever strange relationship he shared with Elaine, considering her many years of attempting to seduce the man, did not stay or slow his hand. Sword in grip, body and coat drenched in blood, he dashed for Elaine with speed so great, a splatter of crimson followed in his wake.

Elders did not battle like this. It was simply not done, and for good reason. Their was no way to prepare for such conflicts, where each Kindred was capable of feats grand and godly. Battles of power and wit, where the smallest mistake meant death. Perhaps Gangrels did, forever chasing the rush of the Beast, but even then, it was beyond rare in elders.

In any other circumstance, Antoinette would have used Majesty, enamored an army to do her bidding, and have them fight for her. In any other circumstance, Jacob would have stuck to the shadows and avoided combat entirely, or bury a victim in a most heinous Nightmare that would leave them paralyzed for hours, if not days. A Nightmare so strong, suicide would be the only outcome once it was over. They were above settling battles with their own, literal hands. Usually.

Elders were smarter than this.

“Prince!” Jack said. “There’s—”

A shadow erupted from the water between Elaine and Daniel, and grabbed Daniel’s foot. Mark, the Begotten, and one of the stealthiest creatures she had ever encountered. Antoinette snapped her glare to the disgusting man as he yanked the foot out from under her sheriff, but she knew the mistake the moment she made it. Jacob leapt for her, and she was forced to duck and roll.

Jacob would never be as fast as her, but he was fast nonetheless. Daeva and Nosferatu were both the primary embodiments of pure Kindred strength, but neither were terribly resilient, and if the man

managed to hit her, there was a good chance it would prove immediately fatal. And while she could dodge his attacks, and he would struggle to dodge hers, his next maneuver rendered such an advantage moot.

Jacob vanished.

Antoinette jumped to her feet, and flexed her toes against the stones underneath her; she was barefoot, having already abandoned her heels. She ground her teeth as she looked left and right, and poured vitae into her senses as she scanned for the man, but reality was not kind. No vampire, not even an elder Nosferatu, could vanish before her eyes from a mere thirty feet away, not without preparation.

She looked down and searched for the blood, but it was pointless. Jacob had no doubt already soaked the area with his vitae, and now both she and Daniel were trapped within his grasp.

“Oubliette,” she whispered. They were trapped within the maze of his Oubliette. She looked for Daniel, but her eyes betrayed her. The colors of the great tear portal twisted and danced, and angles of surfaces turned on their sides. Up became left, left became right, and she doubted the very stone she felt beneath her feet as she took small steps away from where she last saw her old Nosferatu friend.

“Prince!” Sándor’s voice. “Break the standing stones!”

Jacob’s maze of distorted vision may have compromised her eyes, but it did not affect her ears. She had assumed the standing stones were important, but with no time to process the information, Sándor did well to guide her. The nearest stone was thirty feet away, and in any other situation, she could have reached it with a single leap. She dared not attempt it. The maze was lying to her vision, and such a leap could easily launch her straight into the barrier, or through it if it were one way. She could have trusted her memory,

but in the scant few moments she had had to memorize the area upon arrival, it was not a risk she was willing to take.

So she walked. With eyes scanning for patterns in the warping and winding invisible path, she tested directions for whichever brought her closer to the stone covered in glowing symbols. Black Blood and the tear waited within the maze as well, and as imposing as both colossal entities were, neither moved. Elen's divinations had been correct. Black Blood did not have the power to touch her, not even here, not with him drained by performing this ritual, and with how weak the entity was compared to who he used to be, 600 years ago. But that did not mean it was safe for her to touch him, or the tear. Yet another reason to tread carefully.

One step toward the nearest stone took her further from it. Another to the left took her closer to it. She built a map in her mind as she tested each direction, as she scanned for Jacob's invisible approach, as she looked to the red barrier beyond and the onlookers watching, as she looked to Jack and his concentrated, worried expression, as she looked to Samantha who now knelt beside her bound and captured ghost's daughter, whispering with her, and as she looked to Daniel.

Trying to understand what Daniel, Elaine, and evidently, Mark were up to, was as difficult as tracking bullets in a maze of mirrors. Daniel was fast, faster than Antoinette, and certainly faster than any Ventrue, but it was clear he had become trapped in the maze of invisible, warping paths as well. Thankfully, it also seemed so too had Elaine and Mark. And from the few, short lived glimpses Antoinette managed of Elaine's face, her old friend was forced to create a mental map, same as Antoinette. She had not anticipated her partner-in-crime to trigger an Oubliette directly on top of them.

Elaine. How could she do this? What could Jacob have said to her to convince her this madness was the best possible course of action? What mistakes had she made that she refused to share with her?

With the nature of the curse known to them all, as well as Elaine's history with it, Antoinette had had no choice but to assume Elaine had performed a rather heinous experiment to rid herself of it, so long ago. But for Elaine to feel so guilty, so broken over what she had done, or perhaps feel guilty over other secrets in her past she had not shared, that she would aid Jacob in this madness, Antoinette struggled to accept.

She wished Daniel would spar with Elaine verbally, in an attempt to learn more. But it was not his way, and while he was clearly superior to Elaine in melee combat, he had two opponents to deal with. He needed to focus. And, while Daniel was as skilled at Obfuscate as Jacob, and quite capable of hiding himself if given the correct situation, trapped inside Jacob's Oubliette was not such a situation. And if he used Auspex to search for the truth in the maze, it would be a moment's hesitation that could get him killed.

But that did not mean he could not give Elaine and Mark trouble. Once Elaine was close enough the warping vision of the Oubliette was not enough to stop her, she took a swing at the man, and Daniel responded with masterful use of Obfuscate. His body became a blur, a distortion of light, not a product of speed but of his ability to twist the shadows. Elaine missed, and Daniel sliced along her side as he stepped around her. The sword cut through her suit and skin, but could not penetrate deeper, as the Ventrue undoubtedly poured vitae into her flesh.

Neither Mekhet or Ventrue were particularly well equipped for melee combat. That was the purview of Daeva, Nosferatu, and Gangrels. Elders compensated for such limitations, and compensated well. Mekhets frequently learned to use swords. And Ventrue never fought alone.

Mark burst from the black water yet again, and for a sliver of a moment, the silhouette of something grotesque gushed from the onyx fluid, a mound of maggots and other insects that swam out in

all directions. Again, Mark reached up for Daniel's leg, but the sheriff stepped clear, only for Elaine to drive her fist into his chest. He recovered quickly and adopted a defensive stance. Elaine did not have the strength to kill him instantly, but unlike Daniel, she had the Resilience to outlast him. A battle of attrition.

A blur, identical to Daniel's own, came for Antoinette's face, and she sidestepped it, only to return Jacob's punch with a fast jab. But unlike her, Jacob could tell where the walls of lies of his Oubliette were. He stepped away and disappeared as quickly as a fly in a dark room. Normally her senses would have been able to track him, with him so close, but not within this maze of twisting vision.

"I really wish you'd just stay out of this," Jacob said. There was no point in turning to find the source of the voice. All a deception.

"You are trying to destroy the world, old friend."

"I'm trying to save it. To fix it. You know what that's like. You spend every day trying to fix this broken system, but you just don't think big enough."

"Is that what you told my childe?" Antoinette set her harsh glare on Samantha, who knelt with her daughter's ghost and stroked her hair. How unfortunate that, for the first time, Samantha could physically touch the ghost, and yet Mary had apparently degraded into something horrible, something Antoinette had only seen glimpses of in her long, long life. She had become the sort of ghost that folklore tales were written of, to frighten young children and keep them away from old, abandoned homes, or dark forests.

"I told her the truth," the old Nosferatu said.

Samantha looked to Antoinette, eyes beyond distraught. The poor thing did not understand, overwhelmed by circumstance and the potential joy of Jacob's promise. And now every moment the young woman struggled against the insanity before her. Wisped away into

the depths of the Great Below, to watch her lover and his god-of-the-dead companion attempt to collapse the realms into one ball of existence, all things she could not have even considered twelve hours ago. No wonder she looked paralyzed.

“You told her what you believe. That is no truth.”

“You telling me you think life is fine the way it is?”

“I did not say that.”

A chuckle. “It’s a broken system, Ann. We all know it.”

“It is not a broken system!” She risked peeking behind her, only to catch a blur of Jacob’s movement. He was nearby, looking for an opportunity to hit her. Elaine and Daniel would be forced to land multiple hits against each other, but for Antoinette and Jacob, one good blow could be cataclysmic.

She had to be especially careful.

“You can’t be serious,” Jacob said.

“I am. There is beauty in this unfair world, old fool. You know as well as I the power of context. All that you love and hate, you owe to the power of context, of comparison and limitation and definition. And it is that power you wish to strip of everyone.”

“You sound like the beaten wife who says her husband is good some of the time, and those good times are why she stays with him.”

“It is not the same!”

“It is!”

She did not need to spin about this time. Her old friend manifested in front of her, a mirage of shifting dark colors, and his

fist came directly for her face. She ducked underneath, only to jump away from the man's knee as he drove it up toward her skull. Too far. Her own strength betrayed her, and she launched twenty feet back from the man, through multiple walls of the bending, winding Oubliette. They had no texture, they were no barrier, but each wall she passed through twisted and warped her vision.

She closed her eyes and let gravity guide her before vertigo could betray her. Water and stone met her feet, and she landed gracefully as she opened her eyes again. The red barrier was directly behind her, where moments before it had been much further away. Another trick of the Oubliette. If she was not careful, her old friend would simply force her through it, assuming it could be passed through from this side, and she would be doomed to watch the world end on the sidelines with everyone else.

“It is not,” she said. “There is much to be had in this unfair world, and much to defend. You seek to undo life.”

“I don't. Life will still exist, just not as a shitty cycle of dying and living.”

“Then it is not life! It is existence as stale and meaningless as that of a stone.”

Jacob came at her again. Black Blood moved above, but he was nothing more than a distraction to be ignored. Invisible splashes in the black water around her came closer and closer, first from her front, then her right, then her left, then behind. She did not turn.

The final splash came directly beside her, and she spun to meet Jacob as again the man swung for her head, only for his fist to pass beside her as she dodged. She was faster than any Nosferatu, but there was also a moment of hesitation in Jacob's punch. Was he toying with her? No, his frown remained deadly serious, and the strength of his attack was blatant. If he had hit her, fist to skull, it could have very well been enough to kill her.

“I think,” he said as he blurred into shadow, “we should agree to disagree.”

“How quaint.” She swung a fist for where the man’s shadow and where it seemed to be heading, but the moment she took several steps forward, the orientation of everything changed, and again she could no longer tell her left from up. Attempts to use the standing stones, or even the giant above as a land mark, proved futile. Again, she was forced to build a mental map as quickly as she could.

“You don’t wish you could talk to Tony again? You know, François? Maybe apologize to him for dragging him into the Danse Macabre, and letting it slowly turn him into an asshole?”

She snarled as she tested another step, again moving toward one of the standing stones. Black Blood put his hand in the way, but she knew very well he would not be able to use it against her. Once she reached the bony appendage, it would be a simple matter to jump over it, or perhaps simply push forward, and force the colossal creature to move his hand for her. She did not want to touch it, but if she had to, then so be it.

“Tony’s mistakes were his own.”

“Right right, because everyone lives in a vacuum, and no one affects each other at all.” The sarcasm was palpable. “Tell that to everyone else on the fucking planet, who knows just how much that isn’t true. Tell it to everyone who knows how full of shit you are!”

Again, the shadows blurred, and Jacob appeared. He came at her from the other side this time, and again she was forced to dodge first, stepped back so his fist slipped past her waist’s side. She spun, and brought up the heel of the opposite leg behind her and around, hoping to drive her bare foot directly up into his stomach with enough power to shatter his insides. But her old friend rolled with the kick, a dodge sideways that required him to land on his hands and roll.



By the time she caught up with him, he was again a shadow. She was tempted to spare another peek for Daniel, as the man continued his battle on the other side of Black Blood, but she could not so much as glance his way again lest Jacob put a hole through her skull. And she knew, if she witnessed her sheriff cutting off Elaine's head, the image would scar her. She did not wish to lose another friend, lost to the damnable cycle of life and death.

Do not think about Jacob's madness. Do not entertain the thought. Do not consider it. He is wrong.

"I understand your motivations, old friend," she said, "and I sympathize. But surely you must recognize this insanity for what it is!"

Another punch, this one directly from her front. She ducked underneath it, and stepped back to avoid the inevitable attempt to knee her face again. Unfortunately, she did not expect Jacob to dive at her once he slammed the leg back down. A second fist came for her chest, and she backed away again, only barely avoiding the punch with her greater speed. But again, doing so pushed her far back enough she stepped through one of the invisible walls of warping perception. Again, she lost all sense of direction. Again, she would have to rebuild her mental map.

Jacob was testing her reflexes, and he was slowly getting closer and closer to landing a blow. She was losing this jousting match.

"I'm not insane. It's the world that's insane."

"Is that what you told my childe? Did you convince her that this apocalypse you are orchestrating is the only to escape from this so called 'madness'?"

"Samantha's been through some of the worst hell this world can manage. No one deserves what she's been through."

Jacob was not wrong, in that regard. There were few pains greater than that of a parent losing their child, and while Antoinette did her best to help Samantha overcome such hardship, Antoinette and Jacob both, they were ultimately incapable of truly understanding. But for all the pain she had suffered, Samantha had proved durable in a way most could never, in the way her son had proved several times. The idea that she would agree to Jacob's absurd plan to reduce life and death and the realms, and all the stars and gods and things betwixt, into a mere ... soup, with all context, all pains and pleasures, and separation and distance, removed? Antoinette could not see it.

"I do not disagree," she said. "I cannot imagine my childe's pain, but she was recovering. Time heals—"

"Oh shut the fuck up you sanctimonious bitch."

Jacob came from behind her, and only her great Celerity gave her the time she needed to spin and knock his punch aside with the back of her hand. She struck again, fist aimed for his chest, and he stepped back with it. But not fast enough. Her knuckles met his shoulder, and the man flew back, spinning through the air and creating a mess of his robes, before he fell to the water. The graze was enough to tear the robe at the shoulder, and she had felt flesh give. He was wounded.

He managed to look up at her, hidden eyes holding more than rage. Disdain. Not for her, though. The last glimmer of his face she caught before he again disappeared into the blurring darkness about them, ripped her rage out from under her. He was full of sorrow.

"Jacob, please. You have yet to do anything irrecoverable or unforgivable."

"Says you," Avery said from beyond the red veil.

A glance her way showed, through the twisting invisible barriers, the onlookers watching her and Daniel with eyes wide. The Prince and the sheriff were the only ones who could stop the madness, now that Jack and Mary were bound. Beatrice looked utterly torn, eyes snapping between her mentor when he emerged from the shadows, and the Prince. And Samantha, she continued to hold her ghost daughter's head on her lap, her gaze snapping between everyone, eyes so wide Antoinette feared she would see her childe's confused and broken soul.

"Ignore Avery," Antoinette said as she shook her head and gestured about them. "Jacob, this is not over. You need not commit to this lunacy! Please, stop the ritual and come back to my tower, with Samantha. We can—"

"Malachi has spent decades committed to this plan, vampire." Black Blood rumbled above her, his arms doing their best to block Daniel or Antoinette from reaching the standing stones, futile as it may be. "Because he can see past the immediate. This broken machine will continue to turn and grind everyone and everything until all that is left is misery. Enough, we say."

She almost threw the creature an insult for daring to imply she thought only in the immediate. But she could not deny that while she planned in centuries, Black Blood likely planned in millennia.

"It is not broken, Jacob!" she yelled. "I am sorry that you have struggled. I am sorry that life is unfair. But life is beautiful because death comes for us all, even Kindred." Again, she set her eyes on her childe, and the two of them stared at each other through the warping, invisible maze. "And you would undo that?"

A question for her childe, answered by her lover.

"I would." Again the man appeared, the haze of his robe burying her in a layer of shadow she did not expect. He came from above.

She rolled to the side as the man punched the ground. The black water erupted outward from his punch, the ground cracked, but Jacob was plenty agile, and he rolled with the force that pushed back up into him; the other arm dangled at his side, injured by her punch earlier.

The water exploded about her in much the same fashion, as she drove her bare foot into it and launched herself toward the man with every ounce of speed she could muster. He tried to fade into the madness of his maze once again, and no doubt would have, even if she had managed to land her punch. She did not punch him. She grabbed him.

Just as the man nearly jumped away, her hand found the wrist of his bad arm, and she yanked him toward her. A grimace of pain lined his lips, only to disappear as she drove her forehead against his nose. She did not spare her power, but the angle did not allow for something deadly. His head snapped back hard, nose obliterated, but he recovered quickly and swung his fist for her. If she caught it directly, it would have shattered her hand and arm.

She pushed it aside with her free hand as best she could, forearm hitting against the inside of his wrist, only for Jacob to throw his own head in as she was distracted. His forehead collided with her cheek, and her head snapped back as something cracked in her face. Pain flooded her, and her vision went white as her brain bounced in her skull. But she knew if she let go of the man, all could be lost, so she squeezed on his wrist hard. A weaker Kindred's wrist would have broken, but Jacob no doubt pumped vitae through his body and kept it from crumbling under her strength.

She returned the punch, but despite her greater speed, she was disoriented, and Jacob snatched her wrist before she could drive it into his throat. He pulled on it, attempting to throw her, but she stepped with it as she pulled on his wrist as well, forcing him to step

around with her. She raised a leg, only for Jacob to bring up his and force it back down.

“Please, Jacob. Do not make me do this.” Locked in melee combat like this, it was the Nosferatu at a disadvantage. They were both strong, but she was faster, and he could no longer hide from her.

“You might think this world is good the way it is. I don’t.”

“And Samantha?”

“She—”

“You would not know Samantha at all, if not for this broken world. You would not know what it felt like to care for again, perhaps even loved again. Are such joys not worth this life?”

A groan of pain forced them to both look nearby through the distorting walls. Not Daniel, or Elaine. Mark coughed and puked blood as Daniel lifted the man up high, sword sticking up through the man’s back and out through his stomach. It was a strange thing, seeing the man in the hoodie bleed red; everything about his aura suggested he would bleed rotten, putrid ooze. Stranger, to see the silhouette of the disgusting Begotten appear around, over, and within him, a mountain of maggots and bones that fell apart over Daniel before disappearing into the black water.

Elaine was no fool. She did not stand there to gawk at her dying partner, but threw herself at Daniel instead. The sheriff yanked his sword out and to the side, cutting it out the side of Mark’s body, only to bring it down toward Elaine, but she saw it coming. Her hand flowed with red, Kindred blood that seeped out through her skin and around her fingers, and Daniel’s sword crashed against it, earning a harsh wince from the Ventrue. The blade was now lodged in her hand, and Daniel could not remove it.

Elaine closed the distance further, and got her hands on Daniel. The two went down, all grace abandoned as they rolled over each other, closer and closer to the red barrier.

Elaine whispered something, so quiet only Daniel would hear it.

Jacob yanked on Antoinette's wrist again, ripping her attention back to her old witch friend.

"I don't want to lose Samantha! I won't lose her. No one will lose anything anymore. Everyone will be together! Why do you think that is so horrible!?"

"Because what joy is there in such a life, when there is no loss!? No death, no pain, nothing?"

"You make it sound like it'll be Hell. It won't. We'll have our memories. We'll know what life was like, what the pain was like. A shitty nightmare we finally get to wake up from!"

He yanked on her hard enough she fell to the ground, the same as Elaine and Daniel. They rolled over the stone floor, and the shallow black water soaked through Antoinette's suit as much as the blood of Elen's flesh tunnel. Cold, and chilling, even to her Kindred body.

She tried to punch the man, but he yanked on her wrist as they rolled. She did the same. Each attempt to drive their fists through the other was usurped by each pulling on the other's wrist. For a moment she thought they neared the red barrier, and a surge of panic and vitae shot through her limbs. But the next invisible wall of warping, twisting deception showed they had rolled closer to Jack, the wooden table covered in Jacob's artifacts, Samantha, and the ghost bound in chains.

Samantha met their eyes. She was beyond terrified.

Jacob hesitated. Antoinette did not. She brought one of her legs up, and got her knee against Jacob's gut, and pushed forward. The man roared in sudden agony as she ground her knee into his side, where the hip met torso, and his grip on her wrist tightened until it was her turn to let out a pained groan. But she had the advantage now, and she pushed her knee against him, forcing him further away, wrists locked in each other's grips.

"Samantha!" she said. "Please, it does have to end like this. Jacob has been—"

Jacob roared, a guttural and inhuman sound, and twisted his whole body hard. What distance she had managed to create vanished, and the two of them were shoulder to shoulder, chests half together, arms prying and tearing at each other.

"We'll be together in the next world," he yelled. "Everyone will be! Sam and her kids, and even you! I'm trying to help us, help everyone, and—"

The only thing that kept them from throwing the other with the sheer strength of an elder, was their grip on each other. She let hers go. Jacob froze for a hundredth of a second, confused, and instead slipped the hand under Jacob's shoulder, and around the back of his torso. No more a battle of punches and avoiding them, she rolled the man over her, and slammed his body into the water with the grappling technique. Again, the black currents exploded outward with the force of two elders combating, and Jacob went limp as his spine and side hit the stone beneath almost hard enough to crack it. Something inside him, on the other hand, had.

Before control returned to him, she got a hand about his throat, and tore it open. Fingernails ripped through Kindred skin, and with her great strength behind them, an inch of flesh tore from him. Dark Kindred blood splattered over their bodies before disappearing in a harmless puff of ash. And again, before her old friend could

compensate for losing a sizable portion of his neck, she got behind him, knelt, wrapped her arm around his throat entirely, and put him in a headlock.

The only thing that kept his head from coming off immediately, guillotined by her forearm, was the panicked grip he managed to place on her wrist with both hands.

Antoinette did not look to Samantha. She could not. No doubt her childe stared with dropped jaw at the display before her, of Antoinette and Jacob rolling and fighting and tearing into each other like savages. If Antoinette had to kill her childe's lover in front of her eyes, then so be it, but she did not want the memory of Samantha's eyes burned into her when she did.

"I am sorry, Jacob. But you have made your choice. I cannot let you live. Even if I simply stopped this ritual, you would attempt it again in the future." She pulled on her arm harder, tightening it on Jacob's ruined throat even more. "Goodbye."

"S-Sire." Samantha's voice, trembling. Antoinette ignored her.

"Prince!" Jack's voice. Antoinette managed to turn her head enough to look to the man, and his single eye was wide with surprise.

She turned her head long enough to see Mary's ghost lunge for her. The chains that bound her were now merged into Mary's body, and the horrifying creature's eyes were wide not with rage, but panic.

Antoinette let go of Jacob and jumped to the side, but it was no use. The awkward angle, Jacob holding her wrists, she could not get to her feet fast enough before Mary sank her claws into Antoinette's back. All of them. Slowly, with ghost claws sticking through her back and out through her chest, Antoinette stood up, and looked down at the strange blades that jutted from her body.



Then the pain hit her. Like fire, vampire's bane, the scorching agony ran up through her body, exploding outward from the ten huge claws inside her. Not even when Damien had cut off one of her arms and legs had she felt such pain. The world ceased to exist, the stone under her, the water around her ankles, the many onlookers, it all faded as her brain struggled to process what burning alive from the inside out would feel like to a vampire.

She tried to move, but her limbs refused to respond. Only her neck listened, enough for her to turn her head slightly, enough to watch Jacob slowly lift himself to his feet.

"Thanks, Black Blood." Gargling, hand against his ruined throat, Jacob gestured to Antoinette, and then up at the titan. The god of the dead's right index finger was pointed directly at Antoinette. No, not at her, at Mary, who still hovered behind her, with claws still skewered through her.

"Mary?" Samantha asked, and she ran up to join them.

"Under my control," Black Blood said. "My apologies, young vampire, and young ghost. But I could not risk Malachi dying. I cannot finish this ritual without him."

Mary the ghost hissed and snarled, and set her empty black eyes on Black Blood.

"Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!"

Black Blood unleashed his own hiss and snarl, considerably more terrifying than Mary's own horrific sounds. The ghost went silent.

"In a moment. What should we do with her, Malachi?"

She wanted to scream, but she refused. She would not give the horrid god the satisfaction. All she could do, was glare at him, hoping the venom in her eyes would be enough to kill him. It was

not. The titan twirled his finger, and Mary lifted Antoinette into the air, over her, so Antoinette's body spread out limp, limbs and head hanging uselessly.

“Just toss her out,” Jacob said, offering Antoinette one final, sad glance, before looking away. “She's got no other way in here, and it won't be much longer. She can watch.” He took a step toward the table again, and Samantha took a step to him. But before she could slip under his arm to help steady the wounded man, she stopped herself, instead looking to Antoinette, and her daughter's ghost.

“You are not going to kill her?” Elaine's voice.

“Nah. She's Samantha's sire. She might be the most annoying pain in the ass I've ever had to deal with, but she at least deserves to see the change.”

Antoinette, still dangling over Mary's claws with head upside down, set her eyes on Elaine. Where was Daniel? Oh no.

“Do not worry for your sheriff. He lives.” With a playful smirk, Elaine gestured to the red wall. “I managed to toss him through the barrier. Jacob, you did not tell me you set up an Oubliette in the area.”

Jacob gargled on a tired laugh. His throat was healing quickly, at least enough he could speak.

“Of course I didn't. You think I trust you?”

Elaine smirked, tattered and torn, suit ripped, hair a soaked mess, and body covered in what was likely Mark's blood. She came in closer, close enough for her and Antoinette to meet eyes once again.

And winked.

## Chapter 173

~~Jack~~

Oh fucking shit.

He stared up at Antoinette, and how she dangled over Mary's claws, bent backward like a corpse stuck on a pike, skewered up the back. Sabrina's knife had been unbelievably painful, like fire, somehow made of ice, slicing through flesh like a fucking lightsaber. But Mary's claws looked a thousand times worse, and they held Antoinette up over Mary's head, ready to pull her in half. Or cut her in half.

But Jacob wasn't that much of an asshole. Anyone else would have been, considering Antoinette had been about to kill him. But for some reason, the fucker about to destroy the world, wanted them alive to see it. To rub it in their faces when it worked? If it did, life and death wouldn't be a thing anymore, and everyone, alive or dead, would be together anyway. Maybe it'd take a while for it to happen? Maybe Jacob wasn't entirely convinced it'd be that simple?

Or maybe, he just didn't want them to have to die first. Dying sucked. Jack could attest to that. And Jacob had saved them on a couple occasions, for absolutely no other reason, than what he'd said. He liked Jack, and the rest of them.

"Please," Jack said, "don't ... don't hurt her."

Mary looked at him, eyes twisting down on the outer corners with almost cartoony exaggeration. She was tormented by what she was being forced to do.

"I'm trying not to! B-But Black Blood, he's ... controlling ... me..."  
The ghost looked down, body shivering. And Antoinette, still

hanging over her, body limp and paralyzed, managed to turn her head enough to look to Jack. A tiny hint of shame showed through, and Jack returned the same. They'd failed.

Jacob waved a hand, and the distorting invisible walls disappeared, allowing everyone to see what was what again. Elders didn't like showing their strongest powers. They were better off as secrets, to be used on people that wouldn't live to talk about them. People knew masters of Obfuscate could do some really weird shit with distorting reality, if they had the chance to soak an area with their blood, but Jack had never considered something as extreme as invisible walls that warped perception, like some really fucked up mirror maze. That, was a scary thing to get trapped in, and Antoinette had still managed to beat him.

With a hissing whimper, Mary's ghost hovered over to the edge of the circle of standing stones, by the red barrier. With a little more force than was necessary, no doubt at Black Blood's silent command, she threw Antoinette through the barrier, and Sándor, eyes as stoic as ever, caught her with his one good arm, and bit down his need to grunt in pain. His body was still fucked up, too.

Slowly, Jack set his one eye on Elaine, and stared at her as hard as he could. She met his gaze for a moment before looking away, and rubbing her arm where Daniel had managed to nearly cut it off.

Sure enough, Daniel emerged, on the outside of the barrier. Soaked head to toe in not only the blood of the crazy flesh tunnel they'd come through, but also Mark's blood, the Mekhet limped around the barrier until he came to stand beside Sándor and Beatrice. He helped the gargoyle with the Prince, and they set her down on her feet. She tried to stand, but fumbled, and Daniel slipped under her arm to help her.

Jack looked to the crowd, and they all looked to him. No one had to say it. It was plastered on their faces. They'd failed, and now

Jacob was going to start the apocalypse.

Snarling, Jack pulled against the invisible chains holding him. He pulled harder, and harder. He pulled until he felt his vitae pulse in his body and his bones threaten to break. But the ritual circle was made with his own blood, and he didn't need to be an ancient dragon of the Ordo Dracul to guess that meant it was unbreakable to him.

"Shame Mark died," Jacob said, one hand clutched to the side of his fucked up throat. "I suppose the lot of you thought he was gross? Which, I mean, he kinda was, but that was his Horror's fault, not him. The guy was loyal to Azamel, and has lost other people, too." Before Jack or anyone else could call him out, Jacob threw up a hand and shook his head. "Never mind. I'm wasting my breath."

"You okay?" Jack's mom came up to Jacob and peeked at his neck. Exposed flesh showed some Kindred blood pulsing within.

"I'll be fine. I have to finish this ritual, and it's going to take a bit."

"And ... and Mary?"

"I am truly sorry," Black Blood said, and he weaved a finger over Mary's ghost. The chains that bound her reappeared, coiled around her, and the ghost settled back on the wet stone floor. "My options were limited."

"I gotta admit," the old Nosferatu said as he clucked his tongue once as he looked through the red barrier at the watching crowd, "you almost had me, old friend."

Antoinette sneered, but she didn't have the energy to put the ice cold glare in it Jack would have expected. Mary's claws had really, really fucked her up.

Sam leaned in and nudged her cheek against Jacob's shoulder.

“You—”

“Go. I’ll be fine.” He returned the lean to give her a quick kiss on the cheek again before nodding toward Mary’s ghost.

Jack’s mom watched Jacob for a few seconds longer than she needed too. He recognized that look. It was the look she gave his dad when she was worried about him, when he tried to do the manly thing and not talk about how much he was hurting about whatever. But Mary’s sniffles called her, and her mom settled down in the shallow water beside her.

She got on her knees and set Mary’s head on her legs, before peeking back up to Jacob’s back as the man worked, and then to Jack. Something had changed. Her expression, her body language, the way she looked at Jacob’s back as she ran her fingers through Mary’s hair. Mary had whispered something to her earlier, but in all the chaos, Jack didn’t have a fucking clue what. Their mom had mentioned their dad to Mary’s ghost, so maybe something to do with him?

To everyone watching, it probably looked like his mom had betrayed them, had become Jacob’s partner in crime, and doomed them all to Armageddon. Jack knew better. His mom was a lot of things, willful and determined, and soft and loving, but she was not a quick thinker. She didn’t understand what was happening, the scale of things, what Jacob and Black Blood were actually about to do, what it meant for everyone and everything. She just wanted everyone to be together, and Jacob, a man she loved, was giving her a way to make that happen. She’d had maybe five hours to wrap her mind around the fucking insanity of it all, and he knew his mom, it’d take her a lot longer than that to process what was happening.

He couldn’t hate her for that. He could be super pissed at her, like he’d been a thousand times before for her god damn fucking

stupidity and utter inability to use her god damn head. But not hate her.

Jack took a deep, useless breath, hardened his gaze on his mother, and channeled that frustration until he could stomach the shittiness of what he was about to do. No point in trying to Dominate Jacob, or Elaine. It'd take way too long to Dominate one, and the other would intervene, and that was assuming it was even possible, tired as was. He couldn't even try it on Black Blood or Mary's ghost, and Mark was dead. He had one option.

She looked at him. A moment of eye contact was all he needed. He reached out for his mom's mind, and ... got absolutely nowhere. He frowned down at the ritual circle, and tried again. But got nowhere. The ritual circle was blocking him.

He reached down for the cellar in his mind, the chains he'd summoned to hold down the curse, and tried to undo them. It didn't work. It was like he was wearing the necklace again. His Beast was out of his reach.

He snapped his glare to Elaine, and she nodded slowly, reading his thoughts and confirming. She was an Architect of Terror, a dragon who'd studied the Beast and how to manipulate it for literal centuries. It was her ritual circle, and he knew just how she'd made it.

"Black Blood," Jacob said. "Do the ritual now. I still need time, and I don't want that Strix curse to be a problem in the new world. Who knows what sort of shit it'll be able to do when the barriers are all gone."

As Elaine approached Jack, her hint of a grin faded, replaced with something heavy and somber as she looked at him.

"So this is what you wanted my blood for?" Jack asked. "You put me through that other ritual to get some curse-infused blood or

whatever, so you can get this ritual to work?”

“Indeed. Like this, you are bound, and the ritual can force the curse to respond. It would not be necessary if you cooperated.” She frowned at him as she looked down, and checked the dozens of red symbols drawn into the floor, still pushing the black water away. Daniel had done a number on her, more than Jack had noticed before. Several stab wounds and gashes were on her back, and a few more in her stomach and legs. Her suit was a mess, and several of the gashes were deep enough to expose hints of bone. Ventrue were hard to damage without fire or crazy shit like werewolf claws, but Daniel had thoroughly hurt her with nothing more than a regular sword. She was in worse condition than Jacob.

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t exactly trust a god of the dead,” Jack said.

“Then you understand little,” Black Blood said, and chuckled as he set his white, burning gaze on him.

The giant loomed in closer, and reached out with one of his hands. The towering limb covered the air over Jack, huge palm of bone bigger than Jack’s whole body, and it blocked out what little light came from the ceiling above. The maelstrom of ghosts overhead continued to howl and groan, but as the giant god summoned whatever magic he was going to use, the other ghost weren’t needed, or maybe he couldn’t use them for this. They stayed where they were.

“Just relax,” Elaine said, and she came in closer until she was standing only a foot in front of him, “and let Black Blood remove the curse.”

“I...”

Elaine winked at him.



He eyed her, and did his best to run through the thousand possibilities of what that wink meant. And there was most definitely a thousand things. The fuck was she scheming?

He didn't get much longer to think about it. Black Blood's hand glowed with the same dark he'd used to summon his ghosts before, and while no ghosts came down to join him, the red lines of the ritual circle underneath Jack lit up like fire. A rush of invisible energy hit him, more crackling nothingness down deep in the bones that defied the senses. Beast instincts told him it was supernatural, but he doubted he'd need a Beast to pick up on that. It was the same sort of chill you felt when walking past a graveyard at night, and you just knew it was the sort of night to walk on the other side of the street. Times a million.

Everything faded away. The red barrier, his worried lover, Jacob etching more symbols into the standing stones, his mom and his sister's ghost, and Elaine staring him in the eye with an expression he couldn't quite place. All gone, replaced with the white brain zone he'd grown to loathe.

Jack looked at himself. Surprisingly not naked, and wearing a suit. Both eyes again, too. Not that stereoscopic vision meant much in an endless plane of mental metaphors his brain concocted to understand the weird, mystical, magical strangeness of what-the-fuck-ever.

The white plane didn't last. Black clouds cut in from everywhere, rumbling and heavy, until Jack had to cover his ears. More and more of them appeared, carried on winds that thankfully cut well above his head, but left him staring up at a hurricane.

For a second, Jack figured the fucker would descend from them like some angel of death. But, nope, Black Blood came up from the ground, and as he did, the white endless turned into black oblivion instead. Black water inched its way up Jack's feet until it stopped at

his ankles, before it opened up into an enormous whirlpool in front of him. Naturally, the giant asshole came up out of it, a colossal black skeleton with a skull big enough to eat Jack in one bite. Up and up until his entire torso stuck out of the whirlpool, and his two hands rested on the black water around Jack.

This time, no great canyon separated them. And that was terrifying.

“Where is the curse?” Black Blood asked.

Jack snarled.

Sighing, Black Blood shook his head. “I am not your enemy.”

“Says you.”

The god of the dead chuckled and gestured around at nothing.

“You are so utterly convinced, after everything that’s happened?” In a one-on-one, the weird, alien, harsh and guttural accent was even more scary. Jack kind of missed the Southern accent.

“I’m convinced you’re willing to do whatever it takes to achieve your dream.”

“And the times I saved your life?”

Jack ground his teeth. “Just because you’re not as bad as you seem, doesn’t mean you’re in the clear to break the world.”

Unfortunately, time passed slowly in the weird brain space. If Black Blood wanted to spend the next twenty minutes giving a speech, he could.

“Where is the curse?” he asked again. Apparently he didn’t intend to give another rant about his godly, unknowable intentions.

“Locked up.”

Black Blood tilted his skull to the side. “Without your necklace to help you?”

“Yeah. Imagine that.”

“Impressive. Now, bring us to it.”

“No.”

The god of corpses laughed. “Elaine’s ritual gives me the power to force the situation, little vampire.” And with a wave of his hand, Black Blood made that blatant. The endless black that penetrated and permeated Jack’s brain shot away, except it wasn’t the environment that moved away from them a hundred miles an hour, it was Jack and Black Blood. No momentum or inertia, but Jack still fell over as his eyes told him he damn well should have, with how fast everything ripped aside.

A forest replaced his surroundings, dark and creepy, with the quiet chirping of insects in the background. A moon overhead lit the forest, but it was weak, just like the lighting in the Great Below. A harsh breeze cut along every so often, and each time it brought a howl with it, no doubt finding some trees to funnel through to create the eerie noise.

Behind Jack, was the abandoned cabin, the one he’d locked the curse under.

“I believe I have seen this movie,” Black Blood said. His giant skeleton torso still stuck out from a big black whirlpool, except now it was in the middle of Jack’s memory, in front of him and not too far from the old cabin. Somehow, the black ooze didn’t so much as touch or interact with the forest as it overlaid it, kind of like how the Begotten and their Horrors looked when doing their monster stuff outside the dream world.

“You’ve seen—Jacob.”

“He adores this movie.” Black Blood laughed, and gestured to the cabin. “You used the memory to lock up the curse. Most impressive.”

Ah shit. It was so much easier to think of Jacob as some sort of big, soulless enemy to beat, than as a dude who watched movies. Good movies, evidently.

“Yeah well, the Ripper killed two people and he was going to kill more. I wouldn’t let him.”

“Then be happy I am removing it.” Sighing, Black Blood shook his head and gestured to Jack with a hand, snaking it between the large forest trees to do it. “If you had let me take the curse from you, all those months ago, no one—”

“Would have died? Yeah, and you’d have another tool to bring about your utopia. Gonna use it to rule?”

“There will be nothing to rule, when all are together in all ways.”

“You sound like a brainwashed cult member.”

“And you are an ignorant insect. What use is there in convincing you.” Black Blood leaned in closer, until his black teeth were within punching distance. “Go, release the curse from its prison. I will extract it, and you will be eternally grateful.”

“Fuck you.”

“I. Said. Go.”

“F—”

Black Blood’s hand snapped out, and grabbed Jack. Cold and brutal, the bones of the god of the dead squeezed on him, and Jack

froze; not that he could move if he wanted to. Black Blood, or Mictawhatever, stared at him with dots of white flame in his eye sockets, and he squeezed harder, forcing Jack to groan as the bastard compressed his ribcage and lungs.

“Elaine’s ritual was drawn with your vitae, and vitae infused with the curse’s vitae. It allows me full access to your mind, vampire. You could fight me, and resist me, but all it would do is force me to rip your conscious mind into ribbons to reach my goal.” He came in closer, until his teeth were almost hitting Jack’s face. “I do not know how such damage to your mind will affect you in the new world. There are many unknowns. Your mother would prefer you intact to see it, as would Jacob.”

Jack tried to say something, but Black Blood didn’t ease up. The giant skeleton squeezed harder again, and Jack gargled on the few drops of air left in his metaphorical lungs. Metaphors could, apparently, be very painful.

“Now, go, and bring me my new prisoner.” Black Blood tossed him back, and Jack crashed into the front door behind him.

The door swung open, and Jack rolled through the dirty old cabin, before hitting the rug and sliding it across the shitty wooden floor. Eventually he came to a stop, lying on his back, and he stared up at the ceiling as his groaned. He was screwed.

Sighing, he looked over to the cellar door, where the curse still was. The door pushed up from the floor half a dozen inches so the Ripper bulged underneath it, trying to break the chains that held the old wooden door down. Jack had to let him out. He didn’t want to, but he had to.

Christ, they really had failed.

Jack got up, and stood in the doorway of the cabin. “Gimme a minute,” he said to Black Blood.

Black Blood rumbled, but said nothing as he nodded. Okay, Jack had a minute.

He closed the door to the cabin, and squatted down in front of the cellar door.

“I imagine you’ve seen everything that’s happened?” Since the real world was moving at a fraction of speed as the craziness going on in his head, now was a decent time for a little chat, before the end.

The Ripper let out a rumble of his own, all too similar to Black Blood’s. Some of his shadowy tentacles reached out from under the cellar door, and they could have grabbed Jack, but it was all a metaphor. Jack was safe until the door’s chains were broken, or undone.

“You failed,” the Ripper said.

“Yeah, apparently. Didn’t expect the red barrier.” Jack threw up his hands. “We didn’t expect any of this! The trap. Sabrina. The fucking red barrier, or Black Blood being able to touch ghosts, or this fucking ritual circle I’m trapped in.”

“Pathetic.”

“Oh shut the fuck up. Don’t act like you could have done better. This fucking ritual”—he gestured to the cabin’s front door and the giant death god waiting on the other side of it—“is locking you down just as much as it is me.”

A heavy rumble from the cellar door was all the confirmation Jack needed.

“You screwed up,” the Ripper said, “trusting Elaine and letting her draw your blood. Our blood.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to think that. Except...”

“Except what?”

“She winked at me.”

The giant creature trapped in the cellar laughed. “She winks at you all the time, dumbass.”

“This was different. She was trying to tell me something.”

“Something like ‘ha, I win!’?”

Jack threw the giant creature of smoke a glare. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“What sort of useless, idiotic question is that?”

“I want to know, what your problem is! Why, in the ever living fuck, do you want everyone to suffer? I don’t care who are you, what you are, where you came from, any of it. No one, nothing, wants other people to suffer, just for suffering’s sake.”

The creature laughed. “You have no idea how satisfying it is, how much it completes me, to—”

“I don’t buy it. No one just, gets off, on being a fucking psycho killer. Except, you know, psycho killers. But I’m not a psycho killer, I know that, and whatever you are, you might be some sort of manifestation of my inner desires. And for some fucking reason, that also includes visceral murder? No. That’s not right. I’m not like that.”

The Ripper let out a slow, deep rumble.

“No, I guess you’re not.”

Holy shit, that almost sounded contemplative.

“I can’t even begin to imagine what sort of person Susanna was, to want something like you inside her,” Jack said.

“A tortured soul.”

“Aren’t we all?”

The Ripper laughed. “You don’t know torture. You think what Jeremiah and Angela did to you was bad? Or all the times the Uratha have hurt you? Or fire? You don’t know pain, stupid kid, until you’ve been betrayed by the people you love most. And when that happens, every bit of empathy you have is burned away. All that’s left is resentment, for everything and everyone.” Another chuckle. “A perfect fit for the Strix, who have nothing left but hate and resentment for life, and for the Kindred who tried to rejoin it.”

Jack groaned, and sat down beside the cellar door. “I thought you didn’t know anything about them?”

“I don’t. Just ... faint traces of hate. Susanna thrived on it, and quickly found life was more enjoyable as a monster. No guilt, no shame, no empathy, just pure indulgence in power in all its manifestations. Murder and rape and everything between.”

“And that’s what you wanted of me? I’m not Susanna.”

“No,” the Ripper said, voice again soft, and contemplative, “I suppose you’re not.”

“I still have empathy.”

“I suppose you do.”

“And I’m never letting go of it,” Jack said. “I don’t care what you do. I don’t care what happens to me. I don’t care what happened to Susanna. I’m never going to become a heartless monster, Ripper. I’ll die before I do. I’ll kill myself before I do.”



Another rumble from the cellar.

“I thought, with time, I could take over your body. I ... never thought you’d actually be so stupid as to kill yourself than just let me have my way.” Some of the curse’s animal eyes looked at him from under the cellar door. “I’m not so stupid to realize I can’t suppress you forever. If you’re willing to kill yourself to stop me, that’s ... that’s will I can’t break, not completely.”

Jack smiled. “That a compliment?”

The Ripper laughed, a twisted and disturbing sound. “I am bound to a host so utterly pathetic, he can’t let go of his humanity. Viktor is a thousand times the vampire you were.”

“Yeah, well, he also went borderline insane and made stupid decisions that got him killed. We all thought it was because of his last torpor fucking with his mind, but I’m betting the curse in him was getting closer to breaking free, and it was turning him into a psycho.”

“Maybe,” the Ripper said. “But I cannot stop until I have it, Jack. I can’t stop until I get to experience that ... that rush. You’d understand if you just gave in. The feel of power, utter power so complete and whole, you realize everyone around you is nothing more than a sack of meat to murder, fuck, feast on, and toss aside. Total freedom.”

Jack did not like the order he described those actions.

“I thought you were some sort of amplification of my Id, but I guess not. More like, you’re...”

“A manifestation of Strix desires.”

“Whatever that means.”

“Whatever that means,” the Ripper said, mirroring his tone. Some of the beaks and snouts inside the shadows nodded. “It doesn’t matter. All I know is, I can’t stop. I won’t stop. I tried to work with you at first, Jack, to get you to ride with me, like Susanna did with her curse. But you refuse.”

“Yeap,” Jack said. “Sorry.”

“There is no reconciling this disagreement between us.”

“Probably not. Sounds like it’s pretty existential for you to abandon all humanity and become a murdering monster.”

“Sounds like you’re a vampire that refuses to embrace what a vampire could be. What I ... what the curse, wants my host to be.”

Jack coughed on a laugh as he looked down between his legs. “We’re never going to get along. This dance is going to keep going until we’re dead.” It was more than true. It was inevitable. If they somehow managed to stop Jacob and Black Blood — not happening — then he was going to kill himself, unless someone pulled a miracle cure out of their ass. He wasn’t going to let anyone else die because of the curse.

The Ripper groaned annoyance. They could hear each other’s thoughts, of course.

“I have no intention of bowing down,” the Ripper said, “not to you, and especially not to some death god relic no one cares about anymore.”

Jack laughed again. He couldn’t help it. Everything just gets kind of funny when you’re staring down the barrel of an apocalypse.

“So I gathered,” Jack said. “We’re at an impasse. The only option left is mutually assured destruction, I guess.”

“You’re the one that doesn’t want to die. You’re the one afraid of death.”

Jack blinked, and looked at the creature trapped in the basement.

“You’re not?”

“It doesn’t matter. We are bound in this ritual, and because you were stupid enough to trust Elaine, the ritual is strong enough to bind me.”

“Well, we got a bit before Black Blood rips this cabin open and makes me open the cellar. So tell me, Mister Big Bad Curse, you’re not afraid of death?”

“I’m not afraid of death.”

“Uh huh,” Jack said, making sure the sarcasm was absolutely dripping. “You were panicking when I had a sword against our throat.”

“It’s not the same. I’m afraid of spending a thousand years forced to be bound to a useless piss ant like you. And I’m afraid of my existence ending, to a useless piss ant like you.”

Jack raised a brow. “That, specifically?”

“This is just another way that you, a weak vampire that will never amount to what Susanna was, is an unworthy vessel. Being afraid of death? Pathetic. The only death worth fearing is one in a bed, weak and old and frail, with no story told, no mark left, nothing but nothing.”

“We can’t grow old.”

“Dying to passivity is the same. Dying because a worm like you refuses to embrace the power and desires of a true monster, it

sickens me, and terrifies me. I can't stomach it."

"I ... I mean, I guess I'm kind of impressed. I expected you'd be a sniveling snake who'd do anything they could to avoid dying." Jack laughed again and gestured to the monster. "The fuck are you? You're like, a viking or spartan or something, except evil as hell."

The Ripper snorted. "I would be the greatest force of destruction this world had ever known. And I would die happy, if I burned this whole world to the ground, and the flames took me with it."

"Surprised you're not on board with Black Blood then."

Another snort. "The old god wants the opposite. He wants everything together, with everyone holding hands and singing Kumbaya for all eternity."

"I uh, don't think that's exactly what he's going for."

"Close enough."

Again, Jack laughed. He couldn't help himself.

"This is the first time we've ever talked like this."

"Yeah well, I hate you," the Ripper said. "Talking with you is pointless."

"And I hate you. There's no way we can keep existing together."

"Agreed."

"Then ... we have nothing to lose." After a few seconds to think about it, a few seconds more to let out a long, annoyed groan, Jack got up, and squatted beside the cellar door again. "I really hate you, Ripper. People who didn't deserve to die, are dead, because of you. But at the same time, I'm thankful you helped when you did. I gotta admit, having the power to get revenge for Julias was great. Even

beating Avery up when she deserved it, that was great. Even beating up Garry and Michael, that was great. So, as much as you've been a huge thorn in my side, and have caused a lot of people a lot of pain, you've also helped a lot."

He expected the Ripper to laugh at him, but instead, he got an acknowledging grunt.

"You're weak, pussy bitch, Jack, and it infuriates me so much because you're strong, too. Killing Viktor and Tony? Stopping Damien and killing Lucas? Cutting off your hands to escape Angela? You did that yourself, you stupid fucking little shit. You have will. If you'd just let me in, we could have fucked this world into submission."

Jack laughed again and rubbed his head. "Yeah, I guess we could have. Ah well."

The Ripper eyed him with a half dozen eyes. "Why does it sound like you're about to suggest a plan?"

"Because I can't stop thinking about that wink Elaine gave me. She was trying to tell me something."

"If it was Viktor or Tony, they'd have just winked at you to make you angry. She's won. She and Jacob and—"

Jack slammed his hand down against the cellar door. "We're not having this conversation. I'm not going to sit here and try to convince you not everyone is the sick monster you are. It doesn't matter. We either submit, and Black Blood turns you into his bitch toy before Jacob merges all the realms into soup. Or ... we do the only thing we can do. Resist. Fight."

The Ripper chuckled, louder this time, enough the vibration pulsed through the floor. "You say that like I wouldn't have done that in the first place."

“Yeah but you’d fight like a mad dog, and I need something better. Smarter. Something’s going to happen, or has already happened, or —fuck me I don’t know. I’m saying, keep your eyes and ears open as Black Blood starts to, uh, remove you. Don’t waste your energy until you see a good opportunity to strike.”

“You really trust Elaine? She’s committed diablerie. Amaranth. On her own childe. She’s more a monster than you rea—”

“And she’s had hundreds of years of guilt ripping her up over it. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s half willing to help Jacob and Black Blood, just to alleviate her guilt.”

“Then—”

“But she’s more willing to ... to help me. She wants to help me, more than she wants to undo whatever horrible shit she’s done in the past.”

“And you believe this, why?”

“Because I’ve talked with her, hung out with her, saw into her eyes. You might not think an elder can have humanity, but I know different. Antoinette wouldn’t be close friends with her, otherwise. And you damn well know Antoinette is smart. You can hate her all you want, but you know it’s true.”

The Ripper let out a rumbling sigh that sounded a little too close to Jack’s.

“So the plan is ... to let Black Blood do what he wants, but look for an opportunity to fight back?”

“I guess. Got a better one?”

“No, I don’t.” Another grumble.

“Like I said, you got two choices. Either—”

“Submit or fight. If those are my choices, then it is no choice at all. At least if we stop Black Blood’s ritual, you and I can have one last fight for control. And ... And I suppose, that is a fight worth having.”

“That’s probably the best compliment you’re capable of giving, isn’t it?”

“Fuck you. Release me.”

Grinning, Jack reached out, and the key appeared in his hand. The joys of metaphors. He slipped the key in the lock, and let the curse out.

The memory disappeared. The old cabin in the woods, the woods, it all vanished into mist that faded away, until all that was left was Jack and the Ripper, standing before Black Blood, still inside Jack’s mind. Back in the murky, shallow black water, and back underneath the rolling dark clouds, endless and in all directions.

Now or never.

“You took your time,” Black Blood said. “Be happy I am in a good mood.”

Jack smirked up at the fucker. “Figured you’d be upset. Antoinette and Daniel almost ruined everything for you.”

“They used the flesh witch to bypass my barrier. Impressive. But I could have summoned Mary’s ghost to aid me sooner, if necessary.”

“Oh?” Jack asked. He didn’t believe it. Black Blood looked drained as fuck after opening the tear. Using Mary when he did had been an act of desperation, and now the old god was trying to make it seem like it was casual and easy. Hopefully.

“Indeed. And the other remnants I have summoned, I could have bound and sent them to fight in my stead. I have been prepared to do so, in case Elaine decided to attack Jacob.”

“Wait, what?”

“Only a fool trusts another blindly. But, Elaine has proven committed. This ritual is successful, and I will rip this Strix curse from your mind and bind it. Another tool in my repertoire.”

Jack ground his teeth as he glared. Elaine, please, don't be the villain the Ripper thinks you are.

“Now,” Black Blood said, turning his skull to face the curse, “you will bow and submit.”

The curse and the Beast it possessed let out a heavy snarl. “Fuck you.”

Black Blood laughed, harsh accent vanishing under the sound of merriment. But then he ruined it. He snapped out his hand and straightened out his torso, all with enough speed both Jack and the Ripper were struck silent. The god of corpses may have been a limited, weakened thing in the real world, but in Jack's head, he was very much a god.

Black Blood's outstretched hand hovered over the curse. The Ripper, or the curse, or the Beast, or however their strange entanglement worked, was a huge creature, a giant ball of smoke and tendrils, claws and talons, feathers and fur, beaks and snouts, and lots of animal eyes. A perfect metaphor for the darkness in all Kindred, that prided itself on its ability to adapt to its environment. From living in a forest and hunting villagers at night, to living in the middle of a populated city and becoming a political figurehead, vampires were the kings and queens of living as wolves among sheep.



Jack stared on, unable to do anything, not even able to reach out and engage Black Blood in a battle of wills. Something was blocking him. The ritual? Or maybe the fact Black Blood was a literal god — whatever the hell that meant — and not an individual with a human mind? All Jack could do was watch, as black ooze dripped from his palm down onto the Ripper. The strange liquid twisted and turned, like living snakes, all too similar to how the Ripper protected Jack's body with Kindred blood when fighting. Except now, the Ripper was helpless to do anything but snarl and roar as the black snakes coiled around him.

Please, Elaine.

The snakes tightened around the giant cloud of black mist, and the Ripper choked on a snarl as they constricted.

“Striges,” Black Blood said, eyes focused on the Ripper as more and more black snakes dripped out of his palm, “are nothing more than shadows of history. Vermin, that slipped through the cracks of the realms, forever doomed to loathe the vampire for abandoning them and their cause. You are even more forgotten than I, and useless in all regards. We have no use for the Strix in the new world. You would be nothing more than thorns in the sides of those of us who try and embrace unity.”

“Fuck ... you...” More snarls and hisses, but with each second, the giant, curse-tainted Beast became more and more bound in the black coils.

Black Blood chuckled again, and reached out his other hand, palm facing down. This one emitted a black glow, and buried the Ripper in black light; how black light worked, Jack didn't know, but his brain understood the metaphor just fine.

“You have power, though. Great power. But you are a curse of the Beast, and bound to it. You will be nothing but a slave once bound to something less autonomous. A necklace, perhaps? Or a knife?”

The Ripper pulsed inside the black coils. “Fuck. You.”

“Whatever Jacob and I choose, you will be discarded, once the abyss chasm has been crossed, and the final realms merged.” Nodding, Black Blood stood up straighter, legs still hidden inside his whirlpool, but more of his torso came out so he could loom higher and higher over the curse. His skull reached the swirling black clouds above, and he chuckled as the endless black ocean around them rippled. “Now, release your hold on the boy’s Beast.”

The Ripper tried to make a sound, probably more curses, but nothing came out, not even a hiss or snarl.

“I said, release the boy!”

At first it’d looked like Black Blood was binding the curse, the same as he had Mary’s ghost. But now, his other hand pulled something out of the Beast, up into the aura of his downward palm. Black smoke? Jack stared on, unable to look away as he felt the drain, straight down into his guts. Something was coming out of him. His eyes told him something was coming out of his Beast, but it felt like something was coming out of his insides, like someone was pulling a string out of his intestines. A memory flashed of a TV show he’d seen once, where surgeons removed a giant tapeworm out of someone’s guts. It’d looked super satisfying, but probably also super painful if not for the drugs the patient was on.

He didn’t have drugs. There was pain, enough to make him stumble back a bit and clutch his guts and heart. In the past, he’d have ranked the pain pretty high, but after the past few years, it wasn’t all that bad. It was the weird sensation that had him reeling, the draining, as if someone had put a convenient hole in his side that let all the vitae pour out of him.

“Do not worry, Jack,” Black Blood said. “You will live. You have taken many wounds, and you are not capable of sustaining your vigor with such injuries on your own.”

“So I’m noticing.” He tried to stay standing, but it wasn’t long before he fell on his ass. Energy, gone, like he’d just gotten hit by a super flu. Not a concern for a vampire, and he was damn happy for that, but all those memories of lying on his mom and dad’s couch, puking into a bucket while watching Saturday morning cartoons came rushing back. He felt like shit.

It took time. People on the outside would probably only see a few minutes go by, but for Jack and everyone else in his skull, it was a lot longer. Black Blood weaved his fingers like a puppeteer, and every second more black smoke came out of the creature Jack knew as his Beast. With each passing moment, the Beast grew smaller, and smaller. It usually hovered around as a giant ball, almost touching the ground and reaching four or five times Jack’s height. Now it kept shrinking down and down, until it was half of what it was. Less.

The black smoke beneath Black Blood’s other palm, on the other hand, only grew larger. As Black Blood drew it out, his coil-weaving changed targets, and instead wrapped chains around the growing black smoke, chains similar to the ones he’d wrapped Mary in. He’d captured his target.

Jack’s Beast, beneath Black Blood’s left palm, was now a measly eight feet tall. The new creature, under Black Blood’s right palm, was gigantic, as big as Jack’s Beast used to be. An owl, made of shadow and smoke, and two glowing yellow eyes.

It squawked as it tried to escape the chains, and the smoky body showed hints of feathers, straining against the strange, ghostly bindings. Jack stared at it, before flicking his eyes between it and the Beast. The Beast, his Beast, didn’t have a voice anymore. And it didn’t have power, at least not the power of an elder snorting a mountain of cocaine like it did when the curse possessed it.

The shadowy owl and his Beast did share a lot of similarities. Both were made of black smoke and had feathers, but the curse's form was specific, and gargantuan, an owl big enough to pick up a car. Strix, and Kindred, were connected somehow. Black Blood said connected by history, so maybe a common ancestor? Did paranormal creatures evolve? Maybe there'd been some cataclysmic event involving magic and Crúac and stuff?

Jack looked beside him at his Beast again. It was the first time he'd ever gotten to see it without the curse; not that Kindred normally ever got to actually see it. It didn't say anything, didn't insult or quip or bullshit him, didn't do anything but hover there beside him, a bundle of Kindred aspects and hungers, with none of the intelligence. It was the creature that Jack would become if he ever became a draugr, mindless, concerned only with its next meal.

The huge owl, chained up and bound, looked to Jack, and they met eyes. Whatever the curse was, however it work, how it managed to get a personality and intelligence, how it managed to become the Ripper, Jack doubted he'd ever figure out. He doubted the Ripper really understood, either. But as they met eyes, it was obvious the shadowy owl still had that intelligence and personality. And, fucked up as it was, Jack knew that intelligence and personality was partly his own.

The Ripper hadn't been created in a vacuum. It was some sort of twisted, fucked up version of Jack. Jekyll meets Hyde. And, for some even more twisted, fucked up reason, he felt ... parental.

"There are few differences between ghosts and striges, and many similarities," Black Blood said. "Reflections, beings of ephemera, undead, and more. It is no accident that Kindred are half dead, after all. Such interesting parallels."

Jack forced himself back up to his feet, fighting against shaky legs and a body that weighed a thousand pounds. Slowly, he walked

toward the giant owl, dragging his feet every step.

“Sit down, vampire,” Black Blood said. “Your role in this story is over.”

Those words, it was like someone had just stabbed him in the back with fire. Heat and frustration pulsed through him, and he clenched his fists hard as he came closer and closer. If Black Blood wanted to stop him, he couldn't with one hand working on binding the Strix curse while the other continued to draw it out of his trapped Beast. Two hands, both in use, a metaphor his mind spun up to show that Black Blood was too occupied to stop him.

Maybe if Jack had been a Gangrel, or more importantly, if Black Blood hadn't bound his Beast up in black coils, Jack could have summoned its strength to help him. But, nope, all Jack had was just Jack. A young guy with a stubborn streak a mile wide. He took another step and another, earning some annoyed snarls from Black Blood.

“You will do nothing but hurt yourself if you attempt to stop me, Jack Terry.”

Jack ignored the god of death, and came closer, close enough he could reach out and touch the giant shadowy owl. The chains that bound it meant touching the owl would do nothing. But that didn't mean he couldn't touch the chains.

And one of the links in the chain looked different than the others. It was subtle, super tiny, but one of the links of the silvery ghost chain had a red mark on it. Jack squinted at it, bringing it into focus as best he could. He recognized the symbol. It was one of the symbols in the ritual his physical body was standing on. The ritual that currently had Jack trapped, the ritual made out of Jack's blood, drawn from him when the curse's vitae infused it, was affecting one of Black Blood's chains. Something about the ritual was affecting Black Blood then, and he didn't seem to notice. Maybe he couldn't.

“Black Blood,” Jack said. “You’re a god of the dead, right? Of corpses or death or whatever.”

“My influence is far reaching, but yes.” Well, at least the big bastard was willing to answer questions. Typical villain behavior, convinced he’d won so he was willing to spill some secrets. Jack couldn’t blame him. Everyone that was a threat to him was accounted for, and currently sitting outside the red barrier. The only people who were even remotely a threat, were: Jack, bound in a ritual; Sam, far too weak to do anything; Mary’s ghost, bound in a ghost chain; and Elaine, who Jacob was probably ready to squash into pulp the moment she so much as looked at him funny.

“You bound my sister’s ghost like it was nothing. You grabbed her, like she was just a fly.”

Black Blood snorted a chuckle. “I am a god of death and the dead, little vampire. She is a ghost.”

Right, and he’d said the Strix were strangely connected to vampires, half-dead creatures, and were similar to ghosts. The fact there was some crossover was probably how Black Blood was able to extract the curse at all.

Jack had assumed that one time the curse had actually hit Black Blood, the last time they’d had a mind meld, it’d been because they were in Jack’s mind. But, maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe Black Blood was genuinely worried about the curse. Maybe, the curse was a genuine threat to him. And if Elaine knew that ... Well, it wasn’t like Jack had anything to lose.

“You almost let Jacob die. Antoinette almost got him.”

“I was toying with the Prince, nothing more.”

Jack smirked. “No, you weren’t. You were tired. You would have forced Mary’s ghost to help sooner, if you could have. You’re

exhausted. You're weak. You're not some limitless god of power. So ... fuck you."

Before Black Blood could say anything, Jack reached out, and grabbed the chain. No pain. He'd expected pain, like grabbing an electric fence or something, but whatever Black Blood was doing, it had one purpose: binding the curse. It didn't care that Jack touched it.

"What are you doing?"

Jack smirked up at the big bastard again, before looking back into the eyes of the Ripper. No need for them to communicate, Jack knew what it wanted. It wanted to kick Black Blood's ass.

The symbol on the chain glowed. It reacted to him. Elaine, you sneaky bitch.

Jack took a deep, useless breath, and pulled apart with every ounce of effort he could find. All or nothing, everything came down to this.

He figured he'd have a pretty huge epic moment. Maybe some roaring and screaming as the chain resisted him. Maybe he'd have a Samson moment, resummon his lost strength and push down some big pillars, hopefully without the dying part. Maybe something out of an anime, where Jack would find the spark inside him to overcome any barrier, any obstacle, any resistance!

Nope. The moment Jack pulled the chain, the symbol on the one link flared, the link disappeared, and Jack was flung back by a big, invisible, explosive force. He landed on his ass hard, and tried to get up fast. Didn't work. He was fucking exhausted already, so he sat up instead, hands pushing down against the black shallow water, and watched the insanity unfold.

“What!?” Black Blood snapped his head back, but it was too late. The chains changed. Instead of the ghostly, silvery, dark chains Black Blood had spun to coil and trap the curse, they changed into dark red chains. An intimately familiar shade of red. Those, were chains made of Kindred blood.

The chains snapped out, still wrapping around the Strix curse, but also wrapping around Black Blood. One chain wrapped around the back of his skull. Another chain got the hand that’d been chaining the curse, and yanked it back behind Black Blood’s shoulder. His hand sucking black smoke out of the bound Beast got a chain, too, forcing the hand against Black Blood’s chest, stopping his ritual.

The chains did more than that. They pulled the giant shadow owl straight toward him.

The curse, with chains behind it but no longer wrapping it, stuck out its giant black wings, and let out a paralyzing screech. Jack clutched his ears, but it didn’t help. It was the sort of sound Mary made, a shriek you couldn’t make with vocal cords. The sort of sound only something ephemeral could make, and only something that embodied death itself could make.

The giant owl slammed into Black Blood’s face, and everything exploded. The world, Jack’s bound Beast and the black ropes that bound it, the endless mindscape and its black water and clouds Black Blood filled it with, Black Blood himself, the curse, it all shattered and fell apart. He couldn’t see. Everything was gone.

Jack fell on his ass. Again. In black water, again. The world crept back into view as he forced open his eyes. Eye. He groaned as pain ravaged him, pain the Ripper had been suppressing. The scar tissue, the barely formed layers of skin and muscle, all screamed at him to get blood in him and take a long torpor. The curse—

The curse was gone. The anger and rage, the extra personality whispering in his mind. The sickening desires. Gone. Jack clutched



his chest and looked down at the ritual circle around him. It was gone, too, and no longer pushed out the black water. Deactivated, or completed? Either way, he was back in the real world.

He looked to his mom. She sat beside Mary's ghost, holding her, now that Mary was back in chains. Both of them were looking up. Elaine and Jacob were both looking up, too. Jack looked to the red barrier. Same thing. Everyone beyond it was looking up.

The screeching noise yanked Jack's eye up as well. And just like everyone else, he froze, and stared.

A giant black owl was fighting Black Blood. No, fighting was the wrong word. The curse, the Ripper, whatever it was now, its black wings erupted out of Black Blood's right arm, followed by black smoke that exploded outward like someone had just opened a door or window to a house fire. And Black Blood slammed a hand down on the wings and smoke hard enough they again exploded, and disappeared. But before the skeleton could recover, black wings erupted from another piece of his bone, this time from his left shoulder. Again, the god of corpses slammed a hand against the invading parasite, and ripped and tore at his own bones and black ooze, until the owl shrieked in agony and disappeared, only to reemerge somewhere else on Black Blood's body.

"Get out! Get out!" Black Blood roared, and the sound hit like a blast wave. If Jack hadn't already been on his ass, he would have fallen over as the black water around the giant god shot outward from him. Again and again, invisible pulses erupted from Black Blood, each followed by a grand boom.

"Black Blood, what the hell!?" Jacob jumped back to his feet, and put his book and knife on the table. Unfortunately for Jacob, the pulsing eruptions of Black Blood fighting off the curse parasite sent his table over, and a dozen artifacts fell. He paused long enough to

glance to them, before looking down at Jack's mom, at Mary, still bound, then to Jack, and then finally, to Elaine.

“What. Did. You. Do?”

Elaine shrugged and gestured up to Black Blood.

“Why ask me? Your god of corpses is the one who failed.”

The giant god raged and tore at his own body, but the curse refused to die. Its shadowy body emerged from the god's forehead, and it screamed until everyone was forced to cover their ears. Black Blood again raked at his own body, and dragged his claws across his bone face, shredding the shadow owl that fought to exist. Wings erupted from behind his shoulder, and he spun as he reached for it, sending giant splatters of the black ooze on his body outward, thick as sludge and heavy enough it caused the black water everywhere to splash violently from impact.

Jacob came closer to Black Blood and waved a hand up at him. “Destroy it, before you lose control of the ghosts!”

Lose control? Jack looked up, and gulped. The hurricane of ghosts were dispersing. The mutated, horrific creatures, with see-through bodies made of limbs in all sorts of strange combinations and permutations, spread out from their tightly wound circle. Slowly, as Black Blood fought against the parasite, more and more of the ghosts dispersed, some disappearing into the endless black, and others swirling around the gigantic pillars of bone before flowing away. No green lanterns. Ghosts down here didn't have them. Like blind animals, living in pure darkness and only capable of mindlessly roaming as they searched for a new meal, the ghosts floated away.

“Mom?” Mary said. She squirmed against her chains, but they held true for now. She hadn't been able to squirm at all seconds before. They were getting weaker.

“I don’t know, baby. I don’t know what’s going on. I—”

“Malachi! Behind you!”

The old Nosferatu spun around, just as Elaine swung a knife at the back of his neck.

Jacob was ready for it. Somehow, even as the man stared up at Black Blood, obviously confused as all fuck, he spun around and smashed the back of his hand against Elaine’s face. He didn’t hold back. Ventrue were hard to hurt, and an elder like Elaine was very hard to hurt, but Jacob put enough fury and malice into the backhand that Jack felt it. A hard enough punch that Jacob screamed with it. Elaine fell, and the knife flew into the black water.

“After everything I’ve done for you!” Jacob stomped after her, and Elaine struggled to get back to her feet. “After everything I’ve sacrificed! After everything you’ve sacrificed! This is how you repay me!?” By the time she managed to get back to one foot and one knee, he drove a foot into her chest, and she flew back. Her body smashed into one of the standing stones, hard enough her head cracked against it. Her cheek and jaw already looked damaged from the backhand, and now Kindred blood splattered over the stone where her skull hit it. The standing stones were, apparently, a lot harder to knock over than anyone figured they’d be.

Jacob marched after her. The jokes, gone. The chaotic, random funny remarks, gone. This wasn’t the Jacob any of them knew. There was that one time Jack and Jacob were hanging out, when Avery and Clara had approached, and Avery had tried to make peace. Jacob had backhanded Clara so hard, a human would have been in the hospital for weeks. This was a hundreds time worse than that.

“Mom!” Mary said, not screaming, not even yelling. Just, talking, in the most Mary-like voice Jack had ever heard her use. “Stop him, please. Stop him. I don’t want this! I don’t want this!”

Their mom looked down at Mary, and clutched her tight as she looked into her empty black eyes.

“Baby, we can be—”

“No! No, it’s not right! Mom, it’s not right! He’s going to change everything for everyone, and ... and ... ruin things, for everyone.”

“But—”

“No! You’re wrong! You’re wrong! You’re wrong!”

“Mary...”

“I’m dead, Mom. You’re alive! You’re alive, and Jack’s alive! Be alive!”

Mary’s ghost, a bundle of ephemera and memories and a mountain of hate and destruction, said the words Jack struggled with. Just like old times, Mary didn’t have any problem saying the emotional bits. The ghost wasn’t Mary, but she was damn close, and Jack had been adamant about making her cross over. When Mary’s ghost looked his way, he tried to hold eye contact, lasted half a second, and looked away. Fuck, he felt like shit.

If Jacob heard Mary, he didn’t react. He couldn’t have, not with how close he was to Black Blood now, and how loud the giant skeleton was as he ripped and tore at the curse fighting his body. The vampire continued his walk toward Elaine, and he yanked off his eye bandage as he did. Snarling loud enough everyone could hear it even over Black Blood, he tossed the bandage aside, and closed the distance to Elaine.

“I can tolerate a lot, Elaine. But a traitor? Fuck you. You can die here, and you better thank God itself that in the new world, when I find you again, I won’t be able to kill you a second time.”

Elaine wobbled as she pushed herself back up to her feet, back sliding up the stone pillar, the smallest grin on her face.

“I regret many of my decisions, Jacob. This is not one of them.”

The only reason Jack heard her, over the insane roars of Black Blood, was how close he was now. He'd ignored his wounds, ignored how drained he was, ignored how fucked up it felt to have an ancient deadly curse pulled out of him, and had walked toward Jacob's back. After everything that'd happened, knowing Elaine had actually set shit up to fuck Black Blood over, to give them a chance? No way, no fucking way, he was going to let her die.

Elaine didn't even so much as glance Jack's way, knowing it'd give him up.

“It's pointless!” Jacob yelled. “It doesn't matter! Why—why am I wasting my time explaining this? It won't matter, once everything is together.” He came up to her, and put a hand around her throat as he pulled back his other. Elaine grabbed his wrist, but she didn't have the strength to break his grip, not anymore. “No more speeches. I'm done playing games. Goodbye.”

Before his other fist could turn her head into plaster, Jack grabbed the arm from behind and kicked the back of Jacob's right knee. Somehow, Jack found a sliver of strength he didn't think he had, some remnant of vitae, some tiny little bit that screamed out and told him to attack. Something angry.

It was enough. Jacob got halfway through the punch before his body collapsed, knee giving out. You didn't need to hit a knee very hard if you got it from behind. The punch went wide, his grip on Elaine's throat went wide too, and slid her to the side enough that Elaine managed to get out of the fist's path. It cracked the stone.

She threw herself at Jacob, eyes wide with the mania of a hungry vampire ready for a fight to the death. Unfortunately for Jack, he

was still directly behind Jacob, and Elaine tackled him with far more strength than Jack could have guessed. The three of them hit the ground tumbling and rolling, and Jacob and Elaine locked hands like he had with Antoinette. They rolled closer and closer to the red barrier, and the overturned table near Mary and Jack's mom, making loud growling and hissing sounds every foot of the way.

Jack scrambled to his knees as fast as he could, only to find Jacob in a full mount over Elaine, straddling her waist and slowly pushing his fists down toward her. She had her hands up, each open and blocking Jacob's oncoming fists, but the man had given up trying to punch. He was trying to get his fists down to her face, so he could rip her head off.

"Jacob!" Antoinette's voice. The Prince slammed both hands against the barrier once, but it was enough to make a harsh impact sound, and force Jacob to look her way.

"Mom." Mary squirmed harder in her chains, and stared up at her mom with enough panic in her ghost eyes Jack felt his insides ache. Their mom was watching the violence, paralyzed, and it was breaking Mary. "Mom, please!"

"I ... I don't—"

"None of you understand!" Jacob yelled. "And I'm sick of trying to explain it. I understand it. Black Blood understands it. And Samantha understands it. The rest of you can—"

His hand snapped out, out of Elaine's palm, and straight into Jack's face. So much for sneaking up beside him. The world went white as Jack flew back, and something in his face cracked. Pain followed, joining the merriment faster than he expected, and Jack rolled and bounced, and bounced, until a red glow hit him.

He was one foot away from crossing the red barrier.

Groaning, he touched his jaw. Mistake. Burning pain shot through the bone and into his skull, and he choked on a scream of agony. No time for pain, no time for misery. He got back up, and dragged himself toward Jacob again. A glance back showed Antoinette directly across the red barrier from him, looking at him, eyes wide. She wasn't even looking at Jacob or Elaine, or the raging Black Blood anymore. She was looking at him.

For a single moment, he thought about walking through the red barrier, to spend a few final moments with her. But some really big, stupid part of him told him to drag his ass back toward Jacob, and do whatever he could to stop the inevitable. He didn't know what Elaine hoped to accomplish by fucking over Black Blood like this. Maybe her plan had backfired, or failed somewhere along the line. It didn't matter. He wasn't going to let his great grandsire get her head ripped off by Jacob, not after this. No way in Hell.

“All of you!” Jacob threw a glare at everyone beyond the barrier with his empty eye sockets, before getting back to the elder between his legs, and resumed violence. “I'll bring you all into the new world, alive or dead, even if I have to drag you as you kick and scream like idiot children.” He raised a hand, and punched straight down. Elaine tried to block it, but Jacob had raised his fist high enough it was basically a haymaker. It crushed her hand into her own face.

He didn't stop. He pounded into her, again and again, and she managed to block them, but each block was pitiful and weak. Elaine didn't cry out, didn't scream, didn't beg for mercy as Jacob broke bones, driving her blocking hands into her face. And when her eyes refused to open anymore, eye sockets crushed, she held up her forearms, and blocked as best she could as Jacob broke those as well.

“Stop,” Jack said through a broken jaw. “Stop, please. Stop it.” He was too far, way too far. Even if he'd been close enough to fight him, what could do he? The curse was gone, its power gone. He wouldn't

be able to do a thing to the elder witch. Slow him down? For what? At best he'd stop Jacob long enough to get thrown through the red barrier and be forced to watch the world end on the sidelines.

It didn't matter. He had to stop this. He had to fix this. He kept going.

“Into the new world! No more life! No more death! No more pain, no more misery, no more—”

Jacob's head fell off.

Jack stopped and stared. If his jaw had worked, it would have dropped open. His one eye slowly slid from Jacob's headless body, to Jacob's head, as the eyeless thing fell harmlessly on Elaine's broken and battered forearms and head, and into the black water. His body fell over, half sideways and half forward onto Elaine, before it ignited into a puff of cinders.

Elaine managed a small squeak of surprise, and pushed the corpse off before it could burn her. A second later, the corpse was gone, nothing but ash, and the scary robe sizzled and burned before the black water doused the small flame that'd managed to spread.

Jack stared down at the robe, at where the eyeless man used to be. All the man was, all the ... everything, just up and gone in a small puff of ash. All that was left of him was a soaked, creepy robe, half burned.

His mom stood over Elaine, by her legs, with Elaine's knife in her hands. Kindred blood soaked the blade, but with no vitae powering it, the blood ignited and burned away, tiny flames and cinders that left behind nothing more than a faint trace of soot.

“Mom?” Jack asked, voice quiet, words mumbled and agonizing to say with the broken mouth.



“I ... I couldn't ... couldn't let him do it. I ... I couldn't...” She dropped the knife, and stared down at Elaine as she took a few steps back. “I had to stop him. I had ... to stop him, right?” Her eyes opened wide and wider, until her horrified gaze looked to Jack again.

He wanted to look away. No one could look into eyes like that and not get scarred for the rest of their life. But he couldn't look away, as his mom stared at him, desperate for him to say something, anything.

“You had to stop him, Mom.” He dragged himself closer to her, and set a hand on her shoulder. She was trembling. “You had to. It —”

“Malachi!”

Oh fuck. The whole time, Black Blood had been roaring and screaming and fighting off the curse, stomping his feet and twisting and turning between the standing stones only a couple hundred feet away. But now, the giant skeleton looked their way, and the white flames in his eyes exploded in size until they were too big for the eye sockets.

He took one step toward Jack and the others, and let out a shriek that silenced every single ghost above. The vibration pulsed through the floor and stones, and while Jack and probably everyone wanted to cover their ears, they couldn't. He tried to lift his arms, but his body didn't respond. Ice spread through his limbs, and the ghostly nails-on-chalkboard sound he'd become way too familiar with shot up his spine until every tendon in his body seized hard.

Black Blood couldn't touch them. Couldn't hurt them. Right?

“Damn the rules! I'll see you burn! I'll spend a thousand years tearing your skin from your flesh, and force-feed you blood to keep you alive until I am satisfied! I'll tear out your eyes and rip out your

tongue. I will drive metal and stone through your intestines, and every dead remnant in my domain will taste of your pain! Pain! You will know pain!”

Rules?

The skeleton took another step forward, and leaned down, arms outstretched. He was going to grab them.

Before his giant hands could wrap their bodies, huge shadowy wings erupted from Black Blood’s face, and again the titan roared as he stood up straight, and tore at the Ripper. It was like some freaky cancerous disease, trying to break out of Black Blood’s body, or take it over like an alien parasite. They ripped and tore at each other, splattering black ooze and black shadowy feathers alike.

But Black Blood was winning. As the titan stepped back and clawed at his face, some of his bone claws snagged the curse’s chest, and Black Blood ripped the shadow owl free from his body. Only a slither of shadow connected it to his bones, like an umbilical cord.

“How dare you! I am not some Kindred for you to infect, vile leech!”

The giant owl in the god’s hands let out a screech, and flared its wings as best it could as it pecked at the titan’s fingers hard enough bits of black bone fell into the water below. And somewhere in the alien screech sounds the owl made, two words came out.

“Fuck you!” The bird let out a final harsh flap of its wings, hard enough it freed itself from Black Blood’s grip, and flew directly into the titan’s chest.

Black Blood stumbled back. The white in his eyes erupted until two giant pillars of white flame shot out from them, and he let out an alien shriek of his own, before he sank his claws into the giant shadowy bird, and ripped it nearly in half.

Another shriek. The curse fell to the shallow water, two chunks barely bound together by black strands at the bottom of its body, each half of its head still holding a glowing yellow eye. They both looked to Jack, before the dying creature let out another weird sound. Laughter.

*Run, you moron.*

Jack's head snapped up. The whisper was in his mind, quiet, raspy, and dying. The destroyed black creature laughed again and tried to flap its wings, but Black Blood took one step forward, and crushed it underneath his foot.

The curse died, and it hit Jack like whiplash. He stumbled back, and his mom caught his wrists before he fell back on his ass again.

“Damn you all!” Black Blood took a step closer. “Malachi was my friend! And you, Samantha, betrayed him! I cannot complete the merge without him! Damn the rules, I no longer care! I will see you suffer a thousand agonies for a hundred thousand years! Death is too good for you!”

“Go,” Elaine said. She pushed herself to her feet, one of her forearms a broken mess, the other barely holding together, but she managed, and she pushed against them with her shoulders. How she managed to see at all with her destroyed face, Jack didn't know. “Go!”

Jack and his mom managed to turn around long enough for it to become painfully clear they weren't getting anywhere in time. They were too beat up, Jack dragging his feet and Elaine barely able to stand. Everyone on the other side of the barrier stared, and most of them took steps back as they realized what was happening.

Whatever rules bound the god of corpses, he didn't give a shit anymore. He was going to catch them, and kill them.

“Jack!” Antoinette’s voice. She pounded against the red barrier again and again, each crash of her hands against the red light loud enough it sounded like a gunshot. “Run!”

“No!” Jack’s mom broke off to the side, and Elaine and Jack almost fell over as she ran past them. “Mary!”

“Shit!” Jack stared after his mom, but all he could do was watch. She used Daeva speed to throw herself back toward Mary’s ghost, and collapsed on her hands and knees beside her.

“Mom! Run!” the ghost said, struggling and squirming in the ghost chains that still bound her. “Leave me! Run!”

“I can’t! I won’t!” She grabbed the chains and pulled on them hard. Jack half expected it to be too heavy for her, but their mom had no trouble lifting her daughter and the chains.

It didn’t matter. Black Blood was on her in a second, and he scooped her up off the stone, watery floor without issue. Sam screamed as Mary’s ghost fell back to the ground, and Black Blood lifted their mom up into the air until he was standing again.

“They will not arrive soon enough to save you,” Black Blood said. “I will not be cast back into the depths alone. You will come with me, Samantha Terry, and you will suffer Hell unimaginable.”

He lifted her up to his skull face, and growled over her as he began to squeeze. Jack’s mom’s scream cut off, turning into a hoarse gargle that died a second later. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Couldn’t happen. Black Blood wasn’t supposed to be able to hurt them!

Jack ground his teeth, and dragged himself back toward the giant god of corpses.

“Black Blood! Stop it!”

“A thousand curses upon you, Samantha Terry. A thousand lifetimes of misery. A thousand swords in your belly and a thousand maggots in your eyes. A plague upon your undead flesh for ten thousand years. You will know death in all its forms, and—”

A scream cut him off, harsh enough Jack almost fell over as he clutched his ears again. He knew that scream. He'd heard it shatter glass.

Mary erupted from her chains, broke them, and dove at Black Blood. The banshee ghost screamed without end, and pulsing waves shot out from her that pushed the water away as the sound threatened to pop Jack's eardrums. She shot up for Black Blood's hand, and as she closed the distance, she changed. The hanging threads and strips of fabric of her new, tattered and torn cloak grew longer and longer. Her claws grew longer, until her hands were dwarfed. The mist that poured from where her legs should have been converged into something more solid, with weird hanging bits underneath her elongating body.

Hands. Holding knives. Her body grew longer and longer, her tattered cloak becoming some sort of giant cape full of tears and holes, but somehow creating a perfect shadow beneath it. And within, sticking out from under the strange shadow of her elongated body cape, were hundreds of hands, holding knives.

She'd been stabbed to death, and Angela hadn't stabbed her once. She'd stabbed her a bunch of times.

The horrific creature slammed into Black Blood's wrist, and slashed down with her claws. The god of the dead roared in rage, and pain, and let go of their mom as he took a step back, only for the strange creature to dive at his chest. Mary's ghost must have grown five times in size, all the extra length coming out of her human torso like some sort of human centipede hybrid, and she used it, slamming it into Black Blood's sternum. She was still tiny compared

to him, but big enough, and strong enough, to force him back another step. And as she did, the hundreds of hands underneath her body stabbed at the giant god's bones. Bits of black bone fell like rain.

If those knives hurt half as much as Sabrina's knife, Black Blood was in the worst agony Jack could imagine.

Black Blood roared again, and chains shot out of his palms, aimed for Mary's ghost. But she was fast, and she flew underneath them before rising up to attack the god's face, again dragging her many knives across his dark body.

Jack held out his arms, and caught his mother. Unfortunately, physics in reality didn't do the whole 'catching some who's falling' as cleanly as it did in the movies. All the strength in the world couldn't have stopped him from collapsing forward when she hit his arms, but it was better than letting her crack her head on the stone. Unfortunately, he was barely holding together in general, and he collapsed with her straight into the shallow water.

"Mom, we have to go!" He'd found enough vitae to get his jaw bone aligned. It'd only take a gentle tap to break it again, but it was enough for now.

"No, not without Mary!"

"Look at her!" He threw a hand up and pointed at Mary's ghost. The monstrous thing slashed at Black Blood, a frenzy of screams and shrieks that forced Jack to yell into his mom's ear from half a foot away. "That's not Mary anymore!"

"That's my daughter! I don't care what you say, I won't leave her!"

"That—"

Just as quickly as Mary's assault began, it ended. The god of the dead managed to get a hard slash of his claws through her, and Mary's shrieks came to a harsh stop. She tried to fly away, to get some distance between her and the giant skeleton, but Black Blood slashed out again, and again his claws met her ghostly body. Giant gash marks cut deep, and didn't fill in like mist should have. She looked like a centipede someone had cut halfway through a dozen times, never quite managing to cut off a piece of her, but it didn't matter.

The giant ghost fell, and landed only a short distance from Jack and their mom. She tried to get up, her mutated form pushing against the stone, including the hundreds of hands still holding ghostly knives. But she couldn't. She fell over, and writhed and twisted on her side, her upper human half pushing against the stone floor and staring uselessly at Jack and their mom.

"Run," Mary said. "Mom, Jack, ru—"

"I am a god of the dead, remnant. How dare you think to strike me." Black Blood walked toward them, three whole steps all he required to cover massive ground, and reach down for them. "You broke free of my chains. A powerful remnant, you have become, Mary Terry. But all you have earned is a place at your mother's side." He snarled and laughed as both his hands covered them in shadow. "All three Terrys will spend an eternity, prostrated upon torments you cannot comprehend, with only pain to be your—"

A blinding flash of gold erupted from the center of the site. It almost looked like it came from the giant tear, but it came from ... everywhere, a wave of gold and white that buried everyone and everything. It seared the eyes, but Jack looked anyway, eye half locked on the giant skeleton hands about to scoop him and his mom up, and the other about to scoop Mary up.

Black Blood couldn't. A dozen chips and tears and half broken bones on his colossal frame didn't mean shit to him, but the giant gold chains that now bound his wrist, connected to them by enormous handcuffs, did.

The blinding light faded away, and Jack's eyes stopped burning, still locked onto the giant hands above only a few feet away from grabbing him and his mother. The fingers wriggled, desperate to capture him, but the strange gold chains that came out of nothingness pulled back on the god's wrists, and Black Blood thundered as he fought against them. It was like watching a desperate psychopath fight against the chains that bound him to his cell.

“I. Will. Not. Be. Denied!”

The chains came out of glowing orbs in the air, glowing the same gold as one of the colors in the giant tear. The tear stood there, unchanged, still surrounded by the standing stones and their glowing red symbols, as more giant gold portals opened up around it. Two high above had the chains binding the giant god's wrists, and two more appeared, also high in the cave sky. Two gold chains shot out of them, and snapped gold metal bindings around Black Blood's body, his throat, and around the base of his spine. Two more portals opened up, close to the ground, and again shot out gold chains that snapped around Black Blood's ankles.

The titan fell. With another one of his ghostly roars, a searing sound that stabbed the ears, Black Blood fell backward. For a moment it looked like he'd fall through the giant tear, but he fell beside it, and the cave trembled as the colossal creature smashed into the ground on his back.

“Vas reln korta,” someone said.

What the fuck? Jack forced himself to his feet, his mom helping him, and the two looked around for the source of the new voice. It



wasn't raspy, had no ghostly shrieks or screams, and it wasn't a primal roar.

It sounded lovely, like ... ocean waves on the beach.

“Reln difera! Forv ku—” The chains around Black Blood's body yanked hard, and Black Blood's head snapped back into the ground with a crack. An explosion of black water outward announced he'd broken the stone underneath his skull.

Jack didn't know what language they were speaking. There were other words layered into it, like multiple languages being spoken at once.

“Nu ramrelu. Ziar, thaisrah,” the ocean said. Not grating, not heavy or powerful or aggressive. Calm, and deep. Immutable. And just like Black Blood, the words were layered, other words blending in that Jack's brain swore it could find English in, but couldn't.

Black Blood and the invisible voice shared a few more sentences, and while Jack couldn't understand a word of it, he didn't need to. The god of corpses was being reprimanded, punished, or whatever the godly equivalent was.

Black Blood snapped his head up enough to look at Jack and his mom, and again, his eyes erupted with white flame.

“I will return, and have my revenge, Samantha Terry. I will rise again. I will—” Instead of letting the god of corpses have his epic final villain monologue, the gold chains tightened harder, and dragged Black Blood down. He was already on his back, arms and legs spread out between the standing stones, but somehow, the chains pulled him down anyway. The gold hovering orbs that held his chains lowered until they touched the ground, and seeped lower until they disappeared into the rock. They brought their chains with them, and Black Blood twisted and writhed fruitlessly as he sank into the black water.

Whatever the chains were doing, it wasn't easy. Black Blood resisted, and the chains were dragging him straight through solid stone; if that mattered at all to a god. Slowly but surely, the giant skeleton sank and sank, as if the water around him were quicksand with no bottom. Or, thick black sludge. His feet went first, then his hands, then his waist. His skull went last, and his burning eyes stared directly at Jack's mom as the silenced god of corpses was pulled deeper, and deeper into the Great Below.

The moment the black skeleton was completely gone, the red barrier of light surrounding them vanished. No fanfare, no special effects or loud noises, just gone, like someone flicking a light switch. The ghosts above that still remained grew silent, and went on their way, fading into blackness as they flew off. The glowing red symbols on the standing stones remained, but their glow didn't, the red light fading away slowly until all that was left was quiet darkness.

"Jack! Samantha!" Antoinette dashed for them, and Daniel followed beside her. She stumbled several times on the way. Whether that was because she was overwhelmed with emotion, or because Mary's claws had thoroughly wrecked her body, Jack couldn't tell. But once she reached them and hugged them both hard enough Sam and Jack winced, he had a feeling it was the former.

Daniel helped Elaine, picking her up before sliding her hair out of her face.

"It was a stupid plan," he said to her. "A lot of problems."

Elaine, face a broken mess and arms even worse, managed a weak shrug as she walked toward Antoinette. Daniel stayed with her, and helped her from falling over a couple times.

"It was stupid," Elaine said. "But I needed to be sure. I—"

An explanation Jack was dying to hear was cut short, as blinding gold light flooded the giant cave again. Thankfully not so blinding he couldn't tell there were a half dozen orbs coming up out of the black water, each burying the onlookers in their presence, each four times as tall as a person. The black water pushed away from them as they hovered up from the ground, and once they were a couple feet above it, the six orbs drifted toward the tear.

“W-What’s going on?” Samantha asked. “I—Mary! Mary. I have to see Mary!” She wriggled free of Antoinette and Jack’s arms, and ran over to her daughter’s ghost. With no hesitation at all, she got on her knees beside the giant, grotesque creature, and pulled its head onto her lap. “Mary. Oh god, Mary.”

Jack winced as he looked to Antoinette, to Elaine, to the rest of the crowd who’d all dragged themselves closer, before his eye fell on his mom again. If his body didn’t feel like it was about to break into bits and pieces, he’d have run after her and pulled her away.

Mary’s ghost squirmed. The upper body, the human half, looked mostly the same as it had before, but the giant cape, or millipede half, was disgusting to look at. Hands and fingers and knives, clawing uselessly at the ground, with several giant gashes cutting through the enormous body.

“Mom.” Mary’s voice was soft, a whisper, some of the ghost harshness still there but mostly a faded thing. “You’re safe, Mom.”

“I am, baby. I am. We ... I ... oh god, baby, I’m so sorry. I didn’t want this to happen!”

“I know, Mommy.”

Fuck. Jack winced again and looked away, hiding his face in Antoinette’s shoulder.

“I didn’t ... I didn’t want this to happen.” Their mom broke down into sobs, and clutched the ghost’s head close to her chest. “I would have done anything, baby. I would have done anything.” She didn’t care about the god of the dead who’d threatened revenge on her. She didn’t care about the giant glowing orbs nearby that were drifting toward the massive tear. Stakes so high they defied reason, and in that moment, she didn’t care. She cared about her daughter.

“I know. But you did the right thing, Mommy.”

“We could have been together again.”

“It wouldn’t have been right. Not right. Not right. Not right. Better this way, Mommy. Better this way.”

No one else said anything, or even moved. The only noise in the entire massive cave, was Samantha’s sobs.

A new light grabbed Jack’s eye, and he looked up to see a seventh giant glowing orb hover down from somewhere up high. The same as the others, it came down and down until it hovered a couple feet over the black water, but instead of going toward the tear, it came toward them.

“It will be,” the orb said, voice flowing out of it gently in deep, bass-filled pulses, “another cycle before Mictlantecuhtli will be able to interfere with the Fallen World again. Punishment. He has violated the decree.” It was way too soothing a voice, almost like a brown noise machine.

Jack blinked his one eye, and stepped away from Antoinette. It only made sense for the Prince to do the talking, but for some damn reason, Jack opened his stupid mouth first.

“What the fuck happened? How the fuck did any of this happen? I’m gonna assume you’re like Black Blood, or Mictwhatever. And apparently, there’s rules he had to obey? How the fuck does that

fucker get to do what he did, and nearly destroy everything, without breaking your fucking rules!? Where the fuck were you!? You only finally interfered because, what, because he actually touched my mom!?” His jaw felt like it was about to fall off, shouting like that, but rage blocked out the pain.

If there was one way Jack was going to die, it'd be pissing off a divine being with his big fat mouth. But the glowing sphere hovered there, unmoving, gently pulsing, unphased.

“We will undo the damage,” it said. “The ... tears, as you call them.” And with that, it slowly hovered toward the other glowing orbs, and the giant tear that stood over them, as tall as Black Blood had been.

Jack looked to everyone, and everyone looked to him. His mom stayed with Mary and refused to look anywhere else, and Mary's ghost didn't move either. He half expected the ghost to start fading away, but it didn't. Maybe it wasn't going to die from Black Blood's wounds. Better if it did, and fucking christ that hurt like hell to even think about. But Mary now looked almost completely like one of the other ghosts they'd seen before, down here deeper in the Great Below. And it'd kill their mom, if she ended up like that.

Sighing, Jack looked up at Antoinette, but all she had for him was a confused shrug. He looked back at Avery, but she did the same. None of them had a clue what these glowing gold spheres were.

Well, they owed the glowing orbs their lives, since Black Blood was going to break the rules or whatever that fucking meant. So, Jack followed, and Antoinette helped him, holding him up as they walked.

The orbs waited, some hovering higher than others, and from a distance, it looked like they were arranged in a pattern, a seven-point shape. Jack conveniently ignored the prime number, and came closer.

“Hello?” a voice said. It wasn’t one of the orbs. It came from the tear.

He recognized that voice.

## Chapter 174

~~Jack~~

Thick, dripping gold leaked from the tear, near the bottom, like someone had sliced a gash through a bag full of barely molten gold metal. Gold mist joined it, and gently flowed out over the black water until it nudged up against the crowd of people watching. It was warm.

The glow increased, but it didn't burn his eye anymore. For just a split, wishful second, he thought maybe the soothing warmth would heal his injuries. Nope. It felt nice though, calming, and a glance back showed everyone relaxing. Danger over. Whatever these flying orbs were, it certainly didn't seem like they were gonna hurt Jack and the gang. They were the reason Black Blood was now locked up below, or something. And whatever this gold water leaking out of the tear was, it was good.

Everyone came a little closer, except his mom. She stayed with Mary's ghost, stroking the monster's hair. A couple times she glanced toward the singed robe Jacob had worn, still half floating in the shallow water where he'd died, where she'd killed him, before she looked back down at the ghost and whispered soothing things to her. Jack wanted to go to his mom, to calm her, help her, something. But the gold light called to him, literally, with a voice.

"Jack," the gold aura said. "Jack."

"Antoinette," Jack whispered, "am I—"

"I hear it, as well. It beckons you," she said. Not a voice in his head, then, thank god.

“Jack.” Avery came up beside him and gave his shoulder a small tug. “I recognized some of the words those things spoke before. First Tongue.” She gestured to the glowing orbs. “Those things are old, Jack. Very old. They were talking about ... something about a great game. Or, machine. No clue what they meant.”

Black Blood had mentioned something about a machine. Jack had assumed the giant god was being metaphorical. Maybe not.

“Think we should, uh, run away or something?”

Avery snorted and shrugged. “None of us are in any condition to run.”

Jack gulped on a dry throat, and looked back up to Antoinette. Antoinette shrugged as she set her eyes back on the gold tear ahead, and the gentle flow of gold it released. The gold continued to spread out, pushing the black water aside. It was so beautiful, glittering and hypnotizing, Jack drifted closer toward it anyway. And so did the others, though they had the good sense to stay behind him. Like penguins waiting for one to fall off the cliff first, to know if it was safe to swim. He couldn't blame them.

The flowing gold water came up to his feet, and Jack dipped his toe in it. No reaction. He put his foot down on it, until it sank up to his ankle. No reaction. It felt more than soothing though, it felt wonderful, like someone was caressing him. Like, drinking hot chocolate and sitting by the fire; not that he'd ever done that, but it'd certainly looked comfy in the movies and videos he'd seen.

He came closer. The tear's crazy rainbow colors were gone, replaced with an endless gold that glowed in gentle waves. He came closer. The aura shifted and altered slightly, not changing in any major way, but responding to his presence. Well, he wasn't on fire. It wasn't vampire bane. So, he came closer.



A hand, a very human hand, reached out from the tear. And Jack took it. It was solid, and as warm as the gold water around him. He half expected the hand to pull on him, but they didn't. Jack pulled on them.

Mary stepped out of the tear.

"I ... I..." Jack stepped back as he let go of her hand, and looked her up and down. Mary, looking very much alive, and very much naked. The gold glow didn't just come from the tear, it came from her body as well, conveniently hiding her private parts, somehow without hiding any of her features. It was Mary, with her shoulder-length brown hair, soft face, and bright eyes, all gold tinted.

"Jack," she said, smiling. "Wow, right?"

"Um, yeah ... wow. I, I uh ... I don't understand, what's—"

Mary pat him on the shoulder, her beautiful smile paralyzing, and she walked past him. He managed to force his head to turn enough to watch her, and see how everyone else was as frozen as he was, as Mary approached her mother.

Mary's ghost and her mom stared at the oncoming figure of gold. If they noticed the audience of hypnotized onlookers, they didn't show it. No one noticed anything or anyone else anymore, except for the gold figure walking toward her mom, and her own ghost. Even the giant seven glowing orbs had become an afterthought.

Where she walked, the gold water followed, staying just ahead of each step.

"Mom," Mary said, once she got close, smile slowly changing from its usual playful shape, to something more serious. But still a smile.

"Mary?"

Mary giggled as she sat down, with absolutely zero grace. If she'd had grace, it wouldn't have been Mary. She sat just across from her mom, with her ghost between them.

"She doesn't have much time, I don't think," Mary said. "Let me talk to her."

"She's ... dying?" her mom asked.

Mary shook her head. "No, but she'll keep changing. There won't be much left of her soon. I can't believe she's lasted this long, after everything that's happened to her."

Jack dragged himself closer. No one else so much as moved a single finger, every one of them staring at Mary.

"It's okay," the ghost said. "It's okay. Mom's safe. Safe! That's all that matters."

"That's not all that matters," Mary said.

The ghost let out a little whimper, raspy high-pitched shrieks underneath it, loud enough to be heard but quiet enough they sounded more like distant screams in a forest. Echoes on the wind.

"Mom should go," the ghost said. "Go. Don't stay. I don't want her to see me like this."

"Mary," Mary said, and she leaned in close to the ghost and her panicked, wide, empty black eyes, "it doesn't have to be that way."

"It ... It doesn't?"

"No." Mary smiled warmly down at her ghost, the same smile Jack had seen their mother use so many times, when she wanted to be soothing. The mom smile.

"I don't understand."

Mary set a hand on her ghost's shoulder. "You can stay here, and change into something ... big, and scary. Or, you can come with me."

Mary's ghost tried to sit up. It didn't work. She collapsed again on her mom's lap, and her long centipede body splashed a few times as she tried again. She gave up, and relaxed on her mom's lap, head tilted to keep looking up at her original.

"Go with you?"

"With me. Truly with me." Mary put a hand on her chest.

The ghost looked up at her mom, but she was speechless, eyes slowly sliding between her two daughters.

"I ... I can feel ... weight, pulling me down. I don't know how I can —"

"Ghosts can crossover, and join us, in there." She pointed to the gold tear. "But, they ... they almost never do, when they come to the Great Below. And they never, ever do, when they get this deep, lose their lantern, and ... do this." She gestured to the long, hideous body coming out of the ghost's waist.

Mary's ghost sniffed, as if she was crying. "What will happen to me?"

"You'll join me. Together, here." Again, Mary pat her own chest. "Together as one. I've seen it happen to others in the great river, when ghosts manage to cross over. It's always so beautiful! It's just, never happened like this." She gestured to the tear. "But that just means it'll be even more special."

"I won't disappear?"

"Nope! Your memories will join mine, and we'll become one. And believe me, Mary, the great river is a much better place than this

dirty, cold cave, filled with angry ghosts who'll try and eat you."

"But ... Mom..."

"Mom will be fine. I..." Mary sighed as she looked over at Jacob's robe, then back to her mom, resummoning her smile. It was a sad smile. "You and I, we can talk with Mom after. But right now, you need to make a choice before things get any worse."

Jack came closer. He knew what'd happen, once he got close enough. Much as Mary, and Mary's ghost, looked to their mom for everyday, normal advice, Mary knew to ask Jack when it came to the heavy hitter problems. Sure enough, the ghost looked up at him as Jack got close enough to almost touch her.

"What should I do?"

Jack smiled down at her. "It's not even a question, Mary. Go with her." The craziness of the situation could wait. For now, logic mode. "You saw what those other ghosts were like. You saw the one in the hole."

The real Mary nodded. "You lost your lantern, right? You'll never get out of the Great Below without it."

So that's what the lanterns were for. Something ghosts needed if they wanted to get out of the Great Below. Something they lost, if they went deeper, and changed.

"Lantern?" the ghost asked. "I ... I never even ... tried to use it. It's gone."

Mary sighed. "You lost it, because of the resurrection, and ... Never mind, it doesn't matter. All that matters, is I'm here, getting to make a special exception."

“Go with her,” Jack said. “Special exception.” And he dug up the best smile he could find. This was really happening. Mary’s ghost was getting a chance at happiness. Finding a smile wasn’t all that hard.

Mary’s ghost looked up at him again, giant black eyes heavy with a sorrow and uncertainty only a ghost could show, before they looked back up, this time to their mom.

“Go with her,” their mom said, stroking her daughter’s ghost’s hair, and she sniffed. She couldn’t cry without Blushing, not really, but she sniffed like she was anyway. “Please, go with her. You deserve it.”

Mary’s ghost looked down, her long, slashed and broken centipede-like body wriggling a little, before she looked back up at the real Mary.

“Okay.”

Jack, their mom, and the real Mary, all sighed relief.

“Okay,” Mary said, and she set her other hand on her ghost’s shoulder. “Okay.”

Mary, already a gently glowing body of gold, glowed brighter. Jack’s vampire instincts told him to back off, or at least cover his eye, but he didn’t. He needed to see this. His mom did the same.

The giant, horrific creature that was Mary’s ghost, melted away. Her shark mouth settled into a soft smile, and her giant freaky eyes closed, as the white mist of her body changed color. More gold. It flowed slowly and gently up toward Mary, the ghost’s features disappearing, like an ancient statue getting worn down by a desert storm, but far more softly. Despite the almost blinding light, Mary’s ghost didn’t flinch or twitch or anything. She wasn’t in pain. She was calm. She was at peace.

It wasn't long before her giant body was completely gone, now a cloud of gold dust that flowed onto Mary's chest. It siphoned into her, slowly disappearing into her, every grain of sand following suit. No rush to it, no tornado or harsh siphon. The whole process was as gentle as someone tenderly pouring sand out of one palm into another.

And then there was one Mary. The bright light settled until it was only a soft glow again, and Mary opened her eyes with a small squeak, and set her eyes on her mom.

"Mom?"

Their mom blinked at her. "M-Mary?"

"Mom!" She threw herself at her, and almost knocked her over as she embraced her.

Their mom blinked down at her daughter, then up at Jack again. Jack could only shrug. Don't ask him, he was just as confused. But with a few seconds to accept what just happened, their mom hugged Mary back, and let out a quiet whimper as her arms found something solid. And warm.

"It worked," Mary said. "I ... oh god, I ... I didn't know."

"I don't understand," their mom said. "I thought—"

"It worked! Her memories are mine. Mine are hers. I ... oh my god." She giggled, a lot, and squeezed her mom so hard she earned a squeak out of her, too. More than that, she helped her stand up, and resumed hugging her. A solid body, but not flesh or skin. Something their mom could hug, but Jack knew it was only going to make things sting even more, when Mary went back to wherever she came from.

It didn't matter. This was perfect.

He came in a little closer, and Mary giggled and jumped and yanked him in for a hug, too. Which may have been a mistake, considering how much it hurt to get squeezed, fucked up as he was, but it didn't matter. He got to hug his sister again.

“Jack, you asshole.” Mary eventually let him go, and punched him in the chest. She had no more strength than a regular human, but that was more than enough to make him grunt and stumble back. Only their mom holding Jack with an arm behind his back stopped him from falling over.

“Hey! What'd I do?”

“Don't tell me you weren't hoping to leave me—er, Mary's ghost, behind here! I saw the looks you gave me.”

He winced as he looked down. Shit. Ghost Mary was unstable and not right in the head. This Mary very much was.

“I mean—”

“It's okay it's okay.” She groaned as she let go of their mom, and hugged him full on, putting her face in the crook of his neck. “I was ... I'd lost my lantern. There was no saving me.” She kissed his cheek, giggled some more, and before their mom could say anything, she hugged her again. “I was so jealous.”

“Jealous?” their mom asked.

“Yeah, of me, the um, the ghost Mary. She got to see you again!”

“You could see?”

“Yeap. You can watch the realms below, from the great river. Everything.” She giggled as she grinned at her mom, but the giggling died away as she glanced back to look over at Jacob's singed robe. “I

... I'm sorry, Mom. I think you did the right thing, I do! But I can't imagine—”

“It had to be done,” their mom said, and she hardened her expression a little before looking to Jack. “Right?”

“It did,” Antoinette said, filling in for Jack as she came closer. “He had to be stopped, permanently. I would not trust myself to stab his heart perfectly in such a circumstance, either. The only option was what you did, my childe. And we are all thankful.”

Mary nodded and hugged her mom again, before turning enough to look at the rest of the crowd. Everyone had drifted a bit closer, and we're all looking at the gold figure, and her mother. Everyone took a quiet minute to just stand there, and stare at what was happening. It was a minute too long, and Samantha's expression started to crumble.

“I killed—”

“Don't!” Mary hugged her again, as if she could protect her mom from her own thoughts. “Don't. Don't think like that. You heard the Prince, it had to be done. Okay? Okay? I told you I didn't want what Black Blood was trying to do, and you listened. You made the right choice.”

Their mom sighed as she hugged her daughter back, and stroked her hair as she kissed her forehead.

“Okay.”

“Agreed,” another voice said. “It had to be done. You can always trust a Terry to do what needs doing.”

Jack spun so fast he almost fell over, only his mom's arm keeping him up.



A tall man stepped out of the tear, as naked as Mary, but again with a gold, glowing body conveniently hiding private parts with the gold glow. He had broad shoulders, a decent amount of muscle, and short-ish hair combed back. If everything hadn't been tinted gold, his hair would have been blonde.

“Julias?”

The man winked at him as he walked up to join Jack, and set a hand on his shoulder.

“Kid, I have to admit, it looked pretty bad from where I was looking. Can't believe it worked out. I—”

Jack threw his arms around him, and squeezed.

“You fucking ... you fucking asshole.” He squeezed harder. His body didn't want to, muscles crying, and his jaw screamed at him for risking breaking it again, but he didn't care. He pressed his forehead against Julias's sternum, and held him.

“Not exactly Ventrue behavior, Jack.”

“I don't fucking care.”

Julias laughed and pat him on the back. Of all the things Jack had expected, he hadn't expected this. And even in his fantasies of getting to meet his sire again, he never expected to hug the man like this. The two of them were a lot of things, had been a lot of things, but the hugging bros type? Never.

But he was here, and no way in fucking hell was Jack not going to hug him.

“Fuck me, I'm sorry kid. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't know.”

“No one knew what Jacob was doi—”

“Not that. The curse. The infection. I knew Viktor and I had something dark in our blood, but I didn’t know about the curse.”

Jack sighed as he stepped back. “Only one person knew.”

Slowly, with a little more malice than a gold being from the afterlife should probably have been able to muster, Julias set his gaze on Elaine.

“So I’ve gathered.”

Elaine winced as she came closer. Her face had managed to regenerate enough she could see again, but she was still a broken mess, worse than Jack. The only reason she was still standing, was all the damage was above the waist.

“I am sorry, grandchilde.” She looked down, before her eyes looked to the glowing tear. “Is ... is Maurice...”

Julias shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. His shadow is there, but the rest of him isn’t, not until...”

Elaine sucked in a quick breath, nodding. “Do you know if—”

“There’s no rush, grandsire. No rush.” Nodding, Julias stepped past Jack, up to Elaine, and pat her on the shoulder, too. “And after what you’ve done tonight, I think he’ll be okay with waiting. You’re not the woman you used to be, if the other souls I’ve talked to are any indication.”

It was like someone had lifted a ten-tonne weight off the elder’s shoulders.

“Other souls...”

Nodding, Julias pat her on the shoulder a second time, before he turned, and looked through the watching crowd, until his eyes

settled on someone specific.

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~~Beatrice~~

Oh god oh shit oh god.

She didn't know what was happening. None of them had any fucking clue what was happening. Black Blood crossed a line, so now some giant glowy orbs showed up to do damage control? Sure, whatever. But then Mary, the real Mary, her soul walked out of the tear and saved her ghost from what would probably have been millennia of torture, down here as some sort of fucked up monster.

So, sure, Triss could accept that. Mary's ghost deserved help. But Julias, her Julias, glowing all gold and naked and shit walked out of the tear, and was now walking toward her. Her Julias. The dude whose body she had ready in a cave!

She froze.

Superman smiled at her as he came in close, and closer, until he set his hands on her shoulders. Warm, warmer than vampires ever were unless they were Blushing Life.

"Triss," he said. She forced herself to look up, and meet his eyes. "It won't work."

She sighed, finally finding the ability to move, at least a little, and she set her hands on his wrists.

"It won't?"

"No." He gestured beneath them, at the glowing gold water. She'd barely noticed it. "This is just a piece of the river, and I can't leave it."

"River? I don't—"

“It’s all metaphorical crap for the afterlife and stuff. This, the gold body, all of it. I can’t leave the river. If you wanted your plan to work, you’d have to be a god, and bring the realm with you, maybe ruining everything for everyone, like Jacob and Black Blood nearly did.”

Shivers worked up through her body, and she lowered her head. She was crying. You didn’t need tears to cry.

“I ... I missed you, so much. I—”

He leaned down, and kissed her. Her eyes went wide, and she stared into his, but they were closed, doing one of those classic, big time romantic kisses that were always so over the top, they made her feel like she was on a stage. And god damn it, the memories grabbed her and grabbed her hard. She wrapped her arms around him, and kissed him back.

“Sorry,” he said eventually, pulling his head away a bit. “That was dumb. Couldn’t help myself.”

“Dumb? I—”

“You know why.” He nodded his head toward Sándor slightly.

“But, I ... you...”

“Triss, I spent every moment in that river, hoping to God you’d let me go and move on. It was fucking killing me — no pun intended — seeing you trying so hard to not let go. I want you to move on.”

“But we—”

“Triss.” He sighed as he hugged her, and kissed her forehead. “I’m dead, alright? I’m dead. And that’s okay.”

Fire shot up through her hands, and she punched the man in the chest. He stumbled back.

“It’s not okay! You shouldn’t be dead! That wasn’t fair! You got yourself killed trying to help Jack! You think that’s okay? You fucking shit! You asshole! You fucking—”

He hugged her again. She squirmed and fought against him, but he held her close, and god damn it, she gave in.

“I couldn’t let Jack die. And I couldn’t Samantha die, either.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“But you’re right to be angry with me.”

“I know.”

He laughed and stroked her hair. She relaxed against him, and sobbed a little longer.

Noises grabbed her attention, and she turned her head enough to see back to the tear. More gold shapes emerged from the glow, more and more, a whole bunch of people she didn’t recognize. And a few she did.

The gold souls stepped up to the group, each of them never leaving the gold water that leaked out of the tear. Each of them, sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, sometimes more than one, found someone in the crowd. And the crowd was, predictably, frozen with shock. None of them expected to this. How could they?

Laughter grew from the gold souls when they realized they had to be the ones to break the silence, and they ran up and joined whoever it was they came to see. Some dude ran up to Clara and hugged her. A woman Triss recognized ran up to the werewolves and hugged each of them: Stephanie, the one who’d died to an azlu a

few years ago. The other werewolves came, too. Carter, Monica, and Caleb. Others Triss didn't know, came up to Avery, and the old woman broke into tears. Old pack mates?

A woman came up to Eric, and hugged the stunned man.

"Mom?" Eric said, so quiet Triss had to read his lips to hear it over the growing sound of dozens of people talking.

The woman squeezed her son, and kissed his cheek, before hugging him some more. She gestured to Jessy, too, and gave the woman a quick hug before starting a conversation, which had Jessy squirming. Apparently, she was scolding the Gangrel, and she gestured to Jessy's ... breasts, on a couple occasions, and mentioned Eric's dad. Weird.

Two people came up to Natasha, a man and woman. The little vampire was reduced to sobs instantly, and she hugged them like they'd vanish any moment. Probably not far from the truth.

"Julias," Antoinette said, "I ... I do not understand. Please, tell me what is happening?"

Julias shrugged as he stepped away from Triss. She was tempted, so damn tempted to hold on, but some piece of her, the wise part maybe, told her it'd be a mistake.

"Black Blood's tear managed to reach across the chasm. Just a little, a tiny sliver. And the guardians"—he gestured up to the glowing orbs—"figured, after what you guys managed to do, you'd earned a quick visit from us."

"The chasm?"

Julias put up his hands. "Sorry, can't talk about it. But the guardians there gave us what we needed to cross it, and visit for a bit. Those of us that haven't sailed on past the horizon yet."

Sailed on? Past the horizon? Was the afterlife a pirate adventure?

“How long is a bit?” Triss asked.

Julias smiled down at her, but it was one of those somber smiles he used when he was about to give bad news.

“Enough time to say hello, goodbye, and maybe a few things in between.”

“Right.” She gulped down her guts that were trying to jump out through her throat, and forced herself to nod. “I—”

A squeal forced her to spin around, ready for whatever suddenly made someone scream. But, it wasn't that kind of scream. It was a kid's scream, the excited kind.

A woman stepped out of the tear, and a small kid ran ahead of her, a boy. Whoever the little boy was, he didn't give a shit about anything else, except one thing: Sándor. And the poor guy was struck dumb, eyes wide, and mouth dropped. He did manage to at least get down on a knee, and catch his kid, before the little guy could tackle him.

“Theo?”

“Dad!” The kid squeezed, and Sándor's eyes, still open wide and staring past the little guy, looked to the approaching woman. Tears were in his eyes. Sure, part of that was probably because his kid was crushing his fucked up arm and shoulder, but from the way he was looking at his wife, Triss knew the reason for most of them.

“Sándor,” the gold woman said, and she got down on a knee with him. Slowly, she leaned in, and set a kiss on his forehead, before running her fingers over his short hair, and giving him a proper kiss.

“Margaret, I—”

“Shhh.” She kissed him again, and shook her head.

The two adults went quiet, and rested their foreheads against each other, while their kid squealed with joy. It was so damn beautiful, Triss had to look away. Sándor was crying, same as her, same as everyone.

Damien wandered over, eyes drifting between everyone and the tear, before coming to Julias.

“I don’t suppose—”

“Sorry, Damien,” Julias said. “The older people are, the harder it is for them to get around, in the river. And elders vampires are very old.” He pointed at his own neck. “Carrying anchors, you know? Takes them a long time to let them go.”

“I see.”

“But, I did speak to him. He’s ... open to the idea, that he might have been wrong. And an asshole.”

Damien laughed. “Music to my ears.”

Julias laughed with him, and motioned for Damien to come in closer. Damien raised a brow, but came in anyway, and Julias leaned in to whisper a few things to him. Each word had Damien’s eyes widening, and eventually, a smile, the same sort of heavy, overwhelmed smile everyone else was wearing.

“Thanks,” the Mekhet said. “I will.”

Julias nodded as he winked at him.

Elaine and Antoinette chuckled as they looked at each other, before they both nodded, and stepped back. No one was coming to



visit them. Why? Triss looked up at Julias and nodded toward the two elders.

He grinned, and nodded toward the tear.

Sure enough, a couple of new squeals joined the chorus of happy voices. Two women ran out of the tear, and went straight for Antoinette.

“Lana? Darlene?” the Prince said, staring.

Triss was seeing lots of firsts tonight. First time seeing Jacob get emotional, and now first time seeing Sándor get emotional, and Antoinette too. The Prince hadn't seen it coming. They'd all been blindsided by the dead coming out to say hi, but Antoinette looked utterly confused, like there was no way a dead person would actually want to see her again. Vampire guilt, probably, over how the Vinculum bound ghouls. But considering how devoted Sabrina had been to Viktor, post death, it was nice to see a couple of more normal girls doing the same for the Prince. They hugged her, and she hugged them.

Triss glanced Athalia's way. Daniel was with her, talking with a man Triss didn't know, some ghost from Daniel's past. Athalia was the third wheel in the conversation, and she inched away a bit to let the two talk as she glanced toward the tear a few times. Jesus christ, it hurt to watch. Go talk to her? Nah, not a good idea. Much as Triss and Athalia could actually talk to each other now, that was a far cry from—

“Mom!”

Another voice came out of the tear, and everyone shut up instantly, as a woman emerged. Even without the glass eye anymore, it was a face Beatrice would never forget. A face that shot heat up through her body until her Beast roared.

Her skin didn't shine quite as bright as everyone else's. No, that wasn't it. It was glowing, but it wasn't glowing the same color. Some different shade. Bronze? Whatever the strange color was, it also pulsed out of the thing hanging from her neck.

A stone, the size of her head, hanging from her neck by a black chain. A quick glance to Julias got the nod she was looking for. That was one of the anchors he'd been talking about.

With the rage in the woman's eyes, Triss half expected the soul's feet to taint or burn the gold water underneath her into the same black water the rest of the cave was covered in. But no, no change at all. She came closer, coughing a few times, and struggling with each step. She looked exhausted.

"Angela?" Athalia took a couple steps toward her daughter, but the look in Angela's eyes stopped her.

"Mom." Angela managed a few more steps before she fell to her knees. The anchor hit the gold water, and the splash that followed made it clear just how heavy the thing was.

Athalia didn't hesitate. She was down on her knees beside her dead daughter in a second.

"Angela, I—"

"Jeremiah," Angela said, grinding her teeth, "was ... an asshole."

"What?"

"Jeremiah was an asshole!" She snapped her hands out, and grabbed her mother by the shoulders. "He took a little girl and twisted her. Made everything worse. Lied and used her. I didn't deserve that! I didn't ... deserve that..."

Athalia tried to keep back her tears, but there was no point. Everyone was already in full emotional breakdown mode, and even with the craziness happening, this was still a surprise.

“No, you didn’t,” she said eventually, voice wavering. “And you didn’t deserve what I did to you, either. What ... What my Horror did to you.”

“No, I didn’t! You ruined my life, my childhood! The nightmares your stupid Horror put on me! I didn’t deserve that! But...” She clutched her mother’s shoulders tight, the both of them on their knees in the gold water, and the daughter visibly trembled. “It wasn’t fair of me, to blame you for everything. It wasn’t ... it wasn’t all your fault. I know that. I know that, and ... and I came here, dragged myself here, with this stupid thing around my neck! Because ... I had to ... I fucking had to ... I had to say I’m sorry.”

Athalia blinked down at her daughter, before looking around until she spotted Beatrice, and without her usual look of anger or frustration, or even icy daggers. She looked at her like she was looking for help on what to say. And Triss didn’t have a god damn clue, so, she shrugged, and gestured back to her daughter. Talk to her, you dumbass.

“You’re sorry? But I—”

“I know you’re sorry! You said you were sorry a hundred times. And ... And I...” Angela broke down, and hugged her mother. Everyone went from silent, to stone silent. Whatever bug was going around and getting everyone sick with the sobs, they hit Angela hard. A murdering psychopath. A broken child, who never really got to have a mother.

The stone hanging from Angela’s neck shrank. Hard to see, considering she was hugging Athalia, but the stone lost half its size, and the weird glow it gave off half died with it. All these dead people, dead souls, came here to say something to everyone alive,

and it seemed pretty obvious now they were doing it because they wanted to help those unlucky enough to still be alive. Angela came for a different reason.

Triss looked away. From the way Julias and Mary were looking at Angela, nodding knowingly, they weren't surprised. Hell, from the little smile Triss noticed on their faces, they'd saw this coming, maybe even talked to Angela and convinced her to do this.

Triss spoke up. "Should I—"

"No," Julias whispered. "Angela's made a lot of progress, but she's got a long ways to go before she can sail."

Sail. Considering all the talk of a river, she had to wonder if that was a metaphor at all.

"I suppose y'all don't hate each other up there, do you?" Triss asked.

Superman shook his head. "No, we don't. But I can't talk about it. Literally. Part of the deal for getting to talk."

"Oh. I guess it'd be bad for business if Heaven gave up its secrets."

Laughing, Julias gave her another hug, before stepping back. "I'm gonna go talk to someone."

"But—"

"I'll talk to you again before we go. Don't worry." He winked at her, gave her his usual suave, confident jackass grin, and walked toward Sándor. Sándor!? Oh shit. She walked after him, but managed three steps before one of the gold ghosts came her way.

Sándor's wife. Tall, slim, long dark hair, and a couple of hard eyes pointed right at Triss with the sort of direct confidence only women

who chewed up business proposals for breakfast had. Sándor did say she was a hardass, the sort of woman who demanded things when she wanted them. Which was pretty awesome, honestly, but right now those determined eyes were pointed at Triss, and they were more than a little scary.

Margaret came in close, put a hand on Triss's shoulder, and pulled her away from the group, leaving Sándor behind with his kid, and Julias. Julias laughed and joked with the obviously paralyzed gargoyle, no doubt doing his best to help Sándor get over the fact he was a big part of the reason Julias was dead. It was painful to watch Sándor squirm, but Triss couldn't help but smile seeing it. It'd taken a long time to get over the fact Sándor had been involved in Julias's death, and seeing Superman laughing and clapping the man on the shoulder was strangely ... easing.

"You're interested in my husband?" Margaret asked.

"I uh, um..."

"Beatrice, I'm dead. Have been for years. He's not. It's okay if you're interested in him."

She winced. "Is it? I mean, after what I was doing, and—"

"You learned your lesson. Right?" Damn, her voice was hard.

"I ... I did." Triss gestured around her at everything. "I—"

"I don't mean because it turned out you can't resurrect Julias. I mean because you've realized how fucked up it is, to do something so selfish. You don't get to break the rules because you think life is unfair. Right? Or did you agree with Jacob?"

It was like getting slapped in the face. Double damn, this woman could be cruel.

“No, I guess I didn’t agree with him. I thought, maybe, I did, but ... no, I didn’t. I don’t.”

“Good.” Margaret smirked as she leaned in, and put her arm over Triss’s shoulders so they were inches from each other. “Now, I don’t know if you’re a good fit for Sándor. Maybe you are. I’m no match maker. But ... you know about his Horror. You know about the worst of it.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Sándor had to kill people to satisfy his Horror’s hunger, absolutely had to, and probably in very brutal, terrifying ways. It was territory vampires were familiar with, but that was like comparing swimming in the shallow end of a pool to deep sea cave diving.

“Azamel’s helped him with controlling his hunger, but it’s still a problem. He dealt with it on his own when he was with me, despite my shitty attempts to help him, but I was just a human. You’re not. I expect you to try and help him out, okay? Even if he pushes you away, push back.”

“But what if—”

“I don’t mean right now. I mean, if you two hit it off, see if you can help him find a good way to feed, okay? You’re a vampire. Figure something out.”

This woman’s personality could smash through a brick wall. Maybe instead of her and Sándor falling in love, she’d basically bullied the man into romance? Judging from his reaction to seeing her, he did love her, though. But aggressive as Triss knew she could be, she couldn’t see herself hopping a semi and driving through Sándor’s boundaries and into his personal life like this woman probably had.

Then again, after the shit that'd happened, she kinda already got to see his personal life, up close. Maybe she wouldn't need the semi.

"I'll try."

"Good. Now, sex."

"What!?"

"Shh! Jesus." Margaret snapped her eyes around before leaning in closer so their foreheads touched slightly. "My husband deserves to be happy. I don't know how much of a fit you two will be, if at all, but just in case, I figure I should give you a tip."

This conversation was not happening.

"I—"

"Sándor is at odds with his Horror all the time. He hates being aggressive, because of how much it reminds him of his Horror. So, you and your 'girlfriend'", she air-quoted girlfriend, "will have to take control, when he's not with his Horror. He'll be pretty passive, usually. Take charge, and it'll go smooth."

"Wait, when he's not with his Horror?"

Margaret smiled. "And when he is, it'll be the opposite. He's a giant monster, Triss. Be prey. Run away, hide, squeal and have fun, and he'll chase you and fuck you into oblivion. It'll be great. Just, don't do it if he hasn't fed in a while, for reasons you already know."

Triss gulped. Sándor's dead wife was giving her sex tips on how to fuck the man, and on how to fuck the giant gargoyle, too. Damn, the woman would have fit in Dolareido perfectly.

"Jen, she uh, she wanted to know if—"

"Yes, he does."

“Holy shit.”

“Just, be careful, okay?” Margaret said. “You know what the deal with his Horror is, how dangerous it is.”

“Definitely.” And if Margaret was watching her husband from Heaven, or whatever it was, she knew about the time Sándor had nearly eaten her and Jen.

Margaret grinned at her, and looked her up and down a couple times.

“I think you’ll be good for him. Sándor and I loved each other, but like I said, I was human. I could only help him in so many ways. Maybe you and Jen will do a better job.” Cue oddly evil grin from the woman. She knew she was making whatever she was talking about ambiguous. Jen would have loved this woman.

“You know Sándor and I aren’t actually dating, right? This advice sounds a bit premature.”

“Well, now you’re getting his dead wife’s blessing, and ... and I want him to be happy. The man deserves to be happy. He’s got a thousand anchors on his neck, and it’s not fair. And I’ve seen enough. You and Jen can make him happy, in a lot of different ways.” She leaned in closer again. “And I know my husband. He likes you a lot, but you’ve probably noticed he has a hard time showing his feelings. So, this is cheating, but that’s fine. You’ve earned it. Get him alone — well, not alone if you’re bringing Jen — and bully him a little to get in his pants. A little! He’ll be happy you did.”

“But—”

She gestured back to her husband. “Dude has trouble hurting a fly. He needs help.”



Beatrice couldn't help but smile. "He really is a nice guy."

"To a fault."

"Apparently I seem to like that quality in men."

Margaret laughed. "Julias is a pretty great guy."

They both turned to watch Julias. He'd moved on from Sándor, and was chatting with Natasha and Jessy, his oldest friends. Tash was pretty much sobbing nonstop, and even Jessy was struggling to stay strong. But once Julias gave them both a hug, the Gangrel broke into sobs, too.

Triss smiled and looked back to Margaret. "You—"

The dead woman winked at her, and walked off to rejoin her husband. As she walked past Julias, the two gave each other some quick, knowing grins, before Julias came back and joined Triss again.

"Do I even want to know what you said to Sándor?" Triss asked.

Julias shook his head. "Nope. I told him all your worst secrets."

"Asshole."

He smiled at her, and she tried to return it, but it didn't last. Before she could stop it, tiny sobs worked their way through her throat, like hiccups, and she ground her teeth as she looked down.

Julias hugged her again, and stroked her hair.

"Tell Jen I love her, too, in that strange way only she seems to understand. You got a weird friend in her, but she's great, and I hope you too stay together for a long, long time."

"I will."

“And ... I’ve got to go.”

“I know.” She buried her face in his chest again, and squeezed him again. Part of her thought she should be freaking out, screaming at him to not go, to stay with her. She would have, if this had happened not long after Julias died. But, much as it sickened her, she had to admit, time helped heal the wound.

Look at her, getting wiser every night.

“And—” A quick gasp from someone else cut him off.

A new person came out of the tear, someone Triss didn’t recognize. But from the way Jack and Sam got up and dragged themselves over to the man, and hugs were had, it was probably James, Jack’s dad. Handsome guy. He chatted with his family, and the look on Sam’s face was amazing. She looked happy. The Terrys, all together again.

“She’s going to hate herself,” Triss said, nodding toward Sam. “The moment you ... you guys leave, and all she has left is Jack, she’s going to hate herself.”

“Maybe,” Julias said. “But Jacob had to be stopped. Black Blood can’t do the ritual without someone else’s help.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And maybe he’ll find someone, next cycle. But for now, Sam saved the world. She’ll need a friend to remind her of that.”

“I’m not sure she’ll think of it as saving the world.”

Julias sighed, and stepped back from her. “She will. Once she’s thinking clearly, she’ll understand. In the mean time, be her friend.”

“You know I will.”

Nodding again, Julias half turned, ready to walk away. But he stepped back in toward her, and kissed her. Good, because if he hadn't, she'd have made him do it anyway.

“No regrets, Triss. The time we had was wonderful, and I hope you cherish the memories. But it's important that—”

“That I move on. I get it already, okay? You sound like a fucking therapist.”

He grinned at her, and hugged her tight one last time, before letting her go, and slowly stepping back.

“I love you.”

God damn it. She choked down another sob, but it still came out as a trembling squeak.

“I love you, too.”

He smiled, winked, and walked back toward the tear. Right on cue, as if Julias was leading the pack, all the souls gave their loved ones some final hugs and kisses and tearful goodbyes. Caleb and Monica gave Jack a drive-by pat on the shoulder. Antoinette's ghouls, the other dead werewolves, Sándor's wife and kid, Eric's mom, whoever that was with Daniel, Tash's parents, everyone eventually moved on.

Mary and James gave Samantha extra hugs, Mary in particular, before she took her dad's hand and made for the tear. She didn't get far, of course, before she turned around and gave her mom one last hug. They both cried and squeezed each other until James had to interfere, and gently pry them apart. Sam got one last quick forehead kiss from James, before the two souls moved on, and James gave Jack a knowing pat on the shoulder, and a quick hug, too.

Before he left, Julias walked over to Athalia, and squatted down beside Angela. The two women were still locked in a hug, not talking anymore. After the sort of tense life they had, and then the tense confession Angela just gave, talking probably wasn't the best idea. Just, better to share some 'I love yous' and hug it out.

"It's smaller," Julias said, gesturing to the rock hanging off Angela's neck.

"Yeah."

"Glad I convinced you to come?"

Angela, trembling and crying, managed to nod as she smiled up at him. "Yeah."

Nodding, he held out a hand, and helped her stand up, while also giving Athalia one of his perfect, infuriating winks. Athalia came up with them, and before Julias could react, she hugged him.

"Thank you, Julias."

Julias returned the hug, before slowly guiding Athalia off him, and into Daniel's arms instead. The two men nodded to each other in typical manly fashion, before Julias put his arm around the back of Angela's shoulders, and guided her toward the tear. The woman who'd killed him, and he was helping her.

Triss dragged herself over to Sam and Jack. For a second she'd been tempted to go to Athalia, but Daniel was doing cleanup duty for her, and from the way she was snugged up under his shoulder as she watched after Angela, tears streaming down her cheeks but a smile there too, she was fine. Sam, on the other hand, was having a rougher time than anyone. She wasn't sobbing anymore, but it was damn clear from the look in her eyes that her face would have been soaked in tears if she'd been Blushing.

“Bye! I love you!” Mary waved, pausing by the giant tear as other souls stepped through it. “I love you Mom! I love you Jack!”

“I love you baby!” Sam said, waving in the exact same, exaggerated way.

“I love you,” Jack said, with only a pinch of the stand-offish behavior Triss expected of an introverted guy like him. “And I love you too, Dad.”

James nodded in that firm, proud father kinda way as he gave them a final wave, and disappeared through the tear with his daughter.

Julias paused at the tear, and waited for Angela to step in. She gave her mom one final look, and a small wave that said a million words, before she followed the others in. Only Julias was left.

He looked to his childe, and Jack returned his gaze. And, because Julias’s cheese knew no bounds, he gave the kid a thumbs up. Poor Jack. Everyone in the crowd laughed quietly as Jack returned it, but Julias maintained the most dramatic, intense, cinematic and proud gaze, before locking eyes with Triss. He smiled at her, one last time, before disappearing into the tear.

The glowing orbs got to work. They hovered around the tear, and shot what looked like gold lasers at it. It was almost like one of those scifi shows where machines used lasers to cauterize wounds. Maybe that’s what they were doing, burning the wound closed. Not much noise, either. All in all, a very anticlimactic end to all the work Jacob and Black Blood had accomplished.

Then they left, without a word, probably to deal with the other tears. No explanations about who or what they were, their relationship to Black Blood, or how they managed to use the tear to let dead souls come for a visit. Assholes.

Triss looked around. Everyone was stunned, not by what had happened, but by what wasn't happening. The world wasn't ending anymore. And, they weren't talking to the people they'd lost anymore. All they had anymore, was silence. And memories.

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~~Antoinette~~

"I believe," Antoinette said, "that we may ... return home."

Everyone sighed, tension melting away, replaced with melancholy. It was only natural, after being given such a gift, only to lose it so soon. While it was a beautiful, and cathartic moment to speak with her ghouls Lana and Darlene again, it was also true that she was an old creature, and used to moving on when those she cared for died. And Daniel, who got to speak with his dead child from so long ago, was also not as emotionally exhausted as everyone else. Elders were used to death.

Beatrice, Samantha, Jack, Athalia, and Sándor, were the ones most obviously drained by the experience, but also fulfilled. Goodbyes that were not said before were said, and final moments exchanged. Perhaps the most powerful, was Athalia's conversation, an interaction Antoinette could not help but watch, overwhelmed with interest, and perhaps empathy, as the woman reconciled with her daughter. Or rather, partially reconciled. The weight around the troubled daughter's neck had diminished, and with Julias as a strange friend in the afterlife, it was likely the girl would eventually be free of her burdens.

The idea that a psychopath, filled with hate and cruelty, could go to some great 'river', and slowly release themselves of their sins to become free to roam it, left her with a strange feeling. Did someone like that deserve such forgiveness?

She frowned as she looked down. How pathetic had she become, to suddenly subscribe to the idea that the compassionate enjoyed

their afterlife, while the cruel were doomed to suffer? A religious view, and not her view. Julias had said Lucas could not visit, as he was still weighed down by his burdens. She had to admit, the idea of that lunatic trapped by his sins as anchors around his neck, unable to sail some mystical river, was pleasing, and her frown shifted into a smile.

“Prince,” Natasha said, joining her side after a quick conversation with her sire. “What do we d-do now?”

Antoinette touched her chin as she considered. Ask her student about her conversation with her dead parents? No, too soon. Little Vola would speak of it when she was ready.

“Jacob is ... dead.” She scooped her old friend’s robe from the shallow water. “And Black Blood has been indisposed. What those strange entities did with him, I do not know, and they did not have the decency to explain what a cycle was to give me a time frame for his next appearance. But, I believe it is safe to say, we may return home, and worry about destroying this another time.” She gestured to the standing stones.

“Agreed,” Daniel said. “We’re too injured to do it by hand tonight. If a Begotten provides me passage, I’ll destroy the standing stones with explosives tomorrow night.” One of his arms held Athalia to his side. Such a display of affection was not normal for her sheriff, but it was clear Athalia needed it. And, perhaps Daniel’s conversation with his young childe Torrence, had softened him a touch. Perhaps he would even speak of him to his living childe some night.

“Elaine my dear, if you would join me for a moment?” She looked to her old friend, one of her few remaining, and offered her a cold, neutral expression.

Elaine tried to return her gaze, but her face was still a broken mess. It had healed enough to function, but only just. With a few

moments to consider it, Elaine joined her, and the two elders stepped aside from the rest of the crowd, who had begun to isolate themselves to absorb what had just happened.

“Elaine,” she whispered. “You ... made quite the gamble.”

“I did.”

“I do expect you to tell me the details of your plan.”

Elaine managed a grin with her split and ruined lips. “After you lock me in a cell, and turn me into a prisoner, I assume?”

Antoinette returned the grin. “No. I trust you to not disappear. And besides, you ... did try and stop Jacob.”

“I suppose I did.”

“And if Jack had not arrived at all to trigger your trap, and your trap against Black Blood?”

Elaine looked away. “Then ... maybe Maurice...” Sighing, she shook her head. “I grow sick of this place. Let us go.”

“Daniel,” Antoinette said, loud enough to summon him. “Help Elaine, would you? She is gravely injured. And ... do keep an eye on her.”

Elaine choked on a small laugh. “By all means.”

Nodding, Antoinette walked past the others, on her way back to her lover and her child. The mix of sadness and joy in the crowd was palpable, and no doubt poor Jack wanted nothing more than to separate himself from the powerful aura the group radiated. Such was the way of any introvert, when emotionally overwhelmed.

“Antoinette,” he said. “I uh ... I’m not sure—”



She held up a hand. “Let us go, drink, and sleep. It would not do to speak of these events so soon, and as injured and exhausted as we are.” Slipping an arm about her injured lover’s body was easy enough, as he sought her touch.

Samantha was not so easy. Her childe appeared more torn now, than she had been when Antoinette first arrived through the flesh tunnel.

Poor, dear Samantha. She spoke at last.

“I ... I was ... going to let Jacob—”

“Samantha, my childe, you were thrown into chaos you could not have even begun to appreciate, and told by a ... by a wonderful man, that you could be with your loved ones again. Anyone would have been seduced by his words in such a circumstance.”

Jacob had been, for all his chaos and strange, primal views, truly a wonderful man, and she did not regret calling him such. But in that moment, the words hit Samantha with more weight than Antoinette could have anticipated, and her childe broke into sobs once again. Jack, battered and barely standing, slipped an arm about his mother, and hugged her as best he could.

Antoinette looked back, and found Beatrice nearby, close enough to hear what she had said. After a heavy moment, Antoinette offered her old friend’s student a solemn nod.

Beatrice stood strong, and nodded in return.

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Antoinette had been tempted to speak to the others, but she knew her own advice was true. There would be time to speak of the realities in the future. For now, they needed rest.

“Sleep well,” she said to her childe, and pet her shoulder as she gently ushered Samantha into her room, deep within the Elysium Tower.

“You too,” Samantha said, and she sat on her bed in the grand room of black marble. While her room and bed were not as massive as Antoinette’s, it was still quite vast, and her blankets a beautiful shade of sky blue. Antoinette had half expected her childe to acquire stuffed animals for her bed, but Samantha was not Natasha.

Antoinette nodded, and turned to leave, but stopped and set a hand against the door frame as she looked to her childe.

“Samantha. I ... I cannot even begin to imagine the agony you must be suffering. But—”

Her sweet childe looked up from her netted hands, and smiled up at her.

“Mary told me to live, sire. That’s what I’m going to do. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“That ... That she did.” Antoinette nodded to her, and left.

The Prince went to bed, where her love waited.

Jack sat upon the edge of the bed, wearing only his boxers, his hands between his knees and his head hanging. His body had not healed, despite a quick trip to find food. His crows rested at the mansion, and Antoinette did not need to be a master of Animalism to know the crow Scully was not happy with her. The memory of the small bird cawing at her with frustration as she released Jennifer, was strangely amusing.

She sat beside her love, and set a hand behind him along his lower back, where his injuries were few.

“You are in pain,” she said. “The injuries, I mean.”

“Yeap.”

“The curse would have healed them by now.”

“Nah, not completely. Those werewolf claws hurt.”

She nodded, and rubbed the man’s spine. “Still, they would have mostly healed by now. I believe this is proof enough that the curse has truly been removed.”

He nodded as well. “Yeap.”

“Are you ... content? Not about the other insanities that befell us this night. But about what Elaine did, for you.”

“Not sure. The curse is gone...” He raised a fist, and squeezed it experimentally. “My body feels like it’s on fire.”

“And yet you sit there, as if under no pain at all.”

“I’m getting used to pain.”

With a heavy sigh, she reached out, and slowly turned her love to look to her. He still had but one eye.

“Without the curse, it will take you weeks to fully heal from these wounds, my love.”

He managed a small grin. A stomach full of fresh blood had, at least, mostly healed his broken jaw.

“You won’t mind if I just, relax here, all that time? Sleep a bunch? Maybe you could tell Michael to fuck off and leave me alone? Business reports can wait?”

She returned his grin, and gently slid her fingers back over his hair, against the grain. It would likely be a gesture that soothed him for the rest of time. He melted back into her touch, and she rewarded him with a kiss upon his head.

“The Invictus and Carthians leave each other be, thanks to you. You have earned rest.”

He nodded, and crawled back on the bed. He moved with more solidity than someone as injured as him should have.

She sighed as she watched him, and disrobed. Once she was naked, she crawled over to him, and pulled the blankets over the two of them. For the unlife of her, she wanted to pull his head to her breasts and let it rest there, but the position would be awkward and painful to him.

“It’s a strange sensation,” he said. “The curse, it ... it was power, you know?”

She turned to face him, and continued to lightly stroke his head.

“You wish to speak of it?” A strange topic. She thought he would wish to speak of Julias or his sister, but perhaps he felt those topics could wait until he felt better.

“It’s g ... He’s gone, now. Lot more comfortable talking about it.”

“Then, by all means.”

He nodded, and turned so he could rest his back against her breasts. He wanted to be the little spoon, and she happily obliged.

“When the curse started to get it hooks into me, before Julias died, it hit me with some of the most twisted, sick desires you can imagine. Real psychotic shit. When I released it, it ... I don’t know. I guess it copied a part of me, and created its own intelligence? But

that part was also part Susanna. And it was part Strix, it had to be, to be that fucking vile. It was like ... having a really, really powerful horse between the legs, one I'd raised from a foal. When it worked with me, it was amazing, thrilling, and empowering. When it fought against me, it was terrifying. This creature had zero sympathy. It hated the very idea of empathy. It was, fucking stupid as the word is, evil. But..."

"But?"

"But I still ... feel like I'm missing a part of me. Or maybe, like I'm missing something important to me." Again, he slowly clenched a fist in front of his face, curling and uncurling his fingers. "It's like, someone's taken my crazy horse, a horse I've been driving for years, shot it dead, and told me to walk."

"Quite the malevolent horse, though."

"Yeah. Good thing it's gone, I know. But it still feels weird. Feels like ... losing something that, yeah sure it was horrible, but it was still mine. It's gone, and it feels ... empty. I keep trying to put my hands on the reins, but they're not there, because the horse isn't there anymore."

An interesting dilemma. She kissed the back of his head, and risked a hug, a gentle one.

"It was 'your' horse." She emphasized 'your', sealing the meaning.

"It was. I thought maybe an extra limb was the better comparison, or maybe a car. But, no, the curse was alive. It ... He had his own personality, his own desires, and life. He was mine, and now he's gone. I know I should be happy, and I am. I fucking am. But ... it feels ... strangely lonely. And I even feel ... a bit guilty, about him dying. He was my horse. He killed so many people. He killed Monica, and Caleb. But ... he was my horse."

“You would be surprised, my love, how many people have felt similar feelings, over similar circumstances. Someone with a violent dog. Someone with a violent friend. People have followed their destructive companions into misery and worse, in some misplaced need to help them, or feeling bound to them in some way.”

He let out a quiet chuckle, and groaned with pain.

“Toxic relationships.”

“In a sense. Even mutually destructive, forced companionship, is still companionship. But with time, you will forget the sensation of the curse beside you. You will move on.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He nodded, and relaxed into his pillow.

She dare not say what she thought. Jack was convinced the Ripper was truly evil, and perhaps it was, but her love thought that neither he nor anyone else were capable of such levels of evil. He was convinced only the Strix, or similar, soulless creatures, could be capable of such total lack of empathy, and the ability to indulge and enjoy in cruelty of biblical proportions.

For all her love’s wisdom, he was still naive. Even a human was capable of becoming a monster who could enjoy such cruel indulgences. A Kindred, more so. It was quite likely the Strix curse did not carry any Strix desires at all, and was merely Susanna’s own personality, twisted by hate and rage, carried onto Jack. Or perhaps even worse, simply Jack’s personality, from an alternate world where he had suffered whatever horrible betrayals Susanna had.

It was better he continued to think such things impossible.

Day came, and torpor took them.

---

“There were many flaws with your plan.”

Antoinette stood in front of her grand office window, and looked below to her city. Safe, secure, at least from cataclysmic events brought on by gods and witches.

“There were.” Elaine stood beside her, both of them dressed in their usual business suits.

Antoinette’s insides still felt quite pained, Mary’s ghost claws having left lasting injuries. Elaine had suffered no magical injuries, but had been beaten ten times worse. She looked much better after a night’s sleep, but she moved as an old woman suffering arthritis might.

“How long had you been working with Jacob?”

“Not long. We had talked on several occasions, and once he finally explained to me what he and Black Blood were doing, I sensed an opportunity. I used the blood I had withdrawn from Jack, infused by vitae tainted by the curse, and placed my trap for him.”

“All so it would force the Strix curse to fight Black Blood.”

“Yes,” Elaine said. “I realized that Black Blood could control ghosts. I also realized that Black Blood, ghosts, and the Strix curse had much ... overlap. The curse would not be able to possess a piece of a god’s mind; Black Blood was neither Kindred, nor had a physical brain. It would instead force a direct confrontation. Which I needed, if I wanted to stop Jacob. Black Blood could control ghosts, and had summoned an army of them to help power his ritual. I needed the god of the dead distracted, or he would simply do what he did to you, and use a ghost to stop me.”

“Stop you from killing Jacob.”

Her old friend sighed as she nodded, and lowered her head. “Yes.”

“You did not think to come to me, and you and I, and my sheriff, could have—”

“Jacob had contingency plans upon contingency plans, Ann. Do you know what sort of magic Crúac rituals can accomplish? No, the only option I had, was to make sure he died when he was most vulnerable: performing the ritual. And even that was ... risky.”

“Risky does not even begin to cover it! What if Jack had not come?”

“I knew he would come.”

“You knew no such thing.” Antoinette forced herself to keep her eyes on the window, and to not stomp her foot. “The chance Jack would not find his way to Jacob was high, and then you would have had no way of stopping Black Blood. Then what? What would have happened? Would you have tried to kill Jacob? Perhaps when Daniel and I arrived? The three of us, against Jacob and Black Blood’s ghosts?”

“I had considered it, but with Mark helping him, I did not think it possible. And I had a sneaking suspicion Jacob had a trap set. I had expected a Crúac ritual, not an Oubliette, and an unusual one at that.”

“So, if Jack had not come? And the battle went as last time, with both my sheriff and I tossed past the barrier and no longer able to interfere?”

Elaine took a deep, useless breath, and kept her eyes on the window.

“Then ... I suppose Jacob would have won. And you and I would be having this discussion in a new world, a strange ocean of anything and everything combined.”



“You were willing to let the world as it is, end. You were partly seduced by our old friend’s plan. Perhaps a small part, but a part.”

“I ... was.”

“And your great crime against this fellow named Maurice would no longer haunt you.”

There it was, the words Antoinette needed, to break her friend’s composure. Elaine turned and looked to her, but where the elder Ventrue would naturally hold perfect composure, Antoinette found hints of shame. And it was not fabricated, she knew her old friend well enough to see that.

“I suppose after what Julias and I shared last night...”

“I suspected you had performed diablerie the moment I learned how Susanna acquired the curse, that you were her childe, and that you had removed the ritual long ago. Your words with Julias confirmed.”

“Ah.” Elaine forced her eyes back to the window.

Antoinette had not looked her way yet, and would not. She needed her resolve to have this conversation.

“Centuries ago, you used your knowledge gained in the Ordo to devise an experiment that would clash curse with curse, and have them kill each other.”

“I did.”

“You decided to use someone else other than Viktor.”

“I ... did. Viktor was my first childe. I could not harm him.”

“You found someone else, a man named Maurice. You sired him. You lured him into a ritual circle, like the one you used upon my

love. You diablerized your second childe.”

Elaine took another breath, pointless to any vampire, and yet there it was.

“I did.”

Antoinette mirrored the breath, turned, and looked her dear friend in the eyes. “Tell me about it.” Before Elaine could respond, Antoinette gestured to the chair across from her desk, as she sat down in her grand chair. It was not an invitation. It was an order.

Elaine nodded slowly, before taking the chair.

“It was long ago. The memories are blurs, many scarred by the ... withdrawal, that happened after. Cravings, Ann, you cannot imagine. No drug any kine has ever tasted comes close. It was more than vitae addiction.”

“The deadly cravings of amaranth are documented, Elaine. And yet, you did not diablerize another?”

“No. Jacob found me, and ... helped me. If not for him, I likely would have.”

Antoinette could not contain her sigh of grief. Yet another reason neither of them wished to see the old Nosferatu dead.

“Continue.”

“I dared not journal my experiences, lest another Kindred discover my sin. But I can remember the cravings, Ann. I can remember what it felt like, to claw my flesh off my bones, as I shuddered and trembled deep within dark, cold caves beneath the Earth. But, that was nothing, compared to ... the voices.”

“Voices?”

Elaine leaned in closer. “He spoke to me, Ann.”

“I do not understand.”

“Maurice. After I ... devoured his soul, he spoke to me, in my mind, for weeks. Perhaps months. There is little I can remember from those years, but Maurice’s voice is a scar centuries have done little to fade.”

“What ... did he say to you?”

Elaine shivered as she leaned back in her chair, and rubbed her arms.

“Nothing but words of hatred toward me, at first. As the weeks went on, and his voice grew quieter, the hate faded, replaced with ... a strange fatalism. He spoke of the end, how everything and everyone comes to ruin, and how eventually, I would too.” Her trembling grew worse. “I never released my curse, as your love did. I do not know what Jack has gone through. But when he spoke of how the curse whispered its desires into his mind, I ... I could not help but sympathize. I could not have him suffer what I suffered to be free of it. Never.”

A similar shiver ran up Antoinette’s spine, and no doubt Elaine saw it. Few Kindred ever accounted their experiences with diablerie, as merely admitting to it often led to immediate execution. To hear her old friend speak of the whispers of a soul, hating her for consuming her, was a horror story told around a campfire fire in the dark of night.

Elaine did not wish to simply stop Jacob. She wanted to destroy Jack’s curse, without forcing him to go through the trials she had. Or perhaps it was simpler, a more basic need, to see the curse suffer for the sins of its earlier incarnations. From the shame she found on Elaine’s face, it was the former.

With a heavy nod, Antoinette leaned in, and motioned for Elaine to do the same. Once she did, Antoinette took the Ventrue's hand in her own, and squeezed it.

“Julias spoke of a shadow?” Antoinette asked.

Elaine smiled, and returned the squeeze of hand, before sitting back.

“I can only assume he meant a piece of Maurice's soul waits for the ... primary piece? I do not know.”

“Ah. Peter Pan.”

“Peter Pan?”

Antoinette nodded. “If Maurice's shadow waits in the ... afterlife,” she hated herself for using such a word, “then all that remains is for the main body to rejoin it. A body that ... rests within you.”

The guilt on Elaine's face was heavy enough to drown all of Paris.

“I see.”

“Julias also told you there is no rush, non? As if telling you you should not rush to reunite Maurice with his shadow. Then, perhaps ... time has no meaning, at least no true meaning, in whatever river realm he spoke of?”

For the first time that night, Elaine gave a genuine smile. A tiny, pitiful thing, but a smile nonetheless. She placed her open hand upon her sternum, and tapped it several times in a slow beat, as if mimicking a heart of flesh.

“A sick, disturbing way to learn so much about what waits for us beyond death,” she said.

“Indeed. We learned enough secrets last night to have the Ordo buried in research and experiments for decades.”

“Dangerous experiments.”

“Quite.” Antoinette nodded again, and returned her friend’s smile with a sly smile of her own. “It may, perhaps, be in the Ordo’s best interest that such information be withheld from them.”

Elaine’s smile brightened. “Thank you.”

“For what, my dear? I am only making the best decision for our Ordo.”

“Then I thank you for that.” They chuckled, as they pushed the sad realities of their pasts, and present aside. “How is Jack?”

“My love recovers slowly. Without the curse, he has but the strength of a young neonate Ventrue once again. But, he is happy. He feels a touch out of sorts, and guilty for those the curse killed, but joy bubbles within, and will rise to the surface more and more as he accepts his new life. He is free of the curse, thanks to you.”

“And we shall live to see another night, thanks to his mother. How does she fare?”

“Samantha is ... both better, and worse. Her meeting with Mary’s soul, and Mary rescuing her own ghost, settled much of Samantha’s pain. And seeing her husband, knowing James is with Mary, has done even more.”

“But...”

“But, the first person she has ever killed, is not only another Kindred, but the first man she had loved and physically enjoyed since her husband. I know of no woman, none, that could have done what she did that night.”

They both sighed as such cruel poetry ripped the few droplets of joy from the room.

“The Terrys are willful people, in their own strange ways, are they not?”

“Oui.”

“Even Mary. To see what she did, what her ghost became, and yet still held onto her mind enough to fight a god of corpses, to save her mother?”

“Oui,” Antoinette said, smiling as she thought of her childe, and her love. “I am a lucky vampire, to have such intimate company.”

“Can I ... also, be intimate with such company?”

“With Jack and I? After what you did? I am sure Jack will happily invite you into our bed again. But if you so much as look at Samantha with desire, Jack will never forgive you.”

“Alas, I do not believe Samantha will be looking at anyone with romantic or lustful eyes for some time.”

“No,” Antoinette said, though after a moment to consider, she smiled and shook her head. “But, she is a Terry. I believe she will recover faster than we anticipate. In fact, I think it will not be long, before she is embracing the joys of her second life once again.” The look her childe had given her last night had been a powerful one. Samantha intended to live. Truly, live.

## Chapter 175

~~Beatrice~~

Their first stop was to go get Aaron. And, shit, he wasn't there. They checked for ashes, but didn't find any, except the ones his limbs left.

Aaron was stronger than a Gangrel his age had any right to be, and apparently, maybe even stronger than he'd appeared to be when he fought Athalia. Regenerating limbs was difficult, even for elder vamps, but the dude was a Gangrel, and they could do it better than anyone. Maybe he had a Crúac ritual set up to allow himself to do that, too, or get yanked across the realms back into some secret hideaway? Or maybe he'd run off, and was now trapped in the Great Below?

Well, shit. Enemy? She fucking hoped not. Dude turned out to be a thousand times scarier than she ever expected of him. Hopefully he'd be happy they let him live, and return the favor. Either way, once they were back to the cave, she was going to either find a new place to sleep, or set up some defense measures with rituals of her own.

Sándor dropped them all off at the Elysium Tower, and from there they went their separate ways. Triss had been tempted to talk to Sándor, to maybe ask him about how his conversation with his wife and kid went, but something told her to leave it be. So, she gave him a very manly 'let's talk later' nod, and got Jen from the tower.

Jen wanted to know what happened, but she quickly figured out Triss was way too fucking tired. They got a quick drink, and went to one of their hideouts to sleep.

---

The next night, they made the trip to Jacob's cave, and Triss explained what happened. She explained about Aaron, and what Athalia, Triss, and Mary went through to get to Jack and Sándor. She explained about Jack and the Ripper, and the werewolves he'd killed. She explained about what they found deeper in the Great Below, the crazy ghosts down there, the standing stones, and what Jacob and Black Blood were doing. Who lived, who died, Antoinette's random arrival, what Elaine did, what Samantha did, everything.

"I can't believe he's gone," Jen said, standing outside their headquarters cave in the canyon, on the city's edge.

"Yeah, me neither."

"And Samantha—"

"I can't even imagine how fucked up she's feeling. She cut off his head, Jen. Like ... slice..."

"Good god." Jen rubbed her arms and nudged herself into Triss's. "I can't even wrap my mind around it. Jacob, gone ... Are you sure—"

"I'm sure, Jen. He's dead."

"Jesus. I ... didn't want him to die."

Triss nodded, slipped her arm around Jen, and gave her a sideways hug.

"Yeah, but at the same time, I ... I wouldn't be surprised if he's happier where he is now."

"You think?"

"Yeah. After what Julias said, about a great river and shit, I think ... eventually, Jacob will be happier where he is."



“Uh, I’m sorry, what?”

Triss leaned in, and gave her girlfriend a quick kiss on the cheek.  
“I got to speak to Julias.”

“Julias?”

“Story time part two.”

Triss went into detail about the gold souls, about Julias and Mary in particular, about the things they said, about Mary saving her ghost, about Julias and Triss finally getting to have that last conversation, about all the other souls who showed up, everything. Even Margaret and her kid, Theo, and even Angela.

“You couldn’t have explained this last night!?”

“Jen, I was exhau—”

Jen threw up her hands, pouted some, and crawled into the cave. Triss couldn’t help but chuckle as she followed her in.

Othello was there, but Madison wasn’t. And neither was Aaron. Triss continued on, and went in detail about what happened last night, close enough Othello could hear. The big lug didn’t say anything, but he listened with wide eyes and dropped jaw. And when they moved to Jacob’s den, he followed, not saying anything, still listening like a confused child.

“What ... What was it like, seeing Julias again?” Jen asked.

“It was amazing. It was ... sad. We got to say goodbyes, apologize. We got to ... to ... have that final conversation lovers are supposed to have, you know? That’s what he came for, so we could have that talk. That’s what they all came for, all the dead people.”

Jen sat down on Jacob's furs, and lifted one of his many big scary witch books. The ones he'd left in the Great Below were confiscated by Daniel, but the Prince said she might let Triss have them. Emphasis on 'might'.

"You're doing a bad job telling this story, Triss."

"Well fuck you, sorry I'm not a storyteller."

"Not forgiven! You got to see Julias! You got to see ... Julias..."  
Jen's head collapsed, and she threw the book aside.

Shit. Triss sat down beside her, and hugged her. A proper hug this time, full on, Jen's head against her neck and everything, complete with some back rubs.

"He was pretty sad he didn't get to see you, too. He wanted to."

Jen let out a pitiful groan and nudged her nose into Triss's neck.  
"And Mary?"

"Super happy and cheerful, just like she'd been when we ... you know."

Nodding, Jen slipped out of Triss's hug, and they got back to work, checking for any weird traps or rituals Jacob might have left behind.

"I'm glad Mary's ghost got to join Mary, then," Jen said. "I thought, after what happened, after what ... we did to her..."

"It only got worse. Mary's ghost was a monster by the end of it. She was gonna become one of the other freak monsters we ran into. If the real Mary hadn't saved her, it'd have been fucking awful. Sam's worst nightmare."

"Jesus christ."

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

After a few minutes of more exploring, they got up and headed back out to the main room. Othello followed.

“I can’t believe Margaret talked to you,” Jen said. “I can’t believe she ... encouraged you.”

Triss laughed again as she poked her head in Aaron’s alcove. No changes. The two of them started digging through his stuff, but considering how minimalist Aaron was, they didn’t find shit, except some reading material, all fiction.

“More than encouraged me. She basically told me — us — how to seduce Sándor.”

“Oh! Do tell!”

“Well apparently, you were right. Or at least, more right than I was. When Sándor is in human form, we should ... basically just seduce the guy. Like, directly. Like, very directly, in his face directly.”

Jen clapped her hands. Sure, Jen felt bad about Jacob, but no chance she was going to put that out on the surface for long. Excitement about romance and sex, on the other hand, Jen was all too eager to indulge visually.

“I can do that.”

“The whole city knows you can do that.”

Scrunching up her nose, Jen yanked out some of Aaron’s fur blankets and threw them out into the main cave, looking for hidden ritual symbols and whatnot.

“But,” Jen said, “if he just talked to his dead wife and son, I think maybe we should wait?”

“Yeah. We should drop by and say hi soon, but maybe wait a week or two before trying to seduce him.”

Jen grinned at her, and hugged her from behind. “With Julias’s blessing.”

“Yeah.”

“Which is all sorts of strange, you know. Very strange.”

“Yeah, it is,” Triss said. “Very fucking strange. But, it was ... it was weirdly ... perfect. It wasn’t like it was some creepy scene with ghosts or anything. It really felt ... amazing, you know? I don’t know if it was the gold water we were all standing in, but it ... it was calming, and soothing, and ... every word those souls said hit home. It was like one giant therapy session, where everyone was completely committed. Christ, even seeing Angela again, I couldn’t get angry at all. And seeing her come to some kind of ... understanding with Athalia? Everyone walked away feeling better.”

“I wish I’d been there.”

“Yeah, it was fucking terrifying, but ... amazing, you know? You should have seen the look on Sándor’s face when he got to talk to his wife and kid again. You could practically see a hundred thousand pounds get lifted off his shoulders. Dude even cried, a little.”

Jen sighed dreamily into her ear. “I can’t imagine what sort of meeting that was, for you or Jack to not want to kill Angela ... again.”

“It was the sort of meeting that gets written down and turned into a religious text some idiot cult misinterprets for the next five thousand years. It was the sort of event someone paints a painting

about and then it gets copied a thousand times across a dozen cultures. It was ... It was powerful.”

“Are you going to do either of those things?”

Triss laughed. “I mean, maybe some stick drawings and some shitty notes? If I’m gonna keep doing this witch thing.”

“Jacob would want you to.”

“Yeah, he would.”

“I am sure I can write poetic witch verse, and draw detailed pictures better than you,” Jen said, grinning.

“Then I guess you’ll be my ghost writer. Though, I doubt Jacob ever used one. I’ll ... never be as good a witch as him.”

“Give it a few centuries and I bet you’ll change your mind. And Jacob, he was the villain in this story, wasn’t he?”

“No, he wasn’t. Neither was Aaron. Hell, neither was Black Blood.” She plopped down in the middle of Aaron’s alcove, and gestured around. “It was a giant asshole thing for Jacob to do, to decide the fate of the world for everyone. But ... good intentions, right?”

Jen nodded as she sat down beside her. “Do you regret helping stop him?”

“No.” And because she said it instantly, she knew she didn’t sound sincere. Fuck. “I mean, I ... I do, but it had to be done. It’s better this way. It is.”

“We should go see Samantha,” Jen said. “Last time, she was upset we didn’t talk to her after her daughter’s resurrection failed. And now that Jacob’s dead, she ... she doesn’t have any friends anymore,

not really. Jack's her son, and Antoinette's her sire. Neither will ever really qualify."

"Yeah, we should. But ... let's make another stop, before we do." Slowly, she dragged herself back up to her feet, and blinked a few times at Othello. Dude stood in the door of Aaron's alcove, jaw still hanging open, staring at them. "You okay, dude?"

"Jacob's dead?" he asked.

"Yeap."

"Samantha killed him?"

"Yeah..."

"And Aaron—"

"Mary's ghost fucked him up bad, put him in torpor. Or at least, so we thought."

She took a few minutes to clarify shit for Othello, each word making his jaw drop more and more. It was strangely satisfying, seeing the normally calm and collected playboy look so utterly confused. She wished she could have enjoyed it more, but thinking about Jacob kinda ruined it.

And what she was about to do next, ruined it more.

---

Elen wasn't in the cave. The Prince had her. The book and knife were still hidden away, but Triss didn't even entertain the idea the Prince would let her keep them. She might even confiscate all of Jacob's other stuff, probably in hidden caves and tunnels and shit Triss didn't know about.

Would she give Elen back, if Triss asked? Without her, Julias's body would eventually die and rot away.

No reason to even think about it. No point.

She yanked the tarp off Julias's naked body. There it sat, unchanged, eyes closed, breathing in only the slow, methodical way someone in a coma could. The body was completely oblivious to everything that'd just happened. To the soul that'd paid Triss a visit. And to the shitty news that souls in the afterlife weren't 'life compatible' or whatever. The body was useless. Unless she found some way to do a genuine godly act of divine power, to somehow bring a piece of that other domain along with Julias's soul back into the physical world, it was never going to work.

And even if it was possible, Julias wouldn't want it. And, neither did she.

She held out a hand, and Jen handed her a knife. Othello stayed behind at their headquarters cave, and that was for the best. This was too personal.

"Triss, we could just—"

"No. I'm not going to leave him ... it, here, to starve to death and rot."

"But it's empty. It's just flesh."

"It's not just flesh. It's..." Sighing, Triss gently pressed the knife against the body's chest, where the heart would be. She didn't push it in, not yet. "Every night, I feel like I know what it means to be a witch, more and more. I feel like ... like I get where Jacob was coming from with all those stories and shit. The Ordo Dracul might treat everything impartially, scientists filling out numbers in a fucking spreadsheet, but ... the Circle of the Crone know better.

"Everything has weight. Everything has meaning. This isn't just a body. It's a representation of the shit I've gone through, the stupid decisions I've made, and the shitty, brutal reality we all deal with. In

the past, I'd say sure, that's all true, but it doesn't make this empty body special, like dealing with it is now some kind of rite I have to push through. But it does, and it is. It really fucking is. It's all ... connected..." She could almost feel the electric tingle of something magical with her knife resting on the body's flesh. Magical and personal.

Jen came a little closer, and stuck her head in front of Triss enough so Triss saw her cock an eyebrow as they met eyes.

"You don't need a ghost writer, Triss. That sounded exactly like the sort of thing Jacob would say. The sort of thing you'd read in one of his books."

Triss managed a weak chuckle. "Yeah. Guess you're right. I thought about maybe talking to Garry and going back to the Carthians, but ... fuck me, there's no going back. I can't even talk without sounding over-the-top dramatic anymore. Jesus christ, I really do sound like Jacob sometimes."

"It's warranted." Jen straightened up a bit, and ran her fingers back through the empty body's blonde hair. "So, I guess ... the meaning of this act, this rite ... is obvious..."

"Yeah..." Triss gulped on a dry vampire throat, and set her free hand on the body's head, next to Jen's.

There were some things about life you couldn't get around. Eternal truths, even to vampires. The body sitting in front of her, empty and waiting, was the result of her trying to break the rules.

No, that was only half the truth. Sure, big magical rules and realms of existence, the afterlife, the inevitability of death, crazy shit like that, it was all very real, and impossible to ignore. But the witch in her knew that was only half the puzzle, half the lesson to learn. The other half was far more personal, and far more real. After letting her suffer in ignorance and confusion for a while, Jacob



would have told her straight up exactly what the lesson was, and he'd have told her to suck it up and use it. It was the perfect lesson for a witch, complete with permanently scarring trauma.

You had to let people go.

She pushed the knife into Julias's body, straight into his heart. He was dead in seconds.

---

They buried the body deep in the rocky sand, near the cave. Triss half expected it to crumble and melt away on death, but nope, it really was just a perfectly normal body, which made burying it a hundred times harder. It was like life wanted to rub it in just how much she'd fucked up. But at least digging up a big hole wasn't hard, vampire strength and all.

Once they were done, Triss looked down at the crow skull necklace dangling from her neck, and gently flicked it a couple times with her index claw. There was no going back. She was a witch, now.

After the burial, and a few painful words, the two of them went to the Elysium Tower.

Daniel met them at where the Elysium Tower's front stairs met the big hedge maze front lawn, and what do ya know, Athalia was with him, hanging out. It was weird. Neither of them had the hanging-out personality, so seeing them just standing around, chatting, was very strange. Seeing Daniel wear a small smile, stranger.

"Athalia," Triss said, and she gave a small wave.

"Beatrice." And, holy shit, Athalia returned it. Just as small, but still.

"Sheriff."

“Miss Damar.” Daniel’s smile vanished, and he adjusted his glasses, single finger against the bridge. God forbid the dumbass let anyone know he actually had feelings.

They went silent. Not an awkward silence, but a calm silence, complete with some real eye contact full of acceptance and understanding. It was super out of place for them, and Jen picked up on it instantly.

“I really missed out, didn’t I?”

Triss shrugged and kissed her girlfriend on the cheek. “Yeah, you did. Sorry.”

“Five people died,” Athalia said. “Maybe six, if Aaron’s dead. More, if you include the ghosts.”

“Yeah, I know. But you all got to have something so special.”

Daniel nodded slowly as he sat down on one of the hedge maze’s very Gothic stone benches, and Athalia sat with him.

“It was,” he said. “But Athalia is right. Five people died, and many of us nearly died. I am sorry to say, a young Ventrue like yourself wouldn’t have survived.”

“Jacob wouldn’t have hurt me,” Jen said, “I don’t think...”

Triss slipped her arm behind Jen and pulled her in so she stood hip to hip with her.

“He didn’t want to hurt anyone.”

“No,” Athalia said, “he didn’t.”

They all looked down, even Daniel, and let the shitty reality of what happened last night sink in. Jacob was dead, and sure, it

needed to happen, but that didn't change that the guy wasn't some evil fucker who deserved it. And it sucked that he was gone.

Triss spoke up first. "How's Samantha?"

The sheriff managed the smallest shrug she'd ever seen.

"She hasn't come out of her room."

"Eesh, really? I mean, she sounded fine when I texted her. Asked her if Jen and I could visit, and she said yes."

Daniel shrugged again. Ugh, the dude was useless.

Triss turned and made for the stairs, stopped, and walked over to Athalia.

"Athalia, I—"

"It was wonderful, getting to talk to my daughter again, Triss. I want my last memories of her to be of ... of what happened last night. My daughter, in my arms, crying. She told me she loved me, you know? Whispered it."

"I ... wow."

"So, don't worry about it, me, us. I don't want to think about the stuff that happened between you and her, if you don't mind. Let me have my last memory of her as ... as what you saw."

"Yeah, yeah sure." Nodding, Triss gave Athalia a smile, and Athalia returned it. That was what last night gave people. Closure. Sure as fuck Triss wasn't going to ruin that for Athalia, who'd had it worse than any of them, save for maybe Sam.

Jen and Triss walked into the tower, where one of Antoinette's thralls waited, some dude in a suit with the bulge of a pistol hidden under his jacket.

“This way, please.” The thrall bowed, and headed to the back stairs, past the elevators.

Jen and Triss rolled their eyes. It wasn't like they were a threat to Antoinette, or could sneak around and steal Ordo secrets. But whatever, they followed anyway, as the guide took them down into the tower. It was a pretty awesome tower, and as much as Triss had grown pretty damn fond of dark, scary caves lit with candles and covered in ritual symbols, the black marble walls with their cool white lighting lines were very cool. They fit Antoinette well.

Down and down, the staircase grew wider, and a glance down hallways showed some of them led into very large rooms filled with furniture, or electronics. One of them had a pool.

“I wonder,” Jen said as she poked her head into the giant underground pool room that'd probably cost a billion dollars, “what sort of antics Jack gets up to in these rooms.”

“Probably everything you're thinking, considering Antoinette is ... you know, Antoinette.”

“This way, please,” the thrall said, and they continued on, earning a pout from Jen.

Eventually he stopped in front of a big metal door down a hall of black marble, bowed again, and walked back the way he came. He stopped at the hallway entrance, and waited. Yeap, Triss and Jen weren't allowed to go roaming alone, and apparently the Prince and Jack weren't around to play chauffeur.

Triss knocked. She expected to hear a quiet, meek ‘come in’, but instead, the door opened, and Samantha smiled at them from inside her room.

“Hi Triss. Hi Jen. Come on in.” She wore a business suit, which Triss most definitely did not expect. Pajamas, maybe, or something

super comfy, the sort of clothes anyone wore when sinking into a pit of despair. But nope, the woman was looking okay. No jogging pants or loose hoodie to be found.

Triss and Jen blinked at each other a couple times, but followed the woman in. Big room, with more black marble walls, but there were curtains hanging from them too, very mature sky blue curtains. Her bed was the same color, and damn it was a big bed, with a night stand beside it with three pictures. Jack, Mary, and James.

There was a bandage on the nightstand, too. Jesus, that was Jacob's eye bandage.

"Sam." Jen came up to her, and held out her arms. And to Triss's surprise, Sam didn't hesitate to return the hug.

"Jen. Did my sire hurt you too bad?"

"I can't say a stake in the heart is fun, but the pain dies pretty fast when torpor pulls you down in seconds."

"That's good. I wasn't too happy when I learned what she did."

Triss shrugged as she came in and stood beside them. "I can't blame the Prince. She didn't know if she could trust us."

"I can certainly blame her," Jen said, putting a hand over her heart. "Ow."

Triss laughed, which of course made Jen frown at her, which of course got Sam between them to play peacekeeper. She pulled them down until all three were sitting on the foot of her huge bed.

"How's Jack?" Triss asked.

“Sleeping. Er, torpor. Now that the curse is gone, healing all those wounds is going to take him a long time. A week or two.”

“That’s definitely a good thing,” Triss said. “Well, you know, about the curse. Sucks that he’s down for the count for so long. I bet he got used to recovering from injuries like that in record time.”

“He did. But, he’s happier now. Much happier. The little we’ve talked, it was like ... I could see he didn’t look so heavy.” Sam smiled as she looked down, and set her hands on her knees. “I owe Elaine a lot, for that.”

“Maybe,” Jen said. “But she bet a lot on things going a certain way. It could have easily backfired, from what Triss told me. And from what else she told me, it sounded like Elaine wouldn’t have been all too disappointed if Jacob had actually succeeded.”

“Maybe.” Sam nodded as she pat Jen on the leg. “Maybe. Jacob promised ... something really amazing. But, Mary was right. It wouldn’t be fair to everyone who didn’t want that. And, more importantly, it wouldn’t be paradise, would it?”

“No,” Triss said with a heavy sigh, and collapsed back on Sam’s bed. Big ceiling. “No, it wouldn’t have. It might have been, at first, but give it some time and I bet everyone woulda kinda just ... stopped. Without death, there’s no life. Without down, there’s no up. All that crap.”

“It’s not crap.” Sam reached out and gave Triss a pat on the stomach; on the abs, considering Triss had a cropped tank top on. “Mary made that clear. And Julias made it clear, right? Enjoy life while you can. It’s special.”

Holy shit, this woman was unbreakable. Triss lifted her head enough to smile at Sam, before relaxing back on her bed again.

“You’re right.”

“Samantha,” Jen said, “you okay to talk about it? I missed it, and Triss talked about it with me, but I wanted — we wanted — to know how you felt about everything. But, if—”

“I can talk about it.” She nodded as she got up, fetched Jacob’s eye bandage, and sat back down between the two women. “James really ... really helped me.”

Triss sat up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Jack takes after his father. James was a logical man, and he helped me see things in a way that was ... painful, at first. But he knows ... knew, how to say things in a way that I could understand. I’m not smart like him or Jack, or my sire, and sometimes I think they’ll never really figure out how to talk to me so I can understand things. But James knew.” She held the bandage in her hands and along her lap, and stared down at it as she ran a finger across it. “He was happy for me, you know? But he was also sad, because he knew what I’d do, once I realized ... what I had to do.”

Fucking christ. Triss slipped an arm about the woman’s shoulders, and gave her a sideways hug as she looked down at the bandage, too.

“James knew you pretty well.”

“We were married for a good while, before he died. He knew me better than anyone. And he ... helped me understand.” Nodding, she slid the bandage onto Triss’s lap.

“You want me to have this?”

“Yes. I thought about keeping it, but James was right. Everything that happened, Jacob, Black Blood, the ritual, me ... killing Jacob, it was all a ... different Samantha.”

“Different? I don’t—”

Sam shook her head as she laughed. “When I first woke up as a vampire, everything just kept ... happening. I didn’t get to make any decisions. All I could do was hold on as everything kept happening around me. The only decision I got to make was trying to bring Mary back, but that wasn’t really a decision either, that was just me running away and trying to get things back to the way they used to be. Last night, when I killed Jacob, that was ... the first time ... I’ve made a real decision.”

Oh. Triss nodded as she took the bandage, and admired it in her palm.

“You changed.” More than changed. Sure, Sam wasn’t the smartest cookie, but now, she was talking with a degree of self awareness Triss doubted most vampires had. You didn’t get to thinking in those terms until life chewed you up, spit you out, and you had the will to get back up.

“Looking back at it, I can’t even understand how I wound up in such a situation! And Jacob, he...” She shook her head as she frowned. “We used each other. We were both running away from our pains, and ... I don’t think either of us would have agreed to Black Blood’s plan, if we hadn’t been.”

Jen rubbed Sam’s back and rested her head against the mother’s shoulder.

“You did the right thing in the end, I believe.”

“Agreed,” Triss said. “Just, holy fuck it sucks that ... that you had to do that.”

“It does.” Sam managed a solemn nod, before she pulled a gentle smile out of some deep reservoir of will Triss doubted she’d ever be able to match. “But James was right. I’m not the person I used to be.”



Triss hugged her friend, nice and tight, before wrapping Jacob's bandage around her wrist. Whether Sam knew how 'witchy' it was to hold onto something like this, from someone she'd killed, Triss didn't know, but it was pretty much a given the bandage would have power. Dangerous witchy power she could investigate later.

Triss felt bad Jacob was dead, but, not as bad as she thought she would. Sure, the dude had been awesome in his own way, and if it wasn't for him, she'd still be that punk Carthian, raging at the Invictus for being assholes and controlling everything. Now, those problems seemed petty and pointless.

She flicked her crow skull necklace a couple more times, looked at the bandage wrapped around her hand, and smiled.

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~~Eric~~

He was in a dream.

He was getting a lot better at figuring out when that happened. Lucid dreams, maybe. He was in wolf form, sitting on the edge of a river, Dolareido on the other side of it and a forest behind him. It was an obvious metaphor. And kinda comforting, now that he'd seen it so many times.

Beside him was another wolf, white, and she let out a long, wolfish sigh as she lay on the ground.

"You won," she said. Her voice sounded so normal, it was almost frightening. She didn't usually sound like that.

"I guess we did."

"Your mother had some interesting things to say."

Eric frowned down at the white wolf beside him, as much as a wolf's face could do that.

“You were eavesdropping.”

“Everyone watched. Me, the old crone, others.”

“Crone?”

“Beatrice can explain, if she wishes.”

Slowly, Eric lay down as well, and looked up at the moon shining overhead.

“You sound disappointed,” he said. “I figured you’d be happy. The Gauntlet’s still up, and everything’s normal.”

“And I am still separated from your father.”

“My fath—oh. Father Wolf. Christ, I hadn’t even thought of that.” He pawed at the ground a little. “I’m surprised you didn’t help Black Blood, then.”

“I will not remake this world for my own selfish reasons. Urfarah will be beyond my reach until the end of days, and so too will Mictecacihuatl remain beyond Mictlantecuhtli’s reach.”

“End of days?”

She shrugged. “Should such a day ever come.”

Oh thank god, she wasn’t predicting the end of the world. He couldn’t stomach an Armageddon prophecy, not right now anyway.

“I’m ... sorry,” he said, “that your mate is still separated from you, then. I—wait. Spirits like you, big, important spirits, were watching Dolareido, weren’t they? A bunch of ... gods, have been watching, because of what Black Blood was doing?”

She nodded.

“This whole time,” he said, “we’ve been stuck in some sort of game, or experiment, or fucking something! You all have been watching, waiting, to see how Black Blood’s plan would go!”

She nodded again, eyes still pointed to the city across the river. If she wasn’t going to say anything, he sure as hell was.

“That spirit I ran into years ago, in the prison, the tiny young spirit that looked a lot like Black Blood. What was that?”

“One of the many spirits of death that grow from the tainted ground Dolareido was built on. It was called to the violence and death of the old prison.”

“Jesus. The city really is on cursed ground?”

“In more ways than one, as the vampire Prince knows. She uses its strange nature to fuel her experiments, just as Jacob did. And just as Black Blood did. His past, his essence, the ruination his existence brought to those who lived here before, has made this land a part of him. And...” She sighed as she gave a wolf shrug. “It doesn’t matter. The guardians have bound him. His new chains will last a cycle. And even when he does return, his presence may lead to millions of deaths, but no damage to the tapestry itself. Such a task must be done by someone in the great game.”

Tapestry? Great game? Guardians? There wasn’t any point in asking.

“How did those souls visit us? I—”

“The tear was powerful, and the guardians decided you and your companions deserved a small reward.”

“A small reward for saving the universe.”

Luna laughed. “Indeed.”

“It was ... pretty amazing, getting to talk to Mom again.”

“She scolded your mate for tempting your father with pictures of her breasts.”

It was his turn to laugh. “Yeah, she did. I thought maybe she was jealous, but nah, I think she was just teasing Jess. Mom was happy that Dad got himself in shape, and is finally enjoying his golden years.”

“I am glad.”

He wasn't so sure about that. Luna sounded torn, maybe a little bitter. Considering Samantha had stopped her from being reunited with her mate, he couldn't blame her. But it was for the better, according to her. It was a victory.

“Are you going to leave Dolareido? I mean, I don't know if you've truly been here, but—”

“I am here more than elsewhere, in a sense. But now that Mictlantecuhtli and Malachi's plot is broken, I shall return to where I used to be.”

“Does that mean, uh...”

Luna lifted her head enough to look directly at him, and give him a small wolf grin.

“I have blessed this city for my forsaken children. The spirits of sexuality remain in the city as well, and will obey my order. You will be able to continue your carnal indulgences, but only within its walls.”

“So Dolareido really is the sex city capital of the world.”

She laughed again. “It is not only I that has set my gaze on this city. Many spirits come and go, and many more will come. Some as powerful as I. Dolareido remains a ... hub, for many forms of interaction. The very soil beneath it has forever been altered.” Slowly, as if mulling the words over, she looked at him. “My children must remain, to keep this place under control. You must herd the flock, and cull the herd, as is necessary. And ... since so many spirits of sexuality exist here, and you have earned my aid, it seemed simple enough to bless it so. A reward for Uratha that remain here and do my bidding.”

“Jessy certainly appreciates it.”

Again, Luna laughed as she sat up. Still a wolf, so, sitting on her hind legs with her front paws between her knees.

“I like her.”

“Jessy? My girlfriend?”

“Indeed.”

“The super brazen punk, Jessy? Hyper sexual, no shame, no guilt, Jessy?”

“Quite.”

“Why?”

Luna shook her head as she chuckled. Okay, no explanation then. Maybe she saw something of herself, or itself, in Jessy? Crazy to think of a god spirit like the moon ever behaving like Jessy.

Or maybe, Jessy behaved like Father Wolf.

“Your father,” Luna said. “Were you considering asking a Kindred to sire him?”

Well, fuck, that was a hard question. He shrugged wolf shoulders as he stared off to the distant city.

“I’d considered it, yeah. Mom’s happy Dad’s finally moving on. But...”

“Your father is old, and alive. To become Kindred at such an age will be difficult, and while he may be moving on from your mother’s death, a part of him will not be able to, not after the strife the three of you faced together. It may be best to let age take him.”

“Yeah ... maybe...”

“And after everything that happened last night, I hope you’ve come to understand, young Uratha. Your mother’s words were wise. Be happy while you can.”

And of course, the god didn’t beat around the bush when it came to the big, life altering questions.

“I ... think I understand.”

“Will you tell your father what she said?”

“I’d thought about it. But he’s ... happy. That’s what she wants. I’m not necessarily happy knowing that he’s seen my girlfriend’s breasts, a lot, or is apparently getting laid quite a bit...”

“The old still enjoy sex.”

“Yeah, apparently.” He shuddered. It didn’t matter how much he’d grown up or would ever grow up, he’d still have trouble picturing his dad having sex. “If I tell him I talked to Mom’s soul, that might ruin things for him. But before that, I think ... I think I’ll ask him, if he wants to become a vampire. He’ll think I’m kidding, but now that we’re talking again, I think I can get an honest answer out of him.”

“Be careful, young Uratha. You would not be the first soul to ruin someone’s life, by having them become Kindred.” Before he got to ask, Luna stepped onto the water. And in classic fashion, she walked on the water, because of course she did. “I take my leave. I am glad to have spoken with one of my children, about more ... normal things. But we will not speak again.”

“We won’t?”

“Mictlantecuhtli will not be back for some time, and my interference, and the interference of others, were only balanced by his own. My gifts will remain, as will his, but you and I will speak no more. From now on, you are on your own.”

“I ... see.”

The wolf looked back at him over her shoulder, and nodded her head slowly.

“The power of the wolf will always threaten to drown you in the lust of the hunt, young Uratha. But it is a desire only. It is not who you are. Breathe, child of the city, and it will not control you. Breathe, and...” Laughing again, her tail wagging slightly, she managed another shrug. “If you do not understand yet, you never will. Goodbye.”

With a quiet shimmer, the white wolf faded away, but instead of floating up into the sky to join the moon, she dispersed into the water below her like mist. The mist settled, coalesced, and disappeared into a white circular shape in the water. The reflection of the moon.

“I understand,” he whispered, “ ... I think.” How long ago had she told him that word? Breathe? At the time, he didn’t get it. It took a long time before he realized Luna was telling him how to be ... aware. Aware in the big sense, in the ‘I’m alive’ sense, in the sentient sense.

Very guru, very yoga or Buddhist, and very much not him. Probably why she felt the need to tell him, or he'd still be that raging Uratha who'd killed and eaten three humans. Sure, Avery probably understood it intimately, and she'd taught it to her pack. Eric didn't have a pack, and he doubted he ever would. Too stubborn, and too dumb.

He owed Luna his life.

---

~~Damien~~

“I have seen crushed insects in better shape than you.”

Damien managed a weak chuckle as he sat down by Maria's new piano, in her cavern beneath the Grand Cathedral.

“I never did heal very quickly. One night is not enough.”

“Indeed.” Maria got up from her desk and sat beside him on the piano bench, facing forward, same as him. “Why didn't you visit me last night? A single phone call was hardly enough of a report.”

He frowned slightly as he looked down. “I had to think about how to ... best tell you about what happened.”

“How best to tell me?” The corpse woman, dressed in one of her fuller, fancier white gowns, eyed him with a raised eyebrow. “What happened?”

His report last night had simply been: ‘Black Blood is defeated, and Jacob is dead. We're safe.’

Now, it was time to explain everything, and maybe bring his boss to emotional ruin.

He spared no details. Maria was the definition of methodical, and she listened with focused eyes as he detailed Jacob's trap, the battle



with the azlu, the intervention of Sabrina, the Ripper's slaughter, and finally, the encounter with Jacob and Black Blood.

"Samantha killed Jacob? Oh ... Lord help her. Is she alright?"

"I texted Jack a moment ago. He'll be spending the next couple weeks mostly in torpor, but he assures me his mother is doing well. She's ... grown, for the experience."

Maria did something the corpse vampire almost never did. She trembled.

"I cannot imagine ... doing such a horrible thing. I am glad she did, but..."

"She surprised everyone. And I mean everyone. Jack, Antoinette, her daughter's ghost."

"She is a stronger woman than I had considered."

Damien smiled at her, and leaned in a little as he set his elbows on his knees.

"When the dust cleared, we heard a voice from the tear. It was Mary's."

"The ghost—"

Damien shook his head. "Mary, the real Mary, her soul stepped out of the tear. A being of gold." A shiver went through him, not of fear, but of awe. "I'm sorry you weren't there to see it, Maria. Gold poured out of the tear, liquid gold. It flowed over the stone and caressed our ankles, and it ... soothed everyone and everything it touched."

Maria's mouth fell open.

“Mary,” he continued, “asked her ghost to join her in the afterlife, and the two merged. The ghost’s memories went into Mary. According to Mary, that’s what happens when ghosts cross over, and apparently, most ghosts do not get to do so. But, that moment was just the beginning. More souls stepped out of the tear. First, Julias.”

“Julias Mire!?”

“Yes. Then, others. Many of Avery’s dead werewolves, including those that’d just died that night, came to say goodbye. Jack’s father came. Sándor’s wife and son. Eric’s mother. Clara’s brother. Natasha’s parents. Others I didn’t know. Even the two ghouls Antoinette lost before the Purge came to say hello and goodbye.” He looked to Maria again, and she stared at him, desperate to hear her lover’s name. “But not Lucas.”

“Oh...” Her posture sank.

“Apparently the truly old have trouble abandoning their anchors, according to Julias. It weighs them, traps them, in the afterlife. Which is why I suppose some individuals didn’t appear, such as Viktor or Tony, or Azamel, or Lucas. But ... Julias had a message from Lucas.”

“Oh?” Her posture returned, and she leaned in, eyes so wide he could see into her soul.

“Lucas ... apologized. He admits that, toward the end, he was mad with conviction, not thinking straight, and obsessed.” Before Maria could look away, disappointed with the lack of her in the message, Damien lightly pat her leg. “And, for you, Lucas had another message: he was a fool. His biggest regret, is doing what he did, and asking you to betray Natasha to him, instead of re-seeking the love you two had.”

Lucas had spent fifty years in torpor, with Damien ready to revive him the moment the political situation in Dolareido made it

possible for Lucas to rebuild his power. Fifty years was a long time, even for a vampire. Fifty years of Maria, wishing Lucas was with her, only for the maniac to basically ignore her as he went mad with his quest for revenge and domination.

Apparently death had been the wake up call he'd needed to realize how stupid he'd been to neglect Maria. A fool to the end, then. After death was far too late to realize a mistake.

“Is that ... that all?”

Damien pulled up a smile he'd been saving for exactly that line.

“And he said that he loved you, loves you still, and that you should find happiness in your second life while you can. Don't forget him, but move on, as well. And don't do anything stupid like challenge an entire pack of werewolves to a fist fight again.”

Poor Maria. She should have been there, if at least to hear the words directly from Julias, but Damien had recited them accurately enough.

She broke. First, a small laugh over the last remark, but it passed quickly and turned into a quiet sob. Elders did not cry, and yet there she sat, body trembling lightly as she struggled to contain the noise.

“He said those things?”

“According to Julias.”

“And I suppose we can trust Julias, can't we?”

“I suppose so.” He nodded again as he put his hand back on his own leg. “Not everyone got to see someone. Elaine didn't. I didn't. But most did.”

“Truly a wondrous scene. I ... am sad that you did not fetch me to aid you in this battle, Damien.”

“I—”

“I know. Jacob trapped you, and you were catapulted into extreme circumstances.” She sighed as she let herself slouch forward, elbows on her knees, same as him. “Daniel got to speak with his childe, Torrence?”

“Is that who that was? A tall man, skinny, short hair.”

“Indeed. And Antoinette spoke with her dead ghouls?”

“Lana and Darlene?”

“Indeed.” Maria sighed as she smiled, and stood up. “We must chronicle this event, Damien. But we must do so carefully.”

“It shall be done.” The proper word choice, for as big a deal as this.

Maria stepped behind her work desk and got to typing. Damien joined her. It was the first time Maria had smiled like that in a long time, and he was determined to see it continue.

---

Fiona burst into tears the moment Damien stepped into her apartment. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him as hard as her little body could manage.

“I talked to Sándor!” she said.

“You did? Do I ... need to hurt him? You look upset.”

The tiny redhead burst into giggles, and they mixed into her squeaky sobs. Happy crying.

“Sándor told me Julias talked to him. And Julias had a message from Azamel.”

“Oh?”

She nodded excitedly as she let him go and sat down on the edge of her bed. Small apartment.

“Aye! She wanted to tell me that I ... that I...” The giggles vanished, and Fiona broke down into proper loud sobs, full-on crying.

Damien slid off his shoes, joined her on the foot of her bed, and slid an arm around her. It'd take her a while to stop crying, he knew that. He also knew from the way Fiona was smiling between her sobs, that Azamel's message had been good.

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~~Natasha~~

“Your parents were really cute,” Jessy said. “I mean, you know, for glowy gold people.”

Tash couldn't help but laugh as she pat her best friend on the leg. The two of them sat together in Tash's apartment, Eric on the couch watching the news while Tash and Jess sat at the kitchen counter. Tash was typing up a report on her laptop for her boss, and Jessy was trying to steal ideas for her own report. Considering how insane it'd been, two nights ago, she couldn't blame her. And considering Michael hadn't been there, Jessy couldn't cut corners. She needed help, especially with Jack on sick leave.

“They were! Oh god, I was s-so happy t-to see them together. The way Dad died, I wasn't sure he'd...” Sighing, she tried to type a few more words, failed, and leaned in toward Jess. “I never really believed in ... Heaven.”

“I don’t think it was Heaven. At least, not the kind I think you’re talking about.”

“Ugh, d-don’t even get me started on that! The Prince told me it’s my new job t-to cross reference what we learned, with every text that talks about the afterlife.”

“Every text?”

“Every text.”

“Damn. That is going to suck.”

Tash giggled as she shrugged. “I like reading.”

“Nerd.”

Rolling her eyes, she gave her friend a gentle shove. Jessy was about to return it, but her expression softened, and she rested against the counter top instead.

“No soul came to visit me. But I guess, yeah, never really was close to anyone when I was alive. And as a vampire, there’s ... well, you, and...”

“Julias.”

They both sighed, and despite their efforts, it was a heavy, sad sigh.

“It was great to talk to him again.”

“It w-was.”

“And in typical Julias fashion, it seemed like he was trying to help everyone. Jesus fucking christ, he was even helping Angela.”

Angela. Even as a gold soul, Athalia's daughter had been absolutely terrifying, and had looked like she was going to strangle her mother, the way she'd dragged herself forward with that big rock hanging around her neck. Everyone in the cave had stared, dumbfounded. Even Jack and Beatrice, two people who had enough reason to hate Angela more than anyone in the world, had been paralyzed and unable to look away.

Tash was glad they didn't interfere, and they probably were, too. Much as Angela deserved to suffer, no one deserved to suffer for eternity; if that was even how the afterlife worked. And more importantly, Athalia didn't deserve to suffer for it. Sure, Athalia betrayed Jack and Triss at the end of their attack against the hunters, but who could blame a mother for doing what they could to save their daughter?

Poor Athalia. Poor Samantha. Tash looked down, and a tiny shudder worked through her.

Which Jessy must have recognized, because she got off her stool, and hugged Tash, nice and tight. And Tash melted into her.

"It was nice," Tash whispered, "to ... t-t-talk to Julias again. I miss him."

"Me too. We owe him a lot."

Eric peeked over the couch. "Should I—"

Jessy waved him off. "Girl moment. You're good."

"Roger that." And the man seamlessly went back to watching TV, without a doubt in his mind that Jessy was telling him the truth. Those two were strangely perfect for each other.

"I w-wonder," Tash said, "if the souls are together, in the afterlife, that river place Julias was talking about. I mean, like ... d-d-do they

socialize? Maybe be romantic with each other?”

“Oh fuck me, if there’s no sex in the afterlife, I’m not going.”

Tash laughed. Leave it to Jessy to make her laugh, no matter how serious the topic, or how sad she felt.

“Mom and Dad d-did seem like they were together. And happy.” Every time she summoned the memory of her mom and dad walking out of that tear together, it felt wonderful, and she made sure to smile brightly so Jessy could see it, as she guided her friend back onto her stool. “And Julias looked happy too. Like, m-maybe ... maybe—”

“Like maybe he was getting some pussy in the afterlife. Maybe from that Margaret woman?”

And of course, leave it to Jessy to ruin a deep moment, too.

“That’s not what I was thinking!”

“Uh huh, sure.” Jessy gestured to Eric, only the back of his head visible over the back of the couch. “Question, Eric. I got the impression from Julias that people who’d recently died didn’t get to visit, because of the weight around their necks. But Monica, Carter, and Caleb died that night.”

“No way they’d miss seeing their family,” Eric said. “Werewolf packs are a pretty heavy bond. Soldiers in arms combined with family bonds.”

Surprisingly, Jessy didn’t make a quip about how ‘weak’ or ‘gay’ that was, or call the werewolves ‘pussy bitches’. She nodded, face trying its best to keep her smile and fight off a somber look, and failing.



“Matt and Art,” Tash said, “they were ... they were so happy, you know? They d-didn’t think they’d ever get to talk to Caleb or Monica, or Carter, or Stephanie again. They were ... so happy to get to d-do that. And Avery, how many souls visited her? Seven more? I’ve never seen her so happy.” Happy and Avery didn’t really fit together, not unlike happy and Athalia. But that night broke all the rules.

“It was ... really nice,” the Gangrel said. “And meeting Eric’s mom was great, too. I thought maybe she’d yell at me for how I got Eric’s dad to start taking care of himself ... and she did, a little. But she was happy.”

Eric got up off the couch, and hugged his girlfriend from behind. “She liked you.”

“Of course she liked me. Who doesn’t fucking like me?”

Eric nodded over Jessy’s shoulder, as if Jessy’s words were obvious truth. A few more hugs later, he sat back down on the couch. Jessy joined him, and snuggled into his side.

Tash smiled at the backs of their heads before turning back to her laptop, and tried to type her report again.

“Tash,” Eric said, looking over the couch’s back to her, “we should take a trip into the Hisil soon, when you’re up for it again. There’s someone who wants to talk to you again.”

Tash sat up straight. “S-Sanctuary?”

“It’s alive.”

Oh thank god.

“Let’s!”

---

~~Jack~~

One week since the incident.

He spent almost all night of every night for a week since the incident sleeping. When he was awake, he managed to make some quick calls to his thralls to make sure they and his crows were fine, and a quick call to let Michael know he was still alive. Of course, his boss didn't show him a hint of sympathy, but did tell him Jessy's report covered the bases and Jack didn't have to do anything until he was healed. With no painkillers for vampires, the Beast knew how to draw him into the coma-like state to let him sleep the night — and day — away while he regenerated damage. And nothing in the world felt as good as more torpor sleep.

On the eighth night, when dusk came, he sat up and stretched out his limbs.

“Ow! Fucking shit.”

Antoinette chuckled as she sat up next to him, and kissed the top of his head.

“Rest, my love.”

“I'm feeling good enough to stay awake.”

“Then by all means, remain awake. But that does not mean you should not rest. Only move as required.”

He rolled his eyes, but smiled up at Antoinette, and got a quick kiss for it.

“Yes ma'am.”

“Have you spoken with your mother yet?”

“A little. We’re ... still dodging the Jacob topic. And the Mary topic. All the topics, really.”

The Prince nodded as she set a kiss on his bad eye. It felt healed. Her way of telling him it was.

“You should speak with her. She is resilient, my love, quite resilient, but trauma can be insidious, and leave deep seeds that take years to bloom. Best uproot them now before they dig deep into her mind. Or your mind.”

He nodded as he leaned into her, forehead slipping into the nook of her neck.

“Yeah, you’re right. And I will. But holy fuck I am tired.”

“Quite so. And Beatrice is speaking with your mother, helping her come to terms with what happened, as is Athalia.”

“Athalia...” Thinking about Angela and her mom used to flood him with so much anger, it was blinding. Not anymore. Something about seeing Julias actually helping Angela in the afterlife was like a bucket of cold water dumped over his anger. And that was a good thing. He was sick and tired of being angry.

“And you, my love? Will you speak to me now?”

“About—”

“Two people died at the Ripper’s hands that night.”

He sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Yeah. But their souls visited me. So, I mean, I guess I’m still upset about it, but it’s hard to get too angry when Caleb and Monica both looked me in the eye and told me it was alright. I still feel guilty about it, but ... not nearly as much as I would have.”

“That night did more than settle the deep anguish in many. It settled angers, as well.”

“You mean about your ghouls, and Lucas?”

“Oui. Knowing that Lucas regrets his actions is ... a small comfort, but a comfort nonetheless. But seeing Lana and Darlene again? I was not prepared. It is such a rare thing to be given a chance to revisit the pains of our past, and soothe them so.”

“You looked happy.”

“I was. I am.” Nodding, she pushed on his chest a bit, until he was on his back again, head on the pillow. She snuggled up against his side, and rested her head on his shoulder, squashing her breasts against his stomach and waist. “Never, in my wildest dreams, did I expect that night to go as it did.”

With her head on his left shoulder, his left arm had free rein to caress her back, and she nuzzled into him more as he did. Relaxing. They were relaxing. How long had it been since they'd been able to do that, truly do that, without some looming disaster around the corner, or noose of guilt strangling him. And sure, he still had some work to do, some people to talk to, emotional conversations he knew were going to sting. But that was nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to how good it felt to not have a giant problem to deal with. Nothing that demanded his immediate attention.

It felt weird. Freeing, but weird. Almost like he was psychologically naked.

“I'm actually feeling kinda restless,” he said. “Feel like I should be fixing something, but there's nothing to fix. Only thing I'm worried about is Mom, but you say she's fine? Er, well, not fine, but you know.”

“Oui. Your mother is doing better than I could have hoped for. I still recommend talking to her, but it is not a pressing issue. And I have spoken to others, as well. Maria is happier for Julias’s news.”

“That’s good,” he said. Maria might have been an angry bitch, but she wasn’t as bad as all that. She deserved a bit of happiness, too. “Garry and Michael, they angry we didn’t invite them?”

“A touch, but they understand the circumstance. No doubt the two Gangrels would have liked to speak with Roland.” Sighing, Antoinette leaned in and kissed his jaw, before resting her cheek on his shoulder again. “You have not asked about Elaine.”

Elaine. He’d definitely been avoiding that topic, for a whole bunch of reasons, including her own safety.

“I ... wasn’t sure how.”

“She and I have spoke at length about her dark past. Her diablerie. You need not keep it a secret from me.”

The word was enough to make his whole body tense.

“Is she—”

“It is a secret she and I will keep, as will you, I assume?”

And relaxed again.

“Yeah. After what she did for me? It’s the least I can do.”

“She has earned our trust. Though, her plan was ... a problematic one. If you had not come, you would have never triggered her trap. Black Blood would have had control of the situation with his ghosts. Jacob would have succeeded.”

“You talked to her about it?”

“Mhmm. Many words were exchanged. She ... She did not want for you, what she had to do to rid herself of her curse. She resented it for what it did to her. She despised it for the terrible things it brought on her.”

“From day one, I thought she wanted it because I’d released it from the weird binding spell that church dude in the curse’s flashbacks put on Susanna. I figured Elaine wanted its power.”

His lover chuckled and kissed his shoulder.

“I do not doubt the thought crossed her mind. But my old friend is not as heartless as other elders. Indeed, I think she may have quite a large heart, hidden within.”

“Elaine, a big heart?” He laughed, a proper big laugh, and regretted it as pain quickly put the laughter to an end. Okay, insides still not in tip top shape. “I gotta admit though, I’m surprised she did what she did. Sounded to me like she had good reason to let Jacob win.”

“And yet, she stopped him, and freed you of your burden.”

“Yeah, she did. I really do owe her.”

Antoinette sat up, and reached for the nightstand. With a wicked smile, she held out his phone to him. No cell signal in the tower’s deeper floors, but she did have wifi in all the rooms.

“Call her. Invite her. She has been quite anxious about how you feel about her.”

“Anxious? Her? About me?” Hard to believe Elaine, a Ventrue 500 years old, could be anxious about much.

“Of course. She cares for you, Jack, and as more than your great grandsire.”

He blinked at her.

“That sounded dangerously close to romantic, Antoinette.”

The Prince laughed and shook her head.

“Not at all. But I would be lying if I said it was purely platonic. She cares for you, but until you sire your own childe, it is difficult to explain. She is not your family, nor is she your lover. But she is your friend, and your great grandsire, a true Kindred blood connection. She is my old friend, and the two of us have shared more than friendship for centuries. She is...” Antoinette tapped a finger on her chin thoughtfully. “A very close friend.”

He laughed. Okay, close friend wasn't a bad descriptor, especially when said with a little sly emphasis.

He pulled up Elaine on the contacts list, and almost pressed dial. But his finger stopped halfway, and he stared at the phone as the shitty memories of that night climbed back up into his skull. And they were shit memories, for more reasons than he'd shared.

His arms drooped, and the phone fell on the blankets.

“I was going to kill myself.”

Silence. Look at her? No, not yet, it'd hurt too much. He sat up beside her again, blanket over his legs and phone resting on it, and he looked down.

Eventually she put a hand on his back, and rubbed his spine.

“Tell me.”

He gulped, half expecting a surge of primal, disgusting hate to scream at him from in his head. But it never came. It was just him now, in his head. He'd almost forgotten how ... not angry and

hateful his thoughts were, when he didn't have to share them with the Ripper.

“The Ripper killed Caleb and Monica, and he was going to kill Clara. He almost did.” A shudder worked through him, and he squeezed the blankets between his knees. “The Ripper and I had been fighting for control over my body for a while. That night, he decided he wasn't going to give it up, ever again. He pulled out all the stops. Crushed and buried me in my own mind. I had to find a way out, and ... and realizing the only course of action was to kill myself, was ... it was...” He squeezed the blanket harder, until his shoulders trembled. “I tried. I actually tried. I put Damien's sword against my neck and pushed with everything I had. Only reason I'm still here is the Ripper fought me until Mary and Triss showed up and interfered.”

“Oh Jack.”

“I'm sorry. I thought about you, and Mom, but ... but I couldn't let it go on. I couldn't...”

Antoinette took the phone, set it aside, and gently pushed Jack onto his back again. She lay with him, snuggled into his side, and kissed his cheek as she traced lines on his chest.

“I am afraid, little Ventrue, there are no words I can offer. No wisdoms or truths. I can say your situation was dire, and you were willing to do what had to be done to save those you could. But, I know such words are meaningless.”

He closed his eyes, and nudged himself into her.

“I figured if I was gone, you'd figure something out, some way to stop Jacob.”

“I had. But I could not have predicted Black Blood would be able to control ghosts to such an absurd degree. Elen's haruspex proved



that he could not interfere with us directly; a flaw in the range of her haruspex, in multiple ways.”

“Elaine knew. She could have told you.”

Antoinette nodded. “She discussed her plan with me. She made quite the gamble, assuming you would arrive to stop Jacob. Though a large part of her plan was born from fear of Jacob’s abilities, fear not misplaced. She waited for the opportune moment to strike.”

“Shitty plan.”

“If her goal was only to stop Jacob. A large part of her goal, my love, was saving you, so you would not have to suffer as she did.”

Yeah, that was true. Much as Elaine’s plan had a thousand ways it could have failed, she’d set it up so she could save him. And if Jack had to kill his own childe to save himself from the curse, he wasn’t sure he could do it. You couldn’t sire someone randomly, it didn’t work like that. You had to pour will and intent into the vitae you used to sire someone. You had to put a piece of yourself into it. It was a big, big fucking deal. More than that, it was literally a magical, binding power. Childe and sire were connected.

And Elaine had killed hers, to free herself. No fucking wonder she felt like shit. No fucking wonder she went with a plan that could have failed, since losing meant undoing Maurice’s death, sorta, and freeing her from that guilt. He couldn’t blame her, considering what he’d been willing to do to stop the Ripper from killing more people.

Elaine knew. She knew he’d kill himself before doing what she did. Would Elaine even do what she did before, and kill her own childe, if she had the chance to repeat history? No, she wouldn’t. What did she say, when she was fighting Jacob?

‘I regret many of my decisions, Jacob. This is not one of them.’

“I guess even elders can change,” he said.

“To my surprise, and delight.” Antoinette kissed his cheek again, and ran a finger down back over his head. “I am glad you did not succeed, my love. You, your mother, your sister, you make decisions with such extremes of will.”

“I guess we have a habit of ... either being very stubborn, or making big decisions.”

“Quite so.”

He smiled at her, and picked up the phone again. “I really should thank her. Elaine, I mean.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes. “You know very well how she will repay your thanks.”

“You’re the one that suggested I invite her.”

The Prince gave him an evil grin, and kissed him. “That I did.”

---

“Ann. Childe oh mine.” Elaine stepped into the Prince’s giant bedroom at the bottom of the Elysium Tower’s basement, and once she realized Jack and Antoinette were still in bed, she closed the giant vault door behind her.

“Elaine,” Antoinette said. Both her and Jack were sitting up, back against the headboard of her ridiculously huge bed, both with blankets pulled up to their waist. And of course, the Prince didn’t bother covering her breasts.

“I have been summoned?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “We haven’t really talked, since the incident.”

“Indeed.” Elaine walked over to them, eyes spending more than a little time looking both their naked torsos up and down. “You needed rest.”

“I’m rested enough. I wanted to talk to you, to...” Sighing, Jack managed a slow shrug of his shoulders. Yeap, still tender as fuck. “You did something amazing, Elaine, for me. I owe you more than my life.”

Speaking so straight and blunt to someone like Elaine, an elder who danced the Danse Macabre and probably hadn’t said a thing plain and straight in hundreds of years, had her squirming. And seeing a 500-year-old vampire squirm was amazing. He grinned at her.

“I assume dear Ann told you the details of my plot.”

“Some of them, yeah.”

“I see.” She squirmed a little more.

Jack looked back to Antoinette, who smiled down at him and nodded toward Elaine. Looked like he was in charge of the conversation, then. Which the Ventrue part of him absolutely loved.

“If there’d been a way you could have stopped Jacob without doing something so risky, I’d have said yeah, do that. But Antoinette thinks you’re right, there was no better way to try and stop Jacob than when he was performing the ritual. Bastard probably had other rituals set up to stop anything, and if you gave up that you wanted to stop him, or that the Prince even knew what he was up to and wanted to stop him, he’d have disappeared. The smart play was making sure he trusted you, and waiting.” Which was still a tough pill to swallow. It’d meant letting his mom continue to date the man.

“The curse—”

Jack held up a hand. “You did what you did, and I can’t say I agree with it, but ... god, you have no idea how good it feels, Elaine, to not have that fucking voice in my head anymore, begging me to kill and worse. It’s quiet, and it’s ... it’s great. It’s so fucking great, and I have you to thank for that.”

“I ... understand a little more than you realize.” She finally stopped squirming, and met his eyes with a serious gaze. “I could not let my past become your future, little Ventrue. I—”

“You already had this conversation with Antoinette. I’m not gonna make you have it again, unless you want to.”

Like he’d lifted a wet blanket off her, Elaine’s smile beamed, and she sat on the side of the bed close to him.

“No, I would not. Words were had, lessons learned.”

“Okay.” He grinned at her again, and motioned for her to come closer.

The plan was to tease her a bit and convince her to get undressed. Apparently he wasn’t very good at the teasing, coy game, because Elaine kicked off her clothes immediately. The tall, busty and fit, blonde woman crawled onto the bed, naked and huge breasts swaying underneath her as she came over to him. Without even asking, she pulled the blanket aside, and slipped under it so she could sit beside him.

“Welcome,” Antoinette said.

“Indeed. I am feeling quite welcome.” Nodding, Elaine slid down further until she was on her side, facing Jack. And with elder strength, she pulled him down until he was on his back on the bed, head on a pillow, right beside her.

“I welcome you into my bed,” the Prince said, “and you immediately attempt to steal my lover out from under my nose.”

“You let your guard down.” Nodding, Elaine pressed her body into his side, huge breasts squashing into his chest and molding against his body. She blew onto his ear lightly before setting a kiss on his neck. “My childe is—”

“My lover,” Antoinette said, frowning playfully as she scooted down to copy Elaine and lay next to Jack before snuggling into his side, “is mine.”

“He is my childe.”

“He is my love.”

Uh oh. Jack raised a brow as he looked between the two women. They were both looking at each other, and him, with a little more ... animalistic hunger than they usually did.

“Uh, ladies?”

Antoinette grinned at him, and pushed her body against his chest enough for her left breast to press into Elaine’s right. His chest was completely covered in boobs.

“There is an unexpected benefit from the removal of the curse, my love. You are, once again, as weak as a kitten, compared to elders such as us.”

“I mean, that ... yeah, that’s true. I ... um...” Oh shit.

“That he is,” Elaine said. “I have never touched your little Ventrue, with him so vulnerable. Completely, and utterly vulnerable.”

Oh shit oh shit.

“It is delicious. He squirms and wriggles, and there is nothing he can do to stop the pleasure you force on him.” Antoinette leaned over him, and kissed him, while one of her hands slid down his body, and her other took his closer hand and pinned it over his head.

“Oh my.” Elaine leaned in and kissed his jaw, putting her mouth a literal inch from Antoinette’s, while her hands did the same. Her higher one slid down his stomach, while her other slid up and over his head, and pinned his other hand by the headboard next to his other one.

He squirmed. His body was tender and didn’t want to move, but even if it could, he knew he wouldn’t be able to move an inch. Holy shit, he hadn’t even thought about this. Not being able to defend himself out on the street against stronger vampires, yeah sure, he’d been thinking about that the moment he lost the curse. But suddenly being Antoinette’s helpless boy toy? And Elaine’s too? Hadn’t even crossed his mind.

It was exciting. He tried to lift his hands, but they pinned them down easily. He tried again. They pinned him down again, and this time, they both purred.

“You know I’m pretty beat up, right, ladies?”

“Then you will have to stay put,” Antoinette said, “while Elaine and I take care of you. Non?”

“I mean, I guess. But—”

“Stay still,” Elaine said. “That is an order.”

Antoinette gave Elaine a playful swat on the shoulder as she slid herself further down Jack’s body.

“He is my lover, in my city. He obeys me.”

Elaine returned the swat, giving Antoinette a small flick of the back of her fingers against the Prince's shoulder, as she also slid down Jack's body.

"He is my great grandchilde, and I do believe he said he owes me."

Uh oh. Cat fight? No, they were both way too old, and way too friendly with each other to have a cat fight. But they sure as hell would pretend to have one, just to make him squirm. And they were completely right, he was powerless to resist, let alone genuinely stop them. He wasn't Blushing Life, but if he had been, his heart rate would have been soaring.

Both women came to a stop once they were cuddled into the sides of his legs and waist, and their breasts were pressed to his naked pelvis. His penis, flaccid since he was still in undead mode, disappeared underneath the soft, heaviness of their huge breasts. And all four breasts were pressed together, fighting for room on his body, shapes conforming to each other. With how the two women were resting their torsos on him while still kinda lying on their sides, and considering how big their breasts were, the huge pillows nearly reached their chins.

He gulped, and stared.

"Clearly my love cares only for me," Antoinette said, grinning like a cat.

"You seduced him when he was too young to know any better. I am clearly the better match. I am Ventrue, and his great grandsire." And Elaine wore the same grin. This was a game they'd played with each other before, before ever meeting Jack. Silly words that read like a horrible porn script. From the 1700s.

Antoinette reached back up to Jack, took his closer arm, and pinned his left hand down beside her, her torso still fighting for space on his pelvis with Elaine.

“Jack, my love. Blush for me.”

Elaine reached out and did the same thing, re-pinning his right hand next to his hip against the blankets. Unlike Antoinette, she let go of his wrist and netted her fingers with his, still keeping the hand trapped in her grip.

“After all I’ve done? You neglect me so?” Elaine licked her lips, and Blushed, bringing color to her skin, and warmth. And with her closer hand still holding his, with a grip he couldn’t escape, she used her other to toss her blonde hair slightly. Very fashion model-esque.

Antoinette rolled her eyes, and Blushed too, before also netting her fingers into his.

For a super tiny second, he was tempted to say no, just to tease them. But the looks in their eyes told him he’d be much happier right now if he just gave in. They were in a competitive mood with each other, and a dominant mood with him. Dangerous combination, mostly for him.

He Blushed Life, and both women let out quiet, practiced purrs, as they watched his skin fill out and gain a bit of color. And, despite his injuries, his length grew hard in seconds, fighting to point up against the four breasts pinning it down.

~~♥♥♥~~

They both smiled at him, before turning wicked, evil grins at each other, as they both adjusted so his hardening cock could come up between their breasts. Considering how big their breasts were, he was pretty happy the tip of his glans was visible at all, once it was snug between the four giant pillows.

Both women purred again as they pushed themselves toward each other, just a little, just enough to have their breasts press on his cock and bury it in gentle skin-on-skin friction. Sometimes, they



looked at him, and gave him more practiced, bedroom eyes, fully intent on making him cum with nothing more than how insanely sultry their expressions could be. And sometimes, they looked at each other, and he could see they were reliving memories, erotic ones.

Antoinette's free hand near his legs slid up onto Elaine's shoulders, and the Prince licked her lips as she eased her fingers behind her friend's head, and into her hair. The two women shared another, knowing look, before they both looked to Jack again with 'cum for me' eyes. As they did, Antoinette pushed down on Elaine's head, and his great grandsire leaned down to wrap her lips around the head of his cock.

Instant wet warmth set jolts of bliss down his length, and he shivered underneath them.

It only got worse when Elaine lifted her head up from between the four breasts, and did the same to Antoinette. She pushed her friend's head down gently, and Jack's glans disappeared under Antoinette's kiss.

They took turns, each woman spending maybe ten seconds slowly working their lips back and forth on his cock's swollen tip. They couldn't reach down very far, awkward angle and all that, plus their huge breasts didn't leave their heads much room to move down, jutted up toward their own shoulders and chins as the huge pillows were. But it made it hypnotic to watch, their faces nudging against their own breasts, and the other's breasts. Each turn they took, more warmth flooded underneath his testicles, until his cock was flexing and pulling toward his abs with desperation. He'd be soaked in precum, if they hadn't licked it all away.

Elaine won the contest. Antoinette rolled her eyes, but chuckled as she smiled at Jack, and kept her hand on Elaine's head. Not really pinning her down, since Elaine wasn't trying to escape, but it looked

erotic as hell, her fingers intertwining with Elaine's hair as the elder Ventrue tightened her lips on Jack's cock. His great grandsire drained him as she slowly bobbed her head, easing her lips up and down the base edge of his glans, and milked him dry.

Eventually she lifted her head, winked at Jack, and gave Antoinette a quick kiss on the corner of her lips.

"Elaine! You sneaky little—" Antoinette stopped, and blinked down at the strand of white that connected her lips to Elaine's.

"Sorry," Elaine said as she swallowed. "I could not help myself. And I knew your lover wanted to see such a display."

Antoinette looked to Jack, as if scanning to see if he was offended Elaine had stolen a kiss from her. They did have a 'no kissing anyone else' rule. But, well, Antoinette had a strand of his cum literally connecting their lips. Last thing on his mind was taking offense.

The Prince rolled her eyes for the hundredth time, grabbed Elaine's head, used a bit of real force this time, and pushed her back down onto his cock. Once Elaine couldn't see her expression, Antoinette licked her lip free of the strand, and smiled at Jack. She'd liked whatever expression she'd seen on his face.

~~♥♥♥~~

They didn't drain him too much. A couple orgasms for him, and then one for each other, from each other, with him watching. All in all, a pretty relaxing bout of sex; he was pretty injured, after all. Except, there was something more to it, something more intimate, now that they knew Elaine's secrets. It hadn't just felt sexual and exciting, having her there this time. It felt nice.

He was excited about inviting her again. And he could see Antoinette was, too.

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As Antoinette and Elaine lay beside him in bed, relaxing, he held up his right hand and squeezed the fist in front of him a few times. It felt a lot better. It also felt a little strange, how his fingers squeezed a little tighter than he'd expected them to, with the curse gone.

He'd gotten intimately familiar with the power the curse gave him, and now that it was gone, he could feel it in every motion. But, he didn't feel like he did before he'd unlocked the curse either. Something was different.

He felt a little stronger than he should have been. The ritual Black Blood had been performing, he'd interrupted it before Black Blood could finish. The god had still been drawing out some of the black smoke from Jack's Beast, when Jack used Elaine's trap. It was a thought that'd been nagging him for days, and making him paranoid the curse would whisper in his mind again, or some of the old hate and rage would resurface.

It never did. He felt calm. He felt good. He felt ... happy.

He felt strong. Not nearly strong enough to resist a couple horny elders, but stronger than a young neonate Ventrue should.

"Antoinette," he said, turning to face her, Elaine snuggled into his other side. Probably best to tell them now, in case something happened. He was pretty sure it wouldn't, but still, no way he was going to keep secrets about the curse. "I—"

"Jack," she said, chuckling as she kissed him, and teased a finger up his abs, "Elaine does not call me Antoinette. You should not, either."

"No?"

She kissed his forehead, before gazing down at him with longing so powerful it made his heart ache.

“Call me Ann.”

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~~Author's Note~~

This is the unofficial last chapter of Part 10 and My Little Ventrue. I've still got 5-7 chapters coming, but they're all purely about character arcs, closing off some minor storylines, things like that. And lots and lots of sex.

Thanks for reading! I read all the comments, even the mean ones; criticism is very useful to me. I also noticed a few readers who commented frequently, and I greatly appreciate it. Thanks for sticking with me through 2 and a half MILLION words. It took years to finally reach the ending I'd planned since I started Part 3, but I got there! Lots of lessons learned I'm excited to use in my next story.

When this epilogue is done, I move onto my new series The Pleasures of Hell. I hope you'll check it out.

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While Dolareido and its characters are original creations, MLV was set in the world Vampire: the Requiem (with a bit of Werewolf: the Forsaken, and Beast: the Primordial thrown in there), IPs owned by Paradox Interactive. Make sure to check it out if you liked my spin on it.

## Chapter 176

~~Eric~~

“Sanctuary!” Natasha ran at the angel, and hugged it. And Sanctuary hugged her back. It’d already come down to its feet and knees so the tiny vampire could hug the huge spirit, and its glowing white eyes and mouth smiled with almost cartoonish presence. The gold-ish body and white facial features weren’t actually there so much as they were just glowing lines, painted expressions on a gold face, with no nose either. Strangely beautiful, in that ‘oh god it’s an angel and it’s going to burn out my eyes’ sort of imposing way.

Eric, Tash, Jessy, Matthew and Arturo, Clara, Flowing Sanctuary, not-flowing Sanctuary, and for some reason, Brace Harcourt, stood in the street in one of the quiet neighborhoods of Dolareido, Grey Street. In the spirit world, the quiet parts of the city were even more quiet, and the group of them had the street to themselves. No car spirits. A few spirits of rest and respite watched on from the windows of the Hisil’s versions of houses, which looked mostly normal save for a few differences: an unusually long driveway here, a very large window there.

Of course the only human in the group was left staring at everything, overwhelmed, but the female-ish tall angel with the giant wings hugging the little vampire had most of his attention at the moment.

“How did you s-survive?”

Sanctuary pat Tash on the head, its smile unwavering. Almost a bit creepy with how consistent and painting-perfect it was.

“Red Tide was bound to its contract, to stop the Uratha and the Kindred. When you left, its contract no longer applied to me, as I

could no longer help you. It left.”

“Gotta love spirits,” Clara said. “They respect their contracts, right down to the letter.”

“B-But, if Red Tide’s contract had been different, you coulda been killed!” Tash said.

“Perhaps. But I couldn’t let harm come to you, Natasha. I owe you much. And I owe Eric much.”

“Eric?” Tash looked back at him.

Damn, he couldn’t stay out of the light forever.

“Yeah, I guess. I—”

“My boyfriend,” Jessy said with a big smile, “is Batman!”

“I’m not Batman.”

“Spider-man.”

“Stop watching those shit movies.”

Her grin was unwavering. She would not be deterred.

“My boyfriend is a vigilante.”

He shook his head. “There’s no law force in the Hisil. Can’t really be a vigilante without—”

“My boyfriend has been going into the spirit world,” Jessy said, approaching Tash, “and trying to clean up the streets. He’s been making places like Grey Street safer.”

“Against Avery’s wishes, I might add,” Clara said.

Jessy shrugged. “Fuck Avery. If Eric wants to be a superhero and give back to the people, I say let him.”

Eric sighed, but Jessy beamed at him and kissed him. He kissed her back. Much as he’d prefer his girl didn’t advertise his activities like they were something to be proud of, he had to admit it did feel a little satisfying.

“Eric,” Flow said, flowing over to stand beside Sanctuary, “is free to do as he wishes, including getting himself killed angering the wrong spirit. I will not defend him in such circumstances.”

“You wouldn’t defend me in any circumstance. It’s not in Avery’s contract.”

“True,” the spirit said. “But I am not forbidden from helping you, either. Perhaps I would, if you would approach situations more wisely.”

“Avery,” Clara said, “is a little more concerned about the ecosystem, Eric. You don’t really appreciate the sort of knock-on effects your actions have. Never watch a nature documentary? You could destroy an entire ecosystem with a small change.”

“Cleaning up some hate or greed spirits isn’t going to bring everything crumbling down.”

With a snort, Clara walked up and gestured to the large glowing angel spirit.

“Sanctuary has grown into a powerful spirit in record time, Eric. This sorta shit normally takes decades, centuries, not a few years.”

Natasha frowned up at Clara. “That’s a p-problem?”

“It is, if it grows out of control. Dolareido is a strange city. The spirits here are very strong, and the whole city just ... teems with

extremes. We have to be careful.”

Sighing, Eric gave a slow nod, and started the walk back toward the main city. Everyone followed, Sanctuary included.

“Dolareido is a special city,” he said. “Luna said so, and after everything that happened with Black Blood ... Yeah, I get it. I’ll be careful.”

Clara stepped up beside him. “Please do. Talk to Avery, and—”

“I’m not joining the pack.”

“Yeah yeah.” His fellow Cahalith rolled her eyes before giving him a gentle punch in the shoulder. “You did good, though. Sanctuary is good for the city.”

“I am,” the angel said. “Red Tide has no direct opponents, not anymore. I can oppose it.”

“Carefully,” Tash said, nodding.

“Carefully,” Matt and Art said together, mirroring the little vampire’s body language with familiar exactness.

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“The tear is gone,” Sanctuary said, and it gestured to where a tear used to be, on the outskirts of the city.

While the city behind them was a giant, towering behemoth of structures, literally warped and twisted with its reflection of the physical realm, Gurihal, outside the city it was just endless desert, with rocks and stone, and very little warping or twisting. No crazy windows with literal teeth, doors with literal eyes, or spirits of asphalt or cars or electricity zooming around. There might have been a few spirits of sand or maybe snakes out there, but not many. It was always where the humans grouped up where spirit activity grew its most intense.



“This tear,” Tash said, “w-was the one that showed the gold place, right? Sándor said it was higher than he could r-reach.”

Eric nodded as he waved a hand through where the tear had been. Just empty air, now. Whatever those guardian things were, they’d done good work.

“I’m guessing Black Blood was trying to cross the chasm — whatever that is — before he needed to. He said he managed a peek, right?” They all nodded. “Powerful.”

“The old spirit is gone,” Sanctuary said, “but that’s only made it more obvious how altered the ground we walk on is. Black Blood changed this land, both here and in the Gurihal.”

“Probably other places too,” Clara said. “Other realms that, uh, crossover in this place. If he could go between realms basically whenever he wanted, he was no normal spirit.”

“He wasn’t a regular spirit,” Eric said. “Same as Luna, I guess.”

His fellow werewolf grumbled slightly as she looked down.

“Only you would know.”

Sighing, he considered giving Clara a small pat on the shoulder. Someone in her pack would have, but for him, it’d just feel awkward.

Naturally, Matt and Art came over and pat Clara on her shoulders in a very buddy buddy, obviously teasing manner.

“Cheer up,” Matt said. “Luna’s never given me any powerful or interesting dreams.”

“Mostly sex dreams,” Art said, nodding sagely. Tash groaned.

“She didn’t talk to me because I was special, Clara. I’m not. She said so herself,” Eric said, shrugging. “Just ... a city boy. And she wanted a city boy Uratha to stick around. You gonna tell me Avery is a city girl? Hell your entire pack could be living in luxury, taking baths in hot tubs, sleeping in giant beds, and indulging in all the vices the city has to offer. But nope, you stay with the Carthians in a shit apartment building, and sure Avery says it’s because she can’t trust the Invictus, but you damn well know it’s because she’d prefer to sleep under a tree.”

“Trees give shade,” Matthew said, mirroring Art and nodding sagely.

Shuffling his feet a bit and digging up some courage, Harcourt came up, shooed Matt and Art off Clara, and slipped an arm around her.

“I’m not much of a city slicker, but I for one am happy Clara doesn’t need a two-thousand-dollar purse to be happy. You know how much money being a hunter pays? I’ll give you a hint: none.”

Eric laughed. He knew what was coming. Without missing a beat, Jessy marched up to the man and jabbed him the chest with a finger.

“I earned that purse, you little redneck shit.”

Everyone, save those two, laughed. Lot of that going on lately. It was nice.

It was really nice.

“Tash,” Clara said. “Since you seem to be the only levelheaded person in the city, or at least the only one I can trust, I was wondering if you wanted to sign a contract with Sanctuary.”

“Contract?”

“Yeah. Avery has a contract with Flow. It’s our spirit. It works for us, and we work for it. It’s how we can store it in special objects easily.”

Tash’s eyes lit up. “I can—”

“I’m not saying you can put Sanctuary in your bracelet and summon it whenever you want, like Triss did with Mary’s ghost. But, Sanctuary can still help you, when in an object. And in the right circumstance, even manifest.”

The little vampire slowly looked up at the giant angel, who smiled down at her and nodded knowingly. Apparently it’d already had this conversation with Clara.

“That ... w-would be wonderful.”

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~~Beatrice~~

It was the forest again, the one from her dream. The breeze was cool. The moon was visible between some big trees overhead. And a small fire surrounded by rocks burned in front of her.

An old woman wearing rags, standing up with the help of a walking stick big enough to be a staff, smiled at Triss as she nodded slowly.

“You stopped Mictlantecuhtli.”

Triss stood up; apparently the dream started her off sitting. The fire was between them, crackling quietly, so quiet the crickets were louder.

“You could have fucking told me—”

“No, I couldn’t have. The game had to be played. If I broke that rule, then Mictlantecuhtli would have had the power to break more

rules without consequence.”

“A game.” She threw up her hands. “We almost died! Or, not die, but ... you know what I mean.”

“Sorry, but not sorry. You are pawns in a great game. What religion, what culture, has not made that clear?”

Triss grumbled and ground her teeth as she paced. “Okay, so, Mictwhatever couldn’t break the rules?”

“Not without risking interference. Which you saw in action, when he touched Samantha.”

“Everything else was fine? Controlling the ghosts and making Mary attack the Prince? Ripping open the tears? Like, what the fuck? What are the rules?”

The Crone shook her head. “I can’t tell you. And you know I can’t tell you. Don’t ask stupid questions. Otherwise you waste my visit.”

Of course, because what fun would there be in knowing how to play the game.

“Then why are you visiting?”

“To congratulate you.”

“I didn’t do shit. That was all Elaine, Jack, and Sam.”

“I suppose. The Terrys are unusually willful, aren’t they? I can’t imagine what sort of resolve it took that woman to kill her lover.”

Weight pulled on Triss’s body, and she sat down as she groaned. It wasn’t real weight, just her instantly becoming depressed at the memory of Sam having to do something so horrible.

“I ... do miss Jacob.” And that.

“Malachi was an interesting, wise man.”

Triss raised a brow. “Wise? You agree with what he planned to do?”

“I think this Fallen World has been broken for a long time, vampire. If you could see what I see, you might think twice before assuming Malachi and Mictlantecuhtli’s goals were misplaced. You saw a tiny, just the tiniest morsel of the gold river, touched the faintest trace of it. How did it feel?”

“It felt ... wonderful. But I remember what it was like being human, and eating enough ice cream to puke. If I had to guess, it’d be like that? Eventually it’d be too much of a good thing, being in that kind of place forever?”

The Crone laughed. “Your mind is limited. Rest assured, you would not puke.”

“Uh huh.” It was hard to imagine being in that sort of place for too long a time. Wasn’t there a dude who said an eternity of Heaven would eventually be Hell?

“Regardless, Luna and the others are satisfied. The world continues as it did.”

“I still can’t believe you guys just sat back and watched that happen.”

“We interfered. We simply did it in different ways. Perhaps not as much as Mictlantecuhtli did, but you saw the results of him overstepping his bounds.”

“Me—”

“I have spoken to you, and Luna has spoken to another, but that was for different reasons. Indeed, be under no illusions. You are not

some special snowflake I've come to, in hopes you'd save the world from your master's ambitions. I came to this city because Dolareido is one of the tainted, blessed lands."

Triss grumbled and folded her arms across her chest.

"You're a real bitch, you know that?"

Again the Crone laughed. "Of course."

"So you came to the city because it's special, not me. Still not sure why you're talking to me."

"Because I have made similar mistakes to you, in my past. Because I see a bit of myself in you. And because I like you."

"That's ... scary." Being similar to some sort of ancient god that embodied primal chaos and cruel, harsh nature, wasn't exactly a compliment. Well, it was kinda. Jacob definitely would have considered it a compliment.

"You will go far, Beatrice. You have what it takes to follow in Malachi's footsteps, and further."

"Uh, I don't really wanna end the world, though."

"That will be up to you. But that isn't what I meant. What I mean, idiot child, is that you have a mind capable of thinking in the ways of a witch."

"Growing up on metal will do that."

The Crone blinked at her, confused. Which was fucking hilarious, and Triss laughed, laughed until it hurt, and she fell on her side in the grass and dirt.

"And just like Malachi," the Crone said, "you can make yourself laugh."

“Ha, I guess, yeah.”

Nodding, the Crone waved her stick over the fire slowly. A pillow of smoke rose up, and blocked out the moon for a second before fading into the cool night air.

“I thought you should know,” the old crone said, “that the Prince is probably going to talk to you.”

“She has Elen, and she’ll want Elen’s knife and book back.”

“I suggest you give them to her. I also suggest you ask if you can have what material of Malachi’s she feels comfortable letting you have. And some she doesn’t.”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure the Prince isn’t going to just, give me that shit.”

“She will, because you attempted to stop your master. She trusts you, now, to a degree. And she will, because you’re going to make a rather harsh statement about the amount of kine she killed to have Elen perform that ritual.”

“Wait, what?”

The Crone smirked. “The dragon may dislike how visceral and brutal our ways may be, but when her back was against the wall, she had no choice but to use a witch. And she used the methods a witch requires: weight, and intent. She killed dozens of kine for Elen’s ritual. Her methods, a scientist’s methods, were inadequate to handle the situation, and she knows it. She needs a witch who is an ally in her city.”

“Jesus, you really are a manipulative schemer.”

“As was your master. As are the best witches, and vampires. It’s a skill you lack, but Jennifer will help.”

“Lucky me.”

“Indeed.” With another hearty, croaky chuckle, the Crone waved her stick over the fire again, and another pillow of smoke met the night sky. “I take my leave. We will not speak again.”

“Not gonna answer any of the questions you know I have?”

“Of course not. They are stupid questions.”

Which meant questions about the afterlife, about Jack’s curse and the Strix, Crúac rituals, the Beast, the different realms, all of the important questions were shit she wasn’t supposed to know. Or at least, not have the answers handed to her directly.

“Fucking asshole. I—wait, I got one. The fuck do we do about Elen? I mean, I’m guessing you won’t tell me about how she managed to make herself semi immortal.”

“I won’t.”

“But what do we do with her now?”

“She is not invincible. Burn her.”

“Burn her.” Triss gulped as she stared. “Burn ... the witch?”

“Trust me, little vampire, that flesh witch has done more than enough to deserve a worse fate, as Sándor can attest. But if you’re feeling sympathetic — very un-witch like — then cut off her head, then burn her. Leave no trace. Only when every trace of her is ash and soot will she be truly dead.”

“Jesus. Okay, we’ll uh, do that. And, um ... thanks, for, you know ... at least talking to me, and helping me with the resurrection ritual. Kinda wished you’d told me from the get-go it was basically impossible, and spared me a bit of pain. But...”



“But pain is how a witch learns.”

“I must be a fucking genius by now.”

This time, it was the Crone’s turn to laugh hard. Not that an old woman could laugh all that hard, but she did anyway, and Triss smiled at her as she did.

After a minute, the old bitch winked at Triss, and without flair or anything, the Crone morphed into a crow. No, wait, too big. Raven. The big black bird circled the fire’s smoke a few times as it gained height, before it blinked out of existence.

Leaving Triss sitting there in her forest dream, gently flicking the crow skull necklace her dream body had for some reason. It was just a random necklace, one Jacob had given her when he’d started teaching her Crúac rituals, a lifetime ago. Or maybe not so random. Maybe Jacob had actually done some impressive work on it, given it witch powers or something. She didn’t know, but it wouldn’t have surprised her.

Jacob had liked her, and it would have been just like him to do something sneaky like give her a super powerful artifact and never tell her. Or maybe it wasn’t powerful at all, but something he’d crafted with care. Or maybe it was just ... her, being sentimental, that her boss was dead.

She sighed, let her head droop, and for the first time, cried about Jacob’s death. Just a little, just a few tears; the dream seemed happy to let her have those. A bit more pain to learn from.

She got up, and kicked some dirt on the fire until it was out.

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Two weeks since the incident.

She hadn't expected the Prince to do everything the Crone said she would. But she did. Now, safely stored away in a hole in the ground, Triss had most of Jacob's shit, including the stuff he'd had with him in the Great Below. Not Elen's book or knife though, Triss had returned those. But the Prince did say she'd give them to Triss eventually. The Crone was right. She wanted a witch ally.

A partnership. The Prince would officially acknowledge Beatrice the primary member of the Circle of the Crone in the city. She wouldn't be going to any Primogen meetings yet, and probably not for decades, but still, it was a step toward some big responsibility, responsibility Othello didn't want. Lazy asshole.

More importantly, Beatrice wouldn't get flack from the sheriff when she did witchy things, as long as she maintained the Masquerade. And hell, maybe the Prince would even give Triss some tips on weird magical shit, if Triss returned the favor. Probably not. Freaky Frankenstein scientists, and witches with cauldrons, would never get along when it came to their pursuits.

And now, Elen was dead. Triss suggested burning to Antoinette, and she'd taken to the idea, especially after Triss had mentioned the mysterious disappearance of a lot of Dolareido kine. Antoinette really hated how she'd had to use Elen, and how she'd had to commit murder on such a scale. It made her a little more malleable to deal with. Sure enough, they chopped off her head; Elen barely noticed, but at least her head went still and didn't start talking. After that, they burned her. More than burned her, they fucking cremated her. Nothing of Elen existed anymore, save for the book and knife.

---

Triss and Jen walked the street of Dolareido, on the way to The Quiet Note, the most up-its-own-ass hippie joint for poetic artist types who thought they were going to change the world. Sándor would be playing again, and they wanted to see. More shockingly, he'd invited them. Triss had been pretty surprised to learn the man

knew how to text at all, and hadn't just given up and sent them a literal letter in an envelope, with a wax seal.

Jen wore something dark and sexy, but safe for a joint full of hippies. Triss wore her usual black jeans and black tank top, because she'd wrapped herself in Face in the Crowd so no one was going to notice her anyway.

They hadn't arrived yet, though, and stayed close as they ducked around the sidewalk traffic.

"It's been two weeks," Jen said. "Think he'll be happy to see us?" Two weeks save for a few very short visits, just to make sure the dude was okay.

"I hope so. Considering what his wife told me, and what I'm guessing Julias told him, I'm guessing he will..."

Jen leaned in as they walked. "You're nervous he secretly doesn't like us, doesn't like you, but because he's so against voicing any of his thoughts, he just hasn't told you."

Groaning, Triss stepped away and dodged around an oncoming kine, before coming back in with a sideways lean of her own.

"Yes, okay? Yes. This isn't how I do ... this sort of shit. I can't fucking stand this build up. Does he like me? Not like me? Christ it makes me want to puke. When I decided to go on a date with Julias, I just fucking told him we would, that first night. When I wanted to fuck Julias, I just told him we would."

"On the first date, I might add."

"Yeah yeah fuck you. This 'does he doesn't he' shit is torture, and I'd have loved to skip over it. But there's always been something in the way." Mostly her own damn fault.

“Now there isn’t. And he’s ready to talk. I’m sure we’ll find out tonight if he likes you. And us.”

Triss groaned again as she let her head hang, earning some chuckles from Jen. The two vampires walked into The Quiet Note, wrapped in Triss’s increasingly awesome Obfuscate abilities, and found one of the small benches alongside the wall and its god awful gray flowery wallpaper. The small circle tables in the large room were full, and people sipped their drinks quietly, waiting for the various musicians who’d come up on stage. The place was dark, with only a bit of dim light near the stage so the audience could see.

The place smelled of lots of different drug flavors, but the crowd didn’t make a noise. People came to a place like this to hear the artist, not use it as an excuse to socialize. It made more sense to Triss to just stay home and use some good headphones, but at the same time, there was a special magic to seeing someone live. And that time she’d seen Sándor live, it’d been strangely magical.

Sure enough, Sándor came out on stage, wearing some blue jeans and a loose white shirt. With the somber stoic look, his European face, and super short dark hair, the simple look really fit him. He was, as far as anyone could tell looking at him, a super simple guy from Romania. Until he had an instrument in hand.

He sat down on a small stool, spent a few seconds tuning his guitar, and pulled the mic nice and close.

“Sorry I haven’t been around. Had things to do.” He nodded to himself as he looked down at his guitar, plucked a string, and tuned that one, too. “Feeling a lot better though. Lot of things happened. Good things.” Holy shit, the man gave the crowd a tiny smile, the wickedly handsome ones that were subtle and confident. Everyone stared, hypnotized. “It’s amazing what a few words from an old friend or lover can do. Amazing, how much your perspective can change.”

He tuned the final string, and slowly ran the pick along the strings, striking out a clean chord. Then he strummed it, teasing out the beginning of the song to see if people could figure it out before he played it at proper tempo.

Triss knew it instantly, and just like someone putting in the final piece of a puzzle, she felt complete when Sándor finally started strumming right.

“I was a little too tall, could’ve used a few pounds. Tight pants, points, hardly renown.”

A shiver shot up through her, and she melted into Jen’s side as they both listened. The crowd knew the song, or at least most of them did. A few, like Jen, were utterly oblivious. Fucking kids. They didn’t know what it’d been like to bring out a jukebox, and listen to a song like this, out in the fields or on the side of a dirt road when the moon was high. You closed your eyes and let the music take you on a journey.

She’d thought Sándor’s singing voice was similar to Bob Seger’s. Apparently he thought so, too.

It only got better. He was up on the stage alone, so there wasn’t any drummer or piano to join in, but that didn’t stop Sándor. If the dude could play Symphony X, this song was a cakewalk, and he proved it as he started tapping his foot to the beat. The hook that pulled everyone in, and had them all humming the melody as they lightly swayed with the beat. No one said a word. Everyone listened.

His eyes. Dreamy blue eyes, normally so hard and stern, melted in the song, and he stared off over the crowd, like he was looking to the horizon, as he played.

“I woke last night to the sound of thunder. ‘How far off?’ I sat and wondered. Started humming a song from 1962. Ain’t it funny how

the night moves? When you just don't seem to ... have as much to lose. Strange how the night moves. With autumn closing in."

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"I'm sorry," Jennifer said, "I don't listen to my grandparent's music."

Triss groaned and shoved Jen hard enough she fell on Sándor's couch with a bounce. They'd gone to his apartment after his time at the club, when another artist came up to play after Sándor played a half dozen songs. Surprisingly, the sleek, modern, stereotypically expensive Dolareido apartment wasn't entirely empty anymore. The gray couches remained, so did the piano and guitars, but now there was also a couple pictures on the walls, big paintings of landscapes, and an old cathedral.

It was the new picture on the countertop that really struck Triss, though. It was a picture of Margaret and Theo.

Sándor followed Triss in, noticed what she was looking at, and touched the framed picture slightly before he moved over to sit on the piano bench.

"I listened to them," Triss said, picking the conversation with Jen back up. "I mostly listen to metal, but sometimes it's nice to listen to the bands that my metal bands owe their existence to, you know? Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band. The Eagles."

"Agreed." And like he was taking a breath, Sándor played a tune on the keys.

"Roll Me Away!" Laughing, Triss plopped down on the bench with him, and watched his fingers work. Just like ringing a bell. "You really do like music. Like, really like music, in the way most people just don't get." Sounded dumb to say, considering he was a musician, but some people didn't really get or 'feel' music. It was worth saying.

“I do. So do you.” He gave her a tiny grin, and played another song. It took her a second to pick it up. But once it picked up speed, she caught it, like chasing a butterfly with a net.

“Don’t Stop Me Now!” Christ, now she couldn’t stop laughing. “Jen doesn’t listen to Queen. It physically hurts being her girlfriend.”

“Hey!” Jen said from the couch. “I like music.”

“You like to listen to pop and EDM while you do other shit. I said music, not flavor of the month noise to fill up the background.”

Jen scrunched up her nose, and with a bit of bounce in her step, plopped down on the bench on Sándor’s other side.

“Play something romantic,” she said, and she grinned brazenly up at Sándor as she ran a finger down the keys.

Sándor nodded. Didn’t grump or grunt or anything, just nodded, hell he even smiled a little, leaving both women speechless. Jen had definitely been trying to get a reaction out of him, but instead, Sándor rolled with it and got to work.

Three notes in, and both girls sighed dreamily. Even Jen knew this song.

“Faithfully,” Triss whispered, and she swayed to Journey’s tune. “Do you just know every song?”

“When I came to America, long ago, music was evolving in ways no one could have imagined. From Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters and many others, blues evolved and changed the world, and rock and roll evolved from it. Elvis changed the world. Johnny Cash changed the world. Then Queen and Journey, two of my favorite bands, changed the world, too. I have to

admit, the rock bands from the seventies and eighties, and sometimes nineties, dominate most of my listening.”

It was a wonder he didn't start playing Don't Stop Believin', but he stayed on Faithfully, and Triss and Jen continued to sway with it.

“Another,” Jen whispered.

Sándor paused only long enough to let them know he was switching songs, before his fingers found the high notes and danced on a tune.

Triss frowned as she watched his fingers. “I know this ... I know this ... Styx!”

The man smiled, his eyes on the keys, as he played Lady.

“I can't sing like DeYoung.”

“Trust me,” Triss said. “You can sing. Maybe not that high pitch, but still.”

“Thanks.” And again, he smiled. What the fuck was with all the smiles? Yeah, sure, they were small smiles, as if his face wasn't capable of big expression, but tiny smiles and plenty of them was still a big jump from the usual Mister Stoic she was familiar with.

Triss put her fingers on the keys. Sándor stopped, and Triss showed off her insane piano skills she'd honed over the past couple weeks. She played Mary Had a Little Lamb, on rhythm and everything. Volume all over the place, since Sándor insisted he used a realistic keys setting for his electric piano, but still.

“Impressive,” he said, in the steady tone a teacher would use when happy with a student.



“Thanks, but I’m still shaky. If I push a little too hard, I know I’m gonna push the key straight through the piano into the floor.”

“Even human students suffer that problem. Maybe not to that degree.” Nodding, he reached out, and put his hand on hers. “But you’re getting past the issues with your Kindred body. That’s good.” He gently pushed down on her finger, with just the right pressure to get the key volume perfect.

He paused, and looked at her hand. She looked at his hand, so warm compared to hers. Electric jolts shot up her arm, making every nerve ending tingle, before she slowly looked from their fingers, to him. And he looked at her.

Was he nervous? Was he even capable of being nervous, considering how old he was? Dude was ancient. He looked at her with a calm expression, just a touch sad, but also a touch ... hopeful? He was so hard to read, she couldn’t tell. But he was looking at her, straight at her, deep blue eyes hiding a billion thoughts the fucker refused to share. If she wanted to know what he was thinking, she’d have to beat it out of him, like Margaret had.

Fuck it. Time to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. She wasn’t some high school virgin, even if he made her feel like one. She was a woman, damn it, and this man’s dead wife told her how to break the ice. Just, be bold.

She leaned in, and kissed him.

Sándor blinked, a little surprised. And Triss stopped kissing, but kept her face an inch from his. No words. After everything that’d happened, the fuck needed to be said? Someone needed to actually hit the ‘go’ button. Might as well be her.

The world melted away, and so did her muscles and tension, as Sándor half closed his eyes, and leaned in to return the kiss.

God. Yes.

She smiled into the kiss as her eyes closed, and she set her piano hand on his chest as she half turned to face him. He didn't move at all, and she had to fight to keep herself from chuckling. Yeah, Margaret was right, this man needed a tour guide if he wasn't merged with his Horror. That was fine. Jen and her—

Jen took the man's head, turned him mid-kiss to face her, and kissed him.

“Jen!” Triss leaned around Sándor enough to see one of Jen's eyes, the other blocked by Sándor's head, and her girlfriend grinned at her mid kiss as she waved Triss off with her hand.

So Triss did the only reasonable thing to do. She pushed her off the bench.

Jen landed on the hard floor with a squeak, and glared at Triss.

“Hey!”

“Bitch, don't make me come down there and kick your ass.” Triss flipped her off. “Ruining our first kiss, what the fuck?”

Sándor tried to help Jen back up, but Triss grabbed his head, twisted it around to face her instead, and got back to kissing. Dude was completely confused, frozen, which meant Triss got to kiss him as much as she wanted.

At least until Jen made some whining puppy sounds. Literally. Groaning, Triss let Sándor go and motioned to Jen. Sándor reached out to help her up, confusion doubling, which had both girls laughing.

“I've been waiting to do that,” Jen said. “So's Triss. The kissing, I mean.”

“So Julias told me.” Sándor scratched his hair a bit, so short it almost looked buzzed. “I ... I wasn’t...” Oh shit, he was doing the awkward backpedaling thing. Because he mentioned Julias? Fuck that. She wasn’t going to let anything ruin this, not now.

“Nope,” Triss said. “Nope nope, we’re not doing awkward. I am too old for awkward. And you are way too old for awkward. So we’re just gonna go past it.” She took Sándor’s hand, and guided the man to the couch.

“Agreed!” Jennifer followed after them, and together the two ladies pushed Sándor down until he sat in the center of his couch. “We’re not going to think about the stuff from before. I like you. Triss likes you. You like her. I hope you like me.”

“I do, but—”

“Then the hard part is over. Now we move onto the good stuff.” Nodding matter-of-factly, Jen reached behind her, undid the zipper of her dark dress, and slid it off until it fell on the floor. The busty brunette wore nothing more than a tiny lingerie thong, the sort you wore when you were expecting sex.

It made Triss roll her eyes. It made Sándor gulp and stare. But, that was a look of intrigue in his eyes, if startled. Intrigue was good.

Triss slipped behind Jen, and hugged her from behind, with Jen pointed at Sándor. And, because actually breaking Sándor’s stoic face and getting a surprised look out of him was proving to be fucking awesome and fun to do, Triss cupped her girlfriend’s huge breasts. She squeezed them, molded them against her fingers and palms, and Jen Blushed Life as she did, earning another gulp from the man as Jen’s skin filled out, darkened with blood flow, and her nipples hardened.

“I’m ... not sure how—”

“Two women?” Jennifer asked. “Two women in a relationship at that?”

“Yes...”

Jennifer nodded, and set a hand on her hip. “It’s simple. Beatrice and I are best friends, and very close, sexually and emotionally. But the romance parking space isn’t reserved. I’m more comfortable sharing it with someone, than I am holding it on my own. So, you”—she gestured to Sándor—”get to have that spot with me. Dare I say, you even get priority parking over me.”

“The fuck kind of analogy is that?” Triss asked. “I’m a fucking parking spot?”

“It’s good enough.”

“Uh huh. Look at him. The dude is confused as all fuck.”

Sándor did manage a small nod, eyes drifting from Triss’s eyes to Jen’s, and occasionally at her huge tits, too. His stone face couldn’t hide that the man definitely had a sexual appetite.

“It is a ... unique situation.”

“Okay, I’ll explain it better,” Jen said. “When I was young, I read a book, about a king and a queen, and a small slave woman they’d saved. Over the course of the story, the woman gets closer to the king and queen, until they invite her into their bed. And it’s this super hot scene where the king and queen, obviously deeply in love with each other, share that intimacy with the young woman. They fuck her silly and cuddle and ... and all the good stuff.” With a quiet moan, Jen slid her hands down her naked stomach, and between her thighs, where one of her hands lightly caressed her clit through her thong. “I’ve always wanted to be the young woman in that story, not the queen. I want a happy lovey dovey couple to pamper me and fuck me.”

Sándor raised a brow slightly, looking between the two ladies again.

“That is ... a lovely way of describing it. I think I understand you better.”

Jen beamed. “I know, right!? People just don’t get it!”

“I get it.” He nodded, and his eyes drifted down her body to her masturbating hand, before shooting back up. “Though, isn’t it the king and queen doing the seducing, in the story?”

“Yeah well, I can’t just sit around waiting for my fantasy to come true. Gotta work for it.” Nodding, Jen slipped out of Triss’s grip and walked off for the bathroom. “I’m getting a towel. You two, get naked.”

“Towel?” Sándor asked.

Triss grinned at him, and slipped off her tank top. Dude had no idea what he was in for.

The way his eyes looked her tattooed body up and down had her quivering like a schoolgirl, and it only got worse when she Blushed Life.

“Like tattoos?” she asked, and she traced a claw along the snake biting her nipple before it ran down her abs.

“I do.”

“Piercings?” She shifted onto her toes and back to her heels a few times, making her small breasts jiggle lightly. Maybe next time, she’d wear something fancier than plain old nipple studs.

“Very much.” Dude wasn’t lying, from the way his eyes locked onto her hardening nipples.

Nodding and grinning, she slipped off her jeans and kicked them aside, leaving her in just her socks and a black thong. Unlike Jen, she just wore simple thongs, and she wore them because they made her righteous, large, firm ass look amazing, not because she just went around expecting someone else to see her in nothing but the thong. But the way Sándor's eyes opened wide when she turned around slowly for him, was enough to have her body lit up like a Christmas tree.

He was hard. She could see the bulge pressing up against his jeans.

“We just kissed. First time. Are you sure—”

“We're vampires, Sándor. Dolareido vampires.”

“I know, but—”

She reached down, and pulled on his shirt. After a few seconds of hesitation, he helped, and she groaned bliss as the man finally was finally topless. He was slightly above average height, with a lean, muscular build, not super thick but definitely super defined, with fucking chiseled abs. It matched his short facial gruff and dreamy, stern, stoic eyes perfectly.

She'd seen him topless before, when she and Tash and them had sneaked into the flesh chamber, a lifetime ago. Some of Elen's knife work had even left scars on his back, though not the whole ritual symbol the flesh witch had used to control him, thank god.

Jen returned, towel in hand. “Ok Sándor. Up please.”

~~♥♥♥~~

The man blinked, but did as requested. Jen threw the huge towel down where he'd been sitting, before she reached out and undid the button on his jeans. Just like Margaret said, Sándor didn't resist. He

was more or less stuck in a state of ‘what do I do?’, and the girls — especially Jen — were happy to guide him. Triss had been hesitant to the idea of bullying Sándor into sex, but with his wife’s advice in hand, it suddenly got fun. Super fucking fun.

Triss joined in, and the two vampires worked together to get the man’s jeans and boxers off, revealing a firm, hard ass, and a nice big cock, standing and waiting. Much as Sándor was clearly unsure of how to handle himself with two women tugging on him, he wasn’t embarrassed. He didn’t blush or cover himself, and considering how ripped the dude was, it was no wonder. Or maybe it was the gargoyle in him, or the hundreds of years of experience.

He had an Apollo’s belt that made her fucking melt, and a big cock that was only getting bigger the more he looked at them. She could see, and almost hear, his pulse fill it more and more. Hell, he’d even trimmed his pubes down short. Dude was fitting into Dolareido more and more.

Jen pushed him down onto the towel. He sat, back against the couch, eyes looking between the two ladies.

“What do I—”

“You,” Jen said, “can sit there, and simply enjoy yourself. We’ve been wanting to do things to you for a while now. We’ll tell you what we want.” Purring, she straddled his lap, knees pressing against the couch. She came in closer, close enough to press her big breasts against his chest, while she put a couple kisses on his neck.

Triss made sure to sit on the side where Jen was kissing, Sándor’s left, and she gave her girlfriend a harsh slap on the ass. A loud squeak, and Jen sat up straight before glaring down at Triss. Her sitting up also meant Triss got to see Sándor’s big dick pinned against his abs by Jen’s pussy, still wearing panties. Wet panties. This woman, good god.

“I kissed him first, so you fuck him first? Is that how this is gonna go?” Triss asked.

“Naturally.”

Well, if Jen was gonna be a bitch, so was Triss. She slid a claw under the side of Jen’s thong, and snip snip, cut the thing. And before Jen could squeak again, Triss reached around and did the same to the other side, and pulled the remains of her girl’s underwear off.

“Those were expensive!”

Smirking, Triss tossed the ruined underwear away, and snuggled into Sándor’s side. The man was a deer in headlights, which teased something in Triss so bad. Every part of her suddenly wanted to pull a reaction out of this man, like a cat playing with a toy. A dangerous toy. She lifted his arm and got under it so it draped her shoulders, and she leaned in and kissed his jaw. He turned, and she took the opportunity to kiss him proper.

“Sorry,” she said. “About us, I mean, and uh ... being romantic. We really suck at this.”

“Says you,” Jen said, and she set one hand on Sándor’s outside shoulder, her other on Triss’s outside shoulder. With a deep, playful groan, she eased her hips back and forth slightly, and her pussy lips dragged along every inch of Sándor’s long cock. Up to the fat tip, and down and down until his length pointed up slightly from how Jen’s weight pushed on the bottom. Coated in juices.

He gulped. “You’re both...”

“Beautiful?” Jen asked.

“Yes...”



Jen grinned. “And gorgeous? Amazing? Absolutely breathtaking?”

“I think,” Triss said, “he was going to find a polite way to say sluts. You’re already dripping.” And, god damn it, seeing her naked girlfriend rubbing her bare slit back and forth on her—their boyfriend’s cock? Yeah, Triss could feel her body warming up, too, little waves of heat that flowed down between her thighs and told her things were getting swollen.

Shrugging, Jen nuzzled her nose against Sándor’s, gave him a kiss, and then did the same for Triss, leaning in before giving her a kiss, too.

“Sándor,” Jen whispered, “you’ll have to forgive me, but I cannot stand silly little girlish games of flirting for ages on end. I know what I like.” She leaned in close enough to squash her breasts against his chest again, slipping her head around his neck opposite of Triss, but still speaking loud enough she could hear her. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Sándor’s eyes half closed as he relaxed back against the couch, before turning to look at Triss. Even his hard, stoic face couldn’t hide that super hot look of guilt as Jen continued to rub her clit along the underside of his cock while kissing his neck.

“Dude, she’s my girlfriend,” Triss said. “Stop worrying. You like her, right?”

He scrunched up his nose for a fraction of a second.

“Her taste in music is horrible.”

Triss laughed. Hell, Jen laughed, and drew her head back so she could scrunch up her nose at him, too, for longer and far more obviously.

“That aside?” Triss asked.

“I ... don’t know what I’m getting myself into. But, I always found the two of you very intriguing. And intriguing grew into more. But, I’m still not ... sure how to...”

“Deal with two women.” Nodding, Jen knelt up higher, reached down, and guided the man’s large cock up toward her wet slit. Everyone went silent as they watched the big cock’s fat tip spread her open, and a bead of juices dripped down his cock’s front until it reached his pelvis. Once his glans had slipped into her, earning a small quiver from the man, Jen set both her hands on his shoulders, and licked her lips as she slowly worked her way down, swaying her hips left and right as she did. Triss couldn’t help but stare at how her perfectly smooth pussy spread around his cock as she made sure to take him balls deep. Lock and key.

“Don’t worry about it,” Triss said. “Like in Jen’s ridiculous story, I’m the queen, you’re the king, and she’s some silly little girl with a ridiculous sex drive who’s living rent free in our bed and eating our food.”

“Perfect,” Jen said, after a playful, satisfied moan.

Triss slipped a hand under her own thong, and rubbed her clit as she watched. She’d get her turn, but for now, this was a good way to help a super vanilla dude like Sándor get used to what was probably going to be a very unusual sex life for him. She cuddled into his side, and kissed the side of his chest a couple times, before she snuggled back into the groove of his shoulder, and masturbated as her girlfriend slowly swayed her hips while keeping him buried to the hilt.

“My queen, you say?” Sándor asked, looking down at Triss. Once he realized Triss had started masturbating, his breathing picked up, and his eyes locked onto how Triss’s hand worked underneath her thong. She could feel his heartbeat speed up, too.

“Mhmm.” With her left hand massaging her swollen clit, her right hand, the one closer to Sándor, was free to slide up onto his abs, and walk down the hard muscles. “Which also means we get to do whatever we want to our little sex slave.”

“Sex slave? I thought in the story—”

Jen put a finger on his lips, shushing him. “You can think of me sex slave, too.” Her other hand found his, the one not currently around Triss’s shoulders, and pulled it toward her. With a purr, she put it underneath one of her breasts, and squeezed her hand around his, making it squeeze her tit. “I would make a good sex slave, wouldn’t I?”

The man nodded slowly, eyes locked onto her huge breast as he gently squeezed it on his own several times, making its softness spill over his palm and between his fingers.

Words weren’t going to be enough to help Sándor get more comfortable with the situation. He needed encouragement. So, Triss stopped masturbating, got up, and got behind Jen. She leaned in, hugged the girl from behind, and slipped her arms under Jen’s, so she could cup her breasts. After having fucked her dozens and dozens of times, Triss knew exactly how Jen liked to have her tits played with: full cupping, with some gentle nipple pinching.

Jen mewled, turning her head enough to almost reach Triss. Triss leaned around enough to meet her, and they kissed, long and deep, while Triss continued to massage and caress her girlfriend’s tits and swollen nipples. All the while, Jen worked her hips back and forth, grinding her body against Sándor’s.

“Sándor,” Triss said. “Take her hips.” Sándor did as ordered, eyes locked onto Jen’s breasts filling and overflowing Triss’s hands. “Work her.” No need to explain what she meant, Sándor pushed Jen back and forth on his lap in a way every man understood. Stay deep

inside the girl, and enjoy her pussy clenching on your cock while she grinds.

With Sándor holding the Ventrue's hips, Jen's hands were free to do whatever they wanted, and naturally one of them tightened on his shoulder while the other found her clitoris. She masturbated, and Triss smiled as Sándor's eyes almost completely closed. No doubt Jen was clenching on the guy like a vise, and considering the familiar, quiet groans Jen was making into Triss's kiss, the girl was in one of her hyper horny moods. She'd been wanting this for months, finally got it, and now she was soaking the man between her legs.

Much as Jen was a certifiable sexpert, she didn't have much patience. She masturbated faster, fingers abusing her clit and making her tremble. The only thing that kept her moving back and forth now was Sándor's grip on her, and Triss broke the kiss so she could watch his fine arms flex with the motion. God damn the man was beautiful.

Jen came. She grabbed both of Sandor's wrists and held on as her body quivered. Triss let her go, and her girlfriend leaned forward enough to plant her body against Sándor; from behind, Triss could see the backs of her huge tits, spread out from how they squashed against Sándor's chest. She hugged him as she hid her face in his neck, probably kissing him some more as she slowly ground into him, milking her orgasm aftershocks.

Sándor looked at Triss from over the woman's shoulder, a tiny smile on his otherwise calm, if slightly surprised face.

"I've never done anything like this," he said.

"Gonna be a lot of that," Triss said. "Now, gimme a hand here." Nodding, she put her hands on Jen's hips, and lifted the girl up a few inches, before slamming her down.

Instant groans from Jen. She hadn't seen that coming. Triss bounced her a few more times, until Jen sat up straight, hands on Sándor's shoulders, and she looked back at Triss.

"You want to make him cum? Sándor isn't Kindred. He might not be able to ... you know..."

Sándor managed a tiny smirk. It was a super weird expression on his face, and it vanished a second later.

"I am Begotten, and the gargoyle's appetite is ... large. I'll be fine."

And from the momentary smirk, Triss bet he was being modest. The gargoyle Horror probably influenced him in a lot of ways, and sure, Sándor did everything he could to keep it suppressed, but vampires and werewolves certainly used their inner monster to fuel their sex drives. Good chance Sándor did the same. Hell, reading between the lines from what Margaret said, there was a chance the woman literally couldn't keep up with him.

The idea of learning about the man's limits got Triss quivering, and she bounced Jen on the man harder.

Sándor took her hips, and picked up the job, bouncing Jen on his cock. He wasn't gentle. Awesome. Triss had half expected the man to be too gentle, but he was getting in the mood now, and a quiet growl rumbled in his throat as his eyes drank in Jen's giant breasts bouncing against her chest.

Triss had to see this. She sat back down beside the man on the towel, and immediately slipped her hand back under her thong as she watched her girlfriend's smooth slit work up and down his long length. Jen's hands found Sándor's wrists so she could lean back, probably trying to drive the angle of his cock to hit against her g-spot more. Whether that was her goal or not, it made her look fucking amazing, her chest jutting out so her breasts rippled against her with each bounce.

Jen came again. Her head fell back, and her moans came out as short pants, barely a noise, as Sándor continued to bounce her hard enough the couch was doing a little more than squeaking. How the fuck had Sándor not cum yet? Some weird zen mode? The woman was squeezing on the man hard enough slivers of her insides came out with her each time he lifted her up, only to slam her back down through her orgasm, until trickles of her juices flowed out of her onto his pelvis.

Triss managed a quick peek up at his face, and another tiny quiver shot through her. He didn't look like Sándor anymore. He looked like the gargoyle, stern face mixed with animal hunger, eyes set on his meal. Hard bounces had the couch shaking, and Jen almost fell back as her body trembled. The only reason she didn't fall was the dude's grip, as Jen's hands eventually went limp as the poor girl came again. Sándor didn't stop.

Sure, Jen was the sort of girl who got off easy; pretty common trait for the lady paranormals, at least the ones in Dolareido. But Sándor bounced her in just the right way to have her melting. Much as the man was the quiet, stoic type, he was old as dirt and knew his shit.

Finally, it was his turn to cum, and he slowed his pace, instead using just a few harsh, heavy bounces, with a lot of downtime between them, earning some girly squeaks from Jen. Finally he relaxed, and Triss snuggled into his arm as she watched where his thick cock had her girlfriend spread apart. Heavy white cum leaked out of her drenched slit, and Sándor groaned softly as he relaxed back into the couch as he filled Jen up.

Filled, and filled. Triss hadn't really known what to expect. She knew the werewolves were bundles of life and shit, and came their brains out; Jessy loved to talk. Sándor was part giant gargoyle monster. Uncharted territory. But sure enough, as he relaxed back on the couch, using his grip only to gently move the limp and

leaning back Jen back and forth on his cock to milk him, he pumped her full of cum until more heavy drops of the white fluid leaked out of her. And more. Holy shit.

Triss leaned up, and kissed the man's jaw. It was enough to get him to look at her, and she grinned as she kissed his lips, instead. He let go of Jen with his closer arm, and slipped it around Triss, half hugging her as they kissed. Considering the man was in the middle of filling up their girlfriend, little shivers worked through him, and a couple of groans, too. Something about kissing the man as he filled Jen up with enough cum she was literally overflowing, had Triss boiling.

But finally he was done. Triss got up off the couch, doing her best to ignore how soaked her thong was, and set her hands on Jen's shoulders. She gently pushed her friend forward, and the girl collapsed against Sándor's chest. Apparently the man was getting on the threesome wavelength, because he stroked the girl's back a few times, kissed the side of her head, lifted her up off his cock, and set her down on the couch on his right, on the towel. Big towel.

Jen nuzzled into his arm, eyes half closed, legs half spread, cum oozing out of her onto the towel. Which left the man's big cock, dripping with both their cum, pointing up toward him, waiting.

Triss licked her lips, and her extra teeth, as she watched his thick, soaked cock flex toward his abs a couple times, and another drop of white rose to the tip. Christ, she was going to cum the moment he was in her.

"Wait," Jen said, voice wavering a bit. Somehow, the girl managed to sit up enough to reach over to the table, and into her purse. And of course, sat back with a small tube of lube in hand.

"Seriously just walking around with that, Jen?" Triss asked.

“Of course.” Nodding as if it was perfectly reasonable, she popped it open, and poured it onto Sándor’s cock. The man raised an eyebrow, not sure what was going on, but considering he’d just had a huge orgasm, he seemed happy to wait and see.

Rolling her eyes, Triss slid out of her thong, making sure to stick her ass out a bit as she did. A quick glance down showed a line of juices connecting it to her swollen slit, and she groaned, annoyed, as she kicked it aside. She turned, and aimed her ass toward Jen, but kept her eyes on Sándor. His eyes were locked on her large, firm ass, and his breathing quickened.

It quickened again, once Jen soaked her fingers in lube, and set them on Triss’s ass. Jen spent a little time working the liquid on the outside, before gently easing two fingers into her ass, and spreading the lube around a little more. And god damn it, Triss’s slit was already dripping. She moan. She didn’t cum, thank god, but she squeezed on Jen’s fingers as she tried, and failed, to not make more noise.

Sándor’s eyes were wide.

“Never had anal?” Triss asked. “You look surprised.”

“Never.”

“Wait, really? Dude, you’re ancient.”

“It’s ... never come up.”

Triss licked her lips again as she watched his eyes stare at her ass while Jen worked lube into her, longer than needed. The damn Ventrue saw an opportunity to have some fun with her, and the hypnotized Sándor, so she spent a minute longer gently working her fingers around and around in Triss’s ass. Plain as day in the man’s eyes, he liked what he saw. He liked what he heard, when Triss failed to stop another tiny groan from slipping out of her.



Jen stopped, thank god, and Triss straddled the man, her man, putting her weight on her knees around his legs. Big couch meant his ass was forward enough she had the room to straddle him properly, and she smiled down at him as she held his shoulder with one hand, and took his wet cock in the other.

“Beatrice,” Jen said, “is an anal addict.”

“I’m not ... addicted...” Another small moan snuck its way out of her as she lowered herself down on the man’s thick cock, and set the warm, drenched glans against her ass’s entrance.

Jen laughed as she turned in toward Sándor, and slipped under his arm so she could press her body into him, half sitting, half rubbing herself into him and Triss’s leg.

Triss didn’t really want to prove Jen right, but her body didn’t give a fuck. The sensation of her ass’s sensitive skin spreading open, and the sensitive nerves getting caressed by a hot, hard, drenched cock, had her sighing happily. But it was the sensation of being full she ached for, and she forced her muscles to relax so she could take the man deep and deeper. It didn’t take long. She’d done this a hundred times, and she was out of her fucking mind horny.

She got the man balls deep in her ass, and groaned as she leaned back and put her hands on his knees. Fucking finally. The feeling of being full. The feeling of a hard cock pulling toward her pussy from inside her ass, the way the pressure inside felt so similar and different, it had her quivering. You had to get the right angle, and she made sure she found it, sliding her hips forward a bit while leaning back, making sure the dude’s hard cock pushed straight toward her belly.

Plus, leaning back like this really showed off her abs and tight little waist. She loved them, and Sándor did too, from the way he was looking.

“It’s pierced,” Sándor said.

“What?” Triss followed his hypnotized eyes, and managed a tiny laugh. A little bolt piercing sat above her clit, through her clit hood. “Next time I’ll wear something fancier.”

“Lots of chains,” Jen said, nodding. And as she grinned up at Triss from within the nook of Sándor’s arm, she reached down over his abs and cum-soaked pelvis, and with palm up, she slipped two fingers down along Triss’s pierced clit hood, over her clit, along her swollen lips, and then directly into her. Fuuuuuck.

“Feel that?” the Ventrue asked Sandor, and she moved her fingers toward Triss’s ass, pushing the backs of her finger knuckles against the back of Triss’s pussy, before pulling her fingers forward, and pressing them against Triss’s g-spot.

Instant pleasure, a deep tingling wave that pulsed out from her insides and down into her toes. Triss sucked in a quick, useless breath, and tightened her grip on Sandor’s knees as she teetered on the edge of orgasm. But she kept the position. Sandor was staring at her, at her tattoos, her small breasts and pierced nipples, at her smooth pussy and tiny piercing, and her abs as they stretched. It wouldn’t be long before he grabbed her and fucked her hard, same as Jen. The anticipation was killing her.

“I can,” the man said after a heavy, deep groan. Unusually deep. Gargoyle deep.

Jen chuckled, and without warning, finger fucked Triss, hard. She worked her hand back and forth, the back of her fingers hitting the back wall of her pussy, and pushing against the man’s cock through the wall of flesh. But it was the strength of her fingers hitting Triss’s g-spot with almost slapping speed that broke Triss. She leaned forward and grabbed Sandor’s shoulders for dear life as Jen fingered her, her ass and pussy clenching down hard, and instant pulses of tingling bliss shot out through her whole body.

A gush of her fluids splashed over Jen's hand and over Sándor's abs. Jen didn't stop. The damn Ventrue grinned up at Triss, and continued to pump her hand, fighting against Triss's clenching insides and driving her fingers against Triss's g-spot again, and again, and again. It was too damn good. The way Sándor stared down at Jen's hand, and then up Triss's abs, to her jiggling breasts, and up to her face as her mouth fell open, his own eyes wide with surprise, was too good. He was hypnotized, and she couldn't help but cum until her toes curled while Jen pounded away. She squirted again, harder, drenching Jen's hand, Sándor's stomach, and even a bit of his chest.

Eventually the damn slut stopped, eased her fingers out of Triss, and teased them up Sándor's now very soaked abs, and up to his chest. Now that she had some time to recover, Triss sat up straight again, and looked down at Sándor's breathing, sweating body, and how his abs flexed in slow crunches as Triss quivered on him. The orgasm aftershocks worked through her, up and down, waves that had her nipples so hard the metal studs hurt.

"You call me a slut," Jen said, giggling as she lifted her hand, and let a drop of Triss's clear juices drip from her fingers down onto Sándor's abs.

"Oh fuck you." Triss stuck out her tongue before leaning in again, and snuggled in close to Sándor. "Sorry, I soaked you." She shifted up and down along his body, rubbing her small breasts and diamond nipples into his chest. Her whole damn body was tingling and shivering and refused to stop.

"I can see that," he said, gulping, before looking over her shoulder and down her back. Noticing, she made sure to arch her back, and squash her stomach into his so her ass stuck out in a way she knew looked damn good. With her face buried in his neck, she couldn't see what he was looking at anymore, but his hands found her ass,

and squeezed. Which got her all sorts of tingly again, and she sighed happily into his neck.

Her noise apparently encouraged him, because he squeezed her ass harder, massaged it, and dug his fingers into the meat of it. Triss hated the idea of comparing her body to his dead wife's, so no fucking way she'd actually say it out loud, but Margaret had been a tall, thin woman. Not much meat on the bones. Triss had a small waist with abs, and an ass for days; lot of time spent at the gym, lifting heavy shit, when she was alive. And feeling Sándor squeeze and knead it had her grinning into his neck as she kissed him. He liked her body.

Well, Margaret had said to be aggressive with him, and even bully him a little. So Triss sat back up, licked a couple of her extra, large teeth, and turned around. No need to get off, half the fun was showing off how comfortable she was doing this, and Sándor groaned as she twisted on his cock. Once she was facing away from him, she put her feet between his on the floor, put her hands on his knees again, and slowly worked her ass left and right as she made sure to keep the man balls deep.

Poor guy. Dude had been alive for centuries, but it was obvious he'd never gone through a sexual indulgence phase. Every paranormal in Dolareido, except for maybe the more fucked up Nosferatu, went through at least one horny phase in their long lives, where they fucked and fucked and fucked, and tried everything under the sun or moon. And now he had two girlfriends, Jen and Triss. Sándor was in for the time of his life.

Triss ground her ass around and around, going in circles, and occasionally give the man a hard squeeze. Sure enough, his hands found her ass again, and she looked over her shoulder to drink in his hypnotized, hard blue eyes.

Jen, looking a bit jealous, leaned in and kissed Sándor, making sure to squash her big tits against the man. Triss laughed and nodded to him, giving him permission to kiss her back. He did, eyes mostly closing as Jen made sure the kiss lasted, taking extra time to tease his wet abs with her hand, and rub her breasts into his side and chest a few times. Satisfied, she sat back down, snuggled under his right arm, and put a hand on Triss's ass.

And gave it a good slap.

Instant groan from Triss. It wasn't so much that Triss liked having her ass slapped; she did, but definitely not as much as someone like Samantha. But the way Sándor's eyes widened as he watched her butt ripple, was fucking perfect, not to mention how Triss's spontaneous clench pulled a quiver out of him. From the way Jen grinned, she was trying to draw out the animal that'd power fucked her fifteen minutes ago.

"Don't worry," Jen said, and she gave Triss's ass another slap. "We're not only here for sex. You and Beatrice can indulge in some cuddling and other romantic, far less sexual stuff, when we're done."

"I do like cuddling," Triss said.

Jen nodded, and traced her finger up and down Sándor's body some more.

"Cuddling is very personal. Very intimate," she said.

Sándor raised a brow as he looked between the two of them.

"Cuddling. Not sex?"

Triss laughed. This guy was so old fashioned, it was hilarious. And fun. Would he change after a year or two of nonstop crazy sex?

Considering how old he was and still a stoic quiet stern vanilla dude, probably not. Which was going to be strangely fun, too.

“Like holding hands,” Jen said. “Extremely intimate.”

“Naughty,” Triss said, grinning back at her girlfriend.

Enough foreplay. She lifted her ass up a few inches, and worked it back down. She had to shift herself forward a bit to get the angle right, but once she had his cock hitting the right places, she bounced a little harder, and mewled. The feeling of being full, of pressure against those places, sent more tingling waves up into her chest and rippling down into her legs.

Jen leaned up and whispered something into Sándor’s ear.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

The Ventrue nodded, and shifted back on the couch a bit away from him before lying on her back, head against the couch arm. Oh, she wanted to do that position. Triss was down, and from the way Sándor looked to Jen and then back to Triss, he was too. Dude just needed permission to indulge in a fantasy.

Triss rolled her way toward Jen, off the man’s cock, and Sándor got up off the couch. A second later, Triss lay on Jen’s body, grinning down at her, head over Jen’s breasts and her knees between Jen’s legs. Sándor got behind her again on his knees, and stared down at Triss’s ass as she arched her back for him. His eyes grew wider when Jen pulled Triss’s ass cheeks apart for him.

He slipped the head of his cock back into her, set his hands on her hips, and very slowly sank himself balls deep into her ass. When his heavy testicles rested against her lips, she shivered.

“Dude, I am fucking dying here. Just fuck me already.”

With his eyes still locked on her ass, Sándor pulled his pelvis back a bit, and experimentally thrust forward. Fucking finally. A long, hard cock, hitting those deep places. She moaned, and didn't try to suppress it at all.

"She's well lubed," Jen said. "Fuck her hard."

Sándor managed to lift his eyes from her ass long enough to check in with Triss, and she grinned at the man as she nodded, before resting her head between Jen's breasts. With her head on her girlfriend's sternum, and her chest pushing into Jen's stomach, her ass was high up in the air, creating pretty much the most perfect looking display possible. Sándor had no chance.

He thrust into harder, a lot harder, hard enough his testicles slapped against her pussy, and Triss's whole body shifted slightly on Jen's. Jen reached down along Triss's back, and gave her ass another hard slap, both hands, earning a deep growl from Sándor, and another hard thrust. And another, and another.

A proper fucking rhythm. Triss groaned into Jen's body as she melted, body going a bit limp so she rested on the girl's torso. Jen took advantage, and teased fingers down her back before again reaching down low and playing with Triss's ass, digging fingers into its curves. The occasional slap, too. Triss's eyes rolled up as she hugged Jen with weak arms, as Sándor fucked her faster.

Her empty cunt clenched down hard, and a shot of her juices splashed down against the towel. He thrust again, another quiet, dark growl rumbling in his throat as he forced his cock into her ass despite her clenching muscles. Lube putting in overtime. She managed a quick peek back up at Sándor, and the look of sheer hunger in his eyes as he pounded her ass was perfect. The pleasure wave came back, rolling up and down through her, and again her empty pussy clenched so hard she heard the gush of fluid hit the towel. And then, hit Sándor's testicles, as again the man thrust into

her hard. Her cum splashed, soaking her thighs, only getting worse as the man didn't stop.

He only slowed down when it was his turn. He gave her a few more hard thrusts before sinking balls deep into her and staying there, as he flooded her insides. Warm, so warm, cum poured into her, and she gasped as she managed to push her quivering body up onto her elbows. She inched forward a little, just enough to collapse on Jen again, this time burying her face in her girlfriend's neck. More tremors worked through her, making her toes curl and her pussy squeeze, earning another gush of fluids, some hitting the large testicles resting against her lips, and soaking her thighs. The dude just kept going. He stayed deep, grinding her ass against him with his grip, and her muscle spasms pulled more quiet, dark growls from him, and more cum.

Jen chuckled up at the man, and held her hands out to him.

Sándor relaxed his grip on Triss's hips, and lay forward. Triss managed another quick peek of his eyes — relaxed and blissful — before his chest met her back, and gently pinned her against Jen's body. A Beatrice sandwich. Jen wasted no time, and pulled the man's head down to hers. Triss could feel them kissing, her own head in the nook of Jen's neck and shoulder.

Jen broke the kiss, and when Triss managed to turn her head enough to look at her, she kissed her instead. Fuck it, Triss kissed her back as she melted against her. She doubly melted when Sándor kissed the back of her head.

And then she groaned, as Sándor lifted his hips up, and thrust into her. Lying on top of her, his cock pointed straight down, and drove straight toward her belly. Triss mewled into Jen's kiss, and her girlfriend laughed.

“Fuck her until you're done, Sándor,” Jen said. “As long as it takes.” The sneaky Ventrue hid an odd inflection in there. She was



implying that Sándor's previous lovers had been human, and not able to fuck as long as him. Unlike vampires.

Apparently, gargoyles could fuck for a long time. Triss lay where she was, trapped between girlfriend and boyfriend, as Sándor fucked her ass again. Softly at first, until her sensitive insides had her moaning, inviting Sándor to fuck her hard. He did, still lying on top of her and keeping her pinned. She drenched her thighs, Jen's, and the man's testicles, as he got faster, and faster. And when it was his turn to cum again, he slowed down to a crawl, stayed balls deep inside her, and ground into her like he was trying to break her apart in a mortar with a pestle, forcing his long, hard cock toward her belly and keeping it there as he poured more cum into her.

Sometimes, she hated the fact she was a vampire. Sometimes, she loved it. Paranormals had the best sex.

~~♥♥♥~~

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"I'm still not ... sure," Sándor said.

Triss and Jen blinked at each other before looking at him. They were all in his shower, and thankfully since he had one of the modern, stupidly expensive apartments, it was a big shower. Lots of sleek, metal-colored tiles and whatnot.

"About what?" Triss asked. She stood in front of Jen, and was running soapy hands up and down the girl's chest. Not like the girl had anything to wash off her chest, but she wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to tease Sándor some more.

Sándor stood literally one foot away, and was having a difficult time not staring at what Triss was doing.

"About the nature of the relationship."

Triss gulped. “You mean—”

“About there being two women.”

Oh thank god. For a second there she thought she might have fucked the man to the point of post-nut clarity, and now he was thinking he wasn't into her. Guys with heartbeats did have a habit of thinking with their dick until a good orgasm got their brain working again.

Triss let go of Jen, and walked into Sándor. His back was already against the shower wall, so it was easy to lightly pin him, and press her pierced nipples straight into his stomach; he was a good six inches taller than her.

“You and I are dating. I like you. You like me. Right?”

He smiled, and set his hands on her hips. “I do.”

A shiver worked through her spine, the good kind, and she leaned into him a little harder.

“We're boyfriend and girlfriend. We don't fuck anyone else. Jen is our sex slave.”

He raised a brow and looked to Jen. “She—”

“I already told you,” Jen said, and she came in beside Triss, and did the same thing, pushing her huge breasts into the man's side and chest as she fought for room beside Triss. “I know what I like. I like this.”

“But—”

“She's free to fuck other people,” Triss said. “But she won't.”

“It's not interesting anymore,” Jen said. Yeah, she said it ‘wasn't interesting’ but Triss was pretty sure the girl was just romantically

invested, whether she wanted to admit it or not. It'd been the same with Julias.

“And she won't fuck me or you without the other present,” Triss said. This was annoying, but necessary. It was a weird relationship, and Sándor was a defining example of ‘too old to change’. They had to talk about it and set up rules. Communication was important, and she wasn't going to let something as stupid as not talking about shit end the relationship.

Look at her, growing up and getting wiser about the more normal shit, too.

“I ... see.”

Triss and Jen both laughed. The man was so different to Julias. Every night, the two of them were going to have to work past the man's conservative nature. But that also meant they'd get to enjoy teasing him out of his shell every time, to pull out the hungry man hidden inside. Like opening up a not-illegal Kinder Surprise egg.

She nodded as she pushed up onto her tippy toes, and kissed his chin. When he looked down to her, she turned it into a proper kiss, and the man eventually closed his eyes. And slowly, as if he might shatter the illusion if he went too fast, he ran his fingers up her back. God yes. She melted into him, and hugged him into her.

A tiny part of her wanted to ask if he stroked her spine like that because Julias told him to. Nah, too weird. Better to leave the mystery.

Jen whined like a puppy until Triss broke the kiss and gave her girlfriend a kiss, too. And both girls peeked Sándor's way to make sure the man was hypnotized by the sight of their bodies pressed together. He was, and gulped as his eyes looked them up and down, head to toe.

No wonder Antoinette enjoyed fucking Jack so much. Sure, there was something to be said for a more even sexual dynamic, but seeing Sándor's surprise and almost guilty delight that he was getting something as extreme — not even close by Dolareido standards — as two women at once? It had her feeling all tingly with excitement. Probably how Antoinette felt with Jack.

And, unlike Jack, Sándor had another half.

“Sándor,” she said, and she slipped behind Jen. Wet, naked bodies pressed together, both girls pushed their asses out, creating a big S shape that had Sándor's eyes running a race track. “We ... were wondering...”

“How ... comfortable you were,” Jen said, reading her mind and jumping in, “with ... your Horror, and ... sex. Because, we were—”

“Pretty damn interested,” Triss said.

Sándor raised one eyebrow very high.

“But, after what happened—”

Triss gave the man a slap on his naked, wet chest, hard enough to make the water ka-splat.

“Yeah, that sucked, but that was then. You regret what happened, and we regret what happened. We didn't respect the fact your Horror is fucking terrifying, and powerful as all fuck.”

The man looked down. And unless she was seeing things, a tiny smile appeared on his lips before he wiped it away. Happy? No. Proud? No. Satisfied? Well, he was a half monster of nightmares. It probably did appeal to some existential part of him that his Horror was so horrifying.

“But you still want to ... have sex with it?”

“Not it,” Triss said. “You, as it, with all those ... big arms and stuff.” Very, very big arms. And legs.

Jen nodded as she came in again, right up to Sándor’s chest, and pressed her huge breasts into his upper stomach. When in doubt, use the boobs. No man could resist the feeling of giant boobs squashing against the body.

“I was angry for what it tried to do. But this is different. I want to be a tiny little woman in your giant monster gargoyle hands, and disappear in your shadow as you bury a giant cock inside me. I want to groan and feel like I’m about to burst, as you treat me like a plaything.”

Jesus christ. Triss agreed with everything Jen said, but her saying it like that was so damn direct, Sándor was floored. Hell, it was surprising Jen didn’t ask him to rearrange her guts.

“Now?”

Triss laughed, and shook her head. “No, not now. When you’re comfortable with the idea. When you’ve fed. For now, you know what I want to do? I want to go cuddle and watch a fucking movie. I got nowhere to be tomorrow, and that’s a great fucking feeling I want to savor.”

Lie down on his bed or couch, cuddle up, and watch a movie. The most god damn romantic thing in the world.

Jen stepped back as she laughed, but nodded.

Sándor paused, eyeing Triss. Maybe he didn’t believe her. Maybe he thought she was being sarcastic. So she kept her expression serious as she waited for him to realize she was being completely legit.

He relaxed, and smiled. “That sounds heavenly.”

## Chapter 177

~~Jack~~

He went home. He didn't want to go home. Well, he did, because he wanted to see his thralls and crows, and make sure everything was going well. And much as it kinda irked him, he did feel possessive of his thralls. They were his pets, his, and any good owner took care of what was theirs. The Ventrue half of him loved that idea.

But at the tower, he spent all night in bed, recovering, and being the center of attention to Antoinette and Elaine. Antoinette, er, Ann, got in a pampering mood whenever Jack was injured, and considering how the confrontation with Black Blood went, combined with him now being as weak as a young neonate again, mostly, she was in a super motherly, pampering mood. He'd spent every night with his head on her lap, kissing and sucking on her breasts, while Elaine made sure he came over and over, until he had to feed on Ashley or Julee just to stay hard.

Difficult to walk away from that. But, as he stepped out of the car in front of his mansion, and Mulder and Scully flew down to land on his shoulders, he smiled. There was something empowering about coming home, even if he felt only a shred of the curse's power left in him. A shred was a shit load more than Elaine had expected him to have left, and he was damn happy to have it. He'd need it. Owning a mansion as a young neonate? There was a chance Michael or Garry would try and take the mansion from him, and he'd have to prove he could hold his own territory from pushy Carthians.

And he was kinda excited to do that.

He stepped into the mansion, with his mom, Damien, Beatrice, and Athalia following behind him. It was originally just going to be Damien and his mom, but he'd found her with Beatrice and Athalia, chatting away. And naturally, his mom had invited them, without checking with him, because it never even dawned on her that Jack might not want all the possible company he could have for his first trip back home.

That was fine. After everything that'd happened, those three deserved a little leeway from him, especially his mom. If she'd been anyone else, his mom would have figured out how to use the 'I saved the world' card to get whatever special treatment she wanted. But she was his mom, and the idea would never, ever enter her mind.

He loved her for that.

"I feel like I should be helping carry some bags of clothes," his mom said as she followed him into the entry hall, big stairs in front of them inviting them to come upstairs if they wanted. Not yet. "Like old times, you know?"

"This isn't a yearly trip to the university dorms, Mom."

"I know. Still. Where's the girls?"

Right on cue, all three girls stepped around the wall upstairs and stopped at the top of the stairs. He half expected to have a very awkward situation with his thralls standing there in sexy fake maid outfits, or bikinis, or nothing at all. Thankfully they were wearing more normal, modern maid outfits, and they all waved before hopping down the stairs.

"Master!" they said in unison as they ran up to him. Before he could say anything, they all hugged him, at the same time, and they made sure to squash him between them as they did.

Veronica with her blue hair was a bit shorter than Jack. Leilani with her brown hair was his height. Rachel with her short blonde hair was a couple inches taller than him. Having all three hugging and giggling was colorful and varied, and Jack did his best to hug them back while ignoring the judging looks he got from his mom and Athalia.

“Dude,” Triss said, and she held up a thumb. “Nice.” Which earned a small slap on her hand from his mom.

“It’s nice to see you too, girls,” Jack said. “Sorry I haven’t been here. I’ll make sure you get your blood later.”

Their eyes lit up like kids on Christmas.

“Yes master,” they said. They stepped back, gave him a small bow, and gave his mom a small bow, too.

“Thank you, Miss Terry.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

They bowed deeper, and left.

If she’d been Blushing Life, his mom would have incinerated from the heat of embarrassment. She stared after the girls, before looking back at him and the others.

“Don’t look at me,” Jack said, shrugging. “Probably something Antoinette told them to do.”

“You didn’t call them?”

“I did, but I didn’t really fill them in on the details.”



Nodding and sighing, she came in closer to him and gave him a quick pat on the arm.

“I know you don’t like to talk just to talk, but young girls do. Make sure you treat them nicely, even if that means just having a conversation with them every so often. Even if that means ... sitting around and just listening to them talk.”

He raised a brow, and looked to everyone else. Damien shrugged. Triss shrugged. Athalia shrugged.

“Yes, Mom.”

And then they all laughed. Assholes.

“Think you can defend this place without the curse?” Damien asked. Leave it to him to be direct about the issue. One of the reasons he was Jack’s best friend.

“We’ll see. I know Michael’s gonna wanna talk about it.”

Athalia frowned as she looked around. “But you own it.”

“I’m Invictus, and this place was passed down from other Invictus. I don’t really own it. I mean, I kinda do, and I kinda don’t.”

“Stupid,” she said, shrugging, and walked off.

“Mom, follow her and make sure she doesn’t burn my home down.”

Athalia laughed, which was a pretty damn strange sound to hear from her. And kinda creepy, evil sounding, like she belonged behind some big computer screen with a countdown showing the seconds before her deadly nuclear strike wiped out the world.

His mom nodded and followed after her.

“I’ll show you around. This place is huge! Almost as big as my sire’s tower! Well, its basement anyway.”

Jack watched after them as the two mothers left, before he relaxed and sat down on the stairs. He clucked his tongue a few times up at Mulder and Scully, and the two crows nodded before flying after his mom and Athalia. Much as he trusted his mom, she could be a bit of a pushover, and he didn’t want Athalia rummaging through all his shit. The birds would stop her. Hopefully.

“How’re things with Sándor?” he asked Triss as she sat beside him.

“Pretty great, honestly. You’d think there’d be drama, considering how we met, and all the shit with ... everything. But, no, the dude is so chill.”

“Yeah? Sounds kinda boring.”

She snorted a laugh as she shoved his shoulder, and slid him a few inches across the stairs.

“You’d think, but it’s not. He’s—wait, why do you care?”

“What, I can’t care?”

“No. You’re a guy. And you’re Jack.”

“True,” Damien said, nodding. “She makes a valid point. I couldn’t care less about how Beatrice’s dating life is going.”

Triss nodded and gestured to Damien, as if he’d said some universal truth. And Jack did kinda agree, but only a little.

Groaning, he rubbed his hair a few times. How to say this, how to say this.

“I care, because ... shit’s happened to everyone. Bad shit. And I’m hoping people are recovering.”

Damien leaned against the railing beside him. “That’s also true. Fiona was a wreck when Sándor delivered a message to her from Azamel. She really was the grandmother Fiona never had.”

“That old bitch?” Triss asked.

Jack laughed. “She was an old bitch, but probably the kind who was super nice to her close family. I don’t know how Fiona got into that family, or Athalia, or Mark, but considering Mark was willing to die to see her again...”

“Assuming Jacob meant Azamel,” Damien said, “when he was talking about Mark.”

“Assuming, yeah. Athalia doesn’t talk about Azamel, Triss?”

“Nah. We keep the topics light, ya know? It’s her and Sam that get into the heavy topics with each other. I steer clear.”

“They do?”

She nodded as she looked down, tapping her boot toes on the floor.

“They’re the ones who know what each other’s going through, ya know? Sure, I’m Sam’s friend, and I guess Athalia and I can talk now without wanting to kill each other. But it’s those two that are gonna be best friends, given some time.”

Athalia and his mom, best friends. That was a weird thought, but Triss was right, it fit. Both moms who’d lost their daughters. Both had gone through a lot of other nasty trauma, too. His mom had lost her husband, and then killed the next man she’d gotten close to. Athalia, Jack had no idea what other sorts of troubles she’d faced,

but considering the sort of shit Begotten had to go through just to survive, combined with having her own daughter hunting her down to kill her, it probably ranked similar.

“I wonder,” Triss said. “I mean, I know what happened with Jacob is probably eating her up, and Athalia is the best person she could talk to. They both blame themselves for shit. But, Athalia’s got a boyfriend.”

Jack grimaced. Best head this conversation off before it went sideways.

“Mom’s been through Hell. I think we should let her recover before—”

“Fuck no. Your mom is not that sort of person, Jack. She shouldn’t be left alone to wallow in misery in a tomb with candles, listening to shitty emo metal, and drawing bleeding roses on her arms with a black pen.”

Jack blinked, and looked to Damien. Damien blinked and looked to Jack.

Triss threw up her hands. “Yes, I’ve done that. You fucking assholes.”

“Okay,” Jack said, “you think we shouldn’t give Mom time to recover?”

“I think some people need that. The super introspective types that can’t get out of their own head.” Predictably, she poked Jack in the skull, and he winced as her claw almost pierced skin. “But your mom? No. She’s better off with someone in her life. She is the last person on the planet who should ever be alone.”

“I can’t even begin to wrap my mind around that.”

“Of course not. You ever stop thinking, dude? You ever stop running thoughts in your head, around and around and around?”

No point in trying to deny it. He knew it. Damien knew it. And apparently she knew it.

“No.”

“Well, your mom is not like that. She’s a, dare I say it, extrovert. Dun dun dun!” She threw her hands up again. “I know, right? Other kinds of thinking exist. Not everyone is like you, or him,” she gestured to Damien, “or Miss BigTits. Some people are like your mom, or Fiona, or Othello, or Harcourt. If they’re alone, that’s basically their own, personal Hell. They do better when they have people in their lives most of the time, people to talk to.” She pointed at Damien. “What would happen to Fiona if she had to spend a week with no one to talk to, no one to text or call?”

“She’d die,” Damien said, nodding slowly as he looked up and went into thinking mode. “She talks to Jessy all the time, and Natasha, and Athalia, and others. When she’s done talking to one, she moves down the list.”

Jack had to fight to not laugh. Much as Damien was smiling at the thought of his girlfriend, he was also wincing. Fiona likely talked his ear off whenever her girlfriends were out of contact. And sure, Damien probably enjoyed listening to her ... for a while. Jack knew the man pretty well, and Damien loved silence like Jack did. Why the man was so into Fiona, he couldn’t figure out, but the man clearly loved her. One of those mysterious examples of opposites attracting and actually working.

“So what’s the plan, then?” Jack asked Triss.

“I dunno. I’d thought about maybe asking her if she wants to fuck Othello and Madison again. Get some intimacy that way, but—”

Jack groaned and sank his face in his palms. “Why. Whyyy.” It was in his head now. His mom, naked, with Othello and his ghoul doing things to her. Argh.

“Oh shut up. Your mom knows you fuck those three girls who just hugged you and called you master. Fucking slut with a fucking harem. Imagine how she feels seeing that?”

“It’s not a ... okay, fine. Mom has a sex life. I can accept that.” In some alternate reality. “But...?”

“But fucking Othello would probably bring back bad memories for her, what with Jacob.”

A mountain of will and mental fortitude later, Jack managed to not cringe.

“Maybe one of the werewolves?” Damien said. “Maybe Carter...”

Silence hit them like a snowball with a hidden rock inside. The azlu had killed Carter, the oldest werewolf in the pack alongside Avery.

“I don’t have anyone in mind yet,” Triss said, “but I figured I should say it. Your mom is not the sort of woman that should be left alone, but she’s too nice to actively go looking for company. So keep an eye open for any guys you’d think would be good for her.”

“Maybe a thrall?” Damien asked. “Or, you know, a few? She is a Daeva.”

Again, somehow, Jack managed to find the strength to not cringe or groan or even squint at the thought of his mom getting triple stuffed. Look at him, growing up.

“Honestly, Triss,” Jack said, “you’re talking to the wrong guys. I mean sure, she’s my mom, but I don’t really, uh ... hang out with

people and talk to them. I have no idea who'd be a good match for her."

Damien lifted a finger. "The Prince would know. So would Elaine."

It was Triss's turn to groan. "I mean, I guess I could ask them. The Prince probably already knows, but sure, yeah, I'll talk to her."

"You're going to be talking to her a lot," Jack said, "if you're going to be the leader of the Circle of the Crone in Dolareido."

"Fuck me, leader? There's three of us. The only one who actually does Crúac rituals is me. And I need another fifty years at the fucking minimum before the Prince gives the smallest shit about my opinion. I'm no Primogen. Far as she's concerned, the Circle of the Crone doesn't exist, and I'm just a hippie with a couple friends who like to dance naked around a fire in the moonlight, smoking random plants."

Jack laughed. It was a pretty accurate description of what a pompous elder would think of anyone who called themselves a 'witch' in the modern era. It wasn't accurate to what the Prince thought, though. Ann knew Triss was more than some deluded hippie.

"You know that's not true."

"Yeah, well, it's true enough. And that's fine. Maybe in fifty years I'll have scratched the surface of the mountain of shit Jacob knew that he didn't tell me, didn't get a chance to teach me. The rituals. The ... crazy weirdness. What it means to be in the Circle of the Crone." She looked overwhelmed, like a kid hanging onto a piece of driftwood in a flood.

Jack was shit at this, but it seemed like the thing to do. He put a hand on her shoulder.

“You got a friend in me?”

“Oh my fucking god, you really suck at comforting people.”

His turn to throw up his hands. “Nevermind, then!”

He got up to walk away, but she grabbed his wrist and yanked him back down.

“Thanks anyway, dumbass. You seen Aaron?”

“No. No one’s seen him. I got the whole Invictus keeping an eye open for him, but so far no show. You sure he got out of the Great Below? You said he had no limbs left, and was in torpor. I can’t imagine he survived, Triss.” That’d be enough to kill any neonate vampire.

She shook her head. “Something happened. There should have been more ashes, and the other ash piles weren’t touched.”

“Crúac ritual?” Damien asked. “Something that yanked him out of the Great Below? Or maybe had some sort of reserve blood that allowed him to heal?”

“Probably. Or maybe a ghost came and helped him? Sabrina was full-on helping Black Blood, right? Like, she was convinced he’d help her get out of the Great Below. Could be the fucker had other ghosts under his thumb, too.”

“Got a place to sleep?” Jack asked. “Must be unnerving, knowing Aaron’s out there, maybe plotting revenge and shit.”

“Yeah I do. Jen and I have a little hideaway, something no one knows about. But it’s just a hole in the ground. Literally.”

“You could—”



“Nah we’re not staying here. Besides, I’m a fucking witch. I got ways of defending myself.”

“Witchy witch stuff?” he asked.

“Hell yeah.” She grinned and flicked her crow skull necklace a couple times. Mulder and Scully hated that thing.

“What about Sándor?”

“Yeah, he might be able to help.” She sighed dreamily, leaned forward, and set her elbows on her knees, chin in her palms. “Me and Jen been fucking the guy pretty much all night every night for a week, now. It’s been great.”

Again, Jack went through his sanity-saving routine of burying his face in his palms before rubbing his buzzed hair. But the beaming smile on the girl’s face settled him. She wasn’t just saying that to screw with him. She was happy.

“Glad it worked out for you two.”

“Thanks. Sándor’s great. Pretty damn hard to read, though. Super quiet all the time, making it a bitch to tell if he’s brooding or just thinking about how to play a song.” Her eyes drifted away, thinking up something she liked. “How about you, you little shit? You need help?”

“From Aaron?”

“Nah. If Aaron’s alive, and if he’s got revenge on his mind, he’ll be coming for me. I don’t think that’s what’ll happen, but who the fuck knows.” She stood up and paced around in front of the giant mansion doors. “I meant with normal vampire shit. If Michael gives you trouble about the mansion, I could cast a curse on him?”

Jack laughed. "I'll find out later tonight." A meeting he was not looking forward to.

"Garry gonna gank your ass for all the trouble you gave him?"

"Hopefully not." He didn't think he would. Michael and Garry were both assholes that liked to shove people around, but they weren't colossal assholes. "Uh, put me a good word for me with your old boss?"

She laughed and shrugged. "Uh, yeah sure, I'll try. What about that bitch Bella? She doesn't like you."

"I think my last conversation with her managed to settle things down a bit. I had the curse then, so maybe she was just biding her time. But, uh, hopefully once I talk to Garry and tell him about what happened with Jacob, Bella won't hate my guts so much."

"Assuming Bella wouldn't have wanted Jacob to win," she said.

There was that, and that was a pretty big if. The details of Jacob and Black Blood's plot were still basically a secret, and usually summarized to others as 'an apocalypse'. If people found out what Jacob had really been up to, some might be angry Jack and the others had stopped him.

"Playing damage control will be harder from now on, yeah, but I think I'm fine."

"Maybe," Damien said. "I'm worried about Isabella."

"Ah shit, right." Another facepalm and head rub. "I did kind of bully her, didn't I?"

"Ice queen?" Triss asked. "Want me to deal with her?"

"She's almost as old as Othello," Damien said. "She's strong."

“With delusions of grandeur,” Jack said. “Pretty shit combination.”

“We could have her killed,” Damien said. That was ice cold, even for him.

Jack shook his head. “I’ll talk to her, probably right after my meeting with Michael.”

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Mulder and Scully perched on some nearby power lines. If something happened, they had specific instructions to tell the girls, and the girls were on standby to contact the Prince. He wanted the girls out of any situation dealing with Jacob or Black Blood, but typical Danse Macabre politics? They weren’t just his food or pets, they were his backup.

Next time he had a minute for them, he’d do more than teach them how to load and shoot a semi-automatic pistol.

Sure enough, as he stepped into the Invictus HQ, repairs completed since the fire, Isabella cut him off before he could reach the elevator. Tall, busty, wearing a business suit with plenty of cleavage, her long dirty blonde hung behind her in a half dozen braids, she grinned at him with icy blue eyes and a very sharp jaw. Daeva doing what Daeva always did, using their looks to get their way, but he wasn’t the simple little Ventrue who’d walked into this building an eternity ago as a naive kid.

This woman was a venomous snake, waiting for the right moment to strike.

“Mister Terry,” she said, blocking him from hitting the call button for the elevator with her body. “How are you?”

He met her icy gaze with a solid, flat gaze of his own. He would not be intimidated.

“Madam Leauvion. I’m feeling a lot better, thanks.”

“That’s good. News got around about how badly you were injured.”

“Second time getting torn up by werewolf claws. They hurt like fire. Literally.”

That got a shiver out of her. Isabella was confident about a lot of things, but a physical brawl wasn’t her strong suit, even as a Daeva. Mekhet would probably have suited her better.

“Not to mention losing your curse.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Got your ear to the ground, don’t you?”

“Of course.” Her grin was absolutely evil. “I have to know where I should put my focus.”

“Not on me, I hope.”

Her grin only got more evil.

“And why not you? You are at the center of so many conflicts, many I didn’t even know about.”

“Not by choice, and not anymore.”

“You know full well you’ll end up in the middle of events in the future, Mister Terry. Be it with the werewolves, or the covenants, or even the nightmare monsters in our midsts, you’ll be put between it all again eventually.”

Much as he hated what she was saying, he couldn’t entirely disagree with her. It was still his job to play liaison with the different groups and try and keep peace as best he could. It was a job the Prince insisted he keep, and as far as he knew, Michael still wanted him to keep; probably not for its peacekeeping position, but

the knowledge it made him privy to. A key piece in his game of chess.

“No point in dodging around it,” he said. “No, I’m not the freak I was before. Just a young Ventrue, now.”

“Very young.”

He smirked. “You could probably kill me in a fight, yeah.”

She blinked. Well well well, a hole in her armor: honesty. Typical.

“How will you defend yourself and your assets now, Mister Terry?”

“With the power, of friendship.” And of course, he made a rainbow-like gesture with his hands.

“What?”

“I got friends in high places, Isabella. And in dark places. You really think you’re a threat to me? You? Some ice queen bitch hiding deep underground with a troupe of actors who can barely throw a punch? I’m dating the Prince, and have been for years. My best friend is one of the stealthiest Mekhets around. My second best friend is a witch, and Jacob’s favorite, largely because she’s a god damn natural at being a witch. I’m close with the Uratha, and despite what you may think, we’re not on bad terms. We’re allies, and they’ll help me if I ask. Same for the Begotten.” He leaned in toward the staring Daeva, and grinned up at her. “You have any idea what Begotten can do, Isabella? Any fucking clue at all?”

She frowned, ground her teeth, and said nothing.

“No, of course you don’t.” His turn for an evil grin. “They don’t need to attack you physically. They have ways of getting into your mind, and terrorizing your dreams. Not to mention literally showing

up under your bed or in your closet. And trust me, you fucking sociopath bitch, you wouldn't last two seconds trapped in the dark with one of them." He raised a hand, and Isabella glared at it as he pointed a finger at her sternum. He jammed it into her chest, and she took a step back, giving him the space needed to press the call button for the elevator. "And you might not think it, but you'd be hard pressed to find a Ventrue my age who can do what I do. I'm not an ant for you to step on, or child for you to bully. It won't be long before I won't need my friends to grind you into ash myself.

"With anyone else, I'd be trying to make peace, but you are a cruel, heartless fucking sack of shit, and as far as I'm concerned, the city would be better off without snakes like you. But, unlike you, I have a heart. Stay out of my way, and you get to live. Follow whatever official orders I give you, and you get to live. Fight whatever war you want with Michael, and as long as you keep me out of it, you get to live. But cross me and I'll make sure Hella comes home to find your urn, nice and full."

Her eyes had widened, rage and surprise cutting through her usual icy mask, but he didn't have to keep staring at them. The elevator dinged, and he stepped on. Isabella didn't follow.

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"I have to admit," Michael said, "I didn't entirely believe my childe's report until the last Primogen meeting."

Jack nodded. The two of them stood alone in the usual meeting room the Invictus council always used, a big expensive black table near a wall that was actually a giant touch screen. It was off. No relevant data to show for this conversation.

"The night was pretty insane, sir."

"Insane doesn't begin to cover it. Everything in the report read like something I'd expect to see in a witch's book, or the bible."

“It was biblical in scale, no denying that.”

Michael nodded as he slid his finger up his smart tablet, likely reading more of Jessy’s report.

“Jacob is dead.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So’s the Begotten Mark. The sheriff killed him.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your curse killed two werewolves, while one of those azlu monsters got another.”

The man wasn’t trying to hurt his feelings, but damn, he was blunt.

“Yes, sir. Avery and Eric have since told me they’ve been working with the Begotten to find the remnant of that azlu, before it grows up. They’re confident.”

“Good. Monsters in the sewers? Shit like that ends up on the news, and then we get hunters on our doorstep. More hunters.” Nodding, he scrolled some more. “Your curse is gone.”

“Yes sir. Black Blood’s doing.”

Michael eyed him. “The report is pretty vague on the details of that.”

“It was a complicated situation.” How to word this without exposing sensitive information. “But, ultimately, Elaine had set up a trap to stop Jacob and Black Blood. She succeeded. Me losing the curse was a step in that plan.”

“I want more details, Mister Terry.”

“Sorry, sir. I was pretty beat up before I even got to Jacob, and missing an eye. Damien was a bit too far to see the nuances. Jessy and the others arrived in the middle of chaos. Elaine and the Prince, on the other hand, were in pristine condition, and hands-on with Jacob until the end. You’ll have to ask them for the more intimate details.”

Michael knew he was lying, that much was obvious. But considering what Jack and the others had accomplished, there was a good chance Michael would let it drop. He did.

“Damien has spoken with Maria at length of the event.”

“Has he?” Jack asked with his best poker face.

His boss glared at him. “He has, but Maria is hesitant to speak of it.”

Jack nodded slowly. “I wonder why.”

More glares.

“Regardless, you and your companions have done well, Mister Terry. I wish I could have been there, if perhaps for a chance to speak to Roland. But, considering how he died, and how ... shortsighted, my feud with Tones over his death has been, I am under the impression he would not wish to speak to us.”

Oh, shit, he was being honest.

“I ... wouldn’t know, sir. I only know his name wasn’t mentioned by any of the souls.”

Michael nodded slowly, and shrugged. “Very well. This event will remain a mystery, as it always had to simple folk such as Garry and myself. How dare vampires such as the two of us live our second lives in the world of the physical, of blood and smoke.”



Jack said nothing. Hearing his boss be honest one moment, and sarcastic the next, was throwing him off. This was not the usual Michael McDonald.

“Next topic. Your mansion. Do you think you are capable of defending it?”

“I think I can. I am confident I can easily defeat a vampire of similar age in any sort of battle, without the curse.”

“Yes, but it won’t be young neonates coming to your mansion to kill you and hide the evidence. It’ll be vampires like Isabella.”

Jack frowned. “Isabella—”

“Is more of a threat to me than she is to you, officially. She wants my head, and my seat now that the council is gone. But she will forever be undermined by her passions, a slave to them. She is a pale shadow of Antoinette, and she knows it. That, however, does lead to a second issue: she is more of a threat to you than she is to me, unofficially. She does not like you. She envies you.”

“I can handle her. And if I can’t, I have other ways.”

“Other ways.” That seemed to make Michael’s night. He smiled bright, and leaned in toward him. “You mean you won’t just bash your skull into her over and over again and hope for success?”

That reversal came out of nowhere, and Jack winced as he looked down.

“I’ve had to learn a lot of things over the past half a decade, sir. And, I admit, I resisted a lot of those lessons. But, yes, I now know if I have to make something happen, it’s not always optimal to bash my head against the problem and hope for the best.”

“Good. Now, I will let you keep the mansion, Mister Terry, assuming you can deal with Isabella, and Hella, and Garry and Bella taking the occasional poke at you and your rather exposed property.”

“I can.” Especially once his three thralls were not only trained in firearms, but conditioned into fit fighting machines. He didn’t have the luxury to pamper them, like Antoinette did her ghouls. It’d be at least a hundred years before Jack had the sort of defenses the Prince did.

“Very well. I hope you’ll do Julias proud.”

“I will, sir.” Even if you hate him for it, Michael.

“Now, the next topic. Carthians have been poking around in Madam Goldman’s and Mister White’s brothels in Devil’s Corner. They expect confrontations in the future. It will be up to you to—”

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Mentally. Exhausted. One day back on the job and he was already tired. Yeah sure, he had a lot of catch-up work to do, getting his bearings and figuring out who was arguing over what again, but he didn’t expect to have it all dumped on his lap so quickly. Combined with having to worry about Isabella and Hella being thorns in his side, his brain was done. He wanted to curl up in bed, and do absolutely nothing.

A car in his mansion’s driveway told him that wasn’t going to happen.

“Recognize the car?” he asked Mulder on his shoulder. Mulder nodded, cawed once, and shared a mental image of the Prince. One of her cars, then. Trust a scavenger bird to remember details like that.

Scully cawed a couple times, loudly. She wasn't too happy with the Prince, not after what she did to Jen. It'd take some time for her to get over it, and apparently for crows, that could be a while.

He opened the door to find Elaine and Antoinette standing and chatting with each other in front of his big staircase, both dressed in business suits. On the stairs, Ashley and Julee slid down the railing, literally, both girls wearing some casual jeans and t-shirts, and giggling away as they half rolled off the railing at the end to avoid the ball-top post. They were very lithe and agile, far more than their silly attitudes suggested.

They were in their thirties but looked in their twenties, thanks to Antoinette ghouling them, and they had a large education in a lot of subjects. He didn't know if their giggly attitudes would last forever, but he knew for a fact they'd have lost it by now if they hadn't been ghouls. You didn't get to your thirties busting your ass in sports and academics and stay so cheerful. Or at least, he certainly wouldn't have.

"Elaine. Ann." Wow that still felt super weird to say. "What're you doing here?"

Ann walked over to him and gave him a quick kiss, both elders wearing a rather playful grin. For a second, Jack thought maybe Scully would peck her, but she wasn't that stupid, and instead she flew off and landed on one of the huge curtain rods, holding up a ridiculously massive red curtain over a window. Mulder followed her.

"We are visiting," Elaine said. "The girls have not seen much of the mansion. And neither have I."

"You've been here."

"Yes, but I have not explored. I would like to do so. Is that alright, childe oh mine?"

He rolled his eyes before looking up at Ann. She still had that playful grin on. They were gonna tease him about the mansion, how hilariously old fashioned and gaudy it was, and shit like that.

“Fiiine.”

Elaine nodded. The two ghouls clapped. Ann gave him another kiss, this time on the forehead.

“I can see that you have had a rough day,” she said. “We will make it up to you.”

He eyed her suspiciously. “Oh?”

“Of course. Summon your thralls, if you would please, my love. I have a request to make of them.”

He did. The girls came running, wearing maid uniforms with some blatant cleavage, and they smiled for him as they lined up. Which of course invited some rather hungry stares from Ashley and Julee; they loved large breasts as much as he did.

Antoinette stepped up to Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel, and whispered something to them. They all giggled and blushed, gave Jack a few inviting glances, before they nodded and left.

“You’re not going to tell me what you told them, are you?”

“Of course not.” Nodding, Ann gestured down the hall. “Come, show us your mansion, my love.”

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“This place, is boring,” Ashley said, and she stomped a foot like the declaration needed to be carved into the floor for all time.

They were in one of the rooms. There were a lot of rooms, and most of them were absolutely, utterly, ridiculously pointless, with hilariously fancy old-fashioned furniture that was less comfortable

to sit on than a torturer's wooden horse. Lots of golds and reds, huge curtains hanging on walls, couches with curvy wooden legs and undersides, chandeliers, tables with fancy cloth that looked like they were begging to be covered in fancy cutlery, and a bunch of variations on those themes. Some rooms were huge with tall ceilings, taking up two floors instead of one, and one of them had giant bookcases filled with big, ancient books. Another had a giant poker table that must have been 150 years old.

Currently, the five of them stood in the live theater room. Yeah, it was a big mansion. Having three people around twenty-four-seven to keep it clean sounded ridiculous at first, but now, it seemed necessary. The floor was some sort of black tile, and the walls were draped in blood-red curtains, thicker than the others. A dozen small circle tables lined the walls, ready to be pulled into the center of the room when it was time to host a small party, if you could call fifty or more people small. There was a black wood stage with red curtains hanging, and a bar nearby with lots of bottles on the walls. Empty bottles, or fake bottles, Jack didn't know. Useless to a vampire, except in keeping up appearances. The chandelier was, of course, gold, but at least it was subtle and went with the gold and red curtains that hung from the high ceiling a couple feet, likely for acoustics.

Viktor definitely had a taste.

"Boring?" Elaine asked.

"Boring. I mean, super pretty, but boring." Nodding, Ashley approached the stage and hopped up to sit on it, facing the four of them. "Where's the pool!?"

"Sorry," Jack said. "No pool."

"Where's the gaming room!?"

“Sorry, no gaming room. Unless you like poker.” He did actually have plans to fix that. He missed video games.

“Where’s the ... the ... secret basement room filled with computers, where you can solve crazy mysteries and stuff?”

He blinked at her. “I ... what? I’m not Batman.”

“I like it,” Julee said, and she slowly twirled a couple times under the chandelier and the gold light it reflected around the otherwise dark room.

“As do I,” Elaine said. “And I believe Viktor kept a dungeon, Ashley.”

“Ooooh!”

Jack put up his hands. “Not ooh. Nasty. People died down there.” It was also where he slept when not in the tower, in a sealed off room you couldn’t get to without a mountain of explosives and thermite.

Ashley grimaced as she scrunched up her nose. “Nevermind.”

“Quite,” Ann said. “Come, let us explore upstairs. The bedrooms are far more appealing.”

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He rolled his eyes, but it wasn’t long before they came back down to stare at the sight, hypnotized.

Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel, all three girls sat on his big bed, naked, and all three of them were locked in an embrace. Hugging, rubbing, touching and massaging, and kissing. Veronica, shortest of the three, lay on her back, blue hair on a pillow, and legs locked like scissors with Rachel, who sat on one of Veronica’s legs, other leg

under one of Veronica's. She was holding both the blue-haired girl's hips, and grinding her pelvis into hers. Scissoring. Leilani lay on top of Veronica, squashing their breasts together, kissing, and rubbing her pelvis back and forth over Veronica's free leg.

From the quiet mewls and moans, the three women were obviously horny out of their minds. They squirmed and writhed on the giant red bed, little whimpers escaping them as they panted with effort, and as Jack took a step closer, he could see the coating of juices Lei left on Veronica's leg.

"Master." Rachel, tallest of the three, a bit taller than him or Ashley or Julee, short blond hair. She grinned back at him, and it melted into pleasure as she continued to grind her slit against Veronica's. "Please, come join us? The Prince told us to get ready." She lightly tugged on a thin piece of black rope hanging from her neck, silently asking him to come hold it. A leash, attached to a choker. Not a choker, a collar. And the other two girls had them as well, both leashes lying on the blanket, waiting for him to take them.

"I did not say you were free to begin without us." Ann rolled her eyes, and mimed Jack's tone and body language to a T. "Alas, young women. Worse than men, in these modern times."

Leilani sat up, half sitting on Veronica's stomach and high on her thigh, and she pouted as she looked back at the watching vampires and ghouls.

"Master hasn't had fun with us in weeks."

Christ, she did her sexiest pout — very sexy — and ground her hips about as she looked at him with begging eyes. Yeah, it sounded hilariously cheesy, the whole sex slave fantasy. Except not so cheesy, when three naked women were grinding against each other, literally leaking juices all over each other and his bed, while looking at him like he was the only thing that mattered.

“I ... have been neglecting you,” he said, and he sneaked a knowing glance up at Ann. She knew he had been. Hell, even his mom knew he had been.

Ann put a kiss on his lips, slipped a quick, practiced moan into it, and gently pushed him toward the bed.

“Do not neglect your thralls, my love. They deserve your attention, as well.”

He smiled at her, before some squirming drew his attention. Ashley and Julee stared at the three busty thralls like they'd been starving and someone had dropped a dessert buffet in front of them. They hadn't been getting much action lately, either. Jack, Ann, and Elaine had been all over each other the past while, but only the three of them, no thralls or ghouls included.

The Prince noticed, and after a confirming glance with Jack, she gave both her ghouls some pats on the ass.

“Go, enjoy yourselves.”

“Yes!” Ashley threw off her clothes in record time, and literally jumped onto the bed. It took Julee a second to register what was happening, but eventually she blushed red, slipped out of her t-shirt and jeans, and crawled onto the red blankets after her best friend.

Jack came closer, and watched. There was something between Rachel's ass cheeks, and he shivered as he recognized the anal plug; gold, because it went with her blonde hair. He remembered what it felt like to fuck Veronica when she'd had one, how it made everything so much tighter. A quick peek underneath her showed Veronica was wearing a blue one, and glancing around Rachel, he saw Leilani was wearing a black one.

He threw a grin back at Ann, and she returned it as she watched him. She'd sent the girls to go get cleaned up and put in anal plugs.



It was a wonder she didn't have them wearing anal-plug cat tails.

Sometimes, it was great being a vampire. Sure, he'd gone through Hell, him and Elaine and Antoinette, and had dealt with some extreme pain, physiological and psychological. Sure, every night was either an overt or covert battle for life and death, as his rant at Isabella embodied perfectly. But, there were some things that made being an undead creature of the night worth it.

He reached up, undid the knot of his tie, and his three thralls looked to him with widening, excited eyes. They didn't care he didn't have the curse anymore, he was still a powerful vampire, and their master. His pets wanted him, now.

Some day, he'd give them the choice. He'd break their Vinculum and wipe their memories. Or, elevate them to ghoul, and eventually, vampire. But for now, they were his doting sex slaves. And the Ventrue part of him loved that.

"Don't stop," he said, smiling. "And let Ashley and Julee join in." An order, not a request.

The three girls blushed, but nodded as they looked to the two naked ballerinas climbing on the bed with them. Ashley didn't need any encouragement, and she pounced Veronica, lying down with her and snuggling into her side so she could bury the woman's closer breast in suckling kisses. Instant mewls. Julee was a little slower to join in, but once Rachel caught the look in Jack's eyes, she reached over to the ghoul, and pulled her in close.

Five women, squirming and wriggling. Rachel didn't stop scissoring with Veronica, but she also used her height and strength to help Julee climb around onto Veronica's other side, and crouch over her, but facing Rachel. And with a little encouragement from the taller woman, Julee giggled, and wrapped her lips around Rachel's huge breast and nipple.

All the while, his thralls snuck glances Jack's way, eyes devouring him as he slowly got out of his suit. Something about undoing a tie and setting it aside, sliding out of his suit jacket, and slowly undoing his buttons, while five women fucked each other as they waited for him, was the perfect ego stroke. The Ventrue in him sang.

Elaine and Ann undressed in the same way, both of them taking their time and undoing buttons on their suit jackets as they watched the girls. No rush. No one had anywhere to be or anything to do. No immediate concerns, at least none that put a wet blanket over everything, or made them feel like they were dodging a responsibility. No reason whatsoever to not focus purely on the moment, and make it last. It was freeing.

He undid the button of his pants, and his thralls paused to stare.

“Keep going,” he said, voice stern.

His pets nodded, eyes half closed, desperate and hungry, and they set their eyes back to each other. Leilani sat up and ground her pussy against Veronica's leg harder, and Rachel ground her pussy into Veronica's with the same enthusiasm. Ashley and Julee had a smorgasbord of hot flesh to indulge themselves, and both girls smiled brightly as they switched between targets. Ashley spent a good amount of time suckling on Veronica's breasts, before she sat up and massaged the huge pillows, flattened with gravity against her chest. Then she switched, and did the same to Lei, before slipping a hand between the girl's thighs, and into her.

Ashley Ashley Ashley, forever overstepping her bounds. What a brat. She was fun.

Lei squeaked, and looked to Jack with begging eyes, as if he'd save her from the sudden assault. He didn't. He grinned at her, and slowly slid off his pants, making sure she knew he was quite happy with the sight of her getting fingered to orgasm. It didn't take long. She erupted into more squeaks and clutched Ashley close, burying

the ballerina's head into her large, tanned breasts, as she writhed on the ghoul's fingers.

Jack slipped off his boxers, and Blushed. Instant erection. The girls whimpered as they watched him, even Lei, who managed to keep her half-closed eyes on him as she wriggled on Ashley's fingers. They must have been grinding on each other for a while before he arrived, because Lei's pussy let out more than few drops of her juices onto the assaulting fingers, and her fellow thrall's leg.

"Too fast, Ashley," Elaine said, and she slipped onto the bed, naked and smiling, huge breasts gently swaying underneath her before she sat near the bed's side, opposite of Jack.

Jack chuckled, a far more confident, manly, quiet and dominant chuckle than he'd normally make. Nodding, he climbed onto the bed, and the five girls separated enough to give him room.

"I think," Ann said, "the master should relax first, before he satisfies his thralls properly. Non?" Nodding as well, she climbed onto the bed beside Elaine, did the same cat crawl that had her enormous breasts gently swinging, before she sat against the headboard and leaned back over some pillows. She held out her hands for him.

They'd done this position before. Usually just with Ann and her ghouls, and sometimes Elaine, but never with seven women in bed. He licked his lips as he crawled up to her, got between her milky thighs, turned around, and lay back against her. She hugged him and helped him get settled, until his head was on her sternum, her breasts resting on his shoulders, and his ass was on the bed between her legs.

He held out a hand to his three watching, starving thralls.

"Give me your leashes."

They all gulped, blushed more, and did as commanded. He gripped the long, thin black leashes, and all three girls sighed happily at the sight of his fingers holding their tethers. They liked how it looked in his grip.

“Now, Rachel, lie between my legs and put my cock between your breasts.”

The tall blonde — almost like a mini Elaine — did as ordered, eyes sliding down his body and Ann’s breasts, to his abs, and finally to his cock where it stood mostly upright, half pointed toward him. She got comfy on her stomach between his legs, and inched forward until she put her elbows down around his hips, and his cock jutted up between her two heavy pillows.

“Veronica, lie on my left. Leilani, my right. Press your breasts into Rachel’s.”

His blue-haired thrall nodded as she smiled brightly, and lay almost perpendicular to him, her legs almost touching his since they were spread out. It took a little angling, but she squirmed in over his left hip, and set her two huge breasts on his lower abs. Leilani did the same. Her tan breasts were a bit smaller than Rachel or Veronica’s, but considering how big their breasts were, that didn’t matter much.

It wasn’t long before the three thralls had their six breasts squashed together on his pelvis, and his cock stuck up between them, only the pink, swollen glans visible. Considering how their leashes dangled from their necks, and gently rested against the huge mounds, before crossing his abs and disappearing into his right hand, the sight was glorious. Six huge, malleable pillows of soft, heavy silkiness, squashing each other into round and bending waves, trapping his hard cock until the friction was perfect. And with them on their stomachs, breasts raised up onto his pelvis and lower abdomen, the huge pillows nearly hit their chins.

“Now, make me cum. Grind your breasts against me. Slowly. I expect to be here a while, and you’re going to make this last.”

His poor thralls. At least Leilani looked a little satisfied; he’d punish her for cumming so soon later. But Veronica and Rachel looked delirious, and they whimpered quietly as they looked at him, and then each other.

“Kiss,” he said, earning some more hungry peeks from them.

They obeyed. His three thralls leaned in closer, burying his cock in softness as their lips met each other. First, Veronica and Rachel, the two of them obviously desperate for any kind of stimulation. They kept their eyes on Jack at first, but it wasn’t long before they were looking into each other’s eyes as they kissed, girlish pecks turning into slow, deep kisses, with bits of tongue eventually joining as they moaned. With them leaning into each other like that, his glans disappeared between the squashed layers of breasts.

Lei watched, and let out a jealous whine. Veronica giggled, and kissed her, before Rachel did the same.

Watching his three thralls make out while they slowly ground their six breasts around his cock, their leashes in his hand, was enough to have precum leaking out of his glans already. It was too perfect. But with the pace they moved and ground against him, the stimulus was minor. He’d cum eventually, but it’d take a while.

Elaine nodded, almost like she was proud, before she slipped in under Ann’s right arm and half leaned against the pillows behind the Prince, half turned to face in toward her and Jack.

“Having your slaves take care of our every sexual whim,” Elaine said, “is quite a Daeva thing to do, little Ventrue.”

“I learned from the best.” He nodded as he looked up at Ann.

He expected to see her smiling back down at him, so they could trade a knowing grin. But instead, her eyes were locked onto the three thralls around his cock. She liked what she saw, and her large pink nipples swelled. She really liked what she saw. Something about his pets being under his command and at the mercy of his every whim, now working together to make their master cum in the way he wanted, really seemed to turn her on.

Elaine noticed. She winked at Jack, before she leaned in a little more, slowly and gently slid her lips and nose along the outside of Ann's breast, and slipped the engorged, pink nipple into her mouth.

Ann let out a quiet, deep groan, and finally tore her eyes away from the display so she could look at Elaine.

"Fiend," she whispered.

Elaine chuckled and shrugged, but didn't stop suckling. If anything, she had some fun with it, gently working her head around a little before pushing her face in toward it, and toward Jack. Considering how big Antoinette's breasts were, it didn't take much for the motion to have the breast squashed against the side of Jack's face. Elaine didn't stop. She smiled at Jack from around the Daeva's areola, and pulled back enough to draw his eyes so he could watch how she teased the nipple with her tongue, then some gentle kisses, and then again, deep, devouring kisses that sucked the nipple into her mouth.

Ann sighed bliss.

Jack grinned at his great grandsire, and looked to the ghouls. Ashley stared down at Jack's waist and the three thralls, probably looking for some way she might be able to jump in and join the fun, despite the lack of space. Julee, on the other hand, didn't have a clue where to go or what to do. So Jack reached out his free hand to the brunette ballerina, and motioned for her to slide into his and Ann's left side, opposite of Elaine.

She smiled, thankful for some direction. She got underneath Ann's arm, snuggled into hers and Jack's side, and set kisses on her master's breast on Jack's right shoulder. Kisses traced down and along the huge breast's shape, before finally enveloping the engorged nipple, inches from Jack's face. The skinny ghoul traded a thankful glance with Jack, and even set her hand on his chest to half rest her weight against him — and caress his muscles — as she focused on sucking on her mistress's nipple.

Ann relaxed back against the headboard and pillows, stroked the backs of the two women suckling on her, and looked back to watch Jack's thralls. Jack did, too. Feeling his lover quiver underneath him as Elaine and Julee brought her closer and closer to orgasm had his own juices boiling, and it wasn't long before the warm tingles of orgasm crept up on him. Each flex of inner muscles prepared more heat underneath his testicles, until finally he couldn't hold it in any longer.

The first squirt of cum shot up high, and splashed against Rachel's chin. She pulled her head back from Lei's lips, and stared down at the tip of his glans between the six huge pillows, sticking out just enough that each flex of Jack's cock caused a heavy spurt of white to shoot up. The three girls mewled quietly, like kittens, as they pushed their breasts together harder, milking him. More cum splashed up onto them, soaking their breasts in white until the lines of cum pooled between them. Jack melted back against Ann's body, but kept his eyes on his thralls, and nodded encouragingly to them, all while still holding their leashes.

He almost didn't notice Ann's suppressed moan. Maybe she didn't want to detract from him being the center of attention, but he could feel her quiver slightly, and both Elaine and Julee eased up suckling on her. She was cumming, too, and a quick glance up showed she was still staring at the three thralls as she did. Seeing him coating his thralls' breasts with his cum and getting milked by them, was apparently really good porn for her.

He smiled up at her before looking back at his pets, and gave their leashes a small tug.

“Again. And take turns kissing my cock. I want to see cum on your lips, before you kiss each other.” No one could say he wasn’t getting into the spirit of things.

His thralls gulped as they looked down at the small pool of cum trapped between their breasts, and his soaked glans in the middle of it. They were so horny, they almost salivated. Rachel leaned in and did as ordered, kissing his cock until she fit most of his glans in her mouth, nudging her chin into her own breasts, and her cheeks into Veronica and Leilani’s breasts. The feel of her hungry lips suckling on his swollen cock’s head, so soon after climax, was enough to send another jolt through him. But when she pulled up her head, and a heavy glob of his cum dripped off her lips onto her breasts, his body told him it was ready for round two.

Rachel leaned into Lei, and the brunette happily kissed her. Both girls closed their eyes as they pressed against each other, and his cum shifted over both sets of lips before dripping down, and falling on their breasts. Veronica took the opportunity to kiss his cock, and spent more time than needed suckling on it, burying her face between the six breasts while the other two thralls made out. She licked him, ran her tongue in circles around him, and slipped her lips back and forth along the sensitive base edge of his length’s bulbous tip, drawing more pleasure sparks out of him, until she suddenly lifted her head with a squeak.

“Master!” Veronica’s eyes went wide before she looked back over her shoulder at the blonde ballerina who’d suddenly decided to sit between hers and Rachel’s legs.

Jack couldn’t see well from the angle, but Ashley’s fingers were inside Veronica, pointed down, and the girl was smiling like an evil queen as she pumped her hand down against her. The blue-haired



thralls eyes rolled up, mouth open, and she melted against Rachel's side as she came in seconds. Ashley probably knew how to finger her better than Veronica herself did, considering how many years she'd spent doing exactly that to other women.

Jack grinned at the brazen ghoul. She really was a brat. Well, he'd punish her, or Ann would. For now, he shrugged, and gestured to Rachel, who'd stopped kissing Lei and was staring at the woman cumming her brains out beside her.

Ashley didn't lose a beat. Kneeling between the two women, she had no trouble reaching down between Rachel's ass cheeks with her other hand, and slipping her fingers into the woman's pussy, again pointed down. She grinned at Jack as she pumped both hands down, working them together like pistons, until she had the huge bed creaking.

The noise was lost under the sounds of Rachel and Veronica mewling as they both came.

"Wow," Julee whispered, resting her head against Antoinette's breast — and pushing it into the side of Jack's head — so she could watch Ashley work.

"Leilani," Jack said, and the tan thrall looked his way, eyes lost in hunger and envy. "Kiss me until I cum. Lift your head when I do. I want to see my cum coat my three slaves."

"Yes, master." She managed to tear her eyes away from the two girls beside her long enough to lean down, and bury her face in the sea of breasts. Like she'd been taught, she enveloped his glans, and slipped her lips up and down its base edge, all while gently suckling and licking. With Rachel and Veronica squirming and wriggling, layers of soft breast brushed up against her cheeks and nose again and again, but she didn't stop, eyes closing as she moaned around his cock.

“Rachel, Veronica. I didn’t say you could stop.” He gave their leashes a small tug. “Keep kissing.”

Rachel peeked back at Ashely before looking to him with begging eyes. “But master, she—”

“Now.”

She eeped, nodded, and leaned back into Veronica. Both girls were a panting mess, cum dripping down their lips, chins, and necks, and seeing them struggle to keep their eyes open, let alone kiss each other, was delicious. They managed, both leaning into each other as they locked lips, only to whimper into each other’s kiss as Ashley got back to work.

Lei opened her eyes long enough to look up and see her two thrall friends melting away as Ashley gave them no mercy, before she buried her head between six breasts again. It wasn’t long before she pulled her head up again, his cum dripping down her lips, as a heavy gush of more cum shot out from his cock and onto her breasts. Veronica and Rachel didn’t notice. They were still kissing, or trying to, as Ashley grinned madly and made them cum until their knees bent and their feet kicked the bed a few times. Their enormous breasts rippled with their writhing bodies, and Jack’s cum poured up over the huge mounds before trickling down onto his abs.

Ashley stopped, and the girls got to breathe again. They stared down at the new pool of cum coating their breasts, looked at Lei, and then to Jack. They’d liked that they’d cum the same time he did.

“I think,” he said, and he slowly sat up, “that my lover deserves some pampering.” Nodding, he slid out from between Ann’s legs, and motioned for his three stunned, soaked thralls to come closer.

Their eyes shot open. It was no secret his pets were deathly afraid of the Prince. That was part of the fun. They squirmed like

frightened puppies as they came closer, and Ann couldn't help but chuckle as she watched them.

"I do feel like being lackadaisical tonight, my love." Nodding, she spread out her arms where Elaine and Julee were still snuggled into her sides. "How shall your slaves pleasure me?"

He thought about it for a moment. So many possibilities. Dozens. Hundreds. He'd have to narrow it down, and try the others in the future.

"Ashley, join Julee. Elaine, come join me back here. Veronica and Rachel, replace Elaine. You two are to suckle on my lover's breast. Leilani, you are going to eat her pussy."

"M-Me?" Lei knelt up straight, eyes wide, new levels of fear working through her.

Elaine laughed as she got up, and with not-so-gentle hands, forced Veronica and Rachel into the groove of Antoinette's right arm and shoulder. Both thralls looked terrified, but when Ann laughed and rested her arm on them, they calmed down. A bit.

Ashley laughed with the same merriment, cuddled into Ann's left side with Julee, and both girls leaned into do something they'd done together a hundred times: kiss her nipple at the same time. Lips overlapping, half fighting half massaging and caressing, they covered their master's swollen areola with kisses and licks, and took turns softly suckling it, pulling it into their mouths. Ann sighed blissfully.

"Veronica, Rachel," Ann said, grinning down at the two newcomers. "Do rub your breasts into mine first. I want to see you lick your master's cum off me."

God damn. Sometimes he thought he went overboard, and got lost in this whole 'master' role. Then Antoinette said something that

made him look tame, or at least, not mad crazy with power compared to her.

His blue and blonde-hair thralls looked at each other, her, and then at Jack for a quick confirm nod, before they both leaned their heavy dangling breasts over the mighty, scary Prince. Then they both lowered themselves down, and gently slid their chests around, dragging lines of white cum along her enormous right breast. Ashley and Julee stared from the other breast, hypnotized.

“That is enough,” the Prince whispered.

The two thralls nodded, took a peek at the two ghouls to see how they managed the position, and the two of them snuggled half into each other, half into Ann’s side. Their lips found the large, cum-soaked nipple, and slowly, carefully, they tested their master’s lover with kisses. A smile from Ann and a practiced moan settled their nerves, and they moved from tiny kisses to proper, deep kisses, burying her pink areola in between the two of them. Their lips met each other as much as the hard, swollen nipple, and they kissed each other, sharing his cum between their lips as it ran down their necks and dripped off their huge breasts squashed into Antoinette’s side.

“Master,” Lei said, “I—”

Jack give her leash a tug, and she fell forward toward Antoinette’s legs. And with a little guiding help from him, the girl was soon on her elbows and knees between the Prince’s long milky thighs.

“Eat her,” Jack ordered.

She whimpered quietly, and Elaine, probably the most evil out of all of them, chuckled as she reached down past Jack and gently pushed on Leilani’s head. The brunette froze for a moment when her face was suddenly pressed to Ann’s slit, but once Ann made a

tiny, inviting moan, Leilani relaxed, or at least stopped shaking like a leaf.

And then Jack grabbed her hips, and slammed his cock into her.

“Master!” She sat up with a jolt and looked back at him, only for Elaine to again push her head back down.

It was an interesting position, for sure. Ann, half lying on a mountain of pillows, half sitting back against the headboard. Ashley and Julee were snug under her left arm, both cuddling into her and kissing her left breast. Veronica and Rachel were snug under her right arm, kissing her right breast. Lei was on her elbows and knees between her legs, eating her out, ass in the air so ripe Jack could see her dripping slit grip his girth, and he could see the — likely very large — anal plug above it.

One thrust confirmed. Whatever she had in her ass, it was large, and it buried her tiny pussy in more tight pressure he could feel all the way to the tip of his length.

Moaning hungrily, Elaine came up behind him, got on her knees like him, and pressed her breasts against his back as she hugged him from behind him. She was more than tall enough to look down over his shoulder, and watch Leilani’s tight slit grip his cock as he rammed it into her.

“Let me, childe oh mine,” she said, and slid her hands under his. With a heavy growl he felt, Elaine tightened her grip on his thrall’s hips, pulled her snug to him as she pushed Jack into the thrall’s ass, and forced them to grind together. She was stronger than him now, a lot stronger. He was trapped.

It left Jack’s hands free. He still had his thralls’ leashes in hand, but now he could use his other hand to give his slave a hard slap on the ass. Lei squeaked into Ann’s pussy, earning a happy chuckle and

sultry moan from his lover as she looked down at the quivering thrall's eyes.

“Ashley,” Ann said, “hold her.”

Ashley grinned up at her mistress, then back at Jack, and then down at Lei as she slipped her fingers into Lei's long brown hair. Giggling, she gently pinned Lei's head down so the girl couldn't so much as take her lips off Ann's pussy, before she turned back in and buried her face into Ann's breast again.

No need to worry, then. Jack gave his slave another hard slap on the ass, and shivered as she clenched on his length. Elaine moaned into his ear, and apparently decided foreplay time was over. She drew her hips back so Jack moved back with her, and slammed her hips forward, driving Jack's cock back into her, her grip firmly on Lei's hips. Power fucking. Poor Lei didn't stand a chance.

The brunette tried, she really did, earning a few practiced moans from Ann, but it wasn't long before it was obvious she was faceplanting into Ann instead of eating her out, while her insides clamped around Jack's cock and drenched him as she came.

“She failed,” Elaine whispered. With an evil laugh, she forced Jack to keep power fucking her, and Lei's arms gave out. She fell onto her chest, cheek on Ann's pelvis, mouth open and drooling. Ashley could have held her head in place better, but the girl wasn't that mean. It was clear Lei was cumming hard, squeezing as hard as she could, and everyone stopped what they were doing to watch the brunette tremble, and her ass jiggled each time Jack's pelvis slammed into her.

Jack couldn't help himself. Even as Elaine continued to power fuck his thrall with his body, forcing her to drench his cock until her juices dripped from his testicles, he slapped her firm ass again. Again, she clenched, her tiny mewls turning into gasping pants as she struggled to breathe between her pleasure tremors.

Elaine was ruthless. She stopped power fucking the girl, and helped pull the girl up. Jack was feeling a bit ruthless, too, and he hugged the girl with one arm, hand squeezing her breast roughly, while his other pulled on her leash until her back was pinned to his chest. He turned her to face Elaine, and the two of them buried her body between them, as they each took a side of her neck, and drank her. The rush of warm blood filling their stomachs had Jack and Elaine groaning.

The poor thrall left a wet spot on the blankets a foot wide.

Both Ventrue set the exhausted and drained thrall aside, before both setting their hungry eyes on the rest of the orgy.

“Rachel,” he said, and Rachel sat up with a tiny lip tremble. He pulled on her leash. “Replace her.”

Gulping, Rachel did as ordered, climbed over Ann’s leg and got on her knees between them. Again, Ashley — apparently vibing on the power wavelength the Ventrue were indulging in — slipped her fingers into Rachel’s hair, and pinned the girl against her master’s pussy. Ann was content to watch, right hand holding Veronica’s head to her breast, left holding Julee. And Elaine did the same as before, getting behind Jack, and guiding him toward Rachel.

This time, Elaine used her hands, wrapped his cock, and aimed him against Rachel’s soaked lips. He took her shivering hips this time, and slammed his cock into her hard enough the bed shook, her ass rippled against him, and she groaned into Ann’s slit. Jack fucked her on his own, slamming his hips and pelvis into her at rapid speed, while Elaine, still snug to his back, gave his thrall several harsh slaps on the ass. Each time, Rachel clenched down hard, but did manage to work her mouth against Ann’s body enough to earn a few approving sighs of pleasure from her.

That stopped when Rachel’s body began to tremble, her insides buried his cock in random spasms and clenches, and a fresh coating

of juices drenched him. He almost didn't realize some of those were his, until a glance down showed white coating her pussy's lips. He didn't slow down, powering through his orgasm until Rachel collapsed, same as Lei.

Again, Elaine picked her up, and again, the two Ventrue took a drink, forcing the writhing thrall to soak Jack's cock until her juices flowed down his thighs.

Veronica lasted less time than either of them. Ashley replaced her on her master's right side, and now that Ann's ghouls had both her breasts all to themselves, they were familiar enough with her body to help bring her to another orgasm quickly. Which meant Veronica was eating the Prince's pussy as she came, and trying to find a balance of stimulating and not overstimulating, while Jack fucked her hard. More than a few times, Ann shuddered as Veronica probably licked her a little too hard mid-orgasm, and Jack made sure to punish her with a hard ass slap. And when he didn't, Elaine did.

He smiled up at his great grandsire, and motioned for her to go to Veronica. She did, sharing his evil grin as she helped pull the girl up to kneel straight up, and press chest to chest with the much taller vampire. Elaine sank her fangs into Veronica's neck, and Jack did the same. This time, he fucked his slave as he did, not able to thrust hard with the angle, but more than hard enough for his tiny thrall to cum again as two sets of fangs buried her in the bliss of the Kiss; not to mention the giant anal plug making her pussy so tight, every thrust drove his cock straight into her g-spot.

He didn't cum, though. Almost, but he stopped shy. There were still four women on the bed, and he wanted to keep going. The two Ventrue set the exhausted, basically unconscious women next to her fellow thralls on the foot of the bed, before looking to Ann and the two ghouls nuzzling their faces into the sides of her breasts.



“How many times have you cum?” Elaine asked, gesturing to the Prince. “I thought this was about Jack. And yet here you are, the center of everyone’s attention.”

Ann rolled her eyes. “A few, if you must know.” Before Elaine could retort, Ann pointed a finger at Elaine’s pelvis. “You would have done the same. You are dripping like the whore of Babylon.”

Elaine groaned — playfully — as she looked down at herself.

“Jack and I have both just drank. Three times.”

“Well then, I think it is time for you to take the spotlight.” With her arms still behind each of her ghouls’ backs, she motioned to the nearby desk. “Lubricant, for you.”

Elaine grinned, slipped off the bed, fetched the lubricant, and crawled back, again doing the cat crawl thing specifically for Jack’s benefit. Ann was right. The woman’s thighs were soaked in her juices. Well, Jack wasn’t much better off. A belly absolutely full of blood, his thralls’ blood, had him ready to fucking explode again.

Ann motioned for Elaine to come to her, earning a raised brow from Elaine and Jack, and a laugh from Ann before she gestured down at her stomach and spread legs.

“Come lie upon me, silly woman.”

“Oh my.” Elaine licked her lips, turned around, and lay on Ann just like Jack had done earlier. She snuggled in, made sure to shift around until both of the Prince’s huge breasts rested comfortably on her shoulders, before she handed Jack the lubricant.

“Girls,” Ann said, “do treat Elaine well, would you?”

As Jack poured lubricant on his cock, Ashley and Julee slid down Elaine’s body, and Elaine closed her eyes as the two ghouls wrapped

their lips around the elder Ventrue's nipples. Without a glance, Elaine spread her legs wide, putting her bare, empty, smooth slit on display, and the copious juices dripping from it. A few Kisses and a belly full of blood would do that to any vampire, let alone watching an orgy from a foot away.

Jack slid in close, got his knees under Elaine's thighs, and guided the tip of his cock down to her asshole. Slowly, he pushed his cock's head against the entrance, and took his time spreading the lubricant around and around using his glans. Both him and his great grandsire groaned quietly with the sensation.

He poured a little more lube onto his cock, tossed the bottle aside, and slid in closer. Each inch he came forward was another inch of his length slipping into her squeezing insides, a tight ring of muscle that clenched and unclenched in spurts. She was toying with him.

He took his time, and let the pacing of the night slow down so they could enjoy it. He'd fucked his three thralls into comas, but with a little concentration, a mental reset allowed him to slow down to a crawl, and shiver in bliss as his great grandsire's ass milked his length. He slipped his hands around her hips, and inched forward again, until he was balls deep inside her.

"Girls," Ann said, "make her cum."

Ashley giggled, Julee mewled, and both girls slid their hands down Elaine's flat stomach and onto her swollen clit. Julee stayed there, caressing and teasing, but Ashley knew what she wanted, and she slid a finger into Elaine's squeezing slit. A new drop of juices eased out of her, and down onto Jack's cock. Elaine sighed bliss, until Ashley slipped another finger into her. And then a third. Her sighs turned into moans, and she melted back against Ann's body, as the two ghouls played with her.

Jack barely moved, easing his hips back just enough to feel a bit of friction of her insides, of her ass's ring of muscle squeezing the

base of his length, and of his swollen cock's head pressing against her depths. It'd take a long time to cum like this, but he'd already cum three times. Elaine hadn't cum once. He could wait. And besides, he wanted to focus on watching.

Elaine didn't so much as lift her hands, leaving them to both rest on the girls' hips, while she enjoyed being the one pampered. She was rarely the center of attention whenever they had these group sessions. It was wonderful, watching her eyes close and her mouth open as she drifted away into pleasure. She hadn't cum, not yet, but it wouldn't take long at all, and Jack smiled down at her as he fought the urge to fuck her hard.

Without warning, Ashley started finger fucking her hard for him. Elaine's eyes snapped open, and she glared down at the blonde ballerina sucking on her breast, but Ashley didn't stop; probably out-of-her-mind horny and beyond saving, considering how long they'd been going and no one had so much as touched her yet. She'd pay for her brazen behavior later, and she knew it, too, but that didn't stop her. She finger fucked Elaine hard enough they all heard the slapping sounds of her fingers hitting the woman's inner wall. And Jack felt it, too, the jackhammer motion of the ghoul's fingers hitting the back wall of the woman's pussy, straight down into his cock, before up again against her g-spot.

She only slowed down when Elaine came. She came hard. Fluid flowed over Ashley's hand, and the little ghoul giggled as she withdrew her fingers, and let Elaine's clenching muscles force more juices to leak out of her empty pussy until it flowed down over his cock, beneath it, and down her ass and his testicles. She'd drenched him. Holy shit, Elaine had really been wanting that.

"You little devil," Elaine said between pants. "You—" She quivered and stared down at her beautiful, empty pussy, as Julee's hand slipped past her clitoris, and sank three fingers into her as well, stretching her insides apart.

Ashley moaned into Elaine's breast, her own eyes closed, barely aware of what was going on, as she found Julee's hand, and worked past it. Another three fingers forced their way back into Elaine's pussy, and the elder watched, mouth ever so slightly parted in unprepared pleasure, as the two ghouls stretched her wide while bathing her breasts in suckling kisses. A belly full of blood had her whole body blushing, her pussy and nipples swollen like crazy, and every motion the girls did had her quivering. Breathing too hard on her neck would have been enough to make her cum, let alone two girls fingering and pounding her insides.

Jack couldn't wait any longer. With six fingers inside her, everything was so damn tight, wriggling sensations from digits that fought for space inside her pussy he felt in her ass. And when Ashley and Julee started finger fucking her properly, enough to have her huge breasts rippling against their faces, Jack fucked her, too.

He grabbed her hips, pulled his hips back, and slammed them into her. It was a poor angle for anal sex, at least for her pleasure, but that didn't matter with six fingers opening her up and slapping up against her g-spot again and again. She came in seconds. He didn't stop.

"Jack!" The powerful, deadly, normally so very confident and in control Ventrue, looked at him with just a hint of desperation in her eyes. "Slow down!"

He didn't. He grinned at her, and winked at both ghouls. They didn't stop, and he didn't stop. Elaine at one point actually tried to push the ghouls away, but Antoinette got her arms out from behind her ghouls, grabbed Elaine's wrists, and pulled them up over her head.

"Harlot," Elaine said, voice wavering as she looked up at her old friend.

Ann looked absolutely drunk on pleasure, her eyes constantly drifting between Jack and Elaine. A far more honest expression than she'd normally ever let herself show.

Elaine squirmed and writhed on Jack's cock, arms still held up over her head so Ashley and Julee had free rein, and she glared at him for a whole half a second before she closed her eyes and melted back. A fresh coating of juices leaked out of her, drenching him. He didn't stop.

He tightened his grip on her hips, and knelt up straight. Elaine managed to open her eyes again to look up at him, back arched, head still pinned to Antoinette's sternum. The ghouls had to adjust slightly to deal with the new angle of Elaine's ass being in the air, but they did quickly, and continued to devour the elder's breasts as they fingered her. And now Jack had the angle he needed to fuck her properly.

He thrust forward, hard, hard enough he felt his great grandsire's ass ripple against him, and her huge breasts jiggled underneath the pinning faces of Ashley and Julee. Her ass squeezed, only the copious amount of lubricant allowing him to keep fucking her, as she trembled on his cock and came again.

It wasn't long before he flooded her insides, her relentless milking of his cock draining him and sending jolts of pleasure through his core, under his testicles, and down into his thighs. Each flex of his inner muscles poured more cum into her, and more, and he gave a hard thrust with each, waiting a full second between thrusts to make sure he drained every ounce of cum he could into her.

And then he did it again. She was going to punish him later, and Antoinette was going to let her, no doubt. He was just a young neonate Ventrue. How dare he do something so absurd like fuck his great grandsire until her whole body was a trembling mess, and

every few moments she clamped down like a vise, and soaked him?  
Yeap, Elaine was gonna make him pay for this.

Worth it.

~~♥♥♥~~

# Chapter 178

~~Author's Note~~

These last 4 chapters are mostly just fun sexy times, with a strong focus on monster sex, kind of like a primer for my next series *The Pleasures of Hell*. Expect kinky monstery goodness.

~~Natasha~~

“Bye,” Samantha said, waving as she stepped out of the apartment, Daniel beside her. “Bye!” And back to the tower she went, sheriff in tow.

Natasha and Jessy waved from the couch. So did her boys, and Eric, and Beatrice and Jennifer and Athalia and Sándor. The others were in the kitchen, having an argument about how to cook steaks. Well, the boys were and Eric were, and Athalia. Sándor said nothing, while the two vampires witches provided witty commentary as they examined the raw steaks.

Jessy and Tash, on the other hand, stayed on the couch, the one along the wall across from the kitchen, so they could see the kitchen, the others, and the door as Sam and the sheriff left. Which was a good spot to be sitting, because the video playing on Tash’s phone, was utterly carnal. If Sam saw it, she’d implode.

It’d taken a second to figure out what was happening in the video, but after a few disorienting camera pans, they’d pieced together the puzzle. And they watched it again.

It was Jack’s bedroom in his fancy mansion; well, one of his bedrooms. Antoinette’s ghoul Ashley had the phone, and she was having fun with it, aiming it at her own naked body before turning it

to face the crowd on the bed. And it was a crowd. Antoinette was on her back with Julee snuggled into her left side, hugging and kissing the woman's absolutely enormous left breast. Jack's three thralls were kneeling on Antoinette's right, and each of them were also kissing the Prince's body, burying her right breast and big pink nipple in kisses. Antoinette looked pleased.

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Jack was straddling her stomach, and with his three thralls on Antoinette's right, each of them pushing their face into her right breast, the breast was sitting more in the center of her torso. Ashley brought the camera in nice and close, so it showed Jack's penis rubbing on the huge breast, his dripping wet glans leaving trails of juices along her areola. His thralls kissed it away, and either kissed the engorged nipple, suckling on it, or they kissed Jack's penis. Or each other, often with Jack's penis, or Antoinette's nipple between them.

A hand stroked the base of his length. At first Tash thought it was his own hand, but Jack's hands were out of the way, behind him, as if he didn't want his arms to get in the way of the camera. It was Elaine's hand. She was also straddling Antoinette, sitting behind Jack and reaching around him so she could work his shaft with one, and sometimes both of her hands.

Jack let out a small groan, and Ashley zoomed in so all the camera could see, was Antoinette's breast, the faces of three thralls kissing and licking and suckling, and Jack's cock with Elaine's hand, milking him as he gushed cum onto his lover's nipple. The thralls let out quiet moans as they buried his cock in kisses, again half kissing each other, half kissing Antoinette's nipple, and covering it all in more strands of white as the young man gushed cum. A lot of cum. Jack was taking advantage of his Kindred body and indulging in his orgasm, prolonging it and making sure to absolutely coat Antoinette's breast until it looked like avant-garde art.



Judging from the quiet, satisfied moans from the Prince, she wasn't just enjoying it. She was cumming, too. Tash knew her boss had very sensitive nipples, but, wow.

With an ecstatic giggle, Ashley handed the camera to one of the thralls. They took it as Ashley cuddled into Antoinette's left side along with Julee, and the position was repeated. Ashley and Julee pushed their master's giant left breast up onto her torso, and buried it in kisses as Elaine guided Jack's cock onto it. The young man's great grandsire worked his length in slow, deep strokes, and made sure to run his dripping glans around her friend's areola in circles, before settling it on the center of her nipple so the two ghouls could kiss it and their mistress at the same time. And each other.

It wasn't long before Jack came again, and drenched the Prince's other breast in white.

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Jessy and Tash both gulped as they leaned back into Tash's couch.

"Jesus fucking christ," Jessy said. "That kid is just living in a fantasy world."

"You have four g-ghouls who—"

"Yeah yeah I know. But I haven't fucked them since Eric. This kid though, has got two ancient elder vamps pampering the shit out of him, and five sex slaves he's pumping his cum into on the reg."

"I'm sorry, what?" Athalia asked as she walked over. Apparently a lull in the argument about steaks allowed her to hear the ever-too-loud Jessy.

Jessy snatched Tash's phone and tossed it to her.

"H-Hey!"

“Oh come on. If Ashley sent it to you, she’s gonna send it to me, too. And Fiona. Athalia would see it eventually anyway.”

“Jesus,” Athalia said, staring at the phone. “I ... Jesus.”

“I know, right?” Jessy said, chuckling and gesturing to the phone. “Christ, I’m jealous.”

“Envious,” Tash said.

“Whatever!”

Her raised voice drew the others, and soon everyone was standing around Athalia and looking at the phone.

“Holy shit,” Matthew and Art said together.

Jen and Triss stared. Sándor looked, face its usual unreadable, stern self, but he did do a double take before eventually sitting on the other couch.

“You vampires are ridiculous,” Athalia said, and she gestured to the phone as she held it a little closer to Triss and Jen. “That ... boy, has seven women in his bed!”

“That he fucking does,” Triss said, and she took the phone. “My fucking god the tits on that woman.”

“Indeed,” Jen said, and she leaned in close to admire the video. “Though, I think it’s worth noting that Jack is quite the sexy little morsel. Julias trained him well.”

“Fuck yeah he did,” Triss said. “Kid’s got abs for days.”

Nodding, Jen licked her lips as she glanced Sándor’s way. “And quite an exquisite looking cock. Look how Elaine holds it.”

Poor Sándor. The man looked up at Jennifer, eyebrow raised, and Jen giggled as she leaned over the sitting man and gave him a quick kiss. The girl loved to tease. How she wasn't Daeva, Tash would never know.

Matt, Art, and Eric all looked clearly troubled. They liked what they saw, but the camera was focused on Jack's penis, a man they knew. Men got awkward about that sorta thing.

Athalia looked just as troubled, at least she did for a moment, before she took the phone back, sat beside Tash on the end of the couch, and made the motion like she was about to return the phone ... but didn't. She slowly drew it back and stared at it as she leaned into the couch's arm. The video didn't stop. It just kept going and going, showing stuff Tash hadn't seen yet. Seeing the young man pin Ashley down by her throat against Antoinette's sternum, the Prince's huge breasts resting on her ghoul's shoulders, while Jack fingered the lithe, skinny girl into a plethora of orgasms, was particularly hypnotizing.

Jessy laughed. "I'm picking up on a few clues, Athalia."

With a snort, Athalia quickly gave Tash back the phone. "I don't know what you mean."

"Ha, yeah you do. Skinny girl getting choked and fingered into a coma? Bet that scratches a fantasy."

Athalia groaned. The only thing hiding the blush in her cheeks was her dark complexion.

"Don't be absurd. Not every girl walking around Dolareido is looking to wind up in an orgy."

Jessy leaned in over Tash toward Athalia, and her grin would have made the Devil envious.

“I didn’t say orgy.” She licked her lips. “I bet a lot of your sex with the sheriff plays out like this: you, him, sitting around on a couch, having some pretty fulfilling but boring-as-fuck conversation about real life shit. You get up, maybe to get a bite to eat, but you make sure to put just a little hip sway into it, or toss your hair a bit. You play innocent. Suddenly Daniel, the big tall scary-as-all-hell sheriff is there, silent as an assassin, and you turn around, pretending to be shocked. He adjusts his glasses as he looks at you, gaze steady, like some sort of anime villain, and—”

“Anime?” Jennifer asked as she sat beside Sándor on the other couch. “You watch cartoons?”

“Shut up, let me finish. Then he reaches down, takes both your hands, and pins them up over your head against a wall. He uses his other, slips them into your pants, and—”

“Fine, fine!” Athalia squirmed a few times. Poor woman. Vampires had a good nose for blood, and they could tell hers were flowing faster.

“Sounds awesome to me,” Triss said, sitting on Sándor’s other side. “I mean, getting pinned against a wall and fingered and shit. I’m not really into Daniel. Dude scares me and not in the sexy way.”

“He’s not scary...” After a moment of silence from the room, Athalia groaned and shook her head. “He’s not! Not ... usually ... He’s just quiet.”

“Quiet like Sándor?” Jennifer asked, before shaking her head. “No, it’s not the same. Sándor is quiet because that’s who he is. Daniel is quiet because he’s plotting a thousand ways to kill you every time he looks at you, and because he knows showing any kind of expression would be a tactical disadvantage.”

That did sum up Tash’s sire pretty well. There was always something going on his head, probably dozens of somethings. He

never stopped thinking, planning, plotting. It was why he made a good Mekhet, and a good sheriff.

A tiny mewl erupted from Tash's phone. The video was still playing, and despite the volume being set super low, a woman had made a loud enough noise everyone in the room heard it. Before Tash could stop the video, Jessy snatched the phone, and groaned.

"Wow, that girl has got a kink." And because she had to, Jessy held up the phone in a slow pan for everyone to see. Jack was fucking Julee, very hard, while the girl was on her knees between Antoinette's legs, hands pressing on her mistress's hips. The Prince had both her hands around her ghoul's throat, and was clearly choking the girl while Jack pounded her from behind. And to make matters worse for the poor brunette ghoul, Elaine knelt beside her, and was routinely giving the ballerina's butt a rather harsh slap.

Julee always had a super innocent look to her, and kinda behaved like Tash sometimes. Which made the new twist the video had taken all the more problematic, because everyone knew the sort of kinks Tash enjoyed, considering the videos she'd shared. The grin from Matt and Art confirmed, they were picturing her getting the same treatment.

"That reminds me," Triss said. "Anyone find a guy for Sam, yet?"

"Is that something we're doing?" Jessy asked, looking to Athalia. "I mean, Jacob hasn't even been dead a month. Moving on kinda fast."

At this point, everyone knew Athalia and Samantha had become close friends, even if it was Beatrice who spoke on her behalf. It made sense. Triss would always be more comfortable with the group than Athalia.

"It is something we're doing," Athalia said. "Maybe not throw her into a situation right now, but Sam is not the sort of woman who

should be alone. She's her happiest when she has someone."

Tash tapped her chin. That, was true. Samantha was simply not the sort of woman who did well on her own, which, kinda irked Tash. Her, Jessy, Jen and Triss, and obviously Athalia, all prided themselves on their autonomy. It felt weird suggesting that the woman was actually better off with someone in her life, and yet, it was true. Some people simply did better when they weren't alone. Some people needed other people.

There wasn't anything wrong with that, but it did mean the lot of them weren't well equipped to understand her. And they all knew it, each of them throwing some guilty glances at each other.

"I'm sure the Prince is helping her," Sándor said.

Triss nodded. "Yeah, but, there's gonna be a bit of awkwardness there. And, uh, I'd ask Othello, 'cause that dude absolutely loves hanging out with Madison and other people every moment of every night. But with his history with Sam, that'd get weird."

"How about Fiona?" Jessy asked, looking back to Athalia. "She's got that kinda personality."

"Yes," Athalia said, "but she's just a kid. And sure, her Horror has memories of her own, and plenty of wisdom to share, but none of that would help in this situation."

"This," Matthew said with a powerful hand gesture, aimed to the sky, "is a challenge for the likes of the pack!"

"No it isn't," Jessy said, shaking her head.

"No, it isn't," Eric said, shaking his head.

"Yes it is!" With a confident nod, Matt spun around once in the center of the living room, before he grabbed one of the kitchen

stools and sat on it. “You lot may not have noticed, but I generally don’t like being alone. Art and I hang out twenty-four-seven. Others in the pack go all day every day with someone else in the pack nearby. We know a thing about social types.”

That was also true. The Uratha were a pack, and they did talk to each other and other people all the time. They mingled with the kine, and vampires too, made friends, and got the ‘lay of the land’ the old fashioned way: lots of talking. Eric was the oddity.

“Gonna sleep with her?” Jessy asked Matt, raising a hand. “‘Cause, I mean, if you two and Tash bag Sam, I want that video. Or can I just, like, come watch?” Eric sat on the arm of the couch beside Jessy, and gave his girlfriend a firm, loving pat on the shoulder. Which quickly evolved into a forceful squeeze that earned a squint of pain from her. “I give I give! Jesus!”

They all laughed. It was a nice sound.

Tash raised a hand. “That d-does bring up a good point, though.”

“Wait, it does?” Jessy asked.

“Yes.” And she gave her friend a pat on the leg, much gentler than Eric’s. “Do we w-want Sam to find someone else to love, or just a friend? And, I s-suppose, maybe someone else to fuck as well?”

“That is a good point,” Triss said. “I’d just assumed we were gonna play matchmaker, but Sam doesn’t necessarily need someone to replace James and Jacob. At least, not yet. She definitely needs romance in her life, but in the meantime, yeah maybe a friend?”

“I’m her friend,” Athalia said.

“Yeah I know, you’re a closer friend to her than I am, and I’m glad. But Sam’s gotta have some man energy in her life. And some dick. So a friend with benefits.”

Jennifer nodded. “Agreed. She’s just that kind of woman. If this was a eighty years ago, she’d be a stay-at-home mom raising six children, and loving every moment of that life. She’d happily cook supper for everyone, and when her husband came home from a hard day at work, she’d happily give his tired body a massage and quick blowjob in the privacy of the bathroom before serving supper to him and the kids.”

Tash raised a brow as she looked at Jen. They all did. But the Ventrue just shrugged like what she’d said was perfectly reasonable.

“I read a lot,” she said, as if that explained everything. “Though, in retrospect, she’d do all that, but she’d also be one of the first people to help the resistance if it was World War II.” And the last detail gave it away. She was reading about some romance story set during World War II. From the look on her face, she’d found the fantasy of being a loving house wife back then strangely appealing. Or at least novel.

“Okay,” Triss said, laughing. “I uh, wasn’t picturing that. But yeah, Sam likes being a mom and wife and sitting around with a bunch of other wives, drinking wine and talking about their kids and the latest books they’ve read and the latest shit crime or medical drama they’re watching.”

Jessy, Athalia, and Tash all cringed.

“Exactly,” Matt said. “So, the Uratha can help her out. Carter—”

Oh no. Matt cut himself off as he looked down, and took a deep breath as he gulped down something in his throat. He’d forgotten. Much as Tash hadn’t known Carter, he had seemed like an interesting, older man.

“Carter,” Art said, stepping in closer to his best friend, “might have been an interesting match for Sam. Old fart, bitter on the surface, but a heart of gold.”



They all smiled. That did sound like it could have worked.

“So we’re sure it needs to be a man?” Jessy asked.

They all looked to Triss and Jen.

“Uh...” Triss scratched her head a few times and looked to Jen for help. Jen shrugged and gestured back to her. “Uh, well, I mean, probably? I think Sam is her happiest when she’s opposite some masculine energy, you know? But, um, sexually, she’s ... willing to explore.”

Jessy leaned in. “Gimme. Details.”

“I don’t—”

Jen leaned in toward Jessy. “Her, riding Jacob, but facing Othello. Othello, fucking Madison’s ass until she’s a mewling mess and clutching Sam for dear life. Sam, kissing and suckling on Madison’s breasts as the gorgeous creature cums her brains out.”

“Fuuuuck.” Jessy squirmed a few times as she looked up and let her imagination wander.

“Jen,” Sándor said, “I think maybe Sam would prefer you didn’t tell everyone about her sexual past.”

Jennifer grumbled as she sat back and folded her arms across her chest. She knew Sándor was right, and it was terribly cute seeing her take his advice. Something about the way the man talked was soothing, even when he was more-or-less berating Jen for being rude. You couldn’t be mad at Sándor, and you couldn’t help but consider his words when he felt the need to say something. Part of that was how rarely he did say something. Part of that was his calm, direct, mentor-like way of talking. No wonder Azamel asked him to take over for her.

“Either way,” Triss said, “she needs a man in her life.”

“Agreed,” Athalia said. “I guess we should all keep an eye open. And ... as much as it pains me to even think of it, Samantha probably wouldn’t mind us trying to help her more overtly. She is a social creature. As long as we respect her, we can do this like ... like...”

“Like normal people would?” Art said, laughing. “You know, hanging out, talking, having a good time, getting drunk and introducing people?”

“I do that!” Jessy said. “Minus the drunk part.”

Arturo shook his head. “You’re on the hunt when you do that. Either for blood or sex, but you’re always on the hunt, Gangrel. And it comes through in your actions. Even the humans see a predator when you’re on your best behavior.”

With a playful, fake scoff, Jessy put her fingers on her sternum, as if Art had just wounded her with his words.

“You wound me, sir!” There it was. “I’m not ... always hunting.”

“Yes you are,” Triss and Jen and Eric said in unison.

Jessy slumped her shoulders and leaned against Eric’s hip, him sitting on the couch arm.

“You’re out of your depth,” Art said. “Antoinette would do better.”

“P-Probably,” Tash said, “but it would be awkward. I know I can barely talk normally when my sire is around.”

Jessy lifted a finger. “Same.”

“Then I think,” Art said, “it’s time Sam made some new friends in the Uratha. I bet Brianna or Clara could help her quite a bit. Though

you should probably come too, Athalia.”

“Sure, I’ll be there.” Nodding, Athalia got up, and headed for the door. “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’m going to head home.”

“Let me know how it goes,” Jessy said, grinning at Athalia like a devil.

After a heavy, exaggerated groan, Athalia grinned slightly, and went.

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“Why not!?”

“B-Because...” Tash squirmed on her couch, suppressed her embarrassment, and glared at Jessy on her laptop screen. “Because!”

Jessy rolled her eyes. She was on her side, in bed, and Eric was behind her. It wasn’t the first time Jessy had called her during the middle of sex with her boyfriend, and it wasn’t the first time Tash hadn’t hung up immediately when she’d realized.

“Tash, I’m telling you, and Eric’s confirmed. Whatever Luna did to the city, it’s made it safe for Uratha to transform. Well, I mean, safer. As long as you don’t try and kill them, I’m sure Matt and Art can fuck you senseless, no worries!”

Tash frowned and folded her arms across her chest. How Jessy managed to have a conversation with Eric spooning and fucking her, Tash didn’t know. The Gangrel was clearly enjoying herself, with nipples blatantly hard, and little shivers occasionally working through her. Her laptop’s camera was pointed at her upper body, and Jessy had her head propped up on a palm, elbow against the mattress so her other hand could work the laptop.

Eric peeked over her shoulder long enough to give Tash an affirming nod, and kiss Jessy's neck, before he sank back behind her. His arm sneaked up around Jessy and half hugged her before he cupped her lower breast, and casually teased and caressed it, while he maintained a slow fucking rhythm. Jessy had completely corrupted him.

“Matt and Art are huge! And I'm t-t-tiny!”

Jessy outright moaned, and it wasn't because of Eric.

“Sounds perfect to me.”

“Well, unlike you, my v-vagina isn't the size of a—”

Jessy laughed and pointed a finger at the camera.

“We've seen you getting double stuffed by those two boys, Tash. You can't fool me. I saw the look in your eyes when you looked and saw yourself getting split open. You were wondering what it'd be like if they were giant, fucking glorious wolf monsters, forcing huge cocks into you.”

Groaning, Tash squirmed a little more. Why was Jessy her best friend? The woman was brazen and rude and hedonistic and ... and absolutely concerned with Tash. She wanted Tash to be happy, which in Jessy's mind, meant the best sex possible.

“I ... don't know. I mean, they'd be so huge!”

“Just get them to go slow.”

“W-Would they listen?”

Eric poked his head up again. “Yeah, they would. Don't worry, Tash. Luna made it pretty clear. Dolareido is a blessed city.”

“Or c-cursed,” Tash said, gesturing at nothing, but obviously implying all the things that’d happened recently.

“Yeah, true, but Luna has a vested interest in the city. She wants Uratha to stay here. And considering it’s Dolareido, she figured out a way to do that.” Eric kissed Jessy’s shoulder, and disappeared behind her again.

Jessy grinned evilly. “It’s working pretty damn well, from what I’ve heard. Mason’s fucked that Tilly girl while transformed. Even Brianna’s fucked her two boys while transformed.”

Both girls looked up, wondering. How would that work? Big powerful werewolf woman with two normal-sized vampire men?

Big movement on the camera drew Tash’s eyes. Something gigantic moved in, black and gray and white and blurry, until the camera focused and revealed a cat’s fur. An American Shorthair.

“Kat, you bitch.” Giggling, Jessy reached out and dragged Kat off the laptop’s keyboard, and into a snug hug and a big kiss on her head. The fact Kat interrupted a bout of sex didn’t bother Jessy at all, or Kat apparently. This was probably a common occurrence.

After a few pets and kisses, and deep scratches into the cat’s head fur, Jessy lifted Kat up and set her beside the laptop with only her tail in view. Judging from the tail, Kat settled down, and probably chose the laptop’s exhaust as a warm place to nap.

“You’re gonna do it sooner or later,” Jessy said. “You know you will.”

“I w-won’t.”

“You will. And then you’re gonna describe it to me in intimate details.”

Tash scrunched up her nose. “I won’t!”

Jessy laughed like an evil queen. “Yes you will. I’d say you’d eventually film it too, but fucking hell no matter what we try we can’t get cameras to work when Eric changes. Fucking werewolf Luna curse or some shit. Buuuut, you will tell me about it, ‘cause you’ll be dying to share details, you little nerd.”

Groaning, Tash looked away, but some more movement drew her eyes back. Eric was fucking Jessy faster, fast enough her big breasts rippled against her chest, and Jessy groaned quietly as she reached around and set her free hand on Eric’s hip, off camera.

“N-Not if you’re gonna be mean about it.”

“I’m not being mean!” She chuckled a few times, a few groans sneaking in between them. “It’s just killing me waiting. I want it to happen so we can talk about it! Big, juicy details.”

“You have a problem. Big meanie.”

Jessy rolled her eyes. “Imagine it, Tash. A giant, sexy-as-all-fuck werewolf with a huge hand wrapped around your waist, slowly pushing your tiny pussy onto his huge dick until he’s stretching you deep, deep, and deep. And when you think you’re about to burst, that super thick bottom part sinks in, and you can feel him so deep inside you it’s like he’s just ... wearing you on his cock like a toy.” She groaned, louder, her own dirty story driving her crazy with arousal, and she half closed her eyes as she turned her torso into the blankets.

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Eric took it as a sign. He got up, got behind Jessy off camera, rolled her onto her hands and knees so the girl’s ass was high up, also off camera. The camera was focused on Jessy’s upper half, so Tash could only see her friend’s big boobs smushed against the blankets, and her back curve deeply. Jessy grinned at Tash, reached

out, and turned the laptop just enough so the camera was now looking down from near Jessie's shoulder and over the rest of her body. It put Eric in view as the naked, very handsome dark-skinned man grabbed Jessie's hips, and thrust into her hard enough the Gangrel's big ass rippled with the impact.

Apparently the conversation had driven Jessie to the edge, because it wasn't long before she was cumming, her groans turning into moans. She made no effort to suppress them. And as much as Tash enjoyed watching Eric's hard body pound away at his girlfriend, arms and abs flexing with each thrust, Jessie's noises had Tash looking at her. Why was the Gangrel so damn hot? The short pixie cut blonde hair, the muscular but feminine body, the large breasts squashed, one sticking out from under her chest where the camera could see. It was absolutely unfair.

Then again, Jessie thought the same thing about Tash and her tiny, skinny little body. The grass was always greener.

Eric and Jessie finished, and Eric sat back, leaving Jessie's big butt to take up most of the screen, laptop still by her shoulder. Tash expected the call to end, but nope, Eric flipped Jessie over, earning a very girlish squeal from her, and he slipped his knees under her legs. There was more than a few spots of white cum on Jessie's body around her thighs and pelvis.

"M-Missionary?" Tash asked him. With Jessie on her back and legs spread, now it was Eric's amazing body on display, camera pointed directly at him between Jessie's knees.

He shrugged. "What's wrong with missionary?" The tiny, but very real cocky grin on his face was frustratingly pleasing and hard to look away from. He knew he was handsome. And he knew he could put on a good show, and play for a crowd. Spending his younger days as a professional fighter had definitely given him a bit of that

arrogance Jessy loved. She probably spent every day trying to draw more of it out of him.

Jessy laughed, and slid the camera a bit so it was more beside Jessy, but a bit further away, so it could see all of both her and Eric.

“Ain’t no girl ever cum from missionary, Eric,” Jessy said.

“You have.”

“Well, yeah, when I’m full of blood and I’ve already cum five times. Kiss my fucking ear and I’d cum when I’m like that.”

Tash smiled. These two were so strangely perfect for each other, it was a joy to watch. It was also great porn, and the next time Tash saw the boys, she was going to funnel all this bundled up sexual energy right into them; and show them the recorded footage at Jessy’s request. But, it was also heartwarming to see Jessy so happy. And Eric, too.

“Eric,” Jessy said, “let Tash pick the position, ya?”

Oh no.

Eric stopped thrusting, rolled his eyes as he smiled at Jessy, and looked to the laptop.

“Hit me,” he said, waiting.

Oh no oh no. They’d never done this.

“I ... I um...”

“Come on, Tash,” Jessy said. “I know you’ve got lots of ideas. You got that horny nerd mind running all the time, picturing scenarios. How you wanna see me get fucked?”



Tash wriggled and squirmed on her couch, looked away, looked back, looked away again, before slowly looking back, eyes sliding along Jessy's naked body, big breasts flattened against her chest, down her hard stomach, and then up Eric's harder abs and thicker arms and shoulders.

There really was no point in being embarrassed anymore. Habits died hard, but, she did know what she wanted to see.

“Y-Your ankles ... over his shoulders...”

“Ah yeah.” Nodding, Jessy grabbed a thick pillow and put it under her butt, before lifting her hips up. Eric gave each of her ankles a quick kiss before setting them on his shoulders, before the man took her hips into his hands again, with her legs between his arms so they wouldn't slide off.

Tash loved directing her own porn films. It scratched some weird itch inside her that loved being in control, despite very much losing control when her two boyfriends fucked her. But, telling other people how to have sex? She hadn't thought of that.

The two of them fell into a very comfortable rhythm. They'd done this before, and had slept with each other so many times, they knew exactly how to make the other happy. Jessy made sure to lift her arms up out of the way, and grinned at Tash several times, as Eric's thrusting made her large breasts flow back and forth along her chest. And Eric flexed his hard abs and arms probably a little more than the position required. They looked amazing.

Jessy came first, and she arched her back as she did, smiling at the laptop camera for a second before melting into her pleasure. Eric slowed down, but sped up a moment later. A quiet grunt from him told Tash he was about to cum.

“W-Wait, Eric, don't. Can you ... climb onto Jessy, and ... um, cum on her breasts?”

Eric blinked at Tash, before another tiny, handsome grin hit his lips. He spread the trembling Jessy's legs aside, and crawled up onto her stomach and straddled her. His long, dark cock dripped with Jessy's juices.

Eric leaned in toward the camera, and smiled at Tash, making her freeze and blink, before the man brought the laptop in close. Much much closer. Once it was directly beside Jessy, the camera lens at the top of the screen allowing it to look down over her chest, Eric grabbed his cock in one hand, and slowly stroked the drenched length as he aimed it down toward Jessy.

Jessy recovered quickly, and with a still lightly trembling body, took her breasts into her hands, and pushed them up onto her chest. Eric had no trouble pressing his cock's swollen glans against one of her nipples, and he masturbated onto it.

They knew what she wanted. She wanted to see them do what Jack had done in the video, or at least as close as they could mirror it.

From so close, the camera could only see Jessy's lips, jaw, neck, breasts, and Eric's cock, one of his big muscular arms, and his flexing abs. And soon, all Tash could see, was the gush of white squirting out of his cock, and onto Jessy's body. Thick, heavy strands of white, each leaving huge trails along Jessy's breasts and over her nipple, and then down in the valley between her breasts, and onto her other nipple. Eric came, a lot, just like Matt and Art did, a ridiculous amount of cum that soon had Jessy's chest absolutely drenched in white, until a couple lines of it trickled down her ribs near the camera.

All the while, as Tash stared at the glorious display, she couldn't quite ignore the words in her head, yelling at her that this would look so much better through the lens of proper professional

cameras, under controlled lighting. She'd make Eric's abs glisten and pop, and Jessy's breasts look divine.

“Um...” Tash bit her bottom lip. “Can w-we try another?”

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She had to wait a whole night before she got to meet up with the boys again. Now that Black Blood had been dealt with, she didn't have the contract she used to have to keep them under her thumb. They didn't have to go where she told them to, and instead had to do what Avery told them to do, which meant hunting that final azlu.

It made perfect sense, and Tash wouldn't have stopped them, but damn it, she was out of her mind horny! How could she not be? Eric and Jessy had done everything she'd asked, and that'd gotten increasingly kinky as the night went on. It'd scratched an itch inside Tash she didn't even know she had.

Every night, Tash felt a little more of Jessy's evil corrupting ways devour her.

A knock on the door. Finally. The boys stepped into her apartment. Jeans, t-shirts, the usual. They took off their boots as they looked around, and Tash stepped into view.

“Tash,” Art said. “I—whoa.”

“Whoa,” Matt said, staring at her.

Tash stood there in absolutely nothing but some sky blue thigh high socks, and a bottle of lubricant in hand they knew well. And as they stared at her, she Blushed Life.

It was beyond embarrassing how quickly her body lit up like kindling. Right in front of them, her skin fleshed out and gained a bit of color, as much as a tiny pale girl's could, but her nipples also hardened and swelled, and she could feel her vulva doing the same.

She knew it'd changed a few shades of pink, no need to look down and check.

“Um ... something happen?” Art asked, smile turning into a hungry grin as he pulled off his t-shirt, revealing tan skin and delicious muscles.

Matt didn't bother asking. He smiled bright and stripped out of his clothes with all the grace of an ox.

Art was a little bit bigger than Eric, and Matt was a bit bigger than Art, and Tash licked her lips as she looked them up and down, imagining their huge bodies squashing her tiny one between them. Maybe Jessy had a point.

“J-Just, um, a very ... sexual vid call with Jessy. I recorded it for you. B-But, later! Now, I am...” Dying. She was absolutely dying. “Come on.”

They followed, stripping off more clothes and tossing them on the floor as they did. She didn't care. The only thing on her mind was getting her two boyfriends inside her, now.

She hopped up onto her bed, on a big towel, and popped the top of the lubricant.

“No camera?” Matt asked, stepping in and standing beside her, near the bed.

“No. No camera. Just sex. We're going to f-f-fuck, all night.”

“Well damn,” Art said, standing beside Matt, “you even need us here? You look—”

“Shut up!” She glared up at him as she spread her legs, poured a giant glob of lube onto her palm, and got to work spreading it on her ass. She tried to keep up the angry glare, but it melted away as the

lube softened her skin more and more, until she slipped a finger past the ring of muscle, and another finger, and made sure to absolutely drench it with enough lubricant to drown someone. Nothing would interrupt them tonight.

Satisfied, she slid the towel and herself to the edge of the bed, reached out, and grabbed both men's cocks. They were already half erect, and a couple strokes was enough to bring both large phalluses to fullness, thick and hard, hot and lined with interesting patterns of veins. She bit her lip as she looked up at them and their massive bodies, and gave them her best doe eyes before she leaned in, and kissed the tips of their lengths.

The smell of testosterone, life, flesh and sexual desire, it came off the boys in spades. It had her dripping. She switched from man to man, working both their lengths with her hands, a tight grip at the base of each long cock massaging the firm, almost spongy but hard texture of their girths. All the while, she slipped the head of one cock into her mouth, buried it in suckling kisses until her lips slid back and forth along the base edge of the bulbous tip, before switching to the other man. They both groaned quietly, and she gave them her doe eyes again, knowing full well it'd drive them crazy, and make them throw her onto the bed, pin her, penetrate her together, choke her, squeeze and hug her and bury her, until she—

She squeaked, sat back, and set her palms down against the towel around her, as she stared up at the giant men. Gianter men. They grew larger, and larger, and larger. Thicker. Heavier. Where there was skin, short dark fur emerged, short enough that it didn't hide their insane musculature. Their cocks changed, thickening, and turning into shades of red from end to end, with a big thick round base above two enormous testicles; just like Eric's had been, that one night Tash saw him fuck Jessy as a werewolf.

Werewolves. Massive, towering behemoths of muscle, with thick necks and longer fur, practically manes. Hunched forward slightly,

like hunting animals usually did, the two monsters rumbled deeply, quietly, in their throat as they looked down at her, and their animal eyes devoured her.

She could hear their new hearts, enormous, thumping heavy and hard in their gigantic chests. She could hear their huge lungs taking slow, deep, hungry breaths. She could feel the heat radiate from them, like living furnaces.

“Um ... uh...” Oh shit. “I ... I d-didn’t ... uh...”

Arturo, fur slightly darker, body slightly smaller — still almost nine feet tall! — lowered himself down toward her, and set both hands on the blankets around her. Oh god he was huge.

“Jessy told us to, last night.”

“Jessy!” Oh that bitch. That manipulative, scheming, overstepping bi—Tash squeaked, and stared down at Arturo, as the colossal creature lowered himself down and down, until the titan was inches from her face.

He slowly ran his long tongue along her cheek.

“You’ll like,” he said, voice so deep and rumbly she felt the vibration through the floor and bed. “Promise.”

She shivered as Matt came down, and did the same, opposite cheek. And his rumbling purr was so deep, she felt it buzz inside her. She almost didn’t notice, eyes locked onto the size of his shoulders. She could curl up into a ball and fit inside his torso, with room to spare.

“I ... I mean, I ... I d-don’t know if ... um...”

Arturo got down onto his knees, leaned in between her legs, and ran his long tongue up her tiny, smooth, swollen and drenched slit.

She squealed, reached out, and grabbed the giant beast by the fur his neck. Soft fur, warm, inviting. She blinked as she stared down at him, and he looked up at her with wolf eyes as he nudged his huge, teeth-filled snout between her thighs, and again licked her pussy. And again, she squealed, but at least no so loudly this time.

Matt pushed in beside Arturo, one hand pressing on Art's back so he could lean over him, and not jam their giant shoulders together. And as Arturo experimented with his massive tongue along her slit, Matthew pressed his tongue against her slit as well. Tash had no choice but to put one hand on Matt's head, and sink her fingers into his mane to hold on, as she stared down at what was happening.

Two terrifying beasts, two strangely handsome, towering juggernauts, creatures of violence and legend, were licking her pussy. At the same time. They didn't care if their tongues touched the other's. They buried her small slit with broad strokes of their tongues that fought for space on her body, and she froze, legs spread wide, her hands on their necks near the backs of their heads, her eyes locked on the strange sight.

Werewolves were terrifying. Absolutely, utterly terrifying. And the two biggest ones she'd ever seen were burying her clit and tiny lips in so much warm, wet friction, she was shuddering in minutes. She came, and she forced herself to keep her eyes open as she dug her fingers into their fur, let out a defeated mowl, and watched them relent. But they kept their tongues pressed against her, not moving, not licking, but still burying her pussy in wet heat as her clit fired sharp jolts of pleasure into her thighs and insides.

They really were terrifying. And ... thrilling.

They both stood back up, mostly, crouched low enough their huge bodies loomed over her, and they rumbled desire. Their cocks were pointed straight at her. Enormous, pinkish redish things, each thicker than her wrist, with knots at the bottom even more swollen

than before. Jessy took one of those things, all the way inside her, regularly. Tash didn't know how.

Possessed by some evil, vile demon of lust, Tash's hands reached up, and did the same as before, wrapping each giant cock in her grip. She squeezed them gently, experimenting, and both wolves purred; she almost melted at the sensation of the vibration flowing through her. Gulping, she squeezed again, testing the firmness and unique texture of something she'd never thought she'd touch. So warm. Not as hard as she'd thought they might have been, but considering how big they were, that was a good thing.

Again, completely not of her own volition, she leaned in, and set a kiss on the tip of Matt's enormous cock. The heavy, bass-filled, rolling purr she pulled from him had her thighs quivering. She did the same for Art, getting the same purr, and a little more as she tried to fit more of his cock into her mouth. The tip was slightly more pointy than a human penis, but quickly grew thicker than anything like one. She could only manage the tip no matter how wide she opened her mouth, and she couldn't even get her fingers all the way around it. But from how Art's rumbling purrs continued and grew, that was enough.

She worked her hand back and forth along it, and when large drops of precum rose to the surface, she spread those with her fingers along his cock, and resumed. A hot, gentle prod against her cheek drew her attention to Matt as the beast poked her with his length, then slipped one of his titanic hands behind her hand, and gave her a gentle pull in his direction. Matt would normally wait his turn. This Matt had a little more aggression in him. The animal desire in his eyes pulsed through her until she was rubbing her thighs together.

She fit as much of the titan in her mouth as she could, and ran her hands down his thick length until they hit the strange new shape at the base. His knot, a super thick part of his cock, hot and



firm, and when she cupped it and teased fingers along it, experimenting, the biggest werewolf in the city rumbled deep in his throat, and loudly.

She blinked up at him, and outright squeaked when the beast used his giant hand, and gently pulled her toward the corner of the bed.

“W-What are you doing? Matt? I—” She sucked in a quick breath as the titan gently pushed her onto her back, and with her butt on the corner of the bed, her legs dangled limply over the bed’s side and bottom. Art stepped aside, and watched.

Matt reached down, took her legs, and brought them up. One of his palms was as wide as her shin was long. She stared at the size of his grip, not able to compute what she was seeing, as the colossal beast brought those tiny shins toward her shoulders, until they pressed against them, her back rounded and ass pushing up into the air. He’d bent her in half.

The werewolf’s cock rested against her pussy, and she stared at it, at how long it was, how wide it was, and how Matt picked a position Tash knew would let him ram himself into her. Her fake heartbeat skyrocketed, and she whimpered quietly as she tore her eyes away from the gigantic cock, and up toward the beast looming over her.

Matt leaned in, and gave her a gentle lick on the cheek again.

“Will be gentle,” he said between deep rumbles.

Her heartrate slowed. A little. He was in control.

She nodded slowly, her whole body shaking like a leaf as Matt stood up a bit straighter, and used his left hand to pin both her ankles to her shoulders, burying her upper chest under his palm and long fingers. His right hand took his giant cock, and pressed the slightly pointed tip against her clenching pussy.

He eased in the first two inches, and already she was spread wider than ever before. She stared down her bent body, at her tiny slit, and watched in a strange mix of fear and awe, as the huge red length spread her apart. It wasn't like she wasn't already dripping wet and ready, but the thing was so gigantic, she couldn't help but bite her bottom lip as she stared.

He eased in a couple more inches, and she mewled. He eased in a couple more, and she whimpered between growing pants. There was a distension on her lower abdomen, showing a subtle outline of the thickness of his cock, how much he was stretching her wide, and now pushed against her deepest places. As the titan gently forced in another inch into her clenching pussy, she moaned. Any other time, it might have been too deep already and maybe a bit painful. But she knew she was drenched, her insides aching and swollen, and begging to get penetrated and stretched deep.

He still had many inches to go, and she reached up between her pinned legs up to his giant body looming over her, and gently pressed on his abs and lower chest, the only things she could reach. The titan kept going, his wide, giant chest and torso coming in closer until she disappeared in shadow, and he sank another inch into her stretched insides. And another. The pulsing waves of sensation as his cock forced her deepspot deeper into her body had her legs trembling under his pinning hand, and she managed a few more weak whimpers as Matt pushed deeper.

He let go of his cock, and her legs. He placed both his hands against the bed around her shoulders, and again, Tash whimpered as she realized she couldn't lower her legs. They stopped at his arms, half hooking over his elbows, trapped and unable to go lower. She was trapped under a mating press.

She meeped like a squeak toy as Matt lowered himself down onto her until his giant chest and abs were only inches from her face, and his thick cock's knot pressed against her already stretched lips.

“W-Wait! Wait, p-p-please...”

With a heavy, deep purr, Matt held still. He stayed where he was, giant body of short fur and muscles covering her, her ass held up because her knees were locked toward her shoulders by his arms. But he did listen, and stopped, leaving just enough room between them for her to look down at her small belly, and the bulge pushing out against her abs.

“Oh ... god...” Whenever Matt and Art were both inside her, her short stature, tiny frame, itty bitty waist and flat stomach meant she could see a subtle distension along her body, showing how deep they penetrated her. This time, it was just one of the boys, and the bulge was bigger. And deeper. Her head was swimming, hints of pain from being stretched so deep disappearing under waves of tingling bliss that flowed down through her legs and back up into her chest.

Matt gently shifted his pelvis back and forth a little, just enough to gently pull his thick cock back out of her a couple inches. She mewled as her clenching insides came out with him, the grip of her flesh almost sucking on his cock, before he gently sank himself back down onto her, until again his knot pressed against her lips. Slowly, gently, the giant beast again fucked her just a couple inches, stretching her so deep she thought she might burst.

She relaxed back against the blankets, reached up between her raised legs again, and ran quivering hands against Matt’s abs. With him hunching over her, normally she’d look up to see his neck and chest over her head. But now he was a werewolf, and she gulped as she stared up at his sternum and upper abs over her head. She was so small compared to him. So very, very small.

The giant creature rumbled, a heavy purr that vibrated out through his body into hers, and she let out the tiniest mewl as it sent tingles into her toes.

He picked up speed, and she let out a little whimper with each gentle thrust the giant made into her. Each time, her insides clenched tight, and she peeked down to watch her stretched pussy squeeze around him, and to watch the bulge push up along her belly. She'd had no idea she could stretch so much. Each inch he worked was delicious friction on her squeezing insides, rubbing against every inch of her, while the terrifying beast forced her aching depths deeper into her.

She came again. Her head fell back, and she stared up at the werewolf as tingling bliss worked through her, flowing up and down in waves that started deep inside her pelvis. She managed another quick peek down at her pussy, only to groan as the sight of her juices leaking out of her, coating the giant red cock filling her, and soaking the knot pressing against her lips.

Matt slowed down for only a few moments before he resumed, not giving her nearly enough time to recover. A few more squeaks worked out of her, and she again pressed up against the giant chest and abs directly overhead, a pathetic weak attempt slow the werewolf down. He wasn't going fast, but with everything stretched taut, each inch was friction and pressure filling her up until she could only pant. If she'd been human, she'd have started seeing stars from not breathing.

As the giant beast got a little faster, Tash managed to turn her head. She couldn't see much, with her legs and their thigh high blue socks nearly pinned to her shoulders, still hooked around Matt's arms, but she could see another werewolf. He stood nearby, waiting, not touching himself at all despite how hard his cock was, with several thick drops of precum leaking from the tip. Art was waiting his turn, and she knew what he was going to do to her when it was.

Then he disappeared, as the hulking beast already over her lowered himself more, and suddenly she was pinned under Matt's chest and stomach, unable to see a thing. His body pressed down on

her, literally, pinning her whole body to the bed while he bent in her half, her legs sticking out from around his arms, while he pushed his cock down against her. He stopped thrusting, and instead ground himself down into her, and he pushed harder.

“M-Matt!” She managed to pull enough air in to say his name, but nothing else. She tried to say things like ‘wait’ and ‘stop’ and ‘no please I’m going to break’, but they all disappeared under her panting mewls as the werewolf pushed. Again, she pressed up against his chest, but even that was hilariously weak. She could have pushed harder, gotten his attention, she knew that. But some part of her was locked in place, head swimming, as the beast ground his cock’s thick knot against her soaked slit.

Slowly, the giant creature forced a sliver of his cock’s base into her, and a bit more, and a bit more, each bit making her body tremble and her insides clench. He was stretching her, deeper, and wider, and all she could do was whimper as he buried her with his body against the bed. Her juices flowed down her from their connection, soaking her, and she whimpered into Matt’s chest as her squeezing muscles milked on his length. He didn’t stop.

The knot slid in. What little air she had left came out as a tiny squeak, and she pressed up on Matt’s chest hard enough to finally get his attention. He lifted his chest and head up, and looked down at her and her body with hungry eyes, and thank god he’d stopped moving. Any movement would have been too much. She couldn’t stretch anymore! She was going to burst. Absolutely, utterly, was going to burst, and she whimpered as she looked down at the long bulge reaching across the whole length of her belly. The bulge near her pussy, just above her pubic bone and below her navel, was huge, showing where the beast’s giant knot was stretching her to the limit. Only its soft flesh texture, and the fact she was dripping soaked, made it possible.

And the beast was so deep, she swore she could feel him in her stomach.

“Slow!” Finally, she found some air again. “Slow! P-Please ... Oh ... oh god, I can ... Oh god.”

With a deep, purring rumble, the beast lowered himself down onto her again, and she mewled openly as she was again pinned by his body. For a second, she was terrified he'd get aggressive and fuck her hard; way too big and too deep for that, way way too deep. But the deadly, gorgeous monster gently flattened her against the blankets, so again only her legs could be seen sticking out from under him, hooked around his forearms, as he slowly fucked her.

He gently pulled himself back an inch, but her clenching pussy kept the knot buried in her, refusing to let it go. Then he pushed back down onto her, and she whimpered openly as the tip of his cock stretched her as deep as she thought her body could possibly go. He stayed there, balls deep, and ground into her in a gentle humping rhythm, sometimes working his body in slow side-to-side motions, and sometimes back and forth. There wasn't much friction anymore since he couldn't pull himself out of her, but there was pressure, so much pressure on her insides she could barely have moved even if he hadn't pinned her.

She came again. The unending bliss of being so full, of having so much thick, hot pressure filling and stretching her in every possible direction, was too much. She melted into the blankets, and her arms went limp as the giant beast continued to gently grind on her, working his cock around and around so the pressure drifted in different directions, but forever against her deepest places, while his knot pressed relentlessly on her squashed g-spot. The pain of being penetrated so deep was quickly lost under waves of more tingling electric shocks that worked down her legs until her toes curled, and up into her chest until she was a trembling mess.

A loud rumble announced the beast's orgasm, and Tash let out a squeak as Matt at last gave her an actual thrust. Not hard, not hard at all, but she had no room left inside her, and he literally forced the squeak out of her. Again, and again, gentle thrusts that filled her to her limits, and she squeaked with each one like a squeak toy, as the titan pumped thick waves of warm cum into her. More and more, unending waves of white she felt overflow her insides instantly, and gush out of her, literally splashing against her thighs before flowing down onto her stomach and ass. More, and more, until she felt her insides stretch a little, parts of her deepest places filling with his warmth she couldn't have expected, until she could feel her swelling belly pressing against the beast's body.

At last, Matthew stood up, and growled like a possessive wolf as he looked down and licked his chops. Her belly wasn't just bulging with the ridiculous amount of flesh he'd forced into her anymore. It was bulging with cum.

"Oh ... g-god," she said, staring down at herself.

After a few satisfied, rumbling purrs, Matthew stepped back, and pushed against her thighs to keep her on the blankets as he removed his knot from her body. It took some effort, and her clenching insides didn't make it any easier. She couldn't stop her body from trembling with orgasm aftershocks, and the sheer pressure of his knot against her g-spot. But he managed, and Tash forced herself up onto her elbows to stare at the sight.

His cum gushed out of her like a momentary waterfall, and within moments, her belly was back to its tiny, flat shape.

"I ... I ... I d-didn't kno—Art!" She managed another squeak, one of many tonight, as Art came around and picked her up. He'd been waiting a while, and she could see animal lust in his eyes. He was ready to cum then and there.

She mewled as she stared up at him, biting her lip as the giant beast held her in his huge hands like a toy, and inspected her, considering his options. Pin her on the bed, like Matt? On her back, or on her belly? Maybe on her side? Maybe—

She trembled as the beast turned her over so she was facing the ground, and he held her horizontal in the air. With one giant hand holding her tiny waist, his other half wrapped around her left shoulder and half wrapped around her neck, he guided her ass toward his cock, and pressed its dripping wet tip against her entrance.

“Art, slow down! Slow ... down...” Her voice melted away as the beast pushed against her. He did go slow thank god, and she managed to relax a little. Just a little. Two giant hands with claws held her like she was a doll, and every time she glanced back and up, she could see the hungry eyes of the wolf staring down at her body, hunched posture meaning his chest and head were over her, like he was ready to pounce and eat her.

Her ass was still soaked in lubricant, and Matt’s ridiculous amount of cum. Art didn’t care. He rumbled as he slipped the tip of his huge length into her asshole, and paused long enough for her clenching muscles to stretch. He didn’t wait long. The beast pulled her further toward him, and she whimpered and managed to lift her head again to look down her back and over his hands, to see her tiny ass spread apart around the massive, thick red cock. Thick, and thicker, until the pressure stretching her apart had her eyes rolling up.

She let her head dangle, and her arms and legs go limp. Her long blue socks and toes gently swayed back and forth below her as Art sank her onto his length, occasionally lifting her off an inch, only to sink her down two. She peeked past the giant claws around her breasts and stomach, and whimpered at the sight of his thickness creating a subtle bulge along her belly. As Matt’s cum, and hers,



dripped down her thighs and soaked her thigh highs, Art pushed deeper, and deeper, until the heat of his cock reached places he never had. Slowly, gently, he pushed the knot of his cock against her ass checks, forcing them apart, and she shivered as the pressure along her insides buried her pussy through the wall of flesh.

When the knot finally reached her entrance, he kept pushing.

“Art ... sl ... ow ... d-d...” She couldn’t stop panting and whimpering. Dangling in his grip, limbs hanging loosely, she closed her eyes. It wasn’t uncommon for the boys to lift her up and do things to her, using the fact she was tiny and light to put her in helpless positions. And it wasn’t uncommon for her to beg for them to stop, despite absolutely loving it; it’d become a frequent, exciting, and erotic part of their love making. But this was new. This was extreme. Tonight, she was nothing more than a tiny toy in the grips of monsters, and she trembled as more of the gorgeous creature’s huge cock forced its way past her clenching, soaked muscles, and into her tender insides.

He pushed harder, and her asshole slowly spread around the thick knot.

“St...” Her eyes rolled up, and she shivered as the sensation of the boiling heat of his thickness spreading her sensitive skin wide and wider had her whole body tingling. And every inch he sank into her was pressure against her pussy, burying it completely and pushing it toward her belly.

He kept going, pushing deeper, and deeper, and the tingling waves built up more. Everything inside her was aching and swollen, and no matter how she tried to relax her muscles, Art’s thickness kept burying everything.

And then her ass’s muscles slipped past the apex of his cock’s knot. The last couple inches pushed into her suddenly, and she let out a squeak as her ass hit his hard pelvis. His heavy testicles lightly

slapped her pussy's lips and clit, and sent a shock up into her pelvis. With her toes dangling more than a foot above the floor, her legs quivered blatantly, swaying with the sudden penetration, and her insides squeezed in milking spasms as the beast's knot buried her g-spot in pressure. She came hard, and found enough strength to look down underneath her body to her belly, and the bulge that pushed out from it, almost as big as Matt's despite him using a different hole. A few beads of juices leaked out of her, directly onto the short fur of the testicles resting against her pussy, before falling to the floor. More, and more, until she couldn't watch anymore, and she let her eyes close, head and neck going limp as she shook like a leaf.

Art fucked her. He didn't pull the giant base of his cock out of her, instead leaving it inside her like a plug. But that didn't stop him from pushing her away from him a few inches, only to pull her back, her ass's ring of muscle squeezing hard around the knot to make sure he couldn't slip out. And each thrust filled her to the limit. The length of her pussy, her deepspot, all of it pulsed tingling waves through her from how his cock pressed against them through her ass, but the sheer size of his knot pushed on her g-spot relentlessly. And each thrust caused his huge, soaked testicles to slap her dripping pussy, until she felt the splashes against the bulge on her belly.

It wasn't long before she came again, and her toes curled hard as the splashing only got worse.

Art rumbled pleasure, and slowed. Slowly, tenderly, he fucked her, and the vibration of his purrs rippled through her as he flooded her insides with cum. Waves of white flowed out of her hard enough she felt it splash up over her ass and Art's abs before gushing down over her legs and his testicles. But a lot of it went into her, and she whimpered as heat filled her, thick and heavy and flowing, until she knew the bulge on her belly had grown.

“Art,” she whispered, and the beast gently pulled her up until her back was pressed to his abs, and he placed both of his palms against her chest and swollen belly, pinning her against his stomach. “So full ... I—”

Matthew stepped up to her, took her dangling legs by the thighs, lifted them until his hands slid up to her calves, and he crouched down enough to press the tip of his cock against her pussy.

“Matt! W-Wait! I can’t ... I can’t fit...” She gulped as she stared down at the bulge the angle created. With her back against Art’s chest, his cock pointed straight into her abs, and she panted between her tiny whimpers with how it pressed on her insides. Her belly really was even more distended than before, filled with his cum. Oh god.

Matt came in closer, and forced the first few inches of his long, dripping cock into her pussy.

“Matt!” She found enough strength to lift her arms and press against his chest, and she stared down at the distension. Not subtle anymore, not with another werewolf already penetrating her. She could clearly see the bulge his cock created on her body, pushed out by Arturo’s cock, and it only got worse as he pushed in another inch.

She was full. She was so full she was going to pop. Her mouth hung open, and she stared at her body and the encroaching titan in front of her, his muscles and short fur and rumbling purrs, as he pushed more cock into her. A few weak pushes and slaps of her hands against his chest did nothing, her mind unable to do anything but drown in the sensation of being so completely full. Each inch Matt sank into her was insanity, her tiny pussy lips squeezing and milking desperately. With Art filling her already, knot pushing constantly against her g-spot, it made Matt’s cock bury each inch of her now stretched pussy in pressure and friction. She stopped breathing. She simply sat there, legs held apart by Matt’s grip, but

otherwise gravity doing most of the work to keep her pinned on Art's cock, as Matt forced more meat into her.

Two standing werewolves, her trapped between them, filled with cum and meat, and shivering from head to toe. She let her arms go limp, and stared dumbly down at her belly as she came again, her body now on a hair trigger. The giant's cock dripped with a new coating of her juices.

Matt finally pressed his knot against her stretched lips, and stopped. Not because he stopped pushing. He ground into her, fucked her gently but determinedly, and pushed her back into Art's body as he tried to force his knot into her. There was simply no more room left inside her. She managed to summon a quick mewl, and even set her hands against the giant's upper abs, hoping he got the picture. She couldn't take anymore, literally. She was full.

He did get the picture. He rumbled, maybe a little unhappy, but it passed quickly and became a deep purr, as he pulled back several inches, and sank them back into her. Again, he pushed against her pussy, knot rubbing against her taut lips, but instead of trying to ram it into her, he pulled back again, and fucked her.

Tash was hypnotized. She stared down at herself, arms going limp again as she watched the distension move back and forth along her skin. God, how had he managed to stretch her so much? Each time the beast sank his cock into her, and pressed the boiling hot knot against her lips, the bulge pushed an inch past her navel. And he'd been deeper than that, moments before. He was trying to get deeper now, gruitlessly grinding his knot against her pussy lips, drowning his cock in her juices and pushing her insides directly into Art's cock.

A tiny whimper worked through her, and she managed to tear her eyes away from her pussy, up to the behemoth in front of her holding her legs apart. His tongue hung out from between giant,

sharp teeth, and his eyes stared down at her with more of that animal hunger that had her whole body tingling. She tried to lift her arms again, maybe just to touch him and feel his body, his heat, the short fur that did nothing to hide his muscles, or maybe just to feel his heart beat; she could definitely hear it. Thump thump. Thump thump. But she couldn't. Her arms hung limp, and her eyes slowly slid down Matt's body down again to the giant cock trying to force its way into her, gently but persistently grinding the thicker part of its base against her slit.

Art rumbled, deeper and louder than before, and she mewled, barely audible underneath the heavy bass flowing through her. He fucked her again, faster than Matt but still slow enough he didn't hurt her much. But every time she felt a little pain spark from being stretched so deep and wide, her body betrayed her, and drowned it in waves of tingling electricity that flowed out from her core where the two cocks fought for space. Down into her toes, up into her nipples, she shivered as the orgasm worked through her again, and again she stared down at the bulge and its evolving shape shift and morph along her once tiny, flat belly, as the two werewolves fucked her.

"Lie down?" Art asked in that harsh, barky kinda sound.

"Yes," Matt said, and he took a step back as he crouched down.

Art crouched down with him as Matt sat on the bed's edge, and slowly Matt lay back on the blankets. It creaked with the weight of him, but he kept his legs planted on the floor, while Art squatted over him and Tash, all of his weight still on the floor. Half of Matt was nearly enough to have her bed breaking, and anymore would have cracked it in half.

Art let go of her, and she collapsed onto Matt's stomach. The hardness of his abs was offset by the soft fur, and she rubbed her cheek against it, only half aware of what was happening, as Matthew

held onto both of her thighs. He was so thick, her knees only grazed the blankets, and none of her weight reached them.

Art put one hand on her back, and pushed down, earning a squeak from her as he pinned her to Matt's body. His other hand grabbed her waist, and with him squatting low behind her, she was free to lay on Matt's body, as Art fucked her again. He wasn't so gentle this time.

She lifted her head long enough to see the towering beast gazing down at her body, and how her small, firm ass smacked against his pelvis as he thrust into her. Matt kept her pinned in his cock, forever threatening to force the knot into her, as Art's faster pace had her shifting back and forth on Matt's body. His cock stayed inside her, her ass still locked around the giant knot, squeezing around the base of it to keep it locked inside her.

She almost didn't notice when Matthew came. With her ear pressed against his sternum, her body trapped and pinned, she drowned in the vibration of the beast as he rumbled pleasure. More cum gushed into her, but without his knot to block it off, and it squirted out of her like a fountain. Hot, thick cum poured around their legs, and Tash whimpered as her quivering muscles basked in the heat of it drenching her thighs, and her stomach where it rested on Matt's.

A moment later, Arturo's pinning hand wrapped around her throat, and pulled her up to straddling. Her weight pressed her straight down onto Matt's knot, and she mewled as the wolf, holding her thighs, shifted her back and forth to milk more of his cum out of her, rubbing her squashed lips against the huge base of his length. Art held her snug to him as he fucked her ass, and it wasn't long before he was cumming again, too. Another wave of heat poured into her guts, and another. She couldn't see it with Art pinning her head against his upper abs, but she felt her belly stretch

more. And more. He was filling her up, and the cum had nowhere to go.

Art let go of her neck, hand taking her shoulder instead, and her head lulled forward so she could look down. Her belly was bigger.

She thought maybe they'd stop. They didn't. Somewhere, deep inside her mind, a little voice told her if she could just stop cumming for two seconds, she could punch Matt hard enough to at least get his attention, and let her have a break. But it was a tiny voice, lost in an ocean of pleasure. Of heat, and fake sweat, and rumbling purrs and tingling waves that had her nipples so hard they hurt. She couldn't see her pussy anymore, not with her distended belly in the way, but she could feel her juices leaking out of her, soaking the giant's knot until her cum was probably trickling off his testicles.

She'd never made such a mess, and she'd made a lot of messes before.

Art pinned her down again. She turned her head, cheek to Matt's body, and she looked up to see Art staring at her ass. Again, he fucked her, hypnotized by how it devoured every inch of his length. It was his first time having sex in this form, and he was reveling in it. He picked up speed again, hunched position ensuring his cock pressed straight down against Matt's with every thrust, squashing her pussy until again, she came. And then again, he came. All she could do was lie there on Matt's chest and stomach, arms spread apart over him, as Art pumped her full of cum for the third time. With her stomach pressed to Matt's, she could feel it bulge, feel it squash against his abs, feel their cocks press it down into him, and feel the new waves of thick cum flow deeper into her guts, stretching her belly more and more.

With a heavy, satisfied rumble, Art pulled back on his cock, and kept pulling. Slowly, steadily, he managed to slip the knot from of

her body, and Tash moaned into Matt's chest as the pressure inside her poured away. How much cum was flowing out of her ass and onto her bed right now? She couldn't see it, but she could feel it as her belly shrank.

Matt pushed down, hard, and forced a squeak out of Tash as he forced his knot into her. She didn't move. Didn't squirm or wriggle or even try and push on his chest. She lay there, arms limp, legs trapped in his grip, as the beast thrust up into her, again stretching her pussy deep up into her body, and burying her poor g-spot in the massive thickness of his knot. Clenching muscles drowned him in her juices, renewed by her vampire body; no human could have kept going this long.

He stayed inside her, balls deep, knot secure and abusing her g-spot until her clenching muscles demanded she cum again. Tired, aching insides, engorged and pulsing with way too much stimulus, tingled with another wave of pleasure, and she shivered ever so slightly on Matt's body as he fucked her. Always a couple inches, never letting the knot slip out of her, but still fucking her hard enough to pull tiny squeaks out of her.

It didn't take long before he slowed down, and she melted onto him as her clenching insides milked him. Most of his cum poured out of her. Some didn't, reaching places even his cock couldn't, and making her belly press against his abs just a little more. She was absolutely exhausted, and her body refused to listen, but she did her best to squeeze on the giant thing stretching her pussy to bursting, and she smiled at the rumbling purr she pulled out of the giant, terrifying werewolf between her legs.

She half expected Art to come back in and fuck her some more. Perhaps he wanted to, given the quiet rumbling growl he made. But she glanced back at him, and sighed relief as the man transformed back into a human. She held onto Matt for a little longer, and



milked the last few drops out of him, before he transformed back as well.

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She handed Matt the bucket, Art the mop, and pointed to the giant mess they'd made of her bedroom.

"I expect the blankets washed twice, and the m-mattress to be replaced!" One towel had not saved it from the pool of fluids those two had made.

The two boys frowned as they looked down, looked at the tools, then at each other. Everyone had showered, and the boys were in their boxers, ready to clean up a giant, smelly mess that defied reason. They didn't look happy about it.

"You didn't enjoy yourself?" Art asked, wearing his perfect, cocky, handsome, infuriating grin.

"I nearly d-d-died!"

Matt waved a hand, dismissing her. "You didn't nearly die. You loved it."

"I could have split open!"

Art also waved a dismissing hand. "That was some of the best sex we've ever had and you know it. I've never seen you go completely coma like that. Well, I mean, I have, but not like that that."

She glared daggers into the two boys. Yes, when they had sex, they had a habit of getting a bit rough with her, and she had a habit of really, really liking it. But that was no excuse for nearly popping her like an overinflated balloon. Or, soaking her bedroom in buckets of werewolf cum. Hot in the moment, not hot after. And unlike a vampire's fluids, it didn't fade away.

She wore her bathrobe, and she tightened it around herself as she squirmed a bit under Art's knowing gaze.

"It was g-good," she said eventually. "But if I wasn't a vampire, my insides would be b-b-bruised for weeks, you know."

"But you are a vampire," Art said, and he chuckled as he dipped the mop into Matt's bucket, and got to scrubbing.

Matt sighed as he picked up the soaked blankets and bundled them together, ready for washing.

"This is the price for being so good at what we do," the Canadian giant said, and he sighed a little louder.

"Next time!" she said. "Next t-time ... we can ... do it somewhere easier to clean."

"Next time?" Matt asked, perking up and beaming a big smile.

She scrunched up her nose at him, got her laptop, walked back to her living room, and called Jessy. She had some yelling to do.

## Chapter 179

~~Beatrice~~

They had more sex. A lot of sex. A lot, lot, lot of sex. They spent multiple weeks in bed, pretty much only getting up and out when they needed a bite to eat.

Part of Triss thought maybe Sándor would reveal a more forward and open personality when he got comfortable. And he did get comfortable with them. But, nope, the man was just a quiet, reserved, stoic dude, right down to his soul. Which made every conversation with him a strange delight, because she — Jen, too — managed to pull smiles and chuckles out of him semi frequently. And with a guy like Sándor, semi frequently was a lot. It was a fun game, seeing if they could get past his shell, and they were getting better at it.

His reserved nature changed when you got an instrument in his hands. Some people were just like that. They opened up when they had the avenue to do so, and Sándor opened up like a nerd talking about his favorite topic. He talked about music, and then rode that momentum to talk about other stuff.

It felt like a normal relationship, which was really fucking weird considering their history, who he was, who she was, and the second girl in the bed with them. But, something about hanging out with Sándor and just talking about shit felt perfectly, oddly normal.

Where was the drama? Was she too old for drama? Was he? A small part of her wanted some drama, the part of her that was actually kinda interested in sparkling vampires who stalked high school girls. A much larger part of her was so fucking god damn glad she didn't have any of that shit to worry about.

Like, right now. She was in bed with her boyfriend and girlfriend, getting spooned by Sándor, and melting back into his chest to feel the hard muscles against her. Jen was sitting on the foot of the bed, looking at the TV Sándor had in his bedroom, and looking through the streamer app for something to watch. All three of them were naked.

Cuddling. She was cuddling with Sándor. It'd taken a while to get to this point. Sex was the easy part, but it'd taken a couple weeks before either of them felt comfortable holding hands, let alone cuddling. That was where shit could get real intimate, and the both of them were terrified of that.

But, again, like trying on clothes that fit perfectly, she fell into a groove with Sándor that left her fucking speechless, and him too. They just ... got along, intellectually, and emotionally. No need for a big dramatic argument to break down some emotional wall between them. It just fit right. And it was fucking weird, but god damn exhilarating.

She was cuddling with a man again, a great man, and it felt wonderful.

“Nope,” Triss said, waving a hand at Jen. “Nope. Nope. Nope.”

After a heavy groan, Jen threw her a heavier glare.

“Pick something!” She got back to flicking between the options of shit to watch.

“Nope. Nope. No—wait, go back. Um ... nope. Nope. Nope.”

Sándor chuckled, and slipped an arm around her chest. Surprisingly he didn't need to be invited this time, and he cupped her lower breast with a gentle squeeze while his index finger teased her nipple piercing.

Jen snapped her head around to yell at Triss some more, but when she saw what Sándor was up to, she put the controller aside and crawled over to them. And Jen wouldn't crawl anywhere unless she did it cat style, back arched and huge breasts swaying underneath her. She got on top of them, both of them, and let gravity pull her down until she was between them.

"Selfish bitch," Triss said.

"Mhmm." Nodding and grinning like, again, a fucking evil cat, she put her back to Sándor instead, and guided his hand to do to her what he'd been doing to Triss.

Honestly, Triss couldn't blame her. She turned around, rested on her other shoulder, and watched as Sándor was helpless to resist gently massaging the breast that filled and overflowed his hand.

"Find Aaron yet?" Triss asked. Much as she kept telling herself there was nothing to worry about anymore and that they could relax, the Aaron puzzle itched at her.

Sándor looked over Jen's shoulder, shook his head at Triss, and leaned down to kiss Jen's neck. Wow, he was feeling bold. No matter how many times they fucked, it was clear Sándor was never going to get used to their weird threesome relationship, at least not completely. He must have been in a playful mood.

Jen grinned at Triss, sharing the same thought. She nudged herself back into Sándor, and encouraged the man to continue.

Triss had full plans to ruin Jen's fun, but not just yet. Instead, she put a hand on Jen's other breast, and joined Sándor in the miracle that was playing with a big tit.

"I think you're fine," Jen said. "He's not going to try and hurt you."

“Yeah, not with all these blood door rituals I’ve been setting up.” No way she went to sleep at day anymore without one. Aaron could have a thrall or ghoul around, waiting to storm into her home and set her on fire while she slept. It was why she and Jen had found a new place to sleep during the day, a cozy little hole in the ground — literally — that no one else knew about. Maybe they’d start sleeping at Sándor’s place, but it wasn’t entirely safe either. No building was.

“Stop worrying.” Jen grabbed her shoulder, and pulled her in for a quick kiss. “Aaron’s not going to do anything.”

“Says you.”

“I knew him longer than you.”

“I don’t think any of us really knew him, except Jacob,” Triss said.

“Maybe, but Othello knew him for a long time, too.”

“Othello is—”

“A moron, yes, but he’s also a good reader of people. He’s like a ... golden retriever.”

Triss choked on a laugh. “I guess.” She glanced past Jen to Sándor, but he just shrugged slightly. Dude was ancient and patient and all sorts of mature and wise, but not a people person. He’d probably be good at poker, not because he could read people, but because he could make himself unreadable.

“Well, I’m still gonna sleep in our little cubby-hole with a blood door set up, until we at least find out what happened to him,” Triss said.

“Smart,” Sándor said. “But there is another place you could sleep.”

“Yeah?” Triss asked.

“My lair.”

“Your la—ooh.” She nodded slowly as she came in closer, until her body was pressed to Jen’s. “Is that safe?” Much as she was cool with the idea of sleeping in Sándor’s badass, if super old and dirty, nightmare castle, they hadn’t done anything involving his Horror. Anything, not even visited for a chat. Not because they were afraid to, even though they kinda were, but because they were enjoying being in the physical world and fucking all night and enjoying the softness of modern beds. Talking with him while he was merged with his Horror was on the to-do list.

“It takes a long time before my hunger becomes an issue. Months, thanks to Azamel’s help.”

“Awesome. Because, yeah, the lair would be a great place. Aaron’s got no way in there unless he convinces Athalia or Fiona to help him, or if Mark’s still alive.”

Uh oh, she said the M word. Sándor sighed as he looked down, and his massaging hand went still.

“He’s not.”

“Shit, I’m sorry, man.” Fuck, mood ruined. She let go of Jen, and Jen turned over to press her back into Triss instead. They’d both gotten used to reading his vibes, subtle as they were, and much as the dude had a horny side they’d been playing with nonstop for weeks now, he also had a really heavy somber side. Case in point, just mentioning Mark was enough to have his thoughts probably spiraling down into a bit of guilt and shit.

There wasn’t any point in telling him it wasn’t his fault. Mark wasn’t his responsibility, even if Azamel told him he was. The dude pulled an Aaron, and decided to help Jacob try to end the fucking world. No fucking way that was Sándor’s fault, and he knew it. But it was just the kind of guy he was.

Different, and yet, kinda similar to Julias.

“I texted Jack earlier,” Jen said, saving the day with a topic change. “I thought we’d visit, before we left permanent ass impressions in this bed.” Before Sándor could respond, she gave him a small pat on the shoulder. “Not you. Just us girls.”

To most, that’d probably have sounded almost mean. But Sándor gave one of those tiny smiles before nodding, leaning in, and giving Jen a quick kiss. He was relieved.

“When do you leave?” he asked.

“Thinking thirty minutes?” Jen said.

Sándor nodded, and surprising them both, slid across the bed even closer, until his chest pressed to Jen’s, and he leaned over her to kiss Triss, too. Wow, he bounced back a million times faster than he would have a few months ago.

“Time for a quickie?” Triss asked, and she Blushed Life. Sándor’s small grin and nod confirmed.

“New position?” Jen said, Blushing too.

“There are more?” he asked.

The girls laughed.

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The visit to Jack’s was short-lived. He’d intended on hanging out, but Ann and Elaine had dropped by, with Ashley and Julee, and the lot of them were having sex, thralls included, when Triss and Jen arrived. In the lobby. He’d apologized, but Triss and Jen just laughed, shrugged it off, and decided to go eat.

Seeing Veronica answer the door, clearly by order, with a ridiculous old maid outfit on and her tits completely hanging out,



had been pretty awesome.

“I want a taste,” Jen said, mind clearly on food after witnessing that. “Of Sándor I mean, not ghouls or thralls. Think he’ll let us, yet?”

Ah, this topic. Drinking of the Begotten. Jen and Triss had talked about it with each other, but hadn’t brought it up with their boyfriend yet. Weird topic. Potentially sensitive topic.

“Yeah, so do I. But I dunno. I mean, we’re getting along so well, right? Like ... really, really well. I’m afraid to rock the boat.”

Groaning, Jen shook her head as she started up the stairs. Bloodlust, tried and true, a place any vampire could go if they wanted an easy meal, save for a Nosferatu. But Triss was getting better and better at Obfuscate, at a record pace at that, and she felt comfortable hanging out around the kine now. Face in the Crowd meant they’d basically ignore her, and as long as she was careful about the lighting, and using Jen’s boobs as a distraction, she could convince them to let her get close enough to Kiss them.

Except, she didn’t want to Kiss some random kine. She wanted to Kiss Sándor. She wanted to feel his warm blood filling her up, as his cum filled her up. She wanted to squeeze and hold onto him with her legs, latch onto him like a fucking animal, and sink her teeth into his neck. She wanted to feel his her breasts squished against his hard chest as his monster blood warmed her.

“I think we should just ask,” Jen said, taking the final step up onto the second floor of Bloodlust, where all the vamps liked to hang out. “You said so yourself, Margaret told you to be pushy with him. He’d appreciate it.”

“She meant about romance and shit, Jen. Not like she ever drank him.”

“Not his blood, anyway.”

Triss rolled her eyes, but yeah, Jen’s stupid joke managed to make her laugh a bit.

Jen wore a skimpy black dress, and Triss wore some black jeans and a tiny black tank top. Like, super tiny. She didn’t have any intention of sleeping with anyone except Sándor, but when it came to hunting kine, seeing a girl’s nipples point out against her shirt was the best bait.

“Okay,” Jen said. “How about, we get a small drink here, maybe one kine between the two of us, and then we go back to Sándor and talk about it? Maybe even ... talk about it while he’s transformed?”

“Oh is that what this is about? You want a piece of the gargoyle.”

“Are you telling me you don’t?”

Triss grinned as she leaned in and kissed Jen on the neck. “You know that gargoyle side of him is dangerous as fuck, right?”

“And you know that only makes it better.”

“You’re like a kid with his dad’s gun.”

“You—” Jen stopped, and looked into the shadows toward the back of the second floor. In one of the booths, there was movement. A couple, having a good time. And judging by how quickly Jen decided to stroll on over there, it was people they knew.

Sure enough, Triss recognized the couple once they were closer. That, was Damien, and Fiona.

With zero hesitation, Jen slid into the booth on one side, Triss the other, and the two lovers going at it eventually stopped once they realized they had company.

“Hi,” Jen said, and she licked her lips as she looked at Fiona.

The redhead sat on Damien’s lap facing away from him, her stomach almost hitting the booth table. Big booths, lots of room, designed for fucking, and Kissing. Her giant tits rested on the table, literally, jiggling lightly as Damien fucked her, grinding her on his lap with his grip on her hips. Or, had been fucking her. He slowly removed his grip from the smiling ginger, and set them on Fiona’s legs under the table instead as he squinted at the two visiting vampires. Fiona was completely naked, and Damien’s shirt was undone and pants pulled down.

Jen and Triss blinked as they met his eyes. He looked hungry. Not for blood, but for sex, in a very obvious, aggressive way that was very not Damien.

“Hi,” Triss said eventually as she took a little more time than necessary to admire the huge mountains of soft pillowy goodness sitting on the table. Jen had large breasts, but Fiona was something else.

“Hi,” Fiona said, blushing. Not embarrassed, but coming down from an orgasm high.

“Hello Damien,” Jen said, and she slid in closer, until she was almost shoulder to shoulder with the now clearly uncomfortable Mekhet. “Enjoying yourself?”

“I was.”

“Come now, don’t be like that. If you’re going to make love to your girlfriend in a public place, you must be willing to accept a little company.”

“Yeah!” Fiona said, giggling, and she half turned to lean in toward Jen. “You could—”

Damien slipped his hand around her throat, and pinned her back to his chest. The little ginger girl melted instantly, and her arms went limp as Damien put just the right amount of pressure on her to make her face go a little red, and her body quiver. Yeah, this girl was on a hair trigger and ready to cum her brains out the moment her tall emo vampire boyfriend did anything to her. How much of that was from being post Kiss, or just good sex, Triss didn't know.

"It was Fiona's idea," he said, making sure to frown at both newcomers some more. Though, he didn't push Fiona off him or anything, or even try and cover up her tits. He just held her against him, putting her wriggling on display, complete with some delicious choking he'd obviously mastered because the girl was balancing on that edge of asphyxiation and cumming her brains out.

And he had taken a drink. They could smell the blood. Perfect time to get some questions answered.

Triss smirked as she slid in a bit closer. "You drank her, right? Got all that Begotten blood in you?"

Damien rolled his eyes, but nodded as he let go of Fiona's neck, and wrapped her in a gentle hug. She didn't resist.

"Tell us," Jen said.

"It's amazing," Fiona said, mewling as she cupped her breasts over Damien's hugging arms, and massaged them and her big, swollen nipples. She did it more for the audience than herself.

"Not you," Triss said, laughing. "Damien. We want some details. About what it's like to drink a Begotten."

"I—"

"You told us nothing last time," Jen said, and she slipped in a little closer, until her leg nudged against his. "Same situation,

remember? And last time you left us high and dry.”

“You wanted sex details.”

“Well, that too,” Triss said. “But right now, we want to know what it’s like to drink a Begotten from the only man doing it. Except, you know, Daniel, but not like he’d tell anyone shit.” Damn it, she couldn’t help but grin at him as she watched the girl squirm on his lap. On his cock. “It’s got you so out of your mind horny you can’t even stop Blushing Life if you wanted to, am I right?”

Damien rolled his eyes again, but a quiet mewl from Fiona gave him up. He was still inside her, probably hard as a rock, and Fiona was loving every minute of it. With weak arms barely able to stay up, she massaged her breasts some more, before lifting one up as she bent her neck and head down, so she could slip the big nipple into her mouth.

Triss and Jen stared at her, as she suckled on herself. Holy shit that was hot.

“You’ll go if I answer?” Damien said.

Both girls said nothing.

“Triss. Jen,” he said.

Slowly, Triss managed to tear her eyes away from Fiona, whose own eyes were closed as she continued. Jen leaned over the table and stared from only a foot away. Lost cause.

“Uh, yeah, we’ll go.”

After a slow nod, the tall, pretty boy vampire took Fiona by the hips, and turned her. She squeaked in surprise, but the ginger was utterly exhausted, and didn’t do a thing to resist him. He lifted one of her legs, got it up and over him, and once she was facing him, he

used one hand to squeeze her tight to his chest in a hug. His other hand held her ass, hidden under the table, or it would have been hidden if Triss and Jen weren't sitting so close. They could see the man knead her soft ass, and give it the occasional slap.

She wasn't sure she needed details anymore. Damien was clearly hornier than he would ever normally get, and feeling confident, and aggressive, aggressive enough they could probably ask him to throw Fiona on the table and fuck her hard for a display, and he might just do it.

“It—”

Triss put up a hand and shook her head. “I think I can see.”

He grinned a little. Damien, grinning. He never grinned. The Begotten's blood was doing some powerful shit to him.

Sure enough, right after his cocky grin, the man used both hands to slap Fiona's ass cheeks, hard enough they could hear it over the music. Jen and Triss stared.

“That's a ... strong effect,” Jen said, and she peeked in a bit closer so she could see down at their connection. She licked her lips.

Much as Jen was a fucking hornball, Triss trusted her. If Damien and Fiona both, right there, asked her to take a drink of Fiona, and fuck them, she'd say no. But damn did the girl love to tempt herself, and she made no effort to look away.

And Damien didn't even try to hide it. He actually pushed Fiona back a bit so her back pressed to the table edge, and she pressed her elbows down against it behind her. Poor girl was barely awake, considering she was post Kiss, and making love to her boyfriend was obviously hard. But she was enjoying it, and really enjoying being the center of attention of a couple observers.

Her huge tits rippled like water balloons when Damien used both hands to slap her ass cheeks again, and the leaning-back ginger squeaked. He shifted his grip, grabbed her hips, and bounced her on his cock; Triss couldn't help but take a peek down to see what that looked like. Dude was utterly drenched. But, much as seeing his big dick spread the tiny girl apart as he bounced her was hot, there was something so damn hypnotic about Fiona, her blushing face, her huge bouncing tits, and the way she tried to keep from falling over, elbows still on the table behind her, that Jen and Triss couldn't look away from.

The ginger's squeaks turned into weak little whimpers, and her elbows started to slip. Damien took her by the throat, stopped her from falling over, and choked the quivering little woman as she came all over him. A glance down showed, yup, she was drenching his cock more, and a pretty copious amount of white stuff was leaking out along with her own juices.

Damien's eyes were locked onto his girlfriend, and Jen and Triss shivered at the look on his face. That, was a very horny, possessive vampire. He didn't even care that Jen and Triss were seeing every intimate detail as he pumped his trembling girlfriend full of cum. Dude was completely absorbed.

He let her neck go, pulled her in snug, gave her ass a few more hard slaps — probably felt amazing, pussy clenching on him mid orgasm like that — and bounced her up and down some more. Yeah, dude was totally gone.

Jen and Triss watched for a little longer, before they looked at each other, nodded, and headed back to Sándor's place with a mission.

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“Please?” Jennifer asked as she stepped into the apartment. She slipped out of her dress without so much as a hello, leaving Sándor dumbfounded and stepping back to give her room.

“Please what?” he said, eyes staring at her breasts for a second before he managed to rip them away to Triss.

“Please.” Triss said. She slipped out of her tiny tank top, kicked off her jeans, and Blushed Life. Instant hard nipples. “I mean, you can say no, if you want, but ... Jen and I are both really hungry, and we saw Damien with Fiona tonight, and...”

“Can we taste you?” Jen came closer, now in only a skimpy little thong, and pressed a hand against Sándor’s chest. He was wearing blue jeans and a white shirt, so hilariously casual compared to the two girls coming at him.

Triss was down to nothing but her own thong too, less lace, more g-string than Jen’s, and she came up and pushed her chest into his, beside Jen’s. They really were bullying him, just burying the poor guy in tits and ass and begging for some of his blood. But hey, Margaret said bully him a bit, and holy fuck she needed a piece of what Damien had.

Sándor took a second to process what was happening, before he smiled, and sat down on his couch, leaving room on both sides of him.

Jen clapped and jumped onto the couch beside him, and Triss half-jumped onto the other.

“I’ve been Kissed before, a long long time ago,” he said.

“Sexually?” Jen asked, and she leaned in to put her lips to his neck.

“Not exactly, but it was ... very pleasant.”

“Well,” Triss said, putting one hand on his jeans and undoing the button and fly as she leaned in as well, “this is gonna be sexual.”



A second later she had his cock out, and Sándor sighed peacefully as he relaxed back on the couch, and—

“Wait,” he said.

Jen and Triss froze.

“Don’t wanna?” Triss asked.

“It’s not that, just ... I thought after talking about my lair ... maybe you’d want to ... after the Kiss, visit my lair ... and ... the gargoyle.”

The girls blinked at each other, and then their lover a few times.

“What?” Jen asked. “When we Kiss you, you’ll be pretty drained. I thought we’d make sure you came a couple times as we Kissed you, before Triss and I fucked each other while you watched.” And as if she’d just said something perfectly reasonable, she nodded at him and Triss expectantly.

Oh god, Triss laughed and gave Sándor a happy pat on the stomach.

“She does have a point,” she said. “Kinda hard to keep an erection when you lose a pint of blood.”

“Maybe, but ... this body and the Horror’s body are two different things.” He nodded as he leaned in, kissed Triss on the cheek, and then the same for Jen. “You can drink me, but, if you want, you can join me in my lair after, and we can ... perhaps...”

That, was an invitation to a night of monster sex. Triss gulped and shared a much more shaky glance with Jen, who did the same, her eyes lighting up and lips putting on a nervous smile. The idea of seducing Sándor until he ravaged them with his huge gargoyle half had seemed more like a fantasy than a reality. Now he was offering

that possibility? That the girls come visit the giant gargoyle and get fucked? Get absolutely ... utterly ... ravaged?

Jen and Triss leaned in, pressed their breasts into the man, and sank their fangs into him.

Holy. Fucking. Shit. The blood hit her like a freight train, and she groaned into his neck as the thick liquid flowed down her throat and into her belly. The difference wasn't slow or subtle, or hidden in the flavor or any shit like that. It bowled her over, and she melted into the man as the strange power of his blood sent tingling waves of ... something, through her. Something dark, and twisted, and hungry, and powerful, and exciting.

It'd been so damn long since she'd had alcohol, but this was like taking six shots, and instead of getting overwhelmed with a need to vomit, something came rushing up through her body that had her Beast singing. She groaned louder, drank harder, and hugged the man tight. More. She needed more. The Beast in her guts demanded more.

No fucking wonder Damien was so confident and aggressive with Fiona's blood in his belly. The alcohol comparison only got more accurate as the blood spread out through her, and every thought she had was cut short and replaced with the most simple, absurd impulses. How the fuck had Damien even managed to speak? The only thoughts she could come up with now were: fuck, eat, and maybe fight.

She pulled her head away long enough to see her man's stoic face looking ever so slightly not stoic, even a little pleased. Not even Mister Gargoyle could resist the power of a Kiss double whammy. She looked to Jen, who pulled away too, and the two of them stared at each other, ready to pounce. Jen's body was on fire, same as hers.

But she didn't get to. The room went dark.

---

Sándor was crazy strong. Her Beast knew that, each time she was near the man. Just being around him was enough to feel overpowering, in a quiet kinda way, like standing in the presence of a cathedral. It didn't make a sound, but you damn well knew the building was imposing, intimidating, grand, and ancient.

Sándor did a good job hiding that aspect of himself. Normally he was just a quiet dude, and now, someone she could kiss and hug and tease, and even bully a bit. Sometimes she straight up forgot the crazy shit he'd done in the past.

And then, bam, it was right in her face just how insanely powerful Sándor was. The other Begotten talked about how hard it was to open up paths into their lair, or out of their lair into any place that didn't really jive with it. It was why they often did things in the dark, because most of them had dark places in their lair. But if Fiona wanted to open up a place to her jungle lair and she didn't have any dark places, she'd have to find a forest or something. Even then she'd probably need to do it at night, otherwise, she wouldn't be able to do shit.

Sándor was strong enough to open up paths to his lair even with all the lights on, and when he did, Triss sucked in a quick breath under the sudden weight of his presence. Holy shit.

And then, she was there, in the lair. Her, and Jen, standing beside each other in the gigantic throne room. Sándor had dropped a blob of darkness right on them, and now that it was gone, they were surrounded by pillars, and the braziers on the walls and pillars alike went from dim, to bright, and brighter, fires growing within and lighting up the place for them. Did he have magic monster powers allowing him to control his lair, like a psychic connection or some shit? God damn. She gulped as the fires grew so large the flames poured out of their little gargoyle mouths and eyes, and she took a step back. Yeah, just because it was weird dreamland fire didn't mean it wouldn't turn her to ash if she touched it.

Jen touched her hand, and with familiarity, Triss slipped her fingers into it, and the two of them stepped out into the main hall of the giant castle. He hadn't dropped them off in one of the hallways off to the sides, with the wooden walls and ceiling, old rooms for an old castle. This time, he'd skipped that part, and the two of them, tiny and borderline naked, were left standing in the colossal room of colossal pillars topped with colossal statues of the gargoyle.

It was like being dunked in a big bucket of cold water. Yeah, sure, they still had bellies full of blood, and her heart was now beating, pumping her full of fake life that had every bit of her tingling. But now it wasn't only horny aroused. She had enough self awareness to know what was happening to her.

She was scared. Horny and scared. Fake adrenaline coursed through her, got her heart racing even faster, and before she knew it, she was breathing faster too as she looked around at the giant, life-sized gargoyle statues. One of those handsome fuckers was probably waiting on his throne right now, ready to scoop her up, and fuck her. And hopefully, not eat her.

Jen took a step forward, and Triss followed, quickly catching up so the two girls walked side by side. Slowly, they approached the giant throne in the distance.

“Um...” Jen leaned in to her and whispered. “I feel ... weird...”

“Drunk on Begotten blood and ready to pin and fuck Sándor?” she whispered back. The only reason she was even able to think straight, was the cold-water dunk getting yanked into Sándor's lair had been.

“Yeah, but...”

“Fucking terrified, too?”

Jen gulped and nodded. And squirmed. Yep, getting scared was only making her hornier. She was one of those girls who got pretty

randy after an intense roller coaster ride, and apparently, so was Triss.

It took will to not throw herself at Jen and fuck the girl right there. Something about the weird blood in her belly had her Beast roaring, and telling her to just give into her desires and hungers. Aggressively. But every time the urge flooded back up to her brain, she looked around at the scary-as-fuck nightmare chamber they were in, and the distant throne they were walking toward, no doubt with a giant gargoyle sitting on it. A gargoyle that'd almost done something horrible to them in the past. And yeah, that was water under the bridge, but still, maybe this wasn't such a good idea?

The throne was empty.

Oh fucking shit.

The girls spun around in time to hear the creature roar as it swooped down from one of the pillars. It landed in front of them like a giant eagle landing in front of a free meal, slow and casual, big wings flapping and burying them in heavy gusts that almost knocked them over.

Sándor's gargoyle body was huge. Ridiculously huge. He must have been twelve feet tall, and considering he had that animal-ish hunched posture in his upper body, he'd probably be taller than that if he stood up straight. Muscular as fuck, big chest and shoulders and tapered waist with huge abs, and two sets of arms, one set under the other. Big, giant, dark horns, dark blue skin, long dark claws and talons, and a couple of dark eyes on a surprisingly handsome, oddly hyper masculine face with very pronounced eyebrows and an inhumanly hard jaw.

Jen and Triss didn't even try and run. They just stared up at the huge beast who'd just landed basically on top of them, four wings drowning them in shadow.

He picked them up, upper left hand taking Triss's torso, lower left taking her legs, and the right hands doing the same for Jen. The two eyes glowed red for a few seconds as they locked onto the girls, before switching back to their dark color.

Okay, this was bad. Was he thinking straight, or was he like the last time they met the gargoyle? Were they dead?

He brought them in closer, slowly, and rumbled with a deep vibration that had her shaking, fear mixing with the vibrations.

"Your one and only chance," he said, that deep voice full of gravel and bass. "Stop?"

Jen and Triss slowly looked at each other. That confirmed Sándor was in his right mind, at least.

"Is it safe?" Jen asked, voice wavering.

Sándor brought her in closer, until she was only a foot away from his head and giant horns.

"I won't hurt you," he said. "But the gargoyle is ... a powerful creature. And willful."

Message received. If they agreed to do this, Sándor might have trouble controlling himself. Sure, if they both screamed bloody murder, he'd probably stop, but...

The two girls looked at each other. Dive in? Back out? Holy fuck it was so damn hard to think straight with Sándor's blood pulsing through her and telling her to try and fight and fuck the titan holding the two of them like dolls.

"Y-Yes," Jen said, voice wavering even more. "Yes, please, fuck me."

Sándor rumbled, and the smile he wore had Triss shivering. Gorgeous, and terrifying, the kind of smile a deadly villain wore before committing some horrible act. It faded, thank god, and a subdued-but-very-real animal hunger replaced it. He was a nightmare monster, so the smile probably wasn't something he had full control of. The gargoyle was supposed to be scary, in a very literal, that's-why-it-even-existed sense. It was.

He began his prowling walk toward the throne, giant tail swaying gently behind him, like a crocodile casually treading water. Every so often, he rumbled, a deep purring sound that reminded Triss of the stories Jessy had shared. She'd said Eric's rumbles and purrs felt like what a giant cat would if they could purr, something heavy and bassy, but still a rapid-fire sound like a normal cat's purr. Sándor's rumble was like putting her ear up against one of those mega-sized dump trucks. It was so deep she felt it more than heard it, the sound almost entirely nothing but heavy waves of vibration that flowed through her like she was plugged to a motor.

Jen and Triss stared at each other. It was becoming all too apparent way too quickly, just how beast-like this giant gargoyle was.

The gargoyle stepped up to his throne, and sat down with slow, lumbering steps. His long tail draped over one of the throne's arms so it could dangle off the side, and one pair of wings hooked over his neck and shoulders like a cape, the other two snugging it behind him so he could press his spine to the throne as he got comfortable. Nodding to himself, like a king thinking deep thoughts, he held out both vampires in front of him, each dangling by their hands from his upper arms, while his lower arms reached out, slid a giant claw into their underwear, and slid them off.

Triss didn't bother looking. She knew she was wet, and now Sándor knew it, too, his stern gargoyle face again showing that dark, scary grin for a second before fading away.

Both vampires squirmed a little, dangling, helpless, as they watched the gargoyle look their naked bodies up and down like meals. Each breath the beast took was slow, and now that he was staring at them with his dark, hungry eyes, each breath was a quiet, but deep rumbling wave of vibration.

His lower hands were free, and he used them to undo and toss his loincloth aside.

Both girls looked down, and gulped. Well, they were right, he had two. And they were huge. They looked like a human penis for the most part, bulbous tips a dark shade of purple compared to the navy of his body, no foreskin. But, yeah, two of them, both massive and lined with veins, and getting bigger and harder by the minute. Not so hard they stood upright though, a bit more malleability to them than a normal dude's cock. They hung forward, half bending with their own weight.

The upper cock was a bit bigger and longer than the lower one, which was already big enough Triss was having some serious doubts about whether it'd be fitting into anything. Anyone.

Naked, a titan of muscle and power, the gargoyle relaxed back against his throne, leaning back so his pelvis slid forward a little. Jesus fucking christ, just one of his legs was bigger than Triss. He rumbled again as he looked to the two of them, and brought them toward him until they were both close enough to his face they could feel his breath.

“Who first...” He spoke the words slowly, voice carrying as a wave of depth and bass that almost shook the pillars. Nodding to himself, he brought in Jen toward his mouth, and opened the giant thing filled with a lot of damn scary teeth. Not super sharp teeth, but more like a crocodile's, fully capable of clamping down on flesh for a good grip. The sort of teeth you'd use to bite on something as an anchor, while using your hands to tear it to shreds.



Jen stared down, frozen, as Sándor brought her in so close her thighs nudged against his chin, and they spread apart as he brought her in closer. Just as she was about to say something, or maybe kick the gargoyle out of reflex, Sándor let out another deep, pouring rumble, and his tongue slipped out from between his teeth.

Jen managed a quick peek at Triss, before her head lulled forward, and stared down at the fucking massive monster tongue forcing its way into her slit.

“Sándor! Slow down! I ... oh ... oh...” Her voice fell away, wavering and fading, as the gargoyle brought her in closer again, until he literally had her pussy an inch over his gaping maw. More and more tongue, long and pink and wet, came up out of his mouth in waves, and once he had what must have been a dozen inches of it fighting for space inside the wriggling vampire, the rest of it pressed against her pussy, and buried her clitoris.

Jen just sat there, literally sat on the dude’s tongue as he fucked her with it, and stared down at her belly as a small distension flowed up it in waves. Triss had done that with her own tongue inside Jen before, but Sándor’s was easily twice as thick and long, and Jen was reduced to nothing but a mewling kitten as the huge thing filled her up, and probably stretched her both deep and wide, as it curled and rolled like a wave machine. And each roll forced her to slide back and forth along the portion of his tongue outside her and pressing against her clit, making sure the helpless Ventrue got every bit of her thoroughly tongue fucked.

Even if Jen had come into this cold and dry and thoroughly unaroused, she wouldn’t have been able to stay like that long, not against this. But with Sándor’s blood pumping through her, Triss and her girlfriend had come ready to skip the foreplay. Sándor had other ideas, and his tongue broke Jen in a matter of minutes.

Triss stared on as Sándor brought her in close enough she could see every detail, now dangling only a couple feet away from his head. Christ, she couldn't look away, eyes locked onto her girlfriend's huge tits rippling against her chest as she came, her stomach wriggling as she squirmed on his tongue, and holy fuck the rolling bulge that worked up her belly from her pubic bone up to her navel, and past it. That, was deep. That was very deep.

Sándor wasn't just eating her out to make sure she got to cum before they got to the good shit. He was literally stretching her, and prepping her. He pushed more tongue into her, and Jen's mewls turned into loud squeaks, before she melted back into her rolling rhythm as again the gargoyle fucked her with his tongue, forcing the bulge on her belly further and further up.

Satisfied, he lifted her up, and Triss stared at the lines of juices connecting his tongue to Jen's now thoroughly drenched slit. He took a moment, looking her up and down, as if considering if his new sex toy was ready, before he adjusted his grip on her. He set both girls down onto the arms of his throne, careful to make sure they didn't fall, and slid his hands down so he could hold them around the waist instead, like toys, or dolls.

He lowered Jen down, and slid her legs down his abs so her limp thighs slowly spread apart around the monster. And as she did, not even trying to resist the giant gargoyle's motion, he sat Jen on his abs, her legs spread around his titanic waist. And then he lifted her up a bit, lowered her ass between his thighs, and brought her back down again so she was sitting under his cocks, with the weight of the two huge things now resting on her stomach. All Jen could do was stare.

Triss could only do the same. She shivered as the juggernaut admired the sight of his two cocks sitting on Jen's body. He was measuring. With one hand holding Triss, and the other holding Jen, his other two hands were free to make adjustments and set the two

huge lengths on Jen's stomach in a more straight line, and both girls gulped as it became obvious just how big the gargoyle was.

The smaller cock was, what, almost a foot long? And it was thicker than Jen's damn wrist. And the larger one was ... larger. A little longer, and a little thicker.

Okay, maybe they had bit off more than they could chew.

Sándor took the smaller of the two cocks in one hand, and slowly lifted Jen. She didn't fight or protest, or even make a sound. She just stared up at the giant monster, and then at the two cocks leaving trails of precum on her stomach. The bigger one left a few drops of it just under her sternum.

The gargoyle lifted her up, and guided her dripping slit onto the head of the smaller cock.

"Sándor, I ... I ... nnnn!" Her voice disappeared in a harsh gasp, as the beast pulled her down toward the fat glans of his length, and her lips rubbed against it as they slowly spread apart. Juices trickled down over his girth, quickly drenching the tip as Sándor made sure to rub her pussy around it, almost like chalk on a pool cue. Only when the huge thing was dripping with her fluids, did he really start to pull her down toward him.

She outright squeaked when her pussy spread apart, and the huge glans slipped past her clenching muscles.

"Oh god ... Oh ... g-god..." She looked down at her body, and at the distension now pushing out from above her pubic bone. Before she could say anything else, the gargoyle pulled her down further, and she whimpered as she squirmed on his cock. So much thick meat filling her, slowly getting pushed into her, Triss just stared, awestruck by the sight of the bulge moving up her once flat belly.

Sándor's other, bigger cock rested on her stomach, and slid along her skin, up and up as the gargoyle sank the vampire onto his length. More drops of precum oozed from it, glistening her skin and trickling off the sides of her waist. His bigger cock reached higher, and higher, passing her navel before it finally came to a stop. But Sándor wasn't done. He gently lifted Jen off his cock a few inches, exposing slivers of her insides as her pussy squeezed him, before he sank her back down. When he hit the same depth, he waited a little, and then pulled her down a little further.

Jennifer moaned, and clutched onto the gargoyle's fingers as she stared at the bulge on her belly, and the larger cock sliding up along it. He did it again, lifted her a bit, and then lowered her back down. Once he hit the same depth, he took his time, ground her hips around a little, and pulled her down deeper. Each and every time, Jen's whole body quivered, and she groaned loud as fuck as Sándor gently stretched her deeper and deeper. And fucking deeper.

Even if the girls hadn't been out-of-their-minds horny on Begotten blood, the way Sándor worked Jen on his cock was fucking perfect. Jen melted like butter, and her hands squeezed on his fingers tighter as she started to shake. She was cumming. The gargoyle still had a couple inches to go, but Jen's body didn't feel like waiting, and she writhed on his length as more of her juices leaked out of her. Sándor kept going, ignoring her whimpering mewls and trembling body, and he pushed another inch into her.

"Sl ... slow ... d ... d..." She tried to lift her head, and probably beg for some mercy, but one look up at the giant gargoyle's eyes was enough to strike her quiet. Triss risked a peek, too, and froze. The hunger in the gargoyle's eyes was gigantic, and inhuman.

He continued the same motions, lifting her up a couple inches, and again, pulling her back toward him, even as her insides were probably clamping down like a vise, mid orgasm. She just kept sinking deeper onto him, bulge pushing past her navel and earning

some desperate mewls from the vampire, before at last her spread lips finally hit the base of him, and her legs and ass rested on his pelvis and hips.

The larger cock on her stomach had pulled to the side a bit, bending under its own weight. Sándor used one of his hands to right it and set it on her body, and Jen stared down at its thick glans, as it rested just under her sternum and between her heavy, hanging breasts.

“Jen,” Triss said, “holy shit. You—shit!” The world turned upside down as Sándor lifted her up toward his face, and actually did turn her upside down.

Before she knew what was happening, she had her hands pressed against the gargoyle’s chest to keep her balance, as the giant spread her legs around his face. Jen and Triss shared a shocked expression, but it vanished in a blur and then shadow as Triss closed her eyes.

Something very hot, firm, wet, and strong, was rubbing against her asshole. It was huge. She managed to open her eyes and look back and up over her body, and down to her ass, where the gargoyle’s eyes sat above it, looking down at it as he rubbed his very, very, very long tongue against her, while he held her upside down over his jaw and chest.

He pushed it into her, and she squealed, just as loud as Jen. It was so damn thick, almost as thick as the cock splitting Jen open right beneath her, and Sándor wasted no time forcing more of the wriggling muscle into her ass. Inches on inches on inches, rolling over each other and creating waves of flesh that stretched her apart and filled her. The muscle pushed down toward her pussy and stomach as it went in, and she knew she had a bulge on her stomach, too.

Triss had no idea how much tongue he forced into her. A foot? Two? Fucking more? All she could do was wriggle there, half upside

down, half doing a push-up against his chest, face aimed down at Jen, as the titan filled her up. She couldn't think straight, not with the weird position, and definitely not when Sándor lifted Jen up a few inches, and sank her back down balls deep on his cock right in front of Triss's eyes.

“W-Wait!” Jen said, eyes wide. “Wait, I’m still—nng!”

Mental note for the future, Triss. Sándor's Horror was not easily communicated with in the middle of sex. He lifted Jen up and sank her back down again, a slow rhythm that was more than enough to leave the girl a quivering mess considering how deep he was, and how thick he was. Her juices trickled down his length before disappearing underneath him, only for her pussy lips to flatten against his pelvis as he forced her down again, and she soaked him again.

Sándor pulled Triss in closer, and she gulped as she felt some of his huge fangs — thankfully not razor sharp — press against her big ass cheeks. The tongue pushed deeper, and she groaned as he rolled it, making it stretch her insides apart, before slipping further into her. And with unending consistency, he rolled the whole damn thing toward her pussy and belly like a fucking ocean wave, forcing a mountain of pressure against everything aching and swollen and begging for it inside her.

Her empty slit clenched down hard, and shot juices straight into the giant mouth filled with huge teeth. As pleasure tremors filled her, tingling waves that rolled up and down through her, she stared down at Jen, who was getting the fucking of her lifetime. It wasn't that Sándor was rough with her, he wasn't. But the dude was just so damn long and thick, a slow fucking was enough to have the girl grunting and groaning as she looked down at her body, and the giant cock between her rippling tits, coating them in precum.

The world shifted again, and Triss had to put her hands down against Sándor's literal fucking jaw, as the gargoyle pulled her up and into his mouth. Now she was almost sitting upright, the gargoyle's head tilted back, and he had both her thighs wrapped in one hand each, keeping her legs spread. He continued to masturbate with Jen's body, slow and steady, but it was clear it was Triss the monster had his mind on, because he pulled her down further and further into his mouth — damn thing could open real wide — as his tongue pushed deeper into her.

Fear shot through her. She was literally sitting in his mouth. He could have bitten down right then, and with how much he'd managed to fit her ass and pelvis between his jaws, it'd have split her into four pieces. That was fucking terrifying, and she managed to tear her eyes away from Jen long enough to look back over her shoulder, and down at the hungry eyes of the colossal creature.

He didn't have to say it, or communicate it. He liked that she was afraid of him, if only for that split moment. He was a monster of fear, literally, and he fed on fear, literally. And now with the heat of his breath, and the vibration of his quiet rumbles filling her up, that suddenly meant a lot more.

But he didn't bite down, and after a few seconds of panic, she knew he wouldn't. He wanted to scare her, just a little hopefully. It fucking worked. That sudden shock of fear had had her muscles clamping down hard, and in the new position, he'd pushed in more of his tongue anyway, past her squeezing entrance, and deep into her fucking guts.

She whimpered as her arms shook, and her body shivered as another climax hit her. Before she could fall forward and get a nasty gash from his teeth, his one free hand came up and pressed up on her shoulders, giving her something to relax against, and not obstruct the view of Jen. Her girlfriend stared up at her, body shaking, before her head fell back, and her body trembled, too.

Then Sándor rumbled. A deep rumble, with enough bass Triss's whole body buzzed with the vibration. A deep, heavy sound that flowed out and went into the walls. If a whale could purr, it'd sound like that.

Jen forced her head up, and she stared down at the huge cock resting between her tits, as a giant wave of white flowed out of it. It didn't squirt or gush, as if it was too heavy and thick for that. Instead, it came out as a massive, slow wave, and with Jen half sitting up in Sándor's hand, gravity caused the huge wave to gently splash between her tits, before flowing down over itself and her body. A moment later, a similar wave came flowing out of Jen's pussy, thick cum that took its sweet time pouring out of her before trickling down her thighs and Sándor's pelvis.

More, and more, and more. Sándor slowed his masturbation, and instead only gently moved Jen up and down a single inch, keeping her balls deep as he used her to milk his orgasm. She managed to lift her hands and set them onto the base of the huge cock sitting on her, and she even found enough energy to gently stroke it. The rumble her hands pulled out of Sándor was enough to have Triss's insides vibrating like a living ... vibrator. More and more cum flowed out of him, heavy globs of it, each so thick it only slowly fell from Jen's body, leaving thick trails of the fluid on her skin.

How Jen managed to pull herself out of her own pleasure to think up new kinky shit to do to the giant monster fucking her, Triss had no idea. But she did. Jen leaned forward slightly, and with both hands, pressed her big tits together against the head of the giant cock coating her chest, neck, and stomach in buckets of cum. Again, Sándor rumbled pleasure, and gently lifted Jen up so he could masturbate with her body a little faster, and at the same time, rub the head of his bigger cock against her tits where she pushed them together for him.



It went on for a while. How long did it take a normal dude to finish coming? Ten seconds, if that? Sándor went on for at least a whole fucking minute of just drenching Jen in slow, heavy, thick waves of cum, before it finally came to a stop. The girl now looked like she was wearing a white robe from the neck down.

Triss whimpered as a weird pulling sensation filled her, and Sándor lifted her up out of his mouth, pulling his tongue out at the same time.

“Jesus christ,” she said. “Jen, you okay?”

Jen nodded slowly, her two hands now resting against the base of the big cock sitting on her white stomach. Her pussy was drowning in a pool of white cum, completely hidden from view.

“Y-Yeah.”

“I—” She gulped as Sándor turned her around as he lowered her down. Uh oh. “Um, Sándor? Jen’s—”

She outright squeaked when Sándor lowered her in the exact same way he had Jen, with her facing him, legs dragging down his abs until they spread around his waist. One of his free hands took the bigger, drenched cock sitting on Jen, and pointed it upright.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, right? ‘Cause, I mean, I don’t think —”

Sándor rumbled, eyes staring down at her with that weird mixture of a stern statue face, and obvious animal hunger, as he pushed her down against the head of his cock. He rubbed the soaked thing against her pussy a few times, its tip thicker than her own fist, before he lowered it down a bit, and pressed it against her already thoroughly stretched, drenched asshole.

“Sándor! Holy shit dude, can you ... oh ... fuck...” She stared down at the giant slab of abs, and the absolutely massive, cum-soaked cock thicker than her fucking arm, slowly pushing its way into her body. The soaked tip pushed her ass apart, so much more than his tongue did, and Triss held onto his fingers for dear life as the huge thing pressed against her, and spread her open.

The titan licked his lips, and pushed her down. Triss let out the most embarrassing, pathetic squeak she'd ever made, as the giant cock's tip slipped past her clenching asshole, and into her body.

“Jesus ... fucking ... christ...” She held on for dear life as Sándor put her through the same treatment he had Jen. Slowly, with the most absurd patience she'd ever seen, the gargoyle sank her ass down onto his cock, forcing two inches past her clenching ring of muscle before lifting her a single inch, then doing it again. The fucker was so damn thick, each inch was pressure she felt against her pussy through the wall of flesh separating it from his cock.

One of his hands took her right thigh, and the hand holding her waist took her left thigh instead. With one of his hands behind Jen and keeping the girl where she was, resting back against his palm and balls deep on his cock, Triss's back now rested against the girl's breasts. And his other two hands were free to hold Triss's legs and keep pulling her down, giant grip encasing each thigh so completely her legs borderline disappeared.

It also meant he wasn't holding her waist or torso anymore, leaving her free to look down, and stare at the bulge moving up her abs.

Triss tried to say something, maybe ask Jen for a reality check that this was really happening. All she managed was pants and groans, as Sándor sank her deep. The bulge pushed higher, slipping up to her navel, and past it, as the giant beast eased her down and down. Once she was low enough, her ass pressed against Jen's

pelvis, but Sándor kept pulling her down anyway, and Jen's legs spread far apart to make room for Triss's ass as she sank deeper.

So. Damn. Thick. His cock filled her with heat, its malleable texture bending slightly to fit her god damn guts, and giving her squeezing muscles a little leeway to work with. But even being a bit bendy didn't change that the cock was thicker than her forearm, and longer. And he was determined to get every inch into her. Deeper, deeper, until the distension on her once flat stomach reached way past her navel, and got closer and closer to her sternum.

Finally, Triss's ass pressed against the beast's pelvis, squashed snug between Jen's thighs and right up against her pelvis. Every inch of the fucker was inside her, filling her, making her gasp—and quickly realize it'd gotten harder to even breathe with so much meat inside her. Thank god she didn't need to breathe, but still, how fucking deep was he?

She stared down at the bulge along her stomach, and the tip of it that almost nudged against her sternum, showing where most of the cock was pressing up into her.

“Oh ... god...,” she said. “Jen ... I, I um...”

Jen reached around her, and hugged her tight, squashing her heavy wet tits against her back as her hands roamed Triss's body. One hand reached down, and teased along her inner thigh just above Sándor's finger, while the other pressed against her belly.

“Oh my god,” Jen said, in the same tone as Triss. Her hand slid up higher and higher, squeezing and pressing on the distension, and earning some rumbling purrs from Sándor that had both girls quivering. Jen couldn't see much, trapped behind Triss like she was, so she let her fingers see for her, prodding and pressing, until they reached up to Triss's breasts, and the bulge just underneath them. “Oh. My. God.”

“Christ, I ... I—nnng!”

With another deep, rumbling purr of pleasure, Sándor lifted Jen and Triss both up at the same time, gently working a few inches of length out of them, before he eased them back down again. Triss’s clenching asshole squeezed for all it was worth, but everything was dripping wet. All she managed to do was make the gargoyle rumble more, and fill both girls with enough vibration buzzing through their insides they were both whimpering.

Triss expected Jen to start fingering her, or play with her clit, or squeeze her tits, or anything. Nope. Jen was reduced to putty faster than Triss was, and she hugged her tight, wrapping her arms around her and holding on for dear life from behind, as Sándor fucked them both.

“Sán ... dor...” Triss reached out and pressed down on the behemoth abs in front of her. “W ... Wa ... W...” No good, she couldn’t get the words to come out. All she could do was quiver in Jen’s hug and Sándor’s grip, as the beast gently bounced them on his cocks.

And then not so gently. He lifted them at least six inches off his lengths, before he sank them back down. Triss pushed down on his abs, trying to slow him down a bit as he picked up speed, but the gargoyle found his new, slow-but-not-too-slow rhythm, and was determined to stick to it. Again and again, he lifted them off his cocks, two dolls in his hands, and sank them back down until he’d made sure every inch was buried inside them.

Jen clutched Triss tight, and writhed. Triss would have said something if she could, ask Sándor to slow down if he could, give Jen a break since the girl was clearly cumming and cumming hard, while the gargoyle made no signs of stopping. She wasn’t much better off. The constant, wet, delicious friction against her sensitive ass, combined with the ridiculous girth of his cock pressing against

every inch of her pussy and then some, was too damn much. She came too, and squeezed on Sándor's fingers as her empty slit clenched hard, and shot juices straight down onto his pelvis hard enough it splashed up onto his abs.

Sándor looked pleased. He licked his teeth, rumbled some more, and turned Triss around.

“Sándor!” Fucking finally, he'd slowed down enough she could say something. “Dude, we're ... we're...” The look on Jen's face as Triss was turned to face her, both her legs now hooked over Jen's hips, shut her up. Jen's eyes were glazed over, half closed, mouth parted slightly, and she had a half smile on, the sort she sometimes got when she was really, really into the sex zone. There wasn't a single thought going through that Ventrue's mind anymore, just sex, bliss, and a clenching pussy drenching the huge cock stretching her to her limits.

Before Triss could look away from Jen's gorgeous, sex-coma face and cum-soaked body, Sándor bounced them again, earning some instant kitten mewls from the Ventrue. She reached out, wrapped her arms around Triss again, and hugged her close, squashing their breasts together and coating Triss in the warm, white cum from earlier.

Triss hugged her back, slipping her arms in between Jen's back and Sándor's palm. She managed to peek behind her up at the gargoyle, just long enough to see his hungry eyes locked onto her ass, before she melted against Jen and let her head lull over her girlfriend's shoulder. Squashed together with her legs hooked over Jen's hips, her pussy rubbed against Jen's pelvis, coating it in her juices.

Jesus christ, Triss could actually feel the bulge on Jen's stomach press against the one on her own stomach. So much meat, filling her until she was ready to explode. She squeezed Jen close, and held

on tight as the giant beast found a faster rhythm, and bounced them on his cocks while he sat back on his throne, enjoying himself. Faster, harder, hard enough Triss's ass rippled with each bounce, and Jen's tits jiggled despite being pressed against hers. Flowing flesh, squirming and wriggling, as Sándor masturbated with their bodies.

Jen's thighs were soon drenched in a new coating of juices, almost all of it Triss's, and plenty of it hers. They held on, whimpering into each other's ear as the giant rumbled with pleasure. He got a little faster, and a little faster, his quiet deep rumbles getting louder as he bounced them harder, lifting them higher until the beast was pulling at least eight inches of his lengths out of them, before pulling them both back down balls deep. All they could do was hold on, and tremble.

Her girlfriend clutched her hard before desperately patting Triss's back several times. She was trying to say something.

"Sándor!" Oh thank fuck, Triss found enough air to say his name between the bounces that had her squeaking like a chew toy, his cock literally knocking the wind out of her.

He stopped. Both girls clutched each other as they shivered, legs shaking, toes curling, slowly coming down from their orgasm high as Sándor let them simply sit there on his cocks.

"I think..." Jen's hugging arms relaxed, and she let them go limp into the giant palm behind her. "I think ... I'm gonna tap out."

"Wuss," Triss whispered, and she gave her girlfriend a quick kiss. "Sándor, can you..."

The gargoyle, with two hands still holding Triss's thighs, used his other two hands to gently lift Jen off his cock. It was fucking glorious. Triss stared, gulping as she watched Jen's tight pussy clench on the huge thing on the way out, a bit of her insides coming

out with her, just slivers of pink pussy flesh exposing themselves before the huge, cum-drenched log came free.

Jen wasn't off the hook. Sándor held her between his legs, half dangling half standing, holding both her hands up overhead so she didn't collapse. He pulled her in close, and with how thick and kinda malleable his now free cock was, it hung forward toward her. Maybe in another situation, Triss coulda grabbed it and massaged it or something, like Jen had done with the bigger cock before. But Sándor had other ideas. He brought Jen in closer until her chest pressed up against it, and the huge cock nestled in between her big tits.

He lifted Triss up, and sank her back down again, forcing another squeak out of her as the giant slab of meat filling her insides pressed deep enough it made her head spin. Triss looked back at the creature, and he licked his fangs as he stared at her and her ass, before he peeked his head to the side a bit to make sure Jen was lined up with his other cock. It was.

It didn't take long. Sándor bounced Triss for maybe two more minutes, earning a few pathetic whimpers from her she doubted she'd ever made in her life, as his cock stretched her apart. And each stroke meant the other cock resting between Jen's breasts shifted gently between her soft, cum-drenched tits. And with her so close, between Sándor's and Triss's legs and looking up at her, both girls stared into each other's eyes as Triss again clenched down hard, and squirted juices straight onto the cock in front of her, fucking Jen's tits.

Sándor slowed down, and the world slowed down with it, as the first gush of his cum poured into Triss's insides. She blinked, looked back at the gargoyle and his subtle, satisfied smile, before looking back down at Jen. Sure enough, more of the heavy globs of white cum oozed from the huge thing on her body, and with his glans against her neck, this time it poured out and over her shoulders, the

tops of her breasts, and down over every inch of her body below the chin.

That much cum was pouring into Triss's guts. She stared at the holy mess her girlfriend was getting drenched in, for the second time, before looking down at her distended belly, and the growing bulge there. Both girls stared, and both girls groaned at the way it shifted slightly with the obvious waves of warm, white cum filling her up. He was literally pumping her insides full of his juices.

Just like last time, his orgasm lasted ages. Buckets of fluid, just, pouring into her, until she was wriggling and squirming with how much of it flowed from her ass and around her thighs, but still went deeper into her. This was insane. She clenched on the fingers holding her legs, and a hard shiver pulsed through her as Sándor worked her back and forth a few times, making her milk more cum out of him with muscle spasms.

"Sándor," Jen said. "I think I can stand on my own now."

The beast, nearing the end of his orgasm, nodded as he let her go, and set his other two hands casually on the arms of his throne. If Triss didn't know any better, she'd think this was a perfectly normal day for this gargoyle, leaning back in his throne while turning a fucking gorgeous vampire into a cock sleeve he could pump full of cum until she popped.

Now on her own two feet between the gargoyle's legs, her now white body almost up against the throne, Jen took the cock between her breasts into both hands, and gently worked its length with a milking grip. More cum flowed onto her until it literally dripped off her hard nipples and down into a pool of white around her feet.

"Sándor," she said, eyeing Triss evilly. "Want to lift Triss up? Just a little ways? I want to try something."

Uh oh.



“Jen, don’t you dare. My insides are thoroughly tenderized and I feel like I’m about to explode. If you—” Her voice vanished under another pathetic little mewl, as Sándor did as Jen asked, and lifted her up and up until her empty slit was on display for the Ventrue.

Jen licked her lips as she stared at Triss’s pussy, and guided the huge cock in her hands toward it.

“Jen! I’m warning you, if you—” Oh fuck.

Jen pressed the huge, swollen head of the giant cock against Triss’s dripping slit, and rubbed it against her clenching hole. She wasn’t gentle. She pushed against it, half guiding it, half forcing its fat tip against her pussy.

Sándor lowered Triss down, and Jen made sure the huge cock stayed where it was, jammed right up and under her cunt. Her clenching muscles gave way, and the monstrous thing slipped inside her.

She tried to say something. Beg for mercy? Something, anything. But the friction and pressure of Sándor’s second cock filling her up ripped the wind out of her. She stared down at her body, panting, mouth hanging open, as Sándor gently eased her down, sinking both his cocks into her holes. And as one cock pushed up into her ass until he was practically in her cum-filled guts, the other spread her tiny cunt wide, and deep, stretching her pussy inward as the head of his warm dick pressed against her deepspot.

When her insides gave some resistance, Sándor slowed down but didn’t stop, content to grind her around and around, rubbing his glans against her deepest place, until her aching muscles stretched more to fit him. Triss couldn’t do a damn fucking thing but stare, eyes locked onto her stomach, and the huge bulge pushing up along her abs. It wasn’t subtle. It was a big, fucking, bulge, showing a second cock wearing her pussy like a sleeve, and another behind it, pushing up through her insides.

Sándor pulled her down more, until she thought she'd pop. No room left inside her, not an inch. She couldn't even bend anymore. She sat there in the beast's hands, and went limp as the gargoyle sank her down until her little slit's lips found the base of him. Balls deep.

"Oh my god," Jen said, and she put both her hands on Triss's stomach. "Oh ... my god..."

Triss tried to say something, but getting enough air into her lungs was too damn hard. Either she let it go as a weak little whimper or pant, or an attempt to take a proper breath was cut short by the pressure filling her.

Jen's massaging hands slid up the bulge on her stomach, up to where it stopped a few inches above her belly button. And higher above that, the other bulge behind it, going even higher and almost hitting Triss in her sternum. So deep Triss could feel its malleable shape bend — just slightly — to fit her insides. Triss stared down at her body and Jen's hands, just as shocked, just as frozen.

And then Jen slid her hands down and down, and cupped the giant monster's soaked testicles in her palms. Enormous, heavy things, coated in everyone's cum and dripping the warm fluids everywhere. She giggled a couple times as she experimented, lifting them up and down in various patterns, before she grinned up at Triss, leaned in, and put a heavy, hard kiss on her clit.

Too much, too fucking much. Triss again let out the weakest, most girly sound she'd ever made, kitten mewls they could barely hear over Sándor's breathing, as the shock of Jen's kiss sent electric bliss through her whole body. Sándor took it as a sign, and he ground Triss around a few more times, trying to fit more cock into her despite every inch of his lengths already rearranging her insides.

Triss's muscles clenched hard. With her pussy stuffed to its limit, she couldn't squirt out her juices with force like usual, but that

didn't mean they didn't come out of her anyway, trickling like a tiny waterfall down over the giant testicles underneath her. Jen's giggles turned into moans, and her hands slid up to massage the giant bulge on Triss's belly, while her eyes stared down at the mess Triss made.

Sándor rumbled, deep, powerful, and with one hand still on each of Triss's thighs, holding her spread open like a toy, he lifted her up half of his length, and sank her back down.

"Fuuu—" The wind got knocked out of her again once the beast pushed her balls deep, and she whimpered with the final bits of air before they were gone. Sándor wasn't gentle; not super rough, but not gentle either. He bounced her, hard enough her small tits bounced too, and she stared down at her body and the giant bulge on her stomach as long as she could before her eyes drifted closed.

A gargoyle over twice as tall as her, was masturbating with her body, and forcing two gigantic cocks into her insides. Holy fuck. It was surreal, and for a second, she thought she was dreaming, but the vibration of Sándor's rumbles buzzing through her body yanked her back to reality.

Her eyes opened when he stood up.

"Sándor?" Jen asked.

Sándor stepped over Jen, clear over her fucking head, before he turned around, and with one of his free hands, picked Jen up and sat her down on the giant throne instead. Before she could ask what he was doing, Sándor squatted down in front of the throne, facing it, and lowered Triss down onto Jen's body.

Jen lay back on the huge throne, looking up at Triss, confused, but her eyes went wide as she looked up at the gargoyle now looming over her, like a monster ready to pounce. She gulped as Sándor leaned over the two of them, and they disappeared under shadow as the titan spread his wings. With two hands still holding

Triss, his other two each took an arm of the throne, and he hunched over the two vampires as he held Triss in place against Jen's lying body, and fucked Triss more.

He didn't lift her up and down anymore like a sex toy. He held her in place, pinned her against Jen's chest, and fucked her, like a beast. He pulled his hips back and thrust into her, and the world disappeared as the monster again sank his cocks balls deep into Triss's pussy and guts.

Sándor roared. Not a rumble or a purr, or a grumble or anything quiet. He fucking roared, more than loud enough Triss's whole body clenched hard, and Jen's eyes widened again. Scary. The gargoyle was fucking scary. And exhilarating. His voice rumbled throughout the huge stone hallway, and echoed in the aftermath as the monster thrust into Triss again and again.

He could have fucked her hard enough to literally break her, but he didn't. If it'd been just the Horror, it probably would have, but Sándor kept the pace reasonable, by giant monster standards. His heavy, soaked testicles gently slapped against Triss's thighs as the titan found a consistent rhythm, pulling his hips back before thrusting them into her, working over half his length in and out of her with each stroke. All Triss could do was let out a tiny squeak with each thrust, and go limp, body lying on Jen's, while Jen hugged onto her tight.

Triss came again, and it didn't stop Sándor. The beast probably didn't even notice. He kept thrusting, giant cocks pushing past Triss's clenching muscles until his testicles were slapping her newly soaked thighs harder, and splashing everything with her juices. She could feel him, stretching her apart, huge girths forcing her stomach to bulge and press into Jen's. She could feel the distension slide up and down her abs with each thrust. And she could feel the heat of his cum, when he finally slowed down, buried himself balls deep inside her, and came again.

“Oh ... ffffuck...” Triss went limp, and went into lala land. Electric pulses worked up and down her body, from her nipples stabbing into Jen’s soft tits, to her curling toes under her dangling legs hanging off the front of the throne. Her cum dripped from her toes, but that was just tiny drops compared to the copious warm flood of cum that flowed down her thighs now. Thick, heavy, hot, white cum that oozed from both of her holes.

Some of it managed to swell places in her pussy she had no fucking idea Sándor could reach, so much cum flowed into her cunt she felt it, going deep into her and filling her womb.

But it was the cum gushing into her guts that had her shivering. Most of the cum he shot into her slit squirted out of her, but most of the fluid he poured into her ass flowed into her insides, and she held onto Jen as her belly swelled.

“W ... Warm,” Triss said, voice a shaking mess, and an octave higher than usual. She could barely breathe before, and now with Sándor filling her up, it was almost pointless to try.

She lay there, letting her boyfriend fill her with cum, as Sándor slowed down to nothing. He went quiet. The girls went quiet. No one moved as Sándor simply held Triss balls deep on his cocks, and gently ground his massive weight against her tiny body, making sure she milked more cum out of him. She did, whether she wanted to or not, body trembling and squeezing.

An eternity later, Sándor pulled out, and Triss managed to relax as all that cum flowed out of her. She kissed Jen’s neck, and Jen kissed her back, as the orgasm aftershocks tingled up and down her cum-soaked thighs still pouring with new waves of the white fluid.

But finally, it stopped, and with a few more minutes to recover, Triss found enough energy to push herself off Jen, and sit beside her. The throne was more than big enough for both girls to sit, legs

dangling. And a glance down showed a literal pool of cum at the throne's base. Fucking christ.

~~♥♥♥~~

Sándor got down on a knee in front of them.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Triss laughed, and with a shaky hand, reached out and touched the man's huge, handsome face. She pulled on his hard jaw, got him closer, and gave him a kiss. Hard to kiss something this big, but she tried.

“Y-Yeah, I am ... I think. Jesus christ, you really just ... went to town me.”

“I've been wanting to do that to the both of you ... for a long time,” he said.

“Really?” Jen asked.

He nodded, grinning. “Many fantasies. I wasn't sure if you could ... manage me, but you did. I am ... very satisfied.”

Holy shit her boyfriend had been fantasizing about fucking her and Jen as a giant monster all this time? Fucking. Awesome.

“We can ... do some more,” Triss said. “Later, maybe? More fantasies? I know there are things Jen wants to try.”

Jen put up a hand. “Of course!”

“But,” Triss said, “there's things I want to try too. Lots of ... different things.”

Sándor's grin softened. “You are welcome to stay in my lair whenever you want. I will make sure my Horror's hunger will not be

an issue.”

A new jolt of tingles worked through Triss’s insides, for a different reason, this time with some butterflies in the stomach, too. Moving in with Sándor? That was ... exciting, and for more reasons than just the inevitable amount of monster fucking there’d be.

But that was a good reason, too.

## Chapter 180

~~Antoinette~~

“Do not lie to me, Begotten. I can see your thoughts.”

“No you can’t.” Sándor did not so much as blink as he looked at her, and then back down at his electric guitar.

The two of them sat together in her Elysium Tower, in one of its many deep, large rooms. This one was a carefully balanced room with acoustic panels in strategic locations, to ensure whoever played their instrument within its center, would experience only the most perfect balance of sounds. The appropriate amount of time smearing and echo, minimal but existent. No standing waves. No loose bass to bury their instruments and hide their depth.

But other than the various, and sometimes intricate arrays of white panels along the black walls and ceiling, with especially thick panels within the room’s corners, it was an empty room. Large enough for plenty more than Antoinette and Sándor, but small enough that such a small arrangement felt natural. She had been tempted to invite Maria, but ultimately, she was happier to have not. The two of them would never get along, and she wanted to speak with Sándor alone.

“Nonsense. I can see it in the way you move. I can see it in your eyes.”

Sándor effortlessly played a scale along his guitar’s neck, and the tiniest smile appeared, only to vanish. The man did not like showing his emotions, but he had them. It would be an interesting challenge discovering them, a challenge that likely intrigued Beatrice to no end.



“Fine. It’s going well.”

“I would imagine so, for it to garner such massive reactions from you.” She grinned at him as she mirrored his scale. Alas, the cello was not designed for such quick notes. She did well, and Sándor watched with a pleased, if subtle expression.

“It’s going very well,” he said at last.

“That is good. Beatrice, and even that little minx Jennifer deserve some happiness. As do you, whether you believe it or not.”

He nodded slowly as he looked back down at his guitar, and quickly tested another scale.

“I believe it.”

“Oh?”

“I do.” He nodded again, and played the scale faster.

She eyed him as he continued to warm up. Any other man would have explained what he meant, but Sándor was content to let his words stand. He knew that she knew he referred to the night of Jacob’s death, and the advice the dead souls had given many. A powerful night for all present, and perhaps Sándor most of all.

Antoinette mirrored the scale.

“I can only imagine the sex has been quite the adventure for a man such as yourself. Two women at once, with appetites as large as theirs? Jennifer is a buxom, beautiful woman. And of course, Beatrice and her rather ... large derrière.”

He missed a note, paused, and resumed playing the scale again, faster.

“You’re shameless.”

“Of course.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if rolling them would have been too great an emotion.

“The sex has been great, and they’re both gorgeous. And, they’re both wonderful.”

“That they are.” She offered the man her most warm, inviting smile, and scanned his expression as he peeked up at her from under his stern eyebrows still aimed at his guitar. A confirmation. The two women had indeed satisfied some of his fantasies, helped settle his nerves, and perhaps, even opened him up to new experiences he had not considered.

Antoinette was tempted to tease him about it. A threesome was hardly a step above vanilla, and neither was anal sex, two forms of sexual activity that had been practiced by many cultures for thousands of years. But she could not tell how sensitive the man would be to teasing. Some quiet men were quiet because they were fearful, with sensitive egos. She doubted that applied to him, but still, no reason to poke the bear and taint his newfound pleasures.

But that did not mean she could not indulge the conversation and satisfy her curiosity, either.

“And the gargoyle?”

He lifted a brow as he looked up. “What about it?”

“Forgive me for asking, but it gave me the impression it was capable of sex, when I saw it. Am I wrong?”

He looked back down at his guitar. Hiding his facial expression then. Embarrassed? Unsure of himself? She could not tell, not yet.

“Not wrong.”

The small inflection was enough to tell her much. He had had sex with the girls while transformed, and it had been good. And considering who he was now dating, the girls had likely been the ones to suggest the idea.

Antoinette tapped her chin with a finger, before again setting her bow to the strings of her grand instrument. She paused, opened her mouth, and closed it, before again playing a scale.

“You want to say something,” he said. He had not looked her way.

She smiled. “You know I am interested in sexuality in many ways. Academically and artistically.”

“I do.” He tuned one of his strings.

“It appears you have indulged Beatrice and Jennifer in what has likely been some of their greatest sexual fantasies. I would be in your debt to learn of the details.”

“Details...”

She grinned as she looked back to her cello, and again played the scale he did. The cello would never be as fast an instrument as the guitar, but a few centuries of practice helped mitigate the issue.

“Details. Such a fantasy is so tantalizing, so delicious, I am afraid I must ask for the particulars.”

“I’m not sure I get ... why my sex life would be so interesting to you.”

She laughed and shook her head. Sándor was an ancient, wise man, but the ways of a woman’s mind were, perhaps, still a mystery to him.

“The idea of a beast, gargantuan, deadly and dangerous, powerful and beyond intimidating, even terrifying, and yet strangely handsome and oddly masculine? And, dare I say it, perhaps a touch tortured, morose, and longing for companionship? That, is a romantic fantasy given life, Sándor. Have you not spoken with Jessy? Or rather, has she not bombarded you with tales of what it is like to be pinned and thoroughly ravaged by Eric when he is transformed? To be filled to bursting by hot flesh, claws wrapped around her throat, while a hungry beast glares down at her with an aching need to wholly possess and own her? She craves such a fantasy.”

“I...” He gulped. Finally, she had managed to dent his armor.

“Have you not seen Disney’s Beauty and the Beast?”

“I ... have.”

“Then be aware that many, many women, found the idea of Beast in said movie, to be utterly carnal.”

“Because he transf—”

“No, not because he transformed into a man at the end. I mean, as the Beast, Sándor. A deadly, terrifying, massive, strangely handsome monster. To be held down and ravaged by such a creature? Many young girls — and boys — had their sexual awakenings watching that film.”

He frowned slightly. “You might ruin that movie for anyone listening.”

“Then be glad it is only you that listens.” Chuckling, she played her scale again, faster, faster than a song would require, until she felt comfortable her Kindred half would not interfere with her muscle memory tonight. “There is no need to feel self conscious. Women everywhere would love to taste such a fantasy, not just

Beatrice and Jennifer. And as you and I become better friends, I hope you will share with me the details of such an indulgence. I envy those girls.”

He eyed her, a little suspicion in his gaze.

“You never—”

“Alas, never. Looking back, I can see I was too absorbed in my own growth of power to ever dare risk a sexual encounter with a deadly creature, such as a werewolf or monster. Now, I am centuries old. There are few creatures on this planet I could not fight face to face. The delight in being helpless and at the mercy of a colossal creature about to force his massive length into my dripping, boiling insides? I will never experience such a treat. And while I adore my life with Jack, and our sexual dynamic, a wandering mind cannot help but peek over the fence to examine the grass elsewhere.”

The man said nothing for a while, watching her, looking for the joke in her words. There was none. She was serious, and she made sure he knew it as she held her smile.

“You’re a strange person, Antoinette.”

“Do not be ridiculous, Sándor. No one can live as long as us and not become a touch bizarre.”

“Touché.”

She laughed, and motioned to him and the small tablet in front of him, held up by a music stand. It could display sheet music, and scroll through it automatically, along with a metronome beat for them to follow. She had her own.

“I assume you know Vivaldi.”

He frowned slightly. “I do.”

“But...”

“But I was kinda hoping we could play something a little more contemporary.”

“Why would we, when we can play the true classics?”

With his subtle frown unrelenting, Sándor looked at her, and began to play.

She stared, and forced herself to keep her jaw from dropping, as the man effortlessly played Vivaldi’s Summer. He did not glance at the tablet, and needed no metronome. Indeed, as his left hand smoothly danced the fret board, and his right hand’s picking missed no string nor struck too hard, Sándor continued to look at her. And despite herself, her mouth did part slightly as he began to tap his foot. To play a fast, complicated piece of music from memory without error, on beat, was the territory of a master musician. To do so while tapping the foot, was a place where even the virtuoso struggled.

She stared on and listened as he completed the movement, and she managed to close her mouth once again.

“I ... did not realize you were this talented, Sándor. Dare I say, you are more talented than I, or even Maria.”

“Thank you.” He nodded as a small smile crept onto his face, and he looked down at his guitar as he effortlessly swept an arpeggio. “The gargoyle likes to ... sit around, and watch the world go by. I like music. So I practice a lot.” And by a lot, the quiet man likely meant several hours a day, every day, for literal centuries.

“I can only imagine.”

“So, Maria’s good, too? I’m surprised you didn’t invite her.”

“We do not get along, she and I. I am a scientist. She is a devout, religious...”

“Simpleton?” he said, offering her a knowing eye.

“She is not simple. That is part of the reason her blind faith in a religious figure infuriates me so.” Shaking her head, Antoinette set her bow against her strings. “You think I should invite her regardless.”

“I do. I can play the piano about as good as I play the guitar, but it’d be nice to have a pianist join us. Three instruments. Fuller sound.”

She frowned. “I will ... invite her another night, if you play some classical music with me now, dear Sándor.”

He chuckled, a quiet sound that carried with it a gentle breeze that soothed her. It was likely a sound he rarely made, and she could easily imagine Beatrice savoring each one she managed to pluck from his soul.

“Alright. After that, how about some Pink Floyd?”

---

~~Jack~~

Down and down into the Elysium Tower, down past all the sealed off doors and long hallways where Antoinette did her crazy experiments.

Which one of these rooms did Antoinette kill all those people in? He didn’t want to know. It wasn’t like she kept it a secret from him, and it’d been just a matter of time before the Invictus — and Damien — stumbled onto the information. A lot of kine had disappeared, a lot lot, enough to be a Masquerade risk, and the Invictus and the Prince were doing some double duty on the media

to keep it from spreading. A shit load of people had disappeared off the street, in one night.

Jack wasn't going to ask her about it, either. He knew she'd done, did, and would do everything she could to make sure she only killed kine who deserved it, but, damn that was a lot of people.

Elders were scary. No way in hell could Jack do some twisted shit like that, just execute a bunch of people who deserved it ... Except, that one time, with Beatrice and Jacob...

He shook his head and rubbed his buzzed hair. Don't think about it. That was then, a lifetime ago. Now, he was on a trip to visit his amazing girlfriend, and hang out and talk about stuff. Just, hang with his girlfriend, and talk. Not strategize or talk about politics. Just, hang, and talk.

There were two people in the whole world he actually liked talking to, just to talk about stuff. Damien, and Ann. Yeah sure, the others were his friends too, but not like Ann and Damien. And now he was going to have a conversation with Ann—and Sándor, apparently.

He stepped into the music room, and made sure he raised his eyebrow in a very obvious quizzical manner, as he looked between Sándor and Ann. She had her giant cello, and the gargoyle had an electric guitar in hand, plugged into an amp.

Where the fuck did Ann get an amp? Did she even know anything about amps? Or had Sándor brought it?

Jack joined Ann's side, and she smiled at him as she finished off a song, a song he knew pretty well.

"That," Jack said, grinning at her before giving Sándor his 'I know that' eyes, "is Pink Floyd. Comfortably Numb, right?"



“Indeed,” she said. “I am not unfamiliar with the band.”

“You’re ... not?”

“Of course not. But, no, I do not know how to play the song. Sándor was teaching me.”

“Sándor?”

The man nodded, and rested his hands on the guitar, letting the neck strap keep it on his thigh and knee.

“I’m a fan of the classics. Unfortunately for the Prince, she thought I meant classical music.”

“Which,” she said, “are the classics.”

Sándor snuck in a quick smile, so fast Jack almost didn’t notice, before he looked down at his guitar and slipped his left hand under the neck, fingers to the fretboard.

“Agree to disagree,” he said.

“You like Pink Floyd?” Jack asked.

“Yes.”

“And...”

Sándor shrugged. “Classic rock from the sixties, seventies, and eighties, are my true loves.”

“Oh shit.” Jack grabbed one of the tiny stools and sat down. “I mean, I knew you played music. Triss mentioned that, but we haven’t talked much lately.” On account of her hanging out with Sándor pretty much nonstop since they started dating. “You like metal, too?”

He nodded.

“You like ... Metallica? Megadeth?”

He nodded.

“Journey?” Sándor had to like Journey, if he liked rock.

He grinned, again a sneaky thing that vanished quickly as he nodded. He loved Journey.

“Judas Priest?”

He nodded.

“OZZY?”

He nodded.

Fucking god, finally! Finally, someone else who knew music. Sándor probably didn't live in the modern era of metal, like Jack did, kinda, but Jack enjoyed the classics, too. If it weren't for the classics, his favorite metal bands wouldn't even exist.

“Dio?”

He nodded. It was practically a given.

“Queen?”

The man outright smiled, bigger this time, almost as big as a normal person's smile.

“I think it's safe to say I'll like most of the classic bands you do, Jack.”

Fucking. Awesome.

“Newer bands?”

“Maybe.”

“Ayreon? Avantasia? Nightwish?” Not exactly new, but new by Sándor’s standards, for sure.

Sándor nodded.

“Unleash the Archers? Devin Townsend? Blind Guardian? Sabaton?”

He nodded again. Okay, maybe some heavier stuff.

“Lamb of God? Architects? Sold Soul?”

He nodded. He knew the names of all these bands? Did the guy just live and breathe music?

“Lorna Shore? Mys—”

“Jack.” Ann reached out and pat him on the shoulder. “I think it is safe to say, that Sándor has dedicated his free time to music in a way none of us have.”

“Well, damn. I mean, I uh ... I had no idea.”

With a hint of a smile again, Sándor plucked a string, but didn’t play anything.

“I assume you play, Jack?”

“Nah. I’ve tried, but I could never stick to it, you know? Fiddled with some instruments when I was younger but never stuck to anything.”

“No time like the present.”

“From what Damien and Triss have told me, learning to play an instrument as a vampire is a pain in the ass.”

Sándor nodded as he looked at his strings and tinkered with them idly. “Supposedly. But...” He gestured to Ann.

Ann grinned at Jack, leaned over, and kissed him. “You do seem to like music in a way few do, my love. You should learn to play an instrument.”

“But I suck at it.”

“Then it is a good thing you will have centuries to learn.”

He couldn't help but laugh. Encouraging words, with absolutely zero attempt to bullshit him. No ‘oh I'm sure you're fine’ or ‘I bet if you just put your mind to it, you'd be great’ or any of that crap. God, he loved her.

“Well, I mean, I do like guitar and piano, but it's the singing that really sucks me in.”

Ann and Sándor looked at each other, considered, and smiled.

“Then,” Ann said, “you have some work to do, my love.”

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Garry's apartment building was old, shitty, and strangely comfortable. There was something freeing about knowing you didn't need to worry about making a mess. Scuff marks, dirty footprints, no one in this building cared, and its hallway carpets showed enough wear and tear you could see the story in them. A fight here, some old vomit stains over there, claw marks from a local cat using the carpet to sharpen their nails, shit like that.

“I miss this place,” Triss said.

Jack grinned at her. “Take your pick. Crappy apartment buildings and crappier bars, or underground caves filled with bones and stuff.”

“Oh the caves, definitely.”

They both nodded as they walked the stairs up toward the top floor of the building. The stairs creaked, unhappy with the intruders.

“You know your boyfriend is a great guitarist?” he asked.

“Dude is a fucking virtuoso, with guitar and the piano.”

“And he loves music. A lot of really, really good music.”

“I know! Wait, how do you know?”

“I caught him playing with Antoinette. She had her cello and he had his guitar.”

“Oh damn. I knew she played, but, she can play with Sándor?” she asked.

“Maybe not Sándor good, but still damn good.”

“Bet they’d make some awesome metal.”

“Ha, good luck convincing Antoinette to play metal.”

“Not a fan?”

“Fan, no. She can enjoy it, some of it, but she’s a diehard classics lover. And by classics I mean—”

“Mozart and shit.” Laughing, Triss gave him a gentle punch on the shoulder. “Shame she hates Maria. With Maria on piano, the Prince on cello, and Sándor shredding, they could play some pretty wicked shit.”

“That ... is the plan, I think.”

“Really?”

“Sándor wants her to try and get along with Maria enough to at least play with them. He hasn’t had anyone to play with, especially not at his level.” Jack looked up at the old ceiling as they walked. “If he can manage that, he can have my job as peacekeeper.”

“Thought that was only for dealing with the Uratha and Begotten? Not Maria.”

“He’s better suited for the job than I am, if he can get Maria to play with Antoinette.” And honestly, Jack wouldn’t mind someone else taking the role. Then again, with Azamel and Mark dead, and Athalia best friends with his mom, the Begotten were now easy to deal with. Avery, on the other hand, not so much. She was next on the visit list.

Triss knocked on a door, but didn’t bother waiting. With a little more force than was probably necessary, she swung the door open and marched in.

“Garry, long time no see.” And without so much as a glance to the man to see if this was okay, she sat down in one of the shitty chairs in front of his big, wooden, chipped and worn desk.

“Beatrice. Nice to see you’re still a bitch.”

Garry sat behind the desk in his chair, wearing a black t-shirt and blue jeans. He was leaning back, feet up on the corner of the desk, and the shaved-bald man smirked as he looked at Jack.

“Mister Tones,” Jack said.

“Jack. I suppose you’re here to get an update on shit and get back to your job? Took your sweet time, jackass.”

“Sort of. May I sit?”

“Yes you can fucking sit, Jesus Christ.” He pointed a thumb at Jack while looking at Triss. “This guy. Just like Julius.”

Triss smiled. “He is.”

Jack sat, smiled at Triss, and gave Garry a stern look.

“I—”

“This isn’t about Vicky and Parker’s brothels, is it? Those two little fucks can suck my dick, Jack. Those brothels are getting problematic, and—”

Jack put up a hand. “Not about that.”

“Then the fuck do you want? And why’d you bring the witch?”

“Hey!” Triss yelled.

“Oh come on, you telling me you’re not a witch?”

“You said it like I was some ugly bitch making villagers sick. Which, I mean, I could do, but I resent the implication.”

Garry laughed, plucked a knife that’d been stabbed into the corner of his desk, and idly flipped it in his hand as he looked back to Jack, waiting.

“I’m here,” Jack said, “to talk about Jacob.”

Garry stopped flipping the knife.

“I’ve already talked about Jacob with the Prince.”

“All official, right? As official as a Primogen meeting can get.”

“And?” Garry asked, narrowing his eyes.

“And, that’s not what you want to hear, is it? What was said in those meetings. I know you and Jacob were friends, sort of. You want to know more about what happened, right? No Carthian was there to fill you in on the details.”

With a heavy snarl, Garry stabbed the knife back into the desk’s corner closest to him, and Jack got ready for a fight. But, nope, Garry stayed sitting, feet still up on the desk as he looked up and stared at the peeling, stained, white paint on the ceiling.

“And what will this information cost?”

“Nothing.”

That got him to take his feet down.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing,” Triss said, “you fucking asshole. Not everything needs to be a transaction.”

“With the Invictus, it does.”

“I’m not here as Invictus,” Jack said. “If I were, I’d be telling you to stay the fuck away from Vicky and Parker’s brothels before Michael retaliates.” It took some doing to not make it a more personal threat. Talking with Garry was always a struggle, like trying to help a wounded animal who didn’t understand you were trying to help, so they kept snapping at you as you tried to undo the trap. It put Jack on edge.

The man laughed and shrugged. “Alright. Lay it on me, kid. What do you want to tell me about that fucker?” And there it was. Garry frowned, voice darkened, and followed his words with a quiet snarl. He wasn’t happy with Jacob.



“That Jacob wasn’t a villain.”

“The fuck are you talking about? He’s dead, right? You and the Prince and that bitch Elaine killed him because he—”

“We killed him, yeah.” Better he think that than knowing Sam did it. “And stopped Black Blood. But, Jacob wasn’t a villain.”

“He stirred up the hornet’s nest on purpose, Jack, and got me and Michael fighting. He got Avery on Maria’s ass, and nearly got her killed.” Her, being Avery. Garry didn’t give a shit about Maria. “And unless I’m wrong, Antoinette was pretty clear Jacob is the reason Avery showed up in the first place, and lost people to the azlu. Jacob —”

“Jacob barely lifted a finger and had you and Michael ready to burn the city down to kill each other and ruin each other’s lives. Don’t put that on Jacob. Yes, he tricked Avery and others to go after Maria, but if Avery had just taken a second to talk to Maria, that wouldn’t have been a problem. And yes, Black Blood lured them here to fight azlu for him, but Avery wants to fight azlu. Her whole pack does. Even if he hadn’t specifically lured her, she’d have happily come.”

Garry raised a brow. “You’re seriously defending him? You?”

“I figure you deserve to know the truth.” Or at least some of it. “Jacob, and even Black Blood, weren’t just a couple of villains trying to fuck everything over. Sure, their goals were selfish, but they wanted to share their goal with everyone. They legitimately wanted to help the whole world, Garry, especially Jacob. Fucked up as it was, twisted as it was, they wanted to help. Hell, Jacob could have killed us at any time, at the end there. He didn’t. He wanted us alive and around when things changed, and I don’t think it was to gloat. He just ... He...”

“Jacob was awesome,” Triss said. “And yeah, he needed to be stopped, but no one walked away from that fight thinking Jacob was some shithole fuckwad, Garry. He was a great guy. Maybe misguided and fucked in the head, I don’t know, but he was a great guy. I miss my boss.”

Garry looked between the two of them, silence heavy in the room. But after a minute to think about it, Garry nodded as he leaned back in his chair and put his feet back up.

“Jacob and I were always strange friends. We agreed on a lot of things, and disagreed on others. He really fucking hated Avery for what Simon did. If I hadn’t talked to him, I wouldn’t be surprised if he ... if he woulda killed her. Poor guy was really fucked up.”

Jack didn’t say anything. Triss didn’t say anything. Everyone stewed in the shitty reality that Jacob hadn’t been some horrible person, some vile asshole villain who needed to be put down. He was a man who’d been hurt, and saw a way to ‘fix’ that problem for everyone.

“How’s your mom taking it?” Garry asked.

Jack didn’t flinch.

“She’s recovering, pretty fast, too. The whole situation was weird. She really liked Jacob, but he also really helped her ... find herself, I guess. She’s not the same person anymore.” He smiled. “I owe Jacob for some of that.” And his sister for a lot of it, too.

After an awkward laugh, Garry grabbed his knife again and resumed tossing it in one hand, flipping it handle to handle each time.

“You came all this way just to have a chat about Jacob?”

“You’re not that far.”

“Far enough. But don’t think I’m taking this as a favor done, Jack. I don’t owe you anything for this, got it?”

“Got it.”

“But ... thanks, anyway.”

Nodding, Jack got up and made for the door, but stopped.

“Garry.”

“Yeah?”

“You play an instrument?”

“The fuck?”

“He plays a bit of bass,” Triss said as she got up and joined him.  
“Just a bit.”

Jack nodded, grinning.

---

“The fuck do you want, Jack?”

Oh boy.

Wincing, Jack forced himself to keep eye contact with Avery. Every time he talked with her, it was more and more obvious the woman was wolf software running on human hardware. He had to treat her like a dangerous animal, and that included not showing signs of weakness.

“Just wanted to check up on the pack.”

Avery grumbled and looked back to her TV. She sat on her couch in her apartment, a couple of her pack nearby watching as well, but it was clear Jack’s arrival had soured things a bit.

No Clara. He looked, but no, she wasn't around, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"We're fine," Avery said.

"Yeah, you sure sound fine." Maybe a little bit of his classic cynicism and sarcasm would push the conversation along better.

"You really gonna visit just to get on my bad side? And why's the witch here?"

"I'm already on your bad side. And Triss is here because she's my friend." He smiled at the Nosferatu standing beside him, and she fist-bumped him in return.

"Figured you'd take that Damien dude with you," Avery said. "He was damn good with a sword."

"It's his day off. But that doesn't matter anyway. I'm here because ... we haven't really talked much since that night, and—"

"What? That fucking surprises you? Jack, I had to watch that curse thing use your body and kill two of my family. Not to mention nearly kill the rest of us."

"I know. I just thought—"

"Thought what? That because I got to talk to their ghosts, or souls or whatever, and that Monica and Caleb gave you a pass, that I'm going to stop seeing your face every time I think about how they died?"

Fucking ow. Jack looked down, shaking his head. "I ... I..."

"Fucking bitch," Triss said. "You just fucking said that wasn't Jack."

“I know it wasn’t.” Avery got to her feet and marched up to them. For a little woman, she could march. “And Caleb and Monica told me to not blame you. Hell, they told me to thank you for everything you’ve done. And sure, I’ll do that, I’ll thank you for everything you’ve done, kid. But ... I’m only human.”

“You’re not human,” Triss said.

“Oh shut up, you know what I mean. I’m just a fucking person, and ... and I think about Stephanie and Carter, and I’m fucking wrecked. I think about Monica and Caleb, and I’m fucking wrecked. But at least with Steph and Carter, I get to have my revenge. I hunt and I kill those fucking abominations and have for a fucking century. But ... Monica and Caleb? All I can see when I think about them, is that Ripper asshole wearing Jack’s skin.”

Heavy silence, even worse than with Garry.

“Yeah, I get you.” Nodding, Jack turned and reached for the doorknob. “Sorry. I thought—”

Avery put a hand on his shoulder and turned him around.

“Kid, what I’m saying, is ... just give me a bit of space, okay? Give it a few years and maybe I’ll be able to look you in the eye.”

He breathed relief. “Okay, sure. Um, and Clara, she—”

“Is handling it better than I am. She’s still young.”

“Good. Where is—”

“Out with Harcourt, getting laid I assume.”

Triss and Jack smiled at each other, before stepping out.

“Hey, Avery,” Triss said. “You play an instrument?”

“Bit of drums. Why?”

Triss and Jack’s smiles only grew as they left, leaving Avery with eyebrow cocked and confused.

---

Triss and Jack walked the streets, slowly heading back to the more populated center of South Side. They didn’t say anything for a while. Not an awkward silence, just a silence that didn’t need to be broken. If it hadn’t been for Julias’s visiting them to say goodbye that final time, it definitely would have been an awkward silence, and painful. It’d be the sort of silence most people had to deal with when hanging around with people who used to be connected by someone, and now that someone was gone.

Jack and Triss were lucky. Unlucky, and lucky.

“I’m on my way to Damien’s,” she said after a bit. “Piano lessons.”

“So much for him having a day off.”

“Dude. Teaching me is a delight.”

“Ha. Good enough to play anything yet?”

“Nah, not really. I mean, some simple Disney stuff?”

He laughed. “Figures.”

“How’s that?”

“You’re the type who’s probably always wanted to be a Disney princess.”

“Hey, fuck you. I am a beacon of feminism. I don’t need no king or—”

“You want to sit in bed, get fed pancakes — or blood now, I suppose — by a bunch of servants, while your dad rules a kingdom and owns a giant castle. You want to try on fancy custom-made dresses, and have suitors doing everything in their power to win your hand.”

She snorted and shoved him. He shoved her back.

“Hey, that ... does sound awesome.”

“As awesome as a cave filled with skulls and candles and ritual symbols?”

“I mean, yeah? I live in a cave filled with skulls and candles and ritual symbols. Being a pampered princess would be novel.” Despite her attempts to hide it, he could see her grinning.

“What’s up?”

“Well, Sándor asked me to move in with him, sorta.”

“That’s ... wait ... weird? I mean—”

“Not like that. I mean, into his lair. We still haven’t seen Aaron, and I’m pretty sure he’s just up and left Dolareido. But if he hasn’t —”

“He’s not gonna—”

“Dude, you don’t know. You didn’t see him, at the end, when he tried to stop me. He—” She cut herself off this time, and waved both hands for a second. “Don’t worry about it. He’s my problem, and I’ve got a few rituals set up to hopefully warn me — us — if he shows up. I was gonna say, because no place I sleep is perfectly safe, Sándor’s letting me stay at his place, his lair. And, uh...” She squirmed a bit, rubbed one of her arms once, and looked down as she smiled. “He was pretty insistent I could stick around.”

“Stick around? You mean, live there?”

“I guess? Kinda? ... yeah, live there.” She shivered. “That’s fucking scary!”

“He is a nightmare monster. The castle is, literally, a nightmare.”

“Not because of that. Er, mostly not because of that. I meant more normal shit. How the fuck do you live with someone else?”

“You hadn’t been living with Jennifer and Jacob and them?”

“Fuck no. I hung out there, sure, slept there too but that ain’t exactly ‘living’. Sándor thinks I could, like, live with him.”

“Which is ... what? Hanging out in his lair slightly more than you did the witch cave?”

She threw up her hands. “It’s symbolic!”

“Symbolism is a trap. Just think about the reality. You’re gonna spend more time with the guy you love—”

“Whoa whoa whoa! No L words have been exchanged yet.”

He leaned in and eyed her. “Really?”

Rolling her eyes, she shoved him away hard enough to hit a lamppost. None of the nearby kine looked. Her Obfuscate skills were getting better.

“Really. Awesome monster sex aside, my relationship with Sándor is very ... normal, and new.”

“And normal means what? You can’t say things like ‘I love you’ because there’s no big, dramatic moment to underline it?” He leaned in again, eyeing her until she turned away slightly. “The



relationships that need big dramatic moments are called ‘toxic relationships’.”

She put a hand on his shoulder, but instead of shoving, she pat it slightly, and smiled.

“Getting smart in your old age.”

“My sire taught me a lot. He was awesome.”

“Yeah, he was.” Laughing, her pat turned into a shove, and she timed the shove so his shoulder hit a lamppost dead on this time. “Yeah, it’s normal, and I’m very afraid of ruining that. It’s so comfy.”

“I admit, comfy does sound nice.”

“Dude, there is no one living a comfier life than you.”

“Eh?”

“We all saw you getting jerked off by Elaine onto the Prince’s tits, with five”—she held up five fingers—”kine there to kiss it all off.”

“Oh ... right.” Damn it, Ashley. “Sex aside! I love Antoinette and my relationship with her, but I wouldn’t exactly call it comfy, in a normal kinda way. And thinking about it, maybe I wouldn’t like normal? I dunno.”

“Well I do, apparently. I like that I can get in bed with Sándor and we can cuddle and watch a movie and no one has to say a fucking thing. It’s almost like ... all the drama shit got wrung out of us before we ever started dating.”

“If you’re gonna be basically living at his place now, then maybe it’s something to think about?”

That got another smile out of her, and she nodded as she looked down, thinking. She loved the guy, she knew it, but it was just so

weird for her to be in a normal relationship she didn't know how to approach the topic. In another month or so, they'd sit down and have a romantic, powerful, but otherwise normal and healthy conversation where they'd share their feelings with each other. In her lover's castle.

Before he could stop himself, he laughed.

"The fuck is so funny?"

"Disney princess is moving in with a beast and his giant castle. Does he have talking utensils?"

"Dude, fuck off." She tried to go for a shove again, but he managed to jump out of the way. "And Belle wasn't a princess. Plus, the castle is creepy as fuck."

"You like creepy."

"And it has a giant ghost town outside of it."

"You like the ghost town." He put up a hand before she could retort. "Go live your Disney fantasy ... metal version, I guess."

"Ha, I guess that is what it is, isn't it? Fine, fine, I'll go live in a giant castle, safe and secure and getting routinely railed by a giant sexy monster. And hey, maybe I'll invite your mom, and she can join Jen and me riding Sándor. Think she can handle two giant dicks at once?"

"Dude ... not cool."

---

~~Damien~~

"Aye? Ye did?" Fiona asked.

Jen grinned wildly as she nodded. "Yeap."

Damien groaned as he rolled his eyes, and glared down at the piano keys in front of him. They were in his apartment, Beatrice beside him on his piano bench, and they were supposed to be going through piano lessons for her. But when Fiona and Jennifer were around, it was impossible to get her to focus. She sat on the bench backward, facing the others on the couches, laughing and even occasionally giggling, a sound she never used to make.

He didn't say anything. Much as this chattering annoyed him, it made Fiona happy. And, it made Beatrice happy. It even made Samantha happy. She sat beside Fiona, and couldn't help but giggle along with her, sometimes outright losing control and letting out a snort from how hard she laughed. Triss and Samantha deserved some happiness.

And, in a painful way, this was sort of like exposure therapy for him, all this socializing. The problem was when Jen steered the conversation toward sexual topics, and Fiona not only did nothing to stop her, she pounced on the opportunity.

"We were both dying for it," Jennifer said. "After seeing what your blood did for Damien, first thing we did is head back and do that to Sándor, and—"

"You saw Fiona with Damien?" Samantha asked. "Details!"

Triss chuckled, glanced Damien's way, snickered at him and his probably very obviously uncomfortable expression, and looked back to the girls.

"We found Fiona and Damien having some wonderful sex at Bloodlust a couple days ago," Jennifer said. "He'd taken a drink of this cute little creature already." She leaned in and gave Fiona a playful slap on the knee. "So naturally, Fiona was making quite a mess all over the man. But it was Damien that surprised us. A private man, not exactly prone to outward acts, correct?"

Everyone looked to Damien.

He put his fingers on the keys and played the famous eight notes of Beethoven's 5th symphony. All the girls laughed.

"Well!" Jen continued, "it definitely left an impression with us. Lots of hugging, and choking, and spanking."

"Oh my." Samantha peeked over the couch to Damien, and Damien caught her in the corner of his eye before looking back to his piano.

"So we tasted Sándor, and ... oh my, the rush. The absolute rush. It was so powerful, overwhelming, and frightening. It was like ... getting drunk, very quickly—if memory serves. But also the same adrenaline rush of a flight or fight reaction. It was extreme. We were unprepared."

Fiona giggled as she nodded. "I hope ye enjoyed it."

"We did. But then Sándor surprised us. I mean, he told us he was going to do it, but it still surprised us."

"What did? Oh aye, right. He took ye to his lair."

"Yes. And ... proceeded to fuck us until we couldn't walk anymore."

Damien slowly peeked back over his shoulder again. Okay, yes, this wasn't a conversation he'd planned to be a part of, but they were here, in his living room. And the idea of Sándor, the giant gargoyle, having sex with two women at once, while transformed, was ... intriguing.

"Details!" Fiona said, squealing.

Jen, obviously thriving on Fiona's and Samantha's enthusiasm, held up two fingers.

"Two. Two cocks."

"Two?" Samantha asked.

"Two. And they were ... very, very large. And one was bigger than the other."

"Which," Triss said, "I had to handle, because Jen here was too much of a pussy."

Jen scoffed. "Well I'm sorry if—"

"No no no, you don't get to play innocent here." Apparently giving up on the pretense of being here to learn piano, Triss hopped off the bench and sat down beside her girlfriend. "This bitch here was fucking the smaller dick, which was still fucking giant mind you, while I had to handle the bigger one. And then Jen taps out! Like it's wrestling! Before I knew it she was helping Sándor get both dicks inside me, and I was lucky I didn't just explode by the end of it."

"How big?" Fiona asked.

"Fiona!" Damien reached out from the bench and gave the back of the couch a slap. Of course that did nothing to deter his girlfriend. She just giggled, stuck her tongue out at him, and leaned back toward the girls.

Jen held up hands, indicating a size. A huge size.

"Like that," Jen said. "Thicker than my wrist. And that was the smaller one."

"And you took both!?" Samantha asked Triss, voice rising a lot more than expected.

Whoever said women were prim and proper and didn't talk about extremely intimate details, never met two or more women at the same time. Utterly filthy creatures. Vile. Eve tempted Adam, and Jezebel was fed to the dogs.

Damien laughed quietly, shaking his head as he looked back to his piano and gently practiced some scales. Lucas's old lessons sounded so ridiculous in hindsight.

"And I lived to tell about it," Triss said. "Joys of being a vampire. We're pretty durable."

"I mean, I've seen some porn of normal women putting some large things inside them," Fiona said. "Even a living lass can stretch quite a bit."

Everyone went quiet, before erupting into laughter again.

"It's nice you ladies are having fun," Samantha said, with a little inflection Damien hadn't expected. Ah, right, she'd had some sexual interactions with all the witches. Her friendship with them was different than the one with Athalia.

"How about you?" Triss asked. "Taste any interesting kine lately?"

"I'll have you know I met a very nice man at a book store a few nights ago."

"Really? How'd he approach you in at a book store?"

"I approached him."

Jennifer whistled. "Oh my." No need to say it. No one expected Samantha to have that much courage, not in a social situation like that.

"I did!" Samantha said. "And I ... I um..."

“Tell us tell us!” Fiona said.

“We uh...” Samantha was squirming. Damien didn’t have to look to tell. “I took him into one of the quieter corners, hidden behind some bookshelves, and I ... I Kissed him.”

Jennifer clapped. “Quite the Daeva, aren’t you? Seducing kine ... in strange places, but seducing nonetheless. Did you sleep with him?”

“No. I—”

“Why not?”

“Jennifer! I just met him.”

“So?”

Jennifer. A modern day Lilith.

“Because I ... I don’t know. He was a kine. I don’t want to start a relationship with a kine ... do I?”

“Plenty of books about it,” Triss said. “You know, those black tragedy books about vampires romancing a human, getting the human all obsessed with them, only for it to all go down in flames.”

“Triss!” Fiona said. “Dinnae be mean.”

“Hey I’m just trying to be real. Human-vampire relationships can get pretty fucked up, especially if she makes him a thrall or ghoul. Then you’ve got a dotting servant who’ll do almost anything for you. That’s fine if you’re keeping them at an emotional distance. Not so fine if you’re looking for more.”

“But, couldn’t I just ... not give him my blood?” Samantha asked.

“Sure, if you’re cool with your lover dying of old age. But what vamp is going to let their lover, or even their fucking pet, die of old age? It’s a pretty weird, shitty situation. Buuuut, if you just want a fuck toy and a servant, thralls and ghouls are awesome.”

Fiona hopped up from the couch, and sat on Damien’s bench with a loud plop, body facing the couches and the girls, but head pointed directly at him. That, was a Jezebel grin.

“You want me to adopt a thrall, or a ghoul,” Damien said, eying his wicked, sinful girlfriend.

“Aye!”

“A man, I assume.”

“Ha! Aye, a lad, if ye can stand it. But I wouldnae mind having a lass in bed with us.” She walked some fingers up his arm to his shoulder, very spider like. “Someone we could both have some fun with, ye ken?”

He rolled his eyes, now intimately familiar with the dark space hidden inside the upper echelons of his eyelids and brain.

“Ya dinnae want a ghoul?”

“Mekhets like to do things quietly, and alone.”

“Is that so?” Triss asked, and she replaced Fiona on the couch beside Samantha. “Sam, you shoulda seen the way this church boy fucked Fiona in Bloodlust. I swear he was putting Fiona on display for Jen and me. We got to see everything.” Triss leaned in toward Samantha. “I mean everything. Big dick, her little pussy, making a mess. Damien made it all very visible.”

Samantha gasped and looked over the couch back at him. “Damien!” The look in her eyes was a combination of surprised and



disappointed, classic mother look. Damien had never been close with his parents, at all, hence his attachment to Lucas back then, but even he could feel the ancient weight of a mother's mom gaze.

"I ... it was..." He grumbled and looked back down at his keys, earning more laughs from the girls.

"Aye, and it was great," Fiona said. "Begotten blood turns vamps into truly wicked creatures. I love it." She scrunched up her nose, leaned in, and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. She knew this social environment was Hell for him, and this was her way of telling him she'd make it up to him.

"Damien's aversion to joy aside," Jennifer said, watching him and apparently reading his mind, "Triss makes a good point. If you want a fuck toy, or even just a blood bag you can trust, a thrall is a great option. You'll definitely want to run it by Antoinette first, though."

"Okay," Samantha said. "I'll ... think about it. About that, and what Triss said, 'cause I like him and I don't wanna ruin that."

"Smart," Triss said. "It's a whole lot healthier to be in a relationship with someone who has some free will, ya know?"

"That ... is a little sad to hear. My son has three thralls, and—"

"Antoinette probably has a dozen or so, Sam, not to mention her two ghouls. It's just a fact, the older you get, the more you need some thralls and ghouls to keep you safe during the day, and be a food source in emergencies. But she also seems to know better than to get romantically into one. And, speaking of, how is Jack?"

"Jack is good!" Naturally, Samantha's voice rose in pitch. She liked talking about her son. She was proud of him. "I was talking to him yesterday. He's ... He's different. Very different, than when he was alive. But, very different than he was after that, too. When I woke up that first night, as a vampire, I could tell Jack was all torn

up inside, you know? He was worried about me, but he was the one who..." After a slow, heavy sigh, Samantha sat up a bit straighter. "He's doing much better than before."

"Sam, you have a serious mother complex," Jennifer said. "Stop worrying about your son so much. Yes, he had to deal with some pretty horrible things, but he also had some powerful friends to help him."

"I know! I can't help it. He's my boy. My ... only child..."

Before Damien could blink, Jen and Triss both got close to Samantha, and hugged her. Fiona ran over to join them, leaving Damien to stare at the trio of heads surrounding Jack's mother. That was way too much social contact. But, instead of getting up and shoving people away, Samantha let out a very happy 'aww' sound and gave everyone hugs in return.

How Jack came from this women, Damien had no idea.

"Jack's fine, like you said," Triss said. "You, on the other hand, need a man."

"I don't need—"

"You need a man to snuggle with, and talk to about your day. You know it. I know it. And we're gonna find you said man."

Samantha grumbled. Ah, there it was, a noise Damien had heard from Jack many times. They were related.

"Come on," Jennifer said, "let's go to ... um ... I would say Bloodlust, but you'd rather hunt for men elsewhere."

"Not hunt!" Samantha stood with the Ventrue and Nos, shaking her head. "Not hunt. Socialize. We could try a ... quieter night lounge, maybe?"

“You mean an expensive club filled with preppy types and rich shits?” Triss asked.

“I mean ... yes?”

The girls laughed and hugged each other some more, before Triss gave Damien a small wave.

“Same time next week, Damien?” Triss asked.

He frowned at her with his most intense glare, which wasn't very intense. Jack could do intense. Not Damien, and she knew it. Laughing, she waved, and she, Jen, and Samantha left.

“Your friends are evil,” Damien said.

Fiona giggled up a storm as she came and sat with him at the piano again.

“They're nae evil!”

“You don't see it because you're too close, but they're very evil.”

“Samantha?”

He shook his head. “Not her, but she will be soon enough. Daeva blood, Antoinette as a sire, and those two as close friends? She's doomed.”

Laughing until he had to grab her shoulder so she didn't fall off the bench, Fiona eventually leaned in toward him and hugged him.

“I'm nae?”

“You're just as corrupted as those two. Always were, even before you came to the city. Probably before Vrall joined you.”

She stuck out her tongue. “I blame the internet.”

“So do I. Clearly you’ve been living a sinful lifestyle since you hit puberty.”

He got her. Giggling like a maniac, she blushed and hugged him, and rubbed her nose into his.

“When I was a wee lass, I read those vampire novels every girl loves.”

“Those aren’t exactly healthy reading.”

“Pffft. They’re fun!” She kissed him, and tightened her hug on him before getting up, and reaching for the light. “Vrall wanted to spend some time wit ye. Ye up for it? She dinnae have two dicks, but I think she’ll keep things interesting.”

He hadn’t spent much time with Vrall lately, not since Azamel died. Fiona wanted him around, and he wanted to be around.

“Only if it’s okay with you.”

“I am Vrall, ye ken. Of course.”

She flipped the light switch, and the room went dark.

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It was the jungle. Her jungle. Usually when he visited Vrall they went to the haunted hospital nightmare. A dense jungle wasn’t exactly the best place for a chat, or sex.

“Vrall?” he said. No response. That happened sometimes when she pulled him into her lair. She told him it was because of the nature of opening and closing chamber doors, but he was pretty sure she liked making him stumble around in the dark. It was kind of frightening.

That’s why she liked it. No matter how comfortable he grew with the spider woman, there was always that element to her that wanted

him to be afraid of her. Begotten struggled with that, and how it ruined their relationships with the people around them, Athalia being the prime example. It was also part of the reason Fiona left her hometown. But it was a good move, coming to Dolareido, both to get away from her family so she didn't hurt them, and to find more food.

It also meant that, every time Damien interacted with Vrall, there was always that tiny element of fear in the mix, because there had to be. Vrall was beautiful, and frightening. Triss felt the same way about Sándor's Horror, and it probably made their romantic encounter ... spicier.

He'd never admit it to Triss, but it made his encounters with Vrall more thrilling as well.

Sure enough, after a couple minutes of careful walking through a jungle of dense foliage full of insects and stalking predators, he found a dangling, thick white rope of spider silk. In the darkness with the canopy blocking out the two moons, he couldn't see shit, but the rope caught just enough light to glint slightly. Plus, he basically fell into it. And surprisingly, it didn't stick to him.

When in Rome. He grabbed the rope, and climbed. And climbed. And climbed. There were a few trees around that were absurdly thick, and the canopy of the shorter trees hid their tops from him, until he managed to get a good fifty feet up. Past the first canopy, he found another fifty feet to climb up to a more parse canopy, giant leaves and branches spread apart so the moons were visible. Stars, too.

It would have been a beautiful sight, and it sort of was, except for the distant howls of predators.

The rope took him up to a giant ... trampoline? Something like a trampoline, made of web, spread out over empty air.

“Lie down,” the darkness whispered.

Damien smiled, and stepped off a branch onto the huge, tightly wound web. It didn't stick to him, which should have made him feel a little less nervous about tangling with a spider monster. But it also meant a very large fall was right beneath him, and from above, it looked more like a death pit trap, the sort filled with poison spikes.

But, thankfully, the web didn't have any gaps in it larger than an inch, and he was free to lie down on it. If he rolled too far to any side, he'd plummet, and probably break a dozen bones, even as a Kindred. He wasn't afraid of heights, but still, it was a little frightening. Which was, of course, Vrall's goal.

The spider woman descended from the shadow of a tree, and Damien gulped as she lowered herself with such smooth, seamless motion, it was chilling. Eight spider legs, each coming out of her spine, each ridiculously long at almost thirty feet, thin, and almost a pure shade of dark steel, ending in tips she could easily skewer him with. Eight Blade Arach, her old title, made sense.

But, terrifying as the blade legs were, the human-ish part of her was always a treat to look at. She didn't bother with her usual white silk dress this time, nude and onyx-colored skin on full display, glistening slightly in the moonlight. Human-like legs that ended in blade points, and three claws instead of fingers and thumb. Breasts just as massive as Fiona's, but on a slimmer body and an inhumanly small waist.

Even more distinct than that, was the lack of eyes. An onyx bone-like plate covered where eyes should have been, and raised up and back into giant horns that curved back like a crown. Not a single hair on her body, anywhere. Combined with her sharp chin and small, sharp navy-tinted lips, it was no wonder ancient tribes worshiped her, feared her, and lusted for her.

She grinned down at him as she used her spider legs to walk onto the giant, flat web, and stood over him, licking her lips. She was about as tall as Damien, without the horns.

Without a word, she leaned forward slightly so two of her spider legs rested on the web near Damien's feet, and two more rested on the web past his head, putting her horizontal. He smiled up at her, doing his best to not let her see how vulnerable he felt, a spike pit of death beneath him, deadly spider monster above him. And he smiled because her hanging like that made her huge breasts hang and sway underneath her.

She used her other four spider legs to poke at and undo his clothes. He helped her. No need to cut them off this time, not without any stick in her web. And with how sharp her spider legs were, he had plenty of reason to undress quickly. She did like to stab him, gently, when he didn't obey fast enough.

Naked, he spread out on the web as if it bound him like a trapped fly, even though this was one unusual web. It was the first time she didn't bother with the stick. Or, was sticky default, and she had to do something to make it not stick?

Vrall lowered herself down toward him, until her heavy hanging breasts brushed against his face, and the rest of her hovered a single inch over his skin.

“Beatrice and Jennifer had sex with Sándor, while he was transformed.”

He nodded, cheeks brushing against the inner contours of her breasts.

“She told you?”

“I am her. I hear what she hears.”

“Right, right.”

Chuckling, she lowered herself down more, and buried his face with her breasts as her stomach settled on his chest. Her thighs spread around his waist, and he shivered as the long, sharp points her human-ish legs ended with teased along his own legs, almost hard enough to cut him.

“The gargoyle is quite the beast,” she said.

“Pretty scary, last time I ran into him.”

“And gorgeous.”

“You think?”

She chuckled, voice quiet and deadly. “I do.”

“Going to make me jealous.”

“Oh? Fiona adores her pretty vampire boyfriend. She loves that you are beautiful, and would look good with mascara.”

He frowned up at her, but she just laughed and slid forward until her breasts fell off the top of his head. Higher and higher she slid up, until she righted her torso over his neck, thighs spread around his shoulders.

“I’m not a pirate in a movie,” he said.

“Of course not.” Nodding, she reached down, and ran her long claws through his hair. She was looking down at him, but without eyes, it was hard to tell. And with her sitting up directly over him, huge breasts hanging down and blocking a lot of his view, it was hard to notice anything else.

“You made it sound like my girlfriend would prefer to be ravaged by a giant gargoyle.”



“I think being ravaged by you, more thoroughly, interests her. You should experiment with inserting large objects into both of her holes.”

He blinked. That was pretty forward advice, even for Vrall.

“I’ll ... talk to her.”

“By all means.” Nodding, the spider lady shifted her hips forward, and lowered her sex directly onto his mouth.

~~♥♥♥~~

Vrall’s proportions were exaggerated, in the most sexual, alluring, deadly sort of ways. A ridiculously tiny waist with huge breasts, a small mouth hiding long fangs, and a very, very small slit. She wasn’t just some spider monster. She was an ancient nightmare god, worshiped and loved, with ritual sacrifices done for her, and she’d likely slept with many of her followers, hundreds of years ago. A divine gift in the eyes of the tribes that paid her tribute.

What she saw in him, he’d never know.

He Blushed Life, and ran his tongue slowly along the outside of her smooth lips, wetting them before sliding his tongue higher. A quick brush against her clitoris was enough to make her shudder, and he grinned up at her before moving his tongue back down to explore the lips of her entrance some more.

“You may be wondering why my web does not stick to you tonight.”

He nodded.

“I thought,” Vrall said, “I would enjoy tonight more if my prey was ... not so much my prey, as my helpless, dotting servant. You will do as I say, with the utmost enthusiasm. Understood?”

He nodded, and gave her clit a quick kiss, earning an evil, soft chuckle from the spider woman and her quiet, raspy voice. Like a lounge singer who'd smoked her whole life. She hadn't sounded like that when he'd first met her, but she'd adapted to Dolareido quite a bit.

“Good. I want my lover bound by my words tonight, not my webs.” She leaned forward, and set her claws onto the web over his head. How she managed to dance her claws along the web without cutting it, he had no idea. “Now, continue. Devour me.”

So he was going to be a slave tonight? He could do that. He spent so many nights tying Fiona up, and sometimes he also ordered her around and made her do things for him. To him. Maybe Vrall wanted to try that?

“Hold my legs, vampire.”

That was, indeed, what she wanted. He put his hands on top of her thighs, and helped hold her snug against his mouth as she got comfortable.

They went slow at first. No need to rush things; the novelty of that truth was still euphoric. They could spend all night doing things to each other, and no emergency would blink on their phones to greet them. So, slow kisses on her inner thighs, one for the left, one for the right, before again his lips found her sex, and explored her lips some more. Gentle, teasing, playful, a part of him he hadn't ever known.

When he tasted a drop of her juices, she leaned forward more, and pressed the front of her slit down against his face. He opened his mouth wide and devoured her, like she'd ordered, and her smile was positively evil. She shifted her hips back and forth slightly, barely moving them at all, only helping him bury her clitoris in heavier a longer strokes of his tongue. More of her juices wet his face, and the spider monster moaned as she shivered on top of him.

Her claws took her breasts, and squeezed, causing their huge softness to spill over her fingers. Her bodyweight never planted down on him hard; she weighed very little even if it did. Her spider legs kept most of her weight off him, giving him no trouble keeping his mouth latched onto her slit, so he could hide her clitoris in his mouth and massage it in faster and faster licks. She preferred it when he started soft, and got faster and harder as she grew more and more aroused, and the beautiful spider creature was growing more aroused by the minute.

She grabbed his head, and pulled it up into her pussy until his lips were flattened against hers.

“Faster.”

He licked faster. The dark, steel-skinned creature groaned openly, quiet voice erupting for a single moment before quieting again as she ground her pelvis down against him. After a few shudders, she came to a halt.

“Stop.”

He stopped. Tongue still pressed to her clit but no longer licking, or daring to move in any way, he let Vrall move in whatever way she wished that milked the most pleasure she could from her orgasm. And she did, grinning down at him with her small, dangerous smile and dark purple lips, as more beads of her juices wet his cheeks.

Once her shaking body recovered, she slid herself down over him until she straddled his waist, and it was his turn to shiver as another droplet of her warm juices fell out of her onto his abs.

And then she moved lower. He managed to push his torso up a bit, weight on his elbows against the webbing, and he gulped as the skinny, curvy creature reached down with a set of claws, took his cock, and aimed it up at her tiny slit. With a subtle, hypnotic sway of her hips, she pressed her small, clenching hole down on his cock's

swollen head, and licked her lips as she slid his glans into her wet insides a single inch. She squeezed, and electric tingles shot down his length and in between his thighs.

“Tell me,” she said, “that I am beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful,” he said, voice wavering slightly as she worked her pelvis up and down, so her clenching muscle stroked the tip of his length and nothing more.

She sank a little lower, and squeezed hard, making him shudder again as a warm bead of her juices trickled down his girth. With that quiet evil chuckle she’d developed lately, she let go of his cock, keeping its tip inside her as she reached out, and set both her hands against his chest. Her human legs lifted up and forward, and rested their rapier tips on his shoulders, leaving her eight spider legs to do the work of keeping her from falling on his cock.

“Tell me I am terrifying,” she said, and one of her spider legs reached up and around to run its blade tip along one of her horns. The spider legs were hyper flexible.

He was tempted to tease her, maybe say something like ‘not all that scary’, but it’d be a mistake. It was the grin. No eyes made it borderline impossible to read her, except now her grin was wearing an especially evil smile that was more than a little scary. Was she angry with him about something? He’d definitely been paying Fiona a lot more attention than Vrall lately, what with Azamel’s death and Fiona being far more emotionally ... hungry, than Vrall.

Plus, even with how utterly beautiful and sexy she was, she was still a monster, with claws and horns and a web. Maybe she’d always looked this scary? He’d gotten used to it, but he could still remember the first time he’d ran into the spider monster, the panic of getting caught in her webs, the chill that’d run down his spine when she’d shown herself.

The memory was enough to send that chill up his spine again. His erection didn't mind.

“You're terrifying.”

Her grin softened, and she lowered herself down all the way, squeezing on him in spurts as she did. Hot, wet, clenching flesh surrounded his cock and buried him in heavenly warmth that didn't fit the spider woman's exterior at all, and he groaned as he fell back, lying on the web again. She was so ridiculously tight.

She folded her legs, putting her right leg over his left shoulder along with her left leg. Her hands found her breasts again, and she gently caressed them, teasing her claws up and down her dark skin, while her eight spider legs slowly lifted her up. When only the tip of his length was inside her, leaving it coated in her juices, she lowered herself, and Damien sighed bliss as her gripping pussy swallowed every inch of him.

“I haven't been entirely happy with you as of late, Damien.”

“I ... had a feeling.”

She chuckled. No, it was more of a giggle. She wasn't the sort to giggle, and it sounded less lovely and inviting than Fiona's would, and more like a scary spider monster who impersonated a beautiful woman, about to enjoy her meal. The lure of a siren, or angler fish.

“You fought Black Blood and Jacob without me.”

He lifted his head. “That's what—”

She clenched. He froze, wincing as her boiling insides squeezed hard enough to almost hurt. It felt amazing, her powerful muscles gripping him from base to tip until more of her juices trickled out of her, but she made sure to do it hard enough to border him on the edge of pain.

“It annoys me that you did not bring me.”

“Fiona was out like a light, and everything happened so quickly, and Jacob trapped us, and—”

“Are you sure you could not have stirred her awake?” She relaxed her grip on his cock, only to tighten it again, and folded her arms across her chest under her heavy breasts. Even without eyes, he could tell she was looking down at him, sorta, in a royal manner. Combined with how her legs crossed at the knee and sat on his left shoulder, while her spider legs shifted her back and forth along his body while she sat like a queen, it was a very imposing look.

“No, I couldn’t have. She was completely exhausted. You were ... there, right?”

Vrall sighed, and stopped squeezing so hard. If he’d been human, he’d have let go of his breath he’d been holding onto. Nodding slowly, she slid her feet off his shoulder, and sat sideways on him, legs still folded at the knee and blade tips sticking out over the web, perpendicular to him, dangling off the web’s edge. She put her hands on her knees, contemplative, again like a queen considering her options. She’d used her eight spider legs to turn her seamlessly, and she continued to use them to move her body around and around, making her beautiful ass squash down against his pelvis as she went up and down, while also swaying side to side.

She was dancing on his cock, while also sitting on it like she was on a throne, pondering the politics of her kingdom. It was strangely beautiful to watch.

The warning signs began, and he let out a soft sigh. Heat built up underneath his testicles, and sparks of pleasure flowed out of his swollen glans, down through his length and into his core. Inner muscles flexed, and he pushed his pelvis up—

“Don’t move,” she said, and she licked her small lips as she grinned at him.

He didn’t move. Every part of him wanted to thrust, or grab her hips and yank her down, but the moment he lifted one of his hands, one of her spider legs pressed down on it. If he didn’t give into it, its sharp tip would penetrate his skin. He relented, and gulped as he watched the spider woman slowly sway her body around and around on his cock, up and down in a slower, milking rhythm.

She knew exactly what she was doing. Much as he loved Fiona, cherished every moment he was with her, and enjoyed pinning her and choking her as he fucked her, she wasn’t a very self-aware woman during sex. Vrallar’trakla of the Eight Blade Arach was an entirely different woman, completely in control of every motion, every muscle, and she milked his cock of every gush of cum with deliberate purpose. She was making sure his orgasm was almost painfully pleasurable, and he groaned a couple times as she clenched.

Only when the final spurt of cum flowed into her, and then out of her around her spread lips, did she stop her dance.

“I was there,” she said at last, and she slowly turned her whole body to face him again. The wringing sensation of her soaked insides squeezing on his cock was euphoric. “And I admit, Fiona was incapacitated.” She spread her legs, and leaned forward. Her claws found his shoulders, and she pulled him up into a sitting position before wrapping her legs around him. “But it was ... frustrating, to learn that so much happened. To learn you almost died?” With a heavy sigh, she leaned in, and hugged him tight, burying her face in his neck and her breasts against his chest.

“I ... I didn’t...”

“Hug me,” she whispered.

He hugged her.

“Use your hand and stroke my horns.”

He lifted his hand, and ran it along the texture of her horns. Surprisingly smooth, but not perfectly smooth, almost like a turtle shell. He'd never touched her horns before, not like this at least, and to his surprise Vrall let out a content sigh as she relaxed into him.

“Caress my back, and the grooves between my legs. Both hands.”

He did as ordered, and ran his fingers between the bumps where her spider legs connected to her spine. A hard, firm texture, again almost like a turtle shell, that quickly softened into a normal skin texture outward. He rubbed, massaged, and experimented, pushing in on those places with his thumbs hard, as if trying to work out the knot in a muscle. Vrall sighed bliss again, relaxing against him. She liked it.

“Now, hold my hips, and bounce me on your cock.” She leaned back, and with her human legs still wrapped around him, she used her spider legs to keep her from falling as she leaned even further back, while her claws gently held his shoulders.

She was now weightless.

He licked his lips, took her hips, and stared at her glorious body, her huge, dark steel breasts spreading out over her ribs as she leaned back, and her tiny waist underneath them. He held her waist, caressed it for a moment, and enjoyed the softness of her skin there despite how lean and tiny it was. After, he slid his hands onto her hips again, and lifted her.

Still weightless. Her spider legs were, somehow, working with his motion to keep her bodyweight nonexistent.



He slammed her down onto his cock, and couldn't help but smile as the deadly spider monster let out a squeak. A weird, raspy, quiet sound, but a squeak nonetheless. Her huge breasts rippled across her chest, taking a couple moments to settle. Her hands on his shoulders tightened slightly. And her mouth smirked, as if judging him for only now figuring out what she wanted.

He tightened his grip, and bounced her hard. And didn't stop.

"There ... we ... go," she said between bounces, and she moaned with that quiet, alien voice, as she leaned back further until her torso was horizontal. Flexible. And as much as he wanted to look down and admire her tight slit drenching his cock in new layers of juices, he couldn't help but stare at her breasts flowing back and forth over her chest. Her dark, purple nipples jutted out from her onyx steel skin, and her breathing — now panting — raised them with each gasp.

"Faster," she said. He bounced her faster. "Harder." He bounced her harder.

A part of him was acutely aware of how much the web trampoline shook with each bounce, as if it was getting ready to launch him out of it, or maybe tear. But it didn't. He was free to hold Vrall's hips tight, and slam her down on his cock as hard as he wanted. With her being weightless, it didn't have the same sway and motion of normal sex. Every bit of strength he put into moving her meant speed. He bounced her harder.

She let go of his shoulders, and let her arms dangle as she came. And after a quick smile, she let her head dangle back as well, body going limp, and yet not, spider legs still keeping her weightless. He slowed down a bit, indulging in the muscle spasms of her insides milking his length and coating him in wet warmth, but she lifted her head and frowned at him.

“I did not give you permission to slow,” she said, even as her body quivered, and voice wavered slightly.

He got back to work, bouncing her hard on his cock, even as she squeezed like a vise. An affirming nod from her, and she leaned back again, torso going limp again as she relaxed and quivered. The way her enormous breasts flowed in circles along her chest was mesmerizing, and he stared, mouth parted, as he watched them jiggle with each motion he made.

He could feel his juices build again, and he squeezed her harder as he lost himself to his own desire. Closer and closer to orgasm, it became less about sex, and more about doing whatever he needed to do to milk pleasure from his length with her clenching insides. He pulled her down hard enough to make noise, and to feel her ass ripple as her pussy took his length. And—

“Stop,” she said.

If he'd had Fiona's blood in him, stopping would not have been an option. Begotten blood, or the Begotten's vessel blood, filled him with enough mindless need and aggression that he always succumbed to it, and fucked Fiona until she was either begging him for a break, or went coma. Tonight, the sex was far more controlled. Vrall wanted to have a more aware and intimate night with him, and he was going to make sure she got what she wanted.

He stopped, and couldn't help but frown slightly as she pulled herself upright again.

Vrall chuckled as she took his shoulders again, and pulled herself in until she put kisses on his neck, and her huge breasts molded to his chest.

“You make me climax easily,” she said. “I wonder if that's because of Fiona, or because you are a talented lover.” Grinning at him like a playful devil, she leaned back again but kept her hands on his

shoulders, and slowly ground her hips up and down, rubbing her clit into his pelvis as she massaged his length. But she was going too slow to push him over the edge and let him cum, and she knew it.

“I don’t exactly have a long list of lovers in my past.”

“There is two, right? Fiona, and me.”

He smiled. “You’re a lot different to Fiona.”

“I am.” She slid one set of her claws down his chest, and traced the lines of his pectorals and abs. “I am much, much tighter.” If Fiona and Vrall ever talked to each other, they probably had a catty relationship.

Vrall squeezed on him hard, and again he shuddered as her boiling insides pulled more pleasure sparks from his swollen glans. She wasn’t wrong, but no way he was going to say it.

She chuckled. “Sit up on your knees.”

He gulped, got his legs underneath him, and knelt up straight.

Vrall smiled up at him as she leaned back, her spider legs again seamlessly moving around. Even with her pussy wrapped around his cock and thighs holding his hips, he couldn’t feel her spider legs doing any movement. Weightless. She used her spiders legs to lay her body horizontal, hovering and perfectly in line with his pelvis, and she folded her thin arms across her chest under her breasts and held the huge pillows together with her biceps and forearms.

“Fuck me.”

He tightened his grip on her hips again, and pounded into her. On his knees like this, he was free to thrust, and with her still making herself weightless, yanking her toward him was beyond easy. Hard, powerful, rough, he fucked her until the entire web was shaking,

until the branches it was bound to were shaking, and her breasts, still held together by her arms, bounced up and down beautifully and inversely to her movement.

He continued to stare, almost oblivious to her grin, as he came inside her. He slowly pulled her off most of his length, and yanked her back down hard, earning a heavy gush of his cum, and a flowing wave of tingling bliss through his length down between his thighs. Again, he fucked her, slow but harsh thrusts that had her skinny body and her huge breasts jiggling, as her muscles clamped down and more of her juices joined his own. Her expressions were impossible to read, but her mouth was open a bit, and she made a few moaning sounds with each thrust.

She was cumming along with him.

Eventually everything slowed down. He held her balls deep, and let her squeezing muscles milk the last few drops of his cum out of him. She was content to do just that, and she shivered between muscle clenches, grinning at him even as a mix of their juices soaked his testicles.

They both stared at each other for a little while; he did, at least, and could only assume she was also looking at him. After a minute of simply holding still, and letting the jungle night fill the silence, Vrall raised herself in a seamless, all too creepy motion using her spider legs, until she was sitting upright. She hugged him, and hid her face in the groove of his neck.

“You should stay here, too.”

“What?”

She kissed his ear, and hugged him tight, squirming on his cock as she did and making sure to mold her breasts into his chest. Eventually his cock softened, fell free of her, and their juices fell through the web to the jungle canopy below.

“Stay here, with me, where it’s safe. I cannot protect you out there. I can protect you in here.”

Where it’s safe. Like Sándor had provided for Beatrice and Jennifer.

“I don’t—”

“Not to stay here all the time. I’m no fool. But, you should ... rest here, more often, during the day. I’ll protect you. No one will lay a finger on you. I will not ... not let Fiona suffer another loss.”

He smiled into her neck, and kissed her skin as he hugged her back.

“The sun won’t catch me here?”

“There is no sun in this chamber. Forever darkness, where it is safe.”

He nodded slowly as he stroked her back and the hard skin between her spider legs, using his newfound knowledge to make her melt against him.

“I can do that.”

~~♥♥♥~~

# Chapter 181

~~Author's Note~~

And we're done! There might be more MLV epilogue chapters in the distant future, exploring different ideas and stuff. But MLV is officially complete. Thanks for all the love.

This whole chapter is a big porn experiment and some mindless fun, something for the truly degenerate readers. Enjoy.

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~~Jessy~~

Once Eric was out of the room, she looked back, winked at the old man, and lifted up her shirt and bra. The sparkle in his eyes was hilarious, and she laughed as she lightly jumped up and down a few times, showing off how fucking amazing her big tits were, before she slipped the clothes back on, gave him a thumbs up, and chased after his son.

“You didn't just—”

“Personal business,” she said, and she gave him a quick peck on the cheek as they stepped out of the retirement home. “Dude's in great shape for his age. You must be happy.”

“I am. Not necessarily happy with how it happened, but happy.”

“It's the power of tits. All men can be encouraged to become better, awesomer versions of themselves with the reward of tits.” Which was completely legit and a universal truth not nearly enough societies utilized.

It wasn't actually the tits. It was her, showing Eric's dad, that not only was his son in a new life that was awesome and full of good times, but that his could be awesome, too. Tits were the perfect metaphor.

"Uh huh." Her handsome boyfriend rolled his eyes, and the two of them fell into a familiar rhythm on the Dolareido sidewalks. They were a ways out from the business center of the city, but they had nowhere to be. Nothing to stop them from just going on a fun stroll, which was fucking great and a nice change of pace. She had some heads to clonk later, some Carthian assholes being a pain in the ass for Vicky and Parker, but it'd be a few nights before it came to that.

"Tash and me are going to Bloodlust tonight. You in?" she asked.

"Who else is coming?"

"I didn't say—"

"You didn't say it, Jess, but I can see evil in your eyes."

She covered her eyes with her palms, still facing her boyfriend.

"Tash and the boys are coming, duh."

"And."

"And ... Marge."

"Uh huh."

She lowered her hands and glared at him. Of course he was right, and was already down wind of her plans apparently, but she could still try.

"Hey, I think we deserve to hang out and have a fun time!"

"Fun time. Uh huh."

“And that fun time will include alcohol for you and the boys, and Marge.”

“Uh huh.”

“And I’ll make sure Marge gets a deep Kiss. And, uh, maybe Tash will drink her a bit, too.”

“Uh huh. And will Marge be naked during this Kiss? Lying on our booth table? With a couple of your fingers inside her?”

She threw up her hands. “Dude I don’t know! I’m not a fortuneteller!”

“Uh huh.”

Laughing, she elbowed Eric gently, hooked her arm with his, and guided them toward her apartment. No need to explain, she needed better clothes for a trip to Bloodlust.

A question ran through her mind, and she was tempted to ignore it. She had sexy plans tonight, and it was a question that could easily derail that, ruin her fun, and leave her high and very dry. But it was important, and damn it, she loved Eric. Stupid love shit getting in the way.

“Ask your dad yet? About becoming a vampire, I mean.”

Eric nodded as he looked down, thinking.

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“He ... laughed.”

“Well, I mean, becoming a vampire does sound like a joke to most sane people who think we don’t exist.”



“No. He laughed about the idea of living forever. He said, who in their right mind would want to live forever? He’s gonna enjoy life, but he’s also ready to move on, see Mom again, and ... yeah.”

“Wow. I ... shit.” She looked down too, and the two of them walked quietly for a bit. Yeah, that was a heavy topic, with a heavier response from his dad. Part of her regretted asking; no sexy times. A bigger part of her was happy she did. Eric wanted to talk about this, but in classic man fashion, didn’t really know how to broach the topic.

But even she didn’t want to touch the other topic that, unless she took a sunrise to the face or someone blew her head off with a shotgun, she was going to live forever. And he wasn’t. Sure, werewolves lived a long time. She had at least a hundred years of having Eric in her life before he got into that dangerous old category like his dad, if the other Uratha were any indication. But, fuck.

She slid her arm down from around his elbow, and slipped her fingers in between his. He squeezed her hand.

“But I’m not my dad,” he said eventually, and he kissed the side of her head. “He’s got that old man energy going, and will happily go on a ... merry stroll, I guess, when death comes for him. Not sure how he’s going to explain his new sex life to Mom when he dies, but, he’s looking forward to seeing her again.”

“But you don’t?”

“I look forward to seeing her again, but no, I don’t plan on dying any time soon.” He gave her hand another squeeze, slid it up, and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I’m happy he’s happy. Really happy. That’s thanks to you.”

She grinned up at him. “You just gotta know how to talk to a man.”

“Evidently.” He kissed her forehead, smile returning. “Right, so, your place to get some clothes, right?”

Oh. Apparently sexy times weren’t out of the question. She loved her boyfriend.

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She swung open the door to Eric’s apartment, and the group laughed as they stumbled in. Tash and Jessy, the only two not shitfaced, because their seconds lives were cruel and insisted they could only drink blood, helped Marge in. Kat, oblivious of the dangers of drunk people’s feet, immediately attempted to kill them all by rubbing against their shins, and Jessy had to very gently slip a foot under the cat and nudge her aside.

Satisfied with her attempted murder, Kat took a perch on the windowsill in the back, and looked out into the city.

The boys and Eric followed in after. Getting them drunk hadn’t been easy, and they weren’t exactly drunk, just very tipsy, but even that had taken four times as much drink as it’d taken to turn Marge into a mess. The good kind of mess though, giggly and horny and with shit hand-eye coordination. One more drink would have pushed her over the edge into vomiting, and maybe sobbing territory. No good.

Eric had three couches in his big-as-fuck fancy living room lately. A three seater, two seater, and one seater, all pointed at each other; they moved them when they wanted to watch TV. So once everyone was in the apartment, she and Tash set Marge down on the chair, while Jessy sat down on the loveseat. Tash stepped aside so Eric could sit with Jessy, but before she got out of reach, Jessy snatched her best friend by the wrist and yanked her onto the loveseat with her instead.

“J-Jessy!”

“Ha.” Laughing, Jessy motioned for the boys to sit on the bigger couch. They did, stumbling slightly until Eric took the left arm, Art the right, Matt in the middle. “Have fun tonight, boys?”

“Yes ma’am,” Matt said, nodding enthusiastically. “Got to see plenty of skin!” He gestured to the three women.

Jessy wore a tiny black skirt with a high-hip thong, and a black tube top that threatened to fall off any minute. Tash wore a sleeveless club dress, a one-piece thing that stopped halfway down her thigh, covered her chest nice and snug, and left all of her back exposed. Blue, or sapphire, something like that, very pretty. Marge wore the same sort of dress as Tash, though it had more cleavage, with some cross straps exposing her sternum. Black.

“Plenty of skin,” Art said, nodding half as enthusiastically, but that was still plenty of enthusiasm.

Jessy caught Eric’s eye, and he laughed quietly as he nodded.

“Yeah,” he said at last. “I admit, it was nice, dancing with a few lovely ladies.”

Tash beamed brightly. Jessy grinned. Marge managed a happy laugh, and waved a hand as if all the compliments had been for her. Then she got up.

“Marge,” Eric said, “you might wanna sit down and—”

“I! Was promised, a Kiss.” With a happy, teetering sway, Marge walked past the boys, and gave each of them a silly smile, before she fell on Jessy. Marge was a small woman, not Tash small but small, but the angle meant Jessy had to reach out and catch her so the woman didn’t hurt herself.

“Yeah, I did promise.” Nodding, Jessy helped sit Marge between her and Tash, leaving no room on the small couch. “Tash, want a taste of Marge?”

“W-What? No! I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re hungry.”

“I mean, yes, b-but I’ll take a drink of Matt and Art later.”

“Why? Marge is right here, begging.”

“Begging!” Marge said, and she grinned up at Jessy before turning her attention to the tiny vampire beside her. With an evil grin Jessy knew all women were capable of, Marge leaned in toward Tash and rubbed up against her shoulder. Playful shoulder-on-shoulder rubbing turned into more as Marge full-on faced Tash and tried to basically lie on top of her.

“I ... I um...” Tash gulped as she looked between Jessy and Marge, obviously feeling a little awkward. Good. The more Jessy could push her out of her shell tonight, the better.

Laughing, Jessy pulled on Marge’s shoulder toward her, and Marge, borderline oblivious and giddy, giggled as she turned and leaned into Jessy instead.

“Come on, Tash. We both promised we’d Kiss her before the night was over.”

“I p-promised no such thing!”

Jessy grinned at her. “I believe you said ‘umm, y-yes Marge. I’ll k-k-kiss you later.’”

“I ... I ... L-Later could mean anything!”

“Uh huh.” Rolling her eyes, Jessy slid one of her hands down Marge’s back, leaned in, and put a normal, but plenty powerful kiss on the girl’s quivering neck. “What about the boys?”

“The boys?” Task asked.

“The boys!” Jessy gestured to the three boys watching. “They paid to see a good show.”

“They didn’t p-pay anything!”

“Yeah I know, but still. They definitely want a show.”

“A ... show?” Tash blinked at her, before sheepishly looking over at the boys. All three of them were staring at the three pretty ladies on the couch. They’d entered ‘dumb man zone’, where they’d sorta zoned out and were just watching, waiting.

Without drawing Tash’s eyes, Jessy slipped the strap of Marge’s dress up over her head, and let it fall off her chest.

“Jess, w—hey!” Marge sat up, looked down at her small, dark breasts, and let out a sultry moan. Or at least, it would have been sultry, if not for her giddy giggles and tripping words.

“Jessy,” Tash said, frowning at her. “W-What are you doing?”

Jessy shrugged at her best friend, before she hugged Marge tight to her, and Kissed her.

Everyone went quiet as they stared, the boys getting even quieter while Tash’s eyes opened wide as the topless kine wriggled, squirmed, and mewled. How Marge got into hunting, Jessy still didn’t know, but it was pretty damn obvious the girl would have been better off not pursuing that line of work. She was fun! Hunters were supposed to be broody and mean, but Marge turned into a bag

of joy with a drink or two in her, and her body was on just as much a hair trigger as any slut's. Which was awesome.

Marge melted into Jessy's chest, and Jessy hugged the girl tighter as she drank her, letting the girl's own heartbeat squirt the warm fluid into her mouth. Blood was fucking amazing. To a kine, it just tasted like metal. To a vampire, it tasted like ambrosia. It sent tingles through the body when it hit the tongue. It relaxed the body as its warmth coated the throat. It pulsed energy and life through the body once it hit the stomach. And in seconds, whether she wanted to or not, Jessy was Blushing Life as well.

She didn't drink Marge as much as usual. Nah, she had bigger plans. With an evil grin, Jessy helped push Marge back up to sitting, and slowly turned the now half delirious, topless drunk girl toward Tash.

Tash gulped as Marge, barely aware of what was going on anymore, leaned forward toward the small vampire, and then onto her. Full chest-on-chest hug, and while Marge was a small woman, Tash was smaller, and she half fell back into the couch's arm as Marge half laid on top of her.

"Please," Marge said, and she kissed Tash's neck as she hugged her snug.

Tash glared at Jessy over Marge's shoulder, but didn't push her off. Oh ho, was that hesitation in her eyes? It was! Hesitation, and straight-up vampire hunger mixing with horniness. It only got worse when she looked over at her boys, and the two of them were in full puppy mode, mouths open slightly, eyes wide. They liked seeing a half naked woman lying on Tash and begging for her.

After scrunching her nose up at her boys, and then doubly so at Jessy, Tash grumbled a few times, rolled her eyes, and sank her teeth in Marge's neck. She tried to keep glaring at Jessy, but no vampire could resist the lull of the Kiss, the sensation of warm

blood filling the belly, and the life and pleasure it pulsed out through the limbs. Mission successful. Tash melted, and her hands hugged Marge's back as she clutched her prey against her.

And that meant Marge's ass was pointed straight at Jessy.

Jessy slipped both her hands up under Marge's dress's short skirt, between her legs, and pulled her underwear aside. Marge didn't respond, and Tash's eyes were closed. Perfect. Jessy winked at the boys and Eric, who again, all stared at what was happening, but didn't say a thing. Well, if they weren't gonna stop her, Jessy was just gonna keep going until someone did. Point one on her manifesto.

With one hand holding the tiny lacy underwear to the side, her other hand slipped two fingers in between Marge's cheeks, down to her already wet pussy — the Kiss was amazing — and sank them into the girl's slit. Jessy kept her right hand's middle and ring finger's nails short for a reason, since she'd started using Marge to spice up her sex life with Eric, and, god damn the girl's ass was right in front of her, wriggling. The fuck was she supposed to do?

Marge's mewls and whimpers turned into an outright squeak, as Jessy fingered the girl hard and fast. No need to build up to it, she'd been horny for the past hour at least, and getting double Kissed had her on edge. Marge melted in seconds, and Tash was too engrossed in her Kiss to notice at first. She did, when Marge started wriggling like a worm on a hook as she came, tight little slit squeezing on Jessy's fingers for all she was worth.

Tash opened her eyes, awareness kicking in, and she glared at Jessy, but didn't stop Kissing her prey either. She was in it now, out of her mind with the pleasure of the Kiss, and even as Marge obviously shuddered with a cunt-shattering orgasm, Tash continued to drain her. And drain her. And drain her. That, was a full on deep, coma-inducing Kiss, and it gave Jessy plenty of time to lean in, get

closer, and wink at Tash as she continued to finger the small hunter woman. And closer, until she pressed her chest into Marge's back, and squashed her against Tash, who'd closed her eyes again as she indulged her Kiss, and the prey cumming on top of her.

God damn, the tiny vampire was so beautiful.

Tash finally opened her eyes, and Jessy stopped. Marge was drained. Apparently Tash had been so hungry, and horny, she'd actually Kissed Marge into a coma. Chuckling, Jessy sat back, and gently pulled Marge up until she was sitting up between them again. Yeap, out like a light.

"Still alive?" Jessy said, and she gave the girl a small pat on the shoulder. No response. The hunter's eyes were closed, but she was breathing, and her small breasts' nipples were hard as stone despite the blood loss.

"Of course she's alive," Tash said. "I w-would never..." Squirming a bit and rubbing her thighs together, Tash sat up, and looked at the unconscious woman beside her. And, unless Jessy's eyes were playing tricks on her, Tash looked down at the small woman's dark breasts and lean stomach more than a few times. "She um ... she really enjoyed that."

"Girl came her brains out in a single fucking minute." Jessy couldn't help but laugh some more as she scooped Marge up, set her back on the one-seater, and sat back down with Tash. She hooked her elbow over the couch's back, and smiled at her friend before looking her up and down a few times. The girl's nipples were hard and pushing points out against her tight little blue dress.

"You d-didn't tell me you were gonna ... finger her."

"Would that have stopped you?"

"Maybe!"



Jessy scoffed and waved a hand. “Tash, you were hungry as hell. And I know you’ve been waiting to get railed all night, ever since we showed up at Bloodlust. Probably planning to drink your boys.”

“I have n-not!”

“Come on. You’re waiting until you can leave right now! Go home and get those two gorgeous dudes inside you.” She gestured to Matt and Art, who were staring at the two of them with obvious ‘I want to fuck Tash right now’ eyes.

“I ... well, I m-mean, I ... have a healthy sex life with my b-boyfriends. You can’t j-j-judge!”

“You are a horny little thing and I bet if I had a camera here, I could get you to do a live show, right now, and absolutely love it.”

Tash glared, angry ... for a whole half a second, before she looked down with some obvious guilt and shame, before looking over at her boys. They weren’t any help. They both looked at each other and nodded enthusiastically before looking back at Jessy and Tash. Eric chuckled.

“You do ... live shows for me,” Tash said, as if that’d make Jessy feel hypocritical or something. Bahaha.

“Yeah. Ha. I love that. I love it when you watch.” Grinning at Tash, Jessy tapped her chin a couple times before sliding across the small couch to get closer. “I like the way your eyes light up.”

“They d-don’t light up.”

“They fucking light up and it’s such a turn on.” Nodding, Jessy leaned in closer, shoulder to shoulder with Tash, and licked her lips. “Like they are now.”

“They’re ... not...”

Jessy leaned in a little closer, and whispered.

“Want to show the boys something they’ll never forget?”

“I...”

“You know all three of those handsome-as-fuck guys are staring at us, wishing we’d do things to each other. Look at them.” She nodded to Eric first, who was folding a leg to try and subtly adjust his erection. Matt and Art didn’t bother hiding theirs.

“You just want t-t-to...”

“To what? Have some fun with my best friend? Damn right. But more importantly, look at them, Tash. They are drooling. Let’s have some fun and I can guarantee those two boys are going to fuck you for the rest of the night like their lives depended on it.”

Tash blinked up at her before looking back to her boyfriends, and Eric as well. Jessy grinned at Eric, and pointed down to Tash with her eyes a few times, encouraging the man to look at the tiny, pale little vampire instead. He did, and when Tash met his gaze, she squirmed and wriggled, and rubbed her thighs together. Poor girl was horny out of her mind.

“Let’s vote,” Jessy said. “Boys! Eric! You guys want to watch me and Tash have some fun with each other?”

Matt and Art both immediately put up their hands, while Eric rolled his eyes, but lifted his hand, too. Much as Eric tried to be all chivalrous and shit, the dude had a kinky side. He liked it when Jessy vidcommed with Tash while having sex, the pervert. She loved him.

“Jessy!” Tash said. “It’s not a vote.”

“Come on. We’ve seen each other naked, seen each other fuck, a lot, and so have the guys. Hell, you fucked my ghouls with me, way back in the day.” She gestured to the werewolves again. “Just imagine, all three of ‘em, masturbating right now, as we touch each other.”

Her words had Tash wriggling more, obviously getting turned on by Jessy’s story, and the images they put in the tiny vampire’s head. Time to risk it. With Tash watching the three guys, Jessy was free to lower her lips, and put a little kiss on Tash’s ear.

Tash didn’t push her away, and quivered. Progress!

“You’re evil,” she said.

“Yeap. You love it.”

“I d-don’t ... love ... it.”

“Yeah you do. The thought of these three dudes drooling at the sight of you squirming and wriggling while I touch you?” Jessy slid a hand up Tash’s back, and caressed her naked spine, fingers getting closer and closer to the strap behind her neck. “Who knows. Maybe if we put on a good enough show, Art and Matt will pounce and just ravage the fuck out of you. Right. Here.”

Tash squirmed a little more, her eyes locked on her boyfriends, and Eric too. Eric wouldn’t fuck Tash, and that was fine. That didn’t mean they couldn’t have some fun anyway. And Jessy knew just how she’d make all three guys happy.

“Art? M-Matt?” Tash asked, voice quiet and wavering.

The boys licked their lips as they smiled at her. They weren’t gonna do anything to save her from Jessy. And Jessy knew Tash well enough — partly because of all the porn Tash had released — to

recognize the girl's 'I want this but I'm afraid to say it' body language.

What Jessy needed to do, was find the perfect balance of gentle suggestions, and outright bullying. Tash needed a push sometimes, but once she was past that edge, the girl really got into whatever it was that'd peaked her interest. And Jessy was sure this would be just like the porn films her best friend loved making.

So, Jessy lifted up the strap behind Tash's neck, fast enough Tash would have to make an effort stop her if she didn't want this. If she made the effort, Jessy would stop.

She did try and stop her, but it was slow and halfhearted, more of Tash's fake attempts to try and not seem like a total hornball. The act was pointless, and Jessy didn't really understand why Tash was so insistent on clinging to that mask, considering she literally made porn and shared it. But it was also super cute, and it was fucking hot as hell, forcing Tash's dress top down despite her trying to put her hands in the way.

All three boys breathed deeper, too. Oh, that was why Tash acted like this. Tiny little dainty woman acts all defenseless, and innocent-but-horny? It shot fire through the boys' veins, all three of them, and Tash knew it, even if she couldn't admit it. Tash let out the tiniest whimper too, and the boys had to clench their knees to keep from getting up and pouncing Tash right there. God damn she knew how to get a man nearly berserk horny. Maybe Jessy should try playing the innocent, weak and defenseless damsel once in a while?

"You ... meanie," Tash said, voice still a quiet whimper. Jessy grinned down at Tash, and pushed her off the couch. "Hey!" And now with Tash standing, Jessy had an easy time reaching out, grabbing the bottom half of the dress, and pulling it down to her ankles. Which left Tash standing in nothing but her tiny little blue

thong. Her small breasts were gorgeous, and her tiny pink nipples were swollen to hard points.

“Fucking. Hot.” Jessy said, looking her half naked best friend up and down as she licked her lips.

Tash blushed from head to toe as she covered her breasts with her forearms, and looked back at the boys. All three guys stared at her, eyes showing more of that werewolf hunger. Much as Jessy was doing a lot of pushing, it was the three men staring at Tash like they wanted to pin her down and fuck her senseless then and there that had her giving in. It was their hungry eyes that had Tash so horny, Jessy was having an easy time manipulating her.

“You’re evil!”

“Nah, come on. Don’t be like that.” With an evil grin, Jessy stood up, and slid off her skirt, showing her own black thong. Unlike Tash, she made damn sure to stick her ass out as she did, and spent a little time bouncing her ass cheeks on the waistband of the skirt once she pulled it down a bit. Sure enough, all eyes fell on her, Tash included, and everyone watched her great butt jiggle on the waistband before Jessy laughed and kicked the skirt away.

She did the same with her thin tube top. The thing was barely wide enough to cover her breasts, but she had some fun with it, pulling it down just barely enough to expose the tips of her areola, before jiggling it to make her breasts ripple. Her nipples were more than hard enough they poked diamonds through the fabric, and again, all four of her audience stared at what she was doing. She peeled the tube top up, slowly revealing more of her amazing big tits, before taking the thing off and shooting it like an elastic band at the unconscious Marge. It landed on her lap. Bullseye.

“You enjoy this way too m-much,” Tash said, folding her arms across her chest, hiding her tits.

Jessy couldn't have that. She grabbed Tash's arms, and pulled her down onto the couch while conveniently pulling her arms off her breasts. But she didn't sit down with her. She winked at her friend, before marching over the whole four feet to the three men on the couch. She grinned down at them and stuck out her hip as she licked her lips.

“Boys, y'all are about to watch the two sexiest women in the city do some kinky shit to each other, and you're all just sitting here? Fully clothed? Get naked! I want to see some muscles, and some hot guys jerking it — slowly! — while Tash and I have fun.”

Art and Matt blinked at each other, then Tash, and then at Eric, as if he'd have something to say to rein in Jessy's awesomeness. But she was unreinable! She grinned at the three men, licked her fangs, stood in front of Eric, and set both her hands on his knees. And of course she made sure to stick her ass out as she leaned over, and shake her tits a bit so they swayed underneath her.

“I promise,” she said, “this'll be fun.”

“You really are evil,” Eric said.

“Yeah but you love it.”

He rolled his eyes, and looked over at Art and Matt. Guys could get pretty self conscious about getting naked around each other too, but the boys were drunk, and they'd seen each other all naked indirectly through vids and shit. So when Art and Matt reached down and pulled up on their shirts, Eric shrugged and did the same.

Once all three men were shirtless, Jessy helped Eric take off his pants; mostly she just pulled on them. Once he had the button and zipper undone, she yanked them off with a little more roughness than probably necessary, half pulling off his boxers along with them. She yanked them off too, leaving Matt and Art looking at her with raised eyebrows.

So she came over to them, winked, and pulled on their pants, too.

“Jessy!” Tash said.

“I’m not gonna fuck your boys. Calm down. But everyone should be naked!” Nodding, she got their pants off, and helped them with their boxers too. Both guys did a check-in with Tash, not so much for her permission, but to see if Tash was still in her ‘I want this but I’m not allowed to say it’ mood. She was, and the boys let Jessy strip them.

Three fucking gorgeous, ripped, muscular men, all looking at Jessy and Tash, all with big dicks hard and begging for a pussy to milk them. Perfect.

Jessy sat down beside Tash again, and sure enough, Tash stared at the boys and their dicks, blushing from head to toe and squirming. Knowing three gorgeous dudes were looking at her just as much as Jessy, aching to get inside her, turned the little Mekhet on like paper to fire. Tash didn’t even notice when Jessy slipped an arm around her shoulders.

“Now,” Jessy said to the boys, “masturbate! Slow, like I said.”

Matt and Art didn’t even hesitate. Eyes locked on both ladies and their naked breasts, the two men wrapped their big hands around their big dicks, and slowly stroked. Eric took a second, a knowing smirk aimed at Jessy, but he relented eventually, and masturbated. And after Jessy again gave him a few eye-points to aim his gaze at Tash, he aimed his hungry gaze at the petite vampire, and smiled at her as he squeezed his cock.

Tash was utterly hypnotized. What a pervert.

Jessy leaned in, set a kiss on Tash’s neck, and the girl outright moaned. She probably didn’t even realize she’d made the sound.

“Come on,” Jessy said. “We’re supposed to be the ones putting on a show, not them.”

“But ... I um...”

“Get over here.” Laughing, Jessy reached under and around Tash, and picked the girl up, earning a squeak. Jessy turned on the couch, lay on it sideways with her legs up on it, and sat Tash down on her lap, nice and snug over her hips so she could straddle Jessy. “I mean, if you really want, Tash, you can just sit there and let me do whatever I want to you.”

“You meanie! I don’t—nnng!” Tash whimpered when Jessy leaned in, and set her lips around one of Tash’s tiny nipples. Hard as a button. The little vampire pushed her hands against Jessy’s shoulders, so Jessy grabbed Tash’s wrists and pinned them against the small of her little friend’s back. Half hugging, half restraining her, Jessy was free to pull Tash in close, and bury her small breasts in hungry kisses that had her writhing and squirming on Jessy’s lap.

All three boys groaned.

Tash sat up straighter at the sound of the boys’ voices. She’d forgotten about them for a moment.

“Matt! Art! D-Do something!”

Matt and Art did nothing. They sat there, staring at how Jessy kissed and suckled on their girlfriend’s tits, and they masturbated. They were completely mesmerized. And even better, the sight of her boyfriends, and Eric, staring at her with hypnotized eyes while Jessy played with her, was enough to have Tash go from squirming and wriggling to escape, to squirming and wriggling in pleasure. The damsel-in-distress kink really turned her on.

Chuckling, Jessy leaned back and relaxed her shoulders against the arm of the couch, her feet against the other arm, knees up with



Tash's ass pressing against her quads.

"K, you do me. Play with my tits. Have fun."

"You..."

Jessy was tempted to interrupt her and tease her some more, but it wasn't needed anymore. If Tash wouldn't give in now, horny to the point Jessy could smell it, then she'd never get horny enough. Instead, Jessy relaxed back, her big tits on display and half flattened against her chest, and she set her hands on Tash's ass. Tiny but firm and sculpted, it was a great little ass, and Jessy squeezed and kneaded it as she grinned up at her friend.

Tash scrunched up her nose, for a whole one second, before she melted into Jessy's touch, and her horniness swept her away. With shaky hands and a few shy peeks at the boys watching, she set her palms on Jessy's breasts.

"They're ... soft."

Jessy sighed happily. Finally, her best friend was touching her. How long had it taken to get to this point? Fucking decades!

"Yeap."

"And ... heavy." Tash slipped her hands under them, cupped them, and gently lifted them to feel the weight of them in her palms.

"Yeap. Imagine how the Prince feels."

Tash smiled sheepishly, and experimented a little more. She had her own tits, but the girl was mostly flat, and she'd never played with another girl's tits before. This was new territory for her.

"Suck on 'em," Jessy said. "Maybe gimme some of that Jack treatment."

Tash blinked. She hadn't expected the comparison, but truth was, no matter how much Jessy had seen Jack suck on Antoinette's tits in the few vods she'd seen, Tash had seen it a lot more, from the stories she'd shared. Jack and Antoinette fucked in the Elysium Tower in public areas sometimes. So she instantly knew what Jessy meant, and blushed until she could have burned a hole through the couch.

But after another peek at the men, she gulped, slowly leaned in, and wrapped her lips around Jessy's nipple, the one closer to the audience.

Jessy didn't have super sensitive nipples or anything, but it still felt great to have something wet and warm massaging them. Tash was way too gentle at first, but it didn't take long before she picked up the intensity, and full-on kissed it. After a few seconds of that, she pulled her head back, squeezed Jessy's breast, stared at the swollen nipple, and leaned back in again to bury it in living, heavy licks. The boys groaned again, and Tash went harder, outright suckling, and peeking over at the boys as she did.

It was all about the boys, for Tash. Yeah sure, Natasha thought ladies were hot, but she was most definitely the type who wanted a big strong man to have his way with her, routinely. That was her biggest turn on, not women like Jessy. But, hey, this was fine too. Jessy got to have her fun, and Tash got to enjoy turning on the guys in a way she hadn't done before. Everybody won.

Seeing how much the three guys were turned on by Tash and her breast kissing really did something for her. The tiny vampire moaned softly a couple times, and after a very guilty glance up at Jessy, leaned in and pressed her face straight into the other boob, half burying her face in the softness of Jessy's breast. It felt great. Jessy sighed happily as she looked over at the men, smiled at each of them, spent more than a few happy moments admiring their hard

cocks in their big hands, before she slipped her own hands under the waistband of Tash's thong, and slid it down off her ass.

Tash finally stopped suckling, sat up, and frowned down at her. It was the weakest frown Jessy had ever seen, and she laughed at her friend on her lap.

“You're really n-not going to stop, are you?” Tash asked.

“Fuck no. You really want me to?”

“I...” Tash looked over at the guys, at their big dicks and their grips slowly working them up and down, and looked back down at her. “N ... No.”

Fucking finally, admittance! Maybe next time they'd bust out the cameras and do a proper orgy. Not tonight, but still, it was always smart to plan ahead.

Jessy spread her knees, and gave Tash a small shove, making her squeak as she fell between Jessy's legs, back on the couch cushion. A great position to pull on her thong so Tash's legs came up, and the thong came off. And holy shit, a couple lines of juices connected it to Tash's teeny tiny pussy. When Tash saw, she squealed and covered her slit; reflexes died hard.

Laughing, Jessy scooped Tash up and sat her on Jessy's lap again, slipped her hands under her own thong, and pulled the thing off. There, two naked ladies. The boy sighed with desire.

“Whatcha wanna do?” Jessy asked. “What would be the hottest thing we could do to get those three guys over there to cum?” Oh ho, a devious thought occurred to her. “Or, what would look really good on a camera, if we had one?”

Tash, still a giant red beet, gulped as she looked down at her from Jessy's lap.

“I ... I um...”

“I bet I know the position you’re thinking of.”

“What? W-Wait! I didn’t—” She squeaked when Jessy pushed her back again between her knees, and this time helped slide Tash along the couch a bit so her shoulders and head rested on the couch arm behind her, Jessy’s own shoulders and head on the other couch arm.

All three boys groaned quietly, when they realized what Jessy was doing. With an evil, dramatic chuckle, Jessy slipped one leg over Tash’s, and the other under Tash’s. Tash was lying on her back, and so was Jessy, which made it perfect to put the girl into a scissoring position with her, grab her leg so she couldn’t escape, and casually press their pussies together.

“Jessy! You...” Tash peeked over at the boys again, before slowly looking down her small stomach, her smooth, little mons, and down to where her teeny tiny perfect little pussy, was squished against Jessy’s.

Jessy was wet, pretty damn wet, but Tash was fucking soaked. Her juices drenched and leaked down over Jessy’s, and her body shivered as Jessy slowly ground her hips into her to make sure their slits were completely squashed. And, because Jessy had done this more than a few times, she knew how to angle her hips and pelvis to gently grind her clit against Tash’s.

Tash pushed herself up onto her elbows so she could sit up more, but didn’t stop Jessy. Hell, she stared down at the squished flesh between them, eyes wide, body quivering. She liked how it looked. She liked how it felt.

“Not exactly a good position for getting off,” Jessy said. “But damn doesn’t it look fucking amazing? I bet it’d look great on camera.” She reached out, slid a finger down Tash’s stomach down to her mons, and then down an inch to gently run her finger over the top

of both of their pussies and clits. Tash let out the tiniest little mewl, and it was Jessy's turn to shiver. Why did her best friend have to be so damn hot?

"It ... It..." Tash gulped as she looked between Jessy and their rubbing pussies, before looking over at the boys. Sure enough, seeing the three guys struggling to not jerk themselves to a quick orgasm right there had the tiny Mekhet boiling. Her pussy was swollen, dripping, and every grinding motion Jessy made had her shivering.

Shivers turned into trembles. Trembles turned into shaking, and Tash panted as she fell back against the couch, and came.

"Holy shit," Jessy said, watching her best friend quiver and squirm in that fucking perfect way Jessy would never be able to match. Tash squeaked, and Jessy stopped. Yeah, the girl's clit got super sensitive when she came, so Jessy went still and watched with delight as Tash wriggled. More than that, more of her juices leaked out of her, coating Jessy's lips until beads of girl cum soaked her ass. And the way Tash's flat stomach and little waist flexed and rolled with her orgasm, her small body between Jessy's thighs, was beyond erotic. All three guys groaned.

Tash recovered, eventually, and she managed to push up onto her elbows again as she stared down at her pussy, and the mess it'd made.

"I ... I um..."

"As I was saying, it's pretty damn hard to cum from tribbing. Unless, you know, you're a total hornball who cums at the drop of a hat."

"That's ... n-not fair!"

“I’d planned to just put on a good show for the boys, and they could be the ones making you cum. But, damn. Guys, get in here, and look at this, close up! She’s soaking me.”

“N-No!” Tash fell back and covered her face with her hands, but spread a few fingers to peek through them at the men as all three of them got up and walked over. Three big, muscly guys, all with a hand around their cocks, still slowly masturbating as they stood nearly shoulder to shoulder, looking down at the two girls on the couch. Their cocks were beyond swollen, each of them with wet tips, just begging for release.

“Come on guys,” Jessy said, grinning up at them, Eric especially. “Cum all over us.”

“W-What?” Tash lowered her hands and grabbed Jessy’s leg, the one hooked over her own. “But ... But...” Slowly, she looked at the men directly beside her, Matt and Art, with Matt between Art and Eric, Eric closer to Jessy.

“I think I’ll wait a bit,” Art said, grinning at Jessy and winking. Ooh, a devious wink. She liked him.

“Suit yourself.” Jessy took Tash’s leg by the knee, the one over hers, held on nice and snug, and ground their pussies together again. Instant whimpering mewls from the tiny vampire. Jessy used her other hand to cup one of her breasts, and squeezed and massaged it, making sure all the boys got an intimate look at how fucking amazing her tits were.

Eric leaned over her, and set his free hand against the back of the couch over her so he could aim his cock straight down at her chest with his other hand. And he masturbated faster.

Matt clued in and did the same, aiming his cock down at his squirming girlfriend. Tash’s eyes opened wide as she looked up at her giant boyfriend, and she peeked at Jessy a few times, eyes

flicking between her and the huge cock just begging to cum. Precum dripped from the big, fat, swollen glans, and fell on Tash's closer breast.

Laughing quietly, Jessy tightened her grip on Tash's leg, made sure to mostly stay on her back so the boys could see everything; because who the fuck wouldn't want to see everything with two amazing women scissoring. She rolled her abs and made sure it looked fucking amazing, how her lean and fit figure writhed and rubbed against Tash, and how amazing their two smooth pussies looked flattened against each other. Matt couldn't help but stare down at where the two girls were squished together, and even looked over to stare at Jessy a bit as he masturbated. She winked at him, and used her free hand to squeeze her tit all the more.

Eric came first. With a single, quiet groan, the man masturbated faster, and leaned down while half squatting, free hand still on the back of the couch so he could put his cock's tip right on her breast. She helped him, cupped the breast and pushed it up into his cock, and shivered as the first gush of warm cum squirted straight onto her nipple where he rubbed his dripping wet glans. More, and more cum poured over her breast, into the valley between her tits, and down her abs. Werewolves came a lot, even in human form, and sure enough he managed to coat her in enough cum some of it actually reached her pussy.

Jessy let go of her tit, grabbed his cock, and helped milk the last few drops of it straight onto her abs, so it could ooze down her awesome body until it slid between her and Tash again, and coated their pussy lips in cum.

Tash stared down at the cum flowing down Jessy's body, and didn't even react to Matt doing the same thing. The giant got down low, and squirted cum straight down her body. And because Matt was a fun guy apparently picking up on Jessy's vibe, he aimed his cock down Tash's skinny little body so it flowed straight down from

her sternum, down her stomach, her mons and around it, and into the groove of her pelvis and thighs so it got between her and Jessy. Squish, squish, warm white cum, from two guys, mixing and soaking their pussies.

Jessy didn't grind hard enough to make Tash cum again, and she'd never really be able to cum from this position herself. But, god damn, it looked so damn fucking good, a couple big cocks coating them in cum until both girls had streams of white running down their skin, trickling off their breasts, the sides of their waists, down their stomachs, and between their perfect cunts. Everyone stared at how hot it was.

Jessy, was a genius.

“Okay, time for more stuff.” Nodding, Jessy got up off the couch, and both boys backed off as she quickly scooted into the bathroom. A quick glance back showed Tash, staring at her cum-soaked belly and pussy, blushing even worse than before. A lot of that cum was Eric's and she knew it.

Jessy grabbed a few towels, her favorite lube, and rejoined the group as she quickly wiped herself down, and handed Eric the lubricant.

“Here, Tash.” With a mischievous grin, Jessy leaned down and wiped up most of the cum off her girlfriend's small, dainty, fucking hot little body. Tash glared at her the whole time, but didn't stop her, even when Jessy winked at her.

Then she yanked her friend up onto her feet.

“H-Hey!”

“Come on, gotta prepare you if the boys are gonna fuck you.”

“But, I thought ... I d-didn't...”



Rolling her eyes, Jessy guided Tash over to the bigger couch where the boys had been, threw the biggest towel down first in the couch's middle, and sat Tash down on it. Matt and Art sat around her, and took her wrists into their hands, holding them on their legs so Tash couldn't go anywhere. Jessy licked her lips. A small yank was enough to have Tash's ass hanging over the cushion edge slightly, and she squeaked as she looked to her boyfriends with begging eyes.

Jessy took the lube from Eric, poured a huge glob of it into her palm, and pressed her hand against Tash's ass.

“Jessy!”

Jessy stared down at Tash's little slit above her hand, and how it clenched in spurts as Jessy rubbed the lubricant into the even smaller asshole. She wasted no time, drenching the squeezing hole in enough lubricant to drown someone, before she pushed her middle finger against it. And into it.

Tash's mouth dropped, and she stared up at Jessy before looking down at her body, view of what Jessy was doing blocked by her pelvis. Which meant she didn't see it, but felt it, as Jessy sank her ring finger into her as well, palm up, and spread the lubricant around inside her ass. Every attempt she made to squirm away from Jessy's hand was blocked by the boys still holding her wrists, and honestly, they weren't very strong squirms.

Jessy groaned as she pressed her two fingers up, straight toward Tash's pussy, and up toward her g-spot. The simple motion made Tash's smooth little pussy clench hard, and earned a squeak from the trembling vampire.

“Jessy! I'm ... lubricated, okay? Stooooop.” Oh, a whiny kitten voice. Damn that just made Jessy want to bully her more.

“I dunno. I think you need a little more.”

“Jessy, y-nnng!” Tash mewled into more whimpers, as Jessy began to finger the girl, pushing both fingers in her ass up toward her pussy in a nice, proper fucking rhythm. She made sure to use most of the finger in the upward motion, pressing the whole underside of both up fingers toward her pussy, especially her g-spot. And to make doubly sure that’s where Tash felt it, Jessy used her free hand to squash Tash’s lower abdomen, just above her pubic bone.

Poor Tash, reduced to kitten mewls in seconds, as Jessy fingered her ass.

Tash was a bundle of nerves and pleasure, and she melted back into the couch as her body betrayed her. It was beyond hot, watching her squirm, half trying to escape her boyfriends’ hands as Jessy bounced the girl’s ass on the edge of the couch. No need to touch her pussy. Tash’s body clamped down hard as she came, and her empty slit leaked more juices down her lips and skin, down onto Jessy’s fingers, joining the lubricant as Jessy went on.

She could have gone on, forced Tash to keep cumming until she was exhausted and spent, even with a vampire body with a tummy full of blood. But she still had a whole night of fun planned, so she relented, and slipped her fingers out of her friend’s perfect little ass, before standing up again.

“Okay boys, have fun with her.” Jessy rubbed her hands together, and wiped them off on the towel as she watched Art scoop up his little girlfriend, move over to sit on the towel instead, and slowly lower her shaking body onto his cock.

A nice, big, now coated in lube cock that slid nicely into her pert little ass. Tash didn’t fight this time. She spread her legs, mostly out of limp exhaustion more than anything, as Art sank her down and down, thick girth spreading her tiny hole open more than Jessy’s two fingers had. Down and down, Tash’s legs spread out over his,

empty slit on display as her boyfriend slowly penetrated her ass with his big cock. When Tash's ass finally squished against the big guy's pelvis and lower abs, Art wrapped one arm around her waist, and his other hand took her by the throat, and pinned her back against his chest.

Tash melted.

“Wow,” Jessy said, eyes locked onto the embarrassed, guilt-ridden, high-on-pleasure face Tash wore. Getting pinned, trapped, with a hand around her throat, was a huge trigger for her, especially with an audience. “Eric, mind if I get in there?”

“Go ahead.”

Oh wow, her boyfriend was feeling very explorative tonight. Had to be the alcohol. Or maybe he just trusted Matt and Art a lot more than she thought he did? Maybe because of the shit that happened in the spirit world?

Matt stood up at Eric's silent request, and the two of them backed up and stood by, whispering to each other as they watched Jessy from behind. Well, she did have an amazing ass.

Jessy grinned down at her helpless friend, leaned down, put her hands on Tash's hips, knelt down, and wrapped the girl's tiny pussy in her mouth.

“Jessy! W—” Her voice cut off hard as Art squeezed, and with his arms wrapping around hers, Tash couldn't get her hands out to stop Jessy. Which was exactly what Jessy — and Tash — wanted. She squirmed and wriggled, and with Jessy's lips on her slit and tongue burying her clit, it was easy to feel Tash clench and squeeze her muscles. Art was in Heaven.

Jessy grinned around her best friend's perfect little pussy. She could taste Tash's cum, and hers, and Eric's, and Matt's. Tash

trembled, unable to say anything, but her body language was obvious, and Jessy eased up as the girl melted into an orgasm. God damn she was easy to make cum.

Better yet, Jessy tightened her grip on the girl's hips, and bounced her. Sure, her clit was too sensitive to play with mid orgasm, but a deep ass fuck? Tash's legs trembled with muscle spasms as Art's big cock filled her ass, and from how hard Jessy pushed down on her hips and bounced her, his hard dick probably hit all her best, deep places.

Art looked at Jessy over Tash's shoulder as he came, and his eyes half closed as he grinned at her before he leaned in and kissed Tash's neck. It was sexy, and wholesome. Fucking your girl's ass and pumping her full of cum while you kiss her neck and choke her? Didn't get much more wholesome than that. Tash certainly loved it, eyes closing and body going limp.

Jessy stood up and smiled down at her friend as the girl melted into Art's chest again. What to do next?

"You," Eric said as he came up behind Jessy, "have been enjoying being in charge way too much."

"I—" The world went white for a second as Eric grabbed her by shoulder and hip, stood behind her, and slammed his cock into her. Hard. Her legs trembled, and she almost fell as her pussy, already boiling for a fucking eternity, almost came from just one fucking stroke. Sweet fucking jesus christ she did not expect Eric to just penetrate her like that.

She looked back over her shoulder at him. And froze. His nose was getting longer. His mouth was getting longer. His skin was growing fur, and his body was getting bigger.

Uh oh.

“Eric? What’re you—” She blinked. Matt was transforming too, standing a couple feet beside Eric, hungry wolf eyes glancing at her before looking down to his real prey, Natasha.

Jessy’s feet slowly lifted off the ground as Eric, with now giant hands still holding her hip and shoulder, kept her pinned on his cock as he got taller. And taller. And fucking thicker. She groaned as her eyes closed, bliss pulsing out from her pussy into her legs as his giant cock split her open as it grew. It stretched her, her own bodyweight and gravity keeping her pinned on it so it pushed up into her and forced her pussy deeper inside her. And the thing got so damn thick she always thought she might split open when they fucked, especially when the knot filled her. Transforming like this, it was already inside her, and she groaned loudly as it squashed against her g-spot, hard.

Dangling above the floor, skewered on a big, fat, werewolf cock, Jessy managed to open her eyes again, and look up at her boyfriend and his hungry wolf eyes. Transformed werewolves were not part of her plan.

“J-Jessy,” Tash said.

“Tash, I—” Holy shit.

Art’s hand wasn’t wrapped around Tash’s throat anymore. Instead the giant werewolf beast was content to leave both his ridiculously huge, clawed hands resting on his girlfriend’s spread thighs; spread much further now, now that Art was a werewolf and his legs were like tree trunks. The dude was big, giant, even a bit bigger than Eric. If it wasn’t for Jessy and Eric making sure they got furniture durable and strong enough to handle werewolf weight, he’d have broken the couch easily.

And just like Eric, he was balls deep inside his tiny girlfriend. Getting penetrated by a giant werewolf cock was bound to make a bit of a distension on any girl’s stomach, but Tash was such a small,

dainty little thing, it was straight up a big bulge that went way past her navel. Her boyfriend's knot was clearly defined against her skin, too, right above her pubic bone. And Tash, with her mouth hanging open and staring at Jessy, was quivering with that 'oh no they're going to fuck me until I pass out' look in her eyes.

Jessy didn't get to admire for very long. Eric fucked her, hard, and Jessy hung in his grip with nothing to hang onto. The giant beast kept his knot lodged in her pussy, but that didn't stop him from bouncing her a few inches, her cunt's muscles locking his cock inside her. Her ass rippled with each impact, and her feet bounced against his knees and shins, Eric holding her horizontal so her whole body swayed with each thrust.

So. Fucking. Deep. Christ she loved that feeling of something stretching her in, and wide. So. Fucking. Thick. Her g-spot was absolutely squashed, and every thrust altered the pressure his knot jammed against it, until her muscles lost control. Tingling waves shot out from deep inside her cunt, and her toes curled as she let her head go limp, and melted into the electric shocks working up and down through her whole body. Nothing, nothing in the whole world except maybe the Kiss, felt as good as those sparks of bliss in her thighs making her legs spasm, and coursing up through her core.

Art rumbled, drawing Jessy's eyes as the orgasm faded, and Eric slowed down again. Tash was staring at her, biting her bottom lip. She really liked what she saw.

"I didn't ... plan this," Jessy said.

"L-Liar."

"I didn't! We were just gonna have a good time, maybe touch each other a bit, before fucking our boys. I didn't—" Her voice broke away into a wavering, mewling mess, as Eric got down on his knees in front of Tash and Art. Every movement he made, even just kneeling

down, was shifting pressure on her thoroughly stretched, taut, aching insides, making everything tingle.

He knelt close enough to the couch it put Jessy was on her elbows on the couch, her knees grazing the floor, body still partly held up by Eric's grip. On her left, Art's giant muscular thigh. On her right, Art's other giant muscular thigh. In front of her, Tash's spread thighs, her dripping little slit, and Art's huge testicles.

With a heavy grumble that vibrated through the couch, Art took one of Tash's hands, and put it on Jessy's head. Jessy stared up at the huge wolf head looking down at her over Tash's head, at the giant hand guiding Tash's small one, at the bulge on her friend's belly, and gulped.

Art guided Tash's hand, and Tash stared down at Jessy, still biting her bottom lip — fucking hot — and let her boyfriend pin Jessy's head to her slit.

Jessy groaned into Tash's pussy, and buried it in hungry kisses and licks. As she did, Eric thrust into her, and the world exploded into white lights again as she buried her nose against Tash's mons. By the second slow, deep thrust, Art let go of Tash's hand, and Tash set both of them on Jessy's head on her own with a desperate, shaking, weak grip.

And because she couldn't help herself, Jessy slid one arm in closer, and pressed down against the big bulge pushing out against Tash's belly. Holy fuck she could actually feel Art's cock through her friend's flat — well, used to be flat — stomach. Even better, Art put his titanic hands on Tash's hips, and gently ground her on his cock, causing some of his earlier cum to leak out of her ass, causing Tash to groan, and causing her pussy to rub against Jessy's lips.

Licking a girl's pussy while getting railed was not easy. Licking a girl's pussy while a werewolf fucks you in the cunt right up to the lungs, was borderline impossible. She tried though, smiling up at

her friend as she licked and kissed, and pressed harder on the bulge above her pubic bone. Tash loved it, and her jaw dropped as she stared down at Jessy, and melted. Cumming again already. Jessy pulled her head back a bit, but kept pushing against the bulge, squashing the tiny vampire's g-spot against the werewolf cock in her ass, and making her empty pussy clench and leak more juices.

Vampires really did get to have the best sex.

“Down,” Matt said, voice deep and barky. The titan gestured to the floor.

Eric pulled Jessy back, and gave Art the room to stand up. He held Tash like Eric did Jessy, horizontal, dangling, skewered on his cock, with her limbs going limp and swaying with his movement. The huge beast lay on the floor on his back, and Tash, still trembling and limp, fell back on his abs and chest, legs going wide around her boyfriend's.

Rumbling, Eric knelt beside Art, perpendicular to him, and pointed Jessy straight at the man. And at Tash. He came in close, and closer, until Jessy had to climb over Art's giant arm, and her head was now directly over Tash's stomach.

Much as she wanted to dig into Tash like a buffet and molest the shit out of her, a shadow drew her eyes up. The biggest werewolf got down on his knees between Art's legs, took his fucking massive cock into his hand, and aimed it down at Tash's pussy. It was hard to pick what to stare at. The beautiful tiny vampire underneath her who came at the drop of a hat. Or the goliath blocking out Jessy's view of the ceiling as he leaned over her and Tash, and pressed the tip of his werewolf cock against Tash's tiny slit.

Matt, definitely Matt, and the monstrous thing he was about to force into the little vampire.



Unable to stop herself, because why the fuck would she, Jessy reached down with her closer hand to Tash's pussy, and spread it for the big guy. He rumbled his thanks, and pressed his red cock against her clenching little hole. And sank himself down into her.

For a second, she thought he'd really just squash her into Tash, which mighta been kinda sexy getting sandwiched like that, but once Matt had the tip of his cock spreading his little girlfriend open, he let go and put both his hands against the floor around Art's shoulders with his long arms. He still loomed over Jessy, but at least he wouldn't flatten her into Tash as he leaned in more, and more, giving Jessy a visual feast of watching his giant abs and their short fur come closer, while his thick cock spread Tash's slit apart.

The distension the second cock created on her belly was massive. With one cock already filling her insides, it only made sense, but Jessy hadn't expected this. She could literally see the second bulge slide up her once flat stomach, showing clearly how thick Matt's cock was, getting pushed up into Tash's abs by Art's cock. Licking her lips, Jessy set a hand on Tash's stomach, and shivered from head to toe as she felt the girth of Matt's cock pushing deeper and deeper into his girlfriend's pussy, sliding under Jessy's hand as it stretched the girl inward.

Tash stared on, managing to push herself up a bit with her elbows on Art's chest, and her eyes flicked between the giant looming over her, the bulge moving up her belly, and Jessy. The most noise she managed was quieter than a kitten's mewl, and it was clearly taking every bit of energy she had to not go completely limp and fall back on Art's chest again. She wanted to see.

Jessy still had her hand on Tash's pussy, fingers spreading her swollen little lips, and she squeezed them together softly, pinching them around the log pushing into the tiny vampire. Okay, much as Jessy had wanted Tash to get fucked by werewolf cock, and from what Tash had told her, she'd ultimately enjoyed it, Jessy hadn't

really thought this through. That, was a lot of cock, and Tash was so dainty and petite. The second, new bulge on her belly just keep going, higher and higher, passing her navel and—coming to a stop, as the thick knot of Matt’s cock squashed against Tash’s lips and Jessy’s fingers.

Tash had mentioned this too, with enough embarrassment to fill a swimming pool. The boys couldn’t both fit inside her at the same time, not completely. She just didn’t have enough room inside her. But holy fuck it looked so fucking good, the way the giant’s throbbing cock’s thickest part buried the girl’s lips in its round shape. And Tash’s juices coated the parts of it that touched her as Matt ground gently into her and Jessy’s fingers, earning some more whimpering, quiet mewls from his girlfriend.

“You,” Jessy said, looking to her friend, “are too damn small.”

“I’m not ... n-not...”

“What, not that small?” Laughing, Jessy pushed down on the giant double-cock bulge pushing out against Tash’s belly, earning a small grunt from her. “Look at this!”

“It’s your fault!”

“Well, yeah, and you should be thanking me. Damn shame you can’t fit them both inside you all the way though.”

Tash eyed her suspiciously.

“W-Well! They’re my boyfriends, so you’re not ... fucking them.” It would have sounded defiant, if she didn’t sound so completely exhausted.

“I didn’t plan to fuck them!” She rolled her eyes as she leaned down, and gave one of Tash’s nipples a kiss, earning a tiny shiver from the thoroughly penetrated Mekhet. “But, uh ... it’s kinda in my

way. Mind if I touch it a little?” She gestured to the thick knot rubbing against Tash’s pussy.

Tash frowned at her, but it melted quickly as her two boys very gently ground their bodies against hers, massive cocks softly rubbing and stretching her insides; Jessy recognized the look. Get a girl on the precipice of orgasm and you could make her agree to anything.

“Only ... Only if they don’t mind. Eric, t-too.”

Jessy looked to Art. Hungry eyes, struggling to keep back an animal need to power fuck Tash into a wheelchair. Jessy looked up at Matt, who’s head hung over Tash’s head a few feet up. The same look, but he did manage a small nod. She looked back at Eric, and her boyfriend gave her what could only be described a very subtle wolf’s grin, mixed with a lot of the same wolf hunger.

Okay, she was in the clear to touch the boys. A little. Definitely dangerous territory. And hey, maybe someday in the future, they could do something crazy like that? But tonight, she had her eyes on Tash.

She pressed one hand down against Art’s hip for balance, beside Tash’s waist, leaned her head in toward Tash’s pussy, and pressed her lips against the top of it, where the curve of Matt’s knot pressed against Tash’s very swollen, and likely very, very sensitive, now thoroughly abused clit. And, as much as Jessy did make an effort to keep her kiss on Tash, there was no stopping her lips and tongue from rubbing up against Matt’s cock, too. The rumbles of pleasure he made were so heavy, she felt them, like a bass guitar plugged into her kiss.

Tash whimpered. “T-Too much! It’s...”

Right, right. Jessy grinned back at her friend before putting a gentler kiss on her clit. Too sensitive. She kissed it again and again,

but with a very tender touch, only little licks that brushed up against the big cock squashing it.

Eric rumbled. Oh shit, too far? She peeked her head up over her shoulder to her boyfriend, only to find the beast resettling his grip on her hips, and resume thrusting. She knew that sound, too. That was his 'I'm going to fuck you until I cum' sound.

She melted, and dug deep to find the control to not collapse. Fuck, seeing Tash get stuffed up to the gills was so fucking hot to watch, it had her own body on that edge too, and kept it there. And of course so did having a giant werewolf cock in her, staying in her, and refusing to go anywhere. She had to put her other hand against Matt's closer leg to keep from face planting.

Trying to keep her lips on Tash's clit quickly became a lost cause. Her body went limp, her head and neck fell on the Tash's bulging belly, and she shivered from head to toe as the pleasure pulsed through her. Pleasure, and heat. She groaned as cum poured into her, filled her pussy instantly, and forced itself deeper into her. Most of it splashed against Eric's pelvis, and considering how much werewolves came, the splashes were big enough to soak her ass, her thighs, and some poured down the small of her back before trickling off the sides of her waist.

Matt pulled his big cock out six, seven, eight inches, and slowly pushed it back into his girlfriend. With Jessy's head resting on Tash's stomach, facing Matt, she not only got to watch the huge cock split her open from close up, she got to feel it. His cock sank deep into the little vampire's slit, and the bulge pushed itself under Jessy's cheek, while Jessy quivered like a fish out of water.

Eric slowed down, rumbling with satisfied pleasure, and Jessy found the strength to push her weight back up on her hands again. Good thing, because once she had both hands on Art's hip so she could look down at Tash, the two werewolves began to fuck her in

earnest. Art's hands took Tash's spread legs, one arm under Jessy, and sorta bounced his girlfriend's limp, panting body on his cock, while the tiny thing still lay back on his chest. Matt straight up fucked her, deep thrusts that always squashed his fat knot against her pussy and buried her lips and clit in its soaked, hard girth.

Jessy stared down at the distention on Tash's stomach, and how it slid back and forth with each motion. Even with Art's motion being pretty shallow compared to Matt's, it was still visible, its distension moving up and down a couple inches so deep in Tash's body she could probably feel it in her guts. Two giant cocks, fighting for room in her little pelvis and past it, leaving Tash a squirming mess, wriggling between her weak mewls, before she collapsed back on Art's chest again.

Couldn't have that! Jessy slid her closer hand behind Tash's back, and helped prop the girl up a bit so she could look at the two bulges fighting for space inside her.

"Grab his cock," Jessy said. "Come on, don't leave him hanging."

Tash blinked at her, lip trembling, trapped between orgasm waves. But, after staring at the huge knot desperately trying to get inside her but unable, she managed to reach out with her shaking arms, and wrapped her hands around Matt's giant cock's knot.

Matt let loose. His purr turned into a rumble, and rumble turned into outright growl, as he fucked his little girlfriend faster. Tash whimpered openly, and looked at Jessy with some pleading eyes, as if Jessy could help her somehow. Well, they'd made the rules. Jessy wasn't going to touch Matt. If Tash wanted to make sure both her boyfriends got to enjoy total dick coverage, she had to do it herself.

She managed. Somehow, even as her body quivered, her eyes half-closed, and her clenching slit coated Matt's huge red cock in another layer of juices, she managed to keep her hands on its thick knot, circling it and cupping it. Matt loved it. He fucked Tash faster,

groaning with each thrust, until it was less Tash grabbing his cock to pleasure him, and more Tash holding on for dear life while a bronco pulverized her. And Jessy, one hand still holding up Tash's back so she didn't collapse, could only stare at the giant bulge pushing back and forth along her belly like a piston.

Jessy slipped her other arm under Tash's, put her hand on the girl's lower abs, and pressed down. Holy. Fucking. God. The feel of Matt's cock driving in and out of her leaking little slit was amazing. She couldn't help but press down a little harder, wrap her fingers around the wide bulge, and squeeze it a bit through Tash's flesh. Tash's thighs trembled again. She loved it.

Matt loved it too. He sank himself down to the knot, and ground into Tash long enough for the first gush of cum to pour into her. Jessy could see that, too, the distention on her friend's thin little belly shifting slightly as cum filled her. Matt thrust again, and the second gush splashed outward, coating the base of his cock, the knot, and Tash's hands. The third thrust only made things worse, and Jessy blinked down at the geyser of cum that splashed up over Tash's mons, coating her thighs, her wrists, her stomach, and Jessy's hand.

It was Jessy's turn to be hypnotized. She continued to press and massage her hand down against Tash's belly, squashing the girl's g-spot down against Matt's cock, and occasionally squeezed her fingers around the bulge to make the girl whimper. And every time she did, Matt purred. He must have been in heaven, considering Tash was doing the same to his knot, both her hands squeezing and caressing, now coated and dripping with thick, white cum. Both girls were milking him.

And then Art came. As much as it was hot as fuck, seeing what Matt's cock did to Tash, and being able to touch it through Tash, what Art did made Jessy's jaw drop. He poured cum into her. And more cum. And more cum. Jessy had expected a bunch of it to come

squirting out of her ass, but his cock was just too damn big. He'd plugged her, and almost all the cum the werewolf poured into his girl, stayed in her.

The bulge on her belly got bigger.

"Fucking god..." Jessy gulped, and let go of Tash's back. She melted back, lay on Art's chest, let her arms go limp, and let the boys pump her full of cum. Matt stopped, but Art still had a little bit to go, and he purred as he ground Tash's body down against him, his grip still on her thighs, the distension on her belly only getting bigger. He was loving this, too.

"Good," Matt said, nodding.

"Good," Art said, nodding.

Eric rumbled, and nodded. "Good."

Okay, the boys were enjoying themselves. That was good. Jessy had been confident she could make Tash love this sorta stuff given the chance. Her bigger concern was whether the boys would feel comfortable around each other. Alcohol helped alleviate that concern a little. Apparently werewolf form made it a moot point. They were super horny and ready to fuck. And fuck some more.

"Change," Matt said, and he motioned to Eric.

Eric pulled back, slipped his cock out of Jessy's pussy — fucking god — and helped slide her back a couple feet so the two behemoths could roll over. They stayed in the same spot in front of Jessy, and Matt had to pull out of Tash completely for a bit there, but otherwise they got into the same positions as before, except now Matt was on his back on the floor, and Art was the one between their legs and leaning over them.

Tash lay on Matt's stomach and chest, her head on his sternum, swollen belly flattened on his abs. She was still recovering.

"Tash. Wakey wakey," Jessy said, and poked her in the cheek. "You—ah!" Eric took Jessy's hips, and rolled her over. "Uh, dude, not sure this position is gonna—" He pushed her, and she fell on her ass, her back pressed to Matt's side.

Eric, still on his knees between her legs, gripped her hips, lifted her pelvis up, and pressed his drenched hard cock's tip against her cum-soaked ass. Oh fuck. He pushed her down, and with how much cum everything was soaked in, it was more lubricated than a handful of lube could do. He wasted no time, and pushed harder, sinking wet flesh into her squeezing ass, and soaking it cum.

Art took Tash by the shoulders and pulled her up so she was sitting upright, her back against his chest again. When he did, Eric pushed Jessy toward Matt, and her shoulders and head slipped up over Matt's side, over and onto his abs, and slightly past it. Well, fuck, now she was the one lying on her back on a werewolf's abs, except perpendicular across him, her body on full display for Tash while she got fucked in the ass.

Tash blinked down at her, and once Art let go of Tash's shoulders, she leaned forward slightly and put both her hands down on Jessy's stomach, gently resting her weight there, as Eric pushed more of his cock into Jessy's ass.

"Um..."

"I didn't—shit!" Jessy forced herself to sit up slightly, elbows pressing down on Matt's giant slab of abs so she could look up at her boyfriend. He came in closer, and closer, eventually planting a hand on the floor on Matt's other side so he could lean and loom over them, as his other hand held Jessy's hip. And pulled her in closer.



With her on her back like this, even on Matt's thick-ass body, Eric still had to hold her ass way up in the air to meet his pelvis with him on his knees. It left her a squirming mess, trying to keep balance on Matt's body as Eric stretched her ass. It wasn't long before his fat knot spread her ass cheeks, and Jessy outright groaned as he worked her pelvis up and down against him, grinding his knot into her asshole until the soaked muscles spread wide. Really, really wide.

In it went, and Jessy collapsed back on Matt's stomach, going limp for a second with the delicious sensation of getting her insides filled. She loved it. Fucking god she loved it.

Tash blinked down at her, and at the much smaller bulge on Jessy's belly. With a shy little smile, she put a hand on Jessy's stomach, and pressed down, right above the pubic bone. Instant flowing waves of tingling bliss spread out from Jessy's cunt, down into her thighs and up into her chest until her nipples were so swollen they fucking hurt. She hadn't cum yet, but god damn the way Tash was looking down at her with a mixture of hunger and shyness was so fucking hot, she was going to pop the moment Eric gave her a proper fucking.

Except, Eric didn't. With a strangely hearty werewolf chuckle, Eric reached out, and took Tash's closer hand from Jessy's belly, earning a surprised squeak from the little vampire. His hand was big enough her entire forearm disappeared in it. But somehow he managed to guide her hand down further, until her knuckles brushed up against his abs, and then lower and lower, until her cum-soaked fingers pressed up against Jessy's slit.

Tash, a quivering mess, crazy horny just like Jess, and now staring at the giant werewolf holding her hand, gulped, and slipped her fingers into Jessy's pussy. Fuck yes fuck yes fuck yes. Jessy groaned encouragingly, squeezed down on Tash's fingers, and went limp on Matt's abs again, head half hanging back over the

werewolf's waist. That was Matt's cum Tash's fingers were filling her with.

Apparently to get Tash to this point, Eric was the one needed to give her a push, not Jessy. Awesome.

“Go nuts,” Jessy said, grinning up at her little friend, still splayed out on Matt's abs like a fucking charcuterie board of the most amazing meat ever. “Probably got some pent up aggression you wanna take out on me, right?”

Tash frowned, but it was the playful kind, and she nodded.

“Then—” Jessy's voice stopped short as a moan cut it off, and she melted into a big pile of bliss, as Tash fingered her. Hard. She sank another finger into her, and then another, spreading Jessy's slit wide with four fingers, palm up, and slapped them up against Jessy's g-spot with enough force it made noise.

The little woman's eyes were wide with something a little closer to maniacal evil than Jessy ever expected to see on Tash's face. With hungry eyes, Tash fingered Jessy continuously, and when the pleasure waves erupted and flowed up and down Jessy's body, forcing her cunt to squeeze damn hard, Tash didn't stop. She kept going, and going, fingers smacking up against Jessy's g-spot, down into Eric's cock, and back up again, rapid fire.

“Tash! Holy shit, gimme—” No good. Jessy tried to sit up, but Tash kept pounding away, even as Jessy coated the girl's fingers in enough juices her cum splashed against her thighs, and with her pelvis held up in the air by Eric, it splashed onto her abs, too. Okay, Jessy had expected Tash to maybe finger her gently, not give into some deep seeded desired to fingerbang Jessy until she went into a coma, but that's what was happening.

Eric was loving it, too. He purred with pleasure, and found a decent rhythm to fuck Jessy's ass with, while Tash continued

fingering. Her other hand took Jessy's closer breast and squeezed it. Not rough, but hard enough it conformed to her grip and pushed out between her fingers slightly, and she massaged it like a young guy getting his first taste of a big tit.

Jessy managed to look up enough to see Tash's eyes, and how they flicked between Jessy's body, and Eric's. Every so often, when Jessy's head fell back as more electric tingles worked through her, Tash paused long enough to press her fingers down, hard, straight into Eric's cock through the wall of flesh between them. It made Eric rumble with his own pleasure, and he tightened his grip on Jessy's hip as he fucked her a little faster, against the sensation of Tash's fingers rubbing his cock from inside Jessy's slit.

Tash had to stop fingering and groping her though, when Art gave her his own thrust, earning a gasp and squeal. With how hard Tash had been fingering, both girls had been shaking and quaking, and that meant Matt and Art had both been holding still while their little girlfriend's insides had been squeezing and milking on their cocks. Art had had enough, and he matched Eric's rhythm, fucking Tash's ass with the same consistent, fast-but-not-too-fast pace that left Jessy groaning, and Tash whimpering.

Now that she had a second to stop cumming her brain outs, Jessy pushed herself up onto her elbows again, but it didn't last. Eric pulled his head back, giving room for Art to lean forward, and forward, until his giant body pushed Tash down onto Jessy. Oh fuck they actually did it. Jessy blinked, staring up at the titan of short, dark fur, and massive muscles only a few inches over her, pressing Tash's body down against hers, squashing Tash's stomach straight onto Jessy's. Both girls were trapped between two titans of hot, hard muscle.

Art picked up the pace, and Tash's fingers slipped out of Jessy as she melted. Her whimpers and mewls lasted maybe ten seconds before she went limp, and her body quivered with her climax.

With Tash flattened against her, the bulges fighting for space inside her little belly pressed down against Jessy belly too. And she could feel Art's cock pushing against Matt's as he thrust back and forth inside his tiny girlfriend, never removing his knot from her ass but coming pretty damn close with each thrust. Deep, so fucking deep into Tash's guts, it was no wonder each thrust he made earned a tiny squeak, almost inaudible, from the little vampire. He was knocking the wind out of her.

And then of course that's when Eric decided to pick up the pace as well, and Jessy melted away again. He'd had to move out of the way a bit to make room for Art, so now he had both hands free again, and he held Jessy's hips snug so he could pound away. Jessy couldn't see any of it, apparently the lettuce in this sandwich, but holy fuck she could feel it. She felt all of it, all four other people at the same time. It didn't get more intimate than this.

Somewhere along the line, as she clenched her empty slit and drowned Eric's cock in her juices, the boys began to cum. Eric first, and Jessy groaned and squirmed on his length as the first gush of thick, warm cum flooded her insides. Considering Art was still pounding away, keeping everything a moving, writhing mess, there was plenty of shifting movement to help milk her boyfriend of his cum, even if Jessy was trapped and barely able to move.

Art came next, right after Eric, and he knelt up straighter as he did. He wrapped one hand around Tash's throat, pulled her up against his chest again, and pinned her head to his sternum as he poured cum into her ass. With his fat cock plugging her ass, and this being his second time — third if you counted his human form earlier — cumming in her, the poor girl was getting filled. The bulge on her belly grew and grew, and Tash, eyes half closed and limbs dangling, didn't so much as mewl as Art filled her guts with his cum. She was spent.

“Fucking god,” Jessy said, staring at the growing bulge on the girl’s belly. That was insane. That was hot as hell.

Art was still cumming when, probably from the ridiculous increase in pressure on his cock, Matt came too. Gushing waves of white poured out of Tash’s little slit, and splashed over everything, since she was sitting upright and directly on the knot of his cock. It squirted out of her with force, coating her thighs, Matt’s pelvis, and the side of Jessy’s body since she was still lying on Matt’s abs. Jessy barely noticed. Her eyes were locked on Tash, her dazed, euphoric expression, and the big distension on her belly getting bigger.

But finally, they were done, and the men all transformed back into human form. While still in the girls, and around them. The world shifted and turned, and soon Jessy lay on her back on normal Matt’s abs, staring up at Eric, Art, and Natasha, and the girl’s stomach quickly went back to normal size as the two cocks filling her went back to normal; plus the whole bucket of cum thing gushing out of her, coating the floor.

Jessy sat up, and with some very shaky legs, got up with Eric’s help, and the two of them looked down at the giant mess. That, was ... yeah, a giant mess.

“This is your fault,” Jessy said, stumbling a bit again until Eric grabbed her arm. “I didn’t say a thing about werewolves.”

Eric rolled his eyes, grabbed some of the towels, and tossed them at Jessy and the three still on the floor in the fucking literal pool of cum. Jesus christ.

Kat, who’d apparently jumped onto the bigger couch’s back at some point, looked down at the three on the floor, then at Jessy and Eric, and scratched herself a few times like. She didn’t give a shit.

“Shower time?” Jessy asked.

“Shower time,” Matt and Art said in unison.

Nodding, Jessy picked the limp and exhausted Tash up, and walked her toward the bathroom. “We’ll go first. You can come watch. And then we’ll watch you three shower at the same time. Sound good?”

The three guys looked at each other, eyebrows raised, before they grumbled, picked themselves up, and followed after. Marge snored.

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# The End

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